



The Lost Fleet: Beyond the Frontier: Leviathan

By Jack Campbell



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“One of the best military science fiction series on the market,” (*Monsters and Critics*) The Lost Fleet delivers thrilling combat on a grand space opera scale. Now, Admiral John “Black Jack” Geary embarks on a brand new mission—to defend the Alliance from itself—in *New York Times* bestselling author Jack Campbell’s latest action-packed novel...

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As the government attempts to conceal the existence of the A.I. warships—and its role in their creation—Geary pursues them, treading a fine line between mutiny and obedience. But it soon becomes clear that his fleet is no match for the firepower of the machine-piloted armada.

With the help of the Dancer species of aliens, Geary has tracked the A.I. ships to their secret base in the supposedly mythical Unity Alternate star system where his fleet, the last hope of the Alliance’s future, will end the conflict at any cost...

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Editorial Review

Review

“Campbell combines the best parts of military SF and grand space opera...Geary’s *Star Trek*-like mission of exploration sets the fleet up for plenty of exciting discoveries and escapades.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Rousing military-SF action.”—*Sci Fi Weekly*

“This series is the best military SF I’ve read in some time.”—GeekDad

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 and the spin-off Lost Stars series, as well as the Stark’s War series and the Paul Sinclair series. His short fiction appears frequently in *Analog* magazine. He lives with his indomitable wife and three children in Maryland.

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For S., as always.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE FIRST FLEET OF THE ALLIANCE

ADMIRAL JOHN GEARY, COMMANDING

SECOND BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Gallant

Indomitable

Glorious

Magnificent

THIRD BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Dreadnaught

Orion (lost at Sobek)

Dependable

Conqueror

FOURTH BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Warspite

Vengeance

Revenge

Guardian

FIFTH BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Fearless

Resolution

Redoubtable

SEVENTH BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Colossus

Encroach

Amazon

Spartan

EIGHTH BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Relentless

Reprisal (returned to Callas Republic)

Superb

Splendid

FIRST BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Inspire

Formidable

Brilliant (lost at Honor)

Implacable

SECOND BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Leviathan

Dragon

Steadfast

Valiant

FOURTH BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Dauntless (flagship)

Daring

Victorious

Intemperate

FIFTH BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Adroit (lost at Atalia)

SIXTH BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Illustrious

Incredible

Invincible (lost at Pandora)

FIFTH ASSAULT TRANSPORT DIVISION

Tsunami

Typhoon

Mistral

Haboob

FIRST AUXILIARIES DIVISION

Titan

Tanuki

Kupua

Domovoi

SECOND AUXILIARIES DIVISION

Witch

Jinn

Alchemist

Cyclops

THIRTY-ONE HEAVY CRUISERS IN SIX DIVISIONS

First Heavy Cruiser Division

Third Heavy Cruiser Division

Fourth Heavy Cruiser Division

Fifth Heavy Cruiser Division

Eighth Heavy Cruiser Division

Tenth Heavy Cruiser Division

Emerald and Hoplon lost at Honor

FIFTY-FIVE LIGHT CRUISERS IN TEN SQUADRONS

First Light Cruiser Squadron

Second Light Cruiser Squadron

Third Light Cruiser Squadron

Fifth Light Cruiser Squadron

Sixth Light Cruiser Squadron

Eighth Light Cruiser Squadron

Ninth Light Cruiser Squadron

Tenth Light Cruiser Squadron

Eleventh Light Cruiser Squadron

Fourteenth Light Cruiser Squadron

Balestra lost at Honor

Lancer lost at Atalia

ONE HUNDRED SIXTY DESTROYERS IN EIGHTEEN SQUADRONS

First Destroyer Squadron

Second Destroyer Squadron

Third Destroyer Squadron

Fourth Destroyer Squadron

Sixth Destroyer Squadron

Seventh Destroyer Squadron

Ninth Destroyer Squadron

Tenth Destroyer Squadron

Twelfth Destroyer Squadron

Fourteenth Destroyer Squadron

Sixteenth Destroyer Squadron

Seventeenth Destroyer Squadron

Twentieth Destroyer Squadron

Twenty-first Destroyer Squadron

Twenty-third Destroyer Squadron

Twenty-seventh Destroyer Squadron

Twenty-eighth Destroyer Squadron

Thirty-second Destroyer Squadron

Zaghna lost at Pandora

Plumbatae, Bolo, Bangalore, and Morningstar lost at Honor

Musket lost at Midway

Kururi and Sabar lost at Atalia

FIRST FLEET MARINE FORCE

Major General Carabali, commanding

3,000 Marines on assault transports and divided into detachments on battle cruisers and battleships

ONE

“FIVE minutes to exit from jump space,” Captain Tanya Desjani said from her seat next to Admiral John “Black Jack” Geary on the bridge of the Alliance battle cruiser *Dauntless*. “All systems at maximum combat readiness.”

The warships commanded by Geary had left the blood and fire of Atalia Star System in pursuit of the dark

ships that had carried out the destruction there. Geary and the others called them “dark ships” because their hulls were a duskier shade than most warships’, perhaps because of special stealth materials. It hadn’t been the crews of the dark ships that had committed the atrocities at Atalia and at Indras Star System but the dark ships themselves. The dark ships lacked human crews who could have overridden automated systems that had developed deadly glitches or perhaps been deliberately sabotaged by any of a variety of malware. Having finally won the century-long war against the Syndicate Worlds, the Alliance government had decided not to place its faith in the men and women who had paid the price for that victory, instead placing its trust in robotic systems that had already set ablaze two star systems.

