

SOL
A Silver Ships Novel

S. H. JUCHA



Excerpt : Chapters 1 and 2

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

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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.

Jodylyne crawled on her hands and knees through the air shaft, the cool rush of air chilling her thin body, making her shiver despite the exertion. The circular, one-meter diameter, metal ventilation shaft nested inside the walls of the enormous spoke, extending a hundred meters from the space station's core through the inner wheel to the outer wheel. A fine layer of dust coated the inside of the shaft, making it easier for Jodylyne's wrapped hands and knees to slide along.

Two years ago, at the age of eleven, Jodylyne became an orphan. The United Earth (UE) militia caught her parents running supplies for the station's rebels. Judged guilty, they received life sentences to work the ore borers in the asteroid fields. Word reached Jodylyne that her parents weren't even granted the small favor of working at the same outpost.

Rather than be taken into the militia's custody and shipped via freighter to an inner-world, UE-run orphanage, Jodylyne ran away. While the militia searched for her, she discovered an air vent in a utility corridor's bulkhead that was detached at the bottom. The vent swung up to accommodate her small frame and she crawled into the dark, sliding down the passages, until she lost her way.

In the pitch black, with the air cooling her body, Jodylyne sat absolutely still, knees drawn to her chest for warmth, trying not to cry and listening to the militia call back and forth as they searched for her. Hours passed and she sipped water and chewed on meal bars, fighting the urge to pee.

After what seemed like an eternity to Jodylyne, a voice hissed at her from the darkness. "You gonna sit there all day or you wanna come with me?"

Jodylyne hadn't seen anyone, but she heard scuffling and then saw a small glow light shining on a scrawny butt, which began fading away. Stuffing her water jug and a half-eaten meal bar into her pack, Jodylyne had scurried after the fading light.

Today, Jodylyne was still following the slender flanks of Edmas, the boy who had found her that day. The fliklight pinned in her hair fluoresced the bands of reflective cloth affixed to Edmas's coveralls and the dashes smeared on the walls, which the young rebels used to guide them through the station's extensive ventilation system.

Jodylyne's heart was thumping in her chest. Edmas had picked her for the raid, and it was to be her first. Her teenage mind spun fantasies of being with Edmas, who was two years her senior and the leader of the tunnel rats. She touched the gun strapped to her thigh for the hundredth time.

The tunnel rats lived to harass the UE militia, crawling through the ventilation system from the inner ring to the outer ring to pop out and ambush militia patrols. They tagged the troopers' visors with their pellet guns, blinding them, and then swiped their stunstiks and anything else that could be grabbed before dashing back into the air tunnels. Jodylyne had practiced incessantly with her pistol in every stance and from every position she could imagine until she was considered one of the best shots among the rats.

At the end of their air vent, Edmas eased opened the cover whose bottom was unattached. The vent ended in a utility corridor rather than the station's main passenger corridor. Edmas motioned Jodylyne up beside him, and they lay together for warmth in the air vent's mouth, listening for the footfalls of militia boots.

Sometime later, a nudge in Jodlyne's ribs woke her, and a dusty hand covered her mouth. She flushed with embarrassment that she had fallen asleep, but Edmas's body had been a warm blanket after the seemingly interminable crawl through the incessant stream of cool air.

Edmas held a finger to his lips, which Jodlyne could barely discern in the dim light that penetrated the vent's slats, and he signaled her to crawl deeper into the vent. Jodlyne wriggled backward as quickly and silently as she could, hearing the muffled sounds of Edmas following her. He had no sooner spread an old piece of dirty cloth over their heads to conceal them, than a powerful light played off the tunnel's walls as the militia patrol sought to catch any tunnel rats off-guard.

Seconds later, the light switched off, but Edmas cocked an ear, listening intently to ensure the patrol had walked on. He tugged on her jacket, crawling quickly back to the vent cover, and Jodlyne hurried to keep up with him. Edmas was already in the corridor, holding up the cover, when Jodlyne reached the opening and slid silently to the deck.

Creeping down the corridor, their wrapped boots served to muffle their approach as they followed the sound of the patrol's fading footsteps. At the corridor's tee, Edmas peeked around the corner to find a militiaman waiting for him. The patrol had set a trap with one man noisily walking on and the other lying in wait.

