

CHAOTIC FUTURES

Gate Ghosts Book 9

S. H. JUCHA

Chapters 1 & 2 Excerpt

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

Glossary

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1: Dakargk's Onus

IMPERIUM, PALTUR SYSTEM KRACKUS HOME WORLD

Elation filled Executor Dakargk. He envisioned the moment he would have his revenge on an individual who had irked him for much too long. The morning's assembly meeting would begin with the presentation by the four commanders who had been tasked with destroying the warship raider.

The governor's records, downloaded from three different flagships, clearly demonstrated that the raider hadn't been wiped from Imperium space.

Under the decree placed on the commanders and their advisors by Dakargk himself, the fleets weren't to return to the Imperium home world until their task was accomplished.

Commanders Deckus, Gretren, Fastark, and Goskerk would share the assembly's judgment. In addition, Imperator Doktorg and advisors Tarbar and Ragirt would be included in the decision.

What happened to six of the individuals didn't matter a whit to Dakargk. It was Inquisitor Tarbar's fate that occupied every fiber of his being. The executor ached to hear the assembly's announcement. He anticipated Tarbar's crest flattening in defeat. At the same time, he wanted the inquisitor to see his crest rise in triumph.

Dakargk was so sure of the outcome that he'd planned a lavish meal at his residence with some close associates. The extravagant display of Krackus specialties would demonstrate his domination of an irritant — an inquisitor, no less.

The transport delivered Dakargk early to the assembly hall, and he ascended to his place on the dais. His orbs gleamed, as he regarded the few executors who were present.

As the time to start drew close, Dakargk noted that two executors had yet to arrive. This wasn't unusual. However, the pair was Presiding Executor Rebtar and Executor Gaketork. The lateness of one or the other might have caused Dakargk some minor concern. But, more than likely, the pair was speaking privately, and Dakargk was disturbed by what that might mean. He glanced at the empty tables and chairs in front of the dais, and his elation withered, to be replaced by burning anger.

Rebtar and Gaketork finally arrived and took their seats. They had brief discussions with their senior admins. Then they turned forward, and Rebtar opened the proceedings.

Dakargk noted that neither executor looked his way, which didn't bode well for his moment of revenge.

An assembly staff member led the seven presenters into the hall. The four commanders sat at one table, and Doktorg, Tarbar, and Ragirt occupied the other.

Fleet imperator crests were held stubbornly upright, while Doktorg's and Ragirt's were hesitantly half-raised.

It bothered Dakargk that Tarbar appeared confident. Then again, the executor considered that the inquisitor was putting on a false front for his benefit.

"Our first presentation concerns the fate of the raider warship," Rebtar announced. "The commanders may speak first."

To the surprise of the assembly, Goskerk, the most junior commander, rose to address the executors. "By general agreement, I've been selected to deliver our presentation," he said. "One reason is that my flagship was acting as a spotter in the Monforth system when the raider arrived. The other is that our peacekeeper's position allowed us to observe most of the raider's actions, including its final state."

"Is this really necessary?" Dakargk interrupted. "Our committee was clear that these four commanders weren't to return to Imperium unless the raider was destroyed. I assume that every executor has seen the preliminary

images supplied by the governor. Clearly, the raider was under power when it exited the Monforth system. There's only one decision that the assembly can reach."

Dakargk expected a swell of support for his outburst, but the assembly remained eerily quiet. Of particular note was Rebtar's silence.

"Presiding Executor Rebtar," Gaketork said, "I would like to hear the executors' preferences as to whether they want to see the complete presentation before a decision is reached."

Rebtar queried the assembly. Dakargk and three of his most ardent supporters were the only dissenters.

"Commander Goskerk, continue," Rebtar instructed.

Gaketork's admin cued the first vid for Goskerk.

"When the alien warship arrived, the call was placed to the fleets to rendezvous in the Monforth system," Goskerk began. "During the coming cycles, our peacekeepers arrived on the far side of the inhabited planet to hide their energy signatures from the raider. Of the one hundred twenty-eight ships in our combined fleets, sixty arrived before the warship made its move. It's believed that the raider emperor detected our peacekeepers' energy signatures."

