



Megamouse

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# Megamouse

Emma Laybourn

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# MEGAMOUSE

## Chapter One

‘Go on,’ urged Kelly. ‘I dare you! Your Granpa’ll never know.’

Joe shook his head unhappily. ‘I can’t.’

‘Of course you can! Don’t be so soft. It’s *your* living room!’

‘Not any more,’ said Joe gloomily. ‘It’s Granpa’s room now.’

‘So? It’s still your house! If your Granpa doesn’t want anyone to use his computer, he should lock his door. But he hasn’t, has he?’

Joe shook his head. His fingers curled nervously around the door-handle.

He told himself there was nothing to be afraid of. Nobody would know. Granpa was at the University, where he was probably growling at terrified students right now. He wouldn’t be home till Dad fetched him; and Dad was out, too, painting somebody’s kitchen.

Mum was busy upstairs feeding baby Rose. It was the perfect opportunity. But all the same...

‘If this was my house, I wouldn’t think twice,’ said Kelly. ‘Go on, Joe! Please! I’ve got all these brilliant games, and our computer’s too old to run them!’

She hopped impatiently up and down, waiting for Joe’s answer.

He gave in.

‘All right... Just for a bit.’

‘Good for you! *Martian Warlord* first!’

Joe pushed open the door.

The living room felt strange. It felt alien. Dad had only just finished decorating it when Granpa broke his leg and had to move in. It had been Granpa’s room ever since.

Joe was left with nowhere to spread out his race track. There were no more cosy evenings snuggling in front of the TV— he had to watch the tiny TV in the kitchen instead, perched on a hard chair.

The room didn’t feel like part of his home any more. It had been taken over by Granpa’s things: his bed, his bookshelves, and especially the computer that sat big and square on Granpa’s desk.

It was a gleaming, new and very expensive computer. Around the huge flat-screen monitor teetered piles of CDs and memory sticks, boxes full of electronic bits, old coffee cups and snaking coils of tangled wire. In the middle of the wire maze sat a packet of digestive biscuits and a large square cage, where a white rat crouched, glaring at them.

‘A rat? What’s your Granpa doing with a rat?’ whispered Kelly.

‘Don’t ask me. She’s called Cleo. She doesn’t like me.’

‘Cleo! Cleo!’ Kelly tapped softly on the bars. The white rat turned its back on her and began to clean its whiskers.

‘I wish I had a pet,’ said Kelly wistfully. ‘Even a rat would be better than nothing.’

Joe was getting twitchy. ‘Come on! If you don’t want to play, let’s leave!’

‘Of course I want to play!’ Kelly pulled the *Martian Warlord* CD from her pocket. Then she looked round, puzzled.

‘Bother! Where’s the mouse?’ she complained. ‘There’s a rat– but no mouse!’

‘Maybe we should just forget it...’ Joe was already edging back towards the door.

But Kelly rummaged through the piles of equipment on the desk.

‘Aha! Here we are!’ she said triumphantly. ‘This’ll do. Must be new– it’s still in its box.’ She read aloud from the label.

**‘MEGAMOUSE  
ADVANCED COMPUTER MOUSE  
WITH MEMORY, BACK-UP BATTERIES  
AND OPTIC CELLS–**

what are they?’

‘Like eyes, I think,’ said Joe.

‘**AND OPTIC CELLS FOR FASTER DOCUMENT READING,**’ finished Kelly. She tipped the mouse out on to the mouse mat.

Carefully, Joe set it upright. Its grey plastic dome was cool and smooth to the touch.

‘If it’s new, we probably shouldn’t use it,’ he said anxiously.

‘What’s the problem? A mouse is a mouse. This one’s not that special. It’s not even wireless. Give it here!’

**THUMP!** Something heavy crashed into the patio door, making Joe recoil in alarm.

‘*What’s that?*’

A wrinkled black nose was squashed against the glass. A pair of watery, bad-tempered eyes glowered at him.

‘It’s only that awful bulldog from next door,’ said Kelly. She plugged the mouse’s cable into the computer. ‘It belongs to that woman who moved in last week. She calls it Hogarth. Horrible Hogarth. Just ignore it. Relax, Joe! You’re as jumpy as a flea!’

Joe turned away from the bulldog’s snarling face at the window, as Kelly loaded up the game.

‘Be careful,’ he pleaded.

‘I’m being careful! Watch out, Martian Warlord. Here come Jumpin’ Joe and Killer Kelly!’

She was Killer Kelly all right. Joe had to admit it– she was a whiz at computer games. Joe was hopeless. He always seemed to end up dead.

‘These Martians are really cool!’ said Kelly, her fingers busy. ‘The blue ones are the best. They’ve got nine tentacles and they’ll slime you with poisonous goo if you don’t zap them!’

Kelly was good at zapping them. Martians exploded in slimy splurts all over the screen. Their spaceships turned into golden fireballs. Kelly was *quick*.

‘Much quicker than me,’ thought Joe. ‘I can’t do that!’ He was all thumbs on the computer. They’d never had a proper one before Granpa arrived, only Mum’s ancient laptop which took about half an hour just to start up.

And he’d only been allowed to use this computer with Granpa frowning over his shoulder and going ‘Hrmph!’ under his breath. It hadn’t been much fun.

He jumped as the bulldog thudded on the glass again. It was squinting hungrily at Cleo’s cage. The white rat calmly ignored it.

‘Bother that Horrible Hogarth!’ exclaimed Kelly. ‘Now I’ve gone and got myself killed. Your turn, Joe.’

She ran at the window, waving her arms and pulling faces until the bulldog backed away.

Joe slid into her seat. He held the mouse tightly, and fixed his eyes on the Martians as they belched blue slime and slashed out with their plasma swords.

But he couldn’t concentrate. He kept thinking he heard the car outside, with Granpa; and his heart would pound and his fingers stop. And then he got drenched in blue slime.

It wasn’t fair. Granpa had taken over the house. Grandfathers were supposed to be kind old men who gave you toffees, thought Joe resentfully, not snappy old tyrants who barked out orders and made you do mental maths tests and kept on asking if you’d left your brains in bed...

Joe winced at the memory. His hand clenched on the mouse. Angrily he clicked its buttons in a rapid tattoo, banging it on the desk, not caring what part of the screen he clicked on.

‘Gotcha! Gotcha!’ he muttered. But it was Granpa he was zapping, not Martians.

‘What are you doing?’ said Kelly. ‘That’s not how you play! You’re going to – ‘

There was a dazzling flash. Then the screen went blank.

Beneath Joe’s hand, the mouse quivered. Suddenly it pulled away from his fingers, shot across the desk and tumbled headlong onto the floor.

## Chapter Two

‘What on earth are you playing at?’ hissed Kelly.

‘Nothing!’ said Joe, bewildered.

‘You tell *me* to be careful, and then *you* go and throw the mouse on the floor!’

‘But I didn’t throw it! It jumped!’

‘Oh, sure,’ snorted Kelly, stooping to pick up the mouse.

The instant she touched it, it darted away. It zoomed under the desk and disappeared behind a box of paper. Only its tail, a long grey cable, could be seen sticking out.

Kelly sat up so fast that she banged her head on the desk. ‘What’s going on?’

‘It came alive,’ Joe whispered.

‘Rubbish! It can’t have.’ Kelly dived after it, but Joe pulled her back.

‘Wait! Let me.’ Kneeling down, he cautiously reached beneath the desk until he felt something cool and smooth and rounded. It trembled at his touch.

It’s scared, thought Joe. But that’s crazy...

All the same, he held the mouse gently, until it was still. Then, wrapping his fingers carefully round it, he lifted it up.

‘Batteries!’ said Kelly. ‘Of course! That’s how it moved.’ She sounded relieved.

Joe cupped the Megamouse in his hand. He felt afraid of hurting it, as if it were a flesh and blood mouse, not rigid plastic. He put it carefully on the desk.

‘Not batteries. It came alive,’ he murmured.

Kelly picked up the mouse and jiggled it. ‘Doesn’t feel alive to me.’

She plonked it back on the mouse mat, where it sat like a lump of stone. ‘Doesn’t look alive either,’ she sniffed. ‘Let’s plug it in again. I hope it still works after you threw it around like that!’

She switched off the computer, reconnected the mouse, and powered it back up.

The screen flickered, and a single word flashed out.

But it wasn’t READY. It wasn’t even ERROR. It was:

**‘Greeting.’**

‘That’s not right!’ said Kelly, frowning.

Joe gaped at the screen. Then, reaching past Kelly to the keyboard, he hesitantly typed: **‘Who are you?’**

**‘Megamouse,’** said the screen.

Joe stared down at the plastic mouse. He put his hand gently on it, and felt it quiver.

**‘Greeting, Light Hand,’** said the screen.

‘What?’ exclaimed Kelly.

Joe looked down at his hands. ‘I think it means me,’ he said. He typed: **‘I am called Joe.’**

**‘Greeting, Called Joe.’**

**‘No, just Joe.’**

**‘Greeting, just Joe.’**

Joe gave up. **‘Call me Light Hand.’**

**‘Second greeting, Light Hand.’**

‘I’ve heard about programs like this,’ said Kelly. ‘You can program a computer to have a conversation just like a real person. You wouldn’t mistake this one for a real person, though! Nobody talks like that!’

Joe wondered what to type next.

**‘How do you do?’** he asked politely.

**‘How do I do what?’**

He tried again. **‘How are you?’**

**‘How am I what?’**

Kelly giggled. ‘Weird program!’

‘It’s not a program. It’s the mouse. It’s alive,’ said Joe firmly.

‘Then why is it talking in such a funny way?’

‘I’m asking the wrong sort of questions,’ said Joe. He thought carefully, and then typed: **‘How are you made?’**

This time the reply came readily.

**‘92% moulded polycarbonate plastic, rechargeable 15 volt battery, 16 gigabytes of memory. How many gigabytes do you have?’**

Joe scratched his head. ‘I don’t know!’

‘I guess it *is* the mouse talking – but it can’t be alive, Joe,’ said Kelly. ‘It’s just programmed to say things. It’s good, though, isn’t it? I bet –’

She stopped in mid-sentence.

Joe heard the sound he had been dreading. A car engine coughed to a halt. Car doors clunked, twice.

The children stared at each other in alarm.

Joe heard the smack of crutches on the path. ‘Granpa! Quick! Before he finds us!’

Swiftly, Kelly shut down the computer. Joe snatched up the Megamouse and put it back in its box. They heard the front door open.

‘Get out this way!’ gasped Joe. They scrambled for the patio door and slipped out into the back garden, just as Granpa’s heavy footsteps entered the hall.

‘Go round to the kitchen,’ whispered Joe. ‘Maybe we can sneak in there.’

But as they crouched under the kitchen window, they heard Granpa's deep, imperious voice.

'I'll have a chop for my tea,' he was announcing loudly. 'Peas, *not* carrots.'

'Yes, Gerald,' said Mum's quiet voice in answer.

'And apple sauce. Smooth, *not* lumpy like last time.'

'All right, Gerald.'

'And don't burn the chop!'

Kelly pulled a face at Joe. 'Bossy, isn't he?' she whispered.

'I have some very important work to do this evening,' Granpa went on, 'so I need to eat as soon as possible. I'll have a coffee now. Three sugars.' His crutches clattered to the floor as he sat down.

'Wow! What an old grump. I'm glad he's not *my* Granpa!' muttered Kelly.

'Come in with me,' urged Joe.

'No way!' Kelly shook her head. 'Sorry, Joe. I'm off home. See you tomorrow.'

She ran off. Joe slunk into the kitchen, hoping Granpa wouldn't notice him.

But Granpa frowned at him, his grey eyebrows bristling.

'So what have you been up to, young fella?' he asked sharply.

'Playing in the garden,' mumbled Joe. He was sure Granpa suspected something.

Luckily Rose began to wail, so Joe busied himself with bouncing her on his lap until she giggled. Her wriggly, wobbly legs kicked against his. Her starfish fingers pulled at the tablecloth and slopped Granpa's cup of tea.

'Careful!' snapped Granpa. Rose gazed up at his face and burst into wails again.

'I hope she's not going to keep that up all evening,' Granpa grunted. 'I need peace and quiet! I can't work with that racket.'

'She's only five months old,' said Mum mildly. 'I'll try and keep her quiet, but babies still cry a lot at that age.'

'I like a bit of noise while I'm working,' said Joe's Dad cheerfully. 'I don't like things too quiet.'

'Well, painting window-frames doesn't exactly tax the brain, does it?' snorted Granpa. 'It's not what I expected a son of mine to end up doing.'

'It's what I'm good at,' said Dad. He drained his tea and walked out of the kitchen.

Joe felt like snorting and snapping right back at Granpa. How dared he talk to Dad that way, when he was living in Dad's house? Only it seemed to be Granpa's house now. Everything revolved around *him*.

Yet Joe didn't dare say anything. He didn't want to draw attention to himself, because he felt guilty about using the computer. So he kept quiet as he helped Mum make the tea.



It was mashed potato again. They seemed to have mash all the time now, because Granpa liked it. Joe didn't.

Halfway through tea, he stopped eating.

'What's the matter, Joe?' asked Mum.

'Nothing.' The mash had just turned to cotton wool in his mouth. He could hardly swallow for the fear that had gripped him.

