

**BOUNDLESS by Jack Campbell**  
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**Excerpt**

**FROM** near orbit, the world called Unity looked like many other planets. Patches of darker and lighter land, green where vegetation bloomed, white where ice or snow lay, a very broad ocean and some slender seas, and rafts of cloud cover sailing between the surface and space. The native vegetation on the planet was lighter in shade than species from Old Earth, with a silvery sheen, so the forests and grassy plains bore a strange gloss where the light of the star fell upon them. One city bore the name Unity as well, but there were other cities, and many citizens whose work and lives weren't directly tied to the fact that this planet held the capital of the Alliance.

Tanya Desjani walked him to *Dauntless's* shuttle dock. "Be careful." "You, too. Keep an eye on *Mistral*. There are people who'd love to see all of that evidence destroyed."

"I'll be watching." They walked into the dock, where a large display showed the planet below. She nodded toward it. "I read that once this star had another name. The first colony planted here was bombarded from space, though. They never did find out who was responsible."

He looked at the planet, imagining it as it must have been on that long ago day when death fell upon it from orbit. "Why mention that now?"

"Because even at the time a few people speculated aliens might've been responsible." Tanya gave him her most serious look. "We've learned some alien species were making tentative moves into this part of space when humanity came flooding in. And we've learned that one of those alien species, the enigmas, wouldn't have hesitated to try to stop the human expansion. And we know they had malware hidden in all of our fleet's systems. There might still be some hidden dangers down there, because the enigmas still don't want us at peace and we don't know what else they might have planted before we discovered them. Don't assume all of your dangers will come from known sources."

"Good point. I'll contact you as soon as I can."

"Yes, Admiral." She saluted him, still solemn. "We might develop some comm problems of the blind eye to the scope variety, though. Depending on events."

"I understand." He returned the salute, praying that everything would be fine and he'd see her again, before turning to walk up the ramp into the shuttle.

Orbital space was busy, filled with maneuvering traffic and satellites of many kinds as well as human habitats and stations. But the shuttle was given a clean path down, other spacecraft scattering to clear the way.

"We've got company," the pilot announced, her voice echoing in the passenger compartment where Geary sat. The display on the forward bulkhead shifted to highlight several contacts swerving in to match vectors with the shuttle. Aerospace craft, deadly and swift. Hopefully an escort to protect the shuttle, and not guards with orders to keep the shuttle from deviating from its trajectory.

The shuttle swooped down, coming to rest on the surface with the unnecessary but graceful élan of a human pilot showing off their skills.

The VIP landing field was clear, security barriers and what seemed to be hundreds of police holding back a crowd of spectators that appeared to number in the tens of thousands, filling the open public areas that ringed the landing field.

Geary stood up, straightened his uniform, and nodded to the two members of *Dauntless's* crew

who'd come down in the shuttle with him. Marine Gunnery Sergeant Orvis and Master Chief Gioninni, both resplendent in dress uniforms, nodded back. Tanya Desjani had suggested sending down *Dauntless's* entire Marine contingent in full battle armor as escorts, but the impression that sort of show of force would create would send precisely the wrong message. Aside from displaying professional background, Gunny Orvis would spot any open threats being aimed at the shuttle, while an expert schemer like Master Chief Gioninni should be able to detect any covert dangers. Geary didn't think anyone would be authorized to take steps against him, but he had to worry about those who might be worried enough about protecting themselves that they might try something.

The shuttle ramp dropped, letting in the air of Unity's atmosphere, as well as the distant rumble of thousands of voices. As Orvis and Gioninni walked down the ramp and took position on either side of the bottom, the noise dwindled rapidly, not even the sound of wind rising over the silence, as if the entire planet were holding its breath.

Geary walked down the ramp, trying to look calm and professional despite the worries filling him.

As his right foot touched the surface of the planet, noise erupted from the watching crowds. He nearly froze as the sheer mass of sound from so many people rolled past.

But he did pause, looking out across the landing field, nerving himself for what was to come.

It was one of those moments that he knew would be forever branded in his memory, the smallest details clear no matter how many years passed. On this part of the planet, the sun was just rising, its rays lighting up the bottom of a swath of clouds so that they looked like a sheet of molten gold flung across the sky. The air smelled of cut grass and distant flowers and the thousand faint scents put off by people and their machines and their buildings. A flock of something birdlike was circling the landing field, repelled by the measures used to keep wildlife off the field, but stubbornly still trying to find a way in.