Geary’s Task Force *Dancer* had left Varandal with twelve battle cruisers, eight heavy cruisers, thirteen light cruisers, and twenty-five destroyers. The battle cruiser *Adroit* had been lost in the fighting at Atalia, along with the light cruiser *Lancer* and the destroyers *Kururi* and *Sabar*. Four battle cruisers, *Leviathan*, *Dragon*, *Steadfast*, and *Valiant*, along with some heavy cruisers and destroyers, had remained at Atalia to assist damaged ships and recover wreckage from destroyed dark ships.

Only seven battle cruisers were left in the pursuit force.

That would be enough. If they could catch the surviving dark ships, which had fled from the destruction they had wrought at Atalia.

—

“ARE automatic software updates disabled for *Dauntless*’s systems?” Geary asked.

“Yes, sir.” Tanya could be informal at other times, but now she was sharp, precise, and dangerous, a human weapon honed by the last decades of the brutal war with the Syndics. “My people are actively monitoring all systems, and if something tries overriding the block on updates, they have orders to shut down those systems and do a cold reboot from last-day backups.”

“Good,” Geary said. “It’s a hell of a thing not to be able to trust our own software.”

Desjani shook her head. “We could never completely trust our software. It wasn’t just flaws and glitches, it was also all the malware that enemy hackers could come up with to cause our software to misbehave. Humans separate from the machines are the only firewalls proven to be reliable enough. That’s why we always kept humans in the loop, for those times when the software got its artificial little brains twisted.”

“‘Always’ until those dark ships were built,” Geary said, his tones tight with anger.

“Yes.” She leaned closer and spoke more quietly. “If the dark ships went berserk after they arrived at Varandal, like they did at Atalia, stopping them from doing a lot of damage might be impossible for us. They were nearly two hours ahead of us when they jumped for Varandal, and if they accelerated after they left jump space, they will have opened that lead. And none of the defenses at Varandal will be able to see the dark ships at all to counter them.”

“I know,” Geary said, trying not to let his frustration sound too clearly. “Thanks to official software updates designed to keep us blind to the dark ships. Are the software patches that fix the damage caused by those updates ready to send as soon as we arrive at Varandal?”

“Yes, sir. The First Fleet ships still at Varandal will install the patches on your say-so because you’re the fleet commander, but other Alliance forces not directly reporting to you may not,” she reminded him. “They’ll argue that these are unauthorized modifications to official software, so they need approval from

their own chain of command to install them.”

“If they’re already getting shot up by warships that are invisible to their sensors, they may be motivated to ignore regulations concerning unauthorized software modifications.”

“One minute to exit from jump space,” Lieutenant Castries called from her watch station at the back of the bridge.

Geary fixed his eyes on his display. A marker to one side confirmed that *Dauntless*’s weapons systems, like those of the other warships in this pursuit force, were set to open fire immediately if any dark ships were within range when the Alliance warships left jump space. He didn’t think they would be, though. The artificial-intelligence routines governing the dark ships’ tactical decisions were apparently closely based on Geary’s own methods, and under these circumstances, if he had been the commander of the dark ships, he would not have attempted an ambush against a force with as much an advantage in firepower as Task Force *Dancer* still possessed.

The jolt of transition from the gray nothingness of jump space back to the real universe hit Geary. He was barely aware of the sudden reappearance of the stars in the endless blackness of space, his mind dazed by the transition, but even while fighting off the effects of the exit from jump, Geary noticed that none of *Dauntless*’s weapons were firing.

His display swam back into focus as Geary concentrated on it.

Desjani was a second faster than he was in getting her mind working right again. “They’re heading for the hypernet gate.”

“To attack it, or to use it to get away?” he wondered aloud. “At least they’re not moving into the star system to attack the ships and facilities.”

Space had no up or down, no east or west to determine directions, so humans had made up their own. Every star system had a plane in which planets orbited. One side of that plane was labeled up, the other down. Any direction toward the star was starboard or starward, while any direction away from the star was port. The conventions were simple, but they worked to give common references for ships that might be pointed in any direction, upside down or at right angles to each other.

The dark ships that had escaped from Atalia, two battle cruisers, one heavy cruiser, and five destroyers, were to port of Geary’s ships and diving down slightly as they moved at a steady point two light speed for the hypernet gate orbiting six light-hours from the jump point where Geary’s ships had just arrived. “They’re three hours’ travel time ahead of us. We won’t have any chance of catching them before they reach the gate,” Desjani said. “We’d better hope they’re running and that their warped artificial brains haven’t decided the gate is also an enemy target.”

“Status signals from the gate indicate that the safe-collapse mechanism is operational,” reported Lieutenant Yuon, the weapons systems watch-stander on *Dauntless*’s bridge.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. At least if the dark ships do attack it, we don’t have to worry about the gate’s setting off a nova-scale explosion when it collapses. They’ll reach the gate in another twenty-seven hours.” She ran some quick calculations. “There are two destroyers at the gate. Maybe . . . damn. The only other units already at Varandal that are positioned to be able to intercept the dark ships are several more destroyers and light cruisers.”

“Those wouldn’t stand a chance even if they could see the dark ships,” Geary said. “We may not be able to catch the dark ships, but we can stay on their tails.” He tapped a comm control. “All units in Task Force Dancer, immediate execute accelerate to point two five light speed, come port two five degrees, down zero three degrees.”

“Are we going to chase them through the hypernet gate?” Desjani asked.

“If we have to,” Geary said. “We have to find their base, wherever it is.” He checked the fuel cell status on his ships and let out an angry breath. “I’ll have to leave our destroyers here if we do that. Their fuel supplies are getting too low. Now, let’s get the word out to everyone here,” Geary added, his mood and his voice grim. He could see the many defenses at Varandal, the numerous warships and installations, all at standby readiness because the war with the Syndics had at last ended. “Why aren’t they reporting peacetime readiness instead of standby?” Geary grumbled.

