

OLD LEGENDS NEVER DIE

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Lost Tavern***On the edge of Silas's Outpost******Novo Tressida******Magistracy of Canopus******The Periphery******5 April 3064***

The man wore his years like a burlesque dancer wears her boa—with panache. The set of his broad shoulders and the upward tilt of his chin let me know power lurked beneath the plain leather vest and recycled military trousers, despite the white mane and shaggy white eyebrows. An equally white flavor-savor mustache topped off the ensemble.

One look from those piercing cat eyes would set most men back in their seats without so much as a word.

But I wasn't a man and I wasn't intimidated.

I polished an invisible speck from the goblet in my hand. "So, Captain. What brings a merc like you to a lonely bar like this?"

The man reeked of trouble—a concoction of Adventure cologne and early morning sweat with a little desert dust thrown in for good measure.

"Your mother," Fortran Merrick said. He eased a leg over the nearest stool and blew out an explosive breath, his face turning a nice radish red. "The woman has me planting desert begonias."

I polished another speck and grimaced. I'd been experiencing similar torture for going on two months now. "That's my mom—Rachel "Show-No-Mercy" Bell, mistress of creative torture."

For years I'd tried to figure out why I loved the woman—Mom and I got along about as well as grease and water. Maybe it was her sparkling green eyes, full of life and ready to dabble in deadly mischief. Maybe it was the simple fact she gave up her pirating and cradled my developing body in her own for nine agonizing months before turning me loose on the universe.

Or maybe I was still just trying to win her approval.

Whatever the reason, when Mom called, I came running.

That's why I'd agreed to take a break from my lucrative smuggling business. Work the tavern while she took a little R & R after snapping her right arm in three places. Bouncing disagreeable customers tended to have a down side, though Mom didn't really want to admit it.

But the woman was healed now. Time she got back to work tending her own bar.

"Next thing you know," Merrick said as he stretched his back with a long, self-pitying groan, "she's gonna have me decorating the outside of *this* place."

The Lost Tavern was almost as eccentric as its owner. Set into the base of a ten-kilometer plateau, draped with snakeweed and barberry vines, the building's metal sides bore the years a little less well than Fortran Merrick did. And Rachel Bell was trying to mold both.

I actually felt a bit sorry for the man. "She has a knack for smacking someone over the head and making them like it, you know that."

"I'm learning." He glanced at the road-weary customer nursing a drink at the far end of the bar. "Busy, huh?"

"Swamped." How the hell a man like Merrick ended up in the middle of miles of desert and high plateaus, both spotted with devil's fork cactus, deadly dune brush thorns, and various not-so-friendly local creatures was a story I really wanted to hear and probably never would.

It also was the reason I couldn't quite bring myself to trust the man—or believe my mother was actually thinking of making their relationship permanent.

The problem wasn't Mom remarrying; after all, my father died close to ten years ago. No. What I couldn't figure out was why Rachel Bell—a woman who made a high speed chase through an asteroid field seem like walk in the park—would settle for a man who'd get down on his knees and plant begonias?

Silas Bell would have walked into the fiery brimstone of Hell before he'd done such a thing. But then my father had been a manic, blood-sucking pirate whose sole purpose in life was to enjoy himself at the expense of others.

Nobody told Silas Bell what to do, not even my mother.

The door slammed open and searing desert wind blasted through, leaving behind a tumble of dried stinkweed, dirt, and three very undistinguished patrons.

"You boys can have a seat anywhere you like." I set the goblet I'd been polishing into oblivion carefully among the other glasses beneath the bar counter. "I'll be with you in a moment."

Merrick ran a calloused palm over his face. "I'll have my usual."

I kept my eyes on the newcomers as they wandered into the main room. I didn't really have a bartender's patience, but I'd promised Mom I'd try.

"You gotta perty place here," the taller of the three said. I scanned the heavy weaponry hanging at his side. The other two were just as well armed.

"I'll tell my mother how much you appreciate the ambiance."

The inside of the Lost Tavern had just as much character as the outside: bulkhead-style walls hung with decorative tapestries handwoven by the local Omniss, gentle multi-hued clothes draped over tables bolted to a plated floor. Hand-carved Omniss chairs waited patiently at each, the guileless forms managing to blend wood and metal with a grace only my mother could achieve.

She was not going to be happy if these offworlders decided to play rough.

A quick search of the refrigeration unit turned up Merrick's beverage of choice. I pulled off the cap, slid the chilled bottle of Centurian Bubble-Up into Merrick's waiting hand. Not a real manly drink, but my mother's rules on drinking were rather unbreakable.

The big guy at the far end of the bar didn't know any of that. His derisive snort made Merrick and I both turn his way.

"Easy does it," I said under my breath. The look on Merrick's face was about as readable as a dune rat's sneer.

