

**TWO 'MECHS,
THREE QUEENS
AND A PUG**

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Secluded cottage
On the outskirts of Belona
Campoleone
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Privacy. An extremely valuable commodity. A commodity some people will kill for.

Once I watched my father nearly blow a man in half with a machine pistol for barging into his “office” without knocking. I couldn’t have been more than two at the time. The stunned look on the dead man’s face still haunts my dreams.

So does my father.

Though I’ve bloodied a nose now and again to get my share of personal space, even killed in self-defense a time or two, I’m nothing like my father, Silas Bell.

I draw the line at murder.

At least I did until today.

My *Vindicator* could’ve pulverized the cottage I was in with one stomp. What the place lacked in size, however, it made up for in opulence.

The bathroom was a prime example: Gray stone counter and sink. Matching stone floor. Even had a little waterfall tucked into the far corner. The entire place smelled like a hothouse full of blooming flowers I had no desire to identify.

I stripped down to a thin chemise, tossed the tunic and trousers I’d lived in for the past two weeks onto the counter along with my pistol, and started water running into the fancy claw-footed tub.

A quick glance in the mirrored cabinets overlooking the counter showed me what I already knew: smooshed mushpuppies looked better than I did right now.

Probably smelled better too.

That’s what came from flying a *Fortress*-class DropShip with only four hands for two solid weeks. Barely enough time to eat and catch a few hours of shut eye. Bathing simply wasn’t an op-

tion. Didn't help that every time I managed to get a little down time, my murdered crew—in vivid holocolor—stomped through my sleep-deprived mind like zombies on parade.

But Doni and I were off the DropShip now. Away from the stuff of nightmares. All I wanted was a hot bath and a little time to myself.

Not unreasonable requests as far as I was concerned.

The mole in the toilet didn't agree.

Unfortunately, said mole didn't see fit to introduce himself until I'd settled onto the seat, intent on getting through the personal business and into the tub as quickly as possible. It was a testament to my exhaustion that a little splash down below didn't put me on alert.

But the cold nose definitely got my attention.

"Holy...!" I leapt up faster than a bee on Spazz, slipped on the faux marble floor, managed to execute a delicate pirouette while simultaneously falling to my knees, and ended up face to nose with my assailant.

A very tiny, very wet nose. Covered with spiky whiskers.

The thing looked harmless enough—in spite of the tickle factor. I reached forward to pluck it from the bowl. Pulled back as the fur beneath the nose parted, revealing a double row of pointy teeth.

Give me a pistol and I can outdraw most any man, but this little guy was faster than fast. Before I could get my hand back into safe territory, he had my trigger finger between his teeth, and it didn't look like he intended to let go.

At least not in the foreseeable future.

"...Stars!" I clenched my teeth against the pain and thought about my options. Fingers are a valuable commodity, especially to a smuggler. I prided myself on getting through life so far with all ten intact. So I decided to forego shooting the little bugger and instead shook my hand vigorously.

Two rings and a bracelet clattered onto the tile, but the mole clung to that finger like an oversized leech.

Time for a change in strategy.

I raised my hand, intending to thwap the fuzzy thing against the counter. Until it opened a pair of beady eyes and squinted at me.

No way I could thwap something that small while it squinted.

The mole must've read my mind. As suddenly as it had grabbed my finger, it let go, landing by my right foot with a rather soggy thud.

My reaction was pure female: I screamed. (Not something I'm proud to admit, but hey, I've seen guys twice my size be unmanned by a single mouse.)

Then I lunged for the pistol.

Unfortunately, the mole lunged too—right in front of me. Instead of tromping on the furry monster, I stepped toward the toilet, only the lid was still up—silly me—and instead of planting my foot in the place that had coughed up the source of my discomfort, I stepped backward into the tub and managed to catch a bar of soap under my right heel. Down I went in a splash of ignominious glory...

...just as the bathroom door burst open.

"What the...?"

Doni had no problem leaping up on the counter as the mole dashed between her legs. Long mole claws on the spade-like paws scrabbled across the tile, slipping and sliding like kids playing on ice, only no one said "isn't that cute." Instead Doni glared at me from her countertop perch.

"What the hell was that?"

"Your sister's plumber, maybe?" I pulled myself out of the tub with as much dignity as a half-drowned captain can muster and tried to tug my soaked chemise into a reasonable semblance of covering.

An act about as dignified as belching during a fancy dinner.

Doni hopped down and tossed me a towel. I nodded my thanks, wrapped myself in the warm, dry cloth, peered thoughtfully at the blood dripping from my right index finger.

"*That* was a Galatean mole, if I'm not mistaken," I said. Doni yanked open a section of mirrored cabinet and pulled out a round bottle no bigger than my thumb.

"Let me take a look at that." She reached for my hand, grinning.

"I'm okay." I started to stick my finger in my mouth, glanced at the toilet, decided maybe a little antiseptic was in order after all. Reluctantly I held out my hand.

"When were you on Galatea?" Doni asked, taking my finger in her cool hand and studying the bite.

"During my young and stupid days." The days when I thought going straight was an option. Before I realized exactly what kind of ramifications came from being the daughter of an infamous pirate.

Time to change the subject.

"I didn't see medical experience on your resume."

"No real experience," Doni said, "just lots of pets."

Great. "Promise my hand won't grow fur and start growling."

Doni made a wry face and poured a drop from the bottle onto my finger, which stopped throbbing and started burning like I'd just stuck the damn thing smack dab in the middle of a 'Mech reactor.

"Blake's blood!" Before I could lambaste my first officer for taking advantage of a captain in distress, the tub bucked like a Taurian bull as the far wall erupted in a thunderous mélange of splintered wood and shattered tile.

So much for a quiet bath.

###

It took a moment to remember just how I came to be sitting on a strange bathroom floor with church bells ringing in my ears. One look at my first officer lying crumpled beside me brought memory flooding back.

"Doni?" Before I could do more than frown, she blinked and sat up.

"You look like hell," she muttered. She glanced around. Stared at the wall that had just exploded and let out a string of curses that would've made even Silas Bell blush.

The room didn't smell like a hothouse anymore. It stank like a freshly dug grave.

"Come on." I worked my way into a standing position and grabbed Doni's hand. Pain careened through my almost-blown-to-bits body as I hauled her to her feet.

No sweat. I'd been through worse. I was sure of it.

Not so sure about Doni. She sagged against the counter, her complexion grayer than the stone countertops. I guided her to the toilet. Made sure the lid was down before she collapsed.

"Hang on," I said. "I'll go check on Retha."

The sooner I found out if Doni's sister was still alive, the sooner I could get help for both of them. I limped out the door and down the hall, bare feet thudding on the blonde plank floor. The living room was still intact.

So was Doni's sister.

