

# ALIEN INTRIGUE

Gate Ghosts Book 6

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S. H. JUCHA

*Chapters 1 & 2  
Excerpt*

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## Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.



## Contents

1: Two Systems Lost.....	1
2: Negotiators.....	14
3: Kelter's Fears .....	26
4: First Flight.....	37
5: Naiad Delivery .....	52
6: Knut's Plan.....	64
7: Traveler Cadets.....	76
8: Z's Journey .....	90
9: Kelter's Reunion.....	104
10: Executor Ire.....	120
11: Empire's Dissidents .....	129
12: Return to Naiad .....	142
13: A Commander's Duties .....	155
14: Assembly's Challenge.....	167
15: Juno and Baltart .....	179
16: Cremsylon's Decisions.....	192
17: Dangerous Insertion .....	204
18: Guerilla Tactics .....	218
19: Bad News .....	230
20: It Happened Again .....	242
21: Stay Alive.....	256
22: Tough Timing.....	270
23: Rescue .....	279
24: Korvath's Subterfuge .....	293
25: An Alternate Plan .....	308
26: Geneva's Turn.....	321
27: Tough Decisions .....	334
28: Reparations.....	350
29: Violet's Research.....	364
30: Union Reps .....	375
31: Imperator's Report .....	387
32: Show Us.....	396

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33: You've a Task to Perform .....	406
Glossary .....	417
My Books .....	424
The Author .....	426

# 1: Two Systems Lost

## IMPERIUM, PALTUR SYSTEM KRACKUS HOME WORLD

“The ousting of seven fleets from Helgart is unforgivable. Whom have we installed as fleet imperators?” Dakargk, the chief antagonist of Presiding Executor Rebtar, demanded.

“That the visitors had a terrible weapon not seen in the first encounters is not the fault of our fleet commanders,” a moderate argued. “The destruction of an entire peacekeeper’s barrage, including the crippling of the ship, with a small probe is unbelievable.”

“We’ve not even mentioned the worst of the encounter,” Executor Grageth interjected. “The alien commodore said that the probes could follow our ships through space and time. If we’d fled the Helgart system with those weapons following us, we’d never have been able to return to Imperium.”

The other executors heard the fear in Grageth’s voice. Nothing shook their confidence in their Imperium power like having one of their own tremble from an encounter with the aliens.

“Is this technology possible?” a Rebtar supporter inquired. He gazed around the semicircle.

Executors consulted their admins, but no one had heard of such a thing.

“We don’t know whether this was possible or an alien lie,” Dakargk stated. “What we do know is that three peacekeepers are undergoing repairs and many thousands of missiles and probes have been fired uselessly. And what damage have we caused the aliens? I’ll tell you what. Nothing!”

“The events at Helgart must certainly be reviewed,” Rebtar said. “However, we’ve a more pressing query to resolve. Where have the visitors’ ships gone?”

“Perhaps, this is how the visitors operate,” a moderate proposed. “They claim a system and evict the rightful owners. Then their constructions allow them to dominate the space, which frees their ships to move to another system. Then they build again. In this way, the Imperium will succumb system by system, territory by territory.”

Grageth’s administrator whispered urgently into his tympanum, and the executor turned to listen. As Grageth’s voice rose, the assembly’s discussion faded. Then the executor shouted, “No!” and swiveled away from his admin.

“Can you share, Grageth?” Rebtar asked solicitously.

“I’ve the answer to your question, Rebtar,” Grageth replied. His beak clacked, as it rapidly opened and shut to indicate his exasperation. “The alien fleet is at Jumanus. I’ve lost a second system.”

“Do you have details, Grageth?” Dakargk inquired.

Rebtar’s antagonist recognized an opening. The presiding executor’s failure to halt the aliens’ advance had put him in a poor light. To Dakargk’s way of thinking, the Imperium’s debacles might be the opportunity he sought to replace Rebtar. However, he would require a strategy to offer the other executors, who could view him as Rebtar’s successor.

“The transport imperator stationed at Jumanus sent messages reporting the alien fleet’s arrival,” Grageth replied. Briefly he consulted with his admin, and then he continued, “Comparing the numbers seen at Jumanus to those of Helgart, the majority of the visitors’ fleet is at Jumanus, but certainly not all their ships.”

A moderate volunteered an explanation that most executors were considering. He said, “It would be prudent of the alien admiral to post some of her ships on the far side of the vortex.”

“Is our transport returning with our citizens?” Dakargk asked.

Again, Grageth’s admin whispered to him.



“The last message sent by the transport imperator stated that the aliens were intercepting the shuttle launches,” Grageth replied. “He communicated that he was launching for Imperium, but his message was truncated.”

One more conversation with the admin resulted in projections above each executor’s station.

“These are images of the aliens turning around our transports,” Grageth explained.

The assembly watched the conclave’s fighters dance bow-to-bow with their shuttles until the pilots gave up and returned to the planet.

“Flying backward without engines,” an executor muttered in exasperation, which summarized the assembly’s thoughts and feelings.

“What was heard from those on the ground?” Rebtar asked.

“Only one message,” Grageth replied. “It was a statement about evacuating Jumanus and returning to Imperium.”

“Nothing afterward?” Rebtar inquired.

