

AN ORIGINAL NOVEL SET IN THE UNIVERSE
OF THE AWARD-WINNING VIDEO GAME!

BORDERLANDS®



UNCONQUERED

JOHN SHIRLEY

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BORDERLANDS® UNCONQUERED

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Based on the Gearbox
Borderlands games



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PROLOGUE

Marcus Tells a Tale

“Lady, I’ll be getting you to ol’ Fyrestone as quick as I can,” Marcus said, looking in the bus’s rearview at the woman sitting a few rows behind him. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, pondering the situation. They were sitting on the tarmac of the spaceport, about half an hour before sunset, as he waited for a report on the bandits. There was a Claptrap robot sitting in a rear seat, muttering and clicking to itself; so far, he had no other passengers besides the robot and the lady. “I got an alert about a crew of particularly vicious Psycho bandits,” Marcus went on. “A new bunch, just wandered into the Fyrestone region. Interlopers from the far side of the Arid Lands. We haven’t had a hard bunch like this so close in a while. There’re missions on the board to take ’em out, but no one’s had the nerve yet. I’d do it myself, but I’m getting on in years, and . . .” He tapped his heavy belly. “I don’t move so fast anymore. So I drive the bus, and I sell guns to other people so they can do it.”

“That’s all quite . . . *fascinating*,” the woman said, with undisguised sarcasm. “But when do we go? It’ll be dark soon. I’d like to get to Fyrestone.”

“Soon as I hear the coast is clear, we go. We’ve got to drive sharp, quick as we can, get through the territory.”

Marcus checked his wrist communicator; there were still no missed calls, no texts, no report on those bandits. Maybe the ECHO link was down. He ran a quick link test on it, tapping the test icon, and . . . yep. It appeared the damn thing was down. Again. Bandits might’ve dismantled the transmission tower for scrap metal.

“I wonder why you don’t have hoppers at the spaceport,” said the woman. “Instead of this bus.”

Her voice was silky, but there was a keen edge of warning in it, whatever she said. Something subtle in her tone conveyed, *Don’t mess with me*. There was a stillness about her, too, a relaxed readiness that suggested a professional warrior, someone who could handle herself. And he’d seen her take a high-quality pistol out of her luggage, sticking it in a holster just before she got onto the bus.

Her slim face and magenta hair were partly masked in purple dust goggles and helmet. What he could see of her looked kind of familiar, anyway, but she was sitting in shadow, and he couldn’t view her well enough to place her. What with the helmet and goggles, worn from the moment she’d stepped off the shuttle from orbit, Marcus figured she didn’t want to be recognized. Which hinted that maybe she wasn’t a complete stranger to the planet Pandora. She was coming from deep space, but he suspected she might also be coming home. Only she didn’t want people to know *who* was coming home . . .

The spaceport authorities would know whatever name she’d given them, and he had those guys on his payroll. But fake identities were easy to come by. Hell, he sold them himself sometimes.

That thought made Marcus wonder what he could sell to this woman. He could tell by her luggage and that gun, she had money, all right. Likely he could sell her some more weapons. He was going to have to try to draw her out, get a fix on who she was—could be that information itself might be worth money.

“Or is there a hopper that I haven’t seen?” the woman went on, glancing out the window.

“Nah, no hoppers, lady. See, I arranged that . . . I mean, the only hopper service ’tween here and Fyrestone was shot down, right outta the sky. Bones of the riders picked clean. Not *safe*, though, no hoppers.”

“So we’re stuck with this old rattletrap bus,” the woman murmured. Louder, she said, “I really have to get to Fyrestone. If you can check to see if you have any *balls*, we could just go. Any bandits both

us, we can take care of them between the two of us.”

Marcus chuckled, still watching her in the rearview. “You’re a salty one, you are. So you’re fighter, eh? We’ve had some tough women fighters on this planet—the only kind that survive.”

“One way or another, all women are tough.”

“And of course, General Goddess, that Gynella. Whew, that one!”

“Gynella?” She seemed to perk up at that, looking back at him—at his eyes in the mirror. “How that panning out?”

“Oh, well, what’s happened with that—well, that’s a whole story. Be glad to tell you. Got the inside word on it from a lot of sources. I’m working up a history of Pandora, see, and I—”

“Suppose you tell me about it on the way to Fyrestone.”

Marcus sighed, controlling his temper. “Now, look, lady—”

“This bus goin’ anywhere?” asked a gruff male voice.

Marcus assessed the man climbing the steps into the bus. Big galoot with a swag belly, wide shoulders, small piggish eyes, a lantern jaw. But he was young, not long out of his teens. He had a lot of fresh-looking tattoos, and his mercenary costume looked secondhand. Cheap gems glittered in his gold front teeth; he had a rifle in one hand, duffel in the other, brand-new goggles pushed back on his close-shaved head.

Marcus knew the type. Likely a kid who’d failed at everything else—kicked out of some homework college, looking for a fresh start where the quick money was. Only most people looking for quick money in the Borderlands of Pandora found quick burials instead.

“Take a seat, kid, if you’re going to Fyrestone,” Marcus growled. “We’re about to leave.”

“Hey, pal, I ain’t a kid, okay? You got that?” The young adventurer, standing in the aisle, put on his best angry-bull look.

Marcus snorted. “Could be you’ll get the chance to prove it, you ride with us. We’re about to run through some nasty bandit territory. And I haven’t got the all-clear.”

The adventurer licked his thin lips. “Yeah, well, if you think it’s . . . you know . . .” Then he noticed the woman, sitting quietly in her seat. His vantage point from the door gave him a good view of the parts of her he was most interested in. She was voluptuous, and her battle-ready clothes were tight-fitting. Real tight-fitting.

The young man stared at her, and his mouth dropped open. “I, uh . . . I can handle bandits. Unlike who’s . . . I mean, hi, lady. We going to be traveling together to Fyrestone? My name’s Jakus.” He pronounced it “Jake-us,” with a long *a*, and he did it emphatically.

“Jakus. Naturally.” They couldn’t see her eyes, but her voice suggested she was rolling them.

“You haven’t told me your name,” Jakus said, trying to charm her with a grin that would have made a skag shudder.

“No,” she said. “I haven’t. Are we leaving or not, Marcus?”

“Sure, sure, get on the bus if you’re coming, Jack-us.”

“It’s *Jake-us*.” Frowning, the adventurer got into the seat across the aisle from the woman.

Who is she? Marcus wondered again, as he closed the doors and started up the bullet-scarred old bus. Clearly, he wasn’t going to find that out easily.

She was interested in Gynella’s story, it seemed. And he knew a hell of a lot about it—and about the other side of the equation: Roland, Mordecai, Brick, and Daphne. Yes, that was the way he’d do it. Tell the mystery lady the story, win her trust, then draw her out.

They were soon rumbling along the dusty, pocked highway toward Fyrestone, Marcus glancing nervously at his wrist communicator—still no word on the bandits—and scanning the horizon.

