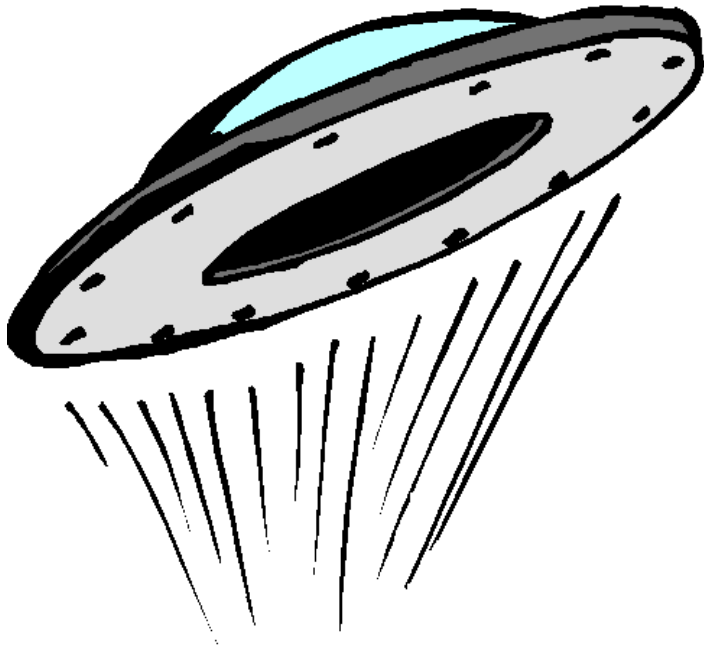

Madica



by Greg Wilson

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*To Madeleine
with love from Daddy
Christmas 2014*

Chapter 1:

Strange Sounds in the Night!

Once upon a time, a fairy named Madica lived with her mom and dad in a little house on a quiet street in a hidden city not far from the South Pole. The house and the street were pretty normal by fairy standards: the house's windows were filled with panes of colored diamond instead of glass, and the streets were always full of cold, crisp snow that was perfect for sleigh rides. And the city—well, it was the only fairy city in the world, so it's hard to say if it was normal or not, but it sparkled in the summer-long sun and shone through the winter-long night and the fairies who lived there made very sure that humans never found it.

One day, as Madica was skiing home from school, she saw a big black cat resting on the neighbor's gray stone steps. Its paws were tucked underneath it and its eyes were closed, and if it hadn't been for the occasional twitch of its tail, Madica might have thought it was a stuffed toy. She reached down to scratch it behind its ears, but stopped herself at the last moment. The cat looked so happy just lying there that she didn't want to wake it, even for something as nice as a good ear-scratch.

When she straightened up, she noticed another cat asleep under a snow-covered bush in the garden across the street. And then another one on the porch of the house next to that one. It was asleep too, and so was the one on the seat of the neighbor's sleigh.

In fact, when she thought about it, Madica realized that most cats seemed to spend most of their time sleeping. *Why is that?* she wondered. Then her face brightened. She had been trying all week to think of a good project for science class—maybe she could do this! Or maybe Mr. Poudell, her teacher, would

let her and her best friend Laurellen work on it together. She was sure the two of them could figure it out.

She skied the rest of the way home and then forgot about the cat for a few hours while she:

- took her art homework out of her bag to show her mother,
- got a glass of juice and some raisins,
- read a chapter of *Helga the Happiness Human*,
- took the cushions off the couch to find the raisins she had dropped when the alligator snuck up on Helga and *almost* caught her,
- set the table for dinner,
- went upstairs to wash her hands,
- went back in the living room to put the cushions on the couch,
- ate dinner,
- washed her hands *again*,
- did ten minutes of piano practice,
- had a grape popsicle,
- played a game of checkers with her dad,
- went upstairs to brush her teeth and wings and get into her pajamas,
- kissed her mom and dad good night, and then
- pulled the covers over her head and waited for Santa Claws to kidnap her and turn her into an elf and make her work in his factory forever and ever.

She knew it was silly. Santa Claws hadn't kidnapped any fairies in years, but night after night she lay awake listening for the sound of him squirming down a chimney with an empty sack in his hand and a wicked gleam in his eye.

She was still awake when her dad came in to pull the covers down and kiss her forehead like he always did. She pretended she was asleep, because if he realized she was awake, he'd ask why, and if she told him, he'd give her a big hug and explain why it was silly to be scared. The hug would be nice, but she

already knew that she was being silly, and it was embarrassing to have a grown-up point it out. After all, she wasn't a baby—she was seven years old.

She was *still* awake an hour later when her mom and dad went to bed. She listened in the dark as they talked for a bit, then yawned, then started to snore. They both snored: her mom went, "Snrrrrrk... phew... snrrrrrk... phew...." and her dad went, "...rrrRRRrrr... ...rrrRRRrrr..." It was almost like a lullaby: "Snrrrrrk... phew... ...rrrRRRrrr..." over and over again.

And then, without warning, *zzzZZZing!* A brilliant white light streaked across the sky outside her bedroom window.

Madica sat up with a start. *zzzZZZing! zzzZZZing!* Two more lights shot by chasing the first. She pulled off her covers, tiptoed over to her window, and pushed the lace curtain aside.

Everything seemed normal. There was nothing in her backyard except her swing and the snowbox where she and Laurellen were building a castle and the big old inner tube propped up against the garage that they took sledding sometimes and ---

zzzZZZing! There it was again! The light shot along the rooftops, dipped into the alley, and dodged nimbly around a phone pole. And there came the other two lights, blue-green instead of pure white like the one in front, swerving clumsily from side to side as they tried to keep up.

The tiny gossamer wings on Madica's back trembled. She opened her mouth to call for her parents, but just as she did so, something moved on the roof of the house on the other side of street. No, not moved: *poured*, like spilled black ink running down a white sheet of paper. One, two, three, four black cats slunk across the roof single file, nose to tail.

When the first one reached the edge it bunched its legs and leaped forward, body stretched, then did a somersault and landed with all four feet clutching a phone pole. It scrambled up the pole and ran along the wire as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

The second cat did the same thing, then the third, and then the fourth. Except the fourth paused after it landed to turn its head toward Madica for a moment. Just for a moment, but somehow, Madica knew it had looked straight at her.

Madica rubbed her eyes. She had never seen anything like it. She had never even *heard* of anything like it, and fairy children heard a lot of stories. She watched another few moments, but nothing else happened, so she slipped back into bed and pulled the blankets over her head once again. She'd tell Laurellen tomorrow. And she would *definitely* do something about cats for her science project.

Chapter 2:

Crash!

Madica woke up like normal the next morning. First her mom came and shook her gently and told her it was time for breakfast. When that didn't work, her dad came and tickled her ear, saying, "Rise and shine, rise and shine," until she batted his hand away. And finally her mom came back and pulled off the covers Madica had wrapped around herself and said, "Come on, sweetie, we really have to get going."

Laurellen was waiting for her at the corner as usual. They said hi and skied uphill to school, puffing clouds of steam as they went. Madica didn't tell her about the strange lights or the strange cats—with a warm breakfast inside her, she wasn't sure she hadn't been dreaming.

School was school, which is to say, they did math and science and fencing and imagination and had a snowball fight in gym class because Miss Ziggle was the best teacher ever and then had music and human studies (which Laurellen thought was boring, but Madica loved), and passed notes back and forth and ignored the boys making farting noises in the back of the class.

It was Laurellen's turn to come to Madica's house after class. She and Laurellen ate the raisins and smoked salmon their mom had left them, then went into the back yard.

It took them a couple of minutes to untie the piece of twine that held a big blue tarp on top of Madica's snowbox. The castle inside was their best yet: its tallest tower came up to their waists, and they had even figured out how they could make a drawbridge, sort of.

Today's goal was to finish off the walls. They stood two pieces of cardboard rescued from the recycling upright and started

piling snow between them. Scoop, plop, scoop, plop...
zzzZZZing!

Madica looked up, startled. "Did you hear that?" she asked.

"Hear what?" Laurellen asked.

zzzZZZing! zzzZZZing! Two bright lights shot past just below the clouds that had gathered while they were working.

The girls jumped to their feet. Laurellen shaded her eyes. "What are they?"

"I don't know," Madica replied, "But ---"

Before she could finish her sentence, the first light reappeared, only this time it wasn't going *zzzZZZing!* It was going *zzz... zzz... zzz...* and wobbling from side to side, and it was headed straight for them!

Madica and Laurellen jumped out of the snowbox just in time. *Whump!* Snow splattered in every direction.

"Ack! Ptooie!" Madica spluttered, spitting snow out of her mouth. It was all over her glasses too—she couldn't see a thing. She wiped the wet gunk off the lenses with her finger, then wiped her face on her sleeve and put her glasses back on.

And gasped. There in her snowbox was a flying saucer just a few feet across. It was as shiny as a mirror, and shaped like two fat frisbees stuck together with a shallow dome on top. Madica could feel heat coming off it, as if it was an oven door too hot to touch. And it had landed right on top of ---

"Our castle!" Laurellen shrieked. It was squished! It was squashed! And what was left of it was melting under the saucer!

Click! The dome on top of the saucer opened like a lid. Madica and Laurellen grabbed each other in fright. *Tikka, tikka, tikka...* The dome ratcheted back jerkily. The girls gasped again. There in the saucer sat a small silvery figure with a bubble for a head. It stood up, then wobbled and nearly toppled over.

Without thinking, Madica reached out to stop it from falling, but the little figure batted her hand away. "I'm all right!" said a tinny, echoey voice. "Now quick, hide me in the castle!"

"The castle?" Madica repeated.

"Yes, the big thing with walls and towers?" the little figure said impatiently. "I need to hide, and it's bound to have secret passages and stuff."

"You, um, you landed on the castle," Laurellen explained. Then she frowned and put her hands on her hips. "And you ruined it, too! And we spent a whole *week* working on it!" Which wasn't really true—they had only started on Saturday—but Madica put her hands on her own hips and frowned too.

"I *ruined* it?" The little silver figure slid down the saucer on its backside and surveyed the damage. "Huh. Not a very good castle, then, was it?"

Laurellen bristled. "It was a *fine* castle 'til you ruined it!"

The little figure waved a hand dismissively. "Sure. I bet it didn't even have any secret passages, did it?"

"Of course not! It wasn't real! Why did you think it was real?"

"Well, it *looked* real through my bigoscope. And I *was* a bit distracted, *if* you hadn't noticed. Speaking of which..." It pointed its right arm at the saucer and pressed some buttons on its wrist with its other hand. With a *pling pling pling* sound, the saucer sparkled and turned invisible.

"Now quick," it said. "They'll be coming back soon, so I really do need to hide." It started toward the back door of the house.

"Yes, but—hang on!" Madica took three quick steps and stood in its way. "Who are you? And why are those other things chasing you?"

The little creature sighed and pointed at its head. *Ping!* The bubble on its head sparkled and turned transparent. "Is that better?"

The two girls gasped once more. "You're—you're a dinosaur!" Madica said.

Chapter 3:

Lasers!

"A snarkasaurus, actually," the little creature replied with a sniff. "Now can we please get inside before—uh oh." It dove into the snowbox and pulled Madica's bucket on top of itself. A second later Madica heard the now-familiar *zzzZZZZing! zzzZZZZing!*

"Quick!" said a muffled, tinny voice. "Look busy!"

Not knowing what else to do, Madica bent down to pick up her shovel. *Bang!* "Ow!" she exclaimed, rubbing her nose. She had forgotten about the invisible flying saucer.

Laurellen knelt down beside her and started scooping snow into a big, messy pile. "Who are they?" she whispered loudly. "And why are they after you?"

"They probably want their saucer back," the little voice replied. "Now shush! If they point a listenator this way, they'll hear you!"

The two girls busied themselves shovelling. From the look on Laurellen's face, Madica could tell they were thinking the same thing. *Their* saucer? Had the little dinosaur stolen it?

"Are you a thief?" Laurellen whispered.

"What? No!" the little voice said. "I'm a *pirate*." The bucket tilted back cautiously. "Now can we *please* get me inside? The saucer's invisibilator won't fool them forever."

Madica exchanged another look with Laurellen. Talking to a tiny dinosaur pirate from outer space in her back yard was one thing. Sneaking one into her house was completely another. If her dad found out ---

"Maaadicaaa! Laureellen! Time to come in!"

Clang! The bucket toppled backward. The little dinosaur pointed its right arm wildly one way and then another. "What was that!?"

"It's just my dad!" Madica hissed. She didn't know what the blinking red light on the dinosaur's wrist was, but she had the feeling it wasn't good.

"Come on, girls!"

"Coming, dad!" Madica hollered back. She thought furiously for a moment. "Can you make yourself invisible?" she asked.

"Of course not," the dinosaur snapped. "If I did that, how would I ever find the switch to make myself visible again?"

Madica and Laurellen looked at each other. Madica took a deep breath. "All right, then here's what we're going to do."

Madica opened the back door a few seconds later. Her dad was already chopping vegetables for dinner.

"Hi, dad," she said as casually as she could.

"Hi, squidge. Hi, Loolee." Her dad glanced at what she was carrying. "Is that new?"

"Um, this?" Madica said, holding up the silver spaceman hanging limply in her hand. "It's, um, it's Zizzy's? We borrowed it so we can have a tea party with Mrs. Mop and Frankenprincess?"

"Cool. Have fun." Her dad was already back to his carrots and broccoli.

Madica heaved a silent sigh of relief and hurried down the hall with Laurellen right behind her. "Who's Zizzy?" Laurellen whispered.

"I made it up," Madica whispered back. "He can't ever keep my friends' name straight."

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, she glanced out the living room window and stopped so fast that Laurellen bumped into her. There, sitting in a neat row, were three black

cats. And judging from the way their ears were laid flat on their heads, they were *not* pleased.

"Hsst!" the dinosaur whispered. "What's happening?" Its back was to the window, so it wouldn't see the cats.

"Nothing," Madica whispered back, shushing Laurellen's question with her hand. One thing at a time—they needed to hide the dinosaur in her room before her mom got home. Her dad might not wonder where who Zizzy was, or where this new toy had come from, but getting anything past her mom was a different story...

Madica's room was exactly as she had left it that morning: dolls and stuffed animals tangled in the blanket on her bed, clothes she had decided not to wear lying on the floor, a stack of library books that hadn't quite tipped over yet, and in the corner, four doll-sized chairs, a table to match, and the tea set Grandma had given her for her fifth birthday. She let out a whoosh.

"We made it," she said, setting the dinosaur down on its feet.

"About time," the dinosaur grumbled. "Much more of that and my arm would have come out of its socket." *Ping!* It made its bubble helmet transparent again and looked around the room.

"Well excuse *me*," Madica muttered under her breath. "Don't they have manners on your planet?" She pulled her two favorite dolls off her bed and plunked them down at the toy table.

"This is Mrs. Mop, and this is Frankenprincess. I'll put them in these seats. If anyone comes upstairs, you sit in this one and don't move."

The dinosaur nodded sharply, then held out its paw to Mrs. Mop. "Greetings, Earth comrade!"

A moment passed. It lowered its paw (or hand). "Hmph. Don't *you* have manners on *your* planet?"

"They're just dolls," Madica explained, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"Well, obviously." The little dinosaur sounded impatient. "But are they *brave* dolls? Will they defend the house when the attack starts?"

"Attack?" Laurellen crossed her arms. "What attack? Who's going to attack us?"

"The other dinosaurs," the dinosaur explained patiently. "The real ones. They're not just going to hyperzoom away and leave me here, are they?"

Madica sat down on the edge of her bed, her head whirling! She opened her mouth without even knowing which question was going to spill out of it when the dinosaur suddenly barked, "Look out—a ninja!" It jumped up from its seat at the tea party table and pointed its right arm at the window.

There, with its feet tucked underneath it, was a single black cat, and it was looking straight at them.

"That's not a ninja," Madica said scornfully. "That's just a cat."

Before Madica could answer, a now-familiar *zzzzZZing!* filled the air. The cat leaped out of sight as a silver saucer sank down in front of the window as lightly as a balloon. The little dinosaur threw itself under the bed. An instant later, a bright red beam of light shot through the window and blew Mrs. Mop's head into a thousand smoldering pieces.

Chapter 4:

Mom Comes Home!

Madica shrieked. The saucer tilted forward to give its bubble-headed pilot a better view of her bedroom. "Look out!" Laurellen grabbed Madica's arm and pulled her out of the way as the red beam zapped through the window again, blowing Frankenprincess out of her chair.

The two girls fell to the floor in a heap. The little saucer tilted forward again, took aim, tilted back to fire once more ---

--- and the black cat landed on it with a *thump!* The saucer tipped wildly from side to side, trying to shake it off, but the cat swayed back and forth. Once, twice, a third time: it hooked the saucer's edge with its paws and flipped it over, leaping off in the same motion.

Zzzooorrrnnng—clank! clank! crash! A moment later a very dented saucer wobbled up past Madica's window and flew away.

"Maaadicaaaa! What are you doing up there?"

"Nothing, dad!" she yelled back. "I just narble flarble moo!" She held her breath. Nonsense words never worked with her mom, but if her dad was still chopping vegetables...

"Okay, but you promise you'll clean up before you come downstairs?"

"I promise!" She whooshed out the breath she had been holding and sat up. "Are you all right?" she asked Laurellen.

"I think so," her friend said shakily. "What—what just happened? And where's the dinosaur?"

Madica yanked the covers out of the way and peered under the bed. Sure enough, the little dinosaur had disappeared. She scrambled to her feet, dashed over to the window, threw it

open, and stuck out her head. The black cat was gone too—all she could see were a few pawprints in the snow.

She pulled her head back inside and slammed the window down. "All right!" she said loudly. "I know you're in here somewhere. If you don't come out right now, I'm going to be very, very cross!"

"Me too!" Laurellen echoed, brushing herself off and folding her arms to match Madica's.

A moment passed, and another, and then a cheery voice downstairs said, "Hello the house!"

Madica's hand flew to her mouth. Laurellen looked at her wide-eyed. Madica's mom was home! And from the sound of her footsteps, she was coming upstairs!

Without a word, the girls shoved the partly-disintegrated dolls under the bed. Laurellen grabbed a box of crayons and a pad of paper from Madica's dresser and started drawing penguins. Madica threw herself onto the bed beside her and picked up the nearest book just as her mom knocked opened her bedroom door.

