THE HEART OF MARS

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1

'You can do it, Peter. I know you can. It's not a massive jump.'

He was frozen to the spot. All his limbs had locked and he was standing there, staring at me. He couldn't move an inch.

'There's nothing to it,' I told him. 'Look! Karl did it. Karl jumped easy.'

Karl was at my feet, wagging his tail and doing his best to look encouraging. He'd sailed through the air to land on this muddy bank, easy as anything.

'Karl's got cybernetic legs,' Peter pointed out. 'Of course he can jump.'

'But so can you! What's the matter with you?'

I was goading him on purpose, but I was starting to lose my temper, too.

'All right…' Peter gritted his teeth. 'Stop yelling at me…'

He looked down at the filthy water.

'Don't look at it!'

It was a hellish sight. Thick purple, oozing mud. Bursting with swamp gas bubbles. It looked like it'd poison you dead if you dipped just one toe in. Looking

down was a big mistake. Plus the jump was further than I was saying.

'I'll grab you!' I promised him. 'Just jump!'

He'd made the first few jumps across the swamp okay. From island to island, dotting our way from bank to bank. But something had made him lose his nerve this time.

'We don't have time for messing about, Peter. We gotta find some dry land before night falls.'

'I know that,' he said. 'But … they're looking at me.'

'Who are?'

And then I saw them.

What I'd thought were black bubbles on the filthy water – they weren't bubbles. They were eyes. They blinked at us. Gold and black and nasty-looking. And they were watching Peter. Two pairs, three pairs. More were surfacing as I watched. Five, six. They were coming to stare at him, hungrily. Ten, twelve. How many more? The more I looked around the more I could see. What kind of creatures were these, anyway, with gleaming eyes, each as big as my head?

'D-don't look at them! They aren't there!'

'Yes, they are,' said Peter. 'You know they are. And they've been watching us ever since we came to this hideous place…'

Perhaps he was right. Ever since we arrived in the swamps there'd been that feeling of something watching us, studying us. And now we could see them. Dozens of eyes, emerging from the purple mud.

Karl the cat-dog barked suddenly, loudly. He snapped his tiny teeth.

And that's what did it. Without thinking about it a second more Peter thrust himself forward, his arms windmilling clumsily. He tumbled headfirst towards us, just missing the muddy bank right in front of me.

He yelled and I darted forward to grab him while Karl jumped and barked. All three of us were engulfed in the stinking fog as I pulled him free of the mud and it felt like an eternity before we collapsed in a relieved heap on solid ground. Well, mostly solid ground.

'You did it!'

I was laughing with relief and Peter started laughing too.

'Let's get right away from those things,' I said. I glanced back, only to see that the eyes were vanishing once more under the surface.

We hurried on, keeping as far from the soupy waters as we could. Neither of us were used to terrain like this. Peter was a city boy and had never seen a place so primitive or inhospitable. I grew up on the Martian prairie, where everything was dusty and dry, of course. Water never stood still long enough to grow mouldy and slimy. And it never had *eyes* in it, that was for sure.

But this was where we had to be. When we'd learned that we had to go to the swamplands of the north, I admit my heart sank. I've never heard anything good about swamps

or bogs. But there was no other way. This was where my ma and my sister Hannah had been sent. This was where they were last seen. And we had to go after them.

We found a relatively dry hollow by the base of several ancient, leathery trees. I dished out the chewy green cubes of food we'd been given.

'These are disgusting,' Peter pulled a face.

'When I was a kid on the prairie, these were a great delicacy,' I told him. 'Only the Oldsters had these, left over from their days aboard the Starships, when they came from Earth.'

'I suppose you'd have eaten anything on that prairie of yours,' he smiled.

'Hey, when the crops were good, we ate well. But sometimes we were glad of Grandma's supply of space cubes…'

We chewed in silence for a while, and I was thinking about my former life at the Homestead. It seemed like a million years ago now. Further than any Starship could travel. Those years with Da and Ma and Grandma, Al and Hannah were very distant. None of us was together anymore.

But there was no use dwelling on that. That was the whole reason for my quest. I was reuniting my family, whatever it took.

'I suppose we're lucky to have any food at all,' Peter said, looking worried he might have upset me by bringing up the past.

'At least we don't have to hunt and eat swamp creatures,' I told him, and he went a funny colour.

By then we'd been two days inside the swamp. I didn't know how far it went on. It might be forever. It could be we'd get stuck wandering here for the rest of our lives. We had three days of cubes and no other kind of plan. We had just been told: head north. That's the way we sent your ma and sister.

They had been sent as sacrifices. That's what the people of Ruby's town had told us.

It was still shocking to think about.

