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OF THE AWARD-WINNING VIDEO GAME!

BORDERLANDS™



THE FALLEN

JOHN SHIRLEY

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PROLOGUE

Riding in the bus from the spaceport to Fyrestone, looking out the dusty, louvered window at the craggy gray-blue landscape, the aluminum-blue sky, McNee can't believe he'd talked himself into coming back to this vicious planet.

It was all Roland's fault. Roland knows that McNee likes him. Took to him almost like a son—McNee is old enough to be Roland's old man. Takes advantage, that Roland, that's what he does, damn his eyes . . .

«McNee—easy pickings. Real juicy trove of Eridian weapons—just gotta take it from some oversized mutated cretins. No problem, right? Can't do it without you! Get your ass back here! We're burning daylight! —Roland.»

That's what the subspace message had said. But the real message was the "Can't do it without you" part. That's what McNee is a sucker for; that's what brings him to this hellworld on the outer edge of the galaxy. First time Roland had admitted he needs McNee's help. But of course, it's hard to find anyone you can really trust on Pandora.

Speaking of which—there’s that big chunk of a weapons dealer, Marcus Kincaid, chuckling to himself as he drives the creaky old hydrogen-cell-powered bus. They’re alone on the bus, except for a Claptrap robot in the very back, muttering to itself. Kincaid, with his squat face and short black beard, isn’t just the guy who drives the treasure hunters and prospectors in from the spaceport—he’s the one who sells them weapons. Unauthorized weapons. Some good—some not so good. He brings you here, then sells a weapon to the guy who’s likely to kill you in the next half hour. Or sells you the weapon to kill the guy trying to kill you. McNee doesn’t have much use for Kincaid, but you have to put up with him.

From somewhere on the bus canned music plays, some group singing, “*Ain’t no rest for the wicked, until we close our eyes for good . . .*”

They come to that old, decrepit billboard McNee sees every time he comes. *WELCOME TO PANDORA, Your Final Destination*—McNee wonders what wise guy came up with that slogan.

A skag runs across the road, the vicious four-legged, three-jawed predator leaping right into the bus’s path. The bus doesn’t slow and the skag becomes red mush on the windshield, before oozing off.

McNee shakes his head. Here he is, heading back into the Borderlands.

“Ha ha, time to wake up!” Kincaid says, glancing back at McNee. He speaks in a jovial, heavily accented growl. “It’s a beautiful day, full of opportunity!” His accent sounds like one of the desert nomads of the homeworld, to McNee.

“Well, you got any new weapons in Fyrestone, Kincaid?”

“Got plenty new weapons always,” Kincaid rumbles, chuckling. “Nice Eridian beauty, fry your enemy in ten seconds. If you can pay!”

McNee sighs. He’d blown most of his money from the last trip here—blew it on the Planet of Pleasure. But he didn’t regret it. Good memories to get a man through a cold, lonely Pandora night. “Rumors of another Vault out on this dirtball somewhere, I heard . . .”

“Ah the Vault . . . So, you want to hear a story, eh?”

“Marcus—you really don’t have to tell me that one again . . .” Kincaid tells the same story over and over to keep the Vault Hunters coming. So he could sell them weapons. Some story about the Vault he’d worked up talking to a nephew.

But once Marcus Kincaid gets started, it’s hard to stop him. “What . . . about treasure hunters? Ha! Have I got a story for you!”

“I’ve actually heard it . . .”

“Pandora! This is our home! But make no mistake, this is not a planet of peace and love . . .”

“That’s one hell of an understatement.”

“They say that it’s a waste planet, that it’s dangerous. That only a fool would search for something of value here . . .”

“Thanks for that, Kincaid, always nice to hear that from you . . .”

“Many people tell it, the legend of the Vault—”

“That one’s shut down, from what I heard,” McNee says, leaning forward and asserting himself with jabs of

his finger at Marcus Kincaid. “But what about that new Vault they’re talking about—or some kind of crashed ship or something with a lot of artifacts, way out in the Borderlands . . .”

Marcus glances at him, scowling. “That is something maybe is not wise to talk about! Atlas, others . . . they don’t like it when I ask . . . Best you not ask either. Just go after that weapons cache Roland wants you to find. Kill a few Psychos. Try to come back with all your fingers and toes.”

“Wait—how’d you know what Roland said to me on subspace transmission?”

“Who you think he came to, to send the transmission? Me! And when you find the weapons cache—you sell it to me! I sell for profit! Everyone will be happy, ha ha.” After a moment he adds: “If you live. Not so likely. Very dangerous out there where Roland has gone. Very dangerous . . .”

“Okay so it’s dangerous.”

“Very, very . . . very . . .”

“You *said* that, Kincaid.”

“. . . dangerous. So, back to my story—you’re going to love this one, I promise . . .”



It was raining in the Arid Lands, on the planet Pandora. “Some *arid* lands,” Roland muttered to McNee, as they stared out the mouth of the cave, watching raindrops splash from rocks, flow in crevices. “Oughta be called the Wetlands.”

“Don’t happen but once or twice a year,” McNee said, tinkering with an Anshin shield—Anshin was a not especially effective brand of force field armor.

Roland and McNee were a stark contrast. McNee was middle-aged, Roland was fairly young; McNee was as slender as Roland was bulky with muscle; as sunburnt and pink as Roland was dark-skinned.

“Rain’ll spur some plant growth, mebbe,” McNee went on, frowning over the device. “Wake up a Wyrms Squid to come out ’n’ play.”

“Don’t care to meet any Wyrms Squids today,” Roland declared. “I’m sure as hell not in the mood. Saw a big one

eat a whole town once. It was hungrier than my fat aunt Matilda and that's going some. You gonna get that shield running or not?"

"I dunno, the rain seems to make the cheap ones short out and all we got's cheap ones. Need to get back to Fyrestone, get some decent gear. But you're all about, 'I *know* there's a big Atlas weapons cache out East in the Graves for the Brave, it'll be easy pickins!' Sure it will, Roland. And I think 'Why would I go any place called Graves for the Brave' anyway? But I just trail after Roland like a skag pup after a brain-damaged mama . . ."

