

DEADLY GAMBITS

Gate Ghosts Book 7

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

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book and on the novel's website page, <http://scottjucha.com/deadly.html>.

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1: Residents Returned

OTHALIAN HOME WORLD SISTHALUS SYSTEM

<You're cleared to launch, Gaylene,> Captain Hornflower sent. <May the stars protect you.>

<Thank you, Captain,> Gaylene replied. She lamented the absence of Captain Juneski, but she and her crew were training on the class one freighter that was about to clear the Helgart outpost hub.

The Othalian stared anxiously at Juno's palm holo-vid display. At the distance that Hornflower's Trident had launched Gaylene's traveler, his world was no more than a semi-bright ball. Despite that seemingly great distance, she held tightly to what she'd been told. She was headed home.

This was to be Juno and her companions' ninth return of Helgart residents.

After the near disaster on Vokslem, Tocknicka had debated the risk versus reward of the insertion attempts.

However, Juno was not only committed to freeing the residents from Helgart, but she also wanted to accelerate the transfer rate.

Tocknicka had spoken to Kreuz, the Helgart governor and had voiced his concerns for Juno's safety.

In reply, Kreuz had informed Tocknicka that it was imperative that residents kept their hopes alive, and Juno's efforts were critical in this regard.

Recognizing that resistance wasn't an option, Tocknicka chose to query the senior SADEs, Juno, and Kreuz. He wanted to mitigate the danger by changing the method by which the residents were selected. <We must not

be obvious in our selections,> he sent. In response, he received numerous suggestions about how to select the future destinations.

When the digital sentients reviewed the offerings, they'd loosed blasts of noise. Every idea indicated order. While the first one or two drops might have been surprises to some Krackus executors, they would have set a pattern, which would allow the remaining worlds to be easily extrapolated.

<We need assistance from the proper source, biologicals,> Minimalist offered.

It had fallen to station biologicals to randomly select stars belonging to the residents. They were limited to those home worlds in Executor Grageth's territory.

The insertion method was refined based on the disastrous Vokslem events. Captain Hornflower's Trident was substituted for a freighter.

Kelley remained aboard the Trident. His job was to contact the populace. Citizens would provide the necessary confusion.

As the traveler approached the planet, the Othalian's elongated nose, essentially a shortened trunk, twitched and tried to scent her world.

"Need I repeat your instructions?" Juno asked quietly.

"They're clear, Juno," the Othalian replied. "I'm anxious to return to my kind."

"If you're to remain hidden among your citizens, our subterfuge must be successful," Juno cautioned.

"I'll be faithful to your words, Juno," the Othalian female promised.

Other than Gaylene, Juno and the Othalian were the only individuals aboard the traveler. This was to minimize the risk of loss of life. Each successful return after Vokslem had allowed the team to perfect their methods.

Gaylene piloted the ship for the planet's dark side. The cover of night was preferred, as were overcast locations.

The choice of landing sites fell to Gaylene. There were no preset coordinates. Touchdowns took place on her whims alone.

Kelley monitored the traveler's path and prepared to contact the local populace when he saw Gaylene set down. Except for the choice of night, every other element of the return was meant to be ad hoc.

I like this place, Gaylene thought, eyeing the small city. She dropped through the wet night, landed the traveler, and dropped the ramp.

Per Kelley's instructions, a crowd of Othalian's raced from various buildings and flooded up the ramp. They attempted to embrace one of their leaders, but Juno blocked the way.

"Blanket," Juno requested. When she was handed the beautifully decorated fabric, she threw it over the head of the nearest Othalian. "Now go," she ordered.

The Othalian crowd reversed course and ran to a single, large building. The covered individual was huddled in their midst.

Immediately, Gaylene lifted, while closing the ramp. She spent much of the night choosing other locations and repeating the exercise.

While groups of Othalian's might have been disappointed not to be the ones recovering their precious activist, they faithfully participated in the subterfuge.

In the middle of the landings, Gaylene had sent, <Juno, this one.>

When this crowd rushed aboard, Juno requested the blanket, and she urged the Helgart resident forward. "Welcome home," she said, and covered the Othalian female.

Before the rescuers could react, Juno cautioned them. "Don't celebrate. Hurry to the nearest building. You must act no differently than the other groups," she said.

Trunks were lowered, and heads nodded obediently.

Then the returnee was enveloped in the group, and the Othalian's headed into the soft rain.

When the night's work was finished, Gaylene made for the Trident.

From the moment the Trident had appeared out of the dark far above Othalia, Kelley used the Trident's powerful imaging resources to catalog the planet and the system for the outpost and the fleet.

The home world was heavily populated but ecologically maintained. Long ago, the Othalian's had moved their heavy industry off planet. They located the mining and refining platforms in the two asteroid fields that ringed their star.

When the Krackus arrived, they focused their efforts on the rich outer ring. The Othalian had objected, and they continually sabotaged their platforms' processes.

According to the Helgart resident, the Krackus had dropped shuttles across the home world. Then Radags had spilled out.

The peaceful Othalian learned a hard lesson — sabotage was to cease or more of the population would be decimated.

The Radags had captured three dissidents and handed them off to the Krackus. The two males hadn't survived interrogation. Only the female Othalian had stood trial and received an Imperium decree. Then she had been incarcerated on Helgart.

The ruthless treatment of the citizens explained why Kelley didn't find a single Krackus ship orbiting the home world. It was no longer necessary. As well, peacekeepers weren't seen anywhere in the system. Instead, Imperium freighters and transports plied the rim and the inner ring.

Gaylene landed the traveler aboard the Trident and dropped the ramp. When she entered the main cabin, she found Juno waiting for her.

<Nine residents returned,> Juno sent, with a big grin.

<And the last seven without incident,> Gaylene returned. She slapped Juno's hand, which had been held out for her.

In the corridor, New Terran and sister were greeted by two anxious Helgart residents.

This was another change that Juno had proposed after the first successful return following Vokslem. She'd requested that the team visit two home worlds on the next run.