“We were reminded by every interviewee from the original encounters at Helgart that the aliens easily control our ships’ systems,” a moderate said. “In that case, I would think that neither ground-based nor ship-based messages will be allowed to come our way.”

“For that matter, the aliens will intercept our inbound messages,” Dakargk suggested.

“What’s to be done?” Grageth stated hotly. “First, I’ve lost an opportunity to expand my territory via the vortex. Then I lose not one but two systems. How many systems is this assembly willing to let the aliens take?”

After hearing the initial reports about the aliens, Rebtar feared there would be a time when this question might arise. Unfortunately, he’d never been able to prepare an adequate response.

Dakargk saw Rebtar’s hesitation, and he wisely kept his beak closed. *Let’s hear your answer, Rebtar*, he thought contentedly.

“Was there any message from the Radags?” Rebtar asked, as he sought time to consider a reply.

Grageth stared disbelievingly at Rebtar. “When have we expected the Radags to communicate except through our citizens?” he asked incredulously.

“Under the unusual circumstances, I might have expected some ingenuity,” Rebtar returned. “It’s not every cycle that we lose a system to aliens.”

Rebtar noticed that his supporters didn’t appreciate his flippant remark. On the other hand, he saw the gleam in Dakargk’s orbs. His most powerful adversary was enjoying his discomfort.

“There’s no doubt that the Imperium faces a challenge unlike anything it’s encountered,” Rebtar temporized. “I request that each executor conference with staff and advisors to submit suggestions as to how to deal with this invasion. Please deliver them to my admin before the next scheduled meeting. Now we must return to our agenda.”

*Your stall won’t save you, Rebtar,* Dakargk thought triumphantly.

While Rebtar moved on to the next item on the assembly’s calendar, Dakargk hurriedly composed a message to his admin and sent it.

The admin scanned the message and requested more details from Dakargk. When he received them, he messaged fourteen executors with Dakargk’s invitation.

After the lengthy assembly meeting, an executor was prepared to sail to the territory. Typically, an executor spent about a third of the time in his territory. The remainder found the executor on Imperium.

Every one of Dakargk’s fourteen invitees postponed their sailing date, especially when notice was taken of the individuals who expected to attend the impromptu meeting. An inkling of the subject was the invitation to Grageth.

Dakargk’s admin notified the executor’s household of the requirement to prepare a dinner for the guests, which occasioned a rush to accommodate the request.

As Dakargk rode to his residence in his personal transport, he worked to script his opening to the other executors. Nothing he created pleased him. Therefore, he decided on a different approach.

The executors expected drinks and a contentious meeting. Instead, they were served, and, within minutes of the last arrival, they were treated to a sumptuous meal. Afterward, the fifteen executors retired to a private room. When the doors closed, the household staff was excluded.

“An intriguing collection, Dakargk,” a moderate commented, surveying the group of executors. Supporters of Rebtar and Dakargk were present, as well as moderates.

“I thought our discussion about the aliens was truncated today,” Dakargk said, “and I hoped that this group would like the opportunity to continue it.” He was pleased to see that every head and beak tipped in agreement.

“I’m perturbed that Rebtar is treating this alien infestation with indifference,” Grageth said angrily. “Of course, he’s not the one losing two systems and an opportunity to expand his territory.”

“Who here thinks they’ll be able to submit a proposal to Rebtar that has a significant chance of defeating the aliens?” Dakargk inquired.

Heads turned left and right seeking to see if anyone thought they might be successful.

“That’s disappointing,” a moderate remarked, when it was clear that no one thought they knew how the Imperium could defeat the aliens.

“Dakargk, you invited us here,” Grageth said. “Did you intend this to be a general discussion, or did you have an idea?”

“Admittedly, something occurred to me, but I’d hoped that the rest of you might have a better idea,” Dakargk replied.

“Well, as we aren’t producing anything workable,” Grageth continued, “I think it’s time to throw your concept on the table.”

“Understand, it’s not a polished proposal,” Dakargk responded. “Work will be needed to see if it’s viable.”

“Out with it, Dakargk,” a Rebtar supporter instructed.

Dakargk tipped his head in acknowledgment of the request. “It occurred to me that our encounters with the aliens result in humiliating defeats because we lack information about their offensive weapons. In addition, we’ve heard numerous times about the aliens’ preference to

preserve life. This led me to think that we shouldn't be engaging the aliens in space."

"Where else do you fight ships?" a moderate queried confusedly.

"On the planets?" an executor inquired.

"Not on any planet," Dakargk replied. "On the home world only."

"We aren't prepared to take on the digital sentients, the SADEs," Grageth argued. "I've seen the reports about them that Engineer Ragirt filed."

"I agree. Krackus aren't their equals," Dakargk replied. Then he sat quietly, waiting for others to anticipate where he was headed. It didn't take several executors long to guess what Dakargk was intimating.

"It would have been helpful to hear how the Radags fared against the aliens if they'd landed on Jumanus," a Rebtar supporter said.

Heads whipped toward the speaker. It dawned on the remainder of the executors what Dakargk had been suggesting.

"You can't be suggesting equipping the Radags to fight the aliens?" an executor queried anxiously.

"Why not?" Dakargk asked. "Do you have an alternative for this group?"

"No, I don't," the executor replied hotly. "The Radags are dangerous, and you know it."

"The Radags are a dangerous race," Dakargk admitted. "This is why we need them."

