

VINIUM
A Silver Ships Novel

S. H. JUCHA



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Published by Hannon Books, Inc.

www.scottjucha.com

ISBN: 978-0-9994928-0-2 (e-book)

ISBN: 978-0-9994928-1-9 (softcover)

First Edition: November 2017

Cover design: Damon Za

Acknowledgments

Vinium is the tenth 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 Lucy Kelleher, 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 -
Negotiations

“The fleet is stationary. We’re receiving the *Vivian*’s telemetry,” Svetlana Valenko, the captain of the Trident warship, OS *Liberator*, announced.

The Omnian squadron had emerged outside the system that the SADEs, self-aware digital entities, had named Vinium. The Omnians were intent on rescuing one of their scout ships, the *Vivian*, which had been captured by a Vinian warship.

To be accurate, the two ships, Vinian and Omnian, had captured each other. The warship held the scout ship tightly tethered, and the scout ship, crewed by three SADEs, had shut down the flight control systems of the Vinian vessel. The pair were trapped together in a wide, circular orbit around the Vinian system.

Neither ship had done anything remotely aggressive after achieving the initial impasse. For nearly a month, the ships had been stuck together, while each side considered their options.

“Greetings, Alex,” came the voice of Killian, the scout ship leader, over the *Liberator*’s bridge speakers. “We’ve been eagerly awaiting your arrival.”

Alex Racine, leader of the Omnian forces, couldn’t resist a smile at the calm announcement of the *Vivian*’s SADE.

“Have you been enjoying your tour of the Vinian system, Killian?” Alex asked.

“The early moments proved fascinating, Alex,” Killian replied, “but it’s the consensus of those aboard that we are ready to come home.”

“We’ll see what we can do about that, Killian,” Alex replied.

Someone less familiar with SADEs might have urged Killian to be patient, but Alex, the human most intimately involved with the entities he helped to free from their boxes, felt no such compunction.

<Killian, your confidence that Alex Racine would come for us defied significant probabilities,> Bethley, the second-positioned SADE in the *Vivian* sent to him via private comm. <Yet, you've been proven correct.>

<There is logic, Bethley, and then there are humans,> Killian sent in reply.

<Alex, we're receiving the memory core dump from the *Vivian*,> Julien, Alex's crystal friend, signaled.

<Understood,> Alex replied via his implant. The tiny comm and data storage device within the human cerebrum allowed a multitude of capabilities, including private communications with other humans and the SADEs.

"Killian, Bethley, and Trium," Alex said, addressing the three SADEs wedged into the tiny scout craft, "please give us your assessment of what we face."

"Forgive my general characterization, Alex, but we face a most unusual situation," Killian replied. "These entities are definitely floral-based but with faunal characteristics. We have nothing in our historical data that enables a comparison."

"We can tell you, Alex, that our attempts at communications have yielded little information," Bethley added. "But we've gleaned some information on Vinian behaviors and the ship environment."

"Such as?" Alex queried.

"We're speaking, using arbitrary names for the aspects of these individuals, mind you, Dassata," Trium, the third-positioned SADE in the scout ship, added. He was using Alex's Dischnya name, which meant peacemaker. "The terminal pod of an individual acts as the head, and we refer to it as the bloom. It has no facial details, no eyes, nose, mouth, or ears."

"Their life processes must be plant-based," Julien surmised, having quickly perused the data accumulated on the warship by the *Vivian*, as every SADE aboard the flagship had done.

“Precisely, Ser,” Trium agreed. “We managed to link with their vid system, without opening the warship’s flight controls, and have been able to monitor much of their daily cycles.”

“We discovered,” Killian explained, “that when they converse, the blooms turn toward each other, but that might simply be a courtesy.”

“But how are they communicating?” Admiral Tatia Tachenko asked.

“Unknown, Admiral,” Killian replied.

“Best guess?” Alex asked, knowing full well that it took a SADE several years after release from confinement to be comfortable responding to that quintessential human expression. However, Alex had worked closely with Killian, while the SADE managed the buildout of the Sardi-Tallen Orbital Platform at Omnia.

“We believe, Alex, that they’re using sonic waves or light frequencies outside the scope of human detection, but we’ve nothing to confirm that,” Killian replied. “It would require a SADE to be in their presence to determine the Vinians’ communications process.”

“Wonderful,” Tatia grumped. “We’re supposed to negotiate with a plant species that doesn’t communicate in any manner we can hear or see. What are you two grinning about?” she asked, looking between Alex and Julien.

“I’d imagine it’s the challenge,” Commodore Reiko Shimada posited. “After solving the dilemma of how to communicate with two alien species, these two are excited by a fresh opportunity.”

“Sers, what else can you tell us about the Vinians’ habits?” Alex asked, refusing to rise to Reiko’s teasing.

“You get a sense of a Vinian’s reactions by the opening and closing of the petals that ring the blooms and the generous-sized leaves along the stalks,” Bethley said. “But we have no lexicon to translate any of these motions.”

