

ALIBI JONES
and
The Sunrise of Hur
By Mike Luoma

ALIBI JONES AND THE SUNRISE OF HUR
SAMPLE OF THE FIRST EDITION

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THE FULL-LENGTH NOVEL
"ALIBI JONES and THE SUNRISE OF HUR"
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Chapter One

Each time he sleeps, the memory returns as a dream.

At first, he observes. He watches himself stand to speak, champagne glass in hand.

"My name is Alibi Jones..."

No! Stop!

Why can't I wake up?

Alibi again lives through that horrible night.

"They know who you are, Alibi."

Kitrafgrundlerrrrrralllkazzh – "Kit" – purrs up at Alibi with

amusement from his place next to him at the main table.

Not yet completely in the dream, Alibi can't stand to see Kit so happy. Knowing what is to come.

So sorry, my friend. Wish I could go back and change... anything.

The dream memory draws him in. Alibi smiles at his friend, the "cat-man," as they celebrate Kit's joyous day.

Kit is a proud Dakhur, the apparently feline race native to the world of Hur. He's dressed in Dakhur formal wear for the ceremony, resplendent in green and gold Diplomatic Family formal robes, his dappled brown and rusty gold fur oiled, brushed and shining out from underneath the satin folds.

"I'd like to lead you in a human custom," Alibi tells the assembled Dakhur.

The fifty or so cat-like aliens in the expansive banquet hall all look his way. Alibi scans the brown, gray and tan furred faces, so alien yet somehow comfortably familiar.

Alibi decided long ago that familiarity comes from the light he can see in the eyes of the Dakhur, eyes shining with intelligence and empathy, lit by a soulful spark. Though similar in appearance to upright house cats, to Alibi's mind the Dakhur are the most human-like in character of all the alien races he's encountered.

Though they are still *very* different.

"When we humans get 'married', as we call it," Alibi tells the Dakhur, "the friend of the 'groom' – the male in the joining – usually raises a glass and says a few words about his friend. We call it a 'toast'. So. I'd like to offer Kit and his new mate Trish a toast!"

Alibi raises the champagne glass a little higher.

"Toast?" Kit asks, sounding confused as he looks up at Alibi. "The word means cooked bread, does it not?"

"Is that what it translated as? It also means... um," Alibi searches for another word. "Tribute!"

"Oh. So, you raise your glass and say... what?" Kit asks.

"Something nice, I hope?"

"Something, um, well... kind of nice," Alibi says. "I've been working on it for days."

Alibi Jones and Katie Ramsey, his on and off girlfriend, Kit and the Dakhur have gathered together for the Dakhur equivalent of Kit's wedding day, or "Day of Joining", with his Join-Mate-to-be, Trish.

Kit has looked forward to this day for months. All the while, Alibi has given him a hard time; Alibi's natural response to Kit's nearly constant talk of his "Join-Mate-to-be" and their upcoming "Joining Day."

Despite all the talk, Alibi was only able to meet Kit's "bride" – Trishkersnrgherlardle – a few weeks prior to The Day of Joining. The silver haired, slender Dakhur female was kind enough to let her new human friends Alibi and Katie call her "Trish" for short.

Thinking of her, Alibi allows himself a quick glance over at Katie. She catches his eye and smiles back, caught up in the joy of the ceremony.

Ah, Katie.

Not mad at me.

For the moment.

If Alibi understood Dakhur customs correctly, Trish and Kit had been destined to be "joined" from the time they were cublings, promised to each other by their families. The Dakhur way, Kit assured him.

"You call them by longer names," Alibi says to the alien crowd, "but I know the happy couple as Kit and Trish. I've been friends with Kit for over a year now. I haven't known the lovely Trish quite so long, but after these last couple of weeks spending time with her and Kit, I feel like we've been friends forever."

Trish *was* special.

Kit taught her English a few months ago, and she'd picked up the human tongue quickly, coming from a Dakhur diplomatic family trained for facility with languages.

More than merely understanding the syntax and grammar of English, she picked up on subtleties that allowed her to appreciate the human sense of humor. She and Katie became fast friends. Trish could appreciate her sarcasm in ways that Kit still could not. Truth be told, Alibi didn't always pick up on it either.

