

## A Clockwork Fairytale by Helen Scott Taylor

### Prologue

Silver-veined marble columns flanked the portal to the temple of the Silver Jinn. The woman mounted the three steps to the entrance, treading lightly in satin slippers. Silver bracelets on her wrists and ankles jangled while a rare breeze tugged at the pink and turquoise silk sheathing her body.

She sighed with relief as she entered the relative cool of the marble temple and escaped the searing heat of the midday sun. Neat rows of embroidered kneelers filled the space, ready for the devout at dusk prayers. Her eyes rose to the magnificent silver pillar at the far end of the central aisle. Four times as thick as her body, the gleaming column soared high into the domed roof of the temple.

When her toes met the raised ridge of floor tiles that marked the place where devotees must wait, she crouched dutifully. Ticking and whirring sounds broke the still heat of the afternoon as the embossed design on the pillar started to move. Viewing the column from one side, it was not immediately clear what was represented by the intricate pattern that covered the silver. But as the woman watched, the column opened out before her into a huge silver serpent. First the Jinn's head emerged from the metal, the millions of tiny joints and plates of silver unfolding in a miracle of engineering, the lethal spiked crest on its neck rising like a row of blades. The whirring of spinning cogs reached a crescendo that vibrated through the floor into her feet as the Silver Jinn's head dipped to the ground and its thick sinuous body followed. Millions upon millions of minute silver scales tinkled across the marble floor as the serpent slid along the aisle toward her.

Every piece of silver in the city contained the spirit of the Silver Jinn and could be fashioned into mechanical devices animated by the spirit, but nothing else in the city was of anywhere near this size or complexity. Sorcerers and silversmiths far more skilled than any alive today had fashioned this magnificent mechanism and summoned the divine Jinn from the silver to automate it millennia ago.

After years of daily visits, she stood patiently, unafraid of the creature's huge hooked fangs and deadly poison. Hissing, the silver serpent reared up in front of her and peered at her with unblinking eyes. With a click of mechanical jaws parting, the woven silver rope of its tongue flicked out to taste her skin. Satisfied she was one of its own, the Jinn drew back and

began to refold its body into the pillar.

The first part of her daily ritual over, she went to a red silk cushion in the back row and kneeled. She bowed her head and closed her eyes. “Great Silver Jinn, son of our mother the moon, take pity on your humble servant and deliver home my husband and son from the infidels in the north who worship the Earth Jinn.” She had first whispered this prayer fourteen years ago when her husband’s merchant brig failed to return after sailing the trade route to the north. She had pleaded with the Great Silver Jinn to return her husband and son safely, to no avail. Now her daily prayer was little more than a habit. But deep in her heart, a tiny spark of hope still burned.

She rose but instead of heading out, she went to the tower on the north corner of the temple. Entering through the door used by the priests who rang the tower bell at dusk, she mounted the spiral steps.

At the top, pinpricks of heat rained down on her where shafts of sunlight spiked through the silver filigree cupola. The woman went to a small window facing north and stared across the gleaming gold and silver roofs of the city of Arco toward the harbor. Seagoing merchant vessels swayed at anchor, while nearby the cloudless sky was as bright as an artist’s palette with the multicolored silk envelopes of airships, half of them emblazoned with her family’s Silver Serpent emblem and the other half with that of their rivals in power the Golden Dragon sorcerers. Her gaze tracked the horizon. Somewhere, far away over the turquoise waters of the ocean, could her beloved husband and precious little boy still be alive? Or had the dark seas of the north stolen the Stars from their hearts?

## Chapter One

*If the Great Earth Jinn warns you something is wicked, do it quick before you change your mind.* –Master Maddox

Master Maddox had taught Melba to keep her cap pulled down and her face dirty. The port area of Royal Malverne Isle was a dangerous place at night and if someone recognized her as a girl, she'd be done for.

