

The Clockwork Heart

By Justin R. Macumber

Perseid Station was a magnificent work of space construction. Seen from the outside, it looked like two gigantic mushrooms joined stem to stem. It was a place brimming with life, home to thousands of beings from hundreds of worlds. But, in the foyer of apartment 513-Epsilon, the universe was ending.

“What do you mean you don’t love me?” Jack asked. He felt like a bullet had pierced his chest, and all that remained of him was pouring from the wound to collect around his numb feet. It was a strange sensation, and the chill that crossed his skin did nothing to diminish it.

“I mean exactly what I said,” Sarah replied.

Sarah was beautiful, no matter which region of the galaxy you hailed from. She wasn’t tall, but every centimeter of her radiated like a star on the verge of going nova. Olive-toned skin hinted at tropical beaches under a sleepy sky, and her lustrous black hair fell in lazy, rainy afternoon curls down her back and across her shoulders. She didn’t wear much in the way of makeup, but she didn’t need to. It was her eyes, though, her strangely magnetic pale blue eyes that struck every person who met her. They were bottomless pools a man could drown in if he let himself. Jack had, many times. He’d hoped to one day marry her and lose himself in them forever.

“You can’t mean that,” he said, trying hard not to sound as desperate as he felt. “Come on, whatever I did, I can make it up to you. I can fix this.”

Sarah shook her head and leaned back against the railing that led down to their living

room from the apartment foyer. She was dressed in a red business dress suit, the silky material perfect for her skin tone. He remembered when she'd bought it, the night she landed the Carson account. She'd been so proud. They'd made love in the dressing room of the store.

"No, you can't, Jack," she told him in tones as flat as his heart. "This isn't something you can patch over. There is no 'fix' for this. It's just... you. I can't do this anymore."

"Do what?"

"This," she replied, gesturing around the apartment they'd shared for just over a year. "All this. I can't do it anymore. In the beginning, it was cute, you know? You were the sensitive artist, hopeful, promising. But you gave up on that, so it's not cute anymore. Honestly, it hasn't been for awhile. I'm done with it. Any love I once felt for you is gone. This is over. I'm leaving."

Panic rose up in Jack's chest like a startled bird. "Why didn't you say something sooner? If you've felt like this for so long, why didn't you say something?"

Clutched in her right hand was her purse, and Sarah flicked it open with an angry snap of her wrist. She dug around in it for a moment, and when her hand came out she had a cigarette clamped between her fingers. She pulled the burn cap a moment later, lighting the cigarette as it came off. Pale grey smoke floated into the air in thin, nonchalant ribbons.

"Christ, Jack, I shouldn't have had to. This is just who you are. Somewhere inside of you is an artist, but for whatever reason you've buried him, and now you seem content to just wander from menial job to menial job. You're happy to do that. I'm not."

Jack rummaged around in his pockets for a smoke of his own, but his jeans were empty, and the thought of bumming one off of Sarah made his eyes itch. So, instead, he said, "If it's money, baby, I can get a better job. I just do these while I think about what my next project is

going to be. I can get a suit job, though. I can make more money.”

“You aren’t even listening,” she barked, her hands suddenly shaking. “It isn’t about money! I make enough for both of us! It’s about you letting yourself slid away into nothing. Every day I see that spark you once had dim little by little, and it’s to the point where I don’t know if it was really there to begin with. You used to talk about the books you wanted to write, the songs you wanted to play, and it would set my skin on fire to hear it. You had passion, Jack! Dammit, you had heart! But... now... hell, I don’t know what happened. Whatever you had, it’s gone, and I’m gone with it. And please, don’t try and spin this later on as me wanting to be your groupie or something. It was never that. It was all about you being you, and now you being... not you.”

“Then...” He stammered, trying to think of something that would stop her from stepping toward the door. “Then give me a chance to change. I’ve told you, I have a story in my head that is going to blow this universe wide open. Let me write it! Give me a chance!”