It was typical rugged gray-brown Pandora wasteland terrain, flat for long stretches but gouged with sudden ravines, shadowed by rocky buttes and stony hillocks, which often stood alone, like weather-

fortresses in the dusty mist. It was hot out there, the pale blue, cloudless sky looking sun-faded. Desert plants flecked the landscape, casting long shadows as the sun slipped toward the serrated horizon; the distance he could see small packs of skags wandering near their burrows, forever hungry for prey and vulturine raptors turned kitelike in the sky. The bus thumped over the remains of some large yellow scythids, their carapaces crushed; he'd smashed them into roadkill on the way to the spaceport.

On some of the higher buttes, in the distance, he could see the tops turning pink and dull scarlet—sunset was coming. It'd be dark soon . . .

When he could, Marcus kept an eye on the two humans in back, tilting the rearview mirror for a better look—the interior mirror wasn't good for anything but looking at the passengers—and he wasn't surprised when Jakus set his rifle aside and moved across the aisle to the seat beside the mystery woman. Jakus put his arm across the back of her seat and leaned toward her, trying to look suave.

"So, pretty lady, when we get to Fyrestone, we could have a drink, whatya say? I'm buying, of course, and then maybe we could find us a cozy little—ow!"

She'd shoved her pistol's muzzle hard against his jaw. "Get back in your seat, or I'm gonna have to splatter your brains on the ceiling. If there *are* any in there to splatter."

Jakus gulped and hurried back to his seat.

"Hey, she's a pistol, ain't she, kid?" Marcus laughed. "Ha, get it, a—"

"Shut up, you old—! Wait, who's that on the road up there?"

The kid pointed, and Marcus returned his attention to the road just in time to slam on the brakes. The dust plume following the bus kept going when the bus stopped, shrouding the windows. But he saw them, clear enough, about twenty meters ahead: four Psycho bandits, and towering over them the Bruiser, all of them masked and bare-chested, blocking the road side by side, all with powerful weapons in their hands.

"By the Angel!" Marcus swore.

"They do not look like paying passengers," the Claptrap robot called tremulously from the back. "I do not advise letting them on board."

Marcus's expert eye automatically evaluated the Psychos' weapons. The Bruiser, on the right, had an Eridian blaster rifle, alien tech that fired energy balls; the other four, right to left, respectively carried a GPR330 Painful Death shotgun, a Dahl Punishing Pounder combat rifle, a Tediore Genocide Guardian, and a Hyperion Sentinel combat rifle. He made the mental catalogue in a few seconds. "Shit! Just the bastards I was planning to not run into."

"You *oughta* run into them!" the woman snapped. "Run 'em over, and let's get on down the road!"

Marcus had been considering doing just that, but her contemptuous tone almost made him put the bus in reverse instead. Then he saw the Bruiser raise his blaster and point it his way—no way he could let that murderous lunatic get a bead on him while he was backing up.

He slammed his boot hard down on the accelerator.

The bus roared forward right at the Psychos, and almost instantly a big piece of his windshield vanished from its frame to his right, the glass and broken louvers coming into the bus in spinning fragments, some of them cutting Marcus's cheek, nicking an earlobe. Other rounds slammed into the engine, and then the Psychos scattered, all of them getting out of the way in time except for the smallest one in the middle.

The bus's front wheels crunched over the littlest Psycho, squeezing one long and piteous scream from him.

Psycho roadkill for the trash feeders, Marcus thought, grinning to himself.

Smoke was rising from the engine, and it was making a *chucka-chucka* sound it had never made before. But they kept moving—

—until the bus shuddered as an Eridian blaster impact struck it, and he heard a back tire blow. The hulking vehicle swerved sickeningly as he struggled with the wheel; then a hummock of shrubs and rock seemed to rush up at him till they came to a jolting stop, Marcus clutching at the wheel to keep from going through the windshield.

Dust and smoke billowed around them, swirled chokingly through the shattered windshield.

Grimacing with pain in his back, Marcus straightened up and looked at the engine lights, then out the windshield.

The engine was dead, steaming, smoking, the front end dented. But the engine didn't look totally fried from there.

He tried restarting. It said *chucka-chucka-chuck* and nothing else.

He got up, grabbed the weapon he kept racked to the left of the driver's seat. It was a Vlad ZX10/V3 Detonating Hammer assault shotgun. He'd thought of bringing a rocket launcher along, but they made some of the temporary visitors to Fyrestone nervous. What the hell did they expect? The planet had the rep of being the most dangerous world with breathable atmosphere in the galaxy. He should have brought the big guns—and an extra shield. The only energy shield he had on the bus had burned out on the way to the spaceport. Cheap off-brand gear . . .

Marcus opened the door, glancing over to see if his passengers were dead.

Good, they were shaken but alive. He hated swabbing blood and guts from his bus. But he rarely had to do it. No more than a few times a year.

The Claptrap robot in back was jumping up and down in excitement. "This is not part of the itinerary, helloooooo!"

The young tattooed adventurer was licking his lips, looking nervously out the dusty window, peering between the metal louvers. "Where—where are they? You killed one, maybe, but . . ."

"They're out there, and they're not far behind," Marcus said, climbing out of the bus.

"Then you oughta close that door!"

"How am I gonna figure out if we can drive outta here otherwise, ya dumb son of a mama skag?" Marcus called out as he stepped onto the stony ground.

Checking the shotgun's readiness as he went, Marcus hurried, coughing in the dust and smoke, toward the engine. He could see sparks crackling, but it looked more or less intact. Salvageable once he got to a shop. But he was going to need help getting it there.

Shotgun at the ready, Marcus scanned the area, looking down the highway, which was about ten meters from the back of the bus. He didn't see the Psychos. He knew damn well they were out there, and they'd be back soon, when they'd worked out their tactics. Smarter than some Psychos—a lot of them would run at you screaming. The Bruiser knew there'd be weapons on the bus, and they'd be coming, soon enough, probably at a flanking angle.

Marcus checked his ECHO communicator. Still no response from Fyrestone. Not that anyone there was reliable at the best of times.

Swearing to himself, Marcus climbed back up onto the bus, closed the door, and sat in the driver's seat, hurriedly flipping on the bus's transmitter. It had a little more reach than his ECHO comm. He tapped it and, wincing with pain, leaned over to speak into the grid. "Anybody there? Fyrestone?"

The only response was a crackle from the speakers.

He shifted the bus's transmitter to aim at T-Bone Junction. Last he'd heard, Scooter was working out there. He was the best man on the planet for automotive emergencies. When he was sober.

"Scooter! This is Marcus, you picking up? You out there?"

Another crackle. Then, "Hey, Marcus, you old gut humper!" came Scooter's voice on the ECHO, thick with an unplaceable bumpkin accent. "You done got your bus in a skizz hole again?"

"Ran into some Psychos. Squished one, but there's four of 'em left, and I can't raise anybody from

Fyrestone. Link's down. You're the only one I can raise!"

"Well, catch a ride, boy!"

