

LIBRE
A Silver Ships Novel

S. H. JUCHA



Excerpt - Chapters 1 and 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.

Copyright © 2015 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 S. H. Jucha

www.scottjucha.com

ISBN: 978-0-9905940-3-1 (e-book)

ISBN: 978-0-9905940-4-8 (softcover)

First Edition: August 2015

Cover Design: Damon Za

*For my mother, Marjorie; my sister, Jan;
and my brothers, Greg, Brett, and Barry.*

Acknowledgments

My deepest thanks go to Jan Hamilton, my sister, who contributed substantially to the funds that made the publishing of my first novel possible. And to my fans, whose purchases of *The Silver Ships* made possible this second book in the series.

A thank you to my independent editors, John Kudrick and Joni Wilson, whose guidance gave the manuscript its final polish. To my proofreaders, Abiola Streete, Dr. Jan Hamilton, and David Melvin, I offer my sincere appreciation 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.

“Admiral on the bridge,” announced Julien, the *Rêveur*’s SADE, a self-aware digital entity.

“At ease,” Alex Racine said as the crew braced to attention. *This will take some getting used to*, Alex mentally grouched as he strode onto the starship’s bridge, attired in his new, four-star uniform, to join his officers and Renée de Guirnon, his House Co-Leader and lover.

Three hours ago, the *Rêveur* had exited a faster-than-light (FTL) jump from Bellamonde to outside Arno’s heliosphere. The ship was headed in system toward the planet Libre, carrying the crew’s prize, a captured silver ship, in the starboard bay. The cost of capturing the enemy fighter had been high ... one pilot, Jase Willard, and two of the *Rêveur*’s four fighters.

Alex regarded his newly promoted officers, Senior Captain Andrea Bonnard, Captain Edouard Manet, Commander Tatia Tachenko, and Squadron Leader Sheila Reynard, all standing particularly straight and proud, while sneaking appraising glances at one another. Their new uniforms, adorned with gold rating stars, the House Alexander insignia, and the *Rêveur*’s patch, had gone over quite well. *They have a right to be proud*, Alex thought. *They’ve accomplished something the Confederation hadn’t dared attempt in seven decades ... the capture of a marauding silver ship.*

Julien was already gathering information on the Arno system and Libre, the only habitable planet, and its satellites. Housed on the *Rêveur*’s bridge in a metal-alloy case that enclosed his circuitry and crystal memory, the SADE was the technologically unifying force of a Méridien starship. FTL jumps were completed by his calculations; FTL communications were sent through his crystals. Every primary system on any Confederation starship could be remotely monitored and controlled by its SADE.

Originally, Alex had sought to return the *Rêveur's* survivors to their home world, but the Confederation was in disarray. Hundreds of ships were seen fleeing Méridien to escape the encroaching swarm of silver ships. Renée's brother, Albert, the present House de Guirnon Leader, attempted to usurp their vessel, but the Méridiens refused to heed his demand. Their response was to abandon their House and declare themselves to be Independents. Their allegiance, from the moment of their revival after seventy years in stasis, had been to their rescuer, Alex, a New Terran explorer-tug captain.

It was Alex's suggestion that Renée, a daughter of House de Guirnon, create her own House. Renée had embraced the idea, which was how Alex found himself Co-Leader of House Alexander, the Military Affairs Arm of the Confederation Council. Not that their House was official yet, and, with the Confederation in chaos, Council approval of the House's petition might never come.

Alex had hoped that their newly adopted disguise as Méridien militarists instead of New Terran civilians would lend them authority toward enlisting the services of the Independents and their keepers, House Bergfalk, to help them in the fight against the silver ships. The Independents, Méridien society outcasts, were quarantined on Libre to prevent them from infecting other Méridiens with their so-called rebellious thoughts and ways.

On the bridge, Alex nodded at Julien's holo-vid display of Libre and its satellites. "According to Confederation records," Alex said, "House Bergfalk maintains a single, small orbital station for transfer of the Independents to the planet's surface. Supposedly, it constitutes Libre's entire orbital assets."

Instead of a single station, Alex, Renée, and the officers were looking at three orbitals. A small one, probably the planet's original station, was a small speck floating above Libre compared to the two gigantic platforms, each supporting a massive, partially constructed, disc-shaped ship, more than 2 kilometers across. The immense constructions dwarfed even the long-haul freighters docked opposite the huge ships.

“It appears Confederation records aren’t up to date,” Alex said. “Julien, would you care to hazard a guess about those two enormous saucers?”

“Yes, Admiral, I would. While their design is not in my archives, it’s my supposition that these ships are FTL-capable cities, designed for long-term habitation.”

“So, no fighting ships,” said Senior Captain Andrea Bonnard, voicing the group’s disappointment.

