

Stembrannt

The light bulb flickered to life. Laying aside his wrench and wiping a sweat-streaked brow, Kai surveyed his handiwork of the past half hour, filled with the pleasure of a job well done. The fifteen year-old mechanic, the youngest working in the city of Stembrannt, had just been about to clock out when a nearby diner had lost power, and he had decided to help.

"I think," He told the portly man behind him, removing one last corroded wire. "That'll do it, Mr. Rouen."

Mr. Rouen, proprietor of Rouen's Spare Dishes, was a wide, jovial man, possessed of a boisterous temperament and a proud red beard.

"Well done, m'boy!" He thundered, slapping Kai's shoulder, his hands as greasy as his stained apron. "How much do I owe?"

Kai checked the watch stitched into his thick leather gloves. "Well, seeing as I was supposedly off duty half an hour ago...this one's on me."

"Nonsense!" Rouen bellowed. "Those lights've been flickering for more'n a decade, and you just fixed 'em up in the time it takes me to bake a potato!"

"No, really," Kai extricated himself. "I need to get back to my sister."

"Ah." Rouen's smile faded. "Y' haven't been able to get any more o' that medicine?"

"Too expensive."

"It's these blasted taxes by the Clockmaster! Some folks are just managin' to scrape by, and he—"

"What's this now?" Three men in stiff white uniforms, trimmed in gold with matching clasps buttoning their coats down to their knees, and pitch black bobby helmets emblazoned with the emblem of a clock with both hands at XII strode into the restaurant, ignoring the 'closed' sign. The Clockmaster's "Guards".

"My dear sir, I do so hope that you have not been disrespecting the Clockmaster. After all, he keeps the peace, ensures all your safeties, and makes sure your city works, well, like clockwork. All he asks in return is a little loyalty." The lead guard's smile was that of a crocodile.

"Loyalty, my beard," growled Rouen. "Obedience, you mean!"

"Careful, sir." The guard tapped his nightstick menacingly. "We wouldn't care for, ah, any accidents to occur in this *esteemed* restaurant. You must understand, even the smallest signs of disloyalty can be cause for.....investigation."

"An' I suppose you think it's yer duty to 'investigate', eh?" Rouen and the lead guard were almost nose-to-nose. "S'ppose you're never held responsible for the 'investigation'?"

"Now, what might you be implying, good sir?" In one smooth motion, the guards drew their nightsticks.

"Boy," Rouen reached behind his back. "Get out of here."

Kai started. "But—"

"Yes, *mechanic*." Drawled the Guard. "Do run along now."

"Kai. Go." With more speed than a man of his girth should have, Rouen shoved Kai through the kitchen's back door, simultaneously whipping out a sleek black object.

Kai scrambled to his feet, stared for split second at the swinging door, then took off running as fast as he could. A resounding *BANG* followed him through the clouds of steam

obscuring the city's streets. He thought for a moment that a pair of dark eyes peered out at him from the thick smog, but he ran past and too quickly to be sure.

The city of Stembrannt was very different from day to night. From dawn till dusk, the city was packed full of people from all walks of life—well-dressed aristocrats, burly workmen, and the impoverished swarmed every market, street, and house like a hive of ants. However, at night, the city shed the pretext of busy forgetfulness. Like a shiny red apple hiding a wormy core, its two conflicting factions emerged. On the one hand were the conventional calling themselves the Clock's Guards. Despite the ridiculous name, this group held the power of terror, seen by the people as extremists who did the Clockmaster's dirty work. Originally, the Clockmaster was nothing more than a regulator of sorts, directing public services in the city. Over past several years, however, he had greatly increased his power, including control of all economy and the city's police, his 'Guards'. Opposing this movement were the Backsliders, so named by Guard's propaganda.

The Backsliders were, for the most part, an enigma, though many were in sympathy with their public aim: overthrowing of the Clockmaster. Aside from that, not many had any idea of what their other goals might be, but any one who was too out-spoken about either side would disappear mysteriously. Therefore, the people of Stembrannt kept quiet. Better to let the battles be fought by those who had started it, they reasoned.

Kai, for his part, was too busy to *really* formulate an opinion on the intrigue. Working twelve-hour shifts at fifteen and taking care of his ill sister, Ariella (who supported the Backsliders) took up all of his spare time and thinking space. The Clockmaster's taxes did him no favors, and neither had the Backsliders.

Currently, though, he was having enough trouble trying to navigate the darkened city back to home. Throughout many a mechanical mission, he had learned the majority of city routes, but never at night.

When Kai had finally reached the three-room flat he called home, what could be seen of the Cheshire cat smile of a moon was high overhead. Unsurprisingly, all the lights in the flat were off. Ariella was probably already asleep.

When Kai searched for the spare key, usually hidden inside a flowerpot beside the front door, it was nowhere to be found.

That's odd. I was sure I put it out here this morning.

He knocked on the front door. To his surprise, it swung open. He inspected the handle and locking mechanisms. They were broken, but not destroyed, rather, picked apart, disabled with expertise. With dread mounting in the pit of his stomach, Kai crept quietly into the house. *Maybe Ariella just left the door open, or...something.* He tried to reassure himself.