Pulling a towel from the sink, I worked my way down the bar, meticulously wiping every speck of dirt from the intriguing inlay of aeroship parts and ironwood found only in the deserts on Milligan's World. The design was my mother's, the handiwork that of an eighty-year old Omniss woodworker.

"Is there anything else I can get you?" I asked, taking a final swipe where the man's hand had just been resting. Only one

more day, I reminded myself. After this shift I'd be back in space where I belonged and my mother would deal with these idiots. Her arm had a limited range of motion, but she was once again capable of dishing out a tongue-lashing that could send grown men into hiding.

I studied the offworlder while I waited for his order. The big man's face had the same timeless aura as Merrick's, but there the resemblance ended. Dark skin that looked like it had been tanned and cured in the desert sun. Hair and eyes to match. By the amount of alcohol he'd already consumed, it was more than likely he'd preserved every cell in his body. Dump this guy in the ground and he'd probably still be staring at you when all the other corpses had gone their natural way.

Without saying a word he reached down, dug something from his boot, and laid it on the counter.

Merrick's shoulders stiffened.

I'd been chewed up and spit out by worse things than a wise-ass merc, though. Without missing a beat, I took the still wiggling sand roach between forefinger and thumb and squeezed until it stopped squirming.

"I tolerate a lot of things in here." I tossed the roach into a trash receptacle tucked beneath the counter, spread both hands on the bar, and drilled the man with a hard gaze. "The one thing I don't tolerate is troublemakers. You want trouble, you take your boys and go on down the road."

That caught the offworlder by surprise. "How'd you know they were with me?"

"It's kind of obvious, isn't it? You all smell like you've been making love to a Draconian skunk."

The room exploded in a riot of guffaws and deep belly chuckles. Everyone laughed except the man I locked gazes with. His eyes were sharp, in spite of his sour alcoholic breath. I returned his look, stare for stare, until he finally slapped the counter and grinned. "You got my number, don't you, sweetheart. Name's Connie Clark, and I guess there is a little something else you can do for me."

Sweetheart. I'd decked men twice my size for taking such liberties. But I kept my face expressionless while Merrick sipped his Bubble-Up. Might as well find out what the idiots were after. Information was, after all, one of the benefits of working in a bar.

You never knew what kind of tidbits you'd pick up. Tidbits a girl could capitalize on—in a business kinda way, of course.

"The *Nova Hunter*," Clark said, carefully watching my face. "Tell me about her."

I groaned and went back to polishing glasses as a chuckle crept out of Merrick's beard. Treasure hunters. Worse than a band of out-of-work thugs. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"That's not what I hear. I hear you know the real story behind the *Nova*, not the story every treasure hunter and scavenger knows. Sort of an insider's point of view," Clark said. "Why don't you give me another shot of that cleaner you call whiskey?"

Cleaner. Right. I'd heard rotgut called a lot of things in my time—from the ubiquitous liquor to alcohol to moonshine and whiskey—but I'd never heard it described as "cleaner." Some of the stuff I'd consumed during my travels would probably qualify, come to think of it.

"I think you've had enough." Chairs scraped as the group in the main room stood up. Maybe it was time to stop polishing glasses and start cleaning up the floor—with smart-mouthed customers.

Merrick rose to his feet.

I held out my right hand and he settled back on the edge of his stool with a frown. My left hand eased around the cool butt of the shotgun mounted just under the left of the counter. "I hope you didn't pay for that information. Everyone and their brother knows my father shipped out on the *Nova Hunter*. Doesn't mean he had anything to do with her disappearance."

A situation that had plagued our lives ever since, especially since my father had up and disappeared into the unexplored area of space nicknamed the Pirate's Belt not long afterward.

I grinned at Merrick. "Next thing you know he'll be claiming I know how to find the *Paymon's Staff*!"

Merrick's lips thinned in amusement, but he didn't pick up on the cue. The old fart just sipped his Bubble-Up without saying a word.

"I'd considered that possibility," Clark said after giving Merrick the once over. "Could be the same man planned both hijackings. Both had to be planned by somebody on the inside."

"Sounds like a bunch of hooley to me," Merrick finally said. He downed the rest of his Bubble-Up in one gulp. "The *Paymon's Staff* is just an old man's pipe dream. But I was on the *Nova*. They did a head count after the hijacking, dead bodies and all. No one turned up missing. If there'd been someone on the inside, they would have disappeared with the ship."

"Besides, you can't just stick a DropShip in your pocket and walk away," I said, wondering at Merrick's reticence. Hell, he loved talking about the *Nova Hunter*, especially the story of how my father threw himself in front of the captain and saved the man's life during the hijacking.

What Merrick didn't know—what no one knew except a handful of men and most of them were dead—was that Silas Bell had tried to stop the hijacking and had gotten a bullet in the brain to show for it.