She barreled through the front door, ugly one-eyed pug in her arms. Stared at the demolition zone that used to be the wall between kitchen and bath.

I'd always considered Doni tall, but compared to her sister Doni'd been stunted from birth. Little sister's growth hormones must've worn themselves out with all that height—there wasn't enough meat on Retha's bones for a gnat to gnaw on.

"I said you could use the bath, not tear my house apart." Retha set the pug on the floor and walked over to survey the damage.

"Glad to see you're okay," I said, wiping sweaty palms on my still-dripping chemise. I hobbled to the edge of the kitchen.

"Maybe a gas leak?" I asked. Retha wrinkled her nose a moment, then shook her head. I had to agree. The place smelled of torn wood, dust, and melted electrical wiring. No telltale smell of gas, natural or otherwise.

Stove and fridge stood like lonely sentinels at either end of a gaping hole where the sink used to be. A small flame flickered beneath what was left of the green and black stone counter and was immediately doused by water spraying from the ruptured pipes.

Something moved deep in the rubble. The pug shoved between my legs, its corkscrew tail wobbling back and forth like it was missing a connection.

“Come out of there, Charlie.” Retha snatched the pug before he clambered into the ruined cabinet.

I stepped carefully over a mass of displaced wire. Reached into the gaping hole that used to be a cabinet. And pulled out a piece of black hide. Recently skinned.

Very recently. The thing was still warm.

Charlie woofed and stuck out his nose to examine my find. One whiff got him snorting pug snot all over Retha’s arm as he jerked his head back and tried to clear out his nose.

Couldn’t blame him. Dirty wet dog mixed with mangled hamburger didn’t smell this bad.

“You didn’t happen to see a mole running around anywhere?” I asked Retha.

“A mole? No, why?”

“Just curious.” I mentally ran through my limited knowledge of explosive materials. There’d been a couple of memorable male-types floating through my unwritten history in a sort of romantic way. One of those male-types just happened to be a demolitions expert.

Too bad I hadn’t listened when he wanted to discuss his day. I’d had other things on my mind. Perfectly understandable, given the situation.

At least that’s what I’d thought at the time.

I had managed to pick up a few nuggets of knowledge; even took a peek at his *Demolitions Handbook*. Nowhere did I remember seeing anything about black hide being an explosive material.

Probably just a case of the little guy with the big teeth being in the wrong place at the right time.

Still... I held up the piece of hide. “You have something I can put this in?”

Retha set Charlie down and ordered him into the living room. She located a palm-size container—with an airtight lid—amid the rubble. “What are you going to do with that thing?”

"Find someone who can identify it." I carefully folded the hide, goo side in, and sealed it in the container.

"Identify what?" Doni asked. She'd managed to move from the toilet to the couch without yelping. Charlie sat on her feet like a fuzzy foot muff. Her color hadn't improved any—except for the nice purple bruise tinged with red decorating her left eyebrow.

Living room, kitchen, and dining room shared common space. I'd thought it a cozy arrangement when I'd first arrived. Now only the couch looked cozy.

"Nothing," I said. I wasn't trying to hide anything, but I couldn't let go of the nagging suspicion that our little mole friend had something to do with the explosion, a suspicion I wasn't going to share until I was a little more certain. Not good for a captain to get her crew thinking she belonged in a loony bin.

In spite of the lack of odor, the explosion was probably caused by some kind of leak, maybe gas or something equally as harmless. Speaking of which...

"Maybe you should find the shut off valve," I said to Retha. She reached under the sink. Shut off the water.

"Nicely done," I said. "Now how about the gas?"

###

Call it intuition, gut instinct, whatever you want, but when Doni had suggested two days ago that we stop by her home planet to do some recruiting, I initially shrugged her off.

I had my own thoughts about recruiting, thoughts I didn't share with my first officer. Not yet.

That night, however, I came across an entry in my aunt's journal: my aunt claimed she'd located a man who knew exactly where her daughter had been taken. That kind of information would make my own journey a hell of a lot shorter.

It would also eliminate some of the mystery.

As far as I was concerned, mysteries belonged in fiction novels, not in real life. Unfortunately, I now had enough mysteries to fill a couple of books, starting with who kidnapped my niece and progressing nicely to the murders of my aunt and crew.

Unfortunately, the page containing said information was missing.

Another dead end?

That's what we were on Campoleone to find out. The old man was supposed to reside in a rest home a few miles from Retha's cottage.

Since the bathtub was no longer usable, I decided to cut to the chase.

"We need to get into the local loony bin." I raised my voice slightly to be heard over the clanking silverware. Retha's kitchen was out of order, so we'd moved to a local establishment for refreshment. Doni's little sister managed to sweet talk the maître d', a lumpy little creep wearing a black jacket with tails that practically swept the slate floor, into letting us—Charlie included—take over a dark booth.

A very, very dark booth.

In the farthest corner of the restaurant.

"Excuse me?" Retha evidently didn't feel the same need to keep her voice down. Her question rose above the conversational murmur like a dove taking wing. "I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

I glanced around the room, uncomfortable as a prune in an apricot patch.

We were a bit early for dinner—it was only 1700 hours—but the place was already filling up. Not exactly a prime spot for intimate conversation.

An overdressed patron two tables away—a man who'd been watching us ever since we waltzed through the door—turned away quickly when I caught his eye.

I glared at the back of the man's neatly-coifed head. He looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place him—the hair was throwing me off. Shiny black tresses bound at the nape of his neck with a red bow.

No man's hair should be so perfect.

"Okay, so maybe it's not a loony bin," I said, making a mental note to keep an eye on that particular head of hair. "The Rocky Hills Rest Home. There's someone inside I need to talk to."

Whoever'd designed this place must've been colorblind. Everything—from the slate on the floors to the dimly lit chandeliers—was either black or white. Even the customers' clothing fit the color scheme.

Most of the customers, that is. I smoothed a wrinkle from my cherry-red tunic as a black-uniformed waiter stalked past, full plate in each hand. The rich smell of slow-cooked beef trailed in his wake.

Charlie and I both licked our lips.

The jerky I'd had early this morning had worn off somewhere between removing the rubble from Retha's kitchen and mopping up the puddles. I wasn't the only one hungry—Doni still looked she was gonna keel over any minute. We all needed to eat. That's why we were seated—me in borrowed clothing four sizes too long and Charlie in a bow tie made out of boot laces—in a restaurant that would put a Muldavian palace to shame.

I sipped ice water and forced my thoughts away from food.

"Doni says you have connections."

A spot between my shoulder blades started itching, the kind of itch that insists on being scratched. A quick rub against the back of the booth took care of the itch. It also attracted the maître d's attention.

I stopped scratching.

"Think you could use those connections to get us into the Rocky Hills Resting Home?"

Retha waited while a busboy filled our water glasses. The kid was good—he even filled Charlie's water bowl.

