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By Jack Campbell

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Editorial Review

Review

"Jack Campbell has written the most believable space battles I've ever seen anywhere—**David Sherman**, coauthor of the "Starfist" series

About the Author

"Jack Campbell" is the pseudonym for John G. Hemry, a retired Naval officer (and graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis). As Jack Campbell, he writes *The Lost Fleet* series of military science fiction novels. He lives with his family in Maryland.

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ONE

THE structure of the Alliance heavy cruiser *Merlon* shuddered again and again as hell lances fired by Syndicate Worlds warships ripped into and through her. Commander John Geary grabbed for support as a volley of Syndic grapeshot struck *Merlon*'s port side, the impacts of the solid metal balls vaporizing part of the hull. Wiping a hand across his eyes to clear away sweat, Geary blinked through the fumes the overloaded and failing life-support systems couldn't clear out of the atmosphere left inside the ship. His first real combat action might also turn out to be his last. *Merlon* tumbled helplessly through space, unable to control her motion, and the final hell lance still working on the Alliance warship went silent as more enemy fire ripped into her.

There wasn't anything else he could do. It was time to go.

Geary cursed as he got the emergency destruct panel open and punched in the authorization code. Another volley of hell lances sliced into *Merlon*, and more indicator lights on the bridge went out or shifted to blinking damage status. Geary pulled on his survival suit helmet, knowing that he had only ten minutes before the power core overloaded and *Merlon* exploded. But Geary paused before he left the bridge. He'd ordered the remaining members of the crew off once it was clear that he alone could handle the few operational weapons and the final act of self-destruction. He'd bought all the time he could for his crew to get clear.

But *Merlon* had been his ship, and he hated to leave her to her death.

Another rumble and *Merlon*'s out-of-control tumble rolled sideways and up as more Syndic grapeshot slammed into her, the passageways around Geary rotating dizzyingly, bulkheads thrusting suddenly toward him, then away, sometimes slamming painfully into him. His search became more desperate as he kept passing escape-pod berths either empty or with mangled remnants of their rescue craft still wedged in place.

He finally found one with a yellow status light, indicating damage, but he had no choice. Inside, seal the hatch, trap in, slap the eject control, feel the force of the acceleration pin him to the seat as the escape pod tore away from *Merlon*'s death throes.

The pod's propulsion cut off, much earlier than it should have. No communications. No maneuvering controls. Environmental systems degraded. Geary's seat reclined automatically as the pod prepared to put him into survival sleep, a frozen state where his body could rest safely until his escape pod was recovered. As Geary's consciousness faded, his eyes on the blinking damage lights of the escape pod as they winked out

into dormant status, he knew that someone would come looking for him. The Alliance fleet would repel the Syndic surprise attacks, reestablish control of the space around the star Grendel, and search for survivors from *Merlon*. He'd be picked up in no time.

He opened his eyes on a blur of lights and shapes, his body feeling as if it were filled with ice and his thoughts coming slowly and with difficulty. People were talking. He tried to make out the words as the blurry shapes began to resolve themselves into men and women in uniform. One man with a big, confident voice was speaking. "It's really him? You've confirmed it?"

"DNA match with fleet records is perfect," another voice said. "This is Captain Geary. He's been badly physically stressed by the duration of his survival sleep. It's a miracle he came through this well. It's a miracle he came through at all."

"Of course it was a miracle!" the big voice boomed. A face leaned close, and Geary blinked to focus, making out a uniform that was the color of the Alliance fleet but otherwise different in details. The man beaming at him bore the stars of an admiral, but Geary didn't recognize him. "Captain Geary?"

"C ...; C ...; Com ...; man ...; der ...; Geary," he finally managed to reply.

"*Captain Geary!*" the admiral insisted. "You were promoted!" Promoted? Why? How long had he been out? Where was he?

"What ...; ship?" Geary gasped, looking around. From the size of the sick bay, this ship was much larger than *Merlon*.

The admiral smiled. "You're aboard the battle cruiser *Dauntless*, flagship of the Alliance fleet!"

Nothing made sense. There wasn't any battle cruiser in the Alliance fleet named *Dauntless*. "Crew ...; my ...; crew?" Geary managed to say.

