

OMNIA
A Silver Ships Novel

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

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Chapter 1 - Daelon

Chapter 2 - Moon Landing

Chapter 3 - Evacuation

Chapter 4 - Experiments

Chapter 5 - Z

Chapter 6 - Willem

Chapter 7 - Dassata

Chapter 8 - So It Begins

Chapter 9 - Fissla and Peace

Chapter 10 - Omnia

Chapter 11 - Inventive Minds

Chapter 12 - Face of Omnia

Chapter 13 - Young Queens

Chapter 14 - Sawa

Chapter 15 - The Edifices

Chapter 16 - Waffala

Chapter 17 - Plan C-3

Chapter 18 - Return to Omnia

Chapter 19 - The Tour

Chapter 20 - Swei Swee's Return

Chapter 21 - We Have Guests

Chapter 22 - Fortune Strikes

Chapter 23 - *Into The Dark*

Chapter 24 - Maria's Deal

Chapter 25 - Decisions

Chapter 26 - Haraken Transplants

Chapter 27 - Soma School

Chapter 28 - *Rover*

Chapter 29 - Scout Ships

Chapter 30 - Three Years

Chapter 31 - Killian

Chapter 32 - To the Rescue

Glossary

My Books

The Author

-1-
Daelon

“This is Captain Cordelia of the *Freedom*, calling the orbital platform above the Daelon moon,” the SADE, a self-aware digital entity, sent via the ship’s comm. Her voice was relayed through the speakers of the city-ship’s massive bridge for her fellow Harakens, who were arrayed around the bridge and anxiously awaited the reply to Cordelia’s hail.

“This is the Daelon orbital station, Captain Cordelia,” a voice was heard over the *Freedom*’s speakers. “Your ship isn’t in the Confederation’s database. Please state your ship’s origin and the nature of your emergency.”

“We’ve no emergency, Ser,” Cordelia replied.

“Then state your intentions, Captain.”

“We’re volunteering no information, Ser,” Cordelia replied. “We’re informing you that within a day and a half we’ll be in a stationary position relative to your moon. We’ve business to conduct with those individuals below and would appreciate no interference from you.”

“Captain Cordelia,” the voice replied, “we’re duty bound to inform you that this is Confederation space, and the people on Daelon are Méridien citizens. You’ve no authority here, and we require you depart this system immediately.”

“You’ve a most interesting manner of treating your citizens, Ser ... incarcerating them on a dead moon in a dead system. But you’ve touched on the reason we’re here. We wish to ask your Independents whether they want to remain Méridien citizens.”

Cordelia waited patiently for a response, as the silence dragged on. The SADE could imagine the intense discussion taking place on the platform’s bridge. It was unnecessary for Cordelia to check whether the connection was still active. An app in her crystal kernel, which monitored the ship’s comms system, would inform her immediately if the link was dropped.

When no reply seemed forthcoming from the platform, Cordelia glanced to her left at Alex Racine, wondering what the architect of this

jaunt into Confederation space was thinking. Alex leaned against an unattended bridge panel, arms folded, and his eyes staring into space, while he waited for the conversation to continue.

“Captain Cordelia, this is Maynard Scullers. I’m the manager of this orbital platform, and I respectfully request you include my staff and me in your discussions with those below. You see, we’re all Independents here.”

Maynard heard the delightful tinkling of silver bells, musical and soothing, over the platform bridge speakers. He glanced left and right at his operation’s personnel, who wore myriad expressions ranging from smiles to confusion.

“Captain, am I speaking to a SADE?” Maynard asked cautiously.

“Yes, Ser Scullers.”

“A SADE who’s the captain of a Libran city-ship ... is Alex Racine aboard?” Maynard asked, hoping with all his might that liberation was sailing toward him.

Cordelia glanced at Alex, who shrugged his shoulders, which she took to mean that it was her decision as to how she should choose to answer.

Tatia Tachenko, Haraken’s ex-admiral, smiled and gently shook her head. Everyone who worked in Alex’s immediate sphere was forced, at one time or another, to apply their own interpretations to his favorite enigmatic gesture.

“He might be,” Cordelia replied, drawing out her words, as she often heard Alex do. From the *Freedom’s* bridge speakers burst the sound of laughter, cheers, and clapping, originating from what was obviously a room full of people aboard the orbital platform.

Maynard regained some control, hushing his people, and leaned into the comm pickup to ensure he was heard. “Well, Captain Cordelia, I can’t speak for anyone else aboard this platform or below, but you can sign me up.”

“Sign you up to what, Ser?” Cordelia asked.

“I don’t care, Captain. If Alex Racine is involved, I want to be aboard!”

The twins, Étienne and Alain de Long, exchanged glances.

<Well, we've definitive confirmation,> Alain sent to his crèche-mate via implant, the tiny comms units in Haraken cerebrums. <The madman's mental condition is indeed infectious.>

<Because we've been in close proximity to Ser for two decades, that would imply we must have caught the malady,> Étienne sent in reply.

<Happily so,> Alain replied, adding a wink for his twin.

"How do you transport the Independents below, Ser Scullers?" Cordelia asked.

"We've only two shuttles, Captain, but they're both travelers."

"And how many Independents are incarcerated on Daelon?"

Laughter and whistles again broke through the *Freedom's* speakers. Those on the bridge could hear Maynard quieting his people. "You'll have to forgive us, Captain. We're the only ones to have ever used that word ... incarceration. Counting the moon base and the platform, we have 18,289 people."

Cordelia glanced at Alex, who was frowning. Julien, her partner, sent a private query to Cordelia, which she relayed. "We expected many more, Ser Scullers."

"Understandable, Captain. For a few years after Libre's evacuation, which was with Ser Racine's assistance, the annual number arriving here was fairly constant. But when Gino Diamanté replaced Mahima Ganesh as Council Leader, the count of individuals transported here slowed dramatically. In the first half of this year, we received one-eighth of the people who were shipped here in the same time period during Daelon's first year.

"You seem well-informed of the historical numbers, Ser Scullers," Alex said, activating the bridge's vid side of the comm signal and stepping into view. "How long have you been on Daelon?"

Maynard glanced around the platform's control room. His people stared at their monitors, taking in the view of Alex Racine. There was no mistaking the wide build of the famous, or infamous, depending on your viewpoint, New Terran, who sported a heavy-worlder body, which was in considerable contrast to the slender physiques of the Méridiens, who inhabited the Confederation. Maynard's people nodded their heads

enthusiastically to him, responding to his unspoken query, their eyes gleaming in anticipation.

