

ONE OF THREE

Cercians Book 3

S. H. JUCHA

Chapter 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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Glossary

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1: Change of Plans

MERON, METTER MILITARY BASE WIDSUE SYSTEM

After Mila and the first wave returned to Meron, the conversation with the division commanders focused on the means by which the investigation of the Ajasta vectors could be undertaken.

At the heart of the matter was how the Metters could support the encounters against the missile walls.

Escher had volunteered the idea that destroying some of the missiles should bring the Ajasta battleships to investigate, if they truly were the race beyond the missiles.

The division commanders, Bedrim and Pretall, and the base commander, Halus, were concerned that the presence of Metter ships would anger the Ajastas and result in retribution.

<We need the Metter probes to keep our distance from the missiles,> Shoya shared with the team.

Dimitri translated for the division commanders.

<And as we don't know the extent of the missiles' capabilities to communicate along the wall, we're going to need a lot of probes,> Shoya finished.

<That means we need dreadnaughts to carry them,> Gat'r added. <Our Tridents certainly can't do that.>

"You'll be exposing us," Bedrim reiterated. He'd been saying that same line for nearly half an hour.

<What's the compromise?> Ceda inquired, recognizing the impasse wasn't going to be resolved unless the sides found a third way.

<Why not hide the dreadnaughts?> Sven inquired. <They could launch the probes and retreat into the dark.>

<We've no idea about the wall's telemetry collection,> Dimitri replied. <Images could be recorded of the first wave and the dreadnaughts, which would result in what the Metters fear.>

<Sven has an idea,> Escher mused. <It would require us to do some work before we could sail to trace our route along an Ajasta vector.>

Mila linked privately to Escher. <Let's hear it, Escher. At this rate, we'll never get anywhere.>

<The dreadnaughts load probes and travel with us,> Escher shared. <They remain far away from the wall so as to be difficult to resolve on the missile's telemetry recordings, if they have that ability. The probes that are launched will be our version with the controllers and the more sophisticated programming.>

<That's a significant delay,> Mila pointed out.

<Priority could be given to manufacture as many new probes as we might need,> Marianne opined. <Constructing more conclave probes can proceed after we've sailed.>

Mila regarded the division commanders, who appeared hopeful. <How many probes can a dreadnaught carry?> she queried.

"We've two sizes of ships," Bedrim replied. "Although they share the same hull, the newest version can accommodate more probes. Would you need more than one ship?"

The defenders and Sadie chuckled.

"Pardon the question," Bedrim quickly said. "Identify the number of probes you wish us to carry, and we'll work to provide that number of the new versions as swiftly as possible."

Elements of the newest conclave wave, under Cremsylon, Miranda, and Z, had begun the process of uplifting Metter manufacturing, while the first wave was investigating the three Ajasta vectors.

Mining facilities started on the outer system, and smelting was underway. The priority was to produce a quantity of small controllers that would reside in the new probes.

Production of the original Metter probes had halted, and Z managed the overhauling of the lines to assemble version two.

Mila found the delay to be irritating, and she sought an outlet for her energy. On a conference link with Z, Miranda, and Cremsylon, she sent, <As the trade samples are ready, I would like to take on the responsibility of introducing the Metters to the Casterns with an eye to equitable trading.>

<How do you intend to accomplish this process, Admiral?> Miranda inquired.

<Simple,> Mila replied. <I'm going to delegate.> Her remark had the SADEs blaring noises.

<We applaud your approach, Mila,> Cremsylon sent. <Share more details with us.>

<I take one Trident and one Metter carrier to Castern,> Mila explained. <I'll need the defenders, who know the Casterns well, and Sadie will help with the ship transfers. Captain Thurston and her crew will support the exchange with the Casterns, as will Legate Iopast and Advisor Meomast.>

<There are many samples that will be awkward to convey across the planet to take orders, Admiral,> Z pointed out. <I'm concerned for the Metters, who don't appear to have much long-term stamina.>

<Which is why we'll be going with Sadie's idea, as she has voiced the same concerns,> Mila shared with a chuckle that sounded like she was pleased with herself and the team. <It'll be a fair in the middle of government plaza. A lengthy message to Shelley will have the captain making preparations. She'll communicate the concept of fair trade, advertise the date of the fair, and provide the plaza's structures. We'll arrive and set up for some trading.>

