

# The Salvager



ALLEN DONNELLY

# **THE SALVAGER**

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## **DEDICATIONS**

Dedicated to everyone struggling through life's trials  
And still finding the strength within themselves  
To keep kicking it in the metaphorical balls

Also dedicated to my friend Karen from Texas,  
From whom Aimee sprang

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)  
[Chapter Two](#)  
[Chapter Three](#)

## CHAPTER ONE

The school bus flew across the undulating landscape of red-brown sand, a bright yellow lozenge filled with children who were all rapidly becoming bored as the novelty of being out of the classroom wore off. Every now and then, as the dunes rose to meet it, the bus kicked up a thick plume of sand that hung briefly in the air behind it before being whisked away by the ever-present wind that whistled and hissed in contrast to the hum of the bus's anti-grav engines. Faces peered out of the windows, watching the vast desert slide past, searching for sand-sails or jackals, or indeed anything to break up the monotony of the sands.

Kendra Williams, history teacher and unwilling tour guide, also stared out of the window, enjoying, for a few beautiful moments, the relative peace. It was a temporary respite, she knew; inevitably it would only be a matter of time before boredom got the better of the children and they returned to the squabbling and the endless, endless questions. Not that she minded being asked questions - that was generally a large part of her job - but she was a history teacher, not a geography teacher. The geography teacher who was supposed to be leading this field trip, Mr Reiker, was apparently 'sick', which Kendra was sure had nothing to do with him celebrating his birthday at a club the previous night. Most of the staff had gone; the recently arrived history teacher, in her first job after qualifying half a galaxy away on the far distant Earth, hadn't been invited.

Kendra huffed out a deep sigh; her knowledge of the geography of Danelon IV amounted to little more than "This bit's a desert, at the equator it's a tropical jungle, then there's more desert on the other side." Was there ice at the poles, or an ocean somewhere? It suddenly occurred to her that she didn't know. Had she looked out of the window when the transport ship that had delivered her down to the surface was heading into the atmosphere? No, she remembered with painful shame, she had been too busy violently dispensing her lunch into the conveniently provided paper bag; the embarrassed looking man in the seat next to her had held her hair out of the way whilst also contriving to look out of the window, or indeed in any direction but at the vomiting woman next to him. She hadn't been able to look him in the eye afterwards when she was trying to thank him.

Well, as long as none of the children asked any real questions then she could probably wing it. *I mean, it was just rocks and sand, right*, she told herself. She

looked down at the notes she had frantically scribbled down some twenty minutes before the trip had started. Was the information she had correct? She didn't have the faintest idea. Honestly, she was suffering no small amount of anxiety that she had actually looked up the wrong planet; it was entirely possible that she had typed in Danelon V or Danelon VI instead. Were they desert planets as well, were they even habitable? She was sure she remembered that at least one of them was a gas giant. Would it have been so hard to give the planets individual names, there were only eight of them after all? It displayed, in her opinion, a desperate lack of imagination. She looked out of the window and tried to let the motion of the bus and the desert flowing past soothe her worries.

"Miss?" The peace and quiet crumbled and drifted away like the sand below them.

Suppressing another sigh, she swivelled in her seat to look back down the length of the bus. In amongst the rows of children staring out of windows or looking at their personal holoscreens; a small, lone hand was stretching up towards the bus's ceiling; it quivered in a way that suggested great urgency. "Yes, Jason?" she said wearily, knowing without needing to be told what was coming next.

"I need the toilet, miss."

Kendra stared at his pudgy little face, which was currently clenched up like a fist; it spoke of someone undergoing great stress. "You can't need to go now, Jason, we only left the school twenty minutes ago." She had been very particular about reminding the children that they should go before they left; it was one of the most important lessons that a teacher learnt, even if it was also usually one of the most futile.

"Misssss!" The panic in his expression suggested that a very damp explosion was imminent.

Muttering curses under her breath, Kendra looked inquisitively at Mr Lennet, the driver, her eyebrows raised.

"No chance, love," he said, with more than a hint of a smirk on his thin lips. "Can't set down here, we're in the middle of a jackal pack's hunting range. Lad's going to have to hold on for a bit."

Why her? She had set aside her free morning to sit in the library working on lesson plans for the next month but no, that would have been a much too productive use of her time, so instead she was now stuck out in the bloody desert with a lippy bus driver and an incontinent child. She silently laid yet another curse on the absent Mr Reiker. "How long until we reach a safe spot?" she asked the driver.

He thought for a moment, rubbing at the coarse stubble of his chin with a thick, yellow stained finger; the action raised a cloud of dust from his beard. Kendra tried not to think about it circulating around the closed atmosphere of the bus. "About another ten, fifteen minutes, I reckon," he said.

"Ten minutes," repeated Kendra. *Truly, the universe has a grudge against me.*

"I've got an empty bottle if you want it."

~

The bus had settled onto a rocky escarpment that had been declared more or less safe by Mr Lennet, who was currently taking the opportunity for a quick cigarette. It offered a fantastic view as long as you liked looking at an endless sea of yellowy brown. To think she had left behind the verdant fields and gentle forests of Earth for this over-sized litter tray. There had been a job in Dublin she could have taken, or she could have stayed on at university for a doctorate and a life in academia where she wouldn't even have needed to deal with children; it was something she lay awake at night thinking about.

“Miss, I can't go with you standing there!” Jason had clung on with a Herculean effort, striving against the mounting stress, however now that the opportunity to relieve himself had arrived it appeared that the irresistible pressure had suddenly abated.

Kendra glanced back over her shoulder, trying to look without actually looking; the boy was standing at the back of the bus with his back to her. “Sorry, Jason, but I'm not leaving you on your own. There are, I'm led to believe, sand jackals out here. Just try to relax and let it happen on its own,” she said and left it at that. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do if a jackal appeared, nor was she sure what one looked like. The only jackals she had any vague knowledge about were the ones back on earth; they were, if she remembered correctly, a type of dog. Probably. There had been an orientation for new arrivals to Danelon IV but Kendra had missed it, the victim of an asthma attack brought on by the ubiquitous dust. Her hastily cobbled together notes also had no mention of jackals, or indeed any of the other wildlife; apparently she hadn't made it far enough through the article on the net to reach that section. Not that she was horrifically unprepared for all this, oh no. It certainly wasn't the case that she had come to live on a desert planet without getting any of the genetic modifications to protect fragile, pale skin that struggled even with the thin sunshine of a damp English summer. She hadn't even packed any sunscreen. Or a hat. Love would provide, she had been sure - ha!

