

# EMPIRE TURMOIL

Gate Ghosts Book 10

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S. H. JUCHA

*Chapters 1 & 2  
Excerpt*

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## Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.



# Contents

1: Breakout Plan.....	1
2: Take Control.....	13
3: Standoff.....	26
4: Janus and Her Kind.....	38
5: Sathus Exodus .....	50
6: Tables Turned .....	65
7: Election Furor .....	82
8: Don't Goad Her.....	95
9: We Need Travelers .....	110
10: Final Hope .....	123
11: An Eye-Opener.....	134
12: Training Resistance .....	151
13: What's the Purpose? .....	164
14: Provocation .....	176
15: Wymron's Decision.....	192
16: First Investigation.....	207
17: Utilimats .....	220
18: Unfortunate Discovery .....	233
19: Open Conflict .....	244
20: Kelley's Concept.....	259
21: Resolute's World .....	272
22: Disastrous Results.....	287
23: Thousands Arrive .....	299
24: Radag Reorientation .....	313
25: Harvest Season .....	327
26: Dwerves' Offer .....	339
27: Desperate Breach.....	355
28: Riot's Aftermath.....	369
29: Return Run .....	381
30: Take a Different Path .....	397
31: Judimal Council.....	413
Glossary.....	432

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My Books .....	438
The Author .....	440

# 1: Breakout Plan

## SATHUS HOME WORLD IMPERIUM SPACE

The Krackus on Sathus were in a quandary. A committee of executors had allowed an exception to the standing edict that no Radag mercenaries were allowed on Krackus home worlds.

The conclave's protectors had shut down the return of the mercenaries to Darmian.

Krackus conversations were filled with conjectures for this decision on the part of the protectors, Miranda and Z. As a result of Darmian off-limits to returning Radags, pressure was placed on subjugated societies where the Krackus employed the mercenaries to protect their businesses.

Unable to return home to participate in the contests that sharpened warriors' skills, the Radags grew irritable. Despite accommodations by the commanders, the warriors' tempers frequently got out of control with regard to the local citizens.

Eventually, the warriors committed atrocities that pushed the populations to retaliate. Where those rebellions were successful, the Krackus business individuals, for the most part, escaped unscathed. In some cases, the Radags were eliminated. In other situations, the Radags jumped aboard shuttles to flee with the Krackus.

Following the exception to the assembly's edict, imperators told the Radag commanders that they were being transported temporarily to a Krackus world.

This announcement caused the Radags to rejoice. They perceived their approval to land on a Krackus home world as a signal of their elevation in the executors' orbs.

Sathus was in the early stage of terraforming. Deep underground ancient lakes would assist the Krackus to green the surface.

The Radag commanders were informed that they would be housed in an underground warren until new facilities could be built.

Unfortunately, the executors didn't anticipate the number of Radags who would be evicted from the conquered outer worlds. While the commands were small, the huge swath of space the Krackus occupied meant that the amount was significant.

The Sathus warren quickly filled. Then, as Radags continued to arrive, the warren became crowded.

Commanders tried several times to escape, only to have their attempts end in failure each time.

A clever intrigue was perpetrated by painting a mural with a hidden message on the outward face of the inner interlock hatch.

A grizzled commander, who had just arrived, spotted the message, but the attempt to regain the shuttle was too late. Three warriors were selected to use the air ducts to reach the jailers' areas, but they were rebuffed. In the end, two more shuttle loads of Radags were added to the secure but desperately overcrowded warren.

Originally, the commanders' regular morning meeting had adapted to include the new arrivals. But, as the number of commanders grew, this proved to be unwieldy. Three veteran commanders chose to take control, and they limited the number of attendees to the most senior commanders.

"While I've been here a lot shorter period of time than some of you," a heavily scarred senior commander started, "I perceive that many of the attempts to escape our incarceration haven't been desperate enough."

"Why do you say that?" a commander challenged.

"How many warriors have we lost?" the seniormost commander retorted.

"None," the challenging commander growled lowly.

"That's correct. None," the grizzled commander repeated. "Yet, our warriors are living six to a room built for four. Still, we don't hear the sounds of tunneling that would indicate we're about to receive more space."

“What are you saying?” another commander inquired.

“I think the Krackus have failed to think through their predicament,” the elderly commander replied. “The Krackus couldn’t return us to Darmian, and they couldn’t land all of us on a captured world. So, they dropped us here without considering the next steps.”

“Then you think they’ll just continue to drop more teams here?” a commander queried.

The grizzled commander produced a summary sheet on his device for the other commanders to review.

“This sheet details the arrival of teams over the course of time,” the senior commander explained. “What do you see?”

“The arrivals have stayed either constant or increased,” a commander replied. “There’s been no drop off.”

The commanders eyed the elderly one with concern.

The senior commander growled at the reticence he saw. “Get hold of your weapons,” he said. “Now is the time to retaliate, not cringe and run to your rooms.”

“Do you have a plan, or do you intend to continue to insult us?” a commander shot back.

The elder approved of the fire he saw lance through the eyes of his audience.