There were a few moments of quiet, during which Mila thought that her great idea had fizzled. Then she received a link. When she opened it, Z sent, <Have Dimitri, Marianne, and Amalima share these concepts with Halus. Your fair stalls need to be able to demonstrate the unique aspects of the goods you're presenting.>

<An added thought, Mila,> Cremsylon sent. <Take two carriers, which we presume will be commanded by Leptem and Daffert. Their officers and

crew chiefs must be exposed to Casterns under these new circumstances, and they need to adopt the concept of free trade.>

<Delegating is serving you well, Admiral, continue along that path,> Miranda sent, and the conference links dropped.

Mila eyed the team, who surrounded the conference table. They'd heard every thought, and Sadie, the defenders, and she were grinning at one another. This was a group who didn't enjoy inactivity. Now they had a project, while the probes' manufacturing processes continued.

Planetside, Halus, Leptem, and Daffert listened to Dimitri explain what the admiral intended to do.

"You've the kind of individuals who are capable of selling our products?" Leptem asked. He didn't see himself proposing to Castern that they buy Metter products.

<We won't be asking Casterns to buy your trade goods on first sight,> Gat'r responded. <We demonstrate the products. You let the Casterns imagine using them and take samples. They know their needs, and they'll seek ways to acquire superior material and equipment.>

"Then engineers would be helpful," Halus enthused.

<In limited capacities,> Escher returned. <The engineers provide details about operations and specifications, but they're not responsible for closing the sales.>

Once again, Halus, Leptem, and Daffert adopted retiring postures.

<Don't expect the first fair to proceed smoothly,> Ceda shared soothingly. <Leptem and Daffert, your roles will be to organize the engineers and crews to be available to the Castern business individuals. After the samples are tested, expect the Casterns to return with more questions or orders. At the time, defenders will be available to help Metters close the sales.>

<We will?> Shoya asked dubiously.

<It's the Metters, or it's us,> Mila pointed out to the team.

<I know it's not me,> Shoya replied. <More likely, it's Escher, Gat'r, and Ceda. Maybe even Sadie might be good at it.>

At that instant, Sadie regarded Shoya with wide eyes.

As for the carrier commanders, they were relieved. It had worried them that they would be exclusively responsible for the first ever sales opportunity with a local race, and they envisioned returning empty handed much to their disgrace.

After the meeting, the defenders retired to a cabin to investigate Z's designs for the Metter samples.

<Our colleagues are less than impressed with Z's offerings,> Amalima privately shared with Marianne and Dimitri.

<Our fairs had things that amazed us and were fun for the family,> Sadie offered. <This event looks like it's only for business. How does that help intrigue an entire Castern family?>

As the suits had never experienced a fair, they regarded Sadie with interest.

<So, what would constitute family fun?> Ceda inquired.

Sadie looked at her friends' expectant faces and felt a pang in her heart. She was reminded of their existences in mining domes, with their limited space. Furthermore, two were mickies, one was a clone, and the other existed for the digital programs he could write.

Taking a breath that she slowly let out, Sadie smiled gently and described the things she enjoyed with her parents. When she finished, she waited, while the four digested what she'd shared. Soon, she was grinning. The suits were involved in a vid war, creating outlandish rides and fun stall games.

<Time to be serious,> Ceda sent, interrupting the fun. <We've got to take Z's ideas and turn them into exciting demonstrations.>

<We could have Castern engineers bring problematic constructions or products for analysis by the acoustic equipment,> Gat'r volunteered. <The Metter examinations would be free.>

Marianne added, <We could capture the test imagery for the Casterns and place them on the company's servers.>

<Those would interest the company owners,> Ceda enthused.

<Remember the way heavy material was moved for the Darmian cities,> Escher prompted.

<Lift straps around traveler hulls,> Amalima swiftly supplied.

<What about this?> Escher inquired.

The defenders received an image of a traveler lifting a platform. Escher had labeled the single line connecting the traveler to the platform as a Metter threaded cable. Also, the platform had protective railing about waist high on all sides.

Shoya was about to ask its purpose, when she suddenly burst out laughing. <I want to ride that!> she sent.

Dimitri populated the platform with numerous Casterns, both adults and young.

