

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter Two

[Excerpt: “Mind-MASC” Paramedic and First Responder’s Handbook of Controlled and Illegal Substances, supplement 3057/2, Distributed by Federated Commonwealth Ministry of Health; August, 3057]

SCREEN FIRST if evidence indicates Mind-MASC may be involved.

TOXIC INTERACTION

If Mind-MASC IS present:

DO NOT administer sedatives or beta blockers.

TREAT any physical injuries. Use topical anesthetics and disinfectants as indicated.

ISOLATE the patient from lights and sound to reduce overstimulation.

Use THERMAL INTERVENTIONS to reduce fever and lower tachycardia.

OVER HYDRATE to flush system and boost fluid levels.

DO NOT administer any internal medication—INCLUDING any meds for preexisting conditions for which the patient may have a script—until urine indicates Mind-MASC compound has left subject’s system. (Estimate 4 to 12 hours after ingestion.)

***First Battalion Headquarters
Florida Periphery March Militia
Florida
Federated Commonwealth
10 August 3057***

"I don't care that she has her own 'Mech," the man's voice said sharply.

Lex paused just outside the doorway.

"The fact that a bunch of frontier bumpkins were so impressed with her they gave her one does not qualify her to go on a mission."

"It's not your call to make, Willard," said a female voice. "She was vetted by Hauptmann Judson."

"That nameless ..."

Lex set her game face, what Hauptmann Michaels had called her "one half Elemental" stare, and stepped across the threshold.

The sight of her nearly brought the lieutenant leaning against the desk on the dais to his feet. Then her rank registered and he relaxed back into a pose of studied nonchalance.

Also on the dais was a female lieutenant, as pale as Lex was dark, standing at something close to parade rest. Lex thought the almost masculine cut of her white-blonde hair indicated the same no-nonsense attitude toward piloting a 'Mech as her own centimeter-thick buzz. If nothing else, Lex liked what that said about her.

By process of elimination, the lieutenant, leaning on the desk ignoring her as if she hadn't made him jump a moment before, was the one who didn't think she belonged on the mission. He was sharp-featured and pale, with dark hair trimmed in a traditional cut and—if she was reading the body language right—the leader of the newly formed milk run lance.

Ignoring him, Lex focused on the standing woman. Stopping a respectful two paces from the dais, she came to attention and saluted.

"Lieutenant Atreus, Third Battalion, reporting as ordered."

The woman brought herself to attention and returned the salute. Even with the twenty-centimeter advantage of the platform she was about two fingers shorter than Lex.

"You're late," said the lieutenant leaning on the desk, cutting off his companion's acknowledgement.

Lex did not bother to point out the four chronometers centered on each wall of the room read oh seven five eight. If petty upper classman harassment was the worst he could muster she didn't have much to learn from him.

"Lieutenant Willard Britto is our lance leader," the blonde lieutenant introduced. "I am Lieutenant Magda Caradine, and"

"And I," said a new voice, "am Lieutenant Tommy Aldicott."

Lex was startled to realize a third person had been in the room. *Distracted by the high-profile targets again.*

Lieutenant Aldicott rose unhurriedly from a chair by the wall and gave Lex a sketchy gesture somewhere between a wave and a salute.

"Don't call me Thomas," he said. "I won't answer."

He didn't reek with the Nagerling arrogance of the two on the dais, but his almost languid demeanor screamed titled gentry.

He was also at least a decade older than she or the two on the dais. There was a black oval beneath the unit designation on the sleeve of his duty jacket with a symbol she couldn't make out—probably the insignia of a previous posting, some old school warriors kept that tradition alive.

Lex pegged Aldicott as a youngest son of whom not much was expected. She wondered what he was supposed to learn on this milk run mission.

"If you'll take your seats," Britto said, rising. "We'll begin."

Lex and Aldicott both took chairs in the front row while Caradine, predictably, took one of the chairs on the dais. There was to be no mistaking the social order.

"In two weeks we will lift with the DropShip *Southport*, then transfer to the *Orville Wright*, for transport to Despair," a standard star chart of local space appeared on the main holo screen, then adjusted to a closer view of Ender's Cluster. "Despair is the only

inhabitable planet orbiting Ender's Seven. We will be providing security and protection for an expedition assessing the planet's resource value."

"Why does a survey team need 'Mech protection?" Aldicott asked.

Britto frowned at the interruption.

"You will be provided that information when it is necessary," he said sternly.

"Any idea when they might let you in on it?"

