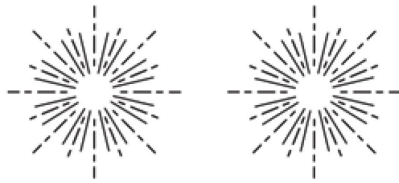


MESSINANTS

Pyreans Book 2



S. H. JUCHA

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Despite the assistance I've received from others, all errors are mine.

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book. Some alien names are used frequently. For pronunciation of many of them, refer to the glossary. For instance, Jatouche is pronounced as jaw-toosh, with a hard "j," as are all the Jatouche names beginning with "j."

- 1 -
Patch Death

“Major Finian, we’ve got a suspicious death,” Commandant Emerson Strattleford called over his comm unit.

“Where, Commandant?” Liam asked. It was late evening, and Liam was off duty, which was why he was surprised to receive Emerson’s call.

“Locate my device, Major. I’ll preserve the scene until your people arrive,” Emerson replied and abruptly ended the call.

Liam checked his comm unit for the duty roster and selected a name. When his call was answered, he said, “Sergeant Lindstrom, you’re authorized to locate the commandant’s position. Contact Sergeant Rodriguez and a forensics team to investigate a death at his location. Send me the reports when you file them.”

“Understood, Sir,” Cecilia replied. She accessed the JOS station’s security personnel database, pulled up the code for the commandant’s comm unit, and pinged it. Then she called Miguel and passed on the major’s orders.

Emerson stared dejectedly at the scantily clad body of Lily Tormelli. She was splayed across the bed, and her pose suggested she was asleep, except Lily was absolutely still, her eyes open and staring.

The commandant’s evening had been flipped on its head. During the years, he’d availed himself of the services of more than a few coin-kitties. Then, ten months ago, he’d met Lily at the Starlight, one of the station’s more prestigious cantinas. It was an unlikely pairing. Emerson was a short man with a strident personality, which didn’t engender the amorous attentions of women, including service providers.

Lily was Emerson’s physical opposite — tall, long-legged, and lithe. But, she was a kind and gentle woman. There was another element to their relationship, which was in addition to the exchange of coin and services.

Lily was addicted to streak. It was a plant-based narcotic produced by the downsidiers, the population of Pyreans who occupied the planet's domes.

Emerson was under no illusion that his position as commandant might have been the primary reason for their seemingly chance encounter at the cantina. He wasn't happy to accommodate Lily's habit, but, at the same time, he would have done anything to be with her.

Lily's weekly supply of streak was shipped to Emerson via the El, the elevator car that connected the station to the domes. Addressed to the station's commandant, the package passed through freight customs without inspection.

Knowing there were precious few minutes before security and forensics arrived, Emerson scanned the scene. There was nothing to be done about his DNA. It would be found throughout Lily's cabin. That wasn't his primary concern. He couldn't believe that Lily had taken her life, which the scene suggested. It wasn't like her, and, while the drug was addictive, it wasn't debilitating.

Emerson carefully searched the dresser, nightstands, couch, and chairs in the richly appointed sleeping quarters. There was no indication of pill vials, syringes, or any implement by which Lily might have taken her life.

Peering closely at Lily, Emerson performed a cursory inspection of her body. He couldn't find any indication of trauma. Her skin appeared as flawless as ever.

Emerson did find Lily's comm unit. It was partially tucked under her arm. Using a disposable wipe, he pulled the device free and was surprised to discover it open, the virtual screen projecting above the device. That was an odd thing for Lily to do. She jealously guarded her comm unit. As an independent coin-kitty, her contacts and comm history were incredibly valuable to her and a good many people.

Examining the screen, Emerson saw a message meant for him. It said, "Bitty, I'm sorry. I can't live without my streak, and I don't want to hurt you. I love you."

The commandant used his comm unit to take a snapshot of Lily's screen, then, with a second wipe, he cleared the message. He was about to close the comm, when he halted. Instead, Emerson accessed the device's

system controls and selected the wipe function. When the comm unit chimed, marking the end of the operation, he closed the unit and tucked it under her arm, where he'd found it.

Emerson got rid of the wipes by flushing them down the sink. As they rapidly dissolved in the running water, he heard, "Commandant? It's Sergeant Lindstrom."

"Here, Sergeant," Emerson replied, stepping from the bathroom, his voice guiding Cecilia into the sleeping quarters.