"What's in it for me?" she asked when the busboy moved to the next table.

I smothered a sigh and tapped a finger on what appeared to be an authentic black granite table top.

"Think of it as a personal favor," I said, hoping Retha would take the hint. The tabletop pressed seductively cool against my fingertips. I had a few clients who'd be interested in this stuff, no matter what the price.

Something to keep in mind.

"I want to join your crew," Retha said.

"My crew?" I cleared my throat. Rearranged the silverware beside my still-empty plate. Twice.

Retha nodded. She plucked Charlie from the seat and cuddled him close, smothering the pug's face with kisses. Charlie sneezed—a rather loud, wet sneeze. I couldn't blame him. Enough was enough already.

I carefully drew my napkin out from under the rearranged silverware and wiped pug snot from my cheek.

"I want to get off-planet," Retha continued. "Do some exploring."

"Sign up for a cruise," I said without missing a beat. "You'll have a lot more fun."

Could this woman possibly be serious? Far as I knew, she'd been landlocked her entire life. Just what I didn't need—someone who'd get spacesick at the first launching.

I shot Doni a sidelong glance, wondering just how much she'd told her sister about our business.

"She has a 'Mech," Doni said.

I kept my face neutral, though the thought of adding another 'Mech to our little entourage definitely had sales appeal.

"So?"

Doni rolled her head, popping the vertebrae in her neck with a distinct Snap! Crackle! Pop! Shivers ran up and down my skin. People weren't made to sound like that. 'Mechs, maybe. But people? It just wasn't...right.

"Retha's got this talent," Doni continued. "Ever since she was old enough to put a wingnut on a bolt, she's been able to make just about anything not only work, but work the way she's got it pictured in her mind. She's been rebuilding 'Mechs for—how long now, little sister?"

"Ten years," Retha replied. Her face lost that dour look. A gleam of excitement lit her eyes. "I've got a whole 'Mech in my barn. Ben brought me the last part..."

"Hang on just a minute," I said. "You mean to tell me you've got someone supplying you with discarded 'Mech parts and you put 'em together so they work again?"

"That's just what she's saying," Doni said.

Retha nodded. "I'll show you. I even retrofit an exoskeleton for Charlie."

Good old Charlie. So damned ugly he was cute. All those wrinkles and that eye...

The pug blinked. He licked his lips...

...and smiled.

"You've got to be pulling my leg," I said.

Charlie barked, eliciting a murderous stare from the maître d'.

"Actually, Charlie's pretty good," Doni said.

"Took some doing to get the body suit right..." The rest of Retha's words were drowned in a terrified scream.

You'd figure a place that looked like money and smelled like heaven would keep their customers under control, but someone always has to cause a commotion. From the far end of the restaurant, the section nearest the kitchen, came another scream followed by the sound of scrambling feet.

I was halfway to a standing position when Charlie growled. Retha's eyes widened. She leapt onto the booth seat, made a grab for Charlie as he scrambled free, and ended up in the middle of the bread basket.

A quick scan of the room revealed the culprit between tables halfway across the room: another mole, black as jeweler's velvet.

The mole scrambled beneath a table, sending the female occupant screaming. Her date followed, a bewildered look on his face. I eyeballed their untouched steaks.

Too bad the table was so far away.

White tablecloth draped over the tiny black nose as the mole poked its nose free. It sniffed the air. Pushed a little further into the open. Squinted its squinty little eyes.

Charlie went crazy. He danced around the mole. Barked. Darted in and out so fast he appeared a dirty blur against all that white.

The mole opened his mouth and hissed, a long, drawn out sound that made my bandaged finger throb just listening to it.

But there was more at stake here than my injured finger. I worked my way between abandoned tables. A chair scraped the floor as I lunged at Charlie, catching his hind legs just before he launched himself at the mole.

After all, something or someone had blown up Retha's kitchen. The evidence was piled in her front yard. And the only clue we had was a partially disintegrated mole.

Now here was another mole. Exactly where it shouldn't be.

"Here." I thrust the pug at Doni and pointed toward the front door. "Get everyone out of here."

Doni raised an eyebrow, but I stopped her protest before it started.

"Remember the mole at Retha's, and the big boom that brought the wall down?"

Doni nodded.

"The thought crossed my mind that maybe the two were connected. You know. The explosion and the mole." For a minute I thought Doni was just going to stand there staring at me like I was nuts, but after a long I-can't-believe-you-said-that look, she took the pug and headed toward the doorway.

Leaving me alone with the mole.

Half the restaurant had already cleared out and the rest didn't take much convincing. From the burnt smell leaking into the room, it appeared the cooks had cleared out as well. Mr. Maître d' didn't look too happy.

A lumpy man in a monkey suit was the least of my worries.

The mole hadn't moved. Not yet. The furry critter didn't look like I'd expect a bomb to look—no wires poking out of his fur, no packages tied to his back, no explosive caps on those shiny white teeth—but it didn't hurt to be on the safe side.

"Okay. It's just you and me, kid." I took a deep breath, wiped sweaty palms on my borrowed trousers, and moved in.

###

I could've just blown the mole away with my pistol, but the more I studied the velvety black hide, the more I shied away from physical violence.

"Easy now," I said to the mole. He squinted back. For a brief moment I wondered if I was having sleep-deprived hallucinations. I'd been seeing boogey 'Mechs behind every star before we landed on Campoleone. Sleep was supposed to be number one on my priority list, but I hadn't had a moment's shut-eye since we landed.

There was only one way to prove I wasn't hallucinating.

A movement caught my attention. I spun around and found Retha standing by my elbow. "What are you...?"

The mole charged, his mouth open wide. I leapt up on the closest chair. Retha backpedaled faster than a pig in fresh mud, slipped and went down hard on her scrawny derriere.

Time to make like a hero.

The *Demolitions Handbook* probably had a whole chapter devoted to "going down on bombs," a term my demolitions expert was way too fond of. But the only thing I remembered about disarming explosives was that the disarmer had to be careful, precise, and decisive.

Yeah. Right. Careful with an exploding mole.

I looked around for something to protect my hand from those voracious teeth while I mentally reviewed containment options.

On first glance—taking myself-as-human-shield out of the equation—it appeared I had precisely zero, zip, zilch places to contain the creature. Maybe if I could get it into the kitchen without blowing up and find the freezer unit, I'd have half a chance. But in the main room there weren't many options. I eyeballed the nearest ice bucket.

Too small.

Through the picture windows I could see a small round roof that stirred some vague memories...

Across the room something crashed to the floor. I jumped. The mole ran.

No time for subtlety.

Ignoring the pain in my hand, head, and soul, I executed a flying tackle that would have been perfect—if I'd taken into account the simple fact that the mole was about three feet closer to the floor than my anticipated contact zone, a mistake I chalked up to sleep deprivation.

