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THE CLOCKMAN MOVEMENT

by

ALLISON MARTIN

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree for Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term
2016

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ABSTRACT

As a genre of Neo-Victorian fiction, Steampunk is largely identified by Victorian aesthetics and technology centering on clockwork and steam power. The novel *The Clockman Movement* seeks to emphasize the “punk” in “steampunk” by exploring the social concerns of colonialism, including sexism, racism, and classism, while embracing the more fantastic and entertaining aspects of steampunk.

Before all other labels—Nordlunder, daughter, woman—Eve Traugott is a machinist. Or she would be, if one of the machinists in the capital would hire her as an apprentice. She thought it would be simple to find a machinist willing to take a chance on her in Aufziehbürg, the mechanical center of the State of Nordlund, but so far the Aufziehbürger machinists have been as narrow-minded as the one she left behind in her hometown.

Her inheritance dwindling, Eve sets her sights on the clockmen, the State’s automaton workers, hoping that studying them might help her learn enough to gain an apprenticeship. When her curiosity draws the unwanted attention of Statesman Bristed and the winders, procuring an apprenticeship becomes the least of Eve’s concerns.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This novel would not exist without the support of my parents, James and Sarah Martin, whose belief in my talents and abilities has gotten me through the roughest times.

Exuberant expressions of gratitude also go to my friends, editors, and fellow writers who read this manuscript and worked through outlines and plot points, especially to Lisa Stage, Ilana Greenberg, Danielle Armstrong, and my usual writing partners Katie Sands and Lara Eckener. Special thanks goes to my workshop classmates for not only providing valuable advice, but for letting me teach you about steampunk and science fiction. I would be remiss if I didn't especially thank Brendan Stephens, Ben Buckingham, and Jonathan Phin for reading additional chapters and showing their support for this fictional world.

Finally, I'd like to thank my thesis committee, Professor Terry Ann Thaxton and Dr. Anne Collins Smith, who have provided exceptional support as I navigated the thesis process. This novel would not be what it is without the guidance of my thesis director, Dr. Anna Maria Jones. Her generosity with her time, expertise in Victorian and Neo-Victorian literature, and brilliant suggestions have helped to make this novel so much stronger than what I could have written on my own. Thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE

Eve shook off her coat as she stepped into the Aufziehbürg train station and ran a hand over her snow-dusted hair. The train station thrummed with activity. Under the arched glass ceiling, protecting them from the dark sheets of rain and snow, bundled passengers and city-dwellers of every color and complexion were revealed in pools of lamplight. Their clothing ranged from high-necked wool dresses in grays and blues to fanciful brocades and paisleys of red and gold, peeking from flaps of long winter coats. Heated and electrified, the train station was a place to catch your breath as well as a train—a relaxing lunch stop for businessmen, an escape from the elements for the homeless, and a classroom for Eve. She'd fallen in love with it when she arrived in the Capital three months ago, and had come as often as possible to study the machines that Aufziehbürgers took for granted.

Eve's boots clicked on the marble floor as she approached the automated ticket stands. All one had to do, she understood, was select a destination from a peg board and then insert the correct number of notes and coins. She understood how a machine could tell the coins apart and count them—they could easily be separated by size—but the notes were another matter. So far no one had admitted to any trickery concerning the automated tellers, but she suspected human minds were behind those dark windows counting the bills.

One day she'd talk to the right station employee and they'd confess the deception. Better yet, they'd show her the mechanism; even a counterfeit machine could be instructive.

Eve darted through the crowd, hardly able to see her destination through the bustle of the station—bodies, towers of trunks, and automated porters—still hustling even at a quarter till nine. The automated porters—wheeled carts pushed by wind-up bipeds, their arms molded right into the

filigree of the cart—came from newly arrived trains, queued for checkpoints, waited while travelers presented papers and received stamps, and finally led their human charges outside to waiting carriages. An informational display accessed by a punch-panel was mounted in curling iron on the side of the cart. Following a series of prompts, travelers could find directions and information about Aufziehbürg, tiles flipping into place on the display to show maps and answer questions. Eve had tried to access a porter for information, but it took a train ticket to make the screen flip to anything other than a message declaring, “Welcome to Aufziehbürg, Capital of the State of Nordlund, Home of the Clockmen.” The clockmen, the metal men used to construct the Southern Railroad, were Eve’s quarry today.

State supply trains left twice a month, sending supplies and clockmen to the southern towns where they were still expanding the railroad and connecting freshly conquered territory to the Capital. Eve came from one of those towns, from Kamberstadt, the closest of the southern territory towns to the Capital. Even so close to Aufziehbürg, machine novelties were restricted to machinist shops and the homes of the wealthiest landowners, not put on display in windows as automated advertising. Eve’s family had owned a few unusual items—a self-stirring pot and an automated collar starcher among them. Eve’s father had invented the devices, and they had filled his shop, waiting for the day Kamberstadt became as rapt with machines as the Capital. He had mainly spent his time repairing and tending to clocks, young Eve watching intently as her father’s informal apprentice.

She passed by the highest numbered tracks—those were all passenger trains—on her way to track four. Some days she came just to see the opulent trains carrying passengers north and west, into the fledgling cities. The State of Nordlund crest, mounted on a lattice of brass work, adorned each of the sleek black engines. She’d heard that the carriage doors in first class automatically retracted when the train pulled into the Aufziehbürg station. She’d like to witness it herself one day,

from inside a first class car. Her trip from Kamberstadt had been on a cramped bench seat, luggage jammed in under her feet, already budgeting her inheritance so she could survive in the Capital.

In the Capital, buildings crowded together like crooked teeth, stack pipes striped the sky, and the factories west of the city belched and blew smoke across the river all day and into the night. It took Eve weeks to adjust her pace to the foot traffic and avoid being buffeted on her way to and from the Aufziehbürg Laundry. Even though the Capital bruised her, her work in the laundry was hot and exhausting, she was running out of money, and she still hadn't secured an apprenticeship in a machine shop, she didn't regret coming. For all its faults, it was the center of their mechanically gifted State Machinist Program and home to the top private machine shops and clockmakers, the perfect place for an aspiring machinist. The perfect place for Eve Traugott.

Conversations drifted as people passed, occasionally muted by the shriek of train whistles or shouts signaling the next train: "Ten-thirty to Abbrücken now boarding! Track fourteen—Express—to Abbrücken!" Lamps glowed along the center of the platform, casting distorted shadows on the marble. She sniffed, still expecting the familiar sharp kerosene that veiled Kamberstadt at night, but instead she smelled the heady scent of out-of-season, imported freesias; cinnamon drifting from a pushcart; and grease from the train. The electric lamps continued to impress and astonish her, even after passing under them in the street every night when she returned to the boarding house.

She slowed as she neared the track, stopping at a cart to peruse the mechanical toys on display. Soldiers in State blue, horses and twittering birds, and twirling dancers beckoned children and their parents' marks. Eve had a pair of dancers similar to the ones revolving behind the glass. Her father had crafted them at her mother's behest, a last present from her mother who died within the year. The female figure had her mother's same dark brown hair, pulled into a chignon, and a

formal dress in her mother's favorite shade of violet. The toy dancers were one of a few mementos Eve refused to sell, having already parted with furniture, housewares, and most of her parents' clothes to fund her move to the Capital.

The attendant glanced up at Eve and muttered, "I'm watching you, girl," before returning to his newspaper. She made a face, but understood his concern, dressed as she was in her laundry uniform and apron, a patched coat tucked over her arm with her pinned hair fraying after she'd removed the kerchief she wore for work. At least he'd only warned her and hadn't called over the soldiers who patrolled the station to clear out undesirables.

The steady clank of mechanical footsteps caught Eve's attention and she turned. Considering tracks one through five were designated for supply trains, there were a surprising number of people reading on benches or strolling while they munched on warm and salty snacks. They stepped back now, abandoning their seats or vacating the walkway with a murmur to make space for eighteen magnificent metal men marching in formation toward track four, lamplight reflecting off their brass brows. The clockmen stood a head taller than most of the men, their squared shoulders hidden beneath silver, rounded caps. Their hips were wide and sturdy—a metal belt bracing the waist, built to bear heavy loads. Their featureless faces reflected the trains and people—a bend at the nose the only distortion in the image—their feet rolled heel to toe as they marched, and their arms swayed in perfect synchronicity. It was an artificial walk, loud as metal brushed against metal, and clockwork ticked and echoed in their hulls, but it was balanced, poised, a miracle of modern manufacturing.

Two men wearing cerulean jackets with wide, overlapping lapels brought up the rear. The two columns of buttons on their jackets aligned like rivets, and the men were so in step with the automated movement they might as well have been made of clockwork. Eve had heard of winders,

the men who tended the machines, slept beside them, and never let them out of their sight, but she had never imagined they might be as interesting as the clockmen themselves.

The crowd collapsed behind them like an exhaled breath, making it easy for Eve to slip in with them, just another observer and admirer of the State.

The parade came to a stop—all at once, with no winding down, an astonishing feat she'd observed only once before, when the clockmen had marched into Kamberstadt a year earlier to extend the railroad and build a train station. Even then, when her father had been sick, losing more and more of who he'd once been, he'd still been impressed by the machines.

Three other winders came from the open boxcar, each taking a clockman in the first row to coach through a turn and queue for the waiting train. The two winders who'd marched in the parade engaged the crowd in conversation, an amicable barrier between the people and the State's greatest invention. Eve slipped past them easily.

Moving up two rows, she sidled between the clockmen, keeping a safe distance from the winders and staying to the outside of the column, figuring the other tall metal men would help hide her as she examined their brother closer.

She didn't quite reach the clockman's shoulder. A distorted version of her face reflected in the clockman's torso, awe captured in the image of her wide eyes and parted mouth. Up close the clockmen were bigger and grander than she'd ever imagined—and the way they moved! Walking, chopping, hammering, lifting—not to mention the sudden and complete stop—the gearwork had to be more complex than any machine Eve had explored. Maybe even more complex than any machine her father had built. The skill to build one—on her own—that was the dream, an indisputable way to prove her worth as a machinist. If she could build a clockman, there was nothing she couldn't master.

A gap in his metal hide, under the arm socket, tempted her; she could just see a gear tooth and cam that had to control some arm motion. A quick glance confirmed the winders were still occupied, so she rose on tiptoe, the brass torso cool under her fingers as she balanced. A constellation of clockwork was contained just in the glimpse she stole. Her toes stretched and gave up, dropping her back down—set back but not defeated. She put her boot on the clockman's foot and tucked her fingers in the gap at his neck to pull herself up for a better look.

Someone cleared their throat, impatience seeping into the cough.

She ducked her head, silently cursing her negligence. She didn't need to be run out of the train station again.

Eve dropped off the machine, turned, and looked straight into a bushy red beard, standing out against the cerulean jacket. The color of his beard alone was enough to startle her—all the men in Kamberstadt, and most in Aufziehbürg, had dark hair.

"Curious?" His voice was deep, with the soft, rounded accent of the Capital.

"Of course." She half-laughed again, eyes darting to the uniformed soldiers who patrolled the station with batons, rattling benches and overturning cups set out by limbless beggars. She had yet to earn the soldiers' ire, but enough of them recognized her as a regular. "The clockmen are. . . ." She searched for a word that captured all her appreciation, but might compliment the winder enough that he'd forget her. "Impressive," she finally said with a tilt of her head.

"That they are." A severe-looking man came from the front of the procession, emerging from between the columns of clockmen. He was lanky and pale, with dark hair, dark eyes, and thick imposing eyebrows that gave him a hawkish look. From the way he appeared, Eve had the impression he'd been watching her longer than the winder.

He uncoupled his hands from behind his back to brush the sweep of his dark hair back into place. “They are servants of our State,” he continued, his accent similar to the winder’s. “And our State is very impressive.” He smiled at Eve when he used her word, all teeth with little warmth. “Thank you for saying so.”

“Of course, sir.” She gave a stilted curtsy, not sure about his station. From the cut of his blue tailored coat, white collar, and unblemished skin, he was clearly upper class, but something in his accent sounded put-on, like he’d assumed a role that didn’t quite fit.

He continued to stare at Eve, her cheeks heating under his assessment. She bit her lip, smoothed her skirt, and glanced to the side again where there was a gap in the onlookers. She could slip between the nanny with the baby and the man in the purple waistcoat.

“What is it that most interests you?” the man asked.

“Pardon?” Eve blinked, trying her best to gather her attention on the man instead of her escape route.

“About the clockmen. You seem to have a particular interest in them. They’re not just a novelty to you.” The winders working at the front were closer to them now, just one more row to move before they’d interrupt this conversation.

“Oh.” She wasn’t used to being asked about her interests in machines. Most men assumed it was a passing fancy, which was why it had been difficult to obtain interviews in machine shops once she walked through the door. “I’m particularly impressed by how they stop, all at once and so suddenly. I assume they have an escapement and distributor that shifts the inertia and allows the gears to return to rest.”

His eyes shifted from her to the winder next to her. Despite the heat from the engines, a chill twitched the small of her back. “I didn’t catch your name, miss.”

She inhaled shakily, eyes turning to the winder as well. He bowed his head ever so slightly, and there was a kind crinkle at the corner of his blue eyes, warmer and more indulgent than the other man's toothy intimidation. "Eve. Eve Traugott."

"Eve Traugott," the severe man repeated. "I regrettably understand little about machine workings, but I suspect you might be correct." His eyes passed over her once more, slowly, carefully, methodically, as if he were cataloguing her. "You'll have to excuse us. We have to board our train." He raised his hand and twisted his wrist in two short flicks, some silent command, and then strode toward the train.

"Excuse me," the winder said. He stepped up to the clockman she'd been examining and flipped a toggle she hadn't noticed on the waist.

"What's that?"

He glanced over his shoulder, bemused and shaking his head. "You don't take a hint very well."

She'd gotten the hint—she had intended to take the hint and slip into the crowd, but curious machines distracted her. That was less her fault and more a personality description. "If you won't tell me what that is, can you at least tell me if I'm right?"

The winder blinked; a silent request for clarification.

"Am I right about the escapement and distributor and—?" She rolled her hand, indicating the rest of what she'd explained earlier.

The winder checked behind him, and then conspiratorially leaned in. "I believe you are," he whispered, "though you didn't hear that from me." He straightened again and drew a long rod from the leather thong at his hip. "Have a good night, Miss Traugott."

“You as well, Winder.” She felt like she’d been teased, but also like she’d gotten an answer—an answer that proved her hypothesis and mechanical intuitions correct. That had made the trip more productive than she’d imagined, even with the unwanted attention.

Eve backed away a few steps, but was stopped by another question from his soft voice.

“You work in one of the laundries?”

She checked to see if the soldiers had taken notice of her yet. Their batons hung at their hips and their focus was on their own conversation, not on Eve or anyone else milling around the clockmen. The clockmen and their security were the winders’ charge. She recognized the soldier on the left with his broad shoulders, golden epaulettes gleaming, rounded cheeks and blond hair, which meant he likely would recognize her. He’d chased her away from the popcorn vendor once, when she’d put her hands against the glass and stared at the mechanical arm scooping popcorn and sprinkling salt. She’d avoided him as much as possible since then, but he always watched her if their paths crossed, one chilly green eye set on her movements.

She bit her lip and turned back to the winder. “How could you tell?”

He pointed at her with the rod, the head of it arrowed with two notches—a key. “Your apron. My sister’s a laundry girl, too. She works at Fresh Linen.”

Eve shook her head. “Not me.” She turned to go, but he called her back again.

“Do you like it?”

“Excuse me?” He’d respected her enough to answer her question, but now this winder was growing bothersome.

“Your laundry, do you like it? My sister doesn’t like where she works so much. She was thinking she might inquire elsewhere.”

Now Eve was certain he was trying to wheedle something out of her—he was too persistent for one, and far too specific in his questioning. “I don’t think they’re hiring.”

He shrugged. “For when they do.”

The soldiers were still talking to each other; the blond one laughed, head roaring back. But she’d seen him snap in a second, spinning to chase down a pickpocket—that had been an exciting day.

“I can’t complain. It seems fair as far as laundries go.”

“Which one? I’d like to pass the name along.”

She bit her tongue. He’d asked too fast for her to remember the name of another laundry, preferably one on the opposite side of town from hers. “Bleier’s,” she said, dredging up the name of her supervisor.

“Bleier’s. I’ll pass it on. Thank you.” He dipped his head.

When he averted his eyes, Eve turned and hurried away, not wanting to give him another chance to call her back. She’d dawdled enough, and staying any longer could draw the eye of the soldiers and get her tossed out of the station, if not something worse. She skirted around the back of the soldier she recognized, giving him as wide a berth as possible. When she glanced back at the clockmen, the red-bearded winder waved at her. She confirmed the soldiers still weren’t paying her any attention and then hesitantly waved back, a tiny stuttering motion.

She pulled on her coat as she walked, bundling the collar around her neck as much as possible. As she pulled her gloves from her pocket, she bumped into something at thigh height.

“Spare a coin?” A smudged little girl with white-blond wisps of hair held out a hand wrapped in an unraveling glove. Two of her fingers were naked.

Eve had heard informants could get as much as five marks for turning in someone begging in the station. The soldiers weren't far off; she'd only walked a few tracks away. The blond one glanced their way, but didn't seem to notice them.

Eve put her hand over the girl's, lowering it and leading her away from the soldiers. "I can't help with coins, but it's safer to warm up here and beg outside." She searched her pockets and found a quarter of a biscuit wrapped in a napkin. "Be careful." She left the biscuit in the girl's hand and continued on to the main exit, finally tugging on her gloves.

The girl unwrapped the biscuit and stuffed it in her mouth, sucking crumbs from the napkin. Eve hoped she had a family somewhere, that even if she didn't have a warm room to call home, she had a parent or sibling to hold her through the night. Some nights Eve would trade her room for a hug from one of her parents.

The wind cut through the Aufziehbild streets, ripping at Eve's coat and skirt, the street lamps stretching shadows into monstrous puppet theater. A couple crunched through the snow, but veered when a door yawned open, laughter and the scent of beer spilling out. A guitar twanged a song that sounded foreign, yet familiar, something southern Eve could almost remember.

Eve continued alone, tracking through the snow back to her solitary room in the boarding house.

CHAPTER TWO

Eve hurried down the cluttered street, her coat wrapped securely around her. She should have bought a scarf when she'd still had savings. People crowded the sidewalks even this early in the morning, passersby wrapped tightly head to foot. Presumably many of them had grown up with Aufzieburg's long, frigid winters.

She sidestepped a bound stack of newspapers, and the newsie who owned them, hurrying past his hollered headlines—SOUTHERN RAIL SPECULATION and CLOCKMEN CONVERGE ON DEMIRTAN BORDER—and stopped short of being trampled by a brougham and its stamping dark gray steeds.

She pressed closer to the looming, stacked shops and office buildings, benefiting every time someone opened a door and warm air gasped out. The marble-embellished edifices of downtown, with their scrolling ironwork rails, exuded an air of organization and cleanliness the street denied. Newspapers, tin cans, and gutter refuse rolled in from a few blocks away, each section of the city bleeding into the other. Still, it was cleaner than the streets around Eve's boarding house.

Eve lived in the West Edge, along the riverfront, opposite coal-chugging factories churning out buttons and shoe heels and standardized machine parts. Her room constantly stank of smoke, though Johanna, Eve's next-door neighbor, confessed the winter stench was nothing compared to the choking high heat of summer.

Their boarding house boasted private rooms, though it was one of the few in the West Edge. Most of the tenements crammed four or more renters to a room, charging by the bed. Eve had heard Demiri families clustered as many as ten in a single room, sending children out to beg for their

doss. The only problem: begging in downtown was prohibited and no one in the West Edge had money to spare.

Eve never would have guessed this was how people lived in the Capital. Kamberstadt wasn't rich. Its roads were dust, the streetlights gas-powered, and they'd only recently installed a telegraph, but they took care of their own. They would have taken care of her, if Eve had stayed. Of course, she'd had little reason to stay in Kamberstadt after her father was gone. His machine shop had long since passed to Mr. Paulson's hands—a transaction that had funded her father's prolonged illness—and Mr. Paulson had made it clear that he wouldn't take Eve as an apprentice. He claimed the position was earmarked for his toddler son, which seemed an excuse for not wanting to take on a nineteen-year-old girl who'd picked up bits of the trade by dismantling her toys and watching over her father's shoulder. The Capital, then, was a reasonable next step—plenty of machine shops, and they were more likely to take an inexperienced, yet passionate, machinist seriously.

At least that was what the advertisements had said.

Eve adjusted the satchel at her hip, patting it again to confirm that her portable steam press was still secure. Her apron and kerchief nestled beside it, and, if the machinist didn't keep her waiting, she'd be able to nip back to the laundry on time for her shift (hopefully to turn in her apron and bid Mrs. Bleier goodbye).

She was still excited from seeing the clockmen on Tuesday. She'd immediately gone home and spent too many of her evening hours jotting potential clockman configurations in her sketchbook and making adjustments to the steam press. Two nights in a row she'd gotten fewer than three hours sleep, but she was certain the portable press was ready and would be much more interesting than the wind-up toy soldier she'd demonstrated for Mr. Paulson (one of her first forays into mechanics), or the Night-Cap Candle (a candle that put itself out after a set time) she'd shown

at Clockworks, or the automatic page-turner (a device primarily useful for cooks or surgeons, she suggested) she'd presented at The Machine Shop. No, the portable steam press was necessary in any home, could be easily operated, and, most importantly, it worked. The Night-Cap Candle, while expertly named, couldn't judge how far down the candle had burned, and therefore wasn't reliable. The page-turner had difficulty with Aufziehbürg's humidity and certain page types that stuck together more easily. Of her inventions, the steam press worked the best, especially after all her recent tinkering. Surely Bergmann's would offer her a job.

Bergmann was one of the great independent machinists, hailing from Abbrücken, home of the annual Metallurgy Festival. Machinists from all over flocked there each year to compete in the Inventors' Tournament and hawk their wares in the market place. Eve had attended once when she was six years old, the vibrant colors and marvelous machines a washed memory that centered primarily around the strange, salty smell of the port city and riding on her father's back while he picked through clockwork, holding up each piece for Eve to approve.

Bergmann was still in Abbrücken, to Eve's knowledge, but when the State annexed the city, he'd taken the opportunity to expand into the Capital. Once he'd done it (and was successful), others had tried, but no one had been able to maintain their franchises like Bergmann. Eve heard the State tried to recruit him for the State Machinist Program, but he'd refused. With a business like his, he could afford to turn them down. Even if that meant he could never build a clockman (or a knock-off variety), considering the State restrictions concerning the proprietary rights.

Eve would have been interested in the State Program if she thought she could find a machinist willing to put his reputation on the line in front of the State. Her failure or success in the program would reflect directly on the machinist who recommended her. She had a better chance

finding the right private machinist at the right time, someone who needed an apprentice and wanted a legacy for his shop.

A cold wind swept around the corner, looping a newspaper through the air. Snow caught in the draft, curling with it and spinning on to settle in a grime-filled gutter farther up the street. Eve turned into the headwind, gritting her teeth as the cold leached through to her bones. Horse breath smoked the air as the animals worked against the wind, tugging carriages and hansoms filled with businessmen and ladies who could afford the luxury of avoiding the weather. They probably had foot stoves tucked in the floorboards and warm meals in their bellies.

Drifts had gathered in front of the shop door. Eve smoothed the fall of her skirt, preparing herself. Her stomach growled, a reminder that she'd had to skip breakfast again. If she could secure an apprenticeship that would no longer be a problem.

Eve broke the line of snow when she pulled the door open, a cuckoo cawing above the door instead of a bell.

"Good morning!" The voice was bright and attached to a well-dressed gentleman with a graying, pointed goatee. His royal blue waistcoat glinted with metallic threads. When he came around the counter and spotted Eve his salesman expression melted a degree. "Can I help you?"

Eve brushed the snow from her coat and hoped her hair was still neatly pinned. "I hope you can." She walked into the shop, feet crossing over each other as she dug into her bag. Halfway to the counter and shopkeeper, she remembered to straighten her shoulders and hold her head higher—she wasn't a laundry girl here; she was a machinist.

"Sir, I'm Eve Traugott and I'm interested in being an apprentice."

He cleared his throat. "Apprentice?"

“Yes, sir, I’d like to study machines. My father was a machinist and he taught me a number of things before he passed.” Her previous experiences had taught her to fib about her father’s involvement in her education. No machinist had liked hearing she was mostly self-taught. “I’m on my own now and seeking employment.” Eve carefully withdrew her steam press from its felt sleeve and placed it on the glass counter, the iron plate secure against its attached board.

He bent, peering at the contraption. Eve winced, knowing that the shape was rough and it was obviously pieced together from scrap metal. The items on display in Bergmann’s were polished steel and brass, and either crafted from whole sheets of metal or decoratively seamed, making a functional object ornate.

He straightened and addressed her. “What is the device?”

She let out a breath. He was taking her seriously.

Eve filled the reservoir from her canteen and wound the key at the back of the machine. “It’s a portable steam press. For home use.” She lifted the plate by the handle, waiting for the sputter of bubbling water. “Just a moment.” She rooted in her bag, past her apron, and found the wadded blouse she’d brought for demonstration, snapping it out and displaying all its wrinkles. Steam belched from the grated faceplate—perfect timing. She spread the shirt over the board, lowering the plate so that steam gushed over the fabric.

As she worked the fabric across the board, carefully lifting the plate and reapplying it, she pitched her machine: “Every housemaid and lady’s maid spends far too much time on laundry. A device such as this can cut that time exponentially, allowing a maid to attend to other, more important tasks.”

“You expect maids to purchase this machine?”

Eve startled, raising her attention from the fabric. “Ladies, sir. They can provide the machine for their housemaids just as they do other tools.”

“But it’s portable.”

“So it can be used downstairs, upstairs, in any room, and can be easily stored.”

“But presumably a maid could bring it with her.”

Eve clenched her jaw. She hadn’t made a device to pluck money from the hands of maids who barely scraped together a living as it was. Most of them lived better than she did as a laundry girl, but only because housemaids were provided lodgings.

“Presumably, sir, but I reckon the price bracket would be more befitting a lady than a maid.”

He nodded, and then held out his hand, indicating for her to continue.

She lifted the plate again, intending to flatten the last few inches of wrinkles. Left unattended, while the machinist had distracted her, the hot plate had left a light brown stain on the shirt. She sighed inwardly—that meant she was down to three blouses—but finished pressing the shirt. “In just a few moments, a shirt can be perfectly pressed with the portable steam press.”

She plastered on a winning smile, lifted the plate with a rush of steam warming her face, and then presented the shirt, displaying a pressed column of flat fabric, marred only by the faint outline of a brown square.

The shopkeeper scratched the point of his bearded chin. “An interesting machine. Some flaws.”

“User error,” Eve corrected, a flush blooming on her throat. “Most maids won’t be attempting conversation while ironing.”

“True. It’s difficult for women to divert their attentions as such.”

The flush on Eve's throat darkened. "It's difficult for anyone to focus when distracted." She thought she'd kept most of the ire out of her voice, but the shopkeeper raised his eyebrow.

"I'd be interested in purchasing the machine, if you were inclined to sell me the rights to reproduce it."

Eve's eyes widened. He was impressed by the steam press. She knew it'd be the ticket!

"I can offer you a competitive rate, provided you can write up designs for the machine. You can write, can't you?"

"Of course. But I'm not looking to sell the portable steam press; I'm looking for an apprenticeship." She raised her chin, keeping her focus on her prize.

The shopkeeper clucked his tongue. "I'm not looking for an apprentice. And while you have an unusual point of view as a woman—who else would consider making a domestic machine for *maids*?—I don't think your employment would be a practical investment."

"Not practical." She repeated the words slowly, trying to wrap her head around them. "But you'd buy my machine outright and reproduce it?"

"With improvements, of course. I'd want to ensure that an inattentive maid couldn't ruin an expensive piece of linen."

It felt like she'd taken a step back, yet she hadn't moved.

"I could offer you fifty marks for the prototype and another twenty-five for the designs."

Seventy-five marks was more than a month's salary at the laundry. She bit her lip. Her stomach growled. The steam press gurgled, steam still puffing at regular intervals, the machine still working even though no one was guiding it.

"I need a formal apprenticeship."

He shook his head. "You won't find that here. Did you try Clockworks?"

Disappointment settled in her gut, like she'd tied her apron too tightly around her waist. She sighed. Every machinist she'd met had suggested another, but none of them wanted to help her.

"Yes, and The Machine Shop and Drake's and now Bergmann's."

He sniffed, his mustache twitching. "You saved Bergmann's for last?"

"Meaning no offense. I wanted to bring a worthy machine."

He stroked his beard into a point. "Your machine is worthy of refinement, my dear, but it is not the quality we expect from an apprentice."

"I don't have the money for better parts, metal—"

He held up a hand to stop her excuses and then continued, "Your device is a novelty, and while novelties can turn a profit, at Bergmann's we make *necessities* and *luxuries*. Your machine—a machine meant for servants—is neither. Moreover, we make and repair machines much more complicated than this one. I suspect you would struggle to keep up."

Heat flooded Eve's face, and she was certain her anger couldn't be disguised. It was true the machines at Bergmann's were refined and lovely and meticulously constructed, but the majority of the devices on display were less complex than making clockwork strike a flint to heat water.

"Thank you for your candor, sir. I appreciate it greatly." She stuffed the ruined shirt back into her satchel in a wrinkled wad and picked up the steam press as well, jerking her hand away when the hot edge touched her skin. Tears pricked her eyes, but she refused to let him see her pain. She slid the hot press into its felt sleeve and shoved the device in her bag.

He frowned, something like disappointment flicking over his face. "What if I raised the total to eighty marks?"

"I'll take nothing, sir, but my pride."

"Pride doesn't buy bread."

Her finger throbbed where she'd burned it, her stomach so empty it echoed, and as soon as she stepped outside the cold would once again seep through her inadequate coat. Eighty marks could buy a new one, a scarf, and could easily be rationed for months of food. But if she sold her design, she'd never earn more than those eighty marks. She tightened her grip on the strap of her satchel.

"My ideas and labor are worth more than bread. Thank you for your time."

He let her leave without another word. He'd been more condescending than the other machinists she'd met, but he'd fairly assessed her machine. He'd *wrongly* assessed her skill, but he'd been honest in his prejudice and perhaps that was the best she could hope for. After all, she'd presented a mere *novelty*.

The satchel was warm against her side, so she wrapped it in her arms and held it close to her chest, almost as good as a foot warmer in a carriage, she supposed. Wind-up hand warmers! She dug in her satchel to pull out a hand-sized sheaf of scrap paper she'd bound with twine. Flipping past designs for escapements that possibly triggered the stopping mechanism for clockmen, she found a blank page and made a note: *hand warmers—use the same lighting mechanism from the steam press.*

She tucked the notebook back in her satchel and turned on to Schulzestraße, merging with the foot traffic. She had to dodge immediately, darting toward the street and out of the way of two men wrapped in long navy coats and royal blue scarves the color of the State flag. Aside from being near the Aufziehbürg Laundry, she wasn't far from Parliament. Eve often saw varying shades of blue pass through the laundry, bleeding into the water and staining her hands. While Parliament wore their national pride in their clothes, the laundry girls wore it on their skin.

An arm bumped hers hard enough that her satchel popped free of her grip and swung to her hip.

“Excuse me, I’m so sorry.” The voice was soft around the consonants, rich and familiar, but it wasn’t until she saw the bushy red beard that she placed it.

“Winder!”

“Miss Traugott.” He didn’t sound as surprised as she did, and he doffed his cap as he gave a perfunctory bow. “Fancy seeing you here, not far at all from the Aufziehbürg Laundry.”

Eve blushed, but she figured the flush in her cheeks from the cold would hide it.

“On your way to work, then?”

“I am, so you’ll have to excuse me.” She scurried past, lifting the satchel again against her cooling chest.

He matched her pace, long legs making it easy. “Allow me to escort you. Especially after I so rudely bumped into you.” He hurried alongside her, and then had to sidestep out of the way when another pair of walkers nearly collided with him. He caught up again, face red enough to match his beard.

“Are you following me?”

“I’m walking you to work.”

“I meant before now.” She turned her head, giving him her most suspicious look. “Were you trying to find me?”

His hesitation—the mild twitch of his beard, the guilt glassed in his eye—was all the answer she needed. “Aren’t you curious about the clockmen?”

She slowed a hair. They weren’t far from the laundry now and the crowd was thinning considerably. “Isn’t everyone?”

His mouth slanted. “Your curiosity is more intense than the average Aufziehbürger.”

“I’m from Kamberstadt.”

His grin widened; Eve had given him something he'd been after. She needed to watch her tongue more closely around this winder.

"It's more than that, isn't it? You're interested in machines. How they work."

She clutched the satchel tighter, the edge of the steam press and recent rejection cutting into her chest. "What if I am?"

"I'm a winder. Winder Engle. Ambrose," he said, as if remembering he'd never introduced himself. "I know a bit about machines."

Her eyebrow perked in interest, realization suddenly blossoming. He was a winder, a caretaker of the clockmen, the most complicated and impressive machines the State had to offer. And he'd been following her. "Are you suggesting that we be friends?"

He ducked his head. "I'm suggesting we have a common interest. And if you're recently from Kamberstadt, you might not know many people."

"I *know* people." She shook her head, sweeping away a snowflake caught in her lashes. Her mind was working quickly now, calculating the addition of a winder to her resources. What could he tell her about the clockmen? Could he help hurdle the questions that had prevented her from building a clockman? What supplies could she procure for eighty marks? How much exactly would building a clockman cost?

She tilted her head, softening her expression. "However, I could know more people."

That seemed to be the correct response, judging from the way his posture relaxed. "Would you allow me to escort you to the Noble Exhibition this evening?"

Eve's eyes brightened. The Exhibition displayed many wonders of the State and the regions it had conquered—collecting and collating the most impressive and unusual specimens. It sounded like the Metallurgy Festival in many ways, though it was all housed inside one giant building, whose

central glass dome boasted the largest telescope in the world. It was far enough away from the laundry and the train station, situated in Glockner Park, that Eve hadn't even had the opportunity to walk past it. She wanted desperately to attend; she'd seen the posters advertising the Hall of Mechanical Marvels, which included an exhibit called The Evolution of the Clockman. Ambrose was too good to be true, especially since his offer probably also meant that he'd pay for her ticket. Perhaps for a snack as well. Winders must be paid well.

"I'd be delighted, Winder Engle."

"Ambrose, please, especially if we're planning to be friends."

She grinned; she despised formality between friends. "Then, Ambrose, I'd be delighted. My shift ends at eight o'clock and I presume you know where to find me."

A self-conscious laugh escaped his lips. "I'll see you at eight."

She waved to him as she pushed into the laundry, the hot air from the boilers thawing her fingers and setting her mind to planning. She would slip out at dinner and return to Bergmann's, penitent and agreeable, and sell the portable steam press. Eighty marks could buy proper steel, screws, and springs. After she drew the designs for the steam press, she'd begin her clockman, with Ambrose's unwitting input, of course.

With any luck she'd begin building a clockman by the weekend.

CHAPTER THREE

“Come on, you can’t stop the story there.” Eve poked Ambrose’s wrist with her middle and ring fingers. The great steam engine powering The Noble Exhibition churned and pumped beside them, keeping the electric lights bright and powering a carousel that spun in the next room. Tinkling music and laughter drifted from that room and from other exhibition halls displaying the production of leather and lace, a giant timeline with life-sized figures depicting the history and glory of the State, and the flora and fauna collected from the various regions the State military had traveled. Calligraphic signs announced each room, a navy-suited attendant welcoming guests and preventing them from entering with unfinished beverages.

“Yes, yes.” Ambrose lowered his glass, face flushed and shining with laughter and the humidity pumping from the steam engine next to them. “Ainsley ran—I’ve never seen a man move that fast—and I yelled, ‘It’ll wind down! I only wound it for seven!’ Only I hadn’t, as you know.” Eve grinned, liking the way Ambrose ducked his head toward her as he spoke, a confidential aside.

Eve leaned her elbow on the guardrail. They’d been lucky to find a table so close to the belching engine—an engine that Ambrose had dutifully allowed Eve to explain in detail. It was a balm after the disappointment of The Evolution of the Clockman display—an array of machines from simple automatons feigning human actions to greater and more complex machines to finally one fully articulated clockman. Ambrose had confessed in a whisper that the clockman on display (behind glass) was just a shell—no gears inside. She’d been hoping the exhibit would include a practical demonstration.

“I thought Ainsley was going to hate me, but clockmen—they’re not the fastest. So once he’d stopped panicking over the axe-swinging machine walking straight at him, it was easy to get

away. The clockman *did* damage a wall that I had to repair, since I was responsible. Can't dock a clockman's wages, can they?"

"Ainsley's your partner, is that right?"

"The less handsome one, yes."

Eve sputtered into her glass, not expecting that joke. There was much about this evening she hadn't been expecting, including enjoying Ambrose's company. Seventy-five marks in her pocket was also unexpected, mostly because the shopkeeper at Bergmann's had offered her eighty that morning. He'd said the loss of five marks was a lesson in caging her pride. She thought the loss had more to do with him taking advantage of her desperation.

She dabbed at her face. "I didn't notice Ainsley enough to be able to compare."

Ambrose ducked his head, tracing his finger through the cinnamon remains on the wrapper spread out on their table. He'd been kind enough to buy each of them a beer and they'd split bags of popcorn and roasted nuts.

"Your interest skews toward brass and steel."

She shrugged one guilty shoulder.

"What is it that you find so interesting about machines?"

Eve rested her cheek on her fist, the engine puffing steadily beside her, warming the air and the white marble floor. Other patrons chattered around them, southern and Demiri accents slipping in among the Aufziehbürg ones, no discernible pattern to the cadence of their voices, the slap of their feet on the stone, or the random shriek of laughter from one of the children. People crammed around the engine, most of them the pale ivory of a Capital winter, wearing freshly trimmed dresses and evening coats in every hue that passed through the laundry, flowing in and out of the exhibit halls, hands constantly moving, heads turning here toward a taffy pulling machine, there toward a

miniature railroad, totally random, unpredictable. And years from now, months or even days for some, their clockwork—the unidentifiable, terminal thing that keeps their hearts beating and their minds thinking—will one day give out, and no amount of careful cleaning will restore them.

“Because clockwork isn’t this.” She cast her free hand out and sat up straight. “There’s order in machines—timing. Everything has its place and happens in a specified sequence.” She looked up at the enormous engine before her, a monstrosity that was easily the size of a small house, but that had every cog working in concert. “Every component works together and then the machine moves, as expected every time. Machines are made *for* things. They have purpose.” She burped suddenly, and she discovered with a surprising lack of care that she was tipsy.

Ambrose narrowed his eyes, but he seemed to be looking into his thoughts. “I’ve never seen them like that. Purpose, obviously, a machine’s a tool, right?”

“Right!” She licked a finger and gathered the leftover crumbs.

“But I never considered that they’re ordered according to a sequence. That every part is necessary for it to work. Hmm. Interesting.” He scratched his cheek, his nails short and stained with grease even though he’d excused himself to wash his hands. It was a state Eve wished her hands were in more often. A few hours each night were not enough, especially after returning home from the laundry, fingers cramped from marking, fighting exhaustion, fiddling not finishing, laboring over something to impress the unimpressible, the dogged machinists who were uninterested in domestic devices and only sold machines of “necessity.”

“What does that even mean?” Ambrose asked.

Eve’s mouth shaped an O and she belatedly realized that at some point her aggravation had slipped from her thoughts and into words.

“It means,” she said, putting aside her embarrassment, “that whatever I build next has to be . . . masculine.”

“Masculine. What’s a masculine machine?”

“Not a steam press.” Or any of the other domestic devices Eve had constructed. She supposed it was difficult when the sources for her inspiration consisted of the laundry, taking care of her sick father, and the machines he’d invented for her mother.

“What are you dreaming up, then? You’ve already got an idea for something, don’t you? Ah, I can tell from the way you’re smiling—you have it.”

“Ha!” Eve’s laugh flattened. She didn’t need Ambrose, or anyone else, knowing too much about what she was thinking about building. “I’m sure I’ll have something soon.”

Ambrose tapped his finger against his temple. “You have something tinkering up here. Come on. Tell me a story now, Miss Traugott.”

Her satchel felt exceptionally light without the steam press in it and it was easier than usual to find her notebook. She flipped pages, considering what to show Ambrose, but he reached his hand out, fingers stopping hers on a cross-section of a clockman’s shoulder. She’d been working through the chopping mechanism, trying to fit it in with an earlier doodle for how the clockman lifted steel beams for the railroad.

“You’re an artist as well?”

Her minuscule doodle appeared more utilitarian than artistic. “Just schematics. Designs for machines.”

He turned the notebook, his fingers lightly tracing (but thankfully not smudging) the pencil mark outline of the shoulder. “My youngest sister is an artist. She makes portraits, but usually not of clockmen.”

Eve bit her lip and wiggled her fingers to ask for the notebook again. “Drawings or paintings?”

“Drawings. I’ve had to sit for her a few times while she practiced.” He slid the notebook back around, allowing Eve to skip to the more innocuous design for the steam press lighting flint.

She tapped the drawing, circling the lighting flint. “I’m thinking about reusing this design for wind-up hand warmers.”

A smile tickled Ambrose’s beard. “You’ve been feeling the chill, have you?”

She sighed, nodding. “It is freezing here!”

“Why do you think I have this?” His fingers danced on the tip of his chin. “Nice and cozy under this beard.” She took a drink while Ambrose leaned over, examining the drawing closer. “So this is in a different machine?”

“Mmm.” She wiped her mouth, setting aside her empty glass. “The portable steam press. To make the hand-warmers I’ll have to shrink the lighting mechanism. And of course I can’t use steam for the heat.”

He pulled a face of disgust. “Wet pockets.”

“Exactly.”

Another clockman drawing shadowed the page she was on, the dark gray pencil lines visible when she pressed down on the corner of the page, the clockman bleeding up and through the paper, her hidden agenda revealed. She lifted her finger, letting the image fade.

“You’ll figure it out. I believe in you.”

“You believe in me?” She flipped the notebook shut. “You hardly know me.”

Ambrose covered her hand and the notebook, stopping her from pulling it away. “I know the way you love machines.”

His hand was calloused, lightly resting on hers. The skin on the back of her hand goose-pimpled. “Love isn’t the same as skill.”

“But passion is needed for any pursuit. I’m positive that you’ll rise to any challenge put to you.”

Any challenge—that was what she was counting on, wasn’t it? That her ambition would take her to the limits of her skill and be her best teacher. She pulled her hand from under his, sliding the notebook off the table and tucking it into her satchel. “Are you challenging me, then?”

“I am.” He held both hands out, palms up. “Make a wind-up hand warmer, Eve. They’ll display it in the next Noble Exhibition! I believe in you.”

She bit her lip, trying not to grow used to the idea that one of her inventions might wind up in an exhibit hall. “What if I make something else instead?”

“Whatever you make next—it’ll be impressive.”

She wished any of the machinists, or her father, had had the kind of confidence Ambrose unconditionally offered.

“I might need help, you know. I don’t know everything about clockwork.”

Ambrose leaned on the table, arms crossed. “What do you need to know? Maybe I can help.”

Eve ducked her head. She never thought he’d agree so easily. “Would you really help me?”

He shrugged, then drained the rest of his drink. “Helping is what friends do.”

#

“Hello, friend.”

She’d done it—or started it, rather—in less than a month, she’d completed the first part of her clockman.

Eve bowed the clockman's head toward her in greeting. Her smile reflected across his face, filling the small space where a human mouth would be. The high forehead gave him an innocent look she was certain matched the faces of his State-made cousins.

Starting with the head had been a bit silly—there wasn't any discernible clockwork in it save a spring at the neck that helped absorb the shock of hammering in a railroad spike. If she failed at executing the other complex clockwork that made up its movement, the head would be nothing more than a very large, and slightly unsettling, paperweight. But Eve couldn't get the clockman's face out of her mind. As caught as she was by their movement and complexity, she'd also been drawn to their featureless faces, to a being that had the shape and size of a man but whose thoughts came from someone else. Her gut told her that to understand her clockman she'd have to first look him in the face. Now she could.

She tossed the head side to side, the light of the gas lamp glowing and then sharpening to a point when it caught the ridge for the nose. The face was silver, but the rest of the skull was a patchwork quilt of brown brass, dark gray steel, and red copper cobbled together, with ragged soldered stitches. The finished head in her hands, she felt more confident than ever that she could build her clockman.

It'd taken days to procure the correct materials, days to complete the initial designs, and then weeks to create the wood forms and bang out the head, but it was all worth it to finally have one finished component. Now that the raw materials were stored under her bed and at the back of her armoire, she was confident she could begin assembly in short order.

"Eve?" Ambrose's voice came from the top of the stairs.

Eve fumbled for the burlap sack and shoved the head into it, tossing it under the workbench with several loud clanks.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she called back. “Startled. Give me a minute and I’ll come up. It’s blistering hot down here.” She wiped her forehead, as if to convince herself that was the only reason Ambrose should stay at the top of the stairs.

“Mrs. Braun said I might find you tending the boiler.” Ambrose shuffled on the stairs, but he didn’t come down any farther.

“I’m always tending the boiler,” she said, her statement nearly true. She used the basement boiler room for her workshop, but the old boiler needed almost daily adjustments, frequently burning too hot or too cold, making it easy for hard-working tenants to catch a cold.

Eve stooped and crawled under her makeshift workbench—a board balanced on two barrels, squeezed in the small space next to the boiler. She snagged the burlap and then crawled to the corner under the bench. Two loose bricks came away easily, and she stuffed the sack in the opening behind them. The bricks didn’t fit back into place neatly, but someone would have to be looking for her hiding place to find it. She’d have to find other hiding places—larger ones—as she put together her clockman, but that was a problem for another day.

“Is it already seven-thirty?” It had been nearly four weeks since Ambrose stumbled into her on her way to the laundry and they’d fallen into a routine. Ambrose collected her in the morning and escorted her to work, eager to hear about whatever progress she’d made or questions she had. Sometimes on the weekends they visited a park or promenade, Eve quizzing him about clockwork on each walk. So far she’d been able to juggle working on her clockman with dreaming up complications for the wind-up hand warmers, but eventually he’d ask to see her prototype, so she couldn’t put it off much longer. She resolved once again to start work on it when she got home.

“It’s a quarter to seven.” He took a step down the stairs, and Eve hurried up, dusting herself off and straightening her clothes to make sure she looked presentable. She grabbed her satchel, coat, and new scarf, a necessary deduction from the seventy-five marks she’d earned for her steam press.

He shuffled on the stairs again, coming down one more step. “I hoped you’d allow for a deviation in our routine.”

Eve came up the stairs quickly, preventing him from wandering down farther. “A deviation?”

“Mm, I’ve arranged for a special tour.” His winter’s jacket looked freshly laundered, buttons shining even in the low light of the stairwell. “Ainsley and Bristed are occupied this morning, so I thought you might enjoy a quick tour of our Clockman Storage.”

Eve gasped in surprise. “Really?”

He nodded, his grin wide. “Better than the Noble Exhibition, I promise.”

She patted his arms, encouraging him to turn around and ascend the stairs. “What are we waiting for?” He laughed as she continued to push him, hands on his back. “Go, go, go!”

Greta—Mrs. Braun to Ambrose—was standing at the top of the stairs when they emerged, her gray hair pulled into a tight neat bun, her green dress freshly trimmed since Ambrose had been making regular appearances.

“It’s working now?”

“Running a bit hot, but I’ll adjust it tonight. Everyone should be nice and toasty through the day.” Eve wrapped her scarf over her head.

“Always tinkering with the boiler.” Greta patted her own wrinkled cheek—it was a gesture that endeared her to Eve; so similar to her mother’s reaction every time Eve disassembled a clockwork toy. It was shorthand: ‘what am I going to do with my daughter?’

“It’s a delicate machine,” Eve said. “It requires a lot of attention.”

“Machines aren’t the only things that need attention.” Greta’s eyes cut from Eve’s face to just over Eve’s shoulder where Ambrose stood. Eve’s stomach twisted at what Greta must be implying. She’d hoped no one had noticed what was happening between the winder and her; she didn’t want that kind of reputation. She should have had a chaperone, but in Aufziehbürg her options for a chaperone were limited.

Eve tried to disguise an uncomfortable groan and then waved goodbye, grateful that Greta wasn’t scandalized by their friendship. Ambrose, his cheeks pink, held open the door, letting Eve pass first. He shut the door firmly behind them.

“Mrs. Braun, huh?”

Eve pressed her lips together. “Indeed.” Ambrose offered her his arm and she took it. He covered her hand with his, keeping her fingers much warmer than her threadbare gloves allowed. Practicality kept her hand sandwiched in this grip.

“She says we make a handsome couple.” His voice was soft on the edges, confidential and affectionate. She hated every awkward reminder that Ambrose had feelings Eve didn’t return.

“Do we? I still feel like too much of an outsider to be coupled with anything in Aufziehbürg.”

Ambrose’s face reddened, and once Eve realized her suitor’s interpretation of her words she reddened as well.

He patted her hand. “Give it time. You’ll feel like an Aufziehbürger soon enough. Up here, on the left.” They turned the opposite way from the laundry, heading toward the more opulent end of downtown where white-columned government buildings, banks, and the main telegraph office resided. The change of scenery distracted Eve enough to ignore the twisting in her stomach. She

knew what she was doing, leading him on, letting him hope for something more between them, but she preferred the illusion of simple friendship that encompassed most of their time together.

Ambrose led them through a wrought iron fence alongside one of the government buildings and he waved to a guard just on the opposite side of it. The guard looked up from his newspaper, but didn't say anything about Eve.

"Is it common for winders to bring in guests?"

Ambrose tilted his head toward her. "It's common to slip someone a few bank notes."

Eve laughed uncomfortably; she didn't need strangers knowing too much about her interest in the clockmen. "I didn't think you'd resort to bribery."

"We do what we must." It was a joke to Ambrose, but a precept for Eve.

He guided Eve through the courtyard and into a building, down a hall, and into a vestibule where she expected another checkpoint, but no one was manning the booth. They stepped through another door, outside again, the skyscraping spire of the Parliament building just next door. Parliament was off Schulzestraße, about four blocks down from the laundry. Eve never would have guessed she worked so close to where the clockmen were hidden.

"Here," he said softly. Across the lawn was another building, this one labeled by a small weathered sign that read *Clockman Storage*. He pressed his hand against her back, urging her through the open door, checking over his shoulder. Small windows near the ceiling let in enough light to keep Eve from stumbling, but it wasn't until Ambrose turned on the electric lights that Eve could see the backs of inert clockmen—rows and rows of them—standing ready for their orders.

"Come on." Ambrose led the way, dodging the steel beams and boxes stacked along the walls, keeping a brisk pace. Eve trailed behind when she noticed one of the boxes was open, sets of

complicated clockwork movements cushioned in packing material. They were small and shiny, some internal component.

She picked up one of the movements, the front end dangling as it rotated on an axis. It was a joint! A wrist, if she had to guess from the size and range of motion. She tested the joint, peering inside the gap to see what components were used and how they were assembled. The movement was largely what she would have expected, but some components were shiny silver—aluminum, she guessed, not steel. She'd never be able to afford aluminum components.

“Come on,” Ambrose coaxed, almost at the front of the warehouse. “We have time, but not much.” He waved her to come and then kept walking, facing away from her.

She didn't have time to consider it, so she stuffed the wrist in her satchel. She hurried to catch up to Ambrose at the front of the chilled room, her bag much heavier.

The high ceiling kept the heat far above their heads. It felt like the laundry when it was quiet and still, about a half hour before the day started. Another door, large enough for a cart to pass through, was latched shut. Judging from their orientation in relation to Parliament, she assumed the door opened on Schulzestraße. She knew exactly where their Clockman Storage was hidden, and she knew there wasn't a sign on the building's front announcing what was housed in this warehouse. A sign like that, she would have noticed!

The clockmen stood at attention, facing her now, light reflecting from their faces and shoulders.

“There are so many.” Eve reached out to the closest one, running a finger over the raised silver scrolling on the front of its chest. There was a mark on its left shoulder, a barely visible etching. She hadn't noticed it the last time she'd been this close to one. She looked at the clockman

to his right and noticed a different etching. She ran her fingers over the etching, detecting what felt like a number four. “Numbers?”

“That’s how we tell them a part.” Ambrose put his arm around the clockman’s shoulders, his arm hitched upward to close the height difference. “The State has to keep track of its investments somehow.”

Simple, a design element she could appreciate. She’d have to pick a number that meant something to her when she etched one into her clockman, maybe seventy-five, to commemorate the seventy-five marks Bergmann’s had paid her for the steam press.

Eve ran her hand down from the clockman’s shoulder to his hand, feeling the rivets, seaming, and joint gaps that allowed for flexibility. There was so much to take in, almost too much as she tried to memorize the veneer that would make the most convincing copy. The clockman’s hand was fully articulated, fingers able to bend backward farther than a human’s. She held the hand up, palm to her palm, the first joint curling over the tips of her fingers. The digits were thinner and more ladylike than she would have thought—replicating them would be a challenge.

“What do you think?”

Eve let out a breath. “That this is amazing. Thank you.” She dug into her bag carefully, searching for her notebook and pencil, trying not to draw attention to her acquisition. “Do you mind if I make notes? Sketch?”

Ambrose shook his head. “Not at all. But I thought you might want to see me wind one. Especially after The Noble Exhibition disappointed you.”

Eve’s eyes brightened; Ambrose was much too good to her.

“Please?” She ignored the guilt creeping up her arm from her thieving fingers. The State had plenty of those wrist joints—she’d only taken one. And it was just for study.

Ambrose chuckled, reaching for the clockman key on his hip. “You’ll want to come around on this side.” He stepped behind the clockman she’d been investigating. The back of the machine was covered in divots—covered keyholes that kept dust out of the machine, but allowed a key to wind its gears. Ambrose flipped a toggle at the clockman’s waist. “This holds the gears while you wind them, so he doesn’t start walking away immediately.” He carefully inserted the key—an eight-inch rod—into one of the slots on the clockman’s back, the one near his hip. “Each slot corresponds to a different set of gears.”

“I’d guessed that much.” She scribbled notes, trying to capture as much as she could without taking her eyes off what Ambrose was doing.

“Naturally, just confirming your suppositions.” His voice tickled with amusement, but Eve couldn’t be bothered if she was being teased, not with the mechanical feast in front of her. “This one is for walking.” Ambrose twisted the key slowly, counting each time it clicked. The key made less than a complete revolution.

Ambrose withdrew the key with a faint sound of a catch closing, flipped the toggle, and the clockman raised its right leg, taking a step forward, following with his left leg and taking exactly three steps before halting a few feet before the door, still and ready for the next set of orders.

Eve circled the machine and pressed her ear against its chest. A tick grew slower and fainter as she listened to the distributor wind down. She couldn’t tell exactly where it was located—somewhere in the center, she guessed, so any set of gears could tap into it.