Bullet in the brain would've killed most normal men, but my father had abandoned all claims to normalcy years ago. He floated around space in an escape pod until rescue crews found him. Then they bagged and tagged his "body" and stuck him in line for burial along with the rest of *Nova's* crew.

How my father escaped from that particular constipation was a story he never told. Said it was good to keep folks guessing about the real mysteries of life.

I'd finally stopped guessing when I turned sixteen. By then I figured he'd simply done what he always did: paid someone off. Either that or he'd killed them.

Shortly after the *Nova* incident, he hooked up with the woman who was to become his first mate and his wife—Rachel Murdock.

Together they proceeded to plunder, rape, and murder in the manner of true pirates while that bullet slowly ate away at his health and sanity. He wouldn't let anyone touch him. Said he didn't want to end up like a rotten turnip just because some idiot couldn't keep their hand steady. So he lived with the pain and Mom and I lived with a raging lunatic.

Until he finally took matters into his own hands and blew the offending missile away along with half of his head.

"You gonna polish a hole clean through that bar you keep rubbing at it like that."

I glanced up to find both men staring at me, eyebrows raised.

"Just seeing if you were awake," I said with a shrug. I started pulling trays from a low wall cupboard. Rush hour was coming up and Mom would be here any minute with the fancy little snacks she liked to prepare. Little finger sandwiches, some kind of liver paste, probably some of those birds indigenous to Milligan's World—the ones so tiny you didn't even have to pull out the bones—stuffed with mushrooms and Mom's "secret" ingredients. Just thinking about it was enough to make my stomach growl.

"Looks like I threw good money after bad information." Connie Clark slapped some change on the counter and raised his glass. "Here's to old legends. May they never die."



Sand crickets sang a dirge to the stars as I stepped outside and locked the Lost Tavern's massive door. Milligan's World sat on the edge of nowhere without even a moon to call its own. But the night's darkness came with a certain amount of freedom. Take away sight and the other senses become more acute.

One of the reasons Mom and I couldn't see eye to eye was because I refused to follow in my father's footsteps. "If you're going to run his business," Mom said, hands on ample hips, "you do it the way your father did. Otherwise, you might as well let the real men take over."

Fat chance. Silas Bell and I had one thing in common—I didn't let anyone tell me what to do either, at least not as far as business went. I took over the *Fortress*-class DropShip, spent time, guts, and money, and put together the best crew inside or outside the Inner Sphere.

And tonight I was going back to that crew. Nothing left for me to do here except give Mom a hug good-bye.

While it was a straight shot down the road to my mother's house, I preferred the off-road route. The pistol on my belt thumped gently against my hip as I jogged through cactus and dodged barberry vines. The exercise kept my senses honed and reactions quick. Punishment for failure was swift: stinging cactus spines and steely barberry thorns leave an immediate impression.

A single glow illuminated the desert as I approached the edge of town. I knew the source; I didn't know the why.

I shivered in spite of the night's warmth. There could be a good reason why the light still shone in my mother's house, but none of the reasons that came to mind had a positive image.

Death had been a part of my life almost from the time I could walk. I didn't fear death. I respected it. And with that respect came an ability to sense the dark predator's approach. Tonight death hung around my mother's house like a funeral pall, its whispers weaving in and out of the cricket song without bothering to harmonize.

The crickets stopped singing.

Adrenalin sharpened my perceptions to a painful edge as I pulled my pistol free. A pebble crunched and I dropped into a crouch before I realized I was hearing my own footsteps. The scent of fresh-turned earth and Merrick's begonias mingled with a metallic odor. An odor I didn't want to identify.

Keeping my breathing slow, I eased up next to the kitchen window and peeked inside.

Except for shadows cast by the light in the other room, the kitchen appeared empty.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end with that creepy, crawly being-watched sensation. I dropped back into a crouch and spun so my back brushed the wall. The putrid stench of rotting flesh and dirty wet robes assaulted my nose at the same time I spotted two pairs of red eyes off to my right.

Wild jacotes. The nastiest scavengers this side of the Belt.

I snatched a stone from the ground and hurled it at the smelly beasts.

The eyes disappeared.

They'd be back, but hopefully not until I'd found out what was going on inside my mother's house.

Keeping my movements slow and silent as the night itself, I turned the knob and opened the kitchen door.



The first thing I recognized was the smell. Blood had been spilled here. Lots of blood.

No wonder the jacotes had been so adventurous.

I quelled the urge to run headlong through the house like a child seeking solace. My stomach tightened in a nauseated knot as I forced myself to go slowly until my eyes adjusted to the light. A deep breath brought calm to my body. One more breath and I was no longer the caring daughter, but a trained professional.

