

Plantgirl

by

M. Pax

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Plantgirl

Under New Management!

An army of contractors, decorators and corporate suits had come in, scurrying in the shadows. They worked tirelessly for weeks. The stench of rotting vegetation and meat had been scoured away. The floors and shelves gleamed. The promise of a new start blared across the spotless windows. The crowds did not come. They didn't feel it.

Ba Rainey didn't feel it either. She stared out the window, unmoving. If she dared to move, someone might notice her. If someone noticed her, she'd have to make some sort of effort at something. She didn't want to. Saying more than the first syllable of her name was more effort than she could bear.

The world baffled Ba. Brash colors blinded her ears. Shrieks and clangs deafened her eyes. Her touch was soured and her tastebuds sore. Only one thing sustained her, kept her grounded. Her stare moved to her feet.

Her aspirations were drying. She shuffled her larger than necessary shoes stuffed with dirt over toward produce. She picked up the hose and watered her feet. She felt the Miracle Gro being sucked up through her toes. The thought being, it would grow something akin to the promise of new management and get her a new start. Just like the Super K which used to be a Value Cart.

She was tired of her tired little life, but beyond the fertile soil encasing her feet could think of nothing else to break the cycle of monotony. Everyday dawned gray. It colored everything in lethargy. Drudgery.

Was this all there was? Ba shuffled back to her post at checkout and waited.

Lyle Rogers started crowing. He used to be the phys. ed. teacher over at the middle school before the town decided kids didn't need exercise or any sort of extracurriculars. It had been all right with Ba at the time. Now she wondered if it weren't part of her problem, that she had never learned to be anything but a lump passing through.

"Why is there mud all over my floor, Ba?"

She shrugged, pulling the hand-knit cardigan tighter around her shoulders. It was badly knit by her own hand, lopsided and holey, when she thought perhaps sweater-making might be the answer she needed. It wasn't. "How should I know, Lyle?"

"The trail leads right to you. I'm reporting this." He stomped off toward the back of the store leaving Ba in peace.

The hum from the boxy lights above made her sway. She felt it thrum through her, becoming the pulse in her veins. She lifted her face to drink in its light. Seeds needed light to grow. She wondered if it were the right kind of light, because this sprouting thing was taking longer than she figured.

"The new boss wants to see ya," Lyle said. His chin thrust upward in an annoying gloat.

"Then there's no checker," Ba said, wiggling her toes. The squishy dirt felt good between them.

"Get your ass back there." His thumb gestured violently as if it still jogged miles by itself on the never-ending oval track at the school every morning.

Ba clumped to the back to the breakroom and the offices, leaving a trail of muddy footprints and a howling Lyle Rogers. His caterwauling about the mess made her crack. She laughed for a half second. Then shuffled on.

The new management waited back there. He was basically a kid minding the store for his rich daddy. The fact irked Lyle to no end, so Ba felt an inkling more than indifference for the new boss. She didn't like his matching sweatsuits though. They were too neat and sporty for life at the Super K, advertising he belonged somewhere better than a crudely constructed office with narrow windows among myriad crates. She didn't like to be reminded here wasn't what anyone would consider better. She wiggled her toes in the Miracle Gro hoping for just that, some sort of miracle.

Management looked up at Ba's distinctive footsteps. His haircut belonged in the 1960's and the glasses over his eyes were thick and out of fashion. Behind them blinked watery blue eyes of no distinction other than they twinkled in an interesting way. "Have a seat, Miss Rainey. Or do you prefer Ms.?"

Ba pulled her sweater tighter around her shoulders then sat down. "You can just call me Ba, sir."

"All right. You can just call me Mike then."

"OK."

"OK."

They sat in silence avoiding each other's gaze. Mike shifted and fidgeted as much as she did.

"Look, Ba, I don't like Rogers either. He's an ass. But, I need an ass to run this place so I don't have to be the ass. Do you need money for another pair of shoes so that the floor quits getting muddy?"

Ba felt an arrow pierce her heart. Did he want her to get rid of the Miracle Gro? It was her last chance to reach for sunlight, to pull herself out of the dark copse of her life. Like a sapling fighting to reach up from the forest floor. If she had to stop her experiments with trying to be more like blooming flora brimming with promise, what would become of her then? No way was the likes of him going to understand the likes of her. "I can't get rid of the shoes, Mike."

