

Short Story



# THE CLOCKWORK WITCH



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LIMITED EDITION



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While walking back to his lodgings, Titus Johannes's world turned purple. This was not unusual.

Sighing, he wiped the splash of potassium permanganate from his glasses and face, ignoring his attackers' laughter. He was fed up with the delight certain of his fellow students took in teasing him, yet he saw no simple way to avoid it.

He reassured himself that it didn't matter in the grand scheme of his life. For him, university served one purpose—a doctorate. This would allow him entry into the hallowed halls of the Council of Danaeus in New Londinium. The Council was the world's foremost scientific organisation, and he belonged there. Of this, he was certain.

The ancient buildings of his college beckoned, and he let the familiar warm glow of destiny wash over him. He was glad the proposal to change the town's name back to Oxonium failed to curry favour. His most fervent desire was to graduate from the University of *Oxford*, following the precedent of those he aspired to emulate. A degree from the University of *Oxonium* would not suffice.

A mere hundred yards stood between him and the sanctuary of his room. Inside, a fascinating project waited for him, the beginnings of what he hoped would be his greatest contribution to the scientific world. His binary calculating machine held the potential to be as groundbreaking as Paget's Featherlight metals and Ripley's Perpetual Steam Engine. It would revolutionise mathematics, and although he knew others with more experience worked on similar inventions, he rarely let such trivialities stand in his way.

“Evening, Johannes. Pleasant walk?”

Titus gritted his teeth. “N-no thanks to you and your l-lackeys, P-Pakenham.”

Rafe Pakenham was handsome, rich, of impeccable breeding, and well-liked. Titus was none of these. The only trait they shared was an unshakeable confidence in their own abilities—intelligence and inventiveness for Titus, worthiness and privilege for Rafe.

“S-s-s-s-sorry, T-T-T-Titus.”

“Oh, g-grow up.”

“You need to learn your place, young Johannes. Count yourself lucky to be rubbing shoulders with your superiors.”

To Titus's annoyance, Rafe had poked his aristocratic nose into the young inventor's background. Titus's father was an orphan from the back streets of Tshwane in Sudland. Of an entrepreneurial nature, the ten-year-old convinced one Jan Johannes, a visiting Flemish antiquities dealer, to hire him as a guide. Tourists needed help to navigate the sprawling and often dangerous city. Jan's wife, Hilda, took a liking to the charming boy, and the childless couple soon adopted him, naming him Tobias.

Now blessed with opportunities for education and advancement, Tobias became a successful engineer, married a Finnian woman, also an engineer, and moved to New Londinium, where Titus was born. Sadly, both parents died before Titus was twelve, so he spent his teenage years with his grandfather.

Though Titus took pride in his heritage, toplofty conservatives like Rafe did not. Yet he understood that while he alone could not change people's opinions of him, their views did not need to dampen his ambition.

“And you are lucky to rub shoulders with a genius.”

The moment the words fell from his mouth, Titus regretted it. Ambitious he was, but his father's advice lived in his memories. *Never let arrogance diminish the gifts so generously bestowed upon you.* Even now, he remembered the exact moment he first heard those words, down to the sunlight streaming through the window and the cinnamon fragrance of fresh-baked speculoos.

Rafe laughed. "We'll see. Anyway, there's a surprise for you in your room."

"S-spiders again? Or have you p-progressed to s-something a b-bit more inventive."

"Now, now. I'm the messenger this time, not the perpetrator. The porter asked me to tell you before he toddled off to tea."

Titus didn't know whether to believe him. Trepidation dogging his footsteps, he ascended the stairs to his room.

The door was ajar, so rather than barging in and falling prey to another prank, he eased his face through the opening. A woman, dressed entirely in black lace, stood by the window, staring into the quadrangle below. Next to her was a large object, half as tall as the lady herself, and hidden by a black velvet cover. His mouth dropped open in surprise.

Not knowing what else to do, he gave a genteel cough. The woman turned her head, and, although a veil concealed her features, he sensed her eyes boring into him. When she spoke in a strangely accented English, the hairs on his neck stood on end. He did not enjoy the sensation.

"You are Titus Johannes, are you not?"

"Y-yes."

"So why do you linger outside your own lodgings?"

"S-sorry. I never expected to f-find a w-woman in m-my room."

"Your friend didn't tell you I was here?"

“He is not m-my friend, and he m-merely m-mentioned there was a s-surprise.”

“And I am a surprise, no?”

He entered the room, suddenly outraged at the presumption of Pakenham letting this woman invade his privacy.

“Y-yes. And not a p-pleasant one. W-who are you?”