"You *insisted* on coming along," Roland reminded him. But he was smiling to himself. For some reason he enjoyed McNee's eternal bitching.

"Who'd watch your back? A back a sniper couldn't miss, I might add, what with the size you are . . . Ow!" A small electric arc had jumped from the shield and he sucked his burnt finger. "The hell with this shield . . ." He tossed the tool and the broken shield aside. "I'll do without one today."

"Don't seem wise." Roland himself had a pretty strong Pangolin shield. "You oughta fix it."

"Don't seem wise to go without your Scorpio Turret either. And where the hell is it?"

"Not my fault that spiderant come outta the ground right under the Scorpio. I'll get it fixed up first chance. Looks like the rain's quitting . . . Speaking of skags, McNee, you did check this cave out all the way back, didn't you? Stinks of skag in here."

"I kilt a family of the buggers, in the back, while you were tucking the outrunner away. You want some skag

meat, go back and skin 'em. The motherbuggers haven't been dead more'n twelve hours or so."

"I'll pass. Come on, we're burning daylight. Let's check the outrunner, see if it's swamped. Psycho Midgets might've messed with it."

Hefting his Tediore Defender—a shotgun he'd upgraded to vicious effectiveness—Roland ducked his head and led the way out of the low cave mouth, into the steaming afternoon. The clouds were parting; the sun was burning through, sucking streamers of mist from the wet ground. The red-stone canyon walls dripped water, but already the sandy ground had soaked up most of the rain. There was even a rainbow over the juttingly slanted butte.

"Another *be-yoot*-iful day!" McNee jeered. "On the most dangerous planet in the galaxy . . ."

Roland automatically scanned the ancient bed of the canyon for any movement. A little stream was running through the canyon; flowering bushes and purple thatch were poked up here and there.

He didn't see any of the local fauna. Almost all the animal life of Pandora was hostile. Anything you saw might attack you. It was a strange food chain—made up entirely of predators, as far as he could tell. Predators eating predators eating predators. But it was the humans, and the descendants of humans—the subhumans, really—who were the most troublesome creatures on the planet, to Roland's mind.

The rain released curious scents from the red and blue sands; some putrid, some spicy, some acrid, some earthy. A twisted, leafless growth, like branch coral, spiked on a nearby outcropping of clay—its tips seemed to be writhing. He paused and watched it warily. Some new threat?

“Hey now look there!” said McNee, admiring the writhing bush. “That’s gotta be a rare sight, some plant response to rain in the Arid Lands! Maybe something you see only a couple times a year . . . Could be no other humans saw it before . . .”

The plant’s tubules extruded what looked like small tongues, the wet red organs “razzing” in every direction, fibrillating furiously, spitting some kind of seedlings.

Roland was more interested in scanning for enemies. There wasn’t *too* much to worry about—just scythids, rakks, spiderants, bruisers, stalkers—

“I mean,” McNee was saying, as they headed down the canyon, “I seen some pretty impressive critchers on this planet, but I tell you what, who knows what lives way underground? Besides the tunnel rats I mean. Now, in a cavern down in Freebottle, I saw somethin’ like giant fleas—”

—bugmorphs, crystaliths, larva crab worms, tunnel rats, Nomads, goliaths—

“—fleas big as St. Bernards,” McNee went on. “Turn a regular dog inside out with one slurp—”

—wurm squids, drifters, skags, spitter skags, elder skags, alpha skags, corrosive skags, spiderants, gyro spiderants, Badass spiderant burners, Psychos, Midget Psychos, Burning Psychos, Badass Psychos, Roid Rage Psychos—

“—but I knew a guy tried to make a flea circus with ’em, hired a clown to get ’em to jump through hoops. The giant fleas ate the clown, though, first crack out of the box . . . Hey, looks like the outrunner’s okay.”

The open-air outrunner, hidden away between two boulders, looked untouched. It was even gleaming, a little cleaner from the rain. The outrunners were something like

the old Desert Terrain Vehicles, with a big gun in the back. "I'll drive," Roland said. "You get on the turret."

"Okay—so we're going to find that weapons cache today?"

"Sure, sure," Roland said, climbing into the driver's seat. "We'll find the bandits, if they don't find us first, follow 'em back to the Graves of the Brave. It's hidden back there in the Hunter Lands. Somewhere. Anyway there's something going on back there—has to be. All kinds of mercs and bandits looking for something back there . . ."

"Yeah well—" McNee climbed up behind the turret in back, took hold of the big weapon, checking out the ammo feed. "I'm always hearing about something great right over the next sand dune. Usually don't turn up. I dunno why I came to this misbegotten planet."

"Same reason we all did," Roland said, fitting his shotgun into the gun rack. "Same reason the Dahl Corp. did, way back when. 'Cause it's wide open, there's treasure here, if you get lucky, and no one can tell you what to do."

"If you get lucky—that's the part I haven't worked out yet. You havin' some trouble startin' 'er up?"

Roland had to hit the ignition three times to get the engine to catch. Finally it roared to life. "There it is. Kind of slow starting. After we score the goods we gotta take it back to Scooter for servicing."

"If he's not dead! Every time I think I'm gonna see somebody back in the settlements, seems like half the time you hear, 'Oh so-and-so, the skags got him! Oh you mean her, the Psychos got 'em! Or the—'"

Roland gunned the engine, the noise drowning out

McNee's bellyaching. He rammed the vehicle into reverse so that McNee, cursing, had to clutch hard at the turret to keep from falling over.

"Why you son of a—"

Another roar of the engine muffled McNee as Roland screeched the outrunner around almost 360 degrees, then darted off to the east. He bumped the outrunner at a good clip across the rugged landscape, splashing through puddles, enjoying the wind in his face. The ground was shifting to the gray-blue that you saw so widely on Pandora. The pale blue sky was clearing, so that he could see the dark, wheeling shapes of rakks flying over the horizon. Not a threat at this distance.

Up ahead, the mist parted to show a narrowing of the canyon walls, a natural passageway just wide enough to get the outrunner through.

Roland slowed down to little more than walking speed, not knowing what was up ahead, not eager to run into an alpha skag head on, and not wanting to alert the bandits—or whoever else might be waiting for him. On Pandora, you never knew.