She avoided the area if possible, but tonight Maddox had sent her there with an urgent message for a smuggler. As she made her way home by moonlight, a tavern door burst open in front of her. Raucous laughter and light spilled into the narrow alley. Three men stumbled out, cursing and shoving each other. She pressed back against the damp stonework of the brothel opposite. If the Great Earth Jinn were on her side, the men would turn the other way.

On the shoulder of the tallest man's coat, the gold insignia of the Royal Fleet caught the light. A chill curled in her belly and her fingers sought the handle of the dagger wedged in her boot. Bluejackets would doubtless head for the brothel—straight toward her.

The shortest man carried a staff with an unlit lantern swinging from the hook on top. He paused by the tavern lamp, lit a twist of hay, and touched it to the wick of his lantern.

“Get your arse moving or we'll not finish with the tarts before the tide turns,” the tall man said.

Melba sidled away from the brothel door, praying they were too drunk to notice her.

The short one stumbled against his fat friend causing the lantern to swing wildly, flashing light around the alley.

“Ha! A boy,” Fatty shouted.

Melba's grip tightened on her knife.

"Up to no good, I'll wager." The short one raised his lantern and Melba squinted against the glare. "Extra rations for a week if we take the lad back to the cap'n." The men spread out and advanced.

Life on board ship was dismal for a boy pressed into service, unthinkable for a girl. Melba darted a few steps one way, then the other, testing their reactions. They paused, arms spread to block her escape. They might be drunk but their wits were still sharp.

The tall sailor lunged for her. She jumped aside only to crash into the fat one, who had moved to flank her. She stumbled to her knees, dropping her dagger in the gutter. Before she could scramble away, a hand grabbed the back of her jacket and hauled her off the ground.

"Nothing of 'im." The stench of rotten teeth and ale curdled her guts. She jabbed her elbow back and connected with soft flesh. Breath whooshed out behind her, but the grip on her collar held.

"Bleedin' tyke." A fist thumped her side, knocking the wind from her lungs. She hung limp and helpless, gasping for air, while her hands were yanked behind her. Eyes watering with pain, she tried to think how to escape. Whatever happened, she must get away from the sailors before they reached the ship.

A dull thud echoed off the surrounding walls. The hand holding her let go suddenly and she landed awkwardly, skinning her knees on the gritty dirt through the holes in her breeches. She had no idea why she'd been released and she didn't wait to find out. Shaking the half-tied twine from her wrists, she lunged forward to snatch up her knife and then hid in the shadows by the wall.

Another man had entered the fray and he seemed to be on her side. The tall dark stranger kicked out at head height, the buckle on the side of his boot glinting in the light as his foot connected with the fat sailor's chin. With a grunt, Fatty crumpled to the ground. The stranger had worked fast. The tall sailor was already lying in the gutter beside the tavern door. At the sight of his fallen comrades, the short sailor threw down his lantern and scarpered.

Melba's heart thudded and she flexed her fingers on her dagger as she assessed the stranger. Just because he had dispatched the three lowlifes didn't mean he was her friend. Many people on Malverne Isle had cause to hate the sailors of the Royal Fleet. Had she evaded capture by the bluejackets only to fall into the hands of someone worse?

The man turned toward her, his black garb relieved only by a glint of silver at his throat. “Come, boy. Mustn’t be caught with sailors of the Royal Fleet at our feet or it’ll be The Well for both of us.”

Melba swallowed back bile, fear of the man temporarily forgotten at the thought of something worse. She’d heard the screams of men tossed down The Well. If you were lucky, the bluejackets threw you down at high tide and the sea took you right away. If you were unlucky, you lay broken on the rocks at the bottom for hours before the water flowed in and put you out of your misery.

Her rescuer strode away into the shadows and she hesitated a moment longer, but she had to follow or risk being caught. She raced after him as the tavern door opened behind her and shouts of alarm chased her along the alley.

As she caught up to him, her rescuer glanced over his shoulder at her. “Ever traveled the skyways?”