"I'm nowhere near none of your ride stations, dammit! We can't walk to one without getting more passengers killed. Spaceport frowns on that!"

"Well, hellfire in a honey box! I'm a gonna have to get you some help. See what I can scare up. Take me some time, now. You're gonna have to hunker down and kill you some Psychos and whatnot. And probably some skags, could be some of them fire skags out there between the town and the spaceport. And maybe some tarantellas, then ag'in, now, could be some skrappies, maybe a nice 'smelly rakk or two, not to mention them hungry ol' crabworms—"

"They're coming!" the kid shouted, his voice hoarse with fear. "The Psychos! They're out to the left side of the bus there!"

"Scooter!" Marcus said. "Listen up! You got to send help and a repair crew!"

"Like I said, I'll do 'er, but it's going to take a while to get 'em there, pardner. We'll make it quick as we can, quick as a greased-up—"

A rifle round sped between armor louvers and shattered a side window.

"Scooter! Can you trace my coordinates from this signal?"

"Yep, I got your location, just hold 'em off there, old son—we'll see what we can do. Won't be real quick, but if you can hold out, why, I'm gonna charge you a big stack of cash for this'n—"

Marcus switched off the transmitter and ducked down, not a split second too quickly.

The window next to the driver's seat exploded inward, blasted by an energy ball that singed the top of his head as it went past to detonate on his right. Shrapnel from a shattered window louver zinged past.

"Anybody dead yet?" he yelled, looking over the back of his seat at his passengers.

"We *will* be if we don't take the fight to the enemy!" the woman yelled fiercely. "I say we get on and rush 'em! With me around, you might actually get somewhere!" She was hunched between seats but he saw her goggled face bob up long enough to fire her pistol four times out a shattered window. "Crap! I think I missed the bastard . . . No! I got him! I got that Bruiser . . . Oh, wait, he's up. I just wounded him." She ducked back down as half a dozen bullets slammed into the armored side of the bus.

"You got any shields, lady?" Marcus asked her.

"Naw, I was gonna buy one from you!"

"And I got plenty for you to buy, but they're over in Fyrestone. Only one I had on the bus crapped out on me when I drove out to the spaceport."

Jakus was flattened on the floor as three more energized bullets sizzled screaming into the bus. Another tire blew. "What we gonna *do*?" Jakus called. "Driver? Yo! You got any ideas?"

"Listen, amateur—" the woman began, turning to Jakus.

"I'm not an amateur!"

"Okay, prove it! Get out there and head 'em off! If you're going to survive on this planet, you've got to be able to take out a handful of Psycho bandits on your own! You've got the rifle! All I have with me's a pistol!"

"Yeah, well, uh . . . How about sending the robot out first?"

"That would *not* be a recommended use of my hardware!" the robot protested shrilly. "My warranty has expired! Helllooooooo!"

Marcus shook his head impatiently. "The robots, they aren't fighters, kid. That's not what they're for."

"Look, *Jakus*," the woman went on, "you want to give me the rifle, *I'll* do it. But you better head back to the spaceport after. You're not going to survive out here without the guts to fight!"

Marcus looked at Jakus, saw him chewing his lower lip. Then the amateur nodded, prepped his rifle, got up, and headed to the door. His voice was hoarse as he said, "I'm goin'."

"Might do just as well to fight from the bus, kid," Marcus pointed out.

"I . . . I'm gonna see if I can sneak up on them, maybe if I nail the big one . . ."

Marcus shrugged and opened the door. It would keep the Psychos busy, anyway.

Jakus stepped outside the bus, looking around, face twitching. Then he headed off around the hummock, hunched over, rifle at the ready to fire from the hip.

Marcus lost sight of him. A few seconds passed. Then he heard a thud, saw a flash of light . . . and something flew over the hummock, falling like a soggy cannonball on the hood of the bus.

It was Jakus's head, blasted from his neck, rolling to stare sightlessly right at Marcus.

"That's not what I meant by 'head them off,'" the woman said dryly. "Damn amateurs."

Marcus sighed. "Dumb kid! Well, anyhow, we know where some of 'em are."

"Dammit, I should've taken his rifle," the woman grumbled, shaking her head in disgust. "How about giving me that shotgun? I'll trade you the pistol. Give you the Vladof back later."

So she knew her weapons. Who the hell was she? "And if you get killed? The Psychos gonna give back to me later? I don't think so, lady. Not a chance."

"Okay, fine. But if we just sit around in here, they're gonna blow this bus up with us in it." She started for the door. "I'm not waiting to be fried in this hunk of junk. While you're enjoying your break, I'm gonna see if I can take a couple out, discourage the scum from getting too close."

"Wait a minute, dammit! We'll go together and stick close to the bus. Come on."

Hefting the shotgun, Marcus went out the door first; she followed behind, pistol ready.

"I'll stay here and keep an eye on things in the bus!" the Claptrap called after them. "Ah-ha, yes. This seat needs cleaning, by the way. I'll make a note of it."

Marcus looked around, but the Psychos were keeping their heads down. He pointed to a spot where she could hunker behind a low boulder, on the right side of the hummock, and she nodded, moving quickly to station herself there.

He climbed over the still-steaming front bumper of the truck to get to the other, stepped onto the ground, and saw a Psycho bandit coming around the hummock, bent from the waist and surprised to see him waiting there.

He fired the shotgun almost point-blank and exploded the bandit's head from his shoulders.

"A head for a head," Marcus muttered as the bandit flopped dead at his feet.

He heard a noise and looked up to see another bandit, this one with a scar slashed across his bare chest in an X shape.

The bandit fired spasmodically, the round going over Marcus's shoulder, and jumped back at Marcus fired. Marcus's shot missed him, but then he heard the *crack-crack* of the woman's pistol. Just as he'd hoped, the bandit had backed into her firing line.

Marcus didn't bother to check. That woman knew what she was doing.

He grabbed the first bandit's weapon, then turned to look at the bus—and swore. The shot that missed him had smashed into the severed head on the bus's hood, blasted it to pieces, scattered the remains all over what was left of the windshield and inside.

"Gonna be cleaning up messes till sunrise," he said. He climbed back over the bumper and went to look for the woman.

On the other side of the hummock, he glimpsed a flash of light, a blinking outline of a woman that was there and gone—and a Psycho staggering back, lightly wounded. The Psycho dived behind a small outcropping of blue stone.

Where was the woman? It'd looked as if she'd gone invisible for a moment . . .

No, he must've been wrong. It was dusk, starting to get dim and shadowy. He must have been seeing

things.

~~Then she was there, behind, tapping him on the shoulder. “We’d better get in the bus.”~~

He opened his mouth to ask her about what he’d seen, but she turned away from him in a way that suggested she didn’t want any questions. He mutely followed her back to the bus.

What was going on? Had he really seen her vanish? How had she reappeared behind him?

They climbed into the bus and closed the door.

“Am I . . . am I safe now?” the Claptrap asked.

Marcus ignored the robot. He checked the ECHO—no new messages had come through. But Scooter had been clear that he was sending help, and despite his eccentricities, Scooter was usually dependable.

