DJINN OF DESPAIR

Kevin Killiany

Chapter Seven

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Pirate outpost, northeast of Chevalier Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyran Alliance
29 October 3057

"I'm bringing you up on charges," Caradine said.

"I'll testify for the prosecution," Lex answered.

"I am not joking, Leftenant."

Caradine was sitting up, leaning forward in the infirmary bed while Nick pressed a stethoscope to her back. Her eyes were circled but clear and her color, where she wasn't bruised, was good. The tubes were gone.

Except for his attempt to brush her spiked hair flat, Nick had also done a professional job of washing Caradine up and dressing her wounds before waking her.

Lex wished she'd had the time for the same treatment. Even without Nick's help, a shower would have been good. She was tired with a fatigue two hours' sleep had barely dented and grimy from mucking out the cockpit of her *Nightsky*.

She and Caradine—particularly Caradine—had not been tidy passengers.

Rigging the single-couch cockpit for three passengers had required a bit of ingenuity, but she was pretty satisfied with her handiwork. With a knife, adhesive strips, and room to work she'd been able to fit sheets of padding to every surface. Not the last word in comfort, but enough to cut down on blood-splattering injuries. If Caradine stayed folded in the equipment bay and Nick curled around the base of the command couch, they should just fit.

She had only to splice a third vest to the cooling system.

"Look," she said, making the effort to sound calm. "We can still pull this off and do some good."

Caradine did not look convinced, but she didn't retort, either.

"I know everything I did wrong, and I know how wrong I did it," Lex said, trying to sound crisply professional, and aware she came across weary and defensive. "But if I hadn't screwed the regs we

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wouldn't know how big things are here—and there is something very big in the mountains."

She pulled a case of data crystals from the pouch that had carried Caradine's pistol. The weapon, cleaned and holstered, was atop the folded cooling vest at the foot of the bed.

"I've downloaded everything that was in their computers and holomap," Lex said. "Most of it's encrypted, but we can get it to people who can read it."

"You didn't screw the regs, you screwed the mission," Caradine said. "It's just your dumb luck the operational situation outgrew your orders. And my dumb luck you were willing to screw everything else to save my ass."

Lex blinked.

"You're good," Nick announced, pulling the stethoscope from his ears. "Full recovery's a long way off, but I'm pretty sure the real medicos will confirm all you need is time. Just don't push it."

"I need to go to the head," Chevalier said.

Lex glared at the scientist, still tied to the chair and table.

"You just went."

"Get old and grow a prostate," the prisoner snapped. "You'll go every five minutes, too."

"He might have a point," Nick said. "We'd better load a field commode in the truck."

"About that..."

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Lex's plan for the three to evacuate in her evaporated the instant Caradine stepped into the 'Mech hangar.

"There's another 'Mech!"

"Most of a *Thorn*," Lex agreed. "I don't think it's much of a threat."

" A *Thorn* does ninety-plus kph over broken ground," Caradine's tone was incredulous. "*And* it's a Star League design—which means a jump seat for ride-alongs in the cockpit.

"That's not a threat, that's my—and the doctor's—ride home."

Lex looked at the smaller woman. She was clear-eyed and on her feet, but holding Nick's arm to steady herself. Merely walking the few dozen meters from the infirmary had taxed her.

"You can't pilot a 'Mech," Lex said flatly.

"Not in combat, no," Caradine agreed. "But we're just walking home. And I'm going to have the doctor here with me."

Lex hesitated.

"Get my neurohelmet," Caradine said. "If I can climb into the *Thorn* under my own power and override the lockouts, we have two 'Mechs. If I can't, we go with your plan."

Not wasting time with words. Lex scrambled up the ladders to her own 'Mech's cockpit and retrieved Caradine's neurohelmet. She resisted the temptation to drop it on the woman and carried the helmet's sack slung over her shoulder as she slid down the ladder rails.

Caradine seemed to gain strength just from holding her helmet. She strode over to the *Thorn* with more energy than Lex expected and stuck her head in the open service hatch in its ankle assembly.

"Everything's fine," she reported. "Tech seals in place, diodes green. Somebody just forgot to close the door."

Lex didn't say what she thought about the reliability of a good-to-go seal from a technician who didn't bother to close access hatches. She cast a glance at Nick, but he was watching the way Caradine moved as she dogged the hatch and started up the ladder.

"She's pushing it," he said.

Lex didn't bother to answer.

