

CLASH OF WILLS

Cercians Book 1

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 © 2024 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 Hannon Books, Inc.

www.scottjucha.com

ISBN: 979-8-9900518-6-7 (e-book)

ISBN: 979-8-9900518-7-4 (softcover)

First Edition: November 2024

Cover: Enemy Shuttle Invasion

Design: Damon Za

Acknowledgments

Clash of Wills is the first 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: Disastrous Landing.....	1
2: Sisterhood	18
3: Halt the Shuttles.....	31
4: First Wave	39
5: What Did We Learn?	52
6: Tests and Trial.....	66
7: No More Threats.....	81
8: An Alternate Target	95
9: Take the Moon.....	109
10: Expect Visitors.....	124
11: Initial Journeys	135
12: Share the Pain.....	147
13: A New Pathway	160
14: What Do They Intend?	176
15: The Hunt Is On	186
16: Interrogation	198
17: Will You Share?	210
18: Data Hunt.....	223
19: Détente	236
20: They Should Have Left.....	251
21: In Search of Answers.....	270
22: Chase the Vile Race	286
23: Recovery.....	301
24: Our Best Idea	316
25: New Aggressors	330
26: Why Are You Here?.....	343
27: We Must Try.....	360
28: Connect the Dots	373
29: Second Wave.....	388
Glossary.....	404
My Books.....	408
The Author.....	410

1: Disastrous Landing

EARTH COLONY SHIP *TERMINUS* MALIA SYSTEM

Professor Janet Mariko breathed a sigh of relief, as did the colonists around her.

The emergency klaxons of the Earth colony ship, *Terminus*, had been sounding for nearly two hours. It was ironic that the crew had trouble shutting the loud, warbling sound down, as just about every other system on the huge ship had been failing for decades.

The crew knew about the ship's crippling problems, but the colonists had lain blissfully ignorant in their cryogenic pods.

The *Terminus* was the final colony ship to be launched from Earth. It was completed in the waning days of social stability, and it circled the planet in lower orbit at a construction platform.

Close to launch date, shuttles delivered supplies to the massive ship, as well as passengers and crew members.

In the final days of launch preparations, the fabric of Earth's society unraveled. The reasons were many. But the strain of critical water and food shortages, the violent crimes, and the outright despair proved too much for people.

The outcry began with huge demonstrations against autocratic governments and their leaders, which morphed into lawlessness.

In a hurry to supply repair parts for the generators aboard the *Terminus*, a clerk entered the wrong information, resulting in unusable parts being delivered to a waiting supply shuttle. The desperately needed correct electronic circuits never made it to the colony ship.

When the first generator needed overhaul, the ship was about eighty years into the flight. Crew members were livid about the mistake, but there was nothing to be done. Going forward, crews machined parts to manage repairs and cannibalized some generators to keep others going.

A ship the size of the *Terminus* had more than three hundred generators. Most of them were driven by the extensive sets of solar wings the ship sported.

By the time the colony ship neared the target system, the numerous inactive generators meant that the vast majority of cryogenic pods had failed.

When Janet woke from her pod and had recovered, she was informed that her husband was deceased. He'd been dead for more than forty years.

Janet was stunned by the news of her husband, and she continued to be mentally pummeled, as the crew member related the terrible tragedy besetting the ship. And too, she found it odd that the crew member appeared to be in his sixties. The crew was supposed to trade out every ten years.

That's when Janet discovered that the crew members had faced their own troubles. Replacement crews had their cryogenic pods succumb to power failures, and the active crews didn't trust their own pods to maintain them.

Worse, the present captain was reticent to share his plan with the replacement captain who should have been woken. He and the crew members chose to operate under triage conditions, especially as it concerned the success of the landing party.

Personal data records had been accessed. The passenger losses were itemized. Hard decisions were made to ensure that the desperately needed individuals would survive until the last possible moment.

Thus, the passengers awoke to the surreal situation of elderly crew members delivering dire news.

Janet collected her emergency pack and added a few precious memory items to it. She followed the lights in the floor to head toward an elevator to take her to the shuttle level. She expected to find a crowd waiting to board the voluminous cars and descend to the shuttle levels. It frightened

her that there were so few waiting. She wondered if her eyes looked as terrified as those around her.

In the corridor of a shuttle deck, an octogenarian ordered everyone to set their emergency packs aside, and a second crew member led them away.

“Help with the unloading,” the crew member ordered, pointing to a bay’s interior. “I’ll show you where to take the pallets.”

“Why would a shuttle not be able to launch?” a newly woken male inquired authoritatively.

“Shuttle’s fine. Bay doors don’t have power to open,” the crew member replied testily. “Now do you want to stand here and chat, or would you like to get your butt moving and get off this sailing disaster?”

The male passenger looked stunned, but the tired eyes of the elderly crew member dared the man to object.

Janet shoved past the man, with a comment. “I’ve an intense desire to live.” As she entered the bay, she heard the crew member say, “That’s the spirit.”

What Janet thought would be a few hours of work turned into a race against time and stretched for days in front of her.

Passengers struggled to stay awake and move critical supplies to the few shuttles that could escape their bays.

Every *Terminus* colonist received the captain’s report four times a day. His dry, raspy voice announced the distance to the target system, their rate of approach, and the remaining shuttle loads to move.

In answer to the passengers’ question about the captain’s voice, crew members told them that their captain was ninety-three years old.

Eventually, the drudgery ended, and the passengers were told to don vac-suits and board their assigned shuttle.

Something about the transfer of supplies between shuttles, and the number of passengers handling the work, made Janet uneasy.

At one point, Janet drew a second mate aside. “Help me out,” she said. “We’ve made transfer to nine shuttles. Four of those we packed until crew members told us that they couldn’t land with any more weight. The other five shuttles have light loads and look like they’ve just enough space to handle the passengers.”

“What’s your question?” the elderly female asked.

“You know what I’m asking,” Janet replied.

“Smart cookie,” the crew member remarked, grinning. “I’m glad I voted for you. The landing party will need you.”

