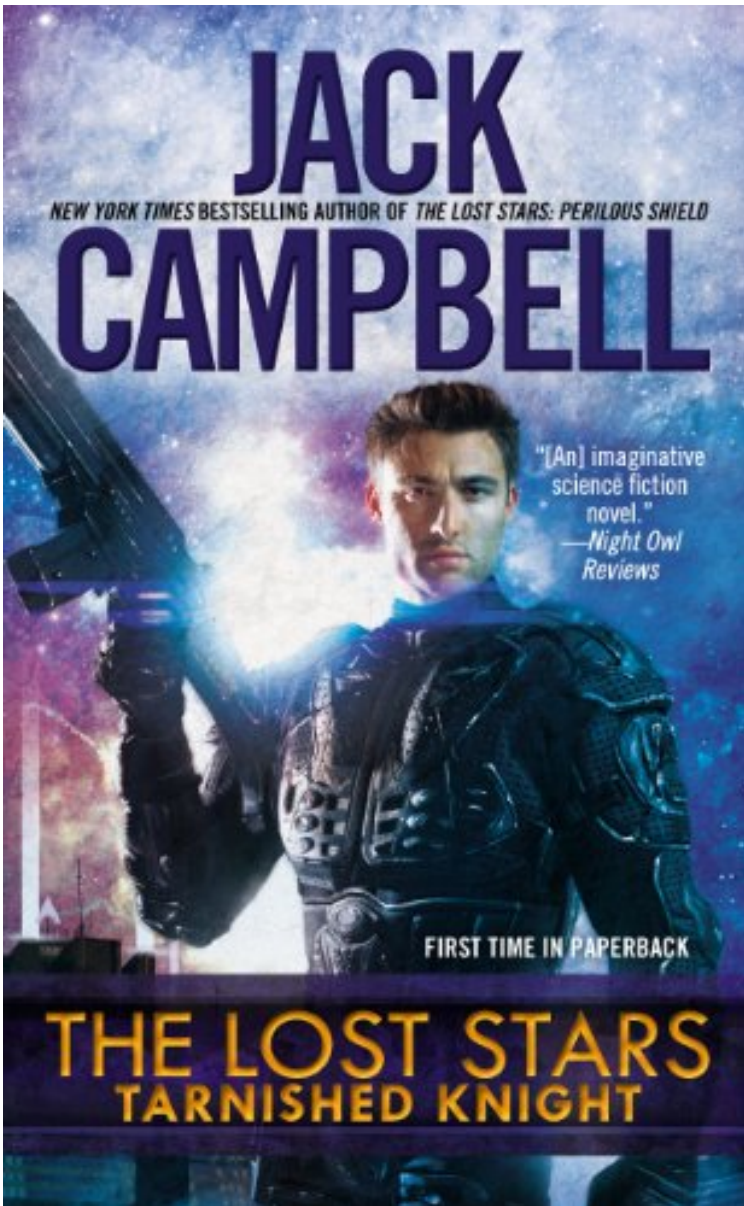


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The Lost Stars: Tarnished Knight



Par Jack Campbell

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurCEO Artur Drakon has been betrayed. The Syndicate Worlds government failed to protect its citizens from both the Alliance and the alien enigmas. With a cadre of reliable soldiers under his command, Drakon launches a battle for control of the Midway Star Systemassisted by an ally hes unsure he can trustCEO Gwen IcenI was exiled to Midway because she wasnt ruthless enough in the eyes of her superiors. She proved them wrong by commandeering some of the warships at Midway and declaring the star systems independence on behalf of the people though staying in charge as President. But while she controls the mobile fleet, she has no choice but to rely on General Drakons ground forces to keep the peace

planet-side. If their coup is to succeed, Drakon and Icenis must put their differences aside to prevent the population of Midway from rebelling against them, to defend their star system from the enigmas and to ferret out saboteurs determined to reestablish Syndicate rule.

