



WAR AMONG THE STARS

A SCIENCE-FICTION NOVEL

BY

MICHEL POULIN

WAR

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS

THIS FICTION NOVEL CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF WAR AND VIOLENCE, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to LOST AMONG THE STARS and is the fourth novel in the JOVIAN UPRISING Series. It continues the adventures in space of the giant cargo ship KOSTROMA and of its captain, Tina Forster.

Other novels by this author

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CHAPTER 1 – DISHONOR

15:18 (Drakan City Time, Ross 128b)

Tuesday, November 02, 2320 (Earth calendar)

Disciplinary Court, Drazt Navy Headquarters

Drakan City (Capital of the Drazt Empire), Ross 128b

Ross 128 System, 11 light-years from Earth

"GUARDS, ESCORT THE ACCUSED IN!"

Grand Admiral Tok Tharn kept an impassive expression on his face as the accused, wearing the uniform of a shipmaster of the Drazt Navy and closely escorted by two armed guards, entered the courtroom at a lively step, then stopped at attention once inside the accused' dock. Four other high-ranking Drazt Navy officers were assisting Tok Tharn today as judges for this court-martial, as the offences pursued today were of a grave nature indeed. The accused, a mature and solidly-built Drazt male, in turn kept a neutral expression, but Tharn could still feel his apprehension. In that, Shipmaster Lem Doz had good reasons to be nervous, as the charges against him were most serious. Measuring some 192 centimeters and with his two pairs of long arms bulging with muscles, Doz was the typical image of an adult Drazt male, with a large torso, brown skin sparsely covered by short body hair, a short but powerful pair of legs, a square, strong jaw with two rows of large teeth and two black eyes visible under a prominent brow ridge and flanking a large, flat nose. Tharn looked at his four assistant judges, getting nods from them, then banged twice his gavel.

"This session of the Navy's Disciplinary Court is now opened! The prosecutor will now read the charges against the accused."

The prosecutor, a commander from the Legal Department of the Navy, raised his electronic pad in front of him and started reading from it in a strong, steady voice.

"The accused, Shipmaster Lem Doz, previously in command of the space cruiser MURKAN, is charged with gross incompetence and negligent performance of duties that led to the loss of a large quantity of highly classified and sensitive data at the hands of an alien spaceship which intruded into Drazt space on the fifth of the month of Rotha of this deca-rotation. Shipmaster Lem Doz is further accused of letting through inaction that said

alien spaceship escape after it copied and stole all the classified data stored in the MURKAN's central computer."

Tharn, like the four other judges, stared coldly at Lem Doz as the prosecutor fell silent.

"How does the accused plea about these charges?"

"I plea 'innocent' to all charges, Admiral."

"A plea of 'innocent' will thus be recorded into the proceedings of this court. The prosecutor may now detail the circumstances in which the alleged offenses were committed."

"Thank you, Admiral!" said the prosecutor before activating a large viewing screen set to one side of the courtroom, where everybody could watch it. A video file showing some kind of alien spaceship then started playing as the commander spoke.

"Honorable judges, what you see now is a video recording taken by the cruiser MURKAN as it closed in on an alien spaceship which had entered Drazt space and was approaching our star system on a direct course. Later data and analysis told us that this alien ship was an interstellar ship which originated from the home world of a race we know as the 'Koorivar', situated some 676 jekten from our star system. That ship had apparently traveled for many decades at sub-light speed and was under automated control, while its crew and passengers were hibernating during their long space trip. When that Koorivar ship neither reacted nor responded to the calls from the MURKAN, Shipmaster Lem Doz then ordered his crew to board that ship and enter it. However, before his crew could do so, a second alien ship approached the MURKAN and interposed itself. I am now going to show a video recording of that second alien ship, which identified itself as a Human ship named 'KOSTROMA'. As you can now see, that Human ship was truly enormous and approached quite close to the MURKAN before stopping."

While Tok Tharn stayed impassive as he looked at the pictures of the Human spaceship, having seen that video a number of times in the past days and weeks, the four assistant judges stiffened as they examined the space behemoth. One of them then asked a question to the prosecutor.

"How big exactly was this Human ship, Commander?"

"It measured a good 2,900 drachs in length, Vice-Admiral Komosh. While huge, our experts however determined that it used an inferior kind of propulsion technology, as it was propelled by a type of nuclear rocket rather than by a directed gravity drive."

"And how could a Human ship with such a said 'inferior propulsion technology' come all the way from the Humans' star system to our own system, Commander?" replied caustically another judge, making the prosecutor smirk in embarrassment.