“No fighting ships,” Alex agreed. He had hoped that House Bergfalk, that had pushed the Confederation Council for an aggressive response to the attacks of the silver ships, might have been working with the Independents to build fighting ships. Alex’s people, the New Terrans, hadn’t possessed warships prior to his discovery of the *Méridiens*. And now it appeared the Confederation still hadn’t built any.

“Well, I’m sure by now that we have House Bergfalk’s attention,” Alex said. “What I need is an entrance, some sort of demonstration.” Alex studied the holo-vid, lost in thought, and then he began assigning flight positions. “When we’re ready, Captain Manet, you’ll detach your ship and take up a position here.” Alex expanded the holo-vid view and placed an icon of the armed shuttle, *Outward Bound*, presently riding ex-carrier on the *Rêveur*, slightly ahead and to port of their position. “Captain Bonnard, I want the fighters to take up positions here and here.” He placed Dagger-1 just outward of the *Outward Bound*’s port side and Dagger-2 just outward of the *Rêveur*’s starboard side. They had lost the original Dagger-1 and Dagger-2 in the fight to take their first silver ship, necessitating call-sign changes for the remaining two fighters. “Is Lieutenant Dorian well enough to fly Dagger-2, Squadron Leader Reynard?”

“Negative, Admiral. Physically, the lieutenant is fine, but his experience has severely shaken his confidence. He needs more time.” Sheila couldn’t blame Robert Dorian for his reticence to rejoin the fight. In their encounter with the silver ship, Robert’s Dagger had been cut in half by the enemy fighter. He had been strapped in a tumbling, dead cockpit with no power or comms, scared that rescue might never come. “I’ve assigned Lieutenant Hatsuto Tanaka as Dagger-2’s pilot.”

“Ah, Miko’s brother,” replied Alex, referring to Lieutenant Miko Tanaka, Captain Manet’s copilot. Alex queried Julien and received Hatsuto’s profile from the Méridiens’ visit to Barren Island, New Terra’s fighter training site, and shared it with Renée and his officers, giving them time to review the file.

“Look familiar?” Alex asked them.

“Jase,” Andrea responded, referring to Lieutenant Jason Willard, the pilot they had lost. During the journey to Arno, Andrea and Sheila had queried Julien for an analysis of their fight with the silver ship. Alex’s attack plan was designed as a pincer movement, trapping the enemy ship between two flights of Daggers. But Andrea and Sheila, who had piloted Flight-2, had arrived late. By then, the silver ship had destroyed Jase’s craft and cut Robert’s fighter in half.

The comm buoys, deployed during the fight to facilitate data transfer, had provided the answer to Andrea and Sheila’s questions. Jase hadn’t followed his fighter’s preprogrammed flight path. Instead he had switched to manual and cut closer to the gas giant to engage the enemy fighter sooner. Operating in manual, his skills were no match against the speed and agility of the silver ship, and his hubris had cost him his life.

“Admiral, Tanaka’s a good pilot,” Sheila said. “Captain Bonnard and I have shared Julien’s analysis of Jase’s performance before and during the fight. Hurrying to meet the enemy wasn’t the only break in procedure Jase committed. We made sure Tanaka saw Jase’s mistakes and how his actions had endangered everyone. Tanaka got the message, Sir.”

“Very well, Squadron Leader, it’s your call.”

“Ah, it’s a fan-squirrel,” said the executive officer (XO), Tatia Tachenko, staring at the holo-vid.

“What?” Edouard asked.

“A fan-squirrel, a native New Terran animal,” Tatia said, sending an image to Edouard from Julien’s archives via her implant, the tiny Méridien device surgically embedded in her cerebrum. “It’s a New Terran, long-haired, tree dweller. When surprised on the ground, it turns sideways and spreads its fur, making it appear several times its size. It’s quite a sight.”

The others nodded as they began to comprehend Alex's concept of a dramatic entrance. A military House should look imposing.

"We won't respond to House Bergfalk comms until we're ready," Alex stated. "We launch 'Fan-Squirrel' when we're a few hours out from Libre. Our silence for three and a half days should keep the House Bergfalk Leader wondering."

* * *

As the *Rêveur* closed on Libre, the Daggers and *Outward Bound* spread out into their assigned positions. Using a House Leader's priority code, Julien opened a comm request to the station director, who had originated the House Bergfalk comms to the *Rêveur*. The response was immediate.

Director Karl Beckert preceded his implant comm with his bio-ID, a Méridien custom upon introduction. <SADE,> Karl sent, <we've received your ship codes, but our records indicate the *Rêveur* was lost nearly seventy-one years ago, and you're in the company of non-Méridien craft. Explain.>

"Julien, open a vid on me," Alex said.

The director's mouth flew open at the sight of Alex's 146-kilo New Terran stature, so unlike the Méridiens' slender frames. His eyes glazed as he focused his thoughts through his implant comm to relay an urgent request to his Leader for further directions.