Maybe that's why he stayed on this misbegotten rock. Because you never knew. There was always another threat—which meant not much time to think. You didn't brood. You didn't think about the past. You just kept looking for that edge, for whatever it took to survive. It was one long adrenaline rush. Till you slammed into that final wall . . .

He eased through the twisty stone passageway, keeping the engine as quiet as possible. He listened for the screech of rakks, the burbling snarf of sniffing skags, the mad

giggling of Psychos. But he heard only the wind keening through the narrow stone pass.

Then it widened, and a rolling plain opened ahead of them. Broken gray clouds admitted shafts of sunlight and mists swirled. He made out a group of skags far to the north—spots moving restlessly out there, near a stone burrow, still a good quarter kilometer off. Skags were relentless killers.

“Keep your eyes peeled, McNee,” Roland growled.

“Peeled my eyes years ago and left ’em that way.”

They drove over a rise, and on the low ground beyond a tumble of skeletal parts lay an old encampment. Human skeletons, mostly. Some from creatures he didn’t recognize. Broken weapons rusted amid the bones. He drove around the bones, up onto gradually rising ground—then slowed up, seeing figures silhouetted against the sky on the next crest of stone. The strangers were about forty meters away, at least nine armed men standing side by side on the crest.

As Roland got closer he saw them more clearly: scarred, tattooed men, broad chests crisscrossed with bandoliers, their eyes opaqued by dusty goggles. Ex-military, he figured—he recognized the tattoo of the Crimson Lances on a forearm of the big one to the right. He didn’t know the guy—though Roland had been with the Lances himself, back in the day. He’d rated Soldier, and fought his way through three campaigns on three planets, till he got to Pandora—and resigned in disgust with the corruption of . . .

. . . Of the tenth man, stepping into view on the crest.
Crannigan.

Roland stopped the outrunner, angled up the slope toward the armed strangers. He let the vehicle idle, pondering his next move. “Them the bandits you were talking about?” McNee asked, his voice low. “I thought we were supposed to see them *first*?”

“This bunch ain’t bandits,” Roland whispered. “Look like mercenaries to me. Some of them are Crimson Lance. Or were. That big, broken-nosed, bald-headed thug in the middle—that’s Scrap Crannigan. Used to work with him. He’s a real backstabber.”

“What, a backstabber on this planet? You’re kiddin’.”

“Stuff the sarcasm and keep quiet—lemme just see if I can get the prick to tell me what they’re up to before they open fire.”

Heavy-caliber weapons were already trained on the outrunner. Roland’s expert eye picked out a Pearl Havoc combat rifle, two Cobras, a Stomper, a bunch of Atlas pistols, and a Helix rocket launcher. Crannigan himself toted an Eridian rifle—alien technology, recognizable by those curves in the rifle’s organic lines, as if the weapon had grown like a plant instead of being manufactured.

Lots of ordnance on that crest. This could get ugly fast.

Very slowly, Roland raised his two hands over his head—not in surrender, which wasn’t much use in Pandora anyway—but in a greeting that old Crimson Lance vets knew, hands open—then fisted—then open again. *Parley.*

Crannigan nodded, then took a few strides closer, down the slope, before stopping and calling out, “That’s Roland isn’t it?”

“That’s who it is, Scrap!” Roland said, lowering his hands.

“You back with the Lances?”

“Not me. Don’t look like you are either.”

“Working for Atlas,” Crannigan said. “New division. Acquisitions Department. You heard?”

“No, haven’t heard of it. What are you ‘acquiring’ for Acquisitions?”

“That’s our business! Course, it could be yours, if you’re looking for work! You could hire on with us. Don’t know about the little gnome you’ve got there.”

“What did he call me?!” McNee fumed.

“Quiet!” Roland whispered. “If he didn’t know me, we’d both be dead already! Just don’t make any quick moves—but if they open fire, you hammer them hard with that turret!”

“You interested or not?” Crannigan bellowed. “Big pay!”

“I’ll think on it!” Roland called. “Where do I find you after I decide?”

Crannigan shook his head. “Uh-uh. It’s now or never, pal. Sign up with us—or . . .”

Roland gauged the shooting angle. Awkward. The shotgun wouldn’t be much use from here. But he had a good Atlas Raptor pistol on his hip. He might be able to pull the Raptor and nail Crannigan in the forehead before the merc used the Eridian rifle—but the others would open up. Maybe McNee’d be able to machine-gun a few of them while the outrunner slammed right through the middle of them, run a couple of the bastards over. But that Helix rocket launcher with its multiplying blasts would probably bring the outrunner down.

Crannigan grinned—a nasty sight, showing green, crooked teeth. “I can see you trying to figure the odds, Roland!” He shook his head. “You’ll never make it alive! Better choose joining up instead! Tell you what—shoot your little pal there to show your commitment! *Then* I’ll cue you in on the mission . . .”

McNee snorted. “As if he’d . . .” He peered around his gun at Roland. “You wouldn’t, would you?”

“Shut up and let me think,” Roland muttered. After a moment he called out, “Crannigan! Lemme point something out—if this comes to gunfire, you’ll be the first to go down. So I’ll tell you what: I’m gonna put this in reverse, and back out of here, and think on your offer! And you can avoid a firefight.”

“Oh—I don’t have to get in a firefight!” Crannigan said, his corroded grin widening. “*They’ll* take care of you for us!” He pointed past the outrunner.

Roland turned to see a sight that was bizarre even for Pandora—he’d heard of these creatures, but never seen them before.

“Primal Beasts!” McNee burst out, whistling.

There were three of the hulking semihuman creatures—and riding on each Primal was a Psycho Midget. The little jockey-like lunatic mutants, wearing goggles and finned helmets, sat in small saddles on the upper backs of the Primals. The Midgets were hooting and giggling and shrieking with murderous delight as they approached, flourishing their throwing hatchets.

The Primals were six-limbed creatures native to Pandora, reminding Roland of the enormous jungle anthropoids of the homeworld, in rough outline, but larger,

far more savage, and each with four large forelimbs that sometimes acted as additional legs . . . and sometimes, when the creatures reared on their hind legs, became arms. Their clawed forelimbs had opposable thumbs; there was armor across their sides, catching the sunlight as the creatures splashed through puddles in the lowland. Metal embossments on their head indicated mind control devices.

