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The Eternal Clockmaker

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Introduction

Time may be the most faithful companion or the slyest of tricksters. For Evelyn Hawthorne, it was, for as long as she could remember, a gentle and precise melody—the measured tick of gears in her grandmother’s clock shop, the soft clang of a carriage clock’s bell at noon, and the hum of promise each dawn in Brackenridge, her sleepy hometown hemmed in by silver mists and ancient woods. The granddaughter of Rose Hawthorne, the most respected horologist in three counties, Evelyn grew up with the scent of oil and brass polish, and the wonder of unraveling the language of timepiece innards. It was a life of gears, dials, and spring-driven mysteries.

Evelyn never anticipated inheriting the shop so soon. Rose’s passing left her heart cracked and her future uncertain, yet the responsibility rested naturally on her shoulders. As she swept its creaking floorboards and tended the familiar faces of grandfather clocks along the paneled walls, Evelyn’s sorrow lent way to a quiet determination to continue her family’s work. The shop was more than just a business; it was a haven of memory and tradition, filled with secrets nestled in the faces of countless ticking guardians.

But not all secrets lie silent. Amidst a neglected shelf, covered by layers of time and dust, she discovered the Hourglass Pendulum. An oddity, even by the standards of her seasoned eye—it ticked backward, its sands flowing up, challenging the very logic she cherished. The longer she studied it, the more she felt something ancient stirring, as if the pendulum’s steady swing summoned echoes from beyond the world she knew.

Brackenridge held its own mysteries, and the Hawthorne legacy ran deeper than the townsfolk ever guessed. When the Hourglass Pendulum revealed its power—drawing Evelyn out of her ordinary existence into a realm where night and day warred endlessly, and time was both ally and adversary—nothing would ever be the same. Old stories rushed forward, whispered warnings at the edge of sleep, and the faint suspicion that her grandmother’s life had been lived on the knife’s edge of two entwined destinies took root.

To survive, and to protect all she loved on both sides of the clockface, Evelyn would have to master more than the mechanics of gears and springs. She would need to uncover the truths long buried by her ancestors, embrace allies and face adversaries both human and magical, and, most of all, come to terms with her unique place as a keeper of the timeline. This is her story—a saga that spins outward from a small, shadowed shop into the winding halls of eternity.

CHAPTER ONE: The Shop at Willow's Bend

The scent of metal and aged wood was Evelyn's personal perfume, a familiar comfort that clung to her clothes and hair like a second skin. "Hawthorne's Horology," the faded sign above the door read, though most townsfolk simply called it "Rose's Shop." Now, it was "Evelyn's Shop," a transition whispered more than spoken, accompanied by sympathetic nods from neighbors who understood the weight of a legacy, especially one so deeply embedded in Brackenridge's quiet rhythm. The town itself was a collection of brick and timber houses, nestled beside the languid flow of the Willow Creek, perpetually draped in a soft, ethereal mist that lent an air of ancient mystery.

Evelyn ran a dust cloth over the polished brass casing of a German cuckoo clock, its carved bird poised in perpetual anticipation. Each morning, she followed a ritual born of habit and grief. She'd unlock the heavy oak door, letting a sliver of the morning sun cut through the shop's dim interior, then begin her rounds. Winding the grandfather clocks, resetting the carriage clocks, checking the delicate mechanisms of wristwatches left for repair - it was a dance she knew by heart, each movement a silent conversation with the hundreds of tiny, ticking souls around her.

Rose, her grandmother, had been a woman of precise movements and keen intellect, her fingers capable of dissecting the most intricate clockwork with the ease of a seasoned surgeon. Evelyn had inherited that dexterity, alongside a peculiar patience for the inanimate. She often felt more comfortable among the quiet whir of gears than in the clamor of human conversation. The clocks didn't ask probing questions about her future, or offer pity for her recent loss. They simply existed, demanding only understanding and careful attention.

Today, however, the quiet hum felt different. A restless energy thrummed beneath the surface of the shop, a subtle vibration that Evelyn couldn't quite pinpoint. It wasn't a broken spring or a jammed escapement; it was something else, something... expectant. She paused, her hand hovering over a particularly ornate French mantel clock, its bronze figures of nymphs and satyrs frozen in an eternal, silent revelry. The air felt thick, heavy with unspoken possibility.

She moved towards the back of the shop, where Rose had kept her personal workshop - a sanctuary of tools, half-finished projects, and shelves overflowing with dusty, forgotten timepieces. This was Evelyn's favorite part of the shop, a place where she could lose herself in the intricate world of tiny gears and springs. The scent here was stronger, a mix of old oil, metal, and something else - something faintly metallic and earthy, like freshly disturbed soil.

