

The Girl Who Fell Through Time

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The star fell screaming.

It tore through the night sky like a shard of glass cutting through silk; silent to most, but not to her. Isobel felt its descent deep in her bones, a fractured hymn woven of agony and lullaby, a song that did not belong to this time.

Where it struck the earth, just beyond the barren cliffs, the air itself wept runny, white, light. The twisted trees turned their hollow faces away, as if ashamed to witness such a rupture.

Isobel found it at the center of the crater, a fragile thing no larger than a lantern, its surface neither fire nor metal, but a trembling veil of glass and shadow. It had no eyes, no mouth, and yet it spoke, not with sound but in the hollow spaces of her mind.

“I am not meant to be here.”

The voice was a fracture. An echo of ancient sorrow.

“I was destined to fall only at the thousandth year of the Pale Age. But something—someone—ripped the order from the sky.”

Isobel’s breath caught as she knelt beside the fallen star. Within its fractured shell, she glimpsed three broken visions, fragments of futures undone: kingdom’s adrift on oceans of air, a child crowned beneath three pale moons, a cathedral woven from living roots singing secrets to the stars. All fading, dissolving into mist.

“I don’t understand,” Isobel whispered, reaching out with trembling fingers.

The star recoiled; it's light flickering like a candle caught in a storm.

“Your presence here tears at time's delicate weave, like a blade through silk,” the star sobbed. “Every step you take cleaves my mistaken presence deeper into the fabric.”

A cold wind rose, and above, the sky bled faint cracks of fading light, as if it too remembered what had been lost and feared what might never be restored.

“What must I do?” Isobel asked, voice barely more than a breath.

The star pulsed, fragile and dim, like a heartbeat on the cusp of silence.

“Carry me forward,” the star instructed. “Forward into time. Beyond your death. Beyond the wars. Beyond the endless quiet. To the place when I am meant to shine.”

Then, as if exhaling a warning, it whispered one final truth:

“But beware—time is a jealous master. It does not forgive the mending of its wounds. And it always collects its debts. I will tell you where you need to take me. But listen closely.”

They called it the City of Clocks, though no one who lived there remembered building it. The streets ticked. The buildings groaned. The very air held the scent of copper and forgotten hours. It was a place lost between seconds, where time bled and did not heal.

The star hummed in its shroud of linen and stardust, cradled in the arms of the girl who carried it. Her name had been lost sometime between the crater and the road, discarded like a

husk. No longer Isobel, now she was only motion—tired feet, cracked lips, and a body moving through borrowed time. The star called her Keeper, for even the star could not remember her name.

The city gates opened for no one, and yet they parted at her arrival—hinges rusted by centuries grinding open without a sound. Beyond them lay towers shaped like broken metronomes, chimneys exhaling steam in rhythm with an invisible heartbeat. Clock faces watched from every surface: tall ones with golden rims, crooked ones stained with rust, some missing hands altogether, still others with too many.

Time moved wrong here. Some buildings leaned into tomorrow while their shadows lagged behind. Passersby walked in loops, their eyes glazed, their lips mouthing fragments of conversations that had already happened—or hadn't happened yet. All of them wore blindfolds made of silver mesh, delicate and strange, as though to protect them from seeing the truth of the hours that hunted them.

The Keeper said nothing. She moved between the spires like a thread pulled through fabric, unnoticed yet felt. The star pulsed faintly in her arms, its light flickering beneath the linen like a dying heartbeat. When it spoke, it did so without voice.

“The Heartclock lies ahead. In the tower with no hands. The one that ticks only for the future.”

She turned toward the city's center, where a tower taller than the rest loomed like a tooth in the sky. It had no windows. No doors. Its surface was black stone streaked with silver veins,

like a giant clockwork root reaching into the clouds. At its crown, a great clock face stared across the rooftops. Blank, handless, still.

The closer she walked, the more the city noticed her.

Clocks began to hiccup. Hours stuttered in the air. A shopkeeper's bell rang three times in one breath, then shattered. Far above, the bells in the Time Cathedral tolled backward.

