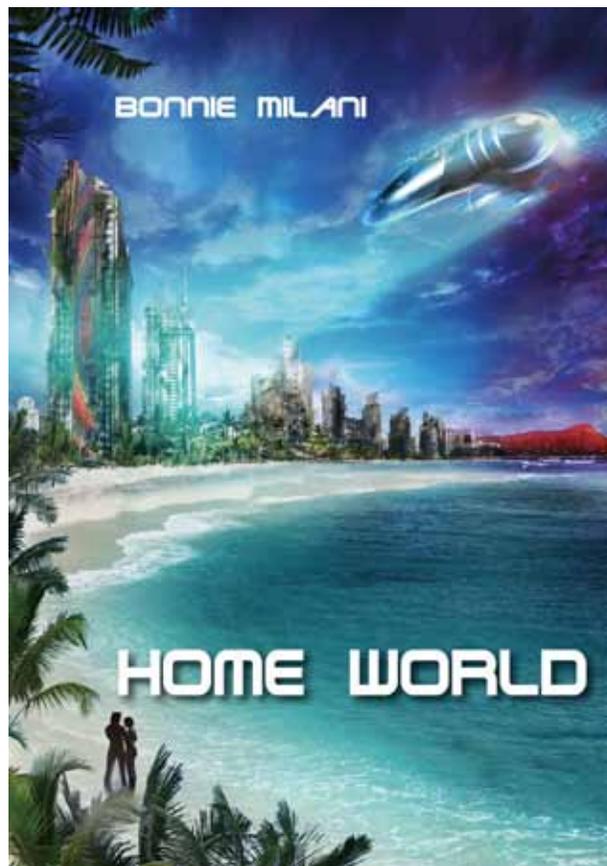


ARRIVAL



The Protector’s shuttle dropped into atmosphere above the North American mainland. It raced its sonic boom west across the steel blue waters of the Pacific until the green ridges of the Hawaiian Islands rose from the horizon like broken dragon teeth. Within the quiet luxury of the Protector’s private cabin, Jezekiah Van Buren leaned forward for a better view. Even this far out, he recognized the misty outlines of Maui and Kauai to the north of the island chain. To the south, he made out the Big Island, Hawaii itself. And Oahu, dead ahead, its outline etched in his heart.

Home. After three years of living the myth out on the galactic rim, he’d almost convinced himself that Home World was all a fantasy. Now, the beauty of the reality surprised him. Though not half as much, as the thrill he felt just in being here. The shuttle banked north, following the island chain to the space port up on Niihau. Jezekiah twisted in his seat to keep Oahu in sight as long as possible. Foolish to welcome the sight of home. There was nothing for him on Earth: no hope, no freedom – just Mother’s duty and Leticia’s hatred. He did not want to be here. Yet his body felt the islands’ call and his soul sang with joy. Sensors woven into the fabric of the seat picked up the telltale changes in his body’s chem signals that betrayed his eagerness and fed them to ShipMind. The shuttle upped screen magnification instantly. Squinting, he glimpsed the sunlit sparkle on Pearl Harbor before it vanished behind the gray-green coast.

“You sure your sister ain’t going to knife me, Milord?” The worried voice of the pretty boy wearing Jezekiah’s clothes broke his reverie.

Milord. The very title sounded like a death knell. He’d managed to forget, these past couple of years, that he was condemned to be the future Lord High Protector of Earth. Jezekiah rose, put on a smile to disguise the loathing in the thought, and scrounged memory for the boy’s name. He came up blank. “Quite. Unless you open your mouth and let her hear that accent.” Simple cosmetics let the crewman – ah, Roy, that was the name - fake the fiery red hair and impossibly blue eyes of the Great Family Van Buren, but the sweat sheening his skin was real fear. Ad-

mirable bravery, nonetheless, for a Sprite. SpriteType was gene coded for beauty, not courage. He pulled Roy's collar straighter, smoothed the silken drape of his double's blouse to show the flame-orchid crest emblazoned on it to better effect. No point telling the boy now that little sister Leticia was not really the reason they were trading places. "Just do the smile and nod. That's all anybody's expecting."

