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Haywired

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HAYWIRED

By Alex Keller



MOGZILLA

HAYWIRED

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Chapter One: It Begins



In the gardens of Castle Guggenstein, a young boy of no more than eleven or twelve strolled over to a cannon sitting on the well-kept lawn.

Next to the cannon was Mr Shawlworth. The old castle gardener stood peering over his half moon spectacles, trying to make sense of a piece of paper in his hands. 'Ah Ludwig,' he said, looking up. 'Ready?'

The boy called Ludwig nodded. 'Sure. What do you want me to do?'

'We're going for a field half a mile away this time. Can you lift the cannon forty-five degrees...'

Ludwig bent down and tilted the cannon until its dial read forty-five. 'Done.'

'Now, drop in the pod.'

On the ground near Ludwig's feet was a round metal ball about the size of a man's fist. He picked it up and shook it. Inside he could hear seeds bouncing around. He dropped it into the barrel and listened to it roll down, hitting the bottom with a satisfying clunk. 'And done,' he called over his shoulder.

'Good. Now you best stand back. Your dad'll have my head if you get hurt again,' said the gardener.

Ludwig stood next to one of the flowerbeds and watched as Mr Shawlworth stepped up to the cannon.

The gardener looked at the paper in his hand once more. 'It says I have to…' He reached out and a low hum came from the cannon, followed by a rumbling that slowly grew

louder. Then the ground began to shake.

'Is it meant to do that?' Ludwig asked uncertainly.

'Definitely,' said the gardener, not sounding very definite at all. 'And when this dial gets to a hundred I have to press…ah!' Mr Shawlworth hit one of the bigger buttons and jumped away, diving into a ball and covering his head with his hands. However, after a few moments of silence, he peered up to see Ludwig standing looking unconcerned.

Nothing had happened.

'It hasn't worked,' said Ludwig.

Mr Shawlworth began to get up. 'Well, at least it didn't–'

BOOOOOOMMMMMM!!!!

The explosion was tremendous. A great gust of wind knocked the gardener face down again with a grunt. 'Agh! Hellfire!' he cried, covering his head as clods of earth and shards of metal crashed into the lawn around him.

Ludwig, meanwhile, had found himself lying in the flowerbed covered in petals. He wiped the flowers from his face and looked up to see the metal pod shooting up into the sky at an incredible speed, clipping the side of the castle on its way.

'Your father's not going to like this,' said Mr Shawlworth when the ringing in his ears had died down. He looked at the hole that had been left in the ground. 'And that's going to be a right nightmare to sort out.'

Ludwig sat up. 'At least it fired in the right direction this time,' he said.

Mr Shawlworth shrugged and pulled out his pocket watch. 'You need to go, lad, you've got your lessons.'

Ludwig got up, nodded, and, swaying slightly, made his way back inside the squat castle he called home.

This was how many of his mornings began.



In the kitchens, Ludwig found Mrs Pewsnitt, the castle housekeeper, washing the breakfast dishes. Her husband sat at the table with a cup of tea in one hand and the paper in the other. He usually popped in to visit his wife at this hour. Father didn't mind. They both looked up when he opened the door.

'Morning love,' Mrs Pewsnitt cooed. She passed Ludwig a freshly-made bacon sandwich, which he took gratefully. 'Nothing broken this morning I 'ope?'

'No,' said Ludwig shaking his head. He slid onto a chair, dropped his plate on the table, and started on his breakfast.

'All right, lad?' said Mr Pewsnitt. 'How goes the new thingumabob? We 'eard Arthur cursing all the way in here, as well as the explosion of course.'

Ludwig mumbled something between mouthfuls and Mr Pewnitt looked at him oddly. 'Nothing to worry about,' Ludwig finally managed. 'Thanks Mrs Pewsnitt!' he got up and ran out of the room.

'Strange lad,' said Mr Pewsnitt before returning to his paper.



Ludwig made his way through Castle Guggenstein's great hall and up the staircase that led to its library. Behind the library doors he could hear the faint sound of music that meant his father was inside. Opening one, he stepped through.

