

FATAL FLAWS
Gate Ghosts Book 13

S. H. JUCHA

Chapters 1 & 2
Excerpt

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

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Glossary

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1: We're Full

WOOT AND DEVONA PLANETS IMPERIUM AND QUELLER TERRITORIES

“That’s it. The Krackus freighters can’t take anymore,” a conclave crew chief signaled the Woot sisters and the traveler pilots.

The crew chief closed the hatch to the freighter’s module. Then he sank to the deck in the bright corridor of the freighter’s spine to join his entourage of Dwerves, Woots, and conclave members who sat on the deck.

“We desperately need a conclave freighter,” a conclave engineer commented.

As a heavy worlder New Terran, the engineer was indispensable in moving the hefty grain bags from bays to modules. Grav palettes facilitated much of the distance. However, each traveler’s load had to be manually moved onto palettes. Then, at the freighter’s modules, the reverse was required.

Frieda, the sisters’ leader, recalled the traveler that was en route to the fifth freighter, and Cyan halted the loading of the traveler that would have been next to lift from the Woot planet.

<What’s left to be loaded?> Frieda queried via a conference link.

With the number of conclave members and sisters dispersed among the ships in system and on the planet, the number of bags was quickly tabulated.

<Thirty-four hundred fifty-two,> Cyan relayed to Frieda.

“How much is that in traveler loads?” Quantine asked the Toralian pilot, Tefloose, who’d shared the amount with Captain Eshtitor.

“Four full travelers,” Tefloose replied.

“We can handle that,” Quantine prompted Eshtitor.

“Of course, we can,” Eshtitor replied.

Immediately, Teffloose communicated the new destination. The traveler pilot who was headed for the planet reversed course and made for the Dwerve warship.

Eshtitor made a shipwide announcement that four travelers would need to be unloaded into two bays. He didn't need to add that only the most robust Dwerves were required. After multiple harvest seasons, each Dwerve who had assisted the Woots knew the weight of a grain bag.

<Our efforts are producing results faster than anticipated,> Cyan commented to the sisters.

<Blame the Woots,> Orly quipped, which had the sisters laughing.

The effort to draw Woots into the idea of sending excess grain to the Queller planets in trade for better farming equipment had started slowly. However, as the reticent dresats saw the bounty produced by the new equipment in other fiefdoms, they encouraged their citizens to partake in the sisters' enterprise.

At this point, the Woot grain project was self-generating. In addition, the Woots who were artisans or who employed their skills in other ways were speaking to the sisters about improving the efficiency of their products' production.

<Cyan and Orly,> Frieda sent. <I'd like you to undertake an important journey.>

<You wish us to sail with the freighters and the Dwerve ship,> Cyan offered.

<Affirmative,> Frieda replied.

<For what purpose?> Orly inquired.

<The Dwerves are seeking planets for homes, and the Quellers are welcoming them,> Cyan explained. <In a mere few annuals, the Dwerve ship will be empty. Then, who will speak to the Quellers for the Woots?>

<That would be a start,> Frieda sent. <However, the Quellers are not the only point of contact we need.>

<You're seeking expanse for the Woots agrarian products,> Orly reasoned.

<Precisely,> Frieda replied.

<Captain Eshtitor has mentioned several times that the conclave is heavily invested in the Quellers' technological uplift,> Cyan volunteered. <Older conclave members would be good future contacts.>

<Think broadly,> Frieda encouraged.

<The empire,> Orly quickly replied.

<Now you understand the extent of this journey that I've requested,> Frieda shared. <Due to its importance, your presence must make a statement.>

<The *Withern*,> Cyan sent, referring to the sisters' new mini-Quadrant.

<On the one hand, we must demonstrate our independence. On the other hand, we must communicate through negotiations that we seek to develop the Woots' interests,> Frieda encouraged.

<How many more sisters will sail with us?> Orly asked.

<Additional sisters? None,> Frieda responded.

Cyan intuited the reason for Frieda's response. <The conclave members have finished their projects and helped with the latest harvests,> she shared. <We can return them to Devona. There are gates there.>

<What about the *Liberation*'s travelers and pilots?> Orly inquired.

<That's a question that should be asked of Cremsyron,> Frieda advised.

<We must request that his response be tempered with the latest news about the empire's collapse,> Orly strongly sent.

<Now you understand why I'm sending the two of you,> Frieda pointed out.

<Frieda, divert the travelers with grain to the *Withern*,> Cyan quickly sent. <The Dwerves have proved their worth to the Quellers. We must take the same path. The *Withern* could use a complement of four travelers and the grain needn't be unloaded.>

<Good thought,> Frieda shared, and she signaled the sister who flew the traveler about to land aboard the Dwerve warship.

"Apologies, Captain Eshtitor," Teffloose said. "There's been a slight change of plan."

Eshtitor noted the traveler was now headed toward the *Withern*. He growled good-naturedly. Looking toward Quantine, he said, "We'll have additional company on our journey to Devona."

“Five freighters, the *Withern*, and us,” Quantine remarked. Her long, scaled fingers stroked Eshtitor’s furry neck. “The sisters are following our example. Most appropriate.”

The Dwerve pair eyed Teffloose. The Toralian displayed her sharp teeth in a satisfied smile.

“Captain, more than you and I seem to think so,” Quantine commented, which made the Toralian’s wings flutter and her smile widen.

