

HARAKEN
A Silver Ships Novel

S. H. JUCHA



Preview - Chapters 1 & 2

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

A glossary is located at the end of the book.

“Captain, we have the guide’s warning,” the navigation officer announced. “Thirty minutes until we exit this final FTL leg.”

“Comms officer, announce FTL transition conditions,” Captain Francis Lumley ordered. “All hands prepare for exit.”

Throughout the ship, the crew hurried to confirm lockdown of all mobile material, cleared the mess rooms, policed the cabins, and ran through tight corridors to their final positions, strapping themselves into their bunks or chairs. Reports filtered to the bridge as each section reported readiness.

“Ship reports all ready, Captain,” the first mate replied and checked the countdown. There were eight minutes to spare before exit.

Captain Lumley slid onto his bridge chair, dropped it to a horizontal position, pulled the webbing sheet across his body, and locked it securely in place, preparing for the ship’s exit. His people were still trying to eliminate all the quirks of transition from faster-than-light (FTL) to sub-light and back. The captain checked left and right to ensure his three bridge guests were taking the appropriate precautions for this momentous occasion. Speaker García wasn’t, but he was one of two men, besides the major, the captain wouldn’t dare instruct.

Speaker Antonio García, the mission commander, watched in consternation as the captain, crew, and his direct subordinates, Major Barbas and Administrator Olawale Wombo, hurried to their chairs for the exit, but García was intent on delaying the moment. He hated the chair’s webbing confinement. It brought back painful childhood memories of his father’s favorite disciplinary technique for his sons.

This mission was an opportunity for García, one of the youngest speakers in United Earth’s (UE) pantheon of leaders, to prove his value to the elite and gain another rung of promotion. “The higher your rank, the

safer you are,” García had heard his mother say over and over until she was dead at the hands of his father. After his mother’s murder, García lost his other parent. United Earth’s justice system was intolerant of crime, any crime, and there were only two punishments ... lifelong incarceration or death. In the early days of the UE, resources to house and care for prisoners were severely limited so the punishment was often death.

García waited until the final minute to strap himself into his chair and pop in his mouthguard. He filled his mind with images of celebration back on Earth in order to ignore the violent, but short, transition from FTL. The *Reunion* shook and rattled ferociously throughout its 600-meter wingspan. As soon as the transition started it was over, in less than nine seconds.

After months of transit time through a seemingly endless cosmos, the explorers’ long journey was completed. The ship’s guide, monitoring the flight time to the picosecond, shepherded the vessel through light-years of interstellar space to its predetermined destination. While not a self-aware entity, the guide was housed onboard the interstellar ship’s bridge in a small, heavily cooled box and was thirty-third-century technology.

The explorer ship carried more than 900 crew and scientists and was armed with militia troops, fighter craft, and a defensive array of rail guns and missiles. The explorers were prepared to deal with any conditions.

The comms officer announced “all clear,” and bridge crew released webbing and set their chairs upright.

“Nav officer, position, please,” Captain Lumley requested.

“One moment, Captain, the guide is still collecting and analyzing star data.”

Major Kyros Barbas came to stand beside Speaker García. The pair was a contrast in personalities and physiques. Much about Speaker García was average ... hair coloring, eyes, facial features, stature, and height ... all of which was in contrast to his rapacious personality. In contrast, Major Barbas displayed a short, heavy-set, bull-dog stature. His stern visage and powerful physique echoed his task-master personality, and he was a devotee of the mission commander.

Of the three bridge guests, the odd man was Administrator Olawale Wombo, who detested his title. In his mind, he was the mission's lead scientist. He was a bear of a man with a shaved head and a coal-black complexion, owing to his Nigerian ancestry, a country he knew only from the tales of his grandfather. Nigeria joined the African Western Coastal Pac before it became part of the African Union (AU) before its demise in the Third Union War. This last war found the AU against the bloc known as the Shia Intifada.

"Captain," the navigation officer called out, "the guide confirms that at present velocity we are eighteen days out from Mane. We've done it, Captain. Destination achieved!"