“Now, I’m only trained in basic maintenance, but I’m confident most machinists don’t hug their machines.”

Eve rolled her eyes. “I’m listening to the clockwork. You can find out a lot about a machine by listening to it.”

“Really?” Ambrose moved in beside her and pressed his ear to the clockman’s chest. His nose was still bright red from the wind. It was quiet for a few long seconds, their breathing the only noise in the warehouse. “I don’t hear anything.”

Eve straightened, putting a step in between them. “The clockwork wound down.”

“Oh, well. What was it you heard?”

She hesitated a moment, not sure how much she should confess. “The winding down in the secondary gear set. I think it’s set somewhere . . . here.” She pointed to the clockman’s stomach, a logical place given that he had no need for digestive organs behind the pins and pistons that likely made up his abdominal wall and accounted for his ability to bend, lift, and walk.

“A clever observation.” The voice came from behind, startling Eve and Ambrose. Somehow they’d both missed the door opening.

“Statesman Bristed,” Ambrose said, pulling himself to attention. Eve curtsied, keeping her head bowed once she identified the speaker as the same man who she’d met on the train platform a few weeks ago. She had assumed he was some sort of über-winder; a statesman belonged in the Parliament next door, not a machine warehouse.

“Winder Engle, I’m surprised you have a visitor this morning. Are you enjoying your tour? Miss Traugott, as I recall?”

“Yes, sir,” Eve said, her head still bowed. Her satchel hung heavy beside her.

“Ainsley.” A second winder stood next to Bristed, also at attention. Eve’s eyes slowly drifted up, straightening her head so she could see. “Could you help remind Winder Engle of his duties and restrictions while you run through your paces this morning?”

“Yes, sir.”

Eve winced. It sounded like Ambrose was going to get in trouble for their little outing. More trouble if the Statesman searched her before she left. Ambrose was still standing at attention, no particular emotion reading on his face.

“Miss Traugott, I hope you understand that you’ll need to bid Winder Engle goodbye for now.” The Statesman’s eyes fell on her once again, his brow thick and furrowed. “I can escort you out.”

“Of course,” Eve said, proud when her voice didn’t shake. “Thank you, Ambrose. This was a rare delight.”

He nodded, lips pressed together. She swallowed, worried for him, more so than for herself, she realized with wonder.

Statesman Bristed held out his arm. “Miss Traugott.” She took his arm, giving one last look to Ambrose. Ambrose winked at her, barely moving the rest of his face, and she left with the Statesman, heading to the backdoor once again.

“I hope you understand,” the Statesman said as they slipped through the warehouse, “that you cannot tell anyone about what you’ve seen or discovered during your explorations.”

“I’ve seen very little, sir.” She tensed as they approached the open crate of joints, hoping the Statesman didn’t keep such a close eye on clockman operations that he’d notice the missing piece.

“Winder Engle knows that I’m interested in machinery. It was nothing more than that.”

“I’m sure you have nothing but the best intentions in mind. Especially concerning Winder Engle.”

Eve stiffened, the cold creeping up her extremities; she was certain it had little to do with the weather.

“He’s early to leave the dorms and nearly always away on weekends. Your presence this morning explains it conclusively.” He smiled thinly, a snake preparing to strike. “I’ll forgive Winder Engle this time, but I expect you to respect the State from this point forward. Unless you’re a State employee, the only way for you to examine a clockman up close again will be to visit The Noble Exhibition.” His eyes slid over her, making her feel like she’d been doused in oil. “Is that clear?”

She swallowed and attempted a brave face. “Perfectly.”

They exited the warehouse and stepped into the still empty courtyard, crossing at a trajectory that ended at the corner of the building rather than the door. Bristed continued in silence, his head held high, shoulders back, scarf wrapped tightly around his neck. Eve pulled her satchel to her side, imagining she heard the wrist joint pinging against something.

“There’s a ball at the end of next month,” he said suddenly. “A State affair. Graduation, of a sort. I’m sure Winder Engle would be inclined to ask that you attend with a word from me.” He stopped just in front of a gate, similar to the one Eve entered with Ambrose, although no guard stood watch over this one and it was well hidden from the street. He dropped his arm and put his hands behind his back, expectant.

“I’m not angling for anything,” Eve blurted.

“You are.” His words were crisp, and she expected his hand to shoot out, seize the strap of her bag, and upend it, spilling the evidence of her angling on the yard.

The corner of his mouth twitched before he spoke. “Please agree to accompany Winder Engle when he asks. I’m sure it will repair any damage done by this excursion.” His tone was congenial, but ice filled his eyes, sending a shiver down Eve’s spine—the cold had nothing on Statesman Bristed.

He turned, walking away at a slow pace. “Please see yourself out.” He continued his stroll, seemingly unaware of the hammering in Eve’s heart.

Eve gripped the wrought iron for a moment, trying to settle herself. He hadn’t searched her. She still had the wrist. She hadn’t made this worse.

She glanced back. Bristed walked rigidly with his hands clasped behind his back: a statue gliding through the courtyard.

She hoped she’d learned enough from this visit with the clockmen because it seemed she wouldn’t get another opportunity to see them. Unless Ambrose was willing to risk a second visit? Eve mentally shook herself; no, they’d been caught and even if he volunteered one, she wouldn’t agree to it, not after witnessing Bristed firsthand.

She would have to be more careful with Ambrose’s involvement, and when he asked her to the ball, she would have to say yes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Thankfully no one had noticed the missing wrist joint and Ambrose hadn't gotten into much trouble for his generosity. About two weeks after their adventure, Ambrose resumed his normal routine, walking Eve to work and escorting her somewhere on the weekends. He'd caught her up on what had happened to him (a few "voluntary" watchman shifts) and Eve lied about progress on the wind-up hand warmers. Naturally, she'd spent every spare hour dissecting, documenting, and rebuilding the wrist joint she'd stolen, followed by fabricating her own and crafting a hand. She knew she ought to dispose of the evidence—at least the stolen evidence—but as time passed the threat of detection had worn into forgetfulness.

Eve patted her brow with a hand towel, smiling at the in-progress clockman spread across her workbench. She had pieced together nearly a full arm, fingers to shoulder. She couldn't replicate the long thin fingers of the State's clockmen, but the thicker, mannish hands she'd wrought were more appropriate for lifting heavy loads. The head, of course, crowned a pipe next to her, supervising her progress.

She held the forearm to her eye, sighting down its length to ensure that the thumb lined up correctly. The underside of the arm gaped open, its shaped skin sitting to the side. She would have finished the forearm clockwork first, but keeping her eyes focused on the intricate clockwork became more difficult as the long, late nights continued. Shaping sheet metal over a wooden form took less finesse.

Satisfied with the alignment, she curled each finger in turn, checking the gears and ligaments that turned and contracted with each motion.

"You've never looked better," she told the head.

The clockman's cheeks reflected the crimson of her blouse.

She was close to finishing the left arm—two weeks to go, maybe less. With the State-made wrist joint as a guide, it had been easy to figure out her own version, even if crafting some of the parts had been difficult. The wrist joint had helped her discern the elbow, and from those joints she should be able to extrapolate the ankles and knees. The legs could easily take as long as the arms to build, if not longer, same with the interior movements connecting limbs to winding mechanisms to distributor—not to mention she still had to finalize her designs for the hips and shoulders. She'd be lucky if she finished assembling the whole clockman in another seven months. And that optimistic estimate assumed she could continue to operate on three hours of sleep a night, a prospect that was becoming less tenable.

Getting an apprenticeship was supposed to be easy—or at least easier than this. Build a device, impress machinists, apprenticeship—maybe Eve had overestimated her skills. Maybe she should work on the wind-up hand warmer while it was still winter. Maybe she could sell it to Bergmann's if it still wasn't impressive enough to earn an apprenticeship—she'd need something to continue funding her clockman piecemeal like this. Maybe she could sell everything, quit the laundry, and cut her clockman production time in half. Absolutely.

She sighed and pushed the clockman's chin with her finger, causing the head to spin and bob on its stand.

Her father's scratched pocket watch told her it was half past two and time to clean up for the night. She left the head out to watch while she put away her tools and carefully wrapped the arm in old crumple-creased newspapers with headlines like SOUTHERN RAIL EXPANDS and CLOCKMEN MARCH SOUTH AS RESISTANCE MELTS. The wrapped arm went into a sackcloth stuffed with still more newspapers, perfectly disguised for carrying upstairs. She finally hid

the head in the hollow under the table, giving it a pat before she tucked it in, and then trudged upstairs to her small bedroom.

The silhouette of a dress startled her when she entered her room, but when she lifted the gas lamp she identified the familiar blue striped silk hung on the armoire to air. The ball. Of course. Tomorrow she'd waste her Saturday hours dressing and primping, and in the evening she'd waste her workshop hours blending in with the State's elite. She had immediately said yes when Ambrose had invited her, perhaps too eagerly given the smile that lighted his face for the remainder of their walk to the laundry. The week between asking and event had been filled with shy glances that left Eve feeling more and more awkward. Neither dressing in her mother's hand-me-down dress nor the idea of being fed could elevate her excitement above the dread of spending an evening tolerating Bristed's chill and dodging Ambrose's romantic hints. She would have a long, exhausting evening ahead of her.

She hid the arm under the bed, alongside some of the more expensive pins and gears she'd purchased at Clockworks, the only machinist willing to barter, and then climbed into bed. The dress stared at her from the foot of her bed, and Eve closed her eyes, visualizing the distributor to ease her apprehension of the next evening.

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Eve fidgeted with the sleeve of her dress, tugging the lace over her elbow yet again. She felt ungainly and large, even with the modest bustle, and out of place amid the other dresses that fell straight and narrow from tightly corseted waists. Striped silk had also apparently fallen out of fashion—or so she'd been discreetly told by a baroness—but the dated dress was still appropriate, given that nearly every one of the guests wore some shade of blue, pledging their sartorial allegiance to the State. The gloves, another heirloom from her mother, hid the grease Eve couldn't quite work

from underneath her nails. The fake pearl buttons were nearly indistinguishable from the real thing. Most of the guests were more charmed by her presence than offended, and a few ladies (one also clearly from the South, although she'd softened her accent) had offered advice on navigating dinner. Several had also inquired how Eve and Ambrose had met and if Eve expected the courtship to be long. They had accepted Eve's stammering as nerves and hadn't pressed further, though the lone councilwoman lamented that Eve had no living relatives to approve the match. As if Eve couldn't decide for herself whether or not she wanted a husband.

She kept Ambrose to the side of the dance floor, distracting him at the end of every song so he wouldn't have the opportunity to ask her to dance. He finally caught her unaware, lost in a moment of watching the dancers twirl, just like the wind-up toy dancers she had at home.

"Did you want to dance?"

Something like horror must have crossed her face, considering how quickly he backpedaled.

"Dancing isn't my strong suit, mind. You might not want me as your partner on the floor."

Once again, Ambrose was too good to her. "I'm comfortable just watching."

He squeezed her hand resting on his arm, and together they watched the dancers spin. Unlike her toy dancers, the woman sculpted in the bulky, modest, caged-style dress that suited eleven years ago when the toy was made, the women whirling around the dance floor had trains that draped from tightly fitted bodices and there wasn't a crinoline in sight. The living couples glittered as they twirled, jewels and beaded gowns and hairpins flashing in the light of shimmering crystal chandeliers, making everything sparkle.

Ambrose tapped her hand, which was always on his arm, a grounding presence in the midst of marble columns, the arched ceiling, impeccable manners, and the highly polished dance floor reflecting everything.

“Ainsley,” he said softly, and then led her through the double-wide glass-paneled doors and into the gallery where settees and couches hid in alcoves and between columns. Ambrose moved briskly, tapping the shoulder of a gentleman with brown, neatly trimmed hair and a jacket exactly like Ambrose’s. When Ainsley turned, he laughed and clapped Ambrose’s arm.

“It’s nice to finally meet you.” Ainsley inclined his head and saluted Eve with his drink in lieu of a bow. Ainsley stood just taller than Ambrose, with a few more years softening his face and rosy cheeks. The alcove in which they stood was directly across from a fireplace, which suited Eve fine since her dress had originated in warmer climates. “I see your interests extend beyond clockwork and gears.” He elbowed Ambrose. “I told you, every woman worth her salt has a dance frock.”

“Not all of them have one as lovely, though.” Ambrose’s cheeks were red, but she didn’t think she’d seen him hold his head as high before.

Eve sipped her wine, not liking the focus of this attention. “I’m out of fashion, or so I’ve been told, but you’re both very kind.”

Ainsley snorted. “Jealous. Don’t worry about them.” Ainsley stepped back, narrowly missing the blue velvet settee, to assess Eve a moment, his eyes shifting to take in the couple. “I didn’t know what to make of you—finding you inside Clockman Storage—but this makes sense.” Ainsley’s face was flush, happy for his partner (or perhaps he’d been through his wine faster than Eve).

“Why wouldn’t my interest in clockwork make sense?” She tried to keep her voice passive, but Ambrose squeezed the hand on his arm, a gentle reminder. She glared at Ambrose as she said, “Machines are fascinating even if I don’t understand them.”

Ainsley barked a laugh. “I have a fair feeling you understand them more than you let on. But we all have our secrets, don’t we?” He thumbed at his nose and laughed again.

“So what will the two of you do once we ship out? It’s not long now.” Ainsley pulled a brass watch from his pocket and flicked it open, barely glancing at it. “What, two more weeks? Though, we might be delayed given the circumstances.”

Ambrose shifted his weight away from Eve; her hand rose from his arm.

“Ship out?” Eve kept her voice steady this time, mentally trying to work it out—graduation, of a sort, Bristed had called this ball.

Ambrose cleared his throat. “We haven’t discussed it yet, Ainsley. Thank you for deciding when I should broach the subject.”

“What subject?”

“Our departure from Aufziehburg,” Ainsley said jauntily. He leaned closer, lowering his voice. “Sorry, friend. I thought you’d been more forthcoming with the woman you secreted into Clockman Storage.”

“*You* said we all have our secrets.” Eve crossed her arms, not caring that the stance was hardly ladylike.

Ainsley held up a single finger. “Perhaps I should be elsewhere.” He gave Eve a brief nod matched with an apologetic half-smile, and then stepped away, slipping through the nearest set of doors.

Ambrose swallowed thickly, his neat four-in-hand tie shifting with his discomfort. “I wasn’t purposely keeping it from you.”

“Save for the fact that you hadn’t told me.”

Ambrose ducked his head, properly chastised, it would seem.

“Two weeks? Two weeks and you’ll be gone?”

“For awhile, yes.”

A cascade of connections followed, snapping together all at once, renewing her surprise at the news. “Ainsley’s been training you to build the railroad. You’re going south.”

“Yes. The contracts allowing the State to continue the rail farther south have been finalized. Ainsley and I have been assigned to that region. Some of the mayors are here tonight—Giftholz, Abbrücken.” They’d been introduced to the Abbrücken mayor, Sunter, and her husband. Sunter wore a light-colored sash over her dress, a royal blue brocade that fully covered her shoulders and arms, embellished with embroidered peacock feathers. Her hair was pulled up in a Nordlund style, but they were Demiri, tawny skin standing dark against the sea of pale-faced Nordlunders. Eve had seen enough Demiri in the West Edge that their appearance hadn’t struck her as odd until now.

Ambrose pried Eve’s fingers off her elbow, and she uncrossed her arms. “I’d put in for the travel before I met you.” He said it exactly as a love-struck suitor should—soft, cajoling, vulnerable—and that tenderness shook the remaining surprise and anger from her, focusing her on dispassionate reality.

“But—how am I supposed to complete my work without you? I still have so many questions.”

A frown momentarily crossed his features before he chuckled and squeezed her hand. “Clockwork, right.” The tenderness leached back into his voice. “You can write to me. I’ll answer every letter in detail.”

“But.” It wasn’t just losing the winder that bothered her. Ambrose was her friend—her only friend in the Capital. Who would take her to the promenade or to wander through The Hall of Mechanical Marvels yet again? Who would listen to her complaints about the difficulty of shaping cams and gear teeth without the aid of an eye loupe?

“I hadn’t meant to tell you like this,” he whispered. He brushed her chin with his finger, meeting her eyes. “I’m sorry, Eve.”

The apology, the emotion in his voice and eyes, the realization of how far they’d come as friends and in Eve’s project—Eve put a hand to her hip, taking a steady breath, suddenly warm. She went to the settee and sat, putting a little distance between herself and the fire. Ambrose followed immediately, sitting beside her and taking her hand.

“Are you all right?”

Her eyes flicked up to his—an innocent icy blue even in this dim light. “Surprised. I should have realized it sooner myself.”

“You don’t know winter regulations. A real friend to you would have explained.”

“I’m not an idiot. I should have asked where you’d be assigned. It was an obvious question and I didn’t even think to ask.” There were other things she’d never asked Ambrose. He had a sister, maybe two, an artist and a laundry girl; did he have any other siblings? Were his parents still alive? Had he grown up in the Capital? Shouldn’t a friend—a real friend, as Ambrose had said—know these things?

Before anything more could be said, someone struck a knife against a glass, the high-pitched ring drawing everyone’s attention. They moved with the others in the gallery to the doors. Across the room, the Minister of State, the host of the evening, stood at the center of a semi-circle along with other dignitaries including Statesman Bristed and a woman in a beaded blue dress. The woman caught Eve’s attention partly because her dress was one of the most elaborate Eve had seen, but also because her skin was a beautiful golden brown. Despite the fact that most Aufziehbürgers tended toward pale or rosy complexions, Eve was certain she would stand out in any crowd. Her bearing,

shoulders back, gaze relaxed, a healthy glow in her cheeks and brow easily made her one of the most distinctive women at the ball.

“Welcome, honored guests, friends.” The Minister of State addressed everyone, his glass raised in a toast. A sapphire brooch glittered in his lapel.

Ambrose touched Eve’s arm and pulled her back a step. His eyes were focused on the Minister, but he quietly addressed Eve. “I don’t think you’re an idiot. I would have liked to tell you under different circumstances, is all. Can you forgive that?”

Every bit of self-consciousness dropped from her posture. Of course she could forgive him—no matter what she knew about him or how selfish she’d been in her scheming, somewhere in all of it she’d grown fond of his company. She opened her mouth to tell him that, but everyone raised their glasses and she hurriedly followed suit, tripping over the toast everyone else seemed to know.

Ambrose stiffened, coming to attention as Bristed stepped forward. Bristed adjusted his dress coat, a style with double the usual number of brass buttons and a metallic blue sheen that twinkled in the electric light of the chandeliers. A congenial expression polished his sharp features, mitigating his severity, enhancing his approachability—a mask for public appearances.

“While this dinner is in honor of our new friends from Giftholz and Abbrücken, we are also here to honor one of our own. Winder Engle.” Ambrose patted her hand as he pulled away from Eve, leaving her by the doors and joining Bristed at the center of the room. His jacket didn’t shine like Bristed’s, but he looked just as stately. “Winder Engle has completed his training and is being promoted to Senior Winder.”

Eve applauded with the others, proud of him, even if his promotion meant he’d be leaving her.

“He has confessed to me that he’s excited about his new assignment, not least of all because he’s heard your southern towns are quite warm.” Bristed paused for a laugh; Mayor Sunter’s husband miming a chill. “I assure you, we won’t let our winders linger idle in your mild winter—even if the clockmen do most of the work. Our winders are faithful to the State and its contracts.” Bristed bowed slightly, but his eyes had found and were locked on Eve. That same chill crept up her spine as when he requested that she attend this function. “The State hopes you will find your new train stations to be satisfactory.”

The audience applauded again and another councilman took over for Bristed, making a few more public comments—something about payments, taxes, and the whole endeavor being good for commerce. An urgent whisper distracted Eve, the tone catching her attention before the words filtered into her consciousness.

“Security’s tightening on storage.”

“They still haven’t located the missing joint?”

The word “joint” sliced through her attention. Eve swayed, catching the speakers from the corner of her eye. They stood in the gallery, just visible through the glass of the door. One was a statesman—Langford, perhaps; she was having trouble keeping them straight, but he had hair as red as Ambrose’s and carried a cane—the other was dressed more simply, perhaps another winder.

“There are some suspects, but the first interviews haven’t produced anything.”

“Bristed is handling it?”

“You know how hands-on he is.”

“Keep me apprised.” The statesman tapped his cane and stepped through the doors, cheering with the other guests for whatever had just been said. He passed within a foot of Eve as he made his way to the semi-circle, and Eve clapped to blend in.

Her heart kicked—they'd discovered the missing wrist joint she'd taken from Clockman Storage. And they had a list of suspects. Even if they hadn't discovered it was missing until recently, it had only been three—nearly four—weeks since Eve's private tour. If Bristed was responsible for the list of suspects, Eve had no doubt her name was on that list. Why not come to her immediately, then? Was he waiting for the right occasion? Was he waiting for tonight?

Ambrose came toward her quickly, breaking away from the other guests—she froze. She was on the opposite side of the room from the exit to the front hall. Would running even matter? Ambrose knew where she lived and where she worked.

"Can I have a word with you before dinner?"

Dinner—people were drifting to the dining room, chatting, amicable—it was an unlikely setting for an arrest—and Ambrose, with his wide and innocent eyes, an unlikely interrogator. She nodded, and he led her back into the gallery.

"You will forgive me, won't you?"

She let out a breath. That was a question she was willing to answer.

"Of course. I'm mostly embarrassed I didn't work it out on my own." She linked her fingers, squeezing the seam of her glove. "And sad. That you're leaving."

"Telling you was admitting that I was leaving, a notion which is less and less appealing the more time I spend with you." Ambrose took her hand. It was warm even through the glove.

"Ainsley says winding keeps us on the move, but we check in to Aufziehbürg every few months—sometimes more often if they need us to make reports in person. So, I'll be back." He squeezed her hand. "I mean, if you'd wait for me."

Eve wasn't sure how to respond. He was her friend, and despite how she'd treated him, despite using him for his knowledge and access, she didn't want to mislead him so directly. He

wasn't a bad match, but she'd never go through with it. Not to mention that by the time he returned, Bristed might have arrested her for theft. It wouldn't do anything for his career to have a fake fiancée in prison.

If she couldn't be honest about the wrist joint or the clockman she was building, she should at least be honest about her feelings. The only consolation was that given how he was still speaking to her, he didn't know about the investigation. He didn't know about her guilt.

Bristed appeared at the door then, that same placating mask stretching his features, still playing his game. "I thought I saw you slip away." He extended his arm, a ruby cufflink glinting. "Miss Traugott? May I escort you into the dining room?"

Ambrose guided her hand toward Bristed, and while Eve wanted nothing less than to get closer to Bristed, she took his arm when prompted; it was better to do as Bristed wished and act as though she was uninformed.

Bristed leaned close to Eve, whispering nearly in her ear as they walked. "I assume you'll miss your suitor once he's left Aufzieburg."

"He must do what the State requires of him."

The corner of Bristed's mouth curled at her words. "We are all responsible to the State."

The dining table stretched the length of the room, two crystal chandeliers dividing the table into thirds, illuminating every shadow so that the silverware, glasses, and guests all glistened. The Minister of State sat at one end, his wife at the other, with dignitaries clustered around them both. Of the three vacant seats, two were side by side, across from Ainsley. The third open chair was to the left of the Minister. Eve knew Bristed was connected, but she hadn't realized exactly how high his connections went. The statesman she'd overheard and the woman she'd noticed during the speeches were immediately to the left of Bristed's seat.

Bristed paused to pull out Eve's chair, leaning in again as she sat. "I trust you to remember our responsibilities to the State."

Eve flushed at the statement, thinking of prison, and when Ambrose took his seat next to her, he raised his eyebrow, but politely looked away when she shook her head. Bristed must know about her involvement in the theft, or at least strongly suspect it. She should cut her losses, dispose of the wrist joint, and destroy the arm. But if she did that, she might as well be in prison. Her money was running out and even tending the boiler wouldn't cover the difference between what Eve earned as a laundry girl and rent in a respectable boarding house. She didn't have any other options for gaining an apprenticeship—her only way was her clockman.

She could find a more secure hiding place for the arm, dismantle the State's wrist joint and lose the parts over a few days while taking the long way to work. With little effort she could turn Bristed's hesitation to her favor.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Eve, Eve. It’s morning, child.” The voice broke through Eve’s drowsiness, but the hand on her back startled her awake. No one usually woke her up.

She sat up straight, her neck protesting when she tried to turn her head. She adjusted her whole body instead. “Greta.” She was still in the boiler room—Greta was also in the boiler room. Eve had been exhausted the night before—exhausted and distracted—reliving every word she’d overheard at the dinner party a day ago, trying to figure out why Bristed still hadn’t questioned her. She’d looked at her watch around two o’clock, but she must have drifted off on her stool.

“Greta?”

Greta’s eyes had locked on the workbench where Eve’s completed clockman arm was spread out, its guilty hand grasping a hammer. Greta had never seen the boiler room transformed into Eve’s workshop. Eve had always been so careful to keep one eye on her watch and to tidy up before leaving. Her warnings about the extreme heat were usually enough to keep everyone away, even if it was freezing outside. Of course Eve hadn’t been awake to give those warnings this time.

“I’m sorry I didn’t clean up.” She considered explaining the arm as some component of the boiler—maybe a new automated regulator Eve was installing—but the lie was flimsy as ash. “I *have* been putting time into the boiler, but I’ve also been tinkering on my own inventions. I didn’t mean to lie to you.”

Greta rubbed her fingers, like she was trying to get them warm despite the fact that Eve was sweating. She worried the wedding band around her finger, a tin ring Mr. Braun had always promised to replace. He never had the chance, but his soldier’s pension had provided Greta the means to purchase the boarding house outright.

“Greta,” she tried again when Greta still didn’t respond. “What time is it?”

“Nearly half past seven.” Her voice was breathless, eyes still locked on the arm. “Winder Engle will be here shortly.”

Eve was cursing herself for this mistake. She had no time to get ready, hardly any time to clean up her workshop, and she still couldn’t get a read on Greta. At least for once she was well rested.

“Greta, I should have asked if I could use the space for my inventions.” Eve tilted her head, looking for some kind of reaction. “I’m sorry. I hope I haven’t abused your hospitality.”

Her eyes finally flicked to Eve’s; it was like a light coming on in a house, the difference between vacant and home. Greta patted her own cheek, the familiar, indulgent gesture relaxing Eve a hair. “You should have mentioned it.”

Eve stood up, trying to hide her tension. She began clearing away the tools. “I should have. I’m sorry. I wasn’t sure who to trust in the Capital. It’s all still so new to me.” She pried the clockman’s fingers from the hammer and set the tool aside. “You’ve been so supportive. I should have confided in you.”

“It’s difficult.” Greta eyed the arm, the look on her face more curious than suspicious. Trust—that was what she wanted.

Eve clutched the burlap sack in her hand. “Would you like to see it?”

“The fingers moved,” Greta said. “You made it?”

Eve licked her lips, pressed them together, and nodded.

Greta brushed the index finger of the machine, and then pushed it hard enough to enact the first joint. Her hand startled away when it moved.

“It looks like one of theirs.”

Never had Eve been so aware of the danger of what she'd been doing. Stealing hours in a boiler room, subtly quizzing Ambrose on his winding responsibilities, hiding every scrap of evidence of her clockman—none of those actions had the same weight of this moment, the tottering scale that would be thrown off balance by a drop of sweat.

Greta took a step back, a step closer to the stairs. "You'd better hurry up. It's almost half past." She turned toward the stairs and then turned back, patting her cheek again before holding the wall for balance as she went up.

Eve collapsed onto her stool, holding the burlap over her eyes. It could all crumble in a moment, and hadn't yet only because Statesman Bristed hadn't questioned her like he should have. She took a deep breath, the dry, woody scent of the burlap helping to steady her, and then cleaned up the workbench. She dashed upstairs, stowed the arm under her mattress and freshened up as quickly as she could.

Ambrose leaned against the banister, leafing through a notebook, when she stumbled down the stairs, pulling her scarf around her neck. Usually Greta chatted with Ambrose if he was waiting—Eve had expected to find him explaining that Eve had told him she needed more time to consider the proposition he'd made at the State ball—but Greta wasn't around.

"Running late?"

"A bit." She craned her neck, ignoring the tug of pain, to look past Ambrose down the hall to the kitchen. Sometimes Greta pulled together a snack for Ambrose before he left. So he'd associate the boarding house with something sweet, she'd always said.

"I haven't seen Mrs. Braun this morning. Is she feeling well?"

"I'm not sure." They were five minutes late already. "One moment." Eve went down the hall, but the kitchen was empty. The dining room had the usual suspects—three of the four other

boarders currently in the house—but no Greta. Eve opened the door to the boiler and called down the stairs, but didn't hear any answer. It was obvious that Greta had left the house. Eve returned to Ambrose.

“Everything all right?”

Eve shook her head slightly. “I'm not sure.”

#

Concentrating at the laundry was nearly impossible. It was a miracle the boiler didn't need repairs or Eve would have come away with burns. As it was, she marked an entire bag of laundry with the wrong number and Mrs. Bleier had to sort the items from the inventory that accompanied the bag.

Mrs. Bleier gave her a talking to, but Eve only heard half of it, preoccupied by Greta's disappearance and what it meant. She had two strikes against her—the clockman arm and the pilfered wrist joint. If Greta had gone to report Eve for the arm, they'd know about the missing joint.

And even if Greta didn't report Eve today, she could on any other day. Any day when the bills were piling up, a boarder was late on rent, and the standard thirty marks for information was too good to pass up.

Eve almost couldn't blame Greta if she turned informant.

The safest thing for Eve—the safest and most heartbreaking thing—was to dismantle the arm and dispose of the joint. The parts—especially the pins and specialty gears—would be harder to fabricate, but it was too risky to hold on to it all now. With her designs she could rebuild, maybe commission new parts, once the attention had cooled. The designs would be damning, but she could hide them more easily. Maybe here in the laundry, or she could pry up a floorboard in her room.

She watched the clock more than her work, itching for the shift to end. She was out of her chair as soon as the clock struck eight and out the door before she had her coat properly buttoned. She froze when she saw Ambrose standing in the middle of the sidewalk. He'd never walked her home before.

He stood at attention, like a councilman had just passed. "I thought we should spend as much time together as possible." He licked his lips, eyes glancing to the side, but then Hanna and Therese came past, giggling good night.

"Oh." She buttoned her coat and wrapped her scarf around her neck.

"I'm being presumptuous."

"No, I—" She'd spent all day worrying about how she had lied to Greta and how much those lies had cost her. She couldn't confess everything—not about the clockman or the joint, certainly—but she didn't have to pretend to consider his proposal. Maybe one truth would lay the groundwork for another.

She took a deep breath. "I'm happy to see you, but . . . as a friend, Ambrose. I'm sorry, but I don't feel the same way about you that you feel about me."

"Ah." He looked away again as a carriage clacked past, the horses grunting. "I'm not exactly surprised."

"You're not?"

He sniffed. "You've been distracted since the ball."

She turned her head down, agreeing with his assessment.

"Allow me to walk you home, regardless." He held out his arm, a waning smile on his face. Even in heartbreak, the winder was as considerate as ever.

She took his arm, trying to silence her other concerns and focus on distracting Ambrose.

“What does Ainsley have you doing to prepare for your trip?”

He kicked a rock from their path, sending it skipping ahead of them, stopping just before a bound stack of newspapers next to a stand. IRON IMPASSE, the headline proclaimed.

“We were assigned to other tasks today. Not much to do with the travel.” He looked straight ahead, but bowed when they passed a lady and gentleman. Eve didn’t recognize either, but it was possible one or both were members of the Cabinet.

“Not running clockmen through their paces?”

“Concerned about the clockmen, are you?” His last words were hard, very un-Ambrose. She couldn’t blame him, given what she’d just confessed.

“Always concerned with clockmen, aren’t I?” She laughed uncomfortably, eyes on Ambrose. His shoulders echoed her laugh, softening that hard edge, though his eyes looked sad.

“Your focus has always been singular.” He looked down, their feet no more interesting as they crossed to her street. “How’s the progress on the hand-warmers? We were so busy with the ball, I forgot to ask.”

“Stalled,” Eve said. It was the truth, of a sort. More honest than many of the other responses she’d given him over the past few weeks, fabricating problems on the fly, spontaneously designing in response to his questions.

“Stalled.” He coughed, but skepticism seeped into his voice. He appeared taller somehow. “Too bad, I’d think you could use it now.”

“It is cold,” she agreed, but the ice growing in her stomach made her think he was talking about something else. Her feet slowed as they approached the boarding house. Eve had never noticed the crack in the pavement, jagging from the street to the front stoop like a warning. Most of

the upstairs windows were dark. Johanna—the teacher who lived next door to Eve—was usually home by now with a lamp burning brightly in the front window. A curtain in the downstairs window swayed like someone had recently abandoned his watch.

She stopped. She couldn't force her feet to move a step farther. The chill crept through her arms. "Ambrose?"

She tightened her hand on his arm instinctively. He drew in a sharp breath, something passing in his eyes—some unreadable expression. The frozen feeling took her entirely. He knew; they all knew.

The door opened, a yellow bar of light spilling across the stoop.

"Was your interest only the clockmen?" he whispered. It came out in a rush, like he'd been waiting to ask it.

"I—Ambrose, I." Her tongue thick in her mouth, mind spinning out of control—there was nothing she could do, no way out. Ambrose had led her into this trap without a word of warning.

"Come along." He covered her hand, a gesture that had previously been uncomfortable but had never hurt. Now his hand pressed on hers, keeping her from pulling away, from running.

"Good evening, Miss Traugott." Bristed stood just inside the door to the sitting room, his expression unreadable. "I believe we have something to discuss."

"Statesman," she said dully. Ambrose closed the door and stood in front of it, head bowed. She wasn't sure if he was a blockade or just embarrassed for his part in her duplicity.

Bristed walked into the sitting room, gesturing to the yellowed couch. "Please sit." He continued past the coffee table to a high-backed velvet chair. A cloth draped over an arm-shaped lump in the middle of the coffee table. Eve's heart sank.

She took a seat on the edge of the couch, fanning her skirt out and carefully unbuttoning her coat. Despite living here for over five months, she had never sat in the room. It smelled of mildew and was overly warm and humid, positioned directly above the boiler room. A shelf of books sat across from her, the window behind her. She tried to steady her breathing, hands fidgeting in her lap, fighting the urge to glance at her former friend who leaned against the doorframe, like he couldn't stand up on his own after her betrayal.

"I'm innocent." The words peeped out of her mouth, a thought she'd been testing, trying to believe. As if there was any question after they'd searched her room and found the arm.

"You possess a rather loose definition of the word." Bristed adjusted his cuffs. He didn't look at Eve as he continued, still fussing with his sleeve and his square-cut carnelian cufflinks. "We have the arm and the missing wrist joint. Oh, don't feign surprise, you are less skilled as an actress than you are as a thief."

Eve turned away, her future was slipping from her fingers, but she wouldn't allow Bristed to see that anguish in her face.

"I find I must proceed with caution," Bristed continued, "because either you are a talented but foolish machinist, or you are entirely too cunning to not be in the State's employ." He arched an eyebrow, and Eve straightened, almost offended by the implication she might be foolish.

"Despite the stolen parts, the arm is clever, creative, and demonstrates adaptability." Bristed's lips thinned but for once his smile seemed truer. "I believe in nurturing talent . . . wherever it may lie. Ambrose tells me you've been seeking an apprenticeship."

She glanced to Ambrose now. He gazed straight ahead—eyes razor sharp on a faded landscape hanging on the opposite wall. She'd get no subtle hints from him on how to navigate this craggy conversation.

“I’ve been to the machinist shops,” she confirmed.

“I spoke with a few of them. You have a reputation for domestics.” He didn’t put the sneer on “domestics” the way some of the machinists had.

“I have greater range than just domestics.”

“Oh,” Bristed said, leaning forward. “You clearly do.” He stood up, clasping his hands behind his back. “You are lucky. The testimony against you was flagged and sent to my office. This affords us all an opportunity.”

An opportunity? Eve leaned forward.

“I cannot let your actions go unpunished. You will be taken into custody, however whether that is for imprisonment or for your employment will be your choice.”

Eve raised both eyebrows in surprise. “Sir?”

“We have all the evidence we need to apprehend you for theft. The arm could get you into considerable trouble as well, depending on how closely it resembles clockman anatomy. And I suspect if a State Machinist were to dissect it, the resemblance would be uncanny.” He brushed back his hair, tucking loose strands back into the carefully crafted sweep. “So, you have a choice. You can face trial—and be found guilty, I assure you—or you may accept an offer to become my ward and enter the State Machinist Program.”

Eve’s eyes widened. Did she hear him correctly? “That doesn’t seem like a difficult choice.”

“It isn’t meant to be.”

Eve’s eyes flicked to Ambrose, but still his gaze was focused on the wall. “What about my arm?”

“It’s evidence.”

“But if I accept your offer?”

“Insurance. A reminder that I will not forget your origins and that at any time I can change the terms of our deal.”

“Wouldn’t you get in trouble for not turning me over now?”

Bristed’s mouth twitched. “My dear, you could have stolen that wrist at any time. Who would believe your word over mine?”

Ambrose met her eyes this time. Something tightened in her chest as she stared into those crystal blue eyes. He didn’t nod or give any other acknowledgement or direction. After a moment, he looked away.

Eve straightened her shoulders, holding her head a bit higher, and she forced air into her lungs. “Well, then. I’ll be your ward.”

“An encouraging choice that displays some intelligence.” Bristed held up his hand and flicked his fingers, cuing Ambrose. Ambrose snapped to immediately, going out the front door. The retreat was probably a relief for him—some tension inside Eve’s chest also gave.

Bristed paced to the window, slowly humming a familiar anthem Eve couldn’t quite place.

“What will happen next? And what about Ambrose?”

“Concerned for him, are you?” Bristed peeked between the drapes, the door to the hall wide open and unguarded, though there was no reason for Eve to run. Not anymore. “With no trial, I can privately assume Winder Engle was duped by your feminine wiles. I believe the previous punishment is sufficient. Provided that you hold to your new responsibilities.”

So the arm wasn’t the only collateral Bristed would hold against her performance.

“And me?”

“You’ll pack your things and we’ll take you home. Ah, there we are.” He exited, and Eve rushed to the window. Four large gray horses stamped the ground, harnessed to a black carriage adorned with the twisting vines of the State crest.

“I have to take you to pack.” Ambrose appeared in the door, flushed.

Eve came to him, dreading what she’d agreed to. “Ambrose, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He took a step backward, funneling her toward the staircase. “I’m certain you are.”

“Ambrose, please—”

He held up a hand and adjusted his cap, becoming official, an officer of the State. “I would prefer you call me Winder Engle, Miss Traugott. It’s only proper.” A clockman carried a warmer expression than he did.

“Of course, Winder Engle.” She led the way to her room, ignoring the opening pit in her stomach. Each step up the stairs was a new recrimination—she’d broken his trust, she’d caused this rift, this incarceration was her fault, her mistake.

Ambrose stayed at the door while she packed; of course it didn’t take her long. She reached under the mattress for the box of parts she’d hidden next to the arm, but it was missing. “Did you—?”

“Confiscated.”

That was that, then.

She stood, smoothing out her skirt. “I never meant to hurt you,” she whispered. She clung to that fact, knowing, without a doubt, that it was truth.

“You lied to me. How else did you think it would end?” Ambrose blinked and then looked away; his voice composed when he spoke. “Are you finished?”

She swallowed, accepting that he was right. She’d had some idea of what would happen and proceeded anyway. She’d been so focused on her goal, even after Ambrose had become her friend.

The intention of hurt wasn't the point: she'd betrayed his trust. "I have some tools in the boiler room that belong to me."

He followed her downstairs where she reassembled her toolkit, trying not to think about who had scattered it in the first place, trying not to imagine Ambrose tossing her wrenches, tweezers, and hammers across the floor. She knelt to pick up a fallen file and checked the hiding place for the head. The bricks were still in place, not flush against the wall, but not moved. They hadn't found that stash.

She stood, dusting off her knees, leaving the head behind. Maybe she'd come back for it one day.

Ambrose escorted her out of the building. Greta was nowhere to be seen—none of the boarders were, come to think of it. Eve didn't spare the house a second look as she climbed inside the waiting carriage, sitting across from Bristed. Ambrose handed her luggage up to the driver and then shut the door before Eve could even consider a goodbye. The driver shouted and the carriage rolled forward, pulling away from Ambrose, the boarding house, and Eve's old life.

CHAPTER SIX

Bristed's house loomed before her in silhouette, the electric lights of the city illuminating the haze of smoke Aufziehbürg belched even this late in the evening. They were farther from the river, a handful of streets over from Eve's familiar paths; here the street lamps clustered closer together and most of the houses were framed with gated fences and brittle grass fighting to survive the winter. From between sandwiched houses and over the eaves of peaked roofs, Eve picked out the waterfront factories and the Parliament spire. While they hadn't ridden far—a much shorter trip than Eve would have expected—she felt she'd entered another world. It was quiet here—not as quiet as Kamberstadt, but it was an awkward in-between of faint city murmur and creaking branches, the smell of snow sharp and clear upwind from the factory smog. It was rich here. Not as rich as the Minister's mansion had been, but there was money in the air.

She mounted the stairs leading to the porch, a careful hand sliding up the rail. The door yawned open, yellow light spilling out from electric bulbs. Of course a Statesman had electricity, while Eve's boarding house only had gas lamps—just another sign of how far removed she was from the world she'd known. Kamberstadt didn't have any electricity, not even at the State-constructed train station. They'd had a telegraph office only a year longer than the railroad. Bristed probably had a telegraph wired directly into his home, or one of those electric refrigeration boxes she'd seen at the Noble Exhibition.

Eve, suddenly overcome by a claustrophobic press on her chest, hesitated at the door.

“Miss Traugott?” A woman stepped from the door. Her white ruffled blouse stood out against her golden brown skin; the pins in her hair were the same blue as the State's colors. It took a moment for Eve to recognize her as the woman she'd admired at the ball.

Eve opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out, and then Bristed mounted the stairs at a sedate pace, hands clasped behind his back.

“Miss Traugott, allow me to introduce my sister, Miss Maryam Vengas.”

Siblings? Eve never would have guessed; they couldn’t look more different. It wasn’t just the color of their skin; it was the shape of their noses, the set of their eyes. Their hair was the same shade and texture, Eve supposed, and their eyes the same color. There was something in the mouth, too, in the shape of their wide lips, and in their bearing that implied they could be from the same stock.

“Maryam tends the household affairs,” Bristed continued, without calling attention to Eve’s bemusement, “and will be your chaperone while you stay with us.”

To further their familial resemblance, Miss Vengas’s hands were clasped in front of her, a perfect complement to Bristed’s standard pose. Her cheek ticked in a smile, but her jaw remained clenched. By her bearing, Eve had thought she was much older, but now that she saw her face, Miss Vengas only appeared a few years older than Eve, twenty-five or twenty-six, clearly the younger sibling by ten years.

“Charmed, Miss Traugott.” Her voice was harder on the consonants, as if she hadn’t grown up in the Capital. Curious. Eve had always assumed Bristed was born and bred to be a statesman. Maybe it was just Miss Vengas who grew up away from the Capital.

“Eve is my preference.”

“Informal.” Miss Vengas’s eyebrow arched on her high forehead.

“I told you,” Bristed said as he passed them both.

Miss Vengas turned in the doorway, the backlight shadowing half of her face. “Well, come on, then.”

Eve gripped the railing tighter, fruitlessly wishing Ambrose were with her. The Ambrose from before, of course, the one who didn't know she was a thief and who didn't understand how she'd used him. "Just taking a moment," she said, relieved that her voice didn't shake.

"Take all the time you need, although we'd rather shut the door if you'll be much longer." Miss Vengas took a step back, her hand on the doorknob. "It would also be preferable that you allow Mr. Richards to enter with your luggage." Miss Vengas jerked her chin, and Eve turned, finally noticing the pile up behind her.

She decided that it was consideration for the valet rather than embarrassment that sparked her to action. Eve took one final deep breath and then uncurled her fingers from the rail. The palm of her hand was stained with soot.

The inside was exactly what Eve had expected. A red and white Lindisfarne tile stretched the length of the open foyer, offsetting the mahogany wainscoting. Just beyond the foyer, a circular stairway curved around a crystal chandelier, up to a second floor. The red carpet runner spilled down the stairs, the end of it blending perfectly into the tile—Eve couldn't help but notice that Bristed's home appeared as meticulous and manicured as he was. The light from the chandelier splintered and painted the walls with a colorful dance, the light actually moving along the walls and floor. Upon further inspection, clockwork movements revolved, turning the shaded bulbs slowly in opposite directions. They pumped up and down between two tiers, rising like a carousel.

Bristed cleared his throat, one finger curled to his mouth. "Is it too ostentatious?"

A bulb spun upward, flashing with every quarter turn, and then slowly sank into the frame as the bulb next to it shot up.

"It's remarkable."

Bristed's lips curved in a smirk. "Perhaps I'll let you study it one day."

She perked up, surprised by that generosity, and took a second look around the foyer. A grandfather clock stood at the far end of the entrance hall. It had a second ring on its face that expressed what looked like the phases of the moon and a glass front that teased Eve with its naked clockwork. Other ticks and tocks, in discordant rhythms to the pendulum, surrounded Eve, coming from other rooms. She suspected Bristed owned many devices she'd like to study, with or without his permission.

He turned and touched his sister's elbow. "Could you take Miss Traugott to her rooms and get her settled?" The tone of his voice shifted ever so slightly as he spoke to his sister, warm, honest. To Eve he said, "I know you're not used to having access to—or need for—a lady's maid, so I've asked Maryam to assist you in dressing for dinner. If there's anything else you require, she or my valet can assist you."

"Thank you, but I don't need assistance dressing for dinner."

"Judging from your ensemble at the ball, I should say you do." Bristed arched an eyebrow, completely ignoring Eve's aggravated huff.

"Now, now, that's uncalled for," his sister gently scolded. "Let me take you up to your room." Miss Vengas took the stairs so quickly that Eve was breathless once they'd reached the top. "Don't mind Julian. Your frustration only encourages him." She turned her head just enough for Eve to catch the corner of a smile. "A placid face is the best defense in a house such as this." She hesitated just a moment. "Eve, since we'll be spending so much time together, I'd like you to call me Maryam."

Eve barely restrained an eye roll. "Informal."

"Somewhat."

Somewhat—Maryam was likely to report Eve’s every move to Bristed. She wasn’t a chaperone: she was a spy. If only Eve hadn’t been so set on her clockman idea. Aufziehbürg had been imperfect, a struggle, and she’d gone hungry, but she was surviving, safe and warm with a roof over her head—and Eve had never had such independence. In Kamberstadt she’d assisted her mother in her nursing duties (perhaps the apprenticeship her parents had hoped for Eve, cut short when Eve’s mother passed), and then later she’d been the primary caretaker for her father. Being responsible for only herself and her own whims was a relief, no matter if her whims resulted in problems.

She’d sacrificed it all when she let her ambition get the best of her—her quest for a clockman obscuring all else. Worst, she’d sacrificed Ambrose, her only friend in Aufziehbürg, a casualty of her blind enthusiasm. He’d probably never forgive her.

Maryam led them through a door on the opposite side of the stairs. They entered the suite through a sitting room, but there was a bedroom just beyond, the four poster and canopy visible through the open doors.

“These are your rooms.”

“My rooms?” Eve put extra emphasis on the plural. She hadn’t expected Bristed to provide her with anything so lavish. In fact, she hadn’t been sure the carriage ride wouldn’t end at a jail cell. She suspected that threat loomed over every future disappointment and failure. Even with all its luxury, it wasn’t difficult to imagine the rooms as little more than a gilded cell.

“There’s a chamber beyond, where a lady’s maid would sleep. If you find that you should require one, I’ll inform my brother and we’ll hire someone to see to your needs.”

“Oh, oh no, nothing of the sort.” Eve hadn’t even had a lady’s maid when her family had money. After her mother died, her father gave up the machine shop, and the money dwindled; the

staff had been reduced to a maid-of-all-work while Eve nursed her father through his decline. And at the boarding house she'd grown accustomed to picking up after herself. The fewer maids fluttering around her, the more comfortable Eve would be.

Assuming she could be comfortable amid furniture as extravagant as this. The conversation area, arranged around a flickering, half-roused fire, consisted of a sofa with a sweeping rosewood frame, a green armchair with the sculpted curve of a wine glass, and a side table inlaid with shimmering abalone half circles and birds. To add to the upper-class air, the silver tea set was embellished with abalone and the sugar jar had a clockwork key protruding from it, though Eve wasn't sure if it was decorative or functional.

Heavy drapes covered the windows, another settee and side table positioned in a corner underneath a lamp decorated in mosaic glass birds. A bookcase dwarfed the wall opposite the door, stocked end-to-end with thick leather-bound books and curios, including an impressive collection of ceramic figurines, eggshell bodies shaped into ducks, kestrels, peacocks, fish, and turtles. Black beaded eyes protruded from every face. Some were painted lifelike colors: a mask, on a stand by itself, captured light green eyes and a smirk that looked all too much like Bristed's. She gave the bookcase a wide berth, already plotting where to hide the mask once Maryam had departed.

Maryam lifted a bright red and yellow pillow from the settee, turning it and replacing it so that the flowers in the design grew upward. She fussed with trinkets on the side table as well, turning a boy and girl so that they faced each other.

Something medicinal tinted the air that reminded Eve of her father, particularly in his last year of illness. No daguerreotypes or paintings revealed who the previous owner of the room might have been, but from the care Maryam took to rearrange some of the figurines, Eve could guess the rooms previously belonged to her mother.

“Would you like to inspect the room? The housemaid freshened it this morning, but it should be arranged to your liking.”

She freshened it this morning? Bristed hadn’t asked Eve to be his ward until an hour ago—how had he been so certain Eve would agree? Not that the alternative was very appealing, but she could have said no. She turned slowly, eyeing the room, suspicious of its luxuries and the strings that must be attached to each one.

She stepped through to the bedroom, losing her breath a moment. The wardrobe, twice the size of the wardrobe she’d had at the boarding house, was adorned with a wooden peacock ornament. It wasn’t identical to the one that had decorated her parents’ wardrobe, splitting over the double doors, but it was similar enough to startle her. The peacock on her parents’ wardrobe represented the first repair entrusted to Eve. The right side of the decoration rose just higher than the left, and when her mother was sick of staring at it, she’d handed Eve a screwdriver, and shut her inside with only a sliver of light to find the screwheads, her mother shouting directions from outside. Eve had treasured that wardrobe since.

She ran her finger over the peacock’s head, pressed her nail into the cut of his beak and neck, and then traced up into the pattern of his feathers, remembering when she’d stand on tiptoes to touch the topmost feathers on her mother’s wardrobe.

“It’s a handsome piece,” Maryam said, startling Eve’s hand from the door.

“It is. Everything’s fine in the room.” She tucked her hands behind her back and turned to Maryam, not quite processing the ostentatious four-poster with the drooping canopy or the matching vanity laid with a basin and silver-plated grooming instruments. A smaller version of the fireplace from the sitting room warmed the foot of the bed.

“Mr. Richards will bring your trunk shortly. Dinner is at eight o’clock every night. I’ll be up to help you dress an hour before. If you’d like to freshen up, I can have some water brought up.”

Would throwing water on her face wake her from this dream? If so, she was game. Still, she didn’t want to force anyone to haul water upstairs. “I could go down to where there’s a tap?”

A cough died in Maryam’s throat, however her face didn’t give her away. “It’s no trouble to bring up a pitcher.” She slipped out a door Eve hadn’t even noticed, going straight from the bedroom to the hallway, the slat railing circling the stairhall just beyond.

With the door shut and Maryam gone, the rooms felt larger, draftier, and so very far from everything Eve had known.

#

When Eve had packed her mother’s old gowns, it had been for partly pragmatic, but mostly sentimental, reasons—the dresses would fetch a fine price if she were hungry enough to sell them. She had hoped to not ever sell them, but in the last few months she’d considered the option more seriously. What she hadn’t considered was that she would have worn two of them and would have a proper Aufziehburger scrutinizing her mother’s prized possessions.

Maryam quickly sorted through the dresses on top—the simple cut, dull fabrics Eve wore every day, for every other occasion—and then seized on the four dresses below, including the striped silk Eve had worn to the ball. She threw the blue striped silk to the side and hustled Eve into her least favorite gown, a pink silk dress with a V-neck bodice and elbow sleeves. The sleeves were a bit longer on her than her mother, the Mechlin lace cuffs falling almost to her wrists. Maryam made quick work with them, folding, pinching, and manipulating the fabric so that they sat almost properly. With the adjustment, and ignoring the color and the lace and the embroidered roses on her arms and hips, the princess shape was flattering, and the V-neck more closely resembled the

necklines Eve had seen at the ball. Maryam proclaimed that it would do, the implication being that she would outfit Eve much better, given her druthers.

“We’ll get you appropriate clothes soon enough,” she’d said, before hurrying Eve downstairs.

At dinner, Maryam and Eve sat opposite one another, Bristed at the head of the table. The dinner was similar to the dinner at the ball, with footmen (Mr. Richards among them) laying each course before the diners. Eve sipped from her glass each time a new plate arrived, glancing over the lip of the crystal to see which utensils Maryam selected. Ambrose had guided her through the State dinner; Maryam could unwittingly guide her through this one. Eve could scarcely remember her mother quizzing her on table etiquette when she was a little girl.

Bristed dominated the light conversation, nearly a monologue with only three diners, one of whom wasn’t acquainted with State affairs.

At the fourth course, Eve blurted, “Is dinner like this every night?”

The conversation stopped abruptly, making Eve regret her question. “Would you prefer this was all in your honor?”

She sat up straighter. Not that Eve had imagined a meal held on her account, but she had wondered if Bristed were trying to impress or intimidate her in some way.

“We eat according to the station of a statesman.” Maryam didn’t look up as she sliced through her duck. She made her bites so small that they must not have tasted like anything at all.

“You may be used to picking at bread crumbs, but you’ll grow accustomed to this lifestyle as well.”

She pushed her plate away. She might have been hungry, but she’d done better than bread crumbs most nights. “I don’t need you to save me.”

“You’re right.” Bristed set his fork on his plate, tines down. “I suppose they would feed you sufficiently in jail.”

She blanched, belatedly remembering her place.

“Ah, you do remember the alternative.” He picked up his fork again, taking a bite while Eve gathered herself.

“I do, but I’m still not certain what I’m doing here.”

He sniffed. “I thought I’d made that clear. I’ve conscripted you into government service. You will of course have to lie about the circumstances surrounding your appointment, but I suspect you’ll have little trouble with that.”

She hated the reminder that she’d lied to Ambrose almost as much as she hated that Bristed could hold it over her head at any moment.

“But what do I do? Tomorrow? I have a job at the laundry. What do I tell them? I haven’t quit.”

