

This Sundered World
By Jenny K Brennan

Copyright 2016 Jenny K Brennan

"Don't forget, don't forget! The heart, the heart. Ticking clicking whirring. Oh poor me, have to see. See this. Don't forget, don't forget."

Bird

Chapter 1

"Oh no you don't. I can't. Shit, spit god fuck. Shit you don't do this to me. Oh no, not to Gabriel. Not fucking fair... not fair. Not fair." The rant exhausted itself in a moan and a sudden hiccup. The outburst of frustration and fear morphed into wordless mumbling. The sounds didn't even seem his own anymore. Gabriel kept making sounds to stop thoughts about what he was doing from crushing him. Because Gabriel had no fucking clue. He didn't know. He had never known. So he kept sputtering garbage because it might, on some level, help. Gabriel's fingers worked quickly but clearly at random where they had never been meant to be working. They prodded and poked at the intricate machinery. He turned one small knob, flipped a switch, prodded desperately at the bundles of wires and pipes grafted into flesh. He stared intently into the clockwork and willed it to keep going. Each desperate searching touch seared his fingertips as the overheating little engine spewed intermittent bursts of steam. Each leak decreased the pressure in the tiny engine he was trying to get going again. He had to get it right and do it before it failed. It had to be repaired while still running as it would never be restarted. That was the only thought in Gabriel's head as he scanned the incomprehensible clockwork that was his mothers failing heart.

A ragged cough stilled his fingers and he looked up at his mothers face. Her pale lips were turning a shade of blue that Gabriel had never seen before. He stared at his mothers trembling mouth while avoiding her eyes. A dry tongue prodded outwards from between perfectly manufactured teeth fronting the darkness of her mouth. It waggled weakly in a futile attempt to moisten dry and cracked lips. He stared as another cough racked all of her and a dribble of dark blood joined the already gore

spattered chin and neck. Too much pressure will do that to a person, he thought numbly. Failing fucking machines will do that.

The woman on the table drew in breath and smiled weakly. "Mind your words, Son." Her voice was barely loud enough to make out over the hissing steam and gurgling from her chest. It was no more than whispers of leaves, crackling and buzzing of insects dying. Not the intense fight for survival but the feeble twitching lingering remnant of the same. Accompanied by irregular clicks and incorrectly modulated functions, her words rested in the air between them for a moment before they registered as actual words. The meaning became clear several long moments after that. She slowly shook her head and laughed a rasping huff, wobbled a frail shuddering chuckle, "Gabriel, you idiot. Get your hands off my tits."

Gabriel blinked in confusion at the unfamiliar words but did look at his hands. And true enough, one of his hands had slid out of the cavity in his mother's chest and rested on one of her withered sagging breasts. A desperate sound emerged from his chest. It might have been a laugh. It might have been a cry. It was both. How could he feel embarrassed in a time like this? Mother was dying and Gabriel was trying to mend her breaking heart. However, long habit told him he should be feeling shame and so he did. Something that had built up inside him ever since he had found his mother in the state she was in now, wanted to burst out in the open. It felt hot and acidic in his chest, but moved about frail and thin in his mind. He closed his eyes and willed it to stop; that thing that he didn't want to feel.

He mumbled, "Sorry Mother." and pulled his hand away from the unseemly touch.

Mother raised her hand and placed it on top of his where it trembled against the blood spattered crumpled fabric that had been her dress. A splayed open corset and neatly unbuttoned shift completed her outfit. She breathed. For the time being she breathed. But he knew it would soon stop. She strained to speak but speak she did. "Don't worry, silly one. I didn't expect you to fix me. But you just ruined your vest. You can't go out like that." A disapproving wrinkle appeared and disappeared. "Your gloves. Did you lose your gloves again Gabriel?"

