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Iron Heart

The year is 1865. All over the country celebrations for the triumph of the Union in the Civil War were heard like the gunfire that had put them there in the first place. As it turns out, it was a premature celebration.

A radical shift in the British Empire, commanded by the iron fisted Queen Victoria, gave the Confederates all the political and military support they needed to turn the tide. In the middle of a sweltering hot night in New Orleans, that had long been taken by the Union armies, the noise of machines was heard, machines which simbolized progress, a future of steel that could not be stopped.

They appeared in the cloudy sky like the moon rising from behind the mountains, huge dirigibles covered in silver cloth, their massive metallic structures hovering over the city eliciting screams from the fine ladies below, dressed far above their status now that the whole game had changed.

The engines roared and buzzed, the clanking of gears sounding like its own language, communicating with one another. Fire emerged from the ships, so similar to legendary dragons in children's stories, burning the cotton and sugar plantations that made the Crescent City so famous.

Following the ships came the soldiers, armed with muskets and pistols that looked like something out of science fiction, such was their speed and accuracy. Ground machines, equally as impressive and unknown, descended upon the streets, crushing everything in their path. That was the contribution of sweet Britain.

The attack of heavy war machines provided by the Empire weighed the scale considerably in favor of the Confederates. The domination which had started in the swamps and mansions of Louisiana spread like wildfire, swallowing the whole nation.

It was on a night much like the one when it had all started that the fiancé of young Evangeline Darrow passed away, murdered in a war to which neither truly belonged.

And at only sixteen years old, that was the night Evangeline swore she would give her body, her soul and her heart to get revenge for her beloved and make suffer those responsible for his untimely end.

What she did not know was that in that night, a night of a full moon, of blood, iron and steam, when the creole magic of the Crescent City was stronger, someone had heard her promise.

And Evangeline was going to pay.

A year after Jonathan's death, Evangeline still dreamed of him. Still dreamed of the fire and the smell of gunpowder mixed with rust, a smell that had become familiar in that past year, as the Confederates spent every second forging their own empire, built by the slaves who actually tasted freedom before everything collapsed in ruins.

Now, as Evangeline looked out the window of her mansion to the streets of the city, all she saw was a distorted mirror of London, her old home. The cobbled streets were there, and the black carriages, the richest ones moved by a system miniaturized from the great steam trains. But New Orleans was not London, it didn't have its morning

fog or the cold, grey sky. The city was wearing makeup, like one of the brothel ladies trying to hide bruises and cuts on their skin but one could still see the ugliness underneath. What it represented. You could still see the french influence underneath the obnoxious influence of the British, a theater made for whoever's benefit, it didn't matter. The falseness of it irritated her.

To Evangeline, who used to love that city, bathed by the Mississippi River, all that ground was nothing but a grave for the man to whom she had given her heart. And every cog used to raise the monstrous structures that looked so out of place in New Orleans was another nail in his coffin.

She opens the window, expecting the perfume of flowers and coffee, but all she smells is the same rust and smoke of always. The smell of the new century.

The door to her bedroom bursts open and Evangeline hears an undignified scream, but she doesn't turn. Her blue eyes are tired and her brown hair is falling in tangled curls over her white sleeping gown.

"Miss Darrow!" Kiana, the woman who runs the house, pulls her away, but Evangeline doesn't turn. Her blue eyes are tired and her chestnut brown hair is spilled in tangled curls over her white sleeping gown. "A woman like you, standing by the window in her undershirt! It's not appropriate! What would your mother say?"

Evangeline doesn't care. Not anymore.

She turns to face the dark skinned woman, sweaty and dressed in the same beige getup she always is. But despite her clothes, Kiana has much more fire in her big brown eyes than Evangeline does in her aristocratic and lifeless ones. She feels dead inside. And she looks the part.

Kiana looks at her for a moment and sadly sighs, shaking her head.

"Mr. Peters wouldn't like seeing you like this, child. You have to forget. You have to let go."

There was a time where the mere mention of Jonathan's name would send Evangeline into fits of rage. She had once knocked over every single item on a dining table at the Gautier residence because a woman suggested it was time to look for a new fiance.

That rage was gone. All she felt now was a void, consuming her from the inside.

Kiana takes Evangeline to the wooden screen, a beautiful intricate work that had been a gift from one rich suitor or another. Evangeline just stands there as Kiana undresses her, puts on a fresh set of clothes and pulls tight the laces of her corset. She gasps, more a reflex than a reaction, but the pain she used to feel from it is subdued. Almost unimportant.