Tocknicka had viewed the idea as presenting a negligible increase in risk and had agreed. When Juno had returned nearly a month later, she'd smiled. The team had delivered both residents without incident, and Juno wanted to return three residents next. He'd allowed that run, but he'd refused any further increases.

When Gaylene heard of Tocknicka's refusal from Juno, she'd sent, <Don't push it. If we deliver a few trios, the commander might relent to allow more residents in a single run. Had you considered suggesting two teams?>

Juno's short delay had Gaylene wondering. It seemed an obvious next step. She chose to wait until they were bound for Sisthalus before she sat face-to-face to discuss the issue with Juno.

"I don't understand why you're reticent to advise that we use two or more teams," Gaylene said, preferring to vocalize her thoughts.

"It's difficult to explain," Juno replied.

Gaylene laughed, but the sound was quickly truncated. "You're serious, aren't you?" she queried. "I can't believe I'm hearing this from a digital sentient, of all entities."

As Gaylene stared at the strained expression on Juno's face, a thought occurred to her. "Does this have anything to do with those odd requests I received via Kelley before we dropped planetside on Vokslem?"

"Yes," Juno admitted.

"Have you discussed this with anyone?" Gaylene inquired solicitously.

"I shared with Kelley, requesting privacy," Juno replied.

"Okay, let's put aside the how," Gaylene said. "What has you nervous about suggesting a second team?"

"It's nothing specific," Juno explained. "However, when I think of another team, which the idea on its face seems a necessary step, the group lacks ..."

Gaylene had never heard a SADE or a sister fail for words. Hearing Juno's voice trail off gave her an unreal sensation. "You don't want to use imprecise words, do you?" she suggested. "You would have to employ terms that you hear biologicals use, wouldn't you?"

"Gaylene, you must understand that I'm unable to understand the source of these thoughts," Juno implored. "They didn't originate from my kernel. How can that be?"

"What did Kelley think?" Gaylene asked.

"He spoke of Alex Racine's dreams," Juno replied. "Then he finished by stating that it appeared to be a biological phenomenon, and that no SADE had ever reported experiencing the same thing."

"Okay, let's go back to the idea of the second team," Gaylene encouraged. "Tell me what the group lacks and use any words that come to you."

Juno regarded Gaylene. The thought of sharing this unsettling information disturbed her. But, if anyone was a trustworthy companion, it had been Gaylene. Vokslem had proven that. “When I think of a second team, I try to determine the best individuals for the attempts. No matter whom I see, they never have the right ... aura.” Then she shrugged her shoulders apologetically. It was a purely biological mannerism.

Gaylene briefly covered her mouth. That a sister would describe entities as failing to exude the correct aura was laughable.

Then again, there was Vokslem. An environment suit and a locked hatch, as has been requested by Kelley at Juno’s insistence, had saved her life. If she had been asked, she would have said neither of these precautions would have been necessary.

Not believing what she was about to say, Gaylene asked, “Do they have a bad aura?”

Juno was acutely aware of the conversation’s absurdity, but her sharing with Kelley had been inadequate. Whereas, Gaylene appeared to be making an attempt to delve into the subject.

“They don’t have any aura at all,” Juno replied.

“Then I don’t understand how you can decide that that these other individuals don’t make good choices for other teams,” Gaylene admitted. Seconds ticked past, and she searched for a way to help Juno. The sister deserved that. Juno had risked her existence multiple times on Vokslem to protect Kelley and her.

“Wait,” Gaylene suddenly said, snapping her fingers. “When you think of Kelley, me, and you, what do you see?”

Juno gurgled, channeling Korvath.

Now Gaylene was intrigued. “Tell me,” she urged.

“I can’t request privacy from you, Gaylene, but I ask you to protect what I’m about to say,” Juno said, intently staring at her friend.

“You have my word,” Gaylene said seriously.

“When I see the three of us, the faces of the residents appear behind us,” Juno said.

“How many of them?” Gaylene inquired, trying to focus on specifics before she tried to grasp the bigger picture.

“All of them,” Juno replied quietly. “Z’s entire resident catalog.”

“Do the faces look just like they appear in his database?” Gaylene asked.

“Oh, no,” Juno said, laughing. The sharing with Gaylene was relieving some of her uneasiness. “They smile, laugh, or make celebratory noises.”

“Did you have those images in your kernel?” Gaylene queried.

“Not before I saw them behind us the first time,” Juno admitted. Into the sudden silence, she added, “I’ve run numerous checks on my persona data and kernel’s structural integrity. No errors were found.”

“I don’t know what to say about your experiences, Juno,” Gaylene said. “I can imagine they must be difficult to comprehend for a digital entity.” Then she reached across the table and placed a comforting hand atop Juno’s. “But I will tell you this. Any time you have one of these images I want you to feel free to share it with me ... especially if I’m in it.”

Juno laughed at Gaylene’s earnest face. “It’s a promise,” she said and laid her other hand atop Gaylene’s.

In the Trident’s corridor, New Terran and sister regarded the next two dissidents to deliver.

Simultaneously, the Damlaarian and the Lithera asked about the status of the Othalian’s delivery.

It fell to Juno to reply. She confirmed to the Damlaarian that the drop was successful. Then she issued the high-pitched frequencies required of the Lithera.

The Lithera elevated the rear pair of his six legs and rubbed them together, affirming his appreciation of Juno’s information.

“Is my winged friend still to be dropped next?” the Damlaarian inquired.

“Yes,” Juno affirmed. She kept the Lithera apprised of the conversation.

Only Kreuz had managed to communicate with the Lithera. That was until Z visited the warrens. Thereafter, the Lithera had the company of SADEs and sisters with whom he could converse.

Juno and Gaylene left the residents in the corridor and sought Kelley.

Meanwhile, Captain Hornflower flew her Trident to clear the system’s gravitational effects. Then she entered the dark on a heading for Litheros.

<How is our timing?> Gaylene inquired when they found Kelley.

