

ALLIED ENEMIES

Gate Ghosts Book 8

S. H. JUCHA

Chapters 1 & 2
Excerpt

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.

Contents

1: Problematic Start.....	1
2: Strained Negotiations	15
3: Alternate Plan.....	26
4: Can We Talk?.....	42
5: Hillside Meeting.....	54
6: Resident Evacuation	65
7: Maiden Voyage.....	75
8: First One; Then Many.....	87
9: Aliens Galore.....	98
10: Critical Disagreements.....	107
11: We've a Problem	116
12: Lightning Raid	127
13: Dangerous Positions	140
14: Feudal Society	153
15: Dresat's Compound.....	165
16: Harsh Lessons.....	179
17: Now You See Us.....	192
18: Let's Trade	204
19: Late Arrivals	219
20: More Sisters and Suits	232
21: Deception.....	245
22: A Better Way.....	258
23: <i>Alexander's</i> Visit.....	271
24: Director Treachery	282
25: Raider Hunt	296
26: Energy Signatures	306
27: We Go Now.....	319
28: Where Do We Go?.....	332
29: Salvage.....	343
30: Light the Engine.....	356
31: Tell Us the Truth	369
32: D'Arcy's Encounter	383

33: It's Time	397
Glossary	412
My Books	418
The Author	420

1: Problematic Start

DARMIAN HOME WORLD RADAGUL SYSTEM

A Radag warrior skidded to a stop outside the council meeting's hut. His interruption elicited angry growls and hisses from the chiefs.

Fyghturn, the lead negotiator, held up a hand to request patience. "Speak," he commanded.

The warrior kept his eyes downcast. It was dangerous to regard a chief directly. There was too great a chance that the chief might take offense.

"Pardon the interruption," the warrior said contritely. "I deliver a message from control. A ship has been spotted entering the system. It's headed here."

"And," Ogdurg, Fyghturn's mate and the sub-negotiator, prompted.

"It's the style of ship of the empire's invaders," the warrior replied. "It's a tri-hull."

"How soon?" a chief snarled.

"Unknown," the warrior replied. When the chief tossed his mane and snarled, the warrior took the hint and swiftly retreated.

Then the chiefs regarded the negotiators.

"We've learned that the invaders can move their ships through space faster and more accurately than anything the Krackus possess," Ogdurg said, explaining the reason for the warrior's lack of information about the expected arrival time.

"Will you meet with the invaders on their ship?" a chief hissed.

"This is unknown," Fyghturn replied. "There is no precedent for this meeting. It's best to let the invaders dictate the means by which they wish to communicate."

"You can't call the tri-hull, can you?" a chief queried, the sibilance strong as he spoke through his heavy canines.

"In a manner," Ogdurg replied. "We would broadcast in the open. The tri-hull's digitals would receive our message and connect with us."

"Why have they come?" a chief inquired.

"The commanders' reports from Vokslem, Tritium, and many other worlds within Grageth's territory indicate the invaders are escalating their attacks to throw the Krackus off many home worlds," Fygthurn replied.

"Could we expect new contracts to fight the Krackus?" a chief hissed. The snake heads of his split tail rose expectantly over his shoulders.

"Not likely," Ogdurg replied definitively. When the chiefs growled and hissed their disappointment, she quickly added, "From what we've learned, the invaders don't wish to be the empire's new masters."

"What do they want?" a chief demanded.

"This is to be learned," Fygthurn replied. Despite the chief's menacing flex of claws, he stood his ground. Council meetings were always a dangerous aspect of the negotiators' jobs.

When the chiefs began to bicker and distance themselves from one another, Fygthurn and Ogdurg took that as a sign to depart.

"What do you think the invaders want?" Ogdurg asked her mate, when there was no one to overhear them.

"I would think that might depend on who resides aboard the tri-hull," Fygthurn mused.

"I can tell you who isn't up there," Ogdurg quickly replied. "It won't be the invaders' leaders."

"You're probably right about that," Fygthurn said. "If their leaders were aboard, then I'd expect to see many ships." Suddenly, he paused and regarded Ogdurg.

"Yes, that's who I think would visit Darmian in a single warship," Ogdurg replied to her mate's unasked question.

"Alone?" Fygthurn inquired, recalling the commanders' imagery of Miranda and her partner, Z.

"Would you come alone?" Ogdurg asked.

"I'm reminded of the way the giants visited the Vokslem commanders," Fyghthurn responded, before he invited Ogdurg to continue walking.

"That's what I recall seeing," Ogdurg said. "The giants were surrounded by more digitals and those in the colorful suits."

"The chiefs won't be easily convinced of the superiority of any of those three conclave types," Fyghthurn offered.

"Agreed," Ogdurg replied. "Despite viewing the warriors' recordings of the contests, the chiefs will assume that, with their greater prowess and experience, they'll be able to defeat the suits and the lesser digital sentients."

"I think we must do everything possible to prevent those contests taking place," Fyghthurn worried. "We've watched the recordings of those bouts many times. The game is obvious."

"I believe the warriors knew it too," Ogdurg said. "However, they were able to practice their skills without fear of suffering debilitating injuries."

"The extent to which the invaders went to prevent harming our warriors was inventive and surprising," Fyghthurn agreed.