Sadie shifted to sit behind Escher, hug him, and whisper, “For someone who didn’t have much opportunity to play, you catch on fast.”

Escher had time to pat Sadie’s forearm twice before she’d returned to Ceda’s side.

<This might prove popular,> Gat’r mused. <If so, we should be prepared to provide several platforms, which would require more threaded cables and straps.>

<Dimitri, how thin can the Metters make the lift cable to demonstrate its strength?> Shoya queried.

<I’ve sent your question to Oliver, as he’s with Metter engineers,> Dimitri replied. <I’ve had to estimate the weight of adult Casterns, and we’ll have to allow for a significant error to ensure safety.>

<So, what do our pilots do after they’ve hoisted the Casterns off the ground?> Ceda asked, which had the suits eyeing Sadie.

<They fly them, what else?> Sadie replied, as if it was the natural thing to do.

<I think that might be too much to start,> Ceda cautioned, <but I take your meaning. We could lift them until they had a view of the city. Give them some time to enjoy it. Then lower the platform to the ground.>

Sadie shrugged her shoulders. In her mind, sailing the platform would be much more entertaining. However, she acknowledged that first contacts weren’t her expertise.

Some time was spent designing stall displays that would intrigue business and family Casterns.

Mila received the final results of the defenders' concepts, and she stared bewilderedly at Salus. <If I'm not sure I grasp the purpose of most of these ideas, how are we supposed to teach them to the Metters?> she inquired.

<Dimitri's point is that we let Sadie and the suits encourage the Casterns,> Salus relayed. <They trust Sadie and the suits and will participate. It's anticipated that the Metters will see the reactions of the Casterns to the various opportunities. Families will be entertained, and business individuals will discover new tech that they'll wish to acquire.>

<This might take more than one fair,> Mila mused.

<Marianne and Amalima wish to correct that thought, Admiral,> Salus shared. <They believe that it will be important to run the fair for at least ten cycles. Word should have time to travel about the nature of the event, and they anticipate that it'll continue to draw Casterns.>

<Better warn the Metters about the possibility of an extended stay on Castern,> Mila sent, chuckling about an event running away from her. Then again, it seemed to be running in the right direction.

Dimitri and Salus incorporated the defenders' ideas into formal drawings. They were sent to Harmony on Castern and Oliver, who was planetside.

<Admiral,> Escher sent. <Will we be carrying a number of SADEs? If not, should we outfit many of our crew with relays for the SADEs to help us?>

<Good question,> Mila replied.

Salus informed Mila that the SADEs were occupied with the Metter work.

Therefore Mila requested the production of forty relays and informed Escher of the choice.

<Forty?> Sadie privately queried her big brother.

<The admiral is probably anticipating that Captain Thurston's crews will be of great help with the fair. They must have made tremendous inroads with the Castern population,> Escher replied.

<Oh, good thinking by the admiral,> Sadie remarked.

<I'm sure she'll appreciate that thought,> Escher added wryly. He had to laugh at Sadie's swift shifting. A hand had appeared, without her body fully coalescing. His thigh received a swat, and she was gone.

Afterward, Escher shared his implant recording with the other team members. They realized they were witnessing the growth of Sadie's power and her mastery of it too.

As the material for the demonstration projects accrued, other ideas were offered about how to transport them. Loading them on the Metter carriers would be a challenge. Arriving at Castern, the process would have to be reversed. In addition, the need for more travelers was growing.

<Seeking some help, Admiral?> Peña sent, wrapping her question in warm tones.

<Obviously, you've witnessed the extent of our projects,> Mila remarked.

<Which we heartily approve,> Peña shared, which was a cue that Sven and the sisters were listening. <I'm offering the services of the *Storyteller* to carry your material and supply the additional travelers that you might require.>

<The offer is much appreciated, Peña, and I gratefully accept,> Mila replied. <The concepts of a sales and entertainment fair are far outside my expertise.>

<That would apply equally well to Sven, the defenders, the second-gen sisters, and me,> Peña returned. <Dome worlds don't offer the space to enjoy fairs, and militarist first-gen sisters didn't participate in such things.>

<Well, we'll have time to adjust our routines. The defenders believe that we must allow word to travel and bring other Casterns from across the planet to the fair,> Mila pointed out.

