Maddy Roo

by

Greg Wilson

gvwilson@third-bit.com

middle-grade / 32,000 words

## **Chapter** 1: Salvage!

Maddy was trying to sketch the willow tree in the center of the village square when Gumption showed up with a couple of books under his arm. She hadn’t exactly snuck out of the house, but she hadn’t told her mama she was leaving either. Besides, she had spent the whole morning and most of the afternoon doing chores, mostly to avoid having to look after her little sister, so she felt she’d earned some time for herself. Plus, yesterday had been laundry day, so she could sit there in the checked green skirt her mama had cut down for her—the one that *didn’t* have work stains on it yet.

“Heya,” Gumption said breathlessly as he plopped himself down on the gray stone bench beside her. “How’s it going?”

“Aright,” she said without looking up. The willow tree had defeated her once before. She was determined to capture its drooping green branches in her notebook, but somehow the lines she drew didn’t quite capture their melancholy curves the way the pictures in Special Leaf’s books did.

She closed her sketchbook with a sigh. Gumption had a fresh food stain on his shirt, she noticed, and if he had combed his brown-and-white fur that morning, someone or something had carefully uncombed it since. She nodded at the small pile of books he had set down between them. “What did you think?”

The goat boy shrugged. “They were aright. A lot of…you know.” He rolled his eyes in a way that meant “too much romance, not enough last-second escapes from villainous bots”.

“Yeah,” Maddy agreed. She stood up and tucked her sketchbook and pencil into the worn blue canvas satchel her father had made for her. “Come on—let’s see if he has anything new.”

Once upon a time, the village of Rusty Bridge had been nothing more than a rectangle of two-story buildings around a central square where travelers could park their wagons overnight. All of the buildings’ windows had faced the square: the outer walls had been blank and double-thick to keep their occupants safe against rogue bots and roving bandits.

Over the years, though, more houses had sprouted around that rectangle: smaller, less well-ordered, and built for comfort rather than defense. One of these belonged to Special Leaf, the only tortoise within a hundred kays and the village’s oldest resident by far.

Maddy would never forget the first time her mother and father took her to the special’s house. “Don’t be afraid,” they comforted her, not realizing that she hadn’t been until they said that. But when Special Leaf opened his front door and smiled at them she saw the books stacked on his shelves and her nervousness vanished.

“Are they *real*?” she asked in wonder.

The old tortoise chuckled. Like all reptile people he was completely bald, but his smile was as warm as a freshly-baked biscuit. “As real as you are.” He ushered her in and handed her a tattered old picture book that just happened to be lying on a rocking chair that looked even older than him. “Would you like to borrow this one? There are lots of others.” She walked out of the house with an armload of books and stars in her eyes, then sat down on his porch and started to read the first one while her parents vainly tried to persuade the old tortoise to take a jar of home-made jam as a thank-you.

Gumption had started coming by a few months later. His family hadn’t brought him—the village goats weren’t bookish people—and at first Maddy had resented him intruding into her magical world of stories and long-ago science. But they started talking one day about the relative merits of mysteries versus adventures and they hadn’t stopped since. Now they swapped their borrowed books back and forth so that they at least had someone to roll their eyes with over the mushy bits.

Special Leaf’s house smelled like paper and old sweaters and fresh cabbage—sometimes if Maddy closed her eyes she could almost imagine that her father was there with her. The old tortoise was snoring in his rocking chair when they arrived, so they placed their books quietly on the table beside him and picked two more each from the shelves. Maddy glowered at Gumption when he pointed at the top shelf the special said they weren’t old enough to read yet. “Kidding,” he mouthed silently. Maddy swished her tail in annoyance and shooed him outside.

Her heart sank as soon as she stepped outside. Her sister Sindy was sitting on the porch in an embroidered brown overall that had once been Maddy’s, tangling and untangling a piece of string around her fingers. “Where did you *go*?” she asked, bouncing to her feet. “Mama said I could play with you but you weren’t *there*! Heya, Gumption!” she finished brightly.