“You have, actually. I sent a letter of resignation on your behalf.” He flipped open a pocket watch. “It should have been delivered already and your supervisor will lay eyes on it in the morning.” He fiddled with the watch fob while Eve boggled at the audacity, again forgetting that this arrangement was in lieu of jail.

“I should have liked to quit myself, to say something to the girls.”

“Don’t pretend you had friends there. You may lie to winders, but you’ll not lie to me.”

Eve crossed her arms, deciding unequivocally that she wouldn’t eat another bite. “Since I’m unemployed, when do I start the State Machinist Program?”

Bristed's thin smile stretched across his face. "I see why you've hardly eaten, you're already full of anticipation. Maryam, you've made the necessary arrangements, correct? And we have an escort for Miss Traugott?"

"Of course. There were some questions from the testing facility, but your letter clarified all matters. They are expecting Miss Traugott in the Joint Assembly room in the morning."

Eve's breath quickened. The very next day she'd be among other machinists and begin building clockmen.

"Is tomorrow early enough, or should I rouse the foreman for your orientation at once?"

For once Bristed's sarcasm couldn't touch her. "Tomorrow sounds fine."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eve was still tying her new red apron over her State-issued skirt and blouse as the foreman led her down the hall to the Joint Assembly room. She'd heard about it already, when Foreman Bedford had droned about the various workrooms during a long orientation that made her miss lunch. Eve had tried not to be too disappointed when he said she'd start in Joint Assembly—she'd already figured out most of the joints in the arm from the stolen wrist. The other rooms sounded more interesting—Appendage Assembly where they made feet, hands, heads, and arms, and the best room, Clockman Assembly, where they finally assembled the full clockman puzzle. That room must be the noisiest and most active, with machinists consulting or working together to heft heavy arms into sockets or pull the torso up to a standing position. She'd worked alone so long, she relished the idea of openly collaborating with other machinists. Of course she'd had Ambrose to discuss her plans, but he'd been an unwitting collaborator, and she'd had to use subterfuge to get the information she needed (or, at least, she had told herself she had to; in retrospect her rationale wasn't as convincing). Here, everyone would be working toward the same goal, helping new machinists learn the trade. That was the benefit of the State Machinist Program, wasn't it? Learning from other machinists?

The door to Joint Assembly—just a few doors down the hall—was marked with a red frame and a small scripted plaque that identified the room. A green frame farther down the hallway marked another assembly room, she assumed.

"You'll be spending your time here," Foreman Bedford said. He held the door for Eve, allowing her first unfettered look at the assembly room.

The room felt stretched, tall with catwalks crossing the span that would have been a second floor, and long with two workbenches taking the majority of the space. Pipes were exposed along the walls and ceiling, though they seemed to be cold—Eve was used to the pumping steam of a laundry, and, looking around and finding a drain in the concrete floor, deduced the room might once have housed a boiler. The pipes were so familiar she imagined the whistles and creaks and shouts before she realized that aside from a constant click and clank of slotting metal parts together, the room was quiet.

As she moved farther into the room, it was easier to see that the two long workbenches were several workbenches pressed end to end. On one side of the room were machinists like Eve—all men, all of a similar pale-skinned, dark-haired look, dressed in matching rust-colored coveralls and Eve’s same red apron. Some sat two to a workbench, others had gaps between them, though the reason wasn’t clear since each workstation took up the same amount of space. The wooden table tops were gouged, machinists all sitting on the interior side, a collection of containers and tools and a halo of light from an overhead lamp forming a half-circle around their work space. A large box sat at the left of each station. On the opposite side of the room, ten other workers dressed in blue fluttered around the tables, pushing boxes back and forth. Eve wasn’t sure what their blue uniforms meant, but half of them were women in royal blue dresses with an embroidered light blue apron and more than half had darker complexions, ranging from ebony to amber brown, representing a more complete cross-section of Aufziehbürg.

“Statesman Bristed vouched for you—said you could handle any work—but everyone starts on ankles.” Bedford’s voice carried through the room. At the far end of the room, someone’s head popped up, his lank hair draping over black goggles. He leaned out from his workbench, and Eve clasped her hands in front of her, feeling his assessing gaze. The machinist just beyond him clanged

the bell sitting between them. “Ankles,” Bedford continued. “Four screws, two bolts. Anyone can handle ankles.”

“*Anyone?*” The word struck Eve, demanding her attention. Either the foreman didn’t hear her or he ignored her ire.

“You’ll learn the ropes on ankles. See how you do.” Bedford walked slowly into the room, one thumb hitched into his belt. He stopped next to a workstation, fully outfitted except for a machinist. “Jasper, got a new one for you. Traugott.”

“Eve,” she quickly supplied, rushing to hold out her hand.

His pale forehead creased and Jasper squinted at her from behind fold-down magnification lenses over his glasses. His brown hair grayed at the temples, but he moved with vigor, sleeves rolled to his knobby elbows, a spark in his eyes and a twitch at his mouth. He didn’t take her proffered hand and instead kept screwing in the bolt he’d been working on before he was interrupted. “Pull up a seat.” His voice rasped like a knife on a sharpening stone.

“Mind the others.” The foreman clapped a meaty hand on Eve’s shoulder, forcing her to her seat. Orientation appeared to be over. “Good work, Jasper,” Bedford said as he walked away. Eve was certain he hadn’t looked at Jasper’s work at all.

She settled herself on the bench, taking in the tools in front of her: screwdrivers, tweezers, pliers, and hammers. Metal containers separated screws, bolts, nuts, washers, arbors, plates, and cams and gears that had clearly been shaped elsewhere—was there a room for metallurgy she’d missed?

Next to her, Jasper was still engrossed in his work. Many of his containers held the same materials, but there were enough differences that Eve was certain he wasn’t working on ankles. No

one was at the table next to Eve, and the next set of workstations was too far away for her to observe them in detail.

Four screws, two bolts—how hard could it be? Eve pulled out two plates, assuming those formed the bases of the movement, and began fitting the screws into the pre-drilled holes. One gear, one cam, all slid onto the arbor, marked with hashes visible through her provided eye loupe. An armature fit into the pre-drilled hole on the cam, a half-circle that must account for the up and down movement of the foot. Twine was already knotted on the armature and must hook into a component from the leg—along with the gear that had to turn the entire arbor. Foreman Bedford was right in assuming that Eve would be able to figure out the ankle joint, although she doubted literally anyone could.

Eve turned the last screw on the ankle joint and set it in front of her, manually rotating the arbor to test it out. The exposed joint reflected the lamp that hung just over her head. Everything moved smoothly enough. She looked over to Jasper, not sure what to do now that one was complete. “Mr. Jasper?”

“Just Jasper.” He hadn’t looked up from attaching a pinion, but when he leaned back, Eve recognized the joint.

“You’re working on shoulders!” It was exactly how she’d imagined the shoulder would look—the train shifting between wheels and pinions on both axes and attaching to a ball joint.

“Eh?” Jasper’s attention finally turned to Eve. His eyes, huge behind the magnification lenses, flicked to her finished ankle. “One down, huh? Keep working. Stop at a dozen.” He immediately turned back to his work, going right back to ignoring Eve—so much for collaboration.

“A dozen or a baker’s dozen?”

Jasper's tongue peeked from the corner of his mouth and he didn't speak until he leaned back, finally uncurling from his hunch and flipping up the fold-down magnification lenses. His pale cheeks swelled with a smile, making him look years younger. The crinkle at the corner of his eyes was mischievous, like when Ambrose had suggested he don the empty suit of clockman armor in the Hall of Mechanical Marvels so Eve could see a clockman move.

"A dozen. Bedford doesn't want more than twelve parts to a box." He pointed to the cardboard box to Eve's left. She pulled it toward her, finding dividers marking spaces large enough for one ankle joint apiece. She placed her finished joint in the box.

"It's easier for quality control to sort through a limited number of joints."

"Quality control?"

"Yeah. Production." He patted his chest. "Quality control." He hitched his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the tables opposite theirs. Boxes were piled at one end where the blue-clothed women labeled them and then passed them down the line. The men—machinists—unpacked the boxes, testing each part. A box labeled *shoulders* passed along the line, stopping in front of a gray-haired man who pulled an eye loupe into place and then pulled out a joint and started twisting it, the metal plates shifting over the ball joint. A board behind them, with the bold chalk-heading QUOTAS listed each joint and a number. One of the women erased the 12 next to "shoulders" and held a bit of chalk aloft, ready to write a new number.

"I didn't really get the tour."

"You'll see it." Jasper flipped his lenses back down, the yellow flecks around his green eyes visible under the magnification. "A dozen to a box. Ring the bell." He pointed at it with the nose of his pliers and then resumed his work, content to ignore Eve once more.

“How long have you been in the State Machinist Program?” Eve stumbled over her words, trying to get them out before she lost Jasper entirely to his work. She’d been waiting so long to talk to a machinist teacher—if Jasper was whom she was given, she wanted to know more about him.

Jasper’s cheek brushed the tip of the verge escapement he was attaching. “Eh? Work.” He pointed with his spanner to the screws and bolts in front of her, waiting to speak until she’d picked up her tools again. “Started younger than you. I was fourteen, walking through that door.”

Fourteen! Eve had never felt her nineteen years so keenly.

“Spent more than half my life here, coming up on twenty-five years.”

“Twenty-five years and you’re still working on shoulders?”

“Twenty-five years and I worked up to shoulders!” He slapped the pliers on the workbench. “Everyone has their part in the clockman. Just because I’m better than shoulders doesn’t mean I’m not needed here.”

Eve blanched. “I’m sorry. I misspoke.”

“You’re just as blunt as the rest—no feel for the work or the speed.” He stretched, hands braced at the small of his back, his anger dissipated, or at least tucked away. “You’ll learn your measure soon enough, and then know your place.”

Eve glanced down the table—the other machinists were mechanically slapping together parts, twisting screws, dropping in bolts. She was more skilled than an assembly line worker.

“How, um, how long have you been working on shoulders?”

Jasper scratched his eyebrow. “Six, no five years. A lot of us moved up after Fulton lost his hand.”

She gasped, turning to him, her thoughts on losing a hand and not on her own hands. Her screwdriver clattered out of the screwhead, catching on the plate and flipping the joint out of her

hand and into the container of bolts. The bolts rained onto the floor, each one making a horrible *tink* as it struck the concrete, Jasper shouting, “Mind the joint! Mind the joint!”

Eve scrambled to do just that, standing up and tipping over her seat. It fell with a dull thud and if everyone hadn’t been looking at her before, they were now.

One of the blue-aproned women hustled from the opposite table, squeezing between the small gap where Eve’s table met the next. “Have care, take your seat.” She motioned for Eve to sit, holding on to the edge of Eve’s table as she picked up the scattered bolts and dropped them back into the container.

Eve righted her seat and bent down, picking up the bolts directly underneath the table.

“Get back to work,” the woman snapped. Her blue eyes were icy in contrast to her brassy skin, her nostrils flared and angry. Eve drew back, startled by the scolding—surely it couldn’t hurt for her to clean up the mess she’d caused. She put the bolts on the table and reached for another, but this time the woman snatched it before Eve.

“You have a quota to keep. Do your part, I’ll handle my bit.”

“I’m just cleaning up. *I* caused this mess.”

“You did, but you’re a machinist.” She said “machinist” like a curse, and then rolled her eyes. “You’re new, you’ll understand soon enough. Just do your job.”

Eve scooted backwards, getting herself from under the table, her face burning with embarrassment. She settled at her bench, fingering the two bolts she’d placed there.

“Work,” Jasper said. His voice startled her so much she nearly sent the bolts back on the floor, but she steadied herself, grabbed her tools and began working on the joint again. She may have quickly mastered assembling ankles, but it was clear she had much to learn about working within the State.

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Mid-afternoon, bells tinkled up and down the hall. Tools were gathered and deposited in their bins along the tables and in-progress parts were set aside. Eve followed Jasper's lead, putting the main joint she'd been assembling to the side and gathering the unattached parts—bolts, nuts, and spring—in the pocket of her canvas apron. Everyone stood up from their benches, filing toward the door, Quality Control first.

“Where are we going?”

Jasper stretched his back as he stood, the other machinists going ahead, casting Eve brief looks. Other people were passing the open door of Joint Assembly, wearing green, brown, and purple aprons. “Tea.”

Eve's stomach grumbled at the thought of food, reminding her how long ago breakfast had been and that her orientation prevented her from attending lunch

“Luncheon and tea are taken in the dining hall.” Jasper finally started walking and even though Eve could just follow the crowd, sticking with Jasper—a known quantity—appeared the intelligent thing to do.

If Joint Assembly had been stretched, the dining hall had been hollowed. The room shared the tall ceilings and catwalks of Joint Assembly, only there were more catwalks stretching the cavernous space, crisscrossing at perpendicular joints, leading to obvious windowed cubicles set at the ends of the room. Tables and benches were laid everywhere—a real dining hall for a workshop. At the laundry, meals were taken at any horizontal surface, so long as the laundry girls weren't about to soil what they'd already washed.

The machinists filed into the tables according to the colored aprons they wore. No group had more than ten machinists, however the seating could accommodate at least twice that number.

Instead of clustering around one table, they spread out, three of the machinists from Joint Assembly moving to sit at one table while the other three sat at Eve's table.

The giant across from her would be more useful bullying a clockman into position—his fingers were thick and clumsy looking; they didn't look like they belonged to a machinist. The man next to him had lank hair, sharp features, and a pointed, twitching nose. He was the one who'd watched Eve when Bedford brought her in. Jasper sat to her right—just as he did at their worktable.

Chatter and clattering dishes echoed while the blue-aproned women passed out tea and biscuits. Thankfully the one who'd snapped at Eve stayed at the other table from Joint Assembly.

Eve's stomach rumbled again when she finally had food in front of her. The biscuit was firm in her fingers, perhaps a bit stale, but her twisting stomach was willing to accept anything.

"Put the biscuits in your tea." Jasper followed his own command, letting the two biscuits settle at the bottom.

Eve gave him a sidelong glance before biting into one. It was so hard her teeth hurt, and she ended up with only crumbs in her mouth.

The other two machinists laughed, the smaller one wheezing.

"Everyone insists on learning the hard way." Jasper shook his head and sipped his tea.

The biscuits were inedible as they were, so Eve slipped the biscuits into her tea, trying not to feel self-conscious as everyone stared at her.

"You must not get many new apprentices." Eve stirred milk into her tea, watching it change color.

"Apprentices," the smaller one scoffed. He hitched his thumb at the giant. "You hear that, Robberson? She's an *apprentice*." He sneered, his features sharpening further, taking on a distinctive rat-like look.

“Well, we’re not State Machinists yet, are we?” She looked to Jasper, unsure if she’d misunderstood what she’d heard about the State Program.

“Does our work look much like an apprenticeship?”

Jasper’s head dipped to the side, agreeing with the rat’s words if not his tone.

“What do we call ourselves, then?”

“Indentured servants?” The rat and his friend sniggered at his joke.

“Machinist Third Rank,” Jasper supplied.

“Third Rank meaning *the bottom*.”

She shrugged. “So it is *like* an apprenticeship, if the point is to progress through ranks and become masters.” She considered the twenty-five years Jasper had spent in Joint Assembly, her gut sinking and not because of the biscuits.

“That honor is for a select few—they upper-ups come to the floor and pluck us off—*after* proper testing, mind. I’d like to see you become a master. Suspect you will, what with your fancy recommendation from Statesman Bristed.” The way he sneered “statesman,” Eve thought he might know Bristed. “Your connections slipped you past the introductory testing, didn’t it?”

“My connections?”

“Is the statesman your uncle?” Robberson asked.

“Maybe not an uncle.” The rat laughed and elbowed his compatriot, not at all subtle in his meaning.

“Excuse me!” In all her unchaperoned moments with Ambrose, no one had ever impugned her honor. “I’m here by *merit*, same as you. Presumably.”

“Merit is in testing. They prove that well enough when they decide who goes to the next room. You haven’t proven yourself at all.”

“First day and she’s doing a right smart job on ankles.” Jasper had fished one of the biscuits from his tea and slurped the soggy mush from a spoon. “Klein, you hardly did as well your first day, as I recall.” His eye twitched in something like a wink, and he turned toward Eve, elbows on the table.

He flicked his spoon at the rat, launching drops of tea that splattered Klein’s red apron and bled to burgundy spots. Jasper ignored Klein’s scoff, continuing his story. “On Klein’s first day, after fumbling for hours to assemble one box of ankles, every one—every last ankle—was rejected by Quality Control. Man didn’t know his ass from an arbor.”

Eve laughed with Jasper and Robberson, taking special pleasure because it had taken her little more than an hour to fill her first box of joints and every one had passed inspection.

“I was young—younger than this miss!” Klein swiped at the spots on his apron, but the tea stains stayed right where they were. “Age won’t save her when she makes her big mistake.”

“Doesn’t seem likely to happen today.” Robberson’s voice was deep and even though he looked to be Klein’s friend, Eve appreciated his observation.

“The day’s still young,” Klein sneered. He knocked back his tea and then put both hands on the table, pushing himself up. He jerked his chin and Robberson stood, getting up much more delicately.

“Bah,” Jasper said as they walked off. “Don’t let Klein and Robberson color your impression of us all.”

“Robberson wasn’t bad; Klein was dreadful.” She sipped her tea, the heat seeping into her chest and helping her settle from Klein’s dramatic departure. “I appreciate your intervention, but I could have handled myself.”

Jasper nodded, eying her. “I don’t doubt your capabilities. That coot just wasn’t going to listen to you.”

Eve stirred her tea slowly. “And I shouldn’t expect that kind of treatment from other machinists?”

“Machinists here are selected for their skill, not their manners.” Jasper spooned more of his soggy biscuit into his mouth. He made a soft noise in the back of his throat, like a premature apology. “It’s a little suspicious you not coming through testing like the rest of us.” While Jasper had been kind about it, it was obvious he was also wondering about Eve’s supposed connections.

Eve shrugged and glanced away, trying her best to dismiss his concern. She didn’t need anyone asking too many questions about the arrangement Bristed had offered. “It was just a recommendation.”

“Recommendations usually come from the shops. But a statesman?” He shook his head. “That’s rare.”

“I’m not special.”

“Someone thought you were.” Jasper shifted, his back hunched, shoulders nearly around his ears—he appeared strangely comfortable, slumped into his workstation position. “How are you enjoying your first day?”

“Mmm, it’s not what I imagined.” Eve attempted to tame her words and failed. “Don’t you ever tire of making the same thing over and over?”

Jasper shrugged one shoulder. “It’s what I’m asked to do, and now I excel at it. How fast do you think I can build a shoulder?”

Eve thought for a moment, attempting to recall how many times Jasper rang his bell this morning. “Twenty-four, twenty-five minutes.”

“Fifteen minutes twenty seconds. On average.”

“That’s a precise count.”

“When your hands know what they’re doing, your mind can drift a bit. I count. It helps keep me all together and steady. Some of the others count as well.” He lifted his teacup to a man with a great beard at the other Joint Assembly table. His beard was thicker than Ambrose’s but was shot through with grey even though he couldn’t have been much older than thirty. Eve thought he was working on hips, judging from the larger components she’d seen at his station. “Jackson memorizes poetry and recites it in his head. He says the iambs help keep pace.”

The other two machinists—Dunst, who was reedy and wore thick glasses, and Rosser, who looked well fed—Jasper pointed out as counters. They’d learned the trick from him, Jasper said, and Eve wondered if anyone in Joint Assembly hadn’t started exactly where she was, on Jasper’s left.

He pointed to a woman in a green apron in the next row of tables—Eve hadn’t noticed her earlier and quickly scanned the room, looking for any other women among the machinists. “Keller is a musician in her off hours and composes as she works. She says tightening screws is its own music.” Keller was the only other woman Eve saw among the machinists. She was younger, closer to Eve’s age than Jasper’s, with mousy hair tied in a fat braid. Her biscuits lay untouched; clearly Keller was smarter than the rest of them.

“What does the green apron mean?”

“Appendages! She’s working on arms, I think. Wrists were her last stop in Joints. Wrists are tricky; smaller fingers are better for reaching in to make the right connections.” That fit with Eve’s experience of the joint. “When there was an opening, she was an obvious choice for promotion.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Near two years. We miss her in the Joints,” Jasper whispered. “But don’t tell her.”

Two years couldn't be the last time someone was promoted. "Who else has moved up in that time?"

Jasper blinked. "Just Keller. When a position opens at the top, there's movement down the chain. Doesn't happen often. Like Klein said, there's testing and then they make a selection and you get promoted. Nothing like becoming a master, in any event."

She pressed her fingers to her temple. "Then what's the point? An apprenticeship is supposed to help you rise to the rank of master, maybe own a shop one day. Here, I thought I'd get to work on clockmen. But if I have to spend twenty years on shoulders!" She stopped herself, not meaning to offend Jasper again. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be disrespectful, just . . . this isn't what I expected at all."

The youthful facade dropped and every one of his twenty-five years in Joint Assembly showed on Jasper's face. "It's not what most of us expected. But it's a job."

She'd had a job. The laundry work had been frustrating and dull, but this was worse, so close to what she wanted and yet entirely wrong.

She sighed, picking up her teacup. "I suppose I should get used to ankles, then. I could be working on them for quite some time." She sipped her tea and winced when mushed biscuit crumbs stuck to her lips.

"More time to perfect it." Jasper smiled as he repeated what felt like a State-approved line, but his flat eyes told her even he didn't believe it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eve returned from the State Machinist Program bone weary. Her back and wrist ached from the repetitive motions and from staying stuck in one position for so long. No wonder Jasper stretched at every interruption. The next days in Joint Assembly were much like the first—repetitive, painful, and mostly silent. Jasper chatted some at lunch and during tea, and he finally introduced her to the other Joint Machinists, who were all better mannered than Klein and Robberson. Jackson did work on hips, Eve learned, but he wasn't interested in answering Eve's questions about how the arbors for the hips connected to the legs. He quickly shifted the conversation to his children, a topic that Jasper warmed to immediately and Eve promptly tuned out.

To round out the clockman, Dunst worked knees, Rosser wrists, and Klein and Robberson each took an elbow. The others each switched between making right and left joints, but Klein and Robberson had difficulty switching orientations, so they'd been paired together. Eve took great joy in that discovery.

In the evenings she ignored her aches through dinner, measuring her responses when Bristed asked about her day and using her left hand whenever table etiquette allowed it.

After the second night, Maryam brought a hot water bottle to Eve's door along with a cloth and no other word. The heat had helped ease the pain considerably; the boredom, however, Eve's other pain, could only be endured. She couldn't believe she was hoping someone up the line would get injured just so her job would be more interesting.

She reached her first Friday desperate for the weekend. She wasn't sure what those hours would entail—if Bristed expected her to attend some sort of finishing school to refine her table manners or to turn her into something resembling a lady, but she assumed her hours wouldn't be

spent tinkering with her own inventions, rummaging behind machine shops for discarded scraps, or haggling with machinists for pieces she couldn't salvage. And the activity that had taken up large swaths of her weekends in recent weeks—walking the promenade or visiting the Noble Exhibition with Ambrose—was certainly out.

Saturday morning started the same as any weekday, with Maryam rousing Eve before sunrise. She helped Eve dress, mostly with loosely lacing her corset and pinning up Eve's hair, and then they descended the stairs together. The table was set for two, Bristed noticeably missing.

"Isn't Bristed joining us?" Food arrived quickly in answer to Eve's question.

"Statesman Bristed has responsibilities that sometimes extend beyond the traditional work hours." Maryam put an emphasis on his title, as if Eve might eventually start using it.

"Does that extend to other meals?" She hoped she didn't sound too eager, but she was wearing thin of feigning daily interest in her Joint Assembly duties (not to mention she'd be happy to go weeks without seeing Bristed's smug face).

"Sometimes he takes dinner at the club or with a colleague." Maryam carefully spooned cereal into her mouth. The lines she made bringing the spoon to her mouth were graceful yet precise, as if her hand traveled along the curved track of a well-tended machine.

"Do you know how often?" She reached for the jam with her left hand, trying to be breezy. "It would clear up most of my evening if I didn't have to rehearse new ways of saying, 'today I built more ankles.'"

The corner of Maryam's mouth lifted, a surprised laugh escaping. "Most evenings, I would guess. His counterpart was away on family business these last two weeks, which is why the Statesman was available so frequently. He also wanted to ensure that you had settled in."

"Like he cares."

Maryam tilted her head. “He does. I know my brother can be difficult, but he has reasons for acting as he does.” Her back stiffened when Mr. Richards came into the room. “And there are many advantages to being under Julian’s watch. You’ll come to appreciate them in time.”

Maryam flipped through the newspaper as Bristed usually did, leaving Eve to read bits of the opposing page from across the table. An article below the fold about the rising cost of clockmen caught Eve’s eye, but Maryam readjusted the newspaper before Eve could find out the cause.

A timeline down the right-hand column of the next page caught Eve’s eye—a history on Abbrücken that mentioned the Metallurgy Festival. She skimmed it over (paying particular interest to the sections mentioning the Metallurgy Festival and opening of Bergmann’s), and then slowed down, reading it over again. The article marked the ten-year anniversary of the annexation of Abbrücken. Eve had been nine at the time, tucked away much farther north, and grieving the loss of her mother. She hadn’t even really known there had been a war at the Demirtan border until she was much older.

At the end of breakfast, a set of brass keys arrived on a tray. “Mr. Bristed asks that you escort Miss Traugott to the basement,” Mr. Richards said. “The delivery has been made.”

Maryam folded the newspaper together, collected the keys, and stood. “Follow me.”

Eve stood as well, following closely behind Maryam. The keys jingled as Maryam searched for the correct one—short and nearly black—unlocking the doors to a set of stone stairs that descended into the bowels of the house. For a moment Eve wondered if Bristed had changed his mind about her accommodations.

The base of the cold stairs opened into a room with a low ceiling and a long workbench against one wall, a table in the center, and an impressive array of tools. Three clockmen, in varying states of distress, stood on the opposite side of the room.

“A workshop?”

“Julian thought you might feel more comfortable if you earned your room and board.”

“But these are clockmen.”

Maryam crossed her hands in front of her and hummed, a deadpan commentary on Eve’s ability to state the obvious.

Eve descended the last step, running her hand over the leather apron hung on the end of the bench, the chain and pulley anchored to one wall clinking as she brushed against it. The thin soles of her shoes scuffed against the concrete floor. Without the boiler, the room was cool, not as humid, and there was more space, better tools. Something about it felt like a bribe, but she couldn’t imagine what more Bristed could possibly ask from her.

She turned slowly, taking in every inch of the workshop. “So I’m to repair these clockmen.” Each clockman had a different ailment: one a crushed elbow; another, a dent in its chest plate; and the last leaned against the wall, one leg crushed.

“Assuming you can accomplish the task, yes.”

“Oh. Well, that task. That sounds . . . difficult. Very difficult.” Eve widened her eyes and tried to feel the weight of the chore Maryam implied that it was, but it took all her strength not to run to the machines and embrace them.

A workshop! A real workshop where she could look at the whole machine and invent the solutions if she needed to. The only quality control was her own, and there would be no meat-headed, sneering tradesmen around to question her abilities. Freedom could be found in the four walls of a private workshop.

“I suppose I’ll have to get to work.” Eve looped the leather apron over her blue day dress and pulled a stool in front of the clockman with the dented torso. She looked into his face first,

seeing her wobbled reflection. A real clockman up close that she could dissect, study, and repair—it was almost as good as building her own.

Maryam paced behind her as she examined the clockman. The reflection of Maryam's auburn dress distorted around the blemish on his chest. The point of impact was high, pushing into the pectoral and blossoming into the shoulder, like a rock had struck him. The damage could be incidental, or it could extend to the shoulder gear exchange. His shoulders weren't quite level, but that might not be a symptom.

She touched the dent, feeling around the edges like she was testing the tenderness of a bruise. "Let's see what else ails you."

Eve set about removing the outer covering. One, two, three, four—fourteen bolts? What excess! Did bolts grow on trees in Aufziehbürg? She unloosed the first nut cap easily, wondering if there might be a reason for having so many bolts. Ambrose might have been able to explain it—or would have made a joke about it to ease Eve's frustration. Maybe she'd ask Jasper about it, given the opportunity. Of course since he'd spent all his years in Joint Assembly, it was unlikely he would know.

Eve continued removing bolts until she came to one that wouldn't budge. She tried all the tricks she knew but the bolt was screwed too tightly for her to move it on her own.

Eve glanced to where Maryam leaned against the doorframe, sliding the carnelian pendant around her neck back and forth on its ribbon. If Bristed was going to force Maryam to watch over the repairs, Eve could at least get another set of hands out of it.

"Would you mind pitching in? I need a bit more force in my leverage." Eve beckoned her with the wrench when Maryam didn't move. "Come now, you won't get dirty. I just need use of your muscles."

“I don’t think I’ll be of much assistance.” She came over slowly, her eyes widening.

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t need the help.” Eve tried to muster a kind tone. “Would it help if I said, ‘please’?”

Maryam’s tight smile plainly told Eve that it wouldn’t. Nevertheless, she squared her posture and took hold of the wrench when Eve fitted it into place. Silently, they pulled together, Maryam letting go and wiping off her hands before pulling again. Despite her resistance, Maryam was well suited to the task, her face straining with the effort, a sheen of sweat breaking across her brow. Finally the bolt budged and they both yelped in triumph.

Eve took control of the wrench again, finally able to untwist the nut. “Thanks, I never would have gotten that on my own.” Eve turned, her words melting as she realized Maryam had retreated up the stairs. She shrugged and turned back to the clockman, striking his chest. “Just us now.” She grinned up at his blank face; his was the company she preferred.

#

On Monday, luncheon began just as it had every other time, bells tinkled, workstations secured, machinists filed and then broke off by color. After lunch was served (jam sandwiches, tea, and those same inedible biscuits), Eve noticed Keller off by herself. She glanced at Jasper and Jackson before standing up and walking across the divide to where Keller sat hunched over her plate.

“Jasper advised me to soak the biscuits at the bottom of my tea,” Eve said by way of introduction. “I had difficulty stomaching them soggy.”

“They’re best left untouched.” Keller didn’t look up, her brown braid thrown over her shoulder like a shield, but she shifted over slightly. A scrap of paper half-hid under her plate; slashes—like some secret code—skipped across it.

Eve lowered herself to the space Keller opened. “What are you writing?”

Keller looked up quickly, brown eyes wide, her mouth parted like she’d been caught in the middle of a thought. Despite the surprise rounding her face, she had the sharp look of an Aufziehburger—straight nose coming nearly to a point, severe cheekbones above hollowed cheeks, and a pointed chin and squared jaw. “Nothing.” She almost said it like a question.

“I’m not going to tell anyone.” Eve mimicked Keller’s hunched over posture, whispering, “It is a secret letter to someone?”

“No!” Her cheeks reddened. “It’s, well, it’s music. Theoretically.”

Eve tilted her head. “It doesn’t look like any music I’ve ever seen.” Eve’s music lessons on the flute had only extended a few days until her mother admitted that Eve’s interest in taking apart the instrument greatly outweighed her desire to play it.

“That’s because it’s for a music box. You’ve seen the inside of one, right?” She bent the paper back, creating an arch. The slashes resolved themselves in Eve’s mind, and she could perfectly visualize the cylinder and comb that made tinkling, tinny music.

“Oh! What song is this?”

“It doesn’t have a name yet.” Keller turned back to her paper, the corners of her mouth shyly curling. “Traugott, right?”

Given how little Eve knew of the other assembly rooms, she was surprised Keller knew her name. “Yes. Eve.” She picked up her sandwich, settling in. “I’m not used to going by my last name.”

Keller rolled up the paper scrap and tucked it into her apron along with her pencil. “You get used to it.”

Eve sniffed. “I’m not sure that I want to. What’s your name?”

“Keller’s all I’m called here. That’s the way it is. I don’t mind it. Makes me the same as everyone else.”

They weren’t the same as everyone else, not when they were the only two women in the State Machinist Program. Eve had quickly learned that Quality Control consisted of Sorters, the blue-aproned women, and “scrapped” machinists, machinists who’d “retired” from the Program. Eve wasn’t exactly sure what retirement entailed—many of the machinists in QC were greyed and wizened, but she’d also found out that one-handed Fulton had found a place in the Quality Control of another room.

Perhaps Keller was right, maybe it was better to not call any more attention to themselves. Eve bit back a snort—Keller was the one eating lunch by herself; until she’d moved over, Eve had blended in perfectly with the other Joint machinists.

“Then it’s Traugott, if you prefer it. I’ll try to get used to it.” She rubbed her palm, stretching the taut muscles. “It’s always first names where I’m from.”

“Where’s that?”

“Kamberstadt, but I’ve been in the Capital about five months.”

“Were you a machinist in Kamberstadt?”

“No, but my father was. I watched him in the shop and sometimes he’d help me repair my toys.” Nostalgia wrapped her like a warm blanket—so many memories of her father had slipped from her, just as he had. A slow dulling that ate away at her memories, as well as his. “I took a job in a laundry when I got to Aufziehbürg. I thought I’d be able to find an apprenticeship in a shop here.” How naïve she’d been.

Keller nodded deeply. “I was a laundress. Always asked to fix the boiler, right?”

“And every other machine that broke down.”

“Thankfully my supervisor had the right connections to find someone to give me a test. Here I am.” She dipped her teacup, gesturing to the whole room.

“If my supervisor had known that was an option, she’d have found someone to take me. Might have even *paid* them.”

The skin between Keller’s eyes pinched in a question.

“I never really got the hang of laundering,” Eve explained. “Jasper said you’re working on arms. You like that?”

Keller sipped her tea. “It’s better than ankles.” Her eyes darted up, a tease in them.

Eve groaned. “I’m not the only one who noticed that?”

“We all know ankles are wretched. And made worse the way everyone carries on about how easy they are.” Keller circled her hands around her cup, gaze and voice lowered. “You know you might be stuck on them for some time.”

“I’ve heard that.” Eve sighed. The basement workshop had been a balm over the weekend, and she had arrived at Joints feeling refreshed. Half a day, though, and she’d already embraced the hopelessness the State Program had conjured after her first day. “It might be more tolerable if we at least swapped stations, then I could learn all the joints.”

Keller made an ambiguous noise—neither agreement nor dissent. Eve waited for Keller to elaborate, but they both just chewed their sandwiches and sipped tea. Eve didn’t think she’d said anything wrong, but her experience with Jasper had taught her that dreaming beyond your station was discouraged.

“Are you making a music box?”

Keller looked up, startled and guilty. “What? Oh, it’s just something I play with.”

Eve shrugged. “I have projects I tinker with too.” Her clockman secret pushed at the edges of her mind, but she knew well enough to keep it to herself. That they both had side projects might have been a small thing to have in common, but it felt like something real.

“One day I’ll build it. Maybe. I’d have to commission someone for the case. I’m no good at woodwork.”

“Me either,” Eve confessed. She could make forms for shaping metal, but that was about it. Most machinists were clumsy with wood.

Keller sipped her tea again, and this time Eve got lost in the companionable silence. In the hustle of the last week, the complete upheaval of her life, Eve had nearly forgotten what it was like to sit quietly with someone. The last time she could remember a comfortable silence, she and Ambrose had picnicked in the Hall of Radiance at the Noble Exhibition. Cleverly placed mirrors and crystal chandeliers reflected and refracted the light from a single bare light bulb to illuminate a cavernous room. A group of children attempted to make shadow puppets on the ground, but the room was so bright, they could barely see them.

That had been the week before the ball, before expectation and subterfuge had destroyed their friendship. She’d written three letters of apology in the last week, but they’d all gone unanswered.

The bell rang to end their break and Keller stacked her plate and cup, moving them to another table, leaving her table clear. “Have lunch with me tomorrow?”

Eve nodded briskly. “I’d love to.” She returned to her workstation feeling like she’d made a friend, and resolving to lie to this one as little as possible.

CHAPTER NINE

Another week passed uneventfully, and Eve settled into her routine. Up before light. Dressed and to Joint Assembly by eight. Lunch at noon, tea at three, both breaks usually spent with Keller, unless she was desperate to record her music box's song. Maryam or Mr. Richards appeared at five-thirty to escort Eve to a carriage (she was the only machinist with an escort, mind). Basement work until seven. Dinner at eight—fully dressed, regardless of Bristed's attendance. The single fluctuation to this schedule came after dinner—some nights she and Maryam played cards and others Eve worked in the basement before retiring for bed. It was as regimented and unrelenting as clockwork.

Through the monotony, Eve had counted down to the day Ambrose must be leaving the Capital, the same day a supply train was set to depart. Her letters had gone unanswered, and despite working in the building next door to Clockman Storage, Eve hadn't laid eyes on Ambrose since leaving him in front of the boarding house. The train station could be her last chance to make amends.

She climbed into the carriage, ignoring whispers from the likes of Klein and Robberson (Bristed had to know what the daily carriage ride was doing to Eve's reputation among her peers), and found Maryam inside.

"Good afternoon."

Eve repeated the greeting, shutting the door behind her. "Is Bristed joining us for dinner?"

"Statesman Bristed is dining at the club. He has some late arrangements to make in town."

"At the train station." She'd already considered that Bristed would most likely oversee the departure, just as he had the day she'd met Ambrose.

Maryam's hmm was enough of a confirmation for Eve.

She took a deep breath, a plan beginning to formulate. "Have you spoken to him about my clothes? I know the dresses I have for dinner must be difficult for you to see on a rotating basis."

"We've spoken." Maryam turned to the window, but Eve still felt her gaze in the reflection.

"If he's approved a sum, perhaps we could sacrifice my workshop time tonight and visit a shop? The visual may be unappealing to you, but the fit has been bothering me." She frowned, worried it was too fake, and immediately relaxed her face.

"I didn't expect you'd be eager to look through fashion plates and fabrics."

She pulled another face, this one not at all conjured. "I'm sure your assistance would significantly reduce the options—make it go a little faster?"

A skeptical look passed in Maryam's reflection, and then she turned to release a speaking-tube to communicate with the driver, directing him to a dressmaker's. Eve didn't recognize the name of the shop, but the carriage took the next right, back toward downtown. As long as Eve could slip away, she'd be able to find her way to the train station. She felt a little bad about deceiving Maryam, but the anticipation of seeing Ambrose greatly outweighed any guilt.

"Three new evening dresses," Maryam said. "And we'll see about making adjustments to the three you own—at least for a better fit. I don't know if you want to alter them more than that." Something softened in her eyes and mouth. "I understand they were your mother's."

Eve instinctively fingered the outline of the watch in her pocket. She didn't often carry a reminder of her mother, but her father's watch was always with her.

"I wouldn't mind alterations to the pink dress."

"The pink dress is the one I like the most."

"No." Eve was aghast. "The roses and the lace? Don't you think it's a bit much?"

“Oh, but the cut is so flattering on you, and the embroidery is unlikely to go out of style. The neckline is very chic; it would easily blend in at any party.” A smile teased the corner of Maryam’s mouth—was Maryam baiting her? “We’ll assess alterations at a later date,” Maryam said, sitting up straighter.

They pulled up to a shop with two automatons displaying dresses in the window. One wore a modern dress style similar to what Eve observed at the ball—a narrow skirt and low neckline, bedecked in glittering beads. The other had an unusual shape to its spine. The corset cinched the waist and arched the back—it didn’t appear natural, and it looked impossibly tall. A wig atop its head styled in a chignon barely moved when its head turned, painted eyelashes fluttering.

Once inside, Maryam immediately engaged the dressmaker, speaking right over her when she tried to address Eve first, and asserting herself as the woman in charge, explaining crisply she was assigned to properly outfit a ward of a Statesman (the dressmaker’s eyes grew to saucers at that). Within moments Eve was being measured and cinched and pinched and prodded. Fabric fanned against her skin in samples, and her opinions were largely ignored, although she noted with some thanks that Maryam pushed aside the pinks, favoring the cooler colors.

While Maryam assessed the fabrics and fashion plates, Eve assessed the shop, locating a backdoor behind the counter. She almost didn’t go through with it—new dresses *would* be nice, and Maryam had gone along with Eve’s suggestion with hardly a hesitation; Eve hadn’t thought anyone would be willing to trust her so readily so soon. But when she imagined Ambrose and the betrayed look she’d last seen on his face, she knew what she had to do. It wasn’t ambition driving her this time; it was an apology.

She edged to the back of the shop on the pretense of examining the glove selection and threw her hip into a mannequin, toppling it into another and blocking one of the narrow paths in the store. The dressmaker screeched louder than Maryam.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Eve said, quickly backing away from the mess.

“Hey!” Maryam stood up just as Eve stepped behind the counter.

“I really am sorry,” Eve repeated and then she bolted for the door, spilling out into an alley. She checked the sky, unable to see the Parliament spire until she broke from the alley and wandered a few unfamiliar streets. But then she found the spire, adjusted her course, and ran toward known paths and the train station.

#

Out of breath as she arrived, she knew to slow once she was inside the station. If one of the soldiers had a reason to stop her, they’d have a reason to throw her out, especially since she didn’t have a coin or bag to convince anyone she was here to catch a train. She slipped in behind a young couple, matching their pace, and pulled her coat off, draping it over her arm and holding it away from her body to feign the appearance of luggage underneath. At six-thirty, Eve had expected the station to be as crowded as a weekend, but it was remarkably empty, and easier for her to stand out.

Her cover turned at track ten, and Eve continued on, feeling more and more conspicuous as she moved past the passenger tracks, getting closer to the shipping lanes and specifically to track four, the State Track. The train on track five blocked her view, but five soldiers stationed between the two loading trains were more conspicuous than she was. The soldiers normally patrolled in pairs; so many clumped together made it obvious something of value was being loaded on the train.

She slowed further, looking up at the track numbers, attempting to appear lost. With the luxuries at Bristed’s house, she’d been washing more thoroughly and Maryam pinned her hair up

each morning in more elaborate and tighter curls than Eve could manage on her own. It was possible the blond soldier—the one who’d previously memorized her face—might not recognize her without grease streaks and her hair flattened from a bonnet.

She came level with the train on track five, bringing the phalanx of clockmen into her line of sight—only a few rows left to load. A ramrod figure she guessed was Bristed stood at the far end of the train, Ainsley coming toward the clockmen.

Eve rose on her toes, eyeing first the distance to the clockmen, then the soldiers. Their polished batons shone, although their inattention made them less intimidating.

She headed straight for Ainsley, hoping he would intervene if the soldiers tried to apprehend her. She knew how Ambrose felt about her betrayal, but Ainsley might be more sympathetic, at least after she explained that she only wanted to apologize—that this was putting Ambrose ahead of clockwork. She wasn’t even going to look at the clockmen or study how their shoulders were moving before their legs lifted, like a marionette controlled from above.

“Hey!”

She felt the shout in her spine, but continued forward a few more steps—almost halfway there—trying to pretend the shout wasn’t meant for her. She had to stop at the second shout and scramble of footsteps.

“Are you shouting at me?” she asked as she turned.

It was the blond soldier, his face meaner than ever, a snarl perfectly curling his lips. “Don’t play coy, missus. You got no business here.” His eyes widened and she was certain that he recognized her. “The train rat! Out you go.” He grabbed her arm and she pulled back, turning toward the winders, looking for help. Ainsley was missing, but Ambrose had appeared on the

platform, a ledger in hand. He stopped short, and then turned away, his back unusually rigid. She opened her mouth, but a train whistle drowned any shout she might have given.

The soldier pulled her arm up, lifting her almost on tiptoe, and she skidded after him, tugging the opposite direction until the muscles in her shoulder shouted in pain.

“Come along or you get the club. Don’t care if you look the part of a lady if you’re sniffing around the trains again.” He grunted, tugging her on tip-toe again. Her coat flapped heavily against her leg. “You don’t have a mark to your name, do you?”

“More than you’d think,” she snapped. Behind her Ambrose wound one of the clockmen. Ainsley appeared a moment later, tipping his hat to Ambrose and not even glancing her way. She was nothing to them now, the soldier’s problem. Her feet stumbled, and she almost fell.

The soldier pulled her straight, the solid baton whipping up in front of her nose, the wood dinged, pocks filled with a coat of paint that likely covered stains that wouldn’t wash out.

“You’re not so heavy I can’t carry you.”

Eve twisted in his grip, pulling away from the baton. She’d seen him strike beggars for less resistance than she was giving, but logic left her in that moment. Surely Ambrose and Ainsley would notice now—notice and save her—but the train from track five once again concealed her.

“Release her.” Maryam, one hand on her hip, nostrils flaring with a controlled breath, was a welcome vision. “Miss Traugott, I asked you not to get ahead of me.”

The soldier looked between them, his hand still tight on Eve’s arm, but the baton hand had lost its rigid grip. “You know this girl?” His eyes flicked over Maryam, taking in the same things Eve saw: a tailored violet jacket, white lace collar and lavender overskirt; hair pinned with a floral barrette that had slipped in her pursuit; and a stern jaw and brow line that brooked no nonsense or disobedience.

“I called her by name, didn’t I?”

He pulled Eve closer. “You got any papers to prove your story?”

Eve wasn’t certain it was Maryam’s story that required any proof, but Maryam withdrew a set of papers from her pocket.

“The woman you are manhandling is the ward of Statesman Julian Bristed. I assume you’ve heard of him.”

He nodded, but his eyes darted to the other end of the platform, uncertain.

Maryam unfolded the papers, the gold State seal flashing under the electrics.

She gave him a moment—his eyes flicking back and forth rapidly, not seeming to take in much more than the seal. “So, you should release her,” Maryam prompted.

He pointed the baton over his shoulder. “She was by them trains, Miss. Regardless of who she’s ward to, she’s not supposed to be there.”

“I agree entirely and will be escorting her from the premises immediately. Thank you for your service, Corporal.” Her eyes left his face and trained on Eve. They all waited another beat before the soldier’s grip relaxed enough for Eve to pull away. She rubbed her arm, expecting bruises once she undressed for bed, grateful she wasn’t expecting worse.

She came to Maryam uncertainly. Even though she was close to Eve in age, and even though she’d been cordial previously, a formidable fire sparked in her brown eyes. Eve hoped it was residual from dealing with the enthusiastic corporal.

Maryam turned, forcing Eve to hurry behind her. At some distance from the still confused soldier, Maryam said in a low voice, “You’re lucky my brother didn’t see you.”

“Does that mean you’re not planning to tell him about this?”

Eve felt Maryam's gaze on her face but kept looking straight ahead, focusing on an automated porter's clicking gait.

"I'm considering the options. Your lark could have serious repercussions if I inform him. I should like to trust you on a simple shopping trip."

The length of her pause was Eve's only cue that it was her opportunity to speak.

"I only came to apologize to Ambrose—Winder Engle. I reckoned he was departing the Capital today." Eve's cheeks heated. "I didn't quite succeed."

Maryam shook her head. "I would have hoped this constitutional had been fruitful—at least something would have been gained. You won't be doing it again."

"I won't be, no. I'm sorry." Eve clasped her hands, emphasizing the sincerity of her apology.

Maryam nodded sharply. "I purchased a muff for you before leaving the shop. You need to return this weekend for a fitting and an apology."

"I'll be prepared for both." The gift of the muff was unexpected and shamed Eve further. As Maryam noted, the escape hadn't even amounted to anything. She hadn't been able to repair her relationship with Ambrose, and he had proven how far she'd fallen in his esteem. She couldn't believe he'd ignored her when she was caught by the soldier! Even betrayed, *she'd* have done something.

Maryam stopped to help Eve into her coat and then pulled it tight at the collar. "The carriage is just around the corner but the wind has kicked up."

Eve smiled tightly, once again thought her apology, and mimicked Maryam's thank you when a gentleman held open the door for them.

CHAPTER TEN

Six weeks passed without incident, and Eve further adjusted to her new life as a ward and machinist. She settled not just into her routines, but her room. Maryam helped her pack away the ceramic figures that dotted the side tables and set out the wind-up toys Eve's father had made, along with some of Eve's previous attempts at being an inventor. The Night-Cap Candle sat at her bedside (mostly unused), and her page-turner displayed a novel she'd pulled from the gigantic bookshelf (she also pulled out a tome to hide the smirking ceramic mask behind soft red leather). Her new dinner dresses, along with several new day dresses, hung in her wardrobe, mixed in with the dresses she'd brought from Kamberstadt, most of which were resized and freshly trimmed.

She wasn't a lady, not by any stretch of that definition, but she was starting to feel a bit like she belonged. Especially during the hours she was put to work in the basement workshop.

Eve pressed her face against the clockman's elbow, light flickering through the open casing, between the clockwork gears. She was checking the connections she'd made, but also examining the biceps connections—they looked like they were wearing down. She coughed, breathing in some of the dust trapped in his joints, and felt a homesickness curl from her lungs to her stomach, the phantom scent of wisteria filling her nose. It had been months since she'd smelled it; when she was young, it grew in clumps up a trellis at the back of the house every summer. She gathered a sprig for her mother's lapel every afternoon. Her mother always split the sprig and placed some in Eve's hair, in a hairpin at the back of her head. Eve would turn in the mirror, just catching the purple from the corner of her eye.

When she breathed again, Kamberstadt was gone in a faint nostalgic exhale.

She straightened on her stool and took one more cleansing breath, grounding herself in the cold reality of the basement workshop. Officially it was spring, but it hadn't yet broken through the snow. She wasn't surprised Kamberstadt was on her mind when she was anxious for winter's end.

With her focus broken, Eve checked her watch—almost time for Maryam to get her for bed. She glanced behind her to the stairs, checking to make sure Maryam wasn't already waiting—sometimes she came down early but waited for Eve to surface from her work. Eve would have to hurry if she wanted to finish the arm tonight.

Refocusing, Eve reconnected the arbor and checked one last time that all the parts were secure before resealing the arm covering. She'd repaired the clockman with the dented chest and sent him on his way. Bristed casually mentioned over dinner that the clockman was operating "as expected," which Maryam later translated as meaning that it was functioning perfectly. With her first repair an utter success, Eve had been happy to move on to the crushed elbow.

Bristed hadn't mentioned anything about replacement parts, so Eve was halfway through fashioning a new elbow from her own designs when a box of arm joints appeared in her workshop. She almost scrapped what she'd built, but after comparing the State design to her own, she dismantled the State joint and reused the parts. (Dismantling an elbow that Klein had likely made was a source of personal joy, but she tried to not let that influence her decision.)

The State joint had obvious weaknesses—the one she'd removed from the clockman had stress fractures in addition to the mangled components. While the fractures could have been caused by the trauma, it was more likely from the repeated movements and heavy loads a clockman was expected to carry. A human with an achy elbow would refuse to pick up a steel beam—a clockman didn't know his elbow was in need of repair. A reinforced joint—one with a more careful design

from a conscientious female machinist—could limit the stress a clockman didn't know he was causing.

The arm cover securely in place, Eve grabbed the borrowed clockman key, came around to the clockman's back, and inserted it into the topmost keyhole on the right side. She'd been slowly mapping the keyholes to each set of commands, learning to chain the commands so that a clockman could take a few steps and then perform a task. There were limits to the chains—both in number of actions and in function—but her self-taught winding was feeling more complete with each successful experience.

She released the hold on the gears and the clockman raised his arm and then swung it, hammering violently. Maryam screamed, her voice unmistakable.

“Are you all right?” Eve called from behind the hammering machine. “I was just testing him!”

“It startled me!” Maryam shouted back. She pressed her hand to her chest and turned away, appearing uninjured.

The clockman, however, was in distress, if the popping noise accompanying each swing was any indication. The elbow ratcheted to the side, holding firm, so the problem was coming from elsewhere.

Eve squatted, getting a different angle on the machine. “Do you see anything odd about his arm from that side?”

Maryam turned back around, mouth open as she examined its arm, tilting her head side to side. “I don't know exactly what ‘odd’ looks like on a clockman.”

Eve pushed her hair from her forehead and stood up. “Considering the ones I’ve been closest to are these three broken ones, I’m not sure I do either.” The metal groaned and both women winced.

The clockman gave one last swing and when he returned to rest, something from inside the arm pinged. Nothing sagged, but Eve suspected one of the worn down components in the biceps had given out—she’d have to take it apart again.

“Tomorrow,” she murmured, untying her apron. She hung the apron around the clockman’s head and patted his flat cheek.

She followed Maryam upstairs, lingering in the foyer to look for any new machines. Bristed had his own Noble Exhibition flowing through his home. Regular deliveries of new inventions and modern conveniences passed through the doors with little fanfare. It was rare that Eve could do more than glimpse a machine before it was spirited away to Bristed’s study.

Mr. Richards usually kept the machines out of Eve’s grasp, but Maryam would let Eve circle it, poke it, and ask questions. One of the most remarkable machines Eve had seen was for sewing. She’d always had trouble with a needle and thread—even at the laundry when her job depended on it—but she was certain she could master it with a machine.

“I take it repairs were almost finished,” Maryam said as they started up the spiral staircase.

“Were,” Eve emphasized. “But other parts weren’t well-tended, or were just overused. Clockwork wears down, you know, and it doesn’t help that the clockmen are expected to lift who knows how much weight.”

“Steel beams are quite heavy.”

“Even for a clockman.”

Maryam opened the door to Eve's sitting room. A fire was already lit; the teapot replaced by a chocolate pot, with its unmistakable long spout. Eve rubbed her hands together and advanced toward the heat.

Maryam took the chair and poured two cups of chocolate. "Wouldn't it be something if the clockmen knew a load was too heavy for them to lift? Or if they could ask for help?"

Eve laughed, thinking about what a machine might say if it could speak. "It'd be remarkable, except for the fact that machines don't think." She took a seat on the couch and leaned across to wind up the dancers toy, poised as always for a waltz. She watched as they took off, bumped into the chocolate pot and then spun, dancing in the opposite direction until they hit another obstacle, this time the sugar jar. Each time the toy predictably turned when it couldn't progress any farther forward, like it knew what was in front of it.

"Hold a moment." The toy spun again, heading for the lip of the silver tray and finally toppled over it and onto the floor.

"Not much thought there." Maryam sipped at her chocolate, a grin playing at the corner of her mouth.

"No, but it knew to turn because it bumped into something." Eve tapped her leg, clicking an imaginary rhythm of clockwork that only made sense to her. "A clockman could do that. A balance would easily let a clockman detect if a load was too heavy for it to lift. It would just need to be calibrated with the right weight."

"Wouldn't it take a large weight to outweigh steel?"

"You don't need to outweigh it."

Eve picked up the dancers, winding them again, and setting them loose on the tray to twirl and bump and change directions. As they danced, Eve's mind raced, fitting together the types of

gears that would need to be fashioned to give a clockman this sort of logic, how the balance would need to be calibrated and span the shoulders. She stood, stumbling for her notebook, trying not to lose any of the images springing to mind.

“Thanks for the chocolate,” she said distractedly.

She barely heard Maryam’s soft reply, “Anytime.”

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The balance, which she’d taken to thinking of as a weight-balance, needled her during the morning in Joints. Her eyes drifted to Jasper’s work station and the pile of shoulder joints he regularly assembled every sixteen minutes. If she could examine one of those, she wouldn’t have to completely dismantle her clockman. She couldn’t steal it, right? That had gotten her into enough trouble the first time.

