



by Eric Etkin

I pledge allegiance to the flag
of the United Provinces of America

and to the Federation

For which it stands

One Resolution

Under God

With duty and freedom for all

There is an evil tendency underlying all our magic - the tendency to do what is reasonable even when it isn't any good. - Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Nethercycle Maintenance*

"Do you remember anything yet?"

The girl raised her eyes and shifted a stare to the window grate. A mocking puff of warm breeze touched her face, teasing her with offerings of the outside world. Rolling clamors of street traffic echoed from the other side of the police station wall.

Click, clack, click. The officer came closer, his heels ringing against the pitted marble floor. His sword hilt rattled against his hip. "Miss, we want to help you, but we can't do that until you help us first. You need to talk. Who are your parents?"

"I... don't know."

"You don't know? So you're an orphan?"

"I don't know, that's what I said. Being an orphan implies I need help. I don't."

"Miss, are you in trouble? Are you not telling me something?"

"No. I'm..." The station walls seemed to grow larger, as if she were shrinking. The brightness

from the overhead gaslights hurt her eyes, made her dizzy. Everything was so new, so strange and dangerous. She felt out of place, out of step. Nothing seemed right. Was it the world that was different, or was it her?

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"So you know that at least. Well, what's your name, then? Do you remember that yet?"

"I... I'm..." Something churned and wiggled in the back of her mind, trying to surface. "I don't know my name." She kicked her heels, scuffing the floor with brown smudges.

"Hmm. Put your right index finger here for me, will you?" The officer held out a clipboard with a single piece of paper attached. A pattern of thin silver lines crissed and crossed about the page.

Something wasn't right. For a second, maybe two, she thought she saw those lines shift and move. She blinked her eyes and felt her heart pound harder.

"It's fine, Miss. Nothing to worry about. Just press your finger somewhere on the page."

It was late. Maybe her eyes were playing tricks on her. All she knew is that she wanted to leave. She had a purpose. Something to do. What was it? She tapped her finger against the page. A swift tingle ran up her arm as the paper shimmered with orange light. A brief, irritating prick drew a drop of blood from her fingertip.

"Ow"

"That's it. Don't press too hard."

"What's this for? Where'd that orange light come from? Is that magic?"

"Hold on, Miss."

The shimmering stopped when the officer withdrew the paper from her grasp. His gloved hands held the document gingerly, like someone might hold an egg. *Click, clack, click*. He returned to his desk and retrieved a quill from the drawers.

"What are you doing?"

"It's ok, Miss, I'm only checking our records. You've done nothing wrong, don't worry."

"Then can I go?"

"No." He set the quill on its stand. "Not yet, anyway." He cleared off a broad section of his desk, exposing a large, frayed ledger of yellowed paper. The officer dipped the quill into an inkwell and wrote a few lines. "Please be quiet. I need to concentrate, or this will take longer for both of us."

The officer removed the glove from his left hand. She noticed his fingertips reflected the station's gaslight with a metallic hue. Placing his left hand on the silver paper, he drew a deep breath, closed his eyes, and muttered something that didn't sound at all like English.

His right hand jerked and twitched. Suddenly, he wrote at a frantic pace, his eyes closed the entire time. From where she was sitting, it appeared as if the quill itself was writing, and the officer's hand was merely along for the ride.

Despite being forced into the squad wagon - despite being stuck in a dirty police station - despite being assaulted with inane question after question about things she couldn't remember - she found herself wanting nothing more than to see *exactly* what the officer was doing. Quietly slipping off her shoes, she placed them on the bench and tip-toed closer to the desk. The officer's eyes remained shut.

Small puffs of air gasped from the officer's lungs. Beads of sweat had begun condensing on

his forehead. His quill-hand stopped and started, sketching volleys of ink in short, quick bursts.
She peered at the ledger:
Notice of requisition. Stop.
Database: County of Essex, province of Massachusetts. Stop.
Type of request: Missing Persons and/or Identification. Stop.
Female; fifteen; 5' 4"; 118 pounds. Stop.
Special request: search expansion unlimited. Stop.
Begin search.
No records found in local database.
Expanding search into Resolution Security Registry. We are rechecking the blood and fingerprint
sample provided.
No match found.
Expanding search into related colonies and European Commonwealth. We are rechecking the
blood and fingerprint sample provided.
···

Thank you for your patience. No match found. Person does not officially exist.

She gasped. *Not officially exist?!* Her stomach churned. A name tickled her memory. Not far off now – it was so close. What was it?

"What are you doing?" The officer slammed the ledger shut and stood. "I'm sorry Miss, you can't see this. Please sit back down."

"It's about me, isn't it? Why can't I see it if it's about me?"

"Police business. You can't look at this without an attorney present."

"Attorney?! What does it mean, I don't exist?"

"Miss, please. I can't continue this conversation."

"What does it mean? Who am I?!"

Her legs felt weak. She grabbed for the desk, hoping to break her fall. She missed. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the floor with a thud. She was vaguely aware of the officer rushing to her side, asking if she was all right. She was not. Swirls of letters and numbers danced through her head, monopolizing her vision and drawing her closer and closer to blackness.

Magic paper – magic quill – What spell was cast, and why would it matter? Why should she care? *Tick. Tick. Tick.* What makes things tick? What makes *her* tick?

