



ISLE OF THE BLESSED

Book One

Chapter 5: Clock is Broken

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***The A49 Motorway, En Route to Cantor
New Avalon, Crucis March
Federated Suns
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Jackson Davion had to admit that the Saturnus V Grande Circuit Racer's alcohol-nitrous engine purred nicely as the metallic blue sports car ate up the road at 120 kph, but the truth was he'd rather have made the trip at night.

Hell, he'd rather have made the trip in his BLR-4S *BattleMaster*.

Mordred's orbit schedule made the night trip impossible, and his advisors had convinced him that a lance of 'Mechs would've been too conspicuous.

So instead, he was traveling in a long train of vehicles, a Bayamo hoverbike up front, followed by the Saturnus, an Avanti limousine next, and finally a semi. There was still traffic on the A49 (though Davion hadn't seen anything west-bound in the last twenty minutes) so their train was not horribly unusual. And they were moving past sandstone cliffs and forest that partially shielded them from aerial view.

He still would've preferred to make the journey in the cockpit of his 'Mech.

Maybe he was just irritated because of the wine. He'd heard a rumor that Supply had gotten hold of a 3015 Merlot as a treat for him. He knew the SuppO meant well, but damn it, the Den needed food more than wine!

He'd made the SuppO get rid of the Merlot; the man had managed to get enough real pork bacon to feed the Mountain for a week, and some farmer got the deal of a lifetime. Davion shook his head. He was a warrior, not some pampered politician.

And here he was being chauffeured around in a sports car. He sighed.

"Is there something wrong, Marshal?" asked the driver, a sergeant named Morgan Something or Something Morgan, Davion couldn't remember which.

Davion shook his head, eyes fixed on the hoverbike. "I was just wondering how long until—"



The hoverbike suddenly morphed into a molten orange fireball. An angry rumble tore down the road.

Davion jerked forward into his seat belt as his driver slammed on the brakes.

"No, goddamn it," Davion shouted, "don't slow down, *that's what they want.*"

"*There's nowhere to go,*" the driver shouted back at him.

"The next lane, *the next lane,*" Davion screamed. "That's a fucking order."

The signal finally got through and the man jerked the wheel to the left. The Saturnus V slid into the empty oncoming lane.

Just as a bone white LGC-03 *Legacy* stepped from behind a wall of sandstone and into the road.

The sergeant's eyes went wide and he slammed his foot down on the accelerator.

Davion had just a second to take in the monstrous assault 'Mech, eighty tons of danger laid out in an "X", a pair of heavy PPCs up on the shoulders and a mix of lasers built into its arms, and then they flashed past, jetting right through the monster's splayed legs as laser fire gouged divots out of the asphalt behind them.

"There's going to be m-more," stammered the sergeant.

"Yes, there's going to be more," snapped Davion. "*Run.*"

"But maybe we should—"

"Maybe we should what, Sergeant?" Davion roared. "Speed is our only defense."

Sweat was streaming down the man's face, but he put his foot down and the Saturnus V was suddenly flying over the ferrocrete highway.

Running for its life.



Zucker watched the sparkly blue sports car sprint down the road. He dropped his right arm, ready to take out one of its wheels with



his twin lasers, but he underestimated the roadster's speed and it zipped right through his legs.

A white *Banshee* appeared behind the semi. Joanie McKinnon's voice crackled over Zucker's radio. "We have them all locked down."

"Not all of them," Zucker growled. "Chaser Squad, we have a rabbit running, east on the A49. Run him down."

"What's the problem?" asked Joanie. "We've got Davion right here—in the limousine."

"Davion's not in the limo," Zucker shot back. "He's the craftiest son of a bitch on this rock. You can bet he's in the car that got away."



The Fox's Den, The Mountain

Field Marshal "Wet Willie" Kossacks stood in the situation room, sipping black tea and studying the deployment of Wobbie forces across the planet.