"If that were so, then why did a battle take place?" an executor asked. "Why didn't the raider flee?"

When Goskerk paused, the executors were taken aback that he deferred to Emperor Doktorg.

"Are we not to hear from our vaunted commanders?" Dakargk grouched. It was a sign of the assembly's mood that no one paid attention to his interruption.

Even Doktorg started as if he hadn't heard Dakargk. He was intent on laying out the facts. "We've stated previously that the extent of the warship's capabilities was unknown," he said. "However, a committee of executors heard from a construction platform that aliens from the raider gained access to our peacekeepers. The aliens knew exactly our peacekeepers' capabilities."

Several executors, who'd recently returned to Imperium, listened intently to their admins, who updated them on what had transpired in their absence.

"Obviously, the raider emperor reached the decision that his warship could deal a crippling blow to our ships," Doktorg finished. Then he sat down, while Gretren took his place.

"Of the four commanders, only Fastark and I were on the planet's far side, when the raider attacked," Gretren said. "We formed the six spears that we believed would give us an advantage over the warship's armament."

"It's evident to all of us that your strategy was an unmitigated disaster," Dakargk challenged. "Your failure to employ standard fleet maneuvers cost the empire ships and crews."

Gretren raised a hand and pointed toward Gaketork's admin. "The projection scenario, if you would?" he asked.

As the graphics rolled, Gretren narrated, "We thought this question might arise. Our data records detail exactly the amount of weaponry expended against us in the fractions of time in which we passed the raider. Typically, a fleet would have formed a wall. As there were but sixty ships, they were divided evenly between Commander Fastark and me. This is our projection of what would have happened with a standard tactic."

The executors watched a wall of peacekeepers encounter the raider. Most of the wall was too distant to be of use in the fight. In the limited time allowed, only a few peacekeepers were able to launch on the raider. However, the raider was able to spread its armament in a wide swath and devastate a circle of ships as it passed through the wall.

"We estimate a loss of eight to nine peacekeepers, with possibly a few more damaged," Gretren said. "In this engagement, we would have done limited damage to the warship, and we'd have lost the element of surprise."

"But with your strategy, your six spears lost you twenty-one peacekeepers," a Dakargk supporter pointed out.

Tarbar rose to stand beside Gretren. "Did we misunderstand the committee?" he asked. "The commanders were told to destroy the raider. No thought was given to the inordinate amount of time we spent trying to locate the warship. We attempted a trap, but we were outwitted. Only our

unusual formation managed to deal enough damage to the raider to prevent it being a problem for the Imperium Empire.”

“How did you reach that conclusion?” Rebtar requested.

Goskerk stood to reply, and Gaketork’s admin cued the next vid.

“My flagship followed the raider as it sought to exit the Monforth system and escape into the dark,” Goskerk said. “We recorded every manner of data that we could capture, and I won’t bore you with the details. Instead, I want you to pay attention to the raider’s engines.”

A second vid replaced the one in the projection.

“This is time-lapse with the accompanying thrust measurements,” Goskerk continued. “You’ll notice that by the time the raider clears the system’s gravitational pull, it’s lost nine of its twelve engines. Furthermore, the outputs of the three remaining engines are fluctuating. They’re in danger of shutting down.”

Another vid started.

“To ensure that the raider hadn’t flung mines at us as we chased it, my flagship took evasive measures,” Goskerk narrated. “From these different perspectives, we were able to collect imagery about the raider’s hull. You can see the damage.”

“The ship appears intact,” Dakargk argued. “That means it’s still capable of harming our worlds.”

The standing participants sat down, and Ragirt stood. That was the admin’s cue for the engineer’s part of the presentation.

From Gaketork’s point of view, the seven participants had spent a great deal of time thinking through the possible objections to their actions and the results. Then they had studiously set out to refute each and every one of them.

“These are a series of stills with image enhancement,” Ragirt said.

The assembly watched shots of raider shuttle doors go past until they grew bored.

“Could we have the point, Engineer Ragirt?” Rebtar asked in annoyance.

“But there are many more, Executor Rebtar,” Ragirt offered in mock lament. “Oh, well, the rest are all the same anyway.”

“All the same what?” Rebtar pressed.

