Max Darwin shuffled down the driveway toward his mom’s car, keeping his black cape wrapped tightly around him.

His mom looked at her watch, rolled her eyes, and opened the passenger door. “Hurry up, or we’ll be late for the birthday party!”

“I’m coming!” Max protested, bunny-hopping the rest of the way and wriggling
into the backseat. He could have moved a lot faster if he’d just let the cape go loose, but that would have ruined everything. Carefully, he set his backpack down beside him, not revealing the slightest glimpse of what might be inside his costume.

“I know you want to surprise Tyler, but I don’t know why you can’t let me see what you’re wearing.” His mom sighed, starting up the car and accelerating onto the road. “After all, you did raid my fabric stash to make it!”

“I’m pupating,” Max insisted, as if that explained everything.

“Oh, right,” his mom continued. “So you can’t come out of your cocoon too soon?”
“Exactly!” Max grinned, jiggling with excitement as his mom drove them through the streets toward Tyler’s house. He already knew what his best friend would be dressed as. Tyler was just as obsessed with superheroes as Max was with bugs. But Max’s costume had been a closely guarded secret so far.

“How about I guess?” his mom suggested.

Max just groaned—she’d never be able to figure it out.

“Let’s see. A pretty butterfly?”

“Nope,” Max said.

“Hmm. Maybe . . . a moth?”

“Wrong again.”

“Something nastier? A wasp?”
Max laughed. “No. You’ll just have to wait!”

“Fine, fine, you win. I give up.” His mom laughed. “Now, where are we? Furze Avenue . . . oh. Oh, no!”

Max sat bolt upright. “What’s wrong, Mom?”

“Tyler’s present!” she wailed. “I don’t remember putting it in the car. Last time I saw it, it was on the kitchen table! We need to turn the car around . . .”

“Wait!” Max called, already rummaging inside his backpack. He pulled out the long, gift-wrapped package—a light-up power sword he’d chosen for Tyler.

“Got it!” he shouted. “It’s right here.”
“Phew,” his mom said. “Crisis averted. It’s a good thing one of us has their head screwed on right!”

While he had his backpack open, Max felt inside for the huge, heavy shape of his *Encyclopedia of Arthropods*. Sure enough, the book was in there, along with the magnifying glass that went with it. Ever since his mom had brought it back from an estate auction, the book had never been far from Max’s side.

The mysterious old book was not only full of bugs of all different types that Max could look up, it was also full of a strange magic, capable of transporting Max to an amazing world of talking bugs. He’d already
had adventures on Bug Island, and the bugs could need him back at a moment’s notice.

His mom glanced back at him and groaned. “Do you have to bring that dusty old encyclopedia everywhere you go?”

“Of course,” Max said. “Bugs are everywhere!”

“Sometimes I worry you might turn into a bug overnight,” his mom joked.

Max couldn’t think of anything cooler!

As they pulled up outside Tyler’s house, they could hear music blasting from the backyard. Still hugging his black cape close to his body, Max jumped out of the car and sprinted down the path that ran alongside the house. He almost collided with Tyler, who was running the other way.
“Max! You’re here!”

“Happy birthday!” Max called, looking Tyler up and down. “Awesome costume!” Tyler looked like he belonged on the cover of a comic book, with his scarlet cape, blue bodysuit, and mask.

“Thanks,” Tyler said. “But this isn’t all . . . You have to check out my Fortress of Power.”

“Your what?”

Tyler practically dragged Max into the backyard, where a huge crowd of their school friends had already gathered. Everyone was in costume: from pirates to zombies to ice princesses.

Rising above them all was Tyler’s jungle gym. It was a set of two wooden towers
with a slide, rope ladders, and a walkway between the two. For Tyler’s birthday, it had been transformed into a fortress. Plastic sheets with brick patterns changed the wooden walls into castle ramparts. There were even realistic flame-effect electric torches flickering from the tower tops.

“We’re going to have the best siege ever,” Tyler said. “Dad’s been making ammo all day.”

“Ammo?”

“Water balloons. It’ll be total chaos.”

“Count me in!” Max said, glancing around to see his mom and Tyler’s mom hurrying over.

“If I get to see your costume before I go?” Max’s mom asked.
“Come on Max, what’s under the cape?” Tyler urged.

Max took a deep breath, counted to three, and unfurled his cape with a flourish. The inside was painted a bright orange, with two black dots on either side and a line across the middle—just like a pair of eyes and a mouth. Little extra legs made from stuffed black socks dangled along his sides. The whole thing looked like a giant human face, sure to scare away any bug predators.

“I’m a man-faced stinkbug,” he said, beaming proudly. “Cool, huh?”

Tyler stared, too amazed to laugh.

Max’s mom just chuckled. “I never would have guessed that! But I think it’s more like a boy-faced stinkbug.”
Everyone burst out laughing.

Max’s mom turned his way. “Okay, stinkbug. I’ll pick you up at six.”

“See ya, Mom,” Max said as he headed to the Fortress of Power with Tyler.

“Hold on a sec,” Tyler’s mom called. “You might want to put your things inside, first.”

“Okay,” Max agreed. “I’m just dropping off my bag,” he called to Tyler.

Max hurried across the deck and into the house. All the bags had been piled up in the corner of the kitchen, and the table was laden with presents for Tyler. Max pulled his backpack open, fished out his own present from under the glowing encyclopedia, and put it on top of the pile.

Wait. *Glowing* encyclopedia?
He quickly double-checked. No mistake—the pages were pulsing with an eerie greenish light. That meant the Battle Bugs were calling him!

*Great timing,* Max thought. *The party will just have to wait!*

He couldn’t risk being discovered. Even though everyone was outside in the yard, someone might wander in and see Max vanishing into the pages of his book.

With the encyclopedia under his arm, Max went through the house checking all the doors. Luckily, he spotted a closet under the stairs. He pushed through the door and found himself in a small space where old coats and boxes of clutter had been stored.
There were even some nice, thick spider-webs at the back. *Perfect*!

Max shut the door carefully, making as little noise as he could. He took off his cape with the attached legs. It would really slow him down on Bug Island! Then he sat cross-legged among the boxes, opened the encyclopedia to the map of Bug Island, and took out his magnifying glass.

Everything began to swirl around him, faster and faster, like bathwater going down the drain. He felt himself shrinking smaller and smaller as the map loomed up before him, and he vanished inside.