



The Lost Stars: Imperfect Sword

By Jack Campbell

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Editorial Review

Review

“A fast-paced thrill ride that leaps nimbly from harrowing to heartbreaking to heroic.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“The ride is worth it. Fans of the numerous military science fiction will find something to like here.”—*SFRevu*

“A wonderful action-packed installment...This is the kind of book that leaves me hungry for another helping of Campbell’s space combat.”—*Fantasy Literature*

About the Author

“**Jack Campbell**” is the pen name of John G. Hemry, a retired naval officer who graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis before serving with the surface fleet and in a variety of other assignments. He is the author of The Lost Fleet series as well as the Stark’s War series and the Paul Sinclair series. His short fiction appears frequently in *Analog* magazine.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE MIDWAY FLOTILLA

Kommodor Asima Marphissa, commanding

(all ships are former Syndicate Worlds mobile forces units)

ONE BATTLESHIP

Midway (not yet operational)

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 Icení

Kommodor

Kapitan First Rank

Kapitan Second Rank

Kapitan Third Rank

Kapitan-Leytenant

Leytenant

Leytenant Second Rank

Ships Officer

LIKE a pack of immense sharks, warships of the rebellious Free and Independent Midway Star System roamed the dark emptiness of space, patrolling against any threats. At other stars, the crumbling but still-powerful and predacious empire of the Syndicate Worlds gathered forces and tried to stamp out revolution wherever it flared into existence. Midway, strategically positioned and a leader among the rebel star systems, knew it was only a matter of time until the Syndicate attacked again.

—

“I almost wish something would ha—”

“*Don’t* say it.”

“I’m sorry, Kommodor. It’s just that there are few tasks more boring than standing sentry,” Kapitan Diaz said. “Especially deep in space far from any planet or orbiting facility.”

“And few things more dangerous than becoming bored or distracted as a sentry,” Kommodor Marphissa reminded him, her voice sharp. “Let alone jinxing us with careless wishes!”

“I was about to say how important it was to stay alert,” Diaz added quickly. He raised his voice for the benefit of the specialists on the bridge of the heavy cruiser *Manticore*. “If you’re on sentry and not paying attention, some enemy might sneak up and stick a knife in you.”

“Or one of your superiors might catch you napping,” Marphissa said. “If that happens, you’ll probably wish an enemy had killed you quickly instead.”

“That’s the Syndicate way,” Diaz agreed. “But we rebelled against the Syndicate.”

“And that’s why we’re on sentry duty,” Marphissa said. “The Syndicate wants this star system back under

their control.” Her gaze shifted to the display before her command seat. The huge hypernet gate that helped make Midway Star System very important hung in space only ten light-minutes away, the massive structure seeming small and insignificant against a backdrop of endless stars. Space had a tendency to dwarf the mightiest human creations. The nearest ship traffic was almost a light-hour distant, a boxy freighter plodding steadily along toward the inner star system. President Icení, the only one whose orders Marphissa would respect, was four light-hours away, on a planet orbiting only several light-minutes from the star. Marphissa’s warships were on their own out here, as was she.

“How long do you think it will be before they attack again?” Diaz wondered.

Marphissa shifted irritably in her own seat. How many times had they had this conversation? “Maybe next week, maybe next month, maybe in the next minute. The only thing we know for certain is that the Syndicate will be back, and they will be bringing a large enough flotilla to make us fight for our lives.”

“The battle cruiser should be operational again soon.”

“It needs to be operational *now*, along with our battleship,” Marphissa grumbled, lowering her voice so only Diaz could hear. There were some things the specialists should not listen to. “We’ll be sitting ducks if the Syndicate returns with a battleship of their own, and all we still have in fighting condition are these cruisers and Hunter-Killers—”

An alert blared, causing everyone on the bridge to jerk to full alertness and frantically focus on their displays as a new symbol sprang to life near the hypernet gate. Ten minutes ago, something had arrived at the gate, the light from that event one hundred eighty million kilometers away only now reaching Marphissa’s own flotilla. Boredom and irritation vanished in a flare of excitement and fear as Marphissa waited for *Manticore*’s combat systems to identify the new arrival.

“We’re getting a Syndicate ID on it,” the senior watch specialist reported, drawing a curse from Kapitan Diaz.

Marphissa had once envied those who commanded flotillas, imagining them free of the day-to-day responsibilities that kept lesser souls in constant labor and worry. But she had already learned that the burdens of being in charge, of having no one else to turn to for orders and guidance, were as heavy as a neutron star and as unforgiving as the pull of gravity from a black hole.

And Marphissa would have to make all of the decisions. It would be almost four more hours before President Icení even saw that a new Syndicate ship had arrived in this star system.

—

THERE were times when President Gwen Icení regretted having learned that not every problem could be solved by ordering someone to be killed.

This was one of those times.

Because at this moment she really, really wanted to kill someone.

“We know that the next Syndicate attack could come at any time,” she told General Artur Drakon in what Icení thought a remarkably well-controlled voice. The way his defensive glower deepened at her words led her to suspect that her voice might not be as controlled as she thought. “There are unknown forces moving against us within this star system, though we’ve managed to keep the citizens quiet for now by giving them

some voice in their own affairs. Supreme CEO Haris at Ulindi might try attacking us again. And, of course, we never know when the enigmas might return and wipe us all out. Did I forget any problems we currently face?”

He met her eyes, defiant despite the obvious guilt he felt. “We can’t entirely trust each other.” Drakon paused, then added more in even darker tones. “We can’t entirely trust our own closest subordinates.”

“Then you agree we had more than enough things to worry about before this.” Gwen sat back, sighing heavily. “Why do I trust you at all, Artur Drakon?”

“Because you have to. The same reason that’s always been there.”

“No. I could have tried to have you killed. Where is she now?”

“Colonel Morgan? In her quarters.”

“Her quarters.” Iceni let the two words hang for a long moment. “After she exploited her position as one of your closest aides to betray you, that’s all you’re going to do?”

Drakon ran one hand through his hair, looking away. “I haven’t decided. I told you. There are complications—”

Whatever Drakon had been about to say was interrupted by a high-priority alarm. Iceni tapped acknowledge, hoping her jerk of surprise hadn’t been apparent to Drakon. “What is it?” she snapped as the image of her personal aide/bodyguard/assassin Mehmet Togo appeared beside her desk.

“A ship has arrived at the hypernet gate—” Togo began, his voice and expression both as placid as if nothing could ever unnerve or even annoy him.

“One ship? Why is that so critical?”

“A Syndicate ship.”

Iceni felt a chill at odds with the earlier heat of her anger at Drakon and Morgan. “Just one? Did the Syndicate send an unescorted battleship to attack us this time?”