Melba shook her head. Runners and thieves like her took the waterways, escaping through the drains and flood defense pipes crisscrossing beneath the city.

Only spies traveled with the birds.

That meant, Sweet Earth Jinn, he must be a spy. Excitement bubbled inside her.

He stepped back and, with a soft grunt, leaped onto a wall as tall as she was. Then he held down a hand and whispered, “Put your foot up—”

“I know.” She’d played at spies with the boys often enough. She put her scuffed boot against the wall, leaned back so he took her weight, and walked up as he pulled.

Shouts echoed along the alley below. Her rescuer glanced down. “Time to disappear.”

He darted up the sloped wall to roof level, his soft leather boots near silent on the rough-hewn stone. Melba tugged her cap down, sucked in a breath, and ran after him. Balancing took all her concentration as her tight boots pinched her toes.

He waited for her at the end of the wall where the row houses finished. As soon as she caught up, he leaped across an alley. His jacket flapped up behind him to reveal four silver stars on his belt.

Melba’s breath froze halfway in. Only one man carried lethal spiked throwing stars. Her rescuer was far more than a spy, he was a legend. Poor people of the outer circles thought he was a benevolent Earth Jinn stealing from the nobs to give to the poor. Thieves spoke of him in

reverential whispers as Master Turk, spymaster extraordinaire. Old Maddox had told her that Master Turk even had spies on the top of Nob Hill in the Royal Palace.

She'd prayed for the opportunity to catch a spymaster's interest and have the chance to better herself.

Shouts of alarm from below pierced her thoughts.

"Jump," Master Turk urged. "Two more streets and you'll be safe in the third circle."

Melba was used to crawling through dirty pipes and squeezing through holes, but jumping gaps twenty feet in the air.... She peered over the parapet to the street below.

"It'll be easier if you take off those clodhoppers," he said, pointing at her feet.

She looked down at her boots and shook her head. All her life Master Maddox had drummed into her one vital lesson, *keep your boots and breeches on*. His other boys often went barefoot, but he always made her wear boots, so people wouldn't see her strange feet and breeches, so no one discovered she was a girl.

She took two steps back and hauled in a breath. She must make a clean jump and clear the gap. If she impressed Master Turk, he'd be more likely to accept her pledge. She belted forward, leaped, and landed in a clattering heap at his feet. Bruises throbbed and grazes stung, sending tears to her eyes, but she kept her face down so he wouldn't see her embarrassment. She must be tough if she wanted to do well.

Without a word, he pulled her up by an arm and set off at a trot along the valley gutter between two rows of terraced cottages. After they had leaped another alley, he led her behind a thick brick chimney that shielded them from the street below.

He turned to face her and rested a shoulder against the brickwork. "You should be safe now." He pointed to the right where a sloping wall led down to the back of a shop. "That's your best way down. Not much of a drop."

Melba pressed her tongue on the back of her teeth and gathered her courage. "You're Master Turk."

"Observant, lad." He angled his head to examine her. Moonlight glistened on the dark strands of his hair, sculpted his profile with light and shadow. He had dark eyes and golden skin like the foreign sailors up from the south. Her heart gave a strange little bump. She had never met a master so young and handsome. But how would she persuade him to take her on?

"Let me pledge to you. I'm a superior runner and thief. I'll be a great spy. I see stuff all

the time. Pledge me, sir, please.”

“Superior, huh?” He smiled. “What are you, thirteen?”

She nodded vigorously. Although she was seventeen, she was small and skinny and passed for a lad of thirteen easily.

In the roof beside them, a lamp sputtered to life behind a small skylight. Master Turk put his finger to his lips and peered through the window. After scrutinizing the room for a few seconds, he relaxed and leaned back against the chimney.

The light revealed the fine fabric of his jacket, the stitching almost invisible. The five small circles of a tiny silver Earth Blessing gleamed against his dark neck cloth. Black jewels glittered on his ears. He dressed like a nob.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Mel.”