The library was vast. Row upon row of bookcases led away from the main doors, each one crammed from floor to ceiling with books of every possible size and length. Ancient myths sat next to astronomy that sat next to advanced mathematics and music theory, all jumbled together in no apparent order. Ludwig wandered between the books towards the light at the end of the main aisle. Soon enough, the shelves ended and the room opened up to a space in which stood an old desk, a comfortable leather chair, and to

one side, an odd-looking piano.

At the odd-looking piano sat his father.

Mandrake von Guggenstein had his eyes closed when Ludwig arrived. He was tall, and like Ludwig, dark and thin. At this precise moment he sat with his shoulders straight and his head tilted slightly to one side as his long fingers danced across the piano's keys, lost in his music and seemingly totally unaware of his son standing nearby.

Until...

'My boy,' Mandrake said gently over the melody. 'Did our cannon perform its duties admirably?'

'Well...' mumbled Ludwig. 'Not exactly.'

'Hmm?'

'It left a hole in the garden and we're not sure where the pod went; but at least it *fired* this time.'

Mandrake sighed. 'Ah, that's better than yesterday at least. Oh well, it can't be helped; we are scientists after all and mistakes will be made.' He dropped the piano cover, walked over to one of the shelves and took a book, not bothering to check the spine. 'Now, sit down and we will begin.'

Ludwig climbed into the chair behind the desk and waited.

'Magdaliana's *Metallugica*,' Mandrake said, tapping his hand on the book and pushing it under Ludwig's nose. 'We'll continue from page two hundred and thirteen.'

Ludwig flicked to the right page and cast his eye over complex signs and patterns. Then he took a pencil and waited while his father cleared his throat.



'Ludwig,' said his father later that day, 'We'll finish here for now. Put your books away.'

Ludwig cleared his things and got up, but as he made his way back to the kitchen for lunch, his father called him back.

'I'm not quite done with you yet.'

Ludwig smiled. 'It's ready?' he asked.

His father didn't reply. Instead, he pulled out a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and pinned it to the desk with a couple of paperweights.

Ludwig went over and looked down. It *was* the new project. 'What about the cannon?' he asked.

'We can put it to one side for awhile. This is far more important.'

The thing on the paper was human-shaped, with two arms and two legs attached to a round, stocky body. The machine's head was pushed forward so its top was at the same level as its shoulders, and on its head was nothing more than two bulbous, glassy lumps, like the eyes of a fly. Overall, the whole thing looked like an overweight praying mantis.

'What is it?' Ludwig asked.

'An Heuristic Engine with Learning and Obedience Tailoring,' replied his father.

'A what?'

'It's a bit of a mouthful I know, so I've called it the HELOT for short.'

Ludwig looked over the design. 'What does it do?'

'Let me show you.'

His father leaned over the desk and flicked a switch. There was a buzzing sound followed by the clattering of dishes. 'Mrs Pewsnitt, can you hear me?' Mandrake called out.

'Loud an' clear, sir. No problem! What can I do for yer?' came the voice of the housekeeper.

'Could you be so kind as to bring us our lunch in the library today?'

'Right you are dear!' The radio went silent.

Mandrake took his son by the shoulders, turned him so he was facing the doors, and lent down to speak in his ear. 'Now watch.'

A minute later, the library doors opened. Mrs Pewsnitt came in with a silver tray in her hands. She let out a sigh and slowly made her way to Ludwig and his father, careful not to drop anything.

'Where would you like it, sir?' she asked politely.

'On the desk please,' replied Mandrake.

Mrs Pewsnitt put the tray down and rubbed her back. 'Oh that's better,' she muttered. Suddenly she glanced at Ludwig and his father as if she'd forgotten they were there, then quickly took her hands away from her back. She looked embarrassed. 'You've got pork, potatoes, and veg. Plus a glass of wine for you, sir, and water for Ludwig, of course.'

'Thank you Mrs Pewsnitt,' said Mandrake.

'Anything else dears?'

'No. This will be more than adequate I'm sure.'

Ludwig just shook his head.

'Right you are,' she finished and hobbled away out of the library, closing the door quietly behind her.

'What did you notice boy?' Ludwig's father asked when the housekeeper was gone.

Ludwig was silent.

