

# DUBIOUS RISKS

Gate Ghosts Book 12

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S. H. JUCHA

*Chapters 1 & 2  
Excerpt*

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

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

## Glossary

A glossary is located at the end of the book.



# Contents

1: Welcome to Darmian .....	1
2: A Challenging Task .....	12
3: Dimitri's Offer .....	24
4: Managers' Reports .....	40
5: Executors Collide .....	54
6: First Opportunity .....	65
7: Dastral Disguises .....	80
8: Breakout.....	92
9: Race to Capture.....	108
10: Take Balgrade.....	123
11: Multiple Challenges.....	141
12: What Now? .....	153
13: Radag Reeducation .....	167
14: Avatar Choices.....	181
15: Covert Action .....	196
16: Hidden Forges.....	209
17: Wymron's Journeys .....	222
18: Eye-Opening Visit .....	237
19: Ugly Reception.....	250
20: Can't Live without Them .....	264
21: Fillery's Impasse.....	276
22: More Turmoil .....	292
23: Sabotage .....	307
24: Truth Be Known .....	322
25: Palladon .....	338
26: New Relations .....	352
27: Tarbar's Advice.....	367
28: Independent Agent .....	378
29: Citizens' Broadcasts .....	390
30: Assassins .....	399
Glossary.....	417
My Books.....	423

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The Author ..... 425

# 1: Welcome to Darmian

## RADAG HOME WORLD

### RADAGUL SYSTEM

The Imperium refugees, Executor Grageth, Commanders Deckus and Gretren, and Imperium Engineer Ragirt, sat at the Trident captain's salon conference table, while Miranda, Z, Nebulon, and Fordark stood behind them.

In the meantime, the families of the Krackus at the table were entertained by the crew. Some of the youngsters were enjoying the adventure of a lifetime. They'd yet to comprehend the huge changes yet to come in their lives.

After rescuing Fordark from his distributed servers and the Krackus families, the Trident had cleared the Paltur system and entered the dark.

"Where are we headed?" Gretren inquired.

"We're returning to Darmian," Miranda said evenly. Then Z, Nebulon, Fordark, and she waited for the fallout.

However, rather than argue, Deckus, Gretren, and Ragirt were dumbfounded.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," Grageth said encouragingly. "I was there with Admiral Cordelia. Admittedly, I didn't land on the planet, but the conclave has made enormous changes in the Radag social system."

"Our families are with us," Deckus squawked. "Are we supposed to live out our annuals aboard ship because we can't land on the planet?"

"Who says you can't live on the planet?" Miranda inquired.

"The Radags are there," Deckus replied pointedly, as if it was obvious.

"Do you think all Krackus are clones of one another, having the same personalities?" Miranda asked.

“I don’t understand the question,” Deckus responded.

“Miranda is inquiring if you think there are differences among Krackus citizens,” Fordark explained.

“Of course there are,” Deckus replied.

“Yet, you think all Radags must be the same,” Fordark pointed out. “Isn’t it possible that you’re operating under a false assumption?”

Gretren laid a hand on Deckus’s forearm, knowing the senior commander was suffering from stimulant withdrawal. “We’d like to learn what the conclave has managed to achieve on Darmian,” he requested.

For nearly two hours, Miranda, Z, and Nebulon educated the Krackus on the events that took place on the Radag planet since their arrival.

By the time the protectors and the sister finished their presentation, the Krackus, including Grageth, were in awe.

“What’s your final goal?” Ragirt managed to ask.

“Rehabilitation of the Radag race,” Z quickly replied. “Admittedly, it’ll probably take two or three generations to thoroughly eliminate the warrior mentality. Essentially, we’re returning Radag society to its starting point. This would be before the Krackus found them. Our technological uplift should ensure the maintenance of a healthier social attitude.”

The length of the conclave’s commitment to the Radags convinced the Krackus that they had a limited view of the future. They thought in annuals, and the conclave, especially the SADEs, thought in generations.

“Other than inhabiting two cities, have Radags participated in programs which you’d say proved they were on a more peaceful path?” Gretren inquired.

The question generated another presentation, during which the Krackus learned about the medical rehabilitation of the scarred matriarchs and young and the adoption of implants.

“Radags have implants?” Grageth queried in surprise, his desire showing.

“How else were the matriarchs supposed to activate the mini-minelettes before they tossed them on raiders?” Z returned.



“Obviously, that was done in the past,” Miranda interjected. “But it does indicate a use of our tech. You might be interested in the efforts of Commander Dahjist.”

Then Nebulon detailed the many projects that Dahjist, other Radags, and the sisters were completing for the farmers.

“It’s odd that the Radag agrarian members never adopted the warrior mentality,” Ragirt said.

“They probably didn’t, because they were concerned about their crops and orchards,” Nebulon replied. “The farmers wanted nothing to do with the warriors and their competitive attitudes.”