There was something else in the air, something indefinable, that made him want to back away. The same feeling the air got before a huge storm, the same sense that immense danger hovered just out of sight but was bearing down and would soon strike with overwhelming force. These crowds held a terrible potential, which if unleashed would rage against anything and everything in its path. In that moment he knew with absolute certainty that Charban had been right.

"At least they're cheering, Admiral," Master Chief Gioninni remarked as he and Gunny Orvis saluted. But the way Gioninni said it, the way he ran wary eyes across the crowds, made it obvious that he, too, could feel the ominous atmosphere. A good con artist had to be able to read their audience, and Gioninni was a very good con artist. "Sir, you might want to watch your step."

Gunnery Sergeant Orvis nodded in agreement with Gioninni's words, his eyes scanning the crowd as if they were a threatening enemy force. "I *think* they're cheering you, sir."

"Let's hope you're right, and that they don't change their minds," Geary replied. "You two wait in the shuttle and keep an eye on things until I get word about how long I'll be on the planet."

"Yes, sir," Orvis said. "Should we seal the shuttle and remain ready to lift?"

"Yes. If a mass of people comes charging onto this field, you're authorized to lift."

"What about you, sir?"

"I will hopefully be in a more secure area than this."

Orvis nodded. "Light off your beacon and get to the top of a building, and we can lift you off. If you can't get to the top, get to a window and we can get close enough to get you. The pilots flying this bird are the best in the fleet."

“Thanks, Gunny.” Geary tried a smile he hoped looked reassuring. “I doubt that it’ll come to that. Those are all citizens of the Alliance,” he added, waving to indicate the crowd.

Gunnery Sergeant Orvis shook his head, his expression grim. “Admiral, with all due respect, if things go to hell, we won’t be dealing with citizens of the Alliance. We’ll be facing a mob. Mobs are people who’ve forgotten they’re human, and forgotten that other people are human. A mob will do things none of them would imagine doing in other circumstances, because they’ve forgotten they’re human. I’ve seen it, and wish I hadn’t. Even disciplined military units can turn into a mob if they have poor leadership or are pushed too hard for too long. Civilians . . . hell, Admiral, you know as well as I do that there are politicians who’ve been encouraging these people to turn into mobs.” “Not all of the politicians,” Geary said. “A great many are doing their best.”

“I concur, Admiral,” Orvis said. “But it only takes one match that doesn’t care what gets burned in the blaze it sets off for its own profit.” He couldn’t think of any words to answer that, because everything Orvis said was true, so Geary just nodded wordlessly before turning to walk to the waiting ground vehicle, an armored limousine. A single guard waited at the door, another Marine, who saluted as Geary approached.

He got in, finding a single occupant waiting. “General Carabali. It’s nice to see you again.” Nice and reassuring. He’d been working with her since Carabali had been the senior surviving Marine in the fleet he’d assumed command of deep inside Syndic space, and knew he could trust Carabali in any matter. The government knew that as well. Had sending her to meet him been a subtle sign of encouragement?

“And you, Admiral.” Carabali gestured to the guard. “Seal us in and get this thing moving.”

“Yes, General.” The heavy door sealed with a reassuring thunk, cutting off the sustained roar of the crowds. The display screen on the front end of the passenger compartment gave a view of the guard getting in next to the driver, who was also a Marine.

“A fully armored limo?” Geary asked as the ground car surged into motion. The side screens, positioned as if they were windows instead of panels inside strong armor plate, showed the crowd waving and shouting, the sound still blocked. “But no other ground escort?”

“No, Admiral,” Carabali replied, her eyes studying the outside view. “I was told they didn’t want to create the appearance of you being detained by force, or the appearance of you coming in to take over, and a lightly armed honor guard also acting as an escort would’ve been too exposed if the crowds erupted. They don’t want anything happening to you, but they can’t do anything that might trigger unpleasant reactions.”

“At least they’re thinking things through. Are there any specific concerns?”

Carabali gave him a startled look. “They didn’t provide you with that information, Admiral?”

“No.” Geary tried to sit back and relax a little. “All I’ve been told is to come down here in the shuttle and report to the Grand Council.”

“I see.” Carabali gritted her teeth, clearly unhappy. “There’ve been reports of plans to harm you to create a distraction. Nothing specific as to time and place and means, but credible enough to cause concern.”

“A distraction?”

