

RULES OF SALVAGE

#Z 4UFWFO .PIBO +S

Kuzmin's Treasure

The Rock System, Oberon Confederation August 3041

Candle scrambled over the dusty corpse of a great machine long forgotten by an earlier age. She didn't know what the machine was exactly, but she knew what might be in it: circuit breakers or sheets of ferroglass or gold-plated resistors.

Salvage.

A burst of static exploded from her suit radio and she started. The sudden motion almost sent her tumbling over the beast's side. She struggled to regain her balance—the seven- or eight-meter fall would hurt, even in light gravity.



And if she punctured her suit on the rocky ground, that would be that.

She staggered back from the edge, sucking in recycled air in great gasps, and sat down hard on the machine's hull, glancing around wildly, looking for danger, the source of the static. Treasure's constant night shrouded the graveyard in darkness, turning the ancient machines into black splotches in the dim starlight.

Nothing moved in the darkness. The static must've been caused by a solar flare or something.

It was times like this she almost understood why her mother had forbidden her from going to the graveyard.

#VU TIF IBE UP

Mom was too busy and Martin was too young and no way could they make it without the extra money salvage brought in. You couldn't count on anyone but yourself.

That was a lesson Candle had learned and had learned well. No matter what her mother said.

She climbed unsteadily to her feet and peered down at the machine's ancient metal hide. An unlikely flicker of motion caught her attention. She looked up and caught the golden flash of thrusters against the stillness of the stars.

So the burst of static hadn't been from a flare after all.

The light winked out.

Candle stood rooted to the spot, hearing nothing but the rasp of her own breathing echoing in her helmet, her heart fluttering painfully, frantically, like a finch with a broken wing.

The light did not flick back on.

Then it did.

And it stayed on, stayed on for a good long burn. Someone was landing. Landing on Treasure.

Treasure was one of thousands of planetoids that dotted the system's inner belt. The asteroid's people only traded with their nearest neighbor, Novosibirsk, and then only during conjunction, when the dictates of orbital mechanics made it practical. All 437 souls who lived on Treasure knew when the launch window opened and closed, usually to the nearest day, some of them to the nearest hour.

So Candle knew that the next launch window wouldn't open for another 17 days. This ship had come from out-system. Which made it a—

"Pirate." Candle jumped before she realized the tight, worried voice inside her helmet was her mother's.

Candle dipped her chin towards her voice-activated mic. "See it," she said, slipping into clipped speech to minimize transmission time. No point in giving the pirates something to home in on.

"Get back, little girl," said her mother.

"Aye," said Candle.

She climbed off the great machine and took off for the camp at a panicked run, taking the distance in great bounding leaps. Her breath rattled in her ears and sweat stung her eyes. She jerked past every dark outcropping of rock, quailed at every unfamiliar shadow, always ready for something to leap out at her.

Candle was only a child, but she was old enough to know that some monsters were very, W F 621.

She turned a corner—

A great beast lunged at her.

Stumbling backwards, she nearly fell over. She tore a small cutting laser from her belt and flicked it on, her breath coming in short ragged gasps.

The creature was a horror, giant and grizzled, fashioned from metal and menace.

She blinked.

Shadows in the belt were not like shadows on a world. They were sharp, distinct lines drawn across the difference between light and dark. Human eyes were not made for those kinds of shadows. Sometimes they played tricks.

The monster wasn't really moving.

And it was a BattleMech. The sight was strange enough to halt Candle's flight. She'd spent a lot of time in the lostech graveyard scavenging parts, but she'd never seen anything like this.

The 'Mech looked a little like an insect with twin missile launchers that rose up behind the cockpit like wings and double-articulated legs that ended in splayed feet. It crouched in the semi-darkness, its back braced against the crevasse's rock wall. The 'Mech was dented and scarred and its right knee was a solid mass of melted metal.

But it was still a 'Mech.

Suddenly Candle had an idea. It was a stupid, desperate idea.

But that didn't stop her.

A chain-link ladder hung down from the 'Mech's head, preserved against time by the vacuum of space. Candle reached out and tested it with a good, strong tug. Then she shot up the ladder, the climb easy in the light gravity.

