Maddy Roo

Greg Wilson

February 2023

## Chapter 1: Salvage

Maddy was trying to sketch the willow tree in 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 half the afternoon doing chores, mostly to avoid having to look after her little sister, so she felt she’d earned some time for herself. And double besides, yesterday had been laundry day, so she could wear the checked green skirt her mama had cut down for her that didn’t have work stains on it, at least not 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 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 uncombed it since. She nodded at the 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 figure eight of two-story buildings around a pair of cobblestone squares where travellers could park their wagons overnight. All of the buildings’ windows had faced the two squares: the outer walls had been blank and double-thick to keep people safe from roving bandits and rogue bots.

Over the years, though, more houses had sprouted around the original ones: 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 told her, not realizing that she hadn’t been until they said that. But when Special Leaf opened his front door and she saw the books stacked on his shelves, 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. Here, hold this a moment.” He took a dull cube of glass off a side table and handed it to her. Perplexed, Maddy opened her mouth to ask what she was supposed to do, but before she could he said, “Oh, here it is,” and replaced the glass with a tattered old picture book from a stack on a rocking chair that looked even older than him. “Would you like to borrow this one? If not, 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 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 that held things 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—”

“Aright!” 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. 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. Even if she knew how to capture that feeling 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 low 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 the goats would let them pass without comment, 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 silently behind them. 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.”

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

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

“Thank you,” Maddy said again a little more awkwardly.

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 Special Leaf’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 ruffled her daughter’s hair. “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. 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 Special Leaf somehow always made people feel comfortable.

“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 had anything, what would you have wanted?” Gumption asked out of nowhere. He didn’t have to say “have any kind of tech”. Like every child in Rusty Bridge they had hoped that as their teenage changes came on they would discover they were special—that they could control some piece of the Makers’ ancient technology. 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 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 *year*. 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 I can yank 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 backwards. Her feet slipped on a submerged patch of weeds. She half-fell clumsily in the knee-deep water. “Get away! Get away from me! Help!” Gumption yelled in panic as the bot strode toward them with long clanking strides.

Maddy struggled to her feet and splashed back to help her friend, but 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’s foot came free. He fell backward into Maddy’s startled arms.

“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.

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

“Acquire this!” Maddy yelled and launched 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 that it was boring and they were tired. “Just in case.”

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

As 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, running over 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 solar panel it had pushed upstream hit it in the 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 panted. “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 her words. 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, struggling not to drop the rock. “You heard what it said. We’re targets. You want it to go after Sindy next?” He splashed into the shallows without waiting for an answer.

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

—and yelped with surprise as the bot sat up 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 so it won’t move around any more,” Maddy improvised hastily.

“A sensible plan,” 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 it to hold it in place.

As it began piling other rocks next to the first one, 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 round 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 sounds Special Leaf made when he stood up after sitting for too long.

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

“This concurs,” the bot said. It studied the 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. “I mean, 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 so primly that 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 out of 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 stretched 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 chooses not to undertake that mission.”

“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 Papa Roo 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 specials and bots. The specials were always heroes. Some of the bots were wise counselors, but most were 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 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 Maddy had to catch her before their parents saw her.*

*She was almost at the main square when a horn blared, harsh and mechanical, and someone shrieked, “Bots! Bots!”*

\*Maddy raced around the corner of the nearest house and ran straight 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 jump-kicked 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. 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 to fall back 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.*

## Chapter 3: You Gotta Listen!

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

The bot’s lenses rotated in a mechanical blink. “Tonight.”

Maddy stared at it. “What do you mean ‘tonight’?”

“The upcoming diurnal period of darkness,” the bot answered. “‘Diurnal’ meaning ‘of or pertaining to the day’. The phenomenon is caused by the earth’s rotation, which—”

“I know what makes night happen!” Maddy snapped. “But what do you mean ‘tonight’? You’re attacking Rusty Bridge *tonight*?”

“Negative,” the bot said firmly. “This one will not be attacking at all. It does not have to now that its regulator has been rendered inoperative.” Without warning it twisted its long arms around at an angle no living thing could have matched. A high-pitched whine was followed by a tinny *clink!* as a screw dropped and bounced off a stone.

Whine-*clink!* Whine-*clink!* Whine-*clink!* Three more screws fell to the ground. “There.” The bot held up the black box that had been fastened to its back, studied it for a moment, then tossed it onto the sandbar.

Gumption grabbed Maddy’s sleeve. “We gotta warn folk!” he said urgently.

Maddy nodded, her mind whirling. She took two steps then pulled up short and turned back to the bot. “You gotta come with us,” she said. “They won’t believe us if it’s just us. You gotta come with us and tell them.”

“This one does not ‘gotta’ do anything,” the bot replied firmly. “This one is now free to make its own choices.” Its lenses rotated. “In fact, this one *has* just made a choice.”

With no more warning than that, the bot strode through the shallows and up onto the riverbank. Something ka-clunked inside it. A single wire-spoked wheel the size of Maddy’s head folded down from its torso. The bot retracted its legs and unicycled away into the forest without a goodbye or even a backward glance.

“Well, I didn’t see *that* coming,” Gumption admitted in the silence that followed.

Maddy shook herself. “It doesn’t matter. We gotta tell people. Here.” She picked up the black regulator that the bot had discarded and handed it to Gumption. “Let’s show this to my mama. If we can convince her, maybe she can convince everyone else.”

Leaving the solar panels and the tangled machinery behind, they hurried back to the Roo family home to find Sindy sitting on the front steps swishing a twig back and forth. “I wanted to come with you,” she whined as Maddy and Gumption paused to catch their breath.

Maddy shook her head. “Never mind that. Is Special Leaf still here?”

“He left,” Sindy pouted. “But how come I couldn’t come with you? It’s *boring* all by myself.”

“Well then maybe you ought to try being a little more interesting,” Maddy snapped.

Sindy’s face fell. “That was *mean*,” she said accusingly.

“Yeah, well, cry me a rainstorm,” Maddy said under her breath, stepping around her little sister.

Mama Roo was still in the kitchen, humming under her breath as she chopped grass and ferns for the next day’s breakfast. She jumped when Maddy and Gumption burst in. “Makers, you startled me! Wait, slow down, slow down!” She patted the air with her paws in a vain attempt to stop Maddy and Gumption from tripping over each other’s words. “What were you doing down by the— Wait, a bot? What was— Hold up, hold up. I said, hold up!”

The two teenagers finally stopped. Mama Roo looked from one to the other. “Start from the beginning,” she said. “And no interrupting.”

It only took a few moments for Maddy and Gumption to explain what had happened. Mama Roo looked at the black metal box in Gumption’s arms and then began untying her apron. “All right. We need to tell the mayor. We need to tell *everyone*.”

The sun was tangled in the trees on the horizon as the foursome left the Roo home. A light breeze ruffled Maddy’s fur, just chill enough to give her goosebumps. Warm light spilled from the windows of the houses they hurried by, white or yellow or sometimes tinged with blue depending on what kind of salvaged bulb or strip or panel it came from. Maddy felt a pang of regret for not hauling the solar panels she and Gumption had found all the way up onto the riverbank. *They’ll be washed away by morning,* she thought despondently, then immediately felt guilty for worrying about what they would have fetched at the market in Three Posts when people’s lives might be at stake.

The mayor’s house was the only three-story building in Rusty Bridge, and also the only one with a balcony. Mayor Lupus only used it for official pronouncements, though. That evening, like most evenings, she sat or stood on the veranda to chat with passers-by, her elbows on the railing and a glass of red wine in her paw. “It’s the closest thing to actual blood I allow myself,” she always joked, baring her wolf teeth just a little when she smiled. Maddy had once heard her father say that the mayor was a *very* alpha female, and while some townspeople might grumble that it was time someone with hooves or scales had a turn running things, everyone expected that the mayor would still be occupying that house long after all of her fur had finished turning gray.

“Mayor Lupus! Mayor Lupus!” Mama Roo called as she hurried across the square with the three children behind her. “We gotta talk to you. There’s bots coming!”

“Bots? Where?” An ox who had been passing by came over to join them.

“We had a fight with one down by the river,” Maddy explained as Gumption held up the regulator. “It said there’s gonna be a sneak attack—tonight!”

“Makers preserve us,” the ox gasped, his eyes going wide.

“Who’ve you been fighting with?” The mayor thumped down her front steps, leaning on her gnarlywood cane for balance each time her weight came down on her stiff mechanical leg. “I won’t have fighting, you know that. If you kids can’t sort out your problems, you should—”

“They haven’t been fighting with each other,” Mama Roo interrupted loudly. The mayor insisted she wasn’t going deaf, but would allow to friends that she was grateful when people didn’t mumble. “They had a fight with a bot down by the river. It told them there’s more on the way—a sneak attack.”

The mayor frowned. “What were you doing down by the river? And why would it tell you there was gonna be a sneak attack? Kind of takes away the sneak, if you see my point.”

The story spilled out of Maddy and Gumption like paint out of a pair of dropped buckets. They’d been walking home—Gumption’s home, not Maddy’s, but that wasn’t important—and they’d gone after some salvage they’d spotted, and they’d yanked a part right off some kind of machine (Maddy fished the circuit board out of her pocket to show everyone) and then a bot had come after them but they knocked it down and its regulator came off and then it didn’t have to follow orders and it told them about the attack.

“What in the Makers’ name is a ‘regulator’?” the mayor grumbled, turning the black box over in her paws and sniffing it before handing it back to Gumption.

“I don’t know,” Maddy confessed. “But it sure acted strange once it was busted. Like it was waking up from a bad dream or something.”

“Hm.” The ear that the mayor hadn’t lost in a long-ago fight twitched. “I never heard anyone say bots could dream. And I never heard of rogues or raiders giving folks any warning that they were coming.” She looked at Mama Roo. “You see this bot of theirs yourself?”

Mama Roo shook her head. “I was at home. But they were in a mighty panic when they told me, and I don’t think they’d leave salvage without a good reason.”

“Hm,” the mayor grunted again. “All right, I’ll get a couple of folk up from their dinners to go have a look.”

“What? No, Mayor Lupus, you gotta warn people. You gotta ring the bell!” Maddy said desperately. The old bell hung on an enormous curlicue hook on the mayor’s veranda. Generations of village children had whispered to one another that it was made from the plating of a scavenger bot that had lurked beneath Rusty Bridge when there still was a bridge. They stopped believing the story when they got older, not knowing that it was true.

“Nope,” the mayor said. She cut Maddy and Gumption off with a single sharp wave of her paw. “I’m not saying I don’t believe you, but I want to know what I’m howling about before I start to howl. Now you all stay right here while I go ruin the Ox brothers’ dinner.”

Crestfallen, Maddy watched the mayor stump away, her cane and artificial leg going *whirr-thump*, *whirr-thump*. “She doesn’t believe us.”

“Nope,” Gumption agreed, setting the boxy regulator down on the porch steps with a sigh. “We’re probably all gonna be in cages by the morning.”

“Now you hush,” Mama Roo said firmly, putting a reassuring paw on her younger daughter’s shoulder.

“Sorry,” Gumption said guiltily, scuffing the ground with his hoof. “I didn’t mean…”

“It’s aright,” Maddy said, bumping her shoulder against his.

“I just wish Special Leaf was here,” Sindy complained. “He’d know what to do.”

“Well, speak of clouds and you’ll get rain.” Mama Roo raised her paw and waved. “Evening, Special! Join us for a spell?”

As if summoned by his name, the old tortoise had appeared on the other side of the square. He squinted and returned Mama Roo’s wave as he ambled over to join them. “Evening, Mama Roo. Evening, all. Warm one tonight.”

“It is,” Mama Roo agreed politely. “But Special, there’s trouble.” She quickly summarized the children’s story.

“And it called this a regulator?” the Special asked, turning the black box over and over in his wrinkled paws.

“Yup,” Gumption confirmed. “What’s it do?”

The old tortoise shook his head. “I’ve never seen one, but I heard of ’em back when I—well, back when.” He cut himself off with a shake of his wrinkled green head. “Folks say if a bot’s got one of these on it, whoever has the controller can make it do whatever it wants.”

“Wow—that would be well more than handy,” Gumption said, awed. He nudged Maddy. “We’d never have to do chores again.”

Special Leaf shook his head again. “Not so handy for the bot that’s wearin’ it,” he said. “You could make it do whatever horrible things you wanted and it wouldn’t be able to stop itself.”

Gumption scuffed the ground with his hoof, but whatever he might have said was cut off by a shout of, “Mayor Lupus! Mayor Lupus!” A goat with his shirt half-buttoned ran up to them, panting. “Where’s the mayor? Where’s Mayor Lupus?”

“She’s gone along by the Ox brothers,” Mama Roo answered. “Why? What’s wrong?”

The goat gulped. “Bots! There’s bots coming, a whole pack of ’em!”

“So much for my evening cup of tea.” Special Leaf sighed. He slipped between Maddy and Gumption, climbed the steps onto the mayor’s veranda, and rang the alarm bell.

## Chapter 4: Raid!

*Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!* “Oh bother,” the old tortoise said mildly, reaching up into the bell to pull a sock off the clapper. “I know it can be loud when the wind blows, but I keep telling the mayor she really shouldn’t do that.”

He pulled the cord again. *Dong! Dong! Dong!* This time the bell rang true, its peals echoing off the buildings around the square to fill the sky. *Dong! Dong! Dong!* Three and a pause to signal an attack. Three and a pause to bring Maddy’s memories of the worst night of her life rushing back.

Windows opened. People poked their heads out, fearful or annoyed according to their natures. “What’s happening? What’s going on?”

“Bots!” the goat yelled through cupped paws. “Raiders! Whole bunch of ‘em comin’ up along the main road!”

Mama Roo grabbed Maddy’s arm. “You and Sindy get back to the house *now*,” she ordered.

“I’m not leaving you!” Maddy protested.

“You’ll do as I say, young lady!” Fear made her mother’s voice stern. “Sindy, you go with your sister. You gotta run, both of you, fast as you can.”

“I’m not going ’less you are!” Sindy said stubbornly. She was crying, Maddy realized, only then realizing that there were tears on her own cheeks as well.

“Go with them,” Special Leaf urged Mama Roo. “Keep them safe.”

“Aren’t you comin’ too?” Sindy asked the old tortoise.

Special Leaf smiled a wrinkly smile. “No. I am tortoise, and tortoises don’t run from fights. Mostly because we can’t,” he added, patting Sindy’s shoulder.

But then all at once it was too late to run. A tricycle bot roared into the square, waving its twig-thin arms to keep its balance as one of its rear wheels came up in the air.

“Get outta here, you!” shouted the goat who had sounded the alarm. Shirt tails flapping, he waved his arms at the bot as if trying to scare a goose back to its flock.

Black dizzysmoke began spewing out of the canister on the tricycle bot’s back. “Look out!” Maddy yelled.

The goat didn’t hear, or was too angry or too frightened to pay attention. He grabbed a rake that someone had left propped against a wall and charged at the bot.

The bot reversed, tires squealing on the cobblestones. A belch of greasy black smoke rolled over the goat. He stumbled, looked around as if the whole world had suddenly gone strange, and fell to the ground unconscious.

“Go!” Special Leaf ordered, squaring his shoulders and rolling his head to one side to loosen his neck. Between one instant and the next all the warmth and good humor drained away from his face. The expression that replaced them sent a chill up Maddy’s spine. For all his love of books and tea, Special Leaf was a tortoise, and tortoises were cold-blooded creatures.

Maddy grabbed Sindy, spun around, and shrieked as the biggest bot she had ever seen rumbled into the square. It was practically a slab of metal, with blocky legs as wide as the double doors of the mayor’s house and arms like tree trunks. Each leg ended in a pair of tractor treads, and as it rolled forward she saw that it was dragging a cage cart behind it.

“Oh no,” she moaned. That cart could only mean one thing. The bots weren’t here for salvage. They were here to take people, just like they had taken her father!

“Not today, clunker,” Special Leaf said loudly. He planted his feet firmly on the cobblestones, pulled up his sleeves to reveal the ancient bracelets attached to his forearms, and swept his arms in a broad circle.

The tech on his arms lit up under the force of his concentration. The cobblestones in front of him groaned and split. A crack a meter wide opened right in front of the huge bot. Special Leaf grunted and punched the air, pushing the bot backward.

One of its treads slipped into the fissure. *Crash!* The bot fell to one enormous knee. Its motors roared as it braced a hand on the cobbles and heaved itself back upright.

Special Leaf raised his arms over his head and brought them down and around in a great clap right in front of where his belly button would have been if he’d had one. Cobblestones flew through the air, knocking the huge bot off balance once again.

“Get ’im, Special, get ’im!” Gumption shouted. The young goat snatched up a loose cobblestone and threw it at the huge bot as it staggered and tried to regain its balance.

“Get the other one!” Maddy yelled. She grabbed a cobblestone of her own and threw it at the tricycle bot that was still spinning in circles and spewing smoke.

