

NUA'LL
A Silver Ships Novel

S. H. JUCHA



Excerpt - Chapters 1&2

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Published by Hannon Books, Inc.

www.scottjucha.com

ISBN: 978-0-9994928-8-8 (e-book)

ISBN: 978-0-9994928-9-5 (softcover)

First Edition: June 2018

Cover Design: Damon Za

Acknowledgments

Nua'll is the eleventh book in the Silver Ships series. I wish to extend a special thanks to my independent editor, Joni Wilson, whose efforts enabled the finished product. To my proofreaders, Abiola Streete, Dr. Jan Hamilton, David Melvin, Ron Critchfield, Pat Bailey, Mykola Dolgalov, and Yolanda Timmons, I offer my sincere thanks for their support.

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

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.

- 1 -
Haraken Fleet

<Admiral, the Haraken carriers have arrived,> Commodore Cordelia sent to Admiral Tatia Tachenko.

<Are they alone?> Tatia asked, replying with a thought via her implant.

<Negative, Admiral, more ships are transiting now,> Cordelia replied.

Tatia had exited a lift into the *Freedom's* grand park. She was intent on spending some time walking through the exquisite gardens, while she organized her thoughts. The impending encounter with the massive alien fleet that was seen at the wall was foremost on her mind. Forgoing the peace and quiet Tatia sought, she turned around and caught a lift to the city-ship's uppermost deck. She anticipated that by the time she reached the enormous vessel's bridge, the remaining ships would complete their transit to the Omnian system.

As a SADE or self-aware digital entity, Cordelia was easily capable of multitasking, as she acted in the capacity of the enormous city-ship's captain. She maintained communication with the arriving ships, coordinated the *Freedom's* services, managed the arrivals and departures of shuttles from the bays, and hundreds of other sundry aspects of command. And, of course, she reserved ticks of time to communicate with her partner, Julien.

<It begins,> Cordelia sent to Julien. <Years of preparation, and now the time is near.>

<We're capable of such long lives,> Julien sent in reply. <But, in light of coming events, they might become as short as those of the humans we love and support.>

<I ran alternate scenarios of our possible lives until I grew bored of the effort,> Cordelia sent. <Inevitably, I reached the same conclusion.>

<It was the same for me,> Julien replied. <The end comes for us, whether it's in ten years or ten thousand.>

<So, as Tatia has said many times, we bet on Alex and attempt to prevent what would seem to be unavoidable,> Cordelia added. <Excuse me, my partner, the admiral has gained the bridge, and I've updates for her.>

"What's the status of the arrivals?" Tatia asked. Her dark blue uniform jacket, with its short collar, bore fleet admiral insignias, and her New Terran, heavy-worlder figure completely filled it.

"Commodores Miko Tanaka and Edouard Manet command their carriers, the *No Retreat* and the *Last Stand*," Cordelia stated.

Cordelia's status had been elevated from captain to commodore in anticipation of the freighters that were expected to accompany the city-ship to the wall. However, her title became tenuous, when the expedition's leader, Alex Racine, and Tatia decided to accept Mickey Brandon's concept of transforming the *Freedom* into a warship to fight with the expedition fleet. Humans and their allies, the SADEs, would sail to challenge the alien races, who sought to expand their territories by usurping humankind's worlds.

To prepare the *Freedom*, travelers, the Omnians' vaunted fighters, were constructed to fill many of the city-ship's bays, and a ring of rail-mounted beam weapons were installed along the vessel's circumference. The rails allowed the beam weapons to be extended past the bay doors and swiveled in limited arcs.

In essence, the *Freedom*, with its assortment of weaponry, became a force unto itself. The addition of freighters, which the city-ship would have to protect, had necessitated the promotion of Cordelia to commodore. In a touching ceremony, presided over by Alex and Tatia, Julien pinned the new insignias on his partner. Their foreheads touched, and the SADEs shared a human's lifetime of memories in that short moment of communion.

"According to Commodore Tanaka, the last ship in their fleet has transited, Admiral," Cordelia continued. "In addition to the Haraken

carriers, there are twelve Tridents, each carrying their complement of fighters, and two freighters.”

“Considering they’re the contributions of a single world, that’s a good beginning,” Tatia replied, her arms folded across her substantial chest.

“Credit must be given to our accumulated knowledge, Admiral,” Cordelia mused. “It’s been decades accruing, ever since our first encounter with the spheres. Every event has enlightened our understanding of the entities, who wait beyond the wall, and our allies have come to realize the importance of resistance.”

