

"From its engaging drawings to its powerful message, Idiot Genius will leave readers musing about Willa Snap's adventures long after the winding story concludes." —D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer, Midwest Book Review

IDIOT GENIUS

WILLA SNAP AND THE CLOCKWERK BOY



RICHARD DUE

Illustrations by Carolyn Arcabascio

PRAISE FOR RICHARD DUE'S
IDIOT GENIUS
WILLA SNAP AND THE CLOCKWERK BOY



Independent Publisher Book Award Medalist – Juvenile Fiction
International Rubery Book Award Shortlist – Young Adult
National Indie Excellence Award – Juvenile Fiction
Eric Hoffer Award Category Finalist – Young Adult
Writer's Digest Self-Published Book Award Honorable Mention
– Middle-Grade/Young Adult

“*Idiot Genius* is a whimsical novel any middle school kid would enjoy. Zany characters, imaginative settings, and a sense of adventure will appeal to young readers. They’ll be eager to get their hands on the next installment.”

—The BookLife Prize

“Thoroughly engrossing story recommended for young sci-fi and fantasy fans who hold a prior attraction to books such as John Bellairs’ *House with a Clock in its Walls*.”

—D. Donovan, Senior Reviewer, Midwest Book Review

“The narrative is often very witty and the absurdity of the story is what carries it along. The pace is fast and the plot farcical in places which is what children will like about it.”

—International Rubery Book Award

PRAISE FOR RICHARD DUE'S
MOON REALM SERIES

THE MOON COIN

Book One / A Moon Realm Novel

Moonbeam Children's Book Awards – Gold Medal

“*The Moon Coin* is a beautifully written fantasy novel, perfect for middle graders to pore over themselves or as a bedtime story for younger kids. The descriptions of everything, from Uncle Ebb’s electronic fish-bird hybrids to the fanciful creatures Lily meets in the Moon Realm, are so rich that the action instantly comes alive for the reader. The story’s tension builds slowly but the excitement is constant, with Lily asking the same questions puzzling the reader. *The Moon Coin* has all the elements of a great fantasy: a unique, complex world, a battle between good and evil, and creatures that are a mix of comical and terrifying.”

—Foreword Reviews

THE DRAGONDAIN

Book Two / A Moon Realm Novel

“Get ready for a wild ride! *The Dragondain* will have you gasping, cheering, and falling in love with the characters all over again. Due’s rich descriptive prose and fast-paced dialogue make for a truly exciting read. There were so many ‘goosebumps’ moments I literally could not put the book down. I can’t wait for Book Three!”

—S. S. Tamberrino

“Due has just become one of my favorite authors. I love that his books are smartly written. So many YA and childrens books are just junk food for the brain. This book is complex, the characters have some depth, the scenarios faced by the characters are not simple. I read this to see if it was ok for the kids, and it turned out to be a great story, perfect for family reading or for older kids/teen (or even adults) to read on their own. It’s excellent fantasy that appeals to both genders.”

—CS, Amazon Reviewer

WILLA SNAP AND THE
CLOCKWERK BOY

Titles in the Moon Realm Series

The Moon Coin

(Part One: The Rinn of Barreth)

The Dragondain

(Part Two: The Rinn of Barreth)

Richard Due

WILLA SNAP AND THE
CLOCKWERK BOY

An Idiot Genius Novel



Illustrated by
Carolyn Arcabascio



Gibbering Gnome Press
A Division of Ingenious Inventions Run Amok, Ink

Huntingtown



Gibbering Gnome Press, A Division of
Ingenious Inventions Run Amok, Ink
Huntingtown, Maryland

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's overwrought imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

WillaSnap.com

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Run Amok, Ink ebook and print edition December 2017

To my mom,

*who showed me how to tilt my artwork on the
refrigerator at a jaunty angle . . . because,
you know, it just looks better that way.*

Vivian Rosslyne Due
“Viv”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In order to preserve our home's fragile sanity, we established a rule to end all rules: thou shalt have no more than one all-consuming mammoth writing project at a time. It's a good rule! It's an important rule! It's a rule we've thrown out the window of a speeding MiniDirigy.

I've decided to take the low road on this one. That's right, I'm blaming everyone but myself. First, I'd like to blame my lovely wife and editor, Liz, who, after I foolishly pitched her the idea of Idiot Genius, blurted, YOU HAVE TO WRITE THAT! Next, my alpha beta readers, Meredith and Clare Prouty-Due, for begging me to *write faster, Dad!* For the heinous crime of encouragement, I blame Emily Bakely (editor), who, after reading the beginning in a coffee shop, scooped up the rest of the MS, clutched it to her chest, and ran out the door with it. For their patient scrutiny, I blame my beta readers: Jessi Wood, Jared Jiacinto, Jimmy Humphries, Bridget Evans, and Sharon Grummer. I blame Carolyn Arcabascio, the illustrator of this work, for capturing my characters so beautifully—how dare she! I blame the people who contributed IG idioms and exclamations: Tricia Rightmire, Jessica Western, Lenny Lind, Christine E.P.V. Culver, Alyson Griese, Georgi Ridgway, Danny Paul, William Wolfgang Allen, Sari Benmeir, Gerald Smith, John Verrico, Susan Hanson Turfle. And, lastly, the cherry on this ice cream sundae of blame, John Verrico and Yeşim Nuri Clark, for helping me with Nimet's Turkish.

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A Note on the Text

When Willa Snap's first highly illegal memoir landed on my desk (I have since received two more), I must say I was intrigued—and after the first read, fearful for my life. Would proceeding with publication be wise? It was a fair question. But after a long talk with Nimet Simit, all my fears seemed to magically vanish.

As to the text, a little clarification is in order. First, I have no doubt Willa wrote her first drafts in the field, as events unfolded. However, it appears that while redrafting, she was unable to resist adding occasional asides that referenced later adventures. While these interjections at first seemed jarring, I have decided to leave them intact, as I believe the information they contain is as droll and unpredictable as Willa herself. Eğlenmek!

— E.A.P.

Somewhere South of the Flatiron
Building, Manhattan Island

“Genius is not measured by a number alone, but by the deeds and inventions it brings to our world. To possess the number alone, and to make inventions of wide-scale destruction, is not the hallmark of Genius—it is the hallmark of Idiot Genius. This is why we regard The One Who Got Away [Albert Einstein] as the patron saint of the Idiot Genius.”

—Bartholomew vos Savant, chancellor
of the Institute of Intellect, speaking
on the relevance of IQ as a number

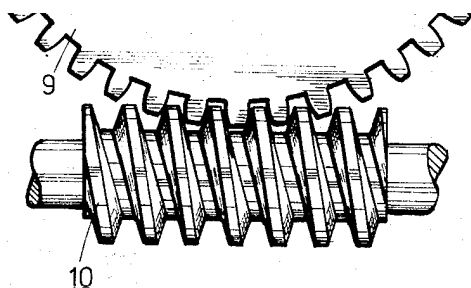
History is always older.

—Black Fez axiom





CHAPTER ONE



Cat's in the Bag

EVER wonder why some crazy scientist hasn't blown up the world? I used to wonder about it all the time. Actually, I was pretty sure my mom would be the one to do it.

But now I know better. It turns out there's a force working hard to keep the world from going KABLOOEY.

Who are these people? Wait for it:

Idiots. Yep, you heard me right.

How do I know? Well, apparently, I'm an Idiot. At least, according to the Geniuses I am. Confused? I'm not surprised. You're probably an Idiot too. Offended? You shouldn't be—I called you an Idiot, not an idiot. There's a difference, just as there's a difference between a Genius and a genius. Confused *and* offended? It gets worse. There's a third category: Idiot Genius. Those are the ones you really have to look out for. You see, Idiot Geniuses—for some unaccountable reason—are completely obsessed with “improving” the world. Maybe it's encoded in their DNA. I don't know. I didn't get those genes. I have Idiot genes, which means that for an equally unaccountable reason, I'm obsessed with *sav-*

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ing the world—usually from them.

I must warn you, my story isn't a pretty one: abductions, time-traveling dragons, the Order of the Black Fez, highly verbal cats, a secret invisible city, condescending robots (condescending means they talk to you like you're an Idiot; wait, is it condescending of me to explain what condescending means?), and that's just for starters.

But I digress. Digress, by the way, is a word I learned from my mother. You tend to grow a big vocabulary when someone in your family is a genius. If *your* vocabulary isn't up to speed and you're using an e-reader, feel free to look up *digress* using your built-in dictionary. However, if you're reading an ancient, smelly fire hazard of a book, then take a minute or two and go look it up in an ancient, smelly fire hazard of a dictionary, because I'm not going to waste my time explaining every single word I use just in case you don't know it. But I digress.

It all began on a Thursday at precisely 8 a.m. I was standing in the family room of our lovely two-story house, directly across the street from Squirrel Brand Park in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The same family room that, in a few minutes, I would never ever, ever see again—ever.

Squirrel Brand Park is a small park, but I miss the little place every day. When I was six, my dad swore he saw a squirrel in the park hide a tiny pair of binoculars behind its back. Dad was *so* serious! After, we laughed and laughed and laughed. We are *not* laughing anymore.

Back to the story. My mother had kept me out of school that day so I could attend her big lecture at the Hall of Speculative Sci-

CAT'S IN THE BAG

ence at MIT. MIT is a university in Cambridge, across the Charles River from Boston. Every month they pick someone to give a talk on an invention that could change the world. That month, they'd chosen my mom.

We were due at the hall in less than an hour, and my cat, the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short, was mixing up my mother's speaking notes by employing her claws to simulate a Cuisinart. Shredded papers were flying everywhere.

"Willamina Gilbert Snap! Get control of your cat!" screamed my mother.

I ran over to the coffee table, plucking bits and pieces of flying paper out of the air, and lifted the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short into my arms. She protested with a loud meow, clawing desperately to reach the last remaining unshredded note.

That's when

my father walked into the room. "Honey," he said to Mom, "can you give me a hand with this?" He



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was trying to tie his tie, which he should know better than to try and do by himself. If you haven't already guessed, he's an Idiot, too.

My dad's a fun dad. Kindly eyes, quick to smile, built like every guy you ever saw on a pre-steroids baseball card—how did all those guys hit so many home runs when they were so skinny? He doesn't talk down to me. He takes me out to ball games and museums and parks when Mom's busy in her laboratory all weekend, but he's not exactly what you'd call brilliant. Unless he's got a wrench in his hand and a bunch of pipes to play with, which is convenient since he's a plumber by trade. Not that he really has to work or anything, except when Mom loses one of her paychecks, which happens kind of often. She uses them as bookmarks, or writes grocery lists on them. Once, we found one in the freezer. It's like she doesn't understand how money works.

Grayson plunged her claws deep into my shoulders. The resulting bolts of pain loosened my grip. Out she flew from my arms. In a single bound she crossed the room and plastered her face against the front window, paws spread-eagled on the glass.

“What's the matter with you—”

She glanced over her shoulder at me, a look of horror on her fluffy face. That's when the doorbell rang.

“I'll get it,” said my mother, finishing up my father's tie.

