

IDUS
FÖRLAG

MICHAEL WIANDER

DEXTER OLSSON

ADVENTURES

®



EN HEMLIG VÄRD

I. CINNAMON BUNS AND SAMURAI

“THERE’S SOMETHING I have to tell you, Dexter,” Grandpa whispered, glancing around as if he suspected that someone might be eavesdropping.

His eyes lingered on the door to the living room, where they sat as usual, chatting in Grandpa’s sofa. Grandpa’s living room was certainly no ordinary living room. The walls were hung with unusual objects, and in the middle of the floor stood an enormous table with zebra-striped legs.

Dexter loved to sit on the floor, leaning against one of these table legs as he studied the walls. He could sit there for hours admiring the stuffed antelope head, the leopard hide, the African mask, the samurai sword, the spears and the shields, as he daydreamed about the African savannahs or the royal palace in the Far East.

On one of the walls hung a map of all the countries of the world. The map was marked with a large red dot for each capital city and a yellow star for each city Grandpa had been in. There were hundreds of yellow stars, as many as Grandpa’s thrilling stories. Dexter had been brought up on these stories, and he loved them more than anything.

There was nothing Dexter looked forward to quite as much as visiting Grandpa’s apartment after school. Best of all was the moment when Grandpa would get up and stretch, push his chair in under the desk and say with a yawn, “All right, Dexter, wouldn’t you say it’s time for a story?”

Before telling his story, Grandpa would go to the kitchen and put the kettle on for tea. He would then bring out some of his delicious cinnamon buns from the freezer, put them in the oven and set the big silver tray from India with the beautiful English teacups, the brown Persian rock candy and the colorful wooden spoons from Africa. The tea smelled heavenly as Grandpa carried the tray in to Dexter. It was a rare red tea from some country Dexter never managed to

learn the name of. Aside from the cinnamon buns, there was nothing in the world that smelled as wonderful as Grandpa's tea tray. It was a glorious combination of things from different continents, just like Grandpa's stories.

Every item in Grandpa's apartment had its own special story, and Dexter had heard every single one. His favorite was the story about the samurai sword. Even if it was a bit scary, Dexter still asked Grandpa to tell it again and again...

"The country was occupied by enemies, and the emperor of Japan had been taken prisoner. He was stuck, imprisoned in his own city along with all his soldiers. If nobody came to help them, they would be forced to serve the enemy as slaves for the rest of their lives. But two of the emperor's warriors had not been in the city when the enemy struck. They were both leaders in the samurai school, and they had been off visiting another country. Although they had reached 75 years of age, they were feared by everyone in all of Japan. No one could swing a flashing samurai sword as swiftly or surely as they. But the people had forgotten them, because they had been gone for over two years. Back then it took a really, really long time to travel to another country. Just crossing the sea took four months. They couldn't travel any faster because of the terrible storms..."

Dexter loved all the details in Grandpa's stories. He learned so much from them. The fact that it could take half a year to travel between two countries was something that he would think about for a long time afterward.

"... Luckily the two samurai happened to be on a boat to Japan, only two days' voyage from land. When they saw the smoke rising from the city's walls, they immediately understood what had happened and strapped on their freshly-polished swords. As soon as their feet touched Japanese soil, they set off as fast as they could up to the mountains to get an overview of the city. They quickly realized that they faced the most difficult challenge of their lives as they

counted over 1,500 enemy soldiers. After sitting down to make plans, they drew a map of the city in the sand, making lines left and right...”

Grandpa drew on the wall with his pointer finger, making the whole thing even more exciting.

“... At sundown they were ready to strike. Dressed in their black cloaks, with their samurai swords strapped to their backs like crosses (they each had two swords), and their long, black hair in stylish knots on the backs of their heads, they climbed down the mountainside. They carefully crept up close to the city wall and waited until the guard patrol had passed. Then they quickly threw up a grappling hook on a rope and silently scaled the wall. Their black clothes made them almost invisible in the darkness ...”

Now Grandpa began to pick up the pace. Dexter sat in suspense. This was his favorite part of the story, even if it was a bit scary.

“When they had reached the other side, they immediately started putting their plan into action. They split up, each taking one side of the city. One of the samurai searched for the place where the emperor and his soldiers were imprisoned. Upon finding it, he easily managed to defeat 20 guards without making a sound. His razor sharp samurai swords swished through the air fast as lightning, and all the guards fell to the ground. The emperor and his soldiers finally escaped from the prison, where they had sat as prisoners for several days without food or water. Luckily, the city’s food stores were right across the street from the prison. The samurai tried every key on the sizeable keyring he had taken and managed at last to unlock the door to the food stores. The emperor’s 500 soldiers stormed in and grabbed all the food they could...”

Dexter had a hard time imagining how hungry they must have been after not having eaten for several days. He knew how hungry he could get before lunch at school, on days when he had skipped breakfast. At times like that, even “gross” food could taste pretty good.