While the crew celebrated, Captain Lumley eyed Speaker García. The man stood stock-still. No one congratulated him or patted him on the back, not even his sycophant, Major Barbas.

"Navigation, put us on a heading toward Mane and maintain present speed," Lumley ordered.

"Aye, Captain, setting course for Mane and maintaining speed."

"First Mate, prep and launch three probes. Minimum spread. I want them out there ASAP," Lumley ordered.

"Three probes, minimum spread, right away, Captain," the first mate replied, saluting Lumley and hurrying off the bridge. On an explorer ship, the bridge was centrally located, vertically and horizontally, to minimize exposure from external sources. The ship itself was an unusual shape, resembling the "flying wing" of the long-defunct US stealth bomber. Early UE-FTL experiments destroyed a number of long-axis ships, tearing them to pieces during the transitions, until it was discovered that a winged shape, with its short bow-to-aft length, enabled the ship to quickly cross the transition zones.

"Speaker García," Lumley said, "unless you have alternative orders, I will hold this ship a day out from the star's outer planet until we receive the probe data on the system."

"Perfectly fine, Captain," García replied. "Major, Administrator, with me, please. We have preparations to make," García added and strolled off the bridge.

* * *

Surging ahead of the explorer ship, the probes spread out and a day later were sending data bursts back to the ship. Expectations on the *Reunion* were that drone data would be minimal until they closed on the system's habitable planet, hopefully discovering a successful colony or even a burgeoning world. Instead, the watch officers were slack-jawed as huge amounts of data poured in itemizing thousands of ships entering and exiting FTL outside the system, the telltale electromagnetic pulse of transition evident to the probes' sensors.

"Captain," the second mate signaled, "your presence is requested on the bridge."

Urged on by the excitement in the second mate's voice, the captain hurriedly made his way to the bridge. Within minutes of reviewing the data, the captain called Speaker García to the bridge. It wasn't a requirement to notify Wombo, but the captain liked the gentle, unassuming scientist, so he called him too. Purely by happenstance, if you care to believe that, he neglected to contact Major Barbas.

The three men stood on the bridge, listening to the bridge watch officers translate the data received from the probes.

"I would say these colonists were fortunate to enjoy quite a successful landing, Speaker García," Lumley said quietly.

"Undoubtedly, Captain," García murmured, lost in thought. His secret hope was to discover a small colony he might personally bring into the UE fold. The honors would fall entirely to him — as would the promotion. Instead, he faced a world as populated as Earth. *So much for the quick stick approach, but did I bring enough carrots?* García wondered.

"Captain, the probes have detected millions of comm signals," the second mate announced. "While some are between ships, most of the signals are directed to or originate from relay stations positioned near the outer planet's orbit."

"Can we decipher their signals?" García asked.

The comms officer glanced at the speaker and then at his captain, unsure of how to explain the complexities of the task. When his captain nodded to him to continue, he attempted to explain as clearly and simply as possible. “Your pardon, Speaker García, both the carrier signal wave and the encoded information are foreign to us. In time, the guide might decode the carrier wave so that we can send our own comms, but we might not be understood ... neither our signal nor our words.”

“So we don’t even know if this is a human world,” García mused out loud. His comment rattled those on the bridge. The crew was so focused on tracing the path of a human colony ship that they hadn’t considered that possibility.

“With respect, Speaker García,” Wombo interjected, “the volume and directionality of the comms indicates communications with other colonies, certainly more than one. Furthermore, I would hazard to guess that these relay stations indicated by the comms officer are FTL-transmission capable.”

García’s head snapped around to look up into the face of his administrator and his eyes narrowed. “Why would you suppose that, Administrator Wombo?”

“The ships outside the system are entering and exiting FTL in multiple directions, indicating multiple colonies are located in star systems light-years away. No culture would bother to communicate via comms if the messages were to take a lifetime to reach the intended recipients,” Wombo replied.

