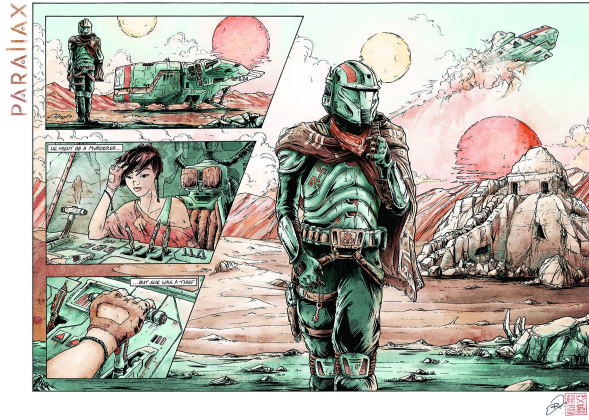


PARALLAX



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Parallax

Noun

- the effect whereby an object appears to differ when viewed from different positions

The light of two giant suns filled the cockpit as they came out of light-speed. Ayre looked out at the planet beneath them. O'rek looked like a giant marble infused with jets of red, yellow and orange paint. Mammoth mountain ranges snaked through vermillion deserts, creating beautiful patterns of black and gray across the surface.

She had never seen a planet before.

During the hyper-light voyage, it was too dark to discern the features of her travelling companion. Now, in the glow of the dual suns, she saw him clearly.

Cassidy, the captain and sole crewman of the *Canso Coyote*, was like no one she'd ever seen before. He wore a wide-brimmed brown hat, encircled by a serpent she didn't recognize. His clothes were clean and unwrinkled. Ayre grew up on Taiden 4-14, and twelve-hour shifts in the iron mines left a perpetual layer of grime on everybody.

A shiny silver gun hung from his hip in a leather holster. At least, she *thought* it was a gun. The blasters she'd seen at the small mining colony were angular and matted. Cassidy's had a long, thin barrel and a rounded body.

Ayre had been on the ship for three days, but Cassidy only discovered her that morning, fast asleep in a ventilation duct. She had a talent for

remaining unseen in the shadows. Ayre had spent the last four years alone on Taiden 4-14, sneaking through dark places and scrounging whatever food she could. Her home had been a maintenance hatch in the waste-recycling section. Few people ever visited the steamy, fetid sub-levels, and she'd gone undetected for years. Without the burden of visitors or friends, Ayre spent most of her time reading books she found in the recycling heaps.

Looking at Cassidy now, in the warm light of the two suns, he was less frightening than she imagined. Maybe even someone who'd trust her. That would be nice — to feel trust again — though she knew it wouldn't last.

"Once I'm finished on O'rek, I'll take you back," Cassidy said. Ayre winced at the thought of returning to the dank, rusty mining base.

"I . . . Why can't I stay with you?"

"Deep space ain't no place for children."

"I'm not a child. I'm fourteen."

"Fourteen ain't no grown-up." Cassidy spun the strange gun around his finger and said no more. Ayre crossed her arms in frustration. She would *not* let him dismiss the conversation. This was her chance to go home.

Her *real* home.

"Maybe I'm not a grown-up, but I read a lot about flying and mechanics and stuff. I could help."

"Kids can't fly spaceships," Cassidy scowled. "And I ain't about to let you mess with her innards. Besides, your parents are probably worried sick."

"I don't have parents," Ayre said, and Cassidy frowned. He slid the gun back into its holster and began the landing sequence.

The *Canso Coyote* broke the outer atmosphere with a shuddering impact. It threw Ayre back against her chair, and she gripped the arms to keep from crashing to the floor. The white, wispy clouds transformed into cyclones of red dust that eddied around the ship, and Ayre marvelled at its beauty.

When they landed, she saw nothing but crimson desert stretching to the horizon. The heat of the binary suns was uncomfortable, and she shuddered to think how hot it would be outside the ship. Cassidy shut off the engine and turned to her.

"What happened to them?"

"They died."

"It don't take a genius to know that. What happened?"

"A methane explosion."

Cassidy pursed his lips and remained silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said, leaning back in his chair. Ayre shrugged.

"Happens a lot in asteroid mines."

