

PIRATES OF PENANCE

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PART SEVEN

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

Lex almost took out the *Grasshopper* in the first seconds.

She'd come from behind, her MiningMech doing a passable impression of the shuffling skate Wood had taught her. Bent as far forward as she could, the shoulder of her 'Mech had caught the larger machine behind its right knee. Her plan had been to break the magnetic anchor's grip and send the *Grasshopper* floating helplessly free of the habitat.

Instead, the larger 'Mech's magnets had held firm and her own machine had skittered across the metal. The MiningMech's anchors held, though she couldn't think how, and she was again running, but this time away from the *Grasshopper*.

She turned, feathering the anchors to let them slip a bit and stay under her center of mass. Laser beams slashed through the vacuum behind her as she dodged behind one of the countless utility buildings dotting the hull of the habitat.

Her goal was no longer to take out the raider. She'd lost her one chance to do that when her sneak attack had failed. Survival was now the short-term objective. If she messed up the raider's mission in the process, so much the better.

To her right was a giant radio mast, its base a smooth ring nearly a hundred meters in diameter. Farther ahead and to her right was one of the main docking rings, rising like a fortified city above the plane of the hull. If she could get there, get inside the habitat ...

Almost directly ahead of her a slender column rose from the metal at an angle. It took her a moment to realize it was a wire support for the radio mast she was passing.

She glanced from the support to the docking ring, quickly computing—guessing—trajectories and vectors. Running in magnets wasn't the only trick Wood had taught her.

Lex pushed off with both feet, stretching her right arm out and ahead, toward the antenna's guy wire. If this maneuver didn't work, she'd be a leisurely floating target the *Grasshopper* could finish off with ease.

The joint of the rock cutter hooked around the cable. Her anchored right arm held her upper body steady as her legs continued to sail forward. As thick as a grown man's torso, the braided ferrofiber bowed under the mass of her 'Mech as her angular acceleration carried her through a tight turn. It wasn't fast—more like ponderous—but it was enough to confuse the raider. Laser fire passed through the space she'd occupied a moment before.

Dividing her attention between the three-sixty viewer and the ferroglass main screen, she timed her release to launch her toward the docking collar. With any luck at all she'd be half a klick away before the *Grasshopper* could retarget. At the last second she flexed the wrist actuator, angling the cutter assembly to release the cable.

Nothing happened.

She triggered the actuator again and a third time without result. Her 'Mech continued to rotate about the cable, its legs swinging forward and up. Then, a handful of heartbeats too late, the joint opened, unhooking from the cable. Her quick course change had become hundred and twenty-degree right turn. Worse, she was sailing feet first completely free of the surface. The hull was only a half dozen meters below her, but with nothing to push against it might as well have been a half dozen light-years.

Jump jets might be stupid in space, she thought, but maneuvering thrusters would come in real handy right now.

She scanned her screens, fighting panic. There had to be something along her flight path she could grab. Her nadir screen, her crotch cam, was now her forward viewer. As nearly as she could tell, she was going to pass between a second support cable and the antenna mast. She'd be close to the cable, but would it be close enough? Beyond it was nothing but night sky; if she couldn't snag the wire, she had a long trip ahead of her. She didn't doubt Wood had disabled her rescue beacon, her "screamer," along with her radio.

She swung her arms wide, turning the torso to her right in an effort to impart spin.

Her velocity couldn't have been more than a dozen kilometers an hour, but the cable seemed to whip past her cockpit at light speed. The rock cutter assembly caught it, barely, but the 'Mech's framework carried the screech of tearing metal even as her damage schematic blazed red. Number one cause of down time. She

flexed the joint again as she whipped to the right, trying to lever her boots close enough to the hull to engage.

The flare of a large laser beam raking along her torso told Lex the *Grasshopper* still considered her a threat even if she didn't. The 'Mech's computer wasn't programmed for combat, the damage control schematic reported a series of meteor impacts.

She worked her leg pedals and swung the left arm, hoping the mass of the heavy drill head would impart enough torque to twist her 'Mech's feet down. But with nothing to push against the net effect of all her efforts was exactly nil.

With a final scream of torn metal, the rock cutter broke free of the cable. Or rather broke free of the arm, she amended, reading the damage screen. As nearly as she could tell, she'd made nearly two complete revolutions before losing the cutter. The only benefit she could see was her erratic path seemed to have completely disoriented the *Grasshopper's* targeting system. Brightly colored beams continued to slice the darkness on either side of her.

She shook the sweat from her eyes. The haze of droplets hung for a moment, expanding away from her, before the ventilation system whisked them away. The main screen was useless, all she could see was the out-of-reach hull sailing past to her left. However, the nadir screen showed the base of the antenna mast almost directly in her path.

She swung her right arm up to eyeball the damage. All that remained of the rock cutter was a twisted angle of metal which had once anchored the main joint. She didn't know what the MiningMech's frame was—certainly not endosteel—and had no way of knowing how much stress it could take. Still, it might snag something.