She’d kept her mouth buttoned in front of Keller by asking about her progress on the music box—the melody was almost correct, which meant she’d be fabricating the cylinder soon, well, as soon as Keller pulled together enough money to pay for the brass, of course. She’d tried a question about Keller’s family, to keep her mouth running, but she was much more forthcoming when talking about machines; Eve could relate.

Eve thought the music box had distracted her enough, but as soon as she sat down next to Jasper her questions about shoulders immediately resurfaced. She fought with herself before giving in to her curiosity.

“How often are the pistons cleaned and oiled once the clockman is in use?”

Jasper spoke slowly, teasing out his answer. “That’s more of a winder question, I guess.”

“Well, I don’t know a winder.” Anymore, she silently amended. She tried a different tack.

“Can I see one of your joints?”

He blinked, his eyes tiny without his magnification lenses flipped into place.

“I thought I might want to test for shoulders one day,” she said. “An early look could help with that.”

Jasper shook his head, clearly mystified. “Work, Traugott.” He picked up his screwdriver and flipped his lenses into place. “You’ve been on task for a good long time, so once you hit your quota—” He jerked his chin to his box of finished joints. “You can look one over.”

Her eyes grew wide, completely surprised that he’d acquiesced.

“But don’t let QC see you.”

“No, no, I won’t. Thank you.”

Jasper grunted, “Work,” and they both picked up their tools.

#

The next day Eve removed the clockman’s torso covering and began mapping where the weight-balance could fit in among his other innards. It had to be centered, so it could play off either arm, and congruous with the existing system. The brief look Jasper allowed helped Eve find the connections for the shoulder joint, which was the obvious place to loop in her new system. She pulled spare gears from bins, laying a framework against her drawings, and spent most of her evening hours before and after dinner comparing that framework to the clockman’s guts. (Maryam understood when Eve elected to pass on cards for the evening.)

All too soon, Maryam descended the steps, a basin, pitcher, and hand towel in her arms. Maryam looked fresher than she had at dinner. Her hair was re-pinned and a silver chain with a blue pendant encircled her throat, replacing the red carnelian teardrop she usually wore.

“The Statesman has returned from the club and he’d like to see you upstairs.” She put the bowl on the one clear corner of the worktable and carefully poured the water. “You should take a few moments to freshen up.”

Eve pulled a rag from her apron and patted her face. “I’m all set.”

Maryam held up the towel, not even bothering to argue. Eve appreciated that Maryam knew just how to deal with her.

While Eve washed her face, Maryam pulled pins, shaped curls, and straightened Eve from hair to hem. When Maryam stepped back to examine her work, she frowned; Eve wondered if she wished she brought a dress downstairs as well, the day dress she wore was an older one from Kamberstadt.

“I suppose that will do.”

“I don’t need to impress Bristed with my wardrobe.”

“It’s not my brother we need to impress. We have a guest.”

Eve’s stomach swooped. Judging by how closely he’d been seated to the Minister of State at the ball months ago, Eve could only imagine the high ranking official he’d brought in for a nightcap.

“Let’s not keep them waiting any longer.” Maryam pinched and adjusted her own dress before ascending the stairs. For the first time Eve noticed the ring on her left hand, a delicate gold band with an oval center stone (the State blue, of course) and small flanking diamonds.

She led Eve into the parlor where Bristed was entertaining his guest. The parlor had the illusion of being comfortable, but the couches and chairs were stiff, the furniture heavy, dark, and imposing. The one grace was the lighting—a smaller, more sedate version of the clockwork chandelier in the foyer reflected off several mirrors placed strategically about the room. Eve

wondered if Bristed had gotten the idea from the Hall of Radiance or if they'd gotten the idea from him.

"Ah, here she is. Mr. Langford, Miss Traugott, my ward." Bristed took Eve's hand, leading her across the room to meet the guest. His suit was white, well-pressed, and Eve could immediately see that she was underdressed for the introduction. She vaguely recalled seeing Langford before, his red hair and neatly trimmed beard hung in her memory, although it could have just been the superficial resemblance to Ambrose. Langford looked at least ten years older than Bristed, gray creeping into his red. He smiled warmly when he took Eve's hand, steadying himself on a cane as he bowed. Even with the cane, his bow was a half dip that made Eve think he hadn't grown up in society, or at least didn't care about all of its rules.

"Pleased to meet you."

"A pleasure, my dear." His voice rumbled with authority. "Mr. Bristed speaks of you very highly."

"You flatter me," she said, gently taking her hand back. Her hands played at her skirt, trying to hide the grease stain at her hip.

"Mr. Langford is a statesman," Maryam explained. "He works quite closely with my brother."

"I'm not *just* a statesman." Langford chuckled warmly, took Maryam's left hand and kissed it.

Her face reddened—aside from the surprise of the clockman in the basement, Eve had never seen such a crack in Maryam's composure.

"They're betrothed. Langford is as charmed with my sister as we all are." Bristed appeared bemused as he finished off his brandy. Maryam still blushed, but she gathered herself once she'd taken a seat on the couch.

“I also meant that I’m the other half of Clockman Regulation, which means Bristed and I are usually in each other’s company, even if we don’t want to be.” Langford laughed, his eyes crinkling. The joviality paired with a red beard was so familiar that Eve smiled despite the pang in her chest.

Langford gestured toward the couch, offering Eve a seat next to Maryam. He continued once she moved to take it. “I’m less hands-on than Mr. Bristed. Less likely to come into contact with talent.” As he took the chair nearest Maryam, Eve felt his assessing gaze. She folded her hands and straightened her back, hoping her appearance suggested a machinist rather than a lucky laundress. “I’ve only met a handful of talented State Machinists.”

“Well, I’m not a State Machinist, yet. I’m in the Program, Machinist Third Rank. I work in Joint Assembly.” Being head of Clockman Regulation, she assumed he’d know what that meant—she was the bottom of the barrel.

“I’ve heard you’re a fine machinist, all the same.”

She hadn’t expected him to be so flattering. Everyone had treated her kindly at the State ball, but she’d been on Ambrose’s arm and dressed in her best clothes. Today she was just Eve, and her plain day dress stood out against Bristed’s polished possessions.

Bristed retook his seat, the high back of the chair fitting him like a throne. “Oh, Miss Traugott’s not one to brag, but I’ve spoken to other machinists along the line and they all say she’s doing fine work. Exemplary, even. It’s likely she’ll see a change in position soon. No need to waste talent on . . . ankles, is it?”

“Yes, sir.” She hadn’t realized Bristed had spoken to any of her coworkers, but she should have guessed his surveillance extended into Joints.

“Ankles!” Langford extended one leg. “I could do with a new one, myself. What do you say, Miss Traugott, can you whip one up for me?”

“I could make an ankle, sir, but attaching it is beyond me. I haven’t yet learned that skill.” She caught a hook in Bristed’s smile. He hadn’t explicitly told her the basement workshop was a secret, but it was in keeping with the arrangement he’d offered to keep her from jail.

“Maybe you haven’t learned it officially, but I have a feeling very little is beyond you.” Langford didn’t undercut his compliments with a smirk. His words were his statement, his assessment bare and direct. Her father had delivered statements in the same way. She hadn’t often heard his praise, but when she did, she knew she’d earned it.

“Thank you,” she said after a moment. “I hope I can live up to that appraisal.”

“I believe you will,” he muttered under his breath. He tapped his cane on the floor twice before he stood. “Well, it’s time I was on my way. I hope you enjoyed dinner as much as I did. Perhaps next time I can join you here?” He addressed this last to Maryam more than Bristed. She ducked her head, her features softened.

“I would enjoy that. Next week, perhaps?”

“I’ll check my agenda and send round my card.” He turned to Eve again and bowed. “It was a pleasure.”

Bristed saw Langford to the door, and Maryam tapped Eve’s elbow. “We should retire.”

Eve waited until they were nearly upstairs before whispering, “I didn’t know you had a fiancé.”

“I haven’t had the opportunity to introduce you.” Her brow furrowed briefly.

“He seems very kind and charming. I like him.”

Maryam’s furrow deepened, the warmth leeching from her voice. “Appearances are not everything.”

Eve glanced over her shoulder, ushered Maryam into the sitting room, and firmly closed the door. “You don’t like him?” He was much older than Maryam, and maybe that didn’t make him the ideal choice for a husband, but Eve hadn’t noticed anything particularly disagreeable about him.

Maryam’s expression changed in an instant, her features smoothing into a blank mask that could rival a clockman. “I didn’t mean to imply dislike. It is an enviable match.” She sat on the edge of the couch, hands cupping her knees, firelight bringing out the golden glow in her cheeks.

Eve wanted to ask why Maryam was marrying him if she didn’t want to, but it seemed like a rude, or at least insensitive, question to ask. She was twenty-six—and Demiri—she might not have many options among her social class.

“Your brother arranged it.”

“Everyone tells me how lucky I am.” The stiffness in her spine entered her voice, but Eve could read through a brave face. She sat beside Maryam on the couch, haltingly patting Maryam’s hand, trying to reassure her. She couldn’t imagine the pressure of marrying someone because it was beneficial to someone else.

Eve let out a breath, getting it: “Langford and Bristed are rivals.”

A wry smile curled Maryam’s lips—Eve had hit it on the head. “They both run Clockman Regulation, a position best suited to a single voice—especially when those voices disagree so often. Marrying Langford solidifies Julian’s place within the Cabinet.” She continued, somewhat haltingly, “It also would help my position to be married to someone like him.”

Eve pressed her lips together, weighing her response. While Aufziehbürg clearly welcomed people of every skin tone imaginable, there was much less variety in the upper classes, and particularly at State affairs. Marriage always offered a woman a certain amount of protection, and marrying a statesman would offer a certain amount more.

“Maybe you can have a long engagement.”

“I have a few months more to adjust.” Maryam squeezed Eve’s hand, her fingers curling into Eve’s palm. The gesture was familiar and friendly and unexpected. “Thank you,” she added. “I can’t express my dismay to my brother.”

“That’s because he’s *Bristed*.”

“It’s his generosity that landed you here. He’s the reason you’re in the State Machinist Program—and the clockmen in the basement?”

Eve had started to make a face about the Program, but stopped when Maryam mentioned the basement. The Program was geared to creating assembly drones, whereas the basement had freed her creativity. She’d never thank him for it, but that workshop had been a generous gift. And the reminder of her situation brought up a different question.

“Would Langford be eager to find something to use against Bristed?” She could imagine what a political rival would do with the information that Bristed was harboring a criminal, moreover that he was allowing Eve to upgrade clockmen in his basement. (Technically Bristed didn’t know about the upgrades, yet, but once he’d seen them, Eve doubted he’d reprimand her.)

“My brother will not be bested by the likes of Statesman Langford.” Maryam’s eyebrow popped in a comical arch. “Don’t think on it too much. Julian will see to it that Mr. Langford’s interest in you keeps to a mild curiosity. He’s quite good at managing his business affairs.” She patted Eve’s hand again and then stood up, preparing to leave. “And if he persists, I can feign jealousy.”

Eve laughed, having some difficulty imagining anyone being jealous of her, least of all a woman like Maryam. “I suspect you will provide quite a challenge to your fiancé.”

Maryam placed her hand over her heart, skirt swishing as she turned to Eve. “I am a dutiful sister and I will be a dutiful wife.”

Eve sat up straighter. “No man is master over us.”

“No man.” Maryam turned the cut-glass doorknob, pulling the door ajar. “Perhaps, in your case, a clockman.” She winked at Eve’s groan, and slipped out the door before the throw pillow struck it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Eve played the ten of clubs to win the trick. The hands on the clock twitched toward ten thirty-five. Thirty-five minutes of workshop time lost. Not that they'd varied the routine any of the four times Langford had been a guest for dinner in the past week, but Eve held out hope tonight would be different.

She enjoyed Langford's company—still not seeing exactly what Maryam objected to behind closed doors—but whenever he was in attendance, Eve and Maryam were expected to retire to the drawing room after dinner where they'd while away an hour playing cribbage, écarté, or whist. Langford and Bristed remained in the dining room, decanting brandy and talking shop (talk that Eve figured must be more interesting than what they reserved for dinner conversation). At eleven, the performance ended when Langford popped in to say good night. Eve would be content to head downstairs and tinker into the wee hours, but Maryam took Eve straight upstairs once the door had shut behind her fiancé.

The unfairness of the situation had flitted about Eve's mind once or twice.

Maryam drooped over her hand, eyelids fluttering closed. She sniffled into a handkerchief once, and otherwise appeared distracted and tired. She twice missed that she'd won a trick and another time had a winning card but played it one trick too late. Eve didn't correct her and merely collected her winnings.

"Are you well?" she asked when Maryam lost a third game—they were usually evenly matched.

"I'm a bit under the weather. Could we retire early tonight?"

Eve immediately snapped shut her fan of cards. “Of course.” She collected the other cards more sedately, setting them to rights and tapping them into a pile. “Why don’t you head upstairs and I’ll straighten up our things?”

Maryam hesitated, aside from her room and the workshop, Eve had never been left alone in the house, probably to make sure she didn’t wander off to tinker with one of Bristed’s machines—she was certain Mr. Richards or another footman would easily stop her from leaving the house.

“You’ll go straight to your room?”

Eve frowned. She’d been thinking of slipping down to the workshop, but she wouldn’t disobey Maryam again. “As soon as I’m done here.”

Maryam sighed and stood—she must truly be feeling ill—and then bade Eve good night. Eve straightened the cards first, then gathered their tea cups and placed them back on the service. She surveyed the room once more before standing and following Maryam out the door.

Eve’s shoes clicked on the tile, the only sound in the echoing foyer. It wasn’t much freedom, moving around the house without Maryam, but it did make Eve feel more like she belonged. Unescorted in a house—that was a slice of normalcy she hadn’t tasted in two months.

The dining room door stood ajar, the only obstacle between her and the stairs.

“It is of the utmost importance to secure the supply, unless you want the State paying twice the going rate for iron and steel.” Langford’s voice barreled through the opening; it sounded like the statesmen were having one of the disagreements Maryam had mentioned but Eve had never heard.

“The iron’s not the only thing we have to worry about.”

She’d heard them discuss the State’s dwindling iron supply before, though always in brief because Bristed dismissed the topic out of hand.

“How much do you think a clockman will cost if we don’t have direct access to iron?”

Eve froze just outside the door. This wasn't just about the iron supply—this was about clockmen. They'd spoken of clockman policy in front of her before—debating legislation about deployment or impact on the economy, but this sounded like something more substantial. She crept forward, inching to the shaft of light that split the Lindisfarne tile from reds and whites to stark grays.

"I didn't say it wasn't important." Bristed's voice was smooth, controlled, but there was steel beneath it, conviction. "There are other considerations."

"Like that the factory is half-staffed."

"That's one."

"We've operated on fewer resources before—we can extend shifts." There was a long silence that sounded like its own response. When Langford continued, he sounded conciliatory. "We'll issue another recruitment drive to re-staff. Push it out to the towns, help them dream of the big city opportunities. We have the posters already."

They were quiet again, this silence less charged. Eve pressed closer to the door, hoping to catch a glimpse.

"It's ambitious," Bristed finally said. She could just see his manicured fingers tapping the table.

"Ambition becomes you."

Bristed snorted and knocked the table twice. "The Cabinet still has to agree to the new facility—it's a sizable amount of funds. Not to mention the salaries."

"They will. More easily if we approach them as a unified force." Langford rapped his cane against the floor.

"We'll require very specific skills."

“Testing will sort that out.”

“Let me consider it before giving you my full support.”

“Perhaps your sister can talk some sense into you.” Langford chuckled.

“She does little else.”

A chair scraped against the wood floor, the sound enough to send Eve scurrying backward. She hurried back to the drawing room, her heart pounding as she heard them approach. Bristed would be annoyed enough that Maryam had left her unattended, much more annoyed if he realized she’d been eavesdropping. She quickly scattered the cards and made to clean them up again, turning back the scene to just after Maryam had left.

Langford tapped his cane just outside the door and then poked his head in. Eve turned in her seat, more startled than she felt she should have been, the color high in her cheeks.

“Oh, Mr. Langford, is it that time already?” Her voice sounded tight to her ears.

“It is indeed, Miss Traugott.” He looked around and then frowned ever so slightly, but the corner of his mouth ticked, some other emotion pricking the surface. “Did Miss Vengas retire?”

Bristed appeared behind him, a matching frown in place.

“She wasn’t feeling well.” Eve turned back to the table, straightening the deck, not certain she could last under Bristed’s scrutiny. “She went up ahead while I stayed to clean up. I’m following her in just a minute.”

“Stay here,” Bristed said. “I’ll have Mr. Richards escort you to your room.”

Langford tapped his cane again. “I bid you good evening. Please pass along my warm sentiments to Miss Vengas.”

“Of course, sir.” Eve stood and curtsied in response to his bow. “Good night.”

Bristed held up a finger. “We’ll be a moment.” He shut the door and Eve sagged in the chair, relief flooding through her. She wasn’t certain what she’d overheard, but if caught she doubted Bristed would care whether or not she understood. It wouldn’t just be a strike against her, either, since Maryam had been the one to abandon her post. She wished now that she’d gone straight to bed—Maryam didn’t need to be dragged into Eve’s ill-considered decisions.

#

A gentleman jostled Eve, bobbling his pocket watch. “Don’t just stand there.” He threw her one last displeased look before being consumed by the crowd once again.

Weekend shoppers lacked something—manners, that was it. They were the main reason Eve had tended to visit the machine shops before her shifts at the laundry and would only duck into the grocery for essentials once a week.

“That was rude,” Maryam said from Eve’s opposite side.

“Isn’t that Aufziehbürg?”

They were in a part of town Maryam didn’t frequent—and on foot, since the carriage couldn’t fit down the narrow side street—and maybe that was the difference. The uptown shops had fewer visitors and more refined clientele. They also weren’t likely to have the parts Eve was looking for. Bergmann’s was great for gadgets, Clockworks for making a deal, but The Machine Shop dealt in parts, particularly unusual parts since they had an Abbrücken metallurgist on staff. In fact, all of the staff at The Machine Shop was Demiri.

A wicker shopping basket brushed Eve’s skirt as another pair of women hurried past, their gazes trailing behind them, distracted by the same storefront window that had drawn Eve’s attention. An automaton switched between two hats, its face painted with red lips and unblinking blue eyes. Skipping past the inhuman face, looking past the ostrich feathers and glittering hatpins,

Eve couldn't help noticing the tick in the wrist each time the machine lowered the hat onto its head. A simple machine in a repetitive motion had a tendency to wear down without the proper care—a point she'd be making to Bristed, concerning routine maintenance and winder training.

Maryam tugged Eve's sleeve. "Come on, let's get moving."

Eve raised a gloved hand to the glass, mimicking the jerky automaton's motion with a flick like a farewell wave.

Eve wound her arm through the handle of Maryam's half-filled basket, taking on some of the weight herself. In addition to Eve's errand, they'd made some other stops along the way, including an impulsive stop at a cart for a bag of roasted nuts. The cinnamon scent drifting up from the basket had Eve's mouth watering and mind whirling with memories of the Noble Exhibition. Maybe she could convince Maryam to take her there one weekend.

Maryam jerked them to a halt before a gang of children snapped past, weaving and dodging as they played along the street, a hand-stitched ball tossed between them. The ball narrowly missed a mustached fruit vendor who stood just as it sailed over his stall; the sudden wind lifting his carefully parted hair. Maryam's navigation, even in an unfamiliar part of the city, was nearly preternatural.

"Have you always lived in Aufziehbürg?"

"No, actually." Maryam paused to sidestep a beggar—Eve scanned the street, didn't see any soldiers, and turned back to place two coins in his hand. His face was half-bandaged and he had one arm tucked into a sling; she couldn't see a hand at the end of his sleeve. He rasped his thanks as Eve returned to Maryam, who had a peculiar look on her face.

"The Statesman doesn't give you much spending money."

"And that man has even less. Are you going to turn me in?"

A horrified look passed over her face. "Of course not."

Eve slipped her arm into the basket again, warmed by Maryam's response. "Come on. The Machine Shop's just around this corner."

The sign dangling above the open door was one of Eve's favorite things about the shop. The letters rotated slowly, drawn by gears at the beginning and end of the words, and as if Eve had wished it, the letters arranged themselves to clearly advertise: The Machine Shop.

The shop was dark even though its large windows were uncluttered and gas lamps ran the full perimeter of the store. Electrics lighted downtown and richer areas of the city, but poorer neighborhoods still functioned primarily under gas lighting. Clockwork gears ticked and clacked, while another machine burped steam and spat a stream of boiling water into a pot. A brass clockwork chandelier rotated over the walkway. It wasn't as fancy as Bristed's, but stationary filigree vines and birds twisted between the revolving lights.

The scent of tea drifted from a cup left on the display case and the cold scent of copper drew Eve deeper into the store. She was familiar with The Machine Shop, of course. They'd been second to reject her as an apprentice, and she'd visited them many times when she was constructing her clockman arm. She didn't know the machinist by name, but she suspected he might recognize her; she'd been in often enough.

A device on the counter caught her eye. Set on a wooden chopping board, several sharp blades raised like spindly fingers, promising to slice, chop, or dice vegetables with the greatest of ease. A toggle on the side flipped between the various options. She leaned in closer, noticing a bit of tarnish on one of the blades.

"Careful with that." A squat man pushed forward, almost emerging from out of the wallpaper for all Eve had noticed him when they entered. His Demiri accent was strong, the way his tongue struck and hardened the language they held in common. "The blades are quite sharp."

“I should hope they would be,” Maryam muttered. She stood in the exact center of the aisle, her head slowly turning with the rotation of the chandelier and her hands clasped in front of her.

“Are you interested in kitchen gadgets? I have an automatic peeler that works on potatoes, apples—”

“Actually, I was looking for parts. I need a weight, something you might put on a pendulum, and I need to special order a pin-wheel escapement to these specifications.” She pulled designs from her pocket and handed them over. It wasn’t quite a pin-wheel escapement, but it was near enough to be called one.

His dark bushy eyebrows arched as he unfolded the designs. “The lady knows what she wants.” He squinted then, looking up at Eve, and she wondered if he might remember her as the failed apprentice. She waited, to see what he would say, when Maryam cut in.

“We work for the State.” She said it lazily, still distracted by the shop and all its moving bits. Perhaps Bristed didn’t bring her to the shops when he made his machine purchases.

“Ah, I thought I recognized you.” He shook his finger at Eve, stepping backward to his counter. “Yes, even the State knows the metallurgist at The Machine Shop is top-notch. Let me run the designs past him to get an estimate on the work.”

“We can pay for a rush job,” Maryam offered.

The machinist’s eyes shone and he bowed low before disappearing to the back.

Eve made sure he’d left before coming to Maryam and whispering, “I don’t think I can afford a rush job.”

“Perhaps not, but the Statesman can.” Her eyes were back on the chandelier and she took a step, following some movement in the device.

Eve grabbed her hand, getting Maryam's full attention. "The Statesman isn't here to approve the purchase."

"If he argues, he'll argue with me."

Eve dropped her hand, not quite believing that.

"You're repairing clockmen for him," she whispered, obviously aware that informants lurked in this part of town. "Improving them, even. The least he can do is help fund your explorations."

"You're already helping me by doing research on the clockmen. I don't want you to get into trouble."

"I can manage my brother."

Maryam seemed sincere, but Eve couldn't push past the notion that Bristed would argue with Eve—and disapprove—whether Maryam stood in the way or not. Still, it was nice to know she had Maryam's support.

The machinist slipped back in, a receipt and small weight in his hand. "Will this do?" He set the weight in Eve's hand; it was heavier but thinner than she expected.

"I think two, maybe. Fused together?"

"Absolutely." He took the weight back and handed her the receipt. "Two days for the escapement as a rush job. And Felix compliments your designs, says they're very well drawn." He bowed again, eager to curry favor with the State.

"Can you deliver everything?" Maryam asked.

He nodded and then busied himself behind the counter to write up the order. He chatted as he did so, blathering about the weather and when he supposed winter would finally thaw. He reported that he was working on a device that would predict just that, but Maryam declined to see it.

When she gave him Bristed's name and address, he fumbled his pen. "Is this for the Statesman?"

Eve's brow furrowed. "It's for me."

"Ah, very well." He kept his eyes downcast through the remainder of the transaction, but when Maryam bid him a good afternoon, he looked at her directly and thanked her for the business.

Once they were outside, heading back to where the carriage waited at the end of the block, Eve asked, "Is Bristed well known in the city?" As they walked past the dim window, Eve looked in, but the machinist had already melted back into the store.

"A bit, I suppose." She took a few steps before urging Eve on with a tilt of her head. "Why do you ask?"

"He recognized the name and house."

Maryam shrugged one shoulder. "You know how many devices come into the house—I'm sure some come from here." Maryam glanced over, her eyes mischievous. "He has a device that will predict the thaw."

Eve chuckled along with her, but didn't feel quite settled. Most of Bristed's devices she recognized as Bergmann's and Drake's ilk, and the machinist's reaction suggested something more than identifying an avid client.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Eve flipped through the research Maryam had given her once Eve arrived home from the State Program. Eve didn't know what Maryam did with her time during the day, but she'd easily gotten her hands on information regarding the weight of steel beams used in the railroad, along with estimations for how many beams a clockman was expected to carry on a given day.

"Clockmen perform other tasks, of course," Maryam said. "But I believe you'll find that the steel beams are the heaviest items a clockman is expected to haul."

"Certainly heavier than lumber or bricks." Eve distractedly ran the math in her head to determine how much weight each gear click would correspond to on the pin-wheel escapement. The Machine Shop had done an excellent job following her designs—Abbrücken metallurgists really were the best. Maybe she'd be able to convince Bristed to send her to the Metallurgy Festival this year—maybe the State would send some of their machinists regardless of their connections.

"What's next?" Maryam asked. "Is it time to install the balance?"

"Not yet." In the middle of her workbench, Eve flattened out the rolled edge of her schematics, using the pin-wheel escapement as a paperweight. Her trusty notebook sat alongside it, propped open to a page of scribbled clockman attributes. "I've been thinking about the way clockmen stop instead of winding down—it's impressive, because other machines can't do it, but does it really have a purpose?"

Maryam leaned forward on her stool, one hand propping up her chin. "You have another upgrade?"

Eve had been thinking about it while she waited for the parts from The Machine Shop, trying to imagine what else might make the clockmen more functional. They could already chain

some commands (walking plus an action, usually), but there was a simple command that could be automatically looped into their system. “A return command.”

Maryam’s face scrunched into a question.

Eve circled the clockman, using his still open hull as a demonstration. “When the mainspring falls below a certain tension, it triggers an escapement that shifts the kinetic motion to these wind-down gears.” She traced from the mainspring to the escapement. “What if instead, the clockman stopped what it was doing, and returned to its winder?”

Maryam gave a surprised laugh and rocked back on the stool. “You’re going to turn the clockmen into the State’s smartest machines.”

Eve bit back her smile, the cool basement suddenly feeling quite warm, and busied her hands by beginning to unscrew the wind-down gears in the clockman’s guts. “Assuming I can effect the upgrades correctly, the clockmen will be much more efficient, and, in a way, they’ll be able to start taking care of themselves.” They would still be machines, of course, but machines that could make decisions about their limits and ask for a new assignment once one task was finished. It would be easier on the winders as well, not having to constantly chase after clockmen. She could imagine Ambrose finding the improvement useful.

Maryam leaned over Eve’s notebook, leaving the washer weighing down one page and flipping forward through the most recent designs Eve had drawn. The notebook still received all of Eve’s doodles, traveling with her everywhere, including to Joint Assembly. “You are a wonder, Eve.”

Wonder wasn’t the reaction she’d elicited from Keller when she posited the idea. She’d blinked at Eve, something like confusion crossing her features, and then muttered a distracted,

“Interesting,” before turning back to composing her music box song. Eve had downplayed the idea as being entirely hypothetical, but she was disappointed Keller didn’t seem to appreciate the value.

Maryam turned on her stool, following Eve’s movement as she crossed to the clockman.

“So, designing the return gear is the next step.”

“Mmhmm.” Eve gently pushed aside loosened gear shafts to extract the whole wind-down movement. She could reuse some of the gears in her new design, but she might need a different escapement to detect the tension in the mainspring. “Is it pretentious to call the whole upgrade a logic system?”

Maryam was quiet for a few moments, and then Eve heard her shoes scuff against the concrete. “It sounds like the perfect descriptor.” She paused, but the air felt tense, like she still had something to say. Eve looked up at her, one hand still in the machine.

“I should tell you, Julian noticed the payment to The Machine Shop.”

Eve’s chest hollowed in fear, bringing her upright. “Is it a problem?”

“No, no. He was merely curious about the expenditure.” Her face was relaxed, the golden tones in her skin radiant in the lamplight. “I told you: I know how to handle my brother.”

Eve made a face as she removed the movement and took it to the workbench. “How exactly do you handle someone as prickly as Bristed?”

“He’s not as prickly as he likes you to think.”

“You’re saying it’s an act?”

Maryam tilted her head side to side, dimples playing by her mouth. “Not entirely.” She plucked screwdrivers and tweezers from Eve’s kit, laying them by Eve’s right hand. “Maybe I’ve grown used to some of his quirks. He was very like a father to me.”

“Like a father? *Bristed*?” Eve poked through Maryam’s selections, only replacing one—she’d become adept at identifying the exact tools Eve required. There might be a machinist inside Maryam yet. “The idea of Bristed as a father is more difficult to imagine than him as a brother.”

Maryam laughed. “He was very attentive. Both of our fathers passed when we were quite young—he was six the first time, seventeen the second. Our mother had terrible luck, she always said.”

Eve leaned over the movement, carefully removing the gears and sorting the parts. She’d been curious, but had felt it was rude to ask questions without an opening. “So, Bristed’s father was . . . Bristed.”

“Land owner,” Maryam confirmed.

“In Aufziehbürg?”

“In the South, actually. Which is why we’re so invested in its development.” She touched one of her hairpins, turned, and then settled on using the clockman’s detached chest covering as a mirror, refastening the loose strand.

“What do you mean, ‘its development?’”

Maryam fussed with her brooch next, taking it off and putting it back on again. The light brought out the orange veins in the agate. “Oh, you know, sending clockmen to build the railroad and train stations, that sort of thing.”

Eve popped out a gear and tossed it into a pile. “I wouldn’t have guessed Bristed was Southern. Not just his attitude.” Eve flicked her hand in a perfect imitation of Bristed. “He talks like he belongs here, accent-wise. But you—” She didn’t mean to compare them like that—they were probably unfavorably compared so many other times by so many other people.

“I didn’t round off all my edges.” Maryam kindly picked up the thread without any offense. She turned from her reflection, fully facing Eve. “The Statesman can hide his parentage, but I can’t. Our mother is on my skin, for better or worse. Julian needed to completely play the part, so he embraced his Nordlunder blood.”

“Does it bother you?” Eve asked quietly. “When people accept Bristed more readily than you?”

Her smile turned wry, and something in her closed off. “I’d be heartless if I said it didn’t bother me sometimes.”

“Well, you’re not heartless.” Eve turned back to her work. “When I first met you, I thought you might be like Bristed, but you’re entirely different.” She caught Maryam’s smile from the corner of her eye.

“Don’t be so easily fooled by my brother. We share the same mother and the same background—there are plenty of Statesman who would like to see him stripped of power because of that, because he doesn’t belong.” Her lips sneered around that sentiment. “He’s very good at playing roles and sweeping people along with his act.” Maryam picked up the gear Eve had just released and sorted it into the correct pile. “You’re smart enough to avoid being swept up.”

Eve kept working on disassembling the movement. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

#

The next evening, Keller caught up to Eve as she was leaving Joints.

“Traugott, I’m glad I caught you.” Keller quick-stepped closer, shrugging into her navy coat. “I’m off to the Noble Exhibition this evening. Is there any chance you might join me?” Her shoulder hitched in an uncertain, self-conscious gesture.

For two months, Eve had nurtured their fledgling friendship, sharing most breaks with Keller and pecking out suitable topics of conversation. Those topics mostly revolved around Keller's music box and inventions Eve had previously constructed, but in dribs and drabs Eve had pieced together that Keller lived alone in a boarding house quite similar to Greta's somewhere in the Barrel, just south of Glockner Park. The Barrel used to be known as the Barrows, but time, accents, and a proliferation of Demiri immigrants had shifted the neighborhood's name to "the Barrel." Eve couldn't help being amused that in a clock, the barrel housed the mainspring, the heartbeat of the timepiece. If the Cabinet had more machinists, she doubted they would appreciate the implication. Keller's family still lived in West Edge, parents and siblings jostling for bed space in one of the tenements. Keller sent them nearly half of her salary, but she'd been saving for parts, and apparently for a visit to the Noble Exhibition.

"I'll have to consult my . . . chaperone." There was no good way to describe what Maryam was, and Eve didn't want to confess her conditional employment in the State Program. "Um, follow me."

Keller's eyes widened when they approached the carriage—Eve had assumed by now everyone knew the carriage waited for Eve each night, but apparently at least one person had missed it. She pulled open the door, relieved that Maryam's month-long streak as Eve's sole escort hadn't ended.

"Maryam, Machinist Keller invited me to the Noble Exhibition this evening. Is there any chance we might be able to attend?" She rose on her toes, leaning into the warm carriage, but not setting foot inside lest that commit her to home.

"Machinist Keller?" Maryam leaned forward, brow inquisitively arched. "The Statesman is taking dinner at the club this evening. You'll be losing some hours."

Some hours in the workshop, yes, but going to the Exhibition was surely worth being a day behind their planned schedule.

“Please?”

An impish look curled Maryam’s face; she’d never had any intention of saying no. “We could both do with a proper outing.” She dislodged the speaking-tube to give instructions to the driver while Eve turned back to Keller.

“How would you like a ride to the Exhibition?”

Keller’s eyes were somehow even wider, pupils pricked on a snow bed of white. “I didn’t realize you have a carriage.”

Eve licked her lips, deciding her friend deserved a sampling of the truth of Eve’s situation. “I’m the ward of a statesman. He’s—” She hesitated to confirm what others had insinuated about her placement in Joints. “He’s the reason I’m in the State Program.”

Keller was silent, the awe slowly dissipating. “Everyone was recommended by someone.” She gripped the handhold next to the door, ready to haul herself in. “After the Exhibition, would you like to stop for some food?”

Eve’s body sighed in relief and she followed Keller into the carriage, making quick introductions between her two friends.

#

“I’m telling you,” Keller proclaimed over the noise of a fiddle and drum, “a telegraph relay is going to become standard in every household.” She smacked the rough wooden table, punctuating her point just as a waitress scurried past, beer sloshing from glasses and flecking Eve’s arm.

“Why would it?” Eve had lived most of her life without even a telegraph office; she couldn’t imagine a situation in which she’d need one in her house.

“Because the State is connecting more and more territory. You saw how far south Nordlund now extends.” A giant map spanned one wall in the Historical Nordlund display, the pull of a lever rotating vertical tiles to show Nordlund during different decades so viewers could watch how the State spread over the last fifty years. Eve and Keller had taken turns pulling the lever and debating about the mechanism while Maryam explained some of the treaties that had resulted in the additional territories.

“So you think we’ll need to communicate more frequently over long distances?”

Keller nodded, the beer in her glass sloshing haphazardly. “Government officials and the like, of course, but regular people will need them to communicate with loved ones at home. You’ve seen how many Demiri are already in Aufziehbürg. You’re in Aufziehbürg.” She shrugged and for the first time Eve felt like a foreigner.

“I didn’t realize you knew so much about politics.”

“Well, this isn’t the first beer house I’ve been in.” Keller gestured to the beer garden around her, a raucous establishment Eve guessed Maryam wouldn’t have selected. She’d been game to try something different, and even though she’d tucked away her brooch and kidskin gloves before entering, she appeared more comfortable than Eve would have guessed.

“I haven’t been in many beer houses, but I agree that telegraphs will become standard in homes. Unless, of course, another technology replaces it.” Maryam sipped from her glass, carefully weighing the heavy beer against the plate of food in front of her.

Suspicious, Eve leaned in closer. “Has Bristed received some new invention?” Of all the machines she’d seen pass through Bristed’s door, nothing could have competed with the telegraph.

Maryam sat back and mimed turning a key in front of her mouth.

Eve gasped and then turned to Keller, ready to explain Bristed's parade of machines, but a man at the table beside them dressed in a crimson vest and tattered coat suddenly shouted above the beer house din:

"The soldiers keep us where they want us—pushed to the fringes and in the sweat stains of the factories. A union could change that! United, there're more of us than them!"

The drumming ceased while the fiddle played on until a ripple of murmurs passed close enough to silence it. Eyes flicked back and forth, even Eve wondering who among them might leave first to report this man. A rabble rouser had to be worth at least seven marks.

Keller leaned closer, whispering, "I saw a soldier as we exited Glockner Park."

The man's head rose from hunched shoulders and he slowly stood, a shakiness in his arms, as though he wasn't quite prepared for what was to come but he was planning to meet it, prepared or not. He'd been talking amongst friends, Eve imagined, he wasn't a leader, he wasn't even really an idealist, he was just a man who'd wagged his tongue too vigorously.

He had a ruddy look about his bronze skin and a grease stain on his cheek that probably came from working in a factory. His friends all had a similar look, but they all kept their heads down as he spoke.

"The Barrel's a fine place to visit." His voice was frail as he started, but he slowly built steam as he built his speech, one idea piling on the next. "An even finer place to live, I imagine, but you'll never see the likes of me here. My family's south of Mekasaba, and even though the Barrel's much closer than much of Aufzieburg, most of us are punted to the West Edge, or even over the river, huddling in the smoke of the factories. You think the smell in West Edge is bad? Whew." As he gained traction, his hands became as animated as hummingbirds, illustrating each point of his speech.

Three men at a rear table stood up, casting off black and brown coats, revealing navy State soldier uniforms.

“Looks like the stench has already made it to the Barrel,” the man shouted, his voice suddenly tense.

“Come quietly.” One of the soldiers advanced, a hand out in supplication, his fellows flanking him. “For questioning.”

The man leapt toward the door, pushing aside patrons to yank it open. The soldiers were on him before he’d passed the threshold, batons whipping out to pummel him. Eve sucked in a breath and looked away as the baton pulled back to deliver another blow.

The soldiers got the man to his feet in a moment, his arms cuffed behind his back.

“Nothing to see here,” the arrested man yelled. “Nothing but the might of the ever-loving State of Nordlund!” He sang an anthem Eve had never heard, his Demiri accent thick in the song, as the soldiers led him out.

One of the soldiers stayed behind to address the whole hall. “The State thanks you for your cooperation in apprehending this known criminal. Enjoy the rest of your evening.”

As he collected the coats the soldiers had left behind, the fiddle and drum resumed their place, picking up the song as though there had been no interruption. Conversations recommenced, potentially louder and more aggressive than before, laughter pitching the air at higher volumes, as if enough laughter could erase what they’d all witnessed. The arrested man’s friends at the next table sipped their beers, none of them speaking.

In all her months in the West Edge, Eve had never seen an event like it.

Keller clucked her tongue. “No informing for anyone, I suppose. Too bad.”

“The fee’s not that many marks, is it? It’s five for begging.” Eve glanced to Maryam, ashamed she could supply that number so readily, even if she’d never informed on anyone.

“It’s not the marks that make it worth it. They keep a record of the most loyal citizens. Being on that list means something.” Keller’s eyes shone as if impressing the State was her deepest desire.

“Is that true?”

Maryam had slid back in her chair, not quite ducking, but there was something shrunken about her posture. “The statesmen are very explicit in advertising the Loyalty List.”

Not a yes and not a no, Eve wasn’t sure how to read that answer, but she suspected whatever list was kept, it wasn’t the honor that Keller implied.

Maryam pushed her chair back. “It’s getting quite late and we should do our best to arrive at home before Julian. Could we drop you off somewhere?”

Keller plucked at the ends of her braid. “No, thank you, I’m just around the corner. One benefit of living in the Barrel: the lights of the Noble Exhibition see me home each night.”

Eve stood, hurrying to pull on her coat. “I’ll see you tomorrow at lunch?”

Keller smiled and threw her braid over her shoulder. “Of course. I’m glad you could come out tonight.”

“Me too,” Eve said before following behind Maryam. As they exited the beer hall, Eve felt multiple pairs of eyes marking their progress, everyone suspicious of everyone else.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Eve rang her bell, signaling one of the QC ladies to pick up the box of ankles. She took the break to stretch her back and massage her aching forearm, noticing a buzz from the opposite end of the table, near where Klein and Robberson sat. She leaned back and forth to try to get an idea of what was happening at the other end of the room other than gossip.

“Your work’s in front of you,” Jasper murmured. His tongue stuck from the corner of his mouth, fold-down lenses flipped to the highest magnification, his concentration unbroken. He’d set Eve straight so many times in the past two months, it seemed it was practically reflex.

“I rang the bell,” she said. “I have a minute.”

Klein gestured with his screwdriver emphatically; Robberson put up a great paw and gently lowered Klein’s hand.

“I just want to know what’s going on.” She scooted back on her seat. “They’re talking about something.”

She suddenly realized that she’d heard far fewer bells ringing that morning. A quick check of the quota board showed just how behind the rest of the joints were—everyone was distracted.

“If they’re talking, it must be about something. We’ll find out.”

Eve turned full in her seat. “I’ll go ask.”

“Later. We’ll find out later.” Jasper drew out his sentence, his tone wrapping around her as firmly as his hand would have circled her wrist.

“But.”

“Your work’s in front of you,” he said again, his full focus on connecting the delicate gears to their arbor.

Eve turned back around just as a Sorter dropped off a new box. Eve picked up her screwdriver, resuming her work with one ear still trained on the buzz, trying to decipher one or two words to give her something to speculate over while she waited.

#

By lunch the buzzing had grown and filtered from elbows and wrists to knees and hips. As far as Eve could tell, she and Jasper would be the last to know what was happening.

Eve scrambled to put her parts away. She usually took her time and was one of the last out of the room, but Klein's constant muttering raised the hairs on the back of her neck—something was happening.

The other machinists came closer, Klein and Robberson holding center court as the pack moved toward the door. Robberson's hands were held aloft as Klein rubbed his chin. "I don't rightly know," he said as they approached Eve's table. "I'm not sure I heard all the details about when there'd be a change up."

"Change up?" The words slipped out of Eve's mouth. She avoided speaking to Klein and Robberson as much as possible and wasn't eager to draw their attention again.

"Oh, you haven't heard?" Klein clucked his tongue, shaking his head sadly. "Ankles are always so slow, aren't they?"

Eve stood, still shorter than all the other machinists. "You know perfectly well I'm at the far end of the table and haven't been able to hear a thing being said. Jasper hasn't been in on all of it either, has he?"

Jasper flipped his lenses up, and then pushed up his wireframes as well. "Rumor is positions are opening farther up the line."

Eve gaped at Jasper. "How did you know?"

He shrugged, but there was something of a guilty look tugging at his mouth and eyes. “I got here early today.” He unfolded himself from the bench, lanky limbs stretching out. “I didn’t want to distract you any further, look.” He pointed to the quota board. “We’re on track, and everyone else is behind. How do you think that will pan out at the end of the day?” Jasper gave the other machinists a long, disapproving look.

It didn’t take long for the other machinists to recover, Dunst prodding Klein again about when the testing might be.

“I said I don’t know, didn’t I? Soon, I suppose. Don’t know why they’d be whispering about it if it wasn’t happening soon.”

“Who was whispering?”

“The machinists over in Appendages.” Klein waved his hand absently at the door—the machinists from the other rooms were passing, and now Eve noticed the Joint machinists weren’t the only ones engrossed in gossip. “The Appeys were saying something about how they’d have to train up the new machinists from Joints to do more than just tighten screws.”

There was a collective hiss—no one appreciated the joke that all Joint machinists knew was how to work a screwdriver.

“Did you hear how many positions are opening?” That question came from Jasper. Eve smiled—she knew he had to be interested in a promotion beyond shoulders.

Klein looked around, making sure he had everyone’s attention. “I heard eight.”

That sent the room into a tizzy, everyone talking excitedly, lunch all but forgotten. Eve pulled on Jasper’s sleeve. His hand was pressed to his forehead, eyes wide. He looked like he might need a seat. It took a second tug before he looked at Eve.

“How many positions usually open at a time?”

“One.”

The answer stunned her. She knew the number had to be low, but one position every few years?

“What happened? Some kind of massive accident?” The question was put to Robberson and Klein, who exchanged a vacant look. The other Joint machinists had reached the end of their information.

Eve shuddered, remembering Jasper’s explanation that when Fulton lost his hand, the machinists in the lower rooms had all benefited. She couldn’t—didn’t want to—imagine what had happened to open as many as eight positions.

“Wouldn’t it be something to move to Appendages?” Jackson bumped Jasper’s elbow. “I’ve always wanted to work on hands.”

“I can stay on shoulders a bit longer if needed, but I’d be happy to move on if they choose me.” Jasper’s eyes glinted, and Eve was glad to see that the State Machinist Program hadn’t leeched all his dreams yet.

One of the Sorters appeared in the red archway and flicked her fingers in a motion reminiscent of, but sharper than, Bristed’s silent commands. Her glare got the other machinists moving, but Eve drifted to the back, thoughts of the open position reminding her of the conversation she’d overheard between Bristed and Langford last week. Whatever they’d been discussing must have passed in Parliament if the Program was now testing for open positions.

Jasper jerked his chin at her, hands tucked in his pockets. “Come on, we’ll listen in to the other tables and find out if someone higher up knows anything more. Sounds like you’ll be able to get off ankles. That’s good, right?”

“That’s very good,” Eve agreed, considering more than just ankles. She’d been repairing clockmen for over two months and effecting upgrades that left Maryam delighted; she was more than qualified for a higher position—a more interesting position—maybe even a position entirely off the assembly line.

She took a few steps to catch up to Jasper. “What’s testing like?”

“Huh? Oh, practical test. Assessment of how well you can assemble something without instruction. Sometimes testing for a complicated joint can hurt your chances of any movement.”

“What if you ask to test beyond your room?”

Jasper looked at her skeptically. “You don’t ask where you test. They decide for you.”

“Hmm.” For someone on ankles, they’d likely only test her for another Joint position. Her eyes slid to Jasper—his hunched back, grayed hair, and leathered skin. No, she wouldn’t waste away in Joints because she’d been given a low-ranking test. She’d already been accused of using her connections, maybe it was time to live up to those expectations.

#

Near the end of dinner, after the conversation of politics and pleasantries had wound down, Bristed predictably turned to Eve to ask how the State Machinist Program was treating her. Most days she responded benignly that it was fine or she’d quote the number of ankles she’d completed, but today she announced, “There’s a rumor positions are opening higher up the line.”

“Oh?” Langford raised his bushy eyebrows, and Eve was certain that the machinists weren’t supposed to know about this news just yet.

She nodded, keeping up an air of innocence, specifically not looking at Maryam, the one person at the table who would instantly see through her. “Of course, *rumors*.” She ran a piece of

bread around her plate, soaking up the leftover gravy. “I hope it’s true, though. I’m ready to move on from ankles.”

“I thought you were enjoying your work.” Bristed’s delivery was full of curiosity, sarcasm layered deep.

“I enjoy every second I’m working on a clockman,” Eve said truthfully. “But I’m suited to something more than just ankles.”

Bristed smirked. Oh yes, Bristed knew just what kind of challenge suited Eve.

“What more do you think you’re suited for, my dear?”

Just the question Eve was hoping Langford would ask. She hesitated to answer, mouth half open, eyes darting to the side, holding on to the moment and hoping Bristed would fill the silence.

“Why, I’m certain Miss Traugott’s ambitions soar much higher than Joint Assembly.”

Eve tried not to let her triumph show.

“You’ve mentioned before that she’s talented,” Maryam interjected evenly. Her eyes met Eve’s across the table, and as she spoke, Eve remembered the State ball and how Ambrose guided her through those unfamiliar waters. “I would think that anyone with those talents would aspire to a more prestigious position.”

“Well said.” Langford gave a light tap to Maryam’s hand. She slowly curled her fingers once his hand had retreated. “Is Statesman Bristed correct? Are you dreaming of something more than Joints?”

“I dream of clockmen, sir.” Maryam’s mouth twitched downward, and Eve quickly backpedalled. “I feel I’ve mastered ankles.”

Langford’s eyebrows knitted together. “A few weeks is hardly long enough to master a skill.”

Bristed clucked his tongue. “Be fair, Langford. You’ve not seen Miss Traugott’s work. She is a talented craftsman. I wouldn’t have brought her here otherwise.” Bristed’s look assessed a thing he owned, but for once his look resembled pride—Eve wasn’t the only one playing a role this night.

“How did you say, again, that she came to your attention?”

“A portable steam-press.” Bristed’s answer was tidy, and Eve didn’t know how he could make that little invention sound impressive when she knew how very small it was.

“Is that all?” Langford’s dismissiveness surprised her, and she found herself a bit wounded, remembering every time a machinist had categorized one of her inventions as a domestic. “It takes less to impress you than I thought. Remind me to stop trying so hard.” He chuckled, raising his glass of wine and turning to Maryam. She offered a titter that sounded nothing like her real laugh.

Bristed’s mask cracked—eyes narrowing and distaste showing, his true feelings for Langford perhaps? He didn’t like the man and yet was foisting his sister off on him, all for political gain. Despised wasn’t a strong enough word to describe how Eve felt about Bristed.

He folded his napkin on the table, the placid mask back in place. “I admit it wasn’t just the press.” He stood and withdrew a long silver key from his pocket, tossing it in his hand. “Come along and I’ll show you.”

Eve’s heartbeat immediately quickened—he was going to show Langford what had drawn Bristed’s attention to her? Was Bristed going to give her up? Langford had been complimentary of her up until now, but surely he wouldn’t overlook theft. Even if Bristed just displayed the arm and made no mention of the stolen joint, how could Bristed be certain Langford wouldn’t use that against them?

While Langford pulled out Maryam’s chair, having some difficulty navigating his cane, Bristed came to assist Eve.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

Bristed responded only with his thin smile.

They all followed Bristed upstairs: Bristed leading the way, then Langford, then Eve and Maryam. Maryam grabbed Eve’s hand and squeezed it. Eve latched on, shaken, her mouth dry; she wasn’t ready for this chapter of her life to end. Maryam released her hand all too soon.

Bristed opened the door to his private study. A burgundy carpet covered the floor, cushioning their footfalls. The room centered on a magnificent desk in the same style of heavy, dark furniture that spotted the rest of the house, so similar that Eve was certain the bookcase in her anteroom had once been part of the set flanking Bristed’s desk. Leather-bound books lined the shelves, curious clockwork machines jammed in every available space. Some machines she’d seen pass through the foyer, but others were older models—antiques really—that she barely recognized. Some devices she couldn’t identify at all.

She looked for her arm, half-expecting to see it mounted on the wall like a trophy, but Bristed went to his desk, unlocked a drawer, and pulled out the arm, wrapped in the same sackcloth she’d used. Eve held her breath, eyes darting to Langford as Bristed pulled back the wrappings.

Langford didn’t react at first, and then started, like he’d been pinched. “She made this?” He looked first to Bristed, then to Eve, and then back to Bristed. “May I?”

He didn’t wait for Bristed to give him permission and instead lifted the arm, hefting it to test the weight. (It weighed just over twelve pounds, heavier than a State clockmen because Eve hadn’t had access to many of the aluminum parts she now knew made up the inner ligaments.) He next examined the forearm, drifting along the soldered bumps where silver met brass, then to the hand, tracing the thick fingers and curling them into a fist.

“The hand isn’t quite right, is it?” Langford said after a moment.

Eve hadn't expected him to notice the unrefined width of the fingers. Bristed had hardly commented on the differences.

"I had only seen a clockman a handful of times when I built it." Her voice barely shook when she spoke.

"An impressive reproduction." He turned to Bristed and waved the hand. "Now I understand why you were so eager to take on a ward. This could easily move her out of Joint Assembly and on to something more complex. You were hiding her." The last he said jocularly, but Eve noticed the bite in his eyes; he was looking to strike back.

Bristed coughed, his hands unfolding long enough to politely cover his mouth. "'Hiding' is not the correct term. I was afraid that certain members of the Cabinet would see the insult, not the ingenuity, in Miss Traugott's success. That they might be more concerned with proprietary rights than in nurturing a clever machinist."

Clever? Eve cut a surprised look to Maryam, still standing near the door. Maryam nodded as if to say, "I told you so."

Langford made a pensive noise and tapped his fingers against the clockman's—one to one, like he was playing a piano. "True, they are concerned about State property." He was quiet a moment more, and then seemed to decide something. "It's time Miss Traugott was properly tested." He handed the arm to Bristed, punctuating his decree.

Bristed set the arm on the desk, one of the bolts scratching the surface. "Your concern for my ward is admirable."

"Oh, she'll always be your find, Bristed, but it takes something extra to cultivate young talent."

The anticipation pulled Eve straighter, all her fears finally forgotten. “Does that mean you’ll test me for another assembly room?”

“An assembly room? Ha! You pass the test I arrange, and you’ll be putting clockmen together from scratch.” Langford crossed the room, his cane nearly forgotten in his hand. He stopped beside Maryam, and held out his arm, bowing slightly. She glanced back to her brother before turning and exiting to the hall on Langford’s arm.

Clockmen from scratch—was that Clockman Assembly or did Langford have something better in mind for the machinist who’d built an arm from nothing? Well, not *nothing*, Eve knew, but practically nothing. She would have figured out all the joints on her own eventually. Besides, didn’t all machinists learn by studying others’ work?

“You must be proud of yourself.” Bristed’s voice startled her; she’d nearly forgotten he was in the room.

“Proud?” She turned to face him, his smile fading hers entirely.

“Mmm, you’ve arranged a better test for yourself. Not just off ankles or on to the next room. I hope you’re prepared for what you’ve gotten into.”

He was trying to shake her confidence, ensure that she wouldn’t pass muster, too worried about the next step to focus on the first one. It wouldn’t work, not on her.

He came from behind the desk, his elbow rigidly offered. “Allow me to escort you downstairs; you know I don’t like you left alone.”

She took his arm, choosing not to be intimidated. Before he shut and locked the study again, she had one last look at the clockman arm still uncovered on the desk, one of the fingers glinting in the electric light.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Eve was tightening the last screw on an ankle when she felt someone approach her shoulder. “Done in just a moment,” she muttered, thinking it was one of the blue-aproned Sorters. They’d begun coming over at regular intervals, rather than waiting for her to ring her bell, but it was rare when one of them visited before Eve had finished a box.

“No need to distract you.” She didn’t recognize the voice, and when she looked up, the reddish-brown face was entirely unfamiliar. The white jacket had a similar cut to a winder’s uniform, with the same double buttons aligned like rivets. He laid a thick envelope on the table. “Good luck.”

Next to her Jasper had flipped up his eye loupe, but hadn’t stopped slowly tightening a screw. His glance flicked in her direction. If she didn’t know him, she might not have known that every fiber of his being was straining toward her conversation.