"I was told we're considering this death as suspicious, Commandant," Cecilia said, asking for confirmation.

"Investigate carefully and fully, Sergeant. Am I clear?" Emerson replied, his eyes boring into Cecilia's.

"Crystal clear, Commandant," Cecilia responded, snapping upright. A question was on the tip of her tongue, but Emerson quickly vacated the sleeping quarters. Seconds later, she heard the cabin door slide open and close, and she was left alone with the deceased.

With little to go on, Cecilia began documenting the scene. She activated her comm unit with a touch of her thumb. Starting from the cabin's front door, she recorded the entire salon and then moved into the sleeping quarters. She paid particular attention to the body, leaning in for closeups of the limbs, torso, and face.

Cecilia heard the cabin door slide open and Miguel Rodriguez call out, "Security."

"In the sleeping quarters with the body, Miguel," Cecilia replied. "I'm nearly done recording the scene," she added, when Miguel walked into the room.

"Do we have an ID, Cecilia?" Miguel asked.

"Negative," Cecilia replied.

Miguel pulled his DAD, a portable DNA analysis device, also known as a sniffer. He touched it to the dead woman's toe and waited.

The DAD accessed a database, which held the DNA profile of every stationer born aboard the JOS, the Jenkels Orbital Platform, in the past 129 years. The database included spacers, active and retired, and the occupants of the *Honora Belle*, the Pyreans' colony ship. It didn't include

the downsidiers, who occupied the domes on the planet, much to security's frustration.

"Her name's Lily Tormelli, and this is her cabin," Miguel said, when the DAD returned a match. "She's a registered coin-kitty. How did the commandant say he got word of this death?"

"He didn't," Cecilia replied, closing her comm unit. "All he said to me was make sure that we investigate this death thoroughly. Then he left. More like he ran," she added, flicking a hand toward the door.

"Hmm, strange," Miguel commented.

"Sergeant Rodriguez, forensics is here," Jorge Olas called from the cabin door.

"Sleeping quarters," Miguel shouted.

"Touch anything?" Jorge asked, as his team entered the room. He nodded appreciatively, when he received negative replies. "Anyone else been here?"

"The commandant was here when I arrived," Cecilia replied, "but he left quickly. I didn't get to ask him a single question."

"Odd," Jorge commented, and Cecilia and Miguel exchanged quick glances. That's what they were all thinking. "You two done?" Jorge asked.

"All yours, Jorge," Miguel said, stepping away from the bed.

"What do we have?" Jorge asked, making a cursory examination of the body, as he pulled on gloves.

"We've been told by the commandant to treat the circumstances as suspicious and to check every detail," Cecilia replied.

"Doubly odd," Jorge replied, studying Cecilia's face. Her serious expression told him what he needed to know. "You two want to wait for the cursory examination before I move the body or get my report later?"

"Wait," the two sergeants replied in unison.

A forensics tech pulled a scope, hooked it to a monitor, and began a slow scan of the body from the feet upwards. Jorge hovered over the monitor. When the tech finished, she looked at Jorge, who nodded. She slipped the scope into its sleeve on her belt, and she and a male tech turned the body over.

“Wait,” Miguel ordered. “Roll her back.” With gloved hands, he slipped out the comm unit from under Lily’s body. “You’re good to go,” he added to Jorge, and the techs rolled the body over.

Miguel scanned the comm unit with the sniffer, but he found only the one DNA profile on the unit, Lily’s.

Meanwhile, the male tech employed his own sniffer and was checking the room. In seconds, it beeped, indicating a match. Then, it continued to beep regularly, announcing new matches, until the tech shut down the audio signal.

“Busy woman,” Miguel quietly commented to Cecilia.

“Look at her,” Cecilia replied. “Beautiful and statuesque. Not to mention that she leases a private cabin instead of working out of a club.”

“A lot of coin changing hands,” Miguel agreed.

“Lift the hair. Check behind the ears and through the scalp,” Jorge ordered. Monitoring the scope’s output, he said, “Check behind the other ear.”

“Confirmed,” the female tech said.

“Sniff them,” Jorge ordered.

“Only the deceased’s DNA,” the male tech replied.

“What did you find?” Miguel asked.

“The woman’s been patched ... one patch tucked behind each ear. We found only her DNA on them,” Jorge replied. “It’s looking like suicide. She could have gotten the patches from med staff, trading for coin or services. I’ll know more after a full examination.”