Gabriel jerked his head and stared into her eyes. Her hand was cool and sticky on top of his. It was so still. Calm where his trembled. He wanted to say something. That he didn't understand. That of course he would. That of course he hadn't lost his... what the hell? What did his gloves have to do with anything? He would mend her up just right. He could fix things. His face burned from the obvious lie even though it hadn't actually been spoken.

"It can't be fixed." she appeared to regain a sliver of energy and she kept talking

as her failing clockwork heart kept losing power, "One too many bad parts got put in to that heart of mine." She rested for a moment and in the silence her body produced one labored breath, and one heavy unsettling clunk from her chest. Just another part grinding to a halt. She ignored it and breathed again. "I taught you what you need to know. You idiot son of a true bastard. Dead River is not for you."

Gabriel looked away uneasily at the face that came foggily to his mind. His father had been recycled for so long that the memory barely stirred anything in him anymore. The remade cripple had been Gabriel's first, and last, lesson in Body work. He hadn't known what that meant then and he didn't know now. A machine like any other he had thought. Machines made things happen. Machines wheezed, sputtered, mumbled, transported heavy things from one place to another, wore down, ticked, gurgled, and broke. But what that machine had done with his father after Gabriel hoisted the broken body into the hopper was something Gabriel hadn't known machines could do. The machine broke people. Broke them into parts. Some bits to reuse, other bits to process into fertilizer, and some bits to place in glass bowls to look at. He had never figured that one out.

Mother noticed the familiar bemusement and sighed. As much as her ruined apparatus could express exasperation, it did. Two surprisingly powerful fingers pinched Gabriel's hand and he immediately jumped to attention. Mother was talking. "I wonder... I wonder if I taught you the wrong thing. You know, stupid child that you are." She paused as she contemplated words that she should have used a long time ago. She wondered if there was any meaning to telling this boy. This creature ... This child. "Listen, you idiot. I know you can't do shit. You are no repairman." She drew shallow breaths and seemed to want to say more. So much more. But after some moments, she slowly shook her head and closed her eyes.

Gabriel's own natural heart skipped a beat but his mother was still breathing, just gathering strength.

Finally she said, "I have been remade, repaired adjusted, prodded on for the last time. You hear me? There is nothing you can do Son. Even if you had the..." She coughed up another glob of bits of her mixed with gelatinous slime and blood, grimacing at the taste of her own fluids. "Go." She said, shaking her head as if that could banish the things she would have said if there was time. She turned her head away and the world seemed to fall in on itself as Gabriel realized he could no longer hear the hiss of breathing. There was a whistle of steam escaping but no human apparatus ever made that sound. Cooling pipes ticked. Cogs slowed, blood no longer had power to move. With just a whiff of air that barely moved vocal chords, Mother spoke so softly that Gabriel had to put his ear next to her mouth to make out what she said. In the stillness he heard it though.

"Go. Away from Dead River. Get out of Crawdin Lands. There is more out there. Outside. More..." Her body shuddered before she told him what she had kept from him for so long, "more people. Find them. I was afraid to see. I was... was wrong."

The hand that rested on Gabriel's twitched violently, turned into a grasping claw for a long second, and then grew still along with the rest of her body. Gabriel stared at the failed machinery, the failed body. He was hoping for just one more sound from her. Just a few more words to explain what he had just heard her say. But he was not that dim. He knew she was dead. She should go in the hopper. That's what he should be doing; recycle her body and all the extra parts that were her. But if... The thought came slowly through resistant patterns of being. Patterns shattered by his mother's last words. 'More people.'

"More people," Gabriel said. Then he said it again, just louder. "More people?" The air quieted around him and turned suffocating. He felt suddenly calm, cold and numb. But through the numb shock, anger reared its uncomfortable head. It was sharp enough to cut through years of protective padding. Plenty of it crept out from where it had been lurking for a long time. But there could be no one place where he could load all of it. There was no point where he could pile all of the blame he felt, all of the wrongs he was just now realizing had been there all along.

