

PIRATES OF PENANCE

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PART SIX

***Asteroid Mining Habitat, Viborg Asteroid Belt
Venaria Operational Area, Periphery March
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Lex turned in place, scanning her surroundings. Unlike Penance itself, the factory was small enough for the hull to curve visibly down toward the horizon. Even so, it was large and covered with the same variety of outbuildings as the habitat proper. It took her several minutes to locate a personnel airlock.

She considered knocking, but decided not to test the door's ability to stand up under impact. Instead, she powered down and removed her neurohelmet. Racking it, she retrieved the soft suit's helmet from its rack and locked it securely in place. She released her couch harness and pushed herself up to the escape hatch.

It wouldn't open. She tried turning the handle the opposite way. Then tried brute force. Nothing. Had Wood or Stalt somehow sealed the hatch from outside?

Only then did she notice that the warning light still glowed red. The hatch wouldn't open because her suit wasn't sealed. Quickly checking all of her connections by touch, she determined all of the seams were intact. She removed the helmet, then twisted it back on, hearing the satisfying *click* as it locked in place. The light stayed red.

Removing the helmet a second time, Lex examined it closely. It took her only seconds to find the rectangular hollow in its base. Wood, or more likely Stalt, had removed the radio transponder. Her suit worked perfectly, but the 'Mech didn't know that. It wasn't going to let her out.

Reattaching her neurohelmet, she strapped herself back in and fired up the 'Mech. The best way to get a long march over with was to start. She considered searching for a 'Mech-sized airlock, but decided against it. Wood had probably lied about there not being one, but she had no idea where to look. It would probably take her longer to search the refinery's hull than it would to walk to the habitat.

She was prepared for the joining of pylon to refinery to be abrupt and was still rehearsing how to step from a horizontal surface to

a vertical when she realized she'd already made the transition. Looking back, she saw a gentle slope flared the two structures together.

She felt a vibration, so faint she might have thought she'd imagined it if the seismic sensors hadn't confirmed it. A multi-ton payload must have passed beneath her feet, its container carried through the pylon by sequential magnets—a giant slow-motion Gauss rifle. If there was an access port to get inside ... She'd arrive at the habitat as a sticky paste inside her crushed and mangled MiningMech.

March, Atreus. Double time.

Unlike the factory or the habitat, the hull of the pylon was smooth. Lex experimented with the miner's trick of feathering her anchor magnets, skating along the metal surface. The 'Mech's computer didn't like it, but she overrode the safety system when it tried to lock her out. What she couldn't override was the anchor failure alarm; the oscillating whistle set her teeth on edge as she slogged and skated along the pylon.

Penance rose ahead of her like a great tower at the end of a causeway. On the round screen of the zenith camera she could see two DropShips moving toward the docking rings. One was huge, clearly a *Mule*, but the other was a small design she didn't recognize. Either something very old or something very new, she decided.

So intent was she on the docking DropShips that she didn't notice the 'Mech sled until it was on top of her. There was a single 'Mech aboard, but she couldn't tell if it was Wood returning or someone else. Her 'Mech, with the big FedCom sun and gauntlet painted on it, was the only identifiable MiningMech in all of Penance.

"... Lieutenant Atreus," crackled Ortega's voice. "Lieutenant Atreus, can you hear me?"

"Hear you," she said, slowing to a stop. "Stick close, radio's jimmied."

"Copy that," Ortega said. "Stand by for pick up."

A few minutes later she was looking at the back of Ortega's 'Mech. He had gotten off, giving her the forward position, then backed on. The sled eased around the pylon, moving out of sight of the DropShips.

"There's a couple of fighters we want to avoid," Ortega explained.

"What's happening?"

"About the time you and Pickering took off, a jamming signal started up. Sounds like background chatter."

"I've heard it."

"Cut us off from the rest of the system," Ortega said. "They must have dozens of transmitters planted on asteroids all around us."

"How'd you find me?"

"I was watching Stalt when I saw Pickering leave with you and come back alone," Ortega's voice crackled even at this range. "I knew he wouldn't space you, so I rounded up Johnny here and my own 'Mech and came looking."