While the forensics team went about moving the body to a gurney, Cecilia and Miguel stepped into the salon.

“Check this,” Miguel said, holding up the dead woman’s comm unit.

“Cleared?” Cecilia said, reading the small system’s status window.

“She could have wanted to prevent her client list from falling into other hands,” Miguel suggested.

“She’s a registered coin-kitty. It’s a legal profession, and she lives in a nice area of the JOS. Anyone who wanted to know who her clients were only had to drop a snoop cam in the ceiling, with a view of the corridor,” Cecilia replied.

“So why is the commandant telling us to investigate this death as suspicious?” Miguel asked.

* * * *

Early the next morning, Major Finian was in his office, reviewing the sergeants’ report and the preliminary forensic analysis on Lily Tormelli. His people had worked late due to the commandant’s interest in the case. Emerson wasn’t a well-respected man, but that didn’t change the way the security and forensic teams performed their jobs. Liam liked to think that was because officers below Emerson’s rank set good examples, the likes of who sat in front of him, Lieutenant Devon Higgins.

“What am I missing, Liam?” Devon asked. “This woman has been addicted to streak for years. According to forensics, her entire hair length, every seventy-eight centimeters, tested positive for the drug. More than likely, her supplier cut her off, she panicked, and used some illegal patches.”

“When was the last time you heard of a patch death that wasn’t administered by the med teams, Devon?” Liam asked.

“Actually, not one, since it became legal to request the procedure for terminal conditions,” Devon replied. “Maybe the woman just wanted privacy.”

“Possible, but you’re forgetting that patches are under direct control of the forensics head,” Liam replied.

“Oh,” Devon said quietly, realizing Liam was speaking about Margaret O’Toole, which meant that inventory access was tightly controlled. “There was that theft years ago,” Devon suddenly recalled.

“Ten patches, seven years ago,” Liam agreed. “And there was a spate of suspicious deaths, following the theft, within the following nine months.”

“Yes, I recall the basics. Stationers were using the patches, but the postmortems indicated they didn’t have any underlying terminal symptoms. Everyone thought that it was the spread of some sort of

mysterious space dementia. But, I don't remember the outcome of those cases. I was sitting for my officer's exams, at the time."

"There was no outcome, Devon. Eight of the ten patches were used, and forensics listed the deaths as unexplained suicides."

"So, ten patches are taken. Eight are used immediately. Are you saying the patches that Lily used came from these ten?" Devon asked.

"I checked with Margaret this morning," Liam said. "The two patches on our deceased are from the group of ten that was stolen. And, before you ask, Margaret's inventory of deadly items has been kept in a vault ever since the robbery, and she showed me the electronic methods used to procure and account for them. I haven't a clue how anyone could get two more of them now and neither does Margaret."

"Who sits on two patches for seven years? Are you thinking this woman wrestled with thoughts of suicide for years and finally killed herself after all this time?" Devon asked.

"That scenario doesn't make sense to me, Devon," Liam replied.

"But why do I think that you want us to continue to investigate this as a suspicious death?" Devon asked.

"I was at your desk, when those patch deaths occurred," Liam replied. "I had a theory, at the time, but I didn't have an opportunity to discuss it with the major, who sat at this desk."

"Who was that?" Devon asked.

"The last of the patch deaths," Liam said.

"I think I'll wait to hear your theory before I say anything more," Devon replied.

"In order, the deaths were: a maintenance tech, a prominent JOS businessman, a cantina owner, a freight supervisor, a cantina owner, a coin-kat, a freight unloader, and Major Dorsey. Each death was accomplished by a patch on the neck or behind the ear."

"Which leads me to wonder why this woman, Lily, used two patches," Devon mused.

"I have two guesses about that," Liam replied, leaning back in his chair. "She might have thought the efficacy had been reduced over time and wanted to ensure that the patches did the job. Then again, she might have

wanted to ensure that the second patch wasn't left to be used by some unfortunate individual. Putting that aside, there's another reason to pursue this case. Lily Tormelli was Emerson's latest paramour."

Devon narrowed his eyes at Liam. "You've had the commandant followed," he whispered conspiratorially.

"I can't confirm that," Liam replied quietly.

Devon grunted in reply. He appreciated the sentiment. Liam was protecting him from his covert observation of the commandant. There was no doubt in Devon's mind why Liam was doing it. Ever since the discovery of the illegal liaison between Lise Panoy, the downside governor, and Emerson, the pair of men were attempting to figure how they could introduce their improperly obtained evidence to expose the commandant.