The door whispered shut behind me. I left it unlatched, a precaution learned on my first excursion with my father. "In this business you never know when you'll need to make a fast getaway," Silas Bell used to say with a wink. "Always make sure you leave a clean escape route. It could save your life one day."

Moving quieter than a desert mouse, I crept through the kitchen and paused at the archway into the main living area.

My mother had to be the neatest person in the galaxy. I'd never known a person who could collect as much "stuff" as she did and never have a mess in her house. Every square centimeter of the tiny cottage was put to work supporting shelves or paintings or providing backdrop for exotic furniture.

She would never leave a spilled wine glass on the floor.

Something was wrong. Seriously wrong.

I inched my way toward the sofa, stopped at the sight of my mother sprawled on her stomach next to a broken statue. She looked smaller somehow.

Frail. A word I would have never connected with Rachel Bell.

Aside from her silver hair being a little on the mussed side, however, I couldn't see any signs of violence. Not from this angle.

Hope fluttered helpless wings deep inside my breast; at the same time my stomach roiled with nausea. She didn't look hurt, but instinct told me the woman who'd seemed unbreakable was as shattered as the statue beside her.

"Rachel? Mom?"

Quickly, I knelt among jagged ceramic shards and felt for a pulse I knew wouldn't be there. A gut punch would've been easier to take than realizing my suspicions had been right on the money.

I lifted my mother's limp shoulder and rolled her toward me.

That's when I saw the blood I'd smelled a few moments before. A sticky pond, reaching from the gaping wound on her neck deep into the shadows beneath the sofa, painted the floor rust red.

My professional facade splintered.

For what seemed an eternity I couldn't move, couldn't breathe, couldn't even feel the pistol in my hand.

The sound of labored breathing penetrated my stupor. Hair crawled on the back of my neck. I stepped to the end of the couch, pistol at the ready, and found Merrick crumpled against the paneled wall. His pulse beat strong, but he was out for the proverbial count.

I went through the rest of the house, puzzled to find the place hadn't even been ransacked. Nothing was missing as far as I could tell. Except for the mess in the living room, the house looked completely normal.

What the hell was going on?

The radio on my hip buzzed just as I popped into the bathroom for a look-see. The sound and sudden appearance of another person almost had me shooting out my mother's bathroom mirror. Seven years bad luck was definitely not what I needed right now.

I climbed back into my skin and shut off the buzzer with a muffled curse before finishing my sweep of the bathroom.

All clear.

On my way back to Merrick I slid my pistol back into its holster, snatched the radio from my belt. "This is Bell."

"Bout time you answered your squawker. Where you been?"

"I've been busy, Flapjack. What's up?" I squatted beside Merrick. Searched his head for wounds.

"Thought you wanted a ride, Captain."

"Hang on a minute, Buck." I clipped the radio back on my belt as Merrick moaned. In one smooth motion I hunkered back on my heels, pulled my pistol, watched the man's eyelids flutter open.

Merrick seemed to have trouble focusing. He stared at the pistol. At me. "What's going on?"

"I was hoping you could tell me." I stood and moved aside, giving him a spectator's view of the living room. The big man glanced at my mother and his already gray skin went ghastly pale. "Rachel?"

"She's dead." The pain hit again, hard and fast, threatening to tear me apart from the inside out. I clenched my teeth until my jaw ached.

Merrick collapsed against the wall, stunned. He rubbed a hand over his face. "She was just sitting here, reviewing the bar records. I was in the bathroom. Thought I heard a noise. Came out here to check and something crashed into my head..."

I swallowed hard against the lump that seemed determined to choke off whatever oxygen managed to survive the violence in this room. The caring daughter didn't want to stay locked away. She wanted to scream and rage and break down like a young girl whose doll just got stomped on by an older brother playing 'Mech.

But the daughter's way wouldn't solve anything right now.

The Omniss would take care of my mother. She'd been friends with Elders and children alike. They'd give her a proper burial, probably more proper than I could ever manage.

What I had to decide was what to do with this guy.

"Clark did this. Him and his thugs. I caught a glimpse of them before I went down."

My caution meter soared. "Caught a glimpse when he whacked you from behind?"

My mother had trusted Merrick, but then she had him wrapped around her finger like a love-starved python.

And look where that got her.

Technically, Merrick hadn't killed Rachel Bell, but he hadn't saved her either.

"I'm going after the bastard." Merrick struggled to his feet. Blood trickled down his forehead and into his white beard. I stared at the red tracks. The blood was real, that much I could tell. It was the rest of his story I didn't quite believe.

I reached out a hand as Merrick swayed. "You're not in condition to go anywhere except the nearest Omniss medcenter."

"Look. Clark wants the *Nova Hunter*," Merrick insisted. "I know more about the *Hunter* than any man alive. Let's set up a trap..."