"That we don't know, Vice-Admiral Hanh. It however possessed as well some kind of unknown star drive that made it disappear in a flash after it attacked the MURKAN." That response only made Hanh frown.

"You do realize for how long we have been trying to invent such a star drive, right, Commander?"

"Er, I do, Vice-Admiral. The charge of negligent performance of duties partially resulted from the failure of Shipmaster Doz to immobilize and capture such a prize when he had the occasion to do so."

"Very well! Continue presenting your case, Commander."

"Thank you, Admiral. You will next see the video exchange of communications between the MURKAN and the said KOSTROMA as a standoff developed. The first alien to speak with Shipmaster Doz was actually a Koorivar, who said that the Koorivar ship intercepted by our cruiser was an automated ship full of Koorivar refugees trying to find a new home planet after their own star system had been devastated by the passage of a wandering brown dwarf¹. The Koorivar alien then forbade the crew of the MURKAN from entering the automated ship, saying that this could endanger some of the Koorivars sleeping in hibernation inside it. When Shipmaster Doz insisted on inspecting the automated ship, the Human captain of the KOSTROMA then cut in and insulted him just before a computer virus introduced aboard the MURKAN during the course of the conversation took control of our cruiser, plunging it into chaos. The MURKAN went through quick alternances of chaos and normal operations for hours before the alien computer virus finally erased itself, returning our cruiser to normal. That was when the science officer of the MURKAN was able to ascertain that all the ship's data files had been copied by the alien virus and then transmitted to the Human ship."

The five judges watched carefully the lengthy video before Tharn asked another question to the prosecutor.

"And what did the Human ship do then?"

¹ Brown dwarf: A gas giant celestial body whose mass was not enough to ignite a spontaneous thermonuclear fusion reaction and turn it into a star. Such brown dwarves are known to be either part of a star system, or can roam space as a wandering, solitary celestial body.

"It was already gone, along with the Koorivar automated ship, Admiral."

Tok Tharn, like the four other judges, switched their eyes to Lem Doz, eyeing him coldly.

"Shipmaster Doz, what did you do or attempted to do to neutralize and capture that KOSTROMA? How could it infiltrate a computer virus aboard your ship without you being aware of it?"

Lem Doz, who had to defend himself without the benefit of a legal advisor, braced himself before answering: his Navy career and possibly more now rested on how effective his defense would be.

"Admiral, when it became apparent that those aliens would continue to refuse to obey my demands, I discretely ordered my electronic operations officer to send a computer virus to the Human ship, which he did. Then, as we believed that our virus had been able to infect the computers aboard that KOSTROMA, the Human captain, a female, threw an insult at me just before we lost control of our ship. Apparently, the Humans were able to detect and neutralize our computer virus, then sent to us their own virus. My deduction from this is that the Human computer technology may well be superior to our own."

"Superior to our own?" nearly exploded Vice-Admiral Hanh. "Those Humans were still living in caves when we were already roaming through our star system, if we believe the intercepted radio and video signals emanating from their Solar System. How could they be superior to us in any respect?"

"I frankly don't know, Admiral. Maybe those Koorivars helped them in improving their technology."

Tharn nodded slowly his head at that.

"That very well may be the case. However, what I don't understand is why you took so long before trying to neutralize that Human ship. That delay only gave time to the Koorivars and Humans to infect your cruiser with their own computer virus. Why the delay?"

Now having beads of cold sweat rolling down on his high forehead, Lem Doz spoke in as firm a voice as he could.

"Admiral, I was hoping to resolve that dispute without having to resort to hostile acts. The tone was at least polite until that female Human captain interjected herself into the exchange, just before the enemy virus took control of my ship."

His argument unfortunately seemed to leave his judges cold, with Tok Tharn's tone of voice hardening.

"You were hoping? That hoping of yours resulted in nearly all our military and ship technology being copied and stolen by that Human ship! Those barbaric Humans, who are so fond of war, can now use our own technology to attack us, especially now that they have proved to possess a working interstellar drive. This court will now deliberate in private about all this. Guards, escort the accused out of this courtroom and return with him only when I will signal you to do so."

Tharn watched the guards leave with Lem Doz, then looked at his four assistant judges.

"What do you think, my friends? Could Lem Doz have acted both faster and more effectively than he did, in your opinion?"

"He certainly could have, Admiral!" responded Vice-Admiral Komosh. "My own reaction to these alien ships, especially to that giant KOSTROMA, would have been to shoot first and ask questions later once it became clear that it would not obey our directives."

"I concur with Komosh, Admiral." said Hanh, immediately supported by the two remaining assistant judges. While Tharn agreed with them, he still brought forward a point that had been worrying him deeply for a few days already.