The white-jacketed winder dropped an envelope at Jasper’s elbow, and continued up the row, depositing an envelope at each station.

Blue wax sealed the flap of the thick parchment paper, an impression like a lion’s paw stamped into the wax. Jasper’s envelope was the same, their names scrawled on the front in looping calligraphy: Eve Traugott, Joint Assembly; Harris Jasper, Joint Assembly.

Jasper ripped into his envelope immediately, a smile already cracking his face. “Appendages,” he sighed. “I’m testing for Appendages at three o’clock today.” He held up the letter, the words *Appendage Assembly* printed in the center of the fold.

“Appendages!” Jackson shouted. He turned to grin at Jasper. “Maybe I’ll make it to hands.”

Rosser also was selected to test for Appendage Assembly—as Eve understood it shoulders, hips, and wrists were the most difficult joints, so it wasn’t surprising they were the three machinists selected to test for a higher room.

She turned her envelope back over, wondering just what test Langford arranged for her.

“Don’t feel bad if you’re testing Joints. You’ll be able to get off ankles. Maybe you’ll take over wrists if Rosser moves up.” He nodded to her envelope. “Go on, open it up.”

Eve inserted her screwdriver into the edge of the flap, Jasper leaning sideways into her space as she pulled out the letter. She expected a similar printed phrase in the center, directing her to *Clockman Assembly*, but her letter was entirely script. A skim didn’t leave a clear impression, so she took a deep breath, slowing her eyes and starting again.

The letter invited her to attend testing at one o’clock for a prestigious new position at the rank of State Machinist. Tools would be provided. Langford’s signature and official seal marked the bottom of the letter.

“Well?”

Eve quickly folded the paper and tucked it away. “Not Appendages.”

“Not surprising. Not that you’re not talented, but no one goes from ankles to Appendages. What time do you go?”

“One. So right after lunch, I guess.”

He flipped the magnification lenses back down, settling into his work again. “Klein, Robberson, and Dunst will probably be with you. Try not to let Klein distract you, huh?”

She nodded, feeling guilty about lying (even if only by omission), and fumbled to fit her screwdriver into the screwhead. She actually had exploited her connections this time—she couldn’t

deny the accusations Klein would make once he found out about her testing so far above Joint Assembly. To Eve's knowledge, there wasn't a precedent for it.

Regardless, it was no more than an opportunity. She still had to pass.

Jasper elbowed her, teeth still showing in a grin. "Twenty-seven minutes to lunch. You can easily finish up four more ankles, huh?"

"Four? How about five?"

Jasper laughed; his laugh wasn't the only one sounding down the line. All the machinists were in a good mood. The promise of change—any change—was a cause for celebration. It felt like they'd all already passed their testing.

"Jasper?" She turned, right knee bumping into her bench. Her new position was out of the norm, so maybe they'd pluck her straight from testing and she'd never even see the workroom again. "Thank you. I appreciate you showing me the ropes. You've been a good mentor."

He shrugged, his normal grey complexion pinkening.

She didn't want to embarrass him further, so she turned back to her workstation. "Twenty-seven minutes."

"Twenty-six now, with your yapping."

She checked her grin and focused on sliding the screws into place, screwdriver twisting. Lunch, then testing. Five more ankles. Hopefully the last ankles she'd ever have to make in this assembly line.

#

In all the time Eve had known Keller, she'd never seen her with an ear-to-ear grin. Keller's cheeks were rosy, her whole demeanor brightened. She wasn't even hiding behind her braid, and it wasn't until she sat down that her shoulders hunched around her ears.

“Have they passed around the invitations?”

“For testing? Just a bit ago.” Across the room the other Joint Machinists were clustered around a table, all of them talking animatedly. Most of the machinists were in larger groups, only a handful sitting by themselves. “Jasper, Jackson, and Rosser are all testing for Appendages.”

“Good for them.” Keller took her plates from the Sorter and mumbled her thanks. “What about you?”

“Not Appendages,” Eve said, sticking to what she’d already told Jasper. She didn’t want to lie to Keller, but she couldn’t imagine Keller reacting much better than Klein if Eve leap-frogged Keller in testing as well. Keller would be up for Internals, a room that required much more skill than clicking parts together. Even Eve might be satisfied there—for awhile, at least.

“Too bad.” Keller ducked her head, casting a look behind. “I’m testing for something new.” She pulled out her envelope, smoothing flat a letter nearly identical to Eve’s. The signature on the bottom was Bristed’s, though, not Langford’s. “I shouldn’t be bragging—I probably shouldn’t be saying anything. It’s just an opportunity, right?”

“A good opportunity.” Eve pulled her letter from her apron, hesitating a moment, and then deciding Keller would find out at one o’clock regardless. “It’s an opportunity we both have.” She laid her letter beside Keller’s.

Keller didn’t say anything immediately. Her eyes flicked between the two letters, reading them over and then again. Eve could practically see the words clicking through Keller’s head.

“We’re testing for the same rank.” The words tripped out of her mouth. “You’re just *ankles!*”

Jasper’s glance caught Eve’s and she quickly looked away, leaning in to Keller and keeping her voice low. “I work on ankles, but I’m a machinist. And a good one.”

Keller lowered her voice, jabbing at her letter. “I worked on ankles for two years. Then on wrists for four. You’ve been on ankles for, what, nine weeks?”

“Ten, but what does it matter? All I’ve got is an opportunity, same as you.” She folded her letter and tucked it away, catching another glimpse at the Joints table. Jasper and Jackson both watched her. She waved her fingers, trying to look as natural as possible.

“But they *shouldn’t* have picked you. You should move to another joint, first. Then to Appendages. Why?” Her fingers twisted in her lap, the jam slowly oozing out of her untouched sandwich. Her braid fell over her shoulder between them, and suddenly Keller looked younger than Eve and much more fragile.

“I’ve done well.” Eve shrugged, not convincing anyone with that weak, unspecific reason. She swiped at the jam leaking from her own sandwich and licked it off her finger. “You’re not the only talented machinist in the lower rooms.”

A half-laugh erupted from Keller, bringing her straight. “Right. Jasper has twenty years of experience. They removed a second shoulder position because he’s so fast. In my room, Fuentes is a master of hands. Do you know how hard it is to make a hand?”

Eve did, of course, but she bit her tongue.

“Fuentes is testing for Internals. *Internals*.” She nodded, and Eve felt she was supposed to let that injustice sink in. “They don’t give this kind of opportunity to Joints.” Her words hissed like venom.

“What? Do you think I forged my letter?”

Keller started and then her eyes narrowed—she’d latched on to the idea, clearly.

“How—? No.” There was no logic in that idea, no way to even argue against it because it was so ridiculous. “Despite what you may think, I deserve this opportunity. We both do.”

“I do, but I don’t know anything about you.”

The words stung and Keller’s delivery froze Eve—with only an hour each day they didn’t know each other well, it was true, but Eve thought they’d forged a friendship. They both loved machines, worked on their own inventions in their off time—they were the only two women machinists in the State Program!

Eve couldn’t muster any anger; she was just disappointed. “I thought you might be happy for your friend.”

Keller’s jaw tightened and she picked up her plate and cup. “Good luck, Traugott.” She moved to an empty table without fanfare, though Eve felt she’d taken all the air with her.

#

As lunch ended and dishes were gathered, a set of doors opened at the opposite end of the hall. Eve hadn’t noticed there were doors on that side of the room. The machinists started splitting into two groups, those who were leaving and those who were testing. Jasper smiled at Eve and then confusion crossed his face—the other machinists around Eve wore yellow, purple, and brown, denoting machinists from Internals, Exteriors, and Clockman Assembly, and Klein, Robberson, and Dunst were leaving with the other machinists. He had to know she wasn’t testing for another joint.

She smiled tightly and then turned away—maybe she’d have to explain later, maybe he’d hate her. She hoped he knew that her gratitude was sincere, and that he might understand even if Keller hadn’t.

A dozen men dressed in the white winder’s jackets filed through the back doors. The clockman keys slung on their hips identified them as winders, though Eve had never seen Ambrose in a white uniform jacket.

They gathered the twenty machinists and marched them through the front doors to a different workshop, this one at the opposite end of the hall from Joints and marked with a white frame and a sign that simply read *Testing*. Inside, worktables were arranged in five rows, rather than one long table like in Joints. Each station had tools and a clockman sitting on a stool. From Eve's quick assessment of the ones nearest her they each appeared to have a limb injury—crushed forearms and knees, a severed shoulder. She had to tame her grin—considering the repairs in her basement workshop, this test would be easier than she'd thought.

The machinists were each assigned to a table—Keller a row up from Eve, and Eve hidden away in the back corner. It gave her a little more space, which she preferred, but the machinist next to her (Exteriors, she noted) sneered at her and hissed, "Joints," when she took her station.

The winders positioned themselves around the perimeter. One, standing at the front with a ledger, raised his chin and addressed the machinists. "You have one hour to assess the damage to the clockman and repair it. If you cannot repair it within the hour, you will have the opportunity to explain the repairs you did not complete to an evaluator." He gestured to the other winders, two fingers extended, the other two truncated. "If you impress us, an exciting opportunity and advancement awaits you." The machinists all knew what awaited them if they failed to impress the winders—back to boredom and the assembly line.

An hour to make repairs. Eve glanced at her wounded clockman, the elbow clearly crushed. Was that something she could repair in an hour? She knew how to do it, of course—she'd repaired an elbow for Bristed—but there could be complications once she removed the metal skin. Despite their offer, she was certain you had to complete the repairs to pass testing.

The winder pulled out a watch, one slender finger aloft. Eve scrambled to pull out her own pocket watch, setting it open on the table, watching as the second hand clicked around the battered face.

“Begin.”

She seized the clockman’s arm, turning it and seeing the forearm was dented as well, although less so, the elbow covering taking the majority of the damage. She shoved a screwdriver between the plates, levering it to get a better look at the joint—completely mangled. A replacement elbow joint was among several other joints provided—part of the test seemed to be about selecting the correct replacement part.

She quickly got to work disassembling the arm, subbing in a slightly smaller screwdriver when she didn’t find the one with the right-size head. Looking around she saw similar improvisations being made at other workstations. “Tools would be provided,” she muttered, recalling the wording in Langford’s invitation.

Covering removed, elbow disassembled—the interior tendons in the forearm appeared intact. She slipped her finger between the gears and clicked one to the next tooth, checking to make sure the piston still operated properly. Yes, the forearm was in working order. Just the dent in the skin, then, and it was quite small; she could hammer it out in no time. She set it aside and went to work replacing the elbow joint.

She fit the new joint in place easily, but making the connections took some time as precious minutes clicked away on her pocket watch. While building an elbow joint didn’t take much finesse (evidenced by the fact that Klein and Robberson were in charge of these joints), attaching them took some skill. The spring (the equivalent of the triceps) had to be positioned precisely, so the spring

could both expand and contract. There was more wear on the spring if a machinist wasn't careful, which meant someone would be making repairs on the arm again sooner rather than later.

Eve balanced the arm on her shoulder, its elbow bent at a forty-five degree angle, screwdriver in her mouth, as she used the pliers to correctly attach the spring. The screwdriver caught on her sleeve, and, while freeing it, she saw Keller out of the corner of her eye. Keller's eyes met Eve's and she looked away quickly, her braid snapping with the motion. Keller had a leg on her table, completely disconnected from the clockman. Eve glanced around the room and noticed most machinists had disconnected the injured limbs before making repairs. She shook her head, opening her mouth to swap pliers for the screwdriver—what a waste of time, removing limbs. She grinned, feeling better about her chances. She screwed the spring in place, making the other attachments with ease now the spring was secure.

She had just under a half hour left. The forearm cover would be simple to fix, ten minutes, she'd guessed, but she doubted she had the time to reform the elbow cover. It was far too mangled. She sorted through her spare parts for a replacement covering—the machinists around her had been employing them readily, including the machinist who'd sneered at her, and his arm had barely been dented! She went through the box a second time, not finding covers for the forearm or the elbow.

Her breath caught as she checked the time, twenty-three minutes.

She grabbed the mallet and started on the forearm, using the uninjured arm as a form. The winder and machinists nearest her flinched. She ignored them.

The machinist next to her finished first. She tried her best to ignore his twitching face while she continued to pound at the metal, desperately flattening the forearm. She gave it a cursory polish and set it aside. Fifteen minutes left; she'd made better time than she'd thought, but she didn't want

to guess how long it would take to reshape the elbow—she was certain it would be more than fifteen minutes, and she'd still have to attach both coverings.

Two minutes, it couldn't take more than two minutes to attach the skin, could it?

She abandoned the mallet when the second hand clicked past the twelve, and immediately started attaching the skin. She was just finishing tightening the last screw when the lead winder said, "Time."

She nearly dropped the clockman's arm, as startled as she was.

"Put down your tools and step to the side of the machine. Winders will be passing through to evaluate the repairs. Please be patient as you wait."

She set the screwdriver on the table and stepped beside the machine on its repaired side. The elbow wasn't perfect, but she'd beaten out the worst of the damage, the curve clearly visible again. Imperfections were obvious when she ran her fingers over the metal, but it was only visible from certain angles, when the light reflected off the bend.

The winders went down the rows of tables, twisting in clockwork commands and testing that each arm or leg functioned correctly and was up to State standards. Most reviews took less than ten minutes, except one machinist who didn't finish spent longer, hands in motion, as he explained how he would have finished the repair.

Keller was one of the first assessed. She helped the winder get the clockman to his feet. His weight held—the first test of her repairs. The clockman took three smooth steps, the damaged leg fully repaired. The winder pulled a blue card from his ledger and laid it on her table. A yellow card flashed on the opposite side of the room, drawing Eve's attention. Eve wasn't sure what the cards meant, but she bet a blue card from the State was a good thing.

When he stepped closer, the winder assigned to her said, "Joint Assembly, eh?"

She pulled herself to attention, but nervously replied, “Maybe I’m here to test you.”

He chuckled, and Eve couldn’t help feeling like Ambrose was with her. The winder extended the arm of the clockman, running his fingers along the sheeting and into the joint. “You’ve done an excellent job restoring the arm. Wait. The elbow’s off.” Eve held her breath as his fingers stuttered over the skin. “Did you repair the original covering?”

She licked her lips. “I had to. I wasn’t provided a replacement.”

His brow furrowed, and then he rummaged through her box of spare parts, checking twice just as she had. “You should have been given all the parts you needed to complete the repair.” He shook his head. “Well, you’re more resourceful than the parameters of this exam.”

He stepped behind the machine again, inserting the key in the highest slot, winding for a lift.

The clockman stuck just for a second and Eve held her breath, letting it out slowly when he finally started to move.

“Could use a little oil,” the winder remarked.

“I was thinking the same thing.”

He checked over his ledger, scratched out notes and checked boxes, and finally set a blue card on her table. “A recommendation only—final assessments are made further up the chain. I think you have a good shot, though.”

A good shot, she thought, and a way off the assembly line. She suppressed her smile and curtsied as the winder moved on to the next table.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Maryam slapped the wrench into Eve's hand. "No one's talked to you since testing?"

Eve shook her head, concentrating on tightening the nut caps to reattach the clockman's chest plate. She wasn't bothered that the other Joint Machinists were avoiding her, but Jasper's silence had been painful. He grunted when she said hello and good night, but otherwise he ignored her. Keller also hadn't even looked in Eve's direction. Three days of lonesome breaks wasn't all bad. She'd covered nearly ten pages of her notebook with new clockman designs. The weekend might cool some tempers. Maybe by Monday things would be back to normal; maybe Monday they'd hear about the positions and then everything would change.

"They're jealous," Maryam declared. "Especially Keller—why is she so bothered by your success?"

"Because if I take a job, she might not get it?" That much Eve understood—the ranks of the State Machinist Program were clogged with frustrated machinists.

"Feh. Friends support each other." Maryam crossed her arms, crumpling the ribbon at the front of her bodice. Her mouth bowed into a deep, stubborn frown, angry on Eve's behalf.

Eve waved the wrench back and forth, trying to dispel their shared frustration. "I know, but I understand, too. I probably wouldn't be much better in her position."

"Well, yes, because *she* doesn't deserve the test the way you do." She gestured to the clockman in front of her with both hands.

Eve hid her smile behind her work, tightening the last of the bolts. "Want to take him on a test run?"

"Why else do you think I'm here?"

Eve swapped the wrench for her clockman key. “You’re always here when I’m working.”

Maryam shrugged. “You’ve needed an assistant.”

She had, but she also hadn’t. She’d needed a friend more than anything, and she was grateful to have her.

“Return command first?”

“Seems the easier thing to test,” Maryam agreed.

Eve angled the clockman and wound it for eight steps and a return. Maryam joined her behind the clockman, and together they watched him walk across the room, Maryam counting the steps. When she said, “Eight,” she grabbed Eve’s hand, squeezing when the clockman executed an about face and began his trip back. He slowed on the return trip, but returned to exactly where he’d been, springs returned to rest.

Clapping sounded from the stairs, echoing in the tight stone space.

Maryam and Eve startled, Maryam’s hand jumping away and her face dropping into a placid mask.

“Impressive.” Langford leaned heavily on his cane as he came down the last steps. Mr. Richards stood behind him, a cross look sketched on his face.

Eve instinctively stepped in front of the clockman.

“Ma’am, Statesman Langford insisted on seeing you at once.”

“It’s all right, Mr. Richards,” Maryam said fluidly, coming over to take Langford’s arm. “That’s all, thank you.” Mr. Richards hesitated and then scurried upstairs, presumably to alert Bristed to what was happening. Langford and Bristed had been absent for several days; maybe Langford’s return meant they’d decided on the testing results.

“What has Bristed busied you with down in this basement?”

Eve swallowed, fighting off the flush creeping into her cheeks. Bristed coming downstairs would have been bad enough, but Langford had now seen her with the clockmen—the cat was definitely out of the bag. “I’ve been repairing damaged clockmen.”

“And you’ve been helping?” He brought Maryam’s hand to his lips and kissed it. “I didn’t realize you were so industrious.”

“Occasionally Miss Traugott needs some assistance, and I’m the one most available.”

He bobbed his head, seemingly unbothered by the prospect. “So, you’ve been repairing clockmen. At Bristed’s command, I imagine. His patronage has far exceeded its bounds, I think.”

“Oh, you know my brother.” Maryam tittered, that fake laugh Eve had heard too often. “He didn’t want her skills to atrophy while she assembled ankles each day. You saw that marvelous replication she whipped together.”

“Hmm, that may have been the smartest decision the Statesman has ever made—aside from introducing us, of course.” He kissed the tips of Maryam’s fingers. Maryam held his gaze, but something in her pulled inward, deferred to him.

“Mr. Langford—”

“That turn the clockman made, is that your design?” The quick shift of topics left Eve off-guard, and she stuttered out a yes without thinking. “And how does it work?”

Her eyes flicked to Maryam as she stepped aside, letting Langford see the clockman in full. From the outside it looked just the same as any other aside from its identifying number, 1822.

“It’s a return command.” Eve took a rag and polished the clockman’s shoulder. Despite not wanting to tell Bristed about the upgrades, she somehow felt guilty that she was explaining them to Langford first. “When the clockman finishes its task, it turns and walks back to the winder before it winds down entirely.”

“Does it really? Remarkable. And it’s functional?”

Eve wiped her brow and then tucked her hands behind her back. “So far. More testing is needed.”

“And what other improvements do you envision for the clockman?”

“Sir?”

“If you were improving them, mind. What would you do?”

Eve glanced to Maryam, not certain this was a question she should answer, but Maryam blinked deliberately. It wasn’t much of a sign, but Eve suspected it meant she should proceed.

“I think some safeguards could be developed, to prevent a clockman from lifting too much weight and damaging itself, for example.”

“And?”

“And?” This time she looked to Maryam for an idea—she’d been so focused on the logic gears that she hadn’t thought much beyond the return command and weight limit. “Maybe . . . specialize them?” As soon as she said it, she latched on to the idea. “A lighter clockman could be dispatched to make repairs to a roof, or, or one could be fashioned with a gas lamp in its head—for working at night or in dark spaces.”

Langford laughed, tapping his cane. “Dark spaces!” He turned to Maryam, seemingly including her in his incomprehensible joke. “I believe we’ve made the correct selection, then. An ideal selection.”

He pulled a thick envelope from the inner pocket of his jacket. “Your assignment. I suppose I should have delivered this to your guardian, but I think Mr. Bristed will forgive my exuberance.”

The paper was crisp between her fingers. She traced the elegant scrawl of her name and formal address: Miss Eve Traugott, State Machinist.

“I’ll let you read the finer details, but there’s a train ticket contained within. Abbrücken.” He grinned when her face lit up. “I know Abbrücken is a dream destination for machinists, but you’ll be there to ensure the financial stability of the State. Your country needs you.”

Eve’s eyes widened. This sounded like something more than just working on clockmen.

“Will you be able to do your part to ensure our future?”

She hunted for her voice amid her surprise—she was responsible for the State? The Cabinet was entrusting the future of the State to her?

“Yes. I won’t let you down,” she stuttered. Eve extended her hand, earning another warm laugh from Langford along with a firm handshake.

“I believe you’ll make the State very proud.” Langford moved toward the stairs, leaning heavily on his cane. “Miss Vengas? Could I get your assistance on the stairs?”

Maryam turned to help Langford. “Five minutes, Miss Traugott, then it’s time to dress for dinner.” Eve hadn’t thought it was that close to seven o’clock, but she didn’t argue, she was too distracted by the envelope in her hands.

#

After dinner, Mr. Richards stopped at the parlor and asked Eve to accompany him to Bristed’s study. She met Maryam’s steady gaze, knowing that confusion marked her own face. Her appointment had been mentioned at dinner, Langford calling for a toast, but nothing much had been said to mark the occasion. Langford called her clever, Bristed raised his glass, and they all drank to her success. The conversation had shifted to business and the new smelting factory opening at the end of the summer.

She had hoped her assignment would be a topic at dinner since she still hadn’t had time to read the paperwork over in full. The first page in the stack announced her evaluation scores and

promotion to the rank of State Machinist, and the train ticket declared she'd be leaving Tuesday next. She hadn't had time before dinner to explore the envelope contents any further.

Eve stood, the envelope tucked in her pocket brushing comfortingly against her leg. She excused herself from Maryam and followed Mr. Richards upstairs.

Bristed waited behind his desk, facing the darkened window. His vast, cluttered study was lit by only two lamps, one by the couch near the door, and the other on his desk. The clockwork machines—including a new one with a glass cylinder and a pump—lumped shadows on the burgundy carpet. The study looked more intimidating than she remembered, but the last time she'd visited Maryam had been with her.

"Miss Traugott," Mr. Richards announced. He bowed and then closed the door behind Eve, leaving her alone with Bristed.

"Sit. Please."

She took the seat nearest the desk lamp, hoping the light would help thaw the atmosphere.

Bristed turned profile, his pale skin in stark relief against the black window behind him.

"What do you know about the State's supply of iron?"

The question caught her off-guard. She thought Bristed had called her to talk about her assignment—or scold her for passing the exam. "Well, the newspapers are panicked about it dwindling." She thought for a moment more. "And you and Langford have spoken about it at length over dinner, though you've always dismissed most of his concerns."

His head dipped; he turned back to the window. "I've dismissed them because I know Abbrücken."

Aside from the Metallurgy Festival, Eve's primary experience with Abbrücken was through the newspapers, specifically through the article she'd read about two months ago, published on the

occasion of the ten-year anniversary of Abbrücken's annexation from Demirtan. The timeline included when the Demiri Treaty was signed and the date the city was renamed Abbrücken (Mekasaba was the Demiri name, though Eve hadn't known that until she'd read the article).

The majority of the State's iron refinement—smelting ore, making alloys that were then used in trains, clockmen, and all manner of machines—was primarily performed in Abbrücken; their metallurgists were the best, after all. It was their metallurgy and mines that kept the city afloat even during the occupation. Neither side had wanted to disrupt commerce, so the fighting had happened around the city and across tables through rejected proposals and treaties until finally Demirtan was spent and the State could make their demands.

The newspaper explained it simply, emphasizing the ways in which Abbrücken had thrived under the State. The Southern Railroad increased their exports North, and the State had put thousands of marks into fixing the docks to reopen the shipping lanes. Skirmishes with Demirtan were a thing of the past, a newspaper memory Aufziehbürgers tossed in with their kindling.

Eve was too young to remember any of it, but from Bristed's statement, she felt like he remembered something more about Abbrücken and its people.

"There are newly discovered iron repositories Abbrücken miners haven't been able to reach." Bristed came from behind his desk, taking the seat next to Eve. "The State has decided it is interested in mining."

"The State's planning to mine iron ore?" That sounded like an operation much bigger than a handful of machinists.

"Assuming they can reach the repository first and lay claim to it? Yes." He settled back in the chair, legs crossed. "I'm sure you can deduce how that arrangement would be financially advantageous to the State."

“Has anyone tried to go after it yet?”

“There have been accidents.”

Deaths, Eve translated.

“With the difficulty of mining, and Abbrücken’s tenuous relations with the State, there’s some pressure to invent safer methods. Quickly.”

This had been Bristed’s game all along. Bristed must have known about and indulged her tinkering in the workshop because he’d wanted to see her creativity. Maryam hadn’t warned off his interest—she might have even encouraged it, bless her. While the State Machinist Program had been grooming Eve to be a mechanic, Bristed had been cultivating her as an inventor.

“I take it this is my assignment in Abbrücken.”

Bristed’s mouth twitched. “What, Langford gave you your assignment and you didn’t even read it?”

“I haven’t had time to read it. Someone set dinner sharply at eight o’clock.” She pulled the thick envelope from her pocket and held it up. “Besides, there’s quite a lot of material.”

“And there’s going to be more.” Bristed leaned over his desk and lifted an even thicker dossier, bound with string, and passed it to her. “Research. To bring you up to speed on what’s expected of the clockmen.”

Eve pinched the lace collar of her blouse. “Clockmen. That’s the only technology to be used in mining? No other devices?”

Bristed held out his finely manicured hand, his wrist delicate and vulnerable. “It is the State’s prize invention.”

It made sense, but it was frustrating, in a way, shortsighted in another.

“You’re not the only machinist selected for this assignment, and, despite your experience, I hope you’ll respect that she is more senior than you.”

“She?” Eve’s throat closed—there was only one machinist it could be.

“Machinist Keller. I’m told you’re familiar.”

She nodded, not able to speak yet. Keller had made it, good for her. Maybe now she wouldn’t be so frustrated with Eve for passing as well. Eve swallowed. “Yes, I know her.”

“Good, then I expect that will ease the transition for working together.” He stood up, stretching and signaling the end of their meeting. “Can I trust you to walk the two doors down to your room, or do I need to escort you?”

Eve crushed the dossier to her chest. “I can handle myself.”

“Excellent. I’ll ask Maryam to take you shopping tomorrow, see about picking up a few things more appropriate for the warmer weather. You don’t have much time to prepare.”

“I know. Tuesday.” She twisted away and then back to him. “Are you looking forward to my leaving?”

Bristed smiled thinly, his hands tucked behind his back. “Why, Miss Traugott, I will hardly miss you at all.”

Of all the things Bristed had said, Eve believed that statement completely.

#

Maryam folded the blue striped silk dress that once belonged to Eve’s mother and placed it in the trunk. “I can’t believe you’re leaving already.”

“I’m strangely torn about it myself.” Her time in Aufziehbürg had taken an unexpected turn, but the most unexpected was how at home she felt in Bristed’s house with Maryam’s daily presence. Of course soon Maryam would be leaving, too. “When is the wedding?”

Maryam made a face and sat on the bed. “Two months, one week, four days. Not that I’m counting.”

Eve chuckled to herself as she arranged her underclothes in the trunk. “Perhaps I can come back for it.”

“You’d better! I expect you and Julian to both attend.”

Now Eve was the one making a face. “I’m certain your brother wouldn’t miss it.”

“No. Not on purpose.” She reached across and plucked up the Night-Cap Candle. “How are you planning on packing these inventions?”

Eve scratched her cheek—the trunk was rather fuller than it had been on her arrival, heaped with new bespoke evening gowns and the linen machine-made day dresses they’d picked up over the weekend. She hadn’t owned this many dresses even when her father was the sole machinist in Kamberstadt and her mother was a nurse.

“I may have to leave some of them behind. Would I have time to run to Clockworks to see if I could sell them?”

Maryam cradled the Night-Cap Candle. “Oh no. You can’t sell these—Clockworks would take them for parts.”

Eve put a hand to her heart—Maryam wouldn’t have known that a few months ago. “Would you like to keep them?”

She blinked, surprised. “Really?”

“Certainly. I can think of no better caretaker.” Eve pressed down on the skirts and fabric threatening to spring from the trunk. She would leave her winter wardrobe behind, but Bristed’s house wasn’t really home, and Eve wasn’t certain where she’d go after Abbrücken. She’d already begun storing the heaviest winter clothes as the spring slowly thawed the Capital.

“All right.” Maryam gave the Night-Cap Candle a fond look and then placed it again on the bedside table.

“Just promise you won’t fall asleep before the light goes out on that one. The mechanism’s still a bit dodgy.” She’d fix it for Maryam if she had time, but the train was scheduled to leave at eight that evening.

Maryam continued emptying the wardrobe, and Eve collected the mechanical toys she’d set in the anteroom. The ones built by her father would be coming with her, even if she had to stuff them in her pockets along with his watch.

“Is there anything you need from the workshop?”

“I already packed my toolkit.” Eve pointed to where the kit was tucked against the base of the vanity. “There should be space in my trunk—maybe it can weigh down some of these dresses.”

Maryam stooped to pick up the kit, moving carefully in her tightly laced corset. It wasn’t a style Eve was yet used to, but on Maryam it was quite fetching.

“Is that it, then?”

Eve turned, taking in the room, the empty wardrobe. She went into the anteroom, giving it the same assessment. Everything Eve about the room had been undone, the clock turned back three months. A clockman head hidden behind some bricks at Greta’s boarding house and her few failed inventions staying with Maryam would be the only signs that Eve had ever been in Aufziehbürg.

She came back to the bedroom door to find Maryam sitting on the closed trunk.

“That’s it.”

“Excellent. I don’t think anything else would fit in this thing.” Maryam knocked on the lid, and feigned that it might pop open.

Eve helped her latch it, then they stepped back, and Eve considered how heavy it must be and the number of stairs.

“Mr. Richards?” Eve asked.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Richards.”

Eve picked up her satchel, already packed with her dossier, train ticket, and notebook, and linked arms with Maryam, going downstairs.

“You promise to write?”

“You promise to write back?” Maryam patted Eve’s arm. “You already have a letter from me in your satchel. Don’t open it until you’re on the train.”

The idea of it made Eve giddy, and for a moment she almost didn’t feel bad about leaving Maryam behind.

“Ah, there they are,” Bristed said as they rounded the last few steps. “Do you need help with your trunk?” Bristed glanced to Mr. Richards and gestured up the stairs, but the valet was already on his way. “A carriage is outside. It’s only a two-seater, you don’t mind saying goodbye here, do you?” He gripped Maryam’s hand as he said this last.

“You’re escorting me to the train station?” Eve frowned. She’d been expecting to have Maryam with her on this last leg before her departure.

“I’m escorting you much farther than the train station, Machinist Traugott.”

Eve took another step into the foyer and finally noticed another trunk—blue leather with brass fittings that looked like just the thing Bristed would have displayed to show his deep patriotism.

His lip slowly curled. “I told you I wouldn’t miss you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The cool air lifted by the time they reached Kamberstadt, only a few hours south, the thaw growing more obvious as the living scents of trees and flowers bled into the train.

The Kamberstadt train station was frozen in time, exactly as Eve remembered, even in midnight dark. Gas lamps lined the platform, illuminating the yawning porters as they waited for the train crew to unload a shipment. Whitewashed spindles supported a guardrail leading to the wide staircase and the town. The pitched roof framed a colorful stained glass version of the State crest installed in a circular window.

They were only scheduled to stop an hour, but Eve still fought the urge to disembark, walk through town, find her house on Third Street, stop at her father's old shop. Nothing would have changed much, she'd only been gone eight months and little about Kamberstadt ever changed. Some other family would be living in her home; Mr. Paulson's would still be the machinist behind the counter. Kamberstadt would still be waiting for her, no matter when she returned.

She turned away from the window and pulled Maryam's letter from her satchel again to distract herself.

Dearest Eve,

Good luck as you embark on your journey. I know Abbrücken will prove itself a challenge, but it is a challenge you're well suited to meet. While I regret that you will be far away, I'm happy to see you reach your greatest ambition. Certainly no one has worked harder to achieve her dreams.

I apologize that I didn't tell you my brother would be traveling with you. He swore me to secrecy, and you know how he is. I don't think he'll be much of a bother once you arrive in

Abbrücken, as I expect you'll soon be busier than ever. When he's in a good mood, convince Julian to show you Abbrücken; he knows it better than he'll admit.

A piece of advice to my friend, the seafood in a coastal city must be sampled. Trust the recommendation of anyone in Mekasaba; they won't steer you wrong when it comes to culinary adventures. However, be more discerning if you ask for directions.

The enclosed is something to help you remember your time in Aufziehbürg. I hope to see you soon. Take care until then.

She ended the letter with her initials, the arm of the V crossing the M, both letters sharp in calligraphy.

The enclosed, as Maryam called it, was a clockwork gear she'd hung on a rust-colored ribbon. Eve had put it on immediately. As she read the letter again, Eve slid the gear back and forth on its ribbon, already missing her friend.

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The next morning, with the temptation of Kamberstadt hours behind them, Eve commandeered a table in the dining car. The four-person table offered more space than her sleeper, and it was easier to sort all of the papers and information she'd received regarding her assignment. She'd read them in the days before leaving the Capital, but the reports were thorough and packed with information. Land surveys, maps of the Magtan Mine, mining tasks, working conditions, and a history of Abbrücken iron mining—each component was a clue to deciphering the perfect clockman upgrade.

Eve returned to the report on working conditions, her notebook open next to it, adding notes concerning the winders and what they would have to expect tending clockmen underground. At the bottom of the typed page Eve found the initials M.V. in a familiar cramped and calligraphic

hand. She traced the letters and then reread the report, imagining Maryam's soft voice flowing over the words. Eve hadn't realized Bristed had enlisted Maryam as a researcher, although she should have guessed it based on her own experience with Maryam's research skills and Bristed's penchant to keep things close to home.

The whoosh of the train intensified when the door opened behind her.

"I see you're not wasting time." Bristed and Keller entered together, Keller a few steps behind Bristed, her hands neatly folded in front of her brightly trimmed day dress. The dress fabric was aged, but the trimmings were new, the blue dyed lace a slight mismatch with the dull gray fabric.

"As I said, there's quite a lot of material. Hello, Keller."

Keller dipped her head, but didn't return the greeting.

Bristed carried two long paper tubes under his arm and set them on the empty table across from Eve. He pulled out a chair for Keller on the opposite side of Eve, and then brought over another chair, placing it at the head of the table, right in the middle of the walkway. He adjusted his cuffs as he lowered himself into the chair.

"What are your thoughts on the project so far?"

His question seemed rather openly addressed, so Eve hesitated to say anything, instead looking across to Keller. Keller's wide eyes were on Eve, her braid curled over her shoulder. When she didn't say anything, Eve gave a half-shrug. "It seems a challenge."

"A challenge," Bristed repeated. "Yes. Not all jobs are as simple as assembling ankles."

Eve shook off the jibe, squaring her shoulders. "In terms of upgrades, my logic system is an obvious starting point. I don't know that you ever saw it in action, but Statesman Langford did. He was impressed." Her mouth twitched when she realized for the first time she could speak openly in front of Keller about everything she knew about clockmen.

“Langford did tell me. Repeatedly. How does that help make the clockmen better miners, though?”

“It doesn’t eliminate the need for winders, but the return command should limit the amount of time a winder needs to be in the mine where it’s most dangerous. The weight limit could allow a clockman to realize when a cart is full and then carry it from the mine.”

“A machine thinking for itself. Sounds like a display from the Noble Exhibition. Something from the Speculative Wing.” Keller smirked, clearly taking Bristed’s statement as a dismissal of Eve’s concept.

Bristed turned, and Keller quickly straightened herself, her smirk flattening.

“And what do you propose?”

“I believe the first—and most obvious step—is to utilize the excess space in the clockmen to make them more useful tools for the miners.” She pulled a small leather-bound notebook from her pocket and leafed to a drawing of a clockman with a porthole in the middle of its face, a bulb clearly visible behind it. Perhaps it was an obvious upgrade, but it rankled that Eve had voiced the suggestion to Langford just a few days ago. “We could also reinforce the hull and specialize tool attachments to work with the *existing* clockman infrastructure.” Her eyes cut to Eve, as if proving a superior point.

Bristed circled the porthole drawing with his index finger, tapping the light bulb. “An excellent beginning. Though Traugott has technically had months. I’ll be interested to see how you combine the ideas.”

“Sir?” Keller snapped her notebook shut.

“We have two days before we arrive. I hope that’s sufficient time for you to work together and draft a plan.” He stood up and bowed to them both, before swiftly returning the chair to its

original location. “I expect to see both of your ideas represented in the schematics. Oh.” He collected the tubes he’d placed on the table behind him and then handed one to each of them. “To begin your work.”

Bristed nodded to Eve as he left, his face once again unreadable.

When the door shut behind him, Keller uncorked her tube. “I didn’t expect to see you on the train.” She deftly extracted the rolls of paper, sliding them right over Eve’s documents and notes. The papers unrolled into clockman schematics—page after page of cross-sections, limbs, torso, specific systems. “Of course I didn’t realize you’d been practicing for the Statesman.”

Eve tugged her notebook from under the schematics. “He didn’t even know what I was doing. He asked me to repair a few damaged clockmen. I noticed some wear. I was inspired.”

“I’m not sure I’d call your work ‘inspired.’”

“Oh, well, I didn’t work on *arms* in the assembly line.”

Keller looked back and forth over the top schematic, a torso-to-head cross-section showing the gear trains controlling arm movements. The silence made Eve feel hot with guilt; she hadn’t meant to lose her temper.

“Do you have your logic system mapped?”

Eve took a deep breath. “I do.”

“Can you copy it out for me?”

“Of course.”

Keller stood and rolled her schematics again, shoving them back in the tube. “Then I’ll work in my room. We can compare notes tomorrow afternoon, before we arrive in Abbrücken.”

Though she was loath to point it out: “Bristed said we should work together.”

“And we will. By sharing notes and then discussing them tomorrow.” Keller flicked her braid behind her back and then exited the door toward the sleeper cars.

“Our collaboration is already going so well.” Eve spread out her own set of schematics and began copying out the modifications she’d made to the wind-down mechanism to allow for the return gears. When she completed copying out the logic system she’d already mapped, she snagged a crew member and paid him a few coins to deliver the schematic to Keller—the less time spent with her the better.

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The remainder of the travel was uneventful. Keller kept to herself as promised, emerging from her room two hours before they were scheduled to arrive in Abbrücken only to pass Eve a set of schematics detailing her ideas, including a battery that could convert kinetic energy into electrical to power the headlamp. Eve didn’t have any experience with electrics, but from what she could tell the battery was ingenious and might be able to power other devices the clockmen could use. She was beginning to understand why Keller had also been recruited.

After three days, the chug of the train was only noticeable when its pattern altered, as it did now. Eve grabbed hold when the train hissed, the brakes engaging as the outskirts of Abbrücken slid past the windows. Birch trees, tall and thick, crowded the sides of the railroad tracks. Long tree shadows striped the train as they passed, the afternoon sun hanging low in the sky. Salt in the air mixed with the scent of wildflowers, permeating the train. Beyond the trees was Abbrücken, the tops of domed buildings peeking unexpectedly. Eve had only seen buildings like them once before, when she’d come to the Metallurgy Festival as a young girl.

The train station was an obvious addition to the city, blue and white and angular and nearly identical to the station in Kamberstadt, although the stained glass State crest that should have hung

over the open door was missing. Otherwise, the color, the design, Eve guessed every measurement was identical to every train station along the Southern Rail.

“Machinist Traugott.” Bristed appeared next to her, one hand braced against the wall of the vestibule. A porter followed him, heaping his trunk on top of Eve’s. “A welcome party should be waiting for us.” He looked around and then back down the hall. “Where is your compatriot?”

“Coming along shortly, I’m sure.”

With one last lurch, the train finally stopped entirely, steam hissing and fogging the window. Eve squashed down a trill of excitement and anxiousness. The door automatically retracted with a pneumatic gasp, revealing two familiar men in winder’s uniforms.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Her voice froze in her throat, even in the sizzling heat. Ainsley was the same as always, but Ambrose's beard was close-cropped, the bushy red gone, showing more of his handsome face. She could make out the square cut of his jaw and full frowning lips. He looked well, if displeased.

"Well," Ainsley said, recovering faster than either Eve or Ambrose, "Statesman Bristed certainly has a sense of humor."

A laugh burbled from her chest, awkward and self-conscious. With the attention on her, she covered it, exiting the train, hand proffered. "It's nice to see you again, Winder Ainsley. Winder Engle." She shook each of their hands in turn, however Ambrose's touch was so brief it could hardly be called a handshake.

Bristed disembarked behind her, shaking hands with both men. "I thought we could all do with some familiar faces."

"It's nice to see you again," Ainsley said. Ainsley's demeanor was as warm as when she'd last spoken to him at the State Ball. He offered his arm, and, with a brief glance to Ambrose, she took it, curling her fingers around the cerulean sleeve. After a brief word with Bristed, Ambrose stepped into the train. He hadn't even said hello.

She tugged at her buttons as Ainsley guided her across the platform, wishing she'd changed into a linen blouse. Abbrücken was much farther south than Kamberstadt and far warmer. Then there was the sea to consider. She hadn't thought it would make that much of a difference, but the air was thick and damp. At least she'd braided her hair and pinned it up.

“I thought it was odd that the Statesman insisted *we* meet the train. Ambrose and I rarely get assigned transport duties.” Ainsley scratched at the light brown stubble on his cheek. “It makes sense, now, of course.”

“I’m glad you’re here. It’s nice to see, uh, a friendly face.” Something of her anxiety must have read through her forced expression because Ainsley sighed.

“A friendly face.”

Eve pursed her lips, glancing at the train. Ambrose disembarked and had Keller on his arm, Bristed at his side. He didn’t seem at all interested with rekindling their friendship. “Did he—?”

“Not much,” Ainsley said, anticipating her question. “I think he was disappointed when your letters stopped coming.”

“Then he should have replied to one of them.” Of the eleven letters of apology she’d posted, Ambrose hadn’t replied to a single one. “Besides, I was busy—very busy. You wouldn’t believe the way they work the machinists!” A voice in the back of her mind sang that the real reason she’d stopped writing was that she’d grown comfortable in Aufziehbürg, preoccupied with her new friendships and upgrading clockmen. She couldn’t quite remember the last time she’d written a letter to Ambrose. Surely it hadn’t been more than a month ago; that was when she’d become distracted by the logic system.

Ainsley held up his free hand, halting her excuses just as she was building steam. “It was probably good for him when the letters stopped. I certainly don’t judge you for it. He was the one who didn’t reply.”

Eve wrapped her arm across her waist, running her hand along the waistband, glad that someone else saw that distinction.

Ainsley descended the stairs a step ahead of her. “He can’t ignore you if you’re here.”

“He’s doing his best attempt.”

“He’s surprised.” It sounded to Eve like an excuse and a lie, however unintentional. “Give Ambrose some time. He’ll come around.” That, too, seemed less than genuine.

A dirt road and mule cart waited for them at the bottom of the stairs. The cart was wood with high sides reinforced by steel buckles, two inches thick. The buckles crossed the body of the cart evenly, making it ideal for hauling heavy loads brought up from the mines.

Ainsley helped her into the cart, giving her the bench seat beside the driver. She smiled at him, but he pulled the wide brim of his hat lower. His hands were cracked and orange-brown from the sun. Eve couldn’t imagine spending all her days outside in this heat.

From the cart, she could see even less of Abbrücken, just the top of the tallest dome, but she could still smell its salty sea, like electricity in the air.

The rest of their party had caught up, and behind them several porters carried the luggage.

“How are you enjoying Abbrücken so far, Machinist?” Ainsley held a hand out to Keller, accepting her from Ambrose’s arm and helping her up beside Eve.

She winced, looking from Eve back to Ainsley. “It’s hot.”

“Is this the best conveyance you could find?” Bristed kept his hands behind him. He probably thought everything about Abbrücken was dusty and dirty and in need of development, as Maryam had put it. A cart on a dirt road wasn’t good enough for the Statesman.

“I’m sorry, sir. The locals have been skeptical of the renewed State presence.” Ambrose stood at attention in front of Bristed, straighter than a clockman. Ainsley’s posture was more relaxed, but it was obvious they were both on their best behavior under the Statesman’s eye.

“I suppose we do what we must.” Bristed pulled himself up into the rear of the cart, showing a surprising amount of athleticism. “Could you assist the porters with the luggage? You never know what a machinist might have in her trunk.”

Eve felt like the dig was for her, but she chose to ignore it.

The winders did as instructed, relieving a porter of a trunk, slinging it between them. They were nearly the same height, Ainsley’s coloring darker, his hair brown like most Aufziehbürgers. They both had a loping walk that Eve recognized as matching the timing of a clockman’s clanking gait. The dusty road rose to meet them as they crossed the deep ruts from iron-laden carts.

The cart bounced from the weight of the trunks. Ainsley climbed in immediately, but Ambrose hesitated, his wide blue eyes briefly meeting Eve’s. She saw the old Ambrose in that moment—her lost friend, the one she’d betrayed. She spun, back straight, guilt heating her cheeks, and tried not to eavesdrop—to give Ambrose whatever space he needed—but she overheard the word “walk,” then Ainsley muttering something else before Ambrose climbed in as well.

Eve felt Keller’s eyes on her—she must have noticed something of that exchange—but she didn’t say anything.

Ainsley sat just behind Eve, but Ambrose stayed to the back of the bed, the luggage, Ainsley, and Bristed a barrier between them.

In the dwindling daylight, all of the houses were some shade of red; nevertheless, it was clear earth tones were the preference for exteriors. The houses were similar in size to the ones in Kamberstadt—single- and two-story buildings that were modest in their uniformity. The windows here rounded at the top, and nearly all of the homes had a porch. Streets spoked from the main thoroughfare, numbered just as they were in Kamberstadt. She was tempted to find the house that mirrored her address back home. The streets in the Capital all had names, many of them in honor of

prominent statesmen and generals, or so Eve had been told. She'd never been instructed in history and, after living with Bristed, cared even less for politics.

"And there's plenty of space?" Bristed's voice drifted forward as the cart creaked and rocked its passengers.

"There should be—the Reza Estate is as large as the Minister's home, at least." Ambrose's voice was barely audible as he reported to his superior.

"The clockmen are there? Raw materials?"

"Of course," Ambrose said.

"I need to send a telegram. We should arrive before the office closes, don't you think?"

Not part of the conversation behind him, Ainsley leaned forward between the two machinists as the cart rolled up a hill. "This is the best part."

As they crested the hill, Abbrücken suddenly sprawled before them, framed by the sea curving the horizon. Houses and buildings packed together in staggered heights, giving a little more breathing space than Aufziehbürg. Laundry lines spanned between buildings, crisscrossing and displaying brightly colored linens with intricate patterns more elaborate than lacework. A red scarf caught the wind as a woman freed it from the line; she expertly reeled it in.

Doorways and windows arched, the arch sometimes rising to a point. Decorative corbels carved with faces, fruit, and fish braced overhangs. Eve had vague recollections of Abbrücken, but this view, especially when she could compare it to Aufziehbürg, was much more rewarding.

The road switched from dirt to cobblestone as they entered the city, buildings and electric lamps lining the street, and Ainsley raised his voice to be heard over the clacking, creaking wheels. He pointed out shops, thin alleys separating the different establishments. Telegraph wires knitted across tiled roofs, ascending low to high as they neared downtown. Locals walked along the road, in

a mix of both familiar and unfamiliar clothing. Some men wore checkered pants and jackets as would be fitting in Kamberstadt, but they topped it with a strange, tasseled cylindrical hat. Many women were wrapped in flowing robes of orange, red, and yellow, but others dressed exactly as Maryam did, in the latest fashions found in Aufziehbürg dressmakers.

The cart turned on to a side street, passing a grocer's and machinist's. A block down, they entered the eastern edge of a large square. The middle section contained a park Eve remembered clearly—it was where the Metallurgy Festival took place. Vendors had spilled from the park onto the sidewalks, everything surrounding the gazebo where the Inventors' Tournament took place every year. The gazebo was immediately recognizable, its caged lattice dome the centerpiece of the green.

As a young girl Eve dreamed of one day competing in the Inventors' Tournament. She doubted many State Machinists had ever participated—the State Machinist Program wouldn't allow them much time to travel, and most machinists' skills must atrophy after working so many years in Joints and Appendages. Eve had been lucky to finagle an advanced placement test when she did. If she was still stationed in Abbrücken at the end of summer, maybe she could earn a spot.

An ornate building that put all the others to shame was directly across the park, nearly centered in the square. A central tower rose from it, its dome the one Eve had seen from the train. She'd remembered the stark white walls and ornate arches and columns wrapped in brass, but she hadn't known what the building housed.

"Their judicial seat," Ainsley said, and then pointed to the building next to it. "But that's what you care about." The building next door was topped with a clock tower, nearly as tall as the justice building. It, the machinist shop they'd already passed, and a third shop on the northern end of the town, nearest the mines, were all owned by the famous Bergmann. The three shops in Abbrücken were only differentiated by their location: east, north, and central.

Eve turned around, her hand finding Ainsley's. "Can we go?"

Ainsley laughed, but he didn't say no.

As they came around the southern side of the square, Eve turned, her attention caught by the rapt look on Bristed's face. His chin was lifted in admiration of the justice building, his shoulders dropped from their perpendicular lines and his features softened into something boyish. As he looked around Abbrücken, the State dropped off him and for once Bristed was just a man. Maybe this was what Maryam had wanted Eve to see in him.

A handful of locals stopped to stare at their cart. One woman shawled in red and gold brocade leaned to whisper something in a child's ear. He took off down the street, whooping and gathering friends.

The cart slowed as it neared the southwest corner, stopping in front of a grand building a few doors down from Bergmann Central with wires running from the tip of its roof outward. The telegraph wires were thickest here, crisscrossing in a lattice as intricate as the square's gazebo.

Ambrose jumped out before the cart had rocked to a halt. "You should take her to Bergmann's." Eve hadn't thought Ambrose had heard her. Once they were on the cobblestones whatever conversation he'd shared with Bristed had been incomprehensible to her.

"A fine idea. I'm sure both machinists would enjoy it." Bristed lighted from the cart bed, patting off his jacket. "However I'd recommend keeping an eye on Traugott. We won't be long at the telegraph office." Bristed waved to someone with his statesman-smile and entered the building, granting Eve a few minutes without his chastising comments.

"Are you sure you wouldn't be the better person to show them Bergmann's?" Ainsley's voice was light, but there was steel beneath it, ready to force a reconciliation.

“Show her Bergmann’s,” Keller corrected as she jumped down from the cart. “I think I’d prefer to send a telegram. I’ve seen enough of Bergmann’s in Aufziehbürg.”

“But this is the original Bergmann’s.” The edifice alone was enough to entice Eve. The glass face of the clock tower showed the interior workings of the giant clock, the sunset refracting through it from the back, a lighthouse for machinists.

“You’ve seen one machinist shop. . . .” Keller shrugged, not finishing the saying, and followed after Bristed into the office. She gave the machine shop one look that made Eve think she wanted to explore it, just without Eve’s company.

Ainsley continued his argument with Ambrose, ignoring the exchange between the machinists. “You like Bergmann’s.”

Ambrose paused, arms spread on the back of the cart. “And Bergmann likes you. Better than me at least. Besides, I owe my sister a telegram.” If it was a lie, it was as smooth as the truth.

Eve turned in her seat, wanting to do what she could to appease Ambrose. “Winder Ainsley, I’d be delighted if you’d show me Bergmann’s. I could use some new files, so you’d be doing me a favor, taking me there immediately.”

Ainsley frowned, but jumped over the side of the cart and held his hand up to Eve. “Then it would be my pleasure.” She took his hand, stepping off lightly, the cart rocking with all the movement. “We’ll be back soon,” he told Ambrose. “And then when we get to the estate we’ll all have dinner together.” Eve bit her lip to keep from showing her amusement at the aggravation peeking into Ainsley’s voice.

“Of course,” Ambrose said. He slipped into the office, and Ainsley offered his arm once again to Eve.

“Shall we?”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The sun sinking behind the stately City Hall and machinist shop obscured the ticking clockwork in the Bergmann tower. Eve pulled away from Ainsley and stepped into the street, shielding her eyes so she could get a better look at the full clock movement. The sunlight flared through the glass, blinding, and Eve stepped on someone's heel.

"Oh, excuse me!" She wheeled immediately, face as red as the sun. One day she'd learn not to be so distracted by clockwork.

The man she'd bumped into—more a mountain than a man, as tall and bald as a clockman—looked down at her, over the box he was carrying.

"I'm sorry," Eve said again. "I was trying to get a better look at the clock."

A dark brown scar on his thick lips tugged when he gave her a quick once over, and then he rumbled, "It's a quarter past five." He turned toward the green before Eve could explain her interest in the clock, but maybe that was a good thing since he didn't look like the kind of person who cared about clockwork or about rambling young women. She thought she heard him mutter, "Machinists," as he walked away. A line of sweat darkened the back of the man's brown shirt, splitting him in half. He bent to pull a sheet of fabric from the box he'd been carrying, tying one edge of it to the wrought iron fence around the green.

Ainsley touched her elbow. "Careful now. We're not the most welcome people in this city."

"I've read the papers."

"You've read the Aufziehbürg papers." Ainsley tugged on the hem of his winder's jacket, the only blue item in the square as far as Eve could see.

"I thought the fighting was long behind them."

“The fighting maybe, but memories last longer than battles.” Maryam had implied something similar in her letter, but before Eve could consider it, Ainsley wrapped her hand around his arm again and entered Bergmann’s, all her concerns fading once they crossed the threshold of the shop. Bergmann’s was loud, crowded with clockwork, and much, much grander than the satellite shop in Aufziehbürg. Keller’s off-hand assessment about all machinist shops being the same did not take Bergmann Central into account.

Clockwork devices dangled from the cathedral ceiling, including twinkling chandeliers very similar to the ones that decked Bristed’s home. Various models of clocks, all of them ticking and tocking, covered one wall top to bottom. If she listened carefully, she could pick one clock out of the din, focusing on the unique noise of the wheel tooth hitting the pallet. Eve found other devices on display in glass cases along the walls and on open shelves down the aisles—peelers, steamers, devices for making tea, cooking pot roast, or dusting—every domestic device imaginable and then some. The Bergmann’s in Aufziehbürg sold a limited number of domestics, mostly small devices, like automated tea services that could be used to show-off in front of guests, but here domestics of all sizes practically spilled from the shelves. Her father always claimed that no one loved clockwork like they do in Aufziehbürg, but here clockwork was more than an aid, it was a way of life.

