

THE BOOK *of* LANDIS



Chapter 01

A CRUEL CREATOR

Thankfully, my only daughter, you will never know what a world of desolation can do to someone's soul. I will be forever grateful that I got to see you grow, and become the hard-working woman you are today.

Please always remember, every time you drink a sip of clean water, that it was not always this way. Many nomads roamed the Coral Barrens, tortured by what at one time, a millennium ago, was a vast sea.

Only rumors and legends remain of what happened, what disaster struck this small planet and left us a stranded people willing to wander miles for a desperate sip from a muddy puddle.

Generation after generation suffered, but the strong found a way to persist and survive.

Once an oasis was found, word spread quickly.

Groups migrated from all over to reach this new, mysterious sanctuary. Legends grew among the migrants: water flowed freely, almost magically, from a tower that reached to the sky.

It was clearly a beacon to the gods, a temple for which the mighty ones would reward the righteous with trickles of water. Over time, the legends grew, and the water flowed.

Most never even got the chance to find out for themselves. The first ones to reach the Oasis quickly built walls in an attempt to restrict population and create sustainability. Those turned away returned to their nomadic life, waiting for one of the inhabitants to die for a fleeting chance to take their spot in the walled city.

Some waited their entire lives, dying at the gates, hoping for a last-minute opening that never came.

So to say I was less than optimistic about our prospects would be an understatement. To be honest, the Coral Barrens had become home. A cruel, heartless, desolate home where you would never stay in the same place more than a day. You followed the water, or fled the beasts that would make you their next meal.

Nevertheless, your mother was always the optimist, and her sights were set on having a family - in the Oasis.

“You’re a fool if you think this is it,” she would say, “that there isn’t something about to happen. That the Creators don’t have something big in mind for you.”

Unfortunately, the Creators did have something in mind for her, and I hated them for those plans, because those plans took her away from you and me.

“Promise me that you will find a way,” she said, her voice soft and barely a whisper. “Promise me you won’t give up, and that you will bring what’s left of our family to the Oasis. You need to find that part of you that believes.”

I didn’t believe, but for her sake, I told her I did.

“I promise,” I said, “with everything I have.”

With that, she left this world, and me alone for what I thought would be the rest of my short days.

I loved your mother, and all I had was my word. That’s when an old-world bot named INC entered our lives.

Bots at one time had been the backbone of the old world, serving mostly as construction and repairing mech. Now only a few remained, and they were in bad shape. Parts were hard to come by, and in the end, humans were cheaper.

I once overheard a merchant say, “Humans can heal, bots can’t.”

Most of my livelihood relied on the fact that bots were seen as more work than they were worth. I could fix almost anything, and with few spare parts to be found, I had built a reputation as someone who could find clever solutions.

That was also the problem with bots - their simple nature. They knew how to work by the book, but thinking outside the box, or looking for an inventive solution to a no-win situation, was out of their scope.

I was clever, bots were dumb, and if any merchant employed a bot over me, I considered them an idiot.

Now I found myself in need of one, and hated the idea of interacting with a glorified toaster.

“That one might work better,” I said, pointing to a bot that was powered down and resting in the

corner of a peddler’s tent. The rusty and worn bot seemed to be held together with nothing more than luck.

The merchant wasn’t having it.

“No, this one,” he said. “Good model.”

He again motioned toward a squat, little bot standing next to him that had one flickering, malfunctioning eye and looked like it could burst into flames any minute.

“Tell me about the one in the corner,” I said.