Which was as well, since their disguises consisted of nothing more than hair dye and contact lenses. He could have had the ship's surgeon do a thorough job, of course, But that would have made the switch official. Made it part of the ship's records, got it posted to NetMind. Odds were too great Leticia would be monitoring ship's records, looking for any hint he was planning something exotic. He had no desire to gift dear little Leticia a heads up on this switch. He was too eager to reach the Manor alive.

Jezeiah circled his stand-in, checking for any glaring flaws. The resemblance wouldn't pass more than a casual glance: the boy was a bit younger than his own twenty-three years, a bit narrower in the shoulders. Still, the lad bore himself well, and had a SpriteType's instinctive flair. He swept his jittering doppelganger a formal salaam. "You are perfection personified, Milord."

"Yuh-huh. Scuttlebutt's putting odds on blood, it is. 'T'ain't bettin' in my favor, neither, they ain't."

"The bet's on my blood, not yours."

"Yuh-huh. Less'n your sister gets eager." Roy's eyes searched his, seeking reassurance. "So why's she want to kill you anyway?"

It was a better question than the boy should be asking. The engineered characteristics that went into the SpriteType gene pack were designed to produce happy-go-lucky personalities in exquisitely beautiful bodies, not deep thinkers. But Type coding only guaranteed looks and talents, not luck. A Sprite who'd been forced to live by his wits the way this one had learned to think about things like surviving the night. He knew how that felt. Rather too well, in fact. But those were not memories he could afford at the moment. Or ever, if he had a choice.

"Wish I knew," was all he said. It was the simple, wholehearted truth. Leticia didn't want the Ring. Never had. Nor was she supposed to know anything about her part in the treaty he had worked out. Of course, with Leticia 'wasn't supposed to' didn't mean much. He pretended his sudden shudder was due to the cool air. Still, Kip Marsden would have alerted him had Leticia pried into his node too far; even Lush – no, better learn to think of his baby sister as Leticia - had never outwitted Kip. Yet. So Leticia shouldn't have any reason to want to kill him. Yet she had most certainly spent a goodly part of the past few months trying. That was one of the main reasons he was coming home in such a hurry – he wanted this treaty ratified before that damned assassin of hers got lucky. The other reason was on Den Lupus, preparing his alternatives. If this treaty failed, Strongarm would take the Van Buren Commonwealth down with it.

He couldn't afford to worry that possibility right now. Jezeiah straightened the Sprite's shoulders, tugged the trousers to a sharper crease. "Doesn't matter for you, in any case. You will be under the protection of the Protector's own Sec chief. No one is going to risk attacking you." He hoped.

He stood back, considered the effect. Not bad at all, for a joy toy who'd been gracing a petty officer's bed this morning. It would do for distance work, and Kip Marsden would make sure the KnowNet cams kept their distance. Past that - Mother was clued. And on Earth that was all that mattered.

Which bent the odds of making it to the Manor alive in his favor. Assuming, of course, that Leticia hadn't got clever while he'd been gone. Assuming that she hadn't clued her assassin to anticipate precisely such a diversion. He forced the odds on that out of mind. Still, if the last few attempts were any indication, her hired killer would get quite close enough to recognize the substitution. Ideally, just not in time to find Jezeiah in the crew line.

Jezeiah dropped back onto the shuttle's seat. The tendril of ShipMind woven into the soft leather read his measure, molded the cushions to him. He'd lost the habit of luxury these past two years; now, he allowed himself a moment simply to luxuriate in its enveloping comfort. He'd lost his edge in the Family games, too, though. That was the real worry. The little voice at the back of his mind recognized the bitter tinge in the thought. He hadn't lost his edge, it murmured. He'd blunted it, deliberately and with enthusiasm. The thought of what Mother would say if he were fool enough to share that particular truth made him grin.

"T'ain't funny from my end, it ain't." Roy jammed hands on hips and scowled. "I still got time to back out of this, I do."

Not really, Jezeiah thought, but there was no point in telling the boy so. Maybe he should drug the poor sot after all. Would not do at all if the fellow ran screaming for shelter when he met Leticia's hatred at face range. He decided against it. Mother was clued; terror and Kip Marsden would handle the rest.

