

DJINN OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Nine

Hill valley, northwest of Chevalier Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyrans Alliance
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Sardella froze as the targeting scanner swept over him. With his *Highlander* on the ground, immobility offered his only defense against the *Cyclops* and its seeking probe.

The signal faded.

The assault 'Mech's targeting computer had locked on to his *Highlander*'s signature in the air, then lost it when he dropped below tree level. Now its sensor array swept blindly over his supine form once because it was calibrated to find a standing BattleMech. The difference between a computer and a mind had saved him on this pass.

But as soon as he started to rise, the machine would recognize him. Sooner, if the pilot thought to adjust the parameters.

This guy must have flunked basic.

No matter how stupid the other jockey was, Sardella knew he was only seconds away from being made. And the first volley of cannon fire would rip into him two seconds after.

Face down, positioned to shove itself upright, all of the *Highlander*'s weapons were pointed at the ground. And his rear armor had been shred to ribbons by the *Trebuchet*'s opening volley. He wouldn't live through the *Cyclops*'s first salvo.

Trying to stand meant he'd probably die before he got to his feet. Staying down meant he'd certainly die.

Sardella shoved down furiously with the *Highlander*'s right arm. Built as melee weapons, the prongs protecting the Gauss rifle's muzzle were strong enough to support the ninety-ton machine, but the rocky ground was not ferrocrete. The blades dug a half meter into the rocky soil before meeting resistance sufficient to push the BattleMech upright.

Weapons lock alarm.

Sardella got the *Highlander*'s left leg under its torso. Straightening the damaged knee, he pulled the Gauss rifle free of the ground.

His own targeting computer identified the *Cyclops*—two hundred meters to his left and invisible through a copse of trees.

With his 'Mech still on one knee, he swung the Gauss rifle across its chest, letting his sensors guide him to the target.

The copse of trees exploded. Trunks and branches were shred to flinders as depleted uranium slugs carved a tunnel through the dense stand.

Sardella was thrown against his harness. The *Highlander* almost toppled as cannon shot shattered armor across its upper torso.

The targeting computer gave him good tone and he fired—trusting his sensors when they told him the *Cyclops* had taken a solid hit. But it wasn't enough. The pirate was moving to his left, getting behind him.

LRMs—no lock. Servos screamed, driving a spike of sound through his ears. Diagnostic showed damage to his waist rotator, the torso wouldn't turn far enough for his chest weapons to bear. Perfect set up for his short range rack and that was ruined. One hundred and sixty-two birds still in the magazine and they didn't do him a damn bit of good.

Though they'd go off beautifully if the pirate's autocannon ripped a salvo into his unarmored back.

Cursing his luck, Sardella yanked his controls, lunging the *Highlander* to its feet. Overbalanced, the machine staggered forward, almost going down on the uneven slope, but he kept it upright by force of will.

Sardella spun the massive machine around, using footwork to compensate for the loss of torso rotation. The *Cyclops* was a little above him across a patch of open ground. At the close edge of his Gauss rifle's effective range, but neatly bracketed by his medium lasers.

Not that two mediums were going to do much good against a ninety-ton assault.

Shuffling a half step back to align his lasers, Sardella brought the Gauss rifle up to firing level.

Thermal flare. The twin-column flame of jump jets rose from the forest to the enemy's right.

Sardella's targeting computer tagged the jumping BattleMech as Aldicott's Florida-blue *Hatchetman* just as it reached the top of

its arc. And projected the medium 'Mech was coming down right on top of the *Cyclops*.

The pirate saw the jumper—and its projected LZ at the same time. Pivoting away from Sardella, he flexed his *Cyclops* backwards at the waist and knees with a suppleness the wounded *Highlander* could only envy. Extending both arms, the assault 'Mech brought both lasers and its autocannon to bear on the descending medium.

It was a simple firing solution, a straight-in shot at less than a hundred meters. One burst and the only thing hitting the *Cyclops* would be a rain of debris.