The admiral frowned and stepped back, motioning forward a woman who wore captain's insignia. Geary's gaze left the woman's face, unsettled by her expression of awe and distracted by the number of combat-action ribbons on the left breast of her uniform. Dozens of them, but that was ridiculous. Topping her rows of ribbons was the one for the Alliance Fleet Cross. He couldn't even remember the last time one of those had been awarded. "I'm Captain Desjani," the woman said, "commanding officer of *Dauntless*. I regret to inform you that the last surviving member of the crew of your heavy cruiser died about forty-five years ago."

Geary stared. Forty-five years? "How ...; long?"

"Captain Geary, you were in survival sleep for ninety-nine years, eleven months, and twenty-three days. Only the fact that the pod had a single occupant enabled it to keep you alive so long." She made a spiritual gesture he recognized. "By the grace of our ancestors and the mercy of the living stars you lived, and you have returned."

One hundred years? A wave of shock rode through Geary's slow-moving thoughts as he tried to absorb the news, not even trying to grasp why the woman had apparently seen some religious significance in his survival.

The bad news having been delivered by someone else, the admiral leaned forward again with another big smile. "Yes, Black Jack, you have returned!"

He'd never liked the Black Jack nickname. But if Geary managed to show his reaction, the admiral didn't notice it, speaking as if he was giving a speech. "Black Jack Geary, back from the dead, just as predicted in the legends, to help the Alliance win its greatest victory and finally put an end to this war with the Syndics!"

Returned? Legends? The war was still going on after a century?

Everyone he had known must be dead.

Who were these people and who did they think he was?

John Geary bolted awake in his stateroom aboard *Dauntless*, gazing up at the overhead, breathing heavily and sweating even though his insides felt a lingering memory of the ice that had once filled him. It had been a while since he'd had flashbacks to the last moments of *Merlon* and his awakening aboard *Dauntless* a century later. He sat up, kneading his forehead with one hand while he tried to calm his breathing. Around him loomed the darkened outlines of his stateroom.

The admiral with the big voice had died in the Syndicate Worlds' home star system after his plan to win the war had turned out to be an ambush by the Syndics. A lot of other people and Alliance warships had died with him. The survivors had turned to the legendary Black Jack Geary to save them, and despite Geary's abhorrence of the impossibly heroic figure that legends claimed Black Jack had been, he'd been forced to assume command of the fleet. After all, his commissioning date to captain had been almost a century earlier, and no other surviving officer in the fleet had anywhere near that much seniority. A number of them had doubted he could do it, doubted that he was truly the hero out of legend, but even though Geary privately shared those doubts, he'd known that he had to try.

And so far he'd done what seemed impossible. He'd brought the Alliance fleet back through Syndic space, a long, fighting retreat using every skill he'd learned a century ago, skills lost to the fleet in the decades of bloodbath the war had become after *Merlon*'s destruction.

His eyes went to the star display floating over the table in his stateroom. He'd left it active when he went to sleep, centered on the star Dilawa. Still inside Syndic space, but only three more jumps away from reaching safety in Alliance space. He was so close to saving those who had believed he could save them. But the fleet was still inside enemy territory, still had to fight its way past the Syndic flotilla that would surely be waiting at the end of one of those jumps, and the loss of the *Merlon* had come back to haunt him.

Geary exhaled wearily, then dug in a drawer for a ration bar. He eyed the bar dubiously. Like most of the food left in the fleet, the bar had come from Syndic stockpiles abandoned in place when marginal star systems had been deserted after the introduction of the hypernet. It was food even the Syndics didn't think worth hauling away. While no doubt long past its expiration date, the bar and the other food they'd picked up had been frozen in airless vacuum since abandonment and technically remained edible.

The bar had a propaganda wrapper featuring impossibly heroic-looking Syndic ground troops marching from left to right. He tore the wrapper open, trying to avoid reading the ingredients, then started biting off and swallowing chunks of it. Despite his best efforts to avoid tasting the thing, he still ended up wincing at the flavor. Sailors in the Alliance fleet often complained about the food they got, but one of the few virtues of these Syndic supplies was that (aside from keeping you alive) they also made the Alliance rations taste wonderful by comparison.

