

DJINN OF DESPAIR

Kevin Killiany

Chapter Thirteen

Excerpt: *“Albermarle Courier/Transport Declares Bankruptcy”*
Acrux Business Beat

Albermarle Courier/Transport, which specialized in rapid delivery of small shipments and individual packages, shocked industry observers by declaring bankruptcy yesterday. The small, highly focused ACT was seen as a stable up-and-comer by market analysts who were predicting the privately-held company would go public within the year. It now appears that ACT profits were in fact subsidized by an outside source—a silent partner who evidently withdrew support abruptly.

Once auditors appointed by the bankruptcy courts have completed their inventory, all Albermarle assets—including their fleet of bright yellow shuttlecraft with the familiar “ACT now!” logo—will be available at public auction.

***Third Battalion Headquarters
Florida Timbuktu Theater Militia
Florida, Timbuktu Theater
Lyrans Alliance
12 November 3057***

Lex stood as far from the 'Mech bay as she could, leaning her back against the hangar wall to get the full effect. Her *Nightsky* was resplendent in Florida TTM colors— freshly painted and polished to a luster that exceeded original manufacture specs. (She knew—she had memorized all available information on the manufacture and maintenance of her BattleMech.)

She had never seen anything so beautiful.

"A bit gaudy, don't you think?"

Lex came off the wall, head snapping toward the voice.

"At ease, Leutnant," said Hauptmann Showalter, raising a placating hand.

"Sorry, sir," Lex said, easing out of her combat stance

"Entirely my fault," her company commander answered. "I know better than to tease a MechWarrior in love."

Lex wasn't sure how to answer that. She remained silent, glad her complexion concealed the hot flush she felt suffusing her face.

Showalter pursed his lips as he regarded her for a moment, then nodded toward the *Nightsky*.

"Beautiful machine."

"Yes, sir."

"We lost two MechWarriors on Despair," Showalter said after a moment. "One to serve with mercenaries and one resigning for medical reasons—but no one died. And the two most valuable 'Mechs we sent came back to us—a *Nightsky* and an *Axeman*—piloted by two of the finest young 'Mech jockeys I know."

"Yes, sir," Lex repeated. "Thank you, sir."

"According to Hauptmann Sardella's report, a lot of that is thanks to you."

"Hauptmann Sardella is very kind, sir."

Showalter indicated her BattleMech.

"The Florida may be the gold standard in low tech, but the Eighth isn't exactly state of the art," he said. "The trouble and expense they put into fixing your *Nightsky* says more about respect than it does kindness."

Lex opened her mouth, but Showalter forestalled her with an upraised hand.

"From what I saw on the battle ROM, you may have picked up a few tricks on this milk run mission," he said. "If you don't mind getting your first born dirty, suit up."

"Let's see if you can beat your CO on the live fire course."

Terrance:

Thought you'd like to know MindMASC is off the streets. Or will be whenever whatever raw supplies are out there are used up.

And no, we didn't just wait for your retirement to be official to close down MindMASC. Turns out Isodore did the right thing bringing in the military. The Eighth Lyran backtracked it to its source.

Best news is, no one is going to manufacture it—ever. I know you've heard this stuff comes from monkeys—or something like that. That is going to be the official word everywhere, including reports to law enforcement agencies.

The big secret is the only source of MindMASC is a thirty-ton bird with a ninety-kilo adrenal gland. Seems if you want the good stuff, you have to keep the bird hungry and scared until its nerves are shot. No word on how you do that. Then you kill it for its gland. No word on what they do with the twenty-nine point nine tons of leftover chicken, either.

The point being, these thirty-ton birds grow in only one place and the Mad Hatters have not only bottled it up, they're making damn sure no one ever finds it again.

From what we now know of their organization and resources, we estimate a year—maybe two—and MindMASC will be gone forever.

Miriam sends her love. Best to Cecilia and the grandkids.

Freideric Salinger

Director, Bureau of Controlled Substances

From: *"Recluse Multi-billionaire Takes Own Life"*

Alarion Intelligencer and Free Press (*Text Edition*)

Venture capitalist Ernst Ridder, founder and sole owner of CosCot Interstellar—an investment and development company which has been instrumental in many high-tech and pharmaceutical start-ups—committed suicide Sunday night.

News of his death was not released by authorities until late yesterday.

In conjunction with the announcement, local tax and revenue agencies stated that all current holdings of CosCot are being frozen pending a complete investigation of alleged irregularities. Also included in the prepared press release was the allegation that Ernst Ridder's real name was Emil Chevalier. Chevalier was an independent, or "wildcat" speculator specializing in planetary resource development who disappeared while exploring an undisclosed world nearly four decades ago.

Speculation runs rife....

Headquarters, Eleventh Arcturan Guards
Timbuktu, Timbuktu Theater
Lyrans Alliance
22 November 3057

Leutnant-General Maria Esteban nodded her assistant toward her usual chair.

The commander of the Eleventh Arcturan Guards kept a private office only because her duties required she sometimes work alone. Though she described herself as long in the tooth, Esteban preferred to be in the center of action—whether the situation room or the cockpit of her *Emperor*.