“Because nobody but you remembers what peacetime readiness is,” Desjani reminded him. “And if the attack on Indras by those dark ships causes the Syndics to retaliate, this peace business may already be over with before the rest of us can figure out what it means.”

“I hope you’re wrong about that. At least if the Syndics attack our defenses, we will be able to see *them*.” Even after experiencing on these ships how secret software modifications had left Alliance sensors unable to see the dark ships, it was still hard to grasp that everything else in this star system would be totally unaware of the dark ships that were passing through. Many of those defenses were too far off to have seen the dark ships yet regardless, of course, let alone the more recent arrival of Geary’s ships. Light only moved at about eighteen million kilometers a minute, so with distances inside a star system measured in hundreds of millions or billions of kilometers, even light took a while to get places.

But other defenses, other ships closer to this edge of the star system, should have seen the dark ships by now. If their own software were not blinding them to the presence of the hostile forces.

“What you are about to do will raise hell,” Desjani commented.

“I know that,” he replied. “Are you advising me not to do it?”

“No.” Her grin was fierce. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Geary couldn’t help a tense, humorless smile in return, then composed himself, touched the transmit command, and began sending the message he had been rehearsing during the long days in jump space since leaving Atalia. “All units in the First Fleet, there are hostile forces in this star system that your software is blocking all sight of. These are not, repeat not, enigma warships. Our best estimate is that these are fully automated combatants that have slipped whatever controls were supposed to limit their actions.”

He paused a moment to let that sink in before continuing. “We have engaged in combat with those forces at Atalia, where they, without provocation or warning, attacked Alliance as well as civilian shipping and caused extensive destruction and loss of life. These hostile warships have already attacked Alliance warships and killed Alliance personnel. My task force is in pursuit of these ships, which are currently en route to Varandal’s hypernet gate. Based on their actions at Indras and Atalia, it must be assumed that any Alliance or civilian ships they encounter will be attacked and destroyed.

“Attached is a set of software patches you are to install on your ships. Disable automatic updates and permit no other updates until I personally authorize it. Your combat, maneuvering, sensor, database, and other systems contain hidden subroutines that mask the presence of the hostile warships. Once you have

implemented the software patches we are sending, we will forward identifying information on the hostile warships. If we sent that information now, your own communications systems would strip out all traces of anything related to the hostile warships. These software patches are personally authorized by me as commander of the First Fleet. Geary, out.”

He tapped in another command, this one aimed at the two destroyers on picket duty at the hypernet gate. “*Mortar, Serpentine*, this is Admiral Geary. There are hostile warships in overwhelming force approaching your orbit. You cannot detect those warships until the attached software patches are fully applied to all of your systems. Immediate execute, accelerate to point two light speed and proceed on a vector toward Ambaru Station while applying the patches. Geary, out.”

“That should have them nowhere nearby when the dark ships reach the gate,” Geary told Desjani.

“If they follow that order,” she said. “And if they don’t head back to the gate as soon as they apply the patches. If they do. Those two destroyers are not part of the First Fleet. They belong to the Varandal local self-defense forces.”

“I know that.”

“You told them that enemy forces were approaching,” Desjani added implacably. “They’re not going to run.”

“I didn’t tell them to run,” Geary insisted. “I told them to head for another orbital location while fixing their system software.”

“Same difference, Admiral,” she said. “You’d better get Admiral Timbale to send them those orders if you want any chance of their being obeyed. Ambaru Station is currently three and a half light-hours from us, and the destroyers are about five light-hours from Ambaru, so if Timbale sends maneuvering orders to the two destroyers within a few hours after we warn him, there is enough time”

“I’m calling Timbale now,” Geary replied. Another command entered, then he spoke with quiet intensity. “Admiral Timbale, this is Admiral Geary. Be advised that there are hostile forces operating within Alliance space, and that hidden subroutines in our own software are preventing us from seeing those forces. A mixed force of hostile battle cruisers, heavy cruisers, and destroyers inflicted catastrophic damage at Indras Star System, damage which the Syndicate Worlds’ authorities at Indras blame on the Alliance. Courier ships must be sent as soon as possible to alert fleet headquarters and border star systems that the attack at Indras may trigger direct retaliatory attacks on Alliance star systems by the Syndicate Worlds. The same hostile warships caused extensive loss of life and property at Atalia and conducted a deliberate and unprovoked attack on the Alliance picket ship watching Atalia, destroying it without warning. They also attacked my ships, destroying one battle cruiser, a light cruiser, and two destroyers, and inflicting serious damage on other Alliance warships. I have reason to believe that these hostile warships are completely automated, with no human crews. They are very heavily armed, very maneuverable, and a force of them is currently traversing Varandal en route to the hypernet gate. I am in pursuit of them and will engage them again if possible. I have ordered the two destroyers on duty near the gate to reposition, but do not know if they will comply with orders from me. Attached is a set of software patches that will allow you to see the hostile warships and retain information about them in your databases. Geary, out.”

He sat back, feeling *Dauntless* accelerate as her main propulsion drove her in pursuit of the dark ships, the other warships of the task force arrayed around *Dauntless* and matching her movements. There was nothing else to do now. Space was too big for anything else to be done. All he could do was wait, and react when he finally received replies to his messages, which would take hours to reach the ships and places to which they had been sent, and hours more for replies to cross the same immense distances.

“At least there aren’t any surprises among our fleet,” Desjani remarked as she frowned at her display. “No ships missing since we left.”

He grimaced at the data being displayed. “But they’re still sending out false readiness status reports. I’ll need to find out what shape they are really in, and how much progress Captain Smythe’s boys and girls have made in repairing broken systems and battle damage.”

“We broke some more at Atalia,” Desjani pointed out. “Or, rather, the dark ships did.”

