

PROLOGUE

HAZION PRIME
EARTH INDEX 1305.129

*A sword, a sword is sharpened, and also furbished:
It is sharpened to make a sore slaughter;
It is furbished that it may glitter . . .
And he hath given it to be furbished, that it may be handled:
This sword is sharpened, and it is furbished,
To give it into the hand of the slayer . . .
I have set the point of the sword against all their gates,
That their heart may faint, and their ruins be multiplied.*

—Excerpt from a Human religious text, origin unknown

The short, golden, stubby grass crunched uncomfortably under Nho's feet as he picked his way up the path that wound through the Bvaso Mountains. As it was so many years before, the path was strewn with rocks that could twist an ankle or stub a toe if one wasn't paying attention. The sun overhead beat down with that same merciless power that only worsened under the humidity. And the wind was light, carrying a strange organic scent that triggered endless memories in Nho's mind. The sense of familiarity here was almost overpowering.

As he reached the crest of the hill, Nho could see the giant lake

off to his left and the mountain pass to his right. With a smile tainted by the deep sorrow in his heart, he made his way over to the lake. Setting Sarco's staff down beside him, he splashed water on his face and cupped a small quantity to drink. The water had a sharp mineral taste.

Strange, he thought. *I once hated drinking this water. Now I find I've missed it.*

He stood and made his way to the pass, which curled around for a short distance before running into a cave entrance. As the cave came into view, he could see people. Tens of them, dressed in plain garments, many of them standing just outside the mouth of the cave. Two of the Humans spotted him, momentarily forgetting their place and shouting his name.

Others outside the cave door looked his way, their astonished expressions quickly giving way to a small stampede of sentients running directly at him. He barely had time to brace himself before several bodies collided with his, hugging him fiercely. They buried themselves in his arms and tears streaked onto his clothes from their weeping eyes.

"It is so very good to see you all," he said softly, leaving unsaid the tragedy that had brought him there.

"It is good to see you, too, Mentor Nho," whispered one of them, the man called Yarden.

Nho had many questions surrounding Tsi's death, but now was not the time to ask them. He knew that Saidor Wheat, the influential Hazionite politician, had taken exception to Tsi's influence over her daughter, Haus Wheat. Saidor had exploited the chaos surrounding the Malum crisis to order Tsi arrested and imprisoned. Just days before Malum was defeated, Tsi was beheaded. He also knew that an official inquiry was underway, though it was unlikely Saidor would face any consequences.

Nho wondered what, exactly, had transpired on the night of Tsi's arrest, although the answers to that, too, would have to wait. One potential clue emerged as he looked more closely at the open area immediately outside the cave. The great stone, which for years

had been used to seal up the cave at night, was cracked in two, presumably by weapons fire. *They must have attacked in the dark, then*, reasoned Nho. That the local police would come here at night, when the most treacherous predators were afoot, only further convinced Nho of Saidor Wheat's madness.

Trailed by his friends and followers, Nho stepped quietly up to the threshold of the cave and peered inside. A number of Hazonites were seated in the center of the main room, the men in the back with the women in front of them. In the far end of the main room, beyond the women, was a large black coffin that contained the remains of his good friend. They were fortunate to have even that.

Nho stepped farther into the cave. He could now make out some of the faces. Many were familiar, including that of Haus Wheat, the now-estranged daughter of Saidor Wheat. The female Hazonites were unaware of his presence; Haus and the other females were in the quiet, catatonic state they lapsed into during the Hazonite death ritual. He marveled at this: it was unusual for Hazonites to experience the death ritual over a non-Hazonite. It spoke to how close Tsi had been to his disciples, and how deeply his loss hurt.

He made his way over to the males and sat next to them, a few of them acknowledging him silently as they tended to the females. Although he could not sense emotion as the Hazonites did, he knew full well that there was much despair here. He felt it himself. Tsi's followers were adrift, shaken by Tsi's senseless death. They would no doubt be questioning Sarco, in spite of the great stories of how Nho, through the power of the One, had defeated Malum.

Nho's course was clear. He would remain here for some time, building them up until they could once again walk on their own.

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TITAN EARTH INDEX 1305.350

“And so it is my belief,” rasped the old historian, leaning forward as he spoke, “that there is no conclusive evidence that Malum, the Aecrons, or the Sarconians were responsible for the loss of historical knowledge that predates the Human Dark Age. The evidence instead points to internal factors on Earth, perhaps of an environmental or political nature.”

