

BATTLECORPS

TITANIUM ROSE

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Pretty Penny's Pleasure Palace
Myopia City, Gallis
Magistracy of Canopus
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Two years since I'd been in this neck of the universe and already I was itching to leave.

Pretty Penny's flashed neon brilliance into the permanent glow of Myopia City, touted as being the "Pleasure Capital of the Stars" on all the local billboards. The operative word here being "local." The place was lit up like a parade twenty-four/seven, from bare lightbulbs flashing in your eyes to tawdry rainbows pulsing above arched doorways promising to fulfill your every fantasy.

"Tell me why we're here again?" The woman standing beside me looked as disgusted as I felt. Gratifying to know I'd made the right choice.

I could handle myself in most any situation; I just didn't want to put up with any macho shit this time out. Doni stood a half-meter taller than my meter and a half and weighed at least twenty kilograms more. Just what I needed, along with the pistol holstered on my hip. I'd thought briefly about dragging along a couple of the guys, but I needed someone I could count on *not* to get involved in the local scenery.

"I'm here for a meeting," I told my companion. "You're here to watch my back."

"Yeah, right," Doni said.

"Like I said, it's just a meeting. In and out in less than an hour. Just about right for this kind of joint."

Doni Mathers had replaced Buck Jackson as my first officer. So far she'd lived up to my expectations. But everyone has buttons that can be pushed; from the look on her face I'd just shoved Doni's buttons right through the wall and out the other side.

A woman screamed. From somewhere in the shadows struggling for a foothold between all the light. The scream turned to a nervous giggle, then a high-pitched laugh. Hawkers bellowed from the recessed doorways of various establishments, competing to lure like-minded hedonistic souls off the streets. And the souls went gratefully, anticipating all sorts of fantastical adventures.

And *Pretty Penny's* outshone all the rest, advertising hot mineral baths along with an astute selection of other fleshly pleasures.

Now I like my pleasure just as much as the next gal, but typically I prefer Canopus IV's more classy establishments. The Magistracy, however, offers all kinds of sensual entertainment —from star-traveling pleasure circuses to planet-side love nests.

Myopia City was one of those nests. It didn't matter if you were a day bird or a night owl, business never shut down. It just changed shifts.

The sidewalks and what passed for streets were already littered with bodies and both hands weren't even straight up on the clock yet. The air, scented with urine, vomit, and stained putrid with last month's libations, weighed heavy in my lungs. If ten 'Mechs strolled in and leveled the city, that stench would remain. Myopia City oozed decadence like an alcoholic oozed booze—through its very pores.

"Come on. Most of the guys in there haven't got the intelligence of the tables they gamble on. Nothing to worry about, right?"

The look in Doni's eye didn't bode well for the future, but the future wasn't what had me concerned right now. If I hadn't been so concerned about this meeting myself, I might have paid more attention to that look. Kind of like a cougar trapped by Canopian hound dogs.

"The sooner we get this over with..."

"...the sooner we can leave," Doni finished. We shoved through the crowd milling around on the sidewalk and entered *Pretty Penny's*.



One whiff of the potent haze that passed for air inside the Palace was enough to set my head spinning. If I didn't find my contact soon and get this meeting over with, we'd both be looking for some "morning after" remedy.

As garish as the place had seemed outside, inside was worse. Bodies, bodies everywhere, packed as tight as the wall-to-wall carpet attempting to cover the floor.

My stomach roiled like a hundred Tressidian vipers had decided to have a party in my digestive system. Doni and I were dressed to blend in, which meant we were hardly dressed at all. 'Mech pilots are used to wearing next to nothing, but take that same state of next-to-nothingness and drop it smack dab in the middle of a pleasure circus and you could find yourself piloting a whole different kind of craft.

One without any shields.

I led Doni through the pleasure-seeking crowd, gritting my teeth to keep from punching out a half a dozen lights, and tried to ignore the leering faces behind groping hands and pinching fingers. There was only one reason I'd come to this place.

My mother.

You might say I'd gotten a message from beyond the grave. A token from the Lost Tavern had been delivered to my DropShip. Mom had the tokens made before she died, a gift for her special friends. Unfortunately, she hadn't had a chance to hand them out to anyone but me.

Or so I'd thought.