After the pounding the Den had taken, the Davion general staff had begun moving, shifting to a number of backup installations. The whole staff was never moved at once, so if something went very wrong, there would always be someone left in command. As the high-value target, Davion always went first, so if the Wobbies puzzled out what was happening in the middle of the op, he would already be safe.

That left Kossacks in charge while Jackson was moving.

So he was in the situation room when a panicked voice came on over the loud speakers: "*Clock is broken.*"

Every head in the room jerked up, every body turned to look at the speaker.

"I say again, *broken clock*. Marbles are loose. Posit, one one zero clicks west of Birdcage. This is—"

The voice was cut off by the sudden screech of a laser, followed by static. The sound of an AFFS officer dying before he even could say his name.

Kossacks' pulse was suddenly hammering in his temple. *Broken clock*. The Wobbies had attacked Jackson's convoy.

"Heavy Guards are closest," sang out the watch officer.

Kossacks snatched up a red, encrypted phone. "Get me Jon Davion on HF," he bellowed. "Right fucking now!"

Marbles are loose. Somehow Jackson had gotten clear. Kossacks hoped to hell it was true.

Almost at once a voice said, "Davion Heavy."

"Jon, Willie. I got a broken clock, marbles are loose."

"Posit?" Jon snapped, sudden urgency in his voice.

"One ten west of Birdcage." *Birdcage*. The safehouse.

Kossacks heard Davion shouting, directing his closest units to respond without bothering to break radio contact first.



Kossacks held his breath.

When Jon Davion came back on the line he said, "Company strength, two eight minutes."

Sound died within the mountain. Kossacks shut his eyes, his knuckles whitening as he clutched the phone.

It wasn't going to be fast enough.



Corean Facility on the Thames, South of Avalon City

Sergeant Major Robert Doucette was in the control center, trying to wheedle information about the Tenth Lyran Guard out of the noncom on duty at comms, when the call came in.

"Bob, you're not even supposed to be in here," said Sergeant Major Jason Caldwell. Caldwell was a thirty-year comms specialist who had gotten fat sitting behind a desk, but his sense of humor was still just as nimble as ever. "If you're still here when Minka comes back from the head, he'll have my scars."

"C'mon, Jason. Millie's in the Tenth. Besides, none of the watch officers care if I'm in here."

Caldwell snorted. "*Leftenant* Minka will care, believe me. The meds surgically removed a meter-stick from his rectum just last week, but it keeps growing back."

Doucette burst out laughing.

Caldwell's voice softened. "Look, Bob, if I hear anything about the Tenth you know I'll—"

The radio crackled and he was cut off by a panicked voice. "*Clock is broken.*" Doucette turned to look at the speaker. "I say again, *broken clock*. Marbles are loose. Posit, one one zero clicks west of Birdcage. This is—"

The voice suddenly cut out.

The color drained out of Caldwell's face.

"What does that mean?" Doucette snapped. "Clock is broken?"

"It's code," Caldwell said. "It means—"

"Don't answer him," someone snapped.

Doucette turned to see an officious junior officer standing behind him with a prim expression on his face. The lieutenant was a good ten centimeters shorter than Doucette, and he wasn't particularly tall.

"You're not authorized for that information," said Caldwell stiffly. "You're going to have to leave."



Doucette hesitated.

"Now," said Minka.

Doucette was passing through the doorway when he heard Caldwell say loudly, "Sir, I break the code as follows: Marshal Davion's convoy has been attacked by the Wobblers."

Doucette wheeled around, his eyes wide.

He stepped back inside the control center and snatched up a telephone, hit a four-digit number. When the duty technician came on line Doucette said, "Wake up the Legion," and hung up.

"You don't have the authority to do that," Minka snapped.

Doucette picked up a mic, pressed a button, and said, "Captain Heuaventas to Control."

"I'm calling O'Reilly," the lieutenant shouted.

Doucette flashed him a tight smile. "Good."

