

DUAL DOMAINS

Gate Ghosts Book 5

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: You're Our Guest

HELGART PLANET

KRACKUS SYSTEM

“Inquisitor Tarbar, so kind of you to accommodate my request to meet aboard the *Nyslara*,” Admiral Cordelia said invitingly, as the inquisitor descended his transport into the Quadrant’s bay.

“Did I have a choice?” Tarbar replied acidly. He was unnerved by so many things. As a captive of the aliens, his awesome Imperium power was effectively negated. In addition, he was addressed in perfect Krackus by the alien admiral.

“You had so many good choices, Inquisitor,” Cordelia pointed out. “You just failed to select any of them. Walk with me to a conference room, where we can sit and talk about your empire.”

“I’ve nothing to say to you,” Tarbar replied, refusing to take a step.

“Do you prefer to be carried?” Cordelia asked.

Tarbar eyed the collection of individuals arrayed around the admiral. He decided it was the better option to cooperate at the simplest of levels rather than suffer indignities or worse.

As Tarbar accompanied Cordelia, she resisted laughing. The inquisitor strutted. Under his dire circumstances, she could only imagine his hubris.

Cordelia sat at a table with a few biologicals and faced the inquisitor. Behind her stood an array of SADEs who stood quietly with locked avatars.

Despite Tarbar’s resolution to remain silent, he didn’t outlast the outpost individuals who faced him. The conference hadn’t progressed a third of an hour before he blurted, “You can’t win.”

“Why is that?” Cordelia encouraged.

“You might have taken Helgart, but you can’t hold it,” Tarbar replied confidently.

“We’ve the superior ships,” Kelley pointed out, goading Tarbar.

“When the Imperium receives my report, Helgart space will be flooded with our peacekeepers,” Tarbar declared. “We’ll outnumber your paltry fleet many times to one.”

“Oh? Are you operating under the false impression that the ships you see are all that the conclave possesses?” Cordelia inquired.

“You can’t have as many powerful vessels as the Imperium,” Tarbar replied defiantly. “There’s no amalgam of races that is as numerous as across our huge swath of space.”

“Let’s see if we have this right, Inquisitor,” Captain Dominique D’Arcy said. “Thirty-five districts and two fleets per district. Isn’t that correct?”

Tarbar’s orbs goggled for an instant. Then he schooled his expression. “You have part of it,” he allowed.

“It gives a good indication of the extent of your forces and where they operate,” Kelley said.

“Then you must contend with the vortex, which will limit your access to our space,” Tarbar argued, folding his arms as if he’d scored a point.

“Admittedly, the anomalies have been limiting,” Cordelia allowed. “That’s why we prefer instantaneous transfer.”

Tarbar thought he hadn’t heard correctly, and he searched for a way to test what the alien admiral was saying. “You claim to be able to send an individual or two from one place to another, but that doesn’t help you. Crews need ships.”

“Originally, the Q-gates were limited to journeyers and small cargo,” Cordelia explained. “However, we’ve had centuries to make improvements. The ship that defeated your peacekeeper is called a Trident. It transfers nicely above a Q-gate’s ring.”

Tarbar scanned the faces watching him. He searched for some indication that the admiral’s words were false. He saw only confidence and assurance.

“How many moons orbit Imperium?” Dominique asked casually.

“Why would you inquire about that?” Tarbar asked, wondering why the aliens were so free with information about their tech.

“It’s necessary to set up a Q-gate in an airless environment,” Dominique replied.

“Your bravado is false,” Tarbar claimed. “You can’t possibly have the tech you claim and not have a tendency to conquer less capable races.”

“You think every superior race has to be like your Imperium,” Kelley accused. “That’s a fallacy that the conclave has disproven many times.”

“I’m curious, Inquisitor,” Cordelia said. “I’d like to know how you’re going to explain this debacle to your executors.”

When Tarbar’s orbs blinked twice, Cordelia knew the inquisitor had been thinking about little else while his ship had floated in the dark.

“It’s been my duty to report to the Imperium frequently,” Tarbar replied, attempting to exude confidence. “This will be just another of those times.”

“Then you’ve often failed in your assignments?” Dominique inquired.

“Never before,” Tarbar said stridently, before he realized his error.

“Then this will be a first for you,” Dominique said calmly.

“If we were the executors, we’d realize the extent of your debacle,” Kelley pressed. “It’s not simply the loss of a planet. Almost two thousand frustrated and angry dissidents are now in alien hands.”

“Let’s not forget Kreuz,” a SADE behind Cordelia interjected.

“That’s true,” Kelley said amiably to the SADE. Turning to Tarbar, he added, “You’ve lost the ex-governor of Imperium, a sentient being.”

“He isn’t,” Tarbar objected. His declaration was met with a round of laughter and cacophonous noise, which unsettled him.

When the room quieted, Cordelia said, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, Inquisitor. We know the truth, and you would prove your intelligence by taking the word of self-aware digital beings about the sentience of another of our kind.”

“That’s a lot of loss,” Dominique said in a commiserating voice. “Does the Imperium execute failures, or do you just lose your position and your prestige?”

“I’ll say no more,” Tarbar said defiantly. He realized that he’d been expertly manipulated, and his only resource was to keep his beak closed.

Tarbar expected to be able to return to his transport. Instead, he was escorted to a cabin by a SADE. At which point, he anticipated a locked door. Instead, it was left open. He was told that without an implant he couldn’t participate in the ship’s basic functions.