Ruby was my grandma's oldest living friend. She had settled in a town that looked so much like Our Town on the prairie, that when we got there Ruby's town almost felt like home. But everything about her had changed. When we'd found her in her new town Ruby had gone crazy and she had locked us all up. The truth had come out. She and her people were crazy-religious; they worshipped creatures they called the Ancient Ones. Finally she'd admitted that they had taken Hannah and Ma as offerings to these mysterious beings in the swamp.

Ruby used to be like a friendly old aunt to us kids. How could she do such a thing? But I'd seen so many strange things in recent times. It was amazing how much strangeness you could absorb. I just had to keep my mind on our quest. Finding my family, and going home.

I could see from the look on his face that Peter was thinking along similar lines.

'Our plan's quite simple, isn't it?' he smiled.

'Since when did I go in for elaborate, foolproof plans?' I laughed.

'We're just heading north and hoping for the best, aren't we?'

I nodded. 'Of course. What else can we do?'

'I thought so,' he said, and nodded, still smiling.

Maybe we should have been more worried or scared. I dunno. Somehow when we were together things didn't seem so bad. I knew I could depend on him.

Karl darted off into the undergrowth then. He surprised us both by bringing back a small, blue, hairless creature he'd caught. He ate it in two bites, smacking his lips. Peter was appalled. 'Karl!'

But how long would it be before we were all eating creatures like that?

Night came oozing and crawling greasily through the swamp, bringing more of that reeking, yellow fog. We bedded down to sleep with our coats over us, huddled in the hollow between the roots of the trees.

For a while I thought I was sleeping. Then I heard Peter saying, 'Can you hear those noises?'

'Yeah.'

'I thought I was dreaming.'

'No, it's voices. I can hear voices…'

Distorted and sometimes lost inside all the night-time noise, there were definitely words and sentences being formed out there somewhere in the swamplands. People were calling out to each other. They sounded … not friendly, exactly. But at least they were alive and intelligent. That's what I was telling myself, anyhow.

I'd known Peter for less than a year. It was hard to believe that this rangy, unkempt boy hadn't been in my life longer than that. I'd met him when he was busking in the City Inside at Christmas time. He was playing a miniature harp, just like the one Ma used to play. It was what drew me to him. There he was, in the marketplace, with his scrappy cat-dog Karl, making this beautiful music.

We'd become friends and he showed me the secret and illegal place where he lived, a system of tunnels underneath the City park.

It was such a strange time for me. I was only just settling into the City Inside, a place I'd never have chosen to be. I'd wandered out of the desert, having lost half of my family and here I was in this amazing place that we'd never even known existed. It was all green glass towers and domes, and red snow was tumbling out of the sky…

So much had happened very quickly. My brother Al settled in quite easily and got taken up by one of the richest, ruling families. I was at a loose end, of course. Even our

robotic sunbed Toaster found a small community of Servo-Furnishings to befriend.

But it was me who discovered something marvellous about the City Inside.

It was where all the Disappeared people turned up.

That was what we called them, back on the prairie. The Disappeared. They vanished in the middle of the night. They were taken from their beds; they were snatched from their homes.

I had seen the ghostly, giggling creatures who'd taken them away. I'd watched them dancing down the dusty red road.

And they had Disappeared my da and my grandma. When that happened the shock and the grief were terrible. I was always a daddy's girl. When he'd gone it would have been easy to give up and wait for the ghosts to come and take us all. But instead we had taken action. I had led the rest of my family – Ma, Hannah, Al and Grandma – away from Our Town, in search of somewhere safer to live.

On our journey, we were all split up and we'd lost Hannah and Ma. Only Al, Toaster and I ended up in the gleaming and mysterious City Inside. I'd made friends with Peter and Karl. I'd made an enemy of the Authorities who seemed to want to pick my brains about everything I had learned in my life on the prairie.

But most amazing of all, I'd found Da and Grandma, living in a tiny flat together in the very middle of the City.

Half my family was back together!

I didn't know how, and I didn't understand why. I still didn't know how it all pieced together. But I was glad. And now I was determined that I was going to find Hannah and Ma too. Hannah and Ma were left behind and so I'd returned to the wilderness to find them.

It had taken another huge journey and all kinds of dangers and now we were venturing into terrain I'd never even seen before.

But I felt we were getting closer to the end of the journey. In the dark of this sweltering, noisy jungle, we were lost and unnerved, but I felt sure that we were coming to the heart of it all.

I was woken up all at once by a hideous noise. It was a crashing, splintering noise of branches being smashed. It was a wrenching, thrashing noise of something hauling itself out of the murky waters of the swamp. I was on my feet in a flash. Both Peter and Karl were awake too, looking as scared as I felt.

The whole ground seemed to be lurching under our feet. And the noise was getting louder. Whatever it was, it was coming closer.

