BATTLECORPS

DJINN OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Four

Jungle, northeast of Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyran Alliance
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"Damn."

White powdery blotches covered the narrow strip of metal between her hatch and the ladder. Dried residue of whatever the wolf tonner had sprayed them with—poison, she was sure.

Mindful of Caradine's inert weight dragging her off balance, Lex lowered herself back into the cockpit. She had no idea whether poison meant for tonners would harm a human, but she wasn't going to take any unnecessary chances.

Truly stupid, suicidal chances, yes; unnecessary *chances, no*.

Two liters of drinking water cleansed the handholds to her satisfaction and she scrambled to the ladder.

The air stank—reminding her Despair's corrosive soup was just beyond the half-dozen vapor baffles covering the 'Mech entrance—but it was breathable. Just.

Lex almost lost everything reaching for the edge of the scaffold. Caradine's limp legs swung out as she leaned, throwing their center of gravity back and out over the long drop to the concrete seven meters below.

She lunged—grabbing the ladder upright—and pulled them through the tipping point by brute force.

Caradine's head lolled against the nape of her neck. The oxygen bottle banged into her left elbow. And the evac rig's chest strap ground Caradine's autoloader into her chest; she could feel the edge of the receiver digging into her breast bone.

No way I'm going to draw that fast.

But she'd known that when she'd secured the heavy handgun in her bra. What she had not anticipated was the weapon's sharp metal edges flaying her flesh as she rushed her climb down the ladders.

Lex knew there was no way to mistake her course of action for sound tactics. She'd powered her BattleMech down in a hostile 'Mech hangar, then made her personal weapons inaccessible before climbing out of her cockpit with a helpless comrade strapped to her back and made her way down open scaffolding toward an unknown enemy of undetermined strength who knew damn well exactly where she was.

She was pretty sure considering any part of that to be a good plan would have flunked her out of Buena.

But her objective was to save Caradine's life, and to do that she had to get her into the infirmary. If there was any way to pull that off while strapped into the command couch of her *Nightsky*, she couldn't see it.

The sweet tang of coolant seeped through the rotten-egg smell of whatever trace of Despair's atmosphere was tainting the hangar's air. It tickled her nose, threatening to make her sneeze. She couldn't look over her shoulder with Caradine on her back, but through the rungs of the ladder she could see crates for long range missiles—some open, some sealed and neatly stacked.

Nothing she'd seen so far packed LRMs. That meant the enemy had....

Any one of a dozen other BattleMechs she could think of.

Her feet hit concrete. Crouching as much as she dared, Lex scurried for cover—Caradine's weight turned her sprint into a staggering run. Except for the scrape of her running steps on unswept concrete, the hangar was silent.

Out of the open, Lex propped Caradine's hips on the edge of an equipment crate and flexed her knees. Freed of its load, the strap across her chest gapped. Reaching down the front of her shirt, Lex pulled Caradine's massive automatic from her bra. She was not surprised to see one edge of the slide slicked with her own blood.

Ballistic weapon. Heavy recoil. Use both hands. She reminded herself.

She was rated a marksman with all personnel weapons. But she preferred energy weapons and knew her reflexes were calibrated to the recoil-free fire of lasers. She'd have no trouble with her first shot, but if she wanted her second shot to be on target—or even to hold on to the gun—she'd have to remember the weapon in her hands would try to jump free every time she pulled the trigger.

A deep *pop* echoed through the hangar, followed by a ponderous rustling.

A moment later a cloud of noxious fumes rolled over Lex. She recognized the odor, though she couldn't remember the gasses involved. Like ozone on Valliore, it signified a lighting storm on Despair.

Peering over the edge of a crate, Lex eyed the vapor baffle across the 'Mech entrance. The heavy panels of plastic fabric shifted again, rustling, but there was no indication a BattleMech was coming through.

Dismissing the thought of facing a 'Mech with her handgun, Lex focused on taking the base.

She kept the autoloader thrust ahead as she moved from cover to shadow to doorframe. Angling the gun down and out of her way, she flashed a glance down the narrow hall connecting the 'Mech hangar to the main dome.

Quick bob—one eye around the edge of the opening—then back out of sight. Nothing. Two crates, litter, a sack of something—but nothing that looked like a threat.

Shoulder to the wall, she held her breath for a long twenty count, listening. No sound, except for Caradine's ragged breathing just behind her head.

Another glance, to catch anyone trying to outsmart her. Nothing.

Again, to catch the really clever ones. Nothing.

No one. The hallway was empty. Which made sense. If the dome dwellers were going to ambush her, they'd do it at the other end of the corridor, when she was already trapped in its confined space.

Steeling her nerves, Lex moved down the short hall, keeping her back—and Caradine—close to one wall.

Oh, great.

No one was going to ambush her. Nobody needed to.

The entrance to the main dome was an airlock, which made perfect sense considering the inefficient baffle system protecting the hangar. Once she was in the airlock, all anyone who wanted her

dead had to do was pump the air out. Or, if they were very patient, wait for her to starve to death.