“... When they had had their fill and realized that they were free, they quickly regained their strength. But how would they make it without any weapons? Thankfully, the other samurai had already snuck around in the city and stolen the enemy soldiers’ weapons. Soon enough, every one of the emperor’s soldiers had a weapon, and in the middle of the night, while the whole city still slept, they snuck out and went into house after house, taking the sleeping enemy soldiers by surprise. The guards on the city wall sounded the alarm at once, blowing their trumpets. Soon enough, a battle was raging on the city streets. The samurai leaders’ swords flashed, and in less than thirty minutes they had each dealt with 500 soldiers, all on their own...”

Dexter found this story thrilling. He could see the two samurai in his mind’s eye, how they practically flew through the air with their flashing swords. What heroes!

“... When the enemy soldiers realized that they would not have a chance against the ferocious samurai, they quickly gave up and fled on their galloping horses. Not a single one of the emperor’s soldiers had gotten a scratch! They hurried to hug their wives and children, and that night, there was a great celebration in the city. The next day, the emperor declared the samurai leaders to be heroes and gave them each a samurai sword with a golden hilt, along with a sheath covered with red velvet. If the two samurai had not saved the emperor and his soldiers that day, no one knows if Japan would have existed today. Maybe it would have been a part of China instead...”

This was how Grandpa always ended that story.

Grandpa’s stories were usually a mixture of thrilling suspense and interesting facts, which was perhaps why Dexter learned more from Grandpa than he did at school.

But how had these valuable samurai swords ended up on the wall in Grandpa’s living room? Well, when the samurai died at the age of 120 (Grandpa explained that samurai lived that long because they ate such healthy food and exercised all the time), the swords ended

up in the imperial museum (later Tokyo's national museum) along with a statue of the two samurai heroes. Grandpa received the swords as a present from the prime minister of Japan as a thank-you for saving his daughter from a life-threatening poisoning.

For not only was Grandpa an explorer and a world-famous inventor and scientist, he was also a professor of biomolecular chemistry and an expert in producing antidotes and curing unknown, deadly diseases.

The Japanese prime minister was so thankful that he gave Grandpa one of the most valuable items in the country. At first Grandpa wanted to say no, but when he remembered that it was Japanese custom to always accept a gift, he gave in and accepted the swords.

Grandpa did not need any swords to fight the evil in the world – his peaceful research was quite enough – so the antique weapons ended up decorating his wall instead. And that was just fine for Dexter. He loved lying in the sofa and looking at the beautiful swords. But he was absolutely forbidden to take them out of their red, velvet-covered sheaths.

“Be careful not to take those swords out, Dexter! There's nothing in the world sharper than a samurai sword!” That's what Grandpa would always say whenever Dexter asked if he could look at them.

Once, after a lot of nagging, Grandpa had taken one of the swords down from the wall and carefully drawn it from its sheath. He was so afraid to drop it that he gripped it tightly with both hands as he held over the sofa so that Dexter could look at it for a brief moment.

Grandpa said that if the sword fell on the floor, he would never be able to pick it up again. It would go right through and get stuck in the rock-hard cement under the wooden floor. That's how sharp it was!

So Grandpa, or Carl Gustav, as he was known to adults, was a world-renowned explorer, among other things. And it was from all his travels around the globe that he had acquired the strange items that decorated his apartment. Dexter wondered how Grandpa could

be so many different things: explorer, scientist, inventor and Grandpa. Most people were either police officers or firemen or something else, not several things at the same time. Whenever he asked this question, Grandpa always gave the same answer:

“Dexter, who ever said that you can only be one thing in this life? I don’t understand people who manage to have only one career their whole lives. Why be a police officer for 50 years and then retire? No, you’ve misunderstood something there. You can be two, three, four or even more things during the course of your life. We decide for ourselves how much or how little we want to be.”

Personally, Dexter dreamed of being an explorer and having a map of his own over his desk at home. And maybe being a fireman as well. But of course, as everyone told him, he was too little to do these things.

Too little? What did that even mean, too little? Was it a matter of how many years one had lived or just a way of saying that one looked small? Why couldn’t “little” or “big” be about how one felt on the inside? Dexter felt very big, sometimes bigger than some grown-ups he knew.

When a grown-up said, “Someday we will do this or that…” one could know for certain that it would never happen. Dexter could hardly count the number of times his Mom had promised that they were going to go to the zoo on Saturday, only to get stuck at work almost all day after just “stopping by to pick up a few papers”. After three cups of hot chocolate from the big coffee machine and a few dry cookies, Dexter finally got his Mom all to himself for 45 minutes, before the zoo closed for the day.

“Sorry, Dexter, I’m really sorry, but you know what?” Mom would plead in her “forgive me” voice. “Tomorrow you and I will go to the movies – just you and me – what do you say?” Then she would look at Dexter with her innocent smile until he finally gave in.

