

CHROMASPACE

CONSCRIPT

A person in a futuristic, dark suit with glowing orange accents stands with their back to the camera, looking out over a dark, industrial landscape. In the distance, a large, glowing yellow ring, resembling a planet or moon, hangs in the sky. The scene is dimly lit with blue and purple tones, and some faint lights are visible in the background.

MEGAN ALNICO

CHROMASPACE : Conscript

By Megan Alnico

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Published by Indies United Publishing House, LLC

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Cover design by Ira-Rebeca P.

Cover art by Tithi Luadthong

ISBN: 978-1-64456-403-5 [Paperback]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-308-3 [Mobi]

ISBN: 978-1-64456-309-0 [ePub]

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021950525

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INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

P.O. BOX 3071

QUINCY, IL 62305-3071

INDIESUNITED.NET

To my loving grandmother, whose kindness, acceptance,
and enthusiasm for anything I did, regardless of whether
she understood it, was boundless.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I never thought I would get this far. Honestly, I didn't. The number of times I'd given up on this project, lost any hope that it would even be 'finished,' or regretted thinking I had the right to even try is soul-crushingly large. Each time, though, there was a person along the way who helped save me and this work.

Liss, Cassie, Mom, Kate, Elizabeth, Tracy, Dan, Dave, Robin, Erica, and Eirynne, please know that your contributions, no matter how small you may think they were, made a world of difference.

Finally, a special thanks to Brandon Sanderson, who took time out of his busy schedule to reply to a message on Reddit from a total stranger. He read some of my work, which was admittedly very rough, and gave me feedback. The most important of which was:

You should most certainly go forward.

And so, I did...

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CHAPTER ONE

Jacob panted as he came to a stop at the top of the hill. He fell to his knees in the green grass, legs burning, chest aching. Grabbing the low orbit transponder from his belt, he pressed the send button.

“Field Agent Zackery to the *Ulysses*,” he puffed. “Mission is done, requesting extraction.” He gulped air again, laid down on his back, and stared up at the strange blue sky with its angular clouds. *It’s over, it’s finally over*, he told himself.

Jacob lay there for a good 20 minutes before he craned his head and looked at the transponder in his hand. He pressed the send button again. “*Ulysses*, are you there? *Ulysses*, this is Jacob, can you hear me?” But there was no response, and another 20 minutes later, there was still wasn’t a response.

Jacob let out a deep sigh. “I. Am. So. Screwed.”



Dust danced in the sunlight that streamed through the open window. Jacob slept on a bare mattress; his body sprawled out from a fitful night’s sleep. Only half-awake, he rolled over. Dust caught in his lungs, and he coughed himself fully awake. Jacob sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“Uuuuuggghhh,” he groaned.

Everything in the house was covered in dust. The plaster-like walls were cracked, the floorboards were

uneven, and it smelled old and musty. There was a stone water basin in the kitchen, and if Jacob turned it on, it would flow with cold, crisp water. He looked at the faucet longingly but turned his attention instead to a dirty plastic jug. He opened the jug and poured himself some of the stale, tepid water.

Sipping, he said the same thing he had at the start of every morning for the last thirty days. "I'd kill for a coffee right now."

The large bay window looked out to the garden. Citrus trees were bearing so much fruit the branches bowed under the strain. The berries were so bright, and ripe Jacob could almost smell them from inside the house. *I hate this planet*, he thought, and not for the first time. From the side of the canister, he removed one of seven paper pouches and headed for the front porch, in his hands the only 'edible food' on this planet.

"Rations? It looks more like colored sand," he had said.

"Tastes like it, too." The supply officer smiled so wide Jacob could see the man's molars. "But y'see, it's cut with forsithadren, and that's important cause it's the only thing separatin' you from a slow and painful death." He held up a finger to emphasize his point. "Now, this is so important I'm going to say it twice; it's not very strong, so you can't eat anythin' you find on that planet. You understand?" he asked. "You can't eat anythin' you find on that planet. I've been ordered to assign you enough rations and forsithadren to complete a ten-day mission."