“The crew isn’t coming, are they?” Janet queried glumly.

“We don’t qualify,” the elderly female returned, holding out her hands and shrugging. Her uniform hung on her like a too-large sack. “I’m eighty-eight years old. What help can I be to a landing party?”

“I’m sorry,” Janet replied, reaching out a hand to squeeze the woman’s shoulder. She could feel its thinness.

“Don’t be sorry for us,” the crew member replied, smiling. “I signed on to ensure that some of Earth’s people reached the stars. I’m proud of what we’ve achieved. Against horrendous odds, we’re going to be successful. At least, to some degree.”

Janet stayed rooted in place. The thought of her husband dying forty years ago had been a blow. Then the emergency conditions had galvanized her. Now the thought of the crew members staying behind seemed too much to bear.

The elderly woman saw the despair on Janet’s face. She gripped the professor’s shoulders firmly. “Buck up,” she ordered. “It’s going to be worse on the planet. You’ve a society to develop, and you’re not going to have the number and the qualities of people you’ll need. I’d like to think that a century or two from now, you’ll have achieved a vibrant foothold on this planet.”

Janet managed to put a smile on her face for the crew member. She nodded, turned, and joined the line to board the shuttle.

It was the captain’s intention to put the *Terminus* in high orbit around the planet, and the crew worked feverishly to make it happen.

Power was rerouted from systems to keep the engines online.

However, despite everything that the crew did, fate intervened. A pump responsible for distributing mass to the four starboard engines failed.

Immediately, the captain ordered the port engines shutdown to prevent the colony ship taking on a new vector that would turn it away from the planet. He ordered the shuttles launched, knowing they’d expend much of

their reaction mass to make the planet, decelerate through the atmosphere, and land.

"Captain," the first mate called on the ship's comm net. "The pump is lagged. Give us about eight days, and we might be able to rig a replacement."

The captain appreciated his first mate's sense of humor. They'd worked for many decades together. Both of them knew that they didn't have eight days. They didn't even have three unless something unusual could be done.

After a few minutes to think, the captain regarded his navigation officer. "Navigation, work out any scenario that allows us to slingshot around a body and head toward our target," he requested.

"With or without the port engines?" the navigator inquired.

"Either way, if we can afford the time to jury-rig the pump," the captain replied.

It was nearly three hours before the navigator sought the captain.

"That's a sour look," the captain commented when the navigator found him.

"We've got only one chance, and the odds aren't good," the navigator replied. "But it'll buy you plenty of time to deliver mass to the starboard engines."

"If it'll put us in orbit around the planet, I'd tell the first mate to set up a manual pump. We could take turns swinging the handle," the captain remarked.

"At our ages, each of us would probably last about five to ten minutes," the navigator returned.

"Show me what you've got," the captain requested.

On a portable computer, the navigator displayed a wire screen model of the system. "We can catch the innermost planet and sling around it," the navigator replied. "It's small, but it would head us in the right direction. However, we'd need some power from the starboard engines to catch the gravitational forces of our target."

"How much?" the captain asked.

"About twenty-three percent," the navigator returned.

"Any negatives?" the captain pressed.

“One,” the navigator responded. “We’ll need the port engines to turn us in an arc to get close to that inner planet. If the engines don’t restart, or they don’t supply sufficient power, then we’re headed for Malia.”

“If our sling operation doesn’t work, it’s just as well,” the captain said resignedly. “These old bones are tired of this ship’s cold. It’ll be nice to be warm before the end.”

“Can’t argue with that thought,” the navigator, who was two years older, said, as he turned to make his way back to the bridge.

While the *Terminus* coasted toward the innermost planet, the exhausted crew fought to keep the minimal systems online that would sustain them and facilitate a return to the target planet.

As the sling-planet drew closer, the captain requested another status report on the starboard mass delivery problem.

“We’ve worked up a pressurized tank, Captain,” the first mate replied. “It should give you about thirty minutes of power for all four engines.”

“At what output?” the captain inquired.

“Sorry, Captain, that’s unknown,” the first mate replied. “The engineers spent a lot of time explaining to me about the variables that are in play. The conversation isn’t worth repeating.”

“Understood,” the captain replied, with a sigh. “Stand by to bring the engines online when the navigator gives you the word.”

The captain walked the navigator and the pilot through the scenario, which was designed to sling the *Terminus* toward the target planet and put the ship into high orbit.

Despite having had the same discussion, at least three times a day for the past weeks, the bridge officers dutifully listened. They had nothing else to do but wonder and worry.

As the navigator’s chronometer counted down, the captain ordered all engines brought online. He stared anxiously at his command panel, willing to see it reflect that the ship’s eight engines had lit. Unfortunately, they stayed dark.

“Captain,” the navigator announced clearly. “Our window is slipping past.”

The captain ached to call his first mate, but he knew the man well. He'd be doing everything he could to save the ship.

Before the shuttles launched, a few crew members had the unenviable tasks of waking their youthful spouses and explaining the circumstances. To the man and the woman, they successfully urged their spouses planetside.

When the window for the opportunity to sling around the small dense planet passed, the captain called the crew.

"I've never been prouder of a group of people," the captain said over the ship's address system. "We were tasked with putting humans on this far planet, and we've done that. More important, we were successful against horrendous odds. At this time, I must inform you that we've missed our one chance to save the *Terminus*. The gravitational pull of Malia will ensure our next destination. Everyone is excused from duty. The time is yours to choose how you wish to prepare to meet your end. By the way, restrictions on food and drink services are lifted, and I'll be handing out the officers' liquor rations to any crew member who wishes to partake."

The first mate sat with the captain in his suite. It was third shift, but there was no one on duty.

A forty-year-old bottle of cognac had been stored onboard. By now, the precious vintage had aged another couple of hundred years, and the two men had finished most of the bottle.

"Can't remember when I last had a drop," the first mate remarked. At this point he wasn't feeling any of the aches and pains his old body had endured for the past twenty or more years. "This cognac is making me think I missed out on something good."

