

A trail of crucified humans leads the Legion squad to the Mound, an alien outpost where certain death awaits them. Beta Three knows they are all going to die but he is no longer afraid. All he wants is revenge.

Slave of the Legion

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*Slave of the Legion*

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**SLAVE OF THE LEGION**

**By**

**Marshall S. Thomas**

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## *Chapter 1*

### *An Island in the Vac*

"ATTENTION UNREGISTERED STARCRAFT! YOU HAVE ENTERED A WAR ZONE! YOU ARE PRESUMED HOSTILE BY MILITARY UNITS OF THE CONFEDERATION OF FREE WORLDS! IDENTIFY YOURSELF IMMEDIATELY OR WE WILL FIRE!"

"ATTENTION STARSHIP P.S. *MAIDEN*! IT HAS ENTERED AN ACTIVE COMBAT ZONE WITHOUT PERMISSION, IN VIOLATION OF USICOM INTERSTELLAR SHIPPING REGULATIONS! THIS IS DEFCOM ULDO COMMAND! REQUEST AN IMMEDIATE EXPLANATION OF ITS PRESENCE!"

"ATTENTION STARSHIP P.S. *MAIDEN*! THIS IS DEFCOM ULDO TRAFFIC CONTROL! PROCEED IMMEDIATELY INTO THE ORBIT INDICATED AND DO NOT DEVIATE OR YOU MAY COME UNDER ATTACK BY HOSTILE OR FRIENDLY FORCES! THIS IS AN ACTIVE COMBAT ZONE AND WE CANNOT GUARANTEE ITS SAFETY! PLEASE NOTE THAT ITS ALL-THREAT INSURANCE HAS NOW BEEN CANCELLED!"

"ATTENTION!" the ship informed us briskly, "WE ARE BEING TARGETED FOR ATTACK! LEGION FIGHTERS LOCKING ON! AUTOFIRE AND ANTIMAT TORPEDOES LIVE AND LOCKED! DEFCORPS FIGHTERS ALSO LOCKING ON—LOCKED! ARMAMENT LIVE AND LOCKED! SYSTEM STARFLEET CRUISER ALSO LOCKING AND TARGETING! ULDO PORT DOWNSIDE DEFENSIVE SYSTEMS ALSO LOCKING ON AND TARGETING!"

The messages boomed through the Personal Ship *Maiden*, rattling the cenite walls; they came so fast that there was barely time to breathe, much less respond. We had just exited stardrive, quite a respectable distance from the Uldo System, but apparently not quite far enough. We had plenty of reasons to be worried about our reception, especially from the Legion. The P.S. *Maiden* was, by now, well known as a slave ship, and there was nothing the Legion liked better than killing slavers. We were hopeful we would get enough time to explain our presence in this

particular ship.

"Welcome to Uldo," Dragon grinned. I could tell he was feeling at home already. Dragon was almost certainly the perfect Legion trooper. War was his natural element. I felt better when he was around, even though I knew he was a professional killer. He had curly black hair, deeply tanned skin and the look of a hungry tiger. He was practically irresistible to the ladies. Colorful tattoos decorated his knuckles and earlobes.

"Attention, Legion units," Tara called out. "Please hold its fire! This is the Personal Ship *Maiden*, registered with USICOM. We are a private yacht, transporting a Legion element back to its parent squad. Attention, System units, we are under Legion control and are not here voluntarily. Repeat, we are not hostile—please hold its fire. We are complying with its orbit instructions." Tara lived a dangerous life. She was on the Legion death list as a notorious slaver, but I knew she was also a secret Legion asset. She was an old friend, a stunningly beautiful, half-Assidic girl with lustrous auburn hair, pale brown flesh and mysterious Assidic eyes. I prayed for her soul, every day of my life.

"ATTENTION SYSTEM STARSHIP P.S. *MAIDEN*!  
MAINTAIN YOUR COURSE TO THE REQUESTED ORBIT!  
PREPARE TO BE BOARDED BY LEGION UNITS!"

"Confirm, Legion. We are maintaining course."

"Look—there's Uldo!" Whit called out. It loomed dead ahead in the bridge viewport, a tiny, shimmering green orb, encircled by a silky, sparkling ring of cosmic dust. A lovely world, I thought—another precious haven for our fragile species in a hostile universe. Uldo—the name was familiar. They had told us about Uldo in Basic. What had they said?

"Well, we're alive so far," Whit commented. Tara's XO was a slim little blonde who had just undergone a perilous ordeal on Katag, a Systie world she recently visited due to a combination of greed and stupidity. We liberated her with duplicity, violence, murder and bribery. I hadn't enjoyed it one bit. But we owed Tara—and now Whit owed us.

