

No one knows how the fire started, but it rushed through the whole building in minutes.

Hugo stayed up all night waiting for his father to come home. He had never been this late before. But when the door finally opened in the morning, it wasn't Father.

It was Uncle Claude.

"Pack your things quickly, Nephew," Uncle Claude had said, his breath smelling of alcohol as usual. Uncle Claude lifted his tiny steel spectacles with one hand and wiped his bloodshot eyes with the other. "Your father's dead, and as your only living relative, I'm taking you in."

Hugo, who hadn't slept all night, barely understood what his uncle was saying. He remembered hearing the blood beating hard in his ears, like the rhythm of a clock. In a trance, he put his clothes into a little suitcase, packed some of his tools and his deck of cards. He slipped his father's cardboard notebook into his pocket.

As they walked through the freezing streets of the city, his uncle explained about the fire and the locked door. Hugo wanted to fall over, to just lie down on the sidewalk and disappear. This was all his fault! He had wanted his father to fix the machine, and now, because of him, his father was dead.

"You'll be my apprentice," he vaguely heard his uncle saying as they walked. "You'll live in the station with me,

and I'll show you how to take care of the clocks. 'Apprentice Timekeeper.' It's a good title for a boy. And besides, I'm getting too old to be climbing through the walls."

A million questions floated through the fog in Hugo's mind, but the only one that he finally said out loud was, "What about school . . . ?" Hugo's hand was still wrapped around the notebook in his pocket, and absent-mindedly he began to rub the cover with his forefinger.

His uncle laughed. "Ah, Nephew, you're lucky. You are finished with school. There won't be time for it once you're in the walls of the station. You should thank me." Uncle Claude slapped Hugo on the back and said, "You come from a long line of horologists. Your father would be proud. Now hurry up." Uncle Claude cleared his throat. He reached into his pocket, took out a greasy silver flask, and drank from it.

The word *horologist* had been painted on the door of Father's shop. Hugo knew it meant clock maker, and he had always thought he would be a clock maker like his father. But after the discovery of the automaton, Hugo began to have other ideas. He wanted to become a magician. Hugo began to think about running away, but at that moment, as if reading his mind, Uncle Claude grabbed the back of the boy's neck and didn't let go until they reached the train station.

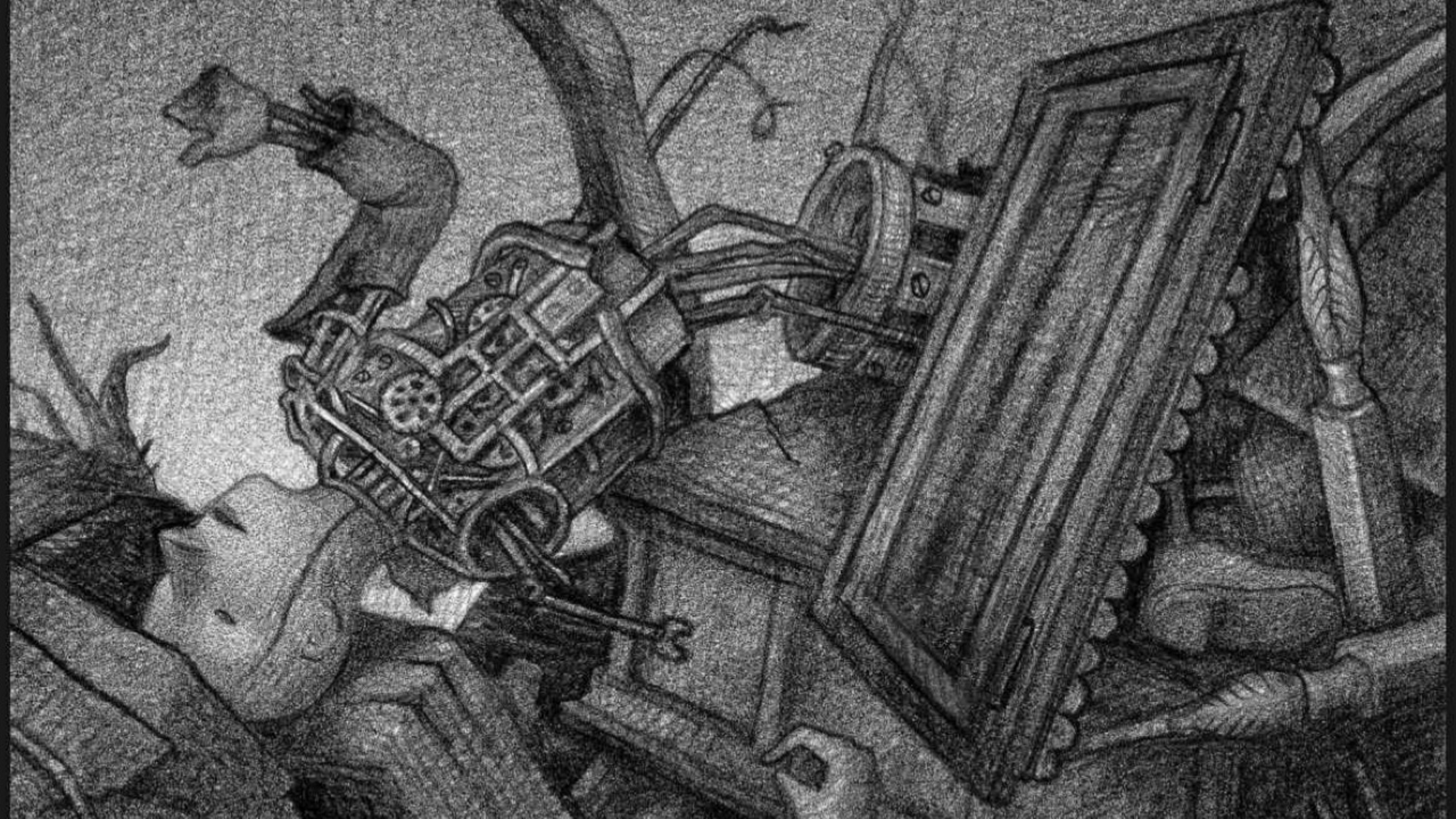
And so Hugo began working all day in the dark on the clocks. He had often imagined that his own head was filled with cogs and gears like a machine, and he felt a connection with whatever machinery he touched. He loved learning how the clocks in the station worked, and there was a kind of satisfaction in knowing how to climb through the walls and secretly repair the clocks without anyone seeing him. But there was hardly ever any food to eat, and Uncle Claude yelled at Hugo, rapped his knuckles when he made mistakes, and forced him to sleep on the floor.