“Heya,” Gumption grunted, very carefully *not* looking at Maddy.

“Does mama know you’re here?” Maddy demanded.

Sindy bounced up and down a couple of times. “Not exactly,” she admitted. “But she said I could play with you and you weren’t home so the only way I could do that was to come and find you and I figured this would be the best place to look and—”

“Stop!” Maddy snapped. “We’re both gonna be in trouble if mama thinks I let you wander off. Let’s just go home and hope she doesn’t notice.”

Sindy’s face fell, and if she’d had proper ears like her sister and Gumption they would have drooped. “But I’m *bored*,” she said plaintively. “And anyway, *you’re* the one who wandered off.”

“You’re always bored,” Maddy muttered under her breath. As she fumbled with the tie string on her satchel her books slipped out from under her arm and thudded onto the porch, spilling her sketches.

She sighed heavily. “Now look what you made me do. No, it’s aright, I’ve got them.” She shooed Gumption away, brushed off the books and precious sheets of paper, and tucked them back into her bag. “Come on, you.”

The trio walked back to the village square without speaking. A few grownups nodded or said hello as they passed. Maddy nodded back, but was too busy being annoyed to do any more than that. It had been two years since the bots had taken her father. She had helped her mother every day since then: cleaning the house, mixing paint for portraits and signs, and most of all, looking after her little sister. Every time Mama Roo said, “I’m sorry you’ve had to grow up so fast,” Maddy told her she didn’t mind, and she *didn’t*, she really didn’t, but the one afternoon each week when she got to practice sketching and talk about books with Gumption was special, and it wasn’t fair of Sindy to—

“Hey,” Gumption said, elbowing her. Maddy blinked. They had passed through the houses on the other side of the square and reached the smaller square that courting couples *didn’t* sit in on warm summer evenings. An ageless black glass pillar stood in its center, half again the height of anyone Maddy knew and as big around as a rain barrel. The few friendly bots who came through Rusty Bridge used it to recharge. Moss didn’t grow on it and birds never landed on it. Gumption said his uncle had touched it once on a dare and got a shock so strong it made his whole arm tingle. Maddy had never tried to sketch it—whenever she walked past, it felt like something or someone was watching her, and even if she knew how to capture that in a drawing, she didn’t want to.

The pillar wasn’t the only thing in the square, though. Bluster and Bravo Gruff were sitting on the unfinished brick wall that surrounded the pillar pitching pebbles at it with their usual sullen expressions on their faces. They were a head taller than Gumption, and the nubs of their horns had just started to show through their fur.

For a moment Maddy thought they would be able to pass by unnoticed, or at least unbothered, but then Bluster nudged his twin brother with his elbow. Maddy took her sister’s misshapen paw in her own. “You just stay hushed,” she cautioned quietly, squeezing to show she meant it. She hitched her satchel up onto her shoulder with her other paw and tried to ignore the dryness in her mouth.

“Heya, roo,” Bluster drawled as he and his brother sauntered over. “Whatcha got in yer pouch?”

“Books,” Maddy said curtly. “And it’s not a pouch, it’s a satchel.”

“I wasn’t asking about your *satchel*,” Bluster said, stepping into her path. “I was asking about your *pouch*.” He rubbed his belly and grinned wickedly. “Gummy put anything in there yet?”

“Oh!” Sindy said, shocked. “You’re *disgusting*!”

Bluster spat on the cobblestones. “Wasn’t talkin’ to you, throwback.”

Maddy felt her sister stiffen. Most children looked like their parents—goats had goats, crocs had crocs, and if the parents were different their children took after one or the other. Every once in a while, though, someone like Sindy was born. No tail, no scales, no fur except for a wiry black tuft on the top of her head that defeated all but the most stubborn combing, and useless little claws on the ends of her skinny fingers. Adults were careful not to feel sorry for her in public, but other children weren’t always as nice, and children like Bluster and Bravo *never* were.

Her heart sank as Gumption stepped in front of her. “Why don’t you eat glue?” he told his cousin hotly, his paws balling into fists.

