

[PDF] Victorious (The Lost Fleet, Book 6 Of 6)

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Description:

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

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. He had faced death many times and

would cheerfully do so again rather than attend this briefing.

"You're not going to face a firing squad," Captain Tanya Desjani reminded him. "You're going to brief the Alliance grand council."

Captain John Geary turned his head slightly to look directly at Captain Desjani, commanding officer of Geary's flagship, the battle cruiser Dauntless. "Remind me again of the difference."

"The politicians aren't supposed to be carrying weapons, and they're more afraid of you than you are of them. Relax. If they see you this tense, they'll believe you really are planning a coup." Desjani made a face. "You should know that they're accompanied by Admiral Otopa."

"Admiral Otopa?" Geary had literally been out of the loop for a century, so his knowledge of current officers was limited to those in the ships of the fleet itself.

Desjani nodded, somehow investing the simple gesture with disdain that obviously wasn't aimed at Geary. "Military aide to the grand council. Don't worry about the grand council trying to hand command of the fleet to him. No one would accept Otopa the Anvil as fleet commander in place of you."

Geary looked back at his reflection, feeling nervous and uncomfortable in his dress uniform. He had never enjoyed briefings, and a hundred years ago he would never have imagined that he would be called upon personally to brief the grand council. "The Anvil? That sounds like a strong nickname."

"He's called the Anvil because he's been beaten so often," Desjani explained. "With his political talents far exceeding his military skills, Otopa finally figured out that the position of military aide to the grand council was risk-free."

Geary almost choked as he tried to swallow a laugh. "I guess there are worse nicknames than Black Jack."

"Many worse ones." Out of the corner of his eye, Geary saw Desjani cock her head to one side questioningly. "You've never told me how you picked up the Black Jack name or why you don't like it. Like every schoolkid in the Alliance, I learned the official story in your biographies, but that story doesn't explain your feelings about the nickname."

He glanced her way. "What's the official story?" Since being awakened from survival sleep in a lost and damaged escape pod, he'd made an effort to avoid reading the authorized accounts of his supposed heroic nature.

"That you never got a red deficiency or failure mark in evaluations of yourself or any units under your command," Desjani explained. "Your marks were always 'meets or exceeds expectations' black, hence Black Jack."

"Ancestors preserve us." Geary tried to keep from breaking into laughter. "Anyone who really looked at my records would know that wasn't true."

"So what is the truth?"

"I should have at least one secret from you."

"As long as it's a personal secret. The captain of your flagship needs to know all of your professional secrets." She paused before speaking again. "This meeting with the grand council. Have you told me

everything? Are you going to do as you told me?"

"Yes, and yes." He turned to face her fully, letting his worries show. As commander of the fleet, Geary had been forced to project confidence publicly no matter how bad things got. Desjani was one of the few people to whom he could reveal his qualms. "It'll be a tightrope act. I need to convince them of what we have to do, convince them to order me to do it, and not make them think I'm taking over the government."

Desjani nodded, seeming not the least bit concerned herself. "You'll do fine, sir. I'll go make sure everything is ready at the shuttle dock for your flight to Ambaru station while you straighten up your uniform." She saluted with careful precision, then pivoted and left.

Geary kept his eyes on the hatch to his stateroom after it had shut behind Desjani. He'd have the perfect professional relationship with Tanya Desjani except for the fact that he'd done the incredibly unprofessional thing of falling in love with her. Not that he'd ever openly said that, or ever would. Not while she was his subordinate. It didn't help that she apparently felt the same way about him, even though neither of them could openly speak of it or act on it in any way. That should have felt like a small problem in a universe a century removed from his own, where the Alliance believed him to be a mythical hero returned from the dead, where an unwinnable war had been raging for that entire century between the Alliance and the Syndicate Worlds, and where the worn-out citizens of the Alliance were so disgusted with their own political leaders that they would have welcomed him declaring himself dictator. Sometimes, though, that "small" personal problem felt like the hardest thing to endure.

He focused back on his reflection, not able to spot any imperfections in his uniform but knowing that Desjani wouldn't have dropped that broad hint about straightening up if she hadn't seen something. Scowling, Geary moved a few things a fraction of a millimeter, his eyes going to the multipointed Alliance Star hanging just beneath his collar. He didn't like wearing the medal awarded him after his supposed death in a last-stand battle a century ago, not feeling that he had really earned such an honor, but regulations demanded that an officer in dress uniform wear "all insignia, decorations, awards, ribbons, and medals to which that officer is entitled." He couldn't afford to pick and choose which regulations to follow because he knew that he had the power to do just that, and if he started, he had no idea where it might end.

As he began to leave, his comm alert sounded. Geary slapped the acknowledgment and saw the image of Captain Badaya appear, smiling confidently and apparently standing before Geary even though Badaya was physically still located aboard his own ship. "Good morning, Captain," Badaya beamed.

"Thanks. I was just about to leave to meet with the grand council." He had to handle Badaya carefully. Although Badaya technically was simply commanding officer of the battle cruiser *Illustrious*, he also led the faction of the fleet that would, without a second thought, back Geary as military dictator. Since that faction made up almost the entire fleet by now, Geary had to ensure they didn't launch such a coup. Since assuming command of the fleet, he had gone from worrying about mutiny against himself to worrying about mutiny against the Alliance itself in his name.

Badaya nodded, his smile getting harder. "Some of the captains wanted to move some battleships over near Ambaru station just to remind the grand council who's really in charge, but I told them that wasn't how you were playing it."

"Exactly," Geary agreed, trying not to sound too relieved. "We have to maintain the image that the grand council is still in charge." That was the cover story he was using with Badaya anyway. If the

grand council ordered Geary to do something the fleet knew Geary wouldn't have chosen to do, Geary would feel obligated to follow those orders or resign, and all hell would probably break loose.

"Rione will help you handle them," Badaya noted with a dismissive gesture. "You've got her in your pocket, and she'll keep the other politicians in line. Since you say time is tight, I'd better let you go, sir." With a final parting grin and a salute, Badaya's image vanished.

Geary shook his head, wondering what Madam Co-President of the Callas Republic and Senator of the Alliance Victoria Rione would do if she heard Badaya saying Rione was in Geary's pocket. Nothing good, that was certain.

He walked through the passageways of *Dauntless* toward the shuttle dock, returning enthusiastic salutes from the crew members he passed. *Dauntless* had been his flagship since he'd assumed command of the fleet in the Syndic home star system, the Alliance fleet trapped deep inside enemy territory and apparently doomed. Against all odds, he'd brought most of those ships home, and their crews believed he could do anything. Even win a war their parents and grandparents had also fought. He did his best to look outwardly calm and confident despite his own internal turmoil.

But Geary couldn't help frowning slightly as he finally reached the shuttle dock. Desjani and Rione were both there, standing close together and apparently speaking softly to each other, their expressions impassive. Since the two women usually exchanged words only under the direst necessity and often had seemed ready to go at it with knives, pistols, hell lances, and any other available weapon, Geary couldn't help wondering why they were getting along all of a sudden.

Desjani stepped toward him as he approached, while Rione went through the hatch into the dock. "The shuttle and your escort are ready," Desjani reported. She frowned slightly as she examined him, reaching to make tiny adjustments to some of his ribbons. "The fleet will be standing by."

"Tanya, I'm counting on you, Duellos, and Tulev to keep things from going nova. Badaya should be working with you to keep anyone in the fleet from overreacting and causing a disaster, but you three also need to make sure Badaya doesn't overreact."

She nodded calmly. "Of course, sir. But you do realize that none of us will be able to hold things back if the grand council overreacts.&rdq...

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