“A plan, you ask,” the elder replied laconically. “Why, yes, I do. It’s predicated on the high-tension nerves of our jailers.”

The commanders growled and hissed at the elder’s taunt about the Krackus.

“I think the thing that our jailers fear the most is our death,” the elder continued. “If they thought that was imminent, it might frighten them into making a mistake that aids our escape.”

“Are you suggesting suicides?” a commander asked dubiously.

“Nothing so drastic,” the elder replied. “We need to simulate a hunger strike.”

“How do you simulate something like that? You either eat or you don’t,” a commander pointed out.

“And how many Krackus have you seen venture into this warren to investigate what we do or don’t do?” the elder queried, staring into the eyes of his younger companions.

Arguments ended. The elder commander had demonstrated that he’d seized on the one aspect of Radags that had always won out. It was time to make a desperate move that would force an error by their jailers.

“How do we do this?” a commander inquired.

“The first phase will take forty cycles,” the elder replied. “After that, I’ve no idea. It will depend on the Krackus. Gather every commander, and I’ll explain.”

Soon, the commanders were seated in a communal area usually reserved for meals.

“We’ve a plan,” the elder began, “but it’ll require the cooperation of every Radag in this place. If this group agrees, there’ll be no turning back. Enforcement of the rules must be absolute.”

Then the elder commander reiterated what he’d explained to the smaller group. Finally, he reached the part about the first phase.

“On the first cycle that we begin, we’ll collect our supplies,” the elder explained. “But, and this is critical, we’ll distribute only half rations.”

The elder heard growling and hissing. As it was, every Radag thought the portions were undersized.

“Toward what end?” a commander hissed. “We grow weaker every cycle.”

“And, if we do nothing, we’ll continue to wither in strength,” the elder commander retorted. “We must resist while we can.”

“I suggest that those who’ve been in these warrens the longest get a greater share of the food,” a commander called out, which garnered support from others who had arrived early.

“So that all of us can be equally weak?” a commander argued. “Those who’ve recently arrived must be ready to fight.”

“I thought we wanted to capture the Krackus?” a young commander queried.

“We want to take over the subsurface installations and, at least, one shuttle,” the elderly commander explained. “If some of our jailers resist,

then they must be eliminated. When the time comes, we'll probably have to respond instantly and swiftly."

The arguments dragged on for a while.

Finally, the grizzled commander lost his patience. "If there's a better plan, I wait to hear it," he shouted above the voices.

The room quieted, and not a single commander responded to the elder.

"Then we go with my plan," the leader stated adamantly, and he left the room to allow the other commanders to argue among themselves.

The following cycle, the Radags collected the first set of supplies from the interlock.

The elder commander supervised the food's distribution. He could read the anger in the warriors' eyes, and he stared at them, daring them to speak.

Every cycle, the two supply runs were carefully supervised and the food divided.

On the forty-first cycle after the plan had been initiated the Radag leader stood in the hatch opening. He regarded the supplies. Then he glared at the vid cam and defiantly roared. A particularly rude Radag gesture was delivered at the vid cam, and the commander retreated inside.

Immediately, a security tech, who had monitored the interlock, summoned a supervisor. When the supervisor, Hajgurt, arrived, the tech replayed the recorded sequence.

"When the Radags get hungry, they'll collect the supplies," Hajgurt pronounced confidently.

"Have we gotten approval for expanding the Radag warren?" the tech asked.

"Unfortunately, the engineers say that those tunnels have gone as far as they can go. The rock stratum beyond them is too soft," Hajgurt replied.

"But the Radags keep arriving," the tech pointed out.

Hajgurt examined the anxious faces in the security room. Every Krackus on Sathus knew that the executors had made a foolish decision. No one knew the extent of the number of home worlds where Krackus and Radags would be evicted. While the Krackus could return to any one of a

hundred worlds, all the evacuated Radags were being dropped on Sathus. Worse, they had to be kept isolated below the surface to secure them.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Hajgurt said, and he left the security room. Then he hurried to the control center.

Pulling the warren commander, Gorstet, aside, Hajgurt whispered, “We’ve got a problem.”

Gorstet led Hajgurt to his office, and the supervisor accessed the vid recording of the interlock. The vid was paused when the Radag saluted the cam.

“I can guess the meaning of that gesture,” Gorstet remarked. “I want to be informed of the Radag response after every supply drop.” Then he returned to the control room.

Hajgurt returned below in a bewildered state. Like his techs, he recognized an escalation by the Radags when he saw it. Although, he’d tried hard to calm them. It had been his techs and patrols who had prevented the three warriors from breaking into occupied areas of the Krackus warrens on one of the Radag forays.

For the next twenty-three cycles, Hajgurt watched the deliveries sit in the interlock. The food was swapped out at the next supply run, and still the supplies sat. Dutifully, Hajgurt informed the commander in every instance.

It was on the twenty-third cycle of Radag defiance when Sathus received notice of three shuttles full of Radags to descend from a peacekeeper.

The security techs fearfully regarded one another. The Radag warren was overcrowded now. Adding another one hundred thirty-eight commanders and warriors would only make things worse.

