

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Nine

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“It was just a stupid prank gone horribly, tragically wrong,” said Rabbi Miriam Waxman of the York City Congregation, New Orthodox Reorganized Temple Israel, reading from a prepared statement. She stood on the steps of the York Judicial Complex, behind a podium which still bore stickers from last month’s gubernatorial elections. The news media had been given less than an hour’s warning that the impromptu press conference would take place.

“Those responsible for this shameful act have stepped forward and made a complete confession to the congregation,” Rabbi Waxman read from her notes, written on the traditional paper used for official pronouncements within the NORTI, without looking directly at the holocameras. “At their request we have escorted these young people to the civil authorities, to whom they surrendered.

“Their names and particulars will be released by the District Attorney’s office in accordance with their guidelines if and when they see fit,” Rabbi Waxman read, raising her voice over reporters’ questions. “It is the position of the York City Congregation in particular and the New Orthodox Reorganized Temple Israel as a whole that the matter is now closed. There

will be further public discussion or statements sanctioned by this body until the criminal and civil trials have run their course.

“Those congregants directly involved in the incident will of course cooperate fully with all secular authorities. A final statement may be made by the New Orthodox Reorganized Temple Israel leadership in response to the judgment of the courts, but only after all legal proceedings, including appeals, have been concluded.”

With that the outspoken leader of the York Congregation who had just days before been denouncing what she called the Planetary Constabulary’s “inaction” ended her final statement regarding has been dubbed the Rosh Hashanah Massacre. Some observers noted that she at no time apologized to the authorities for her daily criticism of their handling of the case. Her supporters were quick to point out that it was she and not the secular law enforcement officials who delivered the perpetrators into custody.

On the evening of September 21 last, the York Congregation was holding their “*Rosh Hashanah 6818 Festival*” —a combination of religious service and cultural arts exhibition showcasing Jewish traditions for non-Jewish participants—in the Congregation’s Social Center when what some onlookers described as a “wave of madness” swept through the crowd. Many people, most of them children, began screaming and attacked one another or objects indiscriminately. Some turned the

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violence on themselves.

Initial investigations of the scene were hazardous as some forensic technicians and medics were struck with fits of the madness. Subsequent testing revealed that much of the Social Center was coated with a fine dust which contained trace amounts of the hallucinogen known as MindMASC.

It was determined that “several kilos” of the finely ground mixture had been sifted into the Center’s air-conditioning system. The process had to have been gradual, investigators explained, because of the quantity of dust and the thoroughness with which it was spread.

The dust was so fine as to have been nearly invisible when airborne, investigators said.

Forensic and medical investigators concluded the effects of the drug varied widely not only because of differences in individual metabolisms, but because the MindMASC used was of low-grade “street” quality. Much of the material was actually inert, being filler used to increase the apparent volume of the drugs. Thus some victims inhaled essentially harmless dextrose powder, others received mild dosages of MindMASC and others were overdosed by the drug.

Investigators pointed out that this was a remarkably inefficient way to deliver the drug and that the perpetrators would have to have worn protective gear and been in

position for “up to an hour” sifting the dust into the ventilation system at some point after the final filters.

They also stated that this was the first case on record of a mass dosing of MindMASC. As Forensics Tech First Class Gerblat Boise explained: “MindMASC is notorious for going inert if you try to dissolve it. Most dealers have tubs of water ready to destroy evidence. Nobody ever thought of using it as a cloud of powder before.”

According to Judicial Complex sources, speaking on the condition of anonymity, the perpetrators were youths whose intent had been to “liven up” the festival by giving everyone a “buzz.” They had delayed nine days before revealing themselves because they had wanted the chance to observe *Yom Kippur*—the rite of atonement—in their Temple one last time. The court has not yet decided if the confessed perpetrators are to be tried as adults or minors.

While denouncing the tragedy, Rabbi Angus MacGuillicutty of the Old Skul Traditional Congregation qualified his support by saying the tragedy was a “sad and terrible” consequence of the Orthodox Reorganized Temple’s practice of turning traditional high holidays into folk festivals and entertainments. He further stated the deaths could have been avoided if the NORTI had properly restricted itself to one day of celebration instead of two.

In response, Rabbi Waxman stated....

Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
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Twice Lex paused to sweep the horizon with the long range sensors. Nothing.

Even so, she could not shake the feeling the second mystery 'Mech was still in the area, either hunting her or searching for Caradine's pod. She hoped the obstinate local conditions made the enemy was as blind as she was.

Half a kilometer from the fallen *Hatchetman*, the overhead damage seemed to peak and begin descending. Sighting along the trail of broken branches that marked the escape pod's flight, Lex cycled her radio to tight beam.

"Atreus to Caradine," she said. Then, remembering the clicks: "Verbal confirmation. Respond."

Nothing.

Caradine might be unconscious. Or she might be keeping radio silence to avoid detection by an enemy close to her Lex couldn't see. Certainly she'd turned off her pod's transponder to keep the enemy from finding her.