<And every past encounter continues to prove just how insurmountable our challenge might be,> Tatia sent to Cordelia to prevent being overheard by the officers who were passing by.

<Does concern or trepidation rule your thoughts, Admiral?> Cordelia sent in reply.

<I’d be a fool not to worry about the limited probabilities of success, Cordelia, but I can’t think of any other options for us, except to follow Alex. However, I’m hoping that with the help of Renée de Guirnon, you and I can curtail the more adventuresome aspects of Alex and your partner,> Tatia sent.

<I will keep my thoughts private about their ill-considered journey, Admiral, although I’ve shared my irritations with Julien,> Cordelia sent with a touch of pique.

Cordelia referred to Alex and Julien taking the OS *Redemption*, a Trident and the Omnians’ new warship design, to the wall. Alex had ordered Captain Ellie Thompson to prosecute an alien probe in the nearby system. Then they waited in their lone ship to see who came to investigate the probe’s flare, which detonated on entering the envelope of a gas giant.

When the aliens arrived, Alex and the *Redemption*’s crew found they faced a fleet led by a small Nua’ll sphere. Soon afterwards, massive carriers surrounded the Omnian ship and dumped an unending stream of fighters into space. The experienced hand of Captain Thompson and the ingenuity of the young pilot, Yumi Tanaka, daughter of Edouard and Miko, narrowly managed to extricate the ship from the trap.

“I presume notifications about the new arrivals have been sent,” Tatia said, resuming the conversation with Cordelia in the open.

“Julien, of course, is aware, which means Alex knows. I’ve updated Mickey. Alex will need to meet with our senior engineer to decide on priorities,” Cordelia replied.

Mickey Brandon, Omnia Ships’ inventive engineer, had his hands full running labs that filled every meter of three of the city-ship’s huge bays. Unfortunately, the scope of his assignments had exceeded the work in those areas. In addition, he was in charge of overseeing the fleet’s upgrades, preparing the carriers for their automated sojourns, and outfitting the *Freedom* for its defense.

Crews and SADEs had expanded the Sardi-Tallen Orbital Platform to keep up with production demand for banishers, the small vessels used to dispatch the alien probes, for rails and tubes for the city-ship’s beam weapons, and for travelers, humankind’s ubiquitous and ingenious fighters, whose design was taken from the Nua’ll. In addition, Omnians, humans and SADEs, produced thousands of circuits, crystals, and other components every week in manufacturing plants outside of Omnia City, the only city on the planet below.

“Shall I notify Rear Admiral Gaumata?” Cordelia asked.

“Negative,” Tatia replied. “I’ll do that myself. Withhold further communication about deployment to the approaching Harakens until I speak with Darius, Miko, and Edouard.”

“Acknowledged, Admiral,” Cordelia replied and focused her kernel’s programs on the host of minutiae demanding her attention.

As one of the first SADEs to be freed by Alex from her box aboard the *Freedom*, Cordelia had been afforded the luxury of time to develop sophisticated human mannerisms, which she displayed, while her algorithms were busy solving problems and sending orders. Outwardly, she appeared a calm, unflappable senior officer, comfortable with her position and duties, while inside, she processed information and communicated at inhuman speeds.

Tatia linked to the ship’s controller and requested the location of Admiral Darius Gaumata. He was aboard his Trident, the OS *Prosecutor*,

participating in a mock battle. Tatia's controller link allowed her to view the maneuvers Darius was practicing. She smiled to herself when she saw the Omnian squadron, Tridents commanded by the rear admirals, tucking deep behind a gas giant, surrounded by tens of moons. They were planning to ambush the four squadrons of Tridents, which accompanied the Haraken carriers. Tatia left a request with the controller to be updated on the outcome of the attack.

<Darius,> Tatia sent, via the ship's controller, <I was planning a face-to-face conference with you, but apparently you'll be busy for the next day or two.>

<A little squadron exercise, Admiral,> Darius returned.

<You and the other admirals have four OS Tridents against twelve Harakens, Darius. What're you hoping to achieve?> Tatia asked.

<No fair peeking, Admiral,> Darius objected. <This was supposed to be a surprise for you and them.>

<I don't intend to tell anyone, Darius, but I'm curious about your intent,> Tatia responded.

<We've spent our time training with Confederation forces, Admiral. When I learned the Haraken Tridents would be under my command, I realized that I've never seen them in action. I'd like to know how they'll react to a surprise attack.>

<And you're saying this, Darius, knowing that it's two of the most experienced combat veterans who'll be your direct reports and who are leading these warships,> Tatia replied. Her implant had picked up her chuckle and transmitted it with her thought.

