



UNCHAINED

Books by Michael J. Allen

Scion Novels:

1. SCION OF CONQUERED EARTH
2. STOLEN LIVES
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3. UNCHAINED

Bittergate:

1. MURDER IN WIZARD'S WOOD
2. THE WIZARD'S BANE



SIGHTS & SORROWS

The airlock door closed with a whisper that tore the heart of Cassiopeia from Alaric's chest.

Letting Cassii just give up and die is wrong. He froze midstep. Only his stomach moved, knotting and reknitting. *She wants this. Breaking my promise wouldn't be for her.*

He stepped forward, tearing last heartstrings from his ruined ship and last remaining friend in the Protectorate. Two robotic bodyguards flanked him. Somber bronze faces returned his gaze as if x-ray vision let them see the tears he fought beneath his helmet. Euphoria suddenly washed away his sorrow.

Alaric cursed the armor. Its chemical response to his unspoken desires pushed away his misery. *I've got to remember to be more careful.*

Words scrolled his helmet display. Ynu: Orders, Master?

A shift of motion drew him across the slip corridor to the same transparent viewport an engineer had used, passing sentence over Cassiopeia and ultimately Cassii. A worker drone drew his gaze left toward Cassiopeia's wreckage—the home he'd worked so hard to rebuild and then ultimately destroyed. His helmet's HUD dissected her, highlighting and labeling each component with damage assessments that stabbed jagged shards into him one by one. Cold space opened around her and filled his chest as

the artificial continent-sized sphere exited the greater world sphere into space.

...I just can't look at her.

His gaze fled coreward to the dancing, befuddling swirl of continent spheres in and out of the world's transparent shell. He didn't understand the reason behind their movements or expend the energy to guess. His gaze drifted to his own sphere's center. Stimulants washed into him, summoning another curse. His powered armor labeled buildings with a slew of data he didn't care about. That single thought vanished the details.

In his desperate preoccupation with Cassiopeia's repair, he'd ignored the marvels of the constructed world. Mammoth cities grew from cores generating gravity and utilities. Shipyards, docking slips and defensive emplacements haloed building tops and transformed cities into blossoming snowflakes. The latticed docking platforms bustled on top with deliveries—flyers and leaping mechanical ants hurrying from ship to warehouse and beyond. Inverted parkland and markets hung inverted on the lattices; underbelly and served citizens and spacers alike while keeping commerce's filthy noise far removed from affluent ears without blocking lofty views of starlit space—at least during the night cycles.

A gasp turned Alaric toward three slack-jawed women standing just inside the interior airlock. Pearl, short sleeved jumpsuits one size too tight to be a second skin clung to luscious curves. His helmet diagrammed them, assigning mere lengths to light-years of sleek leg connecting crotch-high shorts to heels color-coordinated to match stripes and whirls decorating the fore-shortened jumpsuits.

Tyne flit through his trouser-tightening thoughts. His eyes crawled up their bodies to painted smiles and knowing, delighted eyes. Space-black hair fell in soft waves to the first's waist. Yellow and violet neon marked her exotic skin places he never knew Nadjem marks existed. "You're him. You are a him, right?"

"Of course, he's a him, Einolu," Thin, scarlet braids fell like sparse rivulets around dark symbols tattooed along the fine-featured Carek woman's leathery layered face. "Look at his manly stance."

Their Ongali companion wasn't as tall. Cartilage cupped bejeweled ears, bridging them through short, platinum-colored

hair. “Ulonie’s right. He’s oozing manly bravery like only someone who’d raided a Welorin war zone could.”

Wue: Voice tone fluctuations indicate seventy-two percent chance of prevarication.

Relax, they’re just flirting. Alaric’s voice cracked, but he hoped the armor corrected it. “How do you know about that?”

“We overheard some refugees, and your entrance into the system was all over the news vids,” Einolu said. “I’ve never heard of a KIOSC glowing gold before.”

Ulonie sashayed forward. “Me either. How’d you do that?”

Ynu: KIOSC network hacking information inappropriate without clearance.

I know. I’m not going to tell them anything, besides they’re probably just after a few centi of reflected fame. He hastily cobbled an uninformative but impressive answer. His rear display showed Cassiopeia edge away beyond the airlock viewports.

A breathy voice drew him back to the Carek’s smile, honey scent and snugly suspended bosom. “Are you as handsome as you are brave?”

Alaric stammered.

“Leave him alone,” Einolu said. “He’s too shy to remove his helmet.”

Robotic facial disks shuffled, settling into hard expressions beneath glowing eyes. Wue: Warning, removing your helmet will leave vital targets unprotected.

Thanks, but I think I can handle a couple women flirting their way to meet a det Regis. Alaric grinned, lifting his helmet. Their faces soured.

