

CONCLAVE
A Silver Ships Novel

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

Glossary

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1: Potential Heir

Lenson, the Triton console operator, was in a melancholy mood. The exciting movement of unique journeyers through Pyre's dome had been replaced by the usual traffic. Gone were the sudden appearances of alien world leaders, triumphant dome investigators, and Usaanan prisoners. Soon, Alex Racine's fleet would sail for Sol, and even the Omnian use of the dome would stop.

New hope for better days had been offered Lenson. For the first time, he stood duty at the Triton console with two other operators.

Pyre's dome now numbered three gates. In addition to the original connection to Na-Tikkook, the Jatouche home world, the new gates connected to Norsitchia and Sylia.

Lenson's platform lit with its customary blue light of high-energy photons that merged with the dome's hemisphere, and he shelved his musings to pay attention to the next arrivals from Rissness, Na-Tikkook's moon. His pulse quickened with the appearance of three prestigious figures, who stood in front of four Jatouche with baggage.

<Greetings, Console Operator Lenson,> Jastitock, the mate of the female ruler, Tockitak, sent via his implant.

Lenson, an Earther, was overwhelmed by Jastitock choosing to make personal contact. He wasn't aware that the dignitary knew his name. He'd never communicated by implant with the royal couple, which would have allowed them to obtain his bio ID.

<How may I assist you, Jastitock?> Lenson sent, while the individuals stepped off the platform. His focus was on the third dignitary, a maturing Jatouche female, who wore royal garb and walked between the monarch and her mate.

<Our apologies for our unannounced arrival, Operator Lenson,> Jastitock sent. <We've just learned that Alex Racine is readying his fleet to

depart for visits to Sol and the human colonies to organize a conclave. Her Excellency Tockitak requests an opportunity to speak with Alex Racine, his mate, Renée de Guirnon, and the SADE, Julien.>

<I'll inform them that you're here, Jastitock,> Lenson replied, while he called dome security to escort the Jatouche to the city-ship, *Our People*.

<Last-minute visitors,> Julien warned Alex and Renée.

It was the evening before the fleet was scheduled to sail the following morning, and the co-leaders had a flurry of meetings to accomplish in the short time remaining.

Rather than bother with an explanation, Julien sent an image of the Jatouche.

<Who's the young female? She appears to be a royal,> Renée sent to Julien.

<With regret, Ser, I must admit to ignorance,> Julien replied. <This individual has never visited the Pyrean system, and the outpost has no data on her.>

<I'll tell you what concerns me,> Alex sent. <It's the four baggage carriers.>

<It's not possible that the monarch would want to travel with us?> Renée inquired.

<I don't think that's her purpose,> Alex replied. <I believe this visit is about the young royal.>

When the Jatouche made the city-ship, a dome security lieutenant, with his two escorts, led the monarch and her entourage to the owner's suite.

In the corridor, the group approached a collection of four individuals in military uniform, who were chatting amiably.

<I fear we're interrupting Alex's schedule,> Jastitock sent to Tockitak.

<Either that, or admirals have become accustomed to loitering outside Alex and Renée's suite,> Tockitak retorted. She'd tried to make light of the situation, but she was nervous about the coming discussion.

The Earther lieutenant saluted Admiral Tatia Tachenko, as he passed between Admiral Ellie Thompson, Commodore Descartes, Senior Captain Étienne de Long, and Tatia.

<Our pardon for disturbing your evening meeting,> Jastitock sent to the Omnians. It was a message that he knew Tockitak would have preferred to send, but it was general protocol that a monarch didn't make simple apologies. That function was reserved for politically critical moments.

The Jatouche monarch and her mate received nods of greeting from the Omnians, whose eyes tracked the young royal and whose thoughts exchanged conjectures about her possible identity.

The SADE, Descartes, was tempted to ping the young female to see if she had an implant and obtain her bio ID, but the unannounced, last-minute visit and the baggage carriers warned him to wait.

Tockitak paused in front of Tatia, and Jastitock signaled the baggage handlers to rest.

The four Jatouche piled their bundles against a corridor bulkhead and stood silently beside them.

"Admiral, we'd be pleased if you would do us a kindness," Tockitak said.

"Please ask," Tatia replied courteously.

"This is my second offspring, Tanistok," Tockitak announced, presenting the young female who stood beside her. "I would place her in your care, while my mate and I speak with Alex and Renée. Will you assist us?"

"With pleasure," Tatia replied. The request seemed odd to her, as if the young Jatouche would be in danger aboard the city-ship and would need the protection of a fleet admiral.