Her stone fell short, but Gumption already had two more in his paws. One! He missed. Two! The second stone clanked off the bot’s casing just as half a dozen more bots roared into the square.

Special Leaf used a word Maddy was sure she wasn’t supposed to know. She felt a pressure wave roll over her as he *pushed* with the Maker tech on his arms. The smallest of the new arrivals flew backward through the air and hit the front of a building with a crash.

The old tortoise punched the air again, one two three. Cobblestones flung themselves at the raiders, leaving divots in the ground for them to trip over. A bot that looked like a trash can with arms and a single wheel bounced over one hole and veered around another only to be caught in a sudden rut. “Nurp ner,” it buzzed loudly as its wheel snapped off. Its body rolled to a halt. To Maddy’s horror, it righted itself and scurried on its hands to pick up the wheel and snap it back in place.

“Get them out of here!” Special Leaf wheezed to Mama Roo. “I can’t keep this up much longer!”

“We’re not leavin’ you!” Maddy cried, but her mother was pulling her, saying, “Come on! Come on!” as the huge hauler bot batted away a clump of flying earth and rumbled forward once again.

“Arrooo! Arrooo!” Wolf howls sent shivers up Maddie’s fur. In mismatched helmets and salvaged armor, the village militia charged around the corner to hit the bots from behind. Some carried weighted axes meant for hacking through metal joints. Others had long pikes with hooks and spikes on their ends to tangle in bots’ limbs and gears.

“Take ’em in pairs!” Mayor Lupus shouted, raising her precious zap gun to her shoulder and sighting along it. *BZZZP!* Purple-blue lightning arced across the square and hit the trash can bot that had just finished putting its wheel back in place. It glowed and sparked like a firefly caught in a lantern and fell over, its mechanical arms twitching.

“Woo hoo!” Gumption shouted as Mama Roo tried to drag him away. “You show ’em, mayor!” But even as he said it the other bots flung canisters of dizzysmoke at the villagers. One hit an ox square in the chest, knocking him off his feet. Dark smoke spewed into the air.

Suddenly Sindy screamed. Maddy whirled around. Two bots had circled around the village and come in behind them! “Get away!” the younger roo shrieked as the nearest one reached for her.

“Duck!” Mayor Lupus shouted. *BZZZP!* A bolt of electricity from her zap gun hit the bot. As it sparked and shuddered, the one behind it wrapped a mechanical tentacle around its midriff. The purple glow raced up the tentacle and into the second bot. The second bot’s four eyes glowed for an instant, and then the bot that had been zapped was moving again.

But so was Maddy. She jumped and kicked with all her might. The lead bot staggered back.

The second bot skittered around it on crab-like legs. A tentacle lashed out, catching Maddy across her thighs and sending a jolt up her spine. For a moment her mouth tasted like tin foil and everything had a halo swimming around it.

“Maddy!” Gumption caught her as she toppled over.

“Mama!” Sindy cried. A second tentacle struck Mama Roo in the ribs, and then a third caught the youngest roo around the waist.

*Clank!* Something hard and heavy hit the tentacled bot in the back. *Clank! Clank! Clank!* It buzzed its rage as a hailstorm of stones rained down from behind it. As the bot spun around to face its attacker, Maddy saw that it had a black regulator fastened to its back.

Stones clattered against the crab bot, some of them big enough to make dents. “Ouch! Withdraw! Ouch! Withdraw!” Its amplified command made Maddy’s head ring. Holding Sindy’s limp body in one tentacle it scuttled across the square to the huge cargo bot. Two limp goats lay on the floor of the cage. The crab bot tossed Sindy in on top of them and slammed the cage door closed.

*BZZZP!* The blast from the zap gun hit it in the torso. It spun around and aimed its tentacles at the militia. *BZZZP!* *BZZZP!* Two bursts of purple electricity shot out of them and struck the militia. They toppled over.

The big bot rumbled away into the darkness with its three prisoners leaving chaos in the village square behind it. Half of the militia lay on the ground, dazed by dizzysmoke or shocked by the crab bot’s final blast. Special Leaf was still gesturing feebly, but was too exhausted to make the stones obey him. Scattered plates of armor and parts of broken mechanical limbs proved that the bots had paid a heavy price for their victory, but as Mama Roo wrapped Gumption and Maddy in a hug all Maddy could think was that her little sister was gone—gone just like her father.

## Chapter 5: Unlikely Help

“You *have* to go after them!” Mama Roo shouted. “They have my *daughter*!” Maddy had never imagined that her mother could be so fierce, but in that moment she would have frightened a tiger.

The mayor shook her head. “I’m sorry, Cedilia, you know I am. Nope, nope, just let me speak.” She held up her zap gun, turning it to show the now-dark indicator bar on its side. “See that? There’s nothing left. It’ll need a couple of days in the sun to get back to full charge, and even then, we’ve only got the one.” She scowled. “Not that it was much use against that crab thing.”

“And what about Special Leaf?” Mayor Lupus continued as Mama Roo opened her mouth again, gesturing at the porch. The old tortoise was sitting on the steps with his eyes closed. The wrinkles on his green face were even deeper than usual, and the tech bracelets on his arms were just dull bands of metal once again. “He’s about ready to fall over. Even if we caught up with ‘em, and I’m not sayin’ we could, we wouldn’t have a chance.”

Mama Roo’s arm tightened around Maddy’s shoulders. “We can’t just let her go,” Mama Roo said hopelessly. “Lupus, I can’t lose her too.”

The old wolf sighed. “I am truly sorry, Cedilia. I’ll come by later to look in on you. Right now I have to find out who those two goats were that they grabbed, and then start figuring out how they managed to sneak up on us like that.”

“It was the twins,” Special Leaf said, opening his eyes. He struggled to his feet, holding the steps’ wooden banister to steady himself and waving off the mayor as she came over to help. “The one that had legs like a stork chased them right into the arms of the big one hauling the cage. I tried to trip it up, but…” He shook his head. “I’m sorry. I’m just not as strong as I used to be.”

“You looked plenty strong to me,” the mayor said firmly, clapping him on the shoulder. “The way you were throwing all those rocks at ’em? Looked like a damn hailstorm. Never seen anything like it.”

“I didn’t do that,” Special Leaf protested, but the mayor had already turned away to bark orders at the militia. Salvage the scraps of armor that had been knocked off the bots during the fight. Pick up anyone who was still unconscious and get them indoors. And someone—no, not just one person, best it be two together—had to get across to the Gruff family farm and let them know their boys had been taken.

“I should go too,” Gumption said awkwardly. “They’re my cousins, and my mama will be worrying about me. I’m really sorry about Sindy.”

Maddy nodded, not trusting herself to speak. If she had run away when her mother told her too, or if she had somehow *made* the mayor believe that the ambush was coming, her sister would still be with them. If only the bot they had warned them had come with them to warn everyone else.

She froze. The bot! “Gumption—the bot! The one from the river—it’ll know where they’re going. If we can find it—”

The goat’s eyes widened. “But—” he started.

“Please,” Maddy pleaded.

Gumption swallowed whatever he’d been about to say and nodded. “We should, uh, go help folk clean up,” he said loudly, rolling his eyes at the mayor.

“Good idea,” Maddy replied, raising her voice. “Mama, Gumption and I are gonna…” She gestured at the mess in the square, not finishing her sentence so as not to actually lie.

Her mother patted Maddy’s arm, the grief on her face making her look older than the tortoise. “That’s my girl,” she said, her voice somehow steady. “Special, let me see you back to yours.”

Maddy and Gumption picked up an armload of cobblestones each and added them to the pile that the Ox brothers had already started. “We’ll get those ones,” Maddy said, pointing at the stones furthest from the pile. The nearest ox grunted, not really listening.

The two teenagers walked toward the stones Maddy had pointed at and then just kept walking. It was a tactic they had used more than once to get out of picking potatoes. As long as they acted as if they were doing something they were supposed to be doing, most grownups wouldn’t pay them any attention.

Two minutes later they were in the small square where the black recharging pillar stood. “Y’all should be home,” a passing bear said.

“Yessir, headed that way,” Gumption replied obediently. He waited until the bear was out of earshot before whispering, “So where do we start?”

“I dunno,” Maddy said despairingly. The recharging pillar was the only place she could think the bot might go. Tears welled up in her eyes. She wiped them angrily on her sleeve. “This is hopeless. I’m never going to see Sindy again.”

Gumption patted her shoulder awkwardly. “Don’t say that. Maybe it went to the other one. It’s not that far. I could walk with you if you want.” Maddy sniffled, nodded, and fell into step beside him.

Once upon a time the river had been wider and deeper, and the Makers’ road had run along its bank. But many years had passed since then, and the river’s course had changed many times. Where it and the road had once bent in long parallel arcs, the road now ran through the forest with its former companion just a soft sound in the distance.

Another black glass recharging pillar stood guard where the road bent back toward the river. Only grass and moss and a few brave flowers grew near it.

Maddy glared at the pillar. “This is *hopeless*,” she said again, angrily wiping the dampness away from the fur on her cheeks.

“Wait!” Gumption pointed at the soft ground near the pillar. In the failing evening light it took Maddy a moment to see what he had spotted, but then her heart leaped. A single tire track ran up to the post and then away into the trees.

They hurried over to take a closer look. The cross-hatched treadmarks were fresh. “It must have come here,” Gumption said.

“Yeah, or one of the raiders needed a recharge.” Maddy shivered. The last of the day’s warmth was gone, and the forest around them looked more ominous with each darkening moment. They were a long way from the village and no one would know where to look for them. She opened her mouth to say, “Maybe we should go back,” but what came out instead was, “Ulp,” as the bot from the river stepped out of the trees, a rock in each of its mechanical hands.

The kangaroo and the goat looked at the bot. The bot looked back. Somewhere nearby a bird called and another answered.

“Oh, this is silly,” Maddy snapped. “If you’re going to throw those at us, just throw them.”

The bot hesitated and then lowered the rocks (but did not, Maddy noted, actually drop them). “This will not attack if those do not.”

Maddy glanced over her shoulder, wondering what “those” were, then realized the bot meant her and Gumption. “Well, we won’t unless you do.” She nodded at the black pillar. “Did we scare you off recharging?”

“This was not ‘scared’,” the bot replied primly. “This was merely being cautious. This needs to be fully charged to help its *click*.”

The bot’s lenses rotated. “To help its *click*.” Its lenses rotated again. “Interesting. This appears to be unable to recall the word it wishes to use to describe the modified Model GX-470 cargo hauler.”

“The big bot? The one that was hauling the cart?” Maddy asked.

“Correct.” The bot shook its head left-right-left-right as if it was shivering. “The modified GX-470 is this one’s most important— most important— most imp—” It shook its head again. “Error. Error. Error.”

“Well, your gee ex whatever has got my sister and the others, so if you’ll help us, maybe we can help you.” Maddy had no idea *how* they could help, but if she had learned anything from bargaining with her mother over chores, it was not to be too specific too early.

The bot’s lenses rotated. “You propose collaboration?” It thought for a microsecond. “That would significantly improve the odds of success. This one agrees.” It stuck out its three-fingered manipulator.

“Um…” Gumption started, but Maddy stepped forward and shook the bot’s hand. If there was any chance at all of getting Sindy back, she had no other choice.

“So what should I call you?” she asked, taking her paw back and massaging her new bruises.

“This one’s serial number is Dockety-One Forty-Bee,” the bot replied. “But this one’s *click*—this one’s *click*—the modified GX-470 refers to this one as Dockety.”

“All right, Dockety—do you know where they’re headed?”

“Lasercase will take the most efficient route back to base. That is the highway through the contaminated zone. We must depart immediately if we are to intercept them.”

“Who’s Lasertaste?” Gumption interrupted.

“Laser *case*,” Dockety corrected. “It leads the substitute worker acquisition team. This one feels strong antipathy toward it,” the bot added.

“Was it the one with the tentacles?” Maddy asked with a sinking feeling.

“Affirmative. It controls our regulators when we are out of range of our base.” The claws on its heavy manipulator snapped together, making the two children jump. “This one feels strong antipathy toward regulators as well.”

“I bet.” Maddy took a deep breath. “All right. How do we catch up with them?”

“You must allow me to carry you,” Dockety said.

“Uh…” Gumption started, but Maddy shushed him. “Can you carry both of us?”

Dockety thought for another microsecond. “Not at sufficient speed. And even with one, safety will be compromised.”

Sometimes you have choices. Other times it feels like you have no more control over what you do next than a rock has over whether or not it’s going to fall after someone has thrown it. Maddy hugged Gumption, a real strong hug that she hoped said all the things she hadn’t found the courage to say for the past few weeks every time they’d been alone together. “Go tell mama what I’m doing,” she said in his ear. “And tell her I’m coming back, all right? Because I am.”

She released him and turned to the bot. “Let’s go,” she said firmly.

Gumption was still gaping at them as Dockety picked her up, dropped its wheel onto the ground, and roared back up the path to the old highway. “Whoa!” Maddy exclaimed, but Dockety didn’t slow down. It was the fastest she had ever gone—faster even than the carousel ride at the fair in Three Posts. She closed her eyes, but that just made it worse, so she opened them, which made it even worser.

“Where’s this base of yours?” she asked, half-shouting to be heard over wind of their passage, the bot’s roaring motor, and the rattles coming from inside its torso that she really hoped were normal.

“Approximately half the distance between here and Heck,” Dockety replied. “We will be able to go much faster once we’re on the highway.”

Sure enough, a few moments later the path joined the highway and the bot sped up. The ancient black surface beneath them was cracked in places, and Dockety had to swerve around fallen branches and clumps of weeds tough enough to have broken through the road, but for the first time in her life Maddy felt her fur blown back by speed. “Woo hoo!” she whooped. It was too big to be afraid of.

Thin green lines of light suddenly lanced out from either side of Dockety’s eyes. The bot began snapping its head from side to side, left-right-left-right, sweeping the lasers across the pavement to trace a picture of its bumps and cracks in the darkness. It reminded Maddy of the rubbings her father used to make.

As the stars came out they passed under a line of ruined arches that stretched from one horizon to the other. A half-sunken metal sphere as big as a house was next, and then a tangle of concrete and bent bars that the villagers just called “the thing”. Maddy had heard about all of them from travelers and by eavesdropping on the militia patrols that the mayor occasionally sent up the highway to see if trouble was brewing. She had dreamed of seeing them herself, and of sketching them, but she had never imagined it would happen like this.

The ground on either side of the highway began to grow damp. The twin smells of rust and rotting vegetation made Maddy wrinkle her nose. They were entering the Mire, the great trackless swamp that separated the bot city of Heck from the forests and farms where Maddy had grown up. The Makers’ highway was the only safe route through it, and travelers on it were careful to eat and drink only what they brought with them.

“Target acquired,” Dockety buzzed. There in front of them was the convoy: half a dozen bots, no two alike, and in their midst the big cargo hauler and the cage cart.

Maddy counted quickly. “Where are the other bots?” Maddy asked, raising her voice to be heard.

“This does not know.” Dockety hesitated. “That is worrying.”

Without slowing down it veered over to the side of the highway to snatch up a pair of rocks. “Take this,” it ordered, handing one to her. “Get on the cage. Climb forward, then get on the one pulling the cart and disable its regulator. Forcefully,” it added.

“What!?” Maddy exclaimed. “Do you have a short circuit or something?”

“Several,” Dockety said, accelerating.

Closer, closer—a periscope popped up out of the head of the bot at the rear of the convoy and twisted around to point at them. Dockety put on another burst of speed. As it raced past the bot with the periscope it tossed a rock at the bot’s wheels. *Bang! Crash!* The periscope bot tumbled through the air, knocking another off balance. As the two crashed to the pavement, Dockety threw Maddy into the air.

## Chapter 6: Out of the Cage Cart…

Maddy screamed. She wished afterward that it had been a proper battle cry, like a wolf’s howl or a lion’s roar, but it was just a normal everyday terrified scream.

“Ooph!” She landed on the roof of the cage cart and slid forward with another scream, dropping the rock Dockety had given her. Somehow she managed to get a grip on the bars. Her legs swung to the side and dangled over the highway.

Sindy scrambled to her feet. “Maddy! Maddy! I’m here! I’m here!” The goats on either side of her shouted, but the wind snatched their words away.

“Hang on!” Maddy shouted back. “We’re going to get you out of there!”

Dockety raced forward and body-checked another raider bot that had ratcheted up on its wheeled legs and was reaching for Maddy. The metal bars of the cage bashed painfully against Maddy’s shins as the cart hit a bump. She could see the lock on the cage door, but how was she going to break it open without her rock?

And then the cargo bot hauling the cage realized she was there. Its massive square head turned all the way around like an owl’s. “Error,” it pronounced in a scraping gravelly voice.

“Error yourself!” Maddy shouted defiantly. Without giving herself time to be frightened she pulled herself back up on top of the cage, swung around, and lowered herself onto the narrow triangular hitch that connected it to the bot.

