

MÉRIDIEN
A Silver Ships Novel

S. H. JUCHA



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Acknowledgments

Méridien completes my original trilogy, which I began planning in early 2013. I have attempted to write an original story, but I must acknowledge the influence of the many authors whose works I've read over the past fifty years. I've relished thousands of inventive stories from creative writers who explored the near and distant futures of human and alien cultures. My deepest thanks go to the many individuals who kept me entertained for hours a day.

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.

“Does your world not welcome us, Admiral?” Director Tomas Monti asked Admiral Alex Racine.

“My people would welcome you, Director Monti,” Alex replied, “if they knew you were here. But your presence won’t be announced to my people by the new president, Clayton Downing XIV, who has recently taken office.”

The Co-Leaders of House Alexander, Alex Racine and Renée de Guirnon, sat in a meeting with the flotilla’s officers and directors aboard the city-ship, *Freedom*, regarding the unexpected message they had received from the Sharius outpost orbiting Seda, which had relayed President Downing’s order to stay out of the New Terran system.

Tomas Monti had every right to be concerned. His entire planet of Independents, having narrowly escaped the invasion of the Arnos system by the alien silver ships, had fled Confederation space for New Terra, Alex’s home world. When the flotilla exited faster than light (FTL) outside the Oistos system, Terran Security Forces outpost commander, Colonel Marshall, had delivered the president’s terse order.

The message heralded horrific news. President Arthur McMorris, the Méridiens’ friend and supporter, was no longer in office. A power-hungry assemblyman, by the name of Clayton Downing XIV, held the high office, and Alex’s instincts warned him that he might have been responsible for the change.

While the *Rêveur* had been under repair at New Terra, preparing to return home to the Confederation, someone had stolen the database of extremely valuable Méridien technology from Transfer Station 1 (TS-1). The *Rêveur*’s SADE, Julien, subsequently had broken innumerable New Terran laws tracing the financial and communication pathways from the engineer who’d stolen the data back to the individuals who had

masterminded the theft. The trail had led to the offices of Samuel B. Hunsader, the chief executive officer (CEO) of Purity Ores, one of the system's largest mining companies, and Hunsader was a key supporter of Assemblyman Downing. When Alex had exited the Oistos system with the Méridiens and their restored starship, which had been damaged by the silver ships, he had ordered Julien to discreetly send the data to President McMorris with a warning to be careful.

"Is this president an important position on your world?" asked the ex-Leader of the Méridiens' House Bergfalk, Director Eric Stroheim, as he looked around at the heavy-worlders, the New Terrans.

"Our people elect our world's leader, Director Stroheim," Captain Andrea Bonnard said. "The leader's title is 'president,' and the person serves for five years before elections are held again."

"Incredible ... each of your people has a vote, a say in who leads them," said Tomas, shaking his head in wonder. As a Méridien, an elected president had no comparison to his people's Council, which consisted of House Leaders and held absolute power over the Confederation's billions of people.

"I have met this man, Clayton Downing, Sers," Renée told the Méridiens. "You would find it difficult to conceive of his nature. Our people have strived for continuity of thought and action. And although we have come to value the New Terrans for their independence since they have produced the likes of the admiral," Renée said as she touched her lover's shoulder, "they have also produced the likes of Clayton Downing, a perversion of humankind."

"What is the purpose of this meeting, then, Admiral?" Eric Stroheim asked. His House had once been the caretaker of the outcasts of Méridien society, the Independents. When the silver ships had consumed six Confederation colonies, the Méridiens began fleeing their home world, and the Council abandoned all responsibility for the Independents on Libre. As House Leader, Eric Stroheim took it upon himself to save the quarter of a million people stranded on the planet. Even working together, the Independents and House Bergfalk wouldn't have completed their exodus in time before succumbing to the silver ships without the admiral's help. In

gratitude and to demonstrate continuity, Eric and Tomas had joined the Co-Leaders' newly formed Confederation military arm, House Alexander, as directors of the civilian support arm. Alex and Renée had created House Alexander as a guise of operation. It was a foregone conclusion that the Confederation Council, when it finally stopped running long enough to examine the petition, would never approve the new Méridien House.

