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MIKE RESNICK

**STARSHIP:
FLAGSHIP**

BOOK FIVE



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Inquiries should be addressed to
Pyr
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228-2119
VOICE: 716-691-0133
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.PYRSE.COM

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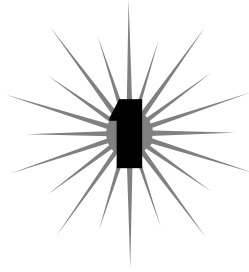
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To Carol, as always

And to Blarney, who knows why



Singapore Station—oddly shaped, built of dozens of disparate pieces, close to seven miles long—moved almost imperceptibly through space at the heart of the Inner Frontier. It was not a world but merely a structure. It possessed no government yet was home to almost twenty thousand permanent residents and a quarter million transients. A dozen mile-long docking arms shot out from its core, giving it the appearance of a gigantic, shining, mutated spider.

The most important location on the three oxygen levels of the station was Duke's Place, a casino run by the once-human individual known as the Platinum Duke. It attracted humans and aliens for its gaming tables, its drinks, and its willingness to look the other way when black marketeers gathered to do their business. But on this particular day, more important things were transpiring than simply the winning and losing of money. To the men, women, and aliens gathered in the Platinum Duke's back room, the stakes were a lot higher than that.

Wilson Cole faced the assemblage. He was a nondescript man, an inch or two below normal height, a few pounds overweight, his brown hair starting to turn gray. There was nothing in his appearance to suggest that he had been the most decorated member of the Republic's vast military machine, or that for the past four years he had been that same military's most wanted outlaw.

"It's time," he said. "We leave tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" exclaimed a few surprised voices.

"I've received word that the Navy has dispatched a fleet of eight

hundred ships, and they should reach Singapore Station in two days' time. So like it or not, we're in a state of war."

"We always were," snorted an extremely tall, statuesque redhead.

"Not until last month, Val," Cole corrected her.

"Okay," said the woman named Val. "*You* weren't at war with the Republic. *I* was."

"It makes no difference," he replied. "Right now we all are."

"You can't say this was unanticipated," said a man whose face and limbs, indeed everything but his eyes and tongue, seemed to be made of platinum.

"Of course it wasn't," answered Cole. "But it means that it's time to go on the offensive."

"Are you sure we're ready?" asked a short blonde woman.

"I don't think it matters," said Cole. "It's been forced on us." He paused. "Look, the Navy tortured two of our officers and then destroyed an entire planet for harboring them. So we declared the Inner Frontier off-limits, and began picking off Navy ships one at a time whenever they'd cross the border. It was only a matter of time before they responded in force. They did that last month, and we beat them—at a cost of half our fleet. This time they're coming with more than twice as many ships. What will it cost us to beat them again—and if we do, how many ships do you think they'll send the next time? They've got three million to choose from, and four worlds devoted to doing nothing but building more. We have less than a thousand, and most of them have no defenses against the kind of weaponry they'll have to face."

"If we can't hold off eight hundred ships, or fifteen hundred, or two thousand, on our own home ground, how the hell do you plan to conquer the Republic?" demanded the Platinum Duke. "I trusted you, Wilson. Now you tell me you can't defend Singapore Station."

“I *can* defend it,” said Cole. “I’m telling you I *won’t* defend it. We can’t stay here. It just wouldn’t be worth the cost in ships and lives. If we lose, it’s over; and if we win, then we’ll lose the next time, or the time after that.”

“So instead you’re going to conquer the Republic, with its sixty thousand worlds and three million military ships?” persisted the Duke sarcastically. “I’ll tell you something, Wilson: if you promote God to Gunnery Officer of the *Teddy R*, I’ll still put my money on the Republic.”

“Wars are like safaris,” answered Cole calmly. “The best ones are where you only have to fire one or two shots.”

“Spare me your platitudes!” snapped the Duke. “Eight hundred ships are coming out here for blood. They don’t know that you’ve teamed up with the Octopus. They don’t know about the few hundred ships you recruited from the Republic itself. They don’t even know if the *Theodore Roosevelt* still exists. All they know is that we annihilated their last force at Singapore Station, and that’s what they’re coming to destroy.”