Renée, standing off-vid, hid a broad smirk behind her hand. She recalled her first impression of Alex when they'd met on the *Rêveur*'s bridge soon after Julien had revived the Méridiens from stasis. On first sight, she had called him an "Ancient," a Méridien term honoring their original colonists, whom Alex resembled. He, though, had thought she'd called him "old." *Such might be the eccentricities of first contact*, Renée thought.

When the director focused his eyes on his vid screen again, he sent, <Who are you and ... what are you?>

Renée had rehearsed Alex in the persona it was imperative he adopt for his new position. <Is this how you greet a Leader?> Alex demanded. <I am

Admiral Alex Racine, Co-Leader of House Alexander, the Military Affairs Arm of the Confederation.>

The director's agitation and confusion were evident. His implant comm to his Leader was even longer this time.

Alex, playing his part, interrupted the man's communications. <Did you authenticate my SADE's code, Director Beckert?>

<Yes ... Yes, Leader,> replied the director, deferring to protocol.

<Do your records correspond with this ship's silhouette?> Alex said.

<Yes, Leader, after your transformation or separation, whichever it was, your ship is confirmed. It's just that —>

<And yet, while Confederation colonies are being destroyed, you quibble with me when I would be speaking to Leader Eric Stroheim.>

<My apologies, Leader, but I'm requested to ask. What are those two single-person craft? They appear too small to be shuttles.>

<Shuttles, Director? Don't be foolish! They're fighters, destroyers of silver ships!> Alex had Julien cut the connection before the director could reply.

A quarter-hour later, Julien received a comm request originating from the planet. "It's Leader Stroheim, Admiral."

"The curtain rises," Alex quipped as Andrea and Renée took positions beside him for the vid comm.

<Leader Stroheim,> Alex greeted the *Méridien*, Leader to Leader, as Renée had demonstrated, nodding his head down and touching his open right hand to his left chest.

Leader Stroheim returned the courteous greeting despite his amazement at the sight of two oversized humans standing beside a *Méridien* that records indicated was the long-lost daughter of House de Guirnon. <Leader Racine, your arrival has generated great concern. Our records don't list your House, you arrive on a ship registered as long lost, you don't appear to be *Méridien*, and you claim to have craft that destroy alien ships.>

<There is much for us to discuss, Leader Stroheim, but perhaps it can wait until your visit to the *Rêveur*,> Alex replied.

<And why should I have to wait for my questions to be satisfied, Leader Racine?>

<I would have thought you'd prefer to peruse our captured silver ship first, of course, Leader Stroheim.>

* * *

During the *Rêveur's* flight to Arno from Bellamonde, where the silver ship was captured, Alex had spent the days wondering how to convince the Independents, the persona non grata of conformist Méridien society, and House Bergfalk, who maintained the Libran colony, to support them in their fight against the alien ships. The giant saucer-like ships were strong indications of the Librans' preference, which was to run, not fight. Alex wondered if his proof that a silver ship could be defeated would be enough to persuade them otherwise.

To date, the Méridien Confederation had lost six colonies to the insidious, alien menace. The swarm of silver ships, in the company of an enormous spherical craft, had invaded the far system of Hellébore first, and, after eliminating the human population, had harvested resources from the system's only habitable planet, Cetus. When the silver ships had finished collecting whatever it was they sought, they had boarded their giant mother ship and exited the system.

Now, the aliens threatened the Méridiens' home world, having overrun the nearby colony of Bellamonde seven years ago. Over 1.7 billion inhabitants and their cities had been burned to ashes by the alien's powerful beam weapons. And the Confederation Houses, that hadn't dared to defend themselves, were fleeing their home world for the farthest colonies.

For Alex, it hadn't started out as his fight. Fate or fortune had intervened. The *Rêveur* had been the second Méridien starship to succumb to the devastating beams of a silver ship. Holed and nearly destroyed, the *Rêveur* became a derelict, speeding across empty space. In a rescue, hailed

by some as foolhardy and by most as spectacular, Alex had saved the eighteen Méridien survivors and Julien.

The *Rêveur's* eighteen Méridiens, including Renée, owed their lives to their SADE and his perseverance. Ensnared in crystal stasis tubes, the Méridiens had slept for seventy years while their damaged ship drifted through space. Julien had remained the only active intelligence aboard. He had waited patiently for rescue, minimizing the consumption of his limited power supply. Finally, in a desperate bid to save his passengers, with his power dwindling, he reduced his processing speed to 1/500 and set contact alarms to revive him if the ship was found.

When the *Rêveur* had shot across the edge of the New Terran system, many light-years from the Confederation, Alex had risked his life to latch his explorer-tug onto his world's first alien ship. The tug's beams and Alex's extravehicular activity (EVA) efforts to gain entrance to the advanced starship had triggered Julien's revival. The *Rêveur's* hull sensors had relayed Alex's helmet-framed face to Julien, who triggered the airlock hatches. Julien enticed Alex to the bridge with a trail of blinking lights, consuming some of the last energy in his power supply. Over the next half-year, Julien and Alex, working to repair and arm the *Rêveur*, had grown close, brothers of crystal and flesh.

