

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter Eight

Advisory of Controlled Substance Classification Update.

By order of the Lyran Alliance Bureau of Controlled Substance Law Enforcement:

All law enforcement agencies and medical administrations are instructed to use the following classification schedule in reporting incidents involving the use of controlled substances:

<u>Depressants:</u>	<u>Stimulants:</u>	<u>Hallucinogens:</u>	<u>Enhancers:</u>
Barbiturates	Amphetamines	Ingrot Venom*	LD-512*
Codeine	Cocaine	LSD/Acid	QwikStim
Heroin*	K-Z ("KrayZee")*	MindMASC*	Rage*
	Methamphetamines	Necrosia	Spazz*
	X-Quick	Peyote/Mescaline	
		Phencyclidine*	
		Psilocybin	

Note that MindMASC, formerly classified as an enhancer, has been reclassified as a hallucinogen. Though MindMASC does trigger measurable enhancements of cognitive, sensory, and motor functions, these effects are minor when compared to its hallucinatory effects at higher dosages.

** = Indicates substances which are not governed by sliding scale penalties. Substances marked with a star (*) are subject to zero-tolerance, maximum penalty provisions under General Order LABSCLE 3057/4281b.*

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

The creature's head appeared out of the mist, floating atop a sinuous neck, its iridescent eyes level with Lex in the cockpit of her *Nightsky*. The rest of its form was lost in the fog. She doubted she'd ever get used to the surreal effect of a close encounter with one of these monsters of the mist.

"Okay, big fellah," Lex said quietly. "Why don't you just turn about thirty degrees south on your own? I've danced with too many of your cousins today."

Lex had redirected four members of this family pod—not quite a herd—and thought her work done when this loner had triggered the picket array's motion alarm. It had either gotten past her while she was dealing with the others or its movements had been masked by the general shuffling about of the group, but somehow it had managed to get a hundred meters closer to the Base than she was.

Quite possibly this grazer would follow the others of its own accord before it came inside the regular patrol perimeters. There was no way she was going to take a chance on that, though. Trusting one of these beasts to do the right thing on its own was the fast track to confirming everything Britto said about her.

Making no sudden moves that might startle the giant herbivore, she stepped her 'Mech forward.

The tonner's head snapped around faster than Lex thought possible. Its two-meter-wide iridescent eyes seemed to whirl in their sockets as they widened, an optical illusion, Lex was sure, but impressive. The creature appeared to swell and she realized it was drawing in a massive breath.

"Easy—" she began uselessly.

The *Nightsky's* external microphones reported a thunderous sneeze. A ball of blue and yellow flame engulfed her cockpit, blinding Lex.

By the time her vision cleared, the tonner was moving away at nearly twenty kilometers an hour—toward the Base.

Lex realized her BattleMech's sensor array was down. The status board documented it had suffered minimal damage in a flamer attack and overloaded sensors were rebooting normally. Either the flaming methane was more potent than they'd been led to expect or there was some unanticipated effect of the metal-heavy atmosphere in high temperatures.

"Atreus to Caradine," she broadcast.

Double click.

"Caradine, request voice confirm," Lex said as she followed the runaway. "We've got a tonner, approximately sixty tons mass, running toward the Base at twenty clicks, this bearing."

"Confirmed, Atreus," Caradine answered. "Pickets show it slowing. What happened?"

"Family pod, this one got by me," Lex saw no point in avoiding full responsibility. "Be aware tonner flamed me when I approached and ran away."

Warning beeps told her the thermal sensor and magnetic anomaly imaging systems had successfully reinitialized, confirming the initial report of no real damage.

"Say again?"

Lex bridled at Caradine's incredulous tone. Then it occurred to her the other was expressing surprise, not questioning her report. This cow's behavior didn't match any they'd seen.

"Tonner responded to 'Mech as though it were a predator," she said evenly. "Never saw one move that fast."

"Well, it's stopped now," Caradine answered.

With her tap to the sensor array restored, Lex could see that for herself, but she didn't comment.

"I'm about a klick and a half north," Caradine said. "Converge slow and stay out of its sight until we can get between it and the Base."

Like I'm some green cadet she has to talk through a basic maneuver.

"Wilco," she said aloud.

Lex angled her course south, giving the tonner—which had evidently resumed grazing—a wide berth. When she was between it and the base, she circled back.

On her screens she could see Caradine had stopped, though why wasn't clear. Given the trouble her 'Mech's targeting system had spotting wildlife, it was possible the other MechWarrior had encountered scavengers or even a predator that didn't show up on her screen.

"Everything okay, Caradine?"

Double click. The woman was a creature of habit.

Or doesn't want to speak to me more than necessary.

Lex eased her *Nightsky* toward the grazing tonner. Even with the dense foliage, she didn't dare get closer than a few dozen meters. With their quarry firmly in sight, she settled down to wait for Caradine.

Intent on its meal, the beast seemed unaware of her 'Mech as it carefully selected fronds based on some search parameters of its own.

