

ALIEN SAFARI

Robert Appleton



Warning! Wildlife may be dangerous. Proceed beyond this point at your own risk.

When celebrated Omicron detective Ferrix Vaughn is called in to investigate a deadly breach on Hesperidia, a protected planet full of indigenous wildlife, he doesn't know what to expect. The place used to be a tourist attraction, but the safari tours were discontinued long ago due to rampant poaching. Only a handful of researchers live there now, including Jan Corbija, the disfigured young woman who reported the breach.

The deeper Vaughn digs, the more the evidence seems to point to a recent raid on a biotech facility in a nearby system. Whatever was stolen from there, it's attracted the attention of major political players in a time of war across the colonies. Vaughn suspects the secret is on Hesperidia, in the hands of the two fugitives who fled the murder scene.

If he wants to get to them first, he's going to need Jan's help. Her *Alien Safari* tour will have to reopen for this final excursion. But to survive it, they'll both need to face their demons, for a predator far deadlier than man roams the wilds of Hesperidia. And this is its killing season.

This way for the ride of your life.

Chapter One

“What’s it called when you wound something and watch it bleed, but you don’t kill it?”

“How should I know? Sport?”

“‘Cause I’m just saying, it’s been a while now, and we’re getting close—”

“Don’t even think it, lad.” Retired freighter captain J.Z. Ricketts parted his long silver hair from his eyes and hurriedly tied it back into his customary tight pony tail. He looked across at his young co-pilot. The lad was close to hyperventilating. Not that he blamed him—the *Kingmaker’s* entire port side was rattling and shimmying like a one-legged loader.

The anonymous chasing vessel had fired once, and only once at the end of a system-long pursuit, disabling the *Kingmaker’s* Revolutions on Anti-Matter engine. But that rupture had ignited a tank full of propulsion fuel, destroying the port tail wing and damn near ripping the shuttle in two. It was a miracle they were so close to a registered world, otherwise they would shortly just have to drift, unpowered, on the eternal floes of deep space.

On second thought, the boy had a point. One shot, one direct hit after such a lengthy chase without any previous firing at all: *was* their proximity to this planet a coincidence? The mysterious pursuers had tried their insane, out-of-the-blue coupling maneuver somewhere between the Herculean planets L-3 and L-4—just a few hundred thousand clicks outside Solzhik space. Then, when that had failed, rather than overtake the *Kingmaker* and force her to stop, they’d harried her, repeatedly pulled alongside her, made ready to snag her by the docking quarters and reel her in.

In hindsight, it didn’t make a lick of sense. The *Kingmaker* had easily avoided those advances, and the bastards had to have known that she would. In the aggregate of over a hundred course corrections, there was method. Imposed method. The old man massaged his furrowed brow over the migraine growing inside.

“They’ve been guiding us here.”

“Come again?”

“And now they’re forcing us to land. They want something we have.”

“Like *what*?” The youngster—Hank, the old man’s new nephew-in-law—traced his painted fingernail over the shapes of several alien glyphs tattooed across his collarbone. A

peculiar habit. Something a lot of the teenagers did nowadays. All the glyphs glowed upon completion of the touch sequence, which sent a nervous message directly to the brain, instructing it to release endorphins. At least that's what J.Z. had heard. Maybe there was more to it. But Hank shivered every time the glyphs glowed, and seemed to like the sensation.

The lad had on a baggy jumpsuit peeled down to the waist, a sweatshirt tied around his waist, and a T-shirt that said, *I Got This Tan From Pyro Canyon*, referencing Fifth Condor Squadron's famous victory over the Finagler invaders, a major turning point in the now decades-long war in the outer colonies.

But despite appearances, he really wasn't the obnoxious idiot others made him out to be. He learned fast, had a flair for vectors, and dug up a sharp bone of wit every now and then, even if he did laugh too hard at his own jokes. Plus, he'd volunteered to co-pilot this taxi cruise as a favor to his sister-in-law—J.Z.'s daughter, who owned the *Kingmaker*—because she might go into labor any day now and couldn't risk flying. All told, a decent enough kid. Shooting far. That was...until today had happened.

"I don't know *what* they want exactly. But they clearly only intended to cripple us, to make sure we'd head for this planet's surface. They need us to land on this particular rock."

"Why didn't they just message us instead? A lot safer than forcing us to land with a crippled engine."

The old man shrugged. "If I was smart enough to figure that out, kid, I wouldn't be here."

"Got to be one of our passengers. Got to be. Maybe it's somebody dangerous, and they don't want to risk a firefight in space. That could finish off both ships if they were coupled. Taking it down to the planet gives them a bigger advantage."

"Could be."

"But who? Chrissakes, we should've vetted them all, shouldn't we. Darcy would have, wouldn't she. Yeah, she'd have flagged anyone dangerous before they ever got near."