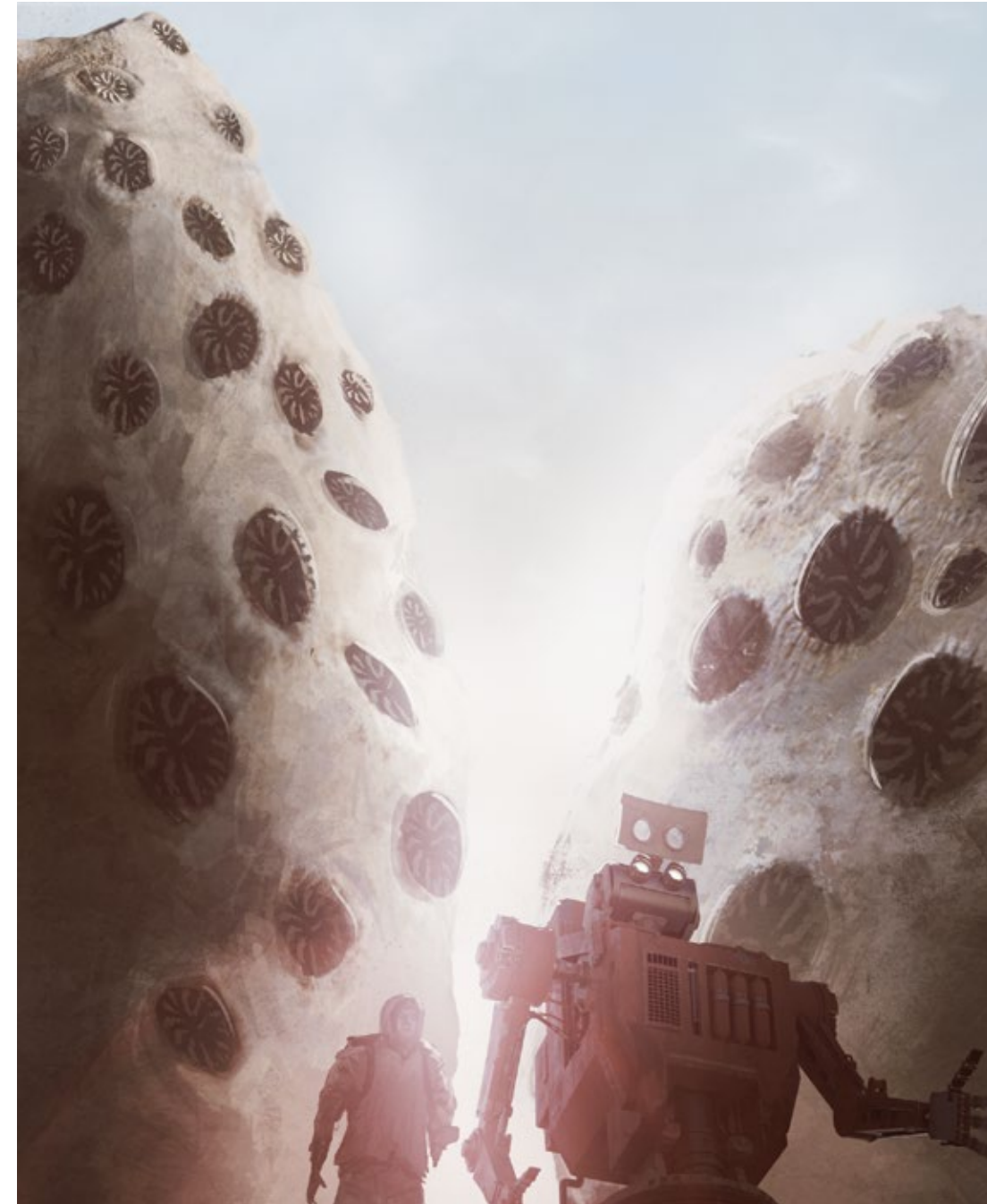
“The red one?” the peddler replied. “Junk.”

Maybe he was right, I thought. I again looked at the small, wobbly bot at his side - its eye flickering at me. It now had a little puddle of “fluid” underneath it on the ground.

“You know what?” I said. “I’ll take my chances with the red one.”

I quickly but carefully made the crucial modifications. It wasn’t much more complicated than most cooling systems on a mech, but this one needed to serve a much more important function.

With my fingers crossed and a hopeful prayer, I powered up the rusty bot.



“Core system computer initialized,” said a monotone, digital voice. It continued, confirming system after system was activated. Then, a pause. I waited with bated breath.

“Additional systems ... recognized ... initiating ... All systems at 100%.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Then, the lights in his eyes flickered on and power seemed to activate his limbs, and he stood upright.

“Hello, what task would you have me perform?” he asked, looking directly at me and speaking in a much more ... “human” tone.

Most bots existed to serve various merchants, working endlessly until they literally fell apart. INC was a welder bot, and his looks and demeanor told me he wasn’t far from suffering the fate of most bots.

Now, his days of working for merchants were over.

“Make sure all your internal systems remain functioning at 100%,” I said.

“So, I don’t have to weld anymore?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “You work for me now. So ... you know.”

INC was my first and only bot, and I was used to competing with them for employment, so to say our first exchange was awkward would be an understatement.

“Actually,” he replied, “I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

“Just ... do what I say and follow me,” I said, “okay?”

“How should I address you?” he asked. “Customary salutations are mister, sir, boss ...”