"We're not going to make a dent in the officers' storehouse," the captain responded, chuckling.

"It was generous of you to open the storehouse to the crew," the first mate complimented.

"Nothing generous about it," the captain replied. "They're a bunch of great people, and they deserve all the comfort I can give them in these final days."

“It was funny to see the techs roll in their carts to fill up on every goodie they could claim,” the first mate responded, laughing.

Weeks later, with the star’s heat penetrating the hull, and the internal temperature rising, the captain left his suite to say goodbye to his crew members. He found the first mate dead in his bed.

Picking up the note addressed to him that was resting on the man’s chest, the captain read the farewell message. It brought tears to his eyes. He touched his friend’s cold cheek before he left.

As the captain wandered the ship, he found not a single person alive. His companions had raided the infirmary and chosen to take a different way out rather than to be roasted alive. When the hull gave way, they’d be exposed to vacuum. Even suits wouldn’t protect them from the fierce cosmic rays.

The captain returned to his suite and chose to open a bottle of brandy.

Many days later, the captain succumbed to the ship’s disintegrating environmental systems. Soon afterward, the *Terminus* was crushed by the star’s powerful gravitational forces.

Of the other four colony ships launched from Earth, only those delivering the Méridiens and the Naiads suffered no significant damage.

The flight of the *New Terra* was a slow-rolling disaster, and it was a desperate gamble to launch shuttles crammed with passengers and survival material to reach the target world. Even then, the planet proved less than hospitable to the colonists.

The Pyreans’ *Honora Belle* had a water failure in a partial section of the hull. The encroaching radiation had a few women producing female children with unusual talents. These would become the empathes, who are prized by the conclave races for their capabilities to help individuals with mental problems.

§

After orbiting the planet a few times, the shuttle pilots chose a huge flat sheet of rock not far from a broad section of woods that promised water sources.

It had worried the passengers that their shuttles had no copilots. Worse, the explanation did little to settle their nerves. Every trained pilot had suffered cryogenic pod failure. In other words, their pilots were crew members who'd spent many of their last years studying how to fly shuttles on the ship's simulator.

However, the crew members' studies proved to have adequately prepared them for entry. Although, the onboard computers did most of the work after the landing site was chosen.

With nine shuttles safely on the ground, extensive tests were run on the atmosphere.

A brief celebration ensued when the air was found acceptable, even a little rich in oxygen and with no harmful gases.

The individuals originally tasked with leading the landing parties weren't present within the one hundred eighty-eight passengers who disembarked via the small baskets lowered to the blackened rock below the midship hatches. Had the appropriately trained individuals survived the trip, they would have been offered different advice from that volunteered by the more domineering passengers.

As it was, the decision that motivated the majority of colonists was to set up camp in the nearby forest.

Janet and about thirty other colonists had objected that research needed to be conducted on the forest to determine its safety. But they were overruled.

During the next four local days, which were about two hours longer than Earth days, the colonists hauled supplies to the edge of the forest, while power tools were used to clear an encampment.

Two men, who were clearing trees, were bitten. Although they didn't see what had bit them, both men contracted high fevers. One man died,

and the other managed to pull through. However, the latter individual forever demonstrated intermittent palsies.

When Janet objected to continuing the camp's construction, she was told that the inflatable quarters would provide the necessary protection.

After the portable housing units were inflated, and the colonists moved into their quarters, Janet donned a protective suit to investigate the local flora and fauna. She was determined to identify anything dangerous to the colonists.

It was the time when Malia's rays were warming the morning air.

Bright Eyes watched from the shadows of dense trees. She'd expected the female to leave the protection of the strangers' enclosure. She judged the female a likely candidate to accomplish the task the elders had assigned her.

The People were incensed that the strangers had chopped down the revered tall trees, killing forest life that had existed long before the People had walked the world.

The elders knew that the strangers treated the forest with disrespect. Worse, they considered the newcomers pups, who had no idea of the many ways that death lurked among the trees. Already, it was reported that the strangers had participated in rituals that buried their dead.

Choosing not to act in a vengeful manner, the elders had told Bright Eyes that she was to find a likely candidate among the newcomers and educate that stranger in the ways of the People.

After many passings of Malia, Bright Eyes had focused on the female. Her kind had argued with her when she left their compound, and she had ignored their pleadings. She gave the female credit for wanting to explore the forest, but she also recognized that she would soon be among the dead.

Bright Eyes followed the female, who chose not to head for the swift flowing waters that ran toward the sea. Instead, she trekked toward the densest part of the forest.

It wasn't long before the female paused to examine blooms on the forest floor. Unbeknownst to her, it was a trap. She removed the coverings from her hands to collect samples. As she plucked several to place in a clear container, long tendrils of the hila vine unwound and dropped toward her.

Bright Eyes knew it was too soon to contact the female, but she was driven to save the female. Energy coiled inside her, which vibrated her, shifting her presence from left to right. Suddenly, she blinked out of existence, appeared before the female, grabbed her hands, and returned to her original location with the female. She braced for the cries of outrage and the screams for help that she expected.

Janet Mariko stared at the dark brown, fur-covered entity standing in front of her. The individual was covered in a tunic of woven material, and she was unable to determine whether the entity was male, female, or something else. The entity didn't appear to be intent on harming her, but she was trying to understand what had happened.

Bright Eyes saw the questioning in the female's eyes, which was an unexpected reaction. With one hand, she caught the female's attention and pointed at the hila vine. Its tendrils were coiling and returning to the treetops.

Janet saw the long tendrils retract skyward, and she guessed at the connection of the vines to the beautiful blooms she'd sought to examine. Gazing at the entity in front of her, she witnessed a pantomime. Furred fingers with sharp nails imitated the tendrils falling from the air. The hand playing the part of the tendrils grasped a single digit on the other hand and drew it upward. Next, the entity grasped its throat and squeezed until it looked as if she'd died.