“A small but significant fact,” Trium added, “is that the individuals remain inactive for extended periods of time in a space that’s extremely bright. We estimate they’re using the light for photosynthesis. Interestingly, they stand in a shallow liquid during this time.”

Julien caught Alex's eye and sent a private message. <Alex, you'll recall that one of your suggestions on Sawa, as a means of decorating my new avatar, was that it could be covered in leaves. Where do those thoughts originate?>

<As if I knew that we'd find a species like this?> Alex shot back.

Because you're prescient, in some manner, and refuse to admit it, Julien thought.

Alex was dubious about the origins of the strange thoughts he occasionally had, which seemed to manifest themselves in future events. It did occur to him that the biotic-based minds of humans might have a capability that the crystal minds of SADEs would never possess.

While Alex continued to probe the SADEs for more information about the Vinians, Tatia communicated privately with Reiko, Z, and Miranda.

Z and Miranda, SADEs and close confidants of Alex, were busy plotting the course of the Vinian warship, and they shared their analysis with Tatia and Reiko.

<Fortune favors the expedition, Admiral,> Z sent. <The pair of locked ships are on approach to our position.>

<What's our exposure out here?> Reiko asked.

Tatia was paying close attention to her commodore's communications. Reiko was the only officer with experience commanding a squadron of warships in battle, having been a member of the United Earth naval forces. It had been Reiko's recommendation to wait outside the system, not only to buy time for Alex to assess the situation but to determine the Vinian warship's armament.

<An astute question, dear,> Miranda Leyton replied. <A review of the *Vivian's* data indicates that the local warships responded quite slowly to the scout ship's initial entry. We surmise that this civilization is relegated to traveling within the system and handles communications and data transfer at the customary speed of electromagnetic frequency transmission.>

<Anticipating your next question, Commodore,> Z added, <the Vinian warship will detect our arrival in the next 5.45 hours.>

<If we wait to intercept the two ships until we have a minimal intrusion time into the system, when would that occur?> Tatia asked.

<Admiral, that opportunity would take place 0.5072 hours from now and require employing maximum acceleration of our gravity drives,> Z replied.

<Z,> Miranda sent privately, <as much as thoughts of you continually warm my kernel, it would have been sufficient to have told the admiral that she should launch the squadron in a half hour to meet her goal.>

<And, as much as your presence fulfills me, Miranda, precision will always be a part of my nature,> Z sent in reply.

Tatia refocused on Alex's bridge conversation in time to hear Trium hypothesize that the Vinians were relegated to traveling within the system, repeating what she learned, moments ago, from Z and Miranda.

"Alex, the ships are on approach now," Tatia said, interrupting the conversation. "According to Z and Miranda, if we launch within the next half hour, we can intercept the two ships as they pass in front of us."

"But would a fleet of Tridents rushing at the Vinian warship panic them?" Renée de Guirnon, Alex's partner, asked. "And if it did, what would they do?"

"Killian, what are your thoughts on the danger you might face if our ships approach the Vinian warship?"

"Alex, we believe the Vinians didn't perceive our scout ship as a threat, which is why we were captured. If they wished, they could have released us, at any time, and fired on us before we could have cleared their immediate space. Undoubtedly, our ship would have been either disabled or destroyed."

"Alex, there are small to moderate ports down the sides of the Vinian warship that hide what we believe to be armament," Bethley added. "We had a glimpse of them before we were captured, but we have been unable to deduce any meaningful analysis from our brief imagery."

Alex controlled the temptation to pace. Instead, he stared thoughtfully at his friend.

“The advantage of making the first move might soon be taken out of our hands, Alex,” Julien said quietly. “In five hours, the Vinians will know we’re here and might decide to make the first move.”

Alex searched quickly through the data from the *Vivian* and pulled images of the Vinian warship taken from a variety of angles. He used the wide bridge monitors to display the critical angles he sought.

“What are you searching for, Alex?” Tatia asked.

“Angles of approach,” Alex replied.

“Forward and aft,” Z replied. “My analysis of the Vinian vessel predicts a 98.8 percent certainty that this particular warship lacks bow and stern directed armament. The portals that Killian mentioned are embedded in the hull and lay along the median lines of the ship. It’s a most inefficient design.”

“Like they haven’t had any real practice at war,” Reiko mused.

Alex regarded the commodore, and she added, “It’s the response that you’d expect from a civilization that encountered an enemy or two and prepared for future conflicts by upgrading defenses, but the lack of in-depth experience means they’ll make the basic mistakes of amateurs.”

“And, if that’s true,” Alex said, “it means their reactions will be unpredictable.” He accessed Z’s analysis of the plotted intercept vectors that he had supplied Tatia and used the bridge holo-vid to project the Omnian fleet and the approaching warship. Steadily rotating the view, Alex continued to study his options.