"We may be dealing with Doz' case today, but this leaves all of us with a scary situation: that we have still not managed to develop a working interstellar drive despite over six millenniums of efforts, while those Human barbarians now have one and can travel to our star system at will. This could well translate into a disaster for us in the short to medium term. At the least, we will now have to significantly boost our space defenses, and this quickly!"

"The more reasons to make an example of this Lem Doz, so that our other shipmasters show more vigilance and resolve." said Komosh forcefully. Tharn had to hide his distaste for what he believes to be an unjust opinion: to simply make that unfortunate shipmaster the official scapegoat in this crisis would do nothing to counter the new threat represented by the Humans of the Solar System. While a strict officer, Tharn also believed in treating his subordinates in a fair manner. However, he knew that Supreme Conductor Bar Kosh was closely following this court-martial and that showing too much leniency towards Doz could well cost him his own position as Grand Admiral of the Drazt Navy.

"Very well, comrades. Let's call back the accused to announce to him our verdict and sentence."

19:58 (Drakan City Time)**Married officers' quarters, Navy District****Capital city of Drakan, Ross 128b**

Zar Doz had been reduced to a nervous wreck as she had been waiting at the family suite for the results of her husband's court-martial. Due to strict Navy rules, no spectators were allowed to watch the proceedings of such court-martials, with the families of the accused in particular told to stay home until the verdict was officially announced. The noise of the entrance door to their suite being opened made Zar jump on her feet and run to the door. She however nearly bounced on a severe-looking Navy security guard who was preceding her husband Lem, with a second security guard behind him. Zar then noticed that Lem was not wearing his navy uniform anymore, instead wearing a nondescript brown coverall. That, and the downcast expression on her husband's face brought tears to Zar's eyes. Going to Lem, she shared with him a desperate hug. Himself in tears, Lem spoke in her right ear as they embraced each other.

"I am sorry, Zar: I was found guilty and booted out of the Navy. We now have to vacate our family suite and leave the Navy District...immediately."

"Now?" asked Zar, shocked, making Lem sadly nod his head.

"Yes, now! A navy cargo platform is waiting outside and will carry our belongings and us to our new residence."

"But, where will we live?"

"I don't know yet, Zar. I...I hope to find some friend in this city who will accept to receive us for at least a while, time for me to find a new job and a new residence. If not, we will have to ask our relatives back in the Khangar Province to accept us. At least I was not given any jail time."

Those last words finished to break Zar's spirits and she started crying openly, her head still resting on Lem's chest. One of the Navy security guards, while keeping a cold, unsympathetic expression, felt bad for Zar as he watched the couple: that officer's wife had done nothing wrong by herself after all.

CHAPTER 2 – DEALING WITH A CRISIS

11h03 (Central Africa Time)

Tuesday, November 23, 2320

Headquarters of the African Union Intelligence Department

Kinshasa, Congo, African Union

A long scream of pain partially muffled by the concrete walls of the basement made John Markham stop and pause for a moment as he was following the new head of the African Union's Intelligence Department. From what he had seen from the air as his shuttle was about to land in Kinshasa, the senior intelligence agent from the Northern Alliance already realized that the situation in the Congolese capital was verging on the chaotic. However, that had not come as a surprise to him: after all, their new President, Mamadou Kajeje, along with the head of the African Union's armed forces, had been assassinated just yesterday, along with President d'Arcy of the North American Union, who had also been the chairperson of the Northern Alliance. Now, the forces that had been led by General Odierno and who had thrown out of power and killed President Makambo were engaged in a struggle to stay in control, facing the remaining military units and armed partisans who had been loyal to President Makambo. For John Markham, this was typical of a classic African military coup, very few of which ended quietly or quickly. He however still needed to learn who exactly had sent the small armed team that had destroyed with a missile President d'Arcy's shuttle as President Kajeje and General Odierno were boarding it.

Another long, piercing scream of pain was heard as John Markham's guide was arriving at a strong steel door. Bracing himself, Markham stepped inside a nearly bare concrete room at the invitation of Colonel Nbare, finding three men in green uniforms surrounding a naked man suspended by his wrists from a steel ring embedded in the concrete ceiling. The Northern Alliance agent couldn't help cringe when he examined the bruised and bloodied body of the prisoner being tortured: apart from dozens of whip marks and deep burns clearly visible, electrodes were also attached to the man's genitals. The prisoner, who was presently unconscious, appeared to be young and fit, being in his early

twenties. Nbare approached the prisoner and examined him for a second before looking at one of the three interrogators.

"Did he say anything of interest yet?"