...What makes you tick, Aria?

Her eyes opened. The blackness vanished, and everything snapped into place. Two words settled into her memory, tidings of her past.

"Aria Smith... My name is Aria Smith."

Chapter 1

Any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology. - Arthur C. Clarke,

Profiles of the Future

"What time is it Aria?"

"7:16, Mom."

"You're going to be late!"

Unlikely. The hike to school was thirty-one minutes, nineteen seconds, tops. The Seconds were negotiable, depending on whether Aria saw fit to brush her teeth. This particular morning looked to be a *brush-free* morning, which meant she still had *plenty* of time to devote to more important things...

Mrs. Fielding – err, *Mom* – rattled Aria's bedroom door. The simple locking bolt held tight, as always. "Seriously, Aria. It's the *same thing* every morning! What're you doing in there?"

"Nothing..." Aria set her last cog in place, capping off the pinion and closing the mechanism's crystal housing. She turned the crank and felt a jolt as the gears of her invention sprung to life.

This was a welcome jolt, the *creative* jolt. The kind of jolt she felt whenever she proved out a long-labored theory or found just the right metal scraps to conquer a perplexing design. She *lived* for this jolt. Ate and breathed for it. An unstoppable grin stretched her cheeks as the crystal glowed with a bright orange light.

"I mean it, Aria. Lateness starts the whole slippery slope. It's downhill from there. Bad enough you keep flunking your magicks."

"Uh huh."

"Uh huh?! Aria, you can't live in your room. Why can't you be more like Casey? You need to socialize. Get some study buddies."

"Study... buddies?"

"Casey's got a good head on his shoulders..."

"Good for Casey." She meant well, but Mrs. Fielding didn't know when to back off. *Another* Casey comparison? Apples and oranges; Casey was a natural at making friends. Probably a byproduct of being punted from one foster home to another since he was six. The only home Aria could remember was here. Gathering a social cloud wasn't high on her list.

Finished. Aria snapped the machine shut. The securing click informed her that everything inside the crystal's housing was safe. 7:18. She gathered her homemade tools and stuffed them into her dresser's hidden compartment. One last check of her workspace: Any stray evidence? No, everything looked clean.

7:19. Her face was a mess. Aria leaned towards the mirror and set about bundling her hair into a neat ponytail. Scowling at her reflection, she wiped away the visible streaks of grease from her otherwise spotless skin.

Plenty of time to spare. Aria threw on a fresh white shirt and shimmied into her favorite slacks. She grabbed her backpack, wrapped the crystal machine in a (mostly) clean towel, and snagged her notebook. 7:20. Jamming everything into her bulging backpack, Aria swung it over her shoulder and unbolted her bedroom lock.

Mrs. Fielding was still waiting, her weight creaking the floorboards in the old mansion's hallway. "Aria, you're almost seventeen, you should know better." She locked her eyes and hushed her voice. "Look, I know I said you can tinker with those Technologist devices behind your door, but you need to at least *act* normal. *Do* normal things. Get *out* more." Mrs. Fielding's jaw tightened. She sucked in her bottom lip and glanced behind her shoulder, down the long stairwell. Her voice grew even quieter. "People might get suspicious. If you get caught building some unsanctioned machine you could get in a *lot* of trouble. *I* might get in trouble. We could all lose this house. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"No, course not!" Mrs. Fielding behind bars? What did *she* have to do with this if Aria got caught? Mrs. Fielding was being way too cautious. It's not like government spies lurked in the bushes... did they? When was the last time Aria saw anyone hauled away for building gadgets? In her nearly two years in Peabody, she'd never seen or heard of such a thing. Sure, technology busts happened in bigger places like Boston, but *here*? East Nowhere? Not a chance. Especially if she was smart about it. "C'mon, Mom. Fielding House is the best thing to happen to me since they found me at the station! I'm not going to do anything stupid."

"You say that, but you're young."

"I'm not that young, and I'm not that stupid. But I *am* going to be late if you don't let me go..."

"See? You're cutting it super close."

Aria slung her backpack over her shoulder. "You worry too much."

"You don't worry enough..."

Aria jumped down the stairs, three or four at a time, and flung open the front doors. "Bye!" "What about your teeth?!"

Aria snuck into first period, thankful the practical arts room was big enough for her to go mostly unnoticed. She eased herself into her desk and took the wrapped crystal out of her backpack. Even facing the front, Aria could feel a familiar set of over-mascaraed eyes on her.

"You're late."

"So what, Sam? What do you care?"

Samantha Reid: The self-important "heiress" of the Reid Clan, aka *Big Diamond Reid's Netherwagon Emporium*. Samantha drove a candy-apple red Netherwagon to school each morning, despite the fact that she lived only a block and a half away. Samantha had a habit of coordinating her outfits with her wagon, and her makeup with her outfits. In Aria's enlightened opinion, it was a beauty trainwreck. Still, Samantha commanded a good amount of inexplicable attention from half the boys in school. Aria sometimes wondered if Samantha's foundation was enchanted.

"You better not hold the whole class up again," Samantha said. "I was up all night cramming

for this."

"I'll tell you where you can cram it, Sam."

Aria heard a sharp cough. She whirled back around and folded her hands on her desk. Mrs.

