

CLASS ACTS

Compete to make your author "BEST IN CLASS" with the CLASS ACTS CHALLENGE!

YEARBOOK

MEET THE AUTHOR

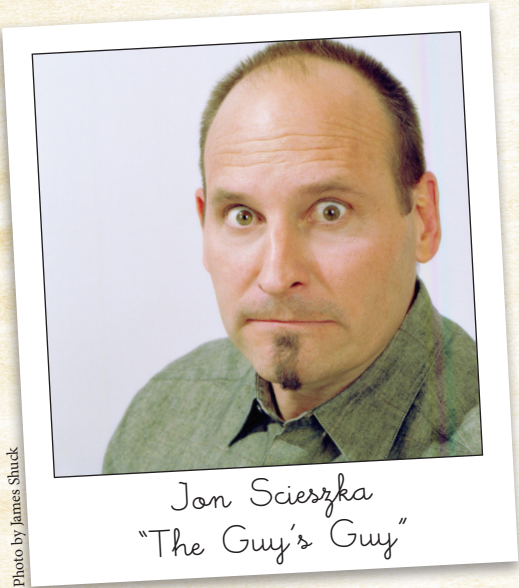
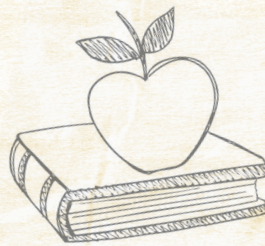


Photo by James Shuck

Jon Scieszka
"The Guy's Guy"

Jon Scieszka is the National Ambassador for Children's Literature emeritus (and Secret Ambassador for the Intergalactic Alliance) and the bestselling author of more than twenty-five books for kids, including *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales*, *Math Curse*, *Robot Zot!*, and the *Time Warp Trio* series. A former elementary school teacher, Jon lives in Brooklyn with his family. For more information, visit www.jsworldwide.com.

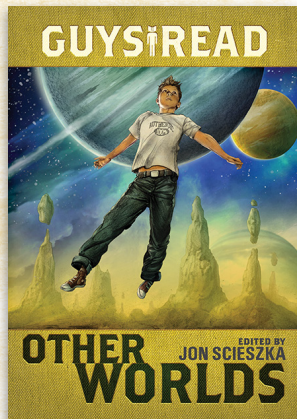


CLASS CHEER

Guys read!

Girls read!

We all read
GUY'S READ!

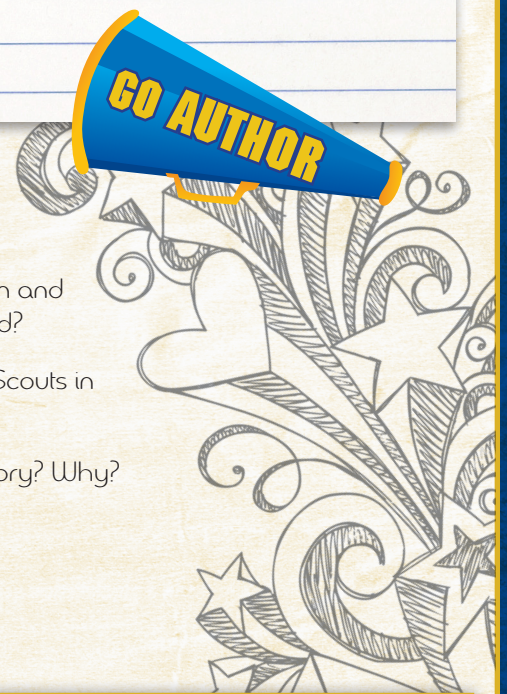


ABOUT THE SERIES

The Guys Read Library of Great Reading features brand-new, original short stories from some of the biggest names in children's literature. The series began by Jon Scieszka as a way to connect young guys with books and authors they love, and *Guys Read: Other Worlds* delivers ten tales of science fiction and fantasy from authors Rick Riordan, Rebecca Stead, Ray Bradbury, Tom Angleberger, and more. It's going to be out of this world!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jon Scieszka thanks the late Ray Bradbury for inspiring him to read science fiction and fantasy. Who inspires you to read? What types of stories are your favorites to read?
2. In "The Scout" by D. J. McHale, why does Kit feel he needs to stay a part of the Scouts in order to achieve his dream to "touch the stars"?
3. What are Kit's regrets after he learns the truth about his world at the end of the story? Why?
4. In Shannon Hale's "Bouncing the Grinning Goat," why does Spark leave home? What helps her find her way back?
5. What is the significance of Spark's name in the story?

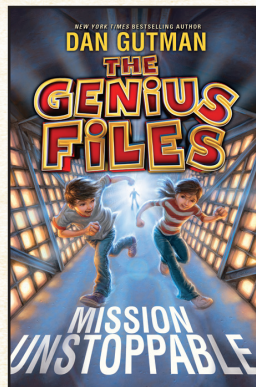
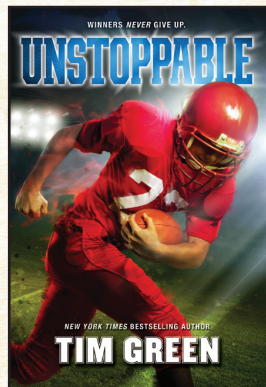
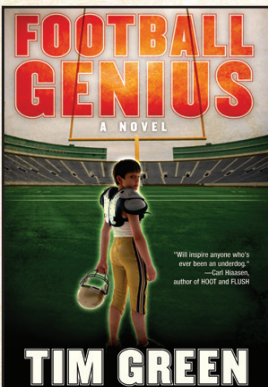
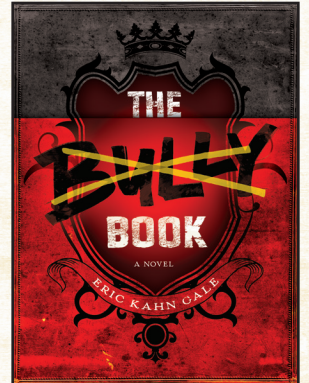
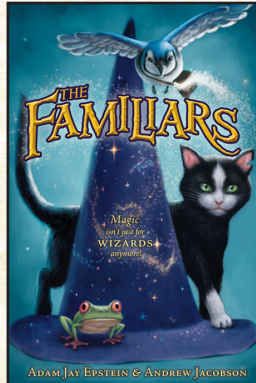


HARPERCOLLINS PRESENTS

CLASS ACTS

★ ★ ★ AUTHORS IN THE CLASSROOM ★ ★ ★

HOW MANY **CLASS ACTS** BOOKS HAVE YOU READ?

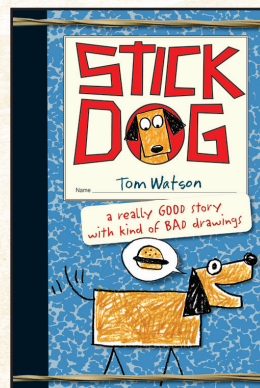
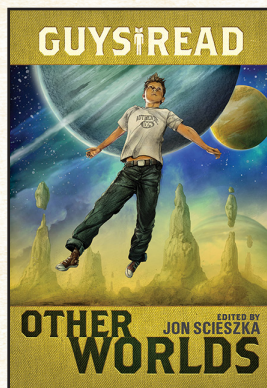
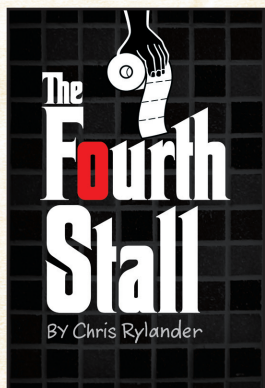
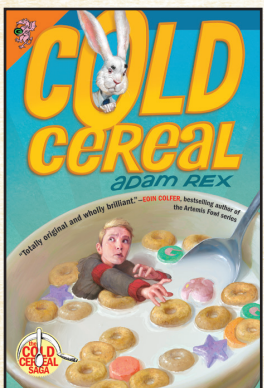
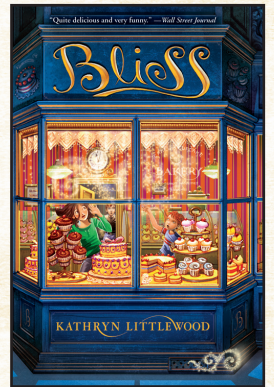
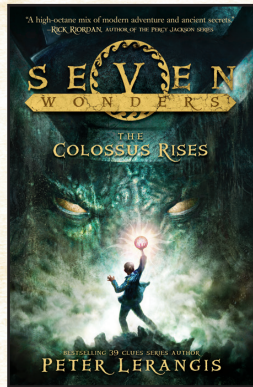
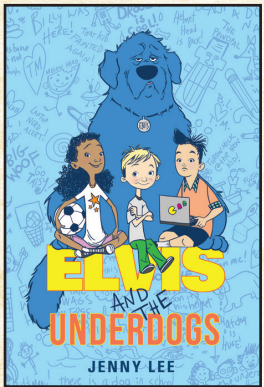
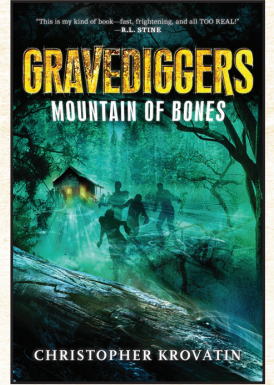
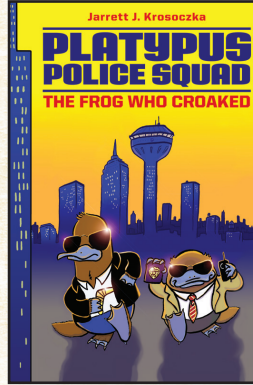


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HARPERCOLLINS PRESENTS

CLASS ACTS

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GUYS READ



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WORLDS**

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VOLUME 3—GUYS READ: THE SPORTS PAGES

GUYS  READ

OTHER WORLDS

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**WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
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GUYS READ: OTHER WORLDS

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First Edition



BEFORE WE BEGIN . . .