The old man raised a crooked finger in the air. “However, I do believe that the presence of Sarconian artifacts on Earth before the current Index age indicates that the Aecron government may yet possess knowledge on the lost past of Human history.”

Several of the Aecron scholars in the audience shifted visibly in indignation.

“I therefore call upon the Aecron government to make available to us on Earth their archives of pre-Index visits to Earth, so that we might reclaim our lost heritage. The time for obfuscation is over!”

The Human members of the audience, who made up the majority of the several hundred in attendance, broke into loud applause which was quickly accompanied by another Human cultural expression—a standing ovation. The few Hazionites and Riticans in attendance were somewhat more subdued, and polite, in their

applause. The Aecons, numbering around fifty or so, sat coldly in their seats.

Above, next to the exit, Senior Commander Jared Carter stood quietly, observing the entire spectacle. Standing next to him was Coto Ute, a one-time study peer and a current historian with the Confederate Archives.

“Well, Jared,” Coto said in his deep voice, “what do you think?”

Jared shrugged. “He certainly created a sensation, but we both know nothing will come of it. This is an old and tired debate. The Aecon government still denies that it ever visited pre-Dark Age Earth.”

“Do you believe them?”

Jared gave Coto a friendly pat on the shoulder. “If I knew the answer to that, I’d be standing up there instead of him. As it is, he’ll get some attention on the feeds, but little more.”

“Perhaps you should take up his cause,” said Coto, laughing. “The last time I noticed, he wasn’t the hero of Malum.”

Jared groaned. “Don’t even start. Listen, I have to get going. I have an appointment over at Navy Command.”

“Finally getting back into a ship, then?”

“Let’s hope so. I didn’t leave academics just to wind up back in an office.”

Jared took his leave from Coto and strolled out the exit, headed for Nevea’s central walkways. He had just taken his first step through the door when a voice from his left called out, “Senior Commander Carter!”

Jared turned to see a young Human walking up to him. Jared stopped and extended his hand. “Delegate Carson.”

Troye Carson took Jared’s hand and shook it warmly in the traditional Human style. “Commander, I’m glad I caught you.”

“I’m afraid I’m in a hurry,” Jared said. “I have a meeting with Command in less than an hour.”

“I’ll walk with you, then.” As they started walking, Troye leaned in conspiratorially. “What does the admiralty want with the hero of Malum?”

Jared stifled another groan. *Not again.* “They haven’t told me,” he said, “and Nho Ames is the hero. I just gave him a little help when he fell down.”

“You’re too modest, Commander Carter,” Troye said, flashing a broad smile. “Nho himself said that he would have never succeeded without your help. Whatever Command has for you, I’m sure it will befit your accomplishments.” He straightened a little. “I just returned from a visit to my constituency back home, and I wanted to reiterate just how proud they are of what you did at Aeroel.”

Jared resisted the urge to ask the man what he wanted. Troye Carson could be insufferable, but he also represented Jared’s home nation, Earth’s Western Territories, in the Confederate Congress. Jared was no fan of the political game, but he’d learned enough from his father to know that a politician who was both one’s representative and a member of the group that supervised one’s employment was a relationship best kept amicable.

“Thank you,” Jared said, hoping that would be the end of the conversation.

It wasn’t. “What would you say to coming to work for me?”

Jared kept looking ahead as he walked, but he couldn’t stop himself from flinching in surprise. “I’m committed to the Navy right now.”

“It would not be hard for me to secure a release from your Navy contract, especially if it involved Confederate business.”

Now Jared looked at him. “What sort of Confederate business?”

Again the broad smile. “I wish I could tell you specifics, but I can’t. I can say this: it would involve the best of your talents.”

“I’m listening.” Jared wasn’t, but he knew the only way out of this conversation was through it.

They were passing into a busier part of the Confederate Capital. Jared had to change direction to avoid colliding with a contingent of Aecrons chattering amongst themselves. Troye adjusted his path to match Jared and continued. “Let me indulge in some guesswork. In an hour you fear you will get assigned to desk duty. That’s probably the last thing you’d like to be doing. You’d rather be in

command of a ship, out there doing the work you love. But you also have the background of the historian, and returning to that role in the search for those Sarconian parchments was invigorating. You'd love to do it again. Take up my offer, and I not only promise something worthwhile, but something that will compensate you well beyond your current Navy pay."

