

The Timekeepers Daughter

The clock in my father's workshop had been silent for three days when I finally heard it tick again. Not the steady rhythm I remembered from childhood—the comforting pulse that marked supper time, bedtime, the hours he spent bent over his workbench with jeweler's glass pressed to his eye. This was different. Arrhythmic. A heartbeat stuttering back to life.

I stood at the workshop door, my hand frozen on the iron handle. Father had been dead a week. The other clocks had stopped the moment his heart did, as if they couldn't bear to keep time without him. The longcase in the hall, the carriage clock on the mantle, even the pocket watch in his burial suit—all silent. The village priest said it was grief made manifest. My aunt said it was unnatural.

She was right about that, at least.

The tick came again. Then another, faster. Then a sound like glass breaking in reverse, pieces flying together instead of apart.

I pushed open the door.

The workshop was exactly as he'd left it—tools scattered across the bench, brass filings glinting in the dust-thick air, half-finished mechanisms frozen mid-assembly. But in the corner, beneath its canvas shroud, something moved. The cloth rippled as if caught in a wind that existed only there.

I crossed the room, my footsteps too loud in the silence between those wrong ticks. When I pulled the canvas away, I understood why my father had hidden it.

The clock was beautiful and terrible. Its case was blackwood, carved with symbols I didn't recognize—not numbers, not letters, but something older. The face held no hands, only a spiral of silver that turned inward, always inward, like water circling a drain. And behind the glass, instead of gears, there were shadows. Moving shadows that formed shapes I almost recognized before they dissolved again.

A piece of parchment lay beside it, my father's handwriting shaking across the page:

Dearest Elara—if you're reading this, I am gone, and I am sorry. This is the last clock I will ever make, and the first that should never have been made at all. Do not wind it. Whatever you do, do not wind it. It does not measure time. It—

The rest was illegible, the ink smeared as if his hand had been shaking too badly to continue.

But there, on the clock's base, was the keyhole. And hanging from a chain around my neck—placed there by the undertaker who'd found it clutched in my father's dead hand—was a key that had been warm ever since.

I heard my aunt's voice in the hall below. "Elara! The priest is here. We're going to cleanse that room. Whatever unholy work your father was doing, it ends today."

Footsteps on the stairs.

My hand moved without thought, pulling the key from around my neck. It burned against my palm, hot as a brand, but I couldn't drop it.

The workshop door burst open. My aunt stood there, the priest behind her with his blessed water and prayers. She saw the clock, saw my hand moving toward it, and lunged.

"Don't you dare—"

I turned the key.

The world shattered.

Time didn't stop. It splintered into a thousand contradicting pieces. My aunt froze mid-lunge, her face locked in fury, but her hair continued to gray, white spreading from her roots like frost. The priest aged backwards, his wrinkles smoothing, his stoop straightening, until a young man stood where an elder had been.

Through the window, I saw the village square transform. The baker stood at his counter, his hands moving through the same kneading motion again and again, trapped in a single second. Children at the fountain grew old in heartbeats, their laughter turning to wheezing coughs. The church bell rang backwards.

Only I remained unchanged.

The shadows in the clock pressed against the glass, and I saw them clearly now—human shapes. Dozens of them. One was my father.

His shadow-mouth moved, forming words I heard not with my ears but somewhere deeper.

Touch the glass.

I pressed my palm against it. Cold shot up my arm, and the world tilted.

Suddenly I stood in the workshop, but it wasn't my workshop. The tools were different, older. A woman bent over the workbench, assembling the clock. She looked up, and I saw my own eyes staring back at me.

My grandmother.

We tried to stop it, she said, though her lips didn't move. The plague. It came in 1823, turning people to ice where they stood. Your great-grandfather built the first clock, trying to freeze the moment before death, to give us time to find a cure.

The vision shifted. I saw him—a man I'd never known—carving symbols into blackwood. Bodies frozen mid-scream, ice crystals blooming in their lungs.

He succeeded, her voice continued. He caught us all in that moment, held us there. But someone had to maintain it. Someone had to wind the clock, or we'd finish dying.

Another shift. My grandfather taking up the key. Then my grandmother. Then my father, his face younger than I'd ever known it, full of the same desperate determination I'd seen in his final note.

It passes through blood, she said. We are the timekeepers. We hold the village in the space between seconds, and we cannot leave.

The vision released me. My father's shadow moved to the front of the glass.

I'm sorry, Elara. I tried to spare you. Tried to find another way. But the clock releases us only when the next keeper comes of age.

I looked down at my hands. The key had vanished, but I could still feel it fused to my palm.

"No," I whispered. "There has to be another way."

You can't. If you stop winding, time collapses. The plague finishes what it started. Everyone dies—everyone who's lived here for two hundred years. You, me, all of us.

Behind him, the other shadows nodded. Generations of keepers watching with hollow eyes.

I turned to the window. My aunt still frozen mid-lunge. The village fractured. Children aging and un-aging. The looping baker. This was the cost of my mistake.

But knowledge settled in me—the rhythm, the motion, the carved prayer.

I wound the clock.

Time snapped back into place. My aunt stumbled forward. The priest caught her, both of them suddenly confused, certain they'd come upstairs for something but unable to remember what. Through the window, the baker finished kneading his dough. The children climbed from the fountain, laughing, their ages correct again.

Everything returned to normal.

Except me.

I felt it settling into my bones—the weight of years I hadn't lived. My heartbeat syncing with those arrhythmic ticks. My thoughts beginning to stretch, to experience past and present and future all at once.

My aunt and the priest left the house, still confused.

I looked at the clock. The shadows had settled back into their places, but my father's remained at the front. He raised one hand and pressed it to the glass where mine had been.

I love you, he said. I'm sorry.

Then he faded back into the mass of keepers.

That night, I found his journal hidden in a drawer I'd never noticed. The entries spanned decades, the handwriting unchanged. The final entry read:

Elara turns eighteen tomorrow. After forty-three years, I will finally rest. I have left her the warning I wish someone had left me, though I know it will not be enough. We always wind the clock. The key makes sure of it.

I closed the journal.

Outside, the church bell rang six times.

The workshop seemed sharper now, more vivid. Already I could feel myself changing.

I was nineteen years old.

I would be nineteen for a very long time.

Someday, decades or centuries from now, I would feel the clock release me. My own child would come of age. And I would leave them a note, a warning, a plea they would not heed.

Because the key would make sure they would it anyway.

I pulled out a fresh piece of parchment and began to write.

Dearest child—if you're reading this, I am gone, and I am sorry...