

# AXIS CROSSING

Gate Ghosts Book 1

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S. H. JUCHA

*Chapters 1 & 2  
Excerpt*

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Acknowledgments

*Axis Crossing* is the first novel in the [Gate Ghosts](#) series, which relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's fourth colony ship.

Gate Ghosts is a continuation of the Earthers' saga. Readers and listeners are advised to enjoy the preceding twin series, [The Silver Ships](#) and [Pyreans](#), to better understand the nuances in this third series.

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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.



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## Prologue

Earth's fourth colony ship, *Destiny*, launched outward on its long voyage from a construction station near the home world's moon.

The ship was a Con-Fed construction built with the credits of the European-Indian conclave, comprising the old EU, India, Singapore, and Thailand. The *Destiny* was the second of three ships that the conclave would manage to build and launch.

Another organization, the North American Confederation had successfully launched two colony ships to the stars.

The only other association that had touted intentions to send its citizens to the stars was the Russian-Chinese Concord. Unfortunately, its launches never came to fruition.

Like every other colony ship, the *Destiny's* passengers were placed in stasis.

The target star, identified as KL-1372, was a far reach for the ship. The crew count was upped from one thousand to two thousand. One hundred crew members were on duty for a year. In this way, the crew members lost only a year of life expectancy every twenty years.

Each team of crew members was tasked with the vigil to keep safe the fifty thousand citizens aboard.

Fortune favored the crew and the passengers of the *Destiny*. They made their target star without mishap.

As the *Destiny's* present captain approached KL-1372, she unveiled the name of the new home world that the passengers had selected by their votes. Naiad, the note said. The planet had been named for a Greek mythology water nymph said to have inhabited a river, spring, or waterfall.

The name had been chosen as a hope for the new home world. The starlight that fell on the rotating planet was weak, less than a quarter of

Earth's Sol. Much of the water and the gases that layered the surface was frozen.

However, many other characteristics of the planet were desirable. There was atmosphere, if thin, and the gravity was ninety-six percent that of Earth.

In the first century, the colonists grew their numbers through natural conception for the initial generations. Afterward, they used the genetic material stored aboard the *Destiny*. This had been a requirement of the contract they signed for the privilege of spreading humankind to the stars.

New construction was concentrated around the planet's equator. The colonists inhabited domes and struggled to develop their industries in the brutal subzero temperatures. Slowly, the heat from the various activities warmed the ice sheets near the domes, releasing water vapor and gases into the atmosphere. This accelerated the atmosphere's density and the planet's warming.

By no means did Naiad become the pearl that had been Earth, but the planet did present a robust opportunity for human life.

The domes, the underground transport tubes, and the above-surface sky bridges kept the population safe. Wherever possible, the infrastructure of buildings and transport hubs were placed aboveground, and heavy use was made of viewplates that transmitted the weak starlight and prevented heat loss.

Dangerous pastimes developed, such as ice racing. Drivers navigated their powerful vehicles through a maze of turns laid out across huge ice sheets.

There was never an audience at the races. The viewers were comfortably ensconced in their warm domiciles or offices. They watched the races on their viewing devices or through their implanted eyewear. The latter process involved receiving the vid transmissions and transferring the imagery to a viewer's optic nerves.

As the centuries passed, medical enhancements provided a way for the colonists' descendants to make the most of an environment that kept them indoors.

The ability to manipulate a human's genetic code led to various issues. Originally, the techniques developed to eliminate genetic weaknesses associated with diseases. Later, they led to modifications for pleasure. For the most part, these mods weren't overt. An ostentatious enhancement display was socially frowned on, except for the ice racers, who proudly sported theirs.

Individuals' secure identification measures quickly became obsolescent and necessitated the need to develop a simple and effective means of identifying each person.

Whether it was a smart decision or not, Naiad's governing body chose to have every newborn implanted with a chip.

C-chips, named for their inventor Edward Kulker, became the Naiads' personal identification system. The chips were encoded with the baby's original DNA strings, and government databases recorded the information.

In time, the tiny cids, as they came to be called, were embedded under the back of the hands of every citizen. They were the means by which humans identified themselves for financial transactions, security clearances, passports for travel between the stars, and many more mundane purposes.

By the sixth century after landing, the burgeoning population, which had already mined the system's moons and rings, chose to explore beyond the Gelus system.

The first survey attempts directed probes toward a strange phenomenon, whose energy emanations powerful arrays had detected. Over four years, several probes approached the seemingly distorted area of space and promptly disappeared. There were never explosions. The probes' signals were there, and then they weren't.

It would take nearly thirty years for Naiad physicists to identify the anomaly as the mouth of a wormhole. Thereafter, probes and small automated ships were sent into the wormhole's mouth to collect information but to no avail.

Slowly, interest was lost in attempting to discover a means by which objects sent into the wormhole could return.

A physicist by the name of Althea Hailey was undaunted by the failures. She continually harangued the scientists and engineers who governed the

decisions about what objects would be sent through the wormhole and when. Unfortunately, her ideas were continually rejected.

A corporate CEO, Francois Axis, was intrigued by Hailey's concept, and he invested the funds to launch his own vehicles. Hailey developed a quantum-coupled system that linked two small transports. One ship would remain on the Gelus side of the wormhole, and the other would carry the quantum-link through the wormhole.

The instantaneous link between ships would allow the far ship to signal when it had passed through the wormhole. Then the far ship would collect data on the starfield. After receiving a report of the completed assignment, the Gelus-side ship would message the far ship to return.