<It'll be tight,> Kelley replied. <If we miss the hatching, the Lithera won't fly and feed for another eleven annuals.>

<As Litheros is mostly equatorial, the hatching should be fairly consistent,> Juno offered.

<That's what our resident is depending on,> Kelley remarked.

<What if the Lithera have already flown by the time we arrive? What are our options?> Gaylene asked. When answers weren't forthcoming, she sent, <I see. There aren't any. Does our Lithera know that?>

<He insists on being dropped regardless of the circumstance we find,> Juno said.

<How is that going to work?> Gaylene asked, incredulous at the foolish insistence.

<It doesn't,> Kelley said. <There are reasons that the Lithera build their domiciles high and stout.>

<So Juno explained,> Gaylene sent. <If we drop him, there's a good possibility he won't gain entry in time.>

<Litheros will be one planet that Kelley won't be able to communicate with the population,> Juno lamented. <We can't warn the citizens that one of their most stalwart citizens has returned.>

<Sometimes, the mind boggles at the disparity of technology in the galaxy,> Gaylene remarked.

Captain Hornflower exited the dark below the system's ecliptic and made for Litheros.

As the home world hove into view, Juno helped the Damlaarian, Dorthenaal, say goodbye to his friend. Their conversations had always required an intermediary.

On hearing the farewell from Juno, the Lithera fluttered his dual wing pair, which ruffled Dorthenaal's heavy fur. The Damlaarian's harsh cough reflected his amusement at the familiar gesture.

Unable to be of any use on the Trident, Kelley chose to join Gaylene, Juno, and the Lithera.

Gaylene thought to point out to Kelley that his presence for the drop wasn't necessary and that he was taking an unnecessary risk. However, her

conversation with Juno was foremost in her mind. The sister had seen their trio as fortunate.

Fortune favored the Lithera.

As the traveler dropped through an intermittent cloud layer, dappled starlight lit tens of thousands of wing sets. The Lithera were flying and feeding on the billions of insect hatchlings.

The Lithera were so intent on catching the fluttering prey that they didn't heed the traveler that settled atop their swarm.

Gaylene dropped the ramp.

The Lithera passenger issued a hasty farewell, and his six legs scrambled him out of the traveler. He'd no sooner exited the ship than he'd caught a small hatchling in a bend of a foreleg. Spines in the leg crease held the prey. Then small, true hands freed the hatchling, and it was quickly devoured.

Flying among thousands of Lithera, the activist was hidden in plain sight and was successfully returned to his race.

Gaylene gently flew the traveler upward to clear the Lithera who chased hatchlings atop the ship. When her path was clear, she made for the Trident.

<Easiest drop we've ever made,> Juno commented to her companions.

<Why does that unsettle me?> Gaylene queried.

<You're anticipating disaster, Gaylene,> Kelley replied. <Is there logic to your concern?>

Gaylene's hearty heavy-worlder laughter could be heard in the main cabin. <I'm biological, Kelley. We don't need a good reason to worry!>

Juno regarded Kelley and raised an eyebrow. His response was to shrug. To any unknowing observer, the SADE and the sister appeared to be human friends communicating silently.

The greeting in the Trident's corridor was repeated. This time, only Dorthenaal was present, and he happily clapped his hands together at the news of a successful drop.

"Do you still believe the Krackus won't be working on your planet?" Kelley asked Dorthenaal.

“From discussions with other residents, I’ve learned that the Krackus have a preference for warm, if not sultry, weather,” Dorthenaal replied. “We’ve a thin equatorial region that moves from temperate conditions to near freezing. The rest of my world tends to remain frozen most of the annual.”

“What is the present season at the equator?” Gaylene asked via Juno.

“I’ve lost track of my planet’s seasonal timing,” Dorthenaal replied. “However, it’s of no consequence. My drop location will be outside that region.”

“Will we encounter storms?” Gaylene pressed.

“Assuredly! Severe ice gales,” Dorthenaal replied. Then his bushy eyebrows furrowed in consternation. “Will that be a problem?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t think so,” Gaylene replied. “It’s just that I’ve never flown in high winds.”

Dorthenaal searched Juno’s and Kelley’s faces for signs of assurance, and he saw none. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Our travelers require your planet’s gravitational pull on our traveler’s shell,” Kelley replied. “If ice builds on the hull, it will impede the charging of our power cells. In the short term, this shouldn’t be a problem. An extended stay in an ice storm might mean we must land and clean the shell. That could give the Krackus an idea of where you are dropped.”

“Waiting for the weather to clear would create the same problem,” Dorthenaal mused.

“Yes, it would,” Juno agreed.

“How do you provide heat to your enclaves?” Gaylene inquired.

“In that regard, you needn’t worry about your ship, Pilot,” Dorthenaal replied, issuing a rough cough. He was about two-thirds the size of a heavy Hyronzy, the race who hosted the Tsargit, the alliance governing body. Otherwise, he appeared similar to that race.

“If the hull ices, what can you do for us?” Gaylene pressed.

“We can spray your ship with a solution of hot water and a fluid that won’t allow the water to freeze on the hull,” Dorthenaal explained. “Long ago, my ancestors discovered caves that extend deep underground. They found thermal vents and hot springs. Apparently, our world had already

lost much of its core's heat by the time our race developed spacefaring technology.”

“Regardless of the impediments, we'll ensure your return,” Juno said, ending the discussion.

Gaylene withheld her next question, and she followed Kelley and Juno down the corridor. A glance back showed the Damlaarian lost in thought.

The Damlaar world was at the edge of Executor Grageth's territory. As well, it was about halfway between Helgart and the beginning of the worlds inhabited by the Krackus populations.

When the Trident slipped out of the dark, Dorthenaal surveyed the bridge holo-vid image of his world. He delighted in manipulating the image with a thick, dark-brown, furry finger. “Here,” he said, holding his finger atop a section of the expanded image.

“That spot looks like the rest of the terrain,” Captain Hornflower commented.

“That it does,” Dorthenaal replied. “We've a preference for building our structures in imitation of our planet's nature. It pleases us.”