Cyan and Orly caught the next traveler to lift with a load of grain, which was headed for the *Withern*.

Jacqueline, the sister aboard the mini-Quadrant, accepted the first grain shipment. Then she headed toward the planet to shorten subsequent traveler flights.

When the four travelers full of grain were aboard the *Withern*, there was an effort to complete the accommodations necessary for the biologicals who would be resident on the mini-Quadrant. This included outfitting cabins, installing food services, and filling water tanks.

Engineers, techs, and SADEs worked to outfit much of the *Withern* to provide comfort to many more biologicals than presently anticipated.

<Is this necessary?> Orly had queried Cyan, who was overseeing the work.

<How do you wish us to appear to the Quellers, who will certainly ask to tour our ship? It’s unique, is it not?> Cyan replied.

Noting that she’d belatedly realized the value of presenting the sisters as willing to host biologicals, Orly made some minor adjustments within her hierarchy and code. She intended to be an asset on this trip to visit the Quellers rather than Cyan’s adversary.

While the *Withern* was prepared for its journey, Quantine requested a conference with Eshtitor and Teffloose. They met in the captain’s quarters after the evening meals were cleared away.

“Delicately attractive,” Teffloose commented about Quantine’s colorful gauze layers. “However, they’re nothing that a Toralian could wear.” To demonstrate her point, she fluttered her wings. The vestigial claw hooks at the bends of her wings were evident of one aspect of the problem.

Folding her wings, Teffloose sat across from Eshtitor and Quantine. “How may I help?” she inquired.

“We know that SADEs routinely share information,” Quantine began. “Furthermore, SADEs have previously visited Devona, and they would have gleaned information about the races on the other side of the anomaly.”

When Quantine paused, Teffloose nodded. “What you state is true,” she said.

“In the future, we hope to empty this ship of Dwerves across the Queller worlds,” Quantine continued. “That presents my love with a problem.”

Teffloose’s dark eyes regarded Eshtitor. “Is this not what you want, Captain?” she asked.

“It is,” Eshtitor replied.

Teffloose worked to understand the conundrum. She’d known the captain to be decisive and forthright. At this moment, he appeared indecisive and decidedly uncomfortable. “Bluntness would be appreciated,” she said.

“The captain is reticent to request what he wishes,” Quantine replied. “However, I want him to see his hopes fulfilled, and I will do whatever that takes.”

“And what do you need, Captain?” Teffloose queried.

“I don’t want to be dropped planetside to live,” Eshtitor said. “Unfortunately, I don’t know how I could fit into Queller society, with their push to adopt conclave tech.”

“Captain, you’re an intelligent individual,” Teffloose stated firmly. “You know the path you need to take. Why not ask for it?”

“Perhaps, I don’t deserve it,” Eshtitor replied, which pained Quantine.

“Perhaps, you don’t,” Teffloose responded dryly. “However, in the event that we’re both wrong, why don’t we ask others? Should we start with your partner? Or maybe the sisters? How about the Woots?”

Eshtitor issued a growling chuckle.

“Not every individual comes to the conclave with an unblemished history, Captain,” Teffloose said. “My race was guilty of things we would

choose not to remember. Still, when we saw an opportunity to abandon our ways and support the Omnians, we accepted that path with open wings. In time, we proved to the Omnians that we were worthy of the opportunity granted us.”

“An entire race,” Quantine repeated, nudging Eshtitor. “What is one insignificant captain compared to that many Toralians?”

Eshtitor imagined shrinking to the size of a ship boot, enabling him to go about unnoticed by the conclave.

“So, what do you want, Captain?” Teffloose asked.

“To sail a conclave ship,” Eshtitor stated, with more emotion than he’d shown since the start of the conversation.

“What type of ship?” Teffloose inquired, keeping suspicion out of her voice.

“There are races spread out beyond Queller space accessible only by conclave ships,” Eshtitor replied. “The Woots need to reach them with their grain for many decades, while they’re still an agrarian society. I wish to help them deliver their products to those races.”

“An admirable endeavor,” Teffloose commented. “Fortune is with us.”

“In what way?” Quantine queried.

“We can seek advice from my sibling, Temtalum. She stands as pilot for the Queller conclave representative, Iltaft,” Teffloose explained. “Captain, how dedicated are you to this idea?”

“I understand I must take several steps to reach my goal, which I’m prepared to do,” Eshtitor replied. “An implant is required to use conclave tech. I would need to train to pilot a traveler. After that, I don’t know what is necessary to captain a conclave freighter.”

“Well, you have two things in your favor, Captain,” Teffloose mused.

“Which are?” Eshtitor prompted.

“First, you’re experienced, having captained the greatest warship that the conclave has ever seen,” Teffloose responded.

“And second?” Eshtitor pressed.

“You’ve a most ardent supporter in the nature of your partner,” Teffloose added, with her whistling laughter. “When we reach Devona, we’ll meet with Temtalum and hear what she recommends.”

With another cycle for preparations, including finalizing the latest requests from the Woots, courtesy of the sisters, for the Quellers, the flotilla was ready to sail.

A SADE in the lead Krackus freighter linked with the other four SADEs, and he initiated the sequences for the five freighters.

Simultaneously, Teffloose said, “Captain Eshtitor, start your journey.”

In turn, Eshtitor directed the pilot to orient the huge ship and accelerate to clear the system. As their destination was known, it required only a few taps on the pilot’s panel for the entire process to run.

