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THE LOST STARS

TARNISHED KNIGHT

JACK CAMPBELL



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England • Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.) • Penguin Group (Australia), 2 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.) • Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.) • Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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Cover design by Judith Lagerman.

Text design by Laura K. Corless.

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FIRST EDITION: October 2012

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Campbell, Jack.

The lost stars : tarnished knight / Jack Campbell. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-937077-82-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)

eBook ISBN

1. Space warfare—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3603.A476L67 2012

813'.6—dc23

2012016425

To my agent, Joshua Bilmes, who has stuck with me through thick and thin, offering support,
encouragement, and advice.

For S., as always.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I remain indebted to my agent, Joshua Bilmes, for his ever-inspired suggestions and assistance, and to my editor, Anne Sowards, for her support and editing. Thanks also to Catherine Asaro, Robert Chase, J. G. (Huck) Huckenpohler, Simcha Kuritzky, Michael LaViolette, Aly Parsons, Bud Sparhawk, and Constance A. Warner for their suggestions, comments, and recommendations. Thanks also to Charles Petit for his suggestions about space engagements.

CHAPTER ONE

TREASON could be as simple as walking through a doorway.

At least that was true anywhere ruled by the Syndicate Worlds, and when the doorway in question had stenciled on it in large, red letters the words *Unauthorized Access Forbidden OBSTLT*. CEO Artur Drakon, commander of Syndicate Worlds ground forces in the Midway Star System, had spent his life following rules like that and only partly because everyone knew that *OBSTLT* stood for *Or Be Subject to Life Termination*. “Death” was the sort of blunt term that the Syndicate Worlds’ bureaucracy liked to avoid no matter how freely it meted out that punishment.

No, he had obeyed because there hadn’t been much choice while the endless war with the Alliance continued, when disobedience could leave a path open for the enemy to destroy homes and cities and sometimes entire worlds. And if the enemy didn’t destroy your home as a result of your rebellious behavior, and if you somehow escaped the long and powerful reach of Internal Security, then the mobile forces of the Syndicate Worlds themselves would rain down death on your world from orbit in the name of law, discipline, and stability.

But now the war had ended in exhaustion and defeat. No one trusted the Alliance, but they had stopped attacking. And the mobile forces of the Syndicate Worlds, the once-unassailable fist of the central government, had been almost wiped out in a flurry of destruction wrought by an Alliance leader who should have been dead a century ago.

That left the ISS, the Internal Security Service, to worry about. The “snakes” of the ISS were a very big worry indeed, but nothing that he couldn’t handle now.

Drakon walked through the doorway. He could do that because multiple locks and codes had already been overridden, multiple alarm systems had been disabled or bypassed, a few deadly automated traps disarmed, and four human sentries in critical positions had been turned and now answered to him rather than to CEO Hardrad, head of Internal Security. All of this had been done on Drakon’s orders. But until Drakon entered the room beyond he could claim to have been testing internal defenses. Now he had unquestionably committed treason against the Syndicate Worlds.

Drakon had expected to feel increased tension as he entered that room; instead, a sense of calm filled him. Retreat and alternate paths were no longer possible; there was no more room for uncertainty or questioning his decision. Within the next several hours, he would either win or die.

Inside, his two most trusted assistants were already busy at separate consoles. Bran Malin’s fingers were flying as he rerouted and diverted surveillance data from all over the planet which should be streaming into the Internal Security Service headquarters complex. On the other side of the room, Roh Morgan used one hand to flick a strand of hair from her eyes as she rapidly entered false surveillance feed loops designed to fool the automated systems at ISS into thinking that everything still worked properly. Drakon was dressed in the dark blue executive ensemble every CEO was expected to wear, an outfit he personally detested, but both Malin and Morgan were clad in the tight, dull black skin suits designed to be worn under mechanized combat armor. The skin suits also served well on their own for breaking and entering, though.

Malin sat back, rubbing his neck with his right hand, then smiled at Drakon. “ISS is blind, sir, and they don’t even know it.”

Drakon nodded as he studied the display. “Malin, you’re a wizard.”

Morgan stretched like a cat, lithe and deadly, then stood up, leaning against the nearest wall with her arms crossed. “I’m the one who got us in here and entered the deception loops. What does that make me?”

“A witch?” Malin asked, his expression and voice deadpan.

For a moment, Morgan tensed, then one corner of her mouth curled upward as she gazed at Malin. “Did I tell you that I’d calculated the lowest possible cost to fire a single shot from a hand weapon, Malin?”

“No. Why should I care?”

“Because it came out to thirteen centas. That’s why you’re still alive. I realized killing you wasn’t worth the expense.”

Malin bared his teeth at her as he drew his combat knife and balanced it on one palm. “This wouldn’t cost a centa to use. Go ahead and give it a try.”

“Nah.” Morgan stood away from the wall, flexing her hands. “I’d still have to put some effort into it, and like I said, you’re not worth whatever energy it would take to kill you. CEO Drakon, we should eliminate those four sentries. They could still betray us.”

Drakon shook his head. “They were promised that if they played along, they and their families wouldn’t be killed.”

“So? If they were stupid enough to believe the promise of a CEO—”

“It was *my* promise,” Drakon interrupted. “I made a commitment. If I violate that, I won’t be able to count on anyone else’s believing I’ll do what I say.”

Morgan shook her head with a long-suffering look. “That’s the attitude that got you stuck out here in the back end of nowhere. As long as they’re afraid of you, it doesn’t matter whether or not they believe you.”

Malin pretended to applaud, his palms clapping together silently. “You know the first workplace rule for Syndicate Worlds’ CEOs. Very good. Now think about the fact that we *lost the war*.”

“I operate the way that works for me,” Drakon told Morgan, who was pretending not to have heard Malin.

She shrugged. “It’s your rebellion. I’ll check on the assault preparations and get the troops moving as planned.”

“Let me know if any problems develop,” Drakon replied. “I appreciate your support in this.”

“That was always a given.” Morgan started to leave, now ignoring Malin’s presence completely.

“And, Morgan . . .”

She paused in the doorway.

“The sentries will *not* be killed.” He said it flatly and with force.

“I heard you the first time,” Morgan replied, then continued on out.

After the door closed, Malin looked at Drakon. “Sir, if she notifies the snakes of what we’re planning, she’ll end up in command and you’ll be dead.”

Drakon shook his head. “Morgan won’t do that.”

“You can’t trust her. You must know that.”

“I know that she is loyal to me,” Drakon said, keeping his voice even.

“Morgan doesn’t understand loyalty. She’s using you for her own purposes, which remain hidden. The moment you’re no longer useful, she might put a shot in your back. Or a knife,” Malin finished, raising his own knife meaningfully before resheathing it with a single thrust.

