

ESPERO
A Silver Ships Novel

S. H. JUCHA



Excerpt - Chapters 1 & 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.

“Stop where you are!” Alain de Long shouted, speaking the New Terran’s language.

A broad-shouldered man, whose heavy-world frame was dimly backlit in Hellébore’s fading light, hesitated in the alleyway’s mouth. He spotted the stun gun in the Haraken’s hand and bolted back around the corner onto one of Espero’s main streets, but his steps faltered at the sight of a second Haraken identical to the man he just encountered. Shaking off his hesitation, the New Terran dropped his head and accelerated, intending to bowl the slender man over.

In a deft movement, Étienne de Long, co-director of Haraken’s security forces, dropped down, spun on his left leg, and used the right to cut the man’s legs out from under him.

With an “oomph,” the man smacked face down onto the street. The force of the impact dislodged his ear comm, which struck the walkway and snapped the tiny transmitter off the comm’s body. Before the New Terran could recover, he found his hands pinned behind him. “Why are you attacking me?” he cried out.

“Why were you running?” Étienne replied, as he applied wrist restraints.

“How do I know who you are? Is this a kidnapping or are you adz?” the New Terran asked.

“As to the former, the answer is no; as to the latter, what are adz?” Alain, Étienne’s twin and crèche-mate, replied.

“Adz ... you know ... administrative types, police and such.”

“Then we’re adz,” Étienne replied. “Allow me to introduce ourselves. We are Haraken security forces, and you are under arrest.”

“For what?” the New Terran demanded, struggling as Étienne and Alain hauled him upright. No easy task for the twins, since the man massed more than their combined weight.

“We’ll answer your questions at the Directorate, as we’ll expect you to answer ours,” Alain replied.

“These ties are too tight,” the New Terran complained. “They’re cutting off my circulation.”

Étienne signaled the tiny chip in the restraints to ease the tension. The wrist cuffs were new tools for Haraken’s premier “escorts,” the Méridien term for security personnel. Restraints wouldn’t have been required for their own people, but Haraken’s primary city, Espero, had doubled its population in the last four years to nearly a million individuals. Many of the new emigrants and visitors were from New Terra and some were from the Confederation, more so from its colonies than its home world, Méridien.

Due to their constrained social fabric, Méridien behavior would be exemplary, but with the New Terrans, it was a different matter. A younger society of much more independent-minded people, New Terrans were still experimenting with social boundaries, and the twins, Étienne and Alain, were discovering that the culture was importing its excesses to Haraken.

Étienne and Alain loaded the New Terran into their grav-transport, a four-seat unit with a modified rear seat that operated as a containment cell, and flew back to the Security Directorate building.

The suspect stood briefly before Julien, a Haraken SADE (self-aware digital entity), who scanned him, recorded his physical aspects, loaded his DNA into the Directorate’s database from a touch on the man’s skin, and sampled his voice pattern when the man asked, “So, who are you supposed to be?”

“You need not worry your simple human mind about that, Ser,” Julien replied.

“Oh, you’re one of the Harakens’ pet computers,” the suspect snidely shot back. When the New Terran saw the Méridiens’ hands twitch toward their stun guns, he adopted a nasty grin, thrilled to see he had struck some nerves.

Julien checked the Directorate's database. <He's not a registered visitor. In fact, there's no record of his ever having entered Hellébore space,> the SADE sent to the twins' implants, the tiny Méridien device in their brains, which allowed thought communication and recording of sensory input. All Haraken residents past the age of consent carried one, except for Haraken's president, Alex Racine, who carried two. Only temporary visitors to the planet were exempt from adopting the devices.

<An interloper,> Étienne sent back.

<A good thing too,> Alain sent to his brother. <I would be displeased to see you disciplined by the Assembly for attacking and dropping an innocent visitor on his face.>

Étienne squinted at his twin, who chuckled. They escorted the New Terran to an interrogation room, while they communicated privately with Julien about the circumstances that might have brought the man surreptitiously to Haraken. It had been reported by citizens that several New Terrans they had met were incapable of producing Haraken IDs, which were required of the planet's visitors.

The interrogation rooms and holding cells within the Directorate were also new implementations. Espero's population changes, resulting from an explosion of New Terran visitors and residents, had required the construction of the Security Directorate's new building only three years ago, and the suspect processing areas were added a year ago.