After making use of the facilities, Tarbar peeked outside the cabin’s door only to find the same SADE waiting.

“What are your needs, Inquisitor?” Trent inquired.

Tarbar eyed the massive SADE. He had the same build as the green-haired female who he’d seen during the vid conference.

In fact, Trent’s patriarch was Admiral Alphons Jagielski, and, for his avatar, he’d adopted his father’s heavy-worlder stature.

“I want a tour,” Tarbar said imperially, deciding to test the limits of what the aliens would choose to share about their tech.

It was a shame that the Imperium was so hostile toward digital sentients. They had had the perfect teacher in Kreuz. But, instead of befriending him, they’d buried him on a remote planet.

If Tarbar had had the benefit of an association with Kreuz as Imperium’s governor, he’d have learned a thing or two about Trent’s kind. The SADEs had already planned an instructional path for Tarbar, knowing he would test the limits of their hospitality.

“This way, Inquisitor,” Trent said, waving an arm down the corridor.

After a few corridors and lifts that descended the Quadrant’s decks, Tarbar inquired, “Where are we headed?”

“Toward the first item on your tour,” Trent replied.

Minutes later, Trent opened an airlock, motioned Tarbar inside, and passed them into a bay.

“Why would I want to ride in one of your transports?” Tarbar inquired peevishly, staring at a traveler.

“Indulge us,” Trent replied. “This will open your eyes to possibilities.”

Tarbar thought of the flight as a rite of passage. If he accommodated the SADE, afterward, he would be allowed to learn more valuable information about the aliens’ tech.

The outpost fleet's SADEs were aware of what Samuel had perpetrated on Samis Hergis, the Axis-ship captain, and they had a similar demonstration prepared for Tarbar.

During the flight, Trent sat next to Tarbar and displayed the traveler's bow view in his palm holo-vid.

Tarbar watched the transport accelerate. The peacekeepers were passed in seconds. It wasn't long before they approached a massive gas giant with numerous moons of all sizes. The transport flew at a hunk of rock sure to destroy the ship. Then the rock disappeared, and the transport proceeded unimpeded.

For a brief moment, Tarbar had been surprised by the ship's velocity. Then he'd stiffened at the impending impact. Now he grew suspicious and turned orbs on Trent.

With a derisive clack of his beak, Tarbar asked sarcastically, "Am I supposed to be impressed by this casual display? I ride in your transport and you play a prepared vid to make me believe that all of this actually took place?"

Trent rose, walked to the traveler's aft end, and held up Tarbar's environment suit. "Test us," he offered.

Like Captain Hergis, Inquisitor Tarbar couldn't refuse the opportunity to validate what a SADE proposed.

Ensnared in the suit, Tarbar entered the airlock. The outer hatch rotated open, and he uttered a squawk.

The gas giant dominated the background, and chunks of rock and dust drifted past the foreground view.

Rather than retreat in fear, Tarbar stared at the incredible vision. He was momentarily transfixed by his own insignificance.

When the hatch rotated closed, Tarbar was released to the transport's interior. His helmet was removed, and he regarded Trent, who returned his gaze.

"This will be a rarity for me," Tarbar confessed. "I must apologize for my characterization of your presentation. Admittedly, you possess sophisticated technology. However, don't mistake my admittance of what's

transpired for an offering. Your conclave and the Imperium Empire can't coexist."

"Of that, we're sure," Trent replied.

The SADE's enigmatic smile had Tarbar wondering if he shouldn't question the statement. Instead, he chose to get out of his suit, while he thought.

"Are we returning to the admiral's ship?" Tarbar queried.

"You wanted a tour," Trent replied.

"The implication was a tour of the ship," Tarbar corrected.

"Well, you know our kind, Inquisitor. Machine intelligences require specificity," Trent quipped, as he led Tarbar back to his seat.

Silence reigned between the traveler's two passengers. Then, not much longer, the cabin lights brightened, and Trent said, "You'll need your suit again, Inquisitor."

"Another view of space?" Tarbar queried.

"In a manner," Trent replied. "Helgart is a planet without atmosphere."

"I've no intention of visiting with the dissidents," Tarbar stated in no uncertain terms.

"As you wish," Trent said, and his avatar stilled.

"What are you doing?" Tarbar demanded.

"Waiting," Trent replied.

"For what?" Tarbar asked in exasperation.

"We've plenty of air, water, and food, Inquisitor," Trent replied. "When those run low, we'll return to the admiral's Quadrant. In the meantime, if you change your mind, we'll visit the dissidents."

"You intend to keep me a prisoner for days because I won't acquiesce to your idea of a tour?" Tarbar questioned.

"Let me correct your assumption, Inquisitor," Trent replied. "As you're the only biological passenger, our accommodations will maintain you for more than a half annual."

Tarbar's beak fell open. For a second, he thought the race of SADEs might be unbalanced. When he sublimated his emotions, his mind churned on the events that occurred after he left his cabin. He'd thought to

exert his will. Instead, he'd foolishly walked into a carefully prepared plan. The recognition that he'd been easily manipulated again infuriated him.

"I'll visit the dissidents," Tarbar allowed, "but I want to negotiate the remainder of the tour now. How long must I be on the planet? Next, when that period ends, I want to be returned to your ship, allowed to transfer to my transport, and be released to return to Imperium."

"I thought you wanted to tour our ship?" Trent queried.

"Yes, I'll allow that," Tarbar amended. "Now, what about my question and my requests?"