“Your pardon, Executor,” Ragirt replied. “I thought the point was obvious. Every pair of doors I’ve showed the assembly demonstrates minor to major buckling.”

Suddenly, the executors were alert.

“The aliens can’t launch their shuttles from those bays,” an executor commented aloud.

“That’s correct,” Ragirt responded. “Now I’d like you to look at this next sequence.”

Ragirt’s casual approach had caught the executors’ interest. They were prepared to study the next series. He didn’t bother to offer an explanation. Instead, the final image froze in the display, and he waited.

“What are those large tubular items that appear trashed?” an executor asked.

“More than likely, they’re generators,” Ragirt replied. “A ship requires many generators to power its systems. Typically, the generators and engines work in tandem.”

“Then you’re telling us that the raider’s engines are failing, and it’s lost much of its generators,” Gaketork surmised.

“That’s correct,” Ragirt replied.

“Anything else?” Gaketork inquired. He saw the participants laying a powerful argument for the raider’s ineffectualness.

Ragirt nodded, and the next series played. “These images were collected from the battle and our trailing ship,” he explained. “The first stills are blurry because of the velocities with which the objects were moving, but we’ve no doubt that what you’re seeing are bodies.”

“Despite the lack of definition, it’s obvious that these bodies aren’t of the same alien race,” Dakargk exclaimed, thinking he’d found an error in the presentation.

“No, they aren’t, are they?” Ragirt replied. “Did you expect them to be?”

The executors’ widened orbs indicated that they’d assumed a single race occupied the ship. They worked to correct their thinking, wondering what the revelation meant.

“Regardless of the origins of these races,” Ragirt finished, “the warship spewed bodies during the battle, as it exited the system and as it made for the dark.”

“What does this tell you?” Gaketork inquired.

“Even as the raider made its way out of the system, it continued to experience structural failures, which opened bays, corridors, and cabins,” Ragirt replied. “The result was explosive decompression that threw bodies, equipment, and odd material into space.”

“All this evidence is fine,” Dakargk interrupted again. Immediately, he was shouted down. Rebtar and he were taken aback by the anger evident from a vast majority of the assembly.

The presenters saw a glimmer of hope that the assembly might give them a reprieve from Dakargk’s onerous requirement.

“Please, continue, Engineer Ragirt,” Gaketork requested politely into the eerie quiet.

“The sum of our information is that the raider is heavily damaged — engines, generators, hull, and bay doors,” Ragirt summarized. “In addition, the ship has lost numerous individuals, and I’m not referring to just those who were ejected. It’s more than likely that an equal or greater number have died within the ship.”

“What does all this data lead you to presume about the warship?” Rebtar asked. He was keen not to be associated with Dakargk, who was quickly becoming a pariah among the executors.

Ragirt resumed his seat, and Fastark rose.

“We were tasked with eliminating the raider, who proved far more dangerous than any of us could have presumed,” Fastark stated with barely controlled anger. “In the brief moment that we passed the warship, we lost twenty-one peacekeepers. However, our six-spear strategy, which I credit Emperor Doktorg with originating, managed to heavily damage the raider. I believe we’ve done our duty.”

Fastark sat down heavily. He didn’t think he’d fully expressed his thoughts, but he was loath to continue speaking for fear of lashing out at the executors.

The presenters could hear grumbling conversations between the executors and their admins.

Gretren moved to stand, but Deckus held his forearm.

When Deckus stood, he drew the executors' attention from their admins.

"My flagship and accompanying ship weren't at the battle," Deckus said. "My pair arrived soon afterward. However, I've spent many cycles reviewing the imagery collected by the surviving peacekeepers. Undoubtedly, you're mulling over the success or failure of our mission. I would ask you to consider these questions. Where will the raider go to resupply and get repairs? With its engines in shambles, can the raider even reach that destination?"

Tarbar rose quickly. "I would add this question," he said. "Who in the empire is prepared to help these aliens? They must not only want to aid them, but they also must have the technology."

This wasn't the only thing Tarbar would get wrong in his lifetime. But, with the knowledge that any Krackus possessed, he could be forgiven for offering these thoughts.

The presenters were excused to wait the assembly's deliberations.

In the anteroom, Ragirt inquired, "How does anyone think we did?"