'Come on. What struck you?'

'Well, she's getting old...'

Mandrake patted his son on the back. 'Exactly. Did you see the way she moved? The effort? She's getting frail boy, and it's not just Mrs Pewsnitt. I think it's time to take the next step in our work.'

'You're going to replace her?' asked Ludwig, fearfully.

'No,' said his father, his eyes bright, 'We're going to *help* her.'



Chapter Two: Sir Notsworth O'Reilly



The months passed quickly as father and son worked on the HELOT. Each morning they would rise early and, after breakfast, disappear into the workshop for the rest of the day. Mrs Pewsnitt rarely saw them until dinner.

Then, one spring afternoon, Ludwig wiped his brow and pulled the blowtorch away from a leg joint he was welding. He took a step back and admired his work. 'It's nearly done!' he called out.

His father looked up from the clockwork innards across the room. 'Not long now.'

Just as Ludwig was about to turn the torch back on and get back to work, a loud chime echoed through the castle. 'Someone's at the door!' he cried in surprise.

'Were you expecting anyone?' asked his father, quietly.

Ludwig shook his head. 'No.'

'Neither was I.'

Ludwig rushed from the workshop and got to the main hall just in time to see Mrs Pewsnitt pull the lever that opened the front gates. Then she wobbled over to the heavy front doors and pulled them open. At this angle Ludwig couldn't see who had arrived, but the deep, booming voice that greeted the housekeeper was enough. He grinned.

'Mrs Pewsnitt!' the voice behind the door bellowed. 'Such a picture of loveliness as I ever saw!'

Ludwig watched the house keeper's face flush.

'Oh Sir, get away with yer!' she said, fanning herself with her hand. 'Come in! Come in! I'll call the Professor.'

'Thank you, my dear, but I'd like to surprise him myself. Is he in the library?'

'No sir, the workshop.'

'Hard at work eh? Excellent. I shall go to him forthwith.'

But before the man had taken two steps, he stopped as he caught sight of Ludwig bounding across the hall.

'Notsworth!' Ludwig cried.

The man's eyes lit up and he let out a great laugh. 'Ludwig! My boy! It's been far, far too long!'

Ludwig jumped up and wrapped his arms around the guest. The man threw him up into the air and caught him again before setting him down on the ground and looking him over.

'Well, you've grown lad and no mistake. How have you been? Not causing too much trouble for Mrs Pewsnitt here, I hope?'

Mrs Pewsnitt tittered and denied any wrongdoing while the big man waited for Ludwig to reply, but Ludwig was too excited to speak. The man chuckled, bent down, then pulled his shoulder bag round to his front and began to rummage inside.

'I think I might have something here for you,' he said, taking his time to go through the bag's contents. He began pulling out one strange item after another, only to put it back in his bag again with a shake of his head. 'No, that's not it,' he said rummaging again. 'No. It must be here somewhere...'

'Notsworth, please!' Ludwig moaned.

The man looked up at Ludwig and gave him a wink. 'Ah! Here we go!'

He pulled out his hand once more, and between his fingers was an oblong shape wrapped in brown paper, tied with an ordinary piece of string. Ludwig grabbed the package and tore the paper away, letting the string fall to the floor still knotted. The man looked on and laughed.

Inside was a book. Ludwig read the title: *The Travels of Sir Notsworth O'Reilly, Adventurer: Vol. XIII*. 'You've finished it!' he cheered. 'I've been waiting so long! Thank you!'

Ludwig looked at the picture on the cover. There stood Sir Notsworth O'Reilly, dressed in his explorer's uniform, with one hand on his waist and the other holding a huge elephant gun. Under one foot was a giant white tiger; its eyes closed and its paws crossed underneath its head. Ludwig pointed at the beast.

'Is that Abberati?'

'Of course. She looks really dead, doesn't she? You should have seen the artist's face when I told him he had to paint her! I nearly had to nail his feet to the floor!'

Ludwig opened the book and flicked through the pages. As he read, he didn't notice the footsteps behind him. He jumped when his father spoke.

'You spoil the boy, Notsworth.'

