

PIRATES OF PENANCE

By Kevin Killiany

PART FOUR

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

"Here it is," Wood announced grandly, "Hold L-four-six-two. The Treasure Trove."

He pulled himself to one side, giving the others a better view of the giant chamber.

Lex found herself completely underwhelmed. After days of waiting and running practice missions in the sims, a tour of the habitat's "treasure trove" as Wood called it had sounded interesting. But this...

Stack upon stack of zero-gee hex crates—featureless metal containers, ranging from five to thirty meters long—extended in every direction, bound tightly together by color coded webbing. The hold itself was brightly lit, the glare and razor-edged shadows announcing, had one neglected to check sensors, the complete lack of atmosphere.

"I was expecting something a bit more dramatic," Michaels echoed her thoughts, his voice flat in her suit's speakers.

"Piles of gems guarded by serpents?" asked Candace.

"With at least a skull or two," Michaels agreed.

Lex filed the exchange under confirmation of her theory that the miner—*engineer*, she corrected herself—was the source of Michael's newfound sense of humor. Such as it was.

Lex had tried to like Candace, but could not warm up to the woman. Mostly, she admitted to herself, because Candace made no effort to be friendly toward her. Not that it was anything personal, she was sure. If she were ever as focused on a new man in her life as Candace obviously was on Michaels, she doubted she'd be overly friendly to any of his female friends either.

"Don't let the prosaic packaging fool you," Wood activated his boot magnets, and the others followed suit; the "wall" through which they'd entered became the floor. From this perspective they were walking among a forest of widely-spaced cables, with the storage nets roofing them over. "You are in the presence of the finest industrial grade crystals in the known galaxy."

Wood and Candace both wore what Lex had come to recognize as miner suits. Less bulky than the Florida's standard issue, and more flexible, obviously intended for freedom of movement and protracted wear. They also had several sealed contact points, which she imagined were for attaching various specialized tools. From their fit she had no doubt they were individually tailored, not just adjusted, an impression reinforced by the unique graphic detailing.

Michaels wore his combat suit, minus the weapons, the covered contact points bearing a slight resemblance to the miners'. However, where theirs were supple, his was rigid, the body armor limiting his range of motion. Her own suit was Florida standard issue. Light blue with white piping and patches on helmet, shoulders and thighs that marked her as a MechWarrior. There were no weapons points on her suit, nor was her armor as thick as Michaels', but compared to the evident grace of the miners' suits she felt swathed in steel wool.

"All of these containers are filled with crystals?" she asked.

"Crystals, steel, gold, germanium, mineral fiber, you name it," Wood replied, waving an arm toward the tethered bundles. "The Viborg Belt is the debris field of not one, but two destroyed planets. That means we've got every mineral in nature, not just the nickel-iron most asteroid fields contain, and we have it more abundantly."

"There's profit in shipping steel?" Michaels asked.

"Only to Viborg," Wood explained. "They're proud of their garden world. Why mine when everything you need drops from the sky?"

"That's why the inbound DropShip put your shuttle off before going in to Viborg," Candace added. "We're almost completely self-supporting. Except for textiles, pharmaceuticals, and exotic items like meat, we produce everything we need right here on Penance."

"Actually, we produce a lot more than we need," Wood said, indicating the cloud of palettes above them. "Some of this has been here over a century."

"Not the crystals, I'll bet," Michaels said.

"That's why your Tertiary Undersecretary is here," there was an edge to Candace's voice. "He wants to take it all."

"What?"

"Not exactly," Wood said. "He came to tell us the government is nationalizing all of our strategically significant resources."

"What does that mean?" asked Lex.

"According to him, just that we'd be doing our duty," Candace said. "Really it means giving the government everything we have that they want in exchange for the promise we may, someday, get paid whatever they want to give us."

Lex turned to Michaels. "Can they do that?"

"It sounds like he's citing part of the same Armed Forces entitlement act we do whenever we have to commandeer civilian resources in the field," Michaels said after a moment. "So I guess, technically, yes. But this is several orders of magnitude beyond borrowing a truck." He shook his head. "I've never heard of anything like it."

Lex thought that over as she followed the others. Nationalizing resources certainly jibed with the scuttlebutt about a military build up. But against whom? Who would have the nerve to take on the Federated Commonwealth?