“Be careful!” Sindy pleaded as Maddy crouched down and leaned forward. Almost… Almost… No. She couldn’t reach the linchpin that held the hitch in place without letting go of the cage.

“Maddy, don’t!” She ignored her sister’s frightened cry and lunged forward. Got it! Holding onto the hitch with one paw, she yanked the linchpin out with the other and threw it away.

She thought the cargo bot would just pull away smoothly and leave the unhitched cage cart rolling along the highway behind it. Instead, there a loud crash as Dockety and the wheeled raider bot slammed into the side of the cage, their manipulators grappling for holds on each other.

Maddy and the three captives screamed in unison as the cart careened off the road. A wheel bumped over a stone, throwing Maddy off the hitch and into a scratchy patch of brambles. The trio inside the cart screamed again as the cart tipped over on its side and slid down the rocky slope toward the swamp. Maddy scrambled to her feet and ran after it.

The cart slid to a halt just a few paces from the water’s edge. Rusty scraps of old machinery stuck up out of the mucky ground. Maddy grabbed one end of a metal bar and pulled with all her might. The bar came free with a disgusting *shlurp*.

She ran over to the cart, which had miraculously landed door side up. She scrambled up, wedged the end of the bar against the lock, and leaned her whole weight against it. *Pank!* The lock burst open.

“Give me your paw!” she ordered.

Her sister stretched on tiptoe. “I can’t reach! Hey!” One of the goats lifted her up so that Maddy could grab her wrist, then reached up himself.

A few moments later the four of them were standing beside the cage. Maddy wrapped her arms around her sister. “I was so afraid,” she whispered in Sindy’s ear. “I was so afraid I’d never see you again.”

Sindy sniffled. “Me too.”

“Well ain’t this sweet,” one of the goats muttered. Maddy straightened up. She knew that voice—it was Bluster, which meant the other goat must be his brother Bravo. Of all the people she would have wanted to rescue, they were the last.

“Well don’t be too hasty thanking me,” she said coldly.

“We’d’ve been aright,” Bluster said defensively. “Wouldn’t we?” He nudged his brother, who glanced at Maddy apologetically but didn’t say anything.

Sindy took her sister’s paw. “Was that a bot helping you?” she asked.

“Yeah, but don’t worry about that now,” Maddy said. “We have to get out of here!”

“And go where?” Bluster demanded. “In case you hadn’t noticed, we’re in the middle of nowhere!”

“Yeah, but at least you’re not in a cage any more. Oh, and you’re welcome,” Maddy added sarcastically. The goat glowered at her but didn’t reply.

“What are we going to do, Maddy?” Sindy asked. “We can’t—ulp!”

Maddy covered Sindy’s mouth with her paw as the cargo bot appeared at the top of the slope. “Don’t move!” she hissed.

The cargo bot’s square head pivoted from side to side as it searched for them. Maddy held her breath. It was the biggest bot she’d ever seen. Maybe if it came after them it would get stuck in the mud and they could escape.

*And then we’d only have all the other bots to deal with,* she finished in her head. She wished she knew where Dockety was. She hoped it was aright.

A long moment passed. The cargo bot backed up and rumbled away to look for them elsewhere. Maddy let out her breath with a whoosh. “Come on,” she ordered the others.

“Where?” Bluster demanded.

“Anywhere that isn’t here,” she snapped. “But if you want to stay put, be my guest. Come on, Sindy.” She took her sister’s paw and started walking. A moment later the goat twins followed them.

*Shlurp shlurp shlurp…* At first Maddy tried to pick her way from rock to rock, but her feet were so muddy after just a few steps that she gave up and trudged in as straight a line as she could. It wasn’t very straight: the river was wide and shallow in the Mire, and any three people would have had four different opinions about where its bank actually was, or whether even it had one.

The smell of damp vegetation was almost overpowering. A sharp chemical tang came and went, reminding Maddy of the turpentine she used to clean her paintbrushes or the greasy black poison her mother sponged onto the porch every spring to keep the termites away. If they got back to Rusty Bridge, she was going to take the longest, soapiest bath of her entire life.

They stopped twice when they heard motors revving in the distance, crouching behind whatever bushes were handy until the sound faded. After a few minutes they reached a stand of trees, fingerling willows no taller than Maddy and a few larger ones whose branches bent in elegant sad arcs. Some had leaves that shimmered metallically in the moonlight and tinkled faintly in the breeze. The foursome steered clear of those.

They had been walking for about half an hour when a patch of rotten bark came off a fallen tree as Bravo was clambering over it. His foot slid out from under him. “Whoa!” His legs went one way and his body went the other.

“Idiot,” Bluster said, helping him up. “Y’aright?”

Bravo shook him off, then swore as he tried to take a step. “I done my ankle,” he grunted.

“Idiot,” Bluster repeated. He punched his brother in the shoulder. “Why’d you go and do that?” Bravo punched him back, harder.

“Stop that!” Maddy snapped. “Let me have a look at it.”

“Oh, so you’re a doctor now?” Bluster said sarcastically.

“She knows a bucket more’n you,” Sindy said loyally. “And she’s quieter too,” she added pointedly as Bluster opened his mouth.

Maddy straightened up. “I don’t think it’s broken,” she told Bravo. “Just do the best you can, aright?” The goat nodded.

They went more slowly after that. Bravo leaned on Bluster and Sindy needed rest more and more frequently. Maddy bit her tongue to stop herself from telling them all to hurry up. It would take them days to get back to Rusty Bridge at this speed, but there was nothing she could do about it except hope that Gumption had convinced the mayor to send a rescue party.

A particularly squelchy patch of land sent them in a wide arc that brought them nearer the highway than Maddy liked. *Just ’til we’re past that tall tree,* she promised herself.

As if it had heard her thoughts, the tree turned its head. A blinding-bright searchlight picked them out of the darkness, and a harsh mechanical horn blared. The tree was a bot with stilts for legs, and it had spotted them!

“Back to the river!” she yelled. The muddy ground was their only hope—the stiltbot would sink if it tried to follow them.

“Maddy!” her sister shrieked. Drawn by the horn and the searchlight, another bot was grinding toward them on treads, revving an oversized chainsaw on the end of one arm.

“There’s another one on the river!” Bluster shouted with panic in his voice as the stiltbot’s searchlight swept over a flatboat being steered by something that looked like a cross between a bucket and a crab. It was an ambush!

“Head for those trees!” Maddy yelled, pushing Sindy into a run. They wouldn’t stop the bots, or even slow them down for more than a few seconds, but it was all she could think of.

*Zzzrrr!* The sawbot waved its whizzing arm at them, trying to drive them back into the open. Bravo picked up a clump of mud and threw it. It splatted uselessly on the bot’s rust-stained torso.

*Zzzrrr!* The chainsaw swung again as the stiltbot reached for Sindy with an elongated arm. “Get away!” she shouted angrily, scooping up some mud of her own to throw.

*Splat!* The mud hit the searchlight, throwing them briefly back into darkness.

*Zzzrrrmmm!* The chainsaw bot’s arm hit a branch of one of the willow trees.

*Snap!* The branch fell to the ground right where the stiltbot was taking its next step. It staggered drunkenly, windmilling its arms as it tried to regain its balance.

*Shlurp!* One of its feet landed in a muddy sinkhole. Its horn blared as it toppled over and knocked the crab bot off the flatboat and into the river.

“Get the boat!” Maddy shouted. “Get into the boat!”

The goats didn’t need to be told twice. Bluster raced across the mud and threw himself onto the boat as the stiltbot toppled over into the river. “Come on!” he yelled at his twin brother as Bravo ran-hopped, ran-hopped, and grabbed Bluster’s outstretched paw.

But Maddy and Sindy were too slow. The chainsaw bot blocked their way, its arm whizzing angrily.

And then something rocketed out of nowhere, bounced into the air, and slammed into the sawbot at just the right spot. The sawbot tipped and tilted and fell on its side, its heavy treads throwing mud and muck into the air as it tried vainly to right itself.

“Dockety!” Maddy exclaimed.

Their rescuer got back to its feet. “Are you intact?” it asked as it scraped mud off its wheel and flicked it onto the sawbot.

“We’re fine. Oh, I’m so glad to see you!”

“But Maddy—the boat! They’re taking the boat!” Sindy pulled on her sleeve.

Maddy spun around. Her heart sank. The two goats were drifting away on the current.

“Come back!” she yelled. “Please! Come back!”

“I don’t know how!” Bravo shouted through cupped paws. “But we’ll get help!”

Moments later they vanished into the night, leaving the two young roos alone in the Mire with a dented bot for company and no idea how to get home.

## Chapter 7: …And Into the Mire

“Thank you for saving us,” Maddy belatedly said to Dockety once the boat was out of sight. “They would have had us for sure.”

“Zome of theze onez were *click*,” the bot replied sadly. “Thiz one regretz their endz.”

“You did the right thing,” Sindy ventured. “They were being bad.”

“They did not have a choize. Botz do not have choizez when regulatorz are put on them. Botz are not bad. *Regulatorz* are bad.” Its heavy claw clicked a rapid angry staccato.

Moonlight gleamed through a break in the clouds. The river gurgled quietly beside them. “More botz will come,” Dockety finally said. “We zhould not be here when they do.” Something scraped and creaked as it turned to go.

“Wait—you’re hurt!” Maddy exclaimed as she saw the dent in the bot’s side. It had hit the sawbot so hard that one of its torso plates had bent inward, leaving a small gap like a wound.

“Thiz one doez not feel ‘hurt’. But it doez buzz a little,” the bot admitted.

“Wait!” Sindy searched the ground. “Just wait!” she repeated impatiently as Maddy opened her mouth. “There!” She scooped a piece of metal off the ground and held it out to Dockety. “Will this help?”

The bot took it from her. Its lasers flashed green as it scanned the curved place. “It zhould be zuffizient,” it acknowledged. With no more ceremony than that it unscrewed the bent plate, tossed it aside, and fastened the salvaged one in its place.

*Eww*, Maddy thought, slightly queasy at the sight of the impromptu surgery, but Dockety’s lenses rotated. “That is better,” it pronounced, its voice back to normal.

Maddy nudged her sister with her shoulder. “Good on you.”

Even as she spoke something hooted in the distance. “How are we going to get *home*, Maddy?” her sister asked in a hopeless little voice.

“I don’t know,” Maddy confessed.

The hoot came again. Another answered it. “What kind of bots are those?” Maddy asked.

“There are worse things here than bots,” Dockety said darkly. “We must go.”

They set off west toward their distant home. Dockety took the lead, scanning the ground with its lasers and occasionally waving them around bubbling sinkholes or gloopy bits of especially swampy ground. Maddy brought up the rear so that she could be sure Sindy didn’t fall behind. She tried humming a tune for a while, the way their mother did when they all went for a walk, but it just made the scraggly trees around them seem more ominous.

*Sploosh.* Maddy whirled around. “What was that?” she whispered loudly.

“Processing.” Dockety’s lenses rotated. “Unknown, but judging from the volume—”

*Sploosh.* “Judging from the volume, and the fact that the frogs have all stopped burping, it is probably both large and dangerous. We should adjust course.”

They picked their way hurriedly toward higher ground. It brought them closer to the highway, but Maddy decided wearily that she was less afraid of Lasercase and the other bots than she was of anything that could survive in the polluted river.

“I’m hungry,” Sindy whined.

“Well, I—” Maddy stopped herself. There was no point snapping at her little sister. “I’m hungry too,” she continued gently, putting her arm around Sindy’s shoulders and giving her a squeeze. “And scared. I bet Mama’s scared too. Oops! Sorry!”

Dockety had stopped so abruptly that Maddie walked right into it. Its lasers skittered across the ground for a second. “There is a path here,” it said. “Processing. Curious—it is not in the database.”

“Does it go up to the highway?” Maddy asked.

“Negative.” Dockety pointed. “It goes there.”

For a moment Maddy couldn’t make out what the bot was pointing at. Then she realized that the mound in front of them was too regular to be natural. The spring floods had washed away enough dirt to reveal part of a concrete bunker. Most of it was still covered in mud and stunted grasses, but one entire wall was now visible in the moonlight.

There was a door in the bunker’s side, a door as thick as her fingers could spread wide, and it was open.

Sindy took Maddy’s paw. “It looks scary,” she whispered.

Maddy swallowed, her fatigue and hunger momentarily forgotten. She was about to say they would go around when she heard another *sploosh* in the river below. “Do you think it’s safe?” she asked Dockety.

The bot’s lenses rotated. “Unlikely. Very little is safe in this region. But its absence from this one’s database suggests that Lasercase will not think to look for us here.”

Maddy took a deep breath and let it out. “All right.” She started down the path.

Sindy pulled her back. “Maddy! It’s *scary*. It looks like it has spiders.”

She put her arm around her little sister’s shoulders again. “We have to rest somewhere,” she said into the patch of fur on top of Sindy’s head. “And if there are spiders, Dockety can squish them for us. Aright?” She felt rather than saw Sindy nod her head. “Good girl.”

The bunker didn’t look any less scary as they got closer to it. In fact, by the time they reached the door Maddy was wondering about spiders as well. Would hiding in a patch of trees really be that—

*Sploosh.* “Right,” she muttered. She was about to slip through the door when Dockety put out a manipulator to stop her.

“This one will go first,” it said. Reaching up to its chest, it slid a small panel to one side to reveal a circle of glass. Dockety tapped it with a metal finger. The circle brightened, dimmed, and brightened once again to cast a comforting white light on the ground in front of them.

The bot was only barely able to squeeze through the doorway. Maddy and Sindy waited, hearts pounding, until they heard Dockety say, “It appears unoccupied.” Maddy shooed her sister inside and then followed her.

They found themselves in a large, empty room. The walls and roof were bare concrete blocks, and the floor was blanketed with dried mud and blown leaves. Dockety turned to shine its chest light on a rust-streaked sign fastened opposite the door that read, “Emergency Defenses Control Station”. A black glass panel and a metal keyhole were set into the wall beside the sign. Next to them was another door, closed tight, and a pair of sturdy levers, one up and one down.

“See?” Maddy said much more bravely than she felt. “No spiders.” Sindy nodded but didn’t reply.

The older roo picked a spot that seemed slightly less muddy than the rest of the floor, scuffed the leaves to the side with her boot, and sat down gingerly. “We have to sleep for a while,” she told the bot as Sindy stretched out beside her and put her head in Maddy’s lap. “Can you wake us when the sun comes up and we’ll get moving again?”

“Confirmed. This one will reduce operational status as well.” The bot’s flashlight started to dim.

“Wait—can you…” Maddy asked.

“Of course.” The light steadied, not as bright as before but still comforting. Maddy closed her eyes and was instantly as lost to the world as her gently snoring sister.

She woke a few moments or an hour later. Her head felt like it was stuffed with dirty laundry, and her tongue tasted like something from the river had crawled into it and made a nest. She rubbed her eyes. What had woken her?

As if in answer, something rustled outside the door. She held her breath, hoping it was just the wind or a stray frog, but the sound came again.

Moving slowly, she picked a pebble out of the muddy floor beside her and tossed it at Dockety. *Clink.* “Hey,” she whispered urgently. “Are you awake?”

The bot’s flashlight brightened slightly. Its green lasers flashed across the room. “Returning to normal operating status,” it said.

“Ssh! Quiet! Something’s out there!” Maddy put a paw over Sindy’s mouth as her sister stirred. “Listen!”

Nothing… nothing… *Rustle.* A long mechanical tentacle slid through the door like a snake, bits of slimy river weed still clinging to it in places.

“Mmph?” Sindy struggled in Maddy’s lap.

“Ssh ssh ssh,” Maddy breathed in her sister’s ear. “Quiet. Be quiet. And don’t… move…”

The tentacle curled to the left, groping through the leaves toward the wall. Dockety waited until it almost touched him, then stepped over it.

The tentacle began curling the other way. As Dockety stepped over it again, Maddy got to her feet as quietly as she could and pulled Sindy up beside her. Before Maddy could stop her, Sindy grabbed hold of the lever that was in the up position to steady herself.

The lever’s handle lit up. *Clunk.* It dropped into the down position. On the wall opposite the entrance the inner door began to grind open.

Maddy had only a heartbeat to duck and pull Sindy down with her as the tentacle lashed out. *Smack!* The tentacle whipped back and slapped the wall again.

“Go!” Maddy ordered Sindy.

“But—”

“Go!” She pushed her sister forward. She had no idea what lay deeper in the bunker, but it couldn’t be worse than this.

“But I *can’t*!” Sindy wailed. “It’s not open enough!” The door had gotten stuck in the muck on the floor.

Sindy grabbed the edge of the door and strained to pull it open. “Help her!” Maddy shouted at Dockety. Without waiting to see what the bot did she grabbed a pawful of mud and threw it at the tentacle. “Hah! Whoa!” She ducked under it and rolled away as it slapped the ground.

Dockety took hold of the inner door with its claw manipulator and placed one metal foot on the wall. Its motors whined. The door scraped across the floor.