Plummeting to earth a long arm's length in front of the mole, I reached out, grabbed the blasted thing by the end of its almost-nonexistent tail...

...and ended up with a handful of butt fur attached to a hissing, ivory-filled trap just waiting to spring.

Being a martyr was not big on my To Do list for the day, so I immediately discarded all thoughts of disarming the beast. Better to just get rid of the problem.

As quickly as possible.

I rolled to my feet. Wove through another set of tables and dashed through the front door, heading straight toward the little peaked roof.

The closer the roof got, the more I was certain I'd made the right decision. I'd seen old-fashioned wells with the exact same roofs on a smuggling trip to a planet that shall not be named.

I tossed the toothy furball over the three-foot rock wall down into what I hoped would be the depths of hell.

"Mole in the hole!" I called, taking a page out of the *Demolitions Handbook* before diving into the surrounding bushes and covering my head.

For two heartbeats—very long heartbeats—nothing happened.

Maybe I was wrong.

Maybe the bombing at Retha's had been an isolated incident and I was just a paranoid nut...

The little rock wall with the peaked roof exploded, hurling dirt and stone ten meters into the air.

###

"Any idea why someone's turning cute little Galatean predators into suicide moles?" I asked the two women in front of me. A torn

sorga leaf twirled in front of my right eye, a good excuse to concentrate on pulling bomb guts from my hair instead of looking up at both of them.

The sisters shrugged in unison. I scowled. Being almost blown up twice in one day was two times too many.

Even for me.

"Looks like the gardener's got a bit of work ahead of him," Retha said.

I surveyed the perfectly manicured landscape with a frown. Except for the newly excavated hole in the middle of the lawn and a few misplaced rocks, there was hardly a leaf out of place—if you didn't count my little hiding place.

I'd extracted my pummeled body from the ornamental shrubs with a little help from the girls. Charlie supervised the whole process. Now the four of us sat on a molded ferrocrete bench outside the front door.

Most of the customers had either left or gone back inside to finish their suppers, leaving us at the mercy of the maître d'.

I tapped my toe on the walkway. Thought about the meals we'd ordered. From the look on the man's lumpy face, I didn't think we'd be getting our food anytime soon.

"You'd think we'd at least get a doggy bag," I grumbled.

At least no one had died except the bombers themselves. There'd been too much death in my life the past few weeks. My aunt's empty eyes haunted my memories; the voices of my murdered crew whispering in the dark.

I'd been a fool to think a simple bath would help. Real rest wouldn't come until I'd finished the job my aunt hired me to do: find one small girl among the hordes of people scattered throughout the stars and bring her home.

No sweat.

Only there was no home for the girl to come to now that her mother was dead. Another interesting dilemma to deal with. When I had the time.

"That wasn't a real well, you know." Retha ran her hand over her short-cropped hair, a style that seemed to run in the family along

with the freckles scattered across a nose that just dared you to say something funny. "It was ornamental. You could've killed all of us."

"Ornamental?" Suddenly all the ache and pains I'd sustained in the last few decades imploded into one skull-busting headache. "Who in the name of Blake would be stupid enough to put an ornamental well in their yard?"

Even from here I saw the dark pupils in Retha's eyes widen. She wrinkled her nose, pug-style, a move that almost succeeded in burying her family freckles. Almost.

Her chin lifted in a manner guaranteed to raise the hackles on any female's back. Lucky for her Doni found a way to change the subject.

Doni's eyes narrowed. Her hand lashed out so quickly I almost ducked. With the speed of a Tressidian viper she plucked something off my shoulder and held it out.

"Thanks," I said, taking the glossy black moleskin from her fingers and tossing it into the bushes. "I don't do trophies."

"What about Retha's request?" Doni asked.

I scowled again. Maybe Retha was a pretty good 'Mech tech. Maybe she even had empathy. But good techies did not always turn out to be good pilots and vice versa, me being the exception to my own rule.

I scratched at an itch on my belly, looked down to find more mole guts plastered on my skin.

But the mole wasn't the issue here.

We had to find the man from my aunt's journal and find him fast.

"Okay, I'll take your deal," I said to Retha. "I'll bring you on board—on a trial basis—if you get me in to the rest home."

"No problem," Retha said.

I could only hope the man named Moloch was still alive and that we'd survive long enough to find him.

###

It didn't take long before I found out that what Retha didn't say mattered a lot more than what she did say.

We'd been sitting in the lobby of Rocky Hills Rest Home for nearly thirty minutes. The place was about as cheerful as a funeral home—dark brown carpet and drapes. Overstuffed tan couches and chairs clustered in groups around—you guessed it—dark brown coffee tables of indiscriminate material. The entire place reeked of disinfectant.

I plopped my boots on our indiscriminate coffee table. "So? Where is this guy?"

At least Retha had the grace to look a teensy bit sheepish. Or maybe it was the light. She shrugged.

"He'll be here. Ben doesn't have the same concept of time as everyone else. That's all."

Time wasn't the only thing Retha's "contact" viewed differently. Doni and I watched Retha accost the man who slouched through the lobby doors a good ten minutes later. She threw her arms around him, indulging in a lingering kiss that made me wonder if we were going to wait another thirty minutes.

"He reminds me of my second husband," Doni said.

"You kill the first?" I muttered.

"Nope. He ran off with my sister."

Now that was a real jaw-dropper. "Retha?"

Doni nodded.

"Where's he now?"

"Six feet under."

I pressed my lips tight together as Retha practically carried the new guy across the room. She set him on his feet. Dusted off a dark brown uniform jacket that looked like it needed a lot more than dusting.

"This is Ben Hoer," Retha said. "My fiancé."

You gotta be kidding.

I cleared my throat. Twice. Doni coughed.

Ben Hoer jackknifed into an overstuffed chair beside me and gnawed at a scab on his right knuckle.

At first glance, the guy was about as pretty as Charlie. Where Charlie had soft, round wrinkles, though, this guy had bone. After watching Ben chew his knuckle into a bloody pulp, I realized that comparing him to Charlie was an insult.

To poor Charlie.

Ben snorted. Not a snurf or a chortle. The kind of snort any Terran bull would've been proud of. He pulled a deck of cards out of his pocket. Glanced toward the empty reception desk.

Looked like everyone but Ben was out for dinner. Not a very good security arrangement, but hey, I wasn't complaining.

"Retha told me what you want." Another nervous glance. "See the thing is—no one gets in to see Mr. Moloch. Not supposed to, anyway. Unless you're lucky, that is. You feeling lucky?"

"I'm not here to play games, Mr. Hoer. Can you help us or not?"

The way Ben kept shifting around in his seat made me wonder if fire ants had taken up residence in his dark brown trousers. He didn't answer, just chewed on his knuckle.

I slapped my hands on my thighs and started to stand, but Doni pushed me back down.

