

PIRATES OF PENANCE

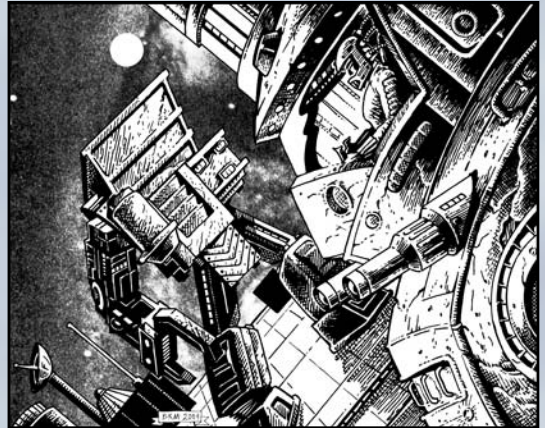
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PART FIVE

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

The MiningMech's damage control panel shrilled for attention.

It took Lex a moment to parse the unfamiliar display and realize she had a reactor coolant failure. A flush and reset didn't solve the problem. The chamber valve's external coupling had failed. The computer calculated sixty-three seconds to catastrophic meltdown.



For ninety-nine out of a hundred emergencies, the smart move was staying with the 'Mech. Even if the main view screen cracked, inside the cockpit was safer than outside. But a reactor meltdown was that one in a hundred exception.

Following procedures Stalt and Wood had drilled into her during interminable sim sessions, Lex shut down main systems and locked the controls. Quickly disconnecting the coolant and four neurohelmet leads at the yoke of her suit, she pulled her neurohelmet free and clipped it to the rack below the left arm of her control couch. *Don't want to leave that behind.* She pulled the soft suit's helmet from the adjacent secure shelf and settled it over her head. There a claustrophobic moment before it dropped into its groove and snapped through the quarter-turn lock.

Good tone sounded as the ferroglass faceplate centered in front of her and the cool breath of the suit's internal air system brushed along her jaw line. The light below the hatch release turned from red to bluish-green.

Stretching up and back, she hit the release, blowing the hatch. She felt the tug of escaping atmosphere trying to pull her from the couch harness. A long two count, giving the hatch time to clear, then launch the couch.

Instead of the explosive thrust she'd expected, there was a gentle shove against the base of her spine. For a heartbeat she thought the system had failed. Then the cockpit dropped away and she found herself hanging in blackness, the 'Mech invisible behind her.

For a moment she could see only her own eyes, floating in the darkness of her reflection before the suit's sensors recognized she was in space and the lights clicked on.

The telltale confirmed her emergency beacon was active. Reaching over the right arm of the floating couch, she unclipped the maneuvering jet. Stalt called it a pistol, but the two widely spaced nozzles made it look more like a stylized crossbow to Lex. She slipped its retaining lanyard over her wrist.

"Done," she announced.

"Twenty seconds," Wood answered from the control room. "You qualify with four seconds to spare."

"Did the ejector malfunction?" Lex asked. "There was almost no boost."

"You want to maybe fly out of the elliptic?" the young miner countered. "Or would you prefer falling into the sun? You've got no gravity to fight and no shockwave to worry about. The chair gets you just far enough away so radiation flash only toasts you a golden, uh—"

Lex waited through the moment of embarrassed silence. From what she'd seen, the population of Penance was overwhelmingly Caucasian. Talking to someone of African descent was obviously outside the young miner's experience.

"Excess vee in a direction you don't want will kill you just as dead as sitting on top of your reactor," Wood said at last. "All you want is to get clear."

"Makes sense," Lex conceded. "Any other pointers?"

"Get the gun secured to you before you unclip it," Wood said. "You drop it out there, it's gone."

"Noted," Lex said as the simulator to reeled her couch back into the ersatz cockpit.

"If Ortega were here, he'd sign you off right now," Wood said. "We could take 'Mechs out this afternoon."

"No real rush," Lex replied. She wasn't going to start meeting Ortega's expectations for MechWarrior behavior at this late date. "Just let him know through channels. When a 'Mech's ready, I'm sure he'll clear us."

"A 'Mech is ready," Wood's voice was eager. "I, well, Stalt and I, got one of the back-up units prepped for you a couple of days ago."

"Really?" Lex asked, pleased with the gesture. "Hard to imagine you and Stalt working together."

"Well, if the project's right ..." Wood grinned. "Want to see it?"

"It looks like any other, doesn't it?"

"Not exactly," Wood pulled out his noteputer and keyed rapidly. "I'm telling Stalt to meet us at the 'Mech."