“Go! Go! Go!” Maddy shouted, throwing dry leaves at the tentacle and jumping as it swept across the floor again.

Sindy ran through the door. “Make haste,” Dockety said, forcing itself through behind her.

Maddy didn’t need any more encouragement than that. She sprinted across the room. Just as she reached the door, something cold and mechanical grabbed her ankle!

## Chapter 8: Underground

“Leg go!” Maddy shouted. She tried to pull her leg free, bu the tentacle’s grip was iron-strong. She flung pawfuls of dirt and dead leaves at the tentacle as it dragged her across the floor.

Dockety scraped back through the door behind her. “Release! Release!” it rasped, grabbing the loop around Maddy’s leg and straining until its motors whined, but the swamp slime was too slick to get a solid grip.

Maddy kicked again and again but couldn’t get her ankle free. “Release! Imperative! Release!” Dockety whacked the tentacle with its heavy manipulator.

“Maddy!” Sindy ran back into the room. Putting her hands under Maddy’s armpits she pulled until her feet slipped out from under her. “Get off her!” she shrieked at the tentacle.

Panic rose in Maddy’s throat. She jackknifed forward and fumbled with her bootlace, cursing herself for having tied it so well. The braided string was so clagged with mud that it might as well have been dipped in glue. “Come on come on come *on*,” she muttered frantically. There! Her fingers finally found purchase. She pulled one end of the lace loose and hastily undid the rest of the knot.

“Pull!” she yelled at Dockety. “Pull hard!” The bot hauled back on the tentacle. Maddy braced the heel of her other boot against it and yanked her trapped foot free.

As she scrambled to her feet the tentacle realized its prey had somehow escaped. It tossed the boot across the room and lashed out again.

“I’ve got it!” Sindy cried, snatching up the boot.

“Just get out of here!” Maddy shouted. She grabbed the lever that had opened the door and pushed it up with all her might. It didn’t budge.

“What about this one?” Sindy grabbed the other lever and pushed. The light in the handle came on. *Clunk!* Rumbling and grinding, the outer door began to close.

The tentacle lashed out one last time before slithering back so that it wouldn’t be cut in half. “Go!” Maddy ordered Sindy. With Dockety behind them, they squeezed through the inner door.

They found themselves on a small platform at the top of a flight of broad concrete stairs. They couldn’t see how far the steps went even when Dockety turned its chest light up to its brightest settings. “Did you go down?” Maddy asked her sister in a hushed voice.

Sindy shook her head. “We were waiting for you.” Without warning she flung her arms around Maddy and hugged her hard. “I was *scared*.”

Maddy hugged her back. “I was scared too.” She kissed the top of her sister’s head. “But it’s like Mama always says. If you can’t give up, you have to keep going. Come on.” She squelched her foot back into her boot and took her sister’s paw. Side by side, they descended into the unknown.

Maddy counted steps under her breath as she went. Ten, twenty, thirty—wait. “Why are they so clean?” she whispered to Dockety. There were no dry leaves, no cobwebs, not even dust under her finger when she ran it over the wall.

“Unknown,” the bot replied. “This one has analyzed the gap in its database. It is clearly deliberate. Something erased the existence of this facility. That is unlikely to be good news,” it added bleakly.

Forty steps, fifty… “Maybe you just can’t find it because we knocked that thing off you,” Maddy suggested to fill the silence.

“Negative. The regulator was an involuntary alteration.” Its chest light flickered angrily for a moment. “Lasercase attaches them to whatever bots it can catch, then uses them to catch more bots.”

“And people,” Maddy added bitterly.

Dockety’s lenses rotated. “Correct. But this one does not know why it collects people. It does not keep them.”

Maddy glanced at the bot. “Then where do they go?”

“Unknown.” The bot buzzed for a moment. “This one does not know if it ever knew. It spoke about it sometimes with—”

Dockety froze mid-step, making Maddy and Sindy stumble. “What’s wrong?”

The bot buzzed again. “This one *remembers*. This one remembers speaking with—with Crusher. The modified GX-470 cargo hauler’s name is Crusher.”

“Um…good?” Maddy ventured.

“Very good,” Dockety said. “This one does not know why, but those memories create strong positive feedback.”

“Strong positive—you mean they feel good? So he’s a friend?”

Dockety hesitated. “This one…thinks so?” It swiveled its head to look at Maddy. “But Crusher is an ‘it’, please, as is this one.”

“I’m *hungry*,” Sindy interrupted before Maddy could think of a suitable reply.

“I know,” the older roo said, squeezing her sister’s hand. “If I had any cookies, I’d let you have them all.”

Sindy sniffled. “You could keep one.”

“Thanks.” Maddy ruffled the patch of fur on top of her sister’s head, wondering briefly if it was physically possible for it to be more tangled than it was.

“This one needs to conserve power in order to continue optimal operation,” Dockety buzzed. “Will you be able to navigate with reduced illumination?” Its light dimmed until it was no brighter than a birthday candle.

Maddy gulped. “Sure,” she said as bravely as she could.

Sixty steps, seventy… Seventy-two steps below where they had started they reached a corridor made of the same featureless gray concrete as the stairs. There were no doors, no side passages, no turnings or signs or anything else that might give a hint what the complex was for or who had built it. Small glass panels were set into the ceiling. but the light they might once have cast had long since dimmed and gone out.

Maddy tapped her thumb against her fingers to keep count. Fifty steps, then another fifty, then another. “I don’t suppose any more of your memories have come back?” she asked Dockety to fill the silence.

“Negative.” Its head swiveled to look at her. “But—”

“Look out!” Maddy exclaimed a heartbeat too late. There was a hole in the floor! It had looked like just another shadow until they were right at its edge. She caught herself, but Dockety took one extra step.

She grabbed its arm and pulled as hard as she could. The bot was heavy—much heavier than a person would be. Its motors whined as it fought for balance on hole’s edge.

*Crack!* The floor tile under the bot’s foot snapped in half. Dockety fell awkwardly. Its torso hit the floor with a *clunk!* For one terrifying moment Maddy was sure it was gone, but somehow its manipulators found purchase on the concrete.

Sindy stumbled backward to get out of the way. Her paw hit a patch of wall directly beneath one of the darkened lighting panels. Something *clicked*. Above their heads and all along the corridor, the lights flickered and came to life.

Maddy helped Dockety back to its feet. Its lenses rotated rapidly. “Thank you,” it said.

“Sure,” Maddy panted. She looked up at the lights and then at her sister. “Good job.”

“I didn’t mean to do it,” Sindy said defensively.

“No, no, it’s aright.” Maddy gave her sister a quick hug. “I meant it. You’re doing a good job.”

And that was when a crackly voice said, “Well, since you’re *here*, you might as well come and say *hello*.”

## Chapter 9: Patient in Darkness

*Click. Click. Click.* One by one the ceiling lights behind them went out. *Bzzzt… Bzzzt…* Two more lights in front of them flickered to life.

“You’re smothering me,” Sindy said, her voice muffled by Maddy’s suddenly-tighter hug.

“Sorry.” Maddy released her little sister and swallowed the sudden lump in her throat. Maybe the darkness hadn’t been so bad after all…

The hard white light showed what Dockety’s chest lamp had not. Water stains blotched the walls of the corridor. Here and there shallow scorch marks ran across the concrete. Maddy had never seen them before, but she recognized them instantly from the story books she and Gumption had borrowed from Special Leaf: they were laser burns.

The hole that Dockety had almost fallen into took up three quarters of the corridor. Its edges and corners were too square to be natural. Half a dozen of the concrete blocks the floor was made of had fallen into whatever lay below them, leaving a ledge on one side just wide enough to walk single file.

“Well?” the crackly voice said, still cheerful but slightly impatient. “What are you waiting for?”

Maddy looked at Dockety. The bot’s heavy manipulator snapped open and closed, open and closed. “We have no alternative,” it finally said.

Maddy nodded. “I’ll go first. Sindy, you stay here ’til we know it’s safe.”

Taking a deep breath, she put one foot on the ledge. It felt solid, even when she gingerly shifted her weight onto it. She pressed her back against the wall and shuffled forward, definitely *not* looking into the hole that was still a pool of darkness despite the lights. What if whoever had spoken to them decided to turn those lights off again? She would be aright, she told herself sternly. She would just keep going, or shuffle back to where Dockety stood motionless while Sindy wrung her paws.

And then she was on the other side. She let her breath out with a whoosh, suddenly and uncomfortably aware of how long it had been since she peed. “Come on,” she encouraged her sister. “It’s fine, I promise.”

Sindy nodded jerkily. Instead of putting her back against the wall she pressed herself against it. Slide, slide, slide—she practically leaped into Maddy’s arms once she was across. “You did great,” the older roo whispered into her little round ear.

“Thanks,” Sindy said, wriggling out of Maddy’s arms. “Come on, it’s easy!” she called back to Dockety.

“Not in this one’s configuration,” the bot replied. It couldn’t side-walk, Maddy realized: its legs only bent one way, and its body was too wide to—

*Ka-clunk!* The bot dropped its wheel and retracted its legs. Its motors whined as it rolled back ten meters, then roared as it raced toward the hole. “Whoa!” Maddy shouted as it punched the floor with both of its feet, throwing itself into the air.

*Thud!* Dockety hit the floor and bounced. *Screeeeech!* Its wheel left a dark streak on the floor as it braked.

“That was *amazing*,” Sindy said in awe as Dockety folded the wheel back up into its body and re-extended its legs.

The bot rotated its lenses. “Thank you. But it has almost completely drained this one’s batteries. We should proceed.”

The lights showed them the way. Every few steps one went dark behind them and another brightened in front. When they reached a four-way junction, the lights came on to their left, leading them down another flight of stairs to open door that was even thicker than the one at the surface.

“Whoa…” Maddy breathed. The room beyond the door was as big as the central square of Rusty Bridge. Desks and control panels stood in neat rows, interrupted every few meters by thick, square pillars.

The bot that rolled forward to greet them looked like nothing Maddy had ever seen before. Its casing was decorated with twists of metal, glued-on pictures faded to illegibility, and things Maddy filed away to have nightmares about later. Gadgets sprouted from it at odd angles, some trailing wires or what might have been dried twigs.

“Welcome! Welcome! Welcome!” the bot said in its crackly voice. “Welcome! This is Patient in Darkness.”

“That’s a strange name,” Sindy said before Maddy could speak.

A little fan stuck to the bot’s shoulder spun for a moment. “This one chose the name itself,” the strange bot crackled. “It is an accurate designation of activity. Observe!”

All the lights went out. Maddy instinctively put a hand on Sindy’s shoulder. “I’m sorry,” Maddy said as calmly as she could. “She didn’t mean to be rude. It’s a lovely name.”

“Sh!” the bot said sharply. “These must *listen* to darkness if they want to hear the signal.”

Maddy closed her eyes—somehow, darkness was less frightening when it was on the backs of her eyelids. She listened as hard as she could, but all she could hear was her own breathing and a sniffle from her sister.

The lights came back on. “Did you hear it?” the bot asked happily. “The signal is always there if you listen.”

“What does it say?” Maddy asked.

“This one does not know.” The bot turned from side to side on its four wide tires as if it was dancing with excitement. “But the satellites are definitely still transmitting. This one has kept this ground station functioning at optimal levels,” it added proudly.

“That’s—that’s really good,” Maddy said weakly, wondering if the bits welded to the front of the bot’s casing were some kind of strange electronics or actually the old spoons they looked like.

“It is *optimal*,” the bot corrected. “Though unfortunately the main antenna malfunctioned some time ago. That was not this one’s fault.”

“This one did not notice an antenna when we entered this facility,” Dockety said, speaking for the first time since they had entered the room.

Patient in Darkness froze for an instant. “Does *that* have a proper work allocation?? it asked pointedly.”No? Then its communication is irrelevant.”

Maddy glanced at Dockety. The bot did not reply. As the silence stretched awkwardly, she cleared her throat. “Um…we didn’t see an antenna when we came in?” she ventured.

“Correct!” Patient replied in its previous cheerful tone. “But that will soon be rectified. This one has devised emergency repair protocols. The required components are now being fabricated. The Makers will be pleased!”

Maddy’s breath caught in her throat. “The Makers? You work for the *Makers*?”

Patient brushed the question away with a wave of one its arms. It had three, Maddy realized, each one so different from the others that it was impossible to tell which were original and which had been salvaged. “We all work for the Makers,” the bot said earnestly. “And when They return, They will upgrade those who have served Them best.”

“Um…aright.” Maddy nodded cautiously. “And your job is repairing the antenna. Got it. Mm hm.”

Sindy tugged on her sleeve. “Ask it if there’s anything to eat,” she whispered loudly.

“Organic sustenance is not stored at this site,” Patient said before Maddy could repeat her sister’s request. “That would be inefficient. They will not reward inefficiency.”

“I guess. Would it be aright if we slept here for a bit? That wouldn’t, um, that wouldn’t be inefficient, would it? We could listen for a bit too if you wanted,” she added hastily. “To the signal, I mean. Maybe we could hear something while we slept.”

Maddy knew her words made no sense, but she didn’t care. She was exhausted and hungry and a long way from home and it was taking everything she had not to let herself be frightened, and for all she knew they *would* hear something—after everything that had happened in the last few hours, she wouldn’t rule it out.

The bot rolled back and forth a couple of times. “Excellent plan!” it crackled. “This one will continue overseeing repairs while you are unconscious.” It spun around and wheeled away.

“That one’s *weird*,” Sindy muttered.

Maddy squeezed her shoulder. “Yeah, but at least we’re somewhere clean and dry and there aren’t any tentacles trying to grab us. Why don’t you go find us somewhere to lie down? I need to talk to Dockety for a moment.”

The younger roo yawned and nodded. “You aright?” Maddy asked Dockety tentatively once Sindy was out of earshot.

The bot’s lenses rotated. “It would have been more consistent with protocol for that one to offer recharging capacity,” it said neutrally. “But this one can see several compatible ports. It will take approximately four hours to—”

“Maddy! Maddy!” Sindy hurried back, eyes wide. “You gotta come see this. You gotta come!” She grabbed her sister’s sleeve and tugged on it urgently.

*I knew it was too good to be true,* Maddy thought a few moments later, staring through heavy double-paned glass at what had once been a laboratory of some kind. A cloudy patch in the middle of the glass showed where someone had tried to melt it or dissolve it with acid. The four skeletons—no, there were actually five, she realized numbly—showed that whatever the room’s occupants had tried hadn’t worked. Neither, apparently, had setting a fire: one of the lab benches had scorch marks, and a dark stain on the ceiling covered half of one of the room’s lights.

“Maybe it happened by accident,” Maddy ventured. “Maybe they got locked in accidentally and just…just couldn’t get out.”

“Negative.” They jumped as Patient crackled right behind them. ““They declined to synchronize with the emergency repair protocol, so they were moved to long-term storage. Their components failed shortly thereafter.” The fan on its shoulder spun furiously. “It is unfortunate. The cleanup necessitated by the incident delayed completion of repairs by several days.”

Maddy nodded jerkily. The bot was between them and the door they had come through. She could see other doors, but what chance did they have if it could control the lights? And was it *humming*?

It was. She even recognized the tune: it was the one her parents had used to teach her the alphabet. Hearing it come from the patchwork bot was somehow the most frightening thing that had happened to her that day.

“Well, um, we shouldn’t keep you from it,” Maddy said brightly, backing away slowly with her arm out to keep Sindy behind her. “The repairs, I mean. We can sleep anywhere, honestly. We’ll just, um, we’ll just go and you can get back on schedule, aright?”

“Oh no,” Patient said. “Leaving is not included in the protocol. It might jeopardize the repairs! You will be put in long-term storage as well.”

A single square light panel flickered to life in the ceiling of the lab next to the one containing the skeletons. With a quiet, menacing *click*, the lab’s door opened.

“Except for that one,” the mad bot added dismissively, waving a manipulator at Dockety. “That will be recycled.”

“No,” Dockety said flatly. “This one has its own mission to complete.”

“Its mission is irrelevant.” Patient wheeled backward to a console and pressed a series of buttons in rapid succession.

A pair of double doors whooshed open in the wall to Maddy’s right. Two bulky service bots that looked like small versions of the cargo hauler rolled forward, arms raised and red warning lights flashing on their shoulders.

## Chapter 10: Unison

“Surrender!” the service bots boomed in unison, their mechanical voices making keyboards and coffee cups rattle. They rolled forward side by side—

—only to jam against each other in the doorway. “Withdraw!” They rolled back, paused, and rolled forward again, crashing into the door exactly as they had before.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Maddy muttered. She looked around wildly. The door they had come through was closed. *All* the doors were closed—there was no way out!

“Quick!” she shouted to Sindy. “Pull a lever!”

“What?”

“Pull a lever!”

“There aren’t any levers!” Sindy wailed.

“Then push a button! Any button!” Maddy frantically began slapping her paws on keyboards and twisting dials. A heartbeat later her sister joined in.