"The gravity on Despair is one point one six Terra standard," Britto ignored Aldicott, putting a training schedule on the screen. "We will begin daily weight and stamina training sessions immediately. All 'Mech exercises will be in weight suits."

Lex saw "immediately" meant in twenty minutes. In First Battalion's PT field. If she ran back to Third and get her workout clothes she would be late. If she did not, she'd have to either work out in her duty uniform or strip to her underclothes.

When resources are available, ask.

"I'll need PT gear for this morning," she said briskly, overcoming her nature.

"Of course," Caradine answered with a nod.

Lex wondered if that had been a test.

"What sort of 'Mech exercises?" Aldicott was asking.

"Blind navigation over varied terrain," Britto answered. "And axe work."

"Axe work?" Lex couldn't keep the surprise from her voice.

"Yes, Lieutenant," Britto sounded weary. "I pilot an *Axman*, Lieutenants Caradine and Aldicott pilot *Hatchetmen* . . ."

"Hers is a very nice *Five-S*," Aldicott put in. "XL engine, three pulse lasers, all the latest upgrades. Mine's a venerable *Three-F*; a simple workhorse that's been in the family for generations."

"...While you pilot a *Nightsky*," Britto went on as though Aldicott hadn't spoken. "The mission requires a lance of axe-equipped 'Mechs able to work in concert."

“Why?” Aldicott asked again.

Britto glared at the older lieutenant.

“It’s quite all right to say you don’t know, Willy,” Aldicott said, uncowed. “It just occurs to me that if Despair is a heavily forested world, they aren’t looking for protection as much as a team of tin woodsmen.”

“We will be fully briefed on mission parameters,” Britto obliquely confirmed Aldicott’s charge of ignorance, “When it is necessary.”

“Of course we will.”

[Excerpt: “Ask the Peter” advice column, InterStellar Male]

Dear Peter,

I’ve been hearing a lot about the performance enhancer Mind Mask. From what I hear it can turn anybody into a superman. I was wondering if anyone has done any tests on how this super drug enhances a guy’s performance in bed?

—Curious.

Dear Curious,

First of all, while Mind-MASC is supposed to heighten sensation for the user, all those stories of superhuman feats we hear usually involve someone getting seriously injured or killed. Don’t know about you, but that’s not something we look for in a love relationship.

Second, all the literature says one side effect of Mind-MASC is low blood pressure. Since a guy’s primary asset in this engagement is basically a spongy balloon held up by blood pressure, we gotta wonder if lowering the old bp is really such a good idea.

Bottom line: While a hit of Mind-MASC might boost your enjoyment a notch or two, not being able to perform—or worse, hurting your partner—would pretty much guarantee no second date.

The Peter says: Upside not worth the down. Give it a miss.

DropShip Orville Wright
Nadir Recharge Station
Enders Cluster
Federated Commonwealth
22 September 3057

Lex sat, lightly strapped to her stool, in the officer's mess of the *Union-class DropShip Orville Wright* ignoring the noteputer and bulb of cooling coffee clipped to the table before her.

The holoscreen on the bulkhead was repeating an image from the port quarter camera. The three-dimensional image seemed to hang between her and the wall and at the same time extend through it, directly into space itself.

Just to the right of center against the blackness there was a magnificent disk of stars, ranging in color from a muted red to a blue-white that seemed to pierce the eye even through the radiation filters. She knew the Cluster formed an oblate spheroid, slightly more dense toward spinward, but from this angle the nine stars seemed to form a rough ring.

This angle being from the nadir jump point of the tenth star of the Cluster. They would be jumping to their final destination, one of the stars near the center of the ring, as soon as the local pilot arrived via *DropShip* from the colony.

The tenth star was as far from the nearest of the others as the ring on the screen was broad, but upwards, toward galactic north. Its apparent separation from the Cluster was an illusion, however, and in a few dozen millennia its orbit would carry it through the center of the ring.

Technically, Terran surveyors had named this star Ender, while Ender's Cluster referred to the nine sister stars. But that fact was of use only in the most obscure trivia games. The star, the planet, the colony which came to be on the planet and the sister stars had all been called Ender's Cluster from the moment the first colonist arrived.

The Cluster was clearly visible from Florida, of course, a bright lozenge above the southern horizon in the fall. Lex had never seen it this close, however, and the effect was mesmerizing.