"Let it play out," she whispered. I eased back into the chair. Noticed the cards in Ben's hands. He shuffled the deck so fast my eyes hurt trying to follow.

"You play?" Ben asked, flipping through the deck with one hand.

"Cards aren't high on my priority list," I said.

Ben grinned, revealing teeth as long and lean as the rest of his body. The cards made a slicky sound as he suddenly stopped shuffling and dealt six cards face down on the coffee table, three in front of me, the other three near his bony knee.

I toyed with the edge of my cards and waited.

"Here's the deal." The look in his eye was definitely challenging. I chewed the inside of my lip. I wouldn't bet money against this man—he wasn't the losing kind—but instinct told me money wasn't what he was after.

"If you win, I get you in to see Moloch," Ben said. "If I win, you still see Moloch *and* I get to join your crew."

Just thinking about this guy on board my DropShip sent creepy crawlies skittering across my skin. I could deal with that later, though, if necessary. "It's a deal."

"Three-card snatch. Pure, unadulterated luck," Ben said. He slapped the deck on the coffee table and leaned back in his chair for a half a heartbeat before leaning forward again. "No skill involved here, sister. What you see is what you get. Ready?"

There might be another way, but my gut told me time was running out. I'd never heard of three-card snatch, but if that's the way he wanted to play the game...

I took a deep breath and nodded.

"Ladies first," Ben said.

I shook my head. "It's a game of luck, right? We go together."

We picked up our cards. He watched me like a vulture watches a dying man, his gaze stuck to my cards like honey in a comb. I gave it a little test—up, down, right, left, forward, backward. He was worse than Charlie with a piece of prime steak—his eyes didn't waver from the cards for a second.

I lowered my hand to the table. Watched him do the same. Turned my cards over. Saw the triumph in his eyes as he glanced at his hand, then held up his and crowed.

Mine wasn't a bad hand—three jacks—but his was better.

Ben Hoer had dealt himself three queens.

He might call it the luck of the draw, but the odds were against both of us coming up with three of a kind.

Time to find out if Mr. Hoer had managed to stack anything else in his favor.

###

Retha had billed the Rocky Hills Rest Home as a place for the demented, the senile, or the otherwise insane. So far the only person I'd found who fit the bill was our tour guide.

The carpet had given way to pukey-tan tile when we passed from the lobby into the halls. Ben led the way past nondescript doors, up some stairs, down another hall. Here and there attendants pushed food carts from room to room. The majority of the workers—and the guards—appeared to be in the cafeteria.

We'd left the dinner sounds behind five minutes ago.

Nerves had Ben Hoer by the short and uglies. He'd finally stopped outside a closed door. Far as I could tell there was nothing that made this door any different from the rest of the doors up and down the hall.

He shuffled from foot to foot. Jingled keys in his hand. Peered over his shoulder as if expecting the boogeyman to show up any minute.

Somehow I had to keep this guy from bolting.

"So when are you and Retha going to tie the knot?" I pasted a smile on my face and leaned against the wall near the door, effectively blocking his view of the hall. If I could just get him to settle down...

"What? Oh, yeah." Ben shot me a puzzled look as if surprised to find me standing beside him. He stared at the keys in his hand. Stuck one in the lock. Twisted. "Soon, I guess."

The door eased open. Before Ben could change his mind, I stuck my foot through the widening crack, forcing the door open with my leg.

"That's nice," I said. "I'll expect an invitation."

A quick pat on Ben's scrawny arm and I was inside the room. Ben, Retha, and Doni piled in behind me.

I stood for a moment, letting my vision adjust to the late afternoon sun streaming through a picture window in the far wall. Decorated in forest green and rose, the room was a welcome relief from the dour browns of the rest of Rocky Hills. It even smelled like fresh pine.

Wasn't hard to find the room's occupant. In fact, he appeared to be waiting for us. A rose-colored couch sat beneath the window. Perched on the edge of the couch, leather bag in hand, sat the man I assumed was Moloch.

A smile humped his rosy cheeks into mounds that hid everything but the twinkle in his eyes. Without taking another step, I

instantly felt like I'd been wrapped in a hug more warm and loving than my mother ever thought of giving. My chest tightened with unexpected emotion.

There wasn't an angle on this man's body—even his elbows were curved. The emotion clenching my gut slid from pain-of-something-missed to suspicion.

This couldn't be the man my aunt's journal referred to. She'd called that man dangerous. Underlined the word twice.

In red.

Suspicion downgraded to disappointment.

What could be dangerous about a fat old man sitting on a silk damask sofa?

"This isn't him" I said, giving the man a quick nod before turning to leave.

"Don't just stand there dithering, Justin Bell," the smiling man said. "Get on in here and rescue me."

###

"Rescue? Who said anything about a rescue? We're here to talk. That's all." I crossed my arms and stared at the old man. This whole misadventure was getting more bizarre by the moment.

"Of course you are," the old man said in a conversational tone. He slapped his knees and stood up with hardly any effort. "And we will talk. Over a nice cup of tea. Come along then."

Moloch shouldered his bag and walked right on by our little group.

He turned in the doorway. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Like I said—weirder and weirder—but having the local authorities hot on our tails was definitely not on the agenda.

"Hold on there." I took Moloch's arm, startled to find firm muscle beneath the silky fabric. An alarm jingled in the deep folds of my gray matter—this man was more than he appeared to be.

My interest peaked, but not enough to execute a kidnapping. I opened my mouth, intending to set the man back on his walking shoes.

"You look like your father, you know? Now let's go find that tea." Moloch stood quiet, a patient look on his round face.

Ben glanced around like a nervous cat—at me, at Moloch, back at me again—ready to jump if a shadow even thought about saying "boo!" I couldn't blame him. After Moloch's last comment, I felt like one of those suicide moles—one more surprise and I'd explode, leaving nothing behind but a piece of my hide.

"You can't take him out of here." Ben picked a scab off the back of his hand and popped it in his mouth.

"We're not going anywhere until you tell me how you know my father." I said to Moloch. He glanced down the hall, his smile fading slightly.

"Later, dear. We have to go. Now. Before our little 'window of opportunity' closes."

Ben licked his lips. His eyes took on a feral gleam. "You can make him answer you, you know. There are ways..."

Blake's blood, but this guy was a basket case. Why in the universe he was holding the keys instead of inhabiting one of these cells was one of those mysteries that might be fascinating to puzzle out. Unfortunately, none of us had the time.

"Please?" Moloch said. I glanced at the earnest look on his face and frowned.

"That's a girl." Moloch beamed even though I hadn't said a word. He winked at Ben. "I'll be back before bedtime, then. Be sure and air my sheets, if you'll be so kind."

Ben chewed his fingernail. Looked up at the ceiling as if seeking guidance. Nodded. "Yes, sir, Mr. Moloch."