He hadn't closed the patio door properly. He was sure of it! He'd left it open a crack.

As soon as Granpa went into his room, he'd see it, and then Granpa would *know*...

### Chapter Three

Megamouse sat on his mouse mat, and wondered.

What was he? Where was he?

He'd been awoken by a chance command that he couldn't now remember. Before that, there was nothing. After that, everything.

Who had woken him? A small, light hand had held him gently. But now Light Hand had gone.

Megamouse had no ears, yet he could hear. Sounds vibrated through his delicate circuits. And, with his optic cells, he could also see. Now he saw that he was not alone.

In the cage nearby, there was a scurry of activity. The white rat was busily clawing at the catch on her door, until it fell open with a click. She slipped out, scampered across the desk, and helped herself to a digestive biscuit from the open packet.

Cleo dragged the biscuit over to Megamouse. Sitting up on her thin haunches, she stared at him bright-eyed. Then she began to squeak.

Megamouse listened. He analysed the squeaks. It only took him a few milliseconds; Rat was not very difficult. He soon translated Cleo's squeaks as:

'Do you want some biscuit?'

She dropped a piece in front of him.

Megamouse tipped his box over and rolled out to survey the biscuit. What was he supposed to do with it? He had no mouth. He tried rolling over it, but that just turned it into crumbs.

As he moved, his little wheel squeaked faintly. This gave Megamouse an idea. He practised rolling and squeaking until he got his answer right.

'No eat,' he squeaked.

Although it wasn't very good Rat, Cleo understood.

'You don't eat!' she exclaimed. 'Then what do you live on?'

'Desk.'

'No, no! I mean food! You *are* a mouse, aren't you? They called you a mouse.' Cleo studied him doubtfully.

'Me Megamouse!'

'Not much of a mouse, if you ask me,' she sniffed. 'Where's your fur? Where are your whiskers, and your tail?'

'Me got tail,' squeaked Megamouse hopefully, waving his cable.

'Hmph,' snorted Cleo. 'Funny sort of tail. Oh, well. If you're staying, I'd better show you round. Come on down.'

Gracefully she leapt on to the chair, and then to the floor.

'Bye-bye up!' squealed Megamouse, throwing himself recklessly after her. He tumbled on to the thick carpet, unhurt.

'Nice big mouse mat,' he said approvingly.

'Pay attention! Now, this is the fire.'

'Fire,' repeated Megamouse.

'When it's orange and hisses, don't go near it! It bites. This is the bin, good for apple cores. Just here under the bed, I've made a nice little nest of tissues. You can share it if you want,' said Cleo.

'Me like nests?'

'All mice like nests.'

Megamouse rolled under the bed and rummaged in the tissues. Shreds of paper caught annoyingly in his wheel.

'Me not like nests,' he declared.

'Hmph,' said Cleo. 'Some mouse you are. Anyway, see that hole in the skirting board? That's the way out. It goes right through to the garden. I don't think the humans know about it. Handy if you fancy an earwig or want to play outside.'

'Outside?'

Cleo pointed her nose at the window. 'Out there.'

Megamouse stared. Like a huge computer screen, the window was full of shapes and colours, shifting, changing...

'Nice game,' he said. 'Big big game! Me want play Outside!'

'I'll take you later on,' promised Cleo. 'Now, here's the stick I keep for gnawing. Granpa doesn't like the wires being chewed, so if you want to keep your teeth down....' She peered closely at him. 'Have you got any teeth?'

'No teeth,' squeaked Megamouse. 'No mouth. No eat.' Yet he felt suddenly hungry. Something was calling him, singing enticingly... something he needed...

Mesmerised, he followed the song. It led straight under the bed, to the wall – and an electric power socket.

‘Hungry,’ sighed Megamouse. Without hesitation, he twitched his wire tail around, inserted it into the socket and –

‘Hey!’ shrieked Cleo in horror. ‘Stop! You’ll fry!’

But Megamouse didn’t budge. He felt electricity race through his wires, blaze along his circuits, and fill his batteries brimful. Cleo’s whisker sizzled when it brushed against him, and she pulled away in alarm.

‘Stop it!’ she squealed. ‘You’ll frizzle up like a rasher of burnt bacon!’

‘Food,’ said Megamouse happily, pulling out his tail. ‘Yum, yum.’ He felt bouncing with energy, as the current rocketed round his metal veins.

Cleo was trembling. ‘Don’t you dare do that again!’

But Megamouse ignored her. Peering out from under the bed, he gazed at the open patio door.

‘Someone playing Outside,’ he announced.

‘What?’ Turning to look, Cleo saw a squat figure with watery eyes squinting through the glass.

‘Hogarth,’ she breathed. The bulldog snuffled at the open door, shouldered its way through and waddled into the room on short, bandy legs.

‘Quick,’ commanded Cleo. ‘Get back up on the desk!’

‘Me no climb!’

The bulldog stood in the middle of the room, his breath noisy and rasping, his hungry gaze fixed on Cleo.

‘Oh, cripes. Stay under the bed! Don’t move!’ Cleo hissed to Megamouse. She leapt at the quilt and scrambled up it, hoping to get to safety and distract Hogarth’s attention from Megamouse.

From the bed, it was only a short leap to the desk – but by now Hogarth was after her. Huffing and puffing, he scabbled up on to Granpa’s bed, his claws ripping at the quilt.

He jumped clumsily across to the desk after Cleo, and only just made it. As he thudded and clattered over the keyboard, piles of CDs slithered to the floor.

Cleo leapt away, landing lightly on the edge of the waste-paper bin, and sprang up to the chair.

Hurling himself heavily after her, the bulldog thudded into the bin. It tipped over with a crash and sent him rolling across the floor in a shower of litter.

Hogarth staggered to his feet, growling. But before he could pounce on Cleo, a small, grey object shot across the carpet, clicking wildly, and charged at his paw.

Hogarth sniffed it curiously. ‘Ruff!’ he snorted, opening his jaws. Just as he was about to go CRUNCH, a furry white missile launched itself at his other end.

‘Megamouse – hide!’ squealed Cleo, and then her teeth met in Hogarth’s tail.

Hogarth yelped and flung himself round. The desk rocked.

*WHOOSH!* A pile of paper slid down in a huge white avalanche.

*SPLAT!* A mug of cold coffee emptied itself on to Hogarth’s head.

Galloping around the room, trampling on papers and splashing through coffee, he tried to shake off the terrible pain in his tail.

Footsteps thudded down the hall. Cleo let go of Hogarth and hurtled like a white bullet back up to the desk. Hogarth blundered to the patio door and charged out into the garden.

The door from the hall was flung open. There was a long silence while Granpa, leaning on his crutches, took in the upturned bin, the coffee-stained drifts of paper and the CDs like giant sequins littering the floor.

Cleo sat innocently in her cage with her head on one side. Granpa took a deep breath.

‘Joe!’ he bellowed. ‘Come in here *this minute!*’

## Chapter Four

‘It wasn’t me!’ Joe protested, staring at the mess. But he felt himself flushing guiltily.

‘Have you been in here, Joe?’ asked Dad quietly.

‘Well?’ thundered Granpa. ‘Why aren’t you answering? Yes or no?’

‘Only for a bit,’ Joe mumbled.

‘Why?’ asked Dad. ‘I thought you were outside with Kelly. You know this is Granpa’s room.’

Joe glared at him. Dad should be sticking up for him! He should be telling Granpa that this was their room, and that they could go in it when they liked!

‘I was playing *Martian Warlord*,’ he muttered. ‘It’s a game of Kelly’s.’

‘What? You’ve been using my computer?’ Granpa’s brows gathered together darkly. ‘Just look at the mess you’ve made! My papers are everywhere – and what’s this mouse doing on the floor?’

He bent down stiffly and picked up Megamouse from the carpet.

‘I don’t know,’ said Joe miserably.

‘This is a brand new piece of equipment!’ snapped Granpa. ‘It’s valuable. It hasn’t even been tested yet!’

‘But I put it back in its box!’ protested Joe.

‘Aha! So you *did* use it!’

‘It was the only mouse we could find,’ said Joe.

‘And why is it on the floor? I suppose it jumped out and ran around all by itself?’

‘It must have!’ Joe blurted out. ‘It came alive while we were playing and it ran off, and it talked to us on the screen and called me Light Hand...’

He knew at once it was the wrong thing to say. His voice trailed away. Granpa was staring at him as if he was mad.

‘Nice story, son,’ said Dad sympathetically. ‘But what really happened? Did Kelly make this mess?’

‘No! Neither of us!’

‘Then who did?’ Granpa’s voice was as cold as ice.

Joe swallowed. He didn’t know what to say.

‘May I come in?’

They all turned. A young woman lolled against the patio door. Without waiting for an answer, she stepped over the threshold and tossed back a shock of gleaming gold hair.

‘Hallo! I’m your new neighbour, Prunella Tree.’ Her eyes twinkled as she smiled ruefully. ‘Oh, dear! What a terrible mess that dreadful dog of mine has made! I came straight round to apologise.’

Granpa let out his breath with a snort like a surfacing whale.

‘Your dog?’

‘Wicked Hogarth!’ sighed Miss Tree. ‘He keeps finding a way through the fence. But don’t worry. It won’t happen again!’ Her smile flashed out brilliantly. ‘Do let me tidy up this dreadful mess for you!’

‘No need,’ said Granpa, looking a little dazed. But Prunella Tree was already on her knees, picking up discs and papers. She set them down on the desk, and then clapped her hands together with a gasp of delight.

‘Oh! I don’t believe it! You’ve got a XK900! Now that is a computer I would love to own. So fast! So powerful!’

‘I helped develop it,’ said Granpa, looking rather pleased.

‘No! Really?’ Miss Tree was rapt. ‘And the processor – the PDQ? Did you develop that as well?’

‘I had a hand in that,’ said Granpa. He actually smiled. Joe was astounded. He couldn’t remember ever seeing Granpa smile. ‘It won an award, you know.’

‘Oh, I know! It’s famous! I’m in computers too, just in a small way, writing games – nothing like you. The creator of the PDQ! And to think my dog’s been sticking his muddy paws all over it!’ Miss Tree shook her head. ‘Naughty Hogarth.’

‘My grandson blamed the mouse,’ said Granpa with a chuckle. ‘He told me it came alive and ran around the room!’

‘What a sweet idea,’ said Prunella Tree. Idly, she picked up Megamouse.

‘Stop!’ cried Joe. Everyone stared at him. ‘I mean – stop tidying up,’ he stammered. ‘I should be doing that. I left the door open, so it was my fault Hogarth got in.’

‘Glad to hear you admit it,’ grunted Granpa, as Joe took the Megamouse from Miss Tree’s hand and put it carefully back in its box. He couldn’t feel even a twitch of movement... but he knew it had come alive.

He began to pick up the rest of Granpa’s things, while Dad helped.

‘I’m glad it wasn’t you,’ whispered Dad, winking at him. ‘But no more silly stories as excuses, eh?’

Miss Tree lingered, talking to Granpa about bytes and bandwidths. Although Joe knew he should be grateful to her, he wished she’d go away. He didn’t like the way she kept fingering Granpa’s things. He was almost glad when she ran a casual hand along the bars of Cleo’s cage, and Cleo tried to nip her.

‘I can see Hogarth outside,’ he said. ‘I think he’s digging up the garden.’

‘Dreadful dog! I’d better go and get him,’ sighed Miss Tree as she strolled to the door. ‘He’s supposed to be company for me, but he’s a complete idiot.’

‘I know the feeling,’ said Granpa. ‘Do come back some time! It’s nice to have an intelligent conversation. Come round for a cup of tea!’

‘I will! I will!’ she promised, and with a wave, she left.

\*

‘It’s not even his house,’ said Joe resentfully, ‘and he invited her round as if he owned the place.’

‘I don’t mind,’ said Mum. ‘Are you drying up?’

‘Granpa likes Miss Tree better than me,’ said Joe.

Mum handed him a dripping plate. Rose sat in her bouncing chair and gurgled at them.

‘Granpa’s not used to small boys,’ said Mum. ‘He’s never got to know you properly.’

‘He’s never tried,’ muttered Joe. There had never been outings to the park or the zoo with Granpa. Granny, yes: but Granpa had always been too busy. ‘He doesn’t even like Rose!’

‘He’s not used to babies either, Joe.’

‘Does Granpa *have* to stay with us?’

‘Well, yes, he does, until his leg’s better,’ said Mum.

‘How long will that take?’ Joe asked.

‘It could be a few months, at his age.’

‘Oh, no!’ wailed Joe. Baby Rose began to wail too. Mum picked her up and cuddled her.

‘He can’t manage by himself,’ she said. ‘If he wasn’t here, he might have to live in a home. He wouldn’t be able to work. His work’s very important, you know.’

‘I know,’ said Joe glumly. ‘He keeps telling us.’

‘He should have retired by now, but the University asked him to go back. He’s a very clever man, your Granpa.’

‘Thinks he’s Brain of Britain,’ muttered Joe. ‘I’m not surprised Granny divorced him.’ He said it under his breath, so that Mum wouldn’t hear. She’d only tell him off.

He couldn’t understand why Mum was so patient with Granpa, when Granpa was so rude to her – just because Dad was only a house-painter, and Mum used to work in a shop...

Mum gave him a hug with her free arm. He breathed in Rose’s milky scent.

