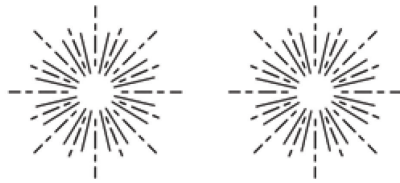


JATOUCHE

Pyreans Book 3



S. H. JUCHA

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

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

My thanks to Michael Fossel, MD, PhD, with whom I've had formative discussions about telomere lengthening, which I mention in this story. I highly recommend reading his book, *The Telomerase Revolution*.

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

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book. Some alien names are used frequently. For pronunciation of many of them, refer to the glossary. For instance, *Jatouche* is pronounced as jaw-toosh, with a hard "j," as are all the *Jatouche* names beginning with "j."

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Glossary

My Books

The Author

- 1 -
Arrival

Jatouche Q-gate number two's flash of blue light merged briefly with the overhead dome. A small coalition of humans and aliens appeared on the gate's platform, having journeyed from the faraway system of Pyre.

"Come," Her Highness Tacticnok said, directing the three humans to follow her, as she and her Jatouche stepped off the Q-gate, which had transported the individuals from Triton, a Pyrean moon.

Tacticnok expected the three Pyrean engineers to follow her. They'd heard her command in their ear wigs, which were a gift from her species to humans. The tiny devices managed translations between the Pyreans and the Jatouche. The humans had Tacticnok's sympathy. They were the first of their species to travel via a quantum-coupled gate.

Instead of obeying Tacticnok, the humans were transfixed by the parade of aliens coming and going from the dome's other platforms. The Jatouche were the first and only aliens who Pyreans had previously met. The discovery that there were other sentient races had come as a shock to humans.

One of the engineers, Pete Jennings, reached a hand to his crotch and felt around. When Pete caught Olivia Harden's quizzical glance, he muttered, "Just checking to make sure everything came through okay."

Despite the warning from Captain Harbour, a notable Pyrean captain, who informed the engineers that they should expect to see other sentient races on their arrival, the engineers stood frozen on the platform, mesmerized by the cavalcade passing by.

Jaktook, the Jatouche dome administrator, who had become Tacticnok's close advisor, regarded the stunned humans. "Perhaps we should have prepared them better," he whispered to Tacticnok.

“How does one prepare a young race for this scene?” Tacticnok asked, sweeping an arm at the dome’s activity.

As experienced engineers, Olivia Harden, Bryan Forshaw, and Pete Jennings, despite their incredulity, were registering an assortment of minutiae, such as the Jatouche dome had six platforms versus the single platform found at their moon. The center console had six stations, but only five platforms were active. A sixth platform was enclosed in a three-meter high wall, with equipment poised on top of the wall, which pointed inward and downward.

However, the majority of the Pyreans’ attention focused on the indescribable parade of unusual individuals, arriving and departing via the other platforms. Olivia, Pete, and Bryan gawked at the diverse species walking, crawling, and slithering past them. In reverse, the engineers were the first humans to be observed by these other members of the alien alliance. As such, stares were exchanged in both directions.

“We probably look as odd to them, as they do to us,” Olivia shared with her companions.

“You sure about that?” Bryan asked. His remark accompanied the passage of a creature obviously capable of flight, even though it was walking.

The avian’s membrane-covered wings were tightly folded, but the one facing Pete appeared to be damaged. Pete leaned forward to examine the injury, and in response, the alien paused, craned its long neck, and extended a sharp beak toward Pete. Human eyes and alien orbs regarded each other silently before the avian walked on.

“This is going to take some time to get used to,” Pete muttered.

The humans stepped toward the platform’s edge, but Tacticnok signaled them to stop. They heard, “Wait,” in their ear wigs.

Four Jatouche in uniforms escorted a tank of semiclear, light-blue liquid past the humans. The tank was as tall as a human and measured about two meters wide by three meters long.

Two small aliens led the way, clearing a path. Another Jatouche wore a headset and transmitted commands to the tank’s carrier, which floated about fifteen centimeters off the deck, and directed the tank’s movement.

A fourth individual followed the tank and acted as a buffer from those behind her.