She looked back over her shoulder; Jason was still there, still doing precious little to introduce liquid to this arid place. There was a slight breeze but all it did was move the hot, dry air around and blow the fine, abrasive sand in all the places that sand had no right to go.

“Having trouble is he?” The bus driver was leaning on the front of the bus, puffing on a hand-rolled, and in no way permitted by school regulations, cigarette while he waited. “He just needs a good fright, that'll get it flowing!” The man's leathery, raisin-like face was twisted into an obnoxious smirk that made Kendra want to smack him, or at least come up with the kind of withering put down that she could never think of.

“I do not believe you are helping, Mr Lennet.”

“Maybe if we squeezed him.”

Kendra gazed up into the hazy blue sky, perhaps looking for guidance from a higher power or perhaps just to look at something that wasn't yellow or brown or Mr

Lennet's smirking face. Far above, she could see a flock of, well, not birds but whatever it was that had evolved to fill that niche on Danelon IV.

"Sand sails," said Mr Lennet, following her gaze. "High up as well. Must be a sandstorm heading this way for them to go that high up. Best tell the young lad to open the tap if you want to go see these fancy rocks and get home again before it arrives."

Oh good, thought Kendra. "Jason..."

"I'm trying, miss!"

"Maybe I should've set down in the jackals' range, bit of fear might have spurred him on!" said Mr Lennet with a rough laugh that degenerated into a hacking cough. And then he was gone.

Kendra blinked to try and clear her eyes because surely this was some kind of desert-induced hallucination, but no amount of blinking returned Mr Lennet to his previous spot. On the ground, his roll-up smouldered on, its tip glowing red as the wind fanned the burning fibres.

"Mr Lennet?"

Her only reply was the hiss of the windblown sand over the rocks.

"Jason, very quickly and quietly get back in the bus," said Kendra, starting to slowly move towards the door, her eyes fixed on the cigarette as the wind made it roll around in a circle.

"I've not gone yet, miss."

"Jason, the status of your bladder is the least of my concerns right now. Get back on the bus or I'll tell the rest of the class about the note I confiscated last week."

"Miss!" Shock, betrayal, fear; all of these things were evident in his voice.

Kendra didn't hear him, her attention was on the thing pulling itself slowly, deliberately over the lip of the escarpment, its savage claws - which Kendra couldn't help but notice appeared to be bloodstained - digging into the soft sandstone. *Oh*, she thought with a kind of detached terror, *so that's what a sand jackal looks like*.

Moving smoothly on six legs, it was about fifteen feet long from its narrow snout to its long tail, sleek and sinuous and covered in overlapping scales a shade darker than the sand. Its mouth was open, revealing rows of jagged teeth; they, like the claws, were stained a distressing shade of red.

"Jason," hissed Kendra.

"Miss, I can't justAAHHHHHH!"

Kendra risked a glance over her shoulder; the boy was staring open mouth and wide-eyed at the jackal. His mouth wasn't the only thing that was open, Kendra reluctantly noted. It turned out that, whilst his knowledge of sand jackal hunting ranges may have been lacking, Mr Lennet - may he rest in peace - had been right about the effectiveness of a fright for loosening a recalcitrant bladder; the barren rocks were getting more of a watering than they had received in countless geological ages. "Get in the bus, Jason."

The jackal was sniffing the air now, possibly confused by the unfamiliar aroma that was currently mingling with the desert wind, the flaps that covered its nostrils flaring wide as it tried to work out what the new smell was. Then it lowered its head, deep-set, hooded eyes fixed on Kendra, and growled. It was like the rumble of distant thunder.

“Jason, are you in the bus yet?”

“Miss, I can’t move, miss. There’s another one behind us, miss.”

A scream suddenly rent the air. One of the other children had come to the door of the bus and had seen the jackals, both of which were now staring at the new source of noise and potential protein.

Kendra turned and ran, taking advantage of the jackals’ momentary distraction to scoop up Jason and sprint for the door, trying not to think about what might be sprinkling on to her feet. There was a roar behind her as she hurled herself through the door, scattering the children out of the way and diving for the door control. With a hiss, the door swung shut just as the nearest jackal leapt. Its snapping jaws thudded into the toughened glass, shaking the whole bus, but the door held.

“Is everyone okay?” said Kendra, wide eyes locked on to the frustrated jackal.

Everyone was fine, if badly shaken up and terrified, as long as you didn’t count the unfortunate driver.

The bus rocked again as the jackals threw themselves against the door and windows. The bus was made of tough stuff, it had to be in order to survive the grinding, scratching sands, but it wasn’t indestructible and the sharp claws of the jackals were already carving deep grooves in the outer skin.

“Right, let’s get out of here,” said Kendra, sitting in the driving seat.

“What about Mr Lennet, miss?” asked one of the children. They were all looking at her with wide, horrified eyes.

“He, er, won’t be joining us,” she said. “Where are the keys?”

“Mr Lennet has them, miss.”

Kendra looked at the Jackal that was gnawing on the front of the bus. She could have been in Dublin, walking along the banks of the Liffey or sitting in a comfy little bar with a pint of Irish stout, but no. “Fudge. Right, have any of you got in touch with anyone back in the city yet?”

Heads shook. “There’s no NET connection on the bus, miss, it got disabled cos they thought it was too distracting.” The voice took on an accusatory tone.

Kendra took a moment to curse both the universe and the school administration’s lack of forethought before regrouping. “Okay. This thing must have a radio.” There was nothing that looked like a handset or a speaker. “Anyone?”

A small hand appeared in the periphery of her vision. “That button there, miss.”

Kendra looked round. “Thank you, Aleesa.” She pressed the button. Nothing happened. “Aleesa?”

“Just speak, miss.”

