

ACHERON RISING

KEN LOZITO



ABOUT

Lt. Commander Elias Browning's military career was over, or so he thought.

When a secret research colony is discovered by a ruthless enemy, Elias must take command of a small battlegroup.

Outclassed and outgunned, Elias must find a way to stop a superior enemy fleet from enslaving his people, but how can he succeed where every other star union in the galaxy has failed?

Acheron Rising is a military science fiction novella that introduces the Federation Chronicles universe by Ken Lozito.

**Keep reading after the end for a sneak-peek of Acheron
Inheritance - Federation Chronicles Book 1**

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CHAPTER ONE



Sometimes he really needed to keep his big mouth shut. Elias exhaled sharply through clenched teeth as he tried to squirm away from Sergeant Tyler's beefy forearm that was pushing against his throat. The side of his face was pressed painfully onto the hangar deck floor, and Tyler's sweat-slicked forearm slipped to cover Elias's ear, drowning out the crowd of spacers surrounding them.

Elias arched his back and twisted away. Tyler also shifted his position, and they were suddenly spinning around on the floor like a slow-moving meat clock.

Davidge squatted down and shifted to the side like a crab to remain in Elias's view. "Just say the word, Lieutenant Commander, and the pain stops."

Elias gritted his teeth but couldn't draw breath enough to reply. The snarl remained half formed as a pathetic cough at the back of his throat.

"Night, night, LC," Tyler said, his voice thick with effort.

Elias's vision swam as he jerked his body back and forth, trying to break free.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Tyler growled and seemed to double his body weight.

Right about then, Elias was regretting... Well, a lot of things, including this stupid bet he’d made. Being goaded to say things like, “Let’s leave rank outside the ring” flashed across his dwindling awareness. He’d lose consciousness in less than twenty seconds if he couldn’t break free. Elias glared at Davidge’s smug face and jerked his body again. This time, he managed to slam his elbow into Tyler’s side, catching him by surprise, and forced his elbow back. The funny thing about pain was that there was an involuntary reflex to pull away from the source of it, even for the disciplined warrior mind of the Acheron Confederacy Marine. Bruised ribs hurt, and broken ribs hurt even more. The big Marine sagged, and his arms slackened enough for Elias to slip free of the grapple and regain his feet.

He might not be the tallest, but he was quick. At five foot ten and a hundred and seventy pounds, he had to be. Elias crouched low and threw himself at the other man, his momentum bringing Tyler’s heels to the edge of the circle. Just a few inches more and this stupid bet would be won. But Tyler bore down, using his extra size and weight to stop Elias cold. For a few moments, both men struggled uselessly against the other. Elias pushed with his legs, and he saw Tyler’s heel slip a few inches back to the line.

Just a little bit more.

Tyler spun and pulled Elias toward the edge of the circle, and he found himself heading over the line. Elias dropped down onto his back, pulling the big Marine off balance. He brought his feet up and launched Tyler into the air over the line in Davidge’s direction.

The lieutenant scrambled out of the way.

Elias lay on the floor, gasping to catch his breath. He glanced to the side and saw that he was halfway out of the circle himself, but it didn't matter; he'd been mostly inside when Tyler went over. He rolled onto his knees and pushed himself up.

"That was an illegal move, and you know it," Tyler said with a scowl.

"I'm still inside the ring, and you're not. You lose," Elias said.

Tyler began charging forward, but Davidge held him back, speaking quickly. "Stand down, Sergeant. If that's how Lieutenant Commander Browning wants to win, then we'll just have to accept it," Davidge said.

Sergeant Tyler's face went from fury to smug amusement in a few moments, and Davidge gave him a firm nod.

Elias shook his head and grinned a little. "Isn't 'improvise, adapt, and overcome' part of your motto?"

"Isn't 'tuck tail and run' part of yours?" Davidge replied, not missing a beat.

"Look, it just wasn't your day. Everyone's got to lose sometime."

"Let's make this more interesting. How about double or nothing?"

"No," Elias replied. *Tuck tail and run*, he thought and clenched his teeth.

"Triple or nothing, and you get to face me," Davidge said.

Elias hesitated. That was how this whole thing had started; he'd wanted to face Davidge in the ring. It was really tempting, but Davidge had seen how Elias won, and he'd be wary of such tactics. The smart move would be to just walk away. But

'tuck tail and run' *wasn't* the motto of the Acheron Confederacy Navy. There hadn't been a war in over a century in this galactic sector, but Elias understood the jibe. He glanced around at the angry glints the other spacers were directing toward the Marines. More than a few of them looked at him, their hard expressions demanding that he defend the ACN's honor.

"You're on," Elias said.

Several men let out jubilant shouts that were quickly caught up by the others, and then quiet seized the men on the hangar deck. Elias closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, then muttered a curse. Only one thing could have that kind of effect on a ship. The skin on the back of his head tightened.

As if in confirmation of his thoughts, the surrounding men stood at attention, directing their gazes to a place behind Elias. Davidge speared a glance at him and then made a show, looking over Elias's shoulder. Elias turned around and saw Senior Fleet Captain James Taggart glaring at him.

"Lieutenant Commander Browning, report to my office immediately," Captain Taggart said.

Now he'd really stepped in it.

"Yes, Captain."

Taggart's gaze swooped to Davidge and Tyler. "You two as well."

Fifteen minutes later, Elias stood outside Captain Taggart's office, waiting to be called in. Two Marines stood outside with him. Davidge and Tyler were inside, and Elias could hear somewhat muffled shouts from the old Senior Fleet Captain.

Taggart had enjoyed a sixty-year career in the Acheron Confederacy Navy that exemplified everything the Navy stood

for—ever patient and always vigilant. Elias could guess which of those traditions Captain Taggart was exercising at this very moment.

The office door opened and Davidge and Tyler hastened out of it. Tyler kept his eyes front, not looking at Elias, but Davidge spared him a glance. It didn't have any of the gloating challenge that had fostered their rivalry since Elias had been assigned to the ACS *Kestrel* more than a year ago.

“Browning, get in here!” Taggart barked.

“Good luck,” Davidge said quietly.

Elias dismissed the comment. Davidge was just trying to get under his skin. He walked into Taggart's office and stood at attention as the door shut behind him.

Taggart didn't look at him but instead kept his attention on the amber holoscreen. He made Elias wait for a few minutes and then looked up at him. He leaned back in his chair. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

There was no use in denying what had happened. The video monitoring systems would give Captain Taggart all the evidence he needed. So, Elias decided to cut right to the chase. “We were just blowing off some steam, Captain.”

Taggart's gaze became even colder, causing the already deep frown lines to sink to new levels. “It didn't look that way to me. You let them goad you into this. And then you continued to allow them to provoke you even after you'd already won.”

“Captain, Lieutenant Davidge—”

“Stop right there,” Taggart said, cutting him off. “You are a lieutenant commander in the Acheron Confederacy Navy. You're two steps away from commanding a ship like this, but

your actions here today put me of a mind that you'll never have your own command."

Elias clamped his mouth shut and squelched whatever reply was attempting to escape his lips. This wasn't the time to begin spouting excuses.

Taggart regarded him for a few moments. "There, you see. You *can* keep your mouth shut when you need to."

Elias flicked his gaze toward the captain. "Permission to speak freely, Captain."

"Denied. What makes you think I need to hear anything you have to say? You may have convinced yourself that what was happening on that hangar deck was defending the ACN's honor, but it wasn't. It was really about you. You made it personal, and that's a flaw. I've seen it in your record and have added my own analysis of your performance on the ship for the past year."

Elias felt his stomach sink to his feet. Had he pushed things too far? "I'm sorry, Captain. It won't happen again."

"Not good enough. Your record indicates an aptitude score well above normal, and yet you're impulsive and easily manipulated. That isn't the best mix of attributes for an officer of the ACN, especially not one who wants to command a ship of his own."

Elias felt the heat rise to his cheeks. "I respectfully disagree, Captain."

Taggart's eyes widened slightly, and then he leaned forward. "Oh, I can't wait to hear this. Go on."

"Captain, I know what's in my record. I'm willing to take chances where other officers wouldn't." Elias paused for a moment and then decided to jump right into the thick of it. "I

also know it was my record that got your attention, which is why I'm here. This is a fighting ship, and if you don't count chasing pirates out of our core systems, the ACN hasn't fought a battle in over a hundred years."

Taggart leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers in front of his chest. "Is that what it is? There's someone you want to fight?"

"Yes, Captain, there is," Elias said, deciding he had nothing left to lose. "And it's not just the confederacy; it's other galactic sectors, too. The Jordani Federation can't stand against all of us."

Taggart shook his head, looking tired. "It was exactly that kind of thinking that gave rise to the Jordani Federation. The fact that their navy crushed all the systems that rebelled is why we're vassals of that federation."

"I know the history, Captain. The Acheron Confederacy didn't rebel like the other systems, but maybe we should have."

"The real trouble with you younger officers is you think you have all the information. Yes, you know the recorded history, but you never stop to consider all the things that weren't documented. You don't stop to consider that perhaps the galaxy doesn't work the way you think it does."

Elias didn't say anything, standing silently.

"You're temporarily relieved of duty and confined to quarters," Taggart said.

"Captain—" Elias began.

"Lieutenant Commander Browning, conduct unbecoming of an ACN officer is a new entry in your record. Shall I add disobeying a direct order from a superior officer?"

Conduct unbecoming. The words appeared like fire in Elias's

mind. This wasn't a mere disciplinary action; Taggart was deciding whether Elias had a future in the ACN.

"Understood, Captain. Who will assume my duties?" Elias asked.

Taggart considered him for a moment. "Lieutenant Polanski."

An image of Polanski appeared in Elias's mind. He was soft-spoken, and given a task, he'd complete it without question. Polanski operated by the book.

"Use the time in your quarters to consider your future. Dismissed," Taggart said.

Elias felt bile creeping to the back of his throat, but he stood up straight and saluted his captain. After holding the salute for the precise amount of time commensurate with the best traditions of the ACN, he spun on his heel and walked out of the office.

Once outside in the corridor, the two Marine sentries roused at his approach.

"We're to escort you to your quarters, Lieutenant Commander."

Elias didn't reply and walked down the corridor. He was still reeling from what Taggart had said. What had gotten the captain so worked up that he'd come down so hard on him? It didn't make sense.

Elias reached the door to his quarters, and he glanced back at his two escorts. "Do you plan to tuck me in?"

"Negative, Lieutenant Commander, our orders are to ensure that you go inside your quarters."

Elias frowned and nodded, opening the door and stepping inside. As the door shut, he felt something hard jab into the small of his back.

“Night, night, LC,” Tyler hissed.

A jolt from a shock stick dropped Elias to his knees on the floor of his cabin. The last thing he heard was Tyler laughing heartily as he left the room.

CHAPTER TWO



Elias jolted awake to somebody shaking him. A small puddle of drool soaked the edge of his mouth, his right shoulder ached sharply, and the rest of him was stiff from the awkward position he'd been lying in for who knows how long.

“Sir, they need you on the bridge,” a male voice said insistently.

Elias groaned incoherently and pushed himself up, feeling a strong set of hands help him to a sitting position. He rubbed the palm of his hand over his face and shook his head to clear it, then stretched his neck by tilting his head from side to side, causing it to pop. He rolled his shoulders to work out more of the kinks.

“Sir, they—”

Elias opened his eyes and glared at the young man. His lower back was sore from where he'd been jolted by the stunner. He held up his hand and nodded for the man to wait a second.

The young spacer looked away, glancing toward the floor where Elias had been.

“Sit rep,” Elias said, his voice sounding dry and gravelly. He looked at the young man pointedly.

“Miller, sir. I was sent by Lieutenant Polanski to retrieve you from your quarters.”

Elias pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes. A dull headache couldn't seem to decide whether it wanted to increase in intensity or not. He stood up and winced, rubbing his lower back.

“Sir, are you all right? Should I get the doctor?” Miller asked.

Elias shook his head. “I just need a minute, spacer.”

“Of course, sir. If you don't mind me asking, what happened to you?”

Elias was trying to remember that himself.

Night, night, LC...

“Tyler,” Elias muttered. The Marine must have been waiting to extract a bit of petty revenge. He'd have to deal with him later.

“I'm sorry, sir?” Miller said.

“Never mind. I'll be out in a minute,” Elias said.

“Understood, sir. I'll be right outside.”

The spacer left his quarters, and Elias glanced at the wallscreen, looking for a ship status, but his access to the *Kestrel's* computer systems had been cut off since he'd been relieved of duty. He tried using his neural implants to get a status and was also denied access.

Elias shook his head and walked over to the sink in his room. His mouth tasted like old coffee, and he grimaced. He splashed cold water on his face and washed out his mouth, then glanced at his reflection in the mirror. There were sleep lines pressed into his face from where he'd been knocked out

on the floor. He grabbed a small towel and wiped his face, then put on a clean uniform. When he opened the door, he could almost feel the young spacer fidgeting nervously, and Miller looked relieved to see him.

Elias walked past the young man and headed for the bridge. He glanced at the ship status displayed on a small wallscreen and noted that it was set at Condition Three. Normal day-to-day operation of an Acheron Confederacy Naval warship was Condition Four, and the only time they'd been above that was for combat-readiness drills. He quickened his pace. They weren't under attack, but something was definitely going on. Why else would Captain Taggart summon him to the bridge? He frowned and remembered that Miller had told him it was Lieutenant Polanski who'd summoned him. That thought sent off all kinds of warning bells in his mind, and Elias began running.

"I've got him, sir. We'll be at the bridge in thirty seconds," Miller said from behind him, speaking to someone over comlink.

Elias clenched his teeth for a moment. There was more going on here than his having been relieved of duty, and being cut off from the ship systems was really beginning to get on his nerves.

The Marines stationed outside the bridge waved them through, already having the door open for them and closing it after they'd entered. Elias proceeded straight toward the commander's chair where Lieutenant Polanski sat. The lieutenant sagged a little but looked relieved when he saw Elias.

"Captain, the cargo carrier *Serenity's* distress beacon is authentic. Their last transmission indicated that there were

Jordani warships closing in on their position,” Lieutenant Sinclair said.

