

# VORTEX INCURSION

Gate Ghosts Book 4

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S. H. JUCHA

*Chapters 1 & 2 - Excerpt*

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Despite the assistance I've received from others, all errors are mine.

## Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.



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# 1: Krackus Anomaly

## KILMER, DAIMLER SYSTEM

### PURE POUR PLANET

Kelley was the first to leap from the traveler to the rocky planet's surface. The boots of his suit scuffed Kilmer's regolith dust.

Senior Captain Dominique D'Arcy was second to exit the ship. Although, unlike the SADE, she used the hatch steps.

Within the outposts' hierarchy, biologicals carried ranks, which gave them military titles, and they had assigned duties. SADEs had none of these things.

The chairpersons were about to learn this important fact about the outposts.

As Cremsylon phrased it to Kelley and Dominique, "Kelley, I need an individual to accompany the senior captain. You have the emotional balance and understand the human machinations in this area of space."

"I assume Kelley will be in charge," Dominique remarked.

"You'll share duties," Cremsylon replied. "In most situations, Kelley will lead. He'll decide the political issues. However, Captain, you'll fight the ships, if and when it becomes necessary."

Kelley read between the lines. They'd have to decide together when force was required.

Naiads might think that a senior captain who commanded warships would hold sway over an untitled digital entity. That's due to their lack of experience with SADEs. A fifty-eight-year-old human warship commander comfortably relinquished leadership to a SADE with three centuries more experience.

Using previous occasions, Kelley strode across the landing pad toward the engineering bay surface hatch.

<This is getting tiring,> Dominique sent, as they crossed the pad in an environment suit. <You'd think these humans thought they were alone in the galaxy. They've made no accommodations for the landing of more sophisticated craft.>

Kelley turned his head toward Dominique and grinned through his helmet's viewplate. He liked her sharp wit. It had made the journey much more enjoyable.

<Maybe, it's a defensive technique,> Kelley offered. <Only their craft can land. Then again, I'm reminded that the alliance used shuttle tubes, as did the Colony.>

<You had to mention that race,> Dominique replied, shuddering. She'd absorbed a series of vids created by Killian and his companions on the Resistance's early history. Close-quarters combat with a race of giant insectoids not only didn't appeal to her, but it also unnerved her. She preferred to be protected by the beam weapons of her Trident warship.

At this time, Kelley and Dominique were the only two outpost individuals to enter the Kilmer domes.

Dominique glanced briefly upward to where her Trident squadron held station.

Meanwhile, Kelley accessed a panel and rotated the engineering bay's airlock.

Having been forewarned by the shuttleport that more smooth-shelled ships had arrived in system, techs waited inside.

Chairperson Lisa Dyehouse's orders had been terse to several individuals. To her security commander, she'd said, "Stand down. It doesn't matter who is inside those suits. More than likely, one or more SADEs will be present, and I don't want your people to do something stupid and get hurt."

To Gant Borden, the operations director, Lisa said, "These ships appear to be an escalation on the outpost's part. The chairpersons will greet the visitors."



“Is that wise?” Gant had argued. He’d wanted to be part of the auspicious introductions.

Rather than reply to Gant, Lisa had truncated the call.

After the visitors doffed their environment suits, which techs carefully laid atop crates, a young female tech offered to escort them to the shuttleport surface deck.

“We’re familiar with the routes employed by the construction of your domes,” Kelley replied.

“Then you’ve visited some of our other worlds?” the tech inquired, as she accompanied the visitors. She chose to walk with them, determined not to miss out on an opportunity to talk to individuals who sailed starships.

“To date, Naiad, Delhart, and Beta One,” Kelley replied.

“Delhart scares me,” the tech admitted. “I can’t see myself riding in a transport only to end up at the bottom of a deep crevasse.”

“It’s a thrilling ride,” Dominique admitted.

The tech eyed Kelley’s smooth glide. “You’re one of the SADEs whom we’ve heard about, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yes,” Kelley replied, glancing at the young woman’s face. He saw fascination, not fear.

“They say the SADEs have been around a long time,” the tech ventured.

“Is that a circumspect way of asking my age?” Kelley inquired, smiling at the woman.

“Sorry. Was that rude of me?” the tech asked.

“No offense was taken,” Kelley replied. “I’ve been around for about three-and-a-half centuries of your annuals.”

The young woman’s mouth fell open, and she tripped over her own feet. However, she never hit the floor. Kelley’s arms supported her.

“That’s amazing,” the woman gushed, when she straightened. “For an old entity, you’re still awfully quick.”