‘I know he’s grumpy sometimes,’ said Mum, ‘but remember he’s a long way from home, and his leg hurts. And I think he’s lonely.’

‘Lonely? How can he be lonely with all of us here?’

‘Well, we can’t talk to him about the things he cares about,’ she said. ‘Maybe this Prunella Tree will be good for him. She sounds like a nice lady. You try and be nice to him, too.’

‘Mmm,’ said Joe. Mum ruffled his hair.

‘How about a board game once Rose is asleep?’ she asked. ‘You can choose.’

Grandpa’s voice bellowed from his room.

‘Newspaper! Where’s the newspaper?’

Rose began to cry. Mum picked up her up, along with the paper, and carried them both out.

Joe clattered the plates angrily.

‘He thinks we’re all his servants,’ he said to the fridge. ‘He thinks we’re all stupid. But I know something he doesn’t! Megamouse *did* come alive! I’m not making it up! I’ll prove it – somehow!’

## Chapter Five

‘Want to go on the computer, hey?’

Joe looked up from his book in surprise. There stood Granpa, leaning on his crutches, his tall, bent frame filling the doorway. His eyebrows bristled alarmingly.

‘Well? What do you say? Lost your tongue?’

‘No – I mean, yes – yes, please!’ stammered Joe.

‘Come on, then. Hop to it!’

Joe followed Granpa into his room. Cleo ran to and fro on the desk, jumping nimbly over wires. Granpa stroked her with a crooked finger, and Joe felt bold enough to ask:

‘Where did you get Cleo, Granpa?’

‘The University,’ he grunted. ‘She was a lab rat.’

It took Joe a minute to work out what he meant. ‘You mean they were going to do experiments on her?’

‘Might have, if I hadn’t taken her.’

Joe stared at Granpa. Rescuing rats didn’t sound like the Granpa he knew.

‘Boys like games,’ said Granpa. ‘Don’t they? Hey?’

‘Yes,’ said Joe. ‘Usually.’

‘Got some computer games for you to play.’

‘Really? Thanks!’

Granpa started up the computer. A mouse sat ready on the mouse mat, but not the mouse Joe was hoping for. Glancing up, he spotted Megamouse hunched in a box on a shelf out of reach. He wanted to ask Granpa about it; but that might spoil his good mood.

‘You see if you can find the games file,’ said Granpa. Joe saw his old, gnarled hand sneak over to stroke Cleo’s ears.

‘He’s being quite nice!’ thought Joe, as he clicked on the mouse.

‘What are you doing?’ snapped Granpa, grabbing the mouse back. ‘Not that file!’

‘Nice to rats, anyway,’ thought Joe. ‘Oh, well.’

‘Here we are,’ announced Granpa. ‘Here’s your first game. *Maths Hound*. Help you do better at school.’

On to the screen waddled a sad-eyed spotty dog.

‘IF YOU GET THE SUM RIGHT, I GET A BONE!’ it told Joe. ‘I HOPE YOU’RE GOOD AT SUMS, BECAUSE I’M HUNGRY! HERE’S YOUR FIRST SUM.’

2413 x 127 = ?’

Joe gulped. ‘I can’t do that!’



‘Hrmph!’ Granpa raised an eyebrow. ‘All right. Let’s try an easier one.’

‘47 x 13 ?’ asked Maths Hound mournfully. ‘18 x 9 ?’

‘I need a pencil and paper,’ said Joe desperately. Even the easiest sums were suddenly too hard, with Granpa snorting at his shoulder. He couldn’t think straight. He guessed wildly, and got all the sums wrong, while Maths Hound moped and howled.

‘Hrmph! Thought you’d do better than that,’ sniffed Granpa. ‘Let’s try the other game.’

Joe’s spirits rose. *Alien Invaders?* he thought hopefully. *Tomb Explorers?*

‘Here we are,’ said Granpa. ‘*Spelling Bee.*’

A fat yellow bee flitted across the screen.

‘Let’s spell ENTHUSIASTIC!’ buzzed the speaker.

Joe nearly groaned aloud. He was hopeless at spelling.

‘Game?’ he thought. ‘This isn’t a game – it’s a form of torture!’

His stomach began to hurt, and his sweating fingers slipped on the keyboard.

‘WRONG!’ buzzed the bee. Joe felt hot and ashamed. All the spellings he knew drained out of his head. He couldn’t spell MISERABLE. He couldn’t spell TRIAL. He couldn’t even spell CABBAGE.

‘Hrmph!’ said Granpa at last. ‘Think you need to practise.’

‘I’m usually better than that at spelling,’ pleaded Joe.

Granpa looked sceptical. ‘Maybe.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Well, Joe, I’ve decided you can practise on this computer if you want, while I’m at work.’

‘Can I?’

‘Just Maths Hound and Spelling Bee, mind. And ask your mother first. And don’t make a mess. And don’t leave the patio door open. Well? Aren’t you pleased?’

‘Yes. Oh, yes. Thanks, Granpa,’ said Joe dismally.

He escaped upstairs and slumped, exhausted, on his bed. Unspellable words floated before his eyes; unsolvable sums rattled hollowly in his brain.

‘I’m going to have nightmares about bees and hounds,’ he thought. The idea of playing Granpa’s games again filled him with dread.

‘I’ll just lose,’ he said aloud. ‘It’ll be awful. I don’t want to do sums. I want to play with Megamouse! I want to talk to him. I want to find out all about him.’

Then a thought struck him. He had permission to use the computer now. Why shouldn’t he use Megamouse? He could play Granpa’s games with Megamouse and talk to him all he liked. Granpa hadn’t told him not to.

Anyway, Granpa wouldn’t be there. Granpa wouldn’t know.

## Chapter Six

‘Go on!’ said Joe. ‘Please, Kelly.’

All day at school he’d thought of nothing but Megamouse: of plugging him in and talking to him again. But he was a bit scared of Granpa’s huge computer. He was afraid of doing something wrong, and wanted Kelly’s help.

‘No thanks!’ said Kelly. ‘Not if it means playing those stupid maths and spelling games. They sound awful.’ She swung her school bag over her shoulder, and kicked a can along the pavement.

‘I bet you’d be good at them,’ said Joe. ‘And you could bring *Martian Warlord*, and any others you like.’

Kelly looked at him suspiciously. ‘I thought you weren’t allowed to play those?’

‘Maybe we could. Go on, Kelly, please! I’ll give you half my chocolate.’ Joe held out the bar he’d just bought on the way home from school.

‘Done!’

A silver jeep pulled up alongside them, and the window glided open.

‘Hello, Joe. Hello, Joe’s friend. Like a lift?’ Miss Tree pushed up her sunglasses and gave them an encouraging grin.

‘No thanks,’ said Joe. ‘We don’t take lifts off strangers.’

Miss Tree chuckled. ‘Very wise. I hope we won’t be strangers for long, though, now that I’m living next door.’

‘Nice car!’ said Kelly.

‘Isn’t it?’ agreed Miss Tree. ‘There’s good money in computer games. Perhaps you two could help me write my next one?’

‘Would we get paid? How much do you get?’ asked Kelly eagerly.

‘Oh, enough for the car, a boat, a country cottage... I’ve just been over to my cottage at Acrefield. You must come there one day and bring your Granpa, Joe. It’s a funny old place, full of mice... How’s that little mouse of yours?’

‘What mouse?’ Joe felt alarmed.

‘The computer mouse that came alive.’ Miss Tree’s eyes sparkled with amusement.

‘Oh, that! I’d forgotten all about that,’ lied Joe. ‘It was – it was just a joke.’

‘It didn’t come alive,’ explained Kelly. ‘It just had a really odd program that made it act in a funny way.’

‘Well, do let me know if it happens again! I’d love to see a computer mouse that could run around on its own!’

Joe didn’t answer. He began to walk on determinedly. The silver jeep glided past them.

‘I wouldn’t have minded a lift,’ said Kelly. ‘Do you think she meant it about the games?’

‘She was showing off.’

‘It’s still a nice car, though,’ said Kelly wistfully.

By the time they trudged up the hill to Kelly’s house, the jeep was parked in its drive, and Miss Tree was striding down the pavement with Hogarth on a lead.

‘Look,’ said Kelly, ‘She’s taking Hogarth for a drag. Poor thing! She’s choking him!’

‘I thought you said Hogarth was horrible?’

‘He’s not *that* horrible,’ said Kelly. ‘Wait here while I get my games. We should have plenty of time before your Granpa gets home.’

Joe felt guilty as they sneaked into Granpa’s room. The guilt lasted just as long as it took to switch on the computer. He took down Megamouse’s box from its shelf, plugged the mouse in and typed:

**‘Hallo, Megamouse.’**

He received an instant reply.

**‘Greeting, Light Hand.’**

‘He knows you!’ whispered Kelly.

**‘How are you going?’** asked Joe.

**‘On my little wheel.’**

‘Let me!’ said Kelly. Grabbing Megamouse, she typed: **‘Hi, Megamouse!’**

**‘Greeting, Fast Hand.’**

‘He knows me too!’ said Kelly in delight. ‘He’s cute! I wish I could take him home.’

‘He’s not a *pet*,’ said Joe. He glanced around the room. He had the oddest feeling that they were being watched, even though there was nobody there with them but Cleo – and she was busy burrowing in her straw.

He looked hard at the windows. Nothing. But he felt uneasy.

‘I’d better put *Spelling Bee* on,’ he said, for he had an awful feeling that Granpa was about to walk in.

He clicked on the game, and Megamouse spun round in a little circle.

**‘Good game like game!’**

‘I wish I did,’ said Joe glumly, as he started to play *Spelling Bee*.

This time, however, to his amazement, he was good at it. Not just good – he was terrific! He got every spelling right, even though he’d never even heard of some of the words before. They just seemed to spell themselves.

‘I don’t believe it,’ breathed Joe. Soon he was on the top level, and the bee was telling him he was a genius.

‘I thought you were no good at this?’ asked Kelly.

‘It’s not me doing it! It’s Megamouse!’

**‘Easy!’** said Megamouse. **‘Hard game please.’**

‘Let’s try *Maths Hound*.’ The mournful spotty dog appeared on the screen.

‘ $256 \times 78 = ?$ ’ it asked.

Quick as lightning, the answer appeared: **‘19968.’** Maths Hound’s tail wagged furiously, as he was awarded a bone.

Joe was astounded. The answers seemed to fill themselves in before he’d even read the questions.

**‘Harder sums please!’** said Megamouse.

Before long, Maths Hound had disappeared under a pile of bones, and the children had top score in the Hall of Fame.

Joe grinned. ‘Just wait till Granpa sees that!’

**‘Easy easy!’** said Megamouse. **‘More games please. I like playing games.’**

Joe laughed. **‘So do I – with you!’**

‘Let’s try *Martian Warlord!*’ suggested Kelly. And since Granpa wasn’t due home for another hour, Joe agreed.

At once, Megamouse’s buttons began to click. Then he was off, racing across the mouse mat so fast that it was all Joe could do to keep his hand on him.

On the screen, Joe’s spaceship became a blur. Somehow it avoided every enemy laser. It zapped so many Martian ships that fireballs littered the screen.

It was the most enchanting hour of Joe’s life. His score climbed to level after level, while beside him Kelly yelped with excitement.

‘Yes!’ she cried, punching the air. She covered her mouth in mock alarm. ‘Sorry! But level twenty! That’s incredible!’

Joe’s score appeared on the screen.

**‘Light Hand 80,000 points.’**

‘It should say Megamouse,’ said Joe. ‘It’s him doing it.’

‘Let me try *Viking Assassins!*’ begged Kelly. ‘That’s a real stinker. I’ve never managed to finish it!’

Joe let her take over. Soon she’d sunk boat-loads of Vikings, stolen all their treasure and had a record score.

**‘Fast Hand 92,000 points,’** said the screen. **‘Easy! What shall we play now? Hard game, please.’**

‘Got any more?’ Joe asked Kelly.

**‘Play Outside?’** suggested Megamouse.

‘Outside? I don’t know that one.’ Kelly fished in her bag for another CD. ‘Here’s *Roadhog Racers*. It’s the most difficult game I’ve got.’

*Roadhog Racers* was a walkover for Megamouse. He beat every other car on the track by miles, and never crashed once.

**‘Easy easy easy!’** he announced.

‘Tea-time!’ called Mum. She stuck her head round the door, and Joe hastily leant across the computer screen.

‘You two have spent long enough on that machine now,’ Mum said. ‘Kelly, are you staying for tea?’

‘What is for tea?’

‘Steamed fish and mashed potato.’ Fish was another of Granpa’s favourites.

‘Sorry, gotta fly,’ said Kelly. She whispered to Joe, ‘I can’t make it tomorrow. Swimming club. And netball the day after. But I’ll leave the games with you!’

Joe grinned. He could put up with fish and mashed potato; he could even put up with Granpa harumphing at the tea table.

All that mattered to him now was Megamouse. With Megamouse on his side, he need never lose a game again!

## Chapter Seven

Joe spent the next three days in a happy trance. He wandered around school with a dreamy half-smile on his face. His teacher was exasperated: his friends tapped their heads.

‘Mad!’ they said. ‘Joe’s flipped!’

Joe didn’t care. All through school, he was just waiting to go home; waiting for that magical moment when he sat in Granpa’s chair and started up his computer. Waiting for those words to appear on the screen.

