

TALUS

A Silver Ships Novel

S. H. JUCHA



Chapters 1 and 2 - Excerpt

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

Glossary

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1: Close the Cage

<Admiral, ready to release,> Rear Admiral Alphons Jagielski prompted. He'd sent his thought from his implant via his Trident's controller to the fighter tethered by his warship.

<Running final checks now, Alphons,> Vice Admiral Ellie Thompson sent in reply.

That was a fabrication. Ellie had run through the list three times. What was embarrassing was that she was acutely aware that Alphons, fleet senior officers, and every SADE in the Celus system knew that. Due to the critical and dangerous nature of the test that was about to be conducted, her implant link with Alphons was being widely shared.

<No hurry, Ellie,> Alphons sent privately. <You tell us when you're ready.>

A sophisticated Omnian probe built by the SADEs, the self-aware digital entities, was attached outboard of Ellie's fighter for the test. It wasn't expected to survive the massive electromagnetic pulse to be applied to it any more than was Ellie's fighter, but its transmissions up to the point of failure were expected to provide extremely useful data.

Ellie took a deep breath. The intake made her shudder, and she blew it out harshly.

<Closing my link, Alphons. Release me,> Ellie sent.

<Good fortune, Admiral,> Alphons quickly sent, before the link was severed. <Chief, untether the admiral's ship,> he sent.

Ellie signaled the faceplate of her environment suit to close. Then she shut down her implant. Hereafter, everything she did would be manual. It was an unnerving experience for a Méridien, who'd depended on her implant for decades.

When the bay crew deactivated the beams holding the fighter, the chief sent, <The Dagger's released, Admiral.>

As the warship eased away from the aging craft, the chief thought, *May the stars protect you, Admiral.* His sentiment was echoed throughout the Celus system.

The lone Trident reversed course and headed system inward, leaving the Dagger and the probe floating in the dark, outward of the far asteroid ring. The ship's controller directed the Trident's movement, having been preprogrammed by the SADEs.

Per Hector's orders, there wasn't a SADE aboard Alphons's warship. Hector, who was in charge of the fleet stationed at Omnia, knew, under these conditions, it was too risky for a SADE.

In that regard, every precaution had been taken to protect Admiral Thompson. She was a biological like every individual aboard Alphons's Trident.

When the Trident reached the far belt, which was the SADEs' predetermined safe distance, it slid behind an enormous iron core asteroid.

Ellie's implant chronometer counted down the time until the weapon's firing. She nervously chuckled, recalling her visit to the bay that held the remaining Daggers, the fleet's first fighters. They'd been built on New Terra for then-Captain Racine. The ships were ugly stubby constructions. They exhibited none of the sophistication and power of Omnian travelers — sleek, deadly, beam-capable fighters.

However, Ellie's memories of her time in the Daggers were burned deep. She'd learned on the fighter, while incarcerated on Libre as a Confederation Independent. Like the other Libran pilots, she had been fiercely determined to succeed. The opportunity to leave their planetary prison aboard the planet's new city-ships drove the efforts of every colonist.

For this test, the piloting of the Dagger fell to Ellie for the simple reason that she was the only individual in the system who had trained on the craft. The outdated fighters were chosen for the series of tests, because their construction imitated the control systems found in federacy battleships. Those enormous and deadly warships would eventually be the weapon's targets.

Of course, any SADE could pilot a Dagger, but an entity who was dependent on electrical signals to exist would be in great danger.

Ellie shoved the throttle control forward, and the Dagger's engines promptly responded. She smiled at the acceleration pressure that shoved her hard into the pilot's seat. It was a sweet and yet unsettling experience. Omnian tech had come so far.

Memories flashed through Ellie's mind. As a young woman on Libre, she'd been alone for years. Now, she had a partner, whom she loved — Senior Captain Étienne de Long. But she couldn't forget that this rudimentary fighter had started her on the path to the life she cherished.

