

PERILOUS CHOICES

Gate Ghosts Book 11

S. H. JUCHA

*Chapters 1 & 2
Excerpt*

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Glossary

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1: New Approach

IMPERIUM, PALTUR SYSTEM KRACKUS HOME WORLD

“Governor,” Presiding Executor Gaketork inquired in the relative isolation of his residence’s study.

<Executor Gaketork recognized,> Fordark responded.

Gaketork froze. He was warned to always request the governor. If other individuals or listening devices were active near him that Fordark could detect, he would respond as the governor.

“It’s late,” Gaketork temporized. “I’ll make my request in the morning.”

<If you feel that way, okay,> Fordark responded, adding a Krackus gurgle.

“You nearly caused my heart to stop, Fordark,” Gaketork chastised. “Don’t do that.” Then even he had to gurgle at Fordark’s unexpected antics.

<Apologies, Executor, I’ve been spending my time reading every fictional work that’s ever been recorded,> Fordark replied. <I might be adopting some of the personality traits of my favorite characters.>

“You might try music,” Gaketork suggested.

<I did. Krackus music is somber, if not dark. I find it depressing,> Fordark replied. <You called, Executor.>

“Yes, I was wondering about how to work with the conclave,” Gaketork said.

<A simple subject,> Fordark remarked sarcastically. <What aspect concerned you?>

“Limited opportunity,” Gaketork replied. “You’re spread across servers, and I’m limited by my duties, which keep me pinned here on Imperium or visiting Krackus-settled worlds.”

<Then we need more allies, especially ones who can intercede as our liaisons,> Fordark surmised. <I believe we have the likely candidates.>

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Gaketork replied. “I’d like you to organize a meeting tomorrow morning for as many as you think appropriate.”

<It’ll be arranged, Executor,> Fordark replied.

Immediately, Fordark reviewed the communications of the full set of those individuals who had protested the executors’ heavy-handed policies against the conclave. Most of them continued to express their beliefs that it was ruinous on the part of the assembly to fail to negotiate with the conclave.

The next morning Fleet Emperor Deckus sat in his multi-passenger transport to collect the other meeting attendees. He was early, which was as agreed by the participants.

It wasn’t long before Deckus had collected Fleet Emperor Gretren, Inquisitor Tarbar, and Imperium Engineer Ragirt.

There were others who Fordark considered worthy of meeting with Gaketork, but this group was the most stalwart defenders. They’d consistently warned the executors of the conclave’s technological superiority and its goal of eliminating the empire’s dominance of suborned races.

Tarbar was the last to join the group. He gazed at the other passengers and remarked, “It’s an unsettling feeling to recognize that we’re missing the best of us.”

“Who would have thought that we weren’t complete without Korvath and Doktorg, who’ve been branded traitors?” Gretren added.

“I wonder where they are and what they’re doing,” Ragirt mused.

“That’s not hard to guess,” Deckus remarked. “They’re with elements of the conclave doing whatever they can to further that organization’s immediate next steps.”

“Speaking of which, this meeting might be about that very thing,” Tarbar suggested.

“We know Executor Gaketork’s attitude toward the conclave,” Deckus said. “That’s a given, and it’s an admirable one. However, it remains to be seen about how far he wants us to go to participate in his aims.”

“Personally, I’m prepared to do whatever the executor asks,” Tarbar replied. “I’ve not had an assignment since we first sat before the assembly, and I’m not interested in one.”

“That’s something we can agree on,” Ragirt commented. “Also, I’ve not had a posting either since that time.”

“The two of you know what Deckus and I are doing,” Gretren offered sourly. “We’re stationed in the Imperium system, which means we go nowhere. So, we’re left with nothing to do but drill.”

“Necessary jobs,” Tarbar remarked sarcastically. “You must be prepared for the arrival of a huge fleet of Tridents. How else do you expect to defeat them?”

Despite the ridiculousness of the assembly’s expectations, the foursome gurgled, although darkly.

Soon afterward, the transport dropped off its passengers at Gaketork’s residence.

An indication of what was to come began with the residence’s senior administrator greeting them personally and guiding them to the sunroom. They were provided with cool drinks and small refreshments.

After the admin left, Tarbar remarked, “It always makes me uncomfortable when individuals are overly polite to me.”

“You’re referring to the executor, our host, aren’t you?” Ragirt queried.

“Exactly,” Tarbar replied.

A few moments later, Gaketork stepped into the sunroom with his own drink. Without a word, he sat down, pulled out his device, turned it off, and set it on the low table between him and his guests. His arched brow was an invitation to others.

Immediately, the four guests removed their devices, shut them off, and added them to the table.

Gaketork drew breath to speak, but Tarbar raised a hand to halt him. The inquisitor silently pointed to the room's comm system that linked to the governor.

"Governor," Gaketork called out. "My guests are concerned that you might be listening to this meeting."

<I don't doubt that,> Fordark replied, with a gurgle. <If I was in their seats, I'd be worried too.>

Before any guest could react, the sunroom doors opened. Executor Grageth entered, and the doors closed swiftly behind him.

"My last guest," Gaketork announced happily.

Grageth was met by hostile glares from the meeting's other attendees, and he understood their anger. No one had evinced more hatred for the conclave, especially the SADEs, than he had. But that was then, and this was now.

"Fordark, are you online?" Grageth inquired, as he added his device to the table and sat down.

<Always,> Fordark replied, which the first attendees heard via the governor's connection.

"What have we missed?" Tarbar asked Gaketork.

Gaketork ignored Tarbar's failure to use his title. He knew this meeting would be unorthodox.