“Well, Mel, if you’re such a good runner and thief, won’t your current master miss you?”

Her hand went to the tin disk stamped with Master Maddox’s symbol on a length of twine around her neck. His baker’s shop in the third circle was the only home she’d known. She’d been happy there, but lately things had changed. Since she’d turned sixteen, he’d stopped her bunking with the boys in the warm storeroom behind the bakery oven and made her sleep alone in the loft. And he never let her fill her belly anymore, telling her it was best she stay skinny.

“He won’t miss me,” she said, hating the catch in her voice. She couldn’t afford to be soft like a girl or she’d get found out and end up in a whorehouse or as skivvy in a tavern.

“Give me your hand.” Master Turk leaned closer, bringing with him the tang of lemon spice. He even smelled like a nob.

*Don’t give anyone your hand unless you’d give them your blade.* Maddox’s lesson echoed in her mind. Why did Master Turk want to touch her? She thought about refusing, but then he might turn down her pledge. She inhaled deeply, tasting the lemony scent of him on her tongue, and held out her hand.

His fingers closed around hers, his grip firm and warm. Melba held her breath, risked a glance up at his face, and found him watching her, dark eyes narrowed. A strange shivery feeling washed through her that made her squirm inside her clothes.

He dropped her hand, pressed his lips together, and scrutinized her from head to foot.

With a flare of horror, she thought he'd sensed she was female.

"Mayhap I'll give you a chance. What will you pledge me?"

On a sigh of relief, she looked down at the three carved wooden toggles on her jacket and slid her fingers behind her favorite. "Carved this meself from a sliver of ironwood I found on the shore."

He raised his eyebrows and ran a finger over the pattern. "That'll suffice."

She grabbed the knife from her boot and sliced off the toggle before dropping it in his outstretched palm. He tucked her pledge inside his jacket and felt in his pocket. "Hold out your hand."

When she did, he dropped something smooth, black, and oval into her palm. She stared at it aghast. Poor masters gave their boys tin disks, the more prosperous used carved bone or wooden tokens. She'd never seen the likes of this pledge before.

"It's a starlight stone," he said in answer to her quizzical expression. "Hold it up to the moonlight."

She turned the warm weight of the stone over in her hand and then angled it toward the moon. Tiny sparks of light danced across the stone's surface as silver, purple, and green streaked through its crystalline depths. For a moment, she forgot where she was, entranced by the colors.

"Take another look tomorrow," he said. "It contains different colors under the sun."

"Oh." Melba curled her fingers around the treasure. Nobody had ever given her something this pretty before. A little fizz of excitement went through her. Perhaps he liked her. She glanced up at his darkly handsome face. "Do you give this type of pledge to all your boys?"

He nodded.

She ignored the sting of disappointment and jammed the stone deep in the secret loot pocket in her breeches where it couldn't fall out. All that mattered was that Master Turk had accepted her pledge. As long as he didn't discover she was a girl, she had a chance to become a spy and make something of her life.

"You stink as bad as an alley cat," he said with a grimace. "When we reach the bunkhouse, first order of business is to get you out of those filthy clothes and into a bath."

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Turk stopped at the top of a set of brick steps that were little more than foot and handholds, invisible unless you were in the know. He glanced over his shoulder at Mel. The boy

had been silent since he'd accepted his pledge. Yet Turk was keenly aware of the boy behind him, his vibrant, energetic presence extraordinarily strong for a boy untrained in Earth Magic.

They were now only a few streets from the bunkhouse he kept for his boys, and he had to make a decision on what to do with him. He had planned to pass Mel on to his friend and fellow spy Steptoe for training, but something about this boy niggled at his awareness, something more than the boy's latent magical ability.

Although Mel had initially seemed eager to tag along, he now had a sour look on his face, his shoulders slumped. "Spit it out, lad," Turk said. "What's troubling you?"