Psycho Midgets were puzzling little muties. Encounter a screeching, sprinting Psycho Midget in the field and the little SOB seemed completely insane—muscular, rabid, unable to focus on anything but killing. Hard to imagine one working on electronic devices—but they seemed to have periods of relative rationality, and in those they'd mastered the Primal Beasts, using them as mounts and living catapults. The catapult analogy came to mind as swiftly as the boulder that was now hurtling through the air toward the outrunner, thrown by one of the rearing Primals.

Half a ton of boulder was flying directly at him.

Roland put the outrunner in gear, floored it, spinning the steering wheel, and the boulder smashed into the slope close behind them, spraying sand. The turret gun rattled as, cussing a blue streak, McNee brought it around to fire at the Primals and the Psycho Midgets riding them.

The repetitive high-pitched *zing-BOOM* of Crannigan's Eridian rifle projected a bubble of destructive energy in front of the outrunner. Roland veered hard left to keep from giving Crannigan a clean shot at him. He glanced over his shoulder—saw the mercenaries withdrawing over the crest, Crannigan sending him a final mocking salute.

“Bastard!” Roland muttered. “Mess with the bull and

you get the horns! And you'll get mine, Crannigan, right through your gut!" But how was he going to get at Crannigan any time soon? He might cut right, over the crest—draw the Psycho Midgets and the Primals that way and just maybe they'd attack the mercenaries.

An explosion to his right bucked the outrunner up on two wheels, almost overturning it. Twisting the wheel, he just managed to bring the vehicle down safely with a jarring crash. He looked over his shoulder at the Primals—saw one of them was throwing some kind of stubby metallic cylinder at them. He'd seen those explosive barrels before. Bad news.

"Where the hell they get that blasting barrel?" McNee yelled. "It's like the damn thing pulled it out of its ass!"

"Strapped low on their backs! Come on, McNee, time is bullets! Spray 'em and slay 'em!"

McNee let go another strafe with the outrunner turret as Roland tried an evasive maneuver, swerving left, right, and left again.

Another barrel came arcing through the air, thrown by the enormous Primal—a two-hundred-kilo object flung the way a man would throw a football—and it exploded just behind the racing outrunner. Roland's shield protected him, though it flashed with shrapnel impacts.

Roland heard a yell of pain, twisted in his seat to see McNee slumped over the turret gun, his head a mass of bloody shreds. Shrapnel had blown the top of McNee's skull off.

Should have got that shield fixed, McNee.

Seething inside, Roland turned away and jerked the outrunner to the right. Revenge would have to wait.

He blamed Crannigan for this—Crannigan had hemmed them in so the Primals would go after them.

But there was no hope of leading the Primals back toward Crannigan's mercs now. The Psycho Midgets had fixated on the outrunner—they hated outrunners, as settlers had used them to run the little killers down whenever they got a chance.

Roland veered hard left, sharply as he could without overturning the outrunner—just managing to avoid a flying boulder, he zagged right again, coming up on a low, rocky hilltop. He accelerated, jumped the hilltop, coming down on the other side with a jolt, holding on with all his strength. The outrunner almost flipped over again—then clunked back down on its wheels.

He spun the vehicle in a doughnut, brought it around facing the hilltop, came to a full stop, and clambered hastily up in the back.

At some point, McNee's body had fallen out. All that remained of him in the outrunner was blood, and brain matter, bits of bone near the turret.

Roland caught a movement at the corner of his eyes—he looked around, caught a glimpse of someone down the slope on his side of the hill, half-hidden behind an outcropping of rock. Someone watching and waiting. He knew the type—a big bulky figure in helmet, long coat, and slitted goggles. A Nomad. Another threat.

One thing at a time. The Primals were coming.

Roland ground his teeth, gripped the turret gun handles, and then the first Primal was there, poised on the hilltop not more than fifteen meters away, a shrieking Psycho Midget riding on its back. The Primal scooped up

a fifty-kilo boulder with the ease of a kid grabbing a snowball, and threw it underhand. Roland ignored the stone missile—taking the chance it'd miss—and fired a burst at the Psycho Midget. The Primal was too heavily armored to bring down at this angle. Its rider was just barely visible from here, hunched down on the Primal's back, getting ready to launch one of those vicious little hatchets.

Roland got lucky twice: the boulder missed him and one of his turret rounds caught the Psycho in the forehead. The mad Midget jerked in the saddle, shrieking in despair. The Primal, psychically linked to its rider, went bounding off in maddened confusion, tearing at its own head with a forearm talon.

But the other two were coming. Roland doubted he could get them both.

An idea suddenly came to him. He vaulted back into the driver's seat, put the outrunner in gear, spun it around, and started down the hill, close to the outcropping where the Nomad was still watching.

He didn't head straight for the Nomad, but drove right by him.

The mad giggling of Psycho Midgets came from close behind as he passed the Nomad—then came a snarling roar, the thumping of feet. Bellows of rage, a spate of cursing.

He smiled. He knew his outlanders.

Nomads hated Psycho Midgets. *Hated* them. Never missed a chance to kill them. One of their favorite methods was binding them and holding them up as living shields to catch gunfire meant for the Nomad.

He heard a grenade blast, another, a burst of gunfire, and lunatic giggling that became shouts of pain.

The Nomad had gone for the targets, engaging both Psycho Midgets and their mounts. That'd keep them all busy for a while.

Roland gunned the outrunner, circling off to the right, heading back to try to intersect Crannigan.

He bounded the vehicle over ridges, low hills, around boulders—finally pulled up, seeing a flying vessel of some kind—hard to make out what exactly—taking off in the distance.

Chances were, Crannigan was in that orbital shuttle, heading off to conference with his handlers at the Atlas Corporation.

Okay. He'd catch up with Crannigan eventually. All he had to do was wait, and patrol the area. And meanwhile look for those bandits. That cache of salable goods.

He went back to the lowlands, looking for McNee's body.

There it was, about fifty meters off. It was already being torn apart by scavenging skags.

Roland pulled the outrunner up, and stared, thinking that McNee deserved better.