Women.

Trish, sitting on the other side of Kit, wears white and green ceremonial robes. A beautiful golden tiara with a blood red gem in its center, *The Sunrise of Hur*, shines from where it sits atop her head.

Kit's father RahKarfrandlgrndlrr, a top diplomat, procured the prized Dakhur artifact, an ancient ritual crown, for their Joining Ceremony. He'd called in some favors to secure its use.

"Ahem," Alibi clears his throat. "Now, today, we gather to celebrate their Joining."

Katie beams at Alibi as he enjoys being the center of Dakhur attention. Glass in the air, he smiles over at Kit and Trish, his newly wed - newly *Joined* - friend and his new join-mate. Alibi looks from Kit and Trish out to the rest of the large group of cat-like aliens gathered to celebrate the joining.

Like a pride of proud alien lions.

Part of Alibi remembers he is dreaming, and wishes he could scream.

The hunters arrive soon enough.

He cannot alter the outcome.

For their Joining festivities, the families of Kit and Trish leased a party room on a "getaway" station. Invited guests were summoned to *Paradissimo*, a free-floating vacation station situated just beyond the border of Dakhur-controlled space.

Paradissimo's many banquet halls and hotel facilities make it a mecca for Dakhur and humans looking to get away from it all. As it's outside the borders of the Solar Alliance as well, it can also be a refuge for less savory types looking to get away from the authorities in nearby human and Dakhur space.

Dakhur Joinings and Human Weddings anchor a large chunk of the respectable side of *Paradissimo's* economy. Celebrating families rent entire packages – hotel and banquet rooms, staff and catering included.

Alibi and Katie had been pleasantly surprised to discover their entire trip had been paid for by the Joining families. Evidently, it was a Dakhur custom for honored guests. Even if they'd wanted to, they'd found they couldn't pay for a thing. Entertainment, lodging, drink and food, it was all covered by Kit and Trish's families.

From his standing vantage point Alibi sees two Dakhur waiters, staff from the station, walk into the hall. He grows confused when they start making strange noises and light flashes out from under their serving trays.

"THUB THUB THUB THUB."

The two Dakhur waiters are firing rubber bullets into the crowd!

Dakhur fall where they're hit or scramble to get out of harm's way in a chaotic attempt to avoid getting killed.

Rubber bullets cause human beings serious injury, break bones and cause massive contusions. The Dakhur physique's bone structure is more fragile. Rubber bullets punch through their bodies. Those bullets that hit vital organs kill instantly.

As the dream plays out again, Alibi tries to will a change to what happens.

If only I could move faster!

Do something to stop the death...

But he can't.

It all unfolds as it did a month ago, as it has almost every night since, playing on repeat in slow motion through his mind.

The glass he holds shatters.

So do two bones, in his middle and index fingers, as the rubber bullet hits his upraised toasting hand. He drops to the ground and looks for Katie as shock momentarily spares him the feeling of pain.

She's on the floor in front of him. Her chest is moving. She's breathing, alive. He looks to the side and sees Kit on the ground. The cat-man is unharmed, but he cradles the limp form of his new bride in his arms. Dark black Dakhur blood spreads out in a thin pool in front of them.

No! Nonononono!!

A rubber bullet crushed half of Trish's skull, caved in the left side of her head and knocked the tiara away.

Kit hangs over her dead body, shaking. He seems to feel Alibi's eyes on him and looks up.

"She is dead. My destiny has been killed. She has died in my arms," Kit says, his voice a violent growl. "I will kill them. Whoever they are, whoever is responsible. They will die."

"Kit! Stay down!" Alibi yells over at him. Alibi looks back at the advancing gunmen in time to see them drop the trays and raise their guns. He ducks back down, cursing when his injured hand hits the floor.

The pain of it finally hits him.

Damn!! Oh, shit, that fucking hurts!

"THUB THUB THUB THUB THUB THUB THUB THUB."

The waiters fire again.

"Hold it!" An amplified human voice orders in English.

Alibi looks up to see a man in an EVA suit walking up between the dead Dakhur bodies strewn around the hall.