Mel shrugged and stared down at his cumbersome boots. Those would have to go. How the lad had managed to walk the skyways wearing such boots was a miracle. At least it proved Mel had balance and courage.

At length, the boy raised his intelligent blue eyes and wrinkled his nose. "I don't need no bath, sir. I'll scrub off me face and hands under the pump in the yard. Don't do to smell too clean." As if to emphasize the point, he spat on his hands and rubbed them against his breeches.

Turk groaned inwardly. He couldn't understand why all his boys detested soap and water. When he was a boy, he'd hated being filthy, his skin sore from the dirt.

Mel blinked in the moonlight. Even his dirty face couldn't hide his jewel-bright blue eyes. Turk rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully. Mel was unusual. Only a boy trained by the Shining Brotherhood should be capable of shielding his thoughts from an Earth Magic adept like Turk, yet he could read nothing from him but vague emotions. Even the tiny Earth Jinn inside the starlight stone had failed to magnify Mel's thoughts enough for Turk to read him.

It would be a waste to have Steptoe train the boy as a regular spy and ignore his fledgling power. He needed to be trained by the Shining Brotherhood, or perhaps Turk could bring him home and undertake his training himself. Mel's small, even features would likely scrub up well enough to make him acceptable in the highest circles. If he proved skillful, the boy had potential to spy on Nob Hill, even in the Royal Palace. Turk's only problem would be persuading his housekeeper Gwinnie to accept the boy.

"Come." Turk indicated a change of direction and set off toward the inner circle.

"So I don't need a bath?" the boy asked hopefully.

"I've decided not to take you to the bunkhouse."

Mel's boots clattered and Turk spun around in time to see Mel scramble up from where

he'd slipped on the tiles. "I'm still pledged, ain't I, sir? If it's that important, I'll bathe."

"Aye, you will bathe. I'm taking you to my home and I'll not allow a grimy tyke inside. For all I know you've got lice."

"I keep me hair short so's I don't get no lice. Master Maddox brushed me hair with pepper dust only last week." Mel pulled off his cap revealing a short fuzz of what was undoubtedly grubby hair.

"My housekeeper Gwinnie will make sure you're clean." And she wouldn't use pepper dust. The back of Turk's throat stung at the memory of that vile dust in his eyes and up his nose.

"You mean a woman will clean me?" Mel asked wide-eyed.

"Yes, a woman."

"Oh."

Turk jumped another alley and turned to watch Mel back up a few steps before he hurled himself over the gap like a rat leaving a sinking ship. The boy scabbled on the edge and pulled himself up, breathing hard. Mel had guts; he'd give him that. He was observant, brave, strong for his size, and bright as a flare: all qualities that could potentially make him an excellent spy.

Mel stood up and looked around. "We're heading to the inner circle, Master Turk."

"Aye." Turk pointed to the row of tall, narrow palaces fronting the canal that ran around the inner circle. "The one decorated with flower mosaics and green metal balconies is Waterberry House. It's mine."

Mel gasped. "You *are* a nob."

Turk glanced at Waterberry House with a twinge of regret. He loved the place and it felt like his own even though it wasn't. But he was as far from nobility as it was possible to get. "A good spy knows that looks can be deceiving."

He set off again and thought Mel would wake his neighbors with his clodhopper boots on the palace roofs, but no one stirred to raise the alarm.

When they reached Waterberry House, he opened the small gate into his roof garden and led Mel along the winding path between the plants. The boy stared around open-mouthed. "I ain't never seen a place like this before." He ran his fingers along the thin brass pipes of the irrigation system and sniffed the flowers in a way that reminded Turk of himself when the monks of the Shining Brotherhood first took him in and he discovered the garden at the Seminary. "'Tis so beautiful, it looks like you summoned an Earth Jinn."

Turk examined Mel's face, wondering if he could sense the presence of the Jinn that tended the plants, but the boy had obviously just used the term as an expression of praise.