<Arrive behind, in front, or with these other ships?> Orly queried, knowing that the *Withern* was by far the fastest ship in the flotilla.

<What image do you wish the Quellers to form from our arrival?> Cyan queried.

<Yes, I see what you’re asking,> Orly shared. <We must think of the impressions that we’ll give the biologicals. In that case, we arrive with the flotilla.>

Occasionally, Cyan paused to wonder to what extent the militant sisters in their midst had truly reformed. Their extraordinary efforts for the Woots couldn’t be denied. But her thought was that the militants could be biding their time. Then she would ask herself, <For what purpose?> To that question, there was no answer.

When the freighters and the Dwerve warship were nearly free of the majority of the system’s gravitational pull, Jacqueline signaled the *Withern*’s controller. The mini-Quadrant expended its grav cells to leap forward.

Before the heavies of the small flotilla could gain the dark, the *Withern* kept them company.



Knowing the next Woot harvest delivery would be arriving soon at Devona, Representative Illaft had her hands full. Despite delegating to

Timteri and Kosyet, who had helped her hire their replacement, she was pressed to ensure that commitments would be met.

<Kosyet, what's the status of our manufacturers' delivery of Woot products?> Iltaft sent.

<I've reviewed my replacement's reports, which indicated that they were on target,> Kosyet replied. <Unfortunately, Bakilt accepted the numbers provided by the manufacturers without making spot inspections.>

To Kosyet, Iltaft's silence was worse than a reprimand.

<There isn't time for the young Queller to ensure the reports are accurate,> Iltaft remarked.

<I can delay my departure and help him,> Kosyet offered.

<No,> Iltaft swiftly replied. <You need to finish your preparations for Trevonian. You have to work on the contracts with other worlds and the subsequent shipping.>

Kosyet deflated. She believed she'd failed by recommending someone who was convincing about his energy and thoroughness. She'd told him many times to verify and not to trust. Her hope was that the numbers wouldn't be too far off, as the manufactured items had been close to target when she made her last verification round just twenty cycles ago.

Iltaft ended one link and made another connection. <Possible trouble,> she sent to Minimalist.

Later that morning, Temtalum picked up Iltaft and added her to the other passengers, Minimalist, Luther, and Morgoth.

After Temtalum located Kosyet's replacement, Bakilt, she made for his coordinates, which identified him at a manufacturing site.

A supervisor was surprised by Bakilt's visit, thinking the constant pressure applied by Kosyet had finally lifted. Worse, Bakilt's affable personality, which he'd first experienced, was missing. The youth was determined to get the latest machinery count contracted by the Dwerves for the Woots.

As if the cycle wasn't going badly enough, the supervisor received a hushed report that a traveler had landed outside the shipping docks. Only a few moments later, he watched Iltaft striding toward him with conclave members in tow.

Bakilt heard of Iltaft's arrival, and he hurried to meet her.

<Greetings, Bakilt,> Iltaft sent congenially. <As the Dwerves will arrive soon, I want to make some inspections of my own. How are you progressing?>

<This is my third company,> Bakilt replied. <The first two should meet one hundred percent of their targets within the next eight to ten cycles.>

<Not one hundred ten percent?> Iltaft inquired suspiciously.

<They probably would have met those goals at the pace they were producing when Kosyet first sent her reports to me,> Bakilt sent, briefly hanging his head.

<Please observe,> Iltaft shared. Bakilt and she received summaries from Minimalist. Luther and Morgoth had assisted him in acquiring the company's records and comparing them to the expected output for the Dwerves.

Then Iltaft focused on the supervisor.

Momentarily, the supervisor wilted under Iltaft's silent stare. Then he began offering excuses about the difficulties that had resulted in reduced production.

"I sympathize with the conditions under which you've been recently operating," Iltaft said. "That's why we're here to help."

"Within thirty cycles we'll meet our contract's goals," the supervisor protested.

"Unfortunately, we expect the Dwerves in the next seven to ten cycles," Iltaft pointed out. "They were disappointed on their last visit, and Senior Elder Wymron made that plain to the company's owner."

"What do you have in mind?" the supervisor inquired, trying to keep his eyes off Morgoth.

"The conclave is going to provide you with the help you need to meet your goals in a timely fashion," Iltaft replied. "Of course, your company will have to reimburse the conclave members."

"I can't authorize that," the supervisor said nervously.

Behind the small group, the company owner could be heard saying, "Welcome, Representative Iltaft."

When Bakilt had started his inspection, the supervisor had called the owner to warn him that they were in trouble.

In a brief summary, Iltaft explained the situation to the owner, who suggested that the company should be allowed to deliver the expected quantities in thirty or more cycles.

Previously, Iltaft was incensed by the companies' failures to meet their obligations in a timely manner. This time, she had a better idea of how to handle the owners.

As the owner continued to offer alternatives to having to hire conclave members, Iltaft's implant signaled the arrival of the one person whom she'd called.

<Greetings, Daughter,> Wymron sent. <Suppliers lax?>

The owner saw the supervisor's eyes widen, and he turned to see the problem. He was stupefied by the approach of Wymron.

Iltaft updated Wymron with the present issue.

As Wymron listened to the details, he kept a steady gaze on the company owner.

At that moment, the owner and the supervisor wished they had implants.

"No choice," Wymron stated unequivocally to the owner. "Conclave helps. Then your choice."