“The ship is a courier vessel,” Togo continued. “It informs us that it carries one passenger, CEO Jason Boyens. The courier ship is en route this planet. Even though it is identifying itself as under official Syndicate control, it claims to be operating independently.”

“Boyens? Alone?” She looked at Drakon, who frowned again.

“What the hell does he want?” Drakon growled. Boyens was known to both of them from his long service with the old Reserve Flotilla, but after going to the Syndicate supposedly to negotiate an end of hostilities, he had instead returned to Midway in command of a Syndicate flotilla attacking this star system. Timely assistance to Midway from Black Jack’s Alliance fleet had forced Boyens to flee that time, but now he was back without any warships.

“Whatever it is, he’s putting himself into our hands.” She sat back, pushing aside her anger at Morgan and at Drakon, letting Boyens’s sudden reappearance filter through the Machiavellian paths that experience in the Syndicate system had worn in her mind.

“Do you want to kill him?” Drakon asked.

“Do you?”

Drakon grinned ferociously. “Not right away.”

“Agreed. Let’s see what he can tell us, first,” Icení said. She didn’t want to pursue further the topic of Morgan’s treachery at this moment, so did not object when Drakon made a quick departure to make his own preparations for dealing with whatever news Boyens was bringing.

—

FIVE minutes after Drakon returned to his headquarters, Icení forwarded a message from Boyens that she had just received.

Colonel Bran Malin began backing out of Drakon’s private office. “I will leave you to discuss the matter with President Icení, General.”

“Hold it.”

“General,” Malin said, “I fully understand that your confidence in me has been damaged and that I cannot expect to be given the same access to critical issues until your concerns regarding me have been resolved.”

“You’re right that I’m going to be watching you more in days to come,” Drakon said. “But recent revelations about you and Morgan do not alter the fact that I have come to value your insight and opinions. Let’s both see what Boyens has to say.”

Even Malin could not help a very brief smile at Drakon’s words, but all he said was, “Yes, sir. You won’t regret it, sir.”

The image of CEO Jason Boyens appeared, looking confident but also regretful. “I won’t insult you,” Boyens began, “by pretending I don’t realize that I am now the one who needs to make a deal for my own survival. I want you to realize how much I can do for you. The last time I was in this star system, I may have looked like I was in charge of that Syndicate flotilla, but I wasn’t. There was a snake CEO at my back, literally at my back, almost every moment. The slightest misstep would have resulted in my death, and you at the mercy of a snake CEO instead of a friend like me.”

A friend? Drakon thought. *Does he expect me to believe that he’s now a friend?*

“I have information that you need,” Boyens continued. “I could have gone to a lot of different places when I escaped from Prime. I came here. Give me a chance to show you how I can help you. Boyens, out.”

Drakon glanced at Malin. “Well?”

Malin considered the question, his head tilted slightly to one side. “His story is plausible, General. Having a senior Internal Security Service agent monitoring his every move would have been a reasonable precaution for the current Syndicate government.”

“Because they couldn’t trust Boyens, either.”

“Yes, sir. But he may know some very important things if he has been at all aware of what the Syndicate is planning.” Malin nodded toward where Boyens’s image had been. “He appears to have intended that

message solely for President Icení.”

“I noticed.” Icení was clearly telling him that they remained allies despite recent discoveries about problems among Drakon’s closest aides. “All right. We’ve seen that message and talked about it. Now, let’s talk about you.”

Drakon drummed the fingers of his left hand on his desk as he eyed Malin. He had been granted very little time to absorb the news of Malin’s true relationship to Morgan, the huge secret Malin had kept from him and everyone else. *On the other hand, if my mother was Roh Morgan, I doubt that I would want anyone knowing, either.* “Never mind CEO Boyens. Can I still trust you?”

Malin usually struck people as reserved to the point of coldness, but now he seemed frozen inside at the question. “I . . . General, I will not betray you. I never have.”

“Are there any more secrets that I should know?”

“No, sir.”

The multitude of hidden sensors focused on Malin provided their verdict on the surface of Drakon’s desk, the words polarized so as to be invisible to Malin himself. *No deception noted.* But Malin was as well trained as anyone could be in fooling the sensors that measured signs of dishonesty. “I want the simple truth out of you, Colonel. Where does your loyalty lie?”

The question puzzled Malin. “With you, General. I am loyal to you above all others.”

No deception noted. “Have you been working with Colonel Morgan in any way I am not aware of? Engaged in any projects I did not order you to pursue?”

“No, sir.”

No deception noted. “Any other person in my position would have you shot. You know that, don’t you?” Drakon demanded. “You’ve been one of my closest assistants, you know just about everything about my forces and contingency plans, and you kept that kind of secret from me. You know too much for someone who misled me.”

“The same could be said of Colonel Morgan, sir,” Malin said, his words coming out as carefully as if they were footsteps through a minefield.

“I agree. Why shouldn’t I have *both* of you shot?”

Malin gazed at him, his face rigid. “You have always been able to count on me, sir. Give me any task, and it will be done.”

“That much is true,” Drakon admitted. “And I will admit that is also one of the reasons I’m wondering if I can afford to trust you any longer. You’re too damned good at getting things done. I need to be sure you’re only acting for me.”

“I am, General. At this moment, you have a very important task facing you. If you are going to let Morgan live, then you need me to protect you from her.”

“You’re no match for Morgan. You couldn’t stop her if she tried to kill me.”

Malin made a self-deprecating gesture. “Not if it was a direct attack, no. But she won’t do that, General. She is intensely loyal to you even though that loyalty is warped. Morgan won’t try to physically harm you, but that doesn’t mean she won’t do other things. I can monitor her, watch for schemes, plots, and unauthorized activities. I can identify anyone who contacts her, no matter the means.”

Drakon considered the alternatives, then nodded. Until he knew more about what Morgan was up to, there was no one better suited for discovering her secrets than Malin. “Do not make me sorry for giving you another chance,” Drakon said, his own words as cold as Malin’s eyes. “There will not be any more chances after this.”

“I understand, sir. Thank you for the opportunity to prove my continued loyalty to you.” Malin saluted, then left.

Drakon sat watching the sealed door after Malin had departed, wondering if he had just made a deal with one devil in order to frustrate the plans of another. But Malin had been invaluable in the past and, aside from the secret regarding his real mother, had never shown any signs of disloyalty or unreliability. In all ways, Malin had always appeared to be bedrock stable and unflappable, which, given that his mother was Roh Morgan, was an impressive achievement.

He called Iceni. “I recommend that we tell Boyens to prove his good faith by telling us everything he knows about the next Syndicate attack. When it will get here, what forces it will consist of, who will be in command, and anything else that can help us prepare to defeat it.”