"Why not?"

She shrugged and glanced away.

"If you don't tell me, I have to give in to Rogers' request."

She twirled her thumbs, rubbing against the calluses in circles. "You'll just laugh."

"I won't laugh. And, I don't think you're stupid."

Ba shrugged again. "Hmmm. Folks always do." The expectation didn't leave Mike's pasty face. It was bloated from too much fast food, but it wasn't a bad face. After all, he did think Lyle was an ass. "It's not just dirt. It's nutrient-rich potting soil and Miracle Gro. So that maybe I can find a better way than this. Maybe it will give me powers. Maybe a miracle. Something really great could happen. All's it took was a spider bite for Peter Parker. Maybe it'll be Miracle Gro for me." She shrugged in apology, her cheeks apple red. It sounded lamer aloud than it had in her head.

He blinked behind those thick, plastic lenses, but he didn't laugh. "Oh. What powers do you expect to get?"

"Don't make fun of me."

He grimaced then pulled off his sweatshirt. A balled-up cape unfurled while he pushed up the sleeves of his T-shirt. Atomic power emblems were tattooed upon his biceps. The muscles weren't flabby like Ba expected. A real live Clark Kent. Guess those sweatsuits weren't just for show. "Lyle will just have to keep washing the floors I think, Plantgirl."

She smiled, a genuine smile which did not fade after a split-second display. This new management thing was OK. Better than OK. And for the first time ever in her life, Ba felt something other than gray blooming in her soul. A blaring sign had been posted in her windows: Under New Management.

#END#

Thank you for reading *Plantgirl!* If you enjoyed it, think about leaving a review.

About M. Pax -- Inspiring the words I write, I spend my summers as a star guide at Pine Mountain Observatory in stunning Central Oregon where I live with the husband unit and two loving cats. I write science fiction mostly. You can find out more by visiting my website: www.mpaxauthor.com

Sign up for my newsletter / www.mpaxauthor.com/newsletter/ ~ sneak peeks, special offers, and updates on upcoming titles. Coming out in 2012: *The Backworlds*, *Stopover at the Backworlds' Edge* and *The Augmentation of Hetty Locklear*.

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Sneak Peek: Semper Audacia

Alone. Leda is the last living member of the brigade, the sole defender of her world. War took everyone she knew, leaving her in the company of memories and ghosts. Or is it madness?

The siren blares. The enemy is coming. Or is it? The approaching vessel isn't a friendly design, but it answers with the correct code. Leda must figure out whether the arrival is reinforcements or the final assault. In an aging flyer, she ventures out to meet her world's fate, the last stand.

M. Pax



**Semper
Audacia**

Semper Audacia

by M. Pax

[Chapter One](#)

Rrr. Rrrrrr. RrrrRrrrrr. The claxon blasted through the outpost. Leda vaulted onto her feet, reaching for the rings hanging above her bunk. Empty berths above, below and beside hers lined the sloping walls of the dome, their hollow echoes adding to the siren's cries pulsing over her nerves. Urgent. She readied for duty, the only one answering Baird Defense Station's call to post, the last soldier standing.

One at a time, she plucked off the rings and activated them. When snapped into place, the circlets formed pieces of armor. Feet. Legs. Hips. Torso. Shoulders. Arms. Hands. She held off on the neck piece and helmet, and attached her weaponry next, the holster clicking in a lonely ricochet against the appropriate plates where magnets held it firm. The blaster powered up, priming.

Not yet fully awake, Leda stretched, cracking her neck one way then the other, not needing coherent thought to respond as the alarm demanded, grabbing onto things to transform her from guardian caretaker into consummate warrior. She snarled, ready to hit feral and fast, with an unbridled force she had sworn oath to when joining the brigade. A brigade which had contracted to one. To her.

Onto the protections shielding her legs and waist she affixed hand grenades, acid gums and cutter arrays. When fully armed, she moved her thick, shoulder-length braid, dark as the depths of space, out of the way and clacked on the band of neck armor. She slung the helmet ring over her holster and whirled toward the stairway to discover what danger threatened her and her world.

The air crackled with a buzz of baritone sound and sensation, prickles which strummed in Leda's ears then along her spine, biting into her wrist and winding their way into her veins. Her head spun and suddenly the station roared with the bluster of the entire brigade springing up. Inert gears freed from an eternal sleep, their phantom boots thundered through the utilitarian corridors.