With that, Wymron turned around and headed toward his traveler.

"What did Senior Elder Wymron mean by his statements?" the owner asked.

"The senior elder was embarrassed by your company's poor performance during the Dwerves' last visit," Iltaft explained. "He's determined to not repeat that situation. The conclave will ensure you meet your goals. Afterward, you can reimburse the individuals or not."

"Or not?" the owner inquired dubiously.

"The senior elder can't force you to hire temporary workers," Iltaft replied. "The conclave will ensure that you don't embarrass Quellers with your poor performance. If you choose not to pay them, your company won't be considered for future contracts with other races."

The owner looked stricken. He had no idea what the conclave workers would cost. When he had been informed that Kosyet had been promoted and wouldn't be monitoring his output, he saw the opportunity to save credits. Immediately, he canceled his workers' overtime, which guaranteed that he wouldn't meet his obligations by the time specified in the contract.

Iltaft waited while the owner's gaze went from individual to individual. His mistake was to end on Morgoth, whose huge maw hung open. Ironically, the Crocian didn't mean to be intimidating. It was warm in the factory. His lower jaw hung down to release some of his body heat.

"I request support to meet my targets," the owner said, relenting.

"A wise first step," Iltaft pronounced. She signaled the conclave members to communicate with the owner and the supervisor. With a tilt of her head, she directed Bakilt to step aside with her.

<Do you know what to do now, Bakilt?> Iltaft inquired.

<I'm embarrassed that I expected forthrightness from these companies, and they took advantage of me,> Bakilt replied. <Kosyet warned me about them, but I thought she was being harsh.>

<So, what will you do?> Iltaft pressed.

<First, a message to every manufacturer supporting the Woot contract,> Bakilt enumerated. <I'll warn them that failure to meet their goals of one hundred ten percent on time requires they hire conclave members to meet them.>

<And?> Iltaft continued.

Bakilt frowned. Then he added, <The conclave members must be paid for their contributions. Failure to pay them or fulfill their contractual obligations will result in the government refusing to include their company in any future opportunities.>

<Now we understand each other,> Iltaft replied. <Get to it. If you have any problems, I need to be informed immediately. Have the companies coordinate conclave hires through Minimalist, Luther, or Morgoth.>

<Could I ask Morgoth to accompany me to any difficult companies?> Bakilt asked.

The request made Iltaft grunt humorously. <Conclave members don't report to me,> she replied. <You may ask Morgoth, and he has a right to

do as he chooses. You do know that his fierce appearance has nothing to do with his personality, correct?>

<Yes,> Bakilt replied, grunting lightly. <Kosyet told me that Timteri adores Morgoth for his gentle nature, but the company managers and owners don't know that.>

<That they don't,> Iltaft agreed, grunting conspiratorially. Then she left Bakilt to work with Morgoth and the SADEs.

As Iltaft approached Temtalum's traveler, she noted that Wymron was aboard. He'd dismissed his ship.

<Trouble, Daughter?> Wymron asked, as Iltaft cleared the hatch.

<Yes, but manageable,> Iltaft replied.

<Owner mistakes?> Wymron queried.

<In this case, that's a yes,> Iltaft responded. <They lack an understanding about the importance of what we're trying to do.>

<Solution?> Wymron queried.

<One step at a time,> Iltaft replied, wearily. She lamented the movement of Timteri and Kosyet from their prior positions, but it was necessary for them to engage the greater scope of her duties.

Wymron considered Iltaft's lack of energy, and he sought a means of supporting her. Of course, he knew that he couldn't do it directly. Furthermore, requesting conclave members report to her wasn't to be considered. Even Quellers weren't who she needed. The newly implanted Quellers needed time to comprehend the complexities of a swiftly changing world.

At Wymron's request, Temtalum dropped Iltaft at her building. Then, following his preference, she rose to a height of a thousand meters, set the traveler's controller to hold position, and left her pilot's cabin. Taking a seat across from Wymron, she waited respectfully for him to speak.

<Krackus with Cremsylon,> Wymron began.

<Korvath was the first Krackus to defect from the empire,> Temtalum explained.

<Implant?> Wymron inquired.

<Yes,> Temtalum replied. <He's quite proficient with it.>

<Job?> Wymron continued.

<Presently or with the Krackus?> Temtalum queried.

<Krackus,> Wymron sent.

<Korvath was a peacekeeper declinator,> Temtalum shared. <The declinator is the officer who is second to the warship's captain.>

<Knowledgeable,> Wymron commented, grunting appreciatively.

<More than you would think,> Temtalum sent. <He trained as an engineer.>

Wymron's eyes brightened. <Seek him,> he requested.

Temtalum located Korvath aboard the *Alexander*.

<Senior Elder Wymron has asked to meet you, Korvath,> Temtalum sent. <When would you be free?>

<My training class will end in a quarter hour,> Korvath replied. <Where does he wish to meet?>

<I'm transporting him to you,> Temtalum replied, which caught Korvath off guard. <Select a conference room. More than likely, Cremsyron will entertain him until you're ready.>

Korvath returned to helping Gat'r with the massive influx of Quellers who wanted implants. The majority didn't want to be pilots, but they did want access to conclave tech that they knew would be continually adopted by their worlds.

When the class finished, Korvath hurried to a conference room in the main corridor that led to the bridge. He was grateful that he'd taken the time to work with the Queller language. However, he was fairly sure that he'd need help from Cremsyron to handle elder speak.

