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THE LOST FLEET DAUNTLESS

JACK CAMPBELL



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THE LOST FLEET: DAUNTLESS

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To Christine and Larry Maguire.
Good people and good friends who've made our lives
richer by their being here.

For S., as always.

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THE cold air blowing in through the vents still carried a faint tang of overheated metal and burned equipment. Faint echoes of a blast reached into his stateroom as the ship shuddered. Voices outside the hatch were raised in fright and feet rushed past. But he didn't move, knowing that if the enemy had resumed the attack there'd be alarms sounding and many more than just one blow struck to the ship. And, attack or not, he had no assignment to run to, no job to fulfill.

He sat in the small stateroom he'd been given, arms crossed and hands tucked in to try to drive away an inner cold that never seemed to leave him. He could hear the sounds of the ship and her crew and as long as the hatch remained closed he could try to pretend the ship was a ship he knew and the crew were people he'd served with. But those ships and those people were gone, as by all rights he should be as well.

He shifted position slightly, clenching his hands tighter against the cold that welled up from within, as one knee brushed against the rough edge of the small desk this stateroom boasted. He stared at that edge, trying to grasp what it meant. The future was supposed to be smooth. Smooth and clean and bright. It wasn't supposed to be rougher and more worn than the past. Everybody knew that. But then, wars weren't supposed to be apparently endless, going on and on and draining the smoothness and brightness from a future that could now only afford efficiency.

"Captain Geary, your presence is requested at the shuttle dock."

The announcement took a moment to penetrate. Why did they want him? But an order was an order, and if he lost the structure of discipline now he might find he had nothing left at all. He exhaled heavily, then stood, his legs stiff from inner and outer cold. He braced himself before opening the hatch, not wanting to face the people outside, but finally yanked it open and began walking.

The passages of the Alliance battle cruiser *Dauntless* were crowded with enlisted personnel and the leavening of other officers. They made way for him as he walked, creating a narrow path that seemed to magically open and close just before and behind him as he plodded steadily toward the shuttle area. He kept his eyes unfocused, looking straight ahead and not seeing their faces. He knew what would be reflected on those faces. He'd seen the hope and awe, neither understanding nor desiring it. Now he knew that awe would be joined by anguish and despair, and he wanted to see those faces even less than before. As if he'd let them down, when he'd never promised them anything or claimed to be anything more than he really was.

The crowd suddenly jammed solid before him, and he had to halt. A junior officer looked back and saw him. "Captain Geary!" she exclaimed, her face lighting with irrational hope. The junior officer had dirty hydraulic fluid smeared across one side of her face and a light cast on one arm to cover an injury from the recent battle. Her uniform showed scorch marks on the side of the injured arm.

Geary knew he should say something to the officer, but he couldn't find any words. "Shuttle dock," Geary finally stated.

"You can't get there through here, Captain," the lieutenant offered eagerly, fatigue falling away from her and oblivious to the lack of reaction from Geary. Her sudden enthusiasm made her seem

impossibly young and somehow made Geary feel even older. "It's sealed off while they repair battle damage. You felt that last shock, didn't you? We had to jettison some fuel cells before they blew. But we'll be ready again soon. We're not beaten yet. Are we? We can't be."

"I need to get to the shuttle dock," Geary repeated slowly.

The lieutenant blinked. "Shuttle dock. Go down two decks and forward from there. That should be clear. It's good to see you, sir." Her voice broke on the last sentence.

It's good to see me? Geary thought. A momentary heat of anger warred against the ice inside him. *Why?* But he just nodded and replied without inflection. "Thank you."

Down the ladders two decks and forward again, Geary moved alone through the crowd that still parted and closed as he walked. Despite his attempts to avoid seeing, he caught glimpses of faces now faces with the same anguish and lit with the same insane optimism when they caught sight of Geary.

Admiral Bloch waited at the entry to the shuttle dock, along with his chief of staff and a small crowd of other officers. Bloch motioned to Geary and drew him aside to speak privately. Unlike the others, Bloch seemed less despairing than stunned by the recent battle, as if he still weren't quite able to grasp what had happened. "The Syndic leaders have agreed to negotiations. They insist that I and every other flag rank officer participate in person. We're in no position to refuse their demand." The Admiral's voice sounded dull, very different from the booming enthusiasm Geary had grown used to hearing. His eyes were dull, too. "That leaves you the most senior officer in our absence, Captain."

