



AGE OF FANTASY

NO STRINGS ATTACHED



SHORT STORY

Gerepetto leaned back from making the final connections to his son's left arm. The morning sun shining through the narrow laboratory window gleamed against the metal as he worked. Gerepetto adjusted his monocle and let a wide grin spring across his face, bouncing his bushy moustache.

"Ah, my dear Pinocci, I'm not even done yet, and you're already the cutest little child I've ever seen... well, maybe you're not as little as when we started, but then, you're a growing boy!"

Gerepetto laughed aloud at his own and slapping his son's back. His son's broad barrel chest echoed at the blow. Gerepetto leaned in, looking for a glint in the metal mask that marked the face on his Automa son, before he shook his head.

"Ah, children never get their parents' humour," Pinocci said in a teasing tone. "Maybe one day when you have little Automa of your own, Pinocci, you'll understand your old father."

He stepped back to take in his son's appearance. Pinocci stood at twice his height, with forearms as thick as tree trunks; no doubt he could carry Gerepetto on his back. Indeed, Gerepetto had even installed a platform for that purpose. Sure, his son looked a little different than most children his age, but that was only because he was made from an Automa Brute.

Gerepetto had previously tried other smaller and cuter designs, but none of them displayed any spark. It turned out that Pinocci needed a body that he could grow into.

However, it was always advisable to seek a second opinion.

"What do you think, my love?" Gerepetto asked. "Do you think our Pinocci's new body suits him?"

He turned to face a portrait depicting a younger version of himself, smiling wide beside a woman. Her eyes were sunken and worn but joyful.

As Gerepetto stared at the painting, his smile faded. The clang of Automa and bustle of citizens outside echoed through the silent room until Gerepetto stirred from his thoughts.

"Ah, you're not ready yet, are you my little dumpling?" Gerepetto said, turning to his side table, covered in screwdrivers, bolts, wrenches, chisels, and an assortment of wood and metal shavings. In a corner sat a large blue gemstone, gleaming in contrast to scattered tools and papers covered in shavings of wood and metal.

He picked up the gem, examining it in his hand.

"It took a lot of effort to find the right Mindstone for you, my son," he said, examining it. "And there might have been a few who said I was a little crazy, but when it comes to your child, you just know!"

"It's as though I can feel you in there, just whispering to me and your dear mamma," He reached over to it to pick it up. "It was worth all those sleepless nights of work to convince aunty Varetia to lend it to me, and I might have ignored some rules, but when aunty meets you... I'm sure she'll understand."

He gazed into the stone and as the sun passed the window, for a moment it glimmered like the eye of his baby boy looking back at him.

A knock at the door interrupted Gerepetto's thoughts.

Gerepetto set down the stone and whispered softly to it, "One moment, my little dumpling. It seems your papa has a visitor."

He walked over, dusting his hands on his dirty apron, which probably worsened them, and then opened the door.

Outside stood a courier, a well-dressed woman with a side bag bulging with letters. "The Duchess requests your presence, Gerepetto."

She held out a letter with the ducal seal of Ollenna.

"Dionta?" Gerepetto asked. His eyebrows raised, but a wide smile parted his moustache as he held out his arms for an embrace. "A lovely surprise. Come in, come in! I have some fine Gentilondo wine..."

"I still have letters to deliver, Gerepetto," Dionta said, already turning to leave.

"Ah. Well," Gerepetto nodded, "It was lovely to see you. Good fortune to you!"

Dionta gave a quick wave but didn't turn back.

Gerepetto closed the door gently, chuckling for a moment before looking down at the letter.

He opened the letter, and his lips continued downwards into a playful frown. "Such impatience! I was supposed to see her in three days anyway! Ah well, the Duchess must have what she asks for."

He looked back over to the portrait on his workshop wall. "Don't worry, my love; it's only some silly business matter, I'm sure. I won't let it keep me from our boy's birthday."

Gerepetto paused to pat Pinocci on the shoulder, then ventured out into the street toward the ducal palace. The inventor bounced through the busy streets of Ollenna, waving and smiling as he passed by familiar faces. Gerepetto never lacked friends in the city and many, both friends and strangers, happily waved back and greeted him as he moved, before whispered among themselves when they thought the Inventor was out of earshot.