"The best indication of the assembly voting for our release was their condemnation of Dakargk's incessant interruptions," Tarbar opined.

"The executors appeared unsatisfied with our arguments that the raider is no longer a threat to the empire," Deckus said.

"None of them have any idea what it takes to construct or repair a peacekeeper," Goskerk said. "Can you imagine their ignorance in contemplating what it will take to repair the raider?"

"Not just the repairs," Doktorg added. "The aliens will need a base, and that base must supply resources for the ship and the population."

"I think if we had tried to educate the executors to the degree we're discussing, I think they might have thought us pleading for our release," Deckus said.

"The images will have to serve," Gretren said. "If the views of that failing warship don't convince the executors, then I think nothing would."

The presenters sat so long that Doktorg and Tarbar stood and began to pace.

Eventually, an admin entered the anteroom and said, "Please, follow me."

To the presenters' disappointment, they were led to a break room, where food and drink waited for them.

When the admin and the server left, Goskerk said, "I don't know if this delay bodes well for us or not." He regarded Tarbar for his opinion.

"It means there's an argument or a fight," Tarbar said before sipping on a drink. "It could be about the fundamental decision. However, I think it's probably about a codicil to be added to the judgment."

"Would you bother with a codicil if the executors chose to apply Imperium decrees to us?" Doktorg inquired.

"It's been done before," Tarbar replied. "In the cases of dissidents who took down shuttles, the transporting individuals were instructed to make sure that the decreed didn't reach Helgart."

Suddenly, appetites vanished. Drinks were consumed, but the food sat there until the presenters were led to the assembly hall.

"Remain standing," Rebtar directed, before the presenters could take their seats. "The assembly's decision has multiple parts."

Tarbar caught Dakargk out of the corner of his eye. The executor was rigid, tightly gripping his hands in front of him. Tarbar wasn't sure whether that was out of anticipation or frustration.

"The assembly is displeased with the enormous loss of ships and crews," Rebtar began. "Yet, after reviewing the data provided, it's been decided that the commanders executed their directive to the extent that it was possible. We believe that, for the near future, the raider is not a threat to the empire. In that case, the condition on the commanders not to return until the raider was destroyed has been lifted."

As Rebtar had spoken of multiple parts to the assembly's decision, Tarbar dared not look at Dakargk.

"However, the assembly isn't willing to accept the presenters' conjectures that the raider won't find an acceptable location to make repairs," Rebtar continued. "Therefore, a search must be executed to find

the raider. Either prove that the ship has become a derelict or summon assistance to complete the job.”

Gaketork cleared his throat, and the presenters focused on him. “It’s been left to you as to how the search should be conducted,” he said.

That offer had the seven presenters thinking about what it meant.

“Executors,” Doktorg quickly said. “It’s been acknowledged by more than one commander that I’ve the most experience with the raider. If we were to sail a fleet and discover the warship, there’s the possibility that it’ll disappear again if it can. Therefore, I suggest a search by one peacekeeper, which I volunteer to lead. I’ve the vector that the raider entered the dark on, and that’ll be my starting point.”

Doktorg’s companions couldn’t believe what they’d heard. They’d known about Doktorg’s conversation with Goskerk of them becoming the forgotten fleet. It appeared to them that he was trying to save them from that fate.

“An unusual suggestion,” Gaketork commented. “How do the commanders view this idea?”

Goskerk saw the pleading in Doktorg’s eyes, and he relented. “Executor Gaketork, it’s acknowledged across the fleets that have encountered the raider that no one understands that adversarial imperator better than Imperator Doktorg. In this matter, his judgment about how to search for the warship should be considered above all other opinions.”

Effectively, Goskerk’s words shut down the other individuals at the two tables. Beaks tilted down, expressing lament and relief.

“I recommend the assembly accept Imperator Doktorg’s suggestion that he lead a single peacekeeper to discover what happened to the raider,” Gaketork said.

“If I may?” Doktorg interrupted. “I would appreciate the assembly allowing me to select my crew.”

“Why?” Rebtar queried.

“My peacekeeper might be gone for a long time, Executor Rebtar,” Doktorg replied. “I would like to request fleet headquarters seek volunteers to serve on the ship.”