“Landis,” I replied. “Now, can we please just focus on the journey ahead?”

From that moment on, INC followed me like a diligent puppy.

Our first week or so together was spent mainly in silence. He would often, to my frustration, watch me perform the most menial of tasks, then try to mimic the way I did things in some attempt to be more human, or maybe to fit in, I’m not sure.

Most bots were quirky. They were hundreds of years old, had been through multiple owners and were always reminded of their place in relation to people. They were expected to work, and nothing else.

So I just wasn’t used to having any kind of actual conversation with one, let alone one that asked things like: “The sky is a very nice shade of blue ... why?”





I just shrugged my shoulders.

I guess because of his fairly recent change in occupation, INC finally had time to contemplate the world in which he lived. Everything for INC was a new, wonderful mystery.

“This planet has a lot of dirt,” he said. “Why?”

“I don’t know. How are your systems?”

“100%,” he replied.

“Good,” I said. “Why don’t you start a campfire before it gets dark?”

I’ll give him this, INC picked things up quickly, creating makeshift shelters while I slept, or keeping watch while I gathered what water I could find.

For some reason, he seemed grateful, in his own weird way, for the fact that he was now in my service. As if I had saved him from something.

I never let on that once he had served his purpose, I would be selling him to fund my new life in the Oasis.

As I slept, I heard INC’s cold, digital computer voice say, “Cooling system at 92%. Water required.”

“Sorry,” INC said. “We should get water soon.”





Now when you had to travel like we did, you followed the water, and when you couldn't find a natural source, which was most of the time, you had to find a peddler's caravan.

"How do you find them?" INC asked.

"Either follow their deep tracks in the dirt," I replied, "or look for their large flags and banners."

These guys were the worst of the worst. They smuggled "repurposed" water from the Oasis, generally filtered waste or runoff that was sold at a steep profit. They often toyed with the weaker migrants, and abused the power they held.

"Don't say a word," I told INC. "I want to avoid trouble."

With my eyes down, I quickly approached the camp, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone. At the nearest merchant, I threw my money on the table and grabbed two jugs.

"Nice try."

Almost immediately, I felt one of the jugs being yanked from my hand.

"Water is a privilege, not a right," the merchant said. "Your rusty companion can fend for himself."





I threw more money on his table.

“What I use the water for is none of your business,” I said as his wife glared at me from the corner of the tent, and I added, “... at least my companion smells better.”

With that, he swiped the other jug out of my hand.

Now in hindsight, I will admit I was quick to temper, and after all that had happened, I wasn't in the best state of mind.

Without warning, I tackled the merchant to the ground and was ready to pummel him into unconsciousness. I can't explain what came over me - the anger, the surge of emotions.

“My life won't be determined by a condescending lunatic,” I yelled at him.

My fist was about to land squarely on his nose when I saw INC watching me. All I can say is something in that dumb bot's eyes made me stop my attack. If it weren't for him, I may have killed that slimy merchant.

Before I could release him, his wife offered to sell me a secret to spare his life. I played it up as if I felt conflicted, visibly tightening my fist.

I glared into the man's eyes. “You're lucky your wife is the smart one.”

I finally agreed to take her offer ... and both jugs of water.

“Why are we walking so fast?” INC asked as we hurried away.

“I had to do what I had to do back there, okay?” I said.

“Of course,” he said. “Why are we in such a hurry?”

“There's going to be a funeral ceremony just outside the Oasis in two days,” I replied.

“A funeral means a death, and a death means an open spot. Our luck might have changed.”

It was now a race. Not only did we have to get to the Oasis, but we had to get there first.

Although I knew better, I pushed us day and night, sometimes taking shortcuts we should have avoided. We were nearly devoured several times.

Of course, INC just watched in wonder as one critter or another would try to chew and tug on his metal limbs in an attempt to steal them away.

Initially, I couldn't decide if he was just amazingly curious, or if he had more than a few circuits loose. Not to mention the constant questions. Day and night, questions. Sitting by the campfire, questions. Climbing a ravine, questions.

“Where did all the water go?” “Why are your eyes blue?” “Why do males have nipples?”

Most of the time, I just kept moving as if I didn't hear him. I did have to admit, the more he seemed to observe and get a chance to interact with everything, the more and more complex his questions became.

“That's strange,” INC said. “Do you think that's a natural formation or ...”

“If you ask me one more ...” I stopped when I saw what he was looking at.