



NIGHTMARE CIRCUS

ERIN
MORGENSTERN

Witty Toddy

Lately, his dinners had been far too stringy. The mice here were not the typical lush, well-fed, juicy, slow-witted city fare Roswell had become accustomed to. They were lean, and wily, and taunted his distinguished sensibilities. He didn't like to play with his food. And it was far more delicious in his mouth than running in demented scattered circles about his feet. Still, it was lean and stringy, or no mice at all.

He had just set to a thorough washing, camped under the popcorn and candy stand in the deserted circus. Dawn was creeping over the brilliant silken tents, washing the damp earth in hazy reds and purples. It was Roswell's favorite time of day...the end of night, when the last drunken onlookers lay passed out in the waning shadows of the night before. He had the place to himself, quiet, except little taunts of feathered prey chirruping from climbing trees all around, and the soft scent of nibbling grasses thickening with dew. Quiet, except...from across the brightening circus grounds came a familiar sound. It floated in and out of the tent walls, ruffling with them as they caught the breeze.

“Snick-snick-kitty-lick...”

His ears pricked forward.

“Snick-snick-snick...”

He knew that call. Forget mice. Diabetes Time was here!

IT WAS ALL POWERED BY CAT HAIR.

Each morning, the clock tender swept up Roswell's sheddings, separating out by white and black, and dropping one pile in that slot and one pile in that slot. Machinery whined dustily. Pendulums started moving without having been pushed. They curled, even insinuated, like cat tails. Roswell watched, seemingly approvingly.

The clockmaker did approve -- "Good job, Gregorious," he told the tender, "see you tomorrow" -- and, having dismissed him, looked at Roswell. "There. Next I will design one that you shall be able to climb on and sleep in safely. That should please you, too. What happens next should please you, as well."

A newsboy could be heard passing a window. "Today's edition! American Civil War declared over through truce! Dual governments agree that war was bad idea! Also in news! English Channel Arch completed! Offers best ocean views in Europe!"

The clockmaker looked out the window at the tents of the nearby bazaar, its shopowners preparing for its day, and whispered "Fare thee well, those who shall sell today. May this be your best-attended day ever. You will at least have the chance for this." He waited. The clock struck.

A minute later, the clock struck 8:61.

"It's working!" said the clockmaker.

And 9:00 never came, and the perfect spot of sunlight never again moved from Roswell's favorite spot.
Jennakayfrancis

He stared at her, she at him. Behind them lurked the shadowy figures of two, ancient wizards. Trainers, pitting Roswell and Jolena against one another in a battle of magic, the reward a wager only known to the old ones. Around them swirled the circus, an odd mixture of tumblers, kitten trainers, tattooed contortionists, trapeze artists, and red-headed twins. Dusk was falling, a time when the circus would close. Not just close, but disappear altogether. Such was the way of magic.

Magic that was settled in the dreamy gazes of Roswell and Jolena. He gripped her hands tightly, afraid to let go, afraid to lose her to the strange whims of others. Her gaze moved almost imperceptively to the grand clock in the circus center. It hovered there, just above the ground, swaying slightly to the carnival music. The stands swelled with an odd cabal of people, who never seemed to age, but returned to this circus every dawn, watching the same show, over and over and over.

Roswell tipped his head, his words barely above a whisper. "Europe. Late 1800's?"

Jolena let out a soft sigh, her acceptance of his plan. With one quick twist of their magic, they combined it, battling not each other, but destiny. The great clock opened up, yawning like a giant beast, and swallowed them whole.

The sun sizzled into silence over the horizon, and the circus faded into nothingness, leaving the two ancient ones, mouths agape, to wonder how they had been outwitted by two young magicians.

THE MAGICIAN'S TANGO

The cat scuttled around hoopskirts and boots and spats with his usual disdain. Surely he wasn't the only one in a tuxedo this evening? At least the audience had the colors right: black and white with the occasional red scarf. The cat himself wore one, knitted by a smitten girl who thought herself his biggest fan. Of course, if she had truly known him, she would have brought food. Or freedom.

Reaching the foot of the stage, he leaped onto a surprised lady's lap and catapulted himself onto the stage just in time to disappear in a puff of smoke. A hurdy gurdy began to play, the notes twinkling through the white cloud like stars appearing at dusk. It was a tango, and the cat sighed heavily as he stood upright and placed a white paw delicately on Esmerelda's hip. With his tail held in a question mark and his partner captured firmly but politely in the cage of his arms, the cat spun out of the dissipating smoke into the spotlight and danced as if the stage were made of fire. Esmerelda moved with him, her lips drawn back over sharp teeth and her white tail whipping around them both and snapping at appropriately dramatic moments.

