

THE SILVER SHIPS

S. H. JUCHA



Excerpt - Chapter 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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*For my wife, Peggy, who has stood by me
and lent me her love and support
for thirty-four years.*

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As this is my first novel, I would ask you for your patience with any errors. They are all mine.

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.

“Anomaly detected,” Tara’s dulcet voice announced.

Alex sat upright in his pilot’s seat. “Show me.” On the navigation screen, a thin red line encircled a tiny dot. “Any telemetry available?”

“The object is headed in system at 13 degrees below the ecliptic. Distance is 388 million kilometers.”

“Velocity?”

“It’s constant at 0.02c.”

His heart skipped a beat. “That’s too fast for an asteroid. So what are you?”

New Terrans had ventured no farther than the ice fields, a dense ring of asteroids circling beyond Seda, a gas giant and their system’s ninth and last planet. Since their colony’s founding 732 years ago, there hadn’t been any outside contact ... human or otherwise.

“How soon before it reaches the ice fields?”

“At its present velocity, it will enter the rings in five days.”

“When will it intersect our system horizon?”

“Two days later, it will cross the ecliptic near Seda.”

At present, he was headed for Sharius, one of Seda’s moons, for refueling. The *Outward Bound*, under its 1g acceleration, had achieved a velocity of 0.01c. In seven days, his path would intersect with the anomaly.

Thirteen days earlier, Alex had piloted his explorer-tug next to a dark, craggy, 580m long asteroid, whose thick layer of ice covered a small, solid core. Using beams, he’d pinned it to his ship then fired a 2-meter long metal shaft into the ice. An electronic beacon housed in the shaft switched on and began broadcasting. Encoded with Tara’s telemetry, it did double duty as information for bidders and as a tracking signal, broadcasting the asteroid’s tag and his ship’s ID.

Tara recorded the claim with the Ministry, initiating the bidding. All the mining outposts on Ganymede's frozen, rocky moons and the government habitats on Niomedes were bidders, as none possessed a natural source of water. Days later, the Niomedes Gordon Habitat was confirmed as the highest bidder and the new owner of Alex's latest haul.

With the asteroid firmly tethered in place, the *Outward Bound*, with engines blasting, had slowly redirected the mass from its ancient orbit into a new trajectory. Running Alex's proprietary g-sling program, Tara had tightened their arc until the desired course was achieved. Alex, in the meantime, had endured the heavy acceleration reclined in his pilot's couch and eating prepackaged rations.

When Tara announced the exit point, Alex had freed the asteroid, slinging it on a ballistic course, system inward. This was the beauty of his innovative, mathematical model. While other explorer-tug captains were forced to haul their asteroids to a destination – Sirius, Ganymede, or Niomedes – Alex slung them directly to the buyer's planet or moon.

It had taken nearly three years and a perfect record before the Ministry of Space Exploration had deemed his program viable and approached him with an offer. Alex knew that once the Ministry owned the application, they would distribute it to every government-contracted tug captain. The moment it did, his exclusive and lucrative edge would come to an end. So he drove a hard bargain for its sale and won three years of bonus payout on top of the Ministry's original offer.

He was returning for another haul from the ice fields by way of a refueling stop when Tara had informed him of the strange object.

Alex had spared no expense for Tara, his bridge computer, and had patterned her voice synthesis program on recordings of his college advisor, Amy Mallard. The striking brunette's orbital mechanics class was one of the most popular courses at Ulam University, especially among the male undergraduates. She was also one of the university's most brilliant professors.

He passed the days exercising, reading, and watching vids on his reader as he closed the distance to Sharius. If Tara had been human, his unceasing

information requests would probably have earned him a slap upside the head. Eventually, as the distance closed, she was able to display a dim outline of the object. It was slender and symmetrical with no heat signature.

“So ... we have what ... an alien vessel on a cold coast coming from outside the system?” Alex mused out loud. Tara didn’t respond – she was programmed to ignore rhetorical questions. With no one else aboard, Alex had fallen into the habit of sharing his thoughts with her.

The image changed the nature of Alex’s curiosity. Before, he’d wanted to see it; now, he wanted to touch it. But he and the alien ship were on opposing trajectories. Even if he reversed course, it was moving at twice his velocity and would pass him by with a delta-V of nearly 3K km/sec.