The old man ordinarily ate up any praise for his daughter, but right now all it did was remind him of his own incompetence. He was well into retirement, over two decades past his last job as an interstellar courier. And frankly he didn't know the vetting protocol these days. Darcy had asked him to do this as a favor at the last minute, after her regular co-pilot had been grounded by the doctors on suspicion of a degenerative neural disease, maybe early fragmentia; and anyway J.Z.'s wilful only daughter rarely asked him for a favor. Not that he blamed her—he'd been missing for most of her life, away between worlds, between birthdays, with nothing much to show for it now, no long-promised fortune he could give her

in recompense. So he'd made damn sure he helped her out this time, when she was on the verge of giving him a grandchild—his first.

Unfortunately, he'd had *no* time to prep the flight, hadn't even had chance to properly meet the passengers face to face—his way of vetting them back in the day, with intuition, experience.

Right now he could be taxiing anyone.

"Any unusual cargo?"

Hank shuffled in his frayed leather seat. "Not really. Prospecting tools and supplies. Computer equipment. A few pets, A.I. bots, all with legal tags. An old hoverbike. And about three tons of methane seed for terraforming. Pretty standard stuff, I guess."

"I guess so."

The planet's autonomous defensive satellite net broadcasted its warning for the second time:

You are entering restricted space. Unauthorized approach to the planet L-12 is absolutely prohibited. All authorized visitors, transmit your security access code now and await a reply from the planet's personnel before proceeding. Any unauthorized vessel found inside the satellites' perimeter will be fired upon. You have been warned.

"Shit. Send the distress code again," the old man said.

"Done. But you're sure it works against a sat net? I mean those things are designed to make sure *no one* reaches the surface. It's a protected planet. Any approaching ship could broadcast a distress code. How do the sats know we're really in distress?"

"They don't. Someone from the surface has to verify it visually."

"What if no one's home?"

"Then we're bugged. Send it again."

"'K. Are they still tailing us?"

J.Z. checked the rearview monitor. "Still there. Vultures."

"Won't that make things dicey—for us, I mean?"

"How do you mean?"

"When the person on the surface sees us up here, being followed—won't they get suspicious? *Two* ships trying to land, and one clearly isn't in distress?"

"Shit, you're right. If the net suspects we're being shadowed by a hostile ship, it'll blast both ships. I'm going to have to open a channel. Tell them something else. It's our only shot."

The old man opened a channel, and repeated the Herculean planet's ID, vaguely recalling it being mentioned in some news story or other—but he didn't know when or why. "L-12, L-12, this is *Kingmaker*, urgently requesting permission to land. We've damaged our engine. I repeat, we've damaged our engine and can't make it to the next port. The ship following us has parts we need for our repair. Please open up a window in the sat net so we can try an emergency landing. This is *Kingmaker*, urgently requesting permission to land on L-12. Are you receiving me? Over."

"*Kingmaker*, this is L-12 Echo." A woman's voice, cross, with a no-shit Hispanic accent. "What's going on up there? You know I can't let you both through. Who's that following you?"

Hank leapt out of his seat and clasped his hand over the old man's microphone. "Tell her the truth," he said. "Maybe she can tell the sats to blast these assholes for us. It's either that or we don't get through."

"But I've just lied to her."

"So get over it. I thought you had experience with this stuff."

"Not with sat nets. Those things scare the hell out of me."

Hank glared at him, uncovered the mike and made ready to speak—

The old man brushed him aside. "L-12, this is *Kingmaker*. I'm sorry I lied to you—I was afraid you wouldn't let us through. We're in big trouble here. We're being shadowed by a hostile ship. It fired at us and crippled our engine, and seems to want us to land. We don't know why. If you could give us safe passage to the surface—*only* us—would the satellites take out the other ship? Over."

"I don't like the sound of this, *Kingmaker*. You should stay in orbit while I broadcast for help from ISPA. Over."

"Negative, L-12. We're a sitting duck up here. They've fired once, they could fire again if they spot approaching ISPA ships. We have civilian passengers aboard, repeat, civilian passengers. The longer we stay up here, the less chance they have. It's imperative we try for an emergency landing now, while we still can. Don't let the other ship follow us. Over."

After an interminable pause, "*Kingmaker*, I can see you're in trouble. I'm sending a unique access code directly to your ship's CPU. When it arrives, resend it, and you'll have a window to the surface. The sat net will give you, and only you, safe passage. I'll be monitoring your flight path. I'm also broadcasting to ISPA for emergency aid. Good luck, pilot. Over."

"Thank you, L-12. And the other ship? Over."

“It isn’t responding. It’ll have to take its chances. Over and out.”

His kind of woman. But as good as that was to hear—the best news he’d heard all day—he couldn’t escape the feeling that he was doing *exactly* what the mysterious chasing ship had wanted all along.

