

Cosmic Camel



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Cosmic Camel

Chapter One

Donal had just beaten his own record.

“Half an hour!” he groaned. “I don’t believe it!”

It was his fastest yet. Just half an hour: that was all it had taken him to get lost in the zoo.

“What’ll Mrs Hendry say?” he wailed.

Mrs Hendry was fed up with Donal getting lost on school trips. Last term at the stately home he’d got left behind in the kitchens; but at least he’d managed to keep up for the first two hours.

And in the Science Museum, it had been three o’clock before his teacher tracked him down and said sharply that everyone *else* was up on the third floor and what was *he* doing down here in the basement?

Today, at the zoo, Donal hadn’t even had his lunch. He hadn’t even had his elevenses. And he was already lost.

Oh, he knew where he was, all right: he was in the monkey house. But nobody else was.

“Where did they all go?” he moaned. “I wish Mrs Hendry hadn’t put me in Toby’s group!”

All the other children in his group were quick and clever and impatient. They’d filled whole pages of their worksheets while Donal was still struggling with the first question.

“Is that all you’ve done?” Toby had jeered, looking over Donal’s shoulder. When Donal had tried to cover his clip-board, Toby grabbed it and waved it around for everyone to see.

“Look what the donkey’s drawn!” he cried. “It’s an octopus! Why are you drawing an octopus, you donkey-brain?”

“It’s a spider monkey,” muttered Donal. Pulling the clip-board back, he began to rub furiously at the extra legs. He’d drawn several on the monkey because none of them looked right.

“Oh, leave it, Donal! We’ll be here all day. Mu-um?” whined Toby. “Donal hasn’t even done his picture yet!”

“Do stop dawdling, Donal!” snapped Toby’s Mum, who was in charge of the group. “Get a move on.” She’d been hustling her eight children round the zoo as if she couldn’t wait for the day to be over. Twenty seconds per animal was enough for her.

“Donal’s always like this,” Toby complained smugly. “He’s hopeless.”

“Well, we can’t wait all day for Donal! He’d better look sharp, or we’ll leave him behind.”

So Donal crouched by the spider monkey’s cage and bit his lip as he drew. He concentrated really hard, trying to shut out the voices of Toby and the others.

And when he next looked up, they had gone.

Vanished. All of them.

Donal trudged hopelessly out of the monkey-house and gazed up and down the path. Not a soul was in sight. Toby’s Mum had been wearing a pink coat, as bright as bubblegum: if she’d been anywhere close, he couldn’t have missed her.

She wasn’t anywhere close. Nobody was. It was a chilly Tuesday morning and the zoo was almost deserted.

“Not again,” he murmured. “Mrs Hendry’ll go mad.”

He held his breath to listen for children’s voices. But all he could hear were monkeys’ screeches, the distant hoarse coughs of a lion, and donkeys braying – no, he thought, they must be zebras.

“The only donkey here is me,” said Donal miserably. “Toby’s right. I’m useless! I wish I hadn’t come.” He slumped against the nearest fence and slid dejectedly down the wire. “It’s that spider monkey’s fault. It kept on moving.”

“*Hharrouh!*” The ugliest noise Donal had ever heard came through the wire fence. Donal twisted his head, and found himself looking up a camel’s nose.

“Well, it did,” he said. “How can you draw something that keeps whizzing round like a sock in a washing machine?”

He began to flip through his worksheets. They might just tell him where to go next – although Toby’s Mum was probably half way across the zoo by now. The camel blew down Donal’s neck as he studied the next question on his clipboard.

“*How would you describe the alligator’s skin?*”

After that came: “*Which antelope has the biggest horns?*”

Donal frowned up at the signpost. Alligators were to the left. Antelopes were to the right.

“Oh, help! I’ll cheat on the alligators and go straight to the antelopes.”

Remembering his Gran’s horrible alligator-skin handbag, he wrote down: “**The allgaters skin is Scaley, brown and ~~rouh~~ Rough Rough.**”

“Hruh!” said the camel contemptuously.

“Hruh yourself,” said Donal. “*You* don’t have to spell. You can just stand around doing nothing all day but grunting and spitting. Lucky old scruff!”

The camel *was* scruffy. It was as shaggy as a bear, but not nearly as impressive. Startled tufts of black fur stood up from the top of its head and its two lopsided humps. From its sides dangled long tatters and tangles of brown wool.

“Moulting, I suppose,” said Donal. He wrinkled his nose. “You’re a bit whiffy, too. And did you know there’s a mouse on your foot?”

“Hnnngh,” grunted the camel. It gazed down at him through long, sweeping eyelashes, ignoring the small animal rustling at its feet.

The mouse sat up and rubbed its nose. It was rather big for a mouse. Rat? wondered Donal. It didn’t look like a rat either, but he had no idea what else it could be.

“I don’t know anything,” he groaned. “Donkey-brain, donkey-brain! I don’t want to find Toby’s group. I wish I could stay lost for ever.”

As he spoke, there was a thud on the ground, just inside the camel’s wire. Something had landed by the fence; a small, silver sphere no bigger than a tennis ball.

“Who threw that?”

Donal glanced around, but there was nobody near. It was as if the ball had just dropped out of the sky.

Then – very slowly – it began to sink into the ground.

“Weird,” said Donal.

“Uraarghch,” announced the camel with interest. With its long tongue slurping noisily around its lips, it bent down to nose at the sinking sphere.

“Don’t *eat* it!” exclaimed Donal. “It’s not a bun – it’ll choke you!” He wiggled his fingers through the wire in an attempt to roll the ball out of the camel’s reach.

His hand and the camel’s nose met the silver ball together. For an instant Donal’s fingers felt something wet and snuffly, and something hard and icy cold.

And then the ball blew up.

Chapter Two

There was a tremendous **WHOOMPH**.

At once the silver ball filled Donal’s vision, expanding like a balloon – only a thousand times bigger and faster. A second later there was total blackness, as if the balloon had burst in a mighty explosion and left nothing in its place.

At first Donal could not feel anything but that WHOOMPH still charging through his body. He didn’t know where he was, or why, or which way up. Then gradually he realised that he was lying face down, with his cheek pressed on a cold, smooth surface.

But it was dark. Had he gone blind? He certainly hadn’t gone deaf, because he could hear someone breathing very loudly and hoarsely close by.

And his nose still worked. In fact, it was working overtime.

He could smell a cowshed on a hot day. He could smell damp dog-basket, and soggy straw, and the inside of old boots.

“Urgh,” said Donal.

“Hgrroungh,” said the smell, clearing its throat with a noise like a cement mixer full of gravel. Donal squinted through the darkness in alarm.

However, it was slowly growing lighter. Soon he could make out a large grey shape looming in the twilight: a shape with four splayed legs, a proudly tufted head, and two shaggy humps.

“It is not Night,” said a hoarse and rasping voice, “so I expect it is Inside.”

Donal sat bolt upright.

“Say that again!”

“That again,” said the camel obligingly. “Inside where? That is the question. A new and rather sudden camel house, perhaps.”

Donal shook his head in bewilderment. It was definitely the camel talking, in a voice that sounded like stones being shovelled. But alongside the camel’s words, he could also hear it snorting and growling, as if it was translating itself as it spoke.

“Can you understand me too?” he asked.

“I have long been acquainted with Human speech,” the camel drawled. “I have had ample opportunity to study it, regrettably.”

Donal rubbed his head. No bumps. He was fairly sure he wasn’t dreaming. So what was going on?

He peered through the gloom. The growing light did not reassure him. For, apart from his rucksack and the camel, he saw nothing whatever that he recognised.

There were no fences. No tarmac path. No walls, no signs; no zoo.

He seemed to be inside a room, a curved room with one dark central pillar rising from top to bottom. As the room slowly turned from grey to silver, he saw that it had no corners; the sides arched straight into the ceiling.

“Freaky,” muttered Donal. “It’s like being inside a ball. A huge silver football. Except that footballs don’t have cores...” He looked at the single column that joined the curved floor to the curved roof.

“Camel,” he said hesitantly, “remember that silver ball in the zoo? I know it’s a weird idea, but I think we might be inside it.”

The camel drew back its head and glared down its nose at him. “My name is not Camel.”

“What is it, then? I’m Donal.”

“The zoo-keeper calls me Humphrey,” said the camel in a tone of disdain.

“That’s a nice name,” said Donal politely.

“It is *not* a nice name. He calls all the camels Humphrey. I do not answer to Humphrey.”

“Maybe he can’t tell the difference between you and the others?”

The camel spat noisily and messily on the floor.

“Ptah! The others are mere dromedaries. I am a Bactrian camel, from the Gobi Desert in Mongolia, a much rarer and more intelligent species. My name,” it said loftily, “is Ulan Nuur.”

“Oolan Nore,” repeated Donal carefully. The name convinced him, more than anything else, that he couldn’t possibly be dreaming. His donkey-brain would never come up with a name like Ulan Nuur. Tom or Fred, yes; Humphrey, maybe. Ulan Nuur – definitely not.

The camel lurched to its feet and began to walk with an awkward, rolling gait. It ambled over the floor, up the curved wall, and kept on going across the ceiling. It stopped directly over Donal’s head.

“Quite a spacious camel house,” it commented, upside down, “but they appear to have forgotten the door, and there is an absence of Hay.”

“How did you do that?” gasped Donal.

“Do what?”

“Walk on the ceiling!”

“I have legs,” said Ulan Nuur.

“Yes, but...” There was only one way to find out. Donal stood up, feeling rather shaky. Then, expecting to fall off at any instant, he set off warily after the camel.

As he walked up the wall, it became floor. Donal gritted his teeth and kept going. He reached the camel, only to find the ceiling turning into floor as well. What had been Up was now Down. His abandoned rucksack was lying down overhead on the bottom of the ceiling.

“This is doing my head in,” said Donal. He leant dizzily against the top, or bottom, of the central pillar. As he touched it, something glowed suddenly under his elbow.

He pulled back in alarm. A long, glimmering white panel appeared, running from one end of the pillar to the other. Donal heard a faint, deep hum start up, as if the grey core held a hive of bees.

“Whoops!” he said. “Wonder what I’ve pressed? Hope it wasn’t anything important...”

The silver-grey walls began to change. They became speckled with pale dots like spatters of white paint.

Luminous white paint, thought Donal. The dots were shining. He stood pinned against the central pillar, and felt his hair rise on end.

For he was looking right through a transparent, glassy wall into endless space: and billions of stars were looking right back.

Chapter Three

Donal clung to the pillar, not daring to move.

He was inside a giant, clear bubble ten metres across. He felt that the smallest step might burst it and send him hurtling out into that huge, black, star-riddled space.

The camel, with no such qualms, stamped on the floor as if trying to put the stars out. Amongst them hung a great disc; a globe of swirling blue and white.

Donal gulped. Donkey-brain he might be, but he knew what *that* was. “Earth!” he croaked. His voice had disappeared.

“Earth? I see no earth,” grumbled Ulan Nuur in his gravelly rasp. “Earth is brown and crumbly. But I observe that somebody has painted the moon blue.” He put his head between his legs to glare down at the sun, which blazed beneath them. “And *that* is in the wrong place.”

“We’re out in space!” said Donal huskily. “That’s not the moon – it’s Earth. We’re on a spaceship!”

“Spaceship?”

“You know what a ship is, don’t you? You must have been on a ship, on your way from the desert to the zoo!”

A thoughtful look came into the camel’s liquid brown eyes. “Possibly.”

“Well, we’re inside a ship now, floating through space. Only it’s not ours! I don’t know whose it is. We’ve *stolen* it!” Donal whirled round guiltily, half-expecting to see a tentacled Thing crawling up behind him.

“Or it has stolen us. In either case, if this *is* a ship, it will come to land eventually,” answered Ulan Nuur, quite unperturbed.

“Land? Land where? We’re out in space!” Donal began to panic. “We’ve got to get back to Earth! What should I do?”

He clenched his fists, but he felt helpless. What *could* he do?

The glowing panel might hold the controls. But there were no switches or buttons, unless they were well hidden.

Donal put out his hand to touch the panel; and then froze. Supposing he pressed the wrong bit and set off the wrong control – like the ejector button, or the self-destruct-in-thirty-seconds switch?

He jumped backwards as if the panel had burned him. He dared not risk it.

“*Think*, donkey-brain!” he muttered. “What would Toby do?” Running his hands through his hair, he tugged it in desperation. It didn’t help.

“This would never happen to Toby, though,” he sighed. “If Toby found an empty spaceship, it’d be a Galactic Starfighter bristling with laser guns – not a giant football with a talking camel!”

“And a lemming,” added Ulan Nuur.

“A *what?*” Donal followed the camel’s gaze to his rucksack. There was a small, furry backside sticking out of it.

“Get out of there!” he bellowed, and the front end appeared, clutching half a biscuit. It twitched a stubby nose apologetically.

“It’s that rat!” cried Donal.

“I think not,” corrected Ulan Nuur. “Observe the small ears and short tail typical of the Norwegian lemming.” He bent to address the cringing ball of fur. “You are a lemming, are you not?”

“Dunno,” said the lemming in a furry voice.

“What is your name?”

“Dunno,” said the lemming, after some thought.

“How did you enter my paddock?” asked Ulan Nuur sternly.

“Dug a hole,” said the lemming. “Dug lots of holes. Dug more lots of holes. Dug lots more lots of—”

“Yes, we get the idea,” said the camel hastily.

The lemming scratched at the invisible floor. “Ugh,” it said. “Ice.” It sprang back into the rucksack, where there was the crackling of a crisp packet.

Donal was suddenly furious. Wasn’t it bad enough that he was trapped in an alien spaceship, without small furry animals eating his dinner?

“*Oi!*” he yelled.

His shout echoed round and round the chamber. As if in answer, the ship filled suddenly with crimson light. The glowing panel burned fiery red.

There was a sigh like the rustling of a thousand unseen leaves. And through the rustling spoke a soft, breathy voice: the voice of the spaceship.

“*Artificial gravity,*” it said. “*Check.*”

“*Universal translator. Check.*”

“*Radiation shields. Check.*”

“*Hyperdrive standby. Check.*”

It fell silent again.

“No mention of Hay,” said the camel regretfully.

Donal’s stomach was busy turning over. Gravity he understood. And Translator – well, that explained the talking camel.

But Radiation? Hyperdrive? What *was* Hyperdrive? He had a horrible feeling that he was about to find out.

“The thing you called the Earth is getting smaller,” commented Ulan Nuur, looking down his nose through the floor. “Like a hailstone melting in the desert sun.”

It was true. The Earth was slowly shrinking. From behind it peeped the crescent moon, like a shy smile.

The ship began to vibrate. A deep rumble, so low he felt rather than heard it, thrummed up Donal’s legs and through his body.

“Hyperdrive on,” rustled the spaceship. *“Hyperspace jump in fifty seconds. Forty-nine. Forty-eight. Forty-seven...”*

“What’s it saying?” asked the lemming, popping out of the rucksack.

“Lots,” said the camel. “And less lots. And less lots.”

