

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter Twelve

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POLL: PARENT'S FEARS DON'T MATCH FACTS, FIGURES

Surveys conducted by the Ministry of Health and Education on several representative worlds in the Alarion Province reveal that of parents of adolescents are concerned about the wrong issues.

"For example," says Dr. Milthrop Wynnpike, developer of the survey, "Most parents cited the hallucinogenic drug MindMASC as a major danger facing children today. In fact, studies have shown persons under eighteen are far more likely to experiment with barbiturates or supposed aphrodisiacs than stimulants or hallucinogenic. MindMASC is used almost exclusively by adults, and then of the fairly narrowly defined "thrill seeker" personality type.

"Parents of most adolescents would be much better advised to be worried about..."

***Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
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"Atreus."

Lex pulled the covers up over her head. If they didn't see her, they couldn't make her wake up.

"Atreus."

That wasn't Shasha. That was.... Somebody. Far away. Somebody hurt? Somebody she didn't like.

"Atreus," then louder: "Alexandra! Wake up!"

Why? She snuggled deeper. If they couldn't find her, they couldn't make her get up. Those were the rules.

A bump. Her bed bumped. And a sound like a sob.

Her command couch bumped again.

"Damn it, Lieutenant!" the voice was weak. But angry. Very angry. "You are not dead! Wake the hell up!"

That was Caradine. Shouting orders again. Damn aristocrats—

Lex snapped awake.

Her hands flew to the joysticks even as her eyes scanned the data screens. No heavy metal in range. Large laser housing damaged, weapon system yellow but still operable. Comm system out; ECM up and running; sensor array eighty percent, damaged sensor; cockpit integrity and life support green; both left leg jump jets and one torso jump jet offline; a dozen stress fractures to the armor, none serious; internal structure and motive systems all one hundred percent.

Well the Nightsky does have the highest survivability rating in its weight class.

"TacSit?" she demanded.

"We are flat on our back in the mud with a dead assault 'Mech on top of us," Caradine reported. There was a breathless tone to her

voice. "You've been out about five minutes that I know of—I was out a couple myself."

Lex glanced at the chronometer and tried to remember what it had said the last time she'd noticed it. No idea.

"How about you?" she asked.

"Stabbing pain every time I breathe too deep," Caradine answered—which explained the breathless quality of her voice. "Probably bruised pulmonary muscles, maybe a cracked rib or two. Several aches and pains, nothing requiring immediate attention.

"You?"

Lex flexed what she could, testing her body's responses.

"Whiplash, half a dozen overstretched muscles that are going to hurt like hell when they've had time to set up," she said. "Nothing else I can find. We were lucky."

"Except for the being flat on our back pinned under the assault 'Mech part," Caradine pointed out. "Any thoughts on how to get out from under our date here?"

Lex grunted at the word choice.

The design of her cockpit kept her from seeing more than one upthrust shoulder of the *Crockett*, but from its position and the stresses the armor schematic was reporting, she deduced the *Nightsky's* upper torso and left arm were free. The right arm was pinned between the two machines, damaged but not crushed.

It should have been. In fact, most of her 'Mech should have been crushed—or at least badly bent—by the eighty-five tons of dead weight that had fallen on it. The boggy ground beneath the *Nightsky* must have yielded enough to distribute the weight—or dissipate the shock of the fall—enough to limit the damage.

And if the soil was soft enough....

Lex experimented with flexing a leg. Servos whined—that the sound of leg actuators reached her cockpit was eloquent testimony to how far above operating parameters her command pushed them. Overstress warnings flashed along the lower half of the wireframe schematic. And the leg moved.

Lex cut power. The half-meter's movement was not worth the risk to the actuator assembly. And she couldn't imagine a combi-

nation of such moves that would get her free of the assault 'Mech's corpse without doing permanent damage to her own machine.

For a wild second she considered firing her remaining jump jets. Under normal circumstances they would vaporize any mud the fall had jammed up their throats. But compressed beneath the bigger machine the mud would be as dense as ferrocrete—back pressure would almost certainly rupture the chambers. Stuck was better than stuck without a right leg.