Jacob shook his fist at the air. "Ten days, ten days, y' bastards. Where the hell are you?"

It had been a month. *A month. Would they even come back to look for me at this point?* This was supposed to be his last mission; he was out as soon as he reported back to Captain Merrick. Then, and only then, would he finally be done with all this bullshit. Military service had never part of Jacob's plan, but circumstances had made it unavoidable. A deal had been struck, and the only way out meant seeing it through to the end.

"I want my life back," he muttered indignantly.

Jacob forced down the bitter, gritty rations with a swig of only slightly less bitter, gritty water. Rationing water was both mentally and physically taxing. He was forced to boil the local water and disinfect it with a dose of forsithadren. This purification cut down on his food even more and made everything taste exactly like an accidentally chewed pill.

In a survival situation, you're supposed to stay put. The idea was that if you moved, no one would be able to find you. Jacob had waited long enough for the extraction pod, and things were getting dire. It was time to find his own way off this godforsaken world.



Jacob had landed on Pherinox 5A in an injection tube, which was a fancy way to say tin-can-that-can-survive-atmospheric-reentry. What it lacked in comfort, it also lacked in legroom and storage. As such, Jacob had been issued only his flight suit, rations, and water. He packed up the few items he had obtained on this world; a small wooden box, a long object wrapped in a cloth, a bolt pistol, his flight suit, and what was left of his rations and water. With a last glance at the lavish but decaying building, Jacob headed out the front door. In the distance, he could see the wreckage of his injection pod; a scar on the pristine landscape. During his time on the planet, he had found many others, most of them within a five-mile radius from his landing spot. All of them were empty of passengers. Apparently, he wasn't the first one to be sent on this mission. From these crash sites, he had been able to scavenge more jugs of water and medicine-laced rations. Just when he thought the forsithadren couldn't get any worse. This older stuff had made him gag, and it took days until he got used to it.

Injection tubes hadn't been the only thing that had landed on the surface. Jacob had found a military air transport of a model that he could *actually pilot*. Unfortunately, the transport's batteries were almost empty, and it would never make it off the ground. There was just enough charge to power up a three-wheeled vehicle in the

cargo hold. It was a striking shade of blue and had the word "VOX" stenciled on the side in big, blocky white letters. If he were lucky, the VOX would get him to a major city where he could find a more powerful transponder or, if he was very, very lucky, a ship. So far, Jacob had not been 'very, very lucky', but he had to hope things would change and soon, or he would starve to death.



The warm air whipped past his head as he cruised down the fabricrete roads. These roads stretched for miles and miles and were one of the few hints that Pherinox 5A had at one time been a relatively modern Terran colony. Fabricrete was expensive, but for practical purposes, indestructible. Pherinox 5A must have been significant at one point in time. Jacob had not been briefed on the exact circumstances behind the planet's demise, only that it had been a casualty of the second war with the Vird some 50 years previously.

"The Vird seeded Pherinox 5A with a waterborne bacterium that harnessed the unique and naturally harmless radiation produced by the Pherinox star and turned it into a deadly poison," said the briefing officer. "This poison eventually found its way into the water table and plant biosphere, killing all animal life on the planet."

"I don't get it," Jacob said. "How does it kill 'all animal life'? Like, what about insects? Rodents?"

The briefing officer frowned. "Our intelligence indicates *all animal life*."

"But there was an evac, right? So not all animal life was affected, I mean, people got out."

"Some did," said the officer with a nod.

"Where are they now?"

"What?"

"Where are the people who escaped in the evac, or their descendants, or whatever."

The intelligence officer rolled his eyes. "I don't like your attitude."

"I get that a lot. I guess it has something to do with *not*

wanting to be here.”

“You really want to go back to prison? Waste another year of your life?”

Jacob just looked away and said nothing.

“That’s what I thought.”

Union Military intelligence was such bullshit, Jacob thought. It was only accurate when he didn’t want it to be.

