

DJINN OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Three

Jungle, northeast of Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base

Despair, Ender's Cluster

Lyran Alliance

28 October 3057

Lex brought her *Nightsky* down to a walk as she neared the perimeter of the mysterious compound. Without Caradine's ragged and uneven breathing behind her, she would have devoted an hour to recon before approaching this close. As it was, she knew she had to figure out what she could as she closed.

Sensors probing through the murk of Despair's atmosphere indicated, confirmed, and reconfirmed the base had no fortifications, no armor, no obvious weapons emplacements. However, even without the back trail telling her the *Crockett* and *Flashman* had originated from this valley, the fact that the base existed at all signaled danger enough.

Two outlying domes were clearly abandoned. Caved panels left the interior open to Despair's corrosive atmosphere and the ubiquitous ferns grew up around and through the support frames.

But the bulk of the outpost was intact—including the main dome and attached 'Mech hangar. Significantly, there was no evidence of DropShip landings, nor beaten paths indicating in which direction the field might lie. This could not be the center of the pirate's operations.

Supporting that theory was the near lack of energy readings. The fusion generator, adjacent to the 'Mech hangar, was active and most of the circuits read live on Lex's screens—but only a small area of the main dome was actively drawing power.

The *Nightsky's* TharHes Ares array found no hardened metal, no energy weapons, and no targeting systems. That did not rule out manually aimed missile or ballistic weapons—and certainly not mines—but the lack of armor indicated the base was essentially defenseless.

As soon as she was sure of the range, Lex targeted the communications array at the top of the lone radio tower with her large pulse laser. An isolated base with radio wouldn't be isolated for long. She had no doubt the base had already called for any help it could. But keeping any relief in the dark as to what they were up against might slow them down.

Of course, it would also insure they brought everything they had with them when they came.

Lex's diagnostic computer warned the large pulse laser's condition could not be confirmed by internal sensors. A flashing amber idiot light advised a thorough inspection by certified technicians before firing. But the safety interlocks had not frozen the fire sequence.

She fired.

The beam seemed to diffuse in the soupy air. The strobing pulse obliterated the unarmored comm array, but the core of coherent energy was surrounded by an unaccustomed cone of ghostly luminescence—as though the laser had become a giant flashlight. The *Night sky's* right arm flared white on its own thermal register as energy escaped through gaps in the laser housing.

The amber light now flashed an angry red, but she still had fire control. Apparently the *Night sky* didn't know what to make of the laser's unusual performance. Of course. Neither the targeting computer nor the diagnostic systems were set up to calculate how much of the laser's energy had been on target and how much wasted. Or how many more shots she had before it blew itself to pieces. By the numbers, the large pulse laser should be a dead weight on the end of its right arm.

She would never be able to prove that thought caused her targeting sensors to ping heavy metal at that precise second, but she would always believe it. Despair's ion-charged air and intervening layers of metal fogged the readings beyond the computer's ability to lock on, much less identify, but there was definitely something massive and armored concealed within the 'Mech hangar.

That the only apparent enemy 'Mech had chosen her destination as its hiding place didn't surprise her. It not only fit the string of luck she'd been running, it made perfect sense strategically.

As much strategic sense as parking a 'Mech right where she'd expect it to be to distract her from other dangers. Lex flared wide, keeping her options open—scanning and rescanning in all directions as she made her way toward the hangar's gaping doors.

Her screens continued to remain blank. And thermal readings of the hanger indicated the 'Mech inside was powered down. A status that should mean she'd have five minutes warning before the machine became dangerous. Though she knew a MechWarrior

willing to override safety protocols and risk the control interfaces could get a cold machine mobile in seconds.

Especially if only to fire a cannon or spread of missiles.

The armor and munitions readings seemed to spread as she approached the hangar. Intellectually she knew she was seeing stacked armor plate and crated munitions come into focus as sensor resolution improved, but the effect was of heavy metal boiling up through the fog.

Nothing moved.

Heat readings were confined to the main dome.

The 'Mech entrance to the hangar was a tunnel hung with a series of vapor-trapping curtains. Lex couldn't imagine the set-up kept the air inside the hangar completely free of Despair's corrosive atmosphere, but it evidently worked. And, her sensors assured her, the tunnel was free of booby traps.