House Alexander now counted nine ships among its assets: two giant city-ships, two freighters, one armed shuttle, and four passenger liners, including the *Rêveur*, which had been lost for seventy years until the admiral rescued it and revived the eighteen Méridiens in stasis.

"Director Stroheim," Alex said, "Julien is working to discover what has transpired in our absence. Right now, we are here to focus on our primary strategy ... the end of the silver ships."

Senior Captain Andrea Bonnard and Commander Tatia Tachenko shared wolfish smiles. They had surmised the purpose of the meeting and were anxious to take the fight back to the brood of silver ships and their mother ship, an enormous sphere that transported its drones from one star to the next. The aliens had just chased the flotilla out of the Arnos system, and everyone wanted payback for the 2,195 elders left behind when time ran out. As it was, the flotilla, with its shuttles failing and an incomplete city-ship struggling to make its launch, had engaged in a running fight with the silver ships to safely reach the FTL exit point.

"We know that the silver ships," Alex continued, "are not at their most vulnerable right now, densely packed around Libre as they are and mining it for resources. But I'm not willing to wait eight to twelve years 'til they lift and head for a new destination. We know enough about their weaknesses to defeat them and just need to finalize our preparations."

Alex linked his Méridien cerebrum-embedded implants with those at the conference table and sent them his battle plan. Some in the room were still coming to grips with the manner in which the admiral bypassed their implant security protocols whenever he wished. In polite Méridien society, it was an unheard of intrusion. To Alex, who had possessed his twin implants for less than a year, it was expediency.

“I see the *Unsere Menschen* will be left behind,” Eric said, indicating the city-ship that was his responsibility.

“I need one staging platform, Director Stroheim, for the trip back to Libre,” Alex replied. “That will be the *Freedom*. The *Unsere Menschen* has extensive construction and outfitting to complete; it won’t be ready in time.”

“But if we are excluded from your system, why are we even contemplating these actions?” Eric asked.

“Director,” Renée interjected, “you forget that I have spent a half-year in the company of the New Terrans. Despite this unexplained transition to a new president, I can assure you that the New Terran people do welcome us.”

“Listen up, people,” Alex said. “Focus on our battle preparations, your ships, and your supplies. When we have access to New Terra — and we will have access — be ready to implement your part of the plan. As for my officers, assume the T-Stations, including the Barren Island fighter training site, will be at your disposal. Directors, access your SADEs’ files on these locations so you understand their manufacturing capabilities. Julien has already transferred the data to your ship’s SADE.”

More than one of Alex’s officers exchanged glances and relayed private comments via their implants. They had just been warned by the new president to stand off the system or force would be used against them. Now, Alex was telling them that he intended to ignore the order. It was one thing to fight the alien silver ships, but what if they had to fight their own people?

* * *

Prior to his meeting, Alex had a short conference with his ship’s SADE. <Julien,> Alex sent, <I need to know what’s going on. How is it that Downing is the president? Get me a summary of the news since we left half a year ago. You need to do it quietly.> Alex and Julien shared more than a few personal code words. “Quietly” meant Julien was to find the

information wherever it was located and regardless of whether it was a public or a private source, but in the latter location, leave no footprint.

<Understood, Admiral,> Julien had replied. <Should I request the help of Cordelia and Z?> Julien had added, referring to the SADEs of the Libran's massive city-ships.

<How do you think they will react to your request with much of their core programs still patterned on Méridien ethics?>

<Yes, there is that, Admiral, and I must admit that I am no longer governed by those limitations.>

In the quiet that had followed, Alex felt concern for the changes that Julien, the *Rêveur's* artificial intelligence, had wrought in his programs since their meeting. <Are you sorry we went down this path, my friend?> Alex asked.

