

OLD PUS EYE

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Midvale
All Dawn
The Periphery
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Midvale was a nothing town on a nothing planet. The Periphery had many worlds like it, each unremarkable, each surviving more on sweat and backbone than success. Midvale was a community with a dirty little tradition that was rarely discussed with the few visitors. Since Bart had been a boy he'd known what autumn meant to the people of Midvale.

Every year the pirates would come, demand their tithe from the community, and leave. Every October first Old Pus Eye would come in the menacing *Hunchback* BattleMech to collect the payment. The 'Mech was a harbinger of what would happen if the community didn't pay.

Old Pus Eye earned his nickname because of the white skull painted on the front of the 'Mech. The armor near the right eye had been damaged by laser fire, and the melted armor had cooled in dribbles down the front of the skull. The pirates had never replaced the damaged armor, only painted over it. The oozing eye was an image Bart couldn't wash out of his memory.

The people of All Dawn were far removed from the seemingly constant state of war in the Inner Sphere. The pirates were the only reminders of the threat that advanced battletechnology could bring to a world. Some communities, like Midvale, existed in flux, caught between the early Twentieth and the Thirty-first Centuries. There were remnants of advanced technology cobbled together in working order, but the people—the farmers and miners there—did not rely on it. There was a working blacksmith in town and a few families had hovercars. A fusion reactor powered the lights, but outside of the town it resembled more of the old wild west of the frontier of Nineteenth Century Terran America.

Old Pus Eye showed up a year ago and demanded more than the tithe—one of Midvale's young women. Her name was Sarah and she had been Bart's girl ever since they had gone to school with each other. Bart had been gone with his AgroMech out on Flat Top mountain cutting trees when Old Pus Eye had last visited. Since his dad died, it was up to Bart to provide for the family and such trips were common. Keeping his old 'Mech running meant

he had to learn more mechanical engineering than he had thought possible.

The town had given up Sarah without so much as a protest from the leaders. From what Bart heard she went kicking and screaming, but the town's leaders had her tied and waiting when the pirate arrived. The townspeople, bullied by Old Pus Eye, had given in. None of them had liked it and most were unwilling to speak of the incident, out of shame. No one had heard from her since the pirate had taken her away.

Bart had tried to follow the pirate's trail but lost sign of him on the plateaus to the west. When he returned he confronted them—the mayor, the sheriff, all of them. Most turned their heads in embarrassment. Some tried to tell him that he didn't understand. All expressed fear over what Old Pus Eye would have done to Midvale.

"You don't understand how these pirates operate," they said.

"We had no choice," was the answer he heard the most.

Each one infuriated him more. He turned to drinking, against the cries of his mother. That lasted two weeks and didn't ease the pain or bring Sarah back. He stopped finally and decided that white whiskey was not going to bring Sarah back. Nothing was going to do that. She was either a rape victim, sold as a slave, or both. He spent some money trying to find her but from the sound of it, she had been loaded on a DropShip and taken somewhere else.

All that was left was revenge, and a chance to make sure that Sarah's fate didn't happen to anyone else.

Bart's AgroMech had begun life three centuries earlier as a *Phoenix Hawk*. He called her Rattler because the noise it made sounded like a rattlesnake when it powered up. Almost every scrap of armor had been stripped from her.

The lower right arm had been replaced with a circular buzz-saw blade. The cockpit had been stripped for every possible part. Half of the ferroglass cockpit shield was gone, sold a long time ago. Her battle computer was long gone. The neurohelmet had long lost its unit insignia. Bart's dad had drilled holes in it to cool it down for the wearer. Her military career had ended two wars and three generations ago. Rattler's reactor hadn't been run at more than forty percent in a long time and even then she was like sitting in a blast furnace. Rattler no longer even looked like a *Phoenix*

Hawk unless you saw her at a distance and squinted—hard.

Every spare hour of the last year had been spent on returning the AgroMech to battle readiness. He had jury-rigged two flame-throwers which really were sprayers used for farming that hosed down a target with some homemade napalm and then lighting it. Just mixing the goo, the homemade napalm, had caused a fire that had burned down a shed at the far corner of the property. Firing the flamers was almost as dangerous to Rattler as the target. He had rigged a missile rack that fired six rockets, solid-fueled beasts he had purchased from a trader in Riggertown. There were no reloads. To make her more menacing, Bart had added another false rack of empty tubes that looked like they were armed.

Rattler had a medium laser which he used for tree cutting. It was so slow charging he wondered if it was even going to be practical as a weapon. The buzz-saw on the right arm was menacing, but you had to get pretty close for it to be useful. The blade was nearly three meters around. While it worked wonders on trees, he was not sure how it would perform in battle.

