RUST HEAD

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PART ONE
LOST AND FOUND

1
THE SCRAP FIELDS

Kol Marsden stood atop a mountain of twisted metal and gazed out across the scrap fields. The three moons floated across the blood-red sky.

Kol wiped sweat from his brow, took a swig from the water canteen hung around his neck, and scanned the fields of wreckage below. The scrap fields went on as far as the horizon and beyond, covering almost the entire planet. As far as he could tell, this desolate stretch hadn't been explored in a very long time.

A muttered curse made Kol turn, and he shook his head at the sight of Sully, his partner and best friend, trying to untangle his baggy blue padded overalls from a jutting metal shard sticking out of the pile. Sully's round blue face was miserable beneath the bright yellow hard hat jammed on his head.

'So graceful,' Kol said as Sully wrenched himself free and landed with a thump among loose cans, disused robot parts, cogs and sprockets.

Kol trudged over, offered a hand, and helped his pal up.

'You shoulda been a dancer, Sully, not a Rusthead.'

Sully brushed off his overalls – which was futile given how caked in grime they were. He gave Kol a withering look, then turned to view the trash fields, a pained expression taking hold on his face.

'I still can't believe old Droopy sent us way out here,' he said. 'I mean, look at it, Kol! There's nothing for hundreds of kiloclicks but dead metal and dust. These fields have been searched dry.'

Kol gave his best friend a grim smile. 'Yeah. That's the point. Droopy's making an example of us, isn't he? Because I beat him at his own game . . .'

Droopy was their nickname for Gat Rigby, the Rusthead supervisor at Station 26. Droopy was about a hundred years old, with hangdog cheeks, scowling eyes and the personality of a bowl of cold swampweed soup. He was also extremely fond of a game of Dead Man's Dice – especially if there were byte coins on the line.

'Serves him right,' Sully said, smiling despite their desolate surroundings. 'Man, his face when you rolled that twenty-five, Kol! I wish I had a picture! And when he was handing those twenty bytes to you, I thought his head was gonna explode!'

Kol laughed. 'Yeah, he didn't like that, did he?'

'Didn't like it? He'd have been less upset if you'd tipped a nest of inferno beetles down his underpants!' He stopped, looked thoughtful. 'I still reckon your little victory dance was what pushed him over the edge though.'

Kol nodded solemnly. 'You think it was too much?'

'I think you were OK right up until the bit where you polished his bald spot.'

Kol chuckled. 'Yeah. Look, sorry, Sully. I got a bit carried away. I never thought he'd punish you too.'

'Hey,' Sully said, waving him away. 'We're a team, right? A package deal?'

'Yeah.' Kol smiled. 'A package deal.'

And this was the truth. Kol and Sully were Rustheads – two of a small army of orphan misfits forced out into the fields each day to look for anything that might be sent back to Rust City in the north to be repurposed or repaired. Rustheads always worked in pairs out in the scrap, and Kol and Sully, who were both fourteen, had been a team since the day they'd arrived at Station 26 eight years ago, a couple of newbies without so much as a crease in their overalls.

'So?' Sully said, nodding out to the vast, dead expanse. 'Where now? It's been half a day and all we've got to show for it is the guts of an old plasma rifle. If that's all we take back to the station, Droopy will make sure we don't eat tonight.' He rested his hand on his round belly, which rumbled as if on cue.

'Hey,' Kol said. 'Keep your spirits up. We still have a few hours before the light starts to fade. We'll find something. I can feel it.'

'Uh-huh,' said Sully. 'And which direction is this feeling telling you we should go?'

Kol gave his pal a sideways glance.

'Let's take the scientific approach,' he said.

He reached down into the zip pocket of his searching overalls and brought out two small metal dice. These were the very dice he'd used to win twenty byte coins from old Droopy last night in the canteen.

Kol cupped both hands around the dice, shook them, and let them settle in his left palm.

One showed a three. The other a six.

'OK,' Kol said, stowing the dice away again. 'Six plus three. So that's nine o'clock.'