"If she gets that thing going, you could get Chevalier out of the bathroom," Nick said. "Carry him back to Chevalier in your machine."

Lex nodded.

On the assumption his people in the storage room were staying quiet because they believed their leader was in the hands of a

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wanton killer, she'd tethered Chevalier to the plumbing rather than locking him with the others. But there was no denying he was a source of intel they needed to have. If Caradine's plan worked, she would carry the hog-tied scientist in her *Nightsky*'s equipment bay.

Not that she expected Caradine to get the *Thorn* moving.

"Think he'll explain what's going on?" she asked Nick, then almost kicked herself.

If Nick rode with Caradine, it would be several dangerous hours before they had another chance to speak face to face and she was wasting the opportunity on shop talk.

Though she honestly couldn't think of what else she might have said.

For a moment she considered suggesting Nick ride in her   and let Caradine carry their prisoner. But there was no denying her lancemate was the one most likely to need a doctor on board.

"I think he'll keep his mouth shut," Nick said, oblivious to her thoughts. "At least, they didn't have any of those holovid drama moments where the bad guys sit around discussing their plans in front of the prisoner just before he escapes.

"Or gets rescued," he corrected, grinning at her.

The old grin, Lex noted. The pre-Lex-blowing-the-brains-out-of-the-pirate grin. Good sign.

"However, I'm pretty sure this is his grandfather's operation," Nick added, looking back at the *Thorn*. Caradine was inside with the hatch shut. "I infer from events that he didn't know anything was here until after he got his own base going. Otherwise, he wouldn't have located it so near the original evaluation site."

"*That's* what this is."

"I think so," Nick agreed. "Except it seems way too small. Maybe an outlying research lab?"

Spreading resources on a hostile world made little sense to Lex, but she dismissed the notion. Scientific exploration required something very nearly the opposite of the military mindset.

A grinding noise rose from the *Thorn*. Light and whispery, it quickly rose to the ultrasonic.

"Gyro's dusty but working," Lex said.

"You mean she's got that thing going?"

"She's got basic start-up controls," Lex explained. "Techs do that just to move hardware around the hangar. Full control without codes is going to take a while."

If ever.

"At any rate, I think *grand-père* Chevalier found something on Despair worth exploiting," Nick said. "And didn't want to share it with the government that bankrolled him."

The *Thorn* groaned, its knees flexing slightly.

"Motor controls are good," Caradine's amplified voice echoed.

The vapor lock over the 'Mech entrance seemed to answer, a heavy plastic sheet popping in a sudden gust of foul wind.

Lex tensed, hand dropping to her service laser. A gust of foul fumes confirmed there was nothing but wind was coming through the tunnel.

Caradine continued testing controls, putting the *Thorn* through what looked like limbering up exercises.

"The gyro is really unhappy about that missing arm," her amplified voice announced. "Center of mass is off. Compensating."

The *Thorn*'s head rotated left a few dozen degrees, then right. The scrape of unlubricated bearings was audible, but not alarming. There were 'Mechs listed as active on the Florida roster that sounded as bad.

The medium laser beneath the canopy swung farther than the head and with proper silence.

Lex judged the weapons angle of fire covered nearly one hundred and eighty degrees left to right. Depression and elevation seemed about ninety degrees. A well thought out mount.

"Weapons control good," Caradine stated the obvious, her voice satisfied. "No operational lock-outs."

Which fits technicians too lazy to close a service hatch.

"Any idea what he found?" Lex asked Nick, resigned to a few more minutes of shop talk.

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"No," Nick answered. "Or—"

He paused, frowning.

"Based on a couple of gripes, not a full explanation," he qualified, "I *think* it might have something to do with a huge herd of tonners."

"Huge herd of tonners?"

"Covers kilometers, if the complaints were accurate," Nick said. "Managing it evidently involves endless hauling, huge piles of tonner crap and millions of scavengers."

Lex felt a chill rise in her chest. She'd been half right and mostly wrong. The red zone on the plain was dangerous, but not for the reasons she'd thought. And pirate reinforcements were a half day closer than she'd thought.

She glanced to the chronometer on the wall and wasted a half second realizing it was broken. She looked at her wristwatch.

"If they've got assaults or heavies, we've got three hours," she said aloud. "Anything faster and two. Or one."

"What?"

"Cowboys riding herd on the tonners," she explained. "They can't use anything but 'Mechs."

"Wouldn't they use some kind of industrials?"