Espero's tremendous influx went hand-in-hand with New Terra's construction of faster-than-light (FTL)-capable transports, passenger liners, and freighters, courtesy of Haraken technology. The vessels were owned and operated by New Terrans, so they flew under the system's banner, Oistos. It required the Harakens create stricter entry controls by constructing the new McCrery Orbital Station, where all foreign vessels docked for Haraken entry and exit. But as tonight's operation by the twins indicated, the new procedures weren't foolproof.

After seating the New Terran in an interrogation room and removing his restraints, Étienne asked, "What's your name?"

"Names seem so unimportant today," the man said. "It's all about numbers anymore, but for the sake of our discussion, you can call me

Henry or Henri, if you prefer,” he added, gesturing toward his captors and acknowledging their Méridien origin.

From the initial moment of his capture until now, Henry had slowly dropped the façade of the innocent victim. Now, the man who sat before the Harakens displayed the mannerisms of the criminal who the twins had sought. Henry leaned comfortably back in his chair, folded his hands over his stomach, and smiled condescendingly at the two investigators.

“How did you arrive here, Henry?” Alain asked.

“So this is it? This is how the big, bad Harakens are going to interrogate me?” Henry asked. “From what I hear, you people can't do much more than scowl or raise your voices.” Then he laughed long and hard at his joke.

<He has a point,> Alain sent privately to Étienne and Julien. <The New Terrans are well aware of our constraints against harming others.>

Julien applied his considerable crystal-processing power in search of a means of unlocking the man's secrets. Terrible things were insinuating their way into Haraken society, tempting the planet's vulnerable Haraken young and New Terran visitors alike. Henry was the first interloper they had caught, and his information could be invaluable in understanding how the new passenger controls at McCreary were being circumvented.

<We could always apply one of our illustrious president's techniques and bluff,> Julien sent to the twins. It was one of Alex Racine's favorite practices during the games played with his ancient deck of cards. Alex called it bluffing; Julien called it prevarication. Whichever name, it provided the two friends with endless hours of entertainment, as they debated its fairness.

<What do we have that will serve as a bluff?> Alain sent.

<Harakens, both humans and SADEs, are well known to most New Terrans,> Étienne added.

<But the Swei Swee are not,> Julien replied. <I believe it's time for our recalcitrant visitor to meet some true aliens. Allow me, Sers, to start this masquerade.>

Julien left his post by the door and stood in front of Henry, saying, “Well, Ser, if you refuse to cooperate with us, we'll have to be rid of you.

We can't have a human of your ilk walking around Espero free to do as he will."

"You can't twist me," Henry said, confident of his position. "The worst you can do is deport me, and you know it."

Accessing a stored image of Admiral Tatia Tachenko's feral grin, Julien twisted his face into a facsimile, and said to the twins, "Ah, so our secret is yet to be discovered, Ser's." A black, stovepipe hat appeared on Julien's head, projected by his avatar's holo-capable synth-skin. It gave the SADE the image of a man intent on conducting dark business.

"Digital freak," Henry snarled. "I'm done dancing with you people. Put me on a freighter, and let's get this over with so I can get some sleep."

"Freighter? Who said anything about a freighter?" Julien asked innocently, looking at the twins, who adopted their own evil smiles in an effort to play along.

"Étienne, we will require a transport to the cliff tops where the Swei Swee can get rid of this piece of human trash," Julien said, dismissing Henry and walking out.

"What are you talking about ... your president's precious aliens?" Henry yelled at Julien's retreating back. Swiveling to regard the twins, he said, "Those things are supposed to be ferocious looking, but everyone knows they're gentle with humans."

"And therein lays the secret, Ser," Alain said, catching on to Julien's ruse.

"Oh, yes," Étienne agreed, building on the story, "the Swei Swee can be gentle, but if you know anything about them, it's that they're carnivores, and, as much as they enjoy fresh seafood, they've developed a fondness for human flesh."

"Keep your tall tales ... like I said, you're not going to twist me," Henry declared firmly, but some of the bravado he had exhibited earlier had evaporated, and even more of his confidence waned as he was hauled out of the Directorate and loaded into the investigator's transport with the SADE for company in the containment cell.

During the flight, the stars twinkling overhead through the transport's clear canopy, Henry sought to determine whether he was being twisted or

he was indeed headed for his death at the hands of aliens. But the three Harakens ignored him, and Henry was forced to listen to a macabre exchange between the twins in the front seat of the transport, which played heavily on his nerves.