Prior to the experiment, nearly the entire Naiad population laughed at the Axis-Hailey enterprise. When the second transport popped out of the Gelus side of the wormhole two days later, the laughter abruptly stopped.

Francois Axis and Althea Hailey held the patents on her concept and implementation. There was some wrangling on the part of Naiad's government to relieve the pair of their patents, but the courts upheld Axis and Hailey's rights.

Passage experiments through the wormhole were tried with cultures of complex proteins and bacteria, which were continually destroyed.

The data the ships collected explained the phenomena. The cultures received huge doses of radiation, identified as originating from the wormhole.

Althea provided a solution to Francois.

Several probes later, one of the transports returned successfully. The bacteria cultures had flourished in their mediums.

The small probe that was sent had floated within a pair of spinning rings. The whirling rings provided a magnetic field that suspended the probe in the center and protected the tiny single-celled passengers from the wormhole's radiation.

A full-sized transport was launched three years later. It carried an assortment of plants and experiments using human blood and tissue samples. The media dubbed the transport, with its whirling rings, an Axis-ship. Every plant and culture survived.

Looping through a wormhole proved possible and safe, and Axis-ships were built to carry humans. Although the ships appeared extraordinary in size, it was the rings spinning around the central core that gave that impression. That core, floating within the magnetic field, served as a universal transport between the stars, carrying humans, personal goods, freight, and raw materials.

Naiads discovered a wealth of wormholes in their region of the galaxy, which resulted in an explosion of probe surveys, explorations, and, eventually, dome settlements.

Humankind's outward expansion from Naiad required Axis-ships and quantum-coupled stations at each end of a wormhole to manage message and data communication. However, the construction of the ships and stations were atrociously expensive.

The Naiad government found itself unable to compete with the corporations that invested enormous credits to fund their explorations.

When a corporate survey ship found a lucrative resource, a planet, a moon, or an immense asteroid, the company claimed the entire body. Without a presence in the faraway systems, the Naiad government could hardly object to the corporations' claims.

Corporate worlds, with their domes and mining processes, became the dominant entities among the rim stars. They migrated outward from Naiad via the wormholes.

Five wormhole loops outward from Naiad, the companies found a confluence of wormholes congregated around a single system. The collective area became known as Axis Crossing.

# 1: Abductions

## GENEVA, FILIUM SYSTEM RAW METALS PLANET

Escher slipped out of bed. He dressed as swiftly and quietly as he could, hoping not to wake Ceda. The effort was doomed to fail. Ceda's assigned below-surface cubicle was barely three by four meters. As usual, her hand slipped from beneath the covers, and Escher squeezed it gently before he exited the cubicle.

Gaining the wide corridor that ran under the dome and connected the other domes, Escher walked with a strong gait. Filium's starlight would soon strike the administrative dome, and he wanted to be in bed before his parents woke. In doing so, he hoped to eliminate the usual questioning about where he'd spent the night. At twenty-five years old, he didn't appreciate the lectures.

Escher understood his parents' concerns. Geneva was a corporate world owned by Raw Metals. Everyone on Geneva worked for the company. On this world, there were corporate rules and corporate norms. He was breaking a corporate norm.

In the Filium system, four known wormholes existed, earning the area of space the name of Axis Crossing.

Escher's parents, Timor and Dahlia Talons, were senior management. They were specialists in locating ore deposits and researching new mineral combinations. As company executives, they were always concerned about appearances, and they wouldn't approve of their son sleeping with a clone.

The Talons family arrived on Geneva when Escher was ten. The family was assigned a corporate asset, a clone called Ceda, who was two years older than Escher. Ceda was assigned to be a companion to Escher and his sister, Allie. This was a common practice on corporate worlds, where

families frequently transferred between mining worlds, and children became upset at the repetitive loss of their playmates.

As a teenager, Ceda had the additional duties of preparing meals, shopping, and cleaning the family domicile. It wasn't until Escher finished his online university degrees in advanced computer design that Ceda and he became lovers.

Walking the wide tunnel corridor in the early morning hours, Escher overheard the conversation of two mining supervisors in front of him.

"Heard security arrived. Looks like a takeover," one supervisor said.

"What kind of takeover has security arriving with mods and sidearms?" the other asked.

"What does it matter?" the first individual asked rhetorically. "Nothing will change for us. It's the crats who have to deal with the fallout."

A nudge in the side by the second man to his partner and a twist of the head had the first man glancing behind him.

"Sorry," the supervisor mumbled when he saw Escher. "Didn't mean anything."

Escher smiled and replied, "Didn't hear anything."

The supervisor tipped his head appreciatively. He'd been forgiven for the slur. Mining personnel frequently and privately referred to corporate management as crats, corporate rats.

Escher saw personnel far in front of him parting like waves to the tunnel's sides. It didn't occur to him that he should do the same. Management children had privileges.

Suddenly, Escher faced four security personnel, who halted as a unit. There were many things wrong with what Escher saw.

One, they were augmented. That was unusual. Takeover security arrived planetside wearing uniforms, indicating the new company, and made polite conversation with the local authorities.

Second, the agents were linked. That was indicated by the way they walked and stopped as one unit.

Third, an agent pointed his arm at Escher. An image projected above the back of his hand. It was Escher's face.

Everything about the moment scared Escher, and he did the one thing that he'd never considered would be necessary. He ran from corporate security.

