



THE LIGHT THIEVES

There was a folded note on the bedside locker, and Grian opened it.

Gone to the Tipping Point! I can't stay here and do nothing when the world needs me. I want to help, even if none of you do. Don't come looking for me until I've saved the planet.

*This series is for Jo and Bobbie – I love you both
all the muches.*

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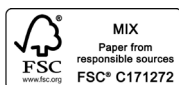
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THE LIGHT THIEVES

HELENA DUGGAN





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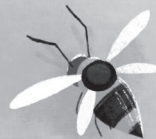
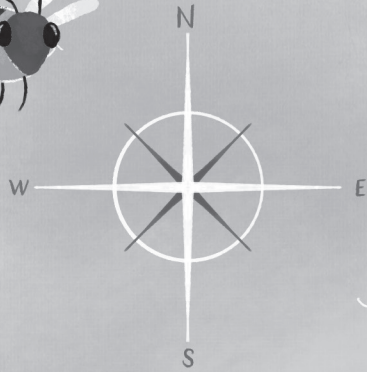
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MAP OF BABBAGE





Grian Woods stared out the classroom window at the rapidly swaying treetops in the distant forest that surrounded his home town of Tallystick. Because it was a sweltering summer's morning, the sun high in the bright blue sky, the window beside him was open, but there wasn't even the slightest of breezes passing inside. The morning had been eerily still, so still he'd pointed it out to his sister as they got on the school bus only an hour ago.

So, if it wasn't windy outside, what was making the trees dance?

It was the last day of school and his teacher was busy handing out small tasks to set up for their end-of-year

party. Everyone was in great form, and giddy laughter swept the classroom. Grian wasn't giddy though – he didn't like parties, especially school ones. Parties meant he'd have to make up random stuff to say to the people in his class, almost none of whom he'd really call friends.

“Bob,” he whispered to his Hansom watch, “are there any weather warnings for this morning?”

Bob, his watch avatar, opened its eyes and smiled out at him from the watch face – Hansom's latest update meant the avatars were almost lifelike. Some people in his class had designed their avatars to look like famous singers or film stars or football players, while others had modelled them on what they wanted to be when they grew up.

One girl had even made hers look like her dog, because she said it was her favourite thing in the world. Grian had left Bob's avatar at the default setting, which looked a little like Howard Hansom, the owner of the Hansom company, because he didn't know what he wanted to be when he grew up.

“That's a negative, Grian,” the watch replied. “The weather will be hot with prolonged sunny spells. Although some summer showers are expected in south-western Babbage, where there is also a risk of thunderstorms...”

Grian gasped, as a small hairline crack spontaneously darted down the centre of the windowpane beside him.

He muted his hEarPods so he couldn't hear his watch and was leaning in for a closer look when the benches and bins in the yard outside rocked, then fell over.

He stood up in shock, knocking his chair back, as the crack suddenly dispersed across the glass like a spider's web. There was a faint splintering sound before Grian roared “DUCK!” and jumped under his desk, just as the window burst inwards. Terrified screams filled the air as glass smithereens flew through the classroom.

Grian covered his ears, pushing his palms into the side of his head. Everything in the room rattled as if a giant had suddenly grabbed hold of the school and was shaking it like a money box. Books, pencils and hTablets flew through the air like missiles as the rest of the class now cowered, terrified, under their desks too.

Everything happened so fast and so slow all at once. Grian's thoughts scrambled as he tried to figure out what to do. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply through his nose until the chaos dulled to background noise, leaving only the sound of his heart thumping wildly in his ears.

He swiped at his Hansom, but the screen was blank. Bob wasn't working. Grian's chest tightened.

His teacher, was shouting something and beckoning everyone to follow her. Her usually perfectly pinned hair had fallen loose from its bun and she only wore one shoe,

her other sandal lost somewhere in the mess of stationery, desks and broken glass.

Grian followed the rest of his class as they all climbed out over the jumble of stuff that blocked the door his teacher had shouldered open.