“Ser Racine,” Maynard replied, tears forming in his eyes, and his throat threatening to close, “I had the dubious honor of disembarking from a Confederation ship twenty years ago along with others and becoming the first inhabitants of this fine establishment. Before that, I was the director of a premier orbital station, responsible for starship construction, until I made the mistake of openly criticizing Ganesh.”

“Good to hear, Ser,” Alex replied.

A scowl formed on Maynard’s face. For a moment, he thought he had misinterpreted why Alex Racine had come to Daelon.

“I meant the part of being a director responsible for starship construction,” Alex added. “I can’t offer much in the way of compensation, at first, but if you’re interested, I have a job for you.”

The tears that had swum in Maynard’s eyes spilled down his face, and he fought to control his emotions, managing to croak out, “Does room and board come with the job, Ser?”

“It does, but, I warn you, Ser, it’ll be a demanding job,” Alex replied.

“Sign me up, Ser,” Maynard replied, and those on the *Freedom’s* bridge watched Maynard drop below his vid’s view, but they could hear his sobs and hiccups.

“We’ll see you soon, Ser Scullers,” Alex said. “Send no comms below of our expected arrival, if you please. It’ll be our job to communicate why we’re here.”

A young woman, tears streaking her face, stepped into the vid’s pickup. “We understand, Ser Racine,” she said, glancing down, presumably at Maynard. “And might I add from all of us here on the platform ... welcome to Daelon, Ser.”

“Thank you,” Alex replied and cut the comm.

Alex looked to the side, where his love and partner, Renée de Guirnon, leaned against another deactivated bridge station.

Tears floated in Renée’s eyes, but anger twisted the planes of her exquisite face. “When will the Confederation stop imprisoning innocent citizens?” she asked hotly. Her fists were balled in frustration at her home

world's attitude toward anyone who violated the Confederation's strict rules of behavior. She felt Alex's heavily muscled arms sweep her into his embrace, but in an uncharacteristic display for her, she shoved back and sent Alex an emphatic, <No.>

If it wasn't for Renée's comm, Alex might not have released her. Her outburst took him by surprise, and he watched her exit the bridge in haste.

<I believe Ser has reached her tolerance limit for Méridien society,> Alain sent to his twin.

<A patient woman,> Étienne sent in reply. <When the Confederation failed to conduct an extensive search for our passenger ship to rescue us, ninety years ago, I was done with them.>

Comms flew between those on the bridge, expressing concern for Renée, but, as expected, no one vocalized their thoughts. In the midst of so many extraordinary experiences, throughout the past two decades, Renée had been the center of calm and reason, and Alex's emotional anchor. Now, the Harakens regarded Alex with concern, if not worry, on their faces.

"It appears we might need to walk softly around my partner, for a while," Alex said to the group. "Back to your duties, people; we've some time yet before we reach Daelon." Alex exited the bridge with Julien, Tatia, and the twins in tow.

Renée stalked back to her suite, remonstrating herself for her behavior on the bridge. She managed to send a quick apology and a love missive to Alex. In reply, Renée received a full image of Alex. His face became gooey, smitten by her attentions, and then his entire body melted into a puddle. *Goof*, she thought, and a burble of laughter escaped her lips, as she gained the cabin's door.

For much of her life, Renée believed deeply in the values of Méridien's culture and societal norms, but during the past twenty years, since her awakening from stasis, her eyes had been opened to many of its flaws. The incarceration of good people, judged and labeled as Independents for violating the Confederation's arcane rules, had become too much.

Renée's anger at her society resolved to a single thought, which was directed at the Confederation's Council of Leaders. *If Alex has his way,*

there will be 18,289 fewer Independents buried on your moon. Then maybe you'll learn.

* * *

Tatia decided to break the awkward silence, while Alex, Julien, the twins, and she walked the huge ship's wide corridor. "So, Daelon has eighteen-thousand Independents. It's a good start, but you look severely disappointed, Alex."

"A little," Alex replied absentmindedly, his mind absorbed with thoughts of Renée.

"How many were you expecting?" Tatia asked.

"Somewhere between 50K and 100K people."

"Big difference," Tatia acknowledged.

"Huge difference. Might have to go with plan B," Alex replied

"Good to hear you're still thinking ahead, Alex. What's plan B?"

"Recruit the Dischnya," Alex replied.

Tatia was stunned and kept her mouth from hanging open. She dearly hoped Alex was joking.

In contrast, Julien and Cordelia briefly shared thoughts on the concept, and the two SADEs simply reorganized their hierarchical algorithms, postulated potential obstacles, and determined the probabilities of future outcomes.

<I'm getting the madman a slug-proof helmet,> Alain sent to his crèche-mate, referencing the near-fatal attempt of a Dischnya queen and her commander on Celus-5 to assassinate Alex.

<I think we would do better to have Z build Alex a durable avatar that he can wear,> Étienne replied.

<At all times,> Alain added.

<Ser de Guirnon might have something to say about that,> Étienne sent and grinned at his twin. He added an image of Alex housed in a suit of metal-alloy standing in a refresher, with moisture pouring down the avatar, and Renée beside him, wearing a frustrated expression.

Tatia reined in her imagination. “Alex, you’re not seriously considering letting those dog warriors you encountered on Celus-5 ... the same ones who tried to kill you ... board our ships and act as crew?”

“It was only two of the Dischnya who tried to kill me,” Alex replied, trying to minimize the impact of his remark.

“It only takes one dog warrior, if he’s a good shot,” Tatia riposted.

“Okay, Tatia,” Alex said, assuming a command voice and intending to focus her. “Let’s start with you learning to say Dischnya. No time like the present to practice.”

“But how is it possible to have the warriors aboard our ships, if they can’t be separated from their queen?” Tatia asked, her strategic planning skills dominating her thoughts.

“They can, but only for a short length of time,” Alex replied. “That’s probably the number-one challenge for plan B.”

Tatia’s steps slowed, and then she stopped in the corridor, as she considered the implications of Alex’s plan B, while he walked on.

Julien passed her, and he politely tipped his virtual fedora, which he projected from his synth-skin.