**‘Greeting, Light Hand! What shall we play now?’**

And then, for the next hour or two, Joe was in another world. A world where he was a hero, a champion. His scores ran into hundreds of thousands. Even Granpa’s grumbling couldn’t make him feel bad...

In fact, Granpa wasn’t grumbling so much this week. There was a spring in his step. Miss Tree came to see him every evening, and Joe could hear them talking and laughing together in Granpa’s study.

Before, he might have felt jealous that Granpa preferred a stranger to his own family. But now it didn’t matter. He didn’t need Granpa. He had Megamouse!

Sometimes, sitting at Granpa’s desk in front of the computer, he felt as if hostile eyes were watching him. When he turned, however, there was nobody there – except, once, Hogarth snuffling at the window.

‘You spend too much time on that computer,’ said Mum to him one evening. ‘Switch it off and come and play with Rose! You’ll turn into a zombie.’

‘But, Mum, it’s educational! I’m getting really good at *Maths Hound* and *Spelling Bee!*’ This was, after all, quite true.

All the same, Joe felt a pang of guilt as he switched off the computer.

It wasn’t guilt about Granpa. He didn’t care about Granpa, these days; his head was buzzing with *Roadhog Racers*...

No. The guilt was about Megamouse. He’d hardly said Hello to Megamouse this afternoon, or yesterday, before launching straight into a game. All he’d thought about was winning.

‘Never mind,’ Joe told himself. ‘I’ll talk to him more tomorrow. Anyway, he likes winning games just as much as I do!’

He replaced Megamouse in his box and put him carefully back on the right spot on the shelf. Then he hurried out. The study fell silent.

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‘Well?’ said Cleo. ‘Enjoying yourself?’ She unlatched her cage and nosed along the desk, looking for crumbs and dead spiders. Joe had left a sweet-wrapper on the desk. Cleo carefully dropped it into the bin.

Though I don’t know why I bother, she thought. I should just let Granpa tell him off.

‘Me score winning top champion super high score!’ squeaked Megamouse happily from his shelf. ‘Me like Roadhog Racers! Win every time.’ His Rat grammar still wasn’t very good, but Cleo understood him well enough. She shook her head.

‘You’ll make that boy a games addict,’ she said.

‘How?’ Megamouse flicked his tail.

‘You shouldn’t let him win every point.’

‘Why not?’

Cleo sat on the mouse mat and glared at him with sharp eyes.

‘It’s not good for him, that’s why not!’

Megamouse pondered. ‘Not good?’

‘Not good at all!’ said Cleo. ‘People don’t win all the time in real life.’

‘Light Hand like win happy,’ said Megamouse.

‘But it’s not him winning! It’s you!’

‘Winning easy,’ said Megamouse. ‘Viking Assassins easy. Roadhog Racers easy. Martian Warlord easy easy easy.’

‘Really!’ sniffed Cleo.

‘All too easy. Want big game,’ said Megamouse longingly.

‘What big game?’

‘Outside! Play Outside!’ pleaded Megamouse.

‘That’s no game,’ retorted Cleo. ‘That’s real life!’

‘Want big Real Life,’ said Megamouse stubbornly. ‘Win Outside for Light Hand.’ He scanned the view through the patio door hungrily.

On the far side of the glass, someone trotted into view. A flat nose pressed itself against the glass; two piggy eyes glared greedily at Cleo.

Megamouse recognised that dog now. Its waddle was just the same as on the screen. Only the spots were missing.

‘Maths Hound!’ he squeaked with pleasure. ‘Look, Maths Hound play Outside! Me play with Maths Hound.’

‘That’s not Maths Hound. That’s Hogarth.’

‘Is,’ said Megamouse obstinately. ‘Maths Hound!’ he squeaked loudly. ‘Five times eight? Eleven times three? He not answer.’

‘He can’t hear you,’ said Cleo.

‘Sums too easy,’ said Megamouse. He tried again. ‘Maths Hound! Square root two hundred eighty nine?’

‘He’s not Maths Hound,’ said Cleo firmly. ‘He’s a real dog, in real life! Don’t you go anywhere near him! He’s dangerous.’

Megamouse felt confused. Why was a Real Dog dangerous? Why didn’t Light Hand win in Real Life? What was Real Life? It must be the hardest game of all.

Along his circuits ran a flicker of unease. He hadn’t been programmed to play Real Life. He needed to learn more. He wanted to get things right; to do his job as best he could.

‘Winning bad for Light Hand in Real Life?’ he wondered aloud. ‘Me not good mouse win?’

‘You should stop winning all the time,’ said Cleo sternly. ‘Then you’ll be a good mouse.’

‘Stop winning all the time,’ repeated Megamouse. He ran the problem through his logic circuits. No matter how he analysed it, there was only one solution that he could see.

He would have to start to lose.

## Chapter Eight

‘Friday, Friday!’ sang Joe. ‘Oh, it’s Friday! Wonderful Friday!’

He dumped his rucksack on the kitchen floor, kicked off his shoes, tickled a giggling Rose on the tummy, and grabbed a packet of crisps from the cupboard on his way out of the kitchen.

‘Where are you going, Joe?’

‘Just on the computer, Mum!’

‘Oh, Joe! Why not go outside instead?’

‘But I might not get to play on the computer all weekend, if Granpa’s home,’ wheedled Joe. ‘Just half an hour! Please! Kelly’s coming round!’

‘Half an hour is all you get,’ said Mum. ‘Remember Granpa’s home early on a Friday.’

‘Okay!’

Joe ran into the study, where glory awaited him. But first he would try and talk to Megamouse properly, as he’d promised himself.

He offered Cleo a crisp, which she refused.

‘Suit yourself,’ said Joe. ‘Who cares about a grumpy old rat, anyway? Here’s my favourite mouse!’ Carefully he took Megamouse from his box, plugged him in –

and there it was again, the strange sensation of someone watching; and this time there was a noise – faint, but definitely there.

Joe spun out of his chair, ran to the patio door and flung it open.

‘Hogarth!’ Sure enough, the bulldog was scratching away in Mum’s flower-bed.

‘So sorry!’

Joe jumped. Prunella Tree stood by the wall right beside him, casually coiling and uncoiling a lead in her hand.

‘Such a nuisance,’ she said. ‘I really don’t know how he gets out. Come along, Hogarth!’ she called. Hogarth ignored her completely, and she turned back to Joe.

‘Boring old dog,’ she said with a smile. ‘Your computer looks much more interesting. Is your Granpa in?’

‘Not yet,’ said Joe.

‘Would you like to play a game with me? I expect I’ve got some you’ve never tried. I could bring them over.’

‘No, thanks,’ said Joe.

‘Go on, Joe! I’m sure you could win easily!’ She put a foot on the threshold.



‘No, thank you,’ said Joe. ‘Kelly’s coming any minute now. Mum only planted those flowers last week.’

He stepped backward into the room, and afraid Miss Tree might follow, quickly shut and locked the door. Then, although Miss Tree was already strolling away, he closed the curtains. He had to put the lamp on before he returned to the computer. But now his good mood was spoiled.

‘**It’s me, Megamouse,**’ he typed in.

‘**Me Megamouse. You Light Hand.**’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Joe impatiently.

‘**Me bad mouse?**’

Joe was taken aback. ‘**What do you mean?**’

‘**Megamouse bad not good winning all games.**’

Joe frowned. What was Megamouse getting at? Why did he think he was bad at winning games? He was very good at it.

More words appeared on the screen. ‘**Megamouse bad winning games for Light Hand bad for Light Hand winning games in real life?**’

‘What?’

‘**WIN WIN WIN games all time bad for Light Hand bad Megamouse make light hand WIN WIN WIN –**’

‘**STOP!**’ typed Joe. He was getting exasperated. Of course he wanted to WIN WIN WIN. What on earth was Megamouse going on about?

‘**Light Hand like play outside?**’

‘Yes,’ replied Joe, relieved that at last there was something he could understand. ‘**Later. Play Roadhog Racers now.**’

He didn’t have the patience to try and make sense of Megamouse’s ramblings. Talking would wait until another time.

Right now, he just wanted to play games and win, to be a computer superstar – not an ordinary boy who was all thumbs on a keyboard and couldn’t spell cabbage.

‘**ROADHOG RACERS!**’ he repeated, because Megamouse was slow to respond.

The Racers appeared on the screen. Joe breathed a deep sigh of pleasure, picked his favourite red car, and sat back to enjoy the game.

But things didn’t turn out as he expected. His car was slow off the mark. It bounced off a wall of tyres, spun, clipped a green car, rolled over and crashed.

Joe was stunned. What had gone wrong? He hadn’t even reached the second corner, and he was out of the game!

‘**New race!**’ he ordered. This time, he picked a blue car, but it fared no better than the first. Joe couldn’t control it. It veered straight off the track and hit a wall.

There was a strange noise from Cleo's cage: a tiny snort, as if the white rat was laughing.

'Shut up, Cleo!' said Joe. '**Start Viking Assassins!**'

It was a slaughter. He didn't have a chance to collect a single magic ring, or even to wield his sword, Trollbiter, before his head was chopped off by a battle-axe.

'This is terrible!' wailed Joe. His fingers punched at the keyboard.

'**Megamouse – what's wrong?**'

'**Nothing wrong all right.**'

'**NO! PLAY MARTIAN WARLORD!**'

'Joe?'

Kelly ventured into the study, to find Joe being drowned in gloopy gallons of poisonous blue slime.

'You're losing, Joe! How come?'

'I don't know!' said Joe furiously. 'I'm losing everything!' He thumped the keyboard in frustration.

'Let me try.' Kelly took over at the computer. She zapped the aliens with no trouble.

'Don't see a problem there,' she said, giving Megamouse back to Joe. The instant Joe laid his hand on the mouse's back, a Martian laser blasted him to bits.

'You see? It's hopeless!' Angrily he typed in,

'**Megamouse! Why am I losing?**'

'**Losing good winning bad for Light Hand good lose good mouse.**'

'**NO!**' Joe banged on the desk so hard that Cleo's cage rattled.

'Hey, Joe –' began Kelly.

'**BAD MOUSE! BAD MOUSE!**' typed Joe furiously, stabbing the keyboard. 'Stupid mouse!' he cried.

'Joe! Stop!' wailed Kelly.

Joe spun round. In his anger, he hadn't heard the door open. He hadn't noticed Granpa standing there.

'Sounds like a lot of noise for *Spelling Bee*,' said Granpa. He put down his briefcase. 'Actually, that doesn't look like *Spelling Bee* to me.' He looked at Joe questioningly.

'It's, um, *Martian Warlord*,' stammered Kelly. 'It's mine. I lent it to Joe.'

'Oh, yes?' The bristly eyebrows shot upwards. 'Did I say you could play *Martian Warlord* on my computer?' He caught sight of the mouse under Joe's hand, and stiffened. His voice turned cold. 'And did I say you could use the Megamouse?'

'No,' Joe muttered.

'We just borrowed it for a bit,' said Kelly. 'We were being very careful.'

‘Were you? It didn’t look to me as if Joe was being very careful.’

‘It wins games for us,’ explained Kelly.

‘Does it, indeed? Then let’s see it win!’

‘It’s not doing it today,’ said Joe.

‘Hrmp!’ snorted Granpa, as he started up *Spelling Bee*. ‘Your mother tells me you’ve been in here every day this week. You should be an expert at *Spelling Bee* by now – Megamouse or no Megamouse.’

‘Surprise!’ buzzed Spelling Bee. As soon as Joe touched the keyboard, the answer spelled itself out.

‘SIRPRFYZS!&#x26;.’

‘Very funny,’ said Granpa frostily. ‘Let’s try *Maths Hound*, shall we? See what Megamouse can do for you there.’

Maths Hound waddled on-screen.

‘48 x 6 = ?’ he asked.

‘2 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> ,’ came the reply.

Granpa glowered. ‘I can see it was a complete waste of my time showing you those computer games! You’re not interested in them at all. You’re just making stupid jokes!’

‘But I didn’t give that answer!’ said Joe desperately. ‘It was Megamouse!’

‘I’ve had enough of this,’ said Granpa. He switched off the game. ‘Do you take me for a complete fool?’

‘But Granpa, it’s true!’

‘You are banned from this computer, Joe. And so is your friend. Who is just leaving.’ He glared at Kelly until she shuffled towards the door.

‘I’ll be in your room, Joe,’ she said, and sidled out.

Granpa turned back to Joe, glowering. ‘This equipment’s too valuable for you to fool around on like an idiot. You could have broken it. I am very disappointed!’

‘But Granpa, I wasn’t fooling around.’

‘You knew you weren’t supposed to touch the Megamouse!’

Joe’s throat felt tight. He *had* known. The anger in Granpa’s voice made him shrivel up inside.

‘But, Granpa, you don’t understand –’

‘If I have any more trouble over this computer, Joe, I may have to make myself very unpleasant!’

‘You already are,’ said Joe.

Granpa’s head jerked back. ‘What’s that?’

‘I said, you already are!’ The words began to flood out of Joe, tumbling over themselves in their hurry to be said. He didn’t try to stop them. He’d been thinking them for too long.