The cockpit hatch was less than a meter on a side. It would've been tight for an adult in a pressure suit, but Candle was ten and small for her age. Her pulse throbbed painfully in her wrists and throat, the touch of foolishness singing in her veins.

The latching mechanism was simple, but she strained against it until the door suddenly popped open. An invisible hand pushed at Candle, confusing her. Until she saw a rime of ice crystals form on the hatch's frame.

" J S

Candle slipped into the cockpit, slammed the hatch, and dogged it back down. How long had this 'Mech held its charge of air?

Panels lit up and a computer's voice said, "Voice authorization required."

Voice T B J E

Somehow the cockpit had filled back up with air. Her hands slowly drifted to the dogs on her helmet. She took a deep breath. The metallic click sounded loud in the small cockpit.

She slipped her helmet off and sipped the air.

The air tasted of machine oil, but it was G S F. She stood there for a whole minute, breathing in that gorgeous air and looking over the 'Mech's controls.

* U X B T T U J M M X P S L J O H

"Candace," said a muffled voice from inside her helmet. "Are you OK?"

Candle winced at the edge of the panic in her mother's voice. She slipped the helmet back on. "Sorry, Mom. Coming."

She popped the hatch, climbed down, and ran all the way back to camp. She wouldn't tell her mother about the 'Mech. Partly because mom had enough to deal with already, but mostly because she remembered what happened the last time the pirates came.



Candle and her mother and brothers spent the long, terrible hours that followed sitting in their small hab dome, waiting for the all-clear signal with almost nothing to eat and absolutely nowhere to run.

They sat there until hours turned into days.

After awhile the long wait became a kind of cruel time machine and Candle found herself reliving another moment. She was no longer a

Careful, clever ten; she was a happy, bumping, jumping, skipping seven, sent outside to fetch her absent-minded Daddy in for dinner B H B J C

She ducked past the tractor sitting in front of the small mining camp and saw her father in his faded green pressure suit. A trio of men faced him. Years later she wouldn't remember what any of them looked like, though she was close enough to see their faces through their bubble helmets.

What she remembered instead was the needler: a wicked-looking, matte-black pistol that fired sharp slivers of plastic at a horrifying rate, chewing up whatever it encountered like a crusher going through rocks.

The pirate with the gun glanced at her. Then he touched the firing stud.

Her father collapsed, the front of his green suit reduced to crimson-stained tatters.

Candle heard it over his radio channel: the deadly X I P P Tdf escaping air, his ragged breathing rattling to an uneven halt, the gurgle of a chest filling up with liquid.

They took her inside where she and Martin cowered in the closet listening to the cries and groans of their mother.

Later, after the pirates had finally left and Candle had a chance to strip off her pressure suit, she saw that she'd been standing close enough to her father that some of his blood had spattered on her. Treasure's vacuum had flash frozen the blood, turning it into a powder that crumbled to her touch.

Right at that moment she lost track of the happy, carefree part of herself. It went quietly, leaving nothing behind but her father's silly nickname for her.

Candle.



The tractor crested a ridge, revealing the small town of Last Chance, Treasure's de facto capital. Candle's young eyes darted over the loose collection of pressure domes, aerogel bubbles, and access tunnels. She worked the controls herself—driving the lumbering beast down into town—handling it with a light touch, beginning to think everything was going to be all right.

Until she saw the common dome, its center smashed and blackened by the unlikely phenomenon of fire.

Once during an argument with Martin over whose turn it was on the simgame set, he'd hauled off and hit her in the stomach. That's what this felt like.

The common dome was her favorite place at Last Chance: filled with old clothes and knock-off trivids and sweetsour candy and simgame crystals and cola packs and... toys. Dolls and puzzles and trucks and spaceships and 'Mechs.

The mechanical toys were her favorite. She loved to get one that was busted up and take it apart, studying the clever springs and joints and catches, fabbing up replacement parts, sometimes even improving the design.

She didn't care about them after they were fixed and usually gave them to her brothers. In fact, the yellow-green FireMech Eli was playing with right now was one of Candle's.

Now, all that was gone. Smashed by pirates.

She let the tractor roll to another stop, and glanced at her mother. When Candle had been little she'd thought her mother was beautiful, but that was a long time ago. Now her long, dark hair was tied into a greasy ponytail and her pretty green eyes were tired and red.