Had to hand it to him. The old man was persistent.

But it wasn't his persistence that had my attention. It was the blood-red wine trembling in the glass remaining on the end table. I stared at the glass as the wine quivered again in a way only earthquakes or traveling BattleMechs could create.

The only 'Mechs I knew of on this planet were stationed at the garrison and they weren't likely to be out at this time of night.

"Did Clark say anything about bringing along 'Mechs?"

Merrick shrugged, a gesture I wasn't sure how to interpret.

I studied the quivering wine, the apprehension in my gut solidifying into certainty. Clark or no Clark, trouble was on the road tonight. 'Mech-size trouble.

Grief clawed deep inside my chest as I pulled Merrick away from my mother's body. The time for helping her was past. Time to regroup and move on.

"Yo, Buck," I said into the radio. "Keep an eye out. 'Mechs are dancing tonight and it looks like we're hosting the party. We'll meet you at the halfway point."

"We?"

"I'll explain later."

"Ten four, Jussy. I'm already on my way."

Buck Jackson was the only one who could call me Jussy and live. He'd joined the crew over nine years ago, during my "proving" time, then became first officer two years after signing on. I almost considered trusting the guy. Not enough to leave him with the coordinates for our next rendezvous while I wasn't on board ship or with traveling money. Just almost.

I turned to Merrick. The best way to know what an enemy or prospective enemy was up to was to keep him or her close at hand. "Do you think you can walk or am I going to have to carry you?"

Merrick gave me a lopsided grin. "I've taken worse hits than this. Lead on."

The silence outside spoke louder than the trembling ground. Even the crickets knew trouble was brewing in their territory. I sniffed the air, searching for signs the jacotes were still near, but could only smell Merrick's sour sweat. The man didn't do half bad following me through the dark night. I touched the butt of my pistol, wondering again if he was as injured as he appeared to be.

I shook off the suspicions. Too many years spent watching my back. Merrick had never done anything to warrant my distrust—except plant desert begonias. I'd have to keep that in mind.

The scent of crushed sage stung my nose at the same time I heard the peculiar thrum that could come only from a hovertruck. I put a hand on Merrick's arm. "Hold on."

"Justin?" Buck's familiar whisper washed over me like a warm shower.

"Here." I tugged Merrick toward the road. Buck met us partway, though I wasn't quite sure how he managed to find us.

"You two sound like a couple of mud buffaloes," Buck said as he took Merrick's arm. "Looks like those 'Mechs decided to take a short cut. I saw them head off through the desert on a bee line for our little gal. She's hanging out ground-side waiting for our arrival. They must've picked her up on their sensors. Lars and Peg were suiting up when I left. They're probably having a good time right about now."

Good to know the bad guys no longer had the element of surprise on their side, though I didn't feel so good about being this far from the action.

We piled into the cab. Buck rammed the accelerator to the floor and the hovertruck leaped forward. We flew past the bar, headlights out. Buck swerved to the left, coaxing the transport off the road with a dust-raising hiss.

Dust and diesel fumes filled the cab. Merrick's head lolled against the back of the seat. His color didn't look so good, at least what I could see of it from the dashboard lights. He sagged in the seat like a sack of limp oatmeal.

The truck bucked over a low rise, launching us toward the ceiling, and filling the cab with more dust. Merrick moaned.

Buck shot a glance my direction. "So, you have a nice vacation?"

"Mom's dead." My voice cracked in spite of my struggle to keep it devoid of emotion. A hard lump lodged in my throat somewhere between a swallow and a choke. The engine's rumble seemed to grow in volume.

"I'm sorry," Buck said after a moment. He reached over and put a warm hand on my shoulder. "You want to tell me what happened?"

In short, terse sentences I related everything from the moment of Clark's arrival at the bar until the discovery of my mother's murder.

"So, they think they found the *Nova Hunter*," Buck said.

It could have been either question or statement; I chose the latter and didn't answer. After a moment Buck eased the transport to a stop and pointed at a wild display of red laser light playing off the plateau escarpment. Searing beams interspersed with blue flicks of artificial lightning revealed the battle scene ahead with strobe-like intensity.

"Looks like you'll get your shot at revenge," Buck said.

The desert below the escarpment had been transformed into a deadly playground. Ahead, the *Fortress's* domed light illuminated the desert around her base. Guns blazed as she struck out at the attacking 'Mechs. From this distance it looked like a bunch of Canopian chihuahuas nipping at a Terran bull.

I recognized our two 'Mechs: Peg's SDR-9K *Venom* and Lars' FS9-C *Firestarter*. There were five other 'Mechs that weren't on our team, including one gut-sucking AWS-9Q *Awesome*.