Ellie reached out and patted the console. *Thank you*, she thought.

The Dagger accelerated, flying toward its death.

Lying ahead in the deep dark was the Omnians' newest offensive device capable of delivering a powerful non-nuclear electromagnetic pulse. Essentially, it was an NNEMP weapon.

The SADEs had constructed the NNEMP inside one of Mickey Brandon's banishers. The fleet had many of the devices, which had been built to remove Artifice's probes.

The entire concept for the weapon had originated with Ellie. She'd been the senior admiral of Hector's fleet in the Talus system and tasked with defending the nascent Talusian society from federacy battleship wedges.

Unexpectedly, Hector's fleet was inundated by many aggressors. In concert with the Talusian wedge, Ellie had successfully led the fights to defeat the attacking races. Those experiences led her to suggest a weapon that might incapacitate the lead battleship of an enemy wedge and prevent an inordinate loss of life.

A nuclear-driven explosion would have provided the greater electromagnetic pulse, which would disable a battleship's systems, rendering it a huge piece of space junk. However, Omnians were opposed to developing that sort of weapon, which would have resulted in the deaths of those individuals aboard ship.

An alternative source of an NNEMP could be a chemical explosion, but that power source was minuscule to what was desired. Instead, the SADEs lined the banisher's interior with banks of power crystals. The energy from the banks would drain in a rush and provide more impetus for the

microwave pulse. It was a more efficient use of the energy release. In addition, a focused antenna in the nose of the banisher would direct the pulse at the intended target.

Ellie eyed her surroundings again. To protect her, the pilot's seat was encased in a cage, which was lined in fine metal mesh. The holes in the mesh would interrupt the pulse's wave frequency. In addition, the highly conductive cage would transfer energy released from the cockpit panels by grounding to the craft's metal hull.

Tucked inside Ellie's suit was a device that would monitor the fighter's systems, the cage, and the mesh. It would record the effects of the weapon's pulse on the Dagger.

As Ellie's chronometer reached the final seconds, she released the fighter's controls and pulled her arms inside the cage. Then she latched the door, ensured the connections were solid, and crossed her arms. Her safety lay in the hands of the SADEs, who had taken great care to ensure she was completely isolated from anything electrical or conductive.

Suddenly, a bright light bloomed in the dark. It signaled the rush of energy from the power crystals, which had overwhelmed the weapons' control circuits.

While Ellie waited for the energy wave, she took slow controlled breaths. When it struck, she felt the impact against the hull.

Then the Dagger's electronic systems failed in a swift cascade. Circuits sparked. Blue and white lines of electrical charge jumped from the console to Ellie's cage, and she sat absolutely still to keep her body from touching her protective enclosure.

Gray smoke filled the pilot's enclosure obscuring Ellie's vision. Then the cockpit and the console went dark.

To be safe, Ellie waited several seconds more. Then she flicked a manual switch to activate a package under her pilot's seat.

The package, equipped with its own power supply, signaled charges in the fighter's canopy and Ellie's cage. In quick succession, the canopy shot off into the dark, and Ellie followed.

The Dagger, which was now no more than space junk, sailed on. A Trident squadron waited outward on the opposite side of the weapon's site

for the fighter to arrive. A warship would tether it and return it to the Sardi-Tallen Orbital Platform, an Omnian ship construction station, for engineering to research.

It was the possible failure of the engine containment systems that was the purpose of Ellie's separation from the Dagger. The SADEs calculated that the immediate cessation of reaction mass delivery to the engines would prevent a feedback ignition, which might explode the tanks. However, having no experience with a fighter undergoing this type of energy assault, they couldn't be absolutely sure.

The launch of the cage headed Ellie on a slightly different trajectory than the fighter. Given a sufficient amount of time, it would achieve a safe separation distance.

With the passing of seconds, Ellie breathed a sigh of relief. The Dagger had disappeared into the dark without an explosion. However, her moment of respite was premature.

