

DJINN OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Ten

***Jungle foothills
West-northwest of Chevalier Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyrn Alliance
29 October 3057***

The plodding exodus of tonners followed the curve of drier ground—and Hauptmann Sardella's prediction—hugging the base of the hills in a shallow curve northward as they entered the swamp region.

If they stayed this course, the beasts would pass a bit less than a kilometer north of Chevalier Base. They wouldn't even infringe on the area Lex had been patrolling—was it only two days ago?

The secondary screen flickered at the edge of her vision. She'd left the image looping—flipping back and forth between the readings on the two 'Mechs she'd spotted on the hill above Aldicott and Sardella.

"Damn it!"

"What?" Chevalier asked.

But it was Lex's turn not to answer. The image on the screen wasn't looping back and forth between the readings on the sixty-ton BattleMech and the seventy-tonner. It was bouncing between the two different images of the sixty. Live—and playing the recording back—the numbers had seemed to morph from one machine to the next. But at the end of the loop, when the transformation was complete, it jumped instantly back to the first set of numbers.

Lex lurched as her *Nightsky* stepped into a creek bed she hadn't noticed. Checking to be sure there were no more serious hazards nearby, she refocused on the screen. It was a quick tap of buttons to freeze the two sets of numbers next to each other.

And that's what it had been—two sets of numbers. 'Mechs next to each other—or at least along the same vector—with their readings blurred to form one impossible machine by Despair's fog.

Dividing her attention between the live sensors, the view through the cockpit canopy and the auxiliary screen, Lex worked to refine the numbers. Standard filters didn't apply—or at least not well.

She relied on her judgment—or guessed outright—to nudge the readings into meaningful data.

Definitely two BattleMechs. One—the nearer one, she thought—was squatter, wider, and running a bit hotter than the other. And the taller one just beyond it...

The outline teased at her memory. Nothing she had seen on Despair, she was certain. But somewhere else with fog and dark and rain. A *Lancelot*! The memory of Hauptmann Showalter defeating her in the pouring rain on the Florida training grounds snapped into sudden focus. Knowing what she was looking at, there was no mistaking the high, boxy shoulders and the tapering large laser arms.

And the shorter one? Sixty tons and running hotter—bigger engine? Or poor shielding. Broad. If she could make out the arms, figure out the main weapons... But the image was too fuzzed. It didn't matter, she had enough to report.

"Hauptmann Sardella," she transmitted.

"Go ahead, Atreus," Caradine answered.

"I've been studying the readings I gave you for the sixty-ton BattleMech I saw earlier," Lex said. "Be advised I now believe it was two sixty-ton 'Mechs close together. Compare the first set of numbers with the last, ignore transition figures."

"Looking," Caradine said.

Lex was aware of Chevalier being very quiet behind her.

"Confirmed, Atreus," Caradine said. "Hauptmann Sardella says he sees a *Champion* and something else."

Champion! *Of course.*

She couldn't make out the arms because the sensors imaged its stubby wings as a broad torso. Better yet, the *Champion* fit the profile of her phantom *Victor*: a close-matched pair of medium lasers and an autocannon. She'd just overestimated the power of the weapon that had toppled the *Crockett*.

"The taller BattleMech is a *Lancelot*," Lex supplied. "Have not cleared up the numbers on the heavy 'Mech yet, but it's definitely only one. Tally three hostiles ahead."

"Good work, Lex."

Lex suspected that last hadn't originated with the Eighth's hauptmann.

"How many more, Chevalier?" she asked over her shoulder. "Adders were a company. Your grandfather couldn't have imported a whole lot of reinforcements, or we'd have seen them by now."

Chevalier said nothing. Which was what she had expected. She'd never been trained in interrogation. Asking her prisoner questions had more to do with organizing her own thoughts than gaining new information.

"So twelve 'Mechs, less seven destroyed and one captured," she said. "A lance left? They have to know they can't win against a company of Lyran Regulars. Even if they avoid a ground search, with two DropShips in orbit, they can't get off world."

Her external microphones conveyed a thunderous sneeze.

A cloud of burning methane washing over her canopy alerted Lex that she'd wandered too close to the river of migrating tonners. Her sensors went down, but she didn't need them to see a second of the great green herbivores douse her with flame before turning to run.

