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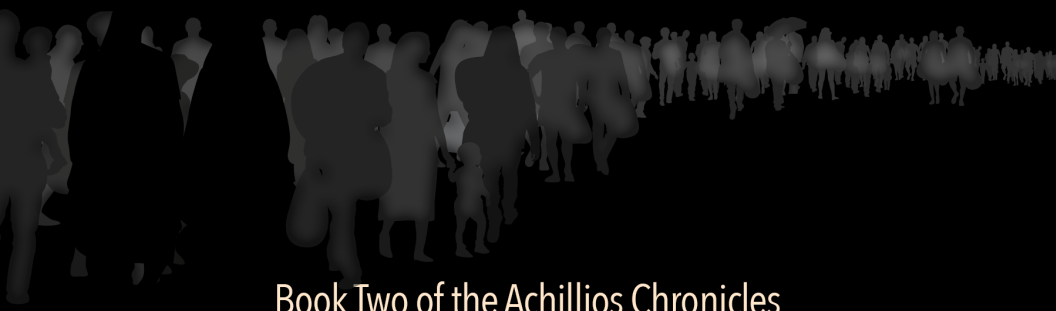

Book Two of the Achillios Chronicles

DON JONES

Onyx

Don Jones

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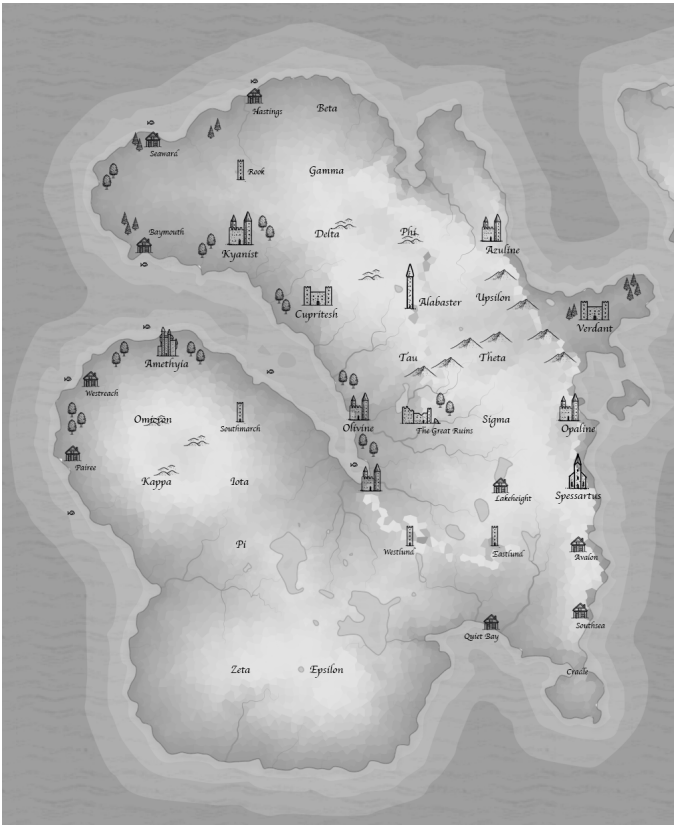
Hastings
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Rook
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Alabaster
Upsilon
Cupritesh
Verdant
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Tau
Theta
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Iota
Lakeheight
Spessartus
Pi
Westlume
Eastlume
Avalon
Southsea
Quiet Bay
Zeta
Epsilon
Cradle

Achillios

One

"Toras!" Randal cried, running into the main control room. "It's Alabaster!" he said, panting. Toras looked up quickly. "Misha and Marten – they've been arrested!"

"How–" he started, but then stopped himself. He ran to the main interface chair and sat. *Initiate connection to Central Processor,* he thought.

:Access denied,: the machine's flat voice said.

He looked up at Randal. "They've cut us off," he said quietly. Randal paled. Onyx—installation Theta, to the machines—had been damaged in an earthquake many, many years ago. Its expert system no longer controlled the local machines, although most of them could still be manipulated through their Central Processor connection. A connection which was now gone.

Toras took a breath and looked around the disheveled control room. Buried within a rocky cave complex, it was one of the few original control rooms not integrated into one of Achillios' major cities. A thin layer of grit covered nearly every surface, the result of the periodic tremors that still plagued the facility. He sighed. The installation they'd christened "Onyx" wasn't much, but it had sheltered them. Nearly everyone here was an outcast of some kind, all with reasons to want retribution from the big cities. It was that thirst for revenge that held Onyx together.

