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DJINN OF DESPAIR

Kevin Killiany

Chapter One

**Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyran Alliance
28 October 3057**

From: Lieutenant Willard Britto,
Commanding Florida PMM garrison, Despair

To: Colonel Ethan Kuhn
Commander, Florida PMM, Florida

Sir:

The DropShip *Sebring* and JumpShip *Zoroaster* have agreed to stay on station at Ender proper until Florida PMM Command and the government of Ender's Cluster communicate their decision on how to proceed with this mission.

First, I must say that it is with deep regret that I report the loss of two MechWarriors of the Florida Periphery March Militia. Lieutenant Magda Caradine and Alexandra Atreus are dead.

Lieutenant Magda Caradine gave her life in the line of duty, exemplifying in her final moments the highest standards of heroism and determination to which a MechWarrior can aspire. Though her escape capsule, and with it her Battle ROM, evidently sank beneath the mineral-heavy bogs, the physical evidence at the scene of her last battle gives a clear account of her final actions.

Lieutenants Caradine and Atreus were apparently ambushed by two BattleMechs of unknown origin, one of which was a *Crockett*, the other almost certainly a heavy. Physical evidence—as you can see from the attached recording—clearly indicates Caradine stood firm and fought despite the overwhelming odds. From the amounts of coolant and armor left by her attackers, she gave a good account of herself. Both enemy 'Mechs were heavily damaged—the *Crockett* assault 'Mech mortally—before she was forced to eject from her *Hatchetman*.

I would like to submit Lieutenant Magda Caradine for the highest commendation possible for her valor and sacrifice in the face of overwhelming odds.

Unfortunately, there is little to explain why Lieutenant Caradine and Atreus were so far from the base when she was attacked. Communication logs indicate Lieutenant Alexandra Atreus had been tasked with notifying

this command of Caradine's intent due to the superior communication equipment of the *Nightsky*. Reliable radio transitions are problematic on Despair. However, the report Leftenant Atreus chose to transmit was incomplete and oblique, giving no clear indication of where Leftenant Caradine was leading her or why.

As revealed by the physical evidence at the battle scene, once she was beyond the range of Chevalier Base sensors, the behavior of Leftenant Atreus became even more difficult to understand or, frankly, justify. From the attached record, you can see the tracks of her *Nightsky* clearly indicate she fled the battle between Leftenant Caradine and their mysterious attackers in some confusion. She first made a short, abortive run north, then reversed herself and fled south toward the swamps at high speed.

The southern swamps are essentially trackless and all but impassible for machines as heavy as BattleMechs. Given the skill at hiding and evading Leftenant Atreus demonstrated on the training fields of Florida, she no doubt felt the fen offered her the best hope of escaping the larger enemy 'Mechs.

Whether she chose to abandon her superior and lancemate at the first sign of enemy 'Mechs or after the firefight began is not immediately obvious.

Operating on the assumption Atreus would find her way back to Chevalier Base after her panic passed, Leftenant Thomas Aldicott and I chose to track the enemy BattleMechs. We briefed the elements of Ender's Cluster Planetary Militia at Chevalier Base on the TacSit before moving away to the northeast.

We did not inform the ECPM of Leftenant Atreus' cowardice. We advised them her radio might be out and asked them to convey my order that she remain to defend the base should she arrive in our absence.

Because all signs indicated the enemy machines were heavy or assault class, our plan was to gather what intel we could at range and return to Chevalier to organize a defense.

When the tracks of the two BattleMechs separated, I ordered Leftenant Aldicott to track one until he was sure of its heading, then make best time back to support Chevalier Base. I followed the second, which seemed to have circled back toward the south.

When I found the *Crockett*, it was already down, having finally succumbed to damage inflicted by Leftenant Caradine. However, before collapsing, the assault 'Mech had dispatched Leftenant Atreus. Both BattleMechs were inert in the mud when I discovered them.

Predictably, Atreus's machine showed minimal damage, nor was there evidence she had made an organized effort to defend herself. However, she had brought her BattleMech close enough to the *Crockett* that the larger machine actually fell on her *Nightsky* when its systems failed.

As the attached vid and radio log attest, the *Nightsky* was unmoving and Atreus did not respond to hails. Her BattleMech was trapped under the larger machine. Without hostile environmental gear, she could not leave her cockpit. It can be assumed that she did not answer radio hails or offers of rescue because she could not.

When the situation on Despair is once again stable, I will of course escort a recovery team to salvage the effectively pristine *Nightsky* and the remains of Lieutenant Atreus.