"Deadman," Dragon said. "Look at all the traffic!" I glanced at the orbital readout. The screen flickered with a bewildering array of brightly-colored, multilayered orbital tracks marked with ship designations, data readouts and warning notices. I had never seen such a crowded screen. Thousands of spacecraft were circling this world like deathbirds over a corpse. A dull wave of resignation slowly washed over me. We were home at last, I knew, and this was exactly where we belonged. A world was

dying, momentous events were underway below; we were to be dropped right into it. Squad Beta was down there somewhere, in the mud, and we were going to join them. Only then would I feel complete, encased in an A-suit, with an E in my arms.

"A Legion cruiser—look!" Priestess was excited, trying to decipher the layers of rapidly changing data blinking on the d-screen. Priestess was a Legion medic and my eternal love. She was a slim, lovely girl with silky black hair and limpid brown eyes. I had no defenses against her.

"Legion fighters—look at all those fighters!" Dragon sounded pleased. He was back in his element, all right.

"Deadman, look—look at that carrier!" I said. "And that's a Legion battlestar!"

"Major Systie forces as well—I don't believe this! There can't be that many ships!"

"Some of those are deceptors, guys—a lot of deceptors. Don't forget, there's a war on."

"Who are those guys?" A shower of red sparks, falling slowly down to the atmosphere.

"Those are the O's," Tara said quietly. "You remember them from Mongera."

"Look—an engagement!" The screen lit up. Antimats, winking on and off, and a ship, suddenly gone.

"Who was that?"

"I didn't see it."

"Well, they're gone—whoever they were." Cosmic junk, sparkling on the screen. Blink once and you're gone. They taught us that in Basic, too.

"Legion fighters still locked on," the ship informed us. "System forces have lifted lock-on." This was certainly a first. The United System Alliance was cooperating with the Confederation of Free Worlds to combat the Omni horde. I disapproved—I didn't trust the Systies for an instant. But I was only a Legion trooper. Nobody cared what I thought.

Uldo grew slowly in the bridge viewport as we approached. It was a galactic jewel, an icy green pearl with a ring of diamond dust. I knew nothing of Uldo at that point except that it was absolutely beautiful and had been chosen as the battleground where the Legion was going to stop the Omni advance.

"Quite a battle in deep space—look at that!" Off beyond the orbiting spacecraft the screen sparkled with antis, as hunter packs of



Legion fighters darted into swarms of Omni ships. The battle for control of the vac was still underway.

Well why not, I thought. If we are to die, let it be for Uldo. I had no home except the Legion. And Uldo was so lovely—symbolic, perhaps. An island in the vac, besieged by the Horde. Fine, let us die for Uldo. Our fathers died fighting the O's—now it's our turn.

"P.S. *MAIDEN*, STAND BY TO BE BOARDED BY LEGION UNITS! PREP YOUR PORTS FOR DOCKING, AND UNLOCK YOUR HATCHES! IF THERE IS ANY RESISTANCE, WE WILL BOARD YOU FORCIBLY. ACKNOWLEDGE!"

"Legion, this is P.S. *Maiden*," Tara said silkily. "We acknowledge the message and we welcome the boarding party. Please turn down the volume; we are complying with all its instructions."

"Commander, we have a very bad feeling about this. Remember we're still on the death list." Pandaros's image appeared on the comscreen, tense and grim. He was a Cyrillian, ebony skin, sharpened white fangs and slit eyes. He was not an admirer of the Legion, and the Legion did not think highly of him, either. After the Mongera raid, the *Maiden* had been released from Legion custody with promises that the ship would no longer be actively pursued. But the names had to remain on the list to cover the *Maiden's* assistance, and it made Pandaros very nervous.

"Sub will just have to trust us, Pandaros," Tara replied coldly. "We survived the last encounter with the Legion, and we'll get through this one as well. We have made certain arrangements which shall protect us all."

"We'll lose the *Maiden*, Commander."

"We expect that, Pandaros. But we'll get it back. Stop worrying, and make the Legion welcome. We will survive."

"If it's wrong, we die."

"We're never wrong, Pandaros. Sub should know that by now." Tara cut the connection abruptly.

\* \* \*

"Looks fine, troopers. We'll shuttle you downside to the milport." The Legion officer handed me back our orders. He was fully armored, gleaming black cenite and dull red faceplate, balancing an E on one hip. The boarding party was securing the ship. Pandaros and the crew were under detention, and Tara had locked the man-ape Gildron into the brig, just to avoid any misunderstanding.

"May we speak with it, sir?" Tara shook her hair away from her face. Her arms were tied behind her back. Whit was beside her, also secured, cold sweat on her brow, hardly daring to breathe. Two Legion soldiers in A-suits had taken their places on the bridge.