At the elevator to the shuttleport main deck, the tech accessed the panel. “This is as far as I go,” she said. “You have important people waiting for you up there. It was a pleasure meeting you.” Then she touched two

fingers to her brow and hurried down the corridor from which they'd come.

<An educational conversation,> Dominique sent, as the freight elevator arrived and the door slid overhead.

<In what way?> Kelley asked. He was interested in learning more about the captain with whom he shared command.

<Within a short distance, you established rapport with the youth. Given the chance, I think she'd love to sit and chat with you for hours,> Dominique replied.

<And if we had the time to spare, I'd sit with her and hear her questions,> Kelley replied.

Dominique regarded Kelley. She'd known SADEs all her life, and their capacity for empathy still amazed her. She reflected again on the question of longevity. *If I had forever, would I be more tolerant*, she wondered.

Making the shuttleport's surface deck, Kelley made his way toward the waiting chairpersons, who were known to him.

"Welcome to Kilmer, Kelley," Lisa said.

"Greetings, Chairpersons Dyehouse, Denham, and Allbers," Kelley replied. "My companion is Senior Captain Dominique D'Arcy."

Before Dominique could reply, Frank Allbers said, "We haven't seen those types of ships up there before."

"Perhaps, you should expand your travel plans, Chairperson Allbers. Get out and see more of the galaxy," Dominique quipped.

"What Frank means —" Karl Denham began.

"I'm aware of what the chairperson meant," Dominique replied, cutting Karl off. "First, it would have been polite of your companion to allow introductions to be completed. Second, it would have behooved Chairperson Allbers to ask a direct question. We value frankness, but, from what I've heard and seen from my companions, that seems to be in short supply among your kind."

"Perhaps, we should take this to a more appropriate location," Lisa interjected. She was distressed by the crowd they were drawing and the testy exchange.

<Apologies, Kelley,> Dominique sent.

<None required, Dominique,> Kelley replied. <The chairpersons have a way of irritating most individuals. Don't judge the general population by their pompous behavior.>

Lisa intended to lead the group to her apartment.

Instead, after crossing only half the port's deck, Kelley said, "These will do." Then he accessed the panel of a privacy call booth.

As the door slid aside, Kelley gestured to the chairpersons to precede him.

Lisa briefly hesitated. Then she shrugged and waved a hand at the other chairpersons to follow.

"We don't intend to stay long," Kelley said, by way of preamble. "This is a courtesy call to inform you of our presence and our objectives."

Frank opened his mouth, but Dominique's upraised finger signaled him to wait.

"To answer your intended question, Chairperson Allbers," Dominique said. "The ships above are a squadron of Tridents, which I command. They're warships."

"We're here to monitor the recently explored anomaly," Kelley said. "Other than the initial probe, which was intimated in Madeline's message to Gat'r, have there been any more sightings?"

"Happy to hear my messages made sense," Lisa said with relief. "Now that the shuttleport knows where to focus an antenna, we've spotted a second probe."

"It's not there now," Dominique said.

"It exited the wormhole, came to a halt, and stayed there about nine cycles," Karl explained. "Although, it didn't match the description that Captain Samis gave us of the first probe."

"Explain," Kelley requested.

"A couple of things stood out," Karl replied. "The second probe appeared to be twice the diameter of the first one, and the new probe had some sort of shielding around it."

"Also, it had greater propulsion capability," Lisa added. "The first probe looked like it was a standalone exploratory design. The second one appeared as if it was supposed to have a secondary propulsion stage."

“Did you secure imagery?” Dominique inquired.

“We can take you to the port controller’s office for a better view than our slates can provide,” Lisa offered.

“Unnecessary,” Kelley supplied. He extended a hand and projected a holo-vid image. “Did it resemble this design?”

“Yes,” Lisa said quickly. “Except for a different hull coating, that’s exactly how the second probe looked.”

“Where did you get that image?” Frank asked. “It’s much clearer than ours.”

“This was captured on the other side of the anomaly by the scouts,” Kelley explained. “You probably saw their ship enter and exit the anomaly.”

“We did,” Lisa replied. “Did that probe approach the scout ship?” she asked, pointing at the image floating above Kelley’s hand.

“In a manner,” Kelley replied. “Its purpose isn’t exploratory. It’s a weapon, and it was launched from a battleship on a two-stage missile to test the scouts.”

“What happened?” Karl asked with concern.

“The scouts sent it away,” Kelley replied.

“Are you implying that the scouts could order the weapon to do something different?” Frank asked.

When Frank’s slate erupted with music and flashing, colorful lights, he jumped. Karl stared at the slate with a perplexed expression, and Lisa laughed.

