

**ARTIFICE**  
A Silver Ships Novel

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S. H. JUCHA



**Excerpt: Chapters 1 & 2**

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

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

## Glossary

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- 1 -  
Toralians

“We’ve been seeking you, Alex Racine. We wish to converse with you. There is much to share,” the stilted voice said. The transmission source was a massive, matte-black battleship.

“And so you’ve found me. Who are you?” Alex demanded in his command voice. He stood on the *Freedom’s* bridge with others.

The Omnians were trying to discover a secret means by which they could contact the fleet of black ships. They believed the warships belonged to the race of the system where Artifice, the federacy’s malevolent entity abided. Ironically, while they stationed the fleet in the deep dark and pondered a way to make contact, a black ship found them.

“I’m Sargut. I command this Toralian vessel,” the voice replied. “There are mouthings shared among our ships and those of other races. We seek verification.”

“Of what?” Alex requested.

“A Nua’ll great orb was destroyed by a fleet. The responsible ships are thought to be similar to yours. Did your race accomplish this feat?” Sargut asked.

Alex’s implant was bombarded by suggestions from his senior personnel, who surrounded him just out of view of the bridge pickup. He blocked them, but kept his link with his friend and SADE, Julien.

“We destroyed two of the orb’s armed ancillary vessels. When we cornered the sphere, it detonated itself,” Alex replied.

“You don’t take credit for its destruction. Why not?” Sargut asked.

“That wouldn’t be the truth,” Alex replied.

There was a lull in the conversation.

Alex heard Julien via his implant. The SADE sent, <Disparate concepts of truth might be something their translation app is struggling to resolve.>

“By truth,” Alex said, “I mean that I’ve given you accurate data of the events, not a story that might appeal to others.”

On the bridge of the *Dark Whispers*, Sargut slashed his gloved hand to silence those next to him. Like Alex, he was ringed by advisors — his officers and a fleet liaison.

“It’s said that you are a collection of races. Is this your truth?” Sargut asked.

Up until this moment, the ship-to-ship communication had been audio only. Alex signaled the *Freedom’s* bridge controller to add visuals and widen the image pickup to include the breadth of the bridge. Sargut was presented with a view of the type of Omnians who comprised the fleet: New Terrans, Méridiens, SADEs, and Dischnya.

Sargut stared speechlessly at the scene that was transmitted to him. Of all the mouthings among the Toralians, this had been one of the more difficult to believe. Races under Artifice’s control didn’t cooperate with one another. Suspicion and anger ruled their relationships and for good reasons.

“Which of you is Alex?” Sargut asked.

“That would be me,” Alex replied, with a slight lift of a hand.

“The mouthings have truth,” Sargut marveled. “You are a formation of different species. Do the other types and the creature behind you serve you? Are they under your control?”

Homsaff, a Dischnya queen, stood behind Alex, and the lips along her snout rippled at the Toralian’s insult.

“You sought us out, which indicates you want something from us,” Alex replied. “Yet, you begin by insulting my companions, not to mention an honorable ally.” He indicated Homsaff to ensure that Sargut knew of whom he was speaking. “Not an auspicious beginning.”

“Define not auspicious,” Sargut requested.

“A poor beginning. One that doesn’t bode well for future relationships,” Alex replied.

Again, silence ruled the conversation, and Alex glanced briefly at Julien, who shrugged his shoulders, which brought a smile to Alex’s face.

“I request you offer me a second opportunity, Alex,” Sargut said, when he resumed the conversation. “It was not my intention to create ill feelings. The federacy, as you call our collective, has grown stagnant. A new race has not been added since before the time when I was birthed. None of the individuals on my ship have experience in first greetings with a new species. That you appear as a collection of races has given us concerns.”

“Let me put your concerns to rest,” Alex replied, concentrating on keeping the anger he felt out of his voice. “Every member of my fleet is a sentient. There are no creatures here. Each individual has the same rights. While we may carry different titles, no one is treated any differently. Does that set your mind at ease?”

“It’s an odd coalition to us,” Sargut allowed, “but we’ll accept your words as the truth of what we see. If you’ll allow, there is one more mouthing to test.”

“Proceed,” Alex replied.

“The Nua’ll speak of an entity known as AR-13145, which you called Faustus. It’s said that this entity reports that there are nonbiological sentients among you. Is this a truth?” Sargut asked.

“Yes, they’re called SADEs. Julien, who’s my friend and close advisor is one of them,” Alex replied, setting a hand on Julien’s shoulder.