She passed a clockmaker whispering apologies to a cracked minute hand. A child dragging a pendulum that left a groove in the stone. A pale woman counting heartbeats into a glass vial and sealing it with wax.

Still, no one stopped her. They couldn't see her.

But something else could.

The air thickened as she approached the tower. The ground trembled with the subtle panic of unspoken prophecy. Her reflection in the street glass blurred, then vanished altogether.

Then the star cried out, not with sound, but with light.

“It’s unraveling. The moment is slipping—”

Beneath her boots, the stones fractured. The tower shuddered. And above them all, the clock with no hands began to tick.

Once.

Twice.

A sound like bone against bone.

And the world split open.

When the crack split the street beneath her, the Keeper did not fall. The world folded instead, like parchment scorched and curling. One blink, and the city was gone. The next, she stood within the Heartclock.

Silence ruled here. Not the silence of absence, but the charged hush before a storm... before a scream. The chamber was vast, round as a moon and dark as the underside of memory. Every surface was metal, etched in strange glyphs that shifted when unobserved. Mechanisms the size of cathedrals loomed overhead, suspended in air without chains, each gear turning with impossible precision. No sound. No creak. Not even breath.

The Keeper exhaled, and the star pulsed faintly in her arms.

They were no longer in the City of Clocks. They had traveled through Time again.

The tower existed *between*. It ticked in the intervals where time lost its balance, between choices unmade and deaths not yet fulfilled. This was the place where time's heart beat, slow and reluctant.

In the center of the chamber stood a dial.

It rose from the floor like a stone altar, rimmed with crystal and wound with veins of pale silver. Its face bore no numbers, only shifting constellations, like stars trapped under glass. Some

burned brightly. Others flickered. One winked out as she watched, dissolving into soot and vanishing from the dial.

The star stirred.

“This is where I was meant to return.”

The Keeper lowered it gently onto the dial. For a moment, the star shimmered, then thrashed.

Light burst from it in spirals, not warm but cold, like moonlight bent through frozen glass. It began to levitate, limbs of starlight unraveling from its core, reaching skyward as if to claw its way back into the sky.

But something *resisted*.

The dial darkened.

The air changed.

From the edges of the chamber, shadows leaked. They were thin as wire, sharp as memory. They moved with purpose. Not ghosts, not creatures. *Remnants*. The debris of broken timelines. They slithered between the gears, clothed in fragments of stolen futures, wearing the faces of those who *might have been*.

The Keeper did not run. She knew better.

The star, still hovering, flickered in panic.

“They do not want the future restored. They were born from its undoing.”

One of the shadows stepped into the light. Its face was hers.

Not quite. Close, but older. Harder. Eyes like broken clocks. Mouth smiling a smile she hadn't yet learned.

“You shouldn't have brought it here,” it said. “Let the future rot. It's easier that way.”

The star faltered. Light dimming.

The Keeper stepped between it and the shadow.

“I made a promise,” she said. “I *carry* the falling, even if I fall with them.”

The words echoed like a bell across the chamber. The gears above shuddered. Time twisted. Somewhere behind her, the dial flared with heat.

The remnant stepped forward, and the others followed.

A ring of possible selves. Each one whispering what she could become. A monster. A traitor. A queen of ash. A girl who never left the crater. A corpse beneath Alpha clocks.

“Give it back to us,” they hissed in unison. “Give it to the dark.”

But the Keeper was already reaching for the dial.

Already bleeding.

Already glowing.

The star screamed, and the Heartclock began to spin.

Time didn't shatter when the dial turned—it *shed*.

Like old skin, like petals from a dying flower, it peeled away layer after layer of the world until only the raw root remained. The Keeper fell without falling, her body drifting through a prism of unlived moments. Her breath crystallized. Her thoughts slowed, trapped in molasses seconds.

And then: stillness.

She landed not on stone or sky but on a glass field where stars grew like flowers.

The Half-Born World.

It had no horizon. Only reflections. The sky above mirrored the ground below—endless, echoing, wrong. A thousand versions of herself flickered across the surface, each one caught in their own ripple of time: some laughing, some dead, some burning, some lost.