But that's what happened on Pandora. You made a friend—they got killed. Should've learned that lesson a long time ago.

Stay solitary as long as you stayed on this planet.

Because Pandora wasn't just a world. It was a planet-sized homicidal maniac.

Pandora glowed like a dying ember in the big rectangular viewport of the *Homeworld Bound*. Zac Finn stood in the ship's lounge with his arm around his wife's shoulders,

the two of them looking at the viewport. Their son, Cal, his face in VR blinders, was playing mindtouch on a sofa nearby, the boy's fingers and shoulders twitching as he played. The artificial gravity was on, the ship at 80 percent gravity, still lighter than the homeworld, so Zac felt mildly buoyant.

A drunk, pudgy, middle-aged man with a bubbly green cocktail in his hand stepped wobblingly up, nodded at the viewport. "Lookitthat. Another goddamn planet. Sick of all these planet stops. Shoulda taken th' express ship. Tryin' a get to Xanthus." The drunk turned to Zac, pointed at him with the hand holding his drink, so he spilled some on the lounge carpet. He didn't seem to notice. "Where you folks headed?"

"Heading to Xanthus, too," Zac said shortly, not wanting to encourage the guy. "Settlers."

But Zac hoped he wouldn't have to be a hardscrabble settler on Xanthus, if things worked out here on Pandora. With luck, he could leave here with some real money, buy an estate on Xanthus for his family, and they'd all live there comfortably. He glanced at his wife, Marla, a compact, shapely woman in a traveler's clingsuit; she had copper-colored hair and bright green eyes. She seemed only mildly interested in Pandora, the third planet the *Homeworld Bound* had stopped at, on this zigzag trip across the galaxy, and he felt a twinge of guilt.

She didn't know he was going down there. Pandora had a reputation—a bad one. If Zac told her what he was planning she might take Cal and go back to the homeworld . . .

Zac glanced at the time under the viewport. 24:00—Rans would be arriving any minute.

There—was that a transport, that silvery oblong emerging from the upper atmosphere?

“Looks like the passengers from Pandora are coming,” said Marla. “Maybe we’ll be able to get out of orbit and on to Xanthus soon.”

“Yeah. Keep an eye on Cal, huh? I’m going to go and . . . check with the bursar.”

“Cal?” She shook her head, her green eyes flashing as she looked at her son. “He’s been locked in that thing for hours. He’s thirteen, he ought to show more interest in the real world. It’s no way for a kid to grow up.”

“Oh, he’s not there all day. Just . . . part of it. Anyway, it’s just a phase, hon. Wait’ll he discovers girls. He’ll take more interest in the real world.”

“They mostly discover VR girls. It’s a surprise people still manage to reproduce.”

“Me and you had no trouble,” he whispered, kissing her on the cheek. He turned and hurried off to the deck lift. But he wasn’t going to the bursar.

Cal Finn was flying a bodysuit through a lightning storm, evading the blasts of enemy fighters, and calculating his counterattack—when someone knocked on the sky. *Thunk thunk thunk*.

It sounded like a door being hammered on in the distance. The hammering sound came right through the roar of his repulsors, the crack of lightning and the whining of machine gun rounds. *Knock knock knock . . . KNOCK.*

“Cal!”

“Awright *awright!*” Hissing to himself he pulled the VR helmet off, blinking in the transition to the peaceful

lounge of the *Homeworld Bound*. There was something intimidating about the way the big golden-red planet hung there, filling the viewport. But his mom, hands on her hips, stepped into his line of sight, silhouetting herself against Pandora.

“Cal—you need to put that thing away.”

“Why? It’s just another orbit. We’re going back into subspace, right? This trip is taking, like, *forever*—”

“No we’ll be here awhile—they’re delivering supplies down to Pandora.”

“I thought there was no one on Pandora but a bunch of criminals and crazies.”

“That’s not true. Exactly. There are settlers. Towns. In fact—we said we were going to learn about the planets we saw on the trip . . .”

He rolled his eyes. “Seeing it from orbit isn’t really seeing it.”

“. . . So we’re going to learn about this one.” She sat down next to him, took a uniceiver from her shoulder bag, and began tapping at the uni’s screen for the *Identify* application. The universal receiver was also a powerful computer. She held the uni up so it looked at the planet hanging in space.

The uni took the image in and said, in a woman’s friendly voice, “The planet Pandora.”

“Text,” Marla told the uni. “Pandora history.”

“*Mo-om. . .*”

“Quiet, Cal.” She squinted at the text on the screen. “Okay, here we go, I’ll just pick out some of the main points: ‘Pandora has human-friendly conditions with respect to gravity and atmosphere. Its mineral deposits

convinced the Dahl Corporation to set up colonization on Pandora, largely for mining purposes.’ And—says they were also interested in the alien ruins.”

Cal peered over her shoulder at the small image accompanying the text. “Alien ruins? I wish we could see that.” Mostly he said it just to make his mom happy. Partly because he wanted her to lay off him—and also for a reason he wouldn’t like to admit out loud: he loved his mom and wanted her to be happy.

“The alien ruins,” his mom went on, paraphrasing the text, “were thought to belong to the same culture that left similar artifacts on the planet Promethia . . .”

“Promethia—that’s where we got the new starship tech, everybody knows that.”

“We got faster starships, anyway. Um—‘a large sealed vault on Promethia discovered by the Atlas Corporation contained alien technology and weaponry.’ The Dahl Corporation hoped to find a similar trove on Pandora. Says here that before they could really find it, they kind of gave up—”

“Gave up? Why?”

“Apparently some kind of cyclic change happened on Pandora, and all kinds of local creatures came out of hibernation and started . . . well, they attacked people, and destroyed a lot of the mining camps. Plus it turned out the best minerals had mostly been used by the aliens thousands of years ago, although there are ‘useful deposits of specialized crystal.’ Says it’s ‘not known if the extraterrestrials who left the artifacts were native to the planet, as none are known to have survived there.’ So I guess they didn’t find as much as they’d hoped for, and the planet was so dangerous the Dahl Corporation basically pulled out.”

“But you said there were settlements.”