Ducts striped the walls horizontally and energy lines banded them vertically. Stairwells spiraled down into tubular passageways. Very few windows let in the raw sunlight illuminating the defensive outpost every twenty-nine hours. The march of Leda's fallen unit burst past her. Rugar. Dris. All of the others.

The claxon blared louder. Leda blinked. She stood alone, tall and imposing, unspilled tears brightening her sometimes green, sometimes blue eyes, mourning once ago times.

Once ago, the brigade packed into all the spaces, jostling Leda and her rings as she struggled into her armor, drumming past her, limbs and shoulders knocking into hers. Her comrades carelessly aimed blasters and hurled insults, attempting to distill the trepidation of meeting a foe armed with overwhelming power and numbers, an enemy none of them

had ever seen. The missiles and flyers hurled at Leda and her regiment were known well enough, but not the beings who launched them.

“Posterior Cava section, Leda.”

The protective armor around her neck made it impossible to nod, so she tapped on the helmet near her ear, but not hard enough to give herself a headache. “I heard, Rugar.”

“Call formations. You take Squadron Elseviar. See you when it’s all over.”

Her sometimes blue eyes stared at his armor-clad back burdened with weaponry, knowing she would lose him, but she hoped not today.

“Dris,” Leda called to a fellow female warrior, “back us up with that cannon.”

Leda’s plated hand gestured at the weapon hoisted in a cavalier manner over Dris’s shoulder. “Let’s get it done.”

Leda led the charge out the hatch. They threw, they launched, they fired, ducked and rolled in perfect form and yet Elseviar and the other squadrons of Baird Defense Station did not find victory.

Over the ensuing decades, the outcome never changed. Defeat after defeat, the brigade dwindled into air. Now only Leda defended the station and the decimated world it orbited, drifting together toward ruin and the abyss.

[Chapter Two](#)

Leda sprinted toward the command center, below where she bunked, glancing out the porthole as she rushed down the stairs. Ghostly crescents of three other moons taunted her with their stillness, their alarms no longer waking anyone but the dead. No sign of a fight existed anywhere else, not even on the struggling Eslin -- a mostly brown sphere which dominated the moons and the heavens. Leda protected that brown sphere and the one patch of civilization remaining on it. The patch blared in a heart-wrenching green, a color waning to epitaphs and memorials. Eslin bled, its lingering hold on power, supplies and technology slipping and ebbing until the planet and Leda’s moon resorted to communicating by taps and clicks.

She requested corroboration from Eslin, fingers flogging the single key keeping court with her world -- thwack, thwack, thwack -- needing to know whether the planet’s alerts had gone off, too. Did they see it? Did they fear? It’d been over a decade since the enemy last struck.

‘You’re our only defense,’ came up from Eslin.

Leda winced at the blunt reminder yet savored the taps, the only conversation she had access to besides the specters which sometimes populated Baird Defense Station. If that was what the glimpses of her lost comrades were. She wasn’t really sure.

Her gaze brushed over their retired, dented helmets -- those recovered, mere shrapnel for others. They lined the walls of the command post like guardians, surrendering their hold on life to a coating of dust. How did their former owners speak to her?

She missed the noise and the stench of the boisterous brigade, of too many bodies crammed into small spaces. The present-day station’s air remained stale, but had let go

much of her comrades' scents. Another loss. Loss kept her company as did her need to feel she mattered to someone. She hadn't mattered to anyone since the squadrons had all perished. Far too long she guarded Baird alone in silence. Waiting. Just waiting.

Standing over the console, she wished for someone to consult with to consider the possible defenses and attacks and to talk over why the enemy came now after not disturbing Eslin's skies for three thousand fifty-six days. In reply, a warm vibe covered her skin akin to sentiment and longing, stirring her blood and traveling down to her wrist where it nipped with more intensity.

Rugar stared up from the glossy veneered panel, a cocked brow exposing the humanity beneath his armor. Tenderness smoldered in his honey brown eyes, filled with a light denied the floundering Eslin. "Initiate Plan T12."