The star hovered beside her, no longer wrapped in linen but clothed in its true shape, a child made of light and grief. Its eyes were wide and white, its skin etched with constellation scars. It wept not tears but dust, fine as ash and glowing with the memories of a future not yet lived.

“I wasn't supposed to *wake* here,” the star whispered. “This is the marrow between destinies. The wound inside the wound.”

The Keeper looked around. There were paths in the glass, thin and luminous like veins, pulsing with soft color. Each led to a doorway suspended midair, some cracked, some pulsing, some nailed shut with time-bent iron. Faint echoes leaked from behind them: A clock tolling backward. A child's voice saying goodbye. Wings made of silver gears unfurling.

She stepped forward, her reflection fracturing and mending with each motion. Behind her, something followed. Not footsteps. *Echoes*. Regret given shape. Her mistakes crawled at the edge of the mirror field, faceless things made of silence and almos

"If you choose the wrong door," the star warned, "we will never find the future I came from. And you'll never return to the world you left."

The Keeper said nothing. Her heart beat once every few breaths. Too slow. The weight of paradox had begun to settle in her bones like frost.

And still, she walked.

Past a door made of her childhood voice.

Past a door where the City of Clocks burned.

Past a door where the remnant with her face stood crowned in shadow.

She reached the thirteenth door.

It was made of no material she recognized. Not wood. Not metal. It pulsed gently. It *breathed*. Across its surface, a sigil had been burned—not with flame, but with memory.

It was the mark she saw once, long ago, beneath her childhood bed. The symbol she drew in ash after her mother died. The shape the moon made on the night she stopped believing in grace.

The star stopped beside her, its light dim and steady.

“This is the one,” it said. “But it won’t open for me. Only for someone who has fallen... and still chooses to climb.”

The Keeper reached out.

The door did not open. It unraveled. Threads of time came loose like strands of gold silk, curling around her fingers. The breath of the new future exhaled from the space beyond: wet, raw, and newborn.

And inside?

A sky not yet written. A city unburned. A clock tower, waiting.

But also: shadows. Fractures. The debt of her journey lingering, unpaid.

She looked down at the star. Its face was turned upward, gazing into the unwritten sky. And then, behind them, the half-born world *shuddered*. Something had followed them in. Something that should not be. It slipped into the Half-Born World without sound. No footsteps. No cry. No heralding wind.

Just the *stopping*...of everything.

The reflections on the mirror-field froze. The doors held their breath. Even the soft, strange stars overhead dimmed, as if blinking in dread. The pulse of the thirteenth doorway flickered, its golden threads curling inward, retreating like nervous roots.

The Keeper turned slowly.

At first, she saw only darkness. Not the shadow of night, but the darkness of *unhappening*—the ink of unspoken choices and unborn catastrophes. And then it moved.

A figure. Tall. Featureless. Not clothed in shadow but made from it, stitched from the negative space between heartbeats. It did not walk. It unspooled. Like smoke remembering it had once been fire.

Its face was a mirror. Not a true one—*her* mirror. But warped. It held her eyes, but they were wrong. Pupil-less. Silver. And bleeding. Its mouth was wide, and smiled with her smile, only stretched too thin. When it breathed, it sounded like ticking.

The star shrank behind the Keeper.

“That’s not a remnant,” it said, voice thin with dread. “That’s something older. From before even the clocks.”

The Keeper stepped between it and the creature, as if her bruised body could stand against time’s worst forgetting.

The thing tilted its head, studying her.

Then it *spoke*.

But not aloud.

It spoke *through* her. Through her bones, her blood, her breath.

“You tore open the gate. You *broke* the Heartclock. You reached into a moment that was not yours to hold. You carried what should have never fallen. Now I have followed it here.”

The Keeper tasted rust in her mouth. Her heartbeat shuddered against her ribs like a dying moth.

“What are you?” she managed to say, though it burned to speak.

The figure rippled. Its voice was velvet soaked in ice.

“I am the debt. I am the cost. I am the silence that follows the wrong future. And I am hungry.”

