

BATTLE BUGS

THE LIZARD WAR



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With special thanks to Tracey Turner

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AN OLD BOOK

Max Darwin held his breath. Two fearsome barbed pincers appeared over the top of the garden wall. The creature's head followed, its feelers waving in the air, hunting for prey. Finally, a gleaming black body pulled itself into view, grasping the wall with six hooked legs.

Wow! A stag beetle! Max thought, his

eyes level with the beetle's enormous jaws. There were thirty different species of stag beetle in the United States, but Max had never seen one in the wild before. Hardly daring to breathe, he crept forward for a closer look, but the insect must have spotted him. Opening the hard black casing on its back, the beetle spread its wings and whirred away into the evening sky. Max watched until it was just a tiny dot. He couldn't wait to add it to his insect records.

Max *loved* insects. He kept a notebook filled with facts about all the bugs he observed in the garden and yard. The stag beetle was his most interesting find yet.

“Max!” Mom called to him from inside the house. “Where are you? Come and see what I got for you!”

Max’s mom worked at an auction house, and sometimes she brought home unusual things that they couldn’t sell. Max never knew what to expect. One time she’d brought him an old pocket watch, and once she’d even given him a suit of armor!

Max jumped up, pulling a handful of leaves off the oak tree for his pet walking sticks, and then raced back through the overgrown garden. His mom was sitting at the kitchen table. In front of her lay an old book with a battered leather cover.

“Take a look,” she said with a smile.

On the front cover was a picture of a golden scorpion, its stinger raised like a dagger above its head. The title letters were a faded gold, too.

“The Complete Encyclopedia of Arthropods,” Max read. “Wow! Thanks!”

“What *is* an arthropod, anyway?” Mom asked, pushing the book toward him.

“An animal with a skeleton on the outside of its body,” said Max quickly. “Like insects, and spiders, and scorpions, and centipedes. And even lobsters. Where did the book come from?”

“That old mansion on the edge of town was being cleaned out,” said Mom. “The book had fallen behind one of the shelves

in the library. It had probably been there for years—it was covered in dust.”

Max wondered who had been the last person to read it, all those years ago. The book seemed even more special now that he knew where it came from.

“Cool!” he exclaimed, stroking the worn leather with his fingertips.

“I had a feeling you’d like it,” Mom said. “No wonder, it’s full of bugs!” She ruffled his spiky hair. “Take it up to your room, if you want, while I make dinner. I can see you can’t wait to get your nose into it.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Max grinned and picked up the heavy book in both hands. He rushed out of the kitchen and upstairs.

Max's bedroom was *crawling* with bugs. Rubber spiders dangled from the ceiling, a row of plastic beetles stood on the windowsill, and the walls were covered with posters of tarantulas, scorpions, dragonflies, and caterpillars. The only *real* bugs, though, were Max's walking sticks, which sat nearly as still as the plastic ones, almost impossible to spot inside their glass case among the twigs and leaves. Max had named them Oak, Ivy, and Rose, after their favorite foods.

Max opened the top of their cage and hurriedly put the leaves in, so they could eat when they woke up at dusk. Then, barely able to contain his excitement, he took the encyclopedia to his desk and opened it. On the inside of the leather cover, there was



a pocket with a magnifying glass tucked inside. *Cool*, Max thought. He started to turn the old, yellowed pages carefully. They were packed with facts about all sorts of amazing creatures—long-necked assassin bugs, huge-bellied trap-door spiders, giant centipedes—and there was a detailed drawing of each one. The pictures were so lifelike that the bugs looked as if they were about to crawl out of the book!

Across the two pages in the middle of the book, there was a map of a blue sea scattered with islands. Next to each island was a different picture: a tiny palm tree, a bird, or an animal. Max squinted and leaned in closer to one that was marked with a black scorpion. Something was written

on the island next to the scorpion's curved tail, but the letters were too small to read. Then Max remembered the magnifying glass and flicked through the pages until he reached the inside cover. He took the magnifying glass from the pocket. It was much older and heavier than the one inside the Bug Finder Kit he'd gotten for Christmas. The handle was wooden, worn smooth where it fitted his hand, and engraved at the end was an insect head with curling feelers. Max hastily turned back to the map. Peering through the magnifying glass, he could just figure out the words next to the scorpion, written in black, curly letters.

"Bug Island," he whispered. "Wow. I wish I could go there . . ."

As he said the words, Max felt a strange tingling in the tips of his toes. Then the room started to swirl around him, making him dizzy. It was worse than the time he'd ridden the Death Loop roller coaster three times in a row. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to breathe normally, but it was no use. His stomach flipped over, and for a moment he felt like he was falling. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the funny feeling stopped.

“That was weird,” said Max, opening his eyes. Then he rubbed them in disbelief. He wasn't in his bedroom. He wasn't even in his house. He was sitting on damp ground, in the middle of a forest! Above him towered a tall tree with a smooth trunk.

Except . . . Max frowned. The trunk was thick and bright green, with lots of thin branches sticking out of it.

What a funny tree, he thought. He looked up to see if he could tell what kind it was from the leaves and branches, and gasped in surprise. Instead of leaves, all he could see were huge white petals, surrounding a great yellow circle. It wasn't a tree—it was a giant daisy!

Max's heart began to pound as he stood up and looked around. Beyond the gigantic flower was a real tree—the biggest he'd ever seen. Its rough bark seemed to go up and up for miles, as high and wide as a skyscraper.

"It's as if everything somehow got bigger," Max said to himself. "Or," he murmured

with a gulp, “I got *smaller*. But how could that be?”

Max looked down and noticed he was still holding the magnifying glass.

As he stared at it, Max heard a strange thumping sound, like heavy footsteps. He shoved the magnifying glass into his pocket and listened hard. The footsteps were getting louder. No, not *louder*, Max realized. *Closer . . .*

The earth under Max’s feet trembled slightly. Whatever was making the footsteps was *big*. Very big. And it was heading his way! Max felt a cold shiver creep down his spine. He ducked behind the giant flower. For a few seconds, the footsteps got even louder. Then they stopped.

Max held his breath and peeked around the stem. On the other side was an *enormous* creature. As Max watched, it scuttled sideways on eight jointed legs, waving a pair of huge, vicious-looking pincers.

Max gasped. It was a scorpion more than twice his size! The giant creature loomed over him, its sharp, curved stinger ready to strike!