This one was blue rather than the usual green, she noted; and she may have overestimated its size at first appraisal. She suspected it wasn't a member of the family pod after all. Just a lone nibbler that happened to be noshing in the same area.

The beast turned, bringing a badly scarred flank into view.

"No wonder you ran," Lex said. "Something almost had you for lu—"

She stopped mid-word. The double scar across the rearmost hip of the grazing tonner was nearly three meters long and razor straight. No claw or fang had made that old wound. Only a glancing shot from an aligned pair of—medium, she estimated—lasers could have carved that double furrow. And, if she was any judge of scars, they had done it years ago.

"Atreus to Caradine."

Double click.

"Request voice confirm," Lex said.

Why the woman insisted on clicking after what had happened— But then again, Caradine didn't really accept Lex's testimony about what had happened. No reason for her to change.

"Caradine, this tonner has laser damage," she said. "Looks like someone took a shot at it with a brace of mediums. That's why it ran when it saw a 'Mech."

Double click.

Damn it!

Lex glared at Caradine's icon on her sensor display. Only to find herself staring blankly at the empty screen where the icon had been.

A quick glance confirmed no heavy metal on short-range sensors. She snapped to long-range scan; same result.

"*Hatchetman* in a jungle, broken ground, fifty kph tops," she said to herself, nudging the sensor parameters in an effort to cut through Despair's chemical-laden air. "She can not have gotten far."

If the 'Mech was still standing. If it had fallen through a sink hole or into a bog, it would take close range scans and a detailed search to find the *Hatchetman*.

Before she went that route, Lex tapped into the picket array. The stationary sensors had longer range, but were calibrated to track animals. It was a trade off.

But one that went in her favor. *Something* metal was moving out of range bearing north northeast. Lining up to follow, she stepped off.

The *Nightsky's* sudden appearance, striding through the narrow clearing, spooked the blue tonner into another lumbering stam-pede—this time directly away from the Base.

"Atreus to Florida," Lex broadcast. "Aldicott, Britto, come in."

Nothing.

Deep breath.

Clicking down to the Base standard ops frequency, she tried again.

"Atreus, Florida PMM, to Chevalier Control," she kept her voice steady. If she was in the middle of another blackout—

"Go ahead, Florida PMM."

The woman's voice sounded bored. Lex tried to remember if she'd ever heard it before.

"Please notify the off-duty MechWarriors that we are investigating a potential situation," Lex kept it dry, sounding matter of fact. "Are you set up to receive compressed data?"

"That's how field reports are done, Florida."

"Sending sensor and comm logs," Lex said, hitting the transmit key. Dialing back up to the Florida channel, she repeated the procedure. Just in case.

"Please pass them along to Leftenants Britto and Aldicott ASAP," she said after dialing back down to the civilian band. "Even if they have to be wakened."

"Got them, Florida." The voice had become decidedly less bored. Evidently the operator was waking up to the fact whatever was afoot was not routine.

"Jerry?" The name was fainter, as though the speaker had turned away from the microphone. Then: "Got a gofer taking the crystals down now."

"Thank you, Chevalier," Lex said. "Do me a favor and record my progress for as far as the sensors reach."

"You got it." Then: "Good hunting, Florida."

Lex pushed the throttle. Weaving around the heavier stands of trees, but keeping to the same bearing Caradine had taken, Lex brought her *Nightsky* up to sixty-five kilometers per hour—dangerously fast in unfamiliar jungle.

She lost her tap on the Base sensors almost immediately and her long range sensors were still befuddled by the atmosphere. Setting their alarm to ping if they found heavy metal, she left the long eyes on auto and focused on the short range readings. Though it was unlikely a fall in the uneven rocks and turf of the forest would hurt her 'Mech, she didn't want to lose the time. Dividing her attention between the nav bearing and the terrain, Lex risked another five kph.

*Alarion Entertainment Variety
Dateline: Czarvowo, Alarion Province
24 October 3057*

Balzac Gilbert, Chief Operations Officer of Yulers Electronics, a subsidiary of SeraVideo Entertainments, Inc., who was arrested four months ago in the home of former up-and-coming starlette Adella Minx, was arraigned in criminal court today.

His defense attorneys had exhausted their options in attempting to have the murder charges dropped on grounds of medical incompetence when Judge William Randall ruled whether or not Gilbert was aware Ms. Minx had given him MindMASC was immaterial.

Attorneys for the State had been prepared to show it was impossible to “spike” Champaigne with MindMASC due to the chemical’s property of becoming inert when dissolved in liquids cooler than body temperature. Their intent had been to prove Gilbert not only took the drug knowingly, but in fact brought the MindMASC with him to Ms. Minx’s posh penthouse in Chechenisgrad’s exclusive Hydrangea Park district.

Judge Randall’s ruling renders this point moot and greatly simplifies their case against Gilbert.

It was mild spring evening in May when late-night pedestrians on Park Place were subjected to a horrific hail of Ms. Minx’s severed body parts, neatly cut into uniform...

