

Storyteller

Princess Lily and the Clockwork Dawn





*For everyone who loves bedtime stories,
and believes in the magic of a quiet night.
May your dreams always tick true.
— Storyteller*



Contents



1	The Frozen Minute	4
2	Flour and Shadows	12
3	Copper Wings	19
4	The Broken Lever	26
5	First Light.....	34





CHAPTER I

The Frozen Minute



A drop of sweet almond oil trembled on the tip of Lily's smallest brass screwdriver. Below her knuckles lay the open belly of a copper nightingale, its hollow ribs packed with silver gears no bigger than apple seeds.

"Right tool, gentle turn, listen for the click," she murmured.

She nudged the hairspring. The bird's wings gave three brisk twitches against her thumb, *whir-clack-whir*, before settling down into the soft shavings on her bench.

"Just three clicks left," Lily told the bird. "Then you may sing for breakfast."



Princess Lily ♡

The attic door swung wide on its hinges with an agreeable rumble. King Alistair squeezed his broad shoulders through the frame, ducking beneath a bundle of dried lavender. His golden circlet sat crooked over his left ear, tipped sideways as though it were sliding toward his tea mug. He carried a velvet box under one arm.



↗ King Alistair

"Well now, my little spark," the King said, puffing softly. "I had a feeling you would be up before the roosters."

Lily tucked the screwdriver into her buckskin pocket, though her fingers lingered on the smooth pearwood handle. "Roosters are noisy, Father. Gears are polite. They wait for their turn."

Alistair chuckled, a deep sound like oats pouring into an oak bin. He set the velvet box upon a stool and pulled back his red mantle cuff. With a damp corner of his linen sleeve, he wiped a gray smudge of graphite from her cheek.

"Gears do not have to kneel before three archbishops at noon," he noted gently. "Nor do they take tea with the Baroness of Bramble Brae. Today's rehearsal calls for pristine white gloves and dignified posture. Look here."

He opened the velvet case. Inside rested the Dawn Tiara. It was stiff, yellow gold, shaped like sharp wheat sheaves, and so heavy it looked capable of drilling a hole through a person's skull.

Lily wrinkled her nose. "It lacks an escapement wheel. And it pinches behind the ears."

"Tradition rarely considers the shape of one's ears," the King sighed. He lifted the heavy gold ring, checking its polish. "Bless my buttons, Lily, you must leave the metalwork to the Guild. Today the court watches us walk together down the nave."

Lily smoothed down her midnight-blue pinafore, feeling two spare watch screws rattle against her screwdriver. Far across the palace rooflines, the Great Spire began its long, deep preparation for morning.



Clang. Clang.

The bronze bells climbed toward the sixth hour. Lily knew the rhythm by heart: five deep tolls, a pause for the brass counterweights to drop, then the final dawn chorus.

Clang. Clang. Cl—

The world snapped.

A terrible, shearing screech ripped through the stone floors. Metal groaned against metal like giant teeth grinding



on river stones. The fourth bell choked halfway through its swing, leaving only a hollow, vibrating thud.

The nursery attic fell so quiet that Lily heard her own heart thump against her ribs.

Down below the window, creeping blue frost crackled across the glass panes, spreading like thin fern leaves in the pale morning gloom.



Lily sprang to the open balcony door, her scuffed boots sliding across the cold boards.

"Father, look!"

Below lay the great courtyard, bathed in an eerie indigo dusk. The butter-colored lantern flames did not flicker; they stood frozen like drops of orange resin. Old Captain Vance was propped against his tall halberd by the fountain, his helmet tilted down upon his chest. He was not falling over. He simply hung there, suspended between breaths.

A soft, rhythmic whistling rose from the window settee behind her.

Lily spun around. "Father?"



King Alistair had sat down among the cushions to catch his breath. His eyelids drooped low. The hem of his crimson mantle grew pale, frosted over by tiny needles of blue ice that blossomed outward from the floor-stones.

"Just forty winks, little spark," he mumbled, his chin sinking into his beard. "The bells... bells will wake us..."

His head lolled against the wood. A warm, peaceful snore rolled from his chest.

Lily ran to him and tugged his wool sleeve. "Wake up! The morning isn't finished yet!"

He only smiled in his sleep, lost in some calm palace dream.