By now it was day. Golden, shimmering light came through the heavy branches of the trees and that was a blessing at least. We could at least see what we were facing.

Peter said, 'Lora, look…!'

Karl was so horrified he forgot how to bark.

It was all the eyes. They had followed our trail through the swamp and tracked us down.

It turned out that those dozens of black and golden eyes did not belong to dozens of separate creatures after all. Each pair was swaying at the end of a golden tentacle, and each tentacle was attached to the shapeless head of a single massive, swaying creature. A creature covered in swamp muck and slime. A creature that was crashing purposefully through the trees, looking for us. It loomed tall as the trees. All those eyes on stalks were blazing with golden fire.

'Keep still, Peter,' I hissed.

The eyes swivelled in mid-air and looked at me and then at him.

Underneath all the swamp slime and scum the body seemed to be made of scarred and knotted bark. Its hands were huge and the wooden fingers creaked as they moved towards us.

'Not many of your kind come here,' the creature said.

We both jumped in shock. It spoke our language! The voice was huge and shattering. It was hard to see where it came from but the noise filled our heads.

Karl found his voice and yapped furiously.

'Who … w-what are you?' I mustered my courage and spoke up.

He trained his many eyes on my face. 'I am Goomba.'

When he said the name it echoed through the humid air.

'What do you want?' asked Peter.

'I am the guardian of the swamp,' he said. 'I am here to command you to go back the way you came.'

Peter looked at me. He hissed, 'How are we going to get past him? He's huge!'

'What will you do if we don't go back?' I said, sounding as brave as I could.

The eyes quivered with fury. 'I will smash you to smithereens!' With that he raised up both massive hands, trailing rooty tendrils that lashed around his head, and he brought them crashing down into the swamp water. We were knocked off our feet and drenched instantly.

'I think he means it,' said Peter.

He could have killed us in an instant. But he hadn't yet. We had a chance to communicate with him.

Suddenly I knew what I must ask him. I stood up and, gagging at the stench of brackish mud, I took a step closer.

'If you're the guardian of this place, have you seen my mother? She looks like me, only twenty years older. And my sister, Hannah, who's very small? They came this way. They were sent this way as sacrifices. The humans of Ruby's town back beyond the desert, sent them here. They sent them as tribute to the people they call the Ancient Ones…'

Goomba had apparently been listening with great care

to my words. When I said the phrase 'Ancient Ones' he became very agitated. His multiple eyes flashed greenish-gold and whipped about on the end of those tentacles. He cried out in rage and the sodden, boggy ground quaked in response to his anger.

'So do the Ancient Ones really exist, then?' Peter spoke up bravely. 'They're not just some legend of the townsfolk?'

'Stop!' cried Goomba in fury. Those vast hands of his went up again and I was afraid he was really going to bring them down and smash us like he'd promised. 'You human children don't understand! They will hear you in their sleep. Your words will penetrate their slumbers! You mustn't wake the Sleepers under the swamp.'

'But we must,' I said. 'If that's where Ma and Hannah have gone. We must wake up these Ancient Ones and ask them.'

'You don't want to wake them.'

'I need to know where my ma is,' I said, staring determinedly back, not sure if I was scared of him or not any more. 'And I think you know. You're the guardian. You've got all those eyes. I think you saw my family. Won't you tell me where they are?'

The many eyes shivered violently, and he held up those wooden hands again like he wanted to swat me out of existence. His arms and eyes, tentacles and all, began to sway menacingly towards me…

'No. I cannot tell you. You must go back the way you

came. Leave the swamp tonight, Lora Robinson. Leave at once!'

'How do you know my name?'

But the creature was turning away from us and, with surprising speed, he slipped away under the swamp waters.

Next thing we knew, there were bullets screaming over our heads and zinging into the tree trunks. Peter and I flung ourselves on to the ground.

Blam blam blam. More gunfire through the trees.

Bullets sizzled through the murky air. Then, just as abruptly as it had started, the gunfire stopped. Two figures came lurching through the golden mist. A dumpy human form and a bulky robot.

I could hardly believe what I was seeing. It was Grandma, grinning, with a rifle held aloft, plus Toaster, her sunbed, who looked delighted to see us.

2

'Good job we came after you,' Grandma cackled as she cleaned her rifle. 'I should have known you kids would get yourselves straight into danger…'

This wasn't quite fair, I pointed out, since Peter and I had spent almost a week trekking across the desert by ourselves, managing quite well, thanks very much. And we'd made it so far into the swamp before meeting Goomba and, besides, I think I had managed to pacify him a little. He wasn't really going to smash us into smithereens, I was sure. I didn't actually need Grandma and Toaster dashing in to the rescue…

'Ha! Yeah, but you're pleased to see us, all the same, ain't you?' Grandma shouted. Now she was hugging Peter hard and slapping him on the back.