After the first shuttle landed, a senior commander led the way through the corridors. When he reached the interlock, he regarded the piles of food and supplies. Turning to the warriors behind him, he ordered them to pick up whatever they could carry.

When the entire shuttle’s complement had crowded into the interlock, and the outer hatch had slid closed, the inner hatch opened.

“Jogthurt,” the arriving commander exclaimed, when he saw the grizzled commander standing in the hatchway.

“Klathfeng,” Jogthurt replied. “Order the warriors to set the supplies down. All will be made clear when you enter.”

That the two commanders were of a similar age and had known each other for decades was the reason that Klathfeng considered the request. Then he noticed Jogthurt’s condition. He appeared less than robust, as did the commanders standing beside and behind him.

Klathfeng signaled surreptitiously with the fingers of his left hand. “Danger?” he inquired.

Jogthurt returned, “Treachery.”

“Plan?” Klathfeng queried.

“Yes,” Jogthurt replied.

Then Klathfeng ordered the food and supplies to be deposited on the floor.

The other commanders and warriors were confused by the directive, but they obeyed. Then Klathfeng’s shuttle group entered the warrens. They were shocked by the appearance of many of the warriors.

The new arrivals ignoring the supplies marked the reason for Hajgurt visiting the commander again. They were huddled in the commander’s office reviewing the recording taken inside the interlock.

This time, Hajgurt was glad to see the commander’s concern, which was marked by his crest wavering in the midpoint.

“The Radag commander, Jogthurt, appears to be serious about the protest,” Gorstet commented.

“If I may?” Hajgurt requested. Then he leaned past Gorstet to pull up a comparison image he’d put together.

The commander regarded two images of Jogthurt.

“On the left is Jogthurt when he announced the protest,” Hajgurt explained. “The image on the right was taken when he met the new arrivals.”

“The effect of the hunger strike on Jogthurt is obvious,” Gorstet remarked. “What’s your point?”

“If food was scarce, the warriors would go without, not the commanders,” Hajgurt pointed out. “That’s not what’s happening. This protest was organized by the commander, and I think Jogthurt is the leader. The entire Radag contingent is intending to force our hands about their incarceration.”

Gorstet was perturbed by the explanation, and his response showed it. “What do you expect me to do about it? Security patrols can’t go into that warren and yank Jogthurt out.”

“True. You’d get our Krackus killed,” Hajgurt admitted. “However, the fact remains that this protest is real. What happens if it’s taken to the inevitable conclusion?”

“They’d be collapsing and dying,” Gorstet offered, shrugging.

Hajgurt stared at Gorstet. He was incredulous that the commander hadn’t thought through the ramifications of allowing Radags to die. However, he felt it was his duty to drive the point home.

“I’m grateful that I won’t be informing the territorial executor of that kind of debacle,” Hajgurt commented. “I can’t imagine the future of contracts between Executor Dakargk and the Radags, when news reaches Darmian that hundreds of their race, who were in our care, starved to death.”

“The Radags chose to start this,” Gorstet protested.

“You and I know that,” Hajgurt offered. “Do you think that will matter to the Darmian Radags?”

“Well, you’ve brought this to my attention. I assume you’ve got a plan,” Gorstet said, eyeing Hajgurt.

“My job is security,” Hajgurt replied. “I’m required to communicate to you any problems I see developing. It’s your job to deal with them.” With that, he quickly exited the commander’s office.

The unloading procedure repeated for the next two shuttle loads of Radags to descend. Each group heeded Jogthurt’s request to leave the supplies where they sat.

When the inner hatch closed on the final arrivals, Jogthurt invited the new commanders to meet with him. He quietly explained the plan. When he finished, the usually voluble commanders stared at him in silence.

Then one commander after another suggested a faster or more aggressive means of escape. The only one who said nothing was Klathfeng.

To each suggestion, Jogthurt described a similar attempt that had been made and how it had failed.

“Might the Krackus be too afraid to do anything about your hunger strike?” Klathfeng inquired when the other commanders fell quiet.

“It’s possible,” Jogthurt allowed. “Our half rations will run out in another seventeen cycles. Probably sooner now that your teams are here.”

“And if nothing happens?” Klathfeng pressed.

“Then we’ll have to abandon the plan and resume gathering the supplies,” Jogthurt responded. “I won’t ask those who have been incarcerated with me to sacrifice themselves in this warren.”

The meeting ended quietly, and the Radag commanders ruminated on how to explain the difficult circumstances to their teams.

Klathfeng stayed behind to talk to Jogthurt.

“I like the determination in your plan,” Klathfeng said. “However, it’s possible that it’s too focused on one outcome. I’ve thoughts that might broaden our opportunity.”

Jogthurt gestured toward a table, and the two commanders sat down.

“Tell me about the infrastructure that exists inside the warren and where you might have explored outside,” Klathfeng requested.

Jogthurt talked until the warriors crowded into the large room for a meal.

A warrior delivered meager rations to the two commanders, and Jogthurt stood, picked up his tray, and indicated that Klathfeng should follow him.

Jogthurt led the way to a small room.

“This is where you sleep?” Klathfeng inquired dubiously.

