

DJINN OF DESPAIR

Kevin Killiany

Chapter Two

16 September 3057

Terrance:

You can get the hard numbers from the attached files. Or save yourself a lot of wading by looking at the digest Miriam put together. Let me save you some time on gloating by letting you know up front you were right. After more than a decade on a low simmer, MindMASC has taken off. It's all over the place. Well, not all over—more on that in a minute.

Lot fewer fatalities among users than we were seeing five years ago. Percentage wise. We've seen something like a ten-thousand percent rise in users in the last year, year and a half. Looks like whoever is packaging this stuff figured out what to cut it with to minimize the risk. Need to keep users alive if you want repeat business. So you were right—I'm going to keep saying that until you stop getting a kick out of hearing it—the limited distribution we used to see meant test markets, not lack of resources.

Pills are standardized, meaning tight central control on production—though we're finding mixing and pill-pressing labs on several worlds. It's easier to smuggle the pure stuff and step on it after it reaches a distribution point. One milligram of MindMASC to ninety-nine milligrams of a sugar/vitamin/electrolyte mix designed to carry the body through the rush.

One upside of the explosion of MindMASC is now a hundred local law enforcement agencies are on the case. Some of these crews are sharp. They've put together stuff in months that took us years. And they've found a few new wrinkles. Which means: You were right. We should have gone public with this in forty-seven.

One thing you—and the rest of us—were not right about. MindMASC is not coming from the outside. Not your favorite Rim Collection nor the Circinus Federation everybody else was betting on. Though you can take some solace from the fact you were probably closer.

MindMASC is a natural product, one that can't be synthesized—yet—and the source can't be widespread or we'd have heard of this stuff a century ago. All of which means MindMASC has to be coming from one place. The tight vertical control of distribution supports that thinking.

Well, Isodore realized we were looking at a distribution issue as well as a smuggling operation and that BCS didn't have the resources to watch every jump point, so he called in—brace yourself—the Eighth Lyran Regulars.

I sent a back-up crystal in case you just threw the noteputer.

Isodore's reasoning turned out to be sound. While you don't expect guys used to making busts in hundred-ton BattleMechs to be too subtle on a street investigation, when it comes to shipping... Pirate hunters routinely analyze shipping patterns and put together clues from circumstantial evidence we'd miss. Evidence we were missing.

Rochelle was the guy we dealt with, XO of the Eighth, pretty much, though you know how they go out of their way to not follow standard structure. Funny thing was we first had to explain MindMASC to him. Never heard of it. From New India to Son Hoa and points in between—the corridor the Eighth occupies—there has been no evidence of MindMASC. Meaning the distributors have been staying out of their way. Which implies talent local to their area—folks who knew enough to stay out of their way.

More evidence of a local operation: Coreward from New India to Halifax and spinward from the Periphery to Mercedes are about a dozen worlds in Alarion and the Periphery March – excuse me, Timbuktu Theater—that have never heard of MindMASC. Rochelle thinks that means the source is somewhere inside that region. (If the stuff weren't taking over the Rim Collection, he'd support your pet theory.) The idea being they aren't doing business close to home because they want to avoid attention.

So while we're still working the streets and following command chains and money trails, the Mad Hatters are making a sweep of the middle third of the Timbuktu Theater. Using their BattleMechs to kick in doors and turn over rocks. Seems they hate drug pushers as much as they hate pirates.

Of course, even if they've wiped out the source by the time this crystal reached you, we both know there's enough raw MindMASC in circulation to keep the drug on the streets for years. Plus we never know when some kid with a chemistry kit is going to figure out how to synthesize the stuff.

So we are ever vigilant, *mon ami*. The stuff is making its way farther spinward every day and it's up to us to stop it. With everything that's on her shoulders now, I don't want our Archon having to take time out to consider something as banal as drug addiction among the people.

Best to Cecilia and the grandkids.

