

PIRATES OF PENANCE

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PART THREE

**Asteroid Mining Habitat, Viborg Asteroid Belt
Venaria Operational Area, Periphery March
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Lex had no trouble guessing the original intent of the chamber she and Michaels found themselves waiting in. About five meters by four, situated between a public corridor and a private office, it was clearly a waiting room. There was what she assumed was a reception desk, unoccupied, several examples of what she now recognized as local art, and a dozen formed plastic chairs bolted to the carpeted deck in conversational groupings. They sat, lightly, on two of these angled so that they could see both the door to the corridor and the one to the private office.

To maximize living space, the rotating grav decks were several stories high—or deep, depending on the observer’s perspective. The closer one was to the center of spin, the lower the gravity and the more noticeable the curve of the ring. Here there was a distinct arc to the carpet and their apparent weight was about half normal. Lex wondered what this indicated about the seniority of the official the undersecretary was calling on.

That Clemments was calling on people instead of holding court spoke volumes about this mission. *Something* was definitely up, but what had not been shared with his honor guard or his token MechWarrior.

“There is a glass slipper in his attaché case,” Michaels broke the silence.

“Could the one who lost it have fled all the way to Viborg?” Lex asked with equal solemnity.

Despite her quick response, Lex was sure Michaels had solidly won that round of “guess the mission.” The normally by-the-book Hauptmann had loosened up considerably since their arrival on Penance. Lex attributed the new and improved attitude to three days of spending every off-duty hour in the company of the woman he’d met at the reception.

“How is your miner friend?” she asked, following up on that thought.

“Candace isn’t a miner,” Michaels said. “She’s an engineer with Periphery.”

"What do engineers with Periphery do?"

"Grow crystals, mostly," Michaels said. "Apparently it's possible to grow geometrically perfect crystals in zero-gee if you have the right bits of ancient tech and about sixty kilograms of raw material for each kilo you produce."

"They grow kilogram gems?" Lex shook her head. "I'd think anything over two hundred grams would be ostentatious."

"And those lasers on your *Grasshopper* use ...?"

"Oh," Lex sat up straighter. "You mean *crystal* crystals."

"They also produce high density ceramic fiber."

"Let me guess: The kind woven to make fibrous armor?"

"Among other things," Michaels confirmed. "Stratified cooling, whatever that is, in zero-gee seems to be the secret to superior tinsel strength."

"So why isn't there a massive garrison in system?" Lex asked. "Or any garrison?"

"The only folks in comfortable striking distance are the Rim Collection, and they've stripped entire worlds for their resources base. This place wouldn't interest them. Plus, it's one of dozens in Lyran space so, unless they want to start a large-scale war, denying it to us makes little sense strategically."

Plus, he left unsaid, the rule of war dating from the Aramis Coup. The legacy of the O'Neil station, where over a million civilians had lost their lives, was the surety that deep space habitats were inviolate. A single misplaced shot to this fragile structure could kill thousands.

"So why are we here?"

"Lex *Atreeus*?" someone mispronouncing her name forestalled Michaels' reply.

A miner, older, an administrative type by the look of him, stood in the doorway to the corridor

"Atray-oos," she corrected as she rose.

She prolonged the movement, deliberately uncoiling to her full hundred and eighty-three centimeters. The self-aware portion of

her mind recognized the move, emphasizing her physical size, as pure Academy bravado—the sort upper classmen had tried to grind out of her. A sure tell she was frustrated with this pointless duty. She may be able to speak politely and smile on cue, but she couldn't quite keep her body language completely in check.

If the miner was impressed at being topped by a half-dozen centimeters it didn't show.

You may think you look like a feline predator, her mind whispered, but you might just look like a petulant child.

Beside her, Michaels rose to his feet with a more military precision.

"Hauptmann Gerald Michaels," he introduced himself.

"Benjamin Ortega," the miner admin type said, extending a hand first to Michaels, then to Lex. "Operations."

His face was weathered chestnut brown, but his hand was milky white, a sharp contrast to her own ebon. Lex recognized the classic "spacer's tan" many Caucasians developed seeing the world through the faceplate of an environmental suit. The mask-like effect would have been comical if it didn't represent a lifetime of risking death in open space.

Lex revised her assessment of the miner upwards.

His eyes, a startling shade of green, held hers for a second before dropping to her chest.

"Buena last year, marksman, martial arts training, good personal hygiene, acceptable table manners, and perfect attendance."