Minka pressed his lips together and stalked off to grab a phone.

Doucette stepped up behind Caldwell. "Birdcage?" he said *sotto voce*.

"Cantor," Caldwell whispered.

"Put a map up, would you?"

"Sure thing, pal," murmured Caldwell.

Doucette was standing at the control center's immense wall screen when Captain Aremas Heuaventas strolled in. Pops was roughly a million years old, though he didn't look to be a day over sixty-five. He'd long since lost all his hair and his skin was tough and leathery, blistered by a hundred different suns, but his broad face and kind brown eyes had a kind of simple integrity that made you forget all about that. As the *Legionnaire's* chief test pilot, he was the only one who had the juice to move O'Reilly.

He smiled broadly when he saw Doucette. "Causing problems, Bobby?"

"You know it, old man," said Doucette.

Pops glanced at the map. "What have you got here?"



"Let's wait for—"

Just then Major Joachim O'Reilly stepped into the room. He was a tall, severe man with skin the color of mocha and short, curly black hair shadowing his skull. He saw Doucette and his eyes narrowed.

"Sir—" began the aggrieved Minka.

Doucette cut him off. "Jackson Davion's in trouble and I thought we could get him out."

"What?" said O'Reilly.

"Broken clock," said Caldwell gravely. "Marbles are loose."

O'Reilly swore.

Doucette looked up at the map and pointed at a spot on the A49. "Davion's escort was surprised here. The nearest Fed unit is a company of the Davion Heavy Guard. Here."

"Damn," breathed Caldwell.

"It's perfect," said Pops. "Too perfect. The Wobbies must have someone on the inside."

That comment earned a long moment of silence.

"They'll never make it in time," said Caldwell.

"No," said Doucette. "But we can. We can have 'Mechs there inside of ten."

O'Reilly scowled. "Impossible. All we have are six Cavaliers and the four MIIO heavies. And none of them are fast enough to—"

"He's not talking about the Cavaliers and the MIIO 'Mechs," said Pops.

O'Reilly looked from Pops to Doucette. "No."

"They have the speed to make it there," said Doucette. "And the power to make a difference. We can stick 200 tons of 'Mech in the Wobbies' craw and do it inside of ten minutes."

O'Reilly stiffened. "Let me say it for you slowly. No."

"We can take the tunnels to the Acheron Forest. The Robes'll never know where we came from."



O'Reilly shook his head. "Look. I know what you're saying. But I have to think about this facility. About the *program*."

"*Major*." Doucette bit the word out. "It's Jackson Davion."

Pops leaned in placed a hand on O'Reilly's shoulder. The major outranked him, but he was a good three decades the man's senior. "Joachim. You know we're doing this, right?"



The A49 Motorway, En Route to Cantor

Morgan Something was terrified beyond all reason. Davion could see it in the man's unblinking eyes, in his death grip on the steering wheel, in the way he kept gasping for air like a fish that had leapt out of its bowl.

Davion would've stopped and taken over driving if they'd had the time.

Sandstone mesas and cliffs flashed by in a khaki blur. The Saturnus was capable of fantastic speeds in the straightaway, but there were no straightaways on the A49. Morgan wrenched the car around a tight hairpin turn and lost control. It slid sideways several meters before the wheels grabbed again and it shot off in a new direction.

Davion heard the sound of rotors and looked up. A white Warrior H-7 orbited high in the blue sky. *Spotting.*

Davion swallowed. "There's going to be an ambush up ahead. We have to turn around."

Morgan Something shook his head. "No. That'll take us back to the *Legacy*." He powered the roadster around another sandstone wall.

"Yes," said Davion, "but I think—"

They cleared the corner and suddenly there was a *Nexus II* standing right in the middle of the road.

The noncom slammed on the breaks and lost control of the Saturnus. It swerved all over the lanes, spinning completely around and ending up facing the sandstone cliff that ran along the north side of the road.

Davion smelled the odor of burning rubber.