I will not speculate as to why Lieutenant Atreus felt comfortable in standing companionably close to a BattleMech that was so clearly an enemy of the people the Florida PMM are assigned to defend—and by extension an enemy of the Lyran Alliance. My belief is that whether she was attempting to surrender or to contact someone she considered an ally is immaterial. Whatever her reasons, her choice was ultimately fatal.

Retracing my course until I was able to establish radio contact, I informed Lieutenant Aldicott of the situation over the Florida's secure channel. Under the circumstances, protecting Chevalier Base was the highest priority and I ordered a withdrawal to form a defensive perimeter.

From this sudden and unexpected appearance of hostile BattleMech forces, it is evident pirates are operating out of Despair. Given the planet's natural ability to foil scanning equipment, this would be an attractive hideout. Only its distance from lucrative shipping lines argues against it. This perhaps explains why we have encountered such a small and poorly organized band of criminals.

Based on what intelligence we've been able to gather, the enemy force on Despair is quite small and equipped with older BattleMechs. Perhaps not a full lance and evidently in poor repair. It is not unreasonable to believe that until now, their lack of assets has forced them to keep their distance from Chevalier Base. However, with Lieutenant Atreus's actions resulting in two of our own BattleMechs being lost, they may become more bold.

As stated earlier, at my request the DropShip and JumpShip which conveyed the upgraded perimeter defense systems to Chevalier Base have agreed to stay in the Ender's Cluster system until we receive your orders as to how to proceed.

If I may be so bold as to suggest: From my assessment of the situation on the ground, the evacuation of civilians would be prudent. The *Sebring* has the capacity to carry all of the people, but none of their equipment. Based on what we have learned of their limited assets, once the field of operations is cleared of civilians, an expedition in force should have little trouble capturing or destroying the pirate base.

On a personal note, let me add: Whatever else she was, Lieutenant Atreus wanted to be a MechWarrior of the Florida PMM. That she lacked the courage and integrity to fulfill her dream should be her private tragedy. An official acknowledgement of her failure would be an embarrassment to the Florida and bring shame to her family. I humbly request that her file be simply closed with a notation that she lost her life during the Florida's defense of Chevalier Base.

Respectfully submitted,

Lieutenant Willard Britto

Jungle***Northeast of Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base******Despair, Ender's Cluster******Lyran Alliance******28 October 3057***

The bearing from which the enemy 'Mechs had come took Lex and Caradine beyond the edge of the swamp into denser jungle. The ground rose, gradually but steadily, as the trees became larger. Even if she had not been making an effort to keep signs of the *Nightsky*'s passage to a minimum, Lex would have had to walk the fifty-five ton machine around some of the blue-grey boles.

Lex kept active scanners at a minimum, relying on passive sensors and occasional "snapshot" readings to assess their surroundings. She had no idea how sophisticated the enemy's defenses were, but she was determined to do nothing to make their job easier.

She jerked the controls involuntarily when a bellowing bray nearly overloaded the external microphones. The *Nightsky* took a half step sideways and halted.

"Fut da hell?" demanded Caradine from the padded equipment cubby behind her command couch.

"Predator," Lex said, willing her pounding heart to slow down.

The "wolf" tonner broke from a dense hummock directly ahead of them, swinging its head back and forth in what Lex assumed was a threat display. Apparently the BattleMech had violated some territorial limit. Or perhaps they were approaching a nest.

Though it stood as tall as the *Nightsky*, Lex estimated its mass at thirty tons, though its splayed fringes of spines and feathers—in clashing shades of orange and red—made accuracy problematic. The creature's fore legs, held close to its body as though ready to strike, ended in three thick talons in radial arrangement. *The better to grasp you with, my pretty.* Its heavy, down-turned beak was clearly designed for tearing flesh.

Glaring defiance, the beast brayed again, forcing the external mics to shut down. Droplets of milky liquid spattered across the canopy.

"Founds like God's own crow," Caradine said.

"It sprayed us with something," Lex said, not adding the creature's challenge sounded more like an amplified donkey to her. "Poison, maybe? Like a spitting cobra?"

"Mayfe deodorant," Caradine answered. "Rememfer we ftink."

Lex grunted.

Evidently disgusted by the huge walking thing that smelled like dead meat and refused to fight, the giant raptor turned aside. Braying its displeasure to the world in general, it disappeared between stands of trees in the direction of the swamp.

Lex waited a long ten count, but no other wolf tonners appeared. And there was no indication on her passive sensors that the disturbance had inspired someone to sweep the area with active sensors. Of course, bellowing raptors were probably the norm in this region.

