

HARLEY HITCH

AND THE IRON FOREST



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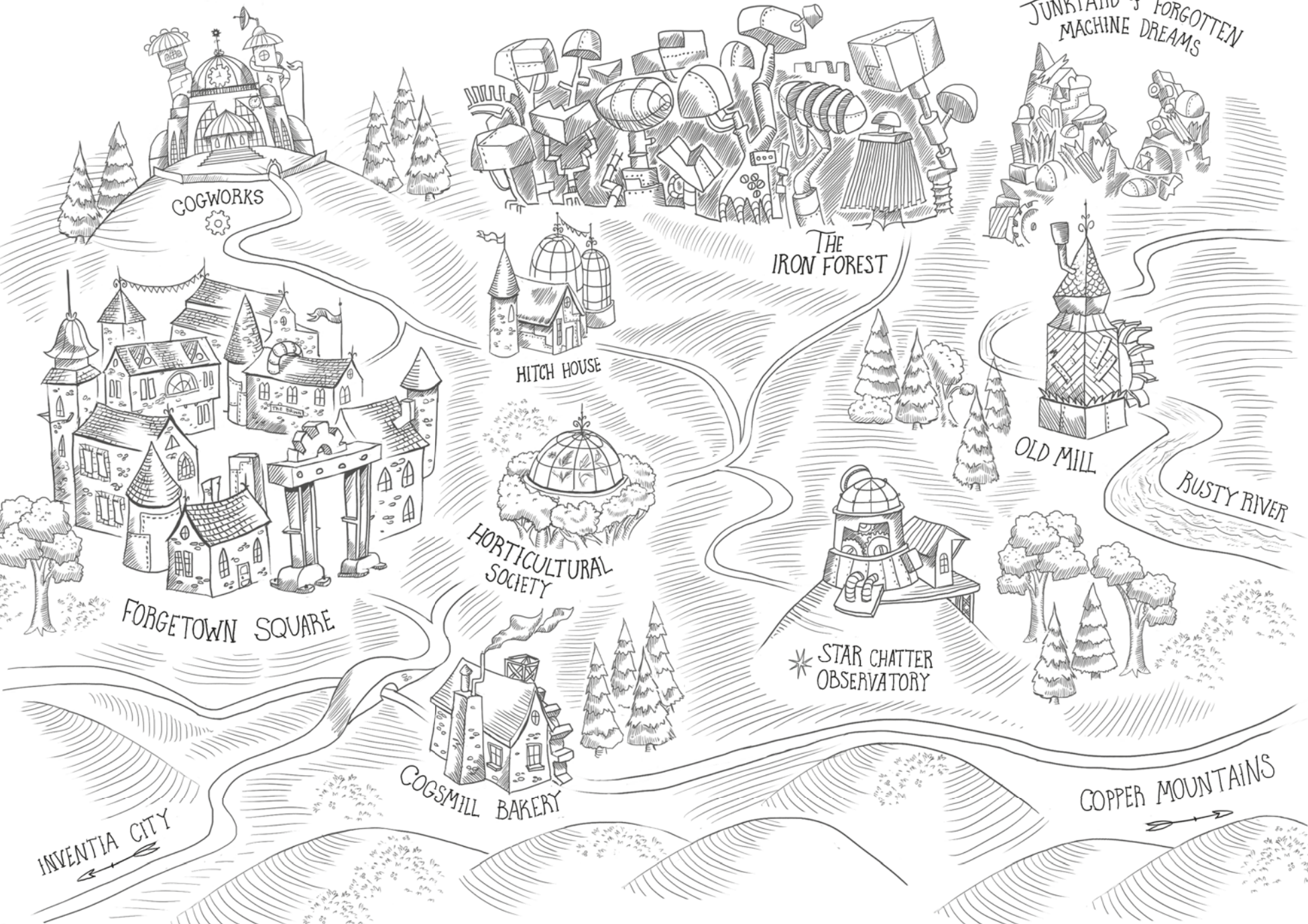
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For Elana

