

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter Six

Play Toy's Play Toy of the Week: Miss Audrey Albright

Height: 167 cm

Mass: 49.5 kg

Hair: Blonde

Eyes: Violet

Measurements: 96-65-94

Latest accomplishment: Made the "hyperjump club."

Turn ons: Renee Raven poetry, Brick Barenson holovids, someone special at the beach when both moons are full, fast motorcycles, hang gliding naked.

Turn offs: liberal politics, guys in pleat-front shorts, losers who have to do Mind-MASC to try something exciting.

Goals: "I will use my title as Play Toy of the Week to help end the suffering of exploited and endangered animals and to ensure the rights of..."

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

"The Lyrans Alliance is about to take its place in history," Britto said. His voice was pitched to stay at their table, but Lex suspected his body language transmitted his anger to the entire commissary. "And we are stuck on this stinking world herding dinosaurs."

"You should try the lasagna, Ali," Aldicott said to Lex. "It's truly extraordinary."

"I don't eat meat and dairy together," she answered, then indicated the eggs and potato hash on her plate. "Besides, by my clock, this is breakfast."

This was one of the few times since their arrival on Despair that the entire lance was together. With the perimeter sensor array operational, Britto had divided the lance into rotating twelve-hour watches, staggered so there was always at least two MechWarriors on duty at all times.

The perimeter detectors meant those on duty did not have to spend their entire watch in their 'Mechs. And, with no tonner activity in the last six hours, Britto and Aldicott had come in, giving them a rare opportunity to have a meal as a group. Though not the same meal. Lex was eating breakfast prior to going on duty, Britto dinner at the end of his shift, and Aldicott lunch in the middle of his. Caradine should have been asleep, this being the middle of her downtime, but she had joined them for a midnight snack.

"Don't eat—? Oh, food allergies. Nasty things." Aldicott took a sip of coffee. "A cabernet would be better, I think, or a pinot noir in a pinch. Kenny Alden, back at Coventry, was allergic to wheat glutes. Might sound easy enough to avoid bread and pasta, but those glutes are used in just about everything. Thickener or binder or some such. We were on sophomore maneuvers when an MRE put poor Kenny in the MASH truck for the duration."

Aldicott paused with a forkfull of lasagna half way to his mouth, seeming to just notice Britto glaring at him.

"I'm sorry, Willie," he said, not quite managing to sound sincere. "You were saying something about your place in history?"

If Britto noticed the pronoun or the tone he gave no sign. He glanced around the room as though expecting eavesdroppers.

The commissary itself was an airy, high-ceilinged room, twenty meters on a side and brightly lit with ersatz daylight. Most of the facility was like that. The dust-filled atmosphere of Despair wrapped the planet like a blindfold, blotting out the stars at night and glowing with a uniform silver grey by day. The psychologists had insisted every possible area of the habitat be flooded with cheery brightness to offset the mood numbing dreariness that had given Despair its name.

"Prince Victor tried to seize control of the Free Worlds League and lost us a half dozen worlds instead," Britto said. "It's going to be up to the Lyran Alliance to keep the war contained. Maybe even bring Victor to justice."

"Victor to justice?" Caradine blurted. Then she glanced around the commissary and lowered her voice. "What are you talking about?"

"His concealing Joshua Marik's death and putting an agent in his stead is a crime against the Free Worlds League," Lex answered the obvious before remembering her policy of silence. "But we didn't lose worlds so much as the Archon let the League have back worlds that were truly theirs."

"I meant for his heavy-handed tactics starting an unnecessary war," Britto said. "But, of course, you would come to the defense of the League."

"Oh, for God's sake, Willie, it's her friggin' *name*."

Lex was surprised. Aldicott seemed genuinely angry.

"Atreus, whether you say *-oos* like our lieutenant here or *-us* like nine tenths of the galaxy, is a damn common Greek name," he gestured toward Lex with his fork. "Or do you suspect the League's SAFE spy masters cleverly named an agent after their capital planet before sending her to infiltrate the Florida PMM?"

