

THE DRAGONS OF DESPAIR

by Kevin Killiany

Chapter Five

[Excerpt: *"Spurious Suits Stall Commerce,"* Acrux Business Beat]

Apax Industries became the third multi-world conglomerate to be accused by the AULU, Affiliated Unskilled Laborers Union, of spiking employer-provided food and drink with mind-MASC. AULU spokespersons allege the drugging is intended to increase worker productivity by "dangerously accelerating their bodies" and "altering their minds so they don't realize they're being overworked."

In previous cases these charges have always proved unfounded. However, law requires a shut down of the Apax Electronics Conductor plant until a thorough test of all company food services and water distribution systems has been completed. These tests are conducted at company expense. These expenses, combined with loss of production, could cost Acrux upwards of one billion c-bills; practically eliminating profits for this quarter.

Industry spokespersons have proposed legislation..."

Chevalier Planetary Evaluation Base
Despair, Ender's Cluster
Lyran Alliance
17 October 3057

"Lieutenant Atreus?" The voice came from behind her in the busy corridor.

Lex turned to find herself facing one of the Evaluation team scientists—a team leader, she recognized from the color of his ID badge. But that was all she recognized. As tall as she, maybe five years older, he was muscled like a professional swimmer and had holovid heartthrob eyes she was sure she would have remembered.

"Leftenant," Lex answered crisply, "and -oos."

Tunnels to the vehicle and lab domes opened off this concourse which ringed the main dome's admin center. Lunch for the day shift had just ended and the stream of techs and scientist parted to flow around them. The science team leader made a palm-up gesture toward a window between radiating tunnels, inviting her to step aside with him.

"Sorry. Free Worlds League accent acting up," the newcomer smiled apologetically when they were out of the flow of traffic. She was relieved to see one of his teeth was crooked. Not much, but enough to save him from physical perfection. "I heard you encountered tonners along the creek northeast of the Base that didn't fit established profiles? That you intend follow-up reconnaissance along the river?"

Lex nodded.

Scuttlebutt network here is top notch.

She noted his light blue shirt was neatly pressed and tucked, with just a hint of fray at the collar, and his stance deferential. No moneyed scion would waste manners on hired muscle, and no noble-born would wear a shirt that was both pressed and frayed. Neither would have let that tooth escape an orthodontist.

Lex brought her personal defense systems down a level.

"I know there is an area in that region you'd like us to avoid," she said a little less stiffly. "If you could provide me with a map—"

"No, that's not it," the holoivid scientist cut her off. "At least, not directly. Look... Can you keep a secret?"

"No."

"What?"

"If you are about to share information which may impact my mission or the safety of this base, I will immediately share it with the rest of my lance," Lex answered, once again formal. "In fact, I'd prefer at least one of them to be present before you say anything, doctor..."

"Oh, sorry, Severin—Bannik Severin," he answered. "Preferably just Nick."

Lex considered the implied invitation for a heartbeat, her eye on the frayed collar, and decided she was willing to take a chance.

"Fair enough, just Nick," she said, keeping her voice businesslike. "My name is Alexandra. Lex to my friends."

"Lex it is then," Nick smiled. "And, yes, I guess I see your point. Is there anyone from your unit available now? I'd like to talk to you before you go on patrol."

Lex activated her comm. Aldicott and Britto were on duty, which meant one or both were in their 'Mechs. Caradine was off, but beyond that Lex didn't know her schedule. Taking a chance, she keyed her code.

"Leftenant Caradine, a Dr. Severin would like to speak with us if you are available."

Somewhat to her surprise, Caradine answered immediately and—once she established their location—promised to join them in five minutes.

Which left Lex standing idly with the holoivid doctor. Clouds threatening storm made the world beyond the window nearly black. Though she was invisible except as a shadow occluding passers-by behind them, Lex could see Nick reflected in the thick plastic. He was angled toward her at an estimated range of one meter. *Now would be a good time to compliment me on my eyes*, she suggested mentally as she tilted her face toward him. Aloud she said:

"So how early in the conversation are you invited to explain how a League scientist came to be working for the science ministry on Ender's Cluster?"

"It's usually the second question," Nick said, charmingly imperfect smile flashing again.

"How many non-answers have you devised?"

"Four I'm happy with," this time his smile was a grin. "I take it you're not a noble-born MechWarrior?"

"Valloire kibbutznik made good," Lex answered. "You?"

"New Rolso Boy's Home, Callison," he shrugged. "Earned a scholarship, won a regional science competition, got lucky."

Lex suspected the orphanage wasn't part of the vita he usually offered. She also recognized the shrug meant sympathy for his upbringing was not welcome.

"Ending up on the backside of Ender's Cluster is lucky?" she asked instead.

"That's part of what I need to talk to you about."

"What is it we need to hear, Dr. Severin?" Caradine asked as she approached.

Technically Bannik Severin, a chief research scientist with the Ender's Cluster Ministry of Science, outranked Magda Caradine, first year lieutenant with the Florida Periphery March Militia. But he bowed his head to her in greeting. He did it easily, as a matter of course, not making a show as he moved on.

