

Krina nudged her clock, and it crept up her long neck, closer to her ear, tiny claws tickling. "Left. Left again," it whispered. "Forward."

Behind Krina walked the confidante, a spider-limbed girl with lip rings to seal her mouth. She kept close to Krina, whose inventions always found the right way, no matter how the ziggurat changed, and the skirts of their cloaks stirred swirls of the maroon dust that seemed to gasp from the mortar and paving stones.

"The salon is located up there this afternoon," the clock whispered to Krina. "Up the Ascent."

Today the Avenue of Ascent was a vast flight of stairs beneath a sky of ceiling windows, and a regiment of urbanishment troops inclined upon the steps in a cove of sunlight, their stiff shirt collars sprung open like traps. Up and down the great flight, fruit sellers stacked their wares for climbers to buy, making the Avenue of Ascent a cascade of color. Blood-red loaves. Foreign lemons. Ripe, adorno pears. Pomelos.

Krina stopped and stared at the big orbs of yellow-green pomelos, considering. Instinctively, she touched the small, spiny back of her other clock, a lookout wrapped about her right thumb and the sibling to the one lit upon her neck. The lookout whispered the futures into her ear, when she raised her hand to her shoulder:

"People will all see the same time together, the apprentice will say to you, Krina. A tool, that apprentice will call the thing he's created. Stop him. Don't let him."

The confidante watched Krina staring at the stack of spongy pomelos, light fingertips resting on her lips as if the tight line of locking rings might not be enough to prevent her from cautioning her mistress from buying one.

The fruit-monger caressed the round brow of a pomelo, flicking dust from its green rind. "Fancying a sweet-tart, duchess?" he said from behind his bandana, which was wet and dusty at the mouth. To him, it was simply fruit. He had no idea what the pomelo meant in Krina's caste or he might not have said, "Only half a corona."

Shadows from a dove flock zigzagged up the Ascent, the moment passed, and Krina shook her head. Then she lifted the hem of her cloak and walked up the steps.

The apprentice will be safe, yes? said the confidante in handslang.

"We clockmakers are the engines of the ziggurat," said Krina, turning and climbing the stairs. "I'd save everyone if I did it now with his clocks unmade. Besides, why do you care?"

The confidante took Krina's left hand and pressed handsigns against Krina's palm in a series of pats, the equivalent of whispering to a handslanger. Assassinating based on whispers from lookouts? Tragic.

"You needn't scold." Krina snatched her hand back. "I didn't buy any."

Krina led the way, lookout hissing and slithering along her shoulder, and in their deep pockets, the confidante's hands said, You are an ungrateful, rebellious confidante.

With heavy, hand-hewn beams of brandy-colored wood overhead, buttery lantern light pooled on the floor, and the room smelled of wood fire, yam griddlecakes, and the scent of spilled wine turning to vinegar. The apprentice's workshop was a lovely corner of the salon, near what had once been Krina's own shop. The large coterie in attendance for the young man's debut drifted from the tables of clocks to the tables holding bottles of wine and back. There was an eagerness to become a throng. Krina accepted a drink from her confidante and they walked to the tables where his clocks were displayed.

"I told you. There they are. The beginning of the end," whispered the lookout with a nip at her ear, as Krina looked down the row of dally maple clocks.

The apprentice was a square-faced and sincere looking youth in old work boots who immediately stopped talking to his colleague and faced Krina when he saw her from the corner of his eye. Nearby, in the wide-open space of his workshop, drunker guests were flailing hilariously through an impromptu reel.

Krina, with the care of a gardener removing aphids from a favorite rose bush, brushed a fine file of the ubiquitous red dust from a nautilus curve in the clock's scrollwork. The clock lifted one paw to her gratefully, and she smiled down into its face, which, oddly, was merely a round disc with hashmarks and numbers as if to represent actual features that would be added later. "What kind of clock are you?" she said, lifting it. The clock's feet kicked and tail lashed as she turned it upside down. "Are you finished?"

The apprentice glanced at her wine-stained teeth. "It's just a protoytp. But you've never seen a clock like this." He sounded chary, as if he expected a reprimand or contradiction.

The blank, featureless face shined at Krina like a little moon, and she thought of the ominous warning her lookout had whispered to her regarding this clock. "No, never. Tell me about it."

Many high-heels clopped on the tiles, and a wine-soaked nonet struck up a song that was either a reel or a staggering waltz. "It's not like the clocks you made, Krina," he said over a burst of laughter from the dancers. "You can tell time by this clock."

The room was warm with so many bodies, which she hoped would hide the rise of angry color to her cheeks. "Rather presumptuous. Me telling the clock time?"