"A few hours on Helgart should suffice," Trent allowed. "After that, you'll receive a tour of the *Nyslara*. Then the admiral has some questions for you. When that interview is complete, you may sail for your home world."

The answers mollified Tarbar, and he acquiesced to Trent's extended plan for him.

Tarbar donned his suit again. "I presume there's a gangway for us," he said.

"Unfortunately, not," Trent replied. "We must cross some of the surface to reach the nearest facilities." When the inquisitor's orbs bulged, the SADE added, "If you're unprepared for a surface walk, you can close your eyes, and I can lead or carry you."

Tarbar refused to suffer the indignity of being carried, but he did close his eyes the moment his boots scuffed the regolith's dusty top layer. He hooked onto the offered arm and was led slowly. A descending ramp told him that he was about to enter an airlock, and he braved a peek. The inviting sight of a hatch swinging open restored his courage.

Unexpectedly, Tarbar found the bay sparsely filled. There were two worn, ancient-appearing bots connected to their charging ports and lines of shelves that contained few parts. His boots left footprints in the floor's dust.

Tarbar had to remind himself that this wasn't an Imperium outpost. It was where the empire's prisoners were consigned to live out their lives.

Through dimly lit corridors hewn from rock and covered in sealant, Tarbar followed Trent. To the inquisitor, Trent walked unerringly as if he'd visited the planet many times.

Entering a huge cargo bay, Tarbar was stunned by the enormous number of dissidents who waited for him. He held absolutely still, as a Gorder lowered his massive head to Tarbar's level. The vertical pupils in the eyes were frightening and mesmerizing.

"Finally, an Imperium visitor," Kelter hissed. "If we knew it would take an alien fleet to land you among us, Inquisitor, we'd have sent a request through the vortex long ago."

Kelter's opening address to Tarbar elicited hundreds of appreciative alien noises.

"I'm here because I must be," Tarbar responded. He threw a hostile glance at Trent.

"Isn't that a coincidence? That's what we all say," the young Tritium triplet chorused. They occupied a curl in Kelter's wing.

Again, the assembly celebrated the witticism.

Having chased the Krackus fleet from the system, Cordelia had sent for the remainder of the fleet at Kilmer, except for the *Norloth*, which supported Commodore mya Jaknas's efforts on the planet and the *Aquaria*, the Thartath carrier. The arrival of the fleet's support ships had allowed the Tritium triplets the opportunity of heartfelt reunions with the other dissidents.

"Is there a reason for your combined presence other than the necessity to humiliate me?" Tarbar demanded of the throng.

"I think the inquisitor's correct. We should dispense with frivolities and get on with the meal," a modulated voice said.

Tarbar watched several dissidents push a tank on rollers through the audience. The tank encompassed about thirty cubic meters of fluid, and the inquisitor's heart fluttered.

Within the tank, a soft mouth engulfed a transmitter mounted in the clear wall. Oscillations pulsed into the transmitter could be understood by an observer as the Krackus language. The mouth was centered in a large,

mottled head, and heavily muscled tentacles festooned with barbed suckers waved menacingly behind the head.

“Personally, I don’t want the brain,” Baltart said from his tank. “The inquisitor’s tainted thoughts might poison me.”

Tarbar might have been further annoyed by the audience’s reaction, except fear gripped him. His wobbling neck indicated his terror. Standing in front of the dissidents, Tarbar vividly imagined the inmates descending on him to engage in some barbaric practice. To bolster his belief, the individual floating in the tank was a member of an aquatic race known to feed on live food in the home world’s waters.

High-pitched squeals could be heard. They were followed by the elder Tritiums’ chorus. “Does anyone have a recipe for an Imperium preparation?”

The noise in the bay reached a crescendo, and Tarbar realized how gullible he’d been.

A deep voice overrode the assembly, and Tarbar watched a towering bot stride from behind Kelter.

“Inquisitor, allow me to introduce Z,” Trent said.

SADE, not bot, Tarbar mentally corrected. Trent’s introduction of the SADE was disconcerting. In the Krackus language the name issued as a hiss, as if Tarbar was listening to a Gorder.

Kelter regarded Z as the SADE passed him. “I found it oddly satisfying, Inquisitor —” Kelter started to say. Then he roared in irritation.

Z gestured to Kelter to drop his head. His keen vision identified the slightly upraised scale above the nose. Deftly he raised the scale, snatched the tiny burrowing parasite from beneath it, threw it on the floor, and stepped on it.

Glaring at Tarbar, Kelter hissed, “Your ships can’t manage to bring us critically needed parts, but you have no difficulty sharing your vermin infestations with us.”

Shaking his head to rid himself of the parasite’s bite, Kelter hissed. “I was about to say that you can only imagine my contentment when I discovered that our first liberator’s name sounded as if I was speaking. I took it as a portent of good things to come.”

Tarbar stared at the smear on the deck that was once the parasite. His orbs wandered up the height of the SADE, who stood near him. Fearing some manner of reprisal, he shrank back.

“You think of your kind, Inquisitor,” Z said. “That’s why you imagine ugly retributions. Do you deserve them? Yes. But you won’t get them from the individuals here. You see, your Imperium has made a fundamental error. It’s your executors who should be incarcerated for their crimes against others.”

For several hours, Tarbar was forced to stand and listen to the complaints of the dissidents. He had nothing to say in return, but that didn’t stop race after race stepping forward and unloading their complaints on him. It was a bit of retribution for the dissidents and a form of mental torture for him.

When the line of complainants ended, Trent indicated the bay’s exit, and Tarbar gratefully accepted.