“Are the attacks still frequent?” Deckus asked.

“Apologies for frightening you with my example of Radag implant use,” Z said, to prevent another remonstrance from his partner. “We’ve almost six thousand suited conclave members searching Darmian for any and all weapons. The commanders and warriors who still resist, and they’re plentiful, are spending their time hiding what few weapons they’ve left. They’ve no time to plan attacks, and we intend to keep it that way.”

“The sisters were of great help freeing Fordark,” Gretren said, gesturing toward Nebulon. “Who are you, and why are you called sisters?”

Nebulon presented a brief history of the sisters after arriving in Axis Crossing worlds. She deemed the history of their origination and the intervening centuries to be too much information for now.

“Then you started as clones,” Ragirt surmised.

“We did,” Nebulon replied. “However, as we aren’t a collective, we were individually influenced by the conclave’s actions, the SADEs, and the biologicals we met.”

“Consider my circumstances,” Fordark interjected. “I originated as a clone of an Imperium governor template. I’m installed and continue as a machine until events propel me into sentience. Now I stand before you, inhabiting a New Terran avatar. When a digital entity achieves sentience, development is much more about environment.”

“On that thought, how would you characterize Janus and her kind?” Grageth inquired.

“Unknown,” Fordark returned. “I know of the things that they’ve done, but until I speak with Janus, I can’t give you an answer to your question. Then again, I wouldn’t be the best judge of digital sentients’ emotional progress. You’ve two SADEs and a sister standing with us who are infinitely better suited to doing that than me.”

“These history lessons are nice, but I wonder if it wouldn’t be better for us and our families to seek a safer place to set down rather than on Darmian,” Deckus offered.

“Where would you suggest, Commander?” Nebulon queried. “Would you want a remote Krackus world, where you’d be immediately arrested? Or how about a suborned world? Of course, you and your family would need disguises to prevent being recognized by the inhabitants, who would surely like to make you pay for the loss of their loved ones to Imperium.”

Deckus waved away Nebulon’s extended query. His skin felt like it was crawling, and his mouth was parched. When he started shaking, Nebulon scooped him up and made for the Trident’s medical suite.

“How long was Deckus using stimulants?” Miranda inquired.

“We say stimulants, but the chemistry has myriad variations,” Ragirt replied. “He hasn’t replied to our queries for almost a quarter. I imagine he started before that.”

“Will he be all right?” Gretren asked.

“We haven’t much experience with these types of medical conditions,” Z admitted. Then he gazed at Fordark, who tipped his head, and left for the medical suite.

“Deckus is worried about our safety on Darmian. Should we be concerned?” Gretren inquired.

“The point that Nebulon was starting to make was that as Imperium refugees, you’ve little choice,” Miranda replied. “You could be delivered to an entirely different area of space, but we believe that defeats your future purposes.”

Grageh, Gretren, and Ragirt glanced quickly at one another.

“Do you intend to train us to return to Imperium?” Ragirt queried.

“Any conclave tech you acquire would help you,” Miranda said. “However, that’s not what we intend for you. You lack perspective. You could gain that on Darmian.”

“By being housed with Radags?” Gretren asked dubiously.

Z held a hand to his forehead, imitating Mickey Brandon when he was vexed by an engineering problem.

The Krackus were both amused by the familiar biological gesture and concerned that Z appeared exasperated with them.

“My partner believes that your worry about safety has clouded your understanding about the circumstances on Darmian,” Miranda said. “How would you characterize the Radags who live in Stratagul, the first city erected?”

The Krackus weren’t prepared to guess, but the protectors stood waiting silently. Knowing that the SADEs were capable of maintaining those positions for as long as they wished, Gretren, Ragirt, and Grageth quickly conferenced.

Surprisingly, it was Grageth who proposed a response that the other Krackus accepted.

“Protectors, we believe that you wish us to perceive the Radags in Stratagul as refugees like us,” Grageth said. “Furthermore, that would mean the Radags in Baft Namus, who are commanders and warriors, are in transition.”

“That would be correct,” Miranda replied. Then Z and she were silent again.

So, the Krackus resumed their conference.

“What perspectives are we expected to gain?” Ragirt asked.

“And for what purpose?” Gretren added.

For individuals used to being constantly directed throughout their lives, it was a challenge for them to consider how they should act if they had control of their futures.

“The conclave wants Imperium to stand down,” Grageth pointed out. “If that were to happen, what roles could we play?”

“We could assist in redirecting Krackus society,” Gretren replied. “That would mean we’d have to act with conclave tenets in mind.”

“Which we haven’t fully adopted,” Ragirt reasoned. “Living among the Stratagul refugees would help us understand what the Imperium has done to Radag society.”