"Hello, love," Madica's mom said, bending down to kiss the top of her head. She frowned and sniffed. "What's that smell?"

"Hi." "What smell?" Laurellen and Madica said at the same time.

Madica's mom sniffed the air again. "It smells like something's burning."

"It's dad's night to cook, remember?" Madica said.

"Ah." Her mom smiled and tousled her mousy hair. "Well, I'd best go give him a hand then. You two wash up before you come down."

"We will," they said in unison. As soon as the door closed behind her, they let out huge sighs.

"That was close," Madica said.

"Too close," Laurellen agreed. She tossed the pad of paper across the room and flopped back on the bed. "I'm sorry about Mrs. Mop."

"It's okay," Madica said, her nose still in her book. "I hardly played with her any more anyway. Or—or Frankenprincess." Laurellen reached up and squeezed her hand, but let the lie pass.

The rest of the evening was as normal as the previous hour hadn't been. Madica's mom told them about an old lady who had come into the library that day to return a book she'd checked out forty years ago, and about a boy—"I think he's in your class, love"—who had taken out every single one of the dozen books that the library had about asteroids and meteors. Madica and Laurellen looked at each other and rolled their eyes.

"Did he have a flumpy wing?" Madica asked.

"Madica!" her father said reprovingly. "That's not a nice thing to say."

"Sorry," she muttered. "Did he have an *unusual* wing?" But she knew what her mother's answer would be before she said 'yes'. There was only one boy in her class who would take out a dozen books at once about anything.

Her dad talked about an email message he'd received from some fairies they had known years ago, while Madica and Laurellen ate their spaghetti carbonara and their apple pie, drank their carrot juice, cleared the table, and *didn't* say, "A little invisible dinosaur from outer space is hiding upstairs." After the table was cleared they voted on what game to play, as they always did, and the two girls chose "Escape", as they did every week.

"Aw, do I have to be Santa Claws again?" Madica's dad complained, grinning, but the girls were already setting up the board.

The next half hour flew by. Madica, her mom, and Laurellen moved their little wooden fairies from one hiding place to

another, slowly gathering the treasures they needed to escape from Santa's factory at the North Pole. Her father ho-ho-ho'd every time his chubby red Santa came close to them. "I'm gonna get you!" he growled. "I'm gonna get you and turn you into an elf!"

"Ssh," Madica's mom said, putting her hand on his arm. "Let's not give them nightmares."

"It's okay, mom," Madica said. She turned over the Secret Door card she had just drawn, stuck out her tongue at her dad, and said, "Ho ho ho yourself." They all laughed.

In the end, only the two girls made it to the sleigh and got away. Madica's mom sighed theatrically. "I guess I'm washing dishes," she said.

"I'll help," said her dad. "You girls pack this up—it'll be time for Laurellen to go soon."

Half an hour later, having hugged her friend goodbye and done her piano practice and brushed her teeth, Madica was back in her room with her light out and the covers pulled over her head once again. This time, though, she wasn't waiting for Santa Claws to come and kidnap her. Instead, she was wondering where the little dinosaur had gone, and who had been flying the saucer, and how the black cats fit into it all. She was still wondering when sleep found her, not knowing that a small, furry shape was curled up on the roof above her, its paws tucked under its body to stay warm, keeping watch through the night.

Chapter 5:

Taken!

Why was her mom was shaking her shoulder, telling her it was time to get up? She buried her head under her pillow, but it was no use: it really was morning.

She ate breakfast in a quiet daze, got dressed, brushed her teeth, straightened her wings, kissed her mom and dad goodbye, and skied up to the corner where Laurellen was waiting for her, just like it was a normal day. She stopped short partway when she saw a fat orange cat ambling across a neighbor's garden, but it didn't pay her any attention.

Ike was under the big tree by the gate when she and Laurellen got to the playground. "Hsst!" He was practically bouncing up and down with excitement. "Did you two see them last night?" he asked in a loud whisper.

Madica's heart leaped into her throat. "Um, them?" she asked. "What 'them'?"

Ike dug into his backpack. It was the biggest backpack in their class, and full to bursting with unmatched mittens, bits of plastic he was going to use to build a submarine (or maybe a unicycle), crayon sketches of giant robots battling each other—definitely battling, not dancing, no matter what Erin and Chloe said—and plastic lunch containers that even he didn't dare open any longer. He pulled out a couple of books and waved them in front of her.

"The meteors!" he said in the same loud whisper. "There were meteors in the sky last night! And I think more are coming!"

The girls looked sidelong at each other. "Meteors?"

Ike nodded so fast that his glasses bounced up and down on his nose. "I saw one a couple of nights ago, so I went and got some books to find out more about them. Then I saw them again last night! What if it's like the dinosaurs all over again?"

The girls looked sidelong at each other again. "D-dinosaurs?"

Ike pulled another book from his backpack. "Like this!" He had put a sticky note in it to mark his place. Opened, it revealed a two-page picture of an enormous fireball hurtling toward the earth. A T. rex and a stegosaurus looked up at it, while in the distance a pair of pteranodons flew away as fast as they could.

"Sixty-five million years ago, an asteroid hit the earth near what is now Mexico," Ike read aloud. "The impact threw so much dust into the air that the whole world was shrouded ---"

"Shrouded," Madica corrected automatically.

"...shrouded in darkness for years. This ended the Age of Dinosaurs." Ike pointed at the little inset box at the bottom of the page. "Scientists believe that asteroids have hit the earth many times in the past. Will another one hit us in the future? Nobody knows."

"Actually, we *do* know," said a tiny voice in Madica's ear. "It's due tomorrow."

Madica shrieked so loudly that one of the older kids nearby turned to look and caught a snowball with his ear as a result. Ike jumped, startled, then said, "Yeah, it scared me too." He shivered dramatically.

"Eww, it scared me too," the dinosaur mimicked.

"Oh, be quiet!" Madica snapped without thinking.

Ike's face fell. He was the smallest kid in her year. One of his wings hadn't grown out straight, and he needed thick glasses to see properly. He was always going on about lasers or whether whales could talk or *something*, and, well, it just got on people's nerves. As a result, he spent a lot of lunch hours sitting under the big tree by the gate, paging through library books by himself and pretending he wasn't lonely.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I just thought it was... Never mind." He stuffed the books back in his bag.

"Madica..." Laurellen nudged her friend. "That wasn't nice."

Madica felt her face burning. She opened her mouth to say that she had been speaking to the dinosaur, not to Ike, but just at that moment the school bell rang to call children away from their games and gossip.

She waited for the ringing to stop, then jerked her head at her backpack to get Laurellen's attention, and hissed, "Hey! What are you doing in there?"

"Hiding, of course!" the dinosaur hissed back. Laurellen's eyes widened as she realized who it must be. "Now quick, follow your herd before someone gets suspicious!"

"But why are you hiding in my backpack?" Madica started toward the door as Mr. Poudell ("pronounced poo-DELL", he told every single class, to no effect) beckoned to her.

"Well, I could hardly stay in your house, could I?" the dinosaur whispered back. "That's the first place the ninjas will look."

"Ninjas? What ninjas?" Madica demanded. "And what do you mean, tomorrow?" But by then she was at the door, surrounded by other children, and the dinosaur didn't answer.

Madica's classroom was on the second floor. It had six big windows and twenty-four desks, not counting Mr. Poudell's at the front or the visitor's desk at the back where parents and other teachers sometimes sat to watch the backs of the children's heads.

She said 'hi' to Zella and Abed and stowed her backpack under her desk. As she did so, she felt it jerk in her hands. "Don't move!" she whispered loudly, then smiled weakly at Zella's curious look.

"Sorry," the dinosaur whispered back. Madica pulled out her math homework, set it on her desk, and looked straight ahead while Mr. Poudell hobbled from desk to desk to give each student their work for the morning.

As always, she wondered how old he really was. "A hundred," some kids said. "A thousand," others claimed. Madica knew that he had been a teacher when her mom and dad were in school, and had been old even then. "Some people just keep

going," her dad said with a shrug when Madica asked. "Or maybe hanging around kids helps keep him young." And then he tickled her and she forgot about it.

She had only been looking at her geography for a couple of minutes when her bag rustled. "What's going on out there?" the dinosaur whispered.

Zella glanced over. Madica smiled weakly again and nudged her backpack with her foot. "Ssh!"

"Okay, okay," the dinosaur grumbled. This time Zella and Abed both looked over. Madica bent over the map she was supposed to be drawing.

The next hour and a half were the longest of Madica's life. Every few minutes the dinosaur wriggled, or yawned really loudly, or muttered, "But I'm *bored!*" Each time the children around Madica looked around to see who was talking. Madica looked around too the first couple of times, as if she had no idea where the noise was coming from either, but nobody was fooled.

Especially not Mr. Poudell. When the bell rang for recess he put aside the papers he had been folding for their origami lesson and said, "Madica, could I please talk to you for a moment?" in his creaky, gravelly voice.

"Yes, Mr. Poudell," she said. Her mind raced. There was no way the dinosaur would stay quiet while Mr. Poudell talked to her.

But as she walked to the front, Ike tried to squeeze past her, his eyes downcast. "Hey!" she said, grabbing her backpack and thrusting it at him. "How about you take this, and I'll come find you over by the tree in a couple of minutes, okay? We can eat our snacks together and look at your books then."

Ike brightened. "Okay!" He slung the backpack over his shoulder and practically bounced out of the classroom.

Madica walked hesitantly over to Mr. Poudell's desk. He didn't look up right away. Instead, he muttered, "Busy, busy, busy, *quite* busy thank you, no time for details like this," under his

breath as his infamous red pen danced across the papers on his desk. They practically whooshed from one pile to another, each one decorated with a few lines of commentary and a big A or D in a circle at the top. Those were the only grades he gave, and he didn't give very many A's.

It only took him a minute to finish, though it seemed like an hour. He neatened the pile of graded papers and looked up at Madica. "Now," he said in a patient, weary voice that every child in the school could imitate, "I don't mind you having fun in my classroom. In fact, I encourage it. But we do need to let other children concentrate on their work, don't we?"

"Yes, Mr. Poudell," she said obediently.

"And we shouldn't—wait, what's that *cat* doing there?"

Madica glanced out the window and gulped. There, on a branch of the cottonwood tree that sheltered the playground, sat a single black cat. And it was staring right at her.

Something inside Madica snapped. She pointed her finger accusingly at the cat. "You!" she said, not caring if it could hear her or not. "You say right there! I want to have a word with you!"

"What?" said Mr. Poudell, rising from his chair. "Who are you talking to? Are you talking to the cat?"

Madica didn't get a chance to answer, because right then, right at that very moment, the sky above them flickered. *PLING PLING PLING!* and the bright blue of the Antarctic spring was gone, replaced by the scarred silver underbelly of a flying saucer so big that its shadow covered the whole city.

Madica's stomach went cold. She knew that saucer. Every fairy child did. It was Santa Claws!

"Oh no!" she whispered. He hadn't raided the fairies in years. It couldn't be a coincidence that he had showed up today—he must be after the dinosaur, and it was in her backpack in the playground with Laurellen and Ike!

"Madica! Where are you going? You have to hide!" She ignored Mr. Poudell's shout as she sprinted for the door and clattered down the stairs, only to find herself pushed back by a flood of frightened children rushing inside, shouting, "It's Santa Claws! It's Santa Claws!"

"Laurellen!" she shouted. "Laurellen!" It was like trying to swim upstream—no matter how hard she pushed and squeezed, she found herself being swept backward by the panicked crowd.

The principal's voice rose above the frightened chatter. "Hurry, everyone! Get to the gym as quickly as you can!"

There was a loud *bzzZORP!*, then another. *PLING PLING PLING!* Madica's heart sank. The saucer must have turned invisible again. It would only do that if it had what it had come for: her friends.

The churning mob turned into a churning stream as children and teachers headed for the gym. It took ten minutes to get everyone there, and another ten to confirm the bad news, but Madica knew what the principal were going to say long before she said it: Laurellen and Ike were missing. "They were over by the gate," said a little boy, crying. "They—they were fighting over a backpack, and then..."

The rest was tears, and not just from him. All around the gym, children had started to cry. Teachers put their heads together to mutter. Why had Santa Claws come back after all these years? And why in daylight? He'd only ever come at night before. And those poor children—and their poor parents.

Madica felt light-headed through it all. "It's my fault," she whispered.

"I beg your pardon?" Mr. Poudell had stayed near her throughout the roll call, talking to other teachers and children but always keeping his eyes on her. "What do you mean, it's your fault?"

"It's my fault," she repeated wretchedly. "If I hadn't given Ike my backpack..."

"Your backpack?" Mr. Poudell asked. "What does your backpack have to do with this?"

Madica gulped, suddenly conscious of how closely Mr. Poudell was looking at her. "I... I don't know," she lied. "I just... I gave it to Ike, and then..." She didn't have to force herself to burst into tears again.

Mr. Poudell leaned toward her, so close that she could smell warm talc and old coffee. "Do you think this might have something to do with that cat you were talking to? They're devious creatures, cats, and definitely not to be trusted. But you can trust me."

At exactly that moment, Madica's dad showed up. He hugged her close, his head on her shoulder, as if he was the one who had been scared. Her mom burst into tears when she arrived a few moments later, and she *never* got upset. They all walked home together holding hands, just like they had when Madica was little, then had hot chocolate and tried to think of things to say.

"What am I going to say to Laurellen's mom and dad?" Madica finally asked miserably.

Her father squeezed her shoulder. "There's not a lot you can say."

She nodded. "Is it okay if I go outside for a while? I want..." She gulped back another round of tears. "I want to fix up the castle we were building."

Her mom and dad exchanged looks. "Sure," her mom said. "I'll make us all hot chocolate when you come back in."

Madica bundled herself up and went out through the back door. *Thud!* Her foot bounced off the side of the invisible saucer when she kicked it. If only the stupid dinosaur hadn't hidden in her backpack. If only it hadn't landed in her yard! She kicked the saucer again, harder.

And froze, as still as a snowman, when a quiet voice behind her said, "Please do have a care with that. We shall need it if we're to retrieve your friends."

She turned around slowly. There, in the open gate, sat a familiar black cat.

Chapter 6:

Ninjas!

"He-hello?" she said uncertainly. "Did you just speak to me?"

"No," said the voice. A second black cat landed in the snow beside her, its paws crunching softly in the snow. "*I* spoke with you. It's my job, you see, speaking with primates. Fairies, gorillas, gibbons... I can even speak a bit of lemur," it added with a hint of pride.

"That's nice," Madica said weakly. "I didn't know *any* cats could talk."

"Oh, all of us can. We just choose not to, most of us, especially where primates are concerned. 'Thumbs make trouble', we say." It sighed. "But unfortunately, thumbs are precisely what we need at the present moment. Whole hands, as a matter of fact, if we're to rescue your friends."

Madica's heart leaped. "Rescue? Are you going to rescue Laurellen?"

The cat cleared its throat. "Not as such, no. *You* are going to rescue your friends. *We* are going to ---" It stopped itself, then resumed. "We are going to rescue the pilot of this wee saucer so that we can save the world from an asteroid that's about to prang it rather hard."

"The little dinosaur? You're going to rescue the little dinosaur?"

"Yes, the—the little dinosaur," it said quickly. "But the controls require thumbs, don't you see, so we find ourselves in need of a primate." It stretched, padded over to the snowbox, and jumped onto the invisible saucer so that it appeared to be sitting suspended in the air. After a moment it looked over its shoulder and said, "Well?."

"But... but I don't know how to fly," Madica said weakly.

"That's quite all right—I do. You just need to hold the controls. Now, come along, spit spot."

"But... but..."

"Unless you don't care whether your friends are rescued or not," the cat purred.

"Of course I care! But aren't there, I don't know, aren't there people who take care of this kind of thing?"

The cat's tail bristled slightly. "There are *ninjas* who take care of this kind of thing," it said sharply. "The Number Six Feline Ninja Danger Squad, in fact."

Madica laughed. She didn't mean to, it just burst out. "You're—you're ninjas? Where did you learn to be ninjas?"

The cat's ears flattened again, but this time they went all the way down. "In ninja school, of course. Where did you learn to be rude, in rude school? Now, are we saving the world today or not?"

It was a tight fit. It was a *very* tight fit. It was so tight that it took Madica three tries to wriggle her legs into the cramped space where the dinosaur had sat. The fact that she couldn't see the space because the saucer was still invisible didn't help. Neither did the fact that the other three cats had hopped up on the saucer as well and were watching her with unblinking green eyes.

But finally she managed to wedge herself in, even if her right foot was tucked in behind her left knee, and her shoulders were in her ears. "Good show," the cat said. It touched noses with one of the other cats, then hopped into Madica's lap.

"What happens now?" Madica asked.

"You pull up your sleeves, please and thank you."

"What?"

"You pull... up... your... sleeves," the cat repeated patiently. "To the elbow, if you don't mind."

"Why do you want me to—oh, never mind." Grunting and grimacing, she managed to get the sleeves of her puffy winter jacket up to her elbows. "Now wha-aaah! Ouch! What are you doing!? Let go of me!"

As soon as Madica's sleeves were out of its way, the cat had put its paws on her wrists and extended its claws just enough to dig into her skin without breaking it. "And now like this," the cat said calmly. Its claws dug into Madica's right wrist just a little more, and without thinking she tried to jerk her arm away.

"More smoothly, if you please," the cat ordered. "Like a leaf on wind. Again." It tugged on her left arm. This time Madica managed to move it instead of jerking it.

"And again." Tug, push, tug, push... Madica had to grit her teeth a couple of times before she got the hang of it, but the hang of it she eventually got.

"Well done," the cat said approvingly. "That was actually rather good, for a primate. Now..." One claw pricked her, making her turn her arm and reach forward. She felt her hand bump into a button.

Tikka tikka tikka... The dome on the saucer ratcheted into place and closed with a loud *click!*

"And now..." the cat muttered. Both paws tugged, bringing Madica's hands together on what felt like a bicycle's handlebars. She grabbed onto it instinctively, and suddenly the saucer wasn't invisible any longer. She could see what she was sitting in! She could see ---

"What is *that*?" she asked, looking up at the picture taped to the inside of the dome. But she already knew the answer.