In the middle of the store, cordoned off in a pen, was a clockwork peacock whose cloisonné silver, blue, and green feathers glistened in the electric light. Agates, polished into smooth ovals, glinted in each eye. When Eve wound the key in its neck, the tail feathers fanned out, waving gently from the sudden movement, and the peacock stretched its neck, opened its mouth, and squawked.

“I bet you could make one,” Ainsley said.

Eve was already leaning into its enclosure, staring between the filigree gaps in its neck, trying to catch sight of the bellows that made it squawk. “Probably. I’m good at replication.” She grinned

up at Ainsley and lost her balance, Maryam's iron gear pendant swinging into her face, but Ainsley grabbed her waist and pulled her back to her feet, offering a modest apology for his hands.

She smoothed out her skirts, fighting the blush creeping up her neck, and kept her hands in her pockets.

"Enjoying the peacock?" A stubbled man in a green embroidered waistcoat and shirtsleeves rolled to his elbows approached from the end of the aisle.

"Peacock?" Eve grinned at the name.

"Patent pending," he said, finger extended. "No stealing that invention."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything by my comments. I was just admiring your work." She gestured with her elbow, not trusting her hands. "What kind of balance are you using to get the tail feathers to flick open like that? It has to be a balance, right?"

His eyes flicked first to Ainsley and then to Eve. "You must be a State Machinist."

Ainsley was standing a bit straighter, chest thrown out, looking every bit like a State Winder. "I suppose that must be obvious: how many local machinists are escorted by winders?" She held out her hand. "Eve. I just arrived from the Capital."

The man hesitated before taking her hand and shaking it. "Bergmann. I assume you already knew that."

"You're Bergmann? *The* Bergmann?" Not that she'd thought the shopkeeper she'd met in Aufziehbürg was Bergmann, but this man was much younger than she had expected, not a day over forty. He had thick dark brown hair and hardly a wrinkle on his youthful face. Not to mention she'd always assumed Bergmann was a relocated Nordlunder based on his surname. This man, with his thick eyebrows, aquiline nose, and tawny, golden skin was obviously Demiri.

He seemed surprised. "Didn't he bring you here to meet me?"

Ainsley's mouth tightened, but it wasn't a smile. "Yes and no. Eve said she needs some new files."

"Also I was dying to see your shop. I've been to the one in Aufziehbürg, so I knew the original must be impressive, but this?" She took a deep, appreciative, perfectly content breath. "I can't wait to explore the other branches in Abbrücken."

Bergmann scratched his eyebrow, bringing attention to the scar that split it. "Well, Bergmann North is more of a metallurgist. And East deals in repairs—oiling, maintenance, that sort of thing."

"But Central is where you have the most interesting devices and automatons."

His pride lifted his cheeks again. "I like to think they're impressive."

"The peacock is amazing." She turned back to the machine, taking it in again: the delicate filigree swirls that made up the feather patterns of its body, the teases of clockwork visible through the open spaces.

Bergmann leaned on the enclosure, arms folded casually. "It eats, you know."

"It eats?" Ainsley leaned closer, exactly the amazed reaction Bergmann must expect.

"It's a machine," Eve said.

"It's an automaton. More specifically it's a peacock." He opened the lid of a metal box welded to the side of the enclosure and pulled out a handful of seed, throwing it in front of the peacock. He wound a key between its shoulder blades, and the peacock's head jerked up and then over, bobbing over the pile of seed, leaving the ground clean wherever its head had been.

"What?" Eve leaned over the rail again, trying to see inside the peacock's mouth. "How's it doing that?"

“Don’t you know automatons imitate life?” Bergmann shrugged when Eve looked up at him with a glare.

“Imitation does not mean that clockwork can consume food.” She went back to her visual inspection, nearly upside-down. She felt Ainsley hovering next to her, ready to catch her again, she supposed. “It’s too quiet for an air compressor, and there’s no mechanism actually touching the ground.”

She gingerly touched the peacock’s back, ignoring the gentle “aht-aht-aht” coming from Bergmann. She couldn’t bend all the way to its mouth, but it raised its head, coming nearly level with her face. Her gear pendant swung into her face again and then lifted as the peacock’s head continued upward. She laughed, having figured it out.

She pushed herself upright, a smile wiggling on her face. “Magnets!” The amused look on Bergmann’s face was enough of a confirmation that she was right. “The ‘seed’ is painted iron filings.”

Ainsley coughed, his hand in front of his mouth, but Eve thought he was covering a smirk.

Bergmann stretched back, hands still gripping the railing. “Eve, you said? The State’s doing a better job of recruiting machinists these days.”

She pressed her lips together, understanding the compliment hidden in his words.

“We need more machinists in the world who appreciate—and anticipate—the illusion of automatons.” His grin turned sharp and something cooled in his green eyes. He nodded his chin to where Ainsley stood behind her. “Your friend said you need some files?”

She liked the idea that Ainsley might be her friend—he was the closest thing she had to a friend in Abbrücken. “I do. Refurbishing clockman parts has taken its toll on my current set.”

Bergmann held out his hand, leading them deeper into the store. “I’d think the State would provide tools. Are they so cheap that they force their employees to buy their own steel, too?”

Eve hesitated—did Bergmann know she was there to build mining equipment to secure State access to iron and steel?

“I prefer to select my own tools.” She glanced back at Ainsley who had followed but now was bent over, looking at a display of eye loupes.

Bergmann hummed and then passed behind a counter—underneath the glass was every clock making tool in varying sizes and grips. He presented a set of files in a wooden box, laying it open in front of her. She lifted them one by one, running the pad of her thumb over the coarse edge, but it was obvious he’d given her top of the line files.

Eve fumbled for her pocket, wondering if she could afford them. “How much are they?”

“No need to get out your purse.” He pulled a ledger from behind the counter. “I’ll charge it to the State account. I can certainly think of a fee or two to include for State employees.” He grinned, his mouth full of salesman teeth, and bent over the ledger, scribbling the description, price, and fees on the next available line—it looked as if the State had already made several purchases in the shop and been charged everything from packaging fees to adjustment fees.

“I suppose I shouldn’t worry about the State forcing me to buy steel as much as I should worry about being overcharged for it.”

His shoulders stuttered with his laugh. “Competency earns you a discount.”

“Well, hurrah for competency.”

His lip curled as he finished marking the ledger and shut it. “Hurrah for competency indeed. Good luck in Abbrücken, State Machinist.”

Eve waved the wooden box in farewell. She tapped Ainsley’s shoulder as she passed him.

“Got what you need?”

She opened the box, letting Ainsley check out the files as they walked to the door.

“He has some quality merchandise, eh?”

“It’s extremely impressive.” Eve gave one more look around the shop, still amazed by its size and stock. She’d have to encourage Keller to come, maybe Ainsley could persuade her to visit some time when Eve was occupied.

As they approached the front of the shop, a crowd—maybe a parade—became visible through the store windows. People passed by, some holding pennants, some yellow and scarlet banners, the print obscured by the angle.

Ainsley grunted, his jaw set. “I thought we’d gotten here early enough to miss this.” He turned, speaking to Eve directly. “There’s a speech scheduled for this evening in the square. Miners union, or something of the like. They tend to not be pro-State.” His eyes flicked over her. “You’ve got boots on, right?” He turned back to the window, leaving Eve perplexed as to why her shoes would matter. “Sometimes these rallies get a bit lively. Stick close; I’m sure the others are waiting at the cart.”

Ainsley moved with purpose, his hand around Eve’s elbow. She wasn’t quite sure what was going on, but when they stepped outside, she heard the shouting from the crowd, a choppy sea of frustration, individual words cresting but still unintelligible. The crowd filled a good portion of the square across the street, attracting more people as the noise level grew. The majority of the audience wore dark colored, dusty clothes—like autumn on a summer day—faces and arms standing out, golden tones sapped to yellow from a lack of sun exposure.

Ainsley directed her to the side, aiming for the cart, but Eve lifted on her toes, trying to see to the center of the crowd and who was speaking. The sidewalk thickened with people, forcing her

attention forward. She'd heard winders cross the crowded streets of Aufziehbürg shouting, "State business, please. Mind the grease." In this crowd, Ainsley didn't utter a word, sliding into gaps, one elbow out at an angle.

Eve tugged her arm back, trying to slow Ainsley down. "Can't we stay and watch for a moment?"

"No," Ainsley said, eyes darting over Eve's head. "Definitely no."

"Look, a Statie." The whisper was sharp and sudden, scratching up Eve's arms like a needle. The men nearest them horseshoed, and Eve felt acutely aware of just how much smaller she was in comparison to everyone around her. She barely came up to Ainsley's shoulder and the Abbrücken miners gathered were all a head taller and much thicker than the Aufziehbürg winder. Even with the buildings in the Capital all piled on top of each other with no room to breathe, even trapped under sweltering heat as she maintained a boiler in the Aufziehbürg Laundry, she hadn't felt claustrophobic until this moment.

"Ah, my wayward ducks." Bristed appeared, almost melting through the miners. He held a hand out to Eve, paying no attention to the locals. "We were beginning to wonder if you'd gotten lost in Bergmann's." Eve passed from Ainsley's care to Bristed's, Ainsley falling in behind them.

"The telegram took moments. Mr. Metz was very accommodating." Bristed slipped through the crowd at a sedate pace, ignoring the other hisses of "Statie."

"I sent Maryam your regards," Bristed continued. "I hope that wasn't presumptuous."

The name reminded Eve of Maryam's often inscrutable mask and tamed expression; Bristed had the same look about him, even moving through this knife-edged crowd. Eve tried to flatten her expression as well. "I was planning to write her tonight."

"Well, she'll have advance notice that you arrived safely."

A small portly man, stood at the top of the stairs to the telegraph office, wringing his hands. He wore a winsome cravat, pinstriped waistcoat, and a jacket too warm for the weather but fully fitting the status he wished to imply. His face was as slick as his hair.

“Is everything all right, Statesman?”

“Exactly as it should be, Mr. Metz. Thank you.” Bristed assisted Eve up to her seat next to Keller before climbing into the back of the cart. Ainsley stood behind him, waiting for Bristed to seat himself, before climbing in.

Eve exchanged a look with Keller, Keller looking more wide-eyed than Eve felt. Eve almost gave in to the urge to take Keller’s hand.

Ainsley moved to the front of the cart as before, sitting just behind Eve. As the cart got moving his hand snaked over the back of her seat and squeezed her arm. “All right?”

“Invigorated.” She had barely breathed as Bristed escorted her, but the motion of the cart was beginning to calm her nerves. She glanced over her shoulder when she felt someone’s gaze, and met Ambrose’s tense face. He relaxed a fraction, and Eve allowed the fantasy he had been concerned for her safety.

The shouts from the crowd continued as their cart clicked past, circling the southern edge and then turning to take the northern exit. It gave Eve a long look at the rally, letting her pick out a draped banner that read Mekasaba Miners’ Association. Scarlet armbands wrapped sleeves, and pennants shook with the cadence of the speaker’s voice. Most of the pennants were turned the wrong way, but she could see one said “Demiri Ore Is Ours.”

The crowd ignored the State cart as it passed, but it wasn’t until they’d turned out of the square that any of the State employees relaxed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In the morning Eve found a pitcher of heated water at her door—another one sat outside Keller’s room just two doors down and across the hall. The Reza Estate was larger than Bristed’s home, a sprawling mansion and grounds where Eve could easily get lost. Her room on the second floor, positioned nearest the grand staircase, was outfitted more simply than at Bristed’s, with lighter furniture that looked more feminine. As Ainsley escorted her upstairs the night before, they’d passed whitewashed and pastel furniture, frequently adorned with glass or tile arranged in symmetric designs or flowers. Eve already felt like she could breathe here, and she opened the window to relish that feeling.

The morning view was more edifying than her peek the night before. The trees edging the property invited a walk between their giant trunks, and flower gardens belied the heat that would later drip over everything. The formerly shadowed outlines of stucco buildings appeared perfect and crisp in the dappled sunlight. It was impossible for Eve to guess what was housed within the buildings, except that one of them was her workshop, and clockmen awaited her there.

The vanity mirror caught the first rays of sun as she washed and dressed with renewed eagerness. She pulled together an outfit bought in Aufzieburg, a tan linen blouse and shale cotton skirt that should be comfortable in the heat. She tied the gear pendant around her neck, and pulled her hair back and up, lamenting that it wasn’t as neatly coiffed as when Maryam arranged it.

Eve followed the smell of bacon downstairs to the dining room, her stomach rumbling and reminding her that she’d been too anxious to eat much of dinner, letting the men dominate the conversation. Keller had been equally as quiet, responding as appropriate to social cues, but similarly as lost as Eve.

“Something smells good,” Eve said as she turned the corner into the dining room. The only person at the table was Ambrose. “Breakfast,” she said dumbly, not wanting him to misconstrue her comment.

He paused in spooning eggs into his mouth, set down his fork on his half-finished plate, and then stood. “I can have Berna fetch fresh coffee. It’s nearly out—most everyone has eaten. It’s Saturday, so Ainsley is—we didn’t want to disturb you.”

Eve folded her hands, she knew which of them particularly wasn’t interested in disturbing her.

“I’ll fetch Berna.”

Ambrose was out the door before Eve could make a protest or say that she could take care of herself. It could have been simple chivalry, but Eve felt certain he was just making an excuse to leave. If he hadn’t, she might have. She didn’t have any other ways to apologize and she didn’t know what else to say to him. She’d almost prefer if he yelled, rebuked her for how she’d used him and preyed on his affections, but his silence was the foundation of her uncertainty. One thing she knew: ignoring Ambrose wasn’t an option.

She served her plate, and took the less awkward seat across from Ambrose’s place, despite her reservations.

Berna, a thin Demiri woman in the middle of her life, came in a moment later, just behind Ambrose, a silvered coffee urn in hand. “Sorry I didn’t hear you come down. I normally do on the weekend—it can be so quiet.”

“It’s perfectly all right,” Eve said, leaning back while Berna poured coffee and brought over sugar and cream. “Thank you.” She glanced at Ambrose, trying to gauge if he’d taken note of her example of how to accept an apology.

Berna stepped back, slipping away with barely a flutter of air, and Eve was left with bacon, eggs, toast, and silent Ambrose across the table. At least the eggs were good, an omelet with tomato and spinach that she guessed were grown on the estate. In Aufziehbürg everything had been shipped in and nothing tasted as fresh as it did in the South.

“It’s good.” Eve’s voice filled the room, and she felt guilty for breaking the silence. Guiltier when all Ambrose did was bob his head and grunt.

“You know, just a few minutes ago you actually spoke to me. Several sentences, even. You could do it again, if you tried. It isn’t all that difficult. Here, I’ll start: Winder Engle, I hope you slept well last night.” She paused a beat and when he said nothing she continued, “The train in from Aufziehbürg *was* lovely, yes. I was disappointed we didn’t stop long in Kamberstadt, but I knew my duties as a State Machinist required me elsewhere.” He still said nothing, the look on his face blank and blinking, reminding Eve of when she’d tried to catch his train and he had left her to the soldiers.

“Ah, finally roused, how wonderful.” Bristed’s voice oozed down Eve’s spine, and she shut her eyes, steeling herself for the combination of Bristed and Ambrose.

“I thought I was early for a Saturday,” she said as he circled to the far side of the table.

“But this isn’t just any Saturday—this is the day you get to see your new workshop.” The eagerness in his voice only annoyed her because it perfectly matched how she felt about the prospect. “We can wait until you’ve eaten breakfast, of course. I’m sure Machinist Keller won’t mind.”

“Not at all.” Keller trailed him and took a seat on his opposite side when Bristed sat next to Ambrose.

“Statesman, Machinist.” Ambrose nodded to each of the newcomers before turning to Bristed. “It occurs to me I didn’t ask about your travel. How was the train? Lovely?” His eyes cut

across the table and Eve caught the hint of a smirk at the corner of his mouth. Eve restrained a scream of frustration, but it was a narrow thing. Lovely, indeed.

“It was excellent, thank you.” As Bristed spoke he turned the jam jars in the center of the table, aligning the labels so Eve could read each flavor. “The Express is remarkable—quieter than most engines. We’ll have to arrange you passage the next time you travel home. I think you’ll enjoy the new sleeper cabins as well—there’s more space than you’re used to on the Clockman Train.”

“There’s not much space for humans on the Clockman Train.” Ainsley, finally joining everyone in the dining room, curled his fingers over the chair back beside Eve and leaned forward. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” she greeted after swallowing a bite.

Ainsley pulled out the chair and sat down; Eve apparently was last to eat. “I assume the Statesman was telling you we’ll be taking a tour after breakfast? I hope you wore your walking shoes.”

“Is the workshop far?”

“Not too far, but we’ll cover more of the grounds than just the workshop.”

“No need to worry about getting lost,” Bristed cut in. “You’ll be escorted on the grounds and in Abbrücken.” Of course she would be—aside from the rally they’d witnessed the night before, Bristed couldn’t let her wander State-patrolled grounds freely. She held back an eye roll and continued to eat.

“Will we be able to get to work today?” Keller’s hands were folded on the table, body twisted toward Bristed, ready to please. If Eve didn’t know Bristed so well, she might take the same pose, but as it was she’d save that respect for the clockmen.

“Not in the workshop. I first need to approve your schematics. I assume you had time to discuss them?” His eyes flicked between Keller and Eve. Eve kept her face blank as she chewed—notes passed between each other twice didn’t amount to much of a discussion.

“We’re in agreement,” Keller said.

Eve stuffed her mouth with egg to not contradict Keller. She wasn’t confident about the integration of Keller’s battery, even though she wanted to see it used. Eve didn’t know enough about electrics to know how its weight might affect the clockman’s balance, and while she wanted to trust Keller, Eve didn’t have the experience to feel so sanguine.

“As long as you both feel ready.” He arched an eyebrow at Eve, turning his statement into a question.

Eve startled, expecting the conversation to continue around her. She hastily swallowed.

“Absolutely.” A fleck of egg flew from her mouth, landing on the far edge of her plate. Bristed tsked but made no other comment on the faux pas. Her embarrassment seemed like a fitting end for breakfast, so she laid her silverware on her plate and wiped her mouth. “Shall we discuss the schematics first?”

“After the tour.” Bristed stood, and then assisted Keller out of her chair. “It’s best for us to walk now while the day is still cool.”

The day didn’t feel cool as they tromped around the estate, occasionally passing soldiers sweating through their Nordlund military jackets, stains visible on the navy fabric. A wood wrapped the edge of the grounds, the woodsy scent diluting any hint of the sea that couldn’t be more than a thirty-minute carriage ride away. Bristed took them first to the carriage house and stables, then to the far side of the property to the distillery and cemetery, back past the house to the servants’ hall

and ice house (no longer in use because Bristed had provided an electric refrigeration box), and finally to the converted greenhouse, the temporary Design Room.

The glass walls of the greenhouse had been partially covered over with butcher paper, obscuring the view inside, however shadowed figures were visible at the back, tall and still. Eve lifted on her toes, eager to enter the room and lay eyes on her clockmen charges.

Bristed held out his hand and Ainsley dug a key from his pocket, handing it over. “The winders are the only ones with keys to the facility. If you want in, you must have one of them with you.”

“It doesn’t have to be that way. You could give the keys to us.” Eve smiled at Keller, but her frown disagreed with Eve’s suggestion. Eve crossed her arms, shifting her weight to the opposite foot. It’d be nice if she could figure out how to talk to both Ambrose and Keller again, especially since she would be working so closely with both of them.

Bristed ignored Eve’s comment, opening the door, and then stepping out of the way for the machinists to enter.

Despite the space being built to grow plants, it was the most advanced and well-outfitted workshop Eve had ever been in. Electric lights stretched the full length of the room, hung from a set of pipes that must have been the irrigation system. Light streamed from the ceiling and through the few uncovered windowpanes, heating the damp air. A lazy fan rotated in the center section of the room, and panes of the roof were angled open, providing some relief, but the warmth reminded Eve of her former boiler room workshop.

The uncovered ground released the fresh scent of earth with every step, but under it was the smell of steel and grease, waiting to be cultivated. Long workbenches lined the walls, tables laid right over the planters. At the front were two workstations, one on each side of the central aisle. Eve

instinctively turned left, running her fingers over the arm mount for the magnifying glass. A second arm with a light bulb grew from a central joint attached to the far edge of the worktable, where it could swing freely between the workbench and drafting table.

“Do you mind if I take this side?” Eve didn’t get a response, but Keller was already studying the right workstation with equal care, opening the mounted drawers and inspecting files, tweezers, and all the tiny components a clockmaker required.

Eve’s eye caught the back wall, and she drifted through the large open area in the center, past the heavy-duty tools anchored to the tables in the middle work area, and hooked her fingers over the grate that separated her from the clockmen. Ten units were at their disposal, each standing perfectly straight and still. She tilted her head, reading the numbers off the unit directly in front of her: 114. Her hand dropped, finding and pulling at the padlock; she could guess the winders possessed the only keys.

Keller approached slowly behind her, matching Eve’s pose. Her eyes were wide, lips parted, and Eve realized this could be Keller’s first time standing this close to a whole, undamaged clockman. Though Keller had lived her whole life in Aufziehbürg, the clockmen were typically used on major building projects outside the city and the automatons in shop windows were cheap knock-offs of the State’s metal men.

“Can we get one out?” Eve asked.

Ambrose snorted—in his eyes Eve was of course showing her primary interest, not asking on behalf of Keller.

“Not yet,” Bristed said, giving Eve a fair answer. “We have other matters to attend to today.” He turned, exiting the greenhouse, leaving the machinists and winders behind.

Ambrose held out his arm and gestured for them to come. Eve pulled away from the clockmen easily, but Keller lingered, the longing in her eyes familiar to Eve. “We don’t want to keep the Statesman waiting.”

“Give her a minute,” Eve said. “Don’t you remember seeing the clockmen for the first time?”

Something in Ambrose’s face softened—particularly around the eyes. Eve guessed Ambrose had been about her age when he started at the Academy. She’d heard it took four years to go through the program: one year of theory and officer training, making winders equivalent to the rank of Captain, and three years with practical demonstrations—hands-on learning. Imagine then that Keller had been working on clockmen for six years and still hadn’t even seen one in person.

“It’s not my first time seeing them.” Keller marched down the aisle, fingers twining the tail of her braid. “They’re just . . . bigger than I remembered.” Keller tucked her hands in her pockets as she strode past Eve, her posture mimicking Bristed’s. “The Statesman’s waiting for us to show him the schematics.”

Ambrose followed immediately behind Keller, but Ainsley offered a shrug, which wasn’t quite support, but it was the friendliest gesture Eve expected for the rest of the day.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Do you mind if I open this?” Keller was already leaning over Eve’s workbench to prop open a window, letting in the fresh scent of bark. They’d been in the workshop barely an hour; the sun hadn’t even crested the trees yet. They’d both suffered through most of the first day with the lower windows barely cracked, relying on the upper panes to vent the heat, not sure if Bristed would allow further adjustment, but then Ainsley had come into the room, declared it unlivable, and opened all the uncovered windows. Eve was coming to appreciate Ainsley more and more.

“Hot?”

Keller pulled her braid off her neck and wound it around, pinning it up rather messily. “It’s terrible down here.”

“It’s not so bad.” Sweat trickled down Eve’s back, but she’d mostly been able to ignore it, focusing instead on making another set of logic gears from the parts she’d found in their stash. Bristed had said they could commission whatever they needed—through Bergmann or any other machinist—but Eve was doing her best to work with the components on hand. She was accustomed to reusing bits and modifying scraps. Still, her custom pin-wheel escapement had been beyond her skill the last time she’d made a set of logic gears. “You haven’t adjusted yet. It hasn’t even been a week.”

“Near enough.” It had, in fact, been five days since their arrival, and was only the third day in the workshop.

Keller fanned herself as she peeked over Eve’s shoulder, looking between the schematics on Eve’s drafting table to the gears on Eve’s workbench. “Is that escapement right?” She pointed to what Eve had in her hands.

“No, but it’s the closest piece we have so I was going to reshape the teeth.”

Keller looked between the drawing and the wheel again. “We could commission it.”

“And wait?”

Keller shrugged. “We have other things to work on.”

Eve picked up her file again and pointed at Keller. “*You* have other things to work on. I don’t understand that battery one bit.” She’d voiced her concerns about the clockman’s balance when they met with Bristed on Saturday, but he’d told them to work it out.

Keller pressed her lips together and turned, half-sitting on the table, hands curled around the edge. “You could learn.” There was an offer wrapped in the middle of her haughty tone, and just as Eve was about to respond, Keller pushed away from the table, one leg lifting and then landing to carry her back to her work. “Electrics are the future, you know.”

The bulb over Eve’s workspace shone brightly in their scant morning light. “It seems that way.” She turned on her stool. A nest of wire, like the moss that hung from the trees around the Reza Estate, grew over Keller’s workbench, pliers weighing down or separating certain coils. It looked messy and alive in ways that Eve didn’t understand. “It wouldn’t hurt to learn. If someone was willing to teach me.”

Keller stayed hunched over her work. “Does that mean you’ll commission the escapement?”

Eve looked between the gear in her hands and the design; it really wasn’t a very good match. She sighed, tilting her head side to side, capitulating. “I’ll commission the escapement.” She pushed the arm holding the magnifying glass out of the way, locking it in place. “Do you need anything commissioned?”

“No, I have everything for the battery.” Eve tried not to take Keller’s statement personally, but it was difficult to avoid the comparison—Keller could build her battery, but Eve needed help with her components.

Eve stood, stretching her back, and hit the telegraph pager that connected to the main house. She wasn’t sure how it worked on that end, but Ainsley usually appeared in about five minutes. It was extremely efficient, and kept the winders out of the way while Eve disassembled their charges. Ainsley stood by while she’d started the first clockman, prying open its hull, but he’d gone white as she dug into the machine, removing gear trains and hollowing space for the logic system. She didn’t need him lingering more than he had to.

She paced to the two clockmen in the open area, standing ready for adaptation. She and Keller had discussed the practical application of their plan for installing the headlamp, but they hadn’t started that process yet. They’d have to refashion the head entirely, but Eve had some experience doing that. She sighed, wondering if the clockman head she’d stored in the basement of Greta’s boarding house was still hidden behind the bricks in the boiler room.

“Did Winder Engle bring those mining tools yet?”

Eve caught Keller’s distorted reflection in the clockman’s face—she still leaned over her worktable, barely visible behind the magnifying glass.

“Not yet. I’ll see if Ainsley can remind him.” Eve wandered back to her workstation, thumping her screwdriver against her leg. She had the majority of the return command’s gear train laid out when the greenhouse door opened, Ambrose behind it. Eve’s heart sank—she’d been expecting Ainsley to respond to the call, just as he had every other time. Ambrose quickly passed his glance over Eve and spoke to Keller. “Did someone call for a winder?”

“I did. I need an escort into town.” Eve trapped her thumbs between her fingers to stop her fidgeting. How many words had she and Ambrose exchanged since she had arrived in Abbrücken?

“Oh.”

She tried not to let the flatness of his tone bother her. “Well, if you’re the one available, we could also stop to get the mining tools we need for the clockmen.”

He winced. “I didn’t really want a machinist with me for that run.”

“Why not? Do you think I’ll get into trouble?”

“Yes.”

Keller coughed, hiding a squeak of a giggle. Just what Eve needed, Keller embracing the insinuations that Eve couldn’t be trusted on her own. As if Eve wasn’t already struggling for Keller’s respect.

“I’m not some accident-prone, trouble magnet that needs to be coddled.”

“No, but there are considerations beyond your whims.” Ambrose stepped around, facing Eve and blocking Keller. His quiet anger was bubbling now, and for the first time Eve noticed the five years that separated them in age. “Your safety is a concern here in Abbrücken. Ainsley and I aren’t just parading around with you for your embarrassment.” He kept his voice hushed, but the tone was clear. “The miners don’t like us. Dangling State Machinists under their noses is likely to incite them. What you’re doing will actively impact their livelihoods.”

Eve tilted her chin up, not appreciating his tone. “You sound sympathetic.”

“Aren’t you?”

The question stalled her, especially coming from Ambrose. Hadn’t her great sin with him been a lack of sympathy?

Ambrose stepped back. “You can ask Ainsley if you think I’m being harsh, but you’ll likely get the same response. I’ll arrange the carriage for Bergmann’s.” He was almost out the door when Eve found her voice and mumbled a thank you. He paused—he’d heard her—but he didn’t say anything more before leaving.

Eve had some difficulty concentrating after that, but it meant she detached from her work easily once Ainsley arrived about an hour later. Relief flooded through her that Ambrose had enlisted Ainsley to take her to Bergmann’s.

“Someone call for a carriage?”

Eve grabbed the designs for the pin-wheel escapement, carefully folding them over. When Keller didn’t move, Eve asked, “Aren’t you coming?”

She shook her head, not even looking up. “I’m at a critical stage.”

“But Bergmann’s.” Keller still hadn’t been to Bergmann’s—not to mention the greenhouse had turned into an oven as they approached mid-morning. Despite telling Keller she’d get used to the heat, it wasn’t good for them to sweat through it every day. They were supposed to break for two hours during the hottest part of the day, but so far they’d both been glued to their work.

Keller shrugged and hummed a few bars Eve recognized as the lilting tune carved into her music box. “Oh. Order extra escapements—just in case.”

Eve waved Keller off—she knew how to order machine parts. “I’ll see you after lunch.”

Ainsley offered his arm and they took off across the lawn. The grass cushioned their steps, a verdant green that made Eve feel cooler.

“How’s it going?”

Eve sighed. “With the clockmen or with people?”

Ainsley tilted his head. “In general.”

“We’re making progress. Well, I know I’m making progress and Keller looks like she’s making progress—she’s pretty careful about what she actually says to me.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“So is Ambrose.”

“I’ve noticed that, too.”

The carriage stood ready in front of the carriage house, two large brown horses in front of it, stamping their feet on the hard-packed track that ran to the front of the house. Their blinders looked particularly heavy and restrictive. Eve was usually rushing into or out of a carriage, and she’d never given much thought to the animals that drove them or the singular path they were pushed into following by rights of not being able to easily see other courses.

“Am I wasting my time? Trying to apologize to him?”

“No. Maybe.” Ainsley puffed out his lower lip, eyes fixed ahead for a long, thoughtful moment. “Maybe you just don’t need to push so hard. Even clockwork breaks when you tighten it too much.”

She clucked her tongue, appreciating that Ainsley spoke to her in terms she understood.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about Ambrose.” He opened the door to the carriage and let her inside, chatting first with the Demiri driver and then with the soldiers who joined him on escort duty. Escorting Eve into town had to be more interesting than patrolling the estate—the only other assignment Eve knew the regiment had. Ainsley kept up conversation with the soldiers the entire ride into town, while Eve kept an eye on their rifles, resting casually across their laps.

When they arrived in town, the soldiers arranged a meeting time with Ainsley and slipped into the telegraph office next door, leaving Ainsley to trail behind Eve as she wandered Bergmann’s, tending his boredom by winding toys and machines on the shelves. Eve clutched the escapement

design in her pocket, a reminder that her browsing couldn't be indefinite, but she went up and down the aisles, eventually losing Ainsley. He was probably just an aisle behind her.

Just ahead, a man a little taller than her with the paled, dirt-bruised skin she'd come to recognize as miner's complexion examined a display of clocks. Even roped in muscle, he didn't look so intimidating that Eve should be afraid of him. He looked like any man she could find in Aufzieburg. He could have a family—maybe a son and daughter—and he worked for his living. Maybe he was part of the Mekasaba Miners' Association, but maybe he just wanted a fair wage. Eve could understand that.

Still, the winders would probably advise her to retrace her steps and exit another aisle.

She sighed audibly, and the miner glanced over, bowed his head and tipped a nonexistent hat. Eve flushed in response and mumbled a greeting before scurrying past him, trying her best to look like a local rather than a Nordlunder. So much for not drawing attention to herself.

Head ducked, she exited the aisle and walked right into Bergmann's path, the wooden case in his arms tinkling as he bobbed it.

Eve rubbed her arm, expecting a bruise from the impact. "Sorry. I wasn't looking where I was going."

"No, my fault. Machinists are easily distractible in my shop. I should have paid better attention." He glanced down the aisle she'd exited. "Ah, Joseph, hello." Bergmann chuckled, looking between them. "Did you scare off my friend here?"

"I was perfectly polite." Joseph put his hand over his heart and bowed again. "I can't help it if I'm intimidating."

"No, no, it wasn't you." Eve felt the heat in her cheeks renewing and she wished she'd handled her errand first so she could melt into the floor now. She turned to Bergmann, hand

yanking from her pocket and thrusting the designs in his face. “I was looking for you. I have a commission.”

“Oh. Business with the State.” He winked at Joseph. “Remember ten percent off for your mother, but it’s full price if you pick something for you. I’ll know.”

“You won’t know.”

“Oh, I’ll know.” Bergmann led Eve to the peacock’s enclosure, setting the case on the thick railing before pulling a pair of glasses over his eyes to examine Eve’s design. “What’s this you need? Pin-wheel escapement?”

“Yes, you can see it’s rather specialized.”

“Mmhmm.” His eyes flicked over the designs and then up to her. “You could have gone straight to Bergmann North. That’s nearer you, at least.”

“No offense to Bergmann North, but I doubt it’s as exciting as it is here.”

His smile turned enigmatic. “When do you need these by?” He nailed the designs to the rail with his finger.

“As soon as possible.”

“Ah, a rush job.” He rubbed his hands together, marks already piling in his eyes.

“Feel free to charge the State handsomely for it.” She folded her arms on the peacock’s fence and leaned over to wind the key between its shoulder blades. It sputtered to life and pecked at the ground, pretending to eat seed again.

Bergmann folded his arms and matched Eve’s pose. “You’re not from the State, are you? Well, I mean, Nordlund, but not—?”

“Kamberstadt,” she interrupted.

He scratched the split in his left eyebrow. “Kamberstadt? I knew a machinist from Kamberstadt.” Bergmann leaned away from her and pushed his glasses to his forehead. “Traugott?”

Her own name startled her—in all his stories, her father had never indicated that he knew Bergmann, or rather, that Bergmann knew him. Her memories of Abbrücken were so faint as to be fantasy, and even though her father had returned for the Metallurgy Festival several times, and had described the great Bergmann’s mastery of the Inventors’ Tournament, he’d never mentioned even so much as a conversation with the man.

“My father.”

Bergmann gave her the same amused expression he’d had when she figured out the magnet trick in the peacock. “Is he still working? He made the most wonderful mechanical dancers. And domestics—the man had a gift for labor-saving devices. He had such clever machines, like you, I’d wager.”

Eve coughed, taking a moment to gather her voice, overwhelmed both by the compliments and by the sudden memory of her father. “Sadly he passed this year.”

Bergmann was silent for a moment, head down. “At least his machines live on.”

Some of them, Eve thought, but not enough of them.

Bergmann gave a curt nod, settling back into his pose beside her and shifting the tone of their conversation. “Be more careful when you’re in town.” He paused, and when he next spoke his voice was harder, more matter-of-fact. “The miners know the State’s designs—what you’re working on at the Reza Estate. Clockmen miners.” He scoffed and shook his head. “Joseph’s not going to hold a grudge, but others might.”

She lowered her voice, matching his volume and leaning in. “I’m not doing anything wrong. I’m trying to make mining easier for them. Clockmen make labor easier.” She would have thought Bergmann would understand without the explanation.

“Easier for whom? Clockmen might be easier to manage than flesh and blood people, but what do you think will happen to all those people if they’re replaced by automatons?”

She pushed herself upright, twisting toward him, realization solidifying as she spoke. “You’re designing mining equipment for the Mekasaba Miners’ Association.”

He laughed and rubbed the back of his head. “I wouldn’t be Bergmann if I wasn’t.”

“We’re competition!”

He eased back, one arm on the rail, his other hand tucked into the pocket of his waistcoat.

“In that we’re both designing mining equipment, yes. But I’m not threatened by the State’s tinkering in the woods.”

She crossed her arms. “You may be surprised, Mr. Bergmann.”

The peacock’s tail feathers suddenly flicked and fanned out, the blue and green jewels catching the light. Eve jumped and gasped, having forgotten it was still ticking away next to them.

“Eve!” Ainsley turned the corner and came straight to her, his face red and splotched with worry. “I turned around one second.”

She put a hand to her chest, catching her breath after two startles in as many moments. “I’m sorry—”

“Well.” Bergmann straightened and scratched his split eyebrow. “I have customers to attend.” He held up her designs.

“I can’t have you make that! It’s not in good faith—you might sabotage it.”

“Never.” He pressed the paper over his heart. “I want your parts to be the best so that when the State fails they know it’s because Mekasaba was better.”

The old name for Abbrücken flustered Eve enough that Bergmann was already turning away before she’d gathered her wits.

“Good evening, Machinist Traugott,” he called as he walked away.

“Did I miss something?” Ainsley scratched the back of his head, looking between the two machinists.

Eve covered her eyes, feeling like she’d just given Bergmann a State secret. She tried to assure herself it was the design for only one part; he couldn’t figure out what they were doing from a single pin-wheel escapement. “No, I don’t think so.” She tugged a corner of Ainsley’s sleeve, carefully drawing back his arm so she could take it. “Did you know Bergmann was building mining equipment?”

He shrugged. “Kind of figured. Gadgets are his thing.”

“Does Bristed know?”

He gave her a look. “The Statesman knows everything.”

Their escort soldiers chatted outside, jumping into action when Ainsley waved; one opened the carriage door and the other climbed up beside the driver. Every bit of metal in the square reflected the midday sun, making Eve squint. Most of the locals stayed inside during the bright afternoons; a cart of miners rocked slowly as they circled, some men jumping over the side, the rest hitching the ride east for a lunch at home. A State soldier on horseback followed behind them at a sedate pace, his gold epaulettes glinting.

Eve glanced back at the shop as the carriage pulled away, thinking again about what Bergmann said and for the first time worried about her success as a State Machinist.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Sleeves already rolled to her elbows, Eve hitched up her skirt and shook it to give some airflow to her legs. It was hotter than ever in the greenhouse, Abbrücken summer already in bloom, even though the official start of the season was still a month off.

Keller wilted at her workbench, half draped over the neckpiece for the headlamp. As expected, Eve had fashioned the head, made easier with wood forms and full sheets of metal on hand rather than soldering together scraps. The three heads she'd already finished sat on her workbench, watching Keller assemble the headlamps, unsettling empty portholes in their faces. She'd heard people express discomfort with a clockman's usual blank façade, but up close the silver, mirror-like finish had always reflected Eve's determination and wonder. These faceless creations with their glass-front door cast only the ghost of a reflection when the light hit them just so.

Bergmann's assisted with the heads and with other gear components through a handful of commissions. Each time they charged an exorbitant sum, but every piece was immaculate, precise to Eve's specifications, and delivered within a few days. Since the initial order, she'd taken Bergmann's advice and conducted most of her business at Bergmann North. Miners frequented the location in the evenings, so as long as Eve's business was completed during their midday break, there was little chance of an uncomfortable encounter.

Perched on a stool in the middle of the room, three partially complete headless clockmen before her, Eve slipped the weight balance behind the main gear trains for the arm movements. It would still need to be calibrated, but that would require a winder and could be put off until later. She inserted the last screw, awkwardly hugging the machine to both hold the screw in place and attach it. Ambrose had caught her in the compromising position earlier in the week and arched an eyebrow, a

hint of amusement hidden beneath his beard. He still wasn't speaking to her unless required, but his enjoyment of her indignity was an improvement over his veiled anger.

Eve tucked the screwdriver in her apron and stretched, punching someone standing behind her. "Oh, I'm so sorry!"

When she turned, it was Bristed rubbing his cheek, and she mentally amended her apology.

"I didn't expect you to be so protective of your work."

"Well, you emphasized security was important."

Bristed's lips twitched in amusement, but he didn't comment further on her behavior. Behind him Ambrose and Ainsley contained their smiles, but Eve knew them both well enough to see through their composed expressions.

"What are you working on?" Bristed leaned forward, hands clasped behind him, and jerked his chin toward the clockman's chest.

"Installing the weight balance to prevent the clockman from lifting more weight than he's designed to carry." She pointed to it with her screwdriver; Bristed bent to see it. "In the mine it can also trigger the clockman to turn and take a full cart with him."

"Has this been installed in all of the units yet?"

Eve glanced over to Keller, who had turned on her stool, the neckpiece she'd been working on sitting in her lap. "Not yet. We decided to make all the modifications to three of the clockmen before moving on to the next batch."

"And have you completed modifications to any of the units?"

"We weren't expecting you, sir." Keller set the neckpiece to the side. "We still have a few adjustments to make."

“Three weeks should have been sufficient for you to finish upgrading one unit.” He looked between the women, hands clasped behind his back.

Eve took a deep breath and stood up, smoothing her skirt down. She could see where Bristed was going with this surprise visit, especially since he’d brought the winders. “The movement upgrades have been finished. There’s some calibration required and, as you can see, we have to finish installing the headlamps, but if you’re here for a demonstration, we’d be happy to provide it.” She held her hand out to the winders. “If you’d lend me a key?”

Ainsley stepped forward when Ambrose didn’t, amusement shaping his features. “I’m not lending you my key,” he muttered, and then spoke louder. “Walk me through the new commands?”

Eve circled behind the clockman whose back she’d already reconnected. His front was open so they could make the final adjustments to the headlamp, but the silvered back would look more familiar to Ainsley than searching for the key catches amid the naked gears.

“Most of the key work is the same,” Eve explained over the headless torso. She included Bristed and Ambrose in the explanation, taking her whole audience into account. In Aufziehbürg, pitching her inventions to the machinists, they always required flare, a hook, and the promise of monetary gain. Bristed valued efficiency, and the winders were here for instruction, so she kept her speech simple and direct. “The headlamp works via a switch at the base of the neck, and most of the logic gears connect to other command chains. We’ve adapted a few of the standard clockman movements to better fit mine work.” She pointed out a few of the updated commands, Ambrose nodding along with the verbal instruction, marking a notebook he’d pulled from his jacket pocket.

“The most interesting upgrade is the return command. You want to try it?” Eve grinned at Ainsley.

“Return?”

“You’ll love it. Wind it for a few steps, and—” Eve reached in to flip a new toggle at the clockman’s waist for the return. The switch connected to the step spring, winding a secondary spring as the steps wound down, holding tense until the other commands executed, and then switching over to the return chain.

After Ainsley withdrew his key, the clockman walked seven steps, stopping a step from Bristed (who hadn’t moved a muscle as the metal man approached), and then executed an about face and returned to an astonished Ainsley. Eve barely restrained a laugh at Ainsley’s bewilderment, and when she turned, looking for someone to share her success, her eyes landed on Ambrose who had a smile almost as wide as hers. It dwindled when he caught her watching, but there was a moment, a brief moment, in which they’d both been proud.

“Fine. Yes. You’re a remarkable machinist, Eve.” Ainsley shook off his amazement and circled the clockman slowly.

Ambrose came over as well, the smile entirely gone from his face. “What did you do to make it come back?” His question was addressed to Ainsley—purely winder skills, not mechanical—so Eve let Ainsley show him, and then Ambrose performed the same feat. They took turns for a bit, marching the clockman back and forth, Bristed humoring their fascination.

“How long will it take to finish the upgrades to these units?”

“A day,” Keller blurted. “I’m almost done with the sockets.”

“A day to finish all three.” Bristed rocked on his heels, a suspicious lilt tucked into the end of his statement. Eve was equally skeptical about Keller’s prognosis based on the number of parts scattered across Keller’s workbench and the necessary testing to ensure everything functioned correctly.

Keller straightened her back, the point of her chin raising. “Absolutely.”

Bristed's mouth twitched, and he tucked his head, straightening his already straight lapels.

"Should I assume it will take equally as long to finish the next three units?"

"Much less time." Keller's eyes slid to Eve accusingly. "We had to commission parts."

"I'm aware of the commissions." His mouth tightened in displeasure. Eve could guess the total cost of those components was a few thousand marks, but they had to be a minor note compared to the expense of outfitting and maintaining this remote design facility. Besides, the expense would be worth it once the clockmen were finished.

"Would you say, half the time?" Bristed continued. "To have six working units?"

Keller nodded vigorously, but Eve frowned.

"A bit longer, I think. We still have some calibrations on these units, not to mention testing. I don't want to release anything that might be a danger to someone in the mine." Her eyes cut to Ambrose who had finally stopped experimenting with the return command and was listening to their conversation.

"So we're potentially back to three weeks." Bristed didn't sound as displeased as Eve would have thought.

She held up a finger, not wanting to be the one holding up their timeline. "Possibly. Maybe a bit less. We'll know more once we calibrate and test these three."

He held up his hand and flicked his wrist, the winders snapping to full attention. "We'll get out of your way, then. I assume you require a winder for calibration?"

"We will." Eve inadvertently looked first to Ambrose, then to Ainsley. No one caught her glance.

Bristed checked his pocket watch, making a show of flicking open its matte brass case.

"Tomorrow just after lunch. It should be a good way to wind down the work week."

“We’ll be ready, sir.” Keller stood nearly as straight as the winders, all three of their faces shone with sweat, shining as bright as clockmen. Eve refused to straighten for Bristed, more focused on the conundrum of how they’d finish in less than twenty-four hours. Keller was a skilled machinist, and Eve had seen enough to be confident in her abilities, but this feat seemed unrealistic.

As soon as the door shut on their visitors, Keller spun around, her skirt flaring. “I think it’s time you learn something about electrics.”

Eve blinked. Despite Keller making the oblique offer weeks earlier, she’d put Eve off at every inquiry. It wasn’t difficult to figure out why Keller was insisting on teaching Eve now—she’d made a promise to Bristed she couldn’t keep without Eve’s help.

“Are you sure I won’t be in the way? I mean, you’re on a deadline now.” She thought she’d kept her voice as nonchalant as possible, but Keller’s eyes still narrowed, the tease coming too soon after promising Bristed an impossibility.

“I’m sure you won’t slow me down much.” Her braid flipped past her shoulder when she spun back to her workbench. “Grab a screwdriver and a set of leather gloves, I’ll show you how to connect the battery.”

Eve held back her grin until she’d turned around to fetch the supplies. Finally she was getting an opportunity for the kind of collaboration she’d been seeking in Aufziehbürg.

Aside from the initial instructions at each step, and a few curses when Eve burned her finger on the soldering iron, they worked quietly through the afternoon, Eve humming softly to herself. At one point she caught Keller staring, and realized she’d been humming the theme from Keller’s music box. She blushed, but a smile softened on Keller’s face, and for once the workshop didn’t feel so stifling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Eve leaned forward in the carriage, rocking gently as the sun-spotted trees whisked past. It had taken most of the day for Eve to convince the winders to escort her into the city, but after the success the day before installing the headlamps and batteries, Eve felt she'd earned the time to shop for a wedding gift for Maryam. She hadn't paid much attention to the shops in the square other than Bergmann's, but Berna, the estate's housekeeper, assured her there was a clothing store that would carry both Demiri and Nordlunder styles. As the date for Maryam's wedding drew nearer, Eve often wondered how Maryam could put aside her own personal feelings about Langford for the sake of her family's social standing. It seemed like too much to ask, even if the marriage was Maryam's choice. Eve's freedom—no matter how limited it was while working for Bristed—meant too much to her to sacrifice it for someone else.

"Tired?" Ainsley bumped Eve's arm, and she sat straighter, blinking.

"Oh, I suppose. Was I drifting? I was just thinking about a friend I left in the Capital." Her eyes cut to Ambrose—he'd been her only friend in the Capital at one time—but he didn't turn from his silent vigil at the window.

"Hmm, I sometimes think about them, too. I have a nephew who wants to be a winder."

"Just like his uncle?"

"Just like his uncle's friend. He worships Ambrose." Ainsley nudged Ambrose, finally getting a reaction.

"He'd worship you, too, if you answered more of his questions."

Ainsley shook his head. "I don't know. I think it's the beard. I've never been able to grow one as full as yours." He rubbed a hand over his smooth cheek.

“You get discouraged too quickly. Every beard is rough when it starts.”

And like that, Eve was efficiently, and once again, removed from the conversation. She didn't think Ainsley realized he was doing it, but every time the three were together, Ainsley would speak to her, invite Ambrose into the conversation, and then the two of them would take over. Even without Ambrose ignoring Eve, the winders were used to each other—friends before Eve met them and friends after. Aside from the fact that they were men, they spoke a private code of their shared experiences that Eve couldn't decipher. Maybe she and Maryam would be the same if the situation were reversed.

The carriage slowed as the sound of the wheels switched to the clack over cobblestones; one of the horses whined, a high-pitched distress that stood out against their normal huffs. A soldier following them on horseback shouted and then rode ahead at a quick clip. Eve shifted forward, pressing a hand against the window, but not seeing anything unusual. Another sound became more distinct as they turned into the square—shouting and yelling from many, many voices.

“Is that coming from the town square?”

Eve's chest tightened, her body immediately remembering the crowd outside Bergmann Central on her first day. “Another rally?”

“I suppose, but I didn't know one was scheduled.” Ainsley looked across to Ambrose for confirmation.

“Otherwise you wouldn't have brought me,” Eve reasoned.

“No, we wouldn't have.” Ainsley's eyes flicked back and forth over the sea of heads gathered in the square. They didn't have a good angle on it yet, but Eve guessed over two hundred people were standing on the green, more spilling into the street in front of City Hall. Scarlet and ochre banners shook in discontent. Navy blue State uniforms dotted the perimeter in packs of two or

three. The winders may not have known about the rally, but the State had mobilized quickly. Eve hadn't realized there were that many State soldiers in Abbrücken.

Ambrose banged on the wall to get the driver's attention, releasing the speaking-tube. "You've got to turn around." The carriage slowed further, but didn't stop as they eased into the crowd.

"No space to turn the carriage," the driver replied, his disembodied voice muffled through the tube.

A tinny, augmented voice broke through the ruckus. "We don't need oil when we toil!" On the metal gazebo in the center of the square, a man shouted into a brass megaphone, his voice amplifying and carrying to the far edges of the crowd. "You think the State will pay Abbrücken if it has control of the Magtan Mine? They have metallurgists of their own—Demiri who passed into their smoggy city and were corrupted by its filth. The State will take what they want, take it all, just like they took Mekasaba! If they take our ore, how will we feed our families? Those clunkmen don't feed anyone but the State. The fat Nordlunders that stole Mekasaba!"

He said something else, but the crowd drowned it in cheers and indecipherable yelling.

"Turn! Take a side street!" Ainsley and Ambrose were blocking the window showing the square, both of them frantically pounding the carriage. The horses sounded as distressed as the winders, the carriage lurching with their sudden tugs to escape the crowd.

Eve checked the lock on the other door—secure. She screamed and scooted away when a face and hand appeared at the window, knocking vigorously.

"Hey, Statie. Come out to face justice."

The carriage rocked suddenly, in the opposite direction of the normal sway, and then was immediately buffeted back. Eve braced herself against the wall. Ambrose met her eyes and slid next

to her, wrapping an arm around her. Ainsley took the opposite corner, bracing himself with his arms and legs.

“What terrible timing we have,” he joked.

The shaking grew worse—Eve couldn’t tell if they were still moving forward. The horses’ whinnies grew louder, the carriage rocked backward with their agitation. The driver yelled, his fear carrying through the speaking-tube more than his words. The motion stilled, and then the carriage rocked one last time, although Eve could still hear steady horse clomps. Had they let the horses loose?

“Whoa!” Eve was thrown against Ambrose as they both tumbled to the opposite side of the carriage. The carriage rocked back into place violently, and then, like it was taking a steadying breath, it pushed again, teetered, and then crashed into the pavement. In that teetering moment, Ambrose wrapped his hand around Eve’s head, holding her to his chest. The fabric and his hand muffled everything, but the cheers from outside still pierced and terrified.

The underside of the carriage was pelted, plats and tings from mud and rocks striking the exterior. Eve pushed herself up and rolled off Ambrose, skirt bunched around her knees, and crouched on the door.

Light poured in a shaft from the door’s window overhead, shadowing the corners of the carriage. The seat cushions were knocked askew, one half-covering Ainsley, the winders’ caps part of the carriage detritus.

Ambrose bled from a cut above his eye. “Are you all right?” he asked her.

“Fine enough.” She took a handkerchief from her pocket and pressed it to the cut. “Are you?”

“Fine enough. Ainsley?”

“Capital,” Ainsley groaned. Eve turned to assess Ainsley, watching as he pushed the cushion off himself—no visible blood and his eyes were focused.

Eve looked up—with one door crushed into the ground, the other was their only exit, no matter how difficult it was to reach. Stamping feet knocked on the door she’d been examining.

“Oh-ho, open up, Staties.”

A boot heel smashed through the window. Eve looked away in time, but shards grazed her neck. A face appeared in the empty portal a moment later. “Come out and we’ll see you Staties off to the train station.”

Eve backed up, the glass cracking under her shoes. Ainsley rushed the door, putting his hand in the Demiri’s face and pushing him back. He kept his head ducked as he checked the lock. “I’m not sure how long that’ll hold.”

Ambrose scooted back, getting his feet under him. He still pressed Eve’s handkerchief to his brow. “There’s not much choice about whether or not the door holds. We need to get out of here.” His eyes shifted to Eve and then back to Ainsley.

The crowd screamed—a piercing cry different from the jeers thrown at their carriage. A crack, followed by another, startled Eve almost into Ambrose’s arms. They listened carefully, but the yelling and screaming intensified, erasing individual words and voices.

“The State soldiers?” Ainsley asked.

“I’m not sure.”

They waited for more shots, or a sound that could clarify what was happening outside. Feet stomped across the carriage from one side to the other and then the top shifted like someone had jumped off. Ainsley cautiously checked outside the broken window.

“Clear.” He only glanced back, but somehow that second was all the time he and Ambrose needed to communicate. Ainsley slipped the lock, flipped open the door, poked his head out for a quick reconnaissance, and then started pulling himself up, finding narrow purchase on the braces for the seats.

“I’ll pass you up to Ainsley once he’s sure it’s safe.”

“What signifies as ‘safe?’”

Ambrose didn’t answer.

More yelling, louder—Eve thought she recognized Ainsley’s voice in the shouts—followed by thunks on the carriage side like someone else was climbing atop. Ainsley’s cerulean jacket flashed past, and there were sounds of a scuffle, punches and grunting just audible above the din. The carriage rocked again, and then Ainsley’s hand stuck from the open door.

“Hurry, hurry. Reinforcements are here, but they have their hands full.”

Eve grabbed Ainsley’s arm, wincing as he clapped onto hers, and Ambrose lifted her, bracing his leg so she could climb up him and out of the carriage. The square was bedlam—a mass of bodies swaying and crashing, noisier now that she was outside; soldiers on foot, a handful on horseback, rocks and mud hurtling toward them and staining their uniforms. One of the soldiers on horseback had a pistol drawn. He fired overhead and Eve stepped back and ducked instinctively. No one else seemed to notice it.