With a flicker, it reached past her. Fast— *too* fast. A claw of shadow split from its hand and wrapped around the star. The child of light screamed, collapsing inward. Starlight seared the floor. The mirror-glass cracked beneath it.

The Keeper lunged.

Her hand closed around the star just as the dark claw closed around them both.

And then—

She fell again.

But this time, she fell with *it*.

It was not a descent through space. It was a falling *out of consequence*.

The Keeper plummeted through something that wasn't sky, wasn't air, but memory in reverse. Every thought she'd ever buried bloomed for a moment, flared into life, then *snapped*. Her name, her mother's voice, the scent of rain on the balcony of a childhood she barely remembered. They peeled from her like bark stripped from a tree.

And then, the *landing*. Hard. Wet. Cold.

She hit the ground with her shoulder first, the impact grinding into her spine like a scream made of bone. The star— no longer child-shaped, but a pulsing ember of pain—rolled from her grip, its light now the color of dying fire.

The place they'd fallen into did not obey the world's logic.

It was not dark, it was *unlit*. The Vault of Unmaking.

A realm beneath even the Half-Born World, made to house that which time has cast out: aborted histories, fractured timelines, aborted gods. Ruins hung upside-down in the air above her: half-built towers, cities made of glass and bone, staircases that led to nowhere. Books with blank pages fluttered midair, shedding letters like feathers.

There was no sky. Only a ceiling of screaming clocks. Hundreds of them, all melted, weeping, their hands turning backward at different paces. Their sound wasn't ticking, but a dirge made of seconds that never should have passed.

She stood, weak. Bleeding from her ear. Heart pulsing like it might give out.

The creature was ahead, its form unraveling, becoming *closer* to its truth. No longer her shadow, it now bore the vague shape of a great bird, wings made of broken hours, talons of absence. Its eyes were twin hourglasses, cracked and pouring black sand that never reached the floor.

It turned to her. The star hovered behind it, flickering violently.

“This is where it ends,” it whispered, again not with sound, but with *finality*.

“No,” the Keeper rasped. “This is where I steal it back.”

She moved. She didn’t *run*, she *bled* forward, the act of walking itself pulling memories from her skin. The Vault tore from her like a tax. Her hands aged. Her breath faltered. Her left eye clouded. But she pressed on.

And then—

The star, hearing her voice, *flared*.

Its light turned sharp. Directional. It remembered. And in remembering, it *called*.

The vault shook. One of the clocks overhead screamed aloud, its metal casing bursting open in a howl of static and moonlight. A ripple cracked across the ceiling.

The creature shrieked in rage. It launched itself at the Keeper, wings of time unfurling—

And she met it with the last of her strength, wielding not a blade, but a name. The star's true name. The one it whispered to her once, in a dream stitched from silver:

"Seylin."

A shockwave erupted, powerfully rippling with *possibility*. The creature howled as its form began to split, riven by the word that made the star *real again*. A light bled through the Vault, severing the ruin from the root. Clocks shattered. Gravity reversed.

And the Keeper rose, rising with Seylin held to her chest, fire in her bones and names in her blood.

The Vault of Unmaking collapsed behind her with a sigh. A long, tired exhale from a god who had finally been allowed to die.

The Keeper rose through the fracture, cradling Seylin in her arms. The star's light no longer pulsed erratically. It was steady now, like a heart remembering how to beat. Around them, the remnants of the Half-Born World peeled away, sloughing off like wet paint from a ruined mural.

She did not climb.

She did not walk.

She *passed*—through veils of no-time, un-time, almost-time. Each step forward pulled her deeper into the fabric, each breath echoing across decades she had not yet lived.

This was the River of Time.

Not a river made of water, but of threads. Thousands. Millions. Some golden and taut with promise. Others frayed, snapped, bleeding. All of them moving. Some forward, some backward, some curling in on themselves like regret. She stood upon a narrow path of obsidian glass that arched through the river like a blade. Beneath her feet: centuries. Above her head: the unborn.

Seylin whispered, “Not long now. Just a little further.”

But the current fought them. Shadows of futures-that-never-were lashed at her ankles, visions of herself older, bitter, forgotten. One showed her a city of dust, where she ruled alone on a broken throne. Another showed her as a child, lost in the streets of the Clock City, screaming for a mother who had never returned.