<I was apprised about that by Sven, who is often linked with Escher, and I believe they might be right,> Peña returned. <I will coordinate with Salus to arrange shipping.>

When Peña dropped the link, Mila felt a weight drop off her shoulders. The original concept of a quick show-and-tell had seemed simple. From that point onward, the plan had expanded enormously. Yes, it was much improved, but had progressed far outside her skill set. Now she intended to

orchestrate general ship services and stand back to watch others execute the needs of the fair.

When Salus knew that the final preparations were complete, and it was only a matter of loading, he sent the flotilla's arrival date at Castern to Harmony.

Sven and the sisters orchestrated the transfer of Metter products to the *Storyteller*.

Sadie facilitated the frequent transport of the Metter carrier commanders, control station officers, and crew chiefs from Meron to the liner to observe the dispersal of the trade goods.

Daffert and Leptem accepted that Sadie's actions were a bit of a ruse on the part of the defenders. The true intention was to allow the officers and the chiefs to become accustomed to Sadie shifting them in and out of travelers and dealing with the limitations of the *Storyteller*.

The first images of a Metter crew chief encountering a sister in a corridor was humorously shared fleetwide and with Metters. It was necessary for the chief to bow his legs to lower his body and accommodate the corridor's height. The oncoming sister had merely ducked under the chief's body and kept going.

Later, new images documented an encounter between sisters and a Metter officer. One after another, the sisters took quick steps and slid under the officer on their lower limbs. The officer could be heard hissing at the sisters' antics.

Soon, the Metters enjoyed lowering their bodies farther and farther to see if the sisters could clear them.

There came a point when a sister jumped and bounded off a bulkhead to clear a crew chief.

The Metters celebrated, believing that they achieved a minor victory.

The loading was completed, and the Metters returned to their carriers. Although, many individuals requested transport from the liner or the planet via a traveler and Sadie.

Soon afterward, Mila's Trident, two Metter carriers, and the *Storyteller* accelerated to depart the system on course for Castern.

Halus, the base commander, stood beside Triumvirate Mesfar. The two had kept close company during the efforts to prepare trade goods.

“How do you feel about the chances of their success?” Mesfar inquired.

“These trade goods are so much better than what we’d been offering,” Halus replied. “I don’t see the Casterns turning them into scrap parts.”

The pair hissed at Halus’s quip.

“I’m confident about our work here,” Mesfar continued. “I was thinking of the fair.”

“If it was Daffert and Leptem’s responsibility to succeed in the presentation of our products, I would be concerned for their success,” Halus offered. “However, I don’t think the conclave will let them fail. Too much depends on them encouraging better race relations.”

“On that, we agree,” Mesfar returned. He noted that it was time to acquire a vehicle and return to government offices for a meeting in chambers.

Halus watched Mesfar cross a transit lane via an arched pathway. He knew what Mesfar was feeling. Transport aboard a traveler was definitely more convenient. Enough government staff and citizens had experienced the marvelous conclave shuttles that there was no longer an indignity to folding legs in public to be moved by Sadie.

Some cycle, I’ll travel aboard a Metter-constructed conclave ship, and I’ll be standing fully upright, he thought hopefully.

2: The Trade Fair

In concert with Captain Shelley Thurston and many of her crew, Legate Iopast and Advisor Meomast had worked hard to inform the Eastern public of the opportunities that the fair would represent.

As expected, a few legates and many citizens regarded the news with jaundiced eyes. Never before had a mercenary race provided a fair trade, and their expectations were that it wouldn't happen now.

There was only one reason that others chose not to dismiss the trade fair outright. This is where Iopast and Meomast made good inroads with business individuals.

"The conclave hosts the fair," Iopast would say. "Do you doubt their technical prowess?"

Invariably, the answer was no.

"Then why would you think they'd bring a race here with inferior products?" Iopast would return. "As I see it, the first to examine their products and place an order will have a jump on competition."

Iopast and Meomast would make no further arguments. They knew business companies were fiercely competitive. It wouldn't be long before worry would set in about losing a prime opportunity.

Shelley's SADEs paired with crew members. They focused on the families they'd gotten to know and encouraged them to attend the fair for entertainment. As well, they didn't belabor the point either. They simply planted the seed of a family outing and left it at that.

A cycle before Mila and her flotilla arrived, a construction company put up barriers to close off the great government plaza to vehicle traffic. That evening, pedestrian traffic was also restricted.