Behind him, Escher heard the pounding of boots, as the augmented agents gave chase. While one part of his brain screamed this was all wrong, the other part thought for a way to evade his pursuers. His sole purpose was to get home. His parents would sort this out, and then everything would be fine.

The thought occurred to Escher that the only way to reach ground level, where corporate management and their families lived, was via elevator, and the security force would catch him while he waited for a car to arrive.

There was a second option, and Escher embraced the opportunity like a lifeline.

Chutes, revolving conveyors, moved mining personnel one at a time up and down the many tunnel levels beneath a dome.

Escher spotted a nearby chute, but there was a queue of eleven or more people waiting to ride it down. Despite the shouts of the security team leader ordering him to halt, he kept running.

The next chute had three people waiting, and Escher realized this was his last chance to evade capture. Apologizing loudly to the waiting miners, Escher shoved his way past them and jumped onto the moving chute. There was room for his feet on a metal ledge and not much more, and he gripped the chest-high hand bar tightly.

Behind him, he heard the three miners curse his privileged action. Then he heard their gasps and shocked utterances, as the security force arrived.

Escher rode the chute down two levels before he jumped off. The miners, who were servicing equipment in the tunnel, stared at him. Apparently, crats didn't visit their location. He nodded at them and asked, "Where's the nearest elevator to the surface?" To which, he received dumbfounded expressions.

"Passenger elevators don't service below the main corridor, sir," a young woman replied.

"Then I need another chute," Escher said.

A middle-age worker glanced at the young woman, and he tossed his head down the tunnel.

“This way, sir,” the woman said, beckoning with a hand.

Escher followed her.

“Did you get lost, sir?” the woman asked.

“Something like that,” Escher replied. “We have to hurry,” he added, and the pair started jogging.

At the next chute, Escher said, “Extend your slate to me.”

“Oh, no, sir. That’s not necessary. Happy to help,” the young woman replied. She smiled brightly and hurried away.

The chute side that Escher faced dropped people lower. He walked around the structure to the other side, grabbed the rising chute, and rode it upward. A strong beep on his slate signaled him to exit. Otherwise, a safety mechanism would stop the chute’s movement. Chutes didn’t travel any higher than the main corridor.

Escher glanced carefully up and down the corridor. Unlike the lower levels, this corridor was wide, brightly lit, and cleanly finished, making it easy to spot the security force, if they were still around. Seeing no one, Escher sprinted away from where he’d last encountered the four agents. He found an elevator, signaled it, and waited anxiously for its arrival.

When the car arrived, several individuals exited the elevator. Then Escher got on and triggered the doors closed. It rose smoothly and deposited him on the dome’s surface level.

Early starlight fell across the dome, creating long shadows. The viewplates that comprised the dome’s lattice-like structure, filtered the harmful rays, collected the solar energy, and preserved the interior heat.

Escher made his way toward his parents’ building. Twice, he had to duck out of sight. Armed and augmented security forces were escorting families. It made no sense to him.

As Escher approached the entrance to his family’s domicile, a message appeared on his sleeve slate. It read, “Escher, I’m by the kiosk across the pathway. Come quickly.”

Escher swiveled around, spotted his sister, Allie. She waved to him, and he ran to meet her.

As Allie pulled her brother into the shadows, she asked plaintively, “Escher, what’s going on? I saw them take away Mother and Father.”

“Were they secured in any way?” Escher asked with concern.

“No, but they didn’t look happy,” Allie replied.

“I saw whole families under escort,” Escher said. “I got a good look at the patches on the augmented shoulders. These are X-Ore security.”

“So, is this a takeover or something else?” Allie asked.

“I think something else,” Escher replied. This was the first chance he had time to think, and he struggled to put the pieces together.

“Escher, should we give ourselves up so that we can be with Mother and Father?” Allie asked, tugging on her brother’s arm.

“Give me a minute, Allie,” Escher pleaded.

Allie’s brain was working furiously too. “Where’s our security?” she asked.

“Our security isn’t augmented,” Escher retorted. “They’re glorified administrators. That means they’re probably hiding.”

“Where do you think the families were being taken?” Allie inquired earnestly.

The question crystallized Escher’s thinking. He turned to look directly into his sister’s eyes, while gripping her shoulders. “They were headed for the number one elevator,” he said.

Allie’s eyes teared, and she said unhappily, “That’s the direction that security took our parents, Escher. They’re headed for the shuttleport.”

“Yes,” Escher admitted sadly. “This isn’t a corporate takeover. Raw Metals is being raided,” Escher said, twiggling to what had happened.

“Why Mother and Father?” Allie asked plaintively.

Escher considered the families he’d seen. He ignored the sons and daughters and concentrated on the parents and their specialties. Snapping his fingers, he said, “The parents are mineral and exotic metal specialists.”

“What do they want them to do?” Allie asked.

“I don’t know,” Escher said. He regarded his sister, who’d begun to tremble, and he enfolded her in his arms.

Suddenly, Escher felt Allie pull him behind the kiosk, and he readily obeyed. “What is it?” he asked, whispering into his sister’s ear.

“More agents,” Allie whispered in return. “They’re leaving two of a foursome in our building’s lobby, and two are headed this way.”

Escher realized that the two agents coming toward them probably intended to hide behind their kiosk. Frantically gazing around, he spotted an air vent.