After hours of driving the Vox, Jacob crested the final hill. Blue domes of this as-yet-unknown city shone brightly in the noonday sun. Despite his best efforts to conserve power, the engine’s whine dropped, and he came to a halt. Jacob grabbed his backpack and rations. He would have to leave most of his water on the vehicle until he needed it. It would be a mile walk to the dome entrance.

Jacob shook his head. “I hate this planet. I hate this planet so much.”

A sign at the entrance read: “Welcome to Heloshia, the Pearl of Pherinox.”

You better be open, y’bastards.

The enormous central gate was indeed open, its arch casting a hard shadow on the road beneath it. Its double-entry design reminded Jacob of an oversized airlock, with the inner side disassembled. There were indeed the remnants of hinges; large rectangular indentations that led credibility to his idea. It also begged the question: why were they needed? In fact, why would a world with a breathable atmosphere need a domed city at all? It didn’t make any sense.

Like every place else on Pherinox, this city was abandoned. There was a stillness in the air. A deserted wilderness has leaves and trees and wind, but an empty domed city had no such background noise. It was a deafening unnatural silence that Jacob found soul-crushingly disturbing.

The streets were crammed with four-wheeled vehicles and some tower climbers, used by the residents of the domescrapers. They were all locked, and Jacob didn’t have his tools, so they’d be no help.

“Why can’t I take them?” he had asked the deployment

officer.

“Because lockpicks are not regulation equipment,” the officer said disinterestedly.

Jacob had, of course, tried to sneak a set into the injection tube with him. But, as always, he was searched and, as always, they were confiscated.

“Where do you always get these?” the security officer asked incredulously.

Jacob shrugged. “If I told you, I’d never be able to get any more.”

The security officer shoved Jacob into the injection tube. “You won’t need them,” he said and closed the tube.

Jacob needed them.

At an intersection of two wide roads and a monorail, Jacob was amazed to see an illuminated sign above a public access terminal. Almost giddy, he hurried to the terminal in awe.

“Fifty years, and it still has power. Amazing!”

A sharp computerized voice replied, “Unrecognized query. This terminal is only capable of providing location and traffic information. Please submit a new query.”

“Computer, tell me the current traffic conditions,” Jacob said with a grin.

“Current traffic conditions are clear. There are no blockages or delays on any byways or skyways. Level 32 causeway 8 is under construction and off-limits. Would you like to make another query?”

“Computer, direct me to the nearest spacedock.”

“Heloshia has two modern spacedock facilities at your disposal. The Dorvan Interplanetary Spaceport and Pherinox World Express Spacedock. Which are you interested in today?”

“Please direct me to the Dorvan spaceport.” Jacob had a feeling that the Express spaceport would only have short-range spacecraft and nothing that could get him very far off-planet. The computer displayed a city map and the direction to the spaceport.

“Let’s hope I can find a ship and get out of here.”

“Unrecognized query. Please try again.”

“What?” Jacob asked, bewildered. Then he rubbed his forehead and let out a long sigh. It seemed that in his month alone, he had begun talking to himself. The computer was only attempting to respond to him.

“Unrecognized query. Please try again.”

“No, no. I’m fine. We’re done.”

“Unrecognized query. Please try again.”

“Computer, end program.”

“Unrecognized query. This terminal is only capable of providing location and traffic information. Please submit a new query.”

“Stop!” Jacob demanded.

“This terminal is only capable of providing location and traffic information. Please submit a new query.”

“Fine, I’m leaving!”

“-only capable of providing location and traffic information- only capable of providing location and traffic information.”

“No, I’m not talking to you.” Jacob threw his hands in the air and walked across the street. As was common in urban areas like this, there was yet another terminal on the other side of the road. As he approached, it sprang to life, emitting an all-too-familiar mantra.

“-only capable of providing location and traffic information- only capable of providing location and traffic information.”

Frustrated, Jacob shouted, “What do you want?”

“Please submit a new query. Only capable of providing location and traffic information.”

Then a thought struck him. “Computer, direct me to a terminal capable of answering advanced queries.”