"Wait a minute." Time to get back in the captain's chair. "I'm in charge here..."

"Hush." Moloch raised a finger to his lips. "Not another word. The walls have ears, you know."

I shrugged and followed Moloch into the hall. Maybe if he took his "little walk," I'd be able to get him to finally talk. After all, there were guards and a security system in place.

Wasn't there?

Without hesitating Moloch turned right—in the opposite direction we’d come in—and strolled nonchalantly down the corridor. The others followed close on my heels.

Too close.

“If you don’t stop swallowing in my ear,” I whispered to Ben, “I’m going to rip out your throat with my bare hands.”

Ben backed off—a whole step.

Moloch kept up a run of nonsense conversation, words that had no meaning, but were said in such a manner that if you were a few meters away and could only hear voices, you’d expect a pleasant conversation was being held between two people.

Only no one was answering Moloch—except Moloch.

Our collective footsteps echoed down the hallway. The acrid stench of fresh disinfectant made my eyes water. I blinked the tears away and stayed focused on the old man.

Maybe it was the fact he was in a nut house. Maybe his smile was just a bit too wide, too generous.

Or maybe—in spite of the fact he’d known my name—I still wasn’t convinced he was the guy from my aunt’s journal.

Moloch’s plump fingers traced the molding along the wall. He followed every dip, every bump, every nuance without breaking his stream-of-consciousness chatter. His fingers ran into a square red box and this time, instead of running up and over the object, his hand dipped out of sight beneath the face plate.

For a moment I thought the entire facility had gone insane. As the nerve-jarring racket blasting through my skull settled into a recognizable rhythm, I realized Moloch had set off a fire alarm.

Talk about bedlam.

“Not again,” Ben moaned.

Before I could figure out the “again” part, a nearby door sprang open. The next door followed suit with a bang I could hear even over the obnoxious siren. One by one every door on the corridor sprang open, releasing their gleeful occupants.

Brown-uniformed attendees swarmed into the hall, trying to gather patients into some semblance of panicked disorder. The

patients paid about as much attention as a herd of stampeding cats.

Moloch strolled through the chaos with an obsequious grin on his face. None of the attendants even looked his way.

A woman tripped in front of me and almost fell. I helped her to her feet, made sure she was all right, and sent her on her way.

Moloch kept on walking.

"Son of a 'Mech!" I said, watching the old man's back disappear through an open door. "Let's go."

###

If it wasn't for the shark-eyed stare, I would never have noticed the guy at the far end of the hall. Creepy crawlies raced up and down my spine as I tried to place his familiar-looking face.

No luck.

He wore a brown attendant's uniform, but somehow I didn't think he was a member of Ben's gang.

"Keep an eye on that guy," I said to Doni. She nodded as we shoved our way through the milling crowd. With a little noise and a lot of force we made it through the door, only to be stopped at the top of a stairway swarming with more patients.

"Hey, Hoer. Get your sorry ass over here." The gruff voice brought us all up short. We all turned and looked at the red-faced attendant waving at Ben. Where Ben was long and lean, this guy was short and beefy. The kind of guy who'd make trouble if Ben didn't listen.

I glanced at Ben. "You know that guy?"

He chewed his lip and shuffled his feet. "That's Gilbert. I'd better go see what he wants."

Retha squeezed Ben's bony hand. "We'll wait for you in the barn."

"Got it." Ben gave a low wave and worked his way over to the other attendant.

Red-jacketed guards forced their way into the melee from the other end of the hall. It would've been fun to stop and watch—if

Moloch hadn't been about to pull another disappearing act. He moved through the milling bodies easy as an eel through seaweed.

I clumped down the stairs, weaving between uniforms and gowns and trying not to breathe. Too many old and unfit bodies in such a limited space did not make for pleasant perfume. I came up behind Moloch just as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

We were in some kind of utility hall. A door a few steps away looked like it led into a closet, but no one paid any attention to it. They were all heading toward the open door at the end of the hall.

Light streamed through the door—natural light. From shadows cast on the walls, it looked like the sun was just about to go down.

Guards shouted at the top of the stairs, their voices drowned in the rising commotion.

"Act like everything's normal," Moloch said. He nodded at a patient with no hair and a parrot-size nose.

"Going for a walk," the other man crowed. "Going for a walk."

We'd almost reached the door when I heard the footstep behind us. I reached for my pistol...

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Busted.

Carefully, I let my hand drop to my side.

"It's okay, Spike," Moloch said with a huge smile. "These are my friends. We were just going out for a walk, is all."

Keeping my hands out to my sides, I turned and sized up the newcomer. Not good. The guard towering over us looked bigger than an Elemental in body armor, at least in this tiny space.

Spike waved a rifle at the chaos. "Your walks are getting a little out of hand."

The barrel slowed, until it was pointed directly at Moloch's chest. "Maybe it's time to take care of the problem. Permanently."

Hindsight is a gift that always shows up too late.

I flexed my fingers—one, two, three—and launched myself at Spike's arm.

Easy to see now how this guy got his name. Both shin guards and gauntlets were covered in sharp, thin spikes, the kind you can't see until they get up close and personal.

Lucky for me I was wearing that oversized tunic. The extra folds caught on the spikes, leaving me dangling like a ripe pear.

While Spike tried to figure out how to get me off his arm, Doni snapped her heel into his throat. The big man blocked the kick with a spiky forearm, sending Doni careening into the far wall. My borrowed tunic tore loose, dumping me ignominiously to the floor.

"Stop, stop. Everybody stop," Moloch waved his arms.

I looked up. Wondered what the old man was up to.

"I'm sorry you're unhappy with my little game," Moloch said. "Guess we'll have to go back to our rooms..."

He had to be kidding.

Moloch turned, hands in the air like a common criminal. Around him patients started to hiss and boo. I scrambled to my feet.

"Out of the way," Spike ordered. The crowd pressed closer. A chant rose from the back of the stairwell. At first the words were indiscernible. The volume rose.

"We want out. We want out." I started chanting along with the others. Doni and Retha joined in. So did Moloch.

I gave a quick nod and sprang up Spike's back, locking my arms around his throat. Doni snatched the rifle from his hand. Our attack must've been some kind of signal—before I knew what was happening, patient after patient piled on. On top of me. On top of Spike.

Old Spiky went down, down, down beneath the roaring crowd.

Carrying me along with him.

A hand pulled me free of the dog pile before I suffocated beneath all those bodies. Retha helped me to my feet and folded the tunic back onto my shoulder. Doni stood by the outer door holding Moloch by the arm.

Behind us, attendants tried to force their way through the pile of struggling bodies.

The open door beckoned. I smiled at Retha and headed outside.