"An asteroid," the cat said calmly. "*The* asteroid, as it happens." It looked like a big gray potato covered with pockmarks. As she stared at it, she realized it was moving slowly against the stars behind it. "It will reach us some time tomorrow, if we don't do something about it, and it will be a jolly poor show all around when it does."

Madica gulped. "I don't know if I can do this," she said.

"I don't know if you can either," the cat said. "But we ninjas have been trained to do the best we can with the materials available. Heeyah!" It dug its claws into her arms. She squeezed the handlebars, and with a whoosh that pushed her down into her seat, the saucer shot into the air.

Chapter 7:

Captured!

Outer space is vast, empty, silent, and cold. A tiny flying saucer with a cat and a fairy crammed into it isn't any of those things, particularly not when the fairy is screaming at the top of her lungs because the saucer is upside down.

"Both hands! Both hands! Use your thumbs, you two-legged idiot!" the cat yowled, sinking its claws into Madica's arms. She squeezed the handlebars. The saucer flipped over, then flipped again.

"Not that tight, blast it!" Madica obeyed. The saucer righted itself, only to start spinning around and around as the cat's tail tickled her nose and made her sneeze.

Eventually—it was probably only a few seconds, but it felt long enough to be an "eventually"—the saucer was right side up and flying in a straight line. It was only then that Madica realized where they were.

"We're in outer space..." she breathed.

"Hardly," the cat drawled, "This is only the upper atmosphere." But its eyes were as wide as Madica's. "Look—d'you see the satellite up there?" A bright white dot in front of them grew in a heartbeat into an actual shape, then into a silver-blue drum with dark rectangular wings, and then ---

"We're going to hit it!" Madica pulled back on the controls, pulling the saucer to one side as they shot past the slowly-spinning satellite.

As she let out a shaky breath, she realized the cat had started licking one of its paws. "We could have crashed!" she said accusingly.

"But we didn't," the cat replied calmly. "You're not an entirely awful flyer, considering your species. Now, tally ho!"

Africa rolled by underneath them, brown and green. A storm swirled over the Indian Ocean, its white clouds replaced a moment later by the brighter, sharper white of ice and snow on the Himalayas.

Madica frowned. "Hang on a second. Africa is west of the Himalayas. Why aren't we flying straight north?"

The cat flipped an ear. "Oh, ninjas *never* go straight—far too obvious. Also, we're not headed *quite* for the North Pole, exactly."

"Not—wait, I thought we were going to Santa Claws' factory?"

"Exactly. But the *real* factory isn't *actually* at the pole—that one is a dummy to confuse you primates. The *real* factory is on a secret island in the Arctic Ocean. Quite carefully guarded," it added with satisfaction. "Lasers, missiles, combat elves... It shall be *quite* a challenge."

"Glad *one* of us is happy," Madica muttered under her breath.

The day turned to night below them as they put the Earth's shoulder between themselves and the sun. A handful of cities gleamed on the great plain of Asia below them like jewels scattered by a careless princess, then were gone.

The cat stirred and stretched. "Ow," Madica complained. "My legs have gone to sleep."

"Best to wake them now," the cat said, putting its paws back on her arms. "This bit coming up is rather dangerous, don't you know. Our changes of survival are actually very low."

Madica goggled at it. "Are you *purring*?"

The cat flattened its ears. "No harm in enjoying one's work," it replied a bit defensively.

Suddenly the atmosphere was a faint haze around them, then thin streamers whistling off the edge of the saucer, not whistling but roaring, and Madica felt the cat pressing down on her, heavier and heavier with each breath, but breathing was hard because her chest was heavy too, and the roaring was too loud for her to hear anything else, too loud for her to think

about anything except the delicate tugs and digs of the cat's claws on her arms as she struggled to keep the saucer upright, plunging belly-first into the sky below her because somehow she knew that if the saucer flipped or tumbled it would be the end of them, the end of Laurellen and Ike and the little dinosaur whose name she had never learned, the end of the whole world because the asteroid was up there somewhere, hurtling toward the Earth just like they were but a billion times larger, and she couldn't do it, she couldn't keep the controls steady, they were going to crash, there was nothing she could do to stop it they were going to crash and she'd never see her mom and dad again and she hadn't even said goodbye.

And then it was over. The roaring stopped. The weight lifted from her chest. The saucer stopped fighting her and flew straight and true.

Madica whooped. "We made it!"

"Mmph." The cat shifted in her lap. "*That* was the easy part. Matters should get *rather* more interesting now." Without no more warning than that, it sank its claws into her right arm.

Madica's flinch flipped the saucer upside down just as a beam of red light lanced through the sky where they had been. "What was that?" she squawked.

"Laser," the cat muttered. "Now please don't interrupt. I need... to concentrate..." Its tail bristled. "There!" It flexed its claws again. The saucer swerved left then right around two more ruby beams, then flipped on its edge, as if it was rolling through the air instead of flying, and shot between a pair of parallel beams.

The cat relaxed and pulled in its claws. Using just the weight of its paws, it pushed Madica's hands down gently. The saucer dipped toward the ground.

"Is—it is over?" Madica asked hesitantly. Her heart was pounding, and she was trying really hard not to be sick—not in the tiny cockpit of the saucer, and especially not all over the cat.

"Mmph," the cat grunted again. "*That* was actually the easy part. Matters should get *quite a bit* more interesting now. Here's my plan..."

The saucer landed a few minutes later on a patch of snow no different from any other next to a stony hill capped with a single stunted pine tree. *Click!* The dome on top of the saucer opened. *Tikka, tikka, tikka...* It ratcheted back jerkily to reveal a small fairy in a puffy winter jacket that had a thick fur collar around its neck. She stood up a little unsteadily, clambered out of the saucer, and hopped onto the snow.

For a moment Madica just stood there, her eyes closed. "What's wrong?" the 'collar' around her neck hissed.

"Nothing." She had never really appreciated solid ground before, she realized, not nearly as much as she should. Or just plain being alive. It was really quite remarkable, being alive... She took a deep breath and started walking up the hill.

She only got three steps before a stern voice commanded, "Halt!"

She froze. "Whart's the parswud?" the voice demanded.

"Excuse me?" she said.

"Whart's the parswud? Ye cairn't gae arp yen hill withart th' parswud!"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand what you're saying."

A second voice chimed in. "He's asking you for the password, dear."

"S whart I sith," the first voice muttered. "Clar's th' day, I sith, whart's the parswud."

"Yes, dear, clear as day, except maybe she's a bit hard of hearing. Is that right, dear? Are you a bit hard of hearing?"

Madica wasn't, but she could certainly hear the warning in the second speaker's voice. "Um, yes," she agreed. "Quite a bit, actually. Sorry about that."

"Ar, nar thart's fer shame," the first voice said. "Bart ye still need th' parswud if ye want arp yen hill. Or we blarst ye fer smithereens."

"Oh, no blasting today, dear," the second voice said firmly. "It's Tuesday today, and we take prisoners on Tuesdays, remember?"

"Salways a flarpin' take prisoners day, seems like," the first speaker grumbled. "Aright. Harnds oop. Wa're takin' ye prisoner." And with that, two figures half Madica's height popped up out of the snow just a stone's throw away.

Madica gasped. Her captors' ragged red coats and tasselled hats couldn't hide their rust-stained steel bodies, and electric red eyes gleamed in their cheery painted faces. She had been captured by elves!

Chapter 8:

Deskbots and Tankbots!

Madica's heart skipped a beat. Every fairy child knew how Santa Claws made elves. It was why so many of them lay sleepless at night, listening for the sound of him squirming down the chimney with his sack in his hand to steal them away and put their brains in jars and then ---

"Do ye nae oonderstand wot harnds are?" The first voice belonged to the elf on Madica's left, the one whose face was painted like a sad clown. "Or is it 'oop' that has ye carnfused?"

"Oh. Sorry." Madica raised her hands gingerly. "Is this better?"

"Mooch." And after a nudge from its companion, the elf grudgingly added, "Tharnk ye."

"Yes, thank you," the other elf added sweetly. It had whiskers on its cheeks, which would have looked sweet if it didn't also have a pair of gleaming tusks stained with something Madica sincerely hoped was just rust. "Now, *do* you know the password?"

"I... Sorry, no, I don't," Madica confessed.

"Yippee! It's blarstin' time!" Clown Face burrowed into the snow and pulled out a bazooka as big as he was.

"Tell them 'presents'," the cat's voice hissed in her ear. "The password is 'presents'."

"How do you know?" Madica whispered back out of the corner of her mouth.

"It's *always* presents," the cat hissed back. "Hasn't changed in *forever*."

"Presents!" Madica shouted. "The password! It's 'presents'!"

Clown Face froze at the word. "Socks!" it cursed, dropping the bazooka into the snow and kicking it in frustration. "I *never* get to blast *anything*! Socks socks socks!"

His final kick must have hit the trigger, because with a sudden *phwoosh!* the bazooka went off. The missile spiralled up the hill, trailing sparks and smoke behind it, until *blam!* It exploded in mid-air.

Or not. Because a moment later, the air sparkled and fizzed, rippling with rainbow colors, and ---

"Oh..." Madica breathed. There, right in front of her, no longer invisible, was Santa's secret factory. It was bigger than any building Madica had ever seen—she could have stacked ten copies of her school on top of one another and still not reached its steeply-slanted roof. Turrets and towers, windows of all shapes and sizes, and ---

A chill ran up her spine. A giant flying saucer was moored against the side of the factory, bobbing gently in the Arctic breeze. She recognized its scarred silver underbelly. It was the saucer that had taken Laurellen. ("And Ike," her conscience added a moment later.)

"The poor reindeer simply couldn't carry the load any longer," Whiskers said, following Madica's gaze to the enormous round gray disk. She (Madica decided it was definitely a 'she') looked at the other elf and sighed in a way that suggested that if she had eyebrows, she would be raising them.

"It wasn't *my* fault," Clown Face muttered defensively, not meeting his companion's eyes. "If she had just said the password when we asked..."

"Well, let's hope Himself sees it that way," Whiskers replied. "Now, if you'll come along, dear. Password or not, *he* will be wanting to see you."

Madica gulped. "He'?" But she knew the answer before Whiskers said it.

"Yes, dear. Mr. Secretary." Whiskers glanced at Clown Face. "Perhaps it would be best if you stayed here and waited for the repair crew?"

"Stupid bazooka," Clown Face muttered again, scuffing the snow with the toe of his boot.

"And perhaps we could put a bit more effort into staying in character?" Whiskers added with just a hint of steel in her voice.

Clown Face's shoulders slumped. "Starpid barzooka," he repeated.

"Thank you. This way, dear." With the elf's steely hand on her elbow, Madica trudged toward a small gate that swung open as they neared.

The inside of the factory was whiter than the snow outside. Everything had been scrubbed, polished, and scrubbed again: the square tiles on the floor, the paint on the walls, even the cobwebs and skeletons.

"They're not real, you know," Whiskers said, gesturing at a grinning pile of bones as they passed it. "Himself felt a castle ought to have a dungeon, but the tundra just turns to mud when you dig into it, so He decided that the ground floor would be the dungeon and—whoops, watch your step, dear." Cold metal fingers tugged Madica aside as a pair of stainless steel rats scuttled across the floor, the windup keys on their backs going 'tick, tick, tick' in time with their steps.

"It's... It's quite well done," Madica said weakly.

"Thank you, dear, that's so kind of you to say. But I'm sure it isn't nearly as dank as the ones the humans keep you in."

Madica blinked. She was about to say, "The humans don't keep us in dungeons—they don't even know we exist," when the cat's claws dug ever so lightly into her skin.

The polished white hallway led to an escalator whose steps seemed to be carved out of ice. It took them to a room bigger than Madica's whole house. Round frosted lights dangled in

clusters from its ceiling like glowing white cherries. On the far side was a desk twice Madica's height, and at the desk sat ---

Madica put her hand to her mouth. The elf wasn't *sitting* at the desk—it *was* the desk. Beneath its beaky face and four long arms, a squat body merged with the desk's cast-iron top. Every few seconds a little bell went *ding!* and a sheet of paper popped up like toast out of a toaster. The deskbot glanced at it, muttered, "Naughty," scribbled something on it in bright red ink, and fed it into a different slot.

"Yes?" the deskbot snapped without looking up as Madica and her captor neared. "How can I help you?" From the way it said 'help', Madica was pretty sure it wanted to do anything but.

Whiskers cleared her throat. "Number one six four, Mr. Secretary, sir, with a prisoner for Himself."

"Himself is busy," it said in a creaky, gravelly voice. "Busy, busy, busy, *quite* busy thank you, no time for details like this."

"But ---"

"I said, Himself is *busy*, thank you." The deskbot's arms hadn't stopped—hadn't even slowed—as it spoke. *Ding!* mutter scribble, over and over. "Put her in the fitting room with the others."

"Yes, Mr. Secretary." Whiskers tugged at Madica's arm. "Come along," she whispered loudly. "He's very busy - we mustn't take up too much of his time."

Madica shook off the elf's hand. "No. I'm not going anywhere until I get some answers. Where are my friends? And why did you take them?"

"This isn't the Answers department," the deskbot snapped. *Ding!* scribble. "Answers is down the main hall, third on your right, up the stairs, across the bridge, third on your left, past the furnace, second elevator, ninth floor."

"Well then, I'll go there!" Madica retorted, crossing her arms.

"Certainly." *Ding!* mutter scribble. "But I doubt it's open right now."

"Well, when *does* it open?"

The deskbot finally looked up at her. Madica caught her breath. Little streaks of rust ran down its beak like the tracks of ancient tears. Above them, its eyes glowed red with malice. "The Answers Department is *never* open. Now you, take her to the fitting room and—wait! What's that?" It pointed at the collar of Madica's coat with one hand. The other three continued their mad *ding!* scribble rhythm.

"What's what?" Madica asked innocently, her heart suddenly pounding.

The deskbot slapped a big red button in the center of its desk. *Blarnk! Blarnk! Blarnk! Blarnk!* An alarm start squawking like the world's angriest seagull.

The tip of the deskbot's finger flipped up. A tiny light at its end glowed exactly the same red as the lasers that had tried to shoot down the saucer just a few minutes before. "Put up your paws!"

"What?" Madica raised her hands. "I don't have paws!"

"I'm not talking to you," the deskbot snapped. "Very clever, *ninja*, sneaking in here disguised as a collar."

"Ninja!?" Whiskers gasped. "Oh my!" Her voice was lost in the *stomp stomp stomp* of two dozen elves pouring out of secret doors that had just opened in the walls all around them. *Their* lasers were much bigger than fingers. In fact, they seemed bigger than some of the elves themselves, especially the ones pointed at Madica.

"I'm going to count to three," the deskbot hissed. "And if you aren't on the floor by then with your paws in the air, we will turn you into toast! One..."

"Wait!" Madica burst out. "What about me?"

"What *about* you? Two!"

Madica grabbed the zipper of her coat, pulled it down, shrugged her arms out of the coat, and threw it into the air. At precisely the same moment, the deskbot barked, "Three!" Two

dozen red lasers sizzled. The coat and its collar burst into flame.

Madica coughed at the stink of burnt hair and melting plastic. "That was my *coat*!" she spluttered.

"It... it appears that it *was* just a coat, Mr. Secretary," Whiskers ventured.

The deskbot hissed with disappointment. "Perhaps. But better safe than sorry. You! Take care of this."

"Yes sir!" One of the elf guards stomped forward on thick metal legs. It pointed its left arm at the smoldering remains of Madica's jacket. With a whirl and a gurgle, wet white foam sprayed onto the flames.

"Now, take her to the fitting room," the deskbot ordered. "Double escort, just in case."

"But what about my coat?" Madica demanded. She wrapped her arms around herself, already starting to shiver. "My mom and dad gave me that!"

"You could file a replacement form," Whiskers suggested sympathetically. Then her eyes widened and her hand flew to her face. "Oh dear."

At the sound of the word 'form', the deskbot had looked up again. The malice that Madica had seen in its eyes moment earlier was nothing compared to the glare of utter hatred it turned on the cringing elf beside her now. "Did you just say that?" it hissed. "Did you just tell her to *file a form*?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Secretary, I ---"

"Do you know how many forms we already have? How many *I* already have!?" Its voice had risen to a shout. "Look at them! Look at them all!" Even as it spoke, its arms were dancing, *ding!* scribble, *ding!* scribble, on and on without end.

"Guards!" the deskbot bellowed. "Take them *both* to the fitting room! Double escort and double quick! Give the fairy the usual, and turn *this* one into a photocopier!"

"Oh no..." Whiskers moaned, "Not that. Please, Mr. Secretary, I didn't mean ---"

An unyielding metal hand closed around Madica's arm. Another clamped itself on Whiskers's shoulder. "Sorry 'bout this," the guard holding the elf muttered, "But orders are orders." And with just enough of a shove to let her know that resistance would be futile, Madica was marched away beside the whimpering, whiskered elf.

Chapter 9:

Imprisoned!

The rest of Santa's castle—at least, the bits that Madica got to see in the next few minutes—looked a lot more like a run-down factory than the gleaming marble entrance. The walls were gray bricks streaked with rust. The lights overhead flickered in time with the thumping and clanking of heavy machinery behind the walls.

One corridor led to another, which in turn led to a flight of stairs that went up and up until Madica was panting for breath. The whiskered elf trudged along miserably beside her, never once glancing left or right.

Madica stopped at the top of the stairs. "I need to rest for a moment," she puffed.

"No resting!" the guard beside her said curtly, shoving her forward.

"Oh, be a dear, let her rest," Whiskers said. "She's not an elf yet, you know. She can't keep up with the likes of us 'til she's been to the—the fitting room." Her sentence finished in a snuffle.

"Wh-What's the f-fitting room?" Madica asked, shivering. She had been warm enough while she was walking, but as soon as she stopped, the arctic cold of the factory had seeped through her school sweater.

"No talking!" the guard ordered. It shoved her again, less gently than before. "Let's get moving."

Another corridor, another flight of stairs, turn left, turn right... Madica gave up trying to keep track of the way they had come—she just couldn't keep it all straight in her head. And she was so cold now that her teeth were chattering. Tired as she was, she didn't dare ask to stop again—she might never be able to get going again.