She's scared, Candle realized. The girl could see it in the hunch of her shoulders and the tight little lines at the corners of her mouth.

Candle said, "The common dome is—"

"I see it," her mother snapped. Then she glanced back at the boys, a too-wide smile stretched across her face. "How're my boys doing?" she asked in a syrupy voice that didn't fool Candle for a second.

"Maaa-ahm," Martin whined. "I'm hungry."

Stupid Martin. Such a pain. Candle felt like smacking him, but she knew her mother didn't need to deal with that right now, so she didn't.

It wasn't all Martin's fault anyway. He was hungry and he was scared and he was eight, finally old enough to feel the electric current of terror that ran through the tractor's little cabin like a river. But he wasn't old enough to understand it.

"I know, baby," said Candle's mother wearily. "We'll get lunch soon."

Eli didn't look up. He marched the FireMech across his lap and made shrill X I P P X I P noises. He was only three. Too young to be frightened and too little to go hungry. Eli hadn't missed a single meal over the last three days as Candle's mother rationed their meager food supply.

"Baby eats first," mom always said, and Candle knew that was right.

But it was hard, too.

Candle turned back to her driving, watching her mother out of the corner of one eye: the way the bridge of her nose notched into a vee, the way her eyes looked all around.

8 I Z B S F Z P V B G S B H E A S K E D P S I N T E N T L Y . 8 F H P U U I F B M T J H O B M

Unless the all-clear was a fake.

Candle suddenly felt sick way down in the bottom of her stomach.

Pirates could be tricky.

Who knew that better than her?



Hampstead's Fresh Foods was a glass kiosk five meters on a side, built off the curved wall of the Merchant's Tunnel. Mr. Hampstead himself was a heavy old man with thinning white hair.

Candle didn't know what his legs looked like because he always stood behind the counter, but he had a bear's chest. Candle liked to imagine what the rest of him looked like. Maybe he had spindly, little stick legs and that's why he never came out from behind the counter.

Normally he greeted the family with a ready smile, one that labored to lift his heavy cheeks, but not this time. This time there were no smiles to be had at Hampstead's Fresh Foods.

Mr. Hampstead's bushy gray eyebrows knitted together and the corners of his lips twitched down. "I'm sorry, Paula, that's the best I can offer."

"A kilo of ore for a single ration," snapped Candle's mother. "That's fifty times the going rate."

"Can't help it. Bastards cleaned me out. Just supply and demand."

"Supply and demand," snorted Candle's mother kicking at the floor with one booted foot. "Fifty times rate isn't supply and demand. It's criminal."

"Now don't you talk to me about criminal, Paula Denton," Mr. Hampstead said roughly. "This time the pirates didn't make it out to your little camp or you'd know what criminal really means."

"How much food could they've taken?" asked her mother. "It was a small long-range shuttle. And I heard they hauled out a lot of ore."

"Aye," said Mr. Hampstead, "true enough. Only trouble is, what food they didn't take, they burned. These ones were mean, Paula. They murdered Frank Johnson just for mouthing off and Mr. and Mrs. Nguyen for no reason I saw. And the Larson girl, well, they—"

Mr. Hampstead stopped abruptly.

Candle's mom turned chalk white.

"Well, anyway," he said a little more gently, "they didn't leave much food. And you know we can't put a shuttle up for another two weeks. And there's more than you that's got to eat."

Mom jerked her head at Candle and the boys. "I have children to feed, Ken."

"Which is why I'm offering to sell at all, Paula. If you don't want to buy at this price, there's plenty will."

Candle's mother stared off into the distance for a moment, chewing her lower lip. Then she jerked her head down once in a sharp nod.

Candle felt that heaviness in her stomach again.

If they spent that much on food, there'd be little left over to buy hydrazine for the generator or comm time or spare parts for the rig. She glanced over at Eli.

But they had to eat.

Mr. Hampton turned to go get their food and Candle ducked out the front door. She wandered down the Merchant's Tunnel past the overturned tables and smashed merchandise. If the pirates had found their camp...

Why would pirates bother them? Candle wondered. There was nothing on Treasure worth anything: a little bit of ore, some mining equipment, and a bunch of people who weren't even dirt poor, because asteroids didn't have dirt.

