

# ZERO-OPTION



LINDSAY H.F. BRAMBLES

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From *CHRONICLES OF THE EARTH EMPIRE* series.

## **ZERO-OPTION by Lindsay Brambles**

### **Introduction:**

I wrote **Zero-Option** back in the eighties on a Commodore 64 using a great little wordprocessor called Paperclip. For a few years it just languished while I worked on other things, including what would eventually become *In Darkness Bound* (ISBN 1-4241-6560-1), my novel now available from PublishAmerica ([www.publishamerica.com](http://www.publishamerica.com)) and as of April 2007 in wider release to bookstores and online retailers like Amazon.com and Barnes&Noble.

**Zero-Option** is about forty thousands words, which puts it in the novella category. I had thought of expanding it into a book, but in going over it I realized that would probably just make it bloated and weaken the story. Everything that needs to be in there is, and adding more would just be deadweight.

The story is essentially told from the perspective of Commander Nathan Imbrahim, but it is really about Captain Lhara Jhordel. The same Lhara Jhordel who is an ensign in my novel *In Darkness Bound*. This story you're about to read, however, takes place about four decades after events in the novel.

The original version of this story was submitted in competition at the 1989 Pinecone II Science Fiction Convention and won first place. As such, I think rather fondly of it, and despite the fact that some years have passed since then, I believe it holds up well.

If you enjoy this story I hope you'll check out [www.freewebs.com/lindsaybrambles](http://www.freewebs.com/lindsaybrambles) for information on *In Darkness Bound*. The latter is set in the same universe and once again involves Fleet. It's a war novel of the future and Lhara Jhordel figures prominently in it. Within the context of that story you get to see how she became the officer she is in this one.

This story and others, as well as several novels in various stages of completion (the sequel to *In Darkness Bound* is all but finished) are intended to create a sort of 'future history,' hence the *Chronicles of the Earth Empire* heading above. Whether they will see completion and publication will essentially be up to you, the paying public. It takes a lot of time and effort to write books, and though I get immense pleasure out of doing so, that does not, unfortunately, pay the bills. So I encourage you to read this story and hope you'll be encouraged to seek out and buy *In Darkness Bound*. If I can sell enough copies of that book I may be able to push on with getting out the next one—providing my publisher considers it worthy of publication.

And now I leave you to Zero-Option. Happy reading.

Lindsay H.F. Brambles, Ottawa, 2007

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1.

He realized he'd made an error in assuming the holos he'd seen of her were old recordings. An understandable mistake, given that the woman seated at the desk in the office seemed far too young to be the notorious Captain Jhordel. He stepped back a pace and re-examined the ID plate beside the hatch, then looked again at the woman who was engrossed in the contents of a com-link file. He would have believed her a junior officer but for the braid on each of her epaulettes: four silver bands on each shoulder to mark her rank as ship's master.

She was slight, to the point of almost seeming delicate, and looked as though she could not have been more than thirty. But rejuv could make a woman of sixty look half those years. Often there were telltale signs, but Jhordel had none of them. No faint discoloration to the whites of her eyes. None of the unusual blush to the skin. And her face did not have that pasty, fleshy, baby-soft look that some rejuvs acquired.

"Are you going to stand out there all day, Commander?"

He started, glanced up at her and blinked. She gave him a measured look in return, clearly sizing him up with that one quick survey. He cleared his throat and stepped forward. "Commander Nathan Imbrahim," he said, snapping off a quick salute. "Naval Intelligence."

He expected her to laugh and make the tired old joke about Naval Intelligence being an oxymoron. But she merely frowned and examined him again, more closely, thoroughly, and then seemed to dismiss him altogether. She turned back to the com-link.

"Sit," she said gruffly, not looking up. There was steel in that order; and it was immediately clear to him she was not the sort to countenance disobedience. So he sat.

Her voice, he noted, was thick, hoarse, like she had been inhaling smoke for a few hours. Or shouting. Probably from the drugs, he thought as he settled into the lone seat across from her. He knew the FS *Confederation* had just returned from a raiding mission deep inside Unity space. He'd seen the scars when he'd come in from Earth orbit on board the flitter. Black blemishes, peppering the surface of the white hull like some sort of fungal disease. Laser blasts, mostly, though there was evidence the shields had had to absorb more than one hit from anti-matter torps.