Notsworth stood up and grinned. 'Bah, I don't spoil him enough.' He rubbed Ludwig's hair with one hand and then walked over to Mandrake with the other out-stretched. 'Greetings, old man.'

Mandrake took his hand and shook it. 'A pleasure, Notsworth, as always. Will you be staying for dinner?'

'Do you have to ask?' Notsworth replied.



The dining room of the castle was only used for special occasions, but when those occasions arrived, the best silver was laid out, the candles lit, and Mrs Pewsnitt put a lot of extra effort into her meals. A visit from Sir Notsworth O'Reilly could certainly be considered special.

Sitting at the table, Ludwig tried to force just one more piece of lamb into his mouth while he thumbed through

Notsworth's book, ignoring the disapproving looks from his father. The explorer sat next to him and Ludwig bombarded him with questions at every opportunity. He only saw Sir Notsworth O'Reilly once a year at best despite him being his father' closest friend, and any opportunity to get him to tell his stories was not to be missed.

'And then what happened?' Ludwig asked excitedly.

'As I ran down into the valley, I knew I was in trouble,' replied Sir Notsworth. 'Fortunately, I'd managed to lose the beasts that had been trailing me all night, but supplies were running low and things were getting worrying. On top of that, I could see a storm brewing...'

Ludwig didn't look impressed. Wild animals were scary, weather wasn't.

'Nothing like what you get here,' Sir Notsworth exclaimed. 'The storms in Hryic are brute things! Raindrops that'll leave a dent in your head! Wind that'll sweep you off your feet and over the nearest cliff!' He waved a chicken leg around his head to show the massiveness of the storm. 'So I pulled out the old telescope and took a peek around. Down below, I spied a group of huts. Ah ha! I thought to myself, this could be promising. I'd heard rumours the tribes around here weren't overly keen on strangers, but needs must and all that.'

Ludwig nodded keenly.

'So I made my way down the hillside, all battered and bruised, and got to a village more dead than alive. I caught sight of a few natives and begged them for a bite to eat and a place to keep out of the storm–'

'And they helped?'

'If only! They took one look at me and started screaming! A few minutes later all their chums had come out to join the fun, spears and all. I thought I was a goner! But with whatever strength I had left, I made a run for it. It was a close thing,

but thank Azmon there was a river not too far away. I made my way to it post haste and jumped in, hoping the current would carry me somewhere a bit less threatening.'

'Didn't they follow you?'

'No lad. I think they were put off by the hundred-foot drop! As I always say, possible death is better than certain death. So I jumped and they didn't, and I live to tell the tale.' The big man leaned back, looking rather happy with himself.

Ludwig smiled. 'Is that where you've just come from?'

'Oh no, I got back from Hryic months ago. I've been on government business since then.' Notsworth lent close and tapped his finger to his nose. 'All very hush hush.'

'And how *are* our fearless leaders?' asked Mandrake, suddenly more interested in the conversation.

'Well enough,' replied Notsworth. 'They're the reason I'm here if I'm honest with you.'

'Oh?'

'Indeed, old man.' Notsworth paused and looked uncomfortable. 'Look, we need to have a little chat.'

Ludwig's father let out a sigh. 'What do they want *this* time Notsworth? I'm rather busy. I assume the war is going well.'

'Well old chap, about that... There have been a few developments...'

Mandrake's eyes narrowed. 'Go on.'

Notsworth set down his knife and fork, and then unbuttoned the top of his shirt. 'Look, to make a long story short, it looks like the war's coming to an end. Good news eh?'

Mandrake said nothing. Then he got up and quietly spoke to Ludwig. 'Could you excuse yourself, my boy. I must talk to Notsworth alone. There may be words.'

'But I want to know what happened!" Ludwig replied.

'It wasn't a request, Ludwig. Leave. Now.'

Ludwig was about to argue, but the look on his father's face made him stop. 'Fine,' he said quietly.



Back in his room, Ludwig climbed onto his bed and thought about what Notsworth had said. *The war is coming to an end?* And to be sent away just as the conversation was getting interesting, it was infuriating! The war between Pallenway and Galleesha had been going on for as long as Ludwig could remember. Each day there were reports in the newspaper saying Pallenway had taken this town or Galleesha had defeated that army. Thousands of lives had been lost.