“Where do we drop you?” Gaylene inquired. She'd signaled the controller to expand the point that the Damlaarian had indicated.

“That will be the challenge,” Dorthenaal admitted. “Your telemetry indicates a major storm. I will need the support of my citizens to open a port for me. Normally, they don't exit the enclave until the weather eases.”

“When you say *eases*, what does that mean?” Gaylene asked.

“For the northern and southern regions, there will come a time when it will still be cold, if not freezing, but the winds will be mild,” Dorthenaal replied, coughing humorously at the subtle distinction.

Kelley linked to the controller and searched for a comm connection with the inhabitants. He managed to reach enclaves in the equatorial zone, which was in its chilled phase. After convincing them of their dissident's impending return, they informed him that the northern and the southern enclaves were cut off until the weather eased.

“What creates the unusual conditions for your planet?” Kelley asked Dorthenaal.

“We have an oblong orbit around our star,” Dorthenaal explained. “For half an annual, we can enjoy a cessation of severe conditions. The other half of our annual means living inside and underground for most of us.”

“How do we reach your enclave’s residents?” Kelley asked.

“When you’re close, your ship should be able to penetrate the storm,” Dorthenaal urged hopefully.

Juno realized calculations for future returns of Helgart residents would soon need reworking.

Despite the storm that raged above the enclave Dorthenaal had chosen, the drop remained on schedule.

Gaylene programmed the traveler with the target coordinates, and she launched the ship when her passengers boarded.

Kelley kept Dorthenaal apprised of their progress with his palm holo-vid.

When the traveler transitioned from space into the planet’s atmosphere, visibility shrank until the controller’s telemetry was useless.

Gaylene quickly took control and halted the descent. <What now?> she queried.

<We’ll have to fly by sight,> Kelley sent. <Close up your suits.>

Dorthenaal saw Juno and Kelley prepare for the cold, and his helmet closed and air flowed courtesy of Juno.

Gaylene reversed the traveler’s orientation.

Then Kelley lowered the ramp, and freezing winds blasted the interior.

Bracing a hand on the traveler’s aft end, Kelley sought a safe flight path to their destination. He used the ship’s original approach, angled it down a few degrees, and sent the traveler rearward at a low velocity.

The traveler flew slowly for nearly a half hour. Its progress was minimized by a fierce wind that swirled violently inside the ship.

Human, sister, and SADE kept eyes on the power cells. They were rapidly depleting.

Juno stepped to the aft end opposite Kelley. She clung to the ramp opening and twisted to get a view of the shell. <The ice is several centimeters thick on our hull,> she sent. <Even if we closed the ramp, our collection of energy from this planet’s gravity will be minimalized.>

<We've lost our connection to Hornflower's ship,> Gaylene sent.

<Do we abandon the attempt?> Kelley inquired.

2: Storm Downed

Juno peered ahead. <I think I see the cliff wall, which means the enclave must be close,> she remarked.

Gaylene registered the controller's signals that indicated impending system failures, and she hurriedly sent, <Brace for impact,> as she urgently dropped the traveler.

Kelley and Juno abandoned their positions and dove for seats.

Juno swept Dorthenaal into her arms as she passed him and held him firmly in her lap.

Gaylene received an impact warning, and she sent the traveler shooting forward before the controller's command of the grav engines was lost. As the traveler had been flying in reverse, her action prevented tons of ice and snow from plowing into the interior via the open ramp. It also allowed a glancing trajectory into the deep snow.

<This was unforeseen,> Kelley remarked when he realized that everyone was safe. <Gaylene, stay in your cabin, and keep the hatch closed. The console's backup power cells will prevent the control systems from completely shutting down.>

<Enlighten me,> Juno requested.

<Me too,> Gaylene quickly added.

<Our attention was on the power cells and the grav engines,> Kelley explained. <We didn't consider the effect of freezing temperatures on our ship's interior systems.>

<So much for vaunted technology,> Juno lamented. <My congratulations, Gaylene. I expected to be buried in the main cabin by metric tons of snow.>

<In the seconds I had, it was a desperate measure to save the ship and us,> Gaylene replied.

SADE and sister could tell that Gaylene was bothered by the outcome.

<No blame must be attached to our downing, Gaylene,> Kelley sent. <These circumstances were unforeseen. You did well to prevent damage to our hull.>

Juno regarded Dorthenaal's wide eyes, and she connected her suit to Dorthenaal's via the comm systems. "The freezing temperature interfered with our systems," she said.

"Can you still connect to the enclave?" Dorthenaal inquired.

"Not your enclave or our Trident above," Juno replied.

"Is the enclave in sight?" Dorthenaal asked. He didn't relish the idea of returning to Helgart.

"I thought I saw it before we dropped," Juno replied.

"Will this suit function long enough for us to reach the enclave?" Dorthenaal queried.

Juno could hear the desperateness in the Helgart resident's voice.

"Be at peace," Juno said, crediting Miranda as the author of the term so often spoken to biologicals. "Kelley and I don't use air. Our suits only have heaters. That allows us much longer use times."

Kelley had monitored Juno's conversation. He sent, <I must go. I've a better opportunity of reaching the enclave residents who will have to rescue us and the ship.>

Kelley didn't wait for a reply. He stepped off the ramp and quickly disappeared into the swirling snow.

Juno led Dorthenaal to the front of the shuttle. Then she detached seats to build them a shelter against the forward bulkhead. When she was ready, she directed Dorthenaal to crawl into her makeshift shelter. Then she pulled a seat after her to seal the entrance, enclosing them.

<Gaylene, are you using your suit's air?> Juno queried.

<Negative,> Gaylene replied. <I intend to use up what's in the cabin before I enclose my suit.>

<Wise choice,> Juno sent.

<I can't detect Kelley's comm ID. He left, didn't he?> Gaylene queried.

<He chose not to have a debate on the subject,> Juno replied. <I must admit that my arguments would have been weak.>

<I heard noises against the cabin's bulkhead. What happened?> Gaylene inquired.

