

THE
DEEP
MAN

BAEN BOOKS by MICHAEL MERSAULT

The Deep Man

To purchase this title in e-book form,
please go to www.baen.com.

THE
DEEP
MAN

**MICHAEL
MERSAULT**



THE DEEP MAN

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Michael Mersault

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form.

A Baen Books Original

Baen Publishing Enterprises
P.O. Box 1403
Riverdale, NY 10471
www.baen.com

ISBN: 978-1-9821-2584-4

Cover art by Kurt Miller

First printing, January 2022

Distributed by Simon & Schuster
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mersault, Michael, author.

Title: The deep man / Michael Mersault.

Description: Riverdale, NY : Baen ; New York, NY : Distributed by Simon & Schuster, [2022] | "A Baen Books original."

Identifiers: LCCN 2021044263 | ISBN 9781982125844 (trade paperback)

Subjects: LCGFT: Science fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3613.E7768 D44 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021044263>

Pages by Joy Freeman (www.pagesbyjoy.com)

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Scrawled within my soul's dark night,
Warmed by only Lilo's light.*

THE
DEEP
MAN

Chapter 1

“The dichotomy of the successful modern human is witnessed in the rebuilding of instinct into a tool of more than mere animal survival. . . .”

Devlin Sinclair-Maru, *Integrity Mirror*

CABOT SINCLAIR-MARU FROWNED AS HE WALKED BESIDE THE Family’s current House Combatives instructor, his cousin Eldridge. Although they both appeared of a similar age, Cabot had lived many decades before Eldridge’s birth, and he found Eldridge’s enthusiasm anything but infectious. It seemed puppylike, annoying, and inappropriate for this early hour of the morning. Still, they strode together from the Family’s ancient manor house, Lykeios, toward their goal, a short distance away: the circular stone building they called the “equestrian center,” though all Family knew it to be the training annex.

“Yes, it’s a small class, I admit, Cabot,” Eldridge said. “But it’s not just against his peers that I’m measuring. Trust me.”

Cabot’s frown deepened, his gray eyes surveying the dawning horizon without favor. “Child prodigies don’t interest me. The Family needs more friends in the Emperor’s circle, not more gifted troublemakers.”

They reached the reinforced doors of the training annex, and the House Intelligence, Hermes, obligingly opened the way before them. Eldridge paused in the stone entrance, impulsively grabbing

Cabot by the arm. “Trust me—” he began, then broke off as Cabot stared down at the offending hand gripping his sleeve. Eldridge pulled his hand away and began again, “Trust me, Cabot, this kid is like nothing I’ve seen in the family. He takes to House doctrine as natural as . . . as . . . I don’t know what. He quotes *Integrity Mirror* at us about everything, and we’ve got to force limitations on his high-gee time. He’d be stunted for life if we didn’t lock him out. As it is, we probably allowed him too much—”

“Fascinating,” Cabot interrupted in an un-fascinated tone of voice. “I’m here, Eldridge. Let’s see this prodigy of yours.”

“Right,” Eldridge said, shrugging. “Trust me—”

“You said that already.”

Eldridge closed his mouth and led the way down the old stone hall. Together they began descending the six-hundred-year-old steps that had felt the tread of nearly every Family member since Lykeios Manor had been founded. As they made their way together into the subterranean depths Eldridge found the courage to say, “You will eat your words, Cabot.”

They felt the tingle of graviton flux before they entered the observation area, so it was no surprise to see the small class of Sinclair-Maru youngsters floating past on their way to the distant ceiling. The training room formed a sort of wide tube, much taller than it was wide, with a variety of obstacles at both poles. Unlike most of the great families, the founders of the Sinclair-Maru, Mia Maru and Devlin Sinclair, had decreed that House Combatives training would take place under a wide range of gravitational conditions. At astronomical expense they had installed the gravity generator (pure Shaper tech, of course), back when Family fortunes ran high, and it had served the Family for centuries without fail.

Cabot’s implanted electronics package, buried in the base of his skull, received constant information from the house Net, and data streamed constantly across his optic nerve in glowing characters and icons. Like all Sinclair-Maru adults, and most Vested Citizens of the Imperium, Cabot’s use of the implanted User Interface had become second nature.

Just now that UI superimposed a glowing identity icon for each student as they soared past the observation window. Eldridge unnecessarily nodded toward one boy who floated past. The identifier said, SAEF SINCLAIR-MARU.