“Yes, Administrator, I see your meaning,” García said. “Such a technology would be a great boon to Earth.” García imagined his reception on Earth becoming that of a hero’s welcome. “Keep me informed of any further updates, Captain, and, in the future, Captain ... please be so kind as to include Major Barbas in your invitation.”

The emotionless countenance accompanying the overly polite request caused the captain’s throat to tighten. “Certainly, Speaker García,” he managed to reply.

* * *

Wombo met with his senior staff to apportion the analysis of the data pouring in from the probes. Despite the deluge, the scientists were delirious. The amount and variety of data had them salivating like children in a sweet shop.

One individual on Wombo's staff possessed a different view. His assistant administrator, Zhang Shin, was a UE true believer. To Zhang, the data indicated a technological display that would add wealth and power to Earth and aid the spread of its influence. Zhang had few friends; a notable exception was Major Barbas. She was a petite example of her Chinese ancestry — tiny, pale skin, and dark-eyed with straight, black, short hair, asymmetrically cut.

“The guide has yet to decode the carrier wave, much less the language of the comms,” Wombo announced. “The speaker has asked our help in identifying the carrier signal so that we might replicate it and send it back carrying our own message. We need to be inventive here, but I should warn you that it is possible we will be unable to accomplish our task. However, we must try our best.”

“Administrator Wombo, your words should encourage our success,” Zhang stated formally.

“I speak in probabilities not in hopes, Zhang, as you well know,” Wombo replied, hoping this wasn't leading to another one of their arguments in front of his staff. “If we can't decode the carrier wave, I will propose to Speaker García that we broadcast a standard signal. It is my estimate that the sophistication of the technology we are witnessing indicates that these individuals will have the capability of intercepting our signal and managing a translation, especially if we send an extended message, coupling our communication with images and text. If this world is inhabited by humans, it should not be too challenging a task for them.”

“And if this world isn't inhabited by humans, what might our message say to these individuals?” Yoram Penzig asked. As the mission's linguist and philosopher, it would fall to him to craft the message.

“If they aren’t human, my friend,” Wombo replied, “then we better hope they are pacifists.”

“Have we detected warships?” Zhang asked.

“The ships observed entering or exiting FTL that have passed close enough for detailed observation appear to consist of personnel transport and freighters,” Wombo replied. “We have detected no signs of armament on these ships nor have we seen any evidence of fighters on patrol, but it’s early yet.” Wombo glanced at Zhang, and his stomach twisted at the evil, little smile that crossed her face.

* * *

In the days that followed, the *Reunion* halted at a fixed position beyond the system’s last planet while the probes passed deep into the system. The possibility of possessing FTL comms galvanized Speaker García to ensconce himself in his cabin with Major Barbas to plan their approach to the planet’s government, human or alien. The failure to sight war craft emboldened them.

One of the probes passed an orbital station and the leaders, officers, and scientists alike crowded around the bridge monitors to view the images. During the viewing, two strange and identical vessels passed in front of the probe and conversations were arrested in mid-sentence. One vessel headed toward the populated planet and the other decelerated at an incredible rate and disappeared behind the station, presumably into a docking bay.

“First Mate, playback the recording and capture an image of one of those two vessels. Enhance it for viewing,” Lumley ordered.

The screen filled with a three-quarter shot of the odd craft, and several moments later the image’s resolution cleared, revealing a smooth-hulled ship with a translucent exterior of blues, greens, and creams, glinting in the station’s docking lights.

“No windows, no engines,” Wombo muttered under his breath.

Speaker García turned his head around to study Wombo. “Captain, can we confirm our administrator’s musings about this craft?”

“First Mate, please review the entire section of imagery,” Lumley ordered.

The first mate chose to study the vessel leaving the probe’s view headed for the planet. First its bow and then its aft was visible. The ship’s rounded aft end was perfectly smooth with absolutely no protrusions. Then the first mate ordered the prior images of the vessel expanded and enhanced. The front of the ship was the same ... bluntly pointed and perfectly smooth with no indentations or protrusions.

“It’s confirmed, Captain, on both counts,” the first mate announced.