“Some settlers stayed. There’s New Haven, some other settlements—but it’s tough down there. Especially because . . . if I understand what it’s saying here . . . Dahl brought a lot of convict labor to the planet to do most of the mining work. When they left, they just unlocked the gates of the prison camps and abandoned the convicts. So the convicts are wandering around down there terrorizing the colonists. According to this, a lot of the convict laborers have gone psychotic, right out of their minds. There are still some working factories down there. Hyperion has a robot operation on Pandora—robots, and weapons. Especially weapons. There are more weapons of different types sold on Pandora than on any other known planet . . .”

“But—nobody ever found the Vault they were looking for?”

She scanned the univiewer, going on to the next page. “Seems like they found some stuff, but not the big discovery—not the Vault itself. Or anyway they couldn’t get close to it . . . Says there’re conflicting accounts of what happened to that.”

He gazed at the enigmatic orb of Pandora. “So—the Vault *could* still be down there . . . somewhere.”

She nodded. “But I wouldn’t want to go and look for it! There are a few scientists—but mostly they stay on the Study Station.”

“What’s the Study Station?”

“It’s the station the *Homeworld Bound*’s docked at right now—which you’d know if you didn’t have your head in that helmet all day. I guess from up here they can look at Pandora from a safe distance. Even without the bandits

from the prison camps and the . . . good Lord, look at that picture! Is that a human being? Must be some kind of mutation. Some of the bandits are cannibals, it says. Even without that, the animals that roam around down there are as savage as anywhere in the galaxy. Oh—here’s a picture of a *rakk*. They’re flying creatures—not like a bird, more like a pterodactyl. But they don’t have beaks. Barbed mouth slits, barbed tails. ‘They swoop down and strike without warning.’ Some of them get huge . . . Oh! Apparently they’re born in a *rakk hive* . . . which is a quadruped, bigger than a bus, that sort of spews the rakks out of its mouth. Oh and look at that creature—they call it a spider-ant. But it’s a good two meters long, that one. . . .” Her voice trailed off. “Really quite interesting . . .”

Cal looked at his mom. She seemed a bit wistful. “You wanted to be an exobiologist. Sounds like you kind of wish you could go down there and study these creatures.”

She sighed. “I was a year away from getting my degree when I quit to help your dad. These creatures are best studied from a distance—like from orbit. They’re just too dangerous.” She smiled wanly. “Believe me—I’m *glad* we’re not going down there.”

It took Zac a long moment to recognize Rans Veritas. His old patrol partner was standing in front of the wedge-shaped transport in the shuttle hangar of the *Homeworld Bound*. Rans had changed—gotten chunky, red-nosed, and balding. The layered, rugged, dirt-streaked outfit he wore, goggles pushed up on his head, seemed more suited for the dusty plain of the wasteland below than a spacecraft. Didn’t they have a laundry on Pandora? “Rans!”

Hearing his name called, Rans seemed to cringe, then he looked nervously around the echoing, metal-walled hangar—and spotted Zac.

“Zac!” Rans came limping toward him, wide face split in a grin, and they shook hands warmly. “You haven’t changed much.”

“Oh, I’m an old married man now. I’ve slowed down a lot.”

“Not too much I hope.” Rans lowered his voice, eyes shifting around nervously. They were alone except for a self-operating forklift carrying supplies into the shuttle cargo bay and a single shuttle crewman hurrying toward the station’s bar. “You’ll need some guts, Zac—it’s a great opportunity but it’s going to take nerve.” Rans’s face twitched, and he gnawed a knuckle, as his eyes darted around again.

“There’s a commissary for the crew—no one in it right now. Let’s talk there.”

“Good, good, lead the way . . .”

Zac noticed Rans limping again. “You okay there?”

“Yeah—yeah that’s a big parta the reason I can’t go after this myself. Don’t get around as well as I used to. Skags jumped me, tore up my leg. Almost didn’t get outta there alive. We got some good medical rebuilds planetside, from ol’ Dr. Zed, but they ain’t free. Can’t afford it right now. Wouldn’t’ve been able to get to orbit here, except I had a trip ticket left over.” That facial tic twitched again.

They went through the glass doors and into the commissary. It was a low-ceilinged, overlit room filled with plain white plasteel tables and orange chairs, the farther wall inset with snack and drink dispensers.

“Have a seat,” Rans said. “I’ll—oh, uh, say, you got any cred? I’m busted.”

“Oh—here, take this. We talked about the advance so you can have it now . . .” Zac passed him the smart voucher for a thousand dollars. It hadn’t been easy to raise the money. He’d had to sell his late father’s collection of computerized insects.

“Great, great!” Rans took the card, used a fraction of it to buy a chocolate bourbon at the dispenser, brought it back to the table. “I need a drink, bad . . . got the shakes again . . .”

Zac had heard about Pandora Syndrome. Lots of settlers on the planet suffered from a specialized PTSD. The constant fear of predation, Psychos, and bandits was traumatic.

They sat across from one another in the bright room, Rans sipping the booze and glancing at the door with twitching eyes. “So uh, let’s get right to it. When we talked on the subspace gabber, I toldya maybe I’d found the Eridian Vault but I couldn’t get it to it myself. Well—turns out, it’s not Eridian. It’s something else.”

“Now wait a minute, Rans, *you* said—”

“I know, but hear me out. It’s an old alien ship—an ET crash site. I saw it, I took pictures, and I found a xenotech who could analyze them for me. He confirms it! It’s alien, pure offworld stuff—but it’s *not* Eridian. Far as my guy can tell, it’s from a civilization we’ve never seen before. I used up the last of my cred talking to this guy and I’m not sure I trust him. Now, Atlas has hired some mercs to find this thing. They know the general area within a hundred clicks—but not exactly *where* it is. Guy named Crannigan, ex-Crimson Lance, real pain in the ass—he’s their man.

We gotta find this thing before he does, Zac. We'll take it to their competitors, you and me, we'll go right to Hyperion, they'll pay double to keep it away from Atlas! There's gotta be alien weaponry on that ship Hyperion could retro-engineer!"

"A crash site, huh?"

"You got it. Now it just happens the crash site is under a kind of overhang in an old volcanic cone—so the Study Station can't see it. Only me and you know where it is!"