Baxter had managed to sneak up on her. "Aria Smith, *are* you joining us for class today?"

"That's rhetorical, right?" Aria pointed at her desk and resisted the urge to smirk. "I'm already here."

"Your brain needs to be here. Stop running your mouth."

"But she -"

"Enough."

"Ok, Mrs. Baxter. Sorry."

"All right then, everyone. I hope you all brought in your illumination projects!"

A chorus of less-than-enthusiastic *yeses* migrated through the classroom. Aria unwrapped her crystal. She made sure no one was watching, then discretely churned the winding crank. Inside, soft clicks of gears ticked into obedient, precise motion. All she needed was a subtle flick of the switch to make her crystal glow. Aria tried slowing her quick, nervous breaths. It was going to work, just like she planned. Easy A. No more stressing out about spells she could never cast. This was the way she'd make it through the school year. This was how she was going to graduate.

Each student paraded their project to the front of the room, casting spells that would ignite their object with magical light. Aria watched intently, memorizing the nuances of each spell word, each focusing gesture. Magic she could never do, no matter how much she tried. The lump in her throat tightened just enough to let her know it was still there. She'd gotten a lot better in the last year at suppressing her jealousy, but the self-loathing would never fully disappear.

The bottom of her feet itched. She shifted around in her seat, unable to get comfortable. Each spell cast seemed to go faster than the last. Why was she nervous? *Suck it up, Aria. How are you ever going to be a Broadway Technologist if you can't deal with an audience?*

It was her turn. She marched to the lab table, keeping the machine's base and switches hidden in the palm of her hand. From the top of the mechanism, only the crystal itself was visible.

She looked out into the classroom. Everyone's eyes were on her. Expectant. Waiting. She felt a creeping sensation in her stomach, like something was crawling around in there. She had a sudden feeling like she wanted to throw up, a slight gagging in her throat. She tried gauging if she could make it to the lab sink in time. Probably not.

"Go ahead, Aria, we're waiting."

Aria heard a chuckle from the back of the classroom. She saw Samantha smirking at her.

Aria's face turned hot. She stared at Samantha hard and cold, stared at her until she looked away and slumped in her seat. The churning in Aria's stomach disappeared.

That's right, heckler. Keep your comments to yourself. I have a show to put on.

Aria inhaled sharply. She passed her right hand over the top of the crystal, reciting the lighting spell she'd committed to memory. Every fake inflection, every fake syllable was spot-on. She was the perfect. So perfect, a *real* spell should have been cast – but of course it wasn't. Still, Aria was proud of her performance.

Her left hand thumbed the switch into its first position. The crystal brightened. Aria flicked the switch into its second position. The crystal began changing colors - red, orange, yellow, green, blue. Aria couldn't resist the showmanship. Mrs. Baxter's eyebrow twitched up in surprise.

Aria waved her hand over the crystal. The happy glow appeared to choke off instantly.

Mrs. Baxter cleared her throat. "That's an interesting casting, Aria. How did you manage different colored lighting with a basic spell?"

"It's a salt crystal." Aria recited her prepared response, tried to sound as unrehearsed as possible. "I'm not sure where it was mined from, but there's some trace elements in it. I found they act as a catalyst for color changes when you inflect the activation syllables differently."

Mrs. Baxter's animated eyebrows scrunched in confusion. "I don't recall you doing anything different. It was a textbook casting."

"I did, Mrs. Baxter. You must've missed it. I mumble sometimes."

"I see... well, very good, Aria. Next! Samantha, you're up."

She didn't get caught. Again. Maybe she wasn't going to flunk this year, after all. Aria felt the satisfaction spread to her lips and allowed herself a smile. This wasn't so bad. Maybe she was even good enough for the advanced class. Magic? *Pfft*. Who needed it? Not her.

Aria headed back towards her desk, passing Samantha. She began to stick her tongue out, but Samantha beat her to it. Aria felt something suddenly block her ankle. She tripped, crashing to the floor.

"Whoops. Sorry, Aria..."

Aria pushed herself up. She clenched her fists, thinking about some creative ways to give Samantha an accident of her own. Then she realized her machine was no longer in her hand. It was gone. All that remained were hundreds of broken pieces.

Chapter 2

The technological is the logical not yet understood. - Elbert Hubbard

Aria kicked against her chair in Principal Porto's office. The leather upholstery made obnoxious squeaking sounds every time she moved. She found it hard to keep eye contact. All she could do was stare at the smashed crystal and broken gears in the shoebox on his desk.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Of course, I built it."

"Don't get smart, Ms. Smith. You could be in a lot of trouble right now." Mr. Porto tossed a familiar notebook next to the box of broken parts. The perfect, blocky handwriting of hers was unmistakable. "I searched your locker, Ms. Smith. I found *this*."

Her notebook. She kept it locked or hidden, always. Over a year's worth of painstaking designs, hundreds of hours of blood, sweat, and ink. There were no copies, no additional sketches. All of her plans, formulas, and engineering secrets were trapped between its crinkled,

ragged covers, now exposed. Naked. "You searched my *locker*? You can't do that!"

"Untrue. Under Resolution Act twenty-six, amendment nine, I'm allowed to search any suspect container on school grounds, provided I have reason to believe there's contraband technology inside."

"But that's a notebook."