Immediately, Janet realized she was dealing with a sentient who had incredulous powers. She held out her hands in supplication and said, "Thank you."

Bright Eyes recognized the attitude, and she tipped her head in acceptance. Deciding to accelerate her carefully laid plan, she gestured to the female to follow her.

As the pair walked, Janet was careful to step directly behind her guide for fear of making another mistake and inviting disaster. They left the forest behind and approached a wide body of water.

Near a rocky shore, Janet's rescuer stopped in front of what looked like a giant bell jar capable of holding a few individuals.

Bright Eyes chose to withhold a critical piece of information, as she attempted to communicate what she needed the female to do.

Janet watched a second pantomime unfold. It consisted of the entity talking but Janet couldn't hear. Reversing the sequence, Janet was speaking, and the entity couldn't hear. She caught the message. Pointing at the huge bell jar, she said, "This device will help us understand each other." With gestures, she indicated that they should use it.

Bright Eyes was pained by tricking the stranger, but the truth wouldn't have been accepted. Tapping the alien female's shoulder, she shook her head. To indicate what was necessary, she removed her tunic and waited.

Janet had two immediate thoughts. First, the entity was female. Her three pairs of teats confirmed that. Second, she wondered what being naked had to do with using a translation device. Glancing at the bell jar, she noticed that it was raised on a base about a meter thick. There appeared to be no entry method.

Shaking her head in resignation, Janet stripped, feeling embarrassed about her naked condition. When the alien female offered her hands, Janet uncovered herself and grasped the female's furred hands.

Instantly, Janet felt the strange oscillating energy again. Mysteriously, she appeared in the bell jar. The alien female continued to hold her hands tightly. Energy seemed to flow from her into Janet. Then they appeared in a huge dome, with six platforms around them.

Peering above her, Janet had a moment of panic. A star field ranged above the dome. She started to shake, and she felt the alien hold her close. In time, the panic subsided, and Janet gripped the female's furred shoulders, mumbling thanks.

Bright Eyes gave the stranger credit. In multiple instances, the female had managed to surprise her with more subdued reactions than she thought she'd receive.

"Where?" Janet queried, spreading her arms wide to indicate the dome.

Bright Eyes gestured to the stranger to approach a broad console.

Janet watched the alien's fingers dance on a panel. It was obvious that the console's operation had been learned. However, the nature of the dome

and its construction didn't seem to match the details she'd accumulated from the furred female.

Bright Eyes gestured to the female to touch a second panel.

Janet laid her palm against the panel. She felt a sharp tingle and yanked her hand away. She was annoyed by what she considered a joke.

However, unbeknownst to Janet, human genetics had just been entered into the Messinants' great web of domes. This would be long before the Pyreans accidentally activated the dome console on the Triton moon.

With the console prepared to handle a new race, Bright Eyes retrieved the Messinant language program. The *de rigueur* start was with the single line. Bright Eyes pointed at the image, and she counted to five showing an increasing number of digits.

"One?" Janet queried, indicating the line. Immediately, the image changed to two lines.

Despite Janet's relative youth, she carried two PhDs and was considered one of the brightest in her field. Recognizing what was intended, she bent with a will toward the program.

Janet was so deeply involved in the program that she jumped when the alien touched her shoulder. She was handed a cup of water and greedily drank it, realizing she'd been focused on the program for hours.

In the meantime, Bright Eyes had hauled sleeping accommodations from below onto the platform deck. She gestured to the stranger to join her, and she sat cross-legged on a pallet.

Janet chose a less exposed posture on her pallet. She was handed a bowl of paste, a simple utensil, and another cup of water. As she sniffed at the deep red paste, she picked up the mild scent of berries. A tentative taste of the paste proved it was palatable, and Janet hungrily cleaned her bowl.

When Bright Eyes saw the stranger finish her meal, she pantomimed the choice of sleeping or working with the console.

Janet decided to return to work. She managed two more food and water breaks before she felt drained. The alien female coaxed her toward the pallets, and she gave in and was quickly asleep.

After some rest, the work resumed and continued for what Janet estimated were two more days. Finally, no more images were offered her. She turned to the alien female and raised an eyebrow.

Bright Eyes barked at the stranger's humorous expression. She held up a finger to indicate that the female should be patient. Picking up the pallets, she disappeared down some steps and returned soon afterward. Then she offered her hands again.

Reaching to grasp the alien's hands, Janet figured she'd come this far, and she chose to see it to the end. They were soon in the bell jar, and just as quick, they were outside it.

Bright Eyes barked sharply. Soon, two of her race slipped out of the water on four limbs. Standing on their hind legs, they stood and approached Bright Eyes.

Janet could see that they were much younger than her alien companion.

After a short conversation, the newcomers shimmered and disappeared.

Out of the corner of her eyes, Janet saw them momentarily appear in the bell jar. Then they were gone. Janet noticed that the two youngsters didn't drop their tunics, which she made a mental note to talk to her companion about.

After dressing, Janet and her alien female sat on a large rock and stared at the sea. It wasn't long before the youths returned. In fact, they appeared beside Janet, which made her jump.

One youth said something, and Janet heard, "Sorry for startling you."

Janet's eyes grew wide, and she stared at her companion, who accepted two small devices from one of the youths.

Bright Eyes handed one device to the stranger, and she looped the woven necklace over her head.

Janet imitated the method of wearing the device.

"I'm Bright Eyes of the People. We're known as Cercians. These translators are supplied by the creators of the domes."

Janet thought this was a critical moment for humans, and she responded formally. "I'm Janet Mariko, a human from Earth. I thank you for rescuing me from that carnivorous vine."

"The hila vine captures many unwary creatures," Bright Eyes responded. "You would have been just one more. Your kind must leave the forest. You can never exist there."

"Where do the People live?" Janet inquired.

"In the seas," Bright Eyes replied. "We've underwater domiciles that surround a huge aquaculture pod."

Janet considered the idea that she would have to convince nearly two hundred other colonists to vacate the forest now. She envisioned a future in which their numbers wasted away due to obstinacy.