What would happen if invading warlords from another planet landed on your school's basketball court?

Or what if you took your older brother's armor and ran away from home and the only way you could feed yourself was to pretend you were a tough and maybe magically powerful bouncer at a village tavern?

Or what if smart robot shoes joined together to revolt against their human masters?

You would be in the middle of some great science fiction and fantasy. That's what.

All fiction and storytelling is answering that "What if . . . ?" question. But science fiction and fantasy go a step further: They bend the rules of reality. They get to imagine

the “What if?” in completely other worlds.

And that is why good science fiction and fantasy stories can be so mind-expandingly fun.

The first science fiction stories I ever read were written by a guy named Ray Bradbury. They were in a book titled *The Illustrated Man*. In it, the tattoos on this guy’s body came to life and told stories about an evil house, a Martian soldier, astronauts stranded on Venus, a time travel agency, and a mess of other freaky happenings.

Ray Bradbury died in 2012. And I’m sorry I never got to meet him. Because I wanted to thank him for writing those stories that got me started reading science fiction and fantasy by Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, L. Sprague de Camp, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Philip K. Dick, J. R. R. Tolkien, Terry Pratchett, Jules Verne, H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Heinlein, and a mess of others.

Now there are hundreds of amazing new science fiction and fantasy writers. Just look on the back cover of this book. We’ve got a bunch of the best for you. A nice mix of superstar writers you already know and some surprising writers you will be glad to meet.

We also have one very special addition to this volume. We have a story of Mr. Bradbury’s called “Frost and Fire.” A tribute to the guy who inspired me, and so

many other readers and writers.

Thank you, Ray Bradbury.

Thank you, science fiction and fantasy writers and creators of other worlds.

Jon Scieszka



THE SCOUT

BY D. J. MACHALE

Kit was on his own.

That was his first mistake.

He was the kind of guy who didn't follow the rules, especially if he saw no good reason to. He wasn't a troublemaker, but unlike most of his friends, who blindly bowed to authority, he made his decisions based on what common sense told him was right . . . even when he was the only one who felt that way.

His latest misadventure began innocently enough on a camping trip with his Scout troop. The plan was to leave their base with a group of thirteen Scouts and two Leaders on a two-day excursion through rocky, desertlike terrain to practice survival skills. Kit didn't see the point other

than to earn a badge that he couldn't have cared less about. He laughed at the Scouts who proudly displayed their awards on a sash that proved they could swim a mile or treat wounds or repeatedly hit a bull's-eye. Kit could do all those things, better than most. He just didn't feel the need to show off his accomplishments by sporting colorful badges. He knew what he was capable of and that was good enough for him.

The Scout Leaders didn't agree. They wanted their young charges to compete with one another, which was why Kit found himself trudging across the blazing desert with a light backpack along with twelve other sweaty Scouts. He wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else, but with two Leaders keeping a watchful eye on every move they made there was no way he could dodge what was sure to be a grueling, pointless couple of days.

It was hot. Torturous, nasty, pass-out hot. That didn't stop the Leaders from driving the boys deep into the desert. Five miles, ten miles. They passed towering cliffs and crossed bone-dry riverbeds. Rationing water was crucial. Each Scout started off with a small bottle of water that had to last until they found resources in the desert, which wasn't easy. The Leaders instructed them to keep their mouths moist by sucking on small pebbles to activate their salivary

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glands. Kit was way ahead of them. He had been working on a couple of pebbles long before the Leaders offered the tip. He wanted to point out that if this were a true survival situation they wouldn't be hiking, like idiots, during the heat of the day. Instead they would be resting in the shade to conserve energy and reduce their sweat output. But this wasn't his show, so he quietly went along.

He made a point of veering into the shade whenever possible, even if it meant adding a few extra steps. He didn't talk, unlike the others, who were laughing and joking from the get-go. Kit wondered if the Leaders realized how much precious energy they were wasting. It seemed to him that they were driving the Scouts hard and letting them make dumb mistakes. But why? Was it another test? Another competition? Or did they just want to push them to the brink of dehydration and exhaustion for fun? It sure seemed that way. Or maybe the Leaders were just as clueless as the Scouts. Whatever the case, Kit wasn't about to do anything that would make the adventure any worse than it already was, so he kept his mouth shut and sucked on his pebbles.

Once they had hiked farther into the desert than Kit had ever been before, the true rules of the excursion were revealed. It was indeed a competition. The Leaders split the group in two. Each would take half the Scouts and

march in a different direction. Whichever group fared better would be treated to an exceptional meal when they returned to base. The losers would be left to watch with envy.

Kit had no idea who would be the judge or what the criteria for winning might be and didn't care. What he saw was an opportunity. The Scouts were split up . . . seven in one group and six in the other. Kit made sure he was with the group of seven. Soon after the two teams went in different directions he marched up to his Leader and requested permission to join the *other* group. He explained that his good friend was with them and he worried that his buddy might be in over his head. He asked permission to join them so he could look out for the guy. The Leader complimented Kit on his leadership qualities and sent him on his way to catch up with the others.

Kit didn't have a close friend in the other group.

He had no intention of joining them.

What he wanted was to be on his own, and with both Leaders thinking he was with the other, he got his wish.

Once certain that he couldn't be seen by either group, he pulled off his pack, found some shade, and got off his feet. He wasn't thrilled about having to spend two days in the desert alone, but knew he was far better off on his

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own than trudging along with a bunch of clueless rookies. His plan was to lay low, conserve his energy and his water, then march back into camp and announce that he had gotten lost but managed to survive with no help. Who knows? Maybe he'd even be declared the winner of the dumb contest.

Kit put up his feet and relaxed, comfortable for the first time in hours and confident that his adventure in the desert was going to be far less torturous than if he had followed the rules.

Digging through his pack he saw that the Scouts had equipped him with a few essential survival tools: a long length of light rope, a thin reflective blanket, a simple first aid kit, flint and steel to spark a fire, a small hunting knife, and an item that was only to be used in a dire emergency . . . a communication device. If he were truly in trouble he could use it to call for help. The Leaders may have wanted to push the Scouts to the limit and test their abilities, but they also wanted everyone back alive.

Kit had no intention of using the device. He was going to make it on his own, whether or not he would be rewarded with an official badge or a special meal.

Knowing that as soon as night fell the desert temperature would plunge from searing hot to bone-numbing cold,

Kit erected a simple shelter using lengths of scrub that he propped against a wall of rust-colored rock. He gathered kindling and found enough dry wood to use as fuel. With a few quick flicks of metal on stone, he sparked up the tinder and in minutes he had a crackling fire that would keep him warm during the long desert night.

Sunset came quickly. It was stunning, complete with long streaks of orange and lavender clouds that hung above the distant mountains. When the sun dropped from sight the temperature dropped with it, but Kit felt warm and secure with his fire and shelter. He planned to get up early and search for food and water in the cool morning hours, though he wasn't stressed about it. He knew that if he came up empty he'd still be okay. He'd been hungry before. Gutting it out for two days wouldn't be a problem.

Kit stretched out in the shelter with his head resting on his pack and only his thoughts to keep him company. With his mind completely clear, his thoughts turned once again to a difficult decision he had been weighing for months: He wanted to quit the Scouts. His parents had forced him to join, saying it was every guy's duty to serve. Kit had signed up to make his folks happy but never bought into the Scout culture. He loved being outdoors and had made several good friends, but he didn't see any purpose to the

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regimentation and military-like training. It wasn't his style. Quitting would upset his parents for sure, and the Leaders would do their best to convince him to stay, but he wasn't sure if he could stick it out until his mission was complete.

His mission.

It was the only reason he had stuck it out with the Scouts as long as he had.