Morgan has told me the same thing about you, Drakon thought as he considered a reply to Malin. “Morgan realizes that she couldn’t count on the snakes rewarding her for turning us in. They’d be just as likely to shoot her, too, no matter what agreement they had reached with her. Morgan knows that

just as well as I do. But I am keeping an eye on her. I keep an eye on everyone.”

“That’s why you’re still alive.” Malin shook his head. “I’m not suggesting that you get rid of her. As long as she’s alive, you need to have her where you can watch her.”

Drakon paused, eyeing Malin. “Are you advising that I take care of the ‘as long as she’s alive’ part?”

“No, sir,” Malin answered.

“Then you’d better not be planning to take care of that yourself. I know it’s common practice with some CEOs’ subordinates, but I don’t tolerate those kinds of games on my staff. It’s bad for discipline, and it plays hell with the working environment.”

Malin grinned. “I will not kill Morgan.” His smile faded, and Malin gave a worried glance upward. “We can take down the Internal Security Service on the surface, we *will* take them down, but if the mobile forces in this star system aren’t also neutralized we’ll be sitting ducks. From what I know of the mobile forces commander, CEO Kolani, she will support the Syndicate government and the snakes.”

“As long as we eliminate the ISS snakes on the surface, CEO Icení will handle CEO Kolani and the mobile forces.” *I hope.*

“Sir,” Malin said with exaggerated care, “if I may, I understand that you and CEO Icení have agreed to run things here jointly. You are justified in believing that it is in her self-interest to stick to that agreement. But how will you run things, sir? I know how unhappy you are with the Syndicate government—”

“Sick to death of the Syndicate government,” Drakon interrupted. “Sick of watching my every step and every word.” It felt strange to be able to say that, now that the snake surveillance gear was neutralized. “Sick of bureaucrats a hundred light-years away making life-and-death decisions about me.”

Malin nodded in agreement. “There are many who feel the same way even though few have dared to say it, even in private. But I am unclear as to what system will replace that of the Syndicate.”

“Are you?” Drakon smiled wryly. “Me, too. Icení and I couldn’t talk about it before this, before we had these surveillance systems short-circuited. Too great a chance of being caught by the ISS. We both agree that we want to get out from under the merciless thumb of the Syndicate. We both agree that the Syndicate government proved its incompetence, and that we can’t depend on that government to defend this star system or to keep us safe. That’s always been the argument, that we have to accept tight controls on everything we do in exchange for security. You and I and everyone else knows how false that proved to be. And now we know that the Syndicate government is moving to try to maintain control by replacing CEOs wholesale and executing anyone whose loyalty is doubted in any way. It’s revolt or die. Beyond that . . . Icení and I will talk when the snakes are dead.”

“The Syndicate system failed, sir,” Malin agreed. “The control has always been there, but it didn’t provide the promised security. I strongly advise that you consider another way of governing.”

Drakon eyed Malin, knowing why he hadn’t brought that up in front of Morgan, who would surely have reacted with derision at the idea of anything less than an ironfisted dictatorship. “Your advice is noted. Our priority for the moment is survival. If we achieve that, we’ll think about how to run things without repeating the mistakes of the Syndicate. I don’t want anyone like the snakes working for me to keep the citizens in line, but I also know we need order and that means some control. Now I need to talk to Icení so she knows this surveillance node is blinded, and so we both know the other is getting ready to move.”

“Do it in person, sir. Even though we should’ve blinded ISS, they might have some security taps we’re not aware of yet.”

“Let’s hope not.” Drakon nodded farewell to Malin, then made his way out through the multiple

layers of security that had protected the main surveillance node. The sensors watched him but saw nothing, feeding routine images of empty hallways and sealed doors to their masters at ISS, the men and women responsible for the very broad range of actions categorized as Internal Security on Syndicate Worlds' planets. He passed by the armored room where two of the turned sentries were pretending to see nothing. Then a little farther along before he reached the new, concealed access that had been painstakingly dug into this building from a neighboring structure, a task that itself had been a very delicate operation, requiring diverting and spoofing various alarms and sensors as well as the cooperation of those co-opted sentries. Walking down a roughly hewn passage, Drakon entered the basement area of a shopping center, ignoring surveillance cameras there which had also been blinded then went up a set of stairs and through an EMPLOYEES ONLY door whose lock combination had long since been compromised.

The ISS snakes are going to be in for a real shock in a few hours, Drakon thought. For over two hundred years, the snakes have been staging surprise arrests and security sweeps. Now we'll see how they like surprises.

It would have been nice to be able just to hit the snakes right now, but Drakon knew the process was like a long line of dominoes that had to fall in turn, each knocking down the next as the plan progressed, as sensors and spies and surveillance gear all over the planet were spoofed or silenced, as military forces loyal to Drakon began to move under cover of those actions, as rebellion gathered without the knowledge of those who could still inflict terrible damage to this world if not taken by surprise. So he kept to the plan, which had been unfolding slowly for months now and would soon begin moving very quickly indeed.

That was why Drakon wore his executive suit despite his dislike for the garment mandated for all CEOs. No average citizen seeing him could tell by his outfit whether he was assigned to overseeing manufacturing or sales or administration or any other aspect of the integrated economic, military, and political system of the Syndicate Worlds. Having spent almost his entire adult life in the ground forces, risking death and leading troops, Drakon didn't care for the thought of being outwardly indistinguishable from someone who had spent the same amount of time in advertising. He had once even suffered the indignity of being mistaken for a lawyer.

But he knew that he had to appear to conform to routine right now in order to avoid tipping off the ISS. Drakon walked briskly but without any sign of concern by storefronts and out of the mall, then turned to walk past the outside of the nondescript building that secretly housed the ISS surveillance relay facility. It took practice to look truly casual when you were guilty and strolling past those charged with enforcing laws, but no one reached the rank of CEO without plenty of experience at doing so.

The citizens he encountered on the streets automatically moved aside when they saw the CEO-level executive suit, some eagerly seeking eye contact on the chance that a CEO might take notice of them, but just as many striving to avoid attracting his attention. Citizens of the Syndicate Worlds learned their own lessons, and one of those was that the attention of a CEO was a double-edged sword which might bring benefits or calamity.

Watching the citizens react with mingled fear and fawning submission, the first real and the second probably faked, Drakon thought about Malin's recent words. What would come next? He had been consumed with figuring out how to kill the snakes without having half of this planet blown apart and what he had said about not being able to discuss the matter with Icenis was true. They had barely been able to risk the few, occasional, and brief meetings in which coded phrases and words sketched out the agreement to cooperate in taking down the snakes, saving their own hides, and perhaps giving this star system a chance to survive the ongoing collapse of the Syndicate empire. Midway would either get caught in the death throes of the Syndicate Worlds or get free of that tyranny and look out

for itself.