The MechWarrior in the *Nexus* turned on his external speakers. "YOU IN THE CAR," said a booming voice. "GET OUT SLOWLY."

The *Nexus* just stood there watching, not moving. *Why should it?* Davion thought bitterly. *The pilot has us right where he wants us.*

I wonder if they'll kill me? he thought, *Or try to capture me?*



"PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD."

And which do I want?

He turned to poor, terrified Morgan Something. "Get out."

The noncom turned to look at him, eyes wide with terror. "*What?*"

"LAY FACE DOWN ON THE ROAD."

"Get. Out. *Of the Car.*"

"Sir, I don't think—"

"Look," said Davion. "You can be captured. I. Can't. So get out of the car. And live."

"YOU HAVE THIRTY SECONDS TO COMPLY."

Morgan turned and opened the driver side door, working the handle like it was some alien device. Half out, he turned to look at Davion. "Marshal, don't you think—"

"Go," Davion roared.

The man stumbled away from the car.

Davion slid into the driver's seat. He knew there was no way he could escape under the guns of the *Nexus*.

But escape wasn't his goal.



The road trembled as Zucker pushed his *Legacy* into a lope. Adept Chu had locked down the fleeing sports car, which was good news. Only one of the Feds had stumbled out of the vehicle. Which was not.

Zucker wanted Davion *alive*. Alive, the marshal was a propaganda tool. Alive, he was an intelligence gold mine.

Dead, he was a martyr.

And Zucker wasn't sure Chu had the touch to handle such a delicate matter.

"Anchor, this is Chaser One. Rabbit is behind the wheel. Preparing to engage—"



"Negative," Zucker shouted. "Don't let him past you. But allow him to run west."

"What if he goes off-road?" snapped Chu.

Yes. Definitely too high-strung for this op. "Terrain's too rough. He'll have to stay in the base path."

"The base path?" He could hear the puzzlement in the youngster's voice. Zucker rolled his eyes. Another kid who didn't watch baseball.

"We've got him in a rundown."



Davion raced over the gray ferrocrete, feeling every bump, every jolt in the uneven road, the car barely held in ragged control.

Knowing that the smartest thing he could do was smash himself into a rock wall, end it all at once. Deny Word of Blake their prize.

Somehow he just couldn't do it.

Deep in his heart, he nurtured a tiny flicker of hope.

Even though he knew he was running toward his doom just as fast as the alcohol-nitrous engine could take him.



Zucker stalked his *Legacy* forward, reached a bend in the rock wall and came to an abrupt stop. He leaned out past the edge of wall's turn and targeted the road with the single small laser over his left arm.

"Infantry One through Four, converge on my position. Rabbit is running. We want him alive, people. I will personally slice the trooper who kills Jackson Davion into little pieces for Avitue's breakfast cereal."

He was answered by a series of crisp yessirs.

Of course, they would understand he was just being colorful.

Mostly.



Zucker wondered why Avitue wasn't here herself. Why had she left such a critical mission to a Demi-Precentor? It bothered him. Not because he didn't think she had a plan.

Because he knew she did.

Zucker reached down and cranked the gains on his external mikes all the way up.

And somewhere to the east he heard the *purr* of the rabbit running flat out.

Davion.

"Shit," he muttered. The infantry wasn't going to make it. He was going to have to do it himself.

The *Legacy* was a bruiser. It was designed for heavy fighting.

Not for traffic stops.

Even his small laser was likely to burn Davion right out of the Saturnus.

The pitch of the engine rose as the car raced toward him.

He saw a flash of metallic blue through a stand of aspens.

And suddenly he knew.

He had seconds.

Zucker pivoted right, dropped his right arm and fired. Ruby light sliced into the trees. The nearest exploded, showering the ferrocrete with the white bark, but a few fell.

Right across the road.

The blue Saturnus followed the ferrocrete around the corner.

Davion swung wide right, trying to avoid the nearest tree trunk, but there was nowhere to go.

