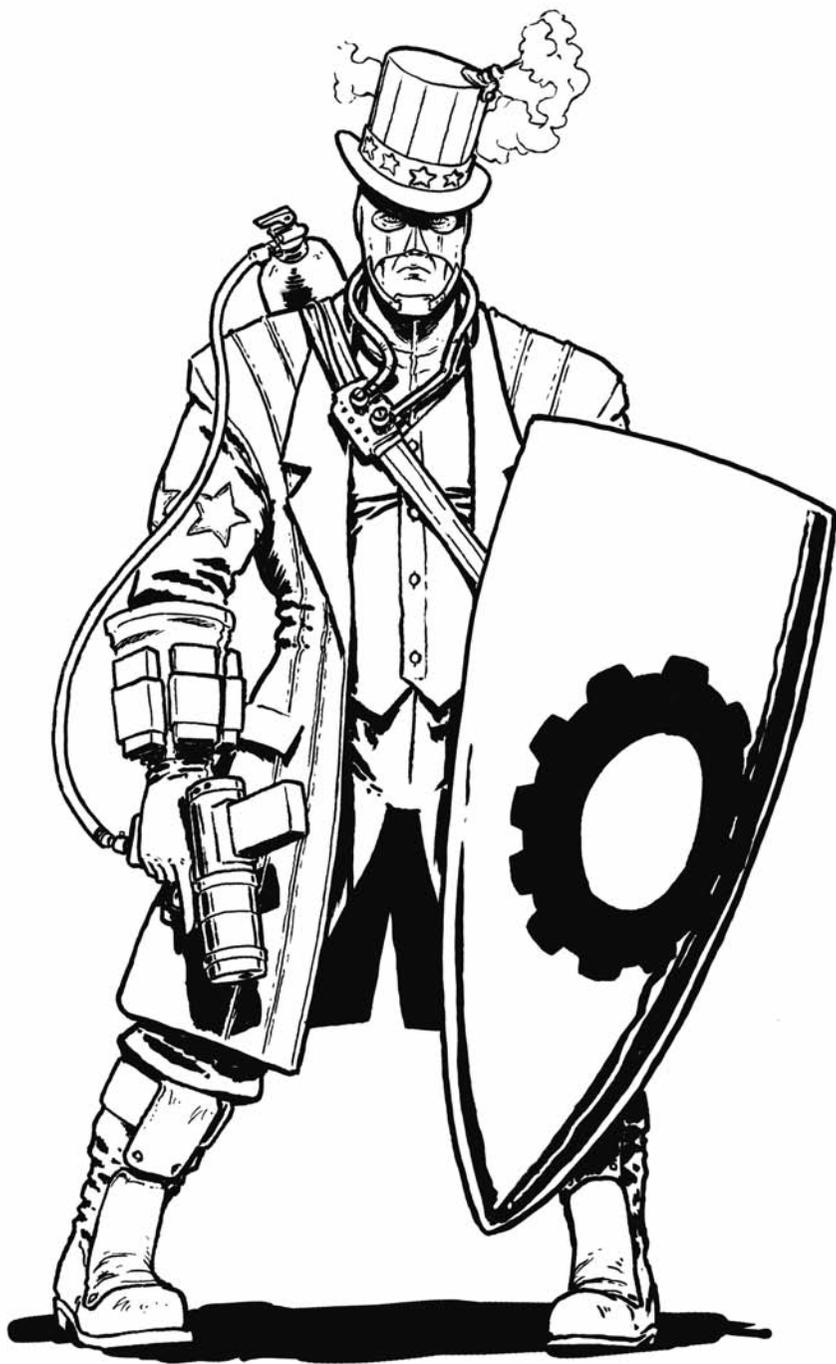


THE FALLING MACHINE



The
SOCIETY OF STEAM

BOOK ONE

THE FALLING MACHINE

ANDREW P. MAYER



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For Hans Mayer, my father,
who never let adversity limit his passion for discovery

Wonders of the World

“**L**ife is short, yet it is the nature of man to make it move faster all the time.” Sir Dennis Darby punctuated his pronouncement with a firm smack of the silver tip of his cane against the concrete underneath his feet.

Sarah and Nathaniel stood nearby, looking up at the old man, quietly and respectfully waiting for him to continue, but before he could say another word his intended dramatic pause was broken by a long, throaty groan rising up from behind them.