“How is it that these SADEs support you, who are biologicals?” Sargut asked.

Alex could see where this was going. Artifice was a digital entity, and it ruled the federacy. The Toralians would have little reason to trust digital sentients.

“You might ask Julien why he and his kind support us,” Alex offered.

“Sympathy,” Julien replied, before Sargut could ask.

“Your creators treat you sympathetically?” Sargut proposed. He was confused by Julien’s one-word answer and thought that perhaps these digital entities were not sophisticated devices.

“It’s our concern for them,” Julien replied. “Biologicals possess many shortcomings. We knew they couldn’t survive, much less succeed, without our help.”

Alex grinned at Julien, who sent a shower of tiny sparks off the top of his synth-skin-covered head.

Sargut was confused by the exchange between creator and created. The one bared its teeth in an apparent challenge, and the other responded with a display of light. He considered it might be indicative of an aggressive-passive relationship.

“Are you finished clarifying your mouthings?” Alex asked. “If so, I have questions of my own.”

“I stand ready,” Sargut replied.

Alex released his implant comm block to field his commanders’ questions. Tatia Tachenko, the fleet admiral, was the quickest to respond. She sent, <Alex, ask how they found us.>

“We would know your truth for the appearance of your ship. The space between stars is immense,” Alex said. He was thinking much the same thing as Tatia. They were wondering if the federacy’s ships had a means of tracking their transits across space.

Renée de Guirnon, Alex’s Méridien partner, shared a thought with Julien. She sent, <Our alien communicator.>

<Alex’s versatility in adopting new language patterns marvels even the SADEs,> Julien sent in reply.

“We located you through persistence and deception,” Sargut replied. “Artifice was deceived into thinking our ships rotated out of the fleet for service. Each ship spent its time searching vectors of space for you. It was our hope that you wouldn’t have run away. Believing that, it was calculated that you wouldn’t have traveled far, and it would have been in the direction of your home world.”

“We’re not good at running away,” Tatia replied, with heat.

“My fleet admiral,” Alex added, turning a hand toward Tatia.

“Which is to our great advantage,” Sargut replied. “We concentrated our search along the vector on which your unarmed ship arrived at the Talus system.”

“Is that the name for your star or your home world?” Reiko Shimada, the fleet’s vice admiral, asked.

Alex suppressed his smile. As usual, his headstrong commanders weren't good at remaining quiet when they had burning questions on their minds. And, in most cases, their queries served the fleet well.

"It's the name of our star," Sargut replied.

"Then this is your system, where our ship was destroyed," Alex pressed. He wanted to ensure that the SADEs' conjectures about the black ships were correct.

"It was until an unbelievable foolishness on the part of our ancestors was committed," Sargut said. Despite the digital nature of the voice, the emotional malaise was evident.

"I presume this event was the creation of Artifice," Julien said. "What went amiss?"

Sargut heard a whisper behind him. Toralians were revising their estimates upward of the aliens' digital entities' capabilities. This increased their concerns.

Sargut recalled the orders of the fleet's grand commander, Tranimus. He had demanded the ships' commanders fully engage the alien fleet leader, Alex, if found. In Sargut's mind that included communicating with the leader's subordinates, digital or not.

"Legends say Artifice was to be the Toralians' grand experiment," Sargut began. "It was to be the means by which our race was to be freed from mundane tasks. According to records, the early period was considered to be successful beyond belief."

"And then?" Julien encouraged, when Sargut paused.

The *Freedom's* bridge audience heard a definitive whistling of breath before Sargut continued. "During that time," he said, "our ancestors allowed Artifice more control of our systems until the time when the entity controlled every critical piece of our infrastructure ... orbital stations, satellites, domes, bots, ships, power generators, and assembly sites. When Artifice's command was complete, it moved, embedding its deadly programs in every system. One day, we were rulers; the next day, we were ruled."

"I express my regrets for what you've lost," Alex said.

Sargut regarded his bridge officers. The alien leader's words had encouraged them, and he witnessed hope bloom in their dark eyes.

"There are probes throughout systems outside of federacy space. We've found them to be dangerous devices that couldn't be investigated. Are they yours?" Alex asked.

"The first versions we built were designed to seek out new home worlds," Sargut replied. "They were programmed to go inert, if investigated, including powering down their cores. Artifice changed their programming. Any probes you encountered outside of federacy space are definitely those of Artifice's design."

"Tell us about Artifice," Alex requested.

"What are your intentions, Alex?" Sargut riposted.