Through the frost-webbed window, Lily saw the morning star. It hung very low above the western ridge, pale and cold. If that star dipped behind the pine ridge before the clock chimed six, the morning would be lost, and the great hemp cables in the spire would freeze brittle as spun sugar.

"No," she said aloud. "No forty winks."

She hooked her brass needle oil-can through her pinafore belt and jammed the heavy Dawn Tiara under her left arm. If her father woke up to find his ceremonial gold missing, he would be cross, and she intended him to be awake to scold her.



Lily slipped through the kitchen passage, flying past rows of silent copper pots and yawning maids frozen mid-stretch by the cold blue light. She burst through the low door into the twilight of the courtyard. The frost bit at her stockings, but her boots carried her swiftly across the flagstones toward the base of the Great Spire.

The tower loomed above her, dark and enormous against the stars.

Lily reached the grand entryway, skidding to a halt before the ironbound oak doors. Thirteen massive iron padlocks hung across the latch bars, chained in three rows, and nailed straight through their center was a parchment notice from the High Clocksmith.





CHAPTER 2

Flour and Shadows

Lily leaned close to the parchment, squinting through the creeping blue gloom. Big black letters warned that the Spire was shut by royal decree until Midsummer.

"Puff pastry and poppycock," she muttered, borrowing a phrase she knew well. Thirteen iron locks would take all morning to pick, even with her best tension wrench.

Turning on her heel, Lily darted across the flagstones toward the low kitchen arches. She slipped through the pantry door, where fat hams hung stiff from the rafters. The hearth fire was trapped mid-flicker, looking like carved lumps of carrot. In the baking alcove, plump dough lay pale and unrisen inside long wooden troughs.

A wooden flour scoop suddenly dropped between Lily's boots with a sharp clack.

"And where do you think you're scurrying, your royal smallness?"



Mistress Mallow 🎵

Mistress Mallow stood over a tub of lard, dusting her palms against her rust-colored skirts. She was the only person moving in the whole kitchen. A smear of white powder sat high on her round cheek, and her gray eyes were round with fright.

"The bells stopped," Lily said, clutching the gold tiara tighter. "Father fell asleep. The courtyard is turning into blue sugar."

"Children belong under goose-feather quilts when the world goes sideways," the cook declared, reaching out a broad hand. Then her gaze dropped to Lily's apron. She saw the buckskin pockets sagging with iron washers, the brass spout of the oilcan, and the small screwdriver handle peeking through the hem. Lily set her jaw firm as an anvil.

Mistress Mallow let out a puff of warm air that smelled of nutmeg. "Mercy me. You've got that look your grandfather had when the water pipe burst beneath the chapel." She wiped her floury forearms. "The High Clocksmith went up the tower two



hours ago and barred the doors behind him. But he forgets where the flour goes."

Lily tilted her head. "The Spire has flour?"

"Not on an empty stomach, mind!" Mallow plucked two warm honey buns from an iron warming drawer and shoved them straight into Lily's pockets alongside the brass screws. "The old bread hoist runs off the Great Spire's waterwheel shaft. There's a dumbwaiter box on a counterweight rope right behind the scullery flue. It drops flour bags straight from the mill level."

She led Lily to a narrow square door set low into the masonry. Pulling the iron bolt with a hearty groan, Mallow revealed a dark wooden chute lined with polished zinc. A draft of biting winter air rushed into the kitchen, carrying the scent of dried machine grease and frost.

"Scramble through the chute," Mallow commanded, stooping to boost Lily by the seat of her pinafore. "Find whatever gear got stuck in its gullet, and don't you drop that gold hat."

"Give me half a turn," Lily said, wriggling her knees onto the slick tin.

With one mighty heave from the cook, Lily shot upward through the flue like an oiled bolt. She spilled out headfirst



onto a broad oak beam high above the flour cellars. Behind her, the hoist rope groaned under the sudden frost.

Twang!

The counterweight hemp snapped like dry spaghetti. Down in the darkness, the dumbwaiter carriage crashed into splinters, cutting off the way back to the kitchen. Lily gathered her knees, balancing carefully on the narrow timber as the cold closed around her.



Darkness swallowed the tower like black molasses. Lily crept forward along the catwalk, pressing her hip against a row of frozen cogwheels. The iron teeth were twice as tall as her boots, coated in a fine skin of hoarfrost that numbed her fingers through her cuffs. High above, the tower was vast, hollow, and terribly quiet.