"If you know me that well, you also know I'm a deliberate thinker. I can't make any commitments right now."

"Of course," Troye said, parting ways, "but if Garvak's assignment doesn't work out as planned, come see me. The offer will still be there."

Jared nodded and kept walking. As he did, though, he asked himself, *Did I specifically tell him I was meeting with Garvak?* He couldn't remember.



An hour later, Jared emerged from his shuttle into the largely empty corridors of Complex 14, home to Navy Special Operations. It had been less than a year since he'd last set foot here, back at the outset of an assignment to recover a set of obscure ancient parchment pieces. That assignment had set in motion a series of events that had transformed his life, events that had culminated in a dramatic victory inside the planet-ship known as Malum.

Had it really been less than a year since this all began? It seemed much longer.

In many ways, he felt as if he'd left his sanity back on that giant fleet-destroying sphere orbiting Aeroel. His ordered understanding of the universe had been rattled by the simple miracle of Nho Ames, an eccentric Human devotee to an obscure Aecron religion. Trapped inside Malum with millions of others, Nho had challenged and defeated Malum's warden, a large cloud-being. Nho's only weapon? An ancient wooden staff reputed to have come from Sarco, an Aecron who claimed to be incarnated from the Creator of the Universe.

While Nho's role in the ordeal was irrefutable—hundreds had

witnessed it—the Confederacy’s intelligentsia had grasped for other explanations. The Aecron Science Institute was cynical at best about Nho’s explanation that it was the supernatural power of the Incarnate. Instead, the Institute officially concluded that Malum had failed as a result of an “aberrant cataclysmic failure.”

In layman’s terms, they believed Malum’s defeat to be the result of a massive internal accident.

“Do you know what the odds of *that* are?” scoffed Nho when he’d read the report.

“1,134,578,963,542 to 1,” sciences officer Darel Weye had said with a straight face. No one knew if he was serious or not.

Nho was the hero, but Jared had also earned substantial (and in some ways unwelcome) glory for his role. He was the envy of his friends and enemies alike, but he found the parade of commendations, interviews, and speaking engagements overwhelming. He never sought fame for himself and simply wanted to return to a normal life of Navy work.

Maybe today will be that day, he thought as he turned down a southwest corridor along Complex 14. There, ahead of him, was the familiar sight of Admiral Nhile-tonna-amel-fro-tigh-Garvak’s office. He passed through the doorway, taking in what he had seen once before: a large space with a decidedly brown and crimson theme, and a trace scent of Ritican atmosphere. Admiral Nhile Garvak’s massive, hairless, rust-colored frame occupied a seat behind a desk at the far end of the office.

“Senior Commander Carter,” said Garvak, looking up.

Jared gave a Navy salute. Garvak stood, returned the salute, and gestured for Jared to sit in a chair nearby. “I trust that this meeting finds you well,” said the admiral.

“Yes, sir, but restless,” Jared said candidly as he sat.

“I can certainly understand your feelings. Were it not for Titan’s scenic beauty, I doubt I could manage this life.”

Jared shuddered. Only a Ritican could appreciate the frozen wasteland that was Titan.

“But let this experience be a lesson to you,” Garvak continued,

“for the day will inevitably come when necessity may force you behind one of these.” He tapped the desk with his fist. “Think on your options before that day comes, so that when it does, you may find work you truly enjoy.”

“I will remember that, sir.”

Garvak set down his portable. “So, let us talk of your situation. As you know, there is something of a shortage of ships in the fleet. You are fortunate to have a job at all. Congress nearly disbanded half of the Navy.”

“So I’ve heard. I’m obviously thankful they chose not to.”

“So am I. Discharging good, motivated officers is a waste, though we are still scrambling to assemble new ships. That effort will take longer than the Navy would rather admit to the public, which means most of our best remain grounded. For you, though, I have different news. You have been given a new assignment.”

“Glad to hear it, sir. What do you have in mind?”