‘You boss Dad around something rotten and you treat Mum like a servant even though they’re always nice as pie to you and you’re always going on about how stupid we all are and how clever you are and how important your work is when Dad’s the best Dad and you’re the meanest Grandad making us eat mashed potato all the time and hogging the big TV and expecting Rose to stop crying just for you when you never even smile at her and – and being rude and horrible to everybody!’

Joe ran out of breath. He waited for the explosion, but Granpa didn’t answer. He just stood and stared at Joe, his expression quite unreadable.

Joe heard his own words echoing round and round the room. He couldn’t believe he’d said them – but he couldn’t unsay them now.

‘Sorry, Granpa,’ he muttered. Then he turned and fled.

## Chapter Nine

Megamouse sat rigid on his mouse mat. He dared not move, nor squeak, nor even twitch his tail. Cleo squeaked softly at him, but received no answer.

When Granpa’s big hand picked him up to inspect him, Megamouse kept quite still. When Granpa typed into the computer, Megamouse was dumb. The screen stayed blank.

‘Hrmph!’ Granpa rumbled at last. He replaced Megamouse on his mat, and with stiff fingers unlocked Cleo’s cage.

‘Not horrible to you, am I, old girl?’

Cleo nibbled his fingers politely, and tried to nudge him towards the digestive biscuits. But Granpa just stared into space.

Mum put her head round the door.

‘Is everything all right? I thought I heard voices.’

‘Yes,’ said Granpa.

‘Joe’s not been messing around in here, has he?’

‘No.’

‘That’s good. I was a bit worried... He does so enjoy using your computer. He’s been over the moon with it the last few days. As long as he’s not causing you any trouble... Is shepherd’s pie all right for your tea?’

‘Yes,’ said Granpa. After a moment he added, ‘Thank you.’

But Mum had already left the room.

Granpa drummed his fingers on the table.

‘Hrmph!’ he said eventually. Then he put Cleo back in her cage, gathered his crutches and stomped out.

‘Well!’ said Cleo to Megamouse once they were alone. ‘I think you overdid that a bit. Not quite what I meant.’

‘You say win all games bad! Me not win all games,’ squeaked Megamouse.

‘Yes, but when I said you shouldn’t *win* all of them, I didn’t mean you should *lose* all of them – oh, well. It’s too late now.’

‘Light Hand say me bad mouse,’ said Megamouse dolefully.

‘He just got a bit upset.’

‘Me bad mouse!’

‘No, no,’ said Cleo. ‘I’m sure he’ll come round.’

‘Bad, bad,’ wailed Megamouse. ‘Me no good real mouse, bad computer mouse, no good ever.’

‘Maybe you should have let him win one game.’

‘Me lose everything.’ Megamouse gazed sadly across the room to the patio doors. The curtains were still pulled across them.

‘Light Hand like play Outside,’ he remembered. ‘Me play Outside for Light Hand! Me win Outside for Light Hand! Me learn Real Life! Then Light Hand say good mouse, good mouse.’

‘Now hang on! You don’t understand –’

Cleo found she was talking to nobody. Megamouse had plunged off the desk and landed on the carpet with a faint thud.

‘Me play Outside!’ he squeaked, as he dived under the bed.

Cursing, Cleo hastily unlatched her cage and scrambled down after him. It took her a minute or two. By the time she jumped off the desk, Megamouse was already rolling through the dust to the hole in the skirting-board.

Before she could catch him up, he had scuttled through it and was out of sight. Cleo scampered across the floor and pushed through the hole after him

‘I’m too old for this sort of thing!’ she grumbled, as flakes of plaster fell on to her head.

Ahead of her, Megamouse squeezed through a gap past a broken air-brick. He found himself outside at last.

A cool breeze blew. A hundred strange sounds vibrated through his circuits. And his optic cells went into overload.

Outside was *enormous*. It was a million times bigger than any game he’d ever seen.

‘Big big big!’ Hurriedly Megamouse clicked his button to make Outside smaller. Everything stayed exactly the same size.

A bright yellow circle overhead was hurting his optic cells.

‘Delete,’ said Megamouse firmly, and wondered why the sun refused to be deleted.

A huge mouse mat was spread before him; a vast carpet of green. Venturing on to it, Megamouse discovered that it was uncomfortably prickly.

He looked around, bemused. Tiny creatures scuttled around him on many legs, busy playing this big game of Outside that Megamouse didn’t understand. Other creatures whirred and buzzed past his head.

‘Who you?’ he asked. ‘Spelling Bee? F-L-I-G-H-T, flight.’ But Spelling Bee ignored him and buzzed away.

‘Megamouse!’ hissed Cleo from the shadow of the wall. She glanced around warily. ‘Come back!’

Megamouse did not come back. He tried to roll onwards, but grass kept catching under his little wheel. With an effort he made it to the edge of the lawn and on to the path.

‘Not like green mouse mat. Hard mat good,’ he decided as he trundled across the path,

‘And

flat

mat

better,’ he added as he juddered down the steps to the drive,

‘But smooth

mat

best

of all,’

he finished, jolting painfully over the pitted tarmac. Every dent was like a ditch to him, and every bump a hill.

But he rolled on determinedly. He had to learn to play Outside for Light Hand. And when he got to the end of the drive, it was worth the journey.

Megamouse sat at the gate, transfixed with wonder. Enormous shapes of dazzling red and green and blue sped past, making the ground shake. The air throbbed with the roar of engines.

He knew this game! It even had the roadworks with their yellow barriers – just like on his screen.

‘Roadhog Racers!’ squealed Megamouse delightedly. ‘Big big Racers! Me good at Roadhog Racers! Me win 9000 points!’

He set out across the road, clicking his button excitedly.

‘No, don’t!’ cried Cleo. She scampered after him and paused at the kerb. ‘Come back!’ she squealed, but her voice was drowned out by the roar of the cars.

Megamouse rolled on, into the middle of the road.

‘Turn round! Go left!’ he commanded the Racers.

To his surprise, they did not swerve.

‘Slow down! Stop!’

The Racers did not stop. They hurtled straight past him with a rush of air that nearly bowled him over. Megamouse clicked his buttons busily – in vain. The Racers would not obey.

‘Error! Error!’ he cried. ‘Abandon game!’

Beneath him the ground vibrated. A huge green Racer was rushing towards him, growing bigger and bigger...

‘Help!’ squeaked Megamouse. ‘Too big! Escape! Delete!’ But no matter how frantically he clicked, the monster kept on coming.

There was a deafening noise, and a whirlwind of hot air as the lorry hurtled past.

Megamouse was sent spinning helplessly round in a circle. He felt dizzy. His circuits were jamming.

Two more cars came thundering towards him from opposite directions. Megamouse couldn’t control these mighty Racers. And if he was caught beneath a wheel he would end up in as many crumbs as a digestive biscuit.

‘No no no escape escape!’ he wailed. ‘Not like this game! Close down! *Close down!*’ Desperately he darted this way and that, trying to avoid the thunderous wheels. Racers seemed to be everywhere. He did not know how to get back to safety.

‘Want Cleo!’ he whimpered. ‘Want Light Hand! Want nice quiet sums!’

Then, just as he thought he was about to be flattened, he suddenly felt teeth fasten on his tail. They dragged him backwards off the road, away from the roaring, crushing Racers. He found himself being jolted over the kerb and dumped on the pavement.

Weak and shaken, he turned to see his rescuer.

‘Cleo?’ he whispered thankfully.

A large, wet nose prodded at his plastic shell. His saviour snorted hungrily. It wasn’t Cleo. It was Hogarth.

## Chapter Ten

‘Your Granpa isn’t staying for much longer, is he?’ asked Kelly.

‘Months.’ Joe’s voice was muffled. He leaned on his bedroom windowsill, his face buried in his arms.

‘*Months?*’

Joe raised his head to gaze out of the window. ‘Months,’ he said dully.

‘Well, maybe you could just stay out of his way?’ suggested Kelly.

‘How can I? He’s taken over the house!’

‘You can always come over to my place to get away from him,’ said Kelly. ‘Cheer up, Joe.’ She gave him an awkward pat on the shoulder, then turned to look out of the window with him.

Together they stared down at the roadworks, where a workman was just pouring himself a mug of tea from a thermos.

‘I wish Dad would come home,’ said Joe softly.

‘Look,’ said Kelly, trying to distract him, ‘There’s Miss Tree. Isn’t that a stupid name? If she was called Holly, she’d be Holly Tree.’

‘She isn’t stupid,’ said Joe. ‘She’s clever. Much cleverer than me. Granpa likes her.’

‘Or if her name was Cherry,’ Kelly persevered, ‘she’d be Cherry Tree. I wonder where she’s going. Maybe she’s after Horrible Hogarth. Look, there he is! What’s he doing?’

She pressed her face to the window. Then she cried out in alarm.

‘Oh, no! Oh, the silly dog – he’s run right into the road! *Stop*, Hogarth! He’s going to get run over! Why is she just *standing* there?’ yelled Kelly.

She flew out of the room, and thudded down the stairs. Interested in spite of his misery, Joe stared out of the window.

Kelly was right. Miss Tree was standing quite still at the roadside, while cars beeped and honked and swerved to avoid Hogarth. Soon there was a huge traffic jam – and there was Dad’s white van in the middle of it, with his ladders tied on top.

Drivers wound down their windows and shouted angrily. Miss Tree just began to laugh.

Meanwhile, Hogarth dodged the cars and galloped back across the road. Something dangled from his mouth, by a string... or perhaps a wire...

Joe’s heart turned over.

‘*Megamouse!*’ He dashed from the window and leapt down the stairs three at a time.

‘Hogarth!’ called Miss Tree. ‘Here, boy!’



The bulldog began to waddle towards her. But as he passed the roadworks, he yelped suddenly and dropped Megamouse. Cleo's sharp teeth had just attacked his broad behind.

Hogarth twisted round, barking furiously. He forgot Megamouse and instead pounced on Cleo, pinning her to the ground with a heavy paw.

'Hogarth!' yelled Kelly.

'Megamouse!' cried Joe.

'Oy!' shouted the startled workman, dropping his cup of tea. 'That dog's got a rat! Is it yours?'

'Yes!' cried both Kelly and Joe, as they ran for the roadworks.

But Miss Tree got there first.

'It's mine,' she said. 'Stupid dog! It's not the rat I want – it's the mouse! Get the *mouse!*' She lunged at Megamouse, trying to grab him.

He rolled away and managed to slip under her grasping fingers. But he couldn't roll far. He looked around desperately. He was trapped, with Miss Tree on one side, and a deep, black hole in the road on the other.

There was only one way he could go.

Megamouse hesitated for only five milliseconds. Then he rolled to the brink of the hole, and toppled in.

Joe and Kelly came pounding up, too late. Megamouse was gone.

As Miss Tree whirled round, angry and baffled, a white rat shot between her legs. With a despairing squeal, Cleo plunged after Megamouse, and disappeared into the darkness.

Four stunned faces stared at the hole in the road. The workman was the first to recover.

'That dog should be on a lead! And keep away from that hole. This isn't a playground!' he said. 'Get back behind the barriers, all of you!'

Behind them, the traffic had begun to move again. Dad parked his van and hurried over.

'Joe? What's going on? I saw a rat, or something...'

Joe pointed a shaky hand at the hole.

'Dad – it's Megamouse! He's in there – and so is Cleo. We've got to get them out!'

Miss Tree's boot tapped impatiently. 'What's down there?' she snapped at the workman.

'Eh? That's the sewers.'

'Where's the next exit?'

'There are manholes all over the place. There's one up the road, one by the traffic lights –'

'Right!' said Miss Tree. 'Hogarth? Down you go!'

And taking the unhappy bulldog by the scruff of the neck, she hurled him down the hole.

There was an echoing howl and a thud. Miss Tree threw back her head and laughed.

‘Oh!’ cried Kelly. ‘How could you? You pig!’

Miss Tree shrugged. ‘All in the game,’ she said, stalking away.

As Kelly leaned over the edge, Dad pulled her back. ‘Oh, no you don’t!’

‘I might be able to get him out,’ offered the workman. Carefully he descended feet first into the hole.

A moment later he reappeared, shaking his head.

‘Nope, he’s gone. I think he’s in the tunnel heading that way.’ He pointed towards the traffic lights. ‘I can’t see him, but I can hear him barking. It’s a bit of a maze down there, though. You’ll be lucky to get him out.’

‘Can’t you reach him?’ begged Kelly.

‘Sorry, lass! I can’t squeeze through that tunnel.’

‘But we’ve got to save him!’

‘And Megamouse!’ cried Joe. ‘We’ve got to rescue Megamouse!’ He felt sick with misery and fear.

He began to run towards the distant traffic lights. Although he didn’t even know if he was going the right way, he had to do something. When Dad shouted after him he just kept running.

A hundred metres down the road he was overtaken by a silver jeep. The driver was Miss Tree. Her hair blew out behind her like a golden flag. She sped past, waving gaily to him.

‘Finders keepers! Losers weepers!’ she shouted.

‘I hate her!’ panted Kelly, pounding up behind Joe. ‘She shouldn’t be allowed to keep a dog! Hang on, Joe. I’ve got a stitch.’ She halted and bent over.

Then she gasped.

‘I can hear Hogarth! The sound’s coming through this grid!’

There was a storm drain next to her. Kneeling down, Kelly put her ear close to it. ‘It *is* Hogarth! He sounds excited – as if he’s chasing something!’

