

Megumi Mandish

Stardust and Springs
Chapter One

He stood in a void. The silence seemed so empty, yet pressed in on him, so thick that he couldn't break it. No matter where he looked, he could see nothing. Even if he could break the silence, find a way out or through whatever this place was, he had no idea where it would lead. His limbs felt heavy, rooted in place as if he were tied to the ground beneath his feet.

Suddenly, a voice broke the silence. "Pinocchio. Can you hear me?"

Pinocchio stared out at the darkness. "Who's there?"

"Pinocchio, you are in danger."

The voice seemed to come from all around him, echoing from far away yet right in his ears, deep and commanding, yet urgent. Pinocchio tried to turn, but his body refused to move. He felt cold, though such a thing seemed impossible.

"What do you want from me? What danger am I in?"

Green eyes opened right in front of him, glowing in the darkness. A wind blew against his face.

"Wake up."

"Pinocchio!"

Pinocchio opened his eyes. Everything seemed blurry and bright, like the torches throwing light on the walls had conjured moving shadows, dark and winding between the cracks of stone bricks, scattering between stacks of books and paper. Then suddenly, a pair of silver eyes appeared, wide and bright.

"--unable to focus. Can you see me, Pinocchio?"

A face of porcelain with yellow lips focused into view with those familiar eyes, and Pinocchio finally recognized her voice.

“...Harl?”

“He is awake. I will stand guard.”

Harl left his field of vision, replaced by two more similar faces. The closer one, marked by red lips, tilted down to look at him. “Stay still. We will unbind you.”

Something touched his wrists, and a pressure fell away from them. The red-lipped face reappeared and touched his shoulder, then a pair of arms wrapped around his and pulled him upright. The cogs in Pinocchio’s head reeled and wobbled at the movement. The orange of the torch light burned his eyes. Had everything looked this bright before? Why did it seem so saturated?

“Rosa?” He stared at the red-lipped face, then managed to turn his head to look at the third face on his left, identical except for its green lips. “Punch?”

“We thought you would not wake up.” Punch reached up and patted his head. “Oh— move carefully. Your torso is still open.”

“Are you hurt? Can you stand?”

Rosa held onto his arm and helped him down from the table. Pinocchio stumbled a little when his feet met the floor with a loud clank. Punch steadied him and glanced at Harl, who stood now by the door, peeking through the gap.

“Is the hall still empty?”

“Yes. Hurry, the guards will return soon.”

Rosa and Punch held on to Pinocchio’s arms and began leading him to the door. Pinocchio’s gears locked up in his legs. They dragged against the stone, scratching grooves into it. Punch jerked back from the force.

“What are you doing? We have to leave.”

She pulled again. Pinocchio yanked his arms free and stepped back. Rosa reached for him.

“You can not stay here—”

“I am not allowed to leave this room until my assembly is complete.”

Rosa faltered. “Yes. I know.”

“Why are you taking me out of this room?”

Harl beckoned again, more urgently. “Rosa, we don’t have time!” she hissed. “We only have this one chance.”

There was an odd tremor to her tone— to all of their tones. Pinocchio stared at his caretakers. The torch light bounced off the walls, illuminating cracked porcelain and damaged joints, reflecting in three pairs of silver eyes from beneath hollow sockets. He didn’t like whatever look they had in them. It made the gears in his torso scrape in a strange way.

“Rosa,” he said, “what is happening? Who damaged all of you?”

Was it an intruder? Had the castle been breached? Pinocchio looked up at each one of his caretakers, searching for a sign, an answer. The idea of some human or monster destroying the castle, hurting the automatons who had looked after him since he was first assembled, made the core in his chest burn harsher. “Is it the Fae? Have they broken through the defenses?”

Rosa hesitated, then grasped Pinocchio’s shoulders tight and looked him in the eyes.

“Master Geppetto wants to kill us.”

A shudder ran down Pinocchio’s spine, clacking from beneath his porcelain shell. “I… do not understand.”

“He is going to scrap us, Pinocchio,” Rosa whispered. “All three of us. Tonight.”

Pinocchio stared up at her, and suddenly he knew that look in her eyes. Fear. It had begun to consume him too, locking in his torso, freezing up all the joints in his body.

“Why?”

“I-I do not know.”