But the anger was not pure. A shameful joy bled through the rage and he pulled at it, used it to soothe his thoughts into a place without that stabbing pain.

'People.' There were all those things to wonder about. Freedoms he hadn't understood were there for the taking. Places to go. People to find. Those were the anchors to hold his world together as it shattered around him.

Slowly, as Mother's anatomy quieted behind him, he turned his head and looked at the insides of the tomb that was so fitting for Mother. He didn't see any of it. He raked a hand through his hair and jerked it back with a grimace at the sticky red mess. Bit by bit, His frayed emotions knitted themselves into an all inclusive ache. It brought him a sense of clarity. Not a comforting clarity. It had no mercy. It stepped in and stomped all over Gabriel's mind with cold hard facts he couldn't take in and understand in a hundred years or a million lessons from mother. He paced the small area in front of the door, where the floor was free of machines. It was too much to take in so he stopped trying. From the overwhelming influx of never thought before ideas and revelations, Gabriel only knew two things at that point and he focused on those.

One: His mother had lied to him.

And two: His mother had lied to him. Those were two distinct facts. He knew they were. He refined it further:

Firstly: his mother had lied to him and that meant that she was not who he always had thought she was. That was not that surprising as far as Gabriel's view of the

world went.

Secondly, mother had lied to him. That simply meant that Gabriel was not alone. They had never been alone. There were others. What others? Had she known them? Who? Where? Why?

Gabriel turned to the table and looked hard at Mother's face for a long moment. Dazed and empty of words, he turned away, wishing he could hate her for leaving him. He stood motionless and simply listened without hearing what he should have heard from the start. But what he didn't hear didn't matter at that moment; instead he was absorbed by another feeling that was so odd he had to grab hold of the edge of the steel table for stability. He felt the world speed up and expand away from him. He sensed his place in the world change. Gabriel shifted from the centre to the insignificant edge. From just the one part to one part of many. Then the world around him rushed back to settle in its new unknown configuration. Gabriel stared at some spot of nothing some place just ahead of him and finally shook his head and blinked furiously. After a moment of that, he started scraping gore and drying blood off his fingers, grimaced, and pulled his newly realized self back to the centre of the universe. He grew taller and the rest of the world came closer. All he had to do was to go get it. Go. Mother had said "Go."

Go where?

Chapter 2

"Hey... Chickadee. Well isn't this just purty. What does a pretty little finch fucker doing all the way up here, prey tell?"

Owl's carefully manufactured voice had been crafted by the most talented of tinkers to maybe sound jovial, friendly on the outside. But that was not really how it sounded to Bird. It would also be true for anyone else knowing Owl personally. What Bird clearly heard was the piercing noise reminding him of steel filings pulled through sizzling goose fat. But that was if one was poetic by nature which Bird was not. In simple terms, nasty scary shit would do. Owl's perfect diction froze Bird in place as his mind twisted around and all over. He stood, not quite paralyzed but completely unable to move. Only his eyes pivoted wildly from side to side in their sockets, trying to look around the back of his head. One scrawny leg hung in the air mid movement. His long awaited meal of Chafer sat halfway down his throat and his guts called for immediate evacuation of its contents. Bird's stomach turned inside out. It was so close. Just a little ways over there. So close. That fucker can't get me over there. Can he?

"Worm caught in your throat Mate?" The screeching turned into chuckle.

Feeling much like a stuffed crow where every supporting steel pin had been installed just a bit early. Nailed to a decorative branch and stretched wide as if in flight, Bird thought madly about all the places he could have been besides here. Right here, right now, because shit just hit the fan and Bird knew he would be rotisserie before long if he didn't do something. Where had that nasty piece of shit come from? And damn if Bird was going back. There would be no lenience, no mercy this time.