"Shut down, Systie," the Legion officer snapped back, then turned to me. "How did you do it, guys? That's a hot drop, showing up in a Systie slaver—these people are all in the Black Book. You've done humanity a great service."

"Do you have a few marks, sir?" I asked quietly. "We'd like to talk about that."

"Sure, boys—this is one story I'd like to hear."

"Somewhere private, sir. I'd suggest the Commander sit in as well."

"The slaver? You're joking—what for?"

"It's important, sir."

"Well...curioser and curioser. All right, sure. I guess it won't matter. She'll be dead by morning."

## *Chapter 2*

### *The Wheels of History*

But Tara was not dead by morning. On the contrary, she was accompanying us as we headed deeper and deeper into the gaping tunnels of the Legion's Uldo Milport, underground tunnels carved by amtacs out of earth and stone. We were on foot, plodding through deep sucking mud, clad in new camfax coveralls, trying to make sense out of a dispo tacmod that was supposed to guide us to the replacement depot. Aircars whooshed past every few moments, rocking us with blasts of icy air. Crude lightmods crackled harshly from the dirt ceiling, dazzling our eyes and casting long black shadows as we trudged forward, Dragon and Priestess and Tara and me. We were followed by Gildron, his massive bulk encased in an extra-large camfax cloak. Gildron wasn't human. He was from some unknown world, but served as Tara's bodyguard and companion. His huge head appeared to be crudely carved from stone, and he peered out at the world under thick brow ridges. His body was covered in long, tangled hair. He didn't seem to be too bright, but you sure didn't want to make him angry.

The grav wasn't so bad on Uldo 4. It was heavier than Veda 6, but it wasn't so bad. I hated heavy grav.

"I can't make any sense out of this thing," I confessed, glaring at the tacmap screen for anything that resembled our surroundings. We were at a major intersection where two tunnels merged. A huge amtac rocketed past us, sirens shrieking, splattering us with a shock wave of watery mud.

"Scut! That retard almost hit us!"

"Deto!" Dragon exclaimed. "Let me see that thing! Can't you read a tacmap?" He took the tacmod and peered into the screen, shielding it from the light with one hand.

"The zero is shot," I replied, "as you can see." Two aircars blasted past, and Gildron snarled at them.

"Are you people any better in enemy territory?" Tara asked with a faint smile. It was cold, and her lips were turning blue.

The Legion officer had been astounded after hearing Tara's story, back on the *Maiden*. He consulted immediately with downside, and orders came through quickly for Tara—she was to accompany us to rejoin Beta.

I was mystified by that, and so was Tara. However, she recovered quickly and insisted that her pet ape accompany her. This caused some consternation downside, but was ultimately approved after Tara had a brief but forceful discussion with some nameless bureaucrat. It was incomprehensible, and I didn't even try to understand it. Nevertheless, here we were, trying to find the replacement depot. They were apparently the only people who could direct us to Beta.

"Worthless piece of trash!" Dragon snarled at the tacmod. "I think we turn right here. There should be a series of squadmods up this tunnel." We turned, sloshing through ankle-deep water. A group of forlorn young troopers appeared out of the shadows, picking their way around a pile of dropboxes.

"Say troopies, is the Twenty-Second Replacement Depot around here someplace?" I asked.

"Just keep going," one of them replied. "Follow the mob." Another amtac glided past us at a more reasonable speed. The amtac's roof was crowded with camfaxed replacements huddled down to avoid the ceiling.

"I'm cold!" Priestess said mournfully.

"Attention! Attention!" A tinny voice called out from our defective tacmod. "There will be a function test of all emergency blast doors in five marks, repeat five marks. This is only a test. Move away from all blast doors!"

"Wonderful," Dragon muttered.

"I think we should be all right," I said. "We just passed some blast doors."

"Maybe it'll slow down these damned aircars," Priestess commented. Another car shot past, buffeting us again with an icy breeze. Gildron roared at it, enraged.

\* \* \*

The 22nd Replacement Depot was a brand new squadmod buried in the tunnel wall. The interior swarmed with troopers fighting for access to some admin types sitting behind a counter piled high with doc printouts, plastic manuals and d-screens.

"Would you troopers please stop tracking mud all over the deck?"

"Gee, I'm sorry!"

"Did he actually *say* that?"

Gildron started pushing people aside for us and we were soon at the

counter. Most of the objections ceased once the troopers got a good look at Gildron. He was big and bad, and not quite human. We stood behind a group of three new replacements. The admin fellow behind the counter spoke, reading from a d-screen.

"All right, here's your orders. Tenth Regiment, the Fourth, CAT Thirty-One. They're at Axis Gold. Transport is available at the Twenty-Second's Aircar Control Center. It's all in the orders. Next!" He pushed three datapaks across the counter.