"Here," Turk cupped a pink rose in his hand and angled the bloom toward the boy. "My favorite fragrance." The spirits of the roses could be turned into mischievous little Flower Jinns that held a special place in Turk's heart. The first Jinn the Brothers had taught him to summon had come from a pink rose.

Mel sniffed and his bright blue eyes widened. "That smells lovely."

"Get out your knife. We'll cut a few stems for my housekeeper, Gwinnie." Flowers might put her in a good mood.

He took Mel's blade, grimacing at the dirty handle, and demonstrated how to cut a rose and trim away the thorns. Then he watched while Mel cut and prepared four more stems.

Mel tucked his knife back in his boot and held the roses out before him reverentially. Turk led him through the small tower door and they descended the narrow winding steps. When they reached the third floor, they took the hall to the main staircase and made their way down to ground level. The mouth-watering smell of baking dinner rolls flavored the air as they approached the kitchen.

Gwinnie turned from the polished brass range when they entered and her brows snapped down. "What's this ragamuffin doing in me kitchen? Send him to the bunkhouse."

Turk nudged Mel in the back and he shuffled forward and presented the roses. Gwinnie scowled down at Mel before taking the gift. "He smells like a sack o' dung."

"I'm training this one myself."

Gwinnie huffed and puffed as she clattered around finding a vase and then filling it with water. "Don't want no filthy tykes in me kitchen."

Turk walked across to the bathhouse door and pushed it open. The white china tub sat in the center of the room, cold and empty. "Fill the tub with warm water and find the lad some clean togs. His name's Mel."

Gwinnie scowled at the boy again. Mel stood sucking his lip and staring at his feet. He'd removed his cap and held it clasped before him. In this light, the boy's hair was unusually pale, even coated with a layer of grime. His head looked small, his features delicate. Luckily, the lad was a lot tougher than he appeared.

"I ain't scrubbing the filth off him," Gwinnie snapped.

Mel looked up, his blue eyes sharp and defensive. "I can bathe meself."

Mel and Gwinnie glared at each other. Turk grabbed a fresh bread roll from the baking sheet and decided not to bother with butter. Retreat seemed the best course of action. Mel and Gwinnie would reach an understanding far sooner if he didn't interfere.

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The old woman narrowed her pale brown eyes and pinned Melba with a fierce look. Melba knew nothing about housekeepers. The only women she had dealings with were the whorehouse madams she ran messages to and the skivvies who trudged around the markets first thing in the morning. The old woman's face was as wrinkled as her droopy stockings, and one of her cheeks was pitted with scars from the Scab. Her gray hair was pinned up beneath a lace cap with ribbons dangling down her cheeks like a proper lady. At Melba's scrutiny, Gwinnie jammed her hands on her wide hips and puckered her lips.

"What you looking at, boy?"

"Nothing." Melba dropped her gaze to the woman's faded layers of gauzy lace skirts.

"Get yourself over here then and help me shift this water."

Melba rounded the table, but got distracted by the silky pink petals of the roses arranged in a blue jug on the table. She'd never guessed that such beautiful, sweet-smelling flowers existed. They seemed to tickle the edges of her mind as though they called to her. While Gwinnie poured hot water into a bucket, Melba leaned forward and breathed in the fragrance of the flowers. If she was a lady, she'd keep roses in every room so she could sniff them whenever she wanted.

"Oy, lad, you leave them roses be. They ain't for the likes of you," Gwinnie said.

Melba couldn't resist inhaling a last deep breath of fragrance before she stepped back.

"Take this through to the bathhouse." Gwinnie tapped her shoe against the tin bucket she'd filled.

Melba heaved it up, careful not to slosh water down her clothes. After carrying six more buckets, Melba's arms were aching fit to drop off and the bath was half-full. Gwinnie appeared at the bathhouse doorway and put her hands on her hips. "Get them clothes off, then, and get in the tub. Looking at it ain't going to wash that grime off you."