Ynu: Caution, Master.

They shared shocked, suspicious expression met. Einolu addressed the Carek. “D’Jenai...”

“I know,” the Carek—apparently D’Jenai—said. “I see it.”

“Fahtsysing idiots.” Ulonie cursed. “If Birak and Strepe weren’t dead...”

“We’d kill them,” Einolu said. “No wonder he got the drop on them.”

Birak and Strepe? A werewolf sped across the airlock viewports. A vultair edged into and out of view. *Fighters? Tract, they’re...*

Ynu jerked him backward. The bodyguard’s left hand extended. Forearm plates unfolded into a shield covered in Alistari

markings, an energy shield crackling outward to fill the corridor. Wue took a mirrored position at Alaric's back.

"What's with the fighters?" Alaric asked. "Afraid to face me, Corollas scum?"

Einolu smiled. "Consider it a professional compliment."

"*We* aren't letting you escape out an airlock like Shepherd did," Ulonie said.

Heat exploded from Alaric's cold guts in a sudden supernova. He slammed his helmet back on and pulled his blasters. "I'm nothing like Manc."

Einolu touched her bare forearm. Alaric jerked upward, crashing into the ceiling. Ynu and Wue slammed into opposite walls. Muscles struggled to raise his weapons. Adrenaline and who knew what hissed into him, but the chem burst proved insufficient to help him free his blasters.

Ynu neurotoxin darts spat an amplified staccato. The robot shifted its left palm back and forth, shooting women in his view and ricocheting darts at Einolu. The projectiles bounced off their thin jumpsuits.

Einolu ignored the darts, regarding the interior airlock. "Got an audience."

"Call off the drones early and meet the transport outside?" The Carek asked.

"Don't release him until that armor's been disabled," Ulonie said. "We're taking no chances after his performance with Rukerd and the other estates."

"Where's that transport?" Einolu asked.

Alaric let go of the blasters, gritting his teeth as he forced his arm toward his belt—metal scraping metal. Eyes shifted toward him.

"You won't escape us, but by all means tire yourself out fighting," Einolu said.

Alaric didn't bother asking about their motives. He knew. He'd met Corollas repeatedly since escaping Earth. He'd destroyed their operations, stolen their slaves, and killed their people. Relived relish spread a soft smile. His fingers found a little disc half holstered in his belt, and his smile widened. "Manc slip your trap?"

"Not ours," the Carek said.

“Like him or hate him, he’s a cunning old bastard.” Alaric’s fingers found the desired stud and depressed the EMP trigger. “Taught me a lot.”

Ionized energy exploded in all directions. His helmet went dark. He slammed into the floor with a heavy thunk. Alaric fought his armor’s weight, wrenching the helmet from his head. Ynu and Wue clattered to the deck. They shook themselves, rising once more with right arms extended. Blades unfolded from their forearm, sliding through fists into an ornately-etched long sword.

Ynu and Wue charged, shifting sideways enough to reveal three women that weren’t women anymore. Faceted eyes sparkled over frowning mandibles. Slate armor layered over golden chitin, encasing four oddly footed legs, an elongated body and butterfly-shaped wings. Darts bounced off armor and insect skin, a rogue shot sticking fast in a computer strapped to an insectoid forearm.

Swords flashed. The former Carek tightened her three-fingered hand into a pincer-like gauntlet. She deflected Ynu’s first slice. Her tail lashed, stinger coming back from dented armor bloody. Ynu bisected her tail and severed her neck. Einolu’s talon knocking Wue’s blade out of line and sliced with her other. It skittered across Wue’s armor as his blade repositioned beneath its hit. He jerked it upward, barely missing her upper arm.

Alaric fought onto hands and knees. He got one foot underneath. Chemical strength failed as he rose, ion hardened batons in hand. He fit them together, energized both tractor and repulsor beams and brandished his staff.

Wue interposed himself, keeping Alaric from the Holite. Without his helmet, they couldn’t speak to him, but body language forbid him from combat. Alaric circled Wue, intent to charge.

The slip rocked.

He stumbled.

Fighting back to his feet brought the exterior airlock back into view. Pirates in a docked transport fought the EMP deadened door. They muscled it open to face a furious Wue. Blaster fire filled the slip, impacting every surface.

“Take him alive you idiots,” Einolu said.

Ynu battered Alaric into a wall, robotic arm cinching around his armor until it pinched. A thruster burst propelled them toward the interior airlock, Ynu's sword extended like a spear. Ulonie raked Alaric, ripping open his left shoulder armor. Ynu smashed them into the airlock door with bone-jarring force and tossed Alaric through the created gap. Alaric careened into two Eika facing off Protectorate security on the open promenade. A remote skittered free across the deck, a Protectorate lieutenant scrambling to reclaim it.