Captain Lumley glanced toward Speaker García to see if he had more questions, but the speaker was staring at Wombo.

“Enlighten us with any other of your observations, Administrator. If these craft have no engines, how do they move?” García asked.

“An interesting question, Speaker,” Wombo replied, refusing to be intimidated by the mission commander. “A couple of thoughts come to mind. The first thought is a microwave beam focused on the vessel ... but then I realized that would deliver energy, even heat, but would probably not provide propulsion. Then my second thought — and I apologize in advance, Speaker García, if this sounds too preposterous — my thought is that these ships use gravitational waves as their manner of propulsion.” The majority of Wombo’s audience stared at him, as if he had grown a second head, and he muttered, “Yes, a gravity drive would explain their movement nicely.”

“Strange as it sounds, Speaker García, that would explain these vessels’ incredible acceleration,” Lumley added. “The craft could use literally any significant gravity-generating body in the system to push or pull itself. The greater the body’s gravity influence, the faster the craft could drive itself.”

“Gravity drives ... don’t be ridiculous!” García declared. “You’re supposed to be practical men ... men of science and technology, and you’re feeding me fantasies. I don’t want to hear any more of this foolish gibberish again!”

“We have additional information, Speaker García, Captain,” said the first mate. “Another probe has managed detailed views of the surface in its pass over the planet, and there are many noteworthy items. For one,

buildings appear to cover almost every square kilometer of the planet's surface. We've calculated that many of the buildings are more than 2 kilometers high, some 3 or more kilometers. They are marvelous feats of engineering. With so little space available, one would have to believe that either most of the inhabitants' food is shipped from other planets or they are capable of culturing it underground."

One of the officers on station murmured to the first mate, who responded urgently. A couple of moments later, the probe's view of an expanse of garden surrounding an ancient-styled house appeared on screen. A single image was captured and enhancement programs reviewed it several times. With each successive pass, the individuals walking in the garden became clearer.

"Humans," the first mate murmured. "Humans, Captain," he said, adopting a command voice. "This is the site of our colony ship's landing!"

"Excellent, Captain! My compliments to your officers and crew," García said expansively. "Now, Administrator Wombo, I await your good news as to the analysis of these humans' carrier-wave technology."

Captain Lumley felt a flash of sympathy for his friend. Word had reached him of the scientists' failure to decipher the comm technology.

"There is no good news, Speaker García," Wombo replied. "We are left with no alternative but to broadcast our message in the open on our ship's customary frequency and hope that these people are able to pick up and decipher our carrier wave and message."

"I see," García replied, his mask slipping back into place. "One wonders why the powers on Earth pack my ship with scientists when they are of so little use to me. "Very well, Administrator, have Yoram Penzig's message forwarded to me for review. Captain, please advance the *Reunion* into the system on course for the populated planet and broadcast the message once I've approved it. Wide beam, if you please, in case their ships do have FTL comm capability as Administrator Wombo theorizes."

García left the bridge as perfunctorily as he had arrived. The captain gave Wombo a commiserating twist of lips and a shrug of eyebrow. Only performance above expectation received the speaker's approval, everything else was unsatisfactory.

Méridien comms and the entire Confederation, for that matter, burned with little else than messages of a strange ship entering the Méridien system. Fear that another alien race had found their civilization was the first thought on most minds, but as the odd, wing-shaped ship continued to advance toward Méridien, no fighters spewed from the ship and no weapons were unleashed on the Confederation's ships.

Days after the intruders entered the system, Méridien SADEs, self-aware digital entities or artificial intelligences, detected the ship's broadcast signal, recorded it, stripped the carrier wave, and relayed the remaining signal to the Council's SADE, a known linguistics master.

<Leader Diamanté, your pardon for the interruption, I have transcribed the message emanating from the unknown ship,> Winston, the Council's SADE, sent. His comm was sent directly to the Leader's cerebral implant. The Méridien devices facilitated thought and data transfer without speaking. <Leader Ganesh,> Winston continued, <is offline, and I believe the message's information is time-sensitive.>

<Yes, it is, Winston. Please forward the transcription to me,> Gino replied. <I will see Leader Ganesh receives the information immediately, and thank you for your efforts.>

<You are welcome, Leader Diamanté. As always, it's a pleasure to converse with you,> Winston replied and closed the comm.

