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Magic Under Glass

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Extract

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The audience didn't understand a word we sang. They came to see our legs. As the posters said,

TROUSER GIRLS
FROM THE
EXOTIC LAND OF TASSIM!

We were billed just under the acrobats and the trained dogs.

Our voices joined in harmony while Saraki plucked the *tei-tan* and I pranced around the stage, my slippers whispering on the wooden floor. My hands curved and wove and paused, each gesture as familiar to me as the words I'd heard my mother sing while I was still in the cradle. I'd done six shows a week in this dank music hall since I'd stepped off the ship that carried me away from home three years ago.

Even before I finished the last plaintive note, a few men began

to whistle, and one shouted something I chose to ignore. Boys on the balcony shelled chestnuts, occasionally tossing one onto the people below. Clusters of boardinghouse girls in tatty straw hats giggled.

Through it all, my gaze was drawn to a tall hat in the crowd and the pair of dark eyes beneath it. A gentleman.

He stood in the back, his face still turned halfway to the door, like he had just slipped in for a glimpse and wouldn't stay long. Among all the dim faces that watched me, I kept my focus on him alone.

Saraki let the applause wane and then began to shake her pick across the *tei-tan*'s strings, bringing forth a tense melody.

The program held no surprises. "The Dragon Maiden's Revenge" had followed "Gathering Flowers for My Sister's Wedding" in every show we'd done this year. Still, I hoped I looked very noble as I pantomimed taking up the sword of the fallen king of dragons. Was the gentleman in the back—*my* gentleman—watching?

Yes. Looking right at me, in fact.

Fifteen years ago a railroad baron had married the most famous of trouser girls, Little Sadi, back when our song and dance had been the fashion, before they even called us "trouser girls." Saraki dreamed of following in her footsteps, charming some rich man into whisking her away. I scoffed when she spoke of it, but late at night I dreamed of things I scoffed at by the light of day.

When I finished my song, my gentleman lingered. The raucous crowd around him whooped, but he kept still, his eyes roving over our crude set: a painted village house on a piece of wood shorter than Saraki, and some dried flowers in mismatched vases.

Our last number, "The Fairest Blossom in a Maiden's Heart," had

been my mother's signature song. She had performed it at the king's coronation, as a new bride of seventeen, just my age now. The song was an ode to a lover who had died, never to be forgotten. I could never help but remember Mother, her haunting voice pitched high, her delicate gestures transforming her into the very embodiment of sorrow. Her performance had always left the audience in tears, but this audience was far from the one she had known, both in temperament and location. If her spirit still watched over me, I knew it must be ashamed.

As I took my bow, with Saraki's hand in mine, I sought one last glimpse of my gentleman, but he had gone.

We left the stage as Granden, master of ceremonies and owner of the troupe, announced the next act, "The Beautiful Eila and her Trained Dogs." Sometimes I stayed to watch, but tonight I was tired and wanted out of my costume. Saraki lingered in the wings, begging a cigarette off of Granden.

"Terrible habit for a lady," he said, giving her a smoke and a sly wink.

I retreated to the dressing room, where a dim lamp illuminated chairs strewn with costumes and floorboards warping beneath the leaking roof. Polly was tugging suspenders over her slender shoulders. I yanked pins from my hair and pulled down my pompadour. My hair tumbled down my back, glossy black and shining in the low light.

"How's the crowd tonight?" Polly asked.

"Standard. There was a gentleman in a top hat, but he left already."

"Must have been Jon Albrook himself, if you found him worth noting," Polly said, bringing up one of the most eligible young bachelors in all of Lorinar, or so the papers claimed.

I made a face. "Hardly. I don't care for Jon Albrook, with those huge eyebrows."

"No one's ever good enough for you." Polly laughed.

"Just because I don't flirt with stagehands! But this gentleman *was* handsome, I'll give him that, and he's got money, by the looks of him. He'd be worth a second glance."

Someone knocked on the door. Polly went to open it. I knew it wasn't Granden. He never knocked; he'd just shout at us to open up.

Polly flung the door open wide. "Is this your handsome gentleman, Nim?"

Heat prickled my cheeks as my "handsome gentleman" saw me gaping like a fool, my hair undone and sash spilled around my feet, and a girl in suspenders giving me a tactless introduction, at that! I shot a venomous look at Polly.