“Admiral, I want you to assign one Trident to drop below the ecliptic, in an arc like this,” Alex said, adding a curving line to the display. It ended far below the system’s horizon and forward of the Vinian ship. “Be sure to use an OS ship,” Alex added.

The squadron was composed of eight, tri-hulled warships. Five Omnian ships were designated by the prefix OS, and NT marked the three New Terran vessels.

“Time your final maneuver for all squadron ships like this, Admiral,” Alex continued, adding three more lines. The first line marked the forward progress of the Vinian ship. The second line brought the remainder of the squadron close to the alien warship but stopped 10

million kilometers short of it. The final line showed the Trident emerging from below the ecliptic to intercept the warship.

“What are you proposing for the final disposition of the Trident that we’re sending under?” Reiko asked, her eyes narrowing.

“You should be quite familiar with the maneuver, Commodore. You saw it executed frequently at Sol by your partner,” Alex replied, grinning.

“You want a Trident to go bow to bow with that warship?” Reiko asked, incredulous at the proposal.

“I like it,” Tatia said enthusiastically, her eyes alight with mischief. “We stand the squadron off in a tight formation to demonstrate our power, without attacking, and we give them a taste of the incredible capability of one of our ships. And, providing Z hasn’t made an error in judgment, there’s little risk to our Trident.”

Miranda immediately jumped to Z’s defense. “How can you doubt Z’s judgment, Admiral? After all, he chose me.” At which point, Miranda threw everything she had into her most alluring pose.

“She has you there, Admiral,” Renée said, laughing.

“True enough,” Tatia agreed. Turning serious, she addressed Reiko. “Commodore, your choice as to which Trident you wish to confront that warship.”

“No choice there, Admiral,” Reiko replied. “I’ll assign Captain Thompson the task. With Ellie’s experience as a low-altitude racer before she was judged an Independent and sent to Libre, she’s the best choice. How close should she approach?” Reiko asked Tatia, who turned to Alex.

“As close as the captain is comfortable,” Alex replied.

Reiko linked with Z to set up the maneuver, and the SADE laid out the ships’ courses, launch times, and accelerations. When Reiko approved the details, Z copied the plan to the controllers of the other Tridents. Reiko linked with her captains to review the squadron’s approach, assigning the frontal action to Ellie.

It was Svetlana who had to curb her disappointment at not being selected to confront the Vinian warship. During the years of squadron training at Omnia, Reiko and she had repeatedly clashed. At one point, Svetlana requested a transfer to a newly commissioned Trident so that

she could be relieved as captain of the flagship. That evening, Reiko had asked Svetlana to sit with her at evening meal, and the pair took a small table to be alone.

“Your request for transfer is denied, Svetlana,” Reiko said bluntly after they had sat down with their meal trays. Reiko was forced to hold up a hand to forestall Svetlana’s response. “Now, I’m going to tell you why. It’s simple. You’re too good.”

“Reiko that makes no sense,” Svetlana replied with a significant amount of heat, which attracted the stares of a few diners nearby.

“And I can understand that, Svetlana, but you’ll have to forgive me. I’m starting to think more like our fearless leader,” Reiko replied.

“Now, that’s dangerous,” Svetlana shot back, but the light in her eyes said that it wasn’t a bad thing either.

“I want you to think about the events that will call our squadron to action. We possess this immense amount of firepower. But, what if, and I say what if, it’s not enough? What if we watch ship after ship be destroyed?”

“That’s exactly why you need me at the forefront of the action, Ellie. I’ve proven my skills, and I can do the most good where the battle is greatest.”

“That, Svetlana, is thinking like a captain. Now, I want you to think like a commodore, who has responsibility for the squadron. Most important, I want you to think about who will be aboard your flagship.”

Svetlana furrowed her brows, working to understand Reiko’s message. It was at that moment, that she heard the laughter of the front table, Alex’s bass, Renée’s treble, and Tatia’s mellow contralto.

Reiko quirked an eyebrow at Svetlana, when her captain’s eyes lit in understanding. “And that’s why I need you as captain of the *Liberator*, Svetlana. One day, when we watch our best-laid plans crumble in our holo-vid display and the enemy comes for us, the last ship, I’ll need your skills to get our leaders to safety. Our traveler pilots might be sacrificing themselves to buy you a narrow window of opportunity to escape destruction, and I’ll be counting on you to take advantage of it.”

Svetlana had reached a hand across the table, which Reiko took. “I’m your captain, Commodore,” she said simply.

* * *

Ellie Thompson listened to Reiko’s orders, while she eyed her ship’s holo-vid display. Z had uploaded the maneuver into the controller, and she focused on the final sequence.

When Reiko finished her review of the squadron’s maneuvers, Ellie linked to the commodore even as her ship, the OS *Redemption*, responded to the controller’s demands and accelerated on the course that would take it under the ecliptic.

<Did Alex have a message for my final disposition, Commodore?> Ellie asked.

<He did, Captain, and I quote ‘as close as the captain is comfortable.’>

<Understood,> Ellie said, closing the link.

