

PIRATES OF PENANCE

By Kevin Killiany

PART ONE

Pirate point, Viborg Asteroid Belt
Venaria Operational Area, Periphery March
Federated Commonwealth
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An asteroid the size of Demos snapped into existence three thousand kilometers off the port bow.

A sane man would have screamed. Anton Kaiman, captain of the *Sanibel*, kept his face impassive, suppressing the reflex to shout orders. Anything he said now would only interfere.



Around him his bridge crew did their jobs, pulling the ship through the last critical seconds of the jump. Information flowed as engineer and navigator and helmsman called out numbers, their voices sharp with the focus of near panic. Coordinating desperately, they compensated for what the proximate mass was doing to their fragile, terrible jump field.

Scientists insisted the forces that littered failed pirate points with knots of tortured metal rage existed below the threshold of human senses. Yet every spacer knew the feel of axion waves surging through his body—a tide pulling in two directions as local reality twisted, seeking balance.

Kaiman rode out the vertigo with studied calm. Twenty years since he'd sat helm, but his fingers twitched on the cracked leather arms of his command chair, shadowing moves younger reflexes were carrying out at speeds he could no longer match.

The fact that they were alive to see the rock that had almost killed them meant they were going to keep on living. The question was how much the *Sanibel* and her three suckling DropShips were going to give in trade for their lives.

Silently Kaiman watched the numbers and colors on the various screens change, reflecting the changes in the unseen universe of energy around them. Gradually, reluctantly, the spikes became waves, the flashing symbols constants and the status lights a uniform green.

The urgent electricity of his bridge crew began to fade. Shoulders relaxed and voices once harsh with fear quieted in confidence.

"All parameters read solid," the flight controller announced at last. "We're here."

"Good work, people," Kaiman said, as calmly as though they had successfully parallel parked a ground vehicle. "Anything to report?"

"We are less than a light second off target," the navigator said as the engineer fielded reports from throughout the ship. "That rock is a rogue. Nothing on any of the charts about anything this far outside the belt."

Kaiman nodded. Nothing unusual in that. Specifics of potential pirate points were seldom in the published star charts.

"Scanners show us in the clear," control reported. "No vessels of any kind. Looks like we're alone."

"Stand down weapons," Kaiman said. "Keep all gun crews on alert."

"All sections report operational," the engineer said, pulling off her headset. "DropShips, too. Some torque damage, minor structural stress, but nothing we can't have solid before the next jump."

They'd been lucky. No, they'd been more than lucky. They'd been phenomenally blessed by whoever or whatever watched over pirates and madmen. JumpShips—even tough, Star League era *Tramp*-class JumpShips like the *Sanibel*—survived encounters like this only in trivid space operas.

There was silence on the bridge, no cough, no fidget, no shifting of weight as Kaiman surveyed the screens. His crew knew they owed their lives and their fortunes as much to his deliberation as his daring. No one begrudged him his careful ways.

The *Sanibel* was just beyond the asteroid belt and slightly below the plane of the elliptic, he saw; the secret to this particular pirate point. Here the gravity field of the system's lone gas giant, close enough behind them to show a visible disk, exactly cancelled the pull of the distant sun. Viborg itself was nearly in opposition, too far away to be a tactical concern, while their objective...

Their objective was ten days away, if they were circumspect about their approach. And circumspect they would be.

"Boats away," Kaiman ordered at last.

On the screen he watched the two long-range shuttles move away sunward, losing themselves in the river of tumbling rock that made up the Viborg Belt. Assuming they had not used up their luck surviving their arrival, those shuttles would prepare the arena for the upcoming drama.

Kaiman smiled at the thought. Drama, well-orchestrated drama, was something he appreciated.

For the next several minutes he and the navigator worked out the details of keeping pace with the pirate point as it shifted with the orbits of the gas giant and the mass of the asteroid belt. The rogue planetoid was a concern, but its projected path would carry it beyond range in two weeks.