Geary frowned. He hadn't really considered that before now. His seniority dated from the day he'd been promoted to Captain. That had been a very long time ago. And with that seniority would come responsibilities. "I can't—"

"Yes." Admiral Bloch drew a deep breath. "Please. Captain. The fleet needs you."

"Sir, with all due respect—"

"Captain Geary, I wouldn't blame you for wondering if you'd have been better off if we hadn't found you. I thought, a lot of people thought, it was a harbinger of good luck. 'Black Jack' Geary, back from the dead to accompany the Alliance fleet to its greatest victory." Bloch closed his eyes for a moment. "Now I need to leave the fleet in the hands of someone I can trust."

Geary grimaced, wanting to yell at Bloch, tell the admiral that the man he wanted to leave in charge of the fleet wasn't the man actually standing here, that such a person had never existed. But Bloch's eyes weren't simply dull, Geary now saw. They were dead. He finally just nodded slowly. "Aye, aye, sir."

"We're trapped. This fleet is the Alliance's last hope. You understand of course. If something happens...do your best. Promise me."

Geary fought down another impulse to shout out his objections. But breaking the ice inside him would be too hard, and a stubborn sense of duty insisted he couldn't refuse Admiral Bloch's request. "I will."

"*Dauntless*...listen, Captain." Bloch leaned close, speaking even more softly. "*Dauntless* has the key onboard. Do you understand? Ask Captain Desjani. She knows and can explain. This ship *must* get home. Somehow. The hypernet key must get back to the Alliance. If we can do that, there'll still be a chance, and the ships and the people we've lost won't have been in vain. Promise me, Captain Geary."

Geary stared, not understanding, shocked even through his numbed senses by the pleading in the admiral's voice. But it wasn't like Geary would be in charge forever. Bloch would negotiate with the Syndics, then return and be back in command. Geary would never have to learn any details about some "key" on the *Dauntless* that somehow related to a method of traveling between the stars that was much more rapid than even the system-jump faster-than-light transportation method used in Geary's time.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Thank you. Thank you, Captain. I knew if there was one person I could count on, it'd be

you.” If Geary’s reaction to the admiral’s statement showed on his face, Bloch gave no sign. “I’ll do my best, but, if worse comes to worst...” Bloch stood silent for a moment. “Somehow, if you can, save what’s left of the fleet.” He raised his voice as he led Geary back to the others. “Captain Geary is in command of the fleet in my absence.”

Everyone turned to stare at Geary. Surprise, elation on the faces of the younger officers, skepticism showing on some of the older officers as they all murmured acknowledgment of the admiral’s order.

Geary brought his hand up in the formal salute he’d always known but hadn’t seen among this fleet. He didn’t know when saluting had ceased to be a normal military courtesy in the Alliance fleet, but he was damned if he’d just wave good-bye to a superior officer. Bloch gave a rusty half-salute in reply, then turned and passed quickly through the entry area toward the waiting shuttle, followed by a couple of the older officers.

Geary watched the shuttle depart, unmoving, wondering what he should feel. Command of an entire fleet. Or what was left of it, anyway. The pinnacle of a Navy officer’s career. His command was just for a little while, of course. No matter how bad things were, they didn’t really want him in command. Admiral Bloch was just making a small gesture toward the legendary Captain “Black Jack” Geary, granting a symbolic honor before the Admiral got back with whatever agreement he’d managed to arrange. The negotiations might take a while, but Geary had once known and dealt with representatives of the Syndicate Worlds, and while he’d never liked the Syndics, he was certain they’d cut a deal now rather than face the losses the trapped Alliance fleet would otherwise inflict as it died.

He became aware that the remaining officers were watching him, expectation now warring with their other expressions. Geary turned to face the group and nodded. “Dismissed.” They all turned to go, except for two who paused to awkwardly salute in acknowledgment of the order. Geary returned the salutes, wondering why and at what point such things had gone out of style.