"Your generosity is appreciated," Tockitak said. Then she and her mate entered the salon, Julien having triggered the door as the guests approached.

"Greetings, Your Highness Tanistok," Tatia said to the young royal offspring. She made to introduce the other commanders, but Tanistok pinged the Omnians to obtain IDs.

Tanistok focused on Descartes. <You're my first,> she sent in the open.

<Being first might or might not be a favorable category, Your Highness,> Descartes replied drily. His response caused Tanistok to chitter.

<It's not often been good for me,> Tanistok replied. <To be more specific, you're the first SADE who I've met. I find the moment auspicious.> Then she gazed across the midnight blue uniforms with their minimal gold adornments and patches.

<Should we snap to attention?> Ellie sent facetiously to the other Omnians.

<I do feel like I'm standing in review,> Étienne commented.

<Impressive uniforms. Simple and commanding. I approve,> Tanistok sent, when she'd finished studying the Omnians.

Rather than respond to the imperial and slightly condescending comment from the young royal, Tatia sent, <I'm impressed that you already have an implant, Your Highness, and I compliment you on your control. It's extraordinary for a new adoptee.>

<I insisted on being one of the first Jatouche on Na-Tikkook to receive one,> Tanistok returned. <I believe it's paramount to be adept with new technology. Wouldn't you agree, Admiral Tachenko?>

Tanistok saw two human Omnians hide smiles behind their hands. It annoyed her. <I've said something to amuse your companions, Admiral Tachenko. Please explain how I've misspoken.>

<You haven't, Your Highness,> Tatia replied. <As a New Terran, an implant was something I received later in life. It's well known by my associates that I struggled to adopt it. Others New Terrans had the same problem.>

<How did you solve it?> Tanistok inquired.

Tatia noticed the regal façade had dropped. She simply faced a curious young female Jatouche.

<Renée de Guirnon and Terese Lechaux, her friend, invented implant games for us to play at night,> Tatia replied. <They were simple to begin, and then they got more complex. More than anything, we enjoyed the competition. Learning to use the implants was a means of winning the games.>

<Clever solution,> Tanistok acknowledged. <I shall enjoy learning from you.>

Tanistok's last remark put the four Omnians on alert.

In the salon, Renée served the royal couple fruit juices, which pleased them.

"Our apologies for disturbing your evening," Jastitock said, as the couple sat on a settee that Alex lowered for their shorter stature.

"Unnecessary, Your Excellency," Alex replied, waving away the apology. "How can we help?"

"With your technology, we imagine that you've seen our entourage," Tockitak replied.

"We were curious about the young female and the baggage carriers," Alex said. To his partner, he sent, <The royal couple seems reticent to start.>

Renée intuited the problem, and she said gently, "Your Excellency, family matters are often the most difficult to discuss, but if we can help, we'll do our best to try."

The tense slender shoulders of the Jatouche ruler and her mate relaxed. "Intuitive of you, Renée de Guirnon," Tockitak said gratefully. She took a sip of her fruit juice and handed it to Jastitock.

Clasping her slender furred hands together, Tockitak began. "We've three offspring ... three females," she said. "It was supposed that the eldest would inherit the monarchy, but that doesn't seem to be likely."

"Is the eldest unwell?" Renée asked with concern.

Jastitock quickly waved away Renée's anxiousness. "She's well," he said. "All of them are healthy."

"This is a matter of personalities," Alex said, leaning comfortably into the couch.

Julien monitored the conversation in the corridor, courtesy of Descartes, and shared it with Alex, which allowed him to comprehend the nature of the royal couple's issue.

"Yes," Tockitak said. "Tanistok, who waits outside, is our second offspring. Her siblings already defer to her more aggressive personality. It's obvious to us that Tanistok will be the next monarch."

“But there’s a problem,” Renée suggested, catching up with the conversation that Julien was sharing.

“We’re loath to admit this,” Jastitock said, “but Tanistok’s headstrong ways represent a challenge to her maturation. Worse, she makes decisions in information vacuums.”

“Her tendency is to be the dominant voice in any room she inhabits,” Tockitak explained. “If individuals have the wherewithal to argue with her and share data, she’ll tend to absorb it.”

“I take it she doesn’t apologize for her actions,” Alex said.

“Never,” Jastitock returned.

“And you want us to take Tanistok with us in hopes that being in the company of Omnian humans and SADEs will balance her personality,” Alex suggested.