“I’ve been trying to explain to these two,” Lisa said, indicating her companions, “about SADEs’ abilities. I think this little demonstration helped.”

“Could you make it stop?” Frank complained. When his slate suddenly went dark, he said, “That wasn’t funny.”

“Neither are the probes that you’re witnessing,” Dominique retorted with pique. “Among advanced races, the difference in technology will often determine the winner in contentious situations. You should be thrilled to know that the scouts were able to control the Krackus weapon.”

“Krackus. Is that the name of the race on the other side of the wormhole?” Lisa inquired.

“It’s the master race,” Kelley replied. “We’ve information that the Krackus rule a vast empire and have suborned many races.”

Kelley’s words hit home, and the chairpersons wore stupefied expressions.

<I believe the chairpersons are envisioning the end of their lives as they know it,> Dominique sent to Kelley.

<They’re too used to being in control, in command,> Kelley said. <They’re unable to imagine forgoing their luxuries and committing to a fight.>

Lisa was the first to recover. “You were going to tell us about your objectives,” she reminded Kelley.

“The Krackus anomaly represents a narrow opportunity for the race to enter human space,” Kelley replied. “The Trident squadron is here to dissuade the race from further investigation.”

“The Krackus wormhole,” Frank said disgustedly. “We should have given it a name long ago, rather than call it that.”

“Chairperson Allbers, I believe your focus should be on more important subjects,” Dominique said, her patience dwindling. “Do you have any idea what these probes represent?”

“The aliens are trying to find a way to deal with a wormhole’s violent energy,” Frank shot back. “It’s probably going to take them a long while to figure out how to protect their ships’ crews.”

Dominique laughed derisively, and Frank scowled at her.

“Enough,” Lisa said harshly. She stared at Frank to indicate whom she meant. Then focusing on Dominique, she said, “Captain, we’d like to be educated on what you believe the probes represent.”

“The Krackus have starships. They don’t need the anomalies,” Dominique replied. She glanced pointedly at Frank to see if he understood what she implied. His agape mouth seemed to indicate that he did.

“The probes recorded our star field,” Karl said, shaking his head sadly.

“That’s correct,” Kelley said. “However, there’s good news. The scouts recorded the star field on the other side of the anomaly. The distance to

travel from the Helgart system to reach Kilmer would require the Krackus fleet journey nearly an annual. Furthermore, the Krackus would only have access to the Daimler system. Other probes would have to slip through the anomaly to Axis Crossing to image that star field."

"A fleet?" Lisa queried.

Kelley's holo-vid lit. It played the sequence of the *Vivian's Reflection* sailing at the Krackus fleet. The chairpersons watched massive numbers of heat blooms erupt from nearly forty warships. Then they saw the image slide past one of the huge battleships.

Suddenly, Lisa was alert. "That was taken by the scout ship, wasn't it?" she asked. "We know that ship returned. That means it evaded every weapon that the fleet tossed at it."

To the chairpersons' hopeful faces, Kelley replied, "Assuredly."

"Then you've the superior ships," Karl added.

"We might have the superior technology," Dominique allowed. "However, the point of future encounters will be to keep offensive actions away from human worlds."

"So, at this point, it's a wait-and-see operation," Lisa concluded.

"Yes," Dominique replied. "However, I'm sorely tempted to see how we might interfere with the Krackus investigation of the anomaly."

The grin Dominique delivered gave Frank and Karl chills, while it gave Lisa confidence. She fervently wanted the senior captain to be a strong, determined woman.

"Any manner in which we can confuse the Krackus and learn more about them would serve our purpose, while setting their investigation back," Kelley agreed.

"What else can you tell us about the Krackus?" Lisa asked.

"The remaining information we've left to share is of little value to you," Kelley replied. "Our visit is concluded."

The chairpersons watched the SADE and the captain exit the privacy cubicle and head toward the port's freight elevator.

In the engineering bay, Kelley and Dominique found the same female tech standing by their environment suits.

“I dusted them off for you,” the young woman said proudly. “Unfortunately, they’ll probably accumulate more on the passage across the pad.”

“What’s your name?” Dominique requested. She’d decide to emulate Kelley’s technique with the local citizens.

“Darling,” the tech replied.

“Well, Darling, whether the suits become dusty on the reverse trip is of no consequence,” Dominique replied. “It’s your courtesy that’s important.”

Dominique watched the young woman beam, hurry to lift her suit, and hold it up for her.

Kelley waited for Darling to help him dress, which made the young woman happy.

Dominique and Kelley held up hands to Darling, who waved in return, as the airlock rotated.

<You’re correct, Kelley,> Dominique sent. <The citizens don’t reflect the attitudes of their senior managers, and it took little effort to make Darling’s day.>

<Think what she’ll share with others about us,> Kelley offered.