She eyed the oncoming antenna base, looking for a hand-hold. Nothing. Or nothing apparent to the crotch cam.

Wait.

A patch of shadow that could be a hollow.

She swung, and saw sparks shower as the last few centimeters of bare metal scraped along the smooth tower. For a desperate moment it seemed to hold—long enough to pull her a few degrees around in her flight—but then her amputated arm slipped free and she was once more flying helplessly.

Toward the *Grasshopper*.

Lex blinked.

The heavy 'Mech was dead center in her nadir screen. After so many turns and drags, she was moving no faster than a human could run, but the range was less than a hundred meters. If the raider had sidestepped the moment she lined up, he might have evaded her. Instead, he'd turned his machine to face her four square, evidently not believing what he was seeing. In the two seconds it took him to assess the danger it was too late.

Through her nadir screen Lex watched the ruby beams lance out from the larger 'Mech as the raider tried to blast her machine to fragments before it hit. Damage control reported meteor strikes along her right leg and back.

Her thighs clenched reflexively when a laser blast obliterated the crotch cam.

Blind, the MiningMech slammed feet-first into the raider. Lex triggered the anchors, latching on even as her momentum bent the *Grasshopper* backward. For a moment she thought the two of them would go tumbling into space, but the heavy 'Mech's electromagnets held firmly to the habitat.

Failure alarms flashed, something—the laser barrage or the impact—had sheared a talon on her right anchor; it read only thirty percent secure. A dozen other alerts informed her the collision had upset or damaged a dozen other systems. If her 'Mech had a screamer, it would be calling for help.

From what she could see of the *Grasshopper* without the crotch cam, the larger machine was angled backwards nearly forty-five degrees at the knees—an impossible position in gravity. No doubt its gyro was trying to right it, but even in zero-gee an extra thirty tons of mass sitting on its chest made the task impossible. Her right anchor, what was left of it, had seized the *Grasshopper's* left shoulder joint, no doubt wrecking it in the process and trapping the arm at a useless angle. Her left foot had connected somewhere near the waist, dangerously close to the torso-mounted lasers.

And the *Grasshopper's* right arm laser was swinging towards her.

Working the controls against their design, Lex crouched her 'Mech forward and to the right, trying to get inside the right arm's arc. The servo motors whined in protest as the frame groaned at

the unaccustomed angle. The *Grasshopper's* right arm slammed against her left hip, its laser blazing uselessly beyond her.

Then the *Grasshopper's* pilot remembered his torso lasers.

At point-blank range, the combined firepower of the center-mounted large laser and the left side medium laser vaporized the armor along her 'Mech's left leg. The damage control alarm shrilled, the confused computer reporting her left leg being crushed by an impact as the armor evaporated. The leg locked up as the absolute cold of space froze its myomer musculature solid. Once the frozen myomer and structural members were severed, her 'Mech would swing out and away, far enough for the right arm's medium laser to blow her cockpit away at contact range.

Bending her right leg as far as she could, Lex flailed the ruined right arm of her 'Mech against the *Grasshopper's* shoulder. On the second try, she snagged an angle of armor at the base of its neck with the exposed twist of metal. She pulled, praying the jagged edge would hold.

The left ankle joint actuator, stiff, but not frozen as solid as the myomer sinews anchored to it, flexed an extra few degrees and she managed to lever her shin beyond the large laser's line of fire. But the medium continued to worry its way through whatever remained.

If his missile launcher was mounted on the left, she thought as wrestled a few more degrees of flex from the ruined ankle, I'd be in a world of trouble.

As it was, the main screen of her cockpit was a half dozen meters above the *Grasshopper's*, angled toward its left profile. From what she could make of the computer's conflicted damage display, she had fifteen, maybe twenty seconds, before the medium laser completed the amputation.

Lex brought the MiningMech's left arm down against the cockpit of the *Grasshopper*, hard. The triple drill head slammed against the ferroglass with an impact that jolted her entire frame.

A second time.

A third.

Lines of frost spidered across the BattleMech's canopy.

Pulling the elbow back, Lex angled the drill directly at the *Grasshopper's* main screen and powered up. She knew the bit

was useless against BattleMech armor in the few seconds she had left, but was willing to bet the diamond-toothed augers spinning at several thousand rpm were a threat to fractured ferroglass.

The 'Mech pilot must have agreed. The *Grasshopper* powered down, the laser falling silent moments before it would have severed her leg. From her angle she couldn't see far into the cockpit, but a pair of hands were thrust forward, almost against the screen, empty and with fingers spread wide. A sign of surrender if she'd ever seen one.

Lex kept the drill revving and chinned her radio control. This close to the tower, someone had to hear her.

"Atreus to Penance," she reported. "Captured one *Grasshopper*."

Silence. Lex was considering options for keeping her prisoner her prisoner while getting to safety when an unfamiliar voice crackled over her radio.

"Where are you, Atreus?"

"Base of a radio tower a few hundred meters from a docking ring, sunside of twilight line."

"Got you," said the voice. "On our way."