He debated comming Sharius, the government outpost for explorer-tug support and refueling. Ultimately, he decided against it since he hadn’t made his own decision about the ship. He passed the time in his chair, idly calculating intercepts, discarding one plan after another. One plan he concocted had the slimmest possibility of working, although its initiation window was closing fast. Despite the hazards, his curiosity had begun to consume him, forcing his decision – he would risk it.

He leapt up, grabbed the rungs of the bridge ladder and slid down into the central living hub, which rotated around the tug’s spine, providing gravity when the ship coasted. In his tiny galley, he grabbed a handful of meal bars then changed into an acceleration suit.

Jumping back into his pilot’s chair, he stashed his meal bars and hooked his suit into the ship’s cleanser system, which processed his sweat and wastes. He loaded the flight plan into Tara’s navigational sub-system, shifted the chair into its horizontal position, strapped himself in, and executed the program.

Long plumes of incandescence bloomed from the *Outward Bound’s* engines, accelerating the ship toward Seda. His plan was to sling around the gas giant and come to a nearly parallel course with the vessel.

Uncertainty haunted Alex as he gritted his mouthguard. If the latch was solid, his ship would be yanked forward and twisted onto a new trajectory,

even if only by a few degrees. The force could damage his ship ... and maybe him. And he wasn't ready to die, not at twenty-eight years old, the youngest captain in New Terra's short, eighty-three-year history of space exploration.

Alex wasn't only the captain of the *Outward Bound*; he was its sole owner. Other explorer-tugs had a minimum crew of four, mandated by their government contracts. Alex, as an independent owner-operator, chose to go it alone. He preferred his own company to that of strangers, and he'd never been one to have many friends.

His late teenage years were spent on his parents' explorer-tug, the *No Bounds*, mining the system's great asteroid belt. With their efficient engines and powerful beams, the tugs were designed to be the perfect crafts to harvest the ice fields.

After university, Alex had spent three more years with his family on their tug, employing his new g-sling program with great success. The inventive approach to harvesting had guaranteed his parents met, then exceeded, the conditions of their government contract. On completion of the contract, they were awarded the ship's title and had sold it. They'd retired and invested their profits with Alex in the *Outward Bound*.

Throughout his ship's design and construction, he'd pushed the engineers to build a one-of-a-kind explorer-tug. And with it, he'd delivered 60 percent more asteroids annually than his parents had been able to sling with the *No Bounds*. In two years, he had repaid his parents with interest.

As he accelerated toward Seda, pressed deep into his couch, he mused that he was about to find out if he'd gotten his creds' worth.

Hours into his burn, he received an emergency comm from Sharius Tracking Control requesting his status and asking if he needed assistance. Normally, ships nearing Sharius were decelerating to dock for supplies and refueling, not shooting past for the great dark. Alex managed a chuckle even through the heavy pressure on his chest. He was nearing 0.012c. "Just how would you catch me if I *did* need help?" he wondered out loud. Instead, he asked Tara to send his prerecorded message.

“Message sent, Alex. Your vital signs indicate extraordinary stress. It is recommended that you reduce acceleration.”

“Negative, Tara, remove medical safety locks.”

“Confirmed, Alex, medical safety locks have been removed.”

He wished he had a vid link to Sharius’ control room to watch the tracker’s faces when they played his message. His reputation and g-sling’s perfect record meant they wouldn’t dismiss a message from him offhand, no matter how crazy it sounded. They’d monitor his approach, confirm his slingshot trajectory, and swing their tracking dish to the coordinates he had shared. Once they verified the alien vessel, they’d relay his comm to the government tracking centers on Cressida, Niomedes, and New Terra. A priority message would be sent to the minister’s office, adding substantially to Alex’s notoriety. He had been quite the media sensation after his first slung asteroid arrived on target. This message, as soon as it leaked to the news media, would make that story pale by comparison.

As he accelerated around Seda, his vision tunneled, threatening a blackout. Bright pinpoints of lights danced in the corners of his eyes. He concentrated on mathematical computations, a trick he used to help him focus. When he cleared Seda’s gravity well, his vision slowly cleared.