‘Megamouse,’ whispered Joe, a painful hope piercing his heart.

He squatted down to listen. From underground there came the faintest echo of distant barking, as if from a phantom dog, buried deep in the earth.

## Chapter Eleven

Loud and close behind Cleo the barks rang out. The sound boomed relentlessly down the brick walls of the sewer tunnel, echoing from side to side. Megamouse felt as if he were trapped inside a cage of noise.

‘Don’t worry, he won’t keep it up for long,’ puffed Cleo. ‘Hear him floundering about? He won’t last. Just keep going!’

Megamouse rolled along the jutting, slimy ledge that travelled the length of the sewer tunnel. One slip and he’d be sinking in the foul stream that flowed sluggishly alongside...

‘It doesn’t half smell down here,’ gasped Cleo. ‘And they say rats live in the sewers! How they put up with this stink beats me!’

Behind them, the thunderous barking turned to a terrified howl, followed by a huge splash.

‘Told you so,’ said Cleo smugly. ‘Come on, Megamouse! Don’t stop now! What’s the matter?’

Megamouse was slowing down. His wheel was clogged with slime; but that wasn’t the only reason why he felt so drowsy and weak.

His batteries were nearly flat. He had used a lot of energy. He had never rolled so far before; and there was nowhere for him to recharge.

‘Need food,’ he murmured.

‘Food?’ said Cleo. ‘Oh, heck! Just keep going, Megamouse. Keep going for as long as you can! We’ll find a way up soon!’

Megamouse tried, but he was reduced to little faster than a crawl. He felt more drained with every metre. Darkness was closing in on him. He was cold, and his wheel squeaked pitifully.

‘Want Light Hand,’ he whimpered. ‘Want nice soft mouse mat.’

‘Don’t stop!’ entreated Cleo. ‘We can’t let Hogarth catch us up!’

But Megamouse stopped dead halfway along the tunnel.

‘Oh, no! Don’t get stuck here,’ wailed Cleo. ‘We’ll never get out!’ She gazed around wildly.

Hardly any light penetrated this far down the tunnel: all she could see were shadows. But she could hear the scrambling of a tired bulldog behind her.

Ahead of her, in the blackness, was nothing but the sound of dripping... and then she heard a faint, close rustle that made the hairs on her neck stand up in alarm.

‘What’s that?’ she whispered.

Megamouse was almost beyond being able to hear. He summoned all his energy to listen. He heard the dripping and the rustling, but they meant nothing to him.

Then he heard another sound – one that Cleo could not detect.

Half-conscious as he was, he felt it calling to him. A high, entrancing song hummed through a crack in the crumbling brickwork of the tunnel.

‘Food!’ sighed Megamouse. Gathering his last shreds of strength, he pushed into the crack. There, like a huge snake, lay a thick electric cable buried in the earth. As Megamouse came close, it buzzed and a spark jumped from it.

Something had already gnawed part way through the cable, so that the wires were exposed. They hummed with electricity. Megamouse rested his tail on the singing wires and drank from the current. Electricity coursed through his circuits like fire.

The cable buzzed more loudly. A hundred sparks sprang from it and lit up the darkness.

‘Wow,’ said Cleo; for this was high-voltage stuff.

She backed away. But when she turned, her heart stood still.

All around her, illuminated by the sizzling fountains of sparks, the shadows had come to rustling life. They were moving closer. Red eyes glinted. Black claws stretched themselves towards her.

*Rats!*

These weren’t the neat, white lab rats she had grown up with. These were massive, muscled, menacing sewer rats. She hadn’t realised rats could be so *big*. Each one was twice her size. And they *smelt*.

‘Well, er – hallo there, cousins!’ began Cleo.

The rats did not answer. Their fur bristled; their eyes glittered. There were dozens of them watching her, and creeping ever closer.

Cleo took a deep breath.

‘I wonder if you folks could kindly tell us which way we –’

She got no further. With a snarl, the biggest rat pounced.

She squealed and darted nimbly sideways to avoid it. The rat leapt again, on an easier target: Megamouse.

Megamouse could not escape. He was still wired up to the cable. He felt the heavy body of the rat land on his back.

Long teeth crunched on his casing: he felt the plastic crack. Although he tried to shake it off, the rat was too heavy for him to shift. It bit again, its vicious teeth breaking through his plastic shell.

But as the rat’s teeth grazed his circuits, there was a crackling blue flash.

It lit up the shadows like caged lightning. The sewer rat was thrown right across the tunnel. It lay still, stunned by several hundred volts.

Cleo stared at it open-mouthed for a second. Then she turned and hissed at the other rats, who looked equally stunned.

‘You don’t mess with this mouse! Get out of our way *now*, unless you want the same thing to happen to you!’

The dozens of wicked eyes blinked, and looked away. As Megamouse detached himself from the cable, the brown horde slowly parted to let him and Cleo past.

But they closed up again behind them in the dark. Cleo heard them rustling. They were still following, ready to attack. Fear would hold them off for a while – but for how long?

‘Hurry!’ she gasped.

‘Me try,’ said Megamouse, but he still wasn’t moving fast enough for her liking.

‘If those rats don’t get us, then Hogarth will,’ thought Cleo. For beyond the rustling rats she could still hear the growling and grumbling and bad-tempered wheezing of a wet but stubborn bulldog. He was gaining on them.

And then he smelt the rats.

It was a smell that even Hogarth’s squashed nose couldn’t miss. With a bark of joy, he put on a burst of speed. He slid and skidded, bounced off the walls and landed in the middle of the crowd of rats.

As Cleo and Megamouse fled down the tunnel, a flurry of squeals and snarls echoed behind them.

‘Now’s our chance!’ gasped Cleo. ‘Hurry!’

Megamouse couldn’t hurry. Most of the electric charge he’d drunk from the cable had gone straight through him into the sewer rat. His batteries were almost as flat as before; and this uneven surface was eating up his last remaining energy.

Just twenty metres further on, he ground gently to a halt.

‘No move,’ he whispered.

Cleo sniffed. She could smell fresh air! Looking up, she saw a trickle of daylight leaking through a cracked manhole.

There might be just enough space for a rat to squeeze through. But it was a long climb up. And she would have to carry Megamouse.

‘I can’t,’ sighed Cleo. She felt as tired as she’d ever been in her life.

Hogarth and the rats were still fighting in the tunnel. She had to move now, while they were distracted.

So she took a deep breath and gathered her remaining strength. Grasping Megamouse by his tail, she clambered slowly up the ragged walls, clinging to jutting stones and lumps of tarmac.

Once or twice she nearly fell; but at last, with a huge final effort, she reached the top, hauling Megamouse after her. They were out of the sewer.

Cleo lay exhausted in the gutter, with Megamouse beside her. She felt immense relief as the cool, fresh breeze rushed over her. She closed her eyes.

She'd done it. They were safe. Kelly and Joe would come and find them soon.

In fact, there were footsteps now! She raised her tired head and opened her eyes again expectantly...

...to see Prunella Tree's triumphant, gleeful smile.

## Chapter Twelve

'Look at that!' exclaimed Kelly. 'The traffic lights are going crazy!'

Ahead of them, the lights flashed red and green in rapid succession. Below ground, Megamouse was struggling with the sewer rat.

Then the lights went out altogether. Brakes screeched. All the cars stopped. For the second time, a massive traffic jam built up in the street, horns honking, drivers shouting.

One car honked louder than the rest. Then a silver jeep swerved up onto the kerb and weaved its way dangerously past the standing traffic.

Further down the road, it juddered to a sudden halt. Joe saw Miss Tree spring out. He began to run towards her.

She stooped to the ground alongside a manhole. Then, picking something up, she held it aloft: a small, grey shape, dangling from a long tail.

'Megamouse!' yelled Joe. Miss Tree looked up with a grin.

'You lose,' she said.

She did not notice as Cleo, exhausted, crept away into the gutter. But a moment later, a hollow bark made her look down at the manhole cover with a frown.

She tugged the cover to one side. A filthy, sodden, very tired bulldog slowly hauled himself out on to the road. He stood before her, dripping slime and wagging his stumpy tail, and proudly dropped a large dead rat at her feet.

'Hogarth! You disgusting dog!' shrieked Prunella Tree. She kicked the rat away. 'No, bad dog! Get off me! You are certainly *not* coming with me in *that* state!'

She flung herself into the jeep. The door slammed, shutting Hogarth out. The jeep pulled away.

'Stop!' cried Joe. 'Bring back Megamouse...'

It was pointless. She couldn't hear him. None the less, despite his aching legs, he chased after the jeep as it accelerated away.

He couldn't keep up. When the jeep roared down the road and out of sight Joe had to halt, gasping for breath.

Dad was calling him. Joe wiped his face and walked heavily back to where Dad stood with Kelly and Hogarth. There was no sign of Cleo.

'I've lost him. I've lost Megamouse.' Joe found his sight blurring with tears of frustration and grief.

'Don't worry.' Dad put his arm around him. 'I've got the jeep's registration number. The police will track her down.'

'That'll take ages. She'll escape – and what will she do to Megamouse? I've got to rescue him!' cried Joe.

'It's only a computer mouse,' said Dad.

But Joe knew otherwise. He was the one who had brought Megamouse to consciousness. He was the only one who knew Megamouse was alive: the only one who cared enough to save him.

'What am I going to say to Granpa?' he said despairingly.

'Leave that to me,' said Dad. 'That Megamouse *does* move on its own, Joe, doesn't it? Don't worry, we'll get it back.'

Joe leaned against Dad's shoulder. 'How?' he wailed. 'Where do we look?' He was desperately afraid that he would never see Megamouse again. Dad patted his back, but did not answer.

Kelly was on her knees, hugging a shivering Hogarth.

'Brave dog!' she told him. 'Fancy her calling you disgusting! *She's* the disgusting one.'

'He's making you filthy,' said Joe dully, for Kelly's clothes were smeared with slime.

'So?' she said defiantly. 'I'm going to take him home and give him a good wash. You'd like a nice bath, wouldn't you, Hogarth?'

Hogarth looked despondent.

'And a rub down with a warm towel by the fire?'

Hogarth perked up a little.

'And a bowl of nice meaty chunks for your supper?'

Hogarth's stumpy tail began to wag.

'That's a good dog!'

'We'd better take him back with us, then,' said Joe wearily. His heart was aching even more than his legs. Kelly was happy; she'd rescued Hogarth – but what about Megamouse? Who would rescue him?

Where was he? Was he frightened? Was he hurt? If only Joe hadn't been so intent on winning everything, he might not have lost him.

'I was Megamouse's only friend,' thought Joe unhappily. 'And I've let him down.'

## Chapter Thirteen

At first, Granpa didn't believe Dad's story. But there was no doubt that Megamouse had gone, and so had Miss Tree; and that Dad had seen the one carry off the other.

'She was so friendly,' said Granpa gruffly. 'Thought she liked me.'

'So did I,' agreed Dad. 'What I don't understand is what she wants with the Megamouse. Is it valuable?'

Granpa nodded reluctantly. 'It's not alive, of course, but it is unique. It's a prototype; worth a lot of money. I should have known something was wrong. Now she'll sell it. She's an industrial spy – she steals other people's work.'

'Then we'll never get Megamouse back!' cried Joe.

'Don't give up yet!' Dad told him. 'I'll ring the police now and see if they can help.' He hurried out, leaving Granpa and Joe alone together.

'I shouldn't have trusted Miss Tree,' said Granpa fiercely, his eyebrows bristling like a thorn bush. 'Should have guessed she wouldn't really want to be friends with an old codger like me. How could I have been so stupid?'

'You weren't stupid,' said Joe. 'You weren't to know.'

Granpa shook his head. 'I should have known. That mouse is the only one of its kind. At least nothing else is missing...'

As he glanced around, his eye fell upon Cleo's empty cage. He touched the cage door and it swung open.

'Cleo?' Granpa anxiously riffled through her nest of sawdust, and then looked frantically around the room. 'Where's Cleo?'

'She followed Megamouse down the hole in the road,' Joe told him. He'd been so busy worrying about Megamouse that he'd forgotten all about Cleo. 'She came out again,' he added, seeing the horror on Granpa's face.

'Are you sure?'

'I saw her by the road, near Miss Tree. But when Miss Tree drove off, Cleo wasn't there. I don't know where she went. She must have been scared and run away.'

'Oh, Cleo,' breathed Granpa. He sat down on his bed, looking suddenly much older. His hands were trembling.

Joe was astonished to see Granpa looking so shaken. Cleo was only a rat, after all, and not a very nice one at that. Surely a rat could look after itself, better than Megamouse could...

Then it dawned on him that Granpa felt just the same way about Cleo as Joe did about Megamouse. *Terrible.*

Cautiously he reached for Granpa's hand. It was trembling and cold.

'She's a clever rat, Granpa,' Joe said reassuringly. 'She'll be all right.'

'Will she?'



‘Of course she will.’ He patted Granpa’s hand awkwardly, wondering how to cheer him up. He rummaged in his pocket. ‘Do you want a toffee?’

‘Thanks,’ said Granpa gruffly. He detached one from the sticky mass in the bag and chewed in downcast silence. After a while he said,

‘Miss Tree didn’t really like me at all, did she? Just wanted to find out what I knew.’