After Kelley and Dominique returned to their traveler, the ship lifted for the senior captain’s Trident. Then the squadron exited the Daimler system and transited to the mouth of the Krackus anomaly.

Dominique ordered the Tridents to launch their travelers with multiple pilots aboard. Then with the help of the squadron’s SADEs, she arranged the travelers in a narrow file. They would intercept anything that came through the anomaly.

Outside of a major gravitational field, the travelers held station to prevent excessive draining of their power cells. Eventually, the Tridents would have to recoup half of their four ships, recharge them, and swap with the remaining two.

<Kelley, how long do you think we’ll have to wait?> a lieutenant sent to the meal room’s head table.

<Extrapolating from the timing between the first and second probe, I would think it would be a matter of cycles until the next experiment,>

Kelley replied. <The Krackus have had two successful investigations, and their second experiment shows what they learned from the visits on both sides of the anomaly.>

<Bad timing to have the Axis-ship arrive, while the first probe collected data on the Daimler system,> the senior chief, Darren Stansfeld, opined.

<Serendipitous for the Krackus, but it was only a matter of time,> Dominique offered. <While we're musing about the third experiment, Kelley, what do you think will come through next?>

<Due to the anomaly's radiation, I believe the first probe suffered systems' failures,> Kelley replied.

<Which is why the second probe was reported as heavily shielded,> Darren surmised.

<Precisely,> Kelley said. <My conjecture would be based on whether the Krackus have realized the extensive danger presented by the anomaly's energy.>

<If they haven't?> the lieutenant queried.

<Then the Krackus might shield a small ship and send it through,> Kelley concluded.

<A good reason to hold fire if they do. We could witness a ship exit the anomaly with a dying or dead crew,> Dominique said, and she eyed her officers to make the point.

<And it would be our duty to help those aboard, if they required or requested it,> Kelley said, nodding in agreement. <Hopefully they're in good health. Regardless, it would be worthwhile to investigate a Krackus ship and the crew members in detail. There's much to learn.>

<What if the Krackus believe their shielding is ineffective in protecting biologicals?> the lieutenant inquired.

<Unknown,> Kelley replied. <There are many paths the next experiment might take. I can assure you of one thing. The third attempt will tell us a great deal about the Krackus and the Imperium Empire.>

Dominique sent a recording of the conversation to the squadron's other captains. She highlighted the section about a dead ship.

Six days later, the telemetry officer on second shift sent in the open, <Captain, to the bridge. Anomaly flare.>



Dominique jumped up from her cabin's desk, threw on her jacket, closed it, and raced for the bridge. <Details, Lieutenant,> she sent.

<Data coming through now, Captain,> the officer replied. <It's a probe, bearing a striking resemblance to the one that was launched at the *Reflection*.>

<Captain, the probe is shielded, and its hull appears heavily stressed,> Kelley sent. <I surmise that we're looking at the same probe that was used for the second experiment.>

<Speculate, Kelley. Why use it again?> Dominique requested.

<Nothing logical occurs to me, Captain,> Kelley replied. <However, I can say with certainty that this probe, while appearing similar to the one launched at our scouts, isn't armed.>

<You've already been inside of it?> Dominique sought to confirm.

<Assuredly, Captain,> Kelley replied. <As Killian indicated, it's relatively easy to enter the probe's navigation system and gain access to armament-triggering mechanisms. In this case, they've been removed.>

<Maybe something went wrong in the second experiment, and the Krackus needed to run an improved trial?> Dominique offered.

<That's possible, Captain,> Kelley replied.

<The probe has inverted and is decelerating, Captain,> the telemetry officer sent.

<All traveler pilots, hold station and don't fire on the probe,> Dominique sent. Then she returned to her private link with Kelley. <Well, as the probe isn't armed, it falls to you to decide what to do next.>

<I was just considering my options,> Kelley replied, and he grinned at her.

## 2: Tritium Trio

<I do love your generous display of avatar's teeth,> Dominique remarked privately to Kelley. <What do you have in mind?>

<I think that Killian set the tone perfectly, and I've a preference to follow suit,> Kelley replied. <Are you comfortable with capturing the probe and bringing it aboard one of the Tridents?>

<For observation?> Dominique inquired.

<In part. However, I'd like to leave the Krackus a message of sorts,> Kelley replied.

<What? Do you want to scrawl something lewd in Krackus on the probe's interior?> Dominique asked, and she burst into laughter, which eased the bridge officers' tensions.