Grageth turned toward the protectors. “Is that some of the perspective that you hope we’ll achieve?”

“It’s not something that you can seek out like a pebble under your foot,” Miranda replied. “Either you’ll come to understand the suffering many Radags have endured, or you won’t. That’s up to each one of you.”

“Your young are hungry,” Z pointed out. “You should join the families to eat.”

Gretren and Ragirt quickly rose.

When Grageth hesitated, Gretren placed a hand on his shoulder and said, “Deckus’s mate and fledglings will be worried about him. You could help placate their worries.”

Grageth nodded dutifully and joined his companions.

The Krackus families had the small meal room to themselves.

The crew was cautioned by Miranda to leave them alone.

“Where is Deckus?” his mate queried Gretren.

“Deckus appeared close to collapse, and he was taken to medical,” Gretren replied.

Deckus’s mate eyed her young. Obviously, she was conflicted whether to leave them to check on Deckus.

“There is no better medical technology than that possessed by the conclave,” Grageth soothed. “Also, Fordark is with him offering his knowledge.” With the young listening, he was careful not to mention Deckus’s stimulant abuse.

The mate looked anxiously at Gretren and Ragirt, who nodded affirmatively. After that, she went about ensuring her fledglings ate. It was an unnecessary concern. The young were starved from their play with the crew, especially the sisters and the suits.

When the fledglings and the matriarchs finished their meals, they left the males to speak.

Ragirt focused on Grageth. “What do you think about this transfer to Darmian?” he asked.

“I don’t think about it as dropping planetside to be among the Radags,” Grageth replied. “I choose to adopt the protectors’ positioning. The Stratagul citizens are refugees too. We’ve something in common.”

“Except that Radags hate Krackus,” Ragirt pointed out.

“I would say that, as a generalization, that’s probably true,” Grageth replied. “But then, I would ask why we’re here.”

“I don’t understand,” Ragirt returned.

“Our own race, in the form of our leaders, was about to arrest and prosecute us,” Grageth replied. “Why did you choose to run?”

“You know why. Why this line of questioning?” Ragirt shot back.

Gretren held out his hands to quiet the pair. “We’re the only Krackus in this system. Best that we don’t fall out with one another,” he said. “Rather than questions, Grageth. How about you tell us what you’re thinking?”

“Apologies, Ragirt,” Grageth said. “I’m here without family, and I’ve failed to realize that you must be worried for your mate and fledglings. I’m only trying to make the point that the planet might be Darmian, but it’s not wholly Radag.”

“Meaning what?” Gretren pressed.

“Look who else is involved in the protectors’ actions,” Grageth urged. “Stratagul is full of matriarchs and young who’ve been injured by warriors. The SADEs say that they’ve nearly six thousand troops hunting weapons. The sisters work with the new cities, Radag commanders, and farmers. Stratagul sounds like a safe place to me. I think if you asked Fordark you’d find that he’ll remain with us.”

“But for how long?” Ragirt asked.

Grageth gurgled, which he immediately stopped when he saw Ragirt’s vexed expression. “Apologies again, Ragirt. Fordark is now a SADE,” he said. Then he waited for the engineer to think it through.

“It’s I who should apologize,” Ragirt said sincerely. “Fordark will never count annuals like us. Also, we’re not exiled here for life.”

“I think we’ve got to adjust our attitudes,” Gretren cautioned. “If we’re nervous about dropping planetside and living among the Radags, then our mates and fledglings will pick up on that.”

“In that regard, we’ve a challenge,” Ragirt warned. “Our fledglings have grown up with nothing but warnings about Radags. Then too, our mates will certainly be hard to convince that everything will be fine.”

Gretren and Ragirt noted that Grageth’s crest was fully raised.

“You might as well tell us, Grageth,” Gretren suggested.

“I can appreciate your concerns,” Grageth replied. “But you continue to fail to take the most important factor about our circumstances into your thinking.”

“Which is what?” Ragirt queried.

“SADEs and sisters,” Grageth responded almost triumphantly.

“They can’t be everywhere at all times,” Gretren said.

Grageth shook his head in lament. “It’s probably all the time I spent with Janus and Fordark that I’ve come to realize something crucially different between digital sentients and the likes of us,” he said. “They can think of so many options to an action in the time it takes us to breathe. Furthermore, digital sentients are adherents of the conclave’s tenets. That means they’re concerned about your welfare and that of your families.”

Ragirt opened his beak to speak, but Grageth had held up a hand.

“All of us know that the conclave will find a way to succeed in its efforts against the Imperium Empire, and it will be with a minimum of brute force,” Grageth pointed out. “They’ve already told us that they want us to be ready to help the Imperium reform. Do you think they haven’t been planning how to help us succeed? As for me, I can’t imagine how many scenarios they’ve considered to ensure that our opportunity is maximized.”

