

JACK

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE LOST STARS: IMPERFECT SWORD*

CAMPBELL



THE LOST STARS

SHATTERED SPEAR

ACE BOOKS BY JACK CAMPBELL

THE LOST FLEET

The Lost Fleet: Dauntless

The Lost Fleet: Fearless

The Lost Fleet: Courageous

The Lost Fleet: Valiant

The Lost Fleet: Relentless

The Lost Fleet: Victorious

The Lost Fleet: Beyond the Frontier: Dreadnaught

The Lost Fleet: Beyond the Frontier: Invincible

The Lost Fleet: Beyond the Frontier: Guardian

The Lost Fleet: Beyond the Frontier: Steadfast

The Lost Fleet: Beyond the Frontier: Leviathan

THE LOST STARS

The Lost Stars: Tarnished Knight

The Lost Stars: Perilous Shield

The Lost Stars: Imperfect Sword

The Lost Stars: Shattered Spear

WRITTEN AS JOHN G. HEMRY

STARK'S WAR

Stark's War

Stark's Command

Stark's Crusade

PAUL SINCLAIR

A Just Determination

Burden of Proof

Rule of Evidence

Against All Enemies



THE LOST STARS

SHATTERED SPEAR

JACK CAMPBELL



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Version_1

*To Bud Sparhawk,
sailor, gentleman, writer, and explorer of new worlds.*

For S., as always.

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THE MIDWAY FLOTILLA

Kommodor Asima Marphissa

(all ships are former Syndicate Worlds mobile forces units)

ONE BATTLESHIP

Midway

ONE BATTLE CRUISER

Pele

FOUR HEAVY CRUISERS

Manticore, Gryphon, Basilisk, and Kraken

SIX LIGHT CRUISERS

Falcon, Osprey, Hawk, Harrier, Kite, and Eagle

TWELVE HUNTER-KILLERS

Sentry, Sentinel, Scout, Defender, Guardian, Pathfinder, Protector, Patrol, Guide, Vanguard, Picket, and Watch

Ranks in the Midway flotilla (in descending order), as established by President Iceni

Kommodor

Kapitan First Rank

Kapitan Second Rank

Kapitan Third Rank

Kapitan-Leytenant

Leytenant

Leytenant Second Rank

Ships Officer

FREEDOM or death.

Dignity or slavery.

Give life to something new or die in the collapse of the old.

When empires fall, the outposts of empire do not immediately disappear. Men and women continue to hold the walls they have defended. The cause they once served may no longer exist, but they stay on, holding a line that no longer has meaning.

Some of them find new reasons to fight. At such times, each man and woman must decide whether to hold on to the past, or to fight for the future.

In Midway Star System, President Icení and General Drakon were building a future different from the oppressive and brutal rule of the Syndicate Worlds. Nearby star systems were choosing whether to align with Midway, risking devastation at the hands of vengeful Syndicate forces, or to cling to loyalty to the Syndicate, which had never worried about repaying loyalty in kind but had maintained stability for generations.

Taroa, Ulindi, Kane, and Kahiki had either joined with Midway or were seeking ties.

Iwa Star System, facing a threat much greater than anyone yet realized, would soon have to deal with the same decision.

* * *

“WHO is in command of your ships?” the woman demanded, her image visible to Kapitan Kontos on the bridge of the battle cruiser *Pele*. She wore the suit of a Syndicate CEO, but some of the details of her clothing reflected sub-CEO status. Kontos wondered what had happened to the last CEO. Iwa hadn’t revolted against the Syndicate, but there were unmistakable signs that the Syndicate presence lonely Iwa was as frayed as the cuff of the CEO’s suit.

“We have not received appropriate entry reports following your arrival,” the woman said in tones not quite arrogant enough for an experienced CEO. “You are to explain your presence at Iwa and subordinate yourself to lawful Syndicate authority without delay. For the people, Vasquez, out,” she finished, running together the words of “for the people” in the usual Syndicate manner that reduced a supposed tribute to an empty string of sounds.

Kontos didn’t have much experience with the diplomatic side of being a senior officer. Truth to tell, he didn’t have much experience at all. Rebellion produced some amazing promotion opportunities. It also produced a lot of opportunities to be killed.

Still, despite his lack of experience, it wasn’t hard for Kontos to understand why the authorities at Iwa Star System would be worried when a battle cruiser and a troop transport showed up from

Midway. Midway was both a fairly well-off star system and the center of rebellion against the Syndicate in this region of space.

In contrast, Iwa was the sort of star system that was often summarized as “too much of nothing.” A lot of asteroids and small barely-planets, a single gas giant that had nothing special about it, and beyond that several larger worlds that were simply giant balls of rock and ice. Only a single planet about nine light minutes from the star was marginally habitable, but too cold for human comfort, and its atmosphere contained too little oxygen while containing too many toxic compounds that would ravage human lungs. The Syndicate had nonetheless planted a colony there, the buildings and streets and factories mostly buried under the surface to allow easier heating. Iwa had once been a fallback position if Midway had fallen to the alien enigmas, with extensive fortifications and bases begun, then abandoned in various stages of completion as the Syndicate first diverted resources for the far-off war with the Alliance, and was later forced to refocus internally on its crumbling empire.

Kontos considered his reply for a few more moments. According to the rules by which the Syndicate worked, those in a position of strength were expected to lord it over individuals with weak power bases, and those who were weaker were expected to bluff against their peers but to offer submission to the powerful. Every action was judged in terms of how it displayed strength or weakness, respect or insubordination.

The transmission from the Syndicate CEO had been sent just over three hours ago from the main inhabited world at Iwa. Kontos’s reply would take another three hours to make its way back, because light only traveled at about eighteen million kilometers per minute, and there was still three light hours’ distance between *Pele* and the planet where the Syndicate CEO resided. But by the rigid rules of Syndicate protocol, that CEO would be timing the reply to see how long Kontos took to transmit his answer. A subordinate was expected to reply within seconds. An equal could take a few minutes. A reply that was received in anything longer than six hours and a few minutes would be considered either a deliberate show of strength or a deliberate insult.