"No, Colonel! He is still refusing to answer our questions, even though we have tried about everything already."

Nbare's face reflected frustration for a short moment before he spoke again to the interrogator.

"Well, whether he talks or not, I am pretty sure about who sent him and the rest of his team: General Seko, the head of the rebel forces, had the most reasons to assassinate President Kajeje and to sabotage the reconciliation meeting between us and the Northern Alliance."

"So, what do we do with this man, Colonel?"

"Continue to question him, until he either talks or dies from the tortures. If you haven't used a blowtorch yet, do it!"

"Understood, Colonel."

"Good! Mister Markham, if you may follow me."

John Markham was too happy to leave the interrogation room with Nbare before the tortures resumed. Once back in the concrete hallway and with the steel door closed, he discretely blew out air in relief, then looked at Nbare. While he was no beginner at intelligence work and had seen many unsavory things during his career, torture chambers were still places he loathed.

"This General Seko, how much military forces is he controlling at the present, Colonel?"

"Too many, unfortunately. While nearly all the units of the African Union's Air Force and a majority of the Army have joined our cause, Seko still can count on at least nine Army divisions, mainly located around the Congo borders, inside neighboring countries like Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and the Central African Republic. We are presently fighting hard in the Katanga Province to expel some of Seko's forces, which have invaded the province in the hope of seizing the rich mineral deposits there."

"And how is that fighting going presently, Colonel?"

Nbare hesitated for a moment, loathe to tell the whole truth to the Northern Alliance agent. He however realized that the Northern Alliance had the technological means to quickly ascertain the true situation in and around the Congo and decided to be candid with Markham.

"Right now, the situation in the Katanga Province is unstable. General Seko is continuously pouring more troops across the border and our units there are having a hard time to hold on to their present positions. Unfortunately, with hostile forces attacking us on multiple fronts, we are unable to send reinforcements to the Katanga Province at this time. We definitely could use some help from the Northern Alliance right now."

That last sentence brought a frown on Markham's face.

"Colonel, you must realize that the arrival of Northern Alliance military units in the Congo would play directly into the propaganda of General Seko and his allies, who are justifying their rebellion by claiming that President Kajeje and General Odierno were ready to sell the African Union to its enemies. While my government would certainly like to help the new government of the African Union, I am afraid that any help from us will have to be discreet in nature."

Nbare lowered his head in discouragement at that answer: while he had hoped for a lot more than that, the Northern Alliance's man was correct in his assessment, as what was fueling the rebellion was mostly raw, xenophobic nationalism.

"Well, could you still pass the word to your superiors that we could use all the help that they could give us? If not, they may end up having to face an African Union led by men even worse than President Makambo, men with little regard for the good of our citizens or for peace in the region."

"I will certainly pass on your request to my government, Colonel, along with the severity and urgency of the situation," replied Markham, already mentally worrying about what his superiors were going to say about Nbare's request.

09:36 (Vancouver Time)

Wednesday, November 24, 2320

Government hangar, Vancouver International Airport

Vancouver, West Coast of Canada

North American Union

The moment that the coffin containing the remains of President Claudia d'Arcy started being carried out of the Northern Alliance shuttle's aft access ramp, a waiting band started playing the North American Union's anthem, making the dignitaries present in the hangar either salute or raise their right hand to their heart. Vice-President Gerhardt Strauss, who was temporarily assuming the charge of President of the Northern Alliance

and who had travelled aboard the shuttle, also stood at attention at the foot of the ramp. He and his six-person retinue waited for the coffin to be loaded on a hearse before walking to the vice-president of the North American Union, Thomas Smith, who greeted them with a solemn handshake.

"Vice-President Strauss, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Vancouver on this sad day. You will be welcome to attend President d'Arcy's state funerals, which will take place in two days, but I believe that we now have some most urgent matters to discuss."

"I believe so as well, Vice-President Smith," replied Strauss while shaking hands with the black man with graying hair. "I have brought with me a briefing paper concerning the latest information about the situation inside the African Union. Unfortunately, things are not looking good."

"I guessed so, Herr Strauss. If you and your delegation will follow me, we will go take place in waiting air limousines which will then bring us to the government's executive building."

"We are ready to follow you, Vice-President Smith."

A few minutes later, with their luggage loaded in the trunks of the air limousines, the Northern Alliance officials were on their way to the local executive building in downtown Vancouver. A moderate rain and low, dark gray clouds greeted the vehicles the moment they left the hangar. Strauss then couldn't help think that the weather well reflected today's general mood. The ride under the rain, with a number of escorting police air cars, took about twelve minutes, the limousines finally landing under a large porch covering the main entrance of the government executive building. From there, Strauss and his small retinue followed Thomas Smith and other North American officials up to the top floor of the building, where they entered a windowless conference room and were offered places around a large oval table.