“Update,” he requested.

“We are on course,” Tara replied. “Velocity is 0.018c; acceleration is holding at 4.3g; engines are within operating parameters; reaction mass is at 38 percent. Estimated time to intercept is 3.42 hours; velocity at intercept will be 0.0198c; delta-V estimated at 0.0001c; delta trajectory will be 2.2 degrees.”

“Object on screen,” Alex coughed out and sipped from his water tube. He stared at the image. The vessel was an order of magnitude larger than the *Outward Bound* and unlike any ship of his people. New Terrans had built tugs, fuel haulers, shuttles, and small freighters that carried passengers. This multi-decked, slim-lined, 300-meter long ship, distinctly free of gravity wheels, was much more technologically advanced. Telemetry still detected no heat signature and the ship’s aft end silhouette appeared to be distorted or damaged. “No doubt about it, Tara. It’s an alien ship.”

“Spectrographic return on the hull is an unknown alloy,” Tara added.

“Okay,” he mumbled, “not only an alien ship, but an *advanced* alien ship. But the real question is whether this is salvage or rescue.”

As he waited out the few remaining hours, his mind whirled with more questions. If this was salvage, would he be awarded the rights to sell the ship? On the other hand, what if it was a rescue? Who would he be rescuing? And his last and strangest thought was whether any survivors would be grateful for their rescue ... or was he about to be a snack for starving aliens.

* * *

The starship and the tug crossed bows so close that any tracking center observer would think they'd collided. Just before interception, Tara energized the beam engines to full power and fired them at the hurtling derelict. The tug's hull groaned under the sudden acceleration and the small but significant 2-degree course shift. Alex's body was jerked within his restraints and he blacked out.

As he came to, the dim light he perceived grew brighter, the black edges fading to gray before his vision finally cleared. He called out, “Are we latched on?”

“The target has been acquired. Drive engines have been shut down,” replied Tara, her melodic voice a pleasant balm to his bruised mind and body.

Alex unstrapped himself and activated the chair's upright position. The weightlessness was a relief after the crushing acceleration. The alien hull captured in the tug's exterior vid cam filled his display screen. He murmured, “Look what I found, Mom. Can I keep it?”

In that moment, Alex urgently wanted to share his success with someone, anyone – jump up and down with a friend, hug a woman. But, he acknowledged, this was the sore point of going it alone. He didn't regret the way he'd chosen to spend the past three years. The creds he'd accrued

would allow him financial freedom to pursue other projects. But he'd come to understand one thing; his difficulty forming meaningful relationships wouldn't be solved by self-imposed isolation.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and belatedly remembered his blackout as stars twinkled at the corners of his dimmed vision. "Idiot," he announced. "Tara, what's the status of our reaction mass?"

"The tanks are at 23 percent."

"That's not good." At those levels, he should be headed for Sharius, not shooting above the ecliptic. He checked his chronometer and was shocked to realize he'd been out for almost five hours. "Display the planet positions," he requested.

He groaned as he realized Ganymede and Niomedes, the only two planets with fuel services that might have stood between him and New Terra, were passing on the far side of Oistos, their star. His only viable target was New Terra. "Tara, plot the most efficient burn to rendezvous with New Terra."

It was quiet while Tara calculated the added mass of the new ship, the required deceleration curve, and the required delta-V. When completed, she announced, "We have insufficient reaction mass for a zero-velocity rendezvous with New Terra."

"Black space," Alex muttered. "Calculate a deceleration burn to put us on course for New Terra until reaction mass is at 5 percent."

After a couple of moments, Tara responded. "A course change for rendezvous must be initiated within 92 hours. Shifting the start time will create a deceleration variable of 0.25g to 3.3g."

"Estimate velocity at time of shut down with the most efficient burn."

The question wasn't only whether he had enough reaction mass to head back into the system, but if he had enough to reduce his speed sufficient to enable a fueling tug to rendezvous with him. They were traveling close to 0.02c, and their velocity would need to be far below 0.01c. Otherwise, he would have to cut his prize free, and that was an unthinkable loss.

“Most efficient burn of 0.25g requires initiation within the next three hours. Estimated velocity at 5 percent reserves will be 29K km/sec to 30K km/sec.”