“If there are no objections, I suggest we add the emperor’s preference to Executor Gaketork’s proposal,” Rebtar replied. When he saw no disagreements, not even one from Dakargk, he called for a vote. There it received the same three dissents as before.

“Emperor Doktorg, you’ve your assignment. Regular reports will be expected,” Rebtar said. “The presenters are dismissed.”

Tarbar debated locking orbs with Dakargk. Deckus and Gretren were ahead of him, and their crests were at midpoints, which gave him an idea. He raised his crest high, knowing that his victory salute would be easily identified by Dakargk.

In the anteroom, Doktorg expected a quick goodbye, but he was surrounded by his six companions. It was an awkward moment. None of the six could find the words to express what they felt.

“I’m truly grateful, Doktorg,” Tarbar finally said. “Yet, I feel like a coward for letting you take the assignment for what our four fleets failed to do.”

Doktorg gurgled, which was unexpected. “There is merely a division of interests,” he said. “The six of you have families and want to be relieved of chasing the raider. That’s understandable. However, I want to know what happened to that warship. I appreciate the opportunity to seek it out.”

Goskerk gurgled at the outcome. “Doktorg, if I didn’t have a family, I’d have wanted to sail with you,” he declared.

“We’ll expect private messages from you,” Ragirt said, clasping a hand on Doktorg’s shoulder.

“What will you do if you find the raider under repair?” Gretren asked. His query confused the other commanders.

Doktorg’s response should have been obvious. Instead, he replied, “I’m not sure,” which explained why Gretren had asked the question. “I think there’s more to this raider than we were able to discern, and I, for one, would like some answers.”

Concern showed in the orbs of the six who surrounded Doktorg, and he gurgled again. “Now you know the second reason I requested volunteers,” he said.

“Suddenly, I pity the raider,” Tarbar said, adding his own gurgling. “I can’t imagine the nature of your face-to-face conversation with the raider imperator if you get the opportunity.”

“If you find the raider under repair, you’ll have to destroy the ship,” Fastark warned.

“I appreciate the advice,” Doktorg replied neutrally.

“What’s the alternative?” Deckus inquired.

“I’ve no idea,” Doktorg said, shrugging. “There’s always the possibility that we never find the raider. On the other hand, I’ll have a better idea about my choices if we do find the warship.” He said goodbye to his companions and left.

“I truly never knew Doktorg was that odd,” Fastark remarked.

“Maybe for this day and age in the Krackus fleets,” Deckus opined. “Doktorg could well be an example of the fleet commander of the future. That is if he survives his next engagement with the raider.”

2: A Gleaming City

DARMIAN HOME WORLD

RADAGUL SYSTEM

<It's been too quiet,> Escher sent to the protectors.

<Usually, I would consider that a good thing, young one, but, in these circumstances, I take your meaning,> Z replied.

<Again, last night's reconnaissance flights revealed no movement at the known beam weapon storage locations,> Miranda added.

<Has the council been meeting?> Ceda inquired. <I couldn't find any vids of the chiefs entering the hut.>

<Nothing to find, Ceda,> Z replied.

<Does anyone think the chiefs aren't meeting?> Escher queried.

<I'm sure the dear ones have come to their senses and understand that the future of their society is in our hands,> Miranda responded.

There was the briefest pause. Then laughter and noise blasted the conference.

Ceda was about to ask where they should be searching for indications of what the chiefs and commanders were planning, when she was interrupted.

<Incoming,> Julien sent systemwide, using a famous Tatia Tachenko phrase. He added the energy signatures of conclave ships to ease concerns.

<Six class two freighters and two Quadrants, with escorts,> Z quickly tallied. <The escorts will free Julien from his oversight function.>

<Our construction will certainly push the chiefs and commanders to show their hands,> Miranda mused. <Our wall tests should catch their attention.>

<Time to speak with Gurderg,> Nebulon shared. As usual, the protectors maintained constant links with her.

<I haven't heard of any trouble,> Jasper sent. Like Nebulon with the protectors, Escher and Ceda maintained links with the other suits.