The token around my neck suddenly seemed a lot heavier. I reached up, took the metal warmed by my skin in hand, ran my fingers over the molded surface. Until recently I thought I'd had all the Lost Tavern tokens sitting in an antique chest under my bunk. Except for the one Mom gave me. I wore that one around my neck, for bad luck and good memories—least that's what I told the folks who have no right being curious.

It was a way to keep Mom close to my heart.

The sour stench of unwashed flesh and other potent derivatives surfaced every now and again through the illicit fumes. Somewhere under all that lecherous flesh were gaming tables and presumably, cocktail tables, but I wasn't about to look around for a place to sit. I'd been told to "see the bartender" and that's just who I intended to see.

Unfortunately, I had to keep my eyes open in order to get to the bar. Never knew what might suddenly pop up.

The crew and I were just getting off one helluva month—our last delivery had been filled with ups and downs and every imaginable sideways twist a smuggler could anticipate, and some no one

could have figured into his or her plans—and we were all ready for a little R & R.

I'd taken a side trip—back to Novo Tressida to sell Mom's old business, the Lost Tavern. Then this package mysteriously arrived on my desk: a Lost Tavern token complete with note asking that I meet the token's owner—here.

Yeah, right. I burned the note, dropped the token back in the box where it belonged.

A second note arrived the next night with one single word: Please.

Blake's blood.

All I wanted was some quiet downtime, make some needed repairs to both ship and crew, kick back and sip some of that aged cabernet I'd liberated several shipments ago on a nail-biting run from New Syrtis. But that one simple "please" got under my skin—I've always been a sucker for the more genteel side of life. Now I was walking through a vermin-infested cat house wedged into the darkest bright spot on Gallis and I had no idea what I was going to find on the other side, besides the obvious, of course.

At least my mom had had the good sense to pick a nice, quiet place for her bar. If she'd parked somewhere in the middle of all this carnal chaos, I probably never would've visited the woman.

The hard edge of the second token pressed through the cloth pouch sewn into my gawdy g-string.

"Yo, honey. Over here," called a sleezeball I couldn't even see. Guy had to be buried somewhere in the fleshy mound wriggling on, over and under the strip poker table. "I got just what you been waitin' for."

You'd think I'd be used to places like this, being a smuggler and all, and I was. But I'd had plenty of the pleasure circus theme growing up. Like any good pirate, Dad's idea of a good time focused on pleasures of the flesh, and I'd seen things a young girl shouldn't ever have to see.

There's two ways a gal like that can go—down or up.

I chose up.

I slid my hand around Doni's waist and flashed what I hoped came across as a lecherous grin in the general direction of the voice. "Sorry, baby face. You just ain't my style."

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Doni hissed through her teeth. She moved forward like a walking statue, her choppy steps rapping out a staccato rhythm even through the carpeted floor. There definitely was some history going on with this woman; fortunately, her loyalty seemed to overcome the negativity swamping her system.

Of course, it could've just been the money. Like the rest of the crew, Doni's paycheck was measured in percentages, and the percentage I paid the woman should've bought a lot of loyalty. Playing the part of a hooker may have been stretching the loyalty thing a bit too far, but I treated my crew well and expected them to go that extra mile.

I never turned my back on them, though. Something Dad taught me a long, long time ago. Keeping a small thread of distrust woven through my naturally sweet disposition had saved my round hiney more than once.

We made it to the bar, but then, so had a number of other enthusiastic patrons. The bartender—a woman built like a reinforced ferroconcrete wall—grabbed a customer by the throat and dragged the small man over the gleaming ironwood bar. Then she proceeded to smother him in not-so-motherly love.

I took a calculated chance. "Penny?"

Miss Burly Bartender raised a bushy eyebrow, but didn't stop what she was doing.

"I'm Justin Bell," I continued. "I believe you have a message for me?"

Pretty Penny finally glanced up. She sighed, wrapped a beefy arm around her paramour's neck in a neat stranglehold, and gave me the once over. "Never heard of you."

Now why did I get the feeling things were about to go south?

I liberated the token from my g-string and held it up so the light caught my mother's molded silhouette. "Are you sure about that?"

Penny took the token, examined both sides, tucked it deep between breasts the size of a man's skull. "I said I've never heard of you. Thanks for the tip."