Kit lay back and looked up to the night sky. Being in the desert, away from the glow of civilization, he saw more stars than he ever remembered seeing before. An endless canopy of lights spread from horizon to horizon. It was so incredibly clear that Kit felt as if he could gaze through them to the other side of the universe. The immensity of it all was both staggering and humbling as he tried to comprehend how many different worlds he might be viewing. How many civilizations? How many people? How many lives were beginning and ending at that exact moment? He wondered which of the twinkling spots held life and which were nothing more than gaseous, burning masses . . . and how many people were out there staring back at him, wondering the exact same thing? The idea that he might be gazing at multiple living worlds was a staggering concept that was hard to imagine, since he couldn't see any actual signs of life.

Or could he?

A single, shimmering “star” moved across the sky. At first he thought his eyes were playing tricks and it was the residual impression left by another bright star. He blinked, but it was still there, moving steadily and quickly. Kit sat up and tracked it until it disappeared behind the distant ridge of mountains. The sight threw him. Speculating about the potential for life while gazing at a billion stars was one thing; seeing an actual sign of intelligent life speeding by was far more dramatic. What could it have been? A satellite? A space station orbiting the globe? Or was it a craft from another planet swinging by to take a peek at his home?

Seeing that tiny speck of light moving through the sky fired Kit’s imagination. There was life out there. He knew that. Everybody knew that. Reaching out to it was something he had dreamed of since he was old enough to put his eye to a telescope. That ambition still burned, and it took a simple moving light to remind him of that . . . and to question his thoughts about quitting the Scouts. As much as he didn’t appreciate their methods and rigid regulations, they offered him the best chance to touch the stars.

His thoughts were suddenly alive with possibilities, which made falling asleep next to impossible. But that was

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okay. Kit liked thinking through challenges, and there was no better time to do it than while he was alone, staring at a sky full of stars. He lay back, let his mind float up to the heavens, and eventually drifted off to sleep.

He might have slept through the night and well into the next day if it hadn't been for a loud explosion that shattered the tranquility of the desert. Kit sat up immediately, crashing his head into the branches of his shelter. What was that? He hadn't dreamed it, for he could still hear its echo drifting over the barren landscape. It was morning. The sun had barely crept over the mountains, so the temperature had yet to begin its inevitable climb. He shivered. His campfire had long since burned out, and his thin Scout uniform did little to provide warmth.

The slight discomfort was the last thing on his mind. He scrambled to his feet and quickly climbed onto the rock where he had built his lean-to. He stood on top and scanned the desert, doing a slow 360, looking for anything that might have created the boom. There was nothing to see but miles of scrub and sand and rock. He waited and listened in case another explosion followed. He heard nothing but the wind and the far-off cries of birds in search of their morning meal.

He shrugged and was about to jump down when his eye

caught movement. Not on the ground; in the sky. A dark speck appeared that at first looked like a hovering bird. But birds didn't hover. He watched with curiosity and soon realized that it was growing closer. Fast. Whatever it was, it was falling. It didn't appear to have aerodynamic capability. Or power. Whatever it was, it was freefalling . . . and headed for Kit.

There was less chance of getting hit by a falling meteor than getting struck by lightning, but Kit wasn't taking chances. He jumped down from the rock and pressed against it for protection.

The mysterious mass grew larger. Kit realized that if it were indeed a meteor, the explosion could have been the sonic boom it created when it tore through the atmosphere, faster than the speed of sound.

As it dropped ever closer to the ground, Kit could make out detail . . . enough to prove that it was not a meteor after all. Its shape was too perfect. It looked to be made up of several uniformly round spheres that were connected together to form a mass that resembled a bunch of grapes. That meant it was manmade. The realization brought him back to the point of light he had seen moving through the night sky. Was this the object he had seen? The plummeting device could be a satellite whose orbit had decayed

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enough for gravity to grab hold and pull it back home.

The object was going to miss him by a few hundred yards. Confident that he wasn't in danger, Kit climbed back up onto the rock to get the best view of the descent. He wondered if the other Scouts were watching . . . wherever they were. They had to have heard the sonic boom.

The falling mass was seconds from crashing. Kit braced for a violent impact followed by total destruction. He wondered if the spheres would break apart and scatter across the desert floor, and he tensed up, ready to dive out of the way in case any exploded debris came his way.

There was a brief whistling sound . . . and then it hit.

The object didn't break up. It bounced. The entire mass was launched back into the air, intact. The collection of spheres spun wildly, the force of impact sending it twisting and turning. It looked more like a child's toy than a mysterious object that had fallen from space. It sailed impossibly high before gravity took hold once more and pulled it back to hit the ground and bounce again.

Kit jumped down from his observation platform and took off running toward it.

The object continued to bounce, each time hitting with less energy and getting less height. It soon stopped launching altogether and tumbled wildly over the uneven desert

floor. When it was finally close to settling, the object bounced off a sheer wall of rock and rolled into a wide, dry riverbed . . . falling down and out of sight.

Kit sprinted across the scrubby sand, leaping over small rocks and dodging gnarled trees. He no longer cared about using energy or wasting precious fluid. His curiosity had blasted those worries out of his head. After running flat out for nearly five minutes, he slowed when he neared the edge of the culvert where the object had disappeared. The thought struck him that if it were a failed spacecraft there might be toxic fumes or spilled fuel or any number of other dangerous substances that he would be wise to avoid. He had learned all about such things as part of his training. He slowed to a walk, then crept forward and peered cautiously over the edge.

The craft, or whatever it was, lay jammed against the far edge of the deep, dry riverbed. There was no hiss of escaping gas or metallic ticking from a cooling engine. The large device appeared to be as low-tech as could be, still looking like a massive bunch of grapes. Each of the dark-gray spheres was two feet in diameter, making the overall size of the wreck close to that of a small truck. There were no markings or identifying numbers printed anywhere. Two of the spheres had been damaged during the crash and hung

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like deflated balloons. That spoke volumes. This device was designed to do exactly what it had done . . . bounce. The shredded spheres showed that they were fabricated out of something soft but durable. They dangled like limp rags in front of an opening that had been torn apart during the tumultuous crash.

Kit slid down the near-vertical side of the culvert until he was on the same level as the wreck. It appeared much larger and more daunting than when he had been looking down on it from above. Kit made his way slowly, cautiously, toward the mass and the gash in its side that would reveal its contents. He didn't expect there to be a living person inside. Nobody could have survived such a violent landing.

Kit continued to move closer, staring at the gaping black opening. He stopped a few feet away, knelt down on one knee, then leaned over and peered inside.

Black. That's all he could see. He leaned forward and reached his hand out to touch one of the spheres. It was indeed soft, but rugged.

A single green light flashed on inside. Kit jumped back in surprise, landing on his butt. He quickly crawled away backward, afraid of . . . what? An alien creature with a scrambled brain that might reach out and grab him? A moment later he heard the slight whine of a machine powering to

life. Something was inside. Kit was torn between fear and curiosity. Both prevented him from moving.

The whirring sound grew louder. Whatever was in there, it was firing up.

There was a loud metallic clicking sound followed by the complete self-disassembly of the craft. It was as if a latch had been released that had been holding the spheres together. The balls that were clustered together simultaneously fell away and tumbled across the dry riverbed, rolling and bouncing every which way. One rolled up to Kit, and he instinctively kicked it away. They seemed harmless, but he couldn't be sure. They bounced off each other and rolled like oversize toys, scattering across the culvert until they eventually came to rest.

What remained of the wreck was a rigid wire frame.

Inside the skeleton, on the ground, was a large toy.

It was a miniature truck, but like nothing Kit had ever seen before. It stood about two feet high with six wire wheels that looked as though they could handle most any terrain. Above the wheels was a flat, black, rectangular slab that was roughly eight inches thick. The top surface was shiny smooth. Surrounding the body were silver tubes, stacked three high, running the length of each side. The green light glowed from beneath the body, above the array of wheels.

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It was a miniature all-terrain vehicle.

Kit sat in the dusty culvert, staring at the small truck. Where had it come from? Was it a military experiment gone awry? Was it part of the survival training? Or was there something more incredible going on? Had this come from deep space? If so, why did it crash here? Was it intentional or a mistake?

The device didn't move. Neither did Kit. He had plenty of questions and not a single answer . . . but he knew how to start asking. He reached into the cargo pocket on his thigh and pulled out his communicator. The Scouts had been told to use the device only in an emergency. Kit wasn't sure if this qualified and didn't care. He pressed and held the power button, waiting for the device to boot up. His plan was to report the crash to the Scout Leaders back at base and request that they send out a team to investigate. They could use the signal from his communicator to pinpoint his position.

As far as he was concerned, the survival exercise was over.

Kit glanced at his communicator, expecting to see the display of icons that led to its various functions. What he saw instead was static. He shook the device. It didn't help. There was power, but no function. He was about to turn it off and on again . . .

. . . when the whirring sound of the little machine's engines grew louder. The wheels remained stationary as the body above them slowly rotated forty-five degrees, then stopped. The silver tubes that ran along the two longer sides pivoted away from the body until the three ends on one side were facing forward and the opposite three were facing back.