Freideric Salinger

Director, Bureau of Controlled Substances

JumpShip Saint George
Kirkkila Asteroid Cloud
Timbuktu Theater, Lyran Alliance
20 October 3057

The last tones of the all-clear signaling the *Pith* was secure in its docking collar were still sounding as Hauptmann Kristoff Sardella, Second Company, Third Battalion of the Eighth Lyran Regulars cycled the personnel hatch. Jackknifing mid-flight with practiced ease, he kicked off from the bulkhead and arrowed toward the bow of the *Saint George*.

Stretching his right arm to its limit—and picking up a bit of unintended spin—he tapped a handhold with the very tips of his fingers. The push accelerated him up the corridor toward officer country. He liked to “fly” as far from the walls as possible—risking the possible injury and certain embarrassment of an uncontrolled trajectory.

He didn’t give a damn most people—particularly spacers—thought it was typical MechWarrior bravado. He remembered the terror of heights—of falling—that had haunted him his entire childhood. And paralyzed him during zero-g before he’d set out to overcome the phobia. Now he reveled in his ability—his victory—and pushed his personal limits at every opportunity.

Now his mind was more on the mission than the joy of flinging himself through empty air. The mission that was changing—had changed—unexpectedly. The unexpected was expected on pirate patrol, of course, but the source of the unexpected—the sort of unexpected one expected—was usually pretty predictable. The new orders were unexpected in a new direction.

Sardella was self-aware enough for a twisted smile at the convolutions behind that thought.

Pulling his knees to his chest, he planted the balls of his feet on the lip of the rotator ring. A powerful thrust carried him across the empty axis of the grav deck—nothing around him for thirty meters in all directions—and into the JumpShip’s forward section. This was the crew’s section. Sardella knew it was supposedly crowded because the *Saint George* carried a double complement—standard practice aboard a pirate hunter that might need a prize crew to man any captured vessels—but he saw no one.

From the grav deck it was a straight shot up the central corridor and through the always-open double hatch of the bridge. Snagging the edge of the hatch frame, he pulled a sharp ninety rather than shoot into the center of the cabin.

Sardella had to stretch to catch the handhold just “above” the scanner tech’s position without bumping his chair. *Her* chair, Sardella saw, Lieutenant Travers. Still on New India Base time, he’d forgotten the *Saint George* was on gamma shift during his mid-morning.

Leutenant Travers—he couldn’t remember her first name—acknowledged the MechWarrior’s presence with a nod, keeping her attention fixed on her duty. Though technically a JumpShip, Captain Josef Lanier and the crew maintained conducted themselves as though the *Invader*-class *Saint George* was a WarShip.

Which made sense, since its primary duty was transporting Mad Hatters on pirate hunts. At the moment the *Saint George* was carrying the *Union*-class *Pith*—on which his company of BattleMechs was berthed—and the *Intruder*-class *Harpy* on a cold hunt for a new pirate group rumor said was building a base somewhere in the heart of the Periphery March.

Timbuktu Theater, Sardella corrected himself. *It’s been Timbuktu Theater for a month, now.*

The *Saint George*’s particle projection cannon weren’t much of a threat to any pirate ship they might encounter. But pirates almost never risked their precious ships in direct combat. Nearly a decade of pirate hunting had taught Sardella pirate battles happened on the ground—either on worlds the pirates were raiding or on moons they’d fortified. It took BattleMechs and ground pounders to bring pirates down.

He didn’t imagine they’d see anything but the exhaust flares of any pirate ships they encountered in space. Particularly if the baddies got a glimpse of the *Harpy*—nobody went up against an *Intruder* if they could help it. What he was really hoping for—had been hoping for—was a ground-based stronghold he and his boys and girls could crack open.

Not likely now.

Sardella noted Travers was strapped tightly to her chair—not merely tethered—ready for any sudden maneuvers. A quick glance at the field of asteroids cluttering the main screens con-

vinced him she had the right of it. Pulling the retractable tether from the base of the handhold, he searched for one of the safety loops built into the jump suit he'd been issued. A hundred patrols and he still couldn't get used to the monkey suits. Of course, he felt overdressed in anything other than a cooling vest—and underdressed without the weight of a neurohelmet.