She walked towards him, offering her hand. Her bearing reminded him of an elderly woman, yet her voice belonged to someone younger.

“Forgive me. My name is Inna Sereda.”

He shook her hand, the touch of her gloved fingers oddly unpleasant.

“And w-why are you here?”

“Years ago, my grandmother procured the services of your grandfather to obtain a priceless artefact—a clockwork witch.

Unfortunately, the witch is broken. I would like you to repair it. I can pay handsomely.”

“W-why me? W-why not s-someone who s-specialises in t-toys?”

“Ah, the witch is no toy. She’s an automaton, a work of art. Some say she possesses magical properties.”

Inna tilted her head to one side, then the other. She reminded Titus of a bird eyeing a worm.

“She needs the skill of a genius. You used to fix automatons for your grandfather, did you not? And you need the money. You will not receive inheritance until after you graduate, yes?”

“How d-do you know s-so m-much about m-me?”

“As I said, I knew Jan Johannes. We kept in touch. Please, at least look at my witch.”

With a flourish, she pulled the velvet cover from the object, and opened a wooden travelling case to reveal a brass statuette in the

likeness of a woman. Something was terribly wrong though—the figure was chimeric, a random melding of age and youth.

Titus was powerless to restrain his curiosity. He lurched across the room, knelt by the statue, and peered at it. He noted where the various pieces intersected. Evidently, these had been designed to be moving parts.

“F-fascinating. An automaton, you s-said?”

“Yes. The witch transforms from old to young, and back again. However, the mechanism has stopped partway through. You can fix it, no?”

“L-leave it w-with m-me and I’ll w-work on it.”

“You will do it now, please.”

Something about her tone chilled Titus.

“It m-might t-take a while. P-perhaps you w-would—”

“I will wait here, thank you.”

Titus rose, ferreted around the clutter on his desktop for the right tools, and shoved them into his pockets. He often wished he was more organised, but there wasn’t much point. The moment he tidied up, another idea would inspire him, and things would mess themselves up again as he worked. When he was a famous scientist, he would hire someone to do the cleaning up for him. And find his missing microgoggles. For now, the task was all his.

“Everything all right, Mister Johannes?”

He pulled open every drawer and finally found the googles nestled inside the bottom one.

“Y-yes, thank you.”

He fitted the straps around his head as he spoke, careful to keep the enlarging lenses raised above his eyes.

He crossed back to the witch, positioned the microgoggle lenses over his own glasses, and recommenced his examination. The intersecting pieces loomed into view now, and he probed every inch of the witch, gaining a broad overview of her external workings. A fine join dissected the statuette perpendicularly, so he surmised the automaton opened up like a book to reveal her internal mechanism. But how to trigger the opening. Maybe underneath?

He felt his unwelcome guest fluttering behind him. Her birdlike movements irked him, and he shuddered.

“If you look under—”

Before she’d finished her sentence, he tipped the witch onto her front to reveal a panel at the bottom. Deftly, he unscrewed it to disclose a small lever. He looped his finger over this and pulled.

He heard Inna gasp as the witch sprang open. When he glanced up, she was clutching her breast, seemingly in pain.

“M-mercy. Are you all right, M-Miss S-Sereda?”

She nodded but sank into the closest available chair.

“Please be careful, Mister Johannes.”

Titus scowled in annoyance. What a tiresome woman! One moment she trusted him to fix her precious artefact, next she behaved like an overanxious mother hen. He returned his attention to the automaton and prodded deeper into its mechanical gut. Its complexity was extraordinary.

“Aha!”

“What is it?”

“A w-wheel out of alignment. It s-seems to have w-worked loose and m-moved d-during the automaton’s operation. And...” He leaned forward and probed further. “It’s s-snagged on a s-spring which is now b-broken.”

“You can replace it, yes?”

“Of course.”

He jumped up and opened the cabinet where he stored the parts he used for his personal experiments. A minimum of rummaging uncovered a box of small springs and, within minutes, he replaced the broken spring and realigned the wheel. With a grunt of satisfaction, he closed the hatch, listened for the sound of the lever clicking into its starting position, and replaced the panel. As he set the automaton upright, the cogs inside sprang into life, whirring and clicking, transforming from old to young.

Titus grinned. “There. Perfect.”

Inna ignored him, too busy clutching her belly, her breathing ragged and shallow.

“M-mercy! C-can I g-get you s-something, M-Miss S-Sereda?”

She shook her head and tore away her veil, gasping for breath. Titus’s jaw dropped. The woman’s face mirrored that of the clockwork witch, its features shifting back and forth like waves over sand. Old over young, young over old. Flowing, mutable, a travesty.