The admiral leaned forward, resting his massive hands under what passed on a Ritican as a chin. “I should first warn you that some of what I am about to tell you is highly classified information. Some of it is, in fact, so sensitive that it is known only to a few select officers at the highest chain of command, as well as a few very trusted members of Congress. President Wheat is not among them. This information is not to be shared except with very specifically authorized officers named by me. You know the potential consequences if you fail to comply.”

“Understood, sir,” Jared said, although in reality he wasn’t sure he understood at all. Information so sensitive even the Confederal President didn’t know? Where was the Admiral going with all of this?

Garvak sat back in his chair. “Commander, some of us at Command are concerned about Malum.”

“Malum?”

“Specifically, we are concerned about whomever or whatever created it, since we do not know where this *bkslab* came from or if

there are any more. The Confederacy is still in disarray, and I am worried that if more forces arrive, we will not be able to stop them.”

“You have reason to suspect another imminent threat.” It was a not a question.

“Possibly. Ten months ago, when Malum was first approaching Aeroel, two Confederal ships nearby detected a particle stream emanating from the planet-ship. We think it was a transmission. We have not been able to decode it, but we have managed to pinpoint its trajectory. The destination was well outside of known space, beyond the Great Void. Rumors of this particular fact have leaked into Congress, and they have asked for a buildup of defensive elements along that stretch of the Far Outerlands. A few of us have determined that this course is far too passive given the circumstances.

“That is where you come in. Senior Commander Carter, I am assigning to you a deep-space exploration mission. Your job is to locate the recipient of Malum’s transmission and assess its threat to the Confederacy. You will be journeying farther than anyone in the Confederacy has traveled before.”

Jared reeled in shock. A deep-space exploration mission, beyond the bounds of the Confederacy? He couldn’t recall the last time the Confederacy had launched such a mission, if ever. It was uncertain, risk-laden, even terrifying. It was also the sort of assignment every Human child on Earth grew up dreaming about.

“As you know,” Garvak said, “a deep-space assignment requires much more than a simple interceptor could bear. To that end, I have been authorized to grant you command of the most suitable vessel we currently have for such an exercise.”

The admiral reached over and manipulated a display, causing an annotated projection of a Navy ship to appear in the air above his desk. It was a cruiser-level vessel, a blocky hull built around a massive cylinder. The cylinder terminated at the front of the ship with a large round orifice, which was closed.

Jared recognized the ship before Garvak could say its name.

“Effective immediately,” the admiral said, “I am placing you in command of the *Hattan*.”

It took a moment for the statement to register with Jared. The *Hattan* was an experimental Navy cruiser that had been deployed—disastrously—against Malum. Jared had seen the ship on two occasions: once during its departure from Titan at the outset of the Malum crisis, and a second time after it had been left empty and adrift by Malum following the battle over Obaiyo Colony. The ship’s former captain, Traves Walbirg, was currently awaiting trial on a variety of charges stemming from the Obaiyo debacle.

Jared said the only words he could think of at that moment. “The *Hattan*, sir?”

“You heard me correctly. Is there a problem?”

Jared balked. He could think of a lot of problems. “May I speak candidly, sir?”

He almost immediately regretted the statement. The last time he had used those specific words with Garvak was in the midst of a heated debate with the admiral not long before the Battle of Aeroel. He had incurred Garvak’s full wrath that day, and he had little desire to do it again.

If Garvak remembered Jared’s use of that question, he did not show it. “Go ahead, Commander.”

“Admiral,” Jared said, carefully choosing his words, “it’s been years since I’ve been on a ship of that size, and I know there are other, more decorated commanders out there. While I’m more than willing to take up the command—why choose me?”

Garvak’s face, partially hidden behind a rebreather, looked almost like it was smiling. “An honest question, Commander. Perhaps too honest. I will also be honest: you were not Command’s first choice. However, you were the first choice of the one sentient in the Confederacy who fought and defeated Malum.”

“Nho Ames.”

Garvak nodded. “As you are aware, Nho returned to the Saronian enclave on Hazion Prime several months ago, not long after your group was extracted from Malum. We have been in

contact with him since then. He has agreed to join this mission, but has made it explicitly clear he will only do so if you are in command.”

Jared wasn't sure whether to be flattered or insulted. Garvak went on, “Moreover, you assisted him that day, so you, too, are viewed as someone who can also contend with Malum. For better or worse, fate has tied the two of you together.”

