

IMPERIUM'S DEMISE

Gate Ghosts Book 14

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.

Copyright © 2024 by S. H. Jucha

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Published by Hannon Books, Inc.

www.scottjucha.com

ISBN: 979-8-9900518-4-3 (e-book)

ISBN: 979-8-9900518-5-0 (softcover)

First Edition: August 2024

Cover: Krackus on Imperium

Design: Damon Za

Acknowledgments

Imperium's Demise is the fourteenth and final novel in [Gate Ghosts](#), a series in the Earthers Saga that relates the stories of the descendants of Earth's colony ships.

I wish to extend a special thanks to my independent editor, Joni Wilson, whose efforts enabled the finished product. To my proofreaders, Abiola Streete, David Melvin, Ron Critchfield, Tiffany Crutchfield, and John Punshon, I offer my sincere thanks for their support.

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

Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.

Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| 1: Only Six Returned..... | 1 |
| 2: Who's the Buyer?..... | 12 |
| 3: We See You..... | 25 |
| 4: Irate..... | 39 |
| 5: Set the Trap..... | 54 |
| 6: Latimers' End..... | 69 |
| 7: Lister's Revenge..... | 86 |
| 8: Vextra's End Game..... | 101 |
| 9: Celebration and Concerns..... | 118 |
| 10: Opportunity Abounds..... | 129 |
| 11: First Challenge..... | 139 |
| 12: More Invitations..... | 153 |
| 13: Special Assignment..... | 167 |
| 14: What Do You Want?..... | 178 |
| 15: Transfer or Don't..... | 193 |
| 16: This Is Our Offer..... | 208 |
| 17: Join the Operation..... | 222 |
| 18: They're Nothing I Expected..... | 235 |
| 19: It Doesn't Make Sense..... | 254 |
| 20: Efforial Death..... | 269 |
| 21: My Friend, Actinial..... | 285 |
| 22: First Timers..... | 305 |
| 23: Assembly Pandemonium..... | 321 |
| 24: Indecision..... | 336 |
| 25: We've Bad News..... | 348 |
| 26: Are You on Stimulants?..... | 361 |
| 27: The Struggle Begins..... | 373 |
| 28: Executor Competition..... | 385 |
| 29: Secrets Revealed..... | 396 |
| 30: Hector's Message..... | 407 |
| Glossary..... | 421 |
| My Books..... | 429 |

The Author 431

1: Only Six Returned

SUPREME FORCES COMMANDER UGURTER UTILIMAT HOME WORLD

“The council will hear your report immediately, Commander Ugurter,” Supreme Councilor Ojoojaf announced definitively. “We’ll convene tomorrow morning.”

“With respect, Councilor Ojoojaf, I won’t be able to accommodate your request,” Ugurter replied.

Councilor Ohmjess, who sat beside Ugurter in his ship’s stateroom, as did the commander’s two senior officers, was careful not to laugh.

“That wasn’t a request, Commander,” Ojoojaf stated authoritatively.

“I’ve naval military duties that supersede your directive, Ojoojaf,” Ugurter responded.

Ojoojaf, who was conferencing with the other councilors, was taken aback by Ugurter’s pronouncement. It implied that conditions at the Freiot home world hadn’t gone well.

“Can you specify those duties?” Ojoojaf inquired.

“I must convene a military court and lay charges for multiple trials,” Ugurter replied.

“Oh,” Ojoojaf muttered. Knowing that he had no right to intervene or question the supreme naval commander on military matters, he relented. Instead of finding some way to regain the momentum, he ended the call.

Ugurter stared at his comms panel. The call icon had gone dark.

“Did Ojoojaf just cut the call?” Ohmjess queried.

“Apparently,” Ugurter replied, perplexed at Ojoojaf’s action.

“That’s not like him to give up so easily,” Ohmjess pointed out.

“Something might have happened in our absence,” a command officer suggested.

“If so, it would be nice to know what occurred,” Ugurter responded. He indicated the command officers with a finger and added, “See if you can find out what might have taken place.”

On the Utilimat home world, a councilor was quick to share a report he’d received with the others on the conference. “There is something odd about the ship count in Ugurter’s flotilla,” he said. “The commander left with one warship, and he returned with an additional five.”

“He probably left a warship at the Freiot home world,” Ufoodab offered.

“Why would he leave one warship behind when our ships have always traveled in a pair or more?” Ojoojaf queried sarcastically.

“I think the answer might lie in the commander’s response,” a councilor suggested. “What if the conclave destroyed one of our warships?”

“Then why would Ugurter intend to convene military trials?” Ojoojaf responded testily. He hated the thought that Freiot conditions were worse than he might have imagined.

As Supreme Councilor Ojoojaf had heard nothing from the other councilors that might explain the meager facts they possessed, he abruptly ended the conference. Afterward, he made a call.

Captain Ulgafem eyed his comms device, saw the ID, and refused the call. Retiring to his cabin, he withdrew a second device from a hidden location. With this unit, he called a different device ID.

“Question,” Ojoojaf said, without preamble. “Why did only six ships return?”

Ulgafem knew this was the reason for the supreme councilor’s call. It had been the subject of conjecture among many naval officers. Unfortunately, no one knew the answer.