A flash of panic tore through Melba. "I ain't taking off me togs with you watching."

Gwinnie flapped her hand dismissively. "Great Earth Jinn, I ain't interested in seeing

your skinny hide.” She turned away, pulling the door almost closed behind her. Melba slipped off her boots and waited a few seconds before tiptoeing to the door. She peered out and saw Gwinnie busy at the range, humming to herself. Melba pushed the door closed the last inch, then returned to the bath. She needed to be quick so Gwinnie didn’t return and catch her unclothed.

As she unfastened her jacket, she touched the space left by the toggle she’d pledged to Master Turk. Gwinnie wasn’t very friendly, but Melba had put up with worse than a carping old hag. This was the opportunity of a lifetime and Melba was determined to be the best spy trainee Master Turk had ever had.

She slipped off her jacket, pulled her shirt over her head, and yanked down her breeches. Dipping one foot in the bath, then the other, she gradually got used to the temperature. She sat down and slid beneath the water, wallowing in the blissful heat. In the summer, she and the other three lads pledged to Maddox played with cold water at the pump, but bathing in hot water was a whole new experience.

Brown dirt swirled in the water when she rubbed her legs and she couldn’t believe how white her skin was underneath. At the sound of footsteps, she hugged her knees to her chest and stared at the door.

Gwinnie came in and glanced at her. “You’ll be needing this.” She tossed a small black block and a scrap of cloth into the bathwater. Then she picked up Melba’s clothes between two fingers as though they were dead rats and headed for the door.

“Oy, me clothes.” Melba started to rise, then remembered her nakedness and plopped back down with a splash. “You can’t take me clothes.”

Gwinnie paused in the doorway and pursed her lips. “You’ll not be wearing this filthy tat in Turk’s house. I’ll bring you something more fitting.”

“No!” Melba’s cry echoed off the blank walls of the bathhouse as Gwinnie pulled the door closed. Panic welled inside her. She had nothing to cover herself. Then she remembered that the pledge stone Turk had given her was in the secret pocket in her breeches. “Bring back me pants,” she yelled.

Silence greeted her call. Gwinnie would have to bring her something to dry herself with and some clean clothes. She would ask about the pledge stone then. She took a calming breath. *Get yourself clean, then you can get out and cover up.*

Melba scabbled in the bottom of the bath and found the cloth and a black slab that she

recognized as a cake of seaweed soap. She lathered the cloth and rubbed it over her body and head before dunking herself again. A brown, scummy crust covered the water. She wrinkled her nose. Had all that dirt really come off her? Maybe Master Turk was right and she had needed a bath.

She scrubbed her feet until the skin was red, but she couldn't clean all the dirt from the creases around her toes. Gwinnie came in so quietly Melba didn't hear her arrive. "Scrub that mug of yours too, boy. Want me to do it?"

Melba hugged her knees and shrank away from the old woman. "Leave me be."

Gwinnie laughed and dropped a large white cloth on the wooden chair in the far corner of the room. "Dry yourself with this. I'm going to find you some clean clothes."

Three times Melba soaped the cloth and scrubbed her face and head to make sure she would be clean enough to please Master Turk. Then she sat still and listened. When she was sure it was quiet outside, she climbed from the tub and darted across the room. Her wet feet skidded on the shiny tiles and she barreled into the chair, landing in a tangled heap with the towel over her head. Cursing, she scrambled up from the cold floor. As she pulled the towel off her head, an earsplitting cry came from the doorway.

"You miserable little dollymop." Gwinnie charged at her.

Melba just had time to throw up an arm before Gwinnie started slapping at her face.

"If you think you can entice Turk to take you into his bed, you're wrong. He don't want the likes of you."

Ducking, Melba escaped and dashed around to the opposite side of the bath. "I ain't a dollymop. I want to be a spy."

"You miserable, conniving, scabby tart."