Jhordel absently rubbed at her neck, revealing a red, perfectly symmetrical 'hickey' beneath the high collar of her jacket. He had expected to see it, but still a chill ran through him. He found himself probing self-consciously at the side of his own neck, running his fingertips over the bump that was still there, where a few weeks earlier he'd borne his own such mark. For spacers it was like a badge of honor, which they wore proudly wherever they went. It was the mark of the spacers. And on those who did the deep runs, it was essentially permanent.

Jhordel's was such a mark, showing signs of recent exposure to the bite of the 'pumps.' It looked as though it might bleed; and that said much about the battle she and her crew had just been through. A rough one, he ventured. They would have been hooked into the system for long cycles, bound to those horrid metal leeches that attached to your neck as though they were part of your flesh, sucking blood from you and pumping it back in. On the return the blood was rich with oxygen and primed with a virtual pharmacopoeia. All necessary, if you wanted to stay alive while the g-forces within the ship—despite the gravity dispensators—reached extremes that would render the unprotected human lifeless in seconds.

He shuddered when he recalled what it felt like, and wondered how they could do it, time and time again. He had never grown used to it, despite his many jumps; but men and women like Jhordel went on doing it again and again, running the ship while being crushed into the cocoon of bladders that surrounded each, and kept conscious by a battery of drugs and mechanisms that left

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one sick and sore and feeling like the living dead long after the fighting had stopped. They went out there into the deeps of space and rained down destruction upon the enemy without complaint, seemingly oblivious of the incredible forces that threatened life itself, treating such threats as though they were simply a fact of life, and enduring the ghastly nightmare of pain that was almost routine on a fighting ship. He supposed that spacers became accustomed to such things; but he never could, having spent much of his life rooted to one planet or another.

Now that he looked more closely, he could see the slight bruising around the captain's eyes, and recalled looking at his own face in a mirror after one particularly long skirmish. He hadn't recognized himself: bloodshot eyes, puffy flesh, the bruising—as though he had taken part in a drunken brawl. It had been frightening the first time, and after that he had never been anxious to look again. They must have been in a long battle, he thought, given that they'd already had a few days to recover.

"I've sent in my report to Intelligence," Jhordel observed, at last glancing up from the com-link cube and addressing him directly.

"I'm not here about the report, sir," he said. From where he sat the script in the cube was backwards, but he'd become quite adept at reading from this vantage point and knew she was preoccupied with data concerning the welfare of her ship. Natural enough after a return from battle, he mused to himself; and she doubtless didn't appreciate that Admiralty seemed little concerned about it.

She eyed him warily. "We've just spent three months out patrolling the line," she said. The 'line' was the Pomerium Line, a semi-official boundary between Federation and Unity space. "We're back in port less than a day and Admiralty tells me I have to be ready to sail within a six-shift, but doesn't tell me why." Her eyes narrowed, an unspoken accusation.

It took Imbrahim a moment to recall that a six-shift was forty-eight hours: six eight hour periods.

"My patience is thin, Commander, so I suggest you tell me why you're here. Since it's not about the report, I assume it has something to do with this mad rush to get us back out there again."

He ran his tongue over his lips and drew a breath. "Orders, Captain," he said. He reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a file-chip, handed the small square of metalastic over to her and watched as she took it and examined it in a perfunctory manner.

"You're surely joking," she growled, with all the pretense of one who knew he was not. "We're hardly in shape for 'spooking.'"

She set the file-chip down on her desk, ignoring it; and he wondered how someone claiming to be at the edge of patience could be so indifferent to its contents. Her renowned discipline, he supposed.

"This isn't a deep-cover mission," he assured her—though he reflected on how that wasn't altogether true.

He detected a hint of curiosity in her eyes, but it was held well in check by that same discipline he found unnerving. He wasn't sure he liked the thought of having to serve on *this* ship under *this* captain. She was too reserved, too *cold*, too much a part of this vessel of hers. She could have been a machine; and he was inclined to think it must have something to do with the fact that she was from Tartarus. There were rumors, though, that it had something to do with an event in her past, on her first mission. Something that had happened to her on some backwater planet out on the Fringes. But that sort of thing was kept in a closed file. Admiralty would have told him if he had needed to know. They hadn't, so clearly he didn't.

