



The Lost Stars: Perilous Shield

By Jack Campbell

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Despite General Artur Drakon's misgivings, he partnered with Icení to overthrow Syndic forces. Now, with an enigma fleet menacing their hard-earned independence, he can ill afford to trust her—or lose her support. But in the back of his mind, there are three words that describe someone who confides in a Syndicate CEO: *Stupid. Betrayed. Dead.*

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for **The Lost Stars** series

“There is one thing Jack Campbell really does very well indeed [and] it is writing space battles. They are fabulous, and there are enough here to give you a real taste of what it would be like to be up there and shot at.”—*SFcrownsnest*

“Campbell maintains the military, political, and even sexual tension with sure-handed proficiency...[He] focuses on the human element: two strong, well-developed characters locked in mutual dependence, fumbling their way toward a different and hopefully brighter future. What emerges is a fascinating and vividly rendered character study, fully and expertly contextualized.”—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Brilliant...Jack Campbell runs a strong saga shown from the viewpoints of the Syndicate at a time when the vicious totalitarian military regime teeters on the brink of total collapse.”—*Genre Go Round Reviews*

About the Author

“**Jack Campbell**” is the pen name of John G. Hemry, a retired naval officer who graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis before serving with the surface fleet and in a variety of other assignments. He is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lost Fleet* series as well as the *Stark’s War* series and the *Paul Sinclair* series. His short fiction appears frequently in *Analog* magazine. *The Lost Stars* series includes *Tarnished Knight* and *Imperfect Sword*.

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Chapter One

THIS day hadn’t started out badly, but now it looked very much as if one of the next few days would end with him dead. The most important questions General Artur Drakon still faced were exactly who would pull the trigger, exactly when it would happen, and how many other people would die along with him.“

Two hundred twenty-two alien warships,” Colonel Bran Malin reported with an impressive show of calm. Above and behind Malin ,the planetary command center’s main display portrayed the entire Midway Star System and every ship within it in depressingly accurate detail. The warships of the alien enigma race were four and a half light-hours distant, having arrived at the jump point from the star Pele, which had been occupied by the aliens decades ago. “We face overwhelming odds even if the Syndicate flotilla commanded by CEO Boyens joins with our forces.

”*Our forces*. Drakon focused on the depictions of those for a moment, trying not to let his gloom show outwardly. Many workers were at their control consoles in the command center, all of them supposedly focused on their work, but all of them certainly watching him for the first sign of panic or even uncertainty.

Near this planet orbited the main body of the grandly named “Midway Flotilla.” Two heavy cruisers, four light cruisers, and twelve small Hunter-Killers. A pitiful force by the standards of the recent war between the Syndicate Worlds and the Alliance, but Syndicate losses had been so heavy in the last part of the war that this now ranked as a decent-sized flotilla within the territory where the authority of the Syndicate Worlds once ran unchallenged. About a light-hour distant, at the space dock orbiting a gas-giant planet, were a

battleship and two more heavy cruisers. That looked more impressive, except for the fact that the recently constructed and recently named battleship *Midway* (recently stolen from a Syndicate-controlled dockyard at the star Kane, where it was being outfitted) did not yet have any working weapons.

“They’re not really *our* forces,” Drakon said to Malin. “The Kommodor in charge of the Midway Flotilla answers to President Iceni.” She might call herself President now, but a few months ago Gwen Iceni had been a Syndicate CEO, just as Drakon had also once been. “We banded together out of necessity to overthrow the authority of the Syndicate Worlds in this star system before the Syndicate could order our deaths, but you know how little we can afford to trust each other.”

“President Iceni has not double-crossed you,” Colonel Malin pointed out.