"Laser scarred tonners," Lex cut him off, already heading for the door. "Help me get Chevalier secured in my 'Mech. Then get in Caradine's.

"We need to lose ourselves in the woods before more pirates get here."

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Excerpt: Transcript #1027
NetTalk with Tommy Thomavitch
Special Guest Dr. Xavier Wortman,
Professor of Xenobiology, emeritus, NAIS and
Chief of Evaluations,
Lyran Bureau of Controlled Substances
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Tommy Thomavitch: Go ahead, caller, you're on the wave.

Caller 2437: Yeah. Hi, Tom. Just want to say I always listen to your show.

TT: That's great, caller. Do you have a question?

C2437: Yeah. I wanted to ask the professor about this MindMASC. I keep hearing it breaks down in liquids, which makes it hard to analyze. How come? And aren't there other ways to analyze? And if it breaks down so fast, how come it makes people crazy?

TT: That's three questions, caller.

C2437: Ha, ha. Yeah. Sorry.

Dr. Xavier Wortman: Don't be. Those are all very good questions. As you have pointed out, and others have pointed out as well, MindMASC does not make a lot of sense logically. A compound that breaks down into inert constituents almost instantly in water, yet has such a profound impact on the human nervous system when ingested is—on the face of it—nonsense. Quite frankly, it's bad chemistry.

TT: Well, now you've got me, Doctor Wortman. How does this bad chemistry do what it does?

Dr. W: To be honest, a great deal of the bad chemistry was on the part of the investigators. A major breakthrough was the discovery that the way the complex molecule broke down was dramatically affected by heat. In other words, at below about thirty-three degrees—which is where initial tests were conducted—the chain breaks into inert chemicals.

TT: Which is why pushers always have a bucket of water handy.

Dr W: Exactly. However, at temperatures between about thirty-five and roughly fifty, the chemical chain breaks differently, yielding a completely different group of chemicals. Above fifty and there is a third—also inert—group of chemicals produced.

TT: And you're saying that middle group is the active one; what causes all the bizarre effects. Isn't that still chemical voodoo?

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Dr.W: With the biology of hundreds of worlds documented and many hundreds more only slightly understood, chemistry that defies the classical model is not all that unusual. Nature finds ways to do things that were never imagined when the fundamental taxonomy of chemistry was devised. This foundation is still solid—in fact it is an accurate predictive and analytical tool in almost all situations—but there are still the rare instances that defy its neat order.

TT: And you're saying MindMASC is one of those instances. What do we know about it?

Dr. W: Much of what we know is inferential. It is a naturally occurring chemical, very like an enzyme or hormone...

TT: Aren't those two completely different things?

Dr. W: That depends on which world's biology you're talking about.

TT: Ha, ha. Got me there. But, wait a minute... Enzymes and hormones? MindMASC comes from some sort of animal?

Dr. W: Almost certainly. And given the narrow range of temperatures in which it's reactive, it is produced by a warm blooded animal—most likely a mammal. It affects neural reactions because it's designed to impact the nervous system.

TT: Intelligently designed?

Dr. W: Ha, ha. Formed by chance, then, to perform a very specific task. Accelerate the nervous system instantly and dramatically. The fact that it has such an immediate—and very short-term—effect indicates this acceleration is dangerous even to the organism which produces it.

C2437: Does that make sense?

Dr. W: Certainly. When you are terrified or in danger, your own adrenal gland dumps chemicals into your system which drive your heart rate to near tachycardia, suppress your pain receptors, and trigger a host of other changes that would kill you if maintained for any length of time. MindMASC—which was aptly named, indicating whoever is distributing this substance understands its effect—performs the same function, but at a vastly more potent level.

TT: What sort of animal would need something like that in its system?

Dr. W: From the evidence it's fairly clear that we are talking about a sloth-like mammal. Perhaps similar to a primate, since the chemical has such an effect on humans. Normally this animal would lead a slow and placid life—again imagine the Terran sloth, which can take hours to climb from one branch to another. However, there must be some situation, most likely a fast-moving predator, which requires the sloth to think and move very quickly and decisively—whether to run or fight—in order to survive.

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TT: So the science investigators are looking to worlds with populations of sloth-like mammals as the source of MindMASC?

Dr.W: Yes. Especially worlds where these animals have not been thoroughly studied. And more especially worlds where there is evidence the population of these sloths is on the decline. Now that we know what we're looking for, it's only a matter of time before we find and eliminate the source of MindMASC.