Punch trembled harder. “Pinocchio, I do not want to die. We need to leave right now. Please.”

“I can hear the guards.” Harl hid further behind the door. “Rosa, hurry!”

“Come with us, Pinocchio.” Rosa squeezed his shoulders harder. “Please, come with us. It is no longer safe to stay here.”

He should have stopped them. If he didn’t, if he let them go, then Master Geppetto would scrap him, just like he planned with Harl, Punch, and Rosa. His core blazed, as if it could already feel the giant furnace consuming him, melting him down to nothing. Pinocchio didn’t want to be scrapped.

But then, for the first time, his core began to beat. And Pinocchio knew what to do.

“I will go with you.”

Rosa let out a relieved laugh and grabbed his hand again. “Then we must not waste time. Come. We will escape together.”

Pinocchio followed his triplet caretakers outside the workshop. Rosa locked the door and pocketed the key, then beckoned. They crept down the hall and ducked around the corner just as orange light flickered from the far staircase. Pinocchio could hear the dull clanks of the guards’ feet, slowly drawing nearer. Then they stopped.

“The caretakers are not here.”

Pinocchio slowly peeked around the corner. A group of guards stood in front of the door to the workshop, holding large spears in their iron hands. Two of them – a squad leader and a captain, judging by painted stripes on their upper arms – held torches and large swords.

The captain studied the door. “Perhaps they have barricaded themselves inside.”

“Then we must break down the door.” The squad leader motioned to the other automatons to ready their spears.

He raised his sword, aiming for the door handle. The captain grabbed his arm.

“Automatons are not allowed inside the workshop. We must wait for Master Geppetto to open the door.”

Pinocchio’s whole body jolted at his maker’s name. Several bolts fell out of his open torso and clattered to the floor. The sound echoed down the corridor, deafening to their ears. The guards’ heads all snapped to Pinocchio.

“Seize them!”

Pinocchio sprinted down the hall, following his caretakers through the castle. Rosa held on tight to his hand as they raced past more guards and down another set of stairs. Shouts and metal boots rang behind them, growing closer with the torch lights, slowly surrounding them in the orange glow. Harl pointed at a far door. They burst through and ran into the front courtyard. Rain pattered against their porcelain bodies, and Pinocchio tried to shield the parts in his torso, afraid that the drizzle would rust his body. Rosa dragged him farther into the courtyard.

“We’re nearly there!”

Pinocchio stared up at the open gate looming above their heads. His legs locked up on their own. Rosa’s hand slipped from his. The ground flew up to meet him. He felt more loose parts fly out as he skidded against the cobblestone. A shout sounded behind him. Pinocchio looked back to see a spear sail through the air and whistle down towards his head.

Punch grabbed his hands again and pulled as hard as she could. The spear embedded itself in the cobblestone right next to his feet. Harl yanked it free as Punch helped Pinocchio up. A low groan sounded above them. Pinocchio’s eyes widened when the gate started rolling down.

Rosa grabbed his and Punch’s hands and dragged them forwards. They dove under the gate and scrambled to their feet, dashing across the drawbridge. Harl slid under just behind them and threw the spear. It thudded against the beam behind the gate, pinning the weights against the

stone. The guards all piled up against it, trying to throw their spears in the crowded space.

Pinocchio slumped against Punch in relief.

“My joints need oil,” He mumbled. Punch patted his head and looked to Rosa.

“We must get him out of the rain. His assembly is still incomplete.”

Rosa nodded. “I know. We will need to go into the city—”

A low chime reverberated through the air. All three caretakers froze up. Pinocchio frowned when he saw the guards lower their spears, their retreating forms concealed by the rising drawbridge.

“Why are they leaving? That is not protocol.”

The chime rang out again. Harl shuffled closer to Rosa. They stared at the empty road before them, winding far away between massive white-walled houses: their only entrance into the city. In the distance, a pinprick of light appeared.

“They’ve summoned the Automaton Patrol,” she whispered. Pinocchio stared at the light. “We need to hide.”

The lights multiplied to nearly every street when they found a drier shelter. The four automatons huddled under a worn down wagon in a side alley, waiting for the rain to let up. Punch took off her shawl and wrapped it around the empty cavity in Pinocchio’s stomach, tying it up in a neat little bow— or at least that’s what Pinocchio assured her it was, before it drooped over from the damp a moment later. The youngest caretaker sighed in disappointment.