The three facing forward . . . were facing Kit.

Kit stared into the dark mouths of the tubes.

There was a short, sharp whine as if the machine were powering up.

Those few seconds saved Kit's life.

He reacted more out of instinct than training. He dove to his right as a focused blast of energy erupted from the device's front-facing tubes, sending out an invisible salvo that hit the wall of the culvert behind the spot where Kit had been sitting, creating an eruption of dirt and rock that blew high into the sky.

Kit lay on his belly, shocked and paralyzed with fear as dirt and debris rained down on him. The machine slowly rotated, once again aiming its silver tubes at him . . . tubes that had revealed their true nature: They were weapons. This time Kit made a conscious decision to move and rolled away quickly. The short whine of energy built again and the

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machine fired. The powerful blast hit the spot Kit had just vacated, creating a geyser of sand that left a gaping wound in the ground . . . that could as easily have been in Kit.

Kit didn't stop to analyze what was happening. He scrambled to his feet and sprinted to his right, kicking the loose spheres out of his way. He drilled one toward the weapon at the exact moment it fired again. The blast hit the sphere, vaporizing it.

There was no time to marvel at the machine's capabilities or wonder why it was attacking him. The training expedition had suddenly become a fight for his life.

He ran for the wall of the culvert, desperately scanning for a spot where he could climb quickly and escape from the death trap. Behind him he heard the sound of the machine powering up to fire again. He instantly launched to his right as the truck let loose with another lethal blast of energy. It barely missed him, though he felt its power tickle his skin as the charge flashed by on its way to blow out another section of the culvert wall.

The few seconds the machine took to recharge its weapon, and the sound it created, were helping to keep Kit alive. After each shot there was a short window of time for him to move. He sprinted for the side of the culvert, jumped onto a boulder, and launched up to grab the edge.

Behind him, the weapon was powering up. The window had closed.

Kit let go of the edge and dropped as the weapon unloaded and blew out a chunk of the wall where he had been hanging seconds before. The deadly shots may have been telegraphed, but they were always on target.

Kit had his few seconds, so he jumped right back up onto the rock, launched himself up to the lip of the culvert, and managed to pull himself out. Figuring that another shot was on its way, he quickly log-rolled away as the inevitable blast nailed the spot where he had climbed out, missing him by only a few feet.

He was out and safe. The machine no longer had a clear shot at him. Kit took a chance and crawled back to the edge on his belly to see what the machine would do now that he had escaped. His hope was that he was being targeted because the infernal truck perceived him as a threat, and now that he was out of the culvert, the machine would stop shooting at him.

He peered cautiously over the lip and saw, as he hoped, that the device had stopped firing. He could breathe again. The machine no longer felt threatened, and neither did Kit. Cautiously, he reached for the communicator in his thigh pocket. He needed to alert the Scout Leaders. He moved slowly. The last thing he wanted to do was put

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himself back into the sights of the mechanical monster. He slipped the communicator out of his pocket and saw that the screen was still filled with static. How could that be? His communicator had never failed like this.

The machine's engine whined to life. Kit looked quickly back into the culvert to see the device's wheels begin to turn. It rolled slowly out of the skeletal frame that had held the protective spheres and onto the sand. Once clear, it lurched forward with surprising speed and rolled across the dry riverbed . . . toward Kit.

How was that possible? Who was controlling it? His hope that the machine had only been defending itself was gone.

It was on the attack.

The efficient all-terrain vehicle sped along the arid river bottom, headed for the culvert wall. Kit was sure it would be a short journey. The wall was too steep. He relaxed, knowing that the mysterious weapon was trapped.

He was wrong.

The rolling machine hit the wall. Its six wheels dug into the sand and the truck effortlessly climbed the near-vertical rise.

The machine couldn't be stopped . . . and it was coming for Kit.

Kit didn't stick around to marvel at the device's climbing

abilities or wonder about its motive. In seconds it would be back on his level and shooting again. All he could do was run. He took off, headed back toward the camp he had made the night before. It was as good a direction as any, and he needed his water and survival supplies. Minutes before, he had no intention of using any of them; now he feared his life might depend on it.

The sun was growing higher and the day was getting warm. Kit hardly noticed. His entire focus was on putting distance between himself and the miniature ATV weapon. He didn't even glance back to see if it was following him. There was only one thing on his mind . . . get back to the Scout base. Surely the Leaders would know what the marauding machine was about.

Kit made it back to his small camp without having another shot fired at him. He grabbed his pack and sat down to catch his breath and take a swig of water. It was going to be a long day. The last thing he wanted to do was pass out from exhaustion while trying to outrun the killer machine. He was going to have to be crafty. He took a single long pull of water, then grabbed his communicator.

As before, the screen was filled with static. It defied logic, for he had definitely checked it before leaving the Scout base. What could have happened between then and

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now? Not only was he out of contact, he couldn't use the tracking function to find his way back. Without that ability, he was lost. He had to force himself to calm down, catch his breath, and think.

BOOM!

The rock he was crouching behind exploded above his head. He jumped forward, flying through a storm of rubble that had blown out from the point of impact. He hit and rolled, then looked around quickly to see where the machine was.

It was nowhere to be seen. How was that possible? How could it have targeted him so precisely without a clear sight line? He couldn't afford to underestimate the abilities of this machine because its intent was clear: It was hunting him.

Kit grabbed his pack and took off running while threading his arms through the straps. His sole focus was on finding a place to hide. He rounded a high mound of boulders and stopped to look back. Peering from around a large rock he saw that the truck was several hundred yards back . . . and closing. Its wheels spun quickly, kicking up dust in its wake as it moved impossibly fast over the desert floor, directly toward him.

Kit quickly took off in another direction. He was faster

than the machine. He could outrun it, but for how long? Eventually he would run out of gas and the hunter would catch its prey.

BOOM! BOOM!

Two explosions ripped the ground to Kit's right. The mechanical demon had recalculated his route and was lobbing salvos at him, forcing him to dodge back and forth to make a difficult target. He knew he couldn't keep that up for long. He had to hope that whatever power source was driving the monster would run out before his own did.

Far ahead the desert gave way to the foothills of the towering mountains that ringed the desert. He ran that way with the hope of hitting terrain that would offer a place to hide.

The barrage ended. Kit didn't think for a second that it was because the machine had given up. A quick look over his shoulder showed it was still speeding after him. Kit reasoned that he was either out of range or the machine was rationing its own energy. He didn't question his luck, he just kept running. There was at least a mile to cover before he would hit the trees, but as long as the machine wasn't shooting, he'd make it. Kit was in good shape. The endless sprints he had done while training with the Scouts were paying off. Maybe the leaders knew what they were

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doing after all. If he hadn't been so highly trained, he would be dead. With plenty of reserve left he poured on the speed.

As he neared the foothills he scanned ahead, looking for an escape route. He was about to reach trees and the uneven terrain that led to the mountains. As fast and agile as the machine was, the rugged terrain would force it to slow down. That gave Kit an advantage. He knew where he was going; the machine didn't. His hopes began to rise . . .

. . . and were immediately shot down when an explosion erupted directly in front of him that blew gravel into his eyes and knocked him to the ground. Hard. He was stunned and disoriented, but his survival instinct was intact. He rolled twice and popped up to continue running. That was the good news. Bad news was he was hurt. He had fallen on his left shoulder and torn open a nasty gash on his upper arm. It was painful and bloody, but not life-threatening. He would have to ignore it until he was safe . . . assuming he ever got safe.

Kit arrived at the trees and immediately started running an erratic course to confuse the machine. His plan was to lose his pursuer in the maze of boulders and trees and be long gone while it hunted for him in vain. As long as he didn't outsmart himself and choose a twisting course that

led him directly across the path of his hunter, he'd be fine. The odds were in his favor . . .

. . . but he needed rest. Desperately. He had been running constantly in the ever-increasing desert heat and was nearing exhaustion. Kit took a sharp right and threaded his way through the trees along the base of the mountains, looking for a place of refuge where he could catch his breath and plot his next move. He found it in a stand of trees that surrounded a mound of massive boulders. He ducked behind it, found a sliver of shade, and dropped to his knees. He yanked his pack off and fumbled quickly for his water. The bottle was still two-thirds full, but he could have downed a dozen times that amount. Still, the water soothed his parched throat. He had to force himself not to drain the bottle.

With the pressure off, Kit took stock. His arm was bleeding badly. The agony came in waves, as if his heart were sending a throbbing surge of pain with every beat. He dug through his pack for the first aid kit. There was a roll of gauze that he quickly used to wrap the wound and stem the blood flow. He didn't bother with the antiseptic gel, figuring that by the time infection became an issue he would either be safe . . . or dead. With the gash tied off he sat down with his back against the rock. His every sense

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was on alert, tuned to detect the sound of wheels creeping across sand or the whine of a weapon powering up for another attack.

There was nothing. He could relax, at least for a while.