Grabbing Allie by the hand, Escher ran to the one-meter-square vent, unlatched the screen, swung it aside, and urged his sister to climb inside. Then he followed her and pulled the screen closed. He couldn’t latch it. So, he used his fingertips to keep the screen snug against its frame.

The micromesh filter didn’t allow Escher to see the agents clearly, but he could hear them. They weren’t speaking, but the subtle whirs of tiny motors and the hisses of hydraulics within the mods gave them away.

When Escher’s fingers began to lose feeling, he silently swapped places with Allie.

It was hours before the agents left, and the brother and sister could safely crawl out.

“I don’t get it,” Allie whispered. “If this was a raid, why are X-Ore agents still here?”

“X-Ore needs top-rated specialists for some important purpose,” Escher reasoned. “The mods are taking entire families because the children will ensure cooperation.”

Allie pulled on Escher’s arm. Searching her brother’s face, she asked, “Do you think Mother and Father would want us with them?”

“If you were them, would you want us to be taken?” Escher replied.

“I knew you’d say that,” Allie said dejectedly.

“You’d rather I lied?” Escher asked.

“Yes ... no,” Allie returned. “So what now?”

“We need a place to hide, while we get some help,” Escher replied.

“From whom?” Allie inquired.

“Don’t know, really,” Escher said, shrugging. “But someone has to be upset about being raided. We can talk to them about getting our parents back.”

Allie would have asked more questions, but Escher had a firm hold of her hand, and he was tugging her along one of the dome's broad circular pathways.

At an elevator, Escher signaled for a car, and the pair took it down to the main tunnel.

"Stay to the right side of the corridor," Escher said. "Walk quickly but confidently."

"Where are we going?" Allie asked in surprise. She'd been living in the upper dome for fifteen years, and she'd never been in the main tunnel that connected the domes of Geneva. That her brother didn't answer her, frustrated Allie, but circumstances were too unsettled for her to make a point of it.

Exiting the broad tunnel, Escher turned down a warren of ever-tightening corridors. He stopped at a narrow hatch and keyed in an access code. The door slipped aside with a whisper.

"Whose place is this?" asked Allie, when her brother pulled her inside.

"A friend's," Escher replied perfunctorily. "We should be safe here for a day or two."

"Since when do you have a friend among the miners?" Allie asked, her eyes narrowing, as she regarded her brother.

"Are you hungry?" Escher asked.

"Starved," Allie replied. She watched her brother move around the cramped space, with a deft familiarity, which made her even more curious about Escher's mysterious friend.

After Allie ate, she yawned, stretched out on the bed, and closed her eyes.

Escher watched his sister fall quickly asleep. He envied her talent to do that. He often lay awake for a half hour or more before he finally fell asleep. His mind wouldn't turn off because he laid his head on a pillow.

The hours passed, and still Ceda didn't return. Escher started to worry that hiding in Ceda's cubicle might have been a mistake.

The whispers of the cubicle's hatch opening and closing woke Allie. When she saw Ceda, she leapt out of bed and ran to hug the woman,

who'd treated her as a younger sister for fifteen years. "I'm so glad to see a friendly face," she whispered urgently into Ceda's ear.

"It's good to see you too," Ceda replied, smiling at Allie.

Then Allie watched Ceda and her brother embrace. The two held each other fervently, and Allie walked around to stand beside them. "Friends?" she asked dubiously. "I don't think so. How come I didn't know about this?" she queried, wagging a finger between the pair.

As Ceda and Escher eased apart, he said, "If it became known, I would prefer the ore load drop on me alone."

"I could have kept your secret," Allie protested.

"And when Mother sat you down and asked if you knew?" Escher inquired gently.

Allie chewed her lower lip, which had always been a dead giveaway about her guilt. "Probably not then," she admitted.

"Are you angry with me?" Ceda asked. Allie's opinion of her had always mattered, and she'd often wondered whether Allie considered her a true friend or a close clone companion.

Allie wrapped her arms around Ceda's neck and clung to her. "Never with you," she said.

After the hug, Allie retreated to the bed, and Escher and Ceda occupied the two padded stools at the cubicle's tiny table. She saw the intimate manner in which Escher and Ceda entwined hands. In a confused moment, she was happy and concerned for her brother.

Corporate strictures governing clones were lengthy and severely defined. For instance, clones were awarded to senior management and could not be kept if the individuals left the company. The higher the principal in the corporation, the more generous was the corporate personnel department. The Talons had received a beauty in the form of Ceda.

Then there was the severe restriction against the transport of clones. Only security was allowed to move them between worlds. Clones had cids identifying them as corporate assets. Despite being human, they weren't citizens.

The primary reason for the strict observance of the transport edict was that the manufacture of clones was outlawed on Naiad. If ever a clone made it to Naiad, they would probably be issued a new cid and granted freedom, and corporate accounting hated the idea of deducting an asset from its balance sheets. To date, not a single clone had reached Naiad.

“You can’t stay here,” Ceda said earnestly to Escher, drawing Allie away from her musings.

“Why not?” Allie queried.

“I was with security half the day,” Ceda replied.

“Which security?” Escher asked.

“That’s the weird thing,” Ceda explained. “I’d gone to the apartment. No one was there for breakfast. So, I started cleaning. Then security, Raw Metals personnel, walked into the place. No door signal; no pardon me. They searched the place, and then they told me to accompany them. At security’s office, I was interrogated about the whereabouts of you two. All the time, an X-Ore commander watched me. She was so augmented that she was scary.”