"Sorry." He put his working smile on, watched the lad relax at its false re-assurance. "I was just thinking what a lucky sot you are. You will be my personal guest, remember. You get to sleep VIP, eat VIP, even screw VIP if you want. It struck me funny that you should worry."

There, that put the dreamy look back in the lad's eyes. He really was a lucky sot; his dreams were simple. Jezeiah felt a sudden pulse in the energy field encircling his Ring finger and tamped the jealousy down. He'd need to find gloves. Thick ones: the energy field that was the Heir's Ring lit its yellow diamond shell from within. The result wrapped a cold, golden star around his finger. In a crewman's line, it would stand out like a system buoy. Or an assassin's beacon, in this case.

So, then. One more item on the to-do list. For these last few minutes, though, he was still free. If he played his hand right, he'd be back off Earth in a week. Without the Ring this time. Without the threat of the Protectorship hanging over his head. Free, once and for all and forever.

He upped the screens' magnification again, shifted focus to Oahu. The tiny colored flecks he'd seen before bloomed into sails where windsurfers rode the breakers. Beyond them, Diamond Head's blunt cone loomed over the curve of white sand that was Waikiki. The familiar blackened skeletons of ancient towers broke the jungle along the shoreline, a long, dark thread binding the Manor to his Family's history.

"Scrat me," said an awestruck whisper at his shoulder. "Those Home World stories really are true, they are." Roy had peered out with him, sham dignity forgotten. "Always thought the legends were sawyered, I did." The boy's lips and eyes formed matching o's of wonder. Decidedly not an acceptable Van Buren expression.

"Some of them are. But not Hawaii. There's no need to lie about Hawaii." Which tidbit was itself a lie. Still... no point ruining the lad's fantasy. He'd make a fine bit of free PR once he was back out on the rim. And Makers knew – he corrected the Lupan expression – God knew 'free' was all Earth could afford these days.

The shuttle banked lightly, angling toward the great public port on tiny Niihau. Docking at three minutes, Milord, ShipMind announced. After two years holding his own on the rim, the title jarred. The reception party is assembled.

The muscles between his own shoulder blades tightened with the words. Jezeiah rose, shook his crewman's coverall loose. He touched knuckles to forehead, crewman style, pinched color into the lad's cheek. "Smile. You're on."

He felt the old, cold calculations settle in behind his eyes. His pulse steadied, the old half-smile formed of itself. So, then. He was home.



Earlier Van Buren Protectors had carved Earth's deep space port out of Niihau's broken volcano. Port facilities were carved into the inside curve of the mountain itself, creating a stone pueblo that overlooked the magnificent bay. Shambling along in the sweating crew line, Jezekiah risked a casual check back at the shuttle. Mother's personal ship nestled on the Protector's private landing pad, sleek and slim as a baroque pearl against the sapphire sea. Beyond it, a TransitLine cruise ship was freshly docked at the tip of the curve. The line of disembarking tourists snagged where it snaked behind the glittering dignitaries swarming Mother's dock. Fathers from the full dozen worlds of the Van Buren Commonwealth worlds lifted children onto their shoulders to catch a live-eye glimpse of a Van Buren prince. The children, less concerned with princes than pleasure, squealed in delight and played catch-as-catch-can with the KnowNet cams whisking past.

Nice touch, that cruise ship. Gave him a flood of tourists to blend into. Had to be Mother's work: it would take Van Buren level clearance to permit a hoi polloi liner to dock while one of the Family was on the field. Odd though, for Mother – she hadn't allowed the rank and file within weapon range since the Tong rebellion.

“Aw, damn me, they lied, they did!” The woman ahead of Jezekiah wobbled to a stop. She had the massive build and albino complexion of the deep space mining clans. Explanation enough for her troubles. In a pinch, a ship-bred miner could survive a good fifteen minutes in full vacuum. In weather they were defenseless. Already her skin was reddening in the Hawaiian sun.