<I've used the cabin's seats to form a protective shelter for our resident and me,> Juno sent. <If I can get the temperature to rise sufficiently, he should be able to breathe without his suit.>

<Who among us is the most in danger?> Gaylene asked.

<Insufficient data to calculate that,> Juno replied. Both Gaylene and she knew that wasn't technically correct, and Juno heard Gaylene's deep chuckle.

Outside, Kelley made dismal progress. His avatar's weight broke through ice crusts and dropped him a meter deep into the snow with every step. Frustrated, he approached the problem as a SADE. Then he lay flat and rolled swiftly forward.

Several times, Kelley smacked into boulder outcrops. His suit held, as did his avatar. However, it did force him to slow his roll.

Every half hour, Kelley stopped and peered into the distance. He waited for short breaks in the wind to enable him to see farther. It was two hours before he spied a bright spot, and he headed toward it.

Fortune still rides with us, Kelley thought when he realized the enclave projected a powerful light. He didn't know whether it was always lit or if it had been turned on for them. At this point, he didn't care.

When Kelley stepped off his pile of rocks, his footing found purchase. The next few steps indicated that the enclave had paved the entrance, and he ran toward the light. Huge double doors greeted him. Unfortunately, he couldn't find a panel or an operating mechanism.

Instead, Kelley searched with his comm for any means of contacting the inhabitants or gaining entrance to the enclave.

Deep in the enclave, an on-duty comm tech registered an intrusion. Before he could analyze the signal, he heard, <Greetings. We're in need of your assistance.>

"State your call ID, as required," the tech demanded.

<We're stranded outside the enclave,> Kelley replied in the Damlaar language.

“No one moves between the enclaves at this time of annual,” the tech objected.

A supervisor moved next to the tech. “State your business with us, stranger,” he stated firmly.

<We’re members of a fleet who are returning your dissident, Dorthenaal,> Kelley said. <If you don’t want him to freeze to death, I suggest you get out of your warm enclave and come rescue us.>

“How is this possible?” the supervisor asked incredulously.

<You can have answers when we’re inside,> Kelley replied. <I’m standing outside a pair of huge double doors. We require transport for four individuals and some means of thawing out the interior of our ship, which was forced down by your weather.>

“Wait one,” the supervisor said. Then he connected with the enclave’s observatory. “Is there any indication of a ship in orbit?” he inquired.

“Odd that you should ask,” a tech replied. “It was reported to the council that a tri-hulled ship with an unusual hull sits in orbit.”

“Then not a Krackus design?” the supervisor sought to clarify.

“Definitely not,” the tech replied.

The supervisor ended the call and contacted operations. “Emergency rescue required,” he said urgently. Then he added the details.

The rescue operator on duty wasted no time sounding the alarm and relaying what she’d been told.

Then the comms supervisor returned to Kelley’s channel. “Stay where you are, stranger,” he said. “Assistance is on the way.”

Kelley checked his suit’s power cells. The heater had about a quarter hour more energy. *I hope we’re not going to travel in an open air transport,* he thought.

With seven minutes remaining for Kelley’s heater, the huge double doors were wedged open, snapping ice coatings at the hinges and along the edges.

A Damlaarian in an environment suit strode out, and Kelley connected to his comm system.

“What do I call you?” the Damlaarian inquired.

“Call me devoid of existence if I don’t get to a warm place now,” Kelley replied urgently.

The Damlaarian beckoned him forward and ran to a vehicle staged inside the double doors. He opened an outboard unit attached to the vehicle’s rear and urged Kelley inside.

When the Damlaarian climbed beside Kelley and shut the rear door, he said, “There’s air in here and some heat but not too much.” Then his faceplate slid aside.

Kelley’s suit sensors told him it was safe to shut down his suit. Gratefully, he saved the last of his heater’s energy cells and opened his suit.

“Where are your friends?” the Damlaarian inquired.

Kelley released a glove and projected a vector from the massive front gates toward the downed traveler.

The Damlaarian drew back. Pointing at the display, he asked, “Prosthetic?”

“No,” Kelley replied. “Digital sentient. I’m called a SADE. My name is Kelley.”

The Damlaarian accessed the rescue team’s comm system. “I will direct all vehicles,” he said. “We’ve unique visitors among us. More to come.” Then he gave the lead driver a heading, which didn’t have a comparable translation in Kelley’s vocabulary.

Kelley maintained his display, and his companion kept the driver on track.

“How far?” the Damlaarian asked.

“Unknown,” Kelley replied. “My avatar is heavy, and I sunk in the snow. Most of the time, I was forced to roll.”

The Damlaarian’s eyes widened, he briefly bared small canines before he coughed repeatedly. Then his hands made a rotating motion, and Kelley confirmed that was what he’d done.

“How long?” the Damlaarian inquired, trying another way to determine distance.

Again, Kelley found he had no equivalent to Damlaar measures. It was evidence of a cursory language build. Knowing his sensory capabilities would be required to locate the traveler, he gazed around for an electrical

outlet. Spotting one, he released the suit's charging connector and pushed it into the outlet. Nanites reconfigured the connector's tip and completed the interface.

The Damlaarian coughed again. "Our visitors have unparalleled tech," he announced over the rescue comm system. "I just witnessed the mating of two mismatched charging components. Our visitors' connector altered its shape to accommodate our port."

Kelley heard a variety of responses, but his companion, whom he judged to be the rescue leader, told everyone that there would be time for questions later.

Kelley was relieved to note the rate that his suit's power cells were replenished. The generator supplied a steady current, and he waited until he had at least two hours' worth of charge time.

The Damlaar vehicles drove across the snow on powerful air jets, which elevated them above the icy crust, and Kelley's companion kept his eyes on the SADE's display.

When Kelley's suit had a sufficient charge, he said, "Stop the vehicles," which the leader promptly ordered. "I'll direct you from the front."

The Damlaarian didn't understand what Kelley meant, but when Kelley reached for the exit door, he hurriedly closed his suit.