“I say we place a wager on it,” Étienne said to Alain.

“They haven’t fed on a human in over fourteen days,” Alain replied. “I think they’ll do the job in fewer than 0.11 hours.”

“That fast? But you’re not counting the skull,” Étienne challenged.

“No, you’re right. I mean they’ll crack the skull eventually, but you know how they like to play with it for a while.”

“Have you ever figured out their game ... you know ... what they’re doing, smacking it around like that and twittering like a bunch of old women?” Étienne asked, his face screwing up and swallowing, as if to prevent retching.

“May the stars protect us,” Alain said, shuddering. “It’s gruesome to watch. I want to be back aboard the transport by then, if you don’t mind.”

“No objections from me. I can’t stand to observe that part either. I still have nightmares,” Étienne agreed.

That the investigators weren’t asking Henry any more questions scared him to death. They didn’t seem to care whether he talked or not. As silently as the grav-transport lifted off, it quietly descended onto the cliff top that overlooked the ocean to the west of Haraken’s capital, Espero. The planet’s bright moons lit the cliff top in a pale glow, and the night air blew sweet and salty scents from the tall grass and sea.

Alex greeted the twins as they hauled the New Terran out of the transport. When Julien told him of their plan to encourage the trespasser to talk, Alex broke out in laughter. He was still laughing as he closed the comm and started the walk to the cliffs.

“Sorry to bother you so late this evening, Mr. President,” Julien said, greeting Alex as they exited the grav-transport, “but we need to process this one immediately. He’s an interloper so there’s no concern about recordkeeping.”

Henry put on a brave front, standing straight and puffing out his substantial chest. But the president’s sudden high, shrill whistle caught him

off guard, and he watched with concern as the Haraken calmly extracted a live fish from a small container.

To Henry's horror, the stories of the Swei Swee hadn't even come close to the truth. A giant, six-legged alien with huge claws raced over the edge of the cliff top, and as the creature scurried toward them at high speed, Henry's sphincters loosened, and he soiled his pants. The rapid snapping of the monster's enormous claws threatened to collapse Henry's knees, and his captors were forced to support him.

When the president offered the fish to the alien, it snatched it up in a claw, tearing at it with the other, and feeding bits of it into its mouth, smacking away. Nausea and lightheadedness overcame Henry. His imagination ran wild, and he envisioned his bones stripped of flesh by the ugly creature. With his last moments of consciousness, Henry blurted, "I'll tell you what you want to know. I'll tell you everything. Just keep that thing away from me." Then he fainted, and the twins lowered him to the ground.

The four eyestalks of the Swei Swee First, the leader of the alien hives, swung to the man on the ground, and he whistled his concern. "Is the human in distress?"

"I believe he might be ill," Alex whistled.

"No introduction this night?" the First inquired.

"Not this evening. Perhaps another time," Alex warbled, offering his sympathy for the event's failure.

The alien leader popped the last piece of sweet fish flesh into his mouth parts, swallowed, and whistled his farewell, hurrying off to join his mates at home, a domicile built into the cliff side. The hives could only fish during the daylight hours when they could see what they hunted, and they consumed what they caught. So a late-night snack offered by the Star Hunter First, as Alex was known by the People, was always a treat.

"After Henry comes to and is cleaned up," Alex said, wrinkling his nose in disgust, "I will be interested to know how he slipped past our security procedures and made it to Espero. Most important, I want to know what he's doing here."

* * *

Renée de Guirnon, Alex's partner, warned of his return by implant, hastily prepared a late-evening repast and some hot thé. For the slender, genetically sculpted Méridien, thé was all Renée desired, but a heavy-world body such as Alex's required many more calories daily, and her lover was one substantial New Terran.

"Did he talk, or was the First forced to nibble on some body parts?" Renée asked, giggling at the thought of the amiable Swei Swee hurting a human. It was the aliens who guarded their son, Teague, when he swam in the bay at the base of the cliffs with the hive's younglings, who Teague thought of as his friends.

"He did agree to talk right before he passed out," Alex said, kicking off his boots at their home's entrance. It was a Swei Swee-built house, a right demanded by the First as tribute for Alex's efforts to free his people from the Nua'll, the mysterious, unseen aliens, who hid in the upper reaches of a massive sphere while they coerced other races to harvest their needs from the planets they ravaged.