Renée saw pleading in the royal couple’s eyes. For this moment, they were parents who were concerned for their daughter’s development. That she might become the Jatouche monarch made it all the more imperative that Tanistok’s maturation be carefully managed.

“I think it’s a wonderful idea,” Renée said, clapping her hands lightly.

Tockitak and her mate looked relieved at Renée’s acceptance of their request. However, they turned wary eyes to Alex.

Alex had carefully schooled his face. He wouldn’t contradict his partner, but he didn’t necessarily think it was a good idea. Unfortunately, the decision wasn’t to be a simple one.

Tockitak and her mate led the new consortium, a recent offshoot of the powerful Tsargit, the organization that represented the advanced alliance races. The consortium had recently been the first worlds to receive new dome gates, courtesy of discoveries made by an amalgam of outpost and Omnian individuals.

To complicate matters, the consortium members were the greatest supporters of Outpost One: Resistance. The outpost was crucial in the fight against the Colony, the insectoid race who threatened to overtake alliance space.

Alex’s desire was to see peaceful races unite in common goals to maintain security and prosperity for their citizens. To do that, he needed

their cooperation, and his vision of the future conclave would be the start of territorial cooperation.

To be successful, Alex needed the alliance races to be represented. That would mean members from both the consortium and others of the Tsargit.

“I’ve one question,” Alex said.

“Only one?” Jastitock inquired, baring his sharp teeth.

Alex chuckled and replied, “One important question. Does Tanistok want to go? It’ll be a long journey with multiple stops.”

“It’s her idea, Alex,” Tockitak explained. “She’s adamant that she be exposed to human ways. She says that humans are the drivers of change, and she wishes to be knowledgeable in the manner in which you think and act.”

“There is no greater agent of change than Alex,” Renée replied proudly, placing a hand on Alex’s arm.

“Will you school her directly, Alex?” Jastitock asked.

“I believe it would be important to expose Tanistok to many sources of opinions,” Alex replied. “A well-rounded education is best, don’t you think?”

Alex was happy to see that he received affirmative nods. He couldn’t imagine having a young royal following him around every moment of every day. He received a short vid from Julien. Alex was chained at the ankle to Tanistok. Worse, everywhere the royal offspring wanted to go, Alex was forced to follow.

Julien received Alex’s reply. In the new vid, the frame widened to include Julien. He walked on the opposite side of Alex, chained to his friend’s other leg. Julien had to admit that perhaps Alex had a good point. Tanistok *should* receive an education from myriad individuals.

“Is it agreed?” Jastitock inquired.

“First, I would like to speak with Tanistok,” Alex replied.

“Most appropriate,” Tockitak said, and she sent a message to Tanistok.

Julien signaled the door for the royal offspring.

“The great Alex Racine and his consort,” Tanistok declared as she entered, holding out her small hand in the tradition of Omnians.

Reluctantly, Alex gently shook Tanistok’s hand.

Then, without invitation, Tanistok sat next to Julien, eyeing him before she added, “Another worthy individual to meet.”

<Oh, how fun this might be,> Renée sent to her companions. Her mirth bubbled around her thought.

Alex resumed his seat and ordered his thoughts. The coming annual represented the opportunity for many political challenges. The last thing he needed was a royal offspring irritating the world leaders the city-ship might be carrying. He regarded the royal couple and said, “I think it best to speak to Tanistok alone.”

Tockitak’s hesitation was evident to everyone.

<We’ve chosen this path for Tanistok for her own good and that of Na-Tikkook,> Jastitock sent privately. <This first step in letting go will be the hardest one.>

Resuming the aura of the Jatouche monarch, Tockitak rose, nodded to the three Omnians, and left the suite. Jastitock and she suddenly found themselves in the company of the four military-uniformed officers they’d passed earlier.

“How did you find your discussion with Tanistok?” Jastitock inquired of the Omnians.

“We discovered she reminded us of someone,” Ellie replied.

Tockitak perked up. “Who, Admiral?” she asked.

“A pilot in my command, Lieutenant Nata,” Ellie offered with a smile.

The royal couple appeared stricken.

“Isn’t the lieutenant one of the clones?” Jastitock inquired.

“Yes,” Ellie confirmed.

“Aren’t the clones the ones they refer to as the wild ones?” Tockitak asked.

“Those would be the ones,” Ellie replied.

Tatia regarded the royal matriarch. “Your Excellency, perhaps your offspring has led too sheltered a life on Na-Tikkook,” she said. “It’s important that you know those are our first impressions. If you want to keep Tanistok the way she behaves now, we suggest you remove her from our presence immediately. Otherwise, you might not recognize the offspring who returns an annual from now.”