So Kapitan Kontos waited, purposely taking his time, while the specialists on the bridge of *Pele* pretended not to watch the clock and hid smiles at the way their Kapitan was disrespecting the Syndicate CEO. Kontos himself had little use for Syndicate CEOs. But the specialists, once all known as “workers” under the Syndicate system, tended to hate the CEOs who had been the highest level of official enforcing their subjugation to the Syndicate. Though “hate” was probably far too mild a word for the workers’ feelings.

About ten minutes having elapsed since the receipt of the message, Kontos composed himself, trying to look every bit an officer of his rank and one who cared little for the expectations of a Syndicate CEO, then activated his reply. “This is Kapitan Kontos of the Free and Independent Midway Star System battle cruiser *Pele*. My ship is escorting troop transport HTTU 458, which is carrying ground forces and mobile forces personnel of the Syndicate Worlds who were captured by the forces of Midway at Ulindi Star System. In keeping with our agreement when they surrendered, our prisoners will be released to your custody. Do not bother claiming that you cannot take these people. We know that with the now-empty barracks that once held construction workers, the existing living facilities at Iwa are more than adequate to handle the additional Syndicate soldiers and crew members who are in the troop transport. Those personnel will require further transport to other locations in Syndicate space,” he added, knowing how it would enrage the Syndicate CEO to be given a job to do by someone like Kontos.

“Once we have dropped off the Syndicate personnel,” Kontos continued, “we will return to Midway. We have no hostile intent toward Iwa and will not launch any attacks while here. Unless we are first attacked, in which case we will reply with all the force of which this battle cruiser is capable. For the people, Kontos, out,” he concluded, saying the last phrase with slow emphasis.

CEO Vasquez would not be happy with that reply, but unless she was a complete idiot she would limit her objections to bluster and legalisms. “Have we spotted any signs of possible hidden defenses?” Kontos asked.

“None, Kapitan,” *Pele*’s senior operations specialist replied. “The Syndicate records of the work being done here match what we can see, but most of that work is incomplete or clearly abandoned, showing no weaponry, no signs of human presence, and not even traces of power sources.”

“Some defensive weaponry had been installed,” Kontos said. “I saw those completed work orders in captured files.”

“Yes, Kapitan. But those installations are now vacant. From what our sensors are showing, it looks like the Syndicate has been recently again cannibalizing Iwa for weapons, sensors, and anything else that is easily removed.”

“It does,” Kontos agreed. “Is this right? Communications we are intercepting within the star system indicate that only a single company of Syndicate ground forces remain?”

“Several messages that we intercepted reference that, Kapitan,” the comm specialist replied, her voice confident. “There is only an Executive Third Class commanding them.”

“An Executive Third Class?” Kontos questioned. “That is the senior Syndicate ground forces commander in Iwa at this time?”

“Yes, Kapitan.”

It seemed impossible that even the Syndicate, overextended everywhere, would leave such a junior executive in command of the forces at Iwa. But, then, Iwa had little worth defending. “The Syndicate probably would have abandoned Iwa completely by now if Midway had not revolted,” Kontos commented. “As it is, they are doing the minimum necessary to keep it as a potential staging ground for further attacks on us. Try to spot any indications that the Syndicate has shifted resources from here to Moorea. And try to pick up any comm chatter about the situation at Moorea and Palau. Anything about Syndicate activity, or other threats. President Icení wants to know anything we can discover about the warlord or pirate who rumors say is operating in the region near Moorea Star System.”

After that, it was only a matter of waiting as the battle cruiser and the troop transport crawled at point one five light speed toward the inhabited world. Forty-five thousand kilometers per second sounded fast on a planet, and was in fact impossibly fast in such a limited environment. But in space, where planets orbited millions and billions of kilometers apart, even such velocities took a while to cover distances too huge for human instincts to fully grasp. At point one five light speed, the three light hours that separated them from the inhabited world would take twenty hours to cover, but since the planet was itself moving through its orbit at about thirty-five kilometers per second, *Pele* and the troop transport had to aim to intercept the planet as it moved, their paths forming a huge arc through space.

“Kapitan,” the comm specialist reported, “we have intercepted a system-wide message from CEO Vasquez ordering a safety stand-down by all Syndicate forces.”

“That is certainly the safest course of action for them,” Kontos agreed with a smile. Technically, CEO Vasquez was not surrendering to Kontos’s demands. She could argue to her Syndicate superiors at Prime Star System that the safety stand-down had left her unable to fight. The senior CEOs at Prime probably wouldn’t be impressed by that claim, but Vasquez was making the best of a situation with no good alternatives for her.

Pele and the transport were still a light hour away from the inhabited planet when an alert sounded. The tension level on the bridge immediately jumped as the warning of a warship was accompanied by a bright new warning marker on *Pele*’s combat displays.

Kontos stared at his display, baffled, as the warning symbol appeared where no symbol should appear on the outskirts of this star system. The location was nearly five light hours distant, on the

other side of Iwa Star System, so the unknown warship had appeared there five hours ago.

~~And then vanished as quickly as it had appeared.~~

“What was that?” Kontos demanded. “What kind of ship was that?”

Pele’s sensors had automatically recorded everything that could be seen of the other ship in every frequency of the visual and electromagnetic spectrum, then compared that to the information in its databases. The answer to Kontos’s question popped up on his display before he had finished asking the question. “An enigma ship?”

“Yes, Kapitan,” the operations specialist replied, sounding worried. “One of their light combatants about equal in size to our light cruisers.”

“How could an enigma ship be at Iwa? The only jump point in a human-occupied star system that they can access in this region of space is at Midway. Iwa is too far from any enigma-controlled star system to be reached by them using jump drives. He must have been hiding from our sensors,” Kontos concluded.

“Kapitan,” the systems security specialist said, “we are scanning our sensor systems and all other ship systems now. No enigma-originated worms that could have hidden the presence of a ship have been found.”

Kontos shook his head, glaring at his display. “You are saying that the ship was not there, then it was, then it wasn’t? That could only mean it jumped into this star system, then jumped out again almost immediately.”

“Yes, Kapitan,” the systems security specialist agreed with clear reluctance.

“How is that possible?” Kontos demanded, turning to look at all of the specialists at their watch stations on the bridge. “There is no jump point at that spot in space.”

