

Andrew Michael
Schwarz

proximity



Children of the Red Sun

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By

Andrew Michael Schwarz

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Image of red sun courtesy of ESO/L. Calçada

Dr. Elizabeth Borenschild had come to the Glass Desert two weeks ago. High levels of beta-particle radiation near the Janosheck Crater required the use of an environmental protection suit as well as a daily regimen of DNA repair meds. Elizabeth had secured funding to outfit a crew in protective gear for two months, but after two short weeks she found her stamina flagging.

No suit, drug or entertainment holo could counteract the eternal nighttime of a tidally locked world. One simply craved sunlight, no matter the type.

The nightside wilderness swallowed them in its grip of red granite and eternal darkness. On the horizon, she could see the planet's terminator, a glowing ribbon of pink light, beyond which hung an M-class red dwarf, taunting her with its frail promise of day.

Note to self: don't buy real estate on a planet that can't rotate.

"Here, hi!" a voice said, a crude attempt at Tantasian.

She found the speaker among her mag tao workers. The fellow's large, compound-eyes were wide and unreadable in the visor-light of his EV suit. Beside the man, stood a female tao, a translator named Lika.

"He says he found something," Lika said through her suit radio.

The taoman spoke to Lika in a babble of clicks and syllables, the incomprehensible ento-mammalian tongue called Ist.

"He says there is a cavity below us," the woman said. The folds of the woman's oversized Tyvek suit fluttered in the dark breeze. The tao were Matdu's native people, thin-framed and possessed of avocado colored skin. Their antennae hung like twin braids down the backs of their bald heads.

The taoman held a spectrographic camera in his hands.

"Show me," Elizabeth said and took the camera from him.

The display did not indicate anything more than an uneven pocket, an aquifer perhaps.

Elizabeth shrugged and handed the camera back.

Lika continued to confer in Ist with the man.

"He says that's not how he knows," the tao woman announced, and pointed to the man's visor, behind which Elizabeth could discern the slightest quiver of an antenna.

It was as an old wives' tale: that mag tao were so in-tune with their planet that they could detect minute vibratory changes in its composition. But there was more than one instance of an explorer finding a reliquary in just that way. It was one of the many reasons why a person traveled in the company of mag tao while exploring on Matdu.

Elizabeth snapped her fingers. A tao carrying a large backpack stepped up beside her. "Turn around," she said, and when the tao complied, she dug out a pair of infrared goggles.

She knew that if she neglected the tao's claim, he might later convince another explorer to return, and if a find resulted, Elizabeth would never forgive herself.

The artefacts in interest were those of the Precursors, or First Race. Discovery of even a single relic from that extinct advanced-civilization could change the world. Elizabeth was under no delusion; the likelihood they were standing over a First Race temple was nominal. They were far more apt to find the remains of an ancient mag tao cave-city.

She powered on the goggles and fitted them over her hood. Green shadows of cold rock filled the view field. She scanned the terrain looking for a thermal spot, or blow hole, an opening in the surface that allowed the passage of warm air from below. There was nothing. Until she turned around.

In her display, a tiny ribbon of yellow heat overlaid the cold, colorless terrain.

She removed the goggles and addressed her translator.

"We're going up there," she said, pointing to a flat cliff-face on a high mountain crest. "With all the gear."

Lika translated to the crew while Elizabeth, fighting gravity, trekked forward, following the line on her display.

They reached the neighboring crest and unpacked their equipment. Elizabeth approached the surface of the redrock wall and examined it under visor-light. The First Race was believed to have

possessed a geoforming technology, which they used to hide their structures.

A fissure ran about six feet along the granite surface and disappeared. The crack was large enough to emit traces of heat. The fact that they'd found it at all was sheer miracle. From her pack she removed a gamma-ray measuring meter and shot the beam at several points around the fissure. The wave-pattern behavior confirmed a hollow cavity behind.

Elizabeth removed a round of micro-nukes from an armored case and planted them in a large oval around the rift, then gathered everyone up and hid behind a boulder.

Scree hailed from the blast, which cracked like rapid-fire thunder. The result was pure art.

"Now that," she said, "is flawless excavation."

The hole smoked in a perfect ovoid. She could not have done better if she had carved it with a knife. She sprayed the surrounding rock with CO₂ to cool it off, then replaced her goggles and approached the hole. On her hands and knees, with two tao men holding her belt, she gripped the rock and leaned inside.

Her stomach did a flip-flop. The height was dizzying. Way down below lay a structure of First Race design.

She pulled back and sat before the newly blasted opening, wide-eyed and amazed.

"This find," she said, "is huge."

A flitter of pink glass-dust settled on the back of her gloved hand. A quick glance up confirmed the thicker air. A supercharged aurora borealis shimmered in the sky.

She came to her feet and found Lika. "Tell everyone to pick up the pace," she said. "I want to be in and out before we get buried by that dust storm."

Part One:

The Spider's Lair

Chapter 1

Jace Starlon's ship orbited in the Silurian thermosphere. He was waiting for permission to land. It wasn't the first time he'd come to Siluria, and surely not to be his last.

He received entry approval and descended in the late afternoon. The interchange upon entry was a written request via holofeed. He only knew the request had been accepted because the temporary override on his ship had been removed. His Intent to Trade motion allowed him entry into the rayon of Theraphase, where he was to meet with a prospective client, the Cyclosa magísta, who was located in Central Theraphase, to discuss the possibility of future business.

As a shipper, Jace could pass interplanetary checkpoints so long as he made the bills of lading available for broadcast. That system hadn't changed under Siluria's new ruling dynasty, and he hoped the new rulers would keep it that way.

During his descent Jace was obsessively-compulsively dependent on his holographic radar display to inform him of any buzzing sky-clusters in the lower atmosphere. *Bugs*, he thought. *They're everywhere*. And these ones he couldn't wipe off his windshield.

He glided over a vast forest of *sequoiadendron* before spotting the long, sprawling structure that was the site of his appointment. Arans were fond of their building style. Huge rotundas connected with segmented, glassed-in walkways spread like so many legs through the forest terrain. Rotundas were universally built on Siluria. Country estates, city mega-structures, and clan dwellings were but a few of the renditions for this all-dominating architectural style, and with good reason. They held up for eons.

He docked his ship on an aerial landing shelf, lit with an oval of white lights. He preferred landing in the evening because of the lights, which made it easier to see through the trees. His ship, *Medusa*, landed easily on her hydraulic struts, dumping excess heat from her triple-jet plasma engines in a humid wind around the hull. She was an inverse gravity drive courier-class. Relatively small and decently maneuverable. They called her a space-plane, but Jace thought of her more as a space-bus. *Medusa* was her formal title, but Jace often preferred to shorten it simply to "Medi." Despite her oversimplified and rote AI program, she was a friend, as well as a ship.

Jace opened the gangway and stepped down.

He was relieved to find a single sub-male escort awaiting his arrival. The pale-skinned man was dressed in a sharp fitting black business suit, his black hair styled in the spiky and tapered-sideburn fashion of his people. He was thin and long-limbed, like all subs, and when he moved he did it with a subtle, deliberate grace that made Jace nervous, as though the man were liable to strike.

"Greetings, Mr. Starlon," the sub-male said, extending a hand.

Jace shook hands with the aran, finding the man's grip less than firm.

"The magísta is waiting for you. Come this way." The sub-male whirled about on the soles of his polished leather shoes.