As the tank silently passed the engineers' platform, the humans saw waving tentacles appear and disappear, as the appendages neared the tank's clear walls. Several tentacles evidenced burn, and Olivia flinched in sympathy.

The entity within the tank pressed close to the wall to view the oddly formed creatures staring at it. Four alien orbs regarded three pairs of human eyes, as the sentients observed one another.

"We're definitely not on Pyre anymore," Pete commented.

"Technically, we never were," Bryan replied. He was referring to the fact that two of them were spacers and the other served on the YIPS, the Yellen-Inglehart Processing Station. None of them lived downside in one of Pyre's domes.

"Did you see that alien's mouth parts?" Pete asked.

"It's probably saying to itself, 'I wonder what happened to their mouth parts. Maybe they're here to have them reattached,'" Olivia replied.

That's what had brought the three engineers to Jatouche, technically to Rissness, the Jatouche moon, where the dome had been built by the alien race known as the Messinants. They had what Her Highness Tacticnok had euphemistically referred to as decorations, severe injuries each had suffered.

"Come," Tacticnok repeated, when the medical unit escorting the tank cleared their platform.

The engineers stepped off the gate and joined Tacticnok and her team. The Jatouche led the Pyreans across the dome, toward the exit, which was a wedge that slid aside to allow egress and ingress to the Q-gates via a ramp.

Despite the number of aliens, cargo, and other sundry items in transport, all appeared to be orderly and fairly quiet, until a console operator announced in a strong voice, "Crocian is arriving."

"Come quickly," Tacticnok said sharply to the engineers.

The Pyreans didn't need their ear wig translations to understand Tacticnok's urgency. Her gestures and fearful expression were enough to galvanize them.

However, before the small contingent could reach the ramp and descend below the dome's deck, a platform's blue light flashed, merging with the shield above, and an alien appeared, who was more imposing than the humans could have imagined. Across the deck, Jatouche and other aliens scuttled aside, leaving an open pathway for the Crocian.

The engineers felt tugs on their arms, intended to pull them free of the Crocian's path. Unfortunately, the Jatouche failed to comprehend the kind of lives the engineers had endured. The harsh conditions of space had mentally toughened them, and their minds were populated with the memories of horrendous calamities. In simple terms, they weren't easily intimidated.

"Ugly as this one is, it's got to be a sentient, right?" Bryan whispered to Olivia and Pete.

"That's my thinking," Olivia whispered in reply.

The Crocian waddled on a pair of thick, squat, hind legs toward the ramp. His muscular tail, which trailed a half meter on the deck, balanced his heavy body. His hands and feet were uncovered and ended in blunt, black claws. He wore a simple sheath and was a head taller than the humans, who blocked his path.

The audience on the deck resembled a tableau, as they watched and waited for the inevitable confrontation to unfold.

"What're you supposed to be?" Olivia challenged the alien, her arms defiantly folded across her chest, not caring whether the scaled entity understood her or not.

"I'm Mangoth of the Logar," the alien announced.

The Pyreans glanced at one another, surprised to hear their ear wigs managing translations for the Crocian.

"Nice name," Pete shot back. "Why are you frightening our friends?"

"I'm Crocian. Many cower before our magnificence," Mangoth replied. To emphasize the point, the alien's maw opened, displaying long rows of blunt, conical teeth.

“Well, Mangoth, despite your glorious presence, it looks like others are more magnificent than you,” Bryan replied, indicating the extensive scars on the Crocian. Deep grooves along Mangoth’s jaw appeared to be made by claws. Punctures in the muscled shoulder indicated teeth or a weapon had delivered the injuries, and a digit on the formidable right claw was missing.

“Who are you to ask?” Mangoth demanded.

“If you don’t like our questions, waddle your bulk around us,” Pete replied hotly.

“Crocians step aside for no race, especially upstarts who haven’t joined the alliance,” Mangoth retorted.

“And there you have it,” Olivia replied, laughing. “We aren’t members of the alliance, which means we don’t know the rules.”

“You’re impertinent creatures,” Mangoth said, his tongue lapping the top of his open mouth.

