

DJINN OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Eight

***Piedmont plain, northwest of Chevalier Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyrn Alliance
29 October 3057***

Lex looked at the river of flesh blanketing the mouth of the narrow valley. She estimated tens of thousands of tonners on the move, all heading off the narrow plain and into the jungle and swamps around Chevalier Base.

Packs of smaller wolf tonners and swarms of jackals flowed among the trees of the hillside, following the huge herd. They had spotted several larger wolf tonners as well—including a new species that easily out-massed the *Nightsky*. But though many of the meat eaters passed within meters of the BattleMechs, they ignored the machines. Apparently the presence of such overwhelming quantities of living flesh overcame the attraction of walking carion.

Caradine was upslope of her, not risking her damaged light 'Mech in close contact with the herd.

Lex had tested her theory that BattleMechs were used to control the herd when their course had first brought them near the slow-moving mass of tonners. Her experiment had been simple: Walk toward the beasts and see if they reacted.

They had. Violently. A few of the larger greens had flamed her *Nightsky*—sneezing balls of fire that set the ground cover smoldering. But many more had panicked. Against the dense mass of the herd, the burst of speed she'd seen in the jungle translated into frantic, flopping efforts to leap over others to get away from the BattleMech.

One beast, flailing wildly, had broken a leg. Its bellows of pain and confusion had brought scavengers out of the woods. Hundreds of them had covered the struggling animal in minutes. Sneezes of flame from the passing members of the herd drove the jackals away momentarily, but the cow tonners lacked the intelligence or social organization to defend their fallen comrade.

Not willing to chance revealing their location with weapons fire, Lex and Caradine had left the beast to its gruesome death and

hurried to reach the valley through the hills. Only instead of being a path away from the giant herd, the valley had turned out to be the tonners' destination.

"Now what?"

"Up and over," Caradine answered. Her *Thorn* turned to head directly uphill. "This doesn't change anything except make it more important we get to Chevalier."

Lex could hear Nick's voice faintly, saying something to Caradine. Lex caught the word *diversion*.

"The doctor says the pirates are probably using the beasts to distract Britto and Aldicott while they do something else," Caradine said. "Attack from the other side or get away, take your pick."

Lex said nothing as she followed Caradine up the hill that framed the north side of the valley. A diversion to cover an escape made no sense. Two Florida BattleMechs and assorted Ender's Cluster infantry weren't the sort of threat that required that much effort. Nor would an enemy force of any size need a diversion on this scale to attack—for precisely the same reason.

Chevalier stirred behind her, arguing with someone in his sleep. The drug was wearing off.

"What's the plan, Chevalier?" she asked.

No change in the muttering dispute. He was still out of it. Lex harbored a faint hope she'd trick a couple of straight answers out of her prisoner before he was cogent enough to lie. She knew it wasn't likely, but occasionally threw questions his way just in case.

The radio clicked twice.

Lex took two steps before realizing Caradine had stopped.

The two radio clicks repeated, then once, then twice again.

Enemy ahead.

Lex acknowledged with a double click.

At first her passive screens revealed nothing except Despair's abundant background clutter. Then the haze lifted and she read active signals—someone was probing the murk ahead with their full array. Taking a chance the other beams would mask her own

transmissions, Lex brought her Thar-Hes Aries array online and swept the hillside above her.

Heavy metal. A lot of it.

The readings were unclear—at least one was a ghost—but they were enough to give her a snapshot. At least a demi-company of bogies spaced across extreme weapons range—and at least one of the unknown 'Mechs was an assault.

Lex cut her sensors.

Pirates.

She knew without being told that Caradine's plan A was get past the pirates without being seen. But if it came to plan B....

Lex raised her left arm. Through her canopy the hatchet looked solid as she swung it through its full range of motion. Status board confirmed one hundred percent. Both medium pulse lasers in the *Nighsky's* chest and the small pulse laser above her cockpit read green and ready. The large pulse laser was amber, but fire control wasn't locked out.

If it came to plan B, a lot of pirates were going down with her.

Hill valley, northwest of Chevalier Base
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Sardella first suspected trouble when flame engulfed his cockpit.

The concussion slammed him right, the restraining harness digging into his flesh through the cooling vest as his *Highlander* staggered left.

The hill—

Working his pedals and shoving the yoke, he got the ninety-ton BattleMech's legs moving—turned the forward fall into a downhill stagger. Around him the hillside was in flames.

"Number one taking fire," he broadcast on the lance channel. He doubted anyone could miss the blazing hillside, but—

The ground slipped away beneath the weight of his 'Mech. Risking his short range missile launcher, he jammed his left arm into the soil, steadying the machine before the slip became a helpless slide into the valley. And the river of dinosaurs. Dino-birds.

Now his target lock alarm sounded.

They eyeballed that first shot.

