

DJINN OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Five

***Jump point seven-gamma-three
Despair system, Ender's Cluster
Lyrans Alliance
28 October 3057***

"There's a low-metal rock on an eccentric ellipse," the pilot from Ender's Cluster said. "Pumice; fourteen clicks mean diameter. Perigee thirty-two thousand clicks; apogee eighty-seven."

"Mr. Brandon?" asked Lanier.

Tradition, dating from the days when harbor pilots had guided sailing ships into unfamiliar ports, dictated that a pilot neither touch a control aboard a JumpShip nor give an order to the helm unless specifically authorized by the captain.

Sardella knew he'd have been frustrated by that level of formality. If he knew the best way to get the ship somewhere, he'd take the controls and get them there himself. Or at least order the helm to do it. But so far the Ender's Cluster pilot had floated at ease, tethered beside Captain Lanier's command chair, and seemed content to offer suggestions.

"Got it," helm answered, confirming he'd plotted the moonlet.

Sardella wasn't familiar with JumpShip sensors, but he knew that at max range something as porous as frozen lava froth would be a ghost to his *Highlander's* targeting computer. The pilot's advice may have saved the *Saint George* an unpleasant surprise.

He'd already brought them through a pirate point that was closer to the primary than any Sardella had seen.

Inside the Cluster, everything is a pirate point, Sardella reminded himself. That's why we need a pilot.

"Sir," said Faraday, the lieutenant on scanners this watch. "JumpShip, outbound on reaction thrusters—"

The string of coordinates and vector data that followed made no sense to Sardella.

He wondered why the man hadn't sung out the minute the *Saint George* cleared the jump point. Then kicked himself for being an idiot. Picking a JumpShip out of a system crowded with moving objects required active sensors—and at the ranges ships in space

had to consider, it took long minutes for the pulse of active sensors to reach out and bounce back.

"Making for jump point seven beta fourteen," the pilot was saying in response to the string of numbers. "More stable, but two days farther out."

How unstable was the point you just pulled us through?

"Incoming message from JumpShip *Zoroaster*," said the lieutenant at comm. "Text."

Which made sense, Sardella thought. He knew graphic symbols survived interference that garbled voice transmission, though he had never understood the physics of why that was true.

"Pirates on Despair," the comm officer read aloud. "Chevalier Base faces imminent attack. Two of the Florida TTM BattleMechs have been destroyed."

"Composition of enemy forces?" Sardella demanded before remembering where he was.

The comm officer looked to Lanier, who nodded.

"Details unknown, sir, though assault-class BattleMechs have been sighted," the lieutenant said. "*Zoroaster* is transmitting available data including report by the commander of the Florida PMM garrison now."

PMM? Despair must not stay in touch with the outside world.

"How fast?" he asked aloud.

"At this rate, two minutes to receive. Maybe six to decompress and format for noteputers."

"Anything else on long range scans?" Captain Lanier asked.

"Nothing showing power outside planetary envelope," Lieutenant Faraday answered his captain. "Too much metal to find anything doggo without close fly-by. Planetary atmosphere is opaque to sensors."

Even if it hadn't been, Sardella knew, without a good idea where to look, there was almost no chance of finding any sort of pirate installation from space. He always got a kick out of holovid dramas where the good guys spotted the bad guys' hideout on the first orbit. Locating anything that didn't want to be seen on something the size of a planet required weeks of careful survey.

Which was true by a factor of ten on a world swamped with static so thick DropShips needed a homing beacon to find the ground.

Lanier rotated his chair to face Sardella.

"Recommendations?" he asked.

Another tradition. Sardella had overall command of the mission, but as master of a JumpShip, Lanier outranked him. Technically, Sardella could give Lanier a direct order on the bridge of his ship, but one did not exercise that letter of the law unnecessarily.

"I think the *Saint George* should remain on station between Despair and the pirate point while the DropShips go in," he said, thinking fast. Naval tactics were not his strong suit. Weren't his suit at all. "It is unlikely any hostile JumpShip will challenge."

"Your supposition being our position here would force any hostiles attempting escape to use a more distant jump point," Lanier said, expanding on Sardella's suggestion. "Increasing our chances of a capture in system. However, this is not a WarShip."

Right. He was used to thinking 'Mech scale—which made the naval PPCs mounded by the *Invader*-class JumpShip devastating. Against another ship, however, they were barely adequate.

"From what I understand of Despair, aerospace fighters will be next to useless on the planet's surface," Sardella suggested. "The fighters from the *Pith* and *Harpy* could remain to defend the JumpShip. That's four additional aerospace fighters, two of them heavies. Rotating their fueling and rest with your own aerospace fighters will give you four defenders in place at all times."

Lanier nodded.

"What of the planet itself?" he asked.

"We'll know more in a few minutes," Sardella indicated the comm officer bent over his console. "But at first blush, I think the *Harpy* should take a polar orbit that will cover the entire globe as it turns. An *Intruder* in close orbit will keep anyone on the ground on the ground.