Ellie studied the maneuver, trying to anticipate Alex’s intentions. *One ship to intimidate the Vinians, or was that the wrong word?* she thought.

“Yumi, I want a change to our final maneuver,” Ellie requested. “When we pop up in front of that Vinian warship, place us bow on at 10 kilometers out. Then decrease the distance at the rate of about a kilometer a minute.”

“Until how close, Captain?”

“I think 25 meters should do it,” Ellie replied nonchalantly.

“Yes, Captain,” Yumi acknowledged, grinning.

Ellie regarded the slender young woman, who was about her age when she was sent into exile on Libre. She recalled the conversation with Alex and Julien when her new crew list was being reviewed a month before the launch of the *Redemption*.

“You’ve chosen an extremely junior lieutenant for a pilot,” Alex had commented.

“True, Alex, she’s young, but she distinguished herself in training at Haraken’s naval academy, in three years of piloting a traveler, and I like her style.”

There was a pause in the communication, and Ellie expected Alex to object. Instead, he said, “Yumi Tanaka ... please tell me this isn’t Miko’s daughter.”

Without the structure of Méridien Houses, Haraken parents, who were once declared Independents, had adopted the habit of gifting their sons with their fathers’ surnames and their daughters with the mothers’ names.

“If you prefer that I start lying to you, Alex, I will, if that’s what you want,” Ellie replied, struggling to keep a smile off her face.

“Has it been that long that those who fought with us at Libre are now supplying their children to continue the pursuit of our enemy?” Alex asked, his eyes reflecting pain.

The conversation had taken an unexpected turn for Ellie. She had thought of Yumi Tanaka as the daughter of Captain Miko Tanaka, not as the niece of Lieutenant Tanaka, who had sacrificed his life to save Alex. Ellie had been a junior pilot that day over New Terra and witnessed the lieutenant’s efforts to absorb the missiles targeting Alex’s ship.

“Your conversation about time passing, Alex, reminds me that I should investigate the newest avatars. Could be time for an upgrade,” Julien interjected. “How about you, Alex? Oh, sorry!”

Ellie’s mouth had fallen open at what she construed a cruel jibe.

Alex had squinted an eye at Julien and fired back, “One of these centuries, you’ll miss me,” and then he had laughed.

Ellie thought that was the end of it. She never knew Julien’s reaction to Alex’s comment. The SADE had imagined that terrible final day, thousands of times, and it had crushed him every time.

The ship’s controller signaled the initiation of the squadron’s final step, and it pulled Ellie out of her reverie. She enlarged the holo-vid’s display of the *Redemption*’s telemetry to focus on the Vinian warship and her Trident, as the two ships closed.

“Approaching the ecliptic, Captain,” Yumi intoned. She rattled off the steps the controller executed that converted the Trident’s drives. “Main engines shutting down. Clamshell doors closing. Grav drives engaged.”

Much later Yumi added, “On a reciprocal course to the Vinian warship, Captain.”

The *Redemption*’s bridge crew tensed as the ships closed. The Trident decelerated and then reversed course until the distance from the Vinians held at 10 kilometers. Thereafter, Yumi signaled the controller to reduce the separation between the ships at the pace of a kilometer a minute.

Ellie had ordered the beam gunners to be at the ready. The outboard hulls of the Tridents were shaped in the traditional elongated gourd or seed, as was the central hull, enabling all three hull shapes capable of collecting the energy of gravitational waves to charge their enormous power crystals.

As opposed to a traveler’s beam, which was aligned with a fighter’s shell and necessitated turning the ship to direct the beam, the SADEs had cleverly set a crystal lens at the bow of each beam hull. This enabled the gunners to swing the beam in a limited but useful 8.5-degree angle from true center.

The gunners kept their eyes glued on their telemetry, anticipating the opening of undetected armament portals in the Vinian warship’s bow. They were linked to their boards’ controllers and adjusting their beam lenses to pin the warship, as they closed.

Trident’s procedures for beam operation began with the captain, who was required to release the safety locks on the ship’s controller before the gunners could respond to an order to fire. If Ellie was incapacitated, their young lieutenant, Yumi, would assume command.

Before the *Redemption* began its final run from below the ecliptic, Ellie had signaled the ship’s controller to release the beam locks, and the gunners had seen their board’s ready lights switch from red to white.

Anxiety on the bridge ratcheted up with every closing minute and spiked when Yumi announced, “Twenty-five meters distance, bow to bow, Captain.”

“Well done, Yumi,” Ellie replied calmly, despite feeling mortally frail.

“And we’re still here,” the young pilot murmured, which caught the attention of the gunner crew members seated left and right of her.

-2-
Seedling

Olive Tasker hurried to the recovery room as quick as stalks could move. Fronds along the ridgeline were tightly closed and vibrated gently. Poor Olive Tasker would have wished this errand on any other member of the ship. Scarlet Mandator had only recently retired to the recovery room to receive the benefit of the light. Unfortunately, it would be Olive Tasker's duty to interrupt the session and urge the mandator to return to the ship's operations center.