“Oh, right.” Kendra pushed the button again. “This is the Mesa School bus, we’ve broken down, is there anyone out there?”

There was no response. It occurred to her that she should probably inject a little more urgency into her request for help given the current situation.

“We are also getting attacked by jackals. Um, help?” Outside, the efforts of the two jackals had stirred up a dust cloud around the bus. Other shapes, indistinct yet threatening, could be seen moving through the haze.

There was a faint hiss from the radio’s speakers but no reply.

“Anyone?”

The radio burst into life with a crackle. “You’re supposed to say ‘may day’.”

Kendra stared, open-mouthed, at the console in front of her for a moment. “This is hardly the time for a protocol lesson!” she shouted.

“Button, miss,” said Aleesa’s voice from behind her.

“What? Oh.” Kendra pressed the button. “My poor protocol aside, some help would be appreciated. I think it’s going to get through the door quite soon.” Her voice was getting progressively louder so she could be heard over the snapping and snarling of the jackals and the yelling of the children.

One jackal had discovered that the door panel gave slightly and was attacking it with increasing ferocity, claws scrabbling and scratching at the edges. Then, with a violent crack, the toughened glass broke, the jackal’s front leg coming through the hole and swiping wildly. Kendra threw herself back in the chair, narrowly avoiding the slashing claws.

The radio crackled again, barely audible over the screaming in the bus. “Hang on a mo.”

The door was buckling inward with a creaking of tortured metal, the claws were getting closer and closer. So this is the end, thought Kendra, all because of one poor life choice, a hungover geography teacher, a bus driver with a flawed knowledge of the local wildlife and a boy with no bladder control. I hope my parents get some small consolation from knowing that their ridiculous objections to me coming out here turned out to be almost exactly right. The jackal lunged forward, straining at the buckling door frame, stretching out with all its might, so close that Kendra could see the individual scales that covered its paw and the scrapes and scratches on the side of its vicious claws.

And then, with a final push of its powerful limbs, the jackal shouldered the door aside, opening its jaws wider than Kendra would have believed possible, and...

CRUMP

...disappeared.

The radio crackled. “Sure, he was a keen one. Give me a second here...”

Thunder filled the air, ground-shaking thunder and the howling of jackals as they died or fled.

“You’re all good now,” said the radio. “I think your bus is fecked though.”

Trembling, each step unsteady, Kendra cautiously went to the door and peered out through the ruined window. Bits of jackal, some twitching, most oozing an assortment of disgusting fluids, poked out from beneath a giant metal foot. Following the leg up, and up, and up, Kendra found herself looking at a huge grey plate of metal suspended above the bus.

There was something else she was supposed to be doing wasn't there? Oh yes.

"Is everyone okay?" she asked the children. They had pressed together in the centre of the bus to the point that they resembled nothing so much as a whimpering, multi-limbed blob of wide eyes and video devices, because even facing death there's still the chance that you might record something cool that could make you famous, albeit posthumously.

When it became clear that death was no longer imminent, the blob collapsed, separating into three distinct groups; the ones wailing and crying, the ones staring in terror-filled shock out of the window and the ones high-fiving one another and talking about how awesome that had been. The majority seemed to be in the latter camp. There was still a lot of videoing going on.

Once she had assured herself that her charges were all intact, even if one or two could perhaps do with a change of underwear, Kendra looked out of the window again at their metallic saviour. She went back to the console and pressed the radio button with a shaking finger.

"Hello, are you still there?"

"Sure I am, just trying to clear a bit of space for you," was the crackly reply. It was a female voice. Probably. "Best if you stay in the bus for now," said the voice. "I've got the old proximity sensors on the go but there's always the chance that one of those buggers'll dive in before the gatlings have a chance to spin up. They're sneaky wee bastards those jackals. Okay, get your kiddies to hold on to something, this might get a bit bumpy."

There was a loud thud from outside that shook the whole bus and the shadow that was covering them disappeared. Hearing cries from the back of the bus, Kendra ran down its length and peered out of the back window over the children's heads. Only a few feet away, a large robot, shaped almost like an enormous spider with an enlarged abdomen that had six thick, jointed legs sticking out of the sides, was lowering itself down on to the sandy rocks. It was a dull grey, bare metal that was covered in scuffs and scratches, easily forty feet wide and just as high.

As Kendra watched, the back of the "abdomen" split into two large doors that swung wide to reveal a cavernous interior, one filled with what looked like piles of junk. A woman in a wheelchair rolled into view at the top of the ramp that was extending out from the base of the opening, waving to them as the ramp thumped on to the rocks in a cloud of dust. She looked to be about the same age as Kendra, with a shock of short, bright pink hair sticking out in all directions atop her head and skin the colour of deep caramel. She was dressed in a khaki tank-top, revealing lean, muscular

arms with several tattoos, and cargo pants that looked to be more pocket than pant. She waved at them again and hit something on her chair's control panel, then started speaking into it.

"Hi there, how's it going?" said the radio at the other end of the bus. "It's grand to meet you. Now brace yourselves, this will likely be a bit rough." On the ramp, the woman wheeled herself to the side and tapped at the control panel. Two large, metal arms swung down from above her and extended out towards the bus. "Safer to just bring you all in in one go rather than risk you running around outside. Hold on!"

The grabbers on the end of the arms clamped on to the bus with a thump that almost knocked them all off their feet. Somewhere on the bus's exterior, metal crunched and twisted.

"Sorry, bit of bodywork damage there. Not to worry, it'll buff out. Right, here we go."

With a grinding, tearing shriek of painful and expensive destruction, the arms dragged the bus up the ramp and into the cavernous hanger. The giant doors swung shut behind them, swallowing them up and plunging them into darkness.

In the ringing silence that followed, as her eyes adjusted to the interior lights, Kendra could see that the children looked, if anything, even more terrified of their noisy, rough arrival within the robot's interior than they had been of the jackal attack.

Suddenly, with a loud bang that was just one more heart-stopping moment in what was becoming a long series of such things, the last remnants of the bus's door were wrenched aside. The woman's head appeared through the hole, her pink hair vibrant in the low light, green eyes twinkling.