Yet. You know the words used in the Syndicate for CEOs who trust other CEOs. Stupid. Betrayed. Dead. Are you sure she hasn’t tried to call Boyens and make a deal for herself?” The Syndicate flotilla controlled by CEO Boyens consisted of a battleship, six heavy cruisers, four light cruisers, and ten HuKs. The Midway Flotilla had faced a desperate and probably hopeless fight against that force until the aliens called enigmas had shown up in overwhelming numbers to menace all humans in this star system.

“Absolutely certain, General. If you and President Iceni can trust each other, neither of you is likely to trust CEO Boyens to honor any deal he agreed to,” Malin insisted. “Even if Boyens wanted to play it straight, the snakes with his flotilla would demand that both you and Iceni die for your leadership roles in the revolt.

”He could see the humor in that. “I have the Syndicate Internal Security Service to thank for being certain that Iceni won’t betray me to Boyens. That’s the first time the snakes ever made me feel more secure.”

“Yes, sir. But Boyens and his flotilla are a relatively minor problem at the moment. It is possible that he will agree to a proposal from you and President Iceni that he join forces with us against the enigmas.”

Drakon shook his head. “No, he won’t. There’s no percentage for Boyens in joining with us. He came here under Syndicate orders to defeat us and retake this star system, but now that the enigmas have shown up, every human at Midway is very likely doomed. Why should he die fighting a hopeless battle trying to save us?”

“He won’t,” President Gwen Iceni answered as she walked up to Drakon, her every movement and tone of voice carefully controlled to portray a calm confidence that in a lesser person would have seemed ridiculous under these circumstances.

But, Drakon admitted to himself, Iceni could carry it off .

“CEO Boyens,” Iceni continued, “is a practical man. There is no hope for us there,” she added in a matter-of-fact way at odds with her words.

Drakon turned to Iceni. “You’ve talked to the enigmas in the past. Is there any chance of a deal with them?”

Iceni shook her head, her own expression calculating rather than fearful. Like Drakon, she knew that it was critically important for leaders not to show fear. A display of fear communicated weakness, and in the Syndicate system, weak CEOs became targets for those under them. Workers might panic if they saw their leaders openly afraid, or senior subordinates might decide an assassination-driven change in leaders might improve their own chances of survival, or believing the situation to be hopeless, the workers themselves

might rise up and wreak last-ditch revenge on their leaders for past suffering.

“The enigmas,” Icení continued, “don’t talk with us, they talk *to* us. When they deign to speak to us, they make demands and never respond to anything except agreement. I would be very surprised if they even bother communicating with us this time before they kill us.”

“Is this Black Jack’s fault? Did he stir up the enigmas like we feared?”

“It’s possible.” Her gaze went to the main display floating in the middle of the command center. “Black Jack did promise to defend this star system against the enigmas.”

“I don’t see Black Jack’s fleet,” Drakon replied, his voice harsh, “and I don’t think the enigmas will be impressed by our telling them that we’ve got that promise. Black Jack took the Alliance fleet into enigma territory, raised hell, very likely got blown to pieces, and now the enigmas are here to finish the job they wanted to do several months ago.”

He didn’t bother adding that, unlike that previous time, on this occasion the Alliance fleet under the command of the legendary Admiral John “Black Jack” Geary wasn’t here to stop the enigmas. Until about a year ago, Geary had been thought dead for the last century, but he had reappeared to wreak havoc on the forces of the Syndicate Worlds and compel an end to the war everyone had resigned them-selves to believing to be unending. In the process, Geary had also shattered any claim by the Syndicate government to be representing a superior system and annihilated the great majority of the Syndicate warships that had been a major factor in ensuring Syndicate control of the planets under their rule.

But Geary had taken his fleet into enigma territory to try to learn more about the first alien intelligent race encountered by humanity. No Syndicate incursion into enigma space had ever returned.

“The situation . . .” Icení paused before continuing in a thoughtful tone “is difficult.”

“Very difficult,” Drakon agreed, surprised that he could let a trace of dry humor into his own voice at such a time. *Damn, she’s impressive.* “All of my ground forces in this star system are coming to full combat status, but none of them stand a chance against the enigmas if the aliens bombard us from orbit.”