<Perhaps it's best to think of this as a kind of *welcome to the party* greeting, Admiral,> Darius sent, his infectious laughter reaching Tatia.

<I'll be linking with Miko and Edouard, Darius. They need to be notified of ship assignments and our new organization chart, but I'll keep your maneuver secret.> Tatia sent.

<Thank you, Admiral,> Darius replied.

<Commodores, welcome to Omnia,> Tatia sent, after she added Edouard and Miko to her comm call. <It's good to have you aboard for the expedition and congratulations on your promotions.>

The Haraken commodores noted Darius' bio ID on the conference call.

<Thank you, Admiral,> Edouard sent, while Miko responded. <It's good to be aboard, Admiral.>

<Let me update you,> Tatia sent. <We'll be keeping your entire Trident force intact. I presume that you've organized your Tridents into four squadrons of three ships each, and you're each commanding two squadrons?>

<We have, Admiral,> Edouard replied.

<Excellent, you'll be reporting to Rear Admiral Gaumata,> Tatia sent.

<Congratulations, Admiral Gaumata,> the Haraken commodores sent.

<It's been a long trek since Libre, Admiral Gaumata, hasn't it?> Edouard added.

<If by that you mean you're surprised to find my butt in one piece despite all the time I've spent under Alex and the Admiral's auspices, then, yes, it's been an awfully long haul,> Darius replied.

<And, yet, we'll be taking on an even greater challenge,> Edouard added.

<Admiral Tachenko, it seems incredible that Omnia has been in development less than a decade. The infrastructure and the activity in this system are incredible,> Miko commented.

<While I'd like to take the credit, Miko, I can't,> Tatia sent. <It's the work of the SADEs. After Alex opened Omnia Ships, the credits flowed in at an extraordinary rate, which meant he could hand out stipends to every qualified comer. And, Confederation SADEs have responded by the shiploads.>

<No wonder,> Miko replied. <If anyone can posit future scenarios, the SADEs can. To them, it's inevitable that the aliens on the other side of the wall will come for our worlds, one day or another. They're here for Alex. They believe in what he's trying to do.>

<We've been fortunate to have two SADEs join our commands,> Edouard replied.

<Congratulations,> Darius sent. <I look forward to meeting them.>

<By the way, Admiral Gaumata, where are you?> Miko asked. Her question sounded innocuous, but Tatia detected the perceptions of a senior combat officer.

<Why do you ask?> Darius returned.

Wrong thing to send, Darius, Tatia thought. Now, she's got your number.

<Oh, I don't know, Admiral. We've completed our scans of the system, and, interestingly enough, there isn't a single Trident visible in the system. Have you lost your ride?> Miko asked.

Miko's thoughts were enveloped in a sweet innocence, and Tatia had to mute her side of the conference call, while her laughter reverberated down the corridor, as she strolled to her next meeting.

Oh, I missed you two, Tatia thought of her good friends.

<Now, where would I hide if I was the devious sort?> Edouard mused. <That gas giant we'd need to pass by would be an excellent spot.>

<That's my guess too,> Miko added.

Tatia added a secondary link to the *Freedom's* controller. She wanted the system telemetry to see if the commodores intended to talk or act. Already, the Haraken Tridents, which had trailed the carriers, were accelerating. Most likely, they'd be deployed in a frontal arc to defend the two big vessels, as they neared the gas giant.

<My compliments, Commodores,> Darius sent, admitting that the ambush had been uncovered. Now, the Omnian Tridents didn't stand a chance against the larger fleet. <I look forward to renewing old friendships aboard the *Freedom*, when you arrive,> he added, ending his participation in the call.

<Commodores, update me on the two freighters with you?> Tatia requested.

<They've a full crew complement, Admiral, and carry numerous parts: raw metal, nanites, crystals, circuits, and food stocks,> Edouard replied.

<Everything a growing expedition needs,> Miko added.

<Have the freighter captains report to Commodore Cordelia,> Tatia ordered. When she received the commodores' assent, she ended her participation in the comm.

Miko and Edouard observed the four Omnian Tridents exit their hiding places from among the moons of the gas giant and head inward. They shared their humor with each other.

<You'd think Darius would know better than to try a sneak attack on us,> Edouard sent to his partner.

<If you were suddenly promoted up the ranks to rear admiral, responsible for the lives of twelve Trident crews and their warships, how would you act?> Miko riposted.