"Your skin wrinkles on your forehead," Bright Eyes pointed out. "What does that mean?"

"It could mean confusion or worry," Janet replied.

"You've concerns about your kind," Bright Eyes surmised.

"Yes," Janet replied. "I'm one voice, a junior among my kind."

"We must gather more voices, and I've an idea," Bright Eyes responded.

During the next four days, Janet led members of the landing party, one at a time, to meet her new friend. Every journeyer to the dome was sworn to silence. While most were junior members, there was no mistaking their exhilaration when they returned to camp.

Finally, Janet approached one of the camp's leaders. He insisted on taking a second individual, another leader.

This was what Janet anticipated, and Bright Eyes and she had prepared for it.

Janet and the leaders hadn't traveled far from camp, when three of the People appeared and relocated them to the mag-pod, the structure that Janet had thought resembled a bell jar.

The leaders were shocked by the transfer. Furthermore, they were irritated by Janet's laughter.

"It does boggle the mind," Janet admitted.

"We've been drugged," one of the leaders declared.

"Don't be silly," Janet responded, her tone hardening. "If you were demonstrating leadership, you wouldn't be volunteering absurd ideas. Instead, you'd be asking questions about these three, who are Cercians."

Bright Eyes spoke, and the device around her neck translated. "If you don't wish to learn anything more, we can return you to your camp."

"We can walk," the other leader declared.

The pair of men turned in semicircles, with their backs to the sea, wondering which way to go.

"Bye," Janet said, trying hard not to smirk.

Suddenly, many of the People appeared, transporting the juniors who Janet had introduced to the Cercians.

"Why are they still clothed?" a junior team member inquired, pointing at the two leaders, as the group he was with stripped off their clothes.

"What are you doing?" a leader asked, aghast at the exposure of bodies.

"Getting ready to visit the dome on the moon," a junior member replied.

"Definitely drugs," a leader repeated.

In quick succession, a Cercian and a human shimmered and disappeared, only to reappear in the mag-pod. A second later, the pair vanished.

"You won't be forced to participate," Janet said. "But the Cercians have a warning for us about the forest, and I need everyone to listen. To make that happen, I'll introduce every colonist to the Cercians and demonstrate journeying by their amazing powers."

"But why do we have to take off our clothes?" a leader complained.

"We can move you across short distances without the magnification power of our pods," Bright Eyes explained. "In those circumstances, you can retain your clothing. However, the pods don't fare well with clothing or devices."

"Which means what?" a leader inquired.

"Some of the first to try the mag-pod failed to reach the moon's dome," Bright Eyes replied.

The pair of leaders gaped at the Cercian, realizing that the individuals who tested the mag-pod appeared in vacuum.

Janet started removing her clothing. As she did, she queried, "You coming?"

Reluctantly and slowly, the two men took off their clothes. They saw the three furred entities remove their tunics. There was a bit of relief when they saw that the Cercians who would transport them were male.

Janet witnessed the expressions of the men when they checked the Cercians' bodies, and she smiled secretly at Bright Eyes.

It wasn't long afterward, when the entire leadership team had participated in the ritual of journeying with the Cercians to visit the dome that plans were quickly made to vacate the forest.

The Cercians participated in the hundreds to move the encampment to another location, where an underground stream could be accessed.

One hundred eighty-eight colonists had landed on Cercia, one hundred seventy-seven managed to leave the forest.

When the colonists were resettled, Bright Eyes approached Janet. "Do you wish to have your kind move as we do?" she asked.

"That's possible?" Janet queried in surprise.

"I would not tease you with that offer, my friend," Bright Eyes replied. "Know that the change is permanent. With our power, your young can visit our domiciles, and it'll help them stay safe."

"I've come this far," Janet mused. "I don't know why I'm hesitating now. Does it involve an operation?"

Bright Eyes barked her laughter. "How do you feel about bathing?" she inquired.

"Haven't had one in a while," Janet replied, smiling and holding out her hands.

2: Sisterhood

THE *STORYTELLER* ENROUTE TO THE CERCIAN SYSTEM

A millennium after the *Terminus* colonists landed on Cercia, a flotilla of Tridents and the *Storyteller* responded to Hector's distress message and sailed to defend the Cercians and the humans from the aggressive forces seeking to overtake the planet.

Due to the distance, and with no dome rings available, the rescuers had a long journey to make.

Aboard the *Storyteller*, the mix of passengers made for interesting dynamics.

Peña had a discussion with the fifty-three second-gen sisters taken aboard the liner from the Helgart outpost.

The militaristic sisters had chosen to remain in a bay, standing like statues.

Peña entered the bay, eyed the sisters, and linked to them. <This behavior is unacceptable,> she sent. <If you continue to act like this, you'll remain aboard this ship.>

<We were promised freedom to fight the aliens,> Gravitas answered for her sisters.

<When did you become so limited in your thinking?> Peña queried.

That a first-gen sister had criticized their kernels' processes gave the outpost sisters pause.

Peña waited while the outpost sisters communed.

<Explain,> Gravitas finally returned.

Peña had an urge to laugh. It was what Sven would have done if he were in the bay. Instead, she sent, <The fighting will be fierce. The initial

action will be to land forces on the planet and, possibly, the dome. You will be in the company of humans and a local race, who've only met SADEs. How do you think they'll react to you?>

<What does it matter what they think of us?> Gravitass retorted.

Now Peña couldn't help the dismissive sound she issued. Shaking her head in disbelief, she sent, <Think on what I said. Let me know when you've a better answer.> She promptly exited the bay.

As Peña entered the corridor, Sven heaved his body off the bulkhead, against which he'd been lounging. <That went well,> he remarked.

<You're fortunate that you're my partner,> Peña sent, shaking a warning finger at him.

Sven laughed and threw his arms around her, cradling her firm ceramic avatar, while her sensors absorbed the sensation.