As my mother made her way to the door, I watched Grayson's eyes dart back and forth between whoever was outside and Mom. The cat sprang into action, racing up the back of a chair and leaping into the air. (This wasn't the first time I'd witnessed this kind of behavior. The Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short arrived on our door-

CAT'S IN THE BAG

step using much the same maneuver, only she was swinging off a nearby tree branch the day she tumbled into our home. If you told me she was a runaway from a flying trapeze circus family, I would say to you: ya think?) Lucky for Mom, I anticipated this, catching Grayson and balling her up in a jacket before she could land on my mom's head. I dropped to the floor, tied the arms in a knot and—voilà!—instant bagged cat.

My mom looks like one of those movie stars from way back. Today, for example, she'd styled her blonde hair in a sleek updo and was wearing a white swing skirt with a wide red belt and a short red bolero jacket covered with big white polka dots. It's the kind of outfit that makes strangers stare and mumble. So whenever she answers the door and I want to know what's what, I stand right next to her. It's the only way to get the firsthand scoop.

“Good morning,” said a woman wearing a black fez emblazoned with a big red *G*. “My name is Heather Peaceout, and I'm with the I.O.I. Would you be Dr. Audrey Snap?” This lady was *not* mumbling.

Except for the bright red tassel attached to the top of her fez, she was dressed all in black. Black clothes, black fingernail polish, black sunglasses. She wore no makeup that I could detect, a plus in my book. If she hadn't been standing so close to my mother, I would have said she looked pretty.

“Can I help you?” Mom asked.

“Are you Dr. Audrey Snap, inventor of the pac-a-purse?” persisted Heather.

“Yes, that's me. Say, that's an unusual style of fez you're wearing, isn't it?” Grayson began struggling inside the jacket like she was warming up for an Olympic gymnastics routine. “You say

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you're with the eye-oh-eye?"

"Yes, the Institute of Intellect. It's a private concern."

Grayson growled loudly. Heather, suddenly alert, dipped her chin and peered over her sunglasses at the growling jacket in my arms. Her eyes were sky blue, and unruly tufts of blonde hair rimmed her fez. I looked down at the squirming bundle and made a *this couldn't be helped* face. Heather gave me a wink and pushed her sunglasses back into place. All business, she tapped her wrist, and a computer thingy strapped to her forearm appeared out of thin air.

"Totally bean!" I whispered. Mom and I say that when we see something unthinkably amazing.

Reading from her computer thingy, she asked, "Are you still planning to give your talk today at 9 a.m. in the Hall of Speculative Science at MIT?"

"Are you with the press?" asked Mom coyly.

"No. I'm with the Institute of Intellect. Don't you . . . remember?"

Mom flinched and touched her hand to her forehead, the way she does when one of her headaches is coming on. "I'm afraid I really don't have the time—"

"One quick question," said Heather. "Then I'll be out of your hair forever." This is standard Black Fez procedure, designed to plant an image in your brain of them walking away. This dramatically reduces the chances of you instead imagining something unpleasant, like being tasered, or hit with a tranquilizer dart, or rolled up in the rug you're standing on and carried off. "Is it true that the principal technology behind your device can be easily scaled up?"

Mom brightened at the mention of her invention. "Why, yes.

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That's the beauty of it, you see. Because my discovery uses a heretofore little-understood quirk of quantum mechanics—"

Heather held up her hand. "One more question. Could it be used on something as large as a city?"

My mother placed a finger next to the adorable dimple on her chin and thought for a moment. "Well, I suppose . . . but all I want to use it for is a purse! You see, I'm always leaving something at home that I wish I hadn't." Heather examined her fingernails and waited for my mother to stop talking. "And so one day I thought if only I could store everything I wanted in my purse, then I'd always have it. Get it?" Mom was excited. Geniuses always get excited when they're explaining how something they invented will change the world for the better.

Heather looked bored. "I see. One final question. If this new technology of yours were used on say, oh, Washington, D.C., what would happen to the city during the time that it was . . . in the purse?"

My mother gave Heather a funny look. "That's crazy! Who would want to carry around an entire city in her purse!"

Heather looked at me to see if Mom might be kidding. I sighed and shook my head.

"Please, ma'am, what would happen to the city?"

"Well, it would exist inside the purse, of course." Heather clearly wanted more. You see, the problem is that geniuses—both capital G and small g—either think you understand everything they've said as perfectly as they do, or that you're as dumb as dirt. It's one of their biggest flaws. "In a perfect state of stasis until it was taken out again," added my mother, now getting a little annoyed.

CHAPTER ONE

“I see. One final, final question. And *please*, I beg of you, think *very* carefully before you answer. All right?”

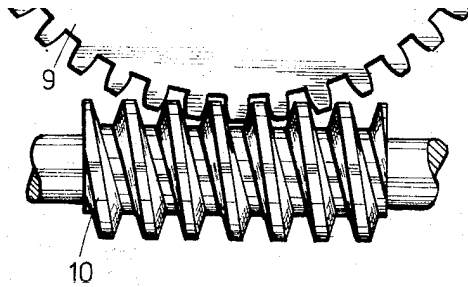
“O-kaaaay.” My mother was now using the voice she reserves for kindergarteners and puppies.

“Do you see *any* problems with that?”

I knew what Heather wanted to hear. Dad, listening from the living room, knew what Heather wanted to hear. Heck, from the gyrations going on inside my coat, you’d think even Grayson knew what Heather wanted to hear.

I often wonder, if Mom had had an “aha!” moment that day, would that have called off the abduction? Lucky for me, she snorted out a laugh and said, “Do you mean like . . . would fewer bad laws be passed?”

CHAPTER TWO



Abduction!

MOM closed the door. The Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short went limp inside my jacket.

“Fez is kind of a funny word, isn’t it?” I asked.

“It’s a type of hat.”

“I know, but where does it come from?” My mom’s an instant-on dictionary. Watch and learn.

“Well,” she began. “Let’s see. One day in 980 CE, in a brilliant piece of marketing, a clever haberdasher decided to hawk his new hat to a bunch of students. Not only did it turn out to be a flashy fashion statement, but it was also instantly associated with braininess. Before you could say Judah ben David Hayyuj, the entire north coast of Africa was wearing them.”

“Let me guess, the hatmaker’s name was Fez?”

“Nooooo,” she said, as if what I’d said would have actually been funny if only I had more brainpower than a canary. “But the city he lived in was.”

“There’s a city named after a hat?”

CHAPTER TWO

My mom laughed. “I can see how you might think that, but no. The city of Fez was doing plenty well all on its own long before the hat came along.”

“What do you think that big red G stood for?”

“That I don’t know. But I do know that, traditionally, a woman’s fez is smaller than the one she was wearing. And they’re usually colored a shade of red made from a particular berry that, for a very long time, Fez held a monopoly on.”

“More great marketing!” Geniuses love it when you pipe up and show that you’ve been paying attention.

“Yes! But all that changed after synthetic aniline dyes were invented in the nineteenth century.” Sadly, geniuses never know when to stop explaining stuff. “The shade of red made from that berry represents the supreme height of practical wisdom. Isn’t that fascinating?”

“Erm, not so much.”

“You know, honey,” said Dad, scratching his head. “That woman did kind of have a point.”

“How’s that, dear?”

“Well, the whole bit about what could happen if you applied your invention to something as large as a city. I mean, call me crazy, but I think a lot of people would probably get a little antsy about being tossed in stasis for a week. Don’t you think?”

Mom dismissed Dad’s concerns with a wave of her hand. “Don’t be silly. That woman was being kooky.”

“But Mom,” I said, jumping in, “don’t you think placing millions of people’s lives on hold could be confusing? Yay, it’s Tuesday! Whoa! Now it’s Thursday! Hey, where did Wednesday go?”

“But that would never happen!” she insisted. “It’s for a purse.”

ABDUCTION!

I looked at Dad. “She’s not getting it. Why isn’t she getting it?”

“Hey, guys! Lighten up, will ya?” said Mom. “Who’s the genius in the family?”

“You are,” Dad and I said dejectedly. Geniuses have been using this technique on Idiots for centuries, and with good reason—it’s devastatingly effective.

Before we left for the lecture, I placed the jacket containing the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short on the living room floor, loosened the arms a bit, and ran for it. The instant I was out of the house, my dad slammed the door shut and peeked through a little porthole of a window high up on the door.

“Did she get out?” I asked.

Dad frowned. “Are you sure she was still in the jacket?”

“Positive. Can I see?”

Dad lifted me up. Sure enough, there was the empty jacket, but no sign of Grayson. Then, all of a sudden, I heard a gallop, followed by silence. A second later, Grayson’s face appeared plastered to the other side of the little window. As she slowly sank from view, she let out a long, plaintive meow. Her claws sounded like nails on a chalkboard.

“Ooh! Looks like I’m going to be painting this weekend!” I said.

Dad rearranged some of his tools and plumbing supplies so I could sit in the back of his work van. Just as we were pulling out of the driveway, I heard a loud thump on the roof but didn’t think anything of it. Later, I would learn that Grayson had run upstairs to Mom’s laboratory, hurled a glass beaker through a window, and then launched herself into the big maple tree out front. From there,

CHAPTER TWO

she leapt for it, attaching herself to the big snapping fingers on the van's roof. (Get it? *Snap!* Snapping fingers? Our last name is Snap? Try and keep up.)

We didn't discover Grayson until after we'd parked near MIT. Dad gave her a poke. She was like a frozen furry statue. "Should we leave her up there?"

He wasn't serious . . . I'm pretty sure.

"Um, can you get her down?" I asked.

He pried her from the giant thumb while I dumped out one of his tool bags and held it open.

"If you don't want to lose her, I suggest you don't open that bag again until we're back home," he cautioned.

But we weren't ever going home, and that's how Grayson ended up being with us the day we were abducted.

The Hall of Speculative Science was smaller than I'd imagined. It consisted of a podium and about thirty folding chairs. A crisp-looking woman sat my father and me in the wings behind a little curtain, like she didn't want us to be seen or heard. Dad pulled a book out of his pocket. He's a voracious reader: mysteries, historical fiction, memoirs, fantasy, plays, science fiction, you name it.

Right at nine o'clock, Mom started her presentation to a full house. I'd seen her rehearse it a bunch of times. It was full of boring scientific jargon that I couldn't pretend to understand. After what felt like an hour—okay, maybe it was only five minutes—I peeked out into the audience for the thousandth time and noticed a man in black sunglasses, dressed all in black, and wearing, you guessed it, a black fez with a big red *G* emblazoned on its front. I tried to get my dad's attention, but he was too into his book. The

ABDUCTION!

next time I looked, there were five more black fezzes, all in the front row. As an experiment, I looked away really, really quickly, then looked back. There was another one! I looked away and then back three times fast. *Fip-fip-fip!* Now there were ten black fezzes in the audience. The most disturbing part, though, was that I couldn't figure out how the normal people were disappearing.

By the time Mom finished her presentation and everyone in the room stood up to clap, they were *all* wearing black fezzes, most with red tassels, but a few with black.

Walking back to the car, Mom couldn't stop talking. "I think they liked it!"

"Um, Mom? Did you notice anything strange about the audience?"

"Strange? Not that I remember. But I really think they liked it!"

"You were great, honey," said Dad, reading and walking at the same time.

Then an odd thing happened.

"Hey," I said. "Isn't that Heather?" Dad's tool bag growled.

The light changed and we started walking toward each other.

It was Heather all right. I looked around. Somehow, we were the only people on the street.

"Maybe she wants to interview you again," said Dad hopefully.