The school corridor looked like it had been looted by an angry mob – fallen lockers, broken hTablets and books were strewn across the floor. He scrambled through the wreckage, joining the masses of petrified children who screamed and jostled each other to escape out the main door.

Once in the yard, Grian followed instructions and raced into the middle of the playground where teachers roared at their students, herding them away from falling debris. He looked around for Solas but couldn't see his sister anywhere. He swiped Bob again, hoping it would locate her, but his watch was still dead.

Grian shivered uncontrollably, as though he'd been dipped in a bath of ice-cold water. What had happened? How would he contact his parents? Were they okay? Where was Solas?

A girl nearby screamed, pointing skywards. The day suddenly darkened like storm clouds had just rolled in.

Grian looked up, but there wasn't a single cloud in the clear blue sky.

"The sun...the sun," his teacher stuttered, her voice a whimper.

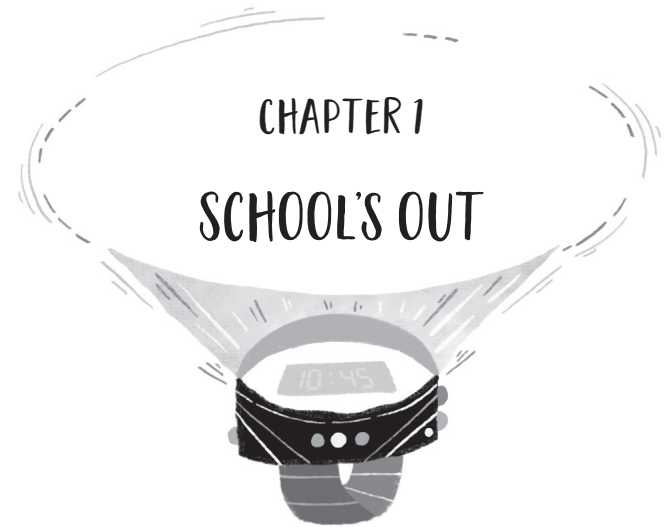
Grian couldn't understand what his eyes were showing him. He rubbed them, afraid the dust and dirt might have caused damage, but it didn't make a difference.

A black shadow had formed on the bottom right-hand quarter of the sun. Almost as if that same giant he'd imagined rattling the school earlier had taken a juicy bite from the orange circle in the sky.

He wheezed in air as the thumping in his chest beat harder. Stunned silence wrapped the school yard.

"It's the end of the world!" someone cried.

THREE YEARS LATER



The vibrations raced up his arm and into his shoulder, shaking Grian awake. He wished Hansom hadn't added their latest software update.

"I said not to use that alarm, Bob!" he groaned, pulling the duvet back over his head.

"Last night you directed that I was to wake you by any means possible, Grian!" Bob chirped.

"I didn't mean that way! Vibrate mode is too far."

"I'm a watch, Grian, I interpret literally. It's hard to decipher what you do or don't mean if you are not clear," Bob stated, before continuing. "You've your last test this morning then school is out for summer. Your grandfather will not be home for a few hours today, so you're

scheduled to accompany Solas to the *PEOPLEPOWER* rally this afternoon.”

Grian didn’t respond as he dressed, pulling on navy tracksuit bottoms and a grey hoody. Then he dragged his feet out of his room and across the carpeted landing towards the toilet.

“Hold it! Me first!” Solas cried, rushing into the bathroom just ahead of him. “I’ve to get ready, Grian!”

His older sister slammed the door and left him standing in the chilly landing. Ever since the earthquake three years ago, the mornings were colder and the days a little darker. It was July now, but it felt like autumn.

Grian waited patiently for Solas to finish – she always took for ever. He didn’t understand why girls spent so long getting ready. Most of the time he wished he had an older brother and not a sister.

“Would you like to revise for this morning’s big summer hTest?” Bob piped up. “We could go over your long division again, as you were a little weak on that last night.”

“Just give me a break, Bob,” Grian moaned, sliding down the wall onto the carpet to wait.