The driver and the tech in the second vehicle watched Kelley leave the lead vehicle and leap on its top.

Inside the lead vehicle, the passengers heard Kelley's heavy footsteps as he walked from back to front.

Standing on the roof, Kelley surveyed the landscape. The wind had lessened somewhat, but the snow continued to fall heavily. Nothing stood out but a few mounds of boulders. The thought occurred again to him that the search could take too long to save his friends.

Trusting his sophisticated programming, Kelley ran computations that gave him a sense of distance and direction. Then he calculated probabilities and chose those numbers with the highest rankings. Taking a seat on the roof, he leaned down to use a hand to signal the driver with a direction.

Immediately, the vehicle's jets fired, and the Damlaarians' powerful air mobiles plunged forward.

After a half hour, Kelley's concern for his companions grew. He had estimated that the rescue team should have made contact within that time.

Then Kelley received a weak signal. Shifting his head left and right, he worked to get a directional fix.

Leaning down again, Kelley urgently indicated a slight vector shift to the driver. As the signal grew stronger, he corrected course until a mound grew in the distance. The traveler had been nearly covered.

Tapping repeatedly on the viewplate, Kelley directed the driver to the mound.

Three rescue vehicles sped toward the downed ship and halted within meters.

Nine Damlaarians, their arms full of equipment, exited each vehicle.

"There is a ramp here," Kelley said, indicating a space. "It's down, and we must dig out my friends."

The Damlaarians activated three portable blowers that churned at the mound of snow filling the ship's rear and shot it from the interior.

When there was space at the top, Kelley dove through. He waded through the snow toward the front of the main cabin and located Juno's makeshift shelter. He opened a side, expecting to greet Juno and Dorthenaal, but that didn't happen. Juno didn't link with him, and Dorthenaal's eyes were closed.

Kelley grabbed Dorthenaal and climbed out of the traveler.

Swiftly, two Damlaarians took Dorthenaal from Kelley and hurried him to the second vehicle.

Then Kelley dove again into the ship. This time, he picked up Juno and made his way outside. "No," he told the Damlaarians who attempted to take Juno from him. "She's too heavy for you. She's a digital sentient like me."

The rescue leader opened the rear of the first vehicle. When Kelley climbed in with his companion, he did too.

Kelley extended the charging connector of Juno's suit to the electrical port, but the nanites didn't activate.

The leader's eyes worriedly examined Kelley's face. "Are we too late?" he asked.

“Unknown,” Kelley replied. “I can’t link with her.” An idea struck him, and he began stripping off Juno’s suit and ship boots.

The rescue leader helped by piling the pieces to one side.

Kelley propped Juno against the vehicle’s inner wall. Then his hands moved in a blur across Juno’s avatar, touching the synth-skin of face, hands, and feet.

“If she’s digital, why are you trying to warm her?” the leader inquired.

“I’m hoping she did something similar to our SADE leader many centuries ago,” Kelley replied, continuing to vibrate Juno’s avatar. “She slowed her kernel’s clock to tolerate a cooler interior. I’m signaling the kernel through her avatar’s sensors that it’s safe to resume full activity.”

While Kelley continued to work on Juno, the leader and he heard from the work crews that the ship’s interior had been cleared of snow, and the next steps were requested.

<Gaylene, what’s your status?> Kelley sent.

<I’ve time yet,> Gaylene replied. <I take it we’ve been rescued. How are Juno and Dorthenaal?>

<Dorthenaal wasn’t conscious when I pulled him out,> Kelley sent. <They’re working on him in another vehicle. I can’t connect to Juno, but I’ve an idea. May I have your status now?>

<I didn’t close my suit until I exhausted the cabin’s air. At the same time, the cabin chilled. I’ve about two hours of suit time left, air and heat,> Gaylene reported.

<I followed the traveler’s emergency beacon to locate you again,> Kelley sent. <It was weak, and I attribute that to the snow and ice that coats the ship. Is there a means of determining the status of the backup power cells?>

<Negative, Kelley,> Gaylene replied. <The controller isn’t responding to my queries.>

Gaylene heard Kelley chuckle. <What?> she queried.

<Many traveler design upgrades occurred because of such uncommon events as this one that we’ve suffered,> Kelley explained. <Without hull sensors and systems’ input, the controller is programmed to enter an inactive stage.>

<Rather shortsighted of the SADEs,> Gaylene offered. Then she laughed at her tease, which released much of the anxiety that had built in her.

Eyeing the rescue leader, Kelley said, “My pilot is in the ship’s forward cabin. She must be released when we’ve stabilized the two passengers.”

“What of your ship?” the leader asked.

“The cold shut down the ship’s systems, which are embedded in the main cabin’s hull,” Kelley said. “What can you do for it?”

The leader coughed harshly. “There has been much conjecture on our private channel,” he said. “Some assumed that you flew a one-way glider, as they couldn’t find your engines. But that’s not so, is it?”

“It flies using grav technology,” Kelley replied.

The leader’s thick, bushy eyebrows furrowed. “We’ve heard rumors of an invading fleet. Are you members of this fleet?” he asked.

“Yes,” Kelley replied.

Suddenly, the leader addressed the rescue team, speaking rapidly for several minutes, while he gestured wildly. He ended by coughing furiously until he had to stop to regain his breath.

Kelley cocked his head, and the leader quickly said, “My apologies. We find it terribly funny that the dangerous invaders, who we’ve heard about, are busy returning dissidents to their home worlds. Or is Dorthenaal the first?”

“He is the last resident to be delivered for this flight. We’ve made other journeys,” Kelley replied, which the leader shared with the other Damlaarians.

Kelley halted his ministrations when he received a link from Juno. She sent, <There were ticks of time that I debated connecting to you, Kelley. I was rather enjoying the synth-skin stimulation.>

<Should I continue?> Kelley offered solicitously.

<Perhaps not,> Juno replied, with human laughter. <It would be awkward to explain to Tocknicka.>

The leader watched Juno regain consciousness. She moved with the same fluidity as did the male, as if she’d never been incapacitated.