On the theory that there might be a nest in the copse of trees—and that walking through said nest would provoke the wolf tonners into attacking her *Nightsky*—Lex gave the dense stand of trees a wide berth. Thirty-ton monsters capable of grabbing her BattleMech—and maybe pulling it off its feet—were the sort of threat that would require weapons fire. And she was fairly certain discharging lasers were not part of the natural order of the jungle. She didn't want to do anything that would advertise their position.

As the ground rose, the pulpy jungle growth gave way to forest until she was navigating between narrower and more solid hardwoods and woody, low lying underbrush that had more in common with juniper than ferns. Night—or what passed for night on Despair—was falling. It was getting dark much earlier than Lex thought it should. She and Caradine must have been unconscious for longer than they'd realized.

They encountered no more wolves nor were any of the larger cows in evidence. Which made sense—all she'd ever seen them eat were the soft, water-filled plants of the swamps and jungle.

On the other hand, there were unclassified tree dwellers in the forest, unidentified heat signatures flowing through the canopy of branches that arched above the *Nightsky*. The hardwoods evidently supporting their weight better than the punkwood trees of the swampland could. And the sensors reported a wider variety of small animals. Hundreds of tiny IR signatures swarmed through

the underbrush, fleeing the approaching monster that smelled of rotting flesh.

Twice carrion eaters attacked. Larger packs than in the swamps, though the individual animals were less than half the size of their lowland cousins. The parasites that had killed the Enders Militia troopers had been nearly as large.

Just after midnight the *Nightsky*'s navigation system reported they had risen two hundred meters above the swamp and that the ground ahead was descending. Apparently they were on the crest of a low ridge. The sky was visible through the thinner branches—a lead and pewter ceiling that seemed almost within reach. Despair's invisible primary and moons ensured the cloud cover was never completely black.

"Outfits like this usually have the smallest number of BattleMechs needed to do the job," Lex said, continuing one of several conversations she and Caradine had rehashed through the night as they kept each other awake.

Actually, the few times she'd seen Caradine in the instrument lights the smaller woman had not looked good. Lex had let her doze for long stretches, only rousing her when she had felt herself nodding off and needed someone to talk to.

The two had developed a companionship based on the discovery they shared a sort of gallows humor. Lex couldn't imagine the two of them becoming friends, but there seemed to be grounds for mutual respect. Something Lex hadn't anticipated.

"It doesn't make sense for them to maintain an entire lance," she added.

"I doesn't make sense for them to be here at all," Caradine countered. Again. Lex had become so used to her slurred speech she no longer had to decode it. "Besides, if the job they're here for is staging for a planetary invasion, they could have a reinforced regiment out here."

"At least one *Victor*," Lex agreed.

"You just like fighting big 'Mechs," Caradine said. "A truck with an autocannon dropped that *Crockett* on us and ran for help. The help that came was the crippled *Flashman*."

"I'm not saying there aren't other BattleMechs out there," Lex could sense the smaller MechWarrior's shrug. "But I am saying

think in terms of any standard military organization. And never think you got all of them."

Lex nodded.

Behind her the breathing, which had become ragged, seemed to slow and deepen. Lex deduced Caradine had fallen asleep again. Though the sky glow was too weak to illuminate the world beyond her cockpit, sensors told her that the forest was giving way to plains ahead. Soon there would be no covering trees and they would be walking across a grassland—fernland—as obvious as a bug on a plate.

"We've come too far," Caradine said suddenly, startling her. "A base this far from Chevalier doesn't fit the pattern of movements we've seen."

And they wouldn't hide a secret base on a plain with all this concealing forest and jungle available.

Lex reversed course, heading back along their original trail. She considered going to one side or the other, covering more ground. But she didn't know enough about the enemy's position to know if she was moving toward or away from it. Wisest course was make the best time possible across ground they knew, then begin searching once they had an indication of where to search.

Three hours backtracking brought them back over the ridge. Lex kept the active sensors at minimal power, probing the ground ahead for evidence of the enemy 'Mechs' passage. A patch of dead ferns at the edge of the hardwoods showed them where they had gone wrong.

"Coolant kills ferns," Lex said, reading her sensor's analysis of the ground.

She expected Caradine to take credit for that—to have deliberately allowed the wounded *Flashman* to escape so they could follow its back trail—but the other woman remained silent. Listening to her shallow breathing for a few moments, Lex decided she had fallen asleep again.

She considered waking her but decided to let the smaller woman rest. She also decided against a stim tab. She was doing fine—the pills were more likely to make her jumpy than truly alert.

Cutting her sensors to narrowest focus and lowest useful power, she aimed them at the ground. The trace of coolant indicated a

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trail parallel to the ridge, along the border between the wetlands and the forest.