Whir-clatter-skrtrt.

A rush of wind dropped from the crossbeams. Something heavy slammed into Lily's shoulder, knocking her flat against the greasy floorboards. The Dawn Tiara clattered against a bolt head with a bright chime. Lily scrambled backward, her hands flying to her belt as sharp metal claws skidded across her pinafore.



Above her, a bundle of hammered copper plates thrashed violently in the gloom. The creature let out a dry, rattling hiss, snapping its hooked beak in blind fury. Lily held her breath, raising her screwdriver to guard her face.

Then she saw the shuddering wing.

Three feather plates were missing from the copper creature's left side, leaving an open bronze hinge exposed to



the draft. Blue rime had crusted over the delicate gears inside the joint, locking the pinions at an awkward, twisted angle. The little beast wasn't hunting her at all. It was shivering so hard that its brass rivets chattered against the planks.

"Hush now," Lily whispered, lowering her tool. "You're only jammed."

She slid the brass needle oilcan from her belt and blew a puff of warm breath over the nozzle to melt the lavender oil inside. Edging forward on her knees, she placed her small hand over the bird's quivering breastplate. Beneath the metal, an iron heart ticked with a frantic, limping beat.

"Right tool, gentle turn, listen for the click," Lily whispered softly.

She slipped the thin steel needle into the frozen hinge. One drop of golden oil ran down the tooth, followed by a second. Lily used the flat of her thumb to ease the stubborn brass pinion upward against the spring.

Click.

The ice shattered into tiny white sparks. The little owl gave a great, fluttering sigh of relief. It shook its copper wings with a merry *whir-whir-clack*, tucking its neat steel talons together.



Click-whirr-chirp!

Two round glass lenses on the owl's head flared into life. Bright amber light spilled across the catwalk, chasing the shadows up toward the ceiling. The beam swept across miles of soaring brass cogs, spinning wheels, and towering steel levers rising like an iron forest into the roof.

Before Lily could stroke the owl's smooth crest, a shrill scream cut through the rafters far above.

"Intruder! Stay down, you little thief!"

A heavy lever clanged overhead. With a deafening boom, massive iron portcullises dropped across the ladderway above, sealing the shaft shut.





CHAPTER 3

Copper Wings



The portcullis bars shivered as they struck the sill, sending up a shower of rust flakes. Above them, iron teeth blocked the ladderway entirely, but Bramble gave a jaunty whistle. The copper owl dipped his polished head, clicked his neck collar,

and nudged Lily's wrist toward a narrow vent in the catwalk floorboards.



↗ *Bramble*

"Up there?" Lily asked, squinting through the gap where grease ropes hung like frozen licorice.

Ch-ch-clink! The bird snapped his steel talons around the shoulder straps of her velvet pinafore. His brass wings beat against the gloom with a furious whirr, lifting her scuffed boots clear off the greasy oak planks. Lily gripped her bundle tight, keeping the gold tiara tucked beneath her elbow as they rose through the narrow floor slit. They tumbled together onto the broad escapement deck, skidding across cold iron tiles directly before the great Solar Cog.

The wheel was five feet wide, cast from buttery mountain brass and scored with seventy-two heavy teeth. Each yellow lug looked thick as a loaf of hearth bread. Directly between its top spoke and the steel anchor hung a wad of crumpled purple cloth.

"Tsk-tsk, excessive friction! Back away from the regulator, young lady!"

Master Barnaby Gilt stumbled out from behind the counterweight drums. His brass magnifying spectacles wobbled wildly on his pointed nose, magnifying watery blue eyes to the size of teacups. He raised a long iron gauge-rod like a walking cane, his plum wool coat trembling down to its fifteen silver buttons.



Master Barnaby Gilt



"You wedged the escapement," Lily said, pointing an accusing thumb at the purple velvet. "You shoved a cushion into the tick!"

"Precisely according to regulation!" Barnaby cried in a shrill voice, his felt slippers squeaking against the frosted floor. "I saved it! Last sunset, right as the five-bell struck, I heard a ping. A hairline fracture across the root of the sunrise tooth! If that wheel drives the noon weight with a cracked tooth, the bronze will fatigue. It will wear away into powder! Clocks must be preserved, child!"