Like the Méridiens, the New Terrans had left Earth aboard colony ships to settle new worlds. Each thought they were alone in their own corner of the galaxy. Now, though, they knew that wasn't true, and it wasn't only humans who were out here.

With Renée, the House de Guirnon representative aboard the *Rêveur*, Alex had negotiated an agreement with his government's Assembly to trade Méridien technology for repairs. The New Terrans, hundreds of years behind Méridien technology due to a disastrous start on their new world, had been overjoyed to accept the exchange.

But Alex had discovered the Méridiens were defenseless against the alien ship that had attacked them. He had pleaded with Renée to sue for co-development of weapons with his people. Renée's request sold itself when the New Terran president and Assembly had viewed the *Rêveur's* records of the attack. Neither the peaceful Méridiens nor the New Terrans,

who had yet to venture outside their own system, had developed weapons more powerful than that required for personal protection or crowd pacification. In the vids, the New Terrans saw how easily the Méridiens' superior technology had been defeated and knew they too were totally unprepared to repel the alien ships. The Assembly approved a mutual weapons-development pact, and Alex, with help from Julien and others, had cobbled together the colonists' records from university archives to resurrect Earth's war machines.

When the *Rêveur* returned to Confederation space, its bays held four fighters armed with an assortment of missiles. Its crew comprised a mix of the original eighteen Méridiens and over a hundred New Terrans. Alex and his New Terran crew had received the Méridien gifts of cell-gen injections for health and longevity, and implants, enabling comms between individuals or groups, even across the Confederation via FTL stations.

The return to the Méridien home world held a brief moment of joy and celebration for the *Rêveur*'s long-lost survivors. During their ship's repairs in New Terra, many of the Méridiens had feared the possibility that more than one marauding silver ship might have been loosed on their Confederation's colonies. Their excitement over the forthcoming reunion had turned to dismay when they observed myriad House ships fleeing the advance of the aliens, who were now only days away via FTL.

When Albert, Renée's brother, the new House de Guirnon Leader, attempted to commandeer the *Rêveur* and abandon the New Terrans, he couldn't have anticipated his people's reaction. The *Rêveur*'s Méridiens had undergone a transformation during their time with their more life-embracing cousins, the New Terrans. Faced with the directive to dishonor their captain and their New Terran comrades, they chose instead to abandon their House, which had led Alex and Renée to record their petition to the Confederation Council as the first military House in the Méridien culture's 700-year history.

Julien had deliberately leaked word of the formation of the new House by Alex and Renée, and, to a man, woman, and SADE, the crew had joined House Alexander, the Confederation's new military arm.

Now, House Alexander prepared to meet House Bergfalk.

The *Rêveur*, the *Outward Bound*, and the two Daggers had taken positions 10km out from one of the giant construction stations to await the arrival of Leader Stroheim and his entourage.

In the interim, Julien was sleuthing. Using the system's FTL comm station, he searched for other SADEs in system, which could be expected to be embedded on FTL-capable ships or on the planet, the orbital stations requiring only sophisticated controllers. To his surprise, Julien discovered that the 2-kilometer-wide constructions, which Alex had dubbed "city-ships," had co-opted SADEs. They had been Independents. His total count of SADEs was seven: two in the city-ships, two in the freighters, two in the liners, and one aboard a liner that had exited the system. However, comm station records indicated he should have located one more. Apparently more sleuthing was required.

Andrea Bonnard, the *Rêveur's* captain, and Lieutenant Sheila Reynard, the new squadron leader, headed for the bridge.

Sheila's comment to Andrea when informed of her promotion, days ago, had been, "Best decision I've ever made was to apply to Barren Island, Captain. At this rate, I'll make Air Command general or something in a year." Then she had added ruefully, "If I live that long."

Tatia interrupted them in the corridor, "Captain, if I might speak with you?"

Andrea nodded to Sheila to continue and said, "Yes, Commander, how may I help you?"

Just six days ago, Andrea had reported to Tatia as the *Rêveur's* Squadron Leader. But Tatia, who had the credentials of the *Rêveur's* first mate and an ex-major in the Terran Security Forces (TSF), had politely refused the promotion to senior captain. In an unexpected turn of events, Andrea found Tatia and Alex teaming up to push her to accept the senior

captain's position. Andrea's fear of becoming the flotilla's senior officer had her also ready to refuse the offer until Renée intervened, nominating, or, better said, pushing Alex into the position of admiral.