And she and Mr. LoveMuffin took up where they'd left off.

I was beginning to smell more than body odor in this joint. Something with the distinctly hairy stench of a rat. In fact, there was something creepy about this whole meeting thing. A small wooden door stood half open at the far end of the bar. Perfect escape route, should we turn out to need one.

I scanned the crowd again, just to prove to my nerves there was nothing to get worked up about, and was just about to relax when a man about halfway between what appeared to be a grease gun shootout and naked bull riding caught my attention. He was dressed like a customer—wearing a tunic bright enough to compete with the local florescents and a pair of trying-to-look-expensive trousers—but there was something about him that just didn't fit...

The vipers nesting in my stomach were joined by a parade of Terran black widows crawling over my way-too-exposed skin. Meeting or no, it was time to get the hell out of *Penny's*.

"Get ready to move," I whispered to Doni, rising up on tiptoe to almost reach her ear. In one smooth move, I slid my hips onto the cool bar surface, stuck my hand down the canyon between Pretty Penny's breasts, and pulled my token free.

Before Penny could squawk, I pulled a ComStar coin—a rare twenty-five C-bill—from the money pouch sewn into my bra, flicked it in the air with my thumbnail, caught the glittering coin before it could hit the bar.

That caught the customers' attention.

I flicked it again, this time directly at Penny. "Free drinks for anyone who can get to the bar!"

During the half second it took for the esteemed patrons to comprehend the words "free booze," I slid off the bar, grabbed Doni's arm, and shoved my way towards the small door.

A quick glance over my shoulder showed my diversion was working: the crowd surged forward, trapping the out-of-place stranger like a piece of trash on an out-going tide. Anger spread across his face as we dodged toward the wall. I gave him a mock salute and turned away. A slow roar started behind me, accompanied by the thud of fist against flesh.

Our escape route was unexpectedly blocked by a burly, bouncer-type guy, complete with tattoo-covered skull. I debated scooting between his tree-trunk legs, but Doni wouldn't quite fit.

“Pssst. This way.” A curtain parted in the wall to my right. A wrinkled finger beckoned.

I snorted. Like I was really going to fall for that little trick. Ending up shanghaied was not my idea of a good evening.

The curtain opened a little further, revealing an old woman even more wrinkled than her finger. A woman that wrinkled couldn’t possibly be dangerous.

Could she?

I glanced around to see if we’d attracted any unwanted attention, then slipped through the curtain, dragging Doni behind me.



It took a moment for my eyes to adjust in the dimly-lit hallway. The wall was pierced with people-sized openings draped with gaudy curtains and not much else.

“Guess this is for those who want a little privacy,” I whispered to Doni. She looked at me as if I had suddenly sprouted a beard, then rolled her eyes.

At least she was loosening up. A little.

The raucous noise faded to relative silence as we followed the cloaked woman deeper into the bowels of the pleasure hall.

Other sounds began to make themselves known; lots of heavy breathing and noises I didn’t need to identify. The bar stench gave way to more personal smells overlaid with exotic aromas—cinnamon, spice, and, I sniffed again, bubblegum.

Every girl’s dream.

After way too long a time exposed to the smells and sounds of the corridor, our guide shoved through a curtained arch. She crossed what appeared to be an actual wine cellar and knocked softly on a wooden door.

I took a quick look at the bottles revealed in the dim light and raised an eyebrow. Terran Château Beaujolais, bottled in 2766. A

very good year. A very, very good year if I remembered my wines. And rare as a saint in this city; very few survived the Amaris Coup. Good operation, here, to boast such bootleg. Very good.

No use trying to stash a bottle in my g-string. Maybe I could borrow the old lady's cloak.

Just then the door eased open and we had to leave the wine cellar behind. Too bad; I'd loved to find out if 2766 was as good a year as everyone claimed it was.



The door clicked shut behind us. I turned around and froze. A woman stood, back pressed tight against the door. Her face was familiar, though I couldn't quite figure out why.

"Hello, Justin Bell," the woman said. Her low, sultry voice sent a shiver racing over my skin. Not because of its sensuous nature, but because I'd heard that voice before.

Or one similar to it.