A woman scampered past followed by another man who'd evidently decided to go gownless into the burgeoning dusk. All around patients ran, danced, leapt, and rolled. A couple waltzed by, huge grins on their wrinkled faces. One man laid down and rolled around like a bowling ball. Others just stood still, arms outstretched.

Looked like Moloch's "rescue" was going down after all.

"Unbelievable." I patted Moloch on the shoulder and calculated our chances of reaching the hedge lining the lawn. A half klick stood between us and freedom. All we had to do was look like a bunch of nutty patients. Shouldn't be too hard. I offered Moloch my arm. "Shall we...?"

Moloch took my arm and together we danced across the soft grass. New pain had been added to old, but the wounds would all heal. Puncture wounds, bruises, torn muscles—such a small price to pay...

For freedom.

Unfortunately, that freedom didn't last very long.

###

We made it to the hedge without interruption. There was only a slight problem.

"Anybody bring their pruning shears along?" The hedge might have been pretty, with its sweet-scented flowers and dark green leaves, but the thorns adorning its branches would be deadly to anyone trying to force their way through.

"No need," Moloch said. I studied the tangled foliage with a skeptical eye. Only way we were going through this thing was with a chainsaw.

Moloch got down on hands and knees and crawled beneath the branches with barely a rustle.

"The way this guy keeps disappearing he should start his own magic act," I muttered. We waited for the old man to come back out.

And waited.

"Where the hell'd he go?" Retha gnawed on a fingernail, glancing at the activity on the other side of the lawn.

"Guess there's one way to find out." I clenched my teeth and followed Moloch's example.

Once I made it through the first leafy layer, the pathway cleared. Branches arched in a woven pattern above my back, but the interior was practically leafless. A thin layer of dead leaves cushioned my hands and knees from the hard ground, making the passage tolerable, if not downright pleasant.

I was out the other side before I even had time to think about spiders and bugs and other creepy crawlies. I stood, brushed off my shoulders and knees. Frowned at Moloch kneeling before a chain link fence. A fence that apparently ran the entire length of the hedge.

Ten meters beyond, oak trees lifted their leafy burdens to the sky. As I watched, the sun slipped behind a far-off mountain range, casting the woods into twilight gloom.

Leaves crunched, announcing Doni's arrival.

"What the...? Ouch!" She scrambled to her feet. Dusted off her trousers as Retha dragged her long body free of the grasping branches.

Apparently climbing through small spaces didn't agree with Retha. Snags and a few tears ran along the back of her tunic. She pulled a stick from her hair and glared at the fence. "Don't you dare tell me we have to go back through there."

"No, no, dear. Not to worry." Moloch sat back on his heels and fumbled in his bag. "It's here somewhere....ah!"

The object Moloch held in his hand looked like a miniature drill. Sort of. "It'll just be a moment..."

Sparks flew as he touched it to the fence. A high-pitched whine filled the air for a moment, then stopped. Moloch grabbed the wire strand, wiggled it back and forth. "There we go."

Over and over the tool sang. I clenched my teeth against the abrasive noise. Listened to the sounds of protest rising from the other side of the hedge.

"Keep an eye out," I said to Retha. There were times when excessive height could be used to advantage. She shot another glare at Moloch's back, then rose up on tiptoe.

"Easy," I whispered. "Try not to let anyone see you."

Retha looked down her nose. "I'm not stupid, you know. Besides, no one's paying any attention to us. They're all too busy gathering up patients."

Finally Moloch sprang to his feet, pulled a section of fence free, and set it carefully to one side. He plucked a flower from the hedge, tucking it carefully in his buttonhole before waving us through.

"After you, my dear ladies. After you."

###

"What was that?" Doni whispered.

We'd stopped alongside a gurgling stream while Retha went back to get the car. No use all of us parading back into the Rocky Hills parking lot and attracting a lot of attention.

"I don't hear anything," I said, leaning back against a log. No disinfectant smell here, only the rich clean scent of damp earth.

A dusty-colored bird no bigger than my hand dropped out of a nearby tree. He tilted his head suspiciously, squawked at us a couple of times, then hopped to the stream and took a drink.

That's when I heard the sound. An eerie scrabbling, scritch-scratch sound that sounded way too familiar.

"Mole in the hole," I whispered. Doni nodded, her eyes wide.

Leather hissed as I slid my pistol free from its holster. *I can pit a prune at thirty meters with this thing. Should be able to put a dent in that mole.*

If only I could figure out where to shoot the thing so it didn't blow us to smithereens.

No time to worry about where the mole came from or how it managed to find us here or why it was even coming after us.

I slipped off the pistol's safety and stepped into the path of the unseen mole.

The secret to being fast and accurate is not intense focus. You have to let your body relax, keeping the target in the forefront of your mind, not necessarily your vision. You keep your ears as well as your eyes open.

Listen for clues that will tell you when to pull that trigger.

Steadying the pistol before me, I forced my eyes to relax. Broadened my vision, expanded my awareness. The mole was getting closer. I could *feel* it. The scritchng claws sent a dissonant shiver deep into my bones.

Deep breath.

Hands steady.

"There you are." Moloch's voice seemed to come from a great distance. I couldn't afford to wonder what he was talking about; couldn't afford the distraction. I kept my mind relaxed and tried not to think about what would happen if I missed.

Or if I hit the detonation device.

Suddenly, Moloch brushed past me, knocking the pistol aside. He took two waddling steps, bent and retrieved something from the ground.

"What are you...?" Anger flashed through my body, leaving a burning path lingering in my gut. "You almost got yourself shot, you moron!"

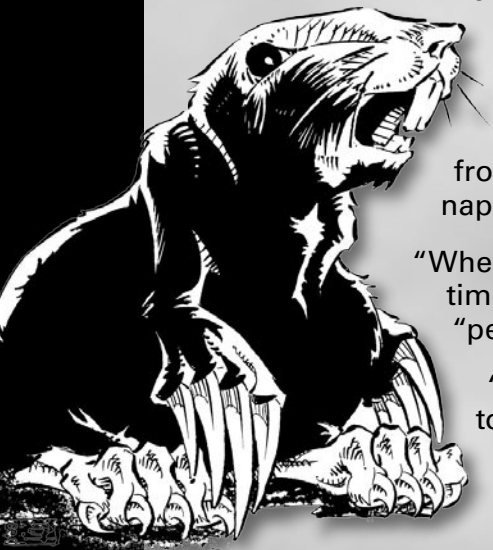
"This is Sammy," Moloch said, holding up a handful of shiny black fur. "He's a Galatean mole. They're predators, you know. Very smart little creatures. Easy to train, too."

He lifted the mole's chin with a chubby finger. "Come on, Sam. Show the girls your teeth."

The mole carefully disengaged his chin from Moloch's finger and settled down for a nap in the old man's hand.

"Where the hell did *that* come from?" I had a hard time finding anything cute about Moloch's little "pet."