Geary nodded, keeping his eyes on his display. “Smythe was worried about how well *Adroit* would hold together when so many systems on her were built on the cheap. He was right. Why would people bother to build a warship and cut so many corners while doing it?”

“The Alliance was close to broke after a century of war,” Desjani said. “Remember?”

“They still are,” he said. “But they found enough money to build those damned dark ships, which might have already caused another war to start.”

She gave him that look, the one he hated to see, the one that believed Black Jack could do what others could not. “You can save it.”

He knew what “it” meant. The Alliance. “Tanya, how can I, how can anyone, save the Alliance? It is so much bigger than any one man or woman.”

“It’s not bigger than Black Jack,” Desjani reminded him. “He is the Alliance as far as most of the people are concerned. He came back from the dead when we needed him the most—”

“I wasn’t dead!”

“Technically, no. I’m talking legends and belief here, Admiral. Black Jack is also the one who reminded us of how far we had strayed from the things our ancestors believed in. He’s the one who finally beat the Syndics. Are you going to argue either of those points?”

He gave her a cross look. “Since when have I been able to win any arguments with you?”

“You give me an order, and it will be done,” Tanya told him. “But if you ask my opinion, you’ll get what I really think. And I really think that Black Jack can save the Alliance. Because most of us believe in him. Maybe during that century you spent frozen in survival sleep, when everyone thought you were dead and the government built Black Jack up to be the greatest hero ever, maybe the living stars and the ancestors really were talking to you. And maybe they still are.”

“Let’s hope so,” he said. “But, if they are, what they are telling me is that Black Jack alone can’t do the job. Just like beating the Syndics took a lot of brave men and women, saving the Alliance isn’t a one-person show. Even the Black Jack a lot of people believe in is going to need a lot of help.”

“He’s got it.”

“I know.” Despite his worries, Geary managed to smile at her. “Black Jack may be what gives others hope, but what gives me hope is knowing people like Tanya Desjani have my back.”

—

MESSAGES moving at the speed of light tore across the vast distances separating objects in space, moving much faster than the ships humanity had built but still feeling slow given how long it took them to reach their targets. It took six hours for the first replies to start coming in from the nearest of Geary's First Fleet warships that had remained at Varandal. Startled and bewildered, all ships indicated that they were applying the patches but all were wondering what was going on.

Given the distance to where the battleship *Dreadnaught* orbited, it required almost seven hours before they heard from Captain Jane Geary, who had been left in command of the majority of the First Fleet that had not accompanied Admiral Geary. "I'm glad you're back though I don't understand what happened," she said. "We're applying the software patches now, but some units have reported to me that they have received orders supposedly from Admiral Timbale instructing them not to apply the patches."

Jane Geary shook her head. "I haven't heard from Admiral Timbale, though, which is odd since he has contacted me whenever a matter concerned First Fleet ships. I've asked Admiral Timbale for clarification, but also told every First Fleet unit to comply with your orders, Admiral.

"You should know that I was interviewed by some government inspectors regarding the fleet repair work. I told them what I knew, which was that all repair work was necessary and funded through appropriate channels, then referred them to Captain Smythe. Geary, out."

"Smythe is going to be glad that Lieutenant Jamenson is back," Desjani commented, as Jane Geary's image vanished.

"He had Jamenson prepare plenty of reports before she left," Geary said. "That woman really is amazing. She could make the simplest thing impossibly confusing, and yet do it all by the book. I'd want her on my staff myself, if I had anything I wanted to hide. But what Jane said was true. All of the repair work is needed, and it's all been done by the book. Maybe the book didn't intend that we do things the way we did, but no one broke any rules."

Tanya twisted her mouth in a half smile. "If there were a rule against confusing things, fleet headquarters would find itself up on charges in no time."

He didn't smile in return as he gazed at the display before his command seat. The three hours of travel time, or about thirty light-minutes, that had separated Geary's ships from the dark ships was closing very slowly as the long stern chase offered no chance of actually catching the enemy before they were able to escape. If they turned to fight, he could finish them off, but as of a bit more than a half hour ago, the dark ships had kept forging steadily for the hypernet gate. "Tanya, I need a gut check from you."

"That's one of the reasons I'm here." She nodded toward where the dark ships were indicated on her display. "You're wondering if we should follow them through that gate if they take it?"

"Yes." He didn't bother asking how she had once again read his mind. In this case, the worry was the sort of thing anyone should have had. "We know the government was building twenty battle cruisers and twenty battleships in their secret fleet. We destroyed four of the battle cruisers at Atalia though only because we had a two-to-one superiority in numbers. If those fleeing dark ships are going back to their base and we follow them there, we might run head-on into the rest of the dark battle cruisers and battleships."

"That thought had occurred to me," Desjani said. "As did the thought that the resulting battle might be very short and very unpleasant for us. Can we afford to run that risk?"

He gave her a startled look. "You're saying that?"

“Yes, I’m saying that. Somebody we both know helped me realize that charging into a fight regardless of the odds might be brave, or just stupid. It depends. I agree that we have to find their base. Since as far as we know all sensor software has been rigged to not see those things, and the odds of anyone’s making an actual direct visual observation of anything in space are as close to zero as doesn’t matter, the base could be anywhere. Maybe even at Unity, where the government would think it would provide maximum security for them.”

“I don’t think so,” Geary said. “Yes, nobody would see them in space, but at the base itself, when the dark ships dock for maintenance, repair, and resupply of weapons and fuel cells, people would see them. And sooner or later, some of those people would talk to other people in whatever star system it was.”

“But you said no new facilities have been built.”

“Not as far as Captain Smythe could find out,” Geary said. “Following the money is the best form of intelligence we have on this mess, and the money says no new base facilities were constructed along with that new fleet. They must have a base where they can’t be seen, but where could that be?”