Winston could choose who to communicate such critical information in Council Leader Ganesh's absence, and the SADE chose Gino. President Racine's treatment of the Haraken SADEs had rubbed off on Gino, and, in turn, he was treating all Méridien SADEs with courtesy, and they were reciprocating in kind. The information gleaned by merely being courteous was invaluable, and Gino never betrayed the SADEs' trust or abused the privilege they granted him.

* * *

<Leader Ganesh, I apologize for the disturbance,> the House SADE announced. Hector waited patiently for a reply. His mistress's sleeps had become deeper and longer in recent years, and her message to Hector was clear. For only the most extreme circumstance was she to be disturbed, and, to Hector, a priority call from Leader Diamanté qualified.

<Your reason better be superb, Hector,> Mahima sent, struggling to organize her thoughts.

<You have a priority comm from Leader Diamanté. He states that his news is most urgent.>

Mahima struggled up in bed and ran a couple of mental exercises through her implant. *No use sounding dull-witted to Gino. The upstart hungers for my Council Leader seat as it is*, she thought. <Yes, Leader Diamanté, you believe your news is so critical that it must be delivered at 1.39 hours?>

<Your pardon, Council Leader, the SADEs have received and translated the stranger's message,> Gino sent.

<These are no strangers,> Mahima replied. <This is a hoax played on us by that puffed-up Haraken, who is building even more freakish ships to demonstrate his importance. Perhaps it's only evident to me why this ship arrives and makes no aggressive movements except to glide into our system. That Haraken president is seeking another Council meeting. Well, this time, he won't get one, and I'll make sure of it.>

<I'm sorry to inform you, Council Leader Ganesh, but your suppositions are unfounded,> Gino sent. <The message announces that these strangers are from Earth, and they wish to make contact with us. Included in their message are historic facts: our colony ship's name, our planet's original name, GL-137, and our star's original name, Mane. Winston has confirmed that although the language has evolved from that of ancient Earth, the characters of the accompanying text have not.>

Mahima signaled the bedroom lights on, swung out of bed, and donned a dressing gown. The slender and exotic body she once possessed was gone. The cell-gen injections preserved her health but not her beauty as she approached the end of her second century.

<And you believe this message to be true, Leader Diamanté?>

<Winston has high confidence in his translation, Council Leader,> Gino replied.

<And he shared this with you first, did he? How interesting ...> Mahima mused.

<There is more to be shared, Council Leader,> Gino said, hurrying on.

<In the message?> Mahima asked.

<No, Leader, this information originates from my House SADE, Esther, who has been analyzing the ship's structure.>

<And why would Esther's analysis of this Earth ship have any value?> Mahima asked, her anger at having a night's rest disturbed leaking into her thoughts.

<Julien, the Haraken SADE, transferred much of Earth's historical records to Esther, Leader Ganesh,> Gino replied, unhappy to reveal this particular information to Mahima.

<So you've let that president's puppet contaminate your SADE, have you?> Mahima accused.

<Leader Ganesh, I implore you to focus on the information we are accruing and put aside your personal animosity toward the Harakens. Whether you realize it or not, we might be in trouble.> Gino sent hotly.

<You said these people are humans from Earth, did you not? How much trouble can we be in, Leader Diamanté?> Mahima shot back.

<Esther compared her records of Earth's war machines with the detailed images of this ship that's called the *Reunion*. It has multiple ports along each wing that indicate some sort of weaponry. It has a great many bays, indicating fighters, according to Esther. Now, I ask you, Leader Ganesh, what does an explorer ship, which in the words of their leader has come in search of other humans, need with fighters and so much weaponry?>

For the first time since her abrupt awakening, Mahima admitted Gino made the right decision to contact her. The information was troubling. *Have we just been invaded by alien humans?* Mahima asked herself.