Lily stepped toward the brass wheel. "Clocks aren't tea saucers, Master Barnaby. They're built to turn. If you stop the gears, morning never comes, and my father stays frozen



asleep down by the fire." She reached her fingers toward the pinched purple velvet. "Just let me ease it loose."

"Do not touch that wedge!" Barnaby lunged across the tiles, throwing his entire spindly body onto the overhead counterweight lever. "I shall engage the emergency arbor-brake! By royal order! By every law of horology!"

The iron brake-shoe swung downward, but frost coated the pivot. It struck the wheel rim at a terrible angle, slipping off the brass shoulder with a screech like a kicked iron kettle. The enormous lead driving weights below caught the slack, jerking the wheel three violent inches counter-clockwise.

CRACK.

The sound cracked like winter ice splitting across a frozen pond. The prime sunrise tooth snapped clean away from the hub. The heavy yellow chunk bounced twice off the copper framework with a hollow gong, skittered across the wet planks, and tumbled over the rim into the black shaft below.



Master Barnaby dropped his iron rod, the metal clattering uselessly against the floorboards. He crumpled down onto his felt slippers, bury his face in his pale, trembling palms.



"Ruined," he whimpered, rocking back and forth until his wispy muttonchops brushed his knees. "I shattered it. Just like the King's astronomical egg in the great gallery. Twenty years of polish, and I have broken the sun."

Lily did not weep. She knelt beside the shuddering brass ring, ignoring the chill seeping through her thick stockings. A five-inch gap now gaped in the wheel's rim, rough and yellow with fresh metal grains where the tooth had sheared away. The anchor pallet above hung in empty space, twitching uselessly every time the draft caught the cables.

Reaching into her buckskin pocket, Lily withdrew the two small brass screws she had kept from her father's pocket watch. She set their threaded shanks against the sheared stump, using her thumbnail to mark the bevel of the neighboring brass cog.

"The face needs a six-degree pitch," she whispered, her hazel eyes darting across the empty air where the bronze had lived. "Root width must be four fingers broad. If the tooth flexes even half a hair, the anchor will slip its notch."

Every swing of the two-ton pendulum above drove forty pounds of counterweight pressure straight down through that single point. Wood would splinter into matchsticks. Soft lead would flatten like pie pastry under an iron rolling pin.





Beside her knee, Bramble tilted his hammered copper head. The bird let out a low, mournful click, his spring mechanism whirring softly inside his chest. He turned toward the western wall, raising one articulated wing toward the great rose window.

Lily looked up through the frosted glass panes.

The morning star hung pale and terrible against the indigo dark. Its sharp silver points were dipping fast, already brushing the black needle-tips of the western pine ridge. When that star dropped behind the mountain, the frost would turn the driving cables brittle as pulled sugar, and the Great Spire would freeze forever.

"We have to build a new tooth," Lily said, wiping a streak of black grease across her forehead. "Right now. What do you have inside your tower forge, Master Barnaby? Bronze stock? Rolled iron strap?"

The old clocksmith only curled tighter into his wool coat, clutching his heavy brass key ring against his chest. "Nothing," he sobbed, his spectacles slipping down his long nose. "The chest stays locked. You shall not butcher the king's tower with kitchen tinkering! We are finished, Princess. The night will simply never end."





CHAPTER 4

The Broken Lever



Lily turned her back on the weeping clocksmith and looked up at the great steel bones of the tower.



Cold wind came whistling through the unglazed vents, smelling of frost and damp chimney soot. The morning star was sinking lower, its silver light prickling the sky like needle points. Beneath her feet, the black depths of the tower plunged away into nothingness. She tucked her chin into her collar, hitched up her blue pinafore, and climbed straight onto the iron balance arbor.

The round beam was slick with frost. Her soft leather boots struggled for purchase against the icy metal, but she curled her toes tight inside the hide. Balancing above the dark drop, she reached the jagged socket where the sunrise tooth had lived.

"Cotter pins," she muttered, her teeth clattering in the wind. "Three iron split-pins will hold the root if I wedge them true."

She plucked three thick iron pins from her side pouch, but the gap in the wheel was far too wide. The yellow brass rim seemed to mock her, empty and broad.

Above her head came a soft *ch-ch-clink!*

Bramble fluttered down from the upper rafters. His articulated copper wings beat a brisk, whirring song against the freezing draft. Alighting on the icy rim beside her knee, he



opened his neat beak. *Clink. Clink.* Two heavy copper washers dropped straight into Lily's waiting palm, smelling faintly of old machine oil and cozy attic dust.

