

MAINE

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HAVOK
PUBLISHING

M I N E

December 20, 2019

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His mottled hands shook as Viktor Engel etched characters into the damp earthen brow. “The good book says it took a word to create the world, eh?” He shuffled back a few steps, flicking the scrapings from his cracked nailbeds. “Not bad. Not bad at all.” A smile crept across his face, deepening crevices under his grizzled beard.

“Just... one... more...” He held his breath, inscribing the last sacred letter that would bring his creation to life.

The golem sat up and stared silently at the man who woke him.

“Evil times are approaching, my son. You can protect this family from harm.”

~ SIX YEARS LATER ~

Grete stomped her foot on the kitchen tiles, daring them to break under all the energy her seven years could muster. “Not fair!”

A blond halo framed her cherubic facade, but Klay could see the storm brewing. Grete had been his charge since before she could walk.

“Schatzi, it’s not safe for you to go out right now.” Cook transferred a bubbling streusel to the window’s ledge, wiping the sides with her berry-stained apron. “We don’t know when devils may fly. There’s no cover in the field.”

Klay stiffened at the suggestion that he would ever leave his charge unprotected.

“You can just unclench those fists, Klay. Your mood looks as dark as your hair.” Cook tut-tutted and flicked flour at him. “I know you would throw yourself in front of a raging bull for our schatzi, but it takes more than that to stop a bomb.”

“Would you really, Klay?” Grete clapped her hands, bouncing on her toes. “Would you really stop a bull? Remember that time I felled out of the big, big tree? I climbed so high, right to the tip-top. Mutti was so scared, but

you caught me.” She giggled. “After that they promised you would never go away.”

“Shh, child.” Cook shook her gray head. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Do so!” She stuck her tongue out. “I saw the soldiers take Herr Engel away. But he told Papa that Klay would stay for me. Forever!”

“Hush.” Cook enfolded Klay with floury hands that half-hugged and half-covered his ears. “Herr Engel was the only family Klay had.”

Grete pointed and laughed as he tried to extricate himself from the powdery embrace. “Your hair’s all black and white now! You look like a cow-head!” Grete grabbed Cook’s bowl and skipped circles around Klay, dusting him with handfuls of flour. “Cowhead! Cowhead! Klay is a cowhead!”

“Careful, Schatzi. You could slip.”

Klay scanned the floor. Cook was correct. The tiles were covered with flour. His imperative was clear. Grete could not come to harm.

Sweeping his diminutive ward under one arm, he secured the ceramic bowl with the other and strode out of the cottage. Cook bustled after them, chasing down her flour bowl.

“No! No! No!” Grete shrieked, her tiny fists raining staccato beats against his arms and back. “Ow! You hurt me!”

Klay froze. Lowering Grete quickly onto a patch of scattered straw, he backed away, assessing her condition. He turned both palms up, raising his shoulders.

“You big dummy!” She thrust her fist in front of his face, displaying the skinned knuckles she’d received from pummeling him.

“Grete!” Cook fussed, snatching her bowl back. “Watch your tongue!”

“Even Papa says he’s dumb.”

Cook sighed. “That’s because he can’t speak. Dumb means mute, not stupid.”

“Well, I don’t care. He hurt my hand, and he’s a dummy.” She tried to stomp, but her soft leather shoes made little impact on the straw. Huffing through clenched teeth, Grete narrowed her eyes and landed a fierce kick on Klay’s shin. “Ow!” She glared up at her target. “I hate you!”

Her guardian hung his head, helpless against her accusation.

“Schatzi! You cannot treat our Klay so.” Cook rested her hand on Grete’s shoulder.

“He’s not your Klay. He’s mine! Mine, mine, mine!” She wriggled away, dashing past the garden gate into the open field.

“Grete! No!” Cook yelled.

Klay lumbered after the scampering child, who shrieked wildly and kept going. He could not tell if she was happy or upset, but it didn’t matter. He had to catch up to her. He had to protect her.

Grete didn’t stop until she reached the edge of the field, where it met the railroad tracks.

“Look Klay! A soldier train!” She pointed and waved excitedly. “Pick me up.”

Relieved that she’d finally stopped, Klay lifted her onto his shoulder. For a moment she was content, enthralled by the cars rolling by. Then a low rumble sounded above, different from the vibrations of the train.

Fighter planes descended in a vee, spraying ammunition onto the tracks. Bullets pinged against metal as they strafed the military boxcars. Klay swung Grete off his shoulders, cradling her against his chest as he ran back toward the house.

A blast shuddered through the air, throwing them to the ground, hurling hunks of metal everywhere. In desperation, the golem curled around the

girl, trying to shield her with his body. Shrapnel lodged in his back and arms, and then stopped. Was the danger passed? Klay looked back. A fragment drove into his face, destroying the spell inscribed on his brow.

At that, the quiet guardian ceased—to protect... to move... to be. The golem was undone.

The dark choked her. It smelled like dirt. Grete fought the wall of Klay surrounding her, kicking an arm that blocked her escape.

“Move!”

Her foot went through the limb-shaped pillar, reducing it to rubble.

“What are you doing?” She grabbed his other arm and pulled, trying to make him stand. It fell apart in her hands.

Grete tried to wrap her arms around his torso. It crumbled under her embrace.

“No, Klay! No!” The child sobbed, huddled on the ground next to her protector. “You were supposed to stay. You were supposed to be mine. Forever.”