“Unknown,” Ulgafem replied.

“Discover,” Ojoojaf directed. Quickly, he cut the connection and pocketed his unregistered device.

Ulgafem quietly groaned. His remuneration from the supreme councilor was paid on one condition. The councilor asked for information.

If Ulgafem could provide it, then he would receive the credits. If not, then Ojoojaf wouldn't even thank him for his efforts.

The captains who'd been previously stationed in the Dobrey system and were subdued by their first officers had recovered from their injuries. This gave Ugurter enough captains to leave the five warships on the system's periphery in good hands.

Then Ugurter's warship headed for the home world. After making orbit, he collected his associates and his arrested officers, making for the planet. As the shuttle decelerated through the atmosphere and the g-forces pressed him into his seat, he glanced at Ohmjess.

"Don't say it. I know what you're thinking," Ohmjess said. "I'm already missing Julien's traveler."

Unknown to the pair, Captains Ulkfay and Ojaftah were sharing the same sentiment.

"I'm jealous of Captains Uferus and Ophorous," Ulkfay remarked. "They ride in travelers everywhere they go in the Yeret system."

"Could you believe Councilor Ufoodab when he remarked that the commander did Utilimat a disservice by using travelers when our shuttles were available?" Ojaftah queried.

"That Utilimat must have something loose in his head," Ulkfay remarked. Then the captains fell silent as the g-forces made it difficult to talk.

On the planet's Naval Forces Headquarters, Ugurter spent the rest of the cycle preparing the actions against Commander Urgurth and the first officers. First, he recorded the charges for each officer. Next, he transferred the lengthy reports originated by Ohmjess, two senior officers, and seven captains. Finally, he created two folders that he set under seal for the military courts. In one folder, he placed Palladon Guelmer's letter of protest. In the other folder, he transferred the documentation provided by Julien and Articus.

When Ugurter finished, he wearily headed for his apartment. After changing out of his uniform, he made the mistake of checking his personal messages. Two caught his eye. There was one from Ohmjess and one from an aide of a senior commander.

Duty called, and Ugurter chose the aide. “Yes,” he said when the aide answered his call.

“My information is not even thirdhand, Commander Ugurter, but I think it’s important to share,” the aide replied.

“Go ahead,” Ugurter responded.

“It’s come to my attention that a captain, who is stationed here, has been asking if anyone knows about the circumstances that has you returning with five warships from the Dobrey system when it should be six,” the aide said.

If Ugurter wasn’t sure about the loyalties of this officer, he might have suspected that this was a subtle way of the aide asking her own question.

“I imagine this is a query that is echoed by our entire naval service members,” Ugurter offered.

“I can’t disagree with that, Commander,” the aide replied. “I’ve asked the question myself. However, this captain called me to wonder if my senior commander knew anything. As he was asking me to divulge information from officers two levels above him, he made me suspicious. I inquired of other aides about the captain. Apparently, he’s called multiple aides and asked the same question.”

“What’s this captain’s name?” Ugurter asked.

“Captain Ulgafem,” the aide replied.

“What do we know about him?” Ugurter queried.

“Nothing stood out when I searched his service records, which made me suspicious,” the aide responded. “The captain has served long enough that he should have been rotated twice to other assignments.”

“Yet, he remains near the home world,” Ugurter mused. “Thank you for the information.”

“Do you wish me to take any action, Commander?” the aide inquired.

“Negative,” Ugurter quickly responded. “Have you shared this with your senior commander or anyone else?”

“Not yet,” the aide replied.

“Don’t,” Ugurter directed. “I wish Captain Ulgafem to think that no one has detected his efforts to acquire information above his rank.”

“Commander Ugurter, could I ask a question?” the aide asked before the call ended.

“One, but make it brief,” Ugurter replied tiredly.

“Why would this information be useful to the captain?” the aide inquired. “Eventually, senior command will know the answer.”

“You put your finger on it,” Ugurter said. “I suspect that someone wants to know the answer now instead of later. Good night.”

After Ugurter ended the call, he eyed his message queue. Ohmjess’s message was still there, but he was too tired to think straight. So, he headed for bed.

In the morning, Ugurter returned to Naval Forces Headquarters to ensure the prosecuting officers had what they needed. He joined a conference room full of prosecutors examining the information that he’d uploaded. When he entered the room, they stood and saluted him.

“Is there anything that you require from me?” Ugurter asked.

“We don’t see your report, Commander,” a prosecutor said.

“During the ship-to-ship encounters, I was on the planet. As such, I was a passive observer,” Ugurter replied.

“Observer?” another prosecutor queried.

“The palladon’s group and I watched the action on Julien’s holo-vid,” Ugurter responded.

“You’ll need to explain that, Commander,” a third prosecutor requested.

“It’s imperative that you understand the nature of conclave technology,” Ugurter replied. “I recommend that you interview Councilor Ohmjess, Captain Ulkfay, and Captain Ojafah on this subject. Otherwise, you won’t comprehend what I’ve just told you. Nor will you understand how a single Trident defeated three Utilimat warships.”

“Please make the captains available to us,” the first prosecutor requested. “A message will be sent to Councilor Ohmjess asking her to make time in her schedule for us.”