And yet... there was wonder in her eyes. Glancing down the queue Jezekiah saw that wonder reflected in a hundred faces. He'd seen it in a thousand tourist vids, some of them his own propaganda. The difference was that this time he felt it himself. This time he, too, felt every cell in his body thrill to the feel of Earth. He felt the pull, the sense that this place was right, that this was where he belonged. Genetic manipulation had adapted humanity to survive the physical demands of other worlds. But even the most radically engineered Types, even polymorphic LupanType, were still fundamentally human. Earth was home world, and every cell in every body on that dock knew it.

The wonder still shone in the miner's eyes when her knees gave out. She dropped straight, nearly taking Jezekiah with her.

“Where you popper?” Jezekiah asked, using crew pidgin. Clansmen normally packed small, pop-up umbrellas to protect their skins from planetside suns. The umbrellas also prevented ship bred miners from attacks of psychotic agoraphobia at the sight of open sky, but no one with a sense of self-preservation reminded them of that.

“No thought t'need it. It's Paradise they said.” She breathed deep, nearly choked on air wet and heavy with the scents of ocean salt and metal tang. “It's lie, they did.”

“No lie. Just summer.” Jezekiah looked up as an airborne Sec cam buzzed the line. It slowed as it reached him, and he felt his skin tingle as it ran bioscan check on him.

“No screens, either – scrat that thing!” The miner woman swung her duffle bag wide off her shoulder, making the Sec cam bounce in its wake.

“Good shot.” The cam zoomed off, apparently satisfied. Still, he'd been spotted, no question. So, then. He could expect to find Kip Marsden waiting for him the other side of customs. Which couldn't be soon enough. Damn, it was hot out here. “Need hand?” he asked as the miner doubled over her duffle, wheezing.

“It's no groundhog dainty can be carryin' me.” Her words were stronger than her voice.

“Lender, only,” Jezekiah said. He offered her his free arm, bracing himself so the weight she put on it wouldn’t stagger him. Truth was, it felt good to simply be himself, do simple, honest work. Good to be able to speak from his heart, for himself. Likely the last time he’d dare such honesty, he thought, and his little voice chided him for the resentment.

Besides, he’d forgotten himself just how sticky hot Hawaii’s weather really was. The crew’s customs line snaked along the unshielded section of the dock, leaving the off-world hands to either exult or fry in the Hawaiian sun while they inched toward the bureaucrats manning the crew customs booths.

A hundred feet or so ahead a trio of towering pylons flanked Niihau Port’s customs terminal. Open scanner booths filled the space between the pylons’ stone bases. Tourist scans, those. Their section of the dock was weather shielded. Paying visitors were sheltered from the unpleasant inconvenience of real weather. Mother wasn’t about to disappoint the chow line. For once, Jezekiah caught himself resenting the fact.

“Damme, worse’n scrattin’ Streiker, it is.” The miner wheezed, leaned on him hard.

“T’ain’t, either.” Jezekiah drew breath to chuckle at the defensiveness in his tone, wound up choking on a gush of hot, wet air instead. “Chance, at least, on Home World.”

“Fuh. Maybe.” On Streiker, parents careless enough to birth a natural were sterilized. The baby itself was simply thrown out onto the blue Streikern ice.

She eyed him speculatively, sudden curious. “You Home World local, I bet. Maker, maybe, I bet.”

“Half true.” Alone of all the worlds of the Commonwealth, only Earth still produced true, genetically unmodified human beings. Only on Earth, on Home World, could one still find completely natural humans, those astonishingly unpredictable people untouched by genetic engineering whose looks and talents and traits were determined by luck rather than a pre-packaged Type code. Only Home World still housed Makers. Made for improbable FunNet romances on the rim and unenviable living conditions on Earth. Among the Lupans, Makers ranked one step below God Himself.

“Got hard body check coming, you do, yeah?” The miner’s voice called Jezekiah’s attention back to the line.

“Yeah.” Dark memories tried to well up. He shoved them down. Not in time.

The miner straightened, though the motion cost her, and laid a kindly hand on his shoulder. “Give for take – tell ‘em you miner clan, you want. Jump you in my own self, you want.” She managed a leer in compliment and gold-capped teeth flashed in the sun.