And, as the ancient joke went, not only was the food terrible but there wasn't enough of it. The bar sat like a

lead ball in Geary's stomach, but that wasn't why he didn't get another. A fleet cut off from resupply and trapped in enemy territory had to get by on short rations. He wouldn't eat better than his sailors. Though considering the quality of the Syndic food, "better" probably wasn't the right term.

His comm panel buzzed urgently, and Geary hit the acknowledge button.

"Captain Geary, enemy ships have arrived at the jump point from Cavalos."

He slapped another control, and the star display winked out, to be replaced with a display showing just the Dilawa Star System and the ships within it. There hadn't been much in the way of Syndicate Worlds' warships left in the Cavalos Star System when the Alliance fleet departed, unless you counted the wreckage of the Syndic warships that orbited Cavalos in slowly spreading clouds of debris.

But there were plenty more Syndic warships hunting Geary's fleet, and the Alliance fleet was increasingly feeling the strain of the long retreat through Syndic space. Not all of the wreckage left at Cavalos had belonged to Syndic warships. The Alliance battle cruiser *Opportune*, the scout battleship *Braveheart*, and nine Alliance cruisers and destroyers had also been lost in the battle there, some torn apart in the battle and some blown to pieces on Geary's orders because they had been too badly damaged to keep up with the retreating fleet.

The pressure was wearing on him as well. His mind kept dwelling on the losses suffered thus far by the Alliance fleet, which was probably why he was getting post-traumatic-stress flashbacks again.

With an effort, he focused on what was happening now. "Only one HuK and two nickel corvettes," Geary commented.

"That's right," Captain Desjani replied, her image popping up next to the display. She was on the bridge, of course, watching over her ship. "Too bad they're almost three light-hours away. *Dauntless*'s hell-lance crews would enjoy the target practice."

"Not that your hell-lance crews need target practice, Tanya," Geary agreed, his remark earning him a proud grin from Desjani. As she'd noted, the jump point was three light-hours distant from where the Alliance fleet was located deeper inside the star system, which meant the images he was seeing of the Syndic warships were three hours old. "No one's following them in. They must be scouts."

"Agreed. We expect to see one of the nickels brake to stay near the jump point. The other nickel and the Hunter-Killer should accelerate toward the jump points for Kalixa and Heradao." She paused. "This is the first time I've seen a nickel corvette outside a Syndic-occupied star system. Those things are so obsolete I'm surprised they risk them in jump space."

So obsolete, in fact, that nickel corvettes had been operating a hundred years ago, back when they'd been given that nickname by the Alliance because they were seen as cheap and easily expended in battle. Back when the war began. Images from his flashback returned, of nickel corvettes making firing runs on *Merlon*.

"Sir?" Desjani asked.

Geary shook his head, startled to realize he'd let his mind drift like that. "Sorry."

Only Geary might have been able to see the concern in the look Desjani gave him, but she went on speaking as if everything was routine. "The first nickel corvette may jump back for Cavalos in a little while to let them know we're still here." Her expression shifted, now professionally unrevealing. "Since we are still here."

"We need everything we can salvage from the material the Syndics left behind when they pulled the last people out of this star system decades ago," Geary replied, trying not to speak angrily in response to Desjani's prodding.

"We've lifted all of the abandoned food already." Desjani made a face. "If I can use the term 'food' loosely. The fleet is still going to have to reduce rations again to stretch out what food we've got left." She shrugged. "That's one good thing about the slop we're getting from the cast-off Syndic stockpiles. No one really wants to eat a lot of it, so shortening the rations doesn't bother the crews as much as it would if the food were edible."

"I guess there's a bright side to everything." Geary smiled briefly as he rechecked the information on the raw minerals being loaded into the bunkers on the fleet's auxiliaries, then realized that Desjani had first made her point about the need for the fleet to move and then deliberately changed the subject to defuse his resentment.

I shouldn't be angry. It's a legitimate concern for every commanding officer in this fleet. When are we leaving Dilawa, and where are we going? We've been here for almost a day and a half, and that's probably at least one day too long.