~~But after that? All he knew was the Syndicate way and, as Malin said, that had failed. How else do you keep things running without everything's falling apart? The Alliance way? He had learned little about that, and what little he had heard Drakon mistrusted.~~

Drakon shook his head with a frown, causing nearby citizens to freeze like rabbits that had seen a wolf and now hoped to avoid notice. He couldn't afford to think about them at the moment, or about the details of what would replace Syndicate rule here. He had to keep his mind centered on getting through the rest of this day alive.

More than a few of the citizens warily watching him walk onward probably wondered why a CEO was in public without bodyguards fencing him off, but it wasn't unheard of for some CEOs to travel occasionally without guards. Drakon had made a habit of that over the last few months, casually mentioning in ways that were certain to get back to Internal Security that he could take care of himself. The snakes wouldn't question a CEO's being arrogant and self-assured, though in Drakon's case his ground forces training and the equipment hidden in his executive suit gave him strong grounds for feeling able to handle most threats as long as he kept varying his routine to make assassination plots difficult.

It took fifteen minutes to reach the office of CEO Gwen Iceni, the senior Syndicate Worlds' official in the Midway Star System. But Malin had been right. Any message could be intercepted, and any code could be compromised or broken. If ISS learned of their plans at this point, with Drakon too far committed to pull back, it would trigger a disaster.

Human bodyguards and automated security systems providing layers of protection for Iceni all passed Drakon without hindrance despite the hidden weapons on him. If Iceni was planning to betray him, it would probably be after his forces had dealt with the snakes that both he and Iceni needed to have cleaned out. And she had surely reached the same conclusion about him, that he would not strike her yet because he needed her to handle those mobile forces still in this star system.

But all of the screening still took time that he didn't have to spare, so that Drakon had trouble not showing any irritation or anger as he walked into Iceni's office.

That office had the grandeur expected of a star system CEO's workplace but on a level consistent with Midway's modest wealth. There was an art to such things in the Syndicate Worlds' hierarchy. Too much ostentation would have attracted too much attention from her superiors, wondering how much extra Iceni might be skimming off tax revenue and what her ambitions might be, while too little pretension in the size and furnishings would have signaled weakness to both superiors and subordinates. Now Iceni, appearing calm, waved Drakon to a seat, then checked her desk display. "Security in here is tight," she said. "We can talk freely. You didn't bring any bodyguards. You trust me that much?"

"Not really." Drakon gestured in the general direction of the ISS headquarters complex. "There's a small but real chance that one of my bodyguards might be partly turned and providing information to the snakes on my movements. Right now, those bodyguards are watching the entrance to my command center, thinking that I'm inside it. Do you trust your bodyguards completely?"

"I don't have to," Iceni replied, not really answering his question. "By the time I do something that might alarm the snakes, you'll be doing your part. Are your people ready?"

"We'll hit the four primary ISS sites on this planet at fifteen hundred, just as planned. I'm personally leading the assault on the main ISS complex in this city, and three trusted subordinate commanders of mine are leading attacks on the secondary complexes in other cities. ISS substations everywhere will be hit by squad-level forces at the same time."

Iceni nodded, then glanced upward. "What about the orbiting stations and other facilities off-planet?"

“I’ve got people ready everywhere the snakes are, except on the mobile forces units, of course.”

“Those are my problem. You have a lot of soldiers moving around. You’re sure the snakes won’t be alarmed?”

He hadn’t sat down despite Icenis offer, being too keyed up to carry that off well. But he couldn’t show any weakness in front of another CEO, any nerves, or Icenis would surely focus on it like a wolf seeing a stag stumble. Instead, Drakon shrugged in a show of indifference. “I can’t be certain. It’s a very big operation, so it’s possible the snakes will see something. But it shouldn’t be enough to alarm them. We had to rush things over the last few days because of the order from Prime, but everything had already been planned out.”

Icenis twisted her mouth slightly. “Fortunately for us. I had been warned that the central government was sending out orders to have star system CEOs hauled in by the ISS for loyalty checks and that quite a few of those CEOs were not being seen again after disappearing into ISS custody; but I didn’t expect the government to send that order here as quickly as it did. Even before you and I launched this plot we wouldn’t have survived such an interrogation session.”

“You think I have the wrong kinds of skeletons in my closet?” Drakon asked.

“I know that you do. I did my homework before I made any offers to you, just as I’m sure you did your homework on me before you responded. But we didn’t start planning rebellion any too soon. The order to the ISS is still held up in the comm systems, but it could pop free at any time; and then we can both expect invitations we can’t ignore from CEO Hardrad.”

“And he’ll also have questions about how that order got held up in the message system,” Drakon noted dryly. “But you did keep it from being delivered for a few days, giving us time to act on our plans. As long as Hardrad doesn’t see that order for a few more hours we’ll be all right. The ISS surveillance systems are disabled while still appearing to be functioning, so we can finally talk freely. The snakes should assume everything is quiet until we launch the attacks. Are you still guaranteeing to handle the mobile forces in this star system?”

“I’ll take care of the warships.”

“Warships? We’re going to start using Alliance terminology now?”

“They did win the war,” Icenis replied, her voice tinged with sarcasm. “But it’s not just an Alliance term. We used to call them warships, too, before the bureaucracy ‘redefined’ and ‘re-labeled’ them. We’re going back to our own older terminology. Changing what we call things will be a clear signal to the citizens and our forces that we are no longer subject to the Syndicate Worlds.”

“After we win, you mean.”

“Naturally. I’ve got a shuttle lifting me to C-448 in ten minutes. I’ll use that heavy cruiser to rally the other warships here to us.”

“What’s CEO Kolani’s status?” Drakon asked. “Any change?”

“Not yet. She’s still in command of the flotilla and still committed to the government on Prime.”

Drakon frowned upward, as if he could see through the building and up through intervening space to where the small flotilla orbited. “You’ll take her out?”

“That option fell through,” Icenis replied in as casual a tone as if she were referring to a minor business deal. “Both agents of mine who were within reach of her have already been neutralized by Kolani’s security, so assassination isn’t one of our choices.”

He felt a chill run down his back at the thought of what that flotilla could do to this planet. “You promised me that you’d handle the mobile forces.” Morgan’s words came back to mock him. *If they were stupid enough to believe the promise of a CEO . . .*

“I will handle them,” Icenis said, her voice hardening. “We can’t wait for better options. Even if that order from Prime hadn’t forced our hands, another high-priority message came in this morning when that courier ship popped in from the hypernet gate, then popped out again after sending its

messages to us. CEO Kolani has been ordered to take almost all of the mobile forces here back to Prime immediately. ~~We need those forces to defend this star system once we achieve control. I've kept that order stuck within the comm system, too, but a high-priority message can't be held up forever.~~

"How certain are you of success with taking over the flotilla?" Drakon asked.