Alex had agreed to the Swei Swee construction simply to keep the peace, but over the years he came to appreciate his decision. The roof and walls of his house required zero maintenance, and they still glowed with the soft luminescent blues, greens, and whites that marked the Swei Swee matrons' craftsmanship. It was the same application that created the shells of travelers, the Haraken's grav-driven shuttles and fighters — Swei Swee "spit."

"Understandable," Renée said sympathetically. "I was close to that reaction the first time the hive rushed at us atop the cliffs of Libre."

"I recall," Alex said, chuckling. "Hopefully we've frightened Henry to the point where he will confess all. We need to understand what's going on here. How are these people getting planetside without documentation? Their intentions are dishonest, of course. But exactly what are they up to?"

“I’m sure the twins will have answers for you in the morning. Now, come, my love, I want to test Mickey’s new invention.” Renée gestured to a seat on the couch. A small table at its end held thé and a plate of food.

Alex removed his jacket and shirt before he sat down. Renée had a preference for his bare chest when she snuggled against him, as she did now with a mug of thé in her hand. “A new vid, as well?” he asked.

“Of course,” Renée replied. She had developed an insatiable appetite for ancient and modern New Terran vids, a style of entertainment not found on Méridien or anywhere in the Confederation, for that matter. After Renée’s liner, the *Rêveur*, was rescued by Alex, she asked Julien to collect the vids to aid her in mastering Sol-NAC, the language of Alex’s people, and much of the nuances of the more evocative New Terran women. To Renée’s delight, she uncovered a huge cache of her favorite entertainment during the Harakens’ time at Sol’s Idona Station.

Renée waited until Alex settled back and laid an arm across her shoulders before she threw a leg over his lap and settled her head against his hard-muscled chest. Then she signaled the vid monitor, which rose off the wall and floated toward them.

“Mickey and his team are installing anti-grav frames on vid monitors?” Alex asked, flabbergasted.

The engineer, Mickey Brandon, and a number of his people were responsible for copying the Nua’ll’s dark travelers and producing the Swei Swee-shelled travelers the Harakens built and sold today. Since the production of the first series of travelers for Haraken, Mickey and several others had formed a company and were producing an endless variety of new anti-grav products.

“Marvelous, isn’t it? You can watch a vid or media reports from any position, anywhere!” Renée exclaimed.

“Any position, anywhere?” Alex asked, frowning.

“Never fear, my love,” Renée said, tilting her head up and kissing Alex’s cheek. “Nothing will ever interfere with you keeping this woman’s attention in our bed.”

Renée had divulged their secret to only one person, her best friend, Terese Lechaux. She had approached Terese because of the woman’s

medical expertise, when Renée discovered one night during her lovemaking with Alex that he was utilizing the ever-growing power of his implants to create a feedback loop between them. Each knew, at any one moment, what pleased the other. The revelation had Terese salivating for more information, but Renée politely demurred from communicating the more intimate details.

Taking a sip of her thé, Renée maneuvered the vid monitor to a position level with their eyesight and locked it in place. Then she cued her new vid, a parting gift from Nikki Fowler, the Idona Station director, and settled back to watch.

“What do you know about these people?” Amelia asked her friend, Christie.

“Not much. That’s why I think we have to check them out. I’ve heard Étienne and Alain are searching for what they call interlopers, visitors without ID. This may be them,” Christie replied.

“Didn’t you say that your brother thought they might be dangerous?” Eloise asked. Of the three close friends, two Méridiens and one New Terran, Eloise Haraken was the most conservative of the three young women. It certainly wasn’t Christie Racine, Alex’s sister, who fancied herself a detective of anything untoward in Espero. The third young woman, Amelia Beaufort, was game for any adventure that Christie could stir up. Despite Eloise’s reservations about some of Christie’s ideas, she was determined not to be left out of a new experience.

“Dangerous to us? I don’t think so,” Christie retorted. “What are they going to do ... mess with the president’s sister? At worst, I think they’d throw us out for asking too many questions.”

Christie led her friends down a narrow side street, which ended at a building’s blank wall. Frowning at her friends, Christie rechecked her information, ensuring she was in the correct location. <This is supposed to be the place,> Christie sent to Amelia and Eloise.

<Over there,> Amelia sent, attaching an image of the right side wall to her thought. She highlighted an artfully concealed infrared beam peeking from behind a small turnout in the building’s face. <Shall we?> she added, and then stepped forward to break the beam aimed across to the other side of the narrow space.