“Anything else?” Ugurter inquired.

“Not at this time, Commander,” a prosecutor responded. “Thank you for your visit.”

After Ugurter left the building, he found a quiet place to sit in a garden with a fountain and called Ohmjess.

“I presume you worked late,” Ohmjess replied.

“I couldn’t assign the work to anyone else,” Ugurter grumped. “By the way, the prosecutors will be contacting you.”

“What about?” Ohmjess queried.

“The moment I explained that I was a passive observer to the action, I confused them,” Ugurter explained.

“That’s hilarious,” Ohmjess replied and laughed heavily. “Naval Forces has been so careful with information that the prosecutors don’t know about common conclave technology.”

“Keep laughing,” Ugurter replied, chuckling. “You’ll be educating a bunch of prosecutors about things that will astound them.”

“I can’t be the only one,” Ohmjess protested.

“I volunteered you and two captains,” Ugurter said. “If I were you, I’d tell the prosecutors that you’ll attend their conference with Captains Ulkfay and Ojaftah. The three of you sharing what you know will convince the prosecutors that you’ve personally witnessed this tech.”

“Do you think we should invite Councilor Ufoodab to join us?” Ohmjess inquired matter-of-factly.

“Look at you, Councilor,” Ugurter responded, grinning at his device. “You start mixing with aliens, and you’ve suddenly become courageous. Keeping company with Ufoodab is a brave thing to do.”

Ohmjess enjoyed the banter, but it ended when Ugurter said, “You called me last evening.”

“I wanted to talk to you about what was coming,” Ohmjess responded.

“You’re going to have to be more specific, Ohmjess. My mind is wrapped around the officers’ trials,” Ugurter said.

“Understood, and those are important aspects of your duties,” Ohmjess replied in considerate tones. “However, your position as councilor supersedes the trials.”

“I was hoping not to think about the council fight that’s coming,” Ugurter groaned. “Tell me what you see happening.”

“The councilors who stayed behind will want to hear about the events in the Dobrej system and how the palladon responded to your entreaty to keep the Utilimat-Freiot defense agreement in place,” Ohmjess explained.

“Good reminder,” Ugurter grumped. “The spying, the mutinies, and the ship fight will be shocks to them. My subsequent decisions will probably leave them gasping.”

“Shock?” Ohmjess queried, laughing politely. “Those councilors, especially Ojoojaf, might need medical services.”

The idea of the councilors splayed out on the floor from his pronouncements had Ugurter sharing in Ohmjess’s laughter.

“While you do have a legitimate reason for arresting those officers, Ojoojaf and his supporters will be flabbergasted that you agreed to cancel the defense agreement,” Ohmjess continued. “How do you expect to defend that?”

“Do you believe I acted hastily?” Ugurter asked.

“No, but it’s the other councilors you have to convince,” Ohmjess pointed out.

“Let me give that some thought,” Ugurter replied. “For now, I owe Ojoojaf a call to set the council’s meeting date. I just didn’t want to hear his tedious questions.”

“I might have an idea. If you’re free for a meal tonight, we could discuss it,” Ohmjess offered.

“Certainly. Let me know when and where,” Ugurter replied. When he ended the call, he stayed seated in the garden. It occurred to him that the councilor had never invited him to anything. “Interesting,” he mused. Sighing, he called Ojoojaf.

The call was short, which surprised Ugurter. Although they’d set a council date only three cycles from now, Ojoojaf had little to say.

For no reason, Ugurter recalled his conversation with the aide about Captain Ulgafem. His curiosity got the better of him. Finding the captain’s information within the service’s records, he called the captain.

“Supreme Forces Commander Ugurter, what a privilege to speak to you,” Ulgafem responded.

“I heard you wanted to speak to me,” Ugurter replied, enjoying discomfoting the captain.

“There must be some confusion,” Ulgafem replied haltingly. “I wouldn’t jump over my superiors that way.”

“But you were asking the aides of command officers about what had happened that only returned six ships from the Freiot home world,” Ugurter pressed. “I presumed you were desperate to know the answer to your query.”

Realizing that Ugurter had found him out, Ulgafem temporized, “I was merely curious. Perhaps, it got the better of me.”

“It certainly did, Captain,” Ugurter replied. “However, I’ve an excellent cure for that. My aide will contact you with an appointment time tomorrow.”

Ulgafem didn’t have time to reply before the call ended. Suddenly, the credits he’d hungered to earn from Ojoojaf seemed to be a paltry amount compared to coming to the supreme commander’s attention.

Ugurter communicated to his aide to set an appointment with the captain, intending to settle the matter on the following cycle. However, his discussions with Ohmjess about the council meeting and the aide who shared her concern about Ulgafem’s numerous calls gave him pause, and he remained seated.

“I wonder who encouraged you, Captain Ulgafem,” Ugurter mused, after a few moments of deliberation. He made two more calls and conferenced the senior command officers, who were council members.

“I’ve a captain who deserves reprimanding,” Ugurter told them. “But I think there might be a similar situation to the one we encountered on the Freiot home world.”

“With the warships?” one officer inquired nervously.

“Thankfully, no,” Ugurter replied. “I think that someone might be paying officers to get information about my actions.”

“And this captain might be such an officer?” the other command officer asked.