As starlight lit the capital, the legates, who'd assembled early in their conference chambers, gazed out the tall view plates. They'd expected to

enjoy a leisurely morning meal before the conclave started their construction.

Iopast and Meomast had snorted in amusement at this idea.

With first light falling on the paved stones, multiple travelers landed on the plaza, and many more floated overhead. Everywhere were conclave members.

“SADE,” Iopast would often comment when he saw an individual carrying a great weight.

At one point, Meomast snorted, pointed, and remarked, “Sadie.” He’d seen her appear with a tool for a SADE and disappear.

“Where?” a legate inquired.

“You missed her,” Iopast replied. “Interesting how not all of her body enters our reality.”

“Meaning what?” the legate pressed. He wasn’t a supporter of the conclave alliance.

“Sadie’s hand and the tool materialized, but the rest of her body was fuzzy,” Meomast explained.

“Fuzzy?” another legate queried.

“It was as if most of her body didn’t complete the transition before she reversed it,” Meomast offered.

“It’s unnatural,” the initial legate to query grumbled.

The alliance supporters snorted humorously.

“For that matter, everything about the conclave is unnatural, and we should be thankful for that. Otherwise, we’d be dealing with mercenaries for the rest of our existence,” Iopast stated definitively.

“Or until they decided to simply take our world,” a supporter added.

From two cargo travelers, which were piloted and crewed by *Storyteller* sisters, Daffert and Leptem sat on the lowered ramps with folded legs to watch the processes below.

“Had you envisioned this grand an operation?” Daffert inquired.

Charise sent the Metter’s question to Evelyn on the other traveler, which she relayed to Leptem.

“I knew that the number of products to be demonstrated would require a significant space to display them,” Leptem replied. “I hadn’t imagined the structures that were required to conduct a conclave fair.”

<The conclave had little to no experience with this kind of event,> Merlie interjected from the liner high above Castern. <According to Sven, most of what you see has been described by Sadie to the defenders.>

Leptem and Daffert hissed their amusement.

“The conclave members take input from one young female, and they diligently transform her words into this massive operation,” Leptem remarked.

“It speaks to the way in which the conclave values every member of their organization,” Daffert responded. “It’s something that I hope Metters embrace some cycle.”

After the stalls and other structures took shape, the unloading of the Metter trade samples began.

The premier attraction was the impromptu lift, which SADEs assembled in the center of the plaza.

As Sadie had instructed the defenders, “You want everyone to pass by the stalls before they get to the good family stuff.”

The legates and Meomast crowded close to the view plates to watch a traveler hover over the unusual structure.

Sadie appeared, took one end of a heavy strap from a SADE, and shifted to reappear atop the traveler. Gripping the strap tightly, she shifted again to pull the strap to the SADE waiting on the other side.

Not achieving that goal, conclave members heard Sadie’s laughter. She hung by the end of the strap about halfway to the plaza. “Apparently, too much drag from the strap’s weight,” she commented to no one in particular. Releasing the strap, she transitioned to the middle of the SADEs.

Salus jumped to grab the loose end of the strap, but his weight wasn’t enough to overcome the strap’s drag against the hull.

Ellyz leapt and hung on Salus. Slowly, the pair was able to overcome the resistance and pull the strap to the plaza stones.

Knowing the challenge, Sadie, Salus, and Ellyz made short work of the second strap.

The traveler rose slowly until it hovered eight meters above the platform. Four more straps were anchored to the platform's corners, and the other ends were joined.

Finally, a length of thin Metter threaded cable connected the traveler's straps to the four tethered to the platform.

Afterward, the sister lifted the traveler until the lines were taut, but the platform rested firmly on the plaza stones.

"What is that contraption?" an antagonistic legate demanded. He was annoyed by the snorts he heard.

"If you would care to engage with Captain Thurston and her crew, you would have learned about this," Iopast pointedly returned.

"Why should I waste my time with them?" the rancorous legate responded. "This group provides me with all the information that is pertinent to our decisions."

"That might have been true until recently, but, as you become less informed, you'll be ineffective in your decision-making," an Iopast supporter pointed out.

The obstreperous legate's retort stuck in his throat. He'd been informed that there was the possibility of a recall. With nine members, only five were needed to force him to step down. Iopast already had that much support. The tension drained from his face, and caution replaced the anger in his eyes.