To Korvath's surprise, Wymron and he were alone.

<Need help,> Wymron sent, after a short introduction.

<Conclave?> Korvath inquired.

<Not appropriate,> Wymron shared. <Declinator. Engineer,> he added, pointing toward Korvath, and the diminutive Krackus nodded. <Experience needed.>

<To do what?> Korvath queried.

<Know Iltaft?> Wymron asked.

Korvath gurgled. <Senior Elder, every individual in the conclave knows Representative Iltaft. She's well-respected.>

<Quellers struggle,> Wymron sent.

<How?> Korvath queried.

Wymron worked to share his thoughts in their complexity instead of in the abbreviated form he'd practiced for most of his life. <Queller society changing rapidly,> he sent. <Iltaft needs help. Lead Quellers.>

Korvath regarded Wymron while he stitched together the senior elder's short phrases. Wymron wanted help from someone with substantial technical skill who had an implant. He wasn't speaking to the conclave. Instead, he'd come to see a Krackus.

When the pieces clicked, Korvath sent, <We should also recruit Doktorg when he arrives with the Dwerves. The pair of us should be able to substantially aid Iltaft.>

Wymron stood. His eyes glistened, and he dipped his head solemnly. <Gratitude extended,> he sent before he exited the conference room.

Korvath shook his head slowly at the turn of events. He'd become bored with the implant training classes. They were too repetitive for him. Wymron's offer came just in time.

<Gat'r, you need a new trainer,> Korvath sent.

<A replacement was hired when I heard Wymron had come to see you,> Gat'r shared. <What's the new job?>

<Nothing much,> Korvath replied, gurgling. <The Queller leader has just asked me to assist the conclave representative with uplifting their race.>

<I'll be curious to hear the title that Iltaft invents for you, Korvath,> Shoya interjected, which had the three of them laughing.

2: New Job

As Shoya was scheduled to monitor a new Queller pilot, Korvath requested a lift to Iltaft, which gave the trainee an opportunity to handle a passenger.

<Where is Representative Iltaft, Ser?> the pilot, an admirer of the Méridien SADEs, inquired.

<According to Temtalum, she's been dropped at her office,> Korvath replied.

<I've that location,> the trainee replied enthusiastically. He was happy that the request was easy.

When the traveler neared the planet's surface, Shoya sent to the trainee, <I'll handle this exit for you. Next time, be ready to assist the senior elder or Korvath.>

<The hatch steps,> the trainee replied, belatedly understanding what Shoya meant. He settled the traveler in front of Iltaft's building and triggered the hatch.

Shoya had exited the pilot's cabin earlier, and Korvath followed her.

At the hatch, Korvath held out his arms, and Shoya swept him up. With her suit, she easily stepped from the ship's deck to the plaza below.

<I'm the one who needs one of those,> Korvath remarked, tapping Shoya's suit. Tipping his beak toward the building, he shared, <Would you mind carrying me inside?>

Shoya laughed and set Korvath down on the plaza stones. <Play nice with the younglings,> she sent, leaping easily into the ship's interior.

Among most Quellers, Korvath wasn't a well-known individual. Nevertheless, he didn't draw much attention. The conclave had too many racial variations for Quellers to be surprised by a new one.

As Korvath approached the front doors, they slid open to allow two young Quellers to leave, and he stepped inside. Locating Iltaft's implant, he made for her. She was leaving the office of an admin.

<Greetings, Representative Iltaft. We should talk,> Korvath sent.

<Declinator Korvath,> Iltaft replied. <This is a surprise. How may I help you?>

<Please, it's just Korvath, and I believe I'm here to help you.>

Iltaft regarded Korvath with a frown. She could think of only one individual who would have the Krackus standing in front of her. <Senior Elder Wymron,> she sent.

<Just so,> Korvath replied.

<This should be interesting,> Iltaft commented and indicated the way to her office.

Once seated, Korvath related his meeting with Wymron.

<And you not only accepted, but you also recommended Doktorg,> Iltaft sent, after Korvath finished.

<If Wymron thought one Krackus, like me, could be of help to you, then two should be better,> Korvath replied, gurgling.

Iltaft leaned into her nanites chair. She had no intention of dismissing Korvath. Yet, she didn't have a defined role for him.

<I've an idea for you, Representative Iltaft,> Korvath sent. <Allow me to shadow you for several cycles. That'll give me time to understand your challenges. Then I might be better prepared to suggest ways that I can aid you.>

<I like that,> Iltaft replied. <And between you and me, I'm Iltaft.>

Iltaft's chronometer signaled her. She stood and sent, <We've a meeting. I'll explain on the way. This is a complicated issue.>

For several cycles, Korvath dutifully followed Iltaft. His command of Queller was sufficient to understand the conversations. He formed two opinions from his effort. First, Iltaft was extremely competent in performing her duties. The second was that she was facing tidal waves of pressure from her society and from the cascading events that were hurled at the Quellers.

An example of the latter circumstances was the announcement from the *Alexander* that seven ships, arriving from the Woot planet, had exited the dark.

<Seven ships?> Iltaft queried, as Korvath and she walked a corridor to return to her office.

<Five Krackus freighters, the Dwerve warship, and what the telemetry officer characterized as a mini-Quadrant,> Korvath replied.