Then he stood, watching them leave, uncertain what to do next. Where did the acting fleet commander belong? On the bridge of the *Dauntless*, perhaps. With everyone watching him and nothing really to do. *What possible difference does it make where I go now? I can give orders from my stateroom if I need to, but I won’t need to, and what would I do if I could? Everything I knew, everyone I knew, is gone. I’m so very tired. I spent almost a century in survival hibernation, sleeping away the lives of my friends, and I’m still tired. To hell with it.*

He returned to his stateroom, sat down at the rough-edged desk and tried to look at and think of nothing again. But he couldn’t, because he did after all have a job to do now. After several minutes, the long habits of duty nagged him into motion. Geary squinted at the communications panel set next to the desk, making sure he’d push the right buttons. “Bridge, this is Captain Geary. Acting fleet commander. Please notify me when the shuttles from the fleet reach the Syndic flagship.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” The enlisted sailor visible on the screen nodded rapidly, his eyes filled with awe at seeing Geary. “Estimated time of arrival is fifteen minutes from now.”

“Thank you.” Geary hastily shut off the screen, unnerved by the hero worship on the man’s face. He tried to settle back into his numbness, but duty dug its heels into Geary’s shoulder and kept poking at him. Rather than keep fighting it, he reached for other controls. The flagship’s combat system balked at first from letting him see the latest fleet status data, but somewhere it picked up the information that Geary was now acting commander and grudgingly provided the necessary access. Geary read down the list of ships slowly and methodically, feeling pain beginning to finally gnaw against the deadness inside of him. So many ships lost. So many of the remainder damaged. Small wonder Admiral Bloch had gone to seek terms from the Syndics.

“Captain Geary. Our shuttles have reached the Syndic flagship.”

“Thank you.” Geary didn’t want to think about Admiral Bloch being herded through the enemy

ship to beg and bluff for whatever concessions he could squeeze out of the victorious enemy. Geary had never cared for the way the Syndics treated their own people, let alone how they handled others. But they could be reasoned with.

“C-captain Geary. Th-this is the communications watch.”

Geary looked toward the screen. The officer there seemed rattled beyond what Geary had seen elsewhere. Far more rattled. “What is it?”

“A...a message...from the Syndic flagship. Captain. Th-they sent it to all our ships.”

“Show me.” The image of the officer dissolved. Geary saw Admiral Bloch and the other senior Alliance officers, standing next to a bulkhead on what must be the Syndic flagship. The view pulled back, showing the location to be a shuttle dock, and revealing a Syndic official with the impeccably tailored uniform, brilliant rank insignia and instantly recognizable arrogance of a Chief Executive Officer facing the camera.

“Alliance Fleet, your Admiral came to us to ‘negotiate’ for terms of surrender.” The CEO made a gesture.

Geary felt his mouth go dry as a group of Syndic special troops stepped forward, one per Alliance officer, and fired point-blank into Admiral Bloch and the others. Bloch and some of the others tried to remain at attention but crumpled as blood stained their uniforms. Within moments, every senior Alliance officer lay unmoving and unquestionably dead.

The Syndic CEO waved negligently toward the bodies. “There is nothing to ‘negotiate’ with your former leaders. Anyone else who tries to ‘negotiate’ will suffer the same fate as these fools. Those Alliance ships and officers who surrender unconditionally will receive reasonable terms. We have no quarrel with those who were forced to fight us by misguided leaders such as these.” Even through his shock, Geary wondered if the Syndic CEO knew how insincere that statement sounded. “But those who attempt to ‘negotiate’ will die, though perhaps not as quickly as your Admiral.”

“You have one hour to surrender your ships. After that, we will move in and crush any resistance.”

Geary stared at the screen after it blanked and the face of the communications officer returned, gazing back at Geary with despair. Geary had known the Syndics to be ruthless, but he’d never known them to commit this kind of atrocity. Like other things Geary had encountered, it seemed the Syndics had changed over the long course of this war, and not for the better.

It took a long moment for it to sink in that his command of the fleet was no longer a temporary thing. A fleet decimated in battle and trapped, facing overwhelmingly superior numbers. With one hour’s grace. And here was this communications officer, and uncounted others like him, hoping and praying that Geary could somehow do something.

Geary took a deep breath, knowing the emptiness he had felt since his rescue was helping to keep his face composed. “Get me Captain...” What was the name Admiral Bloch had mentioned? “Desjani. Captain Desjani. Now.”

“Yes, sir! She’s on the bridge, sir.”

On the bridge. Geary belatedly recalled that Desjani was *Dauntless*’s commanding officer. Had he met her? He couldn’t remember.