But she didn't. As we met, she raised her arm and threw something to the ground. There was a flash, followed by a weird, low-frequency noise. A shimmering bubble seemed to grow around us, first ten feet around, then twenty, then thirty. Then a whole lot of things happened at once. A few feet to our right, a strange-looking bus appeared out of thin air. Big purple letters scrolled across a screen on its side: "E-X-P-R-E-S-S T-R-A-N-S-P-O-R-T-A—"

CHAPTER TWO

Its doors flew open, and people in black fezzes poured out and surrounded us. One of them, looking at his wrist, announced, “Let’s move it, people. Fifty-five seconds to temporal harmony!”

In a bored monotone, Heather announced, “Do *not* attempt to leave the time-bubble. If you attempt to leave the bubble, terrible things will happen to you. Remain calm. You’ve done nothing wrong.” *Done nothing wrong?* The Black Fez tell lies like this *all* the time. “We’re simply relocating you under the Revised Planet Safety Act of 1926. Do not panic. Please enter the transport peacefully. I repeat, don’t panic.”

“Forty-five seconds,” called out the timekeeper.

My Idiot father threw his hands in the air. “I always knew something like this would happen!”

Mom rested her hands on her hips and gave him her best *Oh, really!* look.

“Oh, come on, Dad!” I said. “You did *not* see this one coming!”

Mom pointed at me. “From the mouths of babes,” she said.

“Snaps!” said Heather, snapping out of the monotone. “I’m not joking around here! Please enter the transport—”

“Thirty seconds!”

“I most certainly *did* see this coming!” said my dad hysterically. “Since before we were married! I would say ‘Just promise me you aren’t going to blow up the world one day by accident. Can you *just* promise me that?’”

The Black Fez got all extra agitated. A particularly twitchy-looking one pointed at Mom and started shouting. “Code Tesla! Code Tesla!”

Heather made a growling noise. “Bhattarai, Castillo, get Little Boy Blue here into the transport. And make sure no satellite

ABDUCTION!

strike-forces are being called down on this location, will you?”

“Twenty seconds!” called the timekeeper.

“Last warning, Snaps!” shouted Heather.

I looked at Mom incredulously. “Hey, I wasn’t trying to defend you! I was pointing out how incredibly unlikely it was that Dad could have possibly seen this *exact* thing coming! I mean, people running around in black fezzes, an invisible bus—what are the odds!”

Mom opened her purse and pulled out a box of tissues. “I hate it when you two gang up on me.”

The world outside the bubble wobbled.

“We’re losing bubble integrity!” someone shouted.

“Ten seconds!”

“All right, round ’em up,” ordered Heather.

“Aw, honey!” said Dad, taking Mom in his arms. “I’m so sorry.”

“Me too,” I added, joining the group hug.

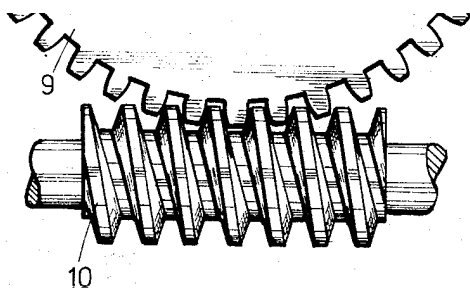
The Black Fez converged on us all at once, whisking us into the transport and down a wide aisle between facing seats. Doors slammed shut. Outside, in the window of the beloved Cambridge cafe $E = \text{More Caffeine}^2$, our reflection wavered and vanished. It was like we’d gone invisible or something.

“5 . . 4 . . 3 . . 2 . .” counted the timekeeper.

The bubble outside started collapsing.

“Henderson!” Heather yelled to the driver. “Punch it!”

CHAPTER THREE



The Order of the Black Fez

THE engines roared. I grabbed onto a pair of safety bars. Something told me this was no ordinary invisible bus (my biggest clue being the billowy white clouds racing past the windows). We were flying! Across the aisle, looking very relieved and happy, Heather smiled at me.

My dad clutched his safety bars in a death grip, his eyes squeezed shut. “We’re all going to die, we’re all going to die,” he chanted.

My mom, by contrast, seemed very alert, even calm. Every once in a while she glanced through her wide-framed librarian glasses at the pilot working the controls. I could almost hear her voice in my head: *There’s always something to learn if you’re willing to learn it.* Already, for example, they’d shown her how to take off and fly the thing. By the time this ride was over, she’d probably know how to land it, too.

I usually find myself taking my social cues from my dad.

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Don't get me wrong. I really love me some Mom, but Dad and I take to new people more easily. Mom, well, she tends to lead off with a pretty unnerving stare, which is sometimes followed up by a barrage of intimidating questions.

Right now, though, Dad was making little frightened-kitten sounds. Oh, dear. Well, I guess there comes a time when you just have to be your own girl.

I climbed out of my seat and stepped across the aisle. "Excuse me, Ms. Peaceout. Have you seen the tool bag I was carrying? I had my cat in it."

She whipped off her black sunglasses. "What? The cat's missing?"

"Got her," shouted a Black Fez in the back. "Got her right here." He handed me the tool bag. As I wrapped my arms around the bag, I felt the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short shift her weight. She was okay.

Heather fell back into her seat. "Oh, good. We never leave a family member behind."

"Is that your motto?"

Heather's eyes crinkled at the corners when she grinned. "You bet it is, Willa. The Order of the Black Fez always gets its family." She stuck out her hand. "We haven't been properly introduced. Heather. Heather Peaceout, Black Fez, Second Order, at your service. You were cool as an ice cube on dry ice today. You've got Black Fez written all over you."

"Um, I'm eleven," I said.

Heather looked at the Black Fez sitting next to her. "She's eleven," she said to him. He chuckled. His fez had a black tassel.

"Great, now you're making fun of me?"

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Heather eyed me cautiously. “Peace, young Snap. It’s just . . . when you’re tired of being eleven, you let me know.”

Outside, the view had turned into black space and bright stars. The blue-glowing curvature of Earth made an appearance.

“Oh, wow! Are we going into orbit?”

Heather glanced over her shoulder. “Hm? No, we’re just making a little bounce out to the Southwest. We’ll have you safe, sound, and on the ground in ten. Feel free to walk around. Just try not to touch too many of the buttons up front.” She winked.

A repetitive thudding filled the compartment. I turned to see my dad pounding his fists on the exit doors, wailing something about going home.

“Don’t worry,” explained Heather, “your Idiot father doesn’t have a prayer of opening those doors.”

“Hey! He’s not an idiot!” I didn’t know then that most everyone in Grandeur is classified as either an Idiot or a Genius. “I mean, not all the time, anyway. Very little of the time, actually.”

“Oh, he’s an Idiot all right. I’m an Idiot, you’re an Idiot, even Drew here is an Idiot,” she said. “Isn’t that right, Drew?”

“You betcha!” he said, taking off his black sunglasses. He was a big muscular guy with an incredibly pale complexion. “There are three basic types of Idiot. You got your Real Idiots, like you and me. You got your Stupid Idiots, like your dad over there.”

“Hey!” I said.

“I know, I know,” he said. “It’s not polite to call somebody Stupid, and I apologize for any offense. Please believe me when I say I’m not trying to make any judgments. Your father’s *probably* a Real Idiot, too . . . only not when he’s being abducted.” Drew held out a massive hand. “Please allow me to introduce myself:

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Drew Loader, Black Fez, Special Ops.” His hand felt like warm carved stone.

“What’s the third type?” I asked.

“Oh, those would be your Complete Idiots,” said Heather.

Drew grinned. “Not your best decision makers.”

“Your cousin’s a Complete Idiot, right?” Heather asked Drew.

“That would be Clark. He’s always cooking up some crazy venture. Right now he’s trying to open a bookstore, with real books in it. Can you believe it? What a Complete Idiot.”

An odd squeaking noise made me turn my head. Dad’s sweaty face was sliding down the glass. When he hit the floor, he passed out flat on his back.

I turned to Heather and made eye motions toward my dad. “You don’t think . . . I mean, there’s not any chance he could be . . .”

“A Complete Idiot? No! He’s just *acting* like one. Happens all the time during abductions. My medics will have him up in a jiffy. Palumbo, D’Amico, help this man back to his seat!”

Palumbo waved something under my dad’s nose while D’Amico gave him a shot. I heard it hiss as it went into his arm. At first, Dad seemed to perk up a bit, only to slump back in his seat a moment later.

I placed my hands on my hips and shot Heather a dubious look.

“Sometimes it takes a little while to kick in,” she said.

Mom’s mind was racing faster than the transport. If she was worried about Dad, she didn’t show it. No, she was trying to find a way out of this mess. I was sure of it.

I tilted my head ever so slightly toward my mom.

Heather gave me a knowing grin and leaned forward. “Don’t

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worry. I got her scoped. She won't get within two feet of my pilot. Never mess with the Fez."

I climbed back into my seat and tried to nudge Mom without Heather or Drew noticing. Out of the corner of my mouth, in a low voice, I said, "It'll never work. They're onto you. Why don't you ask them some questions? They seem pretty talkative."

Mom peered down at me like I was a petri dish experiment gone wrong. It was a look I was familiar with.

"False sense of security," mumbled Dad. "It doesn't matter what they tell us. It'll all end bad."

I patted his arm. "What are you talking about?"

Dad closed his eyes for a second. His face was squished up against the safety bar, and it made his voice sound funny. "Maybe it's best I don't say anything. I wouldn't want to scare you," he slurred.

"What, and leave it up to my imagination? Don't you always say that's ten times worse?"

"Not this time, peanut."

Ideas bubbled up in my mind like an overflowing test tube.

"Really? Okay, how about this? They harvest our body organs for pet food. 'Cause everybody knows a human liver goes a long way—you could probably feed a whole herd of hamsters on mine." My dad let out a little whimper. "Ooh! How about this: They slowly freeze off our arms and legs, then remove our brains and force us to drive their cabs around for all eternity. Wait, wait! They lower us into a big vat of acid, reducing us to a cellular slush-fuel to power their smartphones, and then, as an added bonus, they string up our skeletons to reenact a massive musical stage production of *Les Mis*." I hopped out of my seat, spread my arms wide,

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and sang, “*You will live, Papa, You’re going to live, It’s too soon, too soon to say goodbye—*”

My dad smiled. “Come here, kiddo.”

I stepped closer. He was drooling a little. “I love you so much,” he said, sounding a little stronger. And then, I think because Mom was sitting right next to us, he mouthed the part he always says after: *and so does your mother*. Followed by, and this part was totally through his eyes: *which she would tell you herself if she knew how*.

“I love you too, Dad.” I looked around the cabin. The Black Fez were talking amongst themselves like old soldiers. “Hey, Dad, where’s your book?”

“Dropped it in the street, I think.”

“Where are you taking us?” my mother suddenly asked.

“Grandeur,” answered Heather.

“Anyone ever heard of Grandeur?” asked my dad, sitting up a little straighter and sounding more like his old self. “Did they teach you about Grandeur in school, Willa?” I shook my head. “Honey, is Grandeur in your encyclopedic brain?”

Mom shook her head. “Who lives in Grandeur?”

“Geniuses and Idiots, mostly,” said Heather.

“How old is Grandeur?”

Heather lifted an eyebrow. “Older than you would believe. Grandeur is the place where people like *you* go to live,” she told Mom.

“Me? Whatever do you mean?”