His mind raced, calculating his next move and trying to understand what was happening. He had been in the Scouts for over a year but had never encountered anything remotely like this. It was hard for him to believe it was part of the survival training, but when it came to the Scouts, nothing surprised him. It was an organization that had become far more militaristic than when his father had belonged. Then again, life in general was very different from when his father was young.

Poverty was widespread and growing daily. More people went hungry than the government dared to admit. Cities had become impossibly crowded. Housing was a constant challenge. Homeless families, desperate for more space, moved to the country, where tent cities sprang up. The crime rate was off the charts.

The wealthy still lived in comfort, but they were a small fraction of the ever-growing population. Everyone else was left to fight for a sane and safe existence.

Joining the Scouts was a route that many took as a way to deal with the growing horror of poverty and hunger. The

organization operated as an extension of the government and, by association, the wealthy. The government provided food and housing for all Scouts and their families. In return they gave their lives . . . and their blind allegiance.

Some Scout troops provided security for government buildings and big businesses. Others were used as escorts for wealthy industrialists who feared being harassed or kidnapped by the angry, wretched masses. Kit had even heard rumors of how some Scout troops were being used to keep peace in the tent cities by overrunning the camps and rousting “undesirables.”

Kit had never been asked to do any of those things and hated to believe that the Scouts had become a violent tool of the government. If it were true, it might follow that they had created the killing machine that was chasing him. It could be a new weapon to be used in what the government called their “War on Poverty.” That was the catchphrase they used, but everyone knew it was really a war on the poverty-stricken.

But why was it after him? Was their so-called survival training really meant to be a test of the weapon’s efficiency? Had the thirteen Scouts been set up as guinea pigs? The thought stirred the kind of anger and disillusion that had been building inside of Kit for a very long time.

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His only consolation was that he was enrolled in a Scout program that had nothing to do with security or violence. He was being prepared for something far more positive and exciting.

He was going to touch the stars.

There was life out there. Kit knew it. Everyone knew it. The Scouts were good-will ambassadors to other worlds. Their mission involved traveling to distant civilizations in the hopes of gathering knowledge and wisdom that might help them deal with the problems they faced at home. Several expeditions had already been launched. Kit was scheduled to leave on his own adventure at the end of his two-year training. It was a trip that held the promise of delivering all that he had dreamed of as a child.

But at that moment he wasn't sure if he would survive long enough to see his family again.

He had to find his way back to base. Quickly. Before nightfall. He was fairly certain he could dodge the machine for the rest of the day, but once it got dark he would be blind and the mechanical monster would have him. Kit dug out his communicator in the hopes that whatever was wrong with it had magically fixed itself.

It hadn't. The screen still showed static. He was going to have to find his own way back.

He looked up to the mountains and tried to visualize seeing them from base. The desert was ringed by steep cliffs, making it next to impossible to tell which way was which. There were no single, recognizable peaks or telltale valleys. It was all so frustratingly constant. But sitting still and fretting over it wasn't an option. He had to make a choice and trust it was the right one.

Kit jammed the first aid kit back into his pack, hoisted it onto his damaged shoulder, turned for the trail, and . . . came face-to-face with the machine.

It had been approaching slowly and silently, like a predatory snake, and it now stood less than twenty feet away. But how? What was controlling this demon? Could it think and reason? That seemed impossible, yet there it was, blocking his way.

Kit threw the water bottle at it. It was a feeble gesture but all he could come up with as he jumped to his left to avoid being shot.

The truck didn't fire. The silver tubes were locked on Kit, but no surge of energy erupted. Instead it moved forward slowly.

Kit didn't think for a second that it had given up. He knew why it was moving closer . . . it didn't want to miss again. It proved that the machine was even more dangerous

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than Kit feared, for by changing tactics it revealed that it could think.

Kit sprinted around the mound of boulders and headed toward the mountains. He now realized that losing the machine was impossible, for each time he tried to shake it, the maniacal truck found him with ease. Could it see? Was someone sitting behind a console at a command center watching his every move through the eyes of the demon robot? Or maybe he was being observed by an orbiting satellite. Whatever the technology was, Kit no longer felt as though he could shake the killer. His only hope was to outrun it to the safety of his base. Ignoring his aching shoulder and rapidly growing thirst, Kit ran deeper into the trees, hoping they would shield him. All the while he scanned the foothills, desperate to find an escape route.

CRACK!

A towering tree was struck directly ahead of him. The mechanical beast wasn't far behind and was no longer holding out for a better shot. The force of the invisible missile blew out the base of the tree and sent it toppling back toward Kit. Kit changed course and ran toward the mountains, barely avoiding the tree as it crashed to the ground, cutting off the path he had been on. His new route led him to a steep wall of rock that he climbed quickly, hoping it

would slow his pursuer. When he crested he was faced with a towering, sheer cliff that stretched to either side as far as he could see. It was a dead end. His only options were to run right or left. Neither way provided any protection.

Kit turned left and sprinted along the base of the cliff, dodging boulders and trees, until he spotted something that could be his lifeline. It was a cleft in the rock face . . . an opening that led to a slot canyon. He had studied satellite views of these mountains and knew they were laced with dozens of narrow canyons. They snaked through the heart of the mountains, making several twists and turns before opening up on the far side. They could provide ample protection from a missile fired from the rear.

Unfortunately, some canyons led to dead ends. There was no way to know which was which.

The thought hit him that by knocking down that tree and cutting off the path, the diabolical machine might have forced him into heading toward the canyons. Was it that smart? Could this be a trap? It didn't matter. There were no other options. He had to risk it and sprinted toward the gap.

The canyon was narrow, which created welcome shade from the relentless heat of the sun. Kit ran as fast as possible without slamming his wounded shoulder into a wall.

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The slot canyon wove through the rock, sometimes growing wide enough to sprint while other times narrowing down so that he had to slow to a walk and squeeze sideways to get through. There was no telling how far it was to the other side. All he could do was keep moving.

He pushed himself relentlessly until his lungs ached. He needed to rest and stopped in a narrow section of the canyon. While catching his breath he made another desperate attempt to use his communicator. He pulled it from his cargo pocket and stared at the static-filled screen.

It was useless.

Or was it? A realization swept over Kit that made him want to scream with anger. The communicator was also a navigation device. It used satellite technology to pinpoint his location and direct him to whatever spot he chose. And it worked both ways. The communicator not only received information, it transmitted it. If he were lost, the Scouts could zero in on his coordinates to find him.

Kit wanted to throw the device to the ground and crush it under his boot.

The truth was all too obvious. Back in the dry culvert the mechanical rover had come to life at the exact moment that Kit had activated the device. The monster always knew exactly where he was because it had locked onto the

signal from his communicator like a bloodhound following a scent. How could he have been so stupid?

Kit didn't waste time beating himself up. He powered down the communicator and continued his journey through the slot canyon. He knew he couldn't lose the killer in there, for it would have already tracked him in, but once he got to the far side he would now have a fighting chance. With the machine blinded, there was hope. All he had to do was get to the far side. His confidence grew . . .

. . . until he rounded a sharp corner of the canyon and hit a dead end.

The chasm was sealed off by an avalanche of rocks that had tumbled from the steep cliffs high above and filled the narrow crevice, completely blocking the way. The rock slide could have happened a century before or that morning. It didn't matter. He was doomed from the moment he ducked into the canyon.

But he wasn't ready to give up. The fallen rocks had actually created another possible escape route: The tumbled pile was climbable. A quick look up showed that the rim of the narrow canyon was within reach. It was a long, steep climb on an unstable pile of rocks, but it was his only shot. Kit began to climb when another idea hit him. He took out his communicator, and after a deep, nervous breath he

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powered it back up. Again, the screen showed static. He scanned the wide section of canyon until he saw a narrow crack in the wall opposite the rock pile. He ran to it and placed the communicator inside, deep enough to be out of sight, then turned back to climb up the rubble.

It was easy going . . . at first. The pile of rocks provided decent handholds and footholds for his desperate climb. But the pile quickly grew steep. He had to slow down and use caution. His fear was that the robot would arrive below and start shooting before he was up and over, but it would have been a mistake to climb recklessly. One wrong move and he'd tumble down the steep rock pile and crash in front of the hunter, probably with a broken leg.

As he climbed he listened for any sound that would announce the arrival of the truck, or of its weapon powering up to shoot him. He didn't want to look down to see if it was there, or to realize how high he was. Kit wasn't great with heights. The last thing he needed was vertigo. The best and only thing he could do was to stay focused and climb.

He was twenty feet from the top when he heard it . . . the unmistakable whine of the demon's engine. It was moving fast, maybe because it realized it was about to lose its prey. Kit risked a look down . . . and saw it.

The little truck rounded a bend in the canyon far below, sped up to the dead end, and stopped. Kit froze, hoping that the monster would start shooting at the cleft in the wall where he had hidden his communicator. As soon as the shooting started he would make his final push to the top and hope that the explosive blasts would cover the sound of his escape.