His liver-spotted hands trembled as he strapped his wrist to the ‘dead man’s handle’ on his seat arm. It monitored his vital signs. In the event he had a heart attack, or his pulse rate hiked above safety limits, the autopilot would engage. No, he didn’t trust AI to land a civilian shuttle unsupervised, let alone a crippled one, and he sure as shit didn’t trust Hank. The lad had done well on the simulators, and was a qualified thermal-glider pilot. But this was a few score tonnes of life or death, a banking, bleeding, tumbling metal casket that would fight you to the end for its right to kill everyone on board. Once it hit the atmosphere, J.Z. would need every synapse of his experience to keep its nose steady, to find a realistic landing zone, and to get it down in one piece.

He was old, but he could do this. Only *he* could do this.

“Look, they’ve turned green.” Hank thrust a tattooed finger at the satellites, a pattern of several flashing objects shaped like bass clefs, in self-adjusting orbit. “We’ll be all right, won’t we?”

“We’ll be fine.”

The lad motioned to his collarbone tattoo, but stopped short when he saw the old man was watching. He fisted his hand several times instead, as if squeezing an invisible stress ball, then took a deep breath. “Should I go make sure the passengers are belted in?”

“No. Don’t open the cockpit door—not for anything, not till we land. We can’t risk anyone getting in here. All it takes is one panicky...” The old man nodded at his young companion’s coolly assenting hand gesture. Gone were the hyperactive movements, the bulging eyes, the near-hyperventilating gasps, the nervous glyph-tracing across his collarbone; the lad was in his steady survival groove, observing, waiting, ready to take what came as it came. J.Z. took heart from that, and suddenly didn’t feel so alone. The lad would make a good co-pilot after all.

“In any case,” added the old man, “if they don’t know to belt up now, they don’t deserve saving.”

Hank patted his skipper on the shoulder. “Not too familiar with modern flight protocol, are we, old timer.”

“I land this thing, all other protocol can go screw itself.” He brought up the recommended flight path overlay on his monitor, then dipped the *Kingmaker’s* nose a few degrees to make

optimal use of its heat shield. Their trajectory might be the crucial factor—he didn't know what damage had been done to the ship's structure, so he had to keep it as compact and streamlined as he possibly could through the turbulent resistance. Tricky, without AI to guide him.

“Hang on.”

A long, thin mesospheric cloud hung in wait below like a taut purple hammock made of cotton wool. The *Kingmaker* reached it in seconds. A ring of blue flame flickered around the expanding nose ablator. It quickly raged and enveloped the cockpit as though someone had turned up a gas jet on a giant stove. It roared, turned yellow, and snapped at the fuselage from all sides.

The buffeting began, those thudding, warping, carking sounds from the rear signifying the planet's atmospheric friction had its own way of shaving scruffy visitors. Any loose or jutting panels would be melted or torn off. Which meant those sections would be exposed. Dangerous. Out of his hands now. The gods of L-12 were here to play—and not to play nice.

The old man held his gaze on the holographic flight path overlay in front of his monitor, making small corrections to the ship's wayward yaw, pitch and roll. The damn thing wanted to spin to starboard and rear up by its tail in the worst way, but his intuitive nudges with the two ranks of three-sixty mini thrusters held her straight and steady. Barely.

A wicked jolt hammered through the *Kingmaker*. It wrenched the old man forward into his harness straps, punched the wind out of him. Before he knew what had happened the ship had flipped over and was banking, dipping through sky the colour of a morning-after bruise. An ocean of dark, flashing clouds waited below.

“Can you right her?” asked Hank, chewing on the collar of his T-shirt.

J.Z. managed it with a deft counteracting adjustment, but only for a few seconds. The ship banked to starboard, went nose-heavy, horribly out of balance. “I think we've lost the tail.”

“Shit. Can we land?”

“It'll be ugly. I'll have slow her as much as I can, try and level her out at a few hundred feet and then hit the landing thrusters on full whack.”

“How high are we?”

“Fifty thousand.”

“I can see brighter sky over there—” The lad pointed starboard, “past the storm.”

“Good thinking.”

The old man wrestled his dying craft through a hundred miles of turbulence, never for a moment doubting he could pull this off. At last he saw green-gray forests and pale savannahs

and the unmistakable sparkles of sun-kissed water. It was a sight almost too beautiful for his weary eyes to take in.

“A water landing?” the lad asked. “Would that be safer?”

“Not really. We don’t know how deep it is. We might go straight to the bottom, and we’ve got passengers sealed inside a damaged ship. I’m going to try for *terra firma*. Keep your eyes peeled for a flat area.”

“Yep.” Hank leaned forward, studying the topography. “You know, I never really thought about it before now, but I’ve decided...”

“Decided what?”

“That being an uncle—you know, it’s not gonna be so bad. I’m gonna try to always look out for him, or her, you know?”

