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**Author:** M. C. Pease

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*Piracy in the past has acquired the gaudy technicolor of high romance. In the present, piracy is as tawdry as tabloid headlines. But piracy in the far future, when presented as vividly as in this story, can be scary stuff.*

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# this one problem

by ... M. C. Pease

**The shortest distance  
between two points  
may be the long way  
around—and a path of  
dishonor may well  
turn into the high  
road to virtue.**

over the place."

"Look, lady," Marc answered gently, "I certainly admire those lofty sentiments of yours. I admit they are maybe what ought to be. But the way I see it they just don't fit the facts. Out here the Federation space fleet is supposed to be the big stick. Only right now it's off playing mumbly-peg with the Venerians.

"The Big Wheels seem to think there'll be a shooting war in a couple of months. There's only three or four destroyers left in the whole damn Asteroid Belt. And without the big stick behind me I'm not hankering to commit suicide by looking for trouble."

Marc smiled again ruefully. "What I can do I try to do," he added with sudden earnestness. "I figure the most important thing is to protect the Asteroid Development Company so they can buy the nuclear ore the Astrodites bring in. Without that ore the Federation's going to be in a hell of a fix if it actually does come to war. And along with that there's the matter of guarding the stuff the Navy's got stored here." He waved toward the Navy warehouse that could be seen outside the window.

MARC POLDER, Resident Comptroller of Torran, strolled idly down the dusty littered path that passed for a street. In the half-light of the pint-sized moon overhead the town looked almost romantic. One day, when civilization had at last been brought to these Asteroid bases, memory would make Torran heroic. But now, with the fact before the eyes, it was merely dirty and squalid. Only the scum of the Solar System called it home.

Idly Marc Polder pushed a swinging door aside and entered what passed on Torran for a restaurant. Pushing his way through the tables until he saw his only aide, Female Personnel Manager Lee Treynor, he sat down.

"What's new?" he asked.

"Not a thing." But for a certain softness of voice and curve of unmade-up lips, Lee could have passed for a boy. Her light hair was short, she wore a man's coveralls. She added, "Only the usual murder, arson and brigandage that you don't want to hear about."

"Don't let such trifles get you down," said Marc with a crooked half-smile.

"I'm fed up," the girl said shortly. "I must have been still wet behind the ears when I agreed to come out here two months ago. I thought I was going to help establish a place where decent people could live and work. So far I've just watched my boss swig Venerian swamp beer with the worst elements in town, and do nothing about the lawlessness that runs riot all

"Listening to and fraternizing with the characters you call the biggest crooks in town," the comptroller went on with a shrug, "I've a chance at getting tipped off in advance to anything that may make trouble for our interests. As long as I ignore their rackets they accept me in their midst, talk freely with me around. And it's a hell of a lot easier to stop something when you know the score beforehand."

The young woman's lips parted as if she seemed about to say something. Then they closed in a thin line. Obviously she was not happy with Marc Polder's explanation. She was too young to be willing to compromise her ideals, no matter how potent the logic of necessity.

She was about to leave the table when the shrill screams of a distant whistle sliced through the noise of the crowd. Voices broke off in mid-sentence and bodies froze into immobility. As the siren's piercing tones faded the restaurant's customers looked at one another in silent terror. Then, as the shock wore off and unanswered questions were beginning to fly, a man suddenly ran in through the revolving doors.

"Raiders!" he gasped. "The listening gear's picked up a signal that's not from any Astro-dite or destroyer. Signal Corps figures it's a pirate!"

There was a mad rush for the doors and seconds later the place was empty except for Marc Polder, still sitting calmly at the table drinking his beer, and Lee Treynor who sat watching him.

"What are you going to do?" she finally asked.

"I don't know. What *can* I do?" Marc said.

"Good heavens!" the girl exploded. "Are you just going to sit there guzzling beer while pirates take over the town?" She stared at him incredulously.

"What do you suggest I do?" the comptroller asked. "We haven't anything to fight with. There's no way we can get help. As far as I can see there's nothing we *can* do—not yet anyway." He calmly lifted his glass.