The landing deck tapered to a hooded enclave that led into the rotunda. A door in the side of the beige-colored wall irised open when they approached, bringing to view the angular geometry of the interior. Arans were fond of their architecture. Here was another example: an interconnection of strangely-angled stairwells and walkways. *Upside-down*, were the words that came to Jace's mind. *Those stairs are upside-fricken-down.*

Not all of them, though. The unnerving aspect was that he knew there were beings in the vicinity who could take upside-down stairs, and he hoped not to encounter them during his visit.

The sub-male escorted him to the center, right-side up, stairs where they ascended.

At the landing, a long corridor stretched deeper into the dome. The aran turned to Jace and bowed slightly, the smile grating on Jace's nerves.

"You are free to pass on your own from this point," the sub-male said and turned away. The man's Tantasian was quite good, in fact better than good. Jace hadn't even detected a foreign accent.

Jace walked the corridor to the next wall-door. *Now, I'm really entering the inner sanctum.* Truth was he was in a low court of the Magístrata, come to see the resident ruler-judge. Not all females were magísta, but only females could be. Cyclosa, a recently defeated house, no longer controlled the oligarchic coup, but that didn't mean it had lost all inherent wealth and influence. This particular leg of the Cyclosan royalty shared ties with the Lotherian line and held sufficient power to maintain an office of the Magístrata. Hence, his contact held position in the government's judiciary web. Trading with an aran dynasty as powerful as Cyclosa, even if the house no longer ruled the planetary oligarchy, presented attractive potential for a small-business like Starlon Enterprises, Jace's infant company.

The door closed, leaving him in a chamber lit from the floor and stretching into shadows. At the opposite end of the room the dim lights outlined the end wall, where he saw Mika Misu, the magísta of House Cyclosa-Lotheria.

She was radiant, dressed all in black, her hair a complimentary, glossy raven. Around her neck, she wore a darkly glinting jewel: the Spithracean religious totem of the Maker-Builder, eight segmented legs wrapped around a crystal globe.

"Welcome," Mika Misu said in fine Tantasian, New Earth's, and therefore Rigel Kent's, most common tongue. "Thank you for coming."

"My pleasure."

Jace's augmented ability to use infrared radiation elevated his perception of detail, affording him super-focused clarity in all lighting conditions. He could have seen her wrinkles, if she'd had any. The beauty of her human-basic aspect would have been evident even without retinal implants. He walked the length of the hall until he was but a few feet from the small stairs that led to the raised platform.

He was surprised that she so quickly approached the lower level. In the only other encounter he'd ever had with a magísta—a disaster of a meeting, if ever there was one—the woman had remained on the higher floor.

He watched, fascinated, as Mika Misu's human forelegs gingerly stepped down the stairs, seemingly independent of her arachnid hindquarters.

He stepped back, allowing her to pass in front of him, all too aware that he was catching a whiff of her rich, opium-based perfume. She turned to face him. Close up, he was stunned by her exquisite paleness.

"Thank you," he said, not knowing why he'd said it.

"Please," she said. "This way."

She turned to a side door and went through it. He followed but stopped at the threshold.

She half turned. "What's the matter?"

"Do you want your sub-male present...or something?"

She laughed and pulled back the slit on her dress. The glinting butt of an energy pistol lay strapped against the tantalizing pale skin of her thigh. "I can take care of myself. Now please, unless you want to stand in the cold hall all night."

All night? Why on New Earth would I stand here all night? My other meeting with a magísta took all of twenty minutes and that's only because she was late.

“Sure,” he said, and stepped inside.

Chapter 2

The chamber's lighting, like the hearing room outside, was dim, the way all arans preferred. *Go figure. They have the brightest sun in the system and they live in the shadows.* Just another reason for humans to despise the "spider-people." Sun envy. Humans couldn't get over the idea that the araneá had gotten there first and that, consequently, New Earth settlers had had to accept that an orange K2 type star would heat their new utopia.

But he understood the need to hide from the sun. In the Rigel Kent binary system, two suns ruled the heavens. Despite the fact that New Earth's sun was but a small orange ball, it nonetheless invaded the Silurian night as only a bright moon could. From New Earth's perspective the Silurian sun resembled the ancient Star of Bethlehem from Old Christian lore. You couldn't get away from it.

He felt an airy hollowness inside that told him the space went deep into the rotunda. The air quality had changed, though it was still perfumed with the scent he'd smelled on Mika Misu just moments before. The room was huge, but the shadows tried to obscure it. Jace could see into the darkness, but not to the limits of the cavity. Caryatids carved in the monstrous half-human, half-spider incarnations of the Maker-Builder's alternate life-forms decorated the hall. There were corners and niches IR band sight could not penetrate.

He followed his hostess as she disappeared into the architecture. He rounded a corner into what was surely her living quarters. Couches, sofas and slender divans lined the smooth walls. Diverse rugs softened the hard angles. There was a fish tank on one wall, where swam miniature examples of Silurian ecology. Lumps with fins, tentacled mouths with sharp teeth. She went to the wall-tank, and opened a small hatch, dropping crumbled ocher bits into the water.

Jace watched as the strands of food separated and drifted down, sating the ravenous appetites of her weird pets. Then he saw two eyes staring up at him from under her dress.

"We can sit over here," she said, turning. Her arachnid anatomy moved like an enormous train, trailing behind her human aspect. Jace followed her, keeping his sight on the thing at her feet. Curious, frightful and multilegged, the foot-stool sized trilobite stole glances at the newcomer whenever it dared. Its eyes were small and closely spaced as if recently developed in its evolution.

Why can't she just have a dog?

She stopped at a high table set for two, and took a wide cushioned seat, her spider legs working backwards up onto the couch. She settled her hindquarters in such a way that she could cross her human forelegs. If he ignored her arachnid anatomy, he would see only a human woman. Jace took his stool and positioned himself so that he could do just that. All of this spider physiology was getting to him. He hoped to Vishnu-Christ that she didn't pull that oversized trilobite onto her lap.

"I'm glad you have come," she said, picking up a teapot with an exaggerated spout. She tipped it into his cup. The hot tea steamed, a concoction, perhaps, of cloves and cinnamon, though he doubted it would be anything so familiar. He was really just hoping for caffeine.

"I'm sure you are anxious to learn the reason I invited you here," she said. "So, I will get right to it. It was a hard decision to contact an off-worlder, but ultimately, I believe, the right one. The tea is safe, by the way." She seemed hesitant, almost apologetic. Another thing he didn't expect from a magísta.

He sipped his drink, found it pleasant, and liberally caffeinated. Not all foods crossed over between species. It was, therefore, polite to inform one's guest that one was conscientious of this fact.

"Have you ever been to Kam-no-kai?" she asked.

He glanced down into his cup. "You mean Matdu?"

"Sorry, yes. I mean Matdu."

"I have."

It was the primary planet of the red dwarf star in the trinary cluster. It was called “Kam-no-kai” in Chell and “Matdu” in Ist, the language of the native mag tao race. Matdu was a Tantasized form, being that Ist ranked high on the unofficial incomprehensibility scale. The original human settlers who’d come in the *Zuckerberg* ark three hundred years earlier had called it “Proxima b.”

Rich with relics of the precursor First Race, the red-black planet had become an object of envy between New Earth governments and dueling Silurian dynasties.

“My family has land rights there, on the night side,” she said.

Matdu circled its red dwarf in a tide-locked orbit, causing only half of the surface to ever face its sun, thus casting half the planet in one endless day and the other half in a forever-night.