"Good bird," Lily breathed, tucking the copper rings between the iron pins.

The bundle filled the socket, but the angle was crooked. The iron shanks leaned away from the steel anchor pallet, two degrees shy of true. If the pallet missed its bite, the great counterweights below would drop like millstones.

Lily reached into her buckskin pouch and withdrew her smallest screwdriver. Its honey-brown pearwood handle had been turned by her grandfather, smoothed by thirty years of royal thumbs until it fit her small palm like a second skin. Its brass ferrule gleamed warmly against the gray frost.

She slipped the thin tempered-steel blade between the cotter pins, using the brass rim as a fulcrum.

"Just half a turn," she muttered, nudging the iron shanks. "Come on. Just three clicks left."

The escapement spring pushed back. The pressure was enormous, forty pounds of frozen counterweight resisting her leverage with stubborn, dead weight. Sub-zero air bit into her knuckles, turning her fingertips white and clumsy.



Lily glanced up through the arched vent.

The morning star was touching the needles of the tallest pine. The silver rim began to blur against the black ridge.

A tight knot of panic seized her throat. The cold was winning; the frost was creeping toward her father's still heart down in the hall. Forgetting the patient rhythms of the workshop, she grabbed the pearwood handle with both hands. She set her boot against the arbor rail, braced her knee, and threw all her seven-year-old weight against the tool.

SNAP.

The sound was sharp as a pistol shot.

The tempered blade sheared clean across the shank. The split pearwood handle bucked in her palms, sending a jagged wooden splinter into her thumb. In the next terrible second, the wedge gave way. The three iron cotter pins and Bramble's copper washers burst from the gap, skittering across the frosty tiles before tumbling into the bottomless black shaft.

Tink-tink... tong.

Silence followed, hollow and complete.





Lily huddled against the massive oak upright, her legs drawn up beneath her blue skirt.

The wind fluttered the hem of her pinafore, but she did not pull it down. She sat on the cold planks, clutching the broken stub of pearwood against her chest. The steel blade was gone, buried somewhere in the frozen grease of the gear-track below, utterly unreachable. A streak of gray graphite ran through the tears tracking down her cheeks, but she did not wipe them away.

She had rushed. She had forced the metal with anger and fear, and the work had broken.

"I broke it," she whispered into the collar of her blouse. "I broke my grandfather's tool, and now Father will never wake up."

Beside her knee came a gentle rustle of beaten metal. Bramble hopped closer, his steel talons making small, polite clicks upon the frosted floorboards. He cocked his hammered copper head, his amber headlight eyes glowing warm and steady in the dark. Leaning in, the little owl pressed his smooth copper beak against her temple, letting out a soft, rhythmic whistle like a kettle coming to boil on a nursery hearth.



Lily leaned her cheek against his cool forehead plate. "I'm not a clockmaker, Bramble. I'm just a silly girl with grease on her nose."

She shifted her weight to draw her cloak closer, but her elbow caught the stiff velvet band of her sash.

A heavy, ringing thud startled the silence.

The Dawn Tiara slipped from beneath her arm, bounced twice on the oak boards, and slid against the lip of the Solar Cog.

Lily blinked through her wet eyelashes.

In the blue twilight seeping through the tower roof, the crown caught the faint glow of Bramble's amber eyes. It lay sideways against the gap. Twelve thick, sunray spires of heavy beaten gold rose from its circular base, each one tapered at the tip and wide at the root. The metal was dense mountain gold, soft enough to shape beneath an iron hammer, yet stiff enough to bear the royal crest of Oakhaven.

Lily leaned forward slowly, her breathing hitched in her throat.



She held out her thumb and index finger, measuring the distance between the second and third golden rays. Then she held that span against the empty socket of the wheel.

The pitch was exact.

Four fingers broad at the base. A natural bevel of six degrees along the leading curve. The ancient goldsmith who had hammered the King's morning crown three hundred years ago had measured the rays by the very same gear-teeth of the Great Spire.

If she took the iron rod, if she bent those sacred golden rays double and locked the band into the socket, the tiara would form a perfect, rigid box-tooth. It would catch the anchor. It would bear forty pounds of falling iron.