But then they turned a corner and opened a door that look no different from any other and it was warm, beautifully warm, warm like being snuggled under a blanket in bed early in the morning before her parents knew she was awake. "Aaah..." she sighed, not caring when the guards pushed her forward again or that her nose had started to run as all the drips that had frozen in it began to thaw.

She turned to the whiskered elf to say, "Doesn't this feel wonderful?" but two of the guards were already marching her away. "Wait!" Madica said. "Where are you going?"

"She's for the fitting room, isn't she?" the guard beside Madica said gruffly. "Mr. Secretary's orders and all."

"What—what's going to happen to her?"

The guard shook his head. "Best worry what's going to happen to you. Now come along, we're almost there." His shove was gentler this time.

The warm corridor ended in a heavy-looking door with broad metal straps riveted across it. A small porthole lay in its center. One guard stood beside Madica while the other flipped open the porthole's cover, squinted through it, then snicked the porthole back into place and produced a large key.

Click! Clang! The guard unlocked the door and pulled it open. Madica took one hesitant step inside and ---

"Laurellen!" Madica rushed forward and fell into a hug with her best friend in the whole world. Behind her, the door closed with a menacing *click*.

Chapter 10:

ELF!

The next few seconds were a noisy mix of, "Are you all right?" and, "I was so worried!" and, "How did you get here?" that quickly turned into, "The cat is a *ninja*!?" and, "Wait a second—you were kidnapped by *dinosaurs*!?"

"You go first," Laurellen said, wiping tears from her cheek. Madica wiped hers away too, then quickly explained what had happened since her friend had been taken from the school playground.

By the time she was done, Laurellen was staring at her dumbfounded. "So what happened to the cat?"

"Ssh!" Madica glanced around. "They might be listening." She leaned closer to Laurellen to whisper. "The cat's going to sneak in while I distract the elves."

"How are you going to do that?" Laurellen whispered back.

Madica hesitated. How *was* she going to do that? The ninja cat hadn't explained that part. She looked at Laurellen, who looked away, embarrassed, as Madica suddenly realized that maybe all the cat had wanted was a pair of hands to fly the saucer.

"Anyway," Laurellen said hurriedly, "Guess what I found out? It isn't Santa Claws who's been kidnapping fairies all these years. It's been the dinosaurs all along! Just like Snarky, but evil. That's what I call the snarkasaurus," she added as Madica opened her mouth to ask. "They're working for Santa Claws—or maybe he's working for them, I haven't figured that bit out yet. But after the flying saucer zapped us, we woke up here. At first ---" She had to stop for a moment to get control of her voice. "At first we thought we were still at school, but everyone was gone, and the door was locked, and nobody came when we banged on it. I was pretty scared."

"I bet I would have been even *more* scared," Madica said loyally. "So where is the—Snarky? And where's Ike?"

Laurellen sat on the fold-down cot by the wall. "They took him," she said in a small voice. "An elf dressed up like a doctor came in and poked and prodded us, and I thought that was going to be it, but then they saw his flumpy wing and..." Once again she had to fight tears. "And then they took him away."

Madica sat down beside her friend. "And what about the dinosaur?"

Laurellen shrugged. "I don't know. Ike and I were fighting over your backpack when they zapped us—he said you gave it to him, but I didn't believe him, and then we woke up and it wasn't here. I don't know what happened to it. Or to Ike."

The girls' unhappy silence was interrupted a minute later by the *tramp tramp tramp* of heavy feet in the corridor. The marching feet stopped in front of the door. A key clanged in the lock, and the door swung open as the girls leaped to their feet.

The elves in the corridor were the strangest Madica had seen yet. One balanced on a pogo stick instead of legs, another had a TV screen switching from channel to channel where its chest should have been, and a third looked like a jet that had grown legs.

The elfbot with the screen in its chest pushed the one that looked like a jet into the room. "We'll be back for the rest of you later," it said. The terror it clearly meant to inspire was spoiled a moment later when it tried to high-five the one with a pogo stick for legs and sent it toppling backward into the crowd behind it. *Slam! Click!* went the door.

The jetbot took a step forward. "Stop right there!" Madica ordered as she and Laurellen backed against the wall.

The jetbot raised its armwings. "Hey! Wait! It's me!"

"Me who?" the girls asked in unison.

"It's *me!* Ike!" The jetbot revved its engines. "They enhanced me! Do you like it? I think it's cool!"

Madica's hand flew to her mouth. Beside her, Laurellen dropped the pillow she had snatched up off the cot. It the floor with an unnoticed thump.

The jetbot revved its engines again. "Do you like it?" he asked again. It was a real question this time, and when she heard the uncertainty in the jetbot's voice, Madica knew it was really Ike.

"You're—they—Ike, what *happened?* What did they *do* to you?"

"They enhanced me," he said. "That's what 'ELF' stands for: Enhanced Life Form. It's an acronym—you take the first letter from each word, and ---"

"I know what an acronym is!" Madica snapped.

"Ssh." Laurellen put her hand on Madica's shoulder and squeezed. "Ike, did it—did they hurt you?"

"No!" he exclaimed, excitement back in his voice. "They took me to this room, kind of like a factory but more like a doctor's office, and there were all sorts of books with pictures of other ELFs, and I got to use this really cool computer program to design what I wanted to be, and, and—do you like it?" He spun in a circle, waggling the flaps on his wings. "And the best part is, I can fly! I can really fly!"

Madica felt Laurellen's fingers dig into her shoulder. "Oh, Ike..." her friend whispered. Every other boy in their grade had their wings come in before Ike's. When his finally sprouted, and one of them turned out to be flumpy, Madica had teased him just like everyone else at school—everyone except Laurellen. One afternoon, when the two of them had been walking home after school, Madica had made another joke. She couldn't remember exactly what she'd said, but she would never forget what Laurellen had done. She had stopped dead on the sidewalk and said, in the same quiet voice Madica's mom saved for special occasions, "You take that back."

"What?" Madica had asked. "I was just ---"

"You take that back, or you can find someone else to be your best friend, because I'm not going to be best friends with a bully." Ashamed, and a little bit frightened by the steel in her friend's voice, Madica had apologized for her joke. They had gone back to Laurellen's house and played Squids and Ladders as if nothing had happened, but she'd never teased Ike about his wing again. In the days that followed, other kids had stopped too, at least where Laurellen could hear.

All that passed through Madica's mind in an instant, followed immediately by, *he can fly?* "You can fly?" she asked.

Ike nodded vigorously. "Yeah!" He hesitated. "At least, I think so. I don't know. Maybe. I haven't tried yet. I was just about to, and then all the alarms went off because somebody was attacking us and nobody was allowed outside in case it was humans. It's just like at home—we're not supposed to let the humans know we're here."

"That attack—was it about half an hour ago?" Madica asked.

Ike's wings clanked as he shrugged. "I guess."

"Ah." *That was probably me*, Madica added in her head.

Ike brightened again. "But anyway, I'm supposed to give you this." He opened a small hatch where his tummy would have been if he still had one and took out something that looked like a fat magazine.

"What is it?" Laurellen asked.

"It's all the different enhancements you can get," he explained. "You can't always get exactly the ones you want, but they'll do their best."

"Enhancements?" Laurellen and Madica looked at each other. "What do you mean, enhancements?"

"Enhancements!" Ike repeated impatiently. "Like my wings and stuff. They're going to turn you into ELFs too."

Chapter 11:

Betrayed!

The next few minutes were a confused babble of, "But I don't want to be enhanced!" and, "Of course you do—you can get radar and lasers and all *kinds* of things!" that only ended when Laurellen said, "But what about going home?"

Ike and Madica stopped talking then. "If we get enhanced, will the other ELF's let us go home?" she asked. "Or do we have to stay here forever?"

"I think we have to stay here," Ike said, scuffing the floor with his landing gear. "So we don't tell anybody about, you know, the secret factory and everything."

Madica crossed her arms. "But I don't *want* to stay here! And anyway, we have to save the world, or there won't be any 'here' to stay in." After which, of course, she had to explain why the world needed saving.

"That's just like in the books I was reading!" Ike said excitedly when Madica and Laurellen were done.

"Yeah, it's wonderful, isn't it?" Madica replied sarcastically, then added, "What?" when Laurellen elbowed her in the ribs.

"What we need to *do*," Laurellen said, slowly and clearly, "Is *work together* to get out of here and warn people about the asteroid. Right?"

Madica nodded sharply. "I guess," Ike said reluctantly.

"Thank you. Now, how will we ---"

"I know!" Ike put up a wing, just as if he was answering a question in class. "I know how to get us out! At least, I think so. I don't know. Maybe."

He quickly explained his plan. When Madica rolled her eyes, Laurellen asked her if she had a better one. When she

admitted that she didn't, Laurellen said, "Well, I think it's a really good plan, so let's give it a try." After which Madica had to roll her eyes again, because Ike looked so pleased at Laurellen's praise.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Ike's knock on the cell door was so loud that Madica had to cover her ears. "Guards!" Ike shouted. "I think they're ready!"

A moment later, a key clanged in the lock once again and the door swung open. The ELF with a pogo stick instead of legs hopped into the room while the one with the screen in its chest stayed in the corridor. "Report!" the pogo ELF ordered.

Ike snapped a salute, then said, "Ow, that hurt," and rubbed the welt his wing had made on his forehead. "Um, sorry. That hurt, sir! Anyway, I think they're ready for enhancement, sir." He gestured at the two girls, who were sitting side by side on the cell's cot flipping through the magazine Ike had given them.

"Is that so?" the pogo ELF asked suspiciously.

"Oh yes, definitely," Madica said, marking her place in the magazine with her finger and trying to look as sincere as she possibly could. "Some of these enhancements are wonderful."

"Definitely," Laurellen agreed. "We can't wait to see what they look like for real."

"Hm..." The pogo ELF rubbed his chin. "This wouldn't all be some kind of plot to try to escape, would it?"

"Escape? Why would we want to escape when we could have—could have ---"

"--- could have a built-in microwave oven so that we could warm up snacks for our friends any time, anywhere?" Laurellen finished, pulling the magazine out of Madica's hands and holding it up for the pogo ELF to see.

His face lit up. "I was looking at that one too!" he exclaimed. "It'd be great when I'm out snowboarding!"

"That's just what I said," Ike chipped in. "But there are so many choices, they're having a hard time deciding, so I said they could go and have a look. If that's all right," he added hastily.

The pogo ELF glanced at its partner. *Why not?* flashed across the screen in the other ELF's chest. "Sure, why not?" the pogo ELF said. It stepped aside and waved the girls out of the cell. "Right this way."

Somehow Madica had forgotten how cold the factory was. Within moments she was shivering again.

"Did they take away your coat?" Laurellen asked.

"N-N-Not exactly," Madica chattered.

"Here." Laurellen shrugged hers off and wrapped it around Madica's shoulders. "We'll take turns."

The two ELF guards led them through hallway after hallway, up one flight of stairs and down another, until finally they came to a set of doors three times taller than they were. "This is the place," Ike said excitedly.

"Wonderful!" Madica said as enthusiastically as she could. "I can't wait to try out all the different things they could enhance us with."

"Me too!" Laurellen agreed brightly. "Can we go inside and look?" Because that had been Ike's plan—they would say they were going to try out some enhancements for flying or turning invisible or whatever seemed most likely to help them escape, then use them to get out of the factory.

At least, they *thought* that was Ike's plan, until he cleared his throat and said, "Actually, they don't keep any of the equipment here. You just look at it on a screen, and they bring it up once you've made your choices."

"What!?" The two girls rounded on him. "But you said ---"

"I know." He shuffled his landing gear awkwardly. "I shouldn't have fibbed. But you can't escape—there's nowhere to escape to—and anyway, you might have been hurt, and listen, you're

going to like being enhanced, really." He revved his engines. "I mean, who wouldn't want to be able to fly like a jet or, or, or be a submarine or turn invisible or ---"

"Ike, how *could* you?" The hurt in Laurellen's voice was as cold as the air around them. "You said you'd help!"

"I *am* helping," Ike protested. "I'm just—I'm just not helping like you thought I would."

"Aw, don't be mad at him," the pogo ELF said sympathetically. "That's just the brain thingy talking, that is."

"The what?" Madica asked.

"The brain thingy. They put a thingy in your brain when they enhance you so you'll do what you're told, an' he was told to get you down here without making a fuss. Isn't that right, kid?"

"It's a chip," Ike explained. "They'll give you one too, so you won't miss home at all, I promise."

Whatever anyone might have said next was cut off by a sudden wail from inside the enhancement room. "Mummy! Daddy!" The doors swung open. A heavy, slow-moving ELF wheeled out a cart. On it lay the whiskered ELF who had captured Madica outside.

Or more precisely, on it lay her head, and next to it, the disassembled pieces of her body. "Mummy..." the head whimpered. "Daddy... Where are you? Help me, please..."

"And if you make Mr. Secretary mad," the pogo ELF added, "They take you apart, and take the brain chip out, and then you miss home more than you can possibly imagine." And with that, he pushed the two girls forward into the room.

Chapter 12:

Santasaurus Rex!

The fitting room was larger than it first seemed. Tables, shelves, racks, cupboards, and stacks of boxes made it a maze, so that no matter which way the girls and their three guards turned, the walls never seemed to get get any closer.

And it was definitely *three* guards now, at least in Madica's mind. Ike kept chattering brightly about how cool it would be to have this searchlight mounted on your head, or how practical snowshoe feet would be, but Madica just glared at him.

And Laurellen—well, Laurellen looked like someone had just scribbled ink all over her favorite book on purpose. Madica took her friend's hand and squeezed it. Laurellen smiled weakly at her, but didn't say anything.

"And this," Ike said proudly, "This is the best... thing... ever!" They had reached a table covered in propellers, jet engines, booster rockets, and something that looked like the lid of a very complicated garbage can that hummed slightly and seemed to be floating. "This is where they brought me. Look!" He held up a wing. "We could be twins!"

"We don't want to be twins with you," Madica said bitterly. "We just want to go home."

Crestfallen, Ike put the wing back on the table. "I understand," he mumbled. "But once they enhance you, you'll ---"

"We don't want to be enhanced! Don't you get it? We want to stop the asteroid from smashing the whole planet and then go home!"

"Mind there, no need to shout," the pogo ELF said, as "Rude! Rude!" flashed on the other ELF's chest. "Now, do you want to be a flyer like your friend here, or would you rather something else?"

Madica was about to start shouting for real when a familiar voice whispered in her ear, "Be a dear and tell them you want the saucer thingy—the floaty one."

She froze. "Go on," the cat whispered. "Before they decide you should be a stove or the like. You'd not enjoy that, I wager."

Madica cleared her throat. "What about that one?" she asked, pointing at the humming hubcap.

"The saucer motivator? That's a great choice!" Ike enthused. "I almost picked that one too, but ---"

"Is there another one for Laurellen?" Madica interrupted, speaking directly to the pogo ELF as if Ike wasn't there. "So that we can be twins with *each other*?"

The pogo ELF glanced at the screen ELF, which and started rummaging about. "Why not? There should be another—ah, there you are." The screen ELF held up hubcap, then switched it on and let it go. It floated in the air, bobbing slightly, until the screen ELF nudged it over to Laurellen.

"Good enough?" the pogo ELF asked. "Right, then, let's go see if Himself is free."

"That's the best part," Ike whispered loudly to Laurellen. "You get to meet *him*."

"Him who?" Laurellen asked, ignoring Madica's "we're not talking to him" scowl.

"*Him*." Ike fluttered his wing flaps. "Himself. *Santa Claws*."

The screen ELF opened the door. "Move along, move along, we haven't got all day," flashed impatiently on its chest.

As Madica reached for the first saucer motivator, a whisker tickled her cheek. "Stay close together," the cat whispered in Madica's ear. She turned her head ever so slightly, trying to catch a glimpse of it out of the corner of her eye, but all she could see was the pile of gears and pulleys on the table behind her. She nodded once.

"Come on," she said to Laurellen, putting her arm through her friend's. "Everything's going to be all right."

The corridor was even colder than it had been before, so cold that Madica and Laurellen tried sharing Laurellen's coat. It didn't work: try as they would, they couldn't get it closed in front and still walk, so they had to take turns once again. Their breath steamed in the frigid arctic air as they followed the pogo ELF through hallway after hallway, up one flight of stairs and down another.

Getting the saucer motivators up and down the stairs was a puzzle at first: for all their pushing and tugging, they couldn't get the silver disks to move up or down, just sideways. Ike offered to help, but backed away when Madica snapped, "We're okay, thank you very much." That's when the pogo ELF hopped back and showed them the buttons in the center of the motivators. Push the bottom one, and the motivator rose. Push the top one, and it sank.

After that, there was just the tramp, tramp, tramp of their feet, the boing... boing... of the pogo ELF, and the occasional sniffle from Ike, who might well have been the only jet in history with a runny nose.

After what seemed like ages, but was probably only ten or fifteen miserable, freezing minutes, they turned a corner and found themselves at the top of an escalator whose steps seemed to be carved out of ice. Down they went, pushing the motivators' buttons every few seconds to bring them along, into a room bigger than Madica's whole house. Round frosted lights dangled in clusters from its ceiling like glowing white cherries.

Madica gulped. There, on the far side, was a desk twice her height—a desk with a squat body spliced into its cast-iron top. Four long arms pulled sheets of paper out the slots in the desk's top every time a little bell went *ding!* A beaky face scowled at them, muttered "Naughty," scribbled something on them, and fed them into other slots.

But then she looked more closely and realized that this deskbot wasn't exactly the same as the one she'd seen earlier. Its beak was a different shape, and the streaks of rust running

down it were thicker. Its arms squeaked a bit as they moved, too, and it actually looked up when the pogo ELF cleared its throat.

"Volunteers for enhancement to be reviewed by Himself," it announced importantly.

The deskbot turned its glowing red eyes on Madica and Laurellen. "Hmph." One arm pulled a lever sticking out of the floor beside its desk while the other three continued their yanking and scribbling.

The double doors behind it swung open slowly and silently. "Go on," Ike whispered, "Go ahead!"

Madica took a deep breath and let it out. This time it was Laurellen who took her hand to squeeze. "It's going to b-b-be all right, r-r-remember?"