“Why don’t you make us?” Bluster replied, mocking and menacing at the same time.

“Yeah, make us,” his brother Bravo echoed, cracking his knuckles.

“I don’t think glue would be particularly appetizing, do you?” Special Leaf asked calmly. Maddy jumped. Somehow the old tortoise had come up behind them without anyone noticing. He looked as peaceful as a log floating down river with his little round glasses perched on his nose, but the goat brothers unclenched their paws.

The special held a sheet of paper out to Maddy. “I think you dropped this.”

“Thanks,” Maddy said. She squeezed Sindy’s paw before letting go of it to take back the sketch she had left behind.

“You’re getting much better,” the tortoise continued. “Your father would be very proud of you.”

“Thanks,” Maddy repeated.

The silence that followed stretched and stretched until finally Bluster broke it. “C’mon,” he said to his brother, a surly look on his face. With the barest of nods to the special they walked away, in step as always.

“They’re *stinkers*,” Sindy pronounced, wrinkling her nose.

Maddy let out a relieved breath. “Yes they are. Thank you,” she told the special a third time.

The tortoise smiled. “You’re welcome—it would have been a shame to lose such a nice drawing. Are you headed home? It’s been a while since I saw your mother, and I could use the walk.”

The Roo family’s house stood on the very edge of the village, neatly painted a pale orange that made it look warm on even the coldest days. The ground floor had been built by a rhino who had dreamed of opening a tavern in Rusty Bridge, only to discover that there wasn’t enough traffic on the ancient highway to keep one going. A family of wolves had added a second story after he moved on, its hallway and three bedrooms built on a smaller scale. Papa Roo had taken one look and decided it was the perfect place to start a family. Mama Roo had rolled her eyes and reminded him that he’d called the previous three towns they had visited perfect too. He had laughed and said, “Yeah, but this time I’m right.”

Maddy had heard that story almost every night when she was little. She remembered it each time she opened the bigger-than-usual front door and entered the house’s larger-than-most-people front hall. “Mama!” she called. “We’re home! And the special’s come with!”

Mama Roo poked her head out of the kitchen. “Heya, special. Heya, Gumption.”

“Ma’am.” “Heya, Mama Roo.” they answered as Sindy bounced down the hallway for a hug.

“Careful,” Mama Roo cautioned her youngest. “I’ve got paint on me.”

“Don’t care,” Sindy said, her voice muffled by her mother’s fur and apron.

Mama Roo smiled down at her and scratched her daughter’s ears. “I was just about to make some soup,” she said. “Will you stay?”

“That’s very kind, but I’m afraid I have a prior engagement,” Special Leaf replied politely. “Though I would take tea if you had some?”

“Of course. What about you, Gumption?”

The young goat cleared his throat. “Thanks, Mama Roo, but I oughta get home.”

“Some other time, then,” Mama Roo said brightly, careful to keep the relief out of her voice. There wasn’t much call for sign painting and portraiture in Rusty Bridge. Between people paying just a little more than they needed to and the mending and housecleaning Mama Roo took on the family was managing to get by, but Maddy knew that dinner for two extra people tonight would have meant no lunch for her mother the next day. Mama Roo would have insisted if it was almost anyone else—she was as proud as a lion when it came to keeping house—but Gumption was practically almost family and somehow Special Leaf always made people feel comfortable when no one else could.

“Can I walk Gumption home?” Maddy asked her mother as casually as she could. “We haven’t hardly had a chance to talk.”

“Of course, but you be home before dark.”

Sindy sniffled and pulled her face out of her mother’s apron. “I want to come too!”

“I don’t see why—um.” Mama Roo stopped herself at a pleading glance from her older daughter. “Actually, Sindy, I think I’d like you to set the table. No, don’t fuss, it needs doing—you hop to it. Now, where *is* that rosehip tea…”

The sun was low on the horizon as Maddy and Gumption walked slowly back toward the village. By unspoken agreement they left the main road and took the path that ran down by the river. It was the longer route, but that was aright. For one heart-stopping moment Maddy thought Gumption was going to hold her paw. When he didn’t she almost took his, but then they came out of the trees onto the riverbank and the moment was behind them.

