

PIRATES OF PENANCE

By Kevin Killiany

PART EIGHT

Viborg Asteroid Belt
Venaria Operational Area, Periphery March
Federated Commonwealth
17 May 3057

Tatiana cursed and shook her head savagely. The sweat and tears hung for a moment, a mist the ventilation system swept away.

Her tormentor held position as she swung her right arm around, trying to bring the large pulse laser to bear. The swinging arm imparted spin and once again her *Nightsky* rotated lazily. Her desperate shot went wide.

It took the gyroscope several seconds to counteract the spin. As soon as things were stable enough for readings, she checked her scanners. *Damn*. The 'Mech's nav computer was not designed for independent space flight, but as nearly as she could tell the habitat was behind her to her right. It was definitely moving away.

She extended her left leg as far as she could to the side. If she worked this right, the combined thrust of the three jumpjets should send her in a wide, sweeping turn.

"That's not going to work," her tormentor's voice was calm—almost bored.

She wished she could shut him up, but the FedCom emergency rescue radio installed by the doting daddy of her *Nightsky*'s original owner didn't have a cut-off switch. Her 'Mech's damage computer couldn't comprehend what was happening, but it understood enough to know she was in trouble. Until it died or believed she was safe, the channel would remain locked open.

For now, all she could do was try to block out the infuriating voice and focus on getting back into the action. She knew there was a way to do this; she knew there were MechWarriors who did this. She knew she could do it, too.

It was just a question of figuring out how.

Light, light, light, she willed her jets. Just a little push.

But her jumpjets were designed to lift fifty tons of fighting machine against the pull of a planet. There was no gentle setting to the throttle. All she could affect was how long the jets burned.

A one-second tap sent her into a wild corkscrew. There were no brakes, no way to reverse thrust—unless by some gymnastic trick, which had so far eluded her, she could reverse her position and fire the jets in the direction she was going. All she could do was ride it out and wait for the gyro to cancel out the spin.

Eventually the stars were steady on her screen. Her course was along the last vector of her corkscrew gyration. Not an arc, there was no gravity affecting her flight, just a straight line in a direction her computer didn't understand.

The habitat was...gone. She checked again, then checked the damage display to see if her sensors had been hit. Nothing around her but rocks and that damned service sled. She'd moved out of sensor range of the habitat.

Clang.

Tatiana jumped. Her *Nightsky* scissor kicked in sympathy, the axe chopping down. The stars swung wildly past her view screen. She clenched her teeth, careful to touch nothing, and cursed steadily through grinding enamel as the gyro stabilized her flight.

Damage sensors reported a projectile hit on top of her canopy, no damage. That sled had a cannon? Whatever it was, it was damned ineffective.

"I've staked a claim on your 'Mech," the voice of the tormentor came through without static. "It's my 'Mech, now. Right of salvage."

Tatiana resisted the temptation to swing her laser toward the sled.

The sled itself was a flat platform with an open frame on top and a propulsion unit underneath. The pilot, so cocky he was hanging close enough for her to see him clearly without magnification, sat astride a ridiculously undersized control unit projecting from the front. It looked like nothing so much as a cycle pulling a parade float.

Such a small target...

"If you power down," her tormentor was saying, "I'll tow you to where a rescue shuttle can get you out of that cockpit."

He knew enough not to get in front of her torso lasers, and swinging her big laser just spun her around. But her small laser just might have the range to tap the sled.

The *Nightsky's* head didn't turn, but the small laser could track through one hundred and eighty degrees. Slowly, so as not to alert her target, she swung the weapon around. She let the targeting reticule float, not going for a hard lock until she was sure of the range. She didn't know if the sled's sensors could detect a weapons lock, but didn't want to give any warning.

The amber beam lashed out, vivid against the field of stars.

The soft steel framework above the pilot dissolved into a cloud of molten droplets. If there had been gravity, he would have died horribly in a burning rain of liquid iron. As it was, he boosted the sled down and away, beneath her feet and out of the spray of cooling metal.

"That prospector's marker I staked you with can be tracked over twenty light seconds," her tormentor continued in his maddeningly conversational tone. "No one will come close; nobody violates another miner's claim."

Tatiana ignored him, tracking his position on her sensors. This was the kind of navigation they were designed for. He was behind her, at shoulder level, less than half a klick away. If she swung her axe slowly, the gyro would probably let her rotate. If she preset her lasers to fire in a spread...

"The easiest thing would be for me to go home," said her tormentor. "Wait a month in comfort, then come collect my 'Mech."

Tatiana froze.

"I've got twenty minutes before I have to head back. The offer of rescue expires then." The voice paused, as if expecting her to interject, then: "I'll leave this channel open if you want to talk. Just ask for Johnny."

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"Good work out there," Michaels murmured.

Lex looked at him sharply, then faced front. They weren't exactly at attention, but they were pretty much on display, floating with a half dozen warehouse personnel along one wall of a utilitarian office of some sort. Whatever its original purpose, it was now the initial debriefing room. One of the undersecretary's aids and representatives of the engineers, miners, and habitat—Lex thought it meant something that she could now tell the uniforms apart at a glance—were tethered behind a row of data screens. They were calling people forward one by one and questioning them.