Apparently oblivious to the majesty, or perhaps jaded by years of space travel, Aldicott ignored the image on the holoscreen. He sat at the other side of the mess frowning at his own noteputer and nursing a bulb of fruity drink from his private stores. The scent that had wafted her way when he broke the seal had been suspiciously alcoholic.

Caradine propelled herself across the threshold and Lex straightened slightly, returning her attention to the noteputer. She thought the blonde woman may have nodded in her direction, but she didn't look up to verify. She had appreciated her all-business attitude during training, strict SOP in her *Hatchetman*, *everything* by the book. But she saw no reason to feign social equality off duty.

Caradine paused by Aldicott, snagging a stool with one foot as she read over his shoulder.

"That's a children's text," she accused.

"Middle school, thank you very much," Aldicott corrected blandly.

"You're supposed to be studying the navigational and survey texts."

"Which I understood not at all," Aldicott was unrepentant. "This I do. Did you know, for example that the nine stars of the Cluster proper are so close together they share Oort material? Or that four of them routinely exchange Edworth-Kuiper material?"

"Yes."

"But do you know what that means?" Aldicott held up the noteputer. "It's positively incestuous."

Caradine snorted and made her way to the coffee dispenser.

"Did you know all nine stars have planets—though they shouldn't—and there are fourteen stationary stable jump points within the cluster?" Aldicott went on, apparently not caring Caradine had moved away. "In addition to the ones for each system. Though a jump point three or four years from the nearest system could not be particularly useful.

"Solar wind research," Caradine said over her shoulder. "Deep space navigation experiments..."

"You know, they mentioned that."

Lex knew astronomers also posited several moving jump points as well. Areas of gravity cancellation that followed set patterns through space as the stars of the Cluster orbited each other. So far none had been where the math suggested they should be, but that didn't stop the scientific speculation.

Or the treasure hunters, Lex thought.

Fleets of derelict ships trapped in Sargasso sectors were one of the legends of the region. Not to mention ancient deep-space stations tethered to sunless jump points. Daring or desperate scavengers could always be found making dangerous forays into the fierce gravity currents of the Cluster in search of LosTech.

"The cluster is close enough to Ender to affect the tides," Aldicott read from his noteputer. "Local superstition holds they affect people as well, like astrology back on Terra."

"That was diet," said Lex; then kicked herself. She hadn't meant to get drawn into the conversation.

"Diet?" Aldicott asked. "What has that got to do with stars?"

The best way to get through the conversation, Lex decided, was to say everything she was going to say then withdraw. When in doubt, make a report.

"As a pre-industrial agrarian culture, the Babylonians had to rely entirely on seasonally available crops for nutrition," Lex explained. "Different foods available during different times of year affected the nutritional balance of pregnant women. These chemical variations affected their fetuses, influencing mental development and personality. When the Babylonian thinkers noticed a general correlation between people's behavior and their birthdates, they attributed the differences to the stars, something they could see. Understanding the role of nutrition didn't come until centuries later."

The two looked at her blankly.

"Improper interpretation of statistical data," Lex prompted. "It's a classic study."

"Buena is heavy on the book stuff," Aldicott commented after a moment.

"Useful for an ancient civilizations instructor," Caradine agreed.

The point, as her instructor at Buena had made quite clear, was the obvious answer wasn't always the right one, even if it seemed to fit the facts. Very important an officer understood that. But if her social betters didn't see it, Lex wasn't going to break it down for them.

Without a word, she picked up her noteputer and resumed reading.

Caradine propelled herself over to Lex's table and strapped herself to a stool diagonally across from her.

"What do you think about Despair?" she asked, apparently trying to draw Lex back into the conversation.

When in doubt...

"Despair is the fourth planet orbiting Cluster-seven, an F-type star at the spinward edge of the cluster," Lex reported. "It was cataloged as nonviable for colonization when the region was settled. There was no effort to explore until a privately funded mission, which was lost in 3020. The surface is eighty-five percent water, with two heavily volcanic polar continents which produce enough methane to render the atmosphere toxic. The one equatorial continent is about six million square kilometers and supports a highly developed ecosystem. Dominant life form is roughly analogous to proto-birds, which are present in sizes and varieties similar to Terran dinosaurs."

"That's it!" exclaimed Aldicott. "This entire venture has been concocted by the Solaris VII Gaming Commission. 'Mechs fighting dinosaurs! We could retire on the endorsements."

"Tom," warned Caradine. Then to Lex: "I wasn't asking for a report, Alexandra. I wanted to know your opinion."

First name. Okay. That happened sometimes.