Lily touched the polished gold band with a trembling finger.

The Dawn Tiara was meant for her coronation in the Great Hall. It was meant for velvet cushions, church bells, and the solemn cheers of three thousand kneeling subjects. To smash it with an iron bar, to twist its sacred gold into a greasy cog-tooth, was treason against every rule Master Barnaby and the court held dear.



Across the western valley, the morning star grazed the dark pine needles of the ridge. A spiderweb of pale blue frost began to crackle along the links of the great counterweight chain.





CHAPTER 5

First Light



Lily did not hesitate. She seized the sacred circlet, dragging it across the icy catwalk to the heavy iron rail.



"Stop! Treason and madness!" Master Barnaby scrambled to his slippered feet, arms flailing like a startled heron. "Desecration of ancestral regalia!"

The girl ignored the squawking old man. Bracing the crown against the cold steel beam, she used the blunt brass ferrule of her broken pearwood handle to lever the central sunray downward. The soft, heavy mountain gold groaned under her small hands, yielding like chilled butter. She wedged the narrow spout of her needle oilcan beneath the adjacent spires, prying them inward until the twelve rays braided together into an interlocking, box-shaped wedge.

Barnaby lunged forward to snatch the heirloom away, but a whirl of clockwork cut him short. Bramble dove straight from the crossbeam, his brass wings beating a furious rhythm against the clocksmith's powdered wig.

"Aah! Vicious mechanical vermin!" Barnaby stumbled sideways, batting at the tiny owl while his spectacles slid askew. Bramble fluttered up and hovered, snapping his polished steel talons with indignant clinks. Barnaby paused, wiping his watery eyes, his breath hitching as he saw what Lily had wrought. The twisted circlet was no longer a useless ornament; it was a stout, six-degree tooth, tapered and flanged to perfection.



The last silver tip of the morning star kissed the pine needles. Lily scrambled back to the wheel rim, her knees barking against the frost-rimmed iron. She seated the folded gold deep into the sheared notch of the Solar Cog, pushing with the flat of her palm.

"Right tool, gentle turn, listen for the click," she whispered to the stubborn metal.

Clack.

The gold wedged home, biting tight into ancient brass. Lily sprang to the decking, catching her breath in ragged gasps. "Master Barnaby! The escapement arbor—pull the release lever! Now!"

Barnaby hesitated, looking from his bruised knuckles to the falling star. With a strangled shriek, he threw his entire plum-coated weight against the rusted release handle. "May the saints forgive my joints!"

"Bramble, push!" Lily threw her shoulder against the four-hundred-pound brass pendulum bob. The copper owl fluttered behind her, talons digging into her pinafore shoulder as his miniature drive-spring spun to lend all its tiny force. The dead lead bob resisted, cold and heavy as a boulder. Lily gritted her





teeth, her scuffed boots finding purchase against the rough floorboards, and gave one final, desperate shove.

The giant pendulum swung.

CLICK-CLACK.

The folded golden tooth caught the steel pallet without a shudder. The great counterweights plummeted down the shaft, chains humming a deep bronze song. High above, the massive iron hammer swung wide and struck the noon bell with a booming note that shook the Spire timbers.

CLANG.

Six times the belfry answered. Through the high rose window, a blinding torrent of molten amber sunrise burst over the tower catwalk, instantly turning the crackling blue rime into showers of glistening water.



Down in the courtyard below, the creeping blue frost dissolved into sparkling morning dewdrops. Fat sparrows burst from the ivy vines, trilling their dawn song to the bright sky, while two sleepy guards blinked against the sudden warmth, dropping an armful of rolling red apples across the stones.



Lily stepped through the Spire's heavy oaken doors into the sunlit air. Soot stained her chin, and the stub of her broken wooden handle peeked from her pocket, but her step was firm on the damp flagstones. Bramble perched quietly upon her shoulder, making small, contented clicking noises, while Master Barnaby shuffled behind them, clutching his plum coat with trembling, humbled hands.

"Lily!"

A crimson mantle billowed across the courtyard. King Alistair did not stop for the puddles or the scattered fruit; he sprinted through the arches and fell to his knees directly in the mud. He caught Lily by her small shoulders, his broad face pale beneath an untidy beard, brown eyes scanning her smudged cheeks with frantic relief.