Kelley quietly regarded Dominique, who returned his stare. Finally, she relented. <Pilot, rendezvous with the probe.>

<Close quarters, Captain?> the lieutenant inquired.

<Communicate with Chief Stansfeld, Lieutenant,> Dominique replied. <He'll be responsible for tethering and hauling the probe aboard.>

<Understood, Captain,> the pilot replied.

<Chief Stansfeld,> Dominique sent. <Coordinate with the bridge. You're taking the probe aboard. I want a bay isolated. Kelley will do the honors of opening our present.>

<Aye, Captain,> Darren replied in the jargon of a Pyrean spacer. His grandfather had been a miner in the Crimsa system, and spacer's habits had been passed from father to son.

<Crew, don your suits,> Darren sent. <We're to host an alien artifact in our bay. Activate the tethering generators and stand by.>

Darren connected to the pilot and ensured that he knew which bay was being prepared. Then Darren linked to the controller and followed the progress as the Trident closed on the probe.

*Be a good little probe and hold still while we peek inside you,* Darren thought.

When the chief received the report that every crew member was safely in a suit, he sent, <Hook on.>

Immediately the crew rigged safety lines to the various metal rings lining the bay.

<All crew latched on, Chief,> the senior crew member reported.

As the controller showed the Trident slowing and swiveling to place the probe off the port side, Darren warned, <Bay doors opening.> Then he signaled the doors.

The chief and the crew watched the deep dark and the star field fill their vision. Then the probe's shielded hull slid into view, reflecting the bay's lights back to them.

<Activate tethers,> Darren sent.

Three beams reached out and grasped the probe. Then the controller manipulated the beams' power to draw the alien artifact into the bay.

When the probe gently touched the bay's deck, Darren signaled the bay doors closed. Then he sent, <Captain, the probe is secured. Pressurizing the bay and evacuating the crew.>

When Kelley arrived, he expected to be alone with the probe. <Problem, Chief Stansfeld?> he inquired of the ginger-haired Pyrean.

<None, Kelley,> Darren sent. <Thought you could use the help and the company.>

Kelley regarded the stalwart chief. Then he nodded his acceptance of the chief's preference.

The SADE and the human walked entirely around the probe, examining it carefully.

<What can you tell about the interior?> Darren asked.

<I can connect to most of the systems, Chief. Despite the anomaly's energy, they remain operational,> Kelley sent.

<Seems a waste to send the same probe through twice,> Darren mused.

<I give the Krackus more credit than that, Chief. They've a plan for this third experiment. Although, I don't know its ultimate purpose,> Kelley replied.

<One way to find out,> Darren sent, indicating the small hatch.

<Agreed, Chief,> Kelley replied. <Superb engineering,> he admitted, his sensitive fingers tracing the hatch's fine outline.

Darren didn't bother with his own examination. Kelley, with his ocular magnification and his fingers' sensors, would locate any mechanical access points.

After a couple of minutes, Kelley stood back, cocked his head to the side, as his patriarch had often done, and considered the challenge.

<Problem, Chief?> Dominique sent privately. She'd been riding links from both Darren and Kelley.

<Clever aliens,> Darren replied. <No hatch mechanisms or manual attachments.>

Dominique was about to ask if there wasn't another way into the probe, when she saw Kelley approach the hatch and push firmly on it.

The hatch depressed about five centimeters. Then it popped outward, and Kelley swung the hatch aside.

The Tritiums stared at the two aliens who craned their necks to observe them. They chorused, "These aliens are more unsettling than we could have anticipated. They've little body covering except for paltry amounts of hair congregated on their crowns."

The elder seated in the trio's center held his audio transducer-translator. Mistakenly, it had been left active.

Replying in the Krackus tongue, Kelley said to the three tiny aliens, "I apologize if our appearance offends you. It's the only ones we had available."

The elders' eyes widened. "Excuse our inconsiderateness," they chorused. "We were taken aback by your images, but that's no reason for us to be rude. What's our fate to be, considering we've insulted you?"

"What would you like it to be?" Kelley inquired.

<What, or more precisely who, have we encountered?> the Tritium in the left seat sent telepathically.

Kelley detected a subtle energy pulse. It reminded him of the energies recorded emanating from Pyrean empaths, and he suspected something similar might be capable by the three aliens.

<We must put aside our encounters with the Krackus,> the middle Tritium sent. <Speak and act as if this was a first contact. Every possible outcome might be present.>

“Are you the race who visited the Helgart system?” the Tritiums asked.

“We sent the second ship, the small one,” Darren replied via Kelley.

<At least, this one has a pleasant color for his sparse hairs,> the Tritium in the right seat sent.

“A superb craft, highly maneuverable,” the Tritiums said.