There weren't any good reasons for staying at Dilawa. A star without any habitable worlds orbiting it, Dilawa had once boasted only a small human presence, perhaps several thousand judging from the facilities the Syndics had left behind. Those humans had been here because the old faster-than-light system jump drives could only take ships from star to nearby star, requiring ships to pass through every star system on the way to their objectives. The hypernet had changed that, allowing ships to go from any gate in the net directly to any other gate, leaving the human presence in many unexceptional star systems to dwindle gradually as the interstellar traffic bypassed them.

But those old jump drives were getting his fleet home, one star system at a time, and the hypernet had proved to be a threat to the very existence of humanity. *Dauntless* was also carrying a Syndic hypernet key, which could provide a decisive advantage to the Alliance if it could be safely delivered into Alliance space. If he didn't get the fleet home, that key and the knowledge of the threat posed by the hypernet would be lost along with the warships and their crews. The costs of failure seemed higher every time he thought about them. "Let me know if anything changes," he asked Desjani.

"Yes, sir." Desjani's image disappeared, but not before her expression and her tone somehow conveyed the message that something needed to be changing and wasn't.

He sat there, the star display centered on Dilawa once again floating above the table before him. No matter how long he stared at it, though, the display refused to perform like a crystal ball and offer answers from its depths to the questions he had to resolve.

Primarily, where to go from Dilawa.

Just make up your mind, Geary told himself. He'd done it many times already during the fleet's long retreat through enemy space. It shouldn't have been that hard a decision. There weren't that many jumps left before the fleet reached a Syndicate Worlds' border star system from which it could jump back to Alliance space. It should be easy, with safety so close. Instead it felt harder every time he approached the decision. He kept hesitating, each possible choice running hard into visions of what had gone wrong at Lakota and the losses suffered at Cavalos. And now memories from the destruction of *Merlon* were adding to the mix.

He'd considered asking Victoria Rione, Co-President of the Callas Republic and a member of the Alliance Senate, for her opinion. But the Alliance politician had refused to offer advice of that nature for some time.

Outwardly, Rione claimed it was because she'd been wrong so many times in what she wanted the fleet to do. If there was another agenda driving Rione in the matter, he wasn't sure what it was. Though for a while they'd been off-and-on lovers in the physical sense, Rione had kept much of herself hidden from him even during that phase of their relationship, before they both ended it.

In any event, he'd seen little of her in the last couple of days. "I need to concentrate on employing my informants throughout this fleet," she'd told him. "We need to find which Alliance officers have escalated their opposition to your command of the fleet to the point of employing malicious worms in the fleet's operating systems." Since those worms had once nearly caused the destruction of some of the fleet's ships, Geary couldn't argue with her priorities.

There were others he could ask. Intelligent, reliable, and thoughtful officers like Captain Duellos of the *Courageous*, Captain Tulev of the *Leviathan*, and Captain Cresida of the *Furious*.

But Geary sat alone and eyed his star display, feeling a strange reluctance to seek advice, despite knowing that further delay could be fatal.

His hatch alert chimed, identifying the person seeking entry as Captain Desjani. He authorized entry, wondering what could have brought her here. Given the widespread rumors about his being involved with Desjani, she didn't come to his stateroom very often.

The truth was that they were involved, though neither would, in any way, speak of or act on the feelings they hadn't sought. Not while he was fleet commander and she was in his chain of command.

"Has something happened?" he asked.

Desjani nodded toward the star display. "I wanted to talk with you privately about your future operational plans, sir."

That should have been welcome, because he knew how well Desjani could handle a tactical situation, but this was an operational decision. Or so Geary told himself, wondering why he was reluctant to hear what she had to say. But how could he put her off? Admitting uncertainty would only justify Desjani's request to discuss the matter. "All right."

She walked in, seeming unusually distant, then stood before the star display, not directly facing Geary. "You seemed a little off earlier, sir."

"Bad dream." Desjani looked his way with a wordless question, and Geary shrugged. "About my old ship, and waking up and everything."

"Oh." Desjani's eyes went back to the star display. "We were so caught up in finding you that we didn't realize how badly shaken you were. I've often wished we'd handled it differently, telling you how long it had been, the fate of your crew. I must have sounded very callous."

"I don't think there was any good way to tell me all of that, and no, you didn't strike me as callous. It was obvious you knew I had to be told, and no one else was going to do it."