Kaiman mentally juggled that fact with the mission time table, ten days slowly out and three days fast burn home, and the time it would take their fusion reactors to recharge the K-F batteries. With only a minor adjustment, everything would coincide exactly. Serendipity indeed. Anyone who did not believe in luck was a fool.

He conferred, via ships' internal hardline—no risk of errant signal finding its way to unwanted ears—with the DropShip captains, revising their flight plan. The *Union* would launch in five hours, the *Manatee* seven after that, and the *Mule* twelve hours later. Each ship would accelerate to a different velocity, then coast, mimicking asteroids as they approached the objective on separate vectors. At Kaiman's signal they would decelerate with high-gee retro burns, converging on the target.

Contingency routes were also plotted, ensuring there would be no hesitation should the need to improvise arise.

Kaiman double-checked to be sure the fusion reactors were recharging the K-F batteries, then—satisfied at last that all he could do on the bridge at this point had been done—turned command over to his first officer.

The light push of the main drive imparted only the faintest sense of "down," nothing approaching a real sense of weight. Kaiman pushed and pulled himself along with the otter grace of a lifetime in space as he made his way toward the ready room, just off the bridge.

Time to make final adjustments to the second phase of the raid.



Leftenant Alexandra Atreus of the Florida PMM ignored the murmur of voices behind her, steadfastly staring out the ridiculous port hole. She forced her gaze past her dark reflection in the ferroglass to the Viborg mining habitat.

What she could see, half in bone gray relief and half outlined by a constellation of arc lights, implied something larger than most space stations. It was cylindrical, of course, and studded with radio towers, sensor arrays and structures she could not identify in apparent random. The overall effect was organic, as though the habitat had grown well beyond its original design.

What she took to be a pair of small factories and something, perhaps a third one she couldn't quite make out in the darkness, radiated from the stern on slender pylons. At least Lex thought it was the stern. Her assumption that their oblique approach was toward the bow was based on nothing more than her sense of proportion.

As it slid beyond the frame of her viewport, Lex realized the rounded end of the giant cylinder was a great glass dome. Hydroponics? She wouldn't have thought that possible this far from the primary. Apparently, if there was enough light from Viborg's distant sun for her to see the habitat, there was enough for the plants to grow.

The clarity of vacuum allowed her to spot a laser battery at one edge of the dome, no doubt part of the meteor defense system. With something recognizable to give her a sense of scale, her estimate of the mining habitat's size notched up from *big* to *huge*.

Immediately behind the dome were a pair of gravity decks, rotating in opposite directions to counterbalance each other. Lex bet all of the corn and wheat fields of her childhood kibbutz would fit on either deck with room to spare.

Beyond the grav decks were hangar doors, any one of which looked large enough to swallow the DropShip that had deposited them above the plane of the asteroid field before making its way to Viborg. She could see six, which meant, assuming symmetry, a dozen in all.

Beyond the hangar doors were DropShip docking collars, and beyond those...

The shuttle yawed over, altering course and orientation as it approached. The habitat dropped out of sight, replaced by the star-flecked blackness of space, and she found herself again confronted by her reflection, barely discernable against the darkness beyond.

Lex turned her attention to the cabin behind her, maintaining a firm grip on the handhold as she rotated stiffly in the zero gravity.

Someone had gone to a good deal of trouble and expense to convert this space bus into a diplomatic yacht. The main hold, once a module separated from the crew's section by a double bulkhead, was now an open stateroom. No doubt the finely decorated "wooden" beams across the ceiling concealed a framework meant to replace the lost rigidity. The shuttle's armor had been pierced in a half dozen places by view ports dressed to look like portholes from an ancient sailing vessel, more for appearance than actual use.

Like me.

Lex shook her head, banishing the self pity.

Near the main lock, Hauptmann Michaels was giving the honor guard a final once over. They at least had some function beyond window dressing. All seven of them sported ribbons that attested to combat against pirates and, though lightly armed in their dress uniforms, had their full complement of battle armor stored in the secondary bay.