Armor was more illusion than reality. He found some scraps left over from when she had been a war machine and welded them into place. The rest was scrap metal, even a few old stolen road signs. From a distance, it looked like armor—and that was all he could count on. Bart had no battle computer or targeting systems. He did some test firing and painted some crude sights on the cockpit glass. It was a matter of best-guess and gut-feel.

As the months passed he got a visit from Sheriff Parker. “I know what you’re planning, Bart,” he had said. “You shouldn’t do this. It won’t bring back Sarah.”

“Join me. If ya’ll join me we can take out Old Pus Eye.” There was some hope there, that he would not be alone when the pirate showed up.

“Men against a BattleMech?” He shook his head. “You do this, boy, and you will be putting the whole town at risk. Old Pus Eye will punish us. You know how these pirates are. Killing us won’t be enough. I’ve heard stories from men I trust about pirate bands and what they do to fools crazy enough to resist ‘em.”

Bart stared up at the taller man and then shook his head. “I’m through cowering to these bastards.”

Parker pointed at him. "You are going to get yourself killed. Then you're going to get the rest of us killed."

Bart didn't respond as the Sheriff left, mostly because the older man was right. Was he getting himself killed? *Maybe... hell... probably.* Was he going to be able to take out Old Pus Eye or cripple that evil-looking 'Mech? Bart knew he had to try. If he was lucky he would cripple the old *Hunchback* before he died himself. Without that 'Mech, Old Pus Eye was just a man, a man without the muscle to intimidate the townsfolk. The pirates were nothing but heartless bullies and he looked forward to giving them full retribution for the loss of Sarah.

The last few tense days passed far too quickly for Bart. The word came to him from a runner in the town: Old Pus Eye was on his way. He had already sent his demands for the tithe. Like last year he demanded another young woman. He was going to be there tomorrow at three o'clock in the town square to pick up his tribute. The message came with the traditional warning: if the town didn't have his tribute there, he would burn it to the ground.

The threat didn't impress or intimidate Bart. His whole life he had heard similar threats around the first of October. His mind focused on his last memory of Sarah, his sweet Sarah. He thought of her long blonde hair worn back and the glimmer of blue in her eyes. As he hurriedly spot welded on another scrap of metal on the torso of the old *Phoenix Hawk* Bart knew the town elders were going to some family and picking their daughter as the next tribute.

If we don't take a stand, this will never end.

He climbed into the cockpit and tossed the switch that turned on the fusion reactor. Heat rose up under him. Bart turned on a fan he had propped up in the cockpit beside him and peeled off his shirt. He put on the coolant vest and heard the gurgle of coolant flow through it. Even that part of the 'Mech cockpit was on its last legs. It was going to be hot ride. The sweet smell of a tiny coolant hose leak caught his nose, a reminder that it was only a matter of time before his coolant vest became worthless.

Bart moved Rattler forward one thudding step. It was slow, bogged down with the additional weight, but it moved. He heard something fall below him. Probably some part that had not been welded on tight enough. Bart didn't care. Rattler only had to hold together long enough to take down Old Pus Eye.

It took nearly a half an hour to reach the cobblestoned main street of Midvale. The street seemed deserted. Most of the businesses were closed up. He could see people from behind curtains or hidden behind the sides of buildings, curious to watch but too fearful to expose themselves. In the distance, at the edge of town, stood Old Pus Eye. Bart drank in its shape. It had not been repainted in years. The skull face was less menacing from the cockpit of a BattleMech. Bart walked slowly down the center of the street. Each footfall seemed to quake old Rattler. After a few slow tens of meters he saw Old Pus Eye move forward as well, apparently to meet his challenge.

Near the center of town there was a crate—the tithe—and a young woman, bound and gagged. Bart didn't know her. From the look of it she was fourteen or so, a little homely, and her red eyes were wet with tears and fear. He yelled down from the side of the old cockpit through the gap of missing armored glass. "Get her the hell out of here."

Someone ran into the street and grabbed her from the knots behind her back and half-dragged her out of the street. Bart watched as Old Pus Eye loomed in front of him only thirty meters away.

The sheriff came out with his hands up in the air, one of them holding a rifle mid-stock as a gesture. He turned to face the pirate. "Listen here. This boy doesn't represent us. His grudge is personal. Don't take it out on us if he wants to get himself killed."

Bart wanted to scream at the sheriff but an amplified hissing and crackling voice came from the 'Mech across from him. "You'd better tell that idiot to stand down or I will kill you all." The sheriff's head snapped around and faced Rattler. Bart ignored him.

"Get out of the way, you dammed fool."

"I ain't leaving!" Bart yelled through the gaps of the cockpit.