If Andrea had expected personal conflict between Tatia and her over the promotion, it had never happened. In a moment of frankness, Tatia had told her, "Captain, I've always been a ground-pounder. I need time to learn to be a space-puke like you." The cheeky smile accompanying Tatia's forthright comment had made Andrea smile in return. After that, the two officers had settled into a comfortable relationship.

"What are your plans for Leader Stroheim's reception, Captain?" Tatia asked.

"I take it you have some suggestions, Commander?"

"Several, actually, Captain. I'd like to show you something in storage," Tatia said and nodded her head down the corridor.

Andrea's eyebrows tilted up in inquiry, but it appeared her new XO would rather show than tell as Tatia began leading the two of them down the corridor to take a lift to a lower deck.

* * *

As Alex and Renée walked from their cabin down to the port bay for House Bergfalk's reception, he took her hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. In the corridors, the crew stepped aside and came to attention as their Co-Leaders strolled past. Despite their embroilment in the first war in their 700-year history, a war worse than they could have imagined, Alex and Renée were enjoying their time as new lovers. The faces of the crew at attention held no disapproval. Instead there were twitches of smiles and grins, reflecting Alex's happy face.

Renée found the carefree manner in which New Terrans expressed their emotions exhilarating. It was a freedom denied by her people's formal composure and sensibilities. She sought to interlace both hands around Alex's bulging upper arm, despite knowing she wouldn't succeed, but it tickled her just to try.

New Terra, with its greater gravity, produced humans with nearly twice the girth of Méridiens. From her time on New Terra, Renée knew Alex was one of his planet's larger specimens, due in large part to his youthful years working with his father's collection and recycle of space debris. And Alex had the appetite to prove it, which she witnessed in the meal room. She smiled at the memory of her people, soon after their rescue, courteously drawing out their meals to end to match when the captain finally finished devouring his multiple serving dishes.

When they entered the port bay's airlock, Alex signaled Andrea. <All ready, Captain?>

<The honor guard is ready, Admiral.>

Alex peered through the hatch's crystal shield and saw Andrea, Tatia, and the honor guard, all attired in Méridien environment suits and holding Terran Security Forces pulse rifles.

<Julien, when did we load pulse rifles aboard?> Alex asked.

<None are listed in my manifests, Admiral,> Julien sent back.

<Captain,> Alex sent, <Julien tells me we have no records of pulse rifles in our shipping manifests.>

<I believe they came aboard as Commander Tachenko's private property, Admiral,> Andrea replied. <Apparently they are part of a shipment of 200 pulse rifles and extra chargers, a gift from TSF General Maria Gonzalez, as I learned this morning. I thought they would enhance our military posture.>

<A little heads-up next time, Captain,> Alex said.

<My apologies, Admiral,> sent Andrea, delivering the simple response she had prepared. Under the circumstances, she had decided to take the path of asking for forgiveness after the fact.

Alex considered the general's "gifts," detecting the fine hand of New Terra President Arthur McMorris as well. Their foresight and endeavors to protect his crew touched him.

The bay doors were open, and the lights of a giant orbital station and its massive ship twinkled in the distance. Beyond the station and ship loomed Libre, wrapped in brown, gold, and green. Julien received the

shuttle controller's docking signal and subsumed its operations, guiding the shuttle gently into the bay and settling it to the deck.

Flight Crew Chief Stanley Peterson's crew locked the shuttle down and closed the bay door. When the bay pressurized, Stan signaled the admiral, who with Renée cycled through the airlock. The escort twins, Étienne and Alain de Long, who had taken up oversight positions in the bay for the shuttle's landing, moved to flank Alex and Renée.

Eight *Rêveur* crew members took up positions at the end of the shuttle's extended gangway ramp, standing at attention in two rows. Andrea and Tatia waited at each row's end.

* * *

Inside the shuttle, Leader Eric Stroheim vacillated between anger and curiosity. His world had been the epitome of order until the aliens arrived. In the midst of the chaos, he had sought refuge with the Independents. Now his life was being disturbed once again by what appeared to be a travesty of the human form.

When the shuttle pilot signaled all was ready, Eric led his small contingent down the gangway ramp and received what he considered a bizarre gesture from the *Rêveur*'s crew as they snapped their hands to their heads. *At least they rendered their motion in synchronicity*, he thought. Despite their incredible size, the heavily built humans weren't ponderously slow as he had expected.

Eric eyed the crew's long-barreled weapons and presumed they were a sign of inferior technology. The society must be incapable of miniaturizing the components to produce a sophisticated stun weapon. When Eric came to a halt in front of the Leader, he examined the huge human and worked to conceal his disdain. Eric had always been proud of his elegant, slender build. The creature in front of him was more akin to a hulking animal than a human.