"Hi there," she said in a broad Irish accent. "I'm Aimee Westmorland. Welcome aboard!"

~

"Sorry it's such a mess," said Aimee, rolling backwards so that the teacher could step down out of the bus and into the clutter-filled cavern; piles of miscellaneous junk, none of it recognisable, covered the floor and lined the walls. "Not that I'd have tidied up or anything, mind you." The teacher, a tall, pale, willowy woman, with light brown, wavy hair who looked as if a strong breeze would knock her over, peered around at the inside of the cargo bay with wide, blue eyes like she'd never seen the inside of a mech before. "Tell your kids to watch themselves on the salvage, there're some sharp edges on there."

"Is this your, um, robot?" said the teacher.

Aimee winced. "It's a mech. Well, yeah, technically it is a robot, but we prefer the term mech because it sounds cooler." She span her chair round and headed up the ramp that led through to the living quarters and cockpit. "Follow me and I'll give you the quick and dirty tour before we get underway."

The teacher herded the children out of the bus, doing her best to steer them away from the piles of jagged metal. "Are there others here?" she asked.

“What? No, there’s just me riding along in this old girl,” replied Aimee. She reached the top of the ramp and span round to watch her new passengers following her up. “Why’d you ask?”

“You said ‘we’.”

“Ah, right. I meant ‘we’ as in the salvagers, or ‘sand-dancers’ if we’re trying to sound even more cool. Other mech pilots. Honestly, I think it’s just because saying you’re a mech pilot sounds better than saying ‘I ride around in a robot all day and pick up junk’.”

There was a muted muttering from some of the children. A high-pitched voice from within the huddle of bodies piped up. “My daddy always said salvagers were vicious parasites and cannibals.”

“Trudi! That’s a terrible thing to say, apologise immediately,” said Kendra.

“Nah, she’s right,” said Aimee, grinning broadly. “I’m just biding my time until dinner. Until then, there’s a galley through here where you can fix yourselves coffee (no tea, I’m afraid, can’t abide the stuff), or maybe something a little stronger. The fridge is stocked up with nutritious but phenomenally tasteless snack bars and plenty of beer. Help yourselves.”

She led them into the living space, which consisted of a table, a kitchen area, and a scruffy orange sofa, which was covered in a bewildering array of stains, that faced a large viewscreen set into the grey metal wall. The only attempts at decoration in evidence were a collection of posters on the wall that appeared to depict a variety of engine diagrams, and a distressingly threadbare, stained rug of indeterminate colour. “Sorry about the lack of chairs but, well, not something I have much need of, you know.”

“I’m sure we’ll manage. Er, is there a place to get cleaned up. It’s just that there were a couple of ‘accidents’ during the jackal attack,” said the teacher, nervously eyeing the sofa in case the greasy covers spontaneously ignited.

“Sure, there’s a small toilet and shower through the door to the left of the viewscreen. It’s not the last word in luxury but it does. So,” said Aimee, raising her eyebrows, “should I just keep thinking of you as ‘the teacher’ or do you have a name I can use?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. My name’s Kendra Williams. I’m still a bit shaken after everything that happened; the jackals, poor Mr Lennet...”

“Who?”

“Our, er, former bus driver. The sand jackal thing got him.”

“Ah, right, sorry. I have to say, I was a bit surprised you stopped for a break around there - it’s slap-bang in the middle of the jackals’ hunting range.”

“Mr Lennet thought it was safe there. We had to stop for a bathroom emergency. Oh, the poor man, what am I going to tell the principal?”

“Can’t really help you with that,” said Aimee. She thumped her left thigh with the heel of her hand and a small panel slowly swung open. Reaching into the compartment

that had been revealed she pulled out a pewter hip flask, unscrewed the cap and held up the flask. “To Mr Lennet, a brave man with a poor understanding of the local fauna. Sláinte!” She took a gulp of whatever was inside the flask, coughed and held it out to Kendra, then she followed the shocked teacher’s wide-eyed gaze. “Oh that. Sure, I’ve only got the one leg, mislaid the left one years ago. I just have this thing...” She thumped the top of her thigh; it clanged. “...to balance everything out, and for the extra storage. It’s amazing what you can fit inside.”

“Right,” said Kendra. “And no thanks, I’m not a big drinker.”

“Grand, more for me then!” Aimee took another slug from the flask. “Now, I’d best be getting us on our way.” She stowed the flask back into her leg and shut the panel. Spinning round, she went through a doorway to the side of the galley’s counters. “Cockpit’s in here. There’re a few more seats you can use, long as you don’t start pressing buttons. Just imagine that every button you see is an eject button that’ll send you flying out the hatch with my boot up your arse. Granted, I can’t actually kick you, as such, but I’d find a way.”

Kendra peered around as Aimee headed for the pilot’s seat; the walls and even the ceiling were lined with switches and gauges. Lights blinked in a variety of colours, some faster than others. “Do you know what all these do?” she asked in amazement.

“Nope, do you?” said Aimee. “There was a manual but my da lost it.” She looked at Kendra’s worried expression. “I’m joking, bit o’ mech pilot humour there for you. However, I will confess that despite my best efforts some of the switches remain forever a mystery. If it’s in any way reassuring, I have tried them all and nothing’s exploded.”

“How do you...uh...nevermind.” Kendra blushed as she played the question through in her head and cut herself off.

Aimee looked over her shoulder and smirked at Kendra. “How do I reach the ones on the ceiling?”

“Uh, yeah. Sorry.”

“Sure, don’t worry about it, and in answer to your unasked question: I have a stick.” Aimee pushed her chair up alongside the pilot’s seat, locked the wheels in place and then hauled herself out of it using two handles that were hanging down from the ceiling and dropped down into the seat. Looking at the scanners as she settled herself in place, she could see something big approaching from the east, a large swirling maelstrom. Sure enough the sky was darkening over the eastern horizon. “Right then, let’s roll.” She grasped the joystick on the right hand side of the chair and the throttle on the left and, with a jerk that sent several of the children and Kendra stumbling, the mech lurched around and started walking across the sand with an uneven, rolling gait. “Funny story,” said Aimee. “When I was first getting this set up I didn’t have the handles properly installed and one of them came loose. That joystick went right up...” she looked round at the children who were all staring out of the cockpit’s panoramic windows with varying levels of interest or boredom. “Well, let’s just say it wasn’t

entirely unpleasant but I've avoided doing it again. Mostly."