Olive Tasker cycled through the portal, which preserved the recovery room's moist atmosphere. Stalk pads adhered to the decking through the thin film of water, which contained life-sustaining minerals. Olive Tasker was momentarily excited. An opportunity to recover was less than an eighth of a cycle away.

Silently, Olive Tasker slipped past the others enjoying the brilliant light, their fronds fully displayed, and their stalks sipping at the shallow bath.

In front of Scarlet Mandator, Olive Tasker paused. The mandator's bloom was tilted upward, and the light had transported the leader into a somnolent state. At the end of a full-length recovery session, the lights directly above the bloom would blink to waken the mandator.

Reaching out a tentative stalk, Olive Tasker tripped the lights prematurely and scuttled back to wait. It would take some time for the leader to revive, especially after such a foreshortened period of recovery.

Finally, the mandator's brilliant scarlet bloom tilted down to regard Olive Tasker, who signaled the request. The mandator's bloom tilted up and down once, and Olive Tasker hurried from the recovery room.

Scarlet Mandator slowly followed the tasker out of the room, while stalks regained their equilibrium. Reluctantly, the mandator closed

fronds when passing beyond the recovery room's portal and losing the bright light. By the time the leader reached the operations center, stalks were responding normally.

"Report," Scarlet Mandator requested of Golden Executor, who was responsible for directing the ship's bridge operations in the mandator's absence.

"Ships have appeared from beyond, Mandator," the executor replied, "They arrived, as did the great orb, as if from nothing."

"What of their shapes?" Scarlet Mandator asked.

"Similar to the seedling we hold in our grasp," the executor replied.

The mandator's stalks relaxed. The great orb, which came from beyond, had devastated many ships of the Worlds of Light and a multitude of the Life Givers' offsprings before it relinquished its quest to partake of their worlds.

"The progenitors have come to collect their wayward offshoot," the mandator surmised. "How many ships?"

"We saw eight, but only seven approach us now."

"Weapons ports?" the mandator asked.

"The ships are smooth like that of the seedling. Truly a superior design, Mandator."

"As only flora can create," Scarlet Mandator acknowledged.

Despite the many criticisms the mandator had received during the intervening cycles since first capturing the wayward seedling, the leader insisted that no force should be employed against it. The argument put forth by the mandator was that the essence of the captured ship, shaped as it was in the timeless and eternal design of a seedpod, indicated a superior flora was aboard, albeit a race's junior members, who had wandered far from its progenitors.

In support of the mandator's argument, the seedling never once fired a weapon at the ship. Grasping the pod as the mandator had ordered created anomalies in multiple operations systems, but that was to be expected when dealing with a superior floral species resisting treatment.

"Locate the eighth ship," the mandator ordered.

“We’ve searched, Mandator. The ship is nowhere on the horizon,” Golden Executor replied, fronds trembling at the thought that the leader might be displeased by his response.

“The seven ships of the progenitors have ceased their approach, Executor,” Teal Monitor, who oversaw the navigation board, announced. “They remain motionless at a great distance from us.”

Teal Monitor’s bloom hovered over a telemetry board that no human could read. A SADE would be required to detect the unusual wavelength of energy emanating from the board, but, even then, the SADE would be required to spend some time learning to decipher the output.

“The eighth ship has arrived, Executor,” the monitor reported. “I believe it came from below the horizon.”

“Distance?” the executor asked.

“Forty manels, but it’s slowly closing on us, Executor. It’s approaching us bloom first.”

“Impossible,” Golden Executor declared. “Coming at us from forty mantels, we would have passed each other before fronds could be folded.”

Scarlet Mandator leaned a bloom over the monitor’s board. “The readings are accurate, Executor. The ship before us faces us and is slowly closing the distance.”

“Could these progenitors be seeking to ram us for capturing their seedling?” Golden Executor asked.

“Doubtful, but the better question might be asked as to how the progenitors knew their seedling was here and under duress,” Scarlet Mandator replied.

“Do you think the seedling is capable of communicating to these ships even when they were in the beyond?” the executor asked.

“Undoubtedly, Executor, and they are communicating with it now but in some manner unknown to us,” the mandator replied.

“Truly a superior floral species,” the executor marveled.

“The eighth ship is no longer closing, Executor,” the monitor reported.

The two leaders noted Teal Monitor’s tightly closed fronds. The petals, which surrounded the circumference of the bloom, were tightly

curled under. Both leaders leaned their blooms over the telemetry board, and their reactions were similar.

“How is that possible?” the executor asked. The board indicated that the progenitor ship was less than one-seventh of their vessel’s length from their warship.

Scarlet Mandator turned a bloom toward the executor and then back to the telemetry board, unable to believe the evidence too. “Release the seedling,” he ordered.

