

Fortin's Revenge

Louisa Swann

It was a quarter past midnight when I shoved through the door of the Broken Dreams Saloon. A quick scan of the main floor showed the place hadn't changed much in the years since I'd passed this way. Different barkeep. Different customers.

Same acrid stench of despair.

Not too surprising. The only folks that hung out on this rock were the specialists necessary to keep the mining station operational. Miners, transport pilots, mechanics, and of course, support personnel.

Probably once a decade or so a Judge's Official Enforcer would stop by in search of someone who'd been hiding way too long from justice.

Someone like me.

Not that I'd been hiding from justice. Just the opposite, in fact. As a J.O.E. agent I spent years in space chasing after justice. Now that I'm retired, I seek justice on my own.

After almost thirty days flying through space my mouth tasted like space dust and canned air.

Long past time to whet my whistle.

The crowd blocking the doorway parted like I had some kind of disease. I didn't take offense, though. I'd splurged on a fancy new vest and tie hoping to pass myself off as a regular, but that wasn't gonna happen.

Not this time.

Most of these folks looked like they'd been around the stars a time or two. They knew an ex-J.O.E. guy when they saw one. Being shunned kinda came with the territory.

I made my way toward the bar, admiring the architecture along the way.

Hewn straight from the rock itself, the Broken Dreams wasn't so bad for being stuck on an asteroid just this side of nowhere.

Space-hardened on the outside, polished on the inside to a sheen so fine you could count your pores if you looked at your reflection hard enough, the mirror effect also made the place

feel busier without all the noise and hassle of actual customers.

Tonight was busier than I'd ever seen the joint. Hell, with those polished walls the place looked downright crowded. 'Course, the last time I settled my aching bones on the ridiculous fur-covered bar stools had been close on nineteen years ago.

Nice to see business had picked up.

My barward progress was halted by an ear-shattering cry rising above the ever-present roar of raised voices, bad music, and clattering dishes. No one but me paid any attention to the scream, so I casually scanned the room one more time.

A game I didn't recognize was in full swing just beyond the dicing tables. It hadn't drawn much attention, just a few surly looking fellas who might've wanted to be someplace else. What looked like an electric containment field formed a sparkling dome over two-thirds of the table.

As I watched, a spacer with long front teeth reminiscent of an ancient Terran squirrel stuck his hand clean into the middle of that containment field. The guy let out a banshee shriek as his scrawny body flopped around like a fish on a hook.

Finally, he jerked his hand free, collapsed into his seat for a moment, then shook his head and left the table.

As soon as he'd left another sucker slipped into his place.

I scanned the crowd around the dicing tables, trying hard not to breathe too deep. A miasmic fog of illegal tobacco and burned rice husks clung to the ceiling like a cloud of hungry mosquitoes just waiting for the taste of blood.

You'd think folks with the technology to be running around in space would be able to do something about second-hand smoke. The Powers-That-Be made smoking illegal umpteen years ago, but places like this thrived on doing what wasn't supposed to be done.

Couldn't really complain much. Not in my line of work. But I'd seen the way that airborne poison could work its way into a person's lungs and stick around for years, not showing its ugly face until something happened to weaken the tissue, then blam!

Goodbye lung. Goodbye host.

The folks who patronized this joint didn't have much choice, though. Not if they wanted to get their minds off the job.

I gave up trying not to breathe and hoofed it over to the obsidian black bar lining the back wall. A quick hop parked my ass on an empty stool.

The bartender served the gal at the far end without glancing my way. I started to give the barkeep some grief, but stopped before a word slipped out of my mouth.

That guy serving drinks was none other than Gak Mitchell.

I'd come looking for the man. Only he wasn't a customer like I'd expected. Dear old Gak had switched sides in his grayer years. Now he was looking at life from the backside of the counter.

Other than that, the guy hadn't changed much. He still looked like some two-year-old kid had shaped his face out of volcano mud and left it to dry.

I kinda liked that. Always had, probably always will.

"Pick your poison," Gak said. His voice still sounded like a rock tumbler gone bad. He shoulda recognized me, but the man didn't even lift an eyebrow.

If that was the way he wanted to play the game, it was all right by me.