

BEYOND THE GATE

Cercians Book 4

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.

Copyright © 2025 by S. H. Jucha

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Published by Troubled Tales, Inc.

www.scottjucha.com

ISBN: 979-8-9989125-2-8 (e-book)

ISBN: 979-8-9989125-3-5 (softcover)

First Edition: September 2025

Cover: Messinant Ship-Gate-One

Design: Damon Za

Acknowledgments

Beyond the Gate is the fourth novel in [Cercians](#), a series in the Earthers Saga that relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's colony ships.

I wish to extend a special thanks to my independent editor, Joni Wilson, whose efforts enabled the finished product. To my proofreaders, Abiola Streete, David Melvin, Ron Critchfield, Tiffany Crutchfield, and John Punshon, I offer my sincere thanks for their support.

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

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.

Contents

1: Juta or Thet	1
2: Contention	16
3: Elite Anxiety	31
4: Jot-ma Visitor	43
5: Conclave Priority	56
6: So Many Signals.....	69
7: Menagerie	82
8: The Hunt Continues	94
9: Daddy's Girl	109
10: Uneasy Exchange	120
11: Tough Choice.....	132
12: This Is Unreal	144
13: Resistance.....	161
14: Where to Start?	171
15: Energy Secrets	184
16: Truths Revealed	198
17: Cercian Protection	212
18: Fortune Prevails	227
19: Expansion	245
20: Behind the Star	258
21: Where Did They Go?.....	273
22: Catastrophe.....	286
23: This Is Unexpected	301
24: Tough Decision	315
25: Risky Location	330
26: Ship-Gate-One.....	344
27: Is Rescue Coming?	358
28: Foothold	374
29: Critical Error.....	391
30: Cercians' Decisions	405
Glossary	419

My Books.....	425
The Author.....	427

1: Juta or Thet

KEGA MILITARY BASE ARKLEM SYSTEM

Try as Orgeth might, he couldn't imitate the sweet tones of Sven's whistling. So, he did the next best thing. He sought Peña, who possessed a collection of Sven's tunes.

Thinking he might have to demonstrate his need, Orgeth whistled a bar for Peña.

The first-gen sister heard growls rushing across the Onda's lips. Peña took pity on Orgeth, who knew his imitation of Sven's whistling had been a disaster. The fact that Orgeth admired Sven's whistling had charmed Peña, and she knelt and hugged the little Kega.

Orgeth felt the warmth from Peña's synth-skin. He'd first detected that sensation from Merlie. With Merlie, he'd asked why the sister required heat on her synthetic skin. When Merlie had laughed, he couldn't help but grin. Still, she hadn't offered an explanation. Instead, she told him that it was Peña's right to explain this to him.

However, Orgeth had never asked the first-gen sister the question. The answer, at least some of it, had occurred to him. On more than one occasion he'd seen affectionate exchanges between Sven and Peña. It dawned on him that Peña was warming her synth-skin for those moments with Sven, and the *Storyteller's* second-gen sisters had imitated it for biologicals they appreciated.

Feeling extremely thankful after receiving a link from Peña to a database of numerous recordings by Sven, Orgeth selected a tune, as he strolled the liner's spine. His cadence kept time with Sven's pace.

Entering the conference room, Orgeth lamented having to end the tune early.

“An auspicious meeting,” Orgeth announced to the three other attendees. He climbed into a chair and signaled it to rise to make his position comfortable. Glancing at Commanding Officers Sarvrest and Bethram, he knew via his implant that his sibling, Ondeft, had informed the senior officers of the reason for the conference.

“We feel this meeting is premature,” Sarvrest stated emphatically.

“In what way?” Orgeth inquired politely.

“We think that the admiral shouldn’t be leaving our system at this time,” Bethram replied.

“Have you shared those opinions with Admiral Pappas?” Orgeth asked. In fact, he knew that they had done just that. Salus had sent the admiral’s conversation to Amalima, who had told Orgeth of the commanding officers’ concerns. In turn, he’d relayed to Amalima his thought that he should intervene, which Mila was happy to allow.

“Yes, we have,” Sarvrest replied confidently.

“And what did she say?” Ondeft queried.

“We received a lengthy reply that encapsulated the conclave’s primary goals and her duties, which we were unable to interpret,” Bethram acknowledged. The moment he’d spoken, his eyes narrowed at Orgeth and Ondeft. “That’s why the two of you are here, correct?” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” Orgeth acknowledged.

“Why the subterfuge?” Bethram asked.

“It’s not subterfuge,” Orgeth said. “You didn’t accept the admiral’s explanation. I’m here to help you understand the opportunity that we mustn’t ignore.”

Sarvrest’s response was cut off by Bethram’s hand on his forearm.

“Give it a try, Orgeth,” Bethram allowed.

“Both of you took great personal risks to challenge the revolt,” Orgeth said. “It was the right thing to do. However, putting down the mutiny was only the beginning of our challenges.”

“Don’t forget the success of our females and many of our engineers and techs working for the conclave,” Ondeft, the sibling, interjected. “They’re protected by the conclave, while they earn conclave credits.”

“Think about what my sibling is telling you,” Orgeth encouraged.

“Happier Kega citizens?” Sarvrest tentatively offered.

Through the siblings’ link, Ondeft shared, <Does conclave medical have the means to open an individual’s eyes to gaze at the future?>

<Focus,> Orgeth counseled his younger sibling. <We must convince them to support the admiral.> Speaking to the commanding officers, he said, “Our citizens who are supporting the conclave on Da-fer will be taken care of for food, lodging, and other personal needs. In time, they’ll rotate to our home world or here.”

“And you mustn’t think our females will be content to go home,” Ondeft added. When he received dubious glances from Sarvrest and Bethram, he said, “Young females, who have had exposure to the conclave and other races, won’t be the young you remember. Furthermore, where are all the available young males?”

The commanding officers shared wide-eyed expressions.

“Before you get too wrapped up in the concept of your daughters mixing with our military,” Orgeth said, “some of our Kega might not return to us. Look at my sibling and me. We already have implants. However, the point I was making earlier is that citizens who do return will have saved significant amounts of credits, and they’ll want to spend them.”

“On what?” Sarvrest asked. “There is little on our base that males or females might desire.”