Mr. Porto opened it, flipping through the pages in front of her. She felt her heart pound harder, faster. She tried not to look concerned, to seem as if this was just a minor inconvenience. But there was no way to hide now. There was no way to keep her secrets safe.

He picked a random page and splayed the notebook wide open. His finger rested on a detailed sketch of a cylindrical device with tiny mechanical arms. "*KeyWizard?* Pardon my French, Ms. Smith, but what the hells is *that?*" Mr. Porto rustled through still more pages, reciting title after title of her careful, painstaking designs. "Brightrod? Winding Mechanism? Battery? Magnigoggles? Alternating... Current... *Kerooit*?

"Circuit. It's pronounced *circuit*." Aria risked a glance upwards. Mr. Porto's face was beat red. His brow sweat. His second chin quivered. *Think Aria. What kind of story would he buy?* "They're just drawings, Mr. Porto. Fiction stuff. You know, like comic books."

"I showed your 'drawings' to the science department. Off the record. They told me these things of yours could hypothetically work. The few they could figure out, anyway."

"Who said?"

"I can't say. Confidentiality."

"You can search my locker, but the science department gets confidentiality? Why?"

"You're getting smart again." Mr. Porto leaned over, peering into the shoebox. He shook the contents, rattling around the bits and pieces inside. "I sent a message to your mother."

"Mrs. Fielding?" Aria groaned. This was the last thing she wanted to deal with right now. Would she nag? Ground her? Most likely she'd cut the cord on their quiet agreement, tell Aria she could no longer work on her devices.

"Did you know that what you built is a felony?"

Aria felt her stomach start to crawl again, like it did in class. Her skin became cold and clammy.

"Complex moving parts. Springs. Some sort of... what's that word? *Electric?* Electric current... We're not even sure how you *did* that without magic. I *should* report this to the police. I didn't. Not this time, anyway. Your mother sent back a convincing message. She said you've had a lot of stress at home. *Do* you have a lot of stress?"

Aria nodded. True or not, the lump in her throat made it hard to say anything. Mrs. Fielding – she was already getting involved in this and she'd done nothing wrong.

"These... gadgets, they're dangerous. Vegas or Broadway shows might be able to get away with them for entertainment, but the government restricts complex technologies for a *reason*." Mr. Porto pounded his desk for emphasis. "It's for your own good. You can get hurt. Killed. Maybe worse."

"Worse..?" Mr. Porto was a nut. But he was the nut in charge. Aria realized she needed to play along, be complacent... or at least *appear* complacent. It was the only way she'd survive his office without making the problem bigger.

Mr. Porto sucked in his gut, stood, and slid out a stuffed drawer from one of his many file

cabinets. He removed some beat up pamphlets and dropped them into her lap.

"I realize you missed these presentations in elementary school. Aria, I'm not a bad guy. I know you've had some... problems... before you were placed at Fielding House. That's why I'm cutting you a break. But this *needs* to stop. Understand?"

A felony. For doing the one thing she was good at. Building stuff. She clutched the pamphlets tight and wondered how long it would be before she could get her notebook back. "Yes, Mr. Porto... I got it."

Aria stared at the bear on her desk. Caked with dust, unloved, untouched, the hand-sewn bear was waiting for her when she'd first arrived at Fielding House almost two years ago. She was fifteen at the time. Probably too old for bears, but Mrs. Fielding forced them on all the kids that showed up at the home. Hey, at least she tried.

It was the first time Aria remembered anyone giving her anything.

She said the words again, casting her spell on the bear's nose. Nothing. She poured over her *Beginning Practical Magicks* textbook, studying page after page of lighting formulas. It should have been simple: Basic, average, everyday light. It wasn't. Aria's head started to pound. She couldn't make that bear's nose glow any more than she could turn herself into an aardvark.

Surprised? Not really. It'd been the same story for as long as she could remember - two years, anyway. Had things ever been different? Was her lack of ability somehow tied into her lack of memory?

Her mind drifted and spaced out. There was something crammed back there, a spark of an image. Sheen, corrosion, tarnish. Massive buildings bursting from the steel horizon like metal skeletons. It wasn't Peabody, wasn't Fielding House. It was somewhere else. Someplace where brick had long vanished, where wood was a myth. A vision? A glimpse of the way the world *should* be? A world without spells? Aria tried prying deeper into her thoughts, but the image escaped her.

No one got along in life without being able to cast something. Even mass-produced corporate spells required some smidgeon of talent to use them. What was she going to do when she graduated? A Broadway Technologist - what kind of dream was that? She'd be lucky if she could scrape a living out of being a street performer.

A wave of panic washed over her, leaving the familiar pools of frustration that formed afterwards. Why can't I cast anything? The more she researched, the more she learned about the process, the more spells seemed fundamentally impossible – yet everyone else could do it. But how could anyone just will something to happen? How could you make things appear or disappear with words? The logic had unraveled for her months ago; magic shouldn't be able to happen, plain and simple. Was this all a joke? Was she dreaming? Who would create a ridiculous world like this?

Aria punched the bear in the face. It launched across the room, bumped into her nightstand, and knocked over the lamp. The resulting crash was likely heard on all four floors. Aria remained at her desk, watching the broken lamp as oil trickled from the cracks.