Tockitak's lips bared her teeth ever so briefly. It was one of the few times that the diplomatic mask had fallen. Few had ever spoken so bluntly to her. Her eyes swung from one Omnian to the next. While she detected some sympathy, the faces were unrelenting. Doubt about her decision loomed within her mind, and she suddenly feared for her offspring.

"Do you dislike Tanistok?" she asked Tatia.

"It isn't a matter of whether we like or dislike Tanistok," Tatia replied. "She exudes arrogance, and that quickly irritates individuals. Worse, her poor behavior seems to stem from a lack of experience in dealing with others. In time, we can help her."

"You brought her to us," Étienne added kindly. "You must see that an intervention is needed."

While Tockitak wrestled with her indecision, Jastitock said quietly, "We do see the need. Understand, please, this is a difficult decision for us."

"We do understand," Ellie replied. "We're attempting to be honest with you. Tanistok's behavior will change, and it will change for the better. If she's being groomed to be the next monarch, which is what we surmise, then this is an absolutely necessary step for her."

Tockitak appeared to relent and accept the Omnians' messages. She voiced her final concern. "You aren't intending to encounter any conflicts during this voyage, are you?"

"No," Tatia replied. "If the fleet must sail for an engagement, we'll put Tanistok aboard a Trident, give her a squadron escort, and send her home."

"That would be appreciated," Tockitak said with relief.

"Can you tell us more about the fleet's destinations?" Jastitock asked.

While the principals in the corridor had reached an understanding, it wasn't proceeding so well inside the salon.

"I can imagine you might have a few thoughts for me, Alex, before I occupy my suite and am assigned an administrator and an adequate number of attendants," Tanistok stated imperially.

When Alex didn't immediately reply, Tanistok continued to list her needs and how she proposed others on the ship should be prepared to work with her.

<Your Highness,> Julien sent, which halted Tanistok in mid-sentence. Her head turned to regard the SADE. Irritation at the interruption shone in her eyes.

<This is your one opportunity to be part of something momentous,> Julien continued. <Soon, Alex will be surrounded by world leaders. Some of these individuals control swaths of space more economically robust than Na-Tikkook.>

<This is why I requested to be part of your journey,> Tanistok pointed out, interrupting Julien.

<Your request to accompany us was to your matriarch, and she agreed,> Julien replied. <However, you haven't asked Alex and Renée, his partner, not his consort, for their permission. At this rate, I can tell you that you've little chance of gaining it.>

Tanistok blinked. Her gaze swung from Julien to Alex and Renée, who'd yet to say a word to her. She was unsure how to proceed. In the immediate sphere of family and advisors, discussions were always lively, and her mind was constantly engaged. Now that she thought about it, so was her muzzle.

"Julien has offered me advice, but I'm unsure how to use it," Tanistok admitted.

"Why?" Renée asked.

"He points out that I've failed to ask the two of you for permission. Furthermore, it might be too late," Tanistok replied.

"It might be," Alex said. "You'd have to undo just about everything you've said since you entered this suite."

Tanistok's temper, which she'd always possessed, rose quickly at the rebuke. She fought to control the dark emotion, sure that the Omnians witnessed her control slipping. She dearly wanted to accompany Alex and Renée, but she wanted to do that under her own terms. The juxtaposition of those two thoughts, which she'd just heard from Julien were incompatible, frustrated her.

Swallowing her pride, Tanistok rose. Trying to maintain a semblance of dignity, she leveled her gaze at Alex to say that she did this under protest. The Omnians didn't display any semblance of regret or sympathy, which

did nothing to buoy her ego. When Tanistok reached the suite's door, she paused, exhaled deeply, squared her slender shoulders, swept the cape's right side over her shoulder, and turned.

"Thank you for seeing me, Alex Racine, Renée de Guirnon, and Julien," she said brightly. It was more than a little artificial, but it was her best attempt at sociability.

The response she received was unexpected. Alex laughed heartily. Renée winced, but appeared sympathetic, and a strange shower of sparkles floated around Julien's head.

Tanistok couldn't help herself. The circumstances were absurd, and she chattered self-consciously.

"Now," Alex said, indicating the settee, where the royal couple had sat, "let's talk and have a serious discussion."

2: Hosting Opportunity

There were strained goodbyes among the royal family, but the monarch and her mate were resigned to giving their headstrong offspring what she'd demanded and needed.

