

Chapter 2: The Unbinding

The forest moved behind her.

Not in the way leaves rustle or branches sway, but like an organism stretching after centuries of stillness. Trees groaned, roots twisted, and trunks shifted inwards like a tide of wood and bark converging on the glade.

Elsen didn't move.

The construct still lay curled in the tree's hollow, its humanlike eyes locked onto her. She couldn't look away—not because of fear, but because those eyes held something strange. Recognition.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "What do you mean I planted the seed?"

"You didn't know what you were doing," it said, rising slowly to its feet. The motion was fluid but deliberate, like it had practiced standing a thousand times in its sleep. "You were too small to remember."

"I've never been here before."

"You came through the fold," it said. "Sixteen years ago. On the night the clocks stopped."

Elsen shook her head. "No. No, that's just... stories."

The construct stepped out of the hollow. As its bare feet touched the grass, the ticking from the Clockwork Tree grew louder, faster—almost agitated.

"Your presence awakens the mechanism," it said. "The Cycle is returning."

The trees at the glade's edge began to crowd in. Limbs bent unnaturally, creaking like strained metal. Bark cracked open in spirals, revealing glints of something metallic underneath. The entire forest, it seemed, was part-machine.

The ground trembled.

"What's happening?" Elsen asked, stepping back instinctively.

"The forest remembers the moment it was bound. Now it remembers how to move again."

"Bound by what?"

The construct looked up at the tree, and for a moment, it seemed almost... sorrowful.

"By you."

Elsen's skin prickled. "No. That's not possible."

"It wasn't your fault. You were a child. But you brought the key through the rift. It took root in this tree, and everything changed."

"What key?"

The construct pointed at the locket around her neck.

Elsen hesitated, then opened it.

Inside, the picture of her parents was gone.

In its place was something else—a tiny silver gear, impossibly thin, etched with the same circular patterns she'd seen on the dead gull's stone. It spun slowly, even though she wasn't touching it.

"I've never seen that before," she muttered.

"You couldn't," the construct said. "Not until the Tree began to wake. The locket masked the gear. It was the only way to keep the Cycle dormant."

Elsen's head swam. "What Cycle? What are you even talking about?"

The forest creaked again, louder now, more insistent. A loud *snap* echoed as a massive tree in the distance broke at its middle and collapsed with a metallic groan. The sky darkened, not from storm clouds, but from something else. Something layered. Like the sky itself was a great clockface, turning just out of sight.

The construct stepped closer. "The Cycle is the collapse and rebirth of time. It happens every few thousand years. But this one was interrupted. Artificially frozen. When your locket entered this realm with the gear, it infected the roots of the Tree and halted everything."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"I know," it said. "But you're here now. That means the unbinding has begun."

The grass at Elsen's feet turned brittle. She looked down—the tips had become metallic. Silvery blades, shaped like grass, but sharp and cold to the touch.

"Why me?" she asked. "Why now?"

"Because the last Clockkeeper never came back. And the Tree chose a new one."

"I'm not a keeper of anything."

"You are now."

Suddenly, the Tree lurched.

A deep chime rang out from its core, not like a bell but something more primal—a resonance that made Elsen's bones hum. A circular hatch at the base spun open and out stepped something huge.

A beast made of metal and bark. Its eyes burned red, and steam hissed from vents along its back. It looked like a wolf, but wrong—too many joints, a mouth filled with rows of sawteeth.

"Guardian," the construct said calmly. "It was dormant until now."

The beast growled low. Not a sound of hunger—but recognition. It locked eyes with Elsen.

"It knows who you are," the construct said. "It remembers the one who broke time."

The beast lunged.

Elsen dove aside just in time. The creature slammed into the ground where she'd stood, tearing up chunks of earth and gear-root. The air filled with the scent of oil and ozone.

The construct moved with unnatural grace, leaping between Elsen and the beast. Its arm unfolded into a long, glowing blade.

"I'll hold it," it shouted. "You run."

"I'm not leaving you!"

"You *must*. You need to find the Anchor. It's the only way to finish what was started!"

"Where?"

The construct met her gaze, eyes steady. "Follow the gulls."

"There are no gulls anymore!"

"Exactly."

With a burst of speed, the construct charged the beast. The glade lit with sparks and metal cries.

Elsen ran.

Behind her, time screamed.