Jacob entered a marble building filled with massive stone pillars. Each pillar was engraved with a symbol he recognized but couldn’t read.

“House, woman, life, water closet, guy standing on his head eating an apple.”

His instructor groaned. “No, no, none of those are right.”

"Are you sure? That *really* looks like a guy standing on his head eating an apple."

"Is this a joke to you?" she asked.

"Of course it is. How do you expect me to learn a new language *in a week*?"

"It's mostly memorization. I don't expect you to speak it, but it's important to recognize as many symbols as you can. There's only 1500."

Jacob scoffed. "Only 1500?"

"Would you rather go back to your cell?"

"No," Jacob said, deflated.

"Good. Again," she ordered.

All that effort, and Jacob still couldn't make heads or tails of the pictographic script.

"Oh, look," he said. "A guy standing on his head eating an apple."

At the far end of the atrium, he came to a T intersection of poorly lit hallways. "Where to now?" he wondered, looking around. Jacob noticed a blinking light over a door to the left and, lacking any better idea, went to investigate. The hallway was filled with offices. Each office had a name and title written in gold leaf lettering on its door. Most of this writing was in the universal language of trade and government, but there was always more of the strange angular script that had appeared on the stone pillars in the atrium.

"Bird with two beaks, house on fire, smelly sandwich...." Jacob continued down the hall, interpreting the foreign language as best he could, which was a waste of time but entertaining.

Each office had been ransacked, papers lay all over the place, computer terminals were in disarray, and small pinkie-sized canisters littered the floor. A thick layer of dust covered the mess.

Jacob arrived at the end of the hall. He found a military-grade security door made of dull gray metal. A plaque mounted in the center of the door read *Valan Estirban, Prime Minister of the peoples of Pherinox*, followed by symbols Jacob interpreted as *big penguin, bad haircut*,

plane with one wing, woman in an upside-down skirt. It sounded like an insult to Jacob.

"Of *course*, the door is locked." Once again, he kicked himself for not having the proper tools. "Damn that security officer. You won't *need* it," Jacob said mockingly.

He considered time-consuming and dangerous alternatives when a buzzing, humming sound emanated from the door, followed closely by a loud click. The door unlocked and drifted open by just the smallest of margins, a light illuminating the crack.

"That's not ominous. Not ominous at all." Jacob opened the door and stepped inside to find an immaculate office. Whoever had trashed the other offices must not have been able to get past the security door. Beautiful leather chairs, now cracked with age, along with a desk made from what must have been expensive wood adorned the room. Unlike the rest of the building, this office was well lit. A computer terminal sat on the right side of the desk. Jacob eased into the comfortable leather chair and inspected the computer terminal. A large green circle was flashing on its display

Words echoed through Jacob's mind as he considered the green button.

"...and for God's sake, don't touch anything on that planet," Dr. Janet Mason had said, busily injecting Jacob with toxin reducers and immune system enhancers. "We have no idea who's been down there in the fifty years since the evacuation. There could be all manner of booby traps, land mines, or robotic sentries. And that's just the stuff *we* could have put down there. The Vird might have landed some troops during their occupation."

Jacob shrugged. "The intelligence guys say it's been abandoned since its evac."

"And since when are you a fan of military intelligence?"

Jacob sighed. "They have been known to be remarkably accurate at times."

He shared a knowing glance with the doctor, who nodded. "Anyway," he continued, "supposedly, the Parasations took that system from the Vird after we left. Parasations don't live in an oxygen atmosphere, so if you

believe the intelligence, they didn't set up a permanent base."

Dr. Mason frowned and injected him again, this time with an extended-release vitamin supplement. "Just be careful. That's all I'm saying. I won't be around to put you back together this time."

"That won't happen again. I'll be careful," Jacob reassured her, "Then this will be all over, and I can go home."

Staring at the green button, Jacob contemplated the idea of home. He had been patient. He had waited thirty days when the mission was supposed to only last ten. If he continued to rationing his food, he had another week or two. Risks were necessary at this point.