"And done without suffering damage to their own bodies," Ogdurg noted.

"Which is why the chiefs must not offer challenges to the invaders," Fyghthurn reiterated. "Certainly the chiefs would lose, and I fear what that would mean for our warriors to witness their supreme leaders fail."

"How do you propose to prevent it?" Ogdurg queried. "It's not like you can refuse the chiefs." When her mate seemed to consider the quandary overly long, she cuffed his shoulder, drawing blood with a few scratches. "Do remember that I've grown fond of you these many annuals. I've no desire to take another mate."

Fyghthurn offered Ogdurg a toothy smile, exposing his sharp canines. As for the minor scratches, he'd suffered much worse during their spats and mating rituals. Then the couple continued toward the shuttle control center. It was where they expected to hear from those aboard the tri-hull.

High above Darmian, a Trident circled the Radag home world. The planet was thoroughly surveyed before the ship took up station above the greatest settlement, which had a significant landing pad.

<The spaceport appears ill-used,> Nebulon noted in the open.

<Darmian reminds me of the mining planets,> Ceda Geneva commented. <Some areas look like a dome's pristine surface level, and other places resemble the disused mining tunnels.>

<An example of a planet that's suffered heavy disciplining,> Z remarked.

<Apparently the dear Radags didn't approve of Krackus overlords,> Miranda added.

<It's the timespan that intrigues me,> Escher Talons sent.

<Explain,> Johann Stegmeir requested.

<The areas that have been identified as new already indicate wear,> Escher replied, expanding some of the images of the buildings below. <Within this same location, there are spaces that appear to have held structures. They're scraped bare as if they had been prepared for replacement structures.>

<But none were ever built,> Stacey Caballero, Johann's partner, finished.

<There's a discrepancy among many of the structures we're seeing, > Nebulon noted. <The newer structures are reminiscent of the Krackus buildings on the planets we've raided.>

<This tells us a lot about Radag attitudes toward the empire,> Bethany McIntyre interjected. <I think that the Radags fought against the Krackus, and they paid a heavy price. Presumably, peacekeepers started with the Radag ships and outward installations. When that didn't suppress the warriors, missiles rained down on their planet until the Radag leaders capitulated.>

<Uh ... um,> Korvath sent.

The conference waited patiently for Korvath to try again. He'd had his implant for a mere week, and he'd struggled with it.

At one point, Korvath became so exasperated by his inability to adopt the tech that he came close to requesting the implant be removed.

Ceda came to Korvath's rescue. Of anyone aboard the Trident, she'd had the most experience with this type of situation. As a clone, she'd been immersed in how to manage the children of elite senior mining executives.

Korvath and she spent time alone, as she coached him in how to remain calm and accept the implant as a tool.

“Korvath, it’s not alien tech,” Ceda had said. “Think of it as your Krackus device.”

“I could always put my device down and forget about it,” a frustrated Korvath had replied.

“When you have control, you will learn to ignore your implant by shutting off apps,” Ceda replied.

“Promise?” Korvath asked.

“You have my word,” Ceda said. “Now, it’s time to try again.”

In the present, Korvath took a few deep breaths to focus as Ceda had taught him. Then he sent, <Radag anger ... universal.>

<Korvath has a point,> Escher sent, interpreting his friend. <While the Radags might hate the Krackus, there’s always the possibility that they’ve no affinity for any other race.>

Korvath tapped Escher’s arm and tipped his beak in appreciation of the expansion of his truncated thought.

<Our exercises with the warriors demonstrated two things to us,> Nebulon sent. <They live for combat, and they only appreciate strength.>

<That implies that the conclave will forever have to control this race unless the younger generation can be taught a different way of behaving,> Z opined.

Nebulon’s glance briefly crossed Miranda, who sent privately, <Don’t even think about it. I’m pleased by what you and your sisters have achieved, but you mustn’t be immersed in a culture like this.>

<The thought was brief,> Nebulon admitted. <It was more akin to a curiosity.>

<Our reputation precedes us,> Escher remarked. <We should have been spotted by now, but no one is rushing to the shuttleport.>

<It’s no secret to the Radags that we can land anywhere,> Z commented. <But where now?>

<I think an invitation is best,> Miranda replied. Connecting to the shuttleport, she growled, <Greetings, we were told to request Fyghthurn. Does this individual speak for the Radags?>

“This is Fyghturn. We’re honored by your presence. My mate, Ogdurg, and I are the race’s negotiators.”

<Who must approve what we might negotiate?> Z inquired.

“The council of chiefs will make the final decision,” Fyghturn replied.

<We would prefer to converse directly with the council,> Miranda responded.

Fyghturn glanced worriedly at his mate.

“Who is speaking to us?” Ogdurg asked, trying to buy time to think.

<At present, it’s Miranda and my partner, Z.>

“We’ve heard these names,” Ogdurg replied. “You’d be the sentient giants.”

Z’s eyebrows twitched several times in opposite directions, and he evaded Miranda’s swift swat.

<The commanders who returned from Vokslem know us well,> Miranda sent. <Were Fyghturn and you on Vokslem?>

“There’s been only one occasion when we’ve left Darmian,” Fyghturn replied.

Escher received Korvath’s strangled sending. <Speak to me,> he sent.