Leda's heart lurched, unready for that call to action, because Plan T12 was so final. "What if it's Salvation?" She didn't realize she pled with Rugar. He didn't blink, didn't relent, displaying the tenacity which safeguarded Eslin so well, then ultimately wrenched them apart. Woe welled in her gut, seeping into her eyes, for she remembered loving him long ago in once ago times. Then the suit under her armor took over, preventing her from feeling anything.

She called up current data to the monitor. Any semblance of Rugar vanished. Because of the protective and nurturing suit, she couldn't sense the coolness of the composite as she tapped in her demands. If Rugar stood beside her, she wouldn't be able to enjoy his arms around her. Only her head exposed, it was her long, oval cheek pressed against Rugar's which experienced his pulse slowing to a stop as the last drops of blood drained out of his skull. She had trouble remembering how long ago. The suit conferred with Baird Defense Station and filled in the gap, cutting a fresh gash in her psyche threatening to gush before the garment smothered the sting into nothing.

The isolation from her fellows during these times of war, when she needed reassurance most, emerged as the greatest drawback of the life-sustaining suit. No soldier had figured out how to remove them. Military issue, the engineered fabric wasn't meant to come off. No, the garments were created as a smarter second skin to keep the brigade alive and thriving. Leda couldn't die if the suit could counteract it. It had kept her alive for over six decades and would preserve her for another six decades to come, feeding and hydrating her, tending to illness, recycling her wastes and keeping her in tip-top shape even if she never moved. She believed it invented the deceased companions materializing and disappearing according to Eslin's needs and her whims. More so, the brigade seemed interwoven into the threads of the material as part of her nervous system, adding each comrade's essence to hers, adding their voices to her thoughts and dreams. Whether she'd gone mad or became the foil for the suit's untapped potential, she couldn't discern and gave up trying four years ago now.

In answer to the claxon's serenade, the engineered second skin prodded at Leda's adrenaline to move her body faster, putting pressure in the right place to induce the right reaction. Her boots hurried down a tubular corridor, her fingers snapping the helmet ring into place. Her long legs streaked over gray tiles, past flashing lights and glaring amplifiers, racing phantoms and realities she couldn't tell apart. She wanted an end to the emptiness, wishing for company other than Baird's computers and the suit's murmurings. The garment sought to please her, nipping at the soft flesh of her wrist.

"Hatch Aor looks like the best line of attack," Dris said.

Leda deactivated her helmet, brushing fine, jet strands out of her eyes. Her ambiguous blue-green irises studied Dris suspiciously. Ground attacks against the enemy ships had proven futile. Over and over.

“You have other ideas?” Dris’s thick lips twitched in amusement under a gilded mop of hair. Her smile was so bittersweet, and her gaze reminded Leda of youth -- chattering with twenty girls in a classroom overflowing with a future Eslin never realized. Dris’s clusters of freckles bobbed and winked flirting with Leda and inciting sorrow.

Before the sentiment could settle too deep, Leda’s suit superseded it with duty and the imperative of Eslin’s defense. “Baird’s analysis says a vessel of enemy design answered with the proper code, but its weapons are arming. Data conflicts. It is the enemy. It isn’t the enemy. It’d be better to man a roto-laser and get a more precise idea on what’s up there.” A more strategic course of action to follow than crawling out of Hatch Aor, Leda headed toward the turrets to implement it.

“I’ll take the other gun,” Dris said.

Leda grunted in approval. With a touch to the ring lying around her neck, she reactivated her helmet. Three steps later she was the only one speeding toward the roto-lasers. The suit pricked her shoulder. Energy surged through her veins. Without consciously intending it, Leda’s pace increased, keeping time with the urgency of the siren shrieking through the corridors.

[Chapter Three](#)

It took a split second to switch on the appropriate magnet at her hip and attach the weapon to the curve of her waist. The roto-laser powered up as it recognized Leda’s authority. Information relayed from Baird Defense Station’s mechanical brains pointed the gun where it needed to go in a smooth, easy whir. The weapon honed in on what approached. Leda peered through the targeter. The visual stunned her, for the enemy was far too close. She checked the data. The code emitted by the incoming space craft was valid. “Baird what is it arming?” she asked her programmed colleague.

The station answered through sensors in her suit and armor. ‘Projectiles readied.’

