

DJINN OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Eleven

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

Lex pushed her *NightSky*, counting on momentum to carry her across slipping mud as she dashed along the skirt of the hill. She kept a screen of trees between herself and the plodding river of tonners.

"You can't beat them to the base," Chevalier said from behind. A constant litany that had begun the moment he'd realized what she intended. Not begging, not cursing, not arguing—he was doing his best to persuade. "Even if you do get there, you can't stop the stampede. All you'll do is get killed."

Lex tried to block his words out as she dodged around rock outcrops and trees too big to push through. Scavengers and predators alike dodged out of her way with outraged squawks and challenges.

"Don't throw your life away," Chevalier said. "You'll save more lives if you're there to help the survivors."

"I can stop this 'Mech, kill you, and be moving again in twenty seconds," Lex answered. "Shut up or die."

She thought she heard his mouth snap.

"Atreus to Eighth Lyran," she broadcast. "Atreus to Chevalier Base."

Nothing.

She continued to call. Every few minutes she repeated Sardella's orders and warned of the stampede. Just because she couldn't hear didn't mean no one heard her.

"Aldicott to Atreus," the voice wove through the static.

"Go, Aldicott."

"You're just passing below me," Aldicott answered. "I had ghost readings on something big and something little down your way. Just faded toward the base. Can't do better than that."

“Understood.”

Her screens were clear. Whatever Aldicott had seen was invisible at this level.

“What kills me kills you,” she said. “Any idea what’s ahead?”

“I don’t know BattleMechs.” Chevalier’s voice sounded genuinely frightened. “Two tall man-shaped ones, the one with no arms, and a small, fast man-shaped one.”

“Aldicott, prisoner tallies four unknown ‘Mechs,” Lex broadcast. “Add a scout to the ones we know.”

“Glad too,” Aldicott’s voice was faint. “Good luck.”

“Good hunting,” she answered.

To her right the megaherd seemed to swell, the nearest crashing through the trees of the hillside. She was near the leaders, the front ranks spreading out to alleviate the pressure of being pushed from behind.

If I could turn them now...

Lex squelched the thought. One ‘Mech was almost certainly not enough. Trying to change the river’s course this close to the base would at best fail and at worst start the stampede.

Her geolocator insisted she was zigzagging hundreds of meters from her line of travel, and her other sensor readings shifted randomly. But by balancing what she could see and what she knew of Despair with the data on the screens, Lex kept a straight course.

Heavy metal. Gone. Back. Gone. Her weapons lock alarm hooted as her thermals registered a fire bloom directly ahead.

Lex threw the yoke over, risking her *Nightsky’s* right ankle actuator in a desperate dodge left. She heard Chevalier cry out as he thumped against the equipment locker.

Her Thar-Hes 8A counted ten short range missiles, grouped four and six, as flame and earth geysered from where she’d been. A single medium laser lashed out, tagging the *Nightsky’s* torso just below its right arm.

Commando, decided the targeting computer even as her sensors refused to lock.

Unwilling to risk her damaged large pulse laser, Lex angled her 'Mech directly toward where the elusive 'Mech seemed to be. Not waiting for good tone, she fired. Steam and smoke billowed as her clean misses torched peat and ferns.

A six-flight of missiles, and this time her computer was paying attention—solid lock at extreme range for her mediums. Lex broke stride, dodging back, then surged forward at full acceleration.

Caught by the feint, the *Commando* jockey wasted his SRM-4 volley behind her. But again his laser hit where his missiles missed, slugging armor from the *Nightsky's* chest. Dangerously close to the holes dug by the *Cyclops* autocannon, but no significant damage.

Lex triggered the medium pulse lasers. The paired beams converged on the center of the scout 'Mech's torso, deforming the unshuttered missile tubes. No explosion, fresh loads had not cycled, but the launcher was useless.

His firepower halved, the *Commando* pilot broke to Lex's left, running up an arroyo too narrow for the *Nightsky* to follow safely.

"Aldicott, one *Commando* minus its six rack headed your way," Lex broadcast.

Without waiting for a reply, she resumed her run. Still leery of panicking the tonners, Lex wanted to put more distance between the *Nightsky* and the leading edge of the megaherd before cutting south.