He was glad that the normal end-of-school party didn’t go ahead any more, so at least he didn’t have to make awkward conversation. The principal said it wasn’t right to celebrate on the anniversary of the earthquake – the

day the world tilted – so the party had been replaced by the end-of-year hTest instead, which seemed a little unfair.

The summer test took the morning and then they were getting a half day off so everyone could attend the *PEOPLEPOWER* rally.

“Breaks never a master makes!” the watch replied.

Grian stabbed the off button and his watch’s avatar closed its eyes before the screen darkened to a sleek metal grey. A moment later the double H of the Hansom logo lit up and Bob smiled as the watch turned back on.

“What?” Grian fumed, glaring down at his wrist.

“The new parental controls update. You can’t turn me off when my advice is for your own good, Grian! Now, I think we should do some revision.”

Bob began asking long division questions.

Grian took off the watch and shoved it into his pocket. He’d done his study and was pretty confident the test would go well. He liked learning, though he’d never tell that to anyone in school in case he was teased.

“Any advice on how to get out of my pocket, Bob?” Grian mocked.

His watch didn’t reply and was mumbling mock exam question number four by the time the bathroom door flung open. Solas walked dramatically out, her hair now a silvery pink. Mam would fume, which was probably why

Solas had done it while she and Dad were away. Grian could swear his sister was wearing some kind of make-up too. He never understood why people, especially girls, put stuff all over their face. He'd worn some once for Halloween when he dressed up as the Barber from his favourite computer game, "Beat the Barber"; it was a pretty cool costume, but he'd wiped the sticky make-up straight off the minute he got home.

"He's not even going to see you, you know!"

"Who's not?" Solas replied as she swished past.

"Howard Hansom. All of Tallystick will be there, there's no way he'd even look at you!"

"Oh, shut up, brother!" She glared, then slammed her bedroom door.

Grian stomped into the bathroom and slammed the door too. If Solas could do it, so could he.

"Will you two ever stop banging doors!" his grandad called from his cupboard office downstairs.

He'd probably been up all night talking on his ancient radio set again. There were way easier ways to speak to people all over the world. He could never understand why his grandad didn't just get a Hansom, like everybody else.

Grian brushed his teeth and tried to pat down some of his more unruly curls so they didn't stand out too much. A little happier with his reflection, he trudged back onto

the landing and was just pulling Bob from his pocket when Solas opened her door and pranced down the stairs ahead of him. She was dressed in some sort of ridiculous sparkly skirt and the same neon multicoloured *PEOPLEPOWER* T-shirt everyone was wearing lately.

"Morning, Solas." Bob smiled as Grian strapped the watch back onto his wrist.

Grian cringed, popping in his hEarPods and bluetoothing them to his Hansom so Bob couldn't speak out loud any more.

"Why do you have to be nice to her when she's always so mean to me," he sniped as he searched for his shoes.

"Your runners are under the bed," Bob replied, "and it's nice to be niccccc..."

The watch face flickered and Bob's avatar froze for a minute mid-sentence, before coming back to life.

"What was that?" Grian gasped, his heart skipping.

"Just a signal disruption. Those trees blocking the signals again," the watch replied, its human replica voice suddenly sounding robotic.

Bob had been flickering quite a bit lately, which made Grian nervous. It's true, he did take the watch off sometimes, when it was annoying him, but he definitely didn't want it to ever stop working again. The first and only time Bob broke was awful – it had happened exactly three years ago, the day of the earthquake.

Ever since, that day became known as “the Tilt” because it was later discovered that the earthquake had been so strong it knocked the world off its axis, just before a mysterious black mark appeared on the sun.

“Your school bag is in the kitchen. I’m hoping your grandfather has remembered to make lunch, but because he refuses to wear a Hansom I can’t tell.” Bob sounded frustrated as it pulled Grian’s thoughts back from his most scary memories. “The school bus is exactly four minutes and twenty-three seconds away. Get a move on!”

Grian raced down the stairs past his grandfather’s room. The door was ajar as always, so the squeaks and squeals of his radio system whizzed and whirled out into the hall. Sometimes the sounds were broken by the chopped and usually fuzzy voice of someone from somewhere far away.