Iceni nodded, her eyes hooded. “I agree. I will inform Boyens that he must provide that information right now, before any negotiations begin, to ensure his own safety. Kommodor Marphissa has detached *Falcon* to ‘escort’ the courier ship carrying Boyens to this planet. If Boyens betrays us again, or tries to flee, even a courier ship won’t be able to outrun a light cruiser quickly enough to avoid being destroyed.”

“Boyens will know that,” Drakon said.

“I have had the transmissions from CEO Boyens during his last visit to this star system analyzed,” Iceni added. An image popped up next to her own, showing Boyens on the bridge of a Syndicate battleship. The image zoomed in on a woman standing a few feet behind Boyens. “She can be seen in the same place relative to Boyens in every transmission. Do you recognize her?”

Drakon studied the broad, cheerful face of the woman, trying to remember if he had ever seen her. A chill ran down his back as her possible identity came to him. “Happy Hua? Is that her?”

“Have you met her?”

“No. I’ve just heard about her.” Drakon gazed at the woman again. “Or rather, I was warned about her. Before her reputation became known, she fooled an awful lot of victims with that façade of hers.”

“Hua is a CEO in the Internal Security Service, now,” Iceni said. “She has climbed high on the ladder formed by the bodies of the victims who mistakenly thought her external appearance was a reflection of internal goodwill. If that is the minder that Boyens had at his back, then I am inclined to believe that his words and actions were seriously constrained.”

“We don’t know how much, though,” Drakon argued. “Boyens may have wanted to do some of the same things that Hua was insisting upon. And, for all we know, he didn’t really escape to come here but was sent as a double agent.”

“General Drakon, I have no intention of trusting the man.” Icení leveled a stern look at him. “I sometimes wonder if any man can be counted upon.”

He suppressed the surge of anger those words created because he knew it was a guilty reaction. “I didn’t try to hide anything from you, Madam President. Can you say the same?”

She laughed. “Oh, General, you will never know how many things I have kept hidden from you.”

Her image disappeared, leaving Drakon gazing at nothing.

EVEN a courier ship boosting in-system at point two light speed required twenty hours to cover the billions of kilometers between the hypernet gate and the world where Icení and Drakon waited. But at least it covered the distance fairly rapidly, constantly shrinking the time required for a message to travel between the ship and the planet at the speed of light.

Boyens did not look as confident in this message as he had in the last. “I’ll tell you what I know about the impending Syndicate attack, just to show my good faith,” he said, as if Icení had not demanded the information of him. “I estimate you have about a week before it gets here. They could be delayed past that, but I don’t think they can possibly arrive in less than five days at the earliest. The flotilla is supposed to once again include a battleship, as well as two heavy cruisers, six light cruisers, and ten Hunter-Killers.”

He hesitated. “Here are the important parts. I am certain that command of the flotilla will be given to CEO Hua Boucher. If you don’t know the name, she’s a snake, and a particularly deadly one. I have no idea how good a mobile forces commander she is. From what I saw, she has no real experience at it, but she will be ruthless. Except in one way. I know the Syndicate government won’t permit her to bombard Midway. They need everything here, all of the facilities, intact. But that won’t stop Hua Boucher from killing by any other means at her disposal if she gets the chance.

“That’s all I know. But I gave it to you freely! And there are other things, information that you need to have. If we work together, if you are willing to deal, you can have what you need, and I can get what I want. Boyens, out.”

A snake in command. Icení rubbed her eyes as she thought, then called Togo. “What do you know about CEO Hua Boucher?”

Togo’s expression did not change, but thoughts could be seen moving behind his eyes. “She is Internal Security Service. Very dangerous, Madam President. I met CEO Boucher when she was an executive.”

“Oh?”

“My training unit was interrogated regarding some shortfalls in food supplies at the unit cafeteria. I was the only member not arrested.”

Icení raised an appreciative eyebrow. “The others were taken in by Hua’s happy appearance?”

“As if she were friendly, sympathetic, yes, Madam President,” Togo said.

“How did you know better? You must have been pretty young and inexperienced at that point.”

Togo paused, and for one of the few times in Icení’s experience, he gave the appearance of being upset. “I

was emboldened by her pleasant appearance, so I stole a look into her eyes.”

Iceni leaned forward, intrigued. “What did you see there?”

“Nothing, Madam President.” Togo gazed steadily back at her, now betraying no emotion, his words flat. “There was nothing in her eyes. It was as if I were gazing into a patch of space devoid of stars; no light, no life, nothing but cold and emptiness.”

“I see.” Iceni sat back, eyeing Togo. “What are her vulnerabilities?”

“She . . . is very confident in herself. I remember that. It did not bother her that I had looked directly in the eyes of a supervisor.”

“Can you tell me anything else about her?”

Togo made a throwing-away gesture with one hand. “She will show no mercy at all to you and honor no agreement.”

Iceni smiled. “I assumed both of those were true. Thank you.”

Despite the dismissal, Togo paused. “Madam President, I have heard rumors concerning General Drakon’s staff.”

“Yes,” Iceni said, still smiling. “You missed some very important information about Colonel Morgan.”

Togo hesitated, thrown off by that announcement. “I have been told that Morgan is under arrest.”

“Not technically correct. She remains off-limits. Do you understand?”

“She is a threat,” Togo said. Did she only imagine a tinge of weariness in his voice as he repeated that warning for perhaps the twentieth time? “Eliminating her would remove a serious danger to you and send a powerful message.”

“It would send the wrong message.” Iceni waved one flattened hand in a cutting motion to signify the subject was closed. “Have you learned anything else about whoever is trying to stir up trouble among the citizens of this star system?”

“No, Madam President. But I will find them.”

She waved again, this time in clear dismissal, and Togo left.

Iceni sighed, wishing again that her problems could be solved by simply having Morgan killed. But she had seen too many CEOs fall because they had thought they could kill their way out of any difficulty. It was a simple solution that rarely solved the problem, instead usually generating new enemies faster than they could be killed.

She faced a bigger and more urgent problem at the moment, anyway.

Iceni called up a display above her desk, one centered on the star Midway. Planets and numerous other objects whirled slowly about the star. Bright symbols indicated the warships she had to defend everything here. Four heavy cruisers, six light cruisers, twelve Hunter-Killers. A dangerous force in areas where Syndicate authority had collapsed or was tottering, but not adequate to defend against the battleship that

CEO Boucher would be bringing. Icení didn't trust Boyens, but she had no doubt he was telling the truth about that.

