

Chapter 4: The Engines Beneath Her Feet

The ground cracked like an eggshell under Elsen's boots.

She stumbled backward, the world yawning open beneath her—beneath everything. The cliff split apart, and from the crater, the limbs rose higher: spindly, insect-thin, jointed in impossible ways. They clicked and twisted together like a monstrous clock assembling itself.

The Archivist watched with arms folded, as if overseeing the restoration of an old cathedral.

Elsen turned to run—instinct screaming at her—but the cliff's edge curved in on itself. It wasn't just breaking apart; it was folding, reshaping, *building* a path downward.

Toward the spire.

Toward the Anchor.

And somehow, she knew: she was meant to follow it.

The locket pulsed in her hand, warm enough to sting.

The Archivist's voice floated to her again, thinner now, almost blending into the grinding of gears. "You can't flee from your axis, girl. You are already turning."

Elsen clenched her jaw. "I'm not your axis. I'm not your anything."

She turned and stepped onto the moving path. The 'ground' beneath her wasn't earth anymore—it was a slow, shifting machine, plates sliding into place under her boots.

Each step took her farther from the cliffside and deeper into the swirling chaos of the crater.

Down. Down.

Below the tear in the sky, below the screaming limbs, below the endless hum.

The air thickened, smelled of burned copper and moss. The trees at the crater's rim were disintegrating, their trunks unspooling into long metallic ribbons, spiraling into the sky like offerings.

As she descended, memories unspooled inside her.

Memories she didn't *own*.

A woman in a workshop, building a tiny bird with gears for bones.

A child tracing the outline of a clocktower with a finger, weeping.

A voice whispering across water: "*The fold will remember what was lost.*"

None of these things had happened to Elsen.

Yet they belonged to her now.

The path ended at a platform of stone—no, not stone: *ossified code*, frozen and solid, symbols etched deeper than any chisel could carve.

Before her stood the spire.

It stretched so high she couldn't see its top. Up close, it didn't look like a tower at all—it was a colossus, an infinite screw, threading itself into the heart of the world. Every few seconds, it rotated slightly with a sound like a mountain sighing.

At its base, a doorway shimmered.

A doorway made of light.

She hesitated.

From somewhere behind her, the Archivist's words floated down:

"The Anchor remembers all who touch it. It will remember you most of all."

Elsen clenched the locket so hard the metal bit into her skin.

"If I touch it, what happens?" she whispered.

No answer. Only the grinding of the limbs overhead, the cracking of the world, the tear in the sky bleeding thin violet strands into the crater.

Her legs moved without asking permission.

One step. Two.

She stood before the door.

A second bird—sleeker than the first, with feathers of jet and glass—darted past her and vanished into the light.

She inhaled.

Stepped through.

The world inverted.

She wasn't standing on stone anymore.

She was standing on an ocean.

The sky above was wrong—a clockface, but shattered, its hands spinning backward and forward at once. Stars dripped from the broken sky like melted wax.

Beneath her, the ocean didn't ripple. It pulsed, like a living thing.

Ahead of her, rising from the water, were figures.

Not people. Not anymore.

Each wore parts of machines—cogs embedded in their chests, pistons where arms should be, copper bones exposed through transparent skin. Their faces were a patchwork of grief and precision.

They regarded her with solemn eyes.

One figure, taller than the others, stepped forward.

Its voice sounded like a thousand gears sighing at once.

"The Anomaly arrives. The Weft stirs. The Loom awakens."

"I don't understand!" Elsen cried. "Why me? What do you want from me?"

"Not want," the figure said. *"Need."*

Another figure extended its hand. Embedded in its palm was a mirror.

Elsen, trembling, stepped closer and peered into it.

But it wasn't her reflection she saw.

It was the same clearing she had been born in—yes, she remembered it now, *truly* remembered: the silver grass, the metallic trees bending low to watch.

And above her, on that day, the same tear in the sky.

It had always been there.

Waiting.

She looked at the baby in the reflection—herself—and saw that around the infant's neck hung the locket, already spinning.

Already awake.

"This is a mistake," she whispered. "I'm not supposed to be here."

"You are not supposed to exist," the figures intoned together. *"And yet you do. Therefore, the world must change."*

The sky above the clock-ocean cracked further, the minute hand splintering into a thousand pieces.

The Anchor, unseen now but felt deep in her bones, began to hum harder.

Elsen knew without knowing:

If she stayed here, she would become part of the mechanism.

If she ran, she would tear a hole even wider.

No choices were safe.

The clockwork figures bowed.

The tallest one spoke again.

"The fracture or the forge. Choose."

Elsen closed her eyes.

And chose.