Sarah’s shaking stopped, and her hands and eyes became as still as carved stone. The only motion around her was the smoke from her dwindling cigarette. After a moment she said, “Answer me honestly - if I hadn’t said all this, what would you be doing tomorrow?”

Her question confused him at first, but as an answer formed in his brain, he understood what she was driving toward. He didn’t want to give her the words that had shaped themselves in his mouth, but he knew that to have said anything else would have been a lie. She’d known what he was going to say before he did.

“I would have gone to work at the maintenance bay,” he said, hating every syllable that passed his numb lips.

Sarah nodded, and in that moment, he hated her. For a brief second he nearly exploded in

rage. But then the anger turned back upon its true target – himself.

“That’s what I thought you’d say. And that’s why I’m leaving. Goodbye, Jack.”

She pushed away from the railing, and every step she took stole away a bit of his strength. By the time she walked past him, he could barely keep himself from crumbling to the floor. The faint warm scent of her perfume, a light mixture of jasmine and vanilla, wafted in her wake, and at that moment he knew it would be the last time he would have a chance to take it in. Tears fell down his cheeks.

“What about your stuff?” he asked, unable to turn around and face her.

Sarah stopped and replied, “I got most of my things out while you were at work today. If I missed anything... important... just put it in a box and leave a message in my work email. I’ll have someone come by and pick it up. Oh, and don’t worry about the apartment. It’s paid for through next month. Utilities too.”

“Thanks,” he told her, barely speaking above a whisper.

Sarah didn’t immediately saying anything. She just stood behind him, silent. After several long seconds ticked by she finally said, “I’m sorry this happened, Jack. You’re a good guy. Really. But, until you realize that you’re more than that, you’ll never be what you could be. Take care of yourself.”

The sound of her footsteps as they faded toward the door was like someone knocking on his casket. Every foot fall was final, irrevocable.

As her hand pressed the button that opened the loft door, Jack said over his shoulder, “Did you ever really love me, Sarah?”

She stopped in the doorway, and he could hear her turn back toward him.

“Yes. Once upon a time, I really did. Deeply. But you’re not the person I fell for

anymore. Goodbye, Jack.”

The door closed behind her, and the urge to run toward it and chase her down was so strong that he actually turned and took a step toward it. But, before he could do anything more than that, he sank to the floor and cried. It was all he had the strength for, and at that moment, it was the only thing that made sense.

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Sitting in the open air dining area of the St. Lawrence Café, Jack stared up at the structures far over his head on the other side of the station’s central channel, and in the hazy distance he thought he could see people looking down at him. In his hands was a paper napkin, and he tore at the material with nervous fingers. A snowdrift of tiny paper shreds littered the floor around him.

A whirring sound caught Jack’s attention, and he looked to his right and saw that a robotic waiter had rolled into position next to him. In its hands was an empty tray.

“Can I bring you anything, sir?”

“No,” Jack replied. “Like I told you the last time, I’m waiting on a friend.”

“You have been sitting here for a standard hour, sir. You must order something if you wish to remain seated. The rules of the house, sir.”

The words were said with the clean mechanical precision that only a robot could manage, but Jack thought he could detect a slightly annoyed undertone in the voice.

“Fine. A latte.”

The waiter didn’t move.

“And a zeleanberry muffin.”

“Very good, sir. I will return in a few moments.”

As the waiter rolled away, Jack barely restrained himself from lashing out with a kick to its metallic backside. Instead, he reached across the table and pulled another napkin from the dispenser. Seconds later it began to join its tortured brethren below him, bit by torn bit.

“This can’t be good,” a sultry voice said behind him.

Jack rose from his chair and turned, a weak smile struggling to cross his pallid face.

“Thanks for coming, Shar’rin,” he said.

Shar’rin leaned in and kissed him on his stubbly right cheek.

“Of course. No matter what, we’ll always be friends.”