Then who dismantled the lock?

Kai called out, praying that his sister would answer. "Ari, are you in here?" He proceeded from the hall to the living room, slowly drawing a wrench from his belt. Just in case.

So he was partially prepared when a figure jumped out from behind the couch in front of him. Kai swung at the unknown person, intending to at least stun them. He did not expect to be blocked, then disarmed completely and flipped onto his back.

Dazedly, Kai stared up at his attacker. Completely covered in red and black, they towered over him, face hidden by a head scarf and goggles. He/she lifted Kai's chin with an

ornately carved staff that sparked with crimson electricity. For a moment that crackled with tension from both parties, they stared at each other.

Then the unknown figure stepped off Kai's chest, breaking the moment. Kai let out his breath in a whoosh, attempting to subtly regain possession of his wrench. *Maybe if I can just...*

Before Kai could so much as grasp the wrench's handle, his assailant whipped around, once again pressing staff to his throat.

"O-okay," Kai stammered, acutely aware of the staff's pulsing, "message received."

The figure turned away again after Kai had dropped the wrench and kicked it far out of reach. Without warning, Kai's housebreaker kicked over his sister's favorite armchair.

"Hey!" He protested "That's—" and stopped.

Taped to the back of the chair was a formallt printed notice.

By Order of the High Clockmaster,

Citizen ariella hugoen has been arrested on charges of treachery against the clockmaster by association with enemies of the peace, namelythe backsliders. Said crimes warranted arrest of said criminal at 19:00 hours precisely, as well as a full house search and imprisonment. If any person should have information pertaining to the whereabouts of one kai hugoen, please report to the clock tower.

For the betterment of our glorious city,

Captain of the Clock Guards

Kai stared in disbelief at the proclamation. He looked around flat with new eyes, what he had not seen previously now revealing itself to him. A pair of wooden chairs lay half burned beside the heavily marred and dented boiler. The single cabinet they had scraped for months for was destroyed beyond repair, while their parent's wedding picture was torn too thoroughly recall.

Kai slid to the floor with a muffled sob. The stranger picked the Captain's notice off the armchair. Abruptly, he shredded it.

"Wai—" Kai half-protested. However, the document was as useless as the guard had deemed his belongings.

But the way he shredded it...this person must be a member of the Backsliders. Not that it matters now.

Only one thing was certain. The guards had taken his sister, and he would never see her again. Those taken to prison were never graced with the light of day.

Kai found himself hauled to his feet by the stranger, who tapped him on the head lightly with his staff, and beckoned him towards the door.

"Why?" Kai wondered briefly at he stranger's sudden change of heart.

After a moment, the stranger gestured to the shredded notice, to Kai, then in the direction that Kai knew, even from this distance, was the way to the Clockmaster's tower and prisons.

"You...want my help?"

The stranger nodded.

"With what? Will it help my sister?"

"This will help everyone." The stranger's voice was unusually soft. *Is that why he speaks so little? But for Ariella...*

"Lead the way."

Wherever they were, it was *deep*. The stranger had, without explanation, led him to the city's sewer system, then through a series of subterranean, acrid tunnels. Kai hoped that they were moving towards the city's center. Most everyone in Stembrannt enjoyed indoor plumbing, knowing only that all originated or went *outside*. 'Outside' was a title used with some awe and much terror among the city-dwellers for the unknown lands outside of Stembrannt. None, including Kai were eager to discover the truth.

The stranger halted beside a rusty ladder. Making a *stay here* motion with his hand, he shimmied up. Just as Kai was beginning to wonder if he had been abandoned, there was a series of thumps and cracks after which the stranger reappeared, and assisting him through a drainage hole in a polished marble floor. Five unconscious guards slumped around the hole, as though they had been attacked.

"Did you do this?" Kai asked the stranger.

He nodded with more than a hint of a swagger. They continued walking, eventually coming to an elevator. *This must be the Clockmaster's tower*, Kai decided. *Who else could afford such luxuries?*

The stranger tapped the elevator meaningfully.

"You want me to hijack this?!" Kai asked, incredulous.

Nod.

"Fine."

Fifteen minutes later, Kai had taken command of the elevator. He was not entirely sure how this was helping anyone. Eventually, the stranger broke through a door, on the third floor and nodded. The vast room it led into contained mechanical machines of all shapes and sizes.

"What is this place?" Kai asked.

"Control room," Said his companion.

"But...shouldn't there be some...screens, or something?"

"Clockmaster, not electronics master," Was the answer.

"So...there's a reason you brought me here, right?"

The stranger nodded. "Make them work in reverse."

"What?!" Kai had not been expecting this. "What about Ariella?"

"After." The stranger sat before the door, blocking it.

Kai grumbled, but the stranger was the surest way he would find his sister.

He began exploring the room, watching the functions of certain gears, observing pumps and springs in work. As all good mechanics knew, it was foolhardy to build something whose effects could not be reversed, and the Clockmaster would surely have one efficient button or knob for the task.