Alex’s breath blew out in a whoosh. He had enough reaction mass to keep his prize even if it resulted in a cold coast toward New Terra, *and* he could decelerate sufficiently to match a refueling tanker’s slower velocity. Although, a rescue refueling would mean owing the government before negotiations over the alien ship even began. This would be the same Ministry he’d gone head-to-head with for the sale of his g-sling program only two months ago – but there was no avoiding that. “This is going to cost me,” he mumbled.

He was in parallel with the derelict, bow to bow, and would have to reverse this orientation before Tara could initiate their course change. “Switch off bow and aft beams,” he ordered. “Rotate us around the central beam until optimum position is achieved for the deceleration program.”

Alex monitored his display screen as the derelict’s hull rotated past. The smooth surface was marred by holes varying from half a meter to a meter in diameter. “It looks like they ran afoul of an asteroid storm.”

Tara signaled the rotation’s finish. “Optimum position achieved.”

“Re-engage bow and aft beams. Initiate course change for rendezvous with New Terra with most efficient burn. Shut the engines off when reaction mass drops to 5 percent.”

“The deceleration program has been initiated. Fuel reserve status set.”

At only 11 percent power, the *Outward Bound’s* engines supplied 0.25g, decelerating their coupled crafts and curving them back toward the ecliptic and New Terra.

Alex climbed down into the central hub. He took out two synth-meals, added water, and popped them into a heater. He wasn’t any taller than most of his people at 1.8 meters. But his 146-kilogram frame of heavy muscle, courtesy of a 1.12 grav-world and years spent helping his father offload space junk, demanded more than a single synth-meal at a time. Reaching his arms overhead, he could feel his shoulder muscles roll and

pop. While waiting for the food to heat, he spent the time stretching sore muscles.

When the heater chimed, he grabbed an oversized tray, loaded it with the meal pouches, utensils, and a sealed juice carafe then climbed back to the bridge. Settling into his chair, he placed the food tray in his lap and quickly consumed the meal. He let the desserts cool in their pouches while he checked his comm board.

A priority message from Sharius Tracking Control was listed at the top of the display. Another tap and Colonel Damon Stearns, commander of Sharius, appeared on his vid screen. “Captain Racine, at the time of this message, you are about to attempt an interception of an alien ship. If you have been successful, you are requested to stay in your ship and redirect to New Terra. Arrangements will be made to relieve you of the craft before you enter orbit. Please acknowledge soonest.”

Alex replayed the message twice more as he finished his desserts. “Did you notice, Tara, the colonel did say requested, not ordered?”

“Affirmative, Alex.”

It seemed the colonel had recalled that Alex didn’t report to Terran Security Forces (TSF) or the Ministry of Space Exploration. He was an owner, who had to report to no one. On the other hand, he didn’t want to anger those in power.

In the end, he decided to borrow a favorite ruse of his kid sister, Christie. She had the frustrating habit of pretending she didn’t know her unapproved adventures were off limits. The colonel would later receive a message saying that Alex had already been on an extravehicular activity (EVA) when the request arrived. Alex knew if he followed TSF’s or the Ministry’s guidance, he’d never get a look inside the ship. “I ran it down, and I’m getting first peek,” he mumbled.

Alex ordered Tara to cut the aft beam and tied two directives to his deceleration instructions. Setting *no watch* and *EVA* conditions on the control board, he grabbed his tray and climbed back down to the central hub, recycling his empty food pouches and heading aft through the spine tube to the rear airlock.

It took time to climb into his 85kg-EVA suit with its mag-boots, armored gloves, tool belt, and oxygen tanks. He snapped his helmet into place, checked his oxygen read out, and cued Tara with *engines off*.

When he felt the engines shutdown, he depressurized the airlock, which recycled the air back into the ship's reserve tanks. Then he released the outer hatch's locking mechanism and swiveled the hatch aside. The derelict was oriented upside down. He regarded the 55 meters separating him from the huge ship and searched for a point of ingress. Odd symbols in two columns left and right of an area seemed to indicate a hatch, but the hull was in shadow, and a hatch wasn't visible.