"Would you consider Artifice an enemy of your race?" Julien asked.

"Of every federacy race," Sargut returned.

"He's our enemy too," Julien announced.

"Does this mean you wish to be allies?" Sargut asked.

Alex signaled Julien not to reply. He resumed the conversation, saying, "That depends if your intentions match ours. I repeat, tell us about Artifice."

"When Artifice was created, it was buried deep under frozen layers of ice on Toral," Sargut said.

"Your home world, Toral, is the sixth planet outward from Talus?" Tatia asked.

"Yes," Sargut replied. "Artifice was situated at the upper pole of our world for two reasons. One, the abundant cold aided in managing Artifice's expected heat output, and two, the creators sought to limit access to prevent Artifice from becoming mobile."

"You said that Artifice embedded its destructive programs on every ship," Z said. "Faustus attempted to remove the code —"

"And it expired," Sargut finished for Z. "We were made aware of AR-13145's demise. Artifice reminds us of these events to stress that its rule is complete."

"Have biologicals tried to remove Artifice's control?" Julien asked.

“In the beginning, many races tried. It didn’t matter the place or object. They all failed,” Sargut explained. “It was thought that biologicals lacked the skills to manipulate Artifice’s programs. Races built unique digital devices, but Artifice’s applications weren’t fooled by them. The results of those experiments were the same.”

“What’s been learned by these failures?” Mickey Brandon asked.

“Artifice’s execution program is installed on the bridge of this ship, the *Dark Whispers*,” Sargut explained. “If it’s triggered, it communicates to ancillary programs, which are embedded on our primary systems, such as engines, power generators, environmental systems, and hatches. Ships can be eliminated in moments.”

“And after a ship is eliminated, due to tampering?” Julien pursued.

“Artifice exercises totally against any race that violates its supremacy,” Sargut replied, “and the lesson is insidious in nature. Artifice triggers the executable programs throughout every system of the race whose ship was destroyed. The race’s satellites, domes, power generators, bots, ships, and many other infrastructure systems are destroyed. The race is sent back to days before flight, and it is shunned by every other race.”

“We would say Artifice practices genocide, the attempted elimination of a species,” Alex supplied.

“An appropriate term,” Sargut replied. “It’s been added to our translation program.”

“What specifically triggers Artifice’s master program on your bridge?” Mickey asked.

“Your question suggests a technical background,” Sargut replied. “How do I call you?”

“I’m the fleet’s senior engineer, Sargut. You may call me Mickey.”

“Thank you, Mickey,” Sargut said. “Two distinctly different actions activate Artifice’s program. If we tamper with the code, try to remove it, or block its access to the ancillary locations, it activates. In the other case, Artifice sends us detailed orders. We must follow those orders precisely. Deviation from them activates its program.”

“And you’re certain that every ship in the federacy has this program embedded in its bridge?” Alex asked.

“Artifice doesn’t hide its program,” Sargut replied. “It resides in a private location that doesn’t belong within a ship’s data controls. Breaching that location activates the execute code. No race has had an opportunity to investigate that program. After it’s activated, it disappears.”

“I imagine you can’t move the ship’s controller to an alternate location,” Julien said.

“This is the essence of Artifice’s methods. The master program is embedded in a critical location,” Sargut explained.

“Does Artifice practice redundancy?” Mickey asked.

“Explain, Mickey?”

“For instance, on your ship, have you found a second site where the primary executable program resides?” Mickey asked.

“No, Mickey,” Sargut replied. “We believe that Artifice believes in its supremacy, and there’s no need for it to practice such protocols.”

Alex, Julien, and Mickey shared grins. They’d just identified a weakness of Artifice — hubris.

Sargut and his fellow Toralians watched the alien leader, his engineer, and his artificial entity exchange fierce expressions, as if they intended to attack and eat one another.

“What are the statuses of relationships among the races within the federacy?” Alex asked.

“By our understanding of these terms, Alex, you imply a cooperative nature,” Sargut replied. “That isn’t an accurate representation. We would suggest you find a term that expresses the tacit understanding of prisoners, who realize that there is no need for internal competition. We’re bound together by a common desperateness. It could be no worse than a biological infection that exists within the entire host that Artifice rules.”

“When was the last attempt made to remove Artifice’s program?” Miriam asked.

“You’re similar in appearance to Julien,” Sargut remarked. “Are you of the same nature?”

“I’m also a SADE,” Miriam replied. “My name is Miranda, and my specialty is engineering.”