Bird slowly lowered his leg to the ground and stretched his neck to wiggle the feebly squirming grub down to where it belonged. He contemplated the sight behind him and if there was any point in turning around. But only for a moment and not finding anything that wasn't bad. Bird saw no reason to look death in its ugly eye. Better enjoy the beautiful view of sky and rocks and dead trees than looking at that fucking crow again. He started turning, carefully aligning to the edge. It happened very slowly. Because he needed just a little more time to think, he cocked his head toward the ticking death trap behind him while keeping an eye forward, calculating best he could. Between the edge of the ragged cliff edge Bird had so recently had all to his own, and the meanest, ugliest remade Guardian Bird had ever come across, was about a meter of open ground where there lay a sad assortment of the foodstuffs you could find in such a sad place, and Bird who was apparently looking to kill himself one way or another. There was nowhere to go. The owl had a wingspan four times the size of Bird and he used it to his benefit and pleasure whenever it did please him. The grappling hooks extending from wingtips and tail didn't do much for Birds confidence. He watched the unhurried motion of polished steel and razor edged wingtips out of all corners of his vision. So Bird figured. What the hell. He stopped and straightened, tucking his wings close around him and stared out into nothing.

Owl stopped moving and clattered his beak disapprovingly. With the typical guardian cocksureness the owl tittered and stepped closer. "Hey, look there, little chick, lots of air. Oh, all that sky. Why don't you just spread those puny wings of yours and take off? Shouldn't be a problem for you?"

Bird sighed in defeat and the grub struggled to get back up his throat.

The owl extended his wings completely and flapped them lazily. A cloud of dust rose and swirled up around Bird. "Oh, right oh, I don't suppose you think much of that do you? Best be on our way back south then? It'll be dark come soon you see, me being in some type of a rush see. Got to fly back see. And don't you worry Chicketeer, I'll be careful see. "If Owls could grin; Owl grinned and extended his wing hooks fully with a grinding buzzing and a puff of hot air flowed over Bird's neck.

Bird coughed and croaked, half blinded by the cloud of dust engulfing him. It rose from the owl shaped hell wind behind Bird and even if Bird could have talked he wouldn't have in this moment. He croaked.

Owl's wings stilled. "Alrighty then Chicketeer, Let's get you back home." owl sounded almost friendly as he waited for bird to submit, "Don't suppose you really wanted to give it another go then. Oh, what a pity. You know what gets done with guardians that break down right? I could speak sweetly for you. You know. All feathers are black in the dark Mate." Extending his metals, flexing his blades, impressing his power on a worthless minion. He displayed his instruments one by one with perfect control over the machine that was part of the guardian remade physiology.

Bird wasn't impressed. He had seen more of those wings than he wanted to as he coughed up dust, grub, and all the rest he had had in his puny stomach. Owl crooned and stepped closer. The trap closed in. Slowly, relentlessly. White as bleached bone, strong as.... And Bird had had just about enough of that shit. He hopped quickly toward the cliff, raised his tail and squeezed out a suitably soggy string of shit in front of the owl just as he leaped over the edge. He screamed. Well, he thought he screamed but it may have just been a screeching whistle. It sounded like nothing Bird had ever heard; from anyone, never mind from his own body. He flapped crookedly, started spinning and went down.

Owl was not prepared for that so it took him an extra half second to realize that his prey had thwarted him once more. He screeched in fury and launched off the edge. He circled quickly to face the cliff as he surveyed the below with a single visual sweep. Not a good choice. Far below lay a settlement of humans. The property lay at the bottom of the long dried out Dead River. To the south, a large dam closed the way down river. In the other direction, to the north, a half collapsed metal bridge loomed over an awkwardly tilting ship of unknown origin with many scavenged weapon ports and beyond that, the dead river stretched another few hundred yards to then bend eastward and out of sight. The clear ground between the shipwreck and the makeshift barrier was littered with various buildings and machinery. Owl hesitated for only a moment at the unsettling sight. Then he dove after the crazily flopping traitor. That finch fucker would pay.