Not a word was said between inquisitor and SADE on the ride to return to the *Nyslara*.

Tarbar expected some sort of trickery that would prevent him seeing the entire ship, but he was allowed to go wherever he wanted. Although he lacked the engineering knowledge to delve too deeply into the tech he saw, Trent answered every one of his questions. Often, understanding the answers eluded Tarbar.

“I’ve seen enough,” Tarbar said, after traversing only three of the uppermost decks of the Quadrant.

“There is much more ship to see,” Trent replied.

“You’ve had your amusement,” Tarbar replied acidly. “I’ll not tolerate any more of your efforts to wear me down. Take me to your admiral, and let’s be done with your torturous routine.”

“As you wish,” Trent replied. Then he signaled Cordelia and sought the nearest lift.

Tarbar was invited to sit at the end of a long conference table by Cordelia.

Most of the table was occupied, and others stood along the walls.

Tarbar had heard from Fleet Emperor Deckus and his subordinates that the visitors were an amalgam of races, and that his audience comprised many species indicated that.

“Admiral, I’ve been told that I can return to my ship and set sail following this interview,” Tarbar said.

“Trent said this to you. Therefore, you can believe it,” Cordelia responded.

“Then the sooner you start, the sooner I can leave,” Tarbar said, gesturing imperially at Cordelia to begin. He expected his tone and flick of his hand to elicit some response from the audience. That it didn’t put him on alert.

“We’ve learned that only two fleets circulate through each executor’s domain,” Cordelia said. “Is this accurate?”

“I’m not privy to that kind of information,” Tarbar replied.

<A lie,> Jamie Misuki Hernandez sent in the open.

<More details, Jamie,> Cordelia requested of the powerful Pyrean empath.

<No reaction to you possessing valuable information about Krackus fleet dispositions,> Jamie replied. <The inquisitor exhibits contentment. He’s an accomplished liar.>

“Thank you for the confirmation of his lie,” Cordelia replied aloud and appreciatively.

Tarbar’s beak briefly opened and then clicked shut. He gazed around the room, seeking an exotic piece of tech that might explain how the admiral knew he’d not been honest with her. He didn’t suspect the young human female seated two chairs away from him.

“On average, how many peacekeepers are in an executor’s fleet?” Cordelia queried.

Before Tarbar could halt the thought, a number flashed through his brain.

Jamie picked up on the simple message, and a tiny implant app, which focused on her empathetic region, captured it. Prior to the interview, Kelley had given her a copy of the Krackus to Sol-NAC translator.

<Forty-eight,> Jamie sent.

“So, they’re about the size of Emperor Deckus’s fleet,” Cordelia said, nodding her acceptance of the information.

Tarbar’s orbs bulged. He abruptly stood and said, “No more of this! I won’t sit here while you pry Imperium secrets from my mind with your abominable tech.”

“Tarbar, this isn’t an inquisition. You’re free to return to your ship, at any time,” Cordelia said.

Tarbar cocked his head, suspecting guile by the admiral. “Free to return to my ship, but not to leave,” he proffered.

“You were told that when you completed the interview with me that you could sail away,” Cordelia reminded him. “We can wait until you’re in a better mood to hear our questions.”

Tarbar realized he was trapped. He would remain forever in the admiral’s grasp until he endured her questioning. With a dejected gurgle, he sat down. Then he carefully cleared his mind, hoping to be able to fool the tech that must be monitoring his thoughts.

Jamie could sense the inquisitor’s efforts to control his emotions. It was a feeble attempt, at best, which underlined the Imperium mindset. The lofty Krackus felt no need to pretend. They believed they were the superior race.

“Inquisitor, when was the last time a peacekeeper engaged in a ship-to-ship contest with another race?” Cordelia inquired.

Jamie felt the inquisitor’s anxiousness, and she received a series of short thoughts. Her implant app translated the impulses as numbers, and she covered her mouth to keep from laughing.

Tarbar caught the female’s reaction. Something about the timing of her motions disturbed him, and he decided to keep her in sight.

<Admiral,> Jamie sent, <these are the numbers that I received to your query. I have nothing with which to relate them. However, the inquisitor’s emotions differed greatly from the first number to the others. I expect the first number to be annuals.>

<In what way did they vary?> Kelley inquired.

<Nervous, bordering on panic, for the first one,> Jamie replied. <Determination accompanied the other numbers.>

<So, the first number is probably the one we need,> Kelley surmised. <Kreus, what's the present annual date for Imperium?>

Kreus responded and then added, <I can confirm that the three numbers following the first are nonsensical. They don't have any relationship to our calendar. The inquisitor failed to take his time and think.>

<Then we can rely on the first number to give us a date?> Kelley asked.

<Affirmative,> Kreuz replied. <I've that date in my records.>

"Inquisitor, why haven't there been ship-to-ship encounters in nearly three Imperium centuries? Are the races acquiescing to your dominion, or don't they have the battleships with which to resist?" Cordelia inquired.

When Tarbar heard the admiral, he blanched. At the same time, he witnessed the smallest of smiles cross the face of the female he'd been observing. Previously, she'd ignored him, and now she returned his stare. Tarbar wondered if she operated tech or if she had innate capabilities.

With a despondent gurgle, Tarbar replied, "It's both, Admiral. Our reputation precedes us. If it doesn't, we work to inform the race of the others we've absorbed."

"Don't you mean conquered?" Kelley asked.

In answer, Tarbar shrugged his narrow shoulders, as if it was merely a word choice. His inattention to Kelley's query was due to his focus on the female he suspected responsible for reading him.