Sardella framed the pirate in his targeting reticule. Too close for the LRMs. With the Gauss rifle under the main button, his finger took up the trigger's play.

Good—

Twin lasers, mediums, burned out of the shadows below the *Cyclops*. The ruby beams gouged furrows across the unshielded LRM tubes.

—tone. Sardella sent a Gauss slug singing—

Aldicott feathered his right jet, pitching his *Hatchetman* out of its collision course. The *Cyclops* pivoted left to track it.

—into the pirate 'Mech's upper torso, just below its upraised left arm.

And a sky-blue shape came charging out of the forest to its right.

What the hell?

Targeting sensors read a generic medium moving at better than eighty kph. Sardella saw a *Nightsky* in Florida colors, running in an improbable forward crouch with its left-handed axe cocked out and back—ready for a side-arm swing.

Overwhelmed with targets, the *Cyclops* pivoted right, focusing on the charging *Nightsky* and losing its chance to hit the falling *Hatchetman*.

Sardella's torso lasers fired in concert with the unseen ally in the shadows. Four beams scoured armor from the assault 'Mech's back and side.

Tracing the second set of lasers back to their source, the *Highlander's* Starlight targeting computer belatedly announced the presence of an unknown BattleMech massing twenty-one tons. Sardella cursed Despair's air for the impossible reading.

For his part, the pirate ignored both the mystery 'Mech and the laser damage. He unleashed his autocannon on the *Nightsky* at near contact range.

The smaller machine stumbled, armor shredding under the impacts. For a half second Sardella thought it would falter, but the medium surged forward, accelerating through the last hundred meters. His Gauss rifle signaled ready, but the Florida 'Mech was too close.

Stepping in, the hatchet 'Mech swung its left arm forward—the dense blade along the leading edge chopped into the front of the assault 'Mech's left hip assembly. The force of the impact bounced the *Nightsky's* arm out and back. Going with the rebound, the jockey high-stepped his machine through a textbook-perfect left spin—its curved back momentarily to the *Cyclops*—and poured the full inertia of fifty tons moving at speed into a back-handed blow that drove the main blade of the axe into the rear hinge of the knee.

Pulling the heavy weapon free of the collapsing joint, the *Nightsky* staggered—stumbling a few steps before finding its stride. Then it raced away as quickly as it had attacked, clearing the field of fire.

The *Cyclops* pivoted, swinging its medium laser to follow. And its left leg seized with a metal screech Sardella heard through his canopy.

Aldicott's AC/10 snarled, pouring death into the immobilized BattleMech. The twin medium lasers of the impossible 'Mech—and now the twin pulse mediums of the *Nightsky*—stabbed from the shadows. Not willing to waste his precious Gauss ammo on a beaten enemy, Sardella added his own mediums to the roast.

The hatch atop the helmet-shaped cockpit blew, black smoke following it into the air. A moment later the couch ejected. Sardella had a brief impression of orange hazmat suit as the *Cyclops* pilot rose out of sight.

Sardella waited a long ten count, but the expected fusion explosion didn't occur. Just the continuing billows of black smoke.

"Apparently he forgot his fire extinguisher," Aldicott's sleepy voice sounded faint over Sardella's damaged radio.

"Evidently," Sardella agreed. "The *Trebuchet*?"

"No sense of close combat skills."

Sardella waited, but there was no further explanation. He became aware of a throbbing pain in his cheek and remembered the taste of blood.

Guess it wasn't the tongue.

"I'll be interested in that battle ROM," he said at last.

"Of course."

The *Nightsky* and the mystery 'Mech emerged from the shadows. Sardella grinned, hurting his cheek. The little 'Mech really did mass twenty-one tons. It was a twenty-five ton *Thorn* with a missing arm.

"May I present Leftenants—excuse me—Leutnants Caradine and Atreus of the Florida TTM?" Aldicott asked. "They were happening by and—"

"Shut up, Tommy," said a weary voice. "Hauptmann Sardella, sir, Leftenant Caradine here," the damaged *Thorn* raised its remaining arm. "Leftenant Atreus is monitoring, but has a prisoner aboard who screams curses when she transmits."