"Lieutenant Atreus is at the Florida because she was sixty-fourth in her class," Britto said coldly. "She had no choice in her placement."

"Whereas you bought your way in."

Britto glared at Aldicott for a frozen second, then snatched his napkin from his lap and flung it in his plate. Without a glance at the others, he rose and stalked from the commissary.

Caradine was on her feet before he reached the door, her tray in hand. For an instant she hesitated, considering Britto's tray on the table, then left it. Dumping hers in the disposer by the door, she followed Britto from the room.

"He's too easy," Aldicott observed conversationally, bringing Lex's eyes back to the table. "He'll never make it."

"What?"

"By this time next year he plans on being with the Eleventh Arcturan. It is his intent to be a Guard company commander within the decade," Aldicott shook his head. "But with that hair-trigger temper and fragile ego, he won't survive a day away from daddy's care."

"Daddy's care?"

"Britto," Aldicott said, then realized she didn't understand. "As in Viscount Britto, first secretary to the Marquis of Florida and owner of half the planet."

"Oh."

"You never made the connection?"

"Never thought about it."

"That I believe."

Setting his coffee mug on the edge of the table, Aldicott piled his tray on top of Britto's and shoved the two as far from them as the table allowed.

"In my game you always have to be aware of who is related to whom and who has power over what. Forget that at the wrong time and you might find yourself..." He let his voice trail off.

"Stuck in the Florida for life?"

"Indeed," Aldicott said, heaving a tragicomic sigh.

Lex glanced at the insignia on the sleeve of the jacket Aldicott had thrown on over his cooling vest. With the formation of the Lyran Alliance she bet there would be a change in the gauntlet-and-sun; they were probably all out of uniform.

What caught her eye though was the black oval. She'd long ago discovered the symbol in the center was the stylized outline of a Zeus standing knee deep in what appeared to be a burning lake. Its arms were spread wide, as though targeting enemies in two directions. She didn't recognize the unit. No one commented on it, but she couldn't help wondering what Aldicott had done with them to earn exile to the Florida.

He caught the eye of a steward and raised his empty mug, pointing at Lex's as well.

Lex hurriedly gulped the last of her coffee.

"I'm surprised Lieutenant Britto made the effort to research my record," Lex commented when the server had left.

"He was looking for a reason to cut you from the mission," Aldicott said.

"Because I'm not the right sort."

"Essentially." Aldicott sipped his hot coffee carefully.

"For what it's worth," he added, "My career at Coventry wasn't exactly stellar."

Lex nodded sympathetically, her mouth full of the last of her eggs. These were real. Some enterprising quartermaster had brought live chickens to Despair.

Across the commissary she saw one of the local engineers, shoulder high to the others in the serving line. She couldn't remember his name, but he'd spent their first few encounters making passes. She'd finally made it clear he was unwelcome and he'd contented himself with longing looks from a distance ever since. Something about being nearly two meters tall seemed to attract men under one point five.

And something about being working class tended to attract the nobility.

Lex reined in. She'd been beginning to feel too comfortable with Aldicott.

"What is Lieutenant Caradine's story?" she asked, directing the conversation away from themselves.

"Maggie?" Aldicott shrugged. "Not being—nor wanting to become—a LeSat or a Hasseldorf, there wasn't much future for her

on Kaumberg. She got accepted at the Nagerling and took her inheritance in the form of a 'Mech.

"She attached herself to Britto their senior year and will no doubt have little difficulty following him to the Eleventh," he smiled thinly. "Once among the Guard she may reassess her options."

Lex shook her head. The nobility were given everything they'd ever need at birth then spent the rest of their lives playing chess games to get more. No wonder they never seemed quite real.

"I need to prep," she said, stacking her dishes and reaching for the other dirty trays. "My watch starts in twenty minutes."