And Dexter was forced to pretend that it didn’t make any difference, because he didn’t want to hurt his Mom’s feelings, even

though he was actually really sad on the inside and longed for a real Mom, who didn't work all the time. The hot chocolate at his Mom's work was one of his least favorite things. It tasted like "waiting for Mom", and time always passed far too slowly as he drank it. It felt like an eternity.

Grandpa's tea was much better. Whenever Dexter thought about it, he felt warm and happy all over.

Grandpa always had time for Dexter. He never said, "No, that's enough" or "sorry, I'm exhausted". Grandpa was the only grown-up who Dexter could really depend on. Grandpa always said, "What makes you big is how you treat those who are smaller."

And Dexter was always kind to those who were smaller, even if they were mean to him. But he knew a lot of grown-ups who could be quite unkind. Like the time the groundskeeper at school just came and took Dexter's scooter without saying anything. Later, Dexter heard that it was against the rules to ride his scooter in the schoolyard, because a little girl had hurt herself and had to go to the hospital after falling off her scooter.

What if the security guard at Mom's work just came and took all her work papers without saying anything? What if she was told that it was against the rules to carry big piles of papers, because some colleague had gotten hurt and had to go to the hospital because he or she had tripped by the copy machine? Dexter knew exactly what his Mom would have done. She would have written a letter and called and complained until the guard got fired.

But the groundskeeper still had his job at the school, even though Dexter had gone to the principal and complained.

Nobody cared about what children said. The groundskeeper could have just explained the situation to Dexter in a simple, friendly way. Then he would have made sure not to use his scooter in the schoolyard.

It seemed as if most grown-ups didn't like children. Everyone talked about children's rights all the time, but in reality, they didn't have any rights. The grown-ups decided things and did exactly as

they pleased without even thinking about the children. The grown-up world was strange and unfair.

Dexter loved his Mom, even though she was never there for him. He was proud to have a Mom who was an archaeologist – that was pretty cool. Now and then Dexter got to follow along on one of Mom’s digs, and that was really exciting!

“Dexter, pass me the little hammer...” Mom might say from down in a big hole, where she was busy unearthing an ancient pot. And then, “No, no, not that one, the smallest one! This is very fragile, and if we use the wrong hammer, we might break something that’s over 1,000 years old. Which would be a shame, since it should be on display in a museum.”

When they could see the pot, Dexter got to brush away all the dirt and sand with a small brush. That was the very best part – to finally see the “treasure”, as Dexter called it, after a long, intense and exciting wait.

It didn’t matter if it was a pot, a shield or some other old object. To Dexter they were all treasures. Dexter loved the moment when he finally got to brush away the ancient dust and he and his Mom tried to guess how old the treasure was, what it had been used for and who it had belonged to.

“This pot must have belonged to an important person – you can see that from the pattern on it,” Mom would say, looking just like a schoolteacher, with her glasses resting on the end of her nose.

Dexter would try to picture the scene. He imagined a Viking village with big, dangerous Vikings pouring sacrificial blood into the pot. Dexter had read in school that the Vikings sacrificed animals to their gods and poured out their blood, to get power and become stronger for battle. Dexter shuddered as he imagined the Vikings’ scarred faces and their terrible laughs.

The only thing that Dexter didn’t like finding was skeletons and skulls. When they found these, he did not want to brush them off. Unfortunately, this was the kind of thing Mom usually dug up. Her

whole room at the university was full of plastic bags with pieces of old skeletons.

When Mom was not out digging for old things, she usually sat in the laboratory studying skeletons from the excavations. When she had figured out how old a skeleton was – with a special method with a name that Dexter could never quite remember – all the pieces of the skeleton were given numbers and placed in clear boxes to be shipped to the Museum of Natural History.

Dexter did not understand why the skeletons were so important. He found them completely uninteresting, and honestly just plain creepy. But Mom said that every skeleton she found was like a little piece of the puzzle of human history. Mom always had answers to every question. She had probably gotten her longing to find answers to the mysteries of life from Grandpa.

“There’s something I have to tell you…” Grandpa whispered again.

Dexter scooted closer.

“Yes, Grandpa, I’m listening,” he answered quietly.

Grandpa regarded Dexter with a serious gaze, without the conspiratorial twinkle in his eyes that he usually had when he was about to tell one of his stories.

“So there’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you for a long time,” he whispered, turning his gaze toward the door to the balcony. “You can never be too careful…” he continued. “You never know if there might be someone eavesdropping. Come, have a seat in my chair.”

Grandpa led Dexter into his office, closed the blinds and shut the door properly. Dexter sat down in Grandpa’s big office chair and spun around in a circle, just as he always did. He began to feel a bit frightened. What could be so secret that Grandpa was worried about someone seeing him in his own home?