Ynu hobbled through on a half-collapsed leg. A Holite stinger slammed into his head. Alaric jerked a carbine from an Eika's grip and sprayed the airlock doorway with compressed quasar blasts.

A soldier pointed. "Sirs, that android's markings—that's got to be our hacker."

The lieutenant swapped his remote for a blaster pointed at Alaric. "Drop your weapon. You're under arrest for illegal access of Protectorate military networks."

"Bit busy here." Alaric stomped to the doorway. A tail lanced out. He jerked backward, armor toppling him to the floor barely ahead of the stinger.

The Major scowled "Your Grace, please cease fire. Allow us to deal with this."

"Major Dreks, Sir," the lieutenant said. "That's Alistari royal battle armor, these are royal battle androids. This man's a thief and—"

"Lieutenant Wahn!" Dreks snapped. "You'll address His Grace with respect and cease any unproven accusations. Now." "Corollas are trying to kill me." Alaric fought back to his feet. A starburst of pain throbbled—his shoulder out screaming his other injuries. He strained to move in the thick armor. "We'll chat later."

The airlock door catapulted from its housing, knocking Alaric back onto the deck. Ynu helped Alaric up only to throw its body over his and extend its shield like an umbrella. Blaster fire erupted from the slip. A morbidly curious crowd of dockworkers turned into a fleeing, shouting mob.

Ynu took the blasts rather than reposition his shield.

A blast burned past Alaric's face. "Ynu, shift your shield—"

A tightly focused swirl of coiled energy slammed into Ynu. Shield plates exploded from his shield. A second nearly tore his

arm off. Wue retreated out the slip, scorched shield absorbing blast after blast. He sheathed his bloody propeller of death, seized Alaric and pinned him between their two damaged shields.

Corollas mercenaries charged their position.

“Protect His Grace,” Dreks said. “Get reinforcements here immediately, and someone take out that sniper.”

Protectorate soldiers returned fire, rushing to encircle Alaric. Drek’s commsman completed the call a moment before an energy coil turned his upper body into a fine mist of goo.

Wue further unfolded his combat flanges and extensions, rearranging into a compact fighter shape. Ground and firefight fell away at neck wrenching speed.

“Stop,” Wahk said.

Another coil lanced across the sky. Wue’s leg exploded, driving glowing shards into Alaric’s armor. His battlebot rolled and juked, fighting damaged propulsion and avoiding sniper shots. Corollas seized an ant-like cargo hauler. Its legs folded into its body. It rocketed up their wake, pirates firing from its cargo bed.

Alaric shot back, aiming carefully through workers as they swept low, using cargo, other haulers and warehouses to avoid pursuing fire. Another energy coil gouged a chunk from Wue’s remaining leg. They crash landed. Wue’s last thruster burst threw them sidelong behind a building. Before Alaric recovered, Wue hurled him down a large hole in the docking lattice.

Alaric tumbled end over end down the multistory tunnel. Vertigo and disorientation bullied Alaric through a gravitational null. He shot out the lattice’s underside only to arch back, smashing into a market stall with bone-jarring impact.

Onlookers took one glance at his dead armor and blaster carbine before running screaming along the promenade. He grimaced, struggling to his feet. *Corollas won’t be far behind. For all I know, that sniper still has a clean shot.*

He spoiled for a fight, but with dead armor, an almost empty weapon and no backup, he chose discretion over valor and fled. Fleeing shoppers gave him a view of the far-off sphere’s now opaque shell and its looping recorded and live news feed of his fighting escape and the hunting Corollas. Their hauler’s legs crawled along the lattice’s side then flipped them onto the underside’s gravity plane. It almost registered too late. Alaric

whirled, dove behind cover and fired. The shot blasted an armored pirate backward, knocking two off the hauler.

He ducked down an alley between restaurants, circling back the opposite way in the hope of confusing pursuit. One glance at the image high above proclaimed his failure. Protectorate security fliers swarmed overhead, flashing lights streaking up from the sphere's core through layers of hastily dodging traffic.

He tried to escape the broadcasting vids down another alleyway. The live feed searched his area, displaying Corollas but not him. He found cover, checking his carbine's dwindling energy.

Nothing for it. I'll jump them at the first clear shot.

Tentacles seized him from behind, yanked away his carbine and shoved him into darkness. Adjusting vision counted two a'sorhin flanking the dim room's exterior door. He assumed a fighting stance. A door opened behind him, besieging him with stomach gurgling scents of grilled meat and aromatic spices.

"Admiral effort, Captain." A silhouette filled the doorway. "Though, I'd much rather you didn't hurt us."

Excitement and unease wrestled for abdominal dominance. "Kingsman?"