As Eric Stroheim stopped before him, Alex extended the Méridien greeting, which the Leader returned, and sent, <I welcome you aboard the *Rêveur*, Leader Stroheim. We're pleased to host you and your guests.>

<Leader Racine, were you required to adopt our technology in order to communicate with my people?> Eric sent in reply. <Or, by the slimmest of coincidence, did your people already possess implant technology?>

Alex felt his blood warm the back of his neck, and he fought to prevent his fingers from curling into fists. The Leader's condescending thoughts irked him. Worse, the man had chosen to ignore courtesy for the sake of questioning New Terran capabilities. Despite the occasion's importance, Alex couldn't resist responding in kind and proceeded to update the Leader on their recent events.

Eric Stroheim reeled under the onslaught of multiple vid streams to his implant — the New Terran-Méridien Pact, the *Rêveur*'s repairs, the crew's adoption of Méridien tech, the development of fighters and missiles, the nightly implant games, and the fight to capture the first silver ship. As Eric staggered under the impression that many people were comming him all at once, muddling his cognitive senses, his guests sought to steady him. In the midst of the mental avalanche, Eric wondered how his comm security protocols had been bypassed.

<My apologies, Leader Stroheim,> Alex sent after his multi-stream blast ended. <I hadn't suspected you would employ your implant in such a primitive manner. I'll endeavor to limit my comms with you. I wouldn't wish to make you uncomfortable.>

When the House Bergfalk shuttle had touched down in the bay, Alex had conference-linked Renée, Andrea, Tatia, the twins, and Julien to facilitate communications. Except for Julien, the others had been transfixed by the vid barrage they had just witnessed. Alex's unnatural proficiency with his recently installed Méridien implants had become one of the crew's running jokes: their admiral wasn't New Terran or Méridien since his implant dexterity was more alien than human. The crew had single devices, used primarily for comms, while Alex employed two implants, creating applications and manipulating data, much as Méridien scientists and mathematicians did. But there hadn't been an occasion to witness his

implants employed as a mental force, a display of power Eric Stroheim had just found himself receiving.

<Leader Stroheim, it's my pleasure to introduce you to my Co-Leader, Renée de Guirnon,> Alex said, gesturing to Renée. Alex waited while Stroheim pulled himself together. The Leader was visibly shaken, but pride drove him to resume his mantle. Obvious to Alex, as Eric Stroheim greeted Renée, was that the Leader's air of superiority had been visibly dampened.

<It's an honor to greet you, Ser de Guirnon,> said Eric as he dipped his head and touched his chest. <News of your loss, seventy-one years ago, devastated us all, especially your father ... may his steps be guided back to us one day.>

<I thank you for your sentiments, Leader Stroheim,> Renée replied. <We are here by the generosity of Admiral Racine and his people.>

To further facilitate introductions, Alex added the Leader's guests to the conference comm. Surprised expressions formed on their faces as the admiral flawlessly bypassed their implant security protocols and manipulated their comms, capabilities only a SADE or advanced Méridiens possessed but would never have employed.

<Next you will want to embed crystal storage for full SADE capability,> Julien grumbled privately to Alex.

<I am but a pale imitation of your magnificence,> Alex sent back and heard Julien's chuckle.

Eric shrugged off the admiral's mental intrusion and motioned to his guests. <Leaders Racine and Ser de Guirnon, allow me to introduce Ser Tomas Monti, the elected Leader of the Independents, and his daughter, Ser Angelina Monti.>

Tomas and Angelina wore warm-brown ship suits in contrast to typical Méridien starship uniforms of deep, dark blue. Unlike the few Méridien men Alex had seen, who were all clean-faced, Tomas sported a slender brown moustache, which tapered over the corners of his mouth, and a small pointed goatee on his chin. The Independent Leader was lithe like all Méridiens, but his eyes, swirls of browns and greens, searched like a bird of prey instead of exhibiting the usual Méridien calm.

<How does one greet a New Terran?> Tomas sent to Alex.

The simple, personal request instantly elevated the man in Alex's mind. He extended his hand and sent a short vid of their custom.

Tomas eyed the powerful hand in front of him. The vid he received of two giant New Terrans greeting one another was not reassuring. He received a private thought from Ser de Guirnon: <Trust me, Ser Monti, you have nothing to fear from our admiral.> Tomas glanced briefly toward Renée, taking note of the sincere smile on her face. Guided by the vid, Tomas gripped the admiral's hand and shook it. Surprised by the gentle action, a smile crossed his face, matching the one on the admiral.

Unlike the men with her, Angelina Monti felt no such reticence engaging the admiral. That a House de Guirnon daughter stood next to the powerful New Terran was an intriguing sign to her. Stepping close enough to cross into Alex's personal space, she clasped his hand with both of hers. <We are quite pleased to greet you, Admiral. Please call me "Lina," as my friends do.>

Renée recognized the overtures of an unpartnered Méridien woman — Lina's intimacy; her brilliant smile; both of her hands enclosing Alex's hand; and her large, dark eyes, favored by many of Earth's Italian descendants, shining and inviting.