Back in Ruby's town Grandma had been close to despair. Her oldest friend had turned out to be crazy and had threatened to kill us all and, as a result, much of Grandma's life force had seemed to be gone. But she'd changed in the short time since we'd seen her. She was full of vitality again.

'We couldn't let you get lost in this swamp,' she said,

picking up a startled Karl and dancing him around on the squelching ground. She looked like a crazy lady, with her wild white hair and her faded clothes and weather-beaten, sun-cracked face. 'I couldn't just sit around in that backward town with all the rest of them, waiting and hoping that you'd come back. And no way was I going back to that City Inside. So all I could do, I decided, was fix up Toaster and get him to train his sensors on following you!'

We all stared at Toaster, our family's trusty sunbed. He was gleaming, polished, as good as brand new. In just a matter of days Grandma had put him back together better than ever. Toaster wasn't just a robot to us. He was a member of our family. Before we'd left the town, while we stood frozen in horror, he'd been battered and bludgeoned by the crazy congregation in Ruby's so-called church. His mind had been scattered and shattered within his buckled metal body.

But Grandma had managed to restore him! Sometimes I forgot how skilled a technician she had once been. It seemed that she had forgotten none of her skills.

Toaster nodded proudly. 'I am completely back to my optimum level of functioning. Thanks to your grandma, Margaret Estelle Robinson, my oldest friend on this planet, my entire memory and personality have been returned to me.'

'Really?' I grinned at him and rushed over to hug his metal body. 'Toaster, that's wonderful news.'

For too long before Ruby's town he hadn't been himself. He had been taken over by the Authorities of the City Inside and his original, friendly, loyal personality had been – we thought – utterly erased. That sunbed who had helped us for all those years on the prairie and in the Homestead, who had trekked with us through the wilderness as we looked for a new home – he had been with us every step of the way, never questioning that his place was wherever the Robinson family's fortunes took them. But then, thanks to the rulers of the City Inside, we thought we had lost our friendly Toaster forever. We had found ourselves having to get used to a cold and brusque new sunbed, and we had been in mourning for a friend we'd thought could never return.

'I am ashamed of myself,' the old sunbed admitted. 'I was lost inside myself and couldn't speak out. I was shouting and calling, but it was like someone else was in control of my brain…' For a few moments he looked troubled and a crackle of interference clouded his screens. 'But here I am now, fully restored. And we are all together again, ready to make plans.'

We spent some time eating a breakfast of spiced cakes and coffee that Grandma had been saving for our reunion. It was amazing how even that stinking corner of the swamp seemed almost homely now we had something decent to eat and drink. We talked and made plans about the upcoming days. Toaster shared the few sketchy aerial

maps he had compiled of the northlands, and Peter and I described our encounter with Goomba.

'We detected a large creature in your vicinity,' said Toaster. 'It must have been very frightening for you.'

'He was pretty scary. At first anyway,' said Peter.

'But he seemed even more frightened of anyone waking up the Ancient Ones,' I pointed out.

'That's our first confirmation that the people we are searching for actually exist,' Grandma frowned. Her face looked more seamed and crumpled than ever. And yet there was more vitality in it than I'd seen before. 'The Ancient Ones.'

Peter said anxiously, 'Goomba told us we shouldn't even talk about them, in case they might hear us and wake…'

Grandma rolled her eyes. 'We want them to wake up, don't we? We want to know all about them. We want them to give us back Lora's ma and Hannah.'

It was good to hear Grandma so determined and clear about what we should do next. For most of my life I had been used to her freaking out and doing just the wrong things. Smashing up the Homestead while we were out, or kicking up a storm when it just wasn't necessary. It was something I had noticed recently – Grandma was less erratic and crazy when times were truly dangerous.

Toaster said, 'Going to meet these so-called Ancient Ones might be the most hazardous adventure we have embarked on yet.'

I started thinking about the pictures in that weird church-like building back in Ruby's town. They'd shown leaping flames and strange creatures in underground caverns. There'd been pictures of humans and winged Martians being fed to those flames. If all that stuff was true, what kind of dangers were we walking so willingly into?

We set off again, soon after breakfast. None of us wanted to hang around by those waters, just in case the golden eyes of Goomba came lifting out of the surface again, and this time he really did want to smash us to smithereens.

'There'll be other guardians, I imagine,' Grandma said, cocking her rifle and setting off through the trees. 'And there'll be other creatures in these swamps, even more horrible than Goomba…' She seemed to be enjoying imagining the dangers that might be lurking ahead.