Lex couldn't help a twitch of a smile as Ortega summarized the spirit, if not the literal meaning, of her paltry row of ribbons.

The Operations manager's laser green eyes refocused on her own.

"Why do you want to drive one of my 'Mechs, Lieutenant?"

"Zero-gee practice, sir," she replied, taking her cue for military courtesy from Michaels' parade-rest stance beside her. "Plus I want to broaden my skill set, get checked out on something different."

"These are working 'Mechs," he countered. "I can't just take one out of service for your amusement."

"Understood," she said. "My request is contingent on availability."

"Good answer," Ortega smiled as he pulled out a noteputer and tapped a few keys. "A lot of warrior-types would have puffed up with demands."

Lex doubted that, but let it pass. She knew better than to argue with someone when she was asking a favor.

"I've told Stores to expect you," Ortega said as he pressed the send key. "Get down there for a suit."

"I'm on duty, sir," Lex answered. "I'm afraid"

"Leftenant," Michaels cut her off. "Your duty on this mission encompasses anything which will improve relations between the Florida and the people we serve. Given the circumstances," he indicated the empty waiting area with a cut of his eyes, "I think your talents would be better utilized by accompanying Mr. Ortega."

"Hauptmann," Ortega nodded to Michaels before turning back to Lex. "Get your suit at Stores, then report to the zero-gee simulator in bay J-four-three."

"Sir, I've had a lot of sim time," Lex said. *Nothing but.* "I'd really like to get maximum time in the 'Mech."

Ortega hesitated for a moment and she realized that hadn't been what he'd have called a good answer. Nothing she could do about it. His prejudice against MechWarriors was none of her concern.

"I'll see you in Stores," he said simply.

"My neurohelmet and vest are in my quarters," Lex said, computing transit and changing time as she spoke. "I'll be at Stores in twelve minutes."

Again that slight hesitation, then Ortega seemed to think better of whatever he'd been about to say.

"See you in Stores," he repeated.



It took only a moment for Lex to shed her dress blues and get into her combat suit. Even knowing all she was going to do was run an IndustrialMech through its paces, the thought of being in

a real machine again had her heart rate up. Just before leaving her cabin, she paused, considering her laser pistol. She's feel naked without it, but striding—or swimming—through the corridors with a duty sidearm might not contribute to the positive relations Michaels had reminded her was part of their mission. She unclipped the holster from her boot top and secured the weapon in her case.

Finding Stores was not a problem; the Tertiary Undersecretary's party had passed it on the way up from the hangar deck. She arrived with two minutes to spare.

Expecting a warehouse, Lex was surprised to discover Stores was a room of moderate size with a single crewman, the quartermaster, she supposed, floating near an antique control console. Transparent pneumatic chutes along the far wall indicated connection to several storage areas.

"I can't let you take out a 'Mech like that," the quartermaster said before the door had cycled shut behind her.

Reflexively she looked down at her cooling vest, shorts and high boots. All regulation, all in perfect—*like new*—condition.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"You can't wear that."

"Why not?"

"Because the nice folks at Coventry Metal Works know how hard it is to mop out the cockpit of a model 1S MiningMech after some naked jockey opens the hatch," the quartermaster explained as if talking to a small child. "They don't call it explosive decompression for nothing."

Scooping a headset off the console, the quartermaster cupped the earpiece to his ear without putting it on.

"Jerry? I need a soft suit, female plumbing." He sized her up with casual ease. "One-eighty-five centimeters, seventy-four kilos."

Lex nodded slightly; both his estimates were within a few percentage points.

He asked her shoe size and passed that information along. The voice on the headset buzzed and he gave her chest a hard glance.

"Not particularly."

A heartbeat later he realized what he'd said and busied himself with some minutiae on his noteputer. He was spared the need for further conversation by Ortega's arrival.

The operations manager gave Lex a nod as the door cycled behind him, then pushed off across the chamber. The two men began comparing noteputers on some issue that evidently didn't involve Lex. Logistics, she gathered from what little she overheard, and rearranging priorities.

A grey bundle dropped through one of the chutes, pushed by air pressure through a one-way diaphragm into a holding net. The two men glanced at it and went back to their discussion. A moment later boots and then what looked like a utility pack flushed through the same tube and into the net.

Without breaking his focus on whatever Ortega was saying, the quartermaster unhooked the net. Cinching it into a bag, he shoved it in a no-look pass directly to Lex, a lifetime of habit in every move.