<Point taken,> Edouard replied.

<Can you believe the news about Cordelia's appointment?> Miko asked. <A SADE has become a commodore. It probably has something to do with the *Freedom* accompanying the fleet, and the rumors about the city-ship being armed.>

Miko waited for her partner to reply, but Edouard was silent. <What are you thinking?> she prompted.

<Hmm, sorry, Miko. I was thinking that in all the years I've known Julien, especially during the years he's been freed, I never once apologized to him.>

<For what?> Miko asked.

<Before the attack on the *Rêveur*, I thought nothing about his situation. To me, he was a SADE, and a SADE belonged in a case on a starship's bridge. I can't believe I ever thought that way, and I've never spoken to him about it.>

<You were a product of your society, my partner. You can't criticize yourself for the way you were taught,> Miko sent.

Miko was New Terran, but Edouard hailed from the Confederation home world, Méridien, and it was the Méridiens who had produced the SADEs.

Then Miko added, <However, there's no time like the present to rectify the past.>

<Another good point,> Edouard replied. <I'll wait until we reach Omnia. I want to make this apology face to face.>

<I think Julien will appreciate it. On the subject you mentioned to Darius, it has been a long time since Libre,> Miko admitted.

<And it's been longer since my rear end was unfrozen in the New Terran system,> Edouard shot back. He was one of the original Méridiens in stasis aboard the *Rêveur*, the passenger liner that Alex rescued, as it drifted through the Oistos system.

<And such a nice bottom too,> Miko replied lovingly.

<It's wonderful to be appreciated, if only for certain parts,> Edouard rejoined, and the partners shared a moment of lighthearted laughter.

* * *

Tatia sat at a conference table with Alex; Julien; Mickey; Reiko Shimada, the Trident fleet's vice admiral; and Franz Cohen, the fighter command rear admiral. Every senior naval position in the expedition's fleet was filled by those who had experience fighting the Nua'll and who best knew Alex's methods.

The Confederation, Haraken, and New Terran worlds were sending their warships, fighters, supplies, and crews to fight with the Omnians. It was understood that Alex was leading the expedition, and everyone expected his people to be in charge. It was the way that Alex and Tatia preferred to operate, especially after the recent calamity.

The New Terran assembly had foisted Admiral Anthony Tripping on Tatia to command their three Tridents, when a small Omnian fleet hunted a Nua'll sphere. Once cornered, the sphere had the opportunity to surrender but chose to detonate and take its foes with it. Unfortunately, Admiral Tripping, who was seeking glory, drove his warship toward the sphere, and the explosion ripped his Trident to shreds. Afterwards, Alex told the New Terran president, Harold Grumley, and the new Minister of Defense, Maria Gonzalez, that he would no longer accept New Terran senior commanders without Tatia vetting their capabilities.

President Grumley was certain Alex wouldn't refuse the warships outright for the sake of having the inability to dismiss a senior commander, but Minister Gonzalez disabused him of that notion, pointedly telling him, "Alex doesn't need us, Harold, we need him."

Cordelia received the inventory carried by the incoming Haraken ships from Commodore Tanaka. She added the information to the city-ship's extensive databases and sent Julien a link, knowing he was heading for a meeting with Alex and Tatia. Julien took a few ticks of time to review the list of materials, seeking items of interest for the meeting's participants.

As Julien entered the conference room, he shared the link to the complete list with everyone and included his short synopsis in a separate file.

"Oh, goodies," Mickey said, rubbing his hands in glee. "Look at this stuff. The Harakens must have raided some of the oldest warehouses."

Alex eyed Tatia, who grinned in reply. "Well done," he said to her. "Sheila must have felt like she was visiting the past."

"What did you say to Admiral Reynard to convince her to give up all this material?" Mickey asked.

"We had a sisterly conversation," Tatia replied, choosing to respond simply. She was feeling extremely self-satisfied. There were more things on the list than she had considered, but she could imagine Sheila and her reports reviewing Haraken inventories and surprising themselves with what had been stored.

"Alex, they've brought Daggers, minelettes, missiles, and Libran-X warheads," Mickey enthused.

Tatia regarded Alex, waiting for his input. When he seemed to review the list for an inordinately long period, she glanced toward Julien to confirm what she suspected. The blood-crystal twins of Alex and Julien were communing, absorbed in an exchange via implant and kernel.