"If you've got photos, that might be proof enough for Hyperion . . ."

"Could be faked! You've got to get in closer, retrieve an artifact out of there. Take the real goods to Hyperion! You and me, we'll split the take!"

"I don't know—you told me it was Eridian—"

"Stop obsessing about that, dammit! This is even better! Listen, all you gotta do is wait till the Study Station is over the area—less than an hour from now. Then you take a DropCraft, give it the coordinates, drop almost right on top of the thing. You'll hop out, grab a few artifacts, get back in the DropCraft, hit return, bing-bang-boom it'll bring you up here and you're on your way. We'll be rich! Now—I got all the info you'll need right here . . ."

"I dunno, Rans, sounds pretty risky. What can I expect to run into down there?"

"What? Oh-h-h—a rakk or two, or a skag whelp, little bitty spiderant maybe. There's a gun on every DropCraft, don't even worry about it."

The DropCraft bay was in the bottom level of the Study Station. Zac walked along the semiflexible transparent

corridor, thirty meters long, between the ship and the station, glancing up through the shield glass at the moon over Pandora. He felt naked, exposed to space here, though a filtering force field insulated him from damaging radiation. He heard a whirring sound, glanced over his shoulder—something was flickering in the air back there: a small, disklike flying security drone. Was it following him? No big deal—probably it routinely patrolled the Study Station.

He entered the station proper, nodding to two scientists at a scanning monitor, and crossed hastily to the elevator. Theoretically, passengers on the *Homeworld Bound* had the run of the station while it was docked here, but the scientists always seemed annoyed by tourists.

He took the elevator down, thinking he heard that whirring again, this time coming from the elevator shaft overhead. Probably some servo noise.

He found six shiny DropCrafts lined up on the lowest level, in release bays. The little vessels, no bigger than a flying car, could be rented by the hour. His was craft number one.

DropCraft One was an iridescent teardrop-shaped vehicle designed mostly for emergency escapes, but it could be used for a quick visit to a narrow-gauge area. It carried just enough fuel for one trip straight down and one back up.

He would have to confess all to his wife—but only when he had the goods. Once he'd succeeded, actually had the money coming in, she'd be delighted. He hoped.

Zac hadn't succeeded at much in recent years. He was a trained engineer, but he had a tendency to take shortcuts

in getting the work done, just so he could get the paycheck and move on to the next job. It'd worked until that portable bridge had gotten stuck halfway, stranding a dozen people between skyscrapers for three hours. The portable bridge had teetered in the air, might have crashed if he hadn't flown over there on a quickchopper and reprogrammed it.

Zac felt a sick gnawing doubt as he climbed into the DropCraft's cockpit, buckled himself into the seat, and read the coordinates into the navigator. Could Rans be setting him up? Was it all about the "advance" he'd given him for the landing coordinates? Rans had been a reliable guy in the old days, but he seemed different now. He stank of desperation.

Crazy chance he was taking, even if Rans was on the up-and-up. Zac was leaving his wife and son in orbit, and heading down to a hostile planet. True, he'd only be planetside for a few minutes. But there were risks—probably more than he could know. It was a planet of imponderables.

"Destination fixed and confirmed," said the craft's computer. *"Close heat shield hatch and press ignition."*

That whirring came overhead, unmistakable this time.

He looked up, spotted the small, spherical drone hovering nearby, angling itself as if about to dart down at him.

So it *had* been following him. The expert Rans had shown the pictures to must've shared them with someone else. Maybe he'd shown them to an operative of the Dahl Corporation, or Atlas. And they might not want this little expedition moving ahead.

"Uh, I *do* have ship-to-planet landing permit," Zac told

the drone. Which was true—he was legal to take a quick trip to the surface. “And I did a transfer rental for the DropCraft . . .”

The drone didn’t respond. A red light started flashing on its top. Zac knew what that meant.

He had to get out of here. He fumbled at the console, found the tab marked *Hatch Close/Auto Ignition*, and thumbed it. The shield hatch hummed closed—but not before the drone zipped in. It hovered inside the DropCraft, whirring angrily to itself right in front of his eyes, the red light now flashing with furious rapidity.

“No, wait—!” Zac said as the airlock closed over the DropCraft—and the bottom dropped out of the DropCraft bay.

His stomach seemed to fly up to catch in his throat as the DropCraft plummeted out the lower hull of the Study Station and into orbital space. On autopilot, the craft veered down toward the atmosphere, as the security drone, now inside the cockpit with him, slipped to hover near the navigational unit on his left. He grabbed at the drone—but it fired a short, sharp laser into the craft’s navigational unit.

A *crack*, and smoke drifted up from the blackened unit, choking the cockpit.

Zac coughed, turned in his seat, grabbed the whirring disk—it sparked, jolted him, punishing with electricity. He held on, raised it over his head, smashed it down into the bulkhead of the cockpit. It cracked, gave out a last, sad hum, its red light going out.

He tossed the drone aside and stared out through the transparent heat shield as the DropCraft plunged into the atmosphere—spiraling out of control. Red-and-blue-streaked

vapors were swirling over the little vessel, flames guttered up around its prow . . . as it veered sharply down toward the planet's surface.

Marla and Cal were in the little stateroom, with its three sleeping snugs, its small table and chairs, its single view-screen showing a digital image of space outside with the planet they were orbiting—or in-flight entertainment. Cal was flicking through the entertainment guide as Marla went again to the door and opened it to look down the corridor.

No Zac. He hadn't gone to the bursar's office—she'd called there and they hadn't seen him. What was he up to?

"Looking down the hall's not gonna make Dad come back sooner, Mom. He'll be back. Anyway it's embarrassing, you doing that . . ."

"I know, Cal, I just . . ." A chime sounded from her handbag, sitting on a shelf by the door. She hurried to it, and answered the fone on the uni. "Zac?"

At first all she heard was static, and a kind of roaring. Then she heard Zac's voice, only half-audible. ". . . not on the ship . . . not on . . . I'm on a DropCraft."

"You're *what*?"

"I'm calling you on ship-to-ship but the signal's weak, technical problems, there was sabotage . . . Craft out of control . . ."