And hit him with twelve missiles, according to his damage schematic. He brought the *Highlander's* right arm up and around, his Starlight targeting system backtracking the bogie's signal. No icon on the heads up, intermittent tone. He squeezed the main trigger and his Gauss rifle sang. A silver-blue streak of nickel steel flashed through the forest shadows.

No indication he'd hit anything, but the weapons lock faded.

"*Trebuchet* straight uphill," Aldicott's voice was crisp for a change. "Extreme range."

Straight uphill was not the direction Sardella had just fired, but his computer confirmed it was where the missiles had come from. Long range missiles down a steep slope with no target lock had been a tricky shot. Which explained the burning hillside. Twelve missile hits had shred his rear armor, but eighteen misses had ignited the forest.

Sardella pulled his 'Mech's arm out of the ground. Diagnostic display painted only two of the tubes yellow; he'd been lucky. Focusing his sensors along the vector of the hostile target lock, he found something heavy. It was moving uphill on the oblique, going for position on the slippery slope. Seventy-five to eighty tons and faster than his *Highlander*.

"North slope is taking fire," Sardella repeated into his microphone as he moved to counter the mystery 'Mech's maneuver. "Tally one *Trebuchet* and one unknown heavy north-northeast our position."

A wash of static answered him.

"Twindle, Jarhaal, what's your status?"

Static.

Sardella was about to repeat when the diagnostic image registered. He still had his short range antennae, but the tall spike he needed to drive a signal through to the other side of the valley was gone.

Lifting his *Highlander's* feet to their highest, he churned up the hill. Jumping from a steep slope—especially one as unstable as this—was suicidal. But if he could find a level shoulder, he'd be able to fire his jump jets and close with the enemy.

A thermal flare to his left announced the Florida *Hatchetman* was airborne. The idiot Aldicott was jumping from the slope, but by luck or grace was not tumbling backwards. Sardella kept one eye on the screen as he searched for footing ahead. Just short of what should have been the peak of its arc, the militiaman cut his jets.

A flight of fifteen missiles soared through the space that should have been filled with still-rising *Hatchetman*.

Aldicott fired his jets again. With no ground to thrust against, they couldn't push him higher, of course, but they slowed his fall just enough to allow a second flight of missiles to pass beneath him. Almost. Two tagged his left leg and his smooth descent became a tumble.

He was still fighting for attitude control when Sardella lost sight of him behind the trees.

Too bad. That should have worked.

Sardella hoped the Florida jockey held it together long enough to do some damage to the *Trebuchet*—at least delay the missile-

heavy support 'Mech until he had taken out the major players. But from the looks of that fall, Aldicott wasn't going to be threat to anyone.

The steep slope gave way to level ground. Not much, but enough. Sardella stomped down on his jump jet triggers. Branches slapped against his cockpit, breaking like twigs as the ninety-ton machine rose into the air.

Sardella sneezed. After a lifetime of smelling centuries-old sweat, he could not get used to new neoleather heating up.

With a straight shot clear of the metal-heavy trees and rocks, his targeting computer had no trouble identifying his quarry. The eighty-ton *Thug* had evidently stopped running and was raising both arms to track his flight. There were no fancy flying tricks for a *Highlander*.

Pointing his left arm, he fired a spread of short range missiles, not waiting for a target lock. To his surprise, all six tubes lit off. No hits, but he rattled the *Thug* jockey. Both PPC bolts went wide.

"PPCs and hands," Sardella said. "I'll bet you took out the *Flashman* and pulled the *Nightsky* out from under the *Crockett*."

"Now where's your friend with the autocannon?"

Target lock alarm just as he reached the trees. Too late. His targeting computer counted ten long range missiles wasting themselves on the boles and branches around him as he hit the ground.

From the pattern of fire, and the ninety-ton mass of heavy metal at the other end of the contrails, his targeting computer was seventy percent sure his newest attacker was a 10-Z model *Cyclops*. Old, but formidable—and mounting a twenty-barrel autocannon.

That's what I get for asking.

The *Cyclops* was farther up the hill and to his right as he faced the *Thug*. At extreme range for its missiles—effectively out of range in these dense trees.

Just as the *Trebuchet* that had taken out Aldicott was out of range to his left. Unless it was moving this way. His targeting computer had never locked on, and now couldn't find a ghost of the enemy *Treb*.

Wherever the other two 'Mechs were, he'd get to them when he got to them.

Right now—

Matched storms of blue-white lightning blazed through the jungle shadows. One was distracted by a stone outcropping, but the other tore into his BattleMech's chest, boiling away armor between his medium lasers.

His sensors found the *Thug*, invisible through the fog and mists. His lasers and short range missiles wouldn't reach, but it was well within range of his LRMs and Gauss rifle.