As she eased through the final series of baffles into the hangar proper, the tower of armor resolved itself into a light BattleMech backed into a repair bay in the rear corner of the hangar. All of the umbilicals had been detached and dust and litter around the work area indicated repair operations had ceased months, if not years, ago.

It irked Lex that she could not immediately identify the machine, beyond the fact that it was old. Of course her computer knew what it was, but momentary pride kept her from looking at the readout screen.

Complicating her ID was the blasted stump where the 'Mech's right arm should have joined the shoulder. The torso armor showed no sign of damage beyond light scorching—no doubt residue of the arm's destruction. An internal explosion limited to the arm?

Sensors indicated that in its mangled state it massed just over twenty tons, though she would have guessed twenty-five. The extra volume implied empty spaces in the frame, though that design choice made no sense to Lex. Looking closer, she saw open access hatches in the 'Mech's right leg—the machine's extremities were practically hollow.

The cockpit that rose above the torso and was as large as her *Nightsky's* and clearly designed to rotate. Not far, of course—probably no more than twenty or thirty degrees in either direction. A

cockpit that turned the pilot's line of orientation too far beyond the centerline of the BattleMech could disrupt the reciprocal flow of data between the neurohelmet and the gyro system.

A lot of Star League era 'Mechs had mounted rotating heads, and required complex and fragile stability interfaces to keep the machine upright when the pilot was out of alignment. An unavailable interface module had permanently sidelined the *Grasshopper* she'd been assigned when she first came to the Florida. Most modern 'Mechs—such as her *Nightsky*—used the more rugged fixed-cockpit design to prevent this problem.

Two disproportionately tall cooling fins rising to either side of the cockpit made the entire assembly look as though a conventional fighter had been parked atop the 'Mech's shoulders with its wings folded up for storage.

The reason for the unconventional cooling system—and the independent rotation of the cockpit—was obvious. The broad muzzle of a medium laser thrust forward from the lower edge of the ferroglass canopy.

The penny dropped.

"You are a *Thorn*," she told the dismembered and disassembled BattleMech.

A glance at the text screen confirmed her identification. The missing right arm had been a five-tube missile launcher which—when sub-spec post Star League components were used—was notorious for ammo problems.

Caradine's breath caught. Then resumed. It wasn't much, but it was enough to squelch Lex's moment of satisfaction. Her lance-mate was dying and she was wasting precious seconds playing guessing games.

Lex checked her screens. Sensors sweeping and resweeping the base around her confirmed no active weapons systems. Of course. Threat alarms would have been hooting if they'd spotted a live bogie.

Apparently some catastrophic failure of the LRM's ammo feed had disabled the *Thorn*. And—judging from the dust and debris—the pirates lacked the tech to replace it.

Though it was not completely disabled. With no power running through the smaller 'Mech's systems, it was difficult for her

Nightsky's sensors to get more than general readings, but—except for the destroyed missile launcher and the leg armor neatly stacked to one side of the bay—everything seemed to be in place and in working order.

There were five other 'Mech bays in the hangar—and all five showed signs of recent use. That meant at least three bogies in the field. There could be more, if some of the bays served more than one machine. But with one bay occupied by a 'Mech that hadn't moved in months—and could have been parked anywhere if they'd needed the space—she doubted there were more than three enemy BattleMechs unaccounted for.

So it's an even match-up.

Assuming all of the Florida 'Mechs were present when battle was joined. And assuming the three mystery 'Mechs weren't fully-operational assaults.

And assuming I pull this off without handing them my Nightsky.

Lex wasted no time backing her *Nightsky* into the bay closest to the personnel doors that led to the main dome. The scaffolding was basic, no lifts. Which meant she was going to have to carry Caradine down three metal ladders to reach the ground.

Default configuration of the first aid kit's evac rig was to hold an unconscious casualty across the shoulders in a fireman's carry. But the medicos stocking the BattleMech kits had understood the need to traverse ladders and narrow hatches. It took seconds to adjust the straps to back carry.