“This is my fault,” whispered Donal. “I must have started it up. Where’s it going to take us?”

Ulan Nuur cleared his throat importantly. “I expect I am returning to the Land of my Fathers,” he proclaimed. “This ship has been provided for Me.”

“I’ve got to stop it! I’ve got to switch it off!”

Donal threw himself at the pillar, pounding recklessly on the panel, desperate to find a way to halt the countdown.

It was in vain. The red glow did not alter, and the soft voice continued its steady, inexorable chant.

“Thirty-one. Thirty. Twenty-nine.”

Ulan Nuur raised his head high, his eyes half-closed in rapture. “At last I shall behold my Homeland!” he declared ecstatically. “The vast and windy plains of the Gobi Desert, where the sun shines on rivers of ice—”

“Eighteen. Seventeen. Sixteen.”

“—where mighty sand-dunes rise like mountains, and mirages hang shimmering over the salt-pans—”

Donal stopped pounding the pillar and kicked it instead.

“Ten. Nine. Eight.”

“—where the dust-storms howl like demons,” intoned the camel, “raging for days on end—”

Donal dropped to his stomach on the transparent floor. Beneath him the swirly blue and white globe was shrinking more rapidly than ever. Pressing his hands against the floor, he gazed out at the disappearing Earth, willing it to come back to him.

“Three. Two. One.”

There was the faintest of judders. And the stars were gone. Every single star. The walls turned black.

“Night night,” squeaked the lemming.

“What’s happening?” breathed Donal.

“It is probably a Karaburan, a black sandstorm of the desert,” came the camel’s confident answer out of the darkness. “Fear not. It will pass in a week or two.”

No sooner had he spoken than with a blinding flash, the stars returned.

But they were different stars. The Earth had gone.

Chapter Four

The cool blue earth and friendly yellow sun had vanished. In their place, a huge red globe scowled fiercely at them. Plumes of fire writhed like snakes across its surface.

“Morning!” said the lemming. “Breakfast?”

“That’s the wrong sun,” whispered Donal. He turned to look the other way, and nearly jumped out of his skin at the vast planet that completely filled his view.

“We’re about to crash!” he yelped, before he realised that the spaceship was not diving towards the planet, but skimming swiftly across its surface.

This was definitely not Earth. It was a black and desolate planet. Its surface bristled with spiky hills, steeper and more vicious than any mountains he had seen back home.

And they were barren, with no sign of life. Donal’s heart sank. Surely nothing could live on those jagged mountains and grey, dusty plains?

I’ve really messed up, he thought wretchedly. Why did I ever touch that silver ball? Why did I have to get lost in the Zoo? Now I’m *really* lost. I’m Nowhere.

He felt sick.

Ulan Nuur, in contrast, gazed down hungrily, shifting his feet as if he would like to leap right through the wall onto that empty land.

“Behold the Altai Mountains of Mongolia,” he murmured solemnly. “A thousand miles from end to end.”

“It’s not Mongolia!” Donal watched the new world roll past beneath them. He longed to see a scrap of blue, a single shred of green – but there were only ranks of fierce black hills like sharks’ teeth, topped by clouds of grey dust...

“Hang on!” he cried. “That isn’t dust – it’s *smoke!*” Through the swirling smoke-drifts, he saw red spots below, like burning coals scattered on the ground.

“Volcanoes,” he breathed in awe. “Look! There’s one erupting.” A slow trickle of red oozed down a black hillside.

“Hill’s bleeding,” said the lemming with concern.

“Volcanoes? In the Altai Mountains?” queried Ulan Nuur doubtfully. “I was not informed about those.”

“These aren’t the Altai Mountains...” Donal’s voice trailed away as he stared down at a smoking pool of lava. Tall black spikes stood all around its edge, straight as a row of spears.

“They’re almost like – Ulan Nuur!” As he clutched at the camel’s shaggy coat, a bit of fur came off in his hand. “Those are *buildings!*”

He felt sure of it. They couldn’t be natural, those towers like arrowheads. They were too smooth: and they had windows. His heart began to thud. What sort of people – or things – could possibly live *here?*

Soon he saw. As the spaceship glided closer, he glimpsed figures moving through the smoke. Although he couldn't see them clearly, what he saw sent a shiver down his spine.

They were tall, angular creatures, with too many arms and legs as thin as sticks. They walked on four limbs, while four more waved in the air. They looked like giant stick insects, or preying mantises.

"Gross," said Donal with a shudder.

"They do appear to be rather prickly," commented Ulan Nuur. "And someone is throwing rocks at us. How unmannerly." He bared his long yellow teeth and growled in disapproval.

"Rocks? How can anyone be thro—" began Donal, just as a boulder hurtled past the ship, missing it by a few metres. "They're shooting at us!" he yelled.

A huddle of spiky creatures gathered round a dark hole below. There was a puff of smoke, and the crowd pulled back promptly.

A black dot flew up from the hole towards the ship. It grew bigger and bigger, until Donal could see that it was a huge, pock-marked lump of rock, like a meteorite speeding straight at him.

"Get down!" he yelled. "It's going to hit us!"

"Get down where?" objected Ulan Nuur. The ship shook like a jelly, as the rock missed it by a hairsbreadth.

"We've got to get out of here!" Donal leapt at the control panel and punched it. "Go on! Go *faster!*" he urged the ship, though his pummelling made no difference whatsoever to its speed.

Another rock cannoned up towards the ship. Convinced it was going to hit them, Donal instinctively crouched down, wrapping his arms around his head.

Then he thought, "Don't be stupid, donkey-brain. What good will that do?" He unwrapped his arms in time to see the rock falling away, only metres short.

The ship was pulling out of range. The insect-like attackers were growing smaller and more distant.

"Never fear," said Ulan Nuur complacently. "They would not dare to injure Me. You see, they have thought better of it now."

"That's only because we've gone past them!" Donal took several deep breaths, trying to calm his galloping pulse. "Are you all right, lemming?"

The lemming looked up with a guilty start, and stuffed the remains of a sausage roll into its mouth. "Mmnf," it said, spraying crumbs.

Donal shook his head in disbelief. Was he the only one who realised the danger they'd been in?

At least the jagged towers had slipped behind them now, and the mountains were rapidly dwindling. Soon the ship was gliding over a lifeless plain of black sand, littered with smoking craters.

“It’s a desert,” said Donal, his heart sinking even lower.

“I see no tents, no yurts,” Ulan Nuur murmured. “I wonder where the camel-herders are?”

“There are none. This is a terrible world,” said Donal, hanging his head in despair. He was convinced that he had somehow steered the ship to this dark, arid wasteland, where the only living things in sight had tried to kill them. “I’m so sorry. It’s totally my fault.”

“Hmph! It doesn’t look so bad ahead,” remarked Ulan Nuur.

Donal raised his eyes. Sure enough, on the far horizon, as if a giant hand were clinging to the edge of the planet, fingers of green spread across the black.

“Grass!” said the camel, smacking his lips loudly.

“Lots of lunch,” chirped the lemming. Eagerly they watched the green fingers creep closer, edging their way across the ground.

The black desert became patchy; then suddenly they were flying across an unbroken carpet of green so brilliant and richly emerald that it hurt Donal’s eyes.

It was almost too green to be true. He was entranced. Thick, lush grass grew everywhere across a gently undulating landscape, laced here and there by sparkling streams. Although there were no trees, hundreds of little green bushes dotted the meadows.

The ship began to descend. And Donal’s jaw dropped.

The bushes were *moving*. They had *feet*. Each of them had two short grey arms, green furry bodies and green heads that turned to look at the approaching spaceship. As the sphere hurtled downwards, soon Donal was close enough to see dark eyes glinting.

“Plants that walk?” said the camel dubiously. “I don’t remember *that* about the Gobi Desert.”

“We’re not in the Gobi Desert!” cried Donal helplessly, wondering how to make the camel understand. “We’re on an alien planet billions of miles away. And we’re just about to land in the middle of a crowd of – of – of little green space-things!”

Chapter Five

As the ship touched down, there was a soft WHOOMPH.

The floor of the spaceship disappeared. Donal tumbled onto long, cool grass.

He felt the lemming trying to burrow down the back of his shirt. Its claws tickled and he sat up to fish it out. The camel was sprawled inelegantly nearby. But there was no sign of the spaceship: it had vanished.

That was the least of his concerns. For he was surrounded by hundreds of little green furry space-things, all watching him intently with beady black eyes.

Donal got unsteadily to his feet. "Sorry," he said, although he didn't quite know why.

"*Oooh!*" The little green space-things all gasped together, and moved back in a wave.

They hardly came up to Donal's shoulder. When Ulan Nuur scrambled upright, he looked like a rock hung with tattered brown seaweed in the midst of a rippling green sea. The creatures sounded like the sea, too: hushing and shushing like breakers on a beach.

One of them bustled forward to stand in front of Donal, its head enquiringly on one side. It held a small silver box in its leathery grey hands, each of which had only three fingers.

Trying to be polite, Donal bowed awkwardly. To his surprise, the creature reached up on tiptoe, hung the box round his neck by a thin cord, and squeezed it. At once it gave out a chorus of rustling, whistly voices, all trying to talk at once, and all saying more or less the same thing.

"Welcome, welcome!"

"Don't be afraid, it's a very clever box—"

"—called a translator—"

"—like the one in the skywheel—"

"—to tell us what you say."

Donal squeezed the box experimentally. The voices switched off. When he squeezed it again, they came back.

"—because we knew you would come—"

"—we were waiting for you—"

"—we've been looking forward to your arrival—"

"—and we're so glad! So glad!"

Despite his bewilderment, Donal couldn't help smiling. He was glad too. With their brilliant green fur, which exactly matched the grass they stood on, the aliens reminded him of friendly puppets from Sesame Street.

"We are the Meerie!" they cried in a rustling chorus.

“This is Nolga, our leader—”

“I’m Tola—” “Rolga—” “Holga —”

Their high, feathery voices all sounded identical to Donal.

“I’m Brola, and I sent the Skywheel—”

“—oh, yes, it was Brola’s idea—”

“—she said it would bring someone—”

“—from the far-away stars.”

“I knew it would,” said Brola importantly, fluffing up her fur.

“The Skywheel?” asked Donal. “What do you mean? Is that the ship we came in?”

The sea of Meerie parted in a green wave.

Behind them was a large, pitted slab of stone, half-buried in the grass. On it lay a little silver ball, just like the one that had landed in the zoo. Donal realised that it probably *was* the one that had landed in the zoo.

The Meerie bowed at it respectfully, while keeping their distance from it.

“That’s the Skywheel, it’s very precious, priceless—” said Holga, nodding gravely.

“—the only one left—”

“—the last of its kind—”

“—but we had to send it through the depths of space to find you! So which of you is it?” finished Nolga.

“Which of us is what?”

“Which of you is the one?”

“The one what?” asked Donal, completely out of his depth.

“The most intelligent one, of course,” said Brola. “I programmed the Skywheel to find a planet with intelligent life, and track down the place with the greatest number of species—”

“Do you mean the Zoo?”

“—and to home in the brainwaves of the most intelligent being there.”

The crowd murmured expectantly. Donal shook his head.

“I suppose you must mean the Zoo,” he said, “but I don’t think you can mean me.”

The lemming sidled down his arm. “Got a hole to dig,” it muttered, as it disappeared into the grass.

“Or him,” said Donal.

“*Ahem.*” Ulan Nuur cleared his throat with a sound like a bucketful of coal being tipped down a coal-hole. At once the Meerie surged in a green tide to surround the camel.

“If it’s not *that* one, it must be this one—”

“—oh, yes, we can see now—”

“—so much grander—”

“—such a fine coat, even if it’s not very green—”

A score of inquisitive grey hands stroked the camel's matted wool. With a haughty sniff, Ulan Nuur reached down in his turn to give their emerald fur a cautious lick.

"Not grass," he murmured, disappointed.

"You are the one who is going to save us!" announced Brola.

"Save us! Save us!" they all cried, arms waving like stunted boughs in the breeze.

Ulan Nuur looked up at the coral-pink sky, and Donal thought he saw a faint expression of bewilderment in his eyes. Then the camel shrugged.

"I knew I would be expected. Lead me to your Camel House."

"House?" asked Nolga. "What is *House*?"

Donal glanced around. He could see no houses, no trees, no roads; nothing but a few grassy mounds.

"You must have houses?" he said uncertainly. "Places you build? To shelter in?"

"Shelter? Oh, yes! *House*, of course! Come! Come!"

The sea of Meerie flowed towards the nearest and largest grass-covered mound. Brola, at the front, appeared to sink suddenly into the earth. Donal found himself being pushed after her, down a steep tunnel that led into the mound.

He stumbled into a dome-shaped chamber, whose rounded walls reminded him of the Skywheel; except that it was green.

It was lined with thick, velvety grass. A little light filtered through, filling the place with a soft, green gloom. The only piece of furniture – if it could be called that – was a low stone table, on which stood a number of silver boxes of various sizes. One of them looked like the translator around Donal's neck.

"What are all those?" he asked curiously.

"Oh, very clever things, ever so clever–"

"–things to translate other languages–"

"–and things to clean air–"

"–and things that hear messages from far away," said Brola. "Far too clever for you to understand."

Donal supposed that this was true. He was impressed. If the Meerie had translators, and air filters, and radios, they must certainly be a very advanced race. He wondered why there was nothing else in the room, not even a stick of furniture.

"Why is your house full of grass?" he asked.

"Not grass," grumbled Ulan Nuur, who had just taken a mouthful. "Unfortunately."

"It's the Greengrass," cried the Meerie in chorus, "the Greengrass, very important, the Greengrass, we live on it, it lives on us!"

Then the whole crowd of them inside the dome began to sway in unison, chanting: "O Glorious Greengrass, Greengrass green, O gorgeous greenest Greengrass–"

"Right, right," said Donal hastily. "Greengrass. Got it. But why have you brought us to your planet? Why do you need someone from the Zoo? And when can we go home?"

“Let me explain,” said Nolga. Ignoring Donal, he addressed Ulan Nuur, while the other Meerie murmured agreement with every sentence.

“We Meerie are in terrible danger, because of our deadly enemies, the Gyzols.”

“Gyzols?” inquired the camel.

“—oh, yes, those long-legged spiky faced—”

“—black-hearted cold-blooded—”

“—horrible needle-fingered monsters who live in the smoking mountains,” finished Nolga.

Donal shivered. “We’ve seen them,” he said. “They tried to shoot us down.”

Nolga paid him no attention. “Then Brola had her idea—”

“—to fetch help from outside—”

“—such a clever idea—”

“It was a wonderful idea,” said Brola, elbowing him aside, “and it worked! We sent our precious Skywheel to look for help amongst the stars, and it brought you back!” She clasped her hands together and gazed at Ulan Nuur with pride.

“I’m flattered,” said the camel, “but why?”

“We can’t overcome the Gyzols on our own, you see,” said Nolga. “They’re far too dangerous.”

“Terribly perilous,” said Brola.

“For us to attack them would mean certain death—”

“—but *you* can go and fight them instead!”