Within moments, Captain Desjani’s face was displayed on the screen. Middle-aged perhaps, her face worn with the strain of time, experience, and the recent disastrous battle, so that Geary couldn’t even have guessed at how she’d look in a time and place of peace and calm. “I was told you wanted to speak with me.”

“Captain, are you aware of the recent Syndic message?”

She swallowed before answering. “Yes. It was sent to all ships, so every commanding officer saw it.”

“Do you know why the Syndics killed Admiral Bloch?”

Desjani’s mouth twisted in a snarl. “Because they’re soulless scum.”

Geary felt a twinge of anger. “That’s not a reason, Captain.”

She stared at him for a moment. “They decapitated our leadership, Captain Geary. A Syndic fleet would be crippled if left leaderless, and they’re assuming we’ll work the same way. They want to dishearten us by showing a massacre, and by openly killing all of our leaders they’re trying to make sure we won’t be able to organize any more resistance.”

He stared back, unable to form words at first. “Captain Desjani, this fleet is not leaderless.”

Desjani’s expression shifted and her eyes widened. “You’re in command?”

“That’s what Admiral Bloch said. I thought you’d have been aware of it.”

“I was informed, but...I was uncertain how you’d respond, Captain Geary. But you *will* exercise command? Praise the living stars. I need to inform the other ships. I was monitoring their discussion about what we should do when I was notified to call you.”

Geary forgot whatever he’d intended saying next as the possible implications of Desjani’s statement sunk in. “Discussing? What are the other ships’ captains discussing?”

“What to do, sir. They’re discussing and debating what to do following the death of Admiral Bloch and all of the other flag rank officers.”

“They’re *what*?” Inside Geary, ice cracked. “Weren’t they also informed I’d been placed in command of the fleet by Admiral Bloch?”

“Yes...sir.”

“Haven’t any of them contacted the flagship for instructions?”

Desjani’s face, recently radiant with hope, now picked up another emotion, the wariness of an experienced officer when his or her boss showed signs of cycling off of the nearest bulkhead. “Uh...no, sir. There’ve been no communications addressed to the flagship.”

“They’re *debating* what to do and they haven’t even contacted the flagship?” Geary couldn’t quite grasp the idea. Letting the custom of saluting fall by the wayside was one thing, but individual ship captains ignoring the presence of higher authority? What had happened to the Alliance fleet he’d known? Captain Desjani was eyeing him, waiting for the explosion she seemed certain was coming. Instead, he spoke with forced calm as the right words came from somewhere inside him, spooling out like an ancient recording brought to life. “Captain. Please contact the commanding officers of every ship. Inform them that the fleet commander requires their presence at a conference onboard the flagship.”

“We have less than a hour left before the Syndic deadline, Captain Geary.”

“I’m aware of that, Captain Desjani.” *And I’m increasingly aware that I need to show these people I’m in command before this fleet falls apart, and I need to learn something about them before seriously misjudge anything critical. I know too damn little about everything.* “Admiral Bloch showed me his conference room. He said he could gather his captains for a virtual meeting there.”

“Yes, sir. The necessary data net is still functioning within the fleet.”

“Good. I want them ready at that conference in ten minutes, and to acknowledge that order individually within five minutes, and if any one of them tries to beg off, tell them attendance is mandatory.”

“Yes, sir.”

He remembered with a start of guilt that he’d been ordering around the captain of a ship on her own vessel without any special courtesy. He’d hated that kind of thing, once, when it’d been done to him. He needed to remember that now. “Thank you, Captain. Please meet me outside the flag conference room in...eight minutes.”

If his memory served, the conference room lay about five minutes’ walk from his stateroom.

Geary took advantage of the three minutes that left him to call up the fleet disposition again, staring intently at the way the ships of the Alliance fleet were formed up and mentally tallying their degrees of damage. What had once been a dutiful intellectual exercise had become something he must grasp as well as he could within three minutes. He noticed something missing from the display, something he knew ought to be there and added it in, then he stared at the display a little longer, trying to understand why it didn't make sense to him.

Once again through the passageways of the *Dauntless*, once again the faces of the crew harkened to him. Geary remembered his promise to Admiral Bloch and tried to look like he knew what he was doing. He'd been a junior officer once, so he'd learned that trick long ago. He wasn't sure what else he might've learned that could really help now.