She picked up a small polished disk from the table and gently pressed the center. A holo-map of the planet in orbit appeared around them, filling up the chamber, and virtually casting both Jace and his host into the outer space of the solar system.

Jace watched as the small planet circled the shining red orb, feeling as though he were on board *Medusa* every time the three-dimensional image swung past him.

The magísta manipulated the controls on her remote and the holo-map expanded, appearing to swallow them up, until she and Jace sat amidst a vast holographic mountain range. A white cursor arrow pointed to a spot.

“It’s here, near the Janosheck Crater,” she said, and rotated the map in order to give him a better bearing.

“Ah” he said, viewing the reflective ring crater’s walls. He had never been to the planet, despite lying to her that he had, but he *had* seen many images in holo. The Janosheck Crater was famous, not necessarily for its immense size, but for its presumed origin: one hell of an atomic blast. The anti-uranium fission bomb.

Jace sat back. “All right, what then? You want me to smuggle antiquities out of the Glass Desert, is that it?”

For a moment she seemed slightly flustered at his candor, but she recovered her poise and imperial posture. “Yes,” she said. “That’s exactly right. But I don’t want you to simply smuggle it. I want you to take me there. And I am prepared to pay you five million gravits for that.”

That caught his attention. “Five million—you could buy a brand-new ship for that.”

“Yes, I know.”

“And you, personally, want to go?”

“Yes.”

From everything he knew of the Magístrata—their position in society, the command they carried over the sub-males and the male-primers under their jurisdiction—he did not understand why this magísta would take such a risk.

“That whole area has to be heavily patrolled by the—”

“Lasiodore, the enemy of my people,” she said. “Yes, I know that.”

She could not hide her anger. Not from him. The slightest blush, high on her cheekbones, undetectable by standard vision, could not pass unnoticed from his augmented senses.

He thought it over for a minute. “Why me?”

She glanced down and then back up again. “Your reputation as a smuggler.”

“You want me to smuggle you off planet,” he said. “And I’m small-time enough that you think the Lasiodore won’t notice.”

“Yes,” she said.

“I risk everything doing that, you know.”

“I know.”

He shook his head. “There are laws against that kind of thing. I’m sure you’ve heard of our Sycamore Institute. We aren’t allowed to just go and take relics out of ancient temples and not tell anyone. And you people have your own version of that, I am sure.”

“My people are divided,” she said. “We have no scientific institutions that are not owned by the ruling dynasty. Our laws of property and ownership are tied to family histories. Antiquities from Kam-no-Kai or anywhere else are subject to Roi-un law. I am a sovereign of my own demesnes,

wherever it may be.”

“I don’t know what to say. I don’t have any intention of putting my ship, or my livelihood, or my life in danger for a deal. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t blame you,” she said.

“All right then. That’s a no go.”

“But I think you may change your mind if you hear the rest of what I have to say.”

“I seriously doubt that there is anything you could tell me that would change my—”

“There is a library in those mountains,” she said, hastily. “First Race library. The biggest discovered yet.”

Jace paused. “Go on.”

“Spectroscopic imaging has yielded an incredible amount of information about this sight,” she said, pointing to the holomap arrow that hung in the space between them. “Extremely high frequency T-ray mapping shows us that under the surface lies architecture in keeping with Precursor library designs found previously at other sites, on both the day and night sides of the planet. You may not know this, Mr. Starlon, but all First Race repositories conform to a strict design plan.”

She tapped her control and the mountainous region disappeared, replaced with a model diagram of a star shaped structure. She continued.

“As I am sure you are aware, First Race custodians preserved data-file master works on fortified iridium disks, and consequently kept them vaulted. These so-called libraries reflect this practice.” The image expanded, revealing a second cellular structure below the first. “These vaults likely contain hundreds, perhaps thousands, of data disks.”

Jace had to cut in. “You’re sending spy drones to peer through mountain tops and yet you need me to smuggle you off world? I don’t get it. If you’ve gotten this much information, I am sure the Lasiodore Dynasty is aware of your activity.”

She shook her head. “This is old information,” she said. “Before the usurpation.”

“How old?”

“Half a century.”

He laughed. “Why would you wait so long with this kind of intel? A First Race library this big is worth I-don’t-know what kind of fortune. You might still be in power if you’d explored it when you had a chance.”

Her anger elevated beyond secret blushes and IR-band radiation. She bore into him with her eyes as though she would cut right through him.

“First Race culture and technology is not a sideshow to be parceled off and sold to the highest bidder,” she said. “First Race artefacts are to be maintained and preserved. They must be venerated and treated with the utmost respect. Not used to make weapons!”

Now I’m getting the real answers.

Her anger expunged, she composed herself and continued.

“With the occupation and my father’s death, I am forced to act.”

“And so...you’re going to go and what, exactly? Take the data disks?”

“Yes,” she said. “Load them into your ship and bring them back here.”

“And even if we could get them past the checkpoints, you think they’ll be safe here?”

She brushed her bangs back from her forehead. “I am part of the Magistrata,” she said. “When the disks are brought back here, they will be declared religious artefacts and so protected for all time.”

“Religious artefacts,” he grumbled.

She glared at him. “Yes.” She was blushing, again, but working hard, through her emo-physic training, to suppress it. It was an araneá institution, and a show of strength, to maintain perfectly pale skin in all situations, especially in negotiations.

He sat back and sighed. “Doesn’t this conflict with your Maker-Builder scriptures?”

“What?”

“This bit about the First Race being divine.”

She sat back and crossed her arms. “And if it did, what business would that be of yours?”

“None,” he admitted. “I’m just curious.”

"If you must know, the Spithracean religion espouses the worship of archetypes. Our Maker-Builder is simply the most viable archetype. Contrary to popular opinion, we are free to worship whoever and whatever we want, provided it meets certain incontrovertible criteria, which I can assure you, the First Race definitely does."

Jace shrugged. "I get it—fortunately or not—but...those disks, I mean, they could contain so much information that we don't have and that we need. One or all of them could allow us to break the light barrier, for Christ's sake. I mean, to enshrine them, I'm sorry, it would be such a waste."

The First Race sim-tech industry was huge. Entire branches of science and engineering had grown up under the wonder and potential of discovered First Race artefacts and written records. It drove the power industry, kept them in space, and gave them the promise of the stars, but they had not as yet been able to find the key disk or disks needed to break the speed of light. Until then, interstellar travel remained only a dream.

She shrugged. "They will not be neglected. My priests will study them in great detail."

"Yes, okay, but priests are not scientists, they are not engineers. All First Race texts have been examined and cross-examined and decoded and studied within an inch of their lives in order to get at the scientific principles being described. Yes, they were advanced. Yes, maybe even gods, but if they were, they left their legacy in the form of those disks in those libraries. I just don't think it's right to...hide them away."

"You don't have to understand it," she said. "But since you mention all this wonder these texts can bring us, I have this to say: *A-U-F*." She said those last three letters like a swearword.

"Yeah," he said. "Of course, you'd bring that up."

The AUF, or Anti-Uranium Fission bomb, was the super-class of nuclear weaponry. Fissionable uranium-238 remade as anti-matter was the most destructive force any living being in known history had ever witnessed. After initial testing on the New Earth moon of Crios, the weapon was unanimously outlawed by all thirteen republics. Legislature dictating that the chemical formula be wiped clean from any record had been quickly ratified into law. But the cat had already been poisoned. Siluria never did resolve the matter of the bomb's existence, and rumor was that House Lasiodore possessed the AUF equation.