“But you couldn’t tell them anything, could you?” Allie stated her question as if it was a fact.

Escher watched Ceda’s head drop, and he asked, “How did they threaten you?”

“I’ve two days to find you and turn you in to them,” Ceda responded forlornly.

“Turn us in to whom?” Allie asked. She was getting confused by the players.

“The X-Ore commander laid out my choices,” Ceda replied. “The message was clear. When she had you in custody, you’d be taken offworld, and I’d be placed in play.”

Tears filled Ceda’s eyes at the thought of losing her family. She had known it would probably happen one day, but when Escher and she had become lovers, she’d begun to hope.

Escher left his seat. He stood behind Ceda and looped his arms around Ceda’s shoulders to comfort her. “What did the commander offer you?” he asked.

Ceda snuffled. "If I was cooperative, I could be sent to a nice corporate family," she replied. "If I wasn't, the commander said she would find unsavory employment for me."

"What would that be?" Allie asked. She saw her brother shake his head at her.

"There are versions of female clones that are sent to the mines," Ceda replied, smiling painfully through her tears.

"To do ..." Allie started to say, before the answer caught up with her mouth. "That's wrong," she said stridently.

"There are a lot of things wrong with the concept of corporate clones," Escher said. Then he asked, "With these conglomerates light-years from Naiad, who is out here to tell them what they can and can't do?"

Allie stared at her brother. Her eyes pleaded with him to offer a solution. She'd always thought of him as the analytical one. When Escher said, "We need a plan," she brightened.

"Ceda, first tell me about the interview," Escher requested. Then he listened intently as Ceda reviewed the details of what had been an intense interrogation.

The interview's description had Allie placing her back against the wall and hugging her knees to her chest. Security wasn't supposed to act like this. Then again, she was reminded that Ceda wasn't classified as a citizen. So much of her affluent bubble was being burst today.

What Escher heard from Ceda confirmed his worst fears. Multiple families, escorted by heavily augmented and armed X-Ore security, had been taken to the shuttle dome. They'd be transported offworld. The common theme among the parents was their engineering specialties.

"How do we get help?" Escher mused. He returned to his seat, and his eyes wandered far away.

"Would the miners hide us?" Allie asked quietly.

Ceda crossed to sit beside Allie and placed an arm around her shoulders.

"If you mean the human miners, they wouldn't want to get involved," Ceda whispered. "If they were caught, it would void their contracts. They'd be shipped to Naiad without a credit to their names. And if you

mean the clones, it's the same thing. If the mining clones work hard and behave themselves, they can have the semblance of normal lives. Everything is provided for them. They can even have partners, even though they can't procreate."

The words struck Allie, and she whispered urgently, "You can't have children?"

"No," Ceda replied. "We're designed that way. It's too risky for the conglomerates to tempt Naiad forces to journey out here if clone children start dropping planetside on the home world."

"How come I don't know things like this?" Allie asked plaintively. She was getting angry at her ignorance of what she considered important facts about their lives.

"You aren't employed by the company," Ceda explained.

"You mean Mother and Father knew?" Allie inquired.

"It's part of a corporate employee's indoctrination training," Ceda explained. "It's imperative that new employees know the dos and the don'ts."

"We need to see Thorne," Escher said, breaking out of his reverie.

"I don't like him," Allie complained.

"And I don't trust him," Ceda added.

"Agree with both of you," Escher responded, "but he always seems to know what's going on. We'll find out a lot more from him."

"When do we do this?" Allie asked.

"The sooner, the better," Escher replied.

When Allie stood, Ceda rose, crossed to Escher, and hugged him. "Good fortune," she whispered and hugged him tighter.

"Pack a small bag, especially food," Escher replied to Ceda.

"It's too dangerous to accompany you," Ceda said in alarm.

Escher stared quietly at Ceda.

"You know what I mean," Ceda stated firmly. "The three of us together will stand out. The two of you will have a better chance alone."

Escher's eyebrows lifted resignedly. Then he sat down.

Allie smiled. This was one of the reasons that she dearly loved her brother.

“What are you doing?” Ceda railed.

“I guess we’re waiting to be taken,” Escher explained. “Then the three of us will be in the hands of one nasty X-Ore commander.”

Ceda didn’t know whether to cry or celebrate, but she made up her mind quickly. Kissing the top of Escher’s head, she remarked, “Foolish idiot.” Then she hurried to cram some of her food supplies in what would appear as a shopping bag.

When Ceda declared she was ready, the trio slipped out of the cubicle. Entering the main tunnel, Allie and Escher led, and Ceda walked dutifully behind.

## 2: Friend or Foe?

“Keep going,” Ceda said quietly, as Escher and Allie slowed at the nearest elevator to the surface. When she realized that Escher hadn’t heard her over the corridor’s noise, she walked purposely past the brother and sister.

“What’s she doing?” Allie whispered, as Ceda put more distance between them.

“She knows the below-surface ways better than we do,” Escher replied. “I think she’s headed toward the dome’s center. By this time of night, the lights will be bright on the outer rings, where most shops, restaurants, and entertainments are located. With the inner rings devoted to the residential zones, the pathway lights will be kept dim.”

“So we can view the stars at night through the dome’s shield,” Allie supplied. “That was always a pleasure, but after seeing where Ceda lives, it makes me sick. We’ve enjoyed so much privilege.”

“There’ll be time for recriminations much, much later,” Escher admonished. “Right now, let’s focus on staying out of the hands of X-Ore security. We follow Ceda, but we keep our distance.”