The woman glided with practiced grace across the gray stone floor to a reclining sofa to the right of an enormous ironwood bookcase. The soft smell of roses followed her.

"I am Leila Maddock Bell. Your father's sister."



An orbital bombardment could have blasted this room out of existence and I wouldn't have noticed. All I could do was stare at the woman in front of me.

She wore a diaphanous gown, layered in purples and blues, a gown so light it floated like butterfly wings when she walked. The woman who claimed to be my father's sister wasn't much taller than I, but then Silas Bell hadn't been a tall man. Not in stature anyway. It was his presence that captured men's loyalty and women's hearts. He'd seemed almost larger than life, my father had. Especially when I'd been young and impressionable.

Her hair was darker than my father's. Her eyes a lighter shade of blue. Her nose had that same obstinate crook, though.

If it had only been her slight resemblance to Silas Bell, I might not have believed her. But that voice, even with its female edge and odd accent, was enough like his to make me want to look over my shoulder. Make sure my father wasn't in the same room.

Leila Bell smiled and my lingering doubt swept away like tumbleweed in a desert wind.

"You should see yourself," my aunt said. "You look so like your mother did when first we met. I'm sorry it's taken so long for us to meet. My brother wasn't particularly a family-minded man."

I couldn't help wondering if she thought I'd be so different from my father. "That much you've got right. So why am I here?"

The smile slowly faded from Leila's face. She glanced once at Doni, but only the once. "I understand you have attempted to fill my brother's shoes."

Now why did I suddenly feel as if I'd been dumped in a bath filled with ice? "You didn't invite me here for a family reunion and I'm not inclined to discuss family business. So maybe it's time to leave."

"You are not going anywhere until I've had my say." Leila gestured to the old woman. The distinct clink of a door being locked made my heart skip a beat. In spite of the unusual accent, this woman shared my father's blood, something I'd better not forget.

Time to stop playing hard to get and see if I could get a little something in return. I cruised over to a soft-looking settee, and settled into it. "How about a bottle of that moldy wine while we're talking?"

Leila lifted her chin. I met her measuring gaze, held it with my own until she finally smiled. "Moldy, indeed. Julia, would you please see to our guests?"

I'd hoped my request would have more positive results than just drinking old wine, but instead of unlocking the door to fetch a bottle, Julia hobbled over to a cabinet and pulled down three goblets. I stared in fascination as those wrinkled fingers skillfully popped the cork of a previously opened bottle. Wine the color of blood cascaded from the bottle into the goblets without a drop being spilled.

"I had Julia open the bottle early so that we might enjoy the full bouquet of the wine. It's a Château Beaujolais, 2766. Do you approve?"

I took the goblet from the tray in Julia's hands, sniffed the aromatic bouquet, twirled the glass, and watched the blood-colored wine slip down the sides of the crystal as gracefully as Leila had crossed the room.

Then I took a light sip.

Flavor exploded across my tongue in a riot of rich berry, plum, and a gentle touch of aged oak. I explored the full sensation of the heady wine before letting it slide down my throat.

"Nice." I gave a slight nod of appreciation; ignored Leila's implied superiority at sampling such a rare vintage.

Leila set her glass aside without drinking. What the hell? For a moment, I wondered if I'd been stupid enough to allow myself to be poisoned. A second sip revealed no trace of bitterness. Doni, exercising incredible will power, held her glass in a stiff cradle and only sniffed at it. Shook her head. Clean.

"I'm afraid we don't have much time for pleasantries," Leila said. Her gown rasped softly as she stood and started pacing. I decided to let her take the lead and finish the excellent wine while I still had the chance.

Leila stopped beside an antique roll-top desk, pulled a rolled up cloth from one of the drawers, handed it to me. Reluctantly, I set aside my goblet, and unrolled the cloth. It stank of mold and old age.

I want to come home.

Rust-colored words on a pale shred of torn cloth. A shiver passed through my body as I studied the clumsy writing. Finally, I rolled the cloth and handed it back to Leila.

"Where did this come from?" Not that I really wanted to know. Any connection I might have to my father's sister was going to end right here. With Mom gone, I had no more need for family ties than my father had.

"My daughter," Leila said. My heart took a nose dive quicker than any DropShip ever dreamt of doing.