Lex wished she'd had time to change out of the soft suit before being dragged here. She felt like she stank and the plumbing was damn invasive.

"Dumb luck, more like it," she countered, keeping her eyes front and her voice low.

"Hauptmann Michaels," the Undersecretary's aide said, cutting off whatever he was about to say.

Michaels pushed off and snagged the horizontal line that ran across the room just in front of the table. He oriented himself so that he appeared to be standing in front of them before giving his report. His voice was pitched to the administrators, which meant Lex heard about one word in three. Even so, it was clear he made no effort to downplay how completely he and his men had been lured out of position—or how.

When her turn came, she followed suit. Keeping it dry and professional, she approximated attention as best she could holding the line and stared straight ahead as she spoke. She was thankful her complexion concealed her hot flush of shame as she detailed how easily she'd fallen for Wood and Stalt's lies.

"As directed by Mr. Ortega," she concluded, "I engaged and delayed one of the raider 'Mechs."

There were a few more questions, then they were dismissed. The Undersecretary's aide told them to clean up and get into dress blues for a more formal inquiry later.

"'Engaged and delayed'?" Michaels asked as they made their way up toward the center of the cylinder.

"I should have knocked him out first shot," Lex said. "If I'd latched on one meter to his right..."

"That's enough, Lieutenant," Michaels snapped.

Startled, Lex pulled herself to zero-gee attention for a second time, anchored rigidly to a handhold.

"You went into combat for the first time in your life, unarmed, against a 'Mech twice your size and beat the bloody—" Michaels stopped himself and took a deep breath.

"Dumb luck landed you on the *Grasshopper*," he conceded. "But your initial assault plan was sound, your evasive tactics demonstrated clear thinking under fire, and your infighting was damned effective. You won, Lieutenant. Have the grace to accept it and shut up."

"Yes, sir." Lex said, eyes front. "Thank you, sir."

"Sir, am I?" Michaels asked, his tone once again relaxed. "When did that happen?"

"Long time ago, sir," Lex said, keeping it formal. "I just noticed."

Michaels grunted and led the way up the next ladder.

At the central hub, they caught a cross corridor that led them through the axles of the counter-spinning gravity decks and on toward their assigned quarters.

"From the way everyone's acting," Lex broke the silence at last, "I'm guessing we didn't stop them?"

"We captured a *Grasshopper* and a *Lancelot*, both intact," Michaels' smile was grim. "Not bad. But it looks like we wasted our energy on the diversion."

"How so?"

"While we were defending the goods for export, the habitat's stores were gutted," Michaels said. "Scuttlebutt is about a hundred people used sleds and ConstructionMechs to load a *Mule* in record time."

"A hundred people?" Lex shook her head. "That would take weeks."

"Not a full load," Michaels admitted, "But several thousand tons of tools, rations, sundries, building supplies, and of course the 'Mechs and sleds. Loaded in less than an hour."

Lex considered. Thirty or forty sleds, particularly if some of them were 'Mech carriers, fully loaded and pulling trains of those nets she'd seen in the Treasure Trove—her mouth twisted at the memory—could do it. That they'd just have to get the sleds on board and secured, no unloading, would speed things up. But the planning...this operation had been months in preparation.

"Someone's building a new habitat," she concluded.

"More likely refurbishing a forgotten one," Michaels said.

Lex nodded as she pulled herself along.

Legends of ghost colonies and abandoned stations were part of the fabric of the Periphery. In reality they weren't as prevalent as popular mythology and the trivid space operas claimed, but centuries of wars, changing trade routes, and bad business management ensured they were out there.

"A new pirate base?" she guessed.

"That's what the smart money's on," Michaels agreed. "What we don't know is who or where."

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Kaiman sat regarding his situation globe, the two point four gees of the *Mule's* acceleration pressing him firmly against the webbing of his chair. He glanced up as Isaacs entered the ward room, moving carefully in the high gravity. The MechWarrior had thrown a light jacket over his cooling vest for the journey up through the frozen decks, but otherwise he was still dressed for his *Spider's* cockpit.

Kaiman cocked an eyebrow.

"How'd we do?"

The younger man grinned and eased himself into a chair before answering. Not taking long enough to be insolent, Kaiman noted, but making it clear he regarded this as a conversation between equals.

"We've got enough supplies, equipment, and techs to get the old Republic station up and running," he reported. "Got jockeys for your spare 'Mechs, too."

"Good," Kaiman nodded. "Better than good."

He fished a booze bulb out of the cabinet and tossed it through the holographic display. The heavy gravity flattened its arc, but Isaacs caught it with practiced ease.

"What happened to our diversion?"

"About what you expected," Isaacs shrugged as he popped the seal on the bulb. "One got taken out by the Florida goons, another by that MechWarrior in a MiningMech."

"You're kidding."

Isaacs shook his head.

"If we had time," he said, "I'd make her an offer."

Kaiman made a mental note to retrieve her name from their agent's report. It might be worth knowing the whereabouts of a skirmisher like that.

"The other two?" he asked.

"One disappeared," Isaacs shrugged, "And one made it home."

