DJINN OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Six

BATTLECORPS

Jungle
Northeast of Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyran Alliance
29 October 3057

Sardella watched the softwoods bend back as his *Highlander*-732 pushed through the copse of trees. The expected cracks and splinters didn't come—the resilient conifers simply flexed far enough to let him pass. Having shoved through a dozen such stands of trees he knew the tree wouldn't snap back to its original shape immediately, but he had no doubt it would be serenely upright again in a matter of hours.

Jarhaal called them rubber trees. The science wonks probably had a less interesting and less accurate name for them.

His *Highlander*—along with Jarhaal's and Twindle's—had to press their way through the trees, even though it forced them to move slowly. Stepping off the loamy ridges or islands or whatever the proper name was for the narrow tracks of ground dense enough to support the rubber trees meant sinking the heavy BattleMechs hip-deep in bog.

The bog didn't hurt the machines, of course, but it had taken Twindle thirty minutes to regain solid footing that was a single step behind her. And the struggle of turning her BattleMech had sucked the ninety-ton machine down to its armpits.

Jarhaal had suggested she fire her jump jets, but she'd wisely ignored him. Touching off fusion jets buried in quasi-solid bog would have either breached a chamber with back pressure or flash-dried the peat to entombing cement. Neither result would have completely disabled the BattleMech, but either would have set Twindle up for a lot more ridicule than simply sinking. And landing her brand new 'Mech in the shop on its first tour....

Sardella's lance was composed entirely of new *Highlander*-732s—he himself had upgraded from his venerable 733 just over a month ago. Soon all of Third Bat Baker Company would be one hundred percent factory fresh, thanks to the newly-minted contract with StarCorp. He wasn't sure which rumors concerning the deal were true, but he did know command reorganization was already under way. In a few months the Eighth Regulars would have a fourth bat-

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talion—comprised entirely of *Highlander* 732s and *Emperor* 6-As fresh from the StarCorp assembly line on Son Hoa.

Sardella's cockpit rocked, throwing him against his safety harness. The clayey loam had shifted beneath the ninety-ton machine—its right foot had slipped a sudden pair of meters. Not enough to upset the gyro system, but enough to remind him the command couch was no place to be daydreaming about the future.

Ahead and to the right the icon of the Florida TTM's *Hatchetman* told him roughly where their scout had gotten to. The local atmosphere tended to fuzz the Identify Friend/Foe transponder's range and bearing numbers.

Normally a militia *Hatchetman* would not be used as a scout. Of course, this was not normally. The lighter machine could traipse across ground that would swallow their assault 'Mechs.

He would have preferred doing without the Florida's help at all. Leftenant Britto had been the very picture of the socially connected, upright...

Sardella shook his head.

The young prig had been properly respectful of Sardella's rank, but managed to make it clear he felt he was extending a special courtesy in doing so. The Nagelring had been swarming with Britto's ilk—pampered scions who'd treated him as though the full scholarship his scores had earned him somehow made him *less* worthy to pilot a BattleMech than those born to the class.

Sardella deliberately unclenched his jaw. The arrogant upstart—no doubt well on his way to a politically astute career with the Eleventh—was safely behind them, supporting Franks as the *Highlander* pilot protected Chevalier Base.

He smiled at the memory of the Florida MechWarrior's face as he accepted to the information his rank in the Lyran Alliance had dropped from the FedCom "first leftenant" to simply "leutnant." No doubt some adjustment would be made once the militia lance rejoined its command, but Sardella had enjoyed making the field adjustment.

The Florida *Hatchetman* pilot seemed to be a cut above his lance leader professionally, but was just as annoying in his own way. So far just a voice on the radio, the man's foppish attitude seemed to be amused and bored by turns. Sardella couldn't decide if he imitating holovid stereotypes because he didn't know any better

or just thought he could impress the Eighth by pretending to be an old hand.

Given the evident efficiency and speed with which the militia jockey zigzagged across their projected course, Sardella was inclined to think he was trying to be impressive. The good scouting skills almost made up for the pretentious attitude—but it didn't disguise the fact he was a junior jockey in the least competent theater militia fielded by the Lyran Alliance.

Maybe he thought being tapped for a mission with the Eighth was his chance to get out of the major leagues.

Sardella grinned at the thought.

His ad hoc lance was proceeding by most direct route to the fallen *Crockett* the noble young Britto had found. From there they would reconnoiter along the pirate's back trail. Or, failing that—likely given Despair's enthusiastic flora and resilient soil—determine the search pattern most likely to prove fruitful.

To his left a dense stand of almost-cypress towered, teasing with their implication of solid earth. The tall hardwoods—surrounded by the "knees" of their root system sticking up out of the alkali soup Despair called water—needed to be standing in at least six meters of mush softer than oatmeal to grow.