"Thank you for coming to our rescue," said Kendra, making sure she had a good view of all of the children. "It's reassuring to be in something as substantial as this."

"Sure, it'd take more than a pack of sand jackals to get through this old girl's hide. There are a few things out in the deep sands I'd steer clear of, even in this, but there's nothing round here to worry about. Except for the sandstorms - the real bad ones out in the deep, deep desert can still mess you up." She glanced at the scanner again. "Speaking of sandstorms, I'm afraid it's going to take us a couple of days to get back to the mesa."

"What, why?" said Kendra. Her eyes were wide, horror-struck.

"There's a sandstorm rolling in, one of the bigger pre-season buggers that come through to soften you up before things get really serious. As much as I love this bucket of bolts, speed is not her forte - we'd be caught out in the open when the storm arrived. I mean, we'd be alright, but we'd need to turtle up, seal up all the external ports and joints to stop the sand getting in - things would get a mite warm and close in here with this many people. There's a large cavern in a mech graveyard not far away where there's usually a salvager camp on the go. Even if there's not, we'll be out of the wind and the sand."

Kendra was rubbing at her temples. "Oh no, oh no, oh no, their parents are going to think I've lost all their children." She looked up suddenly. "Do you have a connection to the Mesa?"

Aimee punched a couple of buttons on the console in front of her. "I do, so, but the connection's terrible - there's a magnetic storm that runs ahead of the sand and it fu..." She glanced at the children again. "Messes up communications. You can try and get through but I don't fancy your chances. Use the co-pilot's console. That button there."

Kendra battled with it for a few minutes, trying vainly to get a message out, before she gave up. She slumped back in the chair. "I am fired. They are going to fire me, and possibly throw me off the Mesa."

"Ah, don't worry about it, it's not like you lost any of them! Well, except for poor old Mr Lennet." Aimee opened her leg again and held out the flask. "Here, it'll take your mind off things."

After a moment's hesitation, Kendra took the flask, unstopped it and tentatively sniffed the contents. "Oh my...what on Earth is this?"

Aimee laughed. "Nothing on Earth! That's genuine Danelon IV whisky. Take a shot."

Kendra took a tiny, cautious sip. There was a moment's pause, and then, "Dear Go...ach!" She handed the flask back with a shaking hand.

Aimee knocked back a much more generous portion. It ran down her throat like liquid fire; just the thing to wash the sand away. "A fine beverage that, very smooth."

## CHAPTER TWO

They had been clanking across the rolling sands for half an hour, the familiar motion lulling Aimee into the usual trance, when Kendra came back into the cockpit, settling into the faded, cracked fake leather of the co-pilot's seat with a sigh. She had been checking on the children, making sure they were settled, fed and watered - having been assured that the water was drinkable and trying very hard not to think about it being recycled.

"So how did you end up all the way out here?" said Kendra, trying to start a conversation that might take her mind off both the approaching storm and her impending unemployment. "Seems like a long way from Ireland."

"Well," said Aimee, looking wistfully out of the window, absently noting that the sandstorm was getting closer. "I'm afraid to say that I've never set foot on any planet but this one." She laughed at the confused frown on Kendra's face. "My great-grandda decided, in his infinite wisdom, to leave the emerald green fields of Ireland behind to find his fortune in the stars. The old bastard had the whole universe to choose from and decided on this sand-covered ball of shite - he got caught up in that first land rush after they found cylithium here. You can probably guess from the fact that his descendant is tooling around the desert in a battered old mech that his business acumen didn't match his ambition. And then what little he'd made from the cylithium prospecting we lost in the war. My grandma, displaying similar levels of judgement to her da, picked the wrong side. Coming out the other end of the war, the old duffer had just enough left to buy a garage in the Mesa and put a small deposit down on this thing, the rest of which I'm still paying off, by the way. She passed it on to my da, my da passed it on to me and here we are. That's my family's legacy; a battered old mech, a mountain of debt and a confused yet fierce pride in our ancestry."

"Sounds like your family's got an interesting history," said Kendra.

"Ha! One way of putting it," said Aimee. "Whoever came up with the phrase, 'luck of the Irish' had clearly never met any of my folks. We're like the opposite of that. We keep going though, too daft to know when to quit! I'll make it back to Ireland one day, that's my distant dream." She looked across at the weary teacher. "So what possessed you to go in the opposite direction and come to this paradise in the stars? Are you perhaps the reincarnation of my old great-grandda, following in his tragically misguided footsteps?"

There was no reply, and when Aimee looked round she could see Kendra resting her forehead on the console. “I don’t want to say,” said Kendra.

Aimee grinned knowingly. “Ah. Did you cross the depths of space for true love?”

Kendra still hadn’t raised her head from the console. “It seemed like a good idea at the time,” she said.

“The course of true love never did run smooth,” said Aimee.

“The course on this occasion ran over a cliff and into a bottomless abyss, never to be seen again. We met at university, made promises of undying love. Ha!”

Aimee opened up her leg once more, pulled out the flask and tapped Kendra on the shoulder with it. “Here.” She held out the flask until Kendra took it. “So you’ll be heading back to Earth soon then?”

Kendra took a swig of the vicious whisky, barely gasping at all this time; she wasn’t sure if she was getting accustomed to it or if it had just numbed the nerves in her throat. “Nope. I’m on a three year contract at the school, though that may not be much of a problem after this. And I don’t think I could face the ‘I told you so’s if I went back home this early anyway.” She took another drink and handed the flask back. “You’re going to run out of this soon.”

“No chance, I’ve got plenty. So your parents didn’t approve of your life choices?”

“Ha! No. They didn’t want me to become a teacher, didn’t want me to go to university in Ireland and they definitely didn’t want me to come here,” said Kendra, putting her head back down on the console. “There were dire warnings that I was wasting my life, that joining my dad’s accountancy firm in Shropshire was a better career move and that I would end up alone and destitute. Ha.” She held out her hand; a flask appeared in it as if by magic. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Did you say you were in Ireland? What was it like? Was it green and lovely?” There was an eagerness to Aimee’s voice now.