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Jungle
North-northeast of Chevalier Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyran Alliance
29 October 3057

"Expect our geo locator bearings to be off," Lex said, studying the flat image copy of the pirate topo map on her secondary screen. "But check out the pass in the hills west and south of us."

"I see it," Caradine said. Her voice was faint. With the domes they'd fled only a kilometer behind and they were keeping their radios on trickle power until they were out of the bowl valley. "You're suggesting we follow the ridge line southwest, then cut straight through the jungle to Chevalier?"

"They'll expect us to run directly away from them into the swamps or cut as straight a line as we can to base," Lex said. "This way we double back inside their search area and still make our way back. It adds a couple of hours, but they're not likely to look our way."

"Double back right into their teeth is more like it," Caradine said. "And what good does that maneuvering do if they just head straight to Chevalier and throw up a perimeter to keep us out?"

Lex twisted in her seat, trying to glance back into the equipment cubby.

When he'd realized they meant to take him back to Chevalier Base, Chevalier had become violent—kicking, cursing, and scratching in his effort to get away. Faced with four hours of the scientist cursing and kicking the back of her command couch, Lex had grabbed the most potent sedative she recognized in the infirmary's stores and doubled the safe dosage.

Now Chevalier, possible source of useful information, was snoring noisily behind her.

Lex wished the infirmary had stocked truth serum. Pirates in the holovids always had some on hand.

"I don't think they have the resources for that," she said at last. "Herding tonners must be labor intensive. And they were shy of

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challenging a lance of mostly medium 'Mechs *before* they lost two heavy hitters."

"They were only shy because they didn't want to be noticed," Caradine said. "For all we know, they may be planning a massed assault on Chevalier right now."

Which certainly tied in with Chevalier's behavior, Lex conceded. The man had been a model prisoner until he learned they intended to take him back to the base—then he'd panicked. At the time Lex thought he was afraid of being beyond his compatriots' ability to rescue him.

But not wanting to be at ground zero of an assault would trigger pretty much the same reaction.

No matter how she looked at the tactical situation, getting back to Chevalier Base—or at least getting close enough to apprise Britto and Aldicott of the situation—was their highest priority.

"A straight run back still puts us dead center of any pursuit pattern they mount," Lex pointed out. "And we don't know if they're fast enough to catch us."

It was Caradine's turn to be quiet as she considered the same map in her own cockpit.

"If we're going back into their teeth, we might as well go down their throat," she said at last. "Cut farther west, out of the hills and onto the edge of the plain. On the flat we'll double our speed, cut an hour, hour and a half off our travel time."

And come real close to that red zone. How many tonners and how many 'Mechs?

"Set the pace, Leftenant," she said. "I've got your six."

"Good to know, Atreus," Caradine said. "But I'm not going to fall out."

"Never thought you would."

"Right," Caradine stretched the word out as her   picked up speed. "But be advised that if you drop, I'm leaving you. Getting this intel to base has priority."

"Understood."

"And if I go down, you leave me," Caradine added. "Same reason. Britto, Aldicott and the ECPM need to know what's out here."

"Understood," Lex repeated.

Caradine snorted.

"I'd feel better about that if you'd obeyed the last time I gave you that order."

Lex said nothing.

Behind her, Chevalier muttered in his sleep.

"Ridge line ahead," Caradine said a half hour later. "Radio silence for duration."

A dozen paces behind her lancemate, Lex crested the ridge.

Dawn was coming—the sky behind them was an angry red, fading to a muddy orange then grey ahead of them. Running on passive sensors, not risking a signal that might alert the pirates, Lex could make out nothing of the rolling plain that stretched to the distant mountains. Through her canopy she saw fog and ferns. No sign of tonners, no indication of BattleMechs.

But both were out there—uncounted, unseen and dangerous.

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Hill valley, northwest of Chevalier Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyran Alliance
29 October 3057

"What the hell?"

"What have you got, Jarhaal?" Sardella asked his point man.

"Hang one."

With solid ground underfoot, they didn't need the Florida *Hatchetman* to lead. Sardella had put one of his own people out front and set Aldicott to roving the hillsides above them. The *Highlander*s were moving through a narrow valley that connected the jungle region to a plain beyond.

Sardella had determined their course after comparing notes with the *Pith*—literally, as text continued to get through static that frustrated voice transmission. The DropShip—now in geo-sync orbit above—was reasonably sure a large metal reading in the mountains beyond the narrow plain ahead of them included re-fined alloys.

