

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter One

[Public service announcement, to be broadcast four times daily on all children and family entertainment channels by order of Federated Commonwealth Ministry of Education.]

Hi, kids. Immortal Warrior here to remind you that when I defeat enemies like Phaedra's Phantoms, I do it without any artificial performance enhancers. I'm able to out-fight, out-wit, and out-last my opponents because I eat a sensible diet, get plenty of sleep, and exercise regularly. So if anyone other than a parent or licensed healthcare professional offers you any medicine they say will make you stronger or faster, just remember: Real Warriors say "No!" to drugs!

***Florida Periphery March Militia training fields
Florida
Federated Commonwealth
09 August 3057***

"Pull right, Lieutenant."

Leftenant Alexandra Daya Atreus of the Florida PMM jerked her controls, overreacting to the Judge's command. The landscape beyond the rain-streaked view screen blurred as the torso of her *Nightsky* swung in response.

The low-lying overcast made the live-fire range a twilight palette of unrelenting browns and greys. It had been three days of steady, soaking drizzle and everything was soggy; even the sealed cockpit of the 'Mech had a musty scent the air scrubbers couldn't quite eliminate.

The only constant in her view of the dark and fluid world was the reflection of her own eyes, watching her from beneath the brow of her neurohelmet. Everything else was lost in shadow.

Too late Lex saw the target marker, olive drab against the brown of the muddy hillside, slide by to the left. Compensating, she swung back on target and fired her small pulse laser. The amber beams flickered from above her cockpit at ten percent power, neatly skewering the bull's-eye. The perfect hit did nothing to mollify her.

The Judge—actually Regimental Tactical Officer Hauptmann Solomon Judson—did not comment on either her delayed fire or perfect hit.

"Large laser," his dry voice intoned in her headphones. "Right forward; second of five."

Rotating the large laser to main trigger, Lex swung her torso right. Sensor screens and heads-up dark, she had only her eyes and the rain smeared canopy with which to identify her target.

Three, four tanks, hull down on the ridge. Second of five? Maybe the Judge misspoke. Or maybe one of the tanks was turret down. There was room at the left end of the ridge for another tank, but the right end dropped off abruptly.

Taking a chance, she manually sighted the left end tank, betting number one was below the ridge, and fired.

Even at one tenth power, the large pulse laser's ruby beams illuminated the gloom, throwing the row of five infantry missile teams dug in along the base of the ridge in sharp relief.

Her damage screen reported an SRM hit to her right shoulder.

"Damn!"

"VTOL bearing two-four-oh, up thirty."

Servo motors whined as the *Nightsky* swung left, its right arm already elevating.

"Large laser malfunction."

Biting back another curse, Lex aimed the *Nightsky's* torso directly at the oncoming quarter-scale RC model, dialing the two medium lasers and the small to her trigger finger. Again the manual targeting and again the head laser hit dead center on the VTOL's cockpit. One of the torso mounted medium pulse lasers went wide; the other raked along the side of the rotor housing.

At full power it *might* have penetrated the real thing.

As she swung the *Nightsky's* torso to center, Lex had a moment to wonder why Hauptmann Judson hadn't called the next target.

A shape loomed out of the gloom.

Lancelot. Ten tons heavier, almost two meters taller, and right on top of her. Both arms extended as it targeted her with its large lasers at contact range.

Before the enemy 'Mech fully registered, Lex took a long step forward with her left leg.

Swinging her axe upwards, she caught the underside of the *Lancelot's* right arm with the short blade that ran along the front of her forearm. Her 'Mech was off balance, its legs too far apart, but she pivoted the torso right, her axe lifting the bigger 'Mech's large laser over her canopy.

With a choice of losing his right arm or turning with the blow, the other pilot allowed his 'Mech to be rotated right, but not before he'd unleashed his torso mounted PPC. At one tenth power it spewed St. Elmo's fire that danced across the *Nightsky's* chest and its "malfunctioning" right arm.

With their torsos now facing right, converting her 'Mech's unstable scissor split into a broad stance was a simple matter of pivoting its feet in the oily mud. The follow-through of her upward swing had brought her axe level with her torso lasers, nearly parallel with the ground. Shifting her *Nightsky's* fifty tons left, she swung a savage backhand blow at the exposed underside of the larger machine's upper arm actuator.

At the last moment, she pulled the punch, turning a cut that would have severed the arm into a gentle tap.

"End," said the Judge. "Full force PPC blast would have knocked your 'Mech off balance, Lieutenant Atreus. The enemy would have finished you flat in the mud."

He was right, she realized before a protest formed. For that matter there was no reason he couldn't have hit her with his left arm's large laser, too. Then her memory belatedly replayed the image of a ruby beam caught by the corner of her eye as the blue lightning crawled along her armor. His shot had gone wide.