“All of my mobile forces are also being brought to full combat alert,” Icení informed him. “Those at the gas giant saw the arrival of the enigmas an hour before we did, and we just received the status update from them. They are as ready as they can be.”

“Too bad we didn’t have time to get that battleship operational.”

“Yes,” Icení said. “It would have been useful,” she added in a masterpiece of understatement. “There’s only one thing left to do besides trying to bluff the enigmas, and that is trying to arrange a truce with the Syndicate force.”

“You just agreed with me that Boyens wouldn’t fight alongside us,” Drakon said bluntly.

“I said truce, not merger. Our very slim chance of bluffing the enigmas into leaving will be improved slightly if Boyens appears to be part of the defensive force instead of another invader. And Boyens has reason to assist us in that bluff. His masters on Prime want this star system back. If the enigmas take it, or destroy it, Boyens will not have succeeded in his mission.” One side of her mouth curved in a humorless half smile.

“As you and I both know from painful experience, the Syndicate government won’t let the fact that it is impossible for Boyens to succeed in the face of the enigmas influence their decision that he failed, nor will it mitigate the punishment they mete out for that failure.”

Colonel Rho Morgan had arrived while Icen and Drakon spoke, and now saluted Drakon. Morgan’s eyes glinted with a strange light, as if the prospect of a desperate fight excited her. “Colonels Rogero, Gaiene, and Kai report their brigades are ready for action and are stiffening the locals.”

Drakon nodded, his mouth twisting in annoyance. “The locals are nervous, I suppose.”

“It’s not like there’s anywhere to run,” Morgan said. She stepped close to Drakon, so close they almost touched. Her voice came out whisper-soft yet still clear despite the background noise in the command center. “Nowhere for *them* to run. I have a special forces shuttle standing by. Full stealth configuration. We can lift without being spot-*ted* and be boarding one of the heavy cruisers in orbit within half an hour while decoy comms make everyone think you’re in the ground forces headquarters.”

He frowned, thrown off momentarily by her nearness and the memories Morgan’s body aroused of a drunken night he wished had never happened. But it only took a moment to shake that and focus on her words. “Leave the rest?” he asked in the same quiet tones. A glance at the readouts on his wrist confirmed what he had suspected, that Morgan had personal jammers active that were blocking anyone else, even those nearby, from hearing what they were saying.

“Sorry about leaving Gaiene and Kai,” Morgan said in tones that held no trace of actual regret. “But we can’t take anyone else without tipping off what we’re doing.”

She hadn’t mentioned Rogero or Malin, of course, neither of whom ranked high in Morgan’s opinion. Drakon eyed her, knowing the rest of Morgan’s plan without its having to be spelled out. He had, after all, made his own way up the ranks of the Syndicate hierarchy and learned the lessons that had to be picked up along the way. He and Morgan would hijack the heavy cruiser and head for a jump point, leaving everyone else here to fight against impossible odds. With that heavy cruiser’s firepower, they might be able to establish control of some other, weaker, star system.

And everyone else at Midway would die, or whatever the fate was of those the enigmas captured. No one had ever learned what happened to humans who had fallen into the hands of the aliens.

“No,” Drakon said, his eyes returning to the situation display and the enemy forces arrayed there.

Morgan sighed with exasperation. “All right. We can take Malin, too.”

She probably thought that was a major concession given the level of mutual hatred between Malin and Morgan. But Drakon shook his head. “That’s not the point.” How to explain it in a way that Morgan would accept, when even he didn’t fully understand his own reluctance to do what Syndicate CEOs were taught to do in a crisis? “I know the rule in a situation like this is to throw as many subordinates to the wolves as necessary. But I don’t abandon people. You know that. That’s how I ended up exiled to Midway.” *And I guess that may be why I die here.*

Morgan leaned a little closer, her face almost touching his now, eyes blazing. “It is important that you and I survive. We can set up business elsewhere and come back here someday with enough fi re-power to retake this star system and avenge—”

“I’m not interested in avenging people I left to their fates.”