Sardella glanced at his scanner screens. Nothing. Or rather, a lot of somethings that signified nothing. Whips of metal-heavy mist that read like floating sheets of copper, thermal sheers that bounced back funhouse reflections of his own image, and acres of bog and swamp that his StarLight LX-1 targeting computer insisted was as solid as DropShip armor.

Of course, when he focused the sensors directly at the ground ahead, they parsed the blends of solids and liquids. Why it didn't remember what it had seen when he resumed sweeping the horizon was beyond him. Evidently it was just one of those differences between a computer and a brain.

Reaching the end of the meandering string of rubber trees, he aimed his targeting sensors down. Sweeping the stretch of marsh between him and the next stand he found a bridge of solid ground that arced to his right. It would take them a half kilometer out of their way but it was the only trustworthy trail he could find.

Not for the first time, he considered returning to the *Pith* and hopping directly to the solid earth of the foothills. But—as the pilot

had explained—the only way to travel that short distance was to exit the blinding atmosphere and circle the world. A simple up/down hop didn't give the nav computer sufficient time to recalibrate and calculate the landing before it was blinded again.

Also, the hop would have carried them past any indication of pirate movements on the surface. Intel that may well have proved vital. If there had been any. So far, all they'd found was bog.

And giant dinosaur birds.

Sardella had to admit those beasts were impressive. The small herd they'd encountered—a family pod, their Florida scout called it—had included beasts that towered above the *Highlander*s. Though his instruments said their mass had been about equal to the BattleMech's, their size had stunned him. Or perhaps it wasn't just that they were big, but the fact that they were big and *alive*.

A flurry of movement hear the ground caught his eye. Thermal imaging confirmed warm-blooded life forms as a pack of six-legged birds boiled out of the dense ferns of the fen. In apparent frenzy the beasts attacked his *Highlander*, snapping blindly at its lower legs and ankle actuators.

The creatures massed three to five tons each. If Sardella had been on the ground—even in a battle suit—he'd have been devoured in seconds. As it was, he was merely annoyed. Trying to kick or stomp the creatures on the slippery soil would only make it difficult to keep his 'Mech upright and on course. And he knew from the training video that the creatures were too stupid to understand the threat of his weapons even if he blasted a few.

Not that he was going to risk advertising their position to any observers the pirates may have posted with weapons fire.

Without a club to swing at the scavengers, there was nothing for it but to slog through the pack until the creatures either lost interest or fell beneath the *Highlander*'s plodding tread through dumb luck.

A Berserker *would be nice*.

He wondered how the bird-men natives coped with the beasts. Bannik Severin, the expert on Despair's big secret—Despair's former big secret—was on some expedition far enough from their field of operations to not matter. But from what Sardella had seen on the vid Dr. Tindale had shown them, a bird man would have been little more than a mouthful for the scavengers yapping at his ankles.

With only spears and stone axes to defend themselves....

He shuddered.

There was a lot to be said for applied technology.

Evidently tiring of trying to bring his BattleMech down, the pack of jackals turned on Jarhaal's machine. Unlike Sardella, he risked a stumble side-kicking a knot of the creatures. Two or three stayed behind to devour the few he'd wounded, but the rest continued to break their teeth—*if they have teeth*—against the armor of his lower legs.

For reasons that no doubt made sense to the scavengers, Twindle's *Highlander* strode through the gauntlet unmolested.

The jackal dinosaur birds seemed to have been guarding the edge of the swamp. The ground rose slightly ahead of them and read solid even when sensor arrays were focused straight down. There were still pockets of bog—some the size of lakes—but the changing vegetation made the muddy pits easy to spot.

Sardella doubled his speed.

Passing a thick stand of hardwoods, he caught sight of the bright blue Florida *Hatchetman* standing on the crest of a low ridge to his left. A glance at his screens confirmed that his sensors didn't see the BattleMech, even though it was at the extreme edge of his weapons' range.

"Either of you have him on sensors?" he asked.

"Clear as day," Twindle answered. "Why?"

"I've got nothing," Jarhaal added. "Wait. Heavy metal. But more on the ground than standing."

"Negative on the ground metal," Twindle said. "They weren't kidding about this atmosphere."

Sardella grunted. A changing wind had evidently swept away the veil and he now had clear numbers on the upright *Hatchetman*. But the ground clutter read like nearly four times its mass.

Which would make sense with an assault and a medium 'Mech at his feet.

Without a word he headed for the nearest point of the ridge, choosing to follow its curve around the suspiciously flat ground between them and the Florida 'Mech.

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"Looks like we have some new players on the field," said Aldicott as Sardella drew near. His voice sounded less bored than usual. "Or maybe the pirates have dissention within the ranks."

"How do you mean?"