Jodlyne watched Edmas throw himself across the corridor to land on his back as a sleeper dart from a stunstik struck the wall above his head. Her training took over, and as the ambusher rounded the corner into full view, Jodlyne snapped out her pistol, dropped to one knee, and peppered the trooper's visor, blinding him.

Edmas frantically waved her back to the vent, but the footfalls of the second patroller were fast approaching as he raced to the rescue of his comrade. The man Jodlyne blinded was stumbling around, shouting and cursing the rebel rats. His visor was covered in a matrix of paint and bonding material that glued his visor shut. He was alternating between swiping at the visor trying to clear it and yanking on his helmet to pull it off, but for safety's sake militia helmets were attached to the upper torso armor via a mounting ring.

Jodlyne shook her head at Edmas, who was still waving her off. She backed up a couple of meters and laid down her pellet gun. Swiping the cover off her head, Jodlyne shook out her fine, blonde hair around her shoulders and held her hands up in surrender. She glanced at Edmas, who nodded his agreement and quickly crawled backward to wedge himself into a doorway set back from the corridor.

The second militiaman came sliding around the corner on his knees, but he hesitated when he spotted a young, blonde teenager with her hands in the air. Puffs from Edmas's pellet gun sounded in the momentary quiet, and a second visor was effectively covered and sealed.

Edmas rushed forward and kicked the legs out from under Jodlyne's target. While the trooper was down and disoriented, Edmas unsnapped his utility belt and grabbed his stunstik. He hurried to Jodlyne and snatched at her shoulder, but she jerked free to scabble forward and grab her head cover and beloved pistol before she sprinted after him.

Edmas was waiting at the vent cover and boosted Jodlyne into the tunnel's mouth. She scurried down its length as fast as she could, the coded dashes on the walls guiding her, until Edmas called a halt. They sat side by side, laughing at their successful raid against the UE militia, who held sway over the outer ring of Idona Station.

* * *

“Patrol attacks are rising, Captain Yun,” Lieutenant Patrice Morris reported. “We had five attacks around the wheel yesterday. None of our people were seriously injured, more embarrassed. They were robbed of stunstiks, web belts, and other gear. It’s all kids.”

“Kids grow up to be rebels, Lieutenant. Don’t forget that. Implement four-man patrols immediately. Let’s see how the little rats handle those odds.”

“Yes, sir,” the lieutenant replied.

UE militia was housed in the administration section of Idona Station’s outer ring, but their numbers were such that they didn’t have adequate forces to effectively patrol day and night even a quarter of the huge ring. The rebel stronghold was the inner ring and the core, which gave them control of the station’s critical systems, including its giant fusion reactors, and the enormous size of the station allowed the rebels, mostly tunnel rats, to surreptitiously visit much of the outer ring with impunity.

This had been the status quo for several generations, but lately moods were shifting, and the rats were becoming brazen. And the mood was echoed by the citizens of the station, who no longer ducked their heads as they passed militia patrols, but more often stared back.

“Anything else?” Captain Yun asked quietly.

“Nothing, Captain,” Lieutenant Morris replied.

This was a frequent daily exchange, and not just between the captain and the lieutenant, but between senior militia and naval officers and their direct reports throughout Sol’s outer rim. The entire system had witnessed the historical return of the *Reunion*, and everyone waited restlessly for the much-anticipated announcement from the Supreme Tribunal of the explorer ship’s exciting discovery, but nothing was heard. To add to the general unease created by the lack of information, Speaker Garcia, the leader of the expedition, was not seen or quoted in the media after the *Reunion* made Earth’s orbit.

But nothing was more disquieting to UE forces than the nonappearance of the battleship, *Hand of Justice*. Days passed after the return of the *Reunion*, then a month, and the more time that slipped away, the edgier the men and women of the naval forces and the militia became. Scuttlebutt had it that the UE ships had discovered aliens with the capabilities to destroy the UE’s fiercest war machine, and now the aliens knew the way to Earth. Fear was creeping through the UE’s vaunted forces.

Among the bridge crew of the rim’s patrol ships, it seemed one eye searched for rebels running the blockade and the other eye kept watch beyond on the asteroid fields where the *Reunion* had made its faster-than-light (FTL) transition into the system of Sol.

