

The town of Brinewick had no clocks.

There were no ticking hands on walls, no watches on wrists, no bells to mark the hour. The people lived by the rhythm of the sea and the rustling of the great wind-trees that lined the cliffs. It had been this way for as long as anyone could remember. And yet, deep in the Whispering Forest, far beyond where anyone dared to go, there was a tree that ticked.

No one believed it existed. Not really. Old sailors and children whispered about it—the Clockwork Tree, a massive oak with brass veins and spinning gears nestled among the bark. They said it grew cogs like fruit and bled oil instead of sap. They said it was older than Brinewick itself, older than the ocean.

On the edge of town lived a girl named Elsen Merrow. She was fifteen, sharp as a gull's cry, with salt-blonde hair and a habit of sneaking out at night. Her father was a fisherman who hadn't returned in five months, and her mother was a glassmaker who hadn't smiled in six. Elsen didn't believe in fairy tales. But she did believe in patterns. And something in Brinewick wasn't adding up.

It started with the birds.

Three days ago, all the gulls left. Every last one, just gone from the sky. Then the tides shifted. The moon rose crimson and bloated. And last night, the wind-trees stopped moving.

Elsen noticed. No one else did. Or if they did, they didn't talk about it.

That night, when the town's dim lanterns flickered and the clouds rolled in heavy and low, Elsen packed her satchel: a hunting knife, her father's compass (which spun endlessly, never settling), a flask of bitter root tea, and a locket with a picture of her parents when they were young and laughing.

She didn't tell her mother she was leaving.

The path to the Whispering Forest was thick with fog and humming silence. The trees there were tall and gnarled, their trunks split like mouths, leaves like iron razors. Legends said the forest could move if it didn't want you in it. Elsen didn't believe that either. But when the path forked three times in places where it shouldn't, she kept her knife close.

Two hours in, she found a bird. A gull. Dead, stiff, lying across a stone with symbols etched deep into it. Not letters—just...shapes. Circular, intricate, like tiny machines frozen in time.

She kept walking.

Eventually, she heard the ticking.

It wasn't loud. It was almost shy, like it didn't want to be heard. But it was there, behind the breeze that wasn't blowing, under the rustle of leaves that didn't move. A steady tick...tick...tick... like a heartbeat, but made of metal.

And then she saw it.

The Clockwork Tree stood alone in a glade of ash-white grass. It was enormous, taller than any tower in Brinewick, its bark a mix of old oak and bronzed plates fitted seamlessly into the wood. Gears the size of wagon wheels turned slowly among its branches. Smaller cogs clinked and whirred where leaves should be. A golden pendulum swayed just above the roots, scraping the ground with a sound like a bell drowned in oil.

Elsen stepped closer. Her compass spun faster.

The tree opened its eye.

Not literally—not like a creature. But a panel near its base slid open with a hiss, revealing a smooth hollow with a pulsing blue core. It lit her face in eerie light. Something was inside. A shape. A person?

No. A construct.

It was humanoid, curled like a fetus, made of dark copper and glass, wires where veins should be. Its chest pulsed once—blue, then dark. Then blue again. Elsen reached out.

The construct opened its eyes.

They were not machine eyes. They were human.

Elsen jerked back. The tree creaked, gears shifting suddenly, and the ground beneath her feet trembled. A low, groaning sound echoed through the glade, not from the tree—but from the forest behind her.

It was waking up.

She turned to run—but the construct spoke.

“Elsen Merrow.”

She froze. “How do you know my name?”

“You planted the seed,” it said, voice rough like old wood splitting. “Sixteen years ago. When time broke.”

“That’s not possible. I wasn’t even born—”

“You were,” it said. “But not like this.”

The forest roared. Not with voices, but with movement. Trees shifting. Roots rising. Time unraveling like thread pulled from a tapestry.

Elsen stood between the impossible and the unknown, and for the first time in her life, she realized the clocks in Brinewick hadn’t disappeared.

They had been stolen.

And something had just started ticking again.