Madica nodded. Together, pushing their saucer motivators ahead of them, she and Laurellen walked into the room.

And stopped.

And looked up—*way* up—at a rusty steel head that ten people could have sat on side by side, and rusty steel teeth as long as Madica's legs, and arms that weren't ridiculously little at all, not up close on a body built like a hungry missile on two piston legs. It was him. It was Santa Claws, the one and only santasaurus rex, standing beneath a glass ceiling the size of a football field.

He lowered his head slightly, turning it from side to side to look at them with each of his glowing red eyes in turn. "Mm..." he rumbled. "Are you my lunch?"

Chapter 13:

Lunch!

"No, sir," rasped a voice from behind the two girls. "They aren't your lunch. We're not having lunch today."

"Ah." The glowing red light in Santa's eyes dimmed. "Pity. I haven't had lunch in... in quite a while."

"That's right, sir." The voice sounded like metal scraping on stone. "You don't eat lunch any more."

"Ah. Pity. I think I rather enjoyed it." Santa's eyes went dark. His body sagged slightly, as if the tension had gone out of whatever wires and cables were holding it together. Madica let out the breath she hadn't realized she was holding and was finally able to turn and see who had been speaking.

It was the deskbot. It had rubber casters at the end of each of its four straight legs, and had rolled silently into the room behind them. Ike stood beside it, bouncing up and down with excitement.

"Wasn't he great?" he burbled. "I mean, wow, Santa Claws—the Santa Claws. And he talked to you and everything!"

"Talk to us? He wanted to *eat* us!" Madica said hotly. "And don't say, yeah, but he didn't, or I'll—I'll ---"

"This interview is over," the deskbot announced flatly. It spun around and started rolling back to its post outside the door. "You will be taken for enhancement now."

"And if I—if *we* say no?" Madica asked, crossing her arms.

The deskbot never had a chance to answer. With a blood-curdling yowl, the ninja cat finally made its move.

Later, Madica would wonder where it had been hiding, and how a black cat, ninja or not, could possibly hide in a white corridor. Right then, all she could do was duck as the cat

leaped over the screen ELF, rolled under the pogo ELF just as it was at the top of its endless bouncing, jumped up and ran *across* the top of the deskbot, dodging its arms with a graceful backflip, and landed on one of the saucer motivators. The motivator flew forward under the impact, right into Madica's middle.

"Oof!" she grunted. Before she could straighten up, the cat reached down under the motivator and hit the 'up' switch.

The motivator shot into the air with Madica and the cat on top of it. At the last possible moment, the cat pounced—right onto Madica's bum. "Ow!" she exclaimed as its claws dug in. Off-balance, the motivator flipped onto its side. Madica flew off and landed right on Santa Claws' head.

The cat landed beside her and snagged her arm before she could slide off. "Right," it said. "Now we need one of the blighter's eyes."

"What? What?" Madica's heart was pounding. "What were you *thinking*? I could have been killed!?"

"I was thinking you wanted to help save the world," the cat snapped. "Now, if you don't mind, could you please unscrew one of its eyes before the guards—oh dear." The cat pounced again, this time onto Madica's head to push it down an instant before a ruby beam lanced through the air.

"Blast," the cat cursed. "I was afraid of that." Down below, the deskbot had taken a laser pistol out of one of its drawers and was lining up a second shot. "You get the eye—I'll try to draw their fire. Oh, and best hurry—you don't want to be up here when Himself wakes up."

Bzzzzap! The air above Madica's head suddenly smelled like a hot frying pan. "Wakes up!? Why don't *you* get the eye!?"

"No thumbs, remember?" The cat bunched its hindquarters and leaped into the air as if to catch the next ruby-red beam that sizzled above it. It twisted as it landed and bounded back along the dino-bot's rusty metal spine.

With her heart in her throat, Madica slid her hand along Santa Claws's head and down to its eye. She tried twisting it, first one way and then the other. When nothing happened, she edged over to get some leverage and pulled.

Pop! Trembling, she pulled her hand back up, waiting for a shout from the ELF's below or for the bright, final light of a laser beam. But the deskbot was still shooting at the cat, who was practically dancing along Santa's tail to keep its attention.

Now what do I do? Madica thought wearily. She was pretty sure she knew what would happen if she held up the eye and shouted, "I have it!" She peeked over the side of the dinosaur's enormous head. Laurellen and Ike were still below, along with six—no, seven—no, eight—ELF's of varying shapes, sizes, and armaments. Two of them even seemed to be taking a third apart in order to build what she really, really hoped wasn't a rocket launcher.

Luckily (although that might not actually be the best word), Santa Claws chose that moment to wake up. With a scraping grind and a gust of oil-stained breath, it opened its mouth in a yawn that Madica's entire class could have taken a one-way ride in. She yelped as it stretched its neck and took a couple of tentative, half-awake steps.

Madica bit her lip to stop herself from shrieking as Santa Claws bent down and tilted its head to look at the ELF's with its remaining eye. "Are you my lunch?" it rumbled?

Somehow the ninja cat was back just in time to answer. "Oh yes," it said right into Santa's ear. "Yes *sir!* They are indeed your lunch. Bon appetit!" And as the world's only, and therefore hungriest, *santasaurus rex* leaned forward to gobble up the closest ELF, the cat dug its claws into Madica's arm and threw itself to the side. With a yelp and a tumble, she rolled clumsily past the rusty metal ear, slid down Santa's next, and landed splat on the floor on her backside.

Chapter 14:

Glue!

The next few moments were a symphony of yelling and clanking. Some of the ELFs ran for the door. Others started shooting at Santa Claws, who roared at the sting of their laser beams.

Madica scrambled to her feet a moment before she would have been stepped on by a clawed metal leg. She looked around wildly. Where was Laurellen? Where was her friend? Where had she ---

There! The deskbot had grabbed one of her arms and was pulling her with it as it rolled backward toward the door. Ike had grabbed her other arm and was trying to pull her free, but his landing gear couldn't get a grip on the floor, so he was being dragged along with her.

"Laurellen!" Madica shouted. Santa Claws was swinging his enormous head back and forth, trying to focus his remaining eye on an ELF long enough to catch it. The floor shook with every step it took. How was she going to get past it? And what we should do then?

Suddenly the cat was beside her again. "Excellent work," it panted. For the first time since Madica had met it, its fur wasn't perfectly groomed. "Now, let's see if we can ---"

"I'm not doing *anything* until we rescue Laurellen!" Madica snapped.

The cat huffed. "I was *going* to say, let's see if we can collect your friends and get out of here, shall we? Because I do think we've overstayed our welcome. But mind you don't lose that—we'll need it later."

It took Madica a moment to realize that the cat was talking about the dinosaur's eye. "Fine," she said curtly, stuffing it into her pocket. "Now what?"

"Now you follow me." And off it went again, zigzagging through the dinosaur's legs, tripping one ELF and bounding up to plant all four feet on the chest of another to leap over a third. Madica didn't do any of that—she just ran straight for Laurellen.

Chomp! Ten steps behind her, the ELF that the cat had tripped wasn't quick enough getting to its feet. *Bzzzzzap!* The one it had leaped over fired its laser into the air. The cat wove between the legs of two other ELFs and launched itself at the deskbot.

But the deskbot had been waiting for it. That was all Madica could think, afterward, when she had time to think. The deskbot had been firing its laser at Santa Claws like all the other ELFs. It wasn't pointed anywhere near the cat, but at the very last moment, one of its other arms reached into another drawer and pulled out *another* laser and fired.

The cat twisted mid-air in a desperate attempt to avoid the shot, but it couldn't, not completely. With a flash and a sizzle, the red beam sliced the cat's tail clean off its body. The cat yowled in pain and rage. One kick knocked the second laser out of the deskbot's hand. Another, and the first laser was tumbling through the air as well. A well-aimed swipe of one front paw, and Laurellen stumbled away leaving stray shreds of her jacket in the deskbot's clutches.

The deskbot spun and raced away on its silent wheels with the remaining ELFs behind it and the rampaging santasaurus behind them. Madica rushed over to give Laurellen a quick hug, then turned to the cat. It was sitting on the floor, staring at the smoldering end of its lost tail. "Are—are you OK?" Madica asked.

There was a long pause before the cat blinked and shook its head. "There are always losses," it said quietly. It blinked again and looked up at Madica. "Do you still have the eye?"

"Right here." She held it out.

"Is that... Gosh, is that *Santa's* eye?" Ike hadn't fled with the other ELFs. Instead, he was standing next to Laurellen—or

rather, sort of next to her, but not quite close enough to be 'next' to her.

Madica ignored him. "What do we do now?"

The cat heaved a sigh. "Save the world, I suppose." With a lightning swipe of its paw, it batted its tail away across the floor. "And to do that, we'll need ---"

Whatever the cat was going to say was cut off by the loud *hrrrnk! hrrrnk!* of an alarm. Red lights began flashing on the walls around them and out in the corridor. "I see they've finally noticed that Himself is on the loose," the cat said loudly. "We'd best get moving before they ---"

Clang! Madica jumped and shrieked as a pair of enormous metal doors slid sideways out of the wall and slammed together, blocking their exit. As they did so, hatches opened in the walls and transparent goo started gushing into the room.

"Now what!?" Laurellen asked.

"Blast." The stub of the cat's tail twitched. "It's emergency glue. We thought they'd taken that out."

"And the doors?" Madica demanded. "The big thick steel doors that we can't get through?"

"They must be new." The cat looked up at the two saucer motivators stuck against the glass ceiling high above their heads. "Pity we didn't hang onto those."

Madica slumped. "So this is it? There's no way out? We've lost? The world is going to be destroyed, and we can't stop it?"

Ike cleared his throat. "I—I can help. I think." He shifted uncomfortably as Laurellen, Madica, and the cat turned their eyes on him. "I—I've got almost a full tank of fuel, so I could fly up there and maybe get those saucer things and bring them down here so you could at least get away from the glue and then maybe you'd want to be enhanced after all and stay here?" He was looking straight at Laurellen by the time he finished, his voice full of pleading.

Laurellen stepped forward and put her hand on Ike's wing. "I can't stay," she said gently. "There won't be a world to stay *in* if the asteroid hits, and I..." She stopped to swallow. "I want to be with my parents when that happens. Don't you want to be with yours? Don't you want to go home?"

Ike slumped. "This is my home now." Then he straightened. "But I'll help you go back to yours if you want."

Chapter 15:

Escape!

It turned out that jets weren't very good at climbing stairs. Ike's wings kept banging against the handrail, so he had to turn sideways, but his landing gear didn't move from side to side, so every step was an awkward dance of tipping, tilting, and more-or-less falling up the next stair.

Every tenth step, when he paused to catch his breath, he offered to fly to the top and wait for them. The cat overruled him each time with mounting impatience. "We don't know how much fuel you have," it finally snapped. "And it would be rather awkward to run out at the wrong moment."

They finally reached the upper walkway. Madica could feel the icy breeze coming through the holes the saucer motivators had made in the glass roof. Ice already rimed the glass where it curved down to meet the wall. She wrote a big 'M' in it with her fingertip and sighed.

Ike was lighter than he looked. Even so, once he lay down on the floor it was a struggle to lift his tail section to point at the glass. Madica braced herself against one of his wings. Laurellen braced herself against the other. The cat licked his paw and used it to smooth down the fur on his ears. "Ready?" it asked.

"Ready," the two fairies said.

"I guess so," Ike added in a muffled voice.

"Right, then. Fire it up!" the cat ordered.

Ike fired his jet. A cone of flame splashed against the metal bars holding the windows in place, orange around the edges and blue within. It only took a few moments for them to turn dull red. As they brightened, glowing in the heat of the jet, an alarm started ringing below.

"What's that?" Ike shouted over the roar of his own jet.

"Not for worry!" the cat shouted back. "They're just finally getting around to opening the door."

Ike turned up his jet. "I... can't... hold... him..." Madica grunted, pushing back against the jet's thrust with all her might. She glanced at Laurellen. Her friend's eyes were closed, and her jaw clenched.

Suddenly Madica felt her feet slip. "Ike!" she shrieked. "Turn it down!"

"No!" The cat's tail whipped from side to side. "Just more one minute!"

Madica's feet slipped again. The bars were sagging, and the glass behind them dripping down like ice cream on a warm day, but she couldn't... hold... on...

Clang! The metal bars fell to the floor. *Crash!* The half-melted window fell from its frame and shattered against the floor.

Freezing arctic air gusted in. "Help!" Ike squawked. "I can't get up!" The girls wrestled him back to his feet.

Below them, the enormous door finally opened with a sound like the world's biggest boot being pulled out of the world's biggest mud puddle. Madica looked over the railing. The glue that had filled the room to second-story height was slowly flowing out the door. A pair of helicopter ELF's were circling above it, shining bright spotlights into the glue. *They're looking for us*, she realized.

"They think we're in the glue," Laurellen whispered to her loudly.

"Best be gone before they realize their mistake," the cat whispered back, making them both jump. It nodded at Ike. "Come on."

Madica and Laurellen helped Ike tilt himself forward. "Whoa..." he gasped. Madica stuck her head out the window to look as well, then wished she hadn't. Ike was right: they were

at least a dozen floors up, looking out over a narrow valley edged with jagged rocks and icefalls.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked the cat. Before it could answer, a red laser beam went *bzzzzap!* above their heads. The helicopter ELFs had found them!

"I think it's a *splendid* idea," the cat said firmly. "Now go!" With one bound, it leaped up onto Ike's back. Laurellen got on behind him, leaning forward to hold onto the front edges of his wings as if they were the handlebars on a racing bike. Madica sat behind her with her arms tight around her best friend's waist.

Ike's whole body rumbled as his jets ignited. "Hang on!" he shouted. They jerked forward—then stopped short.

"My legs are caught!" he yelled. "I can't get them over the window sill!"

"Lean forward!" the cat ordered. "Now!"

"We're already leaning!" Madica yelled back.

Bzzzzap! Another laser beam sliced through the air right by Madica's ear, leaving a smoldering round hole in the wall. She screamed in terror and rolled off Ike's back.

"Hang on!" she shouted. She braced her shoulder under Ike's tail and straightened her legs. Ike's landing-gear legs caught on the sill again, but then he tilted forward and started sliding and Madica shrieked, "Wait for me!" and somehow Laurellen grabbed her hand and dragged her with them as they fell forward into the freezing air.

Ike and girls all screamed in terror as they fell straight down toward the valley floor. "Your jets! Your jets!" the cat yowled. Ike's jets roared to life. He levelled off just in time, blowing snow to either side as he shot along the valley floor dodging the laser blasts that chased them from the castle above.

"Help!" Madica was still dangling from Laurellen's hand. "I can't hold on!"

The cat twisted and jumped, landing on Ike's wing. "What are you doing!?" he shouted, even as the extra weight flipped him over. Madica thumped against Ike's belly and slid around into place as he finished his barrel roll. She wrapped her arms around Laurellen's waist again and pressed her face against her friend's back, eyes squeezed shut, as Ike whooped and rocketed up into the sky.

Madica had thought nothing could scare her more than being shot at while piloting a stolen flying saucer. She had been *sure* nothing could scare her more than having lasers fired at her by angry ELFs, or being on the back of a hungry santasaurus. She was wrong. Hanging onto her best friend on the back of a jet was *much* more frightening, particularly when the jet kept shouting things like, "Woo hoo! This is great! What do I do now?"

"How would I know!?" Laurellen shouted back. "Just keep flying!"

"Turn back to the castle!" the cat commanded. It had slid back to nestle in Laurellen's lap. Madica could feel its fur tickling her fingers before they went numb from the cold.

"What?" Ike shouted.

"Turn! Back!"

"Are you crazy!? They'll blow us up!"

Madica felt the cat sigh. "Uh oh," she thought. She knew what was coming. Sure enough, it reached out and dug its claws into his wings. Ike yelped and changed course.

They raced back over the tundra, chasing their own misshapen shadow. "There it is!" Laurellen shouted. "Wait! Where'd it go?"

Madica craned her neck to look over her friend's shoulder. For a moment there was nothing but snow, but then there was the same sparkling rainbow fizz she had seen when the ELF who had captured her had fired its bazooka and the castle was back, the enormous saucer floating over it like a giant's hat.

"Blast! They've repaired the invisibilator! We have to reach it before it's fully operational! Go faster!" The cat dug its claws into Ike once again.

"I'm trying!" he shouted back frantically. "But I feel—I feel kind of... dizzy..."

With no more warning than than, his tail jets went *putt!* Their twin flames vanished, and for a moment, all Madica could hear was the wind rushing past her ears as Ike dipped toward the ground that suddenly seemed a very long way below them.

"Ike! Wake up! Wake up!" Laurellen smacked his fuselage. "Ike, please, we need you!"

"Huh? Wha? Wha's happ'ing?"

"Ike, please." Laurellen leaned forward and whispered something in his ear. Madica suddenly felt out of place, the same way she did when she came into the kitchen and her mother and father were in the middle of kissing each other.

To her relief, Laurellen only patted him and sat back up. "Come on," she said. "You can do it. I *know* you can do it."

Putt! Putt! Fwoom! Ike's jets came back to life. They levelled off again.

"Almost out of fuel!" the cat said, still stretched out across Ike's back. "We *must* get to the super saucer before it disappears!"

"What?" "The saucer?" "Are you *crazy*?" Madica, Laurellen, and Ike all spoke at once.

"The saucer," the cat commanded firmly. "It's the only one in the world big enough stop the asteroid. We take it, we save the world, and then we come back and have a *very* firm discussion with these ELFs about what is and isn't a suitable birthday present for Santa."

Before Madica could ask what birthdays had to do with anything, Ike gasped, "I'm running out again—for real this time!"

"Just a few more seconds!" Laurellen begged. She leaned forward again, hugging him. Madica leaned forward too, her face against her best friend's back, as they rocketed toward the giant saucer. She closed her eyes, too afraid to look, then took a deep breath and changed her mind. She *wasn't* too afraid to look—she just wasn't, not ever again.

A dozen rectangular hatches lay flush against the saucer's side, each large enough to swallow Madica's house. As Ike shot toward it, the one in front of them started to open. Slowly, slowly, much too slowly...

"We're going to crash!" Ike shouted, and despite her new-found courage, Madica *did* close her eyes. A moment later they flew straight into the side of the saucer, burst into flames, and were never heard from again.