“Uh, it was nice, very olde worlde. It wasn’t that green because we were in Dublin for the most part. It had lots of cobbled streets, old pubs, English stag parties getting drunk on stout and wearing foolish hats; very traditional. There was plenty of greenery when you got out of the city though.”

Aimee had leaned back in her chair and was staring up at the ceiling with a faraway look in her eyes. “Sounds grand,” she said, “just like me da used to describe it.”

“Has your father visited earth?”

“Ha, no. I think he just looked at the same pictures that I did, but he was a fine one for spinning a tale; you’d think he’d spent his days wandering the streets of Dublin.” Aimee took the flask back from Kendra and raised it in a toast. “To my wondrous bullshit merchant of a da and the emerald green fields of old Ireland.” She took a long gulp, then let out a long, satisfied sigh. “Best change the subject or I’ll get all maudlin and start singing Danny Boy at you. See the storm?” Aimee pointed out of the window as Kendra reluctantly lifted her head up. The base of storm had crested the horizon now, a towering wall of sand that dwarfed the dunes that ordinarily

seemed so imposing. “It’s still about ten miles away.”

“Oh my...I’ve watched them from the Mesa. It was even quite good fun when one hit the town, hunkering down in my flat with a pizza and a terrible movie while the wind swirls about outside. Feels a lot different when you’re out in front of it.” She looked at Aimee with wide eyes. “Are we going to get to this shelter in time?”

“More or less,” said Aimee with a laugh; her own eyes were gleaming with excitement. “We’ll probably get clipped by the leading edge but we’ll make it. You should probably warn your sprogs though, it can get pretty loud.”

The winds had started to whip around the mech when the gaping entrance to the shelter, a wide cave in the base of a large, sloped hill, came into view, dimly visible through the clouds of sand. The children, who had been chatting and playing games up to this point, fell silent at the sounds of the wind roaring around the mech’s leg ports and the noise of the sand scratching and skittering over its metal skin.

“That’s why you’ll not be seeing any mechs with fancy paint jobs,” said Aimee, piloting the mech towards the sanctuary of the cave. “They get stripped down to the bare metal in minutes.”

“Will there be other salvagers there?” asked Kendra.

“Sure there will, but they’re a decent bunch for the most part,” said Aimee, checking the scanner to make sure she wasn’t about to run into another mech obscured by the sandstorm. “Never seen any of them eat anyone, if that’s what’s worrying you.”

“No no, I didn’t mean...” said Kendra with a shake of her head. “I just meant, will they be okay with the kids?”

Aimee thought about her fellow salvagers, a bunch of idiosyncratic loners who spent their time travelling across the desert or in dark caves carving up old, wrecked mechs left over from the war. “I can’t promise the little darlings won’t pick up a rude word or two - the conversations tend to be a little robust, shall we say - but they’ll be all right.” A thought occurred to her. “Saying that, keep an eye on them. There’re one or two you’re better off steering clear of, not because they’re dangerous, they’re just a bit...odd; too much time trudging across an endless desert on your own can do that to a person. Oh, and if there’s a guy named Markov there then watch your back as well.”

Kendra looked worried now, thick frown lines on her forehead. “Why? Is he dangerous?”

Aimee laughed. “He likes to think he is, though to be honest he’s really just a tragic asshole. He’s no fan of mine, that’s for sure.” She smiled, thinking back over the sweet, sweet memories.

“Why not?”

“He thought it’d be funny to pick on the poor, weak girl in the wheelchair; I suspect it’s just because he’s so chronically insecure. Anyway, I shot him in the balls

with an electro-pulse.” She sighed happily. “Good times. Look, he’s no threat to anyone, he’ll just sneer a lot and be a supercilious bell end.”

“You shot him?” Kendra’s mouth and eyes were three perfect circles of horror.

They were nearing the entrance now; just in time, too, the wind was getting fierce outside. Aimee could feel the mech’s gyros working to compensate against the powerful gusts. She adjusted their course slightly. “Only a little bit, it was on a very low power setting so it didn’t really do any damage. I’m sure everything was working properly again after a day or two.”

“That’s awful!”

Aimee shrugged. “It’s a tough world out here, you got to fight your own corner. And I did mention that he was an asshole.” She reached across and patted Kendra’s knee. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect you.” She laughed loudly.

The mech entered the Stygian gloom of the cave. The noise of the wind and sand abruptly cut off, leaving only the whirring of the mech’s motors and the clanking of its feet on the cave’s floor. Ahead of them was a pool of light cast by numerous mech headlights with a fire at its centre. Beyond the light, the dimly seen bodies of various other mechs loomed in the darkness.

Aimee switched on her own lights, illuminating a rocky floor, smooth but for the scratches and scrapes left behind by the passage of innumerable robotic legs. The lights didn’t do anything to illuminate the vault of the cave that arched above them.

“This is huge!” said Kendra. She suddenly turned to Aimee with wide eyes. “Was there an animal that made this?”

Aimee shook her head. “Nope. All man made. Believe it or not, we’re actually inside a mech. The hill above us? It’s the chest cavity of a Titan that got taken down during the war; took a Scimitar missile right to the nape of the neck that damn near took its head off.”

Leaving Kendra and the children to peer up in amazement towards the ceiling that was lost in the darkness, Aimee steered them towards the back of the massed rank of mechs, throttling back as she arrived to bring her own mech to a gentle, clanking stop. She had been the same the first time her da had brought her in here on their first trip out into the desert, back when she was only five or six. Even though she’d been brought up on tales of the Titans and Leviathans that had battled for supremacy out in the sands, the scale of it had still left her speechless. It was said that the ground had shaken for hundreds of miles around at the height of the fighting, with the pounding of the mechs’ feet and the explosions from the missiles and bombs detonating. It had been destruction on an unprecedented scale that had left behind a landscape of broken machinery for the scavengers to pick over for years to come.