In order to defend this star system, Icení needed her own battleship, but newly constructed *Midway* still had a lot of work that needed to be done before she could engage in combat. The battle cruiser recently acquired from Ulindi was much closer to being ready to fight, once the damage inflicted on the renamed *Pele* when it was captured from so-called Supreme CEO Haris's forces was repaired. *Pele* might be ready before CEO Hua Boucher arrived here. But what could a single battle cruiser do to stop a battleship?

I have no idea how to do that. But I know someone who can do it if anyone can.

This only involved mobile forces, so it wasn't a matter that required consultations with Drakon even if she wasn't still more than annoyed at him. Icení checked her appearance, sat up straight, composed her expression with the ease of long practice in looking like she was in charge and able to handle anything that came at her, then tapped the control to send a message. "Kommodor Marphissa, there is another Syndicate flotilla en route here, one equivalent in strength to the previous attack. I have been told that it could arrive as soon as five days from now, but you should assume it could show up in only four days. We have strong reason to believe the flotilla will be commanded by a snake CEO named Hua Boucher who lacks experience in commanding mobile forces but is certain to be intensely loyal to the Syndicate. She may be overconfident, she will not care about losses among her workers, but it is likely she will have orders to minimize damage to her warships while trying to retake this star system. She will also have orders not to bombard this star system.

"You have proven your skill at command. I give you no specific orders beyond what you know, that you must defend this star system. We must prevent the Syndicate warships from succeeding in their mission and do so while protecting the people of this star system to the maximum extent possible. I trust in your skill and your judgment to deal with this threat as effectively as you have done in the past."

This was the point at which traditional Syndicate communications would add some motivational threats about the consequences of failure. But Icení had already dispensed with another time-honored Syndicate practice (detailed orders spelling out exactly what Marphissa should do, since micromanagement was as much a part of the Syndicate way of doing things as paranoia, corruption, and backstabbing) and had found that she got much better results.

"There are a few other matters," Icení continued. "I will be sending orders to Kapitan Kontos to assume command of *Pele* and make every effort to make her ready to fight within the next few days. I am sending *Falcon* back to you along with Captain Bradamont. Place Captain Bradamont wherever you want to make use of her abilities, but you are to remain aboard *Manticore* as your flagship. I don't want you and Kontos both on *Pele* because I can't afford to lose both of you if the worst happens.

"Good luck, Kommodor.

"For the people, Icení, out."

Icení sighed, then sent a message to Kapitan Kontos, conveying her orders for him to leave command of the *Midway* and move to the *Pele*. She grimaced before sending a third message, to Kapitan Freya Mercia, ordering her to take command of the battleship *Midway* in place of Kontos. That left only the need to copy Drakon on her last three messages, then inform him that Captain Bradamont needed to be lifted up to *Falcon* as soon as possible.

And that was pretty much all she would be able to do to prepare the defense of *Midway* against the latest

Syndicate attack. No one in their right mind tried to dictate the details of time-critical activity across four light-hours' distance, though Icení had known (and a few times had to work for) people who thought such a thing could work. Everything else would now be up to Marphissa, Kontos, the workers trying to get *Pele* ready for battle, and Captain Bradamont. Twice before, Admiral Geary's Alliance fleet had saved Midway Star System, an odd thing given the only recently concluded and century-long war that had nurtured generations of hatred between the Syndicate Worlds and the Alliance. But Midway was no longer Syndicate, Black Jack Geary was no average officer of the Alliance, and now perhaps Captain Bradamont, left here by Black Jack as an adviser and liaison officer, could help Midway's warships save this star system a third time.

Icení gazed morosely at her calendar, knowing that the next few days would pass very slowly as everyone waited for the axe to fall.

At least the prospect of interrogating CEO Jason Boyens offered the promise of some distraction during that time.

DRAKON met Colonel Rogero as he reentered the ground forces headquarters complex. "Did you see off Captain Bradamont?"

Rogero nodded, looking unhappy as he did so. "It would be easier for me to be going off to face a tough fight than to see her doing it."

"You know the same is true for her if she had to watch you go. I've just informed Colonels Gaiene and Kai of something, and I need to tell you in person as well." Drakon did his best to keep his voice level. "Effective immediately, neither you nor anyone else is to follow orders from Colonel Morgan, even if she says those orders are coming from me."

To his credit, Rogero managed not to show any reaction to the statement. "I understand, General. May I ask why—"

"No. Colonel Morgan is going on special detached duty, so you won't be seeing her. But if she does contact you, follow the orders I just gave you."

Rogero nodded. "Yes, sir. Given the . . . change in policy contained in your orders, may I ask if the status of Colonel Malin has changed in any way?"

Drakon took a few seconds to think that through before answering. For the last few years, Morgan and Malin had been his right and left hands. Losing one hand was bad enough, and too difficult to explain at this time. Cutting off the other might well hurt him more than it did any hypothetical plots that Malin might be working on. "No. Except in one respect. If Colonel Malin conveys orders to you that he says are from me, follow your instincts. If anything about those orders smells wrong to you, check with me directly before you carry them out."

"Understood, General."

"Good," Drakon said, knowing just how many questions were boiling under Rogero's impassive surface. But he wasn't ready to answer any of those questions yet, so he shifted topics to another issue of concern. "How is your brigade doing?" He had asked that question many times before, so Rogero would know that Drakon was asking not about readiness statistics but about the mental and emotional state of his soldiers.

"No significant problems," Rogero replied. "But when I talked to my senior specialists this morning, they

said they are noticing an increase in the number of odd rumors making the rounds that they believe are being fed to our ground forces.”

“Odd rumors?” Drakon pressed. “Anything new?”

“Just in the specifics.” Rogero frowned outward toward the rest of the city as he thought. “They fall into three broad categories. One set argues that you and President Icení are only doing what you are in order to stay in control of this star system, that you remain Syndicate CEOs in all but name. That one isn’t gaining much traction since our men and women know you by your actions and know that President Icení has banned labor camps. The second set of rumors is that you and the president intend betraying this star system and the people in it by using it as a base to establish your own Syndicate successor empire. I’ll be frank in saying that the soldiers are worrying about that more than I’m comfortable with. And the third set of rumors are variations on claims that President Icení is planning on assassinating you and wiping out your ground forces to ensure her own place as ruler of this star system.”

Drakon laughed sharply. “How is Icení supposed to accomplish that? With planetary militia?”

“No, sir. That’s one of the devious things about that set of rumors. It claims that some of our own ground forces, whole units or just officers, will betray the rest and help Icení.” Rogero twisted his lips in a crooked grin. “So the rumors foster distrust of President Icení *and* of their fellow soldiers.”

“Clever,” Drakon admitted. “I don’t believe for a moment that President Icení is plotting that, but it’s a well-crafted set of rumors to generate fear and suspicion.”