<Charming, Julien,> Tatia sent, tongue-in-cheek. <You’re being cute, but you should take note that we’re both again following Alex headlong into uncharted territory.>

<But that’s what keeps life interesting, Tatia,> Julien sent in reply, as he walked on.

* * *

Fifteen days ago, Alex ordered the city-ship *Freedom* launched from Haraken’s orbit. It carried a small collection of humans and SADEs on a ship that easily accommodated a quarter million individuals. The ship hadn’t been updated with Haraken technology in more than two decades, and a refit was initiated by Alex after taking possession of the ship but wasn’t completed before launch. Much of the equipment to complete the ship’s refit sat piled in several cavernous bays.

While still on Haraken, Julien and Cordelia affirmed to Alex that the refit supply orders were fulfilled and delivered. They acknowledged the work could continue aboard ship without issue. That was when Alex approached Cordelia with a job offer. “I need a captain,” Alex had told her. “The salary won’t be anything like your income as a Central Exchange director, I’m afraid.”

“I’ve come to appreciate the value of commerce, Alex,” Cordelia replied, “and the freedom a generous income gives me to pursue my desires. However, in this case, I’m sorely tempted to pay you for the privilege of becoming the first SADE to captain a starship. So, I offer a compromise.”

“I’m listening,” Alex replied.

“I believe you paid the enormous sum of one credit for this ship?”

“I did,” Alex replied.

It didn’t surprise Alex that Cordelia knew the details of the Assembly’s transaction. When Tomas Monti, Haraken’s president, said the sale amount would remain undisclosed, he was referring to isolating the information from the human population. The secrecy was meant to prevent disclosure to the Confederation Leaders that the Haraken Assembly was supporting Alex’s intentions. Alex himself was keeping his future actions secret from the Assembly, and he’d warned the august body that they should keep any association with him at arm’s length.

Naturally, the city-ship’s transaction was shared among the SADEs, who perceived data as critical details to collect. If the data came with stipulations to compartmentalize it, then it would remain so until directives were issued contravening the original requirements. To a SADE, there was no such thing as a secret, just data containing communication restrictions.

“Then I propose that I receive the same payment for the position, kind Ser,” Cordelia said, giving Alex a leader’s acknowledgment of right hand to left side of chest and a bowed head. This was a traditional Méridien sign of respect with the hand placed over the heart. Despite the SADEs not possessing the beating organ, they’d copied the gesture to express the emotion.

After Alex hired his captain, he turned to completing his next order of business. Signaling Tatia, Alex asked her to meet him aboard the *Freedom*.

Tatia had resigned her commission with the Haraken fleet and told Alex that Alain and she would be joining his expedition, and Alex had replied, "You'll still be an admiral, Tatia."

"An admiral of four travelers," Tatia said, laughing. In contrast, Tatia intended to bring nearly twenty-five times the number of pilots as Alex possessed of fighters aboard.

When Tatia exited her traveler aboard the *Freedom*, Alex led her around the ship's ring to another bay, where Mickey Brandon, Alex's principal engineer, had set up shop.

The huge city-ship was shaped like a giant saucer, with its massive engines interrupting the circle. Landing bays dotted the mid-level of the entire circumference and were enormous spaces capable of holding ore-excavating and processing machines, giant cargo shuttles, and an incredible amount of raw manufacturing materials. The Librans, who were evacuating their planet in advance of the deadly Nua'll sphere, planned to live on their city-ships for decades, while they searched for a new home. The ship's layout meant that walking between bays was exercise in itself.

Tatia and Alex passed through another airlock into Mickey's bay. While the engineering lab would eventually occupy the entire bay, at this moment, the equipment, much of it still in crates, took up less than one-twentieth of the space.

Alex led Tatia to a small setup surrounded by the usual individuals and stepped back, while Mickey, Emile, and Edmas demonstrated their world-shattering invention.

Tatia's performance during the presentation was as bad as Alex's had been when he first watched the demonstration, anxious to interrupt with questions before its completion. When a substrate layer of nanites fell from the newly sprayed shell, Tatia, who was speechless, alternately stared at Alex and the piece of shell.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Alex commented. He played it low-key, but the engineering team looked as if they were ready to jump out of their skins. It was a rare opportunity to celebrate the secret with a new confidant.

“Somehow, uttering black space doesn’t seem to cover this,” Tatia finally said, which released the engineering team to cheer and clap. They gathered around her, slapping her back in sympathy with the momentous knowledge she now shared.

“What ... I mean ... wait. Let me think,” Tatia said when the cheering died down. “Okay, so you people have invented this capability of creating a Swei Swee shell without the Swei Swee. What do you intend to do with it?”

Demonstrating a pantomime that the engineers and techs had hurriedly practiced, having been forewarned that Tatia was coming to meet with them, they shrugged their shoulders as one and lifted right hands toward Alex.

“Cute,” Tatia said, smirking. “Wait ... they gave it to you?” she asked, turning around to face Alex. “And don’t shrug,” she warned him, pointing a finger at his face.

“Yes, they did, unfortunately,” Alex replied, admitting the nature of the immense responsibility he shouldered once more.

“Again,” Tatia whispered, shaking her head.

“Again,” Alex agreed.

“Well, on the plus side, this means we can make warships anywhere,” said Tatia, shouting and pumping a fist in the air. It galvanized the engineering team, who broke into another round of cheering and applause.

“Quite true, *Admiral*,” Alex said, underlining Tatia’s proffered title. His words had the effect he sought. Tatia’s eyes narrowed, while she considered future possibilities in light of the engineers’ new capability. “Tell them what you need, Admiral. They’re all ears and implants,” Alex said, gesturing toward the team and walking out of the bay.

“But what are the operational demands?” Tatia shouted at Alex’s retreating back.

“How would I know?” Alex said over his shoulder, as he made the airlock hatch.

Tatia glanced at Emile, whose face expressed sympathy for her, but Mickey was grinning. “And why are you so happy?” she demanded of Mickey.

“It’s just like the old days, Tatia. The man brings a whole new meaning to the expression of sailing into the deep dark,” Mickey replied, chuckling.

“Okay, people,” said Tatia, shaking her head, as if the motion would help settle the admiral’s stars she would wear again on her shoulders, “Let’s see what inventive ideas you have that might help us take on an alien sphere, which, more than likely, will be carrying some sort of miraculous, world-destroying weaponry.”