Uncle Claude taught Hugo how to steal, which Hugo hated more than anything, but sometimes it was the only way to get something to eat. Hugo silently cried himself to sleep most nights, and he dreamed of broken clocks and fires.

Soon, Uncle Claude began to disappear for hours at a time, leaving Hugo to take care of the clocks, twice each day, by himself. Sometimes his uncle didn't return until

very late at night, and then one day, Uncle Claude didn't come back at all.

Hugo was afraid that his uncle would track him down if he left, but finally, on the third night that his uncle did not return, he decided to escape. He packed up his things and raced out of the station. He was hungry and tired and had no idea where he would go. He made his way through the narrow city streets, turning blindly, terrified he'd freeze to death before he found shelter. He looked down at his feet as he walked because the wind was bitter, and eventually Hugo found himself, quite by accident, in front of the ruins of the burned-down museum. All that was left of the building was a jagged brick wall with nothing behind the windows but black sky. The police had put up wooden barriers, but no one had begun to clean up the place. A huge pile of twisted metal, wooden planks, and crumbled bricks lay in front. And then something in the wreckage caught Hugo's eye.





There it was, like an accusation, reminding Hugo that everything in his life had been destroyed. He sat down and stared at it.

A long time passed.

Dogs barked in the distance, and the rumblings of the street cleaners pierced the quiet of the night. Where was Hugo supposed to go? What was he supposed to do? He had no one. Even the automaton was dead.

He gathered up his few belongings and walked away. But he kept looking back at the ruined machine, and for some reason he couldn't leave it there. After all of his father's hard work, the automaton belonged to him. Hugo took a deep breath, went back, and cleared away the charred debris. The automaton was heavy and in several pieces, but he picked it up and, not having anywhere else to go, returned to the dreaded station.

It was a difficult trip back, with his belongings slung over his shoulder and the blackened, twisted remains of the automaton straining his arms and back. He didn't even know what he was going to do with this thing once he got it back to his room.

Since it was late at night, he managed to drop it inside one of the air vents without anyone seeing him. It took several trips through the walls to get it all back to his room. When he finished, his hands were scratched pretty

badly, and his arms and back ached. Hugo laid out all the pieces on the floor and washed his hands in the basin by the bed, which he refilled from the spluttering sink in his tiny kitchen. He stared at the misshapen pieces of metal and was thankful that his uncle still hadn't returned.

"Fix it."

Hugo jumped. He could have sworn he heard a voice whispering in his ear. He looked for his uncle, but the room was empty. Hugo didn't know if it was his own thoughts, or if it was a ghost, but he had heard it clearly.

"Fix it."

Looking at the automaton, Hugo didn't think he'd be able to do it. It was in far worse shape than before. But he still had his father's notebook. Maybe he could use his father's drawings as a guide to rebuild the missing parts.

Increasingly, Hugo felt like he had to try. If he fixed it, at least he wouldn't be so completely alone.

Hugo knew it would be dangerous to stay at the train station. His uncle could come back, and in the meantime, he was sure that if the Station Inspector knew he was there alone, he'd be locked up in that little jail cell in the office and then sent off to the orphanage. Then the automaton would probably be thrown away or destroyed.

Hugo quickly realized he had to make it seem like his uncle was still around. He would keep the clocks running as precisely as possible, and he'd take his uncle's paychecks from the office when no one was looking (although he didn't know how to cash them). Most of all, Hugo would do his best to remain invisible.

Three months had passed since then. Hugo ran his fingers along the arm of the automaton and gazed at its face. He had studied the drawings in his father's notebook closely and had made great progress. He had repainted the face himself, and it had the strangest expression. It reminded him of Father, the way he always seemed to be thinking of three things at once. The newly polished wooden hand was now poised above the desk as it once was, waiting for Hugo to make it a new pen.

Hugo had continued thinking about the note that it would eventually write. And the more he worked on the automaton, the more he came to believe something that he knew was completely crazy. Hugo felt sure that the note was going to answer all his questions and tell him what to do now that he was alone. The note was going to save his life.

Whenever he imagined the note, he always saw it in his father's handwriting. Maybe Father, while he had

been working on the automaton up in the attic of the museum, had changed the little mechanical parts just enough so that it would make a new note, one meant just for Hugo. It *was* possible, after all.

Now he just had to get the notebook back from the old man so he could finish his work and read the message from his father.