He imagined himself on a clock face, turned to the direction of nine o'clock, stared out, and smiled. 'There,' he said with a nod. 'We go there.'

Sully shrugged. 'If you say so. It's as good a way as any, I suppose. Lead the way, cap'n.'

Two minutes later, Kol and Sully were at the foot of the wreckage mountain, climbing onto their hover bikes, putting on their helmets and powering up the anti-gravity engines, which lifted them off the trash heap with a deep thrum. Then, with a nod to each other, the boys tore forward, off in the direction of nine o'clock, their heads filled with visions of treasure.

2
THE CAVE-IN

'It's getting late, mate,' Sully said, wiping his sweat-soaked face with a sleeve. 'We should think about giving up and heading back.'

They had been searching for almost three more hours, and the closest to anything valuable they'd come across was the head of an old entertainment bot that kept blinking to life just long enough to start a show tune before short circuiting with a sound like a strangled furburt.

Now, with desperation's fist closing around them, they had taken to squeezing into ever-smaller gaps in the wreckage, using the round lamps atop their helmets to push back the shadows. This gap was barely large enough for Kol's skinny frame. Sully stayed on the surface and held Kol's legs as he reached deep into the dark crevice, the blood rushing to his head because he was almost upside down. In one hand he held his searching hook, an extendable pole with a hook on one end, and he used it to prod and explore the trash.

His keen eyes searched around the sides of the crevice: rusted springs and doors and boxes, mudguards, fragments of long-dead bikes and cruisers, shells of starship control panels and engine housings.

'Come on,' he mumbled to himself. 'There must be something in this sea of cra . . .'

'Kol, you hear me? The sun's starting to go down. I think we need to call it a day.'

Kol grunted in frustration. 'Pull me up, mate.'

Sully heaved on Kol's legs, dragging him out of the hole, and they collapsed down on the heap, breathless.

'Anything?'

Kol flicked his helmet lamp off, shook his head. 'Sorry, Sully. Looks like the dice were wrong.'

'Don't worry 'bout it,' Sully said. 'We'll survive. I'm not even hungry anyway.'

His stomach made a loud rumbling sound again, and the pair of them collapsed into exhaustion-fuelled manic laughter. Their guffaws only died when a great rumble filled the air, and they gazed up to see an enormous ship passing overhead, so huge it filled most of the crimson sky.

'Reapers,' Sully said.

Kol scrambled to his feet, picked up a rusted cog from the pile, reared back and threw it at the starship – a futile move because it was at least a kiloclick above them.

He didn't care, though. The sight of that ship crawling across the sky, insectoid in shape, like some unimaginably vast

metal creature, made his blood boil like acid in his veins. He picked up a chunk of rust, threw it with all he had.

'Get off my planet, bolt brains!' he screamed. 'I'll fry your circuits!'

Sully grabbed his arm, staring at him with wide eyes. 'Someone zapped *your* brain? We've spoke about this – you can't go insulting the Reapers.'

Kol scoffed. 'Those gearheads can't hear me way up there.'

'We don't know what they can hear,' Sully said. 'They're machines, and they wouldn't think twice about turning you inside out. They didn't conquer most of the galaxy by letting runts like us shout abuse at them. For all we know, we could fart and their weird robot ears would pick it up.'

'If you farted, they would definitely hear it,' Kol joked.

The rumble from the starship suddenly grew deafening. It was more than a sound now. It was a feeling, thrumming and vibrating in Kol's head and chest, rattling his brain around in his skull. Around the boys, mountains of metal scrap began to shift.

PING! CLANG! FWING!

Debris was shaking loose from the high, teetering scrap piles, raining down.

'They're going to jump to space!' yelled Sully, pointing up at the rear of the colossal starship, where four awesome engines had begun to blaze with fiery light. 'RUN!'

But Kol grabbed his pal's arm.

'Too late. We need to take cover.' *ZING!* A sprocket

ricocheted past him like a bullet, missing his face by a hair's breadth. He looked around wildly.