Orgeth and Ondeft folded their arms in a like manner, indicating the influence of siblings, and they regarded the commanding officers with ill-disguised impatience.

“I would wish the pair of us had implants,” Bethram lamented, realizing he’d like a private discussion with Sarvrest. His only thought was to advance the discussion in small steps. “Our citizens will have credits, and we won’t have the goods they desire. Do you believe that will be because of the conclave’s influence?”

“Absolutely,” Orgeth replied. “Our citizens will be exposed to many other cultures and their possessions.”

“How are they to get something that a race might offer a distance across the galaxy?” Sarvrest inquired.

“Two ways,” Ondeft returned. “Order it, or make replicas and sell them.”

“So, the enormous number of credits will create Kega commerce,” Bethram reasoned.

“Precisely,” Orgeth responded.

“Relate this part of the discussion to our concerns about the admiral’s plan,” Sarvrest requested.

“Let me ask this question,” Orgeth said. “Do you wish the Kega to develop commercial interests internally and externally without the cooperation of the Juta and the Thet?”

“Why should we need to decide that now?” Sarvrest queried.

“Every Onda carrier is blocked from entering the most productive local systems,” Ondeft pointed out. “The Juta and the Thet don’t have the conclave’s support. How long do you think they can hold out before their commanding officers experience their own mutinies?”

“We don’t know that will happen,” Sarvrest declared, before he had an opportunity to think. “Forget I said that,” he quickly added. “We didn’t see our revolt coming.”

“It behooves us to help the admiral develop relationships with the Juta and the Thet before they suffer the same fate as the Kega,” Orgeth implored.

“What about our defense?” Bethram inquired.

“From whom?” Ondeft asked. “It certainly won’t be from other Onda factions. If they were to sail here, what do you think they’d do the moment they spotted some conclave warships?”

“Good point,” Bethram remarked. “Both factions know that the conclave doesn’t need to engage in ship-to-ship battles, if they choose not to risk their ships.”

“And the Ajastas?” Sarvrest queried.

Both Orgeth and Ondeft growled their humor.

“The Elite will be busy for annuals trying to evict the conclave,” Orgeth returned. “I’m comfortable wishing them good fortune with that, knowing they’ll never have a chance at achieving it.”

“But the Ajastas?” Sarvrest objected.

“You heard the reports via Amalima,” Orgeth countered. “The Elites need the Ajastas to build their ships, and the subs sail the Elite’s ships. The fight at Da-fer proved that most subs weren’t willing to take on the conclave for the Elite. It’ll only be a matter of time before the subs will be running the Elite home worlds.”

“Your confidence might be misplaced,” Bethram remarked.

“Spend a quarter annual aboard a conclave liner, and you’ll realize that you’re dealing with an unparalleled organization,” Orgeth challenged. “Kega haven’t experienced anything like it. Don’t forget that the three of us are alive because of the commitment of a few conclave members to ensure that we were kept safe.”

“We haven’t forgotten their efforts on our behalf,” Sarvrest assured Orgeth.

“Don’t slide into the false comfort of the old ways,” Orgeth urged. “We must firmly grasp the opportunity in front of us. It’s offered by that young conclave female called Admiral Pappas. Which should we recommend, the Juta or the Thet?”

“We should conference privately,” Sarvrest suggested to Bethram.

“Why?” Bethram inquired. “Orgeth is the base commanding officer, our peer, and his sibling is his advisor. Furthermore, they’ve implants and can share, at any time, without our knowledge. Orgeth is right to say that we’ve a tendency to want things to return to the way they were before the conclave arrived and before the mutiny took place. Our comfortable past isn’t going to return.”

Sarvrest sighed deeply. He regarded Bethram with sad eyes. “I’m not suited to lead anymore,” he said. “You must become the senior commanding officer.”

“Negative,” Bethram replied earnestly. “Look at what’s happening, Sarvrest. Kega must evolve socially. We’ll no longer be a mercenary race. Kega must adopt the conclave way.”

“But those ways are confusing to me,” Sarvrest objected.

“Understood,” Bethram returned. “Right now, the Kega need stability. That means you and I must retain our positions. We’re fortunate that we’ve two guides to aid us. They sit across from us. Together, we can provide stability and navigate the future. In that manner, we can’t look on Orgeth’s and Ondeft’s opinions as mere suggestions.”

Sarvrest nodded, as if a great weight had been taken off his shoulders. The manner in which the Kega developed wouldn’t be his responsibility alone.

Ondeft shared privately, <I think we’re there.>

<Agreed,> Orgeth replied. He regarded the officer across the conference table from him and said, “The sooner we help the Juta and the Thet migrate from acting as mercenary races and become allies of the conclave, the sooner we establish a more stable region. Trade will become our primary focus, not war.”

“I’m still not convinced,” Sarvrest stated and quickly raised a hand to halt comments. “However, I’ll abide by the majority opinion, which indicates we must assist the admiral in her duties.”

The other three attendees quietly nodded their understanding of Sarvrest’s quandary and their appreciation of his forbearance.

“Let’s discuss how we’ll accommodate the admiral’s wishes,” Bethram said. “I see multiple items that must be settled. We’ll table the question of Juta or Thet until the end of this discussion. How do we protect this system in her absence?”

“The entire first wave and all conclave members aren’t leaving,” Orgeth replied. He had been tempted to growl his laughter, but he didn’t want to upset the delicate balance they’d achieved. “The alliance requires the conclave protect the Arklem system. We can acquire the details from the admiral now, if you wish.”

“I’ll accept your word on that,” Sarvrest returned. “No need to bother the admiral or her direct reports.”

Ondeft chuckled. “Too late,” he said and tapped his temple.

Even Sarvrest had to growl humorously at the rapidity with which implants could operate. “What did you learn?” he inquired.

“Two Trident squadrons will remain in system,” Ondeft began.

“That sounds inadequate,” Bethram interrupted.

“I would agree, if that was all that Salus shared with me,” Ondeft replied.

Bethram briefly ducked his head, shaking it slowly. “I forgot my own advice to Sarvrest,” he said by way of an apology.

“Our dreadnaughts will be used to distribute the new probe versions around the system. Some will be far outboard, and some will be hidden in the rim,” Ondeft explained.