"Certain enough. Some of the ships are already mine, including C-448. I have enough individual unit commanders committed to me to be able to beat Kolani. If Kolani refuses to go along with us, then she goes down, along with any warships that stay loyal to her. It's not ideal. We could have used every one of those warships, and now some are likely to be destroyed. You just hold up your end and wipe out the snakes, then keep a lid on the security situation down here while I'm busy up there. We have to maintain order. The mob may take the destruction of the snakes as a license for anarchy. Once we've declared independence, you and I have to keep our control of this star system firm. We want ours to be the *last* revolt in this star system."

Iceni had obviously thought about the questions that Malin had raised about what to do after the snakes were dead. Drakon hoped that Iceni's ideas were ones he could live with. He also hoped they didn't involve getting rid of the one other CEO, Drakon, who would be able to challenge her authority here after Hardrad was taken care of.

Iceni closed out her displays, then stood up and walked toward the door. "Any other questions?"

Drakon nodded, eyeing her again. "Yeah. Why are you really doing this?"

She stopped and gazed back at him. "You don't think it's self-interest?"

"I think that self-interest could have led in other directions. Getting me to sign off on rebellion, then turning me in to the snakes might have satisfied them that you were a good little loyal CEO and provided you with a cover for your own actions."

Iceni smiled very briefly and humorlessly. "Then I'll tell you that my motivation is to protect myself, this star system, and surrounding star systems. I need a safe place to maintain power and influence. Midway is the best place in this region to do that because we have the hypernet gate and also jump points to so many surrounding star systems. The Syndic system failed. That system started the war, failed to win it, and ultimately lost it. That system stripped the Reserve Flotilla from the Midway Star System, the only thing holding off the alien enigma race, and left us almost totally defenseless when the enigmas attacked us. The *Alliance* fleet had to save us. The *Alliance*, which we have always been taught is weak, disorganized, and corrupt because they let the citizens have a voice in who rules. You and I both know all too well how disorganized and corrupt the Syndicate system can be, and now it has proven to be weak as well.

"We need to try something else, and we can't depend on anyone else. Maybe we'll die trying, but we might well die anyway if I tried to cut and run with whatever wealth I could stuff onto a ship while this star system is threatened by the enigmas and by the chaos in some star systems that is following the collapse of Syndicate Worlds' authority. So, I'm a pragmatist, Artur Drakon. Those are my reasons. Do you believe me?"

"No." Drakon returned the same kind of smile that Iceni had given him. "Why didn't you run when the enigmas threatened to attack if you're so pragmatic?"

She paused as if deciding how to reply. "Because I was responsible for everyone in this star system, and I wouldn't run when they were all trapped here."

"You're an idealist as well as a pragmatist?" Drakon asked, letting some sarcasm into his own tone now.

"You might say that, as long as you're not being insulting." Iceni gave him a smile which was mocking this time. "Don't you believe I can be part idealist?"

"Not if it's a very big part. Nobody survives as a CEO if they're in any way an idealist."

“Oh? And how did you end up at Midway?”

Drakon smiled sardonically at her. “I’m sure you already know that. The snakes tried to arrest one of my sub-CEOs, but someone tipped her off and she disappeared before they could grab her. I got blamed, but no one could prove anything, so I got exiled rather than shot.”

Iceni looked back at him steadily. “You don’t call someone willing to run those risks to protect a subordinate an idealist? What would you call a leader whose subordinates and soldiers were so loyal to him that the Syndicate sent them all here to get them isolated?”

“I do what I think is . . . appropriate,” Drakon said. “I can’t control how others see my actions or react to them. And whether or not I survive is still an open-ended question. I’ll do what I have to do, and I know the sort of things you’ve done in the past to maintain your power. But if you want to pretend those are your reasons, I’m willing to go along.”

“Fine. As long as you don’t double-cross me. If you do—”

“I’ll die?” Drakon asked, doing his best to sound nonchalant even though he was itching to rejoin his soldiers.

Iceni’s voice was just as relaxed as Drakon’s as she answered. “You’ll *wish* that you had died.” She opened the door and walked out, then waited for Drakon to exit as well before closing and alarming the entrance. “Good luck.” With that, Iceni headed off at a quick pace, her bodyguards taking up positions on all sides.

* * *

AN hour and a half later, Artur Drakon knelt inside another building, only a single, hair-thin recon probe sticking out from his shoulder and over the edge of the nearby window, scanning the outer sections of the ISS headquarters complex through the sensors on his combat armor. The civilians who normally occupied this office were under guard in the basement, along with everyone else who worked in the building. In their place, soldiers in combat armor huddled in the halls and inner rooms, waiting for the assault on the ISS complex to begin. High on one wall, an ISS surveillance camera stared blankly into the room. Somewhere in the headquarters complex, systems were reviewing the feed supposedly coming from that camera and seeing only routine activity by the civilians who normally worked here. “Report,” Drakon ordered.

About one-third of the way around the perimeter, Malin’s voice came from his position. “Everything looks routine. No problem.”

On the other side of the perimeter, Morgan responded in a tone that mimicked Malin. “Everything looks routine. We’ve got a problem.”

“What’s the problem?” Drakon asked. They were speaking over a shielded comm line run overland through every obstacle. A major pain in the neck, but the only way to minimize the chances of any ISS surveillance gear that hadn’t been sabotaged picking up some of the transmissions. *Two tin cans on a string. Millennia of communication advances and in the end we’re still depending on two tin cans on a string to make sure no one else hears us.*

“The problem,” Morgan insisted, “is that everything looks normal. Even though we’ve spoofed the surveillance networks, the snakes must have picked up *something* from all of their other distributed monitoring gear. But they haven’t reacted at all that we can see. No messages to you or anyone else about the troop movements or anything. Routine security around the complex as far as we can tell. It stinks.”

“They could be uncertain,” Malin argued. “Trying to decipher the fragments that they’re seeing. We can’t afford to blow the element of surprise.”

“It’s already blown, moron.”

“That’s enough.” Drakon thought about Morgan’s argument as he studied the ISS complex again. “I haven’t had any messages from the snake brass today. They usually jump on me every day about what my troops are doing just to let me know I’m being watched. I think Morgan’s right. Has anyone seen any vipers moving around?”

“No,” Malin said.

“No,” Morgan added with a touch of triumph.

“Then everything isn’t routine. There are usually a couple of vipers outside running laps or exercising some other way, aren’t there?” Drakon blew out an angry breath. The ISS special forces, nicknamed vipers, had an ugly reputation for brutality and for fighting ability. An independent combat force, answering only to Internal Security, and thus doubly hated by the military of the Syndicate Worlds.

“You think the vipers are activated?” Malin asked, then answered himself. “We have to assume they are.”

“Right. Armored and ready to fight. This screws up the assault plan.”

Morgan came back on. “We need to hit them with everything we’ve got. If we go in piecemeal like we planned we’ll get cut to ribbons by those vipers.”