“Push the button,” Grandpa whispered, pointing to the desk. Dexter scanned the cluttered desk but could not find any trace of a

button. “Under the table”, Grandpa continued and seated himself in a chair across from Dexter.

Dexter groped along the underside of the table and found something that felt like a glass marble, like the ones that he played with at recess at school.

“Do you mean the marble?” asked Dexter.

“Yes, push it in all the way!” Grandpa said, meeting Dexter’s surprised gaze with a sharp look in his dark brown eyes.

Dexter clumsily pressed the mysterious button, and all at once, several very strange things happened.

2. GRANDPA'S SECRET HEADQUARTER

NOW DEXTER UNDERSTOOD why Grandpa had been so secretive.

Throughout his childhood, Dexter had sat and spun around in Grandpa's office chair many, many times, never suspecting that a secret world could be hiding there – right in this very office!

The lights went out and the walls were suddenly transformed into gigantic maps with lots of tiny red and green lights. The desk split in half and two large screens rose up, followed by a pane of something like glass that folded down to cover the entire desktop.

Grandpa pressed a few buttons, and the pane of glass lit up with numbers and letters. Dexter stared wide-eyed at the walls with their glittering red and green lights. He wanted to say something, but it was as if his tongue was stuck. Try as he might, he could not make a sound.

“Now we can speak aloud again,” Grandpa said, finally smiling as usual. “No one can hear us in here. It's completely cut off from the outside world. Not a peep can get through those soundproof walls!”

But Dexter wasn't smiling. He sat as if turned to stone, utterly flabbergasted. Shivers ran up and down his spine. Questions buzzed in his head like a swarm of bees:

- 1. Why did Grandpa need a room that looked like a military headquarters and that was completely soundproof and cut off from the outside world?**
- 2. Who was he afraid of?**
- 3. How long had Grandpa had this secret room?**
- 4. Who had built it for him? And above all:**
- 5. Why?**

Grandpa saw Dexter's concern and tried to lighten things up. "Welcome to my secret headquarters. What do you think?" he said with a smile on his face.

Secret headquarters? thought Dexter. Is Grandpa a spy? A secret police officer? Or maybe even a criminal? No, Grandpa definitely can't be a criminal since he's much too kind, but maybe a spy or secret police officer?

Dexter had read crime novels and seen action films about spies who lived double lives, sometimes acting completely normal and sometimes doing top-secret spy things.

Dexter still sat as if speechless. Grandpa walked around the desk and picked him up in his arms.

"I understand that you have many questions, Dexter. Things in this life are not always as they appear. There is so much more to discover, more than you could ever understand. But most things are hidden from ordinary human eyes," Grandpa said, stroking Dexter's blonde hair with his big hand.

But his words went unheard. Dexter did not understand anything.

"Are you a s-s-secret agent?" Dexter asked slowly, happy that he had finally regained his ability to speak and could stammer a few words.

Grandpa gave Dexter another serious look.

"It depends on what you mean by agent", he replied. "I'm not one of those people who run around shooting at people and driving fast cars up in the mountains and jumping out with a parachute when the car falls off a cliff. You've seen Agent Rex: Cold Blood, haven't you?" Grandpa asked suddenly.

Dexter nodded, surprised, since it was his favorite movie. He had seen all the Agent Rex movies, but he didn't know that Grandpa also liked them. Grandpa always told Dexter that it wasn't good to watch violent action movies, but Agent Rex was sooo thrilling!

"Do you remember when the evil Captain Ergo tries to kill Rex with a laser sword in the airship?" Grandpa asked.

Dexter nodded again. It was the most famous scene in all the Rex films.

“And you remember the scene where Rex locks himself into the airship’s laboratory and copies all the secret files from Ergo’s supercomputer?” Grandpa continued.

“Yes,” Dexter replied, wondering why Grandpa had suddenly started talking about Agent Rex.

“When Rex escapes the airship and it gets blown up, what’s the first thing he does?” Grandpa asked, even though he already knew the answer.

“He hurries to the British government and gives them the data files, of course,” Dexter answered. He wondered what Grandpa was getting at with all these questions.

“Yes, Dexter, and that is precisely the difference between me and Rex. I don’t have any boss who I have to answer to and do assignments for. An agent is someone who works for someone else, right?”

And Dexter could agree to that.

“I don’t have anyone who decides what I have to do,” Grandpa continued. “It is the problems of the world that decide for me: hunger, poverty, war, sickness and injustice. I’m no Agent Rex, but I dream of making the world a better place. I have spent my whole life looking for solutions to the world’s problems, and there is so much left to do.”