The Haraken fleet sailed out of the deep dark two days out from the outer asteroid field that ringed the star called Sol. The distance was precautionary. The fleet decelerated and came to a halt while the SADEs mapped the Earthers' system — stations, surface colonies, planets, moons, and ship traffic.

Alex Racine, the Haraken president, was pleased to see that the data correlated favorably with the UE scientists' information. The Earthers were comfortably settled in cabins below deck from Alex and Renée's suite aboard Haraken's largest fighter carrier, the *No Retreat*.

In preparing for the fleet's launch, Alex hadn't intended to be traveling on the carrier, but in an imitation of the circumstances of Haraken's first traveler test, his people had revolted and arranged alternate transportation. Alex boarded his traveler, the Haraken gravity-driven fighter-shuttle, bound for the *Rêveur*. At least, that's where Alex thought he was headed. However, instead of descending into *Rêveur's* compact bay, the cavernous bay of the *No Retreat* greeted him.

"Welcome to your flagship, Mr. President," Captain Miko Tanaka said proudly, saluting Alex.

"Captain," Alex replied tersely, returning the salute. He turned to Tatia Tachenko and asked, "Any other changes in our plans that I should be aware of, Admiral?"

"Negative, Mr. President. Ships, captains, and preparations are as you requested. It was a strategic decision to locate Haraken's intelligence resources aboard our most formidable ship," Tatia replied.

<Julien, I would have thought at least you would have warned me,> Alex sent his thought via his implant to his friend and SADE, a self-aware digital entity housed in a human avatar, who stood beside him.

<I can't share with you, Mr. President, what I don't know,> Julien replied privately to Alex.

The two individuals, human and SADE, took the measure of the four females who faced them — Renée, Alex's partner; Cordelia, Julien's SADE partner; Admiral Tatia Tachenko, and Captain Miko Tanaka, who stood resolutely in front of them.

<An intelligent human would withdraw gracefully, facing such formidable forces,> Julien sent to Alex.

<Well, we wouldn't want to appear foolish, would we?> Alex replied to Julien. "The *No Retreat* it is," Alex announced, which caused the three humans to breathe quiet sighs of relief, having expected Alex to object to his being overruled. Cordelia, on the other hand, had calculated the probabilities were in their favor that Alex would relent.

* * *

When the SADEs confirmed to Alex that the collection of the system's telemetry was complete, a large group gathered around the *No Retreat's* expansive holo-vid. Surveying the size of the audience, Alex had to compliment Z, the third SADE traveling with them, on his efforts to design and build a holo-vid that was in proportion to the carrier's massive bridge.

"There, Mr. President," Olawale Wombo, the ex-Earther scientist said, putting his finger into the holo-vid, which responded by enlarging that territory of space to the degree his finger was held there. "Your pardon, Mr. President," Olawale said when he realized the audience was left with a display of a small portion of a planet's surface.

“I, for one,” Priita Ranta, Olawale’s associate said, “am glad that Haraken technology does not extend to teleportation by way of their holo-vid. Olawale would have us sucking frozen gases on Neptune at this moment.”

Olawale’s compatriots tittered good-naturedly at their friend’s consternation. It was the same predicament for all the UE scientists, who had deserted the Earther explorer ship and sought asylum with the Harakens merely forty-eight days ago. Haraken technology continued to astound them at every turn. But if anyone could enjoy being surprised and confounded by a world of technological advancement the likes of which could only be imagined, it was seven scientists.

“Not to worry, Ser Wombo,” Alex said, resizing the holo-vid with a signal from his implants, the *Méridien* devices embedded in his cerebellum. Whereas most, meaning nearly 100 percent of the population of *Méridien* and Haraken carried one implant, Alex carried two. It was a consequence of his birth on New Terra, a world far removed from the *Méridiens*’ advanced civilization, his development as a mathematics prodigy, and the receipt of his implants as an adult that enabled Alex to disregard standard practices and adopt his first implant at a phenomenal pace.

Implants were the common means of communication among the *Rêveur*’s survivors, who were the last remaining passengers on a *Méridien* liner that Alex rescued. Alex hadn’t received the structured, step-by-step, implant training every *Méridien* child received. To him, the useful rules were the ones he chose to create and write. Implant to implant there wasn’t an equal to the power that Alex could wield, to the detriment of some, to the relief of the Harakens, and to the pleasure of one, Ser Renée de Guirnon.