Korvath turned to place his beak beside Escher’s ear. “Ask if they were aboard an Imperium transport.”

<By any chance, Fyghturn, were you aboard a Krackus transport?> Escher sent in Krackus.

“Who speaks?” Ogdurg inquired.

<One of the suited humans,> Escher replied cryptically.

“The Vokslem commanders spoke of your kind too,” Ogdurg said. “Are the smaller female sentients aboard your ship?”

<It wouldn’t be a party without us,> Nebulon sent.

“You intend a festive occasion?” Ogdurg queried confusedly.

<Lost in translation,> Stacey commented privately to those aboard the Trident.

<Should I repeat my question?> Escher sent.

“That’s not necessary,” Fyghturn replied. He was annoyed that the question hadn’t been evaded. As it was possible that the invaders already knew of their presence, he said, “Yes.”

“Was it Executor Dakargk’s ship?” Korvath whispered to Escher, which he repeated.

“It was,” Fyghurn admitted.

“Are there other invader ships in system?” Ogdurg hissed quietly to the shuttleport controller.

“Negative,” the controller replied adamantly.

When both parties were quiet, Fyghurn sought to restart the conversation. “Would you speak with my mate and me, as opposed to the council?”

<You must give us a valid reason for the intermediate step,> Miranda replied. <As yet, we haven’t heard one.>

Ogdurg motioned at Fyghurn to reply, but he merely shrugged. A good reason hadn’t occurred to him.

“Miranda,” Ogdurg began, “our chiefs are a special breed of Radags. They’ve risen to their positions because of their prowess. As such, they aren’t the best equipped individuals to deal with complex discussions. It’s simpler for your individuals and Fyghurn and me to reach a proposal that we offer the chiefs.”

<Your frankness is appreciated,> Miranda sent. <We’ll meet with you and your mate, Ogdurg.>

“Where?” Fyghurn queried.

<As you’re at the shuttleport, we’ll land there,> Miranda replied.

When the conference call ended, Miranda regarded Korvath. <Magnificently devious,> she sent, and Korvath preened at the compliment.

<It was a great test of the negotiators’ willingness to be truthful with us, Korvath,> Ceda conceded.

<Um ... maybe not always,> Korvath managed to send.

<We’ll have little time to learn their tells,> Escher remarked.

<Are you ready to play some games of chance, Escher?> Z inquired temptingly.

Escher laughed at the offer. <You’d have to give me some handsome odds, Z, especially since I’m a novice.>

<I’m sure we could work something out,> Z replied.

<I bet you could,> Escher replied, warding him away with a hand.

Miranda, Z, five suits, Nebulon, and a group of her sisters dropped planetside. Korvath elected to stay aboard.

As their traveler broke through a heavy cloud layer, Nebulon sent, <Things have changed on the surface.>

The passengers focused on the shuttleport's sidelines via Nebulon's link. Small vehicles mounted with energy weapons ringed the landing space.

<We could always vaporize a few vehicles to demonstrate our traveler's weapon,> Bethany suggested.

<That's probably Fyghturn and Ogdurg on the shuttleport's surface waving frantically at the vehicle drivers and gunners,> Johann suggested, sharing his close view of the pair.

<I think Bethany has a point,> Z remarked, and he rapidly dropped the traveler toward the shuttleport.

A derelict structure, which probably had been the original control tower, was adjacent to the shuttleport. Much of the upper levels had been demolished, but three levels remained.

Z's swift pass evaporated the empty building.

On the shuttleport, the gunners ducked from the flash of heat and sought the vehicle's cabins to hide from the rain of ash.

Z hovered the traveler about two hundred meters above the smoldering ruins. He pointed the ship's bow toward the pad's surface.

Ogdurg held a furry hand over exposed rows of sharp teeth. Her harsh laughter penetrated the gloom.

Fyghturn regarded his mate, whose distinct reddish brown fur was quickly turning gray. He could imagine that he appeared likewise. Then he joined Ogdurg's laughter.

When Ogdurg saw the armed vehicles swiftly retreating, she laughed even harder. Finally, she started coughing, having sucked in too much ash.

As Z neared the landing pad, Escher signaled his intent, opened both airlock hatches, and leapt free of the ship. His suit allowed him to easily rebound from the three-meter drop. He ran toward the negotiators. Just

before he reached them, he lifted his clear water bottle and took a gulp. Then he held it out to Ogdurg.

"Quite the gesture," Ogdurg said to her mate, eyeing the extended container. Before Fygthurn could comment, she tipped her head at the suited individual, accepted the gift, and sipped on the liquid. Discovering it was refreshing cool water, she drank deeply and offered it to Fygthurn, who sought to wash the ash down his parched throat.

<He has a way with those not like him, clones and aliens alike,> Ceda commented to her companions, who'd descended the ship after it had touched down.

Miranda watched the negotiators eye her group, while they drained the water that Escher had offered them. <Escher,> she sent, <ask Fygthurn and Ogdurg how they would like to get clean.> Then she sent the query in Radag.

When Escher repeated the question, he did his best to imitate the Radag's guttural style.

Fygthurn's eyes narrowed, suspecting an unseen maneuver on the part of the invaders, but Ogdurg inquired, "What do you offer?"