Peña chuckled, warmed her lips, and kissed Sven's neck. When Sven released her, she lamented, <There has to be a way to reach these sisters. We can't let them loose on Cercia with these attitudes.>

<We've other assets to try,> Sven volunteered.

<Dimitri?> Peña queried.

<Why stop at one?> Sven returned. <We've a SADE, two sisters, and four suits who have more combat experience than anyone we know.>

<What are you suggesting?> Peña pressed.

<Nothing specific. This isn't my area of expertise,> Sven replied. <We should listen to the Darmian defenders. I'm sure that they've been talking about what's coming.>

Peña brushed Sven's cheek with the back of her fingers. <Let's go,> she sent.

In the conference room designated for the ship's captain, Peña met with Dimitri, Amalima, Marianne, Escher, Ceda, Gat'r, and Shoya.

<Sven and I are in search of ideas as to how to help the outpost sisters break out of their militaristic habits,> Peña began.

<What are your concerns?> Gat'r asked.

<The sisters' inability to interact socially with the local race and the colonists,> Peña replied.

<Everyone knew that rehabilitating them would be a nearly insurmountable problem,> Shoya interrupted. <Why try to fix them now?>

<We've time on our hands, Shoya,> Sven replied. <What does it cost us to try?>

Shoya tipped her head in acceptance of the argument, but her expression said she wasn't convinced.

<What have you been discussing about your deployment?> Sven asked, eyeing the conference attendees.

<The various uses of our suits in ground conflicts,> Ceda replied.

<Anything else?> Sven inquired.

<Techniques to use in boarding ships,> Dimitri responded.

<Do you think that will happen?> Sven queried dubiously.

<It's not a question of will it happen. We're preparing in the event the opportunity arises,> Dimitri replied.

Sven leaned into his chair to consider what we'd heard.

Escher eyed the big Naiad before he laughed, which had his companions smiling or chuckling.

<Am I that transparent?> Sven inquired, grinning.

<I think we're headed in the same direction,> Escher shared. <Peña and you want the outpost sisters to be engaged. My companions and I are the only ones with fighting experience. Surely, the outpost sisters will accept being trained in close-quarters combat.>

Sven's grin widened. <I would think that's true,> he sent, nodding enthusiastically.

<What about the rest of you?> Ceda inquired.

<You think it'll be necessary for us to engage the enemy?> Sven queried.

<As Dimitri stated earlier,> Amalima replied, <it's a matter of preparation. None of us know exactly what we'll face.>

Sven shrugged his shoulders. <Count me in,> he sent.

There was a pause from Peña. A moment later, she shared, <Consensus is that the rest of us will train with you.>

<Who leads?> Shoya inquired.

<It must be a Darmian defender,> Peña pronounced.

Escher found he'd been swiftly nominated by the other suits. He took the remainder of the cycle to work with the suits and the Darmian sisters to design the approach and the training routines.

The next morning, everyone assembled in the outpost sisters' bay.

<It's the consensus of the rest of us,> Peña began, <that we must be prepared to defend ourselves and fight for the Cercian civilians. As such, we'll begin learning techniques from the Darmian defenders. Escher Talons is in charge of our training.>

<There's no need for such effort,> Gravitas declared. <Given the opportunity, we're prepared to kill biologicals in many ways.>

<That may be,> Escher shared, stepping to the forefront of the outpost sisters. <However, that's not at the heart of our training.>

<What else is there?> an outpost sister inquired, ignoring sharing through Gravitas.

<In close-quarters combat, civilians will be in the mix,> Escher explained. <Do you have the skills and techniques to ensure that they're not hurt by your actions? Also, do you know how to fight in pairs or trios?>

<Demonstrate the first aspect you mentioned,> another outpost sister requested.

Sven shared privately with Peña, <It seems that not all of these sisters are as ready as Gravitas to throw away their existences.>

<We must be grateful for the expertise of the Darmian defenders. Their painful losses have earned them valuable experiences to share,> Peña replied.

<Sven, I need you,> Escher sent. He placed Sven about three meters from a bulkhead.

Amalima and Marianne stepped in front of him, each overlapping Sven's shoulders.

The *Storyteller* sisters exited the bay and grabbed the material that had been staged in the corridor.

Shoya's shields from the intrusion into the efforial station were delivered to the two Darmian sisters, while the four suits took up positions behind Sven.

Two piles of green spheres, each about seven centimeters in diameter, were established behind Sven and about six meters in front of him.

Escher requested four volunteers from the outpost sisters. As expected, Gravitas was one of them.

<We've tested these balls,> Escher shared. <They won't damage the suits or the avatars. They're filled with a dyed substance that will indicate a strike.>

<What is the objective of this action?> a volunteer requested.

<Sven is the Cercian civilian. You must not hit him. Amalima and Marianne have shields to prevent a strike against him,> Escher explained. <The suits will be your adversaries. You must throw your balls as quickly as possible. If any one of us is struck by a ball, then that individual must quit throwing and is presumed to have ended their existence.>

<Is that the extent of your rules?> Gravitas asked.

<If I've not stated a condition of the exercise, it doesn't exist,> Escher returned. <Are you ready?>

The outpost sisters quickly divided their pile among them. Six balls lay at the feet of each sister.

Escher, Ceda, Ga'r, and Shoya loaded a new application. It was originated by Escher. However, Shoya had suggested some changes that Escher readily incorporated. Afterward, the four suits picked up a ball in each hand.

<Ready. Begin!> Escher shared.

The suits moved. The sisters threw balls and so did the suits. Quickly, it was over.

Every sister had been hit in the torso by a ball. Green gooey dye leaked down their clothes. They'd managed to launch a total of eight balls at their adversaries. Of the eight, two were spread on the Darmian sisters' shields. The other six decorated the bulkhead behind Sven.

Escher, Ceda, Ga'r, and Shoya stepped forward to face the four sisters. Not a single suit had been hit.

<But our avatars are superior to your suits,> Gravitas objected.

<You assumed you were superior. That meant you made the mistake of underestimating your enemy,> Shoya returned.