A yellow orange fireball not far from Ellie signaled the eruption of the fighter's reaction mass tanks.

Ellie curled into a tight ball to minimize her target area. She knew it would only take a small piece of hurtling metal to penetrate the suit. Even if the suit managed to self-seal, the injuries could be too severe for the nanites in her system to overcome during the time it took to be recovered.

After an agonizing wait, Ellie slowly relaxed and uncurled. She activated her suit lights rather than sit in the dark. "Still alive," she whispered.

To occupy the time, Ellie activated her implant and reviewed the data recorded by the device in her suit.

The swiftness with which the Dagger's electrical system failed was shocking. Ellie had expected a casual winking out of the control panels. Instead, it was as if the fighter had been directly connected to an overwhelming charge. Especially stunning was the amount of electrical discharge. Panels blew out, circuit boards fried, and smoke inundated the cockpit.

Well, this will be our one and only test with a live subject, Ellie thought.

As the lights of an open bay hove into Ellie's side view, much of her remaining anxiety disappeared. Belatedly, she engaged her implant's communication app and received the tail end of the chief's thought.

<... behind you, Admiral,> the chief had sent.

Knowing the admiral and the chief wouldn't know if she was injured or hadn't yet initiated her implant comm, Ellie sent, <All good here, Sers.> Then she was overwhelmed by the outpouring of relief from crew aboard the Trident, protocols having been temporarily forgotten.

<Nice to be missed,> Ellie sent, chuckling nervously.

<Stand by, Admiral,> the chief sent. <A loader is about to connect to your cage.>

Soon after the chief's warning, Ellie felt the impact of the loader's arms as it gripped the sides of the cage. Her forward view shifted from the deep dark to the welcoming expanse of a lit bay.

To Ellie, it seemed forever for the loader to make the bay and deposit the cage on the deck.

The chief unlocked the cage, while the bay's hatches closed, and the space was pressurized. Quickly, he unlatched Ellie's harness restraints.

When Ellie struggled to stand, her legs shaking uncontrollably, the chief, a robust New Terran, sent, <Allow me, Admiral.> He easily lifted Ellie clear of the cage and pretended to hoist and congratulate her to give her a moment to recover.

When Ellie felt her boots touch the deck, she kept a hand on the chief's substantial shoulder, while she accepted the heartfelt comments of the bay crew.

The time it took the bay crew to remove Ellie's environment suit enabled her to steady her nerves. As her boots were replaced with deck shoes, she caught sight of one crew member elbowing another. They'd been staring at her cage.

"Something that needs to be said?" Ellie inquired. It generated guilty expressions on the faces of the two crew members, which made her curious.

Examining the cage, Ellie found several chinks in the metal frame. Multiple pieces of the Dagger's shrapnel had struck it. In the soundlessness of vacuum, she'd never heard the impacts, but she wondered why she

didn't feel their impact. Then she recalled that her pilot's seat sat on dense rubber supports to isolate it from the cage.

What caught Ellie's eye were several smaller tears in the metal mesh. Most were in places that wouldn't have worried her, but one of the holes was in line with her body.

"Chief, my suit," Ellie requested.

Reluctantly, the chief pulled the air tanks from behind the back of a crew member, whom he'd instructed to hide them.

"It's a scratch, Admiral," the chief admitted, pointing to a slight gouge across one of the twin tanks.

"Guess I should have curled even tighter," Ellie remarked and made her way out of the bay with slightly unsteady steps. She was expected on the bridge for an after-action briefing. Instead, she made her way to her quarters, shut down her comms implant app, and lay down for a nap.

When Ellie woke, she connected to the Trident's controller. She was surprised to find that the ship was stationary, occupying a position off the *Our People*, Omnia Ships' second city-ship. She checked her chronometer and found her nap had transformed into nearly a full day's rest.

While stepping into a refresher, Ellie ordered a traveler for transfer to the city-ship. During the short flight, she hurriedly consumed a meal.