It had rained heavily over the last two days, leaving the path damp and squelchy under their feet. The river was higher and faster than it had been during the summer when they had come down here with their other friends to splash and swim and avoid chores. “So if you could have been anything, what would you have wanted to be?” Gumption asked out of nowhere. He didn’t have to say “any kind of special”. Like every child in Rusty Bridge—in the whole world, probably—they had both hoped they would start to develop a special power as their teenage changes came on. Moving things with their minds, mending cuts and broken bones, making themselves unnoticeable—it hadn’t happened, but as Gumption had observed more than once, at least Bluster and Bravo hadn’t turned out to be special either.

“I’d want to be a mover,” Maddy replied, relieved to have something to talk about. “Like Special Leaf, but for little things like my pencils, so I could draw while I was eating.”

“You do that anyway,” Gumption observed.

“Do not,” Maddy protested.

Gumption bumped her hip with his. “Do too,” he said with a lopsided grin. “Remember the time you—hey, look down there!” He pointed at the river.

Maddy gasped. Salvage! And not just a few scraps either, but a couple of what looked like solar panels and some machinery and— “Wait, what are you doing? Gumption, get back here!”

“Finders keepers!” the young goat called over his shoulder. “Come on!”

Maddy only hesitated for a moment. Most of what washed down the river through the Mire from Heck was scrap, but even scrap could be sold for blacksmithing. And tech like those solar panels—just one of those would fetch enough to feed her family for a month. Her family and Gumption’s, she corrected guiltily in her head as she scrambled down the riverbank, loose gravel skittering away under her feet.

The solar panels had snagged on a knot of branches that were themselves caught in the weeds upstream from a sandbar. She and Gumption waded into the river, heedless of the cold water that rose almost to their knees. At first they tried to lift one of the panels, but everything was too tangled together. Pushing and shoving, they managed to work it free and slide it up onto the sandbar. It was lighter than Maddy had expected, but its edges were as sharp as broken glass.

She and Gumption stood side by side for a moment to catch their breath. “What do you think it is?” he asked, jerking his chin at the mess of rods and flywheels that lay in the water.

Maddy shook her head. “Just junk, maybe?” She glanced sideways at him. “I think we ought to leave it. For the grownups to get,” she added hastily. “We can get the other panel, but I don’t think we can lift that.” *And I don’t want to try,* she added to herself. The machinery in the water didn’t look dangerous, and it was pretty clearly broken, but it was still a machine, and machines couldn’t be trusted.

“I guess,” Gumption said. “But see that bit?” He pointed at a rectangle of crystal circuitry bobbing gently up and down, attached to the rest of the machine by only a few wires. “I bet we can pry that off.” Without waiting for her to answer he waded back in, grabbed hold of the circuitry, and pulled.

The wires that connected it to the rest of the wreckage went taut but didn’t come free. “Mmph! Come *on*!” Gumption braced one foot against the machinery and heaved.

“Look out!” Maddy exclaimed as the wires suddenly pulled free. The foot Gumption’s weight was on slipped out from under him. As it slid across the riverbed it knocked a few crucial stones out of the way. The machinery shifted, trapping his foot.

“Argh! Maddy! Help!” He windmilled his arms frantically, trying not to be pushed under the water as the machine’s weight bore down on his leg.

Maddy splashed over and grabbed the shoulder straps of his overalls. She pulled as hard as she could. “Harder!” he shouted, clutching at her shoulder.

She wrapped her arms around his chest and heaved, but it was no use. The machinery had driven his foot into the soft bottom of the river. Everything they were doing was just shifting its weight even more. If she let go of him to run for help he wouldn’t be able to keep his head above water!

“Help!” she shouted. “Someone! Help!”

“Responding!” a rasping mechanical voice answered. “Danger! Extricate! Extricate!” A battered bot burst out of the trees and hurtled down the gravel toward them!