"Still workin' on that buildin' that kid of yours, Gerepetto?" A fisherman called out as Gerepetto passed. "Ya know if you got out more often, you might meet a nice assistant who could show you an easier way!"

"That is funny, Leuzio!" Gerepetto gave a sincere laugh before leaning in with a wink. "I have everything under control, though. Did your wife have to go asking around for assistants?"

Leuzio craned his neck back, his jaw open at the remark. The rest of the dock was silent for a moment. Then, Leuzio burst into laughter.

"You know what? You're alright, old man," Leuzio said. "You're my kind of loon."

Gerepetto's moustache spread wide in a smile as he bowed before turning back to his walk until he reached the ornate palace door. The guards at the entrance greeted him, and one escorted him in. To his surprise, the guards had him turn left in the grand hall, leading him not to the throne room but to the war room.

Varetia was leaning over a map of Ollenna, pointing at positions as an armoured man stood back, touching his chin. The metal of his armour was burnished black with a golden trim. He wore orange and white striped sleeves.

"While we appreciate your generous offer of service, Captain Volpeno," the Duchess said as she pulled herself back up, "we do have the situation under control."

The man bowed his head, displaying his ginger locks but he shook his head with a wry smile.

"Duchess," he replied. "My mercenaries have been hunting these Deep Sea Elves for some time. Ollenna is their next target. I have made a name for myself in outwitting such enemies; it is why I am called Volpeno the Fox."

Varetia looked down at the rings on her hand and over to Captain Volpeno.

"Yes, I have heard the reports," Varetia replied. "Your company has performed admirably against them, but our fair city's defences are stronger than you believe."

"What do you mean?" Volpeno raised an eyebrow.

"For instance, our dear Gerepetto," The Duchess turned to the newly arrived inventor. "Thank you for coming."

"I am honoured, as always, Duchess," Gerepetto replied, twirling his hand into a deep bow.

"Gerepetto," The Duchess turned to the Inventor, "I gave you use of my family's largest Mindstone. I had hoped, with these reports of raids, you might share what you have been working on for the city's defence."

"There must have been a miscommunication, your grace," Gerepetto raised an eyebrow as his moustache twisted like a caterpillar trying to escape his face. "I did request your Mindstone to develop a weapon."

"My records show you requested two assault Handbows," The Duchess furrowed her brow.

"Ah, yes!" Gerepetto beamed. "Those were for my baby boy."

"Gerepetto," the Duchess sighed, rubbing her temples, "I have never heard of this son of yours before, and I can't imagine what a child would do with these crossbows, they were designed for an..."

"An Automa! It's precisely what a growing Automa boy needs," Gerepetto hesitated. "He could hardly go around with nothing while all the other boys had their own handbows. Perhaps I did indulge him a bit too much though..."

There was a pause as the meaning of Gerepetto's words sank in around the room. The Duchess closed her eyes for a moment, furrowing her brow tightly.

Gerepetto held his breath, his whiskers sagging down his face as he waited for Varetia's verdict. Volpeno merely stood aside, smirking, just out of the Duchess' sight.

"You're an eccentric man, Gerepetto and up to now I have tolerated it, even indulged it," Varetia said at last. "Bring your 'baby boy' here, for inspection tomorrow. I examine it and make my decision; if he passes, he will serve in Ollenna's esteemed Guard Companies."

Gerepetto's face dropped, "But... your grace..."

"Otherwise, I will reclaim my family's Mindstone. You must have known there would be some strings attached to my offer," Varetia concluded, "Then, I shall speak to Captain Volpeno about his services, should he be able to wipe the smirk off his face by then."

Volpeno raised his eyebrows, before assuming a more stoned face bow.

"I trust you will choose wisely, Duchess," the Captain said with a sweeping bow.

Varetia simply shook her head and said, "I will be the judge of that; while your reports show some success, little Fox, I have also noticed that your foes have often reached the vaults before you drove them off. The same Duchess Aquarossa who recommended you also spent hours bemoaning her lost signet ring, among other treasures."