Ceda stopped at an elevator.

Escher and Allie saw the door slide aside, and they hurried to catch the car. It hadn’t the usual surface niceties. In fact, it was extremely rudimentary.

Purposely, Ceda stood quietly on the other side of the car, while it ascended. When it stopped, she exited quickly and waited for Escher and Allie to join her.

“Where are we?” Allie asked, gazing at the utilitarian corridor.

“Clone access to residential buildings,” Ceda commented. “It saves us time getting to and from work and accomplishing our chores. Management ensures they squeeze the most out of their assets.”

Witnessing the pain in Allie's eyes, Ceda quickly apologized. "Sorry," she said. "That remark was out of line." Then she quickly turned and led the way down the corridor.

"I've been so ignorant," Allie whispered to Escher. "It makes me mad."

"Don't feel bad," Escher replied. "I was that way too until Ceda started speaking about the world she inhabits."

"How long?" Allie asked, swinging a finger between Ceda and him.

"First graduation celebration," Escher replied.

"That was four years ago," Allie exclaimed in astonishment.

"You must be quiet," Ceda requested. "We don't want to attract attention."

Allie waved her hand palm outward to Ceda to indicate the message had been delivered.

Ceda stopped at a plain door.

"Wait," Allie whispered. "Escher, what are you planning to do?"

"Haven't thought it through," Escher admitted.

Ceda turned to Escher. "You need a plan before we go through this door," she said, and she crossed her arms in front of her to wait.

"I know Thorne and his family will still be here," Escher explained. "His parents are in accounting. Everyone who was taken shared similar specialties."

"You can't walk into their apartment," Allie stated adamantly.

"That part I know," Escher retorted.

Allie had another thought, but Ceda's hand on her forearm halted the words. She'd seen Escher's eyes lose their focus.

A few minutes later, when Ceda saw Escher's determined expression, she asked, "Are we ready?"

Allie regarded her brother's face and replied, "Hard to tell, but let's do this anyway."

Ceda passed the back of her hand over a panel, which read her cid, and the door slid aside. She peeked into the corridor. Seeing no one, she waved at Escher and Allie to follow her.

The new corridor was strikingly different from the one that they'd just left. There was no doubt that they were walking a residential corridor.

“You lead,” Ceda said to Escher.

“I don’t know where we are,” Escher whispered urgently.

“Sorry,” Ceda replied. “We’re in Thorne’s building. I just don’t know where he lives.”

“Oh,” Escher uttered. Then he led the way to an elevator at the end of the corridor. When he triggered the panel, it indicated they were on the third floor, and that the car was en route to him.

In the car, Escher signaled the fifth floor. Thorne’s parents had a top floor apartment, which Thorne often bragged about.

Escher hadn’t recognized he was in Thorne’s building because each floor was decorated in a different motif. The higher the level, the nicer the arrangements.

“Ceda, is there a back corridor access on this floor?” Escher asked.

“Assuredly,” Ceda replied. “We’ll use the one mid-corridor.”

“You and Allie wait inside there,” Escher directed.

Her brother’s tone told Allie that this wasn’t the time to argue.

Escher and Allie followed Ceda, who walked farther down the corridor and stopped at a decorative panel. When she passed her hand over the display, it recessed and slid aside.

“Can I access this?” Escher asked.

“Wrong cid type,” Ceda replied. “Tap lightly. I’ll hear you.”

When the display slid shut behind the women, Escher proceeded to the end of the corridor where it split. Two doors to the left was the Thorne family residence.

Rather than use the apartment door’s panel, he tapped lightly. Then he raced around the corner and waited.

“No one here,” Escher heard a female teenager complain loudly. It would be Thorne’s young sister.

After a brief wait, Escher repeated his act. There was silence, and then Escher heard Thorne hiss, “Escher, is that you?”

When Escher stepped around the corner, Thorne blanched.

“Are you vacuum sucked, Escher?” Thorne exclaimed in a hushed voice. “You can’t be here. You’ll get my family arrested.”

“I need to know what’s going on,” Escher replied, “and then I’ll be gone.”

“What makes you think I know anything?” Thorne retorted, motioning Escher to step around the corner.

“You always know things, Thorne,” Escher shot back. “Tell me what I need to know.”

“Fine,” Thorne replied. “I’ll tell you what I have now, and I can probably find out more tomorrow morning.”

Escher had heard Thorne constantly brag about his contact in dome security. It’s what made him a good source and a dangerous one.

“There’s some hush-hush issue on Beta Two,” Thorne continued.

“That’s an X-Ore planet,” Escher mused.

“Right. Apparently, X-O needs engineers who specialize in creating materials from exotic substances. Things that haven’t been made yet ... futuristic stuff,” Thorne explained.

“What else?” Escher prodded.

“That’s all I’ve got right now,” Thorne said hurriedly. “I’ve got to get back inside before my nosey sister comes out looking for me. Tell me where you’ll be about nine tomorrow morning. I’ll meet you there with more details.”

“Tomorrow, nine, in front of my parents’ building,” Escher said, pointing a finger firmly at Thorne.

“I’ll be there,” Thorne promised and hurried around the corner.

Escher wasted no time. He raced down the hallway and tapped lightly on the decorative panel.

Ceda heard Escher, and she used her cid to trigger the hidden door aside.

“What happened?” Allie asked anxiously, after the panel slid closed.