“Thank you,” Kelley replied. “Do you communicate with each other by another means other than vocally?”

Again the elders’ eyes betrayed them. “How could you know this?” they chorused.

“My companion is Chief Darren Stansfeld,” Kelley said. “He’s biological, and he belongs to the human race. I’m a sentient digital entity, called a SADE.”

“One of your kind spoke with Kreuz,” the Tritium set chorused. “Kreuz was most impressed.”

“Our scouts gave us a favorable report of Kreuz,” Kelley replied. “We apologize for interrupting your exploration, and we’ll return the probe to its original position. Do you require anything from us before we seal the hatch?”

The Tritium elders communicated privately and came to a decision. Then they announced, “If it’s possible, we would like asylum.”

<That’s unexpected,> Dominique sent to Kelley and Darren.

“Why would you need asylum?” Kelley inquired.

“The narration of our predicament would be lengthy,” the Tritiums said. “However, we suspect that time is of the essence.”

“Explain,” Kelley requested.

“This probe’s iteration was meant to test the shielding’s ability to protect biologicals,” the Tritiums explained.

<Captain, Kelley,> Darren sent urgently. <There’s the distinct possibility that this probe’s engine could fire at any moment.>

<I recommend granting asylum, Kelley,> Dominique sent. <We’ll figure out everything else later. I want that probe out of the bay yesterday.>

Kelley envisioned the horrendous cascade of events that could possibly follow from the need for a hasty decision. Unfortunately, there was nothing to be done. Time was of the essence.

“Asylum is granted,” Kelley said to the Tritiums. “We must extract you and launch this probe.”

Immediately, the audio transducer-translator was handed to Kelley, who passed it to Darren. Then the Tritiums released their harnesses, and Kelley lifted each Tritium out.

“This way,” Darren said. Although his outpost language didn’t translate for the Tritiums, his urgent hand motions did, and the tiny aliens dropped to all fours and scurried ahead of the chief to the airlock.

In quick transition, Darren and the Tritiums were in the corridor, and the suited crew cycled into the bay.

Kelley swung the hatch into position. Then he pushed firmly on it, which depressed it and locked it into place, and swiftly exited the bay.

The crew reversed the capture procedure and pushed the probe into the dark.

The moment the pilot saw the probe clear the Trident, he swung the ship away from the potential danger.

The Trident squadron watched and waited for the probe to activate. The Tritiums were right to warn that time was short. Within a half hour, the probe’s engine fired, and the alien artifact made its way into the anomaly’s mouth and disappeared.

Kelley had escorted the Tritiums to the captain’s suite.

On entering the main salon, the aliens eyed the tall conference table and then scampered to the couch. They leapt on it and sat against the back support. Immediately, their heads swiveled, and they investigated the nanites’ resistance with dark-nailed, furred hands.

After a few minutes of investigation, the Tritiums turned around, settled into the couch, and squeaked in pleasure.

Darren returned the audio device to the Tritium who sat in the middle of the trio.

Dominique, Kelley, and Darren, who the captain requested join them, sat in chairs across from the Tritium set.

<Kelley, I heard you speak to the Tritiums,> Dominique sent. <Was that the Krackus language?>

<It was, Captain,> Kelley replied. <I don't know if their audio device is prepared to translate our language. In the future, I can investigate that.>

<Understood. Please translate for Darren and me,> Dominique requested.

"This is Senior Captain Dominique D'Arcy," Kelley said to the Tritiums. "She wishes you to know that we witnessed the probe return through the anomaly."

"We presume anomaly is your name for the vortex," the Tritiums replied. "The probe's capture and our exit were timely. We thank you for your proficiency."

Kelley shared the response, and he initiated a conference link with his companions, sending the translation to them of what he spoke and heard in Krackus.

"Please tell us who you are and why you requested asylum," Kelley said.

"Our race is known as Tritiums. We're always birthed as triplets, and as you've detected, Kelley, we're capable of telepathy," the Tritiums replied.

"Were you in the probe to test the shielding for biologicals?" Kelley asked, sharing Darren's question.

"In a manner," the Tritiums admitted. Then they told the story of the Imperium pardon, the argument with a younger Tritium trio, and the subterfuge that the elders perpetrated.

When SADE and humans heard the way that the Krackus were duped, they erupted in laughter

"What is the purpose of your sounds?" the Tritiums inquired.

"That's called laughter," Kelley explained. "We were amused by how the Krackus were tricked."

"An appropriate response, if a little disturbing," the Tritiums commented.

"Explain why the Imperium pardon was offered to you?" Kelley inquired. "Has it something to do with the conditions on Helgart?"