Below, Castern citizens of many ages crowded along the barriers to watch the conclave work.

At one point, Daffert saw several young Casterns stare at him. First, one of the young waved. Soon, others joined the little female.

"What is customary?" Daffert asked Charise.

"Lift a leg and wave in the same cadence as the young," Charise replied.

When Daffert did as instructed, the young enthusiastically waved at him, and he responded equally.

Afterward, many of the citizens were alerted to direct their attention toward the two Metters.

Captain Thurston and her crew had prepared for just this moment.

The Casterns had seen images of the Metters, but only a few had dealt directly with them.

SADEs who were paired with biological crew members had constantly displayed images of the Metters. Moreover, they shared imagery from Meron of the Metters' reactions to Mila's award and the uplifting of Sadie.

Just before the fair was to open, Shelley made her entrance. She led a number of her crew members through the growing throng. They were dressed in the Castern style, which the citizens loved to see. Everyone who followed her was biological.

Shelley's intent was to fill the lift platform. SADEs would have provided too much weight. Certainly, an individual Castern was heavier than any biological crew member, but there would be fewer of them on any particular lift.

Sven, wearing Castern clothing, opened the gate for Shelley and her crew to board the platform. He did it with a bow and a sweep of his arm.

The crowd snorted in delight.

After the platform was loaded, the traveler slowly rose into the air, which surprised the onlookers. They knew the number aboard the structure meant a great deal of weight. More important, the cable connecting the platform to the traveler looked severely undersized.

More than one enterprising business individual was tapping his partner and pointing to the fragile cable.

The traveler pilot continued to lift until the platform was high in the air, and Shelley and her crew members took to waving their voluminous attire.

In response, the citizens staring up at them gripped their garments and returned the salute.

Meanwhile, Mila signaled Sadie that it was time to start transferring Metters to the surface.

Daffert, Leptem, and three officers from each carrier would be transported planetside.

To ensure that Sadie wasn't taxed, Mila restricted her to loading the travelers, riding with them to the plaza, and transporting them off the ships.

The throng, which now was nearly four citizens deep around the entire perimeter, watched the Metters appear at the fair's center via Sadie's capabilities. For most citizens, this was their first live view of the Metters, and more than one individual was taken aback by their appearance.

Sadie had saved Daffert and Leptem for last.

Escher sent, <Sadie, we spot some nervous Casterns among the crowd.>

<Understood, big brother,> Sadie returned.

Sadie placed Leptem next to Daffert. These were the two largest Metters of the contingent who would participate in the fair. After landing them, she paused to wipe her brow, as if the effort of moving the Metters had worked up a sweat. At the same time, she leaned against Leptem's foreleg to seek support.

Murmurs worked through the crowd at Sadie's display.

Leptem caught on to what Sadie was doing, and he nervously tapped a foreleg.

In turn, Sadie placed both hands on the foreleg and moved them gently up and down to quell the movement.

Quietly, more of Shelley's crew members were distributed along the barriers' periphery. They explained to nearby citizens that the carrier commander was a little nervous about Casterns, and Sadie was calming him.

That an unbelievably tall, dark entity should be nervous at the sight of Casterns had many citizens thinking they'd misjudged the Metters.

A further demonstration convinced the Casterns about the Metters' nature.

As the lift platform touched down, Leptem hissed to his companions.

Shelley and her crew quickly exited to make way for Daffert, Leptem, and a few officers.

Unfortunately, only six Metters could fit on the platform. However, their gently dancing legs indicated their excitement.

The SADEs along the throng educated the Casterns about what Metter leg movements indicated. The citizens found it fascinating that emotions could be interpreted by the limbs.

By the time the Metters had their ride, they were calling to other officers and engineers that they must board the platform for the view of the city. In reply, five of the smaller Metters climbed aboard the platform.

Escher, who spotted Iopast, Meomast, and three other legates working through the crowd, signaled the traveler pilot to hold. Afterward, he sent, <Sadie, you've another opportunity. Ride with the Metters and urge Iopast and friends to ride.>

Sadie shifted to appear under a Metter. She gripped a leg to indicate her presence, and the engineer tipped his head down to eye her. He hissed at her ability to easily fit under him.