<The sisters' new ship,> Iltaft mused. <I understand their appearance copies that of humans.>

Korvath shared images from the *Alexander's* controller with Iltaft.

<Méridien humans,> Iltaft commented, as she examined the images.

<These are a particular group of sisters,> Korvath sent. <They originated from a first-gen militarist sister.>

<Copies?> Iltaft inquired.

<All sisters are inherently copies. The first-gens originated from a single female SADE called Miriam,> Korvath explained. <Their purpose was to protect the Omnian fleet from a powerful digital entity known as Artifice. This planet-based sentient controlled an entire system and many battleship fleets, which were used as protection.>

<The more I hear about the history of the conclave, the more I fail to understand how it managed to survive to obtain its present size,> Iltaft remarked.

<I would imagine its perseverance,> Korvath opined.

<And SADEs,> Iltaft added.

<Definitely SADEs,> Korvath agreed.

When the Woot flotilla drew close to Devona, Korvath sent a request via Temtalum to relay to Doktorg.

On the Dwerve ship, the Toralian pilot, Teffloose, chatted happily with her sibling, Temtalum.

<I look forward to spending time with you,> Teffloose sent via the *Withern's* controller. <However, there is news to share.>

At which point, Teffloose educated Temtalum about the size of the shipment and her conjectures about why the *Withern* was present.

<And I've a request for Doktorg,> Temtalam sent before the conversation ended.

When the link dropped, Teffloose sought Doktorg.

"You've an invitation from Korvath," Teffloose said. "He invites you to meet with Representative Iltaft and him. He states that there exists a significant opportunity for you and him."

"Did he say anything about the nature of the opportunity?" Doktorg asked.

"No," Teffloose replied. Seeing Doktorg's crest droop, she added, "I spoke for a length of time with my sibling. The Quellers are experiencing major internal and external events. I would think Iltaft might be in need of experienced individuals."

Doktorg's crest rose, but his orbs were hooded.

"My advice is that you consider the future, not in cycles but in annuals," Teffloose said. "Eshtitor and Quantine are doing the same thing, and it doesn't involve this ship."

Doktorg's orbs widened, and his crest fluttered.

"Think on it," Teffloose said, as she turned and headed for the bridge.

When the Woot flotilla made Devona, the routine, which had been established, was quickly put into action. The grain shipments were evaluated for quality, which, of course, exceeded Queller expectations.

"We harvest the grains quicker with the new machinery. That keeps them fresher," Cyan explained.

Orly and Cyan had joined the others aboard the Dwerve ship. The third sister, Jacqueline, stayed behind and was responsible for the *Withern*. In the meantime, she organized the offload of the conclave crews via visiting travelers. Then they were ferried to the Devona gates for reassignment.

Temtalam and Teffloose met, and their audience watched their wings flutter extensively.

<Are you related?> Korvath inquired.

<Siblings,> Temtalam replied.

Korvath approached Doktorg. "We've expertly managed not to cross paths," he said. "Perhaps, it's time to share a path." Rather than deliver the

Krackus salute of a declinator to a fleet imperator, he extended a hand in the traditional conclave manner.

“It’s worth discussing,” Doktorg replied, shaking the hand offered him.

It wasn’t the enthusiastic response that Korvath had hoped to receive. However, he considered it a start, and he intended to win Doktorg to the projects he visualized.

“During the next cycles, our movements will be more complicated than the previous visit,” Iltaft said, directing her attention toward Eshtitor.

“Problems?” the captain queried, which elicited soft laughter from Quantine.

“Representative Iltaft, can we expect that the Trevonian experiment went well?” Quantine inquired.

Iltaft grunted humorously. “You have no idea how successful,” she replied. “Multiple actions involving the conclave and the Quellers are in place to develop Trevonian and other worlds.”

“You sound more hopeful than excited,” Quantine noted.

“There’s a lot happening to prepare for the next steps. We hope they’ll lead to the kind of success witnessed on Trevonian,” Iltaft responded.

Korvath subtly caught Doktorg’s attention, and he tipped his beak in Iltaft’s direction.

“It sounds as if we need to spend more time here before returning to the Woots to ensure your success,” Eshtitor offered.

“It would be greatly appreciated,” Iltaft replied.

“We’ve been sent to be of whatever assistance we can render, Representative Iltaft,” Orly said. “The *Withern* is at your disposal.”

Dwerve eyes and Krackus orbs regarded Orly.

Cyan chuckled, borrowing a Méridien female’s delightful manner. “Orly is trying on a new persona,” she explained. “Your encouragement would be appreciated.”

Orly listened to the applause that came her way. As the noise died down, she deadpanned, “There’s no guarantee I’ll keep it.” The laughter had her grinning.

“I appreciate and will take every bit of support that’s been offered,” Iltaft said gratefully. “Can we start at my offices tomorrow morning?”

As Iltaft spoke, she'd eyed the captain, the sisters, and Doktorg. Receiving everyone's assent, she collected Korvath and Temtalum and departed.

Behind Iltaft, Eshtitor, Quantine, and Doktorg exchanged glances. Teffloose took the hint and made herself absent.

"I received a message from Korvath," Doktorg commented.

"The first Krackus to flee the empire, correct?" Quantine queried.

"Many of us hated what he did. It was much later that we learned he saw the future clearer than any of us," Doktorg admitted.

"What did Korvath want?" Eshtitor asked.