“Thorne said that the families were taken to Beta Two,” Escher reported.

“That’s two loops outward,” Allie interjected. “Why?”

“All Thorne knew was that it’s a secret X-Ore project requiring exotic metal specialists,” Escher said. “We’re meeting tomorrow at nine, or so he thinks.”

The women grinned at Escher, who was tweaking his eyebrows upward.

“Where’s this happening?” Ceda asked.

“In front of our building,” Escher replied.

“That’s too public,” Ceda remarked, surprised that Escher would take the risk.

“Yes and no,” Escher replied with a smile. “How do you feel about air vents?”



“What do you suppose is going on, Lita?” Gat’r asked.

From their hiding place, Lita and Gat’r had watched a strange scene unfold. They’d arrived at the dome’s sweet moment when the outermost ring lights faded. Starlight crept across Geneva’s surface, but it had yet to strike the dome. It was the perfect time to make a food run on the kiosks that lined the walkways.

The pair had arrived in time to see three residents skulk along the building faces and hide behind the kiosk that was supposed to be their first target.

Lita was the number two in the gang, and Gat’r was her muscle.

As a boy, Gat’r had lost both arms. He’d been with his father when the engine of a huge piece of boring equipment had melted down and exploded. The father was killed, and Gat’r was severely injured. The mother had leveraged her future contract payout to purchase her son’s augmentations.

Gat’r had hated the powerful tools that had replaced his hands. In protest, he’d decorated them by welding scales on the metal surfaces. He’d copied the imagery from one of Earth’s ancient creatures.

A few years later, Gat’r’s mother was dead, and, at the age of fourteen, Gat’r was an abandoned orphan.

Lita chose Gat’r to accompany her because it gave him a purpose for the augmentations that he still detested. Their food acquisition technique

was smash and grab. Gat'r's heavy mechanical hands and arms would break through the kiosk's tough barriers.

"Why are crats hiding?" Gat'r asked Lita.

From Gat'r and Lita's vantage point, they'd watched the women crawl into a huge air vent, while the man had stayed hidden behind the kiosk. He'd frequently checked his slate.

The pair's next surprise was to witness a dome security squad hide in various places on the other side of the broad pathway.

Lita had ducked deeper into the shadows, and Gat'r had followed. He was careful not to let his metal monsters, as he called the augmentations, scrape against hard surfaces and make noise.

"What are you thinking?" Gat'r asked, intently focusing on Lita, who seemed deep in thought.

Lita smiled at the seventeen-year-old. At twenty-two, she was one of the oldest of the gang, and the younger ones looked to her as their mother figure. She rubbed Gat'r's head, which he relished, craving the touch of human hands.

"I think," Lita said, "that there's a meeting to take place, and those three who arrived first are supposed to walk into a trap."

"Why would security want to arrest crats?" Gat'r inquired. He was confused by actions that made no sense to him.

The flying metal that killed Gat'r's father and took Gat'r's arms also hit the boy's temple. Despite the surgery, permanent damage had been done to the right side of his brain. Gat'r had always appreciated Lita's patience with his questions.

"Good question, Gat'r," Lita replied. "It must have something to do with X-Ore's security invading our dome."

"Are we going to bust some kiosks, Lita?" Gat'r asked impatiently.

"Not this morning, Gat'r," Lita replied. "This is too important. Those three who are hiding might be just the people who Jasper needs."

"Are they going to join the gang?" Gat'r asked.

"In a way," Lita explained. "They're going to help us, and we're going to help them."

Gat'r nodded his acceptance of the compromise.

The pair returned to their view from the rooftop. They watched the man behind the kiosk set a small reflective ball on the deck at the kiosk's edge. It was a child's toy.

"What's he doing now?" Gat'r asked.

"Clever," Lita commented, which made Gat'r smile. He liked to hear about clever people. Somewhere in his damaged brain, he believed he'd once been clever. Had he been able to save the fantastic drawings that he'd created before his accident, he would have had evidence of that fact.

"The man is using the reflective ball to watch across the pathway without showing himself," Lita explained.

"Pretty good for a crat," Gat'r said, chuckling quietly.

"Yes, it is. Yes, it is," Lita replied, speaking even more thoughtfully the second time.

"Is there going to be fighting, Lita?" Gat'r asked eagerly.

"I hope not," Lita said, laying a hand soothingly on the back of Gat'r's neck. "We need those three unharmed."

"I'll protect them," Gat'r promised, lifting his mech arms.

"Not against security, Gat'r," Lita admonished. "They'd hurt you. I've told you this."

"Yes, sorry," Gat'r said contritely. He hated it when he forgot things that Lita told him. When he'd been reminded, he'd practiced thinking about what she'd said over and over until he could recall her advice. Although, more often, he wasn't successful.

From behind the kiosk, Escher checked his slate chronometer again. It was a half hour to go before the meeting. That's when he saw the Raw Metals security team exit his building, scatter, and hide. He didn't bother to swear when Thorne showed on the hour. Their suspicions were confirmed. Thorne hadn't been trustworthy.

Now, Escher crouched to study the reflection in the mirrored ball. He knew they couldn't leave their hiding place until the agents disbanded. At a quarter hour after nine, the team appeared from their secreted placements. Two X-Ore security agents arrived. One wore the shoulder insignias of a commander, and she turned and surveyed the area.

Escher's heart quickened. He was stunned to see the agents spread out to search the area.

