

Exposed Assets

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"Separation looks good Cactus Flower. Nice work," Ogala said calmly into the headset pickup. He felt the mining rig he was controlling shudder slightly when it undocked from the tug. "Give us a bit more room and we'll make the attitude change for Approach and Attachment."

"No problem, Honey Pie," said J.C. Banting's voice from the speaker. "I always try to leave my men as gently as possible." After a few moments of quiet proximity sensor pings, her voice was heard again. "The Flower is now stationed at 100 Metres. You're safe to go for A-and-A."

"That's go" for A-and-A. Copy," Ogala said, all business. He covered the pickup with his hand and leaned to Nashabi, his second in command, and whispered "Jesus, I wish she'd stop calling me that."
{mospagebreak }

Nashabi, who also happened to be an equal shares business partner in the Emiliana mining vessel, smiled and whispered back "She may be annoying, but at least she's as good as she advertised…"

"I heard that," J.C. interrupted from the headsets. "You boys need to learn how to switch off your pickups when you don't want to be heard. Either that, or learn to lighten up a little. I honestly don't know how you manage to function with so little …personality."

"I was just about to add how glad we are that we brought you in on our little enterprise. You are a highly skilled pilot and we are grateful that you agreed to join our mining operation."

"Join!? Hell I'm a full partner and don't you forget it. I got as much cash tied up in the Emiliana now as you, so don't go treating me like some hired help."

"Copy that, Cactus Flower," Ogala said stiffly. "Going for A-and-A now."

"You just be damned careful with that mining rig boys. That's an awfully big rock to smack into if you

don't attach to it right.

"Our approach looks nominal. Extending grapples now," Ogala reported, oblivious to her warnings. "We should be optimally placed, locked to the rock and drilling by this time tomorrow."

"Speaking of big rocks," J.C. continued, "I can't see anything on my sensors that makes this one different from any of the rest of the rocks in this field. It just registers as another damned rock. Are you sure you tagged the right one?"

"Now who needs to lighten up?" Nashabi retorted. "Don't you start worrying about our probe data, or the prospecting and extraction aspects of this operation. My guess is you're mostly concerned about making a hefty profit on your investment. Well don't. We know what we're doing here. Our information is excellent, and mining is what we do. There are at least two very large deposits of some high grade money-making stuff deep in this rock. We'll be making money for years on this one rock. This is a great investment and you know it or you wouldn't have signed on. The beauty of this find is that no one else suspects these deposits are here. More importantly we're right next to the folks that need it, astronomically speaking. The fact that we've got an excellent source, and we'll get good prices for the ore is only part of the picture. The fact that we won't have to haul it halfway across the cluster to sell it is the other. Together, it adds up to a tidy profit for all of us."

"Oh I know how it's supposed to work, Sweet Cheeks," she fired back over the comms. "But I've been working out here a good deal longer than you have, and I know how long it can take before any of those tidy profits start hitting my account. I also know how much can go wrong out here."

"Which is exactly why you are such a critical asset to this operation," Nashabi continued. "The only way you're going to see any of those profits, is if you can keep up your end of the partnership, and keep the claim jumpers off of us long enough for us to get our first shipments to market."

"Critical asset!?" Honey, our assets are completely exposed out here. Do you really think that claim jumpers are your biggest worry?" J.C. asked, incredulous. "A bunch of desperate, scruffy independents looking for a rock are the least of your concerns in this particular spot. Oh, I know what you're thinking: What can go wrong? Sure, officially, this is a legitimate claim, but unofficially, this is Corporate space. The second your big and powerful corporate neighbors lock onto the fact that you've got a profitable little mining operation right in their backyard, you're going to find everything suddenly become extremely difficult. Just wait until you have to get some fuel cells, or replacement parts, or even replenish your water. Then you'll see where those tidy profits go: gouge prices, bribes or shopping trips that take you halfway across the cluster. That doesn't even touch on the host of nasty people they can send this way to harass you; maybe even destroy you. Armed defensive emplacements, and armed patrols are going to be necessity of daily life, if you want to keep this operation going, and that all costs money."

"Yes, we've been over this, and taken it all into consideration when we devised our business plan," Ogala replied nervously. "This is why we approached you to become a partner: to help us with the defensive end of things."

