Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Time Riders: The Doomsday Code

Written by

Alex Scarrow

Published by

Puffin Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

PROLOGUE

2044, Chicago

'So, ladies and gentlemen,' said the man, 'this is what you all came to see. In just a moment I'm going to step inside that Faraday cage and *disappear.*'

Right, so he IS just another fruitcake. Anna Lopez shook her head. *That's all I need*.

Her eyes met one or two of the other members of the small audience, journalists like her. She recognized a few faces: a reporter who covered science and environment issues for one of the Euro News digi-stations; a science editor for a Stamford-based technology e-periodical. They'd all received the small vanilla-coloured invitation card last week with just a few words of explanation printed on it. An invitation to come down to a place called Larkham's Gallery 'to witness the demonstration of a technology that is going to change the lives of every man, woman and child on this troubled planet'.

Anna Lopez sighed. The world could sure do with a bit of good news.

Larkham's Gallery sounded nice. Like a nice little boutique gallery where there'd hopefully be wine and nice little savoury things on silver trays being offered around. Instead they were sitting on three rows of uncomfortable plastic school chairs in a grim-looking warehouse with a fizzing strip light overhead and the echoing *tap tap tap* of rainwater dripping through somewhere.

'The cage itself takes the charge and will distribute it evenly around me, creating a space big enough for me to –'

'To what? Make you vanish?' called out someone from the row behind. 'My kid can do that trick with his old Chuckle Cheese magic set.'

Someone snorted coffee into their styrofoam cup.

'No,' said the man on the stage. Anna had forgotten his name again. She looked down at the scribbled notes on her T-Pad.

Waldstein. Even the name sounded corny.

'No!' he snapped, silencing a ripple of laughter. 'This isn't a party trick!'

Anna raised her hand. 'Mr Waldstein?'

'Uhh . . . yes?'

'You say you're going to *vanish*?'

Waldstein nodded. 'I will be transported *elsewhere* for a period of no more than a minute.'

'Uh-huh, *transported*.' She nodded. 'Where, exactly?'

He grinned, pushing frizzy coils of salt-and-pepper-coloured hair out of his face to reveal eyes as wide as a child's behind the glint of his glasses. 'Another moment in time,' he announced theatrically.

Behind her she heard a chair scrape the cold concrete floor and someone mutter, 'Idiot,' and the receding clack of footsteps. Either side of her she could hear and see the other journalists shuffle awkwardly.

Time? The poor deluded old fool seemed to be talking about time travel. She decided he was clearly in need of some sort of help; perhaps he needed to be in a place with padded mint-green walls and soothing music. Other chairs began to scrape noisily. It looked like this madman's pitiful little charade was over already. She almost felt sorry for him.

'Don't go!' Waldstein shouted. 'Please! Stop right there!' The footsteps stopped. 'I'll show you right now!'

Anna watched him huddle over a wobbly picnic table on his makeshift stage of stacked wooden pallets. He tapped the keys of a battered and beaten old laptop. Beneath the table was something that looked like a copper boiler, cables snaking in one end and out the other and over towards a tall wire cage. She heard the low hum of power surging inside the copper device, and the lights in the warehouse began to dim. It was then that it occurred to her the fool's little contraption was drawing mains electricity.

Oh my God, he's going to fry himself. Right here. Right in front of us!

Waldstein stepped smartly over the cables and opened the door of the wire cage. 'Just you watch!'

She stood up. 'Mr Waldstein, I think you should –'

Waldstein stepped inside and slammed the cage shut with a loud clang that echoed around the warehouse. The humming was growing louder. 'Ladies and gentlemen!' Waldstein's voice rose to a shout over the noise. 'You're about to witness the very first journey through time!'

'Mr Waldstein.' Anna stepped forward. 'Please! You should stop this!'

She noticed that one of the digi-station journalists had pushed his way through the chairs and was filming the cage with his palm-cam. She shook her head with disgust. No doubt the sicko was hoping to catch the whole thing – catch this poor deluded Froot Loop frying himself like a potato chip.

Jesus . . .

Waldstein was smiling calmly at her through the wire. 'Don't worry, my dear, I'm going to be just fine!' he called out above the increasing hum of power building up towards a discharge.

'Please!' cried Anna, surprised at the sound of panic in her voice. 'Please! Just get out!'

Waldstein's smile was almost reassuring. 'I'll be fine, my dear. I'm going to see them again. I'm going to see them, touch them . . .'