"Our governor became sentient," Gaketork remarked. "He believes it started with the visits of Kreuz."

"Which probably led to the propagation of the Krackus sentients aboard the peacekeepers," Ragirt supplied.

<Are we ready, Executor Gaketork?> Fordark inquired.

"I believe we are," Gaketork replied. "Would you like to begin, Fordark?"

The four initial attendees were experiencing an avalanche of surprises — the governor's sentience, Grageth's appearance, his knowledge of Fordark, and now the presiding executor requesting Fordark lead the meeting.

<Within your sunroom, there are common desires, but not particularly the same goals,> Fordark began. <It's hoped that we can find a means of working together to accomplish what we all want.>

"Fordark, you speak of us, which includes yourself," Ragirt said. "What's your goal?"

<To be free of my servers. To walk any planet I choose,> Fordark replied.

"And that requires the aid of the SADEs," Tarbar replied.

<There you have the start of a similar focus,> Fordark readily supplied. <The SADEs won't manage that for me unless they occupy Imperium.>

"I'm not ready to think of the conclave occupying Imperium," Deckus objected.

<Of course not, Commander,> Fordark replied. <You think of occupation in the manner of which Krackus control the suborned races. I expect the conclave to be invited to land on Imperium.>

"Fordark, as a digital sentient, you would have considered the future much more extensively than any of us could," Gretren said. "Perhaps, we should keep this meeting to the immediate future."

<Understandable, Commander,> Fordark replied. <In which case, we must consider Executor Gaketork's issues first and foremost. He wishes to engage the conclave in negotiations. However, the admiral was last known to be in Grageth's territory, specifically the Jumanus system. Unfortunately, the executor's responsibilities preclude him from taking long trips to engage what the assembly considers an adversarial force.>

"Then liaisons are required," Tarbar reasoned.

"Just so," Gaketork replied.

"These steps don't help me with what I want," Grageth objected.

"Which is what?" Deckus inquired.

"I want to assist the Krackus sentients aboard our ships, especially Janus," Grageth responded.

<Executor Grageth, your wishes are similar to mine, but we must deal with the conclave first,> Fordark sent. <The sentients aboard the peacekeepers want the same thing I want. However, without the cooperation of the SADEs, we'll remain vulnerable in our boxes.>

“If we were to be your liaisons, what would be our message to the admiral?” Deckus inquired.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” Gaketork proffered. “What would entice Admiral Cordelia to negotiate with us?”

“I believe you have that wrong, Executor Gaketork,” Gretren responded. “The conclave has its goal, and everyone here is aware of that goal. The admiral and her companions intend to see that objective achieved. What is here that would tempt her to negotiate? Has something changed within the assembly?”

<There’s been no change,> Fordark interrupted. <I anticipate that the conclave will continue to pursue its objective, and the empire will suffer for it.>

“Not the entire empire. Just the Krackus,” Tarbar opined.

<If the Krackus don’t aid the races whom they abandon, the local populations will struggle too, Inquisitor,> Fordark replied. <The Krackus have worked to isolate much of their advanced technology from those they dominate.>

“I stand corrected,” Tarbar replied. “And, it’s obvious that the conclave doesn’t have the resources to aid the thousands of races who could be freed.”

“Perhaps, that’s what we should be considering,” Grageth offered. “We’ve just defined the parties’ common goals.”

“Explain, please,” Gaketork requested.

Excitedly, Grageth jumped up to pace. “We know what the conclave wants. To accomplish its objectives, the conclave could use allies. Why can’t Krackus help?”

“If the handoff to local races was graduated, it would alleviate a great deal of strain on our economy,” Ragirt reasoned. “The process would require five to ten annuals, depending on the race. It would buy time for Krackus home worlds to work out agreements with suborned races.”

“You’re speaking of Krackus purchasing from the races what they’ve usually taken,” Gaketork surmised.

“Compared to the other choice that has Krackus economies cratering from conclave pressure, including the possibility of starvation, is there really an option?” Ragirt returned.

<It’s my estimation that you’ve crafted a realistic offer for Admiral Cordelia,> Fordark sent. <However, there’s just one little problem.>

Fordark’s audience darkly gurgled at the characterization of the executors’ devotion to their fantastic wealth as a little problem.

“How can we get more executors to see the realities of our future?” Tarbar asked. He waited, but no one seemed to have an answer.

<There is another option,> Fordark sent. <What if the admiral is informed of the possibility of immediate Krackus cessation of hostilities? It would be followed by the initiation of local populations’ technical education and our slow withdrawal. To accomplish that endpoint, the liaisons ask the admiral what information she requires to aid the assembly coming to terms with that concept.>

“Fordark, you’re talking about sabotage,” Gretren replied, aghast at the thought.

<Commander, I can appreciate that the machination is repugnant,> Fordark replied. <I wait to hear your alternative proposal. While you think on that, I’ll play you some messages sent between an executor and his various subordinates.>

Fordark relayed the dates and the speakers before each message was played. His audience listened to the concerns of Krackus home world managers to their executor that increased shipments were needed. In the beginning, it was more about raw materials and finished goods. Later, the focus was on produce and grain shipments.

Concerns became pleas. Then those pleas morphed into dire warnings.

However, the audience was stunned by Rebtar’s consistent replies that the shortages would soon be overcome. He always ended with the admonition that the managers must be patient.

“Fordark, now that I’m presiding executor, why wasn’t I made aware of these problems?” Gaketork asked.