"Julien will work with Cordelia to transfer any ancillary equipment and supplies to the *Freedom* in preparation for the carriers' refit," Alex said, focusing on the meeting. "Mickey, we need to launch the carriers before we leave, of course, but I want the work on the *Freedom's* rail-mounted beam weapons completed before the remaining fleets arrive."

"Do we have a timeline on the arrival of the New Terran and Bellamonde fleets, Tatia?" Mickey asked.

Tatia linked to the ship's controller and examined the expedition's timeline. "We expect New Terra's four Tridents in about eighteen days.

The Confederation ships should arrive fifteen days after that,” she announced.

“We’ll stay focused on this ship’s armament installations, Alex, until the carriers arrive,” Mickey said. “The orbital platform crews can take charge of cleaning out the carriers. The major retrofit task is installing the extended reaction mass tanks on each carrier. Then, we have to load the banishers. I would estimate twenty days to complete the carriers and the *Freedom*,” Mickey replied. He eyed Julien and added, “I suppose your part will be completed within the first day after the carriers arrive.”

“Actually, Mickey, Cordelia began streaming the controller upgrades zero point seventy-five hours ago,” Julien replied. “However, due to the size of the upload and a desire to check the installations, it will take her several hours to complete the operation.”

Tatia grinned at Mickey and added, “And the Haraken fleet is still more than two days out.”

Not to be outdone in the exchange, Mickey retorted, “Well, that’s fine, Julien. Of course, this means you’ll be free to help my teams by getting your hands dirty when the carriers arrive.”

Julien assumed a proper and prim expression, clasping his hands lightly in front of him. A lace doily appeared on his head, projected by his holocapable synth-skin, as he said, “I do so abhor manual labor.”

Tatia and Mickey burst into laughter over the idea of a SADE, who had many times a human’s strength and whose synth-skin could withstand a heavy strike, which would cut into human muscle, pretending to be a delicate entity.

Alex smiled at his friend. Julien and many others were doing their parts to lighten Omnians’ moods. The impending launch of the fleet might have swept a dark pall over those who would sail and those who would remain behind, if not for the efforts of these individuals.

The doily disappeared, and Julien leaned onto the table. “I do have a surprise for this group,” he announced, with a smile. “Something I left off my summary.”

“I like surprises,” Tatia enthused, “so long as they’re nonmilitary.”

Julien received a link from Alex to an item in the extended list, which was stored on the ship's controller. It pointed to the subject at hand. Julien smiled to himself. It was so like his friend to apply the power of his twin implants to pursue the entire inventory, while the group planned.

"The carriers are loaded with a complement of travelers," Julien stated.

"Yes," Tatia said, clapping her hands loudly together. "Now that's what I call a good surprise."

"President Lechoux and her partner, Tomas, managed to get the Haraken Assembly to throw in two complements of fighters. I can't believe that," Mickey said dubiously, eyeing Julien. "I know they had to supply the Tridents, as part of the agreement, and the carriers were going to be parked, if not stripped."

"These come courtesy of the local directors of the Haraken Central Exchange," Julien said proudly. He was a member of the Exchange, which handled the banking transactions for the entire Haraken system.

"Clarify that statement, Julien," Tatia requested. "Did the Exchange pay for these travelers?"

"Negative, Admiral, these are personal gifts from the Haraken-based directors," Julien replied.

"The banking business is good," Tatia mumbled. "A traveler isn't cheap."

"Personally, I think what the directors did was make a declaration that they intend to protect their business," Mickey piped up. "If the entities cross the wall and wipe out our planets, there goes every credit transaction."

-2-

Carriers

Alex and Julien had hatched the plan for the carriers at Haraken, when they visited the observatory platform and spoke with Jupiter, a SADE, who was originally known as Theodosius. He helped the Omnians discover the extensive penetration of alien probes across a wide swath of the galaxy.

The problem for the Omnians was that there wasn't time or resources to wander the stars eliminating a probe at each system. That's when Alex and Julien hatched their plan: Outfit the carriers to perform automated sweeps. The ships' controllers would be programmed with the probes' present locations and sent in opposite directions, circling out from Omnia. Armed with autopiloted fighters to protect the carrier, the ship would launch a banisher to destroy a probe at each system. If the ship's reaction mass ran low or other problems developed, the carrier was programmed to return to Omnia.

No one was under the false impression that the carriers could quickly eliminate the probes. The planting of the alien devices had taken place over tens of thousands of years. A probe had even reached the faraway system of Earth. No, the plan was to give notice to the entities behind the wall that the sentients on this side were choosing to fight rather than surrender or run away.