The bunk was high on the wall and folded against it. There were two chairs and a tiny tabletop that could fold against the wall.

A small alcove contained the refresher. Beside it, three shelves were set into the wall and held some poor excuses for bedclothes and towels.

Jogthurt issued a low growl. It was his opinion about the room’s pitiful condition.

The tabletop couldn't accommodate two trays. So, the commanders picked the plates off the trays and set them on the tabletop. Then the trays were dropped on the floor.

With the small amount of food available to them, the plates were quickly cleaned.

Klathfeng watched Jogthurt pick up his plate and lick it clean. Despite believing it to be rude, he did the same.

Soon after the simple meal, Jogthurt finished educating Klathfeng on various warren infrastructures.

Klathfeng folded his arms and thought for a long while about everything he'd heard. Jogthurt's plan had an element of desperateness, but he didn't believe it would be successful by itself.

"What was to be your trigger that would allow the breakout?" Klathfeng inquired.

"In about seventeen cycles, I planned to let ten or twelve warriors appear to stumble out to collect supplies and food," Jogthurt explained. "The warriors would appear sick. Most would be retching. Some would regurgitate and pass out."

"Food poisoning," Klathfeng surmised. "Good disguise. What do you expect the Krackus to do?"

"That's always been the question," Jogthurt replied. "We've relied on the fear of Radag deaths, while incarcerated on a Krackus world, infuriating the assembly."

"That's the part I don't like," Klathfeng remarked. "I don't want to count on some Krackus commander to make the right judgment."

"Do you have another idea?" Jogthurt queried. At this point, he'd take anything that sounded more plausible than his desperate bid for freedom.

"I think we count on the one danger that frightens everyone aboard ship or in warrens," Klathfeng responded. "We can time the action to a supply delivery, which would open the warren-side hatch."

"The delivery chute mechanism was never repaired, but it's still open," Jogthurt said thoughtfully. "We could stuff smoldering bedclothes into the delivery landing and lock the receiving hatch."

“I like that,” Klathfeng replied. “Not too much. We want the smell to reach the Krackus more than the smoke.”

“We can still use my plan,” Jogthurt suddenly said. “The timing will be critical. The chute fire should be set just before the arrival of a supply run. When the inner hatch opens, we let thick smoke billow out.”

“Yes!” Klathfeng exclaimed. “Warriors stumble out and fall to the floor, gasping for air.”

“The Krackus would have to investigate immediately,” Jogthurt reasoned. “They can’t afford to let smoke or fires reach their warrens.”

“If this is the new plan, we don’t have to wait out the starvation routine,” Klathfeng offered.

“Everyone will be glad to hear that. We can consume full rations, provided we’re ready to go in fewer than eight cycles,” Jogthurt noted.

“It’s controlling the smoke that will be difficult. Yet, the fire must appear to be significant,” Klathfeng cautioned.

“Time to meet with the warriors, and I know just how to start the meeting,” Jogthurt said, bending over to pick up the trays and plates.

Nearly every space in the dining hall was taken. Warriors occupied seats and stood along the walls and in the aisles. Still, there was no complaining. Each individual was consuming another half ration after recently downing the same amount.

“The plan is changing, and we’re moving up the timetable,” Jogthurt announced.

“It’ll take some time to prepare, and our actions must be executed precisely,” Klathfeng said.

“For the next few cycles, we’ll be back at full rations,” Jogthurt continued.

That raised yipping and cheerful hisses from the warriors. The rations had never been all that much, but the half rations had put the warriors on a starvation diet.

“Now listen carefully,” Klathfeng directed. “Commanders will have assignments, and they’ll choose their operational teams. We won’t need everyone to execute this plan. Those not selected will be on standby for an excellent reason. We’re going to use fire.”

There was stunned silence from the audience.

“Rather, we’re going to simulate fires,” Jogthurt quickly amended. “But we can’t let them get out of control.”

“We’ll meet with the commanders after these announcements,” Klathfeng said.

“I’ve a word of warning for every commander and warrior,” Jogthurt said, tipping his muzzle up to indicate dominance. “This breakout is our first step. The object is to capture Krackus unharmed. I repeat. The object is to take our jailers without hurting them. Of course, this may not matter to you if you can fly your tails through the atmosphere and space to knock on a peacekeeper’s hatch.”

The commanders and the warriors barked and hissed at the thought of sailing high above the planet and hammering on a peacekeeper to be allowed entry.

## 2: Take Control

After four cycles of preparations, the Radags were ready.

Jogthurt and Klathfeng were thankful that more of their kind hadn't arrived. The plan was detailed and organized. They didn't need newcomers second-guessing the action.

It was decided to wait for the cycle's second supply drop. Not gathering the food from the first drop would hopefully indicate to the Krackus that the cycle's events for the Radags would be repeated.

It hadn't been easy for the Radags to arrive at this point. Early on, they quickly discovered a significant obstacle.

The Darmian race favored textiles. They used brightly colored tapestries to decorate their walls. Other textiles were made into rugs or soft bed coverlets.

However, a warren was constructed and furnished so as to minimize fire. Therefore, nearly everything the Radags touched was found to be synthetic.