“That’s my thought,” Ugurter replied. “Captain Ulgafem is dropping planetside and will be in my office tomorrow. My aide will have set an

appointment time. While the captain has exited his ship, I want his cabin thoroughly searched.”

“What are we hoping to find?” the first command officer queried.

“I’ll have my aide check the captain’s naval call logs,” Ugurter replied. “I don’t expect him to discover anything untoward.”

“That would mean that the captain has to have an unauthorized means of communicating,” the second officer offered.

“That’s my thought,” Ugurter responded. “If you can locate this second device, I’m guessing that only one individual’s device ID will be on it. If we can track credit transfers from the buyer to the captain, I’ll be able to charge someone with suborning a naval officer.”

“It would behoove our investigation to leave the second device, if found, in place so as not to arouse suspicion, but our mere presence on the warship will certainly be reported to Captain Ulgafem and alert him,” the second officer said.

“In which case, it might be best to keep the captain planetside until our investigation is complete,” the first command officer offered.

“I like that thought,” Ugurter replied. “If my suspicions are correct, then the moment that Ulgafem realizes that we’re on to him will be when the buyer starts hiding his tracks.”

The call ended, and Ugurter continued to sit in the garden and think, while the fountain gently burbled. He came back to the question of who would be able to entice a warship captain to spy on him. He came up with two potential answers. Either one of his most senior commanders wanted his position, or a council member wanted to be prepared to challenge him during the meetings. Both thoughts seemed outlandish to him.

The following morning, Ugurter was enjoying his morning meal when his device hummed.

“Commander Ugurter, we’ve secured an unauthorized comms device from Captain Ulgafem’s cabin,” an officer reported.

“I presume it was gathered under evidentiary rules,” Ugurter replied.

“We’ve a vid recording of our search and the discovery of the secondary device,” the officer confirmed.

“Also, the device was handled in a secure means, bagged, and sealed,” the second officer added.

“And you exited the ship without disclosing what you found?” Ugurter inquired.

“Yes, Commander,” the first officer replied. “We did provide our credentials to the first officer on duty. He was intimidated by our presence and urgently placed a call to the captain.”

“I presume that the device is locked,” Ugurter said. “Get it to naval tech services as quickly as possible. I need proof of who handled the device, and I need that device ID.”

After the call, Ugurter ignored the rest of his meal, dressed, and hurried to naval headquarters. He found Captain Ulgafem sitting quietly outside his office.

“Captain, I’m in early. So, let’s go ahead and talk,” Ugurter said, offering genial tones. He led the way into his office.

“I’d like to apologize for my exuberance,” Captain Ulgafem said, before the pair even gained their seats.

“Exuberance, is that what it was?” Ugurter inquired.

“Certainly, Commander,” Ulgafem replied. “I find naval maneuvers intriguing, and I’m considering writing a treatise about the history of Utilimat encounters. I was hoping to find someone who knew what happened in the Dobrey system.”

Before Ugurter could respond, Ulgafem’s device buzzed.

“Captain,” Ugurter said sharply. “I don’t like being interrupted. You should have shut down your device or, at least, muted it.”

Ulgafem itched to pull out his device and check the caller, but he stared transfixed at the commander’s outstretched hand.

“My apologies, Commander,” Ulgafem belatedly responded. He slipped his device out of his breast pocket and handed it to Ugurter, who promptly dropped it into a secure desk drawer.

“Captain, I’d like to dispense with your dissembling,” Ugurter said, staring fixedly at the captain. “Why don’t you tell me what you were really doing?”

“What do you mean, Commander?” Ulgafem replied nervously, shifting in his chair.

“Why do you possess an unauthorized comms device aboard your ship?” Ugurter queried.

“That’s ... that’s against naval regulations,” Ulgafem stammered. When he heard Ugurter’s device hum, he greatly appreciated the moment of relief it brought him.

Ugurter used his earpiece to isolate the speaker’s words, as he answered the call.

“Commander Ugurter, the techs have the information you sought,” a senior command officer said.

“And?” Ugurter queried.

Realizing that Ugurter was protecting his end of the conversation, the officer sought to keep the conversation short. “One number on the device, Commander, which is also an undocumented comms device.”

“Follow-up?” Ugurter inquired.

“Prosecutor securing release of the captain’s financial accounts,” the officer explained. “Wait one. I’ve just received the report. Interesting, Commander. The captain has one account, but he shares privileges on a second account with a sibling.”

“Trace required,” Ugurter directed.

“Understood, Commander. We’re on it,” the officer replied.

When Ugurter ended the call, he gazed across his desk at the captain.

While Ulgafem thought that the commander’s eyes were burrowing through him, in reality, Ugurter was musing about how to manage the interrogation.

“That was an interesting call,” Ugurter said offhandedly and indicating his device.

“Good news, I hope,” Ulgafem said, hoping to get the conversation on an even keel.

“Yes, it was,” Ugurter replied. “Apparently, naval tech services had no problem getting into your second comms device, which was recovered from your cabin.”

2: Who's the Buyer?

Ugurter regarded the captain's frozen expression and wide eyes. "Do you need a glass of water, Captain?"

"No," the captain muttered.