While Tanistok waited beside the baggage carriers to be taken to her suite, an Omnian conversation ensued.

Renée had chosen a well-appointed suite for Tanistok, which Alex felt sent the wrong message. Fortunately for him, Renée was in the minority opinion, and he could remain quiet.

<Well, whatever cabin assignment Tanistok receives, we should certainly assign a rotation of crew members to manage her needs,> Renée sent.

<Respectfully, Ser, I disagree,> Hector replied.

<I concur,> Julien added.

<Tanistok can't be expected to find her way around this immense ship by herself,> Renée objected.

<And we don't expect her to be left by herself to do that,> Hector replied.

<It's the SADEs' consensus that a single individual should be present to manage the royal sibling's needs,> Julien sent.

<A SADE?> Renée queried.

Julien didn't miss the gentle smile that briefly formed on Alex's face.

<I've accepted the duty,> Lydia interjected.

<Thank you for volunteering,> Renée sent. <We should discuss the services that we'll make available to her.>

<What would those be, Ser?> Lydia asked politely.

<For instance, what about meals?> Renée inquired.

<Where do Alex and you eat?> Lydia asked rhetorically.

<Point taken,> Renée admitted. <I take it the general consensus is that we're offering Tanistok the freedom of the ship with one minder, but she's not to receive special care.>

<That's our consensus, Ser,> Hector sent.

<As you are the fleet commander and the captain of this ship, Hector, I'll abide by your decision,> Renée sent. She swiftly ended her connection to the conference, and, just as quickly, Julien exited the owner's suite. However, he didn't depart without a parting shot from Alex, who accused him of cowardice in the face of the enemy.

Julien's reply was to point out that higher intelligences knew how to pick their battles.

"You were a lot of help," Renée declared in annoyed tones to Alex, as she removed the drink cups and mugs. She paused when Alex didn't respond. "You didn't agree with me," she accused.

"No, I didn't," Alex replied. "We've an annual, more or less, to shift Tanistok's social manners and acquaint her with the challenges of intersystem politics. That's not much time. I can't think of another way to do this than to immerse her in our way of life."

"She might not be able to adopt what we teach her," Renée pointed out.

"Maybe not, but don't you think Tockitak and Jastitock need to know that?" Alex inquired.

Renée sat facing Alex on the couch. She considered what the SADEs and he had said. Her impression was that they were being cruel to a young royal Jatouche who was effectively no older than a late teen. Then again, she considered the idea that she was making the same mistakes as the Jatouche monarch by being overprotective of the young royal, to Tanistok's detriment.

"The treatment of Tanistok sounds harsh to me, but the SADEs and you are probably right," Renée replied. "She might have the strongest personality of the siblings, but that doesn't necessarily qualify her to be the future monarch."

"No, it doesn't," Alex said quietly and reached for Renée's hand.

In the corridor, Lydia introduced herself to Tanistok and led her and the baggage carriers to the assigned quarters.

After a brief tour of the cabin, Tanistok asked, “This is to be the extent of my accommodations?”

“You’ve everything you need here,” Lydia replied. “It has a place to entertain guests, a separate sleeping quarters, and private facilities.”

“The bathing facilities in my royal apartment are larger than this main space,” Tanistok objected, swinging her arm around the cabin. “Are you sure that this is what Alex assigned me?”

“Hector, the fleet commander and captain of this city-ship, assigned you these quarters,” Lydia replied.

“I see the error,” Tanistok declared. She attempted to link directly with Alex. Unfortunately, she was out of range, which necessitated her implant’s request be relayed through the ship’s controller. That’s where her link ended.

By mutual agreement, Hector and Julien had blocked Tanistok’s access to almost everyone. She would be allowed to communicate with one individual — Lydia.

“I can only link with you,” Tanistok said with frustration, when her attempts failed.

“That’s correct, Your Highness,” Lydia said calmly. “You’re on this ship and in our company to learn. We’ll be managing your education.”

“This isn’t what I require,” Tanistok objected.

“That’s understandable,” Lydia replied. “However, it’s our observations that biological youths rarely know how best to direct their learning. We’ll help you widen your perspectives and make use of the wisdom of others.”

Tanistok sat dejectedly on the room’s single couch. She eyed the meager furnishings.

The attendants had piled Tanistok’s baggage in a corner, before Lydia had dismissed them. They’d hesitated, but Lydia had told them they needed to hurry to catch the traveler that was ready to return them to Triton. Otherwise, they would be sailing with the city-ship. That put wings under the attendants’ feet. To add to Tanistok’s misery, she realized she would have to manage her own wardrobe.