No, wait... that's not an EVA suit!

The man is an illegal cyborg.

His human body is enhanced by artificial tech through surgeries not allowed inside of the Solar Alliance. His legs and arms appear to be fully mechanized, his head surrounded by a skull shield and communications array. He is obviously mic'd for sound as he orders the waiters around.

"Where are the humans?" his amplified query rings out.

The Dakhur "waiters" seem to understand but do not answer in English. One of them grunts and points with his gun over towards Alibi.

The mechanized man approaches Alibi in silence.

Thought I'd hear servos or something.

"You're Alibi Jones?" the man asks in his artificially loud voice.

Alibi doesn't answer him.

"You're a lucky man," the cyborg says. "My *employer* doesn't want me to kill you. Thinks that will make him the wrong sort of enemies."

The cybernetic man snorts an amplified grunt. "I said you're already the wrong sort of enemy, and now would be an excellent time to take care of you once and for all. After all, we know you've developed an attachment to the girl."

The half-metal monster waves his rifle casually at Alibi. His words give his employer away.

He works for Laveillur!

Katie.

This is all about Katie!

After over a year. Laveillur came to collect her. Still thinks he owns her.

We didn't know it, but we'd actually come to him...

"My employer couldn't believe how lucky we were that you two waltzed right in to one of his own establishments!"

Paradissimo was supposed to be an independent station. A co-op. But all was not as it seemed. Apparently they had a silent – and secret – partner. Without being aware of it, the Dakhur families had rented the facilities for their celebration from Rene Laveillur, a powerful, interstellar crime lord based on the planet Kismet, outside of human and Dakhur law.

Laveillur also claimed to own Katerina Ramsey and her family.

This was all about Katie. How could Laveillur resist taking her

back when they had just about delivered her to him?

"Sleep now," the half robot man says, pointing a finger at Alibi.

SWIP!

Alibi feels a slim sliver dart hit his arm and burrow down beneath his skin. The tranquilizer starts to effect him. The silver man before him elongates, grows wide and then too tall as Alibi watches him turn and point at Katie.

SWIP!

Alibi's world begins to dim.

The last thing Alibi sees is the mechanical man grabbing Katie by the arm. His world goes black.

The last thing Alibi hears before he passes out is Katie shouting a name.

"Peterson!"

Alibi shouts out the name as the dream ends, as he wakes up in his apartment on Cat's Eye. He sits up in bed and flexes his hand and fingers, still sore a month later, even after the healing. The bitter memory and the dream fade a little as he stirs.

"Fucking Peterson," Alibi says to himself as he stands. He rubs the top of his head through his short black hair and steps into the refresher.

Alibi relaxes a little as he feels the familiar tingle. He lets the vibrations cleanse his skin and hair. Not keen on being alone with his thoughts for too long after reliving the painful memories, Alibi doesn't linger in the stall.

Besides. He has office hours.

Must get to work.

How ludicrous. A mediator with office hours.

I miss M'Bekke.

Miss him for a whole lot of reasons. But especially miss the way he used to run the mediation corps. Under the SAIF, under this

Colonel Brandywine, it's way too militaristic.

And dumb.

"Doesn't really make sense to have mediators under the military," Alibi says to himself as he heads out of the bedroom.

"Do you always talk to yourself?"

Alibi jumps as a man's voice calls out the question from the shadowed living room.

"Thought I heard you shout my name, before, too," the voice says.

"Lights!" Alibi calls out. As the lights come up, a plain looking man appears on Alibi's couch. He has short, thinning blond hair and wears a dark business suit with a white shirt and blue tie. Unremarkable. A man who would blend into any crowd of business travelers.

"Who are you?" Alibi demands of his uninvited guest. "How did you get in here?"

"I think you know who I am. Or at least who I represent," the man says, playing mysterious.

"Laveillur?" Alibi speculates. "You said I shouted your name. What? You're Peterson? I thought that metallic monster man who kidnapped Katie was Peterson?"