A hand circled her ankle. She shrieked and turned, slipping out of the grip. A second hand joined the first and gripped the front of the carriage, pressing until head and shoulders and back rose above the edge. Ainsley stepped on their would-be attacker’s shoulder, pressing down, pushing back.

Movement caught the corner of Eve’s vision, but it was just Ambrose emerging from the open door, arms folded over, supporting his weight. Eve leaned over, tugging on the back of his

jacket, doing what she could to help. Ainsley came a moment later, grabbing one of Ambrose's arms and pulling him up and out.

Ainsley scanned the crowd, hand shading his brow. "James is somewhere down in that mess." Eve vaguely recalled Ainsley greeting their driver by that name.

"Isn't that where we're going?" Ambrose asked. He tugged his jacket down at the waist. The riot pulsed around them, not just made of living beings, but a breathing, beating, bleating being itself. It had been bad enough when the locals had glared, their silent fury palpable. She couldn't imagine being swallowed by all this.

"Where can we go that's safe for the State?" Ambrose ducked, a clod of earth striking his back.

"I doubt we'd make it to Bergmann's," Ainsley said. They were on the northeastern end of the square, Bergmann's clock tower directly opposite, a shining beacon above all the chaos.

"Bergmann East?" Eve suggested. The side street that led to the other location wasn't far from the carriage, and then they'd be off the main road. Eve thought she could navigate the alleyways to get them there quickly enough, not to mention most of the activity clogged the western side, in front of City Hall. Surely they'd be able to avoid the chaos—none of them were trained for this.

Ainsley shrugged and gave a quick nod to Ambrose.

Before they could move (or figure out how to get down from the carriage without jumping on someone), men leapt up from the front and back, like they were on springs. The winders immediately rushed them, one to the front, one to the back. Ainsley knocked his man back, but almost fell off the carriage edge. Ambrose grappled with a hulking man almost a head taller than him. The only thing in Ambrose's favor was that he moved metal men every day, shoving them into

position when they wound down too early. Eve picked up her skirt and kicked at the man's shin, not doing much damage. As she was aiming for his knee, someone grabbed her around the waist and threw her off the carriage, right into another man's waiting arms.

His breath was hot and rank in her face. She hit him, palm up, smashing his nose and snapping his head back. He groaned, one hand releasing her to tend to his bloody nose, her feet hitting the ground. She slipped the rest of the way through his loosened grip, her breath vanishing when she realized she didn't know what had happened to Ambrose or Ainsley.

Another set of arms seized her almost immediately and she punched at the beefy arm before realizing it was Ambrose.

"Get your feet under you!"

He steadied her, and she turned, expecting Ainsley to be on her other side. She looked up and couldn't see him on the carriage either, or a flash of his winder's jacket in the crowd. The carriage horses and the driver James had also been swallowed by the riot.

"Follow me!"

With one arm in front, Ambrose pushed men aside, sprinting forward. Eve followed close, dust flecking behind Ambrose. She clutched at his jacket, a brilliant touchstone flaring in the muddled throng. Shots unleashed again—the mob ducking in unison, taking Eve with them. Someone grabbed Eve's arm but she pulled, momentum on her side, and slipped through his grasp. She overcorrected, lost her balance, and her leg stumbled into something solid and unmoving. She hit the ground, scuffing her arm against tacky cobblestones. Ambrose was there, pulling her to her feet, muttering, "Don't look. Don't look," but of course she looked, eyes immediately finding the frozen face of a young man, a dark hole in the center of his forehead.

An accident, she immediately thought, but she couldn't be sure.

Ambrose tugged her arm again, and they ran, finally passing the crowd, hitting the sidewalk, and slipping down the side street.

Locals cowered behind closed shop doors, faces appeared at the edges of drawn curtains, but no one shouted to turn in the two out-of-breath State employees. Eve had lost her bearing after she'd been thrown off the carriage, but Ambrose had kept to the plan, winding through side streets and alleys, heading straight for Bergmann East. When they arrived, the door opened, and Bergmann gestured them inside.

Bergmann East was smaller than Central. There were only a handful of shelves, most of which displayed cleaning solutions, oils, and files for maintaining a clockwork device. There were only a few steps between the doors and a wide counter for intake. Most of the store was a backroom workshop, which was where Bergmann immediately escorted them. The close, cool smell of metal and grease helped soothe Eve's nerves—and they were far enough from the square that the riot felt more like a fantasy.

"I was on my way here when the riot broke out. I saw the carriage topple. Who would have thought it would come to this?"

"It was unexpected, even knowing the square was a rallying point." Ambrose turned at the door, facing out into the store. He fidgeted, on edge. Ainsley was still out there.

"Are you all right?" Bergmann brought a stool over for Eve.

Eve nodded, not able to speak just yet. She pinched her sides; she wasn't used to running. Her mother had always told her to work through a cramp, keep walking, it would get better. Her legs felt like rubber, though, and she steadied herself on the stool before turning to sit.

"You're bleeding," he said to Ambrose. Bergmann went to the back of the room, rummaging loudly.

Ambrose touched the cut, blood dotting his finger. “I think I lost your handkerchief.”

“Well, you saved my life, so I think it’s an acceptable loss.”

He ducked his head, the ghost of a smile flickering, and Eve could tell he was thinking about the man she’d tripped over. She closed her eyes, trying to forget the round shape of his face, the fleck of mud on his cheek that would have itched if he could feel it.

“There was nothing we could do,” she whispered, letting the pain have her for a moment.

Ambrose shuddered and came away from the door. He pinched her sleeve before letting his hand drop. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Her heart hadn’t slowed to normal yet. Sweat coated her skin. Her arm ached where she’d scraped it. She could still feel the phantom grip of the workmen who had restrained her.

But Ambrose, despite their differences, had been instrumental in saving her. She focused on that. “I’ll be fine.”

Bergmann popped out from behind a shelf, a first aid kit open in his hands. “I’m not very skilled at repairing people.”

“Who is?” Eve joked. She got to her feet, steadier than she felt, and took the kit from Bergmann. She’d assisted her mother enough times to be able to handle cleaning and bandaging a cut. She could probably make her way through stitches if she had to, but Ambrose’s injury didn’t appear that severe. “I can handle this. Sit.”

Ambrose took her stool. She could tell he was trying to hide his surprise by the way his brow and cheeks twitched. She’d always been so focused on the clockmen and her inventions that she’d never told him her mother had been a nurse.

“I heard shots. Was that the State?” Bergmann leaned against a workbench, his arms crossed.

Ambrose stiffened when Eve pressed the alcohol-soaked swab against the cut. “Yes. Basic crowd control. Warning shots for dispersal.” Ambrose’s eyes flicked to hers, the blue intense and pleading; “not a word,” they seemed to say.

“Basic crowd control.” The words sounded caustic in Bergmann’s mouth. “It’s basic to fire guns at unarmed civilians.”

“Not at them—warning shots. Also those civilians are rioting. They attacked us.”

“Sounds like your sympathy is waning,” Eve muttered. Ambrose’s eyes cut to her—she’d clearly said the wrong thing, or perhaps in the wrong company. She didn’t like lying to Bergmann, not when he’d been so honest with her.

“They may not have been right to attack you, but the State isn’t welcome here. Especially not when they’re here to steal from us.”

“Who’s stealing?” Eve asked. Blood slowly seeped into the cotton Eve pressed against Ambrose’s cut. “Mayor Sunter invited the State to have a hand at accessing the Magtan Mine. Your miners haven’t successfully been at it yet. The State’s just applying their resources.”

“Despite how it may look, Abbrücken is a mining town. Without that new mine, Abbrücken will die.”

Eve shook her head as she carefully secured the bandage. “The State still needs miners. The clockmen can’t do everything.” Ambrose coughed, but Eve spoke over him. “Clockmen need winders, and the miners would be the perfect choice since they already know the mines. There will still be jobs.”

“But the State would control the ore, including who is allowed to buy it and at what price. If Sunter suggests selling the ore to, oh, say me—or to someone else friendly with shipping parts and devices to Demirtan or overseas—what will the Nordlund response be? A threat to withdraw the

clockmen, perhaps? Fines and fees if I'm not 'registered' or on some special list they concoct?

'There's a greater economy wrapped around the ore, more than just the mines.'

Abbrücken was famous for two things: their iron ore and their Metallurgy Festival. And one was clearly dependent on the other. Eve had seen enough in the Capital to know how the State would treat Abbrücken once it could leverage the iron ore. People out of work would be kept out of work, arrested when they begged in the wrong place, and encouraged to inform on their neighbors. The Loyalty List, as Bergmann guessed, would keep people in line. Upgrades to public utilities would be provided for the rich, while everyone else continued to make do. Eve had only benefited from their system because she'd been lucky enough to catch Ambrose's and then Bristed's interest. If she hadn't, she'd have run out of savings, and slipped from boarding house to tenement. Forget working on clockmen, she'd have been scraping together coins to build that silly hand warmer.

"The State was invited. They're not breaking the law, not like the rioters." She spouted the right rhetoric, but she doubted Ambrose or Bergmann believed her.

"No," Bergmann said in a measured tone, "they're not like the rioters."

Eve reassembled the first aid kit and closed it up. She passed it to Bergmann. "Thank you."

Ambrose felt the bandage around the edges. "Do we owe you for the first aid supplies?" The wry question tugged at his lips.

"No charge for the State employees. Just this once." Bergmann left the first aid kit on the workbench in easy reach. He'd most likely deplete the supplies before the night was through. "You can stay here until things settle down. I'm going to poke my head outside, walk a few blocks, see if anyone knows what's happening in the square. I don't know how Bergmann Central is faring."

"Keep an eye out for my partner?" Ambrose plucked at his sleeve, drawing attention to the color of his uniform.

“Ainsley,” Eve piped up. “He’s usually with me when I come in. He was in the carriage, too.”

Bergmann nodded before he turned to leave.

Ambrose waited until the bell over the front door chimed and then he squeezed Eve’s hand.

“Thank you.”

“You saved my life,” she reminded him. She let him hold her hand a second longer and then pulled away, making an excuse of fetching another stool.

She positioned the stool across from him and crossed her ankles when she sat, only noticing then that the hem of her skirt was ripped. “Do you think Ainsley’s hurt?” Not dead—neither of them wanted to think about that.

“He can take care of himself. There were soldiers around, too. Our jackets stand out.”

“They do.” They made a good target.

The two fell into silence, each of them staring at their feet, lost in thoughts of the afternoon’s events and Abbrücken.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was past dark when Bergmann returned with news that the State had commandeered the hotel next to Bergmann Central. He offered to escort them, but Ambrose took his jacket off, folded it inside-out, and rolled his cuffs just like the miners, insisting they could take care of themselves. Eve guessed Ambrose just didn't want to owe Bergmann more than they already did.

The streets leading to the square looked the same as always—a bit quieter, perhaps, but that could be due to the late hour. The entrance, where side street met square, was dim, lamps lit haphazardly, stretching shadows into grotesque shapes, transforming blood stains into bogeymen.

Their carriage was the only carcass in the street, but the other debris—banners and broken sticks, rocks that didn't belong, and a claret stain they skirted—was enough to make Eve tighten her grip on Ambrose's arm.

They cut through the trampled green, charting a path over picket signs, scarlet banners, and State flags that had been splattered in black paint. A banner for the Mekasaba Miners' Association clung to the front of a wooden stage, one corner sagging and threatening to fall. "Clunkmen" appeared to be the unpopular word of the day, circled and crossed out on several signs. The iron gate nearest City Hall hung from hinges, so Ambrose held it open while Eve passed through.

The mud and scuff marks marring storefronts seemed incidental, though a handful of windows were broken, the glass twinkling in the lamplight. A squad of soldiers guarded the front of the hotel, nodding to Ambrose when he flashed his jacket.

"Ambrose! Eve!" Ainsley attempted to rise from his chair, but was easily pressed back into his seat by the woman sitting in front of him. She wore a taupe scarf around her head, completely covering her hair, and a cream-colored linen jacket with burgundy and brown stripes of embroidery

along the sleeves. Even unaccustomed to the dress, Eve could identify the no-nonsense look of a doctor.

“Sit still, Mr. Ainsley.”

Ainsley rolled his eyes and eagerly gestured the new arrivals over. His shirtsleeves were rolled just like Ambrose’s, arms scuffed and covered in scratches. Bruises peppered his forehead and cheeks, but the reason he hadn’t stood was because the doctor was stitching up a gash on his leg. Ambrose looked away, but the wound was nearly closed and the most scandalous thing was the shaved skin ringed by Ainsley’s thick leg hair.

“I wasn’t sure what had happened to you.”

“We managed to get to Bergmann’s.” Ambrose looked past Ainsley and nodded to Bristed. Eve hadn’t expected to see him in town, nor looking quite so wan.

“What happened to *you*?” Eve tilted her head, studying the doctor’s work. Her stitching was almost as clean as Eve’s mother’s. Her hand moved steadily, her posture utterly relaxed, as if Ainsley’s skin was nothing more than a torn hem.

Ainsley pointed to a discolored lump on his forehead. “Friendly fire. One of the soldier’s mistook me for a rioter after I stripped off my jacket.”

Eve scoffed. “You’re lucky they didn’t shoot you.”

“Eve, it was an accident.” Ambrose’s voice was soft, and she could tell he didn’t just mean Ainsley.

“Your friend’s right,” the doctor spoke up. Her voice was soft and smooth, just like Maryam’s. “You’re lucky this injury isn’t worse. It will keep you off your feet for a while.”

“In that chaos it was bound to happen.” Ainsley drummed the chair’s arms. “You both look all right.”

“A few scrapes,” Ambrose confirmed. “Excuse me.” He crossed the lobby to confer with Bristed and the captain of the guard—Eve recognized him as one of the soldiers on horseback.

Ainsley patted the chair next to him, tipping his head for Eve to come closer.

“They arrested some of the rioters,” Ainsley whispered after she’d leaned in. “I think they’re discussing what to do with them.”

“Shouldn’t you be part of that conversation?”

“Right now I’m busy.”

Eve hardly laughed at his joke, distracted by the image of the surviving rioters post riot, deflated from adrenaline and rhetoric, nursing wounds as bad as, if not worse than, Ainsley’s.

“What do you think they’ll do to them?”

Ainsley shook his head, craning his neck to get a look at the official gathering. “Jail for at least a few days. If they decide to make an example they might take them to Aufziehbürg. I’m not sure they can call it treason here, maybe just assault and assembly.”

“It’s not illegal to assemble.”

Ainsley’s eyebrow twitched beneath the swelling. “How many assemblies did you see in Aufziehbürg?”

She leaned closer. “It’s illegal?”

“For a few years now. Although, again, with the rallies we’ve seen before, maybe that rule can’t be enforced here. Abbrücken is odd.”

“Abbrücken is very odd.” She turned to the doctor. “Has anyone been in to treat the rioters yet?”

The doctor finished off the stitches and repacked her kit, a frown tugging at her brows and lips. “The State has priority. I’ve been instructed to attend to all of the State soldiers first.” Her

frustration came through in her last words, the syllables practically spitting from her lips. Her facial muscles softened with some effort, the next sentence more nuanced. “Someone will see to them.”

“Someone?” Eve got to her feet and crossed to Bristed, hands already on her hips.

#

They confined Eve to the hotel through the night, forcing her to get some rest in one of the upstairs rooms. In the morning, after Bristed confessed Dr. Izzet had been dispatched to deal with some injured locals and hadn’t made it to the jail, Eve pulled together supplies and forced Ambrose to take her to the jail rather than back to the estate.

“I’m not sure you want to go there,” was all the argument he’d given, before bringing her in through the back of City Hall.

As she understood, the police constabulary was small by Aufziehbürg standards and mostly mediated property disputes and petty theft. A cell in the back of City Hall could comfortably hold five, maybe seven men, but it wasn’t made for retaining the number of rioters the soldiers had seized.

Ten men carpeted the floor of the too-small cell, legs crisscrossing, taking up every available space; another eight shared the cots, lying down or leaning against each other. They groaned in the hot, still room—no windows propped open for any kind of breeze, leaving the cell reeking of urine, blood, and excrement. Eve’s hand flew to her mouth before she could stop it. She disciplined herself, pulling up reserves she remembered from her mother’s lessons. She’d come here because no one else would. These men clearly needed someone to be brave for them. Often a wound looked much worse than it actually was. She’d do what she could, and that at least would make these men more comfortable, make them men again.

She turned to Ambrose, her back to the cell. “Can you let me in, please?”

Ambrose's wide eyes were still on the cell, mouth tense and open as he breathed through it.

"They need a doctor."

"They do, but the doctor's not here." Tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them back. Her feelings wouldn't be of any use to them, and they wouldn't be of use to her as she tried to keep her patients calm. "I can at least make them more comfortable."

"I'll fetch a key." He left her alone, and she took a shallow breath through her mouth and turned.

She assessed the bodies, trying to see through blood soaked shirts to guess at hidden injuries. A few men clearly wore the blood of others and appeared otherwise unharmed—she'd ask them to stay to the back of the cell.

She overheard a sharp bark from the next room, and then recognized Ambrose's voice. She caught the words "inhumane" and "unacceptable"—and was proud of how indignant Ambrose sounded. While a winder's rank was equivalent to captain, she'd never seen it put to the test.

Ambrose returned a moment later with a pair of soldiers. The men shifted in the cell, some coming to their feet, others rising up on their elbows.

"Miss Traugott is here to tend to the wounded. Let her do her business." There was an unsaid threat of a drawn baton. The other soldier had a pistol holstered at his hip.

The men who could move backed away from the door, and the soldier unlocked it. Eve entered first, and then turned to Ambrose.

"Come on, I need an assistant."

Ambrose followed reluctantly, but once Eve knelt beside the first man and began tearing cloth to reveal the gash in his arm, Ambrose transformed into an excellent assistant, passing

bandages, needle, and thread as he averted his eyes. Eve's hand was nowhere near as steady as her mother's or the doctor's, but she could do in a pinch, and this situation was, if anything, a pinch.

A bloody hand covered her arm. "You're from the State?"

A negative response rose in her gut, threatening to escape, but no one would believe that considering her escort and skin color. She considered the way Bergmann had phrased it, identifying her as Nordlunder, but not from the State. "I'm from Kamberstadt."

"Basically a Nordlunder." His voice was barely a sigh. Eve worried something was wrong with his lungs.

"Basically. Stay silent a moment." She put her ear to his chest as she'd seen her mother do before, trying to hear something wrong, but not certain what sounded right. She turned to Ambrose. "He needs a real doctor."

He wasn't the only one who needed a real doctor, but right now all they had was Eve. She stitched until she ran out of thread, cleaned and bandaged wounds, and splinted limbs. Most of the men stayed silent unless issuing a quiet word of thanks. She wasn't sure what to say to them because despite Bergmann's distinction, she was from the State, and while she hadn't hurt them, her people were responsible.

Once they were finished and away from the cell, Eve stumbled, her emotions finally overtaking her limbs. Ambrose put his arm around her and guided her to a bench.

"I had no idea you knew that much about healing."

"My mother was a nurse. I used to assist her. I didn't realize I'd remembered so much." She hunched forward, her breathing ragged. Her spine was a hot poker down the center of her back.

"Are you ready to return to the estate? I can hire a driver if needed."

Eve nodded, ready for a long sleep in a familiar bed.

Ambrose took her back to the estate and sent her upstairs. A few minutes later the cook came up with tea. Eve lay down, but she couldn't shake the image of the rioters and how beaten and bruised and bloody they were. Despite what they'd done, despite knocking over her carriage, she couldn't justify that they deserved that punishment. No one deserved what the State had done.

#

They let her sleep in the next morning, the sun spilling into the room when she finally woke. After a full night's sleep, the riot seemed like it had been little more than a nightmare. At breakfast even Ambrose's bandage had been removed, the closed cut barely visible at his hairline. The only way Eve was certain that it had happened was that Ambrose was her only escort to the design room and, when they arrived, a soldier was posted outside. Eve passed him, eyeing his rifle and trying not to picture the man who'd been shot.

Keller barely glanced up when Eve walked into the room. The electrics in front of her were more important. "I wasn't sure to expect you today. They said you were in town yesterday."

"We came back in the evening, but I went straight to bed." Eve tied her work apron around herself; she'd never been more aware of the strings wrapping around her waist, the knot at her front, the way the apron clutched her. "Did you hear what happened?"

"Riot. You were in the carriage when they knocked it over?" She said it so cavalierly, like it had been a carousel ride.

"Yes."

"The soldiers pulled you out? Set things to order?"

"I pulled myself out." Eve frowned, glancing to the open door. "The soldiers were overrun. I think their presence made it worse."

Keller dismissed Eve's assessment with a puff of air. "It would've been worse without the soldiers. They protect you, you know." She raised her eye loupe to her forehead, pinning back her stray hair. "They probably saved you from being killed."

Ambrose, actually, was the one who had saved her. She sat at her worktable, a partial gear train spread out in front of her. They'd begun work on upgrading the next three clockmen, and she'd been working on the logic gears. She couldn't quite remember where she'd left off in the assembly.

"You were lucky the soldiers were there."

Eve tried not to picture the men in the cell. She'd seen that enough for one day. "People were shot."

"You look all right."

Eve stopped, stunned at the insensitivity. She didn't know what to say to that, or how Keller could justify her words. Eve consulted the designs mounted on the drafting table, tracing her fingers along the gear path, but she kept thinking about the men who'd died and the others in the cell, and the ones who had probably died since she'd left. She had looked each of them in the face, taking in an old brown scar across a nose, the bushiest eyebrows she'd ever seen, a thick-lipped smile that still functioned with missing teeth. She could have known these men, passed any of them in the street on any day, or one of them could be a neighbor of Bergmann's, a friend.

"Well." Keller turned back to her work, lowering her eye loupe again, her indifference hanging in the air. "They wouldn't allow me into town yesterday. Hopefully it's just temporary while they round up the leaders of this riot."

Eve hunched her shoulders higher, trying again to focus on the designs and wishing she had a separate workshop. "They already arrested some people."

Keller humphed. “Good.”

Eve closed her eyes and then opened them slowly, taking a measured breath and turning to face Keller. “They denied them medical treatment.”

“Denied?” Keller’s eyebrow rose skeptically.

“They forced Dr. Izzet to treat the State soldiers first—even though some just had scrapes and bumps. The men in jail still hadn’t seen a doctor by the morning.” Her voice croaked, betraying her feelings. She turned back to the designs, the penciled clockwork swimming in her vision.

“You sympathize with them?”

Eve didn’t need to respond; her feelings were evident.

“Hmm, the Statesman might find that interesting.”

After what Eve had been through—after what she’d seen happen to the jailed miners—she was supposed to be afraid of Keller tattling on her?

“Tell Bristed whatever you want. I don’t owe him my feelings.”

Keller made a disapproving noise in the back of her throat, but didn’t comment further. A few minutes later she declared that she was done with the neckpiece, which meant it was Eve’s turn to install it.

Eve climbed the step stool, pulled down her eye loupe, and leaned over the headless clockman, setting the framework and socket into place. She didn’t need to refer to the designs; it was obvious where each piece went and how it aligned. The tricky part came when connecting the wires, to not melt any of the insulation, but after Keller’s crash course a few days ago, Eve had grown proficient enough to install all of the neckpieces the morning of their test, proving just how quickly (and successfully) they could upgrade the clockmen if needed.

As Eve dropped the components into place, screwing them in, her mind drifted back to the miners, to the State's need to claim the iron mine, to Abbrücken's need to retain it, to the way the State treated its prisoners. She wasn't from the State; she knew that now. It wasn't just that she was born in Kamberstadt; it was that she didn't buy into their propaganda. Keller continued to invoke the nationalistic drivel she thought the Statesman would support, without ever thinking about what she was actually saying, what that nationalism meant for other people. After her experiences, Eve couldn't stop thinking about those other people.

Eve fetched the soldering iron and mounted the stool again, keeping an eye on the red hot end. She carefully applied the heat, watching the wires as Keller had instructed, but her hand suddenly cramped and the tip touched the insulation. A soft, frustrated noise slipped out of her when she realized what she'd done.

Keller didn't look up from the plans she was studying. "What, are you crying?"

Eve ignored her.

"Crying over Demiri," Keller muttered. "Probably think the State should leave Abbrücken entirely, don't you?" She snorted.

Eve narrowed her eyes. The State *should* leave Abbrücken, and they'd have to—at least the mine—if Bergmann finished his mining equipment first.

The insulation was only partly melted, so Eve applied the soldering iron again, ensuring that Keller would need to rewire that side, slowing them down at least an hour.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

She stood outside Bergmann's, wiping her hands compulsively over her skirt. This was it. This wasn't just bungling a connection to slow down Keller. This was treason. This was actual, by-the-book treason, and if she carried through with her plan, she'd be a traitor.

The Abbrücken square looked almost normal again, save for the State soldiers milling through the green, rifles hanging from their shoulders. They weren't on guard, but they were present, and outnumbering the few locals going about their normal business.

Eve darted her eyes to City Hall where a sedate and nearly silent protest had been going on for days. The morning after the riot, the families of the incarcerated rioters and deceased had paraded through the town square wearing black armbands and sat down on the steps to City Hall. As the day wore on, other locals took their places, exchanging armbands and seats, while the melting protesters went inside for some water, or in some cases, to request a visitation. All requests were denied. They'd kept up this vigil around the clock for the past four days. Their dedication was inspiring.

"Looking for trouble."

Surprised, she looked up at the soldier serving as her escort while Ainsley was still recovering and Ambrose was occupied with some other task. "Excuse me?"

He nodded to the families on the steps, his skin red and peeling from the Abbrücken sun. "Another riot brewing."

A young boy leaned against his mother and she wiped a rag over his forehead. The sun was right on them now.

"They're *grieving*."

He clucked his tongue, one hand resting on the baton holstered at this hip. “Intense emotions lead to trouble. Mark my words.” He glanced down at her. “Are you going in? It’s hot out here.” The top button of his uniform jacket was undone, his pale throat peeking out whenever he moved.

His lack of compassion was appalling. If that was what she was betraying, she could live with being a traitor. She marched into Bergmann’s and went straight to the back, finding him behind the counter. The soldier had followed her inside, but stayed near the front door, apparently ready for when the women and children rushed the armed soldiers.

“I need to talk to you.”

“Another commission?”

“Shopping trip officially, but I don’t need to talk to you to purchase parts.”

Bergmann stood up straight. He ran a finger over his lip, contemplating a moment, and scanned the store behind Eve. “Where’s your winder?”

“One is injured, the other occupied. A soldier escorted me today, but he’s more concerned the grieving widows might start a rebellion.”

He studied Eve a moment more, and then jerked his chin. “Come on back.”

Mechanical devices covered every horizontal surface in the back room—some were clearly broken or harvested for parts, some were new inventions in varying stages of production. They were racked on shelves reaching to the ceiling, and despite the bright light in the store, the back room—the workshop—was lit by gas lamps dangling directly over the worktable.

Bergmann pulled down a sheet and covered a large device sitting in the middle of the table. Eve didn’t get a good look at it, but it was long, grey, and clawed at one end. He leaned against the table, pinning the sheet, and offered Eve the stool.

She wasn't going to sit, but when she took a breath, her knees felt weak.

"You look absolutely ashen."

"I feel it, too." She picked at the flaking cuticle of her thumbnail, psyching herself up one last time, remembering the man shot in the street, the cell the morning after the riot, the family members on the steps, the arrogance of the State. She folded her hands and looked Bergmann right in the eye. "I want to help you finish your mining equipment."

Bergmann's eyebrows nearly shot off his forehead. "I'm not showing you my inventions."

"I thought you'd say that." Eve pulled several scraps of paper from her pockets, standing and laying them out, piecing them together, on a corner of the workbench. Copied schematics detailing a large section of the logic gears, right on Bergmann's table. "This is what I've been working on. Part of it, at least." She adjusted one of the pieces to better align the pencil marks. "It's a clockman that can think, roughly. They're more durable than miners, can work longer, and they return to their winders before they wind down."

Drawn like a moth to lamplight, Bergmann touched the edge of the designs, mouth open in a wordless question.

"The State's as bad as you said. Worse, maybe. What the soldiers did to the protesters—" Her voice choked off and she turned away to collect herself. "I want Mekasaba to win the mine." The original name of Abbrücken was thick on her tongue, but she didn't trip over the unfamiliar syllables.

Bergmann looked up sharply. "That's treason." He shook his head and backed away from the workbench. Now he was the one who looked ashen. "Showing me those designs is treason. You know what they do to traitors?"

She balled her fists and ignored her roiling stomach. “Is it the same thing they do to protesters?”

He scratched at his scar and then wiped the side of his face. “You’re serious. You’re serious.” Muttered under his breath, it almost sounded like a question. “What are you proposing?”

“We have three units modified. The Statesman wants six completed before we present them to the mayor. They’ve all but won the contract.” Eve took a deep breath. “I’m slowing down our work, but I can’t buy much time. A week, maybe. Is that enough time for you to finish?”

He bit his lip and slid his head to the side. “It’s tight. There’s a lot of components I’m working on and not all of them have been tested.”

Eve took a deep breath, trying again. “Can I help?”

He turned halfway to the workbench, paused, turned back around with a finger held aloft, and then turned all the way around and pulled off the sheet. With a longer look it was easy to see that the clawed device was an arm, or rather, something that fit over an arm, and the claw vaguely resembled some sort of multi-headed pickaxe.

Bergmann scratched his ear. “It’s pneumatic. And this isn’t all of it. There’s actually sort of a suit. Breathing apparatus, drill, headlamp.” He gestured around the room and she started picking out parts on the shelves that looked like similar components—what a shrewd way to hide his work, in a pile of other junk!

She ran her finger over the clawed end, following the sharp nails. Eve had been hoping to turn miners into winders, while Bergmann had been scheming to turn them into machines.

Eve rubbed her hands together, giving the room one more look. “What can I do?”

#

Eve blew the shavings from the gear and checked it against the crumpled diagram she pulled from her apron. The gear fit over it exactly. She checked that Keller was still head deep in the clockman before sliding the gear into her pocket and balling up the designs again.

Eve's State assignments and exhaustible excuses for heading into town kept her from working with Bergmann directly, so he'd slipped her schematics for the clockwork component of the air compressor. She had pulled back her covers the night after meeting with him and found the papers tucked into the sheets. Since then she'd been slowly fine-tuning the parts and testing them at night, temporarily fastening the cam shafts while she checked the action of the gear train. When she was satisfied, she left the disassembled components between her sheets to disappear during the day. She wasn't sure exactly who on staff at the Reza Estate was working with Bergmann, but Berna had nodded to Eve one morning as she was leaving pitchers of water by the machinists' doors.

Two knocks sounded on the glass door and then Ambrose poked his head into the greenhouse. "Traugott? Time to go."

Eve left her tools on the bench, making sure nothing looked amiss, and hoped her pockets wouldn't jingle too much as she walked. "I'm still not sure why Bristed is insisting that I meet this train. He'd be first to note how terrible I am with people."

"He wants to show off his machinists."

"And he knows I'm needed here to upgrade the clockmen *properly*." Keller glared at Eve, her patience worn thin over the last week of Eve's "mistakes." The latest mishap occurred when Eve "tripped" and broke six light bulbs. For all the danger treason entailed, Eve was quite comfortable with the part of the task designed to frustrate and annoy Keller; Eve still hadn't quite forgiven Keller's comments about the riot.

Eve feigned a worried look. "Should I pick up some light bulbs while I'm in town?"

Keller sighed in response and then grunted a farewell (or something like a farewell), and Eve followed Ambrose out of the greenhouse.

It'd be a shame if they passed through the city without stopping at Bergmann's. Berna should have picked up the majority of the components Eve had built for the clockwork air compressor, and Eve had the rest of them in her pockets. She'd only slowed Keller down a couple days, so it was imperative that Bergmann finish as quickly as possible.

Eve tucked her hands in her pockets, holding on to the tinkling gears. "Do we have to meet the new arrivals at the train station? I'd like to stop by Bergmann's to pick up those light bulbs for Keller."

"Did you break them?"

Eve pressed her lips together, for some reason not wanting to appear as clumsy in front of Ambrose. "I may have."

An amused expression flashed across his face, tightening the skin around his eyes. "I can't leave you in town without an escort."

"Do you really think I need an escort in Bergmann's?"

Ambrose snorted. "I'm positive you need an escort in Bergmann's. I practically had to restrain you the first time I took you to the Hall of Mechanical Marvels."

The memory hung between them, the opposite end of their timeline, the unblemished before.

Her shoe caught a tree root, breaking the memory, but she steadied herself without his help. "Then escort me. But I'll be good and it'll be a complete waste of your time." Her smile was less steady than her feet.

Ambrose made a noncommittal hmm, but when they arrived at the carriage he made arrangements with the driver to be dropped off before the train station.

#

Eve marched down the aisles looking for Bergmann, but feigning that she was looking for light bulbs. Ambrose didn't seem to notice the subterfuge, but he stayed closer to her than Ainsley ever did.

"I wasn't expecting to see you today." Bergmann bowed to them both, addressing them by rank. "What brings the incomparable Machinist Traugott into my store today?"

"Light bulbs," Ambrose answered.

"And some smaller parts. For a gear train." Her eyes slid to Ambrose, trying her best to signal Bergmann without alerting her State escort. She hated leaving Ambrose in the dark yet again, but this wasn't an unaffiliated machinist tinkering above her pay grade—her earlier dalliance with subterfuge would have cost Ambrose his job, maybe something more; this one would end with a noose if either of them were caught.

"Oh, right, right. I'd nearly forgotten. You needed some instruction."

"A demonstration," Eve corrected. They may be fumbling for an excuse, but she was a State Machinist.

"Right, of course." His eyes passed over Ambrose. "This may take awhile, and most of my customers aren't thrilled with Staties."

Ambrose's face darkened; Eve had thought he'd softened on the topic of Bergmann after the riot. "Machinist Traugott is also a 'Statie.'" The tone in his voice said everything his face hadn't.

Bergmann shrugged. "She's practically one of us. Look how tan she's gotten in a month. She'd blend in with anyone in Demirtan."

“Kamberstadt has always been part of Nordlund.” Ambrose’s voice was tight, almost like it had been when he’d found out about the stolen joint.

“‘Always’ in the last fifty years. Before then, it was something else.”

Eve held up both hands. “Clockwork. Demonstration.” She looked between them, staring them both down. Ambrose backed down first, a chagrined look on his face that was soon matched by Bergmann.

“Mmm, right.” Ambrose looked away for a pregnant moment; Eve waiting with bated breath. If he didn’t agree to leave, she could figure some way to slip Bergmann the gears, but she had been hoping to see what he’d made of the other pieces. The designs he’d sent her didn’t show the completed compressor.

“I need to send a telegram to my family.” Ambrose gave Eve a significant look. “I’ll be gone fifteen, twenty minutes. Keep your nose down. I don’t want anyone retaliating by attacking a State Machinist. Lots of people know who you are.”

“She’ll be safe with me. You have my word.” Bergmann bowed slightly, striking an uneasy truce.

“I’ll be fine,” Eve said, reaching out and squeezing Ambrose’s wrist. It was only after she’d touched his bare skin that she realized how intimate the gesture was. She blushed and pulled her hand back quickly. He glanced back twice as he walked to the front of the store.

At the back counter, Eve emptied her pockets and Bergmann produced the components his cohorts had lifted from Eve’s room at the estate. He added a canister to the mix and then demonstrated how the bottom would slide to create a vacuum within it.

“All we need is your clockwork assembly to control it.”

“I think we can finish in twenty minutes.”

“Oh, a race, is it?” Bergmann grinned and flipped a screwdriver between his fingers. Eve flattened out the schematics from her pocket and they set to work, Eve connecting the gears to their shafts and Bergmann fitting the shafts into their housing.

From the back counter, Bergmann could work and keep an eye on the shop. The central aisle opened ahead of his workbench, giving him the perfect view if anyone should approach. Neither was expecting interference; Friday afternoons were notoriously quiet at Bergmann Central.

The back counter was outfitted like a standard workbench, though Bergmann’s tools were sorted in various cans, arranged in no discernible order. A pair of fold-down magnification lenses hid underneath a pile of schematics. Eve riffled through the cans, looking for a smaller screwdriver. She had never worked in a shop so disheveled and crammed and cluttered, but it made sense to her as she got to work.

“That winder is protective of you.”

Ambrose meant well—and he wasn’t wrong about the danger Eve faced being in town by herself. “He’s just worried about me.”

“He’s worried about the State’s possession.”

“Not Ambrose.” Personal difficulties aside, Eve knew who Ambrose was at his core; his allegiance to the State was secondary to his allegiance to his friends. And while the state of their friendship had fallen into a gray area, the aftermath of the riot had cleared away some of the soot.

“You seem sure.”

“Positive.”

They worked silently, each of them clicking parts together. The sound reminded Eve of Joints, and Bergmann’s focused presence of Jasper. It was nice to once again be in a workshop with someone who felt like a partner.

It felt like only a few minutes had passed before Ambrose arrived, but at his word, he'd given her twenty minutes. "Machinist, the carriage is waiting for us."

Eve was in the middle of aligning a cam. "Hold on, hold on. I've almost got this."

"I could hire a driver," Bergmann offered. "Someone trustworthy."

"We were here on State business, the carriage being part of it." An extended silence drew Eve's attention from the cam. Ambrose and Bergmann stared at each other, Bergmann's mouth softened around the edges, like he'd just woken from a nap.

She pushed the glasses up on her head and leaned back on the stool to Ambrose. "They're already outside?"

"They are. Waiting on us, but I've already made an excuse."

"Thanks for this." Eve set the screwdriver and glasses back on Bergmann's counter, hopping down off the stool. "It was very informative."

"Light bulbs?" Ambrose reminded her.

Bergmann held up a finger, ducked behind the counter, and pulled out a box of six hairpin bulbs, exactly the ones Eve had previously ordered. "I'll charge it to your account." He was already pulling out his ledger, ready to ink in a profit.

Ambrose held up his arm, offering to escort her. He didn't say anything, staring straight ahead. She took it, lightly holding on to his arm as they walked through the store.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she said, keeping her voice low. "I know it's inadvisable."

"The Statesman trusts me to make decisions about your safety." He glanced over his shoulder. "Bergmann seems safe."

"He is. We share similar views."

"Very similar. I've noticed."

She suddenly remembered her accusation of Ambrose's sympathy. Now she was the one fully sympathizing with the locals. Mekasaba, she'd called Abbrücken. Was there a clearer way to express her allegiance?

"I refer to machines, of course," she said.

Ambrose's inscrutable profile dipped in a nod. "Of course." But there was something in his tone that made Eve think Ambrose knew more than he was saying, that he'd learned something from her past betrayal and had an inkling of exactly what she'd been doing with Bergmann. She almost wanted to confess to him, to lay her plans bare and show him just how much she'd changed, but this wasn't just her freedom on the line any more. There was so much more at stake and confessing would make him an accomplice at best, an informant at worst. No matter what happened, she didn't want her actions to affect her winders. Ainsley and Ambrose had both been good to her.

The driver, a State soldier since the riot (gray State horses, too), gave a quick wave and then looked around, clearly nervous about stopping in town. Luggage was strapped in behind him, two trunks for the passengers that must have arrived on the train that afternoon. One of the trunks was particularly large with brass buckles and blue leather, exactly like Bristed's.

Ambrose opened the door and then helped Eve in the carriage, putting on extra airs. When she entered the carriage she realized why—Statesman Langford and Maryam were settled on one bench, arm in arm together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Somehow Eve restrained herself until they'd made it back to the estate, but once she and Maryam were alone in one of the parlors, she wrapped her arms around Maryam in a warm hug.

"I didn't realize you were coming!"

"I didn't have time to send a letter—the trip was sprung on me as well." She stepped back, holding Eve's hands and swinging them a bit. "I think it's a surprise for my brother, too. You haven't seen him today, have you?"

It had been nearly a week since she'd laid eyes on Bristed; the night of the protest, she thought.

"That's all right. I was hoping to see him before Langford did. Prepare him." She held up her hand, a wedding ring circling her finger. "I couldn't make an excuse to delay it. Langford is certain that marrying me will rein in my brother."

Eve made a face—she might not see the statesmen in the same light Maryam did, but she could sympathize with her predicament. "I'm sorry. And sad. I was looking forward to attending your wedding." She led Maryam to the couch, remembering that she still hadn't bought a wedding gift.

"It was very small. Julian will be upset that he wasn't able to attend. We had thought he'd give me away."

"I doubt your brother will ever give you away. Not really."

Maryam's lips curled, pleased and proud. "It's rather unlikely. Especially now."

"Especially now—look how useful you are as a married woman." Eve took a seat on the couch folding in the edges of her skirt to make room for Maryam.

Maryam straightened her head and shoulders, standing even taller than she already was. “A wife’s duty is to influence her husband.” She held the regal pose a moment and then sighed, dropping to the couch and meeting Eve’s lazy posture. Eve immediately felt the need to change the subject.

“Did you hear about the riot?”

“Yes, however I’m certain I heard an abridged version. You were in the thick of it?”

Eve held up her elbow, the scrapes reduced to thin lines that only hinted at the small injury Eve had received. “This is minor, and doesn’t at all capture the tenor of the evening.” Beyond the window a clump of soldiers sauntered past, off-duty rifles slung over their arms. “Nine people were killed.”

“Rioters?”

“Demiri miners.”

Maryam’s eyebrow lifted, but she didn’t say anything against Eve’s correction.

“I heard one of the winders was hurt. Was that your friend?”

“Yes. Oh. You mean—no, the other one, but he’s also my friend. Ainsley.”

“Right, Ambrose is—”

“Yes, Ambrose is.” She fought off a blush, uncomfortable with the way Maryam linked Ambrose to her. “And Ainsley’s recovering.”

There was a gap in the conversation in which the rest of Eve’s recent activities itched at her. She slid the gear pendant on its ribbon and fought the urge to pace. She wanted to tell Maryam what she was doing, confide her daring action, that she was finally doing something that wasn’t for herself, but Maryam was wife to Langford and sister to Bristed. Just as she couldn’t put Ambrose in that position, it would be equally unfair to expect Maryam to keep her secret.

“That’s a nice necklace you have.”

Eve laughed suddenly, relieved to have another topic of conversation (and for once grateful for her habit of fidgeting). “Isn’t it? It’s been a nice reminder of Aufziehbürg. The good things about Aufziehbürg.”

Maryam reached over to squeeze Eve’s hand. “Even the bad things have good memories attached to them, don’t they?”

Eve shrugged. Remembering her life in Aufziehbürg was complicated, especially when she considered her friendship with Ambrose and how it had soured. Now, though, it had turned into something else.

“Ambrose is friendlier. Maybe not yet a friend again. It’s hard to tell.”

“Isn’t it always?”

She hoped Maryam didn’t read anything further into Eve’s weak smile.

#

Eve assumed Bergmann completed the clockwork air compressor because she found another set of schematics slid beneath her door Sunday morning, just after breakfast. Eve stepped directly on them so the breeze from shutting the door wouldn’t ruffle them. Bergmann hadn’t told her what she’d be working on next, but she was aware the second arm, a drill arm, had more clockwork components to operate the drill head. She turned the paper one way, then the other, but couldn’t figure out how this component fit with any of the devices Bergmann had shown her.

Eve cleared away the basin and pitcher from her vanity and anchored the schematics with files and pith wood. The majority of the components looked like standard parts, so she rooted through her trunk, finding gears and springs and other bits slipped into the corners. She unrolled her toolkit on the bed and pulled out several screwdrivers and wrenches to get to work.

She'd assembled and tested the first gear train when a sharp knock sounded at her door. She jumped, her screwdriver slipping from her hand.

"Machinist Traugott? I thought you might want to accompany me to visit Winder Ainsley."

Ambrose. She looked around the room, wondering what he might see if he opened the door. A curious exploration? Another deception? Which he'd be right about, frankly. One day, she promised, she wouldn't hide her inventions from him.

"I'd like that," she called through the door. "Give me just a moment."

She tucked the gear train between her sheets, ready for Berna to collect and take to Bergmann. She hammocked her skirt and swept in the anchors and gears, piling them in the middle of her toolkit before rolling it up and tossing it on top of her cold-weather dresses, still packed in her trunk. She closed the lid, remembered the schematics, and slid them under her wardrobe where they'd be difficult to retrieve but well hidden.

She threw open the door, breathless with color high in her cheeks. The murmur of conversation in the hallway suddenly peaked with laughter, startling Eve back and into the doorknob.

"Oh. Keller."

The grin slowly faded from Keller's face. "Traugott."

"Sorry, I'm holding you up." Ambrose side-stepped, allowing Keller passage to her room two doors down. "Good luck with installing that cylinder. I'm looking forward to seeing the finished piece."

Keller dipped her head before hurrying past him and down the hall. Berna came from the opposite end of the hallway, from the servants' stairs, a pile of sheets in her arms. Eve stiffened, the pile of sheets a signpost for her treason.

“She’s building a music box,” Ambrose said.

“I know,” Eve said distractedly. Would anyone notice the slight bulge a gear train must make in a stack of sheets? Over Ambrose’s shoulder Berna stopped in front of Keller, holding out the sheets, here to take care of Keller’s room, not Eve’s. Eve heard what Ambrose had said then, the incongruity clicking in her brain. “How do you know about the music box?”

“Oh, we got to talking. I helped her hire a woodworker to make a jewelry box. It’s a gift for her mother.”

“Well, that’s a clever gift.”

“Keller’s a clever machinist.”

Eve pointed down the hall to the stairs to the third floor. “Ainsley?”

“He’s also a clever machinist,” Ambrose deadpanned. Eve rolled her eyes at his silly joke, and looped her arm through his elbow. The reflexive action struck her as odd after a few steps and she carefully extracted her arm.

“Do you know how he’s doing?”

“Almost healed enough to return to duty. He’s bothered Dr. Izzet about it daily—possibly hourly, if he’s convinced someone to follow her around the city. I think the doctor is teaching him a lesson in patience, now.” They went upstairs to the next floor, where a suite had been transformed into an infirmary, all furniture removed, save for three camp beds and side tables. An undercurrent of antiseptic mingled with the piney scent from the open window.

Ainsley jumped from his bed as soon as they walked through the door. “You’ve come to save me!” The soldier at the far end stirred, but lay back again. His head was bound with a bandage, and Eve wasn’t sure if the injury was old or new.

Ambrose held up his hands and chuckled, getting Ainsley to sit back down. “I hardly think that a visit constitutes saving you.”

“You’re saving me from another hand of gin rummy.” He squeezed Eve’s hand. “How are you doing? I heard about what you did for the prisoners.”

The image of the crowded, vile cell filled Eve’s mind. It had come to her at night in the last week, usually in circumstances in which Eve was one of the prisoners. She shook it off before it could take hold, concentrating on Ainsley in front of her. “I thought the time I spent helping my mother should be put to use.”

Ambrose leaned against the bedpost. “Have you been cleared to get back to work?”

Ainsley leaned his head back, sighing exaggeratedly. “The doc is being cagey. ‘Maybe tomorrow,’ she says. ‘Maybe tomorrow.’ Meanwhile I feel fine.” He thumped his injured leg and then winced.

“I’m sure you’ll be back soon,” Eve said. Ambrose touched her shoulder and then exited, looking right, then proceeding left, further down the hall.

“I hope. I heard you’re nearly done upgrading the clockmen.”

“Mmhmm, very nearly. They’re talking about going into the mines next week. I’m of course insisting on some tests before then—to make sure everything is safe.” And to ensure that Bergmann had as much time as possible to finish his machines.

“I’d like to be there for that. See your work in action.”

“You’ve already seen it in action.” Eve smiled, pleased with his pride, forgetting for a moment how badly she’d betrayed his faith by betraying the State.

“This is different.” It was, for so many reasons, but not all of them Ainsley knew.

Ambrose returned with a chair and offered it to Eve. He sat on the bed next to Ainsley and gestured for Eve to bring the side table closer. “I thought we’d make this visit a little friendlier.” He pulled a deck of cards from his pocket. “What do you say, gin rummy?”

Ainsley nearly throttled him.

#

As they descended the stairs, still in good spirits from their visit with Ainsley, Bristed approached, his shoulders stiffer than usual. “Winder Engle, how nice to see you.”

“Statesman.”

“I wonder if I could have a private word. With Miss Traugott.” He said her name softly and suspicion stung her spine.

Ambrose bowed slightly. “Of course. I’ll see you at dinner.” He continued downstairs, but glanced back, confusion wrinkling his face. Eve wasn’t the only one who’d noticed something off.

Bristed held his hand out. “The library, perhaps?”

The library was on the opposite wing from the bedrooms, and one of the few rooms that hadn’t been commandeered for another purpose despite its large floor space and vaulted ceilings. Eve wasn’t certain if that was because the State actually respected books or if they hadn’t thought of a reason to strip it and fill it with their own propaganda.

Bristed led her away from the door, but not to the pair of overstuffed chairs by the window that seemed the obvious destination for a private word. He instead pulled her into a curved alcove lined with whitewashed built-in bookcases and a ladder for fetching books from the upper shelves.

He gripped one of the ladder rungs, leaning in, his voice low. “This morning Keller apprehended the maid stealing a clockwork device from your room.”

“Stealing?” Fear threatened to show on her face. Losing Berna would be bad enough, but things could get much worse for both Eve and Bergmann if the State investigated. “I assume she’s been dismissed.”

“Her dismissal isn’t my concern.”

Eve felt her heartbeat kick her chest; Bristed would see through her in an instant. She tried to keep steady. “What, what was she trying to steal?” Her voice was thin as lace. She fought to remain relaxed, trying to sound natural. “One of my father’s clockwork toys?”

He nearly rolled his eyes, his shoulders rounding as he ducked his head. “It was something you’d been tinkering with—some partly constructed device. Keller found it and some schematics.”

The air left her in a violent rush, her head filling and swaying. Bristed grabbed her arm, keeping her upright, and he said something else that Eve didn’t catch.

“Eve. What will they know by looking at the schematics? How much of Bergmann’s machine will Keller be able to figure out?”

She met his eyes, his question rattling in her mind. The more shocking part rose to the surface: Bristed knew she’d been working with Bergmann. “How long have you known?”

The sound in his throat was akin to a growl. “This isn’t the time, Eve. Langford is coming to arrest you. I need to salvage this, if I can. What can she figure out?”

Eve shook her head, trying to focus on his question and not on what it meant that Bristed had known she’d committed treason and hadn’t turned her in. “Nothing. I couldn’t figure it out from the drawings. I’ve only built components. He has the rest in—”

Bristed held up his hand. “Shh, don’t tell me. It’s easier to feign ignorance when I don’t actually know everything.”

“You always know everything!”

A smile flickered on Bristed's face before he reassembled his composure with a brush of his hair.

"How long have you known?" she repeated, her voice hard as steel. Bristed had groomed her for this design position, and now it seemed he'd groomed her for treason. She was tired of being manipulated, and that anger was a welcome respite from her fear.

He stepped back and adjusted his cuffs. "The soldiers will be looking for you soon. I hope you'll listen to me when I recommend that you not trust Langford."

"Bristed."

He exhaled, head rolling in an exasperated gesture. "You're about to be interrogated. I believe the less you know about my involvement the better it is for you, for me, and for Maryam."

Eve stiffened once again—her actions had involved Maryam without her even realizing it.

"Go back to your room. Pretend you know nothing. We'll see how far that can get us."

The door to the library suddenly slammed open, a bang reverberating off the arched ceiling and tiled floor. Footsteps followed, and Bristed seized her arm, his fingers biting into her skin.

"She's here," he said, a bored quality in his voice.

Her heart hammered, she'd been preparing for this, hadn't she? She'd known where her actions might lead. Bristed, apparently, was on her side—he had connections, power. She would survive being arrested, survive everyone knowing what she'd done.

"Struggle," Bristed whispered. "You hate me, remember?"

She glared at him. Oh, that was a thing she had not forgotten. She twisted against his grip. "Unhand me!"

Soldiers appeared a moment later, the captain of the guard and two others with batons drawn. Langford followed them, brow pinched, his cane ticking steadily against the tile.

“I told you I’d have no trouble locating her.” Bristed pushed her forward, forcing her to stumble. He still hadn’t released her. “I hope you haven’t disrupted the entire estate for such a trivial matter.”

“Treason is hardly trivial.” Langford shook his head, a frown sagging his features. “My dear, I pray this isn’t true.” He leaned more heavily on his cane than ever, as if the thought of her treason weighed him down.

Eve widened her eyes and looked between the statesmen. She didn’t trust her unsteady voice, but she pulled sharply, slipping from Bristed’s grip, and regained some confidence. “What’s going on?” Her plea must have struck the right note because Langford turned away, eyes downcast.

“Evidence has been brought against you. That’s what I was trying to explain.” Bristed smoothly provided an alibi for himself—for once she envied his oiliness.

“Brought against me? For treason?” She laid into the disbelief and then turned to Langford. “Statesman, please, you know me. Does that sound like something I would do?”

He hesitated and then raised his face in a heavy-handed telegraph of regret. “Unfortunately it is my duty to pursue the matter, regardless of my feelings.” With both hands folded over the head of his cane, he nodded deeply.

The captain of the guard stepped forward and Eve instinctively stepped back and into Bristed. The worry he’d demonstrated in private was wiped clean, replaced by a sneer.

“I vouched for you,” he said. He pushed her forward, and before she could protest further the captain took her roughly by the arm, announcing that she was being taken into the custody of the State and placed her under arrest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

They took her upstairs—all the way up—and turned the opposite direction from the infirmary. Eve wasn't aware they'd been using the area for anything and it showed. The small bedroom they forced her into had the musty scent of disuse. Unlike the infirmary, one small tree-shaded window opened to the front of the house, offering inadequate light, leaving the room dim for mid-afternoon.

She stumbled into the four-poster bed frame, the drop cloth slipping to one side, revealing a misshapen feather bed that had seen better days. The room had the mismatched look of a storage closet—three side tables shoved in one after another next to the bed, a table lamp, and two other lumps of draped furniture.

“Have a seat, Miss Traugott.” Langford looked around, and then gestured her to the bed, waiting until she was seated before uncovering and pulling over a chair with a fanned back and bright orange, overstuffed upholstery. He turned on the lamp, the bulbous glass shade throwing a sickly green glow, and, leaning heavily on his cane, lowered himself into the chair.

“Let's see what I can do to get you out of this mess. What do you know about all this?”

The soldier blocking the door, a rifle across his chest, eyed her up and down—she hadn't felt a scrutiny so severe since she first met Bristed. Eve's eyes flicked between the soldier's rifle and Langford's cane. Langford had done well by Eve previously—he'd even reacted quite mildly when Bristed revealed her clockman arm; a questionable, if not treason-worthy action—but she didn't think he'd be able to overlook the truth in this situation. She wasn't entirely clear on whether Bristed was overlooking the truth, encouraging it, or running away from an explosion. Perhaps Bristed's advice—to feign ignorance and innocence—was the best advice in this instance.