Rogero inhaled deeply, blew out again, then fixed a keen look on Drakon. “You are certain the president will not try to kill you? There have been some attempts on you and on me.”

“I know.” It was Drakon’s turn to smile without humor. “But if President Icení were really the one plotting to kill me, we wouldn’t hear any rumors of it. I’d just be dead whenever she gave the order. She’s that good. Besides, I know I can trust you and that you’d spot any real plotting by some of the soldiers in your brigade.”

“Thank you, General,” Rogero said. “You know you can trust Colonel Gaiene as well. He may not keep track of affairs inside his brigade as closely as he should, but his executive officer is making up for that.”

“And Colonel Kai has always been loyal,” Drakon noted.

Rogero grinned hugely. “You can count on Kai, sir. For him to betray you would require Kai to act quickly and recklessly. When has Kai ever been quick or reckless?”

This time Drakon laughed. “He’s like a rock, for better and for worse. No one’s going to move him. Try to counter the rumors, keep me informed of them, and see if your senior specialists can trace the rumors to any sources. I would really like to speak to whoever is introducing those rumors into the ranks.”

“Yes, sir. So would I.”

“And, Donal, if anyone can handle that Syndicate attack force on the way, it’s Captain Bradamont and that Kommodor.”

It was easy to tell that Rogero forced his answering smile. “Yes, sir. If anyone can.”

—

THIS time, the alert resounding through *Manticore*'s bridge did not warn of anything as easy to handle as a courier ship.

"One battleship," the senior watch specialist announced. "Three heavy cruisers. Five light cruisers. Ten Hunter-Killers. All are broadcasting Syndicate identification. They are arranged in Standard Box Formation One."

Kommodor Marphissa nodded, keeping her eyes on her display. Standard Box Formation One was as frequently used by Syndicate mobile forces as its name implied. The battleship occupied the center of a box formed by the smaller units with it, the three heavy cruisers holding three of the front corners along with one light cruiser at the fourth, while the other light cruisers held the back four corners and the small, expendable Hunter-Killers were evenly arrayed in the region between the cruisers and the battleship. "Is it the same battleship that was here last time?"

"Yes, Kommodor," the watch specialist said. "It is broadcasting BB-57E unit identification code, the same unit as was in the last Syndicate flotilla."

Kapitan Diaz turned a disapproving eye on the specialist. "Just because it is broadcasting that code does not mean it is the real code for that ship. See if you can spot the hull features that will confirm the battleship's identity."

"Yes, Kapitan," the specialist said, looking worried at his mistake. Things had changed on these warships since the revolt against the Syndicate, but no one could forget the experiences they had under the old system. Not answering a supervisor's question accurately, even for the best of reasons, often produced tongue-lashings or worse punishment.

But, having been on the receiving end of plenty of those tongue-lashings herself, Marphissa had vowed to reserve them for real, serious screwups. All she did was grimace, wondering what tricks the Syndicate flotilla might have up its sleeve. "At least the information from CEO Boyens was mostly correct. Let us see who is in command of this flotilla."

Kapitan Diaz glanced over at her. "Do you want me to—"

"No maneuvers, yet, Kapitan. They're ten light-minutes away. I want to watch what they do before I decide what we should do."

Captain Honore Bradamont came onto the bridge, moving fast. "It's them?"

The spectacle of an Alliance officer on the bridge of a former Syndicate warship was strange enough. Even stranger was that the specialists and officers on the bridge greeted her arrival with relieved smiles. Bradamont might be an officer of the hated Alliance, but she was also one of Black Jack's officers, and one who had played a critical role in ensuring the success of some recent operations by Marphissa's warships. To the crew of *Manticore*, she was no longer an enemy officer but one of theirs.

"It's them," Marphissa confirmed, turning a brief smile of her own on Bradamont. "They've got a battleship, all right."

"Damn." Bradamont came up next to her seat and squinted at Marphissa's display. "Where's *Pele*?"

"Still twenty light-minutes away." The battle cruiser had been charging toward the hypernet gate for the last several hours, accompanied by the heavy cruisers *Basilisk* and *Gryphon*. Far behind them, lumbering along

its orbit as it had for countless years, was the gas giant planet near which Midway's main ship-repair facility hung in space, looking oddly forlorn now that *Pele*, the heavy cruisers, and the battleship *Midway* had left it.

Unlike the battle cruiser, though, *Midway* was slowly heading away from the other warships. Her projected path formed a huge arc through space, finally merging with the orbit of the main inhabited world where most of the humans in this star system lived and worked. At the sluggish rate she was accelerating, it would take *Midway* a week to cover the distance to that world.

Bradamont bent close to Marphissa's ear. "Is *Pele* really that ready for battle? Her shields and weaponry look in great shape."

"Kontos wouldn't fake the readiness of that ship," Marphissa said. "Not to us. I've known many an executive and CEO who would, to curry temporary favor, but not Kontos. He's too honest." She smiled again, bitterly this time. "He wouldn't have lasted another year under the Syndicate. Speaking truth to CEOs is a deadly habit."

"He's not being too honest about the status of *Midway*," Bradamont noted, nodding toward the depiction of the battleship on Marphissa's display. "It looks like the ship has suffered a recent major propulsion casualty rather than having full capability as it really does."

"That's some impressive camouflage, isn't it?" Marphissa said. "It looks just like more than half of the main propulsion units blew up. But that's misleading the enemy, not his own superiors. I'm perfectly fine with that. If *Midway* looks like a bird with a broken wing, the Syndicate flotilla should leave her alone and plan to nail her after they've gained control of the star system."

"Or they might try something foolish, thinking she's an easy target. You're keeping this formation?" Bradamont asked, phrasing the loaded question diplomatically. Marphissa had arranged her own warships in Standard Box Formation One as well, though in this case the two heavy cruisers with her, *Manticore* and *Kraken*, occupied the center, with the light cruisers *Falcon*, *Osprey*, *Hawk*, *Harrier*, *Kite*, and *Eagle* at six of the eight corners of the box, and her twelve Hunter-Killers at the other two corners and positioned inside the box.

"For now," Marphissa replied. "I know it's not the best formation to engage that Syndicate flotilla, but I want the Syndicate commander to think I'm still following Syndicate doctrine."

"Good idea," Bradamont approved. "The longer they believe you're going to fight a predictable battle, the better."

"Kommodor," the communications specialist announced, "we have just received a transmission from the Syndicate flotilla. It is addressed to the commander of our force."

"Bounce it to me," Marphissa said.

The window that appeared before her showed a woman whose wide mouth and cheekbones appeared to be set in a perpetual state of kind merriment. She would have seemed the personification of a warm, happy grandmother except for the jarring juxtaposition of the finely tailored Syndicate CEO suit that she was wearing.