"You knew Stalt was in on the piracy?"

"No, I thought Stalt and a few others were organizing to do something rash because of the nationalization," Ortega said. "That's why I tried to keep him busy training you. Didn't count on him handing you off to Pickering."

"They're not related, are they?"

"No. Why?"

Just getting the measure of how thoroughly I was played, Lex thought.

"One of their lies," she said. A thought struck her: "Is hold L-four-six-two important?"

"Not particularly," Ortega said, then asked again: "Why?"

"Candace and Wood told us it was vital," Lex explained. "Odds are that's where Michaels took his squad when the assault began."

"They're a good klick out of position, then."

Reaching the base of the pylon, the pilot—Johnny, Lex remembered—reoriented the craft, bringing it parallel with the habitat's hull. Flying just above the scattered outbuildings, they began moving toward the invaders' beachhead.

"So what do we do now?" Lex asked, watching the pylon shrink with distance.

"We can't stop them," Ortega said, "But we might spoil their fun a little if you're game."

"What do you have in mind?"

"They'll use 'Mechs to force open the bay doors. They aren't going to risk firing ship's lasers on a habitat if they can help it," Ortega explained. "That's their weak point. Their timing has to be tight; they need to get out of range before our lasers can be reprogrammed to fire on them."

"Anything we can do to slow them up cuts down on how much they take and gives our gunners a chance to do some good."

Lex nodded inside her cockpit. Made sense. With her lasers out there was precious little she could do, but any delay was a victory.

"How do we do it?"

"Johnny's going to run at the first raider 'Mech we see, then snap up," Ortega said. "I'll cut my magnets. Angular acceleration will throw me at him like a rock."

"How many times a week do you do that?" Lex asked.

Ortega chuckled.

"Never been tried that I know of," he said. "But forty years driving a 'Mech in zero-gee should count for something."

"I'll touch down to drop you off," broke in a voice Lex hadn't heard before. Johnny the sled pilot, she deduced.

Reflex pride almost made her protest that she'd use the same modified "death from above" assault as Ortega. Then common sense reminded her she didn't have a clue how to do it.

"Thanks, Johnny."

"Good answer," said Ortega.



As the *Manatee* lifted away behind her, Tatiana's sensors gave her a three-sixty degree view. From where she stood she could see a dozen arc lights casting pools of brilliant white and inky shadow, but none were near. Most of the hull was illuminated by a faint blend of starlight, the distant primary and, to a lesser extent, the dim glow of the gas giant and several dozen asteroids. Her 'Mech's night vision rendered the scene a phosphor green in the preternatural clarity of space.

"No one home but us," she transmitted. "Everybody got your targets?"

A quick chorus of affirmatives.

"Move out."

Warren and Jessup fanned out to her left, Irons to her right as Tatiana headed straight forward toward her assigned cargo bay. Or as straight as she could. Radio towers, sensor arrays, even tool sheds, dotted the hull at irregular intervals. While hardly a maze, the unexpected outcroppings made straight line travel problematic.

Tatiana found the anchors attached to *Nachthimmel's* feet equally annoying. They held securely, but seemed a half-second late in releasing when she stepped forward. Being firmly attached to the habitat was certainly better than floating free, but the hesitating rhythm was hard to adjust to. Walking took more concentration than she liked.

"Something back right, Cap," Irons said. "Bearing one two five."

Checking her heads up, at first Tatiana saw only the giant *Mule* right where it was supposed to be. Then tactical painted vehicle icons on a dozen tiny shapes moving toward the DropShip. Sleds? Had to be. Which meant pilots and possibly others too small to show up at this range.

"Huh!"

Irons' grunt called her attention to a 'Mech icon, then another, moving away from the *Mule*, towards the approaching sleds. IFF marked them friendlies, a *Spider* and a *Wasp*.

Kaiman had told her there weren't any 'Mech bays on the *Mule*. The presence of two 'Mechs indicated not everything he'd told her was on the up and up.

"'Huh' is right," Tatiana said. "Looks like there's part of the plan we don't know."