As he said this, Grandpa pushed a few buttons on his desk. Dexter was even more confused now. *Was Grandpa a secret agent or not?*

The screens flickered. One screen showed various parts of Grandpa’s apartment building. Some pictures were of Grandpa’s apartment, others came from the elevator, the street, the basement and the attic. In one of these closed circuit camera feeds, he could see old Mrs. Jansson waiting for the elevator. She tried to stop it from leaving by sticking her cane between the elevator doors. When the elevator left her behind, she hit the doors with her cane and waved her arms angrily. Dexter laughed to himself when he saw it.

All was quiet on the street, in Grandpa's kitchen and in the living room. In the basement, some of Grandpa's neighbors were moving boxes back and forth, and someone was walking their dog on the street. After a great amount of hesitation and a great deal of sniffing, it finally peed on a lamppost.

A strange camera feed suddenly caught Dexter's attention. This image was completely still. When Dexter examined the picture more closely, he found that it was Grandpa's attic. But why was the camera pointed toward one of the attic storage rooms?

"We'll go there next time," said Grandpa. "That's where it all happens."

Is there even more than this? Dexter wondered, astonished. *And what did Grandpa mean when he said, "That's where it all happens"?*

Grandpa pushed a button, and a video began to play on the other screen. Grandpa was in it! The film showed children in Africa getting shots. There were so many children that Dexter could not count them all. They looked very sad and tired. Some were crying and others were screaming. They were speaking a strange language. Then the film showed Grandpa receiving a prize and giving a speech in English.

"The children were infected with a deadly disease, and the shot they were getting was the antidote," said Grandpa.

"Did you help to save all those children?" asked Dexter.

"Yes, it was my medicine that we used in the shots. If I hadn't managed to produce the antidote, all the children would have died in two days."

"Was that when you got the African masks?"

Grandpa nodded.

"But how did the children get infected?" Dexter asked.

Grandpa's expression became grim. "Evan Kostroff... The most evil man in the world. He is suspected of manufacturing a colorful chewing gum infected with deadly bacteria and passing out sticks of it to children in the schools of Africa."

Grandpa fast forwarded the film and stopped at a scene with a large man with black sunglasses, surrounded by short figures dressed in black, with black hats.

“Kostroff is evil personified,” Grandpa said with a heavy sigh.

“Why would anyone want to kill children?” Dexter asked, not understanding anything about this Catastrophe fellow, or whatever his name was.

“No one knows for sure, but maybe it was to create chaos and divert attention from his diamond smuggling,” Grandpa answered.

“Diamond smuggling?”

“Yes, he has several illegal diamond mines in Africa to finance his space project...”

“But how could Catastrophe get away with it?” asked Dexter.

“His name is Kostroff, Dexter, not Catastrophe. Do you see those little men dressed in black, with the hats?” asked Grandpa.

Dexter nodded.

“Those are the Black Hats,” said Grandpa. “Kostroff’s henchmen. They would do anything to protect him! That’s why no one dares to oppose him – everyone is afraid of them. “Once, a journalist wrote an article about Kostroff in a newspaper. He wrote that Kostroff was really a thief and a bandit and that he should be behind bars. But the Black Hats tried to force him to write a public apology in the newspaper, along with an article saying that Kostroff was kind and helped small children. When the journalist refused, they tranquilized him and took him to Kostroff’s torture chamber, and you don’t want to hear the rest.”

“But did he write that article about Kostroff being kind to small children after that?” wondered Dexter.

“No,” Grandpa replied. “After his time in the torture chamber, that journalist never wrote anything again.

Dexter shuddered when he thought about the torture chamber.

“The Black Hats”, he said quietly, clenching his fists under the table.

3. EVAN KOSTROFF

IT WAS DEATHLY quiet in Grandpa's secret headquarters. Dexter still couldn't understand how it all fit together. He understood, at least, that Grandpa wasn't a secret agent, but all that stuff about Kostroff, the Black Hats and all the "world's problems" was too much for him.

Grandpa pulled out two cans of soda and gave one to Dexter. Dexter took a few swigs and carefully put the half-full can down on the glass table. A little bit of cold soda did him good. It reminded him of the world outside, which he was actually starting to miss now.

Strangely, he found himself wanting to go home again. Suddenly, his school, his Mom and his classmates (who he didn't really like) all seemed fairly okay. He missed the feeling of safety. But from this day onward, Dexter's life would never be the same again.

"Don't worry, Dexter, you can spill on the table," said Grandpa. "Nothing will break. The keys on the glass surface are digital."

"Why do you have a secret headquarters?" Dexter asked, almost accusingly. He didn't care about the soda at all.

Grandpa took a deep breath, stood up and began pacing back and forth in the room.

"Dexter, I want the world to be a better place. I want all people to have food, clothes and somewhere to live, and for everyone to be healthy. But first and foremost, I don't want any wars. I don't want people to make war and kill each other!"

Dexter was completely silent. That was something he hadn't thought about since the first time he had watched TV, when he was three years old. He would never forget what a shock it was...

He had been playing with his blocks as Dad sat in the sofa reading the paper. Suddenly Dad said, "All right, now it's time for the news", and turned on the TV.