He pulled a grappling pistol from his belt and clipped its safety line to the retaining ring on the tug's hull. Aiming at the symbols, he fired the pistol's mag-clamp. It sailed across the gap, the line paying out behind it, but the mag-clamp bounced off the hull.

"Well, she said it was an unknown alloy," he mumbled.

He reeled the line back onto its spool and reattached the pistol to his belt. Then, before he had time to argue himself out of it, he wrapped stik-pads over his boots and gloves, aligned his body with the derelict, and triggered the suit's jets. He floated across the gap, the safety line paying out behind him as his heart thundered in his chest. When he struck the hull, 4 meters to the left of his target, the impact jarred his teeth, but his stik-pads anchored him in position.

Now, he could just make out the hatch. "That's some great craftsmanship," he murmured, admiring the exquisitely fitted metal surfaces.

* * *

Small sensors, embedded in the ship's hull, had relayed the contact of the *Outward Bound*'s beams. Subsequently, other sensors relayed the impacts of the mag-clamp, then Alex. The signals were transmitted to the ship's bridge, initiating a wake-up routine.

As the derelict ship drifted through space, power had become a premium, and the bridge computer, managing what little energy remained in its power-crystals, had shut down its sub-routines and later its primary routines in an attempt to preserve its existence for as long as possible.

Utilizing the barest amount of energy, the wake-up routine ended the entity's time-dilation program. Restored to real time, the self-aware digital entity (SADE) studied the sensor logs and the small, odd craft holding it in traction. It monitored the progress of the humanoid figure walking across its hull. When the figure crossed into shadow, its tinted visor cleared, providing an unobstructed view of its face. In response, the SADE signaled the airlock's exterior hatch to open.

Alex knelt beside the hatch, the *Outward Bound* floating above him. He'd searched for an access panel without success and was rethinking his approach when the hatch recessed a half meter into the hull and slid aside.

"Yeah, just ask," he said to himself. He switched on his suit lights, illuminating the darkened interior, released one boot, then the other, and used his jets to glide inside. The outer airlock hatch promptly closed behind him, but before he could panic, the interior hatch slid open. No attempt was made at atmosphere replacement. There was no air, but there was power. "So is this automation or a welcome?" Alex murmured.

Alex tested his comm to Tara and received a response. He signaled *engines on* to reinstate the decel program and steadied himself with an outstretched arm against a bulkhead as the *Outward Bound's* engines ignited.

The interior corridor was anything but utilitarian. It was spacious and clean-lined, without pipes or ducts running overhead. Doors were evenly spaced down the corridor. An odd thing though – there were no numbers, letters, or labels of any kind – causing him to wonder how anyone knew where they were going.

Dust motes, floating throughout the corridor, and a fine sheen of ice crystals coating every surface reflected his lights back to him. The debris was settling toward the bow under the deceleration. A piece of delicate, multihued, faded fabric caught on his shoulder as it drifted past. He'd never been on a dead ship before; never had to recover the bodies of those who'd died in space. The thought made him shudder.

Down the corridor, a small light blinked on. Then a second and a third light followed suit, blinking on and off slowly and rhythmically, 3 meters apart from one another. As Alex stared, more of them joined the pattern,

like nightlights guiding a shuttle landing. He recalled one of his father's favorite comments: "Anything done by half measure is done half-assed."

So Alex took a deep breath, blew it out slowly, and let loose of the bulkhead. Having removed the stik-pads from his boots, he used the *Outward Bound's* momentum to drive him down the corridor toward the bow, following the lights. They led up a wide, vertical chute located inside the bulkhead wall. He halted his motion by bracing a boot in the shaft's opening and slapping a stik-padded glove against a bulkhead. The shaft was empty, so he crawled on his hands and knees along its forward face. Even though the engines only generated 0.25g, his combined mass pressed him forward with 56 kilograms of force.

The chute opened into another corridor and Alex followed the lights to a wide accessway. A double set of split doors, spaced 2 meters apart, were open. Beyond the doorways lay an extensive bridge with enormous vid screens. Two large command chairs, centrally located, were elevated on a pedestal and surrounded by small vid and control panels. Despite the bridge's impressive appearance, Alex's first reaction was one of relief. The chairs were shaped much like his pilot's chair, a sign that the occupants are or were humanoid.