He carried his shotgun to a seat a few rows back and settled in where he had the best cover. Keeping his head low, he peered through the louvered windows, seeing no movement. “I don’t see anybody. You wounded that Bruiser, as you figured earlier . . . and wounded that Psycho . . .”

The woman nodded as she sat across the aisle from him. “Yeah—I figure they’ll be licking the wounds.”

“That’s disgusting!” the Claptrap called out.

“It’s only an expression,” she said absently. Adding to Marcus, “They’ll be patching themselves up, thinking about how to go at us. Probably be near dawn before they make a move.”

Marcus nodded. “That’s my instinct. With luck, Scooter’ll get someone here to help us by then.”

Time passed—maybe not much. A minute felt like an hour as they waited for another attack.

Finally, the woman said, “Well . . . I don’t think I can sleep. Know any stories?”

“Yes, *do* tell a story!” the Claptrap shrilled. “Do you know the story about the Brave Little Claptrap?”

The woman rolled her eyes. “Anyway, you were mentioning Gynella . . . and Roland. I’m curious about that.”

“Are you?” What was her interest in Gynella and Roland? “Okay. I’ve got a few supplies in the bus. We can have something to eat, a drink, and I’ll tell you a story. A true story. As far as I know. It’s about Roland and what happened when he and Mordecai and Brick got together and . . . ah! That happened a ways back but then again, not so very long ago. It started, as so many stories do, at Fyrestone. On a certain day, when Roland showed up there, looking for someone in particular . . .”



Squinting against the noon light glancing off scrap metal, Roland jumped out of his scratched, dented, blast-blackened outrunner. He looked down Fyrestone's sunbaked, dusty main street with a certain feeling of disbelief.

He could hardly believe he was back *here* again.

A lot of Fyrestone looked like an aboriginal camp, with circular huts and lodges, but made out of rust-streaked metal, many of them with gatelike steel doors and big numbers painted on the sides. Some appeared to be made from parts of old surplus spacecraft and assorted junk, welded together into the vague shapes of shops and impromptu dwellings; others looked prefab, probably brought there by prospectors and Vault Hunters, kits assembled by robots. Nobody'd made any effort at decoration; there were more graves than there were people.

What a hole.

But somehow, he thought as he strolled down the street, hand on his shotgun stock holding the gun barrel casually on his shoulder, *everything seems to start here.*

And it was here, he'd heard, that he'd find Skelton Dabbits, the mining engineer who'd gotten hold of the orbital scans, if Roland's source in New Haven was to be believed. Energy signatures on the engineer's purported scans indicated crystalisks, out past the Eridian Promontory.

Roland was crystalisk hunting. They were part of his retirement plan. He was thinking of making a bundle on Eridium crystals, using the moolah to get to Xanthus—a watery world, as different a planet from this one as he could imagine. He wanted to look up some old friends. Maybe start a sport-fishing business. He used to like to go sport fishing for the big ones, back on the homeworld. And he'd had a bellyful of Pandora.

But that kind of lifestyle change was going to take money. Crystalisks might just provide the scratch he needed.

Asking around, Roland was directed to a small, hemispherical, metal-mesh hut on a side trail—you couldn't really call it a street—off the main drag of Fyrestone.

He found Skelton Dabbits sitting out front in the sunshine, using a large skag skull as a stool. Dabbits was a spindly little man in mining togs that were too large for him; they hung on him as if he were a coat rack. The hair on his bald, freckled head was wispy, and so was his beard. He was alternately drinking from a flask and chewing smoked Primal testicles. He looked up at Roland through his green-tinted goggles, seeming unsurprised to see him—must have gotten the message Roland had sent through Scooter.

Dabbits asked, "You *him*?"

"I'm Roland, if that's the him you mean."

"That's the him! Roland!"

"You Skelton Dabbits?"

"If that's the me you mean. Skelton Dabbits is me all over! You care for some of this?" He offered the flask. "Got some real sweet little narco oil mixed in it. Might make you nod a bit."

“No thanks. How much for the scans?”

Dabbits cringed a little and looked up and down the side street. Almost whispering, he said, “Keep your voice down about that, mister! I had to steal those babies from my last employer. As for how much, that is a matter for consideration, and I’m still considering it.” He saluted Roland with his flask, took another pull on it, and his head drooped a little. He seemed to stare off into the sky, as if he could see through the atmosphere to another planet entirely . . .

“Dabbits!” Roland said sharply.

His head jerked up. “What? Where?”

“*The scans*, man. How much?”

“I told you . . . I’m considering on that. They won’t go cheap. Took a big risk. I don’t know if they found out I broke into that mainframe and printed ’em out. If they did, the bastards at Dahl will come after me. But see, they fired me, and that wasn’t fair, no justice in it, so I stole those scans to get my own back.”

Roland wondered how reliable Dabbits could be. “What you get fired for, exactly?”

“Oh, they said I was a narco head. Just because I nodded off while I was flying the prospecting hopper and it crashed into a . . . well, we don’t need to talk about that.”

Roland shrugged. “I’ll give you three hundred for the scans, sight unseen.”

“Three hundred! No screekin’ way, bucko! I took a big chance, putting the word out down here about those crystalisk readings. There’s big money in it, you’ll get rich off ’em, and you’ll be laughing that you got the scans off an old fool for a pittance and a penny.”

“If there’re such big riches in it, why don’t you go claim it yourself?”

“Because it’s dangerous territory! For one thing, General Goddess is right in the way. And she’s shooting down anything that flies over. Orbital shuttles won’t take you there, nor hoppers. Too dangerous. You got to go overland. I look like I could make that trip? I’m an engineer, not a fighter. Soon’s I sell these scans, I’m getting off this hellhole of a world, and I know a nice, quiet planet where they got some righteous narcoweed growing wild. Why, you can pick it like posies—”

“Dabbits? I’ll make it five hundred.”

“Five hundred? Why, that’s not half enough to pay my way!”

Another five minutes of haggling, and they settled on a thousand. Roland paid him, declined the bundle of Primal testicles Dabbits wanted to throw in on the deal, and took his scans back to the outrunner.

Back on the sunny main drag, Roland sat in the driver’s seat—the outrunner was a two-seater, apart from the support for the turret gunner behind—and spread the semitransparent scan sheets out on his lap, holding them below the line of sight of anyone who might be looking his way. He squinted at the scan map and nodded to himself. The crystalisk den—biggest concentration of the creatures yet found on the planet—was marked in Dabbits’s shaky handwriting. Roland knew enough about energy signatures to recognize the flare lines Dabbits had circled. It sure looked authentic—Eridium that moved around, seemingly migrated. That meant crystalisks.

Trouble was, the entrance to the den complex was southwest of the Eridian Promontory, the other side of a lot of desert and a big mountain range. And it was true there weren’t any hoppers going that way. Dabbits was right—he was going to have to go overland by outrunner. That’d put him right up to his neck in bandits, and maybe the army of General Goddess. Bandits he could handle. Bandit armies? He’d need a couple of solid fighters along to help him with that.