“I’m still not entirely sure what’s happening. I’ve been accused of treason?”

“And most unfortunately from a reliable source.”

Was that source Keller, who would do nearly anything to gain the favor of a statesman, or Berna, who knew of Eve’s involvement? She wiped her hand on her skirt, trying to temper her worried face with confusion. If Keller was the informant, Eve thought she could talk her way through the schematics. Assuming Langford would listen to her. “What evidence has been brought against me?”

Langford swayed his cane side to side. “I’m afraid I can’t divulge that. I would, if I could, of course. I’m here to get your side of things only.”

“Then how am I to prove my innocence if I’m not aware of the accusations?”

“Well,” he said, tapping his lower lip, “you could tell me about your relationship with the local machinist. Bergmann, is that right?”

She took a slow breath. Everyone knew who Bergmann was—at least everyone remotely involved in the field of mechanics. Langford’s casualness and care suddenly appeared more calculated and dangerous than Bristed’s obvious oiliness. She might not like Bristed, but he’d never tried to court her loyalty, nor had he pretended to be anything other than a statesman. She didn’t feel as bad about lying to Langford any more.

She rested a hand on the edge of the spiraling bedpost, fitting the groove to her nail. “Not well. We’ve spoken several times, most often about the peacock in Bergmann Central. It’s an amazing device, have you seen it?”

“I haven’t had the pleasure. So you visit Bergmann often?”

Eve slid her nail down the spiral. “I’m not sure I’d say ‘often.’”

“I’ve heard it’s your favorite stop in your off hours.”

“It’s the best machine shop in the city. I’m a machinist.” She tilted her head. “Does that mean Bergmann is involved in this accusation of treason?”

Langford cleared his throat and sat back. “What do you know about the schematics recovered in your room?”

“Someone searched my room?”

He remained silent, so Eve answered his question, inventing a lie on the spot, just as she had when she’d told Ambrose about her progress with the wind-up hand warmer. She never would have thought that gaffe would prepare her for the life of a spy. “I’ve been working on some tools for the clockmen. Digging and the like.”

Langford rubbed his beard, pulling it to a point on his chin. “The schematics don’t appear to be in your handwriting.”

Eve tightened her grip on the post and swallowed. “Sometimes I disguise my handwriting. It’s a game. Ask Maryam.” She fought the flush of that bold lie, but she felt certain Maryam would corroborate a small detail like that.

“That’s an odd game.”

She wrapped her fingers around the bedpost, following the spiraled grooves. “Machinists are quite odd. And I’m a woman, so I’m odder than most.”

In the emerald glow of the lamp, the smile tugging his lips looked more smug than comforting. “I don’t believe that for a moment. You’re clever. Very clever.” His saccharine voice slipped, and something of the man Maryam disliked shone through.

He leaned forward again, spitting his next questions rapid fire: “Have you discussed the schematics with anyone?”

“No.”

“Not even with Statesman Bristed?”

“No.”

“Your winder friends? I’ve heard you’re close.”

Eve felt herself go ashen, her fear spilling out along with her words. “Ambrose and Ainsley have nothing to do with this.”

Langford’s smile curled like a snake—he’d gotten her.

“With my schematics,” she tried to clarify. “I don’t share incomplete designs with winders—no matter if they’re friendly.”

“Yes. We’ll see.” Langford stood, nodded to the soldier and stepped lightly to the door, cane barely touching the floor.

Eve stood, following behind, hands clenching her skirt. “Mr. Langford, I assure you the schematics are mine alone.”

The soldier stepped in front of her, rifle across his chest again. He backed over the threshold, keeping Eve inside her makeshift cell.

“See that she’s fed regularly,” Langford instructed, “but don’t let anyone else visit her without my authority.”

“Mr. Langford!” The door slammed in her face.

#

She paced the room, rattling the window and discovering it was nailed shut. She pounded the glass in frustration before turning her attention to the resources in her room. Under the largest drop cloth, a wardrobe of light-colored birch and scrolling finials was filled with brocade dresses. A set of drawers at the bottom hid gloves, undergarments, and jewelry—brooches and necklaces

mostly, a few pieces of brass or silver with mother of pearl filling in the scales of a fish or the petals of a tulip. Not much in the way of aid.

Her mind's eyes kept imagining Ambrose manhandled and dragged away the same way she was, only he didn't deserve that treatment. He'd be confused until Langford questioned him about his relationship to Eve, and then everything would crystalize—Eve had betrayed him again. She tore at her hair, frustrated with herself. In trying to protect him, she'd implicated him yet again.

She catalogued every drawer, searched under the bed, even tapped the walls for weak spots, all the while worrying over Ambrose—avoiding contemplation of her own fate—and feeling less and less productive. Finally, she dropped to the bed, her stomach roiling with worry, and she curled in on herself, tucked in a helpless ball. Without realizing it she fell into an exhausted sleep.

Near midnight, she woke suddenly when the door creaked open, the guarded glow of a gas lamp peeking from a metal shade. She kicked her legs, tangled in the drop cloth she'd used for a blanket, and inhaled dust. Through her coughs she heard a quiet voice.

"And how might you be, Traugott?" Bristed shut the door behind him. "Familiarizing yourself with your new accommodations?"

She coughed one last time, somehow not surprised by his visit. "I'd like to re-familiarize myself with my old accommodations. What's going on?" She tugged the drop cloth away with one last pull and pushed herself to the edge of the bed and his lamplight.

Bristed lowered himself into the chair Langford had commanded several hours ago, setting his lamp on the side table. Perhaps it was the shadows, but he looked as tired as she felt.

"Well, your expert resistance to interrogation has garnered matching accommodations for Winder Engle. Excellent work."

Eve gripped the edge of the mattress. "He doesn't know anything!"

“It appears your friend Ambrose is more clever than you give him credit for being.”

“But he *doesn't* know anything. He's seen me with Bergmann, is all.”

“Which is all the eyewitness Langford needs to strengthen the evidence against you.”

“Damn.”

Bristed's eyebrow lifted, but he continued in his trademark measured voice, “Langford has also arranged for a demonstration tomorrow to finalize the State's claim of the repository. If it's successful, everything's finished.” The shadows exaggerated his frown. “No matter how much time you bought Bergmann, it hasn't been enough.”

Eve massaged her temple, thinking things through. “Bergmann's close. If someone can get a message to him—”

“Who? Langford's watching me as closely as he is you. We're lucky the guard on duty owes me a favor.”

“What about Maryam?”

Bristed hunched forward, his hand covering his mouth. Eve couldn't read his expression at all in the low light. “We can try.”

Eve leaned forward, fingers shifting to pinch the bridge of her nose. She hadn't wanted to get anyone else involved and her first suggestion brought Maryam right in the middle of it.

“I don't suppose the clockmen will be deficient?”

A mirthless laugh stuttered with her exhale. She'd been so busy buying time, she hadn't considered what would happen if Keller still finished first. Eve had planned to insist on testing the clockmen—running them through their paces to be certain they wouldn't fail in the mine, but Keller would go by whatever schedule the statesmen assigned. She'd probably try to beat their schedule in order to impress them.

“I should have just sabotaged the clockmen.”

“Now that’s treasonous.”

Eve leveled a glare at his deadpan joke. Everything was more complicated now that she knew Bristed was involved. “Why Abbrücken? Why do you even care?” As she asked, it was suddenly obvious. Bristed and Maryam’s mother was Demiri; they were from the South; Abbrücken wasn’t just a place they’d visited, it must be their hometown. She should have put it together sooner. Just another thing her clockwork ambitions had prevented her from seeing.

Bristed’s face shifted out of the light entirely. “Abbrücken is useful—strategically and commercially. Crippling their economy is shortsighted and greedy, a myopic move from a statesman concerned only with his own power.”

Eve hooked her heels on the edge of the bed frame, leaning forward. “So it has nothing to do with split loyalties.”

“I am loyal to the State.” Bristed stood, hands clasped behind his back as he slowly paced to the wardrobe, the Statesman’s mask clearly back in place. “Abbrücken’s independence strengthens the State. We have access to iron and a port—how advantageous.”

Eve shook her head—of course Bristed would be pragmatic and defensive about something that could be seen as a vulnerability. Still, she’d seen what Maryam saw in her brother—the statesman was just a veneer, even if it was a thick veneer.

Someone tapped lightly on the door and Bristed checked his pocket watch. “Time for me to go.”

She leaned forward, chest tightening. He was going to leave her here, a prisoner still.

When he crossed the room and reached for the gas lamp, Eve grabbed his arm. From this distance, imperfect flecks of yellow were visible in his wide brown eyes.

“Langford is going to have me convicted, isn’t he?” Eve whispered. She’d been avoiding that question, trying not to think on it too much.

Bristed’s eyes shifted to the door and then back to Eve’s face. Regret pushed his mask away, and for once Bristed seemed to care. “I see no other way around it.”

Eve swallowed; she’d guessed as much. The evidence against her was mounting—and there would be more if Keller considered Eve’s recent clumsiness, or if the State searched Bergmann’s shop.

“Will they sentence me to death?” For all her talk of accepting the consequences of her treason, she never thought she’d be caught and forced to face those consequences.

He plucked her fingers from his arm, setting her hand in her lap. “Probably.” That word was too simple and too casual for what it meant. “I can argue leniency, life imprisonment perhaps.”

Life imprisonment—that was marginally more hopeful than death.

Bristed picked up the gas lamp, her eyes following him, for once not wanting Bristed to leave. Before he opened the door, he paused and met Eve’s gaze. Neither of them had anything to say.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The morning shadow of the house obscured the movement on the front lawn, but from her window Eve could make out Ainsley, Keller, and two winders she didn't recognize loading carts with the six clockman models Eve had helped adapt. The gray horses hitched to each vehicle stamped the ground, shaking loose limbs in the chill sea-dampened air. The two statesmen stood off to one side, guarded conversation passing between them. Maryam, an apparition in a light green dress that stood out like a lantern, crossed the dewy lawn and kissed the cheek of each statesman. She stayed until the whole procession drove off, veering north toward the mines. Maryam returned to the house—Bristed must not have been able to enlist her to warn Bergmann.

The day passed slowly for Eve, who studied the circling hand of her father's pocket watch, marking off the hour they must have started the demonstration. A train rumbled along the railroad. A quiet, muffled sound. Eve didn't hear a whistle.

#

The silence broke all at once, footsteps thundering through the house, echoing up the staircase from the floors below. A bell clanged in the yard.

"All hands! Collapse in the mine! All hands!"

Eve sucked in a breath—Bristed and Ainsley, Keller and Langford.

She rushed to the window—the lawn was awash with activity, soldiers crossing the lawn, filling a cart with shovels and pickaxes: a rescue mission. They expected survivors.

She sighed, relieved. They were alive.

Footsteps clomped just outside her door and then away from it, the cries for all hands still coming.

“What’s going on?” she yelled through the door.

No answer came.

She pounded the door, but still heard nothing—had her guard abandoned his post? The view out the window had grown more chaotic—men running everywhere, carts and carriages nearly colliding—surely no one would notice if she slipped away. Better to be wanted than to be hanged. She might even have enough time to free Ambrose, too. She shouted one more time, rattled the doorknob, and then examined the lock. She’d never learned to pick a lock, but the faceplate was attached with screws and she was confident she could disassemble anything held together with screws.

Her nails weren’t strong enough to turn the screw, but then she remembered the gear pendant she wore around her neck. She tugged it off, the gear tooth fitting into the screwhead perfectly.

She was just starting her task when the doorknob rattled. She lifted her hands away, expecting a guard’s gruff demand to back away.

“Eve?”

“Maryam?” She put her hand against the door, relieved to hear a familiar voice.

“Julian’s trapped in the mine.”

“He’s all right?”

“They could hear survivors on the opposite side of the collapse.” Her voice caught; Eve could only imagine how she felt.

“Do you know anything more?”

“Not yet. I came for you first.” The doorknob rattled again. “Damn, the key to my room won’t work in this door.”

“I’ve got that covered.” Eve started working on the screws again.

“Actually, I had a secondary course of action.” A screwdriver rolled underneath the door.

Eve gasped and seized it. “You are a wonder!” She worked the screws much faster now. “I’ll be out of here before any of the soldiers are back, thanks to you.”

“No.” Maryam drew out the word, like she was delivering bad news. “I came to enlist you to talk Bergmann into using his equipment to save my brother.”

“You know about Bergmann?” Eve pressed her free hand against the door—she should have trusted Bristed would deliver the message somehow. “Did you tell him about the test today?”

“He’s aware, but in the middle of final assembly. He could probably use your help.”

Eve shook her head, a chuckle slipping out—and she’d thought herself resourceful. “You’ve thought of everything.” Her hand stalled, the second screw nearly loose enough to remove the faceplate. “Except that I don’t want to be hanged.”

“I don’t want you hanged either, but Julian needs your help now. Your friend, too! Winder Ainsley!”

Eve shut her eyes, considering how many failed attempts the State military would make before enlisting the assistance of professionals when Eve and Maryam would immediately go straight to the most qualified rescuers. Could she really live with herself if she left Ainsley—or even any of the others—to the guesswork of the overconfident State?

Eve pulled out both screws and pocketed them along with her necklace. “Do you know anything about Ambrose? Where he is?”

“Your winder? He’s just a few doors down, actually.”

“Perfect. We’re collecting him before we go.” Eve pulled off the doorknob and plate and manually unlocked the door, letting it swing open.

“We’re going together? To Bergmann’s?” Maryam’s eyebrow raised; Eve’s toolkit held close to her body.

“For you, of course.”

Maryam passed Eve her toolkit. “Hurry. I’m going to prepare Langford’s brougham. It’s probably the one vehicle the soldiers haven’t commandeered yet.”

“We’ll meet you at the carriage house.”

Eve hurried down the hall, knocking on doors, calling Ambrose’s name until she got a response. She knocked on the door again, two smart raps. “Hello there, sir. How’d you like to get out of there?”

“Are we running away together?”

“From imprisonment and hanging? Yes. But first we’re going to save Ainsley and the others trapped in the mine.”

There was barely a pause for breath before Ambrose said, “I’m in.”

She rolled her screwdriver under the door.

Ambrose laughed. “Naturally, you have tools.” His shadow moved underneath the door and the screwdriver scratched over the plate before finding purchase. “Do you know what happened in the mine?”

“Not the full story. I only just got out myself. We’re going to Bergmann’s to get his mining equipment.” She looked over her shoulder, not expecting any guards, but the infirmary was just down the hall. Maybe an injured soldier would still try to stop them.

“That makes sense. I’m sure he’d loan the equipment to his partner.”

Eve spun back to the door. “Partner? How do you know I was making mining tools with Bergmann?”

“Because I saw it with my own two eyes.”

A screw bounced on the floor and rolled under the door. Eve reflexively picked it up and pocketed it. “But you didn’t tell Langford?”

“Of course I didn’t. Weren’t you the one accusing me of being sympathetic?”

Eve placed her hand against the door, unable to express her gratitude in any verbal way. Her heart swelled in her throat, stinging her eyes.

The other screw dropped and there were rattles and thunks as the doorknob loosened, dislodged, and hit the floor. When the door swung open, Ambrose stood on the other side, tapping the handle of the screwdriver into his open palm.

“Ah. You’re not the only one clever with tools.”

Eve swallowed a laugh and returned the screwdriver to her toolkit. “Follow me.” They took the backstairs to avoid the soldiers, Eve nearly tripping in her rush. Ambrose was there to steady her, and together they dashed out the servants’ entrance and across the yard to meet Maryam.

#

The square was crowded and loud as they headed into downtown. It looked like the other mines had shut down early, silent grimy faces mixing among the colored tapestry of Abbrücken shoppers. The brougham made such slow progress around the square that Eve considered jumping out. Finally they pulled up in front of the shop, and Ambrose jumped from the driver’s seat to help Maryam from the carriage.

Eve led the way into Bergmann Central, past the casual shoppers who were gossiping more than shopping. She brushed her hand against the peacock’s enclosure as she passed it. It squawked, a mechanical click and the belch of a deflating balloon.

The backroom was as chaotic as ever, but its towering shelves were more vacant, as if they'd been picked over, various devices plucked from their resting places, absent holes in the mélange. Bergmann's schematics draped the worktable, some hanging off the edge. Sea-salted humidity clung in the air.

"Did we miss him?" Eve turned back to Ambrose, circling her finger to indicate the shelves. "Soldiers didn't confiscate any of his machines, did they? Most of the mining equipment is gone."

"How could you tell?" Ambrose turned in the cramped space, head craning to take in the tops of the shelves. He met Eve's level glare. "Um, not to my knowledge."

The untrained eye might not be able to tell the ways in which the room had been stripped, but the majority of Bergmann's tools were missing, in addition to his inventions.

"I thought I heard voices." Bergmann side-stepped a stack of boxes, and then stopped to look Eve up and down. "Well. I'd heard you'd been arrested."

"I was," Eve said. "I am still, technically, I suppose." She glanced to Maryam who for the first time appeared anxious, sweat glistening on her brow.

Bergmann walked past Eve, studying his shelves; he appeared distracted, or maybe just focused. "Can I get a loan of your arms? Winder?"

Ambrose followed him, glancing back to Eve with a confused crinkle in his brow. "We're here because of the mine collapse."

"I figured as such. Isn't it nice when all our agendas finally align?" Bergmann pulled a small boxy device from one shelf and a glass cylinder from another, passing both to Ambrose before searching for something else.

"Are you going there?"

“It seems the only logical course of action.” His eyes glistened. “And the perfect opportunity to prove that my mining devices are superior. I heard the mayor’s trapped in the tunnel.”

“As is my brother.” A muscle tic in Maryam’s forehead exposed her worry, but she was otherwise as collected and confident as ever.

“My apologies, Miss Vengas.” He bowed, remembering his manners. “You know I respect the Statesman.” He extracted several other components, piling them into Ambrose’s arms, and then, from underneath his worktable, he unearthed the drill arm, the mate to the claw-like digging arm Eve had previously seen.

Bergmann squeezed past the women, leading the way through the back door to a cart already piled with devices. A rectangular contraption with fitted leather straps sat at the front of the cart, nearest the driver; the clawed arm Eve had seen previously braced one side, and Bergmann added the new arm next to it. There were other components Eve hadn’t seen before—hoses and more metal cylinders that must have been other air compressors—a precarious stack of metal helmets and cloth masks. Not knowing what it was supposed to look like, Eve wasn’t certain whether his equipment was complete.

“There’re still some final connections to make before we leave. Would you care to help?” Bergmann held his hand out to Eve.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Eve grabbed his hand, braced her foot, and hauled herself into the cart. She unrolled her toolkit, pulling out screwdrivers.

“Ah, you’ve come prepared.” He handed her a cylinder and a box device, giving minimal instruction on how to connect them before she got to work.

“What can we do?” Maryam stood with her hands on her hips.

Bergmann was stymied for only a moment before dropping two cloth masks and lengths of hose down to Maryam and Ambrose. “Hoses connect to the masks.” He twisted his fists together, mimicking the connection.

Eve peeked over the edge of the cart to see a metal ring embedded in each mask where the cloth was a thinner material. “What’s that for?”

“Breathing. Still needs some refinement, but I figure we can test it out.” He winked at her and then got to work making final connections on the drill arm. They fell into a rhythm, Bergmann passing over work, even Maryam taking up a wrench, following Bergmann’s instructions until every piece was attached by screws, hoses, or hinges. Laid in the bed of the cart, Eve recognized the mechanical bones of a man.

Bergmann scratched his neck. “I wanted to make a harness, so the apparatus could take more of its own weight, but.”

But he didn’t have enough time, Eve interpreted. Bones made of steel or other iron alloys wouldn’t be easy to lift. “Who’s going to be operating the equipment?”

“I talked some miners into meeting us.”

“You convinced them to help the State?” Ambrose climbed into the back of the cart with Eve, legs dangling over the edge.

“I convinced them with money.” Bergmann helped Maryam up next to the driver, sliding in beside her. “Don’t worry, we’ll fetch your brother from that mine. Julian has been a good friend to me.”

Eve’s eyes widened. “You’re friends with Bristed?”

Bergmann shrugged one shoulder, half-turning. “Doesn’t he know every machinist in Aufziehbürg?”

“Seems like,” she muttered.

The driver clicked the reins and the cart lurched forward. Their pace was slow, the horses dragging heavy mining equipment plus five passengers. Ambrose dealt with his anxiety through a twitchy leg. Eve took his hand, squeezing hard, and they shared a look.

“Ainsley will be fine.”

Ambrose grunted in response, neither of them quite believing her words, but continued holding her hand until they arrived at the mine.

The area was already crawling with State military who were hauling load after load of rock from the mine’s mouth. More soldiers entered with picks and shovels. Everyone was covered in dust and dirt, uniform jackets abandoned in a pile.

Two brawny men, their muscles hewn from rock, approached the newcomers’ cart. Up close, their ageless faces were similarly squared, framed by strong brows and jaws. Their short-cropped brown hair was dusted gray that could have been from the mine, age, or the difficulty of their lives. The main difference between them was their height—one was as tall as a clockman, the other nearly as short as Eve. Bergmann introduced them as brothers, Alp and Joseph.

Eve ducked her head, recognizing Joseph from the shop and the embarrassing encounter when she’d avoided him for being a miner.

“Ah, Machinist,” he greeted her, clearly remembering the encounter, although he didn’t say anything more about it.

Bergmann started pulling devices closer to the cart edge. “Unload, but be careful not to drop anything. Set up just behind the cart here.”

Ambrose and Eve assisted, while Maryam went to talk to the soldiers to find out if they had any more information. By the time Maryam returned a few minutes later, the brothers, standing side by side, were ringed with machines.

“They’ve had some success moving the rock, but another slide filled most of the hole they’d made. Prior to the last cave-in, everyone was responsive.” Her voice wavered at the end, and Eve came to put an arm around her.

“They’re not shoring it up right.” Alp stooped so Bergmann could tie the mask around his neck. A pair of goggles already crowned his head. “They wouldn’t listen to us.”

“Staties know what they’re doing,” Joseph said with a laugh.

Maryam drew her shoulders back, eyes hardening. “They obviously don’t know what they’re doing, but sneering at their ineptitude won’t help save anyone.”

Eve exchanged a quick look with Ambrose and then led Maryam a few steps away.

“We’re working on it,” she whispered. “We’ll get your brother out. I promise.”

Maryam paced a few steps farther, rubbing her waist, elbows at sharp angles. “I know, I know. I just keep thinking that he’s already gone and my life’s already over.”

“No, it’s not over. You’re resourceful. If the worst has happened, you’ll survive.”

“Yes,” she said, her voice as fragile as a wafer. “Potentially without my brother but still married to Langford.”

“That won’t be the case.” Eve didn’t add that if one of them was dead, it was likely they both were.

“Eve, come help with these last connections.”

While Eve and Maryam talked, the men had suited up both of the miners. Alp, the bigger of the two, carried the rectangular contraption on his back—a metal backpack that extended up over

his shoulders. The cylindrical air compressor Eve had built clipped to his hip, connected to the rest of the device via a hose. Pneumatic hoses ran from the backpack to the clawed arm devouring his left arm, and to the drill arm Joseph wore on his right. Each arm lashed hold of its man by a shoulder harness that belted around the chest.

The right arm had a drill head twice the size of a fist, protruding beyond Joseph's hand. Part of it was operated by a clockwork crank and key, but another pneumatic tube extended into and through it to deliver a targeted gush of air. Both men's faces were covered by oversized goggles and breathing masks, the hoses from the masks snaking to an engine still on the cart. Joseph had a headlamp attached to his helmet, though it wasn't switched on just yet.

Eve knew some people were disturbed by the clockmen, but they'd never seen Alp and Joseph like this, half-clockmen themselves.

"Normally the suit would be worn by just one man, but I didn't have time to build a second suit, and I understand mining isn't the kind of thing you want to do alone."

Joseph tugged down his mask, grinning a broken smile. "Usually not in pairs either."

The brothers led the way to the mine, walking in tandem, appearing less encumbered by their metal prosthetics than they must have been. Eve, Ambrose, and Bergmann followed, carrying coiled lengths of hose and a small clockwork engine with a bellows puffed out on one side. The soldiers parted as the entourage marched into the mine, possibly recognizing Maryam or Ambrose, but probably frightened of the half-mechanical miners and their glinting, sharp arms.

Electric lights hung along the path, rubber-coated wires stretched between each yellow halo, illuminating support beams and rough wooden walls. Soldiers slumped in the light, out of breath and slick with sweat.

"Get outside if you're taking a break," Joseph growled.

Some of the soldiers scurried away from the hulking clawed arm, others presumably merely followed his suggestion.

When the outside light no longer filtered through, Joseph flicked a toggle on the box at his side, igniting his headlamp. The box hummed softly, a battery similar to Keller's converting the miner's rough movements to electricity. As much as Eve had learned from Keller, she was glad Bergmann already had a battery in progress. Even with the designs, Eve still didn't understand it.

"We could do with another few of those," Ambrose said.

Bergmann caught up to Joseph, twisting one of the couplings for the hose and tugging it secure. "If it keeps working and Mayor Sunter likes it, you'll see hundreds of them."

Maryam's hand found Eve's, giving a little squeeze. Her hand was unusually warm in the cool, dank mine. Eve had expected the mine to be dustier and drier, but it almost felt like they'd been surrounded by water.

"Almost there," Eve guessed. Considering how far they'd walked, it couldn't be too much more.

Shouts echoed long before they found the soldiers and the collapse, sound bouncing oddly so that when Eve thought they must still be a ways off, they were suddenly upon the scene. The ceiling had broken in a flood of rock, earth pouring out and filling the mouth of the tunnel. Lumber that must have been supporting the walls was cracked and mixed in amid the debris.

The soldiers worked from either side, chipping away flecks of rock that others scooped into wheelbarrows.

Joseph grunted, his voice muffled through the mask, "They're like to kill us all."

"Hey," Alp shouted. "Shore up the ceiling first. The roof's going to keep pouring in if you don't take care of it first."

The soldiers looked between them a moment, confused, until Ambrose stepped up and clapped his hands together. “You heard the man. Heft that lumber and get it in place!” He turned back to Eve. “Hammer?”

Eve unrolled her toolkit and found two. “You take the left side, I’ve got the right.”

Maneuvering the beams took some effort—none of the soldiers were familiar with bracing tunnels—but Alp and Joseph were able to direct them with some ease. Ambrose climbed a ladder to finish off the left side, while a soldier boosted Eve so she could hammer in the right.

Eve dusted off her hands when she finished, stepping back to admire the work. “I don’t do much carpentry.”

“Maybe you should take it up.” Ambrose handed the hammer back to her.

“Now it’s our turn.” Alp wound a dial on his forearm, the inner gears clicking away. Bergmann came behind and wound the device attached at Alp’s hip.

“Remember, the pneumatic burst needs to be used cautiously. The compressor has to have time to refuel after each discharge.”

Joseph similarly prepared his arm and air compressor and then they lumbered in, soldiers turning and shuffling away from the steel appendages.

“Let some professionals handle this, eh?” Joseph laughed and then applied his drill to the wall of rock, focusing dead center. The drill churned the wall, devouring everything its tip touched. Chips fell around his feet, flinging off his right shoulder. Eve pulled Maryam back, away from the line of fire.

“Get more lumber ready to brace the hole. Mekasabans punching through!” Alp’s claw arm bit into the dirt, swallowing it and then dumping it out the elbow. A pneumatic blast gasped in spurts every other punch, loosening rock and spitting it behind Alp.

Against Bergmann's machines the rock was as soft as butter. He'd taken every aspect of mining life and seen to it, properly attuning the machines to work with the miners, making mining easier and faster. Eve didn't need any further demonstration to know that in a fair fight Bergmann would easily win the mining rights for the Mekasaba Miners' Association.

The brothers concentrated their machines on creating an alcove big enough for two men to stand in (still, Alp was hunched over). Once they could both step inside, they stopped their drills and stepped back, commanding the soldiers to brace the hole with lumber. Supports were slid into place and secured with nails and braces.

Alp pulled his mask down around his neck. "Note for you Bergmann: this pack's heavier than our drunk pa. You might see about lightening it up before strapping it to any lad."

"It's doing the job, though, isn't it?"

"Supremely!" Alp's teeth shone whiter against his dirt-darkened skin.

"How much longer do you think it will take?" Maryam stared at the hole like she might take a pickaxe to it if the brothers didn't resume their work soon.

"It's hard to tell how deep it goes. It's faster with Bergmann's devices, I'll grant you that. Another hour, I'd guess." Alp looked to his brother for his assessment.

"About that, I'd think." Joseph scratched at his brow, his left arm striped with blood where flecks of stone had zinged off his skin.

Eve took a few steps away while they talked. In about an hour they'd recover the statesmen and Eve would rather be elsewhere once that occurred. Ambrose wasn't likely to be hanged for his small part in Eve's scheme, and there were enough soldier witnesses who could proclaim him as one of the heroes of this event. Eve was still guilty of treason, and squeezed between the statesmen as

she was, she doubted Langford would balance her heroism against the accusations. She should leave while she still had a chance.

She waited until Alp and Joseph had begun drilling again, the grinding noise of rock enough to cover the sound of her retreating footsteps. She made it just beyond the first turn when one of the mining arms screeched and clanked. She knew that sound, the sound of clockwork locking up—something had jammed.

She had a long run to get to the surface, and even when she was there, she wasn't sure where she'd go. How often did ships leave from the port? Could she hide in the woods until then? Abbrücken was big, but not so big that she thought she'd be able to hide for long.

The clockwork screeched again and one of the men cursed. There was other yelling, but she couldn't make out the words in all the echoes until she heard Maryam shout, "Eve!"

Eve came running at once.

"You have to keep working until the clockwork runs down!" Bergmann shouted.

Alp hovered at the edge of the hole, his clawed arm crunching and spitting air. "Is he all right?"

"No, he's not all right," Joseph snapped. "But dig the damn hole." His left hand pressed against his eye, blood gushing down his face, cracked goggles hanging around his neck.

Bergmann unscrewed the outer covering of Joseph's mechanical arm, Ambrose helping to support the weight. Maryam pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, face greening around the edges. Eve ducked under the hose connecting the brothers and pushed past Maryam, standing directly in front of Joseph. Blood covered the right half of his face, obscuring where it was coming from.

"Is it your eye?"

"It better not be."

Eve turned his goggles inside out, checking for blood on the interior, but the glass was intact, just cracked. Eve took the handkerchief from Maryam and pressed his brow, dark red blood weeping from a jagged gash. She applied pressure. “Hold this in place.” His bloodied hand pressed against the cloth and her hand slid free. “I need water, a bandage—needle and thread, if you can find it.”

Maryam looked confused for a moment.

“Ask the soldiers,” Eve said gently. “Your brother’s behind that wall no matter what. The faster I patch up Joseph, the faster we’ll get to Julian.”

Maryam glanced back one more time, but went on her way, haste in her step.

Eve peered at the gash again, pressing the cloth harder and rolling her eyes when Joseph winced. “You’ll live. Head wounds are just messy. Keep your eye closed for now.” She turned to Bergmann. “What happened?”

“A rock or something slipped into a crack and jammed up the gearworks. I thought I had it sealed tight!” He fished the rock out and threw it on the ground in disgust.

Eve rose on her tiptoes to look into the clockwork. “Will it still work?”

“Theoretically. But Joseph is going to have to listen this time to not damage the machine any further.” Bergmann made a slight adjustment and then started sealing up the arm again.

“You think a miner’s going to be able to hear the difference between the grind of a drill and the grind of clockwork? No offense,” she added, patting the metal part of Joseph’s arm.

“Wonderful bedside manner,” he muttered, but Eve ignored it.

Joseph wasn’t much taller than her, and the drill device and headlamp weren’t as heavy as the other equipment Bergmann had invented. Eve flicked her hands, making a quick decision before she talked herself out of it.

“Off with the arm. You’re done.” She unbuckled the shoulder harness that held the arm in place. Ambrose lurched, taking all of the weight of the arm.

“What are you doing?”

“The drill is usable with caution. But if we’re not careful, we’ll wreck the whole device. It takes a trained ear, and, well, I have that ear.”

“You?” Ambrose held the arm while Eve eased Joseph’s limb out of it. He jerked his chin at Joseph. “How are you going along with this?”

“Right now I can’t see out of one eye. Now she says my ears aren’t good enough either. I’m amenable to listening to the woman.”

“She’ll fit in the space.” Bergmann jerked his chin to where Alp was still digging—it was a tight fit for the two brothers. Bergmann wouldn’t fit with Alp. Ambrose didn’t have the ear.

Ambrose glowered, but he helped Eve slip her arm into the device and then he tightened the strap around her much smaller shoulder and chest. Bergmann unclipped Joseph’s belt and slung it around Eve’s waist, cinching it tight like a corset. The battery pulled it down, but it stayed above her hips. Eve snagged the goggles off Bergmann’s head before trading helmets with Joseph and tying on his breathing mask. She felt like she was playing dress up in her mother’s clothes.

“How’s the weight? Are you sure you can carry it?”

Eve’s mouth slid in a frown as she gave Ambrose a goggled stare. “It’s no heavier than a clockman arm. I’ve got it.” Still she listed to the side when she took a step. Ambrose caught her without a word and helped her up into the hole. She cranked the clockwork drill, short duration, and applied the spinning head to the divot Joseph had already made. Rock chips flew at her and she flinched and ducked before realizing the majority of her face was completely covered by the helmet that hung low on her forehead, the goggles, and the mask that covered her nose, mouth, and most

of her cheeks. She pushed at the wall, giving a blast of pneumatic air that shook loose dirt. She wound the key to refill the compressed air, then wound the key for another short duration of the drill—she was starting to get the timing.

She worked until Alp tapped her shoulder, let the clockwork die down, and then they stopped for a break. Sweat dripped down her back, tickling as it fell. She tugged the breathing mask down while they sat and gulped water from a bucket, her body dwarfed by her metal right arm.

Maryam had come back with a bandage and inexpertly dressed Joseph's wound. It still probably needed stitches, but pressure was slowing the bleeding. Eve nodded her approval before getting back to work.

On their third shift, Eve heard the gears in the drill starting to go and she pulled back, sending a burst of air through the device, hoping to knock loose whatever debris had caught. The air struck the wall and instead of the rock crumbling in front of her, it shot forward. They were through.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Once the wall was cleared away, Alp shouted back down the tunnel for more braces. He and Eve stumbled off the ledge, their mechanical arms hot and limp. Now that she'd finished the task, the arm weighed heavily on Eve's shoulder, hunching her posture forward. The battery on her hip slid forward with the movement.

"We need to brace here too," Alp said to Eve, pointing up at the rocks, treating her like one of his crew. She smiled, proud that she'd earned his respect.

While Alp shouted for more braces, Eve took her first steps into the mine, shining her headlamp around the dim area to take a headcount. One of the clockmen's headlamps still functioned, but he faced the wrong way, illuminating the mine wall ahead, pocked with holes the clockmen must have made before the ceiling collapsed behind them. A thin layer of dust specked the air, covering everyone, most of whom were tucked against the walls, far enough away from the collapsed ceiling to avoid any of the debris kicked up during their rescue. She didn't know the soldiers or other winders by name, but they blinked in the direct shine of Eve's headlamp.

"Is this everyone? No one was caught in the slide?"

"Eve?" Something shuffled off to her left and she swung the headlamp around, catching Ainsley getting to his feet. "Did one of the clockmen devour you?"

Eve grinned, glad to see Ainsley unhurt. "It's Bergmann's mining equipment. Pretty clever design." She swung the headlamp slowly, looking for either of the statesmen or Mayor Sunter.

"Clever indeed." Bristed stepped directly into her beam of light, shielding his eyes as he approached. Other figures started shifting and getting to their feet. "You are, as always, delightfully unexpected." Behind Bristed, Keller frowned, but she said nothing.

Rocks skittered to the side of Bristed as Langford got to his feet. “You’re supposed to be confined.”

Eve shifted her shoulder back, drawing the drill across her chest. “Yes, that’s the most important thing to discuss right now.”

Two soldiers came through the tunnel carrying a wooden beam and lanterns. Two more beams followed, and then Ambrose, who embraced Ainsley, slapping his back before starting his work to shore up the tunnel. Ainsley pitched in, immediately falling into place beside his partner.

Langford’s fingers spidered the wall, keeping him upright without his cane. He snapped his fingers at the soldiers, directing them to Eve. “Apprehend her. She’s a fugitive.”

“Apprehend her? She’s tethered to a miner and wearing half her weight in a metal appendage. You suspect she’s planning to run?” For once Eve appreciated the sarcasm dripping from Bristed’s voice. The soldiers appeared confused, looking between each other, and not moving toward Eve.

Another figure shuffled forward, a light-colored sash over a dress. “Personally, I’d like to express my gratitude, Miss. To you, this miner here, and especially to Mr. Bergmann.”

“He’s just on the other side of the wall,” Eve said with a clumsy curtsy. The last time she’d laid eyes on Mayor Sunter, at the State ball so many months ago, Sunter had taken Nordlund styles. Now she wore a traditional Demiri dress, wrapped in reds and golds, and a scarf covered most of her hair.

Sunter studied Eve’s metal arm, mouth parted and bright pink against her dusted skin. “May I?” After Eve nodded, Sunter gingerly touched the drill head. “It’s not as hot as I would have expected.”

“It’s easy to use, too. This one proves that well enough.” Alp clapped Eve’s back hard enough that she shook on her feet. “No training, and she picked it right up!”

“Did she really?” Mayor Sunter pinched the point of her chin, eyeing the arm speculatively.

“We’re all set.” Ambrose pocketed his hammer and held his arm out to Keller. “Could I help you out through the tunnel, Machinist Keller?”

She reached out, and then hesitated. “What about the clockmen?”

The clockmen in question were shadowed forms, man-shaped stalagmites. Three of them guarded the back wall, two were on their sides, tangled together, likely knocked over during the collapse, the last missing its head. Even headless, the clockmen would survive.

“For now, they stay here.” The physical exertion had caught up with Eve, blunting her tone.

“We’ll widen the opening after everyone is safely out,” Alp said. “Standard procedure during a collapse.”

Keller’s frown deepened, and she kept looking over her shoulder as she exited through the tunnel. Despite Eve’s words, she understood the pain of abandoning your work.

Mayor Sunter was next, taking Ainsley’s arm to step up into the tunnel. Langford followed, supported by one of his winders. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten your treason,” he muttered to Eve as he shuffled past her. Soldiers followed behind him, leaving Alp, Eve, and Bristed still in the mine.

“Well played, Miss Traugott.”

“Saving your life isn’t a play.”

“From you? No. But it’s still well handled.” He winced as he stepped up into the tunnel, and Eve finally noticed the damp cuff of his trousers. She’d have to check them all over, unless the soldiers above ground had roused Dr. Izzet.

Eve and Alp followed behind, emerging from the tunnel last. Maryam had Bristed in a tight hug, the siblings for once showing the deep affection they obviously held for each other. From Maryam's relieved face, head resting on Bristed's shoulder, it was easier for Eve to imagine Bristed as a man worthy of some sympathy.

Langford, Keller, and most of the other rescued soldiers and officials were already moving along the corridor to the surface. Langford glanced back, and Eve could imagine his frustration that she wasn't in cuffs—or possibly that Maryam had stayed behind to reunite with Bristed rather than escort him to safety. As if he didn't understand Maryam's priorities.

Ambrose released Eve from the harness, while Bergmann carefully removed the drill arm. Her shoulder felt like it was drifting, the muscles in her arm gone to jelly. She made a fist easily, but her hand felt far away.

"The mayor sounded impressed," Bergmann whispered.

"Well done." Eve might have mustered more enthusiasm in her congratulations, but exhaustion had her in its grip.

Ambrose put his arm around her waist, guiding her toward the exit. She leaned against him, needing the support more than she would have thought. The others shuffled ahead of them, silhouettes parading through the mine, soft conversations happening all around.

"Langford is going to have you arrested once you step out of the mine."

"I expect so."

"Do you want me to cause a distraction?" Ambrose looked straight ahead. Dirt smeared his cheek and nose. Eve could only imagine how stained her face must be.

He pulled her closer after she didn't answer for a while.

"No distraction," she said.

“Bristed can’t protect you this time.”

She made a noise like a verbal shrug, grateful when Ambrose didn’t say anything further. She’d made her decision when she chose to stay; she wanted to enjoy the moments before the consequences caught up to her.

Outside, Dr. Izzet had arrived and was performing cursory evaluations, issuing water and rest to most of the survivors, although a few, like Bristed, had bruises, cuts, and scrapes that needed attention. Eve’s face and arm were flecked with scratches and she felt dead on her feet, grateful Ambrose still hadn’t left her side. Dr. Izzet had some concerns about Eve’s arm, and after a consultation with Bristed claimed it would require a more extensive examination, one that should be conducted with some privacy. Eve and Ambrose accompanied Dr. Izzet back into town, leaving the mine and the others behind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Her arm in a sling to aid in its recuperation, Eve stayed in Dr. Izzet's spare room. The first day, immediately following the rescue, Eve stayed in bed, but the following days Eve stumbled downstairs in borrowed Demiri dresses to share meals with Dr. Izzet, before and after she returned from her care-taking rounds. The doctor was an amazing cook, making Eve traditional Demiri dishes with fish, cumin, and pepper. If Eve had more time, she'd be interested in learning some of the recipes, but she figured her convalescence was the only thing standing between her and a trial in Aufzieburg. She could almost forget about it when she and Dr. Izzet opened the backdoor wide and ate from a table in the kitchen, and Dr. Izzet—Leila, she insisted Eve call her—shared stories of growing up in Mekasaba and Kamberstadt, while the sea air wafted in with the dying afternoon light and buoys tolled the passage of time, just as reliable as a clock.

“When you're feeling better, I'll take you to walk on the beach. We used to collect shells and make jewelry from them—Maryam has the best eye for the right kind of shells.”

Eve nodded in a deeper understanding of things. “You know Maryam and Julian.” Bristed's first name was awkward in her mouth, but she felt it was more appropriate in this setting.

“I was disappointed when she and her mother followed him to Aufzieburg, but Julian was always at his best when he had someone to take care of.”

Eve bit back her scoff, well aware that the Bristed she knew wasn't the one who had existed in this place. She fiddled with the gear pendant at her throat and wondered what had happened to Maryam and Bristed after the mine. Ambrose had stayed overnight immediately after the rescue, sleeping fitfully in a parlor chair, he'd confessed, but he had returned to the Reza Estate in the

morning. Eve thought he'd come back to visit within a day or two, but it had been four with no word. She could only assume he'd been arrested again.

"Is Bristed why you took care of the soldiers after the protest?"

Leila sipped her coffee, a drink Eve found she couldn't take without enough cream to turn it khaki. "That and the fact that I'm a doctor. Some Mekasabans would have left them. It's hard to forget how long soldiers have been in our city."

"The State is not exactly known for its kindness."

"Some Nordlunders might say that about Demirtan."

"I'm not sure I would."

The clock tower above Bergmann Central rang out for six o'clock, pausing any conversation. Eve kept expecting State soldiers to march up, pound on the door, and arrest her. Each day that passed without word made her more tense, rather than less. It was only a matter of time before this peace ended and the State came to collect its property—machinist or prisoner, the State owned her.

The next morning, when the sun approached its zenith and Leila was out making her rounds, Eve took her tea on the front porch, relishing the salty sea air. The port wasn't visible from the house—there were too many buildings in between—but the steady salted breeze caressed the side street, another reminder that for the moment Eve was free. Colorful laundry lines swayed above her like seaweed, giving her the distinct impression that as long as she was in Abbrücken, she was living in another world.

"Hey!" She turned at the shout, expecting it to be some neighbor calling up the street for someone to hold the door or get a newspaper or any of the other shouted favors she'd overheard from her bedroom. She was delightfully surprised when Ambrose waved to her, Maryam on his arm.

“I wasn’t expecting any visitors. Come in, sit.” Eve opened the wrought iron gate that enclosed the porch, holding it open as they entered. The gold embroidery at the cuff and hem of her borrowed burgundy dress flashed in the light. “Would you like refreshments?” The tea service was prepared for one, and there were only two seats, but Eve would accommodate her friends as best she could.

“We can’t stay long,” Maryam confessed. Nevertheless, she took the seat next to Eve and removed her gloves, dyed to match the sky blue of her Nordlunder dress. “We’re expected to meet the State delegation at City Hall very soon.”

“And we need time for you to purchase that fabric.” Ambrose leaned against the fence, hands loosely gripping the top rail behind him.

Maryam waved her hand. “I can always tell my husband I didn’t like the price. He won’t be suspicious of my frugality.” She reached across the table to clutch Eve’s good hand. “How are you?”

“I’m all right.” Maryam gave her a look, eyes sliding to the sling still supporting Eve’s arm after five days. “The sling’s a precaution, mostly. The drill arm was a little too heavy for me to lift for that long.”

Maryam’s brow arched. “Someone should have installed a weight-balance on you.”

Eve shrugged her good shoulder, blushing a bit. “What did I miss?” She turned to Ambrose. “I didn’t expect to see you moving about freely.”

“It helps when the statesman threatening to detain you owes you his life.” His bright smile sobered. “I was fined—significantly—and I won’t be working on the railroad for some time—but I won’t be seeing the inside of a jail cell either.”

“That’s good, at least.” She licked her lips, meeting his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was my choice.”

She nodded, accepting the new ground they'd forged between them. "How's Ainsley?"

"Fine," Maryam said. "There were some minor injuries—stitches, bumped heads, and the like—but everyone who was trapped is fine, thanks to you."

Eve smiled tightly, she didn't feel much like the hero Maryam suggested she was. She still had treason hanging over her head. Even if Langford remembered he owed his life to Eve as well as Ambrose, she didn't expect him to be so lenient with her. She didn't think he could be, considering he was a statesman. His loyalties were far more narrow than Bristed's were.

"Do you know what Langford's planning to do with me?"

Maryam and Ambrose exchanged a glance that looked very much like they knew but didn't want to tell their friend. She could understand; delivering bad news was never easy.

"I'm surprised there's not a guard outside my door." She tried to make it sound off-hand, like a joke.

"There's been some confusion the past few days." Maryam twisted her gloves and pressed her lips together. "My brother seems to have misplaced you."

Eve looked between the two of them, utterly skeptical. Obviously they both knew where she was. Obviously Bristed knew she'd left the mine with Dr. Izzet. Obviously Bristed knew how to find Dr. Izzet.

"My husband has had other concerns—and a mild concussion—so he hasn't been able to personally launch an investigation, and Julian, well. He felt a search for a single female machinist might reveal a weakness." Maryam's eyes flicked to Ambrose and then back to Eve. "You know my brother."

The muscles in Eve's cheeks tightened—Bristed, once again playing his role, impeding progress that went against his agenda. And this time, protecting Eve seemed to be on his agenda. Perhaps—*perhaps*—she hadn't given him enough credit.

Ambrose checked his watch. "We should be getting on."

"Yes, we should." Maryam tugged on her gloves, slow to stand. "I'll do my best to visit again."

Eve nodded at what Maryam didn't say—they both knew that marrying Langford had restricted Maryam in many ways.

"I'll understand if you can't get away. I'm sure I'll see you again soon enough." Eve's throat tightened as she wondered if that was true. They'd obviously had a reason to come into town and invented an excuse to slip away. They would have come sooner if they'd been able.

"Absolutely." Maryam hugged Eve warmly. Eve touched her cheek to Maryam's shoulder, exhaling as she let go and stepped back.

"Eve." Ambrose took her hand and bowed, but when he straightened, Eve gave him a one-armed hug.

"Good luck," she whispered.

"Same to you." He patted her back as he pulled away. "I'd tell you not to get into any trouble. . . ." He grinned, his eyes crinkling at the corners just as they had when she first met him.

"I can't make too much trouble for a few more days." She lifted her slung elbow. "Using only my left hand slows me down considerably."

"Probably not enough, though." Ambrose held open the gate for Maryam and waved goodbye. They exchanged farewells once more, and Eve stood at the edge of the porch until they

reached the end of the block. Maryam looked back, the sun highlighting the golden tones in her face, and she waved again before turning the corner.

#

Eve went the next day without other visitors. She'd hoped Maryam would return, but by late afternoon on the second day, when two long train whistles sounded, still no one had come.

After a light knock on the door, Leila came into her room, a newspaper tucked under her arm. A folded over headline proclaimed BERGMANN MINING MACHINE MARVELS, the first few lines of the accompanying article announcing that an order had been placed for one hundred units to be immediately used by the Mekasaba Miners' Association in the Magtan Mine.

"Your shoulder looks much better," the doctor said after a brief examination. "You have full movement. No pain?"

"Not any more."

"Think you're ready to cut your own food?" Leila grinned.

"It's still pretty sore," Eve answered honestly. She glanced at Leila from the corner of her eye. "I'm definitely not ready to start cooking for myself."

Leila laughed, well aware of Eve's compliments regarding the food. "Then you're lucky I favor caution in times of uncertainty." She helped Eve remove the sling and folded it over, the smile on her face shrinking. "You have a visitor downstairs. Male. Very official looking."

Eve stiffened. "Is he from the State?"

"He is."

Eve glanced around the small room. It reminded her of the room at Greta's boarding house in regards to its size and utility, but the furniture was as nice as what she'd been provided at Bristed's; pale green and decorated with glass mosaic drawer pulls that caught the sunlight every

morning. She'd always known she was a guest, that the room was more temporary than any of the other places she'd lived in the last nine months, but as the days stretched and the sea breeze washed over her, she'd become lost in the sensation that time might stop and allow her to stay in her Abbrücken stasis.

She stood up and smoothed out her skirt, finding her legs were steadier than she might have expected. "Thank you for your hospitality." She left the room ahead of Leila, taking the stairs slowly. She gripped the railing with her good hand, wondering just how many soldiers Langford would have thought to bring.

"Miss Traugott, join me."

Eve turned at the foot of the stairs, looking down the short hall to the sitting room, surprised to see Bristed and not Langford or soldiers, or anyone else from the State. She turned to look up the stairs and saw Leila grinning at her. Leila gestured her forward with both hands.

Bristed rose and offered Eve a seat in the brightly decorated parlor before resuming his chair, nearest the door. A well-stuffed and welcoming couch was arranged across from him, a coffee table in between. The rich scent of freshly brewed coffee curled from the yellow and red ceramic pot. The natural light filtering in from the window was augmented by two mosaic table lamps.

She sat on the edge of the couch, still uncertain of what was going on.

"The Demiri look befits you."

Eve's gaze dropped to her skirt, another borrowed dress from Leila, this one teal and adorned with peacock feathers.

"Oh, relax, Miss Traugott. Do you really think I'd go to the trouble of luring you into a trap?"

"You might." She settled into her seat a little more. "Langford didn't send you?"

“Langford—all of the State envoy, actually—is on their way back to Aufziehburg, Miss Traugott.” He leaned forward and poured two cups of coffee, inhaling greedily.

Her breath caught—was that true? They’d left her behind?

“The deal Mayor Sunter struck was shrewd, requesting the withdrawal of the State military in exchange for a fair price for iron ore.” The corner of Bristed’s lips curled.

“Your idea,” she guessed, taking the cup of coffee when offered.

“I may have suggested it.”

“So, what does that mean?”

“It means that Abbrücken is free of State surveillance.” He took a sip of coffee, savoring it and returning the cup to its saucer before speaking again. “Incidentally, Bergmann confessed to me that managing three stores, plus fulfilling the order for the mining equipment has left him stretched thin.”

She tried to read between the lines, through to what Bristed wasn’t quite saying. “That’s interesting.”

“Isn’t it?” He gestured to the side where a trunk sat at the end of the coffee table. “I brought ‘round your trunk, with all of your belongings. Maryam was quite helpful in packing it. Ah, yes.” Bristed pulled an envelope from his breast pocket. “My sister apologizes that she couldn’t deliver this in person. Langford wouldn’t travel without her, you understand.”

The plan slowly crystallized for Eve—the warm envelope with Eve’s name scrawled across the front in Maryam’s cramped handwriting was the final piece snapping into place. Everyone else was leaving, and Eve was staying behind.

She put the letter in her lap, preferring to read it later, out of Bristed's sight, but she could imagine much of what it said. She swallowed the lump forming in her throat at the thought of never seeing Maryam, Ambrose, or Ainsley again.

"This is the best plan."

"The best plan that involves everyone I know leaving me to fend for myself."

Bristed cocked his head. "Should you like an apology? I saved you from the hangman, you helped me save Abbrücken, a choice, I might add, that you made freely. Would you take that back?"

No. Never. But he didn't have to be so smug about leaving her behind.

She would never forget her long winter in Aufziehbürg, or the steam and smoke that curled from its factories and hazed the sky. She'd embraced the city built on mechanical devices, but she also wasn't sure what it held for her any longer, other than people. The State Machinist Program was no more than an assembly line, and the machinists had been uninterested in her ideas. At the end of the summer even the Noble Exhibition would be closing. And she wanted to stay in Abbrücken, she wanted to work with Bergmann, she wanted to learn Demiri cooking and attend the Metallurgy Festival and walk on the beach. She'd just wanted the others to stay with her.

"You have an opportunity to make an excellent life for yourself here in Mekasaba. I envy you, but I also accept that I chose this path." She knew what he meant about Abbrücken—or Mekasaba, rather—she knew how torn he felt—but she'd never say any of that to Bristed.

Bristed stood, and Eve scrambled to her feet, feeling their conversation had been all too brief. "I'd say you're always welcome in Aufziehbürg, but, well." Bristed faced her, hands behind his back. "You may stay here until you can find your own lodgings. I've paid a reasonable sum to ensure your security for some time. Bergmann is expecting you this week, however I'm certain he'll work around your injury."

She shook her head, a sigh coming out instead of a thank you. "I'm not sure what to say."

"An expression of gratitude wouldn't be remiss." His lip curled, brow arched.

He really didn't need to be so smug. Still, she perhaps owed him this much, so she enunciated each word clearly: "Thank you."

He bowed, just a slight dip. "It has been a pleasure, Miss Traugott." He turned and walked away, his shoulders perpendicular and back straight. His jacket and trousers were perfectly tailored, a navy that nearly matched the uniforms of the State military. Bristed turned down the street, the sunset haloing his silhouette, a slight limp in his left leg.

Tighten the screws in the knee joint, Eve thought, and he'd have a normal gait again.

"Did Julian already leave?" Leila wiped her hands on a towel, coming in from the kitchen. "I thought he'd like to stay for dinner."

"He had to go. State business." Eve smiled to herself, thinking of what that really meant in regards to Bristed.

"Well, how'd you like to help in the kitchen? One-handed tasks only. You can operate the mechanical vegetable slicer." Leila playfully swatted the towel at Eve. "Come on."

Eve followed Leila into the kitchen, inhaling warm, spicy smells, and tied on the apron Leila offered. Bristed had always blended in well in Aufziehbürg, his attachments well concealed, as for how Eve blended with Demirtan, only time would tell.

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