THE COGSWORTHS

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STAR BOARD

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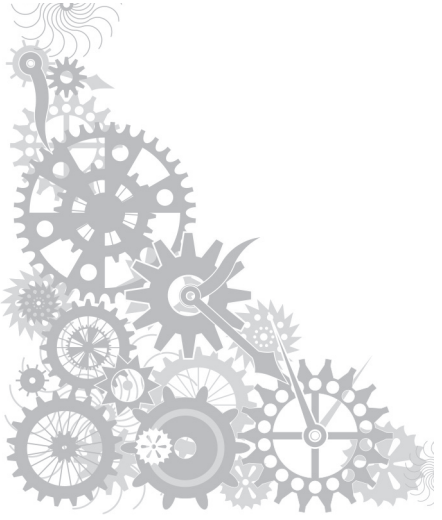
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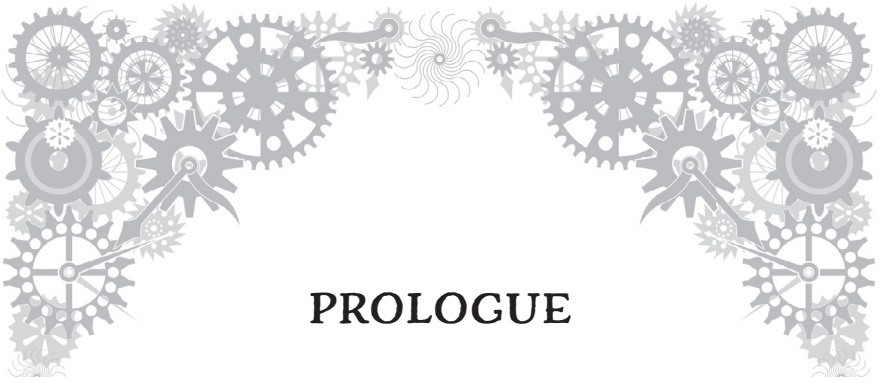
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For the misfits
And the nitwits
For the odd
And the strange
For the hopeful
And the hopeless
Stay flawed
Never change







PROLOGUE

HERM WAS NEVER LATE. IN FACT, HE DISLIKED THE idea of being late so much that it gave him anxiety. Which was probably why he was always so sweaty—either that, or because he rushed around town wearing roller skates all day. And since he hated being late, he was always in a hurry, which made him the best mail carrier in all of Blissburg.

He'd zip through the picturesque town, carrying nothing but an oversized messenger bag filled to the brim with letters. He'd expertly toss each letter into identical white mailboxes in front of identical white houses with identical white picket fences. Every letter was delivered exactly on time. Every time. Except when he had to deliver to Dr. Eliza Cogsworth. For her deliveries, he was always late. Which, of course, he hated.

You see, Dr. Cogsworth lived on the outskirts of town in what used to be the old Observatory. Perched on the top of a hill, with sweeping views of Blissburg on one side and a treacherous drop to the ocean on the other, the Observatory had long since ceased to be a place for stargazers. It now stood transformed into a sprawling, rusty mansion of bronze and brass and gears and glass.

Unlike Blissburg, where everything was pristine and orderly, the Observatory was messy and chaotic, like something out of a fever dream spun by a mad inventor. The wings of the house jutted out at odd angles, twisting as if some giant metal creature had curled up to sleep on the hill. When the wind blew just right, strange sounds would drift down from the Observatory into the town below: clanks, whirs, and the low, eerie hum of machinery. Some swore they heard whispers, as if the house itself were alive. The people of Blissburg feared those noises as much as they feared the house. It didn't belong, they said. It was an eyesore, a blemish on their perfect town. And though people never dared to venture close enough to see for themselves, they speculated that whatever was happening up on that hill wasn't just odd—it was *dangerous*. Something unnatural lurked inside those walls, something Blissburg would be better off without.

But for Herm, this was just a slightly inconvenient stop along his delivery route.



His roller skates came to a screeching halt at the bottom of the hill, where the road curved sharply. As he wiped the sweat from his forehead, he stared up at an imposing gate that blocked his path. The gate stood tall and weathered, its once-gleaming iron now streaked with rust. Right in the center was a smooth, oval-shaped jewel. Unlike the rest of the gate, where flakes of orange and brown clung to the twisted bars, the oval was polished to a sparkle.

"I have…a delivery…for Dr. Eliza…Cogsworth," he said, catching his breath. Herm was always out of breath.

"I'm in…" He inhaled. "Quite a hurry…" He exhaled. "So if you could please—" Before he could finish, the intricate gears around the gate's edges whirred to life. The oval glowed as two panels slid from the top and bottom of the polished jewel, meeting in the middle like a pair of eyelids, then slid back into place.

The gate blinked at him, and a moment later it opened.