Chapter 16:

Brains!

At least, that's what Madica *expected* would happen, but at the last second Ike rolled onto his side and put on one final burst of speed. They shot through the opening hatch with half a sandwich of fresh air on either side of them, bounced off the deck inside with a *clang!*, then skidded to a halt.

Putt! Putt! Ffssss... Ike's jet's fizzled out for the last time. The two girls on his back clung to him and each other, waiting for their heads and stomachs to stop spinning. The cat, on the other hand, jumped onto the deck and began washing itself.

"Th-thank you," Laurellen eventually said in a trembling voice. She patted Ike's side and clambered off. Madica slid to the gray metal deck beside her. "Thank you, Ike."

"Sokay," he yawned. "I' jus' gonna... take a... *snore*"

"Now come with me," the cat ordered. "We still have a world to save."

"I'm not going anywhere." Laurellen crossed her arms. "I'm staying here to look after Ike."

The stub of the cat's tail twitched. "There will be rather little to look after if the world ends."

"I said, I'm staying," Laurellen repeated.

The cat glanced at Madica, who crossed her arms in imitation of her friend (and to stop herself shivering). "Me too."

The cat blinked. "Jolly good. The world has to end some time, I suppose. Might as well be today as tomorrow." Calmly, it resumed washing itself.

Laurellen sighed and nudged Madica. "Go ahead, we'll be okay."

"Are you sure?" Madica asked, secretly wishing that her friend had asked if *she* would be okay too.

"I'm sure." She gave Madica a quick hug. "You go save the world for us. We'll be right here."

The landing bay had only one door. It was three times as wide as a regular door, and twice as high, but it swung open at Madica's touch as easily as if it had been made of feathers instead of double-thick steel. The white-painted corridor on the other side curved away gently in both directions. "148-G" was stencilled in yellow opposite them.

"Which way do we go?" Madica whispered.

The cat sniffed the air, then nodded to their right. "There. Come along." It trotted away so quickly that Madica had to jog to keep up.

148-F, 148-E, ... The cat halted in front of 148-A. Beside it, on the inner wall of the corridor, was a regular-sized one with a porthole at head height. The cat leaped onto its handle, balancing on one rear paw with its tail and other rear leg stretched out for balance so that it could peer through the glass.

"Right," it said in a satisfied voice, hopping back down to the deck. "Open it up, there's a good girl."

"Is that what we're for? Opening doors?" Madica asked, joking.

The cat blinked. "Yes, of course. It's the reason cats domesticated primates in the first place."

Madica opened her mouth, sighed, and closed it again. "I'm *not* domesticated," she muttered under her breath, opening the door.

The stairs went up and up—one hundred, two hundred, so many that Madica lost track and started counting landings instead. Each one had a door on either side, and on each door hung a small green sign: "Greenland (all)", "Azores (infants)", "Tierra del Fuego (overflow)", "Istanbul (southern suburbs)".

She stopped once or twice to look through the small windows set in the doors, but all she could see were empty shelves stretching into the distance.

She was panting by the time they reached the final landing. "At least... I'm not... cold... any more..." she gasped.

"Ssh," the cat hissed. Instead of a door on each side, this landing had only one right in front of them—and it was ajar. Quiet voices muttered behind it too quietly for Madica to make out the words.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"The bridge. The brains of the saucer. There are certain to be guards. And almost certain death. Let's go!" The cat slipped through the door on silent feet.

Madica waited for the sound of laser blasts, crashing metal, and yowling ninja cat. When none came, she eased the door open a bit wider and peered around it.

The room inside was round, with a domed ceiling, and as big as her entire house. A single empty chair, twice the size of the one her dad sat in at home when he was reading his cookbooks, sat on a pedestal in its center. Around it were control panels covered in dials, levers, and blinking lights. And on top of them ---

Madica gulped. A square glass case sat on top of each control panel. And inside each case was a head. There were goats and pterodactyls, gorillas and pandas, something that she *hoped* was a squid, and a few she was going to pretend she had never seen, because otherwise she might have nightmares.

Then she realized that their eyes were open. Each head was watching the control panel it was perched on and muttering quiet instructions. "Reduce plasma flow to engine three by five percent." "Resume repair on air coolant duct." "Transfer four shelving units from 247-C to 247-B."

The cat was sitting in front of the big chair, its back to Madica. She tiptoed up beside it. "What—what *are* they?" she asked.

"The brains of the saucer," the cat replied shortly. "I did say that, didn't I?"

"I didn't think you meant it *literally*," Madica muttered, but the cat wasn't paying attention.

Instead, it was sniffing at the air. "This room smells like it's been empty for some time." The cat sniffed again. "Except for this chair. Something here smells familiar, like... like warm talc. And old coffee."

Madica was going to make a joke—a rude one—about the kind of person (or cat) who had smelled enough chair seats that one of them could smell familiar, but instead she gasped and pointed. "That's my backpack!" Because it was, hanging over the back of the chair. Without thinking, she took two steps forward and grabbed it.

The heads instantly stopped muttering. *Uh oh*, Madica thought weakly.

Hiss! Kerchunk! Hatches popped open in the base of each control panel. A hundred headless robot bodies stepped out, raised their arms, and began slow-marching forward as the muttering resumed: "Braaaaains... fresh braaaaains..."

Chapter 17:

Sixteen Orange Kneecap!

The cat shot her a sour look. "I'm sorry," she said defensively. "I just ---" *I just thought the little dinosaur might still be in it*, she finished in her head, but of course it wasn't.

"Braaaains..." A pair of robot hands brushed against the hem of her jacket. She yelped and jumped up onto the chair.

"No! Follow me!" the cat ordered. It had jumped onto the nearest control panel and was running along it toward the door, leaping over the glass cases one by one.

Madica slipped her arms through the straps of her backpack, took a deep breath, and threw herself at the nearest control panel. "Ooph!" She scrambled to her feet and stepped gingerly over the nearest glass case, over a second, over a third ---

Her back foot bumped the case. The headless zombie robots immediately halted, turned toward her, and resumed their slow march.

"Sorry!" she whispered loudly to the cat, who was perched impatiently on the control panel nearest the door.

"Take all time you want," it said evenly.

But Madica wasn't paying attention. Instead, she was staring wide-eyed at the next glass case she had to step over. "That's... Look!" There, inside it, was a tiny dinosaur head—a snarkasaurus head!

The case made a quiet little *click!* as Madica lifted it off the control panel. The dinosaur head instantly stopped muttering. It blinked, then blinked again and yawned widely. "What—where am I?" it asked. "Did someone deactivate me? Shwobblebob, did you deactivate me again? You *know* that's not nice!"

With three great leaps the cat bounded back to Madica and the dinosaur. "What is the primary launch code for this saucer?" it demanded.

"Why should I tell *you*?" the dinosaur head asked.

"Hey!" Madica said sharply. "We're here to rescue you! So be nice!" Which hadn't been true until Madica said it, but now that she had, she realized she wasn't going to leave the little dinosaur behind.

"Braaaains... fresh braaaains..." the heads around them moaned.

"Looks like *you* need rescue more than *me*," the dinosaur head said. It sighed theatrically. "Fine. Let me look it up." It closed its eyes. "Searching... searching... Would you like some music while I'm looking for it? We have a wide variety of classical and popular tunes in our database."

"No!" Madica and the cat said simultaneously.

"Fine," the dinosaur sighed again. "The primary command code is... um... sixteen orange kneecap and then touch your nose with your finger."

"It's *what*?" Madica spluttered.

"It's for security," the dinosaur head said, opening its eyes again. "We *can't* touch our noses when our heads are in cases, and cats don't have fingers."

"Explain later!" the cat said, racing back to the big chair. "Right now, Miss Primate, if you're not *too* busy, could you please join me so we can get on with saving the world?"

Madica looked at the sea of arms all around her, then took a deep breath and high-stepped along the top of the control panel. She was almost at the panel closest to the big chair when her foot caught against one of the panels.

"Help!" she shrieked, but by some miracle she fell forward instead of sideways and landed with an *ooph!* on the panel. A headless rhinoceros reared up and tried to grab her with its front legs, but she snatched her arm away, pulled herself to

her feet, sprinted the last few steps, and leaped across to the chair.

"These buttons, if you please, one, two, three," the cat ordered, pointing with its paw. Sure enough, Madica saw the buttons were labelled "16", "orange", and "kneecap". Others had "brightly", "spleen", "blandish", and even stranger words written on them.

"Do I push them?" she asked.

"No, you *lick* them," the cat snapped, then batted Madica's ear with its paw as she leaned forward to stick out her tongue. "That was sarcasm, you silly biped! Yes, push them with your finger, that's a good girl! Then touch your nose with the same finger. But whatever you do, *don't* touch the big red button. That puts the saucer on manual control, and you're a long way from being ready to fly a ship this size."

"Gotcha," Madica said. Sixteen... orange... kneecap... As she pushed each button it changed color from shining white to deep, pulsing red. She swallowed, took a deep breath, and touched the tip of her nose.

The moans of, "Braaaaains... fresh braaaaains..." instantly stopped. The zombie robots lowered their arms and stood at attention.

Madica slumped in the chair. All of a sudden she felt woozy. How long had it been since she'd eaten? Or gone to the bathroom? *I really need to go to the bathroom*, she suddenly realized. For some reason, it was the funniest thought she'd ever had, and the foul look from the cat when she started giggling only made it funnier.

"There!" the dinosaur's head called from where Madica had left it. "That's my body over there! Put me back together!"

Madica nodded and pulled herself together. The headless zombie robots were still standing at attention, so she slid her feet onto the floor and stood up. She could feel a faint vibration, but the robots still didn't move. "Is it safe?" she whispered loudly.

"Yes, of course it's safe," the dinosaur head said impatiently.

"But still almost certain death," the cat added.

"Well yes, aside from that, it's perfectly safe. Now hurry up—I want to be back in one piece *this* year, thank you."

Madica picked her way through the motionless crowd, doing her best not to touch any of them (particularly not the one that looked like a cross between a squid and a porcupine with a bit of bulldozer thrown in). The vibration in the floor grew stronger with each step, until the robots' bodies were jiggling slightly.

"What's doing that?" she finally asked.

"Turbulence," the dinosaur head replied. "It'll stop once we're out of the atmosphere."

"Out of the—what?"

"Once we're in outer space. Where there's no air?" She heard rather than saw the dinosaur roll its eyes.

"Oh. Right. Outer space. Of course." Madica turned the head in her hands and set it gently on the dinosaur's body. *Click!*

The dinosaur blinked, then threw up its arms. "Woo hoo!" It did a little dance. "I'm me again!"

Madica grinned, but only for an instant, because without warning the lights in the control room turned red and an alarm started blaring, "Brrrrmp! Brrrrmp! Brrrrmp!"

"Warning," said a creaky, gravelly voice that seemed to come from everywhere at once. "Re-assembled robot detected on control level. All units, respond and deactivate with extreme prejudice."

All around Madica and the snarkasaurus, a hundred zombie robots raised their arms. "Braaaaains... fresh braaaaains..." they moaned, turning as one toward the pair.

Chapter 18:

Outer Space!

"Don't let them get me!" the snarkasaurus squeaked, leaping into Madica's arms.

Madica whipped around, hoping to jump back up onto the control panels, but there were too many zombies in her way. "Help us!" she yelled to the cat.

It was already on its way. It hurtled over the zombies nearest it, spun in the air, and kicked the headless gorilla nearest Madica as it came down. The zombie tumbled across the room, but as the cat spun around for another kick, a stork-zombie stuck out a skinny leg. "Heeyah!" The cat back-flipped over the leg onto the back of a giant tortoise. Arms, tentacles, and at least one goopy green pseudopod reached out to grab it

--- and suddenly Madica was falling. No, not falling, *floating*, except her stomach was definitely convinced she was on the biggest drop of the biggest roller coaster ride in the world.

"We made it! We're in space!" The dinosaur pushed off from the floor and soared toward the ceiling. "Yippee!"

Madica tried to follow him, but she'd floated just high enough that her feet couldn't reach the floor any more. She kicked with her feet as though she was swimming, but all it did was set her spinning slowly.

Then, without warning, two small paws pushed against the seat of her pants, sending her up beside the snarkasaurus. "Whoa!" she squawked. Beneath her (if "beneath" actually meant anything) she saw the cat rebound from her bum to bounce off floor and follow her.

Before she could thank it, the recorded voice said, "Warning! Re-assembled robot still at large on control level. Organic life forms detected on control level. Deactive all intruders

immediately." Instantly, the zombie robots below them began grasping each other's hands, paws, and tentacles to pull themselves together.

"Aim for the door!" the cat ordered, but it was already too late: half a dozen of the zombies had already blocked it.

"Is this really the best rescue you can do?" the snarkasaurus spluttered. "I was better off with my head in a box!"

"Do you want me to put you back?" Madica demanded.

"They'll put us *both* back if they catch us! And not up here either. They'll put us in crates in the cargo holds, and we'll spend all our time just *wishing* our heads were in *glass* cases! Oh, why did I ever run away?" And to Madica's complete surprise, the snarkasaurus started crying.

The cat snagged Madica's jacket with a claw and pulled itself onto her shoulder. "Is there another way out?" she asked desperately.

"Not in one piece," the cat rumbled.

Madica swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. "Of course not," she said. Beneath her, the zombie robots were turning themselves into a giant living net. Hands held ankles, claws held paws, tentacles wrapped around each other, and as each zombie added itself, they got closer and closer to the fairy, the cat, and the sniffing dinosaur floating near the ceiling.

I guess this is how it ends, Madica thought emptily, as a crocodile stretched out and tried to grab her ankle in its jaws. She tucked her feet up underneath her, as though she were at home on the couch reading with a book in her lap with her mom on one side and her dad on the other. She sniffled, just once, as the crocodile's jaws snapped again, closer this time.

Crash! The door burst open, flinging half a dozen zombie robots in all directions as Ike roared into the room, both jets blazing. "Hey!" he shouted. "Does anybody need a lift?"

"Warning," the recorded voice said. "Unauthorized flying vehicle detected in control level. Apprehend and ---"

"Oh, shut up!" Madica said, grinning from ear to ear. Ike fired one engine and then the other to shake himself from side to side, batting the now-helpless zombies off to the sides of the room. She stretched out an arm to catch hold of his wing.

"What are you doing?" the dinosaur squawked. "That's an *ELF!*"

"That's my *friend*," Madica replied. She grabbed Ike's wing with one hand and pulled the snarkasaurus toward him with the other. The cat bunched itself against her chest and dove as gracefully as a swallow for Ike's tailfin.

"All aboard?" Ike sang.

"Go!" the cat ordered. Ike fired both his engines and shot through the door.

"Look out!" Madica tightened her arms around him as they shot toward the far wall, but Ike tilted and dove down the stairwell, laughing.

"Don't worry!" he said over his shoulder (or what would have been his shoulder if his arms weren't wings). "I think I've got this whole flying thing pretty much figured—whoops!" His underbelly scraped against a stair. "Sorry!"

It only took them a few seconds to reach the corridor at the bottom of the stairs. "I got them!" Ike called out, lowering his flaps and cutting his jets.

"Madica!"

"Laurellen!" The two friends threw themselves into each others arms, tumbling over and over in the zero gravity and not caring a bit.

"I was so worried," Laurellen said when she finally let go.

"Me too." Madica wiped her eyes. "I really thought we were done for. There were all these robots with their heads off, and ---"

And whatever else she might have said was cut off by an even louder alarm going, "BRRRRMP! BRRRRMP! BRRRRMP!" and a recorded voice saying, "Warning—collision alert."

Warning—collision imminent. Total destruction of this space craft in five... four..."

Chapter 19:

Once Upon a Time...

Down was suddenly down again. Madica and Laurellen hit the floor with a thump and a double "ow!" The cat, of course, landed on its feet, though the snarkasaurus was under them, and Ike under that.

"Three..." the recorded voice continued. Madica and Laurellen hugged each other again.

"Twooooo..." The recording stretched the count out.

The cat began licking its flank. "Oh, not to worry," it said in response to Madica's half-astonished, half-peeved look. "That 'total destruction' thing—it's just to get everyone's attention. We probably have several whole minutes before we crash."

Madica scrambled to her feet and helped Laurellen up. "Well, at least we'll have plenty of time for an ear rub," she said sarcastically.

The cat froze for a moment, then resumed its cleaning. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about," it said primly.

"I don't *want* to crash." Ike had somehow gotten to his feet (or more accurately, landing gear). To Madica's astonishment, he and Laurellen were holding hands (or more accurately, hand and wing).

"Well, I do," the snarkasaurus said. "Anything would be better than going back in a box for another sixty five million years." It returned Madica's look defiantly. "What? It would be."

The cat sighed. "I suppose this might be as good a time as any to explain what's going on." And quickly it explained:

Once upon a time, the dinosaurs had a king named Santa Claws. He wanted his daughter's turning-ten birthday to be the best ever in all of history, so he had his scientists and engineers make an entire herd of tiny robot dinosaur toys for

her, and then nudge an asteroid out of its orbit to make the greatest fireworks display anyone had ever seen. But somebody miscalculated, and by the time the dinosaurs realized the asteroid was going to be a little bit more than just a fireworks show—

"Nobody miscalculated," the snarkasaurus interrupted. "It was sabotage. It must have been. Dinosaurs *never* make mistakes with math."

"Would you like to tell the rest of the story?" the cat asked. "No? Very well..."

So by the time the dinosaurs realized that the asteroid was going to be a problem, it was too late to stop it. They knew it would be a long, long time until the Earth was livable again, so they put their brains into the toys they had made and sent them all to another asteroid, one that would come back to Earth after ten thousand years. Except they miscalculated again: that asteroid didn't come back for sixty five million years, by which time—

"There you go again with the 'miscalculate'," the snarkasaurus grumbled.

—by which time the Earth was filled with all sorts of new reatures, and one last dinosaur. You see, when he found out what had happened, Santa Claws insisted on staying behind to help clean up the planet. He had his scientists put his brain into a robot body so that it would last until the asteroid returned, and he kept one of their great flying saucers so that he could go out and meet it when the time came, but he didn't count on the asteroid being gone for so long. As the millenia went by—

("A millenia is a thousand years," Ike whispered to Laurellen. "I know," she said, but squeezed his wing.)