The *Hatchetman*'s left arm extended, pointing toward the bog below the slope.

Sardella saw what looked like the lower half of a large 'Mech's torso sitting on the ground. Evidently the upper torso had been removed at the rotator ring, though he could think of no reason for someone do a field strip like that in the middle of the wilderness.

Then he realized the curves and angles jutting just above the thick ferns were hip assemblies. The torso wasn't sitting on the ground, the bog had sucked the legs down.

"I read that as the bottom half of a *Flashman*," Aldicott said. "Unless Leftenant Britto took out a *Flashman* and forgot to mention it, there's at least one unknown BattleMech in play.

"From what I can pick up," he added, walking his own BattleMech out onto the soft ground, "the rest of it is here, there, and there. Already sunk."

"Like you're going to be if you don't get back on solid ground," Twindle pointed out.

"Little chance of that at only forty-five tons," the Florida militiaman answered. "You'd be fine, too, if you kept your behemoth moving."

Sardella bit back a reprimand at Aldicott's patronizing tone. He'd let the idiot realize how much his attempt to impress the Regulars with his expertise had backfired through the Florida's CO after the mission was over.

"There's hardpan under the bog," the militia jockey was saying. "This *Flashman* half is standing on it. The broken bits that were blown away are near enough to the surface for my sensors to read when I stand right on top of them.

"If I can determine what weapons mix took this chap out so thoroughly, we'll have some idea what we're up against."

"Obviously an assault of some sort," Sardella said. "An alpha strike from an *Awesome* at close range would blow the top off a *Flashman*.

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"If we wanted to flip this *Crockett* over, it's a good bet we'd find PPC scars all over its front as well."

"Perhaps." The militia jockey stretched the word out. "I take it you don't credit Leftenant Britto's assessment of Leftenant Caradine's performance."

"A *Hatchetman* might hinder an assault 'Mech," Sardella said, making his annoyance with the regional weekend warrior's presumption clear. "Maybe even do some damage.

"But even if seasoned MechWarriors had been piloting them, if Caradine's *Hatchetman* and the *Nightsky* really came up against this *Crockett* and another assault the way Britto says he thinks they did—" Sardella shook his head, not even bothering to explain how many ways that scenario was wrong. "Your Leftenant Atreus showed the only brains of the bunch when she ran like hell."

"Stereotypical attitude," Aldicott sounded almost sleepy. "I remember it well."

Sardella felt his jaw slacken at the condescending tone. But before he could blister the yokel's hide, Jarhaal interrupted.

"Looks like they salvaged the *Nightsky*."

Sardella joined him on the other side of the fallen *Crockett*. The ground had been torn up, but the ferocious growth rate of the local ferns made it impossible to determine more. Except...

"Any sort of tractor would have torn up a lot more ground," he said. "Gouged furrows pulling it out and a trail hauling it away."

Sardella replayed the loop of battle ROM footage Britto had provided on a secondary screen. The medium 'Mech looked pretty smashed by the *Crockett*. But now that he had some experience with Despair's deceptive soil he realized the machine could have been pressed into the earth rather than crushed.

"Another 'Mech dragged it clear," he said, pointing to deep furrows where something had evidently dug in its heels. "Then they got a jockey inside and walked the thing out of here."

"Not an *Awesome*, then," Aldicott said mildly. "No hands."

Sardella shook his head, refusing to acknowledge the militiaman's interjection. The pompous Florida 'Mech jockey seemed incapable of staying silent—or in his place. No wonder he'd been sent to serve out his time on the back side of nowhere.

"Whoever our unknown enemy—our second unknown enemy—is," Sardella said to his own MechWarriors. "It looks like they've been allowed to salvage a state of the art BattleMech in perfect working order."

For a moment he was annoyed at Britto for letting the pirates get the *Nightsky*, but recognized the feeling as foolish. While his *Axeman* was more formidable than a *Hatchetman* or *Nightsky*, there was little the Florida leutnant could have done against whatever took out the *Crockett* and the *Flashman*. If he'd tried to guard the fallen 'Mech until civilians from Chevalier Base arrived to salvage it, he would only have succeeded in getting himself killed.

Something in the still looping image from the *Axeman*'s battle ROM caught his eye. He froze the image, then moved his *Highlander* closer to the felled *Crockett* to eyeball the damage directly.

"Somebody got this guy in the back with an auto cannon," he said. "High. Across the back of the Hollies and sensor array."

"Stupid shot."

"May have been all he had time for," Sardella said.

Looking around he tried to get a feel for how the battle had played out, but the landscape yielded few clues. From the pattern of charred earth and day-old growth, a lot of laser fire had been directed at something standing in front of the slope beneath his feet. But he could see no evidence a heavy or assault 'Mech had stood on the soft bog at the base of the hill. It was almost as if the *Flashman* had been aiming at the hillside itself.