“That location is nowhere near the jump points that Iwa has, Kapitan,” the senior specialist said. “There are only two possibilities. Either the detection was a false one, something produced by a glitch in the sensor systems, or there is a jump point at that location that our own systems cannot identify.”

Kontos frowned. “Is that possible? A jump point we cannot detect?”

The operations specialist hesitated. Not long ago, when still a worker under the Syndicate system, he would have done his best to avoid providing any useful answer, instead saying whatever he thought his superior wanted to hear. Workers learned the hard way that Syndicate superiors did not want to hear bad news or unexplained events.

But under Kommodor Marphissa, and now Kapitan Kontos, they had been encouraged to think and to give their best information. The specialist spoke slowly, choosing each word with care. “Kapitan, if the enigma warship did appear there, then we would have to conclude that it is possible for a jump point to be at that location, a jump point that we cannot detect with our sensors. But it is also possible that the warship was not really there, that the detection is a ghost generated by a flaw in the sensor systems which was quickly cleared.”

Kontos nodded. “Run checks. Full diagnostics on everything. I don’t see how this could be anything but the result of a glitch, but let’s check it carefully.”

“Incoming call from HTTU 458,” the comm specialist reported.

The image of HTTU 458’s commanding officer appeared before Kontos. “What was that?” she asked. “That ship that appeared on the edge of the star system?”

Kontos paused before answering. “Your ship saw it, too? Was it over the link with *Pele*?”

“No. My ship’s sensors reported a detection independent of that from *Pele*. They identified what they called an *enigma* warship in the same location that *Pele* reported seeing one, then reported that the warship had vanished as if it had entered jump space.” The transport’s commanding officer shook her head. “But Iwa doesn’t have a jump point there.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Kontos said. “Or, rather, it’s not supposed to have a jump point there. And we

cannot see a jump point in that location.”

“I know very little about the aliens, the enigmas. Can they do that?”

It was Kontos’s turn to shake his head. “I don’t know. Black Jack’s people didn’t tell us the enigmas could jump to places where we cannot see jump points, but they admitted they were able to learn little about the enigmas.”

“Alliance,” the transport’s captain said, her tone filled with disgust and anger. “They wouldn’t tell us the truth.” A century of war with the Alliance, a war the Syndicate had finally lost not too long ago had left a vast reservoir of hatred which might never fully drain.

“It was Black Jack’s workers,” Kontos repeated. “Black Jack” Geary, the legendary hero of the Alliance, who had impossibly returned from the dead to save the Alliance and bring an end to the war that seemed as if it would never end. He had been the one to finally defeat the Syndicate. And yet he had also stopped practices such as the bombarding of civilian populations on planets and the execution of prisoners, which during that century of war had become commonplace. He had broken the Syndicate’s power and given places like Midway their chances at freedom. “Black Jack is . . . for the people.”

The transport’s captain grimaced. “The universe seems to be full of impossible things these days. Could the enigmas have used something other than jump space?”

Kontos paused before answering, upset that the possibility had not occurred to him. “We know of only two ways to travel between stars in less than decades. That doesn’t mean another one could not exist. But what we saw of this enigma ship matched the behavior of something using jump space.”

“How could a jump point be there? Jump points are created because the gravity wells of stars are huge enough to stretch space itself far enough to create thin spots which we can use to enter or leave jump space. Jump points stay in the same spots relative to the stars that created them. They don’t come and go.”

“Perhaps the enigma ship used a different kind of jump point,” Kontos speculated. “Or perhaps the enigmas have discovered a new way to mess with our sensors, and there was no ship there.”

“What should we do?”

“We’ll investigate both possibilities as well as we can, though neither your ship nor mine has exotic scientific instruments that might be able to see something we cannot already see. Let’s get this off-load done as quickly as possible once we reach the planet so we can return to Midway. I want to report this.”

He didn’t know what the inexplicable appearance of the enigma warship at Iwa meant, but it could not mean anything good. Neither would the chance that the enigmas had discovered a new way to fool the sensors of human ships. The enigmas had refused to negotiate or even openly disclose their existence for decades, remaining invisible to Syndicate sensors as they seized human-occupied star systems and destroyed human spacecraft without warning. The secret of their invisibility had been solved by Black Jack, but the enigmas had nonetheless continued their attacks. If they could now directly jump to human-occupied star systems other than Midway, it would present a serious threat.

President Icení had to be told. She would know what to do.

* * *

THE largest city on the planet known as Midway in the star system that humanity had named Midway had been built to Syndicate standards. Curves were inefficient, so straight lines marked the street grids and straight lines characterized the buildings that lined those streets. Those designs also meant straight lines of sight in all directions, which helped out another standard feature of Syndicate cities: surveillance systems intended to provide continuous coverage of every square centimeter. Even

though the Syndicate Internal Security Service agents (nicknamed “snakes” by the citizens) had been eliminated during the rebellion by President Icení and General Drakon, the surveillance systems remained, though other watchers now made use of them.

But other standard aspects of the Syndicate were corruption, shoddy work wherever undermotivated workers could get away with it, and shoddy construction wherever corporations could get away with it. Between bribes, badly placed surveillance devices, and poor quality in much of the surveillance gear, the system intended to see everything in fact had cracks in its picture of the city. And in those cracks, crime could still operate, vice could find its outlets, and those who did not want to be seen could remain invisible. The president and the general might be slowly changing how things had been done under the Syndicate, but the nature of the underbelly of human cities had not changed in thousands of years and would not change here anytime soon.

Colonel Bran Malin cautiously eased his way down a short alley, placing each step carefully to avoid noise. A security light intended to illuminate the alley had never worked, but the low-light “cat’s-eye” contact lenses Malin was using provided a decent view of the cluttered alley despite the gloom of the night. The suit he wore, similar to that of an average low-level executive, appeared innocent but actually contained a wide variety of weapons and defenses. He thought of it as a hunting outfit, because it had been designed to stalk and eliminate prey.

Human prey, because Malin was determined that anyone who might threaten either Drakon or Ice would be taken out before they could harm either leader. It sometimes bothered him that he felt no qualms about killing anyone he suspected of being a threat. Perhaps that was because of how important his goals were. Or perhaps he had inherited that lack of conscience from his mother. That thought bothered him as well.