On a workbench, beneath a layer of fine, silvery dust, lay a collection of Rose's unfinished works. A pocket watch with a cracked crystal, a mantel clock missing its pendulum, and a small, intricate automaton that seemed to be perpetually mid-bow. Evelyn picked up a tiny screwdriver, her fingers tracing the delicate lines of a miniature gear. Rose had always said that every clock had a story, and it was the horologist's job to listen.

Evelyn's gaze drifted to a shelf above the workbench, one she had mostly ignored since taking over. It was piled high with forgotten curiosities, overshadowed by a large, draped canvas that Rose had always kept meticulously covered. "Some things are best left undisturbed, my dear," she'd often said, with a cryptic smile that Evelyn now realized held more meaning than she'd understood at the time.

Curiosity, a trait Rose had also unwittingly instilled in her, finally won out. Evelyn reached for the corner of the canvas, her fingers brushing against the coarse fabric. The air around the shelf seemed to shimmer faintly, a barely perceptible distortion that made the small hairs on her arms stand on end. She hesitated for a moment, then pulled the canvas away with a decisive tug.

Beneath it stood a clock unlike any she had ever seen. It wasn't grand or excessively ornate, but it possessed an undeniable presence, a quiet power that drew her in. It was made of dark, polished wood, almost obsidian in its hue, with a face of tarnished silver. Instead of numbers, arcane symbols were etched into its surface, shimmering faintly with an inner light. But it was the pendulum that truly captivated her.

It wasn't a simple weight on a rod. This pendulum was an hourglass, its glass bulbs filled with fine, silvery sand. And it wasn't swinging. It was slowly, meticulously, rotating on its axis, the sand flowing upwards, defying gravity and all known laws of physics. Evelyn reached out a trembling hand, her fingers brushing the cool, smooth glass of the hourglass. A faint hum resonated through her fingertips, a deep vibration that seemed to echo in her very bones.

"The Hourglass Pendulum," she whispered, a name bubbling up from some forgotten corner of her mind, as if the clock itself had spoken it to her. Rose had never mentioned it, never shown it to her, yet Evelyn felt an inexplicable connection to it, a sense of destiny stirring in the quiet corners of her being. The ticking wasn't a familiar forward motion; it was a rhythmic pulse, a subtle thrum that pulled at the fabric of her understanding.

As she stared, mesmerized, a faint, almost imperceptible shift occurred within the clock. The arcane symbols on its face glowed brighter, and the upward flow of the sand in the hourglass pendulum accelerated slightly. A cold draft snaked through the workshop, though all the windows were closed, carrying with it a faint, metallic tang.

Evelyn's heart beat a quickened rhythm against her ribs. This was no ordinary antique.

A sudden, sharp crack echoed from the clock, like a twig snapping underfoot. The air around it crackled with an almost visible energy, and the hum intensified, vibrating through the very floorboards of the shop. Evelyn instinctively recoiled, her eyes wide with a mixture of fear and awe. The silvery sand in the hourglass began to churn, swirling faster and faster, forming a miniature vortex within the glass.

Then, with a sound like tearing silk, a shimmering rift opened in the space directly behind the Hourglass Pendulum. It wasn't a hole in the wall, but a shimmering, undulating tear in reality itself, revealing glimpses of something beyond – a swirling canvas of unfamiliar colors and impossible shapes. The air grew heavy, thick with an almost palpable pressure, and Evelyn felt a powerful tug, a force trying to draw her forward.

Fear seized her, cold and sharp. Her rational mind screamed at her to run, to turn away from this impossible spectacle. But an irresistible curiosity, a primal fascination, rooted her to the spot. The shop, her sanctuary, was dissolving around the edges of her perception, replaced by the mesmerizing pull of the rift. The scent of ozone filled the air, and a strange, mournful chime echoed from within the shimmering void.

Before she could process another thought, the force intensified, a sudden, powerful current that snatched her off her feet. Evelyn cried out, her hands reaching out instinctively, but there was nothing to grasp. She was being pulled, irrevocably, towards the shimmering tear, the shop at Willow's Bend receding into a blur of familiar shadows and ticking echoes. The last thing she saw before being swallowed by the impossible light was the Hourglass Pendulum, its silvery sand now flowing upward at an impossible speed, a silent, defiant testament to a world turned on its head.

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