Exiting the bay into the city-ship's bright broad corridor, Ellie was greeted by twin rows of fleet officers, who stood at attention with their backs to the bulkheads.

As only implanted humans and SADEs could perform, the twin rows of individuals delivered perfectly synchronized salutes.

At the head of one row, Étienne's sharp serious salute was marred by his wink, and it made Ellie laugh. Then her partner broke ranks and swept her into his arms.

<Welcome back, my heart,> Étienne sent.

Ellie reveled in the warmth that accompanied his thought, but she also detected his fear.

<No more tests,> Ellie sent.

<Thank you,> Étienne replied, his relief evident.

<Are you ready for debrief, Admiral?> Hector inquired.

<I've had my rest and a meal,> Ellie sent. <Let's get started.‑

In a conference room, located aft of the city-ship's expansive bridge, Ellie met with the SADEs, Fleet Admiral Hector and Lydia. Also present were Rear Admirals Alphons Jagielski and Adrianna Plummer, and Commodore Descartes, and the twins, Senior Captains Étienne and Alain de Long. Some of the SADEs who were responsible for the weapon's design had joined the group.

"I presume you've already started on the analysis, while I took my extended nap," Ellie remarked. She'd intended to make light of her experience, but the faces around the table reflected their concerns over the harrowing event.

Holding up her hands, Ellie added, "Yes, it was a close one, but I'm sitting here, whole, rested, and fed. So, let's move forward. By the way, there'll be no more tests with any individual, human or SADE."

"Agreed," Hector swiftly replied to Ellie's final statement.

"One question," Ellie said. "Why did the pulse affect the Dagger so thoroughly and heavily? Okay, more questions. Why did the fighter explode not long after I was launched from it? Shouldn't that have been immediately or never?"

Lydia momentarily tipped her head before she addressed Ellie. "Apologies, Admiral, there were too many variables to accurately predict the effects of the NNEMP on your fighter."

Ellie waved away the apology. "I'm not here for apologies or recriminations. The weapon worked, and it worked well. I need to know what happened."

"Admiral," Descartes, a SADE, began, "the weapon was designed to penetrate the armored hull of a battleship. In that regard, the test banisher had a reduced power supply, a smaller coil, and a less-focused antenna. The data reveals that the electrical systems didn't just fail, as in shut down. Instead, the metal in the circuitry superheated and ignited fires."

"Explains the smoke," Ellie commented.

"We surmise the pulse overloaded the hull and your cage," Hector admitted. "Those were the electrical discharges that you recorded dancing across the control faces and the bars of the cage."

“As to the Dagger’s detonation, Admiral,” Lydia said. “It’s believed that the superheating of metal piping that fed reaction mass to the engines detonated the fighter’s tanks. The moments it took to transfer the heat through the piping bought you the time to gain separation from your fighter.”

Under the table, Étienne reassuringly squeezed Ellie’s hand, and she gripped his in return.

Regarding the SADEs at the table, Ellie asked, “Was what you learned worth the test?”

“Assuredly, Admiral,” Hector replied. After the event, he’d had to reorder his algorithms multiple times to maintain his emotional balance. In hindsight, the decision to allow Ellie to test the fighter seemed a failure of his logic.

“We know that we can build an NNEMP weapon within a banisher’s shell that will compromise a federacy battleship,” Lydia added.

“What about the superheating of metal?” Ellie asked. “Are we in danger of starting fires in a battleship? With the ship’s auto-extinguishing system offline, the crew could suffocate even with environment suits before they’re rescued.”

“There’s no doubt that we’ll need more tests,” Adrianna replied. “I’m thinking that we should have the Sardi-Tallen platform construct a battleship mockup.”

“I like that,” Alphons said. “It doesn’t need to be an entire ship, but it should imitate the armor plating and contain some simplified systems.”