“Proceed, Ser,” Alex said to Olawale, indicating the reset holo-vid view of Neptune and its surrounding satellites.

“This is Idona Station, of which we spoke,” said Olawale, pointing to a small dot and careful to keep his hands out of the holo-vid.

Alex enlarged the display of space around the station. “Julien, a summary, please.”

“The station is a pre-grav build, consisting of a core, housing energy plants and utilities systems, surrounded by multiple rings, which maintain gravity with a constant spin,” Julien replied. “However, the station isn’t spinning now, which implies it has been upgraded as Ser Boris Gorenko indicated.”

“If you would, Julien?” Boris asked, indicating the station. Julien increased the holo-vid’s magnification until Boris nodded to him. “When we left Sol’s space, the UE militia was housed in a small section of an outer ring. Commerce under the citizens continues to operate there too, and the rebels hold the inner ring and the core.”

“That’s a huge station,” Tatia noted, studying the telemetry details in her implant.

“Idona Station was built as the transfer center between the rim’s asteroid belt miners and the outer worlds,” Boris added, his knowledge having accrued from his two sons, who had served in UE naval forces. “Many of these miners have lived their entire lives between Idona and the belt, mining, refining, and delivering the finished products to the station. The station’s outer ring hosts, or at least it used to host, a tremendous number of brokerage houses that buy and resell the miners’ metals and liquid gases to other colonies, stations, the outer planets, and to Earth. Freighters and passenger ships journey inward from the station but rarely travel beyond.”

“Julien, what’s the status on the present commercial ship traffic?” Alex asked.

“For an outward location, the freighter traffic is quite high, with ships taking routes between the station and the inner planets and other ships journeying from the belt to the station and returning. Liner traffic appears to be at a minimum,” Julien replied.

“Personnel movement to the station ceased for many years after the station’s takeover,” Boris continued, “and many owners and their families abandoned their shops for a safer life elsewhere. The station’s resident population has never recovered. Estimates are that the outer ring is somewhere at one-third of its previous height. But as Julien noted, the station is still a heavy shipping transit point. Crews take breaks there ... freighters load and unload ... none of them bothered by the rebels.”

“It’s certainly an odd revolution,” mused Yoram Penzig, who was the resident philosopher and psychotherapist of the UE scientists.

“What about military ships?” Tatia asked.

“One significant presence, Admiral,” Z replied. “Utilizing our historic Terran records, this ship would be classified as a destroyer.” When the audience stared at him, waiting, Z added. “About one-third of the *Hand of Justice*’s power ... no fighters and a significant reliance on missiles and rail gun fire.”

“Enough power to destroy the station,” Tatia murmured.

“Indeed, Admiral,” Z affirmed.

“There are several patrol craft, Admiral,” Cordelia added. “They are small, carrying perhaps ten to twenty personnel and capable of interdicting freighters and boarding them, presumably for inspections as our new friends have indicated.”

<Thank ... young ... miss,> Olawale attempted to send to Cordelia. When he saw the SADE turn toward him and smile, Olawale shrugged his huge shoulders in apology. The scientists obtained their implants 35 days ago and were still learning to cope with the new manner of communication. Olawale had tried to thank Cordelia using the term he had first given her of “young miss” even after he learned her true century-plus age.

“This has been going on for decades?” Alex asked. “Why has neither side gotten the upper hand?”

“It became a stalemate between the militia and the rebels from the day UE forces landed on the station,” Yoram explained. “The operating personnel, working in the outer ring, fled to an inner ring, joining the people running the station’s support systems. They sealed the massive transfer doors of the spokes that connect rings. Then the rebels threatened to blow the station if the militia attempted to breach the doors.”

“The station is strategically that important?” Alex asked.

“Yes, Mr. President,” Boris said. “The UE, especially Earth, is dependent on the metals and gases mined in the asteroid fields, and the entire transfer and shipping process of those resources depends on this station. The Supreme Tribunal had no choice but to acquiesce and order the militia to hold.”