Half the size one would expect for her rank, Esteban's office was dominated by a holomap of the Inner Sphere covering the wall facing her desk. McDonald saw the map had been updated—the latest conflict reports were reflected in pulsing red halos surrounding a fresh crop of worlds.

"What did you think of those battle ROMs, Linda?" Esteban asked as the Colonel sat.

"The Eighth and the Florida on Despair?" McDonald ran a hand through her brush-cut red hair. "Typical Mad Hatter—shoot everything and sort it out later.

"That one militia jockey is a madwoman with an axe," she added. "Have we seen her name before?"

Esteban shook her head.

"Though she'll be applying for transfer with the year, I'll wager," she said. "I've requested her records from Buena and Florida and sent an inquiry to Viborg."

"Viborg?"

"Those ROM dupes were part of a sealed packet Nelson sent me," Esteban said, turning her flat screen so the other woman could see it. "So was this recording of a debriefing.

"That's Hauptmann Sardella, company CO, with his back to us at the desk. That's First Leutnant Fatima Twindle moving her chair over to the door. The whelp on the settee is Leutnant Willard Britto, leader of the Florida lance."

"I've seen Britto's ap. Ran a check," McDonald said. "Psyche is brittle, but his performance numbers are top notch."

Her superior said nothing, watching the screen.

"This is the clip you attached to your report before your ROM fried," Sardella was saying.

The ROM image, running without sound, replaced the office scene. A *Nightsky*, was evidently crushed beneath the weight of a *Crockett*, head down slope on a muddy hillside. The hatchet of an *Axeman* appeared and tapped the fallen 'Mech's hull just above the cockpit. Then the camera angle swept up, showing only an expanse of bogs.

"Here's how the incident looked to the *Nightsky*'s ROM," Sardella's voice said.

The bogscape was replaced with a close image of the standing *Crockett* with its burned and smoking cockpit center screen. The seemed to shudder and shift left. The angle of view widened slightly, showing more of the assault 'Mech's upper torso.

"Getting the axe free and easing back," Sardella explained. "The fall is right—"

Red and orange highlights flickered at the upper edge of the frame.

"Atreus reported the *Crockett* took cannon fire from behind at this point," said another voice doubtfully. Twindle, McDonald supposed.

"Those flashes could be reflected lightning," Britto said.

McDonald glanced at her commander, but Esteban continued to watch the screen.

The *Crockett* gave way to a blur of motion then an unmoving view of churning clouds shot through with occasional flashes of heat lightning.

"Here you come," said Sardella as the high crest of the *Axeman* showed at the edge of the screen.

The heavy 'Mech looked gigantic from ground level, the long shaft of its axe foreshortened as it reached down to tap the fallen *Nightsky*. The image vibrated in resonance to the prodding. The *Axeman* straightened, the wide perspective giving it a pyramid

shape. For a moment it stood, evidently surveying the scene, then turned and stepped beyond the recorder's field.

"I remember bending over her for much longer," Britto said quietly. "She was the first MechWarrior under my command I'd seen die."

"Though she wasn't dead," Sardella said.

"I had no way of knowing that," Britto said, his voice tight with emotion. "But I should have known to expect her luck."

"The woman has extraordinary luck," Sardella agreed. "But I need to know what really happened."

"Sir?"

"Twenty-four seconds, Britto," Sardella's voice had a flat and dangerous tone. "Twenty-four seconds between the flash of cannon fire and you stepping up to stand over what you thought was her body. You didn't find her, you saw the whole thing."

There was a long moment of silence. McDonald wished the image on the screen was of the office and not the steadily churning clouds.

Someone sighed.

When Britto spoke again, his voice was filled with such cold rage McDonald almost didn't recognize it.

"Not extraordinary luck," he said. "That bitch has *obscene* luck. Do you know how she came by that *Nightsky*? She panicked. She ran from the enemy—so blind with terror she collided with the very 'Mech she was running from.

"Abject cowardice—desertion in the face of the enemy—and a bureaucrat who never wore a uniform and a pack of unwashed miners present her with a *Nightsky*. Hail her as the hero who brought down a *Grasshopper* with a MiningMech."

"Wait," Sardella interrupted. "You're talking about Viborg?"

"You've heard of it?" Britto sounded surprised. "The Marques realized the story was a lie. He squelched it."

"I had difficulty believing that story myself," Sardella admitted.

"You'd have believed it less if you'd seen her at Florida," Britto said. "Lackluster would be the kindest description. Yet somehow

she was favored, allowed to slide, assigned to missions for which she was unprepared."

"Such as your command on Despair."

"Precisely," Britto nodded once, sharply. "And here she ran true to form. Panic attacks, wandering off patrol, sexual liaisons with base personnel."

There was a pause. The image of clouds shifted. The BattleMech was apparently trying to free itself.

"What happened out there, Britto?" Sardella asked quietly.

Another pause, long enough for McDonald to wonder if he was going to answer.

"I followed the trail of the damaged *Crockett*," Britto said in formal report mode, no hint of his former emotion. "Though I didn't know it was a *Crockett* until I saw it.