Cabot eyed this “Saef” with a critical eye. There was nothing so remarkable to see, unless it was the telltale marks of extended heavy-gravity work. The boy wore the same tight black training suit that all Family students used, the common short training sword and training pistol affixed to his belt. Among the students flitting by, Saef seemed about average in age—ten standard years, Cabot knew—but he seemed perhaps a whisker more muscled and stockier than his peers and he wore an earnest expression on his face as he moved through the exercise.

Since the children would not receive their own enormously expensive, implanted Shaper electronics until they obtained full growth, each wore HUD—head-up display—lenses along with the secret training tool of the Sinclair-Maru: the scaram fear generator. This tool, developed centuries before by Devlin Sinclair as the cornerstone of his warrior philosophy, shaped the minds and reactions of generations of Sinclair-Maru fighters.

Saef Sinclair-Maru soared to the ceiling with the staggered cluster of his classmates, moved through the elaborate obstacles mounted there, then kicked off, bound for the floor but at an oblique vector.

“Too fast, show-off,” Cabot muttered aloud. “He’s going to pile in, or bounce.”

Just as Cabot uttered those words, Saef managed to rotate in flight, and struck the observation window, leaving a streak of shoe tread as he executed a neat trick of braking and redirection. He completed his transit, skidding into the floor beside an instructor and grabbing a padded stanchion to check his momentum.

The other students glided to the floor in a more direct and leisurely way, and Eldridge shot a measuring glance at Cabot before turning back to the view of the training ground.

Hermes automatically directed good audio to the observation booth, so the sound of eight children’s labored breathing came clearly to their ears.

The instructor, clothed identically to his students, and armed with nearly identical training weapons, glanced at each of his students, allowing the House UI to display their vital signs through his optic nerve as a visual overlay. Speaking to the House Intelligence, he said, “Hermes, restore gravity, please.”

“Very well, my lord,” Hermes’ disembodied voice replied. “Caution: Gravity is returning to one-point-zero gees.”

Cabot and Eldridge felt the fringe of the gravity shift, even within the observation booth, and the high tube of the training room rained bits of hair and dust now brought to earth by their sudden weight.

“I will begin activating scaram units now,” the instructor said. “Compose yourselves.”

Cabot and Eldridge observed clenched looks on most students’ faces, and they both recalled their own days learning the terror that was the self-imposed birthright of the Sinclair-Maru.

“Sarah,” the instructor said, “you are ready for level three now.”

The young girl seemed to pale, but she nodded firmly. “Yes, my lord.”

From the observation booth, Cabot switched through his UI screens to an instructor view. Since he was already here, he might as well gauge the vitals and brain activity of the latest crop.

The young girl seemed to sway as the scaram ramped up, her heart rate and respiration leaping, her brain frantically firing in the deepest regions of primal fear. *Fire, darkness, glowing eyes and drowning depths*; the scaram touched the ancient terrors at the core of the human mind. A level-three power setting seemed quite intense for a child of her age, and Cabot watched his UI overlay as her terror mounted and spread through greater portions of her system. Her heart roared along with the staccato gasp of her breath.

Then Cabot watched the transformation as she found the Deep Man, feeling an answering glow in his own mind from his thousands of trials under the scaram.

Her brain activity calmed, her heart rate abruptly slowed, and one shuddering breath brought stillness to her quivering limbs. She stood, apparently calm, as the scaram pulsed away into her brain, screaming terror that she now ignored.

“Are you well, Sarah?” the instructor asked.

“Y-yes, my lord,” she replied after a moment. Cabot observed her control of the Deep Man beginning to slip as she lost focus, but she averted disaster, staying afloat in a sea of fear, regaining control. The instructor moved on to the next student, setting his scaram low, at level one. The next two students received level-two scaram settings, but the third, a young boy, crumpled, vomiting and weeping under the lash of the scaram. The instructor stood impassively by for agonizing moments before triggering his UI to shut down the boy’s scaram.

The boy lay supine, gasping, and the instructor moved on to the next student as a small dumb-mech scuttled over and began sucking up the vomit.

Cabot turned his disinterested gaze from the fallen student and observed the next handle a level-one setting, but he noted as he eyed her vitals on his UI, she merely gritted it out through sheer willpower, pale, sweating, barely capable of speech.

The next student accepted a level-two scaram setting, and the next battled his way to mastery over terrors of a level three.

Then young Saef stood before the instructor. Cabot actually grunted in surprise as the instructor said, “Saef, you will receive a level-six setting.” Eldridge shot a knowing, triumphant glance at Cabot.

Saef said, “Yes, my lord.”