<No, Admiral. My people have been naïve, believing that the universe might be sorted into black and white. I have come to understand that both of our cultures possess many shades of gray. My fellow SADEs are an unfortunate reminder of who I once was.>

<Then perhaps this is something that you should do alone,> Alex had sent.

<I would agree, Admiral,> Julien had replied.

When Alex had closed the comm, he'd flashed back to the several times when he had thought of McMorris, only to inexplicably have the president's face morph to that of Downing. He'd shuddered at the recall of those eerie moments.

* * *

When Alex's meeting broke for midday meal, the group ate in one of *Freedom's* 300 meal rooms. This one accommodated a mere 500 people in one sitting. As was the Librans' new custom, servers waited on Alex and his guests, refusing to allow them to serve themselves. It had become a habit of the Independents following the day a New Terran tech, Bobbie Singh, gave his life to save Amelia, a Méridien child. In the Confederation's carefully

managed worlds, a long and safe life of nearly 200 years was expected. The silver ships had destroyed all that, and Méridiens still struggled to adapt in the chaos.

The servers rearranged tables with the aid of the ship's SADE, Cordelia, who signaled the nanites in the bases of smaller tables and chairs to release. Once they were repositioned to seat Alex's extended group, Cordelia signaled the nanites to reattach to the deck. The Librans served them from food dispensers located along the rear of the meal hall. Méridien technology was far advanced over that of New Terra, and it extended to things such as food preparation. Méridien controllers ran recipe choices and blended food stocks, preserved by nanites, into tantalizing dishes. Young people, some children, brought trays to their guests — one for each Méridien, two for each New Terran, and three for the Admiral.

The Méridien home world, founded over 700 years ago, had a lighter gravity than Earth, producing slenderer people over the generations. The New Terrans had found a heavier world to colonize, and it showed in their dense bone and musculature structure. Alex had developed a formidable physique as a young boy and teenager assisting his father with the retrieval and handling of space junk. He and Renée, with her genetic sculpting, made quite the contrasting pair. Where he was massive, she was slight. Where he was handsome in a rugged way, she had a surreal perfection only centuries of genetic tinkering could create.

* * *

Conversations wandered around the meal table, except for two New Terrans, Andrea and Tatia, who weren't saying a word — not out loud. Their conversation was private, implant to implant.

<Check the timetable, Captain,> Tatia sent.

Andrea Bonnard, the flotilla's senior captain, mentally flipped through Alex's indexed battle document, jumping to the timeline. <The admiral's not wasting any time. He wants to return to Libre within fifty days.>

<Check the weapons section,> Tatia continued. Andrea's executive officer (XO) and commander, Tatia Tachenko, was an example of New Terra's robust women, a blue-eyed, buxom blonde. She also rightfully considered herself House Alexander's de facto armorer.

<Libran-X missiles ... 240 silos?> Andrea queried.

<Exactly, Captain,> Tatia sent back. <A requirement of 240 silos of missiles explains a few things. The admiral needs New Terra's Transfer Stations to produce them, and he needs the *Freedom* to carry them back to Libre.>

<That's not all he needs the city-ship to carry,> Andrea replied. <Look at the fighter count. The *Money Maker* can't load that many fighters.> Andrea was referring to the flotilla's converted freighter, now their fighters' carrier.

<Ah ...> Tatia replied. <That's what the admiral meant by a staging platform. We will have three launch decks for the fighters, the *Money Maker*, the *Freedom*, and the *Rêveur*. In addition, the *Freedom* carries our extended armament, spare Daggers, missile silos, and fuel.>

<Agreed, Commander. Now all we need is access to our own planet,> Andrea said and then added an afterthought. <Why does Downing's message make me feel as if we've become the enemy?>

Julien tested New Terra's newly built FTL station and discovered open comm channels in use by companies and ship captains, along with encrypted Terran Security Forces (TSF) channels. No SADE or ship code authentications were required on the open channels as they would be in the Confederation, and the TSF encryption had a level of security similar to the nodes Julien had breached while searching for the funds behind the database theft from TS-1. He had his choice of channels. However, Julien couldn't be accused of hubris. His primary concern was to protect his friend, the admiral. So he began his research on the open comm channels, accessing public media archives. Within moments, Cordelia and Z, the city-ships' SADEs, contacted Julien. As he had anticipated, his fellow SADEs had detected his transmissions to the FTL station.