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Caradine's *Hatchetman* lay headless in the mud.

Lex felt her adrenaline pumping as she tried to watch her three-sixty and sensors while parsing the scene outside her canopy. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to slow down, to *think* about what she was seeing.

Torn earth, churned prints of the *Hatchetman* and other, deeper prints. Smoldering turf and charred vegetation: lasers, big ones. No missile craters, no collateral burning of PPCs.

A copse of trees chewed by cannon fire. That's where the ambusher had lain in wait—and been targeted by Caradine's LB 10-X autocannon. Armor fragments and puddles of coolant beneath the branches testified Caradine had drawn blood. But not enough; it was not the trace of a mortal wound.

Three craters, each a meter deep and twice as wide, their symmetry ruined by broad 'Mech prints: a heavy 'Mech had jumped in right in front of the *Hatchetman*.

Taking it all in, Lex knew Caradine had been following a heavy or assault 'Mech—no doubt broadcasting her sensor readings and calling for back-up—when a second big 'Mech had ambushed her from beside the trail. That had been the cue for the “fleeing” 'Mech to jump back, catching the medium-weight *Hatchetman* in a close-range crossfire.

Though closing with a *Hatchetman* ...

Fresh scars on the hatchet. Caradine had made them pay.

Still nothing on the long range sensors and—she stole a glance at her chronometer—she had wasted forty seconds reading the battle site. The enemy could be getting away, circling her to reach the base, or setting up an ambush for her.

Or retrieving Caradine's escape pod.

She considered trying to raise Caradine, but she didn't know how sophisticated the enemy's comm system was. They'd managed to

jam hers and Caradine's on separate occasions—in fact, she had no way of knowing whether they were jamming hers now—so the exercise was probably futile. More importantly, it was possible they could trace a transmission to its source.

Lex narrowed the focus of her scanners, willing them to cut through the chemical soup, and swept the horizon, aiming her TharHes targeting system like a searchlight.

Movement. Not metal and near the ground. Could Caradine be outside her 'Mech? Lex was moving forward before the absurdity of that thought registered. Non metal movement near the ground had to be animals. She slowed to a walk.

Fifty meters past the ambush, a twenty-ton predator—though the spiked fan and feathers made size estimation difficult—floundered on its side. Apparently a stray shot from the autocannon had shattered a center leg, bringing it down. The wound itself might not have been fatal, but the pack of scavengers harrying the fallen beast would make certain it didn't live long enough to heal. As she watched, two of the pack flashed in, ripping mouthfuls of flesh and dancing away before the predator could turn on them.

Her first thought was to put it out of its misery. Her second was she didn't want any weapons fire alerting the enemy to her presence.

Of course, that assumed their sensors were as blind as hers.

Ignoring the carnage of the predator's death at her feet, Lex repeated her searchlight scan of the horizon. Heavy metal on the move. Lex cut her signal the instant she had a reading. Maybe whoever she'd pinged would miss the contact in the background noise.

Sensors dark, Lex sat in her chilly cockpit and considered the data. A heavy, about twenty tons heavier than her *Nightsky*, at extreme range and moving away toward the north at thirty kph. Running hot, if that meant anything.

If the second 'Mech were faster, it would be out of range entirely. Or it could have circled around and be almost anywhere. Powered down and stationary, it would be invisible until it moved. Was her *Nightsky* up to tangling with a heavy or assault on its own turf?

She considered returning to Chevalier and bringing Britto and Aldicott to the battle site, but rejected the idea. In the first place, there was not enough time. In the second, it would look too much like running away.

Two options. Sit here until retirement or look for Caradine.

Keeping her active sensors off to reduce her energy signature, Lex went back to the fallen 'Mech.

The *Hatchetman's* head had not gone straight up—its flight would have been clearly visible above the ground interference. That meant it had gone horizontal, or in a shallow arc as the 'Mech fell. Rough, but survivable—particularly given the boggy ground and softwood vegetation.

Softwoods—

Lex looked up, turning her 'Mech in place until she found a tunnel in the thickly interwoven branches of the trees. Something heavy and fast had carved a rising path through the dense foliage. South. Away from the direction the departing heavy had gone.

The battle site was well outside the area Lex had patrolled, but she knew from maps that to the south the jungle gave way to boggy swamp. How far would the head fly at that angle with thirty seconds of boost? Or had Caradine cut the thrust early? Either way, the system wasn't set up for a controlled landing at that angle. Wherever Caradine had come down, she'd come down hard.

Or maybe not hard enough. If she reached the bog, it was possible she'd come down in water – or what passed for water on Despair—which would present a whole new set of problems. The *Hatchetman's* head would keep her alive underwater, of course. Lex just wasn't sure of her targeting computer's ability to find a submerged object through the local static.

Lex powered up her targeting computer, focused on the ground ahead. Keeping her sensors on narrow beam to cut through the interference, she swept the boggy ground and dense growth ahead of her. Not rushing, but not wasting time, she pushed her way through the vines and undergrowth beneath the flying head's tunnel through the trees.