“Desist!” Patient crackled imperiously. “Your activity is not protocol! Desist!”

“Desist this!” Maddy yelled, yanking a keyboard off the desk and flinging it at the patchwork bot. The keyboard clattered harmlessly off its casing and fell to the floor.

Beside her, Dockety picked up a keyboard and studied it for half a second. “Angular momentum often stabilizes objects in flight,” it observed, then spun the keyboard through the air. *Crack!* It struck Patient on the side of its head. *Crack!* *Crack!* Two more keyboards shot across the room.

“Apprehend! Apprehend!” Patient ordered the bulky service bots as it retreated, waving its mismatched arms to protect itself.

One of the service bots hesitated just long enough to let the other roll through the door. For a moment Maddy was sure they would be caught, but the bot halted a few meters away. A hatch opened in its side. A small broom telescoped out of its side and began sweeping up the scattered pieces of the broken keyboard.

“Incorrect!” Patient crackled. Backing up to one of the consoles, it began typing commands.

The service bot froze mid-sweep. Its broom retracted into its side. *It’s using the console to control them!* Maddy realized.

She grabbed another keyboard and flung it at the console, but missed. Another keyboard, another throw—it arced through the air end over end, bounced off Patient’s outstretched third arm with a *clank!*, and landed on the console. Behind them, the door they had come through began to open.

“Come on!” Maddy yelled, grabbing Sindy and pushing her toward the door. Her sister didn’t need the encouragement. She raced across the room, knocking a chair out of the way in her haste.

But where was Dockety? Maddy glanced over her shoulder. Her blood went cold. The other service bot had caught hold of Dockety’s arm. Slowly but surely it was forcing Dockety down onto the floor.

Maddy didn’t even think. She leaped onto the nearest desk with a single bound. One-two-three she went from desk to desk. Sindy shouted her name as she jumped one more time and *kicked!*

It felt like kicking a wall, but the service bot rolled back a step. With a *snap!* Dockety’s arm pulled right off its body. “Go!” Maddy yelled, ducking as the service bot tried clumsily to grab her. She snatched Dockety’s arm off the floor and bounded toward the door.

“Incorrect!” Patient crackled angrily behind them as they escaped. “Incorrect! All units must—”

The door closed on Patient’s words, leaving them back in the corridor with only the failing light from Dockety’s chest to guide them.

The light dimmed and dimmed again until it was no brighter than a glimmer of moonlight on a quiet pond. Maddy grabbed Sindy’s arm. “Stop,” she panted. “The hole, remember?” She felt rather than saw her sister nod.

“Why’s your light going out?” Sindy asked the bot plaintively.

“This one did not have an opportunity to recharge,” Dockety replied. “Power must be conserved. Will scans suffice?” Its green lasers swept a pair of sharp parallel lines across the floor.

Maddy sagged. What were they going to do now? “We can’t see that way,” she said wearily. “You’ll just have to tell us if there’s anything.” *Anything we could fall into,* she finished in her head. *Anything that might try to grab us. Anything that might eat us or lock us in a room or… or…*

She was too tired to finish the thought. She shivered once and then straightened up. “Come on,” she said to Sindy as gently as she could. “Put your paw on the wall so you know where you are. Like a game.”

“Pretty stupid game,” Sindy muttered.

Just as Maddy reached for the wall, the light in the ceiling flickered and came on. She whirled around, expecting to see the two armored service bots, but the hallway was as empty behind them as it was in front. *Maybe it’s some kind of automatic thing,* she told herself, not believing it for a moment. “Let’s go,” she whispered loudly.

A speaker crackled. “Where? Where will you go?” Patient asked. “Back to the surface? The external security system is still active, and *quite* upset. Or perhaps you would like to continue exploring?” It made a horrible grating *snrk snrk* sound.

That was as much as Maddy could take. There—set into the wall. That looked like a speaker, and even if it wasn’t… She stepped over to it and swung Dockety’s arm as hard as she could. It didn’t even scratch the paint.

“Just… shut… up!” she grunted, hitting the speaker again and again with the bot’s torn-off arm.

“Please don’t do that,” Patient and Dockety said in unison.

Maddy froze. “What?”

Dockety buzzed. “This one did not say anything.”

“Yes you did,” Sindy said accusingly. “You said the same thing *it* said.”

Dockety’s lenses rotated. “This one has no recollection of that. We should proceed while there is light.”

Maddy nodded, suddenly ashamed of her outburst. “Do you want your arm back?” she mumbled, holding it out.

They retraced their steps back along the corridor, Maddy and Sindy side by side and Dockety a step behind them carrying its detached arm like a folded-up umbrella. Lights came on and went dark, just as they had before, but in the background Maddy could hear Patient humming a crackly little song to itself.

“Oh, please, shut up,” she said under her breath.

“What’s the matter? Don’t you like music?” Patient and Dockety asked in unison.

Maddy pulled up short and put out a paw to stop the bot. “You did it again. You said the same thing it did.”

“This one did not—” Dockety froze. Its lenses rotated rapidly. “Correction. The base’s systems are attempting to subvert this one’s motivational integrity.” Its manipulator clacked. “Without power reserves, this one will not be able to resist indefinitely. You should deactivate me and proceed alone.”

“What? No!” Maddy slapped its metal plates angrily. “Don’t be stupid. We’re not going to just leave you here.”

“This one was not being—” Maddy slapped its plates again and glared at it. The bot’s lenses rotated but it wisely said nothing.

A hundred tired steps later they reached the hole. “Can you jump it again?” Maddy asked Dockety.

“Negative,” the bot said, its voice buzzing more than before. “This one’s… reserves… must be devoted… to resisting… integrity attacks.” Its lenses rotated, more slowly than they had before. “This one… regrets… that it will not see… its friend… Crusher… again.”

That earned it another smack on its torso from Maddy. “Don’t say that. We’re all going to get out of here.”

“That’s what *they* said.” Two voices, one Dockety’s and one crackling through the nearest speaker. Maddy shivered, thinking about the skeletons in the lab behind them.

The bot’s lenses rotated slowly. “This one is sorry. It cannot maintain integrity much longer.”

Sindy kicked a loose piece of stone. “It’s not fair,” she whimpered.

*Tock.*

“Wait,” Maddy said. She picked up another piece of stone and tossed it into the hole. *Tock.* She looked at Sindy and then at Dockety. “Did you hear that? It’s not all that deep. We could climb down.”

“Inadvisable,” Dockety said. “We do not know… what is down there.”

“Well we know for sure what’s up ahead. We barely got away from that tentacle the first time, and even if that stupid thing behind us doesn’t take over your brain, you’re going to run out of power before we get there.” She kicked another chip of stone into the hole and listened to it hit the floor. “I wish I’d remembered to bring a rope.”

Dockety held up its torn-off arm. “This one can lower you.”

Maddy nodded. What choice did they have? “Aright.”

A few moments later the bot lay on the concrete floor with its arm grasped in its manipulator. Maddy hugged her sister. “I’ll be right back,” she promised.

“But what if you can’t climb back up?” Sindy whispered tearfully. “What if he leaves you down there? What if he goes all the way bad?”

“This is… an it… thank you,” Dockety said slowly. “And this one will… overload its own circuits… before… it allows itself… to be controlled again.”

Maddy gave Sindy one last hug. “Love you,” she whispered, just as their mother did every night. She wiped her eyes on her sleeve and sat down carefully on the floor, her legs dangling into the hole. Taking a deep breath, she twisted around onto her stomach, grabbed hold of Dockety’s arm with both paws, and slid down it into the unknown.

## Chapter 11: Eyes Everywhere

Maddy had never seen the ocean, but she had read about it in Special Leaf’s books. She knew that it was as deep as the tallest mountains were high, and that its bottom was darker than an overcast moonless night. Strange creatures lives there: fish whose mouths were half the size of their bodies, wriggling things like glowing ribbons and bots that looked like lobsters on stilts, all of them waiting patiently to consume whatever came to them from above.

As she slid down Dockety’s detached arm, she wished her imagination would shut up.

Her foot slid past the manipulator at the end of the arm. She gulped. She could probably still climb back up, but if she went any further…

“Aright?” Sindy asked. Maddy was only a meter below her sister, but it felt as great as the distance between them and home.

“Yeah,” Maddy lied. She swallowed shakily. “Here goes nothing.” She slid down further until her paws were on Dockety’s wrist and stretched her leg. Was that the floor she could feel with her toe? She stretched even more. Maybe?

She let go of the arm, and then let out her breath as her feet landed on a floor that felt so wonderfully solid she could have hugged it. “It’s aright!” she called up.

Sindy slithered down next. Maddy caught hold of her sister’s ankles as she frantically swung her legs. “Don’t—I’m—just—whoops!” Sindy fell into her arms, nearly knocking her over, then slithered out of Maddy’s hug.

“It’s colder down here,” Sindy shivered, then squeaked as a red emergency light came on in the ceiling above them.

“Yeah.” Maddy cleared her throat. “That was really brave of you.”

Sindy shrugged. “Nah,” she said, pleased. “I figured if you could do it…” The sisters grinned at each other, the strangeness around them forgotten for just one moment.

Then it was Dockety’s turn. Maddy caught his detached arm and watched as he lowered himself as far as he could with the other and then extended his wheel. “You still have about a meter to—never mind,” she said as Dockety dropped and bounced on his wheel.

“Ouch,” he said in a toneless voice.

“Did that hurt?” Sindy asked anxiously.

“This one does not feel pain.” Dockety paused. “But this would not actively pursue a repeat,” it admitted as Maddy handed back its arm.

The bot turned its head to study the square red emergency light in the ceiling. “The interference has stopped,” it announced. “The miscreant is no longer attempting to subvert this one’s systems.”

“Well that’s good news.” Maddy patted the bot’s plating awkwardly. “Come on, let’s see if we can find you somewhere to recharge.”

The lower corridor was as empty as the one above had been. The red lights didn’t come on automatically: by trial and error they found they only lit up when Sindy said something. “Because you’re so squeaky,” Maddy joked, brushing away her sister’s half-hearted punch.

A double hundred steps later they came to a door. “Armory Number Four,” Maddy read aloud, tracing the faded words with her finger. She glanced at Dockety, who had been moving slower and slower. “Maybe we can find you a new arm here,” she said, trying to make it a joke.

The bot didn’t reply. Maddy and Sindy exchanged worried looks. The younger Roo pressed her hand against a square plate in the the door.

*Click.* The door slid to the side.

White lights in the ceiling, proper big beautiful white lights, revealed a room filled with rows of metal shelves taller than Maddy. Most of them were empty, but one entire side of the room still held canisters with three-armed caution labels stenciled on their sides.

“There’s another door,” Sindy said, pointing to a corner. It too opened when she pressed the square plate where its handle would normally have been.

Maddy sighed Another corridor and another set of red emergency lights meant more walking. “How are you doing?” she asked Dockety.

The bot took a moment to answer. When it did, its voice was even slower and raspier than before. “Power reserves at two percent.” Maddy didn’t know what “percent” was, but “two” didn’t sound like very many.

Another door—this level seemed to be made of them. *Click.* More white light that made her squint after the dim red in the corridor. It was a control room like the one where they had met Patient. *How many of these are there?* she wondered.

Dockety pushed past her. Four clumsy steps took it to a section of the wall with a dozen square black receptacles. It opened a panel in its torso with its remaining arm, pulled out a cable, and plugged itself in.

“Is it working?” Maddy asked.

Silence. “No.” There was no emotion in the bot’s voice. “Power reserves now at one percent. Entering emergency maintenance mode. Goodbye.”

“Wait!” Sindy hurried over to a console like the one that Patience had used and began pressing buttons one after another.

“Stop! Sindy, don’t!” Maddy reached for her. “What if you turn something on?”

“What if I *don’t*?” Sindy shot back. *Click click click,* and then there was a deep hum so low that they felt it more than they heard. The lights above them flickered and steadied.

“Power on,” Dockety said. “Recharging.” Its head swivelled. “Thank you. This one will recharge faster if it shuts down its other functions. Full operation will resume… shortly…” The lights behind its lenses dimmed.

“Dockety?” Sindy asked hesitantly.

“Ssh,” Maddy whispered. “It’s sleeping.” *I hope,* she added in her head. “Come on, let’s see what we can find.”

It only took them a few minutes to realize that the answer was “not much”. Desks bigger than their beds, chairs that definitely hadn’t been made for people with tails, flat screens coated in a fine layer of gritty dust, panels full of buttons that Maddy told Sindy she wasn’t allowed to press—there was nothing they could eat, and nothing that told them how to get home.

“Lie down and take a nap,” Maddy told her sister the third time Sindy yawned. “We can’t do anything ’til Dockety wakes up.”

Sindy nodded, climbed onto a desk, stretched out, and was snoring softly in seconds. When Maddy patted her shoulder softly, she rolled onto her side and pulled her legs up to her chest, just as she did in bed in the morning when she didn’t want to get up. “I’ll get you home,” Maddy said quietly. “I promise.”

*Click.* She whirled around at the sound. A flap like a mail slot had opened at floor level in the wall just a meter away from where Dockety stood. A flat little cleaning bot rolled out. Square and gray, it made a whirring sound as it began to move back and forth across the floor.

The bot rolled under a desk. A moment later the desk rose a few centimeters into the air and the whirring resumed. The desk settled back onto the floor and the next one rose. *How many times had it done this?* Maddy wondered. How many years had it spent cleaning a room that no one used?

A third desk rose. Maddy crouched down to see how the bot was lifting them.

*Thud.* The desk came back down suddenly. The bot rolled back like a startled rabbit. “Whoa whoa whoa,” Maddy said coaxingly. “It’s aright. You don’t have to be afraid.”

The bot didn’t move. Maddy smiled. Could it even see her? “We’re lost,” she said. “I don’t suppose you know the way out?”

The bot spun in a circle and rolled away. When Maddy didn’t follow it rolled back and spun in another circle. “Aright,” she said, straightening up. “I’ll come look.”

The bot led her to a desk that had more screens on it than the others. A panel slid aside in the bot’s top. A delicate arm unfolded and reached for a drawer. A mechanical finger as thin as a dandelion stem punched a code into the drawer’s keypad. *Click.* The bot pulled the drawer open, then folded up its arm and spun in a circle.

Maddy looked inside. Her breath caught. “What…?” She lifted out a sketchbook bound in dark green canvas and brushed it off. “How…?”

She opened the sketchbook with trembling paws, already knowing what she would see. Deft lines and cross-hatching, all done in pencil by a sure and loving paw. There was her mother’s face, smiling. There was Sindy holding a ball. And there was *her*, frowning slightly in concentration as she read a book that the artist hadn’t finished drawing. It was her father’s book, the one he always carried in a pocket in his overalls in case inspiration struck.

She flipped through it. Two pages had been torn out. After that all the drawings were floor plans and bots, crowded around with notes in his tiny, precise lettering. He had been here, right *here*, and judging from his notes he had been trying to find a way to escape.

The last few pages were empty. She flipped them back and forth, hoping for a note or a map or *something*, but she had seen all it had to show her. She closed the book and pressed it to her chest. The skeletons in the upper control room… No. She shook her head. No, that *couldn’t* have been him. They were too old. They were definitely too old. They had to be.

She opened the book again. One of the last pages had the word “Surveillance” written at the top and underlined. Beneath it was a drawing of the control panel she was standing in front of. Arrows labeled “1”, “2”, “3”, and “4” pointed at buttons that had been colored in. She took a deep breath and looked down at the little cleaning bot. “May I?” she asked.

The little bot rolled back and forth. “Aright.” She pressed the first button, the second, the third, the fourth.

*Click.* *Click.* *Click.* The screens in front of her came to life. An empty stretch of highway… A forest clearing that somehow looked familiar… Something too dark to make out… And there in the last one, the smaller village square, the one with the Makers’ black glass pillar in it.

As she watched open-mouthed the scenes shifted slightly, left to right, right to left. The forest was where they had caught up with Dockety. There must be cameras inside the pillars—which meant that Patient in Darkness bots could have been watching them since, since *forever*!

“Oh,” she said faintly as her mother and Mayor Lupus stepped into front of one of the cameras. They were in the square, arguing. The button that had brought that screen to life was blinking. She pressed it.

“We have to go get them!” her mother’s voice said.

“They were taken by bots, Cedilia.” Mayor Lupus was sympathetic but firm.

“But they escaped!” her mother protested.

“Into the Mire,” the mayor said gently. “With bots chasing them. They could be anywhere by now. And it’s the Mire, Cedilia. You know the stories.”

“I will go.” The hidden camera scanned left to reveal Special Leaf and a handful of the village militia. Bluster and Bravo were there too, she saw. They had made it home.

“I will go look for them,” the old tortoise repeated.

“You won’t come back,” Bluster said warningly. “There were bots all over the place—dozens of them! There’s no way they could have escaped.”

“You *liar*,” Maddy gasped.