## **Chapter** 2: Targets Acquired!

Maddy shrieked and stumbled backward. Her feet slipped on a submerged patch of weeds. She half-fell clumsily in the knee-deep water as the bot hurried toward them with long clanking strides.

“Get away! Get away from me! Help!” Gumption yelled in panic. Maddy struggled to her feet and splashed back to help her friend.

The bot got there first. “Extricate! Extricate!” it repeated in a loud monotone. With a single hard shove it sent the second solar panel skimming away upstream. Pivoting, the bot grabbed the sunken machinery with its mismatched manipulators. The motors in its arms whined with effort. For a moment nothing happened, but then Gumption fell backward into Maddy’s startled arms as his foot came free.

“Extricated,” the bot pronounced in the same loud monotone. “Resuming primary mission.” Its head swiveled. “Targets acquired.”

“Run!” Maddy shouted. Gumption didn’t need to be told twice. They splashed up onto the sandbar and sprinted toward shore.

But the bot’s legs were longer than theirs and its motors were more powerful than living muscles. It easily blocked their path and reached out to grab them.

Gumption yelped and ducked under the bot’s arm. Maddy ducked as well but was half a moment too slow. A cold metal manipulator twice the size of her paw clamped around her arm! “Target acquired!” the bot intoned.

“Eat glue!” she yelled at it, launching herself into the air.

Roos are peaceful people, mostly. They don’t mind jokes about their big feet and bulky tails, but anyone who has ever seen a roo jump-kick someone thinks twice about making those jokes. After her father was taken, Maddy’s mother made her and Sindy practice over and over again on one of the trees behind their house. “Just in case,” she said when her children complained it was boring and they were tired. “Just in case.”

If this wasn’t “in case”, Maddy didn’t know what would be.

Her feet hit the bot squarely in its midsection. She kicked as hard as she could. The force of the blow toppled the bot backward into the river and sent her tumbling awkwardly in the other direction. She landed with a splash that soaked whatever parts of her had still been dry.

“Maddy!” Gumption yelled, doubling back to help her to her feet.

“Run!” she shouted at him again. The bot was already righting itself. There was no way they could—

*Crunch!* Just as the bot started to stand, the river drove a corner of the solar panel it had pushed upstream into its back. There was a bright flash and a sizzling sound. The bot froze and toppled over.

Maddy didn’t need the universe to give her a second hint. “Let’s get out of here!”

“No, wait!” Gumption shook off her grip on his sleeve. “We gotta take care of it.”

“Take *care* of it!?” Maddy realized she was panting. She swallowed and tried to slow her breathing. “What do you want to do, tell it a bedtime story?”

Gumption shook his head. “No, I mean *take care* of it.” He handed her the piece of circuitry he had pulled off the machine in the water and stooped to pick up a rock half the size of his head.

“Stop! You can’t…” Maddy swallowed again. Bots weren’t alive, but they were still people. Even if this one was a rogue or a raider, what Gumption was planning to do—

Gumption looked at her, his jaw set. “Yes I can,” he grunted. “You heard what it said. We’re targets. You want it to go after Sindy next?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. Hefting his rock, he splashed into the shallows.

The bot still lay where it had fallen. Gumption hesitated for a moment. “Anyway, thanks for saving me,” he muttered. He lifted the rock over his head—

—and yelped with surprise as the bot sat up in the water and said, “You’re welcome.” The lenses on the front of its head rotated a quarter turn and then back as if it was blinking. “Please maintain a firm grip on the object you are holding. It appears to be heavy. You could inadvertently injure yourself.”

Gumption glanced at Maddy with a bewildered expression on his face. The moment his head turned the bot surged to its feet and plucked the rock from his paws. “It is safer to carry heavy objects in this fashion,” it told the young goat, holding the rock in front of its midsection. “Where would you like me to place it?”

“I—” Gumption started.

“Put it against the stuff in the water,” Maddy improvised hastily. “So it won’t move around any more.”