Each vision tried to seduce her. Each one offered *stillness*.

“You’ve already done enough,” murmured one.

“Let the next Keeper carry the weight,” said another. “Rest. Sleep. Forget.”

The Keeper gritted her teeth. “I will not be remembered,” she said aloud. “I will *arrive*.”

Seylin flared in her arms, and time...*time bent*.

The river screamed open.

The threads thrashed like serpents, but one pulled itself straight—a golden path, pulsing, freshly born from her defiance. It led forward. Into the unknown. She stepped onto it.

With each stride, centuries peeled past her. Civilizations bloomed and fell in her peripheral vision. Glass towers rose and dissolved into ash. Forests turned to deserts and back again. Stars died, and new ones ignited.

The Keeper did not blink. To blink was to lose direction. To lose direction was to drown. She counted steps in heartbeats.

One. A girl crying in the snow.

Two. A clocktower without hands.

Three. A cathedral where ghosts danced in oily light.

Four. A boy with glass lungs singing the future into the sky.

Five. The Edge of the World, rebuilt in gold and starlight.

And then...She *arrived*.

The moment pulled her in like a breath held too long. The world snapped into place with a *click*, like the closing of a great celestial lock. The Keeper stood atop a balcony in a city she had never seen but knew in her bones. Not the Clock City she'd left, but its future. Alive. Terrible. Beautiful.

Above her, the sky was weeping fire. Thousands had gathered below, staring upward, breathless.

Seylin rose from her hands. Its light peeled back the storm clouds. In that instant, the sky opened to receive it. The star ascended higher, higher still, until it became a pinprick in the firmament, burning with *exactly the right brightness*.

As it nestled into its place, the heavens *recalibrated*. Time, once disjointed, *healed*.

The Keeper fell to her knees, not because she was exhausted, but because the moment was too vast to stand beneath.

She had done it. She had brought the fallen star home. But the future was not done with her yet.

The crowd below whispered in awe as Seylin's light carved paths through the storm-dark sky, stitching new constellations from the ragged edges of the old.

But the Keeper's breath came shallow and fast. Time had exacted its toll.

Her skin felt stretched thin, as if she were both everywhere and nowhere at once. Memories flickered and slipped through her fingers like smoke. Faces she had loved, places she had seen, names she could no longer recall.

The star in the sky burned bright. Perfect.

But perfection came with a price. She turned her gaze inward and saw the threads of her own life unraveling. The future she'd fought for was no longer hers. She was becoming a *memory*. A ghost stitched into the folds of time. Too late to return home, too early to simply vanish.

A whisper echoed in her mind, the voice of the creature from the Vault, but softer now, almost mournful, “Debt paid... but balance remains.”

The Keeper knelt; her hand pressed to her chest where the heartbeat of the star still throbbed. She understood then. The star had fallen *early*, yes, but she, too, was caught between moments. A guardian not of a single time, but of all fractured times. Her existence had become a ripple, a warning, a promise.

She closed her eyes and let her existence dissolve. The world around her shimmered and shifted. She was no longer in the city.

She was everywhere. She was *always*.

And Seylin’s light burned on. The sky was whole again.

But the Keeper was gone.

Years passed. Centuries, even.

The city beneath the sky of perfect stars thrives, its towers reaching higher, its people dreaming farther. Time flows like a river, steady and sure, its currents carrying the stories of a world healed. And somewhere in the stillness between day and night, when the wind softens and the clocks all pause for a breath, those who look up see one star burn brighter than any other.

They call it Seylin's Flame: a star that fell too early and returned at just the right moment. And in its light, they whisper of a Keeper—an unseen guardian woven through the threads of time, whose sacrifice stitched the past and future into a single, shimmering tapestry.

No one knows her name. But every child who dreams beneath that sky knows her story.

Some stars, after all, are not meant to fall. They are meant to *save*.

And in the quiet pulse of every night, her light lingers, an echo in eternity, where Time itself remembers the Keeper who dared to steal it back.