The executors, who were normally a controlled group, shouted various retorts and questions at Dakargk, who listened silently. This was the lively discussion he'd hoped to precipitate. Riled as they were, the executors were more likely to consider something farfetched.

Dakargk's admin, hearing the commotion from outside the room, motioned to the household staff, who'd been waiting.

When the room's doors slid aside, the executors halted their heated exchanges.

Efficiently, the staff picked up empty glasses and delivered fresh, cool drinks.

When the doors slid closed behind the staff, the executors stared at Dakargk. He saw hostility in some orbs, curiosity in others, and encouragement from a few.

“As I mentioned at the start of our discussion, I don’t have all the details,” Dakargk explained. “We aren’t stopping the aliens. They’ve handily taken two systems from Grageth’s territory, and, as he rightly points out, we’ve done no damage to their ships. So, I ask you, what are we to do?”

“How would you go about this?” a supporter asked.

Dakargk shrugged. “It would seem logical to talk to Fyghturn,” he replied.

The executors mulled the approach. It was a sensible first step. All Radag negotiations went through Fyghturn, but any proposed agreement required the approval of the Imperium assembly.

“I see problems,” a moderate volunteered. “If you simply negotiate to deploy more Radag mercenaries on home worlds, there aren’t enough of them to accommodate but a small percentage of our systems.”

“Which is why that wouldn’t be my approach,” Dakargk replied. “We can’t afford to adopt a defensive posture with the aliens. We must stop their advance until such time as we’re able to find a way to defeat their superior technology.”

“We wait to hear your offer to the Radags,” a Rebtar supporter said pointedly.

“I would tell Fyghturn that we’ve a problem on Jumanus, and this is an opportunity for the Radags to earn some appreciation from the empire,” Dakargk replied. “Certainly, I expect Fyghturn to recognize the opening and ask for increases in the usual contract rate. I would play his game, and he would settle on a fair raise.”

“Then what?” the Rebtar supporter pressed.

“Then I would tell Fyghturn that we need between one and two thousand of the best Radag warriors,” Dakargk finished. His comment confused the other executors.

“Your proposal makes no sense, Dakargk,” a moderate said. “We acknowledge that you’re the most familiar with Fyghturn and the Radags,

as they exist in your territory, but that many warriors can't protect a planet."

"I agree that they can't," Dakargk responded, rapidly clicking his beak.

"Then you're dangling a huge contract to engage Fyghturn," the moderate surmised.

"As you say, I've been the Imperium's singular contact with Fyghturn, and I understand how he thinks," Dakargk said. "As I'm not due to see the negotiator for another quarter annual, he'll be suspicious of my arrival. Anything I offer will be seen by him as disingenuous, and he'll seek to understand the true nature of our problem."

"How forthright will you be?" a Rebtar supporter inquired.

"If I don't explain the challenge to Fyghturn, we won't be able to engage the Radags," Dakargk said. To the many dubious expressions, he added, "I, for one, don't know how to kill a SADE or any large alien, for that matter, in close combat. Do any of you have the necessary skills?"

"You will bring the contract to the assembly for approval," a moderate said. It wasn't meant to be a question, and Dakargk took it that way. Without the approval of the moderates, who represented more than a third of the assembly, the agreement wouldn't be ratified. Therefore, he tipped his head in acknowledgment to the moderate.

"Are you planning to go alone?" an executor inquired.

"Anyone who wishes to accompany me is welcome," Dakargk replied. He didn't see any takers. "For this trip, I think it's optimal to require the attendance of Inquisitor Tarbar and Fleet Emperor Deckus. Although, I'm severely disappointed by their efforts at Helgart, it must be noted that they had few options, if any."

With no other thoughts or questions forthcoming, Dakargk thanked the executors for their time and attention. His final message was, "I would request the subject of this meeting remain secret until I return." He knew it was unlikely, but any leaks, which he could surely track, would tell him who was serious about the alien problem and who was more intent on assembly politics.



After the executors left Dakargk's residence, he wasted no time communicating to Inquisitor Tarbar and Fleet Emperor Deckus that he required they take an extended trip with him.

Deckus had the same reaction as Tarbar. Both thought the directive to be unusual. It didn't issue from the Imperium, not even from Presiding Executor Rebtar. However, as Dakargk was an executor, they had no choice but to obey.

After his confirmation of the two passengers, Dakargk wasted no time boarding his personal transport for the shuttleport. His admin and household knew his requirements. His baggage was already aboard, and his personal preferences had already been stocked.

Boarding the shuttle, Dakargk found Tarbar in his seat. He nodded to the inquisitor and chose to sit several seats away from him.

When the shuttle docked with Dakargk's Imperium ship, Tarbar watched the executor exit the shuttle and walk off without a comment. A steward was ready to take his bags and show him to his cabin.

Tarbar thought to ask their destination, but he was sure the steward wouldn't know.

After unpacking, Tarbar strolled to the bridge and greeted the imperator. Then he turned to observe the monitors and the panels. "Making for a fleet, are we?" he inquired casually.

"Fleet Emperor Deckus will be joining us," the imperator replied.

Tarbar thanked the imperator for the information and casually left the bridge. Then he made his way to the lower deck to wait for Deckus.

Deckus exited his shuttle and received help to strip off his suit. When he rotated through the airlock, he met Tarbar and muttered, "Not again."