The only "news" Dexter knew about at the time were new flavors of yogurt and cereal, the kind that are extra delicious the first time you try them.

But what Dexter saw on the news was not at all like any new, wonderful flavor of yogurt.

Instead of the fun film about trains that his Mom usually put on for him, the TV now showed exploding bombs, people bleeding, and starving children with really big bellies and flies all over their faces. Of course Dexter started to cry and call for Mom, but she wasn't home, and Dad wasn't as good at comforting. All he could say was, "That's just what it's like out in the world, Dexter. It's not really anything to cry about."

That night, Dexter couldn't sleep. Dad explained that "there's always lots of war and injustice in the world because people are so mean", but it didn't help. Dexter could not understand how there could be people out there killing each other.

When Dexter asked why the little boy on TV had such a big stomach and no clothes, Dad said that he "didn't get any food" and that his family didn't have any money. And when Dexter asked, "Why?" Dad couldn't answer. He just said that a lot of people in the world were "poor"...

Now Dexter gathered his courage and broke the silence:

“Dad always said that you can’t change the world. He said that it is the way it is, and that you can’t think about it too much.” Dexter was surprised that he used an example from *Dad*. He usually never did that, and he immediately understood how dumb it sounded.

Dexter’s Dad had left Mom when Dexter was four years old. Dad wanted to move to some other place, really far away, since he said he wasn’t a “big city” person. But Mom didn’t want to move, since she had her job and wanted to live close to Grandpa. Dad moved anyway, and after that, Dexter barely saw him anymore.

It was really far to travel to Dad’s new house. But Dexter didn’t think about it that much anymore. Though he missed seeing someone hug Mom.

“Your Dad could not be more wrong,” Grandpa said, waving his arms. “Of course you can change the world, if you just give it your all and refuse to give up! ONE person can make a big difference in this world, Dexter, never forget that! But just as a single person can make the world a better place, ONE person can also make the world much worse! I don’t dare to think what Kostroff would do if he got ahold of my inventions.”

“Is that why you have a secret headquarters?” asked Dexter. “Because of Kostroff and the Black Hats?”

Grandpa nodded and then glanced at one of the camera feeds. Old Mr. Bengtsson was stepping out of the elevator on the ninth floor. He had his attic storage unit beside Grandpa’s.

“Tell me more about Kostroff,” Dexter said, looking at Grandpa with a grown-up expression.

“Do you really want me to?” asked Grandpa.

“Yes, Grandpa, tell me,” said Dexter, who was now more curious than scared.

“Okay, but don’t forget that you asked for it,” Grandpa said, sitting down with Dexter in his lap as he always did whenever he was going to tell one of his stories.

“Kostroff was born in Antarctica. His parents were famous scientists who were both stationed at a research lab there. His Mom was from Soviet Russia and his Dad was from America. At a research base, lots of scientists live together. Some live there for several years and others for just a short time before they go back home. The scientists are the only inhabitants of Antarctica, since it’s too cold for normal people to live there. Kostroff grew up in winters as cold as 80 degrees below zero, and he quickly learned to handle incredibly cold temperatures. There were no other children in Antarctica, so Kostroff grew up completely without friends. And his parents were always busy with their research, so he was almost always alone.”

“Didn’t he have any friends at all?” asked Dexter.

“No, Kostroff was the only child in Antarctica, so there was no daycare or school there, and there were no playgrounds either. But I’ve heard that there are good sledding hills, so I hope that Kostroff had a sled at least. Though when it is colder than sixty degrees below, you can’t be outside at all. That’s so cold that if you spit, the saliva freezes to little round pieces of ice before it reaches the ground and bounces away like little marbles. Kostroff could only go sledding if it was 40 degrees below or warmer.”

40 degrees below zero? Dexter could see why one couldn’t be outside when it was that cold. He knew that it was 20 degrees below zero in the ice cream freezer.

He tried to imagine how it felt to spit and see one's spit freeze to small pieces of ice before it reached the sidewalk. The thought sent chills down his spine.

"Isn't there any summer in Antarctica?" he asked.

"Yes, but it never gets warmer than about ten degrees above zero in the summer," Grandpa replied. He continued to tell his story:

"Because there wasn't anything else to do, Kostroff started getting interested in books and science. He spent all day every day in Antarctica's library, and he read through all the books that were there. He even read some books two or three times! When he was ten years old and had studied all the school subjects up to seventh grade, he wanted to try to do the final exams for both the Russian and American school systems. But when he finally got ahold of the tests and did them, he found them so easy that he lost interest completely. He wondered what children did all day in school, since the tests were so easy. After that, he did not go to the library for a long time. Kostroff had assumed that all the children in the world loved knowledge as much as he did, not that they just played and watched TV. When he found out the truth, he became sad and began to despise the world. Instead of books, he developed an interest in space and other planets. Every evening he sat and looked through an enormous telescope that they had at the research base. It was then that he got the idea of building a new world up in space, with only smart people who don't watch TV."