“They’re not coming to destroy Singapore Station,” chimed in the Octopus, a huge man who stood out even among the more bizarre aliens in the room. He wore no shirt and had six misshapen hands projecting, armless, from his rib cage, three on each side. “Use your brain, Duke. Just make it clear that you’re doing business as usual, have your girls greet them with open arms, and keep your casinos and bars and drug dens running around the clock. They know that Singapore Station doesn’t have motive power. Until last month they never lost a ship anywhere near the station. The only reason they came here is because they were tipped that Cole was here. They don’t want your station. They want *him*—and, in all immodesty, me.”

“Fine!” snarled the Duke. “So they’re not going to blow it away; they’re just going to appropriate everything I own. That makes it all okay.”

“Shut up!” said Val irritably. “If we win, we’ll take it back. If we lose, you won’t be around to worry about it.”

“How comforting,” growled the Duke.

“Come off it,” said Val. “You spent a good twenty years running rigged games and serving watered whiskey. It’s time you paid your dues.”

“I thought that was what I was doing when I let you draw them to the station last month.”

“Hey, Cole!” said Val, getting to her feet. “What say I make him the first casualty of the war?”

“Just calm down, Val,” said Cole. “We’ve got serious things to talk about.”

“Yeah? Well, I am seriously offering to coldcock him.”

Cole smiled and turned to the Duke. “You have to forgive the Valkyrie. Sometimes she forgets who the enemy is.”

“Then get on with it!” muttered Val.

“Sometimes she forgets who the boss is, too,” continued Cole. “All right, to repeat: at last count we have eight hundred and four ships, including those that Lafferty can make available to us. The computer can’t give us an exact total for the Navy, but it estimates three million four hundred seventeen thousand two hundred eighty-nine as of an hour ago.”

“Where *is* this Lafferty?” asked one of the men at the back of the room.

“I notice that nobody minded accepting his help last month,” said Cole with a smile. The smile vanished. “He’s our contact within the Republic, and he’s staying there. They’re watching any ship that approaches Singapore Station, so why let them know they have a turncoat—actually, a few hundred turncoats—in their midst?” He paused. “Now, even someone as bloodthirsty as Val can’t really want to take on three and a half million ships with a force of eight hundred—”

“Three million four hundred thousand,” she interrupted him.

“I stand corrected. If you find those odds considerably more favorable, I’m going to have the computer give you a course in remedial mathematics.” There were a few chuckles; the Valkyrie wasn’t laughing. “Not only can’t we go up against them, but it would be foolhardy to travel in any discernible formation, or even in any proximity to each other. We’re fighting a guerrilla war, and it’s a big galaxy. If we do it right, finding us should be even harder than finding needles in a haystack.”

“That’s going to make it damnably hard to coordinate any action at all,” offered another man.

“We’re working on that,” answered Cole. “Christine Mboya and Malcolm Briggs are our two computer experts. They’re on the *Teddy R* right now, working on a code we can use that—”

“There’s never been a code that couldn’t be broken,” interrupted an alien.

“You didn’t let me finish,” said Cole, just the slightest hint of steel beneath the mild response. “As I was saying, they’re working on a code that will be keyed in only to those ships that are meant to receive it, and will instantly vanish should any other ship or computer try to decipher it.”

“It’ll never work.”

Cole indicated a humanoid alien seated in the first row. “Commander Jacovic?”

The alien stood up and turned to face the room. “The Teroni Federation has been using such codes for four years. They exist, and they work.”

“One of the advantages we have,” said Cole, “is that most of the Republic’s military assets and forces will be occupied by the Teroni Federation. It’s true that they have three and a half million ships, but about three million are engaged in this interminable war against the Teronis.”

“So it’s only half a million to eight hundred,” said the Platinum Duke. “That makes it all okay.”

Val glared at him until he lowered his gaze.

“Another advantage we have is that my First Officer”—Cole nodded toward Jacovic—“is the former Commander of the Fifth Teroni Fleet. Should we inadvertently come into contact with them, he will be our spokesman.”