At first, the audience seemed amused, then charmed. Then confused. Surely a cat and a dog couldn't dance like human lovers, their every step sharp with danger and passion, sadness and fury. Surely the graceful Maltese wasn't wearing an evening dress of silver spangles, her topknot braided back in the current fashion and her hat pinned at a rakish angle. Surely that wasn't a single red rose held in the teeth of her pugilistically undercut jaw?

They danced with a treacherous familiarity and an otherworldly magic. The audience clapped in time as the music crashed to a tumultuous close, the dog bent backward over the cat's extended claws. And then the applause roared, and they bowed until their ears swept the floor, but no one called for an encore.

"They will never understand the game," Esmerelda growled.

"Neither will we," Roswell hissed back.

Moonmetssun

PRIMFUL ACT

On the first day of winter of 1813, a magical circus had come to the city. No one knew where it had come those wonderful tents stretching across the sky. Everyone was amazed. The children approached to observe the unique beauty that overflowed of each of them. They were strange. Perhaps wonderfully strange. Unique. By their colors more than anything. Black that emanated from the darkness and the deep mysteries hidden in those tents. Of course, white that sank the minds with a fresh spirit of hope and endless light. But what no one knew, was perhaps the darkest secret of all, that kept alive the flame of the Circus: Roswell. The diminutive and enigmatic hair ball. Two mesmerizing green gems that allowed us to get lost in the depths of her eyes. She could control everything that was going on at the circus. Roswell was the spark behind each charm. Her powers. As unknown as her existence in that magical world without color. Rarely you could see her walking around the tents. Some folks stories told by the circus workers said that Roswell was always sitting on a beautiful red furniture that seemed to breath. Moving like the ocean waves. Her room was under this beautiful piece that always marked the same time : 12:00 midnight. Others believed the clock was the time itself. Moving to each period Roswell wanted. But that's just another mystery behind the black and white color. However, do not let this confuse us. Below the enigmatic tents is a cabal of strange people that never seems to age: the most striking tattooed contortionists, the darkest kitten trainers, the most agile trapeze artists and of course, the peculiar red-headed twins. On the other hand, a duel. A fierce competition between two young illusionists that ended in a sweet, forbidden love...

Be careful mysteries always comes with little surprises, have your mind open and let this act begin...

Oberonia

350 EGGS ZACHERY

If he would have known that the position of his sleeves had an effect on the coloring of his transformation, he would have made sure they were at least in the same position when the spell was cast. Looking down at the white fur on his front legs, Benedict's ears pinned themselves back ever so slightly. The one sleeve he'd left down allowed only the paw of his left leg to be white, while his right leg was almost completely white. He tried to forget it.

Tonight, his mission was information. It was a tricky business. In a town overflowing with wizards, staying on top was not easy. He had been lucky enough to capture the position as First Apprentice with one of the foremost magic practitioners in the city, Dr. Otho Apheticus. Benedict skulked around the bakery and across the street to the office of the doctor's rival. He jumped into the window and swished his tail against the wall.

First Apprentice Jupiter was practicing the shadow bending exercises. Benedict wasn't supposed to learn them until next year. Their masters hated each other and it was expected that they, in kind, hated each other as well. Benedict held no hatred. The only thing he felt was heated interest at the way Jupiter's wrists moved as he conjured and the way the fire light lined his profile. He waited for the practice to end before he meowed.

Jupiter knew the cat in the window and he grinned as he reached over to open the sill.

"You're late."

Benedict bumped his head against Jupiter's cheek, "Mrow."

"Don't give me that. Dr. Titus will be back in an hour."

Benedict jumped inside the room and began to circle. The faster he moved, the faster the transformation shaped him. Finally, he stood, adjusted his sleeve and stretched.

"Don't be mad. Old Patheticus is taking me with him on his next outing. I'll be gone at least three days."

Jupiter pulled Benedict closer. "We'll make due. We always do, love."

The young men kissed as the fire light lined both of their profiles together.