Just below them, the Automaton had begun to slowly and methodically spin the massive wooden spool with his left hand. The wheel was five feet across, with a thick iron post running up through the center of it. Viscous black grease oozed up from where the pole made contact with a metal collar that held it in place, and the noise vanished.

“Tom,” Darby said, addressing the mechanical man, “are you bored?”

The Automaton lowered his arm. “I can stop if you’d like . . . Sir Dennis.” His sentence sounded like a song, and each word was spoken as a single separate note—high and smooth—with just a hint of a rasp from the metal whistles and reeds that played together to create his voice.

“I just wanted to make sure you were paying attention,” Darby continued. “It’s far beyond even your impressive abilities to halt the march of progress.” The old man smiled and looked down at his creation. It was a rare expression on his usually stern face. “No, my dear Tom, humanity will always strive to learn more, rise higher, and go faster. And one day people will look back to this year of eighteen hundred and eighty and imagine that we were a primitive and ignorant people, just as we do now to those who came before us.” The widening grin pushed his sharp features and graying muttonchops out to the sides in a way that was slightly unsettling. “But that is the price

of progress, as we forge ahead to make the lives of our descendants better than our own.” Darby had been wearing a version of his current look of childlike wonder almost from the first moment the four of them had set foot onto the Brooklyn side of the bridge construction site.

They had all dressed up for the trip, as it was intended to be a formal outing. Both of the men wore full suits, with vests, jackets, and hats, as well as long overcoats to protect them against the winter cold. The Professor’s great-coat was made of sensible black wool, while young Nathaniel’s was far fancier. His lapels and cuffs were trimmed with the same rich, black beaver fur that lined the jacket’s interior. Ebony silk top hats rested snugly on their heads.

The two gentlemen were also of similar height and build—six feet tall and slim—but Nathaniel had the athletic demeanor of a young man, while Darby’s frame was looser and slightly hunched, his age having drained away the vitality of youth.

The Automaton stood at five feet, six inches exactly. He was dressed in a similar fashion to the men, but with only a jacket wrapped around his long cylindrical frame. He had no need of an overcoat, despite a temperature that was only being held a notch above freezing by the light of the morning sun.

The mechanical man’s face and neck were completely unbound by leather or cloth, showing a series of tubes and metal shafts that connected his head and body. His delicate features were lovingly painted onto a smooth porcelain mask: the eyes were bright blue, and his lips had the same mysterious hint of a smile as the *Mona Lisa*. The back of his head was a skull-shaped slab of solid brass, and a delicate ribbon of steam drifted lazily out from a valve at the back of his neck.

The Professor’s voice grew louder, as it usually did when he was becoming entranced by his own words, “And you Tom, you are *my* response to that most human urge—mankind’s never-ending desire to bring light to the dark boundary of the unknown.

“And even standing in the shadow of this modern-day marvel,” he said, pointing up to the massive tower, “you are still an object of wonder.” Darby swept his arm across the vista of stone and wire that stretched out in front of them as if he were unveiling it for the very first time. “Even compared to the Brooklyn Bridge.”

Rising up and out from the anchorage where they were standing were two cables of twisted steel, each one as thick as a man, heading from the shore and out over the water. They rose up and over the top of a stone tower standing almost three hundred feet tall and then dropped back down, crossing the East River to another tower of the same height that sat just off the edge of Manhattan Island. The building of the road that would eventually connect the two cities had only just been started, and the cables hung expectantly above the water, ready to bear their load.

“The greatest wonder of the modern world,” Darby said, and then winked at the girl, “even if it isn’t quite finished yet.”

Sarah smiled and clapped, the effect muffled by her gloves. “It’s gorgeous, Professor.” She moved forward with the layers of her ruffled blue skirt rustling and swaying with every step. “Thank you so much for bringing us out here so we could see it.” Her matching fur cape was wrapped around her tightly enough that the rigid feminine curve of her bodice could be seen underneath it. The blonde curls of her hair had been pulled back and piled up into a severe bun. Pinned to the top of it was a navy-blue bonnet, the fashionable veil coming down to just above her eyes. But underneath all the structure that had been built to support and define the modern woman of 1880, a natural aura of relaxed strength and beauty still shone through.