Once he was secured—and had remembered to ratchet the slack out of the safety line—Sardella glanced around the bridge. As commander of the mission, he technically had the right to be on the bridge of the *Saint George* any time he wanted. But tradition kept him either aboard the DropShip transporting his company or in the more public areas of officer country. In making his bridge open to the MechWarrior, Captain Lanier was granting him an exceptional courtesy. And the best way for Sardella to show he appreciated it was to keep himself stuck to a back wall and out of everybody's way.

The scanner tech's screen—a tertiary redundant of the main screens at tac—showed Sardella nothing but natural rocks ranging in size from a small farmhouse up to impressive planetoids. He recognized a behemoth bisected by the left edge of the screen was massive enough for its own gravity to have shaped it into a sphere. That made it, what? At least a thousand kilometers in diameter. A planet in his book, though the astro-cartography works disagreed.

Whatever one chose to call it, that rock alone offered plenty of places for pirates to hide a base. The Karkkila asteroid cloud would take weeks to survey, even if they avoided the areas being mined for metals, rare earths, and water. Of course, fresh from their fruitless sweep of Kladnitsa's moons, they had the search routines down pat. The fact they were looking for a base—and that a base under construction was hard to hide—made their objective possible, if not easy. Hunting a single pirate ship lying doggo in this rocky wilderness would have been pointless.

Though this last batch of orders make it pointless anyway.

Captain Lanier had his back to Sardella, giving orders in a voice pitched to the helm and nav officers directly in front of him; Sardella heard them only as a murmur.

Content to wait until he was noticed, Sardella watched the half dozen other members of the bridge crew do their jobs. As a company commander, he appreciated watching professionals work in concert. But he was a MechWarrior and sufficiently aware of his

own independent nature to know the level of cooperation necessary to command and run a JumpShip was completely beyond him.

Nothing seemed to move, but a faint wave of nausea passed through him. His inner ear told him *something* was changing, but it was too subtle for even his battle-trained reflexes to sort out. He suspected it was a micro correction to the JumpShip's course.

"Hauptmann Sardella," Captain Lanier broke into his thoughts. "What do you make of our last communiqué?"

There was another difference between himself and Lanier, Sardella noted. The JumpShip captain considered conversations in front of the bridge crew to be private.

"There's enough leeway in the wording to allow us to finish scouting the Karkkila system before complying," he said. "We could take whatever time we need and still be within the letter."

"But you don't intend to finish here?" Lanier's tone made it clear he thought hunting down the pirates took precedence over any other consideration.

"I'd rather get the pirates," Sardella assured him. "But this MindMASC is the graver concern."

Which was true. The info dump that had accompanied his orders documented hundreds of worlds—tens of thousands of lives—being corrupted by the hallucinogenic drug.

Lanier nodded. He'd seen the same data.

"Distribution patterns indicate the source is New India," the JumpShip captain said.

"Which would be convenient," Sardella acknowledged with a twisted smile. "But I'm thinking something a bit coreward."

"Ender's Cluster."

"Ender's Cluster," Sardella agreed. "The cluster proper, not the colony."

"All of First Bat is one jump away from Ender's," Lanier said.

"And gearing up to meet a thrust high command thinks the Leaguers are going to make," Sardella shrugged, the gesture bumping him against the bulkhead. "We're already deployed, the

perfect mix for the mission, and also only one jump away from Ender's."

Lanier grunted. He clearly saw the logic of the choice, he just didn't like it.

"There are nine suns and God knows how many worlds and moons in the Cluster," Sardella said. "Any thoughts on where we should begin searching?"

"We don't search the Cluster," Lanier said. "Not on our own. There's too much going on in that soup for anyone who's not there every day to track. We need to make Ender's Cluster and take on a local pilot—three local pilots if the DropShips are going to detach—before we go into the Cluster."

"Ender's Cluster it is, then."

"Course is plotted and load in the nav computer," Lanier said, confirming the entire exchange had been a formality confirming a decision they'd both made in advance.

"Right now our only problem is all this local gravity clutter," he indicated the asteroid field beyond the viewports with an economical wave. "No handy pirate points. We have to climb to the zenith jump point to get out of here."

Sardella nodded. In space the long journeys were instantaneous. It was the short trips that ate up your life.