“The pac-a-purse,” I said slowly. Dad, Heather, and Drew all nodded at the same time. I looked up at Mom. “Don’t you see? It’s dangerous!”

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“What are you talking about?” Mom snapped, looking at me like I was crazy. “What’s wrong with wanting to have everything in your purse? This is insane!”

“You could explain it to her a million times,” said Drew, “but she ain’t ever gonna take it in. It’s the way she’s wired.”

“We’re never going to leave Grandeur alive,” dad muttered.

Now I know what you’re thinking. Dad’s beaten the old paranoid drum a few too many times, and it’s addled his brain. But not this time.

I held the tool bag containing the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short a little tighter and thought about the way she’d been acting all morning. She knew. I didn’t know how, but she *knew*.

Listen, I don’t want you to worry too much. I know things look pretty bad right now, but it’s all good. The Black Fez had no intention of hurting us—they simply wanted to imprison us for the rest of our natural lives.

“Approaching the Forest of the Big Bad Wolf,” announced the pilot.

We all looked out the front window. The transport had completed its bounce, whatever that meant. We were flying high above a vast desert landscape. There wasn’t a tree in sight.

“All right, everybody. Hold tight and think good thoughts.”

“Almost there,” said Henderson. “In three . . . wait for it . . .”

A terrible feeling swept over me. All I wanted to do was run. I leapt out of my seat.

“We’ve got a runner,” announced Heather.

Suddenly, I was all legs, charging blindly down the aisle. One of the Black Fez reached out and scooped me into her arms. I

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screamed. I fought to get loose. I felt like a wild animal trapped in a cage. I had to get free. I had to run! And then, just like that, all the bad feelings vanished. The woman walked me back to my seat.

“Relax,” she said, tousling my hair. “Everything’s fine.”

A few seconds later, four Black Fez wrestled my dad back into his seat. My mom, looking disheveled, came walking back on her own.

“What was that?” asked Mom.

“Perimeter security,” explained Heather. “You’re lucky we have field suppressors on board. If you were on foot, or in an unprotected vehicle, it would have been a hundred times worse.”

“But why?” I asked.

“To keep people away from Grandeur,” said Drew. “It’s important people think it’s their idea to turn around. Much more effective that way.”

“Fifty-five seconds to visual,” announced Henderson. “Slowing velocity. Going into hover-mode.”

We stared out the window. There was still nothing outside but rock and sand.

I squinted.

“Thirty-five seconds . . . thirty . . .”

“How high up do you think we are?” Mom asked Dad.

“Hard to say. Maybe a mile. What’s that make our visibility, Mrs. Wizard?”

“A mile up? A little under a hundred miles.”

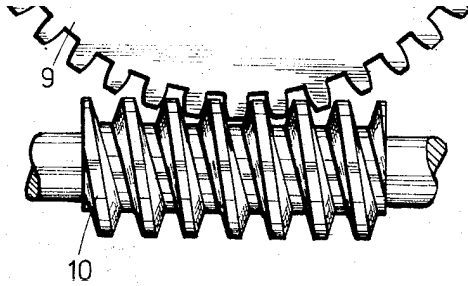
“Twenty-five seconds . . . twenty . . .”

Directly ahead an opening appeared. With no point of reference, it looked really strange, almost like it was moving toward us rather than the other way around.

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As we passed through, it became clear we were entering a dome—a dome designed to hide something from view. Something huge.

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Grandeur

IT was a city! An entire city hidden in plain sight!
“Grandeur,” announced Heather. “City out of time.”

When we didn’t move, Drew spoke up. “All right, Snaps, let’s get movin’.”

Behind us, the rest of the Black Fez formed a wall. They weren’t cracking their knuckles or anything, but we got the message. I hugged the tool bag containing the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short extra tight.

“Well,” said Dad, taking Mom’s hand and putting his arm around me, “I guess this is where we get off.”

Out on the platform, we gathered close as the transport lifted off and backed slowly out of the dome. Heather leaned through the open door and shouted, “Welcome to your next great adventure, Snaps!” I watched through the translucent metal dome as the transport disappeared into the blue sky.

We walked out onto the edge of a wide balcony. The only furniture here was a table with four small boxes on it. A mile

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below lay Grandeur.

“Wow!” I said.

Between us and the city, dark clouds were brewing.

“They have clouds,” said Dad, stating the obvious (a wonderful pastime of Idiots). “They have clouds *inside* the dome.”

“Cumulonimbus,” observed my mom.

“Those are storm clouds, right?” I said.

Mom’s eyes brightened. “Very good! We’ll make a genius out of you yet!” I made my icky face, which Mom didn’t seem to catch.

From this distance, Grandeur didn’t seem all that strange. But the more you looked, the more that changed. Three skyscrapers rose out of a central lake, and bus-sized thingies glided all over the place, high above the streets. Sure, there were neighborhoods, roads, parks, fields, trees—but those skyscrapers . . . they just kept going up and up until they disappeared into the clouds, like Jack’s beanstalk. Water cascaded down between the buildings, creating rainbows over the lake. There was something else, too, far off in the distance, the size of ten or twelve city blocks and covered with propellers. It was floating above one of the parks and tethered to the ground by masses of spidery ropes.

“Dad, what’s that over—”

“What we have here is a classic Buckminster Fuller sphere,” announced Mom. “Well, a partial one, anyway.” She held out a thumb and squinted through one eye. I could practically see the myriad calculations leaping through her brain. She moved her thumb rapidly from one imaginary point to another. “Given the angle of curvature, it must be—”

“Precisely three miles four thousand sixty-one feet high,” said a robot walking toward us. Dad and I jumped, but Mom didn’t

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flinch. “Hello. My name is Ibid-2975 and I’m here to process you, after which I will escort you to your new apartment.”

Ibid-2975 was thin and rather unimpressive looking. I’m pretty sure I could’ve taken it apart with two or three good swings from a plastic baseball bat.

But Mom wasn’t finished. “How much of the sphere goes below ground?”

“If it *were* a full sphere . . . about forty percent would be underground.”

“Ah,” said Dad, “so it won’t roll away, right?”

Ibid-2975 stared blankly at my dad for a second, then asked us to take a seat at the table. “I can assure you, the dome surrounding Grandeur is quite formidable. It is in no danger whatsoever of rolling away,” the robot said, directing that last bit to me and Dad, like it thought we were Idiots or something.

“I know what formidable means, Mr. Nuts and Bolts.” Okay, so I called it a him. I don’t like thinking of a sentient being as an it. Lucky for me, most robots in Grandeur make it easy. Even the ones designed by other robots often go for a him or a her look. I couldn’t tell you why for sure, but I have a feeling it makes it easier for them to fit in. The ibids, however, had no look one way or the other. In cases like this, I just call ’em like I see ’em.

“Willa!” gasped my mother.

You didn’t need to be a Genius to know how this was going down.

“It’s perfectly all right,” said Mr. Nuts and Bolts, although he didn’t *sound* like it was perfectly all right.

My mother wasn’t giving up. “Willamina Gilbert Snap! Apologize this instant.”

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I made some grumbling noises. Mom glared at me until the noises became actual words. This happened grudgingly and by degrees.

The box in front of me had *Willamina Gilbert Snap* written on top. The box next to it, which was smaller, was labeled *The Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short*.

“Creeeeeepeeeeeee,” I said, under my breath. I could tell Dad agreed with me one hundred percent. I placed the tool bag snugly between my feet.

“Please open your box, remove your WatchitMapCallit, and place it on your forearm—your left if you’re right-handed; your right if you’re left-handed.”

“My whatchamacallit?”

“No,” said Mr. Nuts and Bolts, enunciating deliberately. “Your Watch-it-Map-Call-it,” he said.

I took the lid off my box. Inside was a long glass oval, like the one I’d seen on Heather’s forearm. As I stared at it, the glass darkened and a row of glowing icons appeared. When I held it over my left forearm, it attached itself to me like a second skin.

I shot Dad a gee-whiz look, but he was still staring into his box. When I glanced back to my wrist, the WatchitMapCallit was gone. At first, I thought it must have slipped off my arm. But then, remembering what I’d seen Heather do, I tapped the back of my wrist.

It reappeared instantly. *Totally bean!*

“Your WatchitMapCallit is a wearable, touch-sensitive computing device. You can ‘Watch it,’ like a TV, navigate with the built-in ‘Map’ function, or employ the ‘Call it’ feature to commu-

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nicate as you would on a video phone. Willa, do you know what a video phone is?”

I looked at my dad and gritted my teeth.

“Yes, I believe she does,” he said, before I could say anything out loud. My dad may be an Idiot, but he can be a perceptive Idiot when he wants to.

“What a wonderful idea!” gushed my mother. “It’s like a smartwatch, only more useful—it’s a smart vambrace! And you beat Apple to market by at least a year. Wouldn’t they be jealous . . . if they knew, I mean.”

When Mom gets super-excited, she sometimes reverts to a childlike state. If she wasn’t so cute when she did it, it would be annoying.

“Closer to a hundred years,” huffed Mr. Nuts and Bolts.

My dad made his that’s-not-possible-face. “But the first silicon transistors weren’t even invented until the 1950s, after World War II.” See, my dad’s not a Complete Idiot.

Mr. Nuts and Bolts tilted his head back ever so slightly and looked down his metal nose. “Outside Grandeur, yes,” he sniffed. “Inside Grandeur, no. In 1819, three years before Charles Babbage presented his pathetic, hand-cranked difference engine to the Royal Astronomical Society, Grandeur was taping out its first silicon chips. Now, all three of you, look at your WatchitMapCallits. But don’t panic if you don’t see them. Most Idiots have difficulty grasping the concept of object permanence.”

My mom tapped her wrist, like she’d done it a thousand times before, and hers reappeared. “Your WatchitMapCallit will adapt to its environment. If you place it over a shirt sleeve or coat and look away, even for a few seconds, it will do its best to blend in. There

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are many ways to summon it. The simplest is to give it a tap while looking at your wrist. On your desktop you will see several different icons. If you touch the one that looks like a sphere with a red G on it, you will activate Grandeurpedia. Ask Grandeurpedia anything you like and it'll endeavor to answer you in a way that you can understand. The question mark icon will give you more information on how to use your WatchitMapCallit.” My mom started tapping things, and all kinds of stuff popped up—maps, diagrams, mathematical equations.

Mr. Nuts and Bolts eyed my dad and me. “I understand the tutorial videos are very helpful should you require them.”

“Doesn't mind listening to himself talk, does he?” Dad said to me softly. Mom kicked him under the table.

“The second device is your BrainRent. Please take it out of the box and clip it to your earlobe.”

Mom had hers on in a jiffy. Dad and I were more suspicious. They were white plastic discs, each about an inch in diameter with a clip on the back and a circle of ten dots on the front.

“What does it do?” asked my mom excitedly.

“The BrainRent is a multifunction device, but its primary purpose is to earn you easy dolleors, which you can readily spend anywhere in Grandeur.”

My dad raised his eyebrows. “Easy money, huh? Exactly how does *that* work?”

“The device simply scans your brain and utilizes the portions you use the least. It's harmless, I assure you.”

“Is that right?” scoffed my dad. “And how exactly does it . . . *utilize* them?”