"I'm hungry. How do I order food service?" Tanistok asked.

"Allow me to guide you to a meal room, where you can choose what you wish to eat," Lydia replied.

This was another ignominious aspect of Tanistok's new shipboard life. She was expected to become self-sufficient.

"Will I never get to see Alex and Renée?" Tanistok asked.

"Certainly, you'll have opportunities," Lydia replied. "At mealtimes, you'll sit at the head table with them. Then, when our co-leaders meet with world leaders, there's the possibility that you'll accompany them. Your continuing participation will depend on how you handle yourself."

"How am I to know how to do that without having the experiences?" Tanistok whined.

"That's why I'm here," Lydia returned with a bright smile. "I'm to be your teacher."

* * * * *

During the time it took the *Our People* to sail to Sol, Tanistok did get to sit with the members of the head table at every meal. However, her attendance was conditional, which chafed her. She'd been told by Lydia that she could respond succinctly to direct questions. Other than that, she was to listen. The SADE had warned her that her general silence was a test. If she failed the test, then she wouldn't sit at the head table.

Julien had shared Lydia's rule with everyone who sat with Alex and Renée for meals. Renée thought the rules were overly restrictive. No one else who had talked to Tanistok in the corridor or the parks for more than five minutes agreed with Renée.

When the city-ship ended its transit outside the Sol system, Tanistok was allowed to attend the initial contact on the bridge. She stood at the rear with Lydia clear of the vid pickup. As a royal, she thought it an improper place for her.

“Greetings, President Fowler,” Alex said. He’d allowed time for the mining outposts and outer stations to pick up his fleet’s arrival and communicate it to Nikki.

When Alex’s face appeared on her monitor, Nikki laughed heartily. “Alex, every time I receive notice of an Omnian fleet entering our space, my heart lurches. I realize that it’s an ingrained habit from too many decades under United Earth’s harsh governance, but I wonder if I’ll ever lose the reaction.”

“We’ll probably always be tormented by our memories, President Fowler, but if we build better worlds, our children won’t have to be plagued by those types of memories,” Alex replied.

“Is it time, Alex?” Nikki asked, with a broad grin on her face. When she saw Alex’s hesitation, she laughed and clapped her hands. “You don’t know how good it feels to finally, for once, be ahead of you. Make for Earth, Alex. My assistant, Portia, will send you the coordinates. You’ll be surprised how much progress we’ve made.”

“We *are* on the same subject, Madam President, aren’t we?” Alex queried.

“You’re here to discuss your galactic conclave, aren’t you?” Nikki replied. Doubt rose briefly within her, the old specters returning.

“Yes,” Alex replied, relieved that there wasn’t some sort of confusion.

“Good, then we’re in sync,” Nikki said, also relieved. “I’ll see you and your companions soon.” Then Nikki ended the call and returned to her work.

Alex surveyed his audience. “I think that was good news,” he said. Then he eyed the coterie of SADEs for an explanation. But it was the snickers and strained faces of humans, hiding smiles, which drew his attention. “What?” he asked, turning in a complete circle.

“Alex, you can’t have expected this grand strategy that you’ve been espousing for nearly two annuals to be kept a secret,” Renée said. “If we’re aware how important it is to you, how many others, after all this time, know that too?”

Alex regarded Tatia, whose normally taciturn face threatened to erupt in laughter. “Who’ve you been talking to at Sol?” he asked.

“Our friends, of course,” Tatia replied.

“Patrice Morris and Olawale Wombo,” Alex supplied.

“Who have the ear of Sol’s president,” Tatia finished. “Despite the distances that have made communications slow, we’ve managed to lay a good foundation.”

“So, what part is left to play?” Alex asked, feeling that he was late to the party.

“All that we’ve achieved, Alex,” Julien said, “is the president’s tacit acceptance of the concept. Her approval will depend on what details you tell her and the Assembly of representatives.”

Alex nodded thoughtfully. Then he turned slowly in another complete circle, as he said, “Thank you, everyone, for your efforts.”

<Our pleasure, my love,> Renée sent, as she kissed Alex’s cheek.

The humans exited the bridge, while several SADEs remained, including Lydia, who kept Tanistok beside her.

<What did you learn?> Lydia sent to Tanistok.

<The connection was poorly managed,> Tanistok’s thought declared. <Alex failed to demonstrate his position.>

<In what way?> Lydia inquired.

