

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter Four

[Transcript: "Sidney Callen's Sports Talk," episode 698, recorded 08 September 3057. Syndicated and distributed by Sera Video Entertainment Sports Productions. Used with permission.]

Welcome back, sports fans.

We turn now to the issue of drug use by athletes. Not a popular topic, not one we fans like to think about, but one that may be growing in importance. There are disturbing reports that the use of performance enhancing drugs is on the rise.

This is footage of the second quarter action in the first of three tournament matches between the Hilton Hammerheads and the Piedmont Pounders for the all-Alarion Rugby Cup.

Here you see Tanner and Addison of the Hammerheads tackle Pounder Billy Peters. Slowing the replay you can clearly see Peters backhand Tanner across the face. That blow shattered Tanner's nose, driving bone fragments into his brain. That fall's the last one the three-time tournament MVP is ever going to make.

Addison was fortunate in coming up on Peters' ball arm. This elbow, and it's a little hard to see because Addison's body is blocking the camera angle, but this elbow Peters throws breaks Addison's sternum and drives two ribs into his lungs. Addison, we are told, is recovering nicely, but his rugby days are over.

Amazingly, Peters—as you can see from his jaunty prance across the

last few meters—seems completely unaware of the tackle, much less the force with which he rebuffed his attackers. He later testified that it was not until after he completed the goal that he noticed the commotion on the field.

With one player dead and another out of the game for life, Hilton Hammerheads coach John Varnas demanded Peters be tested for drugs. Initial tests for stimulants and steroids came back negative and for a time it seemed Peters' deadly feat of superhuman strength had been the result of excess adrenaline in the heat of competition.

However, Hilton owners financed a more comprehensive test of Peters' blood and urine. Samples which Peters has stated he did not voluntarily provide. These tests revealed the presence of trace amounts of a drug with the street name "Mind MASC."

Peters admitted to trying a small amount of the drug before the game. He said he had been feeling under the weather, particularly after his knee injury in the game against Charlotte, and hoped it might give him an edge.

What it's given him is a chance to play defense against charges of murder in a court of law.

Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyrans Alliance
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The creature's head appeared out of the mist, floating atop a sinuous neck, its iridescent eyes level with Lex in the cockpit of her *Nightsky*. The rest of its form was lost in the fog.

Or what passed for fog on Despair. Lex couldn't recall if the haze was acid or alkali but knew from the safety trivid it would blister her mucus membranes.

The beast's head, projecting above the ground-hugging vapors, looked too large for the neck. The twin cheek plates, extending from below the eyes to a fleshy spike that thrust past the upper lip beside the lower pair of nostrils, made it nearly as broad as it was long.

Lex found it hard to believe these animals only massed a few dozen tons more than her 'Mech. But, of course, living tissue wasn't as dense as metal. This particular beast had nearly twice her BattleMech's volume.

This tonner cow was chewing something unidentifiable but definitely plant-like. Grinding, rather. Its blunt, beak-like mouth was toothless, the lower jaw moved in circles, methodically smashing whatever was in there to paste against the boney upper palate before swallowing.

Lex hated to disturb its meal, but if it kept grazing along its present path, this tonner would eventually blunder into the habitat compound.

She eased her *Nightsky* forward, dead slow.

The tonner stopped chewing, or grinding, when she moved. Evidently its initial response to something new was a frozen stare.

Not unlike some people.

After a moment, the animal decided whatever she was wasn't worth interrupting its meal for. Placid eyes, wider across than she could stretch her arms, regarded her 'Mech solemnly as the great jaws resumed grinding.

More of the beast's form materialized through the mist as she stepped close. The middle set of legs tricked her eye, making the creature seem shorter than it was before its haunches emerged from the fog.

"Steady, big fellah," she said, though her external speakers were off.

The creature turned its head, following her with blank non-comprehension as she placed her hands, axe turned broadside, against its shoulder. No alarm, no worry, *maybe* a flicker of curiosity.

Lex resisted the reflex to fire her small laser as a dermal parasite emerged from the thick mat of green feathers in front of her cockpit. The twenty-kilo crabs attacked anything related to humans—just as this one was now futilely gnawing on the joint of her hand actuator. She wanted to kill the vile creatures on sight.

However, lasering one off the hide of the tonner would probably hurt her new friend. At the very least it would panic him, perhaps enough for him to defend himself. His flamer posed no threat, but being stepped on by a seventy-ton dinosaur was not something her *Nightsky* was designed to take.

She leaned her 'Mech's weight against the tonner, gently pushing.

After a long moment, the beast seemed to understand what she was about. Ponderously, moving each foot only a few meters at a time, it turned away from her. Distracted by a particularly succulent tree frond, it paused to collect another mouthful before completing the maneuver.

Finally, she had it rotated to a new course away from the habitat and stepped back. If the beast was aware she'd stopped pushing—or even that it had changed direction—it gave no sign.

Lex shook her hand actuator, throwing the still-clinging crab to the ground. Shifting her weight quickly, she crushed it beneath the *Nightsky*'s foot.

As her latest divertee munched contentedly along its new course, Lex cast about the hollow of dense forest—the heavy chemicals and charged ions lacing the atmosphere making sensor reading more an art form than a science. The level of interference fluctuated with the breezes—clouds of volcanic chemicals drifting through like showers. It took her several minutes to be sure the tonner she'd redirected didn't have any nearby siblings or offspring likely to wander down the wrong path.