Worse, the warriors couldn't discover the means to apply a flame to anything that was flammable, if they could have found it.

The answer to the first part of the puzzle came when a commander reported the problems to Jogthurt and Klathfeng.

The senior commanders howled their amusement. Then they started slapping various items on the commander, who was momentarily affronted by the indignity. Then he realized they were pointing out small items that the commander wore that could be burned.

The commander stepped back and pulled a blade. It was a favored weapon that had sliced many throats. The edge was razor sharp, and the handle was carved wood. He glanced at his armored chest plate. Several small items hung from it on leather or textile cords.

Glancing guiltily at the senior commanders, he nodded his understanding. “And the fire starter?” he inquired.

“We need a spark,” Klathfeng replied. “Question every Radag about the mementos they carry. Someone must have something that could be struck against a hard metal to create a spark.”

After the commander hurried away, the seniors regarded each other dolefully.

“We’ve advanced to the point that we struggle to find the means to create a fire,” Jogthurt lamented.

“Earlier, I examined the heating devices for food,” Klathfeng said. “They’ve protective sensors. Nothing flammable can be placed inside them.”

“If we could find something to heat metal until it was red hot,” Jogthurt volunteered.

“That was another of my thoughts,” Klathfeng replied. “The Krackus have done a good job of fireproofing this warren. I suspect they were originally built to house their race.”

“Did your first night in your too-short bed give that away?” Jogthurt queried, chortling.

“It’s not the first time that I’ve had to sleep in an alien bed that didn’t fit me, but it doesn’t get any easier,” Klathfeng remarked ruefully.

Toward the end of the cycle, the commander returned to the seniors. He triumphantly held up a small carved effigy figure. “It’s a mineral that when struck with a blade releases sparks,” he announced. “We made a small pile of shavings from a cord. After a few tries, we managed to start the cord burning.”

“Did you discover more than one of these effigies?” Jogthurt asked.

“The warrior said that he and others took the figurines many annuals ago from a race where they’d served,” the commander explained. “He hasn’t seen another warrior in the warrens who served with him.”

“You’re now our fire starter,” Klathfeng directed, pointing a dark-nailed finger at the commander. “Protect that carving with your life.”

The commander nodded dutifully. Then he carefully wrapped the figurine in a piece of fabric and tucked it inside his chest armor.

“Do we have everything needed to start the action?” Jogthurt inquired.

“Everything is ready,” the commander affirmed.

“Has the admonition not to harm the Krackus been repeated?” Klathfeng queried.

This decision had come during Jogthurt and Klathfeng’s first meeting. Jogthurt had reasoned that a successful breakout might result in a long wait for a peacekeeper, and a fleet imperator would be incensed to learn of Krackus deaths by Radag knives.

In response to Klathfeng’s query, the commander flashed his teeth. Then he hauled out a collection of fabric strips from his belt.

“What’s the purpose of those?” Klathfeng asked.

“The other commanders and I were talking about how to manage the Krackus,” the commander replied. “The Krackus are delicately built. We’ve been concerned that our warriors aren’t prepared to handle them properly. So, we’ve trained one in four warriors of the breakout teams to accept the prisoners. The Krackus will be tied by these warriors and kept in rooms away from the action.”

“Excellent,” Jogthurt complimented. “We’ll time our efforts to coordinate with the second supply delivery.”

The commander tipped his muzzle in assent and hurried off to pass the word to the other commanders.

“I hope this works,” Klathfeng commented quietly to Jogthurt.

“If it doesn’t, I’m afraid we might die here,” Jogthurt replied.

“Agreed. In half an annual, we’ll be at one another’s throats,” Klathfeng responded.

“Have you given anymore thought to what happens if we do escape this warren?” Jogthurt asked.

“I’m still in agreement with you that we must gain control of a shuttle and board a peacekeeper,” Klathfeng replied. “If we don’t gain a ship, then we’re stranded on this planet. We’ll simply have more space.”

“Until more of our kind arrives,” Jogthurt pointed out.

“Considering the number of worlds occupied by the Krackus, that could be the fate of our race,” Klathfeng lamented.

“I’ve thought about the path that the Krackus set our race on,” Jogthurt said. “We did have the inclination for combat, but the Krackus provided the means for our race to elevate that into violence. Now I fear we can’t go back in time.”

“If we gain a peacekeeper, what’s to be our destination?” Klathfeng inquired.

“Ask yourself this question,” Jogthurt responded. “What race or society would want us?” With that, he left Klathfeng to contemplate their uncertain future.

The next cycle, the Radags enjoyed three rounds of half rations. More than one commander grumped about the warriors’ constant belching.

The senior commanders made the rounds with the young commander who had organized the fire starters.

“The small batch of textiles won’t be enough to produce the effects that you desire,” the commander said, as they stood at the defunct delivery chute. “However, one of the warriors told me about a small fire aboard a peacekeeper. He didn’t know what started it, but it produced a nasty, dark smoke. His commander explained that some of the nonflammables were brought to the melting point.”

“So, you intend to start a small fire and add some of the bedding supplies?” Jogthurt surmised, looking at the pile of cut up bedding.