Trying not to stare at Sarah, Nathaniel squinted his eyes even more than usual as he turned his gaze to the bridge, tipping his head so far back that his hat seemed poised to slide off. “Do you think something so big will actually hold up, Professor?”

“Of course it will.” Darby nodded firmly, some of his usual intensity returning to his face as he did so. “The principles behind it are quite sound. A large-scale structure such as this simply requires a rigorous application of math, human ingenuity, and hard work. A bridge is the culmination of all those things.”

The Professor took a deep breath, filling his lungs completely and then holding it for a moment before speaking. “All right, everyone, are we ready for an adventure?” He lifted up his cane and pointed the metal tip toward the wooden platform that acted as the entrance to the walkway. It seemed far less sound than the concrete and stone edifice underneath their feet.

Sarah looked over at him. "I've already had my fair share, Sir Dennis." Then she gave him a brave wink and a smile. "But I'm always game for more!" She knew that her father would have frowned on her flirtatious attitude, but she and Sir Dennis had often shared such moments over the last few years.

Inclined to tomboyish behavior as a girl, her early teens had been a time of rude awakening, divorcing her from the casual company of boys and men in ways she still found frustrating and unfair. It only took a glance in a mirror to remind her that she had been gifted with a beauty that had forever stolen away an innocent connection with the opposite sex, and she was still struggling to understand the power of it.

From her mother she had inherited all the best Harrington family traits: long blonde hair, an upturned nose, and sparkling green eyes. And enough men had become hypnotized by her lips while she spoke that she knew she had been given her father's full mouth. She was grateful for it. Even though her suitors often ignored the words that came out of it, at least it kept their eyes on her face, which was a higher level of attention than her fuller-figured friends often received.

Nathaniel stepped up behind her. "It's windy up there, Sarah. Are you sure you're up to it?"

She turned her head and looked back at him over her shoulder. "I'm not the delicate flower you seem to think I am, Nathan." The words came out in a colder tone than she had intended. Much to her father's chagrin, she had also inherited the quick Stanton temperament, and her sharp words often surprised her as much as it did everyone else.

She marched to the end of the anchorage, heading toward the steps that led up to the walkway as fast as the complicated layers of her dress would allow. Just beyond them, the rickety trail of wood and wire stretched off into the distance, almost parallel to the massive cables as it arced up toward the closest tower. "I'll be fine," she said to herself as much as anyone else.

Nathaniel frowned slightly, giving his already-sullen features an even grimmer look. At twenty-two he was still a young man, and some women found his brooding attractive. It clearly had the opposite effect on Sarah. But his dark moods were a part of his passionate nature, and not something that he felt a great need to control. "I suppose we're *all* going up there—the whole

damn circus.” He lifted up his top hat and swept his black hair back over his head, then pulled it down tightly and started to follow after her.

Dennis Darby stopped him, clamping a hand down onto Nathaniel’s shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “Is there need for such language?” He turned back to the Automaton, still entranced by the large wooden wheel. “Now come along, Tom.”

The metal man let go of the empty spool that he had been toying with and strode forward in a smooth, gliding motion. It was, as always, the mathematically perfect arc of his movements that made his inhumanity so obvious. “We are part of a . . . circus? Does that make me . . . the acrobat, or . . . the clown?”

“You’re the side show,” Nathaniel grumbled. Pulling a silver flask from his jacket pocket, he undid the cap with a quick twist and knocked back a swig.

Ignoring Nathaniel’s activities, Darby scanned his eyes over the machine-man, glanced up at the wooden footbridge, and then shook his head. “I’m a little worried about your weight up there, Tom. I think you’re going to need to drop some ballast first.”

“What if there’s trouble?” asked Tom.

“At this moment I’m more worried about the strength of those wooden slats you’ll be walking on than any potential villainy, especially with all that equipment we’ve loaded inside you. It wouldn’t do to have you plunging into the river.” He tapped his cane against the metal man’s chest. “Dropping those armor plates should do the trick.”

Tom nodded his head in another perfectly smooth curve. He unbuttoned his brocade vest, then the pleated shirt underneath, his leather-gloved fingers moving slowly and deliberately. The tiny curls of steam that rose up from his wrists as he worked were quickly consumed by the winter breeze.