The hillside to her left steepened into a cliff. An open fissure vented a dense mist her sensors insisted was equal parts magnesium, hydrochloric acid and wood.

Lex doubted the wood was there, but she cut back to a walk. The fissure could as easily open beneath her *Nightsky's* feet. Another hundred meters and—

A shape loomed out of the gloom.

Lancelot. Ten tons heavier, almost two meters taller, and right on top of her. Both arms came up as the sixty-ton 'Mech targeted her with its large lasers at contact range.

Her axe low for balance on the uneven terrain, Lex took a long step forward and twisted the *Nightsky's* torso left. The large laser on her right arm extended beyond the hand actuator, but it was

never intended as a melee weapon. Nonetheless, she drove it forward with all the power the myomer musculature was capable of, aiming for the deadly particle projection cannon just right of the *Lancelot's* centerline.

The jolt of impact threw her against her harness. Lex heard a thud and grunt behind her as she slapped the trigger panel with her open hand.

Light flooded the cockpit. Flashback from her two mediums scoring across the larger machine's chest, then a white-light sunburst as her big gun's housing flew apart. Part of her mind registered the omni-directional flare did little damage, but she didn't waste time thinking.

Swinging her axe upwards, she caught the underside of the *Lancelot's* right arm with the forearm blade of her *Nightsky's* axe. She pivoted as the blade rose, lifting the bigger 'Mech's large laser over her canopy.

The pirate fought the turn, the underside of its large laser's housing crumpling against the uranium axe. The *Lancelot's* torso laser fired, destroying Lex's right side medium. But the big 'Mech's PPC fountained impotent blue sparks, its emitter port a ragged scar around the ruin of the large laser.

Which was no longer attached to the *Nightsky*.

To save his large laser, the pirate pivoted his 'Mech to her right, lifting its right arm up and away from her blade.

Its gyro already struggling to compensate for the loss of the right arm, the *Nightsky* nearly overbalanced. Lex fought the yoke and pedals, twisting the BattleMech right and continuing the axe's upward swing. Momentum and inertia kept her upright.

Facing downhill, shoulder to shoulder with the pirate 'Mech, Lex shifted her *Nightsky's* mass left and swung her uranium axe in a savage backhand blow. Two and a half tons of dense metal shattered Starshield armor designed to deflect energy fire.

Grey-green coolant spewed.

The pirate's near-side arm was trapped between the BattleMechs, its torso laser was pointed uselessly out over the valley and the far side arm could not traverse enough to hit the *Nightsky*. Leaning into the blade, Lex shoved, putting the full weight of her 'Mech into driving the axe toward the *Lancelot's* gyro. The pirate twisted his 'Mech's

torso in a desperate attempt to break free that ripped cable and myomer. A fresh geyser announced the loss of another heat sink.

Lex felt precious seconds slipping away. The leaders of the megaherd had almost reached her position. She had to reach Chevalier Base, mount a defense. But if she broke away from the *Lancelot*, the pirate could cut her down with his lasers.

There was no choice.

Lex stepped back, yanking the axe free. Before the pirate could react, she struck a second backhand blow, shattering the already damaged right arm laser. The *Lancelot* backpedaled, trying to get position to bring its left arm laser to bear. Its torso laser wasted its power on the ruined stub of the *Nightsky's* right arm.

Lex drove forward, raining overhand blows to the bigger machine's upper torso and shoulders. The pirate twisted and bobbed, fighting to keep his cockpit from beneath the blade.

Then, as abruptly as he had attacked, the 'Mech pilot quit. The *Lancelot's* left arm dropped, pointing at the ground, and the pirate pressed his open and empty hands against the forward canopy.

Lex raised her axe.

"He surrendered!"

Lex nearly jumped out of her skin at Chevalier's shout. She'd forgotten he was back there.

Tripping the release, she brought the uranium blade down, splitting the large laser's housing from end to end.

"So he stays surrendered," she said.

With the first wave of the megaherd only a few hundred meters behind, Lex kicked her *Nightsky* forward. Striking out across swamp and jungle, she ran for Chevalier Base.