"Certainly not Admiral Bloch," Desjani agreed. "I've often wondered what your first impressions of me were."

He grimaced, trying to remember. "I wasn't thinking clearly at all. There was so much. I remember wondering how you could possibly have accumulated so many battle ribbons. And the Fleet Cross. How did

you earn that, anyway?"

Desjani sighed. "At Fingal. I was just a lieutenant on the old *Buckler*. We'd fought until the ship was a wreck, and the Syndics boarded."

"What did you do?"

"I helped fight them off." Her gaze lifted, focused somewhere else.

"Any actions worthy of the Fleet Cross must have been a great deal more than 'helped fight them off,'" Geary commented.

"I did my duty." She fell silent for a moment.

Geary respected Desjani's right to tell that story where and when she wanted. There might be a lot of trauma behind the events that had led to the medal. He watched her, surprised by the topics she'd brought up. "Did you come down here just to talk about those things?"

"Not just that." She paused and took a deep breath. "I'm aware that you don't usually discuss your plans in advance," Desjani began in much more formal tones.

"Sometimes I do," Geary admitted.

She waited, but when he didn't say anything else, didn't offer his thoughts on what he intended, Desjani's brow lowered slightly. Her voice still didn't betray any emotion, however. "I've been reviewing the information we have on Syndic star systems we can reach from Dilawa. I assume you intend going to Heradao Star System, but you haven't yet communicated that intention even though the fleet needs to leave this star system."

If he'd heard right, that was one of the closest things to a rebuke that he'd ever gotten from Desjani. Geary frowned a bit. "I haven't decided on our next destination." There. He'd said it.

Desjani waited again for him to elaborate, then spoke firmly. "The other star systems accessible from here are back to Cavalos, which wouldn't accomplish anything but getting us farther from home, Topira, which leads down and back into Syndic space, Jundeen, which is isolated and would offer no destinations within jump range except back here, and Kalixa, which has a Syndic hypernet gate. Heradao is the only reasonable objective given the threat posed by that hypernet gate at Kalixa and the lack of advantages in going to Cavalos, Topira, or Jundeen."

"I'm already aware of the situations in all of the star systems we can reach from here," Geary replied. "Is there anything else?"

She gave him a hard look, apparently ignoring his implied dismissal. "Some of the Syndic records we captured at Sancere indicate there are Alliance prisoners of war in a labor camp at Heradao."

"I'm aware of that as well."

"Captain Geary," Desjani said in a low voice, "I am a fleet officer and the commanding officer of your flagship, and both of those positions require that I communicate my opinions and advice when I deem it necessary."

Geary nodded. "I don't deny that. You've given me your opinion. Thank you. There are a lot of other factors

for me to consider."

"Such as?"

He stared at her, startled by the abrupt question. "I'm still ...; formulating them in my own mind."

"Perhaps I can help."

A wall of resistance rose in Geary, though he didn't understand why. "I appreciate the offer, but I'm not ready to discuss options yet. There are advantages and disadvantages to all possible star systems we can reach from here."

"Captain Geary, it's not like you to avoid making a decision."

His frown returned, deeper this time. "I'm not avoiding making a decision, and this conversation isn't helping things. Is there anything else?" he repeated.

"What about the Alliance prisoners of war at Heradao?" Desjani asked, her tone getting more clipped.

"For one thing," Geary replied, getting aggravated himself, "we don't know that they're still at Heradao. The Syndic records we've acquired are all old. That POW camp might have been relocated a long time ago. For another thing, the Syndics will know that the presence of Alliance POWs in the system will increase the chance that this fleet will go there, and that means they could be laying a trap in Heradao right now."

Desjani stood silently, her breathing unusually controlled, then finally spoke. "How would the Syndics know that we knew a POW camp was at Heradao? They don't know what Syndic records we've picked up."

That was a legitimate question, but for some reason it made Geary even more irritated. "You know full well that I'm willing to take reasonable risks to rescue Alliance POWs."

"Yes, sir."

No matter the literal meaning of the words, Geary had learned that a simple *yes, sir* from Desjani meant that she was unhappy, that she was disagreeing with something. "I'm not at all certain that the advantages of going to Heradao outweigh the risks," Geary added, growing aggravation giving extra warmth to his words.

