

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter Seven

MindMASC AND NEUROHELMETS DON'T MIX!

Following reports of fatal and near-fatal accidents involving MechWarriors who may have been using the performance enhancer MindMASC, the Ministry of Health has conducted extensive tests on the drug's effects regarding BattleMech operation.

The tests demonstrated that in forty-two percent of the cases MechWarriors UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF MindMASC EXPERIENCED PANIC ATTACKS, SCHIZOPHRENIC EPISODES, HALLUCINATIONS, or CATATONIC FUGUES.

Though the exact mechanism is not understood, evidence indicates the chemical changes to the pilot's neurosystem that heighten perceptions trigger a sensory feedback loop when the neurohelmet is engaged.

Therefore, by order of the Archon:

- Use of MindMASC as a performance enhancer is forbidden.
- No MechWarrior may operate a BattleMech within seventy-two hours of ingesting MindMASC.
- MechWarriors reporting for duty will be randomly tested for MindMASC.
- Any MechWarrior reporting for duty who tests positive for MindMASC will face thirty days' detention and forfeiture of pay.

(Post in all common areas.)

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

"She's not responding," Caradine's voice said from the speaker.

"I can hear that," Britto's recorded voice answered. "When did she go off?"

"Ten minutes ago. She just went dark and headed out of the patrol area."

"I knew something like this—Damn! What is she shooting at?"

"I've got nothing. Only thing out there is her and the sensor array."

"Damn it!" Britto shouted, overloading his cockpit mic. "The crazy bitch is shooting the array! Atreus, cease fire. Atreus! Damn it, respond! What the hell are you doing?"

Her eyes focused on the wall above his head, Lex tracked Britto with her peripheral vision as he reached forward and pressed the stop button on top of the crystal reader, ending the radio log playback. The light atop the second machine continued to blink, signaling everything the four MechWarriors said and did was being recorded.

Only the four Florida MechWarriors were present for what Britto had called a preliminary hearing; a hearing that would have been a court-martial if he'd had the authority. They wore full dress blues and reds for the occasion; academy rags in place, all ribbons present and correct.

Lex was very aware hers was the only tunic completely devoid of combat ribbons. She'd been surprised to note Aldicott was veteran of nearly a dozen major battles, though she did not break attention to read which ones. Britto and Caradine both carried two. Probably earned on their tour with the Nagelring training battalion and probably earned together.

Her own tour with the Buena battalion had been completely uneventful. She had stood garrison watch faithfully. Those three months of inactivity had taught her patience, convinced her she would never master the harmonica and enabled her to become

adept at cataloging minutia. She had never once brought her weapons on line, much less fired them at an enemy.

Nor had she ever imagined standing here with her eyes fixed on the wall above her accuser's head.

Britto was seated behind a table in what may have once been an employee lounge, but was now the hearing room for the review of Lex's actions. He was flanked at the table by Caradine, looking uncomfortable, and Aldicott, whose face was schooled in the sleepy mask Lex suspected he used to hide his thoughts.

There was no precedent for a hearing at the lance level: Lex felt vaguely as though they were all playing dress-up. But Britto's recording of the proceedings would be bundled with the communications log they'd just heard, along with all relevant sensor recordings, and sent to Florida Command for review and determination.

The silence stretched.

"My own radio log—"

"With only your own voice despite heavy radio traffic at the time," Britto cut her off, "was clearly fabricated while you waited for us to arrive. If you'd had the tech skills, you no doubt would have come up with something better than an 'energy spike' that wiped your sensor logs."

"Willie—"

Britto rounded on Aldicott, his glare stopping the older lieutenant mid-word.

"At least pretend to have some respect for your uniform while being recorded, Lieutenant Aldicott."

If anything, Aldicott seemed to become more sleepy.

"I proved my respect for my uniform *and* for my nation," he said languidly, "back when you thought all you did was pee with it."

Lex blinked.

Whatever Aldicott had done to screw up his career to the point that he was in the Florida taking orders from someone two years out of the Nagelring, there was no arguing with the combat ribbons on his chest. Britto wisely decided not to contest the point.

"And before you make charges about her recordings, send them along with yours and let the tech experts see if those time stamps are phony," Aldicott went on. "If there's a chance she was inside some sort of ECM blanket, we need to know about it."

"And there is at least one unknown BattleMech on Despair, sir," Lex interjected. "That poses a potential danger that should at least be investigated."

She felt Britto's eyes on her, but stayed at full attention; eyes on the wall.

"We have only your vague assertions about half remembered, unclear readings," Britto said. "Readings which prompted you to destroy a clearly marked sensor array and create a substantial hole in this research colony's ability to protect itself against the very real threat of local dinosaurs."

"The purpose of this hearing is to investigate the only real danger to this mission's success," he leaned forward. "You."

"Sir—"

"Your first—your only—time in combat," Britto cut her off, "you panicked."

Lex felt her jaw unhinge and clenched it tight.

"Willie," Aldicott said, a warning in his voice.