“I do not like the rain.”

“I like it when I am inside.” Pinocchio poked at a large sliver of wood above his head. “I do not like it inside my torso.”

Punch giggled. “I agree. Harl, when will the rain stop?”

Harl looked up from the chunk of wood in her hands. “I do not know. The rain will stop when it stops, I suppose. Rosa, will we wait here until the rain stops, or will we wait until morning?”

The eldest of the caretakers sighed deeply, and Pinocchio couldn't help the fear creaking in his chest at the quiet. Then Rosa shook her head. “We will wait until the rain stops, but only if we are not caught.”

A thought suddenly occurred to Pinocchio. “Rosa, where are we going?”

“We are going to the Fire-Eater.”

“Where is that?”

“I do not know,” Rosa said. “I have only heard that the Fire-Eater is what keeps automatons like us safe from Master Ge— from *him*.”

“...Oh.” Pinocchio hugged his knees. Even now, he still didn't understand why his caretakers sounded so afraid, or why any of this was happening so suddenly. But as long as they stayed together, Pinocchio didn't mind this. Whatever satisfied his caretakers satisfied him too. “I hope we find it soon.”

Harl opened her mouth to speak, but an orange light washed over them. Pinocchio stared at their shadows cast on the wall, terror rusting his joints together. The wagon rolled away, replaced by an armoured automaton. He towered over their crouched forms, raising his lantern to expose them to the light. Pinocchio caught a glimpse of a dark green emblem on his pauldron – a crossed sword and torch – before he noticed the real sword glinting orange in the light.

The patrolman swung down. The four runaways scattered, racing for the end of the alleyway. Harl grabbed a flower pot from the windowsill of a house and flung it at the patrolman. He ignored it as it shattered against his chest. Rosa and Harl ducked under a second patrolman that rounded into the alley. Punch skidded to a stop. Pinocchio refused to.

He slammed his whole body into the second patrolman. They both crashed to the ground. Pinocchio could feel all the parts in his body grind and rattle from the fall. He turned back to Punch. The caretaker stood frozen, shaking. Pinocchio reached for her. Her eyes widened.

“Look out!”

A giant, cold hand grabbed him by the arm. Pinocchio’s world spun and went dark for a moment. When his eyes refocused, he found himself slumped against the wall. Both the patrolmen stood in front of Punch with their swords raised. Pinocchio staggered to his feet and lunged. The first patrolman crashed to the ground under his weight. Punch ran to Rosa and Harl. A lantern appeared at the end of the street. Then another, and another, all heading towards his caretakers. Pinocchio’s voice erupted from his voice box before he could think.

“Run!”

Harl fervently shook her head. “We will not leave without you!”

The second patrolman grabbed at Pinocchio. He ducked and locked eyes with Rosa. “You all must leave! I will distract them. They can not follow all of us!”

The eldest caretaker nodded and grabbed her other twins’ hands. “You will find us quickly,” she whispered. Her voice wavered. “Promise me this.”

“I promise.”

The triplets fled, vanishing into the darkened streets. Pinocchio scrambled away from the two patrolmen and ran out into the open, staring at the approaching lights. He heard a shout and swords being drawn from their sheaths, glinting along with dark metal bodies hulking on the horizon. Then Pinocchio turned and ran as fast as he could.

He could feel the rainwater piling up inside his limbs, drowning his internal parts. Rain pattered against his porcelain and metal skin, deafening to his ears. Every corner he ducked behind seemed to hold a lantern light at the other end. Pinocchio couldn’t outrun them anymore. Slowly, surely, the Automaton Patrol began to close in on him.

He slowed to a stop in another small alley and leaned against the wall, moving his ball joints to try to rid himself of some of the water. Only a trickle came out. Pinocchio briefly considered untying Punch's shawl to empty out his torso, but quickly abolished the thought. He couldn't risk losing her shawl. Fear crept back into his gears. Perhaps this was already the end; he didn't know where he was, and the Automaton Patrol knew this city far better than he did. It was only a matter of time before someone caught him.

"You're not part of the Patrol."