"Him?" the man responds. "No. Mr. Chen, to whom I believe you are referring, is hired muscle. I'm valued more for my mind, believe it or not. The boss hasn't found a way to enhance THAT. Not yet, anyway. But *we* don't have the same laws against cybernetic enhancements on *Kismet* that you do here in the SA," Peterson over-explains, talking down to Alibi. "No need for you to sound so judgmental."

"Yeah. 'Cause turning people into half-robots is a *great* idea," Alibi cracks back.

"It *has* made Mr. Chen more valuable to the boss," the man points out. "*That* is one of the best ideas Mr. Chen has ever had."

Alibi realizes he's talking to an intruder.

"I'm calling the base," Alibi says. "Base! This is Al..."

"It's not working right now," the man tells Alibi, interrupting him. "Your com. It's down. Running through some self-diagnostics," he informs Alibi. "Stuck in a bit of a loop, I'm afraid."

"What do you want, Peterson? Or whatever your name is!" Alibi asks, beginning to lose his temper with the man.

"Despite your ill-conceived preconceptions, my boss is a very caring man," the man says in an even tone. "Did you know he cares about your health, Mr. Jones, for example?"

"My health?"

"Your health. You've been engaging in some very unhealthy behavior over the last couple of weeks. My boss wanted me to tell you he's worried about you."

"Oh really?"

Can I kill him where he sits, somehow?

What can I use as a weapon?

Alibi glances around the room, trying to keep his eyes on Peterson as he does.

"Really, Mr. Jones," Peterson says, his tone still dripping condescension. "Sometimes, people engage in behavior that's detrimental to their health because they don't know any better. My employer wants to be sure you know better, you see."

"I don't like where this conversation is going," Alibi says. "Why don't you get the fuck out of my apartment! Peterson or whoever you fucking are!"

"Throwing 'fuck' around?" the man tsks him. "Do you think that helps? Makes you sound 'tough'? You're young, Mr. Jones, so I'm going to be more patient with you than is usually my habit."

The man shifts on the couch and brushes a piece of lint off the leg of his suit.

"You've been asking questions," Peterson says, looking back up at Alibi. "Questions about Rene Laveillur. Questions about Kismet. And questions about Miss Katerina Ramsey."

"So?"

"So? I can give you some answers," he says. "Not the ones you want to hear. But the knowledge I give you could save your life. If you learn from it."

"So, you're here to *teach* me," Alibi says. "Right."

Ignoring his sarcasm, Peterson continues.

"First of all? It would be better for you if you forgot all about Miss Ramsey," the man cautions Alibi. "Second? I can tell you from my own personal, first hand observations that it is *never* wise to ask too many questions about Mr. Laveillur. Especially not in public places, with so many possible ears listening in." The man nods, agreeing with himself. "Finally? There's something you need to know about Kismet."

"What's that?"

"You know how poisonous and deadly most of the dead Eldred worlds are, don't you Mr. Jones?"

"I do," Alibi answers. "Necessary knowledge out here."

"Well, here's another piece of 'necessary knowledge', for you. It would be, let's say, *beneficial* to your health for you to consider Kismet to be such a world. To you, Mr. Jones. A dead world. Poisonous. Deadly."

"Are you threatening me?" He balls his hands into fists. Though unarmed, Alibi challenges the man anyway, with nothing to back it up.

I don't care.

"Not in the least," the man says, an over-sweet tone to his voice. He gestures at himself. "Do I appear to be threatening you in any way?"

"Well, huh, not so much, personally."

"*I'm* not threatening you," Peterson explains. "You just need to understand, Mr. Jones, that if you set foot on Kismet you will end up a dead man. And you should also understand that continuing to ask about Miss Ramsey *will* prove unhealthy for you as well. It would be best if you forgot all about her."

"Oh. Really?" Alibi stands defiant.

"Really." Peterson stares back at Alibi, locked eye to eye across the living room. "Actually, from what I'm told, the two of you were no longer a 'couple.' Curious as to why you're so interested in her whereabouts."

"She's still important to me. She's my friend," Alibi says. He gets angry as he finds himself justifying his actions to Laveillur's man.

"Ah." Peterson smirks. "You love her. How touching. I can hear the disappointment in your voice."

The man stands, straightening his suit coat and brushing himself off, preparing to leave.

"That's it, then?" Alibi asks.