“Very simple. The BrainRent will access those unused areas

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of your brain much like a computer does a hard drive. However, if it judges your ganglia to be quick, it may use your excess brain cells as an NPU-node for Source. Earning you bonus dolleurs.”

“NPU? Source? Can we have that in English?” I asked.

My mom’s arm shot into the air. “Ooh, ooh! Let me try!”

“By all means,” droned the robot.

“What this nice robot is trying to say is that the BrainRent can tap into the power of your unused brain cells and use them like a computer’s Central Processing Unit, or CPU. The N in NPU, of course, means Neuro, as in Neuro Processing Unit.” Mom looked to Mr. Nuts and Bolts for approval and I swear that, even though nothing moved on its face, somehow that thing actually smiled. “And that would make Source the main or central computer system for Grandeur. Basically, Source is tapping into the brains of everyone wearing a BrainRent to give itself more storage and processing power. Am I right?”

“Full marks, Dr. Snap. I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Mom actually blushed. Dad and I put on our BrainRents.

“What are these glowing pips on the front?” asked my dad.

“That’s just to let you know the device is active. Now, moving on. The Idiot Genius in your family,” the robot nodded to Mom, who bounced once in her seat before freezing in place as her mind tripped repeatedly over the word *Idiot*, “will have full access to the research facilities in Laboratorium Tower. Or as it’s known in the vernacular”—at this point, if he’d had a real mouth, I think he would’ve opened it and pretended like he was throwing up—“the Lab.” He motioned with a tilt of his head to the three skyscrapers we’d seen rising out of the lake.

Mom’s look of confusion vanished, and she screamed out like

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a game show contestant.

I was happy for her, but all I could think about were the words *Idiot Genius*. Someone had finally done it. The genie was out of the bottle. Up until that moment, I'd've laughed at anyone stupid enough to refer to my mom as anything less than brilliant. But these two words, so seemingly at odds, described her and all her kind *perfectly*.

"There are only two things you need remember, Dr. Snap. One, you are *not* allowed to share the principles of your invention—the pac-a-purse, I believe it is called—with anyone. And two, you may not attempt to build your own laboratory outside of the central towers."

"Seems fair," chirped my mom.

"And you, sir," droned the robot to my dad, "what skills, if any, do you claim to possess?"

My dad folded his arms proudly over his chest. "More than you can count," he said softly.

"Excuse me?" asked the robot.

"By profession, I'm a plumber, but I guess you've got robots for that in here."

"Robots?" sputtered Mr. Nuts and Bolts. "Performing menial labor? You must be joking!" Then he laughed in a way that didn't sound at all amused. "Why would Grandeur waste the talents of a robot on menial labor? Not to worry, though, your services will be in high demand."

"Glad to hear it," said Dad, shooting me a puzzled look.

"Don't you mean *manual* labor?" I asked.

"No. I do not," said the robot. "I said *menial* because I meant *menial*, as in, 'Why would a robot perform a meaningless job

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beneath its station?” I rolled my eyes and silently made my *yap-yap-yap* face, tilting my head in time to each *yap*. “Willa, I see from your BrainRent scan that you’ve tested out as an Idiot.”

“Wait, it’s already scanned my entire brain?”

“That’s correct.”

“And I’m an Idiot?”

“The Idiot school in your neighborhood . . . let’s see, that would be Idiot School 223, doesn’t start for another two and a half hours, so I don’t see any problems in your attending today. Good luck to you.”

“What kind of a school starts at 1:30 in the afternoon?”

Mr. Nuts and Bolts leaned forward, speaking slowly. “Idiot . . . school, and it starts at 11:30. You’re on Grandeur Time now.” He then opened Grayson’s box and removed a kitty-sized BrainRent. “May I see your cat?”

“Her name is the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short, and why?”

The robot glanced briefly at my mother. “All family members must be evaluated. Even cats with ridiculously long names. I assure you, she will not be harmed.”

“Willa . . .” Mom began.

I sighed. Against my better judgment, I placed the tool bag on the table and opened it wide enough for the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short to poke her head out. Quick as a shot, the robot attached the kitty-sized BrainRent to her earlobe. Then he clipped a kitty-sized WatchitMapCallit onto her paw. What was Grayson going to do with a WatchitMapCallit?

Speaking very clearly and slowly, Mr. Nuts and Bolts said,

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“And how are you feeling today, little kitty?”

The Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short looked in turn to each of us and said, “Meow?”

But the sound didn’t come out of her mouth. It came out of the little BrainRent device.

“I know you can do better than that. I have your charts. You appear to be an especially smart little kitty. Now try again.”

The Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short looked up at me with her sad eyes, and out of the little speaker I heard, “Me-home?”

I almost fell out of my chair. She hadn’t actually said it out of her mouth, but it did appear to be exactly what she was thinking.

“She said home!” I exclaimed. “Did you hear that? *Home*.”

“If you say so, dear,” said my mom, looking a little embarrassed.

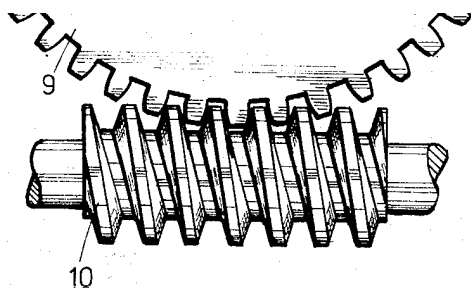
Grayson ducked down and curled into a ball.

“I see,” said Mr. Nuts and Bolts. “Well, I suppose that’s that.”

“What’s next?” my mother asked eagerly.

“A MiniDirigy”—he motioned toward Grandeur, and, sure enough, a double-decker bus-sized dirigible was nearly upon us—“will deliver you to your new apartment. Ask me anything you like along the way. After you’re properly checked in, I will most likely never see you again.”

CHAPTER FIVE



A Ride in a MiniDirigy

THE cigar-shaped part on top of the MiniDirigy looked way too small to lift the passenger area underneath, but that didn't stop it from slowly pulling up to us with little more than a pulsing hum.

I shouldered the tool bag and grabbed Mom's and Dad's hands.

"Please follow me," said the robot.

We walked down a little ramp to where the MiniDirigy had parked. Its lower doors opened as we approached. But instead of stepping inside, Mom let out a scream of terror and yanked me back so fast I thought she was going to snap my arm off.

Inside the MiniDirigy—THERE WAS NO FLOOR! Just about a mile's worth of empty space. Then, to our utter amazement, Mr. Nuts and Bolts walked right on in—ONLY HE DIDN'T PLUMMET TO HIS DEATH, or whatever it is robots do after they go to that big junkyard in the sky.

"Glass-bottomed," he explained. "Perfectly safe."

Dad grabbed a railing, and my mom cautioned him to be care-

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ful. He tapped the floor with the tip of his shoe. Solid. He stepped in, turned around, and laughed.

“Cool!” I yelled, ripping loose from my mother’s grip. I jumped as high as I could and slammed my feet on the floor. “I bet I can smash it!”

Mom wobbled. Dad leapt to her side.

“Don’t look down, honey,” I heard him say. “Just—whatever you do—don’t look down.”

I climbed onto a seat to gain a higher altitude. “Nut Yippee!” I screamed, landing right in front of Mom, coming down as hard as I could with the edge of my heel. But nothing happened. “Dang! What’s this stuff made of anyway?”

Nuts and Bolts leaned down and put his face in mine. “It’s a clear metal. You would need a jackhammer just to dent it.”

“Let me guess,” said Dad knowingly. “Transparent aluminum?”

Nuts and Bolts let out a little groan. “You’re thinking of a *Star Trek* episode, you Idiot.”

Mom rolled her eyes. “Really, Jack, this isn’t one of your crazy science fiction TV shows.”

“But it wasn’t an episode,” he said, sounding a little hurt. “It was one of the movies. The one with the whales. You said you liked it.” But Mom and Mr. Nuts and Bolts didn’t hear him. They were already halfway up the stairs to the MiniDirigy’s second deck.

“Can I stay down here?” I asked Dad, while eyeing the immediate area for sharp, heavy, pointy objects. “The view is . . . so awesome.” And it was. The MiniDirigy was already descending to Grandeur. My dad gave the other passengers a quick once-over, like he was considering what I might do to them.

A RIDE IN A MINIDIRIGY

“As long as you don’t get off without us, it’s fine with me.”

The second Dad’s feet disappeared up the top stair, I ran to a glass box containing a big red ax. But its door handle was missing. Can you believe it? Stenciled on the glass were the words:

SMASH GLASS IN CASE OF EMERGENCY

I threw up my arms. My kingdom for an emergency!

Occasional bouts of poor impulse control are pretty normal in eleven-year-olds. It wouldn’t surprise me if—statistically speaking—rates ran higher for ones recently classified as Idiots. Just guessing.

I pushed my shoulder against the glass and pressed as hard as I could without looking like I was doing anything, but it was no good. I prowled the aisle, spying under the seats for a decent-sized rock or better yet a pickax. But my search proved fruitless. Hey, it’s not like I wanted to smash the whole floor out. A little hole that I could toss stuff out of would do.

Temporarily foiled, I took a seat and gazed out the window. The skies above Grandeur sparkled like fairy dust—not that I believe in fairies, mind you. As we got closer, I could see the cause: sunlight glinting off of thousands of flying objects. The bulk of them were small, but some were huge. As we passed through a layer of them, I had to look away or duck down below the window a bunch of times, convinced one of the things was going to smash into us. The biggest object in the sky by far, though, was the floating platform covered with propellers that Dad and I had seen from the balcony. I could see now that it wasn’t one platform, but hundreds tied together. There was another strange thing I saw, or thought I saw. It was flying over

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a part of Grandeur covered in billowy white steam. It looked—I know this is going to sound crazy—like a steam-powered wooden ship, with rigging and sails and everything.

The other passengers talked and chatted among themselves, showing not the least bit of concern for what was going on out the window.

We leveled off about a hundred feet above a tree-lined boulevard. After a dozen blocks or so, the sound of the engines deepened, and we changed course, heading for a bunch of landing platforms mounted this way and that on top of a tall tower. It was an open structure, with stairs and an elevator down to the street.

I ran back to the seat closest to the glass box as we pulled up. If an emergency broke out, *I* was going to be the one wielding the ax.

The doors swished open. A woman wearing a beautiful pale-green chiffon party dress with a tiered handkerchief hem took the seat across from me. She looked like a dancer—a flapper—straight out of one of those old black-and-white movies, only she was in color and perhaps a bit plain in the face. When she caught me staring, she gave me a knowing look and unfolded a newspaper between us.

Several others entered, including an old man and a dog. If there's one thing I'm not, it's a dog person. They smell, they slobber, and they're dumb as rocks. (I mean the dogs. As near as I can tell, dog *people* don't really slobber any more than anybody else.) But he—the dog—was cute and happy. I gave him a little scritch behind his ears . . . and told him he was *such a good boy*. But then his doggy odor hit me, and all at once I just wanted to wash my

A RIDE IN A MINIDIRIGY

hands and be done with him.

A few minutes later, we were skimming over the treetops again. I caught glimpses of people on the sidewalks below—but all in all, I was getting a little snoozy, and my stomach was rumbling, and this dog next to me smelled all doggy. Bleah!

At the next stop, I was delighted to see the old guy get up to leave. But he walked right past his dog! And the dog didn't budge!

"Hey, mister!" I yelled. "You forgot your dog!" But he didn't even turn around to look at me.