The crevice!

Kol dragged Sully towards the fissure, debris spraying the pile all around them.

'Come on. Get in!' he yelled, pointing to the dark gap.

Sully stared at him. 'There? I'll never fit!'

'Breathe in!' Kol screamed. 'Go!'

Somewhere nearby, something huge and heavy crashed down.

Sully squeezed and slithered into the crevice, Kol helping him, pushing, until, with one final effort, he disappeared into the darkness. Then Kol followed, slipping in just as the starship's plasma engines fired.

There seemed only to be sound and light and fear – even in the darkness of the scrap fissure they saw the sky light up. The world – the entire world, it seemed – was trembling. Kol clenched his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut and clamped his fingers over his ears.

And then it stopped. The ship was gone.

For a long moment, neither Kol nor Sully dared breathe. After all that sound and movement, the silence was almost painful.

'Are we dead?' Sully said at last.

Kol smiled. 'If we are, I'm gonna be very annoyed. I had enough of you while we were alive.'

'Should we get out?' Sully asked.

'No,' said Kol. 'I thought we'd move in here.'

‘I never saw a ship jumping to space so close up before,’ Sully said, ignoring him.

‘Me neither,’ Kol said. ‘Because ships only ever make the jump out here in the middle of nowhere. Otherwise, they’d wreck stations and villages.’

A moment of silence. Then Sully said, ‘You don’t think . . . Old Droopy didn’t *know* that ship was making the jump today? He didn’t send us out here *knowing* that was going to happen?’

Kol had been thinking the same thing. Would Droopy really do that? Put their lives in danger out of spite? For the sake of losing a few credits in a stupid dice game? Anger bubbled up inside his chest as he considered the likelihood.

‘Let’s get back to the station and ask old Rust-for-brains that very question, shall we?’

Kol dragged himself out of the hole, stood up and dusted off his overalls. His temper was still rising, but when he turned around, he couldn’t help laughing at the sight of Sully’s blue face as he tried to squeeze his own way out.

Kol reached down. ‘Here, take my hand.’

Sully grabbed his hand, and Kol heaved, and his friend began to emerge from the hole in the scrap pile.

Then he stopped emerging.

‘Wait,’ he said, grimacing. ‘I think I’m caught on something.’

From somewhere below, deep in the hole, there was a sound – the yawning creak of bending metal.

Kol’s eyes widened. ‘Sully. Tell me that was your belly rumbling again . . .’

Sully looked up at him, his eyes bugging wide. He shook his head slowly. That creaking, groaning sound filled the dry, hot air again, and this time the scrap pile trembled beneath them, became a shifting, rattling mass. Somewhere to Kol's right, a metallic scream made him snap his head around. His insides froze in terror. Ragged holes were appearing all over the scrap, sucking the pile down into darkness. Every Rusthead knew about the dangers of cave-ins – the scrap was unstable and often shifted. But Kol had never seen anything like this.

'Move!' he yelled. He pulled again, and Sully strained and pushed and wiggled. The scrap trembled all around them, and the sounds of screaming metal, clangs and bangs and creaks, poured into their ears.

As they struggled, something made them stop. For a brief moment, everything halted, and was still, as if the scrap was catching its breath. Kol's own breath came in short gasps, his ears listening. Then the entire world seemed to move, slightly, one way, and then the other.

Kol and Sully's eyes met.

And then there was so much noise Kol thought his head might explode. It was painful, as if the world was being ripped apart. And it was. Oh, it was! The ground – the scrap – shifted and fell away beneath them, and they were falling, falling among a million tonnes of sharp metal fragments and bolts and screws and the carcasses of ships, tumbling and rolling and plummeting, down . . .

Down . . .

Down . . .

The cacophony of sound was almost visible; angry colours flashed in Kol's vision as the cave-in threw him like a doll, and there was only the taste of rust, and the smell of metal, and the roar of the collapsing world.