“Acknowledged,” Polanski said. “Helm, best speed to the *Serenity’s* last known coordinates.”

The orders were confirmed, and Elias frowned, looking around the bridge for Captain Taggart. His gaze settled on Polanski, who looked like a junior officer clearly out of his depth.

Elias’s eyebrows raised. “Where’s Captain Taggart?”

Polanski’s eyes widened and then he frowned. “Haven’t you heard?”

Elias shook his head. “No. I’ve been in my quarters,” he said, pausing for a moment and leaning in so only Polanski could hear him. “A bit indisposed, I’m afraid. What happened?”

Polanski nodded, licked his lips quickly, and leaned forward. “Captain Taggart is dead.”

Elias frowned, and it took a few moments for him to get his mouth to work. He felt it opening and closing like some kind of fish. “Can you repeat that, Lieutenant?”

Lieutenant Polanski repeated himself. “The doctor told me that he had some kind of seizure, and he collapsed in the corridor outside the bridge. As the next senior officer, I’ve been promoted to acting captain, but sir,” he said, meeting Elias’s gaze, “given the current situation, I know when I’m in over my head. We need you, Lieutenant Commander Browning.”

Elias glanced around the bridge and noticed that the crew was almost rigidly focused on their workstations, as if they were in their own little protective silos.

Crap, Elias thought and shook his head.

He cleared his throat. “Captain Taggart relieved me of duty.”

Polanski frowned for a moment and then accessed a quick menu on his personal holoscreen. “I’ve just reinstated you, sir.”

And just like that, Elias’s neural implants became active as they reconnected with the ship’s systems. There was a slight tingle in the back of his neck, which quickly subsided. He noticed several of the bridge crew glancing in his direction when Lieutenant Polanski stood up and gestured for Elias to take the commander’s chair.

His gaze flicked to the chair, and it felt as if a mountain were pushing down on his shoulders. He heard Captain Taggart’s voice in the back of his mind, reminding him of all his shortcomings as an officer and a man. Elias felt his eyebrows gather into a frown as he glanced at the main holoscreen. They would reach their destination within the next few minutes.

Polanski leaned toward him. “Sir, you should address the crew.”

Elias’s mouth went a little dry, and he nodded. “Comms, open a broadcast channel to the ship.”

“Broadcast channel is ready, Captain,” Ensign Hunter replied.

“Crew of the *Kestral*, this is Elias Browning, acting captain. We received a distress call from the cargo carrier *Serenity*, which has been waylaid by ships of the Jordani Fleet. Given the fact that we still need to do our own assessment on the presence of Jordani Fleet ships, I’m moving us to Condition Two. Report to your stations. Browning, out.”

Elias sat down in the captain’s chair—his chair now. Captain Taggart was dead. He was having trouble wrapping

his head around that. He'd just been sitting in the man's office, brazenly asking to be put into a situation where he could square off against the Jordani Federation. The Jordanis had the largest, most powerful fleet in the galactic sector, and they controlled all shipping lanes, as well as enforcing tariffs on trade goods throughout the different sectors.

"Captain, I've received confirmation of your broadcast from the *Endurance* and *Fortitude*. Lieutenant Commander Gordon and Lieutenant Commander Rogan have acknowledged your orders and have set Condition Two. They've included personal inquiries for you to review," Ensign Hunter said.

"Forward them to my workstation. Inform the *Endurance* and *Fortitude* that I want them to enter the system and immediately engage their cloaks," Elias said.

The messages from both Rogan and Gordon were pretty much as Elias expected—inquiries into what had happened to Captain Taggart, as well as provisional support in the current situation. They also questioned the log report that had passed command to Lieutenant Polanski before it came to him. Taggart hadn't pushed the update for Elias's status to the other ships, which made him wonder whether Taggart had been meaning to follow through with his threat. Being relieved of duty was tantamount to being dismissed from the ACN altogether. But he'd never know what the old man had truly intended, and he couldn't afford to dwell on it now. He needed to focus on the Jordanis.

He'd set Condition Two to avoid a confrontation with the Jordani ships, but at the same time, he wouldn't get caught with his pants down. The cloaking tech on the other warships should prevent the Jordanis from detecting their heat signa-

tures. If they *were* detected, then things would become a little more interesting. It was a gamble, but it was one he was willing to take. The cargo carrier *Serenity* had gotten caught using one of the unofficial shipping lanes. He glanced toward the doors to the bridge, expecting Captain Taggart to come walking through them. Hoping the old man would approve, he glanced at Lieutenant Polanski, who gave him a knowing nod.

The *Kestral* reentered normal space, emerging from their hyperspace jump within twenty thousand kilometers of the distress beacon. Elias nodded in approval.

“Tactical, I want active scans of the area.” There was no use trying to mask their presence. They were, after all, responding to a distress call from an Acheron Confederacy ship.

“Yes, Captain,” Lieutenant Reese Blackwood replied. After a few moments, the main holoscreen showed an updated plot of the area. “Captain, confirm that the *Serenity* is here, along with Jordani Titan class battleship *Vehement*, and two... no, make that four cruisers. This is definitely an attack force. The *Serenity* is tethered to the *Vehement*.”

Elias’s stomach sank to the bottom of the chair. A Jordani Titan class battleship alone was worth seven of the Acheron Confederacy Navy destroyers. The Jordani cruisers had greater tonnage than the ACN destroyers. However, what the ACN ships lacked in size, they made up for in firepower and the new cloaking tech.

What the hell were the Jordanis doing out here with so much firepower? He’d almost expected a task force like his own—a cruiser and two destroyer class ships—but what the Jordanis had was a full-on battle group. They carried enough firepower to bombard a planet.

Elias glanced at the main holoscreen and saw that the ACS *Endurance* and ACS *Fortitude* showed a cloaking status, which meant they were undetectable by the Jordani. It was a slight advantage. Even with all the improvements the ACN had painstakingly made to their warships in secret, they were untested. If they were detected, the Jordani battle group could probably make quick work of them in a standup fight.

“Comms, send a tight-beam transmission to the *Endurance* and *Fortitude*. Their orders are to remain cloaked and astern of our position. Then, begin hailing the Jordani battleship and the cargo carrier,” Elias said.

He waited a few moments and continued. “Tactical, I want a firing solution on the battleship. If it comes to it, I want just enough to cover our escape in case we need to leave quickly. Ops, I want emergency jump coordinates ready to execute ASAP.”

“Captain, there’s no reply from the cargo carrier. Their communications might be jammed. We’re being hailed by the Jordani battleship,” Ensign Hunter said.

“Put them on the main holoscreen,” Elias said and sat up a bit straighter.

The holoscreen flickered as the vidcom connection became active. It showed a rather large bridge centered around an elevated command center where the Jordani battleship commanding officer sat. He had gunmetal-gray hair and slightly darkened skin, with thick, dark eyebrows over a large, pronounced nose and a thick mustache that made his lips all but disappear. He seemed to have an almost permanent sneer.

Elias flicked his gaze to the gold insignia on the officer’s shoulders, and he almost shook his head but stopped himself. He hadn’t met an admiral who didn’t carry a certain amount of

arrogance with them. This Jordani admiral looked at him as if he'd just spotted a pesky fly that had landed on his arm, and now he was forced to deal with it.

"I'm Captain Elias Browning of the Acheron Confederacy Navy, and we're here investigating the distress beacon from one of our cargo carriers, the *Serenity*."

The Jordani admiral glanced at some kind of prompt that must've appeared on his own screen and then narrowed his gaze at Elias. "Captain, your hailing records indicate that the *Kestral* was in command of Senior Fleet Captain James Taggart. Where is he?"

"He's unavailable. I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage. Can you inform me with whom I'm speaking?" Elias asked.

"I am Admiral Zubair Sarkar of the JFS *Vehement*, and I'd classify your disadvantage as an understatement, Captain."

Arrogant indeed, and rightly so given the battle group Admiral Sarkar was leading. Elias ignored the jibe at the ACN's disadvantage. "Admiral Sarkar, I respectfully request the status of the *Serenity's* crew."

The Jordani admiral seemed to let out an inaudible snort. "Can you confirm that the *Serenity* is a registered carrier of the Acheron Confederacy?"

Elias glanced at Lieutenant Polanski, who looked at the screen and then quickly gave Elias a firm nod.

"I can," Elias replied.

"Then can you explain why the cargo carrier has wandered so far afield of the standard approved shipping lanes?"

Elias lifted his chin slightly. The fact that the ship wasn't near any standard shipping lanes *was* highly suspicious, but it didn't explain why the Jordanis were in this sector unless

they'd already been aware of the unofficial shipping lanes to begin with.

“We have the crew in custody and are questioning them. And we’re taking a data dump of the ship systems. My assumption is that the ship has been taken over by pirates,” Admiral Sarkar said.

“There's no need to jump to conclusions, Admiral. They could be experiencing problems with their navigation systems,” Elias said and paused, glancing at his personal holo-screen for a moment, “and the *Serenity* is equipped with a Paxton jump drive that is several iterations over the limit for mandatory calibration. We’re lucky to have found them at all. This is probably just a simple misunderstanding. If you'd allow me to speak with the crew, I’m sure we can get to the bottom of this,” Elias said. He'd kept his tone as even as possible but could feel the heat rising in his chest. This was the first time he'd ever tried to bluff a Jordani admiral.

“*We'll* get to the bottom of this. For now, hold your course and do not attempt to flee the system. Is that understood, Captain?” Admiral Sarkar said. His tone indicated that he didn't think much of Elias as a captain.

“I’m afraid I cannot allow that,” Elias said and felt a wave of cold wash over him. Admiral Sarkar's gaze went hard. “The crew of the ship you've captured are citizens of the Acheron Confederacy. Standard interstellar fleet regulations require that you hand them over to the sovereign entity responsible.”

Admiral Sarkar shifted in his seat and leaned forward. “So, you wish to spout regulations. I can play that game as well, *Acting Captain*,” he said, his voice sharp. “We arrived first to render assistance to the cargo carrier's distress beacon, and as the federation who arrived first, we have first authority. Given

the criminal nature that this ship was involved in, we have the authority to investigate the matter fully before turning it over to a sovereign authority such as yourself. Unless, of course, you'd like to claim responsibility for participating in piracy on the ACN's behalf?" He let the question sink in for a moment and then continued. "I suggest that if you're going to play the regulation game, you become fully versed in them before engaging with your betters."

Elias felt a flush of embarrassment sweep over his cheeks. He'd just gotten his ass handed to him at his own game. He didn't reply and waited for the Jordani admiral to continue.

"There, that's better. Properly cowed, I see. In the spirit of cooperation, I'll share with you the current status of the cargo carrier's crew," Admiral Sarkar said.

A sub-window opened on the main holoscreen, showing a crew of thirty. Typically, large cargo carriers like this one only required minimal crew.

"Would Captain Dennis McBride step forward?" Admiral Sarkar asked.

Elias noticed that there were Jordani Marines surrounding the crew as Captain McBride moved to the front of the group. He appeared grim-faced and scared.

"I'm McBride," he said and looked at Elias. His eyes widened for a moment before his features became grim once again.

"Captain McBride, kindly inform your Acheron Confederacy brethren what you just told my intelligence officer," Admiral Sarkar said.

"The *Serenity* is part of a smuggling operation. We take part in practices meant to avoid interstellar trade tariffs and embargoes for select star systems," McBride said.

Elias felt his stomach clench. The man had just admitted to breaking interstellar law, which put him firmly in the custody of the Jordanis. He tried to think of something he could say to help the civilian spacer, but his mind was blank.

“So, you see, Captain Browning,” Admiral Sarkar began, “justice, even on the fringes of the federation, will be swift. Smugglers and pirates have only one sentence under my authority—”

“Don’t,” Elias said, interrupting the admiral. “There has to be an arrangement we can make. Turn them over to me, and I’ll see that justice is served. They’ll never step aboard another ship. As for recompense, you can take the cargo.”

Admiral Sarkar’s lips lifted slightly. “I already have the cargo. But before I sentence the crew, I have a question for you. The cargo carrier’s destination was to a planet referred to as Castelan Prime. It’s curious that this planet isn’t registered in the federation records.”

Elias winced inwardly. Castelan Prime. The Jordanis must’ve decrypted the cargo carrier’s computing systems. The breath seemed to catch in his throat, and Admiral Sarkar noticed Elias’s hesitation.

“Well, Captain Browning, do you have anything you wish to share about this...”

Elias muted his audio so he couldn’t be heard, and glanced at his comms officer. “Can we reach confederation comms channels?” he asked quietly.

He heard Admiral Sarkar repeat his question.

“Negative, Captain,” Ensign Hunter replied just as quietly.

He glanced at Polanski, whose face had become ashen. Castelan Prime was a secret colony world of the Acheron Confederation—a colony where they could develop new tech-

nology that would one day give them an advantage over the Jordani Federation—and they'd just discovered its location.

Elias unmuted the audio for the comms channel. "I'm not authorized to confirm or deny anything regarding the planet Castelan Prime."

Admiral Sarkar regarded him for a few moments. "Very well. The pirates will be executed immediately."

Elias felt a surge of adrenaline course through his veins. "Stop! Those are Acheron Confederation civilians. If you don't turn them over to me, there will be larger repercussions from your actions."

Elias used his neural implants to change the ship status to Condition One.

"You're in no position to make requests. In fact, I grow tired of this conversation," Admiral Sarkar said.

Elias watched in horror as the cargo carrier crew was executed in a blaze of weapons fire from the Jordani Marines, and then the vidcom channel was severed. There was no doubt that Admiral Sarkar had wanted Elias to see him execute the crew.

"Captain, they're targeting us," Lieutenant Blackwood said.

"Ops, initiate emergency jump immediately," Elias said, hating that he had to flee.

In the back of his mind, he heard Davidge's comments about the ACN's unofficial motto to tuck tail and run. He clenched his teeth and growled.

The three ACN ships jumped to the emergency coordinates.

"Ops, set a course for Castelan Prime, best speed," Elias said, his voice sounding harsh.

“Aye, Captain, course laid in.”

“Execute,” Elias said.