And then a deep woofy voice next to me said, "He is not my master."

I turned toward the voice and . . . there was the dog.

"You *talk* talk?" I said to the dog.

"My master gave me vocal implants," he said—TALKING THROUGH HIS DOGGY MOUTH! "Do you smell cat?" he asked.

I said nothing, opting instead to stare like an Idiot. Vocal implants? I made a mental note to look them up in my WatchitMap-Callit to see how much they cost. Suddenly, I had something to start saving for.

After an awkward pause, he continued, "Because *I* smell cat."

I looked away and caught the eye of the flapper peeking around the edge of her newspaper.

"I am a dog," the dog announced, as if it were a revelatory statement. Sniffing the air, he added, "Did you know there is a cat in your tote bag?" After another long pause, "I am on a chore for my master. He has sent me to the store where they are expecting me. I have a tote bag just like you. Mine is blue. Why do you have a cat in your tote bag?"

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I tried not to encourage him, but you know how dogs are. Thankfully, he got off at the very next stop. No sooner had he stepped out the door than a flutey voice started shouting from somewhere below.

“Hold the doors! Hold the doors!”

I searched for a button or something but couldn’t find one. The shouting grew louder, and now I could hear heavy feet clanging on the metal stairs leading to the platform.

“Hold the doors! Hold the doors!”

I looked in all the likely places, but I still didn’t see anything to press. A boy waving a cane appeared at the top of the stairs and raced toward the MiniDirigy. I say he was a boy, but he wasn’t a boy at all. He wasn’t even a man. He was metal. But unlike Mr. Nuts and Bolts, he was a symphony of turning gears and pulsating springs.

He wasn’t scary or anything, but his reckless charge made me duck for cover.

“Please! Hold the doors! Hold the—”

The doors started closing. At the last second, he leapt ten feet in one bound, landing half in and half out. Bending himself up like a pretzel, he pushed the doors open enough to roll into the car, unfolding and standing upright as he came. He ran up and down the aisle, scanning the passengers’ faces with his oversized glass eyes and talking strangely to himself.

“Wobblepot!” shouted a man pointing at the Clockwerk Boy.

“Poor thing just needs a good winding,” said a woman pulling her child out of the aisle. “Don’t get too close!”

“Oily cogs,” cursed a third. “Got no business bein’ in Greater Grandeur.”

A RIDE IN A MINIDIRIGY

The Clockwerk raised his hands to his mouth, making a cone. Little bellows pumped erratically in his chest.

“Is there a Willamina Snap on board?” he asked.

My mouth fell open. I dropped the tool bag containing the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short. The flapper thrust down her newspaper and craned her neck to get a better look.

“Um,” I said, raising a hand.

The Clockwerk Boy spun around and approached me with irregular steps. I quickly snatched up the tool bag and put my arms through its loops like a backpack.

“It’s true, just as they foresaw.” As he stepped closer, I got a better look at the mechanism of valves and tubes in his neck producing the sound of his voice. It was a marvel of engineering.

“How did you know my name?” I asked.

“The dragons . . . you’re all they talk about.”

I took a small step backward. “Dragons? Me?”

“*Dracones finis*. It’s your fate to decide.”

He sounded like he was repeating something. “I don’t understand.”

“If they are to survive, you must sacrifice yourself to right the wrong.”

“Did they send you here?”

“No. But there is no time to explain.” He opened a drawer in his belly, pulled out two books, and put the smaller one back. “This is a memory book. Quick, take it! Find me after I’m re-wound. Hold the first page before my eyes. Only then will I understand what’s going on again.”

His framework began to shudder, like an unbalanced wash-

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ing machine during its spin cycle. I reached for the book, but he pulled it back.

“Wait! Did you test out as an Idiot?”

“Why is everyone calling me an—”

“Good! Time travel is business best left to Idiots.” A commotion began on the floor above; people were running for the stairs. “Hide it!” he piped, pressing the book into my hands. “I wish there was another way, but as you can see, I’ve run myself down trying to reach you.”

“Can’t I wind you back up? Do you have a key or something?”

“No—time.”

“But how do I find you?”

A seizure rattled his frame and he lurched a step closer. “Your timeline is in danger, Willamina Snap! Take my c-c-cane. You’re going to neeeeeeeed it.”

He wound to a stop and his hand sprang open with a *CLICK!* The cane tumbled out, shrinking to the size of a baton as I caught it.

My mother’s legs appeared at the top of the stairs, followed by my dad’s shoes and the sound of Mr. Nuts and Bolts’ clanking footsteps. As Mom elbowed her way through the crowd, I tucked the book beneath my shirt and pocketed the cane.

“What’s going on here?” she shouted, her eyes dancing between me and the now-silent Clockwerk Boy.

“A Clockwerk has run down,” said a man in a dapper gray suit sitting where the flapper had been a second before. “Nothing to worry about.”

I gaped at him. Where had the flapper gone? I didn’t see her get up.

“Are you all right?” asked Mom, pawing my shoulders and

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spinning me around.

“I’m fine,” I protested. “He rushed in at the last stop and just . . . wound down.”

“Gangway! Gangway!” said a woman in a blue conductor’s uniform, wheeling a handcart. “Happens all too often, but usually not this far out of the burg. And especially not with a model as old as this one,” she added, after getting a better look.

I glanced back to the man in the gray suit. The flapper’s newspaper lay folded in his lap.

“Can’t you wind him up again?” I asked the conductor.

She removed her blue cap and scratched her head. Tapping a plate on the Clockwerk Boy’s back, she said. “Now that’s highly irregular. Says here his memory reset *just* as he wound down.” She pushed the handcart under the Clockwerk Boy’s feet, strapped him to it, and wheeled him into a corner. “Show’s over, folks! Back to your seats.”

Mom gave me a questioning glance. She was worried about me. *Highly irregular indeed.*

“I’m fine,” I assured her.

Dad, on the other hand, sensed I was in the middle of something.

“All’s well, Audrey,” he said. “Willa’s fine.” Mom’s worry visibly lessened.

Best Dad ever.

My parents and Mr. Nuts and Bolts went back upstairs.

Not long after, the MiniDirigy entered the shadow of a storm cloud, and the entire compartment darkened. I looked back at the Clockwerk Boy, then at the man in the gray suit. He was holding up the newspaper again, but now it was glowing

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dimly like a paper lantern.

I edged closer. The hands holding the edges of the paper were a woman's.

"Excuse me," I said, wondering who might be behind the newspaper this time. "Are you aware that you're glowing?"

The flapper woman slowly lowered the newspaper, her face alight with that strange glee you see in the faces of far-flung relatives you're meeting for the very first time. It's a look that says *I know so much more about you than you do me*.

"Why, Willamina Snap, how did that Clockwerk Boy know your name?"

"You're back. But where did you go? There was a man—and now—"

"Oh, *him*. Righto, allow me to introduce myself, old bean. My name is Tuppence. I'm a mettle man," she said, whispering the last.

"You don't look metal," I whispered back.

"No. Not metal, mettle, as in M-E-T-T-L-E. The 'man' part's not quite right, as I'm neither woman nor man, but I like the alliteration. Rather sporty, don't you think?"

I quickly tapped my WatchitMapCallit and looked up *mettle* in Grandeurpedia.

met'tle \mět'tl\ *noun*

A person's ability to cope well with demanding situations in a spirited and resilient way. Figuratively, the "stuff of which a person is made."

"It does have a nice ring to it," I conceded. "But *what* are you?"

"Step closer," she suggested. "Watch carefully as I power

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down my holo-projectors to fifty percent.”

Tuppence’s skin and clothes became transparent. Her real skin was in fact metal, covered with tiny glowing pinpoints of light. Suddenly, her ghostly image changed to the man I’d seen earlier.

“Remember me?” he said using his man voice, then he became Tuppence again, all bright and real looking, only a little *too* bright.



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A flash of lightning lit up the compartment. Rain pelted the windows. The cabin's lights flickered, then grew brighter. Suddenly, Tuppence was as normal looking as anyone else.

"You still haven't answered my question. How did that Clockwerk Boy know your name?"

"He said I'm all the dragons talk about. Maybe if we wound him back up, he could give us some answers."

"You'd need a winding station to do that. Not that it would matter. This one's memory probably resets every two weeks."

"Two weeks!"

"Sentient Clockwerks don't remember things the way we do. You can only make gears so small, after all. And that goes double for old Clockwerks. Wind this one up again and all it will *know* are the few trade skills hard-gearred into its BrainBox."

"You mean like how to bake a cake?"

"More like how to repair a set of da Vinci wings, but that's the idea. Can you imagine waking up with virtually no memories, not knowing what you did yesterday?"

"I'd be disoriented," I said, "and a little sad, maybe."

"Sad?"

"Because I wouldn't remember who my friends were."

"Or your enemies. Then again, you wouldn't remember anything to be sad about."

"So, no baggage. Well, in that case, I guess I'd be curious, ready for anything."

I pulled the memory book out from under my shirt. "He said to show him this."

Tuppence looked longingly at the book in my hands. "Tell me, does it have a title . . . written on the spine?"

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I turned it sideways and read, “*An Adventure of My Own.*”

“So he has a memory book . . . of his own,” said Tuppence.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that this Clockwerk Boy has become quite clever. Open it. What do you see?”

I opened the book to a random page. “It’s just a bunch of numbers and symbols.”

“That’s his language. What you’re looking at are important memories he doesn’t want to forget.” Tuppence narrowed her eyes to slits. “How much you want for it?”

“I think I’d better keep it.”

“I can offer quite a lot,” she added, so softly I could barely understand her words.

“No, thank you. He wanted an Idiot to have it. And I’m pretty sure you’re not one of those.”

“Well, you’ve got me there.” Tuppence’s face softened. She seemed impressed. “It would appear he chose well. Now, on to more important things. I have a job offer for you. A real job, mind you. Very important stuff. Fate of the world hanging in the balance and all that rot. You interested?”

“I think you’ve got the wrong person.”

“Do you really? I couldn’t agree less. No. In fact, I think you’re *just* the right person.”

“But we’ve never met.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” she said, like she was humoring me.

“He said my timeline was in danger.”

“Yes. He did,” she agreed. “But when you get right down to it, isn’t *everyone’s* timeline in danger?” I didn’t know how to answer that. “You know what I think? Forget about the dragons. Forget

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the memory book. It's Grandeur's timeline that must be saved. I can't tell you how, or where from, but something evil is coming. A time of great peril is near at hand. The soothies are restless."

I tapped my WatchitMapCallit and pulled up Grandeurpedia.

sooth'ie \sōōth'ī\ *noun*

"A friendly sifter of information," I read aloud.

Tuppence blinked. "Does it really say friendly?" I held up the screen. She made a *tsk tsk* sound. "You would be wise to give the soothies a wide berth, Willa. They're forbidden to sift a developing brain like yours, but I wouldn't put it past them, if you knew something they *really* wanted to know."

I looked around nervously. "What does a soothie look like?"

"Don't worry, they rarely leave the burgs. It's highly unlikely you'll ever encounter one. As for your mission: I need you to snoop around. Keep your eyes and ears open at all times. Write things down."

Tuppence reached into the folds of her dress and withdrew a small leather pouch. I suspect what she really did was reach through her holographic clothes and open a little drawer or compartment in her chest, like the one in the Clockwerk Boy's belly.