Golden Executor scurried to the right, and a stalk pad depressed a set of icons on a board, shutting down the ship’s grasp on the seedling.

“And now?” Scarlet Mandator asked.

Teal Monitor rudely held up a stalk, requesting more time. “The seedling has fallen off to a position next to the progenitor ship.” Moments later, the monitor added, “The two vessels are retreating.”

With that announcement, petals uncurled and fronds opened.

“By the Light, I believe we might have escaped annihilation,” Scarlet Mandator announced.

“Mandator, the Life Givers should be told of the truth of your reasoning,” Golden Executor said. “I can’t conceive of the enormity of destruction that might have befallen us if you hadn’t argued for restraint in dealing with the seedling. If not for your communications, urging the preservation of the small vessel, the progenitors would have arrived at our worlds and discovered the loss of their seedling.”

A shiver went through Scarlet Mandator’s stalks and fronds at the foolish action the other mandators had urged. “Destroy it,” they had said.

Golden Executor regarded Teal Monitor’s bloom, which faced him. “Speak up,” he ordered.

“Full control has been returned to our ship,” the monitor replied.

“The Light is beneficent,” the executor pronounced.

“What more?” Scarlet Mandator asked, noticing that Teal Monitor waited.

“The two vessels returned to the waiting group bloom first, and I was able to observe the stalk end of the progenitor ship. It too exhibits no

flame, no gas output, no nothing. It's as if they moved by virtue of the Light," the monitor said in awe.

The mandator and the executor's blooms faced each other, but nothing was shared. Words failed them.

"Return us to the Life Givers. There is a message to share," Mandator ordered. "If the progenitor ships come dangerously close to us, disturb my recovery again. Under no circumstances are you to fire on them. If you were, it would probably mean the end of us all."

Golden Executor's bloom tipped, as the mandator left the operations center.

* * *

"You have our sincere appreciation, Dassata," Killian was heard to say over the *Liberator's* bridge speakers.

"All part of the service, Killian," Alex replied, equally relieved to see the SADEs freed from the Vinian warship.

"What are your orders, Alex?" Killian asked.

"Take a station off this ship and link your controller to ours for flight control," Alex ordered. "I want you to stay close to us, in case I need more of your advice on this system."

"We're staying, Alex?" Tatia asked.

"It was my thought to further investigate this system," Alex replied.

"The presence of a multitude of Vinian warships doesn't deter your curiosity?" Tatia added.

"It never has, Admiral," Julien quipped. "I'm unsure as to why you think it would have changed."

"Wisdom cometh with age and all that," Tatia replied.

"True for most individuals," Julien replied.

Alex ignored the banter. He knew Julien was employing his unique skills to moderate the concerns of the admiral and her people.

<Z, where is that warship headed?> Alex sent.

<On its new course, I project that it will intersect the orbit of the fifth planet in the system.>

<Any calculation on its time to reach the planet?>

<If it continues at its present rate of velocity, I would estimate about eighteen days.>

<Shades of my time in a New Terran explorer tug,> Alex sent. His thoughts were colored with humor.

<I do believe you've become spoiled by advanced technology, dear,> Miranda sent, stepping into the conversation.

It was a habit of SADE partners to be constantly linked. Alex understood and accepted that if he was communicating with Miranda or Z, the other was undoubtedly listening. Likewise, a conversation with Hector or Trixie was likely shared, at that moment, if not later. Only Julien and Cordelia, the earliest of SADE partners, were careful to partition their conversations from him so that he rarely knew what or, better said, when a conversation was shared. More than likely, all of them were eventually known to one another.

"Killian, Bethley, and Trium, what data did you share with the *Liberator's* controller?" Alex asked.

"All that we had on our interaction with the Vinian warship, Alex," Killian replied.

"I presume that you were recording telemetry data on this system until your capture," Alex said.

"And afterwards, up to this very moment, Alex," Bethley replied.

"I want that data," Alex requested. He wondered about Reiko's logic that the Vinian warship displayed a design iteration that announced early weaponry development after an initial encounter with a powerful enemy.

Tatia and Reiko had questions, as to what Alex was seeking, but both realized they were too late. Z, who was closest to Alex, had taken a position directly behind him. Z's broad Cedric Broussard avatar provided a convenient post for Alex to lean against. The other three SADEs, Julien, Z, and Miranda, had joined Alex in delving into the stream of data entering the Trident's controller from the scout ship.

Alex stayed on the periphery of the search, as the three SADEs sifted the telemetry for anomalies, using as a base the parts of the recording that evidenced little to no material.

<A great deal of residual organics, Alex,> Miranda sent, the first one to report findings.

<Refined metal too. Most likely stemming from the remains of ships,> Z added.

<The data appears to support Reiko's assumptions about prior enemy contact,> Julien surmised.

<And isn't that interesting?> Z sent.

Alex was immersed in his twin implants, and the bridge crew wondered what caused the slight smile that formed on his face. Z was universally known for his focus on mathematical calculations and their preciseness, and Alex was tickled to hear Z send something as vague as "isn't that interesting." Those SADEs closest to Alex were continually adopting subtle human characteristics.