And what assault 'Mech had enough PPCs to blast a *Flashman*'s torso to scrap, an autocannon to spray the *Crockett* and hands to grab a *Nightsky*? More than one BattleMech had taken out the *Crockett* and the *Flashman*.

Much as he hated to admit it, the Florida militiaman was probably right about there being some sort of civil war within the pirate ranks.

Sardella's radio beeped. Looking down he saw Aldicott had squirted him a compressed data file. No doubt his assay of the *Flashman* wreckage. He shunted it to a reader without expanding and returned his attention to the rolling landscape leading away from the swamps.

The ground didn't hold tracks. But logic dictated that was the only course BattleMechs wanting to avoid the swamps would go.

"Any ID on the paint scheme?" he asked Twindle. Her gift for organizing data had made her his defacto intelligence officer years ago.

"Looks like we're up against the Adders," she answered.

"Accountants?"

"Adders are venomous serpents on Terra," Twindle said as though Sardella had asked a reasonable question. "And up until about thirty-five years ago they were a marginal mercenary company. Did some work on both sides of the law. Nothing major—at least nothing major we could document. The golden kitties may have more—the Adders spent most of their time in the Eleventh's territory."

"What do we know now?" Sardella asked. "Assets and tactics."

"The Adders had a full company and liked to operate as two ComStar-style demi-companies. No tech support—or anything else—to speak of," Twindle's distracted tone told Sardella she was reading a screen. "Conflicting reports on composition which could reflect personnel changes or battlefield gains and losses or just bad reporting. Best guess: two or three light scouts with the rest probably heavies and assaults.

"Their specialty was brute force."

"You keep saying was."

"They dropped off everyone's radar thirty, thirty-five years ago," Twindle answered. "File says it was assumed they'd broken up or been folded into some larger outfit."

"Seems we've found their hideaway," Aldicott broke in.

Sardella was surprised to find the *Hatchetman* standing at his elbow.

The medium 'Mech had its back to him, facing toward distant foothills barely visible through the shifting mists.

"The question is, why are they here?"

"Garrison duty?" Jarhaal suggested. "Say they got folded into some big boys, got stuck with the job of guarding their home base while the main force does business."

"Nobody would make Despair home unless they had to," Twindle said with feeling. "But it's a great stash for goods you can't move."

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Sardella considered.

It made a certain amount of sense. Particularly given the poor condition of the *Crockett*'s paint and finish. Guarding a storage dump—probably stranded here and dependent on their "employers" for food, water, even breathable air. Knowing failure to protect the cache would result in slow starvation—or even slaughter.

"Next door to hell," Aldicott said, his thoughts evidently shadowing Sardella's.

For once he agreed with the militiaman.

"But thirty-five years?" Twindle asked. "These jockeys can't possibly be the originals."

"Maybe just the 'Mechs stayed," Jarhaal said. "Rotating personnel is a hell of a lot easier than rotating a company of BattleMechs."

Sardella nodded. He certainly liked that scenario better than the one he'd been imagining.

They'd come in looking for a drug manufacturing ring and found a pirate stronghold instead. It wasn't the objective they'd been assigned, but as targets of opportunity went, it was one of the best.

By the letter of his orders, Sardella should leave the pirates where he'd found them and go after the drug distribution center. Not really a risk, since he doubted these goons had the resources to get anywhere while Three Bat Two smoked out the druggies.

But why take the chance? There was enough flex in the objective to clean out this viper den before moving on. Besides, that's what the Eighth did.

"The way I see it, Aldicott's on the right track," he said. He'd probably pay for that admission with extra attitude from the militiaman, but it wasn't in him to not acknowledge good thinking. "There's some sort of power struggle going on with the pirates.

"Right now we got no idea how many are on which side and who's beating who—or even if these Adders are the only ones involved," he let the possibility of a larger force of unidentified hostiles sink in. "Either way, they're shooting at each other, and they obviously don't care if bystanders get caught in the crossfire.

"Which means Chevalier Base is likely to become a shooting gallery real quick."

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He paused, inviting comment. No one offered a dissenting opinion.

"It's a good bet there's a pirate stronghold within a day's march of here," he said. "I want the *Pith* in geo-sync right over our heads. They're going to use the ship's sensors to scan and rescan until they can punch through this muck and get a reading."

Which means hiking two hours back until we're close enough to Chevalier to get a radio signal through.

"One more thing," he knew he was about to point the obvious, but it was better to be sure everyone was on the same page than to risk a fatal screw-up later. "The hostiles have captured a *Nightsky* that may or may not be in shape to be a threat. More to the point, it's mounting a friendly IFF transponder.

"If you see a *Nightsky*, I don't care what it's transmitting, take it out."