Garvak shifted in his seat, placed his massive arms on his desk, and continued. “You will also be assigned a small escort fleet. Under Navy regulations, fleet commanders rank at the level of captain or higher. Accordingly, I have been authorized to promote you to the full rank of captain. This is a permanent designation, not a field promotion.”

Captain. Jared was stunned. He was still getting used to his promotion to senior commander. Captain of the Navy cruiser *Hattan*, and fleet commander of the *Hattan* exploratory fleet, or battle fleet, or whatever the Navy would choose to call it. He managed a brief nod. “It's an honor, sir, if a daunting one.”

“Be honored, Captain Carter,” the admiral agreed, “but it is more daunting than you may realize. Even given the *Hattan*'s resources, this is a dangerous mission, filled with grave uncertainties. There is a reason why no Confederate vessels have ever ventured outside of the galactic region.”

On this Jared stated what nearly all historians agreed on. “Politics. The Confederacy is more concerned with maintaining economic stability inside its own borders than expanding outward.”

Garvak said, “That is the publicly circulated reason.”

Jared hadn't expected that. He felt a sudden sensation of being off-balance, as if Garvak was about to upend a part of his world and there was no stopping it. “I don't follow you, sir.”

Garvak projected a series of floating graphs above his desk. “The true reason dates back two centuries. As you are aware, the Aecrons were in the midst of an era of exploration when the Invasion of 1124 took place.”

Jared knew well the stories of the Invasion of 1124. Long before

the advent of the Confederacy—before Humans had developed fold drive technology—a mysterious race had tried to overrun the galactic region. The Aecrons had repelled that assault, albeit at great cost.

Garvak was still talking. “Before that time, the Aecrons were, by our best standards, an arrogant, condescending culture who felt at ease to explore, and manipulate, whomever and whatever they wanted.”

“Some would say that little has changed.”

“So it would appear, at least on the surface. Certainly their awareness of their superior intellectual abilities persists. But there is a fundamental difference. Following the Invasion of 1124, Aeroel’s policies—their actions—shifted dramatically. The abductions and other acts of interference on your world and on Hazion Prime ceased permanently, as did their deep-space exploration projects. Even to this day, their most distant colonies have fully cooperated, as has the rest of the Confederacy. Have you ever wondered why that is?”

“I assumed it was because of lingering fear over inadvertently bringing about another invasion. Or perhaps it was to consolidate resources against possible future invasions. At least, that’s what the history readings say.”

“That might have held true for a generation,” said Garvak, “but any permanent change is inconsistent with our knowledge of Aecron psychology. In time, their people, and their government, would again be lured to explore the unknown and manipulate what they saw as lesser beings, regardless of past concerns.”

Jared was getting tired of being rebutted, but something about Garvak’s words gnawed at his curiosity. “So what happened? What changed?”

“The answer to your question came approximately fifteen years ago, when a Human embassy on Aeroel—operated by Earth’s Western Territories—inadvertently found themselves in the possession of a collection of journals from over a century and a half ago.”

“You said the embassy found them fifteen years ago? My father

was the lead diplomat for the Western Territories on Aeroel around that time.”

Garvak’s voice was impassive. “Rowun Carter was involved.”

Jared stared at the ground, trying to make sense of this revelation. “I thought it was just another routine political post. He never mentioned anything important happening there.”

“He had very good reason not to. What the embassy found was a secret so deep and so dangerous that it risked his life and the lives of everyone else stationed there. According to the intelligence I have seen, Aecron agents tried and failed to recapture the journals by force, and Rowun was recalled from Aeroel not long after the incident.”

Jared stared down at his hands in disbelief. He and his father were distant; Jared had lived with his mother after the dissolution of his parents’ marriage, and between that and his father’s life-consuming political career, Jared and Rowun rarely met or even spoke. Still, the arc of his father’s pursuits was public enough that he always assumed he knew some things. Rowun’s world looked like one of straightforward political ambitions; Jared never fathomed that his father would ever place himself in serious danger.

Garvak said, “The journals were written by an Aecron scientist involved in a secret government operation on Aeroel. Apparently the Aecron government of that era was very concerned about repeating the mistakes which they felt led to the Invasion of 1124. To that end, they developed a program, one so clandestine that no one today even knows its name. The program, we believe, was designed to psychologically condition all living and future Aecrons to never seek either further exploration or the manipulation of lesser cultures.”