The scout ship's telemetry data, which was taken during the trip through the system, consistently revealed similar chunks and bits of refined metals and organic material, except for one particular area. Z had discovered evidence of different types of metal.

Julien compared the analysis of the metals generally found against that of the anomalous materials. The discrepancy was too great to believe the same culture had created both compounds.

<Julien, Libre,> Alex sent.

Immediately, Julien accessed data from the *Liberator's* private storage banks, historical data accumulated by Alex and the SADEs.

<The materials are too similar to be a coincidence,> Julien sent in reply.

Decades ago, the *Rêveur* had made a return trip to Libre to collect the Swei Swee hives, who would settle the Librans' new world, Haraken. Julien, who was ensconced in his box on the bridge of the luxury liner that Alex had rescued, had dutifully collected telemetry data on the system.

The Arnos system was the site of the massive fight to free the Swei Swee, the alien species enslaved by the Nua'll, who resided aboard their enormous sphere. The sphere and its bullet ships were completely destroyed by the avenging dark travelers of the Swei Swee, who lost many hives in the battle.

It was only later that Alex learned of the treasure trove of data that Julien had collected on the system, as part of his standing protocols.

<Similar, but not exact matches,> Z added.

<It wasn't our sphere,> Alex sent.

<You are a frightening human, dear man,> Miranda sent. <Against the odds, you predicted the possibility of another sphere, and you now possess confirmation of that conjecture.>

Rather than receiving a celebratory response from Alex, the comm was quiet.

<I believe Alex was hoping he was wrong,> Julien sent privately to the other SADEs.

<It's better to know the truth,> Z shared with his kind.

<Alex wouldn't disagree with you, Z. That doesn't stop him from imagining a future of more than two spheres,> Julien replied.

<That's an even scarier thought,> Miranda added.

The SADEs abandoned their private conversation when they noticed Alex drop off the link.

Alex gently shoved off from Z's Cedric suit. He wasn't concerned about disturbing the SADE. Locked in place, the avatar, modeled on the heavy-worlder body of a New Terran and massing more than twice Alex's substantial size, was similar to pushing off a granite wall.

"What did you discover?" Renée asked, having come to stand beside her partner. She made it her purpose to be present when Alex finished deep diving with the SADEs. Having spent years in space alone, tagging and shipping asteroids, and immersing himself in computational mathematics, Alex had developed a distinct preference for spending time communing with the SADEs through his implants. She was there to remind him that he was human and needed to stay connected to his kind.

“The *Vivian* collected evidence of metal compounds scattered in the system that are similar to the Nua’ll sphere at Libre, but they aren’t an exact match,” Alex said perfunctorily.

<That would have been a critical piece of analysis to have run,> Bethley said to her comrades aboard the scout ship.

<That presumes that we had the data the SADEs with Alex accessed. I’m requesting the analysis from Z, at this moment,> Trium replied.

“A second sphere was here,” Tatia said quietly, and Alex nodded his agreement.

“I say we get this out in the open right now,” Reiko demanded, facing Alex, with her fists planted on her small hips.

The bridge, humans and SADEs, went silent at the appearance of a confrontation.

“You, Alex,” Reiko said, pointing a finger at him, “need to close your eyes, go wherever you go, and count the number of spheres in our future so that we can do a better job of planning.”

A grin split Alex’s face, and the bridge broke out in laughter.

“It was worth a try,” Reiko admitted, smiling and shrugging her shoulders in imitation of Alex’s habitual gesture.

“I’m not sure I want to know the answer to that question, Commodore,” Tatia admitted, which many present could understand.

“How much material was found?” Svetlana asked.

“Small amounts,” Julien replied. “Enough to say for certain that a single ship, possibly a bullet ship, which accompanied the sphere was heavily damaged.”

“Why not the sphere itself?” Reiko asked.

“Everyone and everything is sacrificed to ensure the sphere’s survival,” Renée explained.

“Nice aliens,” Reiko said.

“You have no idea,” Renée commented.

“Then there’s information to be had from the Vinians, if we can find a means of communicating with them,” Reiko said.

“Agreed,” Alex said. “Besides, we can’t leave this species wondering who we were. They could be an ally someday.”

“Wonderful,” Tatia grumped. “I want it on record that I refuse to start wearing a colorful, wraparound headdress with frills to imitate a bloom when we greet their leaders.”

“Admiral, I think you would look adorable in the right ensemble, if you’d allow me to help,” Miranda riposted.

Tatia narrowed her eyes at the SADE, who laughed at the expression. “Think on it, Admiral, I’m sure you’ll warm to the idea,” Miranda replied, refusing to be deterred.

“Orders?” Tatia asked Alex. She had insisted that she lead the expedition to rescue the captured scout ship. That action was successfully completed.

