

PIRATES OF PENANCE

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PART TWO

***Asteroid Mining Habitat, Viborg Asteroid Belt
Venaria Operational Area, Periphery March
Federated Commonwealth
08 May 3057***

Lex wondered about the real purpose of the space impersonating a ballroom for the Undersecretary's formal reception. It was big enough to be a soccer field, though at four meters the ceiling wasn't really high enough for sporting events. If it was a hangar, they'd done a terrific job of cleaning the deck—unless the area rugs were covering the worst stains. All of the sharp utilitarian angles had been covered with artfully draped fabrics by someone with a real feel for design.

She was particularly impressed by the ersatz picture windows spaced along three of the walls. Each mural showed a night view of a different world painted in such lifelike detail she expected breezes to ruffle the framing curtains. There were no actual windows, of course. With gravity at about point eight standard, Lex estimated the real night sky was spinning wildly by a few meters below their feet.

The band—and they were live musicians, not a holographic recording—was playing a selection of soft jazz tunes. Lex didn't recognize any of the compositions. In fact, she didn't recognize some of the instruments, but they provided an airy undertone for casual conversation.

The formal dress of the habitat residents tended toward utilitarian with decorative additions. As though a lot of thought had gone into adding just the right details to make the standard and universal exceptional and unique. Actually, given their isolated lives, that's probably exactly what had happened. She bet the skillfully worked ornaments and jewelry were examples of the wearer's own craftsmanship.

Lex found herself thinking of the self-reliant spirit of her childhood kibbutz. Her parents would like these people, she decided, and no doubt would have been accepted as kindred spirits.

Not so the Undersecretary.

Whatever Bartholomew Clemments was discussing with the mining administrators was not going well. Lex was too far away to hear what was being said over the general murmur of the re-

ception, but the body language of Undersecretary's audience was clear enough. They weren't interrupting, but they weren't listening either.

Sort of like how you're ignoring the miner. With an effort, Lex pulled her attention back to the earnest young man who had attached himself to her. *Actually, he's not much younger than I am, he just looks young. Must be the earnestness.*

"... being a MechWarrior," he was saying. From his inflection she deduced she hadn't missed a question. "Just about anything to get off Penance."

"Penance?"

"Periphery Engineering and Northcross Asteroid Mining Consortium," the young man explained. "The name of this place."

"That spells *PENAMC*," Lex pointed out.

"Close enough," the young man shrugged. "The company straights call it PEn-NAM, but we call it Penance."

"We being?"

"Just about anybody below top management—and the owners, of course," he gestured towards some miners who looked no different than anyone else to Lex's unschooled eye. "Most of the good rocks have been staked out, which means the only future is in wildcatting, working for someone else or getting out of here."

"Wildcatting?"

"Heading off on your own and hoping you find something." He made a face. "A good choice fifty or sixty years ago. Now getting out of here makes more sense."

Lex nodded slowly. Her parents had been unable to attend her graduation from Buena because a violent uprising on Valliore had triggered a planet-wide shutdown. No one had been killed, thank God, and the violence had been a continent away from the kibbutz. But dispossessed citizens, forced off their small farms by Acrux Agricultural, had torched thousands of hectares.

"I see what you mean," she said, encouraging emigration over insurrection. "And you think the service is the way to go?"

"Don't you?"

"It's how I got off Valliore," Lex conceded. "And how my grandmother got off Terra."

"Your grandmother wanted to leave Terra?"

"If that were so unusual, none of us would be here."

The young miner chuckled a good deal more than the quip deserved. Lex found herself wondering when was the last time someone had been impressed with a Lieutenant from the Florida PMM. She decided the folks on Penance didn't get out enough.

Though his jumpsuit, augmented by an artfully worked geometric embroidery, bore lapel pins that identified him as a miner and a 'Mech pilot, there was no name tag.

"I've forgotten your name," she admitted, though she wasn't sure it had been mentioned.

"Officially, it's Woodrow Pickering," the younger man grimaced. "Eventually, however, everyone ends up calling me Woodpecker. They mean a kind of Terran bird, not—"

"I know," Lex said.