"Nice move with the axe, though," said a new voice. Hauptmann Showalter. Her company commander was in the *Lancelot*.

That's not his 'Mech.

"Thank you, sir."

But like the perfect hit seconds too late, the compliment did nothing to lighten her mood. She didn't need the evaluator's scores to know that even without the *Lancelot's* PPC burst she had been failing the exercise.

Again.

If there were sim programs for a left-handed *Nightsky*, the Florida PMM wasn't likely to get them for another decade. Which meant Lex had spent more time in the cockpit of her beloved prize in the past two months than she had in any other 'Mech, including her Buena Academy trainer.

She'd also crawled over and through every centimeter of the fifty-ton machine, working side by side with the techs as they learned all they could. The techs had downloaded the complete maintenance manual and systems schematics from the 'Mech's computer, of course, but there was no substitute for a hands-on and eyeball inspection of every joint, circuit and servo.

"Don't hurt it," her company's maintenance team leader had warned. "We're never going to see some of these parts."

Lex had understood the warning was only half in jest. It was a standing joke that if Central Supply were to drop into a black hole, the Florida wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

All of her training and practice had not been as futile as today's exercise indicated. Her *Nightsky* could perform any task the designers had imagined and a few they hadn't. She excelled in broken terrain navigation, the urban obstacle course was candy, her scores on the firing range put her in the top ten percent of the militia, and her axe... Her axe was *fun*.

But mastering the individual skills was pointless if a 'Mech pilot couldn't integrate them into a unified combat ability. And that's where Lex had lagged at Buena and where she was failing now.

[Excerpt: "New Drug in Town," PopSoSci Digest #6348, Cavanaugh Press]

The exact composition of the metabolic accelerator known as "Mind-MASC" is not fully understood. The compound breaks down rapidly under standard chemical analysis into inert subcompounds. Given the complexity of the compound and the varying amounts of trace elements between samples, it is surmised "Mind-MASC" is natural in origin and not manufactured.

The metabolic accelerator has gained the street name "Mind-MASC" in part because at the onset of its effects the subject perceives an illusionary speeding up and expansion of cognitive and perceptual abilities.

Shortly after this mental phase, which can last up to several minutes, the entire motor and sensory nervous system becomes affected. The extent of the effect depends on dosage.

Mind-MASC is sold in one milligram capsule form.

With a single capsule, subjects report a feeling of supreme well-being and the sense that they are capable of anything for a period of up to one hour. Objective observations confirm a slight increase in strength, pain tolerance and visual and auditory acuity.

The feats of superhuman strength associated with the use of Mind-MASC occur at the three to four milligram level, depending on the metabolism of the subject. These events are rare. Not only because a user requires several days to recover

from the physical toll of the episode, but because the euphoric state of the one-milligram dose is preferred by most users.

Subjects usually multi-dose themselves inadvertently when the effects of the first dose are either not as exciting as anticipated or cloud the subject's judgment. There is also a cumulative effect if the subject takes more than one dose in an eight hour period. The extent of this cumulative effect varies with individual metabolism. Seven milligrams in a twelve hour period is universally fatal.

One-time or infrequent users of Mind-MASC will present no symptoms other than possible injuries while under the influence.

Frequent short-term users will present heightened sensitivity to light and sound, abnormally fluctuating blood pressure coupled with a rapid pulse, and reduced short-term memory.

Habitual users experience painful sensitivity to sound and light, heightened awareness of other senses, dangerously fluctuating blood pressure with tachycardia and disorientation, confusion, and inability to speak or comprehend others.

Long term users develop a swelling of nerve tissue similar to spinal meningitis. At this point, permanent neurological damage is likely.

**Third Battalion Headquarters
Florida Periphery March Militia
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Lex wanted to stay while the techs cleaned the mud from her 'Mech, to check it over one last time, but she didn't dare keep the evaluator waiting. Showering quickly, she changed from cooling vest and shorts to duty fatigues.

The Third Battalion's debriefing room was also its briefing room, the name changing with the purpose of the moment. No one seemed to find this odd or amusing and Lex had yet to hear anyone slip and call it by one name while it was being used as the other. Thirty-six chairs, sturdy but not too comfortable, with rests for noteputers and holders for standard-issue coffee mugs and hydration bottles, faced a low dais with a single desk and four chairs ranged to one side. To the untrained eye the arrangement of chairs appeared random, but the companies and lances were clearly laid out to those who understood the pattern.

As Charlie Gamma Four—third company, third lance, fourth position—Lex took her seat in the back row to the far right of the speaker. If there had been a speaker. The room was empty, but for her. She activated her noteputer, ready to take any notes, then allowed herself to relax. A bit. Enough to ease the tension ache across her shoulders without actually slumping in the chair.