Cabot studied Saef’s brain activity and vital signs very closely as the scaram ramped to a level so high it approached that of the masters. The boy’s swirl of firing synapses responded to the scaram’s assault, but nothing seemed quite right in what he saw. The heart rate and respiration barely quivered upward before stabilizing. For a child of ten standard years, the terror unearthed by the scaram at a level six should have been debilitating, and yet Saef’s face remained merely determined under the mental assault.

“Saef,” the instructor said, “are you well?”

After one deep breath, Saef said, “All . . . all fear is the fear of the unknown, my lord. Because we cannot know the unknown, we must know fear. This is the path to the Deep Man.”

In the observation booth Cabot grunted again, lip pursing. “He’s quoting *Integrity Mirror*? Under a level-six scaram ride?”

Eldridge nodded, “He often quotes old Devlin.”

Out on the floor the instructor chided, “A simple ‘yes’ will suffice, Saef.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Cabot continued frowning and looked over at Eldridge. Quoting from old books with the scaram flaying his brain? “Are you certain he hasn’t hacked his HUD? Pretending to quote while he’s reading it? Under a level six that would be impressive enough—”

“No,” Eldridge interrupted, smiling thinly. “He has actually hacked the scaram itself.”

Cabot’s expression deepened into irritation. “Hacked the scaram? Then why, pray, are you wasting my time with—”

“Cheater!” a voice yelled out across the training room, causing Cabot to turn, his impatience visible in every move of his body.

A tall young teen stepped into sight at the edge of the training space. His startling yell overset several of the students who lost their focus, losing their grip on the Deep Man, the crushing fear of the scaram pouring into their minds with staggering force.

As the instructor hastened to shut down the scaram units on the impacted students, in the observation booth Cabot said, “I grant you, a young scrub hacking the scaram is interesting in its way, but I am far from—”

“Shh,” Eldridge interrupted. “I sort of arranged this.” Cabot’s lips thinned as he glared at Eldridge, but he turned back to the drama in the training area.

“Saef’s cheating,” the teen loudly declared. Cabot noted the teen’s name highlighted in his UI: Richard Sinclair-Maru . . . Saef’s older brother. “He’s hacked the scaram!” Richard pointed at Saef, a triumphant smile on his lips.

“That’s a very serious charge,” the instructor said, and Cabot observed that the instructor must have expected the outburst. He rolled far too easily with the shocking interruption to have been surprised.

The next words came from Saef, and for the first time Cabot’s frown disappeared as he became genuinely interested in what was occurring. Though somewhat unsteady, these words were well learned by every Vested Citizen in the Imperium, feared by most.

“B-by your dishonor, my honor is taken,” Saef stammered. “I will have my due.”

Cabot watched the smile fall from Richard’s lips, apparently surprised by his brother’s formal challenge to a duel. After just a moment Richard replied. “Well, uh, regain what you may, I will meet you.” The formal rejoinder came from Richard’s mouth, but Cabot was surprised to see what looked like fear in Richard’s expression. Fear of what?

As the respondent, under Imperial law binding all Vested Citizens, Richard now held the right to choose the place where they would duel. Within this code, “place” not only meant the physical location, but also the gravity level, which could be set to the standard of any Imperial territory, from the asteroid cities with near-zero gravity, to the crushing gravity of Thorsworld or Ericson Two.

Cabot naturally assumed Richard would choose to duel in standard gravity. Thrashing his little brother shouldn't offer much challenge to Richard, he thought. No matter how prodigious the child prodigy, there's an immense gulf of development between a child of ten and a youth of fourteen.

"Here, now, one-point-five gees," Richard declared, hustling out of his jacket and shirt, revealing a well-formed but very slender torso and thin arms. He donned a provided training suit, matching his little brother, and snatched up his sword. Since he still lacked six years until his full majority, he too carried a training sword.

He joined Saef on the smooth expanse at the center of the training ground, the high ceiling soaring up the inverse training ground mirrored high above them.

Saef, looking stocky and diminutive beside his brother, drew his sword and stood waiting.

Cabot scanned Saef's vital signs on his UI, pausing at the indication of Saef's brain activity. It certainly appeared that the scaram chewed at the boy's psyche even now, though possibly at a much lower setting. That made little sense... No one would willingly duel while riding the scaram's assault.

Eldridge's words interrupted Cabot's reverie. "Someone has been sneaking in more low-gee time, it appears," Eldridge murmured, and Cabot could see what he meant. Richard seemed unusually thin and willowy compared to the usual Sinclair-Maru mold. That, along with his blond hair, contrasted sharply with the stocky, dark-haired Saef.

The instructor spoke: "Hermes, please increase gravity to one-point-five."

"Very well, my lord," the House Intelligence intoned. "Caution: Gravity level increasing."