When Amelia intercepted the beam, the blank wall in front of the girls disappeared, revealing a club’s inviting entrance lit in shades of blues and

purples. The club was concealed by a holo-façade, and, curiously, the establishment's name wasn't in sight.

<Odd that this location doesn't wish to advertise its presence,> Eloise sent. <It makes one wonder what it's intending to hide.>

The three young women adjusted their clothing, adopted charming smiles, and strolled through the club's generous double doors, which slid aside at their approach.

"Good evening, fems, I'm Lacey. Welcome to our club," a New Terran woman said in greeting. She spoke passable Haraken, but her accent indicated she was definitely new to the planet. Moreover, the woman's shaved and heavily tattooed scalp, adorning an attractive face, marked her as an oddity among Harakens.

"Club?" Christie asked, letting the question hang in the air.

"Our club," Lacey replied with a smile. "May I offer you fems some stimulants before joining the party?" She waved a small med-injector pistol enticingly, her smile growing brighter. "It will make your experience all the more enjoyable."

Despite several attempts to pump information from Lacey, Christie and her friends found her to be tight-lipped about the establishment, and the girls chose to join the party without partaking of Lacey's offer of stimulants.

Two heavy, soundproof doors, leading to the club's interior, slid aside, and a wall of music struck them. The deafening sound saturated a dance floor packed with gyrating bodies. Laser lights strobed the club, and holo-vids painted scenes on every surface — walls, ceiling, and floor.

Most of the young people were Librans, noticeable by their slender builds and genetically sculpted faces; a small number were local or visiting New Terrans. That the music played over speakers may have been for the visitors' benefit, since they were without implants.

But the threesome found the scene confusing. Haraken young loved to link their implants to synchronize their dances. The intricate, extemporaneous maneuvers were difficult to perform but satisfying to the dancers and viewers alike. It was one of Christie's favorite aspects about her

implant. Looking around, the girls noticed that not a single group dance was taking place.

<Look at their faces,> Eloise sent.

<Appears everyone accepted Lacey's offer,> Amelia remarked, staring at a Haraken boy of probably not more than sixteen, dancing by himself. Strangely, he exhibited none of the smooth, subtle movements of a Méridien dancer. Instead, the boy's body swayed and jerked, and his eyes were vacant.

<To the right,> Eloise sent, transmitting the image of two girls. Their Haraken wraps lay on the floor, trampled underfoot, but the girls kept up their awkward gyrations, unaware of their state of undress.

<These teenagers are gone. They're not on stimulants; they're on some sort of hallucinogen,> Christie sent.

<They're definitely not on Haraken anymore,> Eloise replied, staring into the vacant eyes of a Libran girl next to her and wondering what she saw in her mind.

<Christie, how do you know about what these teens may be on?> Amelia asked.

<Read about drug types when on New Terra,> Christie replied. <The government tightly regulates all drugs and most are used in medical therapy. I can tell you that what these teenagers are on would be illegal anywhere in Oistos.>

After the girls entered the club's dance floor, Lacey touched her ear comm and signaled her boss. "Dar, we've got a big problem ... snoopers are here."

Dar hurried to the front desk with Trembles, a massive New Terran, who acted as the club's bouncer.

Lacey played the vids of Christie and her friends for Dar. "These three," she said, tapping the screen with a long, blood-red fingernail, "are asking way too many questions."

"Questions aren't bad, are they?" Trembles asked dubiously.

"They are if they want to know about the club, about me, where I came from, and how long I've been on planet," Lacey replied.

"Where are they now?" Dar demanded.

Lacey switched her monitor to the cam pickups in the club and changed viewpoints until she located them.

“Hey, they’re not dancing,” Trembles said, leaning over Lacey for a closer view of the monitor. “But, they are some nice-looking fems.”

“Dar, I tried to get them to take some of our twitch, but they weren’t having it,” Lacey said. “Stop drooling on me, Trembles,” she said, elbowing the bouncer in the ribs.

“Give me a closeup of the New Terran’s face,” Dar ordered, a sick feeling forming in his gut.

Lacey worked to get an unobstructed front view as ordered, but the girls were moving through the crowd, looking closely at the dancer’s faces. They stopped to observe two girls, whose wraps were missing, and Lacey got her shot, froze the image, and enhanced it for Dar.