"Is that intended as a comment about me or our circumstances?" Tarbar inquired.

"What do you know?" Deckus asked. He was irritated by the entire affair. The only thing that mollified him was that his fleet had been left in Gretren's hands.

“I do know that we’re not headed to Helgart, if that helps,” Tarbar replied.

“It does,” Deckus replied. “So, where are we going?”

“Good question,” Tarbar responded. “The Imperium assembly recently concluded its meeting. Half the executors headed for their territories. Rumor has it that Dakargk hosted the other half of the executors at his residence.”

“Any information about the meeting’s purpose?” Deckus inquired.

“Nothing leaked, which is unusual,” Tarbar replied.

“That’s not good,” Deckus remarked. “Dakargk has a prosperous territory. Who could be of interest to him that he’d require our company?”

“The only thing you and I have in common is Helgart,” Tarbar mused. “That means this trip has to do with the visitors, and that can mean only one destination.”

The pair’s conversation was interrupted by a crew member. “Inquisitor Tarbar and Fleet Imperator Deckus, Executor Dakargk would see you now.”

Deckus burned to hear Tarbar’s final thought, but the inquisitor kept his orbs focused forward. He took the hint. Every crew member aboard the ship would be absolutely loyal to the executor.

Both Tarbar and Deckus were surprised by Dakargk’s suite. They’d expected something plush, opulent. Instead, it resembled a command post. Two of the walls were completely covered by panels that controlled monitors and projection stations.

“Sit,” Dakargk said curtly to his guests, pointing at a small round conference table. “We’re headed for Darmian.”

“Home world of the Radags?” Deckus queried.

“That’s correct,” Dakargk replied. “I’ve business to conduct with Fygethurn.”

Deckus wanted further details, but he was uncertain how to begin.

Tarbar chose to reply formally. “How might we be of service, Executor Dakargk?”

Dakargk cocked his head, as if to have a better view in which to examine Tarbar’s true nature. Then he replied, “That’s unknown.”



At this point, Deckus's frustration had grown past the point of containment. The executors' intrigues had resulted in nothing but failure, while they risked the lives of Krackus crews. Still, he held his temper in check and said, "Executor, the more you tell us, the better we're able to assist you in achieving your goal."

Dakargk's right hand swept the air in front of him, as if signaling he was willing to relent to the fleet emperor's request. "The alien fleet wasn't found at Helgart because it was at Jumanus," he said.

Tarbar and Deckus glanced toward each other, and their orbs lit.

"All thoughts will be shared," Dakargk commanded.

"Jumanus isn't just the Gorder home world. It's the nearest home world to Helgart," Tarbar replied.

"This is known," Dakargk said dismissively.

"It's provocation," Deckus added.

"Expound," Dakargk directed.

"The visitors have the guidance of Kreuz and the dissidents," Deckus explained. "The admiral would have explained her desires to them, and, in turn, she would have received their help."

"You aren't being clear, Deckus," Dakargk admonished.

"This speaks to the very nature of the visitors," Deckus explained. "The admiral and many other fleet members are SADEs, digital sentients. In addition, we understand that the conclave, which the fleet represents, is experienced at first contacts. They won't react to a single prompt from us. They'll be planning far in advance of us."

"Then the aliens have sailed to Jumanus to provoke a response from us?" Dakargk sought to confirm.

"Isn't what this is about, Executor?" Tarbar inquired, spreading his hands wide to indicate Dakargk and the ship.

"The aliens can't know what I've intended," Dakargk argued.

"We agree," Deckus said quickly. "But this is part of the visitors' way. We consider their actions unorthodox, but each thing they do is intended to make us react so that they can learn about us."

"Discover our weaknesses," Dakargk commented.

"Uncover our true natures, Executor," Tarbar corrected.

“This helps me understand why the admiral didn’t visit our trap,” Dakargk mused.

“What trap?” Tarbar queried.

Dakargk explained the nature of the decoy they’d offered the aliens to split their Helgart forces. When he finished, he noted the nearly imperceptible trembling in his guests’ necks.

“I’ve said something humorous?” Dakargk queried.

The executor’s glare quickly sobered Tarbar and Deckus.

“Apologies, Executor,” Tarbar replied sincerely. “If our opinions had been solicited, we might have convinced the assembly that the trap wouldn’t have worked.”

“Your hindsight is of no value to me or the assembly,” Dakargk remarked disdainfully.

Both Tarbar and Deckus realized that the executor had enough of their advice, and they sat quietly. With an imperial wave of Dakargk’s hand toward the suite’s door, they hurriedly exited.

“Your cabin is this way, Fleet Emperor Deckus,” a crew member said, solicitously indicating the direction.

“Walk with me,” Deckus said quietly to Tarbar.

At Deckus’s cabin, he dismissed the crew member, while Tarbar and he chatted about innocuous subjects. Then the pair swiftly entered the cabin.

“A little utilitarian,” Deckus commented, surveilling the accommodations.

“It’s like mine,” Tarbar remarked. “There’ll be a few cabins superior to ours on this ship. That might tell you something about how Dakargk views us.”

“Let’s make this quick,” Deckus said. “Afterward, I don’t want us meeting except in Dakargk’s presence, unless we must.”

“Agreed,” Tarbar replied.