“Is the pilot like the two of you?” the leader inquired.

“Apologies for the lack of introductions. I’m Kelley. This is Juno. And our pilot is a biological, who is called Gaylene.”

“I’m Pathalos,” the leader said.

“Gaylene?” Juno queried.

“I spoke with her,” Kelley replied. “We’ve about two hours to release her from the cabin. My immediate concern is for the ship’s systems and controller.”

Juno hurriedly donned her suit, and Kelley indicated the vehicle’s charging port.

Pathalos leaned close to watch the suit’s connector reconfigure. “Fascinating,” he said.

“It’s technology that we share,” Juno remarked.

The leader’s eyes widened in surprise. “You are truly vicious invaders,” he said. Then he coughed at his joke.

Kelley privately shared the conversation with Juno that had initiated the leader’s tongue-in-cheek comment.

“Pathalos, you had asked about our ship,” Kelley reminded the leader

“We’ve come prepared for an extended stay outside,” Pathalos explained. “Our vehicles serve as our base. Also, we carry specialized heaters in case we’ve a need to melt ice.”

“If we could warm the ship’s interior to the point at which system functions could be restored, then we could close the ramp,” Kelley proposed. “Afterward, the ship would be self-sustaining, as long as the power cells last.”

“Is this due to the nature of your ships that fly with the aid of gravitational forces?” Pathalos inquired.

“Yes,” Kelley replied.

Pathalos regarded Juno, with beseeching eyes.

Juno laughed gently. “Yes, Pathalos, we share this tech too,” she replied. However, she did douse some icy water on the leader’s expectations. “First, we must deal with the Imperium Empire.”

“That might take forever,” Pathalos lamented.

“It never has before,” Kelley said.

“You’ve met this challenge previously?” Pathalos inquired anxiously.

“Several times,” Kelley assured him.

“Then, one day, my cubs might have access to these ships,” Pathalos said, contented with the idea.

“And perhaps sooner,” Kelley offered, which cheered the Damlaarian. “Juno, you should complete your suit charging. Pathalos and I will see to the heating of our ship.”

Everyone sealed their suits before Pathalos accessed the rear door.

The rescue team stood inside the traveler’s interior. They kept two blowers running to keep out the snow that flew inward.

Pathalos examined the amount of space and issued orders. “This will take some time,” he told Kelley. “The heaters are small. But, first, the generator must be removed from the third vehicle.”

<Juno, how much charge time do you have now?> Kelley sent.

<About a quarter hour,> Juno replied.

<Disconnect and come to my location,> Kelley sent. <We’ve a piece of Damlaar equipment to move.> Then to Pathalos, he said, “Show me the generator.”

Juno slipped out of the vehicle, followed Kelley’s comm signal, and met him at the back of a vehicle.

Six Damlaarians prepared to extricate a generator from a vehicle’s rear, and they stepped back at the leader’s request.

Kelley eyed the rails that were to guide the heavy piece of equipment out of the vehicle and onto the snow. Two sets of wide, steerable shoes would keep the generator on top of the snow.

The SADEs disconnected the lines that were to be used to pull the generator from the vehicle. Then they grasped the generous handles and exerted rearward force.

The Damlaarians watched the visitors free the generator to slide down the rails.

Several nudged their companions and pointed at the deep impressions made in the snow by the visitors’ legs.

Then Kelley and Juno reattached the lines and, in concert with six Damlaarians, they hauled the generator across the ice-crusting snow.

Pathaalos directed the generator's placement. "The heaters are next," he encouraged, and the SADEs followed the Damlaarians back to the third vehicle.

Kelley and Juno each picked up a heater and marched back to the ship.

Damlaarians delivered the other two.

Then the SADEs stood back, while Pathaalos directed the heaters' placements and ensured that the electrical connections to the generator were made satisfactorily. At his signal, the generator was switched on.

Kelley and Juno were surprised by the immense heat emitted by the Damlaar equipment.

"Too much," Kelley said to Pathaalos, pointing at the heaters.

Pathaalos held up his five-digit, gloved hand. "Present setting," he said, wiggling all digits. "Suggest a new setting," he requested.

Kelley stepped near the closest heater and calculated its output. Then he held up two digits.

Pathaalos nodded and ordered the Damlaarian at the generator to adjust the output.

Kelley turned to eye Juno, who stood next to him.

Recognizing the unvoiced message, Juno sent, <I'm going.> Then she returned to the first vehicle to continue charging her heater.

Kelley linked to Gaylene and explained what was happening. <I calculate that the systems should come online before you're in jeopardy,> he sent. <When that happens, the controller should revive. We'll take a few moments to remove the heaters. Then you must signal the ramp to close.>

<What about the snow and ice on the hull?> Gaylene queried. <The hull might not charge. Worse, we might not be able to communicate via the controller because of the coating.>

<When you see the amount of snow and ice that's covered the ship, Gaylene, you'll understand that we've more work to do,> Kelley sent. <The power cells should have sufficient charge to last cycles without need of further input.>

Kelley ran a quick check of his own suit's condition. He was reminded that his time outside was limited.

“Kelley,” Pathaalos hailed, as he hurried to the SADE. “Welcome news. Dorthenaal entered his hibernation phase to withstand the cold. We’ve managed to wake him. He’s suffered no damage.”

“We’re pleased to hear that,” Kelley replied, sharing the information with Juno and Gaylene.

“However,” Pathaalos continued, “the enclave is reporting that a second storm approaches. It’s larger than the previous one, and it will last much longer.”

“Then it appears that we must leave now,” Kelley mused.

“The enclave council had hoped to entertain you as guests,” Pathaalos lamented. “Under the circumstances, it’s best you lift now. Someday, we hope you’ll return.”

“Someday, we will,” Kelley assured the Damlaarian. “For now, we must see to the hull.”

“If your hull can tolerate the contact, we’ve a grazing tool that can work quickly,” Pathaalos offered.

Kelley’s deep cough, echoing the Damlaarians, had Pathaalos eyeing the SADE.