After Alex carefully untangled himself from Lina, he announced, <You came to see a silver ship, Ser. Let's not waste any more of your time.>

<Admiral, if you will indulge me,> Tomas said, <I'm intrigued by the elongated stun weapons of your people,> he said, indicating the twins, who stood behind Alex and Renée.

<Those aren't stun weapons, Ser Monti. They're plasma rifles.>

<Plas-plasma!> Eric Stroheim's thought stuttered. <But plasma would kill.>

<Yes, Leader Stroheim, it would,> Alex replied. <Perhaps you don't understand the purpose of our House. We are soldiers, warriors, if you will. If it requires us to destroy the aliens to protect our race, then so be it.> Alex spun and walked away, leaving it to his subordinates to usher their stunned guests along behind him.

Mickey Brandon, the *Rêveur's* chief engineer, was standing by in the starboard bay. Although Mickey had never been in the Terran Security Forces, he rendered a sharp salute to his admiral as the entourage arrived.

Tatia Tachenko, the *Rêveur's* ex-TSF major, had created military protocol vids for the crew, since most of them had been civilians their entire lives. Mickey had sat in bed with Pia Sabine, his *Méridien* lover, reviewing the vids. When they came to the salute, Pia had insisted they practice. It didn't help Mickey that Pia had pulled them naked from the bed to salute each other. At the start, Mickey felt awkward, but Pia wouldn't let him stop until she was satisfied. At one point, after another unsatisfactory attempt on Mickey's part, Pia had said to him, "You think of this salute as an exercise. Think of my worlds in flame and think of our admiral, who has bound us together to fight for our people. What honor would you render him?"

In the starboard bay, Alex and his people stood aside for their guests, who came to a sudden halt at the sight of the silver ship, which rested on the bay's deck. Mickey's sampling and spectrographic equipment surrounded the craft, whose hull was a dark, shiny silver patina, except where patches of nanites had weakened the crystal matrix, dulling its surface, and where the warhead missile had penetrated one such patch, exploding inside the ship and destroying its occupants.

The guests had no comments as they stared at the silver ship. Alex wondered what it must be like to have been haunted by the specter of these aliens for decades, never daring to fight back, as their enemy consumed colony after colony, murdering billions of their people. Now their guests were confronted with the remains of one of the deadly predators, and it was not their people who had captured it, but strangers working in concert with *Méridien* survivors, lost for seventy-one years.

Tomas began walking toward the ship.

<I advise you to not touch it, Ser Monti,> Eric instructed Tomas and discovered his private comm had been sent to the entire group. He turned an annoyed look on Alex, who responded to the Leader's glare with an amused expression.

<You're on our ship, Leader Stroheim,> Alex sent on the conference link. <House Alexander prefers open communications. If you aren't comfortable with this, you're welcome to leave at any time, with or without your guests.>

Eric Stroheim stared at the admiral, the anger evident on his face. He glanced to Tomas, expecting to find support for him against the New Terran's outrageous behavior, but the Leader's face mirrored that of the admiral's.

Tomas continued to approach the silver ship. Up close, he examined the contrast between the dark, polished hull and the mottled areas, laying a tentative hand on a shiny area, and marveled at the ultra-smooth surface. It felt as if a fine layer of oil coated the ship's skin.

Being the gregarious individual that he was, Mickey launched into an update for their guests about what they had and hadn't discovered about the ship. He went so far as to play the vid that Alex and Julien had created as they pieced together the mystery of the aliens, who burrowed into the planet's surface and used subterranean passages to mine the planet's minerals.

The *Rêveur's* people stood quietly by as their guests watched the vid unfold, a display of imaginative pattern mapping. When the vid ended, the view rotated to expose the substrata, which were highlighted in translucent colors, exposing the myriad tunnels that connected the mined mineral locations to the silver domes. Mickey credited his admiral and the ship's SADE with the concept.

Julien added, <I was merely the librarian, Sers. The concept's architect is our Leader, Admiral Racine.>

The *Rêveur's* crew straightened their shoulders proudly as the Librans turned to regard Alex with wonder and, perhaps, with a touch of fear. While he appeared similar to them, his behavior and capabilities were far outside that of any *Méridien* they had known.

Renée stepped beside Alex, taking his arm at the elbow as she had just done for the first time on their walk to greet the Librans, and sent, <He is our Ancient,> bestowing on Alex the honored *Méridien* term. Renée felt Alex's hand close possessively over hers, and she smiled at him before

turning a penetrating stare on Ser Angelina Monti, who did not miss the message.

The Méridiens' most prestigious celebration day was Colonists Day. They were extremely grateful to their founders who had successfully developed their new world. That Earth colonists, raised on a stronger gravity world, possessed greater stature than present-day Méridiens, had added to their mystique and heroic image. Over the centuries, New Terra, with 11 percent greater gravity than Earth's, had added more mass to the average New Terran than those of the Méridiens' Ancients.