“I don’t see how I add value,” Deckus complained. “The Radags are a land force. I fight ships. The only time our crews encountered the visitors was when they repaired our peacekeepers. Korvath and Ragirt reported every event of the visitors’ processes. I’m sure that Dakargk has seen those reports.”

“I understand your frustration, Deckus,” Tarbar responded. “I think Dakargk’s plan is unformed, and he needs our assistance to understand how the visitors might react to the various proposals offered between Fyghthurn and him.”

“And are you comfortable advising Dakargk on how the visitors will react in a land engagement?” Deckus inquired.

Tarbar gurgled at the thought that he had any knowledge about the subject. “Of course not,” he replied. “I’m proposing what I believe Dakargk thinks. I didn’t say he knew what he was doing.”

“Wonderful,” Deckus grumbled. “We’re about to —” he halted when he saw Tarbar’s orbs widen, and his hand swiftly warded him off. He nodded his head in understanding, and Tarbar offered an excuse about needing some rest, as a conclusion to their conversation.

After Tarbar left, Deckus pulled an electronic device from his baggage and checked his cabins for snoops. He found three and was careful not to disturb them.

## 2: Negotiators

### DARMIAN, RADAG HOME WORLD EXECUTOR DAKARGK'S TERRITORY

“An Imperium transport has arrived in system, Fyghturn,” the spaceport director said over his link to the negotiator.

“Just the single ship?” Fyghturn inquired.

“It’s been on approach for a full cycle,” the director replied. “We’ve been monitoring our entire system. No sign of treachery is evident.”

Fyghturn uttered a gruff chuff in recognition of the information and ended the call.

Radags didn’t trust the Krackus. They knew that as soon as the Imperium no longer needed them, they would endure the same severe restrictions that they’d observed every other race suffer.

“This would be Executor Dakargk arriving much too early,” commented Ogdurg, who was the sub-negotiator and Fyghturn’s mate.

“An opportunity for us or the subterfuge that ends our power?” Fyghturn mused.

“Or a greater offering than our warriors can handle,” Ogdurg proposed. “The Jumanus commander has now missed two reports.”

Fyghturn growled, and his barbed tail swished, while he considered the unlikely coincidence of the interrupted reports from Jumanus and the executor’s arrival.

While the executor’s ship made its way in system, Fyghturn and Ogdurg met with the council of Radag chiefs.

The chiefs were carefully kept hidden from the Krackus. Genetic manipulation to enhance chimerism had been practiced by the race for many centuries. In the case of the chiefs, the results had been optimal, and

their offspring developed to become the most aggressive and best battle-prepared warriors.

Despite Fyghthurn's and Ogdurg's ferocious appearances, they paled in comparison to the chiefs.

At the council, Fyghthurn explained the odd timing of the executor's early arrival. Then he said, "I wish to know how far the council would like us to push negotiations."

"Give examples," a chief requested. His words sounded like wind passing through a small portal. The whistle issued by passing through long fangs that projected from his jaw. During contests for dominance, more than one warrior had felt those fangs bite deep into flesh.

"My mate believes that the lack of reports from Jumanus might indicate a reason for the executor's arrival," Fyghthurn replied.

"The Gorders and the Jumans are subdued," another chief growled.

"They were," Ogdurg replied. "But then why would our Jumanus commander fail to report?"

A chief stood apart from the council. Each half of his split tail ended in a snake's head, and the reptilians hovered over the chief's shoulders and regarded the negotiators with interest.

Fyghthurn and Ogdurg knew the snakes to be venomous. More important, the chief didn't always have control of the reptiles. They'd been known to strike at passersby. It was the reason this chief had never taken a mate.

"The Jumanus commander is competent," the snake chief pointed out. "Absence of reports and the executor's arrival suggests a land invasion."

"My thinking," Ogdurg responded.

The other chiefs nodded, growled, chuffed, or snarled in agreement.

"Any adversaries must be identified," a chief directed, and Fyghthurn tipped his head in acknowledgment.

"Should the negotiators bargain for an exploratory team or a full force attack?" a chief asked the others.

The response was divided, and Fyghthurn accepted that as another condition to be negotiated based on the executor's information.

“We’ve an opportunity,” the fanged chief whistled. “The negotiators can request the attack forces use energy weapons.”

The suggestion created uproar, and Fyghthurn and Ogdurg prepared to abandon the council’s space.

This happened every now and then. The chiefs became contentious, and they turned on one another. Usually, the injuries weren’t life-threatening, but, in recent memory, a chief had been killed.

At the heart of the argument was the fact that the Radags had long ago invented energy weapons. They came in several sizes. The smallest could be worn on the hip or across the chest. The next larger size was a rifle. The third had to be mounted on a vehicle and was capable of demolishing a small building.

“The chiefs hunger for the old days,” Ogdurg whispered to her mate.

“If the executor’s problem is that great, the chiefs might see their wishes fulfilled,” Fyghthurn replied.

The negotiators were discussing the annuals soon after the Krackus discovered Darmian. Naturally, the chiefs had considered the Krackus to be interlopers and sought to eject the Imperium fleet, only to have their ships swiftly destroyed.

However, Krackus fleet personnel who landed on Darmian to negotiate with the Radags were swiftly dispatched. There followed annuals of attempts by the Krackus to suborn the home world from above. Huge swaths of Radag civilization were destroyed. Still, the Radags refused to surrender.