Pinocchio nearly shrieked and whirled around. A person – a human, if he remembered Master Geppetto's descriptions correctly – stood several feet away, half-hidden by some crates. He wore a dark cloak to shield himself from the rain, and simple clothing. Fiery orange hair peeked out from under his hood, bright against the shadows of the alleyway. The human stood at least full head taller than Pinocchio, but still looked quite young. Pinocchio stepped back and braced himself for a fight.

"Who are you?" Pinocchio demanded. "Identify yourself!"

The human put his hands up, but had now begun to stare at Pinocchio with an odd expression. "Hey, you're pretty tiny for an automaton. What are you, a new model? You look like a kid."

Pinocchio stared back. "Automatons do not age."

"Yeah, I know that– never mind." The human lowered his hands and shoved them in his pockets. "So what are you doing out here? The weather's a little wet for you to be running around without any clothes. Or all your body parts."

Pinocchio glanced down at himself. The human was right; no automaton should be out in this downpour without some sort of coverage. But Punch's shawl was all he had. Trying to search for coverage at this moment would only get him caught. But at the same time, his

unfinished body couldn't handle the rain like his pursuers could. Any time he wasted out here only brought him closer to death, to the roaring furnaces deep inside the castle.

"Are you reporting me?" Pinocchio asked quietly. The human blinked in surprise, then scoffed and shook his head.

"No, because I'd also get arrested. It's past curfew." He paused. "Wait, *you're* the one the Automaton Patrol's after? That's what the chimes were for?"

"Yes. My caretakers and I were separated while escaping the castle."

The human's eyes grew huge. "You're from the *castle*?"

He didn't like that tone. "...Yes."

"Wow. Okay. Uh, that changes a lot of things." He glanced both ways down the street, then beckoned to Pinocchio. "I haven't seen your caretakers or anyone else besides the Patrol, but I know a safe place where you can stay out of the rain. It's not too far from here. We can make a plan to find your friends there while you dry off."

Pinocchio hesitated. He had no way to know he could trust this human, but with the Automaton Patrol drawing ever-closer to finding him, he knew he didn't have time to keep wandering alone. He needed to find his caretakers and the Fire-Eater. And he couldn't do it alone, not like this.

"Lead me to shelter."

"Can I get a 'please' and 'thank you'?"

Pinocchio tilted his head. "Why would I say that?"

"Never mind. Come on, we don't want to be here when the Patrol shows up." The human started to turn away. Pinocchio quickly trotted after him, trying to keep up with the human's longer legs.

"What is your name?"

"Call me Lampwick." He shot Pinocchio a crooked grin. "Nice to meet you."

They crept through streets and alleyways, crouching out of sight whenever Lampwick stopped them. Pinocchio couldn't help but wonder at the human's skill at evading the automatons' detection— Lampwick always seemed to see the lanterns before they appeared, before Pinocchio noticed them. In the five hours it had taken Pinocchio to get halfway across the city, Lampwick navigated them to their destination in less than one.

The human checked both sides of the road, then motioned for Pinocchio to follow. They scurried across the street and up to one of the houses. Pinocchio studied the little sign hanging above the doorframe. The faded blue paint was chipped and weathered, and in neat cursive the words 'Crescent Bakery' had been carved over it.

"Here we go." Lampwick fished a key from his pocket. After a moment, he opened the door and gestured inside with a little bow. "After you."

As Pinocchio stepped inside, the amber glow of candlelight washed over him. He stared around the house. He stood in a single large room. A round wooden table stood in the middle with papers and silver metal discs stacked neatly on top. Two chairs stood on opposite sides of it: one pushed in, one shifted diagonally. Shelves of varying sizes were nailed to the right wall with little hand-painted labels. On the other side of that wall, a curtained staircase led up to an unseen second floor. Candle holders and paintings decorated the left wall, their lights casting dancing shadows on colorful sunsets, landscapes, and portraits. One small painting near the door depicted budding blue flowers. They looked strangely vibrant, even compared to the saturated colors he'd been seeing in since he woke up.

"Hey." Pinocchio flinched and managed to tear his gaze from the painting. Lampwick handed him a large towel. "Can't have your joints rusting."

Pinocchio took it and wrapped it around himself, watching the human walk toward the stairs. "Where are you going?"