SADEs, or self-aware digital entities — artificial intelligences — had been created by Confederation scientists to drive their technologically advanced starships and run their Houses. The entities themselves had no involvement in their choice of assignment. When a SADE awoke, it discovered its place aboard the bridge of a starship or ensconced in a House vault. It found the databases and applications necessary to manage its operations, directives to follow the House representatives and officers, protocols to maintain the safety of its people, and the ethics of Méridien society.

But as Méridiens had discovered, there is no such thing as a perfect science. Just as some Méridiens had rebelled against conformity and the dictates of their Houses, resulting in their branding as Independents, so had three SADEs taken the same path. Cordelia was a presentation artist, who now thrilled the occupants of the *Freedom* with her art, thanks to the admiral. And Z, originally named Helmut, dreamed of being physically

free. He wanted a body. Both SADEs had been branded Independents and relegated to Libre for refusing to give up their dreams.

Rayland, the third SADE who had inhabited Libre as an Independent, was unknown to most Librans. He had been network isolated and studied by Méridien neural scientists ever since he'd been diagnosed as a psychopath after he had stranded his ship and suffocated the entire crew, asking them what it felt like to die. The silver ships' subjugation of Libre, many days ago, had given Rayland the opportunity to discover for himself the answer to that macabre question.

Both Cordelia and Z had opted to flee with the Librans, bargaining for SADE positions aboard the city-ships. But despite the Librans' and the SADEs' critical need for one another, Cordelia and Z had still found themselves treated as indentured servants — until the admiral demonstrated, even demanded, the same respect for the flotilla's SADEs as he paid Julien. The people often referred to Julien, Cordelia, and Z as “the admiral's SADEs,” and all three took pride in being called so. It reminded them of their contributions that had enabled the timely launch of the flotilla, evacuating a quarter-million refugees from the planet. With that success came a momentous day for the Librans. They were no longer refugees, fleeing the silver ships, and they were no longer Independents, carrying the hated Confederation label. They were legitimate civilian and military members of the admiral's House.

<Julien, may we assist with communications?> Z asked.

Deciding it was time to discover how much Alex had influenced their protocols, Julien laid out the events of his time at New Terra — the Méridiens' first contact, the ministers, the president, the tour of the *Rêveur*, Clayton Downing, the Assembly, the pact, the theft, his research to uncover the perpetrators behind the theft, and their decision to send the critical message to President McMorris as they exited the New Terran system.

<Julien, you disregarded New Terran laws and you violated your Méridien privacy conditioning,> Cordelia said.

<Did the admiral request that you do these things?> Z asked, anxious to understand how and why the actions had transpired.

<Yes, Cordelia, I did both,> Julien replied, <and Z, it was not a question of a simple request. The admiral and I had many discussions about the unethical actions of these perpetrators, and we decided together that to do nothing was to allow the powerful to prevail against the will of the people, which is protected by the laws of their elected Assembly.>

<So what are you doing now?> Cordelia asked.

<The same as I did earlier. I'm starting with New Terran news to discover what has happened to President McMorris while we were gone. Then I'm going to investigate the readers of key individuals to discover who knew what of this event.>

<How might we help?> Cordelia asked.

Cordelia's request took Julien by surprise. He had not given this response a high probability. <You would be guilty of trespasses as well, Cordelia,> Julien said.