“He’s their version of *you*,” said the Duke. “They’ll blow him away the second they identify him.”

Cole shook his head. “He resigned in disgust. I mutinied. There’s a difference—perhaps not to the ruling parties, but to the officers he may have to contact.” He turned to face the Platinum Duke. “Now, as to your last bit of arithmetic: it’s true that there are probably close to half a million Republic ships that aren’t engaged in the war with the Teroni Federation—but that’s not the only real or potential threat the Republic faces. The Canphor Twins—Canphor VI and VII—have gone to war with them four times this millennium, and there’s always a chance, almost a certainty in fact, that one of these days they’ll try it again. When we were in the Navy, the remnants of the Sett Empire were picking up some support on the Rim, and controlled about thirty planets. Who the hell knows what’s happened in the last four years? And there are doubtless other threats that we know nothing about. Most of the Republic’s ships will be otherwise occupied, as long as we can keep one fact a secret.”

“Only one?” said the Duke.

Cole smiled. “Only one. *We* know we’re in a war with the Republic. The longer we can keep that fact from them, the greater our chance of success.”

A man at the back of the room stood up. “I have a question.”

“Yes, Mr. Perez?”

“It’s easy to keep the fact that we’re at war a secret today or tomorrow, sir, but how the hell do we keep it a secret once we start attacking their ships inside the Republic?”

“In the beginning, we’ll pick them off one by one, just the way we did here on the Frontier. We won’t attack any force that we can’t annihilate before they can get a message off. The notion that we’ve reentered their territory and are engaging their ships is too outrageous for them to give any credence to, at least if we’re careful.”

“Dumb!” said Val.

“Oh?” said Cole. “Perhaps you’d care to enlighten us.”

“We could die of old age before we kill a third of the solo ships they’ve got patrolling the Republic’s borders. Deluros VIII is their capital world. *That’s* the place we should be going!”

“That’s our ultimate target,” replied Cole. “How close do you think we could get as an identifiable military force? Forty thousand light-years? Thirty-five thousand?”

“So you think one lone ship can sneak through?” she persisted. “I hope you’re not thinking of the *Teddy R*, because every goddamned ship and officer in the Republic is on the lookout for it. The best thing to do is put it on autopilot, fill it with exceptionally dirty pulse bombs, and aim it at Deluros.”

Cole looked amused. “You must forgive her,” he said to the room. “She’s really very kind to her cat.”

“I don’t have a fucking cat!” snapped Val.

“I forgot—she ate it,” he said with a smile. Val growled an obscenity, but other than that didn’t respond. “As I was saying,” Cole continued, “we’ll pick them off whenever and wherever we can, we’ll sabotage their bases, and at least half of us will be in the business not of fighting but of enlisting disillusioned members of the Republic to our cause. We have the further advantage that only four of our ships

carry Navy design and insignia. That means that those are the only four ships that can be taken or even identified. If any of you run into trouble, you can cut and run, and even if your ship is identified the Navy will never know you're part of a coordinated attack force."

"By that same token, the *Teddy R* should hang back where it can't possibly be identified," said the Duke.

"In a perfect universe you'd be right," said Cole. "But if this was a perfect universe, we wouldn't be attacking the Republic."

"Okay, it's imperfect. Why does that give you leave to attack a Republic ship and be identified?"

"We call what we have a fleet," explained Cole, "but what it mostly is is a collection of small ships that were never intended for military action. Most of them have been jury-rigged and outfitted with weapons and some defenses, but the fact remains that only three of our ships can resist a Level 4 pulse cannon or a Level 5 laser cannon, and the *Teddy R* is one of them. Only one of our ships has the power to fire a Level 5 pulse cannon, and that's the *Teddy R*. There will be situations where we're the only one with the firepower and defenses to go up against certain ships or certain planetary installations." He paused. "And there's something else."

"What?"

"They don't know that the *Teddy R* isn't acting independently. If they kill or capture us, they'll assume it's over, and the rest of you will be free to operate with far less scrutiny. Which is to say, they won't be searching every ship for me."