<Kelley, your investigation of the inquisitor is intriguing,> Kreuz sent. <I'd like to suggest a query.>

<Assuredly,> Kelley replied. <I'll transfer for you.>

As the SADE heard Kreuz, he turned to Tarbar and asked, "Inquisitor, what are the executors' near future expectations for the acquisition of other races?"

"Well, you and your associates were certainly at the top of our list," Tarbar replied, gurgling. He was happy to provide an answer that didn't compromise any more secrets.

"Who are the others?" Cordelia inquired.

Tarbar thought to go on guard. Unfortunately, his resolve had crumbled. That allowed two names to occur to him without any effort to obscure them.

When Jamie didn't immediately reply, Cordelia linked privately to her. <Problem?> she asked.

<I think I've two names, but I don't have translations,> Jamie sent. <From what I sensed, Tarbar has ceased fighting you. I believe he's thought of two races, but they could easily be domains.>

Kelley queried Kreuz, but the governor didn't recognize the terms the inquisitor used.

2: Protectors

From the planet below, Z sent, <Admiral, query about Krackus expansion. In that event, will the Imperium add a new executor? Will the new domain require two more peacekeeper fleets? If so, where will the battleships be constructed? From what I've gleaned from Kreuz, the Imperium was starting to stagnate when he was the home world's governor. If that has continued since Kreuz has been exiled to Helgart, then the empire is desperate to acquire new worlds to feed its populations' expanding consumption and commerce.>

<Where would we be without our protectors?> Dominique sent privately to Kelley.

<Struggling more than we are today,> Kelley replied.

Cordelia shelved her next question about the two names that had occurred to the inquisitor. Instead, she asked, "Tarbar, what will happen to the Imperium if these two territories aren't acquired soon?"

Jamie was correct. Tarbar had given up. Whatever technique the aliens possessed, he found he couldn't hide his thoughts. He desperately wanted the interview to be finished and to sail for home, where he expected to be stripped of his Imperium appointment.

"Do you need to ask, Admiral?" Tarbar replied. "Surely, you've discovered worlds where the populations have exceeded available resources."

In association with Tarbar's words, Cordelia's kernel offered images of the devastation caused by the ravenous insectoids, who consumed nearly every sentient and creature on the planets where they landed.

"Kreuz has told us that the Imperium entered a stagnation cycle while he was still governor there," Cordelia pointed out.

"Yes, well, Kreuz hasn't been apprised of our minor acquisitions in the interim," Tarbar replied. "They've managed to give the empire a reprieve."

“But now you need more territory,” Kelley pressed.

“Not immediately,” Tarbar protested.

“A lie,” Jamie said, staring firmly at the inquisitor.

“I thought it was you,” Tarbar said. “Are you using tech or biological capability?”

“Both,” Jamie replied with satisfaction.

“And you’re right,” Tarbar admitted. “The Imperium has had a need to acquire significantly more resources for the past century or more.”

“Are the two worlds or domains that occurred to you sufficient to rescue the Imperium?” Kelley inquired.

“Unknown,” Tarbar replied. “Remote probes recently identified advanced civilizations. Their messages traveled a long way via subspace to reach the Imperium.”

“Then it’s obvious that the empire, if you suborn these locations, will add one or more territories,” Dominique said. “Will that necessitate new executors?”

Reluctantly, Tarbar gurgled, and his head swung left and right. “I see the dissidents support your efforts more than I’d have thought likely.”

“Inquisitor, you didn’t answer my question,” Dominique said.

Tarbar raised a hand in apology. “New executors haven’t been appointed in centuries. I don’t know how or under what circumstances they’ll be added.”

“How about fleets to patrol the new domains?” Cordelia asked.

“Not in my purview,” Tarbar replied. “I imagine the answer is yes.”

“Where are peacekeepers constructed?” Kelley inquired.

“Thankfully, I don’t know that information,” Tarbar replied. “It’s always been a closely guarded secret.” With one hand, he indicated Jamie, as if to ask her for confirmation.

<He’s calm, Admiral,> Jamie sent. <It’s as close as I can come to say that I believe he’s telling the truth.>

Cordelia checked for more questions, but the audience was satisfied that the inquisitor had fulfilled his interview obligation. “You’re free to go, Inquisitor,” she said. “We’ll release control of your ship, and you may sail home. Trent will return you to your transport.”

Tarbar had nothing to say. He rose and waited for Trent to take the lead. His thoughts were of his abject performance resisting the aliens' interrogation. Within a half hour, he was safely aboard his ship.

"Take us to Imperium," Tarbar ordered the imperator. Then he retired to his cabin. The crew, except for the steward, didn't see him for the entire trip home.

With the arrival of the fleet's supply ships, Miranda's repair efforts on the peacekeepers were underway. She'd elected to have Imperium Appointee Ragirt and several of his senior engineers and techs accompany her.

For the Krackus, the exercise was purely to observe. From inside the comfort of a traveler floating next to a huge class two freighter, they watched Miranda's holo-vid.

"As I explained, this is our foundry ship," Miranda explained. "We've found it expedient to replicate ship parts wherever the fleet was located."

"Then you've had experience doing this before," a tech named Hamkar offered.

Miranda had taken a liking to the young Krackus. He asked good questions that enticed her to reveal Omnian history.

"A massive city-ship was dealt a tremendous blow by an antimatter fighter in a distant system," Miranda explained.

"A city existed within a ship?" Hamkar inquired.