An Alliance Marine stood at rigid attention outside of the flag conference room and saluted as Geary approached. The gesture startled him for a moment, until he realized that if anyone would retain old traditions it would be the Marines.

Captain Desjani stepped forward. "Captain Geary, all ships' commanding officers are present."

He looked toward the conference room, seeming to be empty from this angle and outside of the viewing area. "All of them."

"Yes, sir. Most of them seemed very happy to receive your order, sir," Desjani added in a rush.

"Happy." Of course they'd been happy. They hadn't known what to do. But now they had him to turn to. Desjani, too, who seemed to have shed at least a decade of age since Geary had told her he'd exercise command. *Waiting for the hero to save the day*, Geary thought bitterly. *But that's unfair. After what they've been through...* He thought about how he felt, the emptiness inside, and wondered what emptiness these others might be feeling with their own universe suddenly changed beyond expectation. He gave the *Dauntless's* Captain a searching look, trying to see beneath the weariness she projected. "What shape are they in?"

She frowned as if uncertain of the question. "They've given us the latest status reports on damage to their ships, sir. You can access them—"

"I already have. I don't mean their ships. You talked to them. I assume you know them. What shape are *they* in?"

Captain Desjani hesitated. "They've all seen the message from the Syndics, sir."

"You already told me that. Now tell me your honest opinion of those ship commanders. Have they been beaten?"

"We're not beaten, sir!" But the words seem to falter at the end, and Desjani's eyes shifted toward the deck for a moment. "They're...tired, sir. We all are. We thought this strike at the Syndic home system would finally tip the balance, finally bring about an end to the war. We've been fighting a very long time, sir. And we've gone from that hope to...to..."

"This." Geary didn't want to hear the plan described again. Admiral Bloch had explained it a score of times when talking to Geary. A bold blow, made possible by something called the hypernet, which hadn't existed in Geary's time, and by a Syndic traitor. An alleged Syndic traitor, anyway. "Am I right in assuming the ships we're confronting represent the bulk of the Syndic fleet?"

"Yes, sir. Damn near the entire Syndic fleet." Desjani's voice wavered, and she visibly fought for control. "Waiting for us. Our leading elements didn't stand a chance."

"The main body fought its way clear."

"Yes. But at considerable cost. Black—Excuse me. We can't hope to defeat the Syndic forces out there with what we've got left."

Geary frowned, only half-noticing the way Desjani had abruptly changed what she was saying. More important, at the moment, was what she'd actually said. No hope. According to the ancient legend of Pandora's box, hope was supposed to be the one gift the box had contained amidst its ills.

Something to keep people going when nothing else was left. But if these people had truly lost hope... Then he looked squarely at Captain Desjani and saw again what he didn't want to see. Hope did still exist there, in eyes focused on him.

"Sir." The *Dauntless's* Captain spoke in an oddly stilted manner. "By your leave, sir. We need you, sir. They, we all, need something to believe in. Someone who can get us out of this."

"I'm not a legend, Captain, or whatever you think I am." There. He'd finally said it. "I'm a man I can't work miracles."

"You're 'Black Jack' Geary, sir! You fought one of the first battles of this war, against overwhelming odds."

"And I *lost*, Captain."

"No, sir!" Geary frowned again, startled by Desjani's vehemence. "You held off the attack, you ensured every ship in that convoy got away! And then you still held the enemy, letting the other escorts escape. Held the Syndics off until you ordered your crew to save themselves while you remained behind and fought the enemy until your ship's destruction. I learned that story in school, sir, just like every child in the Alliance!"

Geary stared at her. *It wasn't like that, Captain*, he wanted to say out loud. *I fought because I had to. Because that was what I'd taken an oath to do. Then we stayed because my ship'd been too badly damaged to run. I told the crew to evacuate, yes, but that was my duty, too, not heroism. Someone had to provide covering fire a little longer so the escape pods could get away, and that was my job.*

I didn't want to die. When my ship's last combat system was knocked out, I set the power core on self-destruct and tried to get away using a remaining survival pod. A damaged pod that was further damaged when my ship blew up. No working beacon. Just another piece of junk in a system filled with junk from the battle. No one found me. Not until almost a hundred years later, when your mighty fleet came sneaking through that backwater system and stumbled across me.

To finally wake me up and tell me the Alliance has turned me into something I didn't recognize. Promoted in the wake of my supposed death during my "last stand" to the rank of Captain in the fleet and legendary hero of the Alliance. I think I can be a Captain. How can anyone living be a legendary hero?