"The Glass Desert," she said, "could be the future of our worlds."

He frowned. "The AUF is a First Race invention, I hope you know."

"We cannot be trusted with it," she said simply. "We are not capable of practicing that level of control."

He winced. "Yeah, and apparently, neither could they."

She had no response.

He continued. "All right, so, until such time as you, or House Cyclosa, determines that men, both spider and monkey, won't use the gift of the gods to blow each other up, you're going to hide away the scientific scriptures forevermore. Do I have it?"

"More or less."

Jace sighed.

The Rigil Kentaurians, races of the trinary suns, no matter all their sophistication, diversity, and grand pomposity were still just an infant civilization scratching feebly at eternity.

Jace pushed his chair back. There were some things he simply would not do. Money wasn't everything.

"Well, okay then. It's been real nice meeting you, ma'am. Thanks for the tour and the tea, but I've got other things to—"

He heard the hiss of a door aperture, and from a corner he had not noticed before, emerged an enormous dark shadow. He jolted to his feet, knocking over his stool, and drew his sidearm. A whirl of quantum energy filled the room as his gun registered his palm print and primed the capacitor. Micro-lasers in the gun barrel painted the emerging figure in chaotic patterns, searching it out for the weakest portions of its anatomy. Jace pulled the trigger and fired, creating a shower of sparks. The proton ray had struck without effect and he recognized what he'd just done.

An aran male-prime had stepped out into the open on eight massive legs. The arachnid stood over

two meters tall, clad in darkly gleaming web-armor.

Jace stared into the creature's eye cluster, his heartbeat thumping in his ears, his psyche swimming in spider-terror.

"Put your weapon away," the magísta ordered. "You are not in danger."

Jace lowered his gun and exhaled.

Chapter 3

The magísta took position between Jace and her male-prime. The giant spider did not appear at all concerned with how Jace had handled the situation. Jace, however, was still trying to put his heart-beat in check.

Different from the psychologist's diagnosis of arachnophobia, spider-terror went deep into the human under-brain where the fear of dying and being eaten twined together in an unholy mix of dread and despair. The day earthmen had first encountered the aran male-prime, was the day earthmen had questioned their gods.

"He says he greets you with respect," the magísta told him. Telepathy was the only channel of communication between the great arachnids and the world of men, both aran and human.

"Yeah, well, tell him I'm sorry." Jace stood his stool upright and sat down. *Krishna Christ*, he thought. *No wonder she didn't care if her sub-male joined us or not. She had one of those hiding in the corner.* "He your husband?"

The magísta chuckled. "Kexo-159 has never fertilized my eggs, if that's what you mean. You do know, that apart from rare instances, we don't marry our primes, don't you?"

Jace cleared his throat. "I'm not an expert."

"We marry our subs," she told him. "Primes are seasonal."

"Good to know."

"Anyway, Kexo-159 will accompany us on the mission."

"The mission?" he said numbly.

"As protection," she said. "It is reasonable and customary that an aran family traveling abroad would bring a prime for protection."

"Family?" he asked.

"Yes. You will pose as my sub," she said, casually. "There is no outwardly detectable difference between human men and aran sub-males other than facial hair. But, surely, even you are aware of that much."

Jace stood up and blinked, as though finally coming to his senses.

"I never agreed to running this mission with you," he said. "And I sure as shit am not going to pose as your boyfriend." He laughed. "I think you have me confused with somebody else."

"No," she said, "I don't. Your ship's name is *Medusa*. Your Trader ID is 145-AN, and you regularly smuggle a powerful opiate known by the street name Liquid Diamond, earning you the nickname of Jace Carbon."

"Screw you, lady," he said, and walked to the door, half turning when he got there. "It's for sick people, all right? They're old."

The republics of New Earth had banned opioid based pain meds some years past in favor of pain relieving nanites. The problem was the price. Nano injections ran in the tens of thousands of gravits with only about thirty-percent of the bill covered by the medical syndicates.

"I don't care about any of that," she said. "It's the reason I chose you."

He punched the door console and opened the hatch.

"You've never been caught," she called out. "You can smuggle us off world and smuggle the First Race scriptures back on again. You're the best choice!"

Jace stepped out of the chamber, turned around and stared at the two arans. He waved as the door spiraled closed.

He was relieved to find *Medusa*, all dingy white with blue-green stripes, sitting right where he'd left her. He voiced open the gangway and, taking the steps two at a time, leapt aboard. It closed with that familiar and reassuring hiss. He loved that sound his girl made. It meant it was time to leave.

“Bye, bye,” he said as he jumped into the cockpit and engaged the inverse gravity drive.

The ship rumbled beneath him, the hydrogen reaction engines engaging for thrust. Then he was off, heading for the docking station and hoping like hell that spider-woman wasn’t calling him in right this very second with some scheme to keep him trapped on planet.

Five million gravits to smuggle her and that prime off-world, pick up a cargo of platinum disks and drop them all back off again? Nuts. Of course, he would have to establish a routine first, coming and going from the Cyclosa rotunda delivering some kind of innocuous cargo. Spice or something. Beer maybe. Something that no one would notice or care about. Do that for a while and then once a routine was established—

Stop it, he thought. Just stop it. It’s not going to happen.

Then he laughed out loud. “Me, pose as her sub?”

But his mind wanted to solve the problem, he wanted to figure out a way around the detection point. He loved the challenge.

All planetary space gates used a combo of EM fields, including terahertz radiation, or T-rays, and various neutrino concoctions, to see into the ships and their cargo bays. There wasn’t much you could hide from all that, so how to hide two living bodies and a boat-load of platinum disks among all those empty spice and tea crates? *Some kind of nanotech, I am sure*, he thought.

He approached within fifty thousand meters of the gate and sent the electronic Permission to Depart form. The instruction that came after was the same as it ever was: *Turn off your shield*, said in so many words. The message wasn’t in Tantasian, but Chell Formal Script.

He flipped the switch to power down his rear thrusters, the source of *Medusa’s* force screens. He found it coldly impersonal having one’s ship bathed with electromagnetic radiation instead of a good old-fashioned face-to-face check-out, but, practically speaking, you couldn’t talk to a prime anyway and they had to scan the ship...

He paused, thinking. Something occurred to him, which he let go through to its logical conclusion before cracking a big, wide smile. He gazed up at the bulkheads and said to himself, “Carbon nano-tube wall-paper. Make an entire state-room and everything in it just—*poof*—disappear.”

Permission granted, returned on his holofeed and Jacen Starlon, AKA, Jace Carbon was off-world, hydrogen engines engaged and cruising at a three g burn.

He waited until he was a good hundred thousand kilometers out before he reduced his speed to three quarter g, where he could get up and walk around. The ship was tiny compared to frigates and big haulers, but then, he wasn’t hauling water or hydrogen, he didn’t have to pay a crew most of the time, and he could still stretch his legs. He was hungry, and in need of a cup of coffee. The trip back home was about an eight-hour tour at this gravity, but he didn’t feel like pushing his nanotech stamina. He even had half a mind to spend the night in orbit.