“We call it The Belly, because when you have something as epic and awe-inspiring as this you’ve always got to have some eejit who gives it a dumb name,” said Aimee, lowering the mech on to the ground with a gentle thump. She pulled herself out of the pilot’s seat and dropped down into her wheelchair. “Now let’s go and say hello, see if

anyone has any better food than those protein bars.”

## CHAPTER THREE

Aimee led them between the mechs, irregularly shaped metal monsters lurking in the darkness of the cavern, and down to the fire that was burning merrily at the centre; as large as the blaze was, it seemed like nothing so much as a tiny candle compared to the immensity of the space. Twenty or so people, mainly men, were sitting or standing around a fire. They all had the same slightly dirty, weathered look to them, mostly lean and muscular, with a few exceptions, and many of them were sporting interesting collections of scars and tattoos.

“Hey, all,” said Aimee as they came into the light. “Make a little space there, I’ve got a tour coming through.”

Several of the other salvagers greeted Aimee, and all of them looked with curiosity at Kendra and the class; and she tried not to picture a flock of lambs wandering into a clearing full of wolves.

“You picking up strays now, Aimee?” said an older, wiry man who ambled over. He had a large, frizzy grey beard that obscured most of his chest, and twinkly eyes almost hidden by large bushy eyebrows. He looked exactly like the stereotype of gold prospectors that Kendra had seen in the old cowboy movies that her dad was fond of; it would not have shocked her if he had been wearing a floppy cowboy hat and had a mule following him around. She predicted that he would be called Emil.

“Something like that, Alby, found them out in the desert. How’s yourself?” said Aimee.

*Almost, thought Kendra. Maybe the jackals ate his mule.*

“Fine, young un, just fine, still finding my way,” said Alby. He had a wheezy voice. “How are you doing?”

“Grand, Alby.” She turned to Kendra. “Alby’s on a spiritual journey in the sands to find himself. On a related note, if he should offer you a cigarette or a sweet to chew on, decline unless you want to go on your own spiritual journey. Definitely don’t let your kids have any.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr Alby,” said Kendra, stepping forward to shake the old man’s gnarled hand. “Class, say hello to Mr Alby.” There was an incoherent chorus of mumbled greetings.

“Pleasure to meet you all. And please, just Alby. We don’t really go in for formality here,” he said with a wheezing laugh.

“Alby,” said Aimee. “Markov here?” She had been searching the group around the fire and peering off into the shadows, searching for him.

Alby sighed and directed a withering look at Aimee, one that was entirely ignored. “Aye, but he’s keeping himself to himself for now. You know he’s not that bad, just not great with people.”

“He’s an asshole.”

“Well...not all the time. I think you bring it out in him.” Alby cleared his throat and scratched at his nose. “Actually, since you’re here, my darling Aimee...” He grinned at her.

“Oh no, come on, Alby!”

“She just needs a quick tune up from my favourite mechanic, I swear.” He coughed.

“Stop trying to butter me up, you old codger!”

“The joint on the back leg might need a bit of a tweak.”

Aimee glared at him. “It needs replacing, is what it needs. Sure, how many times have I told you?”

Alby just smiled at her.

“Fine, I’ll have a look at it. You keep an eye on my friends here.”

“Thanks. It’s back that way.” Alby pointed with his thumb and smiled benignly.

“Idiot,” said Aimee, wheeling herself away.

Sure enough, there was Alby’s mech; a squat six-legged thing, longer and thinner than Aimee’s. Unlike most of them, Alby had actually tried to decorate his mech, using different coloured metal panels to create a pattern on its hull. It also meant that there were more gaps between the panels for the ubiquitous sand to work its way in and screw up the wiring. That wasn’t what she was looking at today, however. No, today she was looking at the motor on the port-side rearmost leg. Again. She stopped next to the offending limb and locked the wheels on her chair, then she reached underneath the seat and scabbled around in one of the compartments she’d installed there. Promising herself, as she always did, that she would finally get around to making proper individual compartments for everything, she dragged out the magnetic grapple-gun. It took a moment to get the sling hooked on around her torso and then she fired it up at the mech’s body, aiming for a spot just above the port where the leg connected to the hull. It landed with a thunk, locking in place, and with a push of a button on the side, Aimee rose up until she was level with the joint.

As she had expected, it was a mess of corroded hydraulic lines and relays gummed up with sand, just as it had been the last time. And the time before that. If she looked closely she could still see fixes she’d done in the past, one on top of another like the strata of a rock formation, each fix accompanied by the warning to get the motor replaced and the solemn promise that this time he would. Grumbling under her breath, she pulled up her spare leg using a loop on her cargo pants, popped open the compartment containing her emergency tools and set to work with the screwdriver.

She had been working for several minutes, marvelling that the motor was still functioning at all, when a familiar but unwelcome voice called up from below.

“Finally found your calling in life as a decoration, Westmorland.”

Aimee didn't bother looking away from the circuit board she was checking; she'd have been more surprised if he hadn't shown up. “What do you want, Markov?”

“Nothing, it just amuses me to see you swinging around up there like a yo yo.”

Slotting the circuit board back in place, satisfied that it, at least, was still reasonably functional, Aimee finally looked over shoulder at the man standing below her. He looked just the same as ever; tall, lean and rangy, with a gaunt, pale face - unusual amongst the salvagers who tended to be more weathered and ruddy - and the same supercilious smile he always had. Looking at his smirk always made her want to smack him with a wrench. “Markov, the day you learn to tell one end of a screwdriver from the other is the day you can take the piss out of me, or was it not true what I heard about you installing a transformer the wrong way round and blowing half your motors up?”

Markov's smile disappeared, much to Aimee's satisfaction; if you can't reach with an actual wrench, sometimes a verbal one will do just as well.

“It was faulty,” he snapped.

“Sure it was.” Aimee went back to working on the motor. There was no reply, and when she looked round again he was gone, and her wheelchair was rolling gently backwards to bump against the legs of a neighbouring mech. “Infantile arsehole,” she muttered, going to work on some wiring that looked like sand-roaches - little many-legged critters that would attempt to eat anything regardless of its nutritional value - had been chewing on it.