True, it wasn't the heavy vault type lock used to protect a DropShip from the vacuum of space. But the metal bulkheads were heavy enough to stand against both Caradine's slug gun and her service laser.

If the people inside the dome wanted to stop her, she wasn't going anywhere.

Unless....

She had to shove the automatic all the way into her compression shorts before the elastic held it firmly. But she needed her hands free to pull the cover of the airlock's cycle controls open. There were no security protocols, no physical lockouts; this was a commercial design that assumed anyone wanting to get to the circuitry was an authorized technician doing his job.

Of course there was a lock-open setting on the controls themselves—a setting which would allow both ends of the lock to be open at the same time. There were times when the air was safe and/or a lot of material had to be moved through quickly when having both doors open made sense. But Lex wasn't trusting the controls.

In twenty seconds she had the exterior door disabled. In another fifteen the inner door was hard-wired to open even with the outer door open.

Anyone inside the dome could still keep them out—all they had to do was spend ten seconds on the same sort of hardwire job she'd done. But no one could trap them in the chamber and pump the air out.

Just in case, Lex positioned one of the crates from the hallway to prevent the outer door closing completely.

With the TacSit as prepped as she could make it, Lex risked taking a thirty-second breather. She crossed her forearms against the wall and leaned forward—keeping Caradine's mass centered—to rest her forehead against her wrists. Slow, cleansing breaths. Maximize the oxygen. She had adapted to Caradine's weight, but bending over the box had almost brought her to her knees. And there was no denying she was having difficulty moving quickly.

Almost midnight. How many hours without sleep? Best not to think about it.

Four breaths. Then she straightened.

Working the automatic free of her waist band, she released the safety—the lever shifting beneath her thumb with a solid click. Then she checked to confirm she'd released the safety and not the magazine. Tired.

Now or never. She chose the center of the doorway—field of fire and mobility taking precedence over the minimal cover the edges would offer.

Reaching out with her left hand, she swatted the inner door release. The lock mechanism clanked, then electric servos whined, fighting inertia and the weight of the door.

Lex gripped the pistol in both hands, extending her arms in a level isosceles triangle. Combat stance.

The whine of the servos rose an octave, but nothing moved. She had long enough to wonder whether the inner door was jammed before something in the floor gave with a grinding pop. The double doors snapped apart, scraping in their tracks.

Nick!

A muscular thug held Nick's left forearm—held him up, the slender scientist was sagging. A woman stood behind Nick and to the right, the collar of his shirt twisted in her left fist. Lex noticed the woman as tall—her sharp features visible over Nick's shoulder—before the gun registered. Her right hand held a service laser, its muzzle shoved against Nick's ear.

Nick didn't seem to notice the grip or the weapon. The one perfect eye that was open stared glassily—apparently not even recognizing Lex. The other eye was swollen shut and his nose seemed bent. Dried blood smeared across his lips and jaw confirmed it was probably broken. His shirt was torn, his hair matted with what looked like more blood.

Nick and his two captors filled the doorway, but didn't quite block her view of the room beyond. There were three, maybe four more people—including a scholarly man she recognized from the vid of the "native village."

"There's really nothing you can do," Doctor Chevalier—the supposedly dead leader of the Despair mission—said mildly. "Except put the gun down and surrender."

Left hand wrapped around right. Push out with the right arm, pull back with the left. No tremble. No shake.

Rock steady, Lex held the gun's muzzle up slightly, over Nick's head. Ready to move in any direction. The others in the room had guns, she saw, but none raised. They expected the threat against Nick to hold her.

"Chevalier, I have wounded here," she said, clipping her words off sharply. Nick's eye cleared at the sound of her voice, seemed to see her. "Render medical assistance and I'll testify to that effect at your trial."

No one actually laughed.

"A hostage blocking your field of fire; a wounded comrade strapped to your back," Chevalier shrugged. "You are hardly in a position to negotiate."

"I'm not negotiating," Lex answered, packing her words with determination.

The woman in front of her was a killer. Lex could see it in her eyes, the way she held the gun on Nick. She'd boil his brains without a second thought.

And Lex had never fired a weapon at another human being in her life. The memory of nausea sweeping over her at the death of the *Crockett* pilot brought bile boiling to the back of her throat.

The woman's eyes narrowed, a ghost of a smile touching her lips.

She knows.

The woman nodded a fraction, as though answering Lex's thought. A killer knew a killer, and this pirate clearly knew Lex wasn't one.

Almost casually, the muzzle of the laser swung away from Nick's ear; arced toward Lex....

Thunder.

The automatic bucked in her hands, forcing her arms up and back, blocking her view. Bitter smoke.

Lex brought her arms down fast, leveling the gun dead ahead. Her field of fire cleared as Nick and the goon holding him fell to her right—both jumping to get out of her way.