<Alex should have dictated to Earth’s president,> Tanistok replied. <Omnia Ships has fleets and advanced technology that Sol needs. He’s bringing an opportunity to this system that would immensely expand the citizens’ markets. This is a simple matter of economic advantage, and Alex has the superior position.>

<So you think Alex appeared weak in front of President Fowler?> Lydia inquired.

<Undoubtedly,> Tanistok sent confidently.

<What of the future?> Lydia asked.

<What do you mean?> Tanistok replied, confused by the question.

Suddenly, Tanistok joined a conference link with Julien, Hector, Z, Miranda, and Lydia.

<Observe, Your Highness,> Julien sent. <We will share with you the possible futures for Sol and a broader galactic alliance if Alex operated as you envision he should.>

Tanistok realized that everything she'd shared with Lydia was known by every other SADE. She was embarrassed, but even that emotion was brief. A dizzying array of scenarios spilled into her implant. She only had time to catch glimpses of them. It never occurred to her to block the incoming stream. Later, she would spend many hours reviewing them.

One thing would become clear to the royal youngling. Force and leverage weren't substitutes for persuasion to ideals. If Alex pressured world leaders, they would resent his domination.

Eventually, technological equality would be achieved. Then there would be no need for the leaders to heed Alex. Worse, the conclave would have been organized under less-than-ideal conditions. More than likely, the amalgamation would simply become a collective economic market. There would be little concern for the social needs of the citizenry or of the developing races.

In that disruptive environment, the defunct philosophies of United Earth might come to the forefront, once again, except on a much broader scale. Nikki's feared specters might truly live.

* * * * *

Tanistok had days to review the information that the SADEs had given her. Their ability to postulate futures fascinated her. The result was that Tanistok spent little time pestering the city-ship's inhabitants with her imperial opinions. Instead, she stayed in her cabin with her eyes closed as the scenarios spooled from her implant.

When Tanistok reached the end of the series, she found links to the controller that allowed her to view more of the SADEs' suppositions about behaviors that could affect the future's outcome.

One of the side effects of Tanistok's studies was that she engaged the SADEs with questions about why Alex's philosophies were more successful as opposed to her views about how a monarch should behave.

Julien had provided one of the most illuminating responses that Tanistok received. She carefully stored his words. He'd said, "Alex's

leverage, as you put it, Your Highness, is fleeting. Soon, Omnia Ships tech will be shared across the known worlds. Then Alex's economic influence will end. What then? He isn't an elected world leader or an inherited ruler. He's the owner of a company. However, his influence will continue because he's persuaded leaders to accept his view of the future instead of the ones they might hold. If you dictate to your citizens instead of persuading them, how will they remember you? More important, how soon will they discard your edicts when you're gone?"

Tanistok was still communicating daily with the SADEs, when Lydia interrupted her routine.

<We're to board a traveler within the hour,> Lydia sent. <Prepare yourself for the meeting of leaders.>

Tanistok sat beside Lydia as the traveler made planetfall.

The pilot headed for the coordinates that Julien had shared with her.

Implants connected to the ship's controller to view the approaching terrain, and Lydia connected with her charge to share the view.

Alex sent a request to the pilot to circle the site.

On the ground, a building and the surrounding area swarmed with construction equipment and work crews. Other travelers were already on-site, and grav cars shuttled passengers from the travelers to a temporary shelter, as the primary building was only partially constructed.

When Alex's traveler landed, he and his companions were met by a collection of grav cars and ferried to the shelter. Alex exited the first car to land. He was met by President Nikki Fowler, who swung an arm in a broad circle and asked, "What do you think, Alex?"

Alex grinned, ignored the question, and gave Nikki a hug, momentarily lifting the Earther off her feet.

Nikki returned Alex's grin. She figured she wouldn't get an answer to her question until the greetings had been completed. Omnians were like that.

When Alex stood in front of Olawale Wombo, the close friends shared idiot grins. Then the audience heard deep grunts as two heavy bodies smacked together, and backs were heartily thumped.

Patrice Morris waited impatiently for her turn. She wasn't disappointed. Alex held her off the ground longer than the president, and he whispered his pleasure to see her again.

When the greetings were complete, Alex signaled Lydia, who ushered Tanistok forward.

"President Fowler, I would like to introduce Her Royal Highness Tanistok, who is accompanying us for the next annual," Alex said.

"It's pleasure to greet you, Your Highness," Nikki said. "The Jatouche are always welcome in our system."