"Happy Hua," Kapitan Diaz murmured, horrified. "That's really her, isn't it?"

"Speaking of false appearances," Marphissa said. "Even though I've heard of her, I still have trouble

believing someone who looks like that is the most ruthless bitch in the Internal Security Service.”

Hua began speaking. Her voice would have been pleasant enough, but the words she was speaking destroyed any illusion of congeniality. “To the commander of the rebellious mobile forces in this star system. You have two choices. Surrender your mobile forces to me, and be allowed the opportunity to prove your usefulness to the Syndicate Worlds once again, or die. I expect an immediate response. For the people, Boucher, out.” As usual in Syndicate communications, the CEO droned out the “for the people” phrase in a quick slur of rote words that her delivery made clear were meaningless.

“That was clumsy,” Bradamont snorted. “She should have tried to fool you into letting her get a lot closer before she issued that ultimatum.”

“She’s a snake,” Diaz said. “She’s not used to negotiating with her victims. I guess their offers to *surrender or confess and you might live* must fool some people because they always say that, but no one who was really guilty would be dumb enough to believe it.”

Marphissa nodded. “That offer only catches the innocent who think their innocence will protect them. That CEO threatened me right off, Honore, because she doesn’t realize how hard it will be to catch our ships with her battleship. Unless you’ve done space operations, it’s hard to grasp just how huge the battlefield is. I bet she’s thinking in planetary surface terms. Like, she can see us, so we can’t be all that far away.” She paused to think. “Comms. Give me a broadcast to every ship in the Syndicate flotilla.”

“You have it, Kommodor. Key Two.”

“Also prepare a copy of the record we have of the destruction of that Syndicate light cruiser the last time they were here. The one that mutinied.”

“In a moment, Kommodor. One moment. Ready. Attachment Alpha.”

Marphissa gestured Bradamont away from her seat, so that the Alliance officer would not show in the transmission, then took a deep breath and tapped the control. “To the people in the crews of the mobile forces still under control of the Syndicate, this is Kommodor Asima Marphissa of the free and independent star system of Midway. We are no longer slaves of the Syndicate. We rule ourselves. Every snake in this star system is dead, so we do not serve the whims of internal security or fear for the safety of our families and loved ones. We are free, and you can be as well! Do not serve those who see you and treat you as cattle! Rise and slay the snakes among you, then join us, or return to your own homes to help them gain the freedom we have fought for. But beware of snake tricks. They will slay you without warning or cause, as they did the crew of this unfortunate light cruiser which belonged to the last Syndicate flotilla to come here. Join us, who value and respect all, workers and supervisors alike. For the people!” she ended, emphasizing and giving power to each word. “Marphissa, out.”

She tapped the attachment control, sending the image of the light cruiser being blown to fragments by its own power core. Did the crews of the other Syndicate vessels know that light cruiser had been destroyed to prevent its crew from taking the ship? They would now.

“Those ships must be crawling with snakes,” Diaz muttered. “What chance of successful mutiny do any of the crews have?”

“Probably none,” Marphissa admitted. “But all of those snakes will be redoubling their watching of the crews of their own ships, worried about them, instead of watching and worrying about what we’ll do. The snakes will question everything anyone in the crews does, slowing their actions and making them hesitate.

You've been there, just like me. You know what it's like."

"Don't remind me! There were times I was afraid I might breathe wrong."

It would take ten minutes for the defiant reply to reach the Syndicate flotilla, but only three minutes later the operations specialist reported movement. "The Syndicate mobile forces are accelerating and coming onto an intercept vector with our formation, Kommodor."

"Standard acceleration profile for a battleship formation," Diaz noted. "Happy Hua is doing everything by the book."

Marphissa nodded again, her eyes once more on her display. "What are you thinking?" she asked Bradamont.

"If this CEO is inexperienced in space combat," Bradamont replied, "then, if it were me, I wouldn't merge this formation with Kapitan Kontos's when *Pele* gets close enough. I'd have Kontos operate separately. That CEO will have a lot more trouble grasping the situation and deciding what to do if she has two attacking formations to deal with instead of one."

"She's going to use the automated systems," Diaz said. "Don't you think? Hua Boucher won't trust the supervisors or workers in the crews, but she will trust the software because people that high up always believe their own propaganda about how perfect the automated systems are."

Marphissa nodded, chewing her lower lip as she thought. "Yes. Kapitan, you are right. And so are you, Captain Bradamont."

"Are your automated systems that bad?" Bradamont asked.

"It's not that they're so bad, though they're far from perfect; it's that we know them. We've got older versions of whatever CEO Boucher has, so we will know pretty much what those automated systems will tell her to do."

"Taking down a battleship is still going to be tremendously difficult with the forces you've got," Bradamont cautioned. "The ideas we discussed before are still your best options. Peel away the escorts, destroy them during repeated attacks, and leave the battleship alone so you can keep pounding it. They'll probably still be able to get away if they run, but if they stay to fight, you can eventually do enough damage to knock it out. It'll very likely cost you, though, and if you push the attacks too close, too early, your ships will get torn apart by that battleship's firepower."

"I have to be aggressive," Marphissa insisted.

"Yes. *And* patient. It's a tough combination. Syndic . . . I mean Syndicate battleships of that model are best hit on their stern flanks. That's where their shields and armor are weakest. You face more firepower than if you hit them dead astern, but their shields facing directly aft are a lot stronger."

Diaz gave Bradamont a troubled look, which Marphissa understood. The Alliance captain had gained her knowledge through experience, through battles against Syndicate warships like that battleship, and like the heavy cruiser which she now rode. It was jarring to be reminded of that, of how many times Bradamont had fought and killed their own comrades, while their comrades had done their best to fight and kill her. Only months, not years, separated those times from now. "Those were Syndicate," Marphissa murmured. "We are not."

Diaz bit his lip and nodded, while Bradamont looked away, understanding their discomfort. "Who is in

command of *Midway* now?" she asked, deliberately changing the subject.

"Kapitan Freya Mercia," Marphissa said. "One of the Reserve Flotilla survivors we brought back. President Icení was very impressed by her."

Bradamont looked away again. That hadn't been a safe topic after all. She had been in command of an Alliance battle cruiser, the *Dragon*, when Black Jack's fleet had destroyed the Syndicate Worlds' Reserve Flotilla. "I met her, too. If she is half as capable as she seems, Kapitan Mercia will do a good job in that command."

"But *Midway* is not in this fight," Marphissa said as she took another glance at her display. "And Kapitan Mercia can do little without weapons no matter how capable she is. We will reposition and begin making things as difficult as we can for CEO Boucher."