Finally, with a final loud whirr, the witch completed its transformation, and both the statuette and the woman were young and beautiful.

Titus frowned, his usual scientific composure shaken by the impossibility of what he witnessed.

“W-what just happened?”

She tapped the side of her nose. “Magic, my dear Mister Johannes.”

He snorted. “N-no s-such thing. Only s-science, unexplained.”

She pirouetted several times in place, and stopped, laughing. “Explain this!”

Try as he might, Titus could offer no rationale. Inna ceased her twirling and sidled up to him, peering from under half-closed eyelids.

“You like what you see, yes?”

Leaning down, she puckered her lips to kiss him. He scuttled backwards, repulsed, before leaping to his feet.

“S-s-sorry. That d-doesn’t interest m-me.”

“You prefer men?”

“I p-prefer n-no one.”

“Ah, now I understand. You are a virgin. Let me show you the pleasures of the flesh, Mister Johannes.”

“I m-must d-decline.”

“Don’t be silly. It is something every young man wants.”

Inna slid an arm around his waist and pressed her body against him. He wriggled out of her grasp and pushed her away.

“That’s quite enough, M-Miss S-Sereda!”

“Insolent little man. I offer you a gift and you reject me? Your grandfather was likewise a fool.”

“W-what has m-my g-grandfather to d-do w-with this?”

“He also refused my offer, ignored my needs. All I need is a little of your life essence to make you just like me.”

“W-which is w-what exactly?”

“Immortal.”

He snorted. “How?”

“The witch came with a spell. When I cast it, I became one with the witch. As long as she exists, so do I.”

Although he yearned to debunk the veracity of a spell and an automaton as precursors to immortality, he suspected such an argument would not convince this woman. The situation required a different strategy.

“W-why don’t you s-stay young perpetually?”

Inna shrugged. “The witch won’t let me. She reverts to her old self at a whim—in an hour, a day, a week. I cannot predict.”

“And w-what happens w-when she is old again?”

“I become my true age.”

Titus rubbed his chin. “P-perhaps there is g-good reason the w-witch reverts?”

“Who knows? I don’t.”

He shook his head.

“I d-don’t b-believe you. And if you w-want m-my life essence, you m-must tell me.”

She paused, her gaze predatory, and sniffed. “Very well. I can only make the trade—life essence for immortality—when young. Clearly, the creator enjoyed a twisted sense of humour, and so the witch spends most of her time as old.”

So much of her story rang false. Titus neither believed in magic nor the possibility of immortality. Both broke the laws of nature. But more importantly, rules restricting a machine’s function usually existed as safety measures. The inventor of this witch instigated the old-new dichotomy for a reason. If the machine had rules, then the machine must tend towards the old state to restrict something, possibly the consumption of this ‘life essence’ by the witch’s human twin. But what was ‘life essence’? And how on earth could a machine link with a human?

Although he itched to find the answers, this did not seem to be an appropriate time to satisfy his curiosity. Miss Sereda presented a nasty threat to his well-being.

“This l-life essence. W-why d-do you need it?”

Inna sneered. “To stay alive, you idiot! To sustain me through the long phases of decrepitude, I must feed on a man’s life essence.”

Titus faced her, his expression grim.

“F-feed?”

The fury etched into her face told him all he needed to know.

“There is n-no t-trade, is there?”

Inna glided toward him, eyes like daggers. “Brilliant, Mister Johannes. You have uncovered my secret. Even more reason for you to die.”

He backed up a few steps and bumped against the door.

“W-w-wait! W-what if I j-jammed the m-mechanism so the w-witch couldn’t change b-back. W-would you let m-me live?”

“Perhaps. I’d still be hungry though.”

“I c-could introduce you to s-some agreeable f-fellows.”

“Like the one who let me in?”

“Y-yes. And n-nicer.”

She paced in a half circle around him, considering his offer.

“All right, Mister Johannes. Put your interesting mind to use once more.”

Titus knelt before the witch, tipped her over, undid the panel, and tripped the lever. She opened, tempting him, a mechanical marvel he longed to study.

“Ah. Here w-we g-go. This sh-should d-do it.”

He closed the witch, and she sprang into life again, whirring and clicking, beginning the transformation back to old.

Inna cried out in alarm. “What are you doing?”

“S-sorry, that w-was unintended. I’ll s-stop it.”

Titus lied. He knew exactly what he was doing and stopping was not part of the plan. Nonetheless, he kept his head bent over the witch, pretending to prod its innards.

The rapidly ageing woman sank to floor. “Hurry, you fool.”

“I’m t-trying. S-sorry this is m-more d-difficult than I thought.”