"Waiting for help is not an option," she said aloud. "Even if Britto and Aldicott find us, they won't be a match if that *Victor* comes back."

"*Victor*?" Caradine gasped. Lex wondered if the startled exclamation had hurt her. "What *Victor*?"

"Heavy autocannon fire to topple this hulk, plus paired medium lasers scarring that tonner," Lex explained. "Given the old school hardware these guys field, a *Victor* is the only 'Mech that fits the profile."

"I don't think there is a *Victor*," Caradine cut her off. "Think about it: A burst of autocannon fire to topple the dead 'Mech and no follow-up to finish us off?"

"If there had been a *Victor* on the field, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Lex had to admit Caradine's logic made sense.

"You're thinking armor of some sort?" she asked.

"That would fit the tech at the sensor picket theory," Caradine said. "On the other hand, I've heard of guerrilla forces mounting autocannons on civilian trucks. It might have been something with no armor, something the sensors might ignore, but couldn't risk you getting a shot at it."

A light truck getting in a lucky shot that immobilized them, then running for help to come finish them off. The theory fit the evidence.

"Which means we don't have much time," Lex said. "Depending on where their back-up is and how far their radio reaches in this soup, we could have company at any minute."

She considered her controls; knowing she had to move and knowing how to move were two completely different things. The

general schematic wasn't helpful. Aware each passing second increased their chances of being discovered pinned and helpless, she tabbed through specific diagnostic screens, trying to assess what each system was capable of before trying any potentially disastrous experiments.

"What about your axe?" Caradine asked after a long minute.

"Chop the *Crockett* to moveable pieces?"

"I meant use it like a rock climber's hammer," Caradine ignored Lex's bitter tone. "Grab a purchase on something and pull us out."

Lex started to reject the suggestion out of hand, then stopped to think it through.

Caradine's idea made sense for a *Hatchetman*, which held its club-like hatchet in a hand. The wrist actuator was flexible enough to turn the double-bladed head to grip the ground. However, the *Nightsky*'s single-blade axe was integral to the arm assembly. This gave it greater structural integrity, increasing the force and damage of its blow, but at the expense of flexibility. It could only rotate as far as the forearm of the 'Mech could turn; not enough to reach the ground while the machine was on its back.

But the *Nightsky* also had an elbow spike, a meters-long titanium blade designed to shatter armor plate and eviscerate opposing 'Mechs. If she could raise the left arm enough to jab the spike into the ground, it should be strong enough to pull the fifty ton 'Mech through the mud. But would it hold up to the extra strain of pulling the 'Mech out from under another?

It took twenty minutes, with Lex second guessing every movement as she tried to balance limiting further damage to her BattleMech with getting it on its feet and back in action as quickly as possible. But by using the elbow spike as a pick and shoving carefully with the legs she was able to work the medium 'Mech out from under the heavier machine.

Whatever had been done to her left leg's jump jets by the fall was made worse by dragging them out from beneath the *Crockett*. Their wireframe image went from red to black. The pressure was too great for some of the stress-fractured armor as well; chips abraded away as Lex eased her machine free. The *Nightsky* left nearly half a ton of Kalon Royalstar under the assault 'Mech.

Caradine wisely said nothing as Lex worked, making only a satisfied grunt when the wireframe reported the last of the crushing weight was gone.

Once clear, Lex was faced with the problem of getting her *Nightsky* on its feet. The curving armor which defended her back so well also made it difficult to stand from the supine position. Placement of armor protecting the rear aspect of the hip actuators prevented her from simply sitting the machine up.

By shoving with the feet and pulling with the elbow spike, she turned her 'Mech until it was perpendicular to the slope of the hill, with the damaged right arm upslope. By raising the BattleMech's right leg and damaged right arm, she could use the incline to roll it to its hands and knees—a much better position for getting up-right.

The world beyond the ferroglass canopy flashed a blinding red.

Laser fire.

The targeting computer reported two near misses. Two large beams, one burning into the hulk of the *Crockett*, the other grazing the hillside beside her supine BattleMech—flash burning the mud into hardened clay.