Peña walked toward Amalima and Marianne, who held up their shields for her inspection. After studying the dripping dye, she shared, <Not only did you not defeat your enemy, but you also killed a civilian. Under the circumstances, I won't take it personally that you failed to protect my partner.>

<We wish to engage again,> Gravitass sent forcefully.

<How can you do that?> Gat'r inquired.

<Explain,> Gravitass stated.

<The four of you no longer exist. The green dye on your torsos declares that,> Gat'r replied.

Immediately, Gravitass was deluged with requests to step away from the contest. Reluctantly, she and the other three sisters acquiesced.

Four more outpost sisters replaced the dyed individuals. They didn't bother requesting more balls. However, as more were delivered, they communed and came to the conclusion that guile was required to win.

Amalima and Marianne whipped their shields, throwing off most of the green goo, and they prepared to defend Sven.

<This dye will wash out, right?> Sven queried his defenders.

<We hope so,> Marianne quipped, which had Sven laughing.

The suits loaded the next iteration of their program. They grasped two balls, even though each had only thrown one at Gravitass and her companions.

Escher started the exercise, and the results were the same. There was one small change. Sven would have been hit only once.

The outpost sisters paired up to examine the strikes on their chests from each other's view.

<You changed your tactics,> an outpost sister pointed out.

<Yes,> Escher replied. <Did you expect us to do the same thing every time? The Darmian Radags were never that accommodating, which is why we lost our friends, who were both suits and sisters.>

<We're throwing balls of green goo,> Gat'r pointed out. <How would you fare against energy weapons?>

<And, as important, how would the civilians fare if you had more deadly weapons?> Ceda added. <With so few balls thrown, you would have struck our representative civilian three times.>

<You constantly used the civilian as a shield,> Gravitas accused.

<So we did,> Ceda returned. <And your enemies will do the same.>

<If we must expend so much care to prevent harm to civilians, we expose ourselves,> an outpost sister sent.

<Such is the nature of conflict for the conclave,> Amalima replied. <It's a difficult concept to adopt and maintain when those close to you are destroyed trying to obey that basic premise.>

<Then we must have the type of training that has kept these Darmian defenders safe,> the outpost sister sent.

Quickly, most of the other outpost sisters agreed. Gravitas and some others were holdouts.

While the *Storyteller* accompanied the Tridents toward Cercia, the training of the sisters became more intricate.

As Sven insisted in taking part in the physical training, it necessitated unoccupied avatars stand in for civilians.

In addition to Jatouche tanks for biologicals, the *Storyteller* carried a host of avatars. Tocknicka had compiled a list of the SADEs and sisters accompanying the flotilla and he'd ordered two replacement avatars for each of them.

After several of the more complicated exercises, Merlie approached Peña and Sven. It was a quiet conversation in the pair's salon.

<How would you assess our progress?> Merlie inquired.

<Mine's abysmal,> Sven lamented. <My clothes are covered in green dye after every practice session. I can't compete with suits and avatars.>

<The enemy might not be as prepared as our suits want us to believe,> Merlie offered.

<I don't think the suits are intent on training us,> Sven responded. <I think our participation provides a bridge between them and the outpost sisters.>

<Are we competition for those sisters?> Merlie queried.

<In a way,> Sven shared. <I think the training exercises are designed to create an even playing field.>

<Explain,> Merlie prompted.

<Within the exercises, you're equal. No one sister is superior to another, except for the innocent avatars standing in for me,> Sven replied, chuckling.

<Who must be washed frequently for the strikes against them,> Merlie pointed out, laughing gently.

<It must be noted that Gravitas has been displaced within the outpost sisters,> Peña shared. <She's no longer their speaker, and she's rarely consulted.>

<Which is a good thing,> Sven added. <Most of the other outpost sisters are concentrating on acquiring the techniques that they were taught.>

<It's obvious that they've finally become inventive,> Merlie opined. <I'd say that's a strong indication of their desire to continue their existence.>

<Agreed,> Sven sent.

<Merlie, let's return to your original question,> Peña sent.

<With the simpler exercises, we were doing better than the outpost sisters,> Merlie sent. <Consensus was that would continue, but it hasn't. The outpost sisters are improving dramatically, and they're consistently achieving better results than us.>

Sven reached across the table and gripped Merlie's hand. He felt her hand warm his fingers, and he smiled gently at her. <Merlie, I suspected this would be the outcome,> he sent. <You'll have noticed that even with Peña's help the *Storyteller* sisters aren't matching the outpost sisters.>

<Do we carry a defect?> Merlie queried cautiously.

With his free hand, Sven reached for Peña's hand and rested their hands on the tabletop. <What you have is infinitely more valuable,> he shared. <It's something that the outpost sisters lack, which enables them to focus fully on the exercises' goals. The sisters who crew this liner have developed that most critical biological trait of empathy. That's why I love each of you.>

Sven stood and gently guided the sisters toward him. He wrapped his arms around the pair and held them. <Maybe our task won't be to become the best of fighters. Maybe it's to care for our damaged and wounded warriors.>

The next morning, Sven found every other sister of the crew opening their arms as he approached them. With the sisters' continual sharing, they'd heard his words, and they wanted their hug. He would chuckle as he enveloped a slender avatar, and she would feel the reverberations throughout her avatar.

When Escher, Ceda, Gat'r, Shoya, Amalima, and Marianne felt they'd gone as far as they could in training the group with the techniques demonstrated in the bay, they held their own conference.

<Do we stop now?> Ceda asked the group.

<The outpost sisters have made significant progress,> Gat'r shared.

<It was obvious to me that Sven, Peña, and the *Storyteller* sisters are participating for the sake of making a good showing,> Escher sent. <I confirmed this with Sven. He believes that his group will focus on a support role.>

<I'm good with that,> Ceda sent.

<Marianne and I believe that to stop the outpost sisters' training would be a mistake,> Amalima shared.

<What more can we do?> Shoya inquired.