"Shana disappeared six months ago," Leila continued. "The authorities have been unable to locate her. I've contacted everyone I know." She shot me an apologetic glance. "That's how I learned of your mother's death. I visited her several times at the Lost Tavern. A fine place. The last time I saw Jessica she gave me that token. It must have been just before she died."

"Go on." I finished off the glass of wine and forced myself to listen.

Leila ran the cloth along her still-smooth cheek. "She is only eleven. An innocent girl. Her life has been protected. Cherished."

Understanding flashed quick as a 'Mech's laser. "She found out her mother wasn't a saint?"

Leila nodded. "An accident. I was entertaining a guest. Shana was supposed to be visiting a friend. She came home unexpectedly and found us in a rather compromising position."

"So she's a runaway. Where's her father?" I didn't really want to know the answer. Didn't want to get involved. But there's a demon inside me, a creepy little bugger who's a sucker for protecting the innocent.

"Dead." Leila's voice went flat as a smooshed dung beetle. "I've done what I had to do to survive. To give my daughter the things I never had."

An ancient myth. One that millions of parents swallowed. I shook my head and stood. "Why are you telling me this? I'm not an investigator. I'm a smuggler."

"That is precisely why you are here. I want to hire you to bring my daughter home."

Talk about an evening filled with surprises. Even Doni gasped. She'd been quiet for so long, I practically forgot she was there. Now she moved forward. Touched my arm. Gave her head a quick shake.

"Why me?" I asked again. There was definitely something rotten in Gallis. "There are hundreds of DropShip captains you could hire to pick your daughter up—if you know where she is. Why haven't you gone yourself?"

That question answered itself. A sharp rap on the door echoed through the room. Leila stiffened and the old woman moaned.

"There's no time to explain," Leila whispered. She returned to the desk. Pulled a leather-bound journal from the same drawer the cloth had been in. Pressed both journal and cloth into my hand.

"Please."

There it was again. That one simple word. I gazed into Leila's pale eyes, tried to read the truth behind the pleading gaze, and failed.

Nothing more sinister here than a mother trying to get her daughter back. And if the words on the cloth actually came from her daughter, then that's where the daughter belonged.

I gave a quick nod. Leila leaned forward and brushed her lips against my cheek. "Thank you."

The door handle rattled, hard, insistent.

"Everything you need to know is in my journal. I will be waiting to hear of your success."

Leila stepped over to the bookshelf and reached behind it. Like a door on a well-greased hinge, the shelf's edge swung forward, revealing a dark stairwell. Leila waved us forward. "In here. Quick."

Once again Doni and I found ourselves following the wrinkled woman, this time down a stairway that felt like it led straight into the bowels of hell. Smelled like it too. A putrid sulphur stench mingled with the smell of wet rats. The woman's lantern barely pushed back the absolute black.

Water dripped on our heads and oozed down the jagged walls. Within seconds my dressed-to-kill shoes were saturated with the evil-smelling liquid. It wasn't cold, though, a fact I noted with mild surprise. We must have been right under the mineral baths Pretty Penny advertised.

And here I'd thought the woman was all hype.



The passageway ended in another set of steep, slippery stairs that led to a door barely large enough for Doni to slip through. The designer must have anticipated only small female types using his door, but I wasn't complaining. We were safely back out on the street.

A quick glance around told me that safety was relative. The lights from Main Street didn't reach these back alleys. In addition to the hefty perfume Main Street had to offer, I could detect the sickly sweet odor of rotten garbage and worse. Dark mounds littered the slick cobblestones.

One of those mounds moaned when I tripped over an unseen lump, and I almost ended up face first in unidentifiable muck.

A man built like a small-scale BattleMech only twice as ugly stumbled to a stop a meter away. One look at the man's eyes had me reaching for the pistol snugged tight against my hip. The man leered drunkenly at my chest, then spat a disgustingly shiny wad of goo, barely missing my soggy dressed-to-kill feet, and moved on.

"We should've parked our 'Mechs close by," I muttered. Doni didn't say anything, but then she wasn't much of a talker anyway.

I tightened my grip on the journal in my left hand and led the way back out to Main Street. I'd parked the hovertruck not too far from Penny's.

With any kind of luck, it would still be there.



