

Chapter 3: Feathers That Shouldn't Exist

Elsen ran until her lungs burned. The metallic grass shredded beneath her boots, biting at her ankles. The forest blurred into shapes she could no longer name—half tree, half construct, all watching her with slow mechanical whirs.

Every few paces, the sound of clashing metal rang behind her. The construct's glowing blade, the beast's guttural screeches, the groaning of the Tree.

The world she had known for sixteen years was gone. It hadn't disappeared—it had simply... revealed itself.

She didn't stop until she reached a clearing, far from the glade, where the canopy thinned and sunlight broke through in fractured ribbons. Here, the trees looked more normal. Almost. They were older, taller, less augmented. Still too quiet. But breathing.

Elsen dropped to her knees. Her arms trembled. Bits of silver grass clung to her clothing. Her heart pounded with unnatural rhythm.

She clutched the locket, now warm to the touch, and opened it again.

The gear still spun.

No photo.

No past.

Just that spinning, relentless eye.

Then something fluttered past her.

She looked up.

A feather.

It drifted lazily down from the trees, bone white, tipped with what looked like copper filigree. As it landed beside her, it sparked once, then went still.

Elsen's breath caught.

Gulls. The construct had said: *Follow the gulls.*

She stood slowly, scanning the treetops.

At first, nothing.

Then she saw it.

A bird—larger than any gull she remembered—perched on a branch far above. Its feathers were streaked with chrome, and its wings beat with the hiss of hydraulics. Its beak clicked open and shut like a latch. One eye was organic, the other a smooth black lens.

It looked at her. Waited.

Then it flew.

Without thinking, Elsen chased it.

It weaved between trees, always just out of reach, but never far enough to lose. More feathers dropped in its wake—some soft, others sharp-edged. They didn't burn or spark like the first. But each one pulsed faintly, like an echo. A signal.

Time bent strangely here.

Elsen realized this as she passed a brook that flowed uphill.

And a rabbit—no, a clockwork rabbit—watched her from a bush, ears ticking, then blinked out of existence entirely.

Still, she followed the bird.

Eventually, it led her to the edge of a cliff.

She stopped.

Below her lay a massive crater. Not a natural one. It was too symmetrical. Perfectly circular, with a spire in its center—a monolith that pierced the clouds. From this distance, she could see its surface rippled with gears and mechanisms, all spinning slowly. A pulse radiated from its core every few seconds. A low *voom*, like a heartbeat the earth couldn't hide.

The Anchor.

She didn't know how she knew, but she did. This was the thing the construct had mentioned. The thing that could finish what had been started.

The bird landed beside her. It cocked its head.

"You're part machine," she said to it quietly.

Its beak clicked. Then it *spoke*.

Not in a language, but in tones—modulated notes, like the memory of a voice carved into music.

"She is coming."

Elsen stepped back. "What?"

The bird stared. Repeated.

"She is coming."

A new sound rose from below the cliff. The hum of energy. Then a screech—high and broken, like metal tortured into screaming.

From the edge of the crater, something began to rise.

A figure.

Female.

Tall. Clad in a dress of black strands, each one writhing and coiling as if alive. Her face was half-covered by a mask that resembled the front of a clock—her left eye was a tiny spinning dial.

Elsen's knees weakened.

The woman was rising not by walking, but as if being lifted by invisible gears beneath her feet.

"She" had come.

The bird screeched and launched into the sky.

The woman stopped at the crater's rim, staring up at Elsen.

"You brought it with you," the woman said, her voice hollow and distant. "The seed. The key. The fracture."

"I didn't mean to—"

"You don't have to mean it," the woman replied. "You simply *are* it."

Elsen clenched the locket. "What do you want?"

"I want to rewind what was broken. And you, child, are the first wound."

The wind shifted. The grass around Elsen turned to riveted metal.

"What does that mean?"

The woman raised one hand. A gear floated above it, glowing with the same etching as Elsen's locket.

"I am the Archivist," the woman said. "The Keeper of All Failed Time. And you are the anomaly."

Elsen shook her head. "No. I'm just—"

"Just a girl who survived the fold," the Archivist said. "Just a girl who brought back the gear and doomed this forest to remember. But you're more than that. You're the unfinished page."

"I don't understand!"

The Archivist smiled behind her mask.

"You will."

And then, the sky split.

A crack—not lightning, but an actual tear—stretched above them. Through it, Elsen saw glimpses of other places: a child standing on a desert of broken watches, a tower filled with mirrors spinning like turbines, a man with no mouth screaming soundlessly inside a chamber of sand.

The crack widened.

The gull-bird flew into it and vanished.

The cliff beneath Elsen trembled.

From the crater, hundreds of spindly limbs began to rise.

Time had stopped hiding.