“Of all the bad luck,” Dar growled, slamming a fist on the table. “That’s the president’s little sister, and she and her friends are recording everything in their implants like Terran Security Forces at an accident scene.”

“You want me to throw them out, Boss?” Trembles asked, hoping he would get an opportunity to be intimate with the fems.

“No ... it’s too late for that,” Dar said. “So, what’s your guess, Lacey? We got trouble or we got opportunity?” Dar asked. He trusted Lacey’s instincts, even though she was known to be impulsive and had a hard taste for fems herself. The latter was evident in the way in which Lacey’s eyes constantly flicked toward the image of the president’s daughter, a big, curvy specimen with chestnut hair.

“I don’t smell adz trouble; I smell amateurs. I say we take ’em,” Lacey said, her pink tongue tracing the edge of a lower lip.

“Yeah, let’s take ’em,” Trembles agreed.

“Just take them? The president’s sister?” Dar asked with incredulity.

“Sure, Dar. We take them, get them off planet, and spread the word about three fems who were abducted by Mr. Blue’s people,” Lacey said, punctuating her suggestion with a raised eyebrow. “Remember, this place is comm sealed. Whatever they’ve seen is still in their cute, little, techie

heads.” Lacey could hear Trembles snicker behind her, and she smiled herself.

“Oh, nice. I like it,” Dar said, softly clapping his hands. “We get rid of the problem and lay the fallout at Mr. Blue’s door. You’re a wicked woman, Lacey. I knew there was a reason I kept you around despite the headaches you cause me.”

“Boss!” Lacey retorted, pretending to be hurt.

“Stop gawking you two. Patch them, and get some crew to carry them out as soon as they go down. I want them off planet tonight.”

Christie, Amelia, and Eloise separated to cover more of the club’s dance floor, trapping images in their implants of the young people, staring into space and twitching awkwardly to the music. Christie and Amelia picked up several teenagers off the floor, who appeared to have passed out, and propped them against a wall out of harm’s way. Their breathing was shallow but steady.

<Did either of you try to transmit a comm outside the club?> Eloise asked. Her question sent both of her friends seeking an outside connection, but to no avail.

<It figures. They’ve isolated the building,> Amelia replied.

<It’s time to go, you two,> Eloise sent, but didn’t receive a reply. <Christie, don’t pretend you didn’t receive me. We leave now,> Eloise demanded. <Amelia, do you have eyes on Christie? Amelia?>

Eloise started to search for her friends, but she felt dizzy. Her legs threatened to collapse from under her when strong hands suddenly grabbed her arms, and she was hauled from the dance floor. Eloise tried to speak, but her mouth wouldn’t move and her tongue felt thick. When her legs gave out completely, she was dragged along by her arms.

A heavy door slid aside in front of her, and Eloise was dropped unceremoniously on the floor just inside the room. She glimpsed her two friends not 3 meters from her, their heads covered by metal-mesh bags, before one descended over her head.

* * *

Tatia sat across the card table from Julien, who projected his infamous poker apparel, a croupier's cap with its green, translucent brim. She once teased Julien that his cap would catch fire from the heat of his processing power as he sought to calculate whether Alex was bluffing, but the SADE calmly reminded her that it was a virtual hat and his processing crystals were in his chest. "But I take your meaning, Tatia," Julien had added. "Our friend's play does challenge my analytics."

Mickey completed the foursome, and he carefully watched Alex's face, trying to guess the strength of his president's hand when Alex froze in mid-play.

Mickey and Tatia sensed their security apps swept away, and they were connected in a comm call with Cordelia; Katie Racine, Alex's mother; and Julien. It had been awhile since Alex had intruded on their implants in this manner, and it was usually only under dire circumstances. The SADEs shared the same capability, but for reasons of their own, they chose not to exercise this capability.

<Your mother is worried, and I believe she has cause,> Cordelia sent.

"What?" Tatia mouthed quietly to Alex.

<When did you detect Christie's implant offline?> Alex asked, and his eyes drilled into Julien's.

Julien immediately contacted every other Haraken SADE, who began an intensive search to locate Christie.