Getting the rig on Caradine's limp form took longer. Finding the lost oxygen cylinder, she set it in its pouch on the side of the evac harness, but left the unconscious woman on the 'Mech's oxy supply.

Lex kept one eye on the sensor readings as she worked. Nothing was moving—at least not in her direction. Though she wasn't sure how accurately the combat computer was parsing the heat signatures within the dome.

Unable to put it off any longer, Lex powered down the reactor. There would be enough power in the capacitors to fire the lasers for several seconds—though the amount of available energy decreased exponentially as the systems cooled.

Lying on her back, Lex thrust her head and shoulders under the control console. Pulling the interface coupling from the useless jump jet controls, she switched the module for the leg actuator controls. Then she shoved the actuator module into the gap in the jump jet board.

The two featureless cubes of blue plastic were nearly identical to the untrained eye, but their contacts didn't correspond. The switch rendered all motive circuits useless. Though anyone who cracked the standard security lock-outs would be able to move the arms and fire the lasers, the 'Mech was immobile.

Only someone who had spent as much time crawling through her beloved *Nightsky* as she had would be able to spot the switch without going through a complete diagnostic. A diagnostic that required hardware she doubted the pirates had.

Satisfied her BattleMech was as secured against hijacking as she could make it, Lex started to shrug her way into the evac rig holding Caradine.

She paused mid-motion, her eye on Caradine's massive slug gun. Easing her comrade back down, she picked up the heavy weapon. Going against an unknown enemy she was going to want every weapon she could carry.

A quick examination confirmed the finely tooled harness was completely useless to her.

The holster was designed to ride high and hold the weapon muzzle-down, with the heel of the butt facing forward. A logical position for Caradine—with the slender build of a dancer, she had no trouble reaching across her chest. But while not buxom, Lex was not a dancer. She needed an inverted holster—one that held the butt down and the muzzle pointing up and back—slung low so she could reach across below her breasts to draw the weapon.

The rig was obviously custom made to fit Caradine. There was no way to adjust the harness straps or to reverse the holster.

Lex set her service laser aside and slid the automatic into its boot-top holster. The larger gun fit, barely. But it was not as secure. If she did anything besides stand still, she'd have to hold the gun in her hand. Actually, considering the TacSit, keeping it in her hand made sense.

But climbing down the ladders would require both her hands and the gun would tip out of the holster. The waistband of her

shorts was not substantial enough to support the weight of the gun. Even if it had, the bend and flex of descending the ladder would dig the long barreled weapon into her gut.

Opening her cooling vest, Lex shoved the weapon down the front of her shirt. The heavy elastic of her athletic bra held it firmly, if uncomfortably, in place. It was not the best arrangement. In many ways it was the worst, with the gun was clearly visible through the light, sweat-wicking material of her tank top while remaining impossible to draw quickly. But the automatic would be secure for the climb down.

Once she was on the ground, the gun would be in her hand.

She started to replace the slender service laser, but paused again, this time looking at the heavy automatic's spare magazines. Each held twenty rounds and two held tightly together fit snugly in the boot holster. Reaching behind, Lex slid the light weight laser into the waistband of her shorts at the small of her back. The elastic was stiff enough for the lighter weapon. Particularly with the cooling vest holding it in place.

It would be impossible to draw the laser quickly—doubly so with Caradine slung behind—but as hideouts went it was the best she could do. Particularly if the enemy was distracted by the big slug gun in her hand.

It was difficult getting Caradine's forty-nine kilos of dead weight onto her back in the confined space of the cockpit, but at last she had her lancemate secured and breathing fresh oxygen from her own tank.

"Pay attention, Lieutenant," Lex said to the unconscious form on her back. "You'll need to remember this for my court marshal.

"This is the moment I go from being very stupid to being suicidally stupid."

With a decisive slap, she released the locks. Above her the access hatch swung open.

Ender's Cluster
Timbuktu Theater
Lyran Alliance
26 October 3057

"While we agree the distribution nexus seems to be Ender's Cluster," Visount Darmon, Governor of Ender's Cluster and left hand of the Marquis, said. Again. "There is no practical way for the ultimate source of MindMASC to be either on Ender or in the Cluster."