When she can barely breathe, Evangeline puts on a white blouse with frills at the front and a waist high skirt that drags on the floor behind her, covering up the boots that button by the ankles. Kiana takes her to the dressing table and brushes back her hair, untangling it gently and pinning it up in an elegant but practical bun and topping it with a black hat that has a lace going over Evangeline's face.

She slips on her own white gloves and pins a sapphire brooch to the center of the blouse by her neck. That brooch had been an engagement present from Jonathan, along with the ring she refused to remove from her finger. It was the only way she knew how to keep him alive.

As soon as she is dressed, Evangeline goes down the stairs, her feet like lead on the wooden floor, like an echo from another life that she could still hear, alive in the walls. The house is busy with workers and slaves moving from one room to the next, the golden decorations and sumptuous fabrics trying their hardest to maintain the estate's status as peak of aristocracy, a silly effort when the world outside is falling apart.

Lord Darrow, Evangeline's father, is one of the cotton barons of New Orleans, which means he is never home to witness the outbursts of her mother, who made it her mission to pester Evangeline to within an inch of her sanity. Lady Elizabeth Darrow never approved of her daughter's engagement to Jonathan, simply because the young man had refused to fight for the Confederates.

And had died for his choice.

"Evangeline, do you have any idea what time it is?" Lady Elizabeth hisses, marching into the main hall with her hands firmly clasped around her own waist. She would be a beautiful woman if not for her severity and obsession with being thin to the point of almost being transparent.

"No, mother," the words come out automatically, already feeling suffocated.

"No, of course you don't. Why would you? I will tell you what time it is, it is far past the time a young single woman should be up and about. Have you forgotten about tea at the Gautier's? For Heaven's sake, please stop embarrassing me. It's the middle of the afternoon and look at the state of you!"

"I am on my way into town for a new dress, mother." Evangeline lies. She has more than enough dresses, but this would be the kind of behavior her mother knew how to handle, the kind she wouldn't question and would be satisfied by.

"Alone?" Lady Darrow says, as if that was the largest scandal in the history of that nation.

"I am going with her, milady," Kiana materializes, as usual at the right time to rescue Evangeline from a lecture that would send her spiraling. "Come on child, you cannot be late," Kiana whispers in her ear, guiding her to the door.

Without another word, Evangeline pushes past her mother, who is still steaming about something and is followed by Kiana as she steps through the doorway.

While Evangeline gets thrown about in the back of the carriage, her eyes gloss over the landscape of New Orleans, framed like a painting by the varnished wood of the carriage windows. After being proclaimed the Capital of the Confederate Empire, the population of the city had doubled. Everyone wanted to bear witness to the preparations to welcome this new era, the new century, as far as it was. It was never too early for progress, or so they said.

The streets are filled with machines, a scale replica of the London bridge starts being erected over the waters of the Mississippi. The war machines have been converted to construction ones, but to Evangeline they still have the same purpose.

Destruction.

The mad search for technology is erasing the traces of magic from the old city. The river accent is disappearing to be replaced by the formal, cold and calculated way the aristocrats in England speak. That mix of creole culture with the aggressive aristocracy is pathetic and irritating.

The carriage parks before one of the best boutiques in the city, where Evangeline is greeted by a genuine smile from the proprietor, whom she has been acquainted with for

many years. It is Kiana who looks at dress after dress while Evangeline stands on the platform, feeling tortured. A group of young women her age is laughing, swinging fabrics and skirts around, fanning their rosy cheeks with lace fans in a futile attempt to remain cool in the sweltering Louisiana heat.

Their laughter and careless whispers are like sounds from another planet to Evangeline. Impatient, she points at random to one of the dresses and asks that Kiana purchase it. The proprietor wraps it beautifully in a large blue box tied with a golden ribbon and hands it over to Evangeline, who just stares at it as if she had never seen such an object before.

Kiana takes it from him and looks at the girl.

“Are you alright, child?” she asks.

Evangeline doesn’t answer. Kiana knows she isn’t. She knows without Jonathan she never will be.

“Please, Evangeline, do your best not to embarrass this family tonight. The O’Malley’s are a good family. This could be our last chance, God knows you’re running out of options.” Lady Elizabeth rambles on as they get ready for another soirée of pointless conversation and parading her for young men like a prized pig.