The Guardian ECM reported it was battling a TharHes Ares-7, grandfather to her *Nightsky*'s own 8a targeting system. With two large lasers, that meant—

"Flashman," Caradine said. "Coming from below our feet."

Lex nodded.

The thermal sensors reported a bonfire—the heavy 'Mech had not had a chance to replace the heat sinks Caradine had destroyed. No doubt the heat was creating as much interference for its weapons systems as her ECM. Otherwise not even the Guardian would have convinced the lasers to target the *Crockett* at this close range.

"He's running hot."

"My autocannon targets heat sinks," Caradine said. Then: "He was running hot before I hurt him—and I hurt him. His thermal screwed up their ambush. These guys do not have good tech support."

On the thermal imager the bonfire below their feet became a sunrise as the heavy 'Mech walked toward them.

There was no time for Lex to wrestle her fallen 'Mech to its feet. Any move that rolled them away from the *Crockett* would give the *Flashman* a clear shot. But not moving while the heavy 'Mech circled the fallen assault...

Flat on its back, the *Nightsky* could bring none of the torso or head weapons to bear on a target approaching from below its feet. The large laser *might* be operational—yellow lights warned the computer wasn't certain—but the targeting computer's designers had never imagined this situation. The system couldn't get a lock.

She had to be on her feet to fight.

Her breath caught.

Eyes wide, she watched the variables tumble into place; the pattern form. She let her breath out slowly. The cold energy swept down from the back of her head, calming her heart before flowing into her hands, her legs.

"What?" asked Caradine.

Lex didn't answer. Flexing her own leg and pulling the yoke, she raised the *Nightsky's* right leg. The enemy would see she was about to roll her machine to its feet, but she needed it closer, in sight, before she made her move.

She heard Caradine moving behind her, apparently trying to find a more secure position.

The white-hot thermal image told her the heavy 'Mech was on top of her before the domed top of its egg-shaped torso crested the lower sill of the canopy.

Pausing above them, the *Flashman* trained both arms on the medium 'Mech. With the heat readings on her sensors, Lex doubted it could fire all four lasers. But the two mediums would be more than enough to melt her cockpit to slag.

Safety interlocks had already cut the left leg's jump jets out of the system. Manually deactivating the torso jets was a flip of the toggle.

Unable to defend at near contact range, the Guardian counter measures suite gave up—its reassuring beep pushed aside by the harsh note of the weapons lock alarm.

Lex fired her right leg jump jets.

There was a grinding scrape of earth and rock against armor as the twin jump jets slid the *Nightsky* a few painful meters along the muddy ground. Lex straightened the leg slightly, keeping their flaming plasma wash directed at the towering *Flashman*. The superheated particles flooding through rents in the armor could do no direct damage to the heavy 'Mech's internal structure, but that wasn't the point.

The *Flashman* half turned, the pilot managing one step towards escape before the jump jets' heat forced the already damaged machine into emergency thermal shutdown.

Cutting the thrust, Lex threw the raised leg over. She was slammed against her harness by the roll, but worked the joysticks, getting her 'Mechs arms under it and shoving. She felt Caradine thump against the back of the command couch, thrown out of the equipment cubby by the *Nightsky*'s staggering rise.

Before her machine was fully erect, Lex stepped it back—toward the *Flashman*.

Momentum threw her against her harness—and Caradine against the bulkhead—as she snapped the still rising torso through a left spin.

The *Nightsky*'s titanium elbow spike did its job, smashing through weakened armor just above the *Flashman*'s rotator ring to shatter internal structures. A grey-green spray misting across the canopy told Lex she'd taken out another heat sink.

Barely keeping her 'Mech upright on the slanting ground, Lex continued to turn, myomer cables snaking from the elbow spike as it pulled free of the enemy. She straightened the arm as she spun, slamming the axe head into one of the torso lasers. Not as powerful as a full-body swing, the blow was still sufficient to deform the muzzle, ruining the weapon.

Lex crab stepped right as the momentum of the swing turned her 'Mech. She wasn't going to get caught standing directly beneath a falling enemy a second time. Her right arm was still extended for balance when her torso and head lasers bore on the *Flashman*. Not waiting for good tone, she fired the twin mediums and small with an open-hand slap to the triggers.