Kaiman waited until it was clear Isaacs wanted him to ask. He sighed. Why engage in conversational games?

Perhaps because he knows that's all he can do.

"Which one?" Kaiman asked at last.

Isaacs grinned and took another squeeze from his bulb.

"Guess."

"I'd say the *Nightsky*," Kaiman smiled mirthlessly. "But you're enjoying this far too much for that to be true."

"That old guy in the antique *Quickdraw*," Isaacs confirmed. "Just as we were about to lift, he came running up the ramp with his rear lasers blazing and an four-ton palette of crystals in his arms. Didn't say a word, just lay his 'Mech down like he did it every night and grabbed two bulkhead stanchions. Wedged the palette and himself down tight for lift off."

Kaiman grunted.

"Fast *and* smart," he said. "Explains how he got to be an old man in an antique 'Mech."

He considered for a moment.

"We'll have to dump the crystals before we jump, of course," he said at last. "Can't take anything out system that can be traced back here. But credit this guy with a bonus; he earned it."

Isaacs nodded

"And let him know who he's working for," Kaiman added. "I'm tired of Laudin getting all the credit."

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The zero-gee shower always made Lex feel like a cigar in a tube. It was a cylinder, barely wide enough for her to move about in while hundreds of tiny needles of water hit her from all sides. A stream of warm air blew the cloud of water droplets away, letting her breathe.

Make that a cigar in a wind tunnel, she amended.

Almost despite herself, she felt refreshed and revitalized as she pulled her dress blues in place with a final tug twenty minutes later. Now to find out what the formal inquiry would entail. Was there a ribbon for being duped?

Her light mood evaporated when she saw two PEn-NAM security wardens were waiting outside her quarters to escort her to the hearing. Bypassing the Undersecretary's quarters and offices, they led her back to the gravity decks, then down, down, until their weight was almost Terra-normal. These were the true corridors of power on PEn-NAM.

Michaels was already waiting, with his own escort of wardens, outside a pair of tall doors dressed to look like wood. He offered her a sketch of a smile before the doors opened and they were ushered into a large room, opulent by habitat standards and dominated by a large oval table.

"This is not a formal military inquiry," Undersecretary Clements said, after greeting them by rank. His hands were folded on the ersatz cherrywood surface of an oval table which dominated the room. "I'm sure there'll be a full review when you return to Florida. This is more of a civil hearing."

Standing at attention, her eyes fixed on a point above the Undersecretary's head, Les said nothing. She understood that. What she didn't understand was why the hearing was taking place in what seemed to be the Penance—PEn-NAM—administrative boardroom.

With a cadet's well-trained peripheral vision she counted six Administrators flanking Clements and an indeterminate number of others—aides—off to the side. She sensed, but could not see, Michaels at her shoulder.

"As I understand military tradition, Lieutenant," the Undersecretary was saying, "under normal circumstances you, as a MechWarrior whose 'Mech is down, would be assigned the BattleMech you captured."

Lex's breath caught on the "under normal circumstances." Something was up.

"This would be particularly apt as the machine you captured is identical to your own."

He paused, apparently inviting comment, but Lex remained silent. She would not speak until told to; she would not break protocol. She was going down, she realized, the scapegoat sacrificed in front of the civilians she'd failed, but she would go down like a soldier. A lifetime of sims stretched ahead of her, if she was lucky. More likely a clerical job, if she wasn't cashiered altogether.

"However," the Clements went on, "the PEn-NAM Administrators have asked that that tradition not be followed in your case."

Braced for it, Lex did not blink.

Michaels shifted slightly. Not enough for the others to notice, but enough to remind her he was there.

"They have, in fact, made a request concerning your disposition," Clements said. "A request which, while unorthodox, is well within their rights under civil law."

Lex could see his hands move, apparently picking up a notepad, though she did not look down.

"I have carefully reviewed the evidence they've presented to support their position," Lex marveled that he managed to sound both pompous and pleased at the same time. But then, his problem was solved. "And I must to say I believe it to be both equitable and appropriate."

Not cashiered. Sold as an indentured servant until I pay back the value of what was stolen.

Lex wanted to shout at them. It was their own people who had looted the place. All she'd done was be an idiot. She kept her face impassive.

"The Administrators of PEn-NAM, through the industry of one of their employees, have recently made an acquisition in the midst of

all their losses," said Clements. "They have asked me, as an officer of the Federated Commonwealth, to make its final disposition, as my action will carry force of law."

Her mind skidded. That last bit seemed to have nothing to do with what had gone before. Had the Undersecretary started reading from the wrong noteputer?

Clements stood up, forcing Lex to look at him as his eyes came level with her own. He looked damned pleased with himself.

At least he had the guts to look her in the eye when he sentenced her.

"In the name of the Federated Commonwealth," he intoned, speaking for the recorders. "And by the authority vested in me by Archon-Prince Victor Steiner-Davion, I bestow on Alexandra Daya Atreus, her heirs and assigns in perpetuity, one Defiance Industries NGS-4S-L *Nightsky*. May it serve her well in defense of her home and people."

"Close your mouth, Lieutenant," ordered Michaels.

The End