Maybe it was the tokens or maybe it was just time for things to go right, but the hovertruck sat right where we'd left it—at the edge of the jungle. The fact that nothing turned up missing was even more amazing.

"Keep your tongue outta your teeth," I told Doni as I kicked off my soggy shoes. "We're blowing this rotten joint."

Doni gave me a tight smile. We both slipped on jackets—the air had turned chilly and there was a damp feel to the air that spoke of rain. It always rained in the jungle surrounding Myopia City, though I'd yet to see it rain in the city itself.

Time to leave this butt-ugly planet behind.

I cranked up the heater and turned the hovertruck toward my *Fortress*-class DropShip.

Fat raindrops splatted the windshield as the city lights faded and then disappeared. Rain-slicked leaves the size of dark green plates shimmered in the headlights. Diesel fumes filled the cab.

“Gotta get that exhaust leak fixed,” I said for the umpteenth time. Cracked the window for breathable air. Along either side of the road, the jungle rose like a living wall. Not much chance of finding a short cut through that stuff.

About halfway back to the landing site, my skin began to crawl.

“Take a look around with the infrareds,” I told Doni. She shot me a glance, then pulled the night vision binoculars from their case and peered into the dark. Finally, she shook her head.

“Nothing moving out there but shadows.”

I nodded, but my skin kept on crawling. I'd had this *feeling* off and on all night. Maybe it was the city, maybe not.

“Keep on looking.”

Doni shrugged. “Whatever you say, boss.”

That's my girl. I smiled. Time to check in with the home office, give 'em time to clean up the party. I grabbed the radio mike from the console.

“Hey, you gorgeous DropShip. This is your captain speaking. Prepare to be boarded.”

I clicked off the mike, waited for a reply.

Nothing.

“While the captain's away, the mice will play,” I muttered, glancing at Doni. She frowned.

“You told them to take a little R & R,” she said.

"I also told them that if anyone left the ship while we were gone, I'd have their heads on a plate. And I didn't mean the part that does their thinking."

That brought a grin to Doni's face. "Aye, aye, Captain."

I keyed the mike again. "This is Bell. You there, Stevie?"

Still no answer. I slapped the mike back into its holder. "Those boys aren't gonna be happy campers for long."

The creepy, something's-definitely-wrong feeling grew until my skin started to itch. The hovertruck fishtailed and shot forward as I goosed up the speed.

We'd landed about twenty klicks from the city. Five klicks from the landing site, I slowed the hovertruck to a stop and turned to Doni.

"The chances of the entire crew abandoning ship are about a hundred to one," I said. "Maybe less if they find the cash box."

Doni just looked at me. So much for black humor.

"We're heading in slow without lights," I continued. "Do a little reconnaissance. There's about two klicks of open space between the jungle and the ship. If it looks clear, we're going in. Fast. Just pray someone left the loading ramp deployed."

"Steve said he'd set it on auto if he couldn't be there." Doni pulled out a pair of night vision goggles and handed them to me.

"Thanks." I slid the goggles on, let my eyes adjust to the muted yellow-green light, and eased the hovertruck forward.



An eerie sense of *déjà vu* swept over me when we reached the edge of the jungle. The night of my mother's death had been similar to this. Only then, the DropShip had been attacked by a roving band of treasure hunters. Now she sat silent in the dark. Lights glowed in all the appropriate places, but there was no activity.

Of course, that could have something to do with the time of night. But there should have been a skeleton crew on watch.

And there should have been someone manning the radio.

I tried the radio one more time.

No luck.

A quick adjustment of the goggles showed the ramp had been deployed. What waited at the top of that ramp was anybody's guess.

"Okay," I finally said. "Here's what we're going to do."



Running dark in a hurtling hovertruck is not recommended for the faint at heart, but I knew this truck inside and out. I also knew my DropShip. I rapped the partition between the cab and the cargo area twice as we approached the loading ramp. Doni rapped back.

A sharp bump and we were on the ramp. I slapped the fans into reverse, setting the hovertruck into a hard slow just short of its normal parking place. A quick glance told me the cargo bay was empty.

Not good.

Pistol in hand, I slid quietly out the driver's side door and let the hovertruck continue on its way. With the auto-stop engaged, the truck should stop just short of hitting the wall.

If everything went right.