VALLEY of FORGETOWN



COGWORKS

THE IRON FOREST

JUNKYARD of FORGOTTEN MACHINE DREAMS

HITCH HOUSE

HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

OLD MILL

RUSTY RIVER

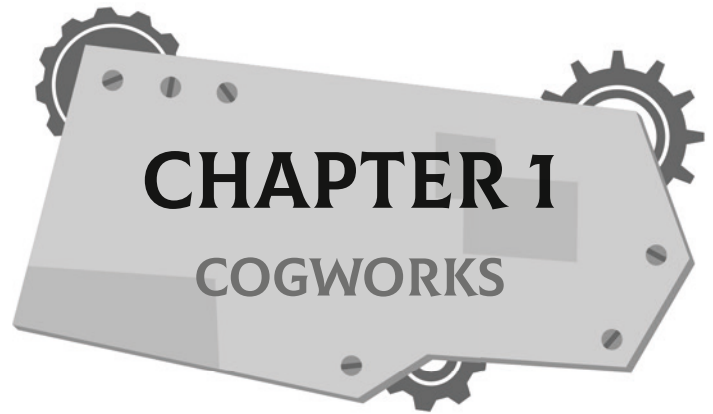
FORGETOWN SQUARE

★ STAR CHATTER OBSERVATORY

COGMILL BAKERY

COPPER MOUNTAINS

INVENTIA CITY



CHAPTER 1

COGWORKS

Harley ran up the lane towards Cogworks, puffing like the Inventia Express. The school was located at the top of a hill, which was not a good thing when you were late.

Sprocket, her robot dog, zoomed ahead. He was twice as fast as her, having been fitted with turbo legs only a month ago.

“Wait for me!” she called.

He stopped and tilted his head, as though to



say, "Is everything all right?"

She'd been hoping to get a turbocharged boost to school this term by putting wheels on her boots and attaching a lead to Sprocket, but the first time she had tried it, the little robot's circuits overloaded and sparks flew. She'd mended his legs but didn't want to risk damaging him again.

Harley glanced up at Cogworks. The morning sun glistened on the twisting steel pipes, the great domed roof and tall, layered towers of the classroom and laboratory block.

The enormous cog clock above the entrance read one minute to nine – she would just make it. As she ran, Fenelda Spiggot’s familiar smug pose, silhouetted in one of the windows, caught her attention: hands on hips and sharply cut bobbed hair. Harley grimaced and charged onwards, hoping Fenelda hadn’t spotted her.

But as she approached the school gates, a loud roar erupted behind her, along with the frantic honk of a horn. Just in time, Harley looked over her shoulder to see a shiny silver transporter heading straight towards her.

“Out of the way!” someone called from inside the vehicle.

Harley had no choice but to leap into the bank of thistles at the side of the lane. The transporter whooshed past, spraying dirt as it made its way through the gates into the

Cogworks grounds.

Harley groaned. The driver had clearly seen her yet had expected her to jump out of the way! Now not only was she late, she was also covered in dirt. Her temper began rolling like a small thunderstorm in her chest. This wasn’t a good start to the day. Sprocket bounded back towards her and licked her cheek with his cold metal tongue.

“I’m fine, thank you,” she said to him as she rolled back on to her knees. She looked towards the transporter and would have paused to admire the sleek metal body and chrome wheels if she hadn’t been so cross at being forced off the road. “Hey! You need to be more careful!”

With a backfire chug, the transporter sped down the other side of the hill, having

deposited a boy on the school steps.

The clock began to chime nine.

Sprocket whined sadly and Harley patted him on the nose. “I know, late again.” She stood up and brushed herself down. “You’d better head home. I’ll see you after school.”

A mechanical voice sounded as she passed the school gates. “Two minutes past nine. Late attendance will not be tolerated.”

Harley stopped and looked back as the gatekeeper robot, Primbot, stepped from behind one of the pillars, wagging a metal finger at her. Harley was certain Professor Fretshaw had made this robot particularly tall just so the robot, too, could tower over the students and look intimidating. In fact, now she thought of it, Primbot did look remarkably like the head teacher herself. Harley quashed her

anger and put on her best smile. “You must’ve seen what just happened. It wasn’t my fault!”