"Here, take this."

"Wait, what about *my* timeline?"

Tuppence looked curiously at me. "Grandeur, Willa, Grandeur. There's a greater danger here. I'll point you in the general direction whenever I can spare the time. The rest will be up to you."

Inside the pouch were a clean pad of paper, several empty pockets, and two sharpened pencils. Old tech. There's nothing like

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the smell of paper and freshly sharpened pencil. I pulled out a pencil and wrote: *Tuppence, mettle man: pushy.*

Tuppence looked at me curiously.

“I haven’t said yes,” I pointed out.

“You’ll be looking for something out of the ordinary.”

I glanced through the transparent metal at my feet, at the Clockwerk Boy, at Tuppence herself. “Yeah, that’ll really stand out here.”

Next to Tuppence’s name, I added: *prone to wild bouts of optimism.*

“You won’t get a better offer.”

I let out a deep sigh. It was like talking to my mother, which gave me a desperate idea. “Hey! Wouldn’t you rather ask my mother to do it?”

“Would that she could?”

More riddles. “How about my dad?”

“Children can go places unobserved that adults can’t.” Tuppence rose. “This is my platform.” She took a few steps toward the opening doors, then paused, tilting her head down and to the side but not enough for me to see her face or eyes. “Willa? Are you with me?” Even though she didn’t say it, I could hear the rest of the question: *or are you against me?*

Against! my gut screamed. *Your timeline is in danger*, the Clockwerk Boy had said. *My timeline!*

“I’m eleven!” I shouted.

“You’d be surprised what an eleven-year-old can get away with.”

I wrote the word *trust*, put a big question mark next to it, and circled them.

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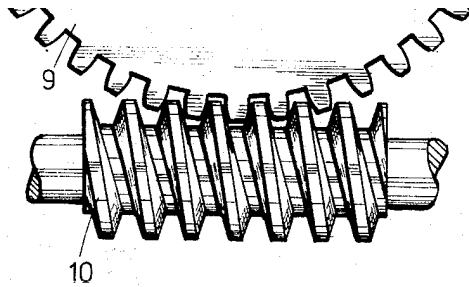
“How do you know the dragons have nothing to do with this coming evil?” I asked. “And what did he mean when he said time travel was best left to Idiots?” But when I looked up again, Tuppence was nowhere to be seen.

I tapped my WatchitMapCallit and typed in something the Clockwerk Boy had said: *Dracones finis*.

Dra·co'nes fi'nis

Dragons' end.

I turned to a new page and wrote that down, too.



The Snaps' Apartment

A FEW stops later, we exited the MiniDirigy. We rode a glass elevator down to the street and left the station through a wide arch proclaiming *Welcome to Greater Grandeur*. Was there a lesser Grandeur, I wondered?

The stroll to our apartment was short and pleasant. The buildings in this part of town were made of brick, and none of them were more than four or five stories high. Mr. Nuts and Bolts talked the entire way, pointing out conveniences, such as grocery stores, parks, the street leading to my Idiot school. I tried to listen but kept getting distracted by all the stuff flying around in the sky. When I heard the word “burg,” my ears perked up. The conductor and Tuppence had both used the word. Mr. Nuts and Bolts was pointing.

“The Biowerks Burg is only two blocks . . .”

I tapped my WatchitMapCallit, and entered *burgs*.

Grandeur’s 237 burgs contain not only vibrant reminders of our past, but also seeds of our future. The largest burg, the Steamwerks, com-

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prises more than forty city blocks. Other burgs of note are the Clockwerk, the Biowerks, the Windwerks, the Waterwerks, the Robowerks, and the Dieselwerks.

“Excuse me, but what burg will we live in?” I asked.

“You’ll live in Greater Grandeur,” the robot said with exaggerated patience. “It is, by definition, *not* a burg. Ah, here we are, Whitehaven Mansions.”

The building, easily twice as tall as the others we’d passed, stood out.

“It’s beautiful!” exclaimed my mother.

Dad looked up at the towering curved façade. His eyes flickered, and his face was twitchy. In retrospect, that should’ve been a clue that whatever they’d given him during the abduction was wearing off. Inside, the lobby was filling up with people in formal dress. Waiters served finger foods from small silver platters, and in the middle of the room, under a grand chandelier, stood a glistening ice sculpture of a little short man wearing a hat and a funny mustache.

“What’s all this?” asked my mother.

“One of Grandeur’s many bizarre or illogical religious cults, I suspect,” sneered the robot. “Leisure time . . . it would take a human to think up such a concept.”

At the lobby desk, Mr. Nuts and Bolts announced our names to a thin-nosed woman wearing spectacles. She ran her finger down the register and frowned.

“Is there a problem?” creaked Mr. Nuts and Bolts.

“Not *exactly*, but Source has put them in . . . *her* room.”

Mr. Nuts and Bolts motioned for the keys. “Hand them

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over, please.”

The woman hesitated. “I—I think I better call the supervisor—”

“Source has no supervisor, my dear Idiot. Now hand over the keys. I don’t have all day.”

“I meant *my* supervis—” In one swift motion, Mr. Nuts and Bolts reached over the counter, his mechanical arm telescoping out, and plucked the keys out of the clerk’s hands. “Hey!”

Partway to the elevators, I doubled back to the desk. The clerk was talking into a wooden box mounted to the wall. A short cable ran from the box to an earpiece. Slowly, it dawned on me. She was talking into a really, really old phone, like you’d see in a museum. Catching sight of me, she hung up abruptly.

“Can I help you?”

I pointed to the people in the lobby. “Hi. Can you tell me who those people are?”

“You don’t know?” She seemed aghast.

My parents were almost to the elevator. I probably only had another ten or fifteen seconds before they noticed I was missing.

“Whose room did Source put us in?” I asked.

But she wouldn’t say. I dashed to the elevators just as one arrived.

Mr. Nuts and Bolts pressed the button for the fifth floor. Dad jumped about a foot in the air and let out a little yelp for no apparent reason. This isn’t normal Dad behavior, but I didn’t have time to tend to him just then.

“Mr. Ibid—” I’d already forgotten the numbers that followed, but I thought I’d make a stab at being polite.

“2975,” finished the robot.

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“Right. Say, who lived in our apartment before we did?”

“That’s unimportant. Source assigns apartments as Grandeur sees fit.”

“I thought you said Source doesn’t have a supervisor.”

Ibid-2975 stared coldly at me but said nothing.

Our new place was only a few doors down from the elevator.

“Ah,” said the robot, “here we are. 56B.”

He gave us a lightning-quick tour. Everything felt so last century—everything except for the giant black screen embedded in the wall of our living room. Apparently, it was part computer, part movie theater, part phone. Dad was prancing around our new coffee table, bleating unintelligibly, by the time the robot left. And true to his word, we never saw him again. But I did meet many, many more like him.

“Mom!” I said, pointing to Dad. “Do something before he explodes.”

Mom quickly surveyed the room before walking over to a glass case mounted on the wall. An open book hung inside.

“Honey,” she asked, “you still like Agatha Christie, right?”

Dad’s arms flopped down to his sides, and he stopped making the weird noises. “No, dear, I still *love* Agatha Christie.”

Mom nodded. “Thought so. Have you read”—she placed her eye an inch from the frame—“*The Murder of . . . Roger Android?*”

Dad cocked his head and scrunched up his eyes. “No. Are you sure it’s one of hers?”

Mom lifted the case off the wall, carried it into the kitchen, and placed it in the sink. After opening and closing several drawers, she raised a small wooden mallet into the air.

Smash!

THE SNAPS' APARTMENT

She pulled the book free with a little shake, brushing it gingerly with the edge of her palm.

“Clean that up, would you, dear?” she said to me. Then, reading from the title page, she said, “*The Murder of Roger Android*, by Agatha Christie, Author of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles.*’ And here at the bottom it says, ‘Somewhere in the Southwest of America, Grandeur Press, 1926.’”

“That’s her, all right,” said Dad. “But I didn’t realize she wrote any science fiction titles.”

Mom walked into the living room and handed him the book. Dad fell into a chair next to a big curved window. He’d be good for hours.

“Do you think they’d run up a nice pot of hot tea?” asked Dad.

I stopped picking shards of glass out of the sink and opened a few cabinets. “It looks like everything’s been newly stocked,” I said. “There are lots of teas here. Should I put a kettle on to boil?”

“That would be capital, my dear,” said my dad, affecting a slight British accent. “Perhaps you should let your cat out of the bag, as it were. I imagine the poor thing is getting a tad weary, being cooped up in there all this time.”

“Oh, no! I forgot!” I’d left the tool bag by the front door. “The Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short, I’m *so* sorry!”

She squeezed out before I had it half-open, dashing across the living room in zips and stalls, eyeing every piece of furniture as if it might contain a large sleeping dog.

I finished filling the kettle with cool water, placed it on a burner, and had just gotten the sink free of glass when a knock sounded at our door.

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“I’ll get it!”

Nothing could have prepared me for my next encounter.

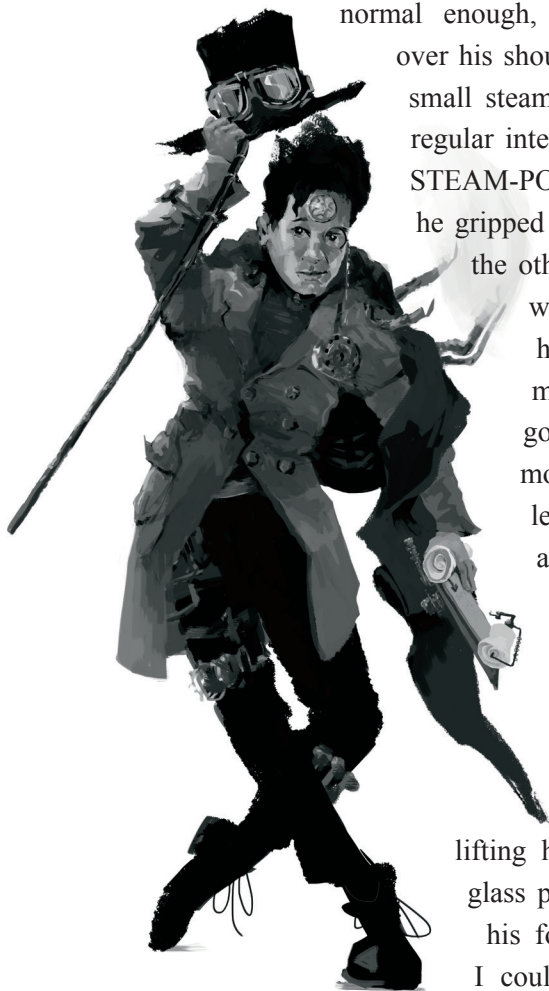
Standing in the hallway was a man enveloped in steam. I say man, but honestly, that was up for debate. His leather coat seemed

normal enough, but the cloak draped over his shoulders was studded with small steam pipes puffing away at regular intervals. WAS THIS GUY STEAM-POWERED? In one hand he gripped a brass-topped cane, in

the other, a clipboard covered with gears. Perched on his head was a top hat mounted with aviator goggles. A monocle—a monocle!—adorned his left eye. He must have had a good twenty pounds of brass gadgets strapped to him. And I couldn’t have told you what a single one of them did.