"It's meant for people to use. I have to figure out a way to make many of them, for many, many people." The apprentice stammered when he saw her wince at his words, but soldiered on with his explanation. "Think of it as a tool."

The lookout on her shoulder murmured and growled.

"A tool?" It looked wrong to her, the apprentice's faceless clock, like a fish walking upright in grass and sun. "A tool to do what?"

"To," he hesitated, as if searching for words that wouldn't offend her, "to measure time as a people, to bring people together. So people will all see the same time. Right now everyone makes clocks to create whatever time they want. But this - it's - it tells a time that everyone can agree on."

"That's the idea," said a passing livery officer with a firm, manly nod to the apprentice. "Quantify it. Time shouldn't be subjective. We should have one time. I've always thought that." With two glasses of wine held high, he meant

to keep walking but stopped. "How does that clock work?"

"We know when and where we are with this clock. Always. But I'm still combing out snarls," he said, shaking his head at the clock. "It needs little hands. Maybe chimes to tell us a common time."

"Now your clock is telling us time?" Katrina chided. "I thought we were telling it time."

"Well, I'll look forward to seeing your clock when it's finished, and so will my company," the livery officer said. "This mad place needs all the help we can get."

From the cowl of Krina's cloak, the little lookout hissed, "See? What did I tell you?"

"We don't need it," Krina said to the officer's back, as he took his wine away. "Farmers have roosters, and bread bakers know the rhythm of a rise in their stiff wrist bones. No one wants these clocks of yours, because everyone here prizes the license to do as we will. This? This is not our way."

"Not yet," the apprentice said, grinning from Krina to her confidante.

Putting her hands in her pockets, the confidante lowered her gaze, sipping wine through a straw, as if the apprentice's grin were a gift she couldn't accept here.

Ah, there it is, Krina thought watching the young man.

His clock shifted its feet, jostling the other clocks on the table, who hissed and spat at the eyeless thing. Why would anyone, she wondered, tolerate being told that one's time was the same as everyone else's – no worse, no different, no more painful, no more beautiful, fortuitous, or grand? In a place where time has reshaped the very architecture, what effect would such a clock have? One of the other clocks took a swipe at the blind clock, which recoiled, unable to defend itself. "We have a responsibility to keep time, yes, but we must keep it well. Vibrant and strong. It's just cruel," she said, "creating something with a face and no eyes."

She lifted her gaze from the crippled clock to see if her words had reached him, and the apprentice nodded slowly to her, perhaps already building another clock in his mind. "Send me your next," she said, "as soon as you've built it."

"Oh, I plan to," the apprentice said, and for the first time, there was a note of challenge, even threat in his voice.

Krina donned her cloak, and, as she pulled up her hood, she whispered to her confidante, "Go back and buy three pomelos from the fruit-monger, please."

The confidante shut her eyes as tightly as her mouth and, when Krina turned her back, handslanged, Oh, I plan to.

Dusk threw shadows across the chamber but Krina didn't light any lamps or candles. She liked the violet calm of early evening, so she stood in the center of her black brocade rug and felt the darkness deepen while her brother's friends fell into an ode for strings and percussion. She didn't want the wags here tonight, but she could retreat to her apartments if they grew

tiresome.

"What's wrong, Krina?" her brother, Lemet, asked after bobbing his head to the music for some time. "You're being particularly ominous tonight."

Cellos and drums rolled and tolled. "I'm afraid of what that new apprentice at the salon will do with his clock," Krina said.

Lemet was a clockmaker, too, had the same broad, strong hands as Krina. He patted his knees in time to the drums and said, "What do you mean? What's to fear?"

"His clocks will kill our clocks, the ziggurat," Krina said.

"You're paranoid."

"My lookout told me," she said. "I'm very serious. My confidante is stacking three pomelos in the apprentice's doorway, as we speak."

Lemet turned the corners of his mouth down as if to say that was a judicious move on his sister's part.

"Oh?" A cellist smirked in appreciation, fingers fretting near his pierced ear. "Is someone about to come down with offcough? The blackspot. Do you use a poisonist, Krina?"

"We pay our dues and use the Method, like everyone in this room," her brother said in calm reprimand, not appreciating the insinuation that Krina was hiring mercenaries. To Krina, he said sotto voce, "Why the Method? You have clocks that could undo the apprentice, right? Use them. Eclipse him."

"Too many people actually want his damn clock. You should have seen the crowd around his salon table."

Lemet showed his sister that he was annoyed with her seriousness by turning his attention back to the musicians.

"It's like the ziggurat has a death wish," she said to his profile.