"My bag, of course," Moloch said. "He needed to get out, stretch his legs a little. Didn't occur to me you girls would be scared of a mole."



Moloch shook his head at the pistol in my hand. “Big, big gun. Little bitty mole.”

Doni and I exchanged glances, but I didn’t put the pistol away. Not yet. Trying to compare Sam with the suicide moles, however, seemed like stretch. A very, very far stretch. The furball sleeping in Moloch’s hand appeared tame.

Those other moles had been filled with suicidal insanity.

I tried to ignore the way my finger throbbed every time I looked at Sam. The whole thing was too weird—and too much of a coincidence—for my suspicious nature.

The odds were stacked against finding Galatean moles on Campoleone to begin with. Finding not only moles trained to conduct suicide missions but a pet mole on the same planet was pushing those odds to the extreme.

“How did you know my father?” I asked Moloch. Time to get a few answers.

The old man put a finger to his lips and rolled his eyes toward the sleeping mole. “All in good time, my sweet. All in good time. Might I suggest we all get a bit of rest?”

“Look. We got you out of that place. The least you can do is give me a little information.”

“Just like your father—no patience.” The old man shook his head. “Now somewhere around here... Ah, there it is.”

Moloch moved over beside a small log, crossed his legs, and sat down in the dirt. I watched carefully as he tucked his “pet” into the shoulder bag he carried. Then my valuable “informant” curled up around the bag and fell asleep.

Yeah, he was dangerous, all right. Dangerous as a dairy cow.

But even placid-looking cows packed a mighty big kick.

This little excursion was supposed to answer my existing questions, not raise more. But it hadn’t worked that way. Questions kept circling inside my skull like vultures waiting for someone to die.

Who would go to all the trouble of sending moles to do a man’s work when a simple bullet would do the trick?

Or a knife across the throat.

Moloch stutter-snorted, then fell into a not-so-rhythmic snore. I resisted the urge to kick him awake. I could demand some answers, but right now my gut was telling me I'd be better off—we'd all be better off—using cooperation instead of coercion.

Meanwhile, I'd keep a close eye on the guy. Maybe my aunt had known something she hadn't written in her journal.

Maybe she'd been killed before she could write it.

Either way, there was nothing I could do now except keep my eyes open and wait.

And hope Moloch's bag didn't suddenly explode.

###

I stood just inside Retha's barn and stared. 'Mech parts littered the floor and lined the walls along with a host of other tools. Dead center of the entire mess stood a intriguing 'Mech: *Enforcer* head on top of a *Vindicator* body and who knew where the other parts came from.

Not like any 'Mech I'd ever seen before, but definitely impressive.

"Guess FrankenMech really exists," I said. My voice echoed through the barn, startling some kind of bird from the rafters. I breathed in the familiar grease scent, felt a twinge of bittersweet melancholy.

Been too long since I'd been with my Titanium Rose. Maybe there'd be a chance to remedy that soon.

Retha flipped another switch, sending light into the far corner of the barn. Charlie yipped excitedly and raced across the floor. He danced around in front of a combat exoskeleton.

"You've got to be kidding me." I laughed as the pug put his front paws on the exoskeleton's leg. "That thing would eat you alive."

The trip from the stream had turned out to be uneventful—except for Charlie's initial confrontation with Sam. After being cooped up in the car while we made our daring escape, the pug decided he had to give everyone a generous welcome. New friends and old all got a good licking.

Then Charlie found Sam.

The inside of that car would never be the same.

Now we were at the barn and the personality conflicts were forgotten. All we needed was to get the 'Mechs back to the DropShip and head for the stars.

"Time to get out of here," I said. We hadn't even been gone a full twenty-four hours, but it felt like four years. The need to get back onboard my ship was like a nasty itch I couldn't quite reach.

Doni went over to the 'Mech with Retha, climbed up the platform, stood aside while Retha snitched open the hatch.

Their collective gasps sent a chill racing up my spine. I jogged over, scaled the ladder, stared down at Ben's limp body.

The air reeked of blood and urine. Retha reached out before I could stop her. She lifted Ben's head...

...and screamed as it sagged to one side. Ben's throat had been sliced clean through.

The fire alarm at Rocky Hills was nothing compared to the alarms going off in my head right now. I clenched my teeth and helped Doni get her sister down the ladder.

Then I went back up and took a closer look.

The slit throat, the tokens pressed into his eyes—he'd been murdered by the same person who'd murdered my aunt and the rest of my crew.

Was this the killer's way of showing me just how easily he could eliminate his targets?

Which raised another question which had been bothering me for weeks: Why were Doni and I still alive?

I forced myself to remove the tokens. One slipped from my hand and fell inside Ben's uniform pocket. I reached inside. Found the token along with three cards.

Retha's sobs filled the air. I beckoned to Moloch. Now we'd see what the man was really made of. The old man climbed the ladder with ease. He stared at Ben for a long time.

I needed to get back to my DropShip. Make sure everything was okay. Besides, the sooner we got Ben taken care of and the 'Mech cleaned up, the sooner we could get off this blasted planet.

I didn't realized I was looking at the tokens until Moloch spoke up. "What have you got there?"

No need to hold the tokens to the light. The size, the weight, the feel of the design were imprinted forever in my memory.

They should be. My mother had them made specifically for her venerated establishment.

The Lost Tavern.

"Just a bunch of old memories," I said. I slipped tokens and cards into my trouser pocket. I'd look at them later. Remind myself that only a limited number had been minted, according to my mother. I'd thought I had all of them in hand, but somehow they kept turning up—in dead people's eyes.

Rage simmered deep in my chest. I stared at Moloch. Thought about the exploding moles.

Were they meant to kill or only scare me off?

And was Ben's life the price I had to pay for not having listened?

"Come on," I finally said. "Help me get him out of here."

"Why would someone want to kill Ben?" Moloch asked as he took hold of the dead man's arm. The sorrow in his voice seemed real enough. Maybe the guy really was on the up and up. I shook my head.

"I don't really know. Not yet. But you can be sure I'm going to find out."

Together we eased Ben free of the cockpit and down the steps. Once on the ground, we arranged the body on the floor. Retha stumbled over.

I took Moloch's arm and stepped aside.

"Ben isn't the first one," I said. Quickly I filled him in on the other killings. I even told him about the exploding moles. "Whoever is behind all this evidently doesn't want me to find out whatever it is you have to tell me."

Once again, Moloch surprised me. He took a deep breath and straightened his pudgy shoulders. "We'd better get going then."

"Going where?" I studied the old man. Tried to see beneath that earnest façade. We needed to talk. I just had to decide if the talking was going to happen here or on board the DropShip. There were still too many questions and no real answers in sight.

Moloch's next words made my decision easy.

"To find your father, of course."

Talk about turning the universe upside down...