Chapter Six

“Certain death? That does it,” said Donal. “You’ve definitely got the wrong man. I mean the wrong camel. Come on, Ulan Nuur, let’s get out of here.” He made for the tunnel, but Ulan Nuur didn’t budge.

“I am called here for a Purpose,” he declared, “and I must perform my Duty.”

“But they didn’t mean to fetch us!” hissed Donal. “Don’t you understand? They wanted the Head of the Zoo, or somebody like that. And even if I was Head Zookeeper, I wouldn’t hang around waiting for certain death!”

“Oh, not certain death for you,” said Holga. “I shouldn’t think so, not very likely anyway.”

“Certain death for *us* – for the Greengrass,” added Nolga. “Our Greengrass can’t survive in the horrible desert where the Gyzols live. We live on the Greengrass, and it lives on us. If *it* dies, *we* die.”

“It lives on you?” asked Ulan Nuur doubtfully. “Are you sure?”

Brola picked up a clump of grass from the ground. She slapped it on to her arm, where it stuck, looking exactly like part of her fur. “It grows on us, as it does everywhere. We cannot live without it.”

“Why not?”

“It gives us our food! It catches tiny animals, and feeds us through our skin,” she said. “But now it is in terrible danger, because of the Gyzols.”

Donal gawped at the grass on her arm, waving where there was no wind. Grass that ate animals...

He thought of sea anemones waving their tendrils to catch shrimps. Suddenly the Meerie didn’t seem so cuddly any more. Their thick green coats weren’t made of fur, but thousands of tiny, waving tentacles.

Surreptitiously, Ulan Nuur plucked a clump of grass with his teeth and tried to plant it on his leg. It fell off.

“But what’s the problem with your Greengrass?” asked Donal. “Why is it in such danger?”

“The Gyzols are killing it,” said Nolga. “Come and look!” He led the way back out of the mound, and climbed up on top of it, huffing and puffing.

“Once this land was all Greengrass,” he said, waving his arms around, “as far as you could see, and further. But the more we sowed it, the more the Gyzols came and burned it back—”

“— and sprayed it with horrible stuff that shrivelled it up—”

“—they want to kill all our Greengrass—”

“—poisoning the land with their fumes—”

“—pointy-toothed sharp-clawed demons!”

Donal gazed over at the threatening black hills that reared up in the distance beyond the sea of luscious green. He shuddered, remembering the cluster of insect figures that had shot at the ship.

“But what can we do?” he asked.

“Ulan Nuur must travel on the Skywheel,” announced Nolga.

The camel looked askance at the silver ball, lying on its slab. “I may have trouble balancing,” he said.

“I’ll show you how! Like this!” Brola pushed through the crowd of Meerie to the slab. Stretching out a grey hand, flat as a paddle, she touched the sphere.

There was a muffled WHOOMP. The silver ball was gone; instead a huge black bubble hovered just above the slab. It gradually became transparent, until Brola could

be seen inside, along with three other Meerie who happened to have been standing next to her.

The bubble drifted to the ground. With another WHOOMP, it burst. It vanished: and the little sphere rested on its slab again, while Brola sat breathless on the grass.

“To make it work, all you have to do is touch the outside,” she said. “It shrinks again as soon as it comes down to land.”

“We had many Skywheels once,” said Nolga mournfully, “all stored safely in our Dome, until the Gyzols stole them.”

“Is that the Dome?” asked Donal, pointing at the mound.

“It was like that, only bigger and better.”

“—they stole our beautiful Dome and all our lovely Skywheels—”

“And then hid them away from us,” added Brola. The other Meerie moaned and swayed in agreement.

“That’s why we brought you here—”

“—to go and get them back.”

“I expect that will not be too difficult,” said Ulan Nuur faintly.

“It’s perfectly simple!” rustled Nolga. “All you have to do is ride the Skywheel to the dreadful land of the wicked Gyzols, seek out our Great Dome in whatever secret cavern they have hidden it, find the entrance, and break in without being caught. That’s all.”

“That’s *all*?”

“There you will find our wonderful, clever Skywheels,” added Brola. “Then bring them home to us. Once we have our Skywheels, we’ll be safe.”

“I think you need somebody else,” said Donal. “I think there’s some mistake.”

“No mistake! No mistake!” chorused the Meerie. “We asked for someone to save us — and we have been sent Ulan Nuur!”

“But the mission’s impossible!” protested Donal.

“Not for Ulan Nuur.”

“He’s a *camel*!”

“He is our saviour,” said Nolga solemnly, and all the Meerie sighed like the wind through the trees. “Our deliverer! Our hero!”

Ulan Nuur blinked his long eyelashes. “I need a drink,” he said.

Chapter Seven

Donal listened to the camel drink. It was a very long and noisy process, involving much slurping and snorting.

“Are you really going on this mission, Ulan Nuur?” he asked.

The camel drained another litre from the clear stream trickling through the Greengrass.

“Of course,” he said, and belched loudly. “Aah. The grass may not be good, but the water is. Full tanks. I won’t need to drink for a week or so now.”

“Ulan Nuur, you can’t really mean to go. The whole task sounds impossible!”

“It must be possible,” said Ulan Nuur, “or they would not ask Me to do it.”

“But it’s dangerous! You don’t have to do what they want.”

“Humans always want something,” huffed Ulan Nuur. “Do this, carry that, stand there, spit for the camera. At least the Meerie ask respectfully.”

“I’m sure there’s something wrong with their story, though...”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” said Donal, worried and baffled at the same time. “Something’s bugging me, but I don’t know what it is.”

“How useful.”

“I wish I could put my finger on it.” He paused as Brola joined them. Wading into the shallow stream, she scooped water over her green fur.

“That’s better!” she said. “It was thirsty.”

Donal pulled his flask from his rucksack, dipped the cup into the water, and sipped cautiously. The camel was right; it tasted good. He decided to risk drinking it, and save the orange juice in his flask for later.

As he drained his cup, the lemming’s head popped up at the water’s edge.

“Dug a nice hole,” it said. “Good hole. Nice grass.”

“Can you eat this grass?” asked Ulan Nuur incredulously.

“Green, innit?” said the lemming. “S’alright.”

“Caterpillars are green,” observed Ulan Nuur, looking down his nose, “but I would not eat them.”

“I would,” said the lemming.

“Ulan Nuur!” commanded Brola impatiently. “Come to the Skywheel! It’s time to leave. Are you bringing your human?”

“It does not wish to come,” said Ulan Nuur, “and it is Not Necessary.” He began to amble after Brola with a slow, loose stride.

Donal bit his lip. He didn’t like the sound of the Meeries’ mission – but how could he let Ulan Nuur go alone? The camel thought he was still on Earth. He didn’t know what he was letting himself in for.

“I’ll come too,” he offered.

“As you please,” said Ulan Nuur haughtily. “Just do not expect to ride Me.”

“Hurry up!” Brola shook a shower of water droplets off her fur as she waddled briskly away. “I’m captaining the Skywheel,” she said over her shoulder, “since it was all my idea. So you have to do what I say.”

She sounded as bossy as a squat, green version of Toby. Donal sighed and bent to pick up his rucksack. It was wriggling.

“Leave me some sandwiches, lemming, please,” he said. “They might be all I get to eat. I hope this mission won’t last long.”

* * *

Even though he had seen the Skywheel blow up twice now, the WHOOMP still came as a shock.

At least it didn’t knock him over this time. All the same, Donal felt wobbly as he watched the black walls gradually turn to silver all around him.

It was a comfort to have the solid, smelly presence of Ulan Nuur beside him, and the soft warmth of the lemming in his hand.

“Morning again,” said the lemming, as the sphere slowly grew transparent enough for them to see green fields sweeping past below.

Donal tried to walk up the wall, and found that he couldn’t. This time, up was up and down was definitely down.

“We don’t need artificial gravity,” Brola told him. She stood by the control core, looking important and busy. “You only need that out in space. We’re not going into space this time; just round the world a bit.”

“How does it work, this Skywheel? How does it expand and go small again?”

“Questions, questions!” said Brola, sounded exasperated. “Do be quiet. I need to steer.”

“I thought this ship had an automatic pilot?”

“Yes, but *I’m* steering now.”

She pressed the edge of the glowing panel in the ship’s core. It slid back to reveal a round screen, split into segments like the spokes of a wheel.

“Since we’re not going into space, we set it for Level, not Out,” said Brola. “Like this. Then we choose the direction to go in by touching the right place on the screen. You have to count the sectors. *This* is where we’re going today; sector four. See? I know all about it. I worked it out. I’m the cleverest Meerie of all.”

“It’s amazing,” said Donal. “So did you design this ship?”

“Of course not!” said Brola. “I’m not that old.”

“Sorry. Silly question. But...” He hesitated. Now he realised what had been bugging him; but it was probably another silly question, and Brola would most likely snap his head off.

“If the Meerie built this space-ship,” he said tentatively, “why can’t you just build some more, instead of trying to get your old ones back?”

“Because we can’t,” she said shortly.

“Why not? Or what about trucks, or tanks? You could cross the desert in those and find somewhere safe to live. Don’t you have any vehicles?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Brola.

“Trucks! Cars! Things with wheels!”

Brola was huffy. “Gibberish. The Skywheel is the only wheel there is. Stop bothering me and go away. I’m busy!”

Donal gave up. The translator obviously had limitations. He stared round, trying to puzzle out how the Skywheel worked.

“If it stays just as heavy when it shrinks,” he said thoughtfully, “it’s no wonder it sank into the ground at the zoo. It must weigh more than an elephant!”

“Got stood on by an elephant once,” remarked the lemming.

“*What?* How come you’re still alive?”

“It missed.”

Ulan Nuur was gazing out in a reverie. “The great Gobi awaits!” he murmured.

Below them, the lush Greengrass carpet was fraying at the edges. Soon it petered out entirely, giving way to barren rock and sand.

“Horrible, horrible,” muttered Brola.

For now the green land swiftly turned to grimy black. Once again they were flying over the scorched desert. Trails of smoke rose up from scattered craters; like long, thin fingers trying to grab their ship and pull it down.

Chapter Eight

The camel stared long and hard at the desolate landscape. At last he let out a contented sigh.

“Behold the magnificence of the Gobi desert!” he told Donal in sonorous tones.

“Ulan Nuur, we’re millions and millions of miles from–”

“Yes, I can see the sand dunes now,” continued the camel as if he couldn’t hear.

“Horrible sand,” said Brola.

Rearing before them, huge dunes cast long black shadows across the lifeless land. Donal shivered, although it was warm inside the Skywheel.

Outside, the smoking sand looked hot enough to fry an egg. The steaming craters grew bigger and more frequent; between them trailed thin ribbons of lava, running into glowing, smoking pools.

The dunes swelled into foothills, and then into mountains. The Skywheel flew over steaming orange lakes trapped in the rock, and red-hot fissures. To Donal, it looked like a picture of Hell.

“Nasty,” squeaked the lemming perched on his shoe, and tried to hide up his trouser leg.

Then, through the steam and smoke, he saw the pointed pinnacles of the Gyzol towers rise before him: tall, thin and pitted with the mouths of a thousand lightless tunnels.

They looked as if they were built out of lava, thought Donal. There were hundreds of them, like giant, jagged ants’ nests; a city of cruel spires...

“I hate them! *Hate* them!” muttered Brola. She stabbed at the screen, and the control panel hummed briefly. Donal noticed a dimple forming in the Skywheel’s skin beneath him.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Brola. The dimple grew to a bubble the size of Donal’s hand, and popped. He saw a cloud of fine dust drift away from the ship. Then it was gone, leaving the Skywheel’s surface as smooth as before.

But down below, something else grabbed his attention.

“Look! There’s some-one watching us!”

On top of a tower, angular figures stood silhouetted against the smoke. Donal could see the four bony arms with which each creature clawed the air. Wiry feelers waved on their long heads.

He remembered a TV programme he’d once seen about a new island that had grown up out of the sea, formed by lava from an underwater volcano. The very first animals to appear on that island – while it was still hot and smouldering – had been cockroaches.

The Gyzols reminded him of those cockroaches; except that they were at least two metres high. He was close enough to see huge, dark eyes turned his way. He shuddered.

“Poisonous stick-legged monsters!” chanted Brola. “Murderers of the Greengrass! But they can’t hurt us while we’re up here.”

“Yes, they can!” exclaimed Donal. “They shot rocks at us before!”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Brola dismissively. “I never heard of—”

With a loud whine, a huge chunk of rock sailed past the Skywheel.

“That hole in the ground is spitting stones,” grunted Ulan Nuur. “The Gyzols feed it, but it spits them out again.”

“So what?” said Brola. “The Skywheel is unbreakable.”

Peering down through the floor, Donal saw a group of spindly aliens pushing boulders into a burning fissure. They hefted up a long vessel and poured a liquid in after the rocks. Then they jumped back.

Two seconds later, the boulders came hurtling up into the air like cannonballs.

“They’re using the volcanoes to fire at us!” yelled Donal.

“They can’t be,” Brola said. “They’re not clever enough to—”

THUNK! A boulder hit the Skywheel, which rocked alarmingly. Donal staggered and clutched at Ulan Nuur.

There was a second **THUNK**, and Donal and the camel were thrown completely off their feet as the ship went into a spin. They hurtled headlong around the sphere like a pair of hamsters in a wheel.

The lemming bleated pitifully as it rolled past. Donal grabbed it and with one hand stuffed it out of harm’s way beneath his T-shirt; while with his other hand, he tried in vain to stop himself from skidding around the rapidly spinning walls.

“Steady the ship!” he shouted to Brola, who was clinging on the central pillar.

“I can’t!” squealed Brola. “I feel sick!”

“I do not care for this form of transport,” said Ulan Nuur reproachfully. He slithered down the rotating wall with his legs splayed out, humps jiggling. “It is most undignified.”

Gradually, the wild rotation slowed. The shaken passengers slid into a pile. Donal saw to his relief that the Gyzols were out of sight.

His relief did not last long. Gazing around, he made an unwelcome discovery.

“The Skywheel’s getting smaller!” he exclaimed in shock.

“It can’t be,” Brola snapped. “That’s impossible.”

“It is! It’s shrinking! Maybe it got cracked. What’ll happen if it shrinks right down?”

“Stop asking stupid questions!” shouted Brola.

“We’d better land,” said Donal. “If the ship gets too small, we’ll be crushed inside it. Or if it collapses in mid-air, we might all get thrown out into the sky! We’ve got to land before that happens.”

“We’re can’t. We’re too high.”

“I *know* we are! That’s why we’ve got to come down!” cried Donal.

Jumping up, he rushed over to the core. He ran his hand urgently over the control screen, as he’d seen Brola do. The Skywheel dipped a little.

“Get off!” said Brola indignantly, waddling after him to slap his hand away. “It’s mine!”

“Then bring it down!” he pleaded.

Brola stamped on his feet and pushed him, hard. He fell against the panel.

At once, with a roar like a gale, the ship went into a nose-dive. Donal and Brola were hurled back against the outer wall, and pinned there by the speed of the falling ship. The panel’s lights went out.