Dropping the tattered napkin onto the café table, Jack gestured for Shar’rin to take the chair to his left, and then stepped around to pull it out for her. The smooth scales across Shar’rin’s cheeks, which were normally colored a bright red, dipped into a light pink shade, making clear her amusement. The rest of her red skin shimmered wetly in the light. She wore a loose white garment that hinted at much but betrayed little. Silver studs across her brow and lower lip winked at him as she sat down. Several of her many long head tendrils brushed his hand as he pushed her chair in, and a sudden rush of heat surged through him. He noted that the tips of her tendrils were also pink, though that meant something entirely different from amusement. He coughed to cover his embarrassment.

“Always the blushing boy,” Shar’rin said with a lascivious grin once Jack reclaimed his seat. “So cute.”

“You know me better than that. I was never much of a blusher while we were together.”

Shar’rin tilted her head, and a few tendrils fell across her burgundy shoulder. Her fingers

reached up and stroked them with an absentminded air.

“Oh, please,” she replied, “you humans, you think you’re so liberated, but in reality you’re still puritanical children.”

Rolling his eyes, Jack said, “Don’t mistake my lack of desire to join you and your husbands in bed as some sort of carnal failing. I was just too selfish to want to share you.”

A wicked grin flashed across her face. “You always did like to have me all to yourself. Still, you didn’t ask me to join you here to talk about that. So, what’s going on? By the amount of shredded paper below you, it’s bad.”

Jack leaned forward, but before he could say anything, the waiter returned. Quickly and efficiently it set the ordered latte and muffin down on the table. Once it was done it said, “And would the lady like something?”

“Some Refflick tea, please. Oh, and if you have any of those delightful little sugar cakes, I’ll take one of those as well.”

A negative *beep* issued from the robot’s voice box. “I’m sorry, miss, but we are out of sugar cakes at the moment.”

Shar’rin’s mouth twisted into a pout. “Very well, just the tea then.”

“One Refflik tea. Very good. I will return momentarily.”

Jack pushed the large cup of foam-covered coffee away from his side of the table, along with the muffin, but Shar’rin fluttered her right hand at him.

“Don’t wait for me,” she said. “Your coffee will only get cold, so drink up. But, while you’re doing that, tell me what’s going on.”

After taking an exploratory sip, Jack sighed and said, “Sarah left me last week.”

Nodding, she said, “I thought that might be it. There are only a few things that will drive

you to paper shredding, and having your heart broken is one of them. I'm so sorry, Jack. I can't believe you waited so long to tell me, though."

"For the first couple of days I was a complete wreck. After I was able to gather myself together enough to actually open a comm channel, I called Sarah and tried to get her back."

Shar'rin's eyes darkened. "You didn't."

"I did. First at her job, and then at her friend's apartment once I figured out where she was staying. I won't bore you with the details. Suffice it to say, there was a lot of shouting. If it wasn't over with when she first left, it's certainly over with now. I dug my hole about as deep as I could. Now I'm just looking to get out of it again."

"What happened?" she asked, leaning forward and cupping her chin in her left hand. "You two seemed so good together. Much better than we were."

Jack took another sip of his latte, and then he started pulling his muffin apart as he replied, "She said she was tired of waiting for me to become who I'm supposed to be, whatever in the hell that means. At first I thought she was mad that I still dabbled in the arts, but then she said it was just the opposite. Can you believe that? She was mad that I didn't indulge my artistic side enough!"

He had anticipated Shar'rin to join him in his indignant confusion, but instead she shrugged.

"Oh, no, I get that."

"What? You too?"

She nodded, leaned back, and crossed her legs. A moment later the waiter brought her tea and set it before her. Once she was satisfied that it had been brewed to her satisfaction, the robot rolled away again.

“Jack,” she said, “there are two types of artists in the universe. There are those who love their art, who... live for their art, who are consumed by it. And then there are those who merely love the idea of art. They put on the airs of an artist, indulge – your word, not mine – the eccentricities of an artist, but deep down it’s just an act. Where do you think you fall into that schism?”