“Thanks, but can’t.” It was no mean offer. She might be nothing more than hired crew on Earth, but she had the rank to grant him status within her own clan. He pried her fingers from his shoulder enough to kiss their tips. “Got family waiting other side.” That half of said family was trying to kill him wasn’t her worry.

“Your call.” She wheezed in earnest. Bad sign; humidity out here would rot her lungs if she stayed unsheltered too long.

Craning to see past the curve of the line, Jezekiah ran his gaze past the dark uniforms of the crew and customs folk, looking for Kip Marsden’s broad figure. He caught the recurrent

flash of reflected sunlight from the transit shuttle station at the terminal exit. But no sign of Kip Marsden. A flicker of fresh worry tickled his gut. That Sec cam had already registered his biopat. Plugged into NetMind as he was, Kip would have pinpointed his location on the instant. Ought to be a whole Sec team strolling the dock

by now. So where was he?

Damn and damn again. He had a whole new problem, if Kip didn't show. Crew customs might not be as comfortable as the tourists', but its scanners were just as efficient. He almost wished for a moment he truly was an Earth-born natural. Then he could stride through bioscan with impunity – without a Type's genetic ID code, the man-made interstellar brain that was NetMind could not 'see' him. As it was, even the most cursory scan would spot his biopat in a heartbeat. At which point bureaucratic hell would break loose. Which was precisely the kind of ruckus his would-be killer would be looking for.

Something pale near the booth's pylon caught his eye. A man in a light suit, broad-brimmed hat pushed back on his white-blond hair, shouldered through the in-coming queue. He was tall enough to seem slender, but his lazy sneer made a burly deckhand change his mind about shoving back.

Aryans. Jezekiah let the miner's weight bow him a bit lower. Trouble by definition. Ugly trouble if Mother had the Aryans looking for him instead of Kip Marsden. AryanType was hard-coded suspicious, and Mother's interrogators were trained to indulge the trait. The Aryan ran his cold, blue gaze across the nearest crew folk without interest, then settled his back against a pylon, pulling his broad-brimmed hat low against the sun. Watching.

Interesting, his little voice murmured. The Aryan carried no scanner. Despite the heat Jezekiah shivered. The fellow looked vaguely familiar, though he couldn't put a name to the face. Could only mean he was attached to the Manor staff. It also meant the fellow would know him. He'd certainly be easy enough to spot. Even an eyeball scrutiny would recognize him under the hair dye and contacts, if someone knew who to look for. The Aryan was obviously looking. Looking eyeball only, keeping it out of Net. Easy enough to vanish him, too, out of Net.

So, then. Little sister Letticia had learned to hedge her bets. Be easy enough to spin a tale for the Aryans, send them looking for an imposter. Might not even have needed a cover story. A simple order would suffice; Aryans would carry out any Van Buren order that didn't directly threaten Mother. Letticia could have him picked off out here and cry oops later. Quite a nice idea, actually, his little voice noted. Warranted remembering. Assuming, of course, he survived it.

For a moment, he considered simply pulling off his gloves. Let the Heir's Ring proclaim his identity. That was the easy way out, the path of perks and privileges. The path he'd vowed to escape. He left the gloves on.

Beside him, the miner doubled over, gasping, her face a dangerous shade of red. Jezekiah wrapped her arm over his shoulder, half-dragged her to the shade of the port wall. Helped that the move put the crew queue between himself and the Aryan.

Jezekiah lowered her to a squat, eased her head down to her knees. No question that she needed a medic. Stretching, he spotted the medics' Helping Hand sign just beyond the crew customs booth and nearly whooped with delight. The medics' booth ran straight through the mountain wall to open out on the terminal passage. Once inside he could simply catch a tour car to the Manor.

He squeezed the miner's shoulder gently. "Stay put. I'm going to send help." Head down, he eased toward the customs booth, trailing a hand along the rock face like a spacer who'd yet to find his groundhog legs. Keeping the queue between himself and the Aryan, Jezekiah stumbled toward the 'authorized staff' door at the back of the customs booth.