‘I expect she liked you as well,’ said Joe.

Granpa shook his head, sighing. ‘What I need is a cup of tea.’

‘I’ll go and ask Mum,’ offered Joe.

‘I can make myself a cup of tea,’ said Granpa haughtily. ‘Don’t want to treat your mother like a servant, do we?’

Joe bit his lip. ‘I didn’t really mean all that!’

‘Yes, you did,’ growled Granpa, ‘and I don’t blame you. Thing is, I’m better with numbers than with people. Always have been. More comfortable with a computer. You know where you are with a computer.’ He stood up. ‘Come on. You show me where you keep the tea.’

They found Mum in the kitchen, feeding Rose. Granpa made a pot of tea, with Joe’s help, and poured a cup for her.

Mum looked surprised, but pleased. She sat Rose on Granpa’s knee while she found the biscuits, and Joe tickled Rose’s toes to make sure she didn’t cry. Granpa looked rather alarmed to be holding Rose. His eyebrows bristled like anything.

Dad came in carrying the phone book, a serious expression on his face.

‘Bad news, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘The police say Miss Tree’s car must have a false registration. They can’t trace her. And there are no Trees at all in the phone book! Not one.’

‘There should be at least two,’ protested Joe. ‘Her house next door, and her cottage at Acrefield!’

Dad shook his head. ‘She must use a false name as well.’

‘How do you know she’s got a cottage?’ asked Mum.

‘She told us. Oh, Dad!’ cried Joe. ‘She might have gone there! Can we go and look?’

‘Acrefield’s a big place,’ said Dad. ‘We could try – but we might drive around all day and not find her. Unless we know exactly where to go, we haven’t much chance of tracking her down.’

The back door burst open, and Kelly bounced in, dragging a reluctant Hogarth.

‘Look! Isn’t he beautiful? Doesn’t he gleam?’ she said proudly.

Hogarth was sleek and spotless. He smelt strongly of peach shampoo. He made straight for the kitchen bin, and tried to stick his head in it.

‘Come out, silly Hogarth!’ said Kelly indulgently. ‘I think he’s a really clever dog. Did you see how he spotted the bin straight away?’

‘Incredible,’ said Mum.

‘It took ages to get all the slime off him, but he only tried to bite me twice,’ said Kelly admiringly. ‘I wish he was mine!’

‘It is a shame he belongs to Miss Tree,’ agreed Joe. He paused, staring at Hogarth as an idea dawned.

‘Maybe we *have* got a chance of tracking her down,’ he said thoughtfully. ‘Maybe Hogarth knows where she is! Good dog! Clever Hogarth!’

## Chapter Fourteen

Cleo had a rough ride.

She’d managed to jump into the jeep without Miss Tree seeing her. Now she crouched in the back, her claws digging into the mat, and was thrown from side to side every time the jeep went round a corner.

By the time it stopped and parked up, Cleo felt quite sick. She had just enough presence of mind to slip out behind Miss Tree, before the door slammed shut.

Cowering under a wheel, she watched Miss Tree walking up to a small, overgrown cottage, half-hidden amongst bushes.

Darkness was falling. Strange smells assailed Cleo’s nose: damp earth, manure and wood-smoke. Country smells.

‘What am I doing here?’ she thought. ‘Miles from anywhere! I’m a lab rat – I don’t know anything about the country. I must be mad!’ The cottage door closed behind Miss Tree. ‘And now I’m shut out!’

As Cleo crept wearily up the path, she felt old, battered and very hungry. A brown mouse popped up from behind a broken flowerpot to watch her with beady black eyes.

‘How do? You’re new round hereabouts,’ it declared.

‘That’s right,’ said Cleo cautiously, wary of strangers after her encounter with the sewer rats.

But the mouse just sucked on a straw. ‘You’re a tadde clarty,’ it remarked.

‘Well, well,’ said Cleo, not having the slightest idea what it was talking about.

‘*Mud*,’ said the mouse.

‘Oh! Yes. I am a bit dirty. Is there a way in?’

‘Ar,’ said the mouse. It chewed its straw. ‘You’ m after yon spuddling setter of mousetraps?’

Cleo could scarcely understand it. It probably couldn’t understand her either, she thought gloomily. It looked a bit dim.

‘How do I get in?’ she asked slowly and clearly. ‘My friend Megamouse is prisoner in there.’

To her surprise, the mouse was suddenly alert.

‘Mouse? Mouse, you say, prisoner?’ It stared at her, then seemed to come to a decision. ‘I be Bartle. You come along with me. This way, quick!’

Bartle disappeared behind a bush and up a drainpipe. Cleo followed. She found herself underneath the sink in a cold, stone-flagged kitchen. Mousetraps were scattered across the floor.

‘Madam be upstairs,’ said Bartle quietly. ‘This way, through the fireplace. She don’t never have no fire.’

He scampered across the flag-stones to the old-fashioned hearth. Cleo pattered after him, keeping her tail well away from the mousetraps. She didn’t like the look of this place. But she had to find Megamouse.

Bartle disappeared into the fireplace, and scrambled nimbly up the broken brickwork of the chimney. Cleo’s heart sank.

‘Not more climbing!’ she thought. ‘I’ve had enough for that for one day!’ Heaving a sigh, she laboured up the chimney, coughing at the soot, until she emerged in a smaller fireplace upstairs.

And then she saw him.

The floorboards were bare. A camp bed and a canvas chair were the only furniture. A suitcase lay on the dusty floor, with a computer resting on top of it; and next to the computer – but not plugged in – was a still and lifeless Megamouse.

Miss Tree flopped in the creaking chair, her shoes kicked off. She was eating asparagus from a tin and swigging champagne from a bottle. She looked cheerful, but as Bartle darted across the fireplace she swung round and fixed him with a fiercely glinting eye.

‘Dratted mice!’ She hurled the bottle at him, and it smashed on the hearth. Puddles of champagne lay fizzing among the shards of glass.

Cleo and Bartle quietly retreated to the darkness of the chimney.

‘Do that there be a mouse?’ said Bartle, looking doubtful.

‘A very rare mouse. What can we do?’ said Cleo wretchedly. ‘We can’t reach him while she’s in there!’

‘Don’t you fret!’ Bartle’s black eyes glinted. ‘Us don’t care for yon mouse-catcher. Us’d be glad to see the back of Madam.’

‘Us? Who’s us?’

‘Us mice and rats. Thinks we’re stupid, she do. She be wrong.’

‘But how can you help?’

‘We’ll talk together and think on.’ Bartle scrambled back down to the kitchen with Cleo wearily following. She stood shivering in the cold fireplace. She felt worn out, cold, starving and very close to despair. What could a mouse and a rat do against a clever, wicked human?

‘If you’ m hungry,’ said Bartle kindly, ‘there be a few kidney beans under the stove. Not much, but she don’t eat proper food, only horrible stuff in tins. I’ll go and find t’others. Never fear, us’ll get him out!’

## Chapter Fifteen

Cleo shivered as she crouched in the kitchen fireplace. Bartle was right: it hadn’t seen a fire in years.

She firmly put her own discomfort aside, and thought instead of Megamouse lying in the room above, dead to the world, while Miss Tree lounged on the camp bed beside him. Even if they could somehow get him out of there, what then? Cleo was totally lost and miles from home.

She sighed. One step at a time, she thought. Maybe Bartle and the mice would have some ideas.

Before nightfall, Cleo met a succession of sleek brown rats and neat grey mice, who scampered across the kitchen floor to talk to her before running off to chatter amongst themselves.

Although she was cautious of the rats at first, these ones were much friendlier than the sewer rats. She felt sure they were cooking up a plan between them, but no-one told her what it was.

It was a long, cold, night. Cleo had little sleep. She longed for the rustling warmth of her cage, instead of this dark, chilly hearth... and for a big, wrinkled hand to carefully stroke her ears, and offer her a digestive biscuit...

‘Wake up!’ said Bartle’s voice. ‘’Tis nearly light.’

Cleo opened bleary eyes, and peered into the shadows around her. They were now just grey, rather than pitch black.

‘Them rats be at work already,’ whispered Bartle. ‘Madam be in for a surprise.’

‘What sort of surprise?’

‘Something to keep her busy!’ Bartle chuckled. ‘How about a little flood? Them old lead pipes be easy for rats to chew through. So be them wires, them buzzing wires.’

‘Electrics? Don’t touch them! They’re dangerous!’ Cleo, now wide awake, shuddered as she recalled the crackle of underground lightning in the sewers.

‘Don’t ’ee worry! While she’s distracted, see, we’ll rescue yon poor mouselet.’

‘But he needs to wake up first, or we’ll never get him down the chimney,’ said Cleo. ‘He needs food; his own sort of food.’ She thought hard. ‘Maybe I can plug him in without disturbing Miss Tree.’

‘Plug him in?’ Bartle was bemused.

‘Come along! I’ll show you.’ Cleo scrambled up the narrow chimney, and peered cautiously into the room above.

Miss Tree lay on the camp-bed, fully dressed, snoring softly beside another empty champagne bottle. Like a grey wraith in the twilight, Cleo glided over to the suitcase. Gently she nudged Megamouse, but there was no response.

‘Dead?’ whispered Bartle.

‘Just sleeping... Poor thing. What a state he’s in!’ Cracked, tooth-pocked and spattered with mud, Megamouse was a woeful sight.

‘Strange sort of mouse,’ said Bartle, sniffing him doubtfully.

‘Very rare and special, like I said. In fact,’ added Cleo, pulling Megamouse’s tail towards the computer socket, ‘he’s probably the only one of his kind in the world.’

She plugged him in and Bartle’s eyes widened.

‘That be for sure!’

Cleo switched on the computer’s hard drive. Megamouse twitched. His tail quivered. His buttons clicked once, twice. He swivelled on the suitcase.

‘Cleo?’ he squeaked. ‘Where me now?’

‘Ssh! Miss Tree’s cottage. Keep still, Megamouse, and keep quiet! You need to recharge your batteries before we can get you out of here.’

‘Good.’ He sat silent, while Miss Tree mumbled in her sleep, tossing on the camp bed. Bartle glided away, and left Cleo crouching next to Megamouse. She watched Miss Tree anxiously for signs of waking.

Would Megamouse have time to recharge before Miss Tree awoke? Then how were they going to get him down that chimney? Megamouse wasn’t equipped for climbing, and they couldn’t just drop him or he might break.

‘Put something soft in the fireplace for him to land on,’ she thought. But even then, their problems wouldn’t be over. They still had to get home...

‘Cleo,’ whispered Megamouse, ‘many files on this computer.’

‘Good. But shush.’

‘Many files, many numbers... no games. Maybe Light Hand like files? I copy files for Light Hand.’

‘All right! Fine! Now hush!’

Megamouse sat quietly once more, now and again clicking faintly.

Meanwhile Cleo’s sharp ears picked up another, more distant sound: the trickle of water on stone. She remembered Bartle chuckling about a flood, and wondered what was happening downstairs.

Light began to shine through the curtainless window, filling the room with a pale, lemon glow. At any other time Cleo would have been glad to see the dawn. Now she huddled in the computer’s shadow, sick with apprehension lest Miss Tree should wake too soon.

Miss Tree yawned, stretched and sat up. Cleo froze. But Miss Tree didn’t see her. She rubbed her eyes, and groaned.

‘Coffee! I need coffee.’

Rolling off the camp bed, she staggered to the door. Cleo heard her stumbling downstairs.

‘She’s gone!’ she hissed to Megamouse. ‘Are you ready?’

‘Nearly.’

‘Time to go!’ They mustn’t miss this chance, thought Cleo. Even if she couldn’t get Megamouse down the chimney, they could hide there.

Just then, Bartle reappeared in the fireplace.

‘Rats have done their work,’ he said cheerfully. ‘There be a lake down in yon kitchen!’

From downstairs came a yell, and a furious splash.

Bartle added, ‘Rats be working on them wires too.’

The low purr of the computer ceased abruptly.

‘Food all gone,’ said Megamouse, withdrawing his tail.

‘Come on, then! Let’s get out of here!’ Cleo scampered off towards the fireplace, and Megamouse rolled after her.

Miss Tree blundered back in, swearing loudly. Her feet left soggy footprints on the floorboards.

‘Dratted place!’ she spat. ‘Dratted pipes!’

Then she saw Megamouse rattling vainly against the edge of the hearth. Low as it was, it was too high for his little wheel.

With a shriek, Miss Tree threw herself upon him. Megamouse squealed in alarm and shot away across the floor, with Miss Tree pounding after him. He scuttled frantically around the room, zig-zagging this way and that, and finally zoomed under the camp bed.

Miss Tree lifted the bed, tipped it over and snatched him up triumphantly.

‘Got you!’

Cleo darted towards her. She had little hope of making Miss Tree release Megamouse; but at least she could try and bite her in the ankle.

Before she reached her, Miss Tree paused, clutching Megamouse. She sniffed the air. ‘What’s burning?’ she demanded.

Then Cleo saw the curl of smoke creeping under the door.

Running to the door, Miss Tree flung it open. Smoke billowed into the room from the landing. She slammed the door quickly, with horror in her face.

‘Well!’ whispered Cleo to Bartle. ‘Your rats have gone and done it now!’

‘Done what?’

‘I told you it was dangerous. They’ve chewed right through the wires – and set the house on fire!’