“I don’t much like that word creature,” Bryan said, glancing toward his friends, who concurred by shaking their heads.

“Now,” the Crocian demanded.

“Now what?” Olivia asked.

“Are you moving?” Mangoth demanded.

“Why should we?” Bryan retorted. “There’s room for you to go around.”

Mangoth loosed a low and rumbling roar. The sonic waves vibrated through the engineers’ chests. “I like your impudence. You’re audacious,” he boomed. “How do you call yourselves?”

“We’re humans. We come from Pyre,” Olivia volunteered.

“What happened to you?” Pete asked, pointing toward Mangoth’s deep wounds. “Did you say something wrong to your mate?” he joked.

Mangoth’s long jaw snapped shut. His yellow eyes regarded the three humans. Then his head drooped.

“I have no mate,” Mangoth admitted. “These marks were received in a mating bid.”

“Ouch,” Bryan remarked, “I take it that you didn’t win.”

“The fighting was fierce, but I acquiesced to my opponent’s greater strength,” Mangoth said. “I’m here to remove these shameful scars. It will improve my opportunity when next I compete.”

“Good luck with that,” Olivia said.

“My thanks for your comment, human,” Mangoth said. “I see you’re in need of repair yourselves, but how is it that you’ve been brought here?”

“We’re here at Her Highness Tacticnok’s invitation,” Olivia replied, indicating the Jatouche, who stood quietly aside, with her team.

Mangoth eyed Tacticnok. “Commendable,” he said, tipping his head minutely at the diminutive royal member. Turning to the engineers, he added, “I look forward to the filing of your race’s application to join the alliance, if it is ever submitted. Now, how will we accommodate our predicament?”

“As a courtesy to an individual, who might someday be a fellow alliance member,” Olivia said congenially. “We will step aside today. One day, it will be your turn.”

The Crocian bellowed his laughter, as the engineers made way for him.

“Be polite to our friends,” Bryan whispered to Mangoth’s scaly back. The only response he received was a subtle lift of the alien’s heavy tail.

The Jatouche watched the Crocian waddle down the ramp. They stared open-mouthed at the Pyreans. Tacticnok’s team members were anxious to speak, but she silenced them with a motion of her hand.

“Let us proceed,” Tacticnok said, leading the party down the ramp. “I regret, Olivia, Pete, and Bryan, that you must remain at the dome until I secure permission from my father to proceed.”

“And if he doesn’t give his approval?” Pete asked.

“Then we’ll immediately return you to Triton,” Tacticnok replied.

A host of questions stirred in the engineers’ minds, but suddenly the Jatouche seemed reluctant to speak. A partial answer was provided in the corridor beneath the dome. Despite the greater width of the passage than the one at Triton, it was crowded with pedestrians, tanks escorted by uniformed Jatouche, and cargo haulers.

As Tacticnok indicated, the party didn’t reach the corridor’s end, which would have led to the dome’s exit. Instead, Jaktook, who fronted the

group, stopped and touched a glowing glyph on the wall. A door recessed and slid aside. The lit glyphs covered every surface of the dome. In this case, the activation of the door uncovered a ramp, and this one led to another lower level.

The engineers saw only Jatouche in the new level, where the group descended. It appeared to them that the levels below the primary sublevel were only accessible by the host race. It made the engineers wonder if they would have access to the lower levels at Triton. Humans had learned that they were the second race to occupy Pyre. According to Tacticnok and Jaktook, the original race was the Gasnarians, who were destroyed in a long-running war after they attacked the Jatouche.

Partway along the third level's corridor, Jaktook touched a second glyph and walked through the doorway.

"Oh, superior accommodations," Olivia remarked, relishing the room's gracious appointments.

"I must leave you," Tacticnok said, her expression portraying her apology. "You will receive word of my father's pronouncement in a matter of cycles. Jaktook will keep you informed."

Tacticnok's gaze lingered on Jaktook. He flashed his teeth at her, attempting to buoy her spirits, and she tipped her slender muzzle in appreciation before she turned and left.