During the war, some Krackus envoys were allowed to live. Their tasks were to teach the Radags the Krackus language and the race’s history. The Radags who learned the Krackus language became the first negotiators.

The Krackus, having encountered the same problem with other systems, saw a solution in the Radags. Imperium ships could rule space, but the Krackus were ill-equipped to take possession of the home worlds of highly contentious races.

Eventually, the Krackus reached an agreement with the Radag negotiators. The entire process was carefully orchestrated by the Krackus to prevent more of them falling into Radag hands.

At the time, the Krackus were aware that the Radags possessed energy weapons. They'd learned that hard lesson with the loss of the first shuttles to attempt landing on Darmian. However, this suited the executors' plan for the Radags.

In the initial agreement, the Imperium offered to supply the material necessary to rebuild the destroyed cities, ships, and mining domes of the Radags.

The parties agreed to two operational phases. In the first phase, the Radags could employ energy weapons when landing on the targeted home worlds. After the race surrendered, the energy weapons were to be collected and held for the return to Darmian. Thereafter, the Radags would use edged weapons to protect the Krackus business elite, who landed on the planet to run their enterprises.

For the Radags, using their energy weapons freely against other races was an opportunity not to be missed, and the bargain had been sealed.

For centuries, Radag warriors lusted to be selected to participate in the wholesale slaughter of the resisting races. Happily, for the warriors, stubborn races often didn't succumb easily. However, the Radags' ruthless decimation of civilians often convinced the defenders that it was better to accept Krackus domination than see their populations decimated.

In the Radag invasion of Jumanus, the first transport dropping planetside with a load of warriors was plucked from the sky by Kelter. The Gorder's enormous claws tore into the bow, killing the pilot and copilot. Then the transport tumbled into the sea.

The Radags hunted the Gorders in retribution for the loss of their warriors, and their energy weapons killed four of Kelter's kind.

Accepting that Gorders couldn't compete with the Radag warriors, Kelter negotiated a deal with the Krackus. He would surrender if the killing of the Gorders would stop.

The Krackus accepted Kelter's proposal.

When Kelter surrendered, he received an injection, which he presumed would end his life. Instead, he woke up in a cold dark bay, with no way to exit the space. From the other incarcerated individuals, he learned that he was deep underground on an airless planet called Helgart.

After the chiefs' fracas, they disbanded to attend to their wounds. Fortunately, none of the injuries were fatal.

The negotiators accepted their limited instructions, and they made their way home. Warriors, who were assigned to guard the premises, checked the negotiators' transport before admitting them through the gates.

Cycles later, an Imperium shuttle landed on Darmian.

Fygthurn and Ogdurg observed the executor's meeting rituals. They boarded the shuttle, which was devoid of passengers.

The pilot's cabin was fortified. An energy rifle could have penetrated the door, but it would have killed the pilot and damaged the controls.

When the shuttle landed aboard Dakargk's ship, the pilot remained in the cabin.

Fygthurn and Ogdurg divested their persons of every weapon, piling them on their seats. Then they exited the shuttle and approached the negotiation station. There were two sides to the station, which were separated by a transparent wall. Audio and voice pickups were the only means of exchange offered the parties.

Comfortable seats awaited the negotiators. When Ogdurg spotted water and food, she nudged her mate and subtly indicated the offering.

The message was clear to Fygthurn. The executor was being magnanimous, and the negotiations could be critical or protracted or, perhaps, both.

Typically, a single seat waited on the other side of the negotiators' transparent wall. Now, there were three, which intrigued Fygthurn and Ogdurg.

When the airlock rotated, the negotiators stood. The executor was a known entity, but the two who accompanied him were unknown. Although, it must be said, the Radags were poor at discerning the subtle aspects of Krackus façades.

"Negotiators Fygthurn and Ogdurg, welcome," Dakargk said. "On my left is Inquisitor Tarbar, and the other individual is Fleet Commander Deckus."

The negotiators nodded respectfully and waited for the executor to indicate they could be seated. Throughout each and every meeting, the



negotiators had always consistently demonstrated their obedience. All the while, they imagined breaching the transparent wall and strangling or eviscerating the executor.

When the two sides were seated, Deckus and Tarbar concentrated on not displaying the fear that invaded their bodies. They'd heard of the Radags' horrifying appearances, and they'd seen visuals. However, sitting across from a pair of warriors was severely intimidating.

Dakargk regarded the negotiators. Like the Radags who had difficulty identifying Krackus, he couldn't read the Radags' expressions. To him, they always appeared angry. "I've a new contract," he said.

Fyghthurn and Ogdurg were seasoned negotiators, and they waited to hear the details.

"An upstart race has tried to invade a Krackus system," Dakargk continued. "We expect some of them have made planetfall. We want them removed."

"Are you referring to the Jumanus system?" Fyghthurn inquired. Dakargk's hesitation told him his assumption was accurate. Nonetheless, he waited for Dakargk's confirmation.

"That's correct," Dakargk replied.

"Who dares attack a Krackus system?" Ogdurg asked.

"Does it matter?" Dakargk replied nonchalantly. "Are the Radags worried about the nature of their adversaries?"

"Executor Dakargk is generous to present us with a new contract," Fyghthurn said. "Unfortunately, I fear the chiefs will not accept the offer without more details."