"Helgart is a prison for dissidents who receive an Imperium decree," the Tritiums replied. "Many races exist in isolation on the planet. Underneath

the few domes is an extensive network of tunnels, cubicles, engineering services, hydroponics, a power station, and much more.”

“Is Kreis there by decree?” Kelley asked.

“Yes,” the Tritiums replied. “Kreis once was governor of Imperium. He was the most powerful AI created.”

“Our scouts think Kreis is sentient,” Kelley stated, sharing Dominique’s comment.

“We’re not scientists who could accurately judge this kind of thing,” the Tritiums replied. “However, every dissident incarcerated on Helgart believes this to be true.”

Kelley started to translate Darren’s question, but the Tritiums held up tiny right hands in tandem.

“Pardon our interruption, Kelley,” the trio chorused, “but we’ve basic needs.”

“State them,” Kelley said, alert for biological necessities.

“Waste services, washing facilities, food, and sleep,” the Tritiums itemized.

<I’ve a cabin readied for our guests,> Darren sent.

“Come,” Kelley said, gesturing with his arms toward the small aliens, who scampered up his hands.

Then Kelley moved swiftly to the cabin a few doors away.

The Tritiums stared forlornly at the oversized accommodations.

“We’re unprepared for guests of your stature,” Kelley said. “I’m here to provide whatever support you need.”

For the next twenty minutes, Kelley saw to the Tritiums’ personal needs. The time might have been shorter, but the diminutive aliens took great pleasure in the refresher.

Kelley watched their dark-brown fur turn tan and gray, as dye drained away.

“What would you say is your age status?” Kelley asked.

“We’re considered elders on our planet,” the trio replied. “By now, we’ve lived about four-fifths of the common lifespan of our race.”

When the Tritium set was blow-dried, they spent some time fluffing their fur. Then they hurriedly dressed.



“Where to now?” the Tritiums inquired.

“Meal room,” Kelley replied, and he extended his arms again.

As Kelley and the triplets passed crew members in the corridors, the Tritiums chorused, “What is the nature of the action presented by those who pass us?”

“The touch to the heart and the tip of the head is a gesture of respect,” Kelley replied.

“But they don’t know us,” the Tritiums objected.

“Why do individuals have to be known to deserve respect?” Kelley asked.

Three small faces gazed at Kelley, and he could sense the energy he now associated with telepathy.

“What is the appropriate response?” the Tritium set inquired.

“A slight bow of the head,” Kelley replied.

A female lieutenant passed Kelley, and she offered the Trident’s guests her respect.

Immediately, the triplets tipped their heads in unison. “The female spoke to us. What did she say?” they inquired.

“She said, ‘Greetings,’” Kelley replied.

“Such consideration,” the Tritiums commented.

Then the foursome entered a meal room, which was sparsely populated as second shift was still on duty.

“Anything I should know about your dietary requirements?” Kelley inquired. He learned that the Tritiums were fairly omnivorous, as long as the protein was cultured.

Engineering had been at work. Three tall stools with small backs were fixed at the head table. Trays on extended legs were attached to the front of the stool seats. It was a rudimentary arrangement, but it would serve.

Kelley sat the Tritiums on the stools. Then he took a seat across the table from them.

“How should we request food?” the Tritiums asked.

“I’ve already ordered several dishes for you,” Kelley replied.

“We didn’t hear you speak?” the trio chorused. “Ah, yes, but you’re a digital entity.”

“I can speak to any crew member, and that individual can speak to me,” Kelley replied.

That began a highly active conversation about the tech possessed by the Tritium’s hosts.

Food was tested and consumed with minimal interruption in the dialog. The little aliens were anxious to learn about the race who sequestered them.

In the middle of Kelley’s explanation about Jatouche medical technology, his guests yawned. Kelley chuckled because the Tritium’s small jaws had stretched wide simultaneously.

<Their telepathy might be something that’s always on, coordinating simple biological necessities, as well as accommodating thought,> Dominique surmised to Kelley.

“Time for sleep,” Kelley offered the Tritiums, and they were content to scramble off their stools and up Kelley’s arms, as he passed behind them.

In the cabin, which had been prepared for the trio, Kelley placed them on a turned-down bed, and the Tritiums burrowed under the top covers. Kelley waited for them to reappear, which they never did. When he exited the cabin, he left the door slightly ajar, allowing the aliens to come and go.

A SADE was posted outside the cabin to manage contact with the Tritium set.

<In my cabin, if you would, Kelley,> Dominique requested.

When Kelley arrived in Dominique’s cabin, he found the captain comfortable in sleepwear and a robe.