Evangeline was usually numb to her mother’s provocations since Jonathan’s death, rarely demonstrating any reaction to her constant prodding, but now, as Kiana closes the buttons on the back of her dress, Evangeline grinds her teeth and balls up her fists until half-moon shapes are dug into her skin. This was the one thing she could not stand, the obsession with setting her up, with replacing the man she had loved so much. It was as if Jonathan had never existed.

The dress hugged the curves of Evangeline’s torso, her waist made that much thinner by the constricting corset, the cleavage marked by small jewels and black lace while the skirt spread in layers that ruffled as she moved. Her hair was still pinned up, but gently curled pieces framed her face. She felt like a doll, about to be put in a glass case never to be touched until she was sold.

The O’Malley’s had sent an exaggeratedly ornate carriage. Gold, steaming pistons moved the wheels, noisy and dirty and Evangeline found herself missing the clop clop of horse’s hooves over the stone streets. The mansion of their hosts was one of the oldest in the cities, its pastel pink facade a mockery of all the ones trying to match its grandeur on either side, lit warmly, surrounded by lush vegetation, away from the poverty of the streets.

Evangeline passes all the women and their grand dresses, the men in their sharp suits and even sharper gazes, without so much as hinting at a smile. Her parents move behind her apologizing to every person she ignores on the way up the stairs, increasingly fast, increasingly aching for some loneliness. After over a year, grief was no longer a good excuse for her lack of manners. She had worn out the pity.

Evangeline finds a place for herself by the corner of the main hall, where it is less likely she will be seen or bothered, but her discretion ends up making her even more evident, as if she was screaming in a quiet room. While all the women are throwing themselves at the eligible bachelor’s, it’s her lack of interest that catches their eyes the most.

Christopher, the youngest O'Malley is a coveted bachelor and he carries himself like a man who knows it. Not only is he wealthy and powerful, his tall frame, honey colored hair always groomed to perfection and long eyelashes hiding irises the color of gold make him the obvious target for anyone looking for a suitor. While he is handsome and charming, Evangeline knows Christopher enough to see beyond it, to his dark nature and coward actions, a man who supported owning other people and who refused to fight or risk a hair on his head for his disturbed cause.

Her thoughts of disdain seem to work like a charm to summon him to her side.

"Miss Darrow, what a pleasure," he says, as if her presence here hadn't been perfectly orchestrated. He kisses her gloved hand and even through the fabric she feels an overwhelming urge to wipe it on the dark fabric of her dress. "May I have the honor of this dance?"

Evangeline nods automatically and silently. Soon, she is being guided through the middle of the hall, through whispering patrons and spinning couples under crystal chandeliers that gleam in the light. She is feeling dizzy and weak when the rhythm finally gives way to something calmer.

"I think we have made them wait enough, don't you, Miss Darrow?"

"Whatever do you mean?" Evangeline replies through fluttering eyelashes, a picture of innocence when every single fibre in her body wants to run screaming.

"All of the people watching us," he smiles at the crowd as he spins her slowly. "If we don't make an announcement soon, I fear they will think we are nothing more than a rumor."

"Announcement?"

"Of our engagement, of course," Christopher laughs again, as if Evangeline had said something terribly funny.

She stops. But the world around her keeps on spinning. The voices, laughter and clinking of crystal are heard as if from underwater, dim and distant. The ground seems to have disappeared from beneath her feet.

"Miss Darrow?" Christopher asks, smiling at the crowd as if nothing is wrong.

"No..." she mumbles, her eyes still wide, her legs still glued to the floor.

"No what? Are you not well?"

Evangeline raises her eyes to him.

"No, I will not marry you."

Christopher's expression changes in an instant, fury gleaming in his eyes as he raises his eyebrows in an attempt to remain in control. "Pardon?"

"I am terribly sorry, Mr. O'Malley, but I will not marry you."

Evangeline turns to leave but Christopher grabs her arm and squeezes. She turns. People around them have started to stare.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" he hisses in her ear, lifting her arm so high she feels her shoulder is going to pop. "How many people do you think are lining up to marry a whore who gave herself to a traitor who got himself killed for his stupidity?"

Evangeline feels her blood boil. In one movement, she swings her arm, slapping him in the face so hard he staggers back and the music stops.

"Jonathan was ten times the man you will ever be. I would rather drown in the Mississippi than marry a spoiled coward who hid behind his father's trousers while men gave their lives in the battlefield. Find yourself another whore, *Mr. O'Malley.*"

Evangeline marches to the door of the mansion under the scrutiny and horrified gazes of the guests, but it hardly matters. She can't breathe. She has to leave.