Melba pulled the towel around herself as best she could, but it wasn't quite big enough to cover top and bottom. Gwinnie lunged around the bath and Melba ran to the other end, keeping the obstacle between them. "Bring me some clothes."

"I ain't taking orders from a tart who's after lying her way into me master's bed."

"I do *not* want to get into Master Turk's bed," Melba shouted in desperation.

"What's this about my bed?" Master Turk appeared at the bathhouse door, his tall dark figure in stark contrast to the white walls.

"This dollymop is after you," Gwinnie spluttered.

Master Turk frowned, his brown eyes focusing on Melba. She struggled to pull the towel up and down at the same time, which proved a wasted effort as Gwinnie darted forward and yanked the fabric out of her hands. Melba froze beneath Master Turk's uncomprehending dark gaze. He opened his mouth and closed it again. Rather belatedly, he turned his back.

"Give the girl her towel, Gwinnie, and fetch her some clothes," he commanded in a clipped tone.

A dark pall of desperation closed over Melba. He'd throw her out now for sure.

Gwinnie smiled slyly, threw the towel at Melba, and bustled away. Melba covered herself, and hurried to the door. Master Turk had moved into the kitchen, his back to her, his fist clenched at his side.

"I can still be a spy," Melba pleaded. "I'm still pledged. I'm good. I'll show you."

He shook his head. "No, Mel, if that's your real name. I cannot train a girl to spy. It's not done."

"Nobody needs to know I'm a girl. You didn't guess." At her words, his breath hissed in sharply and she winced, knowing she'd angered him even more.

"You'll have to leave," he said tightly.

"Master Turk." The whining note in her voice sent heat racing up her neck into her face. No master liked a whiner. She cleared her throat and tried for a calm voice. "Pretend I'm a boy. Please."

"I cannot pretend you're a boy when I know you're a girl. This changes everything."

Her heart thundered as she stared at his stiff back, the width of his shoulders in his fine wool jacket, his gleaming black hair trimmed neatly over his collar. She couldn't appeal to his back. She stepped past him and looked up into his face. He kept his gaze fixed on the far wall, his lips tight, his nostrils slightly flared.

"Look at me, Master Turk. I don't really look like a girl, do I?"

Slowly, he lowered his eyes. His gaze flicked across her features, up to her hair, down to her lips. "You do."

"I don't!" She stamped her foot with frustration.

"You most certainly *do*. I cannot imagine how I didn't notice before."

Gwinnie chose that moment to reappear with a faded brown dress draped over her arm.

"I ain't wearing that," Melba shouted.

Gwinnie threw the dress on the floor at Melba's feet. In all the commotion, Melba had forgotten about her toes. After years of covering them up, how could they have slipped her mind? Master Maddox had told her that if anyone saw she had twelve toes they would tie her down and cut the extra ones off. Now Master Turk would see her deformity and have even more reason to throw her out.

She looked up at Master Turk, frightened of what she'd see on his face. His forehead was furrowed, his silky black eyebrows drawn together. Her last hope of being a spy trickled away. Slowly, he raised his narrowed eyes and scrutinized her features. "What's your proper name?"

"Melba."

"How old are you? The truth, please."

"Seventeen."

He dropped his gaze to her feet again. Melba curled her twelve toes against the cold flagstones. Surely Master Turk wouldn't cut her stupid extra little toes off.

Abruptly, he turned away and headed for the door to the hall. "Supply her with clothes she's happy to wear, Gwinnie. I don't care what she wears—just cover her up. Then feed her and find her somewhere to sleep. I'll talk to her tomorrow."

Melba stared at the doorway long after Master Turk had gone. Finally, she blinked and turned to Gwinnie. "What does that mean?"

The old woman glared at her. "You're in for it is what that means. One thing Turk don't like is having his boys lie to him." She looked Melba up and down meaningfully. "You've done so much lying, I reckon he'll truss you up and toss you down The Well."