"Here's a useful trick when you're saving fuel." Wood said suddenly, his bright tone evidently meant to lighten the mood.

He raced ahead, his feet sliding millimeters above the deck so that he appeared to be skating on their magnetic fields. As he passed one of the net tethers, he caught it in one hand. Lifting his feet clear of the deck, he thrust them up and forward, like a pole-vaulter or a child pumping a swing. Releasing the line, he arced upward into the crowded field of nets above them.

Lex leaned back, tilting from her knees, to follow his flight. As he passed close to a net, he snagged it with one hand, leveraging himself through a quick ninety-degree turn with no loss of speed. Feet-first, he disappeared into the darkness.

Michaels grunted and ran forward. His gait was more lumbering than Wood's, firmly planting each foot rather than trust the miner's skating trick. When he reached the "launch" cable, he swung his legs up and away with much less grace than Wood's more limber suit had allowed, but with the increased momentum of his greater mass.

He didn't catch the second line, but snagged another just past it. A second grunt carried over the radio as he muscled through the turn. Without the augmented musculature of the combat suit, twisting that much mass through a snap turn would have probably ripped his shoulder out of joint.

"Why do they always have to show off?" Candace asked.

"Y-chromosome poisoning?" Lex suggested.

Candace gave Lex her first real smile since they'd met.

"Woodpecker's right," she admitted. "Minus the headlong heroics, tahzan's the best way to get around when you don't want to use your jets."

"Tahzan?"

"As nearly as I can tell the origin is some deep secret of miner mythology," Candace shrugged. "It just means swinging from handhold to handhold, free-falling in between. Inside a bay like this it's safe enough, but only hotshots like Woodpecker tahzan in open space."

"How's it work?"

For the next twenty minutes Candace demonstrated the finer points of selecting handholds and timing a release. Lex enjoyed the workout, stretching muscles she hadn't used since gymnastics back in the kibbutz. Not even the martial arts training at Buena had stretched her as much. She pushed through the burn, matching the other woman move for move as they wove their way among the cargo nets.

From the radio chatter she deduced Wood was giving Michaels a similar lesson, though theirs seemed to involve alternating races with displays of prowess. Twice she heard Wood call Michaels on cheating for using his shoulder jets.

"You're not much of a threat," Candace said as they took a breather, their magnetic boots holding them to a hex crate.

"A threat?"

"Right after your Tertiary Undersecretary dropped the bomb about nationalizing our resources, and Penance admin let him know what we thought about that," Lex could see Candace pull a face through her helmet visor. "He mentioned Viborg might benefit from a protective garrison, for our own safety. He pointed out

you and Jerry as military experts who could evaluate what forces might be needed."

Lex snorted.

"Michaels is the real deal," she said. "He's done ten years of security on planetary exploration and anti-pirate work. I'm just a junior Lieutenant whose 'Mech's in the shop. I got the assignment because I didn't have enough clout to turn it down."

"And you're as imposing as hell," Michaels said, dropping out of the darkness. Lex saw him cheat again, using his jets to adjust his angle before his boots latched onto the container.

Wood followed, more slowly and head first. Catching a strand of the hex container's netting in one hand, he executed a neat half-flip bringing his boots down on the metal surface.

"In your dress red and blues, with your game face on," Michaels said, "You look like an Elemental backing up Clemments."

Lex snorted.

"Okay, half an Elemental," Michaels amended. "The point is, you look more dangerous than I do. Just the thing to impress the locals. Right, Woody?"

"Um—" Wood hesitated, "Yeah. Impressive."

Lex had never realized before that you could hear a blush in a person's voice. *Poor Wood.*

"At any rate, your boss found out veiled threats were the wrong tactic," Candace said, rescuing Wood. "Suddenly no one can find any records of exactly what we have or where it is. He's been going door to door mending fences ever since."

"I liked the glass slipper theory better," Lex said.

It was Michaels' turn to snort.

"If there ever was going to be a garrison," Candace said, ignoring the aside, "This is where they'd be."

"What do you mean?"