But Geary said nothing, because looking at Desjani he knew she wouldn't believe it, and because he now knew that if she did believe, he'd be killing her last hope. *I promised the Admiral I'd save this fleet if I could. I don't see how I can do that. But maybe this heroic idol they believe in has a chance somehow doing it.* "That was a long time ago, Captain," he finally replied softly. "But I'll do my best. And pray it may be enough." "Now, before this meeting, what's this 'key' business about?"

Desjani looked carefully up and down the passageway before answering, and then spoke so quietly Geary could barely hear her. "The Syndic hypernet key is onboard the *Dauntless*."

"What the hell does that mean?"

She looked startled. "I'm sorry. I forgot you didn't have hypernet."

"All I know about it is that this hypernet provides much faster interstellar travel than the system jump drives do."

"Much faster. Yes, sir. The exact advantage over system jumps varies based on some science I frankly don't understand, but it's usually by a factor between ten times and one hundred times as fast."

"Damn."

Captain Desjani nodded, looking around quickly to once again ensure no one could hear them. "Unlike the system jumps, which use the gravity wells from stars, a hypernet has to be created, and when a hypernet is set up, the entire net is aligned to what's usually called a frequency, though it's actually something more complicated than that. Each gate is assigned a sort of subfrequency. To use

particular hypernet, you need what's called a key. It allows you enter that net and select the gate you want."

Geary nodded, trying to absorb the implications. "So having a key to the Syndic hypernet let's us use it. Where'd *Dauntless* get a Syndic key?"

"We got it from the traitor." Her face twisted. "The double traitor. It made our strike at the Syndic home system possible."

"I see. They gave you the means to get here and then waited for you." *Guessing you'd never be able to resist such an opportunity.*

Desjani grimaced. "Yes, sir."

"Then the Syndics know we have this key. Why's the fact it's on *Dauntless* so important?"

"Because they know we *had* it, but they don't know what ship it was on. They don't know if it's been destroyed already. They don't know if one of the surviving ships still has it. If they knew it was on *Dauntless*..."

"They'd immediately throw everything they had at her to make sure the key was destroyed."

"Yes, sir."

"They can't just change the, uh, frequency of their hypernet?"

Desjani shook her head. "That's impossible, Captain Geary. Once the net is constructed, its fundamental characteristics can't be changed."

Geary thought for a moment, all too aware of how much he had to learn but also knowing that he had to get into the conference room quickly to meet with the gathering ship captains. "How big is this key?"

"Too big for someone to carry, if that's what you mean. It's large and heavy."

"Can we duplicate it? Make copies and give some to other ships?"

"No. Copying a hypernet key is beyond the capabilities of any ship in the fleet. Back home, in Alliance space, there are worlds with that capability."

He thought for another moment, thought about what that key would mean to the Alliance if it could be returned home. One more responsibility for the great hero to shoulder. "Let's go meet the ship commanders." People who looked like him but apparently didn't quite think like him. How long would it take him to figure out the differences forged by a hundred years, a hundred years spent at war? He'd have to listen carefully to everything they said... "Wait. One more thing. A few moments ago, when you said we didn't have any chance of defeating the Syndic fleet here, you started to say something else. What?"

Desjani looked uncomfortable, her eyes shifting to look past Geary. "I...I started to say that Black Jack himself couldn't defeat this Syndic fleet. Sir."

Black Jack himself couldn't do it. The expression had the ring of something used all the time. For a moment, Geary couldn't figure out how to respond to that. Then a twinge of self-mockery came to his rescue. "Well, Captain Desjani, we'd better hope you're wrong about that, hadn't we?"

She stared at him, then unexpectedly grinned. "Yes."

Geary went inside. Desjani followed him into the room, then when he paused, she indicated one seat not far from the door. The conference room wasn't all that large in reality. Geary had seen it with the conferencing systems off, just a moderately sized room with a moderately sized table to accommodate those who might actually sit in here. But with the systems on, as Geary came to his designated seat at the table, he saw it stretching out with scores of seats, each seat occupied by the commanding officer of a fleet ship. Geary couldn't help staring a little at them, amazed at how each officer looked exactly like he or she was sitting here instead of on their own ships. As his eyes focused on each, their image came close, as if they were now sitting nearby, and a small tag popped up with their name and ship clearly identified. In the center of the table, easy to see from every seat, a large

projection showed the disposition of the Alliance Fleet and of the Syndics. Virtual image technology had clearly improved during his long sleep.