The carriers, which had served the budding Haraken world so well, had outlived their usefulness. A carrier had no defense once it launched its complement of fighters at the enemy. The Omnians had designed the Trident to operate as their primary warship. The vessel was many times more powerful than a fighter and could carry four travelers.

After a bit of squabbling, Terese Lechaux, the Haraken president, convinced the Haraken Assembly to sell the carriers to Omnia Ships, Alex's company, which would use the carriers to prosecute the alien probes. The

deal was one Alex couldn't resist, and he had grinned as he authorized the transfer of two credits from his account to the Haraken Assembly.

In preparation for the expedition's launch, Tatia hadn't the time to visit Haraken and peruse the naval storage warehouses for what she could use. She had relied on Sheila Reynard, the Haraken fleet admiral. The two women had flown together with Alex from day one, when the *Rêveur*, newly repaired, had sailed from New Terra for Méridien.

Instead, Tatia's time had been absorbed playing war games at Bellamonde, to help the Méridiens sharpen their skills. It'd resulted in the loss of a good many recruits, but those who remained were far better trained commanders, captains, and crew.

The conversation with Sheila hadn't gone as simply as Tatia had intimated to Alex, Mickey, and Julien. When Tatia had requested the Daggers, the original fighters used at Libre, Sheila had replied, "Tatia, those are ancient. They haven't been flown in ages."

"Understood, Sheila, then you won't want them. Ship them," Tatia had politely but firmly requested.

Realizing Tatia's mindset, Sheila sought to match it, saying, "Well, if you're going that far. I have a good number of minelette pallets stored somewhere. The SADEs will know where."

"Great, ship those too," Tatia replied. "How about the nanites we used at Sol against the enemy ships, Sheila? Do you have a significant amount of those?"

"Probably, Tatia, but you recall that they're specific to the metal they contact. Are you thinking that you're going to get that close?"

"I hope not, but I anticipate that we'll be fighting a war of running encounters. No telling who we'll be up against and what we'll need. Most important, there'll be no time to run home."

"What do you mean who?" Sheila asked.

"Renée is telling me that Alex is wearing that worried expression in the morning. You know, the one he gets when he's trying to puzzle out what the odd images mean," Tatia explained.

"The dreams, right?" Sheila asked.

“Yeah, those,” Tatia replied. Few individuals knew that Renée de Guirnon, Alex’s partner, was so intimately connected to the man that she could receive Alex’s dreams while the two of them slept. More than once, Renée had helped Alex interpret his dreams. He couldn’t recall them, but her implant had a record of the strange, fleeting images.

“Any resolution yet?” Sheila asked.

“Not yet. Renée tells me that she thinks Alex is seeing more than one. She believes they’re mixing, which is making unraveling them rather difficult.”

“You’re assembling the greatest fleet of warships that humans have ever created in this part of the galaxy, Tatia. Why do I feel like it’s not enough?” Sheila lamented.

“We’ll have to go with what we have, Sheila. According to Alex, we have to divide and confuse the aliens,” Tatia replied and laughed.

As Julien predicted, the controllers of the carriers and the travelers received their updates before the huge ships crossed the orbit of the gas giant, where Darius had planned to ambush the fleet.

Now, the *No Retreat* and the *Last Stand*, two venerable Haraken ships, were stationed near the *Freedom*. Platform crews emptied bay after bay of equipment to store aboard the city-ship.

Renée, Mickey, and a group of support personnel toured the carriers. Renée and her people were searching for usable items from the meal rooms, such as food stocks, and the cabins. However, the carriers had been in disuse for so long that they quickly abandoned their search. Mickey and his team fared no better. Items that might have been functionally of value were outmoded.

“Hard to believe that the contents of these ships no longer have any use to us,” Renée opined to Mickey. They occupied a pair of seats on a traveler returning to the *Freedom*.

“It’s been three decades, Renée,” Mickey replied.

“And the *Rêveur*, which is in service to this day, is more than 130 years old,” Renée riposted.

“No fair, you’re counting the decades that it was adrift,” Mickey argued. “Besides, that ship was entirely overhauled.”

“And you did a fine job on that,” Renée replied, patting the engineer’s hand.

The *Rêveur*’s repair had swept Mickey into a world of incredible advanced technology, and he’d joined Alex’s team to return the passenger liner to the Confederation. And, if truth be told, a lively Méridien woman, by the name of Pia, had intrigued him.