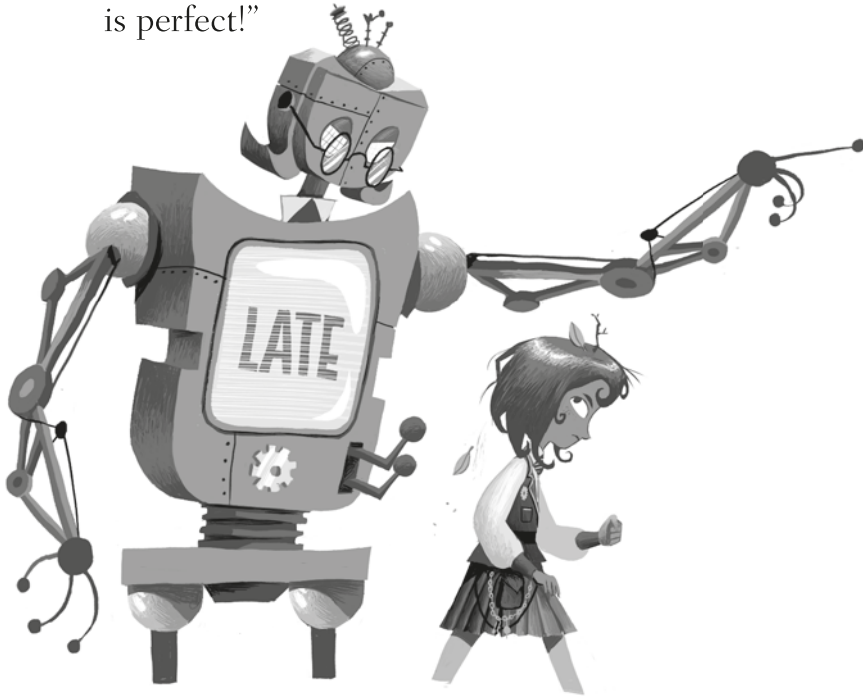
Primbot shook her head. “You must leave extra time to allow for delays.”

Harley wrinkled her nose. She had aimed to leave earlier, but Sprocket had been especially playful this morning and then she’d wanted to help Grandpa Eden water the strawberries. Even so, she would have been just in time – if it hadn’t been for that transporter. She looked at Primbot and tried another smile. “You could let me off. It is the first day of term.”

Primbot tapped a screen on her chest. It flashed up with the words *Harley Hitch – LATE*. They folded into a virtual envelope and shot away with a whoosh.

Harley scowled and stomped towards the school, calling behind her, “Why are you even

wearing glasses? You're a robot – your eyesight is perfect!”



The boy at the top of the steps stared at Harley. Curly brown hair completely covered one of his eyes and his other eye blinked at her several times behind thick black-rimmed glasses. He was dressed in the Cogworks

uniform of a white shirt with leather cuffs, a black waistcoat with a cog badge on the pocket, black trousers, and a hip tool belt. It was all perfectly pressed and new.

Harley glanced down at her big brown boots, pleated skirt and waistcoat, all adapted with many pockets and buckles to hold her useful tools. Her shirt, which had been white this morning, was now covered in dirt and prickles from jumping into the bushes. It wasn't fair; she'd tried so hard to get here on time, to stay out of trouble, and now it was all ruined. She felt a sudden surge of dislike towards the boy. He had been dropped off by the transporter; this was all his fault.

The boy gave a nervous smile.

Harley's lips tightened. "You made me late!" She scowled, then noticed the worried

expression on the boy's face and remembered what Grandpa Eden always said: if your boiler is about to blow, hold your breath and count to ten. If it still wants to boil, then you can let it out.

The boy pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a shaking hand, and they slid back down again. "I'm sorry about my mum, she's always in a hurry... Are you all right? You're going a bit puffy-cheeked," he said nervously.