“Remember,” Orgeth quickly added, “these are conclave versions. They’ve small controllers with comm systems and can be directed as the Trident captains choose.”

“These will be effective against all enemies?” Sarvrest queried.

“Our immediate concerns are the other Onda factions and the Zafts,” Orgeth replied. “SADEs reached consensus that this level of protection is all that’s necessary in the short term.”

“Let’s not forget what we’ve learned about the greater scope of conflict,” Bethram reminded Sarvrest. “The Elite are busy with the massive conclave fleet at Da-fer, and the focus of this nefarious race, the Messinants, is on Cercia in the Malia system.”

“Next issue,” Sarvrest announced. “There’s still the problem of searching through security records to locate others who took part in the mutinous plan.”

Orgeth linked to Amalima and requested an update.

<Greetings,> Amalima sent, her voice issuing through the table’s holo-vid in the Onda language. <In the past three cycles, two officers have been arrested. A third officer is still under investigation, but it’s thought that he might have replied to queries in a manner designed to keep the planners at bay.>

“Well done, Amalima,” Sarvrest replied.

<Be aware, Commander, I had nothing to do with the research or the decisions,> Amalima sent. <The security officers have been well-trained by Commanding Officer Orgeth. They now operate on their own with the use of the new installation.>

“The conclave controller,” Bethram surmised.

<Precisely. However, I must report that the equipment has led to urgent requests from the officers,> Amalima continued.

“Problems?” Sarvrest queried.

<Of a manner, Commander,> Amalima returned. <The great majority of the officers wish implants, and they want approval from Base Commander Orgeth.>

Sarvrest and Bethram regarded Orgeth, who was grinning.

“It’s contagious,” Orgeth commented.

“Would they need them?” Sarvrest inquired.

“They must talk to the controller one at a time. Otherwise, their voices step on one another,” Orgeth explained. “If they had implants, they could communicate without interference. Think about the speed with which security could operate, and recognize that our previous archaic methods allowed the mutiny’s planners to operate in plain sight.”

“I think the decision about the security officers belongs to the base commanding officer,” Bethram stated.

“I must agree,” Sarvrest added.

<Base Commander Orgeth?> Amalima sent directly.

<Approved,> Orgeth replied. <Conditional reinstatement on obtaining the trainers’ approvals.>

<Understood,> Amalima replied. She left the link to the *Storyteller’s* controller open, while she announced Orgeth’s decision.

The foursome at the conference table could hear the raucous growls of approval.

“That’s a sign of things to come,” Ondeft remarked.

Bethram offered a raised brow, and Sarvrest frowned.

To Orgeth, Ondeft commented privately, <We aren’t making much progress.>

<At this point, some progress is better than none,> Orgeth returned. To the commanders across the table, he queried, “What’s another of your concerns?”

“Will this ship sail with the admiral?” Sarvrest asked.

“Unfortunately, the answer is yes,” Orgeth replied. He knew the commanders had come to appreciate its comfort. This included having access to SADEs who could accommodate every question.

“And what of Amalima and you?” Bethram inquired.

“Security has what it’s always needed, a technologically superior system,” Orgeth returned. “That frees Amalima to join the defenders. I perceive my role as a facilitator for the admiral’s first contact with another Onda faction. Which one do you think that should be?”

Bethram growled, delivering ironic tones. “You’ve asked that question several times, Orgeth,” he commented. “What makes you think that Sarvrest and I ever had an informed answer for you?”

Sarvrest and Bethram flashed their canines, which made Ondeft frown. It was Orgeth whose laughter burst from his chest. The joke had been on him.

“What did I miss?” Ondeft queried aloud when the noise settled.

“We’ve entered a time of delicate political maneuvering,” Bethram responded. “This isn’t the forté of mercenary leaders. Your guesses would be as good as ours. In fact, I would think Orgeth might be in the best position to offer an educated opinion.”

With that, Sarvrest and Bethram lowered their chairs and climbed off them.

Orgeth expected them to leave the room, as was their custom. Instead, each commander paused in front of him, grasped his shoulders, and wished him a safe journey.

After the pair exited the conference room, Ondeft sent, <I think you’ve arrived. The commanders are treating you as an equal.>

<Which will last as long as we don’t fail with the other factions,> Orgeth groused.

<If the *Storyteller* is sailing with the first wave, how do I manage transfers from our home worlds?> Ondeft asked.

<That occurred to Salus weeks ago,> Orgeth responded. <A Quadrant transferred its passengers to other ships. This has been possible because many workers remain on planet with the subs around the cycle. The Quadrant will sail here to gather you and collect more Kega recruits. Afterward, it will

journey to other local worlds to pick up other volunteers. I recommend you stay aboard the Quadrant.>

<For how long?> Ondeft queried.

<I think that's up to you,> Orgeth sent. <When you feel your education has advanced sufficiently, find another task to fulfill your time.>

Ondeft stared at his sibling. He knew this was another occasion when Orgeth was thinking far in advance of him. While his younger self would have considered this a challenge, he'd matured a great deal since then. Now he thought about what direction Orgeth was pointing him. When the answer occurred to him, it made him sad.

<Some cycle, you'll be leaving Kega to travel with the conclave,> Ondeft surmised.

<Some cycle,> Orgeth agreed.

<And you believe that the Kega will need me and others to lead our faction into the future,> Ondeft pressed.

<You are precisely who the Kega will need,> Orgeth returned. <I'm proud of the Onda you've become. More time with the conclave will prepare you to be an influential Kega leader.>

<When that cycle comes, I'll miss you,> Ondeft sent. He stood and shared a hug with his sibling.

Afterward, Orgeth joined the defenders.

Mila, Peña, Sven, and the defenders had assembled, while Orgeth had spoken with the other commanding officers.

As Orgeth entered the conference room, he was greeted by applause.

<Our congratulations, Orgeth,> Mila sent. <That was adroit diplomatic maneuvering on your part.>

<Good friends,> Orgeth replied, spreading his arms wide and growling his appreciation.