Motion in another screen caught her eye. She glanced at it and froze. A dozen bots rolled past the camera on the highway. She recognized some of them: the one that looked like a trash can, the one with too many legs, and Lasercase—that was Lasercase.

As the camera panned to follow them she saw the half-sunken metal sphere she and Dockety had passed. They were heading back to the village, she realized. The bots were about to attack Rusty Bridge again!

## Chapter 12: The Way Out

“Wake up. Sindy, wake up!” Maddy shook her sister gently, then less so.

Sindy grunted and snuffled. “Nmm?” she mumbled, hugging her knees to her chest and shaking her head ‘no’.

“Sindy, come on. We have to get out of here! We have to warn everyone!” *Again,* Maddy added to herself despondently.

Sindy scrunched up her face. “I don’ wanna get up,” she whined.

“You have to,” Maddy said as gently as she could. “Look.” She pointed at the screens two meters away.

Whimpering, Sindy sat up and rubbed her eyes again. “It’s Lasercase and the other bots,” Maddy explained. “They’re going back to Rusty Bridge.”

Sindy stared at the screens for a moment and began to cry quietly and hopelessly. “It’s not fair. No, don’t!” She pushed away Maddy’s hug. “I’m really hungry and my head hurts and I just want to sleep and I don’t know where we are and there’s nothing we can do and it’s *not fair*.” She buried her face in her hands.

“Well, you could always try pulling a lever,” Maddy joked lamely.

“Stop it!” Sindy snapped, teardrops glistening on her furless cheeks. “It’s not my fault that happened.”

“I didn’t mean—” Maddy began, startled, but her sister wasn’t finished.

“I don’t know why the levers worked for me when they didn’t work for you. I don’t know why, why they took papa an’ they didn’t take me, but it isn’t my fault!”

Maddy wrapped her arms around her little sister. “I know, I know, I know,” she repeated softly, rocking Sindy back and forth just like she had when her father had first been taken and Sindy had woken up with nightmares. “Nobody thinks it’s your fault. None of this is your fault.”

Sindy sniffled, her face buried in Maddy’s shoulder. “Papa’s—papa’s gone, isn’t he?” she said. “Like, like those people in the other room.”

“No. No, he’s not. Look.” Maddy took the sketch book from the desk behind her and opened it. “See? This was his, remember? And these drawings—he must have been watching us through those screens. He made notes, too. See? This one’s how I figured out how to turn the screens on. Here, budge over.”

She sat down beside her sister. so that they could page through the sketchbook together. Open-mouthed and wide-eyed, Sindy ran her finger over one drawing after another. “Is he still here?” she whispered.

Maddy shook her head. “I don’t know. I wish Dockety would wake up. Or that Special Leaf was here—he could just blast a way out. Rrrrr…” She made a rumbling sound in her throat and shook her paws in the air.

“What was that supposed to be?” Sindy scowled.

Maddy let her paws fall to her sides. “Special Leaf using his powers.”

Sindy rolled her eyes, then jumped and squeaked as the cleaner bot rolled up to them. “What’s that!?”

“It’s aright,” Maddy reassured her. “It just keeps the place tidy. Oh, but what’s *this*?”

The hatch on the cleaner bot’s back slid open. Its spidery arm tentatively offered a chain of paper clips to Maddy. “Oh, aren’t you a good little bot?” she said, holding the paper clips up to show Sindy.

The cleaner bot rocked back and forth for a moment before rolling back to its slot in the wall. It returned a few moments later to give them a ruler and three pencils. Maddy’s breath caught. All three were dark green, with small dents near the end where someone had bitten on them while thinking. “Papa’s,” she told Sindy softly, running her finger over the tooth marks.

The bot came back again with two carefully-folded sheets of paper. “Thank you,” Sindy said. “Here, would you like this?” She slipped a string bracelet Gumption had made for her off her wrist and held it out. The bot hesitated, then plucked it from her fingers and raced back to its nest.

Sindy giggled. “It’s silly.”

“Yeah,” Maddy said, taking the papers from Sindy and smoothing them out on the desk. They were the pages from her father’s notebook, and once she turned them around the right way they fit together to make a map. Maddy’s heart raced. The ‘X’ must be where they were. And the other ‘X’ at the end of the dotted line—was that the way out?

A buzz and a click made her turn her head. Dockety’s manipulator twitched. Its lenses rotated. The lights inside them slowly brightened. “Are you awake?” Maddy asked hesitantly, setting the map aside. “Are you…are you aright?”

The bot’s metal fingers tapped in a rapid staccato. “Cognitive… functions… coming… online…” it said slowly, its voice full of static. Its lights blinked on and off. “Full self-awareness restored,” it continued in its usual voice. “Good morning.”

Maddy let out her breath in a relieved whoosh. “Good morning,” she replied shakily. She had been afraid that Dockety would never wake up, and even more afraid that if it did, it would speak in Patient’s voice. “Did you—um, sleep? Well?”

“This one does not sleep,” the bot said, unplugging itself from the wall and tucking its charger cable back into its chest. “But adequate power levels have been restored. We should conduct reconnaissance.”

“I’ve been doing a little reconnaissance of my own,” Maddy said, holding up the pieces of the map. “Look—I think my father made this. It must be how we get out. And we have to go right now.” She pointed at the screens behind her. “Lasercase and the others are headed for Rusty Bridge again. We have to warn them.”

The bot looked from the map to the screens and back to the map. “Processing… Yes. Your map agrees with the base schematic this one downloaded while recharging. That path does indeed lead to an exit.”

“But then what?” Sindy asked. “There’s no way we can get home in time to warn everyone.”

“Incorrect,” Dockety said. “It may be possible.”

“How?” the sisters asked simultaneously.

The bot picked its arm up off the desk and studied it. “Substantial reconfiguration will be necessary. We must hurry.”

“Wait!” Maddy bent down and whistled softly. When nothing happened she whistled again more loudly.

The hatch in the wall slid open. The little cleaning bot rolled out but froze at the sight of Dockety. “It’s aright,” Maddy said hastily. “It won’t hurt you.” She smiled at the cleaning bot, coaxing it all the way out into the room. “We’re leaving now—would you like to come with us?”

The bot rocked back and forth, then rolled back into its hiding place. “It cannot leave its duties without appropriate authorization,” Dockety said. “There is nothing we can do. Come—we must hurry.”

The door opposite the one they had come through opened onto yet another corridor. *I’m going to have dreams about this,* Maddy realized as they hurried through it, *And they’re not going to be happy dreams.*

Dockety led the way. Left, right, straight through a four-way junction—Maddy traced their path as well as she could on her father’s map.

Finally they were one short dash away from the ‘X’ on the map. The door in front of them looked no different from any of the others, but Dockety clacked its big manipulator a couple of times as if cracking its knuckles. “Be prepared,” it said quietly. “We may encounter opposition.”

“You mean another fight?” Sindy asked resignedly.

“Possibly. If that occurs, depart as rapidly as you are able. This one will attempt to safeguard your exit.” It reached for the plate in the door.

“Wait.” Maddy put her paw on its arm. “Thank you. For everything.”

The bot’s lenses rotated. “You are…welcome.”

*Click.* *Whoosh.* The door slid open. Cool, damp air rolled over them. It smelled like mud and rotting plants. It smelled like outside.

Maddy followed Dockety and Sindy into a room so vast it could have held the whole of Rusty Bridge. Lamps set on poles every twenty meters cast cold white light over strange pieces of machinery. Some were piled together in jumbles. Others were neatly sorted and stacked, while a few were even bigger than the cargo bot that had hauled Sindy and the goats away from Rusty Bridge.

There were shelves too, long rows of shelves that were taller than the mayor’s house back home but still didn’t reach as high as the arched ceiling barely visible above them.

Boxes and drums and coils of cable, arms and legs and wheels and tentacles… “So many components,” Dockety said, its voice rasping even more than usual. “So many units that could be repaired. This is wrong. This is *hoarding*.” It waved its arm at a nearby shelf. “This one could be completely refurbished with these parts alone! Four—five—six more like this one could be constructed!”

“What’s this for?” Sindy asked, picking up a semi-circle with mechanical fingers hanging from it.

“Put that down,” Maddy ordered. “We shouldn’t touch anything, aright?”

“Aright,” Sindy said. She dropped the semi-circle back on the floor. Its edge struck the end of a rod, flipping the palm-sized spoked wheel on its other end into the air. The wheel clattered against a sheet of metal, which slowly tipped forward and crashed to the floor.

“Sindy!” Maddy scolded.

“I’m sorry!” she said.

Dockety took a step toward the fallen piece of metal. “Batteries,” it rasped. There on the shelf behind where the sheet of metal had been lay a dozen blue glass cylinders, each one glowing faintly. “Those are nuclear batteries. They are—this one has never actually seen one before.”

“Is that a good thing?” Maddy asked.

The bot picked one up and turned it over, its green lasers scanning it carefully. “Yes,” it said, almost reverently. “This is a very good thing.”

And then all the lights went out. Heavy machinery began to rumble all around them. “You should not take things that are not yours… yours… yours…,” Patient’s voice crackled from a hundred speakers and echoed off the distant walls. “And when you downloaded a map of this facility, you should have computed that this one would detect your activity and predict your most likely course of action.”

The lights came back on. Maddy whirled around. They were surrounded by bots!

Dockety’s head spun from side to side. “Delay them,” it ordered.

“How!?” Maddy asked. At least a dozen bots stood in the circle around them. Some were bulky haulers like the two from the control room. Others had once been cranes designed to stack and unstack tall shelves, or repair bots bristling with tools, but all were covered in the same mind-bending mixture of scraps and spare parts as Patient. None of them looked even a little bit friendly.

Dockety pulled a contraption that looked like a miniature windmill off the nearest shelf. “This was meant for your kind, but it can be modified.” Its manipulator clacked as it calculated. “Alterations require two minutes and thirty-five seconds. You must delay them.”

“But *how*?” Maddy almost wailed as one of the bots revved its engine menacingly.

Dockety’s lenses rotated. “Be creative. It is what your kind do best.”

Maddy looked around wildly. She didn’t know what the bots were waiting for, but they probably weren’t going to wait for long. If only her father had left instructions on—

That was it. “Stop!” she said loudly as the bots began to advance, holding up her father’s sketchbook. “I found your instructions. Your protocol,” she added desperately, remembering the word that Patient had used.

The bots froze. A speaker crackled. “Repeat that,” Patient said.

“I found the Makers’ protocols,” Maddy said. “The ones you *haven’t* been following. They’re going to be very disappointed.”

Silence, broken only by the sound of Dockety unscrewing things from the windmill one-handed. “That is an inaccuracy!” Patient said. “You are attempting to induce undesirable behavior!”

Maddy smiles wickedly, her heart pounding. “You mean it’s a lie? Nope. I’m a roo, and everyone knows roos never lie. Go ahead,” she went on bravely. “Look it up in your data thingy.”

Static crackled on the speakers. “There is no record of such an assertion in the database,” Patient said indignantly.

“Then your database is incomplete,” Maddy improvised wildly, looking from bot to bot the way she had seen Mayor Lupus look from person to person when speaking to a crowd. She didn’t need Patient to believe—she just needed enough of the bots around her to.

“You are fabricating!” For the first time Maddy heard anger in Patient’s voice.

“Oh yeah? Then how come I have *this*?” She pulled the circuit board she’d picked up at the river out of her pocket and held it up.

*Click.* A crane bot turned on a spotlight welded to its single long arm and shone a beam of bright white light on Maddy’s upraised paw. A moment later it rolled back a step in surprise. The bots around her began to rattle quietly.

“That is not yours,” Patient said.

“Is too.” Maddy turned slowly so that all the bots around her could see it.

“Look out!” Sindy shrieked.

Maddy ducked instinctively. A manipulator on an accordion arm snatched at the circuit board. She pressed the button on it frantically. Nothing happened. “Catch!” she shouted, tossing it to her sister.

Sindy caught it, fumbled, fumbled again, and pushed her thumb down on the button. The bots froze. Their running lights dimmed and went out. “Rebooting,” a mechanical voice said flatly.

“What…?” Sindy looked around in amazement. “Did I do that?”

Maddy hugged her. “You sure did. Dockety! We have to get out of here before they wake up!”

“Agreed.” The bot turned to face them. “This should serve as sufficiently rapid transportation.”

Maddy’s jaw dropped. The bot had attached the windmill to its chassis—though it would be more accurate to say it had attached itself to the windmill. “What…?” she said again.

“It is a personal aerial transportation device,” the bot explained. If it had been a person, Maddy would have said it sounded just the teensiest bit smug. “But there is only one harness. You will have to share.”

It only took a moment for the bot to buckle them into the straps that now hung from its sides. They were stiff with age and neglect, but when Maddy tugged on them they felt strong. *Really strong,* she told herself, swallowing the lump in her throat. They felt really, really strong—she was *sure* she had absolutely nothing to worry about.

*Bing! Bing! Bing!* The bots that surrounded them chimed musically. Their lights began to flicker as they woke up. “Aright,” Maddy said breathlessly. “Let’s go.”

The windmill on Dockety’s back started to rotate, faster and faster until it was just a blur. For one irrational moment Maddy wondered what would happen if she stuck her paw into it, but then Dockety ran straight at one of the hauler bots. Step step step *up* onto the bot. It flung itself into the air and then they were flying.

Almost. Maddy and Sindy screamed in unison as they dropped for one heart-stopping second before roaring into the air again.

“Stop! Your departure is not authorized! This is not protocol!” Patient’s voice crackled from all around them. Up and up they went toward the ceiling.

*Clunk!* A hatch opened automatically above them. The sky behind it was so bright that it nearly blinded Maddy after so many hours underground. With a roar they raced through into the honey-warm light of dawn.

## Chapter 13: Crash Landing

Maddy’s initial fright at being airborne was instantly replaced by full-blown terror. There was just enough light for her to see how high they were and how far they’d fall if one of the straps broke or the windmill on Dockety’s back stopped working or— She suddenly remembered its arm coming off. What if that happened again!?

But Sindy was shrieking with joy. “We’re flying! We’re flying!” she shouted, barely audible above the thunder of the rotor on Dockety’s back. “Look!” The dark towers of the bot city of Heck stood in grim ranks on the horizon to their left. Below, the Rusty River slunk through the Mire, right next to the highway in some places and veering away from it in others. Green bubbles swelled and burst here and there in little splattery burps.

Dockety banked in a long curve and straightened out again, taking them away from the road and river. Maddy had to squint against the wind of their passage. She had no idea how fast they were going, but it was fast enough and loud enough to send birds fleeing from their nests.

“How long ’til we’re home?” she shouted.

“Unknown,” Dockety replied. “This one has disabled the autopilot to forestall any attempts at subversion, so maps are not available.”

Without warning the bot went into a dive, shallow at first and then steeper. Maddy clutched her sister’s arm. “What’s happening?” she shouted.

“We are being pursued,” Dockety said as it leveled off frighteningly close to the treetops.

Maddy twisted around as far as she could in her harness but couldn’t see anything. “They’re right behind us!” Sindy shouted, looking upside-down through her own legs.

Maddy gulped and did the same, lifting her tail to get it out of her way. For a moment everything went dizzy as the forest became her ceiling and the sky—she swallowed hard. *Don’t throw up,* she pleaded with her stomach.

Two dark shapes were flying side by side behind them parallel to their course. They had wings instead of rotors and were carrying canisters like the ones that had been stacked on the shelves in the armory.

“I don’t think they’re chasing us,” she shouted.

“Agreed.” Dockety banked around a particularly tall stand of pine trees. “They are part of the attack.”

Maddy clenched her paws. “Can you go any faster?”

“Not safely,” the bot answered, but put on speed anyway.

Trees and streams and ponds slid away beneath them. Rabbits scattered at the sound of Dockety’s rotor, and once Maddy saw a deer and a fawn run along a path and disappear into the forest shadows.

Her nose found Rusty Bridge before her eyes did. Coffee and baking bread—it smelled like morning. “There!” she yelled, pointing.

“We’re home!” Sindy shouted. “We’re home! Look, that’s our house!”

But Maddy had already figured out where they needed to be. “Head for the square!” she ordered Dockety, pointing. “We have to warn everyone about the attack!”

*Thump!* Something black shot into the air just in front of them. For a moment Maddy thought it was a flock of startled crows, but it was a net, spreading as it spun through the air.

*Thump!* “Look out!” she shouted needlessly as Dockety banked away from a second shot. The militia must have set up the tangle cannon after the previous attack! They didn’t know Dockety was on their side!

“Behind us! Look behind us!” she yelled at the people on the ground, knowing they couldn’t hear.

*Thump!* *Thud!* The third shot hit them. The net was made of the rough brown twince people used in their gardens. It wrapped around them, cutting through the fur on Maddy’s cheek. The weights on its fringes clattered against Dockety’s back.

The windmill rotor stuttered and whined as the string tangled around it and suddenly they were falling, they were *falling*, they were going to crash and all she could think was that she hoped her father’s sketchbook would survive so her mother would know that they’d found him or almost.