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“I hope this isn’t a courier mission,” she said with evident disgust. “I find it difficult to believe Admiralty would pull a ship of the line out of service when we need every one we can get out fighting the Unity.”

“The file-chip, sir,” was all he would say.

She looked at him sharply and grunted. But she picked up the square and dropped it in the com-link slot. The script that had floated in the cube vanished, replaced by new tracts, which glowed an angry red as they hovered in the air above her desk. She read them quickly, the scowl on her face growing darker, until at last she looked up at Imbrahim again.

“There’s a war on, commander,” she said simply.

“I know, sir.”

“Ships disappear all the time. From battle. From poor phase-shifts. Sometimes *in* shift. Any number of things can happen to you out there. When someone doesn’t report in, it’s hardly cause to go traipsing out there after them. Especially not with something like the *Connie*.”

“If it were any other ship, I might be inclined to agree with you,” Imbrahim said. “Though to be honest, sir, I rather hope someone would come looking for me out there if I were long overdue.”

She said nothing, but merely stared, waiting for him to continue. Waiting for him to explain.

“What the report I gave you doesn’t say, and what the Navy doesn’t want commonly known, is that it was the *Niagara* that disappeared, Captain.”

Jhordel visibly stiffened, but said, “The *Niagara* was fresh out of the slips.”

“Aye, sir.”

“There was a lot of untried technology on board,” she added, as though that might explain everything.

“It broke Earth orbit a little more than two weeks ago on its shakedown cruise,” he agreed. “And it’s possible something might have gone wrong.”

“Why not send out a probe? Cheaper, faster, and just as effective.”

“We’ve already done that, sir. Twice.” And she had almost certainly guessed *that*, he told himself.

Jhordel relaxed and slowly sat back in her chair. “I take it you found nothing.”

*You know we didn’t.* “The results were *less* substantial than that,” he confessed.

“You lost your probes,” she said, a smile quirking the corners of her mouth.

He felt the heat of irritation, annoyed she could see anything even remotely amusing about the situation.

“Forgive me, Commander,” she apologized, reading the look on his face. “I don’t mean to make light of the situation, but despite your revelation, I still find it difficult to get all worked up about this.” Her features hardened. “I’ve seen too many good people die out there to shed tears for any more. Besides, everyone remembers the *Phoenix*. This merely could be more of the same.”

She may have been young for a captain of her experience, but the war, he decided, had made her very old indeed. He realized she was much like the masters of the other warships he’d served on, though if anything she was tougher, harder, and perhaps a shade more cynical. He was older than she, but somehow in her presence he felt her junior. He felt the way he had always felt in the presence of his father, and it was a feeling of intimidation he didn’t like at all.

“Tell me, Commander,” she said, regarding him shrewdly; “since it seems Intelligence doesn’t believe the *Niagara* had a simple systems failure that resulted in its destruction, just *what* do you think happened to it?”

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He shrugged. “There are a lot of theories,” he said. “Some insist it must have been the Reds.”

“The Unity?” Jhordel snorted and shook her head. “That’s quite far out from Unity space. And since the captain of a class ship is under orders to conduct random jumps during a shakedown, I find it difficult to believe the Unity could have predicted where the ship would have been at any given moment. No,”—she shook her head again—“I can’t see the Red Catholic Church wasting precious resources that far beyond the Fringes.”

Which means *you* don’t think *we* should either, he thought; and he wasn’t sure he disagreed with her. He was inclined to subscribe to the theory that the *Niagara* had simply been a victim of technology. Something new that hadn’t worked quite the way it should have. On the other hand, there was still the possibility it was out there somewhere, relatively intact. There might be people still alive on board, waiting to be rescued. And even if there weren’t, the Navy needed to know what had happened, just so the same thing wouldn’t happen again.

“There’s also the possibility that it’s some kind of natural phenomenon,” he found himself saying. “Possibly something in the transit lines of the Matrix. The last reported jump was through the Rigar Transit Point.”

“And the probes?”

He shifted uncomfortably, because, of course, that was one of the holes in the theory. “The probes were sent from Msatas Transit Point,” he told her reluctantly.