"Here's what I can't figure, Liam. I looked up Lily's online ads. She was an incredibly striking woman. How could the commandant afford sessions with her on a regular basis?"

"Who said he paid full price?" Liam asked.

"Her streak?" Devon guessed, and Liam nodded his head. "You think Emerson was facilitating Lily's delivery?"

"We know how tough it is for a streak user to get a regular supply. Distributors keep popping up, and we keep shutting them down. Lily would have been mighty appreciative of Emerson if he could safely deliver her supply," Liam proposed.

"We're sure there are no manufacturing sources for streak on board?" Devon asked.

"There's no evidence of that on either station, and I don't see Harbour, as captain of the *Belle*, allowing it to be produced in the colony ship's hydroponic gardens," Liam replied. "As far as I know, the only source is still the nut of the plumerase tree."

"Have to give it to Earth's bioengineering efforts," Devon said in disgust. "They take a simple fruit, the plum, and figure they can make it better by creating a version with more sugar. They're successful in that, but it turns out the nut can be processed to produce a dangerous narcotic."

Liam nodded in agreement and added, “What I can’t understand is why Earth chose to add the seeds to the *Honora Belle*’s inventory, and why the first dome settlers chose to plant the seeds.”

“I had a thought,” Devon suddenly said. “What if the target of the patches wasn’t Lily Tormelli but Emerson?”

“Only thing the DAD found on Lily and her comm unit was her DNA, and that includes the patches,” Liam said, sorting through the forensics report to make sure he was correct.

The two men eyed each other, their minds whirling to connect the disparate pieces of the investigation.

“Where do we go from here, Liam?” Devon asked.

“I find it too great a coincidence that Major Dorsey was investigating El cargo shipping at the time of the patch deaths,” Liam replied.

“Do tell?” Devon replied, sitting up in his chair, his interest piqued.

“Yes, and that makes me want to investigate the people who’ve gotten the vacated positions in El custom inspections since the deaths of the individuals.”

“But you don’t want to look at the other deaths?” Devon asked.

“They might have been obstacles to the distributors’ illegal shipping or they might have been innocent bystanders,” Liam replied.

“That latter option is cold, Liam. You think someone stole ten patches and used them to eliminate two cargo personnel. Then they killed six others to hide those deaths?”

“The two cargo personnel were numbers four and seven,” Liam replied. “They were nicely hidden among the group, don’t you think?”

“I’d love to ask Markos Andropov and Giorgio Sestos about this,” Devon remarked, with a nasty grin, referring to the former governor of Pyre and his head of security. “Unfortunately, I don’t see the pair wanting to extend their seventeen-year incarceration sentences just to please us by answering questions about their involvement in illegal narcotics trade.”

Liam matched Devon’s grin, as he added. “I’d love to make it life sentences for both of them.”

“We do have an alternative suspect,” Devon suggested. “The streak shipments are probably small, weekly or biweekly. The ex-governor and his security stooge have been locked up for a much longer time.”

“You’re insinuating the new governor, Lise Panoy, might have something to do with the streak shipments,” Liam replied. “I don’t see that. She wouldn’t risk her position. Although, she might be willing to cut off the shipments if she found out about them.”

“So where does this leave us?” Devon asked.

Liam carefully considered his options and then said, “First and foremost, we’ve a legitimate reason to investigate the source of Lily’s streak. Perhaps, by following this legal line of inquiry, we might find a way to put the commandant in jeopardy, if he was facilitating her shipments.”

“Oh, I like the way you think,” Devon replied, his grin splitting his face wide.

-2-
Accusations

Lise Panoy, the domes' governor, and the construction supervisor of the impending fifth agri-dome stepped out of their e-trans.

The interconnecting tunnel to the new agri-dome was recently completed and the pair stood at the far gates, examining the work beyond. Encased in vac suits against Pyre's harsh air, caused by repeated volcanic-like surface activity, the workers controlled small, automated digging vehicles to carve out the dome's outer ring.

Unlike the residential domes, the agri-domes were constructed by sinking the support girders and interlinking panels deep into the surface to prevent unwanted gases from seeping into the airspace occupied by the dome. The construction would allow a small amount of porosity, but that was necessary to facilitate water drainage and ground oxygenation for roots.

"The well strikes have been successful?" Lise asked.