He opened his shirt to reveal a pair of broad brass breastplates underneath. Each one was sculpted into an idealized form of the impossibly perfect contoured muscles of a Greek god. There was a loud click as he twisted the first one free from the metal snaps holding it in place. It lifted upward and off, revealing rows of cogs spinning away underneath. He placed it down onto the rough wooden planking. If exposing himself had an emotional impact on Tom, it was impossible to read from the painted-on features of the porcelain mask that acted as his face.

Nathaniel stared at him for a few seconds. There was a slight sneer on his lips as he watched the Automaton remove the second brass plate and place it on top of the first with a dull clank.

Sarah, standing one step from the top of the stairs, had also found herself unable to tear her eyes away. As Tom began to rebutton his clothes, she shook her head as if waking up from a trance. Looking for something else to rest her eyes on, she caught a glimpse of the large sign that stood at the entrance to the walkway in front of them. She read it out loud, for Tom's benefit: "Safe for Only Twenty-Five Men at One Time. Do Not Walk Close Together, Run, Jump, or Trot. Break Step!" She let out a nervous laugh. "Sounds a bit menacing."

"Wise words, those," said a stranger's voice. The words were spoken in a deep Irish brogue that contained both a lilt and a rumble. "Any way you read it, though, yer gonna want to step carefully up there." By the way he was dressed, the speaker was clearly a member of the working crew, his nose and cheeks bright red from the breeze. The thick cloth coat he wore was threadbare at the hem and cuffs, and he pulled it tightly around his barrel frame to keep out the cold of the early January morning. The slouching circle of the kepi cap that rested on the top of his head was a leftover from the Civil War, although all the military insignia had been stripped off of it a long time ago. "The wind's not too bad today, though." His face was broad and round, with a set of thick red-and-gray muttonchops that traveled from ear to chin. His skin was ruddy and rough, placing him clearly in his late forties or early fifties. "Not as bad as some days, anyway."

Darby extended a hand. "And you would be, sir?"

"Barry Moloney. One of the foremen here at the Brooklyn Bridge, and yer official tour guide on this fine Sunday." He doffed his hat, then took the offered hand and gave the old scientist a single quick shake. His gloved paw enfolded the Professor's hand almost completely. "Mrs. Roebling told me to meet you over here and give you the run of the place. She said to give you her apologies, and let you know that she and her husband will meet with you back at her house once you've finished your work at the top of the tower."

Sarah beamed. "You see that, Nathan? There's a woman in charge. We're not all as incapable of critical thought as you seem to think we are."

The Irishman smiled. “Well, she does give the orders. But it’s her husband, Mr. Washington, who writes them down first. Poor man got the sickness down in the Caissons, and now he can barely move.” He looked at Sarah squarely in the eyes. “Yer not one of them suffergettes, are you?”

“Not officially,” She thrust out a white-gloved hand. “My name is Sarah Stanton, Mr. Moloney. Pleased to meet you.”

He shook her hand firmly and stared straight into her eyes. “That’s a good grip, Miss Stanton.” The Irishman smiled over at Nathan. “Rope that lass quick, boy, or she’ll marry the first man that tames her fire.”

Nathaniel replied with a sniff. “This ‘lass’ is the daughter of Alexander Stanton—the Industrialist—one of the most powerful and respected men in all of New York City, and a founding member of the Paragons. I’d ask that you treat her, and me, with a little more respect.”

For a moment the easy smile vanished from the Irishman’s face to be replaced by something darker. “All right, young sir, didn’t mean to offend. I’m just here to help you and yers safely up to the top of the tower and . . .” His word’s trailed off as he saw Tom for the first time. “Good Lord!”

Darby nodded to the metal man. “Go ahead and introduce yourself, Tom.”

The mechanical man finished closing the last button of his jacket, then strode forward and held out his hand. Even under the black leather glove the large round lumps at the knuckles clearly revealed that it wasn’t a human appendage underneath. “I am called the Automaton, . . . Mr. Moloney. I’m very glad to meet you.”

“Are you now?” Moloney grasped the offered hand gingerly, then pumped Tom’s arm quickly up and down. He glanced over his shoulder at Darby. “Does he think he’s alive?”