With a splitting, tearing noise, a web of fine black lines appeared on the Skywheel’s skin, and began to spread like cracks on an icy puddle.

“We’re breaking up,” cried Donal. “We’ve got to land soon!”

“We will,” said the camel soberly, “but perhaps a little fast.”

The ship was falling out of the sky, and the ground was surging up to meet them. On the control panel, a last light flickered and went out.

There was a jolt, and a terrible splintering sound as if lightning was tearing the Skywheel apart.

“We’re going to crash! Oh, Ulan Nuur, I’m sorry,” said Donal, before the ground rushed up and hit him.

Chapter Nine

“*Sand,*” said Ulan Nuur.

Donal raised his head weakly and spat out a mouthful.

“Ugh,” he agreed. There was sand in his eyes, up his nose, in his hair, and from the feel of it, down the inside of all his clothes. Hot sand. It scorched his skin where he lay on it. So he sat up, feeling scoured, bruised and shaken.

They were surrounded by low, black sand-dunes. Somewhere a lonely wind whistled with a hollow sound; but its breeze did not touch them. Beyond the sand-dunes Donal glimpsed the distant tops of the Gyzol towers, hazy in the heat.

But apart from the heat shimmer, nothing moved. There was no life here at all.

Something scratched Donal’s chest. He put up a shaky hand, and discovered that the translator was still tucked inside his shirt; and so was the lemming. It wriggled out in a shower of black grains, and did a scuttling, jumping dance along the ground.

“Hot hot hot *hot!*” it said. “Dig hole quick.” It began to scrape at the sand with its front paws.

Ulan Nuur scrambled to his feet, sniffing the air eagerly. But Brola lay half-buried and unmoving.

“Brola!” Donal crawled over to her, scooped away the hot sand that covered her and gently lifted her up. She weighed surprisingly little. The Greengrass that looked so bulky was as light as a coat of feathers; but now it was limp and lifeless, like Brola herself.

Donal carried her carefully to the only shade he could see – that cast by Ulan Nuur. Rummaging in his rucksack, he sprinkled her with a little orange juice from his flask and fanned her with his clip-board.

A ripple ran through Brola’s Greengrass. She groaned and opened her eyes. “Where am I?”

“The desert,” replied the camel reverently. He gazed around with deep delight. “I have waited for this moment all my life. Behold the splendour of the Gobi’s sands! At last!”

“Oh, no. I’ll die!” wailed Brola. “My Greengrass can’t live in the desert!”

“You’re not dead yet,” said Donal, bracingly. “Come on! Sit up straight and take a deep breath.” He propped her against Ulan Nuur’s leg, and then turned to scan the black sand for any glint of silver. “I’d better search for the Skywheel. Maybe you’ll be able to repair it.”

“I observed it just there,” said Ulan Nuur, “where that hole is.”

“Oh no! It’s sunk!” Falling to his knees, Donal began to burrow frantically. Although he groped shoulder-deep in the warm sand, no Skywheel met his fingers.

“It’s no good,” he sighed at last, pulling out his arm. “The sand’s too soft. It’s already buried itself too deep for me to reach.”

He could have cried. If only he’d hunted for the Skywheel straight away, before looking after Brola... He’d done the wrong thing *again*.

“Donkey-brain,” he muttered to himself. “Useless donkey-brain. Now the Skywheel’s sunk – and so are we!”

The lemming emerged from the sand, sneezed and shook itself.

“Too hot,” it said. “Shiny thing down there. Very down. Very broken. One, two, lots of bits.”

“Our ship!” mourned Donal.

The camel blew on his cheek. “Even if you could reach it, a broken ship would be useless. But you do not need it,” he said reprovingly, “when you have Me. Am I not called a Ship of the Desert?”

Donal leaned dejectedly against his woolly shoulder. “We’re lost in the middle of nowhere, Ulan Nuur, in a baking desert with no water, and we don’t know the way home.”

“Lost? I am not lost,” said the camel haughtily. “I know the way back to the green land of the Meerie. It lies away from the sun, in that direction.”

“But that means going past the Gyzols!”

“We shall go round them.”

“That’s too far! We’ll never make it.”

“Nevertheless, I shall walk that way,” said Ulan Nuur. He took deep, thirsty breaths of the desert air, stretching his long neck as he gazed around. “I long to observe my native home more closely. You may walk with me, if you wish.”

“Walk?” squealed Brola. “I can’t walk!” She stood up, and promptly collapsed in a heap on the sand. “See?”

“She’ll have to ride you,” Donal told Ulan Nuur.

“Ride *Me*?” The camel arched his neck and spat indignantly. “No-one has ever ridden Me!”

“There’s a first time for everything.” Helping Brola to her feet, Donal guided her towards the camel. Ulan Nuur bared his yellow teeth and kicked out with his long legs.

“Please,” begged Donal. “It’s the only way! I’d carry her myself if I could. I thought people rode camels all the time in the desert?”

“Not Me,” growled Ulan Nuur.

But with much snorting and grunting, he reluctantly knelt down and allowed Donal to prop Brola up between his humps. She whimpered as he lurched back to his feet.

“*Huurgh!*” complained Ulan Nuur. “She is not comfortable.”

“No, I’m not at all comfortable,” moaned Brola, jerking to and fro as the camel started walking. “I’m going to fall off!”

“Fear not. I will not let you fall,” answered Ulan Nuur, striding out confidently across the desert.

The camel’s widely splayed feet barely sank into the sand – yet Donal floundered up to his ankles with every step. It was hard work, and soon he was struggling to keep up.

He stumbled after the camel, wading through hot sand between darkly glittering dunes. They crossed wide, empty craters, and walked past smoking fissures whose fumes caught at his throat. The heat was so fierce it felt like a wall pushing Donal back. He grew thirsty. And his shoes were full of sand.

The lemming didn’t help. It sat on Donal’s shoulder, out of the sun, and tickled his ear.

“Can’t you walk?” Donal panted, as he trudged after the camel, ploughing across a dune. “I thought lemmings did lots of walking?”

“Dunno.”

“I thought lemmings migrated in enormous herds and all jumped off cliffs together?”

“Dunno,” it said, sounding a little startled.

“Well, have you ever jumped off a cliff?”

The lemming scratched itself and thought about it. “Dunno,” it said at last.

The furious sun beat down mercilessly. The air was full of bitter fumes that dried Donal’s mouth. He took small sips of orange juice from his flask, and had to force himself not to drain the lot.

How could his mouth be so dry, he thought, when the rest of his body was dripping? Sweat glued his t-shirt to his body. He coughed and gasped as he struggled after Ulan Nuur. How far had they walked now? It felt like miles...

“Jumped off a log once,” said the lemming close to his ear. “Fell in a bramble.”

Donal staggered half-way up a sand-dune to survey the land. His heart sank. Wave after wave of black dunes stretched ahead of them, like ripples on an endless midnight sea.

“Full of berries, it were,” said the lemming. “Lots of berries.”

Donal mopped his brow. This journey felt like a nightmare from which he could not wake. He badly wanted a rest, but Ulan Nuur was striding on ahead, and he didn’t have the breath to shout.

“Full of juice, they was,” reminisced the lemming on his shoulder. “Squishy squashy wet and drippy lots and lots of juicy juice.”

Donal couldn’t reply. His mouth felt as dry as the desert. All he could think about was the orange juice sloshing about in his flask. If only he could sit down, and have a proper drink...

The lemming’s voice rustled in his ear. “Like a nice swim now. In lots of nice cold water. Lots and lots and lots and lots and–”

“Halt!” Ulan Nuur commanded. He stopped suddenly in his tracks. Brola slumped against his neck, moaning faintly. Donal staggered up to join them.

“*Water*,” announced Ulan Nuur, his nostrils flaring. “I smell water.”

“Are you sure?” Donal looked round doubtfully. He could see no sign of pool or stream, or even puddle, anywhere.

“Quite certain. A camel is never mistaken about such things. This way, I believe.”

Chapter Ten

Ulan Nuur began to plod relentlessly up a slope. Rivulets of sand trickled from every footprint.

“You won’t find water up a hill!” protested Donal. The camel ignored him and kept going.

Reluctantly, Donal tried to follow, only to slide down in an avalanche of sand and be dumped at the dune’s foot. Two more attempts to climb it had the same result. At last, summoning his remaining strength, he made a huge effort and charged at the slope.

This time he managed to catch up with the camel at the top. He found himself looking down over the rim of a deep, smoking crater.

“That’s not smoke – it’s *steam*!” gasped Donal. “That means water!”

Steam curled from the bottom of the crater, where a small yellow lake lay, its surface broken by occasional bubbles. Yellow-white crystals encrusted its edges like clumps of dirty salt.

Donal and Ulan Nuur slithered down together to the water’s brink. Ulan Nuur stooped, sucked up a noisy mouthful, and immediately spat it all out again, mostly over Donal.

“Yuck,” said Donal, wrinkling his nose. “It smells like a stink-bomb.” He dipped a finger in the water, tasted it cautiously, and pulled a face. “We can’t drink that!”

“Yuck,” echoed the lemming.

“I am not thirsty in any case,” said the camel dismissively.

“But I am,” wailed Brola, sliding off his back in a heap. “I’ve got to be watered! I’m wilting. The Greengrass has to drink, or it’ll die!” Her fur looked parched and withered. “I’ve got to have water – *now*!”

“All right! Hang on.” Hurriedly Donal scooped up a double handful of foul-smelling water, and poured it over her.

To his horror, the Greengrass began to shrivel and curl up wherever the water touched it. Brola squealed like a whistle.

“I’m dying! I’m dying! Get it off me!” she shrieked.

In a panic, Donal fumbled for his flask, and dashed his precious orange juice over her to rinse away the stinking water. The Greengrass stopped curling up, but Brola didn’t stop screeching.

“My poor Greengrass! You nearly poisoned me, you stupid human!”

“I was only trying to help,” said Donal unhappily. Now all his orange juice had gone, drained into the sand. He was a donkey. He should have known the rank yellow water would be poisonous.

Miserably he sucked the last dribble of orange from his flask before filling it again from the yellow lake. Disgusting as the cloudy water was, he might be forced to drink it later on. Squatting at the brink, he paused to peer into the murky shallows.

“There are things swimming in the water!” he said in amazement. “Little wriggly animals, and creatures like fat orange shrimps darting around!” They looked like satsuma segments with legs.

“There can’t be,” said Brola crossly. “Nothing can live in the desert, stupid.”

“But there are loads of them! And tiny jellyfish, the size of my thumbnail!” As Donal bent down to look closer, he made another discovery. “And there are little plants growing by the water’s edge. Sort of mossy. I didn’t see them at first because they’re yellow too. But they’re everywhere!”

The camel’s head reached past him and crunched.

“Not very good,” said Ulan Nuur with his mouth full. “I have certainly had better.” The lemming scampered over to nibble.

“Pooh pooh,” it said. “Worse than camel droppings.”

“Nothing lives in the desert,” repeated Brola emphatically.

“Well, these do!” said Donal. “See for yourself! And there are tiny golden beetles here as well.”

“They don’t count,” announced Brola, refusing to look. “None of them count. They’re not proper animals. I told you, nothing lives in the desert.”

Donal sat back on his heels, puzzled. “What about the Gyzols? They’re animals, aren’t they? They live in the desert.”

“They don’t count either. They’re horrible monsters. Get down,” Brola ordered the camel fretfully. “I want to climb on to your back. Take me away from this awful place! It stinks.”

Ulan Nuur knelt down with a grunt, and let Brola clamber on to him.

Donal turned away from the yellow lake reluctantly. Even if it wasn’t drinkable, the sulphurous pool with its tiny, busy inhabitants seemed more welcoming than the parched sand of the desert.

Yet once they set off walking again, he saw life in the desert too. Now that he had noticed the first signs, he became aware of more and more with every step.

Black, crinkly mosses grew almost invisibly against the ground; and twisted, grey plants like miniature heathers crackled faintly underfoot. Fleas (or something like them) hopped and burrowed in the sand.

Now the wind moaning through the sand hills seemed to carry voices: whistling, rustling voices. Several times, he thought he heard clicking sounds behind him – yet when he turned round, there was nothing there.

But there were tracks. Most of them were smaller than a mouse's, although one set, crossing their path from dune to dune, had paw-prints as big as a cat's. Donal called the others over.

“Hey! Look at this! What do you think made these footprints?”

“Fox,” whispered the lemming, and dived inside Donal's shirt.

“Marmot,” said Ulan Nuur. “Very common in the Gobi Desert.”

“This isn't the Gobi Desert!”

But the camel appeared not to hear. He was sniffing the tracks, and nodding wisely. “Yes, definitely marmot.”

“They're not tracks at all! They're marks made by the wind,” squealed Brola. “Get me out of here!”

“We're doing our best,” said Donal wearily. Despite the heat, a shiver ran through him. Would any of them ever get out of here alive?

Then, as he shivered again, he realised that the temperature was dropping. A cool breeze had brushed against his skin.

“Thank goodness!” Donal stood with arms outstretched to let the cooler air wash over him. It was almost as welcome as a shower.

But the lemming huddled down inside his shirt, while Ulan Nuur shifted with unease, and stamped, and spat.

“What's wrong, Ulan Nuur?”

“I do not care for this wind,” rumbled the camel. “Feel the sand that blows within it? And over there: observe.”

Donal observed. A long brown cloud sat on the horizon like a frown, its top melting into the sky. Even as he watched it seemed to grow a little larger, a little closer.

“What is it? Is it rain?” he asked, in sudden hope.

“Smoke, of course, from the volcanoes,” said Brola decidedly.

“Neither,” said Ulan Nuur. His voice was sombre. “Unless I am mistaken, that is the legendary Karaburan: the Black Sandstorm, scourge of the desert. And it is coming our way.”

Chapter Eleven

“A sandstorm?” croaked Donal, hoarse with thirst and fear. “Are you sure?”

“I am positive. The Karaburan is famous in camel lore. It is a whirling wall of sand, so dark and dense that you can scarcely see beyond your nose – let alone walk through it.”

“Have you been in a Karaburan before?”

“Naturally. Dozens of times,” said the camel loftily. “I know exactly what to do.”

“Oh, good.”

“First you get down on all four knees, like this.” The camel knelt down to demonstrate. “Close your eyes. Then press your ears down flat – like so – and seal your nostrils, to keep out the sand. Just open them a crack to breathe.”

“I can’t close my ears and nostrils!” protested Donal. “And I bet Brola can’t either.”

Brola gave a wail, and toppled sideways off the camel onto the ground, where she lay waving her hands weakly. “My poor Greengrass! It can’t survive a sand-storm. We’re all going to die!”

Ulan Nuur’s nostrils flared. “If you won’t take good advice, we’ll just have to walk through it,” he said huffily. He jerked to his feet and stalked off.

“Come on, Brola!” cajoled Donal. “Try and get up. We’ve got to move. We can’t stop here, with *that* coming.”

As he pointed to the dark cloud, he realised with a shock how much bigger and closer it already looked. And now he could hear it: a hissing drone like a den of angry snakes, growing louder by the minute.