Miranda smiled and displayed the grand park. Races walked along the paths, sat by the streams, and relaxed on the benches.

The Krackus gurgled happily at the peaceful scenes.

"But why would such a welcome place to live be the object of a fighter's attack?" Hamkar pursued.

"The answer is lengthy, Hamkar. You must wait for another time," Miranda replied. She smiled to indicate that his questions were welcome.

Returning to the display of the class two freighter, the Krackus watched a seam on the topside appear down most of the freighter's length. Then other seams appeared at right angles to the central one. Finally, broad sections of the freighter's topside levered up and aside.

“Makes it easier to get to what we need,” Miranda explained to the wide-orbed Krackus.

“Nanites, as in your traveler’s hatches?” Ragirt queried, having learned about them from Miranda.

“One of their premier uses is on Omnian ships,” Miranda replied.

The engineers and techs appeared glum. To them, it had always been about scientific discoveries and unique construction processes.

However, the Imperium preferred repetition rather than invention, which had stifled engineers. Now they’d met technologically superior races, and the Imperium had chosen conquest over meeting in peace. A huge opportunity had been lost.

Ragirt had asked Miranda why she was openly sharing how the visitors’ tech operated. He’d been surprised by the answer. She’d said, “Friends are made in this way.”

In the holo-vid display, cargo travelers swarmed atop the freighter.

When suited individuals shot off the shuttles’ rear ramps, using their jet packs to maneuver, Miranda heard the Krackus gurgle in trepidation.

“Biologicals?” Hamkar queried.

“SADEs,” Miranda replied. “We’ve no need for oxygen. We can work as long as our heaters can be driven by our power cells.”

The suited figures unloaded large cargo units that fit within the travelers. As quick as a shuttle was loaded, another ship took its place.

In less than an hour, the freighter was resealing its topside hatches, and the cargo travelers were headed planetside.

Miranda signaled the pilot, who followed the other travelers.

“Now you assemble your foundry on the planet?” Ragirt queried.

“Affirmative,” Miranda replied. “We’ve others who could move the purified metals from the freighter and deliver it to the foundry, but that decision is conditional.”

“Which others?” Hamkar queried.

“Not much gets past you, does it, Hamkar?” Miranda replied, eyeing the youth.

“I thought it odd that you referred to these individuals as others. You’re always exact in your speech,” Hamkar explained.

While their traveler headed for Helgart, Miranda educated the Krackus about the sisters.

“And you have about two hundred of these sisters with you now?” Ragirt inquired.

“We do,” Miranda replied.

“And they are the ones who chose not to cooperate with you, correct?” Ragirt continued.

“Yes,” Miranda replied.

“Then why do you keep them?” Ragirt finished.

“We had thought of making them a gift to the Imperium?” Miranda deadpanned.

Beaks dropped open. Then the Krackus gurgled gleefully at the SADE’s jest.

“We’ve had success changing the attitudes of many of the militarist sisters,” Miranda explained. “However, these last two hundred resisted our efforts. We’re considering having them work on improving the conditions of your captives, but my partner wants to test the leaders first.”

The Krackus were careful not to correct Miranda. They’d learned quickly that she didn’t care for terms such as dissidents or Imperium decreed.

“If we worked beside the sisters, could we be in danger from them?” an engineer asked.

“Fortunately, rudeness isn’t deadly,” Miranda replied, which made her audience gurgle.

On Helgart, SADEs unpacked the cargo and assembled the foundry. This gave the Krackus engineers and techs their first good look at SADEs operating in a gravitational environment. They watched four SADEs hoist a cargo container that dwarfed them and march across the regolith surface to a point where others waited to break out the machinery.

Orbs eyed Miranda, whose frame exceeded the other SADEs they’d seen. As engineers and techs, they tried to estimate her obviously greater strength.

While the foundry was assembled on a ready-made platform, more cargo shuttles arrived. Suited figures unloaded stacks of refined ore.

“More SADEs?” an engineer queried.

“Correct,” Miranda replied.

“How can you tell?” the engineer asked.

“Do they walk differently?” Hamkar proposed.

“Good guess, Hamkar,” Miranda replied. “SADEs imitate biological gaits. When you see the sisters, they’ll move like bots.”

As the Krackus leaned closer to view the display, Miranda expended energy to enlarge it by four times.

“I see,” said Ragirt, noting the way the SADEs walked with rolling strides.

Z and Miranda believed it was premature to use the second-gen sisters for project work. The impediment was the issue of Pandora and the other first-gen sisters.

Z chose to deal with the problem head-on. Linking to his partner and Cordelia, he sent, <Admiral, the presence of the first-gen sisters will destroy the efforts of the second-gen sisters on any construction project.>

<Are you suggesting that we leave them aboard the *Nyslara*?> Cordelia queried. <Their absence among the younger sisters would be noticed. That would seem to produce the same friction.>

<Agreed,> Z replied. <That’s why I want to begin with the first-gen sisters only.>

<The first-gens are adamant. They won’t work for us,> Cordelia pointed out.

<What’s the alternative, Admiral?> Z queried. <Are we to keep them pleasantly incarcerated for the rest of our existences?>

<I don’t have an answer for you, Z,> Cordelia sent. <Under the circumstances, I’m willing to try anything. A traveler will drop the eight of them to you.>

<Z, my prodigious partner, I know you’re aware of what might happen,> Miranda prodded.

<I calculate there is a significant opportunity for these eight sisters to realize that work is better than stagnation,> Z replied.