In desperation, she crawled toward him, the breath emanating from her body rank with decay. An arm’s length away, she faltered, her cracking lips struggling to form words.

“Help me, fool.”

Their eyes met, and he saw the tragedy of her existence. Yet, he could not raise a shred a sympathy for her.

“W-we choose our f-fate and m-must accept the b-backwash.”

A familiar whirr announced the witch’s transformation was complete. He opened her once more and removed several springs.

“This w-will put a d-damper on your w-wickedness, M-Miss S-Sereda.”

Inna turned baleful eyes upon him. “A dullard like your grandfather and, like him, you will feel my revenge.”

“N-nonsense. My g-grandfather d-died quietly in his s-sleep last August.”

“Are you sure? I warned him when he was but a young man and I already an old woman that if he betrayed me again, I would make him suffer. Oh, what horrors plagued him in the hours before his final breath.”

The effort of speaking triggered a paroxysm of coughing, and she sank to the ground.

“W-what d-do you m-mean ‘b-betrayed’?”

“First, he refused to let me feed on him. Then, two years ago, he tried to take the witch away from me. He said he could no longer live with his guilt.” A depraved grin split her withered face. “So, I ended his guilt, but not my revenge. I curse all the House Johannes.”

Slowly, she dragged herself into a sitting position and repositioned the veil over her face.

“Give me my witch.”

He put the automaton into its wooden case, replaced the black velvet cover, and pushed it toward her. With a scientific dispassion, he observed as she hauled herself up, grasped the handle, and tried to drag the box behind her.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Help me?”

“N-no.”

“You disgust me. Anyway, I have a carriage waiting. I will send someone for it.”

She staggered to the door and let herself out.

Titus stared into space for several minutes, wondering if a few springs were enough to stop Miss Inna Sereda. Perhaps he should wreak more damage while he still had time?

A knock on the door interrupted his reverie.

“Come in.”

Rafe Pakenham pushed the door open and leaned on the doorjamb.

“What did you do to that poor old woman? I never pegged you as a lady killer.”

“W-what are you t-talking about, P-Pakenham?”

“The woman who came to visit you? Died on the stairs. Heart attack possibly. Could’ve sworn she was younger when I showed her up here. Anyway, hope you two weren’t close.”

“You’re a p-prat, P-Pakenham.”

“Only to you, T-T-T-Titus.” Rafe kicked the door open wider. “Ch-ch-ch-ch-cheerio.”

Titus rolled his eyes, slammed it shut in protest, and turned his attention to the witch. Although magic was bunkum, something about

the automaton set off alarm bells in his head. Such an invention should not exist, and he refused to indulge in unethical research.

He set about dismantling the witch. No one would ever use her again. Not on his watch. But there was no harm in making notes. Inspiration came from many sources, and knowledge of itself was never a bad thing. At least, not in his experience.

~ THE END ~

Want to know more about Titus Johannes?

An excerpt from “Fortitude” follows...

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## CHAPTER 6

Titus Confesses

Titus paced up and down outside Doctor Corazon Paget's office. Above the door was her family coat of arms, and to Titus, all four eagles were ready to attack him. He dreaded seeing her ladyship and admitting the abhorrent truth about his research. That Begby had played him for a fool and his invention used so callously mortified him. Begby had wilfully reanimated those corpses, but worse still, he had abandoned his experiment and attempted to dispose of his research subjects by burning them alive!

Not that they were alive by the usual definition. He had spent most of last night examining the hapless men, unable to fathom their dire fate. Why Begby had chosen only males was beyond him, yet a part of him was eternally thankful that he had subjected no females to the experiment. His own dear mother only recently departed this world, and the thought of her, or someone like her, as one of the reanimates chilled the blood in his veins.

His preliminary investigations revealed that the thirteen remaining reanimated breathed incredibly slowly, their hearts beat at around ten beats per minute, and it seemed they barely ate, drank or slept. Yet they retained the essence of their humanity; that is, they were self-aware and experienced a range of emotions. He shuddered at the thought of these poor souls being burned alive. The cruelty of sentient creatures subjected to such an abominable fate... how could another human being commit such atrocities against their own kind?

Only moments ago, Titus had confronted Begby in his office at the Council, accusing him of gross inhumanity. Why had he continued with

his experiment? Why on earth had he not stopped after the first body reanimated? Why reanimate *more* corpses?

‘Because we could, Johannes. We could, and we needed to do so to achieve our goal.’

‘Which w-was?’ Titus had questioned curtly.

‘Immortality, my young associate. Immortality.’

He could still recall Begby’s face, the features a mask of maniacal fervour. The light seeping through a crack on the heavy green velvet curtain backlit Begby’s head and cast dark shadows on the florid skin hanging loosely over his jowls. He reminded Titus of a rabid bulldog.

