

DJINN OF DESPAIR

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Chapter Twelve

Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyrn Alliance
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One minute past midnight. That's about right.

Lex sat on a palette loader, looking up at the ruin of her *Nightsky*.

The right arm ended just below the shoulder—the irreplaceable hand actuator, elbow joint, and large pulse laser buried in the chest of a *Lancelot* no one had found. A torso laser was ruined, three double heat sinks had ruptured, nearly half the armor was gone....

Her first real mission and she was back where she had begun. Consigned to perpetual standby by a BattleMech that would never fight again. The Florida didn't even have access to Royalstar armor.

The battle of Chevalier Base had been brief. Though she'd never heard the base transmitter, the base had heard her.

Before the fight with the *Lancelot* that had forever cost her her 'Mech, the *Pith* had begun its approach. Realizing there was no time to land and deploy the BattleMechs on board, Captain Lanier had brought the DropShip down between the megaherd and the base—counting on the huge engines to flash dry the mud to hardpan.

It had worked. When it came to frightening tonners, three pirate BattleMechs were no match for thirty-five hundred tons of DropShip descending on a pillar of flame.

Chevalier's homecoming had been strained. The people he used to lead and had tried to kill did not seem to know what to do with him. Britto had suggested the Enders Cluster Planetary Militia take him into protective custody.

Chevalier had appeared grateful.

Lex had tried to report to Britto, but he'd waved her off—telling her he'd have time for her war stories later. He seemed more interested in impressing the Eighth Regular MechWarriors.

There were four of them—Franks, Twindle, and Jarhaal of Sardella's lance and First Leutnant Veronica Dimitri, apparently Sardella's second in command. Their olive-drab *Highlanders* parked along one wall of the huge equipment hangar the base had turned over to the BattleMechs.

Dimitri was a short, muscular woman with a contralto voice deeper than most men's. *She* had listened to Lex's two-minute summary of events.

The hangar's 'Mech-sized airlock opened, revealing a headless *Hatchetman*. Not headless, Lex realized as the BattleMech stepped clear of the cycle chamber. But Aldicott had come within a hand span of being vaporized.

There were no proper bays in the hangar. Aldicott marched his 'Mech to open space near a wall and powered down.

Lex converged with Britto to meet him at the base of the chain ladder. She saw two triangles of cheek that had not been covered by his oxygen mask and hazmat goggles had been burned a blistered red. The effect would have been comic if they weren't so obviously painful.

"Shame the ECPM isn't letting the prisoners in," Aldicott had to raise his voice to be heard over the pumps of the airlock. "Prying them out of their shells with hazmat bags is inhumane."

"They're prisoners," Britto answered as though that were an explanation.

"Best call up a med team for Caradine," Aldicott said.

"Caradine?" Britto shot an accusing look at Lex.

Aldicott indicated the one-armed *Thorn* as the 'Mech shuffled a few steps into the hangar and stopped.

Anyone who served with BattleMechs knew the difference between mechanical failure and a wounded pilot. Dimitri was already at the foot of the machine when Nick got the hatch open and called for help. She swarmed up the ladder with Franks close behind before Britto and Lex made it across the hangar.

The airlock was already cycling when she lifted Caradine's still form from the cockpit and handed her back to Franks. Nick started to follow Franks down the ladder, but Dimitri waved him ahead of her back into the cockpit. As soon as Franks reached the ground,

she stepped the *Thorn* forward, clearing the entry for Sardella's *Highlander*.

Lex caught only a glimpse of Caradine's face—greenish pale around the purple bruises—before the medicos carried her from the hangar. Clearly torn about where he wanted to be, Britto hesitated for a moment before following them.

Alone again, Lex looked up at her ruined *Nightsky*.

"Leutnant Atreus?"

"—oos," Lex said reflexively, before realizing the speaker had said her name correctly. She came to attention as she found herself facing a craggy featured man wearing a cooling vest with a hauptmann's triangle.

"Yes, sir."

"Relax, Leutnant."

Lex assumed parade rest as crisply as she could.

She thought the hauptmann sighed.

She must have stood transfixed, unaware as the hauptmann secured his *Highlander*. She was aware she hadn't slept more than two hours—or bathed—in the last sixty.

Where was Nick?

"I'm Hauptmann Kristoff Sardella," said the man in front of her. "You did some good work out there."

"Thank you, sir."

"These are Mad Hatters, Ali girl, not Golden Lions" Aldicott drawled in her ear. "You're allowed to talk like you're a person."

Lex saw Sardella's dark eyes flash with anger as he turned toward Aldicott. But the reprimand she expected died as the hauptmann stared at something apparently at chest level. She did not turn her head.

"How did you come by that unit patch, mister?"

Lex remembered the black oval patch Aldicott wore, the Zeus standing in a flaming lake.

"Picked it up about twelve years ago," Aldicott answered. "Thought I'd hang on to it."

"The Hell and High Water Boys died on Somerset," Sardella said coldly. "Why do you wear their patch?"

"Because the Eighth damn Arcturan Guard gave the Turkina Keshik bloody hell on Here first," Aldicott snapped back with more anger than Lex had ever heard. "That's where I got separated and that's where I spent two years in the catacombs fighting alongside the best damn planetary militia in the Inner Sphere before getting wounded and extracted against my bloody will."

"Sir."

Lex blinked.

And so did Hauptman Sardella. Several times.

"I thought you were a kid with a damn attitude," he said at last.