"The *Pith* will then land at Chevalier Base. I'll lead Alpha Lance to hunt for the pirate base. Dimitri will command in Beta and Gamma Lances which will stay aboard for a ballistic hop and drop once the hostiles' coordinates are established."

Explaining 'Mech strategy wasn't really necessary, of course—but telling the man covering his six what he intended was sound tactics.

"Are there any navigational problems with that?" Lanier asked the Ender's Cluster pilot.

"A ballistic course in Despair's soup is problematic," the man answered. Sardella tried to remember the man's name and failed. "However a suborbital arc, clearing the envelope, should be simple enough and add less than an hour to the flight time."

Sardella felt a corner of his mouth twitch.

Forming a battle plan against an enemy of unknown resources on an unknown world before reading the first data file. What would his old tactical instructors at the Nagelring think?

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

"Pulmonary edema," Nick said, his voice oddly nasal through his swollen nose.

"What?"

Still feeling unnaturally light without Caradine on her back, Lex stood beside him in the infirmary, reading a medical scanner she didn't understand.

Caradine's bruised and naked body lay supine on the examination table. Even her contusions looked healthy under the golden glow of the warming lamps. The sensor array of the medical scanner—ultrasonic imager, Nick had called it—was suspended on a metal boom that swung out from the wall, its flared nozzle centimeters above her torso.

Behind them, Chevalier was secured to a metal chair and table with a half-dozen meters of electrical cord.

"There," Nick pointed to a cloudy region that covered the image of Caradine's chest on the screen. "Fluid build-up in the pulmonary sac.

"At a guess I'd say one of these broken ribs—or whatever broke those ribs—shoved hard enough to bruise the right side of her heart," he said. "Not a puncture, or she'd be dead, but enough shock to startle it out of doing its job."

Lex followed his pointing finger as he described each point, but gained nothing except new empathy for Rufus; though her dog had passed away years before she was accepted at Buena. Whenever she'd tried to point out a toy or a squirrel to her puppy, the stupid animal would stare blankly at her extended finger, then look back at her face, clearly having no idea what she meant. Rufus had lived to be twelve and never grasped the concept of pointing.

Until this moment, watching Nick's tan finger move back and forth across the black and white screen and listening to the drone of his voice, she'd never considered how frustrating that must have been for the animal.

The weight of the pistol dragged down on the hand at her side. She felt her shoulder stretching under the strain of holding it.

Fatigue.

With an effort she brought her mind back into focus.

Nick had apparently finished explaining the situation.

"So what do we do?" she asked.

"First step, get a tube in her and get the fluid out," Nick said. "Her heart has a deep muscle bruise, so it's not going to be one hundred percent for a while. But it's working. And so are the lungs. They just can't work well against the pressure.

"A chest cavity full of fluid is like having somebody piling rocks on your chest."

"Congestive heart failure," Lex said, recognizing the description.

"Right," Nick agreed as he began searching through equipment drawers. "The main difference between PE and CHF is which sac is filling with fluid.

"All we need to get her on her feet is three or four hours to drain the fluid," Nick held up a sealed plastic bag with what looked like a metal straw and a bit of tubing. "Something for the pain, something to help keep the heart on track until it's found its rhythm again. Fast diuretic, too, of course. Clear out all the water she's retaining—body's natural response to trauma. Once the pressure is off, her body can fix itself."

"It will take her days to recover," Chevalier spoke up for the first time.

"You're not looking at these muscle density readings," Nick answered. "Not to mention bone density, heart rate, lung capacity, all of it. Before somebody beat the hell out of it, this was one top-notch machine."

Chevalier snorted.

"Anything I can do to help?" Lex asked Nick.

"Stick the tube in her chest, attach her catheter, or get some sleep because you look like a wreck," Nick answered. "Your choice."

"Right," Lex answered. "I'll check back with you in a few minutes."

She had no intention of sleeping immediately—though she had no illusions about her ability to keep going much longer.

By the door to the infirmary was a shelf of first aid kits, positioned for quick grab in an emergency. She pulled one case from its nylon pouch and set it on the counter. Adjusting the buckles, she slid the strap of the carry sack over her head and arm until it rested on her left shoulder and held the pouch against her right hip. She knew it wasn't much of a holster, but the hook-and-pile closure held the heavy automatic securely.

A quick search after locking down the others had confirmed there were no other people in the main dome. But Lex needed more than that before she was willing to rest.

Like some indication of where the others had gone in the truck. If she knew where they had to get to, she'd be better able to gauge when reinforcements might return.

Though any available reinforcements had probably headed their way when she'd knocked out the dome's radio tower.

A quick check of the locked storage room confirmed everyone was still secured and accounted for. A more thorough examination of the vehicle garage revealed that none of the remaining trucks was armed or armored against anything more than Despair's climate. Nor did any contain maps or geolocators or anything else to tell her where they had been or where they were likely to go.

Searching the rest of the dome revealed bunks for forty—though two-thirds of them were dusty and without mattresses. Fourteen known hostiles and fourteen used bunks—Lex considered that reassuring intel.

Most of the dome's interior space was given over to chemistry labs. The kind of labs she recognized from high school. Very basic, very low-tech, and evidently very complete. Or they had been. Like the living quarters, most of the laboratories seemed to have been abandoned long ago.