"*Leftenant* Atreus lost control of an IndustrialMech while running away from the enemy," Britto's vitriolic tone pulled Lex's eyes from the wall. The lieutenant was regarding her with cold disdain. "In her panic, she collided with him. She managed to pass the sorry incident off as a victory only because she cracked his canopy while flailing about in blind terror."

Lex felt a cold knot twist her gut even as hot blood rushed to her face. She unclenched her fists.

"That is a lie," she said, proud she didn't scream the words.

She was aware of Caradine to his left, still silent but now positioned to intervene if the confrontation turned violent. She thought Aldicott might have been smiling, but she didn't look to verify.

For his part, Britto took careful note of her stance and her expression. Then, with a great show of unconcern, he leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs out under the table.

"Leftenant, the only lie was the cock and bull story you sold those ignorant miners," he said conversationally. "The fact that a career diplomat who'd never worn a uniform and a broken down infantry hauptmann who'd been lured out of position by a local...*woman*...working for the pirates believed it doesn't make it any less ludicrous."

Lex had the wild thought he'd rehearsed this speech.

"Sir—"

"Leftenant, the only reason you're still wearing a uniform is pirates don't make gun cam recordings of their raids," Britto's backhand wave was dismissive. "At Viborg, you were a pathetic screw-up who got lucky."

Shedding some of the pretense of ease, he leaned forward again, drawing his feet under his chair. Lex expected him to rise, but instead he rested his arms on the table, interlacing his fingers.

"Now, here, you are a pathetic screw-up who is not so lucky," he said. "We have complete recordings of you abandoning your post—running away and firing your weapons in another fit of blind panic."

"Be sure the complete record of this hearing goes out with the 'Mech logs, Willie," Aldicott said. "That last bit is sure to become a textbook example of presiding officer impartiality."

"This isn't a formal hearing," Britto snapped, evidently forgetting that was precisely what he'd called it at the beginning of the recording. "I'm speaking as lance leader evaluating an officer under my command."

"The Nagelring trained you to include histrionics and unfounded accusations when presenting performance reviews?" Aldicott asked in mild amazement. "A subtlety of command to which we stolid Coventry graduates can only hope to aspire."

Britto opened his mouth, then shut it again, regarding the blinking light of the recorder on the table in front of him.

"My distrust in the veracity of her previous record is based on my personal observations of Leftenant Atreus both in training and in the field," he stated formally; for the record. "Observations wholly supported by her unprofessional and dangerous dereliction of duty this morning. It is my strong recommendation that she be reassigned to a non-combat position before her cowardice

costs valuable lives. I would further recommend she be disposed and the *Nightsky* erroneously placed in her possession be assigned to someone worthy of a BattleMech."

Britto reached forward then paused, his finger over the recorder's shut off button. He looked up at Lex with an expression of mild inquiry.

"Any final pleas?"

Lex held his gaze and forced her anger down, washing any sign of her rage out of her features, her body language. There was no winning this fight, either in this room or in any court of Britto's peers. Her only hope lay in the forensic techs confirming her recording was authentic.

And, maybe, finding more evidence of the mystery 'Mech here on Despair.

If there really was a 'Mech, part of her mind whispered.

For his part, the lance leader seemed to mistake her self-control for defeat. He shut the recorder down with a crisp tap and leaned back in his chair with a more genuine air of relaxation. His smug, self-righteous smile made it clear he believed her inability to rebut the charges proved his point.

Lex redoubled her effort to keep her face devoid of expression.

"Justice would require you be confined until your court-martial," Britto said. "But your little panic attack has made our mission here more difficult. There is now a hole in the automated detection perimeter; even with the remaining sensors repositioned, there's a twenty-four degree arc to the northeast that can't be covered.

"That is your patrol area for the duration: as far out as communication allows. Count trees, play tag with dragons, I don't care. Just don't go near anything remotely valuable."

Britto smiled slightly at his own wit. Then his face grew cold.

"And for God's sake stay out of the way of anyone who has the right to be here."

Dear Loyal *Georgie Has the Answers* Viewer:

Thank you for your kind letter about episode 348 entitled The Big Race.

In this episode Georgie convinces Hilary that licorice jellybeans are really MindMASC, and will enable her to win the charity marathon. Feeling guilty about her win, Hilary reports herself to the authorities. Much merriment ensues as Georgie tries first to evade the law then to talk his way out of trouble. In the end, Hilary learns that all anyone needs to be a real winner is to believe in themselves.

We understand your concern about the issue of use of MindMASC raised on the show.

We want you to know we have taken your insights to heart. In response to your letter we have increased the number of anti-drug public service announcements during our broadcasts by five percent.

We hope this sets your mind at ease and that you and your children will continue to be loyal viewers of *Georgie Has the Answers*.

Sincerely,

Rhonda Lisa Grits
Loyal Viewer Relations,
Commonwealth Children's Broadcasting,
Proud Home of *Georgie Has the Answers*

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

A thermal flare and heavy metal jumped to treetop height.

Not again.

Lex fought down a spike of fear and brought her weapons on line, tracking the ascent with her large pulse laser. A glance at her Guardian ECM confirmed all green. No jamming signal.