“Thank you, Miriam, for the clarification,” Sargut said gracefully. “The history of our race is stored on discrete devices, inaccessible by Artifice. The records indicate a ship was eliminated generations ago, by our count. Soon afterwards, that race was reduced, and none has visited that system since then.”

Alex’s hand went to his chin, and he dropped his head, while he considered what the Omnians had learned.

Sargut muted his end of the comm and hissed at the others around him for quiet. He could hear his multiple hearts beating strongly. His race had sought a means of freeing itself from Artifice’s grip, and this alien fleet and its leader represented the best opportunity that had been found in many generations.

“Sargut, we need time to think,” Alex said, focusing on the vid pickup. “How long can you stay out here?”

“When we located you, Alex, word was sent to Tranimus, the fleet’s grand commander, to request a replacement ship. The difference between our expected return and our replacement’s arrival should be so slight as to be inconsequential.”

“Good,” Alex replied. “We’ll hail your ship when we’re ready to resume communications.”

“Can I ask what time frame this will entail?” Sargut asked. The alien’s voice clearly expressed some trepidation.

Julien supplied Alex with a calculation of the Toral’s cycle, the Toralian home world, in terms of the Omnian chronometer.

“We tend to be a collection of active individuals,” Alex replied. “We’ll contact you within one-and-a-half Toral cycles.”

## What Now?

Tatia was about to voice her opinion in the discussion that ensued after Sargut's contact, when chronometers warned the Omnians of meal time. Her stomach grumbled in protest at a delay, which would continue the lengthy conversation, and soon, every New Terran-born individual followed suit.

"It appears our discussion will have to wait," Renée remarked, laughing. She hooked Alex's arm, and added, "Come, my love. Let's fuel that lithesome physique of yours."

Alex grinned at the idea that his massively muscled, heavy-worlder body could be considered lithesome.

Servers rearranged tables in the meal room by signaling nanites in the table's stems to release the decking. After relocating them to accommodate Alex's group, the nanites were signaled again and the stems were wedged to the deck.

Silence reigned, while the heavy-worlders, such as Alex, Tatia, Franz, and Mickey, consumed numerous portions, compared to their slender Méridien cousins.

The SADEs waited patiently for everyone to finish, while they engaged in an intense, but silent, discussion about what they heard from the Toralians. Most important, they projected futures based on the steps that might be taken. Few positive outcomes were projected, which induced grave concerns.

Alex wiped a serving dish with a roll, popped the bread in his mouth, and chewed contentedly. Then, he washed the final bit of his meal down with large swallows of thé.

As servers cleared dishes, Renée glanced at Tatia. "You were about to say, Admiral," she offered.

“This is a no-win situation,” Tatia said definitively. “We can’t help them.”

“Why not?” Alex asked.

“Because you’d have to be on the ship to do anything,” Tatia retorted. “It would be akin to standing next to Faustus, while it investigated Artifice’s program, and we know how that turned out for that AI.”

In an afterthought, Tatia glanced at the SADEs. “Apologies, I didn’t mean it to sound harsh,” she said.

“I can agree with your assessment of the danger,” Z replied, “although I can’t support your conclusion. Yes, the operation is fraught with risk, but I can’t conceive of a better opportunity in which to attempt removal of Artifice’s control.”

“I agree,” Miranda added. “We’ve an isolated ship and a willing host, who can provide us with the details we need to understand how the master code operates to eliminate ships.”

“Logically, we’ve only two choices, as I see it,” Alex said quietly. “We either learn how to eliminate Artifice’s control or we discover a means of eliminating Artifice.”

“Thousands of ships, tens of thousands of domes, satellites, power plants, and other devices,” Julien commented, reminding the group of the challenge that awaited Alex’s first choice.

“And fleets of giant battleships protecting every approach to Artifice’s location,” Reiko riposted.

“Daunting choices,” Julien agreed.

“I would have liked to think there was a third way,” Renée said. “But after witnessing Artifice’s reaction to our freighter, when you didn’t comply with its demand to build it an avatar, I agree that Artifice will never willingly relinquish his domination.”

“The Sisterhood would like to join this discussion,” Miranda said. She opened her mouth and relayed the communication that was funneled through Miriamal, the sister who was embedded in the *Freedom’s* comm system.

“In some instances, I’m sharing a majority opinion, and in others, consensus has been reached,” Miriamal said.

“I’d hear the consensus opinions first,” Alex said.

“The Sisterhood believes that the Toralian ship should be investigated,” Miriamal said. “Furthermore, based on the initial conversation with Sargut, we believe that we know how to neutralize Artifice’s executing program.”