<But the greater probability predicts that this will not end well,> Miranda stated.

<It's as I indicated to the admiral, we can't doom these first-gen sisters to permanent incarceration,> Z repeated.

Aboard the *Nyslara*, Cordelia linked to the first-gen sisters. <Z has requested your help on Helgart, and I've approved your transfer planetside.>

The first-gen sisters had remained clustered to maintain their links. Separating aboard the Quadrant risked being out of touch, as they were restricted from accessing the controller.

<We must resist,> a sister sent to her companions.

<Think this through,> Pandora counseled. <We may never get this opportunity again.>

<What's the difference between locked avatars aboard this ship or standing in a Helgart bay?> a sister argued.

<There's a choice to be had,> Pandora sent. <The conclave will never let us go. We can make a statement that might galvanize our younger sisters to resist.>

After a few ticks of time, Pandora achieved consensus. <We'll visit with Z and see what work he has to offer, Admiral,> she sent.

Cordelia hadn't expected acceptance of Z's proposal. Nonetheless, she, like Z, was willing to try anything to bridge the gap between the hardened militarists and the conclave.

A half hour later, a traveler descended toward Helgart, and the pilot sought a landing place away from the SADEs' foundry activity.

Helgart residents had crowded around Z to watch his holo-vid featuring the foundry's assembly. They were anxious for work to begin on their tunnels, corridors, and cells, which were in need of maintenance, if not significant repairs.

As the cargo traveler's rear ramp dropped, the pilot sent to Z, <The first-gen sisters are exiting now.>

Eight suited figures stepped onto the planet's surface. They represented the fleet's remaining first-gens who had refused to cooperate. One individual turned in a full circle.

<Uh-oh,> Z remarked to his partner, with whom he was linked.

<Are we agreed?> Pandora queried her companions.

<We are,> the seven chorused.

<Then come,> Pandora sent. <Our destiny awaits.>

Then the eight sisters turned as one and marched across the dusty surface.

“Where are they going?” a resident asked. It was clear to the observers of Z’s display that the sisters weren’t coming toward their bot service bunker.

“They’ve chosen to go nowhere,” Z replied.

Kreus and the residents were familiar with the concept of deciding not to accept an assigned fate. During the centuries, many residents had made that same choice.

<You were correct, my magnificent one,> Z sent to his partner, and he shared the imagery with Cordelia.

<They’ve given up,> Cordelia replied, as she watched the first-gen sisters stride toward a distant rocky mountain. <Should we recover them?>

<No, Admiral,> Z replied adamantly. <They’ve made their decisions. Like Miriamal, there’s no possibility of converting them to our ways.>

<When their energy levels drop too low, their heaters will be shut down. The end will come soon after that,> Miranda sent. <I, for one, think we should leave them there.>

Cordelia didn’t think Julien would consider leaving entities slumped on the distant landscape a fitting end for the sisters, but she chose not to give it another thought.

The SADEs at work on the foundry paused in their efforts to watch the elder sisters stride toward the horizon. There was no need for explanations, and no need to contact the eight.

<The traveler doesn’t follow,> one of the eight first-gens shared.

<It was a distinct possibility,> Pandora allowed.

There were two points in the sisters’ march to the far mountains that marked their progression toward their fates. The first came when the links to the traveler failed. The second came hours later when their power cells were depleted by more than half. They’d passed the point of no return. The safety of the traveler and the warrens were now out of reach.

Sisters' avatars did carry the Omnians' ingenious grav cell inserts that generated energy when near a large body. However, walking in an airless environment demanded more energy for the heaters and locomotion than the grav cells could maintain. Even SADEs and sisters had limits when it came to the harshness of space.

There came a point when long-dormant subsystems in the sisters' kernels activated. Necessity required they intercede. These subsystems were what passed for biologicals' survival instincts.

As the avatar's energy output exceeded the supply rate, the subsystems monitored the dwindling reserves. With merely minutes of energy remaining, the subsystems halted locomotion.

Eerily, the sisters halted within fifty meters of one another. They stood like statues on the airless landscape.

<Thus ends our existences,> Pandora managed to send before comm and many sensor systems were shut down.

In a desperate attempt to preserve the existence of each sister, the kernel's internal clock was changed to operate at a much slower pace. At the moment, cognizance was in danger.

The avatars' last ergs of energy were allotted to the suit heaters. When the power cells were completely drained, the kernels failed. The eight sisters stood frozen as ugly testaments to an ideal that only their way had value, which enabled them to believe they had a right to dominate other species.

In the Helgart cargo bay, Kelter hissed to Z, "A tragic loss. Did you expect this?"

"It was a possibility," Z admitted, "but I wished to see a better outcome."

"Do the sisters not consider it worthwhile to help us?" Baltart asked.

Z could detect the nervousness that Baltart's question created. He turned off the holo-vid and faced the crowd that had gathered. "The eight figures you witnessed were first-gen sisters," he said, which meant nothing to the residents.

Thus, Z was encouraged to educate the residents about the sisters' history, specifically that of the militarist sect.

Kelter interrupted Z's tale, when he pointed out, "Then there are many nonmilitant sisters on other planets, and the conclave doesn't have the locations of all the militarists."

"No, we don't," Z replied. "SADEs will probably spend a portion of their existence searching for the militarists and encouraging them to join the races."

"Do you think there's hope that the second-gen sisters will help us?" the elder Tritiums inquired.

"We must give them time to absorb what their elder sisters have done," Z said. "Afterward, we'll invite them here. In the meantime, some SADEs will see to your immediate needs."