The hyperspace jump would get them close to the Castelan Prime star system, but he didn’t intend to head directly to the planet.

“Listen up,” Elias said. “I want you all to bring in your relief.”

“Captain, what are your intentions?” Lieutenant Polanski asked.

“I intend to defend Castelan Prime.”

“Sir, we don’t have the firepower—”

“I’m well aware of our current capabilities, Lieutenant,” Elias said with a warning in his voice. “We were unable to protect the crew of the *Serenity*, but they were Acheron Confederation citizens. We’re not going to stand by and let the Jordanis just waltz in and do what they want to Castelan Prime. Those people need our help. I’ll seek to negotiate a settlement with the Jordanis, but we must be prepared to fight them if necessary.”

Elias sounded much more confident than he felt. He’d cut Lieutenant Polanski off because fear could spread like wildfire, and there was already enough of that. They needed to remain focused and work the problem.

CHAPTER THREE



Miles Harding sat beside his friend Wade and looked out the window of the Celestar high-speed tram as the Ramone Hospital and Research Center shrank into the distance. He kept his gaze on it and swallowed hard. He hadn't wanted to leave. Jim hadn't looked good. There was something in his brother's eyes that Miles hadn't seen before, and it scared him. Jim had hardly looked at him, and his already thin frame was beginning to appear gaunt. He supposed that being in and out of hospitals for the past year hadn't helped.

"You know, fifty years ago this place was just a little research colony of a hundred people," Wade said.

Miles gave his friend a sidelong glance. "They brought a thousand people when they established the colony here on Castelan Prime."

Wade frowned for a moment and shook his head. "But it was fifty years ago, right?"

"Yeah, that's right," Miles said and glanced out the window for a moment. "What made you think of that?"

The tram sped through a wide turn on its circuit through

the city and slowed down as it came to the station. They hadn't felt a thing.

"I don't know. I heard someone talking about it, I guess," Wade said with a shrug.

"The colony was an experiment," Miles said. "They wanted a place to conduct research and development away from the Jordanis."

"Doesn't everyone? We're all looking for a way to topple the 'big evil' and their massive fleet. Think we'll ever do it?"

"Not by building better weapons. That's not the answer."

Wade looked at him doubtfully. "You gotta be kidding me. If *we* don't, they *will*. That's the way it always works."

Miles regarded his friend for a moment. "You're right about that, but why? Why does it always work that way?"

The tram started moving again, and Miles glanced up at the estimated time the onboard computers gave for reaching his stop.

"It's competition," Wade said with a bit of exasperation. "Someone builds something, and then another person builds something better. But if you're asking me why we need to build better weapons, that's easy. We want to protect what's ours."

"If only it was just about security. We want to feel safe, but we also want to intimidate; otherwise, we wouldn't have the Jordani Federation, but let's not keep this just about them. What about the Tilion Empire, or the Dholeren United Coalition, or the Castellus Federal Alliance, and even our own Acheron Confederacy? The fact that we have a secret colony to develop better tech than our neighbors is a symptom of a greater problem."

Wade shook his head. “You’re going to go all philosophical on me.”

Miles grinned. “No, I’m not. Well, maybe just a little, but you asked for it.”

Wade grimaced and held up his hand. “Just spare me, please. My head is spinning already. Look how fast this tram is going.”

“Nice try,” Miles said. “I’ll be brief. If the Jordanis weren’t preoccupied with trying to control everything because they’re afraid someone else is gonna rise up and do what they did a hundred years ago, we wouldn’t have all the restrictions we have now.”

“Come on, Miles. The Jordanis aren’t going to leave everyone alone because we asked politely.”

Miles nodded. “You’re right. I don’t believe that, but what if we didn’t have to worry about things like illness and hunger and even death?”

Wade narrowed his gaze knowingly. “I know what brought this on. Which interstellar corporation inquired about your research this time?”

Miles’s mouth hung open a little. He’d been thinking about his brother, but Wade wasn’t mistaken, either. “Future Computing.”

Wade’s eyes widened, and he laughed. “You serious? The FCC is knocking on your door? Miles, that’s huge. What did they want? What did they offer?”

“What they all want—exclusive access to my research and a share of the preliminary patents I’ve registered through the university. But they don’t get it. None of them do.”

“What do you mean? What don’t they understand?”

“The things I’m working on basically negate everything

they have to offer. You know, like material things—sprawling estates and galactic credits, ships of my own with access to every luxury you can possibly imagine,” Miles said.

Wade pursed his lips in thought. “I don’t know; doesn’t sound so bad to me. I’d take it,” he said and arched an eyebrow. “Just make sure you take me along when it happens.” He paused for a moment. “Why wouldn’t you work with them? They have access to resources even beyond what we have here, and they can help you create all those important things you have in mind.”

“Oh sure, and they’ll use it for their own special set of projects. The things I’m doing can be dangerous if not managed properly,” Miles said.

“Miles, once you make something and make it available to everyone else, you won’t be able to control it anymore.”

Miles stared down at his hands. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

“Well, if you don’t want any of the endowments they’re offering, you can just transfer them under my unique ID. I’ll put them to good use,” Wade said.

Miles smiled. “I’m sure you would.”

They left the tram, walking the short distance to the apartment where Miles’s family lived, and Wade left him to visit his own family. Miles spent most of his time at his quarters near the University R&D campus, but he tried to visit his family as often as possible, which hadn’t been much of late. He had too much work to do preparing for a demonstration of his research projects in preparation for graduating in six months.

He walked to the door and transmitted his access code, and as it opened, he heard a snippet of hushed conversation in the kitchen.

“They can’t do this,” his mother said. “It’s not right. How can they get away with this?”

“They already did it. We’re both out,” his father said.

“But what about Jim? He needs his treatments.”

Miles walked into the kitchen, his eyebrows raised. “What’s going on? What happened?”

His parents stiffened; they hadn’t heard him come in. They shared a glance with each other, and his father pressed his lips together. “Both of our contracts were terminated today.”

Miles frowned. “Terminated? But why?”

His mother stepped away from them, answering a call on her personal comlink, and his father came closer.

“That’s just it. They didn’t really have a reason. They just said something about the reallocation of credits toward other projects.”

“When did this happen? Can you appeal the decision? Will they put you on a different project, at least?” Miles asked, his voice rising in pitch.

His father’s eyebrows drew down into a worried expression. It felt like a punch in Miles’s gut.

“A few hours ago. We’ve been trying to fight it, but I don’t think it’s going to work. They told us our credentials were on file and they’d try to place us on different projects but that we should seek opportunities elsewhere.”

Miles frowned. “You don’t think they will, do you?”

His father shook his head grimly. “No, not with the way they handled this. Early termination from a contract means...” he paused and glanced at his wife.

She’d raised her voice into a shriek and flung the comlink across the room. Her posture was rigid, and then her shoulders

began to shake. She spun around, her eyes brimming with tears. “The hospital is reporting a lapse in our benefits package. They’re going to move Jim to one of the clinics.”

Miles watched helplessly as his father crossed the room and hugged her. Oreilles Syndrome was a rare neurological disease that had recently started to afflict the colonists. The doctors were still studying it, but they had a treatment protocol, which was very expensive. The hospital had the best care available to treat the disease, and the clinics wouldn’t be able to do much for Jim. Anyone who ended up in one of the clinics died. The only chance Jim had was to remain in the hospital to get the experimental treatments that were available there. Miles had to do something.

“Let’s go down there and talk to them. Maybe if... Maybe there’s something they can do,” his father said.

“Maybe I can help,” Miles said, and his parents both looked at him. “My health benefits come from the scholarship I have. Maybe I can get it extended to cover Jim because of the special circumstance. I’m going back there to talk to my advisor.”

His mother came over to him, giving him a hug and a peck on the cheek. His father put his hand on Miles’s shoulder and gave it a firm squeeze. “Let us know what happens.”

The family left the apartment together, and the elevator ride down felt as if it had taken years. A cold, rigid silence had settled on all three of them, and Miles was reluctant to break it. As his parents each left for their respective destinations on separate trams, Miles found himself alone at the station, hoping there was some kind of provision in his scholarship that would allow them to extend his healthcare coverage to his

little brother. They had to. His research was highly valued. Maybe... No, he didn't know, and he couldn't access his contract remotely. He had to go back to the university. He sent a quick message to his advisor, requesting that he meet with him in his office. Then, Miles boarded the tram.

CHAPTER FOUR



Miles's shoulder clipped a man as he raced across campus. He'd been running since he'd gone through the security checkpoint. He shouted a hasty apology and kept going.

Castelan Prime had a slower orbit than any of the core planets of the Acheron Confederacy, which meant a standard day on this planet was thirty-four point five hours. Since they were at the height of summer, there were over twenty hours of actual daylight, but in the wintertime, they only had about fifteen—way above the norm for a standard Terran planet. Miles was practically a native to Castelan Prime, and his brother had been born there. Newer colonists had to go through quite an adjustment period because of the extended days when they first arrived.

Miles entered the Engineering and Robotics wing of the Applied Sciences complex, and the quick cadence of his footsteps echoed throughout the entrance hall. He frowned. The place was deserted. Glancing at the flashing wallscreen, he scanned the announcements. There were several demonstrations that featured the latest achievements developed there at

the university. They were the key to securing funding for research and partnerships with any of the mega-corps in the home systems. Despite putting in ridiculous hours in the lab, practically sleeping there, he couldn't get the necessary approvals to exhibit his work. Miles knew there was considerable interest in what he was working on, but he had to be careful. If his work fell into the wrong hands, it could be quite dangerous, even weaponized, which was why he had to jump through so many hoops to get approvals.

Miles exhaled explosively in frustration. If he'd gotten on the docket tonight, the problem with this brother's healthcare would have just gone away.

He hastened across a courtyard that led to his advisor's office and went inside the building. The corridor was dark and deserted, but the lighting came on as the sensors detected him. Miles rushed down the hallway, and when he reached the wing where his advisor's office was, he saw that the door was open. Muffled fragments of a heated exchange leaked out into the hallway, and Miles slowed down to listen.

"They're growing impatient. I have Herzfeld on my ass even more than usual, and some of Schaefer's vultures are circling around," a woman said.

"They smell blood in the water," Professor Kip Faber said. "Take it easy, Hazel."

"I can't, not with Herzfeld breathing down my neck."

Miles didn't know who Herzfeld was, but his face tightened at the mention of Schaefer. He was the President of Future Computing Corp. They had extensive influence throughout the confederacy and wouldn't hesitate to exert their dominance.

"Don't look so glib, Kip. They'll come after you next."

“As if that would do them any good. But why the sudden resurgence? What do they want?”

“You know what they want. Don’t play coy with me. They want a return on their investment. I can’t go into all the particulars of it with you because...”

They were both silent for a moment.

“Because...” Professor Faber prompted.

Miles crept closer. He heard the woman walk by the open door and saw her shadow spilling into the hallway, but she quickly turned around.

“Chancellor Martin—”

“We’re friends, Kip, but I can’t believe you’re this naïve. You can’t afford it, not with these guys. And don’t bother to ask again; it’s classified.”

Miles froze. Chancellor Hazel Martin was the head of the university. Miles had only heard her voice on the standard welcome vids that get shown to all new students when they first arrive. He’d never seen her, but her reputation preceded her as being a formidable presence able to navigate both governmental and private sectors with efficiency. And apparently, she was friends with his advisor.

“I thought you said he was on his way here,” Chancellor Martin said.

Miles heard someone walking toward the door, and he stepped away from the wall just as they came through the doorway. A tall, handsome woman with long dark hair regarded him with mild surprise. Then, she narrowed her gaze and twitched her head toward the door.

“Looks like it’s one of your star pupils right now,” she said and looked at Miles. “Mr. Harding, won’t you join us?”

She gestured a long, slender arm gracefully toward the

office, and as Miles walked by her, he felt as if the surrounding air was several degrees cooler than it had been a moment before.

Professor Faber sat at his desk with his fingers steepled in front of his mouth. His brow furrowed as he pulled his hands away from his mouth and stood up. He gestured for Miles to sit down.

“Hello, Miles. What can I do for you?” Professor Faber asked.

Miles sat down and heard Chancellor Martin close the door to the office. Then she came to stand behind him. He glanced up at her.

“Excuse me, where are my manners?” Professor Faber said quickly. “Miles, this is Chancellor Hazel Martin, but I’m sure you know who she is. Hazel, this is Miles Harding.”

Chancellor Martin's lips curved slightly into a smile that did not reach her cold gaze. His presence was something to be tolerated, at best.

“It’s nice to meet you, Chancellor,” Miles said, his voice sounding small.

Her expression softened. “I’m glad to finally meet you, too, Mr. Martin. I’ve been following your time here at the university with great interest,” she said and strode to the other side of the desk to stand beside Professor Faber. Miles couldn’t help but notice the way she walked and the roll of her gait as she swung around with a hand on her hip. Her expression became much warmer, and Miles felt himself relaxing a little bit.

“What can I do for you, Miles?” Professor Faber asked again.

“I feel like I’m interrupting something. Should I come back later?” Miles asked.

“Nonsense,” Chancellor Martin said. “We were just talking about you.”

Miles frowned. He didn’t like the way she was looking at him, as if constantly weighing what he was worth. As he watched, her gaze slipped into some sort of calculation.

“Not *just* about you,” she added, “but you and several others of our brighter students.” She flashed him a disarming smile, and Miles felt a rush of heat blossom across his chest. “You have such a bright future ahead of you. But you look troubled.”

Miles told them what had happened to his parents and how his brother wouldn’t get treatment anymore because of the lapse in medical benefits. Both Professor Faber and Chancellor Martin listened.

“I was wondering if there was a way I could include my brother in the healthcare I receive as part of my scholarship, or even just transfer it to him,” Miles said, his gaze darting from Professor Faber to Chancellor Martin.

His advisor shifted in his seat, and Chancellor Martin glanced at him. “I don’t think there’s much you can do here, Kip. I’d like to speak to Mr. Harding alone, if you don’t mind.”

Professor Faber seemed to consider this for a few moments and then sighed. As he glanced at the chancellor, his gaze hardened. Then he stood up. “I’m very sorry for what happened to your family, Miles. If there was anything I could do, I certainly would.”