Malin froze in position as one of the screens on his palm pad revealed another flicker of motion as someone slipped from one crack on the surveillance system to another. He had been following that someone for over an hour, a slow-motion game of cat and mouse. This was no ordinary criminal but a highly skilled operative, using the sort of techniques that only someone trained by the Syndicate snakes would know to employ. Malin, who had acquired that same training by means that would have meant his death if the snakes had ever discovered it, had been sorely pressed to maintain contact with his prey.

Was this a surviving snake, operating under deep cover? Or someone like Malin, who was serving other masters?

And where was he or she going? His quarry had at first seemed focused on places and things related to General Drakon and Colonel Morgan, leading Malin to initially believe that this chase might be related to the hiding place of General Drakon’s infant daughter. Drakon wanted to find that girl, to rescue her from whatever planned upbringing Morgan had arranged. Malin always thought of the baby girl as Drakon’s, and not as Malin’s own half sister. Contemplating the girl’s relationship to him too easily brought up emotions that could distract and anger him when focus and cold calm were necessary.

But something about that other’s long, careful path across the city had led Malin to think there might be another reason behind his or her skulking journey.

Malin, having waited to ensure the other would have minimum chance of spotting him if his prey was also tapping into the city surveillance network, moved in a sudden, smooth rush from the end of the alley into an adjoining street. Clinging to the side of the building, he slid along until he could twist around the corner where another alley met the street.

Pausing, he studied his palm display again. An itching sensation began between Malin’s shoulder, the uncomfortable sixth-sense feeling that someone was aiming a weapon at his back. He leapt across a gap and down a short distance before coming to a halt in a shadowed doorway, a small but extreme

lethal weapon in one hand.

He had very little information from the surveillance net to go on, but Malin's instincts warned him that the prey had become tired of the chase and was trying to become the hunter. Malin had spent the last twenty minutes growing increasingly certain that his quarry knew of the pursuit and was not simply trying to remain hidden from chance watchers but was actually hiding from Malin.

A pair of police officers walked by on a nearby street, their casual conversation and the sound of their feet echoing like gunshots to Malin's senses, which were tuned to bare whispers of noise. The police had palm readouts as well, and were doubtless watching them, but would have seen nothing of Malin and his target, and would have seen no alarms or alerts on their pads. The Syndicate had devoted generations to trying to perfect artificial intelligence routines for the surveillance systems, but every AI operated using rules. Once someone knew the rules, it was just a matter of breaking whatever pattern the AI was looking for.

Human minds weren't locked into rules, though. Their ability to think outside of rules and rigid beliefs had allowed humanity to dominate Old Earth, had brought humans to the stars, had brought them as far as Midway, and had brought Malin to this alley.

Malin spotted a minor fluctuation that told him of movement and edged along on a path that would bring him closer to the path of his quarry. Had that quarry actually been moving to ambush Malin? Or had Malin been spooked by the long pursuit and the mental strain of staying to the cracks in the surveillance net during that time?

He paused again, breathing slowly, scanning the darkness for any movement that might not register on the surveillance sensors. The sensor system could be hacked, had been hacked innumerable times, to keep it from noticing someone or some event. Malin himself carried the means to enter the system's controlling software and redirect it. But he hadn't used that tool tonight because of a growing suspicion that his prey had the same capability and would spot Malin the moment he tried to employ it.

A shuttle zipped by above the city, coming down from orbit and heading toward the landing field on the outskirts of the city. A lesser tracker would have been distracted, but Malin kept his senses glued to his readout and spotted the flickers that marked more motion at the same moment as the shuttle crossed directly overhead.

Too easy, Malin thought, frowning. His target had not made any such obvious moves in the hour of pursuit. Was the prey growing tired and careless? Or had those betraying actions been shown deliberately, clear enough and yet subtle enough to lead an eager and also tired hunter into a misstep?

Morgan would have caught them by now. Malin could not block the thought before it taunted him. Morgan had been in a class by herself, but she was almost surely dead. He no longer had to measure himself against her, no longer had to compete with the woman who did not even realize that Malin was her son. But he almost moved quickly then, almost tried to close fast on his prey, almost tried to keep proving he was as capable as Morgan.

More motion, more noise, several flickers along a path.

His prey was running.

A lesser hunter than Malin might have bolted after the fleeing quarry. A lesser hunter might have hesitated, wondering whether to race in pursuit or not.

A lesser hunter would have died seconds later.

Malin hurled himself away from the path his prey had taken. No longer worrying about concealment, he pelted down the alley, trying to put as much distance between himself and his last position as possible.

The explosion came just as Malin rounded a corner and sheltered next to a building.

As the roar of the blast subsided, to be replaced by shouts and screams and the wail of alarms,

Malin stood away from the building, brushed off his suit, triggered the software routines that would render him invisible to the sensor net, and walked away. The hunt had failed. A dangerous enemy of General Drakon and President Icenis was still at large. He would have to report this, would have to let Drakon and Icenis know of the threat, and of his failure. It would be up to them to decide on the necessary response. Or, more likely, up to Icenis, because even though they were supposed to be coequal, Drakon had increasingly focused on external security and deferred to her on internal matters. It would probably be Icenis who would decide what to do.

An all-too-familiar self-rebuke echoed in Malin's head.

They wouldn't have gotten away from Morgan.

* * *

KOMMODOR Marphissa had long since stopped expecting to ever again get a full night's sleep. If something major didn't demand her attention in the middle of the "night" aboard the heavy cruiser *Manticore*, then something minor would pop up.

This wasn't minor.

"Dancers, Kommodor! Twenty-four Dancer ships have arrived at the jump point from Kane!"

She sat up on her bunk in her darkened stateroom and rubbed her eyes, trying to make sense of the news, then glared at the image of the specialist who had reported the information. "The jump point from Kane? Twenty-four Dancer ships?"

"Yes, Kommodor," the specialist confirmed.

"Did I miss hearing that twenty-four Dancer ships had arrived in human space? Did this happen while I was at Ulindi?"