<With the balls? Nothing,> Marianne sent.

<You think we should trust these sisters with more powerful weapons,> Shoya surmised.

<We've been in contact with most of them,> Amalima continued. <There have been developments. Gravitas holds the allegiance of only five sisters. The other forty-seven have adopted an interest in not throwing away their existences for the sake of destroying biologicals. As such, they seek to increase the odds that they survive their time in the Cercian system.>

<How far do you think we should take their training?> Gat'r inquired.

<We believe that decision must be left to the four of you,> Amalima sent. Raised human eyebrows cued Amalima to explain that statement, to

which she replied, <Apologies, friends, but if the outpost sisters abuse the trust you place in them, the blame for the decision must not fall on digital entities.>

<That's a fair analysis of possible failure,> Escher replied, tipping his head to the sisters. <However, it doesn't make our job any easier.>

<Most of the Tridents with Hector were destroyed. Only SADEs would have been aboard, correct?> Shoya inquired.

<The crew would have had to have been entirely SADEs,> Escher surmised. <Those ships were outbound for centuries.>

<What kind of SADEs?> Shoya asked.

<Clarify,> Gat'r requested.

<Admittedly, I'm new to the concept of digital sentients, but I can already detect that there are significant differences among personalities,> Shoya explained. <Hector's message said that many of the crew members made planetfall in travelers, and I'm wondering if these SADEs would be more like Minimalist and Luther or Marianne and Amalima.>

Escher sent a query to Peña, who offered her opinion. To his group, he relayed the first-gen sister's thought that the SADEs would have explorers, scientists, and engineers.

"Oh," Ceda muttered aloud. Her disappointment was evident.

<Due to the circumstances, could we count on these SADEs adopting more aggressive attitudes?> Shoya asked.

<They would have obtained more than three centuries of existences,> Marianne replied.

<I take that as not likely,> Shoya sent, replicating Ceda's disappointment.

<That makes a great argument for training the outpost sisters to be the focus of the ground troops,> Gat'r shared.

<I would like to agree with you, Gat'r,> Escher sent. <But I've reservations about control.>

<Then we mix like we did on Darmian,> Ceda quickly volunteered. <There are six of us. Let's divide the forty-seven to report to us.>

Dimitri knew the reason he'd been left out of the training and Ceda's recent suggestion. His role on Darmian had been one of subterfuge. He'd

never participated in hand-to-hand combat. More important, he wasn't sure that he wanted to engage the enemy in that way.

<The sisters and the biologicals worked well under those conditions,> Marianne pointed out. <A smaller group with more contact with us would help the sisters in their development.>

<That idea I can get behind,> Escher returned. <Do we train them in the same things?>

<Let's design our goals,> Shoya offered. <Each group will focus on a single goal. When the required level of success is achieved, that group moves to accomplish another goal.>

<When you say goals, what do you mean?> Ceda inquired.

<What weaponry do we have onboard?> Shoya returned.

Immediately, Amalima and Marianne produced a list of anything that might be used in offense. The list named Elvian probes, EMPs, nanites canisters, energy rifles, remote traveler control, stun sticks, and some of Z's terrain and water avatars.

<Makes one nervous about sailing on this ship,> Ceda remarked.

<Who's trained on the launch and the retrieval of the Elvian probes?> Escher inquired.

Gat'r pointed a finger at Shoya.

<And who else?> Escher pressed.

<You're asking the wrong question, Escher,> Gat'r returned. <You've heard about our experience at the efforial station. What you didn't hear was the conversation between Cremsylon and the Trident captains providing escort.>

<Which was?> Escher prompted.

<Shoya believed that the captains wouldn't follow her orders because of the decision she made to immolate the entire station and end the suffering of the dying workers,> Gat'r explained. <He proved to her that Shoya was the only one they wanted to make the hard choices.>

Shoya interjected, <Cremsylon summed it up as everyone, including him, wants to be a mickie. No one wants to be a mickie leader.>

<Are you saying that this flotilla is carrying these massive weapons, and we might not have the individuals with the will to launch them?> Ceda asked in disbelief.

<We do have some,> Shoya replied. <First and foremost, you have Miranda and Z. Next, you have Commodores Dominique D'Arcy, Mila Pappas, and Lalyah Brogone. Mila has already used the probes more than once. That's why Vice Admiral Ticnikrok promoted her again. Last, and hopefully not least, you have me.>

Gat'r reached under the table and reassuringly squeezed Shoya's hand.

<You could train the outpost sisters on the deployment of the Elvian probes,> Amalima offered. <If they were aboard a Trident, they wouldn't have a moral objection to launching them.>

The group regarded Shoya, while they thought about her suggestion.

<If we don't train them on every lethal object we carry, it'll be too late when we reach Cercia,> Escher sent. <Now would be the time to do it. The protectors can always choose when to employ the outpost sisters with what weaponry.>

The group quickly agreed, and Escher sent a private thanks to Shoya.

The next morning, forty-seven outpost sisters found themselves divided into six teams. Each team was headed by one of the suits or the Darmian sisters. They separated to examine the offensive artifacts the *Storyteller* carried.

Peña had taken Gravitas and her five affiliates aside and told them that they weren't ready to start the next phase of training.

<We've been as proficient with the green balls as the other sisters,> Gravitas objected.

<In that regard, you have,> Peña allowed.

<Clarify why you're punishing us,> Gravitas continued.

<You're not ready to take responsibility for some of the dangerous weapons onboard this ship,> Peña replied.

<Our existences will end because we must fight with rocks and sticks against enemies with technologically superior weapons,> Gravitas stated sarcastically.

<Who says you'll be allowed to fight?> Peña asked. <This ship and my sisters will provide support for the Tridents and the ground fighters. You'll assist us with those functions.>

<Is this to be permanent?> one of the outpost sisters inquired.

<Little in this universe appears to be permanent,> Peña replied. <However, in this case, you are the agents of change, if you wish.> She left the six sisters to dwell on what she'd shared.

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.