Pushing open the double doors, Evangeline stumbles down the entrance stairs and runs through the streets of New Orleans, the smell of iron assaulting her nostrils, the steam of machines sticking to her skin. She can't breathe. She can't breathe.

She keeps running through the cobbled streets, tears running down her cheeks, tears she thought had long dried out. Her chest is burning and the bottom of her dress is soaked through, dragging dirt and grime where she goes.

No one tries to stop her. Not that she would notice if they did. Evangeline crosses streets and alleys until she leaves the well off neighborhood where she lives and still she runs. Her misty eyes finally recognize the twisted, haunting shape of the cemetery, a dark and imposing black gate rising from the wet dirt like a specter. She pushes it, hearing it scream. She had not chosen to go there, not consciously anyway, but that is where her legs had taken her. Back to Jonathan.

She walks inside, her dark dress mingling with the night as she pulls the pins and needles from her hair, letting her curls spill out wild and free. Her feet sink in the dirt, stone angels watching her go by from their watchtowers above crypts and graves. The place had doubled in size after the war and is one of the only places in the city not taken over by the electricity of the empire.

There the energy is still strong. Heavy, real. Comforting.

Evangeline stops by Jonathan's grave, kneeling in the dirt. She runs her gloved fingers through his name, the white stained from the rust of the gate.

"Why, John? Why didn't you listen to me?" she whispers, choking back tears.

Something cracks behind her and Evangeline turns, her heart hammering in her chest. But she is alone.

Another crack, a little ahead. She stands up, slowly.

"Hello?" she calls. Another crack has her spinning in the squishy ground, her knees twisting. A shadow stands there, the shadow of a man between the graves. He is motionless, as if made of stone, but Evangeline could swear he had not been there before.

"Sir?" she calls again, taking a step forward, and another, squinting to try and make out a face. A gray cloud moves in the sky and the moonlight lands on the shadowy figure, revealing his face. Evangeline raises her hands to her mouth, trying to contain a scream of horror.

She would recognize those shoulders and the darkness of that hair anywhere. Underneath those blue eyes were the lips she had kissed so many times though she couldn't quite see them now.

"Jonathan?" she calls, her voice almost a whisper, choked with tears. Her legs are trembling and somehow she knows, she knows it is him, even if he doesn't look quite the same. He is still wearing the blue uniform of the Union.

He looks at her one last time and runs, further into the cemetery, towards the swamp and the edge of the river. Without considering anything, Evangeline chases him, trying as hard as she can not to lose him.

She is sweating and exhausted when she stops, putting her hands on her muddy knees to get her breath back. As she raises her eyes again, Jonathan is gone and, for a moment she feels his loss all over again and she doesn't think she can survive it a second

time. But before despair can fully set in, she notices a hut hidden among the trees, moss growing on its walls.

Evangeline hesitates, but the hope of seeing Jonathan again, if only for a moment, pushes her forward to the house, to the only sign of life in that dead place aside from the fireflies dotting the river's edge and the noise of cicadas. She goes up the corroded wooden stairs and pushes open the door, dust landing in clouds on her hair.

"Jonathan?" Evangeline calls, peeking inside. No reply. She risks walking in and realizes that, on top of being small, the house is also empty. The wooden floor is termite ridden and dusty and there is nothing but a trap door in the middle of the room.

Evangeline approaches it, the noise of her shoes loud in the empty house. She grabs the handle of the door with both hands, takes a deep breath and pulls.

The door opens without resistance and falls at her feet, forcing Evangeline to skip back to avoid it. She regains her balance and cranes her neck to look down, where a stone staircase goes down in a spiral until it is too dark for her to see anymore.

Holding her breath, heart hammering inside her ears, she steps on the first step. When nothing collapses, she keeps going down, the air around her growing thicker, more humid, a deep rusty smell permeating every inch of the place. She can hear water dripping down the narrow walls, but even here in this dark and damp place she feels less suffocated than she just had at the O'Malley's.

As she steps on the bottom and looks around, the sight nearly sends her running up the stairs again.

There, right in front of her, are hundreds, maybe thousands of soldiers dressed in Union uniforms, some tattered and bloody, some new and pristine, their eyes closed, in rows like puppets, forming a corridor through which she can walk. But why aren't they moving?