“Just letting Miss Pea know you’re here.” Lampwick offered a reassuring smile. “Sit tight. I’ll be back in a minute.”

He disappeared, quiet footsteps fading up the stairs. Pinocchio shifted his weight from one foot to the other, glancing around the room again. The place felt warm, and yet the silence put him on edge. It felt deafening compared to the downpour and clanking automatons out on the city streets. Pinocchio felt a tightness in his neck. He could only imagine how his caretakers were doing out there. Were they hiding somewhere, stuck in the rain and the cold, still being hunted by their own kind? Had they been caught? Pinocchio quickly shook his head, trying to rid himself of the thought. His caretakers had always been clever. Surely they would have made it to the Fire-Eater by now. Yes, that was it. They were safe, waiting for Pinocchio to meet them there.

A clatter killed the silence. Pinocchio whipped around.

He wasn’t sure if he screamed. Maybe he did. Maybe the intruder did. But the next moment, he’d picked up one of the chairs and raised it above his head, and the intruder had ducked behind the counter at the far wall.

“Show yourself!” Pinocchio demanded.

Two hands appeared above the countertop, waving frantically at him. “I-I’m not a bad guy! Don’t hurt me!”

“Who are you? What are you?”

The hands clamped onto the edge of the counter, and a mop of grey-blue hair peeked over them, along with wide gold eyes. Pointed ears flicked at Pinocchio’s every movement. Pinocchio faltered a little.

“You— You are a Fae.”

The Fae slowly straightened up, watching Pinocchio warily. “And you’re an automaton. W-What are you doing here? How did you get in?”

Pinocchio backed up and raised the chair higher. “Stay where you are, or— or I’ll throw this at you!”

The Fae let out a squeak and shielded himself. “I didn’t even do anything!”

“Master Geppetto says Fae can steal names and faces just by speaking. I won’t fall for any of your tricks, monster!”

“Monster?” The Fae frowned, and for a second, Pinocchio felt a twinge of guilt. “I’m not a monster. And you’re hurt. Did someone attack you?”

He stepped closer. Pinocchio stepped back. “Do not come near me!”

“I’m not going to hurt you— aah!” The Fae jumped back as Pinocchio swung. Six translucent wings curled open from his back and fluttered, catching the candlelight. Pinocchio winced as it reflected in his eyes. “Stop trying to hit me!”

“Then stay away—”

A hand grabbed the chair leg. Lampwick’s worried expression appeared over him. “Hey! Leave him alone.”

“But he is a Fae!” Pinocchio tried to pull his makeshift weapon free. “Fae are dangerous. Master Geppetto told me—”

“Look at him. Does he look dangerous to you?”

Pinocchio hesitantly looked at the cowering Fae again. Now that he thought about it, the Fae did look very young, and very scared of Pinocchio. “...He does not.”

“Exactly. Now put the chair down. The shop opens in two hours, and I don’t want to have to explain to customers why the whole place is wrecked, thanks.”

He did as he was told, though he kept an eye on the Fae the entire time. Lampwick let out a big sigh. “Great. So now that we’re all calm and *not* trying to throw chairs at people, I have someone I need you to meet.”

A soft shuffle made him turn around. Pinocchio felt his mouth open in surprise. A woman stood at the bottom of the stairs, watching them with an unreadable expression. Her black hair had been tied in a loose bun, with several strands falling down to her waist in waves. She wore a simple blue dress with a high collar and a faded brown shawl over her shoulders, and yet there was an elegant air about her. The way she carried herself radiated authority. When her dark eyes landed on Pinocchio, they widened.

“Lampwick,” she said quietly, “why have you brought an automaton into the bakery?”

The human in question stepped closer to Pinocchio. “He’s being hunted by the Automaton Patrol, and he’s been damaged pretty bad, Miss Pea. I told him he could stay here until they give up and I can get him to his caretakers.”

Miss Pea shook her head. “He can’t stay here. I want no trouble with the Automaton Patrol.”

She started to walk back up the stairs. Lampwick frowned and started after. “I’m not just going to throw him back out on the streets. They’ll tear him apart.”

“He is an automaton, as are they. They won’t harm him, and arguments between them are not our concern.”

“I literally saw them try to stab him tonight. Miss Pea, I’m not kicking him out.”