<So, Sarvrest and Bethram haven't a clue about the other factions' receptiveness to our approach,> Escher shared. <You must have an opinion.>

<I do, and it's based on the conversations I've had with other carrier pilots,> Orgeth replied. <I'll start with the Thet. I believe the Thet pilots often exhibited arrogance. To me, that must come from their commanders

and, possibly, their leaders. If that's true, our reception might be received by leaders who will take that arrogance a step further into hubris.>

<In other words, the Thet are likely to launch an attack against us,> Shoya surmised.

<What about what happened to the Juta fleet at Castern?> Ceda inquired.

<That's where hubris enters the scene,> Orgeth responded. <The Thet leaders might think that the Juta commanders lost the battle due to their lack of fighting skills.>

Orgeth's explanation was met by a few disappointed groans.

<And the Juta?> Escher prompted.

<Sven, does the phrase we talked about last evening after finishing that vid apply here?> Orgeth queried.

For the sake of the group, Sven explained, <One character shared his choice for an action, and the female had asked him why. The answer was that his opinion selected the lesser of two evils.>

Orgeth growled. <That's the Juta. Neither faction is a great option,> he shared. <I'm certain that we'll have a poor reception from the Thet. We must convince the Juta to ally with the conclave. That might be enough to make the Thet leaders listen.>

<You spoke to Sarvrest and Bethram about waiting too long to meet the other factions, as there would be pressure to find food supplies,> Gat'r sent. <What do you consider that length of time?>

<I believe the blockades of the local worlds initiated various actions within the factions,> Orgeth sent. <Based on what happened here, there's probably trouble already brewing with the Juta and the Thet.>

<Internal or external problems?> Peña inquired.

Orgeth could only shrug his shoulders in response.

Dimitri lit the table's holo-vid, and Salus, who was aboard the admiral's Trident, supplied the relevant star map.

<We're seeking confirmation, Orgeth, of our potential destinations,> Mila requested.

Orgeth leaned forward and oriented the star map. He saw the designations of the Onda military bases. The Kega base was already labeled.

Tapping a highlighted system, he shared, <Thet.> Immediately, the other Onda base was labeled Juta.

<That's our destination,> Mila pronounced. <Let's talk about our approach.> She gazed around the table, but no one was volunteering an idea. <Is restitution for the lost fleet on the table?> she queried.

<Negative,> Shoya returned quickly.

<Not recommended,> Escher added.

<Perhaps, a little extra hand-holding,> Sven offered.

<Such as?> Mila prompted.

<Something along the lines of greater support for trade,> Sven responded.

Orgeth issued a low negative growl. <SADEs have noted that Kega have little to offer in trade to the local worlds, which is why we were heavily reviled,> he sent. <It will be the same for the other factions. We have to find a way to motivate the Juta and the Thet to ally with the conclave for their benefit.>

<Is this an opportunity for recruitment to help the subs?> Ceda inquired.

<A thought to consider, Ceda,> Orgeth replied. <But why should Juta leadership trust the conclave? Besides, it's Kega females who've jumped at the opportunity.>

<It was the Kega mutiny that allowed trust to develop between us,> Gat'r pointed out. <With the Juta, we're starting on the other foot.>

<Perhaps, that's the answer,> Sven offered. Without a pause this time, he added, <We know more Kega females want to volunteer. What if they could be encouraged to travel with us to enlist the aid of Juta females?>

Heads turned toward Orgeth to see his reaction. It wasn't favorable.

<Orgeth?> Mila queried.

<Taking Kega females to Da-fer under the watchful eyes of an immense conclave fleet is one thing,> Orgeth returned. <Transporting them to a potential war zone is another.>

<I don't agree,> Sadie objected. <We have the first wave to protect the *Storyteller*. The Kega females would be safe beyond the rim. I move the team and only one female to make the point to Juta leaders. Or I could shift,

collect the Juta leaders, and return to our traveler. Afterward, we sail for the *Storyteller*.>

<It worked for Commanding Officer Sarvrest,> Peña pointed out.

<First contact via kidnapping,> Mila grumbled.

<Whatever gets these races or factions to open their eyes, Admiral,> Shoya quickly returned. <They've acted as mercenaries for centuries. It will take all means at our disposal to convince them that fighting with us is useless.>

<I think the Juta already know that,> Mila lamented.

<Shoya has a point, Admiral,> Orgeth sent. <The Juta and the Thet will be running short of food supplies. That will ignite internal conflict. We must prevent that from happening and demonstrate that conclave superiority can offer them stability through an alliance.>

Mila reluctantly nodded her head. She knew their arguments were valid, but she didn't look forward to facing Juta leaders with her guilty conscience.

Through Mila's link to Salus, she sent, <Status of probe deployment outboard of the rim?>

<In progress, Admiral. Two more cycles to complete. Afterward, probes will be dropped off within the rim. Eight total cycles to finish,> Salus reported.

Mila added Peña to her link with Salus. <Ready our ships to sail in four cycles for Vosra, the Juta military base,> she shared.

Sarvrest and Bethram were returned planetside, and they chose to visit the security command bunker. They were pleasantly surprised that the antiquated panel system had been streamlined. Sarvrest's face, voice, and palm print granted him access to the initial hatch. A palm on subsequent hatches was all that was necessary to proceed to security's inner sanctum. On their arrival, security officers leapt to salute the commanding officers, and Sarvrest requested they return to their work.

Amalima stood at the rear of the room with Sarvrest and Bethram.

When the commanders heard the officers continually whispering, they regarded Amalima and raised their bushy eyebrows. In turn, she indicated that they should step out of the room.

In the corridor, Amalima explained, "This is the primary reason that many of the officers requested implants. The controller can differentiate between two or three voices but not eight officers speaking at once. With implants, they will be silent and much faster."

"Have any received their implants?" Bethram inquired.

"Every officer who requested an implant is scheduled to receive one," Amalima returned. "Their training will take place after their shifts. During their work, they won't be allowed to use them until their trainers pass them."

"Is this what Orgeth approved?" Sarvrest queried.

"It's close to his original order," Amalima allowed. "I moderated the implementation with his approval."

"What progress has been made with the mutineers?" Bethram asked.

"No more arrests since I last reported to you," Amalima responded. "Security has placed a few in the suspicious category."

"How will this temporary group be monitored?" Sarvrest inquired.