"Just a frac," one of the troopers objected. "We were told to report to the Third Amtac Support Squadron. We're techs, and they need us."

"You were told wrong," the admin clerk snapped back. "You've just been reassigned. The Tenth needs bodies, and you're it. Now get moving." He was a thin man with a narrow face and a shrill, raspy voice.

"We're techs!" another trooper objected. "We fix amtacs—you can send somebody else to the Tenth!"

"Don't tell me what to do, trooper! You've just been assigned to the Tenth. Those are your orders. Now disappear! Next!"

I pushed my way up to the counter. "We need the location of Squad Beta, CAT Two Four, Black Twelfth. We're returning to our unit."

"How many of you?" His beady little eyes darted over our group, lingering on Gildron.

"Five. We've got orders."

"Let's see 'em." We handed over our orders, and he fed them into the system. "Just a frac." He consulted a d-screen, then made an entry.

"All right," he said, "you're reassigned to the Tenth Regiment, the Fourth, CAT Fourteen. Location is Axis Gold. Transport is..."

"Hold it!" I said.

"Don't interrupt, trooper! Transport is..."

"Whoa!" I objected. "We already have orders, mister! We're going to Squad Beta of CAT Two Four, Second of the Twelfth, and all I need from you is the zero. Now how about it?"

"Your orders have just been changed, trooper," he snarled at me. "All loose bodies are now going to the Tenth. That's the way it is! So pick up your orders and get out of my sight!"

"May I handle this, Thinker?" Dragon asked me.

"Be my guest." I turned away from the admin puke in disgust.

Dragon smiled at the puke. Then he placed one well-muscled arm on the counter, and cleared it of everything, sweeping it all onto the floor. The room was suddenly dead quiet except for a single dox cup, rolling

around on the deck. Dragon reached over the counter, seized the clerk by his tunic, and pulled him over the counter until their faces were only mils apart.

"We're not loose bodies," Dragon said through clenched teeth. "We're with the Twelfth. We're returning to our squad, and we're not going to take any crap from you or anybody else. You are going to give us the location of our squad, and give us back our original orders, right now, or I'll rip your arms out of their sockets and feed them to our friend here." Gildron showed his teeth. The room full of troopers burst into applause, shouting encouragement.

"You're not replacements?" the puke asked. He was sweating. Dragon shook his head, slowly.

"All right... all right," the puke said. "You're not replacements." Dragon threw him back into his chair. The puke shakily pulled himself together again, and rolled the chair back to his post by the counter. "Sorry...I thought you were replacements." The puke tried a smile, but it didn't work. "Squad Beta, you say."

"We've said that several times."

"All right! Don't get upset—I thought you were replacements. Replacements go where they're needed most. We'll find your squad—relax!"

\* \* \*

"Aw right, who's in charge here?" I shouted. I knew damned well who was in charge, but I had to announce our entrance somehow. Beta was camped out in an enormous black hole torn out of the raw earth just off one of the main corridors of the milbase. It was a nightmare scene from the lower reaches of Hell, a few flickering lights casting long spooky shadows on wet dirt walls, a dead dark aircar surrounded by shadowy figures, piles of equipment stacked on a floor of mud, and someone approaching us out of the dark. It was Beta One—Snow Leopard.

"So you found us," he said calmly. "Good. That's good." He was in camfax fatigues, his long blond hair brushed straight back, a comset clipped to one shoulder. His pale face was completely free of emotion, but his hot red eyes glittered with determination. Beta One was back with us, I could tell. For awhile there I thought we had lost him, after Mongera. "Three, Eight, Nine, welcome back," he said. "They told me about your friends. Tamaling, welcome. I hope Three's visit was useful to you."

Cintana Tamaling was Tara's Systie name. One had obviously read her file, which urged us not to use her true name, Antara Tarantos-Hanna. It was a name that could lead to her death.

Tara looked around at our quarters. "Yes," she responded with a dazzling white smile. "Most useful. I appreciate your letting them go."

"We appreciate the help you gave us on Mongera. And this is Gildron." He was looking up at the ape-man. Gildron showed his teeth, but remained silent.

"You'll find him useful," Tara said. "I can't get along without him."

"It's Dragon and Thinker—and Priestess! They've brought the ape!" I recognized Psycho's obnoxious braying. It didn't even bother me—I was that glad to be back.

"Welcome back, guys!" Merlin materialized out of the shadows, smiling. He had a ration pack under one arm. Merlin was our brains. He knew pretty much everything.

"We missed you, Big Guy," Scrapper said, sparkling grey eyes and a face full of freckles and a mop of tawny hair. I had never figured out why she insisted on calling me Big Guy. She had been Warhound's obsession. The last time I saw her, on Veda 6, she had marched up to me unexpectedly and said throatily, "Thinker, I want you to know I'm sorry about Warhound." Then she turned abruptly, to hide her face, and stalked away awkwardly.

