

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter Eleven

From: Hauptmann Kristoff Sardella,
2nd Co, 3rd Bat

To: Hauptmann-Kommandant Emile
M'Benga, 3rd Bat

Re: Viborg system/deviation from
logged patrol pattern

Viborg rendered nothing new, but confirmed rumors of a new outfit carving turf out of Red Eye Louden's coreward territory. They hit the Viborg mining habitat hard.

You heard right: Station raiders hit here a couple of months ago. Remember the all-points advisory? Neither do I. Some suit at a desk decided the first pirate raid on a deep space habitat in a century was a local matter.

What the hell good is a HPG if you've got a moron withholding information?

Whoever the new player is can't have access to top quality resources. Three of their 'Mech jockeys were captured by a squad of Florida infantry, an asteroid miner on an unarmed sled, and—get this—a Florida 'Mech jockey who took out a *Grasshopper* with a borrowed MiningMech. We may never learn the truth behind that tall tale.

Two of the captured pirates are still on the Viborg station doing slave labor as penance—locals seem to think that's a joke of some sort. The third was a Florida deserter, so the militia boys took him home with them. The two we interviewed thought they'd been working for Louden, but never saw anyone but messengers. Too far down on the food chain to know what was up.

Able's Aces got in touch while we were on Viborg. They'd heard of the new pirate outfit, but were more concerned with drug operations. Something called MindMASC. Supposed to be an enhancer, but it's some sort of hallucinogen. Trick is it enhances often enough to really do some good most times, but every now and then it sends the user on a paranoid panic trip. Neurohelmet makes it worse, so a jockey with his mind blown can do a lot of damage before they bring him down.

Funny thing is, I think there may have been an advisory about this stuff out of Alarion a while back. Part of the usual snow storm of useless memos. Might want to check the archives.

We're going to break off usual patrol and push up and in to Kladrnitsa, see if we can't get a line on these station raiders. Don't worry, this time I've already notified the Eleventh Arcturan. I know how the Golden Kitties get when we show up in their back yard unannounced.

My thinking on the look-see is the pirates took a lot of construction supplies; vacuum dome stuff. The Viborg asteroid miners think they're building a space habitat—but you know can dwellers: they think everyone should live in a habitat. Smart money is the pirates are building a base on a moon in an active system—a good base with lots of options. Kladrnitsa has good position and a couple of dozen uncolonized moons.

I'll let you know what we find.

Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyran Alliance
26 October 3057

The enemy *Crockett* was directly ahead.

At extreme range, it was casting back and forth along the central vector. A deliberate search pattern along the most direct route from Chevalier Base and— Wherever it was the mysterious BattleMechs had been running to.

Lex didn't need a copy of the enemy MechWarrior's orders to know his mission was to locate and destroy any Florida with the temerity to follow. Which at the moment consisted of her lone *Nightsky* and Caradine riding uncomfortable shotgun. Not a force calculated to intimidate an assault 'Mech.

"The trees thin out ahead," Lex said. "No cover. Even with the Guardian, there's no way he could miss us."

"The smart move might be going back for Britto and Aldicott," Caradine said. "Making an expedition in force."

"Time is a factor," Lex countered. "We've forced their hand and whatever they're going to do they're going to do fast."

"Well we're going to have to back off in any case," Caradine said. "We need to find a route around this guy."

Lex didn't bother to answer. Hands tight on the controls, she moved the *Nightsky* forward, angling toward a dense copse of trees between them and the *Crockett*.

"So the plan is...?"

"Take out the *Crockett*."

"Right," Caradine answered, drawing the word out.

Lex waited for her to point out a medium wasn't designed to take on an assault. Or that Lex had never been in combat.

Caradine shifted behind her and something bumped against the side of the cockpit. Lex remembered the other MechWarrior had brought her neurohelmet with her. Maybe the Nagelring was

about to suggest she take over, that as the more experienced MechWarrior, she should pilot the *NightSky* into battle.

Or back to base, since it was evident she didn't think much of their chances against this particular enemy.

Caradine let out a heavy breath. Not a sigh of resignation—the determined breath of someone who has made a decision.

Lex braced herself.

“The first time around I got in a couple of good hits,” Caradine said. “His left elbow actuator is out.”

Lex blinked.

“And I hit his right Holly rack point blank with my last cannon volley,” Caradine went on. “It's damaged—I don't know how badly. I was going down.

“And his opening move was a death from above jump that fell short.”

Lex nodded, acknowledging the intel; not comparing it to what she'd expected to hear.

“Watch the screens,” she said.

Leaving *Crockett* watching to Caradine, she focused on easing her BattleMech into an open pocket near the center of the copse of cypress-like trees without leaving any tell-tale broken branches.

Leaning the machine slightly forward, she lined the canopy up with a narrow gap in the foliage, giving them a partial view along the enemy's vector. A low ridge of muddy earth obstructed their view ahead, but another wave of targeting signals washing blindly over them confirmed the *Crockett* was closing.