Harley observed the boy as she finished counting. He was timid and probably wouldn't have meant to run her off the road himself. She sucked in a breath. "Ten!" No, she decided, she still wasn't all right. "Being in a hurry is not an excuse!" She folded her arms.

The boy looked down at his polished shoes.

"My mum was rushing to get to her new job."

"I have no idea how she didn't see me until the last moment."

"Perhaps it was on account of your..."

Harley narrowed her eyes and tilted her head. "On account of my...?"

"Err ... your hair," he said hesitantly. "It blends in with the..." He waved his finger as though it would help to find the right word.

"Bushes?" She raised her eyebrows. "You were going to say bushes, weren't you?" She supposed her hair did match the bushes pretty perfectly. She pulled a twig from it and threw it over her shoulder. "I choose a different colour each term. Me and my grandpa Eden like to experiment. This green uses a combination of sorrel roots, spinach, peppermint leaves and snapdragons."

The boy looked at her with nervous interest.
“It’s ... nice.”

Harley tilted her head and considered. “So,
you’re new?”

“Yes. We just moved from Inventia City.”

“What’s your name?”

“Cosmo.”

“Where do you live?”

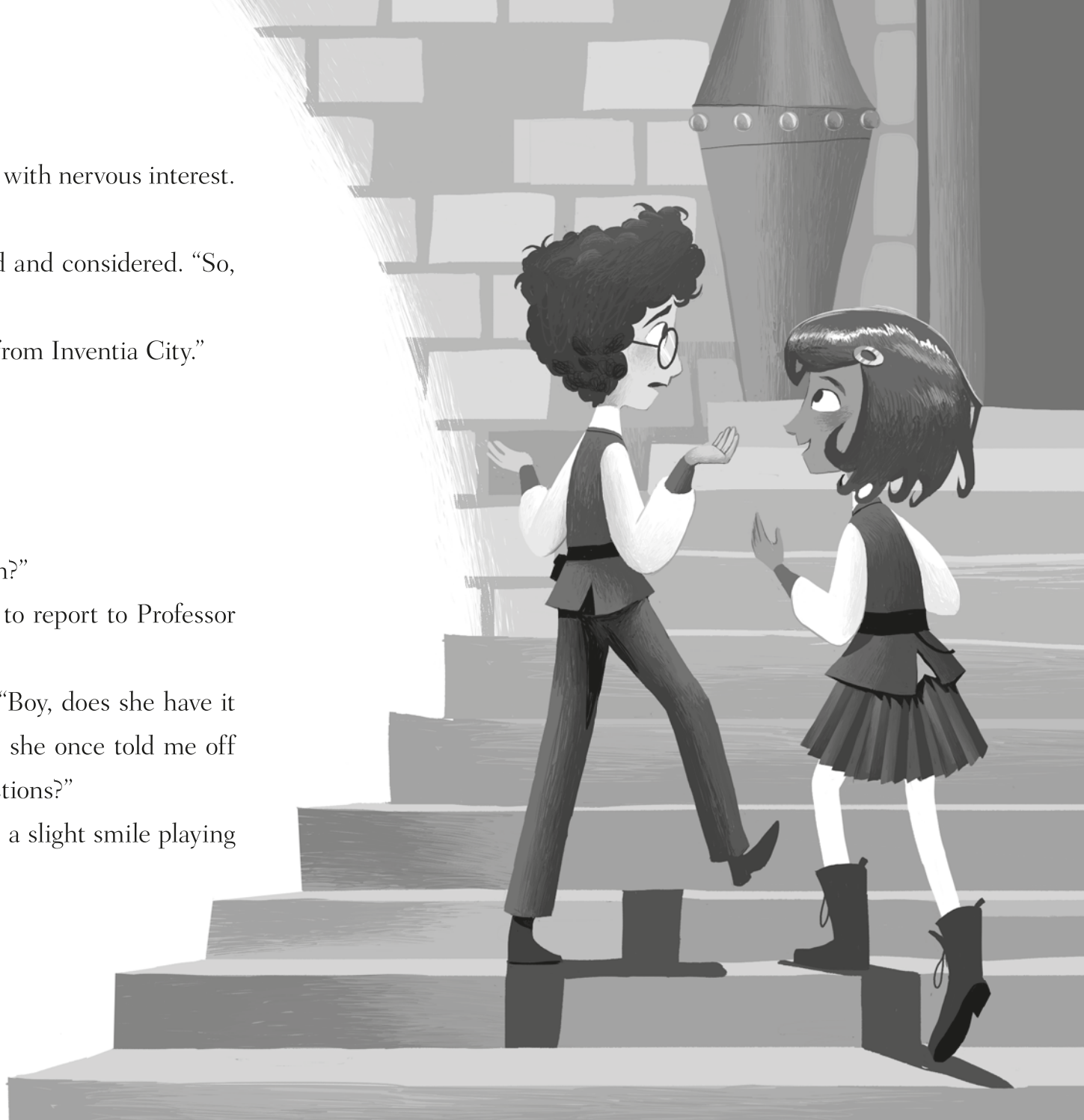
“Hinge Street.”