He fired the Gauss. The nickel-iron slug sang down its rail and disappeared into the shadows. On his screen the enemy staggered. Satisfied he had target, Sardella launched a narrow volley of long range missiles. The forest ahead blossomed into flame, illuminating the *Thug* as it backed—staggered—away.

Taking a chance, Sardella launched on the gentle slope, closing on the *Thug* in a flat arc that barely cleared the trees. If this had been his only opponent, he'd have kept his distance and pounded it with his LRM and Gauss rifle. Depending on the model, a *Thug* close in could answer his six-missile spread with eight or twelve short range missiles of its own. More than enough to counter the advantage of his medium lasers.

But the AC/20 the *Cyclops* mounted could pound his *Highlander* to scrap if he let it get close enough. Smart bet was conserve his long-reach weapons for the enemy he had to stay away from.

Coming down hard, Sardella's 'Mech rocked as two SRMs exploded against its lower torso. Four missile spread, his targeting computer announced. *Thug* 10-E.

Sardella fired both torso lasers as the second flight of missiles streaked from the *Thug*. The pirate's missiles went wide, but his lasers were on target. One beam hit just above the low-slung cockpit, doing little damage, but the second flash burned armor at the left elbow.

Sardella realized the other machine already had battle damage. Old scars, by the look of them. Apparently Aldicott's civil war had been going on for some time.

Pivoting his *Highlander* right, Sardella leveled his SRM-6. Good tone was instant and his missiles flew true, shattering armor across the *Thug*'s high right shoulder and upper arm.

The target lock alarm sounded and faded, then sounded again. At a range of only a few hundred meters, the *Thug* seemed unable to acquire target. Sardella took the good luck without questioning whether it was local conditions or a failure of the pirate's systems. He gave another six SRM hits in trade for eight clean misses.

The *Thug* shuddered as armor shattered and fell, but it stood its ground. If nothing else, the machine was built to take damage.

The alarm announced a second target lock—solid—boring in from the right. The *Cyclops* had closed to viable range and there was clearly nothing wrong with his targeting sensors.

Time to end this.

Bringing his feet down hard on the jump jet controls, Sardella launched his *Highlander*—going for altitude over distance.

The *Cyclops* tried to help his comrade by launching a spread of missiles across Sardella's arc. But it was too little, too late.

The *Thug* jockey evidently realized what Sardella was doing a half second after his partner. He pivoted his assault 'Mech with unexpected grace—then he gave up any hope of escape by running directly away from the descending *Highlander*.

Sardella tapped his jets, compensating easily.

The *Highlander* was the only BattleMech specifically built to land on top of an enemy. Its heavy feet and massively reinforced ankle assemblies were designed to absorb the brutal shock of impact and to crush armor plate.

But this did not mean the "*Highlander* burial" was an easy maneuver. In fact, against anything larger than a medium 'Mech usually resulted in the attacker sprawled on the ground next to his victim. Damage was usually minimal, but it took precious minutes to get an assault 'Mech back on its feet and in those minutes the MechWarrior was vulnerable.

And vulnerable with a *Cyclops* closing in meant dead.

A half dozen meters above the scrambling *Thug*, Sardella cut the jets, letting gravity and inertia carry him to his target. At the last moment, he spaced his feet, trying to line them up on the other 'Mech's shoulders, make his landing as level as possible.

Impact snapped his head forward, even the heavy neurohelmet yielding to the force of physics. The explosive clang of contact

echoed through the 'Mech, deafening him. Pain radiating from his jaw and a rush of salt and iron told him he'd bitten flesh, but he couldn't tell if it was tongue or cheek.

Beneath his 'Mech the crumpled *Thug* pitched forward, twisting as it fell.

Sardella pulled back on the yoke, as the torque sent him hurtling forward. Kicking the pedals, he threw his head back against the couch, willing his dazed reflexes to guide the gyro, keep the *Highlander* on its feet.

He almost made it.

Stepping forward in a rough stagger, the *Highlander's* left foot caught on something—a rock, a piece of *Thug*—and bent under. The left knee flexed, trying to compensate, but Sardella disengaged. It took his brain half a second to realize what years of training had taught his reflexes—completing the motion would have cost him a leg.

He threw his left arm forward, saving his cockpit from slamming into the rocky ground. No soft soil here. The damage schematic for his short range missile launcher flared red, then faded to black.

Sardella silenced the damage alarm. The schematic indicated stress damage—he wouldn't be jumping any time soon—but the joint assemblies looked like they should hold.

There was no time to run a proper diagnostic, so he took the glowing wireframe at its word. Rotating the ankle back into alignment, he pulled on the yoke, muscling the leg into position. The left arm did not look good—multiple frame fractures and ruptured myomer below the elbow—but the right was undamaged. That was all he needed. The designers had anticipated falls and either arm was sufficient to push the *Highlander* upright.

Sensor alarm.

The *Cyclops* had found him.