"What is the purpose of these two Krackus?" Ogdurg inquired, indicating Deckus and Tarbar.

Dakargk mentally sighed. He had a feeling that a simple offer coming at an unscheduled time would make the negotiators wary. His desire for the presiding executor's position drove him to share information that he'd hoped to keep secret.

"The Imperium has an outside invader," Dakargk replied. "The inquisitor and the commander have had contact with them."

"At Jumanus?" Ogdurg asked.

“Negative,” Dakargk replied.

Fyghthurn focused on the Krackus who didn't wear a uniform. Extending a sharp claw, he rapped on the wall in front of Tarbar, which made the inquisitor jump. “Where?” he asked.

“A system dominated by the planet Helgart,” Tarbar replied, unnerved by his failure to maintain composure.

“This place is unknown,” Fyghthurn said.

“It's at the edge of the Imperium,” Tarbar clarified.

“How many ships?” Ogdurg asked.

Deckus regarded Dakargk, who shrugged, giving the commander tacit approval to answer.

“It was a number similar to an Imperium fleet,” Deckus said. “We've heard that more fleets have arrived.”

“Are they still at Helgart?” Fyghthurn inquired.

“We know they're not there now,” Dakargk replied. “They're at Jumanus. We had a report from our transport imperator of their arrival. However, after the initial messages, we've not received anything else. It's possible the invaders haven't made planetfall.”

“They're likely on the planet,” Ogdurg said. “Our team commander has missed three reports now.”

“How did these invaders escape the wrath of the Gorders?” Fyghthurn asked.

“They've had help,” Tarbar replied. He'd grown weary of fearing Dakargk. At this moment, he thought it more important to save the empire, and that required aiding the Radags by delivering accurate and complete data about the visitors. “Helgart held the empire's dissidents. Kelter is a long-time resident of the planet.”

“We know this name,” Fyghthurn said. “Our tales tell of many warriors who were lost to that Gorder before they could earn honors.”

“How many ships has the Imperium lost to the invaders, and how many of the invaders' vessels have you destroyed?” Ogdurg asked.

“None from each side,” Deckus replied reluctantly. “On several occasions, we launched heavy missile barrages, but we never scored a hit.”

“Then why didn’t the Imperium lose peacekeepers?” Ogdurg inquired, cocking her lioness-like head to the side.

“The aliens purport to represent a broad group of races,” Tarbar replied. “Their organization is called the conclave. They say they try to resolve disputes peacefully.”

“You have peaceful invaders?” Fyghthurn asked dubiously. His chortle came from deep in his barreled chest, and his sharp horns sliced the air as he laughed.

“There’s more,” Deckus said. He was of the same mind as Tarbar, which he found ironic. The empire needed protecting. The only way to get on an even footing with the visitors was to demonstrate an equal level of power. The Radags might provide the answer.

“The visitors have digital sentients among them,” Deckus continued. “These entities have powerful calculation capabilities, and their avatars are strong.”

“Stronger than Radag warriors?” Ogdurg asked.

“That’s not known,” Deckus replied, “but I would expect the answer is yes.”

“Then Radag warriors will require more than edged weapons,” Fyghthurn said definitively.

Dakargk nodded slowly. “I thought you would request your energy weapons,” he said. “If this is agreed, the old rules will be in place.”

“The peacekeeper imperator must accurately and closely coordinate delivery of the warriors and armament,” Fyghthurn warned.

“We’re accomplished at these landings,” Dakargk replied firmly, making the point that the negotiators shouldn’t start dictating terms.

“There are too many unknowns,” Ogdurg objected.

Fyghthurn heard his mate’s warning. Long ago, he’d learned to listen when she advised caution. He growled softly to indicate the importance of his next words. Then he said, “Observations must be made.”

“It’ll take time to redirect the territorial fleet,” Dakargk replied.

The negotiators caught the drop of the commander’s eyes and the subtle shake of his beak.

“Speak your mind, Imperator,” Ogdurg requested.

Deckus saw Dakargk's harsh glance, but he ignored it. "If the fleet is called to observe, I can tell you what will happen," he said. "The fleet will either be chased away, or our ships will be destroyed if they engage the visitors. Then you won't get the information about the status of the planet and your warriors."

"Why do you call the invaders visitors?" Ogdurg inquired.

This time, Deckus deferred to Dakargk.

"We've a liaison implanted at Helgart, who feeds us information," Dakargk replied. "He has an affinity for the aliens. So, he prefers to call them visitors."

"I've a solution," Fyghthurn said. He ignored the flash in Dakargk's eyes. Instead, he visualized his claws tearing out the large orbs. "The observations can be made from this ship. It shouldn't draw the invaders' anger."

"I can't leave the inquisitor and commander here, while I sail to Jumanus," Dakargk replied, using his hands to indicate that his decision on this subject was absolute.

"There is no need to leave them behind," Fyghthurn replied. "We find their opinions valuable. They'll provide excellent firsthand observations while your ship collects data."

Realizing what her mate intended, Ogdurg chuffed contentedly.

On the other hand, Dakargk was caught off guard. "Clarify your meaning, Fyghthurn," he requested.

"The five of us will journey to Jumanus, observe the invaders' fleet, and collect records from the surface," Fyghthurn announced, as if it was the most logical thing to do.