“I’m assuming you’re going to say the latter,” Jack replied, his shoulders drooping.

To his surprise, Shar’rin shook her crimson head. “No, you’re the former. But, it scares you. For whatever reason, your art scares you, so you suppress it. What that does is make you appear to be the latter sort, and once people think you’re a phony they lose patience with the whole thing.”

Jack wasn’t sure what to say to that. He wanted to argue with her, tell her that she and Sarah were both wrong, but he couldn’t dredge up the energy to do so. He knew they weren’t wrong at all. Her words struck him deeply, but only because they were true.

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

Over the brim of her glass, Shar’rin said, “I’m no expert on human psychology, but that’s easy - you need to decide who it is you really want to be. Right now you’re a half person, a little of this and a little of that. If you ever want to be happy, to be in love, to share your life with someone, then you have to become whole, and the only way to do that is figure out who it is you really are. If you want to be an artist, then embrace it! You’ve put your heart under lock and key for so long that it’s turned into this mechanical thing, and its beat is there only to keep your body going. If you really want to be an artist, then you have to open it up and let it breathe again. But, if you don’t want to be an artist, stop saying you do and be done with it. Either way, make a choice and commit to it.”

Thoughts raced though Jack's mind too quickly for him to focus on any of them. They were like comets bouncing around inside his skull. He'd hoped Shar'rin would have some advice for him – she always had in the past – but he hadn't anticipated her dissecting him so easily and thoroughly. The ice in her tea had barely started melting, and he was laid as bare as any cadaver on an autopsy table. It unsettled him, but he also felt a strange bit of comfort in it.

“You're right,” he finally said, his muffin reduced to crumbs beneath his fingers. “I guess I've always known that, but sometimes it takes someone else saying it for it to sink in. Thanks.”

Shar'rin shook her head, and her tendrils flared out behind her. “Don't thank me. Just promise me that you're going to pursue your art. I don't think I could bear it if you let it go. I read some of your work, back when we were together, and I know it's what you should be doing. You can't write like that and it not mean something.”

“I wasn't planning on it,” he replied. “I've always been afraid that I wouldn't be able to stand having my art rejected. Now I see that it's me being rejected that's the real fear. Screw that, though. The worst they can do is say my art isn't good enough. The worst I can do is never give them that chance to say it.”

“Exactly. They might surprise you.” Shar'rin reached down to her side and pulled a small clutch from the folds of her gown. As she opened it and reached inside she said, “Anyway, I have a number for a woman I want you to meet.”

“You can't be serious!” Jack said, his eyes wide. “I just broke up!”

Shar'rin stopped rummaging in her purse and withdrew a glowing card, then looked up at him with a smirk. “Don't be obtuse, Jack. This has a number for a literary agent I know. Her name's Rachael Celeste, and she's one of the best in the business.”

“Oh. I’ve heard of her. An android, right?”

Shar’rin nodded. “Not that you could tell by looking. Her programming was updated to the latest firmware recently, and you can hardly tell she’s synthetic. It’s amazing.”

“I could tell,” Jack replied, laughing.

His former lover looked at him and sighed. “Not only are you a sexually repressed little boy, but you’re also a bio-bigot. Not looking good, Jack. A few more failings like that, and nothing will save you.”

“I am not,” he replied. “I just like my women real and fleshy.”

“This from the guy with the clockwork heart,” Shar’rin said with a loud laugh. “Rachael might not have blood pumping through her, but she’s real enough, and knowing your figure preferences, her flesh would suit you just fine. Now that I think about it, you and she might be perfectly suited for each other. You need someone who isn’t going to let you flitter about, and she knows how to get the best out of the artists she represents. Huh…”

Jack saw Shar’rin’s eyes lose focus, and he knew from experience that the mind behind them was whirring madly, schemes and plans piecing themselves together like a master puzzle solver. He coughed loudly, and that broke her from her trance.