"There really isn't a rush," Lex repeated, but she didn't protest when Wood led her down a new corridor.

They reached the 'Mech bay in less than a minute. Lex felt herself relax as the familiar sounds and smells washed over her. Except for the tools being tethered and the spare parts in nets, it could have been any of the repair centers on Florida. And the lifts, she realized. No need for lifts in zero gee.

Following Wood along the central hand line, she spotted "her" 'Mech long before they reached it. It was the only one with paint.

On its left breast, over a meter across, was the sun and gauntlet of the Federated Commonwealth. As they pulled directly in front of its bay, she saw a Florida PMM shoulder patch, obviously copied from a trooper's uniform, had been painted on the right shoulder as well. It wasn't regulation—it wasn't even the right insignia—but it was obviously meant as a compliment.

"Not quite a *Grasshopper*," Stalt's voice came from behind her, "But it's the best we can do."

"It's very nice, Mr. Stalt," Lex replied.

"I'll go suit up," Wood said. "We can take it out for a spin."

"I think I'd better wait for Mr. Ortega to vet me before I take out one of your 'Mechs," Lex tied to calm his enthusiasm. "It wouldn't do to violate regs."

There's something I never thought I'd hear myself say.

"You can certify her, can't you, Stalt?"

"Where do you plan on taking her?"

"Just outside, maybe up to the refinery if we can get a sled," Wood said. "No rocks."

"In that case," Stalt seemed to consider. "Suit up."

"Is this really wise?" Lex asked as Wood hurried off.

"I'm not concerned about a Buena-trained MechWarrior getting into trouble in a MiningMech," Stalt explained. "And Ortega's been incommunicado for a couple of days."

Lex wondered what that meant. It didn't sound usual in an operation as closely organized as Penance—"PEN-NAM"—seemed to be.

"Besides," Stalt surprised her by grinning, "My nephew's trying to impress you."

"Ah."

"If you'll excuse me," Stalt said, "I'll go make sure Woodrow can find a sled."

Lex knew from the sims that there was a central file of authorized user voiceprints downloaded into all the MiningMechs, and wasn't surprised Stalt had apparently already added her voice print. There was no security question, of course, and someone had already run through the systems checklist. Getting her first real 'Mech in six months under way was just a matter of jacking in, triggering the mooring releases, and stepping forward.

Ten minutes later, she and Wood were on the surface of the habitat, which still looked more like an eerie urban landscape than the outer hull of a space station to Lex, watching a 'Mech transport sled back gently down toward them.

Getting a 'Mech on a sled was simple. It only looked awkward. Actually, it looked ridiculous. Following Wood's example, Lex leaned her machine as far forward as she could and extended one leg backwards.

The pilot of the 'Mech sled, one of what she had taken for platoon transports when they'd arrived, had grounded the rear edge

of the platform against the habitat, angled at about thirty degrees. Judging its placement with the crotch cam, Lex anchored her rearward foot to the sloping deck. Once sure of the grip, she released her forward foot's hold on the hull and stepped fully onto the sled. From her new perspective the habitat's hull was now a huge wall stretching up and away from her.

If nothing else, zero-gee is entertaining.

When only one 'Mech was being transported, the 'Mech simply stepped aboard and turned around to debark. With two 'Mechs there was no room to turn and the machines had to back aboard. The theory being it was better to back onto a known surface than off onto an unpredictable asteroid. A frame barrier kept them from stepping backwards off the front of the platform. Or onto the pilot.

Wood had wanted her to have an unobstructed view for her first sled ride and stepped on first to be behind her. The view was certainly exceptional. The outbuildings, radio towers and other structures of the hull looked like an enormous urban miniature. Her inner ear, fooled by the sled's acceleration, interpreted back as down and the vast cityscape seemed to be falling away from them as they skimmed across its surface.

She had wanted to explore the hull on foot more, but Wood had advised getting away from the activity around the habitat proper. Lex suspected that even with Stalt's blessing, their little outing wasn't quite as kosher as Wood was pretending.

They moved from light to dark to light again and Lex deduced they were corkscrewing along the length of the habitat. Over her comm Wood was giving a running commentary on everything they saw, most of it meaningless to her. Behind his voice she could hear the chatter of the general frequency. There seemed to be several work crews active around the bays and holds.

The habitat hull suddenly became a wall and a smooth plane began unscrolling from beneath the sled platform. They were skimming along one of the pylons, Wood explained, heading toward the refinery.