Legs shaking, Evangeline takes hesitant steps between the soldiers, approaching one of them, eyes squinting in the dark. But though their features are human, those soldiers don't just look like puppets.

They *are* puppets.

Where their joints should be are copper screws and their skin is pulled taut over a metal structure that Evangeline can see in the soldiers with tattered uniforms, some with empty eye sockets. She approaches another one, recognizing that from this group is where the rusty smell had been coming from. One of the soldier's faces has rusty lines running down from the corner of its lips and down its chin, like a ventriloquist doll.

From within the soldier comes a noise, like a whisper of a thousand people she can't make out. They are all carrying swords and weapons Evangeline has never seen before. They seem deadlier and more effective than any she has known.

Her blue eyes are raised again to the face of a soldier, some metallic parts of him still exposed. She can see the mechanisms inside, like clockwork.

And suddenly its eyes snap open.

Evangeline yelps when she sees the empty sockets, formed by several cogs simulating the look of an eye. She backs away and bumps into another soldier behind her, its eyes also snapping open. But none of the machine men move.

"Don't worry, my dear," a voice erupts from the dark. "They won't hurt you."

From the shadows a man steps out, not a doll but a human like her, a man who looks like a mix between the bayou witch doctors she grew up hearing about and the

english scientists. His white hair is thick and he's short, his hands dirty with grease and soot.

"Evangeline Darrow," he says. Evangeline is in such shock, she can't remember she's supposed to say something. "You came to see Jonathan, am I right?"

"Is he alive?" she can't keep the hope from her words.

"In a way."

"Where is he?" she asks, desperate. "Please."

"Before I answer that, maybe you can answer *me* something," the old man smiles. Evangeline nods, tears already forming in her eyes. "What would you do to be with him again? Would you be willing to fight?"

"I would do anything," she says, a knot in her throat and she knows she means it. Nothing would stop her.

"Would you be willing to fight the empire?"

"What?" Evangeline's confusion dims her passion for a moment. The man shakes his head and gestures towards the soldiers.

"This is my Iron Army," he says as if presenting it to a room of investors. "The materials I used to build them are the same the Confederate Army used to crush the dream of freedom in this nation. And it is with it that I intend to strike at the people who took my son from me. Your fiance.

"You... you're Jonathan's father?"

The old man nods.

"My son is alive, Miss Darrow. His body has perished, but his soul and heart are powering one of these mechanisms. Like all the other soldiers here, he once believed in liberty."

"How? How is it possible?"

"Does it matter? You made a promise once, Evangeline. I am here to hold you to it. Will you join me? Will you join your fiance and take back what is ours?"

Evangeline looks at the empty faces of those men. Was there really a will there? A heart? A soul? Did it matter? She meant it when she said she would do anything to be with Jonathan again.

"Will I still be me?"

"Your heart is yours. So is your soul. The metal will only make your body stronger."

Evangeline hesitates, looking into his eyes.

"Or would you prefer to go back to ballrooms and dinner parties?"

No. She would never go back to that. She couldn't. Death would be better.

"I will stay," she said, with more determination than she had felt for the last twelve months. She never thought she would be able to feel passion again. But this was her opportunity to see him again. To get revenge.

"In that case..."

The old man gestures to his army and, from between the soldiers steps out Jonathan, as beautiful as she remembers him, even if the shadow of copper and iron is there underneath his tan skin. Evangeline runs to him and throws herself in his arms, sobbing. His elbows hiss like a locomotive when he hugs her. He's cold.

But it doesn't matter. He's there.

Jonathan steps away and intertwines his fingers, also hissing, with hers. Together they follow the old man into another part of this underground world, where furnaces are aglow with orange fire and molten metal is spilled into human molds. The bright liquid looks like something alive, the warmth making her fluster even from afar.

That would be her blood now. She would never return to dust, she would return to metal, to iron. If she had not seen it with her own eyes, she would never believe it.

“Will it hurt?” she asks, hating that she is a little afraid. The old man smiles enigmatically as he plays with a voodoo amulet around his neck.

“Not nearly as much as it hurts now.”

Evangeline feels Jonathan’s cold metallic hand in hers.

It did not matter about the pain. She wanted it, she would do whatever it took.

The empire would fall. She would get her revenge.

And more than that, she would get Jonathan back.

“I am ready.”

The old man asked her to lay on a surgical bed and as he raised a knife, gleaming orange by the furnace lights, she knew she would never see the world in the same way again.

And the world would never know what hit it.