"The message said that he and I should meet with Iltaft," Doktorg replied. "It was Teffloose who told me about developing conditions for the Quellers."

"Negative or positive?" Eshtitor pressed.

"Korvath's message and Teffloose's words indicate opportunity. I take them to be positive conditions," Doktorg said.

"Perhaps, you should keep that meeting," Quantine said.

"What of the two of you?" Doktorg inquired.

"I think this warship has long since served its purpose," Eshtitor responded. "I intend to land every Dwerve on a Queller planet until this ship is empty."

"Then what?" Doktorg pressed.

"Then the three of us will be out of jobs," Eshtitor admitted.

"Thought as much," Doktorg said. "Are the Woots of any interest to you?"

Quantine sidled behind Eshtitor. She rested her long fingers on his broad shoulders and placed her scaled cheek next to his furry one. Focusing on Doktorg and nuzzling Eshtitor's cheek, she said, "Our captain will never be one to be happy planetside."

Doktorg gurgled. "I know the feeling," he said. "Then I think our best opportunity to remain in space is to ally ourselves with the conclave."

"Define alliance," Quantine requested.

“We know that Iltaft has a conclave implant. So does Korvath,” Doktorg pointed out. “And we know it takes an implant to crew aboard a conclave ship.”

“Are you thinking of a conclave Trident?” Eshtitor inquired.

Doktorg gurgled heavily and then added, “I don’t think the conclave principals are ready to let the likes of you and me near a warship. However, a freighter and travelers might not be out of the question.”

“It’s a possible path,” Quantine urged.

“It would also be a serious demotion,” Eshtitor said, his shoulders sagging.

Quantine’s long strong fingers dug briefly into Eshtitor before she stepped around him to look him in the eyes. “I don’t think the conclave has a ship bigger than this one for you to captain,” she remarked.

Eshtitor’s deep-chested laughter reverberated from him. “Too true,” he agreed. “I suppose we must consider a possible future as opposed to no future at all.”

“That was my opinion,” Doktorg added. “If I can be of help to Iltaft, then we would have the Quellers on our collective side for requests made to the conclave.”

“Tomorrow’s meeting should be interesting,” Quantine opined.

Just before starlight lit Devona’s capital, Temtalum collected the sisters and the Dwerve contingent. Her sibling sat copilot with her, as Temtalum dropped planetside.

<Beautiful world,> Teffloose remarked privately to her sibling, enjoying her view through the controller.

<The Quellers have a collection of worlds from temperate to equatorial to arid,> Temtalum returned. <The planets that fall into the last two categories have difficult challenges.>

The conference room was crowded.

Temtalum’s passengers had joined Iltaft, her new direct reports, Korvath, Timteri, Kosyet, Wymron, Minimalist, Luther, and Morgoth.

Iltaft presented the Trevonian developments, which pleased the Dwerves and Doktorg. “You can see that the conclave’s efforts are aiding

the Trevonian settlements,” she said. Then she introduced Timteri and Kosyet.

Timteri explained her role to support the next phase of Dwerve landings on Queller worlds.

Kosyet followed with an explanation of her job to support the growth and sale of Trevonian products.

Eshtitor’s frown had increased as Timteri and Kosyet spoke.

Minimalist signaled Iltaft about the captain’s expression.

“Do you have concerns, Captain Eshtitor?” Iltaft asked.

“From these reports, it would seem that you have everything in hand, but that wasn’t what you implied when you were aboard our ship,” Eshtitor said.

On hearing the translation, the Quellers, including Wymron, grunted heavily.

Wymron shook his quills, gathering attention to himself. “Excellent plans. Challenges to deliver,” he remarked.

“So, you have the outline of a strategy, with, as yet, undefined tactics,” Doktorg surmised.

“Well said,” Iltaft replied.

“Then this meeting is meant to coordinate the implementation details of the next phase of Queller adoption of the Dwerves,” Quantine concluded.

“Now we’re in sync,” Iltaft said, pleased that they’d achieved a common recognition of the circumstances.

“Will the grain dispersals align with the Dwerves immigrating to Queller worlds?” Cyan inquired.

Eshtitor replied, “On the last visit, the majority of the shipment was delivered to the most populated planets. Some was saved for the Trevonians.”

“Understood,” Cyan replied. “Then the *Withern* could facilitate dropping the Dwerves planetside, while the freighters sail to their destinations.”

“Efficient,” Wymron commented, which the audience took to mean the suggestion was adopted.

“Representative, which worlds are being offered Dwerves and how many can land?” Eshtitor inquired.

The conference table’s holo-vid lit, and Minimalist displayed imagery taking from Devona’s databases.

“These are the four planets that need serious help,” Timteri said. “I’ve met with each council to determine their immediate problems and the long-term solutions they require.” Then she outlined the issues and the types of Dwerves requested by the councils.

“You don’t appear to suggest any issue with acceptance of the Dwerves,” Quantine noted.

The holo-vid display changed, and the audience observed head-and-shoulder images of Quellers.

“These individuals were credited by the Trevonians and the Dwerves with managing their successful integration,” Timteri explained. “I took them with me to visit the four planets I mentioned. A SADE displayed before and after vids of Trevonian. Afterward, the question was always how soon will the Dwerves arrive.”

“And the Dwerve numbers for the four planets?” Eshtitor asked.

The holo-vid shifted to display the four planets. Across the face of each planet was a number written in Queller, Dwerve, and Krackus.