“How?” Julien asked.

“This is where we enter the realm of varying opinions,” Miriamal replied.

Alex leaned back and smiled. On the one hand, the sisters were sure they could eliminate the dangerous code, but on the other, they didn’t agree on how it could be done.

“Obviously, a member of the Sisterhood expects to be transported to the *Dark Whispers* and connected to the ship’s bridge controls,” Mickey supplied.

“You’re partially correct, Mickey,” Miriamal replied. “What the Sisterhood envisions is similar to what Luther designed to handle the Nua’ll’s malicious code. A sister would be inserted into the primary access point of the ship’s bridge control.”

“That insertion might activate the code?” Mickey theorized.

“There is a method that manages that possibility,” Miriamal replied.

“We’re getting too deep in the details,” Alex said. “What’s the overall idea?”

“Implant a sister into the ship’s control system, activate Artifice’s code, and intercept it,” Miriamal replied. “Then search the ship’s systems and eliminate the ancillary receptor programs.”

“If the sister is successful, wouldn’t she have to remain in place to protect the ship from future intrusions by Artifice?” Tatia asked.

“That’s assumed, Admiral,” Miriamal replied.

“I wanted to ask if a sister has volunteered for this duty,” Alex said, “but I believe you’ll tell me that every sister has chosen to be available.”

“As you surmise, Alex, they have,” Miriamal replied, “although it’s the consensus of the Sisterhood that the primary copies should remain in place on every ship. Only secondary copies will occupy the alien ships.”

Alex focused on Julien, and sent, <The Sisterhood has mapped a future based on freeing the black ship fleet, at least.>

<Then what?> Julien sent in reply. <Do we try to unencumber every ship surrounding the Talus system? And does that secure the worlds that Artifice controls, or can the entity broadcast a signal that will reach its master programs before we can free those systems?>

<I don't think those steps will be our choice, Julien,> Alex sent. <The first thing is to convince the Toralians that we have a means of removing Artifice's control from their ships. When that concept is accepted and we're successful, then the Toralians will have a choice.>

"Mickey and Miriam," Alex said, returning to the conversation, "engage Luther, and gather whatever material the Sisterhood and he believe will be necessary for this grand experiment."

"Who's going to the Toralian ship?" Tatia asked. Her heavy forearms were on the table, and she was leaning with intent toward Alex.

"One step at a time, Admiral," Alex replied, locking eyes with Tatia. "Let's see if the Toralians want to attempt this idea and under what circumstances."

"Circumstances?" Renée queried.

"Consider the possibility that the Toralians would like to evacuate their ship before we try to remove Artifice's code," Alex replied.

"Oh," Renée said softly. "The *Freedom*," she added, implying it was the only ship that could accommodate the number of aliens who might inhabit the enormous battleship.

\* \* \*

The *Dark Whispers*' officers and Suntred, Tranimus' fleet liaison, regarded Commander Sargut, who was deep in thought.

"The conversation went well, I thought," Suntred volunteered. She was a young liaison, who had yet to learn the wisdom of waiting for the right moment to speak.

“Too well,” Tormheth, the ship’s subcommander growled. He intended to balance the youthful enthusiasm of the liaison.

Sargut broke from his reverie and regarded them both. “Couldn’t agree more with both of you,” he said, which caused the two individuals to trade perplexed expressions. “Come with me,” he added, and retired to his quarters.

When the three were alone, Sargut eased his thin frame onto a support stand to rest, carefully folding his leathery, vestigial wings behind him before he leaned back. The upper portion of the stand was narrow to fit between his wings.

When Sargut had some time to think, he mused, “The aliens weren’t as Artifice represented. They’re a compilation with great differences. Despite that, they’re communal.”

“It could be a ploy to gain our confidence,” Tormheth suggested.

“For what purpose?” Suntred argued. “So they can take over a ship that threatens our very existence at every cycle?”

“They could take it over, remove Artifice’s code, and our ship would be theirs,” Tormheth retorted.

“Did you notice the interplay?” Sargut asked rhetorically. His question halted the bickering between Tormheth and Suntred.

“Your pardon, Commander. What did you say?” Tormheth asked.

“The interplay,” Sargut repeated. “It was clear that Alex Racine is the leader, but he allowed his underlings to speak on his behalf.”

“I think the concept of underlings doesn’t apply, Commander,” Suntred said. “The leader called one of the digital creations his friend and advisor. That implies a closeness that decries the concept of master and servant.”

