

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter Ten

*Partial transcript,
IDCN (InterDepartmental ComNet)
exchange
logged 14 August 3057
Detective Sarah Willard, Major Crime Unit
Badge 4667*

LabRatt33: What are you doing online? I thought gumshoes spent all their time hanging out in sleazy strip bars.

Det4667: That's private dicks. I'll be doing that after I retire. Right now I'm typing up some cases and had to check something through Central.

Det4667: You working or just cruising porn sites?

LabRatt33: Both. I'm an efficient multitasker able to work one-handed.

Det4667: TMI, Davey boy.

LabRatt33: You want TMI, check out my video feed.

LabRatt33: I think I got something for you on the D'Marco case.

Det4667: Like what? Analysis of the soup cleared him. None of the trace chemical tags for a MindMASC dump. Whatever he dropped in those vats was something else.

LabRatt33: Maybe. Maybe not.

LabRatt33: I've been experimenting with some MindMASC samples from evidence.

Det4667: Going to have to turn you in, Davey. Been nice working with you.

LabRatt33: Very funny. You may have the gun, but I know thirty-seven ways to make you lose your mind that don't leave a trace.

Det4667: Too late. Brass beat you to it. Have you seen the new incident reports? 16 screens!

LabRatt33: Okay then, how bout you got the gun, but I know how to make your case against D'Marco?

Det4667: How?

LabRatt33: You want the full report now or wait till AM?

Det4667: Morning, i'm off the clock. Give hilites.

LabRatt33: D'Marco moved his operation to that soup factory because he knew something we didn't. We knew the chemical tags to look for when MASC got dumped in water, right?

Det4667: Right. And none of them were in the soup.

Det4667: Get interesting, Davey, it's late.

LabRatt33: Well the soup in the vats was boiling, right?

Det4667: Simmering.

Det4667: I'm about to log off, Davey.

LabRatt33: Drop your MASC in a pot of boiling water and you get a whole different set of chemical markers.

Det4667: ?

LabRatt33: It breaks down differently. Different chemical fallout. Different set of tags. And every one of the traces you get from dropping MASC in boiling water was in that soup.

LabRatt33: You got him dead to rights.

Det4667: You married, Davey?

Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyrans Alliance
19 October 3057

The Chevalier scout car stood empty at the edge of the abandoned village.

The late afternoon sky filled the clearing with a flat, dim light that robbed the scene of color and shadows. The details were clear enough, though, even without low-light augmentation. Empty scout car; empty village.

Chevalier scout cars were modified general-purpose construction vehicles with their passenger compartments sealed against the hostile environment of Despair. They were sturdy and useful, their heavily studded balloon tires carrying them efficiently through bogs or over rocks. Their several hard points and power take-offs enabled the mounting of a variety of tools.

However, the seals, gaskets, and other hostile-environment modifications were finicky and fragile, prone to damage and failure. Nick had told Lex at least a third of the scouts were in for repairs at any one time. A statistic that reminded her of the Florida's BattleMech assets, though she didn't share the similarity with the scientist.

That Chevalier Base was equipped with these GP workhorses rather than proper exploration vehicles indicated something about either the priority of the mission or the financial resources of Ender's Cluster.

The passenger compartment of the abandoned scout car was open to the elements, the clam shell doors spread to their widest extent. This in itself was not unusual. The cabin was too small to house an air lock. The crew—wearing hazmat suits at all times—had to open the vehicle to the elements when leaving or entering, then purge the corrosive air once it was resealed.

Lex kept only one eye on the empty vehicle as she surveyed the surrounding area. The light enhancing screens gave a phosphor green patina to the grey on grey on grey clearing and the densely tangled trees beyond. She was sure this was the same village they'd seen in the recording, though the buildings seemed foreshortened and the beaten path to the river was now to her left.

The fern-like vegetation had already reasserted itself, covering the vehicle's tracks and any trace of whatever else had been here. Knowing whether the scout car had been following a search pattern or had driven straight from the base would have been useful intel.

Lex was aware of Caradine leaning forward out of the equipment cubby, craning her head to look out through the edges of the canopy. She realized the other MechWarrior was doing her best to cover their flanks while she took in the scene in front of them.

There was no apparent damage to the car. An empty tripod and open equipment bag implied the occupants had been interrupted while setting up recorders or sensors of some sort. Of course the robust flora had eradicated any indication of what had happened, but Lex took some comfort from the fact there were no dead scavengers in evidence.