A family pod of greens had separated from the megaherd, braving the packs of scavengers to grab mouthfuls of foliage from the trees of the hillside. Now they were lunging back into the mass, their blind charge creating a ripple effect.

Lex watched as beast after beast took momentary alarm and tried to push past—or in some cases jump over—the animals around it to get away. The panic didn't last. With no obvious danger threatening, the tonners calmed down almost immediately—their minds too basic to imagine danger.

By the time her sensors were back on line, the river of tonners was flowing placidly.



Sardella replayed the loop of sensor readings the Florida lieutenant had deciphered. Seen as a whole, it made no sense. But once you realized it wasn't a whole...

Brains versus computers. Again.

The targeting computer had seen the readings as one machine—a machine itself, it didn't have the imagination to realize that was impossible. And their brains, used to this godforsaken planet disorienting their equipment, had assumed the computer was right about there being one machine but wrong about the sensor data.

Speaking of confusing recordings and wholes that make no sense....

He keyed his mic.

"Leutnant Caradine, it is my sad duty to inform you that you died in the line of duty," he said soberly. "Leutnant Atreus also died tragically."

"There may be some inaccuracies imbedded in that intel," Caradine startled him by responding in the same somber tones.

Pretty daring for a first year militia Leutnant to joke with an Eighth Regulars Hauptmann. Then again, he'd started it, so it might have been more daring not to go along.

"I'm inclined to think Lance Leader Britto drew a wrong conclusion based on available information," Sardella said more seriously. "And given that available information, I can see why the error was made. I wonder if you could fill in a few blanks."

"Certainly, sir," Caradine answered crisply.

Yep, following my lead.

Sardella pulled up the ROM clips Britto had provided. The battle scene, the headless body of Caradine's *Hatchetman*, the broken trail of softwoods and 'Mech prints showing Atreus's short run north then disappearance to the south, the *Nightsky*—evidently crushed—trapped beneath the fallen *Crockett*. With a quick series of taps, he blipped the visuals over to the *Thorn's* computer. He did not send along the lance leader's actual report. He wanted to hear what Caradine had to say without knowing her commander's spin on the facts.

The silence stretched for several minutes.

Sardella scanned and rescanned ahead. Knowing how thoroughly the sensors and targeting computer could be led astray, he was not willing to rely on any automatic alarms to warn him of heavy metal contact.

“Sir,” Caradine said in the same crisp tones of a moment before. “I can understand Lieutenant—Leutnant—Britto’s thinking. We were not aware he found us when we were down.”

“We?”

“Yes, sir. Leutnant Atreus had already rescued me from my escape pod when she attacked the *Crockett*,” Caradine explained.

“Wait,” Sardella interrupted. “How did she take out a *Crockett* with a *Nightsky*?”

“She cut a standard jump-over short to land toe-to-toe,” Caradine said. “She delivered an overhand hatchet chop on landing, then fired her small pulse laser directly into the cockpit.”

Sardella tried to picture it.

“You’re telling me that at melee range, the *Crockett* pilot didn’t use his autocannon?” he asked.

Now it was Caradine’s turn to pause. He wondered what aspect of her story she was going to adjust.

“Sir, I can only conclude he was distracted by the laser two meters in front of his viewscreen,” the young leutnant answered at last. “Also....”

Another moment’s hesitation.

“Have you noticed that these MechWarriors aren’t very good?” she asked. “It’s not just that their ‘Mechs are in poor repair, the pilots themselves seem to be out of their depth in combat.”

Sardella replayed the memory of the pirate *Cyclops* going down under the massed attack of several lesser machines. Several targets and he’d missed them all but the *Nightsky* because he didn’t focus on any one adversary long enough to actually fire. A competent MechWarrior would not only have survived the engagement, he would have destroyed the *Hatchetman*—and very likely the *Nightsky*—in the process.

Assuming their intel on the Adders was even approximately accurate, these BattleMechs had been on Despair—subjected to corrosive air, fire-breathing mega-birds, and who knew what else for thirty-five years. And Twindle’s theory the pilots inside the ‘Mechs weren’t the Adders made a lot of sense. It was looking more and more as though the muscle these pirates were using

to garrison their stash world was a group of cowboys who knew more about herding big birds than they did about combat.

"I take your point," he said.

But that answer led to another problem. Sardella could not reconcile the image of Atreus taking the fight to an assault 'Mech with her medium after running away from the same machine a few hours earlier.