“I was kinda thinking the same thing.”

“About being a grandpa?”

“It’s a first for me, too, kid.”

“Tell me you’re as good as you boast, old timer. Tell me you can land this thing.”

“I am, and I can.”

“Good. That’s real good. ’Cause I think I’ve found us a—” The lad flinched as something dark and bulky fell away beneath them, an object large enough to appear on the ship’s scope. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s come from us. Something from cargo...” The old man mentally rifled through the items Hank had mentioned, and recognised it instantly: “...it’s a hoverbike.”

“Under power, too.”

He glimpsed the riders—two of them, strapped onto the bike—a split-second before twin parachutes flared up from the small chassis. The old skipper’s heart plummeted as he glimpsed the rearview monitor and saw the pursuing vessel, still trailing them, suddenly veer away to pursue the parachute. “Son of a bitch.” He sat up in his captain’s chair, ready to perform the most difficult maneuver of his life, but he couldn’t banish that feeling of incompetence. Not in his flying—he still had the right stuff there—but in goddamn paperwork.

“We should’ve vetted those assholes,” said Hank.

“Yes, we should.”

J.Z. eased the emergency air brake lever into action, to slow their velocity at a manageable rate. The savannah ahead would be tricky with its watering holes and massive herds and dense patches of trees, but it was relatively flat.

He eased the brake again. This time there was a double flash from the circuitry in the gimbal beneath the lever. A tiny thump and a crackle, a little puff of smoke. An electrical short so small that Hank, tracing the alien glyphs across his collarbone once more, didn't even notice it.

The old man felt a baking, searing heat from behind. He heard a deafening *crunch*! A herd of red, leaping lizards sprang away from his descent like the myriad parting droplets in a splash of blood.

At just under a thousand feet, the *Kingmaker* exploded completely, killing everyone on board.

Shortly after, a few miles away, twin parachutes settled on the surface of an alien world. They were untethered.

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About the Author

Robert Appleton is an award-winning author of science fiction, steampunk, and historical fiction. Based in Lancashire, England, he has written over two dozen novels and novellas for various publishers, most recently Harlequin Carina Press. In his spare time he hikes, kayaks, and reads as many adventure novels as he can get his hands on.

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Also available in this series, the adrenaline-fueled prequel to *Alien Safari...*



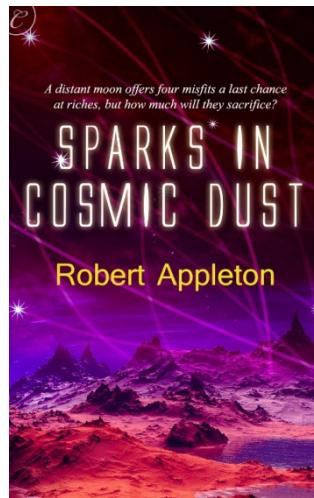
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Alone. Double-crossed. Pursued across thousands of miles of alien desert on his beloved hoverbike, Finnegan is holding onto two things dearer than life itself: the priceless biotech prize he's stolen, and the opportunity for revenge against the treacherous employer who left him for dead. He's never met her, but he knows all about her family, the most ruthless criminal syndicate of the inner colonies.

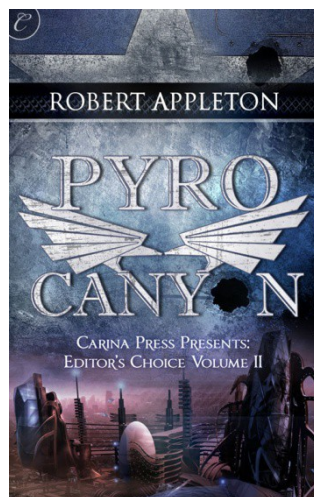
But when he finds a beautiful stranded woman badly wounded in the middle of nowhere, claiming to *be* Lori Malesseur, his employer, he has to make a choice. Either take her across the border and accept her offer of a huge reward, or leave her for dead. She claims she was on her way to warn him when she was ambushed and shot. But can she really be who she says she is?

Trusting one's enemy is not something either of them knows how to do, but when the stakes are this high, going it alone might not be an option. The race for survival is on in this high-octane action adventure that puts the pedal to the metal and doesn't look back.

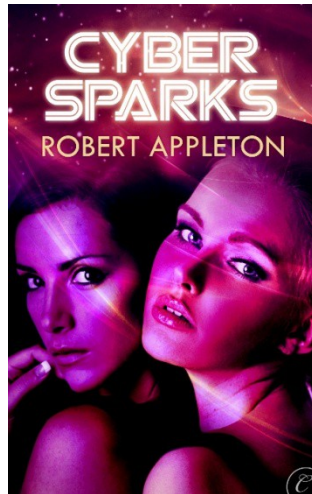
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