5 I F Z X F S F G S F T H A T W A S D I F F I C I L Y T H I N G T H A T M A D E S E N S E .
A small group of thugs willing to scratch for their plunder. Which meant that there was no one to back them up.

Not that it mattered. Even their small ship probably outmatched anything Last Chance had. Not that the miners would fight back anyway. Which was probably why they killed Mr. Johnson and the Nguyens, she suddenly realized. To keep anyone from daring to fight back.

Candle took a short, shocked breath. She'd been haunted by brutality for better than a third of her short life. Now finally she was starting to see how it worked. Cruelty had a structure, a set of rules, rising up like a scaffolding all around her.

If she could just grab one of the structural supports and pull, maybe—

"Hello, Little Girl," said a thickly accented voice.

Candle's head jerked up and she saw a rat of a man. He was small, not more than a centimeter or two taller than her mother and wiry thin. He wore a ragged pair of olive drab pants and some kind of shirt she couldn't really see because it was hidden beneath a long black coat. A scruffy, black beard lined his jaw and his eyes were a watery gray-blue.

"Hello," she said, startled and trying to remember the man's name. Lebed or Lukin or—

"I am Oleg Mikhailovich Lukanov. You are Denton girl, no? Candace?"

"No," said Candle. She laughed, embarrassed. "I mean, people call me Candle."

"What can I do for you this day?" Lukanov asked. "Candle."

Candle glanced about. She'd wandered away from the food kiosk and found herself next to Lukanov's "store."

The salvage dealer didn't have a clean, enclosed area like Mr. Hampstead. Instead, he'd set up folding shelves along a three-meter section of the tunnel wall where he'd piled all manner of junk: reconditioned tools, cracked laser sights, washed air filters.

Candle recognized the signs of repair and something else, too: the repairs were pretty good. However shabby he looked, Lukanov was a craftsman.

She chewed her lower lip, her mind racing with another stupid, desperate idea.

7 P J D F B V U I P S J [B U J P O S F R V J S F E

Lukanov's eyes narrowed. "What is it that you are thinking, little one?" he asked suspiciously.

Candle made up her mind at once. She looked up at Lukanov. "Can you defeat a security interlock?"

Lukanov laughed, an out-sized laugh, but when he spoke his voice was cold. "Oleg Mikhailovich Lukanov is not thief."

"No," said Candle quickly, "that's not what I meant. I'm talking about," she hesitated, "about salvage."

Lukanov raised his right eyebrow. "Salvage, eh? Salvage with a security interlock?"

"I can offer you—" Candle glanced around the man's tables, marking prices with her eyes, tallying the spare parts stacked neatly in the storage closet back home and adding to it what she might find in the graveyard. "—eight hundred rations," she said at last. "I can offer you eight hundred rations."

"That's a lot of money for such a little girl."

Candle stuck her chin out and held her head high.

"OK," said Lukanov slyly. "Maybe you tell me where is this salvage?"

She met his eyes and felt him appraising her even as she did the same to him. "Give me your locator," she said slowly. "I'll transmit the coordinates to you later."

"Yes. Most wise." Lukanov produced a small card and wrote something on the back in an unsteady, spidery hand. He held it out to her. His locator number.

Candle took it from him. "Eight hundred rations," she said, bowing slowly.

Lukanov bobbed his head, but said nothing.

Candle did not trust him for a minute, not even for a second. But there were ways to use broken and bent tools. If you were clever and strong.

And if you were careful.



Candle knelt before her father's plain headstone, a carefully rounded piece of rock, lovingly polished and inscribed with the name, "Jack Denton," and nothing else.

The grave lay only a few hundred meters from the shallow crevasse where an earlier settlement had dumped their junk before abandoning Treasure. They'd only found the dump site because her mother insisted they bury father far from the camp, so that his rest wouldn't be disturbed if the pirates came back. It had been a stroke of good fortune, but the lostech graveyard was still poor payment for the life of her father.

In Candle's imagination her father's headstone marked the graveyard's entrance, a place where cast-off treasures could be bent to new uses.

And so she prayed to her father's spirit, asking for his help in the difficult task ahead. Then she leaned forward and reached behind the headstone, pulling out a needler she'd found during one of her foraging trips.