“Let’s not rush things, okay?” Jack said. “First we deal with my art, and then we deal with my heart.”

Shar’rin laughed. “See? You’re a poet already.”

In spite of himself, Jack echoed her laugh.

“Anyway, here’s her card. I’ll let her know I gave it to you, so she’ll be expecting your call. Don’t disappoint either of us.”

Shar’rin put the card on the café table and pushed it toward him with a red finger, the

white nail at the end of it bright against the smooth cherry-toned skin. Jack leaned forward and picked the card up once it was near him. He could feel the heat of her skin in the stiff, radiant paper. As he brought it up, faint traces of strawberries and warm honey filled his nose, and he closed his eyes.

“You know, we can go back to my place if you want,” Shar’rin said, picking the thoughts seemingly straight from Jack’s brain.

“I appreciate the thought,” he replied, “but I think we both know we make better friends than lovers. I fall for you too hard and too fast. I lose myself with you.”

She looked at him for a moment, her eyes unwavering, but then she glanced down at her lap and said, “I know. I... I shouldn’t have offered. The last thing you need is another excuse. Sorry.”

“You meant well,” he said, reaching forward to pat her hand. “And, I appreciate it.”

Nothing more was said for several long seconds, both of the table’s occupants content to sit in comfortable silence. The solitude was broken when the waiter rolled back to their table.

“Will there be anything else?” it asked.

“I’m fine,” Shar’rin answered.

Jack shook his head. “I think we’re done.”

“And who will be paying the bill?”

Shar’rin pointed at Jack and chuckled. “You called, you pay.”

Jack joined her laugh and pulled a credit chit from his back pocket, which he handed to the waiter. After the chit was run through a scanner, a green light lit up on the waiter’s head, and then a receipt was printed and expelled from a slot on its chest.

“Thank you for dining with us at the St. Lawrence Café. Have a good day.”

With a wobble of its head, the waiter turned and rolled through a service door and out of sight.

“I should be getting to work too,” Shar’rin said, rising from the table. “I’m sorry for what happened between you and Sarah, but I’m glad we got to see each other again. It’s been too long.”

Jack pushed his chair back and rose to his feet.

“It has. I really appreciate you being here for me. You don’t know how much it means to me.”

A purple shine appeared on her cheeks, which Jack knew to be a blush. Those were rare for her.

“You mean a lot to me, Jack. No matter what. So, more than anything, I want you to be happy. Whatever I can do to help you accomplish that, I will.”

Jack nodded, then stepped forward and opened his arms. Shar’rin walked forward, and a moment later they were wrapped in a hug. Jack breathed deeply, and he was almost overcome by her scent and the warmth of her body, the contours of which he was more than familiar with. Sensing his reaction to her, she loosened her arms and pulled back.

“I better go,” she said, the purple blush spreading across her face and down her neck. “Take care, and let me know if you need anything else. I can float you some credits if you need them.”

“I’ll be okay. You’ve done more than enough. I’ll call Rachael later today, after I’ve sorted through a few things, see what I’ve got to offer now and what I might have in the near future.”

Shar’rin nodded. “All right. Be well, and don’t wait so long to call me next time.”

“Believe me, I won’t”

Nodding one last time, Shar’rin waved and stepped away from the table. She was through the waist-high exit gate a moment later, and within seconds she was around a corner and gone from sight.

Jack’s heart, which had been beating like a one-man band since helping his former lover take her seat, began to slow, and as it did he looked down at the business card she’d given him. Rachael Celeste’s name and comm address were emblazoned across it in holographic text that leapt off the card stock. He stared at it for a minute, and then slipped it into his front pants pocket.

Walking away from the café, every step he took toward his future seemed lighter than the one that had preceded it. The gears that made up his heart softened, and for the first time in a long time, he felt good. Jack smiled. He knew who he was, and while that person wasn’t perfect, it was real, and it was good.

The End