"Such fascism," said a violinist. "Who would want a clock that unifies time?"

Keeping the measure with just a tad more emphasis until the violinist looked at him, the drummer said, "Oh, yes, who would want a unified time?"

Now the musicians were annoying him, which seemed to annoy Lemet further. "Music, yes. But not all of life. That's so beyond boring, and it's beneath us - it's below us - it's -"

"Yes, there are no words," said Krina, appreciating her brother's stammer. She stood and looked down at a wide esplanade near the lagoon below. Drifts of maroon dust were splayed across the cobblestone concourse, and young boys in great cloaks and kerchiefs over their faces were attempting to sweep the fine powder into pails. Futile work. The very mortar of the ziggurat gasped silt into the air. "This dust."

A bassoon moaned across the cellos and bass drum.

In birdskin slippers, Krina's feet slid across the floor into her own apartments, away from her brother and his revelers. They would go all night, and she wasn't in the mood to join them. As she shut the door on the boom of a

throaty cello, the first clock she had ever built, with intricate, interlocking pinewood scales leaned kindly against her ankle. Seizing the clock by its fat, solid coils, she looked into its eyes of agate.

Immediately, a strange emotion came over Krina and she brought the clock close, embracing it. Though she stood in the center of a darkening room, she was overcome with an emotion she'd never felt before, a feeling that rays of setting sunlight descending through pipe smoke would one day elicit. She'd built this clock to impart the sense of a time yet to be. She could smell sweet tobacco, years of resin in a beloved pipe that would trigger the lonely sadness. She could actually see the sight of warm, orange light sloping through layers of smoke. Why a pipe, or this time of day, and what as yet unmet lover would she identify with this light?

She let the clock slide out of her arms onto the rug and watched it sidewind beneath a wooden secretary as two smaller, very sturdy clocks galloped into the room, their little hooves thumping the floor, but they were more interested in nipping at one another, and so chased away into the bedroom, kicking a rug across the floor as they ran. Following them, rapt, briefly interested in their cavorting, timeless sense of time, Krina started from an applause of wooden wings. She stepped forward, suddenly, stamping her foot hard to keep her balance, as a heavy, graven thing dropped upon her shoulder. Its digging talons grabbed her and grabbed again, as it settled in place next to her right ear. She turned and looked into the clock's pure-gold eyes. "Give me your time, love," she whispered to it.

Swaths of purple light on the divan and armoire blanched to silver-blue as moonlight replaced dusk, and the murmur of squadrons on the steps became the chatter of bats and swallows.

Krina went to her balcony and looked out at the Ascent. Everyone in the ziggurat enjoyed the feeling of their times growing strange and familiar and strange again, rewinding their clocks and hauling the sun back into the sky, or reverting the ziggurat back into old neighborhoods long ago rearranged by the advance of many, many other times, and remaking of church towers and wide green spaces into clusters of childhood homes so that the lonely song of a piano could play up the alley like wind, as once it did.

From here she could see whole neighborhoods tinged maroon, and the light seemed rusty from dust. The ziggurat is already dying, she thought, watching streets sidewind like her pinewood clock. It won't be able to defend itself from this new kind of time. For through her clock's eyes, she could also see the world as the apprentice would make it, staring blankly back at her from the streets of the refashioned ziggurat, streets preordained and measured like those hashmarks on the betrayer's clocks once and for all time.

The clock gave a birdlike turn of its head and, on oak talons, sidestepped away from her cheek: Unclench, clench; unclench, clench. Looking back, it said, "We clocks will become rulers."

"Rulers?" cooed Krina at her clock.

"Not just devices of measurement, but despots. The future is in order now."

"No, the future is in doubt, I've made sure of that," Krina said in cold return. "The Method and I will sing a requiem in blackpost shortly."

She looked out on the vista of the ziggurat's urbanishment, as if from away and above – a rare sight and one that only this clock afforded her. A continent raised and floating with a ziggurat built upon its widest salt flat,

this landmass's stratified bedrock stood upon thin air, rivers spilling into gulfs of nothing. "You'll have your confidante mark the apprentice?" the clock said. "A stack of pomelos for the Method to find its sacrifice?"

"Snuff the bonfire while it's still just a lit match," Krina answered.

"You can't assassinate every young innovator. And you can't urbanish the ziggurat from reality forever," her clock said. "It's dying, disintegrating."

"I know." From here she could see the ziggurat's soaring aqueducts vanishing into the gasping, rust-colored cloud that enshrouded the city. The urbanishment was a clockmaker's dream – literally – and clockmakers like Krina believed they would dream the ziggurat and its continent aloft, unmake, and remake it forever. She said as in a breathless prayer, "But there's no other way but our way."