"There's something wrong about the village," Caradine said. "Over and above being empty, I mean."

Lex looked again at the loose arrangement of buildings—fewer than she would have thought from the recording—and had to agree. Aside from the fact that they were clearly abandoned, there was something not quite kosher about the layout.

Lex grunted.

Stepping the *Nightsky* ahead dead slow, she moved to the closest building.

Looking down from above, she could see the brown and withered foliage that formed the covering had been laid across the walls, not secured to the structure at any point. Nor was the roof solid. The branches had been arranged in a criss-cross pattern and spaced twenty to twenty-five centimeters apart—close enough to provide the interior with more shade than light, but open enough to let in rain. Or starlight, if there had been any on Despair.

"*Sekhakh*," she said under her breath.

"What?"

Gently sweeping her axe across the roof, Lex pushed the branches aside, revealing the bare interior.

She grunted again.

"Your communication grid seems to be down," Caradine said. "What are you looking at?"

Lex quirked a corner of her mouth at the prod. Meeting Caradine's eye, she indicated the buildings with a tilt of her head.

"These should be temporary structures—never made of stone—and I know many people who would argue about the number of walls," she said, "but these are ersatz *sukkot*. Booths. A very old and very human design."

"Meaning the village is a counterfeit," Caradine said, following Lex's reasoning. "I'm beginning to have more respect for Buena's emphasis on cultural anthropology."

Lex said nothing, scanning the jungle around the edges of the clearing for any signs of life or motion. Or metal.

Caradine made no comment as she double checked the sensor readings. Lex had no idea whether the other MechWarrior would attribute her extra care to thoroughness or fear.

Her own honesty forced her to admit it was indecision. On Penance she had been forced into a fight before she'd even realized there was a threat. Now, knowing there was an enemy, she found herself preoccupied with options, afraid she was overlooking something.

There were dozens of tiny body heat signatures indicating wild-life in the underbrush, all under a dozen kilos in mass. None were near the trail to the river. She was willing to bet a soil analysis along the "beaten" path would reveal a liberal layer of poison to ensure nothing spoiled the illusion of permanence.

As sure as she could be they were alone, Lex focused on the empty buildings in the middle of the clearing. All of the fronds and branches making up the roofs were in the same state of decay—just as they had all been green in the recording. In a living village the colors would have varied as houses were built and roofs rethatched individually. And waste. There was no dump, no midden, no evidence of long-term occupancy.

But there was trash—melon husks and shells from some snail-like creatures perhaps half a meter long—and what was clearly animal waste. Dung deposited indiscriminately among the buildings and—Lex confirmed with a glance—inside at least one building as well.

The "natives" were tool using animals, not tool makers. Nonsentient river hunters who used sticks and rocks—no doubt to pry out or crack open some shelled bottom dweller. Like the giant snails. Otters on Terra did as much.

Presented with hand axes and spears, the creatures would carry them, even use them efficiently, without having the wit to comprehend they were made things. Finding food in buildings, they would be content to occupy the dwellings, strolling the streets like residents, for as long as the provisions lasted.

It was doubtful the creatures they'd been calling natives were in the same intellectual league as *neopithecanthropus*. Given what little Lex had seen of the level of evolution on Despair—and the condition in which they'd left the “village”—Doctor Chevalier's noble ‘*homme d’oiseaux*’ probably had more in common with Terran magpies than primates.

A brief and carefully staged recording of selected scenes—particularly when accompanied by a senior scientist's breathless testimony—could fool even an expert. Had fooled experts. But no one could see the site in its entirety and mistake it for a viable community.

“Somebody figured out the hoax,” Caradine said, startling Lex with how closely their thoughts had run together. “Or at least suspected enough to break the quarantine to come out and check.

“My money's on your gentleman friend, Doctor Severin.”

Chevalier Base scuttlebutt network could teach ComStar a few tricks, Lex reminded herself. She just hadn't realized Caradine was jacked into the net.

More to the point, the other MechWarrior was right. If anyone had come out here to investigate the village, it would have been Nick.

Lex made a tight scan of the ground around the scout car and equipment. No metal fragments, no scraps of environmental suit. Chances were good he was intact when whoever took him took him.

She felt a flutter of hope and fear high in her chest.

Conflicted; that's me.

“Nothing here changes our mission profile,” she said aloud.

“Yes it does,” Caradine sounded surprised. “Now there are civilian prisoners—prisoners who may be used as hostages. That changes all the parameters.”