"It was necessary to bait them out," Volpeno replied, "Such sacrifices are sometimes required..."

"You are both dismissed," Varetia shook her head, "And Gerepetto... I've extended this as an offer of grace; if anyone else had taken my familial stone for such an absurd purpose without my knowledge... You've put me in a difficult position."

Gerepetto opened his mouth to speak, but he felt the touch of a guard's hand on his arm. Slowly, Gerepetto bowed his head and allowed himself to be escorted out.

Though downhill, the walk back to his workshop felt longer and colder. Though the streets still bustled with activity, it was a world away for the Inventor who took no notice at the waves, smile, whispers, or even laughter as he trudged over the cobblestone. This, in fact, only seemed to encourage the whispering of gossip around him as he passed.

When he finally arrived home, he closed the door behind him. He picked up the Mindstone and touched it softly, caressing it in his fingers, and then looked up at his wife's portrait.

Gerepetto took a deep breath and pushed the stone into his son's chest piece and took a step back.

Pinocci whirred to life.

His barrel-like arms popped out of their racks, sending a flurry of sawdust into the air as his body stuttered as it moved its weight from its scaffolding and onto its large feet. A tarp pulled off the top as he stood, revealing a platform with a small workstation above. Wooden gears clicked into place. Now, standing at full height, he looked majestic with his layers of wood and metal plating.

Gerepetto couldn't help but tear up. "Congratulations, my love, it's a boy!"

Pinocci straightened up at the Inventor words, as if trying to stand proudly. Gerepetto stepped back, as he wiped the tears from his eyes.

"Now, I said we would be celebrating your birthday," Gerepetto said, "but there's been a change of plans. We're going on a little trip... this was a wonderful home for me and your mamma, but we must go away for a while."

Gerepetto buried his head in his hands for a moment, as Pinocci stepped forward towards him.

Seeing his son take his first step caused Gerepetto to crane his neck back and his eyes open wide. Tears still falling down his face, his moustache spread into a wide smile.

"My boy's first step..." Gerepetto said with a smile. "Enough crying... Come little dumpling, let us pack."

Gerepetto pulled a large case from beneath his bed and began packing. He threw in many changes of clothes, an extra jeweller's glass, a bar of soap, and all the tools he could fit.

Pinocci seemed to get the idea, pulling another object off of a side table and throwing it into the suitcase. It was a small insect Automa that he had built with his wife many years ago; he had designed it as a music box to play a lullaby which she used to hum when he couldn't sleep.

"Ah," Gerepetto smiled, "yes, for good luck!"

"And now for your birthday present!" Gerepetto continued, "I had wanted to wait until later, but we may run into some trouble, so you will need these... just in case."

He pulled another tarp off of some large contraptions in the corner, revealing two large Assault Handbows. Gerepetto lifted one and affixed it to one of Pinocci's arms. Pinocci lifted the other, allowing Gerepetto to affix the second more easily.

Gerepetto reached over to the wall and picked up the portrait of his late wife, staring at it once more. Before shaking his head and putting it in his case; as he did, the green Automa leapt onto his shoulder. Gerepetto merely gave it a quick nod before closing the case and climbing up onto the platform that he had built onto his son's back.

"Come now, we must be quick. I will direct you," Gerepetto said, "We must go before Varetia and her fox can sniff us out."

Pinocci burst through the door, breaking it completely off its hinges, then broke into a sprint down the road.

Gerepetto nearly fell out of the cockpit, laughing. "Well, I suppose I don't have much need for that door now anyways!"

The sun was setting and the people of the town had mostly returned home for their suppers, though some still moved through the inns and taverns. All stopped and stared as they saw Gerepetto riding atop his son's back, as Pinocci's heavy footfalls nearly cracked the cobbled street with every step, but travelling this way was much faster than walking.

He directed Pinocci as they went, turning down side streets that were less populated while struggling to maintain his balance atop the platform.

Just as Gerepetto had adjusted to the bumpy ride, the docks came into sight. At his signal, Pinocci slowed, coming up another side street and peeking around the corner to look for the dockmaster's station.