"There you go, treating me like a hired gun again. Look, I saw your business plan, remember? What you neglected to tell me, because you needed to keep it such a tightly guarded secret, was the exact location of this rich deposit. Well now I know where it is, and I'm telling you straight up that you are babes in the woods out here, and it ain't gonna be as easy as you think. Just remember that ol'; J.C. told you so."

"Fine, sure, whatever," Nashabi said, distracted. "We're in the middle of the Approach and Attachment maneuver, here. As you said, this is a big expensive mining rig, and that's a big rock coming at us. Would you mind saving the rest of the lecture until after you get back?"

"Yes," Ogala added, "Let us do our jobs, and get on with your own. Clearly, as you've stated, we need to improve our security situation here. You have enough funds in your account to hire at least one mercenary ship at the shipyard. Please do so with haste and return quickly so we won't be without protection for long."

"I'll get you your mercenaries as soon as I see that you're safe and solid with that rock," J.C. replied softening her tone. "Just remember that I've invested a lot in this operation, so these are my assets, too. I don't want them exposed any more than you do."

"That's four grapple lines securely planted at the site. We're winching in now. All the stabilizing armatures are fully extended and ready for final contact. It's all looking perfect from here."

J.C. Banting watched the final phase of the mining rig's attachment maneuver from her bridge in silent apprehension. The armatures seemed to splay and then contract slightly as they gripped the face of the asteroid like a single hand trying to hold a beach ball. Small puffs of dust billowed away from all eight armature tips as the Emiliana fired powerful anchor bolts into the surface. The dust dissipated almost as quickly as it appeared, and the rig was finally secured safely to the rock face of asteroid AG34-2688-19. {mospagebreak }

The control centre of the mining rig was quiet after the all-secure check was completed by the onboard computer. Ogala nodded indicating secure set down.

"That's it," Nashabi said. "We did it." He switched on the audio pickup of his headset and addressed J.C. "This is mining outpost Emiliana to the Cactus Flower. We are officially open for business."

"Watching you boys kiss that rock just made me a whole lot more comfortable with this arrangement," came J.C.'s voice from the speaker. "I guess you really do know what you're doing. Nice work."

"Try not to sound so surprised," Nashabi replied, shutting down navigational and maneuvering systems as he spoke. "We'll start some equipment checks, deploy the transmitter tower, and hopefully have the docking arm ready for you when you get back. Now go find us some good reliable protection."

"On my way," J.C.'s voice was distorted slightly by the sounds of her own maneuvering thrusters as she started to move the Cactus Flower away. "Any last minute requests for supplies from the store, Sweet Pea?"

"Negative, Cactus Flower," Ogala replied. "Just hurry back...with help."

"See you tomorrow." The sounds of the comm link closing told them they done talking. They watched her ship accelerate away, and disappear from the contacts list completely. They were suddenly truly alone in the asteroid field.

"Jesus I thought she'd never shut up," Ogala said to Nashabi. Nashabi held up his hand for a moment, then sighed and nodded, confirming that the channel was indeed closed from their end too. "She may drive me to space myself," Ogala went on. "I'm starting to wonder if we shouldn't have gone with Rheinhardt. At least he wouldn't have been so chatty, and I doubt very much he would have referred to you as 'Sweet Cheeks'." {mospagebreak }

"Maybe so," Nashabi said, working the controls for system checks as he spoke. "But she's the real deal when it comes to piloting, negotiating, and scrapping with pirates. Besides, I think she was referring to you, there Captain sweet cheeks." He chuckled.

"Don't you even think about starting with that," Ogala joked. "Remember, I'm in command of this rig. Besides, I have some Champagne I've been saving for this moment, but I might just decide not to share..."

The alarm from the Navigation console made them both turn to watch the display screen. A contact was approaching. "Did she hear us after all? Is she coming back to lecture us more?" Ogala asked.

"Negative," Nashabi was fixed on the screen as he spoke. "Different signal, different vector. Wait, make that multiple signals. Shit. We've got four incoming vessels. It looks like they're coming straight for us."

"Hostile?"

"Unknown," said Nashabi. "Let's just pray that J.C. saw them before she lit out."