<Just moments ago, her mother sought to ask Christie a question and couldn't reach her,> Cordelia explained. <I attempted to assist her and could not locate Christie's implant anywhere on planet. I broadened my search to our off-planet locations, including any Haraken ships. Her implant signal is not to be found anywhere in system.>

The thought chilled Alex. There were three ways to still an implant signal. Alex discovered the first method when he rescued the derelict ship, the *Rêveur*. The Méridiens were forced to search cabin by cabin, room by

room, for their dead. An implant used the brain's heat to run its programs, and those frozen in vacuum had no heat.

A second possibility was a blocked signal, but Harakens didn't create structures capable of doing that. At least, none that Alex knew. A final possibility, Christie wasn't anywhere in Hellébore's system, but that seemed highly unlikely.

<Alex, Christie's friends, Amelia and Eloise, are also offline,> Julien sent. <We've completed an entire sweep of the system.>

<Mother, we'll find the girls,> Alex sent. <I'm going to let you go now, and I will be in contact with you and Dad as soon as we know something.> The moment Katie acknowledged his promise, Alex removed her from the conference comm, laid down his cards, and stood up from the table.

Renée took this moment to walk into the room with a tray of food to fuel the three heavy-worlders, only to discover the game halted and Alex pacing, never a good sign. She looked at Tatia, who linked her into the conference comm.

<This can't be a coincidence,> Alex sent to his compatriots. <We caught Henry yesterday, and this evening three of our girls disappear.>

<Are we sure that it's just a disappearance and not an accident?> Tatia asked, hating to be the one to volunteer the question.

<Any flyer or building accident that would harm three citizens would have been reported by multiple sources,> Julien replied. <The probability is statistically minute.>

<What is highly probable,> Cordelia added, <are the personalities of these young people getting them into serious trouble.>

<Now that I agree with,> Alex replied. <What are the odds those three were investigating the same issue as the twins?>

<That sounds like our young women,> Renée agreed.

<Which implies that we should be investigating the taking of our girls as hostages by someone sophisticated enough to know that their implants must be isolated from our networks,> Julien theorized.

<And these would be strangers, New Terrans,> Mickey said, disgusted at the thought that his people might be behind the threat.

<We have one advantage,> Tatia added. <They should recognize Christie and would keep her and her friends safe to bargain with if they were caught.>

<And to avoid being caught, they would want to get them off planet quickly,> Alex surmised. He grabbed a coat against the chill night air, sending, <Tatia, Julien.>

Tatia turned to fetch her coat only to have it tossed to her by Renée, who was familiar with Alex's abrupt actions. Tatia grinned, nodded her thanks, and raced after Alex and Julien.

"Where are we going?" Tatia asked. She barely strapped herself in when Alex swung his personal grav-transport in a hard semicircle and shot toward Espero.

"We're going to have another chat with Henry, our new, best friend," Alex replied.

<I thought the twins only got some minor information out of Henry after he met the First and not much more,> Tatia said.

<I believe Alex wishes to have a more in-depth conversation with our interloper,> Julien added, hoping he would not witness the demise of a human at Alex's hand. His own emotional programs were in heightened hierarchy. That someone would harm a member of the Racine family seemed the height of provocation. But his real worries were the actions Alex might take to regain his younger sister, whom he adored, and whether his friend could live with his conscience afterwards.

My Books

The Silver Ships series is available in e-book, softcover print, and audiobook versions. Please visit my website, <http://scottjucha.com>, for publication locations. You may also register at my website to receive email notification about the publish dates of my novels.

If you've been enjoying this series, please consider posting a review on Amazon, even a short one. Reviews attract other readers and help indie authors, such as me.

Alex and friends will return in the upcoming novella, *Allora*.

The Silver Ships Series

The Silver Ships

Libre

Méridien

Haraken

Sol

Espero

Allora (forthcoming)

The Author



I've been enamored with fiction novels since the age of thirteen and long been a fan of great storytellers. I've lived in several countries overseas and in many of the US states, including Illinois, where I met my wonderful wife thirty-seven years ago. My careers have spanned a variety of industries, including the fields of photography, biology, film/video, software, and information technology

(IT).

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

Since 1980, I've outlined dozens of novels, but a busy career limited my efforts to complete any of them. Recently, I've chosen to make writing my primary focus. My first novel, *The Silver Ships*, was released in February 2015. This first installment in a sci-fi trilogy was quickly followed by books two and three, *Libre* and *Méridien*. *Haraken*, *Sol*, and *Espero* the fourth, fifth, and sixth novels in the series and *Allora*, a novella, continue the exploits of Alex Racine and company.

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