He took off his hat—I hoped he meant to be polite, but then I realized it wouldn't have passed through the doorway. "I beg pardon," he said, his accent as crisp as his appearance. Now I could see the whole of him, the traveler's cape, the silk necktie, the dove-gray spats, and most striking of all, the pointed cuffs of his jacket that marked him as not just a gentleman, but a sorcerer. His smooth cheeks and forehead suggested a younger man than I had first assumed, no more than twenty—but his eyes seemed as old as the onyx they resembled, and all the more striking for the pale face that framed them.

I quickly gathered my wits. "What is it you want, sir?"

"May I speak with you a moment?"

"Of course." I snatched up a few of the pins I had dropped, twisting my hair into a loose bun.

"It's a simple matter, really," he continued, stepping into the

room. Polly lingered by the door, obviously torn between curiosity and manners. "I'm looking for a singer."

"What sort of singer?" I mustn't trust him just because he was handsome. I knew how the men of Lorinar thought, what they wanted. To him, I was dark and foreign and crude.

His eyelids lowered slightly, and I felt he was carefully appraising me. "I'm looking for someone to accompany a musical automaton."

"An . . . an automaton, sir?"

He nodded. "A life-size automaton. It plays the piano, and I'd like to hire a singer as accompaniment. I think the contrast between living girl and lifelike machine would be striking."

"And you want *Nimira*?" Polly asked, voicing my own disbelief, although I would've much rather voiced it myself. In more delicate tones.

Granden stormed in just then, striking the door with his walking stick. "What's going on here? Who are you, sir? Bothering my girls? Polly, what the devil are you doing back here, you're almost up!"

"I am here on business," the man said. "Are you her employer?"

"I am indeed, sir!" Granden straightened himself and twisted the end of his mustache between two fingers. "Arnad Granden, at your service."

"My name is Hollin Parry. I'm inquiring after your singer."

Granden paused. He stepped toward me, putting a possessive arm around my shoulders. "Inquiring . . . after my Nimira? On what terms?"

"On terms the lady and I shall discuss, if she is willing." Mr. Parry reached inside an inner pocket of his jacket and handed me a card. "I am staying at the Royale, just across the river. You know it, I'm sure?"

Only as one of the finest hotels in the city of New Sweeling! I nodded, taking the card in a numb hand.

"I'll be there through tomorrow. Good evening to you." He bowed his head to me, stepped through the doorway, and replaced his hat.

"Good lord!" Granden shrieked, his voice a note higher than usual, and I prayed Mr. Parry couldn't hear him as he retreated. "Good lord! Hollin Parry, in the flesh—skulking around my girls!"

"You know him?"

"Well, you're not going with the likes of him," Granden continued. "Ridiculous."

"And why not? Who is he?" I tucked his calling card inside my corset.

"Don't you know what they say about him?"

I wished I did, so I wouldn't have to ask, but alas. "No."

"His wife died within a year of their wedding. They say her ghost now haunts his place. Makes you wonder what happened to her, eh?" Granden leaned close to me, his hot breath falling on my ear. When I tried to move away, he slammed his palm into the wall, blocking me. "You're not thinking of taking him up on his offer, are you?"

"I—I don't know. That's my business, not yours."

"I'll be damned."

"Get away from me. I want to change out of this stuff." I gave him a push to the door. You had to be firm with Granden. His eyes lingered on me as he left the room without a word.

I pulled out the calling card again. *A. Hollin Parry the Third,* it read, in fancy script. Of all the girls in the world, he'd chosen me. But to sing with an automaton? I'd seen a clockwork woman

displayed at the fair, who'd moved her hands and face and eyes and even said "Hello," in a squeaky voice that gave me chills.

Of course the best singers in Lorinar wouldn't do. Mr. Parry likely thought to pair novelty with novelty. An automaton, a trouser girl: we were two of a kind to him—one a machine and the other somewhat less than human. I shouldn't think too much of it.

Still, he had called me "the lady," and he had sounded quite serious. I paid no mind to Granden's silly tales of ghosts. He wanted only to frighten me. Maybe with Mr. Parry, I'd have a better wage and something to eat besides brown bread and vegetables with the flavor boiled out. It might not be the glory of Tiansher's royal stage, but it had to be a step up from this place.