“If we go in all out we blow our chances of surprise!” Malin said. “The sooner the snakes realize we’re actually launching an all-out assault on their headquarters complex, the longer they’ll have to activate any doomsday retaliation devices they still have control over. They’re going to be overconfident, certain that they can handle whatever we’ve snuck in to hit them here. We have to take them out before they realize we have enough force on hand to take the complex.”

They were both right, Drakon realized. “We need to modify the assault plan. Infiltration to clear our way inside isn’t going to work now even with scouts in full stealth gear, but we can’t send in everything at once without presenting massed targets and panicking CEO Hardrad into setting off his dead-man retaliation devices. Instead of sneaking in by squads, we’ll go in by platoons around the entire perimeter at once and shoot our way in. The first barrage is to include the full range of concealment rounds. Sequence the platoons as they jump off to keep from clustering too many personnel in one spot and to keep the snakes from spotting how many soldiers we have here before we’ve knocked out their external surveillance. Once inside, every platoon is to advance as fast as it can toward the snake operations center. The vipers will be able to block some of the routes, but there aren’t enough vipers to stop platoons coming in along every possible approach. How long to get the revised plan uploaded and everyone ready to jump off?”

“Twenty minutes,” Morgan replied.

“Make it half an hour,” Drakon ordered before Malin could suggest something longer. Morgan always tended to push time constraints a bit too closely. “That will shove the assault time back fifteen minutes. I’ll notify the other commanders to move their assaults back fifteen minutes as well and let them know the snakes are prepared here. Let me know when everyone is ready to go.”

Drakon linked in to another landline, this one leading back to his headquarters complex. “Sub-CEO Kai, I’ve been held up at an appointment. They were waiting for someone but only partially prepared for me, so our briefing later this afternoon will be delayed fifteen minutes. Acknowledge.” The message went by the landline to his headquarters, then was transmitted along normal channels so it appeared to have originated at the headquarters. Kai replied within moments, then Drakon called Sub-CEOs Rogero and Gaiene with the same message.

He had barely finished when his comm system alerted him to a call from CEO Hardrad. Drakon blew out a long breath, settling his nerves and settling his expression and posture into the appearance of routine activity. It helped his display of confidence to know that his five subordinates who knew everything, who could have betrayed him, were all loyal. Malin, Morgan, Rogero, Gaiene, and Kai had

all been with Drakon a long time. He didn't hesitate to share his secrets with any of them, and he was certain none of them would have told Hardrad anything.

Activating a digital background to make it appear he was answering from his office, Drakon accepted the call.

Hardrad look mildly annoyed. That expression alone was enough to make nearly every inhabitant of this star system tremble. "I need to discuss something with you, Artur." The ISS CEO routinely used first names with other CEOs. It wasn't a gesture of comradeship but rather a lessening of their status compared to him and a not-so-subtle reminder of the power he wielded over them.

"Go ahead."

"First, tell me why there's a false background on your image," Hardrad said. Of course, the snake systems had spotted that.

"I just got out of the shower."

"An odd time of day for a shower," Hardrad observed.

"Not if you work out. What is it you need to discuss?"

"A message in the comm system. It was high priority, intended for me, and yet held up within this star system for several days."

Drakon frowned. "It came through military channels?"

"No."

That only left one alternative, the comm systems controlled ultimately by Icenis, as both Drakon and Hardrad knew though neither named her. Avoiding saying names in conversations like this was a precaution so elementary that CEOs followed it automatically, since security bots scanning transmissions for information and warnings keyed on names first and foremost. "Good," Drakon said. "Heads would roll if my systems suffered that kind of failure."

Hardrad paused again, eyeing Drakon. "I'd like to speak with you in person, CEO Drakon, regarding the reasons for that failure. Here at my headquarters. The subject is sensitive enough that I wouldn't want to entrust the conversation to any form of transmission."

Smooth. Drakon found himself admiring the skills of Hardrad despite his hatred of what the man stood for and his anger at what Hardrad had done in the past. Hardrad had led the conversation in such a way that it seemed he suspected only Icenis of wrongdoing and wanted to coordinate with Drakon before taking action.

But even if Hardrad didn't suspect Drakon of involvement with the delay in that order from Prim being received, he certainly intended to carry out those orders, which meant getting Drakon into ISS headquarters for a full security screen and interrogation.

Drakon pretended to be thinking through his schedule. "All right. How big a rush is this?"

"The sooner the better. I'll send an escort."

Sure he would. A platoon of vipers in full combat armor. "I don't want to do anything that attracts anyone's attention. You understand. I don't need an escort. My bodyguards can handle anything that might come up." He said it with calm arrogance, a CEO sure of his status and power, and Drakon saw Hardrad relax slightly, like a cat who saw a mouse strolling closer and oblivious to danger. "How about if I start over there in about . . . half an hour?"

A long pause this time, while Drakon wondered if he were starting to sweat and whether or not Hardrad could tell, then the ISS CEO nodded and smiled thinly. "Half an hour. If you're delayed, I'll be . . . concerned."

"Understood. You'll be seeing me soon." If Hardrad had a deception analyzer on this circuit he wouldn't spot any falsity in Drakon's voice because Drakon fully intended to be entering the ISS headquarters complex less than half an hour from now.

Should he warn Icenis that Hardrad had finally received the orders to do a security screen on all

CEOs? But with Icení already well on her way toward that heavy cruiser there wasn't any means to safely pass on such a warning, not without Hardrad's very likely detecting the transmission. And Hardrad would be watching for exactly that, for co-conspirators to begin panicking and sending out warnings that the ISS was closing in. "Malin, Morgan, the snakes are gearing up not because they know what we're doing but because Hardrad finally got that message and he's anticipating trouble after he arrests me. He's expecting me to show up at ISS headquarters in half an hour."

Morgan sounded like she was almost choking with mirth. "Oh, yeah. We'll all be knocking on the door in half an hour. Boom, boom, baby."

"Can you communicate the delay in our jump-off to CEO Icení, sir?" Malin asked. "She might be worried when we don't attack as scheduled."

"She won't like the delay. I don't like the delay. But it's necessary. If you can figure out a way to tell Icení about the delay that doesn't run a serious risk of being intercepted by the snakes, let me know."

Icení was going to have to trust him. That was a hell of a lot for one Syndicate Worlds' CEO to expect of another CEO.

He thought about the mobile forces overhead. For the first time in a long while, he wished there was something to ask for help, something that would listen to a prayer that the delay wouldn't cause problems for Icení and her plans to deal with those mobile forces.

Between the pitiless, ironfisted facts of life under Syndicate rules and the apparent randomness of life and death on the many battlefields he had seen, Drakon had long ago stopped having faith that anything cared about what happened to him. At times like this, he missed the comfort that might have brought and couldn't help hoping that he was wrong.

* * *

ICENI walked briskly through the tube mating the shuttle to Mobile Forces Unit C-448/Cruiser/Heavy/Combat, trying to reveal no signs of concern but frowning around slightly in the usual manner of a CEO, which was calculated to immediately put subordinates onto the worried defensive.