Candle checked the needle charge. Quarter left. She sighted in on a small rock and pulled the trigger. A cloud of dust puffed up, leaving behind a small divot in the rock.

She turned the weapon over in her hands, feeling the cold metal even through her gloves. Not much use against rocks, but it'd tear a savage hole in a pressure suit.

She saw again the structure of brutality, the careful construction of soulless power, rising up all around her, like a giant tower. She could bring that evil edifice tumbling down—but she would have to be smart and strong and I B S E

As hard as those she wanted to stop.

And then she saw something move. Her head jerked up. The golden light of thrusters limned a small planetary shuttle.

The pirates were back.

Much closer this time.

Candle swallowed hard and sprinted for the 'Mech.



Candle clambered over the great, broken machine that hid the 'Mech. She still had fifteen minutes or so. Lukanov had to come all the way from Last Chance, a good fifty-seven clicks away. Two hours drive over the asteroid's rough surface.

If he came at all.

She hoped he hadn't turned back after Last Chance signaled that an unregistered ship was landing.

"Candace," her mother hissed from inside her helmet. "Come back."

Candle tried to swallow in a dry mouth. She wanted to tell her mom about the plan, tell her everything. But something stopped her.

The memory of the last time the pirates were here. And her mother hadn't been able to stop them.

"Can't, Mom. Something I got to do."

"Candace, there are—"

"I know. But this is important."

"Candace Alycia Denton, you will turn around right now and—"

"Love you, Mom," said Candle past the sudden tightness in her throat. "Boys, too. Even Martin."

"\$ B O E B D F

"I'm turning my HF set off now, so there's no point in transmitting."

"Little girl, plea—"

Candle snapped the set off and her mother's anguished voice cut out.

She closed her eyes and took several deep, shuddery breaths. This was hard, already harder than she thought it would be.

And it would only get harder.

Candle crouched down in the shadow of a large boulder that rested across from the 'Mech's splayed mechanical feet and settled down to wait.

She spent the next ten minutes worrying, but Lukanov showed up right on time, carrying a large case in his left hand. His helmet lamp painting white-gray circles on the hull of the great machine that crowded this part of the crevasse. Then he turned and saw the 'Mech.

Candle knew he saw it because his helmet jerked back as he stared straight up and her line-of-sight radio picked him up swearing softly in Russian.

Lukanov walked past her hiding place without even glancing down. When his back was to her, she stepped out from behind the rock, the gun leveled at him. "Mr. Lukanov."

He turned.

"So," said Lukanov. "You found lostech." His faceplate was transparent and she saw his eyes dart down to her weapon. "This is how the Dentons scratch out a living even after father is gone."

"Can you bypass the security interlock on my 'Mech?" Candle asked.

" : P V 'Mech?"

"Rules of salvage," said Candle. "I found it so it's mine."

Lukanov's mouth quirked into a smile. A smile that made Candle's stomach hurt. Her grip tightened on the gun.

"So. Those are the rules of salvage?"

"Can you fix it or not?"

Lukanov lifted the case up. "This is a neurohelmet Codebreaker. After a 'Mech is captured in battle there has to be way to reset security codes."

Candle held her hand out. "Give it to me."

Lukanov smiled that scary smile again. "Are you going to shoot me, Candle?" he asked softly.

He took a step forward.

She took a step back.

"I do not think so."

"I will pay you," said Candle desperately. "Just like I said."

Another step forward.

Another step back.

"You will not shoot your good friend, Oleg Mikhailovich, yes? Rip my suit open. See my eyes bug out, skin go patchy with bruises as blood vessels burst, spatter frozen blood everywhere."

Candle swallowed hard. Sweat trickled down the back of her neck.

"You're not really going to do that to poor Oleg are you, Candle?"

The gun shook in her hand. "I, I—"

Two steps forward.

"I'm warning you—"

He reached out and she jerked backwards, slamming into the rock wall right behind her.

He tore the gun out of her hand.

"I am surprised at you, my little Candle," said Lukanov, studying the gun. "After what pirates did to your family I thought you would know."

"Know what?" Candle gasped.

"There is only single rule of salvage." He held the gun up so that it glinted in the soft starlight. "Take care of only yourself."