"Did you say *sabotage*? Of what?"

"The DropCraft was . . ." Static, roaring. ". . . I'm transmitting my landing coordinates to you so you can arrange for someone to pick me up . . . this thing's not going to make it back . . ."

“Landing coordinates for what? Zac—tell me you’re not going down to Pandora!”

“No turning back now . . . there’s a treasure there . . . crashed ship . . . ET site . . . going down to . . . Oh shit, this thing’s on fire . . . Marla, maybe I shouldn’t have sent you those coordinates. They might go after you on the . . .” Static. “. . . that I love you . . . I’m sorry I went behind your back and . . . just tell Cal that I . . .”

Static, roaring.

“Zac!”

The uni’s polite digital voice said, “*Call ended.*”

Marla tried calling him back—the fone couldn’t find a return number.

“Mom? Did you say Dad was going down to . . .”

A blaring alarm interrupted him, the ululating siren breaking off for an announcement. “*Evacuate ship! All passengers to Study Station! Passengers take Airlock Three to the Study Station! Do not gather luggage! Go immediately! This is an emergency! Evacuate ship! All passengers to . . .*”

“Mom—what’s going on?”

“Never mind, we’re getting out of here—” She grabbed her shoulder bag and hustled Cal ahead of her, down the hallway.

“Wait, Mom! Stop pushing! I just want to get my mind-touch!”

Was he really worried about a VR helmet at a time like this? “Forget that thing and just *move!* Hurry!”

They rushed down the corridor, down a ramp to an elevator. They took the elevator to the main corridor, the two of them breathing hard, side by side, during the short ride. “Our room is a long ways from Airlock Three,” she

said, putting one arm around her son. “It’s the other side of the ship. Hurry!”

The elevator doors opened and they hurried down another corridor, turned a corner, went down another ramp, then a short flight of stairs. They reached the main corridor down the center of the ship, and saw a panting ship’s steward, a round-faced little man in purple coveralls, his popeyes made even more so by panic as she rushed from a side hall.

“Go!” he gasped as he passed them. “Get to Airlock Three!”

“What is it?” she asked, hastening after him. “What’s going on?”

“Those things behind me—those damn drones! Someone’s overridden the security drones—they’re sabotaging the ship!” He pelted on ahead of them. She glanced back—saw four disklike drone bots flying along, their tops blinking, lasers licking out from a node on their undersides, the energy beams hitting power conduits along the corridor. Wherever the beams struck, the lights went out, section by section, so that the corridor was being consumed by darkness, a bite at a time.

“Oh my *God*,” she muttered, pushing Cal along ahead of her.

They reached an intersection and saw the entrance to Airlock Three off to the right. The airlock led to a flexible tube, an umbilicus that extended from the ship to the main body of the Study Station. Running up to the airlock, Cal tugged at the door latch—it wouldn’t turn. A small indicator read: LOCKED DOWN. An oval viewport to the right of the airlock showed the umbilicus extending through space to the station.

Marla could see the popeyed steward running through the transparent passage, arms pumping up and down, passing a hastening group of passengers. There was no one else in the umbilicus . . . which was now detaching from the *Homeworld Bound*, as if the station were recoiling from the starship. Marla realized with a thrill of horror that they were simply too late.

“Mom—they left us!” Cal yelled. “*Now* what do we do?”

Behind them came the angry whir of the drones—and the *crump* of a distant explosion.

The ship shuddered from an internal shock wave. Marla and Cal staggered to keep their feet as the deck rollicked under them. “Mom!”

“Stay calm! There are lifeboats on the lower deck. Come on!”

Another thump, jarring through the starship, made them stagger as they hurried through the corridor. The way looked strangely foggy—smoke was thickening around them.

“There, Mom!” Cal shouted. He grabbed her hand, led her down a plasteel ramp, then down another, switching back in the other direction, till they emerged in the Emergency Hangar. Down the center of the deck was a row of shiny metal capsules, each big enough for one person—not much larger than coffins.

“Mom? They’re one-person lifeboats!”

“Never mind, we’ll go separately, it’ll send us to the same place . . .” She hit the emergency release on the nearest capsule, and its hatch hissed open. She helped her son climb into it—the deck again rocking under their feet.

“Mom, wait!”

“I’ll find you, Cal! I’ll find you and we’ll find Dad! I love you!”

Coughing in thickening smoke, she pushed him down into the recliner. Its cushioning arms automatically enfolded him, holding him in place. He looked frightened—though she could see he was trying to seem brave.

Marla made herself close the see-through hatch over him—just as another explosion shook the *Homeworld Bound* and she heard a high-pitched metallic squealing sound. Wind rushed past her, making her hair swish and slap around her head, suction roaring in her ears.

A hull breach, somewhere. Air was rushing out of the ship.

Marla forced herself to turn away from Cal, staggered on the shivering, pitching deck toward the next lifeboat. She slapped at the emergency latch, and it popped open—just as she felt herself tugged backward, away from the capsule, the increasing vacuum trying to drag her toward the breach in the hull. She grabbed at the rim of the lifeboat passenger hutch, held on to it, used all her strength to try to pull herself into its compartment, fighting agonizingly against the decompression. The breath was ripped from her lungs, and she felt that her trembling arms might be pulled from their sockets—then she grabbed a passenger strap, pulled herself down out of the stream of suction, managed to twist about onto her back, and hit the CLOSE button. The hatch hissed shut; the cushions enfolded her. She was surprised when she realized she still had her shoulder bag.

The Emergency Hangar seemed to tear apart around the lifeboat, debris flashed by the transparent hatch like trash in a tornado, and smoke darkened her view.

This is it, she thought. I was too late. I'm going to die. And so is Cal.

Then the hangar vanished entirely. There was a sickening feeling of plunging into nothingness . . .

Stars—blocked out when the planet rolled enormously into view. The sullen globe of Pandora rushed toward her.

Pulsers hummed to life on the underside of the lifeboat. An energy parachute bloomed around the little vessel . . .

Then the lifeboat began to spin, faster and faster . . .

Centrifugal force built up, pressing her deep into the cushions. She could barely draw a breath. Pressure threatened to crush her flat . . .

Marla screamed—and lost consciousness.