"No, Kommodor. I checked the records. There is no report of any Dancer presence here since the ships of theirs that accompanied Black Jack's battle cruisers jumped back toward their own territory.

Marphissa glowered at the comm screen, but she wasn't looking at the nervous specialist anymore. She was running his words through her mind. The Dancers were the only alien species humanity had yet contacted that seemed willing to coexist. The Dancers actually seemed friendly toward humans, which wasn't what people expected of aliens who looked like the result of the mating of wolves with enormous spiders. But the Dancers had saved Midway from a devastating bombardment launched by the enigmas, another alien race, but one that had acted only with hostility toward humans. That alone inclined Marphissa to see the Dancers as allies against a universe her Syndicate upbringing argued was hostile and unrelenting. "How did they get to Kane?"

"Kommodor, I don't—"

The specialist's image was replaced by that of Kapitan Diaz, commanding officer of *Manticore*. He had clearly been awakened, too, but was already on the bridge of the heavy cruiser. "Kommodor, our sensors show that many of the Dancer ships display battle damage."

"Battle damage?" This just got stranger by the moment. "Can we tell what sort of weapons inflicted the damage?"

"The damage is consistent with a variety of weaponry," Diaz said, consulting a screen off to his side. "Something that could be hell lances or a similar particle beam weapon, fragmentation damage from explosions that could be from missiles, some spalling that could mark hits from small kinetic weapons like grapeshot. Because we don't know enough about the precise characteristics of the Dancer hulls, our systems cannot match the damage to exact Alliance or Syndicate weapons. It could even mark damage from enigma weaponry."

Diaz glanced aside, listening to another report. "We have just received a text message from the Dancers, Kommodor. All it says is 'going home.'"

“Going home?” Marphissa repeated, baffled. “From where? Whom did they fight?”

~~“There is more. Another message.”~~ Diaz blinked, looking baffled. ~~“The Dancers say ‘watch different stars.’~~ Isn’t that what the last group said just before they left?”

“Yes. Maybe we can get this bunch to explain before they leave!”

“That is all we have, Kommodor,” Diaz said.

“I will prepare a report for President Icen,” Marphissa said, trying to figure out what to say. Icen would want more information. Anyone would. But the little available left more questions than answers. Dancer ships arriving from deeper in human space when they had not been seen arriving in human space. Dancer ships that showed many signs of heavy fighting, but whom had they fought? And the repetition of the warning to watch “different” stars, the meaning of which remained obscure.

Hopefully, the president would know what to do about all of this.

GENERAL Artur Drakon, formerly a CEO in the Syndicate Worlds, watched President Gwen Iceni, also formerly a CEO of the Syndicate Worlds, pacing across the width of her office. One wall of the office appeared to be a vast window looking out on a beach, and Iceni would pause each time she reached that view to gaze at the waves for a moment before turning and pacing back in the other direction. In fact, the office was underground, buried behind layers of armor. Syndicate CEOs took for granted that many enemies would be happy to kill them if the opportunity presented itself, and some of those enemies might well be coworkers and co-CEOs.

“What the hell do I do about this?” Iceni demanded. “How did those Dancers get to Kane? How did they get beyond Kane without passing through Midway after coming in through the jump point from Pele?” Pele had been taken by the enigmas a generation ago, and Black Jack’s fleet had been the only human presence to visit that star since then. “We have the only jump point in human space the alien races can access.”

Drakon sat relaxed in a chair, watching Iceni. Even at times like this he liked watching her walk, because there was an assurance and a grace to Iceni’s stride that naturally generated confidence. “There must have a way of getting to other jump points.”

“That is impossible, Artur,” Iceni insisted, softening her dismissal of his words by using his first name.

“Is there another explanation, Gwen?” he asked, doing the same to avoid seeming to confront her reasoning. “As far as we know, it’s impossible for the Dancers to access other jump points in human space. But here they are, and they didn’t come through the jump point from Pele.”

Iceni stopped, gazing toward the image of the beach where the waves constantly rose and receded on the sand. “Yes. It’s impossible for us. We have little idea of what the Dancers could do.”

“Do you think Black Jack would have told us if he knew the Dancers could do that?” Drakon asked.

“I don’t know. I think so. He would know how that knowledge would complicate our defense of this region of space against the enigmas. Because if the Dancers could jump to other stars, then the enigmas might also—” She broke off, turning her head to stare at Drakon. “Watch different stars. Are the Dancers telling us that the enigmas might attack somewhere other than Midway?”

“I hope not,” Drakon said. “Am I right that our warships are barely adequate to defend Midway itself?”

“Our warships are not nearly enough to be sure of defending Midway,” Iceni replied, her voice sharp with anxiety. “Especially when we have to worry about the Syndicate Worlds making another attack on us as well. The Syndicate won’t give up just because we’ve beaten them badly at Ulindi.”

The comm alert on Iceni’s desk buzzed urgently. She tapped a control. “Yes?”

The image of a watch-stander at the planetary command center appeared before her. “Madam

President, we have just seen that *Pele* and HTTU 458 have returned through the jump point to Iwa. Kapitan Kontos reports a successful completion of his mission. He attached to his arrival report a special annex for your eyes only.”

“Send it on,” Iceni said, then waited a second for the image of Kontos to replace that of the watchstander. She listened to the brief report of events at Iwa, her expression not betraying her reaction, then looked at Drakon. “An enigma ship detection at Iwa. It looks like you guessed right.”

Drakon grimaced, automatically mentally running through options. “I wish I hadn’t been right. We could take Iwa easily enough. A single company of Syndicate ground forces wouldn’t last five seconds against a battalion of my soldiers, even if the Syndicate ground forces put up a decent fight, which I wouldn’t do if I were in their position. But how could we afford to position enough of our warships at Iwa to stop an enigma attack and also provide protection to Midway?”

Iceni called up a display showing the nearby stars, the images floating near her desk. “You have much more military experience than I do. If you were the enigmas, what would you do?”

Drakon studied the stars, rubbing his chin as he thought and not liking what his conclusions were. “If I were an enigma? It would depend how much I knew about what was available to humans to defend Midway and Iwa. How much do the enigmas know?”