“Sir, if the Alliance is dealing with massive mobs rampaging through its capital, things like following up on what you found at Unity Alternate will go way down the priority list, giving the guilty parties a lot more time to work up their strategies, and making anything they did look minor

compared to what the mobs might be doing.”

Geary gave up trying to appear relaxed and sat straight, fighting a feeling of despair. “It feels like I’m dealing with Syndic CEOs again.”

He looked at the crowds outside again as the limo left the field and began moving down a broad boulevard, empty except for the car, but the sides lined with more guards and security vehicles. Beyond security stood a swarm of spectators, craning their heads to look at the limo as it passed.

“Do you have any idea what they expect?” Geary asked, indicating the crowds on either side.

“Each of them expects you to give them what they want,” General Carabali said. “And they all want different things. But there’ve been a lot of stories circulating in the last few days. Stories about your loyalty to the Alliance, and statements you’ve made about following orders from the government. Measured against that are stories claiming you’re coming to finally clean out the government. And some really crazy stories that you’ve sold out humanity to the aliens.”

“Which aliens?” Geary asked, his eyes on the faces in the crowds, trying to read their moods and feelings. “The enigmas, the Dancers, or the Kicks?”

“The Dancers. Of course. They’re the ugly ones so they must be evil, right? You can’t argue with some people about that. My Marines, who fought the Kicks face-to-face, have been really surprised to see how popular the Kicks are. Nobody wants to hear how dangerous the cute little Kicks were.” Carabali shook her head in disgust. “We finally find truly alien intelligences and people just want to plug them into our own little human categories, as if they were some kind of toy or exotic animal. Are we going to screw up alien contact that badly?”

“I hope not.” Geary looked back at her. “Any problems with security in the government?”

“Lots of baskets being turned over and lots of people expressing shock at what was under them. No one’s tried anything obvious, though. The special agencies are almost paralyzed because most of their people didn’t know what was going on in the hidden programs, and now they have no idea who to trust with anything.” Carabali shrugged. “But no open threats,” she repeated. “Everyone seems to have thought they were being loyal, even the ones who deliberately worked around the rules.”

Geary shook his head. “The road to hell is still paved with good intentions, isn’t it?”

“I can’t judge intentions, Admiral.” Carabali shifted her gaze to look to the west. “Also, some senior officers at Fleet Headquarters are on house arrest since your arrival message was received. Admiral Otopa is one of them, as is Admiral Tonic. There are others.”

“Who’s enforcing the house arrest?” “My Marines.”

That was simultaneously reassuring and worrisome. What had it come to that Marines had to be used as prison guards for senior officers?

“How far is it to where we’re going?” Geary asked.

“You’ve never been to Unity, Admiral?” Carabali gestured ahead. “Not much farther.”

The landing field hadn’t been far from the seat of government. Geary saw the street they were on end at the plaza outside the soaring building that housed the Alliance Senate. Every image Geary had seen of that plaza showed many people entering and leaving, but as the armored limo came to a halt no one else could be seen between the car and the entrance. More security forces and police formed lines keeping the crowds clear of what was formally known as the Plaza of the People of the Alliance. He gazed somberly at the empty Plaza of the People, no people allowed on it at the moment, thinking there was no better metaphor for the problems facing the Alliance.

Carabali got out of the car with him and gestured toward the entry. “I’m supposed to let you

enter alone, Admiral.”

“All right. I’d be the last to tell you not to follow orders.” Geary smiled at Carabali. “But there’s something else I should do next.”

Instead of walking straight to the building, Geary walked at an angle toward a large fenced-off area crowded with people bearing press badges and cameras. Cameras hadn’t had to be large enough to be easily seen for a long, long time, but after privacy violations got bad enough and frequent enough the laws had been changed to require any recording of others to use equipment that was clearly visible.

Some of the security officials, seeing him deviating from the middle of the path, ran to intercept Geary. But he adopted a ship’s captain attitude, striding forward as if nothing and no one dare stand in his way. He had to direct a single look at one official who planted himself in his path but gave way under that stare.

He didn’t stop until at the fence separating the press from him, trying not to frown at the symbolism of that. One of the founding principles of the Alliance had been to allow as few restrictions as possible on the public’s ability to learn what the government was doing. When had the Alliance started fencing off the press whose constant vigilance was necessary in a democratic system?

The reporters stared at him, poised to shout questions but waiting to see if he’d speak.