"Please sit down, ladies and gentlemen: we have some grave business to discuss. This room is proof against electronic eavesdropping devices, so feel free to talk about classified matters."

Thomas Smith took place at the head of the table, while Strauss sat immediately to his right. The other Northern Alliance officials sat facing their North American counterparts around the table's sides. Once everybody was seated, Thomas Smith looked at Strauss, his expression somber.

"You may now brief us on the latest news about the situation inside the African Union, Herr Strauss."

"Thank you!" replied Strauss before taking out a data chip and plugging it to the computer station which was facing his seat and was integral to the conference table. A color map of the African continent bearing symbols and words then appeared on the giant wall screens of the room and on the displays of each individual computer position.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what you now see is the rough disposition of the respective forces and units of the new African Union government and of those of the nationalist rebels still loyal to the old Makambo regime, which are led by a General Seko. I said 'nationalist rebels' because many members of those rebel units are motivated by African pride and by the refusal to see the African Union allying itself with the Northern Alliance, which for them represents the hated old colonial powers which exploited Africa for centuries. Right now, the forces of the new government of the African Union, with General Lumumba at their head, are fighting on multiple fronts against rebel forces that are at least equal in numbers to them. Even though the forces of General Lumumba mostly enjoy air superiority over Africa, the final outcome is still far from certain. General Seko and his political advisers are using a highly effective propaganda campaign that paints the new government as a puppet kowtowing to the old colonial powers, meaning us. That campaign is succeeding in gaining for Seko many new recruits every day and has even started to cause some defections within the forces of General Lumumba. My military advisors have told me that, if things continue as they are going now, then General Seko may well be able to eliminate the new government and take its place at the head of the African Union. If that ever happens, then we will find ourselves facing again a hostile African Union, while we may expect our borders to be taken by assault by a multitude of refugees fleeing the rebels. At the minimum, we will be obliged to quickly expand and reinforce our defenses, while at the same time having to deal with a new, massive wave of refugees from Africa. On top of that, if Seko wins, we can then expect the resumption of a large-scale campaign of terror attacks and acts of sabotage by clandestine African agents around our territories and in space."

That last sentence from Strauss made more than one person present in the room raise an eyebrow: a number of terrorist attacks by African agents during recent years had resulted in significant numbers of casualties, while a few attempts that could have caused thousands of deaths had been thwarted in-extremis. The attempt to ram and shatter to

pieces an asteroid built-up into a space resort, using a hijacked heavy space ore carrier, was only the most notorious of such attempted attacks.

"This General Lumumba, who took over from President Kajeje after his assassination, can we at the least consider him as a worthy partner in peace, or is he in this only for his personal power?" asked one of Smith's ministers present. The head of the Northern Alliance's intelligence services, Margaret Hurley, took on her to answer that.

"We believe Lumumba to be a progressive-thinking, honest officer, Minister Desjardins. He was a good personal friend of President Kajeje and supported from the start General Odierno's coup against President Makambo. Furthermore, Lumumba has a long-standing reputation as being incorruptible, something that is unfortunately too rare in that region. He would be well worth supporting, in my opinion."

"But do we want to get involved in that civil war?" cut in the foreign minister of the Northern Alliance, Alexander Ponomarev, who was in sharp disagreement with Gerhardt Strauss on that point. He was quickly supported then by the defense minister of the North American Union, James Merriweather.

"That is indeed a pertinent question, in my opinion. If we throw our military support behind Lumumba, then we would only reinforce Seko's propaganda about Lumumba being the puppet of the Northern Alliance, something that would further boost Seko's popularity with the African masses and help his recruitment campaign. I believe that it would be wiser to simply keep our distances from that civil war while establishing a security cordon around Africa, to prevent the infiltration of hostile agents and saboteurs. We should also remember that we recently found a potential threat to the whole of Humanity when the KOSTROMA encountered the Drazt in the Ross 128 System. We should not divert all our means towards Africa while we are not sure of the Drazt' intentions towards us."

"Wait a second!" objected at once Valery Hobbs, the minister of sciences and technologies of the North American Union. "Your argument doesn't make sense, James! The Drazt are eleven light-years away from us and don't possess an interstellar drive yet, while Africa is only a continent away. Clearly, Africa should be our highest priority right now."

The arguments for or against getting implicated in the African civil war, along with how to react to that crisis, were exchanged in an often-heated debate that went on for a good two hours. Seeing that lunch hour was now well past, Vice-President Smith then

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