Ludwig huffed angrily and looked over to his night stand. On it was Notsworth's book. He picked it up again and started reading to take his mind off what was going on downstairs. However, as he turned the pages, something distracted him. He looked up, searching the room. He thought he could hear a slight sound coming from one corner. It was faint, on the edge of hearing, but definitely there. He put the book down and got up off his bed, following the sound over to the chest of drawers on the other side of his room.

As Ludwig got nearer the sound became clearer, and by the time he got to the drawers he was sure he knew what it was. He could hear his father and Notsworth talking!

He bent down to try to look behind the drawers. There was a glint in the darkness! He was sure of it. Something metallic shone down there. Ludwig moved the things from the top of the drawers onto the floor, and then he put his fingers to the drawers' edge closest to the wall and pulled. The drawers were heavy, but with a few strong tugs they came away. Behind, he found a metal grating. Warm air came out of it along with the voices.

They're in father's study, thought Ludwig. *No-one is allowed in there, ever...* He lowered himself down and listened.



'Our "great" government. Those cowards!' Ludwig heard his father cry, 'No spine and no pride. I should petition for their removal!'

'Steady on old chap!' came Notsworth's voice. 'Saying things like that could get you in front of a judge in other company!'

'They're a failure, Notsworth. Completely and utterly.'

'But–'

'A failure! And Galleesha! That abominable country needs to be wiped off the map! If I had my way it would be nothing but dust and cinders by now.'

'We barely remember what we're fighting for anymore Mandrake. Be reasonable.'

'I know *exactly* why I'm fighting.'

'Anyway...' said Notsworth, sounding to Ludwig like he was trying to change the subject. 'The boy looks fine.'

'What?' said Mandrake distractedly. 'Yes, yes, he's doing extremely well.'

'Last time I saw him I think he barely came up to my knee! Bright too by the sound of it.'

'Did you expect anything less?'

'Of course not old man, not with you at the helm.'

'Indeed.'

There was a short uncomfortable silence.

'No... problems then?'

A pause.

'How do you mean?'

'Well, you know. What with Hephaestus and all that... nothing untoward has occurred I hope.'

Mandrake relaxed. 'No. He appears as any child should.'

'Oh, that's good.'

Ludwig heard his father sigh. 'Hephaestus was such a shame. So much promise. If only I could have helped him before... well, it's in the past now.'

'These things happen. You weren't to know.'

'But still…'

'Ludwig will be fine I'm sure.'

'Of course. He hasn't been affected, thankfully.'

'Have you told him yet?'

'No. He doesn't need to know. His brother was the past. It's best for him if he never finds out.'

From somewhere near the roof there was a loud gasp. Both men looked at each other.

'Ah,' said Notsworth.



Ludwig fell back from the grate and sat down heavily. He stared at the opposite wall, stunned.

Minutes later, his bedroom door burst open and his father stepped in. Mandrake took one look at the grate and the pulled out drawers, then another at Ludwig.

'I have a brother?' said Ludwig.

'Boy, you know better than to eavesdrop on other people's conversations.'

'I have a *brother*!?'

His father walked over and sat down beside him. '"Had", I'm afraid,' he said softly. 'Oh child, I didn't want you to find out like this.'

'You weren't going to tell me at all. You just said so.'

'No. I wasn't.'

'Why?'

'Because...' His father's eyes wandered around the room.

‘Because I thought it would upset you. You had a brother but he passed away a long time ago. Why should I burden you with the loss of someone you never even knew? Telling you didn’t seem to matter.’

Ludwig looked at his father. ‘I deserved to know anyway.’

‘Perhaps,’ his father replied. ‘I wasn’t trying to be deceitful, but what with your mother...’ he put his hand on Ludwig’s arm. ‘I’m sorry.’

Mandrake was about to get up when Ludwig caught his jacket.

‘What happened to him?’

‘He suffered from a terrible disease that wracked his body. He didn’t live long. It was always a concern that you may suffer too, but thankfully it looks like you are well. And you’re much older than he was when he passed.’

Ludwig was silent. His father stood up and placed a hand on his son’s head before quietly leaving the room.