“Our objective is the same,” Lex countered. “Find where these ‘Mechs are coming from and secure the safety of Chevalier Base. Rescue is tertiary.”

Caradine said nothing as Lex negotiated the village.

"Want to risk a message?" Caradine asked as they entered the trees on the far side of the clearing. "Britto and Aldicott should both be on the move by now."

Meaning in a position to countermand my bad decisions.

Forcing down her resentment, Lex considered Caradine's suggestion. And rejected it.

"If they run a standard pattern along my last vector, they'll be closing on where we think the enemy base is at about the same time we are," she explained. "If they decided to cover Chevalier and wait for our report, they aren't going to be close enough to make a difference.

"Either way, there's no need to broadcast our position. Time enough to start communicating when we see the lay of the land."

She pushed the BattleMech, making the best speed she could through the boggy terrain.

"You have an active ECM suite," Caradine said, reading the *Nightsky's* instrument panel.

"Yes," Lex answered shortly.

She was certain straining forward while perched on the edge of the equipment shelf in a moving BattleMech could not be remotely comfortable—particularly given the strains and bruises Caradine must have suffered during her escape capsule's tumbling flight. But the other MechWarrior gave no indication of distress as she surveyed everything within and without the cockpit.

"Then how come you showed up so clearly on the picket sensors?" Caradine asked.

"I had the ECM off when I thought we were the only 'Mechs on the planet," Lex explained. "I didn't want to be mistaken for anything else."

For a moment she left it at that, focusing on driving the 'Mech. Here the jungle and swamp vied for supremacy; the underbrush was deceptive and the footing treacherous. She was hard pressed to maintain their fifty kph pace while keeping an eye on the sensors.

"And," she said, annoyed her own nature wouldn't let her remain silent, "I didn't think to turn it on when I saw the intruder."

Caradine said nothing.

Lex slowly let out her breath. She'd been braced for a patronizing pronouncement forgiving her for the tyro screw-up.

"I also switched the counter measures off briefly when I started after you," she added. "I wanted the picket sensors to get an accurate vector."

"But you've had it on since."

Lex sensed Caradine's nod as she approved the tactic.

"You think the *Crockett* can detect us?" Caradine asked.

Lex pulled the assault 'Mech's profile up on an auxiliary screen.

"There are six different sensor suites that can be fitted," she said, trusting Caradine to see the relevant data box. The rough terrain left her with no hands free for pointing. "If it mounts the original Scope 30, the pilot's going to have a fair idea where we are even if he can't get a hard lock. Anything newer than Star League tech in this soup and he might know we're around, but he'll have to rely on visual to spot us."

"Let's hope for new and cheap."

"We know they have at least one piece of lostech," Lex said. "Or maybe something new. I don't know of anything short of a small nuke that can put out an EM pulse like the one that wiped my systems."

"I think I've figured that out," Caradine said. "There was no EM pulse."

Right. The Nightsky jerked slightly in response to Lex's unintended pull on the yoke. The 'Mechs that beat you were real, but I'm still an hallucinating coward.

"You were slaved into the Base sensor net on patrol, right? Of course you were, we all were," the other woman was saying. "Which means your systems were tied into the nearest picket array."

"Yes." Lex snapped the word off.

"What if these guys needed the net to be blind along this vector?" Caradine continued. "They couldn't destroy the picket. Even if they made it look natural, we'd just cover the area until it was replaced."

Lex said nothing. She wanted to ignore Caradine, but the other MechWarrior's mouth was perhaps a hand span from her ear. Lex focused on the jungle ahead, trying not to grip her controls too tightly.

"But if they could reprogram the picket's computer to ignore specific 'Mechs or certain types of activity," Caradine said, "They could do what they wanted and the Base would be none the wiser."

"They'd have to be hardwired to the computer to do that," Lex said, annoyed she couldn't resist pointing out the flaw in Caradine's scenario.

"Exactly."

Lex resumed saying nothing.

"So what if their programmer was hard connected to the array when you linked up?" Caradine asked. "If he was accessing the system, he'd know you'd spotted him—data flowed both ways. But he was in a position to isolate that picket from the rest of the net and, since your system was essentially slaved to the picket, take you out too without you realizing."

Beyond the canopy Lex could see only jungle; the boggy ground seemed to rise ahead of them. They were in a shallow hollow, out of easy sight and passives reported no active sensor signals. Taking a chance, she brought the *Nightsky* to a halt.