“That’s the idea,” the commander replied.

Klathfeng checked his device’s chronometer. “It’s time,” he announced.

The young commander glanced at Jogthurt, who tipped his muzzle. Then he uttered a short bark, and two warriors jumped to do his bidding.

The chute’s access door was opened to reveal a pile of textile and wood shavings from weapon handles.

The commander took out his precious effigy. After unwrapping it, he pulled a blade and leaned into the chute opening. With several strikes he managed to drop a series of sparks on the pile. Blowing gently, he fanned the tiny hot embers.

When small flames formed, the commander backed away, and the warriors added more shavings to feed the flames. Soon, they had a nice

little fire started. Then, slowly, the warriors added bits of textile mixed with the inflammable fabrics.

The inflammables curled and twisted, and the stink of their crisping had the warriors choking.

“Step back,” the commander ordered. When the warriors were clear, he added another handful of shavings and bedding pieces. Then he closed the chute’s door.

“Nicely done,” Jogthurt remarked, his gaze moving from commander to each warrior. “Now let’s hurry.” Then he took off running toward the interlock hatch.

Three groups of warriors stood ready at the hatch. On each side was a pile of the textiles, wood shavings, and bedding pieces.

The third group was in the center. These warriors were stripped to the waist, and they were ready with swaths of bedding material to cover their muzzles.

Klathfeng kept an eye on his device’s chronometer. At the agreed time, he called out, “Start the fires.”

The commander, who had hunkered over the first pile, struck the carved figure and his blade repeatedly together. When the sparks caught the textiles, he hurried to the next pile.

After flames licked at the second pile, the commander stood back and kept an eye on the warriors who nursed the fires.

“Far hatch is opening,” Jogthurt said. It was unnecessary. With the Radags’ sharp hearing, every commander and warrior heard the unmistakable sounds of the heavy hatch opening.

However, Jogthurt’s announcement was the cue for the warriors to throw all the flammables onto the small fires. At each pile, two warriors bent low and blew onto the struggling flames to feed them with oxygen.

When the fires began to catch the wood shavings, the weapon handles were added. With more effort, flames began to lick the overhead.

“Now,” Klathfeng directed.

Handfuls of inflammable bedding material were thrown into the fires, which had the commanders and some of the warriors backing away from the noxious fumes.

The far hatch was heard to close, and Klathfeng started a countdown to indicate when the inner hatch would open.

Warriors continued to add bedding, and the commanders and extraneous warriors vacated the area.

The black smoke began to obscure the hatch, which was desired.

“Time,” Klathfeng called out from across the room.

At that moment, the inner hatch slowly opened.

The stripped-to-the-waist warriors rushed through the opening with the bedding pieces covering their muzzles. They coughed and choked. Feigning that they were overcome, they fell to their knees among the supplies.

Inside the warren, four warriors continued to feed the fires with pieces of inflammable material, adding to the smoky dark haze.

In the security room, a tech sniffed the air. “Do you smell that?” he asked.

“Try using the refresher more often,” another male tech teased.

“No, he has a point,” the female tech, Ikhajard, interrupted. “I smell something too.”

Suddenly, the entire security room was on alert. They had flashbacks to the attempted breakout by the Radags less than a quarter annual ago.

Seeking another opinion, Ikhajard sent an emergency signal to Hajgurt and the security patrols. Her calls were answered shortly.

“Where?” Hajgurt exclaimed, as he shot through the door. He was gesturing at the monitors, but the techs were plugging their beaks’ nostril holes and pointing overhead.

Hajgurt took a deep breath just as a patrol team leader arrived.

“Is that smoke I smell?” the security leader asked.

“Any alarms going off?” Hajgurt asked, scanning the panels in front of the techs.

“Negative,” each tech replied.

“Oops,” a male tech remarked. He pointed at his panel and said, “Looks like the delivery chute to the Radag warren.”

“Would they be stupid enough to start a fire?” the security leader inquired.

“I’m no Radag expert,” Hajgurt shot back. “I’ve no idea what they’d do.” Then he instructed, “Get me engineering diagrams for the chute.”

Ikhajard already had the plans on her monitor. “I can’t see anything that would feed smoke into the chute from any place but the Radag warren,” she said.

While Hajgurt was studying the plans, several warning lights went off on two other panels.

“Fire in the Radag warren,” a tech warned.

“Heavy smoke in the interlock,” another tech announced.

Ikhajard switched her monitor to display the interlock.

The Krackus watched half-naked warriors struggling to breathe, as smoke poured into the interlock from the warren.

Hajgurt uttered several curses. Then he connected on an emergency channel to the commander and fire control. “We detected smoke from the defunct delivery chute to the Radags. When the interlock’s inner hatch opened, warriors spilled out choking and gasping for air.”

“Could it be a trick?” Gorstet asked.

“Dark smoke is pouring out of the warren,” Hajgurt replied. “Trick or not. Something in the warren is burning. The decision about what to do belongs with you, Commander.”

Hajgurt ended the call, and he regarded the security leader, who watched his device.