Iopast and his companions had cleared the throng but halted when they spotted a full platform.

<There's room,> Sadie sent, which Dimitri translated.

Sadie waved the legates and Meomast forward.

It was Meomast who snorted humorously and responded to Sadie.

That snapped resistance, and Iopast and the other legates followed Meomast.

As the five Casterns climbed aboard the platform, they wound through tall legs to reach a position against the railing.

<You're cleared for lift,> Escher sent to the sister, who gently took the ship into the air.

The crowd heard a mix of snorts and hisses. It was an extraordinary demonstration of cooperation between races.

After the Castern dignitaries and the Metter visitors had their ride, the fair was opened to citizens, whose anticipations had changed dramatically in the past half hour.

Business individuals surged forward to locate samples of the thin cable that they'd witnessed lift so much weight. They found several stalls with small kiosks between them.

The SADEs were prepared to translate, but it proved unnecessary.

The Casterns and the Metters utilized their common language. It was that of the Ondas.

The company owners were so anxious to get their questions answered that they dismissed all reservations about using the language of the vile race.

The kiosks possessed small holo-vids, which ran vids in loops, and demonstrated the many uses of the Metters' threaded cables.

Fascinated by the product, the company heads were flabbergasted when they were offered samples of the cables. Prepared to accept substantial weight, the Casterns were surprised that the two-meter lengths were actually quite light.

The defenders held strategic positions around the fair, and they constantly reminded the Metters via the SADEs to encourage the sales.

Gat'r had just watched an excited Castern accept his sample of threaded cable.

The Metter engineer caught Gat'r watching, and he dutifully recited, "If you would like to place an order, please return to the fair with the number of cables you wish and their exact lengths."

"How will they be purchased?" the company president inquired.

"We'll talk and discover an equitable trade," the engineer replied.

"Equitable?" the president queried dubiously.

"It's the new means by which we operate," the engineer responded proudly. "After all, Metters are now allies of the conclave."

The Castern's mouth fell open. After he closed it, he regarded the nearest SADE, who nodded affirmatively. "Allies," he repeated, as if tasting the word. Then he let loose a long snort and added, "I'll be back," and walked off with his sample.

He could be heard to say, "Allies with the conclave. Who would have thought it?"

Word quickly passed through Castern communities.

Families had relished the entertainment provided by the conclave, and business leaders had shared the amazing products offered by the Metter engineers.

From Castern business leaders, the pushback was often, “Good to hear, but at what price?”

Invariably, the response was always that the Metters were now allies of the conclave and equitable trades were offered.

The fair continued to be a lively event, as Casterns made the trip from far away.

The Metters were pleased by the constant stream of Castern business leaders at their stalls and kiosks.

Eventually, the samples ran out, which intimidated the Metters. Suddenly, their practiced scripts failed.

Dimitri and other SADEs came to the Metters’ rescue.

Metter engineers listened intently to Dimitri explain to a potential customer. He said, “We’ve run out of samples. However, would you show me where your company is located on the planet?”

The customer was thrilled to play with Dimitri’s holo-vid projection.

When the site was pinpointed, Dimitri listed the business leaders who had taken samples. “Do you know these individuals?” he asked.

“All of them,” the customer replied.

“They’ve probably run a host of tests on their samples. You should ask to examine their data,” Dimitri said. “Let them know the conclave would be pleased to hear of their generosity.”

The customer snorted at the tactic. He regarded the tall Metter engineer and said, “We’ve learned how to shake hands with the conclave visitors. What do we do to thank you?”

The engineer extended a foreleg, and the Castern wrapped a big hand around the leg near the point.

Shaking the leg, the customer snorted, and the engineer hissed.

Soon, Castern company engineers and accountants were returning to the fair with their orders.

This was the point at which Shelley’s and Mila’s SADEs were critical. The orders by the engineers were numerous, greatly pleasing the Metters.

However, after placing the orders, Castern accountants requested to know the expected trade.

The SADEs had knowledge about the economies of both races. That allowed them to understand the values of the products offered and the goods requested. Essentially, the SADES became trade brokers.

Neither the Metters nor the Casterns were overjoyed by the trades the SADEs conducted. Then again, this was the nature of equitable trades. Each side got what they wanted, but not at the expense of one race or the other.