"This is exciting!" Gerepetto stated with a wide grin. "Our first father-son outing! Say, do you smell that, Pinocci?"

It smelled like something was burning. Perhaps the nearby bakery? No, the nearest one was downwind from them. It smelled like it was coming from one of the dock houses.

Pinocci raised his torso, as if looking upward at Gerepetto, which subsequently knocked him off-balance again.

"Hm... perhaps your nose still may need some adjusting!" Gerepetto said, "But I'll have to remedy that later. Come, there might be someone in trouble. I hope the Deep Sea Elves have not chosen this moment to attack..."

Leuzio and a few other fishermen hurried past them as they approached.

"What are you doing here?" Leuzio said, pausing a moment. "There's a fire at the dock house! Follow us!"

"My son and I will get to the bottom of this!" Gerepetto called out as he guided Pinocci forward towards the source of the smoke.

"You old loon! You're supposed to run away from fires, not towards them!"

Gerepetto pointed Pinocci to the dock house doors. And without further clarifying instruction, Pinocci dashed right through them, sending splinters everywhere and earning a facepalm from Gerepetto.

Just inside the now-shattered doors was a number of crates and barrels. A shelf of linens and hammocks lined the far wall, and the floor was covered in hay. Some hay had been piled up in the corner with some barrels and was currently spreading flames.

Two men stood up from behind a barrel, surprised by their new visitor. They wore dark cloaks and black-burnished armour with a gold trim that glimmered in the light shining from the newly broken door.

Beneath their robes were lanterns and lubricating oil for Automa which one was pouring onto the ground before Pinocci entered.

They each drew a shotbow, raising it at the hulking Automa that had just burst through the door.

“What are you doing here, Cog licker?” One said shouted up at Gerepetto as he ducked into the cockpit.

The two fired their shotbows, letting the narrows ricochet through the dock house. Two bolts stuck Pinocci, one digging into a wooden portion, the other glancing off a metal plate.

Pinocci seemed to acknowledge the arrows, looked at his own crossbows, then raised them to fire.

Both men's eyes opened wide with shock as both larger bolts hit them squarely in the chest, thrusting them backwards and pinning them to the wall behind them.

After a moment, Gerepetto looked gingerly up from his hiding place. “A quick learner! You must take after your mother!” he said, with a startled, yet humoured expression.

Turning his attention to the flames, Gerepetto directed Pinocci again. “Quickly now, we have to put it out... we need water!”

Gerepetto grabbed an open barrel and moved towards the sea. Pinocci did the same, easily picking up two between his claw-like fingers. Gerepetto pushed his barrel under the pier with great effort before pulling it up, only for Pinocci to easily dip in his own.

Pinocci followed Gerepetto as he lumbered back towards the fire, and tossed the water over them. As the flames retreated, Pinocci appeared to understand the process and soon was rushing back and forth with barrels with water until the fire was at last extinguished.

As the smoke dissipated, Gerepetto approached the dead Vinci. Their black armour resembled Volpeno's. Gerepetto touched his chin and inspected it more closely, pushing aside the cloaks to confirm it.

“Did Volpeno order this?” He said, inspecting him closely. “Or maybe they're traitors? Now, Pinocci, a good boy ought to tell the Duchess but I fear we can't go back to the palace...”

Pinocci looked at his father, then turned and picked up the other body, as if to inspect it. Moving around in his arms, he lifted it up by its ankles and the unfortunate mercenary's coin purse burst open along the ground.

The coins bounced along the ground, but a ring among the coins caught Gerepetto's eye. Kneeling down carefully, he picked it up and inspected it; it bore the ducal emblem of Aquarossa.

Pinocci picked up a coin, mimicking the expression.

“Hm,” Gerepetto nodded, “It looks like that was minted in Liberro... but it's better that we don't take it. We don't want people mistaking us for common thieves!”

He paused looking out towards the sea; the docks were empty now. It would be so easy to simply take a boat and sail away into the horizon...

As he paused, the Automa cricket on his shoulder began to play its lullaby, and Gerepetto let out a long sigh as he looked out to the ocean.