Lex found a holomap in what appeared to be an administration office. The state of the art map table struck her as over elaborate given the condition of the rest of the facility. The map and a set of computer terminals were the only pieces of equipment that looked as though they had been in recent use.

Including the radio. From the looks of the dusty instrument, she may have wasted a laser bolt on the broadcasting tower.

Best not to pin too much hope on that.

Keying the map on she quickly found it had only one scale, with the location of the small dome she'd come to think of as the pirate outpost clearly marked in the center. There were controls for plugging different variables into the image—though none were labeled—and connections for a sensor feed so the map could reflect real-time data. But no sensor.

Studying the image she could pull up, Lex saw Chevalier Base was farther away than she'd expected, and the bearing looked wrong. Of course. Despair's demonic atmosphere had been fuzzing her geolocator as well as her sensors.

To the west and north—farther away than Chevalier Base—was a much larger installation, keyed with the same color code as the pirate outpost. It was nestled in a high valley in the mountains beyond the plain she and Caradine had found the night before. Lex was willing to bet a flat circle represented a DropShip pad.

A large portion of the plain between the forest and the mountains was painted an angry red. The indicated route between the pirate outpost and the major installation gave the red zone a wide berth. The zone was not labeled beyond its bright color, but whatever it was, it was clearly dangerous.

Their decision to turn back last night had evidently kept her from blindly walking her *Nightsky* into disaster.

Using the distance to Chevalier Base as a yardstick along the marked route, Lex judged time was not the critical factor she'd been afraid it was. Best guess—even if they had left the major strong point when the dome's radio had gone dark—any relief force was still a day and a half away.

Only after she'd double-checked her estimates did Lex relax enough to consider Nick's suggestion she sleep.

Back at the lab, Chevalier was complaining loudly about needing the bathroom. Nick hadn't been willing to risk untying him until Lex was on hand. She congratulated Nick on his wisdom before leading the former expedition leader to the head. He complained again about the lack of privacy, but she wasn't letting him out of her sight.

Once he was resecured to the chair and table, Lex made her own trip to the plumbing.

"Lie down," Nick told her again. "Rest."

"In a minute," she said.

Fetching a first aid kit from a row of them by the door, she set about cleaning the caked blood away from his scalp wound. As she'd expected, it was a split, not a cut. Someone had tried to crack his head open with an edged club. Gun butt, maybe.

"You're going to need plastic surgery for the nose," she announced.

"I'll just tell folks I was a boxer," Nick said. Lex was glad to see a little of his old humor in his eye. "Cheaper."

"Since when do MDs worry about money?"

"I'm not a medical doctor," Nick said.

Lex looked over at Caradine who looked naturally asleep, not unconscious. And who—despite the undignified tangle of tubes leading in and out of her body—was clearly breathing easier.

"You sure fooled her."

That earned a familiar grin. She was glad the crooked tooth was intact.

"Plumbing," Nick said. "My diploma says xeno-zoology. Comparative anatomy, taxonomy, that sort of thing—mostly in higher orders, such as primates. Which pretty much covers most people.

"Just a question of recognizing what you're looking at," he shrugged. "Once you do that, everything else falls into place."

Speaking of which.

Lex turned to Chevalier.

"Why *sukkot*?" she demanded. "Neo-Reformed at that; you had the walls wrong. Anyone with half a brain would have recognized them."

Chevalier stared at her as though she'd lost her mind.

"What?" he asked.

"The huts in the bird village," Lex explained. "Booths."

"I had nothing to do with the village," Chevalier waved his hand dismissively. "My grandfather thought of it. Epstein—he's security—set it up."

"Not much imagination," Lex said. "And security for what?"

The older scientist held her gaze for a long minute.

"You kill to save your friends," he said at last. "But I don't think you'll kill for information."

"I'm going to keep my mouth shut and see which set of reinforcements gets here first."

Fair enough.

Lex didn't bother to explain she wasn't waiting for any cavalry. As soon as Caradine was ready to travel they—and now Nick—were heading back to Chevalier Base at speed.

She looked at the wall chronometer. Catching Nick's eye, she tilted her head toward the door. A dozen meters down the corridor, she decided they were safely out of Chevalier's earshot.

"How long before Caradine's ready to travel?" she asked.

Nick frowned at the floor for a moment. Lex knew the question couldn't have been a surprise, given their situation. But by the same token, estimating recovery time was probably not part of his comparative physiology training. She gave him time to think.

"If you mean walking around, six or seven hours," he said at last. "If you just mean bouncing around in a truck, three."

The trucks in the garage were clearly up to making it through the jungles and woods of the higher ground around the pirate outpost, but despite Caradine's theory about cannon-toting civilian vehicles, she doubted their ability to negotiate the swamps and bogs between here and Chevalier Base.

It was going to be damn crowded in the *Nightsky's* cockpit. Which meant she was going to have to make some adjustments.

"I have to see to my 'Mech, then I'm going to grab some shut eye," she told Nick. "Have Caradine prepped and ready to travel in three hours. Not a minute later."