"Pleased to meet you, Leutnants," Sardella answered, not making a point of correcting their ranks. "Aldicott, I don't have full radio. Can you raise Twindle and Jarhaal?"

"My pleasure," Aldicott answered. Then after a pause: "They report having dispatched a *Hunchback* and an *Orion*. They are fully operational, but see no way across the river of *Oiseau de Tonnerre*."

"Why not?"

"Apparently whenever they approach the herd it causes a general panic, which carries with it the potential for damage," Aldicott said. Sardella wished the affected tone didn't set his teeth on edge. "Also the valley is too broad to jump."

"Tell them to parallel the beasts until they're out of the valley, then make best time to Chevalier Base," he said. "Assuming Caradine's ride is a former Adder, there's at least a lance of BattleMechs unaccounted for. And we don't know what other assets they may have."

"Sir," a new voice cut in.

From the hoarse shouting almost drowning out the speaker's words, Sardella deduced he was hearing Leutnant Atreus.

"Readings are unreliable," she stated the obvious formally. "But I have readings on at least two more unidentified BattleMechs, massing sixty to seventy tons, continued over the ridge, apparently heading due east."

Sardella pulled the topo map back up on his secondary screen.

"That would put them north of this migration when it passes the base," he said. "There's something up there they don't want us to find and they're counting on the beasts to keep us away."

"That's my thinking," a new voice piped up. "That's where Chevalier built the fake village."

"I take it you have a passenger, Caradine?"

"Oh, yes, sorry," said the male voice. "Doctor Bannik Severin—chief of zoology with the second Chevalier mission. The village of intelligent natives was a hoax—a scarecrow planted by the original Chevalier to keep us from exploring in that direction."

"Of course, the old outpost was in that direction, but that would just be going in a great circle to get where they already were."

"The original Chevalier?" Sardella asked.

"First mission to Despair, disappeared thirty-seven years ago," Severin explained. "The current Chevalier—Lex's prisoner—didn't know his grandfather was still here when we came, but now he's in on it. That's why he faked his death."

Sardella sighed. That explanation assumed he already knew a lot he didn't about the civilian mission, but he didn't care enough to question. While the match-up between the "loss" of the original mission and the disappearance of the Adders couldn't be coincidence, his problem was the current tactical situation not history.

"Let them get whatever they're after," Sardella decided. "We'll keep close enough to monitor—be ready to respond if they make a move on the base."

"Sir?" the voice with shouting behind it. Atreus. Sardella wondered why she hadn't used her sidearm.

Of course, anyone from a family rich enough to equip their neophyte MechWarrior with a state-of-the-art *Nightsky* was probably used to having the servants deal with unruly guests.

"The Eighth has Despair bottled, Leutnant," he explained, not caring if his annoyance with pampered scions used to questioning authority showed. "We've got a *Union* and an *Intruder* overhead making sure nothing gets off the ground. These pirates aren't going anywhere.

"And we have a good idea where their main base is," he added. "Least effort plan is let them grab whatever they think is so precious and crawl back into their cave where we can find them without effort."



Lex focused on the screens, trying to capture any hint of the pirate 'Mechs she knew were somewhere ahead. Knowing they would have been easy to trace without the sensor fog of Despair's climate and ecology did little to mollify her.

The thermal ghosts of the scavengers and carnivores flitting between the trees to her right confirmed she was still moving parallel to the unnatural migration of the great grazing tonners. Having been attacked with mindless frenzy on almost every patrol, she found their silent indifference to her presence both restful and disconcerting.

Sort of like Chevalier's silence.

The scientist had been quiet ever since the Hauptmann's speech about Despair being contained. Apparently realizing escape was impossible had taken all the fight out of him. Though that didn't make a lot of sense. Surely he had realized that simply screaming refusals to return to Chevalier Base availed nothing, but that hadn't stopped him earlier.