“It comes down to warships versus passenger ship, Renée. The stronger our enemies, the more modern and more powerful ships we have to build,” Mickey replied. The engineer in him loved to create new designs, but he understood Renée’s lament.

Mickey’s teams installed the new tanks aboard the carriers and filled them with reaction mass. It was estimated they’d allow the carriers to travel between the stars for ten or more years. In contrast, the banishers, which were loaded into bays, would probably be consumed in six or seven years. There were a number of conditions, such as for resupply or repair, under which the carriers would return to Omnia. And, it remained to be seen if one or both carriers encountered circumstances that spelled their doom, such as inadvertently crossing the path of a Nua’ll sphere or meeting an aggressive spacefaring species.

Two days earlier than Mickey’s estimate of completion, Alex and a large group gathered on the *Freedom*’s massive bridge to witness the launch of the carriers.

Julien initiated the controllers’ hunt and destroy programs. In short order, systems were checked and confirmed online, travelers and banishers were contacted and confirmed ready, and sensor feedback was determined to be fully functional.

Aboard each carrier were hundreds of banishers invented by Mickey Brandon and his engineering team. The Sardi-Tallen platform had been busy constructing the small maneuverable devices, which would destroy the alien probes that monitored systems for the Nua’ll and reported the progress of sentient races.

Not a single human or SADE would live aboard the carriers. The SADEs, Julien, Cordelia, Z, and Miranda, had programmed the carriers to follow courses in ever-widening circles to prosecute the probes. Their

initial forays would focus on the worlds of Omnia, Haraken, and New Terra before proceeding to explore the systems surrounding the Confederation colonies.

When Julien received the controllers' signals that they were ready to initiate their extensive programming, he announced, "The carriers are ready."

"Send them, Julien," Alex said.

With their hunt-and-destroy programs initiated, the controllers accessed their list of probes gleaned from the Haraken observatory platform. Each carrier had half the list, which would send them spiraling in opposite directions. The nearest probe locations to Omnia were retrieved, courses were calculated, and engines were brought online.

When ready, the controllers communicated their departures from the system to the Omnian orbital platform and powerful engines were fired. Slowly, at first, and then more rapidly, the ships worked their way through orbital traffic and headed across the ecliptic.

* * *

"Wow, that was incredible," Captain Bertram Hardingsgale said to Maria Gonzalez, the New Terran Minister of Defense. They were on the bridge of the *Rover*, a passenger ship.

"What?" Maria asked sluggishly.

Maria was one of the unfortunate individuals who did not handle transiting well. The *Rover*, in the company of four NT Tridents, had made the Omnian system about 0.65 hours ago.

"I was referring to witnessing a huge ship exit the Omnian system," Bertram said. "I've never been this close to a vessel when it made a transit. It was a fantastic sight."

Maria glanced at Oliver, her confidant and a SADE, for more information. "It was the *Last Stand*, Minister. The Omnians have sent this carrier and its sister ship, the *No Retreat*, to eliminate probes."

“That will take the crews their entire lifetimes,” Bertram said, aghast at the concept. “Are they expecting to return and trade out after a certain length of service?”

“There’s no one aboard, Captain,” Maria replied. “The entire process is automated, thanks to the Omnians.”

“Most ingenious of them,” Oliver added.

“It was much cleverer to devise the idea to repurpose two ships about to be stripped so they could serve useful purposes once again,” Maria commented.

“Yes, the thinking of Alex and Julien in concert,” Oliver acknowledged. “It’s an enviable symbiosis.”

Maria glanced at the wistful expression on Oliver’s face. It was the first time she’d ever heard him lament the shortcomings between him and her. Despite the circumstances of Oliver’s early existence, serving one of the more disagreeable Leaders of the Confederation, he’d always been able to communicate swiftly and succinctly with humans, the *Méridiens*, via their implants. After meeting Maria, Oliver had decided to lend his support exclusively to her, a human who was effectively mind-blind.

“Minister, you’ve a comm from Captain Jagielski,” Bertram announced.

“On speakers,” Maria replied gruffly.

“Captain, we’re on the bridge,” Maria warned Alphons, in case he needed privacy for his call.

“The Omnians surely have us on their telemetry, Minister, and I was wondering if you felt well enough to announce us or if you’d rather I did it?” Alphons asked.

“Kind of you to ask after my well-being, Captain. I’ll take care of it,” Maria replied.

“Certainly, Minister. Feel better. The *McMorris* out,” Alphons said.