A small vid screen on one of the command chairs lit up. "Uh, oh ..." he whispered. He released his hold on the doorway and floated across to the chair, bracing a hand against its back. The screen was obscured by a film of ice crystals, which he carefully scraped away with a stik-pad, surprised that it could operate in the cold vacuum.

Character groups scrolled up the screen, but he couldn't read them. As the letters Sol-NAC appeared in his own alphabet, he flexed an EVA-encumbered hand toward the screen and the rolling list froze. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he glanced around the bridge. Turning back to the screen, he positioned an armored finger over Sol-NAC.

The screen went blank then refreshed with words in his language. "Hello. I'm Julien, this vessel's SADE, a self-aware digital entity. How are you called?" The screen went blank, replaced by an alphanumeric keypad.

Alex carefully typed out his first name.

“Hello, Alex,” scrolled the response, “I’m in need of your help. Are you the captain of the ship that anchors us?”

Alex typed in his reply, “Yes,” and then, “Are you an AI?” New Terrans had yet to develop AIs or artificial intelligences, but that hadn’t stopped computer scientists from postulating myriad possibilities.

In response to his question, he saw, “As you might define artificial intelligence, I’d answer yes, Captain.”

“Wow,” Alex exclaimed to himself, then typed, “What help?”

“Our ship has been heavily damaged, Captain. The bridge has been cut off from its primary power supply and my backup power is extremely limited. A new power source is required immediately.”

Alex typed, “Want to help. No means of transferring power.”

“I have a means in mind, Captain,” appeared on the screen.

For the next half hour, Alex responded to the SADE’s questions about his ship’s manner of propulsion and how he managed a supply of energy while in dock. Then he turned and exited the bridge, headed for the chute that led down and out to his ship.

* * *

The SADE watched Alex leave and pondered his abrupt departure. No agreement had been reached. He reran the exchange, hoping to discern whether the individual was choosing to help, leaving them adrift, or allowing him to expire so the ship could be claimed. He couldn’t reach any conclusion. His only option was to do what he had been doing for years: wait.

* * *

Alex navigated his way back to the derelict's airlock and signaled Tara with *engines off*. The AI operated the airlock hatches for him, allowing him to leave. For Alex, this was an important test as to whether he might trust the entity or not. The thought made him laugh. "I'm debating whether to trust an alien computer!"

As he looked above his head to judge the leap back to his own airlock, the darkness lit up beside him. A section of hull glowed around a ring extruded from the ship's skin. It hadn't been there before. He was sure of that.

"Convenient," Alex murmured, "and oh so clever." He pulled the safety line from the stik-pad that had secured it to the hull and locked it onto the ring. Saving his suit jets, he returned to the *Outward Bound* by pulling himself hand over hand along the tethered line, his suit's safety ring sliding along the line.

While cycling through his own airlock, he considered his next move. He wanted to think through his decision logically, weigh the pros and cons, and come to a mature decision. Instead, and without much further consideration, he gathered a long length of power line from a storage locker, dropping it on the airlock's deck, then dropped the jet pack and changed out his oxygen tanks. There wasn't time to ponder the risks and potential benefits of aiding the alien ship. That could take forever, and the AI said it didn't have much time left.

A memory from childhood surfaced in his mind. He'd come home with a bleeding face and torn clothes one day, embarrassed to be seen by his mother. Three boys had beaten and kicked another boy to the ground. After jumping in to help the injured boy, he'd suffered the same fate. His mother had tilted his bloody face up to look into her eyes and said, "You have a choice in life, Alex. You can help someone in need or stand back and do nothing. And the choice you make determines the person you are." Then she had kissed his dirty forehead and told him to wash up.

When it came down to it, it wasn't a choice at all.

He cycled back through his airlock. Outside, he attached the power line to his ship's dock receptacle and uncoiled the line as he made his way back across the safety line to the derelict. As his boots' stik-pads hit the hull, a small panel beside the airlock hatch slid open. He peered into its interior and saw nothing – no connectors – just a dark funnel extending into the hull. Dubious though he was, he followed the AI's instructions and pushed his power cable into the funnel's throat. To his utter astonishment, the funnel's sides closed around his line's connector.