Lex wished she had thought to install a rearview mirror. She knew Chevalier was awake from his rate of respiration and occasional shift, but she couldn't see him. If they were still in the jungle when night fell, the shadows would be dark enough to make her canopy a mirror—small comfort with three or four hours of sky glow left.

"You weren't in on it when you made the recording, were you?" she asked, testing Nick's theory.

Silence from behind.

Lex pulled up the recordings of her earlier sensor readings—trying again to determine exactly which BattleMech she'd almost seen. Two, one a sixty ton, the other a seventy. The sixty had been closer, but its readings had been the most confusing. Flickering....

"What makes you think that?" Chevalier asked with belated nonchalance.

"Faking your death," Lex said. "If you had been in on it, you would have come back to base, stayed in charge and made sure no one ever went too far toward those old domes.

"You got captured and made that recording at gun point. Did they know who you were?"

"I suspect that's why I didn't really die after making the recording," Chevalier said. "They knew who I was and told me Pop was alive. It wasn't gun point—I wanted to see what was happening."

"What was happening?"

Silence again.

The hillside dropped off suddenly ahead. Lex left her passenger to his thoughts as she negotiated the cuts eroded in the loose soil beneath the ferns. The hillside as pulling back to her left, the valley widening out into the basin of jungle and swamps.

Sardella had tasked Lex with moving along the more treacherous lower slopes of the hills framing the valley. Her machine was more agile than the *Highlander* or even the lighter *Hatchetman*. Caradine was piloting her *Thorn* in close formation with Sardella across the rolling shoulders of the hills above—not only to act as his radio repeater but because the more predictable terrain was easier for battered 'Mech and pilot to navigate.

Surveying the tangled landscape in front of her, Lex guided the *Nightsky* farther down into the valley rather than move up toward the others. Best to keep their sweep as wide as possible.

Lex kept a close eye on the thermal silhouettes that indicated the plodding mass of tonners just beyond the fringe of trees. She didn't want to cripple more beasts by panicking them. Unfazed by her presence, a pack of carnivores—their spiked crests level with the BattleMech's waist—flowed past, intent on some mission ahead.

"You were—what?—in college when your grandfather disappeared?" Lex asked.

She wasn't really interested in the information—Well, she admitted to herself, she was a little curious. Primarily she just wanted the passenger to talk because having him sit silently behind her was just a bit unnerving.

"Last year of undergraduate," Chevalier agreed easily. "About your age. He'd raised me."

Lex didn't ask about his parents.

"Is that why you went into science, too?"

Chevalier chuckled. A disconcerting sound compared to his earlier screams and threats.

Lex halted the *Nightsky* and locked down the controls. Releasing her harness she drew her laser and twisted around onto her knees. Studying her prisoner over the back of her command couch she confirmed cables still secured him to the frame of the equipment locker and that the cooling vest and other hoses were in place.

He'd gained a few bruises being bounced around in the skirmish—and had no doubt given himself a couple trying to kick his way free when he first woke up. But otherwise he seemed fine. Almost relaxed, which Lex realized was what bothered her. His affect did not fit his circumstances.

"What's so funny?"

"I didn't go into science," he said. "Neither did my grandfather."

Chevalier surprised her with an almost conspiratorial grin and settled back as though making himself comfortable.

"Pop was an entrepreneur—put together funding for wildcat exploration.

"I, on the other hand, have a doctorate in paperwork," he shrugged. "I was chief operations officer of a multi-planetary pharmaceutical company when the Viscount asked me to manage the economic revitalization program.

"When I heard there was a Despair project I knew I had to be on the ground. Felt like I was following in Pop's footsteps."

"You just didn't know where they really led until you got here," Lex guessed.

Chevalier didn't answer, but his smile told her she'd scored a hit. And that it amused him. Something was definitely not right.

She considered calling Sardella, but what would she report? That her prisoner was in a good mood?

Whatever the mystery, there didn't seem to be an immediate threat. Giving up for the moment, Lex strapped back in and stepped her BattleMech forward.