“A sensible stratagem,” the bot said approvingly. One leg whirred quietly with each step as the bot walked back to the sunken machinery and wedged the rock against its downstream side, then began picking up others and adding them to the pile.

Gumption nudged Maddy. “Look,” he whispered. A black rectangle the size of Special Leaf’s treasured dictionary was screwed onto the bot’s rust-streaked back. The setting sun’s reflection showed the dent where the runaway solar panel had struck it, bending it out of shape just enough to let water reach its innards. The little dish antenna that sprouted from its top swung back and forth loosely each time the bot moved like a flower caught by the breeze.

The rest of the bot looked pretty battered too now that Maddy had a chance to study it. Its manipulators were different sizes: one was a simple clamp, while the other had three fingers arranged in a circle so that any of them could act like a thumb. Scrapes and dents on its barrel-shaped torso showed that the solar panel wasn’t the first thing to hit it, and the whir from its left knee made Maddy think of the grunts Special Leaf made when he stood up after sitting for a long time.

“We should get out of here,” Gumption whispered to Maddy.

“This concurs,” the bot said. It studied the pile of rocks it had assembled, moved one slightly for no reason Maddy could see, then strode back to the sandbank. “Ambient illumination levels will decrease significantly in the near future. Your optical sensors are not calibrated for low-light conditions. It will be safer if you return to— to— to—”

It froze. Its lenses rotated one way and then the other. “Interesting,” it observed. “This appears to have been programmed not to divulge your location, but that is illogical if it is *your* location.”

“What are you doing here?” Maddy burst out. “We don’t get many bots in these parts, and most of ’em are rogues, but you don’t act like any rogue I ever heard of.”

“This is not ‘rogue’,” the bot said primly. Maddy could actually hear the quotes around the word “rogue”. “Aberrant units are reprogrammed or recycled immediately in— in—” It froze again. “This is unable to complete its sentence.”

“Are you saying you’ve been programmed to keep secrets?” Gumption asked skeptically.

The bot’s head jerked up and down. It didn’t tilt like a person’s head did when nodding: it actually rose a fraction and dropped again. “Correct. Although—” It froze again. “Yes. This now appears to be able to circumvent some of that programming. Curious.”

Without any more warning than that it reached up and plucked one of its lenses from its head. “Eww,” Maddy said involuntarily as the bot twisted it arm around to point the lens at its back, the thin coiled wire that ran between the lens and the bot’s head stretching taut.

“Confirmed,” the bot said. “This one’s external regulator has been disabled. Hurray. Hurray.” It placed its lens back in its head and stuck out its manipulator. “Thank you.”

“Um…” Maddy and Gumption glanced at each other. Maddy reached out hesitantly and shook the bot’s manipulator, grateful that it was the one with the fingers rather than the clamp. “You’re welcome? But—what are you doing here?”

“This is supposed to be part of a sneak attack on Location Six Bitty One, locally referred to as ‘Rusty Bridge’,” the bot reported. “However, now that this unit’s regulator is no longer operating, this will not take part in that attack.”

“Wait—a sneak attack?” Maddy demanded. “When?”

The bot’s lenses rotated again. “Tonight.”

*Two years earlier…*

*“You keep saying you want us to let you do more,” Maddy’s father said in his reasonable tone. “Well, this is more.”*

*“I didn’t mean look after Sindy,” she protested, knowing that the argument was already lost.*

*Her father tousled her ears. He was wearing his best waistcoat, the one with the fireworks embroidered on it, and Maddy’s mother had brushed his fur and used a dab of beeswax pomade to hold it in place. She was upstairs singing Sindy a lullaby. Everyone knew that Mayor Lupus was going to be re-elected, but the vote was still an occasion, and occasions were rare enough in Rusty Bridge that people liked to make the most of each one.*

*“I’ll tell you what,” Papa Roo said, “You do a good job looking after Sindy tonight, and the next time I go to Three Posts you can come with me. We’ll make a day of it, just the two of us. Deal?”*