The knock was expected. Given the ten other kids fostered at Fielding House, odds were good somebody was always right outside her door.

"Hey Aria, are you ok? Aria?"

She waited eight seconds, trying to shut out the reality of the world. This magical reality that made no logical sense. The knocks persisted. Aria unbolted her door. Casey poked his head into her bedroom, squinting in the dim light.

Casey – big, dumb, Casey. Except the "dumb" was an act. She could tell. It was in his eyes, in the subtle things he'd say during small talk. He'd arrived at Peabody only four months ago, and already managed to squeeze himself onto the varsity football team. He was the same age and grade as Aria, but the similarities stopped there. For starters, everyone loved Casey.

And he was the closest thing to a friend she had found in this place. Despite befriending everyone in sight like an unstoppable happy-faced juggernaut, despite claiming acquaintances throughout the entirety of Peabody Veterans Memorial High School, Aria still felt an exclusive ownership to their friendship. She was the first resident he met upon arriving at Fielding House, the first one to show him around town. He was still the only person she ever really associated with, inside or outside of school. Despite the obnoxious comparisons Mrs. Fielding made between them, resentment never dug itself in. Casey was an apple, Aria was an orange, and that was ok.

"You alright? It's really dark in here. How can you see anything?"

"I knocked over the lamp."

"That explains it." Casey retreated into the hallway. "Hold on." She heard him recite one of the same formulas she'd been studying for the last two hours. Suddenly, a bright blue light appeared on the other side of the door. "Can I come in?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"You gonna clean that up?"

"Eventually."

"What's all *this* junk?" Casey found the pamphlets Mr. Porto had given her, dumped onto her bed with her backpack. "Hey, I remember these! We had these classes in fourth grade, when I was...uh... in Philadelphia... I think. *Machines and Mistakes. The Resolution and You*. Wow, this stuff is ancient."

"Well spare me, huh? Mrs. Fielding slammed me when I got home."

"Yeah, I heard about it all at lunch."

Aria shut the door. "What did you hear?"

"Everyone was saying you brought in some kinda weapon or something. Samantha said it shot out lightening then blew up."

"Samantha can suck current."

"Current..?"

"Nevermind, Casey."

"No one really knows what happened after you were escorted to Porto's office. And you missed the bus home, so -"

"I walked."

"Oh." Casey dropped the pamphlets and sat on the edge of her bed. "Sorry, I didn't know. I would given you a lift in my N-wagon."

"I wasn't feeling social."

"So what was it? What's the real bunk?"

"It just lit up. That's it. It was a lamp, basically. It wouldn't have hurt anybody. Porto said

what I made was a felony."

"Only if you get caught..."

Aria watched Casey's face, watching for clues that he might have been joking. After four months, she was still trying to get used to his sense of humor. She knew there was more to his past than he was letting on, but then that seemed typical of most of the kids staying at Fielding House. Nuggets of private history were all part of the foster package.

She was itching, dying to show someone. She'd kept everything to herself for the last two years, working in secret. Could Casey be her confidant? He was well-traveled. He didn't seem freaked out about machines at all. Almost the opposite. For months she wanted to pop, holding onto her gadgets, her plans, the brewing pieces of her dream. She'd told no one, not even Mrs. Fielding. Could Casey get it? Would he understand what she'd been going thorough, living in this ridiculous, impossible world? Did it matter? Here was a friend – her only friend – an outlet for all her frustrations, a potential sounding board for her ideas. Could their friendship go deeper? She had to try. "You need to promise me something."

"It's been almost four months since I got here. I ain't earned your trust, yet?"

"Four months, six days. I *need* to trust you. What happens next never leaves this room. Ever, ever."

"Got it. Promise." Casey perched himself further on the edge of Aria's bed, eyes twinkling with excitement.

"Ok, turn around." When he wasn't looking, Aria opened her dresser. She pulled out the bottom drawer and removed the false panel, reaching through the back and into a hole in the wall. After a few seconds of fumbling, her fingertips found the right machine. She came back to

the edge of the bed and held the device in front of him. "Ok, you can look."

"Whoa!" Casey's hands shook. It was slight, almost imperceptible, but Aria noticed. His eyes widened. He sucked his upper lip and jumped off the bed. "Wow, where'd you get that?"

"I made it." Aria couldn't conceal her pride. This was the sort of reaction she was hoping for. It very well could have gone the other way, with Casey fetching the cops instead. When machines were involved, nobody was predictable. Aria let herself relax a little and set the palm-sized mechanism onto her desk so Casey could inspect the tiny gears, springs, and dials.

"Ballocks! You made it? How?"

"Wasn't easy, trust me. It's crude. I had to make due with parts I cut or filed down from scrap metal. The casing and stuff I scrounged from a skyclock."

"Did I say 'wow' already? 'Cause this is wow. What's it... do?"

"Keeps track of time. Like a sundial or skyclock, but it relies totally on gears and springs instead of magic. It's very accurate."

"So it's like a Technologist machine? That's juicy stuff!"

"Shh. Not so loud."

"Sorry." Casey got up and checked outside Aria's room before shutting the door again. He grinned wide, and Aria knew a visit from the cops wasn't in the cards. Casey shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "My last foster dad took me to a show in New York once. It was a riot. This guy had this thing he does where he composites these images together with lenses and light. Like a painting, except done by machine. It looked perfect."