Lex shut down her active sensors, trusting her own senses as she followed the trail along this natural roadway for a dozen kilometers. The ground cover here was sturdy but low—a combination of the juniper analogs and a woody vine forming a dense mat that left little sign a 'Mech had passed.

She moved slowly, alert for any sign of armor, vehicles or even infantry that might report her position. She had no idea what resources the enemy had and wanted to be sure she spotted them before they spotted her.

While strolling up their front walk.

It occurred to her that if the *Flashman* had made it all the way back to its base, then returned to the field without replacing its heat sinks, the base might not have the facilities to effect repairs. Or the Florida forces presented such a threat there had not been time to refit.

And the Florida forces being a pressing threat would imply Britto and Aldicott were on the move. Her medium 'Mech wouldn't cause so much concern on its own.

How much a lone 'Mech worried them would depend on what they had to throw at it.

Lex shelved that thought. No use speculating on the enemy's assets until she'd reconnoitered and seen for herself. At the same time, having reason to suspect there might be two other Florida BattleMechs in the field gave Lex a tenuous comfort as she probed the wilderness in search of the enemy. She might not be as alone as she felt.

The trail of spilled coolant ended.

"This is where he turned around," Lex said.

Caradine didn't answer.

Lex pulled the edge of the neurohelmet away from her face. A useless gesture, part of her mind acknowledged as she strained an ear. At last she heard the other woman breathing.

Satisfied her lancemate was alive, Lex eased the *Nightsky* forward. There was no clear trail, but the ground was level along the border between the soft jungle growth to her left and the hard-

woods to her right. It took only a little imagination to see it as a natural roadbed.

Less than a kilometer past the last coolant spill, there was a fold in the ridge rising above the narrow band of level ground she'd been following. Though dense, the forest plants did not assert themselves with the same speed as the ferns of the lowlands and Lex could see broken shrubbery and patches of evident new growth leading toward the fold.

Lex went a dozen paces past the trace before turning uphill, making for what her sensors reported was a shoulder overlooking the dip and whatever lay beyond. The *Nightsky* had no trouble forcing its way through the woody undergrowth and thinner trees of the hillside. She hoped the sound of snapping timber didn't carry to far.

Through the canopy Lex could see the overcast was orange along the western horizon, the color fading rapidly to a dull red overhead and flattening toward purple in the east. Sunrise on backwards-spinning Despair.

Lex had been at the controls nearly thirty hours, running on electrolyte drinks that tasted like no known fruit, MREs she hoped were not made from what they smelled like, and nerves. Fortunately stamina was her long suit. If her numbers were anywhere near what they had been during her senior evaluation at Buena twenty months ago, her reaction time and mental acuity would be at ninety percent at the thirty-six hour mark.

But nobody knocked you unconscious for—how long?—with an assault 'Mech during phys eval. Don't count on more than eighty percent.

A flash of movement snapped her head right. Pain lanced up from her left shoulder, through her neck to a point just behind her eye.

Okay, sixty percent, she amended.

The brightly plumed carnivore that had caught her eye—a smaller cousin of the one that had spat at them earlier—moved rapidly away, putting distance between itself and the foul-smelling BattleMech.

For the next several minutes Lex flexed and stretched her muscles as best she could while driving through the ferns and shrubs. Not surprisingly, she had a lot more aches than she'd had hours

before. There was a padded neck brace for whiplash in the first aid kit, but she didn't want to restrict her range of motion. The stretching—and deep massaging what she could reach—was all she could do on the fly for traumatized muscles.

Cresting the rise among trees scarcely taller than her BattleMech, Lex found herself looking down into a bowl valley.

Alarm beep: metal.

Lex halted. Dead slow, she backed until only her cockpit and crest housing the *Nightsky*'s sensor suite were above the lip of the valley.

Lex ran a careful trickle of power through the active array, trying to see while hoping to remain invisible.

Her screens reported a standard dome base, maybe a tenth the size of Chevalier, surrounded by dozens of towers. The vehicle garage and 'Mech hangar were both larger than a planetary camp that size should require, which meant....

Nothing Lex could think of.

More importantly, none of the metal was heavy metal. No armor, no weapons systems, and no BattleMechs in the valley below.

"Everybody must be out looking for us," Lex said over her shoulder. "This may be easier than we thought."

Caradine's breathing stopped for a long three count, then resumed.

Lex unstrapped and twisted about. Kneeling in the command couch, she reached back to her passenger.

"Caradine?" she instinctively kept her voice low as though the enemy could hear.

There was no answer; no movement in the dark equipment cubby.