Jaktook led the Pyreans around the room, demonstrating the facilities. The engineers, who hadn't visited the accommodations on Triton, were fascinated by the glyph-activated beds that slid from the wall, the self-warming pallets, and the food dispensers.

For modesty's sake, Kractik, the female console operator, showed Olivia the operation of the personal facilities. Afterwards, Jaktook trained the men on the hose receptacle and the controls for the mister.

With the beds extended and the Jatouche lying on their sides and humans sitting upright, there was finally an opportunity to talk.

"Will Tacticnok's father approve access for us to your planet's medical services?" Bryan asked.

"This is unknown," Jaktook replied. "There will be those speaking for you and others speaking against your presence."

“Your sixth Q-gate is enclosed. Why is that?” Olivia asked.

“Actually, that is gate number five,” Kractik corrected. “It leads to the Colony.”

“The colony of what?” Pete asked.

“That’s the name of the group of species that were elevated by the Messinants,” Jakkock, the linguist, explained. “They are a composition of aggressive species that act in support of one another. Their actions have made it impossible to establish diplomatic relationships. Without knowing their true name, they’ve been called the Colony.”

“Why has diplomacy failed?” Pete persisted.

“They bite first and ask no questions,” Kractik remarked, evincing a sour expression.

“The mandibles of the species strike deep and inject venom into the body,” Jaktook explained. “Within moments, a bitten individual is catatonic and dies soon afterwards. Their poisonous bite kills anyone whose skin they are able to penetrate.”

“The Jatouche first visited the Colony’s Q-gate dome centuries of annuals ago,” Jakkock continued. “At that time, there was no species in the dome. Over the annuals, we visited many more times, watching the planet’s development. We were aware when the sentients achieved spaceflight and knew they would soon decrypt the console’s information.”

“They came to Rissness late one evening,” Kractik said, picking up the story. “Gate number five activated, and the console operator called the dome’s commander. Individuals of the Colony arrived before the soldiers could reach the deck. The dome’s records detailed the event. Every trainee console operator is required to view the attack. It’s chilling to watch.”

“In the moments it took the soldiers to gain the deck, the Colony members attacked every sentient in sight, biting and clawing them,” Jaktook said. “The presence of two Crocians was invaluable. The pincers of the Colony members were unable to penetrate the Crocians’ scaled hides, and the alliance members’ massive jaws rendered the centipede-like and millipede-like sentients in two.”

“Three gate activations delivered more than thirty of the aggressive entities,” Jakkock added. “By the time the attackers were stopped, only the

Crocians and half the soldiers survived. Every other visitor caught on the deck eventually died from the bites.”

“The Messinants informed us via the console that obstructing the platform with an object would prevent the arrival of anyone or anything through the gate,” Kractik said. “Immediately after the attack, soldiers heaped parts of the Colony members on gate five’s platform. But we hadn’t comprehended the Colony’s cleverness. They found a way to call to our platform, activate it, and send our obstruction to their dome. Once our platform was clear, they swarmed in again.”

Jakkock spread his hands in exasperation, as he said, “The soldiers grew tired of replacing the platform’s obstacles. That’s when our scientists and engineers created the wall and the weapons emplacement. The Colony members are free to visit and be eliminated on arrival.”

“A Q-gate’s weaponization is a contentious subject, as far as the alliance is concerned,” Jaktook said. “The taking of sentients’ lives can result in the species’ expulsion from the alliance. That the Colony killed thirty-four individuals from various other races, in addition to our soldiers, has had a great deal to do with moderating alliance reactions.”

“Have you sent anyone to the Colony’s dome?” Pete asked.

“When?” Jaktook replied, confused by the question.

“After the Colony began attacking you,” Pete clarified.

Jaktook and Kractik regarded Jakkock briefly. It was their thought that the translation application had failed.

To dispel the confusion, Jakkock said, “You’ve heard of the dangerousness of the Colony, and yet you ask if we’ve sent our soldiers or citizens to the Colony’s dome after they began attacking us?”

“That’s correct,” Pete replied pleasantly.

The Jatouche stared at the Pyreans in amazement.