"My work here is done. Message delivered," the man says. He crosses the room. He has to pass by Alibi on his way to the door, but pauses before he gets to him. He looks Alibi in the eye. "If I were I you, I'd learn to live with your disappointment. Your 'unrequited love' could get you killed."

"Threats will get you nowhere," Alibi says, staring back with all the bluster his small bit of bravado left can muster.

"Oh, don't be so cliché, Jones! I'm trying to resist, but," he sighs. "Eh, 'it's not a threat, it's a guarantee. A promise.' You see, Jones? Hackneyed! *So* played out." Peterson shakes his head. "Living with disappointment is better than dying going after the unattainable, Jones. Disappointment is a fleeting feeling, the short-lived aftershock from a bitter life lesson. Get used to it! People are disappointing, Alibi Jones. Everybody disappoints. Whole worlds will disappoint you at some time or another if you let them. Get used to it. Live with it!"

"Don't die stupidly. Best advice I can give you."

The man looks over at the door. "And with that? Good morning, Mr. Jones."

He resists the urge to whap Peterson as the man brushes past him.

Alibi turns to watch him leave.

"Let yourself out," Alibi jokes at the closing door.

Alibi walks over and opens the door.

He walks out into the corridor and checks in both directions.
Peterson is gone.

"Neat disappearing trick," Alibi says to himself.

So. Laveillur's noticed my prying.

Felt compelled to send Peterson himself to warn me.

If that was really him. Laveillur's right-hand man!

Laveillur does not like to lose. Anything. Or anyone.

That asshole Piccolo was right.

Poor, pathetic, lying, dead fuck that he was, he was right about Laveillur.

Alibi goes back into his apartment to get ready for work. As he finishes getting dressed, he finds himself thinking of Piccolo.

Been almost a year since he died.

Alibi looks in the mirror. He remembers how Piccolo lied to his face.

Told Kit and I that Katie was his sister. And we believed him. At first.

Alibi stopped Piccolo from bringing Katie back to Laveillur, and then Katie shot and killed Piccolo. Before he died, Piccolo warned Alibi Laveillur would send others. The SA courts later cleared Katie of all charges, accepting her plea of self-defense.

He didn't lie about Laveillur coming for her. And so we got Chen and his crew on Paradissimo. And now Peterson in my living room. Threatening me, telling me to stay away from Kismet.

All the more reason to go!

Chapter Two

Alibi leaves his apartment, late for work. He glances up and down the corridor again, as if Peterson might be loitering somewhere nearby. With a shake of his head at the thought, Alibi begins his walk to the SAIF Mediation Corps office on Cat's Eye.

Office hours. Fuck.

For the first year Alibi worked for the Solar Alliance Interplanetary Force (SAIF) Mediation Corps, Alibi had no idea the Mediation Corps even *had* an office on Cat's Eye. M'Bekke – the late Pope John Paul the Fourth – ran the agency back then. He didn't require Alibi to "check in" every day.

Alibi usually works in the field, not in an office. When not on distant worlds conducting and facilitating negotiations, Alibi used to work out of his apartment and his ship. But since M'Bekke's been gone, a more traditional command structure has been place. Colonel Brandywine is in charge. And Alibi is required to head into the SAIF base at the starport to put in office hours every morning when he's not away on assignments.

He trudges in through the lobby of the SAIF office building and rides an elevator up to the third floor. The Mediation Corps office is two rooms tucked away near the back of the building.

The smaller of the two rooms is his, its four drab white walls not even broken up by a window.

Alibi resents having to come into the place every day. As a sort of protest, he's done nothing to personalize his office. The only furnishings are a desk, a chair and the com unit.

As Alibi enters the office the com alert light is blinking. Its red, pulsing glow is the only color in the room.

No chance to settle in.

"Com on. S.A. Mediation, Jones speaking."

"Jones? It's Brandywine. You're late," the angry woman's voice echoes out into the office.

Great.

"Sorry, Colonel. Busy getting threatened by gangsters," Alibi says.

"What?"

"Never mind," Alibi apologizes. "Sorry, ma'am. Won't happen again."

"That's what you said the last time you were late, Jones. AND the time before..."