Peter and Karl walked alongside me and the going was easier with Toaster there. His strong metal arms whizzed and sliced and tore through the clinging jungle vines that we were now pushing through. The Servo was tireless, as we well knew, and it saved us a lot of work, cutting our way through the undergrowth, inch by inch.

The deeper we went into the swamp the hotter and darker it became. It must have been the middle of the day but it was gloomy in here. The air was heavy and green all about us. We had to shed layers of our loose desert

clothing, but we soon found out it was a bad idea to expose any skin. The insects were huge – the size of bats – and they would bite any flesh they could get to. Soon we had lumpy red blisters that itched like mad, and the buzzing noises never seemed to stop.

'I'm not sure about your grandma,' Peter said, sidling close to me.

'What do you mean?'

'She was pretty close to Dean Swiftnick in the City Inside,' he said. 'What if she's working for the Authorities now? What if they're sending her this way on a kind of mission?'

Peter was always suspicious about the higher-up folk in the City Inside. I was, too, especially after some of the tribulations we'd been through. But still I said, 'I don't think you've got to worry about Grandma. I reckon you're just being paranoid.'

'But she's had her head messed around with, and so has Toaster,' Peter said. 'I'm just saying, we've got to be careful who we trust.'

Well, I'd always known it was dodgy trusting Grandma. As far as I was concerned, the old lady had always been crazy. But at least, so far, she hadn't turned traitor on us. She was on our side, I was sure.

That evening we heard the voices again. We sat huddled together, eating our supper, and listening hard.

'There are other folk living here,' Grandma said. 'We

should find them. We gotta talk to them, whoever they are.'

'But … they might be dangerous,' Peter said. 'What kind of people live in a terrible place like this?'

'We gotta find them,' said Grandma steadfastly and I thought to myself: yeah, maybe she does know something we don't. She had that look about her. I saw her exchange a glance with Toaster just then. Perhaps they *were* up to something, those two.

The next day saw us travelling further into the murksome and stinking swamplands. The going became harder as the trees were larger here, and more closely packed together. Fleshy, rubbery vines hung down thicker than ever. There was also a nasty creeper with thorns that grew underfoot.

All through that day, as we inched deeper into the jungle the distant, unknown voices became more distinct. Bellowing shouts of bravado. Jeering. Laughter.

Grandma nodded mysteriously.

'Who are they?' Peter asked her.

'I don't think they're anyone to be alarmed about,' she said.

I wasn't too sure about that. They sounded wild and dangerous to me.

Toaster was using his sensors to tune into them. 'We are quite close to a settlement,' he said, suddenly, pausing as if to sniff the air.

'Maybe I'll go in first, and alone,' said Grandma. 'And do our talking for us.'

'What?' I couldn't believe what she was saying. 'You can't go first. You're…'

'An old lady? With one leg and only one eye?' She crowed with laughter. 'Yeah, I'm not as helpless as all that, Lora, as you well know.'

'Whoever these people are, we face them together,' I said steadfastly.

'They aren't people,' said Toaster. 'Not as such.'

I was about to ask him what he meant when Karl let out a volley of barks. Peter picked him up swiftly, muffling his noise. 'Look,' he hissed at the rest of us.

Sure enough, about a hundred yards up ahead, there was a glade and there was movement. Someone or something was moving through the trees. There was more of that loud, raucous shouting.

'Bandits,' said Grandma.

'What?' I gasped.

I stared with the others and was astonished to see – not human beings, nor Martians, nor hybrids nor any other kind of organic creatures. What we saw were Servo-Furnishings, ambling through the swamp and talking noisily among themselves. Boxy, wooden, lumbering machines. Some of them were metallic, others were painted. Each of them seemed to have different functions. One was covered with light bulbs and cast a golden halo about

himself. Another had a glass front and was filled with ice. A third shape bristled with evil-looking weaponry and had a stuffed beast's head with antlers and glassy eyes that swivelled madly around.

All of the machines were covered in lichen and mould. They looked exactly like furniture that had been left out for years in a treacherous swampy land. Fronds of shaggy moss hung from their artificial limbs and their watery innards creaked and sloshed.

'Servos?' Peter gasped. 'That's who lives out here? They're the *bandits*?'

Grandma nodded grimly. 'Exactly. And we're gonna need their help, I reckon.' Without any further ado she pushed forward through the jungle vines and presented herself before the Servo-Furnishings.

'We come in peace,' she said.

'Oh, my goodness,' Peter gasped. 'She's brave! And I bet she's going to say, "take me to your leader".'

Which is precisely what Grandma did say.

The swamp bandits were staring at her in some surprise and when the rest of us emerged from the trees they became suspicious and started muttering amongst themselves. Where were these strangers coming from? What was going on?