"You mean we're just going to *sit* here?" the girl gaped.

"Sure. The others left to hide their money and valuables. I've got nothing to hide."

"What about that stuff the Navy has cached in their warehouse?" Lee asked. "That new rocket fuel their destroyers use when they need a little extra push. Isn't that worth hiding?"

"The hyper-degenerate-thorium, you mean? I'd like to hide that somewhere," Marc conceded. "But where do you hide ten tons of stuff in five minutes? Besides, it wouldn't do the raiders any good. Too hot. It'll burn out their jets. They'd go up like an A-bomb two minutes after they threw it on. They know that. Only thing they could do with it is sell it to Venus. Not that that would be bad. Shortage of H.D.T.'s may be the chief reason why there's been no war started yet. But for now there's nothing you and I can do." Calmly he lit a cigarette.

"Of course," he went on, smiling, "we *could* bum a ride out with some of the company men. No doubt they're all hightailing it away from here in their space-buggies."

"I'm surprised," Lee said with a trace of sarcasm, "that you're not doing just that, leaving me and the other women to the beasts!"

Marc eyed her unblinkingly. "You know as well as I do that most of the females on this asteroid take pirates in their stride. They might even welcome a change of partners. As for you"—he paused—"you stick close to me and keep your pretty mouth shut. I think we'll manage somehow."

In silence they walked back to the comptroller's office.

"Marc," Lee said as they entered, "what about the new radar? Maybe we could get a message out with it, in code or something."

"What?" Marc turned, astonished. "You want to play our only hole-card on an off-chance like that? There aren't more than four or five people here who even know it's been set up on the other side of the asteroid. There's hardly a chance the raiders will find out about it. And you want to blast the news at them!" He looked disgusted.

The girl said stubbornly, "You can't just give up without a fight. And that's our only weapon."

"Look," Marc said grimly, "that's only a second-hand destroyer radar, so it wouldn't carry far. No. I'm not going to use it on any such harebrained scheme as that. And if you breathe a word about it I'll take you apart." He added with a faint smile, "Not that *that* wouldn't be a pleasure."

Looking at him she knew he meant the tender joke and the knowledge helped her.

"I think," Marc went on after a moment, "I'd better warn the boys over on the radar project or they might accidentally start it up while the raiders are here." He closed the door as he went into the inner office to make the call.

A moment later he emerged and studied the still angry girl through half-closed eyes. She blushed under his scrutiny, said coldly, "What's the matter? Afraid I'm not attractive enough for our visitors?"

He grinned. "You could do with a mite of padding here and there. But I was thinking the other way, as a matter of fact. It's a pity you don't have a small mustache."

"You don't have to insult me!" Lee cried bitterly. "I'm *glad* I'm thin!"

"I'm not insulting you," Marc said mildly. "I even wish you were a bit skinnier. It's the plump girls our guests are going to be looking at first. Remember now—you stick right with me and keep your mouth shut, d'you hear?"

"I hear," she said shortly. But he could see the fear she was trying to hide and he knew she was honestly frightened for the first time in her adult life. She said, "What will they—be like?"

"If it's John Mantor, and I suspect it is, they'll be rough," Marc informed her. "He's a tough ex-pilot who got bounced off Space Patrol and turned outlaw. He seems to hold a grudge against the whole human race. If it's one of the others—it may be a lot worse."

"I don't see why outlaws are allowed to exist at all," she said.

Marc sighed, shook his head. "A lot of people have felt that way over a lot of pirates over a lot of eras. But somehow they keep turning up."

A few minutes later the space-scarred pirate ship had made a rocky landing in the middle of the small spaceport and John Mantor, pirate chief, drove up to the comptroller's office in a cloud of dust. He was tall and dirty and thin and tough. "Which one of you is the comptroller?" he demanded, as he faced Marc Polder and Lee Treynor.

"I am," Marc said, not rising from behind the desk.

"Then you're the guy responsible for any trouble here," Mantor said. "So I'm going to tell you how to avoid trouble." His brutally scarred face twisted into a grin.