“How many?” Leda wished she had someone to discuss the situation with, so she could be certain of her decisions and garner support to coddle away her insecurities. The suit whispered of how it was a great honor for her to be the last one standing to guard Eslin’s waning hopes. The whisper shifted to a soft grating squeeze on her inner wrist. She glanced down and watched the skin redden and tighten through a small, clear panel in the sleeve. Beneath the panel showed the tattooed insignia depicting her rank, Lieutenant Commander.

“The enemy is coming.” Dris spoke too loudly beside her.

Leda started. “They answered with a valid code.”

The thick tumble of crazy-colored hair no longer flopped, tamed into a single braid like the one Leda wore. “It is the enemy,” Dris said. “They’re going to take us out. Let’s get them first.”

Leda concentrated on the view through the roto-laser, her finger hovering over the trigger. “I can’t be sure that is the enemy.” When she twisted around to confer further, Dris was gone.

The enemy vessel settled into orbit and didn't move any closer, loitering above the atmosphere in the darker regions between the cosmos and the moon. The intruder sent out code more rapidly, mimicking a cheery greeting yet it didn't stand down.

"Please." Leda prayed softly as she stared through the targeter, as tired of war as the people on Eslin reduced to clicks and taps.

Cautions instilled from training and inherent in all Eslins rattled through her thinking, mucking up any clear course of action. What if an enemy vessel had been captured by her people? What if the ship came courting peace or surrender? It could be so, since it refrained from firing. All hinged on her judgment, whether Eslin toiled on or took its final breath. Leda's shoulders tensed with the strain. "I think it's a trick, Baird. However, we must be certain before targeting."

The station signaled its agreement through her armor, translated by her second skin as a tickle on the back of her neck. She headed toward the lone remaining skimmer in the fly bay. As she was about to hop up on the wing to launch herself into the cockpit, Rugar blocked her way.

"Eslin needs you," he said. "We all need you to do your duty. Did you start the plan?" Rugar stood as tall as ever, a few inches higher than Leda, his dark straight hair sheared to a shadow and his light brown eyes penetrating as effectively as lasers. He had always been able to see right through her.

"I will defend Eslin with my last gasps, after that I'll join you and the others in the phantom brigade and keep fighting. I won't quit. I won't let you down. If it is the enemy, I'll take them out." Leda saluted with deep-felt respect. Something more shimmered between them before the suit squelched the budding sentiment into nothing.

"It's danger, the enemy. I hear your hesitation. Don't be so Eslin. At least upgrade your interface with Baird."

"All right. Baird, initiate Third Skin. No farther, Rugar. That ship answered with a proper code." The station merged with her suit, enhancing the garment's abilities, allowing Leda to stay connected to Baird light years away from the outpost. In the back of her thoughts, she could hear the murmurs of the station arming and caring for itself, using protocols set up in the past by her and Rugar.

"You can't trust that code. To do so is folly."

To kill her desperate hope that someone out there besides her looked out for their homeworld was folly. Before she acted, she had to be sure. She couldn't give up on behaving as an Eslin, not entirely, not yet. Why didn't Rugar understand? For the first time, Leda found herself doubting him. It was loathsome. His sage judgment had kept her safe all these decades. The unexpected misgiving flooded her, wringing her universe inside out. "That's why I'm going. I must confirm enemy or friend. Whether there is any Eslin after this depends on it. Their weapons are readied, the ship is the enemy's, yet they have our code. It's a puzzle, Rugar. What if it's another defense station with a conquered ship? We could really use the reinforcements. Or the crew of Salvation? Just, what if?" In real need, she stepped forward and spread her arms. She hugged air, stumbling without forgiveness, reeling with the pain of Rugar's cold shoulder before the suit steadied her.

[Chapter Four](#)

Leda boarded the skimmer and climbed into the pilot's seat. With precision, she fastened the safety harness, the buckles snapping with a bite. She initiated the launch protocol. Power on, energy swept through the circuits in a procession of tiny, glowing lights in a profusion of colors. Computers. Sensors. Guidance. Weapons. As she checked over the systems of the aging flyer, Leda ordered the hangar roof to retract. Ancient light from distant stars flooded overhead.

"We're out numbered, seven to one," Dris said from the co-pilot's seat.

Leda analyzed the data streaming in. "There's only one ship." Yet she commanded the skimmer to engage stealth since Dris's paranoia had kept her safe many times before through attacks so thick with grenade fire the air had blazed in flame.