They were particularly alarmed at the sight of Toaster. How smart and gleaming he seemed next to their dingy, mould-spattered casings.

'This woman is an extremely important person,' he said, in his grandest voice. 'She is one of the few Earth women left alive on Mars, and you people are commanded to obey her, just as I do.'

The bandits were still muttering to each other under their breath.

'I don't like this,' Peter said. 'Look at the weapons they've got. If they turned on us, we wouldn't stand a chance.'

'I know.' I grabbed his arm and ruffled Karl's fur. 'I'd have preferred to stay away from them…'

But Grandma had made the decision for us, and she was looking mighty pleased with herself.

The Servo that was sporting a bright array of old-fashioned light bulbs stepped forward on his delicate feet. 'We would be honoured to deliver you to Bandit Town.' He gave a stiff bow.

Grandma hurried forward. 'Who will we find in charge?' she needed to know. 'Tell me, please. Who is your leader?'

'All your questions will be answered soon,' said the Servo with all the lights. His fellows were moving forward now and ushering the rest of us back the way their party had come.

'But you must tell me,' Grandma said in a quavering voice. Her true feelings were coming out now. To me she sounded half afraid, half excited. 'Tell me, please. Is Thomas still alive?'

As we followed the weird robots through the trees to the settlement known as Bandit Town I was trying to get over my shock.

'Who is this Thomas?' Peter wanted to know. 'I don't understand, Lora. How could your grandma know anyone living out this way, in the middle of the swamps? Has she been here before?'

That was a good question. I didn't know whether Grandma had ever been this way before in her life. She certainly didn't seem familiar with the damp and nasty terrain.

But I did know who Thomas was.

'You actually think Thomas could still be alive?' I asked her, tugging on her sleeve.

'We're a long-lived family,' she said. 'We're all pretty tough. I've always felt somehow that he was alive. I felt like I knew Thomas was still here, somewhere on Mars. And the few rumours I heard pointed to the swamp. King of the bandits. My very own brother. Fancy that! The thing is, it was all a long time ago. I didn't want to set up false hope. But all I know is that if the stories are true, then Thomas will surely help us find our family. He and his people. His tribe of bandits. I'm sure I'll be able to get him to help us. How can he refuse?'

Not long after that we arrived in the ramshackle settlement known as Bandit Town.

3

It was a real dump to be honest. The buildings – if you could even call them that – looked like they'd been built hastily and carelessly out of anything that had come to hand. Rusting sheets of metal had been nailed to each other, or else lashed together with jungle vines and assembled in the rough shape of little houses. Dark rubbery leaves had been ripped from the trees all around us and heaped on top of each dwelling, acting as camouflage as well as shelter, I suppose.

But the shabby buildings were the least striking thing about the small town. What stood out most was the fact that no one there was human. No one was, strictly speaking, alive. The whole town was populated by Servo-Furnishings. And each of them – whatever their size or function – was covered in the same swampy mildew and mould as the robots who had discovered us in the jungle.

'Where do you think they've come from?' Peter whispered. 'Have they escaped from the humans they're meant to look after?'

'I guess,' I said, studying them with fascination. I turned to see Toaster appraising them frankly too. His entire

metal body was on the alert, bristling with keen interest. A whole town of Servo-Furnishings apparently doing their own thing in the wild… It must have been quite an eye-opener for our old sunbed.

At that same moment the 'people' of Bandit Town were getting their first look at Toaster, and you could see they were impressed. They stopped going about their business and simply stared at him. He surged forward proudly into the town square, absolutely loving the attention. Refrigerators, radiators, lamps: they all turned to gaze upon the newly restored body of Toaster. A really bizarre creation – which I later learned was a Servo in the form of an ancient gramophone player – raised its huge trumpet and gave blast of crackling noise to welcome us to their weird town. Soon there were Servo-Furnishings surrounding us on all sides as we made our way to their leader's house.

'Why they're all bandits and rogues!' I heard Toaster say, keeping his volume low. 'What a terrible-looking bunch. Cut-throats and desperadoes gone feral and wild! What will they do to us?'

Grandma hushed him. 'They're more scared of us than we are of them, believe me. Just keep your calm, Toaster.'

Finally we came to the hall of the bandit leader. We stopped and there was a hush. When he stepped out to confront us I could see that he was, in fact, a human being, though at first glance it was hard to tell. He was a portly

man, wearing a golden helmet with a glass panel that distorted his face. He wore gauntlets and boots that trailed wires and tubes and a tattered scarlet cloak that gave him a kind of kinglike air, even though it was filthy and full of holes.

The leader put both gauntleted hands in the air, and the electronic buzz of robotic chatter stopped at once.

'We have guests,' he said, in a voice amplified by the helmet he wore.