The commanding officer of C-448 saluted in the Syndicate manner, bringing his right fist across lightly rap his left breast. "Welcome to my unit, CEO Icení. We are honored and surprised by your personal visit."

Icení sketched a very brief smile back at him. "Thank you, Sub-CEO Akiri. I've long believed that not every inspection should be announced in advance. Are you prepared to storm the gates of hell?"

Akiri blinked at the code phrase, took a deep breath, then tried to nod calmly. "We are ready to follow you, CEO Icení." Turning to the woman standing beside him, Akiri gestured aft. "Make all necessary preparations."

Her smile a little too tense and eager, the woman saluted him. "Five minutes."

Icení watched her walk off, not fearing betrayal from that source. Executive Marphissa, the second-in-command of C-448, had once had a brother. That brother hadn't been killed fighting the Alliance but had been arrested by Internal Security before dying during interrogation of what the snakes always called "heart failure." Having done her homework, Icení knew how badly Marphissa wanted to avenge that death. *Find the tools and use the tools*, the voice of one of her old mentors came back to Icení. *We're artisans, Gwen, who use people to shape outcomes. Just pick the right people, point them in directions they already want to go, and they'll do your work for you. And they won't leave any of your fingerprints showing after the deed is done, unless of course you want to take credit for it.*

“She’s capable,” Akiri murmured to IcenI as Marphissa left. “But you have to watch her very closely.”

Cutting down subordinates wasn’t all that unusual (after all, every executive needed someone to blame if anything went wrong), but that Akiri had done it in such a blunt and clumsy way lowered IcenI’s opinion of him a bit more. *Have you wondered yet, Sub-CEO Akiri, why out of all the mobile forces unit commanders who pledged loyalty to me, I chose your cruiser to personally command from? Do you think that was a compliment? I know when a subordinate needs to be closely watched, and Marphissa isn’t the one I’ll be watching.*

Akiri started to say something else, but IcenI held up a restraining hand as her high-priority comm alert sounded. She didn’t have to entirely fake a look of irritation as she thumbed the accept command, seeing the image of her all-purpose personal assistant and occasional hired gun, Mehmet Togo.

“We have received a summons from ISS headquarters,” Togo began in an emotionless voice. “They are in receipt of a message from CEO Kolani claiming that you intentionally delayed her receipt of orders from the government at Prime.”

Damn. The order to Hardrad had already been impeded to the limit they could expect to delay it, but the order to Kolani should have been stuck in the comm system for days yet. Some comm tech too smart for his or her own good must have spotted it and pried it loose from the code hobbles that were supposed to keep the message hung up inside the message-processing software.

Despite all of the security codes and scrambling protecting this conversation on her private line, IcenI knew better than to assume the conversation was private. Those who didn’t assume that Internal Security was always listening tended to pay very high prices for their carelessness. So IcenI put on a look of puzzled anger. “Orders? What orders?”

Togo spread his hands, pretending bafflement as well. “I do not know.”

“How are we supposed to respond to the ISS without knowing what orders were allegedly delayed?” IcenI demanded. “Military orders? Shouldn’t those have come through those channels?”

“I would think so, Madam CEO. Should I contact the CEO with responsibilities for that area?”

Which would be Drakon, of course. “No. Not yet. I’m shocked to hear of this, but I can’t confront anyone else when I know so little. Contact CEO Hardrad and tell him that I need to know what this is about so I can take any necessary action.”

The screen blanked and IcenI glanced at Akiri. “Have you seen those orders?”

He nodded. “CEO Kolani forwarded them to all ships. We received our copy a few minutes ago. All mobile forces in this star system are to proceed to Prime Star System to operate under direct control of the supreme council of the Syndicate Worlds. I’m surprised that you were able to hold up a command directive like that in the communications system without alerting anyone.”

“It’s not easy.” Had someone in Drakon’s camp let the message out? Had Drakon done it? If he planned on betraying her, he would regret it. She hadn’t been bluffing about that. “Did CEO Kolani also give you movement orders when she forwarded the message to you?”

“No, Madam CEO. We’re supposed to prepare for departure, but that’s all we’ve been told.”

IcenI smiled, willing herself into calmness. “CEO Kolani doubtless wants to hang around here to watch me get hauled into ISS headquarters and torn into very little pieces.” She checked the time. “In a few minutes things will begin happening on the surface.”

Another chime on her private channel, the notes different this time, and given an ominous aspect from knowing whose call they announced. IcenI took an extra moment to compose herself, then answered again, this time seeing the deceptively bland features of the head of the Internal Security Service forces in this star system. “CEO Hardrad, I’m glad you called. What’s this about some orders being held up?”

Iceni had never thought that Hardrad looked the part of a snake, which might have helped his rise through their ranks. ~~Bland-featured, his hair, skin, and clothing all shades of beige,~~ Hardrad seemed even after detailed study to be a perfect colorless bureaucrat. Even his eyes rarely revealed anything but mild disinterest. Iceni, who had studied not only Hardrad's looks but also his career, had not been fooled by the outer ordinariness of the man. Judging by his actions, inside he was a very ruthless snake indeed. Now Hardrad pursed his lips in the mildest of reactions to Iceni's question. "A command directive from Prime, Gwen," he said.

"I should have seen that," Iceni protested. "I am responsible for the overall defense of this star system. Why didn't I see it?"

"It was directed to CEO Kolani." Iceni hadn't expected Hardrad to appear tense, but it was still unnerving to see him regard her as if she were a piece in a game with an ending that was foreordained. "Why are you in orbit?" he asked her.

"As senior CEO in this star system, I'm responsible for all Syndicate Worlds' assets." Iceni waved one negligent hand around to indicate the ship. "I'm conducting an inspection."

"No inspection was on your schedule."

"I prefer surprises," Iceni said. "You accomplish more that way."

"That is true," Hardrad agreed. A lesser man would have betrayed some feeling then, some darkly humorous acknowledgment that they were both speaking primarily about the ISS and its tactics. But not Hardrad. His expression didn't even flicker. "However, your inspection will have to take place on another day. I need to see you in person. Right away."

She put on her best expression of affronted dignity. "Because CEO Kolani, who commands the most deadly forces in this star system, is accusing *me* of doing something which is probably the fault of her own communications staff? I don't control military communications."

"No. You don't. We need to talk about who does. You understand?"

So Hardrad suspected Drakon? That was reasonable under these circumstances, and yet . . . *If he's also finally received his own orders, Hardrad wants me in his headquarters so he can find out every disloyal thought I've ever had. What better way to get me into that building than by implying that we're going to act jointly against Drakon?*

Assuming that Drakon hasn't really betrayed me.

"We should discuss this right away, Gwen," Hardrad continued. She had never liked the way he used her first name in conversations like this, implying not only familiarity but also inferiority compared to him. "I've notified the ISS representatives on C-448. Some of them will escort you back down to the planet."