"Well, that's not what this does, but check it out -" Aria wound the mechanism. The gears and wheels jumped into motion, ticking away. "Ok, so here's the trick. See these two arms? They

keep track of time the same way as a skyclock. Hours and minutes. This dial here gives the seconds as time moves forward."

"Murder!"

"Now here's what we're going to do: I'm going to waste some time and read this pamphlet here. At some point, you say *stop* and note the time you did it on this piece of paper. Without looking at my clock, I'll then tell you the exact time you said it, right down to the second. Ready? Go."

Aria read through the faded pamphlet, its grim interior warning of the evils of complex machines:

Before the Resolution Acts, unregistered devices were accountable for 9 out of 10 accidental deaths in America. That's more than all the netherwagon accidents, dirigible failures, and alchemical mismixings combined!

Here's the straight-talk, chums: <u>Mechanized progress can't be controlled</u>, and this puts <u>everyone</u> at risk! Top government scientists predict that if machines were to go unregulated, the rate of unchecked change would dwarf all previous threats to America, including civil war, fascism, and communism!

With America's help, other countries have enacted similar laws, but the heart of the Resolution and the strength of its core is the awareness of you — That's right, the American Citizen! Beware the dangers of unfamiliar machines. Keep America strong and safe. Report anything suspicious to your local police or Resolution Bureau. All contact is kept purely confidential and awarded a -

"Stop." Casey dipped a quill in the desk's inkwell and wrote the time down.

Aria finished skimming the pamphlets and did her best to suppress a chuckle. She scrunched her eyes, pretending to think hard. "Seven thirty-four and eighteen seconds."

"Kippy!"

"You dipped the quill six seconds after that."

"Double kip! How'd you do that?"

"I can't give away all the secrets of my act. C'mon, you know that." Truth was, she didn't really know *how* she did it, just that she *could*. It was like the one piece of magic she had, a secret spell permanently fixed on her, always active, always flawless.

"What else you got?"

Aria returned to her hiding space and fished out her other gadgets. Casey propelled her through every mechanical trick she had, grinning like a wild man and clapping as quiet as he could apparently manage.

She showed him a scale model of a netherwagon she built. Its wheels spun entirely by electric current. She let Casey turn the generator crank and explained the tiny chemical tank the model used to store its energy. Casey was mesmerized.

By 9:30, she realized she still had Casey's attention. She didn't just have a foster brother, a friend, but a loyal fan. Another thought began to occur to her. She pictured her notebook, still locked away in Mr. Porto's desk, packed full of things she hadn't built yet. Things Casey would die to see her make. She decided to take a chance.

"Hey Casey... uh... what do you know about breaking into places?"

Chapter 3

A so-called Technologist, more than a poet, must be born with a peculiar aptitude for the calling.

- Alexander Herrmann, *Cosmopolitan*, *December 1892*

"What time is it Aria?"

"7:18, Mom."

"You're going to be late!"

True, Aria was just crawling out of bed. Also true? She'd spent a good portion of the night discussing her "problem" with Casey. It turned out Casey wasn't a complete stranger to underhanded schemes. He also had a bit of sympathy when it came to reclaiming confiscated stuff.

The plan was basic: wait until after school activities were completed, then sneak into Mr. Porto's office. Casey would watch for faculty while Aria fiddled with the locked desk. Simple? Yes. Elegant? That remained to be seen. Casey seemed certain she had nothing to worry about, that this would be a routine job. Aria was less sure. Despite Casey's assurances, she wasn't

positive he understood the full risk involved, the danger not only to her, but everyone else she was connected with.

"Aria!"

"Calm down, Mom! Casey's giving me a ride."

She threw on yesterday's shirt, avoiding the lamp oil still coating the floor. She opened her dresser's hidden panel and felt around for some of the tools she'd need. She located her smaller latch opener, the one she kept around for more complicated spell locks, and stuffed it into her backpack before unbolting her door.

"I hope you thought about our talk yesterday."

"Sure, Mom." Aria hoped the guilt creeping onto her face wasn't so obvious. She tried to keep her eyes off the floor, look Mrs. Fielding right in the face like nothing had changed. It wasn't like she *wanted* to disobey her, it was just that she didn't have a choice. What other option was there?

"I mean it. That thing that Mr. Porto told me about wasn't safe."

"Mom, he doesn't even know what I built."

"Shh. Not so loud. Aria, you need to be careful. There's too many kids here. Social services could break us all up. And do you know what would happen to you if Resolution Security found out what you're doing?"

Resolution Security. Those government boogymen in plain clothes or business suits that were out there, watching everyone. Would they give Aria a warning or just haul her away? "I'm not going to get in trouble. Mr. Porto said he'd keep it under his hat."

"*This* time. He said he wouldn't contact them *this* time. Aria, what you do affects everyone here. You need to get that. This is serious. You know, my father served with the Rez until he

retired. Maybe you could focus your energies *there*, use your interest in... machines... to help them. Catch people who *don't* mean well, like those illegal immigrants from Canada. It's a government job. It pays well and it's secure. You'll be graduating this year..."

"You already know what I got planned."