“You didn’t get to be a Syndicate CEO by making looking out for other people your first priority, General. We *both* know that.”

Drakon shook his head stubbornly. “I also know that if I leave here first, before President Icení does, I’ll look weaker than her. I’ll also leave her in control of this planet and this star system.” That was the sort of logic even Morgan could accept.

Morgan paused, her eyes going to Icení. “Maybe you won’t leave first. Maybe she’s halfway out the door.”

Drakon glanced that way, seeing Icení locked in close conversation with her personal assistant/bodyguard/assassin Mehmet Togo. Both Icení and Togo had moved a few steps away. Drakon didn’t need a scanner to be certain that their conversation was also being protected by personal jammers.

“Icení is planning her own escape,” Morgan whispered. “Watch. She’ll bolt out of here with some lame excuse and head for a shuttle. I’ve got snipers posted. We can nail her before she reaches the launch area.”

Drakon frowned though he kept facing toward the display and not Icení. “*No.*”

The force of that reply earned him a searching glance from Morgan. “Why not? Is there some . . . personal reason?”

“Of course not,” Drakon snapped back at her. He had gotten to know Icení a lot better, had been able to learn more about the person behind the once-CEO and now-President, and he had found himself both having more (probably irrational) faith in her and enjoying their meetings. But none of those things were influencing him now. He was certain of that. “We need Icení. If we get through this somehow, we need her control of the warships.”

“Once the enigmas are done here, there won’t be any warships,” Morgan pointed out. “Except theirs.”

“Stand down the snipers immediately. I don’t want any accidents.”

“You need to—”

“I need to have my orders obeyed, Colonel Morgan!”

That might have been too loud for even the personal jammers to completely mask. No one actually looked toward Drakon and Morgan, because everyone in this command center knew better than to appear as if they were aware of any arguments among superiors, but he could sense a stiffening among those nearest, as if they were trying very hard to overcome the natural impulse to glance at the sound of rising voices.

Colonel Malin, normally very sensitive to Drakon’s moods, now seemed totally absorbed in his own work. As much as he disliked Morgan, he also knew better than to let Drakon see him taking any interest or pleasure in her being chewed out.

Drakon took a long, slow breath before speaking again, not looking at Morgan’s furious eyes, gazing out of a face gone stone-cold. “I have my reasons. I always have my reasons for taking a chance on someone.”

He knew she would catch the reference. Morgan herself, judged barely stable enough for duty after a disastrous mission into enigma space, had been turned down by every other commanding officer until Drakon gave her an opportunity.

The fury in Morgan flickered, and her mouth twitched, then she abruptly went back into projecting jaded amusement. “Sometimes that might work out. But I’m one of a kind, General.”

Fortunately, Drakon thought. *Could the universe handle more than one Rho Morgan?* “Get the snipers stood down and work with Rogero, Kai, and Gaiene to get forces deployed to defend against a landing. We’ve got plenty of time to get people dispersed and dug in. Maybe the enigmas will sit in orbit and bombard us to hell, but if the enigmas want this planet in any shape for them to use, they’ll have to come down here and take it from us. I intend making sure the price they pay will be one they remember.”

Morgan grinned wolfishly and tapped the sidearm holstered at her hip. “If they do come down here, I can look one in the eyes as I nail it.”

“And as it nails you,” Malin said.

“It’s been tried,” Morgan replied, her tone teasing now. “Unsuccessfully.” Malin didn’t flinch at the reference to an incident on an orbital platform in which his shot had narrowly missed Morgan before nailing an enemy. That incident had looked to Drakon all too much like an attempt to kill Morgan under cover of a fi refight, but Malin had insisted otherwise, and the shot had killed a dangerous opponent.