For all their mutual hostility, the Alliance and the Syndicate Worlds had retained the same simplified conventions for determining directions in the vast reaches of space that otherwise had no defined directions. Every star system had a plane in which its planets orbited. Humans designated one side of that plane as up, and the other as down, anything toward the sun was starboard or starward, and anything away from the sun was port. It wasn't precise, but it got the job done, where otherwise a command to "turn left" might find ships turning in every conceivable direction.

The Syndicate flotilla had finished turning their way, but would still require more than an hour and a half to intercept Marphissa's ships because of the battleship that was the enemy flotilla's greatest strength but also a drag on the flotilla's ability to accelerate. Because they were on a direct intercept, constantly closing the range, the Syndicate warships remained just off to the left of Marphissa's formation and slightly above it. They would stay in that aspect, getting closer and closer, unless and until Marphissa maneuvered her own ships.

Pele was way behind Marphissa, below and about fifteen degrees to the right relative to her. At least, that's where she had been twenty minutes ago. *Midway* was much farther away, nearly three light-hours, below and twenty degrees to the right relative to Marphissa's warships. "We will drop back toward *Pele*, so we can conduct simultaneous attacks with Kapitan Kontos. I want a vector that brings us within two light-minutes of an intercept with *Pele*, and maintains four light-minutes' distance from the Syndicate flotilla until then. Work it up."

Diaz gestured to his specialists, who began calculating the maneuvers. It wasn't hard, given the assistance of the automated systems. Input the variables, tell the systems where you wanted to go, and the answer would display itself in less than a second. It was just physics and complex math, measured against the exact capabilities of the warships under Marphissa's control, all of which automated systems were very good at. "Four light-minutes?" he asked Marphissa.

"It's not too close," she told him. "I don't want to end up within reach of that battleship's firepower unless it's on my terms. Four light-minutes gives us time to see what the Syndicate ships are doing and counter it. But it should also be close enough to make CEO Boucher very frustrated as she tries to close that gap and can't come to grips with us."

"So near, yet so far?" Diaz said with a grin.

"Exactly. She's a senior snake. She's used to the universe bending over backward at her command. *No one* defies her orders. But we will."

“We have the maneuver prepared, Kommodor,” the senior watch specialist reported.

Marphissa squinted a bit as she studied the plan on her display. It showed her formation swinging into a wide arc up and to the right that steadied out onto a flattened curve reaching to meet the projected course of *Pele* and the two heavy cruisers with her. Next to the lines were time marks, indicating when to initiate each stage of the maneuver. With systems like that to produce solutions, it was easy for someone lacking experience (like CEO Hua Boucher) to think that they didn’t need such experience to match those with a lot of time driving ships in space.

“The maneuver is acceptable,” Marphissa said. Nothing fancy, nothing to cause Hua to worry about the skills or predictability of her opponent. “We’ll let CEO Boucher think that’s how we’ll maneuver when we fight.”

“She must know you’re better than that,” Diaz said. “The Syndicate has seen you command in fights here and at Indras.”

“If reports of those fights have made it to the right people rather than being buried in the databases,” Marphissa replied. “And if anyone who read them paid attention to them. I’ll hope for anonymity born of ignorance or arrogance when it comes to what CEO Boucher may know about me.”

After that, it was just a matter of waiting. Warships could boost to awesome velocities when measured in planetary terms. *Pele* was now coming toward Marphissa’s formation at point two five light speed, Kontos having increased velocity once he saw the arrival of the Syndicate flotilla. Point two five light speed was the equivalent of seventy-five thousand kilometers per second. The human mind couldn’t really grasp such distances or such velocities. Even the universe itself partially rejected them. By the time a spacecraft reached point two light speed, its vision of the universe outside it had begun stretching and distorting. Human equipment could compensate for that, could provide a “true” image of the outside, but once beyond those velocities, once a ship reached for point three or even point four light speed, human ingenuity could not prevail against the relativistic distortion that made the universe appear to be stretched and bunched like loose, elastic fabric. And the ship itself grew heavier, its mass increasing, making it ever harder to increase velocity. The cost and complications made such velocities much more expensive for trade than the extra days needed for travel cost. In practice, only warships boosted to point one and point two light speed, and didn’t try to fight at higher speeds than that because of the impossibility of scoring hits on one another when their view of the universe was warped too badly.

Despite the obstacles facing them, humans had found the means to travel to different stars. Jump drives that pushed ships into a different place where distances were much shorter and the rules of this universe did not apply. The hypernet that used quantum entanglement to transport ships between stars without, technically, ever moving them. Humans had used those to settle the worlds orbiting other stars, trade between those worlds, and fight wars spanning the stars.

Wars like that of the last century, started by the Syndicate Worlds and sustained by the refusal of the Alliance to surrender and the refusal of the Syndicate to stop fighting. In the end, with both sides tottering on the brink of collapse, a man who had supposedly died a century before, the legendary Black Jack Geary, had reappeared just in time to save the Alliance fleet. Geary had annihilated the Syndicate forces sent to catch him and forced an end to the war. Defeated, with its mobile forces decimated and economy reeling from the costs of the long war, the iron grip of the Syndicate government finally slipped, and star systems began breaking free.

Star systems like this one.

“Five minutes to maneuver time,” the senior watch specialist announced.

Marphissa shook herself out of her reverie. "Execute maneuver on time using automated controls. Link all ships in this formation." The precision with which the maneuver would be executed would make it clear to outside observers that they were using the systems to control the ships. That should further lull CEO Boucher into complacency.

"Link all ships and execute maneuver using automated controls," the watch specialist repeated to ensure that he had heard the order properly. "I understand and will comply."

At the mark, every ship in Marphissa's formation swung up and to the side, coming around under the push of thrusters and main propulsion units. The turn-together maneuver meant that every ship remained in the same spot relative to the other ships in the formation. They changed their facing and accelerated toward a meeting with *Pele*, but the box formation had not altered.

"You know," Captain Bradamont commented, "if Admiral Geary had required his ships to maneuver on automated controls, he would have had to fend off scores of complaints from his ship captains."

Kapitan Diaz gave her a skeptical look. "They only would have complained once, though. Right? Then he would have replaced them."

"No. It took him a while to assert authority over his ships, and even now his decisions get questioned at times."

Marphissa shot Bradamont an irritated glance. "Seriously? Before Black Jack came back, we saw the Alliance ships attack us in swarms rather than rigid formations, but we thought that was doctrine."

"In a way, it was." Bradamont sounded angry herself. "We'd forgotten that courage needs to be paired with discipline, individual initiative with support to your comrades. Admiral Geary reminded us that fighting as a team is much better than a bunch of ships battling individually. You've loosened a lot of the controls the Syndic government put on you, Asima. Be careful you don't let too much freedom into your military forces."