"Seems that your device's log contains only one ID, which is also an unregistered unit," Ugurter continued. "Now why would you have an unauthorized device on your ship, which only connects to a similar device?"

Ulgafem's mouth opened and closed a few times, as if he were trying on various excuses, but none of them seemed worth uttering.

"Well, we'll find out the answer to that question soon enough," Ugurter said, tapping an icon on his desktop display.

Immediately, two naval security agents swept into the room.

"Captain Ulgafem is to be detained," Ugurter ordered. "He's to be kept incognito. No log entry, and no contact, whatsoever."

The agents briefly regarded each other. Then they helped a wooden captain stand and lead him out of the office.

Ugurter swiftly stood and made for tech services. As he worked his way through the warrens of offices and desks, officers and techs jumped to attention. He didn't have time to request everyone resume their work. Instead, he waved them to their seats or shooed them to continue on their way.

When Ugurter spotted his two command officers, he made for them.

"Where are we?" Ugurter asked urgently. He was nervous about detaining the captain in incognito status. That was only allowed for a short period of time and under the direst of circumstances.

Although a senior officer was loath to do it, he motioned to the commander for quiet and pointed toward three techs, who stared at their projected displays, as they manipulated data.

“Intersection,” a tech announced, and he read off a complex alphanumeric ID.

“Found,” a second tech responded. “Searching.” Not much later, she added, “The search returned a null.”

Ugurter mouthed null to his officers, and they shrugged.

“Uncover the route,” the third tech directed.

“Have it,” the female tech replied.

The techs turned as one to eye the officers, and they were surprised to find the supreme commander standing beside them.

“A summary of your jargon would be good,” Ugurter offered.

The female tech chuckled and explained, “As you heard, Commander, there was but a single ID on the captain’s phone. With permission to investigate the captain’s finances, we found nothing suspicious about his primary account. However, the shared account with the sibling shows occasional deposits of significant credits. They’re rarely the same amount. Soon after the deposits are received, they’re transferred to a third account in the name of a fictitious individual.”

Ugurter blinked at the unexpected turn of events. “Anything else?” he inquired.

“Yes, Commander,” the female tech continued. “We attempted to trace the source of the captain’s deposits, but our search failed to return a response.”

“Is that normal?” Ugurter queried.

The female tech glanced left and right at her associates, who shook their heads.

“Not that we’ve ever found,” the female tech concluded.

“Speculate,” Ugurter requested.

“To hide an originating account from our search, the user would have to have extraordinary authority,” the female replied.

“Then they couldn’t do this on their own?” Ugurter inquired.

“Absolutely not,” the female replied. “It would take the cooperation of individuals in a financial institution.”

“Excellent work,” Ugurter complimented. He signaled the senior officers to retire with him.

“Commander Ugurter,” the female said, halting the officers’ departure. “It would appear that the identity of the user of the originating account is of critical importance to you.”

“It is,” Ugurter replied guardedly.

“We’ve a couple of ways that you might discover this person,” the female said, with a lift of a bushy eyebrow.

“I’d like to hear your ideas,” Ugurter encouraged.

“Have the captain call the other device,” a male tech suggested. “There’s a possibility that you might recognize the voice. We’d record the conversation, which you could use as evidence.”

“What if we don’t recognize the voice?” a senior officer asked.

“With enough time, we can determine the device’s location,” the female tech replied. “Unfortunately, many individuals could be in the same location at the same time.”

The command officers regarded Ugurter. One of them said, “The buyer has to be a powerful person to suborn a captain. We need a more definitive means of identifying this individual.”

Ugurter nodded his agreement, thanked the techs, and signaled the officers to follow him. He led the way to his office. Meanwhile, he called the detention center to bring Captain Ulgafem to him.

When the foursome was seated in Ugurter’s office, the supreme commander eyed a nervous captain. “I’m feeling magnanimous, Captain,” he said. “This is a onetime offer. So, you need to listen carefully.” Then he nodded at one of the commanding officers.

“Our techs have opened your secondary comms device, the one discovered in your cabin,” the officer said. “Your possession of this unauthorized device allowed us to gain a release to search your financial accounts. We found the account you share with your sibling, and it showed us the significant number of credits that it occasionally received. A few cycles later, those funds were transferred to another account in the name of a fictitious individual.”

The more the officer enumerated the investigation’s success, the sicker Ulgafem felt.

“Are you ready to hear my offer?” Ugurter asked.

Ulgafem's throat was dry. In an attempt to speak, he was forced to cough.

An officer poured Ulgafem a glass of water, which the captain greedily consumed.

"Yes, Commander," Ulgafem finally replied, while he held the empty glass tightly with both hands.

"You admit your guilt to the numerous charges that are placed against you, and you identify your buyer," Ugurter said. "If your information leads to an arrest, you'll be dismissed from the service for cause, and you won't receive any further detention time."

"I know who you're after, but you won't catch him. Besides, it would be dangerous for me," Ulgafem replied.

Ugurter and his command officers stared at one another. Suddenly, the pieces clicked for Ugurter.

"How long have you been in the employ of the councilor?" Ugurter asked.

Ulgafem's head jerked up. "You already knew?" he queried.

"This doesn't work if you don't identify the individual," Ugurter pressed.