I kept to the shadows, checked the nooks and crannies for signs of life. No sign of anyone anywhere. I scurried barefooted along the wall of the cavernous room until I reached the cargo bay door. Doni came up the other side.

"This place is empty as a deserted morgue," she said.

I took a deep breath of the grease-scented air, tried to calm my racing pulse. I glanced at the pistol. "Let's stop by the 'Mech bay. I need to switch weapons and you need to be armed. Ready?"

Doni nodded. We both stepped to the side as I opened the cargo bay door. I stepped through first, made sure the corridor was clear, waved Doni in behind me.

Being in an empty DropShip isn't a totally new feeling, but it's always an eerie sensation, kind of like being in an unfurnished house. There's the sense of things going on around you—the low hum of the ventilation system, the quiet click of the temperature control system doing its job—but there's also a sense of abandonment.

That's how the *Fortress* felt now: abandoned. And me? Not only was I angry. I was confused. This DropShip and I had been through a lot of things together, including attempted mutiny, but never had I experienced anything quite like this. As far as I knew if a crew was going to jump ship, they'd at least let the captain know they were unhappy first.

Maybe I was just being naive. But Doni looked puzzled too, and she'd been around more DropShips than I'd ever seen.

The confusion grew when we found the first body sprawled in front of Cargo Bay Two where the 'Mechs were stored. Stevie lay awkwardly across the corridor in a pool of his own blood. I reached down, put a finger against his neck.

His body was still warm.

Doni and I looked at each other. I raised a finger to my lips indicating silence, counted one, two, three with my fingers, and opened the door.

One step through the door and I had to swallow to keep from losing my stomach. The copper-blood smell hit me before I saw the floor littered with bodies. Seventeen of them. Every last man in my crew.

Three 'Mechs—Lars' FS9-C *Firestarter*, the *Tarantula* Doni "inherited" from my late, great first officer, and my own *Vindicator*, "*Titanium Rose*"—stood watch from their silent corners, their empty metal faces accusing.

Without saying a word, Doni checked bodies while I swept the enormous room for hidden assailants.

And once again found nothing.



Doni and I armed ourselves in grim determination, then went through the rest of the ship, compartment by compartment. We checked places rats wouldn't even think to hide. And came up empty-handed.

I had two choices: call in the local authorities and wade through their bureaucratic bullshit only to end up paying them off in the end; or get the hell out of here.

"This is an awfully big ship to run by ourselves," I said. Doni shrugged.

"Been done before."

I grinned for the first time since coming on board. What an understatement. Sure, been done before. But it would be hell to do it without sending us back into the ground in a big ball of fire higher than Pretty Penny's palace. "What's life without a little challenge, huh? Let's do it then."

And so we did.

Relief flowed through me as I felt the deck rumble. The *Fortress* lifted off the planet with a minimum of grumbling, a fact for which I felt profoundly grateful. Sometimes the old ship could be more than a bit ornery.

It wasn't until later, when I returned to my cabin, that I found the last piece of the grotesque puzzle.

My newfound aunt's body. Tucked into my own bunk. With a Lost Tavern token covering each of her eyes. Her throat had been slit just like all the rest.

"I thought you cleared my cabin," I said through clenched teeth, trying not to breathe as Doni and I stared at the blood-stained floor.

"I thought you cleared it," Doni replied.



When the DropShip reached orbit, we stuck her on autopilot and rechecked the entire ship.

"I'll take first watch," I said as we both collapsed into chairs on the bridge. Doni rolled off her perch and curled up on the floor. I had the feeling I'd be doing the same when it finally came my turn to sleep.

Before taking the ship off autopilot, I slipped down to the hovertruck, grabbed the leather-bound journal from its hiding place under the seat, and returned to the bridge.

Tomorrow we'd take care of the bodies, send them off among the stars with all the dignity and honor a good smuggler's crew deserved. Then we'd be off to try and get a new crew; couldn't operate the ship indefinitely with just the two of us. Way too dangerous, even for us.

But for now I had some reading to do. Somewhere in these pages were the answers to why my crew had been massacred. If whoever did this thought they could scare me off, they had another think coming.

I don't scare easy. I just get mad.

Look out, whoever you are. *Titanium Rose* is on the prowl.

The End