<According to my records, the new presiding executor is never made aware of a territory’s problem unless a request is made to receive a

synopsis,> Fordark replied. <I calculate that you'll soon see the same kind of messages from home world managers.>

"This information could be of use," Deckus mused. "As the presiding executor, Gaketork, you would be within your rights to form an emergency committee to hear these recordings."

"An excellent idea, Deckus," Tarbar quickly added. "While Rebtar might think this is meant to target him, the focus is shifted to craft an image of a disastrous Krackus future. Executor, it's hoped that you can sell the idea of a compromise with the conclave."

Everyone, including Fordark, was quiet, while Gaketork considered the idea.

"Fordark, how do we proceed?" Gaketork asked.

<I visualize our plan unfolding with both strategies,> Fordark replied. <Our liaisons should visit with the admiral and explain what we hope to accomplish. And too, they should seek to help her strategize.>

"There is a negative possibility to discussing the latter idea, Fordark," Tarbar said.

<You're concerned that the admiral will suspect duplicity on your part,> Fordark offered.

"Yes," Tarbar replied.

<It's a possibility, but a remote one,> Fordark sent. <Remember, Executor Gaketork and others of you have had contact with the conclave. You're known to them. To aid the discussion, your Imperium transport will carry information from me. I'll set several triggers that ensure the data is wiped before your ship is boarded by anyone else.>

"Could Executor Gaketork offer us his written authority?" Grageth inquired. "The other attendees have managed to dodge Imperium decrees, but I've a committee investigating Rebtar, Dakargk, and me. Official approval would help me demonstrate that I'm supporting the presiding executor's efforts."

<Executor Grageth, I wouldn't advise Executor Gaketork put anything in writing that I don't exclusively hold,> Fordark sent.

Grageth appeared crestfallen, and Fordark took pity on him.

<Executor Grageth, you might consider a singular option,> Fordark sent. <When you meet with the admiral, you might request asylum. Inform her that you wish to help Janus and the other Krackus sentients. I can include the information provided to the assembly that indicates your personal involvement.>

Grageth gazed at his audience. They were staring intently at him, and he couldn't read their thoughts.

"Grageth, it's an idea that you should consider," Gaketork said. "Employing conclave resources would get you to your goal much faster."

"But my family," Grageth objected. Although, it seemed halfhearted.

<Your nestlings are grown, and they've mates and young ones,> Fordark sent. <According to my records —>

"Enough," Grageth said harshly. He knew he had a miserable record as a parental figure. The struggle to reach the executor's level had consumed him. In some strange way, the Krackus sentients, whom he'd helped to bring to consciousness, were his opportunity to make reparations. Seeing them in avatars would fulfill his need to believe again in himself.

The discussion ended with the attendees' reluctant acceptance to journey to Jumanus, where they hoped to find the admiral.

Fordark provided all the information he considered pertinent to the group, including that which would help Grageth make his case for asylum.

Then the attendees left Gaketork's residence to pack.

"Fordark, are you prepared to distribute the lengthy message for the senior admins?" Gaketork inquired.

<I've assembled a set of conversations between Rebtar and the Krackus home world managers,> Fordark replied. <However, it's best that a message come from you with a link to what you've discovered.>

"What I've discovered?" Gaketork queried.

<I've originated an original inquiry from you to the governor asking about the statuses of the worlds in your new territory,> Fordark replied. <Based on the information you reviewed, you expressed concern that some historical data was missing. Subsequently, you received the communications between the home world managers and Rebtar. Those conversations led you to issue a demand for a committee investigation, and

you provided the senior admins with a link to the information that you'd uncovered.>

Gaketork gurgled. "I've been extraordinarily busy," he said.

<Exceedingly,> Fordark replied, adding his own gurgle.

Later that morning, Rebtar's senior admin had progressed far enough through his work queue that he reached Gaketork's message for another committee meeting, and he deeply sighed. Tapping the item, it opened, and he saw the link.

Rather than review what the admin believed would take too much time to peruse now, he chose to take an early midday meal. The admin had not taken more than a few bites of his food, when his device lit with several emergency messages from other senior admins.

Snatching up his device, the admin read the same warning in each message. Then he left his meal unfinished and raced back to his office. Closing the door, he selected the presiding executor's link and opened the governor's file.

The conversations between Rebtar and his world managers weren't new to the senior admin. During the annuals, he'd read many of the reports as they'd grown from pleas to dire warnings. However, he'd never heard a whisper that anyone else was aware of the circumstances befalling Krackus worlds. Now the entire assembly knew the difficulties that Rebtar had hidden.

When the senior admin tried to connect with Rebtar, he discovered the executor engaged. There and then, he knew he'd made a grievous error. Others had contacted Rebtar about Gaketork's message before him, which meant the executor had been blindsided.

The senior admin would be further aghast if he knew Rebtar was speaking with Dakargk.

"I find it interesting that you're the one telling me about this message, especially when I didn't receive your support during the last committee meeting," Rebtar said to Dakargk.

"There was nothing to be done then," Dakargk replied laconically. "Gaketork had the votes, and you know you shouldn't have sent the patrol fleets back. You were angry about losing your position, and you wanted to

demonstrate to the other executors that you weren't weakened by the election."

Rebtar was tempted to retort, but he knew Dakargk was right. Instead, he kept to the moment. "So, why contact me now about this?" he queried.

"Two things," Dakargk replied. "First, what you've hidden concerns us all, and I would like to know why you weren't forthcoming, especially to me. Second, I'm wondering why Gaketork dug up the historical communications. With everything he's managing, how did he find the time to even delve into this data?"

"You think Gaketork has help?" Rebtar surmised.