Then an emergency alert went out warren wide. Security and fire teams raced to reach the interlock leading to the Radag warren.

The fire teams ensconced in environment suits entered the interlock first. They searched for the source of the fires, suspecting that the supply crates might be the cause. As they advanced through the interlock, they stepped over or around warriors who appeared comatose.

When a booted foot reached the warrior closest to the inner hatch, the warrior triggered his device link to Jogthurt.

Then the senior commander alerted the advance team.

Fourteen warriors raced from the back of the room, with bedding material swaddling their muzzles. Swiftly, they crossed the room, shot

through the open hatch, and leapt left and right to climb across the stacked supplies.

In the thick smoke, the environment-suited fire teams weren't certain what to make of the shadows that flew past them.

Breaking through the outer hatch, the warriors were careful not to run into the Krackus security teams. They had been repeatedly warned not to hurt them. Besides, those Krackus weren't their targets.

Racing down the corridor, the lead warrior spotted an open hatch. He saw a Krackus peek out, his orbs growing wide. The hatch was triggered to close, but the warrior made it through.

"Open it," the warrior announced in Krackus to the frightened individual. When the Krackus hesitated, he pulled a blade and held it to the narrow neck.

The Krackus placed his hand on the panel's face.

As the hatch slid open, the other thirteen Radags raced through it.

The last in line said, "I've got this one," and the lead warrior released his captive.

"Hands behind your back," the warrior ordered.

The Krackus gratefully did as he was told. He'd been certain that he was going to be killed.

Gently, the warrior tied the individual's wrists with a strip of bedding.

Up ahead, the warriors surprised two more Krackus who were guarding hatches.

As the lead warrior raced to catch up with his team, he glanced briefly at the care taken by warriors to tie their captives. Then he came to an abrupt halt behind the other warriors, who stood in a wide, brightly lit corridor.

"Which way?" a warrior inquired of the team leader.

Peering at the three directions, the leader ordered, "Three to the left. Four to the right. Three of you follow me down the center one."

After the advanced team had cleared the first hatch, the warrior who had secured the Krackus sent a message of the progress.

Immediately, Jogthurt commanded the warriors tending the fires to smother them. Heavy layers of bedding were tossed over the fires, effectively choking them of oxygen.

Then Klathfeng signaled commanders to advance with warriors to secure the fire and security teams. They did nothing more than grip arms and lead the Krackus into the warrens to areas that were clear of smoke.

When the Krackus teams passed Jogthurt and Klathfeng, the commanders led a much larger group to follow the advance team. After passing through three hatches, they made the bright corridor. There wasn't a Radag in sight.

While the senior commanders waited, a warrior loped toward them from the left.

"We've secured the meal room," the warrior said. "There are about twenty Krackus in there."

"Is there food for Radags?" Jogthurt queried.

"No, Commander. Only Krackus meals are served there," the warrior replied.

"How many of you guard the space?" Klathfeng inquired.

"Three, counting myself," the warrior replied.

Jogthurt assigned a commander and multiple warriors to manage the meal room.

"We need something more substantial than a meal room," Klathfeng quietly remarked to Jogthurt.

Soon, a warrior approached from the right. "We hold an infrastructure facility," he reported.

Klathfeng flashed his teeth at Jogthurt. "This one is mine," he said, and he led a contingent of Radags in that direction.

Jogthurt was tempted to query the lead warrior of the advance team, but he was loath to interrupt his efforts.

It was a while before a warrior came running from the center corridor.

"Apologies, Commander," the warrior said. "Word preceded us. Hatches closed before we could pass through them. However, we've identified a security control room. We've heard a supervisor talking to multiple techs inside the room."

Jogthurt attempted to reach Klathfeng, but their devices wouldn't connect. The walls, the underground rock, and the distance conspired to limit range. Turning to a commander, he said, "Find Commander Klathfeng. Inform him of the location of the security control room. Tell him I'll be outside that location."

A warrior arrived, slipping through the hatch leading to the warren, and hurried to the front of the main group to speak to the senior commander.

"Report," Jogthurt required of the panting warrior.

"The fire and security teams have been secured, Commander," the warrior replied. "None of the Krackus were injured."

"That's good news," Jogthurt remarked. "And the fires?"

"They're out, but the smoke will take time to be pulled in by the air vents," the warrior responded.

"Understood," Jogthurt said. "Inform the commanders in the warren that I expect the Krackus to remain uninjured. Also, tell them that we've secured a major infrastructure facility."

"Yes, Commander," the warrior replied. When Jogthurt motioned at him to return, the warrior sprinted off.

As Jogthurt walked down the corridor, a second warrior came from that direction.

"Good news, Commander," the warrior said.

"You've found a food source for us," Jogthurt interjected before the warrior could share the news. When the warrior appeared disappointed, the commander chortled and added, "You're dripping saliva on the floor."

The commanders and warriors chortled and yipped. While they were laughing about the exchange between the senior commander and the warrior, relief was evident in their voices. They were free of their confinement. They had leverage over their jailers, and a food source had been found.

"Take me to the food," Jogthurt directed.