Santa Claws got lonelier and lonelier and started to forget what he was supposed to be doing and why. He kept tidying things up as best he could, but by the time there were creatures with brains big enough to understand what presents were once again, he was so desperate for company

that he started making them little gifts instead of just eating them. He still ate some of them sometimes of course—he wouldn't have been much of a dinosaur if he didn't—but he made little birdhouses for the birds, and cozy little sweaters to keep the mammals warm during ice ages, and little floating toys for baby whales to play with. And when his body started to rust so badly that he couldn't make toys himself, he began enhancing other creatures to help him.

"Not just fairies?" Madica asked, thinking of all the zombies she had seen in the control room.

The cat shook its head. "All kinds of creatures, but fairies enhanced the best. Except for cats, of course, but he found cats awfully hard to catch, especially after we started training each other to be ninjas."

Laurellen shook her head as if to shake her thoughts into order. "So you're a... a toy?" she asked the snarkasaurus.

"Nooo... Weren't you listening? I'm a *dinosuar*. I'm just *in* a toy." It glared at the cat. "And dad's scientists *didn't* miscalculate. Dinosaurs *never* make mistakes with math."

"Wait a second—*dad's* scientists? You're—you're Santa Claws' daughter? It was supposed to be *your* birthday that started all of this?"

The snarkasaurus shrugged. "It wasn't *my* fault."

"So how did you wind up back on Earth?" Madica asked.

The snarkasaurus shrugged again. "Everyone on the asteroid had to wake up for one day every thousand years to check the machinery and do the dusting—even me. And after sixty five million years, I'd had, like, a zillion turns, and ---"

"One hundred and seventy eight, to be exact," the cat corrected.

The snarkasaurus glared at the cat again. "Whatever. My point is, that's a lot of dusting, and I knew we were getting close to home, and so I thought, hey, someone should check it out and

see what it looks like these days, so I borrowed a saucer, and ---"

"*Stole* a saucer," the cat corrected.

The snarkasaurus harrumphed and crossed her arms. After a moment of awkward silence, Laurellen cleared her throat.

"So you *got in* a saucer, and flew down, and...?"

"And that automatically woke up some of the other dinosaurs, who decided they just *had* to give chase, and then of course Santa's long-range sensors picked them up, and, well, you know the rest," the cat finished.

"But—but what did your dad say when he saw you?" Madica asked. "Why didn't Santa Claws ---"

"Because they wouldn't let me see him!" the snarkasaurus snapped. And then, to everyone's astonishment, she sniffled. "They wouldn't let me see him," she repeated. "After so long... As soon as they realized who I was, they took my brain out and put me on this saucer like I was, like I was *nobody*."

At which point the gravelly recorded voice said, "Oh, we didn't think you were nobody. Far from it."

Chapter 20:

What Are *You* Doing Here?

They all froze: the two fairies, the ELF, the sniffing snarkasaurus, and the regrettably less than fully-tailed cat. They all froze, but the voice carried on. "We knew *exactly* who you were, and if anything was going to wake Himself up, it would be seeing you. And we couldn't have that, could we? Not when we were so close to being free."

"Who's 'we'?" the snarkasaurus asked angrily. "What do you mean 'free'?" the cat asked at the same time. But it was Laurellen's question that made Madica's eyes go wide.

"Mr. Poudell?" Laurellen said. "What are *you* doing here?"

And suddenly Madica recognized the voice, and remembered who it was that smelled like warm talc and old coffee. From the way the cat's fur bristled, she could tell she wasn't the only one.

"I could ask you the same question," the now-familiar voice replied. "It is a school day, you know—you *should* be in human studies class right now."

"I rather think this is a wee bit more important, don't you?" the cat drawled. Batting Madica's leg to get her attention, it pointed at its eyes, then at the walls and ceiling. Madica turned her palms up to signal 'what?'

The cat sighed impatiently, but before it could try again, Mr. Poudell's voice said, "I agree. Oh, believe me, after twenty million years of filling in forms to keep track of whether *this* giant sloth has been nice or *that* smilodon has been naughty, I---"

"What's a smilodon?" Ike interrupted.

"It was what passed for a predator once the mammals took over," the snarkasaurus sniffed. "Kind of like a big cat with teeth that stuck out of its jaw."

"Oh, you mean a saber-toothed tiger!" Ike nodded vigorously, which made his windshield flap up and down. "I read about them! But the correct name for a giant sloth is 'megatherium'. It was in the same book. There was this picture of them fighting, and ---"

"Do you mind!?" Mr. Poudell's thundered. "This is my first proper super-villain speech, and you have quite gone and spoiled it, thank you very much."

"Sorry, Mr. Poudell," the three children said in unison.

"Quite right," the cat said soothingly, all the while gesturing frantically at the walls and ceiling.

"What?" Madica hissed. "I don't know what you're trying to tell me."

"He's trying to tell you that I don't have any cameras in the hallways," Mr. Poudell said smugly. "Which means you could, oh, I don't know, sneak awak while your ninja friend tries to distract me with witty banter. But you see, that's not going to work."

"And why is that?" the cat asked, after shooting one last exasperated look at Madica.

Mr. Poudell didn't answer. He didn't need to. From up ahead, they suddenly heard the shuffle of slow feet and voices moaning, "Braaaains... fresh braaaains..." A moment later the terrifying sound came from the other direction as well.

"Have fun with your new friends," Mr. Poudell's voice gloated. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have a planet to obliterate."

"Oh no! We're trapped!" the snarkasaurus whimpered, sitting down suddenly on the floor and putting her head in her paws. "They're going to put me back in a box and ---"

"Oh, *do* be quiet, thank you?" the cat snapped. It tilted its head to one side, then pointed forward. "That way. Quickly now."

"But what about the zombies?" Madica protested. The voices had given her goosebumps, and the thought of being grabbed at by all those hands again...

"You can wait here for the other lot if you like," the cat said over its shoulder.

Ike and Laurellen looked at Madica. She gave an exaggerated shrug, rolling her eyes and waving her hands in circles, just her dad did when she asked a silly question. It drew a small smile from her friend, who tapped Ike on the wing. "Come on." The two followed the cat up the corridor.

Madica took two steps to go with them, hesitated, and crouched down instead. "Hey," she said softly to the snarkasaurus. "Are you coming with us?"

"What's the point?" the snarkasaurus sniffled. "Stay, go... They'll put my body back in a box and put my brain in a jar and I'll *never* get to play or have friends or *anything*. It's not fair."

"No it's not," Madica agreed. "That's why we're not going to let them." She held out her hand. The snarkasaurus sniffled again, then let Madica pull her to her feet.

They had to run to catch up with Ike and Laurellen. The cat was nowhere to be seen, but the zombies' slow moans grew louder and louder as they raced along the corridor.

And louder.

And *louder*.

At every step, Madica expected to plow headlong into a pack of robot zombies. Instead, the corridor just went on and on, curving gently around on itself until ---

"S-stop!" Ike wheezed, letting go of Laurellen's hand and flopping down on the floor. "I c-can't keep... keep..."

"But Ike—we *have* to keep running!" Laurellen protested, grabbing one of his wings and tried to pull him back onto his landing gear. "The zombies are ---"

"Wait," Madica said. She pointed at the door beside them. "We're right back where we started!"

Sure enough, the number on the door was 148-A. They had run in a circle all the way around the inside of the flying saucer!

Madica and Laurellen looked at each other. "It's just a recording!" they said in unison.

"To drive us away from the control room, no doubt. Fiendish!" The cat pointed at the door. "Get that open, now!"

But the door was locked. First Madica, then Laurellen, then the snarkasaurus rattled it, but it would not open. "If only I still had my tail," the cat sighed. "I can unlock almost anything with that..."

"With your tail?" Madica asked.

The cat nodded sorrowfully. "It was part of the training for this mission. I was actually quite proud when I finally mastered it."

Ike groaned and stood up. "I've still got a bit of fuel left," he said. "Maybe I can cut through."

"No!" Laurellen stepped between him and the door. "You can't use up all your fuel! You'll—you'll—"

"I'll just go to sleep," he said. For the first time, Madica heard the same gentleness in his voice that had been in Laurellen's. "That won't be so bad. Not if you're here. Now come on—I don't think I can do this by myself."

He was right. It took all of them, including the cat, to prop him against the door upside down with his jet pointed right at the lock. "Ready?" he asked in a muffled voice.

"Be careful," Laurellen said anxiously.

Ike chuckled. "Sure. Like that's been working for us. Here goes!"

His jet sputtered, then caught, then flared. A hot white flame splashed against the door and spilled upward like an upside-

down waterfall of fire. The metal turned red, then orange, then ---

Pffft. Without warning, Ike's jet just stopped. "Keep going!" the cat commanded. "You're almost there!" But Ike didn't answer.

"Ike!" Laurellen let go of the wing she'd been holding and knelt down beside him. "Oh, Ike, wake up! Please, wake up!" But he didn't.

"Rats! Darn! Fooey!" The frustration in the cat's voice was almost as fiery as the glowing red patch on the door. "We were so close! So close!"

And that's when the snarkasaurus ran up the length of Ike's body and pressed both hands against the hot metal.

"What are you *doing*?" Madica exclaimed. She let go of Ike's other wing and reached out to pull the snarkasaurus away.

"No!" she said. "Wait! I can almost—look, it's working!" And sure enough, her fingers were slowly, slowly, tearing their way through the hot metal of the door as if it was a sheet of rubber.

But the metal was cooling and hardening as she did so. She grunted with the strain. Madica took a quick step forward and braced her shoulder underneath the little dinosaur's rear end.

Clink! With that little sound, the metal tore away leaving a hole just big enough for a cat to scramble through. And that's what the cat did—up Madica's back, a bound to the snarkasaurus's head, and through the hole.

The lock clicked a moment later. Madica and Laurellen shifted Ike out of the way so that the door could open. "You can let go now," Madica said to the snarkasaurus, who hadn't moved.

"Actually, I can't," the dinosaur said. "My hands are kind of welded here."

"We'll come back for you," the cat said. "I promise. Now come on, you two, we still have a planet to save."

"I'm not leaving Ike," Laurellen said.

The cat rolled its eyes. "Again? Very well—just the two of us then. Come along!"

It scampered up the stairs. Madica and Laurellen exchanged looks that were equal parts "be careful" and "don't worry—I'll be OK" and "how are we *ever* going to tell our parents about this?" and then she squeezed through the half-open door to follow.

Chapter 21:

Taking Command!

The stairs went up and up—one hundred, two hundred, so many that Madica would have lost track if she had been counting. Each landing had a door on either side, and on each door hung a small green sign, but Madica didn't stop to read them this time. All she could think about was the zombie robots that would be waiting for her at the top, and Ike, unconscious in the hallway with Laurellen fretting over him, and the snarkasaurus's hands welded to the door.

"Do you think it hurt?" she asked the cat. "Her hands, I mean.

"Probably quite rather, I'd guess," the cat replied.

They climbed the rest of the stairs in silence, stopping only when they reached the final landing. "Now what?" Madica puffed, eyeing the door that still lay slightly ajar.

The stump of the cat's tail twitched from side to side. "Now I distract them while you get to the command chair. After that..." If the cat could have shrugged, it would have.

"After that, what? Hey!" But the cat had slipped through the door.

For a moment—just a moment—there was silence, and then three things happened in quick succession:

- 1 The cat yowled, "So, it is you!"
- 2 Mr. Poudell's voice thundered, "Get that cat!"
- 3 A triple dozen hollow voices began moaning, "Braaaains... fresh braaaains..."

Madica pulled open the door just in time to see the room explode into chaos. The cat was already in the air, leaping and ducking and kicking and tripping. One robot zombie after another was knocked backward or off its feet (or hooves, or

tentacles, or tires), but it wasn't going to be enough. There were just too many, and the cat's luck and skill couldn't last forever.

But what Madica saw through it all was Mr. Poudell sitting in the command chair. He looked exactly as he always had: thin hair combed across his head, pale, watery eyes behind little silver-framed glasses, a tie that didn't quite hang straight, and old. "Get that cat!" he repeated, pointing in case the zombies had any doubt about which cat he meant.

That's when the cat made its move. It swung around an ostrich's neck, bounced off the back of what Madica now knew was called a megatherium, and launched itself straight at Mr. Poudell. Madica's teacher moved faster than she'd ever realized he could, but the cat was faster.

Whack! The cat's kick connected with Mr. Poudell's forehead.

Sproing! Mr. Poudell's head flew off.

Clank! Clonk! It bounced off a control panel and fell to the floor. A moment later, Mr. Poudell's body fell forward with a soft thump.

The zombie robots instantly stopped moving. Madica yelled, "Yay! We did it!"

The cat didn't answer. It didn't answer, and it didn't move, and suddenly Madica's heart was in her throat. She rushed over to the little bundle of fur draped across the arm of the command chair and gingerly reached out.

It was still alive, but Madica could hear the ugly rasp in its breath. "Broke... my... ribs..." the cat wheezed.

"Sh..." Madica said in the same voice her mother had used when she had broken her arm. "It's OK. It's going to be OK. You were magnificent."

"I... was... rather... wasn't... I?" The cat struggled to raise its head. "Would... you... mind...?"

"What? Mind what?"

"Scratching... my... ears..." the cat wheezed. "It's... the other... thing... you primates... are... good for..."

Hesitantly, Madica put her hand on the cat's head and began to scratch. After a moment it started to purr a broken, rattling purr.

"You... must... hurry..." the cat finally said. "He'll... be... back... soon..."

"Back?" Madica looked from the headless body lying on the floor beside her to the bodiless head on the other side of the chair. "How can he come back from that?"

"Just... another... robot..." The cat feebly licked a paw and tried to clean its ear, but couldn't raise its leg far enough.

Suddenly furious, Madica took a step and kicked Mr. Poudell's head as hard as she could. It flew across the room ---

--- straight into Mr. Poudell's arms. "Tsk tsk," he said in his gravelly voice. "That's not very nice." Behind him, the panel that had opened in the wall slid closed with an ominous *click*. He put the head down on the control panel nearest him and took off his glasses.

"You've caused quite a lot of trouble, young lady," he said as he cleaned them with the end of his tie. "Right now, for example, the children in your class all think I've fallen asleep at my desk. Who knows *what* mischief they'll get up to?" He replaced his glasses and blinked his pale, watery eyes. "Who knows *how* naughty they'll be while I'm here talking to you?"

"But how?" Madica asked, her mind racing. The command chair was right behind her...

"How?" Mr. Poudell laughed the world's driest laugh. "I've been moving my mind from one robot to another for a long, long time."

"Why? Why would you...? Why?" She tensed, ready to jump. She would only have one chance...

"Why?" Mr. Poudell's voice was suddenly as cold and as empty as outer space. "So I can *stop*, that's why." He moved his arms

from side to side as if he was plucking a note from a slot in a desk, scribbling on it, and stuffing it into another slot. "Busy, busy, busy, I've been *quite* busy thank you, for *millions of years*! I was the very first creature *Himself* enhanced, and I've been slaving away ever since. *You* get holidays. *You* get presents. What do you think *we* get? Nothing! Nothing but more work, work, work."

For just one moment Madica forgot about the asteroid, and the cat wheezing on the arm of the command chair, and everything else. For just one moment, all she could imagine was Mr. Poudell and the deskbot and whatever other bodies he had worn spending year after endless, lonely year making notes of which creatures had been naughty and nice.

"Why didn't you just stop?" she breathed.

"Because I *can't*," Mr. Poudell snapped. He tapped the back of his head. "Any more than your little friend Ike could go home. It's all part of being enhanced, you see. It's all part of Himself's wonderful plan to welcome his daughter home, but *where were we*? Where were we in that plan, eh?"

He took a breath to calm himself. "I'm sorry. I have waited so long. I am *so* close. You weren't a bad student, as mammals go, but I can't let you stop me, not now."

He tossed his head aside and straightened his tie. The cat struggled to get its legs underneath it, but slumped back onto the arm of the chair, too weak even to stand. As Mr. Poudell stepped forward to do whatever he was going to do next, Madica leaped into the command chair and pressed three buttons in quick succession. Sixteen! Orange! Kneecap!

"Stop!" Mr. Poudell commanded, but he was too late. With a *smack*, Madica slapped her hand down on the big red button in the center of the control panel.

Chapter 22:

A New Moon!

Click! A set of handlebars popped up out of the control panel in front of the command chair. Madica seized them with both hands and yanked them back.

Vroom! The saucer's engines growled deep beneath her, pushing her back into the chair. The zombies frozen in front of her tumbled to the floor like so many bowling pins. She threw out an arm to scoop the ninja cat into her lap with a hasty "Sorry!" Behind her, Mr. Poudell yelled something angry as the acceleration knocked him back against the wall.

At the same time, the wall in front of her sprung to life. It was a screen, filled with stars labelled in scratchy letters she didn't recognize. There, in the center, a big gray potato covered with pockmarks tumbled end over end. The letters above it were big and red. She couldn't read them, but she knew what they said. Gritting her teeth, she slewed the controls to the side to point the saucer straight at the asteroid.

"What are you doing!?" Mr. Poudell demanded.

"Saving the world!" Madica yelled. She heard him struggle to his feet, so she pushed the controls right then left then right again to throw him back on the floor.

"Warning," said a familiar recorded voice. "Interceptors detected." Sure enough, half a dozen red circles had lifted off from a dome at one end of the asteroid and were speeding straight at them. Madica yanked the controls again as a laser beam lanced through space.

"Skip..." the cat gurgled in her lap.

"What!?" Madica asked.

"Like... skipping... stone..." The cat struggled to lift its head.

Madica suddenly understood what the cat meant. She pushed the handlebars all the way forward. The saucer accelerated again, straight toward the smaller ships.

She turned at the last possible moment. *Clang!* The first little saucer bounced off the belly of the one she was flying. *Clang!* Another hit and ricocheted away. The others scattered, lasers firing wildly. "Warning - hull breach. Deliveries for Hawaii, Honduras, and Hyderabad have been damaged."

The asteroid was right in front of her. She had to get the angle just right—just... right...

A cold hand closed on her ankle. "Stop this nonsense *now!*" Mr. Poudell roared. He had pulled himself across the floor and right under the chair.