"Apparently," said the clock before soaring off, "there's at least one other."

In the street below two fish sellers hailed each other, and Krina backed away from the balcony in a shuffling step, as if beginning a quiet parlor-dance, but then purple shadows engulfed her into a black, unfeeling fugue, swallowing her away into a strange room, into a bed, laying her down beneath velvet duvets. The room's darkness was so black she couldn't see walls but believed this might well be her own bedroom. Time was a surprising lover – this wasn't unusual, to find one's self whisked away in the passionate embrace of another's time. She closed her eyes and waited for clarity, listening to the sound of rapid dripping in the dark, a sound like water wanting to be a stream.

"How do you know?" said a disembodied whisper.

Krina lay still, steeped in her fear. She opened her eyes slowly, as if her eyelids parting would make too much noise. But her eyes were useless, and her gaze slid across the impenetrable dark.

Then there was another sound, a sound like skin sliding on skin. A patting, caressing noise. Someone else was in the room, too.

"Yes, but there's no way to know if she has it, yet," said the whisperer.

Has it? Krina wondered. What do I have that they want? They mean to steal something from me?

Pat. Pat. Press. Pat.

Perhaps these thieves didn't even know she was here, but, in the dark stillness, Krina wondered if she could get to one of her clocks. If she could call the walkaway or her farfar, she could pull up the stitches of this time, but she couldn't raise her hand to call for her clocks. Her arms felt foreign, heavy. What was wrong? Even her mind, she realized, was a swaying, lumbering thing, unable to pounce and seize on simple facts. Who was in this room? Was this even her room? What could they want to steal? More pressing and patting, like a pair of soft hands clapping very quietly in the darkness, and through it, over it, suffusing the room, was that mechanical, trickling sound.

"Look at that. A dart?" The voice was male. Young.

A dart? The Method has been here, she thought. But for whom? Who was this? Krina felt so warm, dizzyingly warm, and her throat was dry as sand. Had she met this young man at a party? She tried to recall the voice, but like her

gaze flitting across the dark, her mind couldn't connect thoughts. Krina almost felt she should know that caressing skin-on-skin, hand-on-hand noise, too, but her lugubrious mind pondered over it in stupid wonder. She'd been at a party earlier. Two of them.

Press. Pat. Caress. Pat.

"She has it," the young man said, no longer whispering, "The whole ziggurat will know soon."

Feet shuffled in the dark, retreating into a space, a chamber beyond, then someone came close to Krina. She stiffened in terror, sightless eyes skimming across the black before her. She couldn't even raise a hand to defend herself, as she sensed the nearness of someone, felt the heat of a body, and smelling the very faintest smell of fruit. Of citrus.

Scent of a pomelo delicate, yet distinct, stacked somewhere in this room, Krina guessed.

Someone marked me? Krina thought. But I thought I'd marked someone else. Who was that that I had marked?

A hand scooped under her elbow, lifting it slightly. Another hand pressed itself into her palm, making warm shapes there, a series of symbols made with thin fingers. Handslang.

Your clocks died surprisingly fast. In sympathy. Sorry. Your brother is gone now. Sorry. I brought the pomelos in from your doorstep.

Her confidante retreated from the bedside and dissolved into the somewhere beyond this space that was filled with fear, fever, and her heavy indolent thoughts. Sleep came and went in slow blinks of consciousness, and the circling of this hatching plot was maddening, like a lantern-and-shadow show that had been scrambled and shuffled into nonsense. Finally, deep, orange light broke the darkness, and Krina could see her own arms now, the intricate constellations of fine, black bursts in her skin, and she was so weak that she could barely think what this disease was called. Black. Black something. Someone was here with her, in this strange room, sitting in a chair. A man. His work boots creaked in the quiet, and the rocking chair answered offbeat. She could see his silhouette against a window of bright, rancid light filtering through dust outside, and light knifed through curls of pipe smoke overhead. Her beloved clocks were gone? Blackspot. That was it. Lemet, too? The salon? Where was she? Where was her home? Was this even the ziggurat? Perhaps she had been stolen and secreted away as part of an insurrection, and the urbanishment was at an end. She could smell sweet tobacco in a leather pouch nearby and felt grateful for the lonely smell of it. Feeling oddly nostalgic for pipe smoke (hadn't she only ever smelled this tobacco while holding the fat coils of her clock, peering into this very future?), Krina turned to look for the man's pipe on the nightstand, but saw instead the faceless clock squatting there, staring at her in dumb sightlessness and tap, tap, tap, tapping out its hateful, perfect measures.