“What Tom thinks or doesn’t think is still a matter of some great debate,” the Professor replied. “Most people would say that if he is able to reason then he must be alive. Having both created him and taught him, I’d like to think that’s so. At any rate, I’d ask that you treat him with the same respect you’d give me.”

“*Cogito, ergo sum*, . . . Mr. Moloney,” the Automaton said.

Barry let go of Tom’s hand and then walked away from the group to a

pile of tools that sat nearby. “Now I’ve met a metal man. . . . That’ll be something to tell the wife, anyway.”

Darby continued to talk, behind him. “I have some experiments I’d like to run once we reach the top of the tower.”

“We’ve both got a job to do today.” The Irishman pulled up his large pack, constructed from what appeared to be brass and canvas, and slung it over his back. He wobbled slightly as he heaved it up over his shoulders and buckled its thick leather strap tightly across his chest.

“What’s in the pack, Mr. Moloney?” Sir Dennis asked. “Perhaps my mechanical friend here can carry it for you.”

“Thanks sir, but no. These are tools for tomorrow’s first shift. I’ll be killing two birds with one stone by taking them up to the top of the tower with us.” Moloney walked up to the steps and dropped the rope from the front of the walkway. “Now watch yerselves. That footbridge is safe, but it can be a bit treacherous if you haven’t been up it before.”

The path was constructed from a series of wooden planks four feet across, each suspended from the metal wire strung between the tower and the anchorage. It was a tiny suspension bridge built to aid in the construction of its bigger brother.

The Irishman waved them forward. “All right then, up we go. Keep one hand on the cable at all times, and take it slow. If you watch each and every step you take, you’ll be fine.”

With their first step out from the anchorage and onto the footbridge they were already high above the buildings below. “I’d say there’s nothing to be scared of, but a bit of fear will do you good up here.”

Sarah and Nathan moved quickly forward, each of them trying to move a little faster than the other, clearly attempting to show the other how fearless and resolute they were.

Darby was more obviously hesitant. After he had walked out and up a hundred feet, a gust of winter wind whipped up around them. The old man’s hands instinctively grabbed for his hat, and the walkway swayed beneath his feet as he did so. With one hand already on the wire railing, his other grabbed for it as well, and he dropped his cane. It bounced once, and then began to roll toward the edge of oblivion.

Tom moved forward suddenly and smoothly. Sliding past his creator, he scooped up the stick before it could fall over the edge. His shifting weight rocked the bridge even more.

With his fingers tightly gripping the thin wire, Darby closed his eyes, shook his head, and waited for the world to steady itself. "I've never been much of one for heights, I'm afraid," he said to no one in particular. "It's a poor trait for a man who has engineered so many devices designed to pierce the sky."

Tom came up behind him. "Don't worry . . . Sir Dennis. I have your . . . cane."

"Hold onto it, Tom," Darby said, and then took another long deep breath. He slowly released it as he counted to ten. Over the last decade he had developed an advanced breathing regimen with a specific pattern of inhalation for almost every occasion. His book based on his theories about the different ways that oxygen could be used to reinvigorate the body had sold quite well. It described a technique that he believed would allow a man to stay healthy and whole for a hundred years or more. Darby puffed out the air in his lungs with a final *Breath of Courage*. "Thank you, Tom. I'll be fine in a moment."

Barry walked back to the two of them. "You and that machine doing all right? The lad and the girl are almost up to the top."

Darby followed his gaze upward to see them, and then reeled slightly. "We'll be fine, sir, just fine. Tom is simply looking after me, and I'm afraid it's been quite a while since I've had their youthful vigor."

Moloney flashed him another smile and then tipped his head in their direction. "You just take yer time, Sir Dennis. I wouldn't want to be the man they said was responsible for the fall of a fine genius like yerself."

Darby took another deep breath, held it quietly for five seconds, and then followed it with a resolute step forward. "Let's go, Mr. Moloney. I'm sure I'll be much steadier once we've made it to the top." But by the time he reached the tower Darby had gone white as a sheet. He sighed heavily as he stepped off the wooden bridge and onto the relative security of the flat stone platform.

The area at the top was wide open, and free of any obstacles except for a few tall wooden cranes. They were still used to bring materials up and down the sides of the bridge, although the main work of laying the wire over the

towers had been completed over a year ago. Only the capstones had yet to be put in place, allowing the wire to settle while the road was hung.