“I’d want to add two small reaction mass tanks, with active pumping between them,” Ellie added.

“It should be noted, Admiral,” Descartes interjected, “that there’s every possibility that our final device might be under- or overpowered when we employ it.”

Ellie considered what Descartes was saying. Too much power would probably result in the death of the crew aboard the lead battleship, which inevitably would be the intended target. That wasn’t what the Omnians wanted. It could incense the remaining wedge captains to attack with a fury. On the other hand, underpowering the device meant it would be

ineffective in shutting down the lead battleship's systems. Worse, it would be a declaration of war, and it would result in the same reaction as killing the crew.

"Let's say that regardless of which way we might err, during a battle, what can be done and how quickly?" Ellie asked.

"The SADEs can calculate the changes required, and any chief can reset the banisher's internal components in a matter of minutes, Admiral," Hector said with certainty.

"In which case, I suggest we have the platform build several mockups for us," Alain suggested.

"Yes," Étienne said, continuing his twin's line of thought. "Each one should be more robust than its predecessor."

"Keep the distance to target and the power of the weapon the same," Alain finished.

"Well-thought-out," Descartes remarked. "SADEs have been aboard the federacy's battleships, and we've excellent details on plating thicknesses, electrical systems, circuitry composition, and many other factors."

"Then those are our next steps," Ellie replied. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I've a private conference to hold with a certain senior captain."

Étienne grinned, as he rose and accepted Ellie's hand.

Not a word was said or sent between the couple as they swiftly covered the distance to their nearby quarters, and they weren't seen until midday meal the following day.

2: Curiosity

During the following month, the banisher tests continued, adding to the SADEs' abilities to estimate the power required to inundate the mass of a targeted battleship.

Ellie kept the fleet occupied by conducting war games. She designed attack patterns with her two rear admirals, Adrianna and Alphons, who would employ the NNEMP weapons.

The vast majority of the commanders, captains, and fighter pilots were experienced veterans of the campaigns to depose Artifice, who'd ruled the federacy.

However, the recent graduates from Omnia's flight training academy were unseasoned. Only the academy's best would join a squadron's fighter groups. The other pilots would take up duty ferrying passengers or freight.

Prior to Alex's departure for alliance space, graduation exercises pitted the newest lot of lieutenants against each other in paired mock combats. The final contest of Lieutenants Neffess and Nata, a Dischnya and a human clone, ended in a tie.

In the most recent fleet mock engagement, Descartes's command entered the system from below the ecliptic. The Tridents had shot inward and launched their travelers. That lent the fighters their warships' velocities. Those fighters altered the outcome of the fight, as they flew through the defenders with the greater velocities.

After the engagement, Descartes directed the Trident command to recover the fighters.

Conveniently, Neffess and Nata, two new fighter lieutenants, were less than fifty thousand kilometers from Sawa, the Dischnya's original home world. The pair had been part of a foursome who had targeted a defender's warship.

One traveler was eliminated by the Trident's mock beam shot. But Nata, Neffess, and the third fighter pilot had each scored strikes in passing, destroying the warship, according to the controller.

Nata and Neffess were ebullient.

In celebration of the moment, Nata took it into her head that she'd visit Sawa. She worked to sell Neffess, Queen Nyslara's and Wasat Pussiro's heir, that dropping planetside should be done for the sake of the Dischnya.

In reality, Nata thought setting foot on Sawa would be a poke in Alex's eye. The Omian co-leader had been the one to recommend to the Dischnya that they never visit their home world. Nata believed that Alex's words weren't a recommendation, but an edict that deserved to be ignored.

<Neffess, I'm not saying we have to visit Sawa for hours,> Nata wheedled. <Let's just drop down and see what the planet is like.>

<Have you bothered to check your telemetry?> Neffess asked. Her fighter was trailing Nata's ship, which continued toward the planet.