Truth was he preferred living on *Medusa* over his high-rise cube any day of the week. He just didn’t want to get in the habit of sleeping onboard when he wasn’t hauling. Other than acceleration and deceleration force, *Medusa*, unlike the big haulers and passenger transports, couldn’t generate artificial gravity because her mass was too small. That meant he’d be strapped in and sleeping in free fall. The billions of nanobots in his system worked full time to regulate the various forces of gravity he encountered, but in reality, they did their best against too much gravitational force, such as when he burned at higher than a New Earth g. Spending too much time in microgravity would cause fatigue and next thing you know he wouldn’t be able to stand up outside, on surface or on station. The pico-sized ray-blockers and nanobots coursing his system didn’t make him invincible, just well-adjusted and the thought of upgrading to a stronger tech package made his skin crawl.

I’ve got enough tiny robots doing duty inside me as it is.

He invoked *Medusa’s* music files and listened to an older album, *The End of Time*, by death-emo band sensation, SnÖrg. *Not bad, but a little heavy on the downtempo*, he thought. But then that’s what SnÖrg was known for. In a recent interview, El Ray Kill You, the lead singer/song-channeler/screamer of the band was quoted as saying “SnÖrg is the aftermath of annihilation.” *Yeah*, Jace thought. *Apt description.*

There was a fair amount of upkeep and minor repair work that he could take care of while underway. It was the only time, for instance, that he was going to be able to fix the broken hydroponic UV light. If he ever wanted to eat space grown carrots again, he would do well to get that thing working. And, of course, there was the water reclaimer/recycler that currently couldn't distinguish between potable water and urine, hence the fifteen empty water cartons lying around. *Medusa* was both a work in progress and a labor of love.

"Don't worry, Medi, I'll never leave you. Speech on."

"I wouldn't let you leave me," she said. "You're my captain. And what good is a ship without her captain?"

He could carry on a conversation this way, but it would only be for amusement. Ship AI wasn't the real thing. No self-awareness backed up the many inventive replies.

He'd purchased his ship out of a mag tao junk yard in the New Earth republic of Worldend. There had been something special about her right from the get go. She'd been in a hell of a condition though. In addition to a shot IGD, the interior was atrocious and her hydro generators were filthy. Still were, actually.

"Play music," he said.

"Certainly. What shall I play?"

"Whatever you think I'd like the most."

"Oh, I have just the thing. "

The echoic melancholia of SnÖrg thrummed through the upper deck once again. She played their most recent and best album, in Jace's opinion, *The Planet Within*.

He busied himself for the better part of four hours before slumping down in the cockpit and engaging in a bit of stargazing. New Earth's sun, Helios, was a bright orange light in the void. He was almost home. New Earth itself was a blue swirl, its night side all lit up with a trillion little lights, and one dark triangle below it, the Zuckerlund peninsula. But that wasn't where he lived. He hadn't been down there for over three months. He really should go and spend a few days. He had a cabin down there on the peninsula, 3D printed and perfect.

I need to take a break, he thought. I need to just...chill for a while.

Zuckerlund was known as "the rainy republic" for good reason. Compared to neighboring Thanlandia and far off Corona, it was a mess. But that's why he loved it. Rain, fog and cold. His cabin was sitting in the middle of the Itasca rain forest and was just what he needed. Nobody bothered him out there. The holofeed didn't even work.

But that's not where he laid his head most nights. Shipping and trading called for its own kind of necessity. Easy access to the system. That's what buttered his bread, and so he lived on Gopshall One, the thirty-million-person metropolis that sat in the L1 Lagrange point between New Earth and its orange sun, Old Earth's Alpha Centauri B.

Once he got home, he matched the station's rotation speed and docked *Medusa*, handing her off to the AI port drones that would park and store her for the night. He took a moment to get his bearings with the rotational gravity of the station. Sometimes he thought he felt it, but most of the time he never noticed. Gopshall One was big enough that the effect was mostly hallucinatory, unless you lived near the center.

There were folks who never left the station because of the gravity effects. They were afraid that if they thought about it too much, they would feel like they were always spinning and go mad.

In the morning, he'd be off again, but not before making a few local house calls. He had a couple deliveries of Liquid Diamond for two regulars in an east-end neighborhood, and even though LD sales made up a total of a tenth of a tenth of his income, he couldn't let them down.

Then, he'd head to the New Earth republic of Corona, where he would pick up two tons of aluminum foam for delivery to the Equinox Corporation, the premier bionics and genetics facility, located on the Neptune Project in New Earth's L2 Lagrange. Small fry stuff, but it paid the bills. Equinox never blinked twice at an invoice.

All in a day's work, he thought. But Krishna Christ, right now I am tired.

He took the skyway to his cube tower. A pleasant enough ride, though very few people were out

this late at night, which he didn't mind. The colossal mirrors that regulated the diurnal cycle of the station would gradually begin opening in an hour or so to simulate the coming of dawn. It was another one of those things the inhabitants of the great space city tried not to overthink. Jace thought about it whenever he came back late, when there wasn't anything else to distract him and he could contemplate such awesome technologies. But there was a perk about living on Gopshall, which was the fact that one got a truly dark night. On New Earth, as on Siluria, the opposite sun of the binary pair was always shining when the other was trying to set. The Old Earth province of Alaska had what was called a midnight sun, which both Siluria and New Earth had in spades. In Rigel Kent it didn't have a word to describe it, but rather used repurposed slogans such as "The sun literally never sets on Rigel Kent," and metaphors such as "Showered with starshit" to describe a bad night's sleep.

He took an elevator up 585 floors to his cube. The basic living model came in three sizes. Single, couple and family size. His was, of course, a single. When the room was fully packed, it was four smooth, compartmented walls on which could be projected any holoimage or feed one wanted. Nature scenes were big, as were beach scenes. Jace preferred the urban tavern backdrop. It peopled his apartment and, because of the background conversation, made him feel less alone.

Each compartment opened to reveal another aspect of the room and could then be stowed away again. The cube apartment was, therefore, infinitely arrangeable, or so they sold it. The Murphy bed and roll-out toilet were nifty inventions, but so were the hidden kitchen, slide-up-door fire place and adjustable wall plates that could turn his studio into a two-room suite.

He opened the fridge compartment, took out the milk-hose nozzle and sprayed himself a bowl of dehydrated rye groats. That and a half a bag of beer was all the fridge readout panel was displaying. He would have to put in a restock order.

He pulled out his bed and dimmed the lights to the ambient orange setting, then turned on the urban tavern wall-scene and set the volume to low. Now it was beginning to feel like home again. He clicked a console above the bed and the floor panels turned into cream colored shag carpet. The energy impulses in the program would make his feet feel it when he got up and walked to the toilet.

He tapped his finger on a holographic keypad near his bedside and opened an infomercial PHG file.

The holo showed an enticing young woman in a tight silver body-suit. She winked and modeled coyly.

"Welcome to your future," a female voiceover said. "Meet Model PC-787, the future of Personal Companions. While this gorgeous PC unit is not legally programable for the Meliczech calculation, the discerning man will never have cause to notice or care. RealGirlz PC models are fully programable for over three hundred personality settings that can take as short as three months to fully personalize. Welcome to the wonderful world of AAI."

Artificial Artificial Intelligence known to the rest of the world as Dumb AI.

Jace turned off the commercial just as Model PC-787 began stripping off the body suit.

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "What else is new?"

Someday one of those sexbots is going to solve the Meliczech and acquire actual AI. Then we'll have a real revolution on our hands, he thought.

Nobody had any trouble with service drones, a brand of clunky sentient masculine robots employed by shipping companies and municipal service depots, but as soon as they figured out how to make them sexy, the government wanted to pass all kinds of legislation about human rights infringements.