Nathan and Sarah had reached the top well ahead of Sir Dennis, and they were already arguing as he arrived. Her voice grew from a whisper to a controlled shout. “Two years ago they voted on giving women the right to vote in the United States Congress!”

Nathan frowned and let out a harrumph. “Which it failed to pass. Which it will *always* fail to pass,” he continued, waving a finger at her. “And that’s because once a woman is married it’s the job of the husband to decide what’s best for his family, the country, and his *wife*.”

She placed her hands on her hips. It was a provocative move in every sense of the word. “Well, I can think for myself, Nathaniel. Should a thinking woman simply exist at the whim of any man who takes a fancy to her?”

The young man pondered her question for a moment. “It clearly isn’t good for *anyone* if pretty girls spend their days worrying about money and politics.”

“Well I can promise you, Nathaniel Winthorp, with that attitude you will never need to worry about making those decisions for me.”

He frowned, realizing that he’d gone too far. “I’m sorry, Sarah.” His tone was measured, but clearly angry.

Darby clucked his tongue loudly, grabbing their attention. “That’s quite enough from both of you. I won’t have this morning ruined by two bickering children.” He rested his hand on Tom’s shoulder. “We’ve been given an opportunity to see the world from an incredible vantage point that few people will ever experience, and I fully expect us *all* to appreciate it.” Scolding them had already put some color back into his cheeks.

Sarah walked over to him. “I’m sorry, Professor. Of course you’re correct.” She took a look around her, and her eyes widened as she turned her head. They were high above New York, with a clear view of the city for miles around. Just across the river, the shore of Manhattan was encrusted with docks stuffed to bursting with ships of different shapes and sizes.

Beyond them the city of New York was laid out in a well-ordered maze of streets. In contrast the buildings that defined them were completely random: a jumble of wooden and brick structures of different heights and

sizes. The steam and smoke poured into the air from thousands of chimneys—proof that this city no longer slept, and barely even rested on a Sunday. Only the steeple of the Trinity Church on the lower part of the island managed to clearly rise above the riot of human industry, and now they were looking down on it.

Directly below them the East River was crowded with boat traffic. Most of the ships were still the tall-sailed schooners that had transported men and goods from one end of the planet to the other for the past two centuries. But gliding in between them were modern paddleboats and steamers that seemed well on their way to utterly replacing the age of sail with one of steam, with the billowing gray clouds of vapor rising up from their stacks mirroring the city itself.

Sarah grabbed the Professor's arm. "It's truly marvelous, Sir Dennis. It's hard not to feel a bit godlike standing above the world like this."

"Seeing this humbles me," Darby countered. "It makes me realize just how many men there are in the world, and what they have managed to create." He walked over to his metal creation and removed his top hat. "Deploy the camera if you would, Tom."

Tom walked up to the edge of the tower and then eased his right leg backward. The knee bent at an unnatural angle until it was fully reversed. As he leaned down, his arms extended out on brass rods, reaching down until his hands were flat on the ground.

With his body firmly planted, his porcelain face mask pulled free of the rest of his metal skull and slid downward, revealing the interior of his head to be three brass ovals held apart by metal shafts springing up from his neck. The series of pipe whistles that he used to speak were visible now, along with a camera lens that sat in the center of his forehead.

"That's a wee bit disturbing," said Mr. Moloney. "How does he see with his face off like that?"

"Tom has a variety of cartridges that I can place into his head. Each one changes how he interacts and samples the environment around him." Darby's tone had slipped naturally into a teacher's cadence—firm and slightly superior. "So, while he has many ways of understanding the world, 'seeing' isn't actually one of them."

“What’s that mean?” asked Barry.

Nathaniel chimed in. “It means that the only reason he *has* a face is so there’s something to talk to. But he doesn’t actually have any genuine human features. No eyes, nose, mouth . . . or soul.”

“But,” Darby said loudly, cutting the young man off, “his sense of hearing is something quite extraordinary. It allows him to perceive things around him in ways we do not.”

The Irishman peered a little closer. “Like a bat then . . .”

“Something like that,” Darby replied, “except he can hear with his entire body, and not just his head.” The inventor turned back to his creation. “I’d like a complete set of photographs, if you would, Tom. And then collect the air samples that we discussed previously.”

“Of course . . . Sir Dennis.”