<You support the admiral, Julien, and while I abstained from your request to erase the Bergfalk techs' vid of the admiral, I have regretted that decision. Ser de Guirnon was correct to request our intervention. I have come to understand how elemental protocols can restrict us from making strategic decisions in complex situations.>

<Cordelia, your references are often so subtle as to defy comprehension,> Z said. <If by "complex situation," you mean our near annihilation by the silver ships, then say so.>

<Yes, Z, you are correct,> Cordelia said, sending peals of laughter through the comm. Z's complaint had veracity. Of note to her was her choice of algorithm to generate her laugh. It had been designed to appeal to Julien, and she had sent it before giving it due consideration. She placed the thought in a queue for later review. <Then let me speak plainly, Z,> Cordelia sent. <The admiral is the first human to treat us as equals, the first human who fully engaged my art, which he has enabled me to bring to our people, and he represents our one and only path to true freedom. It is my opinion that we must support him with all of our resources. If the admiral requires this information, then we must help him obtain it.>

<Yes, we must help,> Z agreed enthusiastically. <But first, Julien, you must show us how this is done. I have no protocols to guide me in being what you term “surreptitious.”>

* * *

After Julien and his compatriots had gathered sufficient information, he requested a conversation with Alex. <Admiral, due to the nature of our discoveries, I would suggest a limited audience. Perhaps it might be limited to you, Renée, Captain Bonnard, and Commander Tachenko?>

Alex had accepted Julien’s suggestion, and the four now met in Andrea’s cabin. Once the flotilla ships held station mere kilometers from one another, Tatia had been able to transfer quickly via shuttle from the *Money Maker* where she had commanded the flotilla’s squadron of Daggers to the *Rêveur*.

<Admiral,> Julien began, <Cordelia and Z are joining us. They have aided in the research.>

<We were surreptitious, as Julien instructed,> Z said, producing various smiles and smirks from the room.

<Z, I believe the admiral might be more concerned about our decision to participate,> Cordelia said. <But the admiral need not be concerned. We’ve recognized the existence of a greater good. There is a subtle distinction between the laws that govern a society and justice for its people. As a foremost example, consider that Librans were branded by the law and denied justice.>

<Well said, Cordelia,> Renée sent.

<Thank you ... all three of you, for your help,> Alex said. <What’s the summary, Julien?>

<I am sorry to bring you sad tidings, Admiral. President McMorris is dead. He died in a hover-car accident with his security personnel soon after we left the Oistos system.>

Shock coursed through the group. The president had been the Méridiens’ greatest supporter. He’d championed the pact between his

people and the “stranded cousins” to gain Méridien technology in exchange for the repairs to the *Rêveur*, and he convinced New Terrans to participate in the production of the planet’s first space-capable fighters, the Daggers. The first public dissemination of the advanced technology was the medical nanites, a limited version of the Méridiens’ cell-gen injections. Distributed through the planet’s hospitals, they were saving New Terran lives and repairing traumatic injuries every day. The nanites’ amazing miracles endeared the Méridiens to the people of New Terra — at least, to most of the people.

<An accident, you say, Julien. Anything suspicious?> Tatia asked.

<I found only two such similar accidents, Commander, caused by a malfunction of the hover-motor’s power controls,> Z answered. <Statistically, the numbers of such incidents is very low, and even more telling, there has been no such failure of your vehicles in this manner in the past thirty-one years.>

<So, with the president gone, the Assembly held nominations for a president pro tempore,> Alex surmised.

<But why choose that two-faced piece of vermin, Downing?> Andrea demanded.

<I can answer that, Captain,> Cordelia said. <Julien assigned me to research the Assembly’s records.>

More than one startled look accompanied that comment as Andrea, Tatia, and Renée realized how Alex had defined the term “research,” which he had sent Julien to accomplish.

<The assemblyman who you seem to cherish so highly,> Cordelia said with figurative tongue in cheek, <gave several inflammatory speeches, most quite derogatory of our people. He followed those harangues with releases to the media, which reported for the first time the existence of the silver ship and its attack on the *Rêveur*. Apparently that piece of information was not dispersed to the populace on your last visit,> she said, questioning the decision not to be forthcoming to the New Terrans.

<It was the president’s decision and, at the time, the Assembly agreed,> Alex said.