“I have something to say,” Geary said, speaking calmly. “I want to put to rest any rumors or worries. I came here on orders from the Alliance government. I will follow the orders of the Alliance government as long as I wear this uniform, because I still believe in the Alliance. I don’t know how many men and women have given their lives over the centuries to defend the freedoms the Alliance has protected, but I’ve seen many of them die fighting under my command. I will never betray their sacrifices. I ask everyone who hears this to refrain from any actions that would harm others or the Alliance. Our ancestors gave us a very precious gift, a government shared among many to ensure their safety and freedom. I will never support any actions that would under- mine that.”

As far as he could see, the members of the crowd near enough to listen were intent on his words, while farther off people’s attention was focused on their individual pads as his words were broadcast as fast as they were spoken.

He paused, and a reporter’s voice leapt into the tiny gap. “Are you here to see justice done? Will you clean house in the Senate?”

Geary didn’t have to feign a frown of puzzlement. “I’m not part of the legal system. I’ve done what I can to ensure all evidence of violations of the Alliance’s laws were brought to the government. I will answer whatever questions the Senate puts to me. And I will trust the government to take the right and necessary actions to deal with those who have violated their oaths and responsibilities.”

His response appeared to stun them for a moment. Geary noticed that the buzz of conversation beginning to rise from the crowd had suddenly dropped back to silence. Was that a good or a bad thing? Did it mean they were thinking about his words, or rejecting them?

The quiet was broken when another reporter called out, her voice harsh. “Won’t you vow to immediately deal with corrupt and law- breaking senators? Will you immediately bring them all to justice?”

“No.” He let the word sit alone for a moment before continuing. “I will let the courts and the legal system do that. Abandoning due process in the name of justice is insane. Do you only want

someone to blame, or do you want those who did wrong to be held to account for their actions? These are your courts, your laws, which exist to protect every citizen. Casting them aside would not produce justice.”

How were they taking that? Geary tried to unobtrusively look over the nearest portions of the crowd to read their reactions, but it was very hard to pick out a single expression in the mass of people without obviously focusing on one individual at a time. The quiet might mean anything, agreement or stunned disapproval. Whether the silence meant they were listening, truly hearing what he was saying, he couldn't tell.

Another reporter spoke up, her voice more measured. “Do you have anything else to tell the people of the Alliance?”

He hesitated, not wanting to risk saying the wrong thing, unsure how his earlier words had been received, but his memory suddenly produced a vision of Rione's last transmission at Unity Alternate, and that broke something inside of him. *Save the Alliance*. Every moment since he'd awoken from survival sleep, other people had been expecting him to save them, to fix everything for them. He was worn out from those expectations. Frustration fueled his words as Geary looked at the reporters, letting the words come.

“Yes. I wish that all of the people of the Alliance would stop listening to lies, stop believing that everything wrong is someone else's fault, and stop believing that someone else will fix everything. There aren't any easy, simple, painless answers. I can't save the Alliance! When Victoria Rione sacrificed herself to save my fleet and to save all of you, she asked me to tell the people of the Alliance to stop blaming others and to look in the mirror for the solution to our problems. Only that person, the one you see in that mirror, can fix what ails the Alliance. She died doing not what would benefit her or people just like her, but doing what would save us all. She knew that anything good requires a willingness to sacrifice for others, to believe the best of others no matter how difficult it is. I believe that her ancestors welcomed her, and that all of our ancestors would approve of her actions.”

He realized that if she were here, Rione would probably be rolling her eyes in open scorn of the idealistic words. But she had lived them, in her own way.

“Thank you,” Geary said in the silence that lingered following his words. He turned and walked away, followed by a crescendo of more shouted questions. His mind was already worrying over what he'd said and how he'd said it. He could only hope those words helped things instead of making them worse.

He had only taken several steps when a single small drone flashed into sight and zipped toward him, so low it skimmed the surface of the plaza, somehow evading a volley of defensive fire as well as whatever unseen electronic countermeasures were being hurled at it.

Running would be senseless. The drone was faster and quicker than he was. Geary stood watching it, not knowing what else he could do. It wasn't fatalism, just a realization that his best and only chance would be a last-moment dodge that the drone wouldn't have time to adjust for before racing past him. The same tactics that he'd use in space, but on a much, much smaller and much, much slower scale.

It didn't seem slower, though, not when standing here as the drone tore through the air toward him.