It occurred to Jaktook that the humans had met a Crocian for the first time and braced the individual. They wouldn’t have known that Mangoth, a Crocian, was a combative male. And here they were asking if the Jatouche had investigated the Colony’s dome, knowing that death waited there for whoever journeyed through the gate. A formative thought to aid the Jatouche occurred to him, which he kept to himself.

Each race spent time discovering the more mundane things about each other. The discussions ranged across subjects of food, sleep habits, work schedules, and personal preferences. The time passed enjoyably for the group. Meals were eaten, and soon it was time to sleep.

The Jatouche cringed, as Bryan uncoupled small sensor relays that connected his prosthetics to the nerve endings in the stumps of his upper arm and upper thigh.

When the propulsion engineer pulled off his artificial limbs, Olivia quipped, “Yeah, I’d love to remove mine too, if only for the night.” Her ruined face was the result of an explosion, while working aboard the YIPS. The deadly gas fire took the life of her husband, who’d been walking next to her.

“Our medical personnel will permanently remove it for you, Olivia,” Kractik said, with great sincerity.

Jakkock chittered at Kractik to chide her.

“What?” asked Olivia, her eyes boring into Jakkock. She wasn’t in the mood for secrets. There was already too much the engineers didn’t know about the Jatouche, their world, and the alliance.

Jakkock chastised himself. It was a mistake to think of the Pyreans as an undeveloped species by viewing them through the lens of technological development. In social matters, he was dealing with individuals who could read him as well as he could read them.

“It’s not known if our present medical techniques are compatible with your physiology. It’s logical to assume that they aren’t. Time and funds will need to be spent to generate the science that will enable our medical teams to repair your decorations,” Jakkock explained, attempting a touch of humor by borrowing Tacticnok’s term for their infirmities.

“Are we talking about a short period of time or a lengthy one?” Bryan asked.

“First, Tacticnok must obtain permission from His Excellency Rictook,” Jaktook finished for the linguist. “After that, it will be a matter of weeks in Pyrean time to adapt our technology.”

“Then how long will it take to fix us?” Pete asked.

“Patience, my friends, you’re asking the wrong individual. These types of questions must be reserved for the medical director,” Jaktook replied, which ended the discussion.

Rumors

In the nearly three hundred years that humans occupied the orbital stations and domes of Pyre, there hadn't been any greater shocks experienced by humans than those that had recently been delivered. An alien dome had been discovered on a distant moon and accidentally activated. Then, if that hadn't caused enough consternation, aliens arrived, and Pyreans learned that the dome housed a gate that connected to a distant world.

The astonishment receded when the aliens, the Jatouche, gifted the Pyreans a massive device, an intravertor. The device was constructed at the YIPS and deployed by humans, implanting it on the planet's surface. The intravertor filtered the heavily laden atmosphere of dust and noxious gases. In addition, humans discovered that the alien's device produced excess energy, which was transmitted to the YIPS to help power one of the smelting lines.

Naturally, enthusiasm about every aspect of these events was spotty. This was because of the pronounced schisms in Pyrean society. Privileged downsiders occupied the planet's domes. Their primary contribution to the populace was food. The topsiders occupied two stations, the YIPS and the Jenkels Orbital Station or JOS. The YIPS produced metals, gases, mechanical parts, and circuitry, and the JOS was the population center for topsiders.

Then there were the spacers, who supplied the YIPS with ores and slush, frozen gases, for processing. A particular group of spacers, who worked for Captain Jessie Cinders, had formed an unlikely bond with Pyre's empaths. It was an involved story as to how the independent-minded spacers had taken a young empath, Aurelia, under their protection.

And their actions had earned them the respect and support of Captain Harbour, the leader of the empaths.

An indication of the current state of thinking of spacers, active and retired, could be heard at the Miner's Pit, a cantina owned by Jessie Cinders.

"Would you go with the Jatouche, Maggie?" a retired spacer asked the manager and hostess of the Miner's Pit.

Maggie paused in the midst of passing the table of spacers. "Do you mean would I go to Na-Tikkook to get rid of this lovely thing?" she said, hoisting her prosthetic arm. Then she added, with gusto, "Just let me know which ship I catch for Triton, when the shuttle's departing, and how much coin I have to pay."