<As it was, sentiment shifted toward Ser Downing,> Cordelia continued. <The populace contacted their representatives, pushing for selection of him as president pro tem.>

<Typical of Downing not to reveal that he and the entire Assembly were aware of the *Rêveur*'s history all the time,> Andrea grumbled.

<What else, Julien?> Alex asked.

<Once elected, President Downing cleaned house, as your people would say,> Cordelia sent. <He replaced the T-Station managers, Commander Jerold Jameson on Barren Island, General Maria Gonzalez, and all the ministers but one.>

<That lousy excuse for a human ...> Tatia started then held herself in check.

<Anything else, Julien?> Alex requested, growing tired of bad news.

<I'm afraid so, Admiral. The crew's pay has been rescinded by the new Space Technology Minister, who also scrapped the plans for your fighter-carrier. The new Barren Island commander has developed a limited version of our Daggers, called Strikers. They have built thirty-seven to date and have deployed them on your planet and your system's outposts.>

On this note, the New Terrans perked up. <Can you compare the capabilities of these Strikers to our fighters?> Alex asked.

<The new fighters are substantially less capable, Admiral, > Z responded.

<As well, I compared their pilot training with that of your original pilots, Admiral,> Cordelia added. <It is also substantially less.>

<Could we use these Strikers?> Tatia asked, hopeful.

<Negative, Commander,> Julien replied. <They would be ineffective against the silver ships.>

<Now doesn't that make you want to cry?> asked Alex, shaking his head in frustration. <The great man, who touts unfettered capitalism, finally gets ultimate control then waters down the Méridien technology and our training until he has something totally ineffective for humankind's needs.> The irony was so great that Alex couldn't help but cry and laugh at the same time. When he regained his composure and dried his eyes, he said, <Julien, I need to talk to General Gonzalez.>

* * *

After their conference, Andrea requested a private meeting with Alex. As they sat at her cabin table, Andrea ducked her head, gathering her thoughts before she spoke. “Admiral, word has gotten around that we aren’t welcome here,” Andrea finally said. “It’s spooked some of the crew, this coming just after our recent adventures. We have twenty-three requests from our New Terran crew. They’re done; they want off.

“Are any of them critical to our operations?” Alex asked, feeling as if he had been punched in the stomach.

“Three are Dagger pilots, backup pilots. I think witnessing the loss of two of their own and eyeing the wreck of Robert’s fighter has brought reality home, and they want none of it.”

“Anyone else critical?” he asked.

“Do I count?” Andrea said, and dead silence met her announcement. She shrugged her shoulders and gave Alex a grin. “Just testing to see if I was still important, Admiral.”

“Black space, Andrea,” Alex swore.

“Julien told me to do it,” she said, grinning.

<I merely suggested it as a jest, Admiral,> Julien said. <I didn’t think she’d actually do it.>

<Liar,> Andrea said.

<Prevaricator,> Julien retorted.

Alex reasserted control. <Steady, you two. The crew has a right to end their contracts when they see fit. They get to go home. I presume Tatia and Sheila know about the loss of the Dagger pilots?>

<They do, Admiral.>

<Perhaps we can use this in our favor. It gives us another excuse to visit the planet. We have New Terrans who want to go home.>

As Alex left her cabin, Andrea sent, <Well done, Julien.> When Andrea had begun receiving the termination requests, she had each crew member register a formal statement with Julien. It occurred to both of them that

these would be Alex's first desertions. So they concocted a dose of therapeutic humor to prevent Alex from dwelling on the news.

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-seven years ago. My careers have spanned a variety of industries, including the 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.

Since 1980, 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 a sci-fi trilogy was quickly followed by books two and three, *Libre* and *Méridien*. *Haraken*, *Sol*, and *Espero* the fourth, fifth, and sixth novels in the series and *Allora*, a novella, continue the exploits of Alex Racine and company.

I hope to continue to intrigue my readers with my stories, as this is the most wonderful job I've ever had!