Then Grageth did gurgle.

“What?” Gretren asked.

“Fordark has joined the SADEs and the sisters,” Grageth replied. “He’s now part of their communing, meaning he’s devising the methods by which we can be supported.”

Gretren and Ragirt regarded Grageth with new respect.

“Then that’s what we’ll communicate to our families,” Ragirt said determinedly. “We’ll tell them this is an important opportunity to learn how we can reform Imperium, and Stratagul city is full of those who will help us.”

Grageth nodded encouragingly.

“We should give up the dining room,” Gretren said. “I’ve seen multiple crew members stick their heads through the hatchway.”

“So, Ragirt, are you going to get an implant with me?” Grageth said, as they exited the meal room.

“Ask me in about ten cycles from now,” Ragirt replied. “I want to deal with our new accommodations first.”

A decision was made among the Krackus to remain aboard the Trident until Deckus recovered. That lasted five cycles.

The families were enjoying morning meal when Deckus walked into the small dining room. His mate and fledglings leapt to greet him.

“You look well,” Gretren remarked, his brow furrowing. “In fact, you look healthier than you have in many annuals.”

“I was told that the medical team decided my body had taken too heavy a toll,” Deckus explained, careful not to mention his stimulant addiction. “They told me that I was placed in a Jatouche tank, which rehabilitated my body.”

“Rehabilitated?” Ragirt queried.

“They explained about my genetic code, and that they could use it to regenerate cellular structure,” Deckus replied, shrugging his shoulders. “I translate that as rehabilitation.”

“Well, you look great,” Deckus’s mate declared happily.

“And I feel good too,” Deckus replied, nuzzling beak to beak. “So, what have I missed?”

While everyone ate, Gretren, Ragirt, and Grageth took the opportunity to educate Deckus and the family members about their destination — the Darmian city of Stratagul. They did their best to handle the objections of Deckus and the matriarchs. Some of the older fledglings sat quietly, concern displayed in their orbs. However, the youngest fledglings thought of descending to inhabit a different planet as a new adventure.

“And we’re being offered no other destination?” Deckus asked.

“We asked the protectors many of the same questions that you’re asking us, Deckus,” Gretren said. “There’s no safe place, save for one, anywhere in

the empire where we can be protected every moment of the cycle. According to the protectors, that one place is in Stratagul city.”

Deckus and the matriarchs continued to offer alternatives to landing on Darmian, and finally, Gretren and Ragirt chose to be quiet.

“I know I don’t have family here. So, I can understand if you don’t value my suggestion,” Grageth said. “But I think you might want to visit Stratagul before you discount it as a suitable place. The protectors stressed several times that we need a new perspective.”

“Why?” Deckus queried.

“It’s for when we return to Imperium and work to reform the system from within,” Grageth replied. “After what all of us have seen, I think Imperium will succumb sooner than later to conclave pressure. That means individuals such as us will need to ensure the Krackus populations don’t descend into chaos.”

“Is the empire in trouble from these individuals?” a teenager asked his patriarch, Gretren.

Gretren looked like a Krackus in dire need of an escape hatch. To his credit, he decided it was time to talk honestly to his matriarch and his fledglings. “The empire has been mistreating other races,” he replied. “The conclave members, who are aboard this ship, insist that the empire mustn’t behave this way anymore.”

“Why are we being mean to other races?” a young female fledgling inquired.

“We shouldn’t focus on what was done but how to repair the hurt the empire has caused,” Gretren replied.

“What’s the real reason that we had to leave Imperium?” another teenager asked. He was Ragirt’s fledgling.

Deckus, Gretren, and Ragirt appeared at a loss for words, and their family members stared expectantly at them.

“Much of this is my fault,” Grageth said. “As an executor, there were many things that I did for my benefit and not for Krackus citizens. The other executors behaved the same way. When the conclave arrived, we failed to take the conclave seriously. In attempting to change my ways, your patriarchs became involved. In time, the assembly would have found



out what we'd done, and we would be punished by Imperium decree. Your patriarchs feared that the executors would find ways to injure you too."

Ragirt saw the anger grow in the matriarchs' and the fledglings' orbs as they regarded Grageth, and he chose to mitigate their emotions. "Much of what Executor Grageth has told you is true," he said. "But understand this. No one forced any of us to take the actions that we did. Each step was our choice, and I, for one, don't regret it."

"Ragirt is right," Deckus added. "We made the decisions, because we believe Imperium has been wrong and has to change. Otherwise, many Krackus will suffer."

"They'll suffer because of the invaders," a teenager declared.

Deckus sadly regarded his teenager. The male fledgling's opinion was due to the secrets that the executors had kept from the population. "Hear me well, my young one," Deckus said gently. "We've been the invaders. Krackus have overtaken thousands of races, and we've done it brutally. That has to change. The conclave is forcing the empire to accept what it's done to other races, and the patriarchs you see seated here are willing to help the conclave reform the empire."