Lifting her hands from the controls, Lex turned to face Caradine, leaning away so they were at as comfortable a distance as the cockpit would allow. She was glad her complexion hid the hot flush of shame she felt. She couldn't think of an artful way to apologize for what she'd been thinking.

"That's a lot of ifs," she said instead.

"It's only one," Caradine countered. "What if you caught the re-programmer mid-operation?"

"They sent a 'Mech to reprogram a computer?"

"They may have sent the 'Mech to cover the tech doing the reprogramming," Caradine said. "Or the tech may have had an armored ATV and just fed your image back to you when he saw you'd pinged heavy metal."

Lex tried to remember the image she'd seen on her screen. Could she have been fooled by her own reflection?

"None of us were using protocols to defend against a real enemy, one with tech," Caradine said. "We were all running with our defenses down and our systems wide open because it was easier to interface with the civilian net with the safeties off. Even our comm was piggy-backing on their net to cut through this soup. If he was good and fast, he could tie you up before you knew it."

Lex shook her head.

"That still doesn't explain the EM pulse."

"There was no EM pulse," Caradine repeated. "He was hardwired to the picket array. He ran an electrical charge through to fry the system."

"That's nonsense," Lex answered before she thought to edit her response. "Without a physical connection, there's no way for that charge to have reached my 'Mech."

"But your tactical computer had a split second to see it coming," said Caradine. "Hooked to the other computer it registered the jolt as an incoming EM pulse—"

"Auto safety," Lex cut her off, the light dawning. "It shut down to protect itself."

"And rebooted to factory settings," Caradine said. "Which means."

"Any memory that hadn't been hard saved was wiped," Lex finished. "And with security protocols off, the continuous back up wasn't running."

Another thought struck her.

"My comm system—"

"Different circuit," Caradine said. "It was still up and slaved to the blind loop until you blasted the picket array."

"It's like that story you told on the way in," she added. "About people looking to the stars when it was really vegetables."

"Missing the truth because the distractor fits our expectations," Lex said, wondering how many times she was going to have to relearn that lesson.

"Right."

"But, safety protocols were up since then," Lex said. "How'd you get led off?"

Caradine looked away and Lex was startled to realize the other woman was embarrassed.

"My *Hatchetman* doesn't have this sophisticated Guardian," Caradine said, indicating the control panel with a nod. "I thought I saw something—I did see something—and didn't want to risk giving away my position with radio chatter."

"So that was you double clicking?"

"I figured sooner or later you'd get pissed off and come see what I was up to," Caradine said. "I just didn't figure on you having such a long fuse."

She went after an unknown bogie without back-up? Explains why she didn't mention my screw up.

Straightening around, Lex set the *NightSky* in motion. Following their original vector, she boosted speed to make up for the minutes they'd lost while she worked through her *satori*.

"There's at least one other BattleMech on the field," she said, and explained about the double laser scar along the flank of the tonner cow that had flamed her. "Neither the *Flashman* nor the *Crockett* mounts a close pair of medium lasers."

"If all their ordnance is as old school and big enough to intimidate a tonner," Caradine said. "Twin mediums means a *Guillotine* or an *Exterminator*."

Lex nodded. A *Victor* was also possible, but that assault 'Mech was rare this far from Davion space—and expensive. Given the little information they'd gleaned from their limited observation of the enemy's apparent resources, Caradine's thinking mirrored her own.

She didn't want to meet either heavy, but if she had to, she hoped it was the *Guillotine*; it was the larger and better armed, but it was built for head to head combat on open ground. The *Exterminator*, on the other hand, was designed for covert warfare and mounted an electronic countermeasures suite every bit as good as the *NightSky*'s. Plus a light polarization screen that would play hell with visual spotting.

With a seasoned pro at the controls of an *Exterminator*, there was a good chance she'd be down before she knew what hit her.

On the heels of that thought came a sensor *beep*.

Heavy metal on the move, a few degrees left of their course.

Lex cut the active sensors and throttled back. Halting the *NightSky* next to a towering stand of what looked remarkably like cypress, Lex mentally willed the reactor to cool rapidly and reduce her thermal image as she studied the data.

Passive sensors reported an active targeting array swept over them and moved on.

"That's your *Crockett*," Lex said. The TarHes computer had already made the identification, but she'd double checked—comparing the numbers with the profile.

"On an active search pattern," Caradine agreed, reading the passive sensor screen. "He's not looking for my pod. He's hunting.

"He knows you're out here."