Biting his lip, he glanced around, searching for anywhere that might offer protection. Their best hope was a large sand-dune three or four hundred metres away.

“Stand up, Brola! We’ll go and shelter behind that big dune over there till the storm’s passed by. You can walk that far, surely?”

“I can’t walk at all,” she complained. Ignoring her protests, Donal heaved her up on to her feet and propelled her towards the dune.

They were only half-way there when the sun was blotted out. A shadow rushed across the ground – a shadow made of sand. It whirled round Donal like a cloak of barbed wire, tearing at his clothes, pummelling his body and stinging his face until he couldn’t keep his eyes open.

He tried to wrap his arms around Brola to protect her. But he couldn’t protect himself. He could scarcely breathe, for the air was full of sand. Shrieking, roaring voices filled his ears – as if a whole zoo had suddenly awoken to scream abuse at him.

Donal fell to his knees, with Brola a dead weight in his arms. Inside his shirt, he felt the lemming trying to burrow into his waistband, away from the searing wind.

When he dared to open his eyes for a brief second, he could barely see the camel's dim shape only a metre or two away.

"I've got to move," he thought desperately. "If we stop here, we're done for."

He groped blindly in his rucksack and found his waterproof. The wind tried to whip it away as he clumsily wrapped it around Brola to keep out the worst of the storm. Lurching to his feet, he pulled Brola up, and battled on once more.

But a minute later Brola collapsed again. This time she wouldn't budge. She lay on the ground whimpering.

"Ulan Nuur!" yelled Donal. His voice was lost in the many voices of the storm. Ulan Nuur had disappeared behind a veil of flying sand, and Donal could only guess in which direction he had gone.

If I leave Brola, thought Donal, I might catch him up. He might be able to lead me out of this storm. At least I could shelter beside him! I'm sick of Brola moaning and not doing anything.

Then he felt ashamed of himself. How could he abandon Brola? She would die without his help. He couldn't just leave her here.

So, bending over her, he tried to lift her. With her weight in his arms, though, he couldn't take even one step against the wind. He had to set her down again.

Then he crouched beside her, trying to shield her from the force of the storm, while the sand lashed him as if it wanted to wear him away. It was all he could do to stay upright.

"Harumph," said a voice up against his ear. "Don't sit there. Not a good choice."

"Ulan Nuur! I can't move her!" gasped Donal into the wind.

"Hmph. I suppose you'll both have to get up on my back." The camel's bulk became visible through the fog of sand, as he lowered himself to the ground.

Brola made no protest as she was manhandled on to his back. Donal climbed up behind her, wrapped his arms around her and clung on tight to the camel's shaggy wool.

Ulan Nuur jolted upright and strode off. The wind tried to rip Donal from his seat; but Ulan Nuur plodded steadily through the blinding, screaming storm.

At first he went at a surprisingly good pace. But it didn't last for long. Donal felt him slowing.

The camel's stride faltered. He staggered, and regained his footing: staggered again, and lurched down on to his knees. His flanks were heaving.

"Let us get off!" Donal shouted in his ear. "You can't do it. The storm's too much."

Ulan Nuur's husky reply was almost hurled away by the wind.

"A camel never gives up." With a great effort, he heaved himself back up on his feet.

This time, he had taken only three or four more steps when Donal felt him stumble once again. Donal was thrown forward against his neck.

Then he realised that it wasn't the camel that had fallen – but the ground beneath him that had given way. Ulan Nuur's feet were sliding down a slope that he couldn't even see.

The camel skidded faster, lost his footing altogether and careered out of control. Donal and Brola were tipped off his back, and slithered after him until the three of them came to rest in a sandy heap.

“Must be another crater,” Donal croaked. “Are you all right, Brola?”

“No!” she moaned.

He raised his head. He felt bruised all over; but at least there was a little shelter here, and the storm was reduced to a half-hearted gale. He could pick out the steep, smooth sides of the crater they had fallen into; but there was no water at the bottom of this one, only sand.

Ulan Nuur coughed in an embarrassed way. “I thought we would be better out of the wind,” he explained. “This will do for now.”

The lemming wriggled out of Donal's shirt.

“Ouch,” it said reproachfully. “Lots of ouch.” It sat up, rubbed its head with its paws, and twitched its nose. “Hole,” it said, snuffling in the sand.

“Dig a hole if you like,” said Donal wearily. “But it won't help.”

“No – *Hole!*” said the lemming emphatically. “Lots of hole! Very lots! Very down. Big big big BIG.” It scraped at the black sand, which suddenly began to pour away beneath it as if going down a funnel. A dark crack appeared in the ground, into which the sand was disappearing.

“Hole, innit?” said the lemming. It squirmed through the gap and was gone. Donal scrabbled at the crack excitedly, shovelling sand away with his hands.

“It might be a cave,” he said. “There might be water!” He imagined it; underground pools, cold as night, trickling streams, wet rock...

He licked his dry lips. “Help me, Brola! Look – this rock's all shiny. It doesn't look like rock at all. It's silver – it's *metal*...”

“Can't be,” said Brola weakly. “No metal in the desert.”

“See for yourself!”

Brola crawled feebly over to him, and stared down at the gleaming surface. She ran her hands across it. Then she smiled.

“The Dome,” she murmured, and collapsed across it.

Donal pulled her away with a gasp. For where she had touched the metal surface, it began to split apart with a thin, tearing sound. He was looking down a rapidly widening chasm, while a waterfall of hissing sand poured over its edge.

Soon the gap was a metre across. And inside was pure darkness, as deep and black as space.

Chapter Twelve

Donal didn't hesitate. No matter what was down there in the dark, it couldn't be worse than the sandstorm. Carefully lowering himself down through the gap by his arms, he dangled his legs into the hole. His feet slid down a pile of sand, and then, to his relief, came to rest on a sloping floor.

The hole was not deep. He reached up to catch Brola as she half-slid, half-tumbled after him.

"Ulan Nuur?" cried Donal. "Try and get down too – it's your only chance!"

Coughing and snarling, Ulan Nuur kicked at the opening. "I don't like holes," he growled.

"Ulan Nuur, please! You can't survive the storm up there! Just think of it as a camel house."

"A very low one," grumbled the camel. He stamped nervously round the opening, until its edge gave way and tipped him down the gap.

He landed in an undignified sprawl of legs. "Brragh!" he spat, shaking himself.

"Are you all right?"

"No."

"Yip," said the lemming's voice. "Nice hole. Nice 'n' big." Its voice echoed as if this was a much larger space than Donal had realised.

Picking Brola up, Donal carried her away from the wind and swirling sand, into the echoing dark. As he felt his way forward, his footsteps rang hollowly on a hard, sloping floor.

After a few metres he put Brola gently down. The floor was smooth and cold, like metal. The instant Brola's body touched it, Donal was amazed to see the darkness lighten until they were surrounded by a ghostly, silver-grey glimmer. It reminded him of the Skywheel.

He stared around. They were in a huge, curved dome, bigger than the school hall. The floor wasn't level, but sloped down from the entrance, for the whole dome was tilted. Sand blown in through the crack trickled past Donal's feet to gather in a thick drift at the lowest point.

Slowly Donal walked further in. The noise of the storm faded, leaving only the whisper of sand around his own echoing footsteps. He stopped in the centre and gazed up at the curved roof of the dome. It was covered with markings.

So were the walls. Carved signs and pictures decorated every surface. In many of them, he recognised the Meerie. They were unmistakable – little round bushes with waving hands.

The pictures were interesting; but pictures wouldn't keep them alive. They needed *water*. Perhaps some might have gathered at the lowest point, thought Donal. Turning to scan the floor, he caught his breath.

Further down the dome was a low metal platform, its surface pitted with smooth dents like small, shallow bowls. It was the same shape as the pitted stone that had held the Meeries' Skywheel – but on this platform rested not one, but at least a dozen silver spheres, the size of tennis balls. Many more spaces lay empty.

"The Skywheels!" Donal cried. "We've found the Skywheels!"

"Some have rolled away," said Ulan Nuur, ambling down to the lowest part of the dome. "Here are more of them," he declared, "sitting in the sand."

"Lots of shiny eggs," piped up the lemming. "Funny nest."

"Don't touch them!" warned Donal in swift alarm. "Lemming? Get away from there!"

If the Skywheels were in working order, he didn't want one to suddenly blow up inside this enclosed space. The lemming scampered anxiously away and took refuge on the camel's foot.

Donal knelt beside Brola. "We've found the Skywheels! Brola? Can you hear me?"

Her limp Greengrass was slowly fluffing out, reviving in the cooler air. Donal helped her sit up, and she opened her eyes wide. Then she spread her grey fingers to touch the silver floor.

"The dome," she said faintly. "I've found the dome! And it *knows* me! It's lit up for me. It's programmed to recognise us Meerie. And I discovered it! Me, Brola!"

"It was Ulan Nuur really, and the lemming," said Donal, but Brola didn't hear. She gazed round in delight, wiggling her fingers and rippling her Greengrass in excited waves.

"Oh, it's mine, it's here, my wonderful dome!"

Donal stood up and scratched his head, feeling more donkey-like than usual.

"I don't quite understand," he said. "*Why* is it here? I thought you said the Gyzols had stolen your Dome and the Skywheels? But we're miles from the Gyzol city. We're miles from anywhere."

"They hid them!" said Brola fiercely.

"Why?"

"Because they hate us, of course." Brola hurried over to inspect the decorated walls, and clapped her hands. "Look! Here are the records, just like in the stories!" She touched each picture in turn, fascinated.

Donal felt suddenly exhausted, and very thirsty. Ulan Nuur had lain down, so Donal flopped down next to him and retrieved his flask from his rucksack. He couldn't bring himself to swallow the cloudy water – especially when he remembered the tiny animals he'd seen swimming in it – but he rinsed his mouth, grimacing, before spitting the water out again.

His rucksack still held an apple, slightly nibbled by the lemming, and two sandwiches. Donal ate half the apple, which seemed blissfully sweet and juicy. None the less, he stopped himself from finishing it, and offered half to Ulan Nuur. The lemming eyed the sandwiches expectantly until Donal threw it a corner of one.

Then he leaned back against the camel, letting a wave of relief wash luxuriously over him like a warm bath as he realised exactly what this discovery meant.

“We did it,” he murmured. “We found the Skywheels!”

“Ahem.”

“*You* found them, Ulan Nuur – you and the lemming! If it wasn’t for you, we’d still be out in that storm. But now we can go home.” Brola would surely know how to fly the Skywheels safely back; and then they could use one to get home to Earth. “We can go back to the Zoo.”

“Oh,” said the camel.

“We did it, Ulan Nuur! We actually did it!” He scratched the camel’s matted fur, and thumped its shoulder affectionately. Surely even Toby couldn’t have fulfilled a quest better?

Ulan Nuur munched his half-apple, watching Brola through his long eyelashes.

“Skipping around like a calf,” he grunted.

“She’s made a quick recovery, hasn’t she? She’s happy now,” said Donal. “It does seem odd that the dome is buried here, though, under the desert.”

“It has been here a long time,” said Ulan Nuur thoughtfully. “A very long time indeed.”

“How can you tell?”

“It smells old. It feels old. It is buried deep. West of the Gobi desert,” reminisced the camel, “lie ancient villages two thousand years in age, and more, hidden beneath the sand, until the Karaburan sweeps their shroud away and reveals them, like visions from the past.”

“Yes, but...” Donal sighed. There didn’t seem much point trying to convince the camel, yet again, that they were far from the Gobi desert. “The Dome can’t be *that* old,” he finished.

Just then Brola began to squeal. At first Donal thought she was hurt, but she was squawking with excitement. “It’s here, our whole story, every bit of it, just like they said! Come and look!”

Donal trudged tiredly over to her, and stared at the rows of pictures etched on the walls. They were framed by repeating symbols that he guessed must be some sort of writing.

“It’s like a comic strip,” he said. “What does it say, Brola? Will you read it to me?”

“Read?” Brola looked baffled. “What’s *read*? I don’t understand.”

“See that writing, there?” Donal pointed at the symbols, thinking the translator must have garbled his words. “What does it mean?”

“Those are just patterns,” Brola said impatiently.

“But I’m sure they’re writing–” began Donal, before she interrupted.

“I don’t know *writing*. You’re talking nonsense. Look at the pictures! They show the glorious history of the Meerie!”

Donal studied the pictures. They were strange. The Skywheels were clearly drawn, with Meerie crowded inside.

But there were also pictures of squat, round houses; only the Meerie didn’t have houses... and there were roads, and lumpy vehicles with three wheels, and boats, and bridges... only the Meerie didn’t have any of those either, as far as he knew.

“What are all these?” he asked Brola.

“Oh, just scribbles. But look at us!” She pointed proudly at the Meerie, waving from their Skywheels. “Here we are, travelling past the stars. Here we are, landing.” She moved on to the next picture. “And this is us, planting the Greengrass in our new home!”

“You new home?” asked Donal, confused.

“Here, stupid!”

“*Here?* But then – where had you come from?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Brola. “Somewhere far away. Before I was born. Just some planet.”

“Another planet? I thought *this* was your planet! Which one are you from?”

Brola shrugged dismissively. “I don’t know. I forget.”

“You forget? How could you forget?”

“I told you,” said Brola, “it was before I was born.”

“Well, didn’t your parents tell you? And what about all these houses and roads and things? What happened to them?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” snapped Brola. She marched away from the pictures to contemplate the Skywheels on their slab. “Just wait till Nolga hears about these!” she said smugly. “I found the Skywheels, all on my own!”

“Will they still work?” asked Donal anxiously. “We will be able to get home, won’t we?”

“Of course they’ll work, stupid...” As Brola spun round, her voice trailed away.

The satisfied smile froze on her face. Her eyes widened, and her fur trembled.

“What is it?” Then Donal heard it: a stealthy clicking, like the quiet crack of ice on a treacherous pond. He had heard that clicking sound before, out in the desert.

He whirled round. Long, ink-blue, spiky legs were descending through the entrance: legs that jointed the wrong way. Legs that clicked as they moved.

Legs that looked as if they belonged to giant insects. The Gyzols.

Chapter Thirteen

“Murderous beasts,” hissed Brola.

Donal stood transfixed and staring. A body followed the legs. Unfolding many joints, it straightened up with a series of loud clicks. It was over two metres tall.

It was a Gyzol; and more came behind. All carried curved sticks or heavy, silver clubs.

Ulan Nuur scrambled to his feet with a snort of alarm. Brola shrieked wordlessly and dashed forward. Scooping up handfuls of sand, she hurled them at the angular figures.

The Gyzols took no notice. Half a dozen of them had already descended into the dome, and more were following: tall blue-black shapes with too many arms and huge, dark, multi-faceted eyes. Insect eyes.

The Gyzols turned to face them in a line and began to stalk forward, joints clicking.

Donal took a step back in revulsion. He glanced round for a weapon, but could see nothing to throw apart from his flask, or the Skywheels – and he dared not touch those.