The teenager fumed, and Deckus could see that the thought of putting his beloved empire in a bad light wasn't sitting well with him.

"Grageth, I think your idea of visiting Stratagul before we continue with any discussions is a good one," Deckus announced. The family discussions had just taught him something important. It wasn't only the patriarchs who needed fresh perspectives.

## 2: A Challenging Task

When the protectors learned of the families' impending visit to Stratagul, they organized a meeting. The pair maintained a house in which to conduct conferences.

Gurderg, Isghert, and Pratherg made their way to the protectors' home after evening meal.

<Unique circumstances,> Isghert shared with her companions.

<It must have to do with the hasty exit from Darmian of the protectors, Nebulon, the suits, and some sisters about twelve cycles ago,> Pratherg said.

<A sister shared that they sailed to Imperium,> Gurderg added. <She said it was a rescue.>

<Who would they be rescuing from the Krackus home world?> Isghert inquired.

<And how does it involve us?> Pratherg queried.

There wasn't an opportunity to respond. They stood at the protectors' door, and Z swung it open.

When Z gestured to the matriarchs to enter with a regal bow and a sweep of his arm, Gurderg and her friends chortled. Each of them patted Z's arm as they passed.

Before the door closed, Nebulon slid into view. Then she shifted into a human gait to enter the house.

<We've an important task for the three of you,> Miranda began, addressing the matriarchs.

<By important, do you mean difficult?> Pratherg interjected.

Miranda laughed lightly. <That too,> she shared. <We've returned from Imperium where we rescued the Imperium governor who has become sentient.>

<The Krackus made another one?> Isghert queried in surprise.

<Actually, we believe that the governor, who is called Fordark, probably gave rise to Janus and her kind,> Nebulon explained. <Fordark came to sentience soon afterward.>

<But something happened while you were there,> Gurderg surmised. <That's why you need our help.>

<Perceptive, as always,> Z remarked.

<Flatterer,> Gurderg returned, flashing her rows of sharp teeth.

<You're right, Gurderg,> Miranda continued. <We do need your help, and this won't be simple. We're about to land some important Krackus patriarchs with their families to live in Stratagul.>

The three matriarchs stared at Miranda, as if her kernel was destabilized.

Gurderg urgently sent to her friends, <We must hear this. The protectors need our help, and there is no pair who deserves it more.> Calmly, she shared with the group, <We're listening.>

<Aboard our Trident are an executor, two fleet commanders, and an Imperium engineer,> Miranda sent. <Except for the executor, the other three will be landing with matriarchs and fledglings.>

<Why are the patriarchs here?> Isghert inquired.

<These are important Krackus who tried to tell the executors that they should alter their present course and meet with the conclave leaders,> Miranda explained.

<They risked their lives to help us achieve our goal,> Z added. <While we were on Imperium, we discovered that investigations were underway to uncover the individuals who were considered traitors.>

<So, their own race would persecute them, much as we've suffered at the hands of warriors,> Pratherg offered.

<Just so,> Z responded. <If the patriarchs chose to flee with us, it was suggested that the executors would take their frustrations out on the families.>

<The young often suffer at the hands of the powerful,> Gurderg commented, which elicited soft growls from her friends. All three matriarchs and their young had felt the blunt claws of warriors. Often, the

abuse was from their mates. Among them, two young hadn't made it to their teenage annuals.

<I seek the answer to my question,> Isghert reminded the protectors.

<The empire is a huge and complex structure, heavily dependent on supplies from the suborned races,> Z shared. <If the conclave was to be heavy-handed in its approach to the empire, the populations of the Krackus and the conquered races would suffer. Consider what it has taken to transform this society. Imagine the effort that it would take to manage that across thousands of worlds.>

<You're preparing for the time when the assembly succumbs to your pressure,> Pratherg sent excitedly.

<We are,> Nebulon acknowledged. <These Krackus are just the beginning of those who might find their way here in preparation for their return.>

<You intimate that these patriarchs aren't ready to help now,> Gurderg proffered. <What do they think of living in Stratagul?>

<They're confused and frightened,> Miranda replied, <except for, perhaps, the youngest fledglings.>

<Our deadly warrior reputation precedes us,> Isghert commented. <This situation seems similar to Dahjist's efforts with the returning warriors. The details might be different, but you appear to need our help guiding their thinking.>

<And there you have it,> Nebulon sent, as she grinned broadly at the matriarchs.

<Any suggestions?> Pratherg asked.

<Be yourselves,> Miranda quickly replied. <You're the best of the Stratagul residents. If you can't influence their thinking, then we think there's no hope for them.>

<No pressure,> Gurderg remarked tongue in cheek. <When do they arrive?>

<They plan to visit tomorrow,> Z replied.