Herm pushed off from the gate, his skates wobbling as they met the steep, narrow path that zigzagged up to the house. The route was daunting for most, but especially for anyone on roller skates. Every push of his legs sent him teetering, the uneven, mossy bricks threatening to send him crashing all the way back to the bottom.

And if he fell—oh, he could see it now—he'd go tumbling down like a runaway bowling ball, arms flapping like

a crazed chicken. His messenger bag would burst open, letters soaring through the air like paper birds. Envelopes would rain down on the townspeople below, landing in flower beds, on rooftops, and probably smack-dab on old Mrs. Granger's head. She'd march into the post office and demand to know why she'd gotten ten different gas bills, while Herm lay at the bottom of the hill in a heap, surrounded by a flurry of overdue notices and crumpled birthday cards. "Yep," he muttered, gripping his bag tighter, "no time for that."

Once he finally arrived at the front door, he paused to collect himself. He always had to muster up the courage to push the bell. It wasn't that he believed the rumors—well, not exactly—but they were hard to ignore. The townspeople said all sorts of things, after all.

Some claimed Dr. Eliza Cogsworth was building a giant mechanical beast right under everyone's noses. Others swore that she had once tried to build a machine to control the weather and accidentally created the fog that sometimes rolled over Blissburg like a blanket. And then there were whispers that three children lived in the house, and they weren't really children at all—they were born not of flesh, but of pure, unbridled imagination in Eliza's fantastical workshop. Some even claimed that the Cogsworth children were built to be *weapons*.

Herm always shook his head when he heard such nonsense. He'd interacted with the Cogsworth children countless times before. But as he stood there staring up at the thick brass door, he found himself wondering if maybe, just maybe, there was a grain of truth to it all. "Nah," he muttered, shaking the thought away. "The children are harmless."

Whatever the case, Herm was in a hurry. So with a deep breath, he reached his finger for the doorbell. But before he could ring it, he heard a loud . . . ***BOOM!***

CHAPTER ONE

"CAREFUL!"

Orion's voice cut through the thick steam, which hissed and puffed from the towering contraption that wobbled in front of his sister, Lyra. It was a Whiskadoodle, or at least that's what they called the giant mixer, which looked like something you'd use to scramble eggs…if the eggs belonged to dinosaurs. The machine stood as tall as Lyra herself, made from a hodgepodge of pipes and gears that clanked together, with a whisk the size of a small propeller. Orion had warned Lyra (repeatedly) that the mixer was designed for high-speed industrial mixing—the sort you'd use to churn cement. Not the kind you'd use for cake batter.

"I've got it, I've got it!" Lyra shot back. She cranked a lever on the side of the Whiskadoodle, and the whisk lifted out of the bowl, flinging bits of butter and flour across the kitchen as it sputtered to a halt.

"I meant to do that," she insisted. "How's it coming with the oven, Scorpius?"

From across the room, Scorpius flashed a grin. "Good to go!"

"You promise it won't explode?" Orion asked.

"Well, I never said *that*," Scorpius replied, shrugging.

These unusual siblings were Dr. Eliza Cogsworth's three children. The same children the townspeople of Blissburg believed were monstrous weapons. The same children who were currently baking their mother a surprise birthday cake.

Orion, the fourteen-year-old, was tall and slender, and always looked the part of the responsible oldest sibling. His thick protective goggles were strapped tightly on his face, shielding his telescopic eyes from any potential hazards. His exceptional vision allowed him to see the world in astonishing detail—although at this moment he was utilizing his miraculous sight only to search for items in the pantry.

Scorpius, the thirteen-year-old, was a burst of energy—both figuratively and literally—a walking, talking fire


FIG. 420312
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hazard with a reckless love for anything that sparked or sizzled. His tousled mop of hair spiked in every direction, and the wires that jutted out from his back crackled whenever he got excited, which was often. He crouched by the stone oven and clicked two of his wires together, sending a spark that ignited an explosive flame, which nearly singed his eyebrows.

Then there was Lyra, the youngest at twelve, who seemed the most "normal" of the three, a fact that only served to make her feel like the outsider of her eccentric family. Her dark, glossy hair was cut into sharp bangs that framed her face. The brass cogs woven into her ruffled dress clinked softly as she moved, though they were currently speckled with cake batter.

"We still need to add sugar!" Lyra called out.

Their mother would be finishing her morning experiments any moment now, and the siblings were determined to have the cake ready before she emerged.

Orion adjusted his goggles. With just the tiniest squint, his vision snapped into focus, the world around him stretching and shrinking. In an instant, the cluttered kitchen blurred away, and his gaze locked on to the top shelf in the pantry, zooming past cans and jars until it zeroed in on a single container, like a hawk spotting its

prey from miles away. "Top shelf, in the back behind the vinegar," he called out.