“We’ve had obvious reconnaissance visits,” Iceni said, gesturing toward the symbol for the jump point at which ships coming from *Pele* would arrive. “A single enigma ship jumps in, collects a snapshot of everything that can be seen in this star system, then jumps out within less than a minute. That detection at Iwa could have been the same thing.” She brightened. “And they happened to stop by while there was a battle cruiser at Iwa, and a troop transport that for all the enigmas knew could be bringing reinforcements for the garrison.”

“What if the enigmas recognized the ships as ours and the ownership of Iwa as still Midway’s?” Drakon asked, not willing to make an overly optimistic assessment.

Iceni narrowed her eyes at the display. “It would look like an invasion force, wouldn’t it?” she said. “The enigmas would probably interpret what they saw as signs that we have already conquered Iwa.” She sighed. “Is that good or bad?”

“In terms of how the enigmas see it?” Drakon asked. “Damned if I know. Assuming the enigmas think we now own Iwa, and assuming they can reach Iwa with an attack, then if I were them I’d try to hit Iwa first. The enigmas can count, and they must know that we don’t have enough warships to garrison both star systems in strength. Take Iwa, where they haven’t been thrown back twice like they have here, then hit Midway again, maybe with forces arriving from both *Pele* and Iwa.”

She nodded. “If we spread our forces out, we’ll be weak everywhere. But if we concentrate our forces here, the enigmas will walk in and take Iwa whether we own it or not. This stinks.” Iceni looked around, seeking someone, then sat down with another sigh. “I still keep expecting him to be here whenever I need him.”

Drakon fought down a reflexive disquiet and tried to sound neutral as he answered. “Your former assistant?”

“Yes.” From the look Iceni gave him, Drakon hadn’t been nearly good enough at hiding his feelings. “We still don’t know what happened to Mehmet Togo, Artur. Yes, he might have betrayed me then bolted. Or he might have been taken by enemies. We don’t know,” she repeated.

“He wouldn’t have been easy to take,” Drakon said carefully. “Can I ask you something?”

“No.” But then she smiled slightly. “Go ahead.”

“Why don’t you think that I or one of my people took out Togo?”

She took a long moment to answer, her gaze on the beach again. “Because you wouldn’t do that to me. And if one of your people did it . . . you would have found out and told me.”

Drakon grimaced again, feeling a mix of anger and unhappiness. “You know how badly I

misjudged how much I knew about my two closest assistants,” he said.

Iceni nodded, still watching the waves. “Colonel Morgan died on Ulindi.”

“I won’t be sure of that until I see a body, and even then I’ll wonder if she cloned one to cover her going deep without my knowledge. Apparently, you still trust Colonel Malin.”

Another nod. “As much as I trust anyone.” Another pause. “Except you.”

He stared at her, wondering why Iceni had said something that Syndicate CEO training and experience insisted no one should ever say. “Um . . . in that case . . . since you need a capable assistant whom you trust, I can lend you Colonel Malin.”

Iceni laughed, turning her head to look at him again. “Make *your* agent *my* personal assistant, privy to all my secrets and actions? Exactly how much do you think I trust you?”

“It’s not about that,” Drakon said, wondering if he was telling the truth. “It’s about how much you trust Malin.”

“I see.” Iceni still looked amused. “And with both Colonel Morgan and Colonel Malin gone, who do you have for a personal assistant?”

“Colonel Gozen.”

Iceni’s eyebrows rose. She reached out, tapping a few commands, then read from the data that appeared before her. “Former Syndicate Executive Third Class Celia Gozen? *Recently* captured at Ulindi?”

“She wasn’t really captured,” Drakon said defensively. “She’s a fine soldier. And she has been extremely well screened, a process overseen by Colonel Malin.”

“I see.” Iceni gave Drakon an arch look. “And how does Colonel Malin feel about the elevation of Colonel Gozen to such a position?”

“He’s unhappy,” Drakon said. “Which is why I know that if he’d found a speck of information indicating that Gozen was problematic he would have pounced on it.”

Iceni leaned forward, resting her elbows on her desk, gazing skeptically at Drakon. “But still, Artur. Someone that new getting that level of trust?”

“I have a gut feeling,” he said, knowing that he sounded even more defensive and hoping that Iceni wouldn’t bring up his misplaced trust in Colonel Morgan.

She did, but not in the way Drakon expected. “Hmmm. Even the very-probably-late Colonel Morgan didn’t betray you in her own eyes. She thought she was helping you. What is it that makes you want Gozen so close to you?”

Drakon shrugged. “She’s . . . blunt. She’s usually properly respectful, but she has no difficulty telling me when she thinks I’m wrong or that I’ve missed something. And unless I very much have misjudged her, she cares about the people who work for her more than she cares about the ego of her boss. Someone in my position needs someone like that, and people like that are very hard to find.”

Iceni’s eyebrows went up again. “She was still an executive in the Syndicate ground forces? Why hadn’t Gozen already been executed or sent to a labor camp for telling her boss when she thought the boss was wrong?”

“She had a patron.” Drakon waved toward the information Iceni had displayed. “Her uncle, in the same unit. I’m sure you know all about it.”

“Yes.” Iceni rested her chin on her hand as she looked at Drakon. “I also know that you could have raised the same objections when I quickly promoted Kapitan Mercia to command of the *Midway*, the battleship that is by far our most powerful warship. But you didn’t. You trusted my judgment. So I shall trust yours. I don’t really have any right to pass judgment on your personal staff, so I appreciate your obvious willingness to discuss the matter with me.”

“You’re using that word ‘trust’ an awful lot,” Drakon pointed out, grinning with relief.

“I know. I’m going to turn into some bleeding-heart Alliance officer, aren’t I? Boasting about my

honor and proclaiming my virtue over those scum-of-the-earth Syndics.” Iceni looked down for a moment, her expression softening into something like sorrow. “We were, weren’t we? Scum of the earth. The things I did to survive, to reach CEO rank—”

“We both did a lot of things that we don’t like to remember,” Drakon broke in. “We did it to survive, so we could someday do something better. And we are doing something better.”