I'd never been much of a spectator; no reason to start now. Especially when my DropShip was the game prize. There was a whole desert out there to maneuver in. The trick would be to get in close without being blasted to bits. Then it was a simple matter of anticipating the enemy's movements, finding the right opening, scooting through before a big, bad 'Mech stomped on us, and we were home free.

No sweat.

I eyeballed the distance over the torn clumps of sage and jagged blast pits.

"How far?" I asked Buck.

"About ten clicks."

There was only one way to do this. I looked at Buck. "Trade places with me."

Battle sounds faded as our gazes locked. For a moment it seemed Buck would challenge my decision to drive.

"We both know I can handle this thing in my sleep," Buck said. I gave a quick nod. Buck's driving wasn't the issue here. This was about being in control. If we were going to drive down the road of death, I wanted to be at the helm. It was my right as captain of this crew.

A right I would not relinquish.

Buck shoved open the driver's door and grinned. "Let's do it then."

I scooted into the warm spot Buck left behind and picked up the radio mike. "This is Bell. Prepare to drop the loading ramp on my mark."

"Keep your eyes open," I said as Buck climbed in the passenger's side. "This is gonna be one helluva ride."

As long as the attacking 'Mechs had their attention focused elsewhere the transport stood a chance. We'd come in on their blind side and stay as inconspicuous as possible. Once they got a fix on us though, we were 'Mechball fodder.

The hovertruck shot forward, an arrogant mouse among a horde of marauding cats. My stomach dropped somewhere down around my toes as I tried to keep an eye on the action and keep our hides intact at the same time. I hugged the base of the escarpment, taking advantage of whatever measly cover remained, while Clark's crew slammed salvo after salvo into our pathetic forces.

Lasers ripped into Peg's *Venom*, sending shrapnel skittering off into the night as her 'Mech's left arm careened off into the darkness.

The *Awesome*'s barrels glowed, gearing up for a PPC burst. The transport slipped sideways as I dodged a laser pulse and goosed the accelerator.

"Get the hell out of there, Peg," I shouted at the window as the *Awesome* fired its deadly lightning. What was she doing? The *Venom* could dance circles around that sluggish *Awesome*...

Frustration ignited in my chest at the same time the lightning swept across Peg's armor, found the weak spot on the right side of the *Venom's* torso, and penetrated the light-shielded engine.

The sky lit up with another explosion. 'Mech parts rained down around us, the shrapnel pinging on the roof with a hollow clang. I peered through the smoke and debris, seeking sight of the *Venom*.

The 'Mech was gone.



I chewed my lip and dodged another misguided missile. Including my *Vindicator* and Buck's *Tarantula*, we had enough firepower to join the party, but delaying our departure increased the chance of a takeover.

“'Mechs who run and hide away, get revenge another day,” I muttered. Another one of my father's illustrious sayings. One that left a bad taste in my mouth. But there were other things in life besides taste.

It only took a blink to see the bad guys had decided to pick on Lars. They seemed to be leaving the DropShip pretty much alone in spite of the fact she was spewing a good amount of firepower their way.

There was a good-size gap opening up to the right of the DropShip. Just enough room for a hovertruck to scoot through.

If the truck was fast.

I gritted my teeth and banked toward the *Fortress*. “Have Lars follow us in.”

Forward Acceleration slammed us back in our seats as I accelerated on a bee line toward the DropShip. What we were doing was pure suicide, but what the hell? We had three things going for us: the element of surprise, my excellent driving skill, and balls the size of a DropShip.

Buck muttered something about sitting ducks as the hovertruck fishtailed. I grinned.

After all, what is life without a little challenge?

But the *Awesome* must've been reading my mind. Sand erupted in front of the transport's right fender.

"Keep your tongue outta your teeth and hang on." I dodged a hail of incoming laser fire.

Buck keyed the radio mike. "Hey, Stevadore. It's time to rock and roll."

The *Fortress's* lights glared on the windshield. We were going to make it.

"Looks like we've got company." Buck pointed to the right. The *Awesome* was headed toward the DropShip on an intercept course. It wouldn't do to have an enemy 'Mech leap aboard in front of the transport. I eyeballed the distance between the hovertruck, the DropShip and the oncoming 'Mech.

We still had the advantage. Barely.

Closer, I told myself. *Just a little bit closer.*

There!

I jerked my head in a nod, somehow managing to keep ahead of the laser tracking our flank.

"Deploy the loading ramp," Buck said into the radio.

"Ten-four."

I held my breath and swerved to avoid a nasty kick the *Awesome* aimed our way. The ramp inched its way to the ground as the transport drew closer. For a moment I wondered if maybe I'd made the call too late, but the second before we crashed into the lip of the ramp, it finished its groundward drop.

"Hang on!" With a teeth-jarring lurch the hovertruck bucked onto the ramp and into the cargo bay.