* * *

Before the *Freedom* broke Haraken’s orbit, seven traveler flights landed aboard. The first flight caught Alex by surprise. He halted in the corridor to query the ship’s controller and received a list of the passengers’ bio IDs, which contained their names and occupations. The number of people who were disembarking was also unexpected, and Alex checked the controller to see who authorized them joining the expedition. While he hadn’t necessarily stated to the few he expected to accompany him who was and wasn’t authorized to approve people joining the expedition, it was Alex’s expectation that he would be the final arbiter — apparently, that wasn’t so.

In addition to ninety-eight pilots, Alex discovered engineers, techs, medical specialists, flight chiefs and crew, assorted support personnel, and even some entertainers. Alex’s intention to limit the number of humans accompanying him to fewer than a hundred had suddenly become moot.

<Hello, my love,> Alex sent. <Your guests are arriving.>

<So Cordelia informed me,> Renée sent back.

<Could I ask why I wasn’t consulted?>

<This wasn’t a matter that required your input, my love. Your associates, Tatia, Julien, Cordelia, Mickey, Claude, and Pia, requested these people be given permission to join us.>

<Requested it of you?>

<Of course they did, Alex. Why should they ask permission of you when they knew you would say no?> Renée replied. Her thoughts carried an element of dismissal, as if Alex was silly for not recognizing this.

<But this does create confusion about who's in charge of this expedition,> Alex retorted.

<No one questions who's in charge of where we're going. That's you, my love. But your subordinates and I are taking a firmer hand about the conditions surrounding how we go there.> Renée waited for a reply, but Alex closed the comm. *Like it or not, Alex, we're going to do our best to protect you from yourself,* Renée thought, heading to the landing bay with some crew to orient the new people, only a few of whom had been aboard a city-ship before.

One of the few points that Alex and Renée did agree on was that they would take the *Rêveur* with them. If a traveler was too small to accommodate the movement of people during the expedition, then they'd rely on the passenger liner as their primary transport. The city-ship was too massive to move around like some sort of shuttle and would remain in orbit around any planet that became their temporary or final destination. Besides, Francis Lumley, the *Rêveur*'s captain, was determined not to be left behind. The captain had said goodbye to his Sol companions, having a tearful parting with his best friend, Olawale Wombo.

"Come visit me, my friend," Francis said to Olawale. "You won't be able to miss me. More than likely, I'll be parked next to Alex's monstrous city-ship."

Moon Landing

Alex invited Winston to his home the morning the *Freedom* was due to launch. Winston once served the Confederation as the Council of Leaders' SADE before he was freed. The two stood beside Alex's gazebo, gazing out to sea.

"I need a piece of information, Winston," Alex said.

"I'm at your service, Alex."

"What's the Confederation's new location for the Independents?"

Winston hesitated for a couple of ticks, deciding how to reply. "I promised Mahima Ganesh that I would never speak of this to anyone, especially you. The woman was never fond of you."

Alex laughed at Winston's understatement.

Meanwhile, Winston drew a series of numbers and declinations in the sandy soil with his boot, and Alex recorded the information in his implant before Winston erased the message.

"It's important to keep one's promises, Alex. So, I will continue to never speak a word of the Independent's location," Winston said, smiling at Alex.

"I'll see you again someday, Winston," said Alex, clapping the SADE on the shoulder and hurrying to his house.

Go, Alex; free more of the imprisoned, and may the stars protect you. Winston thought, enjoying the view and the smell of the ocean. With Alex's help, the SADE had gained his freedom from his metal-alloy box after nearly a century and a half of service to the Confederation Council.

* * *

Cordelia had launched the *Freedom* out of Haraken's orbit on Alex's order. She stood on the bridge, wearing a uniform of Haraken dark blue without military insignias. Instead, Cordelia's uniform was adorned with a captain's gold studs and the *Freedom's* new emblem.

"A destination would be nice, Alex," Cordelia said, as the city-ship broke orbit, a smile tweaking the side of her face.

In reply, Alex sent the information to Cordelia and Julien that Winston provided, leaving it in its original state.

"We're back to drawing in the dirt, Alex?" Julien asked, as Cordelia and he cross-referenced the information to determine the destination.

"The individual, who provided this data, said he promised to never speak of it," Alex replied. "I'm honoring his words."

"These coordinates point to a gas giant in a dead system of the Confederation, Alex," Cordelia said.

"Imagine that," Alex replied, "but, more than likely, we'll be interested in a moon orbiting the planet." He left the bridge, headed for a conference with Mickey's engineering team, who were building a test bed to layup a traveler, one-tenth size, utilizing Emile's faux Swei Swee spit, which Mickey had taken to calling the spraying process.

Cordelia stared at Julien, wondering why the secrecy. When Julien shrugged his shoulders, she said, "And you think that gesture somehow adds something useful to our conversation?"

"Cordelia," Julien said gently. "Alex made you captain because he has confidence in you, but that doesn't mean he'll share everything with you. Recall our early days with him when he led and we followed."

* * *

Cordelia decelerated the *Freedom* until the city-ship took up station 50 kilometers from Daelon's orbital platform. She'd received several inquiries

from Maynard Scullers for more information, but she kept her replies to the manager short and uninformative.

Alex boarded a traveler with Renée, Julien, Tatia, Mickey, the twins, and several of the new Confederation SADEs.

<Why the Confederation SADEs?> Tatia sent to Alex. She was seated across from him when she noticed them boarding.

<For color,> Alex sent in reply.

<Please,> Tatia sent, a derisive tone to her thought, although the patterned and colorful skins of the Confederation SADEs did make his point.

<Well, you'll find out sooner or later, Tatia. This began on the first trip to Celus-5. The SIF directors followed me around and broadcast my every movement, outside my cabin, to the entire group of Confederation SADEs. They said they were observing me and insisted they should be present during any of my discussions.>

<Is that why some of them are always present on the *Freedom's* bridge, standing in the corners?> Tatia asked.

<Yes,> Alex admitted.

<Okay ... and why are they observing you?>

<They're learning to emulate a human.>

<And they chose you ... oh, please, no,> Tatia sent and burst out laughing. Everyone aboard the traveler heard her say out loud, "May the stars protect us." For Tatia's part, she was pleased to see a flush of embarrassment creep up Alex's neck.

Svetlana, who had been appointed Alex's primary traveler pilot, launched the ship from the *Freedom's* bay. It was a short flight to the moon below. Telemetry indicated the moon's rock had been excavated to create a flattened base, which led toward an immense overhang. A pair of bay doors was embedded in the rock's face, and Svetlana chose to hover the traveler in front of them.