ME, ROSWELL AND THE AMAZING CIRCUS TENT

It was a Fall afternoon on desert trail. The coolness of the air keeping the dust down and the orange tint on the horizon telling me dark would be soon upon us. Traveling now for months, the days blur into nights and nights back again into days. I started counting time by existence as opposed to the normal constraints of this world. I was still on "one". We had hoped to be in California by now, I suppose a train would have been quicker, but the romanticism of traveling by horse and wagon had overcome our sensibilities. As we crested the last hill before the waning light escaped us, a strange sight caught our attention. Off in the distance there appeared to be tents strangely arranged in an almost maze like design. The last bit of light left the sky and a huge sign eerily glowed with the word "OPEN". Roswell, my best friend, traveling companion, business partner and the world's last living-walking, talking cat suggested we take a look. He hopped down and led the way to the opening of the first tent. We stepped inside only to have our senses overwhelmed by the amazing sights before us. As far as the eye could see were circus rings with the most peculiar and amazing sights ever seen. It was strange, because as we passed these queer sights and displays of balancing, juggling, oddities, rare animals never before seen, the pathway would turn out of sight and into a new arena and ring with even more spectacular sights. It was though we were spiraling in to what should have been a smaller and smaller area, like the inside of a conch shell, yet each turn inward brought us to a larger and larger area. We finally seemed to get to middle of the tents and to the biggest ring yet. There in front of us was the ringmaster... a horrible and evil looking creature, almost human...yet...not. Roswell said to me, "I think it is time to leave". "I knew it", said the ringmaster. "He talks"! "I must add you to my collection of amazing oddities". "This circus, The Circus of The Night, is only open from Dusk to Dawn". "If I keep you here until the daylight falls upon the tents, you will be stuck here until the end of time and forced to do my bidding". I had turned to tell Roswell we better run only to see the tip of his tail rounding the first corner. I was three steps behind. It seemed we ran for hours, days, years, eternity... Until, a small tiny opening was seen in the distance. It was shrinking before our eyes. At the very moment the first ray of the sun hit the tent Roswell and I dove through, hitting the ground quite hard.....OUTSIDE OF THE TENT! As we turned to look at where we had been, the amazing incredible array of tents and amusements faded away...it was gone. Roswell turned to me and said "Well partner, shall we continue our journey"? I laughed and said "Yes sir...and let's high tail it as far from here as possible". "I am with you", said Roswell.

Howlowkitty

Winner!

The once drab sand glittered in the afternoon sun. This was Roswell's time, before dusk and its machinations, before the circus folk woke and created a colorful world illuminated by the glow of gaudy lanterns and lit torches.

There was no mustachioed barker in red velvet coat waving in marks. No Siamese twins bound in layer upon layer of pastel frocks singing their sirens' song. The pickled punks were packed away, row upon row of jars nestled safely in cartons filled with sawdust. As the circus folk slept, their chosen site was frozen in silence.

The three main tents already hitched, were three blazing jewels enveloped in the light of the setting sun: emerald, ruby, and topaz. Roswell barely noticed; she was intent on her course. She slipped into the smallest edifice and entered a world stained royal blue. She snuck past the wizards, who dueled with lightning in their act. Daytime, they slept curled around each other on a nest of cushions. Roswell leapt over the bearded lady's arm to reach the cordoned off exhibit that was her destination; the woman's fingers brushed Roswell's tail in a dreamy, languid motion that warned her to be more cautious of those under Morpheus's rule.

Finally, she was through the muslin hung as a makeshift wall and perched on the lip of the crude, pine box hidden within. She was fortunate; once again no one had bothered to secure the lid, which gaped open on rusty hinges. Inside rested the living mummy, unprotected from moths and ants and the other creepy crawlies that might munch on her papery skin and wrappings, but this worked to Roswell's advantage.

She stared down in affection. With a lift of her chin, a small mouse still jerking with traces of life flew into the mummy's mouth, past leathery parched lips and jagged, brown teeth. Its jaw crunched closed.

Roswell was pleased. With each new offering, the sound that accompanied the crunch, something like the whisper of two sheets of papyrus sliding and ripping against each other, grew fainter.

Soon, Roswell's friend would be ready.

@whatakuriogirl

THE MOUSE CIRCUS

One evening in June, Roswell the cat was lounging on a windowsill, watching the fireflies drifting around outside, when she saw a small white mouse run across the yard. This was strange not only because wild mice aren't usually white, but also because it appeared to be wearing a mouse-size bustle and a tiny top hat, both tied with small red ribbons. Leaving by a door left ajar for circulation, Roswell turned the corner just in time to see a white tail disappearing into the bushes bordering the yard.