“Something better, hell. I wanted to be in a position so strong I couldn’t be threatened, and powerful enough that I’d be able to avenge myself on some of those who had harmed me. That’s what it was about, Artur.” She used her arms to lever herself back to her feet. “That’s the past. Today, we have a chance at something better, and a star system to defend. I want a meeting with more minds than yours and mine. Agreed? You, me, Captain Bradamont, your Colonel Malin . . . and Colonel Gozen. Anyone else?”

“What about your Kommodor?”

Iceni glanced at the display. “*Manticore* is a light hour from us. Marphissa couldn’t contribute in any meaningful way with that sort of time delay. *Midway* and *Pele* are even farther away.” She paused in midturn, shaking her head. “I was about to order Togo to set up the meeting. He was with me for a long time.”

Drakon nodded, standing as well. “I’ll have Gozen set it up. It’ll be a nice test of how well she functions off the battlefield.” His eyes went back to the display as well, focusing on the images of the Dancer ships. He had once heard old legends about certain birds whose arrival was thought to warn of imminent battle or other woes, and he wondered if those battle-scarred alien ships would prove to be such heralds as well.

* * *

GWEN Iceni left the protection of her heavily armored VIP limo, moving between twin lines of ground forces soldiers in battle armor who formed nearly solid walls of protection for her. The security measure irked her, so when she reached the door to the meeting facility she paused to look at the female soldier in an obviously new uniform who was standing at attention. “Colonel Gozen?”

“Yes, Madam C—” Gozen bit off the word just a moment too late.

Iceni smiled without any humor. “A lifetime’s habits are not easily forgotten, but you need to work on that. It is Madam President, and I am uncomfortable with a degree of personal security more appropriate to a Syndicate CEO.”

Gozen had the look of someone who had just been told that gravity made things float away. In her experience, of course, CEOs always insisted on every perk they could muster as a means of displaying their importance relative to the citizens and other CEOs. “Ma’am?”

“It’s simple,” Iceni said. “I’m not a Syndicate CEO.” Not anymore, anyway. “I don’t play by Syndicate CEO rules, where the more security you get the more important you must be. I don’t fear the citizens of this world.” She made sure to say that last loudly enough to carry, because every word spoken in public had to be used to reinforce the message Iceni wanted to send. Of course, the statement wasn’t strictly true. Some of those citizens were surely gunning for her, and the enthusiasm of the mob scared her since Iceni knew how easily mobs could shift. But most of the citizens of Midway now appeared to genuinely want her as their leader and were not only willing to follow her lead but happy to do so. “I have my bodyguards. That’s enough.”

Gozen’s eyes went to the heavily armored limo, but she was smart enough not to make any comment about Iceni’s chosen mode of transportation. “I understand and will comply.”

“You’re on exceptionally good behavior today, aren’t you?” Iceni commented in a low voice as she walked past Gozen and into the building where the meeting would take place. There had been a time

when she and Drakon would only meet at neutral locations, directly controlled by neither of them, but the time for those games had passed. Especially since the fortified structures that made up Drakon's headquarters complex offered a comforting sense of security.

Everyone else was already in the conference room. Icení noticed Gozen avoiding looking at Captain Bradamont, whose Alliance uniform had been a symbol of the enemy for a century, and tried again to get a rise out of her. "You're not used to this sort of company, Colonel Gozen?"

Gozen gave Icení a bland look in reply. "I'm still getting my feet under me, Madam President. Thank you for your concern."

Icení raised both eyebrows at her. "You are good at borderline insubordination, aren't you? How did even your uncle manage to keep you out of labor camp?"

"He was an exceptional man," Gozen said.

"Were you able to find which labor camp he was sent to?" Icení pressed. "We still have covert contacts within the Syndicate that we might be able to use."

Gozen shook her head, revealing no emotion as she spoke. "I'm sorry, Madam President, but records that were captured after the fall of Ulindi revealed that my uncle had been summarily executed when the snakes took over command of my old unit."

Damn. The game of assessing Gozen had just turned dark. That too easily happened when discussing history within the Syndicate. "I'm sorry," Icení said.

Her sincerity must have come through, because Gozen let a flash of surprise show, then smiled briefly but genuinely. "Thank you, Madam President."

Icení and Drakon took their seats on opposite sides of the table out of habit, Bradamont sitting next to Icení, Gozen and Malin sitting on either side of Drakon. "I want candid discussion," Icení began. "We're facing some unprecedented issues that require an open exchange of ideas."

Drakon nodded, then gestured toward Malin. "Before we do anything else, Colonel Malin has something to report."

Icení turned a questioning gaze on Malin. As far as she knew, Drakon still wasn't aware that Malin had been a covert source for her for some time. But Drakon knew that she had more trust in Malin than she did in others. Had Drakon figured out the reasons for that? Assigning Malin to her would limit Malin's ability to find out what was going on in Drakon's headquarters. Not that Icení worried much about that anymore, especially with the fanatical and unpredictable Colonel Morgan out of the picture.

Malin looked as icily correct as usual, sitting straight in his chair, hands clasped before him, speaking with cool dispassion. "Last night there was an explosion in the city."

Icení nodded. "Cause unknown, I was told. Possibly organized-crime related. Do you know more about it?"

"Yes, Madam President. I was pursuing a suspect. The suspect realized I was trailing him or her, and attempted to kill me with an explosive planted along their path."

"I see." Icení glanced at Drakon. "I have the impression that Colonel Malin is exceptionally skilled at tracking suspects." Actually, she knew it for certain, but it wouldn't do to betray that knowledge.

"He's very good," Drakon confirmed.

"Whoever I was tracking was better," Malin said, still betraying no emotion that would reveal how he felt about that. "That is of particular concern. I only know of two people on Midway who could have moved so stealthily, detected my own pursuit, and nearly taken me out with an ambush. One was Colonel Morgan. It was not her last night. I would have been able to tell."

"Who is the other?" Icení asked, feeling her gut tighten because she already knew what the answer must be.

"Your missing personal assistant, Madam President. Mehmet Togo."

Iceni pondered that information while everyone else waited silently. “How confident are you of that assessment, Colonel Malin?”

“Very confident, Madam President.”