"Sir, I must *respectfully* point out that there are risks no matter where we go, and the longer we linger here, the worse those risks will become."

Geary heard her tone and felt his jaw tighten. "And I must *respectfully* point out that I, not you, have responsibility for the survival of this fleet."

"I'll try to keep that in mind, sir," Desjani stated crisply.

Geary glowered at her. "You know, that sort of attitude and this conversation aren't exactly making my life easier."

She turned slightly to face Geary and glowered right back. "Not to be too blunt about it, but at the moment the question of how easy your life happens to be is rather far down the list of priorities. That's true of a ship's commanding officer, and it's even more true of the fleet commander. I repeat that I have a duty to give the best advice I can to the commander of this fleet, and I will damned well do so even if he chooses to disregard it."

"Fine." Geary made a sharp wave at the star display. "What's your advice?"

"I told you. Go to Heradao."

"And I told you that I've already considered that." She waited for him to continue, then shook her head.

"You're afraid. I've seen it growing since Lakota and Cavalos."

Geary stared at Desjani, shocked to hear those words from her. "Is that advice supposed to be helping me? Why are you talking like Numos or Faresa?"

Desjani's face reddened alarmingly. "Don't you dare compare me to those individuals! *Sir.*"

Geary tamped down his own temper and swallowed a biting response. She had a right to be upset. He never should have even implied Desjani was like those two officers. She wasn't political, she'd never questioned his status as commander of the fleet, and she was a fine commanding officer of her ship. All of which made her totally different from under-arrest Captain Numos and now-dead Captain Faresa. "My apologies," Geary said in a stiffly proper voice. "Why did you accuse me of being afraid?"

"I didn't *accuse* you." Desjani made a visible effort to control her own anger. "I'm not trying to establish which of us was conceived with the bigger gonads. But in talking with you and observing you, I have seen subtle changes, which have increased since Cavalos." She nodded abruptly toward the star display. "Ever since assuming command of this fleet, you've used a mix of cautious and bold actions to keep the enemy off-balance and win victories. I think you depend on your instincts for when to proceed boldly or cautiously, because neither I nor anyone else has been able to identify a pattern. But I can see a pattern now in you, and it tells me that you're afraid."

If anyone but Desjani were telling him this ...; If Rione were saying it, or one of his known opponents in the fleet ...; But it was Desjani. He'd had no firmer ally than her, no more reliable and capable supporter since assuming command of the fleet. She believed in him, originally because Desjani was one of those who thought the living stars themselves had sent him back to save the fleet and the Alliance, but now also because of what she said she'd seen in him. If he didn't listen to Desjani, he'd be a fool. Geary took a couple of calming breaths. "What pattern?"

She seemed to have calmed as well, speaking determinedly but without heat. "I've tried to see things through your eyes as the fleet commander. In the Syndic home star system and afterward, the odds of this fleet getting home seemed very small. Risks were easier to take because every possible course of action held serious threats. Caution often didn't make sense because boldness was necessary, and the obvious result of too much caution would have been the destruction of the fleet. But we're close to home now." She pointed at the representation of Dilawa, then swung her hand to indicate Alliance space. "So close. And now risks *seem* more dangerous, because we've made it this far, against all odds, and you're looking at that and the small distance left to Alliance space and thinking how awful it would be to get the fleet this close and have it destroyed *now* because you made a serious error."

"I have made serious errors," Geary stated heavily. "Such as taking this fleet to Lakota—"

"Which was a calculated risk, and in the end it worked! And taking us to Cavalos was a risk because we might encounter the Syndics there, and we did meet them, and we beat them." Desjani clenched one fist and kept her eyes fixed on his. "The losses we took at Lakota and Cavalos were the worst since you assumed command. That wasn't your fault. Any other commander I know of would have lost a lot more ships in those battles, and would have lost the battles for that matter. Those losses weren't in vain. We've hurt the Syndics

badly, and we're close to home."

The words finally came out from deep inside him. "The ships we lost at Lakota and Cavalos won't reach home, and neither will most of their crews."

"They died so their comrades would make it! Don't negate their sacrifices by becoming so fearful of more losses that you end up losing all! The time for risks is not past. I can understand how you fear failing now, after bringing the fleet this far, but we are still in enemy territory, and excess caution carries a great danger in itself. You can't win unless you try to win, but you can lose by trying not to lose."