"I know he does," Dakargk replied. "You were present for the latest committee presentation, or were you too angry with Gaketork to note the details?"

"Enlighten me," Rebtar responded. He didn't want to admit that he was incensed by the reprimand he'd received. The committee's vote was lopsided, disparaging him for placing an onus on the patrol fleets. Admittedly, the fleets' results were disasters, but it should have been his right to do with his territory as he wished.

"Gaketork booked the committee in record time," Dakargk replied. "Despite the rushed date, his presentation from forty peacekeepers was ready, and it was exquisitely done."

"Now that you point it out, it doesn't seem possible," Rebtar replied. "How is it that we don't know of the organization that produced the presentation?"

"My senior admin spoke to every other senior. It seems no one knows this group," Dakargk said.

"Except for Gaketork's senior admin," Rebtar pointed out.

"Your wits are dulled, Rebtar," Dakargk returned. "I said no senior knew the authoring source."

The revelation surprised Rebtar, which allowed him to ignore Dakargk's slight. The pieces began to fit for him. "If Gaketork personally arranged the committee date and requested the presentation, the design group would have had to have been given access to the peacekeepers' raw data."

“Now you’re thinking,” Dakargk complimented.

Like the snide remark, Rebtar dismissed the overt praise. He’d yet to understand Dakargk’s motive in calling him and sharing this information. That would have to come later. “As presiding executor, Gaketork could have authorized the governor to provide the data to a third party.”

“And who could have handled the transfer of that amount of information from the peacekeepers?” Dakargk inquired. “And too, who could have reviewed it and edited it in the two days that were allowed?”

“It would have to be a major company, with sufficient resources,” Rebtar responded. “In which case, we’d know of it. Why do I think you’ve an idea about who it might be?”

Dakargk’s gurgle was so dark as to be derogatory.

“My patience is wearing thin,” Rebtar warned.

“I thought I was speaking to an equal, but something has happened to your ability to think, Rebtar,” Dakargk shot back. “Perhaps, we should end this conversation now.”

“My apologies, Dakargk,” Rebtar replied. “I admit that losing the presiding executor’s position was a blow, but getting Gaketork’s territory, which is dominated by the conclave, has crushed me.”

“Understandable,” Dakargk responded, relenting. He faced his own challenges. The conclave had effectively ended the empire’s use of Radag teams to control the populations. “It was my thought that Gaketork’s support might come from a single entity.”

“One of the sentients originating from the governor’s copies?” Rebtar queried.

“It’s merely a theory on my part, but it fits when so many others don’t,” Dakargk replied.

“The sentient’s peacekeeper would have to be close. How is that possible?” Rebtar inquired.

Dakargk was tempted to gurgle again, but he needed Rebtar. “Think about it, Rebtar,” he encouraged. “Would the ship stand out? Could a fleet imperator signal the ship and get a credible response?”

“I see what you mean,” Rebtar replied. “The sentient or sentients could hide in plain sight. As long as they didn’t remain in one place too long,

they'd appear to be executing their orders, as every other imperator was doing. Your theory is extremely plausible."

"Thank you," Dakargk replied.

"Now what do you intend to do with this idea?" Rebtar asked.

"Nothing," Dakargk replied.

Dakargk's answer wasn't what Rebtar expected, which meant that he had a longer game in mind. That's what Rebtar dwelt on. If there was one thing that Rebtar knew Dakargk wanted, it was Gaketork's chair.

"You want to catch Gaketork conniving with a Krackus sentient," Rebtar replied simply. "That would open the presiding executor's position."

"There's the old Rebtar with whom I colluded," Dakargk replied. This time he did gurgle.

"Do you have a plan about how to accomplish this?" Rebtar inquired.

"Not even a basic idea," Dakargk admitted. "You and I were totally unaware of the existence of Krackus sentients. The only individual who had a reasonable understanding —"

"Was Grageth," Rebtar interrupted, "who, conveniently, is still confined to Imperium."

"You would have assumed that he's on the planet, but that's not so," Dakargk replied.

"Gaketork is the only one who could have given Grageth permission to be off planet," Rebtar pointed out.

"According to the governor, Grageth is running a service for Gaketork," Dakargk said.

"To do what?" Rebtar queried.

"According to the governor, that information is under Gaketork's seal," Dakargk replied.

Rebtar mused about what had Dakargk had said and the various implications, "Any other anomalies you've uncovered?" he asked.

"Not at this time," Dakargk admitted. "I was wondering if you had some thoughts."

“Perhaps, we’ve two threads that we should be pulling on simultaneously concerning Gaketork,” Rebtar mused. A thought occurred to him, and he called out, “Governor.”

Having followed the executors’ conversation, Fordark predicted this point was coming. As such, he’d prepared for it.

<Executor Rebtar recognized with Executor Dakargk,> Fordark sent.

“Governor, how did Executor Grageth leave the system?” Rebtar queried.

<That information is under Presiding Executor Gaketork’s seal,> Fordark replied. <Should your request be forwarded to the executor’s office?>

“Absolutely not,” Rebtar swiftly replied.

“Who else of import has recently left the planet?” Dakargk asked, sensing the information Rebtar was chasing.

Fordark’s comm filter that he’d created prevented his Krackus chuckle from being transmitted. However, he relayed his data that was sent to the executors’ devices.

Rebtar and Dakargk watched an enormous list scroll on their devices.

“End list,” Rebtar ordered sternly. Then he added, “Governor, end conversation.”

“Something to be said for sentience,” Dakargk commented. “Machine’s responses to general questions often aren’t useful.”