Grandma stepped forward, squinting and looking less confident than a few minutes before. 'Thomas? Can it be you? Can the tales be true?'

The impassive human figure stared at her. He suddenly seemed very tall and powerful. It was obvious that every artificial being in the whole town was at his command. He could give the thumbs down right now and they could pulp us to bits in a trice. We wouldn't stand a chance.

Then the man took a step forward. In the fishbowl of his helmet his green eyes loomed and magnified as he studied us all.

His voice boomed out: 'I know you, do I?'

Grandma yelped as if she had been bit. 'Of course you do, Thomas! I'm Maggie. Maggie. Your little sister! Don't you remember me?'

Again that long, terrible pause as the large eyes behind that visor swam around, in and out of focus. The voice held no emotion whatsoever. 'Maggie?'

'It's been a long time, Thomas … many, many years … since we first arrived on this world. Sixty years or more!'

The chattering of the Servos all around us was starting up again. It was a low, whirring hum of scepticism. Who was this strange old woman, marching into town and claiming kinship with their chief? What was she playing at, making him seem so confused? The Servo-Furnishings obviously hated to see their leader confused. Maybe it was something they had never seen before.

Toaster stepped forward bravely. 'Margaret and the others are on a mission to reunite their family,' he said. 'You are part of that family, Thomas Robinson, and we need your help.'

There was a beat of silence, and then the leader removed one of his clumsy gauntlets. A pale, skinny hand started fiddling with the clasps and fastenings of his helmet. One of his favoured Servos stepped forward and raised his spindly arms to help him. And then at last the leader's mask and helmet were off. The face underneath was pale and undistinguished. It was an old man, bald as a lizard egg and struggling hard to control his tears.

'You're Maggie?' he said, and his voice wasn't booming any more. 'My little sister Maggie?'

Grandma flew into his arms. I'd never seen her move so fast. Even with her dodgy leg and her funny joints. She darted across that clearing and hugged him so hard.

Thomas was staring over her shoulder at Toaster. It was hard what to say was in that look. Amazement? Pride?

'It's okay, we're okay,' I told Peter, letting my breath out at last. The robots around us were applauding the reunion, albeit in a restrained and polite fashion.

'That's really her brother? Your uncle?' Peter asked. 'How long is it since they saw each other?'

I shrugged. 'Decades, I guess. Since their ship first crash-landed on Mars, maybe.'

Peter looked moved by the reunion. I wondered again about his own family, and whether he ever imagined meeting up with them again.

We were soon gathered up and led into the grandest building in that whole shanty town; the house belonging to their leader, my uncle Thomas.

He hugged me awkwardly and I was crushed against his clunky spacesuit, which smelled of mould.

'It's a day for rejoicing!' he cried, and the bandits all cheered. 'I am going to declare a day and a night of holiday and feasting. Yes, we'll have a feast to celebrate this wonderful meeting!' As robotic yelps of delight rang out the old man stared at me, studying my features hard. 'You're the spit of your grandma! Whoah, if that face of yours don't take me back! Maggie…! This girl's got the same danged obstinate look you always wore.'

Grandma laughed. 'I guess she does take after me a little. So – you better watch out!' She followed her brother inside the grandest of the ramshackle dwellings of Bandit Town.

'Well, if they're giving us a feast, then they must be glad to see us,' Peter reasoned.

'I suppose,' I said, still not quite sure about this strange uncle and his army of bandits.

Toaster seemed glad about our welcome, however. He was clearly delighted by the way everyone looked at him with something close to awe.

'This is how things should be done. It makes a change to get a pleasant welcome, doesn't it, Lora?'

I nodded and smiled, but he knew how I felt. I didn't really trust warm welcomes. I didn't trust any kind of welcome, these days. I knew it was best always to stay on my guard.

They served us a strange meal which we had to pretend to enjoy. We were brought slices of roasted greenish meat, which we were told came from giant grubs or caterpillars that lived in the swampland trees. I stuck to eating the bits of mushroom and deep-fried flower heads that came as side dishes. Peter and Karl ate everything they could get because they were ravenous.

Nobody in the chief's home was watching us, however. All eyes were on Grandma and her fond reunion with their leader. The two sat together on seats like thrones in the middle of the hall, locked deep in earnest conversation.

'I suppose it's like if you and Al hadn't seen each other

in sixty years,' Peter said thoughtfully, chewing on a mouthful of jellified meat.

His comment brought me up short. What if I didn't see my brother again for years? I already felt like he was lost to me. He was in the embrace of the powerful Graveley family, back in the faraway City Inside. Suddenly I saw all too clearly how families could be split up and live so far apart on a planet like Mars, and how time and the huge distances could get in the way.