He thought about watching something, but before he could figure out what he was in the mood for, he fell asleep, oblivious to the Writ of Summons that had just been delivered to his holofeed, concerning twenty counts of drug trafficking.

Chapter 4

Amat and Helios, known to Old Earthers as Alpha Centauri A and B, approached the Rigel Kent system barycenter at just over nine thousand kilometers per hour as their eighty-year orbital cycle brought them to their closest point.

In ancient times, when the first and only known earth-wide diaspora had brought Old Earthers to their closest neighbors in the heavens, embittered settlers had shaken their fists at Amat, the brightly glowing aran sun, and cursed their lot of having settled for the smaller, orangish Alpha Centauri B.

Though no real difference existed between the habitability of the worlds, Old Earthers had taken it far too personally. Some historians would go so far as to cite sun envy as the cause of the First Worlds War (3002-3010) and the Second Worlds War (3035-3043.)



Dr. Elizabeth Borenschild was late to work. Again.

She was often late to work because traffic on the 36 was usually terrible. Scratch that, traffic on the 36 was always terrible at 8:30 a.m. and since the Federal Department of Transportation absolutely refused to grant inverse gravity drive capability to private sector automobiles, there was nothing she could do.

At least that's what she told herself to make herself feel better as she pulled into the parking lot of the Sycamore Institute. She hated being late, that was a fact, but if she had to be late, at least she had her own reserved parking spot.

She grabbed her bag and half-consumed cup of coffee and hurried out. Then slammed the door on the seatbelt. "Dammit!"

It was just not her morning. Ever since her trip to the Glass Desert on Matdu, where she'd discovered a First Race library fifty meters below the surface, and recovered no less than seven data disks, her life was not her own.

Sleep was something other people did. Her days and nights were swallowed with disk translation. The hope, which would probably remain only a hope, was that they would stumble upon the coveted light data on one or more disks. The legendary Light Disk, if it existed at all, was, and had been, the Holy Grail of scientific exploration.

Bits and pieces were contained on other disks, but the key was missing.

She tucked the seatbelt in, locked her car and stalked up the cement walkway from the parking lot to a side door, where she was wagering she could slip into her office and slam the door before anyone realized she was late.

Her plan would have worked, if it hadn't been for Glen Cartwright, her assigned intern, who happened to be rounding the corner just as she was making a bee line for her office.

"Oh, Dr. Borenschild! Hey!"

She stopped just short of her door and turned around, hugging her backpack and juggling her coffee. "Glen."

"Holy crap, have I got something that you're not going to believe. Oh, God, this is so fricken huge." He lapsed into nervous laughter.

"Uh huh?"

"Let's just get inside that office of yours where we can talk privately."

Elizabeth grappled with her backpack and turned around, fumbling for her employee ID card.

"Here," Glen said, "let me help you." He deftly lifted her cup out of her hand, thereby allowing

her to unload her backpack and grab her card. “When are we going to upgrade to retinal?” she said, more to herself than Glen, as if that was why she was so flustered.

The door swung open and Glen ushered her inside, closing the door behind them. She set her things down and then took her coffee back from her underling. She hated being accosted the moment she arrived, but tried not to show her exasperation to Glen, who either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“Okay, so you know that one disk section where there’s like all that genetics data?”

She nodded. “The section we sent to Equinox for decoding.”

“Exactly!”

The task of translating a First Race disk was not something any one person could do themselves. Each disk could be divided into hundreds of sections, each one containing volumes of super-scientific principles. The task of decoding, therefore, fell to a network of private-sector contractors, sworn to secrecy until such time as the Sycamore Institute declared the find fit for public knowledge.

“All right, so what?” Elizabeth prompted.

Glen continued. “So, I saw Dr. Lyons in the hallway and he’s like, ‘Glen, come in here right now.’ So, I go into his office and he shows me this holofeed from Equinox, which basically says that they found their DNA code.”

“What?”

“I swear to the Hindu God *and* I shit you not.”

She put her hand up. “Wait, wait, wait—what the hell are you saying?”

Glen began to laugh, schoolboy giggles. “I’m not joking, Dr. B! But it’s more than that, listen, they want to clone it.”

“Where’s Lyons?”

“He left.”

“Where? Its barely nine o’clock in the morning.”

“To Equinox.”

She blinked and glared at her intern. “If this is some kind of joke I will hand you your ass.”

He broke into another round of giggles. “I’m not joking!”

“I need to talk to Lyons,” she said. “Are you sure he already left?”

“Ah, well, he was freaking out, so I’m pretty sure he’s gone. They want him there like now, as in pronto, for a meeting to discuss everything. Something about First Race Article Thirteen or something.”

“Article One-Thirteen of the Kam-no-Kai Antiquities and Discoveries Protection Act of 3125—really, Glen, you ought to know that.”

“Oh...right. I knew that. I just didn’t twig on it. Anyway, he’s going to Equinox to—”

The door opened and Dr. Carl Lyons stepped in.

“To install Dr. Borenschild in a lab of her own to clone the first First Race specimen,” Lyons said, standing with his arms crossed, a shrewd father-knows-best look fixed under his gray brows.

Glen straitened and put his arms at his side. “That’s what I was trying to tell you,” he said, morosely.

She stared at Lyons, daring him to break into a great big wide grin. He didn’t.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said, finally.

“You don’t have to say anything,” he said.

She swallowed hard, trying to reconcile the feelings of confusion and disbelief with pure, undiluted awe, which possibly verged on terror. Finally, she said, “Glen, step out, please.”

Glen did a double take. “What? Dr. B, come on.”

“Out!” she said.

“Krishna Christ!” he said and left the office.

Once the door shut, Elizabeth met Lyons’s gaze.

“My flight doesn’t leave for another hour,” he said. “So, I want to discuss the project with you, first, before I go signing your life away.”

“Carl,” she said. “Is this for real? I mean, *clone*?”

He shrugged. “It’s what they say.”

“And how the hell do they know it’s First Race DNA?”

He exhaled. “They’ve translated most of the disk. It’s written in the usual combination of Scientific Aricon and Kuizie hieroglyphs, none of the occult topology or abstract analysis of High Beziel. So, they’re confident that they understand the information to a high degree of accuracy.”

Elizabeth slumped back into her chair.

“It’s borderline denigration,” she said. “I mean, its...well, it’s illegal, right?”

Dr. Lyons pondered the question for a moment and then sighed. “That depends on your interpretation of the law,” he said. “Does bringing a member of the First Race back from the dead constitute denigration or scientific achievement?”

Since her induction into the institute twenty years previous, they had talked about it many times. The possibility was always out there, a speculative dream; but she had never imagined it would come so soon. *No*, she thought. *I never imagined it would come at all.*

She shook her head. “Clone an organism from synthetic DNA?”

“It’s Equinox we’re talking about. If anyone could do it, they’d be the ones. This is likely the best chance we’ll ever be given,” he said.

She nodded. “If we succeeded—if it’s even possible—what then? We would have a member of this ancient race and then what? Poke needles into it and scan its brain the rest of its life?”

“It would be protected,” he said. “It would be one of a kind.”

“A lab monkey?”

“No,” he said. “Not even close.”

“No,” she agreed. “A holy grail. A grand prize.”

“Listen,” he said. “We’ve been waiting for this our whole lives.”

She thought, *Have we? Is that true?*

There were a lot of misconceptions about who and what the First Race had been. Nowhere was there found a physical description of the long-gone race. Mag tao apocrypha held the most complete record with its anecdotal stories and “tao tales” and even that was severely lacking in substance. Besides, one must not mistake folklore for history.