"The controller will do that," Amalima explained. "It has the names and details of the Kega officers who are included. It will analyze every action taken and every message sent and received by each individual. Suspicious activity will be reported to security."

Sarvrest and Bethram regarded each other. Lest they appear foolish to Amalima, they prevented their mouths from hanging open.

After a moment of thought, Bethram queried, "Does the conclave have such processes for their controllers?"

Amalima politely laughed. "For the conclave, it's unnecessary. With implants, we're continually sharing thoughts and data," she said. "We know when an individual is troubled, and we recommend they visit an empath."

"An empath?" Sarvrest sought to clarify.

"Some Pyrean females have the ability to read emotions and guide them," Amalima replied.

This time Onda mouths did hang open and closed with snaps.

"Could we order the services of about fifty empaths?" Bethram quipped, which had the trio growling and laughing.

After the meeting, the commanding officers returned to their quarters, and Amalima stepped out of the security bunker to board a traveler piloted

by Marianne. As she took the copilot seat, the sisters held hands for the flight to the *Storyteller*.

2: Contention

DA-FER PLANET ELITE SYSTEM

After the conclave had descended on Da-fer to support the hamlet subs, the Elite convened in their three-tiered amphitheater. Seven cycles later, they were still meeting and arguing with little progress.

It was obvious to the Five, who led the discussions, that their carefully orchestrated society had been upended.

Worse, a creators' ship had arrived beyond the rim, halted, surveyed the system, and retreated. The Elite believed that their creators had refused to aid them.

Left with no choice, the Elite decided to take a desperate gamble. A message was sent via Elite Translator Parmegg to a senior High Order member.

In a private chamber in the government building, Fellest listened attentively to the translator.

"You are to send messages to every Elite home world in this sector," Parmegg said, his words impacted by tusks sprouting from his lower jaw. "Request the service of their premier warships. Inform them that we've been invaded, and the interlopers are intent on conquering every Elite world. Now is the time to stop them before the invaders gain a foothold on our worlds."

Fellest nodded his understanding, and Parmegg spun and exited the room.

As a High Order member, Fellest had no love for the conclave, but the translator's message inaccurately described the situation. Furthermore, a fleet of Elite ships would find it difficult to best the numerous conclave ships that

were stationed in and out of the system. However, it wasn't his duty to question the Elite. Shaking his head to clear the disturbing thoughts, he left the room to head three levels up and send the messages.

Those calls for support were many cycles ago, and the responses from the Elite home worlds in this sector gave the Da-fer Elite hope that the conclave would be evicted.

Energy-flare throwing warships exited the dark to ring the system. They hadn't appeared directly above and below Da-fer for fear of striking the planet.

Vice Admiral Tracy "Two Bird" Jackson closed his novel in response to the second-duty first officer's report of numerous heavies exiting the dark.

Darla, the Trident's SADE, sent, <Admiral, these are the same warships that gave the Cercian defenders so much trouble.>

<Of course they are,> Tracy grumbled, as he dressed for the bridge. While he donned his uniform, he began to whistle. As it sounded like he was warbling, he'd been named Two Bird by his mother, a Pyrean who descended from First Nation Earther colonists.

Tracy's casual style belayed the razor-sharp tactician qualities he possessed. His prematurely gray hair contrasted with his ready, infectious smile.

Darla, like Limonge, had multiple opportunities to advance, and she always refused them.

Tracy's warble reached the bridge, and Darla and the officers smiled.

<Enjoying the novel?> Darla inquired privately of Tracy.

<I was,> Tracy replied. <Rude of these warships to show up with only three chapters to go.> He sat in a command chair.

Darla stepped behind Tracy, warmed her fingers, and brushed them against the back of his neck. When she did, Tracy pressed his head against her brief touch.

More than a quarter annual ago, Darla heard of Peña's alternate avatar via Minimalist. She requested he consider developing something similar, but Minimalist recommended she speak with Peña first.

In response, Darla sent a lengthy message to Peña, and subsequently, the SADE and the sister corresponded frequently.

That led to Darla ordering an alternate avatar for herself from the engineering trio at Devona.

Later, Minimalist notified Darla that her avatar had arrived with them at Cercia. He messaged her that it could be sent her way on the next freighter or liner headed for Da-fer, but Darla had asked him to wait. A Trident, operating in a war zone, was no place to practice what she intended.

Originally, it was Tracy who had initiated intimate contact with Darla, with nothing more than subtle gestures that communicated he thought of her as a partner.

Darla reciprocated with small things that Peña had shared with her. She found Tracy was receptive to her warming fingers or from any exposed part of her synth-skin.

As the pair had journeyed to Cercia, with a massive contingent of Trident squadrons, Darla broached the subject of an alternative avatar. In turn, Tracy had asked if it had been done before.

Darla had laughed and informed Tracy that a first-gen sister aboard the *Storyteller* had received the original version, adding that she would be receiving the fourth avatar the engineering trio would build. It would be version number three based on feedback from SADEs and a sister.

Tracy had chuckled at the idea that multiple digitals were interested in the product, and his reaction had drawn the attention of the bridge officers.

Darla had waited patiently for Tracy's thoughts, and he had replied, <I'm not sure that a Trident is the place to test such a thing. I'd like a little more privacy.>

<Admiral, I never knew you were so shy,> Darla had returned.

<Actually, I was concerned about the amount of noise you might make,> Tracy quipped, which had Darla laughing.

Now, looking at the numerous, deadly Elite warships that surrounded the system, Darla wondered briefly if Tracy and she had missed their opportunity to experiment.

Tracy studied a wire frame of the system. He touched many points around the rim and issued orders.

Captains ordered crew chiefs to launch the required weapons, and SADEs directed them to their placements.

As Elvian probes, whirling furiously, sped toward the waiting warships, with EMP devices in their wakes, Tracy connected to the three commanders who had survived the battle at Da-fer.

<I've launched countermeasures,> Tracy sent, which Darla translated. <It's your turn. Don't hold back.>

"Understood, Admiral," the senior commander replied.

This part of the action had been practiced many times, and the commanders appreciated that the entire maneuver was designed to prevent an intense battle and the deaths of many subs.

Repeatedly, the commanders signaled the warships surrounding the system. They knew their comm signals were received, but they didn't have a response.