'*Them?* Who? What're you talking about?' she shouted, but her words were getting lost amid the growing din.

Suddenly sparks began to dance along the wires of the cage.

'Stand back!' shouted someone. She realized the charge could quite easily arc across the space towards them. Instinctively she stumbled backwards several steps, bumping into an empty chair, barking her ankle painfully. The chairs were all empty now; everyone was on their feet. She could hear someone calling for the police. No one came here tonight so they could watch a man voluntarily cook himself – not even a crazy. And there were enough crazies out there these days.

Sparks sputtered from the cage and showered on to the floor. The strip lights across the warehouse ceiling fizzed, popped and went out, leaving them in a darkness lit only by the strobing flash of Waldstein's electrical execution. She could still see his silhouette in there, perfectly still, amid the curtain of sparks. Still, calm . . . not the thrashing and convulsing marionette she'd expected to see by now.

Then, with a soft pop – not a bang but a pop – and a gentle puff of displaced air, it all stopped. The sparks, the humming of power, the fizz and crackle of raw electrical energy. All still and silent. In the complete darkness she could hear the ragged breathing of everyone around her.

'Somebody better call an ambulance!' she heard a man utter.

A torch snapped on, and the beam swung round on to the cage.

'My God! Where is he?'

It was empty. Just as he'd assured them it would be. He'd vanished. Anna felt a surge of relief. She found herself laughing giddily. 'I'll be . . .' She shook her head. 'Well, that's what he *said*, right?'

Not everyone else seemed quite so relieved and amused by the spectacle.

'I didn't come here tonight just to see a magic show! I've got articles to file, ya know? *Real* work, not this kind of insane crud –'

A ribbon of sparks suddenly flickered along the wire of the cage.

'Whoa! Stand back, everyone! It's still live!'

Anna expected a repeat performance to begin, to cover his 'arrival' back in the cage. Smoke and mirrors, that's what magicians call it – the art of distraction. But instead through the wire she could see a faint ghostly glow; at first a pinprick, but quickly it expanded in diameter to several feet across, shimmering and undulating like water. How she imagined ghostly ectoplasm might look – if that kind of supernatural nonsense was for real.

'What *is* that?' someone uttered. The torch flicked off, allowing them to see the ethereal glow more clearly. Anna shook her head in the dark, as if the question had been addressed to her personally.

'No idea,' she replied. In the faint swirling light, she thought she could detect a vaguely human shape. Perhaps shapes – plural. Something in there, *someone*. *Some people*. An outline gradually became more distinct, as if drawing closer. Anna had the definite impression that the faint glow was *somewhere else*. As if – had the wire mesh not been in the way – she could have stepped forward and reached inside . . . and touched another place. Almost as if it was a shimmering, wavering doorway to another –

She caught herself. *What? Really? Seriously?*

'This is insane,' she whispered to herself.

The distinct form *was* human. She could see that clearly now. It seemed to be shuffling forward towards her, beginning to block out the swirling light of this 'other place'. Then all of a sudden the ghostly light was gone. It was dark. In the pitch-black she felt a puff of air on her face, flicking a tress of hair into her eye. She brushed it aside. There was something inside the cage. She could hear it breathing, fluttering irregular gasping coming through the mesh.

'Hello?' she whispered. 'Waldstein? Is . . . is that you in there?'

The breathing remained unchanged.

'Who's got that torch?' said someone behind her. 'Get it on the cage.'

She heard someone fussing with something, cursing as they fumbled for a switch too subtle for its own good.

'Waldstein?' whispered Anna. 'You all right?' The breathing faltered and stopped in answer to her question.

'Get the torch on!'

'I'm trying! I can't find the . . . Where is it?'

The poor man in the cage started to say something quietly. Anna leaned forward, finally brave enough to press against the wire mesh. It was still warm from carrying the electrical charge but not hot. And, thankfully, not live. 'You OK in there?'

'I . . . I've s-seen . . . it . . .'

'It's all right. We're going to get you out . . . and then we'll get an ambulance.'

'I . . . I've *seen it*,' his voice rasped.

Then behind her the torch snapped back on and shadows danced in all directions.

'He's in shock,' said Anna. 'Get the light on him.'

The beam swung down over her shoulder, casting a grid-work of leaping shadows around the warehouse. Through the

wire she could make out the man she'd seen moments ago: the man she'd thought needed medication and a nice comfortable padded cell in which to live out his delusion.