When Jogthurt and the remaining Radags arrived at a door, he indicated that everyone should wait outside. Inside, he found fifteen Krackus lined against the wall. They were cowed and shaking. A warrior stalked along the line snarling at them.

Anger surged in Jogthurt, but he controlled it. When the stalking warrior spotted him, Jogthurt commanded coldly, “Out.”

The warrior was surprised by the abrupt dismissal, but he hurried to obey.

Addressing the Krackus, Jogthurt asked, “Who is the senior individual here?”

No one raised a hand or stepped forward, but all eyes turned toward a Krackus at the end of the line.

“I’m making you responsible for the orders I’m about to give,” Jogthurt said. “If you and your workers follow these orders, no one in this room will be harmed. Do you understand?”

A nervous gurgle escaped the Krackus supervisor, and his beak tipped up and down several times.

“I’ll have a commander and several warriors support your efforts,” Jogthurt continued. “You’ll process our foods, and Radags will deliver them to our warren.”

“Yes, Commander,” the supervisor managed to say.

“Can the delivery chute be fixed?” Jogthurt asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” the supervisor replied nervously.

“What about the supplies you need for our food? Where are they kept?” Jogthurt inquired.

“May I?” the supervisor asked, pointing.

To the Krackus lined along the wall, Jogthurt said, “Return to your work.” He waited while his directive sunk into their thoughts. Then, in twos and threes, they left the line and hurried to their work positions. To the supervisor, he said, “Lead on.”

The supervisor hurried to a hatch that slid aside with the touch of a panel. It was a chilled room to preserve stores, and the cold air ruffled Jogthurt’s exposed fur.

“We’ve sufficient supplies for another annual,” the supervisor said, indicating the shelves with a sweep of his arm.

“Good to know,” Jogthurt said. “Ensure that nothing happens to it.”

“How do I do that?” the supervisor inquired, as they retreated from the storage room.

“I will introduce you to the commander and warriors I choose,” Jogthurt replied. “Memorize their appearances.”

The supervisor’s crest flattened on his head, and Jogthurt recognized the reaction. He chortled and commented, “I know, we all look alike to you. Study the mementos on their armor. That will help you.”

The supervisor nodded appreciatively.

“Now this is important,” Jogthurt continued. “Only your workers, the Radags I choose, and you are to be in this room.”

“What if others come?” the supervisor inquired.

“They won’t be other Radags,” Jogthurt replied ominously. “If they’re your kind, you tell them that you’ve been given strict orders, and they’re to leave. Then you report them to my commander.”

Jogthurt watched thoughts go through the supervisor’s mind, which were mirrored in his orbs.

“Disobey this directive, and I’ll remove my protection of you and your workers,” Jogthurt threatened.

The supervisor gurgled nervously. “It will be done, as you require, Commander,” he said.

“Good. Now continue with your work,” Jogthurt said, with a wave of his hand.

Outside the food production room, he examined the commanders who faced him. Most had hungry eyes, conveying their desire to have access to the food reserves. A younger commander was focused on him, awaiting orders.

“Only a single commander and a few select warriors will have access to this room,” Jogthurt ordered in a strong tone. “No other Radags are to enter here unless they wish to face my wrath.”

Eyeing the young commander, Jogthurt asked, “Is your team present?”

The young commander turned around, spotted some of his warriors, and reported, “Four, Commander.”

“Bring them forward,” Jogthurt ordered. “The rest of you step back.” With the young commander and his warriors beside him, he repeated his warning to the other Radags that only these five were to enter the food production area.

“Why the concerns?” a veteran commander asked.

“Which of you can operate the equipment in this facility?” Jogthurt inquired, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. “Exactly,” he added, when no one replied. “We need the Krackus in there to manufacture our food, and they don’t need to be frightened by a veteran commander slaving over their work.”

Jogthurt had delivered his explanation while regarding the veteran commander, who, admittedly, had been drooling at the idea of a full meal.

The veteran howled at Jogthurt’s tease, and he nodded his understanding of the senior commander’s precautions.

After Jogthurt introduced the young commander and the four warriors to the Krackus supervisor, he took the five of them aside. “If you wish to be fed, I advise that you respect these workers,” he said.

When Jogthurt rejoined the group in the corridor, he tapped a commander and said, “Have Commander Klathfeng join me.” Then he ordered three commanders and six warriors to take up duties at the hatches that they’d escaped through. “Protect them with your lives. They’re our pipeline from the warren where we must remain and through these corridors that we now hold.”

## My Books

*Empire Turmoil* is the tenth novel in the [Gate Ghosts](#) series, which relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's fourth colony ship.

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

### The Silver Ships Series

*The Silver Ships*

*Libre*

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*Celus-5*

*Omnia*

*Vinium*

*Nua'll*

*Artifice*

*Sojourn*

*Alliance*

*SADEs*

*Earthers*

*Talus*

*Elvians*

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**Gate Ghosts Series**

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*Vortex Incursion*

*Dual Domains*

*Alien Intrigue*

*Deadly Gambits*

*Allied Enemies*

*Chaotic Futures*

*Empire Turmoil*

*Perilous Choices (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.*