I guess it's a lot easier to hold meetings now. Geary took a moment to wonder if that was a good thing, or if that was one of the things which had sapped the spirit from the fleet. He stood at his seat, wondering if anyone should or would call everyone else to attention, but when that didn't happen, he sat stiffly.

No one spoke. With the exception of Captain Desjani, who'd taken a real seat just to his left, every other officer was looking at him. Geary looked back at them, one by one, letting his gaze linger on each briefly before moving on. Some gazed back with carefully blank expressions, hiding their thoughts. A number of others held challenges in their eyes, plainly not receptive to Geary's authority. But the majority stared at him with the desperation of the dying, praying for deliverance. To varying degrees, all of them seemed weary and worried.

Geary took a deep breath, deciding to deliberately avoid the informality he'd seen among this fleet in favor of the formal speech and actions he'd always known. "For those of you who haven't met me, I am Captain John Geary. When Admiral Bloch left the *Dauntless*, he placed me in command of the fleet. I intend to carry out that responsibility to the best of my ability." He wondered what his voice sounded like to them, what the words meant to them.

A woman who must be approaching retirement age gave Geary an acidic look. "Did Admiral Bloch provide any reason for that action?"

Geary frowned at her, feeling a slow glow of heat forming inside and welcoming the relief from the coldness he'd felt since being rescued. "I'm personally not accustomed to asking my superiors to provide me with reasons to justify their decisions." A ripple ran through the ranks of the ship captain but what it meant he couldn't tell. "Admiral Bloch did, however, inform me that I was the senior officer in rank and length of service remaining with this fleet."

The woman's eyebrows shot upward. "Length of service? Are you serious?"

"Are you suggesting we compare dates of rank, Captain..." he looked at the identifying tag floating near her, "Captain Faresa?"

"That would be meaningless, as you are aware."

"No, I am *not* aware." Geary let the growing heat enter his voice. "If this fleet begins picking and choosing which rank and seniority factors matter, it will dissolve into chaos, and *you will all die.*"

A moment of silence followed before another officer broke in. Captain Numos of the *Orion*, Geary saw. "Are you suggesting you can somehow offer us salvation? There are only two options available to us as a fleet, Captain. We die fighting, or submit to, at best, living slavery and slower death."

Geary found himself smiling wearily. "I can die fighting. I imagine it's easier the second time around."

Captain Duellos, of the *Courageous*, laughed. "Very good, Captain Geary! If that's our fate—"

Numos interrupted again. "There's another option. If we break up, every ship for itself, some of us may win through to the hypernet gate—"

"Break up?" another captain demanded. "You mean every ship for itself?"

"Yes! The slower and more heavily damaged ships are doomed anyway. There's no sense—"

"My ship took damage because it absorbed enemy fire that would've been aimed at yours otherwise! And now you want to leave us to Syndic labor camps?"

"If there's no alternative—"

"*Quiet.*" It wasn't until everyone stared at him that Geary realized he'd spoken. From their expressions, he wondered what his voice had sounded like this time. "This fleet will not abandon any ships."

Numos spoke again and Geary could see some of the other officers nodding in agreement with his words. ~~“That’s not a reasoned judgment because you’re not qualified to command this fleet. You know that. Your knowledge of weapons and tactics is hopelessly outdated. You lack understanding of the current situation, here and at home. You—”~~

Something inside Geary flared to full life in a blast of heat. “Captain Numos, I am not here to debate command issues with you or any other officer of this fleet.”

“You’re not qualified to command! You don’t know—”

“I *know* I’m in command by virtue of seniority and the last order of Admiral Bloch, and that if I require information to support *my* command, then my *subordinates* will provide that information.”

“I’m not—”

“And if you or any other ship commander feel themselves to be incapable of supporting me properly or following orders, I *will* relieve them of command and replace them with officers I can depend upon. And, I might add, officers that other ships can depend upon to support *them*.” Numos’s face flushed. “Do *you* feel incapable of supporting me properly, Captain Numos?”