"Woah, ma'am, would you believe it? Another call coming in! Gotta go mediate, sorry!"

"Jone – "

Alibi switches off the com, cutting off communication.

He enjoys the silence.

Oh M'Bekke. Why did you have to go and die, old man?

Alibi thinks back to better days.

The Mediation Corps used to answer to the Pope of the New catholic Church – known to Alibi as old family friend M'Bekke, but known to most others as Pope John Paul the Fourth. He was a man who liked to laugh, even as he ran the Corps with a shrewd mind and a stern hand.

As he remembers him, Alibi can almost hear M'Bekke laughing in his head. Alibi chuckles in spite of himself.

After a few minutes of peace, the com lights up again.

Brandywine, leave me the fu... oh. Aunt Anita.

"Alibi?"

"Hey Aunt Anita. How are you?"

"Well, I'd be better if I wasn't hearing from the Secretary of the Interplanetary Force about my wayward ward," she says, her voice heavy with disappointment. "Alibi. Look. I know you miss M'bekke. And you've been through a lot in the last month."

"But?"

"But you've got to take your job more seriously, Alibi! Colonel

Brandywine has filed several informal and now two *formal* complaints with the Secretary. And then the Secretary complains to *me!* What's going on, Ali? You used to be one of the best in the corps."

"Mediators don't need office hours!" Alibi spits out the words. He has to remember not to shout as he stares down at the com light. He's not angry at his aunt.

She hasn't done anything wrong.

The long-distance link over the light years is audio only. He rolls his eyes but tries to sound more calm than he feels as he continues. He fails.

"Brandywine is a bureaucratic ass," Alibi says. "She knows nothing about mediation and makes up for it by overcompensating on official, red tape, chickenshit, bullshit!"

"Alibi Jones! I will *not* have you talking to me like that," Anita chastises him over the com link. "Even if you are right about the woman. She *is* your commanding officer," she says. "You must learn patience, Ali."

"Patience for idiots and fools?" he asks.

"For them *especially*," she says. "It's an important skill. One I had to master to get anywhere in politics." She chuckles.

"Good thing I'm not planning on a career in politics," Alibi says, sounding smug.

"*Life* is politics, Alibi," she corrects him. "You're in the military! You're surrounded by politics! If you get labeled a troublemaker, your life will be miserable," she advises him. "Do be more careful. You're no longer in M'Bekke's Mediation Corps. You're part of the SAIF. Best to play by their rules. However idiotic and foolish you find them."

"Great," Alibi replies halfheartedly. "I'll try, Aunt Anita. I will."

"It's for your own good, Alibi."

"I know, I know."

"But that's not why I called," she says.

"No?"

"No." She sighs. "I almost hate to bring it up. But we've heard from the Dakhur." She pauses. "I don't know how to ask this delicately, Ali... Do you remember the tiara Trish wore at the Joining Ceremony?"

Alibi pictures the shining gold crown with its blood-red jewel.

Blood for blood.

"I do. Kit said it was the 'Sunrise of Hur', I think."

"Yes. That's it," Anita says. "Well, it's a very important artifact for the Dakhur."

"Yeah, Kit told me, said his father was able to get it for the ceremony as a diplomatic favor or something like that."

"Yes. Well. It's missing."

"Missing?"

"Since the ceremony," she says. "But the Dakhur are just announcing its absence now."

"A month later?"

"They have been trying to find it on their own, without success. Now they're reaching out to us through diplomatic channels. They've asked that we try to keep it quiet, but they'd like us to try to help them find it."

"They must be getting desperate," Alibi notes.

"Indeed," Anita agrees. "We're looking at it as an opportunity to get back in the Dakhur's diplomatic families' good graces. Which leads me to my next point."

Alibi is still stuck on the point at hand.

"Their good graces? They delivered Katie right into Laveillur's hands!" He protests. "Their 'good graces'?"

"That's not how they see it. And you know it," she admonishes him.

"For the first time in their history, the Dakhur invited humans to join in one of their ceremonies," she says. "That invitation led to

the death of several Dakhur and the apparent theft of one of their treasures. Whether you like it or not, Alibi, it *was* a major diplomatic incident."