"Yes, Governor. We hit a lake bed, deep underground. The pumps will produce enough water to take care of this agri-dome and another, if we wish," the supervisor replied.

"Excellent, and the anticipated completion time for the dome girders and panels?" Lise asked.

"We estimate about seven and a half months, Governor. The YIPS expects to deliver the first set of girders to the JOS within weeks. We'll be ready for them."

"Has the YIPS obtained priority for the shipments downside?" Lise asked.

The Yellen-Inglehart Processing Station would ship its products to the JOS terminal arms. To reach the domes, the material was transferred through the arms to the lower levels of the El car, the freight level. Girders

were constructed to precise specifications that allowed them to neatly fit within the El's cargo space.

However, the size of the girder and panel shipments required that no other freight be transferred at the same time. Traditionally, the freighting was done during the hours of midnight to four in the morning, and exclusive access to the El's cargo space required the commandant's prior approval.

The supervisor cleared his throat and ducked his head. "I've sent requests, Governor."

"And?" Lise pressed.

"No response from the commandant's office," the supervisor replied. He watched the storm gather in the governor's eyes, and he wished to be anywhere else but standing in front of her. When her comm unit chimed, he could have kissed the caller.

Lise glanced at the caller's ID and signaled the supervisor away with an imperial wave of her fingers. He happily made himself scarce.

"Commandant Strattleford," Lise replied evenly, "I was just speaking about you. My agri-dome supervisor informs me that the YIPS hasn't received your approval for priority freight access to the El for our newest dome's girders and panels."

"Your agri-dome shipments might have to wait, Governor," Emerson replied.

"I presume my recent transfer was to your liking, Emerson," Lise replied, keeping a rein on her temper.

Emerson had demanded an increase in the payments to him after the debacle created by the previous domes' governor, Markos Andropov. The governor's ugly secret of imprisoning a family of empaths was exposed when the eldest daughter, Aurelia Garmenti, escaped the domes, made her way to the JOS, and boarded a mining ship. As events unfolded, Lise failed to keep Emerson apprised of the fine details, which put him in a precarious position with his security staff and many others.

"It's adequate ... for now," Emerson replied tartly. "But you and I have another matter to discuss. A friend of mine committed suicide with two patches."

“I’m sorry to hear that, Commandant, but I don’t see how that pertains to our business,” Lise replied, confused by the subject change.

“She left a message for me, which indicated the patches were meant for me but she couldn’t do it,” Emerson replied. His voice threatened to rise to a screech, as it was wont to do, and he worked to prevent that from happening. He was angry, but his overriding emotion was fear, driven by the thought that he’d escaped a near brush with death.

“Commandant, we don’t have the capability to manufacture patches. They couldn’t have come from downside,” Lise argued. Her mind was working overtime, attempting to figure who might have been trying to take out the commandant. Although she hated the little man, she needed him.

“The woman was hooked on streak, Governor. You do make that, don’t you?” Emerson replied with heat.

“There are elements downside who profit from that. You know that, as well as I do, Commandant. Who was this woman?”

“Her name was Lily Tormelli, Governor. In her message to me, she said she couldn’t live without her streak.”

“Obviously, someone threatened to cut off her supply of the narcotic, Commandant. I’ll investigate this immediately from this side. This type of stupidity is bad for business.”

“You do that, Governor. When you have something useful to tell me, I’ll take the time to review the YIPS and your supervisor’s shipping requests.” Emerson cut the comm, tapped off the monitor’s display of Lily’s death report, and leaned back in his chair. He didn’t know the name of the downsider, who was shipping Lily’s streak to the JOS, which meant he had no idea if that individual was the one who had targeted him. Furthermore, he couldn’t be certain that Lise Panoy wasn’t behind the attempt on his life.

The agri-dome construction supervisor turned from regarding the ongoing work to see if the governor had finished her call. He caught sight of her climbing into what had been their shared e-trans on the far side of the interlock. He let out a deep, long sigh of relief and called for a new vehicle.

Lise arrived at her home and hurried upstairs to her office. Idrian Tuttle and Rufus Stewart were waiting for her, as she requested. Lise stalked across the room to stand in front of them, where she could observe their reactions.

“Which one of you two idiots, or was it both of you, tried to kill the commandant?” she demanded hotly. The reactions she got told her that they weren’t complicit. She held up her hands to cut off their protestations. “Enough,” she declared. “Sit down.”