Eshtitor added the four numbers, and he turned to smile at Quantine, who smiled in return and whose fingers brushed his muzzle.

The Quellers planned to settle more than nine thousand Dwerves on four planets.

“Now the tough part,” Timteri said, and she motioned toward Morgoth. As she passed him, she ran her hand down his scaled arm, and Morgoth rumbled contentedly.

“Each planet presents unique and multiple challenges to Queller settlers,” Morgoth began. “In two cases, grain can’t be dropped to be stored for later. Humidity would rot the seeds. Infrastructure is required. As the Dwerves leave the ship, Captain, it’s hoped there might be material available to provide the infrastructure.”

Eshtitor appeared stricken, and he felt Quantine squeeze his forearm. He knew this moment would come some cycle, but he was unprepared for

it to arrive this soon. After gathering his wits, he replied, “We’ll do whatever is necessary to help the Queller-Dwerve settlements. However, I would like to remind this group that my ship still needs its engines.” His quip elicited polite laughter. Many understood the angst the captain would feel surrendering equipment and significant portions of his ship.

As the presentations from Morgoth, Luther, and Minimalist continued, Korvath saw the attention of Eshtitor, Quantine, and Doktorg flagging. He stood and stepped beside Luther. “This information is complex, but it’s easily absorbed and shared by many here,” he said. “They either possess implants or kernels.” Focusing on the Dwerves and Doktorg, he said, “Have the three of you thought of receiving them?”

The trio was taken aback by the suggestion.

Finally, Doktorg replied uncertainly, “We thought we’d have to earn the right to request such a thing.”

Korvath gurgled and said, “The three of you have more than earned the right to receive conclave support.”

“Need we wait until after the disbursement of Dwerves and grain in the event of implant impairment?” Eshtitor inquired.

“Doesn’t implant impairment cost extra?” Cyan inquired innocently of Minimalist and Luther.

“We haven’t done one of those operations recently,” Minimalist remarked. “We’d have to check with the medical suite.”

On hearing the translations, Doktorg was gurgling, and Quantine was laughing softly.

“I think I’ll go with the standard implantation. No frills for me, thank you,” Eshtitor said, which had his audience erupting in grunts, laughter, rumbles, and gurgles.

The following morning, Korvath accompanied the Dwerves and Doktorg to the *Alexander*.

“Beautiful ship,” Eshtitor remarked, as the group strode a wide, brightly lit corridor.

While the Dwerves underwent genetic analysis, Doktorg received his implant. Having been cautioned by Korvath to wait to use his implant, he

requested a tour of the Quadrant. It wasn't long before he tired of walking the ship, and the pair stopped to eat.

"Medical has had Eshtitor and Quantine for a long time," Doktorg noted, as he enjoyed the food.

"I'll check," Korvath said, holding up a finger. Moments later, he added, "That's interesting. Eshtitor and Quantine have significantly different genetics."

"Multiple adoptions of other races," Doktorg explained.

"You'll have to tell me about that some time," Korvath replied.

"Ah, here they are," Korvath said, even though he had his back to the meal room's entrance.

Gat'r and Shoya met with Iltaft and Timteri aboard the *Alexander*, and she'd urged them to train the Dwerfes and Doktorg.

<We don't want the grain sitting in the freighters,> Iltaft shared. <One is dropping loads planetside, as we speak. Then the five freighters will sail for various heavily populated worlds. Timteri has identified four planets in need of support, and the Dwerfes will aid that.>

<So, the three individuals are being implanted now, and you want us to sail with the Dwerfe warship and the *Withern* without waiting for training to take place,> Shoya surmised.

<Correct,> Iltaft replied.

<SADEs could do that for you,> Gat'r pointed out.

<Minimalist, Luther, and Morgoth will be aboard the Dwerfe ship to inventory its equipment,> Iltaft shared.

When the Quellers saw Gat'r's and Shoya's brows furrow, Timteri sent, <There might be other reasons for your presence.>

<What planet would we be sailing to first?> Gat'r inquired.

<Pavbleg,> Timteri replied.

Gat'r quickly accessed the *Alexander's* controller for information about the Queller world. <A wet one,> he shared privately with Shoya, and the pair laughed.

<Representative Iltaft, you might have just told us that we'd be visiting an equatorial world, with much of the planet covered by wetlands,> Gat'r sent. <SADEs can't swim.>

Timteri blinked twice. Then she said, <They didn't tell us that. They simply requested the two of you do the training.>

<When you're supposed to be the premier conclave individuals in Queller space, it's hard to admit that you have weaknesses,> Shoya shared. <Gat'r and I will have fun with this one.>

<We need to make arrangements for our classes,> Gat'r sent.

<Um ... Minimalist already requested other SADEs pick up your schedules,> Timteri sent.

<Then we should find our new students and pack,> Shoya responded. Gat'r and she closed their mask-helmets and bounded in sync down a long corridor.

<I'm always amazed how we fail to communicate properly,> Timteri lamented.

<We think of the conclave style as being blunt,> Iltaft opined. <They think of it as being direct and not wasting anyone's time.>

My Books

Fatal Flaws is the thirteenth novel in the [Gate Ghosts](#), a series in the Earthers Saga that relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's colony ships.

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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Deadly Gambits

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Fatal Flaws

Imperium's Demise (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](#), which comprise the Earthers Saga. 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.