

ALLIANCE
A Silver Ships Novel

S. H. JUCHA



Chapters 1 & 2 - Excerpt

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2019 by S. H. Jucha

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Published by Hannon Books, Inc.

www.scottjucha.com

ISBN: 978-0-9600459-4-5 (e-book)

ISBN: 978-0-9600459-5-2 (softcover)

First Edition: October 2019

Cover Design: Damon Za

Acknowledgments

Alliance is the fourteenth book in the Silver Ships series. I wish to extend a special thanks to my independent editor, Joni Wilson, whose efforts enabled the finished product. To my proofreaders, Abiola Streete, Dr. Jan Hamilton, David Melvin, Ron Critchfield, Pat Bailey, Tiffany Crutchfield, and Jeff Penver. I offer my sincere thanks for their support.

Despite the assistance I've received from others, all errors are mine.

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Author's Note

Chapter 1: Rebuffed

Chapter 2: The Enemy

Chapter 3: Face to Face

Chapter 4: Talsoma

Chapter 5: Research

Chapter 6: What Happened?

Chapter 7: Friends

Chapter 8: Kasie

Chapter 9: Apology

Chapter 10: Launch the Assault

Chapter 11: Team Two

Chapter 12: Tunnel Five

Chapter 13: Juliette

Chapter 14: Hold the Dome

Chapter 15: Where's Pyre?

Chapter 16: Breakthrough

Chapter 17: Pyre's Story

Chapter 18: Protect Rissness

Chapter 19: Hall of Delegates

Chapter 20: Madam President

Chapter 21: Packeoes

Chapter 22: Secrets

Chapter 23: Hyronzy Station

Chapter 24: Dorgatha

Chapter 25: Archivist

Chapter 26: Norsitchia

Chapter 27: Bait and Pounce

Chapter 28: The Hunt

Chapter 29: The Way In

[Chapter 30: The Assault](#)

[Chapter 31: Find Them](#)

[Chapter 32: Recovery](#)

[Chapter 33: Pimbor](#)

[Chapter 34: New Strategy](#)

[Glossary](#)

[My Books](#)

[The Author](#)

Author's Note

My first novels created the Silver Ships series, which detail the stories of humans and their allies a millennium in the future. Later, I added the Pyreans series, relating the history of another group of humans.

Each of three worlds — New Terra, Méridien, and Pyre — were established by colonists who launched aboard massive exploration ships from Earth within the same century. While these two series are set in the same universe, the timelines of the Silver Ships and the Pyreans are separated by about four hundred years.

I recommend to individuals who enjoy the Silver Ships series but have not yet read or listened to the Pyreans series that they should take the opportunity to partake of the Pyreans series *before* this novel. You'll discover the Pyreans series is similar to the Silver Ships books. They possess strong characters who challenge the status quo, despite the obstacles they face, and they create profound and lasting changes in their worlds.

The four-book, well-reviewed, Pyreans series includes *Empaths*, *Messinants*, *Jatouche*, and *Veklocks*. However, the story of the Pyreans doesn't end with *Veklocks*. The two series merge and reveal a future that includes descendants of Pyrean characters, who readers and listeners enjoy, and our adventuresome present-day Omnians.

In this Silver Ships novel, *Alliance*, which follows *Sojourn*, ex-Earther Olawale Wombo and a small band of Omnians have supported the technological uplift of the inhabitants of Sol, the Earth's star. There exists a strong desire among Earthers to know the fates of their colony ships, which launched to claim new worlds. The Omnians and Earthers set sail to explore the fate of one of these colony ships, the *Honora Belle*, the transport of the Pyreans.

I want to thank my readers and listeners for your ongoing interest in the novels I write. I hope to continue to entertain you with exciting and

thought-provoking stories of the possibilities that, one day, our galaxy might hold for humankind.

S. H. Jucha
October 2019

- 1 -
Rebuffed

“Engage,” the Sylian commander, Tzeena, ordered.

In response, the captains of a squadron of Sylian packet ships directed their weapons officers to energize their vessels’ enormous signal generators, which constituted a sizeable portion of their ships’ interiors. The generators produced powerful electromagnetic fields (EMF), which were focused through dish antennas mounted on the bows of each packet ship.

The Colony, a species of insidiously destructive insectoids, had launched two shuttles from the Sylian moon, Talseseena, in an effort to add another section to the ring under construction above the dome.

The Sylian packet ships dove toward the Colony shuttles, broadcasting their powerful signals. They hounded the shuttles, pressing dangerously close.

Eventually, the insectoids’ shuttles faltered and fell away from their intended courses. In an erratic manner, while the packet ships pursued them, the Colony shuttles returned to the moon’s launch tubes.

“Pull back,” Tzeena ordered the squadron.

Captains ordered the signal generators shut down, and the packet squadron returned to a station high above Talseseena’s dome. They would remain on duty for another twenty-eight cycles of their fifty-cycle stint before they were relieved.

The packet squadron’s single purpose was to prevent the Colony from completing the ring. The Sylians didn’t know the purpose of the ring, but considering the nature of the deadly insectoids, anything the Colony intended to create could only spell disaster for the Sylian home world.

“Commander, non-Sylian ships have appeared beyond Talseseena,” the navigation officer exclaimed.

“How’s that possible?” Tzeena retorted angrily. He regretted his lack of decorum, but his nerves were frayed. The Colony never ceased its efforts. His squadron rebuffed the shuttle launches four times a cycle, every cycle. The insectoids were relentless.

“Get me the fleet commander,” Tzeena ordered.

“Online, Commander,” the comms operator replied.

“Fleet Commander Soshona, this is Talseseena Squadron Commander Tzeena. Navigation informs me that ships are seen beyond Talseseena’s orbit.”

“Whose ships? Where are they coming from?” Soshona demanded in rapid fire.

“Unknown,” Tzeena stated. “I’m examining imagery of the ships now. There are five of them. Four are similar in appearance and have spliced three hulls together. The fifth vessel is in the shape of a long tube.”

“I’m sorry, Tzeena, if I snarled at you,” Soshona said. Her nerves weren’t any better than Tzeena’s. If the Colony had managed to deliver ships to the system, her inadequate fleet became the Sylian home world’s last line of defense.

“Where are the ships headed?” Soshona asked. “I’ll need an intercept course after I assemble my forces.”

“They’re not sailing anywhere, Fleet Commander. They’re stationary,” Tzeena reported.

“Could they be Resistance ships?” Soshona inquired.

“But how did they get here?” Tzeena asked. He knew it was a question without an answer, but he wanted to ensure that his logic and Soshona’s were in lockstep.

“When did you last repel the Colony?” Soshona asked.

“Only moments ago,” Tzeena replied. “We’ve another quarter cycle to wait before they launch again.”

“Send two packets toward those five ships, Tzeena. We need to determine their intentions,” Soshona ordered.

“We can’t engage them, not with just EMF projectors,” Tzeena protested.

“I don’t want you to challenge them militarily,” Soshona stated firmly. “Their appearance is an anomaly. Attempt to communicate with them.”

“Yes, Commander,” Tzeena replied and ended the call. His small bridge crew members stared at him expectantly, wondering who he would select for the mission. “Get me packets two and five,” he requested.

When the comms operator signaled with a white-furred digit toward Tzeena, the commander said, “Captains, the fleet commander requires we investigate those mysterious ships.”

“We’ve been watching them,” said Jess Cinders, the human captain of packet two.

“As have we,” said Tacnock, the Jatouche captain of packet five.

“What are our orders?” Jess requested.

“In a word, contact,” Tzeena replied.

“Contact, as in communicate?” Tacnock queried.

“Those are Fleet Commander Soshona’s orders,” Tzeena affirmed, stressing from where the directive originated.

“The reason I ask, Commander, is that those tri-hulled ships have a sleek appearance about them,” Tacnock said respectfully. “Obviously, they’re not meant to carry cargo, and the shape isn’t efficient for carrying passengers.”

“What my friend Tacnock is trying to say, Commander, is that those ships appear to be built for conquest,” Jess remarked.

“Whatever they are, you two are assigned to go talk to them. Get to it, and be polite,” Tzeena ordered sternly. When the call ended, he muttered quietly, “And may the spirit of Solseena guide you.”

The Sylians often called on revered ancestors for guidance. It was Solseena who ensured the explorers, the individuals who discovered the Colony’s expansion, were brought to the Tsargit council’s attention. Without that initial interaction, Envoy Harbour of the Pyreans might never have formed an amalgam of races to fight the Colony’s advance.

The Pyrean Resistance, or simply the Resistance, comprised younger alliance races who took steps to blunt the Colony’s onslaught. They slowed the insectoids’ spread, but they fought a losing battle. The Colony had a

massive head start. By the time the Resistance was organized, the enemy occupied over a hundred non-alliance domes and multiple planets.

“Well, Captain Cinders, how many languages do you have aboard your ship?” Tacnock asked.

“We’re counting languages, are we?” Jess asked, tongue-in-cheek. “If they’re not an alliance race, they won’t have ear wigs. So, it probably won’t matter what languages we speak.”

“This is probably conjecture on my part,” Tacnock mused. “We’re armed with EMF broadcasters. What do you think they possess?”

“I think we’ll soon find out. I’m breaking station,” Jess said.

“I’ll be on your starboard side,” Tacnock acknowledged.

* * * * *

“EMF waves, Olawale,” Esteban the SADE identified. He stood next to the expedition leader on the *Rêveur*’s bridge.

“That’s all?” Olawale Wombo asked incredulously.

“Apparently it was sufficient to force those two shuttles to return to the moon,” Edmas, a senior engineer, replied. He’d been monitoring the signal data through the *Rêveur*’s controller.

“There’s a powerful energy signature emanating from that hemisphere construct on the moon,” Jodlyne added. She was the fleet’s other senior engineer and Edmas’s partner.

“Why is the blue light pulsing?” Patrice Morris, the Sol Enclave envoy, asked. As an Earther, Patrice was without an implant. She’d watched the action that took place over the moon on the bridge holo-vid.

Esteban constantly chose images for the holo-vid to keep Patrice abreast of the actions that Omnians witnessed through their implant connections to the ship’s controller. She did possess a Méridien ear comm, and her experience at its introduction mirrored that of a New Terran captain many decades ago. Despite being warned by a SADE, she’d involuntarily shuddered when the nanites sealed the ear comm in place. The challenge

for Patrice was that Omnians moved data at a tremendous rate. Without the SADEs' help, she'd have been quickly left behind.

Every Earther aboard the three Sol Enclave Tridents had received an ear comm, which was charged through their body's heat, to facilitate communications. Access to the ships' controllers via an ear comm allowed ship-to-ship communications. However, unlike the Omnian implants, the ear comms limited Earthers to speech to communicate.

"Magnification of telemetry indicates that a structure on the deck intermittently connects with the projected hemisphere," Esteban explained.

"Conjecture?" Patrice requested. Due to repeated exposure to the Harakens, who were now the Omnians, she'd learned the shorthand manner of speaking to SADEs, who were the human colonies' self-aware digital entities.

"No consensus," Esteban replied. "The energy signature is unknown."

Patrice and the bridge audience eyed Esteban. In his brief reply to Patrice, he'd informed her that he'd contacted the fleet's other SADEs, Orbit and Juliette, aboard the Trident OS *Judgment*. Furthermore, the combined experiences and analytic capabilities of three SADEs had failed to identify the form of energy emitted by the hemisphere.

Alex Racine, the Omnian leader, had requested Esteban accompany Olawale. He was an associate of Edmas and Jodylyne, whom he also asked to join the expedition. The addition of two more SADEs was due to Lucia Bellardo's preference. As the Trident captain, who was responsible for the Omnians' safety, she was determined to have SADE backup before they left for Sol. She'd requested Orbit and Juliette join her crew.

Originally called Lambert, Orbit managed ship arrivals and departures over the Méridien home world before he was freed from his box.

All SADEs could calculate astronomical data faster than a human could add one and one, but Orbit carried unique applications to direct numerous ship vectors and shifting velocities. It was Lucia's opinion that if her ship encountered problems, Orbit was the asset that could make the difference between success and failure.

Whereas Orbit was quiet and calculating, spare in his communications, Juliette was another personality entirely.

Lucia explained the reason for her request for Juliette's presence to her comms officer when she said, "Long transits and extended shipboard life can be mind-numbingly boring. Juliette will ensure that won't happen to us."

"Can't argue with that concept," the officer replied, "and she is a SADE."

"Goes without saying," Lucia replied. "I've this feeling that Olawale is going to need all the help he can get. In that regard, you can never have too many SADEs."

Aboard the *Rêveur*, Esteban said, "Olawale, two of the EMF broadcasters are headed our way."

"Arrival time?" Olawale requested.

"Arrival in ninety-six hours, but I would estimate they'll be within contact range of their EMF weapons at seventy-five hours," Esteban replied.

"Could those broadcasts harm our ships?" Patrice asked.

"Rest assured, Patrice, that our ships can withstand the bombardment," Esteban replied. "The SADEs can too," he added, grinning. His facial movements appeared to make his synth skin flow. It was decorated in blues, greens, and white, which imitated ocean waves.

Patrice frowned at Esteban, and Jodylyne smothered her chuckle.

"We won't let them get that close, Patrice," Olawale assured her.

"That's not what concerns me," Patrice retorted. "We've visited forty-one systems without sighting a single civilization. Now, we discover one, but it's in turmoil."

"What I'd like to know is why the fight is centered on that moon," Edmas said. "Is this a civil war for dominance of the moon and that hemisphere?"

"We'll know when we speak to those aboard the two ships on approach," Olawale said confidently.

"Shades of Alex," Jodylyne murmured appreciatively.

"What if they don't hail us?" Patrice asked.

"Then we'll entice them to talk to us," Olawale replied.

“Jodyne’s remark is on target,” Esteban added. “Alex has demonstrated many examples of how to establish first contact.”

“Any sighting of the Earther colony ship?” Jodyne asked. She directed her question to Esteban, who would query the other SADEs. The Tridents, the Omnian warships, had the more advanced telemetry systems. In addition, the lead Trident, the OS *Judgment*, had Orbit.

“Orbit and Juliette have completed their analysis of their ship’s system scans,” Esteban replied. “There’s no sign of the *Honora Belle*.”

“Let’s hope these individuals,” Olawale said, pointing at the small ships displayed in the bridge holo-vid, “can identify the location of a human civilization.”

* * * * *

Jess listened to the broadcast from Tacnock’s vessel. The message was the same from every voice, whether spoken by a Jatouche, a Sylian, a Norsitchian, a Loopah, or others.

When Tacnock’s vessel was finished, Jess lined up his crew members. An individual from each race took their turn hailing the five strange ships.

“That’s everyone,” Jess announced over the comms to Tacnock.

“Not quite, my friend, you’ve yet to try,” Tacnock noted to Jess.

“Before the Sylian dome fell, I received a lengthy cube message from Pyre,” Jess said. “My home world wasn’t building anything like these ships.”

“We need to be thorough,” Tacnock replied. “Besides, if there are dangerous entities aboard those ships, we can hope the screech of a human voice might scare them away.”

Jess’s bridge crew heard Tacnock’s chattering, and they couldn’t help but grin or chuckle. The Jatouche and the Pyrean were the best of friends. Of all the races that had taken part in the Pyrean Resistance, these two races created the most formidable pairing.

Jess shrugged and signaled the comms officer, who opened the circuit to the ship’s antenna.

When the officer signaled ready, Jess announced, “This is Captain Cinders of packet ship two, defenders of the Sylian system. We request the five ships, which have appeared in this system, to respond to this hail and communicate your identity.”

Due to the intervening distance, the packet ship bridge crews waited out the communications lag time for a reply. Then the crews heard, “Captain Cinders, are you human?”

Jess was stunned, as was every other defender on the packet ships’ bridges. Unfortunately, his reply wouldn’t go down in alliance history as momentous. He said, “I was the last time I checked. Who are you?”

“We’re humans from a faraway colony called Omnia and from Earth,” Olawale replied.

“Earth?” Jess queried.

“Yes, Captain,” Olawale replied.

“Pardon me,” Jess said, quickly gathering his wits. “Whom am I addressing?”

“My name is Olawale Wombo, Captain. I’m an ex-Earther science administrator, an ex-Omnian university president, and now this expedition’s leader. You may call me Olawale. I’m not one for formality.”

“Olawale, this is Captain Tacnock of packet ship five. How did you arrive here?”

“Captain Cinders, we didn’t comprehend your companion,” Olawale said.

“Yes, languages,” Jess muttered, realizing the problem. “Olawale, you’ve entered a portion of the galaxy that’s populated by the alliance races. We wear ear wigs that translate languages for us. Captain Tacnock of packet ship five can understand you, although your accent is strange, but you can’t understand him.”

“In time, that won’t be a problem,” Olawale replied. “Three of our crew members are adept at languages. They’re self-aware digital entities or SADEs.”

Jess heard Tacnock’s next question, and he relayed it. “My fellow captain wishes to know, Olawale, if you would consider these individuals as artificial intelligences.”

Olawale laughed, and he regarded Esteban, who deliberately manipulated his face to make the waters of his synth skin appear to flow.

"They're anything but artificial," Olawale said, chuckling. "You'll enjoy meeting them."

"They're mobile?" Jess inquired.

"Their avatars are human-like, although they've a penchant for decorated skin themes," Olawale replied. "What was Captain Tacnock's original question?"

"The question he asked was how you arrived here," Jess replied.

"We sailed from Sol," Olawale replied, not catching the gist of the question.

"How long ago?" Jess asked.

"It's been many months now," Olawale replied. "We've checked forty-one systems in the meantime."

"Months," Jess muttered. He gazed at his crews' perplexed expressions, which mirrored that of his own.

"Apologies for interrupting the conversation. This is Captain Lucia Bellardo of the OS *Judgment*. I'm requesting the captains of packet ships two and five halt your advance toward our ships until further notice."

Into the silence that ensued, Olawale said, "Captains Cinders and Tacnock, Captain Bellardo has command in matters of the expedition's security. Please do as she requests."

"Security?" Tacnock queried. "Jess, ask Olawale to identify the nature of his ships."

"Olawale, you've two different hull types," Jess said, attempting to be diplomatic.

The remark wasn't lost on Olawale, but it was a matter for Lucia.

"Captains," Lucia said. "The expedition leader and the Earther envoy are aboard the slender-hulled ship. It's a passenger liner called the *Rêveur*. The four tri-hulled ships you see are called Tridents. They're Omnian-designed warships."

"Jess, I suggest we halt our advance immediately," Tacnock urged.

"Negative, Tacnock," Jess replied. "Don't decelerate. Reverse course. I'll make a port turn."

“A better idea,” Tacnock replied, and he ordered his pilot to execute a starboard turn and make for the Sylian moon.

Tzeena sat in his bridge chair. The Sylian was deep in thought, and his bridge crew observed him out of the corners of their eyes. The audio had been delayed, but eventually, they’d heard the entire conversation between the packet ships and the strangers.

Humans sailing between the stars in warships, Tzeena thought. *Of course, it would be humans*. Then he smiled, exposing sharp canines in a white-furred muzzle.

Tzeena relayed the entire exchange to Soshona, and the pair planned how to proceed.

Soshona had the same idea as Tzeena. They considered the means by which these new humans could be enticed to help them halt the Colony’s advance, if not defeat them.

-2-
The Enemy

“Captain Cinders, please provide a relay to the human expedition leader, Olawale Wombo,” Tzeena requested.

“Certainly, Commander,” Jess replied. “Comms, establish a connection with the *Rêveur*.”

“Captain Cinders is calling, Olawale,” Esteban announced. The midday meal was ending, and the SADE shared a link with Olawale.

Olawale’s implant received the link and activated it. He retained a link with Esteban, who connected the expedition’s senior staff.

Patrice relied on Esteban. The SADE often relayed implant communications to her ear comm. Patrice suspected that, at some point in the transfer of Omnian technology to Sol, Olawale had exceeded his authority. He’d halted the transfer process when it came to the subjects of implants and the age-defying medical nanites that the Omnians carried in their bodies.

<Greetings, Captain Cinders,> Olawale sent.

“Hello, Olawale. You sound different. Am I interrupting something?” Jess asked.

<I’m not on the bridge, Captain, where I utilized an audio pickup,> Olawale replied. <I’m sending you my thoughts via technology in my brain called an implant.>

On the bridges where Tzeena, Jess, and Tacnock stood, crews stared at one another in wonder.

Tacnock chattered. “That’s much better than ear wigs,” he said to his crew.

<What did you need, Captain?> Olawale asked when the comm silence extended.

“I’m relaying my squadron commander’s words, Olawale. He’s a Sylian, and this is their system,” Jess explained. “The Sylian monarch has invited you to the home world. There’s much to share with you about the events you witnessed at our moon and that have taken place in our portion of the galaxy.”

Patrice whispered to Esteban, who sent via comm, <Captain, the Sol envoy, Patrice Morris, wishes to know where your civilization is located.>

Jess suddenly realized that with implants it would be difficult to detect who was speaking. The familiarity of voices would be missing. Then he had an epiphany. With implants, there was the distinct possibility that conversations could be shared with groups of people, possibly across the entire fleet.

“My family was born on Pyre, Envoy Morris,” Jess replied. “My ancestors colonized the planet after their arrival aboard an Earth ship called —”

<The *Honora Belle*,> Olawale finished.

“Exactly,” Jess replied. “Is that why you’re here?”

<We’ve been searching for these colonists who left Earth about a millennium ago,> Olawale replied. <Can you share their star coordinates with us?>

Tzeena hurriedly communicated with Jess, but he needn’t have worried. Jess wanted what Tzeena wanted, which was what all the defenders wanted — the visitors’ long-term support.

“We could, and then again, we can’t,” Jess replied.

<Cryptic, Captain,> Olawale admonished.

“We don’t sail the stars, Olawale. We journey through Q-gates that are housed in the domes, like the one that you see on our moon,” Jess explained. “Only, we don’t have access to our dome anymore. It’s been overtaken by our enemy.”

<What does your dome and your enemy have to do with sharing coordinates of Pyre with us?> Lucia sent.

This time Jess recognized the voice — or the speaker’s thoughts, he quickly corrected. It crossed his mind that, despite the captain’s

perfunctory manner of communicating, she had a pleasant manner of sending thoughts.

“The dome’s console can project a wonderful star display, Captain Bellardo,” Jess replied. “I’d love to show it to you.”

Jess clamped his mouth shut. Heat rose to his face, and his crew hid the smirks that twisted their lips.

Aboard the *Judgment*, the Omnians smiled at Lucia.

<I appreciate the offer, Captain,> Lucia replied. <Are you telling us that a visit to your dome is the only way to gain the information that Olawale requested?>

“As I explained, Captain, we don’t sail the stars, we journey through the Q-gates of our domes,” Jess replied. “We’ve no need for star maps, as you would use them.”

<One moment, Captain Cinders,> Olawale sent, and then he muted that particular link. <Captain Bellardo,> he sent, <do you have a problem with us making a landing on the planet?>

<Juliette, how many languages did we hear?> Lucia requested.

<Fourteen, counting your admirer,> the SADE replied.

Lucia frowned at Juliette, who smiled politely in return.

Juliette was one of the few SADEs that hadn’t followed convention for her avatar choice.

Most SADEs adopted, as a primary avatar, bodies that neither imitated the heavy worlders of New Terra nor the slender, sculpted statures of the Méridiens. They’d chosen something in the middle, copying the style of Julien, Cordelia, and Z, who were the first SADEs to be freed from their boxes by Alex. Those SADEs, who were close to Alex, chose the appearance of human skin, while those freed later often decorated their synth skins.

Juliette’s avatar choice was a favored Méridien genetic preference. It was similar to that of Earth’s white blondes from Europe’s far north.

<Olawale, the number of different races on these two small packet ships suggests a cooperative venture,> Lucia sent. <It lends them the air of Omnia. Landing would offer an excellent opportunity to learn what’s happening in this part of the galaxy.>

Patrice received an update from Esteban, and, from across the meal table, she nodded encouragingly at Olawale.

<Captain Cinders, will you accompany us to the planet?> Olawale requested. <We'll have need of your services for the near future.>

"I'm sorry, Olawale, our packet ships are on duty against the enemy. We have to prevent them from completing that ring above the dome. We suspect that the construct might have something to do with sending larger constructions through the Q-gates," Jess replied.

<Are those your shuttles launching from the moon?> Lucia asked.

"No," Jess replied. "When the enemy invaded our dome, we launched our shuttles for the moon's station. The enemy built the shuttles you see."

<So, you don't mind if we deter them for you?> Lucia suggested. <That will allow your ships some respite, while you accompany us to the planet.>

Tzeena was aghast at the thought of heavy weaponry fired near or at the dome. "Captain Cinders, warn the visitors that aggressive action against the shuttles is unacceptable," Tzeena urgently said.

"Captain Bellardo, my commander is concerned that weaponry of any kind might damage the dome. There's an immensely powerful energy source buried in the moon that drives the Q-gates," Jess said.

<We use focused-beam technology, Captain Cinders,> Lucia sent. <Our strike will be surgical in nature. Trust me, Captain, we're experienced at this sort of thing.>

Something about the way Captain Bellardo spoke of their experience gave Jess pause. He considered that the visitors might have enemies far worse than the alliance.

"The shuttles lift about four times a cycle," Jess replied, which seriously annoyed Tzeena.

<Understood,> Lucia replied. <When we near your moon, request your commander clear the space. We'll be there soon.>

Soon was much quicker than the crews of the packet squadron could have expected. Against Tzeena's better judgment and at the urging of Jess and Tacnock, he hurriedly ordered the squadron to abandon their post. He did communicate his decision to Soshona, who also had her reservations.

After the squadron shifted to a new position high above the moon, they watched as one of the Tridents separated from the visitors' fleet and took up station in their previous location.

"Can we trust them to be mindful of the dome?" Soshona had asked Tzeena.

"They possess warships that sail the stars, Commander," Tzeena had replied. "Do we have a choice?"

From their vantage points, Tzeena's packet ships watched the Trident launch an odd vessel. Its smooth design reminded the viewers of a gourd seed. Quickly clearing the Trident's space, the vessel shot toward the moon, only to decelerate extremely quickly.

"Oh, for the love of Pyre," Jess remarked over the command comm. "We'd be wearing the bulkheads if our ships accelerated or decelerated at that rate."

"Did anyone see engine flares?" Tzeena asked his captains.

"The better questions, Commander," Tacnock retorted, "might be: Why didn't that ship flip over to decelerate? What sort of technology is it using?"

Chronometers on both fleets indicated the passage of time. Right on schedule, exhaust gases issued from two of the moon's launch tubes, and, once again, a pair of Colony shuttles rose. They moved in tandem to gain altitude before they would advance on the partially completed ring from above.

"Why are the visitors waiting?" Tzeena muttered. He was rethinking his decision to abdicate his responsibility to the strangers.

Just as Tzeena finished voicing his frustration, he saw the seed ship shoot forward. It flew past one of the shuttles, and the ship's engines disappeared in gouts of flame and debris. Immediately, the other shuttle reversed course and headed toward its launch tube.

"What did they fire?" Tzeena asked.

"My comms operator says that he detected an energy spike from the visitors' small ship," Tacnock reported.

"I suppose we've just witnessed the use of their beam technology," Jess said. It underlined his earlier thoughts about the Omnians' enemy or

enemies. He wondered how many encounters it took and over how long a period before that level of sophisticated weaponry was developed. *If only the Resistance had started sooner and more aggressively against the Colony*, he thought.

<Does that action suffice to relieve your squadron's vigilance and release you from duty, Captain Cinders?> Lucia sent.

"Commander Tzeena states that it'll take the invaders a quarter annual to build a replacement shuttle," Jess relayed.

<Nonsense,> Lucia riposted. <Your enemy can recover their shuttle and rebuild those engines in a third of that time.>

"They won't bother," Jess stated, in a desultory manner.

<Why would they recover the crew but allow the shuttle to become space debris?> Lucia queried.

"They won't bother with the crew either," Jess replied quietly.

There was silence, and Jess checked with his comms officer. The Loopah indicated the signal connection was strong.

<What is the name of your enemy, Captain Cinders?> Esteban asked, while humans digested the fact that they'd consigned a ship's crew members to slow death.

"They're called the Colony," Jess replied. He was relieved that the conversation had continued. "They're an insectoid race, whose population expands at an enormous rate."

<They've a constant need for new resources,> Esteban surmised.

"Yes," Jess replied. "The domes are merely way stations for them to reach our home worlds."

<Captain Cinders, you can inform your commander that one of our Tridents will remain on station until our visit is complete and you're required to resume your overwatch. Are you now able to accompany us?> Olawale asked.

"Commander Tzeena says that, under the circumstances, the squadron will be returning to the station," Jess reported.

<The one near your moon or orbiting the planet?> Esteban asked.

Jess was swiftly adapting to the surprising statements and questions from the visitors. The station orbiting the Sylian home world was presently on the planet's far side. Yet, the visitors knew of its existence.

"We'll be returning to Talseseena Station, the one near the moon," Jess replied. "Sailing time will be about a third of a cycle. If I'm excused from duty, it will take my ship about eighteen cycles to reach the planet."

<Captain Cinders, please, request that you be permitted to accompany us. After we collect you, we'll sail for the Sylian home world, which we expect to reach in a portion of a cycle,> Olawale sent.

"Did my ear wig translate the leader's statement properly, Captain Cinders?" Tzeena asked.

"If you understood hours instead of cycles, Commander, then the translation was accurate," Jess replied.

Over the squadron's channel, Tacnock asked, "Captain Cinders, what did you make of the silence after you told the warship captain that the insectoids wouldn't recover their crew?"

"I think these visitors have experienced hardships greater than ours," Jess surmised. "They've incredible technology and powerful weaponry, which they choose to employ judiciously. They didn't destroy the shuttle. They merely trimmed the engines off one of them."

"And they were aghast to learn of the crew's fate," Tacnock finished.

"Yes, that's what I think," Jess replied.

"Captain Cinders, I can't order you to accompany the visitors. However, if you wish to risk it, your ship is relieved of squadron duty," Tzeena ordered.

"Aye, aye, Commander," Jess replied smartly. He'd hoped for the opportunity to travel with the visitors.

"May I accompany Captain Cinders, Commander?" Tacnock requested.

Tzeena knew the pair was inseparable. Their personal bond was formed on the cycle of the Colony's invasion, but it had always been that way between Pyreans and Jatouche. Despite their physical dissimilarities, their races shared similar societal attitudes.

“Permission granted, Captain Tacnock, provided the visitors permit it,” Tzeena replied.

Tacnock flashed his teeth at his bridge crew. He was thrilled, although not everyone shared his enthusiasm for experiencing what the visitors offered.

“Captain Tacnock and I are excused from duty to sail with you, if that’s acceptable,” Jess said, resuming the conversation with Olawale.

<Captains, separate your ships from the squadron. We’ll be picking you up,> Olawale sent.

Despite not understanding the concept of being picked up, Jess eagerly coordinated with Tacnock to select a trajectory that headed them toward the moon’s station and put distance between the squadron and them.

Patrice eyed the *Rêveur*’s bridge crew. It was a desultory bunch of faces. A first contact with an alien race had resulted in the consignment of the crew to slow death. That insidious manner of demise forever lurked in the minds of those who plied the dark.

“Esteban, I need to speak with Lucia,” Patrice requested.

The SADE understood Patrice’s intentions. They’d used this technique many times already. Esteban linked to Lucia and nodded at Patrice.

Patrice knew that she had no expectation of privacy unless she requested it. If she’d learned one thing, it was that Omnians preferred to share. Their implants supported that, and it kept their society open and communicating with one another. There were secrets, but the vast majority of those were held by the SADEs at the behests of the various parties.

“Captain Bellardo, you couldn’t have known of this race’s penchant for abandoning its crews,” Patrice said. “We’ve entered a war zone. Our early encounters will bring unintended consequences. The races who are defending this system are requesting our help, and we need to learn what’s been transpiring in this part of the galaxy.”

Across the fleet, crews stopped to listen, as implants and ships’ comms were employed.

<My actions were rushed, which meant they were ill-considered,> Lucia sent harshly.

<Nonsense, as you Méridiens are so fond of saying,> Olawale strenuously objected. <Your use of force was measured and judicious.>

“I agree,” a Sol Enclave (SE) Trident captain said before the other two SE captains echoed his sentiment.

<Olawale, should we attempt to assist the damaged shuttle?> Lucia sent, dismissing Patrice’s attempt to discuss the subject with her.

<SADEs?> Olawale queried.

<Olawale, it’s not recommended,> Orbit sent. <Too little is known about the enemy and the glowing structure. Attempting to land the shuttle on the moon might mean encountering hidden weaponry defenses.>

<Sorry, Captain Bellardo,> Olawale sent. <If this is the outcome from a single contact with the Colony, I’ve a feeling the body count will steadily climb with further interactions.>

Olawale remained online and sent, <Captain Lumley, Orbit, we need to collect those packet ships. Captain Bellardo, leave the SE Tridents on station. The presence of our travelers should convince the Colony not to launch any more shuttles. If it doesn’t, perform the same operation. Is that clear?>

<Understood, Olawale,> Lucia replied clearly and firmly.

The *Rêveur* and the *Judgment* swept around the moon and sailed toward the defenders’ two ships.

Control was passed to Orbit. He communicated to the packet ship captains, directing their navigators onto the courses and velocities he required. Via the *Rêveur*’s controller, Orbit eased the liner between the small ships.

<Alignment achieved, Captain Lumley,> Orbit sent.

Francis Lumley ordered the crew chiefs to prepare for capture. In turn, the crew chiefs signaled the opening of the bay doors, and pilots launched the twin bay’s travelers to clear the tethering beams. The chiefs and their crews stood by on the starboard and port sides of the liner. Ensnared in environment suits, they watched the packet ships slide into view against the inky blackness of space, and the chiefs ordered the tethering beams powered.

When Captain Lumley received Orbit's message of ship alignment, he sent to the crew chiefs, <Initiate the beams.>

Six tethering beams latched on to the two packet ships and held them tight. Then Orbit gently accelerated the *Rêveur*, careful not to exceed the maximum acceleration the packet ships' crews could withstand. The SADE had determined that their engines were efficient but undersized, which allowed the liner to cut the packet ships' travel time to the moon's station in half.

Tzeena watched the visitors, with his packet ships in tow, sail away. Immediately, he placed a call to Fleet Commander Soshona to warn her of the visitors' impending arrival.