A councilor was an educated guess for Ugurter based on the evidence and the information requested. He was fortunate that Ulgafem had just confirmed it. However, Ugurter didn't have any idea which councilor would be the buyer, which was why he was trying to finesse the identity out of the captain.

"No," Ulgafem replied definitively. "You have to catch him so that there's no question of his guilt. Even then, I get a transfer to another Utilimat world with a new identity. Furthermore, I get to keep the credits I've earned."

Ugurter couldn't help laughing. When he finished, he eyed Ulgafem as if he were regarding something disgusting.

"You help us catch the councilor, and my previous offers stands," Ugurter responded. "Furthermore, we'll transfer you under a new identity, but under no circumstances will you keep your ill-gotten gains."

Ulgafem drew breath to object, but Ugurter held up a hand in finality. “You’ve heard the best offer I can make, Captain, and it’s good only as long as we catch the councilor out.”

Ulgafem considered his position. The offer was better than he could have hoped. He’d thrown in the point of keeping the credits to have something the supreme commander could dismiss. When it was disallowed, he had most of what he needed. Now he had to make sure that naval services caught Ojoojaf.

“I accept the offer, Supreme Commander Ugurter, which I would like in writing from your desk,” Ulgafem replied. “And I think I’ve a way to get you definitive proof of the councilor’s complicity.”

“You’ll have the offer from me,” Ugurter replied. “Now tell me what you have in mind.”

Two cycles later, Ojoojaf made preparations to leave for the council meeting. He was in an irritable mood. Captain Ulgafem had called him to report that he had no information for him, but he knew how to get it. The problem was that the captain needed Ugurter and his two councilor-officers to vacate naval headquarters.

“Ugurter will report early to the council,” Ulgafem had argued. “Take your second device with you. When I have the information you need, I’ll call you.”

“It’ll be too late by then,” Ojoojaf had argued.

“Suppose Ugurter tells the council things that didn’t happen in the Dobre system,” Ulgafem offered. “Then again, what if he simply leaves out some facts? You could catch him out with what I supply.”

Ulgafem’s scenarios had been designed by Ugurter and his officers. When he’d called Ojoojaf, he followed a script, but he insisted on using his device in private.

That had been a contentious moment.

Ugurter wanted to hear the conversation, but Ulgafem had refused. The captain wanted to make sure that Ojoojaf was positively identified as the buyer by the commander.

Later that morning, the council convened.

Ugurter began his presentation by stating for the record that he'd been sent by the supreme councilor to intervene between the local Utilimat forces and the Freiot palladon.

"Not accurate," Ojoojaf interrupted. "I sent you to ensure that the Utilimat-Freiot defense agreement stayed intact."

"I stand corrected," Ugurter replied in a conciliatory manner.

Just then, the council heard a comms device hum.

"You'll have to excuse me," Ojoojaf said. "I've a family emergency that I'm monitoring."

Councilors offered their condolences, and Ojoojaf nodded his thanks, as he read the message that he'd received. When he was done, he regarded the councilors and said, "No good news, but no bad news. Let's continue."

"After my warship arrived at the Dobrey system, Julien exited the dark behind me. He occupied a tri-hull," Ugurter continued.

"And I suppose you brought this council evidence provided by conclave SADEs," Ojoojaf interrupted again.

"As a matter-of-fact, we have some vids provided by Articus," Ugurter replied.

Ohmjess narrowed her eyes. There was something that didn't make sense. Ugurter appeared tentative, and Ojoojaf seemed overly confident about something he knew.

"I'll wait until you finish, Ugurter," Ojoojaf said. "After which, I'll demolish your entire report. This council will understand the extent to which you're undermining Utilimat dominance of the other races."

Ohmjess watched Ugurter's demeanor change.

"Why wait?" Ugurter queried. "Let's have this out now."

"If you insist," Ojoojaf said, sitting upright and leaning forward with forearms on the table. "I happen to know that the conclave was never at the Dobrey system when you were there."

"How would you know that?" Ugurter demanded. "There are others who'll stand behind every word of my presentation."

"Then they're in league with you, Commander, and, as such, they'll be complicit in falsifying data presented to the council," Ojoojaf retorted.

“I’ve a mind right now to call the officers you’ve arrested to refute your report.”

Ugurter smiled and leaned into his chair, which confused Ojoojaf. The fact that his command officers also evinced satisfied expressions worried him.

The council chambers doors slid aside, and two naval security agents escorted Captain Ulgafem into the room.

A few councilors expected Ojoojaf to strenuously object to the interruption, but he appeared dumbstruck.

Two more agents stepped around the captain and his escorts. They walked to the head of the table and stood on either side of Ojoojaf.

“It’s inside his jacket, upper left side,” Ugurter said.

As the agents searched Ojoojaf’s jacket, he plaintively decried the treatment, which did him no good.

A naval services prosecutor entered the chambers. “Captain Ulgafem, is Supreme Councilor Ojoojaf the buyer of your information?”

“Yes,” Ulgafem replied.

“How did you communicate?” the prosecutor asked.

“Via an unauthorized second device I kept onboard my ship,” Ulgafem admitted.

“When did you last communicate with Councilor Ojoojaf?” the prosecutor continued.