Iceni spent a long moment looking at the blank screen after Hardrad's image had vanished. For all his power, Hardrad knew that he had to at least feign respect for senior CEOs. He was acting far too confident by making such an open move against her now. *What does he know?* She checked the time, and her breath caught. Drakon's attack should have started two minutes ago.

"Your orders?" Akiri asked softly.

Strike now at the ISS representatives on this warship and the other warships as well? But if Drakon's move had just been delayed, if he hadn't outright betrayed her to the snakes, then starting her own move now would betray Drakon's impending assault which *had* to succeed. Hardrad would know almost immediately if the status feed from his representatives aboard C-448 was broken. At that point, Iceni might as well broadcast the news that she would be assuming command of all of the mobile forces and her demand that Kolani submit to Iceni's authority. Without Drakon's actions on the surface triggering her agents on other ships she would have to do that, before the snakes on those other ships could strike at the regular unit officers or activate disabling worms that Internal Security was known to plant in every critical system.

Akiri took a message on his own comm unit, then faced Icen. “The ISS representatives aboard the unit will arrive in five minutes to escort you back to the surface.”

What the hell is Drakon up to? How much longer does he need? Or has he already backstabbed me? In which case, I need to act now to try to save my own skin.

“Your orders?” Akiri repeated, his own tone growing not just urgent but also anxious.

CHAPTER TWO

TIME crawled for Drakon as the assault troops made minor changes to their repositioning, every movement careful as they worked to always remain concealed from the ISS headquarters. Drakon kept his eyes on the ISS complex, seeing nothing at all out of the ordinary across all passive visual spectrums and comm frequencies, but now viewing the ordinary as menacing.

“Assault Force Three is ready,” Morgan reported.

“Good. Watch out for those vipers when we go in, Roh. They’re tough.”

“We’re tougher. And every soldier with us hates them. Who doesn’t know someone who got hauled off to a labor camp or worse by vipers or other snakes?”

Drakon nodded to himself, thinking of the worries he had lived with for decades, wondering day by day no matter where he was if a door would come crashing open, followed by a squad of vipers with orders from Internal Security to take him off for interrogation about crimes he might or might not have contemplated but would surely confess to after enough physical and mental duress. He wondered if anyone in the Syndicate Worlds had ever been safe from that worry. Snakes. The common nickname for ISS personnel spoke to the general attitude toward them, but the ISS had been vicious and efficient enough to keep dissent down nonetheless.

Until now.

Morgan spoke again, sounding annoyed. “The unit leaders want to know what the policy is on prisoners. Do we take any vipers alive?”

That one was easy. “They won’t know anything worth sweating out of them, assuming they aren’t conditioned to suicide once captured. It doesn’t matter anyway. Do you think any vipers will try to surrender, knowing how the soldiers feel about them?”

Morgan chuckled, her voice delighted this time. “No. They’ll fight to the death because they know what’ll happen if they’re captured alive. I hope we do capture a few.”

About a minute later, Malin reported in. “Assault Force Two ready.”

“How do your people look?” Drakon asked him. “Any signs of wavering?”

“No, sir. These are the cream of our forces. They’ve been waiting for this day. And you’re not just another CEO. You’re the only CEO who ever showed any concern for their personal welfare. They’re loyal to you. You’re going into battle with them, and how many CEOs do that? It may take time to get all the rest of the planetary troops behind you, but you’ve got a good reputation among them.”

A reputation based on actions that had resulted in his being exiled to Midway, Drakon thought ruefully, along with Morgan and Malin, who had chosen to follow him here. “It hasn’t done much for my promotion potential in the past, but maybe that’s about to change.” Assuming he won, and survived, he would go from being a rather low-level military-specialist CEO within the sprawling bureaucracy of the Syndicate Worlds to being the seniormost military commander in an independent star system.

Tense from waiting, stuck waiting six more minutes for the new time line to run out and looking for something to distract part of his mind, Drakon seized on the idea of change. Icenis wanted to go back to calling mobile forces “warships.” Maybe some other changes were worth considering. “What do you two think about going back to the old rank structure? Dropping the CEO and civilian pay scale?”

stuff and using military titles again?"

"We've been doing it this way for about a hundred and fifty years," Malin said. "It's what the troops and everyone are used to."

Unsurprisingly, that made Morgan jump in on the other side. "I think it'd be a great idea to go back to the old ranks, *General Drakon*."

He liked the sound of that. *General Drakon*. And uniforms for high-ranking military leaders again instead of corporate suits. Something besides an executive specialty and assignment code to indicate what he was. And not just *what* he was but, in a lot of ways, *who* he was. "We need to break with the past, and maybe the best way to do that is to go even farther into the past." Just decide it and get it done. Don't go through a hundred layers of corporate bureaucracy, then wait for years before a decision finally wends its way back down saying no, and why the hell are you thinking instead of doing what you're told? Was it that bad in the Alliance? They hadn't been able to beat the Syndicate Worlds in a century of fighting, not until Black Jack reappeared, so the Alliance probably didn't offer any perfect world, either.

But he had never cared for identifying himself as CEO Drakon on those rare occasions when he sent transmissions to Alliance military leaders. They were generals and admirals, and wasn't he, too? "I'm a soldier, dammit."

"Yes, sir," Malin agreed. "Maybe the new titles would help establish a new spirit in the troops."

An alert chimed with deceptive gentleness and Drakon checked the incoming message. "CEO-level comms have been picked up between one of the mobile forces cruisers and the ISS headquarters."

Morgan cursed. "That bitch is trying to roll us! She knows we can't back out now!"

"We know Hardrad has received his orders," Malin countered. "He's probably questioning Iceni about it, too."

"It doesn't matter which of you is right. We have no choice now but to go in." No choice but to face the potential for horrendous disaster. The ISS had nuclear weapons buried in the major population centers on this planet, but detonating those nukes required the use of codes held by Iceni. The snakes could blow the nukes anyway, but it would take a lot longer to trigger them without Iceni's cooperation. If she was cooperating with the snakes, the ground forces attack might end in glowing craters rather than victory, but it was impossible to halt the attack at this point without surrendering to the snakes. "We go in."

The timer on his heads-up display scrolled rapidly toward zero, meaning it was time to focus on that and forget the distractions. "All assault forces stand by. Jump-off at zero minute." As the green "go" alert flashed, Drakon sent a command that was instantly relayed to transmitters that bounced the message out beyond the planet's atmosphere, to every orbiting station and facility and every base on every moon where both ground forces and snakes were present. The order could only travel at light speed, meaning it would take minutes and sometimes hours to reach the farthest facilities, but any reports of his attacks on the planet would come in behind it. His people would get the order to attack seconds before the snakes at their locations knew anything had happened back on the planetary surface.