I left Merrick in Buck's capable hands and raced toward the lift. There was one more thing I could do that would clean my mouth and help us get away at the same time.

A hard blast shook the ship as I stopped beside the gunnery station. A new man—one Buck had brought on board—sat in the near gunner's chair. I could just order him to take out the *Awesome*, but watching someone else acquire the target wasn't the same as doing it myself. "Move."

The man waited a second too long to relinquish his seat. In less time than it took him to blink, he found himself face to face with the bulkhead. I slid into his seat and took over the control board.

From what little I'd seen of Clark, I figured he'd have to be piloting the *Awesome*. He was just that kind of guy.

The screen in front of me showed 'Mechs headed for the hills.

Smart guys. Anyone—man or 'Mech—caught in the thruster blast when we took off was dead meat, to put it mildly.

I rapidly scanned the fleeing targets, found the 'Mech I wanted, punched in the coordinates, and activated the targeting lock. "Looks like you found your treasure, Connie-boy."

In less than a heartbeat, the *Fortress* unleashed her entire repertoire of weaponry. When the dust cleared, nothing remained but a pile of debris too small to even salvage.

"That's for Mom!"

I hit the comm button. "Get us out of here, Stevie."

Thrusters roared and the DropShip trembled with the effort of lifting her not-inconsiderable hulk back into space.

I gave the gunner back his seat with instructions to do as much damage as he could before we got out of range, then headed down to find out how Merrick was doing.

Stars exploded like flaming meteorites as something cold and hard slammed into the side of my head when I walked into sick bay. The last thing I remembered on the way into black oblivion was Merrick's triumphant face.



"I should kill you now."

The voice echoed inside my head, along with what felt like a battalion of timpani drums pounding out a death march.

The surface beneath me was soft, not hard like a floor. An acidic odor stung my nose, letting me know I was still in sick bay. I sat up and almost fell off the treatment table.

A chuckle assaulted my left ear. I looked over my shoulder into Merrick's satisfied eyes. "I've been waiting a long time for this moment."

I couldn't seem to think clearly. Couldn't get a handle on what was happening. I glanced at the medic lying still on the next bed. "What the hell is this all about?"

"Your father," Merrick said. "And this ship."

He stood and strutted around in front of me, thumbs hooked in the waist of his pants. He didn't sound like a retired military man anymore. Didn't look like one either. He looked like a man just this side of going nova.

The room spun circles and my stomach heaved. I needed to get myself focused or life was going to be short. Very, very short. "I thought you were friends..."

"Friends?" Merrick snorted. "Bell didn't have any friends. He made that perfectly clear. He confronted me when he found me sabotaging the *Nova*. Said he was going to tell the captain. But I knew what he was up to. If I didn't do something, he'd take over the ship himself; leave me behind while he made off with an emperor's fortune."

My mind worked hard to try to catch up. "So you shot him."

"I had to. Don't you see? But he ruined my plan anyway. The crew I'd hired took off with the *Nova* and left me behind to take the heat. The charges were dropped—with your father dead, they didn't have any proof I'd done anything. Then I found out Silas Bell was still alive and I knew I'd been double-crossed."

I rubbed my head and tried to stall. "So you were working with Clark."

Merrick grimaced. "Just the means to an end that didn't seem to be happening fast enough. If I'd had to plant one more begonia, I

would've strangled your mother without getting the information I needed."

I couldn't seem to catch my breath. "You killed her."

Merrick sucked on his mustache. "Your mother was too smart for her own good. Clark stopped by, left me a message. Unfortunately, she figured it out before I got home and was waiting, wine in hand, when I arrived. Not a normal thing for your mother, you know. She'd probably laced the wine with devil's weed or some equally nasty stuff. I pretended to take the bait and..."

"...sliced her throat," I finished. Rage washed red through my vision as I drove my hands hard at Merrick's throat. He grabbed my left wrist, twisted hard, and stepped to the side. I dropped to the floor, gasping.

"I need a few answers before I finish you off," Merrick said. His voice stayed casual, but I could see the anticipation in his eyes. "Your mother was extremely cooperative—she just didn't know it. There are ways other than bullying and torture to gather information. You just have to find the method that suits your intended victim. With your mother, I played to her arrogance. She couldn't resist dropping little hints here and there. I simply put all the bits and pieces together from what I already knew and here we are."

He twisted my arm hard. "You will give me the coordinates for hooking up with the JumpShip. Then you will tell me where your father hid all that treasure."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Rage still twisted my stomach into knots, but my vision was once again clear. I'd kept the JumpShip coordinates confidential on purpose, to keep my crew from taking off without their captain. Giving Merrick the coordinates would not only give him the upper hand.

It would end my life.

Think, you idiot. Think.