Or stalkers. She'd never had to deal with a predator and wanted to keep it that way. The spiked and clawed hunters could mass up to thirty tons. But they only ate live meat, which meant a dead-smelling BattleMech didn't interest them at all. Steering the herbivores away from the base pretty well ensured the predators kept their distance—they went where the food was.

The scavengers were another matter, since human equipment registered as edible to their senses. Standing orders were to kill "jackal" tonners on sight and burn their bodies to ash before they attracted more carrion eaters.

If members of either meat-eating group were on the trail of her friend, there was no sign.

Out of habit, Lex glanced at the sky to judge the time, which did her no good at all. At noon the sky was white, at midnight black, and at sunrise or sunset almost uniformly red. Other than those times it was a uniformly mottled grey. Like the jagged slash of pewter Lex could see between the treetops.

According to her more reliable cockpit chronometer, it was near the end of her patrol. Time enough to make one last sweep along the stream bed before returning to the complex.

She broadcast her observations, including the direction from which the cow had wandered and where it was now headed, on the Florida channel.

Magda Caradine, on patrol somewhere to the west of the base, double-clicked to acknowledge the transmission without comment. In the cockpit Caradine was as all business as she had been during training. None of the idle conversation that had marked Lex's long turns at garrison duty with the Buena training battalion. She was not sure whether her lancemate's attitude reflected Nagerling training or innate personality.

Lex headed south and east through the foliage. She moved to the right of her earlier path a few dozen meters—not much in the scheme of things, but enough to vary her pattern. Part of her mind was aware varying her pattern to confuse infiltrators that would be hard-pressed to outwit a rhododendron pretty much defined "waste of effort," but it was better to keep good habits sharp.

Apparently there was some experiment or pocket environment the scientists didn't want BattleMechs wandering through to the northeast—for about forty degrees of arc they had to pull back

several hundred meters toward the base. Which meant they had less time to respond to any tonner incursions from the northeast. And the northeast, of course, was the direction from which most of the tonners came. Natural order of things.

A stationary metal reading, beyond her patrol area indicated one of the engineering teams setting up a picket array. The same DropShip that had delivered the Florida lance had brought sixteen automated sensor stations. Not standard issue, these were shielded against the corrosive and charged atmosphere of Despair and specially calibrated to detect and track the local fauna. Once these were in place, the Florida's constant roving patrols would be reduced to rotating on-call shifts with periodic patrols to look for any strays that might have made it through the sensor net.

Lex had mixed feelings about that.

On the one hand, the constant patrols were a grind. The staggered schedule Britto had established—ensuring two BattleMechs were in the field at all times—synchronized with neither the local day or the shift schedules of Chevalier Base. More than being out of step with the world around her, though, Lex hated the muzziness she felt creeping as the days of inadequate downtime wore at her of reserves.

On the other hand, on patrol Lex was in her *Nightsky*. Not underfoot in a scientific facility where she was treated like hired muscle. And not having to deal with Britto's arrogance.

However, the dismal two years Lex had feared would—if all systems worked as designed—be reduced to four months—five at the outside. The next supply ship should be bringing the components for a static defense net, which would replace the BattleMechs entirely.

Lex had no mixed feelings about that at all.

The stream bed was bigger than a gully but smaller than a valley and dipped below the mist. Lex found walking through clear air under a ceiling of dense fog pleasantly skewed. Her external microphones confirmed that the stream babbled as cheerfully as any on Valloire as it passed over a tumble of rocks, though she knew it carried enough metal and chemicals to kill her. For some reason the tall trees didn't grow close to the water and her *Nightsky* waded through pithy fern analogs that would have been head high if she'd been on foot.

Fish—or what passed for fish on Despair—broke the surface of the stream in flurries. She wondered if they were pursuing some insects too small for her sensors to detect or fleeing some predator below.

A movement ahead caught her eye—thick rush-like water plants shaking in the still air a half kilometer up river. A quick glance confirmed the sensors didn't see anything that conformed to the programmed tonner profiles. Either there was nothing there, or what was there was new.

With a sigh Lex directed her BattleMech toward the still swaying rushes. They stood at least three meters high and were thick enough to conceal almost anything.

At three hundred meters her thermal imaging picked up half a dozen shapes hidden in the water plants. Their profiles were similar to the scavengers that bent up at the middle, but they were less than half the size of the smallest jackal Lex had seen—two hundred kilos at most.

Her quarry held perfectly still until the *Nightsky* was within a hundred meters. Then, apparently realizing they'd been detected, the pack ran, splashing through the shallow water at the edge of the stream.

Lex saw she'd been right, these were "bent" tonners. However, unlike the jackals she'd seen, they did not drop to all sixes to run. While their four hind legs galloped like horses, remarkably sure-footed over the rounded rocks of the river, their fore legs were tucked up against their upright torsos—

Lex gasped.

Stepping up magnification, she tracked the fleeing creatures. Their fore limbs looked like arms, and they seemed to be carrying objects. As they disappeared around the bend at the head of the gully, the last one paused to look back. Its wide green eyes seemed to look directly at her. Lex realized that was an illusion, a trick of her viewscreen's close magnification.

But there was nothing illusionary about the spear clasped in its hands.