<Except for the loss of two Radag younglings,> Lita lamented. <However, those incidents don't seem connected to Gurderg's contacts.>

A combination of defenders met Gurderg in the enclave's large courtyard. Now that the conclave had increased the water flow to the enclave, the courtyard was greening nicely.

Gurderg entered the courtyard. She was accompanied by several matriarchs, her two female young, and Temstag.

The last individual was an enclave male, who was the lover of Imphastid, Gurderg's older youngling.

Unlike the first time the conclave defenders saw Gurderg, who walked with her eyes downcast, they saw a Radag gaze confidently ahead. Despite the numerous scars to her muzzle and body, there was a determined look. She saw a better future, and she was ready to grasp it with both hands.

"Greetings, Gurderg and family," Miranda said cordially. "Our assistance has arrived, and we wish to hear about your contact with other matriarchs."

"As you suggested, Miranda, my friends were quickly aware that I resided in the enclave," Gurderg responded. "I've been circumspect in my contact with them. They lament that I'm no longer free to meet with them, and I've asked them how many friends feel as they do."

"Clever," Z commented, which made Gurderg tip her muzzle in appreciation.

"The numbers continue to accumulate," Gurderg continued. "At present, the count is ..."

"Two thousand three hundred fifty-two," Pregfert, the younger sibling, quickly supplied.

"Younglings?" Ceda inquired, doing her best to imitate the Radag growling tones.

"No, Ceda," Gurderg replied. "You can estimate two to three young for each matriarch."

"At present, more than eighty-two hundred," Escher commented. "I think we've more than enough to start a city."

<We'll need every traveler in the fleet,> Bethany shared. <But we'll have to be stealthy in the manner in which we gather the matriarchs and their young.>

<We move them en masse,> Z returned. <It's the only way to keep them safe.>

<First things first,> Miranda sent. <We must communicate to the arriving ships.>

Z, Miranda, the original suits, and Gurderg's family met with Julien and the fleet's captains aboard the *Freedom*.

Briefly, Miranda explained the long-term goal for the Radag race. Most of the captains were taken aback by the severe social intrusion.

The conference table's holo-vid lit, and short vids played one after another to demonstrate the nature of chiefs, commanders, and warriors. Finally, more vids further demonstrated the scarring of matriarchs and younglings.

<If you're wondering about casual visits to Darmian, the answer is no,> Z sent. <We can't spare the resources to protect you.>

<Dear captains, your purpose here is to supply us with the material the freighters carry,> Miranda explained. <As well, we'll need your mining and engineering expertise to build two unique enclosures and a city's infrastructure.>

<The planet processes will take place under the sisters' and suits' supervision,> Bethany warned. <Under no circumstance is any member of your fleet to be out of sight of a sister or a suit. You do so at your peril.>

To underline Bethany's point, Escher sent images of the chiefs that the protectors had recorded. In every case, the chief was shown attacking either Miranda or Z.

The only sound that was heard was a low growl from a Dischnya Trident captain.

Miranda laughed at the response. <Couldn't agree with you more,> she sent privately to the captain.

The chiefs disappeared from the projection to be replaced by a rendering of the new city.

<This is the final goal,> Z explained. <However, this is the portion that you will help us create.>

Most of the city's buildings disappeared. Less than ten percent of them remained. A high wall encompassed the city, and a lower one took in a wide swath of territory.

After the captains absorbed the extent of the protectors' plan, Z shifted the display to show a side view of a piece of wall.

<This is different,> a captain remarked. <It looks like a cross section of a traveler's hull.>

<That's precisely what it will imitate,> Miranda replied. <Structural girders will provide stability, and we'll apply Swei-Swee spit to the exterior.>

Many captains grinned at the use of Mickey Brandon's famous comment about the mixture the Swei Swee matriarchs applied to their houses and, later, to their dark travelers.

<And the reason for the outward face bowing?> a captain inquired.

The holo-vid projected a drawing. In it, an energy beam met a curved surface and was heavily reflected. Calculations accompanied the drawing, indicating the inbound energy, the energy reflected, and the residual amount absorbed by the coating.

<Inventive,> a captain commented, eyeing Z and Miranda to see who would take credit.

Instead, Miranda stepped behind Escher and placed her hands lightly on his shoulders.