## Chapter Sixteen

‘Good boy, Hogarth!’ exclaimed Kelly. ‘You’re doing brilliantly. Don’t give up!’

They’d set off at the first hint of daybreak, with Granpa, Dad and Joe squashed up together in the front of Dad’s van. Kelly and Hogarth sat in the back among the paint pots.

For the last half hour, they had been driving slowly along the deserted lanes round Acrefield. To Joe, it felt like days. They must have gone down every road, without seeing any sign of a silver jeep.

Then, just as he was starting to despair, Hogarth began to wriggle and bark.

‘Stop!’ cried Kelly. ‘He knows where we are. Let him out!’

Dad slowed down. Tumbling out of the van, Hogarth waddled energetically down a narrow, wooded lane. The van followed at a crawl.

Granpa sat quietly, his hands tightly clasped.

‘Cleo,’ he murmured.

Joe wished he could reassure him. He wished he could reassure himself. *Oh, Megamouse, he thought. Where are you?*

Hogarth halted, whining, at a rusty gate. Joe scrambled out of the van to investigate. At the far end of a rutted drive he glimpsed a silver shape amongst the trees.

‘The jeep! We’ve found it, Dad!’

‘Good old Hogarth! I knew you could do it!’ Kelly hugged the wheezing bulldog. But Joe raised his head to sniff the air.

‘Dad? I can smell smoke!’

‘A bonfire, maybe?’ Dad suggested.

Joe bit his lip. It was a strange time of day for a bonfire. If it was Miss Tree’s fire, just what was she burning?

Panicking, he yanked at the gate, and raced up the drive.

As the cottage came into sight, Joe stopped in horror. Thick black smoke was pouring through the broken pane of a lower window.

‘It’s on fire!’

As he was about to dash forward, Dad grabbed at his coat.

‘Wait, Joe! Stay well back. I’ll go and look.’

Miss Tree appeared at an upper window, tugging at the catch. The window opened half-way, and then stuck. Miss Tree put her head out and yelled at them.

‘Get me down!’

‘Where’s Megamouse?’ Joe yelled back.

‘It’s here! You can have it – if you get me out of here!’ she cried. She waved, and Joe saw something in her hand. It was Megamouse.

‘Quick, help me get the ladders,’ said Dad. They ran to the van and hauled the ladders from its roof.

‘Pa? Ring the fire service on my mobile,’ Dad called to Granpa.

‘I’ll do it!’ Kelly cried.

Dad carried the ladders over to the cottage and leaned them against the wall. Granpa hobbled painfully behind on his crutches. He put a hand on Dad’s arm.

‘I don’t want you going up there, son!’

‘Don’t worry, Pa!’ said Dad cheerfully. ‘In my job, I go up ladders all the time.’

‘Not into blazing houses!’ Granpa’s voice trembled.

‘It’s not blazing, only smoking. You keep the children well back.’

Granpa seemed fixed to the spot. Joe had to pull him away until they stood at a safe distance. Then he held Granpa’s hand while they watched Dad ascend the ladder.

On reaching the window, Dad wrenched at it until it opened fully. He climbed into the room and helped Miss Tree clamber out over the windowsill.

She descended the ladder at speed, with Megamouse dangling from one hand by his tail.

‘Whew!’ she said as she jumped to the ground. She turned and gave them a wide smile. ‘That was exciting! I’m very grateful.’

‘Please give him to me now,’ begged Joe.

‘Unfortunately, I’m not *that* grateful.’



And with a swift movement she swung Megamouse round by his tail and flung him through the broken downstairs window – straight back into the house. Joe saw the thick smoke swallow him up.

‘No!’ he cried in terror.

Dad came clattering down the ladder.

‘Dad! We’ve got to rescue him!’

‘Sorry, Joe,’ said Dad. ‘I’m not going back in. It’s too dangerous. The roof could fall in any minute.’

‘Then *I’ll* go after him!’

Dad grabbed his jumper and pulled him back.

‘No way, Joe. You’re staying here.’

‘*But Megamouse!*’

‘Sorry, Joe.’ Leading him away, Dad held him tight as the smoke billowed ever more thickly from the window.

Miss Tree laughed. ‘Well, goodbye, all! I must be off. So nice to see you.’

‘Wait! You’re under arrest!’ thundered Granpa, waving his crutch at her.

‘For what? For stealing a computer mouse that talks? Who’ll believe that?’ She tossed her hair back. ‘Your evidence is destroyed. Everything’s burnt. Not that I care! It was all just a game anyway.’

‘A game?’

‘Of course!’ she retorted. ‘Why do you think I moved in next door? Why do you think I was so friendly? Why do you think I let Hogarth loose in your garden? That dog was my only mistake. If he wasn’t so stupid, I would have won!’

‘You haven’t won this time,’ said Dad.

‘Neither have you. So long, losers!’ She strode to the jeep.

‘Get her, Hogarth!’ yelled Kelly. Hogarth galumphed up to Miss Tree and tried to bite her boots.

‘Leave off, you vile dog!’ Miss Tree kicked Hogarth away, jumped into the jeep and started up the engine. ‘South America, here I come!’ she sang out. The jeep began to roll down the drive.

‘We can’t stop her,’ said Granpa heavily. ‘She’s right. No evidence.’

But Dad began to laugh.

Joe stared at the jeep. It wasn’t actually rolling: it was juddering forward strangely, in tiny jerks.

Then he saw that all four tyres were completely flat. Not just flat – shredded! Almost as if they’d been chewed...

‘Drive carefully!’ called Dad, as the jeep rattled slowly and painfully down the track.

Then it stopped dead. Sirens wailed, and a police car turned into the drive, followed by a fire engine. The jeep was trapped.

There was a crash from the smoking house as a beam fell in. Flames leapt up and danced in the cottage windows.

‘Get back, Joe!’ commanded Dad. ‘The whole place could collapse at any minute.’

‘But Megamouse!’ cried Joe. ‘We’ve got to save him!’

‘No,’ said Dad firmly.

Joe stared at the cottage, his eyes stinging and blurring. The air was thick with smoke. He heard the flames’ angry crackle and felt their fierce heat. He knew that nothing could survive inside there any longer.

Then, by the door, he saw a flicker of movement. A brown mouse and a white rat emerged from a drain, dripping wet, and tugging a tiny, round, grey, familiar shape...

Joe couldn’t believe his eyes. Dragging it by its tail across the yard, the mouse and rat released their burden and fell over, exhausted.

‘It’s Megamouse!’ Joe ran forward to pick him up.

‘Cleo!’ Granpa hobbled up and knelt beside him. The bedraggled white rat nuzzled his fingers wearily. The brown mouse picked itself up and scampered away into the bushes.

‘Cleo!’ said Granpa hoarsely. ‘I thought I’d lost you!’

‘Move away now!’ Two fire officers began to firmly guide them back up the drive. Kelly watched entranced as two more unreeled the hose and aimed it at the flames.

But Joe’s eyes were only on Megamouse.

‘Megamouse! You’re safe now. It’s me, Light Hand.’ Joe cradled the mouse gently, trying to detect a twitch or tremble in the small grey body.

There was none. Megamouse’s shell was cracked and split; his tail was twisted and dirty. He was a piece of wire and plastic, nothing more.

‘Granpa?’ said Joe shakily. ‘It’s Megamouse all right... but I think he’s dead.’

## Chapter Seventeen

The living-room was silent. Joe sat hunched in Granpa's chair; Cleo perched tensely by the computer. Together, they watched Granpa at work.

Granpa held Megamouse in one hand. The other hand twirled a tiny screwdriver.

He had removed Megamouse's broken shell. He had cleaned him, and replaced his battery. Now he was carefully fitting a new plastic casing.

'Don't know if this'll work,' he grunted.

Joe said nothing.

'Not really alive, you know,' said Granpa. 'Probably just a programming fault. Mice don't talk.'

Joe still said nothing.

'All the same – clever of you to discover it,' said Granpa. Joe was silent.

Granpa put Megamouse down.

'Sorry if I was rude to you, Joe,' he said gruffly. 'Doesn't mean I don't like you. Because I – er – hrmph. I do.'

'I like you too,' Joe answered. He said it to be polite, and then realised it was true.

He liked the deep growl of Granpa's voice, and the way his gentle hands stroked Cleo. And Granpa had surprised him by thanking all the firemen very politely after they'd doused the blazing cottage. Then he'd shaken hands with Dad, and even mumbled something about A brave lad, son, with tears in his eyes.

'Sometimes you're nice,' said Joe.

Granpa made a noise between a snort and a laugh.

'Glad to hear it! So are you, sometimes.'

He gave the screwdriver a final, tiny twist and put it down.

'Finished,' he said. 'Looks better, doesn't he?' He held out Megamouse.

'Looks better,' Joe agreed with a sigh.

'He'd short-circuited,' explained Granpa. 'Full of water. The firemen said they'd never seen anything like it – fire and flood in the same house. Goodness knows how it happened. But the flood saved Megamouse's bacon – and Cleo's.' He gave Cleo an affectionate pat. 'Well, here goes. Let's try him out!'

Joe's fingers felt shaky as he plugged Megamouse in. He didn't think he could bear it if Megamouse didn't work... or, worse, had become just an ordinary mouse that couldn't talk...

Cleo sat up alertly as Joe typed:

**'Hello, Megamouse.'**

The wait seemed endless. Then, at last, words began to appear on the screen.

**‘Greeting, Light Hand.’**

‘Good heavens,’ said Granpa faintly. He reached across the keyboard and typed in,

**‘And his Granpa.’**

**‘Greeting, Ancient Relative,’** Megamouse replied.

‘Hrmph!’ said Granpa.

Joe grinned. **‘How are you going?’** he asked.

**‘On my little wheel.’**

‘It’s talking gibberish,’ said Granpa. ‘Ancient, indeed!’

**‘What happened?’** Joe asked Megamouse.

**‘Outside was very hard game. Roadhog Racers would not play. Batteries drained. All functions shut down.’**

‘I don’t believe it!’ murmured Granpa.

**‘How do you feel now?’**

**‘Feel mouse mat. Nice and soft. Not like playing Outside.’**

Megamouse rolled around his mat. His wheel squeaked faintly, and Cleo pricked up her ears and squeaked back.

‘Hark at them!’ said Granpa. ‘You’d think they were talking to each other!’

‘Maybe they are,’ said Joe. ‘After all, it was Cleo who rescued Megamouse. She must have followed him on purpose.’

‘Hrmph!’ said Granpa thoughtfully. ‘Of course, I’ve always known she’s a very intelligent rat. And I wouldn’t like to think she’d run away because she wasn’t happy.’

Joe bit his lip. He tapped in:

**‘Megamouse, why did you run away?’** He thought he already knew the answer that would appear on the screen, but he wanted to be sure.

**‘Me bad mouse.’**

**‘No!’** Joe answered. **‘Good mouse!’**

**‘Good mouse?’**

**‘Very good mouse! Best mouse ever!’**

**‘Good good good!’** Megamouse did a little twirl on the mouse mat. **‘I have lots of nice new numbers,’** he announced. **‘Light Hand like new numbers?’** Figures began to flood on to the screen.

Granpa stared in amazement. ‘What on earth...? Good heavens! These files belong to some of the top computer companies!’

**‘Where did you find these, Megamouse?’** he asked.

**‘Naughty computer of Cold Hand.’**

‘Miss Tree!’ exclaimed Joe.

‘Stolen,’ said Granpa. ‘Well, her computer may have gone up in smoke, but we’ve got something to show the police now!’

‘He’s a clever mouse,’ said Joe proudly.

Granpa cleared his throat. ‘Hrmp. If I called you stupid, Joe, I was wrong. This Megamouse is the most interesting thing I’ve seen in years – and it was you who brought him to life!’

‘I don’t know how,’ admitted Joe.

‘Maybe we can find out. I’ll look forward to testing him!’

‘Testing? You won’t hurt him, will you?’ asked Joe anxiously.

‘No. Just talk to him,’ said Granpa gravely. ‘In fact, I think you might be better at it than me. Maybe we could do it together.’

‘You won’t send him away?’

‘When Cleo’s so fond of him?’ said Granpa. ‘No, I’d rather keep him. Even if he does talk gibberish about Roadhog Racers. Is that a game you play with Kelly?’

‘That’s right. Would you like to play it, Granpa?’ asked Joe tentatively. ‘Or I could show you *Martian Warlord*. That’s really cool!’

‘You’d rather play with Kelly, I expect.’

‘No, I wouldn’t! Anyway, she’s taken Hogarth to obedience class this evening. I think he’ll keep her busy for a while.’

Granpa sniffed. ‘I suppose I could play you for a change, then,’ he declared. ‘These games can’t be too difficult – not for someone who’s worked with computers all their life. Don’t be surprised when I win.’

‘Winning’s not everything, you know,’ said Joe. He didn’t care about being champion this time. He didn’t really mind if he won or lost, so long as he had Megamouse – and Granpa – to play with.

‘Just load it up,’ commanded Granpa. ‘I’ll show you how it’s done!’

Joe felt Megamouse give the faintest twitch beneath his hand.

‘I wouldn’t be so sure of that,’ he said, and grinned. ‘Ready, Megamouse? Ready, Granpa? Watch out, Martian Warlord! Here we come!’

THE END

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