She, on the other hand, was a MechWarrior without a 'Mech; a useless supernumerary in a militia renowned for having half its 'Mechs off the line at all times. Chafing in full dress blues instead of a cooling vest, she was a decorative addition to the entourage following Tertiary Undersecretary of Commerce Bartholomew Clemments on his tour of the hinterlands.

Undersecretary Clemments was sitting at apparent ease in an overstuffed chair, actually a concealed acceleration couch, held in place by a single lap strap. An aide floated just behind, one hand gripping a safety tether, the other the ancient attaché case Clemens affected.

If they'd used the money for this junket to supply the Florida with what they needed, her *Grasshopper* would have its neuro

interface assembly and she'd be... Well, Lex wasn't sure where she'd be. But it would be somewhere else and definitely doing something more useful than serving as window dressing.

Knowing the Eleventh Arcturan, or even their sister unit the Aleksevka PMM, had all the parts they needed should have lost its sting months ago. It hadn't. Nor did knowing that with half its 'Mechs and vehicles on the repair list, the Florida PMM still had more than enough resources to fulfill its duties. Protecting planetary exploration teams from wild animals and marching in local parades did not demand much of a unit, and it certainly didn't make for an exciting career. Or a career of any sort. She'd probably retire a lieutenant, still waiting for the spare parts she knew were gathering dust on Teyvareb.

A faint swaying in her inner ear told her the shuttle was changing direction again. Turning back to the porthole, she saw they were now nose to the side of the giant cylinder. No doubt heading toward one of the huge hangar doors she had seen. From her perspective, the side of the habitat was a planetary urbanscape with only the slightest of curves.

A movement on the habitat's surface caught her eye.

Straightening up, Lex leaned close, her breath fogging the ferroglass as she tracked the moving form. A shining silver 'Mech she didn't recognize, humanoid, thirty-five to forty tons, was striding toward the docking area. The machine's outsized feet were clearly magnets of some sort, but none of the other details made sense. The left arm ended in a bulbous device she couldn't quite make out and the right in a sharply angled "T" shape—a hatchet? Across the chest and head were the snouts of three small lasers, useless as weapons.

She blinked.

An IndustrialMech, she realized, the elements snapping into place. A design she'd never seen, unpainted and clearly armored, but an IndustrialMech all the same. She relaxed slightly; those were drilling lasers, not weapons.

She couldn't help thinking her neurohelmet and vest were in her gear. Most MechWarriors would sneer at the thought of jockeying an IndustrialMech, but most MechWarriors hadn't been reduced to driving sims for the last six months. Besides, from the look of its armor, this IndustrialMech had seen more combat than she had.

Why was that?

The 'Mech was replaced by the faint outline of her face as the hull of the habitat swallowed the shuttle. A moment later they entered the hangar proper, a place of brilliant arc lights and knife-edged shadow undiffused by atmosphere.

As the pilot sidled the shuttle toward the docking seal, somewhere out of sight behind her, Lex saw a dozen other craft racked along the far bulkhead like tools on a peg board. She realized the unusual arrangement made sense when gravity was not an issue; all they needed was a place to tie down. The outdated designs reminded her of her own Florida PMM, where the joke was it took four centuries to break equipment in properly.

Also racked were service sleds, little more than frame platforms attached to propulsion units, of varying size. The sleds were used as transport by workers in environmental suits, she knew, but some were as large as shuttles. Did workers move about in platoon strength?

She filed the question under things to find out when bored to tears, which could be at any moment on this duty. She kicked off from the bulkhead and snagged a safety tether, taking her place in line behind the Undersecretary's most junior aide at the end of the line.



Tatiana Himmel scanned the corridors constantly as she followed the crewman toward the upper decks. As usual, nothing showed along the circuitous route, no signage, no other crew, nothing. Kaiman wasn't taking any chances on anyone not part of his crew learning their way around the ship.