Chevalier stood transfixed, his face dead pale where it wasn't covered with sprayed blood. Beside him another goon stood frozen, his laser carbine still cradled in blood-spattered arms.

Blood and globs of—

There was a clatter as another woman dropped her weapon.

The last man stopped mid-motion—his hand half way to his holstered pistol—staring at into the muzzle of the automatic. He raised his hands.

The bloody goon next to Chevalier unfroze enough to follow suit, but took the time to lay his gun gently on the floor before turning his open palms toward her.

Only then did Lex risk a glance at the woman she'd killed.

Images of bodies flung through the air by bullets' impacts were holovid melodrama. The woman with the laser—the woman she'd killed—had simply folded to the ground, her legs bent awkwardly behind.

But....

The human brain is gelatinous liquid held in place by sacks of flexible tissue. When the two-hundred grain slug of copper-jacketed lead smashed through her sinus cavities into her cranial chamber at over a thousand meters per second, the hydrostatic shock had churned the delicate structures to fragments and—as the exiting bullet shattered the back of her skull—sprayed her liquefied brains and blood over half the room.

The fallen woman's head, deformed around its ruined skull, looked like an empty rubber mask.

Lex almost threw up.

No one twitched.

They didn't see her move, Lex realized, swallowing her bile. *I said I don't negotiate, then I blew her brains out. They think I just killed her as a warning*.

"How many more in the dome?" she demanded.

"About half a dozen," Chevalier answered.

Lex focused her gun on his forehead.

"Eight," he amended. "Another guard, six techs, and the cook. He cleans up, too. Maintenance."

Chevalier realized he was babbling and shut up.

"Unbuckle your gun belt and let it fall," Lex said belatedly to the guard who still had a pistol at his hip. "Everyone slide your weapons this way. With your foot. Slowly."

The thug who had been holding Nick—who was still on the floor next to Nick—was unarmed.

"You. Over there."

The man scrambled across the floor to join the others, not getting to his feet until he reached Chevalier. Then he stood using a table to pull himself up, turning his open palms toward her.

Too many open hands.

"Hands behind your heads," she ordered. "Lace your fingers."

Lex took a deep breath, the strap of the evac harness digging into her chest. She had a half dozen assort weapons with which to protect Nick and Caradine while containing five prisoners and subduing eight other hostiles currently at large.

She wished she hadn't disabled the airlock—it would have made a perfect holding cell.

"Brig?" she asked.

Blank stares. Then:

"There's a secure storeroom," the woman who'd dropped her laser said. "Near the garage."

Which meant on the opposite side of the dome. On the other side of the eight hostiles still at large. Lex dismissed the notion.

"Infirmary?"

"Next door."

Which made sense. Most accidents needing medical attention probably happened around heavy equipment like the 'Mechs.

More to the point, to get Caradine into the infirmary she was going to get her out of the evac rig. Which was a problem. The designers of the evacuation harness had done an excellent job,

but they'd never anticipated having to get out of the thing while holding a room full of hostiles at gun point.

"Can you stand?" she asked Nick.

"Yeah."

Nick's voice was shaky. A quick glance confirmed he looked shaky. Bracing against the wall, he climbed to his feet. He was unnaturally pale—shock, she thought. Then she realized he had the same frightened look as the others.

Maybe he'd sensed the pirate's laser moving from his ear, maybe he hadn't. Either way, having a woman's brains blown out within centimeters of his head had clearly rattled him.

Only it was more than that, Lex realized. Nick would never have—They would never have shared what they had if Nick had thought she was someone who blasted people's brains out in cold blood.

Truth was, he was right—despite the evidence, she wasn't. But she wasn't going to reassure him in front of hostiles. Even with the gun, four of the five would take them both in a heartbeat if they didn't believe she was a stone killer.

She'd find out later if Nick had it in him to trust her.

"I take it you went to investigate the village."

"Took about four hundred viewings, but I realized something was wrong," Nick confirmed. "Went looking. Found the place just in time to get caught by this crew."

A jangling bell echoed through the corridors beyond the airlock room.

"The garage door," Chevalier answered before Lex asked. "We have trucks. The others must be making a break."

Making a break instead of attacking her? Chevalier had said only one of the others was a guard, which presumably meant the others were unarmed. And they could not have known she was alone. Either way, the hostiles not under her gun were vacating, which meant they had somewhere to vacate to—not a real surprise. She wished she had some idea how far away their help might be and when to expect them back.

She tabled pointless speculation, focusing on her immediate problem: Stuck ten meters from the infirmary with no way to help Caradine.

"Keep Chevalier," Nick said suddenly. "He's enough hostage. Let the others go. That's better than trying to keep a gun on all of them the whole time."

For a moment Lex was impressed with his ability to read her mind. Then it occurred to her that everyone in the room understood the tactical situation.

Nick's idea made sense—prisoners were a liability. But she didn't want anyone with accurate intel on just how vulnerable they were reporting to the enemy.

"We'll keep Chevalier," she agreed. "But the rest are going into that storeroom."