

CLOCKWORK SHARDS

CAT HOMAN

Back again? Sit down, then, and I'll tell you a story. A short one, mind you; your mother said to send you home by the evening bell. Once there was a robot, who wasn't quite a robot like you and I are used to seeing, who had stood around, gathering dust in an old abandoned house. No one knows quite how it happened. Some say a nail came loose, others say that it was a sign from God above. The robot, which was not a true robot, gathering dust and spiders, started to move. It walked, a bizarre mechanical walk, out the door, down the road, and across the countryside. It walked past fields which had been abandoned by farmers sometime before the bombs started to fall. Some miracle, they tell us, kept that mechanical thing moving until it hit a wall and could move no more.

They found it like that, the soldiers did, and they took it away.

There was one clockwork mechanic left, an old crone who had been captured by the axis in the event the allies resorted to ancient mechanical bombs. Her age varies depending who tells the story. For some, she's as old as the war itself born in 1914, sometimes even on July 28th itself. For others, she was born sometime during the war, back before the Shortage of Children, before the Clockwork makers became desperate.

The adults telling the story always crumple in on themselves to imitate her walk when she was first taken to see the robot. They widen their eyes as hers had widened and in hoarse voices whisper, "I haven't laid my eyes on one of these since I was a young girl."

She was locked in her workroom and ordered to take it apart. The soldiers thought the clockwork robot was a bomb, but one look through her widened eyes told the crone it wasn't.

She pulled on her goggles and worked reverently, taking it apart piece by piece, cleaning the cogs, polishing the wheels. The robot was a marvel of ancient robotics; purely mechanical in design, made for helping with household chores if the pans and dustbins she pulled off were any indication.

She cleaned and replaced the parts with upgrades she had in her cell from other clockwork men the soldiers had uncovered while digging through the rubble. The others were broken beyond repair; good for nothing but scrap metal. This one had somehow avoided the destruction which had devastated the rest of Europe, perfectly preserved aside from the rust and cobwebs adorning its frame.

She kept at it; studying and polishing, until the soldiers knocked on the door demanding to know what the results of her labor were.

“A clockwork man?” The general declared, scoffing at the crone. “Those went extinct fifty years ago at least.” To prove his point, he gestured to the state-of-the-art robot next to him.

“This clockwork man will outlast even the lump of hardware next to you.” Those were her last words. She was sent away and passed peacefully in her sleep that night, rusted wheel clutched in her wrinkled fingers. The last knowledge of mechanical creatures lost to her dreams.

Despite the words of the crone, the general still didn't trust the mechanical man. His men disposed of the body, tossing it in the trash heap along with the others. The base was overthrown a few days later.

The thing about the Great War is that never ends. Even now, sitting here listening to the story, there's the sound of gunfire all around. The soldiers who come back, the ones who survive, tell stories of an odd mechanical helper, sweeping up bodies and rubble that make their way to the old trash heap. Some say it's haunted, others say it's a sign that the war will never end.

What happened to the clockwork man? Well, no one really knows. The castle where it lay is in No-man's-land; it changes hands each day.

What do I think? Ah. There's the evening bell. You'd best head home.