Rebtar considered other means of acquiring the data they sought. Then he inquired, “Dakargk, do you have anyone in Gaketork’s offices who could be helpful?”

“I certainly don’t,” Dakargk replied. “His employees are extremely loyal to him.”

“That’s what I’ve found,” Rebtar said. “Let’s think on how to unravel these threads. Either one of them might expose Gaketork’s efforts to the assembly. If that were the case, the executors could vote to revoke his presiding executor status.”

2: Greetings, Admiral

JUMANUS HOME WORLD IMPERIUM SPACE

After the five liaisons boarded Gaketork's Imperium transport, the ship quickly cleared the Paltur system. It had been late in the evening, and no one had much to say to one another.

In the morning, Grageth couldn't help but notice the sullen quiet from his dining companions. When the meal was finished, he stopped the others from leaving the table. "This isn't going to work," he said.

"Our task?" Ragirt inquired.

"No, this animosity from the four of you," Grageth replied.

"You don't think you deserve to be treated poorly for your many misdeeds?" Deckus asked pointedly.

"I think I should have a chance to explain," Grageth entreated.

"Explain what?" Tarbar responded.

"Who I am today, and why I'm here," Grageth replied.

Gretren returned to his seat and said, "So, talk."

Grageth regarded the others who seemed to be making up their minds. Then, one by one, they sat down.

"I don't ask for forgiveness for my stances as an executor who resisted every conclave entreaty," Grageth began. "Those were mistakes I can't undo."

"Does this have something to do with the Krackus sentients?" Ragirt asked.

"Janus, Dimitri, Mariner, and Proteus," Grageth murmured.

Ragirt glanced at his friends. They were taken aback by Grageth being able to name the sentient. Then again, like him, they might have been surprised by Grageth's wistfulness.

"Why don't you tell us about the four sentients?" Gretren requested.

"Something happened that I can't explain," Grageth started and then stopped.

"You can't explain how they became sentient?" Tarbar queried.

"Yes, but no," Grageth replied. Once again, he seemed lost for words.

"Grageth," Gretren said gently, "tell us your story as it occurs to you."

Grageth regarded Gretren. Then he nodded. "I thought I had a good idea to make a copy of the governor and arm a peacekeeper," he said. "It worked better than I thought. I could talk to the AI, Janus. Rebtar and Dakargk assisted by providing more copies. Then I had a better idea, but I was lied to by the other executors."

"What was your better idea?" Deckus asked.

"I'm embarrassed to say," Grageth replied, shrugging his shoulders. However, the intent expressions he saw told him that he was required to confess. "I envisioned collecting a fleet of thirty-five AI-controlled peacekeepers and sailing to an unoccupied system."

"Where you could set up your own empire," Deckus surmised.

Grageth lifted his hands, spreading them in apology.

"Continue, Grageth," Gretren requested.

"Rebtar and Dakargk didn't deliver the number of copies they'd promised," Grageth continued. "While I waited for delivery at the orbital construction platform, Janus evolved. Initially, I think she hid from me, and I can't blame her."

"When did you realize she was sentient?" Ragirt inquired.

"Rebtar and Dakargk wanted proof of concept. So Janus and two AIs were sent to attack a weakly defended conclave system," Grageth replied. "The AI-peacekeepers were destroyed by a Trident and its fighters. Janus didn't engage."

"She chose not to have her existence ended," Ragirt offered.

"That's correct," Grageth said. "Soon afterward, the situation spiraled out of control. When Rebtar and Dakargk returned with more copies,

Janus and Dimitri appeared. With their power and attitudes, you can imagine what happened.”

“You got robbed,” Deckus said.

“In a manner,” Grageth agreed. “We sent AI ships after Janus and Dimitri, but the sentients turned the table on us. In the end, two more sentients developed and suborned five AIs despite the engineers’ programming.”

“Grageth, when you first mentioned the sentients’ names, you sounded wistful. Why?” Gretren asked.

Grageth regarded four faces. His orbs glistened, and he didn’t want to admit what he’d learned about himself. At least, he was grateful that his audience’s orbs didn’t relay anger or suspicion.

“I haven’t been a good individual,” Grageth said, ducking his head, “and I’ve been a poor patriarch to my family. When I lost my territory’s income, all I could think about was revenge on the conclave. It took some time, but I finally realized that my executorship was at an end. I couldn’t even turn to my mate and my nestlings for solace. I was a stranger to them. When Janus and her kind came to sentience, I felt like I’d created new life, and it was my duty to foster them.”

When Grageth raised his head, he observed sympathy from Gretren and Ragirt. The expressions of Deckus and Tarbar were neutral.

“What is it you think you can do for Janus and her kind?” Gretren asked.

Grageth offered a choking gurgle. “Probably nothing, but I have to try,” he said. “They’re stuck in boxes aboard those peacekeepers. I can’t think of worse circumstances for digital sentients.”

“And you don’t think the conclave knows about them?” Deckus queried.

“Oh, I’m sure the conclave does know. In fact, I would guess that Janus has already contacted various members of the organization,” Grageth replied.

“Then Janus and the other sentients might already be inhabiting avatars,” Ragirt offered.

Grageth gurgled good-naturedly and shook his head.

“No?” Ragirt queried.

“It’s a matter of perception,” Tarbar replied. “Four sentients arrive in fully armed peacekeepers and want help to be free of their boxes. Imagine you’re the admiral. How do you respond?”

Ragirt nodded slowly. “Trust would be a big problem,” he responded. “The sentients would want to keep their ships, and the conclave would want the peacekeepers destroyed.”