Jared stared at him blankly. “My apologies, Admiral. Could you repeat that, please?”

Garvak exhaled loudly into his rebreather. “The Aecron government psychologically programmed the Aecrons to never explore beyond their current exploratory borders or manipulate any species within them.”

It sounded even more ridiculous the second time. “And that includes their descendants?”

“To the best of our knowledge, all living Aecrons are affected. The journals are elusive in their language, but they make general reference to the program on several occasions, specifically speaking to the idea that the Aecrons will never again trespass the borders of explored space.”

Jared hesitated. “Sir, you know how that sounds. The writer could have been delusional, or deliberately lying.”

“I had those same doubts when I first heard of it. It was only after viewing the totality of the evidence that I became convinced, including to what lengths the Aecrons went to recapture the journals from the Human embassy.”

Jared decided to put off asking about the evidence for a moment. He said, “How did the Aecrons accomplish this . . . this *change*?”

“We do not know. No one does. The ruling government at the time made sure that the program was not only completely effective, but they also took great pains to eliminate any clues that might lead others to discover its methods. There are no physiological markers. No technological signs. Whatever it was, it was a flawless procedure. Were it not for the writings the Human embassy found, we would not know such a program ever existed, although there are certain . . . *peculiarities* . . . that sentients in high positions have been trying to make sense of for some time now. The journals brought clarity to those events.”

“That is—I’m not sure how to—” Jared cut off saying what he really thought—that this was sounding more and more like one of the absurd conspiratorial rantings that surfaced in the dark corners of the civilian feeds.

“I realize this is difficult to accept,” said Garvak, “but we have seen it manifested repeatedly over the course of recent history. One of the earliest recorded examples comes from over seven decades ago, when Human and Hazionite expansion was brought to a halt by the outbreak of the Corridor Wars. While the most common explanation for the outbreak of the Wars was Hazionite greed, that

is only part of the story. There are clear indications that Aecron expatriates may have had a hand in encouraging the Hazonites to expand into Ritican territory rather than elsewhere.”

Jared shrugged. “Those expatriates may have had other motives. They may have been trying to distract the Hazonites from attacking the Aecrons.”

“Nevertheless, consider the outcome. After the Wars, during the negotiating of the Titan Accords, the Aecrons succeeded in including a moratorium on expansion in order to prevent future conflicts. This included privately financed expeditions.”

“That may just be a formality. Exploration is prohibitively expensive absent government support. There would be very few private organizations with the desire or resources to take on such endeavors.”

Garvak lifted a portable off his desk and searched through it for a moment. “While that is true, there have been a few private attempts, and they are instructive, because in those rare ventures, disaster has inevitably followed.” He began reading. “Thirty-six years ago, a Human exploration project was canceled when its chief financiers were pressured to do so by the Aecron government. Twenty-two years ago, an interspecies research vessel under an overzealous Human commander ventured outside of the region. The Aecrons on board mutinied and piloted the vessel back into Confederal space, claiming the commander had lost his mind. Eleven years ago, a Ritican vessel heading into the Void was attacked and destroyed by an Aecron patrol ship, which claimed it had mistaken it for a pirate vessel. Later that year a privately owned Hazonite vessel heading toward the galactic core was destroyed when its ordnance mysteriously detonated. An Aecron had overseen the stocking of the armory. Seven years ago a Human vessel that ventured into the Great Void was destroyed, apparently by an Aecron sciences officer on board who went mad. I could list a multitude of other strikingly similar examples.”

“Those are unusual stories. I’ve never heard any of them before.”

“And you have never heard of any successful private expeditions, either.”

“No, sir. I guess I haven’t.” *Could this be true?*

“There are still other examples—more subtle ones. Have you been following the debates in the Confederate Congress regarding the response to Malum? Specifically, the Ritican initiative for a military counterstrike against Malum’s creators?”

“Yes. The initiative failed on a floor vote. It was”—Jared searched his memory—“defeated, having been vigorously opposed by the Aecron delegation. They insisted the Confederacy lacked proper intelligence.”

“Yet another example. By themselves, none of them look incriminating. Taken as a whole, a clear pattern develops.” Garvak shut off the display. “Even so, this information is still kept classified, and for a multitude of reasons. I trust you can discern what they are.”