"That I am, sir," Aldicott answered in his usual drawl. Lex felt a hand on her shoulder. "Ali here will tell you I delight in pissing off prigs."

Sardella blinked again at the implication.

Lex felt the room swaying around her. If it weren't for Aldicott's hand... Shouldn't they be going after pirates? No. They were contained. She remembered something about the *Harpy*. An *Invader*? An *Intruder*? Something.

"Let me guess," Sardella was saying when the hangar came back. "As soon as you got off Here, you blamed central command brass for losing so many worlds—so many soldiers—to the Jade Falcons. Maybe named names and went as high as you could go to get justice done?"

"Got pretty high, too," confirmed Aldicott.

"And ended up busted in rank and stuck on Florida."

"Watching the sky for an enema tube and counting the days till retirement."

That's my future.

"Have you tried for a transfer?" Sardella asked. "It's been—what?—five years?"

"I suppose I could try again," Aldicott replied. "They do say the one-hundred and thirty-fourth try is the charm."

Sardella stared for a long minute at something over Aldicott's head.

Or maybe he didn't. Lex no longer trusted her time sense. Or her sense of balance. She rocked into Aldicott's hand and he pushed back, steadying her.

"A fellow named Brent Matis left the Regulars about the time you ended up on Florida," Sardella said. Lex figured he was talking to Aldicott. "Inherited the resources of an entire planet."

"Some folks do have it rough," Aldicott agreed.

Sardella grimaced.

"Matis formed a mercenary command: the Crimson Crusaders," he said. "And he has the bankroll to equip anyone he takes on with the BattleMech of their choice."

"I don't do mercenary," Aldicott said, no hint of his drawl.

That drawl's fake, Lex realized.

"I'm not a gun for hire," Aldicott did not drawl.

"Matis is from Dompaire," Sardella said. "The only missions the Crimson Crusaders take are kicking Jade Falcon butt."

Lex felt Aldicott's fingers dig into her, hurting through the cooling vest.

I don't need that much support.

"You know, once you do hatchet, there's no going back," Aldicott drawled. "I don't suppose your friend Matis has a *Berserker* in need of a jockey?"

Sardella grinned.

"I'll put you in touch," he said.

Lex rocked as Aldicott let go of her shoulder, taking a half step back to catch her balance.

Sardella's eyes locked on her, the grin disappearing from his face.

"Before you leave this hangar," he said—ordered. "Get a copy of your battle ROM to First Lieutenant Dimitri. All of it. I want to do a complete review."

I'm stuck on Florida forever, she thought, watching the hauptmann's retreating back. What makes you think you could possibly scare me?

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"Pity the Florida doesn't have the tech resources to repair Leutnant Atreus's *Nightsky*," Sardella rested his elbows on the broad desk that had belonged to Chevalier as he read the noteputer's datascreen. "Her family has no money?"

"Farmers of some sort, sir," Britto answered. "Religious commune, I believe."

"Ah."

Britto's manners had improved since the battle; not the first time Sardella had seen combat knock the arrogance out of a young Turk. Now the young Florida lance leader was folded almost double—trying to sit at attention while sunk in the depths of the couch along one wall of Chevalier's former office.

Sardella cast a glance at Twindle, seated in a straight-backed wooden chair positioned to face both the couch and desk. She'd brought the chair from the commissary after her first experience with Chevalier's furniture.

Now she nodded, apparently confirming Britto's information.

"I was more surprised to discover Caradine may be in a similar situation," Sardella went on, looking back at the noteputer. "It seems her *Hatchetman* represented her entire endowment. No money to replace the sunk escape pod."

"I'm sure the Florida will find a way," Britto said.

"Oh?" Sardella asked.

"She—" Britto began, then visibly changed course. "A replacement escape pod for a *Hatchetman* is readily available technology."

"Ah," Sardella nodded, enlightened. He made a note on the screen with his stylus.

"Franks speaks highly of your performance under pressure," Twindle said into the brief silence. "Too bad about your ROM."

"My own fault, ma'am," Britto acknowledged. "I was too impatient to wait for maintenance to repair my comm panel."

He shook his head in self depreciation.

"I really do know better than to try a fix like that myself."

Sardella chuckled.

"I understand being impatient to get back into action," he said. "Fortunately, the battle ROMs of other MechWarriors document your actions."

Twindle added: "You won't lose what you've earned to a fried ROM core."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Britto. "Sir."

Sardella glanced at Twindle. He could see his second consider for a moment before nodding fractionally. She was in agreement.

Sardella sighed.

"Actually, Britto, what I really want is your insights into something that's troubling me," he paused, gauging the younger man. "Leutnant Atreus."

Britto stretched slightly, evidently trying to come to a higher state of attention while folded into the couch.

"What about her, sir?"

"You can relax a bit, Britto," Sardella said.

"I graduated about the time you were born, but we're both—all three—Nagelring here."

He managed a slight smile. "I think we all understand each other."

Britto nodded, and again toward Twindle, but he didn't quite relax.

"How can I be of assistance?" he asked.

"Frankly, parts of Leutnant Atreus's story just don't make sense," Sardella said, leaning forward slightly. "And the only witnesses to most of it were either unconscious, civilians, or criminals. I just wanted to pick your brain a bit. Get your take on what really happened before putting together my final report."

Britto's smile was small but genuine as he settled more comfortably into the couch.

"I will be delighted to help in any way I can," he said.