Emerging on the other side, Roswell was surprised to find not the neighbors' house, but a small black-and-white striped circus tent illuminated from within. Edging closer, she found the flap by the front attended by a small gray mouse in a pinstriped vest. He didn't seem frightened by her, so she slipped through the opening. It was larger inside than it should've been, and she could sit up just fine behind the bleachers, which were filled with mice holding cotton candy and popcorn, squeaking excitedly. Then the lights dimmed and a chubby brown mouse dressed like a ringmaster, complete with handlebar whiskers, stood in the middle and squeaked a welcome.

With a small flash of light and glitter, the ringleader was replaced with a black and grey mouse wearing a silk top hat and cape. With a flourish of his cape, the white mouse with the red hat and bustle appeared next to him. Laying her down, he cried "Squeekaminus Squeakitos!" and she began to levitate. Holding a hoop in his tail, the magician mouse put her through it, showing there were no strings. Returning her to the ground, he performed a few more tricks, then they both bowed and disappeared in another swoosh of his cape.

The rest of the evening featured death-defying motorcycling mice, high-wire tricks and flips, and clowns falling into custard pie. After a while, things began to get hazy and lights began to dim.

Opening her eyes, Roswell found herself in the neighbors' rosebush, covered in the morning's dew. Getting up, she returned home for breakfast.

Esmertina

BETWEEN POINTED EARS

The thrum of a drum roll pulsed through the big top. It erupted into a cymbal clash perfectly timed with the snap of the spotlight, and there she was, flicking her tail and accepting the ooohs and applause that were rightfully hers.

Now the drums accompanied squeaky wheels as unseen assistants positioned the prop for her first act behind her. The children strained in their seats, trying to guess what feat might be coming. She simply sat, breathing in the candy-sweet, animal scent of them.

When the suspense had been allowed to build just the right amount, she had a nice thorough stretch and then surveyed that night's bookshelf. With a crouch and a rear-end wriggle of surgical precision, she leapt to the one shelf that held fragile items. One by one she nudged them toward the edge of the shelf where they teetered, tumbled and spectacularly shattered below. The trumpets played a fanfare, and the children gasped and cheered. She stretched herself out on the now-bare shelf and absently licked a paw by way of a bow.

Meanwhile, worlds away, white paws limply twitched and green eyes darted wildly behind closed lids. A thin lip quivered, pulling back slightly from fang-sharp teeth, almost like a grin.

"Look, honey," her woman whispered, nudging her man. "What do you suppose Roswell dreams about?"

Her man simply smiled, aimed his phone, and captured the moment forever.

Julie Wright

MAKING ROOM FOR ROSWELL

At dusk, for the past two nights, the black and white cat had shown on her windowsill. Its arrival was announced with a resonant meow that seemed to hang in the air and fill every room in her small house.

The first night, she was at the kitchen table. She caught its gaze, watched its green eyes close in a slow blink. When they reopened she felt changed. Energized. Renewed.

She was delighted to hear him again the second night. But surprised on his third visit to see he was wearing a miniature bow tie.

“What a charmer,” she thought. “I’ll call you Roswell.”

She got up from the table and poured some milk in a glass bowl. Feeling a little foolish and girlish for her age, she took the bowl out to the porch and called his name. Like an acrobat, Roswell leapt to her wicker table and bounced off the railing, soaring across her red geraniums and landing at her feet.

He accepted her milk offering, looked up at her with a milky moustache, wiped it dry with a sandpaper tongue and turned to go. As the last wisp of Roswell’s tail disappeared behind her stone wall, she set out after him.

In the darkness, she nearly lost him until two bright marmalade-colored kittens joined his side.

The trio entered a slim alley next to the neighborhood bakery. She braved on, feeling her heartbeat quicken as her pace slowed. The alley ended at a gray brick building with a bright red door. It was slightly ajar with the most enchanting music spilling out. Strings and flutes intertwined with ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs.’

The door swung open and a man’s silhouette barely concealed what looked like a circus performance inside. As he stepped towards her, she saw he wore black and white formal attire, including a tie matching Roswell’s. “This must be his owner,” she thought, until his familiar green eyes met hers.

“Welcome,” he said. And the word hung in the air around her and then filled every chamber of her heart.