The suit, what she could see of it through the netting, was a featureless grey lump but more massive than she had expected. What caught her attention were the gauntlets. Nowhere near as massive as a full environmental suit's, they still seemed too thick and clumsy to operate a 'Mech's controls.

"On second thought," she said, "I think I will take you up on that sim time."

Ortega looked her way. From the slight smile about his eyes, she knew she had just given what he would have called a good answer.

"Stalt, I'll cover here, I need to run these numbers," he said. "Take her to J-forty-three."



Lex and Stalt had gone less than a dozen meters when Wood appeared out of a side corridor. He pulled up abruptly at the sight of them.

"Mr. Stalt," he bobbed his head, "Um, Lex. Leftenant."

Lex nodded.

"Mr. Pickering," Stalt said dryly.

"I thought you'd be, uh, busy in Stores," Wood said, glancing at Lex.

"Mr. Ortega is reviewing arrangements in Stores," Stalt answered.

"Reviewing Stores?" Wood asked. "Is that usual?"

Stalt said nothing long enough for Wood to drop his eyes. Lex deduced he'd overstepped good manners.

"Leftenant Atreus and I are going to the sims," he said at last.

"Right." Wood glanced back and forth between the two for a moment.

It was obvious to Lex the younger man had gotten wind of Ortega's allowing her to qualify on the MiningMech. It was a good guess he'd been coming to head her off and take her to the simulator himself.

Stalt evidently reached the same conclusion.

"You may accompany us if you'd like."

"Yeah, great, sure," Wood grinned. "Glad to."

Though Lex would always be able to retrace their path from Stores to J-forty-three, after several turns she lost all sense of where the chamber was in relation to the rest of the habitat. She tried to puzzle it out as she changed into the suit and could do no better than to deduce they were near the central hangar complex. Unsatisfied, she resolved to learn her way around these decks.

The changing area was an opaque plastic cube bolted to one wall of what appeared to be a control room. Through the thin wall Lex could faintly hear Wood trying to make small talk with Stalt. Unfortunately the only topic he could seem to think of was some recent odd behavior of Ortega's. Not something Stalt was willing to discuss.

Both men looked relieved when she emerged, moving stiffly in the unaccustomed suit. Wood was floating against the ceiling from Lex's perspective. She'd followed Stalt's example, entering the room head first: the door to the corridor was now below her feet. Orientation didn't seem to count for much with the miners.

"The soft suit is constructed of a rip stop material and will not tear," Stalt began reciting what was clearly the standard spiel as he double checked the suit's fit and connections.

Lex half listened as he droned on, experimenting with flexing her joints inside the nearly skin-tight suit. She definitely felt the added bulk, but seemed to have a full range of motion. The sensation was more odd than troublesome.

Livable, she decided.

"These," Stalt pointed out several rectangular bulges, "Are sealant reservoirs."

"Why do I need those if the suit is tear-proof?"

"Tear-proof doesn't mean one hundred percent puncture proof," Stalt's tone told her she'd asked a standard question. "And whatever punctures the suit will puncture you. The foam keeps the air in the suit and the blood in you."

"It's also good for insulation," Wood put in. "If you're going to drift for more than an hour, hypothermia will kill you."

"The suit helmet does not fit over the neurohelmet, of course," Stalt went on with no indication he'd heard. "It's racked by your elbow. Disconnect your neurohelmet, rack it, put on the suit helmet. There's a radio switch in the collar. The hatch unlocks only when the helmet is secure."

"Or if there's atmosphere outside," put in Wood.

"Air is scrubbed," Ortega indicated what looked like thick padding across the shoulders. "Breathe slow or it won't keep up. There's an oxy reserve," bulge above the hip, "But don't use it unless you have to."

"If an environmental suit's an aerospace fighter," Lex said, "This thing's a life pod."

"Right."

"There're no thrusters; how do I move around?"

"If you absolutely have to," Wood said. "Jump."

"But ninety-nine times out of a hundred, jumping's a bad idea," Stalt added, apparently giving up on ignoring Wood. "Outside your 'Mech, you hang on to your chair and hope its screamer's working. Help comes to you."

Lex deduced screamer was miner speak for an emergency beacon.

"There is a jet pistol racked to the chair," Wood added.

Stalt nodded reluctantly. It looked to Lex as though he didn't like having to agree.

"The design is as old as space flight," he said. "Limited but useful and reliable. Use it to adjust your trajectory."

The cockpit of the MiningMech sim was standard, if a little snug. The throttle fell naturally under her left hand and the joystick for the three mining lasers was right where it should have been. The only annoyance was the angry red light at the left edge of her peripheral vision, the light warning there was a vacuum outside and the hatch couldn't be opened.