“I doubt there’s much you can do to harm our hull,” Kelley said.

“Then help us unload the equipment,” Pathaalos urged, and he hurried toward the third vehicle.

Kelley and the Damlaarian extracted several pieces of equipment, which were assembled next to the traveler’s aft end.

Pathaalos regarded the heavy mound of snow covering the ship. Then he tested the depth with a small tool. “Can your ship lift with what’s on top and the sides?” he asked.

“Undoubtedly,” Kelley replied.

Pathaalos nodded and directed his team to start the grazer. The machine heated its blades, which began whirling. Sensors detected the hull, and the grazer crept toward it. The blades cut until snow and a thick layer of ice were sliced through. Then the sensors guided the grazer along the bottom of the hull.

“I see the problem,” Kelley commented to Pathaalos. “Our hull melted the snow, and water froze to the ice covering the ground.”

“It’s a common problem for us,” Pathaalos said. “You’ll have noticed that we constantly rock our vehicles back and forth. That’s to prevent them being bound to the ice below.”

When the grazer completed its circuit around the hull, including the edge of the ramp, Kelley connected to Juno. <A massive storm approaches,> he sent. <If we can restore systems and lift, we’re leaving.>

Juno noted her suit heater’s energy level and disconnected from the charging port. Then she sealed her suit and exited the vehicle into the frigid air.

<I’ve got system signals, Kelley,> Gaylene’s thought exclaimed. <Activating the controller. It’s online!>

<Try to lift the ramp a few degrees,> Kelley sent.

<Negative,> Gaylene replied. <I’ve got a sensor error.>

<Perhaps, a manual assist,> Juno sent, reaching Kelley’s side.

<We can try,> Kelley allowed.

Then SADE and sister planted their boots at the edge of the ramp. Gloved fingers reached under the lip.

<Gaylene, we lift on three,> Kelley sent. <You signal the ramp on one.>

When Kelley started the countdown, Juno and he strained their avatars to lever the ramp free of the ice under it. As he ended on *one*, Gaylene signaled the ramp.

<Negative, Kelley,> Gaylene sent. <Same error.>

Pathaalos, who had watched the action, approached Kelley and Juno. “I feared this,” he said. “The bottom of your ship and ramp are encased in ice.”

<More than likely, Kelley, we’re not going to be able to lift,> Juno sent.

While SADE and sister wondered what they could do to free the ship, the Damlaarians were hard at work. They’d hauled their last two heaters from the vehicles and connected them to the generator.

A single heater and a single blower were left inside the ship to keep the snow out and maintain the temperature. The remaining heaters were placed around the edge of the hull and directed at the base.

Within minutes, the scorching heat had a puddle of water flowing from under the ramp.

Juno signaled the ramp, and it rose. Immediately, she sent it down, and the Damlaarians scurried to remove the blower and the heater from the ship's interior. Then Juno closed the ramp.

Kelley walked the traveler's periphery. Water flowed everywhere from under the hull. <Gaylene, has oxygen been restored to your cabin?> he queried.

Gaylene's response was too weak to be understood.

Kelley approached the traveler's bow and swept snow off a small section of the hull. Then he smacked the ice multiple times to free an area. Finally, he repeated his query.

This time, Gaylene's happy reply of, <I've air and heat, Kelley,> was heard.

<Test a lift, Gaylene,> Kelley sent.

<No motion,> Gaylene replied.

"You must move, Kelley," a Damlaarian said, shooing Kelley away from the hull.

"Dorthenaal!" Kelley exclaimed. "I'm pleased to see you up and around."

"Can't have you stranded on our planet," Dorthenaal said. "You've many more residents to return."

Kelley watched Dorthenaal and another Damlaarian maneuver a blower near the heater. It sent gushes of water away from the hull across the nearby snow. The water froze in seconds.

As the heater worked, more water oozed from under the traveler, and the blowers cleared it away.

<It's amazing what a race must do to adapt to their environment,> Juno remarked. She stood near the traveler's rear and watched another team work to keep the heat directed under the ship without the impediment of standing water.

When Kelley saw the cavity in front of a heater grow deeper, he surmised that the hull was transmitting the energy along its length. <Gaylene, one more time,> he sent.

SADE, sister, and Damlaarians were rewarded with the sight of the traveler rising a meter above the ground.

<Time to head for home,> Juno commented to Kelley.

SADE and sister helped the Damlaarians load their equipment. After farewells, they waited for the Damlaarians to climb into their vehicles and make for the enclave, but they stood patiently waiting.

“Kelley, Juno, our rescuers refuse to leave until they witness your ship lift for space,” Dorthenaal explained. “They’re especially interested in what you intend to do about the heavy layer of snow and ice on the hull.”

Kelley hurried to the bow to connect with Gaylene, who dropped the ramp. Then Juno and he climbed aboard. They waved to Dorthenaal and their rescuers before stepping into the interior and signaling the ramp up.

<Pardon me, Gaylene,> Kelley sent. <Our rescuers wish a bit of a show.>

While Juno returned the main cabin seats to their positions, Kelley commandeered the controller and flew the traveler about two hundred meters from the Damlaar vehicles. Then he slowly spun the ship on its horizontal axis. After a few revolutions, he increased the speed.

The Damlaarians watched the ship whirl dazzlingly. The heavy layer of snow had been tossed off first. Now ice flew from the ship. Great chunks reached out for the Damlaarians, who quickly retreated to the safety of their vehicles.

When hull sensors indicated the surface was clear, Kelley pointed the bow at the Damlaarians and tipped it twice.

Kelley, Juno, and Gaylene saw the Damlaarians salute them.

Then Kelley sent the traveler rising upward. At about five hundred meters in elevation, he shot the ship toward the waiting Trident.

Pathalos gazed wonderingly at Dorthenaal. “The stories you must have to tell us,” he remarked.

“I’ll keep the enclave populace entertained for the entire storm season,” Dorthenaal promised, baring his short canines.

My Books

Deadly Gambits is the seventh 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 greats 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.