"There's more," Randal said. "Orvald made it back from

Gate Town and says they've begun raising a new defensive wall."

"They've unlocked the machines," Toras said quietly. Toras and a few others in Onyx had been, until this moment, been the most knowledgeable people on the planet about the ancestors' powerful terraforming equipment, thanks to the extensive documentation they'd found. Aside from the Servants at Alabaster, Onyx' operators were the last ones he knew of who were capable of using the equipment. Until now.

Randal nodded. "And the Cupritesh army pulled back. Rumor is that Alabaster undid our work in the royal city."

Toras stood and cursed. That operation had been months in planning, and manipulating the greedy Cupritesh king had been their best bet for destabilizing Alabaster and, in the chaos, gaining access to their still-functioning machines. "We have to assume Misha and Marten told them everything," he said. "Round everyone up. We need to leave."

Randal stared. "But– but where will we go?" he said softly.

Toras shook his head. He crossed the room to a rickety desk, and unrolled a map. He stared at it. "I don't know," he admitted. "We've only stayed here because there's water, and it's reasonably easy to grow food. The caves protect us, when they're not collapsing on us. Upsilon is too close to the trade route between Azuline and Verdant—we'd be found. Sigma is as desolate as Alabaster, and I'll bet Alabaster will soon be swarming over the ruins near

Olivine. Beta is underwater, now. Gamma, maybe."

"Dust, Toras, that'd mean marching everyone through the desert. We don't have draybeasts."

"What do you want?" Toras spat, throwing his hands up in frustration. "We've already ruled out Delta and Phi—even Hollis passed on those when he hunkered down at Alabaster. We know Tau is just as damaged as here, and without a connection to the Central Processor we'd be dead in the water. We've never found the station that *should* be here," he added, stabbing at the map with one finger, "and everything else has a population already."

"What about the south?" Randal said, softly, pointing to the big, blank area on the map.

"We've been over this," Toras said. "Omicron, Kappa, and Iota are the only stations documented here," he said, sweeping his hand over an area of the map, "and Amethyia sends patrols through there constantly. We know they've been trying to establish more small settlements. Zeta and Epsilon," he added, waving his hand through the southernmost portion of the continent, "might as well be mythical. It'd be thirty days of hard marching just to get there. As far as anyone knows there are no cities or settlements that far south."

Both men paused, staring at the map in silence. "So what, then?" Randal asked. "Head for Gamma and hope for the best?"

Toras sighed. "No, south is still a better bet. It's less rugged. So we split into two groups. You, me, Asha and Wen will head to Olivine."

"Olivine?" Randal asked, surprised.

"Olivine," Toras repeated. "We need to try and access the Central Processor. We'll infiltrate, keep a low profile, try to stick to the ruins. Maybe we can get there before Alabaster does."

"Okay," Randal said. They'd discussed this possibility before. "And everyone else?" Onyx held almost a hundred men and women, and a few children.

"They're going to have to march. Tell them to head south for Opaline, posing as Road Traders. If they head east first, they can pick up the trade road from Verdant. Then they head south along the coast – Spessarta will welcome them, and Avalon and Southsea will be fine so long as they don't overstay their welcome. Cut west to Quiet Bay after that – the swamplands south of Southsea are treacherous."

"And then?"

"Well, that puts us within striking distance of installation Epsilon, at least. But…" he paused.

"But what?" Randal prompted.

"Quiet Bay is small. A couple of hundred people, at most. Fishers, not fighters."

Randal paused. "You're not saying–"

"I am," Toras interrupted. "We're going to have to take Quiet Bay. We'll see if we can access their installation—it's inland a bit, and so they can scout for it first, if possible. But otherwise Quiet Bay is going to welcome them or our people are going to have to kill them all, and either way we're going to need to take charge of that town."

Randal stared for a moment, and then nodded. He

walked out to break the news to Onyx' beleaguered population.

Two

"Will that do it?" Brother Evan asked.

"I don't think so," Taryn said tiredly, lifting his hands from the chair's control pads and leaning forward. "The damage was pretty severe. As-is, the city will have plenty of fresh water for drinking and for the fields, but we need to do more work to stabilize it."

"Tomorrow, then?"

Taryn sighed. "Yes. I'm too tired, right now. I think everyone is."