"Copper, go!" Scorpius commanded, tapping the side of his vest with a grin. In an instant, a rattling sound came from one of his pockets, and out popped Copper, his trusty little robot companion. Copper was made entirely from, as you may have guessed, copper. Copper pipes, copper bolts, copper wires, and even copper pennies. Scorpius had found him long ago, rusting and forgotten in the Observatory junkyard. But with a jolt of electricity, Scorpius had brought him back to life.

"Copper, go!" Copper echoed back in his high-pitched voice (he had a habit of repeating things like a parrot). He hopped down onto the countertop with a metallic clink. His beady eyes flashed with determination as he scuttled toward the pantry, ready to retrieve the sugar. But then something caught his attention. A shimmer. A sparkle. An open box of glitter sprinkles, twinkling like tiny stars. Without hesitation, Copper abandoned his mission and dashed toward the sprinkles. He was, after all, hopelessly attracted to anything shiny, and in Copper's world, glitter was treasure.

"Copper, no!" Scorpius shouted.

"Copper, no!" Copper repeated gleefully as he devoured the entire box.

Orion shook his head and quickly added the sugar himself, before sliding the cake into the oven with a sigh. "This is going to blow up in my face, isn't it?" he muttered.

"We need to get more sprinkles," Lyra said, brushing flour off her apron. "I bet there are loads of them at the bakery in town."

Orion raised an eyebrow. "You've been awfully curious about town lately."

"Don't you ever wonder what it would be like?" Lyra asked.

"No," Orion said flatly. "I don't have to wonder. It's dangerous. Besides, you know we're not allowed to leave the Observatory."

Lyra rolled her eyes. "Is it almost ready? Mother's going to walk in any minute."

As if on cue, ***Ding!*** The timer chimed. A typical oven would have taken thirty minutes to bake a cake, but nothing in the Observatory was typical.

Orion carefully pulled the cake from the oven, the heat causing his goggles to fog as the sweet scent of vanilla filled the kitchen. The cake, despite the chaos of the baking process, had risen perfectly. It was missing sprinkles, sure, but the layers looked even, and after a slathering of peanut butter and pickle frosting, it was ready to go. Orion pulled a

lighter from a drawer and flicked it open, the flame dancing to life. He held it just above the cake's candle.

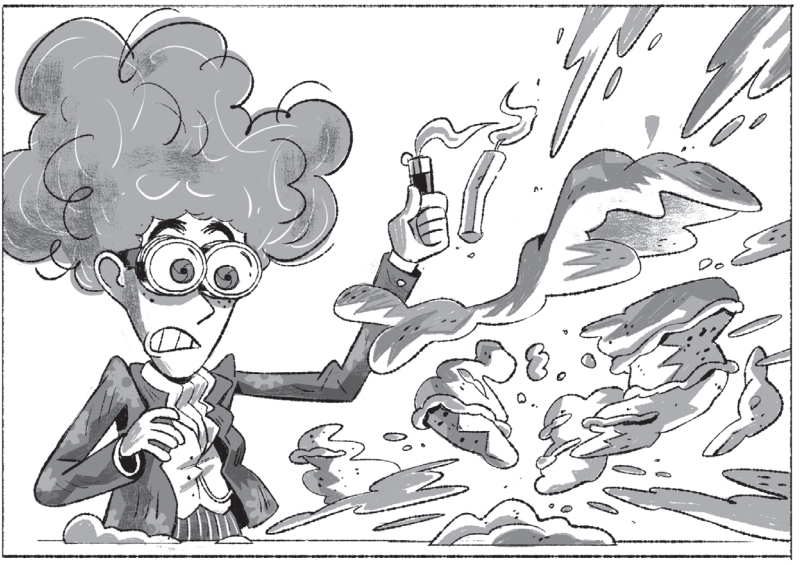
Lyra glanced over the recipe one last time, running through the ingredients. "Eggs, flour, sugar, baking powder—"

"Baking powder?" Scorpius interjected. "I thought you said *gun*powder."

Lyra's eyes went wide just as Orion lit the candle.

BOOM!

The cake exploded in a cloud of icing, batter, and—yes—gunpowder, sending bits of sugary debris across the kitchen. The walls were splattered, the floor now dusted in a layer of flour and crumbs.



As the dust (and the icing) began to settle, a new sound cut through the quiet: the slow, heavy creak of the kitchen door. The siblings froze, turning in unison toward the doorway.

Their mother stood there, draped in a dark, oil-splattered leather apron that reached down to her boots. Brass buckles and thick straps crisscrossed over her chest, securing various tools: small wrenches, a glowing vial, and other curious gadgets. Dark, elbow-length gloves streaked with soot covered her hands.

Her face was hidden beneath a thick black welding mask, its visor reflecting the scattered mess of the kitchen. The air seemed to hang still as her boots clunked against the flour-covered floor, her shadow looming larger as she stepped forward, headed straight toward the siblings…