"Magda!" Lex barked.

The breathing—ragged, stopping, starting again—was her only answer.

Grabbing—almost fumbling—a hand torch, Lex shone a light on the leftenant.

She had never seen a human so pale. The blood had stopped dripping from Caradine's mouth and nose. But not before it had soaked the bandage she'd been holding and half the bedding. Beneath the dull red trails smearing her chin and cheek her skin was almost luminously white.

"Magda?"

Beneath her fingers—black silhouettes against the far too white flesh—Caradine's carotid artery barely fluttered. But there was a pulse, light and thready though it was, testifying that the woman was alive.

Blood loss. That slur—Lex examined Caradine's head as best she could. Despite the bruising along the side of her face, the other MechWarrior didn't have any lumps on her skull. Lex tentatively ruled out a concussion. *That slur wasn't her bandage. She's in shock.*

Awkwardly jerking and twisting the smaller woman in the confined space—praying she wasn't exacerbating any internal injuries—Lex got Caradine's legs slightly above her head. The best she could do for the shock.

And the worst you could do if the bleeding's inside her skull.

Lex banished the thought.

Unable to decide whether to loosen Caradine's cooling vest to let her breathe easier or cinch it tighter to immobilize possibly broken ribs, she did neither. She had no doubts about removing the shoulder holster and heavy slug gun.

That massive weapon had surprised Lex at the battalion target range on Florida, when the lance had been training together. Even Aldicott had seemed startled. He'd asked Caradine if weighing oneself down with antique side arms was a Nagelring affectation.

"My grandfather's gun," Caradine had answered. "Ten millimeter, hypersonic ammo. Fires two slugs in the time it takes a standard issue laser to recharge."

Aldicott had remarked in bland tones that some family traditions made more sense than others—without making clear whether he thought the diminutive leftenant carrying such a heavy sidearm was one of them.

Now the thick straps—real leather, Lex noted—were pressing the weapon into the ribs below Caradine's left arm. Unlike the uniform

pressure of the cooling vest, Lex could see no way the uneven pressure of the straps could help internal injuries.

Food packs and a repair kit served to wedge Caradine firmly in her new position.

“If you were normal size...” Lex repeated.

Caradine’s ragged breathing needed all the help it could get. The emergency oxygen cylinder she’d brought with her was lost somewhere in the floor of the cockpit. Lex didn’t bother looking for it.

Pulling the cockpit’s oxygen mask from its overhead drop hook, she stretched the feed to its limit getting the mask over Caradine’s mouth and nose. She knew the cold, dry gas had to burn like hell over the raw, torn lip but it couldn’t be helped.

At last, having done all she could, Lex paused to survey her handiwork.

It wasn’t enough.

Twisting in her kneeled position, Lex looked over her shoulder at the sensor screens.

A planetary base—even a small secret planetary base—had to have an infirmary. And a medic. Maybe even a doctor.

Twisting full around, Lex slid back into her command couch. Her hand froze halfway to her shoulder harness.

Right. Take the enemy base single-handed and somehow force their medicos to save Caradine’s life. She let her breath out in a long sigh. Get a grip. Walking down there and climbing out of my ‘Mech won’t save Caradine.

I’ll get killed, the enemy will have a brand new Nightsky and Magda will still be dead.

Even if she lived through her capture and the Florida bothered to extract her, a bonehead move like that would get her busted to... *What is the rank below private?*

Lex swept the status readouts as she cinched the harness tight. No jump, no radio, large pulse laser marginal, two mediums and small pulse lasers optimal, armor ninety percent, structure one hundred. Not good, but better than it had a right to be.

If Britto and Aldicott had followed anything like a standard search pattern, she should be very near their likely approach vector—maybe a little west. Chevalier Base was directly south-southwest, four or five hours of hard running distant, depending on terrain. Enemy assets—which could be anything—were either lying doggo in the wooded cliffs surrounding the enemy base, or over the far ridge for reasons that made sense to them.

Real life options are: One, scout for mobile enemy assets and/or Florida elements while Caradine dies; two, hold position and support Britto and Aldicott's move—whatever that may be—while Caradine dies; three, withdraw to Chevalier Base and hope like hell I get there before Caradine dies.

Lex drew a long breath in through her nose, then let it out slowly.

Flipping toggles rapidly, she brought the sensor array up to full power—now was not the time to get surprised. Two more clicks kicked the lasers from stand-by to ready.

"Hang on, Caradine."

Easing forward the throttle, Lex pushed the fusion reactor beneath her to full fire.

Her *Nightsky* crested the ridge and bore down on the enemy base.