Holding completely still and letting the assault 'Mech pass was tempting. But not wise. When it got close enough neither the Guardian ECM nor the trees would conceal them completely. And once the enemy had an idea where they were it would be over. Even with one large laser out and one missile rack damaged, the *Crockett* could lay down enough fire to cripple her *NightSky* before she closed.

Perhaps even before she could run away.

Ambush—striking before the enemy knew they were a threat—offered the best hope of success. What little hope they had.

But beyond “ambush,” she had no plan. How close to let the other ‘Mech get, what weapons to use in what order... Her brain fogged.

Jump over, that was the standard tactic against a heavier opponent. Jump over and hit the back armor, then jump over again when he turned to hit you.

The problem with that tactic was the heavier ‘Mech could pivot faster than the lighter one could complete its jump. Unless the first volley did heavy damage, odds were the *Nightsky* would go down before she got a second shot.

For a wild second Lex considered offering Caradine the command couch.

With an effort she slowed her thoughts and steadied her breathing. She knew the standard maneuvers, she’d run the sims, passed the tests. She just had to evaluate the tactical situation as it unfolded, chose the right move, and make it.

Just.

At the moment all she could do was wait, watch the ridgeline and will her palms not to sweat.

Lex was glad Caradine didn’t have any pearls of last-minute wisdom to offer. She would have bitten her head off.

They didn’t have to wait long.

The towering shapes of the shoulder mounted missile racks appeared above the mud ridge, the crest of the assault ‘Mech’s sensor array between them. The right launcher tower was deformed; partially collapsed. Lex mentally adjusted Caradine’s estimate from “damaged” to “destroyed.”

The towers and crest rotated left, then right, as the *Crockett*’s pilot evidently pivoted his machine’s torso to augment the sensors’ sweep. A useless gesture in most cases, indicating either poorly functioning sensors or an inexperienced pilot. Given the chemical soup of Despair’s atmosphere, Lex suspected sensor problems.

Betting on an inexperienced opponent was a sure way to die young. Or so she’d been told.

Lex was keenly aware that she had never fired a weapon at an enemy. Shooting blindly at a sensor ghost didn’t count. Her tour with the Buena training cadre had consisted entirely of uneventful garrison duty.

The *Crockett* moved toward them. Its low-mounted cockpit and right arm, leveled and ready, seemed to rise from the mud as the BattleMech climbed the far side of the ridge. The left arm hung straight down, clearly useless. But that did nothing to diminish the visceral impact of a war machine with nearly twice the mass of her *Nightsky*.

Even running at the back of a *Grasshopper* on the hull of a deep space mining habitat did not prepare her for watching the assault 'Mech bear down on her. Knowing it was hunting her. And knowing she had to destroy it if she was to survive.

Her hands were slick on the joysticks. She felt the sting of tears and blinked fiercely. Even if the other MechWarrior hadn't been present, she would have refused to brush at them.

She had the impression Caradine was not breathing.

The *Crockett* crested the ridge. One massive foot slid slightly—the slope of mud and ferns giving under the machine's weight. The pilot paused for a moment, evidently testing the ridge before lifting his 'Mech's foot for another step.

Lex felt her breathing deepen and slow. The cockpit around her seemed to fade even as every detail sharpened to crystal clarity. The fog of questions and doubts swept away as a cold energy flowed from the back of her scalp to her fingertips.

"Look at his footing," she said, part of her mind surprised at how steady her voice sounded.

"What?"

"He can't jump," Lex said, dialing the small laser under her main trigger. "And he can't run."

"He's going to run from your small laser?" Caradine's tone was doubtful.

Lex chuckled—surprising herself again. She brought the *Nightsky* fully upright, losing the restricted view, and raised its left arm, extending the axe above her head.

"No. He's going to fade right," she said. "I'm taking him with the small laser."

The words sounded ridiculous even as she said them. She paused, but Caradine asked no questions.

“Rig for a rough jump,” she warned.

She felt her couch rock as Caradine pushed against it, jamming herself as far into the equipment cubby as possible. The emergency blanket and sleeping bag weren’t going to offer much padding, but if the smaller woman could keep herself tightly wedged, she should be spared serious injury.

“Ready.” Caradine’s voice was muffled but crisp.

Lex cycled the *Nightsky*’s fusion reactor to full fury.

On the muddy slope the *Crockett* paused as her thermal flare registered. Its right arm angled up, turning slightly toward the thick stand of cypress.

Lex stomped hard on the jump pedals and the screen of trees dropped away. Heat flooded the cockpit as acceleration shoved her into the command couch. Just short of apogee, she cut the thrust, truncating the high arc.