<Visit?> Isghert queried.

<There's isn't another world suited to their long-term residency,> Miranda replied. <But we want them to feel as if they made the decision to stay.>

<If you'll excuse us, we must think on this and prepare,> Gurderg sent, rising. Swiftly, the three matriarchs exited the protectors' house.

<This is an impossible task for the three of us,> Isghert shared with her friends.

Gurderg hesitated to answer. She was unsure of Isghert's mindset.

<Why is it impossible?> Pratherg inquired.

<An executor, two commanders, an Imperium engineer, and families,> Isghert enumerated. <We can't be involved with them every waking moment. We need help.>

Gurderg stopped and hugged Isghert.

<What was that for?> Isghert inquired, not that she didn't enjoy her friend's affectionate embraces.

<I agree with you. We need help. Where should we start?> Gurderg replied.

Isghert suddenly realized how Gurderg had taken her first thought, and she snorted and bared her sharp teeth in a grin.

<Initially, we must consider them as one group, then two groups, and finally three groups,> Pratherg explained. In response to her friends' furrowed brows, she sent, <We treat the entire complement as one, and we make them comfortable with us and our helpers.>

<Then we separate the patriarchs from their families to make two groups,> Isghert shared excitedly.

<When ready, we engage the young, their fledglings with our young. Let them play together under watchful eyes,> Gurderg finished.

The matriarchs were satisfied that they had a workable plan. Immediately, they proposed lists of potential candidates to one another. When a final list was accepted, they headed for the first house.

The following morning, Fordark accompanied the Krackus families, as their traveler headed for Stratagul.

Following Gurderg's request, the traveler dropped outside the city's inner walls.

When the cargo traveler landed and the rear ramp lowered, Fordark led the Krackus off the ship. The aft end had pointed away from the city, allowing the Krackus to observe the rows of mature crops.

“The air smells nice,” a female teenager commented. “It’s not like our cities.”

“The residents grow most of their food,” Fordark responded, using the information supplied via his link with the protectors and Nebulon.

When the families rounded the traveler’s aft end, they regarded the shining curved walls. Many of the family members glanced at the traveler’s hull and again at the walls.

“You can tell who built the city,” Deckus’s older teenager commented. “Of course, it might turn out to be our prison.”

Fordark turned and stared at the teenager, who refused to be cowed. “Radags, sisters, and suits died to protect this city from the hordes of commanders and warriors who continually attacked it,” he said. “Your lack of reverence for their sacrifices is a deep insult to their memory.”

When Fordark turned away, the youth muttered, “Bot.”

“Return to the ship,” Deckus ordered his fledgling. “You don’t deserve to accompany us.”

The teenager’s orbs burned with hatred for being reprimanded by Fordark and now his own patriarch. The following test of wills ended with the teenager turning and stomping petulantly toward the traveler.

Deckus could see that his mate was torn between remaining with the group and joining her fledgling.

“We’re guests here,” Deckus said firmly. “We’ve little information about the history of this place. If individuals have died in defense of the Stratagul residents, then that must be respected.”

“Well said,” Gretren remarked, which did much to inform the matriarchs and the fledglings of the attitude that should be adopted.

Stratagul’s massive gates slid open, and a host of individuals, led by the protectors and Nebulon, walked through to meet the Krackus families.

“We know you regard conclave members with dubiousness,” Miranda said. “That’s why you’ll rarely encounter Z or me during your visit.

Instead, your hosts will be Radags and sisters. Ask them any questions you choose.”

Two sisters left the group and headed for the traveler. When they disappeared from sight, the ship lifted.

“My fledgling is aboard,” Deckus’s mate said anxiously.

“And he’s in good hands,” Nebulon returned. “Your teenager will continue to be a disruptive influence until he understands the history of this planet. The sisters will teach him and demonstrate what we’ve encountered.”

“That last part sounds dangerous,” the matriarch objected.

“You imply that we’re not aware of the importance of your young male to Commander Deckus and you,” Nebulon said. “Miranda and Z, I think some of these Krackus have closed minds. Perhaps, it would be better to return them to their home world.”

“You know that isn’t possible,” Ragirt replied heatedly. “Stop threatening us.”

On cue, Miranda, Z, and Nebulon stepped aside, urged by Gurderg’s waving hands.

“Enough of this kind of discourse,” Gurderg said in excellent Krackus. “The individuals behind me are your hosts. Please come this way.”

Taking the opportunity to leave the rancor behind, the Krackus patriarchs quickly led the families through the gates into Stratagul’s enormous plaza, which no longer served as a major landing pad. Now trees, surrounded by low walls, dotted the plaza.

Radag young played around the trees, and matriarchs kept watch while seated on the walls.

The first thing that the Krackus families noticed was that they drew only quick glances from the Radags.