“You must always remember to do the right thing, Pinocci,” the Inventor said. “Even if it might hurt you. All you can do is think of those who love you and trust that it will be okay... Come, let us see your aunty Varetia.”

Pinocci was silent, and both the Inventor and Automa listened as the rest of the song played out. Then, they set out towards the palace. Gerepetto nodded and pet Pinnoci's head as they passed through the cheering fishermen and dockworkers who had fled up earlier.

Even Leuzio gave the holding Automa a hearty pat on the back and “Good going, kid.”

Gerepetto directed Pinocci towards the palace, gradually picking up the pace past those who were still out in the late-night hours.

As they arrived, Gerepetto whispered down, “Careful with the doors now, these ones we need!”

Pinocci stopped, gently and slowly pushing the door open as the City Guard inside hurried aside to make way. Following Gerepetto's direction, Pinocci entered the war room.

Inside, the Duchess Varetia sat at a table, her regal face stern. Behind her, Volpeno stood with a satisfied grin.

“... at the docks. It must have been the Elves.”

Varetia did not turn to Gerepetto before she had thanked the guards and offered them each a Ducato in thanks.

She inspected the Automa behind him. “Marvellous craftsmanship, Gerepetto. Your invention will serve us well in the coming war against these elven raiders.”

“Your grace,” Gerepetto bowed. “I've come from the docks as well but we did not see Elves, only men wearing the armour of Volpeno's company.”

Varetia turned sharply, raising an eyebrow at Volpeno.

“After our talk earlier, I wanted to give a demonstration of my company's skill.” Volpeno bowed. “I ordered these men to patrol the docks to prevent the attack. Clearly, they arrived just in time to drive off the Elves”

The Duchess nodded, but Gerepetto stepped forward.

“I found this on one of your men, Volpeno,” Gerepetto held out the ducal ring of Aquarossa. “Do you have an explanation for this, my dear Fox?”

Volpeno paled, then his expression grew dark.

“Disappointing... but when others hear of the death of the Duchess at the hands of Deep Sea Elves, they will better understand the need for mercenaries like myself.”

In a flash of silver, Volpeno pulled a long knife from his cloak and lunged towards Varetia's neck.

“Pinocci!” Gerepetto was halfway through his name before the large barrel arm slammed into Volpeno's shoulder, sending him flying into the wall with a loud crash. In two steps, Pinocci swung the other arm, pinning him to the wall.

Volpeno let out a gasp, the wind knocked out of him. His knife clattered to the floor.

“Some part of me expected this might be the case,” Varetia said looking over at the pinned Captain. “Trouble always seems to show up right ahead of your company; always a convenient way to convince a nervous Duke to assign a Fox to guard the coup.”

Volpeno made one last effort to squirm from Pinocci's arm, then relaxed, breathing heavily as the Guards grabbed him and Pinocci let go.

“Your ‘boy’ has passed inspection, Gerepetto,” Varetia said. “He shall make an excellent addition to the Automa here.”

Gerepetto paused. “Duchess, I was actually hoping we could find some compromise. With the city safe, I thought you might grant your Mindstone to my son, no strings attached...”

“Gerepetto,” Varetia said sternly. “You have done well, but my hands are tied. You cannot simply take my family's Mindstone for your own purposes.”

Gerepetto leapt onto Pinocci's back. “I am sorry, Duchess. He's not some war machine to be given away... he's my son.”

Varetia looked to her guards. “Son? He is an Automa. I am sorry, Gerepetto, but this is for your own good. Guards!”

Guards rushed through the door. Gerepetto looked down at Volpeno with a sly smile, “Looks like you'll have to run.”

Gerepetto directed Pinocci, releasing Volpeno and running for the door. Duchess Varetia would have to choose between capturing Gerepetto and Volpeno.

By the time the City Guards began chasing him, Pinocci had already crashed through the palace door. Down the streets they ran, toward the walls and the roads beyond as the crowd on the street whispered, cheered and waved.

Gerepetto beamed. “You know, Pinocci. You are a very good boy. Your mother would be very, very proud!”