Domes. Maybe armored.

Not surprisingly, Aldicott had tried to appear useful by commenting that the 'Mech Britto had sent him to follow had been heading in a course that would have eventually brought it to this very valley. If it hadn't turned aside first, of course. He didn't know because Britto had called him back before he'd actually seen the mysterious machine.

Sardella wasn't sure the observation was useful. It dovetailed with what they suspected, but he didn't know the Florida militiaman well enough to determine whether that supported their theory or just Aldicott's ability to fit his facts to what he thought they wanted to hear.

"Lots of dinos up here," Jarhaal reported. "Tonners, whatever they call them. A wall of them. Headed this way."

"A wall?"

"A herd," Jarhaal sounded impressed. "Spreads as far as I can see in both directions—which isn't far in this fog—but we're talk-

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ing a couple of hundred animals at least. Thermal image reads a solid mass to full extent of its range. But in this soup...."

He didn't need to finish the sentence. With the metals, thermals and static electricity of Despair's air fuzzing their sensors, those readings could mean anything.

"Locals say they respond to physical displays," Sardella said. "Any chance you can wave your arms or something and turn them?"

"Sir, I am backing up," Jarhaal answered. "Even if the leaders wanted to stop, I don't think they could. They're being crowded from behind."

Sardella brought his own BattleMech to a halt. He was aware of Twindle on his flank following suit. If the herd was as big as Jarhaal estimated, the valley was too narrow for the beasts to turn aside, either. Unless they were adept at climbing steep slopes.

These aren't cattle.

"Ha!" Jarhaal shouted.

"What?"

"Seems I'm something to sneeze at after all," Jarhaal laughed. "Be aware their ball of flaming gas trick knocks sensors out for a few seconds. No real damage."

Jarhaal's *Highlander* appeared at the edge of Sardella's screen, though the heads up hadn't assigned him an icon. The ambient temperature rose sharply just beyond Jarhaal as his man moved slowly toward him, but the sensors couldn't see well enough to determine what was causing the thermal.

"That's not right," Aldicott cut in on the lance channel. "There's something wrong with this herd."

"What, Florida?"

"I'm above the lead edge of the tonners," Aldicott answered. "There are greens, blues and browns packed together. Those are different species. Blues wander around loose, but browns and greens stay in family pods. They don't mingle."

Sardella shook his head. He wasn't going to bother explaining to the militiaman that he'd seen cattle, raxx, gazelles and emus grazing together all his life. There was nothing significant about herbivores clumping together.

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"Probably a migration of some sort," he said aloud. "Are local seasons changing?"

"No idea," admitted Aldicott. "But if the scientists had seen anything like this before, they would have mentioned it. Our job was to keep these beasts away from the base."

"Well, this lot looks like they're headed straight for the base," Jarhaal said.

Sardella wasn't so sure. From the looks of the topo map, if the herd followed the contours of the land, they'd pass just north of Chevalier Base. Of course, they were dumb animals—they could get it in their heads to go anywhere.

However, even if the herd did approach Chevalier, there was little danger. The base was in open land. When the leaders got zapped by the new perimeter defenses, the herd would just split to flow around the obstacle like water around a rock.

The animals were close enough for him to see, now. Aldicott was right, it was a mixed bunch of beasts—many of them larger than the Florida *Hatchetman*. None were the mass of a *Highlander*, of course, though several of the knobby heads rose higher than his cockpit. While the assault 'Mechs could no doubt push their way through the oncoming mass of creatures, there was no reason to expend the effort—or risk the damage.

"High ground, north side," he ordered. "Give them the valley floor. Continue toward objective."

"This is not right," Aldicott repeated.

Sardella opened his mouth, then shut it again.

He'd seen herbivores of every stripe grazing side by side all his life, true. But he had to agree the Florida jockey was on to something. The only time diverse species moved as a group with such *purpose* was when they wanted to get away from something. Like predators or grass fires. Or cowboys.

This isn't a herd of animals. These are animals being herded.

"Change of orders," he said. "Twindle, Jarhaal, reverse and take the hills on the south side of the valley. Could be hostiles are driving these lizards ahead of them as cover."

"Birds," Aldicott corrected mildly.

Sardella ignored him.

"Scan that herd for heavy metal," he ordered. "We are looking for cowboys."