Candle stumbled back to the camp, her chest heaving with shallow sobs. Now Lukanov knew where the lostech graveyard was. Worse, he had her 'Mech.

The only thing that could stop the pirates.

Candle dragged herself up a shallow rise. Her legs felt heavy. Dead. She was so lost in her misery that she didn't see the ship until it was too late.

She crested the rise and glanced down at a beat-up shuttle, its engine fairings still glowing with the last little bit of heat from the ship's descent.

Candle gasped, a sudden sharp intake of air. A strong hand clamped around her right arm. Candle jerked her arm away, but the figure held fast with a steel grip. She struggled for a moment, but then the man jerked her arm down and a wave of crimson pain clouded her vision. Candle fell to her knees.

She twisted around and looked up.

He was big, big-tall and big-wide. Muscles rippled beneath his pressure suit, his left bicep flexing as he crushed her arm. His head was thick and blocky and he had a face to match—broad, empty features, a shaved skull, a hand-sized spider tattoo covering the left side of his face.

Some monsters were very, W F ~~621~~.

"Now you're going to do what I say, right?" he rasped and tugged on her arm again.

Electric pain shot through Candle's body, so bad that the vision of the pirate dimmed and went to black. She came back to reality with a gasp. "Y-y-yes," she managed.

He smiled and she saw that one of his incisors was a hideous metallic red. He turned away from her. "Hey, Bert, look what I found."

Another shape approached. "Hey, lookit this. Where's your Daddy, luv?"

The new pirate wasn't small exactly, but he wasn't a block of human muscle like his partner either. Through his clear bubble helmet Candle could see slicked-back blond hair and too-blue eyes. No spider tattoos or blood-colored teeth for this one.

She shook her head helplessly. Didn't matter what they did to her. Couldn't let them find the camp. "Last Chance," she gasped.

The new one—the pretty one—laughed. "Oh, I don't think so, luv."

Redtooth yanked on her arm and the universe faded in and out.

The pretty one knelt down so that his face was almost level with hers. "We're getting steady radio transmissions from two six one."

Steady radio transmissions. Her mother. Trying to call her.

"That way," he said pointing back at the camp.

5 I F D B N Q

Mother and Martin and little Eli.

Candle closed her eyes. Her throat tightened painfully. She'd led them right to the camp.

And suddenly it all came flooding back to her: Father's body falling ever so slowly in the light gravity, how they used her mother afterwards, she and Martin cowering in the closet with the doors pulled tight shut, waiting for the monsters to come for them.

Going to happen again. And.

Her fault.

Candle screwed her eyes shut and curled into a ball.

She felt a tremor ripple through the rocky ground.

Must be. Imagination. But.

Another one.

And another one.

"Hey, Blade," said Redtooth's voice over the radio. "Did you feel that?"

"This asteroid's not coming apart on us is it?" said the pretty one. "This place get quakes?"

Candle opened her eyes and turned her head.

The 'Mech loomed over her, towering almost directly above her. For a moment it did nothing, just stood there like a statue, some great monument outlined against the stars.

"What the... ?" one of the pirates muttered.

Then the 'Mech raised its right arm.

Candle turned. Shimmering laser fire stitched the ship's dilapidated hull from top to bottom, cutting the small vessel in two. And then Lukanov walked his weapons fire back. He must've caught a fuel tank, because one moment the ship was there. And then it was swallowed by a molten orange ball of plasma.

Candle hugged the ground. There was no sound. She felt the deep, rumble of the ship's death through the rocky ground, but there was no sound.

Someone shouted a string of curses.

Candle looked up. It was Redtooth. The big pirate screamed as he leveled a hand laser at the 'Mech and fired.

A splash of emerald light sparked harmlessly off the 'Mech's armored chest.

The 'Mech took a stiff-legged step forward and tottered. For a terrible moment, Candle thought it was going to go over, but then it raised its left arm.

And Redtooth disappeared in a flash of ruby light.

It was all over in seconds, the ship, the pirates, all of it just
H P O F

Candle staggered to her feet, her right arm throbbing. "You did it," she shouted, "You stopped the pirates."

Her radio crackled. "Yes," said Lukanov, "I did." Some little thing in the sound of his voice twisted Candle's insides.