"We lost someone, too," he says. "And the attackers *were* Dakhur!"

"Dakhur working for a human," she points out.

An uncomfortable silence hangs between them.

A minute goes by that seems far longer.

"Fucking Laveillur," Alibi says, finally breaking the silence.

His aunt lets the cursing slide this time.

"He's a powerful and dangerous man, Ali. Please tell me you'll stop provoking him. We're trying all legal means possible to get her back. You know that."

"Legal means? The guy is his own country. His own planet! The S.A. can't touch him 'legally!'"

"There *are* ways, Alibi," Anita says.

"You're the second person today to warn me off Laveillur and Kismet," Alibi tells his aunt. "One of Laveillur's guys showed up *in* my apartment this morning. Told me to stay away from Kismet and to stop asking questions about Katie and Laveillur."

"Alibi!" his aunt gasps. She raised Alibi from the time he was three years old. At times like these the mother in her comes out.

"You should stay on the SAIF base!"

"I'll be fine, Aunt Anita. Just gotta stop poking around about Laveillur and Kismet. At least for a little while."

At least publicly.

"Well, then it's good I called," she says. "I've managed to convince the Secretary of the Interplanetary Force to put you on a special assignment. You're going to look for the *Sunrise of Hur*."

"Really?" he asks. "Won't that put me right back in Laveillur's way, provoke him?"

"No," his aunt replies. "I don't think so. Laveillur has sworn to the Dakhur that his men did not take the tiara when they grabbed

Katie. Says if they did, it was not at his order." She sighs. "Laveillur is *not* the subject of your investigation. You won't be looking for the tiara on Kismet."

"That's probably wise, after what I was told this morning," Alibi says with a nervous laugh. "But you do know that's probably where it is, right?"

"Well," she says. "Laveillur insists he doesn't have it. He's given his word to the Dakhur that it's not on his world," Anita says. "And I don't think he'd risk an incident with the Dakhur."

She pauses.

"Are you certain you don't remember anything about the tiara from the ceremony?" she asks.

"Huh. I was knocked out too soon to see what happened to it, at the time," Alibi says, "But who else was there to grab it? There were Dakhur on their side. They would have known it was a cultural treasure."

"The Dakhur point out that Laveillur has been honest about 'reclaiming' Katie," Anita says. "They take him at his word. You should, too," she says, and then sighs a heavy breath. "I want you to look for the tiara, Alibi. But please, stay away from Laveillur."

"What if it ends up being on Kismet?" Alibi protests.

"If you think it is, tell me. We'll send someone else in," she answers.

"Right. Brandywine is gonna love this," Alibi says, thinking out loud. "She already thinks I get too much special treatment. I think that's why she assigned me office hours. Try to make me more 'ordinary'."

"Well. We both know *that* won't work!" Anita jokes, trying to lighten the mood. "You'll answer to *me* on this assignment, Alibi. Colonel Brandywine won't have any say over the matter."

"Great. You know this means I'll be getting another lecture on the chain-of-command."

"Your *attitude* gets you your lectures, Alibi. You're giving Brandywine reasons to go looking for excuses to make your life

difficult."

"So it's all MY fault?"

"Usually is!" She laughs. She gets serious again. "You'll have to get moving. I could only get you a week for this, Ali."

"A week? That's no time at all!"

"Guess you'd better get busy, then, Alibi!"

She signs off.

Alibi sighs. He looks over at the clock.

11AM.

All this before noon?

Already a hell of a day!

(continued...)

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About the Author: Mike Luoma writes, designs and publishes science fiction novels and comic books, hosts the weekly *Glow-in-the-Dark Radio* podcast, narrates audiobooks and is the Music Director and midday disc jockey for *The Point* radio network in Vermont. The novels in his *Vatican Assassin Trilogy* are enjoyed worldwide. *Alibi Jones and the Sunrise of Hur* is his latest science fiction adventure novel, just out! Comics include *Panthea Obscura*, *Good Samaritan*, *Souverain*, *Red Hot!* and *The Adventures of Alibi Jones*. Get books and details at <http://glowinthedarkradio.com/>

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