“What happened, Lise?” Idrian asked.

“Who’s a stationer by the name of Lily Tormelli?” Lise asked instead.

“Uh-oh,” Rufus said softly. “Lily Tormelli has been the commandant’s exclusive coin-kitty for nearly a year.”

“She *was* his coin-kitty,” Lise replied, pacing around the room. “A got a call from the little man himself. He’s holding up our priority El shipments until we find out who got her killed.”

“Lise, you have to back up. What happened?” Idrian pleaded.

Lise sat behind her desk and faced the men on the other side. “According to the commandant, his coin-kitty was addicted to streak. He also said she left him a message that implied someone threatened to cut off her supply unless she patched the commandant. Apparently, the woman liked the little man too much. She patched herself instead, and the commandant is angrier than I’ve ever heard him.”

“Over a coin-kitty?” Rufus asked.

“It is what it is,” Lise said. She drummed her well-manicured fingernails on her desktop, while she thought. “The commandant isn’t going to help us with our dome shipments until we provide him a guilty party.”

“Lise, the individual who engineered this doesn’t have to be a supplier,” Rufus argued. “It could have been the distributor on station. And let’s not begin to count the number of people who the commandant has angered.”

“That might be true, but we’ve got to offer the commandant someone,” Lise replied.

“Could it be anyone?” Idrian suggested.

“That occurred to me too, Idrian,” Lise replied. “But Emerson has some smart people working for him, Major Finian, for one. If we give him

an innocent, he'll see through it. No, it's time to uncover some of the streak suppliers, who are operating downside."

"You're probably aware, Lise, that we have a good number of streak manufacturers," Rufus said. "It's a simple process to extract the drug, and a lot of people have access to the nuts. The plumerase fruit is enormously popular downside and topside. We grow the trees in a section of every agri-dome."

"Not to mention, nearly every significant family, who has a garden, has planted one or more plumerase trees," Idrian added. "They can enjoy the fruit and make some coin by selling the nuts on the side."

"I don't expect to disrupt our economic base nor our families, Sirs," Lise replied, her eyes narrowing, as her thoughts evolved. "Our suppliers will have to give up many of their distributors on station, and we can offer that bunch to the commandant. He can sort it out up there. In the meantime, we'll have a handle on who is producing the drug and making coin, without sharing."

Idrian shared an avaricious grin with Lise. It was the kind of plan he enjoyed. Solve a problem for the topsiders and make some coin at the same time.

* * * *

"You're in danger of a trip outside the domes without a vac suit," Idrian said, as the two men rode an e-trans away from Lise's house.

Idrian sat behind the console. He'd entered an override code so that the little electric vehicle wouldn't stop for other passengers, as it was programmed to do.

"Tell me about it," Rufus replied, with a snarl. "And I don't want to hear that you warned me."

"Do you still have just the one supplier?" Idrian asked.

"No, I have three now. Demand kept increasing, and the stuff is so profitable," Rufus replied. He rubbed his hands over his face.

“You could suggest to Lise that you run the investigation,” Idrian offered.

“Not a chance,” Rufus replied. “As far as I know, Lise is already aware that I’m facilitating some suppliers. It’s one thing to make a little coin on the side with an illegal process. She doesn’t mind that sort of the thing, as long as it doesn’t disrupt the broader scheme of things. But, if I offer to manage the investigation, she’ll see that as overreaching. I don’t want to end up like Markos or worse.”

After the men left Lise’s office, she called her security head, Jordie MacKiernan, to attend her.

“Jordie, what do we know about streak operations by Idrian and Rufus?” Lise asked when the security chief made himself comfortable on a couch next to Lise’s armchair.

“I’ve nothing on Idrian, and that’s not for a lack of trying. Word is that he likes to keep his business dealings legal. The man appears averse to placing himself, his family, or businesses in jeopardy.”

“Sounds like Idrian,” Lise commented. “He’s the dependable sort until he’s sure the advantages are wholly in his favor.”

“The information on Rufus is mixed,” Jordie continued. “He got into the trade about three years ago with a small plumerase harvester. Since then, he’s acquired another source and started a small manufacturing lab. My sources say that the lab is producing more streak than the two sources can provide in nuts.”

“So, he has more sources than you can identify?” Lise asked, her eyes piercing Jordie’s.

“That’s the status, at this time,” Jordie replied. His tone wasn’t apologetic. Lise didn’t appreciate weakness, and he wasn’t the type of man to exhibit any.