Brother Evan looked at the nearby control stations and nodded agreement. The Alabaster operators were all blinking, rubbing their eyes—and temples—and stretching to work out the kinks in their backs. Most of them had been working for almost eight hours solid, helping Taryn correct the structural damage underneath the city.

"The King's invited us to dinner again tonight," Brother Evan said.

Taryn smiled tiredly. "Well, that's better than attacking us." Mere months ago, the bulk of Cupritesh's army had marched on Alabaster—a peaceful and largely unarmed city—seeking to conquer it for its healthy water supply. Taryn, with full access to the ancient machines that had terraformed the planet centuries ago, had examined Cupritesh and realized that someone had cut off the city's underground springs and reservoirs. They'd offered to

travel to Cupritesh and fix the damage. "Yeah, of course," he added. "I just want to follow up on a few threads here first, and I'll be up."

"You've an hour or so anyway," Brother Evan said. Cupritesh's royal court tended to eat late, and the Alabaster team had started at first light. Taryn nodded. "I'll leave you to it, then," Brother Evan said. He gathered up the other operators and ushered them out of the room.

Taryn leaned back, and placed his palms back on the chair's control pads. He closed his eyes, and sank into the interface with Cupritesh's machines. *Review structural integrity,* he thought.

:Structural deficiencies in substrata, adjacent to main water supply,: the machine said in his mind. A diagram of the problem, all bright lines and points of light, appeared in his mind. This was the spot they'd been working on all day, and Taryn could see the remaining section of fractured bedrock that they still needed to fix. Rock-mending on this kind of scale was arduous, because the machines needed detailed, moment-by-moment guidance from a team of operators. Taryn's job was to coordinate them all. In his mind, he experienced their efforts as various lines of musical song, and it was his job to nudge them into a single, harmonious composition. Doing so made their instructions to the machines clearer, and made the overall effort less taxing.

Even now, Taryn realized that he could hear a soft thread of music in his mind, and it seemed to coordinate with the gently pulsing lines the machine projected in his

mind. He could also detect a faint, irregular *tick* in the melody, as it tried to flow through and around the still-damaged section of rock. He hadn't noticed it before, but then, he and the other operators had never really just sat and *listened* to the machines.

He sank further into the interface now, listening to the quiet ebb and flow of Cupritesh's rhythms. He'd never noticed anything like it in Alabaster, but the city's Tower was using the machines almost continually, day and night. It's possible that all the operator "noise" simply drowned out the machines' softer music. Cupritesh hadn't had activities operators in… actually, it had probably been decades, if not centuries.

When was the last live operator present at this station? he thought to the machines.

:Local activity logs include information only for the last seventy-two years,: it replied immediately. *:Current logs do not show any local activation.:*

A long time, then, Taryn thought. Although they now knew that the rebels from Onyx had *remotely* accessed and controlled the Cupritesh machinery, creating the fractures that he and his team were now dealing with. Speaking of… *Can you list the remote connections still available to this station?* he asked. The terminology was something he was still getting used to. The machines referred to cities as *stations*, and largely didn't differentiate between the operator *positions*—the chairs, like the one he now occupied—within the station.

:Affirmative,: came the immediate reply. *:Secondary*

command link to station Alabaster remains online,: it began. That would be the connection Taryn himself had been able to create. *:Secondary command link to station designated Onyx remains online under authentication,:* it continued. It had always referred to Onyx that way, Taryn noticed, as if the station had originally been named something different. The authentication piece was his own doing, and was how he'd managed to lock Onyx out of the city. *:Core connection to central processor remains online but degraded,:* the machine concluded.

Central processor was a term Taryn and the others in Alabaster had run into before. It was a special installation in or near Olivine, they knew, and they'd managed to have Alabaster connect to it before.

Something popped out of Taryn's memory. *Tell me again how far back the current log goes?* he asked.

:Current log information goes back seventy-two years.:

Seventy-two. *Seventy-two.* What a specific number… he was sure he'd heard it before. Wait– yes. He *had.* He'd heard that exact number in Alabaster. It was the number of years since the "expert system" running the city's food processing systems had been disconnected. *What happened seventy-two years ago?* he asked.

:All logs were re-initiated at that time. No anomalous activity remains in the current logs. No information is available prior to the log initiation.:

Something happened, though, Taryn thought. The coincidence of both Cupritesh and Alabaster having some kind of reset or disconnect at the same time was… well,

he doubted it was a coincidence.

Initiate connection to the Central Processor, he thought.