Old Pus Eye turned at the waist slowly. Bart could hear metal-on-metal screeching as it did, a bad actuator on the old pirate 'Mech. "All of you will suffer if someone doesn't put an end to this." Bart took a single step forward to close the distance without seeming aggressive.

The sheriff glared up at Bart and despite the distance he could feel his cold gaze. "Bart!" he hollered but Bart ignored him, slowly, methodically taking another step forward toward the old *Hunchback*.

"Get out of the street you damned coward," he yelled down.

The sherriff lowered his gun and shook his head. He jogged back to his office and stepped inside. All that remained on the street was Old Pus Eye and Rattler.

The horribly amplified voice from Old Pus Eye popped and snapped once more. "You've got guts, I'll give you that. Step down now and I'm more than willing to barter with you."

If I climb out of this cockpit I'm dead. If not from him then from the rest of the town. "Go to hell!" He coaxed a half-step towards the *Hunchback*. The pirate must have sensed that Bart was planning for a direct physical assault. He had to have seen the buzz saw blade and wondered how much damage it could do. Old Pus Eye took a slow step back.

"Then you die," was what he could make out through the static. His entire body clenched in an instant as a burst of color erupted from Old Pus Eye. A medium laser's crimson beam hit Rattler in the shoulder. It was loud, the sound of his temporary armor exploding off in a slash of energy. Ozone-tainted smoke wafted into his cockpit as Rattler sagged under the hit.

Time to intimidate the shit out of him. Bart angled his entire 'Mech so that the targeting sight he had painted on the cockpit glass was dead center on the *Hunchback*. Confident he was in the right pose, he jabbed at the switch.

Rattler's old laser whined loudly. Lack of insulation brought the noise and the wave of heat as it fired. The brilliant red beam lashed out and hit the *Hunchback* in the leg, cutting a long scar across the thighs of one leg. Bart heard the weapon shut down and begin to recharge... a process that he knew took forever. He took two long strides forward with Rattler, closing the distance.

Old Pus Eye seemed unphased by the attack. If anything, it seemed to be moving a little closer. *If that autocannon hits me I am a dead man.*

Bart didn't hesitate. He hit the toggle that fired his homemade missile rack. There was a delay from the time he hit the trigger to when the missiles hissed and roared to life, enough to worry him that they were all misfires. Given he had purchased them from a stranger in Riggertown, that was a possibility. Five of them slid out of the tubes and filled the air between the 'Mechs. He took two steps forwards as they launched, to close the gap even more. One

missile slid out of the tube, went twenty meters, and plowed into the street. It fizzed on the street like a dud bottle rocket. One went wild over the head of Old Pus Eye.

Three of the remaining four missiles hit their mark, ripping surprisingly large holes in the frontal armor of the *Hunchback*. He glanced over at the laser and saw that it was still early in its recharge cycle.

A small laser returned a shot, this time into the left arm of Rattler. The fake missile rack was cut in half and a wave of heat rose up around him as Bart tried to sidestep the shot. He heard metal fall onto the street below him. Even though it was a small weapon, Rattler sagged under the hit.

That autocannon hasn't fired yet, maybe we're too close. The massive torso-mounted autocannon on the *Hunchback* was a 'Mech killer but Old Pus Eye hadn't let loose yet. Maybe it was low on ammo and he was holding back... or maybe it didn't work at all. It didn't matter to Bart. The lasers alone were going to slice and dice him if he wasn't quick.

Bart jabbed the throttle as far as he dared forward and lumbered Rattler forward a few meters to the range of his flamer. The flamer opened up. There should have been a wave of heat as the pressurized fuel sprayed out at the pirate. He saw the fuel, thick, gooey, black, but no flames. Easily half of the homemade brew of napalm fell into the street between the two 'Mechs. The rest seemed to drip all over the lower front of Old Pus Eye. Even the autocannon "eye" of the 'Mech oozed with some of the goo. But no flames. Bart slammed his fist into the console in frustration. The igniter may have failed or been damaged. Maybe something had gone wrong with his mix.

Old Pus Eye fired another blast of medium lasers. Both hit low, deep in the legs of Rattler. Bart was tossed hard against his restraining straps. He jammed the foot pedals to keep the 'Mech upright. Sweat stung at the corners of his eyes as he ambled forward a little bit, barely holding the balance of the old 'Mech. If he'd had a battle computer it would have told him a sad story. He was glad for once that he didn't have it.

Options? He glanced to the right and saw the large circular blade used to cut down lumber. It was all he had left. Old Pus Eye was close now, only twenty meters but it seemed like a kilometer. His jaw ached from being tense. He had to do it, not for him, but for Sarah.