Finally, he hit gold. A seemingly unused lever in a shadowy corner had well disguised connections to all the machines in the room. Just as Kai reached out to pull it...

Boom

...an explosion rocked the room.

Both Kai and the stranger, momentarily thrown to the ground, watched as a giant section of the wall was torn away. A cloud of smoke billowed through it, along with figures, some in stiff white uniforms and others displaying the Backslider's trademark orange scarves, accompanied by gunfire.

"They're after the prisoners! Use them as shields, men!" A guard shouted.

Prisoners? Kai ducked, barely avoiding a Backslider's makeshift bomb. *Ariella must be here somewhere!*

He searched frantically, yet could see nothing. Suddenly, a black-gloved hand slammed him to the wall. A guard mistaking Kai for a backslider held a gun to his head, smiling viciously. Just as he squeezed the trigger, a staff crackling with electricity swung down, smashing the gun into its owner's leg. The guard's scream of agony cut short as the staff bludgeoned him over the head.

"Go!" The stranger shouted at Kai. "Pull the lever, hurry!"

Kai ran at the lever, but found his path blocked by a pair of Backsliders. Out of nowhere came a great shout of "CHARGE!" and Mr. Rouen of all people bowled into the men. Kai, although shocked, was within reach of the lever, and yanked it down as hard as he could.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the Clockmaster's controls began to spin backwards, clanking and guttering. Just as suddenly, the fighting ceased. Kai turned around. All the Clock Guards had collapsed, while the Backsliders stood frozen, staring at the same spot. Kai could see the stranger, who had someone wearing an orange scarf pinned to the ground. *I guess he's not a backslider, then.* The second figure turned slightly, and Kai recognized her with a jolt of alarm.

"Ariella?" He whispered, shocked. What was his sister doing here, among the Backsliders? Moreover, how come the stranger was attacking her—Kai's thoughts jittered to a halt as he saw his erstwhile companion. A headscarf and goggles had previously concealed the long dark hair and thin face of a *girl*. The same eyes he had ran past whilst fleeing Rouen's now glared down at his sister.

Movement caught at the edge of Kai's vision. A guard wearing the gold badge of a captain had not collapsed like the others. Surreptitiously, he raised a gun from the floor, aiming it at the two girls.

Without thinking, Kai launched himself at the captain. At the same time, a red-bearded man threw himself in front of the girls.

Bang!

Rouen fell, red spreading across his shoulder. The stranger girl cried out, abandoning Ariella as she rushed to him.

Kai, meanwhile, wrestled with the Captain for control of the gun. Just as he gained the upper hand, a shout rang out across the devastated room. He turned to see Ariella, dragged away by the remaining Backsliders and prisoners, staring in horror at him. "Kai!"

A Backslider grabbed her by the arm, but not roughly.

"Leader, we have to move now, or that She-devil might attack you again! Consider our enterprise!"

Ariella took one last heart-wrenching look at Kai, and ran. Using Kai's distraction to his advantage, the captain struck out, gaining possession of the gun. He swung down at Kai's head. The barrel stopped an inch away, grabbed by the stranger.

With tremendous strength, she wrenched the gun from his hand and slammed him to the floor with a crack.

"Wha-who-" Kai stammered into the sudden stillness.

"My name is Rin," She did not even look back at him. "My uncle Rouen and I were part of the Clockmaster's original guild, dedicated to opening the city gates for the first time in centuries. At least, until he was killed by this imposter." She kicked the limp captain. "He stole the Clockmaster's identity, killed most of the guild, and put himself in a new position of power as captain."

"B-but the guards—"

"Are automations. Supposedly incorruptible. The captain thought he had it all, until he met resistance in the group led by your sister." Rin turned to face him then. "She was the third leader of the Backsliders, after the other two were captured."

"I—she never told me."

"From what I learned, they provided her with the medicine she needed and promised amnesty for you in exchange for her strategical brilliance. Which she hid from you as well, apparently."

"They were just as bad as the Captain. So we had to stop both ourselves."

"You needed me," Kai said bitterly, putting two and two together. "A naïve mechanic with ties to the Backsliders, who could help you shut down the Guards as well. Was all that back at the diner a game?"

"No," a new voice spoke. Rouen had propped himself up on his elbow, wincing.

"Uncle—" Rin began, relieved.

"Honestly, Kai, when y' walked into the diner, I thought this was our chance. W' knew your situation, thought w' could persuade you to join us. Bu' then y' fixed th'se lights, an' I realized y' didn't know a thing. My duty, all of it, fled at yer kindness. It can kill, they say. Kindness. It sure killed my fightn' spirit. I realized, maybe w're just as bad as the others."

Now the city w'll be in ruins by morning, and all cause we dragged a kind boy into our mess. But.....would you help us greedy folk, one last time, and fix this like the lights?"

Both he and Rin looked at Kai imploringly. His sister was gone, the city in chaos, and one rampant gang on the loose.

Kai sighed, and extended a hand. "Come on," he said. "Let's go fix some light bulbs."