It was twenty cycles before a distinct falloff in traffic at the fair was noticed.

Mila announced that they would finish the cycle, and her flotilla would depart.

The Metters were enthusiastic about the announcement. Their elation came primarily from their exhaustion and their desire to spend time in their net-slings.

That evening, Sadie shifted the Metters aboard travelers, which delivered them to the carriers.

Having adopted the Metter interpretation of a handshake, each commander, officer, and engineer who was returned aboard ship extended a foreleg to Sadie. She dutifully shook the leg before shifting away.

The fair's loadout of structures was much easier and simpler. All the stands and kiosks were left in the hands of Shelley and her crews. Only the demonstration products were recovered and returned to the *Storyteller*.

The legates were apprised of the departure of Mila's few ships.

In an assembly hall, Legate Iopast turned from the view plate to address a large body of company owners.

Despite the reticence of a few legates to attend the meeting, the majority insisted they be present.

"Is there anyone present who didn't attend the fair or send a representative of the company?" Iopast asked.

A handful of individuals raised their hands, which gathered astounded looks from those around them.

"Would any of you like to volunteer the reason that no one from your company visited the fair?" Iopast inquired.

A well-dressed owner offered, "We're the industry leader for our products. There was no reason to invest in alien equipment."

"You won't be for long," a company president remarked loudly.

"Doubtful," the well-dressed owner retorted.

Standing, the president challenged, "What's your failure rate on metal alloy pours?"

The owner stood and replied, "You know that we lead the industry there too."

"As your competitors, we're well aware of your efficiencies, but we're about to surpass you," the president replied confidently.

"You should have attended the fair," another company owner added.

The well-dressed owner was bothered by the implication that his competitors had discovered a secret, and he demanded to know what they'd found. However, seats were reclaimed, and his competitors faced forward and were silent.

Iopast continued to query the attendees about their impressions of the fair. The respondents fell into two groups. A small number hadn't paid any attention to the event. The great majority had visited the stalls and kiosks, collected samples, ran tests, and placed orders.

To Iopast's delight, the fair had proved to be a success for Casterns.

Seeking to make a negative point, a legate, who was a conclave detractor, asked, "Of those who took part in the fair, how many have concerns about the Metters promptly returning with your orders and sticking to the deals you made?"

To the legate's shock, most of the attendees stood and turned their back on him. It was the height of Castern rudeness to respond to a questioner that way, much less a legate.

Iopast asked the owners and company officers to resume their seats. When they did, he queried, "Who would like to explain to the legate why his question was inappropriate?"

Row after row of hands were thrust in the air, and Iopast chose a Castern, whose wrinkles expressed his advanced age.

"Simple answer," the Castern owner responded. "The conclave and SADEs."

Before the antagonistic legate could request more details, the room broke into thunderous snorts, which sounded like trumpeting. It was the Eastern equivalent of definitive affirmation.

My Books

One of Three is the third novel in [Cercians](#), a series in the Earthers Saga that relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's colony ships.

The novel is available in e-book, softcover, and audiobook versions. Please visit my website, <https://scottjucha.com>, for publication dates and purchase locations. You may register at my website to receive email updates on the progress of my upcoming novels.

The Silver Ships Series

The Silver Ships

Libre

Méridien

Haraken

Sol

Espero

Allora

Celus-5

Omnia

Vinium

Nua'll

Artifice

Sojourn

Alliance

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Earthers

Talus

Elvians

Q-Gates

Conclave

Pyreans Series

Empaths

Messinants

Jatouche

Veklocks

Gate Ghosts Series

Axis Crossing

Clone Crisis

Race Rivalry

Vortex Incursion

Dual Domains

Alien Intrigue

Deadly Gambits

Allied Enemies

Chaotic Futures

Empire Turmoil

Perilous Choices

Dubious Risks

Fatal Flaws

Imperium's Demise

Cercians Series

Clash of Wills

Enemy at Bay

One of Three

Beyond the Gate (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 writers influenced my series, [The Silver Ships](#), [Pyreans](#), [Gate Ghosts](#), and [Cercians](#), which comprise the Earthers Saga. 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.

These novels have reached Amazon's coveted #1 and #2 Best-Selling Sci-Fi book, multiple times, in the science fiction categories of first contact, alien invasion, and spaceflight.