Soon warship telemetry officers reported energetically spinning objects headed their way.

A commander requested the advice of his High Order passenger.

Jamness left his cabin with a sigh and thought about the failures of every sub.

Stepping onto the bridge, the commander quickly updated Jamness on his concerns, adding that he'd received signals from commanders in system.

"Connect me," Jamness directed.

The comms officer swiftly put one of the calls on the bridge system.

"This is High Order Jamness. Stop your blabbering so that I might question what you're saying."

"Yes," the in-system commander replied considerately and was quiet.

"Describe the nature of the spinning objects we see," Jamness demanded.

"We're told one of these whirling probes destroyed an entire Onda fleet," the commander reported. "Also, there are devices headed outward that emit powerful EMP pulses. Their detonation will cripple your warships' electronic systems."

"How is it that three Elite warships remain in system?" Jamness queried.

"We're the survivors of a furious battle, and the conclave took pity on us," the commander responded. He'd winced slightly, hoping that the newcomers didn't know the truth about what had happened at Da-fer.

Jamless didn't trust what he'd heard about Elite warships remaining unharmed. He saw the ship commander point to his comms officer, who looked anxious. "Hold," he said imperially, which had the comms officer muting that exchange. "What?" he queried the officer.

"A High Order member called Fellest, who is on the planet, has been transferred to you from another of our ships. He's anxious to speak with you," the comms officer replied.

Jamless grinned, baring multiple rows of fine, sharp teeth, and he tipped a long narrow snout at the officer.

Responding in the High Order language, Jamless announced his name and position.

"It's refreshing to speak with an equal," Fellest replied. "Navigating through subs has been tedious."

"I've a signal from a commander aboard one of three Elite ships in system," Jamless explained. "He warns of the devices we face. Although there aren't that many of them, the commander tells me that the invaders have powerful weapons. Admittedly, the spinning rings bear no resemblance to any weapon my ship commander has ever seen."

"We've no direct evidence of the nature of these weapons," Fellest responded. "However, you've sufficient forces to overwhelm this fleet. Don't be fooled by their number. The great ships are freighters and liners. It's the tri-hulls and small fighters that operate as warships. We've learned from witnesses that both types of ships must get close to use their beam weapons."

"Who were these witnesses?" Jamless inquired. "I would speak with them."

"They aren't available," Fellest temporized.

"Why not? This is critical information I must hear directly," Jamless argued.

"The invaders have kept three High Order members on their ships," Fellest admitted. "We were able to speak with Castell, the superior of the three."

"Why do the invaders hold them?" Jamless demanded.

By now, Fellest realized that he was speaking with a High Order member who would soon ascend to Elite status.

"The creators' ship arrived and directed us to send a fleet against a far system," Fellest explained. "To ensure the contract was completed as specified, the High Order members were aboard. There was a battle with the invaders you see in system. Our fleet was destroyed."

"Destroyed by this fleet?" Jammess sought to confirm.

In Fellest's previous iteration he could have licked his lips to wet them before continuing. However, his present appearance would have canines slicing his tongue.

"According to Castell's report, it was a smaller fleet. Although, we were assured that our ships wreaked havoc on the invaders' forces," Fellest replied encouragingly.

"Compare our present ship count to the number of invader warships here, and relate this ratio to the conditions where you were defeated," Jammess pressed.

"I don't have those details," Fellest lamented. "As I said, every warship of ours was destroyed."

Jammess considered what he'd learned. "What of these three warships remaining in system?" he inquired.

"Traitors ... every sub on those ships," Fellest declared.

"Traitors to whom?" Jammess asked.

"To our world," Fellest replied indignantly, forgetting to whom he spoke. "When the invaders arrived, they communicated with our fleet. Our ships divided, and a fight broke out. When the battle ended, these three ships were the only ones that were still intact."

"Any survivors from the other warships?" Jammess inquired. He was sensing something wasn't right in the message that his world, Jot-ma, had received.

Fellest was torn as to whether he should evade the question, lie, or admit the facts.

Jammess noted the pause. It added to his disquiet. "The truth, Fellest, before I order Jot-ma's ships to turn about."

"A lesser contingent of our ships objected to the invaders' message," Fellest admitted. "The battle defeated those ships, and they weren't

salvageable. The greater contingent had many ships burning. The invaders raced in to extricate crews from the wrecks.”

“When was this?” Jammess asked.

Fellest could see that the message the Elite required him to send was unraveling. “It was seventeen cycles ago,” he returned.

“What damages have the invaders’ ships done in the intervening cycles?” Jammess asked. “Detail orbital stations, satellites, mining outposts, and the planet.”

“There has been no damage to our infrastructure. The invaders gave some High Order members a message for our Elite,” Fellest replied. “They would work with the indigent subs and would not tolerate any interference from us.”

Jammess was stunned by Fellest’s statements. He thought of Jot-ma subs the way they did on Da-fer. That wasn’t the issue. It was the possibility of being annihilated by weapons of the opposing force.

“Have these so-called invaders kept their word about supporting the subs and not interfering with High Order and Elite?” Jammess queried.

“We see their shuttles drop planetside by the hundreds to visit the indigent subs,” Fellest returned. “After the first cycle to deliver their message, no conclave shuttle has landed on our compounds.”

“Do you know the name of this race?” Jammess inquired.

“Castell called them the conclave,” Fellest replied. “They aren’t a single race. The conclave is an organization, a collection of races.”

“Why did they travel here?” Jammess asked.

“The first time or the second?” Fellest responded, before he realized his error.

“Da-fer is full of surprises,” Jammess remarked. “Was there fighting the first time?”

“No,” Fellest answered dully. “Two huge bots accompanied two engineering subs from the defeated fleet to speak to the Elite.”

“The subs controlled two of the enemy’s bots?” Jammess queried dubiously.

“Actually, the pair weren’t bots in the traditional sense,” Fellest replied.

Jamness waited for a clearer explanation, and he was forced to prompt the Da-fer High Order member to continue.

"Supposedly, they're mobile digital sentients," Fellest added.

"Then the engineering subs accompanied the pair, not the other way around," Jamness sought to clarify.

"That's probably a better way to put it," Fellest admitted.