Warhound had been killed on Mongera. It was hard to even think about it.

"Three!" It was Redhawk, pale splotchy face, tangled red hair, a scruffy beard. He threw an E at me and I caught the weapon in one hand. It was my own E—an old friend. Memories washed over me. Someone had picked it up out of the mud after I was hit on Mongera. I knew every scar on this E, every ridge, every chip, every burn. And now she was back with me. United at last, just as it should be, on Uldo. I could see the weapon had been re-engineered. More dark magic to confound our foes. I looked up at the dripping dirt ceiling. I was home—home at last. Who could ask for more? I clutched the E tighter. Me and my girl, together again, at last.

"All right," Snow Leopard said calmly, "briefing—now. Three, Eight, Nine, Tamaling. Over here." We followed Snow Leopard over to a pile of dropboxes. Someone set off a hotstar and it crackled to life near the aircar. It was cold—my nose and lips were already numb.

"Have some dox." Snow Leopard tore open a pack and we greedily

helped ourselves, popping open the cups and burning our lips on the suddenly steaming liquid. We gathered around Snow Leopard, savoring the dox. Gildron stood off to one side, snarling at Psycho, who was staring at him. Psycho snarled back, making ape noises. Psycho was a little guy, blond hair, lunatic blue eyes and a wise-ass attitude. He was fearless in battle and a giant pain when it was quiet.

"You'd better terminate that, Psycho," Dragon warned, "or my friend will remove your head." Psycho smiled. He liked to live dangerously.

"Nice quarters," Priestess said.

"It's not the best," Snow Leopard admitted, "but we'll be moving out soon. You're just in time. All right, here's the sit—we've got a mission. It's a good mission. I'm very pleased with the mission." He did not look very pleased, but it was impossible to read Beta One any more. He was just like a biogen. He was the ultimate squad leader.

"Have any of you been briefed on the sit here on Uldo?" he asked, "the general situation?"

"That's a twelve," I replied. "We just got here."

"I see. All right." Snow Leopard looked up to the ceiling, then down at his dox. "Well, let me tell you. I think our squad has been greatly privileged to play a leading role in some of the more important historical events of our time. The mission to Mongera was one for the books. We paid the price, gang, but when we're all dead and gone, our descendants are still going to be reading about that one. And this one—the return to Uldo—is destined to be even more significant." He paused to sip his dox. His pale pink eyes were far away.

"This is humanity's first joint response against the O's. We have at last set aside our differences to unite against the common threat. And how ironic that it should be here, on Uldo. It's the wheels of history, gang—the Gods are laughing at us. It's a cosmic joke." Snow Leopard stared into space, alone with his thoughts. It was almost as if he was talking to himself. I had no idea what he meant.

"What do you mean, Snow Leopard?" Priestess asked. Apparently I was not alone in my ignorance.

Snow Leopard blinked, and came back to us. "Don't you remember Uldo, from the history of the Legion? That was in Basic. The Cauldron, they called it. The Cauldron."

The Cauldron! Of course, now I remembered. That was where I had heard about Uldo before, in Basic. The Race War. The Legion had met



the DefCorps here in a great battle, on Uldo.

"Uldo was a ConFree world," Snow Leopard said, "and the System was expanding and powerful in those days. They dropped onto Uldo with all they had. And the Legion countered them. All of Starcom was involved. We had four Legions down here. Four Legions." Snow Leopard paused, his eyes focusing on images we could not see.

"We lost the vac first, then the at. The Eighth Legion was ultimately trapped downside. The whole Legion—it was hopeless, but nobody surrendered. The DefCorps moved in. They had to fight for every mike of land. That was the Cauldron. Nobody from the Eighth survived—not a single trooper. They fought to the death—all of them. The whole Legion, gone, snuffed out like a candle. There were rivers of blood and forests of bones. The Systies paid for their victory. They never revealed their casualties."

It was one of the darkest chapters in the Legion's history. Now I remembered what they had said: There were so many A-suits buried in the killing fields that the cenite poisoned the soil, and nothing would grow there.

"The Systies took Uldo," Snow Leopard said, "and enslaved the population and imported their own races and made their own world here. Then—a few weeks ago—the Omnis came, just the way they always do, dropping from the skies like fireflies. Millions of them. Soon they were swarming over Uldo, and the Systies knew they had lost another world. That's when they made the political decision to call in the Legion."

Snow Leopard looked up again, to the flickering shadows on the ceiling. "Such irony. The Legion returns to Uldo, allied with the System, to fight the O's." He looked vaguely around. "The Legion has decided the O's are to be stopped here, on Uldo. They've never been stopped, but we're going to stop them, here. We're giving it all we've got. And we'll never leave. Uldo's earth is soaked in Legion blood. This is our home, gang. Our home."