Numos swallowed, then spoke with stubborn insistence but without the confidence he’d shown earlier. “Captain Geary, your seniority is a fluke, as you yourself know. Your date of rank is almost a century old because your promotion to Captain was granted *posthumously*. No one knew you were still alive. A century in survival hibernation does not impart any experience.” Some of the other captains made small motions of agreement, apparently emboldening Numos again. “We must choose a commanding officer based on their ability to deal with the current situation, and that requires current knowledge.”

Geary stared back at Numos so coldly that he leaned back as if being threatened. “In the Alliance Fleet I know, no one ‘chose’ their commanders. I have no intention of allowing you or anyone else to interfere with my command authority.”

A stout man down at one end of the table cleared his throat. “Captain Geary is senior. He’s in command. End of discussion.”

Geary nodded toward him, fixing the name and face in memory. Captain Tulev of the *Leviathan*. Someone Geary could count on.

Then a woman in the uniform of the Alliance Marines spoke. Colonel Carabali, who must’ve inherited her command when the Marine general accompanying the fleet died along with the other fleet officers. “We’re sworn to obey our commanders and defend the Alliance. The Marines understand that. Captain Geary is our commander under Alliance Fleet Regulations.”

Another ship’s Captain spoke up, her voice ragged. “Dammit, if he can’t get us out of this, who can?”

All eyes focused on Geary again as the woman openly voiced what so many of them had been thinking. He wanted to avoid those faces, but he had to meet their hope and skepticism dead on. Geary couldn’t hide anymore. “I’m going to try.”

SILENCE hung in the room for a moment, then Captain Faresa spoke again, her voice and expression still harsh. “How, Captain? What magic will you use? We have less than an hour remaining before the Syndic deadline expires.”

Geary gave her an equally harsh look, but he could gaze down the ranks of ship commanders and see that his command authority hung on a knife-edge. For the first time, he noticed how young many of them were. Younger than the ship captains he’d known a century ago and clearly less hardened or experienced than those captains. Too many of them were watching and waiting, ready to jump in any direction. And if they started jumping, the entire fleet might fall apart and leave the Syndics with easy pickings. “Then we’d better use that time thinking instead of hurling barbs at each other, shouldn’t we?” He pointed at the center of the table, where the display portrayed the ships of the Alliance fleet. The most heavily damaged ships had formed into a rough sphere. Between them and the looming wall of the Syndic fleet, a rectangular wall of Alliance ships spread out, bent into a crescent facing the enemy. It looked impressive, until you totaled up the ships involved and realized the waiting Syndic sledgehammer would shatter the Alliance crescent as if it were made of glass.

Captain Duellos pointed as well. “Unfortunately, this display is accurate, and neither the realities of war nor the laws of physics have changed since your last battle, Captain Geary. We’re here, the Syndics are here only two and a half light-minutes away from our leading elements, and the hypernet gate is”—his hand swung around to an area on the other side of the enemy fleet—“here, thirty light-minutes from us, on the wrong side of the enemy.”

“If we could have a few more hours to repair our damaged ships,” someone suggested.

“A few more hours or a few more days wouldn’t help,” another shot back. “The Syndics are repairing their damage, too. And they can count on reinforcements and resupply coming through that gate behind them!”

Duelos nodded to Geary. “I agree. Time is not on our side, even if the Syndic deadline is not enforced.”

Geary nodded back, his eyes once again tracking along the officers ranked around the table. “We can’t hold off an attack. Nor can we attack them and have any expectation of survival.”

Numos spoke again, his face red. “Individual ships might be able to—”

“To what, Captain? Get to that...gate? Then what?” Geary heard a collective intake of breath. “This fleet has a Syndic hypernet key. I know that. But I assume the ships using it must go through together.” A murmur of agreement came. “I repeat, an-every-ship-for-itself plan will not be followed by this fleet, and any commanding officer who tries it will be court-martialed by me if I can catch them, or killed by the Syndics when they reach that gate *alone* and can’t get through it.” Silence.

Geary sat back and rubbed his chin. “That’s what we can’t do. But it’s not every option. Perhaps one of you can explain this to me.” He hesitated over the display controls, finally finding the right ones. “Here.” Geary pointed to a spot slightly behind and off to the side from the Alliance forces. “Twenty light-minutes away from the Alliance ships nearest to it. Why isn’t this guarded?”

Everyone frowned and craned to look. Finally, Captain Faresa gave Geary one of her looks, one

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