<I have,> Nata sent in reply. <The climate's not anything that our environment suits can't handle. We land. We take a short walk around, and then we leave.>

While the two were sharing thoughts, Nata entered Sawa's atmosphere and descended planetside.

<Don't, Nata,> Neffess sent, with all the force behind her thought that she could muster.

<Stay aloft, if you haven't the nerve,> Nata sent in derision. <I'm going to check out the surface.>

Neffess was torn. She didn't want to embarrass her matriarch, Nyslara. Landing without permission on the Dischnya home world was a slap to the faces of the queens who had chosen to heed Alex's advice.

In direct opposition to that thought was Neffess's concern for her friend. She knew Nata was a wild one.

The term wild one, which was rarely spoken aloud, was applied to the human clones who'd roamed the deep reaches of the derelict colony ship, *New Terra*. However, in Nata's case, it aptly identified her personality.

Neffess regarded her ship's telemetry and watched her friend land. She chose to stay in overwatch. Within moments, the hatch of Nata's traveler dropped, and her friend exited the fighter.

Nata waved overhead, knowing she'd be observed by Neffess.

An ancient stepped edifice that was brutally worn from the planet's harsh winds and sandstorms was near where Nata set down.

Nata had signaled her faceplate closed before she left the ship. It was protection against the heat and fierce swirling sands. She checked her air supply and decided she had time to investigate the structure.

The loose surface material was boot deep, the wind harsh, and the vegetation nonexistent.

The thought crossed Nata's mind that there was no reason for Alex to recommend to the queens that the Dischnya should stay away from the planet. Sawa was a desert, a dead world.

A subtle mound caught Nata's eye. It was an unnatural shape in that it was a perfect circle, and it protruded about twenty centimeters above the soft surface material. Everything pointed to a deliberate installation.

Nata chose to investigate the circle rather than the edifice. Her boots kicked up dust and sand, as she made her way toward the oddity. When she reached it, she kicked at the base and discovered it was metal. That piqued her curiosity. Scraping her boot around the circle, she was taken aback to discover it was a hatch.

Being the headstrong individual she was, Nata grabbed the lever embedded in the top of the hatch and yanked on it.

The hatch levered up, and thickly furred hands with dark nails reached out, grabbed Nata by the ankles, and yanked her off her feet. Then she was roughly dragged through the opening.

<Captain Draken,> Neffess sent. <This is an emergency comms. Lieutenant Nata set down on Sawa. She was walking on the surface. Then she suddenly disappeared.>

<State your position, Lieutenant,> Captain Pettifleur "Petite" Draken requested tersely. Her four lieutenants had completed their attack runs, and she'd anticipated Nata and Neffess would rejoin her ship after circling the far side of Sawa.

<I'm inward of the planet and in overwatch above Lieutenant Nata's ship, Captain,> Neffess sent.

"Black space," Petite muttered harshly, which drew the bridge crew's attention.

Petite normally operated with a great degree of restraint. This was why the crew members' nerves were rattled to hear their robust New Terran female commander this perturbed.

Before Petite continued her conversation with Neffess, she linked with her senior officers, Commander Descartes and Senior Captains Étienne and Alain de Long.

<Explain, Lieutenant Neffess, what did you mean by Lieutenant Nata disappeared while she was walking on Sawa's surface,> Petite queried.

<I followed Nata on telemetry, as she walked on the surface,> Neffess explained. She was well aware of who had joined the conversation, and her throat tightened in expectation of the rebuke Nata and she might face. <She headed toward a stepped edifice. Then she changed course. I took a sip on a drink tube. When I checked my heads-up display, she was gone.>

<Send the telemetry to my ship for the period from Lieutenant Nata setting down until her disappearance,> Petite commanded.

<Sending the telemetry now,> Neffess replied. <I highlighted the object that Nata was investigating. It looks like a hatch set in the ground. From the imagery, I think Nata was pulled underground.>

Petite was careful to halt her implant's comms app, while she silently swore. When the two lieutenants were assigned to her Trident, she'd had premonitions of disasters. While they were skilled graduates, they were poor substitutes for the two excellent veteran pilots she'd lost to a new Trident that had come online. She'd also lost her first officer, who was the warship's new captain.