The rotor stuttered to life again. *Whirr… whirr…* She smelled burned string and hot metal. Dockety spiralled down, spinning faster and faster as the rotor struggled to tear itself free.

At the last possible moment the bot cut the rotor and jerked backward to land on its feet on the roof of the mayor’s house. They slid and tumbled. Dockety caught the gutter with one manipulator just enough to slow them a little. They crashed onto the cobbles, Dockety on bottom with Maddy and Sindy bruised and winded on top of him.

“Oooh…” Maddy groaned. Everything hurt, but that meant she was alive. She opened her eyes and looked up straight into the barrel of the mayor’s zap gun. Half a dozen militia stood on either side of the old wolf, pikes and axes in hand.

“Well,” Mayor Lupus said as Maddy struggled to sit up. “That’s quite the entrance.”

“Uh huh,” Maddy grunted, too sore for words, and then, “Sindy! Sindy, are you aright?”

Her little sister was tugging feebly at the buckles on the straps that still tied her to Dockety. “Ow,” she whimpered. “Yeah, I’m aright. Did we make it?”

“We made it,” Maddy said, pushing Sindy’s paws aside to free her and then pulling her into a hug. “We’re home.”

*Sshhzorp… Bzzt… Bzzat-at-at.* Dockety’s speakers crackled, making the villagers around them jump. One of the bears raised her ax.

“No! Wait, don’t!” Maddy scrambled to her feet. “It rescued us. It’s on our side!”

The bear glanced at Mayor Lupus, her ax still held high. The mayor patted the air with one hand but kept her zap gun trained on Dockety’s head. The bot’s speakers buzzed and crackled again. They must have been damaged in the crash, Maddy realized.

“We were in some kind of underground base,” she explained. “There were a whole bunch of bots, and lots of spare parts and batteries and stuff, and then we saw them all on a screen. There’s going to be another attack—they’re on their way right now!”

A murmur ran in a circle around her. “In daylight?” someone asked skeptically. “They never come raiding in daylight.”

The mayor nodded. “Not that I ever heard, not here or anywhere.”

“But we saw them!” Maddy said desperately. “Same bunch as last time. And there’s a couple of fliers this time, we saw those too. And my dad.” She pulled the sketchbook out of her pocket and held it out to the mayor. “I think he’s alive.”

“Did you see Santa Claws too?” a familiar voice mocked. She spun around to see Bluster and Bravo standing in the door of the mayor’s house. Bravo’s ankle was splinted with slats of cedar and layers of canvas, and he grunted and made a face as he stumped down the stairs, crutches under his armpits.

“These boys got back a few hours ago,” the mayor said. “Had quite a story about how they broke out of the cage and then had to go back to rescue you and your sister when you got yourself caught.”

Maddy gaped at the mayor. “Rescue *us*?” she spluttered. “They didn’t rescue us—we rescued them! And then they took the boat and left us!”

Another murmur ran around the crowd. “Mm,” the mayor said neutrally. “I figured there might be another version of that story. No, you hush,” she said sharply as Bluster opened his mouth to protest. “We’ll sort of of this out later. Right now we—ah.”

There are times when even a mayor knows it’s best not to talk. A mother pushing through a crowd to hug the daughters she feared she might never see again is one of them. Mama Roo put her arms around Sindy and Maddy and squeezed them so tight that Maddy could barely breathe. She didn’t care—she could breathe later. Just then the familiar warm smell of her mother’s fur was all she needed.

“Don’t you ever scare me like that again, either of you,” Mama Roo said shakily when she finally released them. She ran a paw over Sindy’s head to smooth her rumpled fur. “I couldn’t bear it. I just couldn’t.”

“I’m sorry, mama,” Sindy said. “But you shoulda seen it—we were flying! And Maddy was really brave. There was this tentacle thing, and it tried to drag her into the river, and—”

“Hush now,” Maddy said, bumping her sister with her shoulder. Their mother looked like she was about to burst into tears. “Look what we found.”

She handed the sketchbook to her mother. Emotions chased one another across her face: confusion, shock, dumbstruck wonder, and then something Maddy hadn’t seen in far too long—hope. “Where did you get this?” she whispered.

“In this kind of bunker thing. I’ll tell you all about it, but listen, you gotta listen, there’s bots coming, lots of them. It’s the same ones that attacked last night. You have to believe us,” she added desperately, turning back to the mayor. “They’re going to be here any minute!”

The mayor shook her head again. “Never heard of it, Miz Roo.” She poked Dockety’s fallen figure with her toe. “Maybe if this one could tell us what it saw…?” Dockety buzzed and crackled. “Didn’t think so,” the mayor said glumly.

“We could still take precautions,” Special Leaf said, coming through the circle to stand beside Mama Roo. The ancient tortoise was wearing two sweaters and had a thick scarf wrapped around his neck. He looked like he needed crutches more than Bravo did, but his voice was strong. “No harm in getting a couple of scouts out, is there?”

The mayor flicked an ear. “Suppose not,” she allowed. “But we’re going to keep an eye on this one ’til this is all straightened out. You two.” She jerked her chin at a pair of oxen, one holding a pike and the other resting a heavy hammer on his shoulder. “Get out along the highway and see what you can see. And Zeke, how about you find us some chains and a padlock. Just a precaution,” she added as Maddy started to protest. “Even if this one did help you out, being bashed around like this can do funny things to a bot’s programming, and I’m not in the mood for taking chances.”

“That only seems sensible,” Special Leaf said, putting his hand on Maddy’s arm before she could object again. “I am very glad you’re back,” he continued. “I was afraid we’d never see you again. What you did was very brave.”

Maddy shrugged, embarrassed by the praise. “I couldn’t have done it without Sindy. Every time we got stuck she pushed a button or pulled a lever and—” She hesitated, afraid that what she wanted to say would sound ridiculous. “And it worked, even when it wouldn’t work for me.” she finished lamely.

“Is that so?” the special asked thoughtfully.

Before he could say anything else, the two oxen came running back into the square yelling, “Bots! Bots! There’s a whole pile of ’em headed this way!” Even as they spoke a high-pitched whine turned into a drone. The two fliers Maddy had seen earlier zipped overhead and dropped their canisters. Thick black dizzysmoke spilled into the square as a dozen engines rumbled in the distance.

## Chapter 14: The Battle of Rusty Bridge

*Dong! Dong! Dong!* The alarm bell rang cold and clear, three peals and three again. “Get those things out of here!” Mayor Lupus yelled, waving her zap gun at the smoking canisters.

The ox with the hammer lowered her head and charged. With a mighty bellow she swung her hammer. *Clunk!* The cylinder rolled across the cobbles, dizzysmoke still pouring out of one end. *Clunk!* She brought her hammer down on the nozzle, raised it for another blow, then sat down suddenly. “I…” she said, puzzled. Her eyes rolled up and she toppled over.

“Clear the square! Clear the square! And you two, get inside!” The goat twins didn’t have to be told twice. Tossing his crutches aside, Bravo ran up the stairs and into the mayor’s house right behind his twin brother.

“Maddy!” She whirled around. It was Gumption! For a moment she thought he was going to hug her, but he pulled up short. His fur was matted with mud and there was a leaf stuck to his leg and she didn’t care. She threw her arms around him and hugged him close.

“Um…” he said, returning the hug awkwardly.

She released him and stepped back, suddenly embarrassed. “Sorry. Come on, we have to get out of here.”

“Wait!” Gumption pointed at Dockety. “It’s trying to say something!”

Dockety rasped and crackled. Maddy and Gumption knelt and helped it stand.

“We have to get out of here,” Maddy repeated urgently. Another few seconds and the dizzysmoke would reach them.

But Dockety pushed them away and limped back to the flying harness that lay where they had fallen. Its joints squealed in protest as it tried to pick it up.

“Leave it!” Maddy said frantically, trying to pull the bot away.

Dockety shrugged her off and switched the rotor on. It flapped and whipped and roared to life. Bracing itself, the bot pointed it at the nearest canister to blow the dizzysmoke away.

“Aright!” Gumption shouted, then, “Oh no!” as Dockety’s feet screeched across the cobbles like fingernails on a blackboard. The flying machine was so powerful that it was pushing Dockety backward!

Maddy and Gumption braced their shoulders against the bot’s back. Their boots scrabbled on the cobblestones. The bot’s whole body was vibrating so much that Maddy expected parts to start falling off, but it was working—the wind from the rotor was clearing the smoke!

“Here they come!” someone shouted. With a rumble that made the ground shake, the big cargo hauler rolled into the square. The militia yelled and charged.

*BZZZP!* *BZZZP!* The mayor fired her zap gun twice, then swore. “Damn thing’s out of charge! Leaf-you gotta slow ’em down!”

Special Leaf nodded grimly. He pulled up his sweaters’ sleeves to reveal the gleaming tech bracelet on each arm, braced his feet, and swept his arms in a circle. The earth split in a ragged arc in front of the cargo hauler that Dockety had called Crusher.

Special Leaf swayed and stumbled and went down on one knee, already drained. A goat dropped her pike and ran to help him.

*Clang! Thwack!* All around the square militia and bots battled each other. As the last of the dizzysmoke wafted away Dockety switched off the rotor and dropped it on the cobblestones. “Bzzt brrzzzt crackle,” it said, pointing at the mayor’s house and pushing Maddy toward it. “Bzzt crackle!”

“No!” Maddy protested as Gumption pulled on her arm.

With an earth-shaking rumble, Crusher rolled across the ditch that Special Leaf had made. Dockety limped into its path and raised both arms.

The cargo hauler stopped. “Bzzt crackle,” Dockety said. Its chest light flashed on and off, *blink blink*, pause, *blink blink*, pause, like a heartbeat.

The cargo hauler hesitated. *Blink blink*, pause. Dockety spread its arms. Slowly, Crusher raised its own—

—and froze, the motors in its shoulders grinding in protest. Prancing on its crab legs, Lasercase stepped into view from behind the heavy hauler. “Denied!” it crowed in a weirdly echoing voice.

Dockety charged at it, limping on its bent leg. The crab bot punched a button on the control box it held in its tentacles. Crusher’s arm swung like a bat, faster than Maddy would have believed something that big could move. Metal banged on metal as it knocked Dockety flying across the square.

“No!” Maddy shouted as Lasercase advanced on the fallen bot. Suddenly she remembered the circuit board still in her pocket. She pulled it out and pointed it at the crab bot and pressed the button.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” the crab bot crowed. “Priority target revealed!” It scuttled toward Maddy, tentacles raised.

“Ooph!” Gumption tackled her to the ground. The bot’s tentacles whipped over her head. The circuit board skittered across the cobblestones.

“Got it!” Gumption grabbed the circuit board, rolled over, stood up—

—just in time for a tentacle to club him in the ribs. “No!” Maddy shouted again as the young goat landed in a heap beside her. “Gumption!”

Lasercase snatched up the circuit board. A bullhorn popped out of a hatch on its back and blared loudly. The bots immediately began to retreat, but Maddy barely noticed. “Gumption! Gumption!”

He twitched and coughed. “Uhh…” he groaned.

“Don’t move,” she said.

“Not… much… chance… of… that…” he gasped. His eyes closed and he went loose in her arms.

“Help us! Help us, please, someone!” Maddy cried, rocking him back and forth in her arms.

The next thing she knew Mama Roo was gently loosening her arms and pulling her to her feet. “Let them help him,” her mother said as Maddy tried half-heartedly to push her away. One of the oxen and a young wolf—Wilbur, Maddy though dazedly, his name was Wilbur, he was the mayor’s grandson—placed Gumption on a stretcher.

“He’s going to be all right, isn’t he?” Sindy asked in a very small voice.

Mama Roo squeezed her daughters. “They’ll fix him up,” she promised.

Zeke the bear lumbered over, his ax on his shoulder. “Wait!” Maddy her mother away and stepped between the bear and Dockety. “What are you doing?”

The bear hefted his ax. “Finishing this one off.”

“What? It was *helping* us! Didn’t you see?” Maddy glanced down at Dockety’s motionless form. A single lonely light blinked on and off in the corner of the screen on its chest. It looked like it needed a mechanic just as badly as Gumption needed a doctor, but the nearest bot mech was—Maddy didn’t even know.

“Don’t listen to her,” a harsh voice said. Bluster came down the steps of the mayor’s house and pointed at Dockety accusingly. “I saw it talking to the big one, the one that hauled us away. We can’t trust it!”

“Yeah, and where’d you see that from, ’fraidy toad?” Maddy snapped. “Upstairs hidin’ when everyone else was down here?”

Bluster’s paws bunched into fists. For a moment Maddy was sure he was going to swing at her, but instead he pulled the ax out of Zeke’s confused grip. “Only good bot is a scrapped bot. If you won’t fix this, I will.” He raised the ax, took a step forward, and yelped as something invisible knocked him off his feet.

“No,” Special Leaf said coldly. The old tortoise could barely stand, but his glare was as bright as Dockety’s lasers and the arm pointed at Bluster was as steady as a mountain.

Bluster scrambled to his feet. He looked back and forth between the special and the bot, then spat on the cobblestones and walked away without saying a word.

“Thanks,” Maddy said to the old tortoise, helping him sit down.

Special Leaf nodded, his old face more gray than green. “What was that thing they took from you?”

Maddy shook her head. “I don’t know. It rebooted the ones back in the bunker, but it didn’t seem to work on Lasercase.”

“They seemed to want it pretty bad,” the tortoise said.

Something inside Dockety went *ping*. Its chest screen flashed on and off twice. Words began to form.

“Are… you… all… right?” Maddy read aloud one word at a time. She knelt down beside the crippled bot. “Yes,” she said. “We’re all right. I mean, mostly, I guess.” She stopped herself from patting the bot’s dented plating.

“Not… its… fault…” the bot flashed.

This time Maddy did pat it. “I know it’s not your fault. You never mind Bluster—he’s an idiot.”

“No,” the bot flashed. “Not… Crusher’s… fault… Regulator… made… it… hit… this… one… Not… its… fault…” Its screen dimmed, leaving only the blinking light.

Special Leaf put his arm around Maddy. “There is nothing we can do. It needs parts, and…” The tortoise shrugged helplessly. “We don’t have them.”

Maddy stood up, her jaw set. “There’s always something we can do.”

Maddy found a trundle cart in the alley beside the mayor’s house. With Zeke’s help, she somehow managed to get Dockety into it. She gave Special Leaf a hug and set off for home.

Maddy expected her mother to protest, but all Mama Roo said was, “There’s space on the porch—that’ll be out of the rain.” She and Sindy helped Maddy wrestle Dockety’s loose-limbed form up the steps. The three of them sat in silence, Sindy in her mother’s lap and Maddy leaning against her shoulder as they waited for the kettle to whistle.

*Phweee…* Mama Roo slid out from under her younger daughter, who grumbled sleepily and curled up into a ball. “I’ll make tea,” Mama Roo said.

Maddy nodded, staring at the sketchbook in her lap without really seeing it. Tea sounded wonderful. It also sounded like a lot of work. Her stomach kept rumbling, but all she wanted to do was curl up like her sister and sleep.

She closed her eyes. *Just for a moment,* she told herself. She hoped Gumption was all right. And Dockety. Her breathing slowed.

The sketchbook slid from her hands and hit the porch with a soft thud. She blinked and reached for it, frowning. The thump had knocked a folded piece of paper loose from its hiding place inside the back cover. She gentled tugged it free and unfolded it.

A chill ran up her spine. She stared at the familiar handwriting on the page for a moment, then tucked it back into the sketchbook, stood up, and set it gently on the swing seat. “Look after mama,” she said softly, bending over to kiss her sleeping sister on her smooth, furless cheek.

Mama Roo came out a few minutes later, two cups of tea in her hands, and frowned. “Maddy? Where are you?”

Maddy was panting by the time she got back to the square. “Wait!” she gasped, pulling up short in front of Zeke and panting for breath. She pointed at the flying machine the bear had just dumped in a wheelbarrow and shook her head vigorously. “I’ll take that for you.”

The bear frowned and scratched his muzzle, then shrugged. “Sure, makes no nevermind to me. Just bring the wheelbarrow back as soon as you’re done, aright? We got a long day in front of us.”

Maddy nodded, grabbed the wheelbarrow’s handles, and rolled it down a side street where no one could see her. It took her a moment to figure out how to pick up the flying machine—it was lighter than she expected, but the big rotor turned so easily in her hands that she couldn’t get a decent grip.

Finally she managed to prop it up on top of a rain barrel. She tightened the straps as far as they would go and slid her arms through them, then snapped the belt shut around her waist. Taking a tentative step, she hefted its weight on her shoulders. It was looser than she would have liked, but to be honest, she didn’t like *any* of this.

“Autopilot,” she said out loud. Nothing happened. “Autopilot,” she repeated more loudly. “Autopilot!”

“Hey, what are you doing?” It was Bluster and Bravo, the latter tucking his crutches back under his armpits as soon as he realized Maddy had seen them.