"Atreus was apparently under cover in the bogs ahead, invisible. The *Crockett* would have passed by without seeing her. But she snapped under the strain of having the enemy so close. She broke cover and jumped."

His control slipped.

"A simple jump over, and she *choked*," he spat. "Panicked mid-flight. She cut her jets—tried to *stop*—and fell to earth right in front of the *Crockett*. She was so terrified all she could do was flail wildly. Of all her weapons, the only one she managed to fire was the small laser. And her fricking luck lined the *Crockett's* cockpit up with that popgun."

There was a sigh, almost a sob. McDonald wished she could see the scene in the office.

"I couldn't let it happen again," Britto said after long seconds. His voice was weary. "I couldn't let her stupidity, her blind luck—her *cowardice*—make her a hero again. That woman is a disgrace to everything our uniform—any uniform—stands for. I had to put an end to the obscenity."

"By shooting the hulk of the *Crockett* so it would fall on her?" Sardella asked.

"By making sure her cowardly incompetence had consequences," Britto corrected as though stating the obvious.

"Because in a fair world that *Crockett* would have killed her."

"I knew you'd understand," Britto confirmed.

The flat screen display finally returned to a view of the office. Twindle was sitting in her straight backed chair by the door, her feet flat on the floor. Britto was on the edge of the low couch, leaning towards Sardella. For his part, the hauptmann seemed to be consulting a noteputer and adjusting the crystal reader.

"I'm proud of the Nagelring," Sardella said. "It has produced some of the finest military minds—and more importantly, the finest military leaders—in the history of human civilization."

Britto straightened, coming as near attention as he could while keeping his perch.

"But sometimes we screw up royally," Sardella shook his head.

"I fail to see..." Britto began.

"I know," Sardella cut him off.

"I have reviewed every ROM," Sardella went on. "And I found no evidence of Leutnant Atreus being anything other than professional."

"Perhaps," Britto said. "The near-death experience with the *Crockett* triggered an epiphany of sorts—"

Sardella's face wasn't turned to the camera. But whatever his expression it stopped Britto mid-word.

"Leutnant Atreus does have one very bad habit," Sardella said at length. "Before each shot she wastes a second dialing the weapon she's going to use to her main trigger."

"I was aware of that," Britto said. Incredibly, McDonald saw a shadow of his assurance return. "Hauptmann Showalter mentions that particularly in her record."

"Then you will not be surprised to see this," Sardella said.

He tapped a key and the office was replaced by a stand of thick trees that filled the screen. An inset window across the bottom of the image showed dark, long-fingered hands McDonald assumed belonged to Leutnant Atreus at the controls of a BattleMech.

McDonald watched Atreus dial up the small laser, then raise the *Nightsky's* hatchet to its highest position. Then she kicked

the jump jets and the trees dropped away. Center screen was the *Crockett*, trapped on a slippery slope above a bog. As the assault 'Mech leaned back—too late—to fire its missiles, the image froze.

The anonymous office reappeared.

McDonald counted Britto's expression of absolute amazement to his credit. It was obvious the idea Atreus deliberately attacked with her small laser had never occurred to him. He'd honestly believed he was executing a coward.

"Panicked flailing?"

McDonald wished the camera showed the expression that went with Sardella's voice.

"You are not a murderer only because Atreus is a MechWarrior," the hauptmann said. "And because she deserves better, I am giving you one chance to get off Despair alive."

Esteban reached forward and shut off the playback.

"What do you think?"

"That I should forget about processing Britto's transfer application," McDonald said. "But I have to admit I don't understand Sardella's last words. Despair was a police action, not a declared war. He didn't have the authority to execute Britto."

"Linda, he's a Mad Hatter," Esteban reminded her. "He was talking about a fatal accident."

"Ah," McDonald looked at the blank screen, but it offered no enlightenment. "What happened? And why did Leutnant-General Nelson send you this?"

Esteban handed a flimsy across her desk.

"The Lyran Alliance is only weeks old," she said while McDonald read. "And we're trying to keep a war between our two most powerful neighbors from escalating."

"Sardella's analysis is we have to at least look like we've got the moral high ground if we're going to keep war from spreading across the Inner Sphere," a rare smile crooked the corner of her mouth. "In his words the LAAF does not need the crap a public trial about a rich kid's right to murder commoners who offend him would generate."

"So...?"

"It's all there," Esteban indicated the flimsy. "He resigned his commission and signed the *Axeman* his family bought him over to Leutnant Caradine. His family also paid to have Atreus's *Nightsky* rebuilt."

"His family put up with that?"

"In exchange for secrecy," Esteban said dryly. "That *is* a recording of their son confessing attempted murder to superior officers during an official debriefing.

"Nelson sent me a copy in case Britto came my way with a different version of events."

"Wonder who else got one," McDonald said.

Esteban waved the question away.

"I have it on good authority that Leutnant Caradine's application for transfer to the Eleventh is in process," she said. "Unless you find a snake in the background check, it's got my approval in advance. And that information I requested on Atreus is being routed to your office as well."

She indicated the spreading pattern of red-rimmed stars on holomap of the Inner Sphere facing her desk.

"The way the winds are blowing, we just might need a madwoman with an axe."