Last he knew, Brick was over in the settlement on Jawbone Ridge, acting as a bodyguard to some mining agent. That’d be a start. Hell, Brick was a couple of guys all in one.

If Roland brought Brick in, he’d have to split his profits with him, but judging by the flare-line strength, there should be plenty of Eridium crystals to go around.

Smartun was waiting for his Goddess.

A man of medium height, intense black eyes, and otherwise unremarkable features, Smartun leaned against a wall in the shade of the Devil's Footstool coliseum. Gynella had converted the rickety coliseum atop the Footstool to a kind of temporary fortress.

Heart thudding with anticipation, Smartun waited for Gynella, outwardly calm, arms folded across his metal breastplate. Rakks wheeled and wended, not far above the narrow windswept butte of naked stone. He looked off to his right, past the edge of the cliff and across the burning white desert floor below the top of the Devil's Footstool—the Salt Flats.

Heat shimmered up off the flatlands, a long way below the high, columnar, chop-top pinnacle of the Footstool; the far horizon was blurred by heat, dust, and, perhaps, an unknown murk given off by sheer desperation.

Smartun heard a muffled shout and looked across the parade ground at the barracks. They were getting restless in there. The barracks was a fairly new construction, a big Quonset-shaped metal building, housing Gynella's core militia of two hundred soldiers.

The wind sighed and lifted skirls of dust from the parade ground—and then the metal door of the new First Division quarters banged open, and the Psycho bandits and other thugs who'd joined the Division began to troop noisily out, hooting and muttering standard imprecations.

Smartun snorted to himself. For better or worse, they were his people now. Mostly for the worse. Certainly it would be for the worse if *she* weren't around.

He was a relative newcomer to the planet. Wanted for cat burglary, pocket vacuuming, and human trafficking on Red Ferrous Three and for Egregious Sneaking and Corrosive Treachery on the Mudball Colonies, he'd fled to the one planet law enforcement had given up on. Unlike the Psychos and the Bruisers and the other demented thugs of the Pandoran backcountry, he had not been there long, hadn't been damaged and mutated by the curious radiation of the Headstone Mine, the subtle emanation of Eridium-based devices, or the warping effect of Vault obsession. In consequence, Smartun's brain worked fairly well, despite his sociopathy, and he was usually able to think things through. Hence his fellow expatriates—abandoned criminals who'd become the various Psychos of Pandora—knew him as Smartun, for “the smart one,” and he had almost forgotten the name he'd been given at birth: Albatoir Anzlesnass. Forgetting that name was a development to his liking.

Smartun nodded a polite greeting to Flugg, the much-scarred Bruiser whom Gynella had made into a sergeant, as Flugg swaggered out to inspect the troops. The sergeant only glowered back and, waving his rusty hatchet, snarled instructions at the Psychos and the other bandits, the human debris that the General Goddess had gathered up into her First Division army. They were a ragtag bunch, and like most of the wild bandits on Pandora, they wore no shirts; they were muscularly ripped, randomly deformed, foul-smelling, some wearing goggles and masks.

But there was one concession to military uniformity. On each man's chest was an image, tattooed or worn in a crude banner in place of a shirt, of the letter G, in scarlet, somehow made to resemble a skull viewed in profile, under which were the silhouettes of rifles crossed like crossbones.

It took several minutes, but Flugg managed to get the troops lined up in five almost orderly rows facing the entrance to the coliseum fortress. Not a moment too soon, for then the double doors of the fortress creaked open, and out strode Gynella herself, the “General Goddess” of the Army of Pandora. Gynella was at least a head taller than Smartun and more broad-shouldered, muscular, physically powerful—but she was perfectly proportioned, a beautiful golden-skinned woman with flowing flaxen hair, glinting almond-shaped emerald eyes, full red lips that needed no cosmetic in an oval, strong-boned face that seemed perfectly shaped for a man to cup in his hands. She wore a silken red cape and

a tight, plunging, lightly armored bodice of black and silver, emblazoned in red with her skullish and crossed-rifles symbol. Her powerful tanned thighs—he had to avert his eyes from those, as the sight made him feel faint with desire—were set off by knee-high scarlet and black boots and the black edges of a metallic blue microskirt. Holstered on her right hip was an Eridian pistol; on her left was a short sword in a silver scabbard. Her long-fingered hands were gauntleted in black and leather, exposing only her bloodred fingernails. She clicked those nails now on the metal of her skirt, as she stood with her hands on her full hips, gazing at the core cadre of her army.

Gods above and devils below, he thought. I adore her.

At her side was the cadaverous Dr. Vialle, dressed in a white smock and rubber gloves and dingy, bloodstained white trousers. Close behind them came her hulking bodyguard, Runch Menzes, whom Smartun believed to be a creation of Dr. Vialle. There were clues to Runch's laboratory origins in the facts that his bulging eyes were set so wide they were nearly on the side of his head, his mouth was but a wide slit that almost bisected his great, thick, scaly head, and his right arm ended in something like a crustacean's pincer instead of a hand. More to the point, Runch's mouth, when opened wide enough, could extrude acid-dripping insectile mandibles. As if to make up for his physical hodgepodge, Runch wore an elaborate uniform, designed by General Goddess herself, made of shiny dark blue leather and gun-metal links. On his chest was the ever-present symbol, stenciled across the links. Vialle wore Gynella's symbol, too, in the form of a pendant. Smartun himself wore the insignia stenciled across his chest, in red, on the bullet-resistant breastplate he'd brought along from Red Ferrous Three.

Smartun took a respectful step toward Gynella, carefully not coming too close, aware of Runch's bulging eyes watching his every move.

Saluting crisply, Smartun said, "First Division is present and accounted for, my General."

He barely managed not to stammer as he said "my General," trembling with the phrase's implication of her being *his*. As if she could be his, in any sense at all. He lived for Gynella, his General Goddess . . .

She nodded to him. "Very good, Lieutenant."

He adored her imperiousness, the sense of entitlement that she wore as flaringly as the red cape, the way the delicacy of her flaxen eyelashes contrasted with the hard slice of her gaze as she inspected his charges.

He would die for her, of course. But he had other hopes. Foolish dreams they were, perhaps, since she hadn't given him much reason to hope. But if he served her one way, could he not serve her another?

She took one graceful but decisive step toward the men, into the sunlight, so that the metallic highlights of her armored décolletage shot out glints. Her troops ogled her shamelessly, gazing at her as if hypnotized, their reeking collective breath rolling out from their gaping mouths as they waited for a pent-up expectation. Slowly she raised her right hand to the medallion she wore around her neck—just a mere circle of platinum on a silver chain, with a grid in its center, but an object of great significance. And when she touched it, the men all groaned softly, in concert.

The medallion contained the Acti Tone, the locus of her control over them. But she merely tapped it, as if absentmindedly, with the nail of her index finger as she spoke, her deep, sensuously resonant voice carrying easily across the parade ground.