"Pilot, has the platform received a new traveler?" asked the voice on Svetlana's comm. "Hope that doesn't mean we're going to receive a mass of new tourists for our wonderful vacation spot." The bay control manager tried to sound jovial, but it came out a bit strained.

Alex, who was linked with Svetlana, sent, <This is Alex Racine. I wonder if we might land and chat with you?>

In the control room, Glenn, the manager, glanced around him, double-checking that others had heard what he thought he heard. He went so far as to replay his implant recording. "Get OP up here now," he hissed to his comms operator.

Because it was early in the morning, Daelon time, Ophelia and Perrin, partners and co-Leaders of the Independents, were fast asleep and entwined in each other's arms when their comm buzzed.

Perrin activated the comm above the bed and said in a rough voice, "Better be good."

"Sorry, OP," the operator said. He pronounced the letters individually, which is how the Independents referred to their co-Leaders. "Man at the door wants to land."

"What man?"

"Calls himself Alex Racine," the operator replied. The co-Leaders were linked through the bay control room's speakers, and the personnel were forced to contain themselves, while they waited with bated breath for the reply.

"This early in the morning, Jensen, your humor is unappreciated."

"So, you want me to tell him to go away, or do you want to do it?"

"Let's see how far you're willing to carry on with this farce, Jensen," Perrin growled, sitting up in bed. By now, he had Ophelia's interest, and she sat up too. "Connect me to this individual."

"This is co-Leader Keller," Perrin said, when Jensen told him he was online. "To whom am I speaking?"

<I would have thought your people had already informed you, Ser Keller. The name's Alex Racine.>

"Ser, whoever you are, know that life on this dead rock gets dull, abysmally dull, and people here do whatever they can to amuse one another. I'm about to put Jensen and you on report. Now, properly identify yourself."

<Julien, I don't have time for this. Get me a connection to him,> Alex sent privately.

In turn, Julien linked into the comms operator system, followed the connection to the co-Leader's comms unit, and identified the man's bio ID, which he passed to Alex.

During those ticks of time, Alex pulled up a collection of images from the past twenty years. He linked with Julien, who linked him to Perrin. Alex swept aside the co-Leader's implant security apps and streamed the vid he'd prepared.

Ophelia watched her partner freeze and pale. As quickly as Perrin appeared to be overtaken, he relaxed.

"Quick, get dressed," Perrin ordered Ophelia, leaping out of bed. "It's the world shaker himself, Alex Racine, at the bay doors. Jensen, tell Glenn to let the man land."

In the control room, personnel twittered and chuckled. They had played jokes on one another for years in an effort to relieve the boredom and keep peoples' spirits up. This time, the greatest prank they could have imagined was, in reality, not a joke at all.

When the bay doors slid open, Svetlana glided the traveler into the interim lock, edging the ship's bow near the second set of doors, while the first set closed behind them. She eyed the traveler's sensor in her helmet, which indicated air pressure. To her, the wait seemed interminable.

<Air must be precious here, Ser,> Svetlana sent to Alex. <They probably have to be careful to recirculate it, and their pumps are not up to the demand.>

<They probably don't experience many flights, Commander,> Alex sent in reply, <and people who can't go anywhere won't tend to do anything in a hurry.>

When the second set of doors opened, Svetlana guided the ship into the bay, set it down, double-checked the pressure, and signaled Alex that he had a welcoming committee.

Alex led his small entourage off the traveler and onto the bay's deck. Arrayed in front of him were about twenty people, and Alex was struck by their youthfulness, as opposed to his landing on Libre decades ago. There were no elders here on Daelon. The oldest looked to be about forty to forty-five, which meant about sixty to seventy years for Méridiens.

<I expected the man to be older,> Ophelia sent to Perrin, as she regarded Alex.

<And I thought he would be smaller,> Perrin replied, as they quickly crossed the deck to greet Alex. The hand Perrin extended to Alex was a gesture every Méridien knew was typical New Terran, and Perrin enthusiastically pumped Alex's hand with both of his.

It was the release of tension the assembled Independents were waiting for, and the group of them rushed forward to touch, pat, and hug every Haraken.

Alex was pleased to see the Independents unhesitatingly touch and embrace the SADEs. He'd deliberately chosen some of those with the most audacious avatar colorings. He watched the SADEs taking part in the affectionate greetings and enjoyed seeing the smiles spread across their faces.

<You were testing the Independents,> Tatia sent to Alex.

<Perhaps,> Alex sent back.

<When did you become the devious one?> Tatia asked, referring to the nickname that Alex and Julien had bestowed on her for her tactician's cunning.

<The student becomes the teacher,> Alex replied, giving her a grin.

"Ser, it's early morning by our time," Ophelia said. "I imagine you wish to speak to the entire population. If you'll give us a quarter hour, we can assemble everyone here in the bay. Not everyone will be near a comms station, and our implants don't carry far through the moon's rock." She looked hopefully at Alex.

"That would be fine, Ser Sooth," Alex replied.

Ophelia clapped her hands in delight, and Perrin and she raced for the control room to call the population to an emergency meeting. Their message was terse and simple. "Assemble in the bay immediately. Tell everyone you see. If you're late to this one, you might be left behind."

Within a short time, people came streaming through the general airlock, ten or twelve at a time, to hurry to join the crowd. Most of them stopped in their tracks when they got a look at the New Terrans and SADEs. Word had reached Daelon of the SADEs emancipation by virtue

of the Independents, who had arrived during the past couple of years, but none of them had witnessed their choice of avatars.

“Look, darling, painted men,” a mother said to her daughter, urging the child to open her eyes. During their few years of confinement, Vivian had begun closing her eyes, more and more often, to keep the crushing mental pressure of Daelon’s tunnels at bay.

Vivian snuck a peek through one eye and spied the colorful pattern of a SADE. Both eyes opened wide and her little heart thumped. Vivian pulled her hand free of her mother’s and hurried to the SADE whose face was patterned in plaid. The child held up her hands to the SADE, who responded to the little human’s desire, lifting her up and holding her aloft.

“Pretty,” the child said, touching the SADE’s face.

Julien sent an image to the SADE to indicate how to hold the child, and the SADE transferred the girl onto his lower arm. Immediately, the child threw an arm around the SADE’s neck and called out, “See, Mommy, it’s a plaid man.”