All of her passive sensors remained blank. Either the enemy hadn't heard her or he was cagier than she thought. Either way she had no choice but to keep searching. The jungle began giving way to bog proper. The taller trees thinning and being replaced with spongy, fern-like growths that towered over the *Nightsky*.

Keeping her *Nightsky's* active sensors at narrow focus to better cut the ghosts and reduce her own profile, she moved cautiously forward, scanning the path ahead for metal and testing the ground for sink holes.

Just within the dense foliage of the bog, a pack of jackals, the small kind that ran on all sixes, broke cover. Mindlessly they attacked one of her legs, jaws and claws slipping uselessly off the 'Mech's armor. Apparently stunned by the massive inedible that smelled like food, they fell back in confusion. After a moment's milling confusion, they attacked again—lacking the mental hardware not to.

Lex shifted her weight, bringing one massive foot down on as many of the beasts as she could. It took a second stomp and a swing of her axe before the carrion eaters got the message and ran off. One thing she did not want following her on her search for Caradine was a pack of voracious scavengers.

Twenty minutes of careful slogging and a second skirmish with jackals later, her radio crackled.

“That is a damn fine looking ‘Mech you have there, Atreus.”

“Confirmed, Caradine,” Lex grinned. Her radio was still on tight beam, focused ahead, which meant the escape capsule was within ten degrees of her direction of travel. “Hold one.”

Taking her sensors off close focus, she made a thorough scan of their surroundings. Three hundred meters to the southwest were half dozen heat signatures so huge they could only be a pod of cows. No sign of unidentified ‘Mechs.

Shifting to medium range, she scanned ahead.

Something, several somethings, each massing around two hundred kilos, were milling about in the underbrush ahead and to her left. Probably another pack of the pint-sized jackals.

And very close to them a large object of refined metal. The escape pod.

“Looks like you have company.”

“Natives,” Caradine answered. “Bigger than I thought they’d be, but every bit as ugly as they looked on tape. They don’t seem hostile.”

Lex didn’t comment. She wasn’t taking anything on Despair at face value. Still mindful of sinkholes, she made her way to the escape capsule.

The head of the *Hatchetman* had landed backwards. Its crest was driven deep into the soft soil while its canopy thrust into the air, pointed roughly in the direction from which it had come. Lex didn’t want to think how many tumbles it had gone through to land that way, but its angle of impact meant the entire command couch had absorbed Caradine’s momentum. Probably kept her alive.

The access hatch was also clear of the mud, barely; something else Lex had been worried about.

All things considered the situation was about as good as it could have been.

"I have air and supplies enough to last until you bring help," Caradine said. "Once you tell them where I am, the base can send a hover truck with a rescue tent to get me out."

"Negative," said Lex.

"Come again?"

"We've got hostile 'Mechs in the area, unknown local fauna that we know is big enough to crack open a scout car and can reasonably assume is able to break that canopy to get at what it thinks is food, and soft ground that could swallow your capsule at any time," Lex itemized. "We're getting you out now."

"I was going to point out that we don't have an air-tight rescue chute," Caradine said. "But you sound like a woman with a plan."

"What clothing do you have on board?"

"Jacket, cap, jumpsuit, rain poncho, the usual," Caradine said. "No environmental suits or powered armor."

"Oxygen tank with face mask?"

"Of course," Caradine answered. "But that's for smoke in the cockpit. It's not rated for hostile environment."

"It is today," Lex said. "Cover as much of your skin as you can. I'm going to get my access hatch as close to yours as I can."

"Right," Caradine sounded doubtful. "You dare lay your machine down in this muck?"

"We don't have much choice."

"The choice is a rescue team with the proper equipment," Caradine said firmly. "You leave me and go get help."

"With all due respect, Lieutenant, I am piloting a fully operational fifty-five ton BattleMech and you are piloting a head half buried in mud," Lex said. "Cover as much of your skin as you can, put on your oxygen mask, and get ready to jump in my 'Mech."

There was a long moment of silence.

"Yes, ma'am," Caradine said at last. "Taking off helmet to get dressed."

“Acknowledged.”

Judging the best angle to bring her ‘Mech’s hatch as close as possible to the *Hatchetman*’s, Lex set about getting in position.

Caradine had been wrong about laying the machine in the mud. The *Nightsky*’s access hatch was atop its forward-thrusting head. What she needed to do was kowtow. With her machine on its elbows and knees, and her canopy pressed into the soft mud, she could bring the two hatches to within a meter of each other; hopefully angled so that both could swing open.

Lex snapped several giant ferns off at the base, throwing them down to form a rough mat. The more vegetation she had between herself and the ground, the less likely she was to sink.