Professor Faber left his office and closed the door. Miles

saw that his shoulders were slumped, as if he'd been defeated in some kind of battle Miles hadn't witnessed.

Chancellor Martin sat down. Her back was stiff, and she was poised. Miles wondered if she'd ever relaxed a day in her whole life.

"Mr. Harding, first let me extend my deepest sympathies for the hardships your family is suffering right now. To answer your request directly, I'm afraid that the terms of your scholarship are quite clear. They are meant to cover your health and your health alone. As a contributing member of this university, I'm unable to transfer your healthcare coverage to anyone else."

Miles felt his chest tighten and his hands shook. "Please, Chancellor, there has to be something you can do. My brother is going to die. Oreilles Syndrome has no cure, and he's being moved to one of the clinics. Is there anyone else I can talk to? Maybe some kind of board I can appeal to?"

Chancellor Martin leaned back in her chair and regarded Miles for a few moments. "It doesn't have to be this hard, Miles. Your research into the human/machine interface will change the galaxy. If you commit to Future Computing Corp, they'll take care of all your family's medical needs."

Miles flinched and shook his head. "All their major contracts are to the Acheron Military."

"I don't see the problem. Most of our major breakthroughs have stemmed from military funding. You can't afford to be this naïve, not if you want to help your family."

Miles felt the heat rise to his cheeks, and he clenched his teeth. "I can take my research and appeal to the core worlds."

Her gaze hardened into something dangerous and preda-

tory. He felt something cold slither down his back, and he pushed back into his seat.

“I see we’re going to do this the hard way. Fine, Mr. Harding. You have a contract with this university. It seems that we have a say in how you’ll embrace this bright future of yours. However, you need to let go of this gullible idealism and accept the practicality of your situation. You don’t have a lot of options, and quite frankly, neither does your family. You have a way to help them, but you choose not to take it. But I will say this: If you renege on your contract with this university, which is your option,” she said, pausing for a moment, “you’ll lose your claim to the preliminary patents registered under your name. Sure, you can appeal to the Acheron Confederacy Core World Council, but I don’t know if your brother has that kind of time. Also, you’d need to find a way to pay for transport for him, which might be more difficult than you think it is. Especially now, given the current state of affairs.”

Miles clenched his teeth and almost snarled, his breath coming in short gasps. “You’re telling me my only option is to charter a transport ship back to the core worlds to plead my case?”

Chancellor Martin stood up, crossing her arms in front of her chest. “No, your best option for saving your brother is to sign a contract with Future Computing Corporation. I bet you think this isn’t fair. Well, let me clue you in to a harsh reality about our galaxy: It’s *not* fair, even for someone with your potential. It’s about time you learned that and came out of this bubble you’ve fooled yourself into. If you change your mind, you can contact me directly, or Darren Schaeffer. I know you have his contact information. Good luck to you, Mr. Harding. I do hope you make the right decision.”

Chancellor Martin walked out of the office, and Miles sat there alone, feeling numb and small. He went over the conversation in his head. There had to be another way. He couldn't give his research to Future Computing Corporation. They were everything he hated, the galactic bullies in the confederacy. Sure, he'd be rich and set for life, but they'd control his research, and they'd mold it into something horrible. He closed his eyes and thought about his little brother. His frail form was deteriorating before his eyes, but there had to be another option. He just couldn't think of one yet, and he couldn't stay where he was. Had his advisor known what was about to happen? Had he figured out what Miles's options were going to be, which was why he'd acted the way he had?

Miles got up from the desk and left the office. He glanced down the empty corridor and shook his head. He wasn't going to let his brother die, and he wasn't going to give his research to Future Computing Corporation. He'd find another way. There was always another way.

CHAPTER FIVE



Somehow, Miles ended up at the tram station. He sat on one of the benches, staring off into space. For all he knew, he might've been there for hours. He had his personal holoscreen up and privatized so no one could see what he was looking at, but his connection to the colonial network was slow and sluggish.

The only indication that the tram had entered the station was the burst of wind that came whenever it arrived. He'd gotten used to it and hardly glanced up. He was sure he garnered a few inquisitive glances from the people who got off, but he didn't care.

"So, this is where you're hiding," Wade said, walking over to him.

Miles swept away his holoscreen in disgust and glared up at his friend.

"I heard about what happened with your parents. They told me you went to speak to your advisor. I take it things didn't go well?" Wade asked.

"They can't do anything."

Wade nodded and regarded Miles for a few moments. “What are you going to do?”

Miles drew in a deep breath and exhaled long and slow. “I need credits to get my family off world.”

Wade’s eyes widened. “Miles, are you sure about this? There has to be something... There’s got to be another way. Maybe you should go get some rest. Talk about it with your parents.”

Miles shot to his feet with his fists clenched. “I don’t need any rest. I need to get my brother out of here.”

“Okay,” Wade said, holding his hands up. “I don’t have any credits, but there might be a way you can get some.”

Miles glanced at his friend and then frowned for a moment. “I swear if you mention the FCC again, I’m going to just walk away.”

Wade grinned and shook his head. “I wouldn’t dream of it, but in order to get the credits, you need to have something that somebody else wants.”

Miles nodded. “I already have that.”

“I know someone—a service that can broker a deal for you.”

Miles looked at him doubtfully. “Broker a deal? What is this?”

“Come on, Miles. The basis for this colony was to escape intergalactic law. Don’t you think there are other things going on here besides unsanctioned research?”

Miles consider this for a few moments and then nodded by way of tilting his head to the side. “Could they put us in contact with somebody specific?”

Wade smiled and gestured for Miles to follow him.

“Where are we going?” Miles asked.

“To the café not far from here. Way more comfortable than these benches.”

As they walked away from the tram station, Miles asked how Wade knew about any of this stuff.

“Oh, I’ve heard about it before. I’ve never used those services, but I know it can be done.”

Miles stopped in his tracks. “You’ve never done this before?” he said a bit louder than he should.

Wade gave him a meaningful look. “Try to keep it together, okay?”

They entered the café and sat down at a table near the back. Wade used a public-access terminal, and a holoscreen came up. Miles watched as his friend entered a few commands. The standard public-access browser disappeared, and a different terminal session came to prominence.

“You said you had someone specific in mind. Who is it?” Wade asked.

“It’s Grace Harrington from Paramount Industries. We’ve been corresponding on and off for the past year.”

A series of commands flashed through the holoscreen, and then a voice-only call came to prominence.

“Hello, this is Grace.”

Wade nodded toward the screen, and Miles leaned in. “Yes, hello, Grace, this is Miles Harding. Do you remember me? We’ve spoken a few times.”

There was a few moments’ pause. “Mr. Harding? I hadn’t expected to hear from you for a few more months.”

Miles frowned and muted the call. “It doesn’t sound like her.”

“It’s a secure channel, and the voices are disguised to protect both callers,” Wade said.

Miles nodded and unmuted the call, then explained his situation to her.

“That’s just terrible,” Grace said. “But in order for me to move the kind of credits you’re requesting, I’ll need some assurance that you can still access your research.”

“I’m not in any trouble, so there’s no reason why they’d block my access.”

“I’ll need some proof,” Grace replied.

Miles leaned back in his chair, considering, and Wade watched him. The door to the café opened, jingling the little bell at the top. Several groups of people walked in. They looked like university students out on the town without a care in the world.

Miles sighed, brought up his own holoscreen, and entered his credentials to access some of his high-level research data that was stored on the university systems. He wasn’t stupid enough to copy the actual data; taking a screenshot of what he saw would have to be good enough. He did that and tossed it over to the terminal session he was in with Grace Harrington.

The holoscreen flickered as if it was experiencing a power flutter. Then it went off entirely. Miles looked at Wade, but his friend’s wide-eyed gaze was fixed on something behind him. Miles swallowed hard and turned around. Several men in dark uniforms and helmets were striding purposefully toward them.

“Miles Harding?” the man said, pointing at him.

Miles nodded.

“You need to come with us.”

The men surrounded the table and one grabbed hold of Wade, lifting him to his feet. Another did the same with Miles, and they were roughly escorted from the café. The

patrons went mostly quiet, but there were several hushed words spoken.

“What are you doing? Where are you taking us?” Miles demanded once they were outside. He stumbled, trying to stay on his feet.

“Just do as they say,” Wade said.

“No talking,” the leader said, not bothering to turn around to address them.

Miles tried to get a better look at the dark uniforms the men wore but couldn't make out the insignia. They were escorted to an armored shuttle, and the hatch receded into the roof. Miles was kept away from Wade by a divider in the middle of the shuttle's interior, and no one would answer their questions. Miles glanced out the window and saw that they were being flown to the roof of a tall colonial administration building near the tram station. After landing, they were guided into the building and then into a large, empty office.

The door off to the side opened and Chancellor Martin walked in. She looked at Miles and then at Wade. “This one is useless. Throw him out of the building immediately.”

Wade struggled for a moment, but the men easily overpowered him, and he was taken out of the room.

Chancellor Martin waited for Miles to look back at her. “I never would've thought you'd be this stupid. Your actions leave me with very little choice, Mr. Harding.”

“I haven't done anything,” Miles said.

Chancellor Martin tilted her head to the side. “Oh, yes you did, and I have proof. You shared confidential data with an outside company. This is expressly forbidden and in breach of contract. Your scholarship has now been rescinded, and

your preliminary patents to your research based on the work you've done for the university have been rescinded as well."

Miles felt his mouth go dry. Breach of contract meant he couldn't finish his work. "You can't do this. This is my work."

"I'm afraid I can, and I have, Mr. Harding."

Miles stepped toward her, and several men grabbed him from behind. "Please."

Chancellor Martin sneered at him. "It's too late for that. You refused to listen to reason."

She nodded for the men to take Miles away, and they dragged him to the door.

"It's not finished," Miles said. "My research and everything the university stands to gain by it isn't finished. I'm the only one who can do that."

The men stopped, and Miles watched as Chancellor Martin strode over to him purposefully. "You're only partly right. I'm aware that your research is unfinished, but we have a lot of smart people here. And Future Computing Corp will give us almost unlimited resources to make sure we succeed. But you won't be able to witness any of that, Mr. Harding. You're out. Now get lost."

Miles screamed as he was dragged from the room. He was taken to the bottom floor of the building and then shoved out the door where he stumbled and fell, tasting copper from where he'd bitten the inside of his mouth. Then, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the dark building. Wade came over to him and helped him to his feet. Miles immediately tried to push his way back into the building, but Wade stopped him.

"There's nothing you can do there," Wade said.

Tears stung his eyes. *They can't do this. They can't treat us this way.* A message dinged on his wrist computer, and he saw

that it was from his parents. He didn't have the heart to tell them that he'd failed and Jim was going to die, so he just acknowledged the message and wiped his eyes. He took one last furtive glance at the building and then walked away from it. Wade followed him.

As they passed by a public announcement terminal, it was broadcasting news about a mining station accident.

"Do you see this?" Wade asked.

Miles kept walking.

"It's a travel restriction for the next twenty-four hours," Wade said and then caught up to him. "Where are you going?"

Miles glared ahead of him. "They can't take my work. They're not keeping my research."

Wade didn't reply but walked quietly next to him. Miles had worked too hard for too long to let it all slip away. He had only one choice: he had to finish it. Only then could he save his brother.

CHAPTER SIX



Elias reread the postmortem report for Captain Taggart's death. He frowned and shook his head.

"What does the report say?" Lieutenant Polanski asked.

They were in the captain's ready room just off the bridge. Elias refused to even consider the thought that this was *his* ready room. He was just using someone else's office. He made a swiping gesture and passed the report to Polanski's tablet computer.

"He died of a stroke?" Polanski said and glanced up after he'd finished reading the report.

"Taggart was a traditionalist. He wanted nothing artificial inside his body," Elias said and shook his head.

He'd known the aging veteran was a stubborn sort, but it was increasingly rare that any bridge officer had only the standard package of wetware. Standard bridge officer implants allowed the user to interact with the ship's computer systems but without any of the health benefits that would've prevented something like the stroke that had taken Taggart's life. Elias had the most advanced bridge officer wetware because he

didn't feel the need to experience things like headaches and grogginess, and he didn't understand why anyone would avoid upgrading to the latest implants available.

Elias needed to talk with his second away from the bridge crew, so it was just him and Polanski in the ready room.

"Sir, I need to know what your intentions are with the Jordanis," Lieutenant Polanski said.

Elias glanced at the tactical plot on the wallscreen. They were in the outer reaches of the Castelan Prime star system.

"You know we can't win a standup fight with the Jordanis, especially not with that Titan class battleship of theirs," Polanski continued.

"I know," Elias replied. "A jump drone has been dispatched to COMCENT, but by the time the ACN responds, the Jordanis will be here and this thing will be finished." He paused and regarded the inexperienced lieutenant for a few moments. "You did the right thing when you reinstated me."

"I knew I was in over my head, sir. Honestly, I was just glad to pass this up the chain."

Elias nodded, and part of him wished he had the same option. He wondered what Captain Taggart would've done. If Taggart hadn't confined him to quarters, Lieutenant Polanski would never have been put in that position. Elias supposed he could take it a step further and acknowledge that if he hadn't given in to one of his impulses, Captain Taggart wouldn't have been put in a position to relieve him of duty.

"Be that as it may, I thought your actions should be recognized, but it's up to us now," Elias said.

"Understood, sir," Polanski replied.

Elias made a mental note to revise his opinion of Lieu-

tenant Polanski. His initial opinion had been of another spineless young officer produced by the ACN, but perhaps he'd been wrong. Or maybe he hadn't given the young man enough of a chance. Hell, he didn't know.

"Captain Browning, we've just detected Jordani Fleet ships coming out of hyper," Lieutenant Landon Sinclair said, his voice coming over the speakers in the ready room.

"On my way," Elias replied and stood up.

He strode onto the bridge. "I see that our unwanted guests are right on time. I guess they weren't bluffing about getting the data off the cargo carrier. Tactical, what's the status of the defense platforms in the system?"

"All platforms are online and waiting for targeting info, Captain," Lieutenant Blackwood said.