The rest of the squad was loading up the aircar with supplies. I saw a few people I didn't know. It looked like we were going somewhere.

"So what's the mission, One?" Dragon asked. I was freezing. I took another sip of hot dox.

Snow Leopard put down his cup. "The mission, right. There's a big offensive underway, right into the O's axis of advance. We've got a recon—a very important recon. We are to accompany advance elements of the Twelfth to the forward battle area and then jump off, making our

way surreptitiously to the target. It's deep in Omni territory."

"And the target?" Dragon asked.

"It's an Omni installation," Snow Leopard replied. "Take a look."

He opened a doc case and pulled out some reconsat shots. The prints showed what looked like a vast earthen mound, roughly circular, rising from a dark smoky plain. Little plumes of smoke seeped from the mound, caught in a light breeze. Faint trails could be seen running around the outside.

"What is it?" Tara asked.

"Nobody knows," Snow Leopard replied. "We only know it was built by the O's. They're building these all over the planet. After they secure an area, they build one of these...mounds."

"So it's an Omni base?"

"We're not sure. The funny thing is, there's not a lot of activity at the mounds. We don't see many O's around these structures. Only a few. What we do see are human captives—lots of them, marching into the entrances. Those dark openings at the bottom there. Here, here's a good shot." He passed us another print. A long, ragged line of hopeless refugees, hunched over against a cold wind, heading for the Mound. Men, women, children. Toddlers, walking bravely beside their parents. Babies, in their mothers' arms.

"Where are the O's?"

"That's it—there aren't any. It's psypower. The O's want them in the mounds—they have to go."

I didn't want to see any more. I passed the print on to Tara. Her face was cold and hard.

"What do the O's do with them?"

"That's our mission. Determine what goes on in the mounds. Once we report back, the Legion will decide what to do."

"The Legion should attack right now! Why the delay?"

"There's a lot of things the Legion should do. But we've got a war to fight, too. We've got to take on the O's face to face and defeat them and push them back. The offensive is starting right now. If we can't do that, there's no sense in dropping a heavy force in behind the lines to face who knows what. No, there has to be a recon first. By the time we're through, it should also be clear if we can defeat the O's or not. If we can, there should be some resources freed up to target the mounds, if that's what has to be done. If we can't, it won't matter."

We were interrupted by a noisy outburst from the shadows.

"Does not."

"Does so."

"Does not!"

"Dwarf!"

"Mutant!" Psycho and Redhawk were discussing the move over by the aircar. Valkyrie intervened.

"Blackout! What is this, a playschool? Shut down, both of you!"

Valkyrie was pale and angry. The black Legion cross on her forehead added a little edge. She was a stunningly lovely blonde vision. She had been mine, once, but she didn't belong to anybody now—except maybe the Legion.

"Does not!"

"Does so!"

"Shut down, creeps!"

Snow Leopard sighed, and turned back to us. "Dragon, you know I wanted you as our Two, but you were away. Eleven is our new Two."

"Valkyrie?" Eight could hardly believe it. Neither could I.

"She's a good trooper. Dependable—and fearless."

"Crazy, you mean."

"She's got the experience. She was Two for Gamma. And you weren't here. So she's it."

"Tenners."

"Now—do you all know why Tamaling is here?"

"That's a twelve, One," I said. "We don't know—except she has orders."

"I don't know either," Tara said, "and I'm more than a little curious."

"All right," Snow Leopard said. "I've briefed Valkyrie. I see no need for everyone in the squad to know this, but I'll brief the four of you."

Snow Leopard looked up at Gildron, who was staring at him intently.

"Does he understand anything I'm saying?"

"Gildron understands much," Tara replied, "especially kindness, and hostility. He responds appropriately to both."

"Wonderful," Snow Leopard said. "All right, here it is. I received orders from Xcom late yesterday—after the Legion spoke with you, Tamaling."

"Call me Cinta, please."

"Cinta—fine. The orders came direct from Starcom. High-level stuff, and most unusual. They say you are a very powerful psycher, and

are to accompany us on our mission to the Mound. They believe your psychic abilities may prove useful."

"Do they!"

"Yes. Are you a psycher?"

"Yes. That's correct."

"Really. What am I thinking?"

"You're thinking you'd like to pull my panties down and lick my—  
ah..."

"All right! Close enough!" Snow Leopard blushed, his face suddenly turning scarlet. Dragon couldn't help laughing. "I'm sorry," Snow Leopard said. "Sorry."

"It's all right," Tara said. "I get a lot of that."

"Are you in good physical shape?" Snow Leopard asked.

"Yes. I am."

"Ever wear an A-suit?"