“Moments ago in the corridor in your presence,” Ulgafem responded.

“What did you send the councilor and why?” the prosecutor pressed.

“Councilor Ojoojaf requested I find out why only six ships returned from the Dobrey system when it should have been either one or seven,” Ulgafem explained. “I sent him a message that Commander Ugurter’s report to the council was heavily fabricated. He’d speak about conclave members being present, and they were never there.”

“Do you know this for a fact, Captain Ulgafem?” the prosecutor inquired.

“No, I made it up,” Ulgafem replied. He saw Ojoojaf’s eyes blaze with hatred, and he dearly wanted to be anyplace else but here.

“The councilor’s device, please,” the prosecutor requested, extending a hand.

A female tech appeared beside the prosecutor. When an agent handed the comms device to the prosecutor, he passed it to the tech. She already had Ulgafem’s device, and she examined the pair of them.

Meanwhile, four councilors, who perpetually supported Ojoojaf, remained absolutely silent.

“The message sent from the captain’s device is exactly the one received by the councilor’s unit,” the female tech declared. “Furthermore, the device IDs attached to the message match the two devices in my hand, which belong to Captain Ulgafem and Supreme Councilor Ojoojaf.”

“Thank you,” the prosecutor said.

The tech bagged the devices separately, added evidence tags, and imaged them on her device. Immediately, she exited the chambers.

“Supreme Councilor Ojoojaf, I’m arresting you on charges of suborning a naval officer, by paying credits to him to undermine naval services operations,” the prosecutor pronounced.

“Can’t all of you see that this is entrapment?” Ojoojaf wailed, as the agents lifted him out of his chair. “This is a setup perpetrated by Ugurter to remove me as an impediment to his ambitions.”

Ulgafem stepped away from the passing of Ojoojaf and the agents. Despite his intention to make himself small, he caught Ojoojaf’s harsh stare at him. When it was his turn to leave the chambers, he stayed close to the agents accompanying him.

The council chambers’ doors slid closed, and Ugurter gazed at Ojoojaf’s four supporters. “Questions?” he queried.

Naturally, Ufoodab took the opportunity to demonstrate his fundamental misunderstanding about what had transpired. “Commander, the truth will eventually come out,” he stated firmly.

Ugurter, his command officers, and Ohmjess laughed, which irritated Ufoodab.

“Let me rephrase my query,” Ugurter said. “Any intelligent questions?”

“Was this a onetime thing on Ojoojaf’s part?” a councilor inquired.

“If it had been, we probably would have never caught Ojoojaf,” Ugurter replied. “Financial records indicate that transfers from the councilor to the captain have been taking place for about two annuals.”

“Then the evidence is overwhelming,” another councilor offered. He watched Ugurter and his command officers soberly nod their heads.

“What now?” a third councilor inquired.

“I wish to continue with my presentation,” Ugurter said. “I think it’s critical that the members of this council know what took place in the Dobrey system.”

“But we’ll be deadlocked on every proposal, four against four,” Ufoodab pointed out. “What’s the use of holding a council meeting?”

“Not necessarily,” a former supporter of Ojoojaf said.

“True,” another supporter echoed.

Ufoodab blinked in surprise on hearing Ojoojaf’s supporters desert him.

“Ufoodab, Ojoojaf ruled this council for many annuals using fear to bind the majority,” Ohmjess explained. “From now on, each of us is free to make our decisions on the facts.”

“I would like to hear Ugurter’s presentation,” a supporter said, which was quickly affirmed by others.

Until midday meal, Ugurter, Ohmjess, and the commanding officers detailed the events that had taken place in the Dobrey system. They were continually interrupted by questions, which had much to do with the conclave’s actions. It was a lesson to the presenters about the other councilors’ failure to comprehend the nature of many things conclave.

“Hard to believe that a Utilimat commander would take such drastic actions,” a supporter mused, shaking his head, after the end of the presentation.

“Does this mean that you’re going to recall all Freiot-stationed warships?” Ufoodab inquired.

“They don’t serve any practical purpose,” Ohmjess replied.

“But the income and the prestige,” Ufoodab argued.

“At what cost to the future?” a supporter queried. “You just saw a conclave tri-hull defeat three warships in an incredulously short period of

time. Ugurter argued for Utilimats to build new relationships with the other races, and we failed to listen. I regret that I voted with Ojoojaf against Ugurter's proposal. As Ohmjess said, it's time to think for ourselves."

"I suppose we must find a replacement for Ojoojaf to operate with an uneven number of councilors," Ohmjess said. "Names should be submitted as soon as possible."

"And we need someone to act as supreme councilor until confirmed by a council with nine members," Ugurter said. "I nominate Councilor Ohmjess."

The look on Ohmjess's face confirmed for the four Ojoojaf supporters that she was taken by surprise by the suggestion. Only Ufoodab voted not to appoint Ohmjess.

Reluctantly, Ohmjess rose, thanked the council members for their support, and walked to the end of the conference table to sit in Ojoojaf's chair.

After regarding her colleague's, Ohmjess queried, "Who's going to run out and get me a meal?"

The laughter that followed had Ohmjess smiling. She saw Ugurter tip his head toward her.