Grian had to turn the kitchen light on even though it was already twenty past eight. His lunch box was sitting on the wooden worktop. The plastic lid was half off, revealing an apple and a sandwich oozing disgusting purple jam.

“Jam!” Grian huffed, leaving his home-made lunch on the table. “Where does Grandad even get this stuff?”

He opened the press and pulled out a packet of crisps and a chocolate bar, then grabbed his bag and stuffed them inside, before pushing past Solas in the hall. She was poking her head in Grandad’s door, probably sucking

up to him for money. Since their dad’s job had been under threat, Grandad handed it out more easily than his parents did.

Grian’s dad, Cam Woods, was a postmaster, which meant he was the head postman in the Turing district. Grian didn’t tell anybody about his father’s job, purely because he wasn’t proud. It was embarrassing really and total fuel for teasing. Nobody sent letters any more – it was last-century old.

That’s where his dad was now, away at a work conference. His mam had taken time off to go and surprise him. They were to spend a few days together. “We’ll be back Sunday evening,” his mam had said with a smile as she kissed Grian on the head early that morning, before slipping downstairs and out the front door.

His mam, Saoirse Woods, was a solicitor in Turing – the city a few bus stops from their small town. She said she “represented the underdog” – Grian wasn’t sure what that meant, except that her clients hardly ever had money. She was stubborn, his dad often joked, and only worked for people she liked. His mam said that was because she couldn’t do her job if she didn’t believe in the person – which kind of made sense.

“T minus one minute!” Bob cried as Grian threw open the front door.

“Good luck in your test,” his grandfather called.

"Thanks, Grandad!" Grian shouted, dashing down the garden path and out the gate.

The bus was just pulling into the stop as he arrived. Solas was a little way behind. His sister never minded if anyone had to wait for her, whereas Grian got embarrassed even thinking that he might cause a delay. He wished he was a little more like Solas – she didn't care what anyone thought.

Grian was already settled in his seat when his sister mounted the steps and swung into hers. She was just in front of him, sitting beside her best friend Amz. Everyone thought Amy Alton was one of the coolest girls in school, but Grian knew she really wasn't. She was mean, just like Solas.

Grian sat in the middle of the bus. It was the safest place to be. He was alone, which was what he preferred. He'd tried making friends once when he was younger and it hadn't worked out well. His mam said he'd just met the wrong ones and that not all kids were mean. But Grian wasn't so sure and, besides, nobody ever got his jokes.

"Jeffrey is here," Bob suddenly said as a blond-haired boy, with light blue eyes, a thin upturned nose and bright-red cheeks, puffed and panted up the steps. "Why don't you ever make friends with him? I keep telling you, you two have such similar interests. Jeffrey likes history and excels at maths. He also likes gaming and is an ace at "Beat

the Barber". He's on level sixteen and is the number-one player in the Turing district. Maybe he could give you some..."

Grian was turning purple. His stupid watch was always trying to force him into making friends, especially with Jeffrey Slight. Someone giggled behind Grian and, paranoid, he turned the volume down on his hEarPods, in case anyone could hear.

Grian knew Jeffrey a little, as they were practically neighbours and went to the same school. But those weren't reasons to hang out and he made sure they didn't, even when his mam encouraged him to.

Jeffrey seemed nice enough, if a little weird and annoying. People teased him though, and Grian didn't want to be friends with someone who got teased. It drew too much attention and he had worked hard at avoiding the eyes of bullies ever since his first experience of them. Sometimes he even got the answers wrong in his tests on purpose. It made life easier. People didn't like know-it-alls, and Jeffrey Slight was definitely a know-it-all.

Jeffrey always came out with one hundred per cent in his tests, and he tried to talk to everyone about all the stupid stuff he liked. Sometimes his clothes didn't fully fit him either – his trousers stopped at the ankles or his shirts were a little too tight – but he didn't seem to notice when others sniggered.

"If you'd like to go to the toilet before the hTest, then it'd be quicker to enter school via the back door. There is a queue up in corridor five, as a fight has broken out between two sixth-class pupils," Bob said as the bus pulled up at the school gates.