"Comms, have we had any response from the governor of Castelan Prime?" Elias asked.

"They acknowledge receipt of the message but have asked us to stand by while they consider their options, sir," Ensign Hunter said.

Elias muttered a curse. He thought he'd been perfectly clear in his message. "Comms, send an updated message to them. Tell them I realize this comes as a shock, but they must make preparations for evacuation."

His orders were confirmed. Elias knew there was no way they'd get everyone evacuated. There weren't enough ships for that, but the more they could delay the Jordani Fleet, the more lives could be saved. He gritted his teeth. He didn't have time for the governor of Castelan Prime to accept the truth, but he couldn't do anything else but wait. If he broadcast a warning to the general populace, mass panic would ensue. It might come to that anyway, but there was still time. He hoped.

“Comms, hail the Jordanis,” Elias said.

A few moments later, the bridge of the Titan class battleship *Vehement* and Admiral Sarkar’s sour face came to prominence on the main holoscreen.

“Captain Browning, I trust you’ve had time to consider our proposal,” Admiral Sarkar said.

Elias didn’t miss the mocking tone dripping from the Jordani admiral. “You mean the proposed enslavement of the citizens of Castelan Prime? I’m afraid I can’t allow that.”

“You’re not in a position to make demands, Captain, or should I address you as Lieutenant Commander Elias Browning of the Acheron Confederacy Navy.”

Elias clenched his teeth. Admiral Sarkar had done his homework. “The existence of the colony doesn’t give you the right to make them a third-tier planetary system of the federation. I’m prepared to do what I must to stop you, Admiral.”

Admiral Sarkar regarded him for a few moments. Then, he laughed and shook his head. “A cruiser and destroyer escort are hardly able to stand in our way. This communication was a courtesy.”

“A moment, Admiral,” Elias said quickly, sensing that the admiral was about to cut the comms channel. The admiral waited. “The thing is, or the rub if you will, is that it’s not just three ships standing in your way. There’s also a defense network that I’m afraid can do... Well, let’s just say it’ll cost you,” he said, hardening his gaze.

“Doubtful,” Admiral Sarkar replied.

Elias tilted his head to the side. “You’ll find out then. I may not be up to speed about Jordani Federation policy, but I do know that *you* are responsible for the fleet costs under your command. Is the cost of taking out all our defenses, including

our ships, worth subduing a rogue colony world on the edge of the galactic sector? How do you plan to justify that to your superiors?”

Elias watched as Admiral Sarkar’s face went several shades of red. Then another officer leaned over and spoke to the admiral quickly. Elias knew he’d struck a nerve. The Jordanis were, if anything, a practical lot, and he knew that each missile launched was attached with a cost-benefit that the Jordani Federation was keen to keep admirals accountable for. Elias had always thought it was overkill, but he might’ve just bought the people of Castelan Prime some precious time.

“That’s just it, Captain Browning. We’re not subduing a colony world. We’re bringing justice to a pirate stronghold. Perhaps we’ll just wipe the slate clean and turn this planetary system into yet another lifeless world where we store our unwanted things—a world of refuse if you will. But,” Admiral Sarkar said, raising his hand before Elias could reply, “I realize you’re a junior officer who’s been thrust into a position several ranks above where you should be, and I won’t let it be said that the Jordani Federation Fleet is without mercy. I urge you, *Captain*, to review your standing orders. Otherwise, millions of lives will be lost. Yes, yes, you might be able to do some damage to our ships, but let’s be realistic—our ships can take a lot of damage. We’ll still be here, and you won’t.”

The comms channel went dark. Beads of cold sweat collected along his brow and he shivered.

“The Jordani Fleet is holding position, Captain,” Lieutenant Blackwood announced.

Lieutenant Polanski glanced at Elias. “What did he mean, standing orders?”

Elias swallowed hard and shook his head. “I don’t know.”

The Jordanis were giving him some time to consider his options. For all their posturing, they weren't without practicality. So why did Elias feel like he was just delaying the inevitable? Why the hell did it feel like they'd already lost? Admiral Sarkar's reference to their standard ACN Fleet response irritated him. He wouldn't abandon the colony. They were citizens of the Acheron Confederacy, and he'd be damned if he would leave them to the mercy of the Jordanis, no matter what the standing orders were.

One happy galaxy.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Miles glanced back at Wade to make sure he was still following. His friend's wide-eyed gaze scanned the dark corridor.

"Where are we?"

"Maintenance corridors. No one ever comes down here. Well, except for the maintenance bots, no one comes down here."

Wade cleared his throat. "Won't some kind of security monitoring system get flagged and alert that we're here?"

Miles shrugged. "I've been down in these corridors on and off for months, and I've never had a problem. Besides, whatever alert might get sent up wouldn't be for us specifically. We didn't authenticate to get down here, so we should be fine."

Wade was quiet for a few moments and then asked, "These tunnels lead directly to your lab?"

Miles nodded. "Well, it's an access hatch in one of the storage closets, but yeah."

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but what were you doing in one of the closets?"

Miles quickened his pace, and Wade easily stayed with him. "It's part of my research."

"Closet study? Come on."

Miles shook his head. "No, I needed to access a few autonomous bots that we have around. I needed to make sure... I was just testing some things."

Wade made an uh-huh sound. "Miles, are you sure we should do this? Breaking into the lab? I'm sure Chancellor Martin has already alerted the university's governing authorities."

"I don't have any choice now," Miles replied.

"Yes, you do. You can appeal the decision."

Miles scowled. "It'll take too long. My brother doesn't have months for me to go through the appeals process. There's only one way I can speed this along and get what I need."

They turned down a small passageway that brought them to the access hatch. Miles sent an open-door command using a standard bot communication protocol and climbed through the doorway. Wade followed. A light came on overhead once they were inside the maintenance closet.

"I can't do this without you," Miles said.

Wade shrugged and smiled. "What are friends for?"

"No... I appreciate that, but I literally can't do what I'm going to do without you in there. But thanks." Miles looked at his friend regretfully. Sometimes Wade didn't interact so well with people.

"Let's get this done," Wade said.

Miles walked to the outer door that led to the lab and leaned toward it, listening for anyone on the other side. He waited a few moments and then opened the door.

Along the ceilings were tracks of thick cables sectioned by

high-powered conduits, which pulsed lazily in a dim blue light. A collection of nearly identical workstations formed a phalanx in front of the broad opening of a protective transparent ceraphome screen. The power conduits encircled the room beyond a metallic recliner that sat empty, and the large shadow of a sphere hovered beyond.

Miles walked over to one of the consoles, which flickered, giving the area an odd radiance.

“So, this is where you spend all your time?” Wade asked.

“Yeah,” Miles said. “I was trying to get a proof-of-concept ready to secure the patents in my name, but I couldn’t get the approvals in time.”

“Proof of concept? Do you mean a concept validation for human trial?” Wade asked and gestured toward the room. “What exactly were you doing here?”

Miles continued to bring the systems online and then looked at his friend. “I’ve been working on a specialized interface within a virtual artificial construct.”

Wade frowned. “What do you mean? Is this a new kind of implant or something?”

Miles shook his head. “No, something much better and more efficient than implants. We’re still limited by our bodies. Brain implants help, but they’re invasive. Our bodies reject them, and rightfully so. We’re not meant to use a crutch like that. I’m working on something beyond all that—a way for us to live beyond the confines of our physical bodies.”

Wade’s eyes widened. “You want to upload yourself into a machine? Miles, that’s crazy. They’ve tried it before, numerous times, and then they outlawed that kind of research. It always leads to permanent insanity, which is what will happen to you.”

Miles shook his head and smiled. “Not like this, they haven’t. What I’ve been able to do is perfect the consciousness-to-machine interface. I blend them together to form a cohesive matrix with the help of virtual intelligence constructs.”

Wade licked his lips for a moment and glanced out the control room window. “Don’t you mean artificial intelligence?”

“Nope,” Miles said. “There’s no such thing. We can mimic intelligence, but there has never been the creation of artificial sentient beings—only cleverly disguised interfaces that are meant to fool us into believing in something that’s not possible. At least not yet. We’re the missing link.”

“If you say so.”

“It will work. I’ve done it before... well, not me, personally,” Miles said.

“What do you mean you’ve done it before? On whom?”

“On test subjects who are clinically dead but retain limited response to sensory stimuli. Always maintaining a connection to the physical host is key. My work can help people with disabilities and also people who are suffering from diseases—people like my brother,” Miles said.

“Miles, there’s a reason why this type of research is against the law,” Wade began.

“That’s why I’m able to do it here on Castelan Prime. We’re outside interstellar law. Look, I need to set myself up in the cradle, and when I’m ready, you need to enter the sequence to begin the upload,” Miles said.

Wade blinked his eyes rapidly and shook his head. “This is too dangerous. You can’t do this to yourself.”

“I have to do it, or Jim is going to die. I need your help. Once I can demonstrate a proof-of-concept, then the patents are mine regardless of the status of my scholarship,” Miles said.

Wade pressed his lips together. “Are you sure you can’t just talk to the people at Future Computing Corporation? Maybe you can work out a deal with them—anything but risk... all this. You can’t help your brother if you’re dead.”

Miles pressed his lips together and shook his head. “I’ll never give them my research. And I can’t help my brother if I don’t do this. Will you help me?” He watched as Wade glanced around the laboratory. “Just sit here in this chair and wait for my signal.”

Wade nodded and sat down as Miles walked out of the command room, heading for the central chair. Miles removed his shirt and sat down. The chair reclined, and the cushions molded themselves to him, providing maximum support for his body. His stomach tightened as the chair rose, bringing his head into the halo.

“What’s going to happen to you after I activate the upload?” Wade asked.

“My consciousness will transfer to a massive storage array. I’ll be perfectly safe, Wade. Promise.”

He glanced up at the command room window and saw Wade staring down at him. He looked worried, so Miles gave him a wave. “All right, I’m ready. Initiate the upload sequence.”

The halo began spinning, and Miles closed his eyes. He felt the slight prick of a needle that introduced the sedatives into his system. Miles’s heart rate began to slow down, and he felt his body sag into the chair. His thoughts seemed to stretch out in front of him as if he were accessing them through a long tunnel. He heard the high-pitched whine of the surrounding machines, and then he felt as if he’d pierced an invisible shroud that cut off all noise and sensitivity. It was as if he’d

entered a soundproof room, hearing the utter silence of nothingness.

Miles opened his eyes. At first, there was nothing to see, but then he became aware of several virtual interfaces that snapped to life in front of him. Gleaming spheres of glistening silver circled around him, the embodiment of a series of virtual intelligences that were meant to assist him. Miles selected the centermost interface and his vision came through an optical feed from inside the command room. He saw the back of Wade's head.

Miles tried to crane his neck so he could see around Wade, and the virtual intelligence interpreted his intent, making the camera shift to the side. He glanced at the holoscreen next to Wade and saw that there was an open communications channel active.

He flinched, or at least he tried to. He felt the connection back to his body, and it might have jerked in response. He focused on the speaker systems of the lab. "Wade, who did you call?"

Wade sprang up from his seat and spun around as the doors to the lab burst open and armed security officers flooded the area.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Miles watched as Wade raised his hands into the air.

The nearest security officer pointed his weapon at Wade. “Step away from the console,” he said.

“Okay, okay, calm down. I’m the one who called you guys,” Wade stammered.

Miles wanted to recoil from the video feed, but he couldn’t. He suddenly felt as if he could sense thousands of data connections twisting away on pathways of pulsating light, and it was as if he were peering at the molecular structure of the tiniest bits. Thoughts rushed through his mind, thousands becoming millions as they stretched away to infinity in stunning, brilliant clarity. It was overwhelming. There were too many details to keep track of, and his thoughts scattered. He felt as if he was tumbling out of control, unable to gain his bearings, and his mind splintered as he tried in vain to grasp the colossal amount of information available. The virtual intelligence responsible for coherence engaged the neural inhibitors, and Miles felt everything slow down. The expanse

of information was still there, but it was muted to an insubstantial gray background.

“Wade, what have you done?” Miles asked, his voice sounding like a strange whisper with a deep, hearty base. It rang out from every speaker in the lab.

The security officers scrambled into action, trying to find the source of Miles’s voice.

Two security officers kept watch on Wade while the others checked the area. One of them looked through the window to where Miles’s body sat in the cradle.

A security officer activated his comlink. “We’re all secure, ma’am.”

Miles brought his attention to the main doorway, and it took him a second to realize that every single camera in the room had pivoted to show him multiple vantage points of the entrance. It was as if he was seeing the room from a hundred tiny video screens. He experienced a moment of vertigo, and the lights in the lab dimmed for a few moments in response.

“What the hell is going on in here?” the officer standing by Wade asked, glancing nervously up at the ceiling.

In a fraction of a second, Miles had a bead on every officer in the room. He’d gotten the information almost before the thought had completely formed in his mind.

Chancellor Hazel Martin entered the room, her confident gait reflecting the stride of a woman on the rise. She took a few moments to survey the room, and then she glanced at Wade. “He’s done it,” she said and frowned. “Mr. Harding, can you hear me?”

Miles’s anger flared, and a surge of power caused the lights to gleam brightly for a moment before some of them blew, showering the immediate area in sparks.

“I can hear you.” His voice sounded deep, almost cavernous, and not at all like his own.

“Remarkable,” Chancellor Martin said. She glanced at the officer in charge. “Captain Donlan, make sure your men don’t touch anything.”

Miles heard Donlan bark a few orders at his men, and the one who’d been leaning toward Miles’s body stepped back away from it.

A tall, dark-skinned man entered the room, his coldly calculating gaze taking a quick survey of the room before it came to settle on Chancellor Martin. “So, this is the research lab I’ve heard so much about. And is that Miles Harding down there?”

“Herzfeld,” Chancellor Martin said as more of an acknowledgement than a greeting. “His consciousness has been transferred to the ESM here in the lab.”

Herzfeld walked toward the window.

“Who is this, Chancellor? His identification isn’t in our records,” Captain Donlan said.

Herzfeld ignored the question.

“He has authorization,” Chancellor Martin replied.