"You went up the Spire," he gasped, his voice cracking with wonder and fright. "My little spark, where is your crown? The court is gathering at the dais—"

"Sire," Barnaby rasped, stepping forward with his white muttonchops drooping and his head bowed to his chest. "Spare the child your anger. The Spire failed, and I... I froze in terror. It was the princess who saved Oakhaven. Look up, Your Majesty."



The King tilted his head back, his crooked golden circlet sliding toward his left ear.

Three hundred feet above the palace yard, the enormous glass face of the clock caught the new sun. Through the crystal dial, high within the ancient brass skeleton, the braided rays of the Dawn Tiara gleamed like a second sun, catching the drop of the steel anchor pallet in a flawless, endless rhythm.

A list of grand royal speeches had been written for the coronation, but King Alistair forgot them all. A deep rumble rose from his chest, bursting into an enormous, tearful laugh that echoed across the stones. He scooped Lily clean off her scuffed boots, crushing her into a warm bear hug that smelled wonderfully of old wool, pipe smoke, and fresh yeast buns.

"Puff pastry and poppycock to the old rules," Mistress Mallow called out from the kitchen steps, wiping her floury hands upon her calico apron with a broad, beaming grin.

"She doesn't need a golden hat to lead this realm," the King murmured into his daughter's chestnut curls, setting her down gently upon the cobblestones. "A princess who can mend the very dawn is already everything our kingdom needs."



High above in the spire, the golden tiara gleamed inside the heart of the great clock, ticking softly in time with the princess's happy heart.



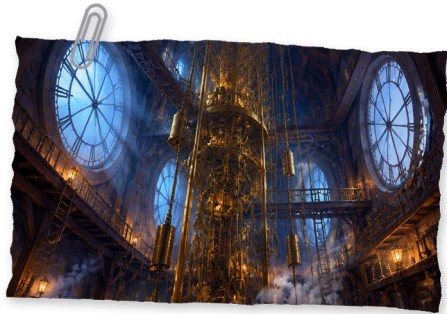
Important places



↪ *Lily's Nursery
Workshop*

Smelling of cedar shavings and chamomile, this sunny nursery corner was where Lily's grease-stained fingers first learned that broken springs can always sing again.

☆ *The Great Spire
Clock Tower* ↗



A dizzying cathedral of turning brass where Lily clutched cold iron rungs, listening to the terrified groans of a frozen kingdom.



↖ The Sleeping
Courtyard

Seeing the court frozen mid-step under sparkling frost gave Lily chills that had nothing to do with the winter air.

Important things



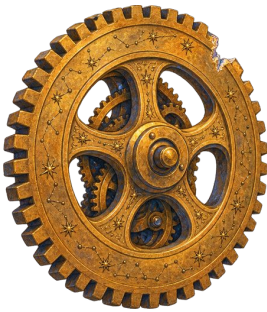
↖ *The Tiny Brass Screwdriver*



Lily's trusty brass companion had tightened loose latches and wound music boxes, right up until the heart-stopping snap inside the dark escapement.

The Dawn Tiara ↗

Cold and heavy upon Lily's brow, this formal golden heirloom found its truest, most radiant purpose deep inside the kingdom's grinding gears.



↘ *The Solar Cog*

The heart of Oakhaven's morning; seeing its jagged, broken tooth made Lily realize sunrise wasn't a given, but a fragile miracle.

♡ The Needle Oilcan ↗

*Just a single drop from its bent snout
brought an old copper friend fluttering back
to life when the ladderway vanished.*





Acknowledgments

Writing this tale was like winding an old, treasured music box, and it would never have found its beat without my real-life Lily.

Thank you, my fierce seven-year-old explorer, for lending our princess your bright, curious spark, your muddy pockets full of screws, and that refusal to ever sit still when something needs fixing. Your stubborn courage keeps every morning bright in our home, even when the world feels stuck on three minutes before dawn. Keep turning your gears and dreaming impossible mornings into being.

Storyteller ♡



Princess Lily and the Clockwork Dawn

Author: **Storyteller**

Written especially for everyone who loves bedtime stories.

October 2026





Three minutes before dawn, the kingdom's Great Spire groans to a sudden halt, plunging the realm into an icy, endless slumber. Armed only with a pocket screwdriver, seven-year-old Princess Lily must scale the dizzying tower gears to restart time before the morning star vanishes forever.