The SADEs accompanying Alex were exploiting the entire bandwidth of the traveler’s controller to send their experiences back to those SADEs aboard the *Freedom*. Only others of their kind could translate the flow of code that passed for visual, aural, olfactory, and tactile pressure sensory information. Embedded in the data stream were their kernels’ cascading algorithms, which shifted hierarchy, as each SADE reacted to his or her welcome. For those SADEs aboard the *Freedom*, it was as if they were standing in the bay, experiencing the greetings themselves.

<Enjoy,> Alex sent to the Confederate SADEs surrounding him, and, as one, they turned and smiled ... great big, generous smiles.

<I believe my brothers and sisters are sensing what it’s like to be truly appreciated,> Julien sent to Alex.

<And it’s been too long in coming for them,> Alex sent in reply.

Humans aboard the *Freedom* were not to be excluded from enjoying the moment. Cordelia separated the SADEs’ data streams, sending vids to every monitor aboard the *Freedom* and the *Rêveur*.

Captain Lumley sat in his command chair surrounded by his ship's bare-bones crew, sipping hot thé and enjoying the images playing across the *Rêveur's* bridge monitors.

"Everyone is present, Ser," Perrin said, addressing Alex. The entire population of Daelon was assembled well before the quarter hour ended.

Alex received an image from the Confederation SADEs. It suggested they could hold him aloft, either on their shoulders or standing on a small platform, so that he would be seen by the entire assembly.

<Absolutely not,> Alex sent back. <Your offer is appreciated, but you aren't tools. Witness and participate in this event for your own edification and enjoyment.>

Alex climbed several steps of the traveler's hatch. He was conflicted by what he saw — grateful that the number of incarcerated was small and disappointed in the relatively few crew members he might gain for his expedition. But then Alex had a habit of underestimating what the opportunity for freedom, adventure, and, sometimes, just a change in lifestyles meant to people.

"Can you hear me?" Alex asked, his heavy-worlder voice booming across the bay, which was cut from the moon's rock and sealed with *Méridien* technology. The crowd smiled and chuckled. Someone from the back of the group yelled out, "We're not deaf, you know," which broke out hearty laughter.

Alex smiled and raised a hand to acknowledge the tease. "I have good news and not-so-good news for you." His opening words silenced the crowd, and the tension in the bay elevated. "I'm no longer a Haraken citizen and have renounced all claims on Haraken possessions."

"But, Ser Racine, when I was in the control room, I heard from Maynard Scullers that you arrived aboard a Libran city-ship," Ophelia called out loudly.

"Yes, that's true," Alex said, creating a buzz among the people. He could imagine their single thought. The largest *Méridien* passenger liner might pack in 400-plus passengers, but a city-ship could carry away every person incarcerated on Daelon. "This is slightly embarrassing to say, but the ship is mine ... I own it."

The crowd tittered at Alex's comment, but nerves were on edge, waiting for him to drop the bad news.

"If you won't reside on Haraken, Ser Racine, where will you live?" Perrin called out.

"Aboard the *Freedom*, the city-ship," Alex replied.

"And where are you going?" a voice in the crowd yelled.

"First stop is Celus-5, a planet we've recently visited. It has two intelligent alien species and possibly a third. I've got several commitments to fulfill on that planet before I move on."

"Move on to where and for what purpose?" Ophelia asked.

"Three dark travelers were found buried in the sands along the shore," Alex replied. "One of the Celus-5 resident species is Swei Swee."

A hush fell over the crowd. Dark travelers and Swei Swee meant the dreaded Nua'll once visited the planet.

"You're here for a reason, Ser Racine," Perrin announced firmly. "What are you offering us?"

"I'm willing to free everyone from this prison, but the problem is that the future, yours and mine, is unsettled. I can't transport you to Haraken, and our people have yet to be invited to settle Celus-5, which is quite habitable for humans. It could be that you spend years aboard the *Freedom* before I find you a planet of your own."

Alex stood quietly, waiting for the response.

<Patience, Dassata, the Independents are seeking consensus,> Julien sent, using Alex's Dischnya title. The alien queen, Nyslara, discovering Alex held no title, had named him Dassata, the Dischnya word for peacemaker.

The Méridien process of communicating via implant to reach a community vote could take place in a relatively brief space of time. Once it concluded, an individual called out, "Ser Racine, when do you give us the bad news?" The man's question elicited applause and laughter.

Ophelia smiled at Alex. "Ser, I believe you know us well enough to know that consensus has been reached. Everyone on this forsaken rock is aching to leave with you, whenever you're ready to depart and wherever you're going."

<Consensus,> Renée sent to Alex. <There are some aspects of Méridien society that I do miss, but none of it enough to ever go back.>

Ophelia watched Renée de Guirnon turn toward her partner and wink. It caused Ser Racine to beam back at her. *A private signal between lovers*, she thought.

“What are your orders, Ser Racine?” Perrin asked.

“Two orders of business, Sers,” Alex announced. “First, let me introduce Mickey Brandon, my senior engineer, and Tatia Tachenko, my admiral. They need to go through this place with your senior people. Mickey.”

Mickey announced in a loud voice, “Admiral Tachenko and I need your help. We’re going to load aboard the *Freedom*, our city-ship above, any travelers, equipment, supplies, and raw materials that could be of value.”

“Your pardon, Sers,” a woman said, “but much of our equipment is more than twenty years old, and it was never the best that Méridien could produce.”

“You’d be surprised what we’re looking for, Sers,” Tatia replied. “Much of it can be repurposed.”

“Please, senior engineers and department heads over here,” Mickey called out, and Tatia and he headed for a corner of the bay. Mickey was thinking that it was a good thing he swapped one of the *Rêveur*’s passenger travelers for a transport model with its rear-loading ramp.

“Sers Keller and Sooth,” Alex said.

“Please, Ser Racine, we’re OP,” Ophelia said, pronouncing the two letters, each after the other. “Ophelia and Perrin,” she added pointing to each of them.

“Okay, OP,” Alex continued, “we’ll be landing three more travelers. Start organizing your people, I want a traveler to land and lift full of Independents in the amount of time it takes to board.”

“We have people who can assist with your reclamation efforts, Ser,” Perrin offered.