Her eyes flickered to the right and fixed on a two-meter ledge. She took a casual step towards it.

"Thank you for saving me," she said.

"I didn't save Z P," said Lukanov pointedly. "I saved myself."

Another step to the right and towards the 'Mech so maybe he wouldn't see what she was doing.

"Well, however it worked out," she said cheerfully.

"It has not worked out yet," he said darkly.

Suddenly Candle's mouth tasted dry. It wasn't just her imagination. Step. Pause. Step.

"What do you mean?" she asked in what she hoped was a puzzled voice.

"Am sorry, little girl, but 'Mech will buy me enough to leave system."

Candle shrugged. Step. "So take it. I don't care."

"I am not fool, little girl."

"So, your word against mine."

"No one will believe Oleg Mikhailovich against the Dentons," he said bitterly.

Candle took another step, a small one. "I thought no one cared about the rules of salvage anyway."

Lukanov laughed, that big, outsized laugh that faded into something cold and scary-strange. "Some people do." He said. "Just not me."

On the last word Lukanov jerked his left arm up.

Candle crouched and jumped, a long leap that carried her toward the shelter of the ridge.

The laser's first blast missed wide, drawing a bright line of slag across Treasure's rocky surface.

The advantage of fleeing in light gravity was that Candle could cover a lot of ground with each leap. The disadvantage was that it took longer for her to come down. She seemed to hang in the sky forever.

Long enough for Lukanov to take another shot.

Candle came down a meter beyond the ridge just as a stream of crimson light burned through the rock wall. Pieces of molten rock drifted down around her, falling like snowflakes.

She darted to her right, weaving between craters, launching herself off rocks, ducking, rolling, running for all she was worth.

The 'Mech pounded behind her, instantly making up ground.

" - F B W F N F . C A N D L E screamed.

"I'll say they killed you."

A metal leg slammed down close enough to fracture the rock beneath Candle's boots. She stumbled.

Fell.

He raised the leg again. "I am only sorry was not soon enough to save poor Dentons."

She scrambled forward, just as the leg came down again.

"My family—"

"Too late," said Lukanov sadly.

She staggered to her feet and jumped left, suddenly cutting right across his path.

The 'Mech's long strides carried it past her before Lukanov could react.

He wheeled around, bringing the 'Mech's full weight down on the damaged right knee. For just a second Lukanov lost control, pivoting on one stiff leg that just would not bend.

Then the 'Mech's great weight finished the job.

The machine toppled over. Candle bounded away. When the 'Mech hit the ground bucked and swelled with the unholy impact, knocking Candle off her feet and flinging her several meters. Stone fragments rained down all around her.

Candle groaned and slowly pushed herself up. Then she remembered where she was and scrambled to her feet, wincing when she put her right arm down to steady herself.

The 'Mech lay face down, half-buried in rubble. Lukanov had managed to get one arm out in front of him, so the great machine was propped up one side.

Just enough so that Candle could see into the cockpit.

A smear of blood a meter long stained the ferroglass surface. And something else. A sinuous gray-white curve snaked its way down the viewport.

Curious, Candle slowly walked towards the 'Mech and ran her finger across the white-gray line, rubbing the substance between her fingers.

Ice.

The cockpit was leaking.

She glanced down.

Lukanov looked up at her, eyes round with panic, his helmet off, the left side of his face filmed with blood.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

He looked up at her and shook his head. The radio antenna must've been smashed in the fall. That wasn't all that was broken. The cockpit hatch had buckled. It would never open again, not without a cutting torch anyway.

Candle pulled the torch from her belt and brought it up.

Lukanov's eyes followed the motion. His tongue darted out and moistened his lips.

Then she stopped.

Lukanov swallowed.

His air was slowly bleeding away. It might take a day or two, but there was no way to seal the crack and no way to get out.

He looked at her.

And she looked at him.

She slowly reattached the torch to her belt.

Lukanov's eyes followed the motion of her hands. For a second he just watched her, then he slammed his arm into the ferroglass. Candle was still touching the viewport so she felt the slight impact.

"You were the one that taught me the rules of salvage," whispered Candle. "Take care of only yourself."

Then she turned and walked away, allowing the cold, hard vacuum of space to swallow up the sound of pounding on ferroglass.

The End