Lex admired the way Nick acknowledged the social order without giving up any of his authority.

"There are some aspects of Despair we've been keeping out of the general reports," Nick said. "Need to know and—since it didn't seem to have any impact on the tonner situation..."

"We weren't on the need to know list," Caradine nodded. "What changed?"

"If you'll come to my lab," Nick repeated his palm-up gesture, this time inviting the two MechWarriors to take a tunnel to their left. "I can show you."



Nick's lab looked like a general purpose room with none of the work benches of bubbling retorts and shrouded computer terminals Lex associated with the term. Except for a perfectly ordinary standard-issue computer terminal and several crystal readers, there was no equipment of any type. She suspected the wall of locked cabinets might conceal the real purpose of the room.

"What do you know of the raxx and the camel?" Nick asked, crossing to one of the cabinets.

"Domesticated animals," Caradine answered. "Colonists have taken them to hundreds of worlds. What has this to do with your need to know situation on Despair?"

Nick turned, startled. Then smiled.

"Sorry. Too many years teaching," he said. "Can't explain anything without quizzing to see what the learner already knows.

"Man has transferred thousands of species to hundreds of worlds," he said, following up the apology with a tutorial lecture. "Some deliberately, like the camel, others despite our best efforts not to, like the cockroach."

"But just as man has ensured the same animals appear on hundreds of worlds," Nick said, pulling what appeared to be a black rock and a data crystal case from one of the cabinets, "he has given the same name to thousands of species which are in no way related."

Lex felt Caradine's glance. Cutting her eyes toward her, she was surprised to see the woman was amused by Nick's inability to get out of instructor mode.

"You understand the difference between tonners and megasaurs?"

"Megasaur is a catch-all name used for unrelated species of giant lizards found on several worlds which have nothing in common beyond being big," Lex took her turn answering. "*Oiseau de Tonnerre* is a taxonomic class of proto bird native to Despair."

Nick nodded, handing the black rock to Caradine. It was roughly oval, Lex could see, or maybe drop-shaped, coming to a point at one end. It filled the smaller woman's hand and, from the way Caradine held it, she estimated it weighed two kilograms.

"Ah," Caradine said suddenly, evidently enlightened.

Nick nodded.

"What do you know about neopithecanthropus?" he asked as Caradine handed Lex the black stone.

"Another broad label," Lex said. "It means 'new ape-man' and it is applied to various unrelated mammal species—usually hominid or simian—that evidence primitive tool-using skills."

"Right," Nick said. "Tool *using*—in that they will pick up a handy rock or twig to do a job. Primates—even birds on Terra—do that. But to date no tool-*making* neopithocanthropoids have been discovered."

Prepared by the question and Caradine's exclamation, Lex cupped her hand over the rounded end of the oval rock. It was obsidian, she saw, light and smooth. The edge leading to the tear-drop point was razor sharp, smoky grey where the light passed through the thin volcanic glass. The finely serrated edge had been shaped by flaking away dozens of tiny crescent chips.

A bit large for a human's grip, it was a freshly minted stone-age hand axe.

Another of Nick's palm-up gestures invited them to chairs. *Another freshman lecture class.* Lex cradled the axe in her lap as he fed the data crystal into the reader.

A close image of rough stone fuzzed to a mottled grey blur then snapped to crystal clarity. Not just stone, Lex realized, but rocks of various sizes piled together to form what might have been a wall.

The recording pulled away from the wall with the motion blur of an amateur recorder to show a group of the small tonners Lex recognized as her river runners. They were walking toward the recorder on four legs along what looked like a beaten path emerging from dense forest. Their upraised heads slightly higher than the camera's position. Though nothing provided scale, based on what she had seen in the gully, Lex estimated eye-level for these creatures was about two meters and that they were about three and a half meters overall.

One looked directly at the recorder with apparent interest but gave no sign of recognition or alarm. The recorder zoomed in for a tight shot—jiggling as the obviously hand-held device tracked the walking tonner—and revealed that what looked like smooth skin was in fact a dense layer of sleek feathers. The mouth was a broad, toothless beak that barely extended beyond the cartilage-ringed

nostrils. But alien as the lower half of the face looked, there was an eerie intelligence to the level gaze.

“The natives of the village seem content to let me wander at will,” said an off-screen voice in hushed tones. “There is no apparent leader, which may indicate their social structure does not require one. Or that I simply haven’t recognized it.”

The holoscreen image spun with another amateur blur to show the village itself. There were buildings, but what first captured Lex’s eye were the natives. Six-limbed near-birds like all the dominant life on Despair, they moved about on four legs, except when evidently conversing—or just looking around. Then they would rise on their hind legs, forming a tripod with their stubby tails.

Some carried stone axes similar to the one in Nick’s lab. Others had what might have been digging tools or staffs of bright wood, like saplings freshly stripped of bark, which they either carried in both forelimbs or dragged along the ground. Lex realized these were what she had mistaken for spears in the gully.