The little car hit the tree and its momentum somehow carried it over. Zucker heard the gunshot crack of a popping tire. The driver lost control of the sports car and smashed into the sandstone wall. An airbag bloomed white. The vehicle dragged along the rock, kicking up a shower of molten orange sparks and filling the world with an unholy shriek until the sandstone finally bled its velocity away.



All this happened in just a few seconds.

Zucker stalked his great machine forward and knelt down. The driver was slumped against the white shroud that covered the steeling wheel. Zucker prayed to Blake that he was still alive.

"Anchor, this is Chaser One. I've got Heavy Guards moving in fast."

"Chaser, fire and fall back. Slow them, but *do not directly engage*."

"Negative, Anchor. They're not slowing to engage. Estimate they will reach your posit in one three minutes."

"Affirmative, Chaser." He glanced up at the ridge above the crashed car. Human forms were silhouetted against the sky. "OK, people, let's get this show on the road. We have our rabbit if we can just—"

He was interrupted by one of the grunts. "*Blake's Blood*. What's that?"

And then the rapid stutter of an autocannon fire filled Zucker's ears and something heavy smashed into his back.

Already down on one knee, it took all Zucker's skill as a MechWarrior not to topple forward. He pushed himself up and to the right, planting the *Legacy's* right foot and pivoting.

His rear armor flickered from green to yellow.

He spared a second to look down at his rear monitor.

What he saw astounded him.

It was a unknown 'Mech in green and gray mountain camouflage, the Fed Suns sword and sunburst painted over its left torso, where a man's heart would be. It looked like a medium to Zucker, though it might've been a heavy. It was a bruiser: high, heavy shoulders, massive claws for hands, lots of armor. Its cockpit was set below the shoulders, giving it the appearance of a brawler. A double chained rotary autocannon sat atop the low, square head.

What the hell is this?

Didn't matter. It might look intimidating—for a medium. But Zucker figured he had a twenty, thirty-ton advantage and plenty of weapons to peel the medium's pilot right out of his cockpit.





Pops had expected the *Legacy* to go right over, but the Wobbie MechWarrior had to be a magician because he somehow managed to lever himself up.

Pops held his shot, tearing at the *Legacy*'s vulnerable rear armor, knowing he was going to pay for his misjudgment when the bigger 'Mech made it around.



Zucker finished his turn and tore into the Fed Suns 'Mech with his right PPC followed by a flight of Streak missiles. The man-made lightning cut an ugly furrow in the medium's torso armor, but the enemy 'Mech somehow managed to sidestep the flight of SRMs.

Holy God, the bruiser was *fast*. How could that be?

Emerald light from a medium laser over the medium's right arm washed over Zucker's canopy, and then the bruiser let loose with a long stuttering peal of autocannon fire, cutting into his chest armor, rattling his teeth in his skull.

Zucker hit back, *one, two* with his PPCs.

The medium's pilot stood there and took it, never taking his finger off the trigger, depleted uranium rounds furiously abrading the LGC-03's Aldis Plate.

The temperature in his cockpit went from sweltering to blast furnace.

A flight of SRMs staggered the medium, forced the pilot to break off his attack, but he came right back with a one, two punch from his lasers.



Mother of God, this guy is good, Pops thought. And tough. A magician on the sticks with the guts to stand in there and fight even when things weren't going so well.

It was a deadly combination.

Unfortunately for the Wobbie, Pops knew something he didn't.





The shrill cry of the heat alarm filled Zucker's cockpit. Before he could slap the override, it was joined by the piercing jump tone that signaled an enemy lock.

Zucker glanced down.

There was another of the little monsters behind him.

Autocannon fire tore into his weakened rear armor. It flashed red.

Zucker was certain he could've taken one of the mediums. But not two.

He clenched his jaw. But Davion was so close. He could almost reach down and pick him up.

Suddenly Zucker saw what he had to do. He had failed to capture Davion, but he would not allow him to escape.