The power line was designed to transfer dock power *to* the *Outward Bound*. Despite Alex's efforts to convince the AI that the line limited the flow to one-way, it had assured him that the line would work for their purpose.

The line's telltale green flashed, signaling current flowing, but the power meter wasn't registering, which didn't seem possible. The meter's circuitry prevented power discharge from his ship, or, at least, that was its purpose. Yet, power was flowing ... out of his ship, bypassing the meter's control circuits.

He broke out of his reverie and commed Tara. "Limit the discharge on this line to 20 percent of our generator's output. Set an alarm for the charging capacitors. I don't want any drain on them. Cut the power to this line if the alarm is activated."

"Orders received," Tara responded.

Then he slid back into the derelict's airlock. As the AI operated the hatches for him, he signaled *engines on* to Tara.

* * *

The brief time Julien waited for the captain's return felt longer to him than all the years of isolation he had spent waiting for rescue. Just when he was starting to wonder if he had been deserted, the small ship's rear airlock

reopened. The captain uncoiled an armload of cable, plugging one end into his ship's receptacle before making his way back.

Julien opened the charging receptacle hatch for him and signaled the funnel nanites to engage the power-line connector. It took only a moment to detect the primitive flow switch, analyze its circuitry, and reverse its polarity. Current immediately flowed into his power-crystal banks. It compared poorly to his ship's overall energy needs and ultimate capacity, but if Julien had been capable of shedding a tear of relief within his metal-alloy case, he would have. His primary question was answered – the human was *not* a scavenger.

As the ship drifted, Julien had been dependent on the bow's power-crystal bank, which allowed the bridge to operate its redundant systems in isolation from the remainder of the ship during emergency conditions. With a renewed power supply, he would be able to resume control of any bridge systems still operational. He closed the double set of access doors behind Alex as he entered the bridge and flashed the command screen to gain his attention. Across the screen, he sent, "Captain, there are decompression openings in the bridge bulkheads that must be fixed. If you would continue to help, please locate the supply cabinet to your left, with the blinking light, and remove two plates."

* * *

When Alex finished reading the instructions, he scanned to his left and spotted the cabinet door. Inside, stacked on edge, were plates about half-a-meter square and two centimeters thick. He pulled two out and returned to the vid screen.

"Excellent, Captain," he read. "You must apply them to the two openings you see in the hull, one high to starboard and the other low to port. The plates will self-seal once provided with sufficient heat."

Heat, Alex thought and considered his options. "I'll be back," he told the AI, then retraced his steps back to the *Outward Bound*. Once aboard,

he stopped for some water and a meal bar. He considered checking his messages, but he figured it was better not to know who had commed what to him.

Back on the derelict's bridge, Alex unloaded two full packs of tools. Whatever this AI, Julien, required next, he was prepared to deliver. He pulled a compact welding canister out of his pack, grabbed one of the repair plates, and made his way to the more accessible portside hole. It was perfectly round, about 32 centimeters in diameter, with smooth edges. He twisted his body around to look at the other hole, which appeared the same. A hole had been punched completely through the bow. The decompression would have been powerful enough to suck anyone on the bridge into space. It explained why there weren't any bodies.

Putting aside the unsettling mental image of the bridge crew's demise, Alex returned to his work, lighting the welder and dialing it to its minimum output. He positioned the plate over the hole and applied the torch to the far edge of the plate, gawking as the edge became liquid and spread out to merge with the bulkhead. In his surprise over the life-like movement of the metal, he had pulled the torch away before the edge became seamless. So he waved his torch over the edge and watched it disappear. Then he applied his torch to the other edges, following the flow of metal until all signs of the plate disappeared. When he finished, he stood up and examined the bulkhead. If he hadn't applied the seal himself, he wouldn't have known it existed.

Suddenly, a touch of vertigo overcame him. The ship's advanced technology surpassed anything his people had ... seamless repairs that took only moments to apply, a funnel that could mold itself to fit a power line, and a self-aware digital entity that could converse in Alex's language or many others, for that matter. He felt strange and out of place, like a child left to fend for itself in an adult world.