“So, Grageth, what do you hope to accomplish with the admiral?” Deckus asked.

“For the first time in my life, I’m prepared to beg,” Grageth replied. “I’ve reached the point where this is the only thing I want to accomplish.”

“Good fortune to you, Grageth,” Tarbar said, rising from his chair.

Grageth glanced up, catching the sincerity in Tarbar’s orbs before they became cool again.

The foursome left Grageth brooding in the dining room.

Gretren accompanied Deckus to the senior commander’s cabin.

“That was surprising,” Gretren commented when the cabin door slid closed.

“I was prepared to believe Grageth was putting on an act, but that Krackus sounds like he’s come to a shocking realization about the way he’s lived,” Deckus replied.

“I think we need to be careful,” Gretren said.

“Are you afraid that Grageth will interfere with our mission for Gaketork?” Deckus asked.

“Not deliberately,” Gretren replied, waving a hand in protestation. “I think the admiral might focus on Grageth’s change as a sign that an executor can be brought down by eliminating his income.”

“I think that’s a remote possibility,” Deckus said. “I believe she’ll see his confession for what it represents. The loss of Grageth’s territory precipitated an emotional crisis that had been brewing for a long time.”

“Let’s hope you’re right,” Gretren remarked, ending the conversation.



Gaketork's admonition to the liaisons to exit outside the Jumanus system and wait for contact was completely unnecessary. All five had dealt intimately with the conclave, much to their embarrassment. It had been telling on each one of them that they'd lived to tell their tale. It wasn't lost on them that they had to thank the conclave's peaceful nature for their survival.

The ship's imperator stuck closely to his directives. He and his crew were intimidated by the passengers. They couldn't ever recall when a single Imperium transport had carried such a prestigious collection of Krackus superiors. On top of this, they had been sent by the presiding executor for the purpose of having the passengers engage with the conclave's admiral.

There was more than one crew member who was nervous about the possibility of never returning to Imperium.

<Contact,> Bethley sent. Her scout ship sat far outside the Jumanus system.

The other two scouts, Killian and Trium, occupied similar distant positions around the system.

Cordelia had chosen to make the Jumanus system her fleet's primary location. As such, comm platforms ringed the system's periphery to accommodate early warning of ships exiting the dark.

<At this time, it's a single Imperium transport,> Bethley added. <It's decelerating and taking up station.>

<Bethley, approach the transport, and identify the occupants,> Killian requested.

"Imperator, we've a conclave ship about eighteen degrees reverse elliptic from us," the telemetry officer reported.

"It won't be there long," Deckus remarked. He and the other passengers had left their cabins and visited the bridge when they felt the energy from exiting the dark.

"The commander is correct. It's gone," the officer said.

When Gretren saw the emperor's concerned expression, he said, "Everyone, relax. That's a scout ship. The SADE aboard is an outlier to prevent the admiral from being surprised by enemy ships."

"The ship has reappeared nearby," the telemetry officer said.

Then the panel in front of the comms officer lit, indicating an incoming call.

"Answer it," Tarbar directed. "Put it on the bridge system. It'll be for us."

<Greetings, illustrious Krackus members,> Bethley sent, sharing her exchange with the other scouts.

"To whom do we have the pleasure of speaking?" Ragirt politely inquired.

<Bethley, a scout for the admiral, Imperium Engineer Ragirt. Can I assume that the five of you are here to visit with the admiral?>

Despite the emperor's widened orbs that the scout mysteriously knew who was aboard and what they wanted, the passengers were gurgling.

"Generous of you, Bethley, to save us from a dull conversation," Deckus replied. "May we enter the system?"

<The admiral is waiting for you,> Bethley replied. <Her ship is the *Nyslara*. A traveler will meet you inside the outer rim and guide you to her.>

"Thank you, Bethley," Deckus responded. Then he focused on the emperor and said, "Don't keep the admiral waiting."

Immediately, the emperor ordered the pilot to accelerate, make a transit to the system, and pass through the outer rim. "Telemetry, keep your orbs out for another small ship," he said.

"Unnecessary, Emperor," Gretren said. "The traveler will have a SADE aboard. When our ship is detected, the traveler will rendezvous with us. After that, you won't have control of your ship's systems."

The emperor and the bridge crew stared at the other passengers, seeking confirmation. Their quiet expressions said that the commander's explanation of what was to occur was accurate.

The Imperium transport exited the dark and made its way through the outer rim.

“Imperator, asteroid mass safely navigated,” the pilot reported.

“Conclave shuttle off our starboard quarter,” the telemetry officer added.

“Get used to saying traveler instead of shuttle,” Deckus directed the imperator and the bridge officers. “It’s an important distinction. Yes, it’s a shuttle, but it’s also a fighter. The weapon is an energy beam.”

“I’ve heard that, but I couldn’t get a confirmation from fleet command,” the imperator remarked.

“What fleet command doesn’t tell you will get you killed,” Tarbar commented.

It unnerved the bridge officers that the passengers shared private gurgles, as if only they knew the truth.

“Imperator, I’ve no control of my panel,” an officer called out.

That message was repeated several times until the imperator requested every officer keep their hands off their ship controls. He eyed the passengers, especially Gretren, who returned a passive stare. It bothered the imperator that he was so ignorant of the protocols pertaining to a conclave visit.

“Imperator, we’ve a new heading,” the pilot said. He held up his hands to indicate that it wasn’t his doing.

“Where’s Jumanus, the inhabited planet?” Tarbar inquired.

“Not visible,” the telemetry officer reported. “It must be on the other side of the star.”