“With respect, sir, I can’t. Why not expose it to the public?”

Garvak stared at him. “That should be obvious. The Aecrons wield tremendous political and technological influence in the Confederacy, and revealing this would have far-reaching repercussions. It could even be a pretext for war, which is the last thing we need right now. As it is, only a select few in the highest levels of the sentient governments know of this.”

“Are other races affected?”

“There is no evidence that they are. For whatever reason, the Aecron government chose not to apply their conditioning to other sentients. Since we do not know how they did it in the first place, it would be useless to speculate on why they did not use it on others.”

“Perhaps there are experts in the Aecron Sciences Institute that could help with that.”

“They do not care.”

Jared’s eyes narrowed. “Do not care?”

“Some in the Institute know, and they do not care. It is quite likely that their very apathy toward the issue was part of the conditioning process. The Aecron government wanted to ensure that none of their own would ever desire to undo what had been done,

even if they did discover what had happened. As a result, this conditioned apathy is an intrinsic part of who they are. To them it is no more a malignant condition than your ability to breathe oxygen.”

Something didn’t quite fit in Jared’s mind. “But you also said the Aecrons reacted violently when the Western Territories embassy acquired the journals.”

“We believe that the conditioning impels the Aecrons to make certain none of their allies try to do that which they are conditioned not to do. Plainly put, they will actively subvert any outside attempt to understand the conditioning or press into the unexplored regions of space.”

Jared had been struggling so hard just to comprehend what he was hearing that he hadn’t given any thought to why Garvak was telling him this. Now that thought emerged, and it was an unsettling one. “The Aecrons would not react well to the Navy sending a ship out of the Confederacy, and—wait.” Jared paled.

Garvak said, “You are being assigned to an exploration mission outside of the Confederacy, across the Great Void. Not only would the Aecron government move to stop you, should they learn of your assignment, but any Aecrons on your ship might also try to stop it. If history is any indication, they might well try to destroy your ship, even at the cost of their own lives.”

Jared stood and paced around the room. After a short time he stopped and, staring at Garvak, said, “Are you suggesting I carry a crew without Aecrons?”

“We both know that would be severely difficult, if not impossible. There are no other sentients with the capacity to fully operate the scientific instrumentation the Navy uses. Venturing into unknown space with only basic sensory capabilities would put your fleet at a serious disadvantage.”

“That puts me in a very difficult situation.”

“I fully agree. Unfortunately, as you can see, our options are limited, but one thing is clear: we cannot afford sit around and wait for a large-scale invasion of more Malum planets, nor do we have the time to develop instrumentation technology and associated

officers to circumvent the Aecron problem. We must know what the source of this threat is, and Aecron crew members are pivotal to the success of that mission.”

Garvak set down his portable and continued. “My team, however, has a plan. First, only a few select members of your crew will be told of the specifics of your real mission, at least at the outset. Your official assignment will be a simple test flight to assess and optimize the *Hattan’s* systems. Stationed aboard your ship will be a unit of non-Aecron medical officers whose primary expertise is Aecron physiology. The unit will coordinate with a trusted team of security officers and, before you leave Confederate space, will implement a protocol to detain your Aecron officers. Once so detained, you will inform the Aecrons of your mission and the unit will monitor their reactions. They will then research proper medical and psychological countermeasures. Our hope is that they can develop a cure.”

“What if they fail?”

“Your mission has many risks, including that one. We do have contingencies in place should the *Hattan* be unable to proceed.”

Jared considered that. “Such as Human ships with Human-only crews.”

“I cannot be specific,” said Garvak, “except to say that we have contingencies, although they, too, have their own pitfalls. Regardless, we believe the *Hattan* to be a far superior option to our other contingencies, enough to justify this attempt.”

Garvak again picked up his portable and began manipulating it. “Now, let us speak to your crew. We have assembled some of the best officers from across the Navy, including some that you know, to serve under you. This manifest includes both the *Hattan* and the five interceptors that will serve as escorts and reconnaissance for your battle group.”

Jared walked over to the desk, took the portable, and looked over the list. Many of the names were unfamiliar, but a good number of them were not. There were several officers retained from the original *Hattan* crew, including its first officer, Tir Bvaso. Also on the

list were crew members from the battle carrier *Sydney*, which fell to Malum at the confrontation over Ahtog 3.