“What class are you in?”

“I don’t know. I need to report to Professor
Fretshaw first.”

Harley gave a shiver. “Boy, does she have it
in for me. Do you know, she once told me off
for asking too many questions?”

“Really?” Cosmo said, a slight smile playing
around his lips.



“No loitering, Harley Hitch,” Primbot said as she clunked up the steps and into the building. She looked to Cosmo. “Cosmo Willoughby, please report to Professor Fretshaw.”

“Has our new pupil arrived?” called a shrill voice from behind a door in the entrance hall. A voice that Harley recognized: Professor Fretshaw. Harley ducked inside and ran to the great iron staircase, hoping she wouldn’t be spotted. The stairs began trundling upwards in a spiral on the inside of a tower like an escalator. Harley was looking forward to being in her new class. Professor Spark had always seemed friendly when Harley had seen her around school before, so Harley hurried along the corridor to her new classroom, hoping she could sneak in the back before the end of the register.

As Harley crept into the room, Fenelda

Spiggot’s hand shot into the air. “Professor Spark, Harley Hitch is late.”

Everybody turned to face her and Professor Spark looked up, her large brown eyes making contact with Harley’s. The professor had voluminous, tight-curved hair and wore a navy dress emblazoned with shooting stars, constellations and moons. Harley smiled apologetically, bracing herself for the telling-off.

“It’s not even like she needed to be late,” continued Fenelda. “I saw her outside chatting, probably because she can’t—”

“Thank you for your assessment, Fenelda,” Professor Spark interrupted. “Take a seat, please, Harley.”

Harley was relieved not to be shouted at in front of the class, but sat down gloomily at the last free desk, which, unfortunately, was

behind Fenelda. So much for impressing her new teacher on the first day.

While Professor Spark finished the register, Fenelda turned around and whispered, “Interesting new hairstyle, Harley.”

Harley shrugged. “You should try some interesting yourself.”

Professor Spark coughed. “Now that we’re all here for our first session together, I’d like to get to know you all a little. Professor Fretshaw has passed on notes about each of you.” She gestured to a toppling pile of paper on her desk and frowned. “But I like to make up my own mind.” She scooped the pile off the desk and placed it in a cupboard at the back of the room.

Harley straightened in her chair. Professor Fretshaw was not Harley’s greatest fan – the feeling was mutual – and no doubt the professor

had made that clear in her notes. There was the time Harley had jammed the school generator trying to mend it, and the time she and Rufus had got stuck on the Cogworks clock because she’d invented some wings to try and travel to school faster... But if Professor Spark was giving them all a fresh slate, this could be a chance to prove herself. This might be the year she could get the thing she most desired and had never achieved: Cogworks’ Pupil of the Term.



CHAPTER 2

LIQUID LIGHT

Professor Spark strode down the aisle between the desks. “I’d like to get to know you all through your actions. So, I’m going to start with a little assignment.”

The class straightened their backs,

“I’ve noticed that the watermill at—”

Professor Spark was interrupted by a brisk knock on the door which didn’t

wait for an answer. The head teacher, Professor Fretshaw, stalked into the room.