"Is it possible to live up in space, Grandpa?" asked Dexter.

"Yes, well, for Kostroff nothing is impossible, I guess, but the question is why one should have to live in space? I think it seems

a bit inconvenient, and humans are probably not made to live anywhere except on Earth,” Grandpa replied and continued:

“When Kostroff was 12 years old, he moved back to America with his parents. He got to start in a special school for gifted children, but he didn’t make it through the first day without arguing with the teachers. He laughed at them and said that they were stupid. Kostroff’s parents didn’t know what they should do, so finally they sent him to a boarding school in Switzerland, a school for the world’s smartest children. It was way up in the mountains, completely cut off from the world outside. There, Kostroff finally felt at home and made many good friends – friends who would later become a part of his global organization.”

“Have you met Kostroff?” asked Dexter.

“I’ve seen him, but I’ve never spoken with him”, Grandpa replied.

“But how do you know so much about him, then?” Dexter wondered.

“I know some people who have worked very closely with Kostroff, they have told me everything”, said Grandpa and continued to tell his story:

“Kostroff spent over ten years of his life up in the mountains of Switzerland. By the age of 25, he had earned PhDs in chemistry, physics and math. He was at the top of his class, and his teachers wanted him to try to get the Nobel Prize, but Kostroff was not the least bit interested.”

Dexter could not understand this. *What could be better than winning the Nobel Prize?* he thought. *You’d have to be crazy to say no to that!*

“Kostroff was completely possessed by the thought of building his new world up in space. When he had left Switzerland, he settled among the eskimoes in Greenland, to get away from all the stupid people. From there, he began to get in touch with some of the richest people in the world in order to get money for his space project. Many became interested in Kostroff’s idea and gave him a lot of money. He promised them that they would get their own cities in his new space world. When he had received the money, he contacted the best students from the school in Switzerland and convinced them to start working for him. Many agreed, but most of them left him after a short time. They thought that he had lost his mind. His ideas were getting crazier and crazier. For example, he said that he was going to take control of the whole world’s economy. But many believed that Kostroff was right, and that he was doing something important for humanity.”

“How could they believe Kostroff?” Dexter asked indignantly

“Well, one could certainly wonder about that, Dexter, but a skilled speaker like Kostroff can get people to believe almost anything.” Grandpa continued:

“Along with those who chose to remain, Kostroff formed a global organization, ‘the New World’. The members of the New World thought that they were smarter than everyone else on Earth, and that it was their duty to create a better world in space. Since then, they have gathered the world’s richest people around their project, but nobody knows how many or who are involved, because they have secret meetings deep underground. And no one knows how far they’ve come, either. The only thing that is certain is that the future of the Earth and of humanity is at stake.”

“Does the New World still exist today?” Dexter asked uneasily.

“Oh, yes, Dexter!” Grandpa replied. “They are more active now than ever!”

“But how old is Kostroff now?” Dexter wondered.

“Well, maybe about 50 years old, but he is racing against time to finish his space project before he gets too old,” Grandpa replied.

“Is that why Kostroff wanted to have all the diamonds from Africa?” asked Dexter, remembering the film with the children getting shots.

“Yes, but that is just a small part of all of Kostroff’s crimes against humanity. He would do anything to get more money for his project. And some of the rich people in the world, even people in charge, are protecting Kostroff so that he won’t end up in jail. They are involved in his project!” Grandpa shook his head and sighed.

“But why does he need your inventions?”

“You will understand when you have been in the attic...”

Suddenly one of the screens’ speakers crackled to life:

“Seagull to C.G. Seagull to C.G. Over.”

Grandpa jumped. “Oh yes! I’m supposed to make a report on the private channel today.”

Dexter sat as if frozen in place, watching as Grandpa put on a pair of large headphones and answered.

“C.G. to Seagull. Over.”

“Seagull to C.G. We’re having trouble with the Black Hats. Over.”

Now Grandpa became serious and began speaking quickly, but so quietly that Dexter could hardly make out what he said.

After a long moment, Grandpa said, “Over and out” and took off the headphones.

“Who was that?” asked Dexter.

“That was one of my friends in the Resistance Movement,” Grandpa answered, typing something on the computer.

“What did you say?” asked Dexter.

“The Resistance Movement...” Grandpa said without taking his eyes from the computer. “Students from the school in Switzerland who chose to leave Kostroff – nowadays they are my friends. Together we’ve formed the Resistance Movement and sworn an oath to fight Kostroff as long as we live!”

Dexter gaped in astonishment. This was all too much for him to take in.