“Why aren’t we attracting attention?” Gretren inquired. “We abused the Radag population by using them as mercenaries.”

“Two reasons,” Pratherg returned. “We’re a unique portion of the population who wants to see our society change. Our walls have aided us in resisting numerous attacks by warriors who wanted our deaths. The other

reason is that you're just another race to us. Stratagul has seen SADEs, sisters, humans, Sylians, Dischnya, Norsitchians, and many others."

"Our residents don't really care how you look," Isghert remarked. "We're more concerned with how you think. If you're filled with hate and xenophobia, your presence isn't desired."

"Commander Gretren, did you think you were the first Krackus to visit our enclave and Stratagul?" Gurderg inquired.

The Krackus patriarchs exchanged surprised expressions, which quickly transformed to fully risen crests.

"Korvath," Grageth exclaimed.

"He was Stratagul residents' first opportunity to meet a Krackus," Gurderg replied. "That small one displayed more courage than any warrior. It's hoped that you can demonstrate the same commitment to the peace and well-being of Radags as he did."

The tour lasted until the energies of the shorter and less athletic Krackus flagged. By then, Fordark's New Terran avatar was carrying five of the youngest on his arms.

Then the group stopped for refreshments and an early meal. They dined in a large common area where tables and chairs had been set up for them. Many Radag matriarchs ensured that everyone was well-served.

"So, how much are you frightened by us?" Pregfert inquired. She was Gurderg's youngest.

As Pregfert had gazed up and down the table, none of the Krackus was sure whom she addressed.

"You don't frighten me," a young fledgling of about seven annuals replied. "But I'd like to play with Radags my own age. I don't like this touring."

Many Radag matriarchs eyed the Krackus mates and waited for their comments.

"Maybe later," Ragirt's mate said to her fledgling.

"Why not now?" the fledgling inquired.

"When the tour is finished," the matriarch replied. "It would be rude to our hosts to leave before they finished."



“My apologies,” Gurderg said sincerely. “We’re done with the tour. It was our thought that the patriarchs would like to speak to us separately. We’d anticipated that the mates and their fledglings would like to learn about our daily lives. Your first stop would be our schools.”

“I want to see the schools,” a male teenager said excitedly. “What kind of classes do you teach?”

“I think, at this point, separating into two groups would serve everyone’s purpose,” Deckus offered, and Gretren and Ragirt agreed.

Grageth remained quiet.

Reluctantly, the Krackus mates collected their fledglings and followed a collection of Radag matriarchs, teenage youths, and many youngsters.

As this group walked toward a compound, the adults heard the young of two races walking and talking in the Krackus language. Mostly, the Krackus young were pointing, and the Radag youths were identifying the objects in the Radag language.

In the first class visited, the Krackus were surprised to see young Radags of about five and six annuals working on display panels that projected three-dimensional imagery in front of them.

“Courtesy of the conclave,” Gurderg whispered, so as not to disturb the young ones.

“Do you teach history?” Deckus’s mate asked. “If so, whose history do you teach?”

“According to the records I’ve researched,” Fordark said, “three histories are taught ... Radag, the empire, and the conclave.”

“Who designed the Imperium’s history?” the mate inquired.

“Kreus,” Fordark replied. “There’s no more accurate historian than him.”

“Who’s Kreuz?” a teenager asked.

“Come,” Fordark invited, and the group stepped into the corridor with him. From his palm, he projected the image of Kreuz. “Did you know that you can manipulate this image?” he asked the teenager, who shook his head. “Try using your fingers.”

It took the teenager a few tries to understand the methodology. In the end, he finished by enlarging the image to focus on the face. “Why does he look like that?” the Krackus youth asked.

“Miranda designed that for him,” Fordark replied. “As the Imperium governor before me, he cared for the Helgart residents for many centuries. His face reflects the many races he knew.”

“Who are the Helgart residents?” the youth queried.

Fordark looked at the mates, who imperceptibly shook their heads. “If you attend a Stratagul school, you’ll find out about Kreuz and the Helgart residents.”

The teenager caught the horrified expressions on the Krackus matriarchs. “More secrets,” he muttered. When he looked at Fordark, the new SADE reluctantly nodded in the affirmative.

The more the school was visited, the more excited the fledglings grew. Their Imperium classes were rigid, with the teacher controlling every step of their education. Here, the Radag youths were learning at their own rate and assisted by sisters when they had questions.

Then the Krackus received a shock at the final classroom, where older teenagers had the same display equipment, but they weren’t touching anything.

“These young are implanted,” Pregfert said proudly, “as I am.”

“Is that mandatory?” a Krackus mate asked. Her orbs were wide, and she appeared horrified.

“It’s necessary to strap them down before the surgery, but when it’s done, they’re docile and under the conclave’s full control,” Pregfert remarked.