~

Aimee rolled back to the campfire to find Kendra and the children gathered around Alby while he regaled them with some tall tale or another, something he appeared to have a limitless supply of. The old coot had been spinning these yarns at least as long as Aimee had been travelling out into the desert; even the first time that her da had brought her out, some twenty two years ago, she remembered him telling her a story about some giant sand monster or another that lurked out in the deep desert.

“Aimee, welcome back, how's my old Clara doing?” said Alby, seeing her roll up.

“Your poor old Clara has knackered joints and thrombosis - when did you last get her a service? The hydraulic fluid had lumps in it.” It had looked like something bacterial had started breeding in the rancid gunk that oozed out of the corroded fluid lines.

“Well...” Alby looked away rather than meet Aimee's accusing gaze.

“And that motor. How many times do I need to tell you, Alby, it needs replacing - it's held together with bodged welds and hope.”

“But why do I need to replace it when I have you, my little mechanical marvel?” He smiled at her. Aimee suspected it was a smile meant to charm and ingratiate - it

didn't work.

"There's only so much I can do. You want my advice, you head straight back to the Mesa and get someone to fit a new one - Hell, I'll do it if you wait around for me to finish my current run - but if you don't get it sorted then it's going to give out on you in the middle of bloody nowhere and there won't be a damn thing that I or anyone else will be able to do to fix it."

Alby winked at Kendra and the children. "I know she sounds angry but she loves me really."

"I'm going to smack you round the back of the head with a spanner, you daft old bugger. Now go and get me a drink."

"To hear is to obey, my queen." He wandered off in the direction of the fire where there was a large box of bottles.

"Wish it was, he might actually fix his bloody mech," muttered Aimee. She sighed and looked over at the others; the children were all either asleep or looking tired. Even Kendra's eyes were drooping shut. "How're you all doing?"

Kendra's head snapped up and, after a moment's confusion, she focused on Aimee. "We're fine, I think. Tired. It's been a long day."

"You can stay out by the fire if you want, it'll be safe enough. Can't promise you an undisturbed night's rest though; after a few more drinks someone usually starts singing. It can get a bit rowdy."

"I think we'd rather be back in your mech, if that's okay," said Kendra. Her eyes were drooping closed again.

"Fair enough. I'll open it up for you - it's keyed to my bio-signature so no one can open the doors but me." Aimee noticed the frown on Kendra's brow. "Don't worry, you won't be trapped in there, there's an emergency override on the internal control panel of each door."

"How will I know how to use it?" asked Kendra, still frowning.

"It's a big, red, brightly illuminated switch marked 'EMERGENCY RELEASE'. I'm confident that, thanks to the excellent levels of education with which you're providing your wee darlings, at least one of them will be able to figure it out."

~

They were woken the next morning by the earth shaking and the sound of thunder. Children started screaming and shouting, some of them clinging to Kendra as she staggered out of the bunk.

"Shush, shush, shush," said a voice from the cockpit. Aimee rolled in, one hand over her eyes, the other flapping vaguely in what was supposed to be a calming gesture. "It's just the others leaving. Probably should have mentioned that. Now stop with the loudness, please."

"Has the storm passed, then?" said Kendra. There was ice in her voice, sharp little icicles that penetrated even the fog that surrounded Aimee's brain.

"The worst of it has, yes," replied Aimee, focusing on the teacher. "You do not

look as thrilled as I would expect.”

“I am tired. Possibly as a result of the singing that woke us all up in the middle of the night.” It had been loud, raucous, tuneless and filled with words that Kendra had ordered the children to pretend they hadn’t heard and didn’t understand.

“Oh. Sorry about that. It’s not normally that bad but Danislav had this homemade wine he wanted us to try - it was awful, more like engine degreaser, but it had a hell of a kick to it. There was lots of singing. There may have been dancing as well. On a possibly related note I seem to have a bruise on my elbow.”

“You were dancing? Sorry, that sounded far worse than it was supposed to.”

“Oh yeah!” said Aimee, clicking her fingers. “You may be surprised to learn that I can still dance the light fantastic when the mood is upon me.” She rocked back in the chair so it was up on the two rear wheels and then span around, pirouetting on the spot. “Oh wow, that was a mistake.” She let the chair drop back on to four wheels and clutched at her head. “Could there be coffee? Is there any kind and benevolent force in this pitiless universe that could produce a cup of coffee, black, no sugar? And also a protein bar.”

Coffee in hand, protein bar on her lap, Aimee settled herself into the pilot’s chair and started powering up the mech’s systems, arrays of lights illuminating on the various control panels one after another. A vibration ran through the metal body as the engines came on line with a low hum.

“Ah, here we go,” said Aimee. She ripped the wrapper of the protein bar open with her teeth and dunked the olive-coloured block of nutrients into the coffee before taking a bite of the dripping, soggy lump. “That’s the stuff. The trick is to time it just right so the wet bit doesn’t fall in.”

“That is disgusting,” said Kendra. She was nibbling unenthusiastically on the end of a similar bar. “What flavour are these supposed to be?”

Aimee shrugged. “Brown,” she said with her mouth full. “Doesn’t matter what it says on the packet, they’re all flavoured brown. Hold on tight, boys and girls!” With a jolt, the six huge legs lifted the mech’s body clear of the ground and it started to turn around. Up the slope, the entrance to the cave glowed like a bright sapphire jewel in a pitch black sky. There was no sign of the sandy maelstrom of the previous day. A minute later, they emerged into a bright, clear morning, the sun still quite low in a clear, cloudless blue sky, something that was not uncommon in this vast, barren expanse. A press of a button on the pilot’s console from Aimee and the thick, toughened windows scrolled down, letting a gust of cool, dry air into the cockpit.

Aimee took a deep breath, chewing on the last little bit of her protein bar. “Nothing like a beautiful desert morning,” she said.

“Feel better for that do you?” said Kendra. Her voice had thawed but not by much.

Aimee grinned at her. “Always. No regrets, ever. Life’s too short.” She brought up

a display on one of the console's screens. "Signal is strong, connection to the Mesa is good and stable - time to call home and reassure the worried parents that their little treasures didn't end up inside a jackal."