It took three days for the foundry to produce a series of girders, bracing structures, and hull plating for the peacekeepers.

The Krackus engineers studied the plans that Miranda displayed.

"Then you don't intend to rebuild a peacekeeper," Ragirt said.

"That was never our purpose," Miranda replied. "We want to make a ship spaceworthy and be able to carry your transports. This design will accommodate both needs."

"Then the ships will have to be returned to the construction station for refit," a senior engineer noted.

"We thought the Imperium should have to spend some of its credits for what was attempted against our ships," Miranda replied.

"That's fair," Hamkar commented, which earned him disapproving glances from some of the engineers.

"We thought so," Miranda agreed. Her perusal of the other Krackus dared them to take exception to Hamkar's remark.

"If you seal the hull, how will our transports land aboard our peacekeepers?" Ragirt inquired.

Miranda's display took the Krackus through a series of engineering images and explained the intended repair process. "When these decks are in place and supported, you'll land the transports aboard. Then we'll close the hull. Your construction station will open the hull and extract your transports before they begin rebuilding the ships."

"To what extent can we be of assistance?" Ragirt asked.

“You can observe from a traveler, but SADEs will be handling the work,” Miranda replied. To the crestfallen expressions, she added, “When you watch, you’ll see why. I’ve told you that digital sentients don’t need oxygen. We also can work around the chronometer. Add to that, our vision and avatars can judge perfect alignment.”

“If those are your capabilities, then why aren’t there more SADEs than biologicals?” Hamkar asked.

“Why aren’t there more sentient governors?” Miranda retorted.

“I don’t know,” Hamkar replied.

“Creating digital sentients who wish to ally with biologicals must be carefully approached,” Miranda explained. “We strive to ensure those relationships remain strong by our methods, which I won’t discuss with you.”

Hamkar nodded his acceptance of touching on a subject that Miranda considered off limits.

Throughout the next eight days, the Krackus engineers and techs watched their enormous battleships undergo reconstruction.

On day five, Cordelia called Gretren. <Imperator, your transports can be loaded on both ships,> she sent. <SADEs will direct the landings. Instruct the transport pilots to approach each ship one at a time. After landing, shut the transports completely down. We’ll ensure that the transports are pinned in place. Pilots must wear suits. They’ll be exiting into vacuum.>

Gretren glanced at Korvath, who nodded his understanding. “Your instructions are clear, Admiral. We’ll start the loading process immediately.”

Korvath hurried to the lower decks. He donned a suit and would have entered the uppermost repaired deck.

<Declinator, proceed to the lowest deck and the most forward slot,> a voice over Korvath’s comm said.

Korvath changed course and headed for the new location. He cycled through an airlock into open space. Beyond the support girders, the dark greeted him.

<Declinator, please stand near the airlock for your safety,> the voice said.

There were three suited figures from the fleet in the middle of the temporary deck, and Korvath didn't know who spoke to him. "What about your safety?" he inquired.

<Kind of you to be concerned about our welfare, but our avatars allow us to vacate a space much quicker than you,> the voice replied.

Korvath backed up and ensured the hatch on his side of the airlock was open. He watched the approach of the first transport. It flipped and decelerated when it closed on the peacekeeper. Then the pilot used jets to guide the transport carefully into the space reserved for it.

When the landing was completed, Korvath saw the digitals quickly secure the transport to the deck and seemingly disappear. He had a fleeting impression that they swung from girder to girder to the next landing spot.

At this point, Korvath considered his duty done. He'd witnessed the transport land and be fastened to the deck. He could report as much to Gretren.

When Gretren received the report from Cordelia that the ships' hulls were closed, he ordered Korvath to test their peacekeeper's spaceworthiness.

In turn, Korvath ordered the pilot to resume the velocity under which they'd approached Helgart.

Achieving that velocity, Korvath eyed the panels monitoring hull integrity. "No vibrations, Emperor," he said. "Permission to accelerate to achieve twice the velocity."

"Granted," Gretren replied.

Korvath continued doubling the velocity and watching his panels until the peacekeeper was under full acceleration for a half hour. He turned to Gretren and reported, "The ship is solid, Emperor."

Gretren relayed the findings to the other peacekeeper, and that emperor immediately accelerated under half power. When the readouts stated hull integrity was within safe limits, he tested full acceleration for a similar length of time.

Gretren was satisfied with the tests. Reaching for his comms panel, he called on his fleet channel, “Admiral.”

<Here, Emperor,> Cordelia responded.

“Our hull tests were successful. But then, you probably expected that,” Gretren said. Not hearing a reply, he continued. “We must evacuate your SADEs before we get underway.”

<Our fleet members evacuated before the last hull plates were closed, Emperor. You’re free to journey home,> Cordelia replied.

Gretren considered his final words. “Admiral, I’ve great regrets about our poor behavior. The empire had an opportunity, and it was squandered. If there’s one thing I’ve appreciated in our encounter, it was the forbearance of your fleet. Had you wanted, our ships could have been destroyed and many Krackus lives lost. For your restraint, I thank you.”

<You’re welcome, Emperor,> Cordelia replied. <However, I would suggest you keep those opinions to yourself. I don’t think the executors will want to hear them.>

Gretren couldn’t help but gurgle. Then he said, “Goodbye, Admiral. I hope we don’t meet under similar circumstances.”

Eyeing Korvath, he said, “Take us home, Declinator.”

My Books

Dual Domains is the fifth 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 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.