Escher relayed the question, and Miranda sent, <Nebulon, join the conversation. Demonstrate your duality on approach.>

Nebulon chose to glide toward the threesome. About the time she saw the negotiator's eyes widen at her style, she switched to a human's casual stroll.

"Mechanical sentient?" Fygthurn queried the sister.

"We're referred to as digital sentients. Specifically, I'm a sister called Nebulon."

Ogdurg pointed a dark claw at Escher. "Who are you?"

Escher released his mask-helmet. He was careful not to smile. On Vokslem, they'd learned that baring teeth was a challenge to the warriors. "I'm Escher Talons. You may call me Escher."

"The water was timely and appreciated," Ogdurg said. "What of your offer to get clean?"

"We seek a place to talk without interference from your race," Nebulon replied. "There's plenty of water aboard our ship."

Fygthurn might have refused the offer, but he took time to gaze around the shuttleport. The armed vehicles had retreated but not that far. They still faced the invaders' ship, and gunners stood behind the beam weapons. He glanced toward Ogdurg and swung his eyes in a circle.

Ogdurg nodded. She'd seen what he'd observed.

"The offer of your ship interests us," Fygthurn cautiously replied. "However, we'll require fresh clothing and food, if we stay aboard for any length of time. We can't eat your food."

"And the same is true for conclave biologicals," Nebulon replied. "Which is why we've prepared separate dishes for you."

Fygthurn and Ogdurg doubted that the invaders could replicate the means by which most Radag food was fermented. However, the opportunity to see the interior of an invaders' warship was tempting.

"We'll accompany you," Fygthurn said, indicating the traveler with a darkly furred arm.

Aboard the ship, Fygthurn watched the giants stand at the aft end.

Ogdurg chose to approach Miranda. She considered it her duty to learn about the giants. "How do you anchor yourself for liftoff?" she asked.

Miranda's palm holo-vid lit.

Ogdurg took the surprising tech in stride. "What am I observing?" she inquired.

"Do you not recognize your planet?" Miranda queried.

Understanding dawned, and Ogdurg hissed for her mate. When Fygthurn stood beside her, she pointed at the holo-vid display and exclaimed, "We've already launched."

Fygthurn wanted to say it was a trick, but he kept his snout shut. Time would prove whether it was true.

Ogdurg continued to ply Miranda with questions about her capabilities. They'd reached the subject of kernel transfer, when the cabin lights brightened.

"We've landed aboard our Trident," Miranda announced. "We'll provide you with a cabin. Then we'll clean your clothes while you're in the refresher."

The negotiators watched the ship's passengers leap through the airlock with alacrity.

When it was Fyghthurn's turn to stand in the hatchway, the interior of a ship's hold greeted him. It caused him to revise his opinion of the invaders' tech.

Nebulon attended the negotiators in the cabin assigned to them. "Do you require modesty?" she asked, directing them toward the refresher.

"Not for us," Ogdurg replied, stripping off her dusty clothing. She hurried to follow Fyghthurn, who was already standing in the refresher.

Nebulon demonstrated the refresher's operation, taking the chance that Radags weren't adverse to the streaming mist. Fortune was with her.

Soon the mated pair was vigorously washing the dust out of each other's fur. When the action became more intimate, Nebulon slipped out of the cabin, leaving the door partially ajar.

By the time the negotiators finished their extended time in the refresher, they found the clothes clean and lying on the bed.

Ogdurg touched an article of clothing. "It's clean, dry, and pliable," she remarked.

"Think about what we've witnessed so far," Fyghthurn prompted.

"Are you proposing to return to the refresher so soon?" Ogdurg inquired, with a gleam in her eye. When her mate, frowned, she admitted, "The compilation of events is overwhelming. I kept wondering how this ship could create such a destructive beam weapon. There's no evidence of armament that size in the main cabin."

"I think the entire ship constitutes the weapon," Fyghthurn proposed.

"How is that possible?" Ogdurg queried.

"Put that aside," Fyghthurn requested, waving his hand. "Think about ships that can fly without engines. The commanders told us about this, but much of what they told us was discounted."

"It was assumed to be a mass hallucinogenic effect induced by the invaders," Ogdurg admitted. She shook her head sadly at the memory of her reaction.

"So, have we endured the same sort of mind control?" Fyghthurn inquired dubiously.

"I, for one, don't feel any different, which means to me that my mind is clear," Ogdurg replied. "As for me, the heat of the building's destruction felt real, as did the dust that choked me."

"I agree," Fyghthurn replied, as he dressed. "Besides, if the invaders are capable of these phenomena, there's no means of stopping them. The empire will be overwhelmed."

"Then it doesn't matter," Ogdurg concluded. "Either the invaders' tech or their mind control or a combination of both will win the invaders' goals for them."

"This means we should rethink everything the commanders described to us about the invaders' actions," Fyghthurn warned.

"We must be prepared to present things we want in exchange for the demands the invaders will make," Ogdurg added.

"Difficult to do when we've no idea what the invaders will say to us," Fyghthurn replied. "Who knows to what level our race would have risen, if the Krackus hadn't kept us buried under their feathers?"

"One word of caution," Ogdurg said, when she finished dressing. "We should refer to the invaders by the word we were taught. They're the conclave."