"You go ahead, I'll get these," Aldicott said. "Gives me an excuse to malingering over coffee."

Lex would have ignored the comment, but he placed a protective arm between her and the trays. Gathering her own debris, she left Aldicott sipping his coffee.

[Excerpt: *"Illegal Drugs and Your Young Teen; A Parents' Handbook"* distributed by Lyran Alliance Ministry of Education; October, 3057]

Mind-MASC has many superficial similarities to QuickStim or phencyclidine (see "PCP") in that it causes hallucinations and periods of apparent "superhuman" strength. However, chemically the drugs have nothing in common and their long-term effects are quite different.

Very little is known about Mind-MASC. It is believed to be a natural substance of unknown origin and is apparently available only in solid form.

A single "hit"—one milligram, usually compounded with 100 milligrams of inert material in a capsule—causes a state of euphoria that has been described as "hyper-clarity." One user described being "on a first name basis with every atom of the universe and they were all happy to see me."

Users also experience a heightened sensitivity to sound and light. A small percentage also report other senses being more sensitive as well. The "peak" effect usually begins an hour or so after Mind-MASC is ingested and lasts from fifteen to twenty-five minutes. However, the general sense of relaxation and well-being can linger for up to eight hours.

What makes Mind-MASC particularly dangerous is that it is highly addictive and its after-effects decrease as the user becomes more accustomed. While an occasional user may feel one "hit" a day is sufficient, they soon need double or even triple that amount to recapture the euphoric state.

At higher doses the sense of euphoria increases (unlike PHP, which induces paranoia) as does apparent physical ability.

It is at this level—three to seven milligrams in a twelve hour period—that the "super human" feats associated with Mind-MASC appear. However, because blood is not circulating properly (see below) the user is in an anaerobic state. This is like a runner who completes the hundred meter dash on a single breath. The brief period of strength is followed by up to several hours of lethargy as the body recovers.

Injuries sustained during the "super human" state are usually not apparent until the drug has left the system, four to eight hours later.

Mind-MASC dilates small blood vessels, which means in pale-complected users a faint but distinct flushing is apparent. This dilation reduces blood pressure slightly, triggering a more rapid pulse as the heart tries to restore normal pressure. However, for reasons not understood, the rapid pulse rate continues after proper pressure is reestablished. An overdose can induce life-threatening tachycardia.

More importantly, long-term use, even at the one to two milligram a day level, causes neural tissue to swell in a condition similar to spinal meningitis. This swelling can lead to permanent damage to the nervous system and even death.

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Heavy metal.

Lex reread the screen twice—generic BattleMech icon, too distant for solid identification, no transponder friend/foe signal. She ran a quick systems check on her sensor array, ruling out a malfunction. Shadows or sensor ghosts were possible in Despair's ion-charged air, but the filter parameters on her TharHes Aries-series targeting computer were set to screen those out—at least she thought they were. This volcanic atmosphere could be capable of tricks she didn't know.

Twelve seconds after the first blip, Lex was forced to conclude there was a strange BattleMech at extreme range. She checked her chronometer. Magda Caradine should be on, Aldicott's shift having just ended.

"Atreus to Caradine," she said over the lance channel. "I'm reading heavy metal, no TFF. Off the patrol grid, bearing north-northeast from checkpoint three-niner at max range. I'm moving to investigate."

A sharp double-click told her Caradine had heard and understood. Whether that meant the *Hatchetman* pilot was going to converge or wait to hear what Lex found wasn't clear. Lex considered asking, but left it alone. A competent MechWarrior didn't ask for reassurance she wasn't alone in the dark.

The forest floor was folded, rounded ridges separating hollows that sometimes descended into bogs. The forest itself was not constant; some areas were nearly free of undergrowth, while others were thick with vines and shrubs. Occasionally the trees gave way altogether to glens of high grass or twisting mats of creepers. None of these was a real obstacle for a BattleMech, but Lex probed constantly with her sensors as she marched steadily toward the mystery 'Mech. The targeting array was not the best for parsing organics, but it was more than able to probe for hidden pitfalls beneath the ground cover.