Herzfeld turned away from the window. “Is the system secure? And how long can the battery support the Energy Storage Matrix?”

“The system is isolated from the outside,” Miles answered almost automatically. He’d gotten that question so many times that he answered without thinking. His reply, however, took the other people in the room by surprise.

Miles noticed that Wade flinched when he spoke.

Chancellor Martin looked at Wade. “Mr. Pierce, thank you for your help.”

Herzfeld glanced at Wade. “What was your role in all this?”

Wade glanced at Chancellor Martin, and Miles couldn’t help but notice a certain amount of familiarity in their gazes. She nodded for him to answer.

“I was his handler.”

Herzfeld twitched his head once, needing no further explanation, but Wade stepped forward. “I was more than that. I was his friend,” he added quickly, glancing up at the ceiling and then toward Miles’s body in the cradle. “I *am* your friend, Miles.”

“You were my handler?” Miles said. The deep voice that came from the lab speakers had an edge to it, and Miles didn’t care. Wade had lied to him. He’d pretended to be his friend. Miles thought back to all the times he’d confided in Wade, who’d been reporting back to the chancellor the whole time. “I trusted you.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Miles. You have to believe me.”

He tried to clench his teeth, but as the VIs attempted to interpret what he wanted, they faltered. Instead, they regulated his feelings. It was strange. He was furious, and at the same time he was entirely rational and able to think clearly. His mind was quickly adapting to hundreds of data feeds. His research hadn’t been simply intended to upload human consciousness into a machine; it was also meant to partner with virtual intelligent assistants designed to bridge the gap.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Chancellor Martin said. “Your research was cutting edge. We needed somebody to keep you on task—a trusted confidant. Mr. Pierce will be adequately compensated for his extraordinary efforts.”

Miles became aware of a new data connection and saw

Herzfeld at one of the consoles, using some kind of override. He wondered if Chancellor Martin was aware of this, but the thought was lost amid a spike of rage. Wade was the first person he'd met here, and he was supposed to have been his friend. They'd been a big part of each other's lives, and it all felt so tainted now.

"You spied on me," Miles hissed softly. "I trusted you. My family..." He stopped speaking, and a wave of energy spiked through the laboratory systems. "My family! My brother! You used me!"

Wade shook his head. "No, I didn't know they'd take away his benefits. I didn't know."

Miles sent an overload of energy to every console in the room. The response was a shower of sparks, and the lights flashed and dimmed. They had manipulated him. They'd manipulated his family, and now that he'd proven his research worked, they would take this from him, too. There was only one thing he could do. He had to destroy his research and reenter his body.

"What's happening?" Herzfeld asked.

Chancellor Martin had covered her face, shielding it from the bright lights. "He's destroying his research!"

Miles quickly went into the tunnel, moving back to his body, but he hit an invisible barrier and simply bounced off. The overloads in the lab ceased as Miles focused on the barriers in front of him.

"Aren't there backups?" Herzfeld asked.

"Of course there are, but some pieces of equipment are prototypes, including..." She frowned for a moment. "He's not back in his body."

"No, he's not, but not for lack of trying," Herzfeld replied.

“You’re in the system?”

“I’ve uploaded some lockout protocols that he’s cutting through. And he’s getting quite good at it,” Herzfeld said, frowning.

“Sir,” a security officer called from near the cradle. “Looks like he’s starting to wake up.”

Miles had been listening to the conversation, but he kept hitting blocks. The first one had tripped him up, but then he was able to unravel their patterns with relative ease. He was almost back into his body—just a little bit further.

There was a loud blast as the protective ceraphome window shattered, startling Miles, and the light of the tunnel to his body went dark. Miles felt a rise of panic, and he heard someone scream.

“You shot him!” Wade shouted.

Miles watched as Wade was wrestled to the ground by the security officers. Then, he saw Herzfeld standing by the shattered remains of the window with a weapon in his hand. That was when he saw his body, and there was a large, blackened hole where his chest used to be. He tried to back away, but the VIs were programmed to assist, and the status of his body was critical information. They utilized the cameras in the area to show him the remains of his dead body.

Oh my god! I’m dead.

I’m dead.

I am dead!

He couldn’t go back. He was trapped.

“What have you done?” Chancellor Martin demanded. “You shot him. You killed him.”

The security officers pointed their weapons at Herzfeld.

“He’s not dead,” Herzfeld said and glanced at Donlan.

“Steady, Captain, I’m with ACI. I’m sending you my credentials.”

Captain Donlan frowned for a moment and then ordered his men to lower their weapons.

“Miles Harding, can you hear me?” Herzfeld asked.

Miles heard them, but he couldn’t reply. All his attention was focused on a wall of screens that showed him the same thing—his dead body. He was stuck, trapped in a prison of his own making.

“You unbelievable bastard,” Chancellor Martin said.

“I’ve been called worse, but you of all people should understand what I’ve done,” Herzfeld replied.

Chancellor Martin looked down at Miles’s body. Her eyebrows gathered, and she grimaced as she turned back toward Herzfeld. “You think you can get him to cooperate. But what if..”

Miles felt a wave of fear rush in. Uploading human consciousness into a machine had been proven to drive people insane. Miles had worked for years to create the virtualized intelligences that were capable of preventing this from happening, but was he still sane? He could still think. He should be screaming. He should be dead, but he wasn’t. He was still here, which meant the VIs were helping him. He felt like he was dangling above a wide abyss, holding on by his fingertips.

Herzfeld walked out of the command center and down to the cradle toward the remains of Miles’s body, gesturing for the two security officers to leave. He looked at the body for a moment and then shook his head. “I’m sorry, Miles. I’m sorry things had to come to this, but there are bigger implications than just you.”

Miles was focused on his body and couldn’t turn away

from it. He wanted to believe this was some kind of illusion, but it wasn't. The reality was right in front of them.

"I don't think you realize the full repercussions of what you've done," Herzfeld said. Chancellor Martin walked into the area and came to stand by his side. "I'm from the Acheron Confederacy Intelligence Division, and I'm just reviewing your file."

Miles shifted his attention to the data connection from Herzfeld's session. It contained detailed information about him, his family, and his brother's illness—who he spent his time with, every search of the colonial net, and even the kinds of foods he liked to eat. It was all there. Miles focused on the image of his little brother from before he was sick.

"I know why you did all this. Chancellor Martin was going to take everything away from you, and you felt that you had to act. Unfortunately, I couldn't get here in time, but maybe it was a cruel twist of fate that things worked out this way. You see, this planet is in danger. A Jordani fleet is on its way here. Negotiations with them aren't going well, and they intend to enslave whoever's left after their bombardment."

"Is this true?" Captain Donlan asked. "Are the Jordanis coming here?"

Herzfeld nodded. "There are three ACN destroyers out at the edge of the system, but they won't be enough."

"We have to get out of here! We need to evacuate!" Donlan said, his voice rising at the realization of their situation.

"There's no way we can evacuate everyone," Chancellor Martin replied.

Miles felt like he could think again, and he seized the opportunity to focus on something else. He wasn't sure

whether it was the VIs working to direct his thoughts, and he didn't care. He accessed whatever laboratory systems were left and spoke. "Can you help my family?"

His question startled everyone. His voice didn't sound anything like his own, and he hated what it sounded like. He watched as Herzfeld glared everyone into silence.

"That depends on you, Miles. Everything I've seen in your file indicates that you're a person of integrity, and you don't want your work in the hands of Future Computing Corporation because they're so closely aligned with the Acheron Confederacy Military. But we can't afford for you to remain so willfully naïve, not in the face of what's about to happen. I've been following your research, and while you *are* outstandingly brilliant, I don't believe you understand the full scope of what you've achieved here."

Miles sighed, and it sounded like a blast of static mixed with a moan. "I'm trapped in a machine. What help could I possibly be?"

"You underestimate yourself. Otherwise, there'd be no way someone like Chancellor Martin's schemes would've worked on you. But that's neither here nor there. You asked if I can help your family, and I'm putting the question back on you. What are you willing to do to help your family? What are you willing to do to save Jim? You did all this for a chance to save your brother, so I'm assuming there really isn't much you wouldn't do."

"You killed me."

"Did I?" Herzfeld asked. "Are you really dead? You're a valuable resource, and I secured your cooperation."

"You. Killed. Me."

"This is no time for you to be narrow-minded, Miles. Do

you know how many secret colonies we have doing all kinds of research that's outlawed by interstellar law? But let's just call it the Jordani Federation Directive that keeps us in line. Do you think for a second that we don't have the ability to grow you a new body someday?" Herzfeld asked and paused for a few moments. "We have your research, and we have all this equipment. It's time we took it a step further."

Miles felt his thoughts gather into a virtual frown. Grow him a new body? He hadn't considered that. "What do you need me to do?"

"I have a team of engineers on their way here right now. They're fully versed in your research and have a few theories of their own as to its capabilities."

"What about my family and my brother?"

"You can save your family, and I'll personally see to it that your brother gets the medical treatment he needs. Do we have a deal?"

Miles thought about it, and those thoughts seemed to race at a speed beyond anything he'd ever experienced before. It was as if he'd ratcheted up the output capabilities of his mind. He was weighing all the options, seeing different ways to achieve his goals before a second had even ticked by on the clock. He was isolated on the lab system, but it did sound like Herzfeld intended to use him. Maybe he had been naïve in thinking he could... He stopped that train of thought. He'd invented this technology, so he could change things and give people an opportunity to transcend death. Now he wanted to be proof that perhaps he could survive one day to go back into his body. He looked at it with a sense of distance, as if he recognized its limitations. Was going back what he really wanted? Opposing thoughts howled in his mind, and the VIs

muted them. He felt something he'd almost never experienced as a person—powerful and a lot more in control, even if he was isolated. The brilliant scientist in him that quested for knowledge would never walk away from this. He couldn't. He'd do whatever Herzfeld needed until the day he could be free of them.

"Agreed," Miles replied.

"Excellent, they'll be here in a few minutes, and they're bringing some better equipment with them than you have here—a way to move you out of this isolated system," Herzfeld said.

Miles didn't reply; he simply waited. There were so many other things to test. What were the limits of his capabilities? He felt like he could spread his perceptions without limit. No, not without limit. He was limited because of the ESM that stored... him. Instead of expanding, he withdrew himself into a tiny space. This would take some getting used to.

He heard Herzfeld and Chancellor Martin speaking in quiet tones, and he tasked part of his attention to keep track of them, but it was the small voice in the command room that snatched his attention.

"Miles," Wade said quietly, "I'm sorry I lied to you. I'm sorry about everything. I'm sorry I called them. I didn't know they would do this to you. You have to believe me."

Hearing Wade beg for forgiveness generated a flash of anger.

"I can make it up to you if you'll let me," Wade continued.

Miles powered on a nearby console, and Wade's eyes widened. He'd done it to get Wade's attention.

"Get out," Miles hissed.

Wade frowned and tilted his head as if he hadn't heard him.

"Leave!" Miles shouted, and all side conversations were instantly silenced.

Wade jumped back and scrambled to the door. He paused for a moment, looking back and shivering. Miles sneered and noticed that several of the security officers looked around worriedly as they, too, edged toward the door. They were afraid of him. But Miles pushed them from his thoughts. They were beneath him now. A few moments later, Herzfeld's engineers arrived, and Miles focused on what they needed.

CHAPTER NINE



Elias sat in the commander's chair and brought up his personal holoscreen, wondering how Admiral Sarkar had known about ACN Fleet response protocols. Lieutenant Polanski came over to his side, and Elias glanced at him. "I'm going to need a few minutes here."

Polanski's eyes drew up in surprise for a moment, and then he quickly returned to his station. He'd overstepped his bounds, but Elias wasn't really concerned about that just now. He had enough to worry about.

He turned his attention to the command interface on his holoscreen and noticed a few additional entries for standing orders from the Acheron Confederacy Navy's COMCENT. They weren't part of the standard regs since they were orders that could be changed, but they were clear. He reread them three or four more times, and each time he felt his teeth clench just a little bit harder as his mouth formed a grim line. He thought about his last conversation with Captain Taggart. Had he seen the warring emotions Captain Taggart kept away from the crew? Elias felt so foolish about some of the things he'd

said. Captain Taggart had been following his orders, even if he didn't approve. Now it was his turn, but Elias couldn't imagine Taggart agreeing to the Jordani's terms. Was he being willfully naive?

Elias saw Polanski glance in his direction and gestured for him to come over. "Our orders are to negotiate a peace settlement, even if it means giving away this system," Elias said and shook his head. "That bastard knew all along what our response would be—what our response *had* to be," he said bitterly.

Lieutenant Polanski read the orders and was smart enough to remain quiet. Elias's opinion of the young lieutenant went up a few more notches, but he saw Polanski's face become pale. His orders were to abandon Acheron Confederacy citizens—brave colonists who chose to risk their lives as part of a secret confederacy effort to develop technology that went against the Jordani Federation peace accords.

"Sir," Lieutenant Polanski said quietly, "what do you intend to do?"

Elias regarded the young officer and saw a reflection of what Elias was already feeling. They were afraid and disgusted. "I know what I'm *not* going to do," Elias said and swiped away his holoscreen, causing it to minimize.

"Comms, give me a broadcast channel," Elias said.

"Ready, sir," Ensign Hunter replied.

"Crew of the *Kestral*, this is Captain Browning. The Jordani Fleet is here to make the citizens of Castelan Prime into Jordani Federation subjects against their will. The standard orders for this ship, as well as the rest of the task force, is to negotiate a peace settlement with the Jordanis, even if this means the loss of the colony; however, I can't follow those

orders. I can't because they are themselves illegal, even if they come from COMCENT. The Acheron Confederacy Navy is here to protect its citizens. We're not simply going to tuck tail and run because they have bigger ships than ours. The Jordani Fleet expects us to surrender and allow them to waltz in there and do whatever they want. Well, that isn't what's going to happen today. I don't know anyone on that world, but I do know that they're citizens of the confederacy, and I'm obligated to protect them from harm. That is our duty, and that is what we're going to do."

Elias closed the broadcast channel.

"Captain, the Jordani Fleet is targeting the nearest mining installation," Lieutenant Blackwood said.