“Oliver,” Maria requested. Like Alex, she understood the shorthand speech that was capable with a SADE, who could anticipate her needs. However, unlike Alex, she had to speak her thoughts.

Oliver connected with the *Rover's* controller and placed a comm to the *Freedom*. A brief request to Cordelia was transferred to Alex via Julien, as the pair was on the Sardi-Tallen Orbital Platform.

The once utilitarian construction station no longer resembled its initial iteration. It had morphed into a dumbbell shape, one end handling passengers from liners and the other end constructing ships and handling freight. The station's interconnector held small bays to accommodate the frequent visits of travelers. Movers embedded along the length of the interconnector transported pedestrians in both directions.

<Minister, how are you feeling?> Alex sent, as Julien and he rode the pedestrian transport toward the platform's ship construction bays. The *Rover's* controller broadcast Alex's voice over the bridge speakers for Maria.

"The usual, Alex," Maria replied. "When are your superlative individuals going to invent a cure for those few of us who suffer from transits?"

<Interestingly, Minister, there's a marked decline in symptoms with additional transits,> Alex replied.

"I'm looking forward to that time. How many transits does it take?" Maria asked.

Alex and Julien shared grins, and Alex's humor leaked through his sending, as he replied, <About forty or fifty transits, Minister.>

"Alex, did anyone tell you that you have a sick sense of humor?" Maria shot back.

<Yes, a few have, Minister,> Alex replied with a chuckle. <Julien tells me that you're in the company of four Tridents.>

"I wish we could have provided more, Alex, but the Assembly was adamant about sticking to the agreement. You got four of the nine warships we constructed," Maria announced.

<And Captain Jagielski?> Alex asked. More than anything, he wanted the captain who had demonstrated the strength and maturity to heed his warnings and not follow the ill-fated Admiral Anthony Tripping to his death.

Despite her body's protestations, Maria smiled to herself. She could have brought Alex just one Trident. As long as Alphons Jagielski was

captain, he'd be happy. *People first; things second. That's my Alex*, she thought.

"I considered it best that Captain Jagielski should stay at New Terra, Alex," Maria said. She waited several heartbeats before she added, "But Senior Captain Jagielski insisted on leading these four ships in your expedition, and I gave up arguing with him."

<What were you saying about a poor sense of humor?> Alex riposted. His laughter erupted over the *Rover's* bridge speakers. <Have the good captain report to Admiral of the Fleet Tachenko,> he sent.

Maria flushed with pride at the thought that one of her favorite officers in New Terran Security had risen to the lofty rank of fleet admiral.

"Will do, Alex," Maria replied. She was feeling better by the moment. Talking to Alex always did that for her. "By the way, we caught the transit of one of the carriers. Are you hopeful for their missions?"

<Mickey, his engineers and techs, and the SADEs have done their usual exemplary job. As for the mission, we've no other choice. There are way too many probes for crewed ships to eliminate. I expect one day we'll find a more efficient means of destroying the probes.>

"There's always the possibility that the entities you meet at the wall will acquiesce, and you won't have to worry about the probes," Maria replied. She briefly eyed Oliver, who frowned, and she listened closely for Alex's response.

<As my endearing crystal friend said to me: "Should we trust anything promised by entities who've been engaged in policies of harsh expansionism for tens of thousands of years?" I think the answer is no. We have to ensure they understand that this isn't a skirmish. It's a declaration of territory and rights, which we intend to defend.>

"Fortune to us all, Alex. Maria out," the minister said, and Oliver closed the call.

Julien regarded Alex. <Endearing?> he queried via his comm.

Alex smiled good-naturedly. He received the image of a giant lagomorph-like creature bounding up to him. It threw its arms around Alex in an embrace, and its weight knocked him to the deck. Buried under

the huge pile of fuzzy, long-eared animal, Alex produced a thought bubble over his head, a concept he borrowed from one of Renée's vids.

The lagomorph's eyes flew open, as it regarded the scene in the bubble. In the dark of night, four men sat around a campfire, roasting the carcass of an animal over flames. The creature shrieked and ran off, only to return with a fire extinguisher, which it sprayed over the thought bubble and Alex, who was inundated by the foam. The two friends reveled in their image war until they reached their destination.

My Books

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

Pyreans Series

Empaths

Messinants

Jatouche (forthcoming)

The Silver Ships Series

The Silver Ships

Libre

Méridien

Haraken

Sol

Espero

Allora

Celus-5

Omnia

Vinium

Nua'll

Artifice (forthcoming)

The Author



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

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

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

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

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

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

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