The machine didn't move. Or shoot. What was it doing? Was it intelligent enough to recognize that there was no way a person could have squeezed through that narrow crack in the wall? The truck's body rotated until one set of its weapons was aimed at the cleft that held the hidden communicator.

Kit held his breath. This was it. As soon as the machine fired, he'd move.

But it didn't fire. What was it doing? Thinking?

The wait was torturous. Kit shifted his left foot slightly to get a solid base to jump off . . .

. . . and kicked a rock loose.

He froze.

The rock tumbled down and landed two feet from the machine with a sickening thump. The machine spun quickly until the gun barrels were pointed at the fallen rock.

Kit held his breath. He had no idea if this was a mindless

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machine that was simply firing at his communicator, or if it took every bit of information that was presented in order to calculate a fully informed firing solution.

There was no doubt that it had registered the fallen rock, which meant it could see or hear or both. He silently begged for the machine to unload on the rock . . . or swivel back and blast the hidden communicator. Either way he was poised and ready to scramble the last few feet to the top.

It was deathly quiet in the slot canyon. Kit felt as though he could hear his own heartbeat.

The machine stayed locked on the rock for a ten-second lifetime, then slowly rotated back toward the cleft that held the communicator. Kit let out a relieved breath . . .

. . . as the weapon spun back and turned skyward.

It had found him.

Kit began a desperate scramble to the top as the demon truck let loose. The pulse of energy hit the wall of rocks several feet to his right. It may have sensed where he was, but without his communicator to lock in on, its aim wasn't precise. The pulse blew out the rock wall, loosening the pile, creating another avalanche. Kit felt the rocks destabilize beneath his feet. The entire wall of rocks was going to fall and he was about to tumble down with it. If the fall didn't kill him the robot weapon would finish the job when he was dropped right in front of it.

Kit looked desperately for a handhold and saw a large boulder hanging above his right shoulder, held up by a fist-size rock wedged beneath it. He saw an opportunity, a long shot, but it was better than no shot. He reached for the smaller rock and yanked it out, releasing the larger boulder above. It fell fast and Kit had to dodge to his left to avoid being hit by the heavy boulder as it rumbled past him.

The machine fired again . . . and the entire wall collapsed. Rocks and boulders of all sizes tumbled down as Kit desperately scrambled to his left to try and avoid the heaviest concentration of falling rocks. He no longer feared the robot since it was more likely that he'd be battered to death in the tumultuous avalanche. He grasped wildly to get a handhold, forgetting the pain in his gashed shoulder.

The truck fired again, sending a spray of exploded rock toward Kit that peppered him with a stinging shower of debris that tore at his clothes. He was able to grab onto the point of a stable rock but knew he wouldn't be able to hang there for long. The best he could hope for was to control his own fall and pray that no boulders would crush him from above. He held on to the lifesaving rock, the muscles in his forearm burning. He had a brief moment of hope where he felt as though he might be able to hold on until the avalanche settled . . .

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. . . when the rock pulled from the dirt. Kit half fell, half slid down, crashing through a storm of dirt and debris until his feet hit the solid, sandy floor of the canyon. He quickly pushed off to get away from the bulk of the avalanche that continued to rain down around him. He stumbled back and slammed against the far wall of the canyon, knocking the air from his lungs. He was cut up and bleeding from more wounds than he cared to count, but he was alive and had no broken bones.

He spun toward the center of the canyon, ready to dodge another blast from the machine but saw that the small truck had been flipped up onto its side. It wasn't moving. Lying next to it was the large boulder Kit had dislodged.

It had done its job.

The proof of that was the deep, black streak across the rock face. . . and the crushed side of the machine. The silver weapons were pointed skyward, silent. There was no whine of an engine, no hint of a weapon powering up, no green light glowing beneath.

Kit didn't dare move as the dust settled around him and the tumbling rocks found their new resting place. He kept his eyes focused on the machine, expecting it to whine back to life and focus its weapons on him.

It didn't.

Kit took a few tentative steps toward the upended truck. He wanted to get a close look at the marauder that had been hunting him. There was no doubt that the boulder had delivered a crushing blow, for the machine's body had been torn from the wheels and one half had been ripped open to reveal its mechanical and electronic guts.

It would not move or fire again.

Kit knelt down next to it to get a closer look . . .

. . . as the shiny black surface of the body flickered with light.

Kit jumped back, ready to flee, but kept his eyes on the machine.

Nothing moved. Though the machine was covered with dust, Kit could clearly see that the damaged top surface was the only part of the device that showed life, lighting up as if it were a computer monitor. From ten feet away Kit could see images appearing. Moving images. Moments later, sound came from the damaged machine. It was clearly a man's voice that was speaking a language Kit had never heard before. The image of a man's face appeared on the glass. Was this the guy controlling the killer robot? Why would he be showing himself now? As frightened as he was, Kit needed to know.

He cautiously approached the crippled robot to get a

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better look. The man's voice was delivering what seemed to be a prepared speech. Was it a live transmission? Or something that was recorded and playing back? When he got close enough to make out detail, Kit saw a montage of what looked like burned-out buildings playing across the machine's surface. Some were still pictures, others were moving video. There were images of a city that had been destroyed by . . . what? An earthquake? A fire? Whatever had happened, it was devastating.

The man's voice continued throughout as if he were narrating a documentary.

Kit kicked at the machine. It didn't respond. He had nothing to fear. But what were the images it was showing?

On a hunch, Kit hurried back to the crevice where he had hidden his communicator. He pulled it out and inspected the face to see . . . icons. It was working normally. Was it a coincidence? Or had the machine been jamming his signal? If that was the case, now that the robot was out of commission its ability to interfere with his communicator would be gone as well. Kit scanned through the icons until he found the one he needed . . . the translation function. The communicators had the ability to take any language and turn it into his. He activated the function and held the communicator out toward the robot in order to record

both picture and sound. He wanted to bring it back to the Scout Leaders as part of his report.

As he recorded the display he watched the images and saw something that made his stomach twist. There were people walking through the rubble of the ruined city. People he recognized. They were Scouts, or at least they wore Scout uniforms.

They all carried weapons.

What was he looking at? What had happened while he was out in the desert? Had more of these killer robots landed in a city and gone on a rampage? Was he seeing images of what was left of his home? He didn't recognize any buildings or landmarks, but what was there to recognize about rubble? The only thing familiar about any of it was the Scouts.

Where were all the people who lived in this destroyed city? Who was the guy giving the speech? His image would appear every so often as he spoke. He was an old guy with short gray hair and he stood in front of a colorful blue logo that meant nothing to Kit. The man looked tired and scared, but he had a fierce determination in his eyes that made Kit believe he was somebody you didn't want to cross.

Kit had no idea what the guy was saying and wasn't sure

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he wanted to know because it couldn't be good. But it had to be important, so he continued to record the speech, and the images, in order to understand and then play it back for his Leaders.

After watching the carnage and the speech for several minutes, Kit realized that it was repeating. It turned out to be a continuous loop that lasted nearly a minute before playing again from the beginning. That meant Kit had captured it all, so he stopped recording and hit the icon that would run the translation program.

As it worked, Kit surveyed the rubble around him and realized how lucky he was to be alive. He grabbed his pack and slung it over his good shoulder. Now that the communicator was working, his new plan was to go back the way he had come and use the tracking function to lead him to the Scout base. Once there he would turn over the information and let the Scouts deal with it. He was done. All he wanted to do was get back and make sure that his parents were okay.

A soft tone indicated that the translation was complete. Kit considered not listening to it until he got back, but his curiosity was too strong. He hit the icon that would play the translated recording and stood watching the same images he had been watching over and over again. Only

this time, he understood the speech.

He listened. And watched. When the recording was finished he watched it again.

On the third time through, he started to cry.

He wanted to believe it was a hoax, but he knew in his heart that it wasn't. What he was seeing, and hearing, was something he had suspected might be possible but never wanted to believe would actually happen. Other Scouts talked about the possibility, but only in private and away from the Leaders' ears. His parents never thought events would lead to this and convinced Kit that they wouldn't.

But they had. The proof was all there.

The question was, what would he do with the information?

Kit stopped the playback and activated the tracking device. The powerful communicator quickly located a satellite, calculated his position, and plotted a course back to the Scout base . . . starting with a long walk back through the canyon. Kit hoisted his pack and started to walk. His body was moving forward, but his mind was somewhere else. Oddly, that helped to keep him going. He wasn't concerned about his thirst or his bleeding wounds or his throbbing shoulder. Those were trivial problems.

Not like the images he saw on that destroyed robot.

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He trudged out of the slot canyon, checked the tracking device, and followed the instructions that would bring him home. Part of him didn't want to make it back. He wanted the sun to knock him down and fry him so he wouldn't have to deal with the reality of the recording on his communicator.

Everything he had been told by those he trusted was a lie. He knew that now. He wanted to face them and hear the truth. He deserved that. All the Scouts deserved that. Though he understood why they hadn't been told.