"Men of the First Division! You have chosen to leave the chaos and misery of your former lives, for a life of meaning, a life of order—and of power!"

The word *power* elicited a roar of approval from them.

"Quiet, you scum!" bellowed Sergeant Flugg.

Gynella, their General Goddess, went on. "And so, to bring order and lawfulness and profit for those of us who bring it, to make this planet peaceful and ourselves rich . . ."

Another roar of approval at the word *rich*.

~~“We shall expand our numbers. We shall move onward! We shall take more territory! Today prepare yourselves for the attack we shall carry out tonight, on a prosperous . . .”~~ She hesitated knowing that many of them didn’t know what that word meant. “A rich new settlement that will give us more troops, more resources, more weapons, more land . . . and some women to entertain the very bravest of my soldiers!”

Oh, Lord, but she’s ruthless, Smartun thought approvingly, as her men roared lustily. *Truly goddess.*

“And now,” Gynella boomed. “Will you follow me into battle?”

As usual, the First Division shouted in unison, “We will!”

“And will you fight to the death for the banner of a new world?”

“*WE WILL!*”

“Then . . .” She grinned sharkishly, her fingers going to the circle of metal around the grid on her medallion. The men moaned in anticipation. They knew what was coming. “*THEN FEEL MY LOVE!*”

And with that, she pointed a finger at the men, while with the other hand she twisted the dial on the device, and the ActiTone chimed like a bell made of thin diamond. The sound seemed to gather strength, to amplify across the Devil’s Footstool; the very air quivered visibly with it. She made her arm quiver, giving the impression that the impulse was traveling from her pointing finger.

All of the men standing before her, including the sergeant, fell to their knees, groaning with pleasure, hips bucking, eyes rolling, saliva dripping from their open mouths, as the ActiTone activated the pleasure centers of their brains.

Smartun, however, felt nothing from the ActiTone. He had not been treated with the susceptibility drug the way the others had. Gynella and Dr. Vialle, who had come together from Kali Four half galaxy away, had brought the ActiTone and thousands of doses of the SusDrug, as Vialle called it, stolen from the Dahl Corporation’s chemicals research lab. Homeworld Security had pursued them and lost the trail.

Smartun had taken up with Gynella the moment he saw her; he adored her already. He didn’t need the drug with a vibratory trigger. It had worked on the Psychos they’d captured. It had allowed her, bit by bit, to build up a small army. It might allow her to take over the planet.

Gynella switched off the ActiTone, and the men fell on their faces, gasping and spent, murmuring her name. “Gynella . . .”

One of them surprised Smartun. The biggest Psycho brute of the bunch, a one-eyed, noseless murderer called Splonk, got up and staggered toward Gynella. “More!” he said. “Want you! Want . . . your . . .”

The other men looked up with a mix of horror and fascination as the big brute stalked swaying toward their General Goddess.

The sergeant and her bodyguard and Smartun—all three at once—started to block the oncoming Splonk. But Gynella made an imperious gesture with a slash of her hand. “No! Let him approach if he dares!”

The men gasped and murmured at that. Was it really possible she would let him touch her? And . . . ?

She waited calmly until Splonk was in reach. She smiled. He reached for her. Her right hand flashed, drawing her short sword. Her body spun in place as she drew it, and as she came back around the blade slashed lightning fast through Splonk’s midsection, right through his waist.

The Psycho Bruiser stopped, gaping, gagging, staring . . . then looked down as she drew out the sword with an expression of contempt. He watched as his entrails slopped onto the ground at his feet.

Splonk sagged to his knees, then fell forward onto his own entrails with a sickening *squish*. The

smell of blood and excrement rose richly from the corpse.

Gynella yawned, then bent, ~~delicately wiped the blade on the Psycho Bruiser's back, and resheathed it as she straightened up.~~ "You others—back to your barracks. Rest! We fight tonight!"

She flicked a hand at them, and they backed away, then turned and went mutteringly, sated and exhausted, into the barracks. Smartun called to Sergeant Flugg, who turned from the barracks door with a look of resentment that was so plain it could've been a hand-painted sign. Flugg passionately hated taking orders from Smartun. "Yes, Lieutenant?"

Smartun pointed at the reeking cadaver of Splonk. "Clean up that mess, Sergeant. Feed it to the skags in pen three."

Flugg looked as if he wanted to snarl a refusal, but he glanced at Gynella, saw the look in her eyes, and gave Smartun a sloppy salute. "Sure thing, Lieutenant."

Gynella turned to Smartun. "I have a mission for you. Come inside."

Licking his lips, Smartun nodded and followed her into the entranceway to the old coliseum. Vialle followed them; Runch stationed himself in the shade, outside the door, to keep an eye on the barracks.

As the door closed behind them, the metal latch echoing in the bare rusty-steel hallway, she turned first to Vialle. "Doctor, for the first time, the drug failed! Perhaps we're not giving it to them often enough."

"Failed?" He shook his head. "It worked!" he declared in his piping, oily voice. "Even on that one you killed. But human behavior—or, in this case, semihuman behavior—is not entirely predictable. There are always a few variables and oddities, with genetically random degrees of resistance. But you handled it perfectly! The occasional thug with a bit of self-will will be winnowed out, exactly as you did it. I salute your efficiency!" His mouth twisted in a mocking smile as he bowed to her.

"Better increase the dose anyway," she said. "Go on, back to your lab. I want to talk to my special operative."

Special operative. He loved it when she called him that.

"Listen, Smartun," she said, taking a small computer memory tab from a pocket of her skirt. "Take this, put it in your palmer, study the files. Selina cracked Dahl's threat-assessment program for Pandora. We've found a group of people who have to either be recruited or eliminated. First on the list . . . one Lilith." She grimaced and shook her head. "Too powerful, and she'll never submit to my rule. I knew her off-planet. If Lilith comes back to this dirtball, have her assassinated. Immediately. And using every resource at your command! And *don't try to do it yourself*. Get someone expert to shoot her in the back. She's too dangerous to take on headfirst. The second one on the list is a certain Mordecai. He's a crack shot. Might be of use . . . and might be recruitable. Third, there's a Bruiser called Brick."

"I've heard of him."

"Brick would definitely be useful to me—on several levels, I suspect. But if he can't be recruited, see that he's eliminated as well. Still, we'll try the SusDrug on him first. And the last one—you even hear of a mercenary, former military, name of Roland?"

"Big black guy?"

Her nostrils flared. "*Oh* yes. That's him."

Smartun grunted. "I saw him in action once, from a distance, just outside of New Haven. Bunch of raiders jumped him, tried to take his outrunner. Kind of surprising how little time it took him to deal with it. He killed four men in three seconds."

"Exactly! Good-looking galoot, too. I've got surveillance vid of him in action. He really caught my eye."

Smartun didn't like the sound of that. But he kept his expression neutral and said only, "Not my type."

She smiled icily at his feeble joke. “He’s *our* type—a deadly soldier. If we can recruit him, he can make a great subcommander. His military experience would be quite useful.”