“I’m landing nearly a hundred and fifty SADEs with these three flights. They can do the jobs quicker and more efficiently. Most important, what

they'll be doing, ripping out equipment and cabling, might be dangerous, which the SADEs are more suitable to managing. Times a wasting, and we have 18,289 people to transport. However, one more note before you get started."

<Assemble on me,> Alex sent to the new SADEs, who stood beside Alex and faced the assembled Independents. The SADE called Killian was still cradling the little girl, who was happy to be in the company of her plaid man.

Alex addressed the Independents, saying "You might be thinking these are liberated Confederation SADEs. In that you'd be wrong. These individuals are fellow expeditionary members, who report to the *Freedom's* captain. They're here to assist your evacuation from this dark pit and nothing more. Am I clear?"

The audience nodded their understanding, wondering why Ser Racine thought it important to clarify that.

<One wonders who you were addressing just then, oh-sly-one, the Independents or the SADEs,> Julien sent to Alex.

<Both,> Alex replied, <I'm trying to launch this expedition on the right note. I never want to see a Sadesville again.> Alex was referring to the persona-less, warren-like structure the Confederation SADEs built when they felt isolated from mainstream Haraken society.

<And you won't, even if you return to Haraken. The Central Exchange owns the property, which was leased to the SIF and allowed the SADEs to build there. On mutual agreement, the lease was terminated, and the structures are slated for demolition. The Exchange directors have chosen to build an open-air park for music and entertainment performances.>

<Well done,> Alex sent, adding a short vid of Julien in an open-air, grav car, riding through a huge throng of citizens, who were all wildly applauding him.

Julien returned the vid. He stood up in the car, excited by the adoring crowd and waving enthusiastically. Suddenly, his eyes rolled wildly, as he lost his balance, and he pitched out of the car.

Alex laughed and slapped Julien on the shoulder.

“Okay, OP, get your people moving,” Alex said, and the co-Leaders issued orders, urging the crowd into an orderly exit through the bay’s airlock. Bay operations overrode the safety protocols and opened both interior hatches to enable everyone to clear the bay quickly, as they had done to allow the people to assemble to hear Alex speak.

<Bring the travelers down, Captain,> Alex sent.

On Cordelia’s orders, the SADEs clambered aboard the three remaining travelers, packing themselves in, and the pilots launched for the moon base.

<Didn’t think you were going to get all the Independents to join you, did you?> Tatia sent to Alex, as Mickey and she followed Daelon’s engineers and department heads out of the bay.

<You never know,> Alex replied.

<How can you beat us so badly at poker and not know how to anticipate a crowd’s reaction to your requests?> Tatia fired back.

<Why do you think I only play poker with my friends?> Alex admitted.

— Alex and friends will return in *Vinium*. —

— *BUT FIRST* —

— Watch for the release of *Empaths*, the initial story in the new sci-fi series, Pyreans. —

Glossary

Celus-5 Sentients and Creatures

- Dives Deep – Member of Wave Skimmer’s Swei Swee hive
 Long Eyes – Member of Wave Skimmer’s Swei Swee hive
 Nascosto – Camouflaged creatures of the forest
 Wave Skimmer – Swei Swee Hive First

Dischnya from Sawa Messa

- Chafwa – Former queen of Mawas Soma nest, now deceased
 Choslora – Heir queen of Mossnos Soma
 Cysmana – Nyslara’s attendant
 Foomas – Chafwa’s wasat, now deceased
 Fossem Soma – Posnossa’s nest, the nest that killed Haffas at the previous Fissla
 Haffas – Emissary from Tawas Soma, killed
 Hessian – Young warrior from Tawas Soma
 Hessmas – Wasat of Mossnos Soma nest
 Homsaff – Queen of Mawas Soma nest, heir after Chafwa
 Mawas Soma – Homsaff, Woosala, and Messlan’s nest
 Messlan – Homsaff’s new wasat
 Mossnos Soma – Seelam, Choslora, and Hessma’s nest
 Nafalla – Tawas Soma midwife
 Nyslara – Queen of the Tawas Soma nest
 Offwa – Sissya’s wasat
 Ossnos Soma – Sissya and Offwa’s nest
 Posnossa – Queen of the Fossem Soma nest
 Pussiro – Nyslara’s wasat
 Seelam – Elderly queen of Mossnos Soma
 Simlan – Older warrior from Tawas Soma
 Sissya – Queen of Ossnos Soma nest, near Tawas Soma
 Tawas Soma – Nyslara, Pussiro, Nafalla, Hessian, Simlan’s nest
 Woosala – Homsaff’s aging wasat

Dischnya from Sawa

Ceefan – Queen of Tamassa Soma nest
Falwass – Wasat of Tamassa Soma
Tamassa Soma – Ceefan, Falwass, and Waffala’s nest
Waffala – Sub-commander of the Tamassa Soma

Dischnya Language

Ceena – Dischnya term for the Celus-5 Swei Swee
Chona – Nest queen
Dassata – Peacemaker
Dischnya – Dog-like species on Celus-5 and Celus-4
Ené – Pronunciation of Renée
Feedwa – Queen’s dogs
Fellum – Pronunciation of Willem
Fissla – Council of queens
Hira – Pronunciation of Keira
Nessila – Dischnya name for Celus
Sawa – Celus-4, Dischnya home world
Sawa Messa – Celus-5, Dischnya’s second world
Wasat – Warrior commander
Zhinni – Pronunciation of Ginny

Harakens

Alain de Long – Director of security, twin and crèche-mate to Alain,
partner to Tatia Tachenko
Alex Racine – Partner to Renée de Guirnon, Star Hunter First (Swei Swee
name)
Asu Azasdau – Captain of the *Sojourn*
Bartlett – SADE from a rescue ship
Benjamin, “Little Ben” Diaz – New Terran Rainmaker, former Minister of
Mining
Boris Gorenko – Sol native, friend of Olawale Wombo, medical expert
Cedric Broussard – Z’s New Terran avatar
Central Exchange – Haraken financial system