Never when Britto was around, then it was all stiff formality. Britto carried his class-conscious arrogance to the nth degree. If Lex hadn't recognized his elitist—and probably racist—attitude for what it was, she might have thought the disdain he heaped on her was personal.

Aldicott addressed everyone by their first name, but he was a different flavor toff. He ignored rank and title as only old money that doesn't give a damn could, speaking to chamberlains and chamber maids with the same casual informality.

The few occasions over the last few weeks when Caradine used her first name had been deliberate. To some they might have looked like friendly overtures, but Lex recognized the efforts of an aristocrat to demonstrate she could be good with the servants. She'd had the wit not to return the familiarity.

But she also knew to give an honest opinion when it was asked.

"There is nothing in what we've been told to justify a lance of 'Mechs being dispatched to support the planetary evaluation mission," she said. "Therefore, we are not being told everything."

"That's pretty much a given," Caradine agreed. "I can't imagine why there'd be an evaluation team on a methane planet anyway."

"Mineral resources would be my first thought with a volcanic planet," Lex said, trying not to sound as though she were spelling out the obvious. "But Despair is very light in metals. Rare earths, perhaps. Of course, with its evolved ecology, pharmaceuticals are always a possibility. And there are certain to be ornamental woods or other exotics for the luxury trade."

"I hadn't thought of commercial applications," Caradine said.

Of course not, Lex thought, but said: "Potential commercial applications are what drives most scientific inquiry."

"Point taken."

"But wouldn't they stink?" Aldicott asked, looking up from his noteputer. "The ornamental lumber or whatever. After all, methane. When we pass gas, that's the gas we pass. Can't imagine anyone spending a lot of money on fart-scented paneling, no matter how lovely it looked."

"Tommy, you have a talent for getting right to the core of every issue," Caradine observed dryly.

"'Tis a gift," Aldicott conceded complacently.

Lex smiled despite herself. And made a mental note to never play poker with anyone who underplayed the buffoon so artfully.

"Say, if we breathe in oxygen and fart methane," Aldicott went on, following his own thought. "When those beasties breathe in methane, they must fart..."

"Some compound of oxygen?" Lex said.

"Don't encourage him," Caradine said.

"No, no, this is useful information," Aldicott insisted. "If you're ever outside the dome and your environmental suit fails, you can stay alive by sticking your head up a dinosaur's ass."

"Tom!"

"No, he's right," Lex said. Deliberately not thinking through the action she raised her noteputer. "The emergency equipment list includes a step ladder."

Caradine laughed aloud at the expression on Aldicott's face.

Recovering, the older lieutenant inclined his head toward Lex, acknowledging her hit.

"Hate to spoil the mood," Britto said coming through the open hatch.

"What is it?" Caradine asked, instantly all attentive business.

Britto seemed to ignore the question. He grabbed the edge of the table near Aldicott and hung for a moment, staring at the holoscreen on the wall.

Lex felt her own adrenaline surge as she took in the sheen to his pale skin and the almost feverish light in his eyes. Even Aldicott came to alert, his eyes snapping to sharp focus on their lance leader.

"I was just on the bridge." Britto nodded toward the wall screen. "Brace yourselves."

As if on cue, the holoimage of the stars was replaced with that of Captain O'Rourke on the bridge.

"All hands," he said without preamble. "We have just received word relayed to us by DropShip from the HPG facility on Ender's Cluster ..."

O'Rourke paused, his face drawn, and seemed to refer to some notes or a screen beyond the camera's view.

"On September sixteenth, Free Worlds League Captain-General Thomas Marik presented evidence that his son Joshua Marik died while in the care of Prince Victor Stiener-Davion." The captain paused again and gathered himself visibly. "The Captain-General further stated that Prince Victor replaced Joshua with a double; a

puppet through which he could seize control of the Free Worlds League."

"We're at war with the Free Worlds?" Caradine's voice was hushed.

"Shut up," said Britto flatly.

"Upon being convinced by the evidence of Prince Victor's actions, on Friday, eighteen September, 3057, Princess Katherine Steiner-Davion seceded the Lyran ... Alliance," he stumbled slightly over the unfamiliar title, "From the Federated Commonwealth. She has declared all Lyran nationals and armed forces neutral in any conflict between the Free Worlds League and those worlds still under Prince Victor's control."

Captain O'Rourke stopped reading and looked directly into the video camera.

"By unanimous action, the Lyran Estates General have declared Katherine Steiner-Davion Archon of the Lyran Alliance."