Zac Newnham

THE WIZARD TWINS

Two young wizards strode down an empty road.

“I bet I can turn that tree into a frog!” yelled one.

“I bet you can’t!” yelled the other.

The wizard tried.

He couldn’t. No matter how hard he waved the stick he’d picked off the ground or yelled magical things whilst doing so, it wouldn’t happen.

The wizards were human children, after all; two red-headed twins.

But this didn’t stop them. They performed magic all afternoon, running through the street with their wands cutting the air, followed mysteriously by a black and white cat adorning a white bowtie. It wasn’t theirs and they didn’t care, but it followed wherever they went. At one point the boy wizard turned and said: “I bet I can turn that cat into a fish!”

“I bet you can’t,” his twin sister replied.

Aiming his wand the boy wizard yelled: “Abra-cadabra-alakapish, turn this cat into a fish!”

Nothing happened.

The boy wizard stormed off, his sister and the cat following behind.

They eventually stepped on a small bridge over a creek. A tree stood before them, and only a foot lower, leaning against the tree with a hat over his eyes, was a man. By his side he had a bucket, and inside was a fish, a hook, and some line.

“I bet I can get that fish to come to my hand,” the boy wizard said.

“I bet you can’t.”

The boy aimed his wand at the bucket, then turning to his sister he said: “Better close your eyes.”

She did, and the boy whispered his spell.

“Abra-cadabra-alakazand, bring this fish to my hand.”

Then he fell silently to his belly. He reached through the gaps in the bridge and pulled on the line in the bucket. The fish at the other end rose. When he had it in his hand he stood quickly and whispered again: “Told you.”

His sister’s eyes opened wide; her mouth hung open. She looked at the bucket, she looked at his hand. She couldn’t speak.

Behind them the cat eyed the fish, silently hoping he’d be given a feed.
Techdragon

The Cat Must Approve....

“Black and white. White and black, ” muttered the old clockmaker as he flitted around his workshop, his nimble fingertips

dancing over the selection of gears, trinkets, carvings and decorations that covered the side tables on every side. Partially finished masterworks hung on the walls and the gentle urging sounds of clockwork filled the air.

In the center of this fantastical space was an enormous oak table with a dark finish that showcased all its scars. There were gouges and light scratches, stains from dyes and paints, roughened places and those worn smooth. The table was well loved and always held, center stage, the most important clock while in progress. At this very moment, as he paced round and round its imposing bulk, there was, in the sunlight circle in the middle of the table, no clock.

Instead, there was Roswell.

“Black and white. White and black,” continued the clockmaker.

She sat up, as proper as any young courtesan, and kept her jeweled eyes on him as he moved. His fingers stopped on a tiny carved statue of a cat, unfinished and unpainted. He replaced it on the table and continued around in his light tread, letting his finger do the work. Some days, he was certain he saw more through his finger than his eyes.

“Black and white. White and... white ...”

A tingle radiated up through his fingers as they rested on a second larger cat figurine. He gently picked it up to hold close to his elderly eyes. The small body was delicately carved and magnificently articulated. As he slowly moved its nimble legs, the figurine seemed to frolic over his palms and through his fingers. Its face was a study in beauty and held an expression on joyful revel. He sat down slowly in front of Roswell and showed her the magnificent kitten dancing in his hands.

Roswell leaned in close and snugged against his curved up fingers, purring loudly as she watched this little one canter around.

“Prefect, my pretty. Black and white. White and black. She will be my new star.”

Amy Stimson

NUANCE

Eyes closed, she can smell the heated sugar, the scent of hot popcorn spitting into midnight air. She can feel boots sink into the worn pathway. She knows her way into the monochrome dream.

**You press your hands over each other, clapping resin between them. From the dark clanks a white spotlight. A performer climbs the silver ladder beneath you. As she nears the top, they slow, then stop. She hoists herself onto the platform. You take a deep breath, and leap from it.

It's not a just freedom up here. It's purity.**

The writer puts her pen to paper.

There is a giant clock face behind you: a great white clock, twice the length of a man. A man stands in it, a black silhouette, ricocheting five black juggling balls between its four cardinal points.

Nothing is inked to the paper, but great patterns of white, invisible words fall imperceptibly, littering the page. Pale hands squeeze at dark hair. It wants to be written.