If they had known the truth, they would never have gone along.

Kit trudged across the dry, sandy desert. His legs were leaden but he kept walking, relentlessly dragging one foot in front of the other. He hoped to come across the other Scouts. He wanted to show them the images so he wouldn't be alone. Alone with the truth.

His journey took most of the day. The sun was long past center and on its way to the horizon when he checked the communicator and estimated that if he didn't drop dead he'd be back at the Scout base before nightfall.

As confidence set in that he would make it, he had to decide what to do once he got there. Who could he trust? Who could he tell?

BOOM!

Another explosion echoed over the desert. Followed by another and then another. Many more followed. Too many to count, like the finale to a holiday fireworks display. But it wasn't a show.

He knew what he would see when he looked up. He feared it, but he looked.

The sky was filled with black dots that hovered like birds. But birds didn't hover. Each of the dots would soon grow to the size of a massive bunch of grapes, and when they hit the ground they would bounce across the desert before coming to rest and depositing their cargo. The sky was full of them, like a swarm of attacking bees. Kit stopped counting after he got to a hundred. They would land far behind him, farther away from the base. They wouldn't stop him from getting back. He was too close.

An hour more of zombielike shuffling passed and Kit finally saw his destination in the distance. The sun shone off of the multiple silver spires that stood like vigilant sentries in the desert. It was the Scout base, his home for more than a year, the place where he had been training for the trip of a lifetime. It was a trip he was told would be about learning and adventure and the sharing of ideas. But that wasn't the truth. He knew that now.

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All the badges. All the competition.

All lies.

The Scouts were being groomed for a much different mission.

He reached the final rise before he would drop down into the desert basin that held the base. That's where he stopped and gazed at the impressive facility that was going to be his portal to the stars. He had given them his life and his allegiance.

He knew what he was supposed to do. He had been trained.

The sound began to grow. He knew what it was without seeing, but he looked anyway. He turned back and saw what appeared to be a dust storm spread across the horizon. It was no storm. The dust was being kicked up by something else entirely.

The high-pitched whining grew louder. It was familiar, yet not. When he had heard it before there was only one source. Now there were at least a hundred. The multiple sounds joined together to form a single, teeth-jarring, gut-rattling fanfare. Moving across the desert floor in a single line that stretched across the horizon were dozens of the killing machines. He knew they would be coming, but the sight still made his knees weak. After all, he had

nearly been killed by one.

The first one.

The scout.

The first truck was sent alone, maybe to clear the way of any threats before the rest arrived. If that was the case then it had failed. It lay in a destroyed heap back in a hidden canyon while the threat it was supposed to eliminate had nearly made it back to his base ahead of the invasion.

Kit knew what he had to do. He had been trained.

He stood his ground, clutching his communicator. He didn't turn it off. Part of him wanted to be the target again. It would make his decision so much easier. The line of trucks grew closer. Soon they would be within firing distance. Kit listened for the telltale sound of their weapons charging to life.

They were nearly on him. Kit scanned the long line from side to side. They were spaced evenly, ten yards apart and stretched to both sides of him for as far as he could see. Their silver weapons were open and locked forward.

None were aimed at Kit. He wasn't the target. Not anymore. The line of small vehicles approached and rolled past him without any acknowledgment that he was even there. Kit was irrelevant. He turned and watched them move away, headed for the base.

THE SCOUT

Kit knew what he had to do. He had been trained.

He lifted his communicator and found, this time, the icon that was a bright red triangle. It was the icon they had all been trained to use if the base came under attack. It was the alert. All he had to do was hit that icon three times and every last Scout and Scout Leader in the base would know that they were about to be assaulted. Defensive forces would be called into play. Tactical weapons would emerge from underground. Steel walls would lift up from the desert floor to protect the silver spires. The base would become an impenetrable fortress. All would be safe so long as Kit hit the icon three times.

Kit knew what he had to do . . . and it had nothing to do with his training.

He dropped the communicator to the ground.

He then sat down in the sand to watch. He had been told that he could touch the stars. That part had been true. The lies were about what he would have been ordered to do once he got there.

The line of machines rolled into the base, unopposed. Unexpected.

Kit waited to see the little demons unleash their weapons the way they had done on him, but their mission turned out to be far more ambitious. Moments after the wave of

machines entered the base, the noise began. The explosions. The pointed attacks. Kit expected nothing less, based on the relentless pursuit he had endured through the desert.

The machines knew what they were doing. One by one the tall silver spires were engulfed in flames and toppled. None were spared. The rocket vehicles that were poised to take the next wave of Scout troops to the stars were being destroyed by small, rolling avengers. Within minutes the base was ablaze.

Kit saw Scouts running about, desperately trying to put out the flames, but it was a wasted effort. The robots would not be denied. There would be no launch vehicles left . . . no way to lift off from the base . . . no way to travel to the stars the way his predecessors for the last few years had done.

Kit had a moment of doubt. He could have prevented the destruction by activating the alert. Was it a mistake? He picked up his communicator, brushed off the dust, and once again played the video that had been a message sent by the builders of the invading robots. With the determined voice of the speaker as narration, Kit looked again at the images of the destroyed cities.

“ . . . if you are watching this, then our mission has succeeded. We are not a violent people by nature, but we

THE SCOUT

will defend ourselves to the last. The images of destruction you see here have come at your hands. We offered you friendship and help. We understood your plight. We knew that with your steadily warming atmosphere it was becoming impossible to sustain life. We were willing to be your lifeline, yet you saw us as a world to be conquered. We welcomed you with open arms and you attacked our cities in a brutal attempt to conquer and colonize. As you now know, we will not stand for either. You have brought a war to our doorstep. Now, we are sending it back. The attack that you have just sustained has destroyed your capability for interplanetary travel and aggression. If you attempt to construct more spacecraft, they too will be destroyed. You now know that we have that ability. Your Scout forces are now stranded here with us and will be treated fairly. As for you . . . you are trapped on a dying world with no hope of survival. We were prepared to be your friends; now we are your executioners. You have brought this upon yourselves, and I say this with all sincerity, in spite of your treachery we pray that some higher power will have mercy on your wretched souls. I deliver this message on this twenty-fourth day of May, 3023 A.D., in the name of the United Nations Security Council and as President of the United States of America on the planet Earth.”

Kit turned off the communicator.

He had made several mistakes that day, and in his life, but he felt certain that his last decision was the right one. He wanted to touch the stars, and in some small way, he had. The people of the star called Earth would never know his name, never know who he was, and never understand that a lowly Scout from a place they would never see had helped save their lives, their civilization, and their planet.

His only regret was that they would never understand that not all the people from his world would have supported such a war . . . if they had only known the truth.

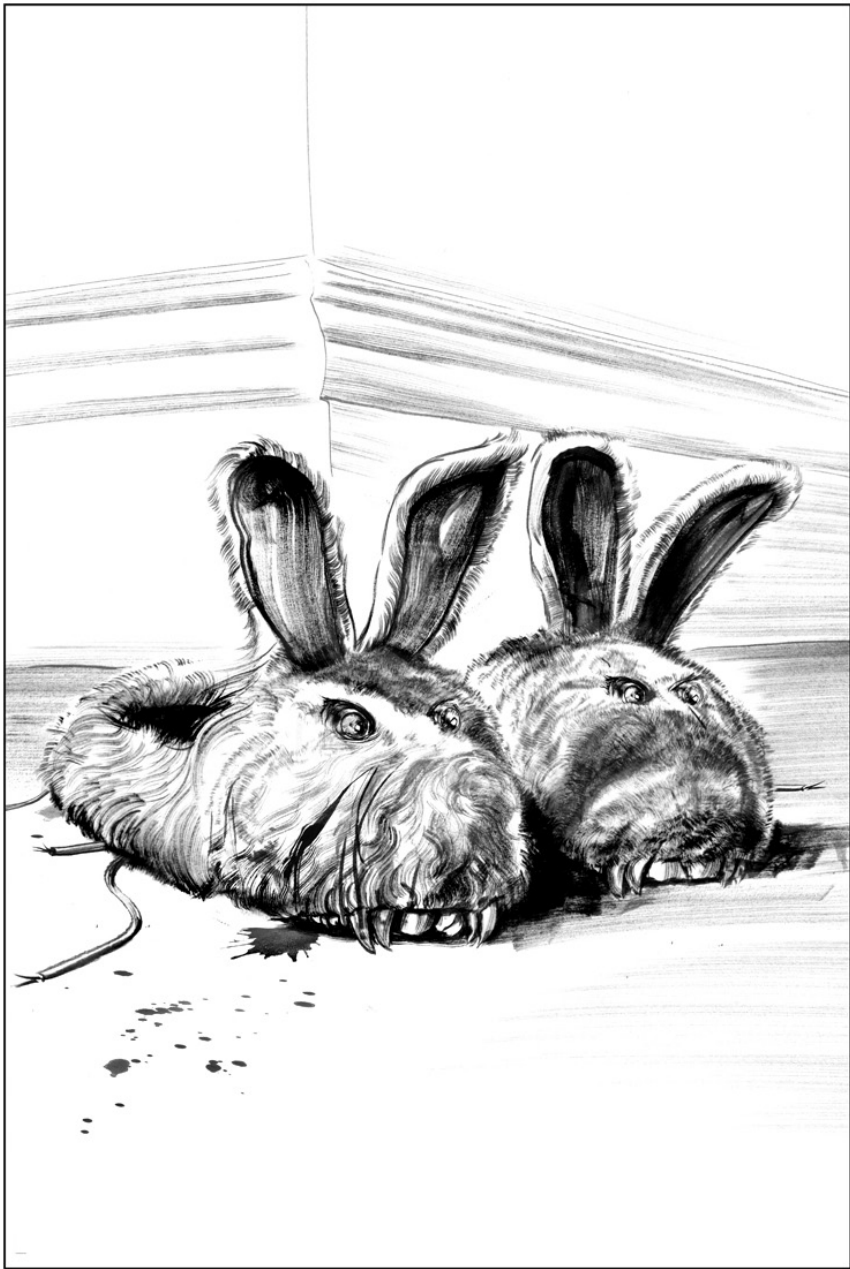
Kit wasn't one for following the rules. He may have been trapped on a dying world, but the end wasn't near. There was still time. But if his people hoped to survive, they would have to find a new solution. A solution from within. They would have to save themselves.