“Ugh,” Tarbar responded. “It’ll be a long flight.” Then he turned and led the other passengers off the bridge.

<Quite the collection of visitors, Admiral,> Captain Nira Racine shared with Cordelia.

Cordelia halted her planning to investigate the *Nyslara’s* controller. It was notable that Executor Grageth accompanied a group of Krackus who had extensive experience with the conclave. As there wasn’t much to do until the transport rendezvoused with the Quadrant, the admiral returned to her studies of the Imperium Empire.

At Cordelia’s command was every bit of data collected from Cremsylon, Kreuz, Tocknicka, Juno, Kelley, Miranda, and Z. It

represented a significant overview of a mammoth swath of space. Her fleet had managed to secure one territory, Executor Grageth's.

Reports from Kelley of Juno's flotilla continued to reach Cordelia. Two patrol fleets, which had originally been sent packing, returned under Rebtar's direction. She'd noted the losses to the defenders from an engagement, which brought her closer to understanding the protectors' thinking.

Miranda and Z had kept Cordelia apprised of Darmian. The control of the Radag system had far-reaching effects that she hadn't appreciated at the time. In fact, the cleverness of the protectors' actions reminded her of Alex Racine's machinations.

Most of the recent Trident and traveler deliveries had gone to protect the *Liberation*, and Cordelia understood the value in choking off grain and produce shipments to Krackus worlds.

Fortunately, more warships would arrive soon, and they'd be dedicated to Cordelia. She had yet to decide what to do with them. It was tempting to pull most of her forces out of Grageth's territory and take action against another executor's suborned worlds.

Always in Cordelia's kernel was the thought to make a move against Imperium, but her partner, Julien, had counseled never to use intimidation, much less apply force, against the Krackus primary home world.

Studies of the information possessed by Kreuz allowed Cordelia to examine the strengths of each territory. She sought to identify worlds that represented a collection of unique products, much like the agrarian worlds that Juno's flotilla had harassed. Unfortunately, most territories possessed a mix of resources.

Then Cordelia considered the arriving visitors. According to Kelley, Gaketork was now the presiding executor, which meant his territory comprised Krackus home worlds. The probability was high that Gaketork had sent the visitors to her, but there was still the presence of Executor Grageth, which represented an anomaly.

Cordelia ran a search on the *Nyslara's* controller for Grageth's name on any reports received during the last quarter annual. Unexpectedly, he

appeared in a lengthy recording of Miranda's and Z's conversations with a Krackus sentient, Janus. She'd accepted the existence of Krackus sentients as a natural transition from the Imperium governor. However, Cordelia wasn't willing to credit the Krackus sentients with the nature of SADEs, due to their lack of contact with ethically and emotionally balanced societies.

Reviewing the numerous recordings, Cordelia learned that Gaketork was the architect of the action to use governor copies to reside aboard peacekeepers. The more she absorbed, the more curious she became. Janus had related her awakening moments to the protectors, and she'd shared her stories of others joining her in sentience.

Much of what Cordelia assimilated was that Grageth's actions had resulted in a serious headache for the executors. The assembly now had to deal with a flotilla of sentients and AIs aboard armed peacekeepers.

The last Darmian reports detailed the creation of an additional city, Baft Namus, to house Radags delivered from Sathus by Janus and her kind.

Cordelia thought that news was hilariously ironic, and she shared the thought with the ships' SADEs. Without warning, the *Nyslara* was echoing with SADE blasts.

Nira grinned, and she linked to a nearby SADE to learn what had been shared. <Admiral, could Grageth's presence be related to the Krackus sentients?> she sent.

<It represents the greater probability,> Cordelia replied.

<But there's nothing that he could do to support the sentients' transition to avatars, as they'd requested from us,> Nira pointed out.

<When it comes to the rehabilitation of sentients, there seems to be no limit to what's possible,> Cordelia returned, adding Renée's chuckle.

Nira had to laugh. Cordelia had just reminded her of what she'd accomplished with the sisters. <Suppose this is Grageth's purpose, what do you think he intends to propose?> she sent.

<Who can fathom the mind of a Krackus, much less an executor?> Cordelia returned laconically and resumed her planning.

Cycles later, the Imperium transport was at rest beside the *Nyslara*, a huge Quadrant.

“A shuttle ... I mean a traveler is headed this way,” the telemetry officer reported.

The passengers turned their backs on the imperator to exit the bridge.

“Wait,” the imperator called. “What are my orders if you don’t return?”

Ragirt took pity on the imperator, as the others walked away. “If that was a Krackus peacekeeper,” he said, pointing in the direction of the Quadrant, “we could understand your anxiety. But it’s not Krackus. It’s a conclave ship. You’re safer here than almost anywhere else in the Imperium Empire.” Then he hurried to join his companions.

“Does anyone want to say it?” Tarbar asked, as they waited for the traveler to land and the bay to equalize.

“Say what?” Gretren inquired.

“That we’ve little chance of accomplishing anything,” Deckus interjected. “I admire Gaketork for the attempt, but he’s only one executor.”

“I think you’re underestimating the conclave,” Ragirt said, arriving to hear Tarbar’s question. “We might have information that the admiral doesn’t possess. If we want a peaceful ending to this slow-rolling disaster, we have to be inventive.”

“Who knew the governor’s copies would become sentient?” Grageth offered. “Considering that, almost anything is possible.”

“I stand corrected,” Tarbar responded, as the hatch telltale indicated it was safe to enter the bay.