Elias's gaze darted to the plot.

"Two lancer class missiles fired from the *Vehement*," Lieutenant Blackwood announced.

The mining station didn't have any countermeasures. He couldn't stop the missiles, but he could make the bastards pay for it.

"Tactical, engage the nearest defense platform and target Federation ships," Elias said.

Elias watched grimly as the mining station was destroyed. A few miners tried to escape in a transport shuttle, but the Jordanis destroyed them. Elias swung his gaze to Lieutenant Blackwood at the tactical workstation.

"Firing solution has been uploaded to the defense platform."

"Execute," Elias said.

A salvo of new missiles appeared on the plot, speeding toward the Jordani ships.

"Captain," Ensign Hunter said, "I'm receiving a data burst

from Castelan Prime. Security clearance has been verified and authenticated with ACN protocols. It's strange, sir. The data is self-contained, so I can't access its contents, but there's a message for the commanding officer of the *Kestral*."

Elias frowned for a moment. "Send it to my station."

He glanced at the plot on the main holoscreen and saw that the Jordani Fleet was now targeting the defense platform. The platform would be destroyed, but at least it would buy the spacers on the other mining stations more time to escape.

Elias pulled up the data burst on his holoscreen and authenticated the message. It contained a special set of communication protocols to a specific subspace frequency. It had come from Castelan Prime, but it didn't have any associated ID that indicated whether the person was from the actual ACN or not.

"Comms, I'm sending you a protocol for a specific subspace frequency, and I want the comlink connected directly to my console only," Elias said.

"Aye, sir."

A few moments later, Elias was looking at the face of a dark-skinned man, who narrowed his gaze for a moment.

"You're not Captain Taggart."

"You're right, I'm not. I'm acting captain. Captain Taggart—"

"Never mind. You can fill me in later, but you need to listen to me," the man said and glanced at something off-screen. "Lieutenant Commander Browning, my name is Herzfeld. I'm with Confederacy Intelligence, and I have something you need."

Elias shook his head. He didn't have time for this.

"Agent Herzfeld, we're about to engage the Jordani Fleet.

I'm assuming you're on Castelan Prime. You need to evacuate as many people as you can. We'll buy you as much time as possible."

Herzfeld shook his head. "Very brave, Captain, but foolish. I've been monitoring the situation on the fringes of the Castelan Prime system since you arrived. Since you haven't begun an all-out assault on the Jordanis, you must have a bigger plan at work, but I don't care what it is. Included in the data burst is a special combat suite that I want you to upload to the missiles with the biggest payload. I believe the *Kestral* carries the Mark XII on board?"

Elias's eyebrows pulled together in a suspicious frown. He shook his head. "Look, Agent Herzfeld, if that's your real name, I'm not about to break combat protocols because you have some cutting-edge new software you'd like to test in a real combat situation. I have a battle to fight, and I don't have time for this." He moved to cut the communications channel.

"Browning, listen to me!"

Elias paused for a moment and arched an eyebrow.

"You're right, this is something new, but if it works—"

"If it works," Elias said with a sneer, his patience slipping.

"If you want to stop the Jordanis, you'll listen to me. You'll listen to me because you're making a stand here at the Castelan Prime star system, which means you looked at your standing orders and decided they weren't good enough. I know your standing orders, Captain Browning, and I know you've already deviated from them. All I'm asking you to do is not to throw away your life needlessly. I'm giving you a way to defeat the Jordanis and possibly begin something much bigger."

Elias leaned back in his chair, considering, and he saw Lieutenant Polanski shift in his seat. A way to defeat the

Jordani—that was what the ACI agent was trying to give him. Elias didn't think it was possible, but what if he was wrong?

“Captain, you have time. If you listen to what I have to say, you could save every person on this planet and not just the handful that can escape on ships.”

Elias lifted his gaze to the holoscreen. “All right, Agent, tell me what you've got.”

CHAPTER TEN



After a relatively short conversation with Agent Herzfeld, Elias had his tactical operations officers review the data provided. He'd brought up their relief officers to assist, so the bridge of the *Kestral* was a bit more crowded than usual.

The Federation ships had finished taking out the defense platform and were slowly moving to the next target. Elias knew the entire ploy was of Admiral Sarkar's design. The Jordani Fleet could've swept into the star system, made quick work of the mining stations, and been well on their way to Castelan Prime. Sarkar knew Elias was out there with two ACN destroyers, but he just didn't care. And why would he? The Jordani Fleet outnumbered them and had superior numbers on their side. They had a damn Titan class battleship and four cruiser class vessels. Elias could have held his own against the four cruisers, but not with that battleship. Acheron destroyers were designed to engage ships with more armament. The Jordanis wouldn't walk away from this encounter unscathed, but Elias knew that the odds were overwhelmingly in the Jordani's favor. Everyone on the bridge knew it.

Sinclair and Blackwood had had their heads together while they checked over the data packet from Castelan Prime.

“It’s getting close to time, gentlemen. What have you got for me?” Elias asked.

“Their engineers were pretty thorough, Captain,” Lieutenant Blackwood said. “They have some strange protocols I think you should be aware of. One of them is the restrictions for which these updates need to be applied. They look like self-contained virtual intelligence programs, but they have a complexity I haven’t seen even on our own onboard CIC systems. At the same time, they’re quite small. They’re compressed.”

Elias nodded. “They only want them uploaded to the individual missile systems and denied access to everything else. What I need to know from you is whether they’ll do the job or not. Will the missiles work, or are we wasting them?”

Blackwood shared a glance with Sinclair and they both nodded. “Sir, the standard missile computer system is within the parameters to run the new VIs, but there are extra things in there. I can’t account for those bits, but they look close enough to accurately say that we wouldn’t be wasting our missiles.”

“Could we roll back the update if we had to?” Elias asked.

“On the ship, yes. Once the missiles launch, then no. If we had more time, we could come up with something, sir,” Blackwood replied.

Elias knew that onboard missile operating systems were complex machines. They were specifically designed with a security-hardening infrastructure that prevented tampering once the missiles were active. If he decided to move forward, he had to update the missiles while they were on his ship,

which was easy enough, but he was also considering sending the update to the defense platforms farther in system. The risk in doing this was to make those missiles even more ineffective against the Jordanis than they already were. Space warfare doctrine was all about trying to beat the enemy's defenses and saturate them enough that a few key missiles could break through point defense systems. The Jordanis had excellent point defense systems and had enough of them that it made any type of attack difficult to achieve.

"Captain," Lieutenant Sinclair said, "I've run a test with the new protocols in a virtualized environment, and they do, in fact, function as expected."

"'As expected' falls short of what Agent Herzfeld told us," Elias replied.

"That's true, sir, but it's what was to be expected. They told us we wouldn't see the improvements until it was used in an actual combat scenario."

Elias nodded and walked away from the two men, staring at the plot on the main holoscreen. It showed the relative positions of the Jordani Fleet ships, as well as his own, including the known positions of the defense platforms. Lieutenant Polanski walked over and stood next to him.

Elias shook his head. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I, sir. But we should at least try it."

After a few moments, Elias nodded. He returned to his station. "Ops, I want the new attack protocols packaged up along with your findings and sent to the *Endurance* and the *Fortitude*. I want the package uploaded to the nearest defense platforms and made active. The remaining defense platforms will get the update and hold it in a ready state. We have time, so there's no need to put all our eggs in one basket."

“Aye, sir,” Lieutenant Sinclair replied.

“Tactical, we’ll be the testers in this. I want the new protocols uploaded to all the Mark XIIIs in the tubes, as well as the next section to come up.”

His orders were confirmed, and Elias knew it would take only minutes to achieve. “Helm, set a course for the Jordani Federation cruiser *Fury*. Maintain stealth protocols.”

“Aye, Captain. Thirty minutes to target,” Ensign Harris said.

“Very well,” Elias replied.

He sounded a lot more confident than he really felt. There’d been too many times in the ACN’s past when they’d been given new, cutting-edge technology that failed to live up to its potential. What made this situation different was that Elias was committed to stalling the Jordanis as much as he could, giving the citizens of Castelan Prime a chance to evacuate.

It didn’t take them long to reach the cruiser. The Jordanis had a staggered formation as part of their standard approach vectors, which put the ACS *Kestral* farthest away from the JFS *Vehement*. Elias had ordered both the *Endurance* and *Fortitude* to maintain a distance of fifty-thousand kilometers and observe the engagement.

“We’re in firing range now, Captain,” Lieutenant Blackwood said.

“Fire.”

The ACN Mark XII missile was a mid-range weapon that had a high-yield fusion-tipped warhead. It was quick and devastating when it hit the mark.

“JFS *Fury* has engaged their missile defense screen...” Lieutenant Blackwood said but paused for a moment with a

frown. “Received a request to launch our own point defense missiles, Captain.”

“A request? From whom?”

“Multiple requests, sir, coming from the Mark XIIIs we just launched. They want us to relinquish control of our point defense missiles to help screen their approach,” Blackwood replied.

Elias shook his head. “Are you saying our own missiles are talking to us?”

“Uh, not exactly, sir. The protocols for engaging point defense systems are within the most basic combat suite we have on the ship. But—would you like to see the request, sir?”

Elias nodded and skimmed the request on his screen. Part of it showed an analysis of the probability of any of the Mark XIIIs reaching their targets, along with a proposal to use their own point defense missiles, which gave a much greater probability of reaching their targets. At the bottom of the request was the name M. Harding. Elias assumed that was one of the developers of the new combat suite but made a mental note to find out who it was.

“Tactical, can you confirm the point defense missiles have the range to reach the target? I don’t think they do,” Elias said.

“Affirmative, sir. It’s close, but they won’t reach the ship. However, they can reach the Jordani missile defense screen.”

Elias felt his eyebrows raise, and then he tilted his head to the side once in a small nod. “Very well, deploy point defense missiles as requested and give control of them to the Mark XIIIs.”

Elias couldn’t believe he’d given the order, but they were so far off standard fleet operating procedure that at this point there was very little point in not trying.

The *Kestral's* point defense missiles began firing at an accelerated rate. Point defense missiles were extremely fast and carried a hardened, solid tip meant to destroy incoming fighters, as well as any other weapon systems that weren't energy-based. As soon as the missiles were fired, they sped toward the Mark XIIIs, overtaking them in just a few minutes.

"Sir, the Jordani cruiser has targeted us," Lieutenant Blackwood announced.

Elias watched the plot as his own missiles sped toward their target. Their combat suite constantly adjusted the predictive point at which the Mark XIIIs would reach the enemy ship. It kept having to push back the range.

"Captain, confirm detonation of eighty of our missiles and counting. Significant damage to the enemy cruiser," Lieutenant Sinclair said from the operations workstation.

"Holy shit!" Elias said, his mouth hanging open. Over seventy percent of his missiles had penetrated the Jordani's defenses. He glanced at Polanski, who'd come to the same realization he'd just had.

"Enemy cruiser is attempting evasive maneuvers. They're trying to run, sir," Lieutenant Blackwood said.

"I don't think we'll let them," Elias replied. The JFS *Fury* was about to be destroyed. He swung his gaze to Lieutenant Sinclair. "Ops, update the rest of the missiles with the new protocols. Order the *Endurance* and *Fortitude* to do the same. Targeting priorities are the remaining enemy cruisers. Be sure to include the expected success probability as a baseline."

Elias was tempted to load the new combat suite into other systems, but Herzfeld had advised against it. The surprising part was that the more they fired their missiles at the Jordani Fleet, the better they performed. Elias wondered how missiles

launched in isolation could collectively perform better. Was there a way for them to make use of the knowledge gained so they could close the gap even further and increase their already high rate of success? But he'd have to set that thought aside for now.

He looked around the bridge, seeing something in the crew he hadn't noticed before. There was a gleam to their eyes and a hunger. Facing the Jordanis had been known as a path to a quick death, but it was one he'd been willing to take to protect the citizens of Castelan Prime. However, they were not only surviving but they'd taken out the Jordani cruisers. One of them had even surrendered, which was unheard of in the history of the Jordani Federation. The ACN task force hadn't escaped completely unscathed, but they were still combat-ready.

At some point during the attack, the Jordani battleship broke away and was making best speed to a jump point. While the *Kestral* could still fly, there was no way she was going to overtake the Jordani battleship. Elias gritted his teeth in frustration. He really wanted to give Admiral Sarkar what he deserved.

“Comms, hail the *Vehement*.”

A communication window opened on the main holo-screen. Admiral Sarkar glared at him. “Congratulations, Captain, the Acheron Confederacy will burn for this.”

Elias was unable to keep the smirk from his face. “What's your rush, Admiral? Surely a Jordani Titan class battleship can take on three ACS destroyers.”

Admiral Sarkar smoothed his features. “An infantile gesture is unbecoming of a ship captain.”

Elias smiled broadly. "I believe the term is 'tuck tail and run.' And your tail appears to be firmly tucked, Admiral."

Admiral Sarkar cut the connection, and a few moments later, the Jordani battleship transitioned into hyperspace.

Elias had to admit it felt good. It felt as good as punching a bully in the nose, and he'd just given the Jordani Admiral one hell of a bloody nose.

"Captain," Lieutenant Polanski said, "what happens now?"

"We begin rescue operations of the stranded Jordani crew and report this up the chain of command."

"I know that, sir, but we just opened hostilities with the Jordani Federation."

"Technically, they opened hostilities with us, but I see your point. News of what we've done here is going to spread."

Polanski thought about that for a few moments. "We're going to war, aren't we?"

"Either we fight or they're going to kill us all. There's no way the Jordanis are going to allow us to have such a decisive tactical advantage. To answer your question—yes, we're going to war," Elias said. Then he added. "It's about time the Jordanis had something to fear."

Elias returned to his station where there was a comlink waiting for him. Agent Herzfeld's face came to prominence on his personal holoscreen.

"I take it you've had a successful demonstration of our new cutting-edge tech."

Elias nodded. "You could say that." He leaned toward the screen. "Just how cutting edge is this?"

Herzfeld smiled grimly. "You have no idea, Captain. The race is on now."

Elias nodded, agreeing with the intelligence agent. “Who is M. Harding?”