"A Technologist. I know. How many times have we discussed this, now? Really, Aria... you need to be realistic. Fancy tricks and fast living is no lifestyle for... for *any* one! You go seeking fame, and you'll wind up on the street. Or in jail. Or a ditch."

"But its the only way I can do what I want with out getting in trouble. It's the only thing I'm *good* at!" Mrs. Fielding knew this. Why was she trying to keep her from her dream? Why now, after almost two years of passive encouragement? This wasn't fair. Aria had a right to a decent future, just like everyone else!

She tried to imagine herself five or ten years down the road. She was smarter than Mrs. Fielding was giving her credit for. A ditch? Really? If Technologists lived so hard and died so fast, then how come the most famous Technologists had been around for decades? Clockworking Manic Murphy? Dr. Combustion? Electric Eleanor? Stage personas, all of them. The lifestyle was an illusion, a dash of Vegas or Broadway glitz. Technologists only *seemed* dangerous – that was the appeal of the show, the cultivation of the image!

"It's a lovely dream, Aria, but you can't consume your entire life with *things* and gadgets.

Broaden yourself. Look *past* the widgets."

Aria didn't break her gaze. She kept watching Mrs. Fielding watch her back. *Who am I?*Without her gadgets, without her dream, she was nothing. She had no past, at least none that she could remember. She *needed* her machines. Why couldn't anyone but Casey understand that?

The hours were excruciating. Every minute, every second, was an agonizing wait, an anticipation threatening to burst inside her. She needed her notebook back. Without it, she felt incomplete, like part of her soul was ripped away, locked out of reach. It wasn't just months of work on those pages, it was her *life*. But she stayed quiet. Kept her head down. She felt the stares as she walked the hallway, heard the rumors and changing facts.

Lies, almost all of it.

She caught Samantha smirking at her in practical arts, and again in physics. What was she saying behind Aria's back? She wanted to grab Samantha's pouty lips and rip them off her face. It took all she had to keep her fists at her side. *Get through the day, Aria. They'll all forget about it by this weekend. They'll find someone new to talk about.*

She noticed most of the kids keeping to the other side of the wall. Aria decided to enjoy the space. She watched them stare at her backpack, likely wondering what illegal devices she had stashed inside.

2:45 came. Aria saw Casey heading towards the parking lot, and he gave her a nod. He was still in. She stopped by her locker, exchanged her books, and pulled out some gum. She crammed all five sticks into her mouth and tried not to gag. *Blech*. Spearmint.

Aria walked past the main office and slipped inside. The secretary was just slinging her purse over her shoulder.

"It's 3:00. Office is closed, honey."

"It's 2:47. I'm looking for Mr. Porto. Is he in?"

Aria worked her jaw, mashing the gum into something pliable. As the secretary went looking for Mr. Porto, Aria packed the wad of gum into the door's latch plate. Hopefully the secretary and Mr. Porto were in a hurry to leave. Hopefully they wouldn't notice.

"Aria! What is it?"

"Mr. Porto... You're still here. I figured you would've left by now."

"Not yet, the day's still young. Staying out of trouble?"

"Definitely. Actually, I was wondering if you had any more of those Resolution pamphlets."

"What?" Mr. Porto paused, clearly asking himself if he had heard her right. "Certainly!" He practically skipped back into his office and returned with a stack of aging propaganda. He swiped a layer of dust off the top pamphlet and handed them over with a smile.

"Thanks." This was too easy. Aria almost felt bad. Almost.

"You... are going to read these, right?"

"Already did. I just figured some positive reinforcement couldn't hurt. Maybe I'll make a collage."

She met Casey outside in the parking lot. She got into his beat up netherwagon and shut the door. She kicked the fast food trash around on the floor until she found a place for her feet.

"So?"

"I gummed the lock like you told me."

"Good. Ok. Sit tight until I'm done with football practice. Check out Porto's office window once in awhile and make sure he leaves. I'll meet you by the gym around five. The main doors should still be unlocked."

"Got it."

"Kippy. This'll be a blast."

Blast? This was supposed to fun? Aria tried to smile. It was hard to do while keeping her lunch contained in her stomach.

"Hey, you'll get your plans back, Aria. It'll be a piece of cake. See you in a couple hours."

Casey had parked the netherwagon in the perfect spot. Not only could she watch Mr. Porto's window from the parking lot, but she could also see the football field. She rummaged through her backpack and found her magnigoggles.

She strapped them to her head and adjusted the crude glass lenses. The bricks on the school's wall came into focus, the cracks and lines sharpening. She panned across the wall until she hit Mr. Porto's office. He was still in there, newspaper in hand, feet on his desk.

Boring.

How far away could these things see? She'd never tested her invention outside her bedroom. Aria shifted her attention to the football field. The detail her magnigoggles provided was amazing. She could make out the numbers stitched on the players' jerseys and even the sweat dripping out from their helmets.

Aria looked back at the school. She squinted, trying to make out if anything had changed in Mr. Porto's office. She couldn't see him.

Something suddenly blocked her view. A candy-apple red sheen bounced off adjacent door panels, the polished finish of another netherwagon parking alongside her. Aria tore the magnigoggles from her eyes and stashed them in her backpack. She blinked and tried to regain her normal vision as everything refocused.

A door slammed. Aria saw a ripple of fabric, a candy-apple red dress. She heard a voice – Samantha's – and the brittle command word of a spell trigger.