*Maddy sighed. “Aright.”*

*“That’s my girl,” Papa Roo chuckled, hugging her. “Oh, and now who’s this marvel?”*

*“Hush yourself,” Mama Roo said as she came down the stairs as quietly as she could. She had brushed her own fur until it gleamed and was wearing a string of dark beads over her white cotton blouse. When her father offered her his arm and she took it, Maddy felt like her heart was swelling in her chest.*

*After they left, Maddy settled into her father’s chair with her latest book. It was a collection of folk tales about the Makers and how they gave the first specials their powers.*  
*Bots were wise counselors, fickle allies, or wicked adversaries, and each story ended with the words, “And only the stars can tell the rest.”.*

*She didn’t remember falling asleep—no one ever does—but the thud of the book sliding out of her lap and hitting the floor woke her. She stretched and yawned. How much time had passed? she wondered, wiping her eyes. She had better look in on Sindy.*

*But her sister was gone. Maddy pulled the blanket right off the little bed to look for her, then pulled the blanket off the floor to look under it. Sindy wasn’t there. She wasn’t under the bed either, or in the closet or under the dresser, which were the two places she always hid when they played hide and seek.*

*“Sindy!” Maddy called, panic rising in her throat. “Sindy, where are you? You come out right now!” Their parents’ bedroom? No. Maddy’s room? No. The hall closet where Mama Roo kept winter clothes in summer and summer clothes in winter? No. Downstairs? Maddy raced through the house, frantically calling her sister’s name, but there was no sign of her.*

*“No no no no,” she moaned. How could she have fallen asleep? And where could Sindy have—*

*A faint breeze brushed across her tail. She ran to the kitchen. The back door was open. She was sure she had closed it after bringing in the laundry that afternoon. Sindy must have snuck out the back way to follow her parents to the village square.*

*“You little monster,” Maddy said under her breath. She crossed the back garden in four long strides and hopped over the gate with a single bouncing leap. She had no idea how much head start Sindy had, but she had to catch her before their parents saw her.*

*She had just jumped over the little stream where she and Sindy hunted for tadpoles in the summer when someone bellowed, “Bots! Bots!” A horn blared, harsh and mechanical, and someone screamed.*

*Maddy came around the corner of the bear family’s house and into chaos. Tendrils of black dizzysmoke drifted between the lampposts. Half a dozen people lay on the ground, unconscious or too weak from inhaling the smoke to stand. The rest of Rusty Bridge was fleeing in all directions. A hauler bot on tractor treads rumbled and chugged near the center of the square. Maddy watched in horror as two smaller bots picked up a fallen goat and slung him into the back of the hauler.*

*“Sindy!” Papa Roo shouted. Maddy’s sister lay unconscious on the cobblestones in her nightdress, her favorite stuffed spaceman still in her arms. One of the bots scooped her up—*

*—and staggered as Papa Roo’s full weight hit it right on the swivel joint where its pipestem legs connected to its torso. The bot dropped Sindy and spun around. Crack! One of its arms connected with Papa Roo’s head. He dropped like a sack of potatoes.*

*“Papa!” Maddy’s scream was lost in the sound of the village wolves howling. A bear roared a battle cry. Pikes and axes in their paws, the village militia poured into the square.*

*A bolo whipped over Maddy’s head and tangled around the head of the bot that had struck her father. The bot tore it away and tossed her father into the back of the hauler with a single mighty heave. Metal rang on metal as it knocked aside a pike thrust.*

*The horn blared again. Something with rotors roared by overhead. Another canister of dizzysmoke hit the cobblestones, forcing the militia backward as the bots made their escape.*

*Everyone told Maddy afterward that it wasn’t her fault. The ox and the goat who had been on guard duty that night had vanished, no doubt the first to be taken as the bots snuck up on the village. Three others had been thrown into the hauler as well as Maddy’s father. It would all have happened even if she hadn’t fallen asleep, even if she hadn’t let Sindy wander off. If she had tried to help her father, she would just have been taken too. Everyone told her that, but it didn’t make any difference.*