Benny turned to his fellow retirees, who filled out the table. They were finishing their food and drink and had been discussing whether they would take the opportunity to get their injuries repaired, if offered the chance. Between them, they had three prosthetic limbs, two missing fingers, a lost eye, and a considerable amount of scar tissue. For most spacers, it was a matter of luck if they made it to retirement with some coin and no injuries. Usually, it was the ships' officers who were the fortunate ones but not always.

"If the engineers come back looking whole, I'm asking to be put on the list just as soon as I can figure out who's keeping one," Benny remarked.

"What if they look whole, but there's something alien in them?" a spacer asked the table.

That comment shut down the conversation, and soon thereafter, Maggie directed them to the bar to finish their drinks to make room for more diners.

The Starlight cantina, with its expensive clientele, was experiencing different conversations. The individuals were often company or ship owners or people who had inherited coin from family members. As such, the topics weren't about the prospects of repairing damaged bodies. They concerned the burgeoning opportunities presented by the Jatouche intravertor.

Around a small table sat four investors, who met regularly.

“What’s the latest from the YIPS?” Trent Pederson asked.

“Same thing,” Hans Riesling replied. “The intravertor is performing within Jatouche specifications. It’s spitting out globules of fused atmospheric dust and gases and delivering power to the station.”

“The same amount of power?” Dottie Franks asked. “Isn’t it supposed to be clearing the air, which would mean the energy waves would be more likely to pass, wouldn’t they?”

Dottie was new to the group. She’d been left a substantial amount of coin when her husband was killed while mining. She’d decided to adopt the three savvy investors as mentors, joining their weekly evening meeting. An attractive widow, the elderly patrons were happy to have her company.

“The intravertor doesn’t clear out a space around it, Dottie,” Hans explained sympathetically. “Atmospheric conditions constantly mix the air.”

“According to engineers, it will take thirty or forty intravertors working for years, if not decades, to make a considerable difference in the atmosphere,” Oster Simian added.

“And we only have the one,” Dottie replied in a desultory fashion.

“For now,” Hans said. He had a twinkle in his eye that attracted the stares of his friends.

“What?” Trent asked.

Hans said genially to the others. “I find it interesting that the three of you think of the Jatouche primarily as aliens. Yes, yes, they are,” he added quickly, waving away the comments before they could be made. “Let’s not forget that it was probably the Jatouche engineer who was the target of the plumerase gas attack on the YIPS. And what did the Jatouche do in retaliation? They did nothing. They completed the intravertor, packed up their gear, and disappeared back through the gate. In addition, they took with them the three engineers, who helped them the most, to repair their bodies. Now, if they were humans from another world, what would you think about them?”

While the men contemplated answers, Dottie piped up. “I’d think they were extremely generous and tolerant.”

Her comment had Trent and Oster nodding in agreement.

“You’re thinking that the Jatouche aren’t done with us,” Trent proposed.

“I think they’re just getting started with us,” Hans replied, with a self-satisfied smile.

Downside in a dome, the three heads of the nascent domes’ council, Dorelyn Gaylan, Idrian Tuttle, and Rufus Stewart, met to discuss the ramifications of the Jatouche intravertor. The council had usurped the power of the domes’ governor, Lise Panoy, but had left her nominally in place. They’d taken the precaution of removing her powerful and dangerous security chief, Jordie MacKiernan. His body, like those of many other downsiders, was buried beneath Pyre’s ash-covered surface.

“What timeline do the engineers give us?” Rufus asked, worry evident on his face.

“Are you concerned about your bodies already?” Idrian riposted.

“This aspect of our discussion is premature,” Dorelyn scolded. She was the head of the Gaylan clan, which in economic terms was one of the domes’ most influential families. “There are more immediate concerns. Captains Jessie Cinders and Harbour grow more prominent in Pyrean eyes with every step they take. Right now, the conversation on everyone’s lips is whether the Jatouche can rehabilitate the engineers and what will happen next with the aliens.”

“It’s ironic,” Idrian said, sitting back in his chair and frowning. “Not long ago, the domes were the center of Pyrean power and attention. Now, it’s a moon with an alien gate.”