Fyghthurn nodded in agreement. Then Ogdurg and he stepped outside the cabin and were met by Nebulon.

"Do you care for a meal?" the sister inquired.

"We're hungry, and we're curious about what you might supply," Fyghthurn replied.

When the negotiators entered a meal room, they scanned the assembled audience, and their eyes fell on a Krackus. Despite their annuals of training as negotiators, their control slipped, and they growled warnings.

Swiftly, two things happened. The Krackus squawked defiantly, and the suited figures on each side of the Krackus dropped their masks into place and flexed their arms.

Nebulon stepped in front of the negotiators. "Korvath, who is our friend and a member of the conclave, wishes to know if you've challenged him."

Realizing their mistake, Fyghthurn and Ogdurg rapidly regained their composure.

To cover their error, Fyghthurn said, "But the Krackus, I mean Korvath, didn't say anything."

Nebulon tapped her temple, and the negotiators belatedly recalled that the commanders had warned that conclave members could communicate by their thoughts.

"What is your response to Korvath's query?" Nebulon pressed. In truth, the assembly didn't receive a full question from Korvath. However, in his anger, he'd clearly transmitted, <Not empire! Conclave!>

Fyghthurn focused his attention on Korvath, whose feathers were ruffled. "Korvath, we've insulted you, and we ask for your forgiveness. As you don't have claws, we'll wait for you to grasp a sharp implement and scar us where you will."

Korvath regarded the negotiators. His anger was palpable. Despite his fear of the Radags, he stepped toward them. As he cooled, he considered his options. When he was ready, he said, "If I've learned anything from the conclave, it's that initial mistakes should be forgiven until an individual or a group has proven that they're past redemption for their actions."

Then Korvath extended a hand to Fyghthurn.

When Nebulon realized the Radags didn't understand the gesture, she clasped her hands to demonstrate and said, "Korvath offers his hand in friendship."

Before Fyghthurn could react, Ogdurg extended her hand and said, "Apologies, Korvath."

Then Fyghthurn quickly followed. "The lesson of your generosity is not lost on us, Korvath," he said.

Korvath nodded and stepped back. His knees shook as he stood between Escher and Ceda, and they closed ranks with him.

<Who knew this meeting with the Radags would be so eventful?> Z shared with his partner.

<Observing Korvath's emotional development, I'm curious if he'll become a conclave leader and maybe a bright light for us,> Miranda replied.

“Now that everyone has had an opportunity to work up an appetite, I suggest we eat,” Nebulon announced.

2: Strained Negotiations

Nebulon led the negotiators to a table. She and other sisters sat with the Radags.

Both Fyghthurn and Ogdurg noted that the suits moved to a faraway table.

“We thought our insult was forgiven,” Ogdurg queried, peering at Miranda and Z who stood behind Nebulon on the opposite side of the table.

“It was,” Miranda replied. “Just as you don’t appreciate our food, your preparations engender harsh reactions from humans.”

“Poisonous?” Fyghthurn inquired.

Nebulon imitated a human regurgitating, and the negotiators nodded their understanding.

Sisters delivered prepared dishes for Fyghthurn and Ogdurg. As the smell of the food wafted toward them, their stomachs gurgled in anticipation.

“How did you accomplish this?” Fyghthurn asked, as he held a dish under his snout.

“There is much that we’re capable of doing,” Z replied. “However, that’s not the purpose of your visit. I suggest you eat. There are more important subjects to discuss.”

Like the Dischnya, snouts and deadly fangs didn’t easily accommodate utensils. The Radag visitors picked up chunks of food, tilted their heads back, and dropped the morsels into their maws.

By the manner in which the negotiators consumed multiple serving dishes, it was obvious that they enjoyed the food.

<Juno would be pleased,> Nebulon sent to the protectors. <Her forethought and yours has made a valuable impression.>

<Credit is due to Juno,> Miranda returned. <It was her idea to preserve some of the Radag food from Vokslem. Although her samples turned

before we could use them, it clued us as to the fresh material to collect on Tritium to prepare new food stocks and program new menu items.>

<When the meal is finished, we'll have to move to a conference room,> Z sent in the open. <Our suited figures and Korvath appear to have lost their appetites. The smells of Radag food have wafted in their direction.>

The protectors, suits, negotiators, Nebulon, and Korvath assembled in a nearby conference room. When Fyghthurn mightily belched, the room was hastily cleared by the biologicals.

Ceda connected to her companions and sent, <How long do you think it'll take the negotiators to figure out that they've a secret weapon against biologicals?>

The laughter from Korvath and the other suits was subdued. They were still trying to clear their nostrils of the egregious smell.

In order to allow the suited figures and Korvath to participate in the forthcoming discussion, the conference reconvened in the engineering space, which had significant air circulation that could be increased on cue.

Every time Fyghthurn felt like belching, he rose from the table and hurried toward an air intake to release his stomach gas.

"This always happens when he eats too much," Ogdurg apologized.

On the conference link, Bethany sent, <I'm recording this. No one would believe this is how our Radag negotiations began.>

When Fyghthurn's stomach activities seemed to calm down, he apologized to his audience and asked in Krackus, "How shall we start?"

"What do the Radags want?" Z inquired.