Untargeted, the three beams did not converge. But each pulse laser delivered a solid double-tap of destruction to the already stricken enemy.

As she swung her large laser around, the top of the *Flashman* popped open and the escape couch arced up and away on a column of smoke.

Lex had a momentary impression of a bright orange hazmat suit and two heads—the pilot carrying the helmet. Stopping to change helmets was probably what had killed the *Crockett* pilot.

Warned by the pilot's evacuation, Lex backpedaled her *Nightsky*, moving away as quickly as the slippery slope allowed.

The *Flashman* shuddered and deformed, coming apart along damage fractures as its massive gyro tore loose. Hypersonic shrapnel, which moments before had been pieces of the spinning wheel's mounts and housing, buried themselves in the muddy hillside or arced out over the fen. Whether through luck, grace, or physics, none struck the scrambling medium 'Mech less than twenty meters away.

With a final shudder, the seventy-five ton BattleMech separated at its rotator ring. The ruptured torso tilted up, seeming to look toward the roiling heavens, then fell majestically backwards. The legs, still joined to the hip assembly that had supported the central ring, remained standing; ankle deep in the bog.

"Oly fit," said a voice next to Lex's ear.

She turned as far as her neurohelmet allowed to see Caradine—a fold of survival blanket pressed against her bleeding mouth—surveying the ruined BattleMechs beyond the canopy.

"Dey teef you dat at Buena?" Caradine asked around the improvised pressure bandage.

"This *is* a melee 'Mech," Lex said, still shaky with reaction.

Caradine rejected the flip response with a shake of her head.

"A heaffy and an affault with a medium—"

"Two mediums," Lex interrupted. "I wouldn't have stood a chance if you hadn't already done most of the work."

To have done as much damage as she had against a *Crockett* and a *Flashman* with her forty-five ton *Hatchetman*... Lex suspected Caradine might have the chops to back up at least some of her landed gentry, Nagelring arrogance.

Though there was no sign of that arrogance now.

Reaching forward, she popped the first aid locker open and handed the kit back.

"Need a hand?"

"Nefg'tiff," Caradine said.

Lex watched the sensor screens while the other MechWarrior did what she could to repair the damage. From the muffled speech and blood soaking the scrap of blanket, she was willing to bet Caradine had bitten through a lip. And if she was any judge of Caucasian physiology, the right side of the woman's face would soon be a mottled bruise. Her eye was already swollen shut.

Refining the sensors to search out light metal near the ground, Lex was amazed by her clarity. She tried to sort out what she was feeling, what was different. The cold energy of combat was gone. but in it's place was... something.

Senses wide, she cataloged each beep and tone as the computer identified wildlife and the Guardian reported natural electronic discharges across an approaching squall, but no organized signals.

For all practical purposes she was alone on a hostile world, transporting wounded in a damaged 'Mech and facing an unidentified enemy of unknown capability. She had an objective, a mission self-selected without orders. There were choices—strategies, tactics, options to be considered—but they were not swirling in a paralyzing fog.

The med kit thrust over her shoulder interrupted Lex's self-examination.

Taking it without comment, she stowed the case in its compartment and set her hands to the controls.

"I owe you an apology, Lieutenant," Caradine said, her voice close to Lex's ear.

Lex turned to meet the other woman's eyes, leaning slightly away from her to focus.

A dark red blood blister marred the point of Caradine's chin, just below the bandage plaster that covered the right corner of her mouth and jaw line. Plum and purple marks, almost like stress fractures, radiating from her cheekbone and temple.

She still spoke with the breathlessness of her chest injury, but the plaster allowed clearer diction than the improvised pressure bandage had.

"Before this," Caradine indicated the carnage around them with a tilt of her head, not breaking eye contact, "I didn't believe you were a real MechWarrior."

That was the difference.

Lex straightened around in her command couch, facing forward and cycling the reactor up.

"Before this," she said, "I wasn't."

Clothed in her *Nightsky*, Lex Atreus stepped forward.

THE END...