Christie Racine – Alex Racine’s sister
Claude Dupuis – Engineering tech, program manager for SADE avatars
Cordelia – SADE, Julien’s partner
Darius Gaumata – Commander, promoted to Trident captain
Deirdre Canaan – Commander, promoted to Trident captain
Durly Pederson – Captain of the *Into The Dark*
Edmas – Young engineer, works with Emile Billings and Mickey Brandon, boyfriend of Jodlyne
Edward Sardi – Earther physicist and mathematician, deceased during first contact with Sawa Messa
Ellie Thompson – Wing commander promoted to Trident captain
Emile Billings – Biochemist, who emigrated from New Terra
Espero – Haraken city
Étienne de Long – Director of Security, twin and crèche-mate to Alain, partner to Ellie Thompson
First – Leader of the Swei Swee hives
Francis Lumley – Captain of the *Rêveur*
Franz Cohen – Wing commander
Frederick – Confederation SADE, employed by the New Terra Assembly
Ginny – Little Singer to the Swei Swee, junior crew member
Jodlyne – Journey crew member, girlfriend of Edmas
Julien – SADE, Cordelia’s partner, Alex’s best friend
Keira Daubner – Security escort, corporal, Méridien
Lucia Bellardo – Commander, promoted to Trident captain
Mickey Brandon – Senior engineer, partner to Pia Sabine
Millicent “Millie” Vane – Méridien partner of Tilda Hennessey
Miranda – SADE, Z’s partner
Mutter – SADE, Hive Singer to the Swei Swee
Nema – Sol native, friend of Olawale Wombo
Nua’ll – Aliens who imprisoned the Swei Swee
Olawale Wombo – Sol native and senior professor
Orly Saadner – Traveler pilot, New Terran
People – Manner in which the Swei Swee refer to their collective
Pia Sabine – Medical specialist and partner to Mickey Brandon

Priita Ranta – Sol native, friend of Olawale Wombo
Reiko Shimada – Captain of the *Tanaka*, a sting ship, later promoted to Trident commodore
Renée de Guirnon – Partner to Alex Racine
Rosette – SADE
Simone Turin – Méridien, partner of Ben Diaz
Sky Waters – Trixie’s Swei Swee name
Star Hunter First – Swei Swee name for Alex Racine
Storen – Sol native, friend of Olawale Wombo, xenobiologist
Svetlana Valenko – Wing commander promoted to Trident captain
Swei Swee – Six-legged, friendly alien
Tatia Tachenko – Admiral, ex-Terran Security Forces major, partner to Alain de Long
Teague – Sixteen-year-old son of Alex and Renée
Tilda “Tildie” Hennessey – First Mate aboard the *Into The Dark*, partner of Millicent “Millie” Vane
Tomas Monti – Haraken president
Trixie – Confederation SADE, original ID is Lenora, relationship with Hector
Ullie Tallen – Senior scientist, died during first contact on Sawa Messa
Willem – SADE
Xavier Escobar – Security escort, captain, ex-TSF officer
Yoram Penzig – Sol native, friend of Olawale Wombo, philosopher
Z – SADE

Méridien

Bethley – Scout SADE teamed with Killian
Confederation – Collection of Méridien worlds
Galania – Vivian’s mother
Glenn – Daelon bay control manager
Gino Diamanté – Council Leader, replaced Mahima Ganesh
Hector – Acting captain of *Our People*, former SIF director, relationship with Trixie

Independents – Confederation outcasts, originally exiled to Libre, rescued by Alex Racine, also used to refer to the exiles on the Daelon moon

Jensen – Daelon comms operator

Killian – Plaid-skinned SADE, friend of Vivian, terminal construction director

Lemoine – Leader

Mahima Ganesh – former Council Leader, cruel former owner of Hector

Maynard Scullers – Daelon orbital platform manager

Miriam – Confederation SADE

Ophelia Sooth – Co-Leader of Independents on Daelon, partner to Perrin

Perrin Keller – Co-Leader of Independents on Daelon, partner to Ophelia

SADE – Self-aware digital entity, artificial intelligence being

SIF – Strategic Investment Fund of the Confederation SADEs

Trium – Scout SADE teamed with Killian

Vivian – Independent child

Winston – SIF director, ex-Council SADE

New Terrans

Bertram Hardingsgale – Captain of the *Rover*

Darryl Jaya – Minister of Space Exploration

Harold Grumley – President replacing Will Drake

Maria Gonzalez – Special envoy from President Will Drake

Myron McTavish – Retired TSF sergeant major

Will Drake – President of New Terra

Planets, Colonies, Moons, and Stars

Arno – Star of the Libre system

Celus – Star the *Sojourn* visited

Celus-4 – Fourth planet outward from Celus

Celus-5 – Fifth planet outward from Celus

Daelon – Moon orbiting sixth planet of an unnamed system

Haraken – New name of Cetus colony in Hellébore system, home of the Harakens

Hellébore – Star of the planet Cetus, which was renamed Haraken

Libre – Planet invaded by Nua'll, Alex Racine rescued Independents

Méridien – Home world of Confederation

New Terra – Home world of New Terrans, fourth planet outward of Oistos

Oistos – Star of the planet, New Terra, Alex Racine's home world

Sol – Star of United Earth system

STV-163 – Star of the plant people

Ships and Stations

Allora – Confederation SADEs' SIF liner

Freedom – Alex's primary city-ship

Into The Dark – Haraken freighter also known as the *Dark*

Liberator – Svetlana's Trident-class warship

Our People – Alex's second city-ship

Rêveur – Haraken passenger liner

Rover – New Terran passenger liner

Sardi-Tallen Orbital Platform – Station over Omnia

Sojourn – Haraken explorer ship

Tanaka – Haraken sting ship

Travelers – Shuttles and fighters built by the Harakens based on the Swei Swee silver ships

Trident – Class of new warship built with new faux Swei Swee technology

Vivian – First scout ship

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 *Vinium*, but my next release is the story of a third Earth colony ship. *Empaths* is the first novel in the new Pyrean series.

The Silver Ships Series

The Silver Ships

Libre

Méridien

Haraken

Sol

Espero

Allora

Celus-5

Omnia

Vinium (coming 2018)

The Pyreans

Empaths (coming 2017)

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-seven 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. In early 2014, I chose to devote my efforts to writing fulltime. My first novel, *The Silver Ships*, was released in February 2015. The series, with the release of *Omnia*, now numbers nine.

The new series, *Pyreans*, relates the tale of a third Earth colony ship and gives readers an opportunity to follow new characters, who struggle to overcome the obstacles of a world tortured by geologic upheaval. Humans are divided into camps — downsidiers, stationers, spacers, and the *Belle's* inhabitants of empathes and the discarded.

My deep appreciation goes out to the many readers who embraced the *Silver Ships* series and its characters. I hope you enjoy the new series. Thank you!