“There are about a hundred of us, spread out in various parts of the world. We get money to work against Kostroff from leaders and influential people who know about his plans. We have found out that he wants to annihilate the world and everyone who won’t obey him. He must be stopped at all costs before he constructs his new world in space!” Grandpa’s eyes remained fixed to the computer screen as he spoke.

“But does Kostroff know about the Resistance Movement?” Dexter asked.

“I’m sure he does,” Grandpa replied. “But he has so much power now that he is not afraid of anything. He’s probably just laughing at us up in his airship.”

“Airship?” Dexter asked, looking at Grandpa in surprise.

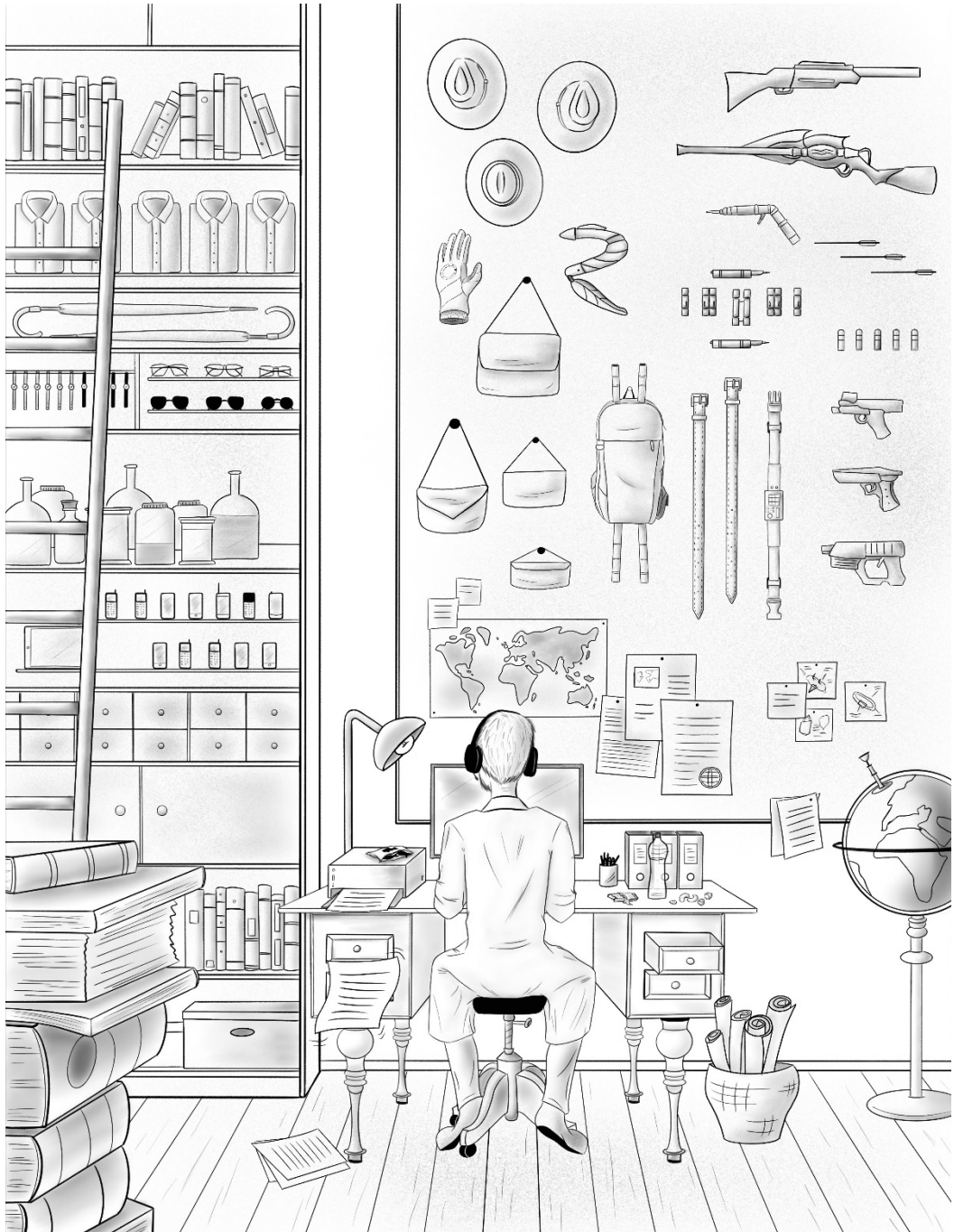
“Yes. According to my friends, he has a gigantic airship which is almost as big as a football field. He can live up there for several months at a time, while he sails around the world performing experiments in his space laboratory.”

“Does he have a space laboratory on the airship?” Dexter asked.

“Yes, one of many.”

“But what did you and your friend Seagull talk about for so long? Has something happened?”

“I have no time to tell you all of that right now...” Grandpa said, glancing at the clock. “We have to hurry to the attic, before it’s too late.”



"Dexter, there's something I need to do now, and it might take some time ..."