I didn't want gloomy thoughts coming at me now, though. Luckily Thomas was rising to his feet to give a speech. All his Servo subjects fell silent to listen to his every word.

'Many of you here will have forgotten the tale of how we arrived in this place. New memories come to fill up the space of the old and in many cases I have had to overwrite your pasts and your previous selves in order to keep you functioning. Such is the life of the Servo-Furnishing, unfortunately, and I hope you all appreciate I have done everything I could to adapt you and to keep you alive.'

There was a mechanical buzz of agreement from the crowd that surrounded us. It wasn't just that they always obeyed their chief, I realised: every one of them completely adored him.

'Once, many years ago, longer than most of us here can remember,' he went on, 'ten Starships brought us to Mars from the blue planet Earth. We came because we wanted

to, and we were great adventurers: admired by everyone on our homeworld as we went off to found a new colony here in this marvellous place. There were only a few human beings aboard this fleet of ships, but there were a great many Servo-Furnishings. A very great many of you.'

Now the Servos were responding with greater noise and enthusiastic chatter. Close to where we were standing, a fancy wooden cabinet decorated in mirrored panels was saying, 'Yes! Yes! I remember the Starships! I remember it all!'

'We came – all of us here – aboard the ship called the *Melville*. It had a rocky landing. All the ships had terrible landings on Mars. We crashed and that's why, in the first place, most of your memories were lost. The ship lost its memory, too. Its head was cracked in the hot blazing impact and all its knowledge leaked into the burning sands. And the same was true of the separate minds of many of the Servos on board, and of the humans, too – those that still lived, that is. It was a scene of hellish disaster.'

The audience members were quiet now. They were shocked at his mild tone as he described this disaster. Beside him, I saw, Grandma had tears rolling down her cheeks. She had never talked about the landing on Mars. I had always known it was calamitous, that many had died and that the colony had not started off in the way that had been planned. Times were tough. But times had always

been tough for my family and I had grown up accepting this. It was strange to hear Thomas describing the very day that all our fortunes had changed forever.

'Many humans and Servos were lost. Those that survived had to scratch an existence out of the harsh and pitiless Martian prairie.'

I couldn't stop myself shouting out a question, even though everyone around me gasped at my impertinence. 'But how? How did all ten Starships crash at once? How could they? What went wrong?'

Thomas glowered at me from his throne. 'No one knows. There are stories. There are legends and theories. But mostly we don't think about that. Mars reached out and grabbed us. The planet couldn't wait for us to get here. Either that, or it tried to obliterate the lot of us before we could arrive…' He shrugged. 'It hardly matters now. It finished with most of us living a rougher life than we ever expected.'

I spoke up again. 'Grandma thought you were dead! She always talked about you as someone long gone and lost!'

Grandma gurned and grimaced at me, like I was talking out of turn, but I didn't care. I couldn't understand why she hadn't said the exact same thing. Were we supposed to act normal that he was standing here talking to us, this old guy who was supposed to have died as a boy? Grandma had mourned him for nearly sixty years. In fact,

his death and that day of the crash-landing were the very things that had sent her loopy back in the first place. That was what Da always said anyway.

'Some of us chose not to live on the dusty plains of Mars,' my uncle Thomas said. 'And some of us preferred the company of loyal Servo-Furnishings to the bickering and the clamouring of other human beings. And so some of us came here, to live in the north.'

Grandma had even more tears running down her face.

Thomas stared at her. 'But you knew I was here, Maggie, surely. You knew I'd survived … didn't you?'

'T-there were rumours … and I was hoping you were alive, all that time…' she sobbed. Her voice was cracked and she didn't care that the whole room was looking at her. 'But no. I never knew you were here. Not for definite. People always assumed you were dead and gone. I can't tell you how good it is to be here. To see you again.'

'After all this time,' Thomas said. There was a strange note in his voice and I realised that he wasn't quite as pleased as Grandma was. He seemed suspicious and on his guard. 'So why are you here now, Maggie? Why did you come looking for folk you didn't even know truly existed? Why would you throw yourselves on the mercy of bandits and outcasts?'

All the electronic eyes in that room were on Grandma.

At that same moment there was a loud interruption. A wailing klaxon went off. Someone was shouting from the

open main doors. 'They're here again! The skies are full of them tonight!'

Suddenly everyone was on their feet, excited, noisy, and heading for the doors.

'Who?' Peter shouted. 'What's going on?' Karl was frightened and yapping. We were almost trampled underfoot by the eager Servos.

'This night we'll be successful!' shouted Thomas. He looked gleeful, rushing to join the crowd outside. All thoughts of his new guests and what had transpired sixty years ago were seemingly forgotten. 'Tonight we'll bring one down! We will! We'll get one of them at least! I'm sure of it!'