She had a point. Had fear of failure after succeeding this far caused him to shy away from the sorts of risks he knew had to be taken to win, to survive? Geary gazed at the star display, trying to sort out his feelings and his thinking. "Do I follow my instincts or not?" he finally said, as much to himself as to Desjani.

"What are your instincts actually telling you?" she asked.

"The consequences of getting caught in a bad position again—"

"Those are your *fears*. What are you instincts saying?"

Geary met her eyes again, realizing she was right. "Heradao."

"Then follow them," Desjani urged.

He exhaled heavily, pointing to where the fleet's status was displayed. "Dammit, Tanya, you know the state of the fleet as well as I do. We've only got twenty battleships left, even if we count in *Orion*, and *Orion* appears determined to see how long it can possibly take to repair battle damage. There are only sixteen battle cruisers remaining in the fleet, and of those, *Courageous*, *Incredible*, *Illustrious*, and *Brilliant* are barely combat-capable after the damage they sustained at Cavalos. The scout battleship division is down to one surviving ship, there are exactly forty-one specter missiles and fifteen mines left in the entire fleet, and every cruiser and destroyer in the fleet has at least one weapons system jury-rigged to keep functioning despite battle damage. And fuel-cell reserves on the fleet's warships are down to an average of only fifty-two percent. That's no way to go into a battle."

Instead of answering immediately, Desjani reached over and highlighted the status of the four fleet auxiliaries. "I know you've already checked this. *Goblin*, *Jinn*, *Witch*, and *Titan* are working all out to manufacture what this fleet needs to keep going. But from the beginning their efforts haven't been enough to gain ground on our logistics situation while we were facing constant threats inside Syndic territory. Even with all the risks we've taken to keep those auxiliaries supplied with the raw materials they need, they simply don't have the manufacturing capacity to keep up with this fleet's combat consumption of fuel cells and expendable weaponry. Not with all of the maneuvering that your tactics demand."

He couldn't deny that. "You're right. I've already checked that."

"So you already know that, until we get back to Alliance space, it's not going to get better." Desjani hammered home. "The fuel-cell situation is at the point where the auxiliaries have to devote everything they can to making new ones, meaning they can't manufacture new missiles. They can give us new grapeshot, and stocks of that are rising to acceptable levels right now. But the missile and mine situation will not improve, and until we make it home, we're going to keep using fuel cells faster than we can make them. There won't be a better time to fight the Syndics than Heradao. We're low on everything, and we do have accumulated battle damage, but they've taken terrible losses. Given time, the enemy will recover faster than we can inside

their own territory."

He looked at the star display again, his eyes going from Heradao across the light-years to Alliance space.

Desjani watched him for a few moments, then spoke again, her voice softer. "You're also worried about what happens when the fleet gets home, aren't you?"

Geary shifted his gaze, his eyes locking on her again, as Desjani continued.

"You're worried about facing a place you knew as home a hundred years ago and all the changes since then." Desjani nodded toward the region of Alliance space. "Most importantly, you're much more worried about what most of this fleet expects you to do once we get home."

Did he have no secrets from this woman? Had he ever actually discussed those things with her in those terms? Geary shook his head, though not in denial of her words. "I won't do it, Tanya. I don't care if most of the fleet, and most of the citizens of the Alliance for that matter, want the great, legendary Black Jack Geary to ride in on a white horse and toss out the elected leaders of the Alliance. I won't destroy what makes the Alliance worth fighting for in the name of defending the Alliance. But a lot of people are expecting that; some of those people will probably try to force my hand, and I have no idea how to deal with that."

"Yes, you do." Desjani's gaze held his. "You already know what you *won't* do. You have a strategic goal, to preserve what makes the Alliance worth fighting for and to end this war. Consider ways to implement that strategy, and the tactics will follow."

"It's not that easy—"

"Not if you try to do it alone! Ask for advice! Is there no one you trust in this fleet except the politician?"