Cabot felt the ripple of the increase, and saw the shift in both boys as their bodies became heavier and heavier, their swords dipping in their hands.

Saef responded first, lifting his sword steadily to high guard. Cabot recognized the smooth motion of extensive high-gravity training on Saef's part, but he saw the sword wobble in Richard's hands. Those long arms, and Richard's apparent affection for low gravity, were not helpful when everything suddenly became fifty percent heavier.

Saef began to move, circling to his right, moving slowly but

forcing Richard to rotate. Both of their steps seemed ploddish in the heavy gravity. Richard sent out a feeler, making a slow, halfhearted feint, and Saef attacked immediately. His sword cracked down, knocking Richard's training blade off center, and he lunged, no hint of slowness in his attack.

Cabot saw Saef's sword point score below Richard's collarbone, saw Saef lower his sword as he began to speak the formal "first blood" statement, saw Richard's enraged face as he swung.

In the heavy gravity, foolishly caught off guard, it was nearly a miracle that Saef managed to raise his sword at all, but Richard's blow, aided by the heavy gravity, struck through Saef's guard.

Cabot dispassionately observed Saef's vital signs spike as Richard's training sword cracked across Saef's temple and jaw. Brain activity exploded as clear signs of high-powered scaram waves rippled through Saef's synapses.

"I thought you said he hacked the scaram," Cabot said, continuing to watch as Richard struck twice more, dropping Saef in an insensible heap.

Eldridge took his eyes off the training ground to shoot a self-satisfied smirk at Cabot. "He did hack it. He's been riding a level-two setting the whole time, then took six more points on top of it."

Cabot held only the blandest interest in what was occurring out on the training ground, his attention fixated upon the data flowing from Saef's system to Cabot's own UI implant. "You're suggesting this child just fought his first duel while riding eight levels of the scaram?" He had to admit the data flowing from the convulsing boy matched this interpretation.

The instructor stopped the duel, killed Saef's scaram, and returned the gravity to standard. Richard walked stiffly from the training ground, snatching up his clothes and ignoring everyone around him.

"Yes," Eldridge said. "Since he unearthed the scaram hack he's been riding a level one or two almost all the time... while he's studying, training... even while he's peeing."

Cabot nodded, his lips pursed as he mused. "And you just set him up for this beating?"

"That I did," Eldridge said. "You ready to eat some of your words, Cabot?"

Cabot looked back at Saef's nearly unconscious form as the instructor and a House mech treated his injuries. He nodded again. "A few. I will dine upon a few of my words." He tapped his chin in contemplation. "You're right, this child is somewhat intriguing to me—but so is the brother."

"Richard?" Eldridge asked, surprised. "Why him? He shorts his high-grav time, and probably sleeps in low-gee when he can, and he can barely reach the Deep Man at a level two on the scaram. His sword work is weak, just a moderate hand at the range, and he all but scorns Family doctrine."

"Scorns Family doctrine?" Cabot snorted. "He becomes more interesting to me by the moment. What's driving him? What's the attraction to low-grav? Why the sibling rivalry?"

It was Eldridge's turn to frown. "Richard'll harp about changing the Family image if you give him a chance. Skimps high-gee to retain his height, I think. He seems to believe we're getting lumped with the heavyworlders, so height would help, I guess. In political circles, I mean."

"Interesting," Cabot said.

"One brother's like old Devlin all over, quoting from *Integrity Mirror* all the time, while the other brother can't get far enough from Devlin's ways."

"Thus the sibling rivalry?"

"Maybe, Cabot. Or maybe it's something else altogether."

Cabot shrugged. "No matter. Angle the young one for command school, and fix his scaram hack before he permanently scars himself."

"Very well," Eldridge replied. "And Richard?"

Cabot thought for a moment, referencing his UI with a flick of his eyes. "I see your uncle Grimsby is the new head of our Trade delegation. Get Richard apprenticed in Trade, in the next year or two, if possible."

Eldridge nodded. If Cabot wanted it, then it would happen. Cabot turned to leave.

"That's it?" Eldridge demanded, staring at Cabot's retreating form.

"Well," Cabot said over his shoulder, "I'll want to see the younger one sometime."

"Okay, when?" Eldridge asked, somewhat mollified, bringing up his UI scheduler as he hurried after Cabot.

Cabot paused with his foot on the first ascending step. "Schedule something here in . . . hmm, twenty years. In the summer, if you please."

Eldridge abruptly halted. "Twenty years?" he choked out.

"If you please," Cabot repeated. "And Eldridge? Please make a note to inform me if either of those two dies before then. Can you do that?"