"That sounds like the only way to put it," Jamness stated firmly. "So, to encapsulate this discussion, the conclave has visited you twice and caused no harm to this system. A conversation was had with your ship commanders, which led to a fight, and the conclave rushed in to save the survivors. Now this enormous fleet is here to support the uplift of your indigent subs. Is that about it?"

"They've no right to be here," Fellest declared hotly.

"You did attack them, correct?" Jamness pointed out.

"We did, but it was on orders from the creators," Fellest argued.

"That's neither here nor there," Jamness returned. "You attacked their system, and you lost. Then they came here and discovered our great weakness."

Fellest was confounded by those words.

Jamness laughed. Through the elongated snout with its rows of teeth, it sounded like a series of high-pitched sneezes. "The Da-fer always had this blind spot about our social organization," he said. "Many of us have always feared the arrival of a superior race, who would condemn Elite and High Order for the manner in which we treat subs."

"What are you saying?" Fellest asked incredulously.

"Your Elite crafted the message you sent, didn't they?" Jamness queried.

"Yes," Fellest admitted. By now, he knew he was failing his Elite and likely he would pay a price for that.

"You've definitely clarified the situation for me. I thank you for that," Jamness said.

Fellest breathed a sigh of relief. "When will you attack?" he inquired hopefully.

Jamness laughed so hard and so long that the ship commander and the bridge officers cringed from the irritating sound. When he quieted, he

inquired quietly, "Would you like to know why I'll be recommending to the other four High Order members that we turn about?"

Fellest was floored, but he could only reply, "Yes."

"Da-fer has failed to recognize the conclave's nature," Jammess explained. "It encapsulates what we've feared. The races, who make up the conclave, stand for social justice. They've come here to rectify our great wrong against the subs. That's who I see, but let me tell what truly made my decision. This organization has mobile digital sentients. Think about what these races have accomplished. These spinning devices we face probably are just as dangerous as your traitorous commanders have warned. It's eerie that these devices have sat outside the system for cycles, and they've never slowed their furious action. I've no desire to end my life in defense of Da-fer, when the leaders can't even understand who they managed to attract to the planet."

"What will I tell the Elite?" Fellest cried in fear.

"You tell them that we recommend that they stay out of the conclave's way," Jammess replied. "I'll be informing the Jot-ma Elite of the same thing. It would be in our favor to start the subs' uplift ourselves, except we'd probably make a mess of that."

Jammess signaled the comms officer to end the connection. "Connect me to High Order members in our collection of ships," he requested.

Within minutes, the comms officer cued Jammess that the conference was ready.

The ship's commander had kept his face turned away from Jammess during his discussion with Fellest. Now he pretended to be busy with his telemetry officer. He was the only individual aboard the ship who could understand the High Order language. The conversation with Fellest had intrigued him. As it progressed, his fear grew. The adversary seemed to possess power greater than they'd ever engaged. By the end of the exchange, he was quietly breathing in relief.

Jammess's conference started unevenly. Two of the High Order members were adamant about attacking the invaders and freeing Da-fer. However, Jammess continued to press his argument point by point.

"Digital sentients? Is that possible?" a High Order representative queried.

“Apparently, the Da-fer Elite met a pair of them in conference,” Jammess replied. “They brought two engineering subs with them from the Da-fer fleet destroyed at a faraway system.”

“Two subs entered an Elite conference?” a High Order member asked incredulously.

“That’s the point I’m trying to make,” Jammess pressed. “The digital sentients perceive the subs as equals.”

“How can they be? They share nothing in common,” a High Order representative who favored attack asked.

Jammess waited. He wasn’t sure how he could convince the two High Order members of what he perceived. Thankfully, one of the other pair came to his rescue.

“Perhaps, that’s what Jammess is trying to say,” the High Order said. “To us, digital sentients have nothing in common with subs, but that isn’t how the conclave views the subs. And that’s what counts. The conclave encompasses multiple races, digital sentients, extraordinary ships and weapons, and this unorthodox view of life. We might disagree with the organization’s tenets, but do we want to argue with the conclave by battling its ships and its eerie devices? Personally, those whirling things are getting on my nerves. They have an intensity about them that seems past our understanding.”

Jammess heard the objections of the other two members, but their convictions were a little subdued.

“How do we know that these things about the conclave are even true?” a member intent on attacking said.

“Would a conversation with a digital sentient enlighten us?” a supporter of Jammess inquired.

There was enough support for that idea that Jammess requested the comms officer mute the conference and connect him to the commander in system.

When that signal was restored, Jammess directed, “You will communicate to the conclave that the High Order members wish to speak to one of the digital sentients. I presume that you can direct them to this ship.”

“We can,” the commander replied. “Have your comms officer watch for an odd frequency on his panel.”

Jamness would have questioned the reason for this archaic signal method, but the commander had ended the conference. He regarded his ship commander, as if to comment that Da-fer commanders were impertinent.

Actually, Jamness’s commander was thinking that he would have loved to cut off an exchange with a pompous High Order member.

Kelley, who was planetside, received the warship commander’s request. After the protectors left, he’d set controllers to inform of any signals from the Elite, the High Order, or the commanders.

Briefly, the commander updated Kelley on the short conversation he had with Jamness. “I was placed on hold, and I believe that Jamness probably had a conversation with the planet,” he said.

“Do you have coordinates for me?” Kelley inquired.

“Ours wouldn’t mean much to you,” the commander apologized. “You have our ship, and I’m sharing a direction in relation to our star and Da-fer.”

“That will do,” Kelley returned. “Thank you for your diligence to maintain communications with these new forces.”

When the signal dropped, the commander regarded his bridge officers. There was a light in their eyes that he’d never seen before now. They were proud of their participation to help the hamlet subs and defuse the possibility of more subs dying in a useless battle to support Elite.

A comms officer aboard Jamness’s ship paid close attention to his panels. He immediately spotted the signal he was told to expect. With two taps, he selected it and sent it to the bridge audio system.

<Greetings, High Order Jamness, I was told that you wanted to speak to me,> Kelley sent.

With a swirl of a finger, Jamness signaled the comms officer to add the other High Order individuals.

“We’re seeking a conversation with a conclave digital sentient. Are you one of them?” Jamness queried.

<We’re referred to as SADEs, self-aware digital entities,> Kelley corrected.