Now, the Omnians were playing in Alex’s space, communicating with another strange, intelligent species in hopes of learning about humans’ nemesis, the Nua’ll. Having discovered evidence that the enemy had created two giant spheres, the nagging question became: How many more Nua’ll vessels were out there ravaging the worlds of distant stars?

“Z said the Vinian warship is heading on an intercept with the fifth planet outward of the sun,” Alex said. “Let’s follow it. No closer than 250K kilometers, Admiral.”

Mealtime approached, and the crews in every Trident broke to partake of an opportunity to be together over food and drink. But, as opposed to passenger liners with SADEs in control, Tatia was averse to allowing a warship’s bridge to ever be unattended. Therefore, personnel were scheduled to relieve the bridge watch, during mealtime, every other day.

The New Terran Trident captains had adopted the same routines that Tatia authorized for her people, though they never had a choice. It had been a directive from New Terran President Harold Grumley. Unlike Grumley’s predecessor, he paid close attention to Maria Gonzales, who had brokered the deal with Alex to have Omnia Ships build Tridents for her government. Maria had suggested to Harold that he instruct the Trident captains to imitate Tatia’s command routines.

During a conversation with Grumley and Maria, the newly minted captains wondered why they should duplicate the Omnians’ military

protocols. Maria had tersely replied, “It’s a simple historical observation, Captains. After twenty years of encountering more danger than any other group in this corner of the galaxy, they’re still alive and prospering. You’d do well to remember that.”

Throughout the decades, the head table, where once Alex and Renée had sat alone aboard the *Rêveur*, had steadily grown in size. On the OS *Liberator*, it now accommodated the couple, an admiral, a commodore, a captain, and three SADEs. Although the SADEs didn’t consume a meal, they attended to demonstrate solidarity with humans.

When Alex was able to get a few servings under his belt to fuel his heavy-worlder body, he glanced at the SADEs and asked, “What do we know about this world where the Vinian warship is headed?”

“Telemetry indicates a warm, wet world, which exemplifies a dense coverage of foliage,” Z replied.

“You could be misinterpreting the data, dear,” Miranda replied politely. “We might land a traveler and discover that the dense foliage is merely a planet absolutely crowded with plant people.”

The group’s reply was a collection of half-hearted laughter.

“Perhaps my attempt at humor was mistimed,” Miranda admitted.

“There is an absence of dense city structure that one would expect from a society that has the extent of warships and space exploration they exhibit,” Julien reasoned.

The SADE comms and human implants received a comment from Bethley, and Alex wondered who at the table remained linked to the scout ship.

<In our leisurely tour of the system, courtesy of the Vinian warship, we spotted several moon bases with a high degree of industrialization, including ship construction,> Bethley sent.

“That would make sense,” Renée replied. “Think about what the Vinians would honor.”

“True,” Tatia chimed in. “Certainly not a dense collection of buildings or heavy industrial complexes.”

“Plants first; animals second; pollution last,” Svetlana replied cryptically.

Alex pointed a utensil at Svetlana in approval, while he swallowed a bite of roll, which he'd used to wipe the juice of a serving dish. Even the only other heavy-worlder at the head table, Tatia, had finished eating, while Alex was busy cleaning up the serving dishes. "I agree," Alex finally said. "The Vinians would revere their greenery, especially immense tracts of forests. Therefore, as soon as possible, they would offload their heavy construction industries to moon bases to preserve their home world."

"I wonder what the plant people think of our ships," Svetlana said.

"Difficult to postulate," Z replied. "Obviously, they would have been confronted with our Tridents' superior capabilities, but that doesn't answer the question of what they think of our origins."

"It does bring up a more interesting question," Alex said, staring thoughtfully ahead. "We've demonstrated peaceful intentions, despite evincing superior technology. That should buy us an introduction, but we don't have a means of communicating with them. In fact, we're not even sure by what means they communicate. No, the real question is: Who would the Vinians be more willing to speak with ... flora or fauna?"

"Are you visualizing your headdress, Admiral?" Miranda asked and was redeemed by the table's solid round of laughter.

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.

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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. My careers have spanned a variety of industries in the visual and scientific fields of photography, biology, film/video, software, and information technology (IT).

My first attempt at a novel, which I've recently retitled *The Florentine*, was a crime drama centered on the modern-day surfacing of a 110-carat yellow diamond lost during the French Revolution. In 1980, in preparation for the book, I spent two wonderful weeks researching the Brazilian people, their language, and the religious customs of Candomblé. The day I returned from Rio de Janeiro, I had my first date with my wife-to-be, Peggy Giels.

In the past, I've outlined dozens of novels, but a busy career limited my efforts to complete any of them. In early 2014, I chose to devote my efforts to writing fulltime. My first novel, *The Silver Ships*, was released in February 2015. The series, with the release of *Vinium*, numbers ten.

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

My deep appreciation goes out to the many readers who embraced the *Silver Ships* and *Pyrean* series and their characters. Thank you!