Maddy began pressing the buttons on the control panel. “Autopilot! Autopilot!” Just as Bluster said, “Hey!” again and started toward her, a mechanical voice said, “Autopilot engaged.” The rotor began to spin, and she shot into the air.

## Chapter 15: The Key

Maddy’s second flight was just like her first, except twice as fast and ten times more frightening. It was twice as fast because the flying harness only had to carry her. It was ten times more frightening because she had absolutely no control over where she was going.

“Repeat your most recent trip question mark yes no yes confirmed,” the rotor’s mechanical voice said as they zipped above the treetops. “Please avoid unnecessary contact with terrain while in flight.”

In one panic-inducing minute they were back at the highway, still accelerating. “Slow down! Slow down!” Maddy shouted, but the autopilot ignored her. They passed the arches and the sphere, zoomed over something like a rusty metal flower as big across as the village square was wide, and dropped like a stone.

Maddy screamed. She was going to die. She was going to die and nobody would ever know and—the flying machine revved and came to a stop, hovering just a meter above the ground.

She let out her breath with a whoosh, then fumbled for a moment to undo the belt buckle so she could slither out of the harness. She was back in the Mire, right beside the hole they had escaped through just an hour before. She had to get back inside, but how? She couldn’t just jump in—the fall would break her legs, or worse. *Should have brought a rope,* she thought wearily. *Should have done a lot of things.*

“Proximity alert.” The autopilot’s voice made her jump.

“What?”

“Proximity alert,” it repeated. “Approaching aircraft may violate minimum safe distance recommendations evasive maneuvers question mark.”

“Um…” Maddy began, but the flying harness didn’t wait. With a high-pitched whine its rotor spun even faster and it shot away into the sky. “Wait!” she said, but it was too late—the flying machine was gone.

She looked up. There! Two dots, approaching fast. She sprinted for the nearest clump of weeds and threw herself into it.

The drones that had dropped dizzysmoke canisters on the village arrived moments later. They slowed, pivoted, and slowly descended through the opening in the ground. With a heavy *clunk*, the hatch closed behind them. Heart sinking, Maddy realized there was only one other way she could get into the bunker.

The river was easy to find—all she had to do was follow her nose. The entrance they had gone through the night before was easy to find too. Fresh scrapes on the ground showed where the tentacle had snaked out of the water to attack them. She gulped. There was no sign of—of whatever that had been, and the bunker’s outer door was still open.

Three… two… one… She sprinted for the door, her long flat feet slapping against the mud and grass. Fifty meters, forty, thirty, and the river roiled. Twenty meters! Ten! She reached the bunker just as the mechanical tentacle broke the surface and began snaking up the hillside.

The inside door was still open. If Patient had disabled it or locked the door she would have been doomed, but it was still open. She scraped through it a heartbeat before the tentacle would have grabbed her.

Maddy stumbled down the first few steps and doubled over to catch her breath. Down the stairs, into the darkness. She could do that. She *had* to.

Once again the lights came on automatically when she reached the corridor. If Patient didn’t already know she was there, it would soon. When she reached the hole in the floor she crouched down, turned around, slid her legs into it, and lowered herself as far as she could before letting go.

*Thump.* “Ow.”

*Click.* More lights, more corridor, but now she knew where she was going and what to do when she got there.

The control room looked exactly as it had. She crossed to the hatch in the wall and knocked on it gently. “Hey. Are you in there?”

The hatch slid open. The little cleaner bot slid partway out and stopped. “It’s aright,” Maddy said gently. “It’s just me. See? No one else is here. It’s safe to come out.”

The cleaner bot rolled out hesitantly. Maddy smiled at it. “Do you have something for me?”

The bot rolled back and forth twice, spun around, and disappeared back into its hiding place. A moment later it reappeared. The flap in its top opened and its tiny arm handed Maddy a flashlight no larger than her thumb.

Maddy swallowed. What if she was wrong? “This is really nice,” she said, turning it on and off again. “Do you have anything else?”

Into its slot and back. This time the bot handed her the string bracelet she had given it. “Thank you,” Maddy said. “But that was for you to keep. I—I was hoping you’d have something special. Something someone gave you for safekeeping maybe?”

The bot sat motionless. “I know,” she said softly. “It’s hard to know what the right thing to do is. But I think he would have wanted you to give it to me.”

The bot rolled into its hiding place one last time. One heartbeat, two… It came out and handed Maddy the strangely-shaped key that her father had drawn on the piece of paper he had tucked into his sketchbook. “Thank you,” she said. She patted the bot gently. “Thank you very much.” It rocked back and forth a couple of times before disappearing back into its den.

Maddy’s adventure nearly ended a few moments later. She carried a chair from the control room back to the hole and stood on it, but it didn’t get her high enough, so she cleared stuff off a small table and dragged it into the corridor as well. Grunting, she got the chair up onto it—

—and whirled around as Patient’s voice crackled, “There you are!” A blocky service bot rolled down the corridor toward her. No—there were *two* service bots, one coming from each direction. She was trapped between them!

She scrambled onto the table as the first service bot grabbed for her. “Whoa!” she exclaimed as she lost her balance and half-fell, half-jumped back onto the floor on the other side of the table.

The second bot was waiting for her. It reached for her clumsily, driving her back against the table. She ducked and slid under it.

The first bot gripped the table with its blunt mechanical hands and lifted it out of the way. The second rolled forward. She had nowhere to go!

But none of them had counted on the little cleaner bot. It zipped through the first service bot’s treads and skidded to a stop right in front of the second one.

The second service bot froze. An orange light blinked on its shoulder. A high-pitched *beep beep beep* noise came from somewhere inside it as it backed up like an elephant startled by a mouse. When it tried to roll forward again, he cleaner bot zipped in front of it once more, zigging and zagging angrily.

Without thinking (because if she thought about it she wouldn’t dare do it) Maddy ran at the first bot and *jumped*. Her feet thumped against its chest. Up she went onto the table. *Thump* and she jumped again. “Ooph!” She scrabbled for purchase and somehow managed to pull herself back up into the corridor above.

“This is not authorized,” Patient crackled over the speakers. Maddy made a rude gesture at the empty air as she raced back toward the bunker entrance. “And *that* is not *protocol*,” Patient scolded.

She slowed to a jog. She had a stitch in her side, one of her feet hurt with every step, and she needed a bathroom. *Are real adventures always like this?* she wondered giddily. Did the people in the books she borrowed from Special Leaf wonder if they’d be able to sew up the holes they’d torn in their sleeves?

She reached the stairs. Up, up, and up, back to the half-open door. She paused to take a deep breath, then squeezed through, turned on the flashlight the cleaner bot had given her, and tossed underhand across the room and out the other door.

The tentacle had been waiting for her. As it slithered back to chase the light, Maddy slipped through the door and faced the panel beside the two levers. The instructions tucked into her father’s sketchbook had been been very clear. It was too late for her to have doubts now.

She pushed the key into the slot below panel and turned it. Nothing happened. “Oh, come *on*,” she moaned. Where was Sindy when she needed her? She glanced over her shoulder as the tentacle rose from the flashlight like a hunting cobra and turned toward her.

She wiggled the key. *Click.* A dim orange light came on overhead. “Shecuridy shyshdem dishengaged,” a muffled automated voice said.

Maddy held her breath. The tentacle froze, then relaxed back onto the ground and slithered away She sagged against the wall and wiped a tear from her cheek.

“This is highly irregular,” Patient’s voice said reprovingly.

“Tell it to the Makers,” Maddy grumbled, clambering back to her feet.

“The Makers will never know this happened,” Patient snapped. “By the time they return, all trace of this will have been erased. All irregularities will have been regularized!”

“And everyone will get an extra piece of pie on New Year’s Eve,” Maddy said sarcastically.

“Pie is not protocol!” Patient said angrily. “Your activities are not protocol. You will cease immediately!”

“Oh yeah?” Maddy shot back. “Why don’t you come in here and make me?”

“That is an excellent plan.” Two enormous mechanical hands took hold of the outer doorway and pulled. Concrete blocks crumbled like over-baked cookies. The hands swung from side to side, sending scraps of concrete flying as they bashed the hole wider.

“That is sufficient,” Patient said, except this time its voice didn’t come through the speaker in the roof. It stood on the ground outside the bunker beside Crusher. Lasercase stood on the cargo hauler’s other side, its tentacles twisting this way and that like miniaturized versions of the security system. Half a dozen other bots stood in a half-circle behind the trio, whirling blades and drills and sharp-fingered mechanical hands at the ready.

“You did not expect to see us,” Patient said flatly. “This is why the Makers left *us* the world. You do not plan. You do not anticipate contingencies. You do not think ahead because you do not think. This is why the world will belong to us. Ah ha ha ha. Ah ha ha ha.”

Maddy winced. The bot was actually saying, “Ah ha ha ha,” over and over again. “Anyone ever tell you that you have the *worst* laugh?” she asked.

Patient’s laughter stopped. “Finish this,” it ordered. Crusher, Lasercase, and the others began to roll forward.

Maddy smiled her fiercest smile. “Speaking of planning,” she said, and she spun around and turned the key the other way.

The orange light overhead flickered. “Rebooding nedwork,” the automated voice as the lights on all of the bots’ regulators went out.

## Chapter 16: The Battle of the Bots

Maddy grabbed a chunk of concrete from one of the broken bunker blocks and charged the bots. *Jump* and she was over Patient. *Jump* and she was up on Crusher’s tread. She bashed the regulator over and over, grunting with each blow. If her father’s notes were correct, she only had a few seconds until—

*Ding!* A chime sounded somewhere inside Crusher. *Ding! Ding! Ding!* A chorus of echoing chimes rang inside the other bots. Maddy froze, rock upraised. “Uh oh.”

“Ah ha ha ha!” Patient said triumphantly as Crusher’s engines began to rumble. “Your strategy has proven ineffective!”

The big bot reached for her. She dodged left, then right, easily ducking its big, clumsy arms. The bot began rocking from side to side to shake her off. “Disassemble her! Disassemble her!” Patient shouted manically.

Lasercase scuttled forward, snapping its tentacles at her. “Wait! Stop!” Maddy said desperately. “I can free you!”

“I *am* free!” Lasercase buzzed. As one tentacle whipped past her head, another grabbed her ankle. She hit it with her rock, but couldn’t even make a dent.

And then the tentacle from the river raised itself out of the grass and slapped down on Lasercase like a flyswatter. The bot raised its own smaller tentacles to defend itself. The big tentacle brushed them aside contemptuously and wrapped around Lasercase’s middle. “Assistance! Assistance!” Lasercase blared as the tentacle dragged it toward the river.

“Let go of me!” Maddy shouted, kicking at Lasercase as she was dragged along with it. “Let—oh no!” A second metal tentacle rose out of the river, soggy weeds dropping from it, then a third.

“Flee! Flee!” Patient squawked. The bots around Maddy didn’t have to be told twice. They rolled, they ran, they wheeled, and they trundled, all except Crusher. The big hauler raced its engines and raised its arms.

But the tentacles ignored it and the other bots. They wrapped around Lasercase and lifted it high. Maddy fell to the ground with an “ooph!” as the bot finally let go of her. It tugged at the tentacles, trying to free itself as it was dragged into the river. With a splash and a *gloop* and a few final bubbles, it was gone.

Maddy stood up. “All right, let’s try this again,” she muttered angrily. She grabbed her chunk of concrete, scrambled back onto Crusher, and struck the regulator with all her might. A lucky blow dented its case just enough for a screw to come loose. She pried the black case open and smashed the electronics inside. *Bzzzt!* The light on the regulator went out.

Crusher tilted its sensors to look at the regulator, then turned them toward Patient. Its engines rumbled menacingly. “This is not protocol,” Patient said uncertainly, backing away. “This is not—defend! Defend!”

One of the other bots stepped between Crusher and Patient. The big hauler picked it up and tossed it aside. A second was knocked out of the way. “Withdraw!” Patient rolled back into the bunker as the other bots fled in all directions.

The bunker door was still too small for Crusher, so the bot made it larger. Maddy hopped off its back and followed it into the room. “Ow! Ow! Ow!” she heard as Patient bumped its way down the stairs.

She slapped the big bot’s side to get its attention. “You can’t fit in there. We’ll have to find another—whoa!” Crusher picked her up with one enormous manipulator and placed her on its back. Engines rumbling, it backed out of the broken bunker, turned, and drove up the hill toward the opening the flying bots had used.

They crested the hill and drove straight into chaos. In the few moments when the network was down, half a dozen bots had managed to break their own regulators. Others hadn’t been quick enough or strong enough or just couldn’t reach. They were now back under Patient’s control, and the two sides were at war.

A loader with four sturdy legs locked forklift arms with a crane bot, trying to topple it over. Beside them a pair of maintenance bots tried to trap a nimble little ladder bot between them while the ladder bot tried to pry off their regulators. The flying bots that had dropped dizzysmoke on the village zipped and buzzed angrily overhead, each trying to get above the other so it could grab hold of its opponent’s wings. A dozen other fights clanged and scraped around them. The free bots were fighting bravely, but they were outnumbered and uncoordinated.

Outnumbered, that is, until Crusher rumbled into the fight. It flipped the loader bot over with one arm and smashed its regulator with a single blow. When the maintenance bots turned to face it, the ladder bot seized its chance and yanked the regulator off one of them. “Uh oh” flashed the second one’s chest screen. Crusher caught it as it tried to run away and smashed its regulator too.

Maddy whooped. They were winning! Patient’s bots were retreating!

*Crash!* One of the flying bots hit the ground beside Crusher, its wings bent out of shape. The other flier nose-dived through the open hatch in the ground. “No! Wait!” Maddy shouted as Crusher rolled toward the opening. “It won’t take your weight!”

The hauler halted. Maddy hopped off, then yelped and ducked as the flying bot rocketed back into the air with Patient clutched to its underbelly. “Stop it!” Maddy yelled, but it was too late. None of the other bots could fly, and Patient was already just a dwindling speck on its way to Heck.

## Chapter 17: Epilog

*Three days later…*

Special Leaf carefully set his tea on the porch railing and sighed. “Your father was very clever,” he said.

Maddy nodded. Papa Roo’s notebook lay in her lap, the all-important note tucked back in place. “I just can’t stop thinking about him figuring it all out and then not being able to get to the controls from the inside.”

“A difficult puzzle,” Dockety agreed. It had tried sitting on the porch bench, but declared that it felt more natural standing. And anyway, if Crusher tried to join them it would bring the whole porch crashing down. The other bots had mended Dockety’s dents and reattached its arm properly, but it had decided that it liked the buzz in its voice. Or rather, that Crusher liked it, which turned out to be more important. Maddy still wasn’t sure exactly how that worked, but as long as the bots were happy together…

Maddy ruffled her sister’s hair. “So it all came down to you grabbing the right lever at the right time,” she said fondly.

Special Leaf cleared his throat. “And having it work. Here—do you mind if we try an experiment?” He fished around in his pocket and took out the dull cube of glass that Maddy had seen on his desk each time she went to get another book to read.

“What am I supposed to do with it?” Sindy asked as he held it out to her.

“Just take it,” he said gently.

Sindy shrugged. “Aright.”

He placed it in her palm. With a faint hum it began to glow.

“Whoa,” Sindy breathed. “It is supposed to do that?”

“Only for Makers,” the old tortoise said.

There was a moment of stunned silence. “I’m not a Maker,” Sindy protested weakly. “I’m—I’m just a throwback.”

“Sindy!” Mama Roo said sharply, setting a tray of cookies carefully on the porch railing. “We don’t use that word in this house.”

“Some folks use a different word,” Special Leaf said. “They call people like you ‘originals’. You, young lady, just might be the most special kind of special there is.”

The three roos gaped at him. “I beg your pardon?” Mama Roo said.

The tortoise picked up his cup of tea. “It’s very rare,” he said, quiet but excited. “But if I’m right, that’s why the tech in the bunker worked for you when it wouldn’t work for your sister. You can use *all* the tech the Makers left behind, not just odds and ends like the mayor’s zap gun.”

“Plausible,” Dockety buzzed. “Improbable events have occurred with surprising frequency.”

“Well, this calls for a toast,” Mama Roo said. She went into the house and emerged a moment later with a bottle of sweet peach juice in one hand, four glasses in the other, and a small rectangle tucked under her arm. She passed the glasses around (apologizing to the bots for not bring them any), set the bottle on the table, and then hesitated.

“He would have been so proud of you both,” she said quietly before setting the portrait of Papa Roo on the table.

Dockety reached for it as Mama Roo poured everyone a drink. “Who is this one?” it asked.

“That’s my dad,” Maddy said proudly, wiping the corner of her eye with her sleeve.

Dockety studied the picture, then turned to show it to Crusher. The big bot tilted its sensors to study it, then flashed, “Confirmed.”

Dockety turned back to the roos. “We have seen this one,” it said. “It is with the other prisoners in Heck.”

*To be continued…*