<Lieutenant Neffess, maintain your position,> Petite sent. Switching links, she sent to Étienne, <Captain de Long, request permission to execute an extraction.>

<Negative, Captain, hold your position,> Étienne sent in reply. In turn, he resumed his link with Descartes and his twin, Alain.

<One of the nests will have her,> Alain continued. <Petite's security team will be insufficient for the task.>

Descartes received a link to vid files on Étienne's Trident, and he took a few ticks of time to review the imagery. They were recorded long ago, when Alex first set foot on Sawa.

The vids showed that the planet's Dischnya were unlike those on Omnia. Over the centuries, Sawa's nests were driven underground by the degenerating climate. Desperation for resources had fueled horrendous clashes among the nests, resulting in loss of many lives.

When Alex and his team had landed, they were nearly overrun by a local nest.

<The vids don't give me a complete understanding of the circumstances we might face in effecting a rescue,> Descartes sent. <I seek advice.>

<Étienne and I will need to execute the extraction, Commodore. We know what we'll face in the tunnels,> Alain sent. <We should take no less than a squadron's security forces.>

<That offers one solution,> Étienne sent. <I'd suggest an additional approach. There's every indication that we could make use of —>

<The queens and the wasats,> Alain finished. <I agree.>

Descartes examined the positions of his command's Tridents, most of which had yet to recover their fighters.

<Alain, your Trident is nearest Omnia,> Descartes sent. <Make for the planet. I'll communicate our needs to Hector, and he'll speak to the queens. I'll have three of your fighters intercept you on your flight to Sawa. Étienne, after your Tridents have recovered their fighters, sail for Sawa. Await Alain's arrival. These actions will give us time to plan our rescue. I assume we can afford that?>

<Affirmative,> the twins echoed.

<The Sawa queen will want to make use of Nata's capture to consolidate her power over the nest,> Étienne sent.

<We're speaking of days and not much longer,> Alain added. <It's imperative that the nest queen is informed of the lieutenant's importance to us. She'll preserve Nata's life to make a bargain that benefits her and her soma.>

<Understood. Execute,> Descartes ordered. Then the SADE created a conference link with Hector, Lydia, and Admirals Thompson, Plummer, and Jagielski. He sent the telemetry collected from Neffess's ship, while he updated the group.

Hector quickly realized that of the Omnian humans who had made that singular visit to Sawa, only Étienne and Alain remained in system. The other visitors had been Sawa Messa Dischnya, but they'd remained aboard the *Rêveur* or aboard the traveler that had landed. There'd been a brief episode, when a queen exited the ship to rescue a desperate warrior and later his mates and pups. Other than those individuals, the Omnian Dischnya had no contact with other Sawa soma.

<What are the assessments of the twins?> Ellie sent.

<They're knowledgeable about the circumstances of the underground nests,> Descartes replied. <They recommend a combined approach of security forces, queens, and wasats. They believe it must be made clear to the Sawa nest that holds the lieutenant that she's valuable to us.>

<Then the queen will know she has leverage,> Adrianna Plummer surmised. <That could be to our advantage.>

<What might she ask for in return?> Alphons asked.

Descartes relayed the question to Alain, but the reply became complicated, and he added the senior captain to the link.

<Repeat your response, Captain,> Descartes sent.

<After we've communicated Nata's value, we can expect the queen to bargain for several rounds,> Alain said.

<Each one requesting more and more from us,> Lydia sent. <She'll be testing our limits.>

<Assuredly,> Alain replied. <I expect the primary focus will be about food. They've been underground for a long time, and I don't know what resources remain available to them.>

<If we're not careful, we risk exposing our hand,> Ellie warned. She was a fan of the card games that Alex and his close companions used to play. She'd never participated, but that didn't stop her from observing the interplay.