She was the tallest professor at Cogworks, and thin, as though she had gradually stretched over many years. She wasn't actually that old, so Grandpa Elliot had told Harley, but she frowned often, which gave her mean, wrinkly eyes. She paused and looked back over her shoulder. "Come along, then."

Cosmo stepped inside, chin to his chest so that his curly hair covered most of his face.

"Cosmo Willoughby will be joining you in Spark Class."

"Welcome, Cosmo." Professor Spark beamed warmly. "Do take a seat." She looked around, then gestured to the seat beside Harley.

Harley groaned inwardly; Cosmo's arrival had already caused her problems today, so she didn't want him to sit next to her. Maybe he was the type of person whom trouble followed

around, whether they wanted it or not. This was something that Professor Fretshaw had said about her last year; and after the clock incident, no matter how hard Harley tried to impress Professor Fretshaw, she had Harley branded as a troublemaker. Harley glanced at Cosmo. She didn't want to make the same mistake with Professor Spark. Only last week, Harley had promised her grandparents a fresh start for the new school year, and she wasn't going to ruin it on the first day. There was an empty seat at its own table at the front. Maybe Cosmo could sit there. But then Professor Fretshaw fixed her with pin-sharp eyes and, heaving a sigh, Harley pulled out the chair for Cosmo to sit down.

Professor Fretshaw glanced at her electropad. "Late on the first day, I see, Harley. And

you look as though you've been rolling around in the dirt with that robot dog of yours."

Fenelda sniggered and Harley tightened her jaw.

"I suggest you smarten yourself up at the earliest opportunity." Professor Fretshaw tutted loudly, shook her head and left the room.

"Let's continue," said Professor Spark. "You might have noticed that the watermill at Rusty River is beginning to fall apart. I'd like you to work in pairs to design and make a miniature working model of a new, updated version by the end of the lesson. We have a double period so it should be doable if you work hard. And there's an exciting prospect for the winners."

They all leaned in.

"I will personally take your design to

Forgettown Electrical Company as a proposal, and this would be a step in the right direction for anyone interested in being a contender for Pupil of the Term."

There were a few excited gasps and the class exchanged glances with each other.

"I'm going to let you decide who you partner with. I'll give you a minute."

Harley scanned the room. She would have to choose her working partner carefully; how she wanted that framed Pupil of the Term certificate on her wall and the golden light bulb badge! Her grandpas would be so proud. She thought for a moment. Dolores Dredge was excellent, she'd been Pupil of the Term twice, but she was bossy and would take over. Rufus Digby was fun to work with, but he'd never been Pupil of the Term either and they would

giggle too much and get into trouble. Fenelda Spiggot was one of the smartest in the class, three-time Pupil of the Term and the previous winner, but Harley would rather work with a mushroom. Her eyes met with Lettice Bigley's, who was smiling at her from the table in front. Lettice was sensible, and good with tools, like Harley. She'd won once, though that was two years ago so she would be keen to work hard too. Harley stood up.

“Shall we—”

“Letti!” Fenelda declared, hooking Letti's arm. “Yes, I'd love to pair up with you!”

Letti looked over her shoulder and mouthed, *Sorry*. Harley smiled, knowing it wasn't Lettice's fault. She had never been very good at standing up to Fenelda. She would feel bad for not working with Harley, but if Harley made

a fuss, Professor Spark might think she was causing trouble.

Fenelda and Harley had been friends once. For the first few years at Cogworks, they'd been put together because they were the cleverest in the class and worked well in a pair. Fenelda had always liked winning things and could sometimes be meaner than Harley liked, but Harley had always pulled her up on it and could hold her own. Then, in year three, Professor Fretshaw had introduced Pupil of the Term. There had been a competition to see who could grow the tallest cogflower, and Harley had won, until Fenelda told Professor Fretshaw that Harley had help from Grandpa Eden. It wasn't true, but Professor Fretshaw wouldn't listen and had disqualified Harley. That was when Harley decided that best friends were too