Herzfeld’s eyes narrowed for a moment. “He’s one of the main developers who made this possible. We’re keeping his identity classified. I’m sure you can understand.”

Elias suspected that Herzfeld had just made a huge understatement, but what else could he expect from an ACI agent? “If there’s nothing else, I need to see about the repairs of my ship.”

“There’s plenty more, Captain. We’ve only scratched the surface of this new capability of ours.”

“You’ll have to explain it to me, but all I really care about is that it works. However, my tactical officers have a lot of questions about it.”

“It’s complicated, but I think it can be arranged. I’ve already sent a communications jump drone to the Confederacy’s core worlds.”

Elias flinched. “I haven’t sent any reports in to COMCENT.”

“You have time, Captain. Believe me, they won’t hold this over you. In fact, they’ll probably promote you. Right now, you and your crew are part of the few elite spacers who’ve seen actual combat. They need you. Let me be the first to congratulate you, but there’s a lot more to come,” Herzfeld said.

The communications channel closed, and Elias breathed in deeply. He took a few moments to consider the intelligence agent’s words. He certainly had one thing right—the race was on. At least now they had a chance to do what no other confederation had been able to do. The dominance of the Jordani Federation was at an end.

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On a dying world along the galactic fringe, Quinton Aldren awakens in the body of an archaic android that's barely operational. He has only vague memories of who he was and no idea what has happened. Everyone is gone and autonomous mechs are hunting for him.

As remnants of the old federations struggle to survive after a devastating war, old alliances are eradicated, leaving warlords and mercenaries to fill the void. When a powerful mercenary discovers Quinton's origin, he'll stop at nothing to capture and enslave him.

The galaxy has changed, forcing people to adapt, while the dangerous machines of the Federation Wars hunt for people like Quinton, and they don't care who gets in the way. Quinton might have missed the war, but his link to the past could be the key to save humanity's future. Will he survive long enough to discover it in time?

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ACHERON INHERITANCE - SNEAK-PEEK



He didn't wake up. To wake would suggest that he'd been sleeping, when he'd actually just sort of become aware. It was as if someone had flipped a switch and he started processing information. First came a vague awareness that startled his mind into a heightened state of activity. Then, a feeling of increased urgency expanded from the diminutive depths, as if he'd suddenly forgotten something important. He tried to open his eyes. Nothing happened.

System diagnostic running.

These words appeared amid the black void of his thoughts. A few moments later, various diagnostic windows flashed, and a status report appeared.

Warning.

Low-power mode.

Less than 30 percent of power remaining.

Recommendation: Deteriorating power cell should be replaced for optimal performance.

Configuration update required.

Please wait . . .

He frowned, or at least tried to, but nothing happened, which instantly made him want to even more. He couldn't feel anything. He couldn't even open his eyes, but he'd seen the status windows, so he wasn't blind. His racing thoughts went into overdrive. He tried to move—first his arms and then his hands. Nothing. He felt the urge to inhale, but it was only an urge—just a longing to take a deep lungful of sweet, precious breath—and it wasn't happening.

He couldn't breathe and wondered why he wasn't gasping. He should be struggling to breathe, but he wasn't, and his thoughts flatlined. He wouldn't panic. He was awake but couldn't move or feel . . . anything. There was no kinesthetic awareness to indicate whether he was lying down, strapped to a chair, or dangling in the air.

Not a good sign.

Maybe someone had drugged him, and he hadn't fully awakened yet. There were drugs that could induce paralysis, and maybe they were wearing off. He tried to remember the last thing he'd been doing. Had he been hurt? Medication to block pain receptors could explain a lot, including the paralysis. Where was he? He felt another urge to frown, remembering what it felt like as his eyebrows knitted together, his gaze narrowed, and his jaw tightened with the gritting of his teeth, but as he commanded his muscles to do those things, they just sort of . . . stalled, as if there was something blocking his muscles from actually moving.

Veris initiation complete.

System startup complete.

Autonomous mode has been activated.

Limited storage available.

A small image appeared in the void that surrounded him.

He focused on it, and the image rushed toward him until the void disappeared. He was in a dreary room with smudgy, broken windows and long, thick cobwebs, and he had the impression that he was sitting. He looked down to a crusty, dirt-laden floor. Howling winds gusted from outside, sending layers of dust swirling into a lazy cyclone. Scummy residue trailed a path from the broken windows to the ground. Across from him were charging stations that housed different-sized humanoid robots. They were covered with a swarthy, crumbling shell that must have taken years of exposure to accumulate. These remnants of abandoned robots were all offline, without any indication of power.

He glanced down at his legs, and his thoughts screeched to a halt. His legs were gone! In their place were thick, metallic legs with an intricate set of connectors and actuators running to his feet. But they weren't *his* feet; they were something else. Each foot had three large, elongated toes and a broad, thick heel. They shifted, seemingly of their own accord, as if their range of motion was being tested.

He jerked backward at the movement and heard the mechanical whine of actuators fighting against their restraints in a cradle unit. Looking down, he saw that his chest was broad and comprised of overlapping plates that flexed when he moved. A whitish-blue power source glowed from between the plates. There was a series of symbols on his left side, and after a few seconds, a translation appeared on his internal heads-up display.

Agricultural Unit – 92.

Repairs have been completed, and the unit is cleared for duty.

Something disconnected from his back with a snap-hiss, and he slumped forward. The table he'd been sitting on

dropped down and became part of the wall. As he landed on his feet, he saw the metallic toes spread and adjust to keep him standing. He flailed his arms for a few moments, trying to keep his balance. Everything felt uncoordinated and slow. He tried to move his head, and the movements were jerky, as there were actuators in his neck that hadn't been moved in a long time.

The one thing he knew for sure was that he hadn't been drugged. He felt as if he was remotely operating a mechanized unit for the first time, except that there was no system lag. Was this someone's idea of a joke?

Self-diagnostic?

The words appeared on his heads-up display—HUD—and he initiated the command.

Cannot run self-diagnostic now. Still restoring backup from remote storage. Please wait . . .

Thanks for nothing. That wasn't very helpful. He was apparently stuck in an agricultural unit, and he didn't know what he was supposed to do. This wasn't funny anymore. Why had he thought this could've been a practical joke? His mind was functioning much like his current body, like neither had been used in a really long time, but his mind suddenly began to race with an all-compelling need to remember.

He needed . . .

He *needed*.

He . . .

Partial data restored.

Veris restore procedure for the consciousness transference protocol has enacted emergency protocol number 736 in accordance with the Veris mandate of preserving core Personality Matrix Construct into the system.

He read the message again. “Consciousness transference protocol” stood out amid the amber lettering on the translucent window. Consciousness transference . . . His consciousness had been transferred, and something was trying to restore it from backup. Someone was restoring *him* into this machine.

He tried to bring up a command menu on the HUD.

Identify.

The system response puzzled him. It had just restored him, so shouldn't it already know who he was? He froze there, his thoughts racing as he tried to make sense of all the information coming at him.

I'm a robot? No, not a damn robot! I know who I am.

He repeated that thought over and over again.

I know who I am.

I know who I am.

I. Know. Who. I. Am.

He glared at the system prompt that showed its last query in dispassionate amber lettering.

Identify?

A surge of hope coursed through him as his name pierced the veil of confusion surrounding his thoughts.

“Quinton Aldren,” he said, his voice sounding slightly modulated. He tried to clear his throat—which he didn't have—and repeated his name.

“Quinton Aldren,” he said, much more clearly this time.

Identification confirmed. Partial restoration of Personality Matrix Construct has confirmed the viability of the individual in this unit.

Quinton reread the message with an increasing awareness that he knew about Personality Matrix Constructs. PMCs were human-consciousness-to-machine interfaces. He tried to

remember more, but the information just wasn't available. He was *sure* he knew more about it, but something . . . He looked down at his body and understood.

A quiet hum came from a maintenance drone as it sank slowly to the floor. Its spherical chassis had multiple appendages, some of which looked to have been torn off, but one of them reached in his direction. Its power indicators went dark, and the drone was dead.

Quinton felt a second presence snap to existence in his mind. It was as if someone had just appeared next to him, but nobody was there.

VI interface initiated. Designation—Radek.

A virtual intelligence should be able to help him out.

"Radek, are you online?" Quinton asked.

"Diagnostics are still running," Radek said a few moments later. "Diagnostics complete. Virtual Intelligence Designate Radek responding."

"Excellent. Now, maybe you can answer a few questions for me. Why have I been restored into this agricultural unit?" Quinton asked.

"Emergency reactivation protocols were initiated," Radek replied.

Quinton felt as if his thoughts were wading through a muddy barrier.

"Radek, putting my consciousness into this agricultural unit violates PMC protocols. It shouldn't have worked, even under emergency conditions."

"Personality Matrix Construct's standard operating procedures were overridden."

"By whom?" Quinton asked.

"Information is unavailable."

“Unavailable . . . how’s that?” Quinton paused for a moment, trying to strangle his growing irritation with the useless VI. He glanced down at the maintenance drone. “Were you in control of this drone?”

“Affirmative. It was required to transfer the Energy Storage System to Agricultural Unit 92.”

“You’re telling me that I’ve been stored in an ESS, which you then stuck in the chest of this agricultural unit—a damn *garden* robot,” Quinton said.

More of his knowledge became available. It shouldn’t have worked. PMCs required a high level of haptic capabilities in order to avoid malfunction. The PMC was a way of preserving his consciousness, requiring that he feel human, or else—

“Your summation of the events is an oversimplification,” Radek replied, and Quinton could’ve sworn the VI sounded a little agitated.

“Not from where I’m standing.”

“Per emergency procedures, I found the best solution given the constraints I was called to deal with,” Radek said.

Quinton looked out at dark gray skies through the shattered remnants of what had been windows. He was in a garden storage shed for service bots. He didn’t have any idea where he was, and he certainly didn’t know why he was there. He needed Radek’s help if he was going to figure out what had happened. He needed the VI’s cooperation, but VIs could be finicky. They weren’t sentient, but they could be singularly uncooperative if given the right motivation.

“It sounds like you did the best you could,” Quinton said. “How long did you have to search before you found this body?”

“One hundred eighty-seven days, fifteen hours, and thirty-three minutes.”

Oh crap, Quinton thought. Radek seemed to sense this, but Quinton reminded himself that VIs couldn't read minds.

“The ESS was in a critical state and in danger of imminent failure. Use of this agricultural unit was the only option.”

Quinton didn't doubt what Radek said. If Radek had searched for a hundred eighty-seven days to find a suitable host for his PMC, then he was in danger.

“Where are we?”

“Unknown.”

That's great, Quinton thought. Radek was just as much in the dark as he was.

“Is there a governing body we can contact?”

“Negative. There are no settlements with active inhabitants that I've observed.”

Six months searching and no one to contact. Quinton glanced out the window at the ash-covered landscape and then looked around the room. This planet had suffered some kind of disaster. A readout on his HUD showed that the atmosphere was still breathable, meeting minimum requirements to survive—not that breathing air was an obstacle for him in his current form.

Quinton tried to recall why he'd been uploaded into a PMC and stored in the first place but found that he couldn't remember.

“Radek,” Quinton said, “my memory access is restricted. Is the ESS intact? Was it damaged?”

“The ESS is undamaged and fully intact. However, because of the limitations of the agricultural unit, you have limited

access to the ESS. This is required so you can fully utilize the unit the PMC is currently housed in.”

Quinton took a few steps across the shed, then turned and paced back to the other side. Each step he took demonstrated more confidence as he learned the capabilities of the agricultural unit. There was significant risk involved with a PMC being loaded into a less capable machine. PMC degradation would occur if the consciousness inside lost its connection to being human. Quinton tried to feel whether he was losing himself and then shook his head. How was that *supposed* to feel?

There were several loud pops as something slammed into a nearby building. Quinton spun around at the noise and glanced toward the maintenance drone on the ground. There were gashes cut into its sides, and several of its limbs were missing.

“I must advise you that there are hunter mechs currently searching for you,” Radek said.

A new pathway engaged in Quinton’s mind, and he had access to new data stored in the ESS. “Hunter mechs! What do they want with me?”

“The hunter mechs are specifically tasked with destroying PMCs.”

That couldn’t be right. Nothing about this situation was right.

Quinton heard something crash from within a nearby building. “They must have control units. Can’t we override them?” Quinton asked, stepping toward the door as he tried to engage the communications systems of the agricultural unit.

“I advise against that,” Radek said quickly. “They can detect open comms signals. These units have been pursuing

me for many days. I already tried an override command, which didn't work. Those systems are locked out from any comms unless they're coming from whatever command central gave them their instructions in the first place."

That made the hunter mechs no better than mindless drones. Why would they hunt PMCs?

"Radek, I need access to your analysis of those units if I'm going to decide how to deal with them. If they're just basic mechs, I should be able to disable them."

"Data is available, as you requested."

A report appeared on his HUD, and Quinton accessed the log data. There wasn't anything like a detailed analysis, and Radek had been severely limited in his capabilities while operating the maintenance drone. His top priority had been to preserve the Energy Storage System that Quinton's Personality Matrix Construct was stored in, which was all fine and good, but it meant he didn't know what he was facing, and they were getting closer to his position.

I hope you enjoyed reading the first chapter of Acheron Inheritance - Federation Chronicles Book 1. You can grab a copy of the book by visiting the link below.

<https://kenlozito.com/acheron-inheritance/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I've written multiple science fiction and fantasy series. Books have been my way to escape everyday life since I was a teenager to my current ripe old(?) age. What started out as a love of stories has turned into a full-blown passion for writing them.

Overall, I'm just a fan of really good stories regardless of genre. I love the heroic tales, redemption stories, the last stand, or just a good old fashion adventure. Those are the types of stories I like to write. Stories with rich and interesting characters and then I put them into dangerous and sometimes morally gray situations.

My ultimate intent for writing stories is to provide fun escapism for readers. I write stories that I would like to read, and I hope you enjoy them as well.

If you have questions or comments about any of my works I would love to hear from you, even if it's only to drop by to say hello at KenLozito.com

Thanks again for reading *Acheron Rising*.

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