“And suppose he can’t be recruited? Suppose he resists the SusDrug—and anything else you might offer.”

“Oh,” she said, shrugging airily as she turned to walk toward the door of her headquarters. “If Roland refuses us, if he truly resists . . . then see that he’s killed. But kill him with respect. A nice clean head shot.”



This town, Roland thought, striding down the rubbishy street, makes Fyrestone look like an urban paradise.

Jawbone Ridge was a crusty, dusty, trash-strewn settlement of shacks, humplike cement bunkers, retrofitted mining trailers, and tents on a long, wide ledge of rock just under a toothy, jawbone-like ridgetop of dull red stone. Come to think of it, Roland figured, you couldn't really say it was a settlement. More like one of those vacant lots where debris piles up, just gets blown there by the wind. The gritty wind of the desert had brought the town mostly shady con men, out-of-work thugs, failed miners, itinerant drunks—Jawbone Ridge was known for its numerous liquor stills—and a few shopkeepers. The shopkeepers, Roland saw, had slammed their steel shutters down to coincide with sunset. It seemed they were afraid of something. The sun wasn't quite down completely, but already the place was shut up tight—except for the Steel Incisor Saloon down at the end of the road. The boozing dive was made of pieces of old mining machines, trucks, earthmovers, and robots, all cobbled together, welded into the boxy shape of a building like a wrongly made jigsaw puzzle.

Roland put a hand on the Hyperion Invader automatic pistol holstered to his right hip and headed down the street to where light spilled out the open front door of the saloon and someone giggled madly from within.

So far, asking around the area, he hadn't been able to find Brick. He'd seen a wanted poster of him put up by Atlas—the Atlas Corp. was mad at him for something or other. He'd spotted a place where a wall looked as if it had been punched right through—Brick liked to punch through wanted posters. But no Brick himself, not in person.

If Brick worked as a bodyguard for a mining boss, where was the mine? The only mining concern left in the area might not be in the town itself. So where was it—and where was Brick?

Instead of Brick, he found Mordecai. Roland stumbled right across him, literally, as he walked through the door of the Steel Incisor Saloon. He tripped over the groaning, prostrate figure of the legendary Pandora gunman.

“Ow!” Mordecai said.

“Sorry,” said Roland, leaning over to help him stand—which wasn't hard, since Mordecai was a lean little guy. Lean but wiry, and dangerous. He had a pointed black beard, a leather helmet, and goggles; unruly black hair thrust like a rooster tail out the back of the helmet. “Didn't see you there, Mordecai.”

“Not you with the ow. *Them!* They smashed two bottles over my head. At once. One each.”

Mordecai pointed at two women standing at the bar across the room—like everything else in the saloon, it was made of random rusty metal parts. One of the women was short and stocky, with 'roided, heavily tattooed bare arms; she wore a sleeveless camo-patterned paramilitary outfit with a red *G* stenciled on it; under the *G* was the outline of crossed rifles. She was shaved bald, and her eyes were hidden in dark wraparound sunglasses; her broad face was tattooed with two blue lightning bolts. Her teeth gleamed with gold, and she was toying with a big serrated knife as she looked Roland over.

Towering over her was a big, gangly, awkward-looking woman, the tallest woman Roland had ever seen. ~~She had leanly muscled arms that seemed too long for her body, her big hands ending in curved, implanted steel talons; her hair was spiky gray, and her face was long, too long, her eyes like blots of darkness, her mouth froggish and crookedly outlined in lipstick; she wore a low-cut armored top showing pendulous breasts that hung to her waist.~~

She also looked Roland over and made a contortion of her mouth, a twisting that was probably intended as a smile, baring filed yellow teeth. “Hey, sweet thing,” the big woman said.

“Uh . . . hi,” Roland said.

“That’s Broomy,” Mordecai muttered.

Roland gulped. He’d heard of Broomy. “Why they call her Broomy, anyway?” he asked in a whisper.

“You don’t wanna know. Her pal there, her name’s Cess.”

Broomy turned around and ordered a drink from someone Roland couldn’t see. “Gimme a KK!” she snarled, her voice grating. When she turned her back, he saw she wore a crude, badly stitched cap with a skullish G and crossed guns on it.

“Yuh, yuh, a Kerosene Kooler, here ya go!” piped up the Claptrap robot bartender, reaching up from the other side of the bar to pass over a seething mug of green fluid. Broomy grabbed the drink, splashing half of it on the bar, and drank thirstily.

“Come on back and have another bottle on us, Mordecai!” called Cess, laughing, waving a bottle of yellow liquor. “This time I’ll let you drink from it instead o’ bathin’ in it!”

Mordecai rubbed his head ruefully. “Good thing I had my helmet on. Just stunned me. Then Broomy tossed me over here.”

“What’d you do to piss her off?”

“It’s what I *wouldn’t* do.” He looked at Roland’s pistol. “Nice Invader autopistol. Modified with the scope and everything, huh? I had one, but a skag ate it. Almost took my arm with it.”

“I don’t see a weapon on you. You don’t look natural without a gun.”

“Got a static Cobra burstfire leaning over against that table right there. And a couple grenades. Anyway, Bloodwing’s here. He’s got my back—*usually*.”

Mordecai looked up at the metal rafters and whistled. Something creaked and fluttered up there, then came flapping down to land on his shoulder. “Some use to me *you* were, pal,” he told the creature, “letting them blindsides me like that.”

Bloodwing made a raspy sound and ducked its head, seeming to laugh. It was a vulturine, leather-winged animal, its head deathly white, its eyes lurid red-orange, its beak the color of steel and almost as tough; it had enormous talons, which Roland had seen put to good use tearing the face off a bandit.

“Yeah, very funny, Bloodwing,” Mordecai said. Bloodwing took to preening itself on its master’s shoulder. Mordecai took a medical vial from a pocket, drank the solution off in one gulp to erase the pain from the blows he’d taken on the head, and turned to Roland again. “What’re you up to here?”

“Looking for Brick. Seen him?”

“Saw some broken walls and broken bodies that have his stamp on ’em, you might say. There’s a mine out east of the settlement; that’s where he hangs out, I’d guess. If he’s still guarding the mine from bandits.”

“East, huh? Due east?”

“Yeah, pretty much. But anything Brick can do I can do better—and I need a job.”

“*Anything* he can do, Mordecai? Really? How about picking up an outrunner and throwing it at somebody?”

“Okay, not anything, but a lot. Did he really do that?”

“According to rumor. I guess you’d be a help on this mission. Come along, then. I’ll give you the

lowdown later. A good long-range shot might be more useful than—”

“Are you nutless wonders going to come over here and give us some action or *not*?” Broomy demanded, her voice so raucous it made Bloodwing’s sound melodious.

“Or *not*, I’d say,” Roland muttered, looking at Broomy and Cess.

“You guys are in my damn way,” said a woman’s voice behind him.