"Out shipment storage," she said, indicating the cargo in all directions. "The treasure trove. Everything from refined metals to rare earths to industrial crystals. More profit per ton, already packed

for transport, than anything else in the system. Maybe even the region."

Lex looked around with new eyes, turning in place. They were surrounded by a Sargasso of containers, a hopeless maze to her, but meticulously organized to one who understood the system. She clicked up the magnification on her visor, reading the content label of a container forty meters away.

Four tons of germanium, she read. Worth more credits than most people see in a lifetime.

"No one lives in this part of the habitat?" Michaels asked, following his own thoughts.

"It's an automated warehouse," Candace answered. "We don't even maintain an atmosphere this side of the shuttle docks."

"No danger of collateral damage," Michaels said. "External doors. A purely strategic, and easy, target."

"I never thought of that before," Wood finally found his voice. "If anyone was ever going to hit us, this is where they'd come."

"Whatever else Clemments might have said," Michaels' tone was thoughtful. "A garrison here, some form of protection, might not be such a bad idea."

"We've been fine without it for generations," Candace dismissed the idea. "No reason to change now."

But Lex thought she heard a note of doubt in the woman's voice. And there was no mistaking the way Michaels continued to turn in place, assessing the situation.

If war was coming, it was coming to Penance.

***en route to Viborg Asteroid Mining Habitat,
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Tatiana Himmel rode the lift slowly down the side of her *Nightsky*. At this light push there really wasn't enough gravity to warrant a lift, but she wanted to be free to admire her 'Mech without worrying about handholds and drifting free.

The *Nightsky* was fifteen tons lighter than her beloved *Axeman* had been, and shorter. The cockpit, a turtle-like head thrusting forward from its torso, did not compare with the noble crest she used to ride into battle and to her mind the medium 'Mech was woefully undergunned. But it was fast and nimble and as left-handed as she was. In skirmishes and drops and long hours of patrol over the past year she'd come to appreciate the durability and flexibility of the design.

Daddy had done good in providing the best 'Mech possible for his little girl. Too bad he hadn't given her the brains not to blindly trust the first veteran to take her under her wing. You'd think after the historical lesson of Stefan Amaris no one would be stupid enough fall for the kindly mentor gambit.

Tatiana grinned and shook her head. Then grinned again as the lift came even with "*Nichthimmel*" in black letters against the camouflage grays and browns above the snout of her left torso laser. There was a name that never would have worked for an *Axeman*.

Finally satisfied, she made her way down to the deck. Checking her chrono, she saw it was still forty seconds until the deadline she had given her lance to have their 'Mechs prepped. She sauntered to the door, acceleration barely holding her to the deck, mentally counting seconds. With a final glance up at her machine, she stepped across the threshold at the exact second.

Her men were waiting for her.

Warren was slumped in a chair that had been a crate three weeks ago. Jessup, the oldest 'Mech jockey Tatiana had ever heard of, was also sitting, but he held his beef jerky body upright and alert. Irons, as usual, paced the corners of the room, always in motion, always anxious to be on to the next thing.

The *Manatee* was a 'Mech carrier of ancient design. Part of its small cargo bay had been converted, roughly, into barracks for her lance. The bay and four individual 'Mech bays, each with its own external door, were built around a small common area. For the last four and a half weeks, the barrack, this common area, and the 'Mech bays had been their entire world. The fact that they hadn't killed each other said a lot.

"Everything ready?"

Nods all around.

"Any last questions?"

"I don't like it," Warren said.

Tatiana ignored him. That was his initial response to every new idea. A hulk of a man with a single eyebrow, Warren's personality could be charitably described as morose. But there wasn't anyone she or the others would rather have as backup in a firefight. In the months they'd been a unit the three had learned it was best to simply humor him.

"Getting off does seem to be a problem," Jessup said, scratching the gray stubble of his beard thoughtfully. "There are no 'Mech bays on the *Mule*?"

Tatiana shook her head, glad Jessup, who had the most to be upset about, was focused on the mission as a whole.

Kaiman was sending them in without missiles. His reasoning was good: If a firefight broke out, the danger of missiles going astray and penetrating civilian living quarters was just too great. Raiding a habitat was one thing, he'd said, slaughtering innocents was another. Tatiana agreed, but wondered if it was scruples about the loss of life that motivated the pirate or the potential loss of business if word of the act got out.