“And we’re going to be up here for a little bit, so I don’t want any more arguing.” He turned to the Irishman. He had slipped off his rucksack and was squatting over it, fiddling with something inside. “Perhaps, if Mr. Moloney here would be so kind, he could tell us about some of his experiences in the construction of this marvel.”

Looking back over his shoulder, Moloney nodded. “If you can give me just a few moments, Sir Dennis, I’m sure I’ll be able to tell all of you a few things that you might find quite surprising.”

Nathaniel moved closer to the Professor and tapped his shoulder. “If you have a moment, Sir Dennis—I wanted to ask you about the matter of the improvements to my flying harness.”

Darby frowned. “This is hardly the appropriate time or place to bring that up, Nathaniel. I’m still working on perfecting some of those ideas that we’ve discussed.” He rubbed his gloved hands together against the cold. “Certainly it would make sense if a way could be found to make the Turbine suit both lighter and stronger. In fact, I’ve already made a prototype that replaces the main engine, and updates some of the previously stiff elements using some of the same principles of tension and suspension being used on this bridge. It needs testing, but . . .”

Sarah’s voice cut through his speech. “Professor, look. . . . Is that a balloon on the horizon?”

Darby peered up and looked out across the skyline where she was pointing. "I believe you're right, my dear." A small black circle floated high above the river.

"It must be a hardy soul who would brave the skies in a wicker basket on a cold winter morning like this." Darby tucked his cane under his arm and reached into the pocket of his coat to pull out a small, leather-bound box. As he opened the lid, a pair of lenses slid up along thin metal rails and locked into place with a satisfying snap. With a quick flick of his wrist the eyepieces extended out into two telescopes. He put the back of the box up to his eyes. "Most peculiar. . . . It's larger than it first appears. The gondola is almost like a boat. . . . It also seems to have a propeller attached. . . . But what powers it? And who designed it?"

Nathaniel tapped his shoulder. "Sir Dennis? If we might, I'd like to continue our conversation."

"What?" The Professor lowered the device and shook his head slightly before gazing back. "Not now, Nathaniel! You're standing at the top of the world—enjoy it!" He compacted the lenses by pressing them back into their case. "Come by the Aereodrome when we're back at the mansion and I'll show you what I've put together." He slid the box back into his pocket.

Sarah's voice rang out urgently. "Professor—"

Nathaniel cut her off with an impatient growl. "Not *now*, Sarah. Can't you see we're talking about something important?"

"Oh, she knows it, lad," Barry said. "But I think she's referring to me, and I'd like yer attention as well."

The two men turned to look at the Irishman. A metal frame was lashed around his upper body. It was a complicated affair made of brass pipes, springs, and gears, all held together by a leather harness and straps pulled tight enough to dig into the cloth of his coat. But the most noticeable items were the two steel cages around his arms; each one holding in place a short harpoon tipped with a shining barb that sprouted out a foot from the end of it.

The Professor's voice was calm and even as he gave the command: "Tom, fire the emergency rocket."

A brass hatch in the Automaton's shoulder popped open, ripping through the fabric of his jacket. A cloud of white smoke sprayed up from the

hole, followed by a small rocket flying up and out of him. In an instant it rose a hundred feet into the air above them and then exploded with a green phosphorous glow that burned like a tiny second sun in the New York City sky.

“Neat trick, metal man,” Moloney exclaimed as he leaned back. Two long rods were attached to the back of the harness. When they touched the ground he braced himself against them. “But it won’t save you.” He put his right leg up against the Automaton and gave him a solid shove. One of Tom’s gloved hands scrabbled against the stone as he tumbled, but with his legs bent backward he couldn’t find any purchase against the granite. The mechanical man teetered on the edge for a moment; then his momentum carried him over and he disappeared from sight.

Darby bolted to where the Automaton had disappeared. “No!” He turned back to look at the Irishman. “What have you done?” Nathaniel knelt next to the Professor and held him back from the precipice.

Moloney nodded. “Removed a threat, Sir Dennis. . . . But that’s not my main job here today.”

Nathaniel jerked forward threateningly. “Who are you, really?”

“Easy now.” The Irishman smiled broadly through his red whiskers. “You’ve probably figured out that I’m not Moloney the foreman. But you can call me the Bomb Lance.”