“The situation is complicated by the civilians in the outer ring, Mr. President,” Nema said, despite the scientist’s advanced age she had become a great admirer of Alex and not just for his presidency. The situation presented moments of pleasure for Renée, teasing Alex by inquiring as to the well-being of his latest admirer. “The UE naval forces patrol the area around the station, interdicting those who attempt to help the rebels, while ensuring the safe passage of UE ships, personnel, and goods. The problem for the militia is that goods for the rebels are snuck in by freighters to legitimate shop owners, who in reality are rebel sympathizers.”

“The inner wheel possesses extensive food production farms and water treatment systems, which are critical assets for the rebels, and the entire outer ring, including the militia and UE ships, depend on that purified water source,” Priita explained.

“That’s our target, people,” Alex declared. “Now, I wonder if the Earthers still know how to play the game of poker?” he mused, and Julien smiled and sprouted a croupier’s visor, imaged by the holo-vid capability of his synth-skin. He had begun displaying the visor when he played cards with Alex. You would think a SADE, capable of calculating the variances of each hand of a card game would hold the advantage, but Julien found an equal in Alex in the games. As Julien would often say, “The tendency of a certain New Terran to prevaricate at will disturbs the laws of probability.”

* * *

“Thé, Admiral?” Renée asked Tatia, who had dropped by Alex and Renée’s suite late that evening.

“No, thank you, Ser. This won’t take long,” Tatia replied.

Alex came out of the sleeping quarters, tying his robe around the waist. “And what can I do for you this evening? Is it Admiral or Tatia?”

“Admiral, Mr. President. I would like you to consider an alternative strategy. The SADEs’ telemetry indicates that most of the UE warships observed are not FTL-capable. At least, they do not have the winged configuration that appears to signify FTL-capable.”

Alex offered Tatia a seat, and he took one across from her. Renée moved behind Alex where she could rest her hands on his shoulders. Tatia was reminded of her Méridien partner, Alain de Long, who exhibited the same habit when they were in private, his hands always seeking to touch her. It had been disconcerting, at first, for Tatia, who was a tremendously independent and private person. Now, after years together, she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Our UE scientists were convinced a fleet would come to the Confederation, which got me wondering how they would accomplish that when the scientists also stated that the UE possessed few FTL-capable ships,” Tatia continued. “When I examined the telemetry in detail, I found several winged-shaped battleships and some enormous winged vessels.” Tatia turned on the salon’s holo-vid, and Alex leaned in to examine one of the gigantic ships on display.

“What is it?” Alex asked.

“According to Z, this ship has a wingspan over 60 percent greater than a battleship but appears to possess none of the bay and port configuration of the warship.”

“So what’s it for?” Alex asked.

“We have a rearward view of one of these ships,” said Tatia, who changed the holo-vid view.

“Are those bay doors? If so, they’re big enough to accommodate ... ships,” Alex said, looking up to see Tatia nodding.

“Giant FTL-capable ship carriers,” Tatia announced. “That’s how the UE intends to spread its forces. It’s quite inventive. It saves the effort and cost of retrofitting or replacing the war fleet.”

“So what’s your suggestion, Admiral?” Alex asked.

“If we take out these ship carriers, the UE battleships might be able to reach our system, but they won’t have any support ships. One quick strike against these carriers and the UE will spend a decade or two replacing those ships,” Tatia urged.

Alex stood up to pace while he thought. “These ship carriers are staged around Earth. The UE naval commanders will see us coming and take measures to protect them. The concept involves a great deal of risk ... fighting our way in system, the battle itself, and then fighting our way back out.”

Alex continued to pace and Tatia waited patiently. “I admit your idea has merit, Admiral, but I came here to stop a war not start one. We’ll continue onto Idona. Thank you and good evening.”

“Wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t offer you alternatives. Good evening, Mr. President, Ser,” Tatia said, turning to leave.

<And a fine job it has always been,> Alex sent privately to Tatia, who paused at the cabin door and acknowledged Alex’s compliment with a touch of two fingertips to her brow.

* * *

In the morning, Cordelia would transfer to the *Last Stand*, Haraken's first and smaller carrier, to organize the launch of two probes Alex required.

Before she left, Cordelia was able to enjoy a final meal time with Julien. Not that the two SADEs would eat, but it was their habit to be present at meals. Cordelia was in the president's suite with Alex, Renée, and Julien when their scheduling apps signaled meal time. Too easily isolated by their implants, Méridiens treasured meal time for its face-to-face reminder of what was important — one another. Alex offered Renée his arm, and, to Cordelia's delight, Julien offered his arm to her.