The exercise.... She snapped her mind away from replaying the morning's events. Time enough for that when the Judge went over her tapes. Instead, she let her eyes roam the room, inventorying the information posters on recognizing standard pirate tactics and identifying partially obscured 'Mechs and armor.

Or infantry missile teams in plain sight if you weren't distracted by the pretty tanks.

The Judge and Hauptmann Showalter entered from the door to the left of the dais.

Lex came to her feet, the bind of tension across her shoulders cutting her she was a bit too rigid. Nerves. She let out a breath slowly, willing her back muscles to relax without changing her posture.

Hauptmann Showalter signaled informally for her to take her seat as the Judge set a data crystal into one of the receptacles on the desk.

Hauptmann Judson was the oldest active MechWarrior Lex had ever seen; easily topping the instructors at Buena by a decade. He was a native of Florida, but of course there'd been no Florida PMM when he'd graduated Buena. He'd been top of his class, immediately recruited by the Eleventh Arcturan.

At the end of the War of 3039—for undisclosed reasons that fueled marathon speculation sessions—Judson had been transferred to the Eighth Lyran Regulars. The "Mad Hatters" had a long reputation for being made up of misfits; the most unconventional anti-pirate unit in the AFFC and—if rumors were to be believed—the Judge had been instrumental in developing their tactics.

Five years before Lex's arrival, Hauptmann Judson had come home to Florida and taken charge of strategy and tactics training for the youngest unit in the Periphery March Militia. His success in bringing Mad Hatter thinking to the 'Mech company had been limited by tradition and his lack of title, but he had turned the Florida PMM infantry into a force people actually called on for protection from pirates.

At the moment the Judge seemed to be ignoring her, watching the holoscreen that took up the wall behind the dais as her cockpit and gun cameras' recordings replayed, each in its own rectangle, at three times normal speed.

The landscape seemed to hop frantically as she executed the rapid series of jump maneuvers. The maze navigation exercise passed with equal speed, her one error—instinctively responding to an order to turn without first asking direction—going unremarked.

The Judge slowed the recording for static target shooting, but still did not speak.

Lex watched her image dial each weapon called for to primary trigger and fire at the designated target. Not all the shots were bull's-eyes, but even with her targeting computer offline, she hit the "acceptable" or better within the time limit every time.

Lex saw Hauptmann Showalter straighten slightly, but couldn't tell what he was looking at.

Again the Judge sped the playback, rushing through the opening phase of the free fire exercise until he got to the ridge with its tanks and missile teams. He froze the recording just before she fired.

"What happened here?" he asked, his voice dry and unruffled.

"Ordered to fire on the second of five targets, I focused on the most obvious targets," Lex answered crisply. "Seeing only four tanks, I assumed a fifth—the one in first position—was turret down and fired on the first tank, believing it to be the second."

"What should you have done?"

"When the obvious targets didn't match the firing criteria, I should have checked for other targets."

"The missile teams were unmoving in the dark," the Judge turned to face her for the first time. "Mannequins are very good at that. Until you fired your laser they were impossible to see."

"What should you have done?"

Distracted by the mannequin remark, Lex's mind skidded for a moment at the question.

"Called my spotter for clearer targeting data."

The Judge nodded.

"Twice, in the maze and on the range, you made mistakes by taking action without first asking for readily available information," he said. "There is an important difference between using your initiative and acting as though you are all alone."

"Yes sir."

The Judge cocked his head toward her company commander.

"I believe you have something to add, Richard?"

"Leftenant, please raise both hands," Hauptmann Showalter said. "Palms toward me."

Lex brought her hands up to shoulder level.

"Please flex your little fingers."

Lex felt her face settle into a mask as she realized where the hauptmann was going. She obediently flexed each pair of fingers in turn as directed waiting for him to make his point.

"Leftenant, you clearly have full use of all of your digits," Showalter said at last. "Why then do you always waste precious seconds dialing whatever weapon you're going to fire to primary trigger?"

"I'm right-handed, sir, in a left-handed 'Mech," she answered promptly. "In learning to compensate for the reversed controls I evidently developed that habit without realizing."

"Break that habit, Lieutenant," Showalter ordered. "Those lost seconds will kill you."

"Yes sir."

"Kommandant Kidd asked me to recommend someone for a special duty lance," Judson said, retrieving the crystal from the player. "I'm sending him you."

"Sir," Lex couldn't keep the surprise from her voice. "I just failed..."

"Precisely."

"Sir?"

"It's a milk run, Lieutenant," Showalter explained. "But an interesting one. And I concur with Hauptmann Judson's reasoning. It will give you field experience, which you need, and experience working with a team, which you need even more. You'll report to First Battalion's briefing room at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow."