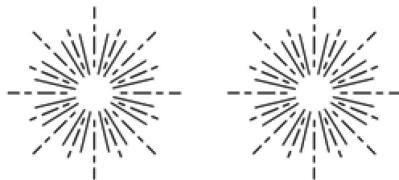


VEKLOCKS

Pyreans Book 4



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.

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I wish to thank several sources for information incorporated into the book's science. The bone replacement copy (BRC, pronounced brick) originated from the website of [EpiBone](#) and commentary by CEO Nina Tandon.

The El car diamond-thread cable concept was borrowed from Penn State Professor John Badding and Dow Chemical Company senior R&D analytical chemist Tom Fitzgibbons, who isolated liquid-state benzene molecules into a zigzagging arrangement of rings of carbon atoms in the shape of a triangular pyramid — a formation similar to that of diamonds.

I'm a fan of James White and his Sector General series of twelve, science fiction novels, which were set aboard the Sector 12 General Hospital, a huge hospital space station. The facilities were designed to treat a wide variety of life forms, with a broad range of ailments and life-support requirements. I'm pleased and proud to pay homage to Mr. White's legacy by borrowing his concept for Rissness Station.

My thanks to Michael Fossel, MD, PhD, with whom I've had formative discussions about telomere lengthening, which I mention in this story. I highly recommend his book, [The Telomerase Revolution: The Enzyme That Holds the Key to Human Aging and Will Lead to Longer, Healthier Lives.](#)

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

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book. Some alien names are used frequently. For pronunciation of many of them, refer to the glossary. For

instance, Jatouche is pronounced as jaw-toosh, with a hard “j,” as are all the Jatouche names beginning with “j.”

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Author's Note

My first novels created the Silver Ships series, which details 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 Pyreans series but have not yet read the Silver Ships series that they should take the opportunity to read the Silver Ships series after this novel. You'll discover the original series is similar to the Pyreans 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 story of the Pyreans doesn't end with *Veklocks*. The two series will merge and reveal a future that includes descendants of Pyrean characters, who readers enjoy, and our adventuresome present-day Omnians of the Silver Ships series.

In the Silver Ships novel, *Alliance*, which follows the recently released *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 the 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 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

July 2019

-1-
Rictook's Passing

The Jatouche monarch, Rictook, was dying. It was his time. His body's telomeres had been lengthened, granting him an extended life. By the rules of the Tsargit, the alliance's governing body, of which the Jatouche were members, the procedure was granted only once to an individual.

After a lengthy sleep, Rictook woke late in the morning. For the first time in many cycles, he appeared refreshed and relaxed.

Lindsey Jabrook, the senior of two Pyrean empaths, provided support for Rictook. In the ruler's present state, it required little effort on Lindsey's part to ease his pain.

Staff notified Tacticnok, the monarch's daughter, that her father was awake, and she hurried to his side.

Rictook gazed at his eldest, when she knelt by his raised pallet. His eyes held compassion and hope for her. Tacticnok was young. Yet, on his death, the enormous responsibility of ruling the Jatouche would be thrust upon her. He did have high expectations for her reign. Already, Tacticnok had taken bold steps that had delivered incredible results for the citizenry. She'd attracted the Tsargit's attention, due to her improbable forming of a bond with the technologically backward Pyreans, the humans.

"You look rested, Your Excellency," Tacticnok said tenderly, addressing her father formally in the company of others. She reached a furred hand to grasp her father's.

In turn, Rictook squeezed his daughter's hand. "Today is better," he said.

The staff looked at one another with concern. The monarch's recent weight loss and accelerated graying fur marked the body's final act of defiance against an inevitable end. His body's resources were being sacrificed at a heightened rate in an effort to delay fate.

Tracy Shaver and Sasha Garmenti, the other Pyreans, rested on nearby pallets. Tracy was one of the Pyrean dome explorers, and her courage was celebrated by the Jatouche. She'd accompanied the empaths, as a minder. To be precise, Harbour, the Pyrean envoy to the Jatouche, had sent Tracy to curtail some of Sasha's impetuousness.

That Sasha was a teenager was part of the problem. The other potent aspect of Sasha's personality was that she was one of the most powerful empaths. Her fellow empaths described Sasha as having limited control. She was either on or off. And without the control that could direct her power toward a single individual, a room had to be vacated or everyone would feel the emotions she emanated.

When Rictook's discomfort was greatest, which was usually late in the cycle, Sasha would be left alone with the ruler. From the pain Rictook felt, the lips along his muzzle would tighten in a snarl, and Sasha would feel his emotionally charged emanations. Then her ministrations would blanket Rictook's mind, clearing his tortured expressions and allowing him to rest and, eventually, to sleep.

The Jatouche were known throughout the alliance for their medical services. Races of all sorts journeyed through the Q-gates, which connected the alliance's systems and unexplored worlds, to seek medical services. An ancient race, the Messinants, who were no longer present, had built a vast number of domes. Each dome possessed one or more gates, and each gate was paired with one other destination. The races referred to their instantaneous transfers as journeying.

Rictook could have spent his final cycles aboard the Jatouche premier construction, Rissness Medical Station, under the care of excellent medical practitioners. Approaching the end of his life, he would be placed in a peaceful state of neurological suspension.

However, events precipitated by the Pyreans' activation of their single Q-gate had catapulted the Jatouche to the forefront of Tsargit politics. Rictook made the decision that it was necessary to forgo the expected medical support for his final days. He needed to be alert and discuss the future's ramifications with his daughter. At a time when the Jatouche

couldn't be treading a more tumultuous path, Tacticnok would don the royal crown.

In sympathy with Rictook's decision to remain alert, Harbour, who was the empaths' leader, among other things, had sent support to ease the ruler's final cycles.

The monarch glanced toward Lindsey, whose hand rested on his bare arm. He flashed his teeth and softly chittered. Lindsey's ear wig, a Jatouche gift, translated Rictook's speech.

"Your services have been appreciated," Rictook said. "The time you've given me with Her Highness has been invaluable."

"We're repaying you, Your Excellency, and Her Highness for rescuing Pyre," Lindsey replied, which Rictook's ear wig translated. "Without your aid, Pyreans might have struggled for centuries to reclaim Pyre."

"Our meeting has been fortuitous," Rictook pronounced. "It has taken patience, inventiveness, and courage from both races to carry us to this moment."

With a free hand, Lindsey adjusted her ear wig. The translation programs were a miracle of the Messinants dome consoles. Speech patterns were recorded by the console, as two species examined images over the course of many cycles. Simple images migrated toward much more complex ones. In the end, the console produced a language program for the ear wigs. Over time, the translation programs would grow with corrections and additions, as the two species interacted. An ear wig in the presence of another race would exchange updates to their shared programs.

Rictook turned to face Tacticnok, and he continued their discussion where they'd left off the previous afternoon. This time, he spoke urgently, as if sensing that the end was approaching. Soon, he exhausted his energy and fell asleep.

Late in the afternoon, Lindsey sent a staff member to Sasha. Lindsey was requesting to be relieved, and Sasha hurried to the ruler's private apartment.

"He's resting peacefully," Lindsey said to Sasha, when the teenager tiptoed into the room.

A medical team was bustling around Rictook, caring for his physiological needs. When the team finished, they exited the apartment.

“Are you rested, Sasha?” Lindsey asked.

“Tracy made me take a nap,” Sasha replied petulantly. “I’m good until star-rise.”

More than once, Sasha was tempted to utilize her powers in response to Tracy’s directives, which she considered overbearing. Only one thing stopped her. After they returned via the gates to Pyre, she would have to face Harbour and pay for her transgressions.

For hours, there was little for Sasha to do. She lay on a raised pallet next to Rictook’s. She’d laid a finger on his arm to enable a finer sensing of his needs, while she dozed.

The raised pallet was the common piece of furniture for the Jatouche. While conversing, they preferred to lie on their sides, which accommodated their bushy tails.

Staff frequently peeked through the doors, felt nothing from Sasha, and tiptoed into the room to examine their monarch. Satisfied that all was well, they quietly exited.

It was in the early morning hours, when Sasha awakened to sensations of fear and pain. She abruptly sat up and gripped Rictook’s arm. The ruler struggled in his sleep, and his short, dark claws curled and flexed.

Sasha coiled her power, opened her gates, and sent a feeling of bliss and calm to Rictook. His tense body relaxed, and he immediately lay quiet on his pallet.

Slowly Rictook’s eyes opened. They were sad. “It’s my time,” he said to Sasha.

“You’ll be fine, Your Excellency,” Sasha replied hopefully.

“No, Sasha, but it’s appropriate that you are my final companion — an elderly Jatouche, who’s leaving this world, as a young Pyrean greets my race,” Rictook replied. He saw Sasha’s eyes widen, and he asked, “Are you frightened?”

“No … yes,” Sasha managed to stammer.

Sasha’s emotional challenge was that her power had grown at a phenomenal rate, and it had given her a sense of invincibility. She was the

empath who had cured Lindsey and other elderly empaths. They'd lost their ability to block the sendings of others, especially normals, who couldn't control what they felt. Through Sasha's efforts, that critical gate control was restored.

"If you wish to leave, I would understand," Rictook said.

Sasha was tempted, which caused her to hesitate. That interrupted her focus, and she saw the ruler's gray-furred lips shudder. She quickly channeled her power, calming Rictook's mind and soothing away the pain.

"You're a brave human," the ruler commented, when his thoughts cleared. "Do not lament my passing, daughter."

Sasha's heart squeezed, and she struggled to maintain control. The history of her family was dark. The escape of her sister, Aurelia, from their family's captivity had eventually liberated her mother and her.

During Sasha's years in the downside governor's house, she'd never experienced a father's love. The empaths of the *Honora Belle*, the original colony ship, took her family under their care, but they were all females. It was the nature of genetics. The ship's residents befriended her, but she was often kept at arm's length due to her uncontrolled power.

As strange as it was, Sasha's first father figure was an alien ruler, and he was dying. Tears clouded her eyes. She'd held to her amazing powers as proof of her worth. Now when she depended on those powers to mean something, she saw that belief for the childish fantasy it had been. Her capabilities had their uses. There was no denying that. But they were merely tools. She couldn't save the monarch, who had adopted her by right of his kindness to her. She could only ease his pain.

The light of Na-Tikkook's star brightened a row of dark apartment windows. Rictook opened his eyes and focused on the light. "A new day, Sasha ... at least, for you," he said. Then with a long sigh, he exhaled a final breath.

A little later, staff crept into Rictook's private chamber. They discovered a human teenager, tears rolling down her cheeks and smooth pink hands clasping their dead ruler's gray furred one.

* * * *

The Jatouche mourned the passing of their monarch. His body was transmitted to Rissness Station, the medical platform near the Jatouche moon, where the system's dome was located.

After the end of the prescribed period of lament, Tacticnok was elevated to the throne. She was the first female to occupy the lofty position since the uplift of the species by the Messinants.

Most Jatouche were ecstatic about their new ruler, but some were not.

Following the ceremony, Tacticnok met with her four master advisors. Three of them, Pickcit, Roknick, and Tiknock, served her father. The fourth, Jaktook, was elevated by her father to serve her.

Jaktook was one of only two Jatouche to journey with the Pyrean explorers through the labyrinth of non-alliance gates and confront the Colony, the aggressive and deadly insectoid race.

Tacticnok chose to hold this critical first audience in the throne room. It seemed an ostentatious move, but she wanted to establish her authority to one particular individual, Roknick, the master strategist. She waited nervously for the staff to notify her that the attendees had assembled. When a staff member gestured toward the throne room entrance, she gathered her courage, assumed a serene pose, and walked to take her place on the Jatouche throne.

"This is a new day for the Jatouche," Tacticnok said solemnly, after she and then the attendees were seated. "We have two critical opportunities to pursue," she continued. "There are no more important goals for us than these."

"Your Excellency?" Jaktook queried, partially raising a hand.

Tacticnok was careful not to show deference to Jaktook, who was becoming more than an advisor to her. There was nothing overt between the couple, but the feelings for each other were mutual.

Imitating her father, Tacticnok raised two digits on her hand, which rested on her leg. It signaled to Jaktook that he could speak.

“I presume, Your Excellency, that your subjects are the Pyreans and the Tsargit,” Jaktook said. “Do you consider one of these more important than the other?”

“No. They’re codependent,” Tacticnok replied.

Tiknock, the master scientist, was intrigued by the response, and he signaled to be heard. When Tacticnok approved, he asked, “How are the Pyreans as important as the Tsargit’s notice of the Jatouche, and how are they linked?”

“The Tsargit has the resources we require, and these must be directed toward the Pyreans,” Tacticnok explained.

“You would place the humans above the Tsargit, above the alliance,” Roknick challenged.

Tacticnok repeated a mantra in her head. It was taught to her by her father, when she was young. It calmed her mind. As she had expected, Roknick’s first act in her audience was to speak accusingly to her and this without being recognized.

Following Rictook’s advice, who had shared this with her in his final days, Tacticnok waited silently. He’d advised her that it was the surest way to restore the throne’s authority.

Roknick took in the stares of the other advisors. Their eyes were unforgiving. He had a decision to make. If he wanted to remain in Tacticnok’s audience, he had to apologize. His other choice was to abdicate his position and leave the throne room.

Roknick’s decision was made by observing Tacticnok. Like her father, the new ruler waited without any intention of responding to him or allowing the meeting to continue until his affront was handled. He decided that being part of the hierarchy afforded him more opportunity to direct the course of his race’s future.

“I regret my outburst, Your Excellency, and I beg your forgiveness,” Roknick said. The apology burned in his throat.

“It’s given,” Tacticnok replied magnanimously. Then after a short delay, she added, in a firm tone, “But understand, Master Roknick, our patience isn’t infinite.”

In the meantime, Pickcit, the master economist, had ruminated on Tacticnok's goals. Like Tiknock and Jaktook, he supported the new ruler. After receiving Tacticnok's recognition, he said, "It's understood that the Pyreans offer us no economic value. Anything the Tsargit bestows on them will be sorely needed to build their beleaguered system. I must assume that you want something intangible from them."

"The gates," Jaktook interjected, addressing his fellow advisors. He believed that Tacticnok had established her authority, and there was value to engaging the others directly.

With a subtle upward palm motion, Tacticnok signaled her assent of Jaktook's words.

Pickcit and Tiknock regarded Jaktook thoughtfully. For all their acumen and experience, they could see that their new ruler was thinking far in advance of them.

However, Roknick in his hubris believed he could offer assistance to the fledgling advisor. "The non-alliance gates have been explored by yourself and others," he said. "The danger has been identified. This is now a matter for the Tsargit."

"How great is the problem?" Jaktook replied to Roknick.

The question stumped the master strategist. All he could offer by way of a response was, "That's for the Tsargit to determine."

"How?" Jaktook pursued.

Suddenly Tacticnok's earlier pronouncements made sense to Pickcit and Tiknock.

"The only way to determine the scope of the problem is to investigate the extent of the Colony's expansion," Tiknock reasoned.

"And who among the alliance races will volunteer to do what our intrepid explorers accomplished?" Pickcit asked Roknick.

The answer was no one. The Colony was an insidious mix of species, who were uplifted by the Messinants. They lived for territorial expansion, and it was assumed that they were depleting their home world's resources through uncontrolled population growth.

The Colony species were venomous. The larger entities, called reds by the explorers, reached a length of five meters, and their pincers could easily separate a sentient's head from the body.

The only explorers desperate or brave enough to investigate the Colony's actions were a group of Pyreans; two Jatouche, Jaktook and Kractik; and one Crocian, the magnificent Mangoth of the Logar.

"The Colony can't journey to any alliance dome," Roknick pointed out. "They're contained."

"That's limited thinking, Master Roknick," Jaktook shot back. "We discovered the Colony constructing a secondary dome, which was distant from their home world, to house a shuttle launch site. They'll usurp habitable worlds from whatever species are resident there. They'll continue to search out worlds that the Messinants discovered and created access to by virtue of the domes and gates."

"You make my point, Jaktook," Roknick replied, forgoing Jaktook's title. "The Colony is limited to non-alliance worlds."

"For how long?" Jaktook returned.

Roknick was tiring of the new advisor's repeated questions, most of which couldn't be answered. "Forever," he replied peevishly.

"All things are possible in time," Pickcit offered.

"True," Tiknock agreed. "Alliance members will sit secure behind their blocked gates until the Colony finds a way to circumvent them. In the meantime, the alliance will stagnate. No new gates will be crossed to greet a new race for fear of meeting the Colony."

"How would the Colony cross blocked gates?" Roknick inquired, surprised to be imitating Jaktook.

"If we knew that, we'd be prepared to prevent it," Pickcit replied. "As it is, the Tsargit must act, or we'll await the inevitable future when the Colony's numbers overwhelm us."

"Masters," Jaktook said, "you're forgetting one possible approach to our world. What if the Colony figures out how to reach alliance worlds via space?"

"Impossible," Roknick declared.

Tacticnok raised a hand off her leg, and the advisors stilled.

"We won't solve the dilemma of the Colony this cycle," Tacticnok said. "I've announced my priorities so that you seek ways to further my aims. The Colony is a danger to the Tsargit and every alliance member, including the Jatouche. The sooner we discover the extent of their activities, the better for us, and we mustn't count on the Tsargit to do it for us."

Tacticnok rose and so did her audience. She exited the throne room, and Jaktook let the advisors precede him out the public entrance. Then he followed Tacticnok's path to her private apartment.

When Jaktook saw Tacticnok's peeved expression, he chittered in sympathy.

"My first audience and it was completely unsatisfactory," Tacticnok complained.

"I didn't think so," Jaktook replied. He yearned to comfort her, but he hadn't the right. Male or female, Jatouche could choose their mates, but in the case of a ruler, only she had the right.

"It was important to educate the other advisors on your goals, and you did that," Jaktook added.

"With your help," Tacticnok pointed out.

Jaktook shook his head in disagreement. It was an intimate gesture, which Tacticnok forgave.

"The challenge was to get the other advisors thinking like us ... seeing the Colony for the danger they represent and realizing that the Tsargit will dither for generations over what to do," Jaktook said. "Pickcit and Tiknock heard you. They'll be considering your goals."

"Roknick won't," Tacticnok added.

"I doubt he ever will," Jaktook said, as they settled on pallets.

"I'd like to dismiss him," Tacticnok said heatedly. Immediately, she held up a hand to stop Jaktook's objection. She quickly added, "Yes, I know. We've discussed this. Roknick has too many supporters. We'd anger them if I dismissed him."

"You're upset about something else. What is it?" Jaktook asked.

"I wanted to be regal, contained, like my father, when he sat on the throne," Tacticnok complained.

“I thought you did a wonderful job,” Jaktook said. He resisted the urge to take her hand.

“And that’s the problem. That’s not me. I’m not my father,” Tacticnok said. She’d leapt up from her pallet, as she’d voiced her dissatisfaction with her performance.

A staff member, who was bringing refreshments, saw the monarch’s agitated state, and she quietly turned around and slipped out of the room.

“Why are you trying to imitate your father? He wouldn’t expect that of you,” Jaktook replied.

“Because they expect it,” Tacticnok railed, gesturing toward the throne room.

“I don’t expect it, and I don’t think Pickcit and Tiknock expect it either,” Jaktook replied softly.

Tacticnok’s frustration with herself eased. She regarded Jaktook and said, “I assumed they would want the same regal performance.” Deflating, she resumed her pallet.

“What type of ruler would you like to be?” Jaktook asked.

Tacticnok’s penetrating question echoed her thoughts. She imagined being the first Jatouche ruler. Her species would be without precedence.

“I want to participate ... join the discussion, challenge the advisors, and argue my point,” Tacticnok said. Then she added, “But I’m afraid that attitude would intimidate them.”

“It might, if you don’t forewarn them,” Jaktook suggested. “Or is it, perhaps, that you’re afraid to match wits with the master advisors?”

Tacticnok’s eyes flashed. For the briefest of moments, she was astounded that Jaktook had the temerity to challenge her. Then she saw the mirth in his eyes. She thought to tease him in reply, but her father had warned her that her actions could easily be misconstrued because of her authority.

Tacticnok casually said, “For now, one master heeds my words, and if the others can’t manage a female’s challenge, I can always replace them.” She flashed her teeth to indicate that she was wise to Jaktook’s attempt to manipulate her.

“I’ll warn the others that you said that,” Jaktook chittered. He was relieved to hear Tacticnok regain her emotional footing.

Tacticnok reached out and patted Jaktook’s hand in appreciation of his efforts. She left her hand on his a few moments longer than necessary, relishing the contact.

“Your Excellency,” a staff member said from the doorway, not wanting to intrude. “You have a call from Rissness dome.

“Urgent?” Tacticnok asked.

“A Veklock triumvirate has arrived. They’re requesting the Jatouche monarch,” he replied.

-2- Triumvirate

“Our apologies, Monarch Tacticnok, for the poor timing of our arrival, and our condolences on the passing of your father,” Patrus said. He was one of the two males of the Veklock triumvirate.

“Your words are appreciated, Patrus of the Veklocks,” Tacticnok replied.

As Tacticnok and Jaktook had hurried to a comm station, he’d advised her to meet with the triumvirate regardless of their intentions.

“We’ll not keep you at this tenuous time in your reign,” Patrus announced. “We journey to meet with the Pyreans, and we thought it appropriate to inform you.”

“I’d meet with your triumvirate before you journey to Triton,” Tacticnok offered.

“We travel on the authority of the Tsargit,” Patrus stated officially. “We’ve communications from the alliance council to share with Envoy Harbour. We can confer with you on our return.”

Jaktook emphatically signaled a negative with his hand, and Tacticnok nodded in agreement.

“I dislike instructing Tsargit representatives in the course of their duties, but under the circumstances, I must,” Tacticnok replied, summoning an imperial imitation of her father. “Pyre isn’t an alliance member, agreed?”

“A simple truth,” Patrus allowed.

“The Jatouche have established the initial relationship with the Pyreans,” Tacticnok continued.

“Then you’re insisting on your right to control alliance contact with this race,” Patrus finished.

“I am,” Tacticnok replied.

"Then we must reluctantly accept. Where and when would you like to meet?" Patrus asked.

"I'll detail an escort for you to Rissness Station. You'll be more comfortable there while I transfer to the station by shuttle," Tacticnok said.

"We await your coming, Monarch Tacticnok," Patrus replied and ended the call. He was perturbed when he glanced at his mates, and his ring of neck feathers ruffled.

"That was unexpected," Pesart, the second male of the triumvirate, said.

"For a newly elevated and young ruler, she stands her ground," Opalus, the female, added.

"It was a mistake on my part to seek to proceed to the Pyrean dome without permission," Patrus admitted. "The information on the humans says that they're a backward race. I wanted to speed our visit, communicate our message, confirm the details, and then leave, as soon as possible."

"Your statement indicates that you believe a technologically limited race offers no advantage to the alliance. This has been proven incorrect," Opalus admonished. Her throat feathers fluttered to indicate her irritation. "The Tsargit learned of the Colony's activities because of the efforts of the humans. If our assignment is to be successfully concluded, we must heed the monarch's advice."

While the Veklock triumvirate made their way from the dome and through the tunnels to catch a shuttle to Rissness Station, Tacticnok made preparations to join them.

"Jaktook, communicate quickly to Kractik," Tacticnok ordered. "We must hurry to meet the Veklocks. As Tsargit emissaries, they'll be impatient to execute their duties. Kractik and you will accompany the triumvirate to Triton."

"As you wish," Jaktook replied and hurried to a comm station.

Tacticnok took a lift to an apartment two floors below. The Pyreans were in residence there. As soon as she entered the apartment, the staff began packing the Pyreans' duffel bags.

"Are we leaving, Your Excellency?" Lindsey asked.

“Promptly,” Tacticnok replied. “A Veklock triumvirate has arrived to visit Pyre. They’ve been sent by the Tsargit.”

“Is that a good thing?” Sasha asked.

“It will be if we manage them well,” Tacticnok replied. “We’ll meet them at Rissness Station.”

“What are your concerns, Your Excellency?” Tracy asked, as the staff hustled around them.

“The Tsargit will have granted the emissaries wide latitude in the performance of their duties. But be assured, the Tsargit has a habit of getting more than full return for whatever the Veklock triumvirate offers your race,” Tacticnok explained.

“Essentially, the Veklocks journey to Pyre to negotiate,” Tracy summarized.

“Essentially,” Tacticnok replied.

Tracy was the first to laugh. Sasha and Lindsey followed, and then Tacticnok belatedly chittered her delight. They’d come to the same conclusion. The Veklocks would sit across a conference table from Captain Jessie Cinders and Envoy Harbour.

Several days later, Tacticnok’s royal shuttle decelerated to dock at the enormous Rissness Medical Station. They arrived on the nocturnal cycle of most of the station’s medical staff and its clients. The royal apartments were opened for Tacticnok and Jaktook, while Kractik and the Pyreans were provided rooms of their own. Refreshments were provided, and they rested until the station entered a period of activity.

The three races met after morning meal. They were a contrast in appearance. Their few similarities were that they were bipedal, possessed two arms and hands, of a sort, and had medial symmetry.

Humans were of a middle height and the less adorned of the three species. The Jatouche averaged about two-thirds of the humans’ height. Their colorful fur, tufted ears, short muzzles, and bushy tails clearly set them apart.

The Veklocks were a feathered and winged race. They stood a half-meter taller than the Pyreans. Their necks and legs were long and thin. White feathers adorned their wings and bodies. Long, colored feathers

sprouted in a ring around the base of their necks. Their beaks were straight, lengthy, and orange, and their wings hung down their backs.

Everyone paused to allow the ear wigs to update. Soft beeps signaled the end of the translation apps' exchanges. Then Patrus introduced the triumvirate, and Tacticnok did likewise for her party.

Tech staff had arranged the conference room to accommodate the physiques of the races. At Tacticnok's request, the techs supplied a round table. It would suit the Veklocks' dispositions.

"We've waited to hear your concerns, Monarch Tacticnok," Patrus said. "What are they?"

"How do you intend to proceed from the Pyreans' moon, Triton?" Tacticnok asked.

The Veklocks glanced in confusion at one another.

"We expect to journey as we always would," Pesart, the second male, replied. "At the dome, we'd request the console operator contact Envoy Harbour to expect our arrival. Then we'd take a shuttle to the planet."

Tracy chuckled at the translation, and three bright orange beaks turned her way.

"The Pyrean's reaction is understandable," Tacticnok said, raising her hands to implore the triumvirate's forbearance. "Obviously, you're not well-informed about the conditions at Triton and Pyre. There are no shuttle services from Triton to the planet, and you won't find the envoy inhabiting the few domes on the tormented planet."

Patrus prepared to speak, but a subtle squawk from Opalus, the triumvirate female, stilled him.

"We indeed do seem to be unprepared to navigate the Pyrean system," Opalus said. "What assistance can you offer us, Monarch?" she asked.

"Master Advisor Jaktook, a trusted companion, will accompany you, if ..." and Tacticnok paused to punctuate her next phrase, "if you're willing to take his guidance."

"Is this necessary?" Patrus queried Opalus.

"Apparently," Opalus replied tartly. She rapidly clicked her beak to indicate her repudiation of her mate. Turning to Tacticnok, she asked,

“What other issues will we encounter which are nonstandard alliance conditions?”

“We expect you’ll find a console operator at Triton, but we can’t be sure,” Jaktook added. “While I can handle most operations, Kractik is far superior to me in that regard.”

“As you can see, these are only a few of the challenges you’ll face in accomplishing your duties,” Tacticnok said. “I’m sending two superb individuals with you to accommodate your needs. Jaktook’s services will be ineffective if you don’t take his advice.”

Opalus glanced at her mates, and they nodded their acceptance of Tacticnok’s conditions.

Sasha had slipped her gates open and let the emotions of the participants flow through her mind. As expected Lindsey, Tracy, Kractik, and Jaktook exhibited apprehension. Tacticnok radiated intensity, determination.

The Veklocks’ sensations were a mix for Sasha. She’d wondered if she’d be able to read the aliens. There was the possibility that the Jatouche were an anomaly, but that wasn’t the case. It surprised her that, while language and appearance could be different, the mind’s creation of feelings had a common vocabulary.

Sasha focused on Patrus. He’d nodded his agreement to Opalus, but he wasn’t calm and accepting. He was perturbed, bordering on angry. When she’d sensed that dichotomy in humans, she knew that indicated they were lying. She wanted to blurt out an accusation, but her experience with the Jatouche, especially hearing the way Rictook spoke to his daughter, had taught her some patience.

Lightly tapping a finger on the table, Sasha attracted Tacticnok’s attention. Then she cut her eyes toward Patrus.

Tacticnok considered what Sasha might be indicating. The basics were obvious. The empath had detected something that bothered her, and she was directing Tacticnok to the source. Tacticnok wondered if the Veklocks were aware of the Pyrean empaths and their capabilities. She decided it was better to explore the issue rather than have the triumvirate discover it later.

"Sasha is concerned about you," Tacticnok said, focusing her attention on Patrus.

"Does she believe I won't be safe?" Patrus asked.

The question confirmed for Tacticnok that the Veklocks were ignorant of the empaths.

"No, Emissary Patrus, I said *about* you not *for* you," Tacticnok replied. "Sasha is a Pyrean empath. She senses emotions, and she's disturbed that what you're feeling doesn't match what you're saying."

"Are we being dissuaded from our task?" Pesart asked. He was confused by the exchange.

Tacticnok sighed and said, "Sasha, I'd like you to calm the room."

A tiny smile quirked the corner of Sasha's lips. She summoned her power, relaxed, and projected a sense of peace. In her mind, she was sipping a green, the empaths' restorative drink, with Lindsey and her sister.

Like the Jatouche, the Veklocks were highly susceptible to Sasha's sending. She quickly attenuated her power, when she saw the triumvirate's orbs roll up in their heads. She kept the room under her control, watching Tacticnok for a cue. When she saw the ruler lift two fingers, she eased off her sending until finally she closed her gates.

Around the room, there were sighs as individuals felt their calm fade away to be replaced by the emotions of the conference and their tasks.

Opalus's beak clattered, indicating to the males that they should remain silent. Her large orbs examined Sasha, and then she turned to Tacticnok. "You sought to make a point," she said. "Explain."

"Pyrean females, who are empaths, can send and receive emotions," Tacticnok explained. "It seems you're as sensitive to them as we are. I know for a fact that she used a small amount of her power."

The triumvirate glanced around the table. When orbs fell on Lindsey, the empath said, "Yes, I am too, but I'm not as strong as Sasha."

Then they turned to Tracy, who quipped, "My only talent is in killing five-meter-long insectoids."

Beaks opened, aghast at the thought of taking sentients' lives.

Tracy quickly amended her statement, adding, "They were trying to kill me first."

“Pyreans,” Jaktook interjected, “they’re different.” He let the comment sink into the Veklocks’ minds. Then he asked, “Were you told that Envoy Harbour is the empaths’ leader? She’s also their most powerful.”

“The purpose of Advisor Jaktook’s question,” Tacticnok said, “was to indicate the challenge you’ll have communicating to the envoy. If you speak, pretending one emotion, but feel something else, as you’ve done here, the envoy will detect your duplicity.”

Pesart was a scientist. He had trouble comprehending something he couldn’t see and measure. In an attempt to put the meeting back on a basis he could understand, he asked, “If the Pyreans are without shuttle service to and from Triton, what form of transport do they use to access their dome?”

“An ancient colony ship and several mining vessels,” Tracy replied. “You’ll find comfort aboard our ships’ shuttles will fall far short of alliance standards.” She flashed the Veklocks a pert smile, as if she’d tried to be helpful and informative. She could hear Kractik’s chittering.

“Your comrades are enjoying themselves at our expense,” Patrus said accusingly to Tacticnok.

“You must forgive their various reactions,” Tacticnok replied. “There’s a wide gulf between your expectations and Pyrean reality.”

“Travel by ship will be slow,” Jaktook said, “but negotiations will be swift. You should be prepared for this. What the Tsargit would deliberate for annuals, the Pyreans will decide in a few cycles.”

“What do you expect to receive from the Pyreans?” Tacticnok asked.

“That discussion is reserved for the envoy,” Patrus said imperially.

“You’re going to be fun,” Sasha stated sarcastically. She was fortunate that her comment was reported by the Veklocks’ translation apps as an error.

However, Lindsey and Tracy understood and agreed with her. Unfortunately, Sasha’s attitude wasn’t missed by the triumvirate.

“Are you a common example of the empaths?” Opalus inquired of Sasha.

“No, she isn’t,” Lindsey replied, before Sasha could speak. “She’s powerful, but she’s also young. The envoy is a mature female.”

One concern did occur to Pesart, and he sought to clarify it. “Are empaths’ capabilities used only for an individual’s well-being?” he asked.

“Any feeling an empath realizes can be transmitted,” Lindsey explained. “Negative emotions have only been used in self-defense.”

“Have we been properly informed to accommodate our communications with the envoy?” Opalus asked, seeking to bring the meeting to a close. Subtle feather ruffling told Opalus that the patience of her mates was at an end.

“You’ve received adequate warning,” Tacticnok replied. “You’ll learn the rest in time either in advance by heeding my advisor or afterwards by stumbling across the problem.”

“When do we leave?” Patrus asked.

“Late in this cycle,” Jaktook replied. “We’ll time our arrival to when the Pyreans begin their cycle.”

The Veklocks rose, towering over the seated individuals. They nodded to Tacticnok and swiftly left the room.

“I would speak to Jaktook,” Tacticnok said, and the others followed the triumvirate out of the room. They were met by a staff member, who guided them back to their accommodations.

“You have a delicate task,” Tacticnok cautioned, when they were alone.

“What are my priorities?” Jaktook asked.

“That’s the difficulty. A balance is required,” Tacticnok explained. “The emissaries must return to the Tsargit with something of value. If they don’t, their race will be diminished in the eyes of the council. The Veklocks are elders in the Tsargit, which means their pride is considerable.”

“Then Harbour has the opportunity to extract something of equal value from the emissaries,” Jaktook reasoned.

“Consider the wealth that the Tsargit represents,” Tacticnok said. “Harbour should think grand, even though that isn’t her way.”

“But Advisor Cinders will understand,” Jaktook added and chittered his humor.

“I expect you’ll find the captain close to the envoy,” Tacticnok offered. “Be smart, be careful, and let the triumvirate make their mistakes,” she

added. Then she patted Jaktook's cheek and left the room more swiftly than the Veklocks had.

Jaktook touched the fur where Tacticnok's hand had been. The brief contact warmed his heart. He realized that he had serious concerns, which had fled his mind when Tacticnok touched him. It occurred to him that her touch might have had more than one purpose, which pained him.

"Well, Master Advisor," Jaktook muttered within the empty room, "worlds are vying for opportunities. Best you keep your eye on the greater challenges."

My Books

Veklocks, the fourth novel in the Pyrean series, is available in e-book, softcover, and audiobook versions. Please visit my website, <http://scottjucha.com>, for publication locations and dates. You may register at my website to receive email notifications of my soon-to-be-released novels.

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Vinium

Nua'll

Artifice

Sojourn

Alliance (forthcoming)

The Author



From my early years to the present, books have been a refuge. They've fueled my imagination. I've traveled to faraway places and met aliens with Asimov, Heinlein, Clarke, Herbert, and Le Guin. I've explored historical events with Michener and Clavell, and I played spy with Ludlum and Fleming.

There's no doubt that the early sci-fi masters influenced the writing of my first two series, [The Silver Ships and Pyreans](#). I crafted my stories to give readers intimate views of my characters, who wrestle with the challenges of living in space and inhabiting alien worlds.

Life is rarely easy for these characters, who encounter aliens and calamities, but they persist and flourish. I revel in examining humankind's will to survive. Not everyone plays fair or exhibits concern for other beings, but that's another aspect of humans and aliens that I investigate.

My stories offer hope for humans today about what they might accomplish tomorrow far from our home world. Throughout my books, humans exhibit a will to persevere, without detriment to the vast majority of others.

Readers have been generous with their comments, which they've left on Amazon and Goodreads for others to review. I truly enjoy what I do, and I'm pleased to read how my stories have positively affected many readers' lives.

If you've read my books, please consider posting a review on Amazon and Goodreads for every book, even a short one. Reviews attract other readers and are a great help to indie authors, such as me.

The Silver Ships novels have reached Amazon's coveted #1 and #2 Best-Selling Sci-Fi book, multiple times, in the science fiction categories of first contact, space exploration, alien invasion, and space opera.