Sardella was beginning to regret his decision to make a courtesy call on the Marquis--which had gotten him no farther than the Viscount. He had the authority to simply order a pilot to guide his task force into the Cluster. But Rochelle had been driving home the idea that the Eighth would get better cooperation from the civilian authorities if they made the effort to be diplomatic.

Like anyone got into the Eighth because they were good at diplomacy.

He suspected Sir Darmon was good at nothing else. The portly little man had a sleek and satisfied look, even when he was frowning thoughtfully as he chose his phrases. His perfectly waved hair was unnaturally neat and he showed no sign Ender's humidity--evident even in the air conditioned gubernatorial offices--bothered him in the least. His multi-layered suit--was that two vests?--was so exactly tailored to his pear-shaped physique it fit like a second skin.

His office, scaled like an audience chamber and one flourish short of terminally ornate, was obviously Sir Darmon's natural habitat. The art on the walls represented works by artists even Sardella recognized and were either real or some of the best reproductions he'd ever seen. Given that the paintings and frescoes weren't hung behind ferroglass in a national museum under twenty-four hour guard, he suspected the latter.

He was glad he hadn't worn his dress uniform. It would have looked tawdry in these surroundings.

"There are simply no worlds supporting any sizeable primate population," the viscount was saying. "Much less the industrial base to harvest any such population in the quantities needed to produce the amounts of the drug the Bureau of Controlled Substances seems to think is in circulation."

"But there are worlds that have not been thoroughly explored," Sardella pointed out. Again.

Diplomacy was not his long suit. Hell, he'd been told polite conversation of any sort was not his long suit. But for the life of him, he could not understand why the Marquis's left hand man was arguing against the Eighth's search of the Cluster. It was possible the Ender's Cluster planetary administration had something to hide, but the viscount's body language and affect told Sardella Sir Darmon was either a gifted actor or had nothing to hide.

It's true, bureaucrats never get anything done because they like preventing any form of action.

Aloud he said: "There are worlds within the Cluster which support life. Lots of unregulated ships go in and out of the Cluster. Treasure hunters, private or corporate prospecting teams...."

"None of which would support the sort of operation you expect to find," Sir Darmon cut him off. "The adrenal gland—any gland—of a primate is smaller than a data crystal. Even if a single animal produced a thousand doses, a commercial MindMASC farm large enough to account for the distribution figures the Bureau of Controlled Substances has provided would require slaughtering tens of thousands of the creatures daily. The logistics of disposing of the unused carcasses alone beggar the imagination."

Sardella sighed. The noble had a point. He hadn't seen his father's cattle ranch in decades, but he still remembered the herds of meat animals covering miles. And the blood stench roiling back from the massive Saturn harvesters when the huge machines made their scheduled visits.

He'd heard people wax romantic about the life of a cowboy, but the memory that stuck with him was always of herding those stupid, trusting beasts into the maw of the waiting processor.

"I tend to agree," he said, pulling his head back into Viscount Darmon's office. "But, like you said, the distribution patterns make the Cluster the best place to look.

"Even if we find nothing at all, we need to search," he added. "Eliminating the Cluster would be the first step in finding where the stuff is really coming from."

Sir Darmon nodded and reached forward to tap what appeared to be a blank spot on his desk. A holomap of the cluster, with major bodies labeled, appeared in the air between them.

"Ender's Three, Four, and Seven have planets currently occupied by scientific or commercial colonies," he said.

"Isle of Borneo, This Is It, and Despair," Sardella read the world names aloud.

"This Is It?"

"Pardon?"

"Ender's Four," Sir Darmon explained. "Note the question mark. The name of the world is 'This Is It?' Usually pronounced in an incredulous tone, I'm told."

Sardella grunted.

"I would think we can safely rule those three systems out," Sir Darmon added. "If there were giant monkey plantations on any of those worlds, someone would have mentioned them."

Sardella nodded agreeably while mentally moving the three worlds to the top of the priority list.

He glanced again at the holographic image of the Cluster. A spiral search pattern made the most sense. And starting with the three worlds the viscount had assured him were pointless...

Ender's Seven. The first rock they turned over would be Despair.