"What we want is more than likely greater than what the conclave will allow," Fyghthurn returned. "Perhaps, we should start with what you wish from us."

"Radags are on most of the suborned worlds, are they not?" Korvath asked.

"Yes, except for the ones the conclave has captured," Fyghthurn replied.

"Although, you've kept a commander and his warriors on Jumanus," Ogdurg noted.

"Those individuals are unharmed," Nebulon stated, which earned her Ogdurg's appreciative nod.

"We learned that the Radag teams are often circulated to Darmian when their contracts end and new teams are sent out," Stacey said.

"That's true," Fyghthurn allowed.

Seeing where the group's logic was headed, Nebulon said, "Then you can accept the returns of commanders and warriors and choose not to fulfill new contracts."

"Before we discuss the potential problems with that path, what are you prepared to offer us for the lost credits?" Ogdurg inquired.

"Your world and I imagine your system have been heavily abused in some distant past," Johann ventured. "Did the Imperium do this?"

The negotiators tipped their snouts, and Johann added, "Perhaps, the conclave would be willing to help you rebuild."

The negotiators eyed Miranda and Z expectantly.

"That's possible," Miranda said. "The effort would be commensurate with the rate of return of the warrior teams."

"Ships like the one we flew inside?" Ogdurg immediately asked.

"We could supply those as shuttles," Z replied. "They wouldn't have beam weapon capability, and they would be limited to sailing within the system."

Fyghthurn and Ogdurg appeared to be crestfallen. However, secretly, they considered they had the beginnings of a proposal that the chiefs might accept.

"What were your concerns about the first item proposed?" Escher asked.

"Executor Dakargk would be incensed by our failure to negotiate new contracts," Fyghthurn proposed. "That would place Darmian and our teams on other worlds in jeopardy."

"Repercussions could vary," Ogdurg added. "The Krackus might choose to strand our teams on those far worlds."

The group heard Korvath's harsh gurgles. "Do your commanders and warriors fear hardships from my kind?" he asked.

The negotiators were affronted that Korvath would insinuate that they feared the mild-mannered Krackus. Then they realized the trap he'd set for them. Surprise showed on their faces, and Korvath's eyes gleamed.

“It is hard to imagine the Krackus taking liberties with your dear warriors,” Miranda said. “Certainly, they might be inconvenienced, but I imagine they’ve done much worse to the races whose worlds they occupy.”

“As for Darmian, the conclave would position vessels here that would prevent peacekeepers from entering your system,” Z said.

“For how long?” Ogdurg inquired.

“Due to the nature of your race, it might be for generations,” Miranda replied.

“Why generations?” Fygthurn queried.

“It might take that long for the societal shifts that would produce Radags who didn’t wish to dominate other races,” Miranda swiftly answered.

“Some of what you are saying will not be acceptable to the chiefs,” Fygthurn noted.

“That won’t be the council’s choice,” Nebulon replied. “If the chiefs find our proposal unacceptable, we can always treat the Radags as enemy combatants. I find that prospect imminently preferable.”

The negotiators wouldn’t have considered the slight digital entity as worthy of their concern, but her intense gaze claimed those opinions were faulty.

“You would forgo the conclave’s careful treatment of our warriors that has been exhibited to date?” Ogdurg asked.

“You must forgive Nebulon and her sisters,” Korvath interjected. “They’re new to the conclave. Therefore, they haven’t fully adopted its ways. As such, they tend to behave in a rough manner.”

<Excellent, Korvath,> Bethany sent. <A little fear goes a long way toward furthering negotiations with a warrior race who promotes prowess.>

“Perhaps, we should reset this conversation,” Fygthurn suggested. “Is there a means by which the conclave could use our warriors now?”

The negotiators were met with noise, laughter, and gurgling. They tried to appear indignant, but their audience’s reaction only got louder.

“Is our race to be disregarded to that extent by the conclave?” Fygthurn objected harshly.

Korvath rose, his feathers extending in an ancient protective act of enlarging his stature. He placed his hands on the table and leaned toward the negotiators. "You happily joined the Imperium Empire to conquer thousands of worlds," he challenged. "The Krackus are ultimately responsible for the injustices committed, but you became their hired mercenaries. From what I've personally witnessed, I favor Nebulon's proposal that you be treated as combatants. Forget the idea of the conclave repairing your infrastructure and guiding your race to be more considerate beings."

When Korvath sat down, he glared at Fyghthurn and Ogdurg.

"I hope that answered your question," Ceda quipped, smiling congenially.

"Then those are our two choices," Ogdurg said. "Accept your proposal of benevolent protection and confinement or face your wrath." When no one replied, she added, "We'd like time on Darmian to discuss what you've offered."

With that ending the meeting, a sister flew the negotiators toward the shuttleport.

In the main cabin, Nebulon extended a visual of the surface from her holo-vid. "Is there some other place that you would like us to set down?" she queried.

Ogdurg, who sat across from the sister, pointed a dark claw into the image. Then Fyghthurn and she watched the display shift, as the sister in the pilot's seat headed the ship for the new location.

In short order, the traveler hovered over the rooftop patio of the negotiators' home.

Fyghthurn and Ogdurg bounded lightly through the hatch to land atop their roof. Gazing behind them, they noted that the conclave ship had never disturbed their patio furniture or smaller items.