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 World 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 **Obey 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 cents. 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 cent 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 were 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 her 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 Iceni 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 Iceni 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 lightyears 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. Iceni and I couldn't talk about it before this, before we had these surveillance systems shortcircuited. 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. Its revolt or die. Beyond that . . . Iceni 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 Iceni 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 coopted 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 well 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 didnt 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 Malins 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 Iceni 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 did you keep things running without everythings 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 couldnt 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 wasnt 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 wouldnt question a CEOs being arrogant and self assured, though in Drakons 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 didnt have to spare, so that Drakon had trouble not showing any irritation or anger as he walked into Icenis office. That office had the grandeur expected of a star system CEOs workplace but on a level consistent with Midways 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 Icenis 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 Icenis, appearing calm, waved Drakon to a seat, then checked her desk display. Security in here is tight, she said. We can talk freely. You didnt bring any bodyguards. You trust me that much? Not really. Drakon gestured in the general direction of the ISS headquarters complex. Theres 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 Im inside it. Do you trust your bodyguards completely? I dont have to, Icenis replied, not really answering his question. By the time I do something that might alarm the snakes, youll be doing your part. Are your people ready? Well hit the four primary ISS sites on this planet at fifteen hundred, just as planned. Im 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 squadlevel forces at the same time. Icenis nodded, then glanced upward. What about the orbiting stations and other facilities offplanet? Ive 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. Youre sure the snakes wont be alarmed? He hadnt sat down despite Icenis offer, being too keyed up to carry that off well. But he couldnt 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 cant be certain. Its a very big operation, so its possible the snakes will see something. But it shouldnt 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 didnt expect the government to send that order here as quickly as it did. Even before you and I launched this plot we wouldnt 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 Im sure you did your homework on me before you responded. But we didnt start planning rebellion any too soon. That 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 cant ignore from CEO Hardrad. And hell 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 doesnt see that order for a few more hours well 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? Ill take care of the warships. Warships? Were going to start using Alliance terminology now? They did win the war, Icenis replied, her voice tinged with sarcasm. But its not just an Alliance term. We used to call them warships, too, before the bureaucracy redefined and relabeled them. Were 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. Ive got a shuttle lifting me to C448 in ten minutes. Ill use that heavy cruiser to rally the other warships here to us. Whats CEO Kolanis status? Drakon asked. Any change? Not yet. Shes 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. Youll 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 Kolanis security, so assassination isnt 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 youd handle the mobile forces. Morgans 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 cant wait for better options. Even if that order from Prime hadnt forced our hands, another highpriority 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. Ive kept that order stuck within the comm system, too, but a highpriority message cant 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 C448. 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. Its 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 Im busy up there. We have to maintain order. The mob may take the destruction of the snakes as a license for anarchy. Once weve 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. Icenis had obviously thought about the questions that Malin had raised about what to do after the snakes were dead. Drakon hoped that Icenis ideas were ones he could live with. He also hoped they didnt involve getting rid of the one other CEO, Drakon, who would be able to challenge her authority here after Hardrad was taken care of. Icenis 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 dont think its selfinterest? I think that selfinterest 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. Icenis smiled very briefly and humorlessly. Then Ill 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 cant depend on anyone else. Maybe well die trying, but I 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, Im a pragmatist, Artur Drakon. Those are my reasons. Do you believe me? No. Drakon returned the same kind of smile that Icenis had given him. Why didnt you run when the enigmas threatened to attack if youre so pragmatic? She paused as if deciding how to reply. Because I was responsible for everyone in this star system, and I wouldnt run when they were all trapped here. Youre an idealist as well as a pragmatist? Drakon asked, letting some sarcasm into his own tone now. You might say that, as long as youre not being insulting. Icenis gave him a smile which was mocking this time. Dont you believe I can be part idealist? Not if its a very big part. Nobody survives as a CEO if theyre in any way an idealist. Oh? And how did you end up at Midway? Drakon smiled sardonically at her. Im sure you already know that. The snakes tried to arrest one of my subCEOs, 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. Icenis looked back at him steadily. You dont 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 cant control how others see my actions or react to them. And whether or not I survive is still an openended question. Ill do what I have to do, and I know the sort of things youve done in the past to maintain your power. But if you want to pretend those are your reasons, Im willing to go along. Fine. As long as you dont doublecross me. If you do Ill die? Drakon asked, doing his best to sound nonchalant even though he was itching to rejoin his soldiers. Icenis voice was just as relaxed as Drakons as she answered. Youll 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, Icenis headed off at a quick pace, her bodyguards taking up positions on all sides.

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