Sardella had been right about missing the action at Chevalier Base. In fact, he and Caradine had been forced to retreat to higher ground when the megaherd stampede threatened to head their way.

Retreating from sixty-ton animals in a ninety-ton assault 'Mech was something he'd never imagined doing. But cattle ranching

had taught him stampedes had more to do with avalanches than animals. His *Highlander* would be salvageable after being trampled by a few hundred panicked tonners, but when the kicking and tumbling was done there was a good chance the parts of him that broke free of the harness—if the harness held—would need to be hosed out of the cockpit.

What had frustrated him in that maddeningly slow climb—a *Highlander* made no speed up a steep and muddy slope covered with dense jungle—was Leutnant Caradine.

Her *Thorn* massed less than half the average tonner, and with its already severe damage he doubted it had the structural integrity to survive being trampled. But, though her light 'Mech could make it to safety at three times the best speed of the *Highlander*, she had refused to break formation.

Sticking like a twenty-some-ton shadow, she had backed her 'Mech uphill in his wake—her two remaining lasers aimed down slope. Covering his back in case the megaherd came their way.

Sardella had never seen anything more comic on the battlefield, and few things more noble. He chose not to point out she was being an idiot and focused on getting them both above the danger line as quickly as possible.

Finding a level shoulder of hillside, he judged they'd come far enough and turned to look down toward the Base. And saw only trees. The jungle growth was too high and thick to see through.

And teaming with heat signatures. Thousands of creatures—ranging in size from a few kilograms to a few tons were racing out of the lowlands. His sensors' acuity fell off too quickly to be sure, but his impression was they'd left the really big animals half a kilometer behind—which bothered him not at all. There was no such thing as being too far from a stampede.

He only wished he could see what the tonners were running from. Obviously Franks—and maybe Twindle and Jarhaal and Dimitri, if she'd arrived—had come up with something that drove away tonners but he couldn't think what.

Aware that on Despair his sensors were blind or lying or both, he nonetheless focused them toward Chevalier base—a narrow band to push as far as possible through the soup. There seemed to be a lot of heat and smoke. Had his people started a forest fire?

“Sir,” Caradine interrupted his thoughts. “Heavy metal at five o’clock. Approaching. I get no identify friend/foe.”

Switching from narrow beam to three-sixty, Sardella instantly saw a seventy-ton heavy and a medium of undetermined mass closing slowly on their position.

“No transponder confirmed,” he said. Any Florida or Eighth ‘Mech would have an active TFF—dark meant pirate.

Though not necessarily hostile pirates. According to his sensors, the heavy ‘Mech—which his targeting computer decided was a *Guillotine*—had its weapons powered down. He couldn’t be sure of the medium walking directly behind it.

Pivoting in place, he brought his weapons to bear. Which put him on Caradine’s flank.

Now I’m fire support for a Thorn.

The *Guillotine* hesitated as it reached the last screen of trees before the small clearing, then came ahead slowly. Its arms were held akimbo—elbows juttied out and weapons aimed at the ground. Their position must have made navigating through the jungle difficult, but there was no mistaking the intent.

With its flared shoulder armor, a *Guillotine* couldn’t hold its hands up to signify surrender.

Sardella recognized the heavy ‘Mech’s fresh battle scars as laser, canon, and axe damage. That last prepared him for Aldicott’s *Hatchetman* stepping from behind the *Guillotine*, but not for the condition of the Florida ‘Mech.

The high crest above the cockpit—including the silver globe of the sensor array and the communications pod—had been sheared away. The cockpit was open to Despair’s toxic atmosphere, which meant Aldicott had to be burning in the fumes.

From the angle of the damage, Sardella judged the *Guillotine*’s large laser in physical contact with the command pod.

No wonder the Florida can’t keep their ‘Mechs up and running.

Aldicott raised his hatchet, bringing the broad side of the blade close to his canopy. He followed the salute with a sweeping motion, using the hatchet to indicate the direction of the base.

“Good afternoon” and “Shall we go?” Sardella translated.

Turning his sensors to the lowlands, he saw most of the tonners had gone and none of those present were running.

“Caradine, you have point,” he said. “Let’s go see what’s for dinner.”