As the traveler rose out of sight, Fyghthurn commented, "Miraculous technology. Why did the conclave have to come to the empire?"

"That's a useless lament, my mate," Ogdurg criticized. "If it wasn't the conclave, it would have been some other race."

“Why do you say that?” Fygthurn queried, as he led the way off the roof.

“You should have paid more attention to the commanders’ reports on Krackus businesses,” Ogdurg replied.

Fygthurn growled desultorily. “You know that I find those boring,” he said. “What did I miss?”

Ogdurg shook her head. She’d reminded him many times to absorb the commanders’ reports in their entirety. “The commanders continually speak of freighters stacking up, and the frustration of the Krackus whom they protect,” she replied.

Fygthurn stopped and stared at Ogdurg. “Why?” he asked.

“There’s a great deal of conjecture, but not many facts,” Ogdurg replied. “When you read enough reports, you get the idea that the outworld businesses can’t produce enough to fill the Krackus freighters.”

“Which types of shipments are coming up short?” Fygthurn inquired.

“Everything,” Ogdurg replied, raising her arms in exasperation at her mate’s failure to listen to her about reading the reports.

“The Krackus home worlds are running out of supplies,” Fygthurn surmised. His arm was lightly cuffed by Ogdurg, and he knew he deserved something fiercer.

“We know the Krackus have expanded their populations for centuries,” Ogdurg said. “Their home worlds can’t feed their populations, and their systems can’t manufacture a sufficient amount of local products. Much has been outsourced and in great quantities.”

“And the conclave is starting to shut off those resources,” Fygthurn exclaimed. When he regarded his mate, she was nodding as if a child had finally learned a valuable lesson. “I wish we’d had this exchange before we met with the conclave members.” Then he did receive a harsh rip from Ogdurg’s claws.

Grasping the wounds to prevent blood from dripping on the rug, he quickly said, “Apologies, I’ve been a dense mate.”

While Ogdurg gathered the medical supplies to bind Fygthurn’s wounds, she chastised him. “Now is not the time for lament,” she said. “We’ve always counted on the expansion of the empire to resist invasions.

However, Imperium expansion has slowed, and the Krackus are at a tipping point.”

Fygethurn’s long tongue licked Ogdurg’s cheek.

“Stop,” she replied, chortling at her mate’s request for forgiveness. “We must ask ourselves if this gives us any advantage with the conclave’s negotiations.”

When Fygethurn’s arm was bound, he walked through a pair of open doors to stand on a balcony, and Ogdurg joined him.

“I don’t think it helps us with the conclave,” Fygethurn said. “But it does tell us that resisting these individuals is foolish.” He regarded his mate, and she replied, “Agreed. Time is against the empire.”

“I wonder if the executors see it that way,” Fygethurn mused aloud.

“Doubtful,” Ogdurg replied. “They’ll resist to the end.”

“Then we should negotiate with the conclave for all the support that we can get,” Fygethurn surmised.

“What about the conclave’s long-term goals for us as expressed by the digital sentients?” Ogdurg inquired.

“Personally, I don’t see that it’s bad for our race,” Fygethurn replied. “However, I think that’s a minority opinion.”

“And a dangerous one,” Ogdurg warned.

“Undoubtedly,” Fygethurn commented, “which makes our ability to sell this concept to the council about zero.”

“The outcome might be worse than that,” Ogdurg suggested.

Fygethurn turned toward his mate. He saw concern, if not a hint of fear, in her eyes. It was a rare sight. “You think we could be attacked by the chiefs,” he said. When she nodded, he turned to look across the horizon at the mix of structures, new and derelict. “You could be right,” he murmured.

“There is an alternative,” Ogdurg suggested.

“I don’t know if your thought is the same as mine,” Fygethurn replied, chortling. “Let the chiefs argue with Z and Miranda.”

“What about the concern that our race shouldn’t see the chiefs defeated?” Ogdurg asked. Then she suddenly grasped Fygethurn’s unmarked arm. “Yes,” she exclaimed. “That might be just what we need.”

“Again, we’re on the same path,” Fyghthurn responded. “If the conclave is intent on seeing a milder nature developed in our race, then the chiefs have become anachronisms. Our warriors must see that the chiefs’ prowess can’t compete with the conclave.”

“Then we have a path,” Ogdurg stated definitively. “Now we must contact the tri-hull above and plead our case.”

In the event the negotiators would be aboard the tri-hull for an extended length of time, they packed clothes and personal items. Then they made their way to the control tower near the shuttleport.

“Call the tri-hull,” Fyghthurn requested of the warrior on duty.

“How?” the warrior requested.

“Broadcast in the open,” Ogdurg replied.

The warrior shrugged his thick shoulders. Then he opened the planetwide channel and said, “This is Darmian control requesting the tri-hull above the shuttleport.”

Fyghthurn and Ogdurg refrained from rolling their eyes at the idea that the warrior thought he had to specify which tri-hull he wanted.

<Greetings, Darmian shuttleport. How may we help you?> Z replied.

The warrior indicated Fyghthurn with a sharply clawed hand, and the negotiator said, “Fyghthurn and Ogdurg wish to continue the negotiations.”