Dakargk stared at Fyghthurn while his mind raced to understand the ramifications and the dangers. The positives outweighed the negatives. Then he tipped his beak and said, "Inform me when you're ready to leave."

"We can leave as soon as a message is delivered to my assistant," Fyghthurn replied. "It will be unnecessary to return to collect supplies for the trip. We brought our personal gear and loaded plenty of food, as yours is unpalatable."

Dakargk activated his device. "Speak your message," he said.

Fyghthurn explained to his assistant that Ogdurg and he would sail to Jumanus with Executor Dakargk to observe the system.

Within minutes of the message's sending, the transport imperator received a response and shared it with the executor, who relayed it to the negotiators.

Fyghthurn heard the reply and grunted in satisfaction. "We can sail now," he said.

What the Krackus didn't know was that Fyghthurn had no assistant. Buried in his message were code words that cued the chiefs that an opportunity was available and the trip to Jumanus was necessary to ascertain the value. The return had an embedded phrase that confirmed to the negotiator that his message and code words had been received.

"You know you'll have to remain in the bay," Dakargk said.

"You might wish to let your pilot out," Ogdurg said. "You have the word of a Radag warrior that he or she won't be harmed."

"Return to the shuttle, and the imperator will arrange the transfer," Dakargk replied.

The three Krackus quickly vacated their side of the negotiation station.

While Fyghthurn and Ogdurg returned to the shuttle, the declinator arranged the transfer. Crew removed the safety locks on the station, and the pilot was informed that it was safe to leave the cabin and exit the craft.

The negotiators watched the pilot walk down the aisle. His attempt at bravery was laughable, and the Radags chuffed in contempt at the wobbly knees.

As soon as the pilot cleared the shuttle, he spotted crew members who urgently waved him forward, and he ran for safety.

The station was swung aside, allowing a slender individual like a Krackus to slip through. The moment the pilot was on the other side of the station, crew members deposited water canisters on the deck. Then they closed and locked the station in place.

While the ship got underway, Fyghthurn and Ogdurg chose to lay their seats flat and doze.

Dakargk directed Deckus and Tarbar to follow him to his suite. When the door slid closed behind them, he rounded on the two males. "Who told

you that you could speak to the Radags?” he asked angrily. “You were told to listen and speak with me later.”

“Then you should have told the negotiators that,” Deckus replied.

Dakargk locked eyes with Deckus. He sought to intimidate the commander, but it didn’t seem to have any effect, which surprised him.

“Despite the unnerving appearances of the negotiators, they’re intelligent and good at their jobs,” Tarbar said, breaking the impasse. “I suspect that they won’t accept much of what you have to say, Executor. If they don’t hear from us, you probably won’t have a deal.”

It dawned on Dakargk that the problem was of his making. Nevertheless, he decided to reserve punishment for Deckus and Tarbar after returning to Imperium. The only question he had to answer was how severe to make the judgments. “Return to your cabins and make yourselves scarce,” he directed.

In the corridor, Tarbar tossed his beak to indicate that Deckus should follow him. A storage room served Tarbar’s purpose, and he urged Deckus inside.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Deckus interrupted. “We crossed the line with Dakargk, and he’ll make us pay for it.”

“That’s what I wanted to say, but where does that lead you?” Tarbar queried.

“I got as far as imagining the degree to which Dakargk would go,” Deckus replied. “At the least, I’ll lose any chance of participating in the fleets. At worst, I’ll probably be declared a dissident.”

“Then you don’t know Dakargk,” Tarbar said, shaking his head sadly. “Dakargk is one of the most vindictive of the executors. We’ll receive Imperium decrees, but we probably won’t arrive at the new incarceration station without being attended to by a few of Dakargk’s chosen torturers.”

“Those are rumors,” Deckus objected, but his tone said he hoped for Tarbar’s affirmation.

“Unfortunately, not,” Tarbar replied. “I’ve witnessed two such events.”

“You?” Deckus said accusingly.

“I was required to report that the executor’s orders were carried out. I never participated,” Tarbar replied quickly. “In both cases, the torture was so severe that the aliens never survived.”

“So, this is what you think awaits us,” Deckus surmised.

“More than likely,” Tarbar replied.

“You hinted at something when we walked in here,” Deckus prompted.

“Interested in an exit plan?” Tarbar asked. He quickly clicked his beak twice to hint at his humor.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Deckus said guardedly.

## My Books

*Alien Intrigue* is the sixth novel in the [Gate Ghosts](#) series, which relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's fourth colony ship.

The novel is available in e-book, softcover, and audiobook versions. Please visit my website, <http://scottjucha.com>, for publication dates and purchase locations. You may register at my website to receive email updates on the progress of my upcoming novels.

### The Silver Ships Series

*The Silver Ships*

*Libre*

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*Vinium*

*Nua'll*

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*Sojourn*

*Alliance*

*SADEs*

*Earthers*

*Talus*

*Elvians*

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*Jatouche*

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*Axis Crossing*

*Clone Crisis*

*Race Rivalry*

*Vortex Incursion*

*Dual Domains*

*Alien Intrigue*

*Deadly Gambits* (forthcoming)

## The Author



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

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

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

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

Readers have been generous with their comments, which they've left on Amazon and Goodreads for others to review. I truly enjoy what I do, and

I'm pleased to read how my stories have positively affected many readers' lives.

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

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