"I've worn Legion and Systie armor."

"Good. Now how about your friend—what's his name?"

"Gildron."

"What can he do?"

"He's strong—and faithful. He'll do whatever I ask."

"Why is he here? I can hardly believe they gave him orders."

"They gave him orders because I insisted on it. When they told me I was to link up with your squad, I decided I wanted him with me."

"You insisted on it." Snow Leopard just stared at her. It did not add up.

"That's right." Tara stared back.

Snow Leopard looked at her for a long time, then shifted his glance to Gildron. "He'll be a liability."

"He'll be an asset!"

"They don't make A-suits that big. And he'll need an A-suit where we're going."

"You'll find him useful—with or without an A-suit."

Snow Leopard stared at the man-ape thoughtfully.

"All right," Snow Leopard said. "But he is to obey my commands—not yours. And if he causes the slightest problem, we leave him behind. And if you object to that, we leave you behind. Understand?"

"Understood," Tara said. "He won't give you any trouble. He's quiet, and strong. You'll like him." Gildron suddenly reached out an arm and put a massive hand on Snow Leopard's shoulder, staring at him

intently.

"See?" Tara smiled in delight. "He likes you! Good, Gildron, good!"

"Kangju," Gildron said. I swear, he almost smiled.

"Fine," Snow Leopard said. "All right—squad meeting!" He shouted it. The others drifted over. Everyone was bundled up in camfaced coldcoats.

"How did it go, guys?" Valkyrie asked. I had almost forgotten her cold, unearthly beauty—hair of spun gold, enchanting emerald eyes. My heart still speeded up whenever she came close to me. Once she had been all I wanted from life. But that was over now.

"Katag? Nothing to it," Dragon responded. I looked over at him. Merlin laughed.

"Thinker doesn't seem to share your opinion, Dragon," Merlin said.

"How was it, Priestess?" Scrapper asked.

"We're back," Priestess said. "That's what's important."

"Missed you, Priestess," Psycho said brightly.

"All right, listen up," Snow Leopard said. "This is Cinta—and Gildron. They are to accompany us on the mission. Most of you remember them from Mongera. They're not formally part of the squad, but for all practical purposes they're your squadies. Get to know them. The big guy doesn't talk much. I understand he's got a good heart, but a bad temper—so don't give him any grief, Psycho."

"Would I do that?"

"It's your funeral. Thinker, Dragon, Priestess, we've got two new bodies. We didn't know if you'd be returning or not. We're one over strength now you're back. Three over, if we count Cinta and Gildron. Beta Thirteen—Twister, and Beta Fourteen—Speedy, these are our missing squadies, Three, Eight and Nine. You'll learn the warnames soon enough."

They nodded at us, uneasily. Beta Thirteen, Twister, was a tall, gangling, awkward colt of a girl, with curly dark red hair and a face full of freckles. A schoolgirl, dressed in camfax. Terrific. Beta Fourteen, Speedy, was a pale, intense young trooper with dark hair and watery brown eyes. It was hard, accepting new people into the squad. It meant that the old people were gone, forever—Coolhand and Warhound and Ironman. They were tiny faces on my knuckles, and phantoms in my mind. How could we not resent replacements for our dead?

"Hi," I said. "Welcome. It's a good squad."

"You'll like it," Dragon said.

"It's our home," Priestess added, "and it's good to be back."

"All right, that's it. Get the car loaded," Snow Leopard said. The squad broke up slowly. Dragon stayed beside me.

"Another female," he said quietly. "That makes four. Five, if you count Cinta. They may as well call this the mammary squad."

"Come on, Dragon, you love 'em."

"Yeah, it's the latest concept—they want us to be able to reproduce ourselves, instead of asking for replacements."

"You'll get over it."

"I doubt it. Let's check out these new people. Do you think that girl is brain-damaged?"

"Merlin—come here," I said.

"Thinker, what's the sit?" Merlin seemed completely happy. He had made his decision, just as we all had, throwing it all away for the Legion. But Merlin had thrown away a lot more than we had. He might have been a brilliant scientist, but now he was just a hired gun.

"What's your informed scientific opinion on this new body, the male, Fourteen—what's his name—Speedy?"

"He seems fairly stable, Thinker. Looks to be a dependable type, from what I've seen so far."

"How about the girl?"

"Kind of nervous. Maybe a little shaky. Sort of like I used to be."

"Used to be?" I laughed. "All right, Merlin, used to be."

\* \* \*

"Just stay there, I'll be right back." Snow Leopard had to see somebody about our mission. We were at Recon Control, a squadmod just off one of the main corridors of the milbase. It was cool and clean inside. Scores of troopers sat before comscreens whispering into their mikes or silently monitoring the activity. A large wall screen showed the Legion offensive already underway, and it was sparkling with antis and tacstars. Another large screen showed the recon missions, all deep inside Omni-occupied territory.