"What do you think?" Wood asked as the habitat rose like an impossible monolith behind them, half in faint sunlight, half a constellation of arc lights.

"Nothing like the sims," Lex said.

"Oh! Forgot to warn you about something else that's not in the sim," Wood said. "Look out for the nukes."

"Nukes?"

"Yeah, this variant of the MM-1S comes with low-yield nukes to break up really big asteroids," Wood assured her. "It's the blue lever just below your suit helmet."

Lex cocked her head forward, craning to peer into the shadows under the helmet rack. She saw nothing but bare metal.

"Admit it," Wood said, "You looked."

"I looked," Lex confirmed.

"It's like left-handed pliers," Wood made no effort to keep the chuckle out of his voice. "Everybody falls for that the first time."

"This is it," a voice cut across the murmur of background chatter.

"Hang on," said Wood.

Her view of the pylon suddenly spiraled though there was no sensation of motion. For a moment her stomach flipped as it coped with the disconnect between what her eyes and inner ear were telling it. By the time it settled down, the sled was passing between the outbuildings of the refinery's hull.

"Ready for a walk?" Wood asked.

"Been ready."

The sled tilted and the pilot gently brought the rear edge of the platform down against the refinery's hull with no discernable bump.

He's certainly done this before.

"Lean back..."

"This part was in the sims, Wood."

Leaning her 'Mech back at the knee, her cockpit swinging closer to Wood's than she liked, Lex slid one foot forward. Only when the toe made contact with the hull did she release the magnetic anchor. Lifting the foot slightly, she flexed the ankle to the new angle and brought it down.

"Leftenant Atreus, report."

Lex froze, one foot on the refinery and one on the sled.

Michaels' voice. *Hauptmann* Michaels' voice, Lex realized, clearly in operations mode even though he was broadcasting on a civilian frequency. Of course he was; it was the only way to reach her in a civilian 'Mech.

"Atreus here," she responded. "In a MiningMech outside the refinery."

"Leftenant Atreus, report," Michaels repeated.

"He can't hear you," Wood said.

"Evidently not," Lex agreed, chinning her comm through several channels. The background chatter of the work crews remained unchanged. "Wood, something's wrong with my comm."

"You don't have a comm," Wood said. "You only have a short-range crew radio. You're hearing my comm through that."

Lex was about to point out that giving her a 'Mech without a comm was asinine when something in the miner's voice registered.

"Why?" she asked.

"I wanted you out of the way," Wood explained. "And safe."

"Safe from what?"

"Some DropShips are about to dock," Wood said. "Some of us are leaving."

"Not empty handed, I take it."

Wood's laugh was a bitter bark.

"We're taking what we've earned," his voice was harsh. "What our parents and our grandparents spent their lives earning. It's our ticket out of here."

"Wood, you're talking piracy," Lex began.

A *clang* rang through her 'Mech as Wood's machine moved forward into hers.

"Step off, Lex." No trace of boyish uncertainty.

Lex keyed her computer interface up, flashing through screens as she considered her tactical position.

Maybe her 'Mech could hold the sled with one foot anchored to its deck and the other on the refinery. But not with Wood's 'Mech, both feet firmly anchored on the sled, ready to shove her off. In fact, if the craft lifted and Wood shoved, there was a real chance she'd end up drifting without comm in a place no one would look. Four days until dehydration killed her.

Lex typed a quick series of commands into the computer.

Her 'Mech's left foot lifted and Lex stepped awkwardly off the sled. By the time she turned around, the sled was clear of the hull.

Her 'Mech's lasers couldn't target, they were designed for softening rock at point blank range. But Lex flexed backwards anyway, bringing them to bear on the sled, and fired.

Nothing happened.

"Figured you'd override the safety lock-outs," Wood said. "We removed your lasers, too."

Lex shook her head slowly. She was six moves behind before she'd even realized there was a game.

"There are no airlocks or bays on the refinery a 'Mech can use," Wood was saying. "To get back inside you'll have to walk down the pylon to Penance."

"I could jump."

"Don't try it," Wood's voice was urgent, which made sense. He'd brought her here to keep her safe. "Penance is rotating, keeps solar heating of the hull even. Coriolis forces will throw you outward. You'll never land anywhere."

Lex considered. Penance didn't look like it was rotating. But even this far from the primary, keeping thermal differentials as small as possible made good sense. Besides, despite the fact that Wood's concern indicated it was possible, she had no idea how to make the 'Mech jump.

"Just walk back," Wood's voice was already breaking up as he moved beyond her short range. "It'll be all ..."

His voice was lost to static.