“Rigar and Msatas have both been used for years without incident,” Jhordel said. “If there’s a problem, it would have to be at the other end.” She looked at him squarely and added, “Which doesn’t bode well for anyone following the *Niagara* and the probes.”

“No, it doesn’t,” he agreed, his voice tight.

“Does Admiralty have some bold plan for how we’re going to make the jump and avoid a similar fate?” she asked with a touch of sarcasm.

He swallowed and grimaced. “They do, Captain, but I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

## 2.

“Tell them,” she said.

Imbrahim looked around at the faces of the other officers assembled in the *Confederation’s* briefing room and thought he sensed a degree of hostility in their eyes. He told himself he was wrong, that it was only paranoia, that he was just letting his own insecurities get the better of him. He wasn’t a spacer. Not in their eyes, at least. And that set him apart from them; he didn’t belong in their world. Consequently, they didn’t trust him as they would one of their own. But they couldn’t possibly hate him, or really have feelings about him one way or the other.

*Except that I’m Naval Intelligence*, he reminded himself; and nobody in the regular navy cared for Jackson’s lackeys.

“We could forego the transit point and make a blind jump,” he began.

“You can’t be serious,” said Wethers, the first officer. “Even doing skip jumps involves an element of risk. And they’re only short distances. You’re talking about light-years of phase-shifting outside of the Matrix. Two hundred and fifty light-years beyond the Fringes, as a matter-of-fact.”

“I agree.”

Imbrahim glanced over at the navigation officer, Seria Talud.

“In the Matrix we’re pretty well guaranteed safe passage,” she continued. “The use of transit points has made interstellar travel much more efficient and safe. There’s little fear of passing

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through a planet or a sun or dropping out into one. The lines we use are generally clear of mass and debris. Blind phase-shifting doesn't guarantee that."

"But it was practiced for more than two centuries *after* the development of the Pearson FTL," Imbrahim reminded them all. "I grant you that use of transit points is preferable, but the only two points that connect to the sector we need to jump to are suspect."

"It's possible to drop shift before you reach the exit point on a given line in the Matrix," said Talud.

"But the risks are no less substantial than blind shifting," Imbrahim argued. "Dropping shift from within the Matrix means an unsighted exit. Even our best efforts can't predict an exact entry into sublight space."

"I'm not enamored of either suggestion," Wethers grunted. "They're both too bloody risky. And if there *are* Unity out there waiting for the next ship to come down the pike, we might not be in any shape to defend ourselves against them. Dropping shift blind or using the old conventional methods could put a lot of strain on the ship."

"Not to mention the crew," interjected the chief medical officer. N'robo gave Imbrahim a sullen look, and there was a hint of indictment in his eyes. "We've just come off three months of an intense patrol, Commander. We took a beating out there. The crew is tired physically and emotionally. The Navy has no right expecting us to go right back out there without a decent respite. We're all need of some much-deserved shore leave."

"I appreciate that, doctor," the Intelligence officer assured him. "And believe me, if there were any choice we'd use another ship. But yours is the only one available. Every other suitable warship in Fleet is either out on duty or in the dock for repairs. It's true we could call someone else off the line, but that would mean more delay. You're here, now. And now is when we need you."

"Well, we wouldn't want to inconvenience to Naval Intelligence, would we?" Jhordel drawled acerbically. "And I don't suppose the fact that if you re-directed another ship you wouldn't be able to have one of your people on board"

Imbrahim blinked at her, but knew it would be fruitless feigning innocence in the matter. "There's that, too," he agreed, smiling thinly. "Naval Intelligence has taken a keen interest in this matter."

"Why?" someone asked.

"Because if the Unity is behind it, they may have some new weapon we should know about," he replied.

"But *you* don't think it is the Unity," said Jhordel in a blunted tone.

He hesitated. "No," he admitted, reluctantly, "*we* don't. If they'd such a weapon, it isn't likely they'd be using it out *there*. Nor does it seem likely they could've known the *Niagara* or the probes were going to be coming through the point in that sector."

"So what does that leave us with?" asked Wethers.

"Natural phenomena," Imbrahim offered. "Which is another reason for caution when approaching this matter."

"And if it isn't something *natural*?" asked N'robo.

Imbrahim shifted uncomfortably. "Then it may be something we've stumbled upon that we'd rather we hadn't," he muttered.