For its part, the other 'Mech held its position, either unaware of her approach or waiting for her, Lex could not be sure. Nor could she be sure of exactly what 'Mech she faced. This was the sort of information her targeting system was designed to discover, yet all

it could reliably report was the stranger massed fifty-five to sixty-five tons. The bogie had to be equipped with either stealth armor or an ECM suite—neither of which could be working very well if she'd spotted it at range.

She radioed all of this information back to Caradine—mindful of Showalter's orders that she not handle every situation like she was alone. Caradine responded to each update with the standard double-clicks of acknowledgement. One of the few times Lex would have appreciated advice and the lieutenant was going with straight SOP.

As she approached weapons range, Lex slowed her pace. Not stopping, but giving Caradine an opportunity to catch up. Or at least get close enough to show on her scanners. On the heels of that thought came the realization she'd been thinking in terms of *her* weapons range. If the bogie had extended range weapons, she'd been under its guns for several minutes.

"No doubt about it," she said under her breath, "Better go with my looks because brains aren't my long suit."

Lex double-checked to be sure she'd at least remembered to bring her weapons on-line. She dialed the large pulse laser up to the main trigger, then bent the right elbow actuator. Her large laser wasn't exactly aimed at the bogie, but it was now angled forward—ready to fire from the hip if a snap shot was—

Weapons lock alarm. The bogie lit up hot as her computer confirmed its fusion generator had just quadrupled its output.

Lex didn't wait to see what sort of weapon needed that much power. From the hip it was a nine degree correction to lock. Her finger tripped the trigger before her brain fully registered the good tone. The pulse laser's deadly double tap of furious energy flash burned its way through the vegetation, carving a meter-wide tunnel that connected her with—

EM burst.

Radio squeal drove double ice picks into her brain. Lex shouted her pain and jammed her hands into her neurohelmet, trying to get her fingertips between the headphones and her tortured ears. She could see her sensor displays flare white with overload, then go dark as safety cut-offs shut the systems down—trying to save them from permanent damage.

The squeal ended. Her wounded ears reported the reassuring beeps of the *Nightsky's* sensors rebooting to clear the burst

damage. They'd be online in seconds, but Lex didn't have those seconds to spare.

At last reading she was at extreme range for her large gun. If she was going to defend herself, she had to get closer. Without trying to aim, she fired her medium pulse lasers toward the bogie's last known position, hoping their energy would fog its sensor readings long enough to cover her initial move. Vectoring slightly left, keeping her main weapon toward the enemy, she rushed forward. The softwoods and shrubs bent beneath the force of her charging BattleMech; the vines clung for a moment before snapping. It would have been faster to jump, but that would have made her a clear target hanging in the sky above an enemy under cover.

Her sensors came up, booting sequentially. Radar first, then magnetic anomaly imaging—both reporting a metal target twenty degrees right and in range of her mediums. She altered course to run at it dead on. A straight attack made her an easier target but simplified her firing solution.

If she got the shot off first.

No weapons lock alarm as she dialed the large and both medium pulse lasers under her main trigger. Perhaps the bogie was as blind as she.

Good tone and she fired.

Vines and foliage charred to ash as the converging beams bore through them toward their target.

The full sensor suite came on line as the beams faded, confirming the metal read out.

But no heavy metal. No armor.

Lex slowed, bringing her *Nightsky* down to a walk.

And, except for the thermal residue of the laser hits, no energy.

"—oos!" Britto's voice shouted in her headset. "Dammit, respond! Atreus! What the hell are you doing?"

Lex didn't answer.

Stepping through the last fringe of forest into the clearing, she stopped, surveying the wreckage. Her instruments confirmed what her eyes told her. The outpost's perimeter sensor array was a complete ruin.