But the names that most caught his eye were the five he knew best: Vetta-parso-bonna-truph-Quidd, Kilvin Wrsaw, Omarami Del, Darel Weye, and Triphox. The crew of the former Navy interceptor *Retaelus*. The crew that had served with him for years—and fought with him in the Battle of Aeroel—were once again at his side.

Garvak stood up. “If you will excuse me, Captain, I have other matters to attend to. You will receive more mission details once you have reported to your new ship. For now, I will dismiss you to Complex 18. There you will meet with Admiral Dal Wrsaw, who served on the *Hattan* project. She will brief you on the ship’s systems. Admiral Wrsaw is one of the few within Command aware of your true mission, although I would advise you to exercise caution when speaking to her outside her office. There are powerful forces that would stop at nothing to make sure this mission does not happen if they were to learn of it.”

Jared nodded, then came to attention, saluted, and was dismissed.

As he left, a tempest of feelings filled his mind. The elation of being assigned a ship—the *Hattan*, no less—was dampened by the reality that he was not Command’s first choice. Were it not for Nho, Jared would not even be a consideration. And why should he be? He was a former interceptor commander. He’d served on a large ship before, but was he really ready to lead one?

But even that was insignificant compared to what Garvak called the Aecron problem. The more Jared considered that it could be true, the more the whole scenario frightened him. He was being sent into deep space in a large, unfamiliar ship where a sizeable minority of his crew might somehow seek to sabotage his mission or possibly even destroy the ship entirely. It seemed an unworkable arrangement.

INTO THE VOID

THE CHRONICLES OF SARCO

BOOK TWO

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THE FIVE RACES OF THE CONFEDERACY

The Aecons. Brilliant, arrogant, and secretive, the Aecons are the scientific and technological backbone of the Confederacy. Hailing from a planet of domed cities, their blue-skinned, black-eyed bodies are small and fragile.

The Riticans. A society that emphasizes peaceful coexistence where possible and violent retaliation when threatened, the Riticans excel in strategic decisions. They are large methane-breathers capable of enduring harsh environments.

The Hazonites. A race of matriarchal tree-dwellers, this once-expansionistic society survived a near genocide by the Riticans and now fills diverse roles within the Confederacy. To varying degrees, they can smell the feelings of those around them.

The Humans. Average by both mental and physical standards, Humans have little knowledge of their homeworld's history prior to the current Index era, which began thirteen centuries ago. They excel as diplomats and leaders, and the Confederacy's capital is situated in their home system.

The Exos. Asexual and individualistic, the Exos have no government, little culture, and a mindset oriented around task completion. They are adept with mechanics and engineering and have bodies tough enough to endure the vacuum of space.

SELECTED OFFICERS
THE CONFEDERAL NAVY

Navy Command, Nevea, Titan

Admiral Wr Ghiri—*Hazionite female, Head of Navy Intelligence*

Admiral Nhile-tonna-amel-fro-tigh-Garvak (Nhile Garvak)—
Ritican male, Head of Navy Special Operations

Navy Cruiser *Hattan*

Captain Jared Carter—*Human male, ship's captain and fleet commander*

Commander Tir Bvaso—*Hazionite female, first officer*

Senior Lieutenant Vetta-parso-bonna-truph-Quidd
(Vetta Quidd)—*Ritican female, senior security officer*

Senior Lieutenant Garo-konna-ichen-Ball (Garo Ball)—*Ritican male, weapons officer*

Lieutenant Omarami (Rami) Del—*Human female, communications officer*

Lieutenant Orel Dayail—*Aecron male, communications officer*

Lieutenant Aioua Horae—*Aecron female, sciences officer*

Lieutenant Kilvin Wrsaw—*Hazionite male, navigator*

Deck Officer Darel Weye—*Aecron male, assistant medical officer*

Deck Officer Triphox—*Exo, engineer*

Hattan Battle Group

Senior Commander Redelia Aroo—*Aecron female, senior interceptor commander*

Senior Lieutenant Eil Morichar—*Hazionite female, interceptor commander*

Senior Lieutenant Amun-also-xixit-orrcsa-Plau (Amun Plau)—*Ritican male, interceptor commander*

Senior Lieutenant Venzz Kitt—*Human male, interceptor commander*

Lieutenant Brigg Drews—*Human male, interceptor commander*