3.

“You’re not telling me everything,” said Jhordel. She gave him a sharp look, suggesting by that glower that she wouldn’t accept prevarication.

“I’m not sure I know what you mean,” he said innocently.

Her jaw line hardened. “I think you know perfectly well what I mean, commander.”

He swallowed. They were alone again, the others having been dismissed from the briefing room so as to tend to their duties in preparation for departure. Imbrahim looked around the table at the empty chairs, purposely avoiding her eyes.

“There are some in Admiralty who believe we’re dealing with some *new* agency,” he said at length. He found the courage to look at her, and saw again the discipline that held her in check and kept her composed. It made him shiver and go cold inside.

“*New agency*,” she echoed. “I see. And they believe this ‘new agency’ to be a threat to the Empire?”

“Possibly.” He gestured helplessly. “Which is why there’s some concern.”

“Because of the information the *Niagara* was carrying?”

“Yes. She contained our latest developments. If someone got hold of her they could find out an awful lot about Fleet technology.”

“I see.” Jhordel sat back in her chair and rested one arm languidly on the briefing room table. “I take it Admiralty has sent you here to ensure we’ll do the right thing then, should *that* become necessary.”

“Yes,” he said, his voice strained, not much more than a whisper.

She grinned sardonically and shook her head. “And how does that sit with *you*, Commander?”

“I, too, swore the oath, Captain. I knew what I was getting into when I joined the Navy.”

“You *thought* you did,” she corrected. “I know your sort, Commander. You got caught up in the patriotism, as so many do when war looms and we see all that we value threatened by outside forces. But you weren’t gene-typed a spacers.”

He showed surprise.

She laughed at that. “Come, Commander, surely you didn’t honestly think it escaped notice. It’s written all over you,” she said.

“We all make choices, Captain. I made this one.”

“Did you, now? That’s not my understanding of how Jackson works.”

He kept silent, not knowing what to say.

“You must be a latent,” she said.

“Sir?”

“A potential empathy, Mister Imbrahim. That’s the only way you could do as many jumps as you have without having been born a spacers. And Jackson wouldn’t have been interested in you otherwise.”

“You’re very astute,” he said.

“I’ve had practice.” She stared at him, then cocked an eyebrow. “So can you...”

He shook his head. “Like you say, Captain, I’m a *latent*. The genetic component is there, somewhere, but other than letting me travel at leisure in space with an implant, it’s not much good for anything else.”

“You could have refused.”

“Jackson?” Now he laughed. “Once I made a *choice* to join Fleet...” He shrugged. “The admiral is not someone you argue with, sir?”

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She rose slowly from her seat. And though she was not tall, she had a commanding presence. He was reminded again of his father. Her lips twitched in a quirky little grin—almost a smirk. “So now you understand,” she said.

“Understand?”

“That sometimes our choices are really not choices at all, are they?” With that she turned from him and left the room.

Imbrahim sat alone in the eerie silence, staring out the floor-to-ceiling viewports that lined the aft wall of the room. He could see Earth in the distance, an enormous shining sphere whose glow blocked out the feebler light of a myriad stars. For some reason it was a more stirring and poignant sight than it had ever been before. He wished he were back there instead of here; he had the feeling he’d perhaps seen it for the last time.

### 4.

The same ensign who had conducted him through the maze of corridors to Jhordel’s office later showed Imbrahim to his cabin in officers’ country on the accommodations deck. The *Confederation*, being a frigate of recent vintage, offered considerably better living quarters than the ‘spook’ he’d last traveled on. The cabin was spacious and well-appointed, not at all like the Spartan and cramped cubbyhole that had been his on the *Aurora* for three hellish weeks. Of course, large ships like the *Connie* were intended to spend months in space without visiting a port; the ‘spooks’ were purposely designed to be small and elusive, their missions seldom lasting beyond two or three weeks.

More than half the mass of a ship like the *Aurora* was engine; and it carried few weapons other than those necessary to safely navigate through the errant debris of space. Shields and sensing equipment on such vessels were the primary arsenal, given that those ships were designed for spying well behind enemy lines. The same properties that made them suitable to this task made them ideal as couriers for Naval Intelligence field operatives like him—which was why many of his shipboard days had been spent in the bowels of such craft.