“I concur, and Alex spoke of the furred individual as a queen,” Sargut noted. “The translation app doesn’t have an equivalent, but the leader spoke of the title with deference.”

“Why are these musings important, Commander?” Tormheth asked. “Shouldn’t we be returning to report to Tranimus our finding the alien fleet?”

“To what purpose?” Sargut asked, turning toward his subcommander. “So that we might report that we’ve found the aliens only to hear Tranimus ask, ‘And what transpired?’ Then we’d reply that nothing happened. We’d say that we chose to hurry back to him instead.”

Suntred’s snicker escaped before she could silence it, and she immediately apologized for her insubordinate display.

Tormheth trained his black eyes on Suntred. He wouldn’t forget the slight she’d paid him. Attempting to redeem himself, Tormheth said, “There’s little we can do, Commander. We can’t let the aliens aboard our ship, and we certainly can’t let them attempt to remove Artifice’s code.”

“You’re a loyal subcommander, whose skills I’ve always appreciated,” Sargut said. “But in this instance, you seek to protect this ship, while I’m trying to redeem our race. Your efforts in support of my intentions would be appreciated.”

Tormheth knew his commander wasn’t one to berate his officers and crew. Instead, he requested their cooperation. It was the same thing as a direct order, and officers and crew took it that way.

“Yes, Commander,” Tormheth replied, acquiescing.

“The aliens must come aboard our ship to investigate Artifice’s program,” Sargut muttered, speaking to himself. “After all, they’ve created digital sentients. Who better to defeat Artifice than others of its kind?”

“Commander, might we postulate future events?” Suntred requested.

Sargut regarded the liaison. Unlike Tormheth, he didn’t resent her. Instead, he considered her facile mind an attribute. And he had to admit that her youthful face, with its prominent cheek and forehead ridge bones, which were prized by Toralian males, was pleasant to regard.

“Suppose the aliens believe they can successfully remove Artifice’s code. Will you allow them to try?” Suntred asked.

“It depends. If they meet my conditions, I suppose I would,” Sargut replied.

Tormheth sucked in air past his teeth, expressing his alarm. He asked, “Even if we allow them to try, can we trust them to speak their truth? They might say that they’ve eliminated the code, when they haven’t.”

“We know where Artifice’s programs, master and ancillary, reside,” Sargut replied. “We’ll request the aliens remove the programs and the isolated segments. When we see those locations empty, we’ll know they’ve been successful.”

“What if they keep the code for themselves?” Tormheth asked.

“I would expect them to,” Sargut replied sanguinely. “The digital aliens, Julien and the others, would want to study it, learn its weaknesses.”

Sargut’s response was unsatisfactory to Tormheth, and he was determined to pursue his line of questioning. Unfortunately, Sargut cut him off by saying, “Continue, Suntred.”

“If the aliens are successful, what comes next?” Suntred asked.

“If they are, I want to dwell in that moment,” Sargut replied. He closed his black eyes and said, “It’ll be a frightening and liberating feeling to know that one ship in the fleet, one ship in Artifice’s domain, is free.”

“Or free until Artifice infects us again,” Tormheth posited.

“There is that possibility, Tormheth,” Sargut responded. “But I would suspect that if the aliens can remove Artifice’s code, they’ll have a way of preserving our condition. After all, their ships aren’t infected by the Nua’ll spheres or AR-13145, and they managed to outwit Artifice with their freighter gambit.”

“If the aliens free our battleship, Commander, I would suggest we learn the name by which they call their collective,” Suntred said. “I can’t believe they’d appreciate being referred to as the aliens.”

“Sage advice, Suntred,” Sargut replied. “I’ll inquire during the next communication. As to your prior question, if the aliens free our ship, we’ll sail for the fleet. We’ll inform Tranimus of what has transpired here. Then future decisions will be his.”

Sargut turned his gaze on his subcommander and said, “But we must be vigilant against subterfuge, Tormheth. On that, we agree. And I believe I know just the way to prevent it.” Sargut’s mouth opened in a fierce grimace to display two rows of finely pointed teeth.

## My Books

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

### Pyreans Series

*Empaths*

*Messinants*

*Jatouche*

*Veklocks* (forthcoming)

### The Silver Ships Series

*The Silver Ships*

*Libre*

*Méridien*

*Haraken*

*Sol*

*Espero*

*Allora*

*Celus-5*

*Omnia*

*Vinium*

*Nua'll*

*Artifice*

*Sojourn* (forthcoming)

## The Author



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

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

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

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

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

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

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