That, and the smooth metal panels where she was used to seeing weapons status displays.

Her only real surprise was the two round screens, one above the other to the right of the main screen. She was familiar with the compressed three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view of the main screen, however, and by comparing its display with the round screens she was able to puzzle out that these were the views directly above and below.

"Zenith and nadir," Stalt confirmed when she asked. "You need to see what you're anchoring to and most of the things coming at you out here are going to come at you from above."

She couldn't help but think these would be useful in dealing with infantry, or aerospace, for that matter.

What was not immediately apparent was the purpose of a long vertical screen just to the left of her line of sight.

"Assay," Stalt explained. "Analyses the vapor and lets you know what you're drilling."

"Refined metals will flash green. Ice of any kind will flash red," Wood added. "Either way, the safety interlocks will turn off the lasers."

"Ice of any kind?" she echoed.

"Water, of course, but also gas." She could hear the shrug in his voice. "Ice veins run all through the larger rocks, filling the fis-

tures. Turn one of those to steam too fast and your whole world will come apart."

As she adjusted the fit of the pedals, she saw movement at the edge of the lower round screens. She moved the pedal again and a leg of her simulated 'Mech came into view.

"Where is the nadir camera located?" she asked.

"About where you'd expect," Wood chuckled. "There are several names for it, the nicest is crotch cam."

Lex felt the corner of her mouth twitch in a momentary half smile. It made sense from an engineering standpoint, it was just a bit silly.

"You'll notice the treads found on the Coventry MM-1 have been replaced by an anchor system for the MM-1S," Stalt sounded as though he were reciting a standard spiel. Lex didn't bother pointing out that with no experience in any sort of MiningMech she would never have noticed the difference. "Sensors built into the foot pads determine whether to engage electromagnets, grapples or both. This system will hold you firmly to any surface you'll encounter."

"If you need to brace yourself against torque when drilling," Wood put in, "You can use the rock cutter as a pike. Hook the joint around an outcrop ..."

"No." Stalt cut him off. "If you need to brace against torque while drilling, you are drilling too fast. Slow down. Using that hook maneuver is the number one cause of downtime with the MiningMechs. The joint is not designed to take that level of stress."

Lex filed Wood's hook trick away for later experimentation as she finished adjusting the controls to her physical dimensions.

Then, with Stalt and Wood monitoring her performance, she spent thirty minutes running through a series of standard maneuvers. The hand controls had been modified slightly, spaced to allow room for the suit's gauntlets, but their overall configuration was standard, if simpler than a fighting 'Mech's. Switching from drill to rock cutter to lasers was child's play compared to cycling between a BattleMech's weapons in combat.

Or so I've heard.

Engaging and disengaging the foot anchors to walk was a matter of pushing her toes up or down against paired switches as she

worked the pedals. The design was so intuitive it was nearly impossible not to step correctly. Her estimation of the craftsmanship at Coventry Metalworks went up. If the real thing ran as smoothly as the sim, their MiningMech was a dream to operate.

At last her two watchdogs seemed convinced she knew how to handle herself in a 'Mech. Her hopes that this would lead to immediate release to operate the real thing were quickly dashed, however.

"Now you're ready for the sims," Stalt announced.

"The sims?" Lex couldn't keep the surprise out of her voice.

"Ortega's orders," Stalt explained. "You don't take out a 'Mech until you've passed the full training series."

"How long will that take?"

"Usually two weeks," the quartermaster said. "But the way you handle yourself, you should be through them in one."

Lex bit back her retort. She refused to conform to Ortega's low image of MechWarriors. It took four breaths for her to be certain she could speak without snapping each word off.

"Okay," she said lightly. "Let's get started."



The lone figure on a Habitat service sled moved among the asteroids. Pausing at a remote sensor satellite, the technician made minute adjustments to the telemetry modules. Confirming the maintenance check with the Habitat, the worker sealed the casing and moved on to the next sensor array on the schedule.

Out of direct line of sight with the habitat, the sled veered from its course, the pilot apparently attracted to an angular shape in the shadow of an asteroid. A long range shuttle, without marking or sign of life. Given the preserving effects of vacuum, it could have been there for decades, though that wasn't likely.

The sled approached the mysterious craft without hesitation. Leaping the last few meters to the shuttle's hull, the pilot stooped to tether the sled before tapping a code into the airlock controls.

A moment later the chamber cycled open and the suited figure disappeared.