Desjani grimaced. “If we chase them there, we’ll get the answer. But how many ships should go? Should we send what we’ve got knowing that the odds against us are likely to be bad wherever those dark ships are going? Or should we just send a single ship with orders to take a quick look, then immediately head back here? Admiral, my best recommendation is that we wait to see where those things take the gate to. If it’s somewhere that might be their base, we won’t need to chase them immediately. But if it’s a big system, something like Unity, we’ll have to follow because the dark ships might be glitched enough to target things there, and we’ll have to stop them.”

“That would be the only thing we could do,” Geary agreed. “You’re right. If their destination is someplace a lot less populated, some border star system that was part of the defenses against the Syndics, that would point to that place as their base. Maybe a star system like Yokai, which was turned into a Special Defensive Zone, with no citizens allowed in to see things that they shouldn’t. It’s possible, though, that we’ll see some destination that’s ambiguous and leaves no clear guidance for what to do.”

“It’s a good thing we have Black Jack in command,” Desjani said. “He’ll know what to do.”

“Very funny.” He scowled at his display again, where the situation nearest the hypernet gate was unchanged. “*Serpentine* and *Mortar* should have begun moving by now.”

Desjani shook her head. “I told you they wouldn’t move. They have orders to guard that gate, and, by their ancestors, they’ll guard it and not run from some invisible enemy. And based on what Captain Jane Geary told us, I will lay you odds that those two destroyers have received orders, supposedly from Admiral Timbale, that tell them not to download those software patches.”

His gaze focused on her. “You and Jane have both used that term. ‘Supposedly from Admiral Timbale.’ Why?”

She paused, frowning. “I’m not criticizing the actions of a superior officer—”

“Which is something you’d never do.”

“Who’s being funny, now?” Desjani asked. “I don’t believe that Admiral Timbale sent those messages to some of your ships because from all that you’ve told me and all that I’ve seen, he has been a pretty reliable supporter of yours. He’s backed Black Jack a few times when it was obviously hazardous to his career. He’s

also kept arm's length from anything he did not have to be involved in, so that you would have freedom to operate. Why would that man send orders to some of the ships under your command telling them not to do what you told them to do?"

"He wouldn't." Geary looked down at the controls on one arm of his command seat. "But the biometrics built into the comm systems are supposed to ensure that anything sent under someone's name actually did come from that person."

"And the sensors on our ships are supposed to ensure that we see everything," Desjani pointed out. "But they weren't. Why wouldn't whoever is behind this dark ship stuff work to protect their lies by also messing with the comm systems? We already *know* that they've been messing with the comm systems in other ways."

"That's a good point," Geary said. He studied his display, thinking through possible options, many of which would burn bridges behind him if he took those paths. "They think they're right. Just like the people who wanted to build those dark ships. So anything they decide to do must be right. Once you've already done a criminal amount of deliberate sabotage to comm systems on your own ships, why not take it another step to try to keep anyone from learning about the sabotage?"

She nodded, her eyes angry as they met his. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to do what I think is right," he replied, reaching to tap his comm controls. "*Mortar, Serpentine*, this is Admiral Geary. I am invoking my rank and an ongoing emergency situation in Varandal Star System to issue orders directly to you. Immediate execute, accelerate to point two light speed and proceed on a vector toward Ambaru Station. I repeat, this is an order given by me personally under emergency authority in the face of an imminent threat. Acknowledge this order and carry it out without any delay. Geary, out."

There was a good chance that he had directly and openly overridden orders issued in the name of another admiral. It wasn't just bad form, it was the sort of thing that impaired discipline and the entire chain of command. "This could tear everything apart," he muttered.

"Admiral," Desjani added, leaning close to ensure they were both inside the privacy field that kept their conversation from being heard by others on the bridge. She only did something like that when she considered it absolutely necessary. Since she and Geary had married during a brief interval while both were captains, they had both followed policies of acting strictly professional while aboard *Dauntless* or any other warship. Anything that might show they were personally close, something other than admiral and captain, was avoided, as was any form of personal contact.

"We didn't set this mess into motion," Desjani said. "You've been keeping your superiors aware of what you're doing, you've been following orders, and I know better than anyone that you have constantly questioned whether or not you are doing the right thing. The people we're dealing with have been lying to a lot of people and keeping what they're doing secret, so no one could question it and whether it's actually all that smart. They've lied to us, they've lied to the people of the Alliance, and odds are they've lied to a lot of people in the government itself."

Geary gave her a surprised look. "You think some of the senators don't know what's going on?"

"Yes. Which is weird coming from me, I know. A year ago I would have been certain they were all rotten and plotting against the fleet." She made a face. "But talking to you, and having a chance to actually get to know some senators, have made me realize that it's like evaluating good tactics and strategy for a situation. You have to learn as much as you can about whom you're facing, and not depend on preconceptions or prejudiced judgments or stereotypes, when deciding the best courses of action. You've told me you think

Navarro is all right, and I saw enough of Senator Sakai to form my own judgment.”

“And Senator Unruh,” Geary said, recalling how she had impressed him. “But then there are people like Senator Wilkes, who struck me as a total opportunist. I think that Senator Costa is sincere in her beliefs, but she’s also willing to let anyone else pay the price necessary for what she believes has to be done. I admit that I haven’t entirely figured out why Senator Suva would have gone along with this stuff.”

“She’s scared,” Desjani said, her tone making it clear what Tanya thought about people who made decisions based on fear. “Scared of people like you and me, who don’t fit into the way she thinks the universe ought to be. Scared of a universe that isn’t working the way it ought to, whatever way that is. People do dumb things when they’re scared. But I actually like her better than Senator Costa, who tries to come across like she’s the number one supporter of the fleet but just wants to use us for her own games no matter how much that might cost the men and women she claims to support with all her heart.”