<Explain, Admiral,> Hector sent.

<Presume the queen asks for food,> Ellie explained. <Then we deliver a small bounty to her that could feed the nest for weeks or a month.>

<The Sawa queen would realize that we have a location that can grow the food we delivered,> Adrianna interjected. <More than likely, she'd require transport of her nest to Omnia in exchange for returning Lieutenant Nata.>

<Your pardon,> Alain sent. <That's the purpose of the security team. We can make a generous offer. That will help her consolidate power within her nest, but our forces are there to remind her of the consequences of negotiating in bad faith.>

<Is there the possibility that the lieutenant will be killed?> Hector asked.

<Regardless of what we do, Ser, that is a distinct possibility,> Alain admitted. <It was dangerous enough the last time we visited the planet. I can't believe that the nests' circumstances have improved since then.>

<Is there a request for this group?> Hector asked the warship commanders.

<The de Long captains believe that Omnian queens should make the exchange offer,> Descartes sent.

<What is Lieutenant Neffess's status?> Alphons belatedly requested.

<She remained in overwatch, while Lieutenant Nata chose to visit the planet,> Descartes replied.

<Glad to see one of the youths displayed some common sense,> Alphons growled.

<I'll speak to Queen Nyslara,> Hector sent.

<If the queens choose to help,> Descartes sent, <their traveler should rendezvous with Captain de Long. His Trident is making for Omnia.>

<Understood, Commodore,> Hector sent and ended the conference links. If Hector had been human, he might have deeply sighed. As it was, he instantly connected to Nyslara, while he considered hundreds of ways to convey to her the events on Sawa. He adopted Alex's advice and chose to be direct.

<Admiral Hector,> Nyslara sent, holding up a hand to the Dischnya in her meeting.

<We've a problem on Sawa, Queen Nyslara,> Hector sent. <Lieutenant Nata landed, and she was captured by a nest.>

<Hold,> Nyslara sent. Then she linked to the queens and wasats in her meeting and shared Hector's message. When ready, she resumed her link with Hector and said, <Admiral, what steps are being taken to rescue Nata?>

<Commodore Descartes's squadrons have operational control,> Hector replied.

<The twins,> Pussiro, Nyslara's mate and a wasat, interjected, with an appreciative chuff.

<What are the senior captains planning?> Queen Sissyra inquired.

<Nata tested and triggered the opening of a surface hatch. She was dragged under,> Hector explained. <The twins intend to use security forces to enter the tunnels. However, they thought negotiations could best be conducted by Omnian queens.>

Hector was relieved that Descartes's choice of the Méridien twins was being well received by the queens and wasats.

<Any other details to the captains' plan?> Offwa, Queen Sissyra's wasat, asked.

<Based on the captains' experiences on Sawa, they believe it's imperative to communicate Nata's value to the nest queen, as soon as possible,> Hector replied.

<Commendable,> Pussiro sent. <The queen will realize the value of her prize.>

<While I'll readily admit that Nata's an unruly officer, she's still my adopted pup,> Nyslara sent. <Pussiro and I have a responsibility to protect her, even if it's from herself. I would ask, what are you prepared to do to recover your lieutenant?>

<I will do just what Alex would do, Queen Nyslara. That's everything necessary to recover one of our own,> Hector sent with determination.

The SADE heard numerous chuffs of support. Then he sent, <Queen Nyslara, please gather your delegation, take a traveler, and rendezvous with Captain Alain de Long's Trident. He's on approach to Omnia.>

My Books

Talus is the twenty-first novel 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. It's available in ebook, softcover, and audiobook versions.

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SADEs

Earthers

Talus

Elvians (forthcoming)

Pyreans Series

Empaths

Messinants

Jatouche

Veklocks

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, many times, in the science fiction categories of first contact, alien invasion, and space flight.