After the meeting, Ohmjess left in the company of Ugurter. "That business with Ojoojaf was expertly done," she remarked.

"Perhaps, I should leave you with that impression of me," Ugurter responded. "The truth is that it was anything but that. More than once, the enterprise was in danger of failing."

"Nothing like a little fortune to assist important actions," Ohmjess replied. "It's similar to a tri-hull showing up when you need it."

Ugurter laughed and added, "Especially if Julien and Articus are aboard."

"You're thinking further ahead of the rest of us," Ohmjess said. "What are your near goals?"

Ugurter stopped and gazed at the bright sky. He regarded Ohmjess and replied. "Recall the Freiot-stationed warships. We'll have to find a concept

for their repurposing. Create ambassadorships for each local race and the conclave and presume on Julien to carry us to meet the Quellers.”

“Is that all?” Ohmjess queried, chuckling.

“Well, you didn’t give me a great deal of time to think,” Ugurter responded. When he turned to continue their walk, he felt Ohmjess’s hand tuck companionly into his upper arm. For him, it was a good feeling.

The next cycle, Ugurter met with three captains, Ulkfay, Ojaftah, and Ombay. “Let me introduce the new member of this group,” he began. “Captain Ombay is a commanding officer’s aide, and she’s the reason that an investigation was launched that led to the arrest of Supreme Councilor Ojoojaf.”

“Commander Ugurter is being generous,” Ombay deflected.

Ulkfay and Ojaftah laughed.

“No disrespect to the commander, but he isn’t one to lavish praise indiscriminately,” Ojaftah said. “Well done, whatever it was that you did.”

Ombay tipped her head in appreciation, and the trio regarded Ugurter.

“Nothing significant will happen in the council until a ninth member is recruited,” Ugurter said. “I expect that individual to be a moderate, who will be willing to listen to facts. If we’re fortunate, the votes will support a reorientation of Utilimat attitudes toward the other races. I’ll propose that we establish ambassadorships with the conclave and the local races. Eventually, with Julien’s help, we’ll add the Quellers.”

“Why must we wait for Julien to aid us with the Quellers?” Ombay inquired.

“A SADE informed us that the Queller worlds are on the other side of the space-time continuum at the Yeret world,” Ulkfay explained. “We were warned that the continuum will play havoc with our warship’s crew and systems.”

“Something about the metal hull conducting the anomaly’s energies,” Ojaftah added.

“Dangerous?” Ombay queried.

“Deadly,” Ojaftah responded.

“Let’s put the question of the Quellers aside,” Ugurter urged. “If the concept of ambassadorships is accepted by the council, I wish to be prepared with nominees.”

The three captains heard Ugurter fall silent and regard them.

“Us?” they chorused in a query.

“And here I thought I’d invited some bright young officers to meet with me,” Ugurter teased.

“Is the conclave on the table?” Ojaftah quickly inquired.

“I’m sorry, it’s not,” Ugurter replied. “I’ve someone in mind who I believe is uniquely qualified.”

Ojaftah smiled and asked nonchalantly, “Does the councilor know you’re considering her for the position?”

“Perceptive of you, Captain,” Ugurter replied. “I’ll expect you to keep that thought to yourself.”

“Yes, Commander,” Ojaftah quickly responded.

“Have you considered which of us should be paired with which race?” Ulkfay asked.

“It really doesn’t matter,” Ugurter replied. “You’ll serve for one Utilimat annual. After which, you’ll rotate. In the first annual, you’ll put a support group in place. When you transfer, they’ll be left behind as a convenience to the new ambassador.”

“I’ve no experience with the other races,” Ombay pointed out.

“Which is why I have the Monkfreds in mind for you, Captain,” Ugurter said.

“The monstrous beasts?” Ombay queried fearfully, but she heard the others laugh.

“It was before your time, Captain,” Ugurter gently explained. “But one grazer, a professor, taught classes at our university. The rider, Testora, was always present to share the professor’s thoughts.”

“The grazers are big, but they’re wonderfully gentle,” Ojaftah enthused.

“In that case, I’ll take them,” Ombay quickly volunteered.

Ulkfay regarded Ojaftah. “Yerets or Freiots?”

“I’ll start with the Freiots, thank you,” Ojaftah replied.

“Then I have the Yerets for the first annual,” Ulkfay replied.

The three captains regarded Ugurter, as if they'd settled the questions.

"Anyone hungry?" Ugurter inquired, as he rose with a contented expression.

My Books

Imperium's Demise is the fourteenth and final novel in [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.

The Silver Ships Series

The Silver Ships

Libre

Méridien

Haraken

Sol

Espero

Allora

Celus-5

Omnia

Vinium

Nua'll

Artifice

Sojourn

Alliance

SADEs

Earthers

Talus

Elvians

Q-Gates

Conclave

Pyreans Series

Empaths

Messinants
Jatouche
Veklocks

Gate Ghosts Series

Axis Crossing
Clone Crisis
Race Rivalry
Vortex Incursion
Dual Domains
Alien Intrigue
Deadly Gambits
Allied Enemies
Chaotic Futures
Empire Turmoil
Perilous Choices
Dubious Risks
Fatal Flaws
Imperium's Demise

Cercians Series

Clash of Wills (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.