That Cordelia's synth-flesh sensors reported the contact of Julien's arm, and her deeper sensors signaled the pressure was immaterial. That her partner, a shy one as any you might find in a human pair, wished to demonstrate his attachment to her brought many of her ancillary programs to a halt. It was a moment to carefully record, to treasure, to play over and over in the centuries and perhaps the millenniums to come.

The morning would pass too quickly for Cordelia, but by 9.75 hours, she was aboard the *Last Stand*, prepping the probes. The first was a smaller FTL relay sent on a ballistic course toward Neptune. Its path was calculated by Alex's inventive g-sling program, which he had developed while hauling ice asteroids from the far asteroid fields of Oistos, his home world's star.

The SADEs still marveled at the incredible precision with which a human-designed program achieved ballistic accuracy when using a tug to sling an asteroid toward a celestial body, not that they hadn't made subtle improvements on the program since coopting it from Alex's Tara, his original computer on board his explorer-tug, the *Outward Bound*.

There wouldn't be time to allow a ballistic course for the second probe. It was loaded on board a traveler, piloted by Captain Darius Gaumata, who had persevered in the first fight with the Earthers, which had been termed a contest by the now-deceased High Judge Patricio Bunaldi. But the detestable contest had cost Darius the life of his good friend, Sean McCreary. In his dark mood, Darius was hoping a UE pilot would be foolish enough to intercept him on the way to or from his destination, Earth's moon, despite his orders to avoid contact.

Darius would land his traveler on the moon's Earth-face and open his hatch to offload the probe. A traveler's shell, created by the alien species, the Swei Swee, depended on harmonics to harness gravity waves, which drove the ship and powered its devastating energy beam. The fighter's dependency on gravitational waves limited its use to in-system deployment and necessitated its shell remain completely intact for it to charge the alien crystal-power systems created by the Nua'll, an alien race that had kept the Swei Swee imprisoned for generations until Alex rescued them.

* * *

While Cordelia readied her probes, Z transferred to the *Rêveur*, where he had stored his "toys."

When Alex landed aboard the *No Retreat*, Tatia told Alex that all of his orders, save the change of his flagship, had been executed as he had requested, and she couldn't be accused of inaccuracy. That Z and she had added their own plans would have been news to Alex, but not surprising to him. Since their beginning together, Alex had come to think of Tatia, the ex-New Terran major and ground pounder, as his weapons master.

When the Assembly approved Alex's plan to take the Haraken fleet and journey to Sol to sue for peace with the UE's Supreme Tribunal in hopes of preventing a war, Julien sought out Tatia and Z. "What plans are in progress, Admiral, Z, to ensure our survival, and how might I be of help?" Julien asked.

“We have a particular challenge, Julien,” Tatia replied. “Allowing the UE explorer ship, *Reunion*, to return home was morally right, but it hurt us strategically. The Earthers took with them a great deal of tactical information about our fighters — acceleration, maneuverability, and our beam weaponry.”

“We must create new strengths,” Z added.

“My greatest concern is that the Earthers will make diplomatic overtures to draw us out, and, as they have amply demonstrated, they will employ treachery,” Julien replied.

“If they offer Alex an opportunity for a diplomatic solution, he might accept it,” Tatia said. She was angry at the thought that the Earthers might exploit Alex’s greatest vulnerability, his good heart.

“From our leader, I would expect nothing else,” Z replied, “Without our president’s sense of justice, there would be no Swei Swee on Haraken, there would be no travelers, and there would be no freedom for us, the Haraken SADEs.”

“To answer your question, Julien, we have plans to teach the Earthers a severe lesson if they pretend diplomacy but intend treachery,” Tatia said.

“There is much to be done before we leave, Julien. It will be good to have your help,” Z replied. “The probabilities are high that our president will have need of tools that will allow him to deal with the Earthers from a position of strength.”

Julien considered himself a pacifist in the general sense of the word. But under the circumstances, he believed that Alex needed every advantage he could get to aid his efforts to prevent a war, and, if unique tactical weapons were required, there were no more devious individuals to turn to than Tatia and Z.