No burnt human carcass. That much was a relief. *But his face . . . his face*.

Those eyes beneath the frizzy lunatic hair and behind those madman spectacles were still round and wide, but not with the childlike wonder and excitement he'd been exhibiting before. Not any more.

It was terror. Sheer terror. The look of a mind utterly closed down to protect itself from insanity. At that moment she realized tonight had been no parlour trick. No stage magician looking for an audience, looking for publicity.

He's been somewhere. He's actually been somewhere. And for some reason she had a feeling he'd been gone far longer than a minute.

'What?' asked Anna Lopez softly. 'What just happened?'

His gaze, faraway, perhaps still looking upon another place, seemed to gradually return, slowly catching up with the rest of his body to arrive back in Chicago. His eyes focused on her – a gradual realization that he wasn't alone, that someone was just on the other side of the wire mesh.

'I . . .' His mouth opened, dry and cracked lips. 'I . . . I've s-seen . . . the end.'

Behind her she could hear someone making a call. Phoning an ambulance. Maybe some of them were hearing him. She noticed the sicko with the camera was still filming. Maybe he was disappointed not to have a smoking corpse to show his editor. Maybe this man's insane babbling was going to be an even better story to file.

'Waldstein?' uttered Anna. 'What do you mean . . . *the end*?'

She realized he was crying. A tear rolled down his cheek and

soaked into the bristles of his beard. The lost faraway look was finally gone. His eyes were on her. He suddenly looked around the cage. 'My God! This is . . . this has all got to go!'

'What? You mean your *machine*?'

He slammed a palm into the wire cage and it rang and rattled, echoing around the warehouse. 'THIS! Time travel! It's . . . it's going to destroy us!'

CHAPTER 1

2001, New York

Alone, Maddy watched a cluster of seagulls picking away at some rubbish tipped on to the low-tide silt of the East River. Overhead, traffic clunked rhythmically across the Williamsburg Bridge, the end-of-day mad-hour rush of city workers returning from Manhattan back to Brooklyn.

She tossed a small nugget of tarmac into the water, and watched the seagulls scatter at the sound of the splash.

My God. Her mind was still spinning with the idea. *My God, Liam is Foster?*

That's what the old man had said, wasn't it? That he and Liam were the *same* person; that he was once Liam. And now he'd said it, she could see he was right. She could see the likeness in their faces, in their mannerisms, even in the way they talked.

'Time travel did this to me. Time travel *aged* me, Maddy,' he'd said.

The fact that Liam was going to become that poor old man . . . something else for her to keep to herself until she figured that Liam was ready to hear it. She felt so lonely harbouring secrets like this; it separated her from the other two. It felt wrong. After all, they'd been *recruited* together: her, Liam, Sal . . . the three of them plucked from different times, from the very last seconds of their lives by the old man. They should be a team. There shouldn't be secrets between them. Not ones like this.

'*You're the team leader now*,' Foster had told her, '*it's down to you how and when you tell Liam about this*.'

She watched the seagulls cautiously return to peck and pull at the plastic bags on the silt.

'Just great,' she muttered to herself. Something else to churn away inside her, keep her awake at night. Because it wasn't just the Foster-is-Liam thing, was it? Oh no. There was that *other thing*, that scribbled message she'd found at their supply drop point . . . the one for her eyes only.

Maddy, look out for 'Pandora', we're running out of time. Be safe and tell no one.

She wondered what she was freakin' well supposed to make of that. It meant nothing to her. 'Pandora' – what was that apart from being a pretty stupid girl's name?

'Why does it have to be me?' Her soft voice caused a strutting seagull nearby to pause and cock its head at her.

'I'm not talking to you, dumb bird.' The seagull resumed its scavenging, one beady black eye still warily on her. She watched lights flickering on in Manhattan as the sun began to settle behind the two tall pillars of the World Trade Center.

Foster recruited you for a reason. Foster put you in charge for a reason. Because he knows you're smart enough to figure things out, Maddy.

She sighed. She'd really like to believe that . . . that she was *destined* to be a good team leader, a good TimeRider. But somehow, with the way things had gone so far, it all just felt . . . as if she'd been *winging it*, hanging in there by the skin of her teeth. Lucky not to be dead, or to have caused the deaths of Liam and Sal. Lucky not to have completely messed up the timeline. Lucky not to have destroyed the world.

Way too much stress for an eighteen-year-old girl to have to be burdened with.

'Darn right,' she uttered. 'Way too much.'