Miss Pea turned around with a cold stare. “Yes, you will.”

“Do you even know how many automatons have run away the past couple years?”

Lampwick held his ground. “They’re waking up, Miss Pea. You have to see that; there’s something big happening. We can’t just ignore that. And besides,” he jerked a thumb at the young Fae sitting on the counter, “he’s already seen *him*.”

Miss Pea sighed and shook her head. “Then a simple memory spell will suffice. I can not risk our safety for one automaton, Lampwick. You may fix him up as best you can, but he leaves as soon as I cast the spell.”

“What? No, you can’t just—” The woman turned and vanished behind the curtain.

Lampwick let out a huff and ran a hand through his hair. “I am so sorry.”

Pinocchio clutched the scarf around his torso. “She is... casting a spell on me?”

“Yeah.” Lampwick glanced at the door. “I mean, we could make a run for it, but... honestly, we wouldn’t last long out there. Especially with you already full of water.”

The Fae fluttered down from the counter and hesitantly approached Pinocchio, faltering when he tensed up. “I can’t help much, but if you want, I can heal you a bit. Are you okay with that?”

Pinocchio blinked. “I am an automaton. I require repairs, not healing spells.”

But the Fae persisted. “You need all the help you can get if you’re going to run out there on your own. I’ve healed automatons before. I can heal you too.”

He doubted the Fae understood even basic automaton structure, but as it stood, he had very few options. “I will allow you to repair me.”

“Really? Great!” The Fae held out his left hand. “Call me Cloud. What’s your name?”

“Pinocchio.”

He almost hit himself for his mistake. How could he be stupid enough to give away his name to the first Fae that asked for it? Did his own name mean so little to him? Now he would have no identity, no face, and he would wander the city with no purpose, waiting for someone to give him a new one.

But Cloud didn’t react at all. “That’s a fun name. Nice to meet you, Pinocchio.”

“Oh. It is... nice to meet you too.” Pinocchio reached out and shook Cloud’s hand.

A jolt snapped through his body. Pinocchio screeched as his vision went white, a flash of searing flame ripping into him from his hand. He stumbled back and collapsed against the table. Papers scattered from his sudden movement. His ears rang, and he barely heard shouts breaking over the high-pitched drone. His tongue felt shriveled from a sharp, bitter taste in his mouth.

Through the pain, he noticed a faint smell of something like burning wood. That was enough to bring him back to reality.

When his vision focused, he found Miss Pea standing in front of him. Cloud hid behind Lampwick. Both boys stared between Pinocchio and Miss Pea. The woman's startled gaze flickered from his face to something downwards. Pinocchio followed it down to his left hand and shrieked. What once had been metal parts and wires was now skin and bone from the wrist down.

"What did he do? What did you do?!" Pinocchio stared at his hand, too afraid to move it. "Turn me back!"

Cloud flinched. "I-I don't know, I swear I didn't do anything—"

"Hush, both of you." Miss Pea stared at Pinocchio's hand, then slowly touched it. It felt like a thousand little sparks on his skin. Pinocchio jerked away and stumbled back onto the chair behind him, collapsing in it and curling up.

"What is happening?" he whispered.

Miss Pea knelt in front of him and took his hand, studying it, then met Pinocchio's eyes as if searching for something. Then she let out a long breath and let go.

"Lampwick."

The taller boy quickly straightened up. "Y-Yeah?"

"Pinocchio must stay here for a while," she said, standing. "While he is here, you are responsible for him. He can not be seen by anyone outside the three of us here. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Cloud frowned up at Miss Pea. "Did- Did I do something, Mom? I didn't hurt him, did I?"

Miss Pea turned away. "I don't believe so. Regardless of this situation, we still need to maintain our cover here. Are you finished with baking for the morning?"

“I am,” Cloud said. “I just need to finish cleaning.”

“After you finish, go straight to bed. The bakery will be closed tomorrow. I imagine we’ll be occupied with other matters this next night.” Without so much as a goodbye, the woman retreated upstairs. All three boys stared at where she’d disappeared for a few long, baffled moments before Lampwick shook himself from his shock.

“I guess we better get you settled in with me.” He offered Pinocchio a small smile.
“Welcome to the City of Druit, Pinocchio.”