"Atreus to Aldicott—"

"Don't shoot. It's me," Aldicott answered. The flare faded as his 'Mech descended toward its launch point. "Damn interference. If I'd known you were that close I'd have given you heads up."

"What are you doing?" Lex made no effort to mask her annoyance as she powered down her laser.

"Conducting experiments," Aldicott said blandly. "This seems to be the place for it."

Lex tried to not read too much into his tone as she powered down her lasers. She suspected asking for details would result in equally bland non-answers. With a sigh, she altered course to go see what he was up to for herself.

Britto's order that Lex stay away from the base had been spurious, of course. The entire lance was needed for at least two 'Mechs to be on twenty-four hour patrol. He had made no adjustment in the duty roster and she had tacitly kept to her slot in the rotation.

She spent almost all of each watch in her *Nightsky*, and made every effort to avoid Britto when she wasn't. Fortunately their watch duties did not overlap.

Aldicott seemed less likely to indulge his skewed humor than before, though that may have been Lex's imagination. On the whole he seemed no different either on duty or off.

To a lesser extent, the same could be said of Caradine. In the field she continued her adherence to strict protocols and off duty the women seldom crossed paths—not difficult as Lex had been spending as little time as possible in the residence dome the lance shared.

Nick's quarters were on the far side of Chevalier Base.

Aldicott's *Hatchetman* stood at one side of a small clearing, evidently surveying the ground, its head tilted to one side. Lex knew the modified silvery sphere extending from the side of its crested head housed the same Artemis sensor suite that was mounted above and behind her own cockpit. She doubted aiming it toward the ground increased its efficiency significantly.

Examining the area herself, she saw a charred circle about ten meters across to one side of the clearing. Looked like SOP for killing a scavenger, then burning its remains to ash. In the center of the clearing was the double crater of the *Hatchetman*'s twin jump jets surrounded by radiating bands of charred vegetation. The jets had burned meter-deep holes in the loam and peat.

"You've got a large laser," Aldicott said. "Would you do me a favor and shoot into the ground? As near those jump marks as possible."

Without a word Lex brought her weapons back on line. Dialing the large pulse laser under her main trigger, she fired at an untouched patch of earth. The double-tap of coherent light flash burned the ground cover to fine ash. Seconds later the steam and dust of vaporized soil dissipated to reveal a cylindrical hole—perhaps half a meter wide and too deep for light to reach its bottom.

Aldicott grunted.

"What?" Lex asked, cursing the defensive note she heard in her own voice.

"I played tag for a while with one of the picket arrays," he answered. "It threw back my targeting sensor, but it really wasn't all that confusing. Of course, I knew what it was going in."

He paused, but Lex remained silent.

"So I looked over the north-northeast array site," Aldicott said. "The jungle vines had pretty well covered everything, and these little fern things were already nearly a meter high. Apparently charred earth is just as good for them as any. Makes sense on a volcanic world, I suppose. I made recordings."

The *Hatchetman* straightened from its examination of the ground.

"Which I just did here as well," Aldicott said briskly. "Now all we have to do is come back in three days and record again and see

what there is to see. We should just have time before the supply ship lifts."

"You're saying you think someone may have jumped out of the way during the sensor white out?" Lex asked.

"I'm saying I don't know," Aldicott answered. "I just think it's a bet Willie is overlooking."

Lex opened her mouth, then shut it again.

Aldicott's studied blandness made it too easy to read layers of meaning into everything he said. Lex steeled herself and risked taking them at face value.

"I've been ranging a bit farther north northeast than standard patrol," she volunteered.

"As have we all," Aldicott answered. "I just wish we'd thought to scan the ground when we found you instead of gaping at the melted sensor array like freshmen at a peep show."

The most experienced MechWarrior on Despair was taking the possibility of her mystery 'Mech seriously; even when she was having her own doubts. She refrained from reading too much into that.

"I'm off." Aldicott's voice broke in on her thoughts.

Lex realized she'd been standing immobile for uncounted seconds.

When not running through the woods firing blindly, Lieutenant Atreus has been known to stand staring blankly into space for protracted periods.

"Right," she said, striving for a note of brisk efficiency. "Tell Caradine I'll be deep on the east side checking those motion readings."

"Happy hunting," Aldicott signed off.

Lex decided to eschew her usual habit of forging a new path on each circuit. Following the trail the patrolling 'Mechs had worn through the jungle would get her to the northeast sensor array with less thought and effort.

The station immediately to the east of the one she'd slagged last week had been reporting ghostly movements for the last several

hours. Either several large tonners moving past at extreme range or one grazing back and forth at the edge of detection. Or some combination of those two possibilities.

While she could simply wait for whatever was out there to move toward the Base before taking action, moving out to investigate made more sense. The farther from the perimeter, the smaller the needed course change. Plus, if it was one of the rare herds—more than a single 'Mech could handle—the sooner she called for back-up the better.

Tapping into the sensor array's broadcast, she took a bearing on the suspicious readings. They covered a narrow arc about three clicks past the rated range of the sensors. Not too unusual, given the vagaries of Despair's chemical soup atmosphere.

Setting course for the center of the arc, Lex stepped alone into the jungle.