"But this is better," Diaz argued.

"It is. Just remember the need for balance, for tying everything into the goal of creating an effective military team that makes as much use as possible of the individual skills of your people."

"You always make things complicated," Marphissa grumbled. Her ships had steadied out on their new vectors, but were still accelerating, aiming to match the velocity of the oncoming Syndicate flotilla. "I was thinking, you said *Pele* should operate separately from my own formation, and I still agree that is a good idea. But if I timed *Pele*'s attacks to match my own, we would present CEO Boucher with a complication, but still she would be dealing with one set of attacks at once, then have time to recover while we repositioned for our next attack."

"That's true," Bradamont agreed.

"But if I just cut Kontos loose, tell him to hit the escorts and keep hitting them, and conduct my own attacks independent of him, then CEO Boucher will face more frequent attacks, from different angles. It will be harder for her to keep track of things and decide which recommendation to accept from her automated combat systems. And Kontos," Marphissa added with a sly smile, "is likely to do something unexpected, something that the combat systems on the Syndicate ship do not anticipate."

"Kontos still doesn't have a lot of experience himself," Bradamont reminded her. "He's good. Hell, he's

brilliant at times. But he's young, and he hasn't been doing this long. A miscalculation on his part, a risk whose magnitude he doesn't fully appreciate because of a lack of experience, could be disastrous when we're facing a battleship."

"True." Marphissa pondered the matter as her ships finally matched the velocity of the Syndicate flotilla. The two formations were now tearing through space, separated by four light-minutes, heading toward a much faster intercept with *Pele*. "I believe that Kontos can do this, Honore. President Icení moved him to command of *Pele* because she has confidence in him. President Icení is a good judge of character. You know as well as I do that we need something extra. Something big extra. We might be able to destroy every escort that Syndicate battleship has got, but stopping the battleship itself with what we've got is going to take a miracle."

"It's your call, Kommodor," Bradamont said. "You are right about how hard it will be to hurt that thing without losing all of our own ships in the effort."

Marphissa tapped her comm controls. "Kapitan Kontos, I want you to use your three ships to conduct attacks on the enemy independently of my formation. We want to eliminate the battleship's escorts, confuse and frustrate the Syndicate commander, and ultimately wear down the battleship's defenses. Keep me informed as necessary of your intentions and planned actions. For the people, Marphissa, out."

"Syndicate flotilla is accelerating," the combat watch specialist reported.

"Match their acceleration using automated controls," Marphissa ordered the maneuvering watch specialist. "Maintain four light-minutes' distance between us."

"You could let CEO Boucher get closer," Bradamont murmured to Marphissa. "Let her think she's slowly gaining on you."

"I'm not trying to lead her anywhere," Marphissa said. "I want to taunt her and frustrate her, like a cat on a fence, just out of reach of the dog trying to get it."

"Kommodor," the senior watch specialist said, "our systems assess that the battleship is exceeding safe limits on main propulsion. If they continue to push their acceleration at the current rate, the chances of catastrophic component failure will rise rapidly."

"How long?" Marphissa demanded. "Do we have an estimate of how much longer they can accelerate at current rates?"

"There are some uncertainties, Kommodor. But they cannot sustain their current effort for more than another sixteen minutes at the most."

Marphissa stared intently at her display, imagining the scene on the bridge of the battleship. She had been in such situations before, the workers or junior executives warning of danger, a clueless CEO insisting that the current effort be continued, the sub-CEOs and most of the senior executives seeking foremost to avoid confronting the CEO and thus refusing to back up their juniors as danger readings crept closer toward disaster. More often than not, automatic safety routines had finally activated while senior ranks still denied or debated.

It was one area where automated systems had saved a lot of Syndicate ships.

Sure enough, the entire Syndicate flotilla kept accelerating at a rate that was unsustainable for the battleship.

Kept accelerating for another twelve minutes, at which point the main propulsion on the battleship abruptly cut back.

“Syndicate battleship is now accelerating at eighty percent of capacity,” the senior watch specialist said. “That is the standard recovery rate for overstressed systems.”

“Reduce our acceleration to match,” Marphissa ordered.

“Kommodor, the Syndicate flotilla has ceased accelerating and is changing course slightly.”

On her display, Marphissa watched the long curve of the Syndicate flotilla’s projected path shift. Four minutes ago, the enemy had bent their path a few degrees to port. “CEO Boucher is trying to position herself between us and *Pele*.”

“She wants to prevent *Pele* from joining our formation?” Kapitan Diaz asked.

“Syndicate doctrine,” Marphissa replied. “Concentrate forces. We still look Syndicate because we use Syndicate equipment, so Boucher is assuming we’ll still fight like the Syndicate. She will soon learn otherwise.”

Marphissa knew that she had to sound confident even though she still had no specific idea how to stop that Syndicate battleship. Any hint of uncertainty, of fear, in her voice and attitude would be scented by the specialists on the bridge and race through this ship and the rest of flotilla like a plague moving at the speed of light. She could lose this battle before a single shot was fired if her crews lost confidence in her.

At least her next move was fairly simple. Both her formation and the Syndicate formation were now racing through space along almost the same path at point two light speed, which meant their relative velocity was zero, the two groups of ships staying the exact same distance apart even though both were moving very quickly. It reminded Marphissa of two ground vehicles on a highway, both moving fast in the same direction at the same speed.

Her formation, in front, would need to slow down to get within weapons range of the Syndicate formation. “We’ll need to brake down to point one light,” she told Diaz as she set up the maneuver. “The timing is right for us to hit the Syndicate flotilla just as *Pele* is about to get there. Hua is going to have to watch both of our formations and decide what to do.”

Marphissa considered options, then decided to stick with automated control of the maneuver one more time. “All units in Midway flotilla primary formation, I have sent the command for our ships to pivot one hundred eighty degrees and begin braking.”

Thrusters on *Manticore* and the other ships pushed their bows up and over, so that the ships were now moving stern first through space, their bows facing the oncoming Syndicate flotilla. To an observer on a planet, their feet firmly planted in a place with an up and down, Marphissa’s ships would have appeared to have looped onto their backs, the crews now upside down compared to their previous alignment. But to the crews, nothing felt different or looked different except that they were now facing the opposite direction. As the pivots ended, main propulsion lit off on all the ships, braking their velocity so that the pursuing Syndicate warships could finally begin to catch up.

“This is pretty simple,” Diaz commented. “We’ve already got our bows with our strongest shields and armaments pointed at the enemy. All we have to do is slide over a little at the last minute to avoid going head-to-head with that battleship.”

Marphissa nodded, then noticed the frown on Bradamont. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Bradamont said. “I just don’t trust situations that seem too simple and too easy.”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joseph Curtis:

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