"Call me Wood for short," he grinned. "That's what I try to get all my friends to do."

Lex promised absently, here eye caught again by the Undersecretary and the habitat administrators barely keeping their exchange civil. What could be at issue here on the edge of nowhere?

She glanced over at Michaels, but he was deep in conversation with an attractive woman who seemed to find whatever he was saying fascinating. In the weeks they'd been traveling together, Michaels had discussed tactics and equipment, never with anything approaching insight or interest. Either there was a side to him she hadn't realized or the stranger found dry recitations of operation manuals enthralling.

For her part, Michaels' new acquaintance was striking, in a pale, almost ethereal way. Her hair was so blonde it was nearly white and there was just the faintest blush of pink to her alabaster complexion. Only her eyes, which at this range Lex could see were a dark blue or violet, saved her from being completely colorless. The effect was somehow unreal, as though the woman were an elf or ghost of some sort.

"... Lex?" Wood was saying.

Pulling her attention back to the young miner, Lex replayed the last bit of conversation. He'd just asked about her name.

"I was the fifth Alexandra accepted to my class at Buena," she explained, hoping the organizational pause hadn't been too noticeable. "Lex was the only unclaimed variant."

"What's your 'Mech?"

"It's not mine, it's the Florida's," Lex corrected. "You don't get many MechWarriors piloting their own machines any more." *Particularly MechWarriors from a working-class kibbutz on the back side of Valloire.*

Wood waved the distinction aside.

"What do you pilot?"

Sims, mostly.

"I'm assigned a *Grasshopper* 5-H."

"Long range missiles, not the new anti-missile system." Wood nodded.

"That's the one," Lex confirmed. "I'll admit I'm surprised you know either model."

"I keep up," Wood blushed slightly under the compliment. "Actually, beyond the anti-missile system, all I really know about *Grasshoppers* is they're about twice the size of our MiningMechs."

"I think you're right," Lex said. "I saw one of those when the shuttle was docking. It looked armored."

"Meteors," Wood nodded again.

"Meteors in an asteroid belt?" Lex asked "I'd think the larger planetoids would sweep them away."

"In an old one, like Terra's," Wood agreed. "Viborg's belt is less than twenty thousand years old."

"How can you tell?"

"It's only spread through about forty degrees of its orbit," Wood said, his tone suddenly dark. "That's why the rocks are so dense that one centralized operation can monopolize the whole system."

"So how did it happen?" Lex asked, hoping to fend off a political diatribe. "The asteroid belt, I mean."

"Captured interloper, like Pluto in the Terran system," Wood's tone was almost grateful. He was evidently equally eager to keep the conversation from going sour. "Only here it hit something. Slowly." He held his drink glass out from his body and moved his other hand gradually toward it. "Overtook the fourth planet from behind; probably took weeks."

Lex found herself wondering if the fourth planet had been inhabited. She imagined local wildlife gazing up at the strange light growing in their sky night after night. She shook the image out of her head. They were well beyond this sun's temperate zone; these had been two barren rocks.

"Tidal forces would have pretty much broken the planets up before impact," Wood spread the fingers of the approaching hand. "It was more a case of two debris clouds colliding."

"It's still going on," Wood gestured as though indicating the thousands of tumbling rocks that shared the habitat's orbit. "Big ones make little ones with every impact. Micros, mostly, smaller than a pea. But sometimes you catch a rock," Wood held his hand about ten centimeters from his drink glass. "At four or five hundred meters per second, a meteor hits like a Gauss rifle."

"What is the difference between an asteroid and a meteor?"

"An asteroid is a rock in space" Wood grinned. "A meteor is a rock in space that's coming at you."

Lex smiled at what was obviously an ancient joke. Though not always a laughing matter, she thought, recalling the apparent battle damage to the 'Mech she'd seen on the surface.

"If that armor ever breeches, you've pretty much had it," Wood was explaining. "Myomer freezes solid in a vacuum, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"Yes, you would know, wouldn't you?" Wood agreed. "You guys do anti-pirate work, don't you?"

