



CALL FOR HELP

The students at Burgdale Elementary thought their library was pretty cool.

All the computers were new, instead of the sluggish old machines some schools had. You could sit and read by the huge glass windows, or listen to an audiobook in a private cubicle. The librarians were strict, but they weren't as harsh as some could be.

All in all, it was the best place to study if you were in the mood.

Which Max Darwin wasn't.

He'd spread three books out in front of him on his table, but he just couldn't concentrate on them. Steve Bergese and Mike Crabbe sat on either side of him, writing down notes. Mike noticed Max wasn't writing and frowned.

When Max didn't respond, Mike nudged him with an elbow. "Hey, Space Captain Max! You want to come back to Earth, maybe?"

Max blinked. "Sorry. I was daydreaming."

"Probably thinking about *bugs* again," Steve muttered without looking up. "Max

has bugs on the brain. I bet centipedes crawl out of his nose when nobody's looking."

Max kicked him under the table, but not too hard, because Steve was the class joker and was like that with everyone.

Besides, he *had* been thinking about bugs: a very special group of bugs, in fact. But he couldn't tell Mike or Steve about them. They'd never believe a word he said.

"Are you boys *talking* over there?" A head wearing dark, round glasses bobbed up over the top of a bookcase, taking them all by surprise. It was Mrs. Marquette, the head librarian. The kids of Burgdale all called her Mrs. Meerkat, because she had a

habit of popping up suddenly, in completely unexpected places.

“No,” said Max quickly, shaking his head. Steve and Mike looked down, guiltily.

“Hmph,” said Mrs. Marquette. She gave the boys a suspicious glare and slowly sank back down again.

Max made a fresh effort to focus on the books in front of him. He had a big history test next period. That was why he, Steve, and Mike had met up here. They were *supposed* to be cramming.

But the moment Max tried to read about armies of men shooting arrows at one another or laying siege to castles, he found himself reliving his own memories of Bug

Island. Neither Steve nor Mike had ever had to command forces on the battlefield. But Max had.

If only they knew, he thought, and closed his eyes.

Max owned a book that was larger and older than anything in this whole library—his treasured *Encyclopedia of Arthropods*. As well as being a guide to everything you could ever want to know about bugs, it was a magical gateway to another world.

Whenever Max traveled there, he shrunk down to the size of an insect and joined the bug forces in their never-ending battle against the lizards. His bug friends were like boosted versions of bugs from the

real world. They were highly intelligent and able to use their real-world abilities in battle.

Bug Island, where they lived, had once been a peaceful paradise. But when an erupting volcano created a bridge of cooled-down lava, the greedy inhabitants of nearby Reptile Island began to cross over and attack. Barton, the titan beetle commander of the Battle Bugs, often called on Max to use his big human brain to help.

Last time Max had visited Bug Island, he'd helped the termite forces build a watchtower so the bugs could see the lizards coming. It must have done the trick, because Barton hadn't called on him for days now.