The Gyzols weren't interested in him or Ulan Nuur. Instead, they advanced on Brola. Their eyes changed colour from inky blue to blood-red, and their curved sticks glittered in their upraised hands.

Brola squealed in terror and ran over to the camel. “Ulan Nuur! Help me! You promised to help me!” she shrieked, darting behind him.

“*Urrarrgh!*”

With a dreadful throaty battle-cry, the camel charged. He seemed to be all thrashing legs and wildly wagging humps as he thudded noisily past Donal. Long teeth bared, neck arched, he galloped headlong at the Gyzols.

The curved sticks whistled through the air. Donal ducked as one flew past his head.

But Ulan Nuur fell, stumbling to his knees. A stick had hit him on the foreleg. As it clattered to the ground, Donal saw that it was made of jagged black glass, as sharp as a dagger.

Blood pooling round his knee, Ulan Nuur tried to climb back onto his feet, and failed. His leg buckled beneath him.

“Ulan Nuur! Save me!” bleated Brola, cowering on the floor. The Gyzols gathered round her, lifting their silver clubs threateningly. The camel raised his head and gave out a mournful moan.

Do something, donkey-brain! Donal railed at himself. What did you come for if you're not going to help?

But he didn't know what to do. He only knew that whatever he decided was bound to be wrong.

“Donkey, donkey,” he muttered. He picked up his flask, ready to hurl it at the Gyzols.

Then he hesitated and dropped it again. Instead he ran towards the aliens.

He stopped between them and the cowering Brola. Standing still, he held his hands outstretched to show he wasn't armed. They lowered their clubs a fraction.

“Wait!” he called out. “Stop! We mean peace!”

His clip-board hurtled past his ear. Brola had just thrown it at the Gyzols. It hit one in the chest and bounced off without appearing to cause it any damage.

But the Gyzols raised their clubs again, their eyes shining like dark jewels.

“Kill them!” Brola shrieked. Donal was terrified. He wanted to run; but none the less he stayed put.

“Please stop! Don't hurt us,” he cried. “All we want is the Skywheels and then we'll go. We don't mean you any harm—”

“Yes, we do!” squealed Brola, just behind him.

Stepping forward, one of the Gyzols whirled its silver club and brought it swiftly down towards her. Instinctively, Donal threw himself in its path. The club smacked against his head.

Donal's senses spun. Staggering, he lost his balance and felt himself begin to fall. He was vaguely aware of Brola's voice shouting: “Kill them! Kill them!”

“No,” he said, his voice echoing strangely in his head, “no killing,” and then both Brola and the Gyzols seemed to spin away in a fuzzy dance.

He wanted to go to sleep. Everything was turning grey. Before he hit the ground, he had already closed his eyes.

* * *

Donal awoke to the trickle of cold water running across his face. He must be in bed, under a leaky roof... no, he was in the zoo, with the rain pouring down...

“Wake up,” said the camel's rasping voice. Donal felt sand underneath his hand, and he remembered.

Opening his eyes, he tried to focus them. A pair of huge, blood-red eyes looked back. A thin, sharp claw held a bottle to his mouth, dripping water.

Donal managed to half sit up. Shakily he took the bottle and gulped from it. The water tasted faintly metallic, but no worse than that. Anyway, he didn't care if it was poisonous, he was so thirsty. Water ran down his chin.

After a while the Gyzol took the bottle back and with a series of loud clicks stood up, unfolding itself to its full height. Donal looked around.

A dozen Gyzols stood at a distance, surrounding him like a prickly hedge. The camel lay next to him, his head drooping, with the lemming perched on his leg.

“Ulan Nuur? Are you all right?” croaked Donal.

The camel raised his head. "Never better," he whispered hoarsely.

"Bleeding!" said the lemming. "Poor leg."

Blood was still trickling from the long gash on the camel's foreleg. When the Gyzol with the water-bottle bent down to inspect it, the lemming snapped its tiny teeth.

"Gerroff, you!"

The Gyzol straightened up and rubbed its stick-like arms together. Donal heard a series of snaps and clacks. To his amazement, the translator round his neck said:

"Do you want water, Browngrass?"

Ulan Nuur twisted his head and glared. "No, you over-sized locust," he growled, and spat on the floor.

"You can talk!" exclaimed Donal. "Can you understand us?"

The leader of the Gyzols made a sound like a bonfire crackling. At the same time, the translator said, "Yes – luckily for you. That is why you are still alive; because you said you meant no harm."

"That's right!"

"In that case, why have you brought the Greengrass here? If you are a friend of the Greengrass, you are our enemy."

"Where is Brola? Where is the Greengrass?" said Donal anxiously.

"I'm here," said a faint voice. Brola sat behind him, huddled in his waterproof. "Don't let them touch me!"

"You mustn't hurt her!" Donal implored the Gyzols. "We don't want to fight. We're not armed. We come in peace."

Brola raised her head. "No, we don't!" she squealed. "What are you waiting for? *Get* them! You're meant to be fighting!"

"She doesn't mean it," said Donal helplessly.

"Yes, I do!"

The great insect eyes stared down at them. "You sowed the Greengrass from your ship," clicked the Gyzol.

"What? No, we didn't!" said Donal.

"Yes, I did!" squeaked Brola. "And I hope it grows all over your horrible cities and strangles them."

"It would, if we did nothing about it," said the Gyzol grimly. "That was why we shot you down."

Donal stared round at Brola. "You sowed the Greengrass?" Then he remembered the bubble that had grown from the side of the Skywheel as they flew over the desert, and the dust that had blown from it.

"Greengrass spores," said Brola proudly. "So that the glorious Greengrass can spread over all this horrible useless country."

"*What?*"

“I see you were unaware of her intention,” clicked the Gyzol. “I am Palzack, patrol leader. When your ship was spotted, we were sent to follow your trail and destroy you, if necessary. We will not tolerate the Greengrass.”

The huge eyes changed from red to violet as they rested on Ulan Nuur.

“Browngrass? That is something new. And a baby Browngrass,” it added, studying the lemming. “Do you plan to sow this new Browngrass across the desert? It will not be permitted.”

Donal said hastily, “That’s not grass! That’s hair. It only grows on him. He’s a camel, from another planet, like me.”

“These creatures are certainly not Meerie,” clicked a second Gyzol. “They may be harmless. But this Greengrass is vermin, Palzack. We must destroy it before it spreads.”

It strode jerkily towards them and raised its silver club – which Donal now saw was not a club at all. It was a narrow canister, with a nozzle that pointed at Brola.

A fine rain began to hiss over her. There was a strong smell of rotten eggs. Brola screamed and threw Donal’s raincoat over her head.

“Stop it!” cried Donal. “You’ll kill her!”

“Save me!” squealed Brola.

Donal jumped to his feet. The movement made his head spin, and for an instant he feared he was going to be sick. He staggered and nearly fell. Spiky claws grabbed at him and held him away from Brola.

He twisted out of their grasp. But instead of going to Brola’s aid, he surprised his captors by running in the opposite direction.

He stumbled over the sandy floor of the Dome to the platform where the Skywheels lay. Behind him, he could hear the quick snapping of the Gyzols’ legs as they pursued him.

He reached the platform just before they caught him up, and whirled round, stretching a hand over the nearest sphere.

“Do you know what’ll happen if I touch this?” he croaked.

The following Gyzols froze in mid-step.

Taking a deep breath, Donal tried to steady his voice. “It’ll blow up into a spaceship with all of us inside! And then it’ll carry us back to the Greengrass to face thousands of Meerie. You’re very brave when it comes to killing one Meerie, but can you face a whole tribe?”

His heart was in his mouth. What if the Gyzols called his bluff? He didn’t want to be trapped in a Skywheel with a dozen angry aliens.

But after a long moment, the Gyzols slowly retreated. Gathering in a group, they put their heads together and interlaced their long arms until they looked like a single huge, spiky creature.

Donal could not tell what they were doing. They seemed to be just staring silently into each other's eyes, while the translator remained quiet.

His outstretched arm began to ache.

"We don't mean you any harm," he said desperately. "We just want to leave peacefully. Don't hurt BroLa, and we'll go away. *Please.*"

At last the Gyzols separated. Palzack clicked an answer.

"We have agreed that we cannot allow the Greengrass to spread across our land, killing our plants, defiling our soil and polluting our air."

"Defiling? Polluting?" BroLa shook off the raincoat indignantly. "It's you who do that – you and your horrible volcanoes!"

"The volcanoes are our life and breath," Palzack replied. "We cannot eat without the plants that grow on them, nor build without their lava, nor breathe for long without their fumes."

"You breathe stinky horrible smoke!" jeered BroLa. "You're the vermin, not me!"

With a sudden grunt, Ulan Nuur scrambled to his feet. Limping heavily over to BroLa, he put his head down close to hers.

"I believe I am in charge of this mission," he rumbled, "and I want to hear what these locusts have to say."

"Those nasty pointy-faced murdering—"

"Be quiet!" growled Ulan Nuur. "You have no more manners than a dromedary."

BroLa's fur bristled defiantly, but she fell silent.

Donal's arm, poised over the Skywheels, was now aching badly. He had to make a huge effort not to flinch away as Palzack stalked up and bent over him.

"So these are the famous Skywheels?"

This close, the Gyzol looked even taller. As it loomed over him, smelling of smoke and sulphur, Donal noticed that its skin was covered in tiny, shimmering scales.

And then, to his alarm, it reached right past him. Before he could do anything, it touched a Skywheel with its claw.

Nothing blew up. No space-ship suddenly expanded to fill the dome.

So they don't work after all, thought Donal, with a sickening lurch of his stomach. That means we're stuck here now for ever!

But BroLa said smugly, "Hah! They only work for proper warm-blooded people, not cold-blooded monsters. *You* can't use them."

"How many of these Skywheels are there?" Palzack asked. "There are seventy spaces on the platform. Ten are filled. Where are the others?"

"You should know! You stole them."

"Stole them? We knew nothing about them," answered the alien. "Until today, we had no idea this place existed, hidden underground – and we have walked these deserts since long before the Meerie came."

Stepping back from the Skywheels, Palzack moved over to the walls to survey the pictures there. Donal cautiously lowered his arm and rubbed it.

“These pictures tell the story of your arrival, do they not?”

Brola was silent. It was Donal who answered Palzack. “It looks like it. But I can’t read the writing.”

With surprising delicacy, Palzack brushed sand from the carving with a claw. “Neither can I. But it appears that this Dome was part of the mother ship which brought the Meerie from their own planet.”

“Might be,” said Brola.

“And it crash-landed here, in the desert?”

“Might have,” said Brola sulkily.

Palzack moved along the line of pictures, studying them carefully.

“It seems that only a handful of you survived – but you couldn’t live for long in these surroundings. I would guess you took a single Skywheel, and left to find a place where there was water, and where your Greengrass could start to grow.”

“A handful?” cried Donal. “There are more than a handful of Meerie. There are thousands!” He spread his arms. “And miles and miles of Greengrass. It’s everywhere!”

“Big big lots,” agreed the lemming.

“It is everywhere *now*,” replied the Gyzol. As it turned to face them, its eyes burned slowly scarlet. “The Greengrass has spread over time, as have the Meerie. Perhaps they tried to find the Dome again; but could not, because it had been buried by the sand. And here it has lain unseen and undiscovered, ever since.”

“Like the lost villages of the Gobi,” murmured Ulan Nuur.

Donal felt a shiver crawl down his spine.

“Ever since when?” he whispered. “Brola – when did all this happen?”

She shrugged. “How should I know?”

“Our records go back far into the past,” said Palzack, “yet when we started to keep them, the Meerie were already killing the desert with their Greengrass, and encroaching on our lands.”

“How long ago?”

The Gyzol looked at him. Its expression was unreadable. “Four thousand years,” it said.

Chapter Fourteen

“Four thou-” Donal’s mouth fell open. “Do you mean the Skywheels have been lost for *four thousand years*?”

“What’s four thousand?” whispered the lemming.

“Very lots indeed,” the camel whispered back.

“I don’t know,” said Brola carelessly. “Many generations. You can’t expect me to count them.”

“Years are but a passing breath in the eternal desert wind,” announced Ulan Nuur. “However, four thousand of them is a long time to have mislaid something of this size. I’m surprised the Meerie still remembered that the Dome existed.”

Donal walked over to gaze at the pictures, trying to work things out.

“They remembered the Dome,” he said, “because they made themselves little domes of earth. And they remembered the Skywheels, because they still had one – but they’ve forgotten everything else!”

“We Camels Never Forget.”

“Neither do we Meerie!” insisted Brola shrilly.

“Then why can’t you read what’s written on the walls?” demanded Donal.

“Because the Meerie have forgotten how to read! That’s why! And what about the Skywheels?”

“They’re very clever things!” said Brola indignantly.

“They’re brilliant,” said Donal, “but the Meerie can’t make them any more, can they? You’ve forgotten how. And why don’t you know what houses are? Because you’ve forgotten how to build them! I bet you couldn’t even make a wheelbarrow!”

“We don’t need those silly things,” retorted Brola, waving a dismissive hand at the pictures on the walls. “All we need are the Skywheels. And we’ve got those back now!”

“No, you haven’t. They are under our control,” said Palzack sternly. He motioned to the other Gyzols, who immediately formed a prickly ring round the platform and its silver spheres.

Donal winced. He’d made the wrong choice yet again. He should have stayed next to the Skywheels. Now he couldn’t reach them.

“Couldn’t you let us have just one?” he pleaded. “Just one, to get home in – if they still work.”

“If they work, the Meerie will use them to sow their Greengrass,” crackled a Gyzol angrily.

“I won’t let them,” said Donal.

“How can you stop them?” rasped Palzack. “Have you such power over the Meerie? Will they do as you say?”

Donal paused. Lie, donkey-brain! he told himself fiercely. Just lie, say anything, to get us out of here!

But somehow he couldn't, with those huge, iridescent eyes glittering at him. As he hesitated, Brola threw aside the raincoat, and scuttled over to stand by his side.

"I'll promise to leave you alone!" she cried. "Just give me a Skywheel, and I'll do whatever you want!"

Palzack stooped to look into her black button eyes for a long moment. Brola blinked back at him, her mouth open and her hands dangling limply.

"Your promise is empty," said Palzack at last. "In your mind I see nothing but the waving of the Greengrass."

"There is nothing else there," rumbled Ulan Nuur.

Palzack turned and fixed his gaze upon the camel. The Gyzol's great red eyes stared long into the camel's liquid brown ones. Ulan Nuur gazed steadily back.

"And your head is full of dreams," said Palzack. Ulan Nuur turned his head aside, and coughed and spat in an embarrassed way.

Donal felt sudden panic grip him. Was Palzack reading their minds? Because if he read Donal's mind he'd see instantly what a hopeless donkey-brain he was, with no more chance of controlling the Meerie than of swimming through the sand...

It was too late. The alien turned to face him, and the huge many-faceted eyes were staring down at his. Donal gazed back, fascinated despite himself by the shifting patterns that glinted across the surface of Palzack's eyes like reflections on a lake.