"Where were they from? Originally."

"Sekla One," she said in a dreamy voice. "I've never been there, though. I was born on Taiden."

Ayre sighed. She had spent most of her life in the gloomy depths of the mining base, dreaming of someday seeing her homeworld.

“Beautiful place, Sekla One. All greens and blues and whites. Not like this damn inferno,” Cassidy said and stared out into the vast desert.

“Do you have a family?”

“Had a wife, once. She’s gone, now.” Ayre sensed melancholy in his voice and changed the subject.

“I don’t think anyone lives here. There’s nothing but sand and rocks,” she said. The heat of the suns was intolerable, and she shifted out of the light.

“I don’t reckon anyone’s lived here for quite some time.”

“So, why are *we* here?”

Cassidy paused a moment, hesitant to confide in his stowaway. With a protracted sigh, he pinched the bridge of his nose and told her.

“I had some . . . financial troubles on Yendys 4E. Got a fondness for card games, you see, and I lost some money. More than some, I s’pose.”

“How much?”

“Let’s just say this ship’s all I got left.”

“So, you came here to hide from someone? The people you owe money to?”

Cassidy studied her again with suspicion. They’d known each other less than a day, and she was asking too many questions. Ayre should be the last person he trusted — for more reasons than one. But if she couldn’t gain his confidence, her escape from Taiden was all for nothing.

“I met a trader on Antigonish Station,” Cassidy finally said, and turned to meet her gaze. He produced a necklace from beneath his shirt and held it up for her to see. On the end of the chain was a shiny, golden key. “Got this from him.”

“What’s it for?”

“He said there’s a place here full of old artifacts. This key’ll get me in.”

“What kind of artifacts?”

“Magic ones, or so he claimed. Said there’s a pendant that’ll grant a man anything he asks for.”

“And he just *gave* it to you? Why?”

“Hard to refuse with three holes in your chest,” Cassidy said and patted his gun.

He murdered a man for that key! Ayre suddenly realized he wasn’t the soft, gentle man she saw in the glow of the suns. Instead, he was again the daunting figure she had known in the darkness of hyperspace. The walls of the cockpit felt like they were closing in on her. The glow of the LED buttons morphed into long, protruding spikes, ready to fill her with holes like the trader on Antigonish. She took a deep breath and steadied herself. *At least he’ll deserve what’s coming.* Cassidy shifted and gave her an uneasy smile.

“Maybe it’d be nice to have some company. For a while, anyhow,” he said. Ayre feigned excitement and returned his smile.

“Really? You’re not sending me back?”

“Don’t get too excited,” Cassidy said. He climbed out of his chair and into a spacesuit. “You’ll need to pull your weight. No one rides for free.”

You’re almost there, Ayre told herself. *Don’t get scared. Not now.* She got up and threw her arms around him.

“Oh! Thank you, Cassidy! I promise I’ll help as much as I can.”

“Take it easy, kid. If this key don’t work, the last place you’ll want to be is on *my* ship.” Cassidy locked his helmet in place and walked into the airlock. “Stay inside. I don’t know what’s out there. Could be dangerous.”

“Will you be long?” Ayre shot a concerned look to the searing environment outside. The air rippled above the red sand like a waterfall that didn’t know which way was down.

“A few hours, maybe.”

When he left, Ayre ran to the cockpit and watched him bounce over the surface. His footprints left deep indentations in the sand, like the tracks of some enormous beast trekking across the desert.

She waited until Cassidy was out of sight and started the engine. A sharp, metallic smell filled the cockpit as the vertical thrusters roared to life. She pulled back on the throttle, and clouds of red sand blasted out from beneath the ship. The intense upward propulsion shook the entire cockpit, and Ayre held her breath.

What if Cassidy was right? What if kids can’t fly spaceships?

When the *Canso Coyote* entered orbit, Ayre let out a sigh of relief. She cut the engines and glanced back toward the surface. It was impossible to see Cassidy from this height, but he deserved a final moment of consideration before she marooned him.

He might be a murderer, but *she* was a thief.

Ayre leaned over the navigation panel and entered the coordinates for Sekla One. With a last glimpse toward the surface, she engaged the engines and jumped to light-speed.