:Connection available,: the machine replied. *:Connected degraded.:*

Clarify 'degraded,' he ordered.

:Connection lag time exceeds nominal,: it replied. *:Bandwidth variability exceeds health parameters. Connection has been down for 36.22% of total time in the past seventy-two years.:*

The connection was unstable, Taryn guessed it meant. *Can I communicate directly with the central processor?* he asked. His prior efforts had involved the local expert systems communicating with the central processors'; he knew that some manner of 'artificial intelligence' existed in Olivine as well, but he'd been unable to activate it.

:Affirmative,: the local machine replied. *:However, the central processor is currently in a maintenance wait-state. Please try again later.:*

Whatever. Taryn was too tired to pursue it now, and dinner would be starting soon. He pulled his hands off the pads, blinked until he could see the room clearly again, and stood to leave.

* * *

"So tell me," the King said, "how can our cities work together more in the future? To prevent… misunderstandings, like the ones we've recently had?"

Father Cilias, who until this trip had been responsible for relations between Alabaster's Tower and the city's

council, said, "I think maintaining communications is an important first step." He nodded to Taryn. "I would propose we station an operator here, as they can use the ancient machines to send messages between cities almost instantly. Beyond that," he said slowly, "perhaps a discussion on different forms of government would be useful?"

The King frowned. They'd brought this up before. "You mean abolishing our monarchy," he said flatly.

"Actually, no," Father Cilias said. "Alabaster retains a library of some size, and we've been researching some of the different forms of government our ancestors tried. Alabaster itself operates on what they called a representative democracy: each citizen gets a single vote, and each district uses their votes to elect a member of council. Council thus equally represents the entire city."

"With no king," the King said.

"Well, no, but that's not the only viable form of government. We also ran across something called a 'constitutional monarchy.'"

The King's frown softened. "Tell me more," he said, reaching for a plate of food.

"It seems to be a combination of Alabaster's system and your own. You establish a Parliament, which is much like our city council. Its members are elected by the people, and they're responsible for passing the laws that govern everyone."

"And where does the monarchy come in?" the King asked around a bite of meat.

"You have to give your assent for each law, provid-

ing a kind of safety net. And the Parliament does not *enforce* their laws. Instead, you establish a government under yourself to do that, led by a single person elected by the Parliament. Essentially, it all happens under your authority, but on a day to day basis you just let everyone do their jobs. The idea, as I understand it, is to enable self-governance," and here, Father Cilias decided to stroke the King's ego a bit, "while ensuring that wiser heads are able to put a stop to anything egregious. It also gives you the time to focus on the city's long-term prospects, and to guide the Parliament in making wise decisions."

"I see," the King mumbled around another bite. "Well, I suppose it's something for discussion. I will admit that such a system could solve for some… vexing thoughts around our line of succession at present."

"Anytime," Father Cilias said, bowing his head. "My peers will continue researching so that we can present you with the most information possible from which to make a decision."

"And such a decision would be required for our cities to work more closely?" the King pressed.

"Not at all," Father Cilias said. "However, knowing that our relationship was not bound to a single man, whose successor might or might not continue his policies, obviously adds some tension to any relationship. A government where policies lingered across generations might feel more… amenable to deeper cooperation." Alabaster still held the secret of operating the ancient machinery, which was a powerful lever. Cilias didn't want to play it

too strongly, though, or make Cupritesh's King feel as if he was being pressured.

The King nodded and returned to his meal.

* * *

"Do you really think there's a chance Cupritesh will change their government?" Taryn asked.

Brother Evan shook his head. "It's impossible to tell. We know he's had problems with his sons fighting over the succession, so handing off some power might resolve that for him. Still… he's a difficult man to read or predict." He paused. "Did you discover anything new after I left you?"

"Yes and no," Taryn said, frustration creeping into his voice. "Something happened seventy-two years ago," he said. "Alabaster's food processing was disconnected from the rest of the systems then, and Cupritesh's logs were all erased and started over. I tried to query the central processor, but there was something about a wait-state and it couldn't reply."

Brother Evan though for a moment. "I'm starting to think that a trip to Olivine's ruins is inevitable."

"Really?" Taryn said, perking up.

Brother Evan nodded. "So much of what we don't know always involves that phrase, 'central processor.' Maybe it's time for us to pay it a visit in person. As soon as," he added, "we've stabilized Cupritesh."

Taryn nodded. He'd make sure that work was finished quickly, then.

Three

Four

Acknowledgements