He hit the switch to power up the blade. It moved slow at first but then seemed to hum. Old Pus Eye hesitated a second then seemed to notice the blade was spinning. The pirate had to have realized there was no room to turn in the middle of the block. For a moment, Bart felt a ripple of satisfaction as Old Pus Eye tried to walk backwards, to put some distance between them. Bart followed with a faster gait and the whirring of the blade filled his ears and mind.

Rattler rushed the last few meters forward as Old Pus Eye fired the other medium and small laser. The medium laser beam hit Rattler's left arm and finished it once and for all. The arm dropped off and was dragging behind the 'Mech, held on by a long bundle of myomer. The loss of weight on one side made the old *Phoenix Hawk* hard to handle but Bart didn't waver. His foe tried to step back but Bart was on him in an instant.

He jammed the spinning tree saw into the center of Old Pus Eye. The blade locked up instantly and ripped loose from the housing. Grinding noise and smoke filled the air instantly. Bart lost his balance and felt Rattler stagger a few meters to the side before toppling over. All around him the *Hawk* crumbled, groaned, and ground into the cobblestone. Sparks danced up from his controls before they shorted out. His coolant vest snapped from the pump and splattered green coolant everywhere.

His ears rang as he pulled off his neurohelmet. The cockpit glass was almost gone. Half of his control lights in the cockpit were out, and the rest were either yellow or red. One that glimmered yellow was the medium laser. It had not finished its recharge but was still operational. The shot would be weak, but it would be something.

He looked out at the laser and saw that it was generally aimed at Old Pus Eye towering over him. *Better to take the shot than simply die.* He hit the switch and the laser fired with a high-pitched whining burst.

The beam was short in duration, less than half of a normal attack. It hit near where the first shot did on the right leg, searing deep in the same hole. Bart didn't wait to see the reaction of the pirate. He scrambled over the remains of the cockpit glass and out into the open air.

When he emerged he saw he stood in the shadow of Old Pus Eye looming over him, swaying slightly as smoke wafted up from the laser hit. The cool air stung at the sweat that drenched his body.

The saw blade was still stuck. He drew in a quick breath. Would the pirate shoot him down? He expected it. At least he showed the other citizens that the pirates were not to be totally feared. He had done a lot of damage with a half-converted 'Mech. Sometime, someone else in the town might grow the balls to resist. Next time Old Pus Eye might not be so lucky.

He heard a sickening metallic moan from the *Hunchback*. It began to list, slowly at first, then faster, right at him.

Bart jumped and ran, ran with a speed he didn't think possible, clear of the black goo from his flamer in the street, clear of the crumbled remains of Rattler. He almost fell when he reached the bank building.

Behind him Old Pus Eye dropped, driving the saw blade even deeper. As soon as it hit something sparked the goo and it burst into flames. Both 'Mechs lay in a pile, together, as the flames lapped up around them. He heard an internal explosion of sorts, something cooking off inside of the pirate 'Mech. It wasn't moving... it couldn't.

As he watched he realized what was wrong. Old Pus Eye was just as cobbled together as Rattler was. The armor plating was just thin metal, now ripped and torn from the fall. It was bravado, not muscle. Thick black coils of smoke rose from the remains of the two 'Mechs.

Slowly, one by one, the citizens of Midvale emerged from their hiding to watch the bonfire on the main street. *I won*. He had hoped to feel better with victory but he didn't. Taking down Old Pus Eye had not brought Sarah back.

The fire burned for an hour and when the sherriff and some others made their way into the debris they came back with a blanket with a body in it. This was the pirate that had taken his Sarah, who had terrorized the town for years. When the body was lowered for the gathering crowd, Bart saw the face of his foe.

She was only in her teens. A young woman. She had some tattoo on her right cheek, probably some sort of pirate marking. He had expected an old man, smelling of whiskey, a grizzled beard; not a young woman. Bart's mouth hung open. "Looks like she tried to eject but the bolts failed on her cockpit canopy. Broke most of her bones," the sheriff said.

"She's my age," Bart said. The poor speakers on her 'Mech had concealed her sex and age perfectly.

"Not a day over fifteen. She probably just took over for some other pirate, probably a family member. All we ever saw was the BattleMech, not the MechWarrior."

Bart stared down. Sarah had been avenged. He stared at the smouldering pile of the two fallen 'Mechs. "Sherriff, get a few of your men and let's tow those 'Mechs back to my farm."

"What in the hell do you have in mind, Bart? Haven't you done enough?" He gestured to the dead girl.

Bart shook his head. "These pirates can be beaten if we try. They might come looking for her, and if they do, we have to be ready." He didn't know if they would come looking for one of their own. Part of him wondered if pirates had that much honor. "We need to get at least one of these 'Mechs working, if only for our protection."

He looked at the dead pirate. *I couldn't bring you back, Sarah, but I have made sure no one else has to face what you face.* It wasn't much, but it was all that Bart could have hoped for.