“We have a problem, Jordie,” Lise said. She laid out the recent topside events to him, leaving little out. When she finished, she said, “I intend to give the commandant a list of station distributors to mollify him.”

“All of them?” Jordie asked.

“Probably not,” Lise replied. “I’ll need to know who supports them. That will help me decide. Certainly, we want to turn over Rufus’

distributors. He'll get the message from that without me having to confront him."

"Do we make an example of anyone?" Jordie asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid so, Jordie. Streak is bad for dome business. A little drug distribution on station can create leverage opportunities, but too much means security will be descending on us. They've had a taste of what they can achieve when they came here, arrested Markos and Giorgio, and obtained convictions. Topsider moods are running against dome independence, and that has to be cooled."

"How will you choose, Lise, and how many?"

"That depends on the details of the suppliers, lab owners, and distributors that you bring me. We're going to trim shipments by about two-thirds, eliminating as few people as possible."

"Disappearances or accidents?" Jordie asked.

"Probably a combination, Jordie. Most important, this is your priority, and you're authorized to spend whatever coin you need. Emerson is sitting on our agri-dome priority shipment approval until he has the information on station streak distributors from us."

"Understood, Lise," Jordie said, and swiftly exited the office.

Two years ago, Jordie believed he was missing out on an opportunity to earn some extra coin. His sources told him of the increased traffic in streak. The problem was that he had no legitimate access to the easy sources, namely the agri-domes. However, Jordie was, if nothing else, a resourceful man. He did have hundreds of informants in the homes of important families and businesspeople. And, each of these families had one or two of the popular plumerase trees in their gardens. It was easy enough to disseminate the word through an intermediary that the kitchen help could make some extra coin by collecting the nuts of the fruit.

The question Jordie was now asking himself was whether Lise knew of his profitable little side operation. Being a man who erred on the side of caution, he chose to believe that she did know. Whether Lise did or didn't know really didn't matter. She'd laid out her position on the matter. The streak trade was bad for dome business, and anything that was bad for dome business was subject to punishment.

Jordie made the decision to swiftly close his business. He'd give word to his security man, Stevens, who had organized the kitchen suppliers, that the business was ended. It was the same low-level security employee who made the rounds to collect the nuts. In the near future, the kitchen help would find no one coming for their supplies.

Jordie briefly lamented the loss of a good security member, but Stevens was too knowledgeable about his side operation. The individual would soon find a quiet place to rest under Pyre's rocky soil, a good distance outside the domes.

My Books

Messinants, the second novel in the Pyrean series, is available in e-book, softcover, and audio book versions. Please visit my website, <http://scottjucha.com>, for publication locations and dates. You may register at my website to receive email updates on the progress of my upcoming novels.

Pyrean Series

Empaths

Messinants

Jatouche (forthcoming)

The Silver Ships Series

The Silver Ships

Libre

Méridien

Haraken

Sol

Espero

Allora

Celus-5

Omnia

Vinium

Nua'll (forthcoming)

The Author



I've been enamored with fiction novels since the age of thirteen and long been a fan of great storytellers. I've lived in several countries overseas and in many of the US states, including Illinois, where I met my wonderful wife more than three decades ago. My careers have spanned a variety of industries in the visual and scientific fields of photography, biology, film/video, software, and

information technology (IT).

My first attempt at a novel, which I've retitled *The Florentine*, was a crime drama centered on the modern-day surfacing of a 110-carat yellow diamond lost during the French Revolution. In 1980, in preparation for the book, I spent two wonderful weeks researching the Brazilian people, their language, and the religious customs of Candomblé. The day I returned from Rio de Janeiro, I had my first date with my wife-to-be, Peggy Giel.

In the past, I've outlined dozens of novels, but a busy career limited my efforts to complete any of them. In early 2014, I chose to devote my efforts to writing full-time. My first novel, *The Silver Ships*, was released in February 2015. The series, with the release of *Vinium*, now numbers ten.

The Pyrean series relates the tale of a third Earth colony ship and gives readers an opportunity to follow new characters, who struggle to overcome the obstacles of a world tortured by geologic upheaval. Humans are divided into camps — downsiders, stationers, spacers, and the *Honora Belle's* inhabitants, which consist of empaths and the discarded.

My deep appreciation goes out to the many readers who embraced the Silver Ships and Pyrean series and its characters. I hope you've found the stories enjoyable!