Aria opened her door and stepped outside. She stumbled. Her legs felt as if they were underwater, her entire body sluggish like an ant caught in sap. She stood, realizing an unseen force was thickening around her. Samantha's spell was making it harder to move.

She shoved Aria against Casey's netherwagon. Aria looked around the mostly vacant parking lot, realizing there was no one there to see what happened next. She was trapped. Helpless.

Whatever Samantha had planned, she'd be able to get away with it, unless Aria screamed. And Aria wasn't about to give that smirking twit the satisfaction.

Samantha leaned close. Aria noticed the spell's force grew stronger as she pushed in. A charm with an arcane inscription dangled from the black choker around her neck.

"That's a swell pendent you got there, Sam. Must be nice for daddy to afford a charm like that. You get it out of a Crackerjack box?"

Samantha reached through the window behind Aria and pulled out her backpack. She found the magnigoggles lying on top and held them up like a dead rat. "Hmm." She dropped the magnigoggles to the cobblestone and dumped out the rest of the bag with it.

Aria squirmed. She tried pushing her hands against Casey's netherwagon, tried gaining enough leverage to break away from Samantha's spell. The charm held her fast.

"What's the matter, Aria? Can't countercast?"

"What's the matter, *Sam*? Can't remember the magic words without some store-bought help?"

"Funny little hypocrite, aren't you? When was the last time you cast anything, Aria? *What*?

Oh... never?"

"I'll cast my fist into your face if you don't let me go."

"Try."

Aria Squirmed. She could move - slowly - but she'd never be able to get enough momentum to swing.

"You know what I don't get, Aria? How you were able to build that crystal thing all by yourself. A little piece of foster trash, holed up in your compound. Someone's looking out for you. Is it Casey?"

"You're a piece of work, Sam."

"One of the other kids maybe? Is it your 'mom?"

"I'll scream."

"No you won't. You'll try to solve this by yourself. Hold your head up and sweep the hair out of your eyes. You think you have the high ground, but you don't. I'll bet you're just a dirty little immigrant. Why else would you be in a home? You make your grubby machines in your grubby foster house and think you can get away with it while everyone else gets along honestly."

"What's your problem, Sam?"

"You might be able to fool Porto and the rest of school, but *I* know what's going on. I'm contacting the Rez. Citizen's arrest."

"Go ahead." Aria felt Samantha's spell starting to fade. If she wanted to, she could have broken away, maybe given her a bruise or two to think about. But Samantha was dangerous now. Her mouth was a sharper weapon than any spell she could cast. Aria relaxed her fists, tried to calm her thumping, ticking heart. *There has to be a way out of this*.

"I can see right though you, Aria. I know you're scared. I'd hate to get Casey or your foster

mommy involved."

"I don't care."

"Don't lie. Yes you do. I know you do. You're going to net me some new shoes. Maybe even a commendation from the mayor. Sure would look good on my college aps."

"What do you mean?"

"You know. I'll get a fat patriot bonus for this. You can turn yourself in with my help, or I can make your life *really* miserable. I'll snitch on your whole house and get *all* you delinquents brought up on charges."

"You wouldn't..."

"Do we do this the hard way? Maybe your foster mommy will see *jail* time. Casey, too. Isn't he eighteen now?"

Samantha backed off. She smiled sweetly and straightened her candy-apple red dress. "I'm not bad, Aria, I'm just doing my duty. You got enough evidence on the ground there to do the trick, but I bet you got some *better* junk at home... I want you to dig up something big and flashy.

Something that'll get me *noticed*. Think about my offer. I turn in you and your fancy machines or *every*body – It's your choice. You got 'til Monday to figure it out.

Samantha climbed back into her netherwagon and traced the dashboard sigils. She bucked forward and rolled out of the parking lot. Aria watched her leave, wishing she could will the fancy netherwagon to burst into flames. She stooped down and gathered her things with shaking hands.

She was furious. Terrified. Like a coyote caught in a trap, forced to chew off its own leg to escape. Would Samantha do it? Would she really turn her in? Nobody at Fielding House deserved

to take the heat for what Aria did, least of all Mrs. Fielding. The woman had sheltered her for almost two years, let Aria build her gadgets in relative peace. What would happen if Mrs. Fielding was turned in? The law was the law, and Mrs. Fielding wasn't a minor.

And what about Casey? He wouldn't be sent to juvie, either. He'd be prosecuted like an adult, and that meant jail time, a permanent blot on his record at the very least. Casey was graduating this year, like her, and a felony charge would kill any dreams of success.

Aria had a dream, too. It was simple, maybe not attainable, but what made her goals any more important than anyone else's? She sat back in Casey's netherwagon, clutched her backpack against her chest, and tried making peace with her conscience.

What if she'd accepted what she was? Spell-less. Powerless. What if she'd stopped trying to bend the rules, let this ridiculous world walk over her, smash its heels into her face? She could have been complacent, like Mr. Porto wanted, like Mrs. Fielding hoped. There'd still be a life for her, somewhere. Maybe not glorious, maybe not exciting, but what had this cost her already?

She should have been more careful. She should have kept everything to herself. Peabody was too small – of course word would get out eventually! Now, it was too late. What right did she have to gamble with anyone else's future? How much damage had she done?