“And let’s not forget that the families don’t own a single ship that can reach Triton,” Dorelyn remarked. “We’re at the mercy of spacer captains if we want a seat at the table.”

“Are you referring to negotiations with the Jatouche?” Idrian asked.

“What else?” Dorelyn replied. “I’ve no idea what form the discussions will take, but as sure as I’m sitting here, I know they’ll happen. The Jatouche will be a part of Pyrean life for generations to come, if not forever, and we must ensure that the council is not left out.”

“Why are you so positive?” Rufus asked. He didn’t like the idea of aliens being involved in human society, especially if they might upset the balance of power.

“Harbour,” Dorelyn replied simply.

Dorelyn hadn’t counted on the empath leader becoming a political force, but the previous governor’s foolishness had ignited a tumultuous cascade of events. Years before, Markos Andropov had kidnapped a young empath and fathered two children by her. It was the escape of the elder daughter, Aurelia, who was taken in by spacers, which had led to the liaison of Captain Cinders and Captain Harbour. Suddenly, two fringe groups of Pyrean society, the spacers and the empaths, had banded together to form a strategic entity that was in the right place at the right time to welcome the Jatouche.

“Worse, the captains are getting wealthy hauling slush in that ancient colony ship,” Rufus added with envy.

“You can stop referring to Captain Harbour’s ship in that manner, Rufus,” Idrian commented. “Everyone calls the ship the *Honora Belle* or simply the *Belle*. The captain has put her coin to good use. She’s hired crew, engineers, and techs, who’ve brought their families aboard the ship, and she’s spent much of her surplus on upgrade equipment.”

“It would take a good-sized crew a few years to turn that aging vessel into a rehabilitated and robust ship,” Rufus retorted.

“Rufus, you really must keep abreast of information on subjects that can affect our business, even if you don’t care much for them,” Dorelyn remonstrated. She watched a red flush of embarrassment creep up the sides of Rufus’ neck. Her eyes held Rufus, waiting for him to object. When he didn’t, she continued. “One of the clever things that Harbour did with her slush coin was buildout a large cantina onboard the *Belle*. It’s reported that the spacers in Cinders’ company love to rotate aboard the colony ship, while they’re at Emperion harvesting slush. They have access to comfortable cabins, a cantina, and the company of empaths.”

Rufus shuddered at the prospect of passing empaths in the ship’s corridors at every turn. He’d always abhorred the prospect of someone entering his head and manipulating his emotions.

Dorelyn and Idrian politely chuckled at Rufus' reaction.

"Well, Rufus, Cinders' crews don't see it quite the same way you do," Idrian said. "The rumors are that the spacers spend their downtime working on the ship's needs, celebrating in the cantina at night, and enjoying the attention of grateful empathaths."

"Enough enjoying yourselves at my expense," Rufus growled. "Dorelyn, what is it that you wanted to speak to us about?"

Dorelyn grew serious, and her sharp gaze demanded the men's attention. "What I need the two of you to do is help me sell a project to the council. The families need to invest in a ship."

"You want us to become miners?" Rufus moaned.

This time it was Idrian who threw a disappointing glance at his friend. "What type of ship, Dorelyn?" he asked.

"We must have the first passenger ship that will be capable of transport between the YIPS and Triton. It must be capable of landing on the moon and docking with JOS terminals arms," Dorelyn replied.

Rufus' mouth clicked shut. Dorelyn was thinking far in advance of him. He realized he'd spent the majority of the conversation's time displaying his weaknesses, and he was determined to change that. "How far have you gotten toward locating a ship architect, estimating a budget, and determining a delivery date?" he asked.

Rufus was pleased when Dorelyn gave him an appraising glance, and he promised to spend more time accumulating knowledge on the spacers and empathaths, especially those working for Cinders and Harbour.

At the same moment, Harbour was sitting at the salon table in her captain's quarters, sharing greens with fellow empathaths.

"I think I'd like an emotional tasting of our engineers when they return," Sasha Garmenti, Aurelia's younger sister said. "Can you imagine the emanations of three people who've had their bodies made whole again?" She wore a dreamy expression, envisioning the sensations she might enjoy.