Tanistok was aware that Tacnock, Commander Cinders' close friend, was the first and only Jatouche to have visited Sol. She replied briefly to the president, as Lydia had coached her. The SADE had also counseled her to listen and not be heard until directly addressed.

"So?" Nikki pressed Alex.

"It will be a pretty building someday," Alex replied. "What's it to be?"

"You don't fool me, Alex Racine," Nikki shot back. "You know what it will be when it's finished."

Alex received the building's architectural plans from Z. His implant ran quick calculations. "Space for six hundred envoys and four staff members for each delegation. Ambitious planning," he commented.

Nikki chuckled. She eyed the SADEs and said, "You're ruining my surprise."

"Madam President, that we're here, with your advisors and a selection of Sol representatives, to admire your forward thinking makes us think that this isn't the only surprise that awaits us," Julien said.

Nikki's smile faded. "Perceptive as always," she said quietly. Then she introduced the representatives.

<Based on their voting records, Alex, these representatives are considered futurists,> Miranda sent to the Omnians.

The SADEs were linked, and they left it to Lydia to determine what to share with Tanistok.

<Futurists about what subjects?> Renée asked on the conference link.

<Apologies, Ser, I researched a single subject,> Miranda replied. <I sought to learn their votes on the question of Sol's integration with other systems.>

<In other words, their opinions on aliens,> Renée clarified.

<Precisely, Ser,> Miranda replied.

The exchange between Miranda and Renée was not shared with Tanistok via Lydia. The SADE thought the subject too sensitive for the young royal until a foundation could be laid.

"You've hundreds of Assembly members, Madam President," Alex said. "Why are only these fourteen individuals here?"

Again, Nikki glanced at the SADEs. She had expected to be in control of the discussion, but she'd not taken into account the SADEs' rapidity to gather and disseminate information to their leaders. *Foolish of you to forget*, she thought.

"It's not as bad as it appears, Alex," Olawale interjected. "These are some of your most vocal supporters. There are others."

"Please explain," Julien requested.

"The Assembly has many cliques," Nikki explained. "We've ultraconservatives to moderates to futurists."

"Talk to me about the ultraconservatives," Alex requested. "How many and to what degree?"

Nikki glanced toward Tanistok, and Alex sent, <Speak in general terms.>

"The conservative groups represent nearly a third of the Assembly," Nikki replied. "The hardcore faction is only a small percentage of those members. Yet, the group wields a lot of influence. Many of them are backed by some of the old UE guard."

Alex and the Omnians were surprised to hear that United Earth supporters had risen to prominence again.

"What do you need from us?" Renée requested.

"A presentation to the Assembly, Alex," Patrice said. "The members need to hear the advantages of joining a galactic organization."

"I believe that's moving too quickly," Nikki said, and she politely admonished her friend with a private message. "The Assembly needs to

hear from you, Alex, but the subject should be the value of hosting the conclave and determining the extent to which Sol will play a part.”

“Explain your latter phrase, Madam President,” Z requested. “You would either participate in the conclave’s progressive ideals or you wouldn’t.”

“I apologize for being vague, Z,” Nikki said. “What I meant was that I hope the Assembly will join the conclave, if it is established, but Sol should have the right to choose the extent to which it enters trade agreements.”

“That would be something the delegates to the conclave would establish,” Julien pointed out. “There is the possibility that they might not wish to allow different levels of participation.”

“And that’s what’s worrying many of the representatives,” Nikki remarked.

Alex and his companions spent the better part of two hours speaking with the representatives who were present.

Initially, the members were anxious to speak with Alex and Renée, but then they gravitated toward Tanistok. They were surprised to find that she possessed an implant. However, without ear comms, they were unable to communicate directly with her.

Initially, Tanistok hadn’t understood why ear comms weren’t provided, but she soon surmised why. Lydia was her filter. This meeting was too important to allow her to disrupt it with open communications.

Afterward, Alex and his companions adjourned to Nikki’s offices for a private conference. Alex requested that Nikki invite Olawale and Patrice to join them.

My Books

Conclave is the twenty-fourth novel and the final installment in the interwoven series of [The Silver Ships](#) and [Pyreans](#), which tell the stories of Earth colonists and the spread of humankind throughout a galaxy filled with alien races.

The novel is available in e-book, softcover, and audiobook versions. Please visit my website, <http://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

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Elvians

Q-Gates

Conclave

Pyreans Series

Empaths
Messinants
Jatouche
Veklocks

Gate Ghosts Series
Axis Crossing (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, alien invasion, and space flight.