Merrick dropped my arm in disgust. "The time for obtaining information in a pleasurable way is past. The bits and pieces I gather from you, my dear, will be painfully extracted."

The hell with all this thinking. It was payback time.

Merrick had been quite an actor, but I'd learned from a real pro. I started to stand, moaned and fell to the floor. Merrick bent down

and grabbed my arm. I slipped a hand around his neck, used my body weight and all the strength I could muster, and slammed the big man's head into the edge of the bed.

The room went red, then white as rage obliterated all else but the need to kill the man in front of me. I bent my arm and jabbed downward into the space between neck and head directly below his left ear with a satisfying crack.

Merrick's feet slid out from under him and the big man hit the floor. No time to think, to worry about projectile shots puncturing the bulkhead. If I didn't take care of this creep, he'd take care of me. In less than a heartbeat I pulled my pistol from his belt, chambered a round, and squeezed the trigger.

One of the reasons I dealt on the shady side of the mercantile trade as opposed to filling my father's pirate boots was the killing. I hated it. But I felt no remorse as I stared at Merrick's limp body.

Maybe I was more my father's daughter than I wanted to admit.



The echo hadn't fully receded before I was on my way to the bridge. I had no idea how long I'd been out or who else Merrick had compromised.

The floor rumbled, feeding me information as I ran. The ship was changing direction. I grabbed a wall rung, the maneuver threatening to buckle my knees. I waited a moment, willing strength back into my legs, then cautiously approached the bridge.

There was no time to find another weapon, but the pistol was all I really needed. Buck was the only one on board this ship who came close to beating me in a shootout. Not only did I always hit my target; my shots were always dead center.

Well, almost always. But in situations like this, almost doesn't count.

Pistol in hand, I positioned myself to one side as the bridge door hissed open.

No shout of alarm, no shots fired.

I glanced around the edge of the doorway and peered in.

Buck's lanky frame filled the captain's chair like he belonged there.

I clenched my jaw, tightened the grip on my pistol. *You're too damn suspicious*, a voice whispered in my mind. I forced myself to relax just slightly, but relaxed wasn't natural. Not for me. Not for the situation.

Pasting a grin on my face, I lowered the pistol as if to return it to its holster and stepped onto the bridge.

"Thanks for filling in," I said with a nod. "I'll take over now."

The silence grew so thick you could slice it with a butter knife. Hell, even the instruments seemed muted.

Then Buck smiled. "I don't think so, Jussy."

I stood still. Blake's blood, how I hated being right. Might as well play the game to its bitter end. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Buck's gun was in his hand. And it was pointed at me. A shootout on board a DropShip—not my idea of fun. But I knew I wouldn't miss, and evidently Buck figured the same thing. Either that or he figured I wouldn't have the balls to pull the trigger. "It's over now, Jussy. Put the gun down."

One of the ironies of life is how well children repeat the histories of their parents. I'd just killed the man who betrayed my father. Now I was facing a betrayal of my own. Not really that unusual considering the venue.

Eyes failed to meet mine as I glanced around the room at my "loyal" crew. Smugglers were a cut above pirates in my mind. But I never let myself forget that, pirate or smuggler, both types were motivated by the same driving force: greed. The men watching me would let this scene play out, then declare their loyalty to whoever came out on top.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Buck." The rage I'd felt during the confrontation with Merrick had cooled to an icy calm. I had one chance and I took it.

Both pistols flashed almost simultaneously. The explosive sound careened off the bulkhead walls, pounding my eardrums. Pain seared through my left shoulder, but I didn't fall.

Neither did Buck.

"I said, that's my seat." The stench of burnt sulfur stung my nose and an overwhelming urge to lie down and sleep for a couple of years washed over me. I lifted my chin. Stood my ground.

Buck gave a lopsided grin as he stared down at the blood oozing through his vest.

"I guess you'd better take it then." His body convulsed once. Then he was still.

I reached the captain's chair before anyone could think to stop me. Buck's body hit the floor with a loud thud. I held the pistol at the ready, gazed into the eyes of the crew—*my* crew.

"Anyone else feel a need to try out this chair?"

No one offered up a challenge. I gave a nod and issued instructions to the pilot to take us to the rendezvous point. A JumpShip was waiting to take our DropShip to her next meeting with destiny.

Wordlessly two crewmen carried Buck from the bridge. *Such a price to pay*, I thought.

There was no treasure on board this DropShip. Buck knew that. But it probably wasn't the treasure he was concerned about. He wanted the ship.

What he didn't realize—what none of them realized—was that this DropShip wasn't the *Nova Hunter*. If my father had known the *Nova's* location, he'd taken the secret with him to his grave, along with the secret of the *Paymon's Staff*, another old legend hardly worth the telling.

For some folks, that is.

Old legends never die, I thought. *They just fade into oblivion.*

The End