Lex made a noncommittal sound, letting the question slide.

"Fracture chips and backwash from the lasers are a lot more common, of course," Wood went on when he realized she wasn't going to take advantage of the opening.

"That's why the 'Mechs are polished silver?"

"Poor man's laser deflector," Wood nodded. "That, and the fact polished metal shows up better on scanners."

"What's the jump range on those MiningMechs?" Lex asked, following her own thoughts.

Wood chuckled again, for once shaking his head.

"What's so funny?"

"Jump jets," Wood explained. "That's blue sky thinking."

"Blue sky?"

"Blue sky, dirtside, whatever you want to call it," Wood smiled. "Jump jets only make sense on a planet."

"I'd think they'd make perfect sense in space."

"Jumping makes sense in space. Micro-gee course adjustments make sense in space," Wood said as though explaining to a child. "But jump jets able to shove you at four or five gee with no guidance system? This does not make sense in space."

"There's a guidance system."

"Which is slaved to the neurohelmet, which keys on the human sense of balance, which in turn depends on gravity to function." Wood's smile was grim. "You'd either splatter yourself against a rock or die of old age trying to get back to where you started from."

Wood chuckled again and sipped his drink. He looked awkward at it, as though he wasn't used to drinking. Which he wasn't, Lex realized; he'd spent most of his life in zero-gee. She glanced around at the other party-goers with new eyes. Drinking a liquid that wasn't safely sealed in a nipples globe must be a pretty novel event for most of the habitat dwellers.

Speaking of novel....

"So," Lex kept her tone casual, "When can I try out one of your MiningMechs?"

"What?"

Not quite a spit take.

"I like to check myself out on every 'Mech I can," Lex shrugged. "And you've just convinced me I've got something to learn about zero-gee maneuvers."

"Um, I don't know." Wood glanced over towards Michaels and the ethereal miner. "No one's ever asked to just take out a 'Mech before."

He looked so flustered that for a moment Lex suspected she'd blown his cover. Perhaps she'd mistaken a student's lapel pin and he had only been posing as a 'Mech jockey to impress the new girl at the cocktail party.

Wood rallied visibly: "I'd have to ask Mr. Ortega."

"Is Mr. Ortega here?" Lex smiled, keeping any edge from her voice

"Uh, over there," Wood nodded toward a tight knot of Penance—PEN—NAM—administrators standing foursquare behind what was apparently their leader. For her part, the leader was explaining something in no uncertain terms to the Undersecretary.

"Not a good time, then."

"No."

Indicating a need for another drink, Lex moved away from the boy before he could offer to get it. For the next half hour or so she let Brownian motion carry her through the reception, exchanging pleasantries with the people who would be their hosts for the next few weeks.

There was definitely a tension in the air, but it was clearly at a level far enough above her head that she could pretend to be oblivious. Everyone else seemed bent on being equally oblivious, focusing steadfastly on enjoying the novelty of the moment and the company.

Particularly Michaels, Lex noted. She doubted he was aware of anything beyond the young woman gazing rapturously up at him as he spoke.



The long range shuttle sidled up orbit, moving against the flow of the river of stone, its pace only a few percent below the aggre-

gate of the larger asteroids. Not enough differential to trigger the Habitat's automated meteor alarms.

The shuttle passed from shadow into light, then again into shadow as it approached the underside of a majestically tumbling boulder nearly twenty times its mass. Using only passive sensors it moved to near contact range, then rotated, bringing its missile launcher to bear.

With a burst of flame a featureless cylinder, dark gray and perhaps two meters long, leapt to the surface of the asteroid. Explosive anchors triggered at contact, burying pitons deep into fresh fissures. The frigid stone leached away their chemical heat in seconds. By the time the asteroid's rotation brought it around to face the habitat, the cylinder was indistinguishable from the rocky surface around it.

On minimal thrusters, the shuttle pushed away from the asteroid. Angling across an open space in apparent random drift, it moved toward its next objective.