The JumpShip was under less than one-tenth gee of boost, so pulling themselves along hand lines was quicker and easier than walking. A moment before the passageway had been warm; now her breath fogged the air. She did not doubt the path they were following from the DropShip docking ring to the upper decks was the most awkward possible. It was the same aboard the DropShip, she and her men bunking near their 'Mechs and denied access to the drive and command sections.

This didn't really bother her. In fact, Tatiana respected her new

employer's caution. Just as she wouldn't allow any crew near her 'Mechs, Kaiman was protecting his assets. Trust—and a more equitable distribution of authority—would come with time.

In the meantime, she was learning what she could from simple observation.

For example, the DropShip they were cooped up in was older than dirt. She'd heard of *Manatees*, of course, the first 'Mech carriers ever built, but never dreamed she'd see one. The collection of spot-welds and patches ferrying her lance had carried 'Mechs into combat a half millennia ago. The fact that Kaiman had one—and that it worked—said a lot about his resources and the talent of his tech support.

More importantly, her people had found patches of fresh paint, roughly oval in shape, where one might normally expect unit colors. Each patch now had a scratch, no two in the same location and none longer than a little finger: red, red, and gold, respectively. Roughly oval and red with gold. C-notes to beans there was a star flare reflected in a blood-red eye under that fresh paint. She may never have heard of Kaiman, but Tatiana had a pretty strong suspicion his boss was "Red Eye" Laudin.

The way Tatiana had if figured, Laudin must be taking advantage of Morrison's growing preoccupation with the Rim Collection to expand his territory. And Laudin was a space-only pirate, no planet raids. If this outfit was growing, and the job offer to her lance implied it was, the area where it needed to grow most was in its 'Mech assets. And that was her specialty.

As nearly as she could tell—and admittedly she couldn't tell much isolated in the bays of the ancient *Manatee*—there was only one other lance of 'Mechs around. The only MechWarriors she'd seen had been Isaacs, the guy who'd recruited her, and his mates. He piloted a *Spider* and the rest of his lance were *Wasps* or *Stingers*. Anyone meant to be higher up the food chain, a real leader, would be piloting something a lot more serious.

A kickass *Nightsky*, for example.

Tatiana smiled grimly.

At last the crewman stopped by an unmarked door and gestured her through.

Not the bridge, Tatiana saw as she pulled herself through the doorway. Some sort of planning room, cramped, with a half dozen wall screens, all dark, and a holographic globe in the center.

Having learned early that the idea of “swimming” through near zero-gee was a trivid fiction, she had the wit to keep her grip firmly on the sill and use only one hand to catch the silvery sphere Kaiman lobbed at her without a word.

A booze bulb, she realized as she caught it. Noting the seal was still intact, she checked the label. Good stuff. She nodded her thanks to Kaiman and slid the bulb into a utility pocket.

Kaiman smiled. He liked that. Good.

Isaacs, the only other one in the room, didn’t look so pleased. No matter, Tatiana was sure she would soon be replacing him. In the meantime, though, she’d better play the part. She gave him a curt nod after Kaiman.

“How is your lance?” Kaiman asked conversationally.

“Ready,” she replied.

“For what?” Isaacs demanded.

Tatiana glared at the other MechWarrior, then toned it down to a direct stare. *No rebellion, not yet.*

“We’ve been riding blind for nearly a month,” she said evenly. “Every piece of every ‘Mech is repaired, calibrated, and polished to the last degree.”

She turned back Kaiman and modulated her voice to respectful competence. “My lance and I are ready for anything you’ve got.”

“You have no space experience,” Isaacs said.

Tatiana wedged the toe of her boot firmly into what felt like a handhold and crossed her arms casually. It was difficult to look at ease when you were afraid to let go of the wall, but she thought she pulled it off.

“We can handle ourselves.”

Isaacs said nothing, neither conceding nor challenging the point.

“We’ve heard Warren’s story,” he changed the subject. Slightly.

Tatiana spared a ghost of a smile; everyone had heard Warren’s story of how he simply walked away from the Florida with his *Grasshopper*. Whether it was true or not, she couldn’t say. He certainly had a pathological hatred for that pitiful excuse for a militia.