"Good try, monk. Get back in line." A customs agent blocked his way with a scrawny arm. The man's features had the humorless set of a NumbersType whose parents were either too poor or too cheap to pay for anything more than the most basic gene pack.

"Need water," Jezekiah croaked. Hot as it was he didn't even have to fake it.

“Yeah, sure. You and every other monkey trying to dodge scan.” The agent moved to shove him back.

Jezeiah locked the agent’s hand on his shoulder. He leaned forward and put heart and soul into preliminary retching noises.

“Gobbing monkey! Get over there!” The agent dodged aside, shoved him hard and fast toward the Helping Hand counter. “Just make sure you check yourself through here afterward!”

Hand clamped over his mouth, Jezeiah waved a bleary assent.

It was already crowded inside the station, and raucous. Crew folk provided the crowd, jump suited men and women huddled arms-on-knees in the chairs lining the walls. The ruckus came from a group of bejeweled Pandari merchants whose retainers were demanding personal heaters at the top of their collective and impressive lungs.

The humans who had settled Pandar world had been gene-coded to survive the mummifying aridity and UV radiation of Pandar’s blue-white sun. Even within the protection of the terminal’s weather screens, this lot needed breathing filters to survive Hawaii’s humid air. They huddled together in a brilliant clump, embroidered collars pulled up around their ears, nictating membranes flickering in distress across their eyes. The metallic threads on their robes raised rainbow reflections on their blue-black skin that matched the enameled patterns of their breathing filters.

A harried medic shoved a teardrop container of water into Jezeiah’s hand in passing, and Jezeiah let himself sag against the wall, cradling its moist coolness against his face. The coolness revived the cold little voice at the back of his mind, reminded him he needed to get out of here.

After he kept his promise. He was past the Aryan’s line of sight here. Already ID’d, too: every doorway in every public building had bioscanners built into it. The medical staff might be too busy to monitor scan, but SecNet would have fed his reading straight into Kip Marsden’s link. Even if not – he could slip his hand into any sync link in the terminal, and the resources of the planet were his. He didn’t need to run any more. At least, not yet.

Jezeiah worked his way over to an open bin of water teardrops behind the staff counter near the terminal side door. He filched an armload of teardrops from the bin, eyeballed the terminal passage for his escape route while he shoved them into a Helping Hand carryall. Fifty feet beyond the station, the terminal arched open onto a fern studded stone plaza. Through the exit arch, he could see the sunlit flash of departing transit cars. He hoisted the carryall higher on his shoulder. All he needed now was to collar a medic and he’d be on one of those cars.

Odd, though. Still no sign of Kip. He ran a quick scan down the terminal passage as he turned back toward the dockside of the station. No Kip - but he glimpsed a different figure lounging against a comm kiosk, watching the other tourists trudge past with professional indifference. He’d half-seen that figure on half a dozen worlds between here and Den Lupus, felt that presence in his gut.

So, then. So much for keeping his word. No hope of keeping his promise now, nor time to mourn the loss. He closed his eyes against the upswell of shame. No choice, his little voice urged. He needed to be out of here before the assassin spotted him. Dead, he was no good to anyone.

Jezeiah bumped into one of the Pandari retainers. He used a bowed apology to put the woman’s voluminous robes between himself and the assassin’s line of sight. Realized with a shock of relief that the jeweled pattern of her robes marked her as a medic. Stifling a grin, he shocked her to silence with a hand clamped around her shoulders. He had her steered half-way to the dockside door before her nictating membranes stopped flickering enough for her to actually take note of him.

“No questions.” Jezeiah used his formal voice, tone calculated to demand obedience. “A Van Buren operative

needs your aid. You'll find her squatting against the wall by the crew line. Treat her well." Jezekiah shoved the carryall of water into the medic's hands. He clasped the retainer's shoulder, added a meaningful smile. "The Protector will reward you. Now go."

Eyes still flickering, the medic swung the carryall over her bejeweled shoulder and strode outside.

So, then. He'd kept the dirt out of his soul a few minutes longer. Elbowing his way back to the water bin, Jezekiah filled another carryall. He swung it over his shoulder and strode out of the Helping Hand booth's terminal door and into the trudging mass of tourists. With luck, the assassin would take him for one of the station hands assigned to keep newcomers lubricated until their transportation arrived.