He turned to see a small but heavily armed woman. She was black-eyed, pale, and unpretentious pretty, with short, glossy jet-black hair. There was a combat rifle slung across one shoulder, two knives in a V of sheaths worked into her tight-fitting skag-leather jumpsuit, and on each hip was a pistol. Her bare arms were spiraled with tattoos of words in a language he didn’t recognize. With her was a scar-faced, spiky-haired redhead in black leather, strapped with a dozen throwing knives plus a pistol on each side of her wide hips. The redhead returned his stare for stare.

Roland stepped out of their way with a mock bow, and the two women sauntered to the bar.

“I kinda like the look of that black-haired one,” Mordecai murmured. “Never saw her before. The other one’s part of Gynella’s gang—her so-called army—like those two at the bar.”

“Gynella, huh? I’ve heard something about her . . . but what I don’t get is where all these women are coming from. Four women in one room—on *this* planet? Most I’ve ever seen in one place.”

“Yeah, well, General Goddess has a cadre of fighting women, her special forces. Some of the bunch’re on leave, they tell me.”

Roland nodded. The way he’d heard it, the army of General Goddess was right in his way. It’d be good to find out more about them. “Come on. Let’s suss this out.”

He crossed to the bar, he and Mordecai both stepping over a dead man he hadn’t seen before, half hidden in a pile of rubbish.

“Who’s the stiff?” Roland asked, almost whispering.

“Some miner. He said no to Broomy too,” Mordecai said out of the side of his mouth. “Only he wasn’t as nice about it.”

“Ladies, let’s have a drink,” Roland said as he stepped up to the bar. “This bottle’s on me. But not the way you put one on Mordecai. I need my skull in one piece.” Broomy cawed laughter at that, and he tossed a small stack of paper money onto the rusty metal countertop. The Claptrap, barely visible behind the counter, snatched the money and rolled away to make drinks. “I’ll have whatever they’re having,” Roland added, although he didn’t plan to actually drink any of the swill they sold here.

Broomy was already swaying—she closed her right eye as she peered at him with the left; then she closed her left eye and peered at him with the right. It was hot in the Steel Incisor, and the smell of Broomy, of rancid sweat, was hard to take. Roland edged away a little and glanced past her at the other two women, who were in close conversation with Cess.

“What makes you think you got what it takes to soldier up with General Goddess?” Cess demanded, looking at the pretty one with the short black hair with evident suspicion.

“Oh, Daphne’s okay, Cess,” the redhead said, eyeing Roland. “She’s changing over to our side. Ain’t working with that big lug at the mine anymore . . .”

“I didn’t ask you, Khunsuela,” Cess growled.

Khunsuela shrugged and swaggered over to Roland, who was pretending to drink his Kerosene Kooler.

So her name is Daphne, he thought, looking at the compact woman in the tight skag-leather outfit.

He suspected she might be the notorious Daphne Kuller. He’d never run across Kuller the Killer himself, but rumor in New Haven said she was a small woman, lithe and quick, a feared hired assassin used by intergalactic criminal gangs against other intergalactic criminal gangs. The Daphne he was thinking of had come to Pandora a couple of years back to hide out from some gangsters who’d taken it a little too personally when she killed their boss. If this was her, it seemed Daphne Kuller was

looking to sign on with Gynella.

~~“I can handle myself, Cess,” Daphne said, shrugging. She sipped her drink and made a face at the mug. “What the fuck is that? It’d gag a trash feeder.” She put the mug down and pushed it away.~~

~~“Say, uh, big guy,” Broomy said, sidling up to Roland, clacking her drink down on the bar. “Howzabout we—”~~

~~“Hey, Broomy, I was just about to make my move!” Khunsuela snapped, shoving herself in between Broomy and Roland. “Back off!” Khunsuela put her hand on Roland’s arm and spoke purringly to him. “Come on, let’s get in my outrider. I know a place where there’s decent drinks, narcojuice, anything you want.”~~

~~“Easy, ladies,” Mordecai said, jeering. “There’s enough of him to go around. How about if you boys take him on at once? One of you could straddle him while the other—”~~

~~“Mordecai?” Roland said. “Shut up.”~~

~~Khunsuela was running her fingers up Roland’s arm. “Nice muscle sculpturing there, big fella—”~~

~~She broke off, gasping, as Broomy’s enormous hands, coming from behind, closed around her throat, squeezing.~~

~~“Bitch!” Broomy snarled into her ear.~~

~~Then she bit Khunsuela’s ear off and spat it out. Roland had to duck the bleeding ear as it flew by.~~

~~While he was ducked down, he noticed a minicom almost coming out of Broomy’s side pocket. The miniature computer and communicator might just have some data on Gynella’s movements, since Broomy was in Gynella’s inner cadre . . .~~

~~Khunsuela shrieked, claspng the bloody rags of her ear with one hand and with the other she pulled a knife and stabbed it deep into Broomy’s wrist.~~

~~Broomy roared, her back arching, her grip loosening so that Khunsuela was able to break free, gasping, spinning on her heel, and whipping out two throwing knives.~~

~~Distracted by pain, Broomy didn’t feel it when Roland tugged the minicom from her pocket.~~

~~He got out of the way just in time to avoid being caught in the crossfire as Broomy pulled a small Maliwan Firehawk pistol from under a breast and opened up with it, firing repeatedly. A knife just missed Broomy’s head; another chunked into her left shoulder and stuck, but she didn’t seem to notice it—she was too busy shooting holes in Khunsuela’s throat. One of the shots glanced off Khunsuela’s shield, making it sparkle with the impact, but the shield ended at her collarbone. Above that she was unprotected.~~

~~Khunsuela staggered back, choking on her own blood, and fell over a steel spool that was being used as a table. She thrashed on the floor, spitting out bloody phlegm.~~

~~Roland looked the dying redhead over, wondered if he could maybe get her some Dr. Zed, help her get out, but it was too late; her eyes were already glazing.~~

~~“Broomy, that’s gonna piss Gynella off,” Cess observed. “She just got that girl trained!”~~

~~“I don’t give a dirty damn!” Broomy hissed, jerking the knife out of her shoulder. She threw the knife at the spasming Khunsuela. Grunting with pain, Broomy pocketed her pistol and poured green liquor over the wound in her shoulder. “Ouch, shit! Anyway, I *had* to shoot ’er. She was tryin’ to knife me when all I was doing was givin’ her a little warning choke. I wouldn’t’ve *killed* her. Prob’ly.”~~

~~“What about *her*?” Cess asked, nodding toward Daphne, who’d been coolly watching the fight.~~

~~Roland noticed that Mordecai was staring hungrily at Daphne.~~

~~“You know what?” Daphne said. “Forget it. I don’t join up with people who sneak up behind their own crew, start in choking them over a *man*.”~~

~~She started for the door, walking casually, unhurried. Mordecai hurried after her, so quickly that Bloodwing was startled into the air, to flap around over them in ragged circles.~~

~~“Daphne!” She turned to Mordecai, frowning, as he said, “Wait! How about if, uh, we offer you~~

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