Geary sat back, thinking, not really looking at his display for the moment. “Victoria Rione told me more than once that the government is like a clumsy giant, with one big hand and lots of little minds trying to make the hand do what they want. If enough of the minds are in agreement, the hand can get things done, for better or for worse, but if the minds are focused on fighting each other, then the hand just flails about.”

Tanya never liked it when he brought up Rione.

“That woman has been involved enough in such things to know all about them! Admiral, in this case it seems to me that some of the minds managed to get the hand doing things without a lot of the other minds knowing what was really going on. Suva thought the dark ships would keep her safe, but Costa probably just wanted a new, dangerous toy that would follow orders and not ask questions.”

He looked at her. “That attack on Indras, which could cause the Syndics to retaliate against us. We’ve talked about that, but we haven’t been able to figure out why someone ordered something so stupid.”

Desjani inhaled deeply, then met his eyes. “Looking at this situation now, and what else may have been done to our comm systems, I think our problem was we assumed that everyone else would realize how stupid it was. The Syndics have been violating the peace agreements in lots of ways, including covert actions coming out of Indras. Someone figured the appropriate response to that was retaliation.”

“That’s an appropriate response when you’re at war,” Geary said.

“So? People today don’t know peace. They know war. A lot of people don’t know how to handle peace, so they’re responding as if the war is still on. A war that justifies them and what they want to do, a war that keeps things just like they’d been for a century.” Desjani looked away, then back at him. “Even people in this fleet. Roberto Duellos is facing a tough decision that never would have come up if the war hadn’t ended. He doesn’t know what to do. He’s not the only one.”

Geary shook his head. “No. That doesn’t make sense—”

“It doesn’t make sense to *you*,” Tanya said forcefully. “To you, war is still an aberration, a temporary, unusual state of affairs. To us, war was how things always were. You, the legendary hero, threw out the certainties of our lives and replaced them with uncertainty.”

“Tanya, the Alliance was on the verge of collapsing from the costs of the war,” Geary said. “The Syndicate Worlds has collapsed in many areas, and—” He paused as he remembered something.

Desjani nodded firmly to him. “And the Syndic leaders have been trying to get the Alliance to attack again because the war justified them, too. The Syndic government wants everyone in Syndicate Worlds space to see us as the threat and themselves as the protectors. Whoever ordered the attack on Indras might have given the Syndic leaders what they wanted, and maybe the people on the Alliance side who gave those orders wanted the same thing as the Syndic leaders, an active enemy to validate what they want to do.”

Geary looked away, fighting off an impulse to reject her words. “You’re right. I can’t put myself in the same mental and emotional state as people today. I can’t imagine wanting to perpetuate war because of feeling that’s the way things should be. But I have seen the disruption that peace has caused, the people like Duellos who feel unmoored, and Duellos is lucky because he hasn’t been downsized and kicked out into star system economies reeling from the costs of the war and the sudden cutbacks in Alliance spending as defense expenditures were slashed. But I can’t imagine anyone seeking war as part of some cynical plan—”

“No.” Desjani shook her head, wearily this time. “You still don’t get it. They’re not being cynical. They’ve convinced themselves that they are doing the right thing. You and I met those former Syndics at Midway, people who have spent their lives serving the Syndic despots and an ugly, dictatorial system. Only a few of them struck me as evil, the sorts of people who did what they did because they wanted power and money and didn’t care who suffered and died. Most of them seemed like average people, who somehow rationalized serving the Syndics. I don’t know all of their reasons, but I suspect they were doing what they thought was the best thing. You met Captain Falco. How do you think he saw himself?”

“I know how he saw himself,” Geary said. “As the savior of the Alliance. As someone who knew the right things to do and would do them. He was wrong on all counts, but he was sincere. You think that’s what we’re dealing with?”

“You already said it,” Desjani replied. “Back at Atalia. They thought the dark ships were the perfect solution to all of their problems. And now that perfect solution has come home to roost.”

His eyes went back to his display. It would be hours before he knew whether or not the two destroyers had followed his orders. Or whether they would hold their ground, determined to do what they saw as their duty.

Usually, waiting was the worst part. This time, the worst part was knowing what was going to happen.

TWO

“ADMIRAL Geary, what’s going on?”

Admiral Timbale sounded as if he was torn between confusion and rage. His expression reflected the same tangle of emotions. “I received a fragmentary message from you, which then disappeared from the comm system. My comm techs were trying to find it and discovered that several messages had gone out under my name countermanding something you had sent even though I had no record of whatever that was. I don’t know why you’re heading for the hypernet gate so fast, or why comms between me and most of the ships in this star system are as messed up as if we had a corps of Syndic meegees at work here. I am requesting that you detach one of your destroyers to physically courier your latest messages to me, so I can be sure I have them and know what they say. Timbale, out.”

“He hasn’t even picked up on the threat, yet,” Geary said, appalled. “He thinks it might be the Syndics.” The term “meegee” was an ancient one, derived from an old acronym for electronic warfare techniques like intrusion, jamming, and interference. The equipment employed had changed considerably since the term was

first introduced, but the basic concepts for sabotaging and confusing enemy comms and sensors still applied.

“How could he understand the threat if the software is deleting anything that might clue him in?” Desjani asked.

“Could there be Syndic meegees at work here? Or is this all the work of our own meegees?”

She laughed. “The lines blurred on that so long ago that no one knows. Our people weaponize some code, their people find it and mess with it a little and shoot it back at us, then we rework what they did and fire it at them, and who the hell knows where most of it came from anymore? There are more viruses on our systems than there are viruses in our bodies, and the ones in our computer systems keep evolving a lot faster.”

“All right,” Geary said. “But Timbale had the right idea. I’ll detach *Hammer* to carry my information to him.”

Her eyes were on her display. “She won’t get there in time.”