‘Then why abandon them?’ he pressed. ‘Why subject them to such a cruel d-death?’

Silas snorted slightly, mildly amused.

‘They are *already* dead, Johannes. But to answer your question, I thought if we could apprehend the deterioration we observed, we may have discovered the key to eternal life. Unfortunately, we could not, and the experiment was a failure. The creatures are merely faulty replicas of life, nowhere near real immortality.’

‘F-Faulty!’ Titus spluttered in outrage, ‘But they feel emotion, sir. They feel t-terror and hopelessness and cry out f-for help. You can’t just w-walk away from them. They were your responsib-b-ility.’

‘Quite so, Titus Johannes, and I have exercised responsible leadership by putting the pathetic creatures out of their misery. You and I both know what awaits them is an interminably slow decay. What of the horror of that, young Johannes? Eh? Now, if you’ll excuse me ...’

He turned his back on Titus and busied himself with papers on the portmanteau under the window.

‘I am g-going to have to report this to her ladyship, Begby.’ Titus sounded less threatening than he wished.

‘Really? And what are you going to tell her? That you gave full permission to use an invention of your making, without ensuring the proper protocols were followed, without even being present for these experiments?’

‘B-B-But...’

‘If one is going to lecture on responsibility, one must be willing to take responsibility. My recollection is that you threw your hands in the air and stomped off at the very mention of using corpses. If there was a time for taking responsibility, wasn’t it *then*, young Titus?’

Titus said nothing.

‘That would have been the time to run and tell tales to Doctor Paget now, wouldn’t it?’ Silas smiled thinly.

Titus swallowed. ‘I thought you w-would withdraw the funding if I ...’

‘Did I say that?’ interrupted Silas.

‘N-no, but you had said earlier that funding depended on you and your associates carrying out research important to your c-company or society or whatever it is.’

‘But did I say I would withdraw funding?’ Silas’s smile was a stiletto ready to stab.

‘N-no. You didn’t.’

‘Correct, my dear boy. One would rather think that it was your own overweening ambition and fear that I might take away your precious creation that stopped you.’

He turned back to shuffling his papers. ‘Too late for regrets now. What would Doctor Paget say if she knew you were fully aware of what might happen but did nothing to stop it?’

‘But I didn’t know that you w-would reanimate twenty-eight human corpses!’

‘Yet the possibility was there, dear boy, if you had stopped to think about it. And you *should* have thought about it. That’s what Doctor Paget will say, won’t she?’

Would that really be what her ladyship would say? Titus stopped in his tracks and turned a ghastly shade of pale. Oh heavens, what would become of him?

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Corazon Paget stood behind her Chinoiserie desk, regarding the profusely sweating Titus as though he were some insect. Luckily, she *liked* insects and had a fondness for the study of zoology; otherwise, this current situation would be untenable. The animals had escaped from the zoo as Silas Begby’s ambition and Titus Johannes’s naivety. She was angry — with Silas, with Titus, and most of all, with herself.

Clearly, Begby had failed to keep her informed of any developments and, worse still had taken it upon himself to extend the boundaries of the work beyond all reasonable parameters. Testing on human corpses was a delicate matter and unforgivable without the proper authority and permission of the deceased person’s next of kin. Begby and Johannes had created an issue of a magnitude never seen in the Council’s history. And she was the one who would have to deal with it.

She took a deep breath and focused on staying cool-headed.

‘So Titus, where is this facility of Begby’s? Is it secure?’ She hoped she sounded less furious than she was; otherwise, she would never get a straight answer from him.

Titus pulled out a damp handkerchief, mopped his brow and neck, and then pressed the cloth against his mouth. For a moment, Corazon thought he was going to be sick.

‘Calm down, Titus. I’m angrier with Silas Begby than I am with you. I know you did what you thought best, no matter how misguided that may have been. Doctor Begby, on the other hand, knows how the Council operates. I hold him to a far greater level of responsibility.’

Titus relaxed somewhat.

‘The facility s-seemed secure, m’lady. It is in P-Portside, close to the river. I believe I persuaded the men to c-cease their appointed task until they heard from me again.’

Corazon ruminated, her fingers drumming an impatient rhythm on the black lacquered desktop. Suddenly, she slapped both hands down and engaged Titus with an unexpectedly charming smile.

‘Right, then we’d better get out there, hadn’t we?’

Titus stared at her blankly.

‘You w-want to go out there yourself?’

‘Carpe diem, Titus. I would very much like to see these reanimated. It will help me devise a solution to this problem. Then I would very much like to see your Possibility Converter.’