Togo. Apparently alive, apparently free to move about the city. But not in any contact with her, having disappeared just before Midway had almost fallen apart in a burst of attempted assassinations and social disruptions that had almost led to mass rioting. “What was he doing last night?”

“I was unable to determine my quarry’s mission last night, Madam President.”

That was vintage Malin. Confessing freely to his failures as if seeking punishment. “All access codes and security arrangements at my offices have been changed,” Iceni said. “But I know that would not stop Togo. Are you aware, Colonel Malin, that General Drakon has offered your services to me as a personal assistant?”

“Yes, Madam President.”

“If Togo makes it through all of my other security and guards, could you stop him?”

Malin took a moment to answer. “I don’t know. It would be difficult. I would have a chance of success, but I cannot quantify it.”

“He’s the best I have,” Drakon said. “There was only one better.”

“I wouldn’t care to have had Colonel Morgan for a personal assistant,” Iceni said dryly. “I would have been more concerned about any dangers posed by her than about any potential assassins. Colonel Malin, alert all security systems to key on Togo’s characteristics. If there is even a minor percentage match, I want it followed up. Notify all security forces that Togo is no longer classified as missing but as a potential security threat. Initiate mandatory password changes and security upgrades on all systems. If you, Colonel, find any indications of what Mehmet Togo may be up to, I need to know immediately.”

After another brief hesitation, Malin nodded. “Yes, Madam President. I . . . still assess that Togo is loyal to you, so I have had little success in determining his motives.”

Iceni waved toward Drakon. “Colonel, I have every reason to believe that the late Colonel Morgan was intensely loyal to your general. But some of the actions she took as a result of that loyalty were not in the best interests of your general.”

Malin nodded again, flushing slightly. “I understand, Madam President.”

Everyone else at the table carefully avoided reacting to Iceni’s words.

“Now,” she continued, “there’s the matter of aliens. Captain Bradamont, did Black Jack tell us everything that was known regarding the Dancers and the enigmas?”

Bradamont nodded. “Everything that was known as of that time. I don’t know if anything else has been learned since, but if it was anything critical I’m sure that Admiral Geary would have passed it on during his brief time at Midway last month.”

“He was in a hurry,” Iceni pressed. “You’ve seen copies of the transmissions made during that visit to this star system. What is your impression?”

“I believe,” Bradamont said slowly, “that his primary concern was just as he stated, that the longer his battle cruiser force remained at Midway the more likely that the Syndics, excuse me, the Syndical Worlds, would block his access to the hypernet gate here, preventing him from quickly getting back to a star system much closer to Alliance space.”

“His primary concern?” Drakon asked.

“Yes, sir. I had the impression that he also wanted to get back to Alliance space as fast as possible for other reasons, but I could only speculate as to those.”

“Please do,” Iceni said.

Bradamont looked uncomfortable. “Internal issues. Alliance politics. Possible power struggles. I don’t know. But he didn’t recall me. Admiral Geary left me here to continue assisting Midway in any

way I can. That at least means his wishes continue to have weight.”

“Weight?” Iceni asked. “You still maintain that Black Jack is not directly ruling the Alliance?”

“I am certain that he is not,” Bradamont said firmly. “He swore an oath to the Alliance. He gave his word of honor.”

Iceni barely stopped herself from a reflexive rolling of her eyes, and could see the other former Syndicate citizens at the table also having trouble suppressing their reactions.

Surprisingly, it was Gozen who spoke up. “That might mean something,” she offered. “It’s Black Jack. He doesn’t lie. The Syndicate does all it can to keep people from hearing anything, but in the ranks everybody knew what he’d done.”

“Besides,” Drakon added, “Black Jack wouldn’t have had any reason to withhold critical information from us. He knows we’re the front line against the enigmas.”

Iceni made a casting-away gesture with one hand. “True enough, but if Black Jack is tied up with events in Alliance space, he’s not going to be back here in force anytime soon.” A sudden thought came to her. “Those damaged Dancer ships. Could they have acquired that damage fighting a battle in Alliance space?”

“Black Jack against somebody else inside the Alliance?” Drakon asked. “Why would the Dancers help Black Jack in some internal fight?”

“They would if it involved something they cared about, and they seem to care about Black Jack,” Iceni said. She noticed that Bradamont, normally as composed as only a veteran battle cruiser commander could be, looked unusually rattled by the turn in the conversation. “Yes, Captain?”

“I . . . just . . .” Bradamont swallowed and regained her composure. “It could mean some kind of civil war within the Alliance. That’s difficult to think about.”

“But it is possible?” Iceni asked. “We’ve been living with various forms of rebellion inside Syndicate space for some time.”

“No, that’s not the same thing,” Bradamont insisted. “The Syndicate Worlds does not allow star systems to leave. You have to fight your way free. But if the people of a star system wanted to leave the Alliance, they would be allowed to go. They wouldn’t have to go to war.”

“Have any star systems ever actually left the Alliance?” Drakon asked.

“A couple. Usually not, though, because they know they *can* leave if they really want to, and that makes it easier to compromise. And both the Callas Republic and the Rift Federation have distanced themselves from the Alliance since the war ended, though neither has completely severed ties as far as I know.” Bradamont looked around at the others. “I can tell that you don’t believe me.”

Malin answered, his eyes hooded in thought. “It does make sense. If you hold a leash very tightly, the leashed animal will fight against it. As we have against the Syndicate. If you let go the leash, the animal will run. But if you give the animal slack, let it move about, it will not see the need to fight or run. You can work together.”

“Nice comparison, Colonel,” Drakon said dryly.

“It’s important, General,” Malin said. “I know that you and President Iceni are still discussing a grouping of star systems. Perhaps we should make that a principle of such an association.”

“We have other principles,” Bradamont cautioned. “In order to remain within the Alliance, star systems have to abide by basic rules of human rights, and freedom, and representative government. If they break those rules, the Alliance can intervene on behalf of the people. It is rare, but it has happened.”

“A leash still implies control,” Iceni said. “We will have to handle diplomacy with other star systems very carefully to ensure our offered hand is not perceived to be holding a chain. If they get that impression of us, we’ll never be able to depend upon them. We certainly do not have the means to force them to do as we want for extended periods. They might agree under conditions of a major threat.”

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