Quickly Grian raced round the school and in the rear entrance. He always needed to go before a test. Pre-exam nerves, his watch called it. He banged the toilet door shut, dropping his bag to the floor.

"Hurry, you've six minutes and forty-two seconds to get to the classroom. Most people are at their desks, but Mrs Norman is not there yet," Bob said, as Grian hurriedly washed his hands.

He sprinted down the corridor and was just settled at his desk as the teacher began to hand out their papers.

"Watches to exam mode," Mrs Norman said, turning to face the class before setting her timer.

Grian swiped across Bob's interface, switching his Hansom to exam mode so it couldn't help him, before logging into his school hTablet.

The exam was easy. Even taking into account the questions he got wrong on purpose, Grian was sure he'd done well. His summer report would be good, and though his parents never really cared about exams, he knew they'd be happy.

"Your results will be hMailed home early next week."

Mrs Norman smiled as she collected up the papers. "Now enjoy your lunch, and then you're on holidays! I'm sure I'll see most of you at the *PEOPLEPOWER* rally later today – what an exciting way to start the summer!"

His classmates whooped and shouted before hugging each other as if they'd never meet again. Grian bid a few quick goodbyes before turning Bob back on and leaving the classroom.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky when he stepped outside, though the black mark on the sun meant the days weren't as warm as they would once have been. This didn't really bother Grian – he'd never been a huge fan of too much heat.

The black mark, or what it meant for the planet, really bothered everybody else though, which was why the whole world was excited about *PEOPLEPOWER* – Howard Hansom's plan to save them all.

PEOPLEPOWER was everywhere. The ads flashed across Bob's screen every few minutes, it was even all over the school hTablets, the hTV, the hNet, hNews, and all anybody ever talked about on the radio or wrote about in the papers. Even the fridge and the bus stop regularly showed the adverts – so much so that Grian was kind of sick of it.

"You've to meet Solas by the school gates in thirty minutes," Bob piped up with a reminder. "I've contacted

Petra and it's let your mother know you'll be here for a while longer before going with your sister to the rally. Now, time for a quick lunch."

Grian hated it when Bob talked to Petra. Petra was his mam's Hansom and it was set on really strict mode, meaning it basically told Bob that Grian wasn't allowed to do anything. Grian had ignored its instructions once and Bob had to report back – he was grounded for a week.

When Solas turned thirteen, some of Petra's permissions were cancelled and it didn't have to know everything about where his sister went any more. Grian couldn't wait until he was thirteen so he could stop Petra spying on him too.

He sat on the bench just inside the school gates and pulled out his lunch of crisps and chocolate.

Hundreds of kids were now piling out the entrance doors, wearing the same multicoloured neon *PEOPLEPOWER* T-shirts. They all seemed just as excited as his sister.

Would anybody really be as excited about saving the planet if Howard Hansom wasn't involved?

Grian loved Hansom's technology – his company made the best products. He couldn't live without Bob or the hNet, and definitely wanted Hansom to keep releasing updates and building all the latest gadgets. But none of that meant he had to swoon over Howard Hansom, even

if he was trying to save the world. Mr Hansom would be better off sticking to his day job, instead of trying to be some sort of superhero – at least, that's what Grian's grandfather said.

Grian munched his way through his food before settling back into "Beat the Barber". He was finding it hard to get past level fourteen. Maybe Bob was right, maybe he should go talk to Jeffrey.

He was still trying to chop a crew cut into a knife-wielding customer without getting butchered, when his Hansom spoke again.

"Solas is late!" the watch stated. "I normally give her a ten-minute window; factoring in lunch, I gave her a half-hour today and she's still not here!"

Grian looked up.

Almost everyone in the school yard had gone, and the caretaker was closing up. A chill crept over his shoulders. Without anyone about, the place felt eerily quiet. The street was empty too; only a single car waited at the traffic lights on the road outside the gate.

Suddenly he startled, as a distant roar filled the sky.