"There's a lot of loot around here. I'm not going to ask you where it is. My boys can take care of that matter. But there's also the Navy warehouse. Maybe we won't know what some of the stuff in there is for, so you're going to tell us."

Mantor leaned across the desk, his eyes as hard and cold as chips of duratite. "And if you won't, there's going to be trouble and you'll be it—you and your friend here."

Marc sat impassively, meeting the hard-eyed gaze. "That warehouse is government property," he said. "So far, there's only piracy against you. But if you raid that building you're going to be the personal problem of the Navy. If I were you I'd leave it alone."

"You let me worry about that," said Mantor.

"Besides," Marc went on, "I don't see what good the stuff in that warehouse can be to you. There's little of cash value in there. And I doubt if you can use any of the parts on your ship."

"That could be," Mantor replied. "But on the other hand, maybe we can find a market for certain items." He smiled coldly. Watching, Lee knew he referred to Venus. She sat perfectly still, praying for him not to notice her.

Mantor spread his hands on the desk, a look of hatred and ferocity on his face. "What I want to know is—are you or are you not going to cooperate? And I want to know fast."

"Don't get me wrong," Marc said softly. "I'm not telling you what to do or what not to do. But that warehouse is the thing I'm here to protect. And if I were to agree to help you, the Navy would be after me, too. So I've got to say to hell with you."

John Mantor rocked back on his heels, hooking his thumbs in his belt. A slow smile spread over his face. "Okay," he said. "I think I get what you mean. So I guess we got to work you over. And we'll do it where there aren't any outside witnesses."

Marc grinned back at him.

Lee was puzzled. It took her a moment to realize that the grins sealed a contract between the two men. Marc would cooperate if he were beaten up enough first to satisfy a later investigation—but not too severely for his own comfort!

Lee found it difficult to hide her contempt. She stared at her hands, clenched in her lap, and waited for Mantor to leave.

The looting and destruction were well under way an hour later when a couple of Mantor's men joined their chief, who stood with a somewhat bruised Marc Polder and an unharmed but furious Lee Treynor. Between them they carried a small, obviously heavy box.

"You know what this stuff is, boss?" one of the men asked. "They got a hundred or a hundred-fifty boxes like this in there." He nodded at the Navy warehouse.

They set the box down and Mantor flung back its lid. It was filled with small grey pellets. Mantor picked up a handful and stood fingering them.

"Looks like rocket fuel," he said. "Only I've never seen any this color. And it's too heavy, also." He turned to the comptroller. "You tell me what it is."

Marc shrugged. "I don't know. It's a Navy secret."

Mantor's eyes glinted. Without warning his fist flew out, sent the comptroller sprawling in the dust where he lay stunned. Lee's hands flew to her mouth barely in time to suppress a cry.

After a few moments Marc rolled over slowly and pushed himself painfully to a sitting position. He looked up at Mantor who stood watching him coldly, his fist flexing.

The comptroller licked his lips and looked around at the several men who stood watching, their faces impassive. "Okay," he said in a none-too-steady voice. "I'll tell you. You'd find out anyway from the files."

"Cut the alibis and give," Mantor growled.

"Keep your shirt on." Marc's voice indicated he was regaining control of himself. "It's H.D.T.—Hyper-Degenerate-Thorium—the stuff the destroyers use to get extra push."

Mantor roared his glee. "Pack it aboard, boys—*all* of it! And put it where it will be handy, just in case."

This was it, Lee thought as she stood by, watching—the final bitter pill. Mantor had as much as told them he was working for Venus. And the H.D.T. was all Venus needed to be ready for war—a war that might well blast civilization from the Solar System. Strange that so much should depend upon one man; tragic that the one man was a weakling.

With an effort Lee forced herself to be fair. It might have done no good to lie, she conceded. But anyone with even a normal amount of simple courage would have tried.

It was about two hours later when the siren went off again like a banshee wailing to a low-hanging moon. Men came running from all directions, shouting questions at the tops of their voices.

A midget auto came skidding down the pirate ship's ramp, its driver standing on the accelerator. The car knifed through the swirling crowd, barely missing several people, and skidded to a dusty stop directly in front of Mantor.