"... and Jessup and Irons are both vetted by units they served with," Isaacs was saying.

Not surprising. Even the unregistered merc units of the Periphery—the hired guns, as trivid dramas liked to call them—prided themselves on a certain sort of professionalism. Though operation details might be scarce, they could be counted on to accurately assess the merits of anyone who'd worked with them.

She'd checked out "Iceman" Isaacs through the same grapevine before accepting his guarded business proposal. His unit commanded top dollar for deep penetration recon jobs.

She knew exactly what he'd found out about her, too. Probably why he wasn't as welcoming as Kaiman. Not that Kaiman was truly welcoming, she amended. The big man was sitting back—floating back, actually—and watching her as Isaacs questioned her.

"You, on the other hand, were born a year ago, apparently in the cockpit of a factory fresh left-handed *Nightsky*," Isaacs leaned forward, his feet anchored to a workstation. The fact that he was rotated thirty degrees off vertical from her perspective made the posture more amusing than threatening. "My question is, who are you and how did you get that 'Mech?"

Two questions, Tatiana noted, and she had no intention of answering either one.

Somewhere back in the Crucis March was a formerly naive young FedCom scion of monumental stupidity; one who should never have been let out without a nanny, much less given her very own BattleMech. Her disappearance had been on the local news-net, but nothing had reached this far. Not that there'd been any foul play; Tatiana's conscience, such as it was, was clear. Just a mortally embarrassed rich kid lying low to avoid public humiliation. And her as far from Davion space as she could get, just in case the kid overcame her shame and raised the hue and cry.

But there was no reason for Isaacs or Kaiman to know that. Tatiana grinned wolfishly and let them think what they would.

"You know I and my boys will get the job done, whatever the job is, or you never would have offered this gig," she countered. "That's all you need to know about us."

Again the silence. Tatiana wondered if Isaacs meant for it to keep her off balance or if he was just mentally shuffling his notes. Either way, it didn't make him look very bright.

You need some new blood at the top, she thought toward Kaiman. Someone who thinks fast on her feet.

"Until now, all of your jobs have been strong-arm stuff," Isaacs said at last. "Intimidation of locals, smash and grab raids. All on planets."

"We can handle zero-gee," Tatiana said, hoping it were true of Jessup and Irons. She was confident of her ability to fake it. Of the four of them, Warren was the only one she knew had formal zero-gee combat training. "But I have to ask: What kind of ship are you going to hit with medium and heavy 'Mechs?"

"If it's a WarShip, it makes sense, but you'll need a lot more than one lance," she was careful to make boarding a WarShip sound like business as usual. "If it's a merchant DropShip, you'll want lighter 'Mechs."

Actually, you want no 'Mechs, she thought. They'd peel a merchantman like a grape and blast half the cargo to kingdom come.

Tatiana kept that bit of common sense to herself. No reason to give Kaiman an excuse not to hire her.

"Normally, yes," Kaiman spoke at last. "But our objective is quite large and the items we intend to retrieve are massive. A lance of medium and heavy 'Mechs will have a distinct advantage. Besides..." He let his voice trail off.

"You want to test us," Tatiana finished.

"Just so."

"Which brings us back to my original question," Tatiana said. "What is it you want us to hit?"

Isaacs and Kaiman exchanged glances.

"We're going to raid a habitat," Kaiman said.

Tatiana blinked.

There were certain lines even pirates didn't cross. Usually. Hitting a habitat was one of them. The risk of accidentally killing hundreds, maybe thousands, of civilians was just too great.

If things went south, no outfit antispinward of Terra would hire them. In fact, a good number would hunt them down and turn them in just for the reward money. Even if the raid succeeded, the

list of people willing to do business with an outfit that took chances like that was short.

What payoff could be worth that kind of fallout?

It took Tatiana one long breath to work through all the angles. Then she nodded slowly.

“What’s our job?”