“Pregfert,” Gurderg remonstrated her youngster.

“Listen to these questions,” Pregfert protested. “They think of the conclave and us as monsters. Stratagul residents took no part in suborning other races and eliminating any local residents who resisted.”

“That’s enough, Pregfert,” Gurderg said sternly.

“More secrets?” the teenager who’d queried Fordark asked.

Pregfert kept her head down, but she tipped her muzzle twice.

“It sounds like I’ve been taking the wrong classes,” the teenager commented. Looking at his matriarch, he added, “If my patriarch doesn’t choose Stratagul, I’ll request permission to stay.”

Gretren’s mate stared at her fledgling. She couldn’t think of what to say. Worse, glances at the other fledglings revealed that they were in favor of staying. It was the inevitable result of the young discovering that their parents had hidden the truth from them.

Gurderg did her best to salvage the matriarchs and the fledglings’ tour.

<Don’t fret,> Pratherg sent privately to Gurderg. <We had no way of knowing how this cycle would unfold. As the teenagers seem to have found something they like, we should see what can be done for the youngsters.>

Gurderg thought that it was an opportunity worth pursuing, and they headed for a large playing field.

A game was underway, and while it was fascinating to watch, the Krackus realized that their fledglings could never compete with the youthful Radags, who were taller and stronger.

“Walk this way,” Gurderg encouraged.

At a nearby field, there were myriad constructions that allowed the youngsters to explore.

Without waiting for permission, both the Radag and the Krackus little ones raced to join the other young.

The matriarchs hesitated. Their teenagers still stood beside them. However, they took solace in watching sisters and Radag matriarchs hurry after the young Krackus.

As the evening closed, the groups rendezvoused and were taken to the protectors’ house.

Soon after arriving, a sister escorted Deckus’s obstinate fledgling into the salon.

Deckus eyed his fledgling and prevented his mate from jumping out of her chair to embrace him. “How was your time with the sisters?” he asked.

“Scary,” the youth replied quietly.

“Are you hurt?” the matriarch inquired nervously.

Deckus regarded her. His silent expression told her not to interfere with the conversation.

“Why was it scary?” Deckus asked.

“I observed a group of aliens —” the teenager began.

“Sylians,” Nebulon interjected.

“Yes, Sylians,” the youth continued. “They raided a house, and I had a view of the encounter via a sister’s holo-vid. The Sylians wanted the Radags’ weapons. The warriors refused and fighting broke out.”

“How many were killed?” an older youth asked, which frightened the adults.

“No one was killed,” the teenager replied. “There wasn’t even much blood. The Sylians wore colorful suits that allowed them to move amazingly fast. They subdued the warriors, searched the house, confiscated every weapon, and left. That was it.”

“What did you learn about the warriors?” Deckus asked.

The teenager ducked his head. He could see that orbs and eyes were on him, waiting for his answer. “The sisters said that the kind of warriors I witnessed multiple times were the kind that Imperium employed on the worlds that Krackus conquered. They were hired to keep the local inhabitants in line.”

“And how did they do that?” Deckus pressed.

Tears began to run from the teenager’s orbs. “The warriors did all manner of things to the locals, including killing them.” Then the teenager wiped his tears, and he stared angrily at the adults. “Why didn’t we learn about this from you or from our teachers?” he demanded.

“Because we were afraid,” Deckus replied. “The history of the Imperium Empire is an ugly one, and we thought to shield you from it until you were older. I’m ashamed of the part I played in the empire’s domination of other races, and I hope to make up for it in some small way. More important, I hope our fledglings’ orbs will be opened to reality.”

Then Deckus rose and went to stand in front of his fledgling. He held out his arms and said, “If you give me a chance, I would like to earn your trust.”

The teenager snuffled and replied, “It would be best to do that here, where they do more than talk. They show us.”

“Then this is where we’ll stay,” Deckus responded, and he embraced his fledgling’s slender shoulders.

## My Books

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

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

### The Silver Ships Series

*The Silver Ships*

*Libre*

*Méridien*

*Haraken*

*Sol*

*Espero*

*Allora*

*Celus-5*

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*Dual Domains*

*Alien Intrigue*

*Deadly Gambits*

*Allied Enemies*

*Chaotic Futures*

*Empire Turmoil*

*Perilous Choices*

*Dubious Risks*

*Fatal Flaws* (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 Earthers Saga series, [The Silver Ships](#), [Pyreans](#), and [Gate Ghosts](#). I crafted my stories to give readers intimate views of my characters, who wrestle with the challenges of living in space and inhabiting alien worlds.

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

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

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



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

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

*These novels have reached Amazon's coveted #1 and #2 Best-Selling Sci-Fi book, multiple times, in the science fiction categories of first contact, alien invasion, and space flight.*