The empathaths around the table laughed at Sasha's remarks. There was little doubt that Sasha would be able to pick up more from the engineers than most empathaths. Although only a teenager, she was already one of the

most powerful empath and was growing stronger day by day. However, her capabilities were ruled by a blunt and determined personality.

“I think the most important point is that the engineers do return fully repaired,” Yasmin, Harbour’s close friend, commented.

“I have no doubt they will,” Harbour added. “Although, Jessie said that the Jatouche might need to augment their skills to deal with humans.”

Small smiles danced across the faces around the table. In this intimate group, Harbour had given up referring to Captain Cinders in a formal manner. At certain times, when Harbour’s guard was down, the empaths sensed her emotional reactions at the mention of Jessie’s name.

“Then what comes next?” Lindsey Jabrook asked. She was a miracle to the empaths and a sign of the evolution of their powers. Age had been a detriment to empaths, weakening their ability to keep the emotions of others from assaulting their minds.

Sasha had played a game of protection with her mother, Helena Garmenti, defending her against her stronger sister, Aurelia. In repeating the game with Lindsey, they discovered Lindsey’s mental guards were gradually repaired. Thereafter, Sasha had gone from one isolated empath elder to another, helping to restore their balance.

“I think the next move must come from the Jatouche,” Harbour replied quietly.

“What do you think that will be?” Aurelia asked. She was only a year past her teenage years and had been shuttered in the downside governor’s house for most of her life. However, her tutelage under Captain Cinders and senior spacers showed her accelerated maturation.

“I’ve an inkling of what might come from Tacticnok, but it’s a matter of what her father says,” Harbour replied. “I would hear your thoughts first, Aurelia.”

“I don’t know what the Jatouche might offer, but I’ve an idea of what it will entail,” Aurelia replied. Greens paused on their way to lips, as the empaths waited to hear her thoughts. The young empath smiled at the attention she’d suddenly received. “It’s nothing momentous,” Aurelia said quickly. “It’s more about the mechanics of our response.”

“Do tell,” Harbour enticed.

“Well, whatever the Jatouche request, it’ll probably entail a journey through the gate to speak with them, their ruler, I mean,” Aurelia explained. “From my experience, I can tell you that the downsiders won’t want to be left out.”

“I don’t think any faction will want to be left out,” Nadine commented.

“I have visions of a great line of Pyreans waiting at the dome’s platform to be whisked away by the blue light,” Sasha said, reaching for the pitcher of greens.

Lindsey slid the pitcher away from Sasha. She was gentle in her reprimand. “Three greens are giving you more than enough visions for now.”

Sasha’s scowl fell impotently on Lindsey’s implacable face, and the teenager acquiesced. Lindsey was one of the few individuals who could direct the headstrong girl.

“As I was saying,” Aurelia continued, “to reach the dome we’ll be riding aboard spacers’ shuttles.”

“Aha,” Harbour exclaimed, and Aurelia grinned in reply.

“And this means what?” Yasmin asked.

“You have to be vac suit qualified to ride aboard spacers’ shuttles, no exceptions,” Aurelia replied, a mischievous smile twisting her lips.

“This piece of information should be kept quiet until the right moment,” Nadine cautioned Harbour. Everyone, except Sasha, was nodding in agreement.

“Harbour, what was your thought about what the Jatouche might say or request?” Yasmin asked.

“Tacticnok spoke to me about a Pyrean envoy journeying to the Jatouche home world as a preliminary step toward membership in their alien alliance,” Harbour replied.

Mouths fell open. Harbour was speaking about a future that staggered the imagination.

“I’ve a question,” Sasha piped up. “Who gets to be the envoy?” She looked around the table, but no one was returning her gaze. Instead, the others were staring at Harbour.

“Afraid so,” Harbour admitted. She was inundated by warm waves of affection sent her way. Harbour kept her gates partially closed to manage the emotions sent by Sasha. The teenager still tended to have two levels of power, on and off.

My Books

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

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The Author



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

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

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

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

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

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

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