Only his luck didn't hold. He made the mistake of looking back just before he reached the exit. Down the corridor, the assassin looked up, looked his way. And smiled a feline, predatory smile.

Damn! Jezekiah's mouth went dry. Only chance now was to reach the next transit car before the assassin got within range. There were a couple of still-empty cars at the stop. Around him, the crowd of tourists slowed as they hit the hot, humid wall of Hawaiian air. He shifted the carryall higher on his shoulder and picked up his pace. If he beat the tourists, he could commandeer the car before the assassin caught up.

Something hard hit him hard in the chest. Jezekiah slammed the carryall around into it, his pulse jumping.

"Hei, you!" A short young woman in a red sarong glared up at him from beneath a skewed plumeria wreath. She took in his crewman's coverall and changed the glare to a smile of patently false welcome.

Joy toys, he thought. "Sorry," he muttered, and moved to skip past.

"You wan' gul? Show you good time, eh?" She was barely shoulder height on him, but she shifted with him to block his path.

"Later."

Her smile widened, though not enough to touch her eyes. Clearly this was a girl who did not enjoy her work. Odd, then, that her stable master hadn't used Seed on her – but no, not odd, not on Earth. Grandfather Ho didn't distribute Venus Seed on Earth. Mother'd seen to that. He brushed past her and kept walking.

"Eh, wha' kine spacer no wan' gul?" She back tracked with him. "You stay come. Give good time, eh?" She was a tasty little piece, some primal section of his mind noted. Buxom but willow-hipped and lithe. With clear brown skin that bespoke fresh air and sunshine rather than a Seed sot's haggard, driven lust.

"No money." He said it sharper this time, and louder. He put his free hand out, palm up in peace sign, and brushed past her again. Behind him, he could hear a flock of tourists gaining ground, aiming for the nearest transit car.

"No hu-hu. You pay later." She skipped ahead to block him again, giving him a view down her cleavage that tickled his groin.

Damned determined little piece. Or desperate. He refused to let himself consider the kind of penalty she must face for failure. "Later." He didn't need to fake the desperation in his own voice. He lengthened his stride to jogging pace.

The joy toy jogged backward with him. She wasn't even sweating, he noticed with envy. "Heia, you don' like gul?" Her gaze took on a narrow-eyed assessment – tinged, he noted, with

relief. “You wan’ boy, eh? You come. Got lots pretty boy.”

“No!”

She skipped into his path, nearly tripping him. Sidelong, he saw her throw a glance past his shoulder. He followed her line of sight to a trio of groundskeepers with the boulder builds of Samoans. Even in this sun, only one of them – an ambulatory mountain with a gleaming, black mole at corner of his jaw - wore a broad rimmed straw hat. They were watching the exchange with interest. And ambling closer.

Damn and damn again! The exchange had cost him precious moments. The tourists flocked past to engulf the transit car. Jezekiah swore softly. The only other empty car sat at the end of the plaza, far enough off to discourage most travelers. He shifted the carryall to the other shoulder, forcing the girl to skip out of its way.

Behind him the Samoans had spread out across the path. Their broad figures blocked his view of the terminal. Which was as well, since they also blocked the assassin’s sight of him. He’d have been relieved, had mole face not been grinning so broadly. The sight stirred memories that he refused to awake.

It took him two steps before the realization struck home. He glanced back again, mouth suddenly dry. Not a mole on that Samoan. It was a tracker stud, one of a pair that would be embedded in temple and jaw. The mark of a Registered killer. That explained the hat.

So, then. He was being herded.

He lengthened his stride abruptly. Swearing, the joy toy grabbed his arm. No invite this time. Her grip was hard as a man’s. Whirling, Jezekiah swung the carryall hard at the girl’s head.

She dodged, stepped in under it to jab her fingers into Jezekiah’s wrist. His arm went numb. She yanked the sack out of his hand, smacked the carryall into his midriff hard enough to double him around it. He heard the water slosh near his ears. Then her knee caught him between the eyes and the world went black.

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