The dark ships were only ten hours’ travel time away from the hypernet gate as they held their velocity at point two light speed. Two light-hours’ distance. Roughly two billion kilometers. It was a very, very large distance. But in this case, it wasn’t nearly large enough. From where Geary’s ships were, the destroyer *Hammer* would take nearly seven hours to reach Admiral Timbale at the vast orbiting complex named Ambaru Station. A message sent from Ambaru to the two destroyers guarding the hypernet gate would take four hours to reach them. Even if Timbale sent that order immediately, it would get there an hour too late.

Geary sat morosely on the bridge of *Dauntless* as he watched the inevitable taking place, the dark ships getting closer and closer to the oblivious destroyers at the hypernet gate. The only good thing was the number of his own ships here, battleships, heavy cruisers, light cruisers, and destroyers, who were calling in to acknowledge having downloaded the software fix, usually accompanied by startled questions as to what the dark ships were and what were they doing at Varandal.

But with the dark ships only five hours’ travel time from the hypernet gate, Geary frowned as a sudden thought came to him. “Tanya.”

She was still on the bridge as well, of course, looking totally unruffled by the hours spent up here. “Yes, Admiral?”

“Suppose I were commanding those dark ships—”

“As best we know, the artificial-intelligence routines running them are based on what you’ve done,” she pointed out.

“Exactly.” Geary pointed at his display. “I know I’m being pursued. I know that if I flee through the hypernet gate, I will reveal the place where my base is located, allowing the enemy to attack it and cut off my entire fleet at the knees. What do I do?”

Desjani frowned as well. “You? You sure as hell don’t use the gate. Not you.”

“No.” Geary sat up straighter, glaring at his display. “I realize that I can’t get away without betraying the rest of my fleet, so I have to stay here, and since that means being destroyed, I have to do whatever damage I can here before all of my ships are lost.”

She stared at him, then focused on her display, hands flying as she tested courses and actions. “Ancestors

preserve us. They're going to go for Ambaru, aren't they?"

"Yes. If we keep charging after them, and they turn aside from the hypernet gate at the last moment and head for Ambaru, we won't even see the maneuver for nearly three hours. My battle cruisers won't be positioned to be able to intercept them before they reach the station and blow apart the central command-and-control node for this star system."

"Why not just throw some rocks at it?" Desjani demanded, using the fleet nickname for kinetic bombardment projectiles, which really were little more than smoothed hunks of metal. "No one could—They've run out, haven't they?"

"Yeah," Geary said. "I think so. They used up their rocks beating the hell out of every possible target at Indras and Atalia. So they get us out of position chasing them, then charge at Ambaru and take it out at short range with their hell lances. They'll know exactly what to target on the station."

Her expression hardened into anger. "Because they'll have blueprints for every ship and station. Because the Alliance government was so worried about internal threats, it assumed its own military installations might have to be potential targets."

"That's what I think," Geary agreed, studying his display. "But if I'm right, we've still got time to mess up their plans. It won't be easy, though. I can move battleships to blocking orbits, but against something as maneuverable as the dark ships, that may not be enough."

"Focus on countering what you would do," she reminded him.

That required thinking a bit backwards. First, using the simulator on his display to figure out how to best position the battleships that could reach blocking orbits in time. Then, shifting perspective to look at those battleships and try to figure out the best way past them to reach Ambaru. It was as difficult, and as unsatisfying, as playing chess against himself. "Tanya, there's something wrong with this."

"What?" She leaned over, eyeing his display.

"Those dark ships are programmed to do what the programmers thought I would do, not what I would actually do," Geary explained.

"Not entirely. They based a lot of it on the battles you've actually fought. But I get your point," Desjani admitted. "You have to think like Black Jack the hero of legend as they think he is, because that's also who the dark ships will be thinking like. So what does the great hero do here?"

He took another look at the dark ships. Two battle cruisers, one heavy cruiser, and five destroyers. Then at his plans to defend Ambaru. There were twenty-one battleships left in his First Fleet. Several of those were laid up undergoing major repairs. Several more were not in orbits that would allow them to move to block the dark ships in time. That left seven battleships he could get into blocking orbits in time to meet the dark ships if they headed for Ambaru—*Warspite*, *Vengeance*, *Resolution*, *Redoubtable*, *Colossus*, *Amazon*, and *Spartan*. There would also be several divisions of light cruisers and destroyers, but the battleships would form the armored shield for the defense.

"Admiral Geary," he said slowly to Desjani, "me, that is, would swing wide and either up or down, outmaneuvering the blocking force and getting to Ambaru before the battleships could have any hope of lumbering into new positions."

“What would Black Jack do?” Desjani asked.

“Imagine that you knew what I’d done in past engagements, but still saw me as you once saw Black Jack.”

She thought, eyes hooded, then looked at him. “That guy, Black Jack, would have gone out in a blaze of glory. Again. Seven battleships form the core of the defensive screen. And Black Jack would have five destroyers that were already running low on fuel cells.”

“Yeah. Five destroyers without crews.”

“The programming running the dark ships has to care about losses,” Desjani pointed out, “or those ships would have fought to the end at Atalia rather than taking off. They’ll try to save their battle cruisers even if they’re willing to sacrifice the destroyers.”

He ran one finger through his display, tracing a possible path. “They could do it. A firing run on Ambaru, then bend their vector toward this jump point. All right. I think I know what they think I would do. Let’s get this done.”

Just looking at it from the godlike perspective of the display before his seat, the necessary maneuvers appeared simple. Move this ship here, move that one there, and so on. In practice, changing orbits was pretty complex. Fortunately, it was a complex math problem, and computers were very good at math. All Geary had to do was designate a ship, tell *Dauntless*’s maneuvering systems where he wanted that ship to go, and the necessary commands and vectors appeared so quickly that it seemed instantaneous.