The ruby beam of the *Crockett*’s large laser flared through the air where the *Nightsky* should have been as the medium ‘Mech descended. Six smoke trails came closer to target before spiraling past in useless random, the missiles’ guidance systems defeated by the ECM’s jamming signals.

Her opponent took half a second to process his target was not jumping over him but coming down toe-to-toe, its upraised axe positioned to smash his cockpit. With no way to maneuver and no time to retarget, the *Crockett*’s pilot tilted his machine to his left—Lex’s right—twisting to take her blow on his already useless missile rack.

Lex shouted as the landing impact forced air from her lungs. The sound was lost in the clang of metal on metal as the axe bit deeply into the torn armor of the assault ‘Mech’s shoulder. She shifted her weight, her own sense of balance augmenting the gyro’s efforts to keep the BattleMech upright on the slippery slope.

The *Nightsky* was down hill of the *Crockett*, the angle emphasizing the difference in their heights. The *Crockett*’s twist meant the autocannon, just below Lex’s canopy in this position, was aimed toward her *Nightsky*’s right shoulder.

And with its torso bent away from the smaller machine’s left-hand axe, the assault ‘Mech’s canopy was directly aligned with the small laser mounted in the armored peak above the medium’s forward-thrust cockpit.

The *Crockett's* escape hatch blew just as Lex fired.

The cockpit exploded in a ball of multi-colored flames as plastics and composites vaporized. A gout of black oily smoke flushed upwards through the escape hatch, mushrooming flatly in the thick atmosphere. The command couch did not eject.

There was a muffled sound—Caradine—behind her.

Lex clenched her throat against a sudden sob.

She'd never killed anything larger than a mosquito in her life. Though she'd trained for this moment, anticipated it, imagined it a hundred times, there was nothing in the sims that compared to the mesmerizing sight of gutted cockpit almost close enough to touch.

Nausea roiled her gut.

The *Crockett* wobbled, shocking her back into the larger present.

Before she could react, the machine steadied itself. Even standing on the uncertain hillside, the Star League era gyro kept the BattleMech upright despite the loss of the neurohelmet's feedback.

Fingertips light on the controls, Lex began wiggling the axe blade free of the rent it had torn in the *Crockett's* armor. The larger machine rocked slightly in sympathy.

"Careful," warned Caradine.

"You think?" Lex asked.

"Sorry," Caradine said. "My hands are cramping trying to help you jiggle the joystick."

"Every bit helps," Lex acknowledged.

She brought the *Nightsky's* right arm up carefully, fearing the consequences of sudden motion, and braced the hand against the assault 'Mech's chest. She felt her 'Mech's feet slide another half meter down the slope and froze, willing the tableau to remain stable. Lex waited a long three count after the last tremble before easing the power to the myomer, slowly increasing her right arm's pressure against the massive machine above it. At last she felt the torn and twisted metal release her axe blade.

Keeping her 'Mech's movements slow and steady, she raised its left arm. Her external speakers reported a long, nerve-grating

scrape as the axe blade slid from the hole it had made in the armor.

“Good work,” Caradine said as grey sky showed between the weapon and the assault ‘Mech. Her voice was almost in Lex’s ear; the smaller woman had climbed back out of her cocoon.

“Thanks,” said Lex, watching the *Crockett* for the least wobble as she slowly eased her right hand back. “Now all we need to do is shuffle—”

A thunder of explosions.

For a fraction of a second Lex thought they were taking fire. Then she saw the halo of flame and smoke framing the missile racks and sensor array above her.

Autocannon. Close range.

The *Crockett* was being hit in the back; high, across its shoulders. A second, then a third volley in rapid succession.

Inevitably, the BattleMech began to rock forward.

Lex brought the *Nightsky*’s right arm up, slamming it against the broad armor of the assault ‘Mech’s chest in a futile attempt to counteract the impacts from behind. The two machines were already too close for her to bring the axe arm to bear.

Not that two arms would have been any more effective than one.

Servos whined and the status board flashed overload warnings as she leaned her ‘Mech into the push, frantically trying to deflect the huge hulk towering over them. She was dimly aware of Caradine shoving against the command couch, rejamming herself into the scant safety of the blanket-wrapped equipment locker.

Inevitably, gravity overcame the gyro and ninety-five tons of heavy metal defeated myomer muscles. The world outside her canopy tilted and spun wildly as the dead assault ‘Mech toppled forward, carrying the *Nightsky* to the ground.

Lex felt her head snap forward, then back—farther than the command couch should have allowed—jerking her neck. A sound, a gong like thunder, and something like a fist that slammed into her spine. Her breath was an agonizing explosion bursting free of her throat.

She couldn't breathe, couldn't will her lungs to inhale.

Above her, the mottled pewter sky of Despair seemed to roil, charcoal on silver shapes half forming faces laughing, faces crying, faces melting away. Lex had a fragment of thought, the conviction the metal sky of faces tasted like copper, then her world faded to black.