"Semper audacia, Leda! We are one."

Leda shook her fist with spirit in camaraderie, one with the brigade as avowed on Eslin before she was flown up to Baird. The cabin emptied.

Engines engaged, the thin half disc glided up and away from Baird Defense Station, cutting through eddies, gravities and the yawning sweep of ebony.

The domes of the defensive complex echoed the appearance of the moon. Pockmarked. Battered. Gray and dull. Leda's eyes marked the places where Rugar, Dris and the others were blown to bits. Canyon. Pit. Valley. Ridge. Her heart swelled and fell as the sacred sites passed beneath her. Baird had been home to Leda longer than the gravely wounded planet beside it, and the brigade had been her world. For a moment Rugar's scent filled the cabin, inundating her with a wistful pang. The suit numbed it to nil.

The moon marred the horizon. Gray. Cratered. Ugly. Battered by violence and death. Brute blood tainted the regolith with countless, hard-fought battles. The stains tugged at memories of artillery fire and cries, then thuds as another then another of the brigade lost the fight. The specter sounds chased Leda across the moon in a haunting concerto, pursuing her up into the ether no matter how fast she accelerated the skimmer.

As the moon grew smaller behind her, the planet it protected took over the sky. Dust billowed in cloudy wakes creating the most uninspiring nebula there ever was, veiling the encroaching destruction spread like a disease across the homeworld's surface. Leda stared at the one clinging patch of green, a tiny homage to the Eslin that was, the remains of her civilization crying out for a miracle.

Her needs yearned as desperate as Eslin's, wanting to return to her world, to feel once more a breeze on her cheeks and watch the play of seasons alter a grove of trees from barren to budding to blooming to shedding then to barren again. She asserted with renewed vigor to save home, and could hear the brigade's bygone voices muttering excitedly of what they would do once back on Eslin. Their words hummed like a ballad, melancholy and melodic, soulful and sentimental.

Brreep! The proximity warning blared on the skimmer's console. Leda jumped. A rabid beacon, the flashes snapped her attention away from Eslin, longings and her regiment. The intruding spaceship filled the horizon, enormous. Much bigger than the targeting on the roto-laser had estimated. Weaponry loomed like nightmares, poking up through a hull so heavily clad with guns and cannons, not enough smooth surface showed to gleam. The elongated oval, reminiscent of a hand grenade, shimmered with the red glare of cautionary lights. Where no guns stood, razor-like fins sliced into the cosmos, poised to dice anything they touched into pieces. Leda was seriously outmatched.

It didn't daunt her. With Baird's assistance, she would think of some way to take on the monstrosity. An assessment of arms, power and strategy pinged through her thoughts in split seconds, causing her eyes to blink her observations in still photographs. Torpedo bay. Laser cannon. Roto-laser. Grappling turret. Skimmer bay. Sensors. The bottom. With the lethal razor fin, the bottom hardly seemed a vulnerability, but that was all there was, just a razor-like protrusion on the bottom of a ... "It's a battle station," Leda said. Armed so heavily, the vessel could be nothing else.

"Our torpedoes aren't going to touch that," Rugar said.

"This is our last stand, we need to play it smarter than launching torpedoes."

Rugar fussed beside her, bobbing and jerking, his antsy twinges imposing themselves on the corner of her sight. "What'd you have in mind?" he asked.

"Our only chance is to get inside."

"Go in?" He howled in approval. "You always think big, Leda."

"Eslin doesn't have a chance with that thing flying around."

"Salvation never met that."

"How do you know? We haven't heard anything from Salvation in over a decade."

"I'm still here." Rugar faded, the battle station foisting itself in a horrific twilight, first over the stars, then over Leda's oval face.

Heading her skimmer toward a hatch, Leda powered off every system, converting the tiny craft into rubble. Whether a hangar for an armada of fighters, or a storage bay, or something else, it didn't matter. The hatch was a way in.

When she felt the monstrosity's tug of gravity on her vessel, her armor-clad palm slapped the eject panel, freeing the transparent dome of the cockpit to tumble away. The safety harness released and the seat engaged boosters sending Leda out on a separate trajectory, pitching and twirling, impersonating space debris until magnets on her armor switched on at the critical moment, generating a field which attracted her toward the enemy station.

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