He sent the commands to the individual battleships affected, as well as to the commanders of the light cruiser and destroyer divisions that would back up the battleships. Space was huge, so even the many ships he was sending out would form a very sparse screen indeed, but the point wasn’t to build a wall. It was to position mobile units so that they could move to intercept anything trying to get past them.

“What are we going to do?” Desjani asked.

“Hold course for now until we see the dark ships head for Ambaru,” Geary said.

“If we do that, we won’t be in a position to intercept them before they reach Ambaru!”

“I know. Even if we turned now, we couldn’t catch them in time. Every minute they spend heading toward the hypernet gate draws them farther away from a straight shot at Ambaru and allows us to try for an earlier intercept. We’ll wait until less than three hours before the dark ships would likely maneuver. That way they won’t see us changing our vector before their own planned maneuver. If they saw that, the dark ships would probably turn sooner and accelerate faster, and make our intercept impossible. Even if everything works right, it will be close. If the worst happens, I’ve got sixteen heavy cruisers that I can move to stop them after the dark ships clear the battleship screen.”

“Sixteen heavy cruisers?” Desjani shook her head. “Against two battle cruisers like that?” She paused in thought. “Maybe. If they at least make the battle cruisers divert their courses and mess up their firing runs—”

“It will be insurance that we’ll have time to catch those dark ships,” Geary finished.

At two and a half hours before the dark ships should reach the hypernet gate, Geary sent more orders, secure in the knowledge that the dark ships would not see his maneuver before they had very probably planned to change their vectors. “All ships in Task Force Dancer, immediate execute, turn starboard zero six four degrees, down zero five degrees.” *Dauntless* swung in response to the command, her maneuvering thrusters

pitching her bow toward the star and slightly below it, the other battle cruisers, heavy cruisers, light cruisers, and destroyers with her matching *Dauntless's* vector change.

Task Force Dancer. So named because it had hastily escorted back toward their home space ships carrying representatives of the alien species that humans had nicknamed Dancers. "What would the Dancers think of all of this?"

"They said they'd be back soon," Desjani said. "How much do you think the Dancers knew about the dark ships, and how did they discover things we didn't know?"

"I think the Dancers may have pulled a few strings," Geary said. "I'd like to know why, but I can't shake my belief that ugly as they are to our eyes, the Dancers are allies to humanity."

"I hope you're right. The living stars know that humanity already has enough enemies, most of them homegrown."

—

GEARY kept hoping his display would show new information, but *Mortar* and *Serpentine* stayed near the hypernet gate. He could easily put himself in the place of the crews of those two ships, imagine them watching the odd movements of Geary's ships and listening to whatever fragmentary and contradictory messages had reached them. They had brought their shields to maximum strength, had their weapons powered up, and were doubtless scanning space, watching for any threat, unaware that the software in their own communications, sensor, and weapons systems had been secretly directed in hidden subprograms to hide or delete anything related to the dark ships. But even if they had seen the oncoming dark ships, Geary did not know if the two warships of the Alliance would have fled. As he had learned after being awakened, in a century of war with the Syndicate Worlds the Alliance fleet had forgotten how to win but had become uncompromising in its willingness to die trying. The two destroyers did not maneuver in the last minutes before the dark ships reached firing range, and they did not fire as the dark ships closed on them.

The dark ships tore past *Mortar* and *Serpentine*, hurling out a barrage of fire at the Alliance destroyers. To the destroyers, the attacks would have seemed to have come out of nowhere, not that they had any time to be shocked by that. Shields collapsed under hammerblows of hell-lance particle beams, after which the weak armor of the destroyers offered little obstacle to the enemy fire. *Mortar* exploded, vanishing into a ball of dust as her power core overloaded. *Serpentine* shattered, breaking into several pieces that spun away helplessly, a pitiful few escape pods breaking free from the wreckage to seek safety for the small number of surviving crew.

It had happened nearly three hours ago, only now the light revealing the deaths of the two destroyers reaching *Dauntless*. Few humans could watch such images and not feel as if they were seeing something as it happened.

"At least everyone will have to believe us now," Desjani said, her voice low and furious. "Everyone saw that."

"I wish we hadn't lost two ships providing that evidence," Geary said, feeling the same emotions. "Look. We guessed right."

"You guessed right," she corrected him.

The dark ships had suddenly changed their vectors, whipping through turns that, while immense by the

standards of distances on a planet, were comparatively tight when measured in terms of spacecraft traveling at twenty percent of the speed of light, or about sixty thousand kilometers a second. Without human crews, the dark ships could manage more intense maneuvers than Geary's ships, but even the dark ships were limited by the amount of stress their hulls could endure.

"Enemy formation is steadying out on a vector toward Ambaru Station," Lieutenant Castries announced. "Estimated time to intercept of Ambaru's orbit is twenty hours, ten minutes. Maneuvering system recommends we adjust our vector to bring about an earliest-possible intercept with the dark ships in twenty-one hours, six minutes."

"Do it," Geary said. His display showed the dark ships diving toward the star, and toward the thin screen of warships that was slowly assembling in their path. Behind that screen of battleships, light cruisers, and destroyers, sixteen additional heavy cruisers were converging into two box formations on orbits that would bring them close to the path of the oncoming dark ships.

"If I were in command of the dark ships," Geary commented, "I'd see all of this, realize that my plan had been compromised, and come up with another plan."

"Never turn aside," Desjani said. "That's another Black Jack quote. Did you ever actually say that?"

"No. Why the hell would I have said something that stupid?"

"Well, Black Jack supposedly did," she reminded him. "Your battles show you maneuvering, but also staying focused on hitting the enemy. It will be interesting to see how the artificial intelligence guiding the dark ships interprets that."

"Interesting?" he asked.

Her answer was cut short by an incoming message.

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