<Aren't you a Naiad?> a captain inquired, regarding Escher in his suit.

<It's nothing but observation and a controller's modeling,> Escher replied, shrugging his shoulders.

<Aboard the *Alexander*, Escher was affectionately known as the lurker,> Julien sent. <He was always on the controller, seeking information. Combine a brilliant mind with our vast store of data and you're witnessing the result.>

<Well done, Escher,> the Dischnya captain sent, and the other captains echoed her sentiment.

<It's a good thing that Escher is a modest individual,> Johann remarked to his partner, Stacey. <Otherwise, he'd be impossible to live with for years.>

<I'm still trying to understand how he comes up with his ideas,> Stacey replied privately.

<For this one, Ceda said Escher saw Radag weapons strike the travelers,> Johann explained. <Later, he investigated the travelers and discovered that the shells had dissipated the energy.>

<That's a mind that never rests,> Stacey sent. Central to her thought was a sense of incomprehension about how Escher tolerated his thoughts in constant motion.

The remainder of the meeting was occupied with the details by which the crews were to be engaged. The SADEs aboard the recently arrived ships transferred the data to their ships' controllers and organized the crews for the captains.

Then equipment was freed from the freighters and ferried to a desolate area of Darmian. It was a dry lakebed that contained the minerals necessary to make Swei Swee spit.

While the minerals were harvested, structural girders were unloaded from the freighters and taken to the site of the new city.

The mining site required minimal protection.

However, at the city site, the protectors assigned a complement of suits and sisters to the engineers and techs who worked planting the girders.

SADEs assisted by unloading the girders, placing them in the predrilled holes, and bracing them while techs filled the holes with foundation slurry. The slurry set within minutes, which allowed those SADEs to collect more girders.

Within several cycles, about half of the outer wall was erected. Unfortunately, that was the extent of the girders that the freighters had brought.

Afterward, engineers downloaded a foundry system near the dry lakebed. Several crews located mining resources on the planet and in the inner asteroid belt.

Then structural girders continued to be churned out to complete the outer wall and start on the inner wall.

When a sufficient amount of coating minerals had been harvested from the lakebed, operations were set up at the outer wall. A canopy enclosed the mixing and spraying equipment, which would build a layer against a curved template. Before the layer cured, it was slid off the template and affixed to the horizontal struts that connected the girders.

As this process mimicked the hull building of conclave ships, it proceeded with alacrity.

Soon, conclave members witnessed the completion of a gleaming curved wall, echoing the Swei Swee's favored colors — that of their shallow ocean waters.

When the outer wall was completed, Nebulon's nightly patrols reported warrior movement. This was the first time nocturnal action had been witnessed since the attack on the picnic.

<Several warrior teams have scaled the outer wall with lines and hooks,> Nebulon shared with Miranda and Z. <I think they were surprised to find that the wall encompassed nothing more than fields. Although, they did investigate the partially constructed city wall.>

<I don't see weapons,> Z sent, as he examined the controller recordings.

<None were seen,> Nebulon replied.

<Scouts,> Miranda surmised.

<Perhaps, we should consider keeping the warriors beyond the outer wall,> Nebulon offered. <The less they know, the better it might be for our defense.>

<We needn't bother,> Z replied. <After the first attack, the commanders will receive the warriors' reports.>

The other sisters quickly communed with Nebulon. They'd noted how the protectors' experience shaped their understanding of struggles yet to unfold.

The following morning, the protectors received a request to meet with Fyghturn, Ogdurg, Gurderg, and Pregfert.

Miranda and Z arrived at the enclave's courtyard meeting with the five original suits.

"Greetings," Miranda said.

"Greetings, conclave members," Fygethurn returned.

Before anyone else could speak, a group of sisters marched through the near gates carrying crates. They passed through the courtyard, tipping their heads to the protectors, their companions, and the enclave members.

When the Radags saw where they were headed, they chortled.

"More equipment for the classrooms," Ogdurg explained.

"Korvath says our young are woefully uninformed," Fygethurn added.

"Soon, we must attend classes," Pregfert said. "I look forward to them. Korvath says that there is much to learn about the many races who inhabit space."

"Will the city have educational accommodations for the young?" Gurderg inquired.