Madica shrieked and kicked, but his grip was too strong. He was pulling her right out of the chair! She pulled up her other leg and wedged it against the control panel. Her knee dug into her chest as she leaned forward to keep her grip on the controls. Almost... almost... She pulled back harder, harder, harder ---

Ping! The metal snapped off in her hand. "No!" she wailed. For one crazy heartbeat she thought she had missed the asteroid entirely, but then there was a deafening *clang!*. The robot zombies bounced into the air and fell back to the floor. Mr. Poudell yelled words she was sure she wasn't supposed to know as he bumped his head hard against the bottom of the chair. The cat flew up, turned over, and fell back into her lap (with its feet under it, of course).

Up on the screen in front of her, the line tracing the asteroid's future path blinked out. "Recalculating course," said the recorded voice. A new line of dashes curved forward, plip plip plip toward the Earth ---

--- and missed it by a hair. The dashes hesitated for a moment while the flying saucer's computer calculated angles and trajectories and probabilities, then curved around on itself. The impact with the flying saucer had knocked the asteroid off

course just enough to put it into orbit around the Earth instead of hitting it.

"New... moon..." the cat wheezed. "Not... bad... for... a... primate..."

"No... Oh, no no no no no..." Mr. Poudell had pulled himself to his feet and was staring at the screen in despair. "No no no no no..." And to Madica's shock and embarrassment he fell to his knees and put his head in his hands. "No no no... I worked so hard... I've waited so long..." He began to cry.

For a moment, all Madica could think was, *Serves you right, trying to destroy the world*. But when his weeping didn't stop, she began to feel uncomfortable. The look on his face—it was if his world actually *had* ended.

"Um, hey," she finally said. "Mr. Poudell? Are you all right?"

He wiped his eyes on his sleeve and glared at her. "Am I all right? Of course I'm not all right! I've waited *sixty... five... million... years* for this, and you just ruined it! And now I'm going to spend the rest of eternity stuck in this flying saucer. Unless you can fix the controls before our fuel runs out."

Madica looked the snapped-off handlebars that was still in her hand, then at the stub of post sticking up from the control panel, then at the dashed line tracing the flying saucer's path on the big screen. She gulped. Mr. Poudell was right—they were still on a course directly away from Earth with no way to change direction.

"Can't you fix it?" she asked.

Mr. Poudell crossed his arms. "Of course I can. Or I could transfer my mind back into the saucer, but I'm not going to do that. I'd rather rattle around out here forever than go back and do paperwork for one more minute."

"But what about me?" Madica protested. "And Laurellen and Ike and, and, I'm sorry, I still don't know your name," she said to the cat in her lap. It didn't answer. She scratched behind its ears. "Hey—are you all right? Cat? Hey, wake up!"

But it wouldn't. She put her hand on its ribs as delicately as it could. It was still breathing, but only just. "Hey," she said helplessly. "Hey, don't. Don't, not now." Tears welled up in her eyes.

"Don't what?" Mr. Poudell demanded.

"Not you!" Madica snapped. "Oh please, no, wake up, come on, don't leave me here. Please, wake up."

Three steps and Mr. Poudell was beside her. "Oh no," he said angrily. "You don't get to escape *that* easily. If I'm going to be out here for the next umptily gazillion years, you're going to be out here with me." And before Madica could do anything to stop him, he snatched the cat out of her lap.

"Hey!" Madica shouted, but she was too slow. Six quick steps and he was back beside the panel in the wall his most recent body had stepped out of. It slid open at a touch. He stepped inside and disappeared without a backward glance as the panel slid closed behind him.

As if that was a signal, the zombie robots lying on the floor began to stir. "Braaaaains... fresh braaaaains..." their heads began to moan.

Chapter 23:

Free!

It's not fair! Madica thought. She had just saved the world. She was apparently doomed to spend eternity floating through space, and now there were *these* guys again. And the poor cat—who knew *what* Mr. Poudell was going to do to it? He was probably going going to take its head off and ---

Madica sat up. The heads! When she had put the snarkasaurus's head back on, it had woken up! She jumped out of the chair, ran over to the nearest glass case, and knocked it off the control panel. It cracked when it hit the floor, but she didn't care—she was already lifting the pygmy elephant's head off its pedestal.

Where where where where—there! The zombies were still getting to their feet, but she had to move fast. "Excuse me," she said, stepping around one and tripping another (some kind of velociraptor that she *didn't* want chasing her, thank you very much). She set the elephant's head on its body and twisted it to the side until she heard a *click!*

The elephant stopped moaning and blinked. "Oh, thank goodness," it said. It twisted around and scratched its back with its trunk. "I've been waiting *forever* to get at that itch. Thank you—thank you so much." It held out its trunk for Madica to shake.

"You're welcome," she said, giving the trunk a squeeze. "But please, help me—we don't have much time."

At first they were two. Then four, then eight, as each newly reassembled zombie woke up and joined their team. Those that didn't have hands or trunks or tentacles helped by spotting bodies and knocking over zombies that were still trying to reach Madica. Only the bat didn't join in. "I'm

nocturnal, and it's definitely daytime," it squeaked defensively before finding a quiet spot of the ceiling to hang from.

Forty-eight heads later, the moaning finally stopped. "Right!" said the elephant, who had appointed herself Madica's second-in-command. "Now what?"

"Now it'sss time for sssupper..." hissed the velociraptor, eyeing the goat next to it. It bleated and ducked behind the gorilla, which huffed warningly at the skinny dinosaur.

"Stop that!" Madica said sharply. "We have bigger problems right now than dinner. This saucer is headed into outer space, and if we don't turn it around, we'll never get home."

"Home?" snorted the panda. "What home? Humans bulldozed my home fifty years ago to make a highway."

"Yeah." "Mine too." "They cut down my tree!" the other creatures chorused.

"My ssspecies is exsstinct," the raptor hissed. "I'm the lassst of my kind. What home is there for me?"

"A good one!" Madica said. "One with green grass and snow and, and a blue sky instead of a ceiling and fresh air. Don't you want to breathe fresh air again?"

An awkward silence followed. "We don't actually breathe," the elephant said. "Being robots and all."

"All right, forget the breathing. What about the sky? What about, what about splashing yourself in a river? Or chasing butterflies?" That last was for the raptor, which still had its eye on the nervous goat.

"I miss climbing trees," the gorilla admitted.

"And coral reefs—I always enjoyed exploring coral reefs," the squid burred.

Everyone looked at the raptor. "All right," it said grudgingly. "I like chasssing butterflyssss."

"Great! Now, how do we take control of the saucer?" Madica held up the broken handlebars.

The assembled creatures groaned. "Well, *that'sss* helpful," the raptor muttered just loudly enough to be heard.

"Come on," Madica snapped. "Some of you have been flying this saucer for ages! There has to be another way."

The gorilla frowned. "If you could connect a brain directly to the main computer..."

"...it could repolarize the anti-gravity drive," the elephant finished, nodding. "That would pull us back toward the Earth instead of pushing us away."

"But it hasss to be a fresh brain," the raptor hissed. "The computer will have been programmed to ignore all of ours as a sssafety measure."

There were murmurs of agreement. All faces turned to Madica. She gulped. "A fresh brain—you mean, like mine?"

"It's the only way," the elephant said.

Madica closed her eyes for a moment. The snow castle she and Laurellen had been building seemed a long way away. She wondered what her mom and dad were doing. Probably looking for her, she decided. Probably worried sick after what had happened to Ike and Laurellen.

"All right," she said, opening her eyes. "Let's go be pirates."

Chapter 24:

"This Is My Saucer Now!"

The raptor turned out to be very good at picking locks. "It'sss all in the clawsss," it said proudly as the panel that Mr. Poudell had disappeared through snicked open.

The closet-sized room behind the secret panel turned out to be an elevator. After a brief discussion and a slightly longer argument, Madica decided to take only the raptor and the gorilla with her—the elephant was too loud on the stairs, the squid's suit had started leaking, the goat was still too nervous, and the bat was still pretending to be asleep. "The rest of you go and find the snarkasaurus," Madica ordered. "And Laurellen and Ike. Tell them what's happened and make sure they're OK. And tell them—tell them ---"

"Don't worry," the panda rumbled, patting her shoulder awkwardly. "We'll tell them you were thinking of them."

Madica, the gorilla, and the raptor squeezed into the elevator. There was only one button. The panel snicked shut when Madica pressed it. She felt heavy for an instant as the elevator rose, then stopped. The door opened. In front of them was a smaller version of the room they had just left. There were no glass cases on its control panels, but where the command chair had been, they saw instead a black cube covered in blinking colored lights.

Beside it was a table surrounded by an ominous collection of robot arms tipped with pliers and screwdrivers and—Madica gulped. And sawblades. And *that* one looked like—she didn't want to think about what it looked like, but she knew instantly that this was where ELFs were made.

Which meant that this was where her adventure was going to end.

"Wait," the raptor whispered, pulling Madica back as she started to step forward. "It might be a trap." It leaned forward to peer around the corner.

Bzzzzzap! A bright red laser sliced through its neck. Its head tumbled to the deck. "Drat! Darn! Fooey!" it cursed as its body fell beside it, sparks shooting out of the cut.

"Come out," Mr. Poudell's voice said. "Come out now and I won't hurt you."

Before Madica could say anything, the gorilla put a hand over her mouth. "Does that mean that if I *don't* come out, you *will* hurt me?" it asked.

"Why don't you ask your friend?" Mr. Poudell sneered.

"He'll... definitely... hurt you..." The light faded from the raptor's eyes as the last of the battery charge in its head was drained.

The gorilla took its hand from Madica's mouth. "I'll take care of him," it whispered in her ear. "You get to the ELFing table."

Madica nodded. The gorilla squeezed her shoulder, "All right," it said, "As long as you promise not to shoot, I'm coming out." It knuckled out of the elevator, held held high, to stand beside the raptor's fallen body.

"Good choice," Mr. Poudell said. "You're a smart—hey!"

With a sudden burst of speed, the gorilla had leaped forward through the forest of robot arms onto the table, then leaped again to the left.

The laser sizzled. *Thud!* "Ooph!" Madica heard the gorilla collide with Mr. Poudell, then silence. She swallowed, took a deep breath, and peeked around the corner.

The gorilla's head had rolled across the room. Mr. Poudell's was still attached to his body, but only by a couple of wires, and that body was struggling clumsily to lift the gorilla off it.

Mr. Poudell caught sight of Madica as she stepped out of the elevator. "You!" he spat. He reached for the complicated twist

of glass and metal lying on the floor beside him. Madica lunged forward and grabbed it.

"Don't move!" she ordered, straightening up and pointing it at his head.

"Go ahead," he sneered. "It'll be quicker than reattaching this head." He drew his arms back under the gorilla's body and strained to lift it.

"Oh no you don't," Madica muttered. She sighted down the length of the laser and pushed the big red button on its handle. *Bzzzzap!* Mr. Poudell's arm clunked to the floor.

She tossed the laser aside, ignoring his shouted threats. She knew his body was just another robot, but cutting off the arm... She felt light-headed and queasy. Without thinking, she sat on the edge of the ELFing table.

Click! A bright white spotlight came on overhead. The robot arms around her twitched. "Subject species: fairy," said a cool mechanical voice. "Recommend immediate full enhancement. Proceed?"

"What are you doing!?" Mr. Poudell demanded.

"I told you—saving the world." Madica nodded toward the black cube beside the table. "That's where I tell it to put my head so that I can control the saucer, right?"

"Control the—ah ha ha ha ha. A ha ha ha ha ha—sure, go ahead, tell it to put your head there. A ha ha ha ha..."

"What's so funny?" Madica demanded.

"It's already full!" Mr. Poudell said triumphantly. "Your little friend, remember? I ELFed it while you and your friends were figuring out what to do! It's too late—the saucer already has a brain, and it's *not yours!* A ha ha ha ha ha..."

Madica grit her teeth. "Well then how about we give it some company?" She hopped up onto the table and lay back.

The spotlight whirled quietly as it tilted to focus on her. "Calculating..." said the recorded voice, then, "Commencing enhancement." Two strong metal arms reached out to grasp

her wrists. Two more took hold of her ankles. The sawblades started to spin. As they descended, Madica took a deep breath. She hoped Laurellen and Ike were OK.

And then the sawblade came down just a fingernail's width away from her ear. As a stray tuft of hair fell silently to the table, the saucer's voice said, "Finally. That's been bothering me since we met."

Chapter 25:

Home

"What?" Madica asked blankly.

"What!?" Mr. Poudell exploded. "You!? No! It's not possible! You *can't* be ---"

"Oh, but I can," the voice purred.

"Cat!" Madica exclaimed. She sat up. "You're all right!"

"I don't know if I'd go *that* far," the familiar voice said. "I mean, I *am* stuck in this box. But I'm certainly better off than I was."

"But you *can't*!" Mr. Poudell moaned. "It's impossible. You'd have to ---"

"I'd have to meditate for hours every day to be able to resist the ELFing, is that what you were going to say?" The cat's voice was as gentle as a finely-sharpened scalpel. "Funnily enough, it happens that I've been doing exactly that ever since I was a kitten. That's what *every* cat does—it only *looks* like we're sleeping."

Madica couldn't help it. She started to laugh. "I was—I was wondering about that," she eventually gasped, ignoring Mr. Poudell's bewildered, angry look. "Oh cat, it's good to have you back. Kind of," she added belatedly.

Mr. Poudell started struggling against the gorilla's weight once again. "You'll never get away with this!" his head raged as he tried to lift the gorilla's body with his remaining arm. "Once we're back in range of Earth, I'll wake up another body and crush you, do you hear? I'll crush you, you furry little ---"

One of the robot arms by the table spun around, reached out, and poked a switch in the bottom of Mr. Poudell's head. *Click!* The head froze mid-threat with its mouth still open.

"There, that's much better," the cat's voice said. "Now, let's see if we can get this saucer turned around, shall we? We need to get you back to Antarctica."

"No," Madica said. "We're going back to Santa's castle first."

The cat was silent for a moment. "Very well," it said approvingly. "Santa's castle, here we come."

It only took the saucer an hour to get back to Earth. That was just long enough for the creatures Madica had unzombied to put the raptor and the gorilla back together and cut the snarkasaurus's hands free from the door. Madica left them to it—she spent the hour sitting with Laurellen and watching Ike sleep.

"We'll find some fuel for him, I promise," Madica said, squeezing her friend's hand.

Laurellen squeezed back and said, "I know," leaving, *And then what?* unspoken.

Finally the cat's voice came over the speakers. "We're approaching the castle now," it said. "I've radioed ahead to let them know we're coming, but they haven't answered, so this might get a bit bumpy."

"He means my dad might shoot at us," the snarkasaurus whispered loudly to no one in particular. "With lasers. Really big ones."

But the lasers didn't fire. The saucer came to a stop right where it had started beside the castle. A gangplank whirled out from its side to make a bridge to the docking tower. Madica took a step, then hesitated. "You should go first," she said to the snarkasaurus. "He'll want to see you."

"Are—are you sure?" the little dinosaur asked. She held up her hands, which still had bits of door welded to them. "I'm kind of a mess."

Madica smiled. "I'm sure." She followed the snarkasaurus across the gangplank with the rest of the creatures behind her.

The gorilla came behind them with Ike slung over his shoulder and Laurellen by his side.

The pogo ELF was waiting for them. "So it really is you," it said to the snarkasaurus. "We didn't know what to think when Mr. Secretary started shouting. And then he just... stopped. Was he really trying to smash an asteroid into the Earth?"

"He sure was," the snarkasaurus said.

The pogo ELF blinked. "Cool. I mean, that's really evil—I'm glad you stopped him."

The snarkasaurus looked up at Madica. "Thank her. And ---"

And whatever else the snarkasaurus might have said was lost in a huge roaring bellow. Madica jumped as heavy footsteps tromped toward them. The whole floor shook, and then, "Is it you? Is it really you!?" a huge voice full of tears said, and the snarkasaurus ran forward and was snatched up to be hugged close in her father's tiny loving arms.

Madica tapped the pogo ELF on the shoulder. "Excuse me, but do you have any jet fuel? My friend..." She nodded at Ike, who was snoring gently on the gorilla's shoulder.

The pogo ELF wiped away an oily tear. "Sure, this way."

Madica put his hand on the ELF's arm. "And can you show me where all the disassembled ELFs are put?"

There were thousands. Some were creatures like the ones on the saucer. Others were machines like the pogo ELF and the ones Madica had first met out in the snow. All of them were neatly crated up with their arms and legs and tentacles and tails wrapped in bubble wrap and their heads in little glass cases. The ELF in charge, who looked like a crane with two sturdy arms ending in mechanical pincers, led Madica to the one she was looking for.

It took Madica a couple of minutes to unwrap the whiskered ELF who had captured her out in the snow. The crane ELF showed her how to remove the little chip from inside the whiskered ELF's head and put her back together.

At first nothing happened when she clicked the ELF's head into place, but then her eyes flickered and came to life. "Mummy?" the ELF asked.

Madica shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm not your mummy. I don't ---" She swallowed. "I don't know where your mummy is."

The whiskered ELF started to cry. "I want to go home..."

Madica hugged her. "Me too," she said. She wiped her face. "And you know what? If we can't find your mummy and daddy, I'm sure mine would like to have you." She smiled.

The whiskered ELF smiled back uncertainly. "Are you sure?"

Madica nodded firmly. "I'm positive." She had no idea what would happen when Santa's giant saucer showed up above the fairies' hidden city at the South Pole with its hold full of ELFs. Or how the humans would explain the second little moon now circling the Earth. Or if the cat would find a way to get its body back, or what would happen to Mr. Poudell, or whether Laurellen would still want to come and play every day after school now that she and Ike were—whatever they were.

All she knew was, the ELFs on the shelves around her were going to have the best... Christmas... ever.

Greg Wilson was born and raised on Vancouver Island, where it rains so much that people get a rust rather than a tan. He lives in Toronto now with a wonderful woman and their particularly wonderful daughter. When he's not trying to get her to eat her vegetables (the daughter, that is), he teaches scientists how to program and writes stories like this one. He apologizes for the lack of dragons, and will try to do better next time.

If you'd like to read more of Greg's stories, you can find him online at <http://sensibleadventures.com>.