“Good day, young miss.” He bowed, lifting his hat and revealing a glass porthole in the center of his forehead, through which I could see his brains—HIS

BRAINS!—illuminated by a ghastly green light and bathed in



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tiny rising bubbles. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Professor Vander Graaff Farsical the twenty-fourth, but you’re welcome to call me the Wondrous Professor Farsical.”

Wondrous? I gaped at him.

A ruby red stud embedded in his gauntlet flashed amber and a concerned look crossed his face.

“Aren’t you a little young to be a professor?” I wasn’t trying to be rude or anything, but his acne hadn’t even cleared up yet.

He shifted nervously. “Is your mother home?” I continued to stare. “You see, I’m inquiring for signatures.” He held out the clipboard. Gears slowly spun at its corners.

“For what?” I asked.

“It’s a petition to have Grandeur completely made over as a Steamwerks society—like the glory days of 1325, when Grandeur Abbey was located but a short pony ride from jolly olde London.” He handed me the clipboard and put on a hopeful smile. I won’t burden you with the image of what was going on with his teeth.

As I skimmed the document, he bounced his cane on the floor. The brass knob on top bloomed open, creating a concave dish that he swung around furtively. Each time it went past me, an alarm sounded.

I glanced up, and he stuffed the bulky cane under his cloak like nothing was happening. I decided to play along. If he didn’t want me to see the cane, I didn’t see the cane.

“If your petition was granted, would I have to dress like you?” I asked, choking down a giggle.

He opened one side of his coat and flipped a few switches sewn into the lining. “That would be only one of the great many privileges awarded under—”

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Bam! went the door as I shut it in his face. *Snick!* went the deadbolt.

I guess something inside me just snapped. I mean, who puts a glass porthole in his forehead, adds bubbles, and lights the whole thing up? I couldn't decide if it was the creepiest thing I'd ever seen, or the coolest. Creepiest, coolest. Coolest, creepiest. Trying to decide was shorting out my brain. Closing the door had been my only good option.

My one problem? I was still holding his clipboard.

Gah!

I silently slid back the deadbolt, then opened the door super-fast. He thrust his cane back into the folds of his cloak. He'd been scanning again. We both knew I'd caught him in the act.

It was an awkward moment. I needed an opener.

"The bubbles are a nice touch," I said finally.

His face brightened. I got the impression he wasn't setting any records for the most conversations in one day, if you know what I mean.

"Okay, so . . . what are you up to *really*?" I nodded to the cane he'd hastily tucked inside his coat.

He was still considering what to say when something in there beeped three times. Finally, his shoulders sagged.

"Oh, all right. I'm tracking a reverse time-eddy."

"A what?"

He pulled out the cane again and bounced it on the floor. The top folded back into a big brass knob.

"It's like this: when an object travels through time, it leaves ripples in the timeline before and after its 'present' location."

"Are you telling me you're . . . a Time Lord?"

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The “professor” snatched back his clipboard. “Don’t be a fool! The Black Fez would never allow a Time Lord into Grandeur. Too disruptive. Time-*eddies*, however, can form anywhere. Trust me, I know a thing or two about time travel. In fact, I’ve built a time machine of my own.”

“That seems . . . really unlikely.” I didn’t mean to say it out loud. The words just kind of popped out when I wasn’t paying attention.

The red stud on Professor Farsical’s gauntlet started flashing amber again. He leaned forward and spoke in a low voice. “Mark my words: the dragons are up to something. They’re planning on sending something or”—he looked me up and down oddly—“*someone* through time.”

I looked *myself* up and down. “Hey, what are you trying to say?”

“Don’t worry, they only take volunteers.”

“Well, you won’t find any volunteers here!” Which wasn’t at all true, now that I think about it. I mean, given half a chance, I’d leap into a time machine faster than a squirrel could twitch its tail.

Professor Farsical gave me a dubious look. “A reverse time-eddy does not mean, one hundred percent, that you’re destined to travel through time. You *do* have free will. Personally, I don’t blame you. Traveling through time is a dangerous business. Especially if you’ve been sent to alter something that *wants* to happen.”

“You can do that?”

“I suppose it all depends on how you look at it, but yes, I believe so. Time is more malleable than you might think. I’ll give you an example, shall I? In a few seconds I’m going to say a sentence. This is what we call the future, although, now that I’m actu-

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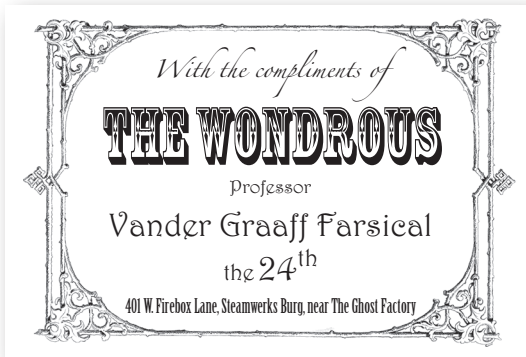
ally saying the sentence it has become the present. And now I've said it—it's in the past. See?"

"But you didn't change anything."

"Didn't I? How do you know?"

It hurt my brain to think about it.

Professor Farsical took a card from an inside pocket and handed it to me.



"If the dragons want to send you through time, you can bet it'll be for their benefit. They may try and make it look like it's in your best interests, but they will not hesitate to send you to your death if they feel it necessary. Think about that." He turned and walked down the corridor, disappearing in a haze of white steam.

I closed the door and stared at the card. As I drifted back into the living room, the kettle began to whistle. Without looking up from his book, Dad motioned toward the kitchen.

"Could you . . . get . . . please . . ."

I made him his favorite: Earl Grey, hot. As I set the cup and saucer by his chair, I noticed the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short poking her

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head out of a back room. She made a fist and, using a single claw, beckoned to me.

So that was new.

The room she'd picked was obviously one appointed for a young girl . . . just about my age. Well, someone definitely knew I was coming. And it disturbed me to think they might know my underwear size.

The Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short stood on her hind feet and pushed the door shut. Huh. I'd never seen her do that before. She leapt up onto a dresser, clapped a paw on either side of her head, and spoke through the little speaker on the BrainRent device clipped to her ear.

“What are we going to do? Nobody escapes from Grandeur! Nobody! Do you understand? We're stuck here FOREVER!”

“The Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short,” I said, “you talk?”

“And that's another thing. Don't you think the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short is a bit much? I mean, for the love of Bastet, can't we go with Grayson, or Lady Grayson, or the Magnificent Lady Grayson?”

I—I didn't know what to say. I felt a little hurt, and yet, sure, saying the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short *did*—at times—seem a little bit much.

I mulled it over. “All right. Lady Grayson it is. But I still reserve the right to call you the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short whenever I'm really mad at you!”

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“Deal!” She stuck out a paw. I gave it a little shake. Then she lost it again. “Dogs dancing with cats!” she wailed, throwing her paws wide. “I *knew* this was going to happen! I knew the day I first walked into your house that your mother was nothing but trouble. She had Idiot Genius written all over her! I was a fool to think I could stop her! A fool! A f-f-fool!” She broke down into heaving sobs.

I had a mini-flashback: this morning, Lady Grayson, back when she was still called the Magnificent Lady Grayson of the Silky White Underbelly, or Just Grayson for Short—okay, okay, it’s a little hard to let it go all at once; I’m working up to it—shredding Mom’s notes. Then a secondary series of flashbacks hit me, going back years. All the wrecked experiments in Mom’s laboratory upstairs. The countless laptops pushed off tables. (Dad suggested they were committing suicide, to put an end to all the grueling calculations Mom kept putting them through.) Cell phones in toilets. The answering machines that mysteriously erased ALL their messages.

“You didn’t walk into our house. You swung in, like one of the Flying Wallendas. And if you knew this was going to happen, then why did you stay?”

Grayson (see, I did better that time) butted my cheek with her head.

“I—I couldn’t leave you all alone, kid,” she said sheepishly. “Especially with you being right next to squirrel headquarters . . . and your mother working on the pac-a-purse. CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF IT FELL INTO THEIR DEMONIC LITTLE PAWS?”

“*Squirrel* headquarters? Mom’s pac-a-purse?”

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Grayson grabbed me by the collar. “BUT NOW WE’VE GOT BIGGER PROBLEMS! WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE! Don’t you see? What’s going to happen to the old neighborhood? Who’s going to protect the Petrelli kittens from that big stupid Doberman on Clover Court? Who’s gonna keep Scuffles and Fluffy, the two meanest toms who ever lived, from tearing each other’s eyes out? I’ve gotta make my nightly rounds! Oh!”—she stood on her back paws and threw a furry forearm over her eyes—“never to leap from tree to rooftop in the black of night again! THE NEIGHBORHOOD WILL FALL INTO UTTER CHAOS WITHOUT ME!”

“Hold on. If nobody ever escapes from Grandeur, how do you know about it? You’re just a cat.”

Grayson threw off her hysteria like casting off a cloak on opera night. “Just a cat! *Just a cat!* I am the *stealer* of breaths, the *walker* of shadows, the *keeper* of nine lives.”

“Don’t forget spitter of hairballs, chaser of tails, and eater of moths,” I added dryly. Grayson’s fragile resolve crumbled. Climbing into my arms like a lost kitten, she buried her nose in my neck and burst into tears. I petted her back comfortingly. “Look, if you can’t explain, that’s fine. Everybody needs a few secrets.” *Especially if they involve demonic squirrels and cheating death.* “But since it sounds like we’re going to be here for a while, I need you to promise me one thing.”

“What,” she said, her voice all muffled.

“If, in the meantime, *you* figure a way out of here, we all go.”

“Okay,” she said, still sniffing.

I opened a few drawers until I found one filled with sweaters. “Do you think you can hang out here for a little while?” Grayson

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burrowed her way into the drawer until all I could see were her green eyes staring back. I pulled out the memory book and Clockwerk cane and tucked them in with her. “Guard these as best you can. They’re important.”

“Willa?” said my mother.

I spun around. Mom was standing in the doorway. She must have been inspecting the closets in her room or something, because now she was wearing a nifty little cape and pillbox hat that I’d never seen before.

“I was . . . talking to Lady Grayson.”

Her eyes brightened. “Lady Grayson! Is that what she likes to be called now?”

“Yes. Well, either that or the Magnificent Lady Grayson. We haven’t fully—”

“My word, Willa. You make it sound like you have conversations with her.”

I bit my lip.

Mom strode into the room and opened the closet door, which was now *my* closet door.

“Listen,” she continued, while rummaging through the racks. “I’m heading out. Your father seems to have calmed down for the moment. How about I walk you to Idiot school?”

“I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

Mom emerged from my closet with an armful of clothes and a very pleased look. She laid out a short red cotton dress, a light cardigan, stockings, a pair of canvas shoes, and a beige cloche hat.

“Will they feed us at this . . . *school*?”

Mom frowned the way she does when she doesn’t want to tell

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me something. “Dear, it’s not going to be like the schools back in Cambridge. Just come home when it’s over and tell your father to take you out to lunch.”

The clothes were straight out of an American Girl catalog.

“I’m going to look like Nancy Drew’s English cousin, fresh off the boat from London,” I complained.

“I know! Isn’t it fun?”

It wasn’t really to my taste, but after viewing myself in the mirror, I decided to enjoy it. And why not? Moping about it certainly wasn’t going to improve my day.

End of Sample. [Visit Amazon for the rest of the book!](#)