He mentally shook himself and tackled the second hole on the bridge's starboard side, its repair just as simple, then returned to the chair's vid screen. The screen switched to the keyboard and he typed, "What next?"

"Allow me a few moments, Captain," was sent back.

After nearly a quarter hour, Alex wondered if something had happened to the AI. Then his suit's audio pickup relayed the soft hiss of air, and his helmet readouts displayed increasing air pressure. When the hissing ended, his helmet registered an acceptable air mixture for breathing, though with less oxygen than was found on his world. The air temperature was acceptable so he broke his helmet seal and tested the air. Satisfied, he removed the helmet completely.

With air present to transmit sound waves, a pleasant male voice came over the bridge speakers. "Hello, Captain. It's a pleasure to speak with you."

"Julien?" Alex asked tentatively.

"Yes, Captain. May I know your full name?"

"It's Alexander Racine. Black space! I don't know where to start. I have so many questions."

"As do I, Captain Racine, but I must ask you to wait. There are emergency repairs that must be made to restore minimal functionality to the ship."

When Alex failed to respond, Julien perceived an important facet of the young captain's personality – he would help, but he wouldn't be directed. "What questions might I answer for you, Captain?"

Alex understood the AI would have his own agenda, but he couldn't continue without at least some answers to the questions swirling in his head. He decided it would be best to compromise and save most of his curiosity for later. "Two questions, for now, Julien. Are your people human or something else?"

"They are human, descendants of an Earth colony ship as I imagine your people are also. And your second question, Captain?"

Humans, Alex thought. *Well, at least I probably won't get eaten.* "Is there anyone else alive on this ship?"

"And that's my greatest concern, Captain. Due to our damage, I have little access to most of the ship, so I don't know. If they are alive, they are in stasis and as much in need of power as was I."

“You should have said that in the first place! What do I need to do first? I haven’t a clue about your technology. You’ll have to show me what to do,” Alex blurted out.

Despite the calamitous circumstances, Julien found himself amused by the captain’s exuberance. “I will be pleased to guide you, Captain.”

Alex admitted he was definitely willing to be guided. He couldn’t wait to learn more about the ship’s technical marvels. “If I could but discover this world’s wonders ...” he murmured, quoting an early colonist’s poem.

“Is that an affirmative, Captain?” Julien asked, unsure of his response.

“Yes,” Alex laughed, breaking the tension, “yes, it is.”

“And your efforts are much appreciated, Captain.”

A light blinked on a small cabinet door and Alex walked over to it without prompting. It opened to reveal a set of tiny devices stored in slots.

“Captain, these are comm devices. Please take the one next to the blinking light and place the contact end to the inside of your ear.”

Alex picked up the device, which looked like a short, dark, thin stick attached to a piece of sealant. Intuiting which end was the contact end, Alex pressed the daub of sealant into his right ear. It was cool to the touch but warmed instantly and suddenly the little mass of sealant flowed into his ear. “Whoa,” he yelped as he tugged the comm device out of his ear. “What just happened?”

“My apologies, Captain,” said Julien, realizing he would have to give more consideration to the technological gap going forward, “the contact end is a small patch of audio-integrator nanotech that conforms to your inner ear on contact with your skin. When you wish to release it you only need to pull gently on it.”

Alex eyed the sealant end dubiously, but then pressed it back into his ear, allowing the daub of material to warm and flow into his inner ear.

“How does it feel, Captain?”

“Fine ... as if you’re speaking inside my head. Will this allow us to communicate when I’m aboard my ship?”

“Once the repairs are further along and a ship-link has been strung, it will be possible. While on the bridge, I might respond via the bridge

speakers or comm, depending on your preference. When you are off the bridge or your EVA helmet is sealed, we must depend on the ear comm.”

“What about recharging?” Alex asked.

“Your body heat charges the nanites.”

“Of course,” Alex mumbled quietly, “alien miracle technology.”

Julien decided it would be better not to explain the ear comm’s complete capabilities. The fact that he could monitor Alex’s blood pressure, pulse rate, and other physiological parameters through his inner ear might be more than the young human was prepared to handle.

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. This, my first novel, *The Silver Ships*, was released in February 2015. It was to be the first installment in a sci-fi trilogy and 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!