“How do you appear?” a Jammess supporter inquired.

Kelley borrowed a nearby SADE to share a live image of himself, and he sent it to every bridge of the High Order members he’d detected. He smiled at the ease with which he could access the Elite ships. This was due to the work of the protectors.

Miranda and Z had investigated an Elite ship that had survived the battle. In doing so, they discovered a means by which a comms panel linked to the bridge. With that knowledge, access to the comms panel gave a SADE control of the entire bridge panel system.

Jammess blinked twice at the speed with which Kelley had responded and his ability to send an image of himself from the planet.

“Does everyone see Kelley?” the Jammess supporter asked.

Affirmatives came from the other four on the conference.

“How did you manage this, Kelley?” Jammess asked, seeking to understand the capabilities of a SADE. In the back of his mind, there was growing worry.

<Conclave ships can instantly communicate through their controllers, and all of our members can make use of this feature,> Kelley replied.

“What of your devices facing us?” a conference attendee asked.

<Our admiral moved quickly to ensure you paused your advance,> Kelley explained. <That bought everyone time to think, especially the five of you. We don’t wish to harm the subs on your ships.>

“The subs?” an aggressive High Order member queried dubiously.

<They are our primary concern,> Kelley replied.

“You forget. The subs will obey what we tell them,” an antagonist stated unequivocally.

Kelley’s link to that High Order member’s ship was through a Trident that sat outside the rim. With a quick signal, the SADE aboard the Trident shut down the warship’s bridge panels. She waited fifteen seconds and turned them on again.

To the belligerent individual who had spoken, Kelley pointed out, <You can see that, while you might order your subs to attack, it will be we who command your ships.>

“What happened?” Jammess demanded.

The High Order member who had seen his ship lose bridge control fumed, and Jammess directed commanders to reply.

A commander cleared his voice before he explained, "We lost control of the ship for a brief period. The panels went dark and then lit again."

"It was a trick," the other doubter declared.

Offering a mental sigh, Kelley signaled SADEs who were nearest the warships with the High Order members.

This time, the panels stayed dark. As the warships were on station, there was no immediate danger for the crews.

Kelley and the other SADEs waited.

Eventually, Jammess said, "Kelley, you made your point."

Still the SADEs waited. At Jammess's encouragement, the other four High Order members added their recognition of what Kelley had done.

With great relief, the warship crews regained control of their vessels.

Two commanders ached to tell their High Order members to recognize the danger they faced, but the repercussions for speaking out would have been severe.

"Kelley, your demonstrations have been eye-opening," Jammess said. "Thank you for your time."

The link ended before Kelley could reply, and he chose not to initiate contact.

"My decision is made," Jammess told his companions. "The Jot-ma fleet will be reversing course and returning to our system. Furthermore, I will inform the Elite translators that we should expect the conclave in the next few annuals. More important, we must not interfere with whatever they wish to do for our subs."

"That's cowardice," a belligerent one declared.

Jammess's laughter was long and noisy. "Attack the conclave, if you wish," he said. "I'll report the loss of your ships to your home world."

Three other High Order members confirmed to Jammess that they would also be making for their home worlds. As one of them put it, "The Da-fer have brought trouble on all our heads. Worse, it's the kind that we must endure not fight."

Admiral Jackson and his Trident force watched four-fifths of the warships ignite their main engines, execute about-faces, and accelerate for the dark.

<One antagonist appears slow to learn,> Darla shared privately with Tracy when it was noticed that a portion of the warships remained on station.

<If their main engines fire, they have five minutes to demonstrate they're reversing course,> Tracy replied. <When the time is up, and they're still headed in system, turn them around via their panels.>

Darla shared Tracy's directives with the Trident captains and SADEs nearest this group of warships.

Time dragged by, and Tracy blew out a noisy exasperated breath. <Gain access to these ships, fire their engines, and reverse their orientations,> he ordered. <When they're pointed toward the dark, accelerate them, and return control. Leave a message. Return without permission, and we'll confiscate your ships. The High Order member will be put to work supporting the hamlet subs.>

Around the fleet, crews laughed at the threat. It suited their desires. The protectors had made it possible to gain access to the Elite warships. Threatening to take the ships away was funny, but making the High Order do manual work to uplift the subs had them howling in delight.

Darla shared some of the noise with Tracy, who grinned.

Aboard the warship contingent that remained, the commanders were flabbergasted that their ships were out of their control. Soon after the engines ignited, the ships reversed course and accelerated.

Control returned in time for the pilots to set their home world as the destination.

The High Order member had nothing to say. He stormed off the bridge and returned to his cabin. He would spend the entire journey designing how he would report the fiasco.

<Our actions were successful, Kelley,> Tracy sent. <Thanks to Julien and the protectors we had everything we needed to turn these ships around.>

<I lament we couldn't get every High Order member to retreat of their own volition,> Kelley returned.

<From where did our troublemaker originate?> Tracy inquired.

Darla connected with the SADE who had managed control of that ship during Kelley's demonstrations. <I'm informed that the group of warships sailed from a world called Kim-la,> she shared.

<One world that will require special handling when we arrive there,> Kelley opined. Then he dropped the link.

<Rim Trident Captains, I appreciate your prompt action. My congratulations to your crews. Recall all heavy weapons,> Tracy ordered. Then he returned bridge control to his first officer and retired. He would finish his novel, while Darla kept him company.

My Books

Beyond the Gate is the fourth novel in [Cercians](#), a series in the Earthers Saga that relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's colony ships.

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

The Silver Ships Series

The Silver Ships

Libre

Méridien

Haraken

Sol

Espero

Allora

Celus-5

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

Race Rivalry

Vortex Incursion

Dual Domains

Alien Intrigue

Deadly Gambits

Allied Enemies

Chaotic Futures

Empire Turmoil

Perilous Choices

Dubious Risks

Fatal Flaws

Imperium's Demise

Cercians Series

Clash of Wills

Enemy at Bay

One of Three

Beyond the Gate

Worlds a Plenty (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 writers influenced my series, [The Silver Ships](#), [Pyreans](#), [Gate Ghosts](#), and [Cercians](#), which comprise the Earthers Saga. 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.

These 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 spaceflight.