As he watched the patterns change and merge, a picture gradually formed in his mind: a tall thin tower of black stone, sharp as a needle, tunnelled like an anthill. Along its dark, warm passages strode many Gyzols, and the tunnels echoed with their constant clicking. Through doors on either side he saw narrow chambers, their black walls polished, where more Gyzols huddled in spiky groups, or sat in circles, legs folded neatly up beneath them, chattering like classrooms of children...

The picture faded. Donal blinked. Palzack's eyes had turned deep blue.

The alien paused for a moment, as if thinking. "Very well. You may take one Skywheel, and go free. But be wary of the Meerie. Go straight home to your own planet, if you can."

"Why?" Donal rubbed his eyes, feeling dizzy.

"You are a resourceful being," continued the Gyzol. "You know more than you realise. You will find your way. And I believe we can trust you. Will you swear friendship with us?"

Palzack held out a long, thin arm to Donal.

Donal stared at the scaly claw, and swallowed. It was like being asked to shake hands with a giant cockroach. As he slowly reached out his own hand, he saw the Gyzol flinch.

“It probably thinks I’m revolting,” realised Donal in a flash. “All soft and squishy instead of hard and crackly…”

Their hands met. The alien hand felt rough and cool, like a dry branch. It gripped Donal’s for a brief moment.

“Farewell, friend,” clicked Palzack. “You may leave. Farewell, Browngrass, and baby Browngrass.” The lemming ducked away from the alien’s gaze, and began to burrow in a heap of sand.

Donal gathered up his things and put them in the rucksack. “Can we really go?”

“Yes. You and the Browngrass may have one ship – on condition that you do not return to the Meerie.”

“But hang on,” said Donal, light dawning, “what about Brola? She can come too, can’t she?”

“No,” said Palzack firmly. “The Greengrass stays with us. She will be kept safely confined.”

“In prison?”

“She must not be allowed to spread her spores.”

Brola wailed, and hurled herself on Ulan Nuur, clinging to his shaggy fur.

“Desist,” said Ulan Nuur. “I am very attached to my coat, and it is very attached to me.”

“Ulan Nuur! You promised to help me!” cried Brola.

“Indeed I did,” said Ulan Nuur mournfully. “Very well. I shall stay with you.”

Donal was horrified. “What – stay here, in prison? You can’t, Ulan Nuur!”

“It will be nothing new,” rumbled the camel.

“But why can’t we all go home?” cried Donal. “You don’t have to stay, Ulan Nuur!”

“I have pledged to protect Brola,” said Ulan Nuur, rather hoarsely.

Donal swallowed. What was he to do? Despite his desperate longing to see Earth and his own home again, he couldn’t leave Ulan Nuur behind. To abandon him now would be betrayal. He couldn’t bear the thought of the camel locked up in prison.

“Well, if you’re not leaving, then I’m not either,” he announced.

“You must. You will be wanted in your own home. Your parents will miss you. Nobody will miss *me*.”

Donal ran over to the camel and buried his face in the smelly, matted fur. “I’ll miss you, Ulan Nuur!” he whispered. “I’ll miss you dreadfully!”

“You can’t have him,” cried Brola shrilly from the other side of the camel. “He’s mine!” She tugged at the camel’s leg.

“It is time for you to leave,” clicked Palzack. He walked towards the platform where the Skywheels rested.

The camel turned his head away from Donal and cleared his throat. “You had better go. Look after the lemming – wherever it is.”

The lemming spoke from the heap of sand by their feet. “Dug a little hole,” it said. “Found one more down here. Poor little egg, all on its—”

WHOOMPH. With a shattering, splintering crash, Donal was thrown into darkness.

Chapter Fifteen

“I’m dead,” he thought, until he realised that the darkness was full of the smell of old boots, and the sound of Brola whimpering.

“Oops,” said the lemming.

“Did you do that on purpose?” Donal could hardly speak. He was breathless with elation and terror.

“Dunno.”

“Where are we? Are we still underground?”

“S’alright, underground,” said the lemming in the dark. “No owls.”

“I do not enjoy this mode of transport,” said the hollow voice of Ulan Nuur.

“But where are we?” whispered Donal. “Are we buried? Where are the Gyzols?” He waited, his heart pounding, for the darkness to lighten.

Gradually the walls cleared, to show sand beating soundlessly against the skin of the Skywheel. They were in the midst of the sandstorm.

Donal looked down through swirling sand, and saw the shattered remains of the Dome below. The Skywheel had broken right through it.

“Palzack!” he gasped. Then he saw angular figures scrambling out of the wreckage, pulling each other free.

“Serves them right,” said Brola. “Nasty horrible monsters.”

“No, they’re not,” said Donal. The Gyzols turned, pointing bony fingers up at the Skywheel: and then they were lost in a blizzard of sand.

“I hope they’re all right! They weren’t nasty at all. They were interesting.” Donal remembered the shifting patterns of Palzack’s great eyes. “I’d like to have visited their city,” he added wistfully.

“For me, it is sufficient to have walked the desert,” said Ulan Nuur. He gazed mournfully through the floor at the shrinking ground. “And to have seen the Karaburan, and the majestic Altai mountains,” he murmured.

The Skywheel climbed rapidly until the sandstorm was no more than a dull, brown cloud spread harmlessly beneath them. Beyond it lay the bleak landscape of black dunes and smoking craters.

“The peerless Gobi,” breathed Ulan Nuur, “the shining centre of the World.”

“But it’s not—” said Donal automatically. Then he sighed. “Oh, never mind.”

He lay down beside Ulan Nuur to watch the dunes diminish as the Skywheel ascended. The desert fell away beneath them, becoming no more than a pattern in a sand-box, or a perfectly drawn map.

“I know,” said Ulan Nuur quietly, at last. “But it matters not. Whatever you call them, all deserts are one, and all are Home. It was magnificent, was it not?”

“Yes,” said Donal, to his own surprise. “It was quite something.”

“Horrible place,” muttered Brola.

“I wish you would enlarge your vocabulary,” sighed Ulan Nuur. “By *horrible*, do you mean perilous, outlandish, intimidating, or incinerating?”

“Big hot,” offered the lemming.

“Horrible,” said Brola firmly. “The sooner all that desert is seeded, the better. First chance we get, we’ll take this Skywheel back to the Dome and fetch all the other Skywheels. Then we’ll show those horrible Gyzols!”

“Seeded? But, but you promised not to!” said Donal, aghast.

“You just try and stop me,” said Brola belligerently. She stood next to the ship’s core, covering the control panel with her flat hands.

Donal thought of trying to wrestle the controls away. But last time he’d done that, they’d crash-landed...

“Don’t worry,” murmured Ulan Nuur in his ear. “After that sandstorm, the Skywheels will be better buried than ever. The Meerie will never find the Dome again. Why, I would be hard put to find it myself, experienced as I am in the ways of the desert.”

“Oh, we’ll find the Dome again,” said Brola confidently. “The Skywheel will remember where it’s been. It’s programmed to remember. We can dig all the other Skywheels out. Then we’ll seed this whole planet with Greengrass. Sow it all over those horrible Gyzol towers. With seventy ships, we can do anything!”

Donal stared at her in horror, as an emerald horizon crept gradually towards them, smothering the world below in its brilliant green embrace.

Chapter Sixteen

The Skywheel burst like a bubble over a crowd of swaying, cheering Meerie, and dropped its passengers in their midst. Hoisted high on the Meerie's shoulders, Brola appeared to be riding the crest of a giant green wave.

"See the Skywheel!" she shouted proudly. "And there are more! I found them all! I found the Dome! Me, Brola!"

"–didn't the Gyzols attack you?"

"–didn't they try to poison you?"

"They tried," retorted Brola, "but they couldn't stop me!"

"Shameful! Bomb them with Greengrass! Horrible Gyzols! Dirty thieves!" cried the Meerie all together in rustling confusion, their Greengrass puffing up like the fur on a troop of angry cats.

"Hang on!" yelled Donal over the din. "Listen! The Gyzols aren't thieves!"

Scores of black eyes blinked at him.

"–oh yes, terrible thieves, they stole the Skywheels and the Dome–"

"No, they didn't," cried Donal. "They were never stolen! They were buried in a sandstorm. And it wasn't Brola who found them – it was Ulan Nuur!"

"He can't have them!" squealed Brola.

"Certainly not," said Ulan Nuur with dignity. "A dreadful mode of travel. I much prefer to walk."

But Donal was furious. "Ulan Nuur saved your life back there in the desert!" he shouted. "Without him, you'd be a bundle of bones on the sand! How dare you be so mean and – and ungrateful?"

He might have well have saved his breath for all the attention the Meerie paid him.

"Brola's our heroine!" they cried. "Hurrah for Brola the brave!"

"Brave? She spent half the time hiding under my raincoat!"

Brola glared at him furiously, but the other Meerie were too busy chanting to hear.

"Kill the Gyzol cowards! Sow the Greengrass! Cover their land!"

Ulan Nuur cleared his throat loudly. The Meerie hushed as he stepped forward to address them.

"I think not," he said. "Brola promised to leave them alone. And a promise is sacred. Even a dromedary knows that."

"Oh, don't be stupid! That promise didn't mean anything," sniffed Brola.

"They're *our* Skywheels," added Nolga. "Why shouldn't we have them back?"

"We want them back!" "We want them back!" the Meerie chorused.

Donal and the camel looked at each other helplessly.

"They're like toddlers," said Donal in despair.

“What they want, they will have,” shrugged the camel. “They only care about themselves.”

“*Sow the Greengrass! Cover the land!*”

“You’ve got plenty of Greengrass!” protested Donal. “You don’t need any more!”

Brola threw her arms out wide. “We want to turn the whole planet green!” she declared.

Donal was appalled. He thought of Palzack and the Gyzols, and their black desert full of hidden life. He’d promised to save it from the Meerie – but they simply wouldn’t listen.

Then he had an inspiration. Climbing up on to the camel’s back, he shouted over the chants of the Meerie.

“Listen! Listen, all of you! I’ve got a much better idea. If you get the Skywheels back, you could go anywhere. Anywhere in the Galaxy! Why stay on this planet full of volcanoes and deserts? Why don’t you find a nice new planet, with no Gyzols to worry about, and plant your Greengrass there instead? You’ve done it before.”

The Meerie hummed and rustled doubtfully. Brola tilted her head and surveyed the sky.

Then she smiled. “All right!” she said. “Once we have our Skywheels, we don’t have to stay on this horrible dusty planet any more. We can find a better one.”

“Good idea,” said Donal, almost sagging with relief.

“I always have good ideas,” said Brola. “And I know just which planet to try.”

“That’s great!”

“*Yours*. It will do very nicely. If it’s good for you, it must be good for us. The right sort of air, nice and warm, and lots of space to grow our Greengrass... Beautiful, glorious Greengrass! We’ll plant it all over your Earth.”

Donal was horrified. “What? But you can’t! We’ve got our own grass already, and animals that live on it! What if they can’t eat Greengrass?”

“They won’t be allowed to,” Brola said. “It’s ours.”

“But,” he stuttered, “but—”

“First we’ll go and fetch the other Skywheels,” announced Brola, “and then we’ll all go to Earth.”

“You’ll never find Earth!” protested Donal. “I won’t help you!”

“Oh, we’ll just set the program to hunt sector nine, and find the nearest planetary system. That’s how the Skywheel found your Earth the first time. When we get there, we can seed the whole Earth with Greengrass. It won’t take long!”

The other Meerie chimed in. “We’ll leave this horrible planet—”

“—take our lovely Greengrass somewhere else—”

“—find a new home for the Meerie—”

“—Earth!” The Meerie chanted together. “*We’re going to Earth! We’re going to Earth!*”

“No!” Donal clasped his hands over his head. “What have I done?” he groaned. He imagined his garden – the park – the fields – the whole countryside – covered in Greengrass, smothering the flowers, stifling crops, strangling trees. It was a nightmare.

“*Earth! Earth! We’re going to Earth!*”

Donal slid wearily off the camel’s back. “I’ve done it again, Ulan Nuur,” he said. Despair made him want to sink into the ground. “The Earth’s going to be covered in Greengrass, and it’s all my fault.”

“I’d say it was all the Meerie’s fault.”

Donal shook his head. “I’m just a donkey.”

Ulan Nuur gave him a long, thoughtful look. Then he cleared his throat. It sounded like someone spilling a bucketful of wet pebbles. All the Meerie stopped chanting and looked up. In a loud, sonorous voice, the camel proclaimed:

“I too am looking forward to returning to my native Earth. How I long to tread once again the endless sands of the Gobi desert! To cross the waterless dunes of the Mongolian wastes—”

“Deserts?” rustled the Meerie. “Dunes?”

“Dunes as high as mountains,” sighed Ulan Nuur, “hot as a furnace in summer, yet so cold in winter that nothing can survive. Except us camels of course. Your little black desert here made me feel quite at home.”

“–Little?” “–at home?” “–you live in the *desert*?” The Meerie looked aghast.

“You didn’t tell us that! Is Earth a desert?” Nolga demanded of Donal.

Donal hesitated. He was not good at lying, so he picked at the truth.

“Not just desert,” he said. “There are lots of volcanoes, too. Bigger than the ones here, of course – some are quite awesome. One destroyed a whole island last year.”

“But not where *you* live? Surely things grow where you live?”

Donal thought carefully. “Not much really,” he said. “Where I live, it’s all covered with a rock that humans make, called concrete. And hard black stuff called tarmac.”

“Humans like concrete,” grunted Ulan Nuur. “They put it everywhere. Strange animals.”

“And there are lots of fumes,” Donal added. “Loads of air pollution. Humans are very good at *that*.”

“I thought you stayed too healthy in the desert,” complained Brola. “And Ulan Nuur kept saying how much he liked it there!”

“–Maybe Earth won’t be so suitable–”

“–most unhealthy–”

“–there must be some other planets around–”

“–I don’t like the sound of that Earth at all,” concluded Nolga. The Meerie began to drift away in a murmuring, grumbling green wave. Only Brola remained, her fur standing indignantly on end.

“It’s most inconvenient,” she said petulantly. “You should have told me about Earth before.”

“I’m sure you’ll find somewhere else suitable for the Greengrass,” said Donal, trying not to look relieved.

“Speaking of which,” remarked Ulan Nuur, “I begin to feel in need of some Hay. Although I can march for a month without food, a little Something now would not be unwelcome.”

“Me too. Sausage and chips,” said Donal longingly. “Giant pepperoni pizza.” It felt like days since he’d eaten his last sandwich. “Brola? Can you give us a lift back to Earth? We’ve done what you asked. We found the Skywheels. Now we’d like to go home.”

Brola stamped her foot.

“You haven’t helped at all! You’ve spoilt everything! I’m supposed to be the heroine, and now they’ve all stopped cheering me!”

“But we found the Skywheels for you—”

“I found them,” snapped Brola. “And you can’t borrow them! If we can’t live on your horrid planet, I’m not taking you back. So there!”

And tossing her head angrily, she fluffed out her fur, and waddled away.