"Korvath has already requested support," Escher replied through Miranda. "He's asked for educators, equipment, and a director for the school. As well, he wants to see a university established that will allow graduates to be qualified to join the conclave."

"He carries anger within him about the Krackus," Fygethurn opined.

"Not for all Krackus," Ceda corrected. "It's the assembly, which is run by the executors. The means by which the executors rule is what disturbs Korvath."

When eyes focused on Fygethurn, he returned to the meeting's subject. "We must inform you that the enclave is growing anxious," he said.

"Do members have concerns?" Z asked.

When Ceda saw brows knit, she asked, "What do they want?"

Immediately, the frowns disappeared, realizing that Fygethurn's statement might have been misinterpreted.

"The adults and older young want to help," Ogdurg explained. "They want to take part in building their city."

<It appears defending the city will become a priority,> Nebulon sent to the protectors.

<My apologies, Nebulon. I misunderstood,> Z returned.

Nebulon was flooded with comments. They were similar in nature and remarked that the first-gen sisters would never have apologized.

<Miranda, Z, the fields,> Stacey shared.

“Would the enclave families want to plant the fields that surround the city?” Miranda inquired.

“Would we be protected?” Gurderg asked.

“Always,” Z replied.

“How much space is there?” Gurderg queried.

“Come,” Miranda urged.

Gurderg issued a warbling howl, and Imphastid and Temstag came running.

Then the group boarded a cargo traveler. Soon they were over the new city, and the ramp was lowered.

The suits sat on the edge of the ramp to protect those who leaned out for a view.

“That’s a lot of land,” Fyghthurn commented. “The enclave families have no experience with farming large tracts of land.”

“It’s time to learn,” Gurderg pronounced. “I grow a small garden, but the soil is poor. I assume the conclave will teach us how to manage this amount of land.”

“We’re building bots to do the work,” Miranda replied. “You must learn to maintain them and program them.”

“Where will we get the seed to plant?” Ogdurg asked.

“It appears that we must liberate the initial quantities of seeds from the local warehouses,” Z lamented.

“You would steal from the merchants?” Temstag queried. He seemed shocked by the notion.

“The conclave prefers to offer exchanges,” Pregfert explained. “In this case, that’s not an option.”

“My youngest one is correct,” Gurderg said. “You must raid the warehouses, and you must do this at night. Don’t be subtle. Otherwise, the owners might appear complicit, which will cost them dearly.”

While Gurderg spoke, she leaned farther out, and Escher and Ceda braced her legs.

“Can we land?” Gurderg inquired anxiously.

Immediately, the traveler dropped toward the field. When the ship was near the ground, Gurderg freed her legs and jumped over the suit’s protective arms. After landing, she fell to her knees and grabbed a handful of dirt. Breathing in the scent of moist dirt and grasses, she declared, “This is wonderful for planting.” Then she stood and surveyed the wide swath of land between the two walls. “We must have the seed soon,” she said, “The growing season has already started.”

<That’s a detail that escaped us,> Johann commented ruefully to his companions.

<That’s what we get for depending on food stocks,> Bethany replied.

The protectors, suits, and sisters knew the preferred vegetables of the enclave families, but they had no idea where to locate the warehouses that would hold those seeds.

Miranda and Z searched for Radag information repositories. The few resources that they found related to general communications and shuttle control.

<There’s nothing online,> Z shared with the conclave members.

Gurderg pulled her device from a pocket, tapped out a long query, and sent it.

“What did you do, Gurderg?” Ogdurg inquired.

“I told my friends that I lamented the swift rate with which my young grew, and they would soon be on their own,” Gurderg replied. To the curious expressions she received, she added, “Then I said it’s a shame that I don’t know where I’ll discover the next crop of young.”

Gurderg’s conspiratorial grin had the entourage laughing and chortling. She shrugged and added, “Not everyone will understand what I implied, but many will respond in some form of code. Perhaps, we’ll be fortunate.”

My Books

Chaotic Futures is the ninth novel in the [Gate Ghosts](#) series, which relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's fourth colony ship.

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

The Silver Ships Series

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Allied Enemies

Chaotic Futures

Empire Turmoil (forthcoming)

The Author



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.