"If they kill you, you'll be avenged," said a tall blond man.

"I certainly hope so, Mr. Sokolov," said Cole. "All right. Lieutenants Mboya and Briggs think they'll have their code finished by nineteen hundred hours station time. I'll want each of you to make your ships' computers available to them at that time, and I want at

least one member of your crew, and preferably two, standing by to learn whatever they need to know about it. We'll depart the station tomorrow, after one more meeting at oh-nine hundred hours. This meeting is adjourned."

As the men, women, and aliens began returning to the casino, the Platinum Duke walked up to Cole.

"You're so calm and soft-spoken, one really has to listen to realize just how bloodthirsty you are."

A pretty brunette moved next to Cole. "We were hoping you wouldn't notice," said Sharon Blacksmith with a smile.

Cole put an arm around her and turned to the Duke. "You didn't mind financing most of this a week ago," he noted. "What made you so argumentative today?"

"A week ago eight hundred ships weren't coming after the space station that I happen to own and live on," answered the Duke.

"It was inevitable after we destroyed their force of three hundred last month."

"Inevitable is just a word," said the Duke. "Eight hundred Navy ships hell-bent on destruction is a *fact*—and you're leaving it to their mercy."

"If you really want out . . ."

"No, of course not," said the Duke. "What I really want is for us to have won already with no damage to the station."

"Well," said Cole, "I'll give you points for honesty."

"I'll give you even more for gall," said the Duke. "The Teroni Federation has thrown a couple of million ships against the Republic and hasn't made any measurable progress in twenty-nine years. And you're planning to overthrow them with a handful of ships and a crew of misfits."

"I'd rather have a fleet of five million ships manned by seasoned

veterans,” said Cole. “To put it in terms a casino owner will understand, you play the cards you’re dealt.”

“Just destroy Admiral Susan Garcia and her flagship before they blow you away,” said the Duke. “Do that and I’ll consider it a victory.” He paused and his expression softened. “You two want some dinner?”

“Maybe later,” said Cole. “I want to get back to the ship and see how they’re coming on the code.”

The Duke checked his timepiece. “Two hours?”

“Yeah, that’ll be fine—if my Chief of Security agrees.”

“We’ll be there,” said Sharon.

“And Duke?” said Cole.

“Yes?”

“I think you should consider coming with us. They don’t want the station, but sooner or later they’re going to find out who’s financing us.”

The Duke considered the offer, then nodded. “You have a point. I’ll have some of my things transferred to the ship in the next hour.”

Cole and Sharon took a tram ride half a mile out on one of the docking arms until they reached the *Theodore Roosevelt*.

“I’ve got to go up to the bridge,” said Cole.

“I thought you hated the bridge.”

“I do, but that’s where Christine and Briggs are working.”

“Okay,” she replied. “I’ve got about an hour’s work in Security. Pick me up there when you’re ready to go back for dinner.”

“Will do.”

Cole took an airlift up to the bridge level and stepped out into a corridor, trying not to think of how long it had been since the ship had last been refitted. When he was still about forty feet away he stopped, walked over to a bulkhead, and tapped on it.

“Good afternoon, David,” he said.

“Are we at war yet?” asked a voice from inside the bulkhead.

“All’s quiet on the Western front,” replied Cole.

“We’re in space!” snapped the voice. “There *is* no West! And how dare you quote Erich Maria Remarque to me instead of the immortal Charles!”

“You get stranger and stranger every day,” said Cole, heading off to the bridge.

“Bring me back a dry sherry,” the voice called after him.

“You can’t metabolize it.”

“I’ll be the judge of that!” said the voice.

Then they were out of earshot, and Cole entered the bridge.

“Hello, sir,” said Christine Mboya, looking up from her computer. “How did it go?”

“Our side has a redhead who wants to attack all three million Republic ships at once, an egomaniacal criminal kingpin with eight hands, a platinum cyborg who’s only willing to go to war as long as no one shoots back, and an alien who thinks he’s David Copperfield,” replied Cole with a wry grimace. “How can we lose?”