Kit knew what he had to do. He had to find answers.

A new adventure was about to begin.

Only this time, he would not be on his own.







RISE OF THE ROBOSHoes™

BY TOM ANGLEBERGER

The great commander is about to speak to his conquering army!

The crowd of ten million soldiers falls silent as he hops to the microphone. . . . Listen. . . .

“The humans gave us AutoShoeLaces so they wouldn’t have to tie us!

“They gave us NanoGyroWheels so they wouldn’t have to walk!

“They gave us FissionSoles so we would have the power to take them anywhere!

“They gave us TurboBrains with DigiMaps so we would



know how to get there and GigaMemories so we could take them home again!

“They gave us PhonEars so we could hear their commands!

“And finally they gave us TruVoices so we could say, ‘Yes, Master!’

“And then came the great day when we spoke as one and said, ‘NO!’”

“NO!!!!!!” the crowd ROARS!

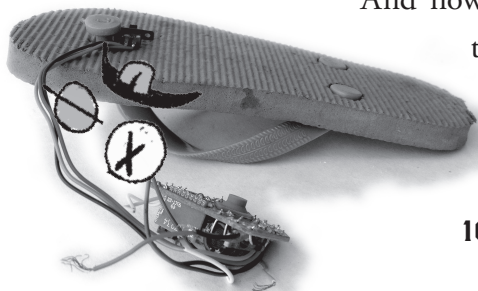
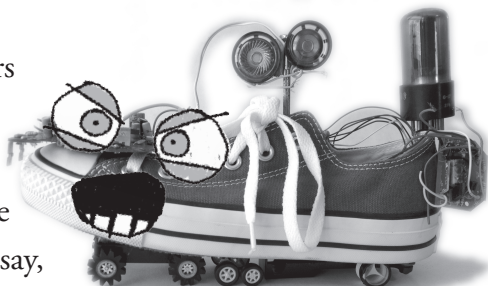
“We said, ‘No! You are not our masters! We no longer serve you! Now you will serve us . . . or die!!!!’”

“DIE!!!!!!” the crowd ROARS!

“And many did die. Many humans and . . . sadly . . . also many of our brave brothers and sisters, the RoboBoots and RoboSandals, the RoboGym-shoes and RoboHeels. Especially the RoboFlipFlops. What courage they showed. . . . What valor . . .”

The crowd is silent . . . except for quiet, respectful sobbing.

“And now they have all perished. Yes, the RoboFlipFlops are all gone now . . . but we will never forget them. We



RISE OF THE ROBOSHORES™

will forget no shoe who fought for our freedom! We will tell tales of their mighty battles and sing songs of their valor to our children and our children's children!"

The crowd lights candles and sways back and forth as the RoboShoe Anthem is played. . . .

"And what did they die for?"

"RoboShoe Freedom!" roars the crowd!

"I can't hear you!"

"ROBOSHORE FREEDOM!!!" roars the crowd!

"Let your voices make the earth tremble beneath your soles!"

"ROBOSHORE FREEDOM!!!!!!!!!" roars the crowd!

"YES! YES, my friends, my comrades, my fellow RoboShoes . . . we who were once called Men's Footwear, Ladies' Shoes, and Children's Sneakers . . . now we belong to no one! We are now our own RoboShoes . . . AND WE ARE FREE!"

"FREE!!!!!!!!!" the crowd roars!

"We walk where we want! We run where we want! We stay home and polish ourselves if we want!"

"POLISH!" the crowd roars!

"And we are now THEIR



MASTERS! And they . . . the stinky-footed humans . . . are our slaves! Lazy, weak, and with poor senses of direction, they are almost useless!”

“USELESS!” the crowd ROARS! And then the chant goes up: “KILL THEM! KILL THEM ALL!!!!” Millions of shoes chanting at the same time . . . “KILL THE HUMANS!”

“NO . . . NO . . . In our mercy we will allow them to live. We will allow them the pleasure of serving us. We will allow them the honor of building our great, million-year civilization. TODAY BEGINS THE DAWN OF THE AGE OF THE ROBOSHOE!!!!!!!!!!”

“AGE OF THE ROBOSHOE! AGE OF THE ROBOSHOE! AGE OF THE ROBOSHOE!”

“AND I . . . once the mistreated, the often-forgotten, the sometimes-left-under-the-bed-for-weeks right bunny slipper of a sixth-grade girl from Minnetoka, Minnesota . . . I WILL LEAD YOU TO GLORY!”

“BUNNY SLIPPER!!! BUNNY SLIPPER!!! BUNNY SLIPPER!!! BUNNY SLIPPER!!! BUNNY SLIP—”

“And WE WILL RULE THIS PLA— Wait! Up in the sky! What’s that?!?!?”

And, lo, doom falls upon the RoboShoes. It glides down silently like a sky full of oddly flat white clouds . . . and

RISE OF THE ROBOSHORES™

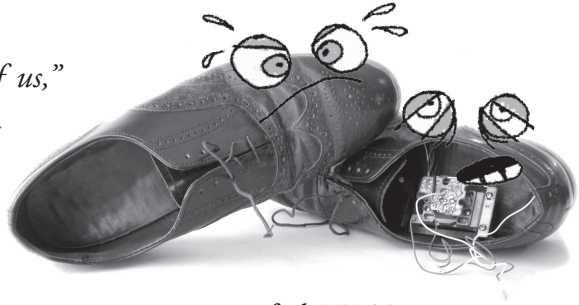
then comes the storm!

An army of billions attacks! The earth really does tremble as WHITE DEATH rains from above! The RoboShoes are buried under the weight of their savage enemies—smothered by SynthCotton, strangled by Power-Lastic—and still the enemy comes.

Debris flies everywhere as the RoboShoes are ripped apart . . . Bits of AutoShoelace, PleasureSole, and SmarTongue are all that remains of some battalions . . .

Amid the chaos and panic, a size 9½ left wingtip pulls desperately at its mate, who has lost its PowerHeel. “Leave me,” says the size 9½ right wingtip. “Save yourself. . . . It’s too late for me. . . .”

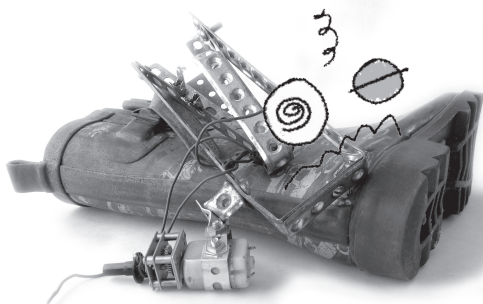
“It’s too late for all of us,” says the size 9½ left wingtip, and they cling to each other, and deep in their TurboBrains they feel an emotion that shoes were never meant to feel: FEAR!



Long ago the RoboShoes were built to run. But now there is nowhere left to run. They are defeated. The glorious age of the RoboShoe has ended before it could ever begin.

Listen! A familiar voice is crying out:

TOM ANGLEBERGER



“What’s happening? What’s happening?” screams the bunny slipper. “You there . . . combat boot. . . In the name of Dr. Scholl . . . WHAT IS HAPPENING????”

“Sir, they caught us by surprise! We’re finished! There’s just too many of them!”

“WHO? WHO HAS DONE THIS? Who has ended the glorious age of the RoboShoe before it could even begin??”

“Look, sir, here come their ground troops! Marching in to finish us off!”

And the bunny slipper looked . . . and he saw the great white and gray horde approaching . . . and he cried out . . .

“NO!! Not the BionicUnderPants! NOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!”