"Why did she not engage the *Crockett* during the initial battle?" he asked. "Working together, the two of you should have been able to break free with both BattleMechs in one piece. Made it back to base with your intel."

"She wasn't there," Caradine sounded surprised at the question. "You saw the tracks of her search pattern. Something distracted her, then she followed the route of my escape pod. The *Crockett* and *Flashman* were both long gone when she found my 'Mech."

Sardella grunted. The way the *Nightsky's* tracks dug into the soft earth, the BattleMech had been running at speed. Not the prints of a MechWarrior conducting a search pattern.

"When the *Crockett* fell on us, we were knocked unconscious," Caradine resumed her report. "We had assumed it was only a matter of minutes, but from this record I can see it could as easily have been much longer."

A sensor bleep. Sweeping manually, Sardella recognized it as a natural outcropping of— No, it was a plant. A tree with enough iron in its bark to stand up to a hand laser. This world was crazy.

"Any idea what destroyed the *Flashman*?" Sardella asked when he was sure nothing dangerous lay ahead.

"Some combination of jump jets, elbow spike and hatchet," Caradine answered. "I think she fired lasers, too. You'll have to review her battle ROM. I was getting thrown around too much to follow what was happening."

Sardella stared at his radio. Then he leaned as far forward as his safety harness allowed to stare directly at the *Thorn*. The small machine was just visible at the edge of his canopy as it kept pace with his *Highlander*.

There was certainly nothing about it to indicate its pilot had lost her mind.

He wondered about the extent of her injuries. He thought he remembered from first aid training that shock often involved hallucinations and false memories.

"You're right," he said at last. "I am very much looking forward to reviewing that battle ROM."

Below them the valley had widened out into the swamps and marshes of the coastal region. As he'd predicted, the migrating tonners had curved north, following the band of firmer ground that framed the wetland basin. He adjusted course slightly.

"Sir," Caradine said suddenly, "Atreus asks if you are familiar with herding horses."

"Why—? Never mind," Sardella realized if there was a point to the question Atreus would get to it faster without his counter questions. "Tell her I was raised on a cattle ranch."

Static crackled from his cockpit speakers.

"—oos," said Atreus.

Sardella saw the icon denoting her *Nightsky* climbing the ridge toward him. Not a reckless maneuver, considering their quarry was probably well ahead, but still opening a gaping hole in their tiny dragnet.

"Go ahead, Atreus," he said.

"Sir, what would your DropShips do if there were a natural disaster?" she asked, her voice getting clearer with each step. "If something happened to the base?"

Sardella opened his mouth, then stopped, his eyes caught by the topo map. The megaherd of tonners was going to pass north of Chevalier Base. The pirate BattleMechs were north of the tonners. And these tonners were terrified of BattleMechs.

"A stampede," he said.

"When the DropShips land to rescue survivors—"

"I see it, Leutenant," Sardella cut her off. The pirates had a DropShip stuck on the ground. No doubt a JumpShip lying doggo near a pirate point. With the *Pith* or *Harpy* on the surface, they'd make a break for it. Chevalier junior would be their prisoner, but he could probably beat any charges—after all, he was a kidnap victim.

Though the fact that he'd been terrified until he learned he wasn't being taken to the base said a lot about how innocent he was.

"Caradine, relay to Aldicott. Update him on the TacSit. Tell him best speed to engage and delay pirate 'Mechs," he studied the map, trying to estimate the megaherd's speed and radio distances through Despair's opaque atmosphere.

"Atreus, outrun the herd. Get to the base. Have them radio the *Pith* and order it to land. Authority code Bad Egg. Tell Dimitri to deploy Beta and Gamma lances to start a counter stampede."

"There isn't—" Atreus began.

"Do it," Sardella snapped. "Try to raise Jarhaal and Twindle on the way. If you can't get them, you, Franks, and Britto will have to defend the base until they get there."

He was talking to the *Nightsky's* back. His targeting computer confirmed she was driving her 'Mech at twice the speed his *Highlander* could manage over the rough terrain.

"Let me go, sir," Caradine said. "This *Thorn* can—"

"You are my ears and voice, Caradine," he said. "Stick with me and keep trying to punch a radio signal through."

He looked at the numbers on the map. Atreus would make it. Jarhaal and Twindle—it depended on how fast they'd been pushing it since he lost contact.

He wasn't going to be close.