He lunged forward.

But the medium was too fast. The first bruiser, the one who'd gone toe-to-toe with him rushed in and put a massive shoulder into him. *Hard.*

Zucker caught the blow mid-step. He tried to take it, but suddenly the *Legacy's* entire eighty-ton weight was balanced on his left ankle.

Gravity yanked his machine down, slamming Zucker against his five-point restraint and then cracking his skull against the console, filling his cockpit with darkness.



The Acheron Forest

Something in the forest was not right.

It wasn't something she had to think about, she just *knew*.

Maybe it was the texture of sound, a wave of little silences moving through the trees, through the brush, through the grass, as small creatures encountered terror and fell silent in the desperate hope that it would pass by them.

Avitue closed her eyes and felt it as a ripple of gooseflesh on her bare arms.

They were coming.

She had guessed right.

She still didn't have all the answers. But they were coming.

She dropped to the ground. Laid her head down, felt the earth's quivering flesh beneath her palms, like the trembling body of a lover.

It was a perfect, intimate moment, just her and the world.

They were coming.

She remembered Saxon touching her, holding her. She knew everything there was to know about him. His unit, where he'd been captured. He'd been a member of the New Avalon Cavaliers. ROM did not know where all the Fed units on the planet were, but they had ideas, theories. *Leads*.

Except the Cavaliers.

They'd disappeared off the face of the world.

Or gone underground. That's what Avitue thought.

All she'd needed was proof.

Which he'd provided with a single whispered word.

A perfect, intimate moment.

The human part of her regretted the terrible things she'd ordered done to him to make him desperate for someone he could trust. The human part of her regretted the terrible things she'd ordered done to him after he'd spoken that one word.



She did not like any of it. But it did not trouble her either.

She was not the one who had chosen to reject Blake's Word.

After she'd left Saxon, before she'd ate or slept or cleaned up, she'd gone straight to her office, pulled out the map that marked the location of Saxon's capture and drew a 250 kilometer circle around it.

Her treasure had to be *there*.

It was a lot of territory. But Avitue was a patient woman. Today she would use the response time of the 'Mechs to take a massive bite out of that circle.

The ground suddenly shook under her hands. No longer the gentle tremble of a lover. More like a seizure.

Gran Mal.

She stood up and brushed her hands. She wore blue jeans, brown leather riding boots, a pink cotton blouse. No clue to who or what she really was.

She tilted her head and then moved it. A person watching her might've been reminded of a dog who'd heard a strange sound.

Bearing three two two, magnetic north.

She slowly climbed into the hover jeep and moved along the bearing where, her ears told her, she'd find what she was looking for.

The jeep's lift fans came up to speed with a lazy whine and the vehicle rose. Avitue guided it along the desired direction, rechecking her approach with her hearing, watching the thermal signature of the forest with her right eye.

And then suddenly they were upon her, so quickly that she had to rapidly dial her senses back down to human normal. That told her something.

They were fast.

She dropped the jeep and watched. She saw them through the trees, about a hundred meters distant. Forest camo, star and sunburst, moving fast, impossibly fast for machines so heavily armed and armored. Looked like at least two different variants.



They'd been fighting. She saw the marks of laser and PPC fire on their tough hides.

The fact they were coming back told her that Zucker had failed to secure Davion. The kind of men and women who'd pilot machines like this wouldn't have left Jackson Davion behind.

That was okay. There would be an opportunity to rectify that error soon enough.

She carefully noted her position on GPS.

Everything was coming together nicely.

And then suddenly there was something else. *Another* wrong thing. She heard it over the rumble of the 'Mechs' passage, a crackling hiss rising into a roar. And she saw it, too, the thermal signature of the growing monster, far more powerful even than the 'Mechs she'd come here to see, a ravenous creature, growing, and stretching, already taking up a sizable portion of the horizon.

And then, only then, did she smell the smoke.