Jacob's hand inched toward the screen and hovered over the flashing green circle. "Sorry, Jan," he said and pushed the button. He almost immediately regretted his action. The screen went black. There was a click followed by a thunk, almost like that of an airlock opening. Plumes of shiny gray smoke flowed into the room. Startled, Jacob tumbled back in the office chair, smacking his head on the wall behind him. He cursed.

A gentle voice emanated from the mist. "Greetings. I didn't wish to startle you." Jacob could only see a blurry humanoid form. Either the cloud was obscuring his view, or the blow to the head had blurred his vision.

Jacob rubbed the back of his head and attempted to stand. "It's okay. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

One side of the room was filled with mist, but his impact-addled vision was clearing. Before him stood an olive-skinned woman with dark, upswept hair and light gray eyes, she had a delicate, ageless face and a slight build hidden under a long flowing robe. Behind her, the far wall was missing, and a dark room lay beyond.

The woman smiled broadly. "I live here. This is my world. A better question is, what are *you* doing here?"

"How is that even possible? This planet is dead."

The woman frowned. "I am in no danger from the toxins

of this world.”

“How did you survive all this time? Are there more of you? *Do you have food?*” Desperation leaked into Jacob’s voice.

The broad smile returned. “I’m sorry, the imaging system is quite convincing.” The woman moved her hand in an arcing motion, and the mist became significantly less dense. At the same time, her image lost its sharp edge and became ghostly. Jacob could see the bookshelf on the far wall through her now translucent body.

“I am the central control system for archival and retrieval of all knowledge on Pherinox. I maintain real-time indexes on trillions of discrete subjects and contain a copy of the entire galactic coalition’s historical archive. Yet, given all my vast knowledge, I still do not know who you are.”

“Field Agent Jacob Zachary.” He said, addressing the AI self-consciously. Artificial intelligence was illegal in the Union and, to Jacob’s recollection, had been for quite a while.

“Greetings, Field Agent.”

“Please, Jacob is fine.”

“Then greetings, Jacob. I am the Librarian. What are you doing here?”

Jacob hesitated. His mission was not supposed to be common knowledge. “I’m on a search and retrieval mission. I didn’t find anything, and I missed my rendezvous. I’m looking for a way off-world before my meds run out.”

“Ah, I understand,” the Librarian nodded. “You were smart to come to Helosia. There are many abandoned vehicles you might choose from.”

“Yeah, they’re all locked.” Jacob had a plan in mind, but it would exhaust him, which was dangerous right now.

“Pherinox abides by standard trade council policies regarding salvage. The one hundred and fifty years since the abandonment of Pherinox is well beyond the minimum necessary to claim any salvage you like.”

“Well, as long as it’s legal,” Jacob said with a smirk. He was not in the least bit interested in Union trade by-laws. “Still, I need a key or passphrase.”

“I can provide you with the location of a ship and an activation passphrase.”

Jacob was ecstatic. “Fantastic. I need to leave as soon as possible. Where is it?”

The woman frowned, and her eyes looked somber. It was so real that Jacob had a hard time believing that this was a simulation and not a real woman. “There is one small condition in exchange for the activation key.”

“What could you possibly want? Oh,” he said, coming to the only logical conclusion. “You want off-planet too.”

“Yes,” she said. “I want you to take me with you. I want to leave this lonely place.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan is a software engineer, sci-fi author, hobbyist luthier, RP junkie, improv comedy performer, and the all-around paradox that is the extroverted nerd. She graduated from the Rochester Institute of Technology with a BS in Computer Science and a minor in live-action role-playing games and storytelling. Well, her minor was actually in Artificial Intelligence but spent significantly more time doing the former.

Megan spent her formative years in Connecticut but has since bounced from state to state on her own personal Oregon trail. She now lives in Portland and can be found enjoying the local comic book shops, computer recyclers, sushi restaurants, and improv comedy clubs.

For information about the Chromaspace Saga or any of Megan's books, check out: chromaspace.net or follow her on Twitter @The_Magnet_Girl for author readings, and special announcements.