Chapter Seventeen

For Donal, it was the last straw. His hopes had been dashed yet again. He turned angrily on Ulan Nuur. “Now look what’s happened! If you hadn’t put them off the idea, we might be on our way home!”

Ulan Nuur raised a haughty eyebrow. “With a ship full of Meerie, all ready to colonise Earth?” he retorted.

“We could have sorted that out once we got there! At least we wouldn’t be stranded here!” Donal kicked furiously at the lush Greengrass, sick of seeing its bright, wrong shade of green everywhere he looked. “I’m starving,” he grumbled. “I wish I’d never come.”

“You needn’t have,” Ulan Nuur reminded him. “It was only Me they wanted.”

“I didn’t have any choice, did I!”

“But if you had not come, you would not have met Me.”

“Oh, big deal!” said Donal. “What do you want, Camel of the Year Award? Stink of the year more like!”

Ulan Nuur half-closed his eyes and looked down his long nose at Donal.

“Do you know,” he said, “the Meerie remind me very strongly of you humans. Do this, do that, and no Hay at the end of it.”

“Well, thanks very much!” Donal stamped away in a huff.

But he didn’t go far. There was nowhere to go. He sat stiffly by the stream with his back to Ulan Nuur, and chewed on a stalk of Greengrass. It tasted as bitter as old tea-leaves, and Donal felt very depressed.

Nearby, the lemming emerged from the water with barely a ripple. It shook itself dry, and began to graze noisily on the Greengrass.

“Glad to see somebody’s happy here,” said Donal morosely.

“S’alright. Nice streams. No foxes,” pointed out the lemming.

“No.” Donal pulled a face. “Nothing but Meerie.”

“Don’t you like it?” asked the lemming in wonder.

“Not any more. I want to go home.”

“To the zoo?” The lemming sounded faintly horrified.

“Not much chance of that,” sighed Donal. He glanced across at the precious Skywheel on its stone slab, surrounded by a huddle of admiring Meerie.

Even supposing I barged past them and managed to touch the Sphere, he thought, I’d find a dozen Meerie inside it with me. Hopeless.

Noticing Donal watching them, the Meerie ruffled their fur and turned their backs pointedly.

“I wouldn’t treat people like that,” said Donal reproachfully. “Not people who’ve helped me. They’re just as mean as Toby. Meaner!” But even as he spoke, he remembered, with an uncomfortable jolt, how he had just turned his back on Ulan Nuur in exactly the same way.

His own words echoed in his head. *Stink of the year*...It was a horrible thing to say. Truly horrible, because it was meant to hurt. It was the sort of thing Toby would shout, jeeringly, in the playground.

But Donal had said it to the best friend he had on this world. The thought was as bitter as the Greengrass.

He squatted down at the stream’s edge, and splashed water over his face.

“Swim?” said the lemming hopefully.

“No, thanks.”

The lemming glanced back at Ulan Nuur. “Still bleeding,” it said. “Poor leg.”

“His leg!” cried Donal, horrified. “I forgot all about it! It must be really painful.”

Cupping clean water in his hands, he hurried back to where the camel stood surveying the cloudless pink sky. The lemming scampered after him.

“Sorry, Ulan Nuur,” muttered Donal. “I forgot about your leg.” He trickled water over the wound. The blood on it was thick and clotted, so Donal took his flask back to the stream to fetch more water.

Then, since he had no handkerchief, he used a corner of his T-shirt to dab gently at the camel's shin while the lemming watched. The gash was long and deep.

"Hhrmp," said Ulan Nuur, twitching as if to kick his hand away. But Donal persisted, until the wound looked reasonably clean.

He straightened up, and hesitantly stroked the dishevelled fur, without looking the camel in the eye.

"I *am* glad I met you, Ulan Nuur, even if we never make it home. And you probably are Camel of the Year. It's really the Meerie that I'm angry with – not you. I liked the Gyzols better, although they looked so insecty. The Meerie look cute and cuddly, but they're not really, not on the inside."

"Bossy," agreed the lemming.

"Selfish brats," rumbled Ulan Nuur. "They think they have nothing to learn."

"They must have been so clever once," said Donal, "to have made spaceships that still worked after four thousand years. Yet they've forgotten it all."

"They cannot be bothered to think for themselves any more," growled Ulan Nuur.

"I'm not really as bad as them, am I? I know I'm not very clever," said Donal dolefully.

"The Gyzol said you were a resourceful being," said Ulan Nuur, "and I have no doubt that it was right."

"I like you lots," said the lemming, nuzzling his foot. "Nice warm shirt. Lovely sandwiches."

"Thank you," said Donal sadly. "They call me donkey-brain at school."

"There is nothing wrong with donkeys," said Ulan Nuur. "They are sensible beasts, determined and brave. Anyway, you should hear what the dromedaries call Me."

"What?"

"Old-scrap-of-carpet-from-a-poor-man's-tent-that-needs-beating. They're jealous, of course."

"What do you do, when they call you that?" asked Donal, enthralled.

"I kick them," said Ulan Nuur, "and my kick is much stronger than theirs. You may scratch my second hump, just in the middle, if you please."

Donal scratched while Ulan Nuur rumbled in his throat with a camel-sized purr. Burying his face in the camel's wool, Donal breathed in its deep, warm smell. It was very comforting.

The lemming had scurried off. They leant against each other, Donal scratching and the camel purring, until Donal felt a sleepy contentment creep over him.

"The Meerie are getting excited about something," he said dreamily. There was a commotion amidst the green field of Meerie, who swayed and parted as an object ran past their feet. Something large and crumpled, with two arms...

"My raincoat!" exclaimed Donal, straightening up. The raincoat was shuffling and wriggling across the ground, while Brola jumped alongside it, shouting:

“How *dare* you! Stop making fun of me! Come out from under there!”

She snatched at the coat, but it twirled away, and flapped across the grass past Donal and Ulan Nuur. Despite Donal’s bewilderment, he couldn’t help laughing.

“I did *not* hide under the coat!” squealed Brola, waddling furiously after it.

The crowd of Meerie watched in puzzlement. Then, like grass rippling in a sudden wind, they shifted to follow Brola and the dancing coat, and poured in a green flood past Donal. The Skywheel, left exposed by the ebbing tide of Meerie, sat high and dry on its stone slab.

Ulan Nuur stood up and gave his leg an experimental shake. “Come along,” he said, as he began to stroll towards the slab. “Time to go. Don’t forget your bag.”

“But hang on,” said Donal, hurrying alongside him. His hand was still resting on the camel’s back as Ulan Nuur reached the Skywheel and bent his nose down to it.

“Hang on, what about the—”

WHOOMPH

Chapter Eighteen

“—lemming?” finished Donal, breathless in the dark.

“Who do you think was under your coat?”

“But we can’t leave the lemming behind!”

“I think it knew what it was doing,” said Ulan Nuur.

“You mean it sacrificed itself so that we could get away?” The Skywheel’s walls cleared to reveal a horde of stunned and angry Meerie down below, shaking their arms like a forest of stubby grey branches.

Donal’s raincoat lay limp on the Greengrass. He couldn’t see the lemming anywhere.

And then they were sailing away until the Meerie became just a distant shrubbery in the middle of a green meadow. Soon they could not be seen at all.

“I don’t know about sacrifice,” said Ulan Nuur. “I think it may be quite happy to stay. Now, you had better program this ship to go back to Earth.”

“Let me think,” said Donal. He put his hands to his head. Palzack and Ulan Nuur thought he was resourceful, so he had better be resourceful... He tried to remember what Brola had told him. “Set it for Out, not Level, and then sector nine... first planetary system,” he muttered.

He went to the control panel, counted the segments on it carefully, took a breath, and touched the screen.

“Artificial gravity on,” rustled the ship.

“Let’s hope this works. If we can just get within sight of Earth, I can guide us home. I know my way around the globe all right. And I know where the Zoo is on the map – we had to plan the route to it at school. It’s finding Earth that’s the tricky bit...”

“We are bound to find somewhere,” said Ulan Nuur composedly.

“I feel a bit sick,” said Donal, watching a thousand stars crawl past. “Ulan Nuur? Can you tell me some more about the Gobi Desert, to take my mind off it?”

The camel closed his eyes and cleared his throat. As he began to speak, Donal pulled his clipboard from the rucksack, found a fresh sheet of paper, and started to draw.

The Gobi Desert was riddled with burrows, said Ulan Nuur; marmots popped in and out of them as quick as blinking. Elsewhere the massive bones of long-dead animals lay scattered in the sand, wind-scoured: and long-abandoned nests still full of eggs, so old, said Ulan Nuur, that if you could believe it, they had turned to stone.

He told Donal of the camel herders living in their round, felt tents, of the laughing, red-cheeked children who learnt to ride the camels before they could walk. He told of treks a thousand miles long, beneath icy clear skies as blue and hard as diamonds.

And all the while he told his tales, Donal drew, slowly, carefully. At the pencil’s point the camel grew: his shaggy hair, like an old coat about to slip off, his callused knees, his proudly curved nose, his deep and thoughtful eyes.

“Hyperspace jump,” breathed the ship’s controls. *“Ten... Nine... eight...”*

“It’s finished,” said Donal, holding up the portrait, as they were plunged into darkness once again. He held his breath to see what would appear on the other side of hyperspace.

“Behind you,” said the camel.

Donal spun round and beheld a globe of swirling white and blue, growing larger by the minute.

“Earth!”

“I’ll take your word for it,” said Ulan Nuur.

“It is! There’s India, and those must be the Himalayas, and above that – Ulan Nuur! That must be Mongolia, and the Gobi Desert! You can see your home from here!”

The camel put his face down to the floor, gazing long and hard. At last he let out a quiet sigh.

Donal opened his rucksack and began to stow away his clipboard and pencil, along with the flask. Trapped in his lunch-box was a scrap of soft, grey fur.

“Oh, dear,” he said remorsefully. “Poor lemming, left all on its own.”

* * *

The lemming sat up by the stream and cleaned her whiskers. She felt very pleased with herself. Not only was her stomach full of Greengrass, but her burrow in the riverbank was nearly finished.

Her den, lined with camel hair, was warm and snug. This would be a good place to bring up her young family; no foxes, no stoats, no hawks or owls... The Meerie were too toothless and clumsy to pose any threat. And there was food galore.

She closed her eyes contentedly and basked in the orange sunset, dreaming of a green land swarming with happy lemmings, while her unborn babies kicked impatiently inside her.

Chapter Nineteen

Donal sat by his rucksack on the grass...

...Tired, dull, dusty grass, scattered with lollipop sticks and crisp packets. Next to the wire fence nearby was a small, newly-drilled hole in the ground, about the size of a tennis ball. A pair of long-lashed eyes watched through the fence as the last gleam of the Skywheel sank out of sight.

The camel looked up and regarded Donal solemnly.

“Better put that translator away,” he said.

Donal felt for the silver box around his neck. He squeezed it to switch it off, slipped it over his head and buried it in his rucksack. “That better?”

“Hrrungh.”

“What?”

“Rarunngh!” insisted the camel, stretching out his long neck.

Donal followed his gaze. Mrs Hendry was bearing down on him, along with Toby’s Mum and her group.

“Oh, no!” he said. “Now I’m for it!” As he scrambled guiltily to his feet, he checked his watch and frowned.

How could only twenty minutes have passed since he had last been here?

“Hyperspace,” he muttered. “Speed of light, or something.”

“What’s that?” asked Mrs Hendry. “Donal, did you get lost?” She didn’t sound as angry as usual, and Donal took heart.

“I got left behind in the monkey house,” he said, “and I didn’t know where to find the others. Sorry, Mrs Hendry! I didn’t mean to be so slow.”

“But where have you *been*?” squealed Toby’s Mum. She looked almost as pink as her coat.

“I’ve been with this camel the whole time,” said Donal.

“But you can’t have been, you silly boy, we’ve been looking all over—”

Mrs Hendry silenced Toby’s Mum with a glance.

“It was very sensible of you to stay put, Donal,” she said. “I thought you couldn’t be too far away. And what have you been doing here?”

Donal held out his clip-board. She looked at it, and gasped.

“Why, Donal – what a beautiful drawing! So careful! It’s this camel to the life!” She held up the picture for the other children to see. “I had no idea you could draw like that, Donal.”

“I just need a bit of time,” he said.

“Well, you certainly haven’t been wasting your time here,” said Mrs Hendry, and she smiled at him.

“I know all about camels,” Toby put in. “They live in the Sahara Desert and they can go for months without a drink.”

“Only about a week,” corrected Donal. “And this camel comes from the Gobi Desert in Mongolia. That’s why it’s got such thick fur, because it’s cold there. It’s a Bactrian camel, not a dromedary. Dromedaries only have one hump.”

“Quite right, Donal,” said Mrs Hendry, reading the information board. “I’m glad you’ve taken the trouble to find out instead of assuming you know all about it.”

The camel looked down its nose at Toby, and spat rather close to his feet.

“You’re wrong about one thing, though, Donal,” continued Mrs Hendry. “This camel doesn’t come from the Gobi Desert. It’s spent all its life in the zoo. See here? It says, ‘Humphrey, our Bactrian camel, was born and raised in captivity.’ He’s never seen the desert.”

She handed Donal’s picture back. “Good work, Donal. Now I’d like you to join Nicky’s Mum and go round with her group for the rest of the day.”

Nicky’s Mum was plump and slow and friendly. Nicky’s group grinned at him cheerfully. “All right,” said Donal.

Then he remembered something. “Oh, Mrs Hendry?” he added anxiously. “I noticed that this camel’s injured – it’s got a bad cut on its leg. Can we tell somebody so that they’ll look after it?”

“Well spotted, Donal!” she said, peering at Ulan Nuur’s leg. “We’ll go and find a keeper and let him know. Come along, now, everyone! Back into your groups.” She began to herd them away.

Donal, stooping to fasten his rucksack, glanced up at the camel.

“Be seeing you, Ulan Nuur,” he murmured. “I’ll be back.” He carefully noted the spot where the Skywheel had sunk into the ground. If it hadn’t gone too far down, perhaps he could still reach it...

He wouldn't mind doing a bit of exploring with Ulan Nuur. "We could start with the Gobi," he said softly. The camel blinked at him slowly, and rumbled deep in his throat.

"What a scruffy old specimen!" said Toby scornfully. "Only a donkey-brain would draw a portrait of that horrible old thing."

Donal looked at him. Toby's words should have hurt him, but they didn't. They didn't matter. Toby hadn't just piloted a spaceship half way across the galaxy. Toby hadn't met a single alien. Toby didn't have a translator in his rucksack. And Toby didn't have a camel he could call a friend.

Come to think of it, Toby didn't have many real friends at all, because nobody trusted him. Donal felt a little sorry for Toby. But only a little.

Toby was looking put out. "Didn't you hear me?" he said. "That camel looks stupid. The dromedaries are proper camels."

"Actually," said Donal as he hefted his rucksack onto his shoulders, "You don't know anything about it. Bactrian camels are much rarer than mere dromedaries... And, of course, far more intelligent."

And he winked at Ulan Nuur and strolled away.

THE END

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