The *Confederation*, by contrast, was a fortress with engines. As such it was less maneuverable, less agile than the *Aurora*, but with the power to raze the surface of a planet. And even though space on any ship was at a premium, the *Connie* was closer to the luxury of one of the commercial interstellar passenger liners than it was to the likes of the *Aurora*.

Under different circumstances he might have reveled in the good fortune that had won him an assignment on board the *Connie*. But this was no ordinary mission Admiralty had given him; and he suspected there was nothing fortuitous in being handed it.

He dropped his kit into a nearby chair and strode easily to the large viewport that filled a good portion of the cabin’s bow-facing wall. From where he stood he could see along the spine of the ship, forward, towards the prow of the frigate. Between him and the bridge there was an array of weapons, some of them tucked away, others, like the laser cannons, jutting forth threateningly—the sharp, deadly spines of a quiescent beast. They were muted now, but they had not so long ago spat their fury into the eerie silences of space. He felt some reassurance in seeing them—though secretly he wondered whether even these formidable armaments would be sufficient to the task they were about to undertake.

He moved to the desk in the corner, sat down and activated the com-link. The cube formed above the projector rods, a faintly blue field that rotated to orient itself towards him.

“Personnel information,” he said.

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“Concerning?” the AI requested.

“Jhordel, Lhara.”

“Clearance?” the machine queried.

He gave his security code, grateful his position in Intelligence provided him such easy access to information that would otherwise have been off limits. Admiralty might not have thought it necessary he know the truth about Jhordel, but he was damned if he was going to go on this mission in the dark. He liked to know as much as possible about the people he might be called upon to trust with his life.

“Jhordel, Lhara Annyselia,” the AI intoned at length. It rattled off information he already knew: her birth on Tartarus, the ships she had served on, the missions of which she’d been a part. So many missions, in fact, that there could have been two of her and it would still have seemed a remarkable career. But it was the first that caught his attention. She’d been part of the mission that had started it all. The one that had started the war.

“Obsidian,” he murmured to himself.

*Obsidian*, where Grenier had made her fatal mistake. She had raised the ire of Red Catholics throughout the empire, and there had been no turning back after that. The Red Catholic Unity had gained steam quickly, spreading throughout worlds on the Fringes, then rapidly inwards, towards the more populous regions of the Federation. The Unity had grown more and more powerful, until Fleet itself had been seriously threatened.

He listened through to the end of the AI’s recitation, but was frustrated to find that one critical piece of data was still blocked. Whatever had happened to her on Obsidian remained a mystery. Nothing he could do would allow him to see the file on that. Admiralty was clearly determined it never be known but by a handful. Or *someone* in Admiralty was so determined. Because now, as he looked over her dossier, he could see a distinct pattern emerging. Vice-Admiral Carter’s prints were all over it. The admiral had constantly intervened in her career; it was as though he had made it his personal mission to do so.

Imbrahim pondered this, considering the many possibilities, and reaching the conclusion that whatever it was that had happened to her on Obsidian had had something to do with the Reds and why she seemed to hell-bent on exacting some sort of revenge. He better understood her, he thought, despite the blacked out information. Jhordel’s recklessness—as some would call it—was firmly rooted in her past. It was a simple enough motivation; and he could sympathize with her wholeheartedly. But it was an emotional response, and in his experience that was the sort of thing that led to mistakes. And in space, mistakes got you killed.

While the episode that seemed to have changed her life was sealed from scrutiny, there was considerable information regarding the incident for which she was publicly famous—the one for which she had almost been court-martialed. And would have been, Imbrahim thought, if not for Admiral Carter.

For Imbrahim much of this information was new, since he had not been on Earth at the time of the furor. By the time he had returned, the details had already become blurred by countless retellings. Of course, as far as what had gone on in the Council of the Admirals, that information had been limited to the handful who *had* been there. It wasn’t counted among the data the computer offered up for his edification. He did know, however, that quite a battle had been fought as to whether Jhordel should be demoted and denied future command. Some of the traditionalists had insisted it was the only way of maintaining discipline, but the more moderate element in the Admiralty had foreseen that such a move would alienate the public, and consequently the politicians whose support the Navy so desperately needed.

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