"*Radar signal!*" the driver yelled. "The search receiver picked up a signal that sounds like a destroyer's radar. It suddenly came in strong. Probably sneaked up on us from behind that damn moon. It's coming in fast and braking hard!"

There was a mad scramble as the looters raced for their ship. Heavy-handed horseplay was forgotten. They knew they were helpless against a Navy destroyer. Their only hope lay in a fast getaway. Seconds could easily spell the difference between safety and defeat.

In less than ten minutes the ship's locks were sealed and they fired off. As the flames roared out and the huge ship lifted swiftly it was obvious that they were throwing on all the fuel their jets could take.

Marc Polder had faded back into the crowd at the first sound of the siren. As he stood watching the blastoff Lee joined him, hands in her pockets, looking more than ever like a boy.

"Maybe my idea of asking for help wasn't so far-fetched," she said quietly. "Maybe the patrol might have been here in time. Maybe you wouldn't have had to tell them about the H.D.T."

"Maybe," Marc answered without turning his eyes from the dwindling point of reddish light high in the dark sky.

"And just by way of keeping the record straight," the girl went on in a voice that began to rasp, "you know as well as I do that the files don't list any H.D.T. It's under a code name."

"Maybe," Marc replied in a noncommittal tone.

The point of light in the sky suddenly turned blue. Lee was staring at it too, now. And she knew also what the change of color meant. Mantor had started to use the new fuel!

Suddenly there was a blinding flash. Lee cried out and staggered back, covering her eyes. Marc, who had closed his eyes when the color change came, took hold of the girl's arm.

"I told you what would happen if they used the stuff," he said gently. "It's too hot for their jet chambers. It melts the walls. A lot of gas piles up in the tubes. The pressure pushes the fire back. And when it gets shoved back into the recoil chamber and you lose the protective layers of cold gas there—well, then you've got to look for your ship with an ionization gauge!"

"I told you all that long ago. The trouble is, you're too idealistic, Lee. That's not the same as *having ideals*. I admire ideals—I might even confess to a few of my own. But *you* don't stop to figure out just what your ideals are—exactly what you're fighting for.

"You come to a crisis like this one and you forget about the *big* goal. All you see is this one problem. And by giving them yes-or-no answers—good or bad, brave or cowardly—to the problem of the moment—you may miss a simple solution to the big one.

"You've got to keep a cool head and never forget for even a moment exactly what it is you want to

accomplish." His voice was gentle, and it held no rebuke.

"All right," said Lee unhappily, "you win. You needn't bother to rub in the salt. I was going to chase you through all the inquiry courts for this. Instead, you got a lucky break, so I can't do a thing. You ought to be tarred and feathered through every city of the Federation, but because a destroyer happened to stumble in here at the right time you'll end up a hero." Her voice caught in a sob.

"Oh, the destroyer," Marc replied. "Ah, yes, that *was* lucky, wasn't it? The only hitch is—there wasn't any destroyer. Probably not one within a million miles!" He laughed as Lee turned surprise-widened eyes toward him.

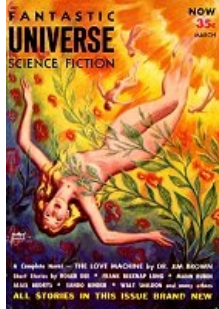
"What they thought was a destroyer was the radar system on the side of the rock, bouncing a signal off the moon. I gave the radar boys the word just before Mantor dropped in on us. The crew did a damned good job of juggling the power and frequency and all." He grinned. "Remind me to buy them a beer sometime."

He laughed then at the girl's expression as it changed from bitter disillusion to something akin to awe, close to hero-worship.

"And this, by the way," Polder said, "is as good a time as any to tell you that I'd like to see you look like a woman, for a change. How about changing into a dress before we go into town. You know, I've never seen you out of that uniform?"

She hesitated, unsure of herself now. "That will take a little time," she said doubtfully.

He put hands on her slim shoulders, gave her a gentle shove toward her quarters. "We've got time," he told her. "Lots of it. But I've been waiting quite a while."

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