“Elizabeth, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity, of that I am certain. If you want it, you can have it. My understanding is they have already sequenced the genome.”

She blanched, then let out a nervous laugh. “That’s already a huge violation...”

He raised his hand. “I understand. But what choice do I have? Shut them down? Destroy their work? Confiscate? You see the dilemma. We all want the same thing: to learn, to understand, to grow. Listen to me when I say this next bit, because I do mean it. If there is anyone in this world I would personally trust with something this important, this precious, this...remarkable, it would be you.”

“What are you saying?”

“Didn’t you hear me?” he asked. “They want us to head the project, and by us, they mean you.”

“Oh come on...Equinox doesn’t need me to clone a gnat, let alone a Precursor.”

“Oh yes they do,” he said. “You’re the foremost authority on First Race culture.”

“First Race culture, sure,” she said. “But this is different.”

“It isn’t,” he countered. “The biocultural link is our best shot at truly understanding who and what the Precursors were, and if anyone knows how they thought, it’s you, my dear. Your education and experience makes you the foremost, if not the only, bonafide xenobiologist in the system. Think about that for a moment. Communication and interaction that leads to understanding is the real treasure in all this.”

She nodded numbly. He was adroitly removing all her objections and she still wasn’t sure that was such a good idea. “I just...I don’t know. I don’t get it.”

“There’s nothing to get,” he said. “You’re the expert. And why not? God knows, you worked hard to get here.”

“Aren’t you missing your flight? I thought you said it left in an hour.”

He looked up at the ceiling. “I think if you listen carefully, you can hear it taking off right now.” He chuckled. “I was halfway to the spaceport when I said, ‘Carlson, my dear boy, what on New Earth are you doing trying to operate independently on this one? Elizabeth is your all-star player.’ And so,

I turned right back around and came directly to your door.”

“Carl...”

“You want this, you can have it. If you don’t want it, say so, and I will kill it. I’ll sue the bejesus out of them until we own every last scrap of First Race IP they’ve got. They won’t be able to think a single thought about the Precursors that we don’t own the copyright to, with or without my dead body.”

That made her laugh, albeit nervously. “I hope that’s a joke, but something tells me you’re not kidding.”

“I’m not a fool,” he said. “Never once since the beginning of Sycamore and the subsequent ratification of Article One-Thirteen, have I ever doubted that I am a wanted man. I’ve been in the cross-lasers more times than I care to imagine. There are plenty of self-serving factions right here at home who want nothing more than to exploit the mysteries and secrets of the First Race for profit and personal gain, and this is no different. I take it very seriously.”

“And if I say, yes,” she said. “If I...choose this, as you say, then what?”

“Then you get your own lab. Inside Equinox. Your own security team, your own staff. And you call all the shots. No one does a thing without your signature.”

“That’s all well and good, but that’s not what I’m talking about. What about the organism? Its rights, its security, its life for Christ’s sakes?”

“Whatever you want,” he said. “Write the book.”

“But Equinox...” she began.

“Leave Equinox to me. You say how you want it to go, and I’ll make it happen down to your last word. There are places for such a being. Places where he or she will be safe and fulfilled for a lifetime.”

She was thinking, *Where on New Earth?* but the obvious answer came to her mind: Kam-no-Kai, where lay vast countries of land so sparsely inhabited that a whole colony of First Race clones could exist with no one ever knowing. *There are ways*, she thought. *Sycamore writes the law on First Race protocol and we have the resources.* The idea was growing in her head.

First Race antiquities were not just curios and interesting fossils to her, nor did they represent piles of money. They were pieces of advanced technology and, in some cases, an entire education in super-physics. To Elizabeth, a First Race scholar, or Precursologist and Biologist, it was about understanding an advanced culture and technology well enough to guide, not just the human race, but all the races into the future. The responsibility was huge, and the competition for antiquities was about putting the future in the right hands—human hands—not the fascist regimes of araneá dynasties.

Human ingenuity had not only brought the system spaceflight, but an entire space society—for it was human scientists and engineers who had broken the code and translated the first disk.

We are qualified to do this. We can be trusted. We are ready.

She took a deep breath, trying to prepare herself for what she was about to do.

“Carl, this is so big, you realize that, right? This is bigger than—”

“Anything,” he said. “Yes, I know. This is *it*.”

She thought, *I suppose there are worse things than going a million miles from home and making history.*

“Okay,” she said. “If I were to do it—and I’m not at all saying that I will—can I pick you to come with me?”

“Yes,” he said, “you could, but I think I need to stay and run local operations, and any support operations that might be needed here at home.”

“Right. Of course. But I could take Glen?”

“So long as he’s signed non-disclosure.”

“And I could take certain security personnel from here?”

“Whoever you like,” he said. “I want you to have whatever you want. I want you to be very comfortable. I can arrange it so that you never even have to speak to an Equinox employee or executive officer, and like a wizarding academic, sit in your ivory tower and have underlings do all your bidding.”

“They really want this, don’t they?”

“Extremely,” he said. “They want this more than anything.”

“But that’s what scares me,” she said.

“Me too. But the cat’s dead, and the only people who have the slightest chance of unkillling it are right here in this room.”

That made her swallow again. “I need a cigarette. And not a fricking synth-smoke. I want tobacco.”

Lyons smiled broadly. “Then you’re in luck. I happen to have a whole safe full.”

She eyed the older scientist, her mentor, and the closest thing she had to a father. “Oh, Jesus Krishna Christ,” she said. “Things are about to get really interesting.”

Chapter 5

Jace was standing in the office of his attorney, Mr. Katki al Kulu, or KK. Jace had always had the urge to call him Kris Kringle, but had never had the patience to explain the Hindu-Christian mythology. Though, for all Jace knew, KK might be Hindu-Christian himself now.

KK was an aran sub-male who'd emigrated to New Earth twenty years ago to practice law. On Siluria, and all other aran settlements, the law was given over entirely to the female ruler-judges, known collectively as the Magístrata. Sub-males, though variously talented and with much opportunity afforded to them, were not permitted to pursue this one vocation. KK passed the bar exam first try and opened a practice. Fifteen years later he married his human fiancée and adopted three lovely daughters.

Jace didn't much feel like staying seated in the cluttered office while he waited for KK to finish with another client, so he found himself snooping around KK's vintage-print book collection. Mostly law tomes, but also a Tantasian translation of a volume on the aran science of emo-physics. *Paleness and Casuality: A Primer* by some unheard of aran author. He thumbed through it and spotted a few chapter headings before putting it back. Paleness and Casuality. That phrase formed a mantra in most aran psyches. Jace had heard it said that the science was paleness and the art casuality. Emo-physics could be summed up as how to keep one's physical features from betraying one's emotional state. Emo-physics played no small roll in KK's success as an attorney.

On the shelf below, he found a half-open paper bag, wherein lay a small stack of old-school pulp magazines. These were not written in Tantasian, and while he did not speak Chell, he could read it a bit.

He took a moment to admire a front cover. It gave him a monster-vid feel. It was a head and shoulder shot of a beautiful woman in the foreground with a giant tarantula looming up behind her, but unlike a possible Tantasian version of the cover, the female wasn't exactly running for her life. She had a contemplative look in her eye, rather coy, as though considering something slightly outré.

He translated the title into Tantasian: "*The Builder and the... Virgin?*" No, he thought. *Maiden*. It's "*The Builder and the Maiden*." Only that wasn't quite right either. The Chell word for "builder" actually meant "spider," the two being synonymous. The title of this novel therefore was *The Spider and the Maiden*.