The ball's reflection showed Escher when he had a clear window of time in which to move, he snatched the ball and stuck it in his pocket. Then he snuck behind the kiosk to the rear building.

At the vent, Escher whispered, "Open up."

The women released the vent screen, and Escher levered it open, quickly climbed inside, and pulled it closed.

Allie was anxious to ask what happened, but the tense expressions of Ceda's and Escher's faces kept her quiet. Soon, the trio heard the sounds of security agents checking behind the kiosk.

"I'll be happy when that X-O commander gets her butt off this planet," an agent remarked.

"Don't let her hear you say that," another voice said. "Besides, I don't think she's leaving until she has every family member."

"Can you believe the Talons' son ran from X-O agents?" the first agent asked. "Why would he do that?"

"That's a foolish question," the second voice replied. "With those augmentations and those weapons, they'd scare me. Why wouldn't a citizen be frightened?"

Soon afterward, the trio in the vent heard the voices and footsteps fade.

"How soon can we climb out of here?" Allie whispered.

"I've blundered," Escher said, hanging his head.

"Thorne turned us in, didn't he?" Allie insisted.

"Yes, he did," Escher admitted. "But my mistake was in hiding here."

"Because of what the agents said," Ceda offered, and Escher nodded.

Allie stared through the gloom at her companions.

Seeing Allie's frown, Ceda explained. "We've just heard agents comment that the X-Ore commander who witnessed my interrogation is here to stay until the two of you are caught."

"Oh," Allie uttered. She regarded her brother. "Then you don't know when it will be safe to leave the vent." With a resigned sigh, she added, "Oh, well, might as well make ourselves comfortable."

The trio had only a meter of shaft length before the vent dropped deep into the tunnels. Allie sat opposite Ceda, and the women stretched out, their legs crisscrossing. Escher took the space next to the vent screen. He tied a piece of clothing to an internal protrusion on the screen to make it easier to keep it closed.

“Gat’r, listen carefully to me,” Lita instructed. “Go find Jasper. Tell him that Lita said it’s important. Tell him to bring Red and Scrounger. Now, repeat my message.”

Four recitations later, Gat’r was ready, and he crawled silently away. He lived for these moments. Lita had entrusted him with something important.

Using the gang’s secret exit from the surface, Gat’r dropped several tunnel levels. Then he asked everyone he saw for Jasper’s whereabouts. An hour of searching resulted in zero contacts, but Gat’r was undaunted. Although, he was getting hungry.

“Bibi!” Gat’r cried excitedly, when he spotted a member of the gang. “I need Jasper. Important!”

“Okay, Gat’r. Calm down,” Bibi replied, placing her hands on Gat’r’s shoulders where they were safe. “Who needs Jasper?”

“Lita does. It’s important!” Gat’r said.

“Did you eat yet, Gat’r?” Bibi asked, examining his flushed face.

When Gat’r shook his head, Bibi pulled a juice drink from her pouch and handed it to him.

Gat’r popped the tab and guzzled it in one continuous flow. “Good,” he commented, with a small burp.

“Do you have a message for Jasper?” Bibi asked, knowing Gat’r’s challenge.

“Lita’s message,” Gat’r replied, nodding vigorously.

“Why don’t you share it with me, Gat’r? I can help you remember,” Bibi urged.

Gat’r thought this was a great idea. He carefully lowered his arms to his sides and practiced breathing like Lita had taught him to do.

Bibi waited, watching Lita’s influence on the teenager.

When Gat'r was ready, he rolled off the message, with only a few words omitted.

"One more time, Gat'r," Bibi encouraged. "She noted the difference in the repetition and requested he try one more time. The second and third recitations matched, and she was confident she'd heard Lita's message correctly.

Bibi led Gat'r to where Jasper and most of the gang were working.

"Gat'r has a message for you, Jasper," Bibi said.

"Talk to me, Gat'r," Jasper encouraged.

Gat'r repeated his breathing exercise, and then he spooled off Lita's message.

Jasper glanced toward Bibi. Her nod told him that the relay was probably accurate.

"Great job, Gat'r," Jasper said, ruffling the boy's shorn hair. "Red, Scrounger, you're with me. The rest of you stay at it."

Turning to Gat'r, Jasper added, "Let's go see what's interested Lita," and Gat'r nodded enthusiastically. Then Jasper led the way to the surface through the gang's unique pathway.

## My Books

*Axis Crossing* is the first novel in the [Gate Ghosts](#) series, which relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's fourth colony ship.

Gate Ghosts is a continuation of the Earthers' saga. Readers and listeners are advised to enjoy the preceding twin series, [The Silver Ships](#) and [Pyreans](#), to better understand the nuances in this third series.

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

### The Silver Ships Series

*The Silver Ships*

*Libre*

*Méridien*

*Haraken*

*Sol*

*Espero*

*Allora*

*Celus-5*

*Omnia*

*Vinium*

*Nua'll*

*Artifice*

*Sojourn*

*Alliance*

*SADEs*

*Earthers*

*Talus*

*Elvians*

*Q-Gates*

*Conclave*

**Pyreans Series**

*Empaths*

*Messinants*

*Jatouche*

*Veklocks*

**Gate Ghosts Series**

*Axis Crossing*

*Clone Crisis* (forthcoming)

## The Author



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

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

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

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

Readers have been generous with their comments, which they've left on Amazon and Goodreads for others to review. I truly enjoy what I do, and

I'm pleased to read how my stories have positively affected many readers' lives.

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

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