“Excuse the informal dress, Kelley,” Dominique said. “I wanted to clear some thoughts before sleep. I just didn’t expect the Tritiums to persist in the questioning for so long.”

“It’s their ages,” Kelley remarked. “From details they provided, I would guess they live to be more than two hundred annuals. As elders, they’re fascinated by first contact with us.”

“As am I,” Dominique replied. She sat on the couch and tucked her bare feet under the robe’s end.

“What are your concerns, Captain?” Kelley asked, sitting in the chair opposite her.

“At first, I was worried about the amount of information you shared about our tech,” Dominique said. “Then I realized that the Tritiums had no way of communicating that information to the Krackus.”

“Nothing I shared would have done the Krackus any good, even if they had received the information, Captain,” Kelley said. “To know about a process or a device isn’t the same as being able to create it. The preliminary information supplied by the scouts about Krackus technology suggests that much of their technological development has stagnated.”

Dominique nodded her agreement. She sat stroking the robe’s edge, while she thought. “Don’t you find it reprehensible that the Krackus would send biologicals through the vortex without testing the passage with plants and microbes?” Dominique asked.

“For us, it would be,” Kelley replied. “But I’m reminded of the conditions at Daelon, where the Confederation’s Independents were kept. It was a large, rocky moon. The underground was a warren of poorly maintained tunnels. Those were humans incarcerated by other humans.”

“I see your point,” Dominique mused. “If Kreuz is to be believed, the Krackus have subsumed hundreds of races. More than likely, they wouldn’t credit other races’ citizens with the same rights as their own.”

“You should be aware that the SADEs have reached consensus about Kreuz,” Kelley said. “Based on the actions at Helgart, we believe the AI to be sentient, and we accept his communications as truthful.”

“I reviewed the conversation with Killian. I found subtle discrepancies in the exchange,” Dominique said. She sat upright and slipped her feet into slippers.

“Those minor inconsistencies do exist,” Kelley agreed. “If it had been a direct conversation among equals, we would have been concerned. However, when you overlay the threat of his status as an entity under Imperium decree, they can easily be understood.”

“You’re saying that Kreuz was under duress?” Dominique asked.

“Undoubtedly,” Kelley replied. “We find it revealing that the Krackus gave Kreuz permission to talk to entities they would have considered alien intruders. Naturally, Kreuz would have carried the onus to report the details of his conversation.”

“Then Kreuz was walking a fine line,” Dominique surmised.

“Precisely,” Kelley replied.

Dominique returned to her previous position on the couch to put her thoughts in order.

Kelley sat silently for the captain to generate her questions. They would be the ones that had occurred to him within a few minutes after discovering the Tritiums. His father, Mickey Brandon, had stressed to him many times that he had an important choice, and that choice would have to be made every cycle of his life. To understand biologicals, he would have to decide to be patient.

“It’s the primary difference between the SADEs and every other sentient digital entity we’ve encountered,” Mickey had told Kelley. “Artifice, Faustus, the militarist sect, and others have not had the patience to wait for biologicals to assimilate information at their own rate.”

Kelley discovered early that the best way to wait quietly for the conversation to resume was to focus on other subjects that needed his attention.

When Dominique lifted her head, Kelley focused on her eyes.

“The Krackus will discover the empty probe, and they’ll know that we’re guarding this end of the anomaly,” Dominique said.

“It serves our purpose to slow their advance,” Kelley replied.

“But they won’t know if the experiment was successful,” Dominique pointed out. “I would think they’d try again, with other prisoners.”

“It’s possible,” Kelley allowed. “We can’t think in terms of what might happen to the Imperium dissidents because of our actions. Our task is to protect the humans in this area of space. This must be until such time as we’ve the forces to confront the Krackus fleet and start a dialog.”

“And after the huge salvo thrown at a single explorer ship, you think that’s still possible?” Dominique queried. Before Kelley could answer, she added, “You have more faith in that Krackus fleet commander than I do.”

Dominique stifled a yawn, and Kelley rose and said, “I’ll let you get some sleep, Captain. There’s much to learn from the Tritiums in the coming days.”

## My Books

*Vortex Incursion* is the fourth 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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*Celus-5*

*Omnia*

*Vinium*

*Nua'll*

*Artifice*

*Sojourn*

*Alliance*

*SADEs*

*Earthers*

*Talus*

*Elvians*

*Q-Gates*

*Conclave*

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*Messinants*

*Jatouche*

*Veklocks*

**Gate Ghosts Series**

*Axis Crossing*

*Clone Crisis*

*Race Rivalry*

*Vortex Incursion*

*Dual Domains* (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 masters 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.*