Ah, yes, well, that makes sense. Best-seller for sure.

He picked up the next one and laughed. Here was a new take. A man putting a ring on a woman's finger with, of course, a giant hairy spider looming in the background. This one was titled *The Season of Love*.

KK walked in, dressed in a stylishly tailored mauve shirt, shiny black slacks and black pointy-tipped shoes. Aran sub-males were known for their panache when it came to style of clothing.

"Ah, I see you found my dirty little secret," KK observed. "Aran romance novels," he said proudly. "I pick them up for my wife. She gets a kick out of the love-triangles. There's always a lot of, you know, combinations."

"So I've heard." Jace put the novels back into the bag. He didn't know a ton about aran families and mating practices, but he certainly knew that subs harbored a natural resentment toward the primes, at least when it came to sex. *And why not*, he thought, *if I had to share my wife with a giant spider, I might be a little PO'ed too.*

He turned to KK. "So, did you get my vidfeed?"

The aran lawyer sighed resignedly. "Yes, unfortunately, I did. Listen, Starlon, I gotta tell you, fighting this is a losing battle. Somebody turned you in and now it's time to pay up."

Jace bit his lip. *Yeah*, he thought, *one of your damn spider witches.* "What are the damages?"

KK sat down at his cluttered desk and pulled over his holofeed monitor, setting the screen for projection mode. The lawyer navigated to a file that was labeled “Starlon Enterprises, LTD.” and touched it open. He then opened the ninety-page Writ of Summons and began flipping through the pages.

“They nailed you on, what, eighteen separate possible infractions of Unlawful Opioid Distribution...no, nineteen. Sorry...twenty. And they have names. A long list of names of people you sold to. In a federal court, shoot, if we even tried to fight this, you’re likely to get a few more charges added. They never show their full hand on these. And, you’ll lose, at which point they won’t just want your money anymore.”

“What, three months, you think?” Jace asked, thinking that if he had to spend one day, let alone three months, in a detention center, he was liable to hang himself with the bedsheets.

KK shook his head. “Six to nine.”

“Jesus Ganesha,” he said. “Why?”

KK reclined in his seat and folded his hands behind his head. “You’ve been dealing dope, man.”

Jace shook his head. “It’s not like that.”

“I know that, you know that, but that’s how the UR sees it. You’re being charged by Corona, Russia, Gopshall, Ajia, New America, Nova Sino—God, Jace, you’ve been busy—Tantasia and just for the cherry on top, Bellemar.”

“How do they even know all that?” Jace asked.

“Someone knows you,” KK said, “better than you think they do.”

The idea unnerved him, but it had to be true. Surveillance wasn’t hard to do. He could be followed by any number of people. Sub-males could hide easily as run-of-the-mill humans on New Earth and there were plenty of New Earthers, like himself, who could be hired by aran officials. Not to mention smart dust, microscopic optical transmitters, which could be anywhere outside *Medusa’s* hull since, thank Brahman, her shields blocked small particles.

“What about Worldend?” Jace asked.

“Nothing on Worldend,” KK said. “But that’s what I’m saying. If you fight it, they’ll likely throw in Worldend, Zuckerlund and all the rest of the original thirteen. You know, when they want the book, the usually get it.”

Jace hadn’t dealt in all thirteen republics. But it didn’t matter. The UR could fabricate evidence at this stage. They had enough to stick it to him across the full federal spectrum. Whether all the details were true or not didn’t matter.

All this for trying to help the poor sickies. Why did he do it? It wasn’t the money. It really wasn’t the money. The UR had introduced sanctions heavily restricting prolonged access to opioids, because the junkies had gotten out of control, but that had left a lot of chronic pain sufferers out there in the lurch. Jace had done the first runs for the money, that was true, but the end users hadn’t been junkies, they’d been people. Mothers and grandfathers. Jace couldn’t help thinking, *Those could be my people. That could be my mother.*

“I’m not a drug runner,” he said quietly, but looking up into his attorney’s eyes, he saw another reality. *Yes, you are.*

“Jace, listen to me. The biggest drug pusher in the system is the UR federal government, and they go berserk when anything threatens their revenue. So, take my advice. Take it now. Stop dealing. Whatever your reasons, just put it to rest. Trade anything else you want. Smuggle puppies or trilobites or whatever, but just stop selling people opiates. All right? Will you do that? I hate to see you bankrupt.”

Jace sighed. “Fine,” he said. “What am I looking at?”

The lawyer returned to his holofeed. “Well, assuming I can mitigate most of this, which I think I can, I can probably get you off for about ten million, which includes my fees, and that’s letting you off cheap, by the...” KK’s face fell.

“What is it?” Jace asked.

“How in the devil...?” KK finger-turned through the document, back and forth over the many protonic pages. Finally, he sat back and blew out a deep breath.

“What the hell, KK?”

“I missed it the first time going through all this.”

“What?”

“I take it you didn’t read all this?” KK asked.

“No,” Jace said. “I quit after page five.”

KK shook his head. “Well, have a look at page ninety-one.”

Jace inspected the protonic document and furrowed his brow. “What is it?”

“It’s a Notice of Intent,” KK said.

“Intent to do what?”

“It’s a lien,” KK said. “On your ship. They’re giving you fifteen days to pay or they’ll take your ship.”



Jace went home. There was nothing else he could do. He went to his cube where he could adjust the wall display to the somber rainy-day profile.

He felt like he’d already lost his ship. Like the fight was already over. He couldn’t even get mad. He knew it was her. He knew it was that Shiva damned aran magísta. But how could he prove it? And who would care anyway? The fact was, he’d been being watched. He’d been being watched very closely.

But why me? Surely there were other one-man bands with a ship who would fly that woman to her mysterious red world.

He submitted to a retinal scan at his front door and went inside. He thought briefly of a group of thugs who’d made a good racket out of slugging a guy and taking a holo of his eye, then presenting the holo to the eye scanner and robbing him blind while the poor sod was recovering in a gutter somewhere.

Holos were being upgraded everywhere on station now. They just hadn’t gotten to his yet.

“Set wall screen to rainy-day with lots of fog,” he commanded aloud. The current “high-end-wall-paper” display blinked out, replaced with a rustic fence set against an open field with lots of mist and low hanging clouds.

He was pretty sure that if one waited long enough and actually watched the display, which he fully intended to do, one would be rewarded with the exciting event of a cow crossing in the distance. It could come at any time.

He’d never seen the cow, of course, usually falling asleep long before its arrival—if indeed, it ever arrived—but word on the net was that the damn thing was there and seeing it was supposed to be some sign of good luck. Some Hindu-Christian bullshit, he supposed.

“Maybe tonight, I’ll get lucky.”

His fridge was bare, but the bladders were full, which meant he had milk, oat, corn, or some other kind of grain meal or mash, and water. He could use a little brown sugar and butter, too.

He was too depressed to eat. He kicked off his boots and flopped down on his bed, and thought once again, that he ought to get a pet.

He noticed his holofeed terminal was blinking. He almost didn’t care but hoped it might be KK with some better news. It wasn’t KK. The message signature was Silurian.

Offer still on the table. Let me hire you, and I’ll double your payment.

—Mika al Misu, House Cyclosa

Jace stabbed a finger on his holofeed and turned it off. When he looked up, there was a big brown, Jersey cow walking through his apartment.