That made Geary look away for a moment. Just as Rione had long since stopped using Desjani's name, Desjani herself had started referring to Co-President Rione only as "the politician." On one level, the job description was true enough, but politicians were also despised by a fleet that, after a century of war, had come to blame them for the failure to achieve victory. "Do you want to know why I haven't asked you for advice on that?" he asked.

"It might be a refreshing change of pace for you to tell me."

Damn. What had gotten into Desjani? Geary met her eyes once more. "Because I'm afraid you'll agree to whatever I say, that you'll break your own oath and follow me no matter what I do, because you believe that the living stars sent me to this fleet and are guiding me."

Desjani nodded, her expression resolute. "Yes, I would follow you." As Geary openly winced, she held out a forestalling hand. "Because I *know* you were sent to this fleet with a divine mission and that you do benefit from special guidance. Because of that, I also *know* that you will not do something that you have sworn not to do. I know you will not destroy the Alliance, and therefore I know I can follow you and help you, *if you will let me*. There are others who will help you figure out a course of action if you confide in us, and I'm sure you know who they are. Give us credit for loving the Alliance as much as you. I admit that at one time I could have been talked into accepting a military coup, but not now, not after the things of which you've reminded us all. Our own attempts to match Syndic brutality have only served to convince the Syndic populace of the need to keep fighting hard against us, and there wouldn't be much point in winning if victory meant becoming the mirror image of our enemies. But like the problems with the Syndics, political problems within this fleet and at home will not get better if you defer dealing with them."

A host of retorts and rebuttals came to Geary, but he knew every single one of them would either deny what he knew to be the truth or avoid the real issues. He sat staring at the stars once more as the fragments of what he knew and what Desjani had said fell into place inside his own mind, forming a picture he recognized as accurate, then he finally nodded. "Thank you. You're right. About everything. I've been avoiding a decision. I was seeing it all, but I wouldn't put it together because I was haunted by the thought of losing this fleet on the threshold of safety and because I was letting worries about what would happen when we got home further paralyze me."

Desjani grinned, the tension having suddenly fled from her. "We're going to Heradao?"

"Yes, Tanya, we're going to Heradao. We're going to get those Alliance prisoners of war, if they're still there, and we're going to defeat whatever force the Syndics might have gathered at Heradao. And I'm going to work on that strategy for when we reach Alliance space."

"You can ask Captain Duellos, Captain Tulev—"

"And you," Geary interrupted her list. "It seems you're a very important part of my 'special guidance.' " Desjani actually flushed slightly at the praise. "I wouldn't have reached these decisions on my own, and I've been avoiding anyone who would make me confront that. I needed you to push me into it because you know me a lot better than I realized you did and because you're a tough enough bitch to make me see what I was doing."

She smiled wider. "This tough bitch has had to deal with a lot of difficult sons of bitches in her time. You're one of the more reasonable ones. Sir."

"Thank you." He hesitated. "Tanya, none of the other senior officers in the fleet seems to have picked up on what was bothering me."

"You never openly spoke of your growing caution. Knowing you well, from all the talks we've had, from all of the experiences we've described to each other, did make a difference. But from watching you I also knew that you were smart enough to realize how important advice from others can be. The fact that you were recently working to avoid such advice told me something, too."

"I guess I need to thank my ancestors that you're the captain of my flagship. Thank them again, I mean."

One corner of Desjani's mouth curled up in a half smile. "I'll take that as a professional compliment. Now, by your leave, sir, I have other matters to attend to, and you need to formulate the orders for the fleet's movement to Heradao."

"Certainly, Captain Desjani." He wrenched his eyes away from her smile and his mind away from wondering how her lips would feel against his. That wouldn't happen, not while he was in command of the fleet, not while this war lasted. She'd earned his respect countless times, and even if he'd failed to maintain proper professional feelings toward her, he could still be sure to grant her that respect in both public and private. So Geary simply stood up and returned her salute.

But she paused just before leaving and looked back at him. "I hope you don't take adversely anything I said, sir. I did feel obligated to speak honestly and forcefully."

"Thank you, Captain Desjani. I hope you will continue to speak with as much honesty and force whenever you feel it is appropriate, and I will listen when you do so. I've been told that I am one of the more reasonable sons of bitches in the fleet."

"That's probably true, sir, but don't let it go to your head."

He managed not to laugh until the hatch had closed behind her.

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