Warren had objected, of course, but LRMs were only a small part of his *Grasshopper's* arsenal. Her *Nightsky* and Irons' *Lancelot* didn't use any at all. But without missiles, Jessup's QKD-4G *Quickdraw* was reduced to four medium lasers, two pointing backwards. Nowhere near enough firepower if a fight developed.

Yet instead of griping, the man was thinking through the operation. Pro to the bone. Picking people like that to back her up was what was going to take her to the top.

"No 'Mech bays," she confirmed. "We hand our haul off to the loading cranes, then lie down. Their cargo handlers will anchor us to the floor."

"I don't like it," Warren repeated.

"You'd like maybe bouncing around during high-gee maneuvers?" Irons asked, not bothering to conceal his impatience.

"Why can't we land in the *Union*?" Warren asked. "It's got 'Mech bays to spare and plenty of room for anything we can grab in one trip."

"I asked that," Tatiana answered, not bothering to remind him she'd already explained this phase of the operation. Warren wasn't stupid, just obstinate. "The *Union* goes in first and deploys its fighters, then stands off to provide cover fire if and when the anti-meteor batteries fire on us."

The habitat's laser batteries were for meteor defense. Their fire control computers were designed to lock out if sensors showed the target was made of refined metals. There was no way central control could rewire the system to bypass the safeties quickly enough to bring the whole system on line. But it was possible for individual batteries to jack out of the net and target manually. Their aim wouldn't be good, but at point blank range it would be good enough.

"What if the batteries are in housing areas?" Irons asked.

"The miners aren't going to invite fire toward where their families live," Jessup pointed out. "Their armor is not designed to stand up to weapons fire."

"There's one other wrinkle," Tatiana said, cutting her eyes toward Warren. "There's a Florida anti-pirate squad on the habitat."

"They know we're coming?" the big man asked.

Tatiana shook her head.

"Some high mucky-muck is visiting. They're his honor guard." She smiled. "He also brought along a MechWarrior."

That got the other two's attention.

"What's his 'Mech?"

"She didn't bring it with her." Tatiana's grin was forced. Memory of her own year without a 'Mech soured the humor of the situation. "However, she is learning how to use their MiningMechs."

"What good will that do?"

"Probably nothing," Tatiana shrugged. "But don't take the chance. If you encounter any of the Florida goons or the MechWarrior, do not engage. You won't have the time. Break off and head for the *Mule* if you don't want to miss your ride home."

Irons and Jessup nodded immediately. Warren's nod was slower in coming and Tatiana could read rebellion in his eyes. She'd hate to lose him, but if the moron started a firefight, she wasn't going to trade her life to bail him out.

"What's the plan?" she asked.

"The *Manatee* drops us," Jessup answered. "Then boosts out 'cause its armor can't take the anti-meteor lasers."

Tatiana strongly suspected that was one of Kaiman's lies. The *Manatee* was certainly ancient, and patched to the point it would be hard to find the original structure, but she'd never heard of a DropShip that couldn't take a few blasts from an anti-meteor laser, even at close range.

The old pirate was just limiting their options, in case they got any ideas of their own.

"The *Union* and aerospace fighters stand off, providing cover fire," Jessup continued, ticking the items off on his fingers. "The *Mule* docks. We hit our objectives, high-tail it back to the *Mule*, hand off the loot and lie down."

"Right," Tatiana confirmed. "After we rendezvous with the JumpShip we'll have time to get back aboard the *Manatee* before jump."

"That still sounds like the waste of a good *Union*," Warren said.

"We don't know what Kaiman's got aboard that *Union*, and he wants to keep it that way," Tatiana said. "We've only seen Iceman's recon lance, but every 'Mech bay on that ship could be filled for all we know."

She glanced around as though expecting to see eavesdroppers, then leaned into the circle. Her lance mates followed suit.

"This is our shot at the big leagues here," she said, voicing what they all suspected. "Kaiman has got to be Laudin's man. And he's not going to hire us on until he knows what we're worth. Half the purpose of this mission design is to test us, see how we do on a raid."

"And to leave us behind if we screw up," Warren pointed out.

"So we don't screw up," Irons answered.