With the next motion, he switched his circuit to the frequency linking the portion of the attack force he was personally leading in. Half-terrified and half-exhilarated, he felt adrenaline surging, while visions of a hundred earlier battles and engagements flashed through his memory as he began yet another. "Assault Force One, fire and move!"

A one-hundred-meter-wide area free of obstacles or cover, grass- and marble- and stone-surfaced separated the ISS complex from surrounding buildings. Against civilian rioters, that offered plenty of free-fire zone, and even a small number of regular troops trying to assault the ISS building faced formidable defenses. But no complex could be designed to withstand a massed assault by so many

troops, so close to their target, armed with so many heavy weapons.

Drakon heard a roar of mingled rage and defiance surge across the comm circuit as his soldiers opened fire on the hated snakes. The breaching teams fired clearing rounds into the double-layered fence around the complex, blowing huge holes in the fences, detonating the mines placed between the fences and destroying the sensors. Other teams fired antiarmor rounds straight into the security towers set at intervals around the complex, most of the towers automated but some occupied by ISS snakes who never knew what hit them.

As the outer rings of defenses were simultaneously blown apart, other weapons teams dropped screening rounds nearer the walls of the ISS complex, generating dense clouds of smoke mixed with floating infrared decoys and radar-defeating chaff.

In every attack he had participated in, Drakon never remembered actually starting to move. This time, like every other time, he went from crouched under cover to realizing that he was charging forward across the open area toward the complex, moving in the low, fast leaps that the power assists in combat armor made easy. His soldiers followed, dim shapes to either side of him. Despite Malin's reassurance, he had wondered if his soldiers would obey him when it came to this. But on the heads-up display of his helmet Drakon could see every soldier moving to the attack.

Fire flashed by, the complex's defenses firing blind in hopes of scoring hits. Electromagnetic pulse charges went off all over the area, but the EMPs which would have fried electronic circuits in civilian gear or standard survival suits couldn't harm the shielded combat-armor circuitry. Drakon's soldiers paused to return fire, their armor's combat systems pinpointing origins for the defensive shots, then rushed onward as the building's outer defenses were rapidly silenced under an avalanche of attacks.

Drakon reached a stout wall, knowing that it had layers of dead space and synthetic armor beneath the stone exterior. Schematics for the ISS complex had been highly classified, but that hadn't prevented Malin from acquiring copies through some inspired hacking. Now more of Drakon's troops reached the wall to place breaching charges specially formulated to blow through that armor. "Take cover!"

The assault troops nearest the wall huddled back as the charges detonated, directing a series of blasts against the fortified exterior to tear two-meter-wide and -high holes in the walls. On the heels of the detonations, the assault troops poured through the gap, knowing that any defenses right behind the wall would have been taken out along with the wall itself.

Drakon went with the troops, knowing that if he were alone he might have trouble nerving himself to leap into the face of the enemy defenses, but he was able to overcome his dread by staying in a group. Once through the hole, Drakon hurled himself to one side as a volley of high-intensity fire ripped down the hallway the gap opened into. *That's not any internal automated defense. We must have run into a viper strongpoint.* Fear forgotten for the moment under the demands of decision-making, Drakon checked the IDs of the soldiers closest to him. The symbols representing those soldiers glowed on the display that projected information onto the faceplate of his armor, showing exactly where they were on a schematic of this floor of the ISS complex. "Second squad, take cover and return fire to keep those vipers busy. Everyone else, head north with me."

There wasn't time to worry now. Drakon had attention only for the map on his helmet display and the glimpses he could catch of the actual building around him through the dust and smoke thrown up by the breaching charges and the fighting. He and the soldiers with him had barely entered the next passage when barrages of defensive fire began raking it as well. Drakon hit the floor, fuming with anger at the holdup, then checked the floor plan on his helmet display again before calling out orders "Fire some concealment rounds and EMP charges toward those defenders. Combat engineer team sigma, blow a hole in the floor just around the corner."

The concealment charges turned the area between Drakon and the vipers into a fog impenetrable by sensors, and a few moments later that area of the building shook as the combat engineers blasted the hole. Drakon and the troops with him crawled back and around the corner, then as the vipers continued to pour fire down the now-empty corridor, he and the others dropped through the new access to the next lower level.

That level felt oddly quiet, even though the building was shuddering as firefights raged throughout other sections. Doctrine called for Drakon to pause now and evaluate his entire force posture before ordering coordinated attacks, but he had trained his soldiers to operate without detailed orders even though such an approach was discouraged by a Syndicate hierarchy which rightly feared independent thinking. Drakon's approach paid off, as individual platoons and squads from the attacking force spread through the building along every open path, like water flooding an area without adequate protection.

The snakes seemed to be reacting slowly, though, waiting for orders before they shifted position. The delays were often fatal, as soldiers surrounded and wiped out pockets of defenders.

Drakon's helmet display kept fuzzing and sputtering as the jamming systems inside the ISS building as well as the building's structure blocked signals. But so many soldiers were inside the building, each of the combat armor suits relaying signals to every other suit of armor within range, that Drakon still got a halfway-decent picture of events. "This way," he ordered the soldiers with him diverting to the south along a short corridor as the roar of battle grew in intensity again. Fear had become a distant thing, lost in the need to concentrate on developments and keep moving fast.

A sudden alert pierced the pounding of the gunfire. Drakon paused to eye the symbol, which told him that this message had to be from one of two people in this star system. He ordered the soldiers with him to halt movement and accepted the transmission.

The image of CEO Hardrad was fuzzy, breaking up into pixilated static before partially reforming. "Drakon, break off your attack now, or I will detonate the nuclear charges under every major city on this planet."

"You don't have the codes."

"Yes, I do." The interference made it impossible to read Hardrad's expression or get any feel for emotion in the other CEO's voice, not that Hardrad ever showed much feeling in either face or tone. "Iceni betrayed you in exchange for limited immunity. I have the codes, and I will destroy this world before I let you overthrow lawful authority. But, if you stop now, we can reach an agreement. Iceni gets some immunity. So can you. The alternative is to die along with everyone else."

In the middle of a battle, and despite his long experience with the cold-bloodedness that often characterized Internal Security, it felt odd to hear Hardrad making such an apocalyptic threat in the same manner as if he were suggesting that forms had been filled out improperly.

But does he have the codes? Did Iceni turn on me to protect herself? Can Hardrad carry out his threat right now? How much longer before my troops can get to Hardrad's office in the heavily fortified command center?

Drakon's eyes rested on the display depicting his soldiers storming deeper into the ISS headquarters building. He could hear orders being passed, and other cries across the comm circuits as his soldiers exulted in finally striking back at an enemy they might have come to hate more than anything in the Alliance. And he wondered if, despite the brutal discipline exercised within Syndicate forces, it would be possible to get his troops to withdraw or if, no matter what he said, they would keep attacking until every snake was dead.

Or until this city, and numerous others, saw nuclear blooms blossom in their centers.

* * *

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