**The acrobat twists in a scarlet ribbon, the span of your hand. First he spins, faster and faster until you cannot see him, then with one motion, he stops. He rolls up the length, so high you feel your own nerves.

Wrapped up there, he juggles a knife. Its edges flicker. You almost cannot bear to watch.**

**The clock behind the trapeze is ticking backward. Only seconds to midnight. You are the acrobat, wrapped at the height of its twists. The balls slap into the juggler's hands, precisely, at each tick. Five seconds to midnight, he throws them out, one by one. Five—you brandish your knife—four—a single swipe, you slice that red cord—three—a blood-red bullet, you plummet toward the ground—two—the crowd gasp hungrily—one—you slap the ground with your hands—somersaulting over—leaping up again.

Midnight strikes—and you are vanished, gone, disappeared.**

The writer takes up her pen. Near enough to read her scribbles, Roswell, curled on her desk, begins to purr. A circus where you are anyone: She knows where her story shall begin.

Brittney Gabbard

THE LOVERS' ACCOMPLICE

“How many times must I implore you to keep this cat inside your own tent?”

Nessa could not help but smile despite her master's sardonic tone. “Just once more, as always,”

“You'd do well to take extra care from now on. The Draeseke brothers were quite humiliated when they revealed their little trick, and, instead of a canary, there were merely a few feathers in the cage. Roswell was quite pleased, no doubt. It's what those plebeians deserve, pandering their sleight of hand tricks to the public..”

He was interrupted when Roswell leaped from the cradle of his arms onto the small table sending a stack of horticulture books to the floor. He explored the table until finally settling down on the open book in front of Nessa. She might have reprimanded him had he not looked quite so cute in his little bow tie.

“Are you ready for tomorrow? That old fool is up to something I'm sure of it. He brought his boy to our tea today; little cad kept sending me these smug, little smiles between sips. I won't have you embarrassing me tomorrow—”

“—if master wants me to do well tomorrow then perhaps he should leave me to my reading.”

“I suppose.” He looked quite put out at having his complaints interrupted but made to leave nonetheless. “Might I have a hint of what you are planning?” He asked while looking pointedly at the pile of books on the floor.

She smiled. “I've become quite fond of tree grafting.” A shrewd look appeared on his face before he left the tent with great haste with the intention of lounging about his rival's tent with a smug smile of his own. Nessa waited a few moments before unclipping the tie from Roswell's neck. With a wave of her hand the tie transformed into a note.

“Dearest Nessarose...From your loving rival”

Nessa read the letter slowly, heart pounding as usual, then quickly penned one of her own. “Make sure master doesn't see you,” she said as she clipped the new bow tie around Roswell's neck.

SuddenlyJamie

SILENCE AND CLOCKWORK

Sabrina couldn't open her eyes. She was quite sure – based on the sensation of hard, cold ground beneath her – she was awake, but her eyes refused to open. She pressed her palms into the dirt and pushed herself up. The fingers of her left hand closed on something cold and smooth; she drew the object into her lap and sat motionless.

The only sound was the quiet rasping of snowfall. She brushed ice crystals from her lashes and opened her eyes. Bright moonlight cast daytime shadows across a courtyard hemmed in by hulking tents. Sabrina looked at the object nestled in her hand: a delicate, iron key. She remembered– the gay evening at the Cirque des Reves, the explosion of light and sound that came from everywhere at once, the pandemonium, the red-headed girl pressing the key into her hand before disappearing between the tents after a marmalade kitten.

The quiet deepened. She felt utterly alone, but from the shadows, a black and white cat watched her with an air of appraisal and forced patience. Unsure why, Sabrina gathered her skirts, rose to her feet, and followed the cat down a narrow alley between two tents.

As she passed an open entry, she gasped. In the dim light cast by floating paper lanterns she could see a startling tableau of circus performers and visitors, frozen like a child's collection of china dolls. She shuddered and hurried past, following the cat as it slipped into a small, unassuming tent at the border of the grounds.

Inside, a small, white-haired man in shirtsleeves, an apron, and wire-rimmed spectacles stood frozen beside an enormous and intricate contraption that looked like a grandfather clock had turned inside out and collided with a steam engine. The cat peered intently into a dark crevice at the foot of the machine and mewed piteously, reaching a white paw between two gears. Sabrina slid her fingers and the key into the crack. She tugged and a small, mechanical mouse flew out. The cat pounced and the machine creaked to life.

“Thank you, my dear,” said the bespectacled man.