"Think that's the Florida goons?"

"Negative," Tatiana said, thinking fast.

The parade of vehicles looked to her like a prearranged meet, a loading operation. Their DropShip had lifted, and every step they took toward their assigned objectives was taking them farther and farther from their only ride home. A ride that was already being loaded up by partners who suddenly didn't seem so trustworthy.

"Irons, switch off with me," she said. "I want to keep an eye on that."

The *Lancelot* cut left across her trail as she turned right.

"Jessup, rendezvous with Irons at my target," she broadcast over the team channel. "Warren, shift right to Jessup's target. Everybody look alive. Follow the plan, but be ready to drop everything and break for the *Mule* on my signal."

Again the chorus of ayes. Tatiana nodded to herself; her team followed orders.

Curving right of the planned course, she kept the activity around the *Mule* in sight. Things were definitely happening, but a ship that size wouldn't be loaded in minutes. There was still time for her lance to pull off their part of the mission. And they had to be part of the mission, not just a diversion. Their objectives were worth more than any other prize on this hulk—far too valuable to be thrown away. Besides, if nothing else, Laudin wasn't going to leave anyone behind who could tell the galaxy just who was low enough to raid a civilian habitat.

The mud-sucking gait of the magnetic anchors frustrated her. For several seconds they occupied more of her attention than the mission or the behavior of Iceman.

"Florida!" Jessup's voice interrupted her stew. "I read militia infantry hard suits; tally seven."

"Anti 'Mech gear?" Tatiana asked.

"No battle armor, no heavy ordinance," Irons answered, reading the superior sensors of his *Lancelot*. "But they could have explosives."

"How close?"

"I make it four-two-oh meters," Jessup reported. "Moving from cover to cover, but closing."

"Confirmed."

Tatiana swore. This was getting too complex by the minute.

"Everybody pull right," she ordered. "Warren, do *not* engage the Florida goons. Reform at my target. We'll—"

Her proximity alarm shrilled.

It took Tatiana a half second to realize the new threat was coming from above. She back pedaled quickly, or as quickly as the magnetic boots would allow.

As it was, the dropping 'Mech missed her by less than a meter.

A flare of laser fire scorched across her viewscreen as something clanged against the forward-thrust cockpit of her *Nightsky*. She had a momentary glimpse of a silvery 'Mech, shorter than her own, and swung her axe before the image fully registered.

The shape seemed to bounce clear of the habitat's hull just as her axe caught it broadside. On a planet, or with the MiningMech anchored by its magnets, her axe would have bit deep into the smaller machine. Instead, her roundhouse blow batted the free-floating machine away in a ponderous cartwheel.

A quick scan of her damage schematics showed the drilling lasers had done little beyond boil away some paint. Whatever had hit her cockpit had done even less damage. The gravest consequence of the attack seemed to be the laser flare's purple afterimage clouding her vision.

Punctuating her thought, a second flare illuminated the cockpit.

It took her tactical computer a moment to parse the unfamiliar image, but by the third laser shot she had it. The cartwheeling MiningMech had hit the vertical side of what looked like a sensor array feet first. With its magnets anchored to the metal, the pilot had bent the 'Mech backwards at the knees to bring the torso mounted drilling lasers to bear.

The miner was tenacious, she'd give him that. And a fair marksman to hit her, even at sixty meters, with drilling lasers. But in the end he was irrelevant, ineffective. The only danger he posed

was the chance his distraction would slow her down. She was cutting her team's mission short, but she wasn't going back empty-handed.

Ignoring the small lasers refracting off her armor, Tatiana scanned for her target.

The cargo control tower their intel said marked the bay she wanted was less than ninety meters away. A check of the status display confirmed mass in her jumpjets' reaction chambers. An easy jump and she'd be nose to nose with the waldo operators. Given a choice between opening the bays or tasting space, they'd open up quick enough.

With a last snarl at the gadfly still peppering her with beams of impotent light, Tatiana stomped her feet hard on the pedals, firing her jumpjets.

The habitat dropped away beneath her.