<We’re pleased to hear that,> Z replied. <A traveler will land for you shortly on the shuttleport pad.>

“We’ll be waiting,” Fyghthurn replied.

When the connection ended, the warrior eyed the negotiators. “It’s a waste of time,” he commented.

“Why do you say that?” Ogdurg inquired.

“Radags are meant to dominate,” the warrior replied. “One day, we’ll have our chance again, and we’ll replace the Krackus at the head of the table.”

“Is that a common thought among your companions?” Ogdurg asked.

“I’ve never heard a dissent against it,” the warrior replied, as if the negotiator was foolish to suggest otherwise.

By the time Fyghturn and Ogdurg were out of the shuttleport tower and headed for the landing pad, they could see the traveler high above them and dropping fast.

Aboard the conclave ship and headed for the Trident, the pair was quiet, and the sister who'd stood by at the hatch chose to join Nebulon in the pilot's cabin.

<Something has happened,> the sister shared. <The negotiators are subdued. The term Miranda would use is despondent. Does this bode ill for the negotiations?>

<We must wait to find out,> Nebulon counseled.

The conclave members and the negotiators assembled in a small conference room.

"How to begin?" Fyghturn asked rhetorically, spreading his hands in apology.

Ogdurg interjected, "We've come to understand what your offer is meant to convey. In addition to a way forward for our race, it speaks to the precariousness of the Krackus supply routes."

"You're referring to the overexpansion of Krackus home worlds, and the empire's dependence on the conquered worlds," Korvath offered.

"Yes," Ogdurg replied.

"What Kreus and Korvath didn't know, we've gathered from the databanks of Krackus ships," Z assured the negotiators.

"Then you understand that we're convinced that the conclave will eventually be successful in displacing Imperium control," Fyghturn said. "That's why we wish a future for our race in the new order."

"Why do we sense the rest of your conversation will be full of negatives?" Bethany inquired.

"We've serious impediments," Fyghturn admitted.

"Detail them," Z directed.

"We're confident our council of chiefs won't accept your proposal," Fyghturn replied.

"It's worse than that," Ogdurg quickly said. "It's highly likely that the chiefs will see the proposal as an affront, and Fyghturn and I will be disciplined."

“Explain disciplined,” Escher requested.

“Killed,” Ogdurg replied.

“Then, perhaps, we should present the conclave’s options to the chief,” Miranda proffered.

“The chiefs will know that we sanctioned the presentation,” Fyghthurn said.

“You needn’t be present,” Z said.

“We fear the chiefs’ response for us will be the same,” Ogdurg said. “After you leave, we’ll be severely punished.”

“Are there replacement negotiators?” Stacey asked.

It was a question that caught the attention of the other conclave members.

“Multiple families raise young to behave and communicate as we do,” Ogdurg explained. “These families live in an enclave with us.”

“Are negotiator families in danger from other Radags?” Ceda queried.

“Accidents have happened,” Fyghthurn replied. “An angry warrior cuffs a young one and breaks the child’s neck.”

On the conference link, Miranda sent, <We’ve met Radag warriors, commanders, and negotiators. It’s critical that we meet with the Radag council.>

<Agreed,> Z swiftly replied.

<Is it possible to withhold the options discussed with the negotiators and use the opportunity to understand the chiefs’ natures?> Escher inquired on the conference link.

<All things are possible,> Miranda replied.

<In the event that the chiefs are incensed, as they’ve intimated, it might be best that they remain with us,> Johann volunteered.

Korvath focused on the negotiators. Then he asked, “Do you have children?”

“We had two,” Ogdurg said despondently.

“Warriors?” Korvath queried.

“Yes,” Fyghthurn replied. “Both were young and unable to understand the nature of our planet’s warriors and commanders.”

“Was there no recourse for you?” Stacey asked sympathetically.

“In what way?” Ogdurg inquired.

“Your two children were murdered,” Stacey insisted. “Surely, there must be some way for you to obtain justice.”

“Now you see the gulf between your worlds and ours,” Fyghthurn said. “There is an inviolate hierarchy. It starts with chiefs. Then commanders and warriors.”

“I take it that negotiators are at the bottom,” Escher surmised. When the negotiators nodded, he added, “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Ogdurg regarded the assembly. She could read the pain in their faces, which surprised her. Other negotiator families had offered their condolences, but no other Radags. Now, many annuals later, aliens heard of her children’s deaths, and they were stunned and hurt by the tragedies that Fyghthurn and she had suffered.

“Could the negotiator families be the future of the Radag race?” Korvath asked.

Fyghthurn and Ogdurg were taken aback by the question. They’d never perceived themselves as anything but the bottom of the social hierarchy.

“How many Radags live in your enclave?” Bethany inquired.

“About a hundred and sixty adults and some five to six hundred children,” Fyghthurn replied.

<A sizeable genetic pool,> Z commented via the conference links.

“Do the children mate with those who live in the enclave?” Ceda asked.

“It’s required,” Ogdurg replied. “More than likely, a young negotiator female wouldn’t survive the mating night with a warrior.”

“Please excuse us,” Miranda said. “We’ll let you rest in your cabin, while we talk. If you require food or have needs, a sister will handle your requests.” She gestured toward the room’s exit.

My Books

Allied Enemies is the eighth 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.