Several of the natives broke cover as she worked. They were bigger than they’d appeared in the recording—nearly three meters tall. None were carrying the poles and tools the ones in the village had, but several clutched small objects that could be hand axes. She expected them to flee, but instead they ran to the other side of Caradine’s escape capsule and took up new observation positions.

She wondered what they thought of the giants that smelled like carrion and tore their forest apart.

Speaking of giants ...

Lex paused and boxed the compass with her long range sensors. Nothing but trees and ghosts and cows. Hopefully that’s all the enemy could see as well.

At last satisfied her mat was as good as it was going to get, Lex lowered her machine to its hands and knees. This was a relatively simple maneuver, but the *Nightsky* wasn’t really designed for it. The gyroscope signaled its distress while the attitude alarms warned her she’d fallen over.

Flexing her elbow actuators, she lowered the cockpit until the canopy just touched the soft earth.

“How’s the position?” she asked.

“Line-up’s perfect,” answered Caradine. “But you need to come forward about a meter and a half.”

Flexing her knee and shoulder actuators, Lex eased the *Nightsky* forward, her viewscreen dragging across the mud, until Caradine announced she was in place.

Lex locked down the controls and quickly unstrapped. Careful to keep her feet on the edge of the console and away from buttons and toggles, she pulled on her rain poncho – no way she was going to get into a jumpsuit at this angle – and donned her own oxygen mask.

“Ready?”

“Give me a three-count,” Caradine said. “Then open your hatch. From my mark; now.”

Lex counted to three slowly, then undogged the hatch. The foul atmosphere of Despair flooded in as her own puffed out.

Despite the scientists’ assurances, Lex couldn’t shake the fear that the real danger was not the caustic effects of the acid air, but fire. She couldn’t shake the fear a stray spark would envelope them both in a nimbus of blue white flame. With an effort she suppressed the mental image of the two of them stranded in the middle of a hostile jungle covered with second and third degree burns.

Caradine came through the hatch head first before it was fully open, tumbling to a pile against the back of the control couch.

Lex pulled the hatch to, the rubber seals cushioning the slam, and dogged it shut.

Caradine hung over the edge of the couch for a moment, scanning the control panel. By the time Lex had the last gear sealed, she’d found the emergency purge and the alien atmosphere was being pumped from the cockpit.

“I tracked one hostile moving north,” Lex said. “Seventy-five tons and running hot.”

“That would be the *Flashman*,” Caradine said. “Him I hurt.”

“*Flashman*?”

Caradine chuckled at Lex’s tone.

“You thought the Florida was the only outfit with one of those museum pieces?” she asked. “The big one is another antique. A *Crockett*.”

A *Crockett* outmassed her *Nightsky* by thirty-five tons and mounted better sensors. And extended-range weapons. They needed to be up and moving, pronto.

She couldn't strap herself back in the couch with the front of the cockpit down, but she managed to brace herself against the edge of the control panel as she got the *Nightsky's* legs under it. Getting upright was a graceless stumble that threw them both against the side of the cockpit and scattered the watching natives. But between her fast grab on the tiller and the gyro cueing off her neurohelmet, the 'Mech found its feet.

Caradine, who had been clinging to the back of the command couch was now jammed in the narrow gap between it and the emergency equipment shelf in the back of the cockpit.

"We need to get you secure," Lex said.

"I'm fine."

"While we stand here. If I have to fight or jump your blood spatter is going to get all over my controls," Lex said. "Speaking of which, you got your cooling vest on under there?"

"Of course," Caradine indicated a bulky bundle wedged between her hip and the bulkhead, "neurohelmet, too."

Pulling out the field repair kit, Lex made sort work of running an extra line and splicing Caradine's vest into the cooling system. Two minutes later the MechWarriors had converted the equipment cubby into a padded cocoon into which Caradine just fit.

"If you were normal size..."

"Stow it."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Plumbing may be a problem."

"I'll leave that one to you," Lex said, securing her five-point harness and scanning the sensor screens. "I'm driving."

"Where?"

"Come again?"

"Are you planning on running back to base?" Caradine asked.

Lex hesitated.

"You've got the fastest 'Mech on the planet, Lieutenant," Caradine said. "You can out run and out jump anything the enemy can throw

at you. We have a good bearing on their home base and they don't expect us to move on them.

"We're never going to get a better chance to reconnoiter."

Lex considered. Caradine's syllogism was based on the assumption the enemy hadn't planned on being found and wasn't deliberately luring them out of position. On the other hand, based on the tonner's old laser scars, whoever these people were, they'd been on the planet a while and had made no attempt to harm the base. Even before the Florida lance had arrived. Everything pointed to them wanting to remain undiscovered.

Of course, the destruction of Caradine's *Hatchetman* changed all that.

Now the question would be how far were they willing to go to preserve their anonymity. Were they planning on getting off Despair as quickly as possible? Or were they planning on wiping out anyone who knew where they were? Another mysteriously failed expedition lost on Despair?

There was only one way to find out.

"North by northeast it is," she said.