There were no clothes evident—not even the draped skins or grass skirts Lex associated with primitive cultures. Of course, covered with feathers and living in a temperate climate, the natives probably didn’t need additional protection from the elements.

The holoimage stopped focusing on groups of natives and began a detailed examination of the structures that made up the village. Lex immediately revised her estimate of the native’s sophistication upward. Though their nakedness made the natives seem primitive, their village proved they were far above any species of neopithocanthropus she’d ever heard of. While natives who wore skins and stacked rocks or branches in cave mouths as wind breaks had been found on other worlds, nowhere did any but man build standing houses.

The buildings of the village were stacked stones—unshaped but fitted and packed with what appeared to be dried mud. These crude walls were barely taller than a native standing on its rear tripod; wide at the bottom and narrowing rapidly toward the top. There were no windows, but broad gaps in the walls acted as doors. The roofs were fresh-cut branches, their leaves still bright silver-green, apparently layered across the tops of the walls in a crisscrossing pattern.

The image showed a native no different from the others, tearing into what looked like a prickly gourd with stringy, evidently juicy

flesh. The native held the fruit in its hands as it stripped the juicy meat away from the rind. After each bite, it looked about with bright, challenging eyes.

"This female, resting in the doorway of her home, is eating fruit," said the voice in the same hushed tones.

"While none have been observed eating animal flesh," the voice said, then interrupted itself to chuckle. "Or carrion or I wouldn't be here—they do eat fish and mollusks found in the river. These are clearly omnivores, the first we have encountered on Despair."

There was a shift in image. The village and the natives were gone, replaced with a static shot of the jungle and a man speaking directly to the recorder. Lex realized he had to be sitting inside a vehicle, using the windshield as a backdrop—otherwise he would have been in an environmental suit.

"The natives, whom I am tentatively naming '*homme d'oiseau*' pending an official designation, are peaceful," he said. "There is no evidence they pose any threat. On the contrary, they show every evidence of developing a vital society more complex than any observed among the so-called neopithocanthropus races. Heretofore, no creature other than man has been observed constructing shelters of such architectural complexity.

"I strongly recommend that all exploration of Despair be halted immediately, and these native people allowed to develop on their own, undisturbed," the man nodded, emphasizing his words. "Barring that, the areas occupied by these people should be kept inviolate, their sanctity respected. Without putting too fine a point on it, these may very well be the first truly intelligent non-humans we have ever encountered. Every effort must be made to allow them to flourish."

The screen went dark.

"Am I to assume from the fact that we are talking to you instead of him that the person who made that recording is no longer with us?" Caradine asked.

"Dr. Chevalier died shortly after making that recording," Nick confirmed.

"Chevalier?" echoed Caradine. "As in Chevalier Base?"

"His grandfather led a privately-funded expedition to Despair about the time I was born," Nick said.

Lex lost a second calculating that meant she'd been born when he was twelve, making him half a decade older than her first estimate.

"The elder Chevalier sent back recordings of the tonners—named them, in fact," Nick was saying. "Along with botanical samples and assay reports on ores from most of the volcanic ranges. Overall, not a very promising first report."

"So why the follow up mission?"

"Well, the report was not complete. Something—some accident—apparently killed the Chevalier expedition," Nick shrugged. "More to the point, Ender's Cluster's economy has pretty well stagnated. The Viscount was hoping we'd find something to turn things around."

Caradine glanced at Lex. She remembered none of the others had considered the economics of exploration before she'd mentioned it.

"How did this Dr. Chevalier die?" she asked without acknowledging Caradine's look.

Nick's face became somber.

"Something smashed through the canopy of his scout car to get at him."

Lex felt one of her eyebrows rise. So far they had not observed a wolf or jackal capable of doing that.

"The scout car was on autopilot, evidently in motion when he was attacked," Nick swallowed. "We found it two weeks after he'd been due back, a few kilometers north northeast of the base; out of fuel. The jungle had repaired any sign of where it had come from."

"Hence the ban on any exploration to the northeast," said Caradine. "Possibly intelligent natives and carnivores capable of tearing open a scout car."

Eyeing the subdued Nick, Lex suspected there was something more to it. She wondered if Chevalier had been a mentor, even a personal friend.

"More the natives than the tonner," Nick said. "I've already petitioned the Ministry for a grant to come back on my own, after the Eval project is over, and study them at length. This is the sort

of discovery that could change how we think about everything. Properly evaluated."

That explains the backside of Ender's Cluster being lucky.

"Improperly evaluated—or worse, turned over to the popular press—this is the sort of discovery that can turn into a nightmare," Nick shook his head. "Non-human intelligence. Everyone from xenophobes bent on their extermination to missionaries out to save their souls will descend on us."

"You seem to assume there will be no long-term colonization of Despair," Caradine said. "Isn't the point of the Evaluation survey to find resources worth developing?"

"The purpose is to find raw material worth exploiting," Nick corrected. "If we find anything—which doesn't seem likely at this point—there may be some commercial development, but no more than a few hundred workers.

"In any case, for the foreseeable future, we need to keep these people—" he tapped the data crystal of Dr. Chevalier's recording—"a deep dark secret."