And Alex stood out among New Terrans. His father, Duggan Racine, had trained as a shuttle pilot and fielded a job recovering space debris from orbit. Duggan's assistant had quit when he was almost killed in a foolish accident with his EVA suit. Weeks of income might have been lost while Duggan interviewed for a replacement, but then his eleven-year-old son had volunteered to help him. Most fathers would have refused outright, laughing at the suggestion, but then most fathers didn't have Alex for a son.

Schooling could take place on children's readers, so Alex would sit in the copilot seat, studying, while his father readied the shuttle and flew into orbit. Per his father's strongly worded orders, Alex had stayed in the shuttle while his father performed the EVA trip and Alex operated the recovery winch. In zero-g, the space refuse, composed mostly of metal, had no weight. The hard work came after landing when the debris had to be dragged to the shuttle's ramp, winched, and loaded into the hover-truck for transport to the recycling center. It had been heavy work for a young boy, until one day, having added 39 kilos of muscle, it wasn't.

Tomas turned from admiring the captured ship. <A wonderful accomplishment, Admiral. How did you manage this?>

<With difficulty,> Alex sent. <We started with four pilots and four Daggars ... that's the name of our fighters. We lost one pilot and two Daggars to capture one alien ship.>

Eric stared aghast at Alex. <You ... You sent people to their deaths? Were they Méridiens?> His thoughts were laced with accusation.

Alex released Renée's arm and closed on the Leader, his mass intimidating the man, but the Méridien held his ground. <You do not fight the aliens without being willing to die to win,> Alex sent.

Eric swallowed under the admiral's glare, noticing the blood pounding in the arteries of the New Terran's thick neck. The Leader's security placed their hands on their stun weapons, and Tatia signaled Étienne and Alain, who stepped toward the Leader's two security personnel, escalating the tension in the bay.

<My crew risks their lives every day, including our fighter pilots, who are New Terrans,> Alex sent, while extending a finger toward the Leader's face. <But understand this, Ser Stroheim ... the man we lost died for all humans, including you.>

In the sudden stillness that followed Alex's angry release, a quiet thought was heard: <I'm saddened by your loss, Admiral, and would know the name of your pilot so that we may honor his sacrifice.>

Alex turned toward the speaker, Tomas Monti, and in the face of the honest words that had been offered him, he deflated. <Your words are appreciated, Ser Monti. He was Lieutenant Jason Willard.>

Eric Stroheim, always the consummate Leader, recognized the extent to which the admiral's focus was shifting toward "his" Independents. So Eric vied for some attention of his own. <And I must offer my apologies, Admiral Racine, to you and your people. The death of a person, the sacrifice of a life, is still a frightening concept to us. We are by design a peaceful people, and it's true that our nature has cost our people dearly. Yet it's still a shock to learn that humans are attacking our foe with the intent to kill.>

Tomas walked up to Alex, carefully regarding him from top to bottom and side to side. <My large friend, I think you came to Libre for a reason, and I, for one, would love to hear it.>

My Books

The Silver Ships series is available in e-book, softcover print, and audiobook versions. Please visit my website, <http://scottjucha.com>, for publication locations. You may also register at my website to receive email notification about the publish dates of my novels.

If you've been enjoying this series, please consider posting a review on Amazon, even a short one. Reviews attract other readers and help indie authors, such as me.

Alex and friends will return in the upcoming novella, *Allora*.

The Silver Ships Series

The Silver Ships

Libre

Méridien

Haraken

Sol

Espero

Allora (forthcoming)

The Author



I've been enamored with fiction novels since the age of thirteen and long been a fan of great storytellers. I've lived in several countries overseas and in many of the US states, including Illinois, where I met my wonderful wife thirty-six years ago. My careers have spanned a variety of industries in the visual and scientific fields of photography, biology, film/video, software, and information

technology (IT).

My first attempt at a novel, titled *The Lure*, was a crime drama centered on the modern-day surfacing of a 110-carat yellow diamond lost during the French Revolution. In 1980, in preparation for the book, I spent two wonderful weeks researching the Brazilian people, their language, and the religious customs of Candomblé. The day I returned from Rio de Janeiro, I had my first date with my wife-to-be, Peggy Giels.

In the past, I've outlined dozens of novels, but a busy career limited my efforts to complete any of them. Recently, I've chosen to make writing my primary focus. My first novel, *The Silver Ships*, was released in February 2015. This first installment in my concept of a sci-fi trilogy was quickly followed by books two and three, *Libre* and *Méridien*. *Haraken, Sol, Espero* (Oct. 2016), and *Allora* (Dec. 2106) are the fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh books in the series and continue the exploits of Alex Racine and company.

I hope to my readers are intrigued with my stories as I plan to continue this most wonderful job!