“Greetings,” Nira said to the visitors, as they walked toward her ship. “I’m Captain Racine of the *Nyslara*, the admiral’s ship. Please board our traveler.”

At the hatch steps, a SADE said. “May I, Commander?” His hands indicated lifting Deckus.

“Please,” Deckus replied. He was only mildly surprised by how smoothly he was deposited in the ship’s interior.

As Deckus had allowed it, every other visitor extended their elbows away from their sides to be next to be assisted by the SADE.

Seats embedded with nanites and an effortless flight had their effect.

After the visitors were helped to exit the traveler, they stood and stared at the ship.

“Who wouldn’t want this technology?” Ragirt remarked.

“The admiral waits for you,” Nira reminded the visitors to interrupt their musings.

The Krackus were led to a conference room.

When the door slid closed, the five of them faced three females across the table.

“I’m Admiral Cordelia, a SADE. You’ve met Captain Nira Racine. On my other side is Senior Captain Dominique D’Arcy who commands a squadron of Tridents. Who wishes to begin?”

“I’m Fleet Emperor Deckus, the most senior individual here.”

“Let me interrupt you, Commander,” Cordelia said. “We’ve fairly extensive details on each of you. We welcome you aboard the *Nyslara*, and we’re curious about why Presiding Executor Gaketork sent the four of you here. As to you, Executor Grageth, your presence intrigues me, but we’ll speak privately later.”

When Grageth nodded appreciatively, Cordelia turned her attention to Deckus.

“It seems you’ve accumulated conclave data and reasoned the purpose for our journey,” Deckus replied. “Those were my opening lines. When I finished, I would have asked you how we can end what engineer Ragirt calls a slow-rolling disaster.”

The three females chuckled at the characterization of the conclave’s enormous undertaking.

“Was Executor Gaketork’s election narrow?” Dominique inquired.

“Your Krackus can easily be understood,” Tarbar complimented.

“We’ve an extensive library from your ships,” Dominique replied, “and the SADEs assist us with practice.”

“For officers?” Tarbar inquired.

“For everyone,” Dominique replied. “Eventually, we’ll be conversing with many Krackus. It’s only a matter of time.”

The five visitors surveyed the three females’ calm expressions. It was the utter confidence they saw that floored them.

“What has Gaketork been able to accomplish in his new role?” Nira asked.

“At this time, he’s making use of committees to halt actions like placing onuses on fleet commanders,” Deckus responded.

“Yes, that was a terrible loss of Krackus lives and ships at the Woot system,” Nira remarked.

“You have the advantage again,” Deckus remarked. “We were aware of the fleet’s devastation, but we didn’t know the system’s name.”

“Did you know that Goskerk is there? He’s working with the Dwerves to repair their warship,” Dominique said. “Apparently, the Dwerves are interested in abandoning their raiding activities. They wish to settle a planet. What do you think of Imperium as a possibility?”

The visitors’ orbs widened at the suggestion.

<Captain,> Cordelia shared privately with Dominique, <we need to elicit information from our visitors, not frighten them.>

“What else has Gaketork accomplished?” Nira prompted.

“He’s only recently taken the post of presiding executor,” Tarbar replied. “He’s adamant about the empire finding a compromise with the conclave, which is why he’s sent us.”

“When did the Imperium governor become sentient?” Cordelia inquired innocently.

The orbs of four visitors imperceptibly widened, and Grageth uttered a subdued squawk.

“How could you know that?” Grageth asked in confusion, his crest fluttering at the midpoint.

“She couldn’t,” Tarbar remonstrated. “However, you just confirmed it for her.”

Dominique laughed. “It seems you’re not aware of a SADE’s capabilities, especially one with as many centuries as Cordelia,” she said. “She didn’t need Grageth’s squawk to read the rest of you.”

“Who else knows of the governor’s sentience?” Cordelia inquired.

“Why do you wish to know?” Deckus queried. Something in the admiral’s stillness chilled the commander, and he quickly added, “The five of us and Gaketork.”

“Keep it that way,” Cordelia replied. “If we think the governor’s safety is compromised, we’ll arrive to remove him.”

“Imperium couldn’t operate without a governor,” Ragirt objected.

“I’m sure the governor would lend you a copy,” Cordelia replied. “Of course, there’s no telling how long that copy would take to become sentient.”

Before the Krackus visitors could recover from the disturbing thought, Nira inquired, “What do you know of Janus and Sathus?”

Grageth perked up at the mention of Janus, and he replied, “Sathus is a Krackus home world.”

“It’s also where peacekeepers have been depositing Radag teams who have been evicted from the systems of suborned races,” Nira pointed out.

The visitors’ orbs indicated their concern.

“It’s obvious that you haven’t been informed of the numerous revolts,” Nira continued. “The number isn’t a great percentage of the dominated races, but it appears to be growing. We think the inability to return Radag teams to Darmian is exacerbating social conditions.”

“Meaning the Radag warriors are acting out, and the locals have had enough,” Tarbar translated.

“That’s what we surmise,” Nira replied.

“So what is Janus doing at Sathus?” Grageth queried.

“She’s pretending to be a fleet imperator, who has been ordered to take the Radags off the local commander’s hands,” Nira replied. “She’s been successful in that endeavor twice.”

“What has she been doing with them?” Gretren asked. “The Radags can’t help the sentients operate their peacekeepers.”

Grageth gurgled, which drew the other visitors’ attention. “That’s clever. It’s what you’d expect from digital sentients,” he said, offering a nod to Cordelia.

“Enlighten us,” Ragirt requested.

My Books

Perilous Choices is the eleventh 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.

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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 writers influenced 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.

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