Malin looked back at Morgan for a moment, his expression un-readable. “Perhaps you will die in enigma-controlled space after all.”

“You sound unhappy at the idea.”

“You’re imagining things,” Malin said, then turned to his display.

Drakon studied the display grimly as Morgan left to carry out his orders. Hopefully all of his orders. “Colonel Malin, ensure that none of our personnel are on any kind of alert status near this installation.”

“I’ll check on it, General. If there are any nearby, what am I to do?”

“Ensure that they’re stood down and returned to their units.” If only Morgan weren’t so valuable as an assistant. But then, the more valuable people were, the more difficult they seemed to be to live with. Drakon had seen a number of CEOs who got rid of anyone who was hard to live with and instead surrounded themselves with people who caused no drama or problems at all. No problems at all, except for letting the CEOs in question go down in flames through sheer ineptitude, lack of initiative, lack of imagination, and/or lack of brains. Neither Malin nor Morgan was an easy subordinate, but they had bailed him out more than once in situations where kowtowing, compliant assistants would have been overmatched. “How is internal security going? Have the citizens figured out what’s happening?”

“Word is spreading rapidly,” Malin said, “but so far the citizens are not panicking.” He looked thoughtful. “This may seem an inopportune time to mention the upcoming elections that you and President Icení have allowed to go forward for low-level political positions—“

“It’s a damned inopportune time,” Drakon broke in roughly.

“But, General, you should be aware that a substantial number of the candidates for office have contacted local appointed authorities and asked if they can assist in keeping the citizens calm.”

Drakon frowned in surprise. “They’re taking responsibility for that? Even though they haven’t been elected yet and may not be elected?”

“Apparently,” Malin said, “many of the individuals running for office have already been playing leadership roles among the citizens though in underground, unauthorized ways. The opportunity to participate in real elections has convinced the people who are unofficial leaders to come out into the open.”

“I should have expected that,” Drakon said. Just how “real” the elections would actually be was a matter he and Icení were still debating, but even the maximum level of vote manipulation being considered by them was a pale shadow of the total farce that Syndicate elections had been.

But it seemed that offering the citizens a real buy-in to the government, even if a low-level one, had already produced some benefits. Drakon bent his head, thinking. “Make sure we keep track of everyone who offers to help and check back after this is over to see how successful they were.” Odds were that after this was over, they would all be dead, but it never hurt to plan for the future even when that seemed insanely optimistic.

Out of the corner of his eye, Drakon could see Togo backing away from Icení, an uncharacteristic amount of unhappiness visible on Togo’s normally impassive face. But, unhappy or not, Togo nodded in acknowledgment of some instruction and left the command center.

Icení looked around, focused on Drakon and walked briskly back over to him. He admired the walk, and not just because Icení had the sort of walk any man would enjoy watching. She also knew exactly how to pace it. Just fast enough to communicate urgency and control but not so fast as to give the impression of fear or worry about being able to handle whatever happened.

She stopped near him, still radiating apparent confidence but her eyes questioning. “Will you be staying at the command center, General?”

“Yes. Are you going to stay, too, or are you planning on restructuring your business model?” It was an old joke, perhaps as old as the Syndicate Worlds, a semipolite way of asking if someone was preparing to abandon former partners and cut their losses.

Icení’s gaze on him didn’t waver. “I think I will stay. Restructuring doesn’t seem like the most profitable option at the moment.”

“But staying does?” Drakon asked. “That’s an odd business plan.”

“I’m not running a business,” Icení said, her voice growing harder.

“I’m responsible for . . . many other things. This is the best place to monitor events and pass on orders to Kommodor Marphissa as our warships defend this star system.” Icení looked toward the display as if the situation shown there were, if not favorable, at least survivable.

Drakon took one step closer and spoke quietly. “Careful. You’re very good, but if you look too confident in the face of this, the workers might think you’re insane.”

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Frank Miller:

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