"Good duty here," Valkyrie said, "you don't even get your boots dirty."

"I know this work," Merlin said. "You sip dox and offer advice to people who are dying. It's nice work if you like it." Snow Leopard was talking with an officer at the command desk, determining our fate.

"Scope out that opmap, guys," I said. "See if you can find Corin." Corin was our jump-off point, a city that had been in the path of the Omni advance. Now it was in the path of the Legion advance, and the future did not look good for that particular city.

"Look at all those units!" Merlin exclaimed. "Those are regiments of the Twenty-Second—look! The Tenth, the Twelfth, the Sixty-Eighth, the Fifty-First! Deadman!"

"Corin is over there," Valkyrie pointed. "On the left, by that river." I could see it—our own regiment, the 12th, was closing on it. Antimats winked and faded on the screen.

"Do you think we'll win?" Valkyrie asked, gazing blankly at the screens.

"We're ready for them," Merlin said confidently. "I don't see how they can counter the new generation of weapons, weapons designed specifically to kill O's. The O's are very powerful because of their psypower. But they're slow to change. We can counter the psypower now. And look at their tactics—they don't have any! They've never had tactics! It's just individual O's, wandering around killing anything that moves."

"I've never understood that."

"Don't feel alone. I tell you, if the O's ever really get organized, we'll be in terminal trouble!"

"Control, our mission has been compromised!" A voice crackled with static from a nearby console.

"Red Opal, Control—please provide details." The Mission Coordinator hunched over the d-screen. He looked like a brand new recruit.

There was silence from the console. The trooper entered some data into the system.

"We're under attack!" The console crackled again. I could hear the shriek of tacstars in the background.

"Red Opal, Control. Do you require extraction?" There was no response. Only silence, from Red Opal.

"Let's go." Snow Leopard had finished his business.

"Tenners." I wondered about Red Opal, but I knew we'd never learn the ending. We straggled out of the squadmod and into the cold, dark corridor. Our aircar was waiting, assault doors open. The whole squad was there. We climbed in, and I found a seat next to the new girl, Beta Thirteen.

"Everything tenners?" I asked her.

"Oh! Um, fine..." she seemed startled by my question. She was blushing, I suddenly realized, and avoiding my eyes. Great, I thought, she can't even talk. Hope she can shoot, at least. The aircar doors slammed shut and we shot forward along the shadowy earthen corridors of Uldo Milbase, emergency lights glaring from the dripping ceilings, our aircar trailing a shock wave of icy, muddy spray. Redhawk hit the sounds and the latest ionic music blasted through the car.

"You missed those guys, Redhawk!"

"Look at that! He's giving us the bird!"

"All right, gang," Snow Leopard said. "We're off to the armor shop, to get Cinta and Gildron fitted for A-suits. We're all going to get our suits checked as well. If anyone has any problems with your armor, this is your last chance before we hit the death zone. Are you listening, Psycho?"

"Yes sir! That's a tenners!"

"What did I say?"

"Last chance for Cinta and the monkey to get their armor fixed!"

"Somebody tell Psycho," Snow Leopard said wearily.

"So how did you like Hell?" I asked the new girl.

"Oh, we didn't go there," she said. "We did the field tests on Veltros."

"They didn't send you to Hell?" I was astounded. "But they send everyone there!"

"Not any more," she said. "They said it was too expensive, and out-dated. Primitivist, they said."

"Primitivist?"

"It's a new Legion, Sir. And they had to cut down on the training cycle, because of the war."

"The name's Thinker," I said. "Not 'sir'."

"Yes sir. Uh...sorry."

Primitivist! A new Legion! Unbelievable.

"Well, how were the—ah—field tests?" I asked her.

"Exhausting, sir. Oh! I'm sorry...Thinker. They walked us almost to death. I'm in good shape, sir. Oh! Sorry."

"Exhausting, huh?" Exhaustion had been the least of our problems in Hell. Potentially fatal dangers, constant terror, hate and resentment, thirst and hunger had all been a lot higher on the list for us.

"Priestess, I need some medical help." It was Psycho.

"What is it, Five?" Priestess responded warily.

"I get this really painful big bird whenever you get near me. I know



you can help me!" Groans of disgust from the rest of the squad.

"I'm so sick of you, Psycho!" Priestess replied.

"This is a very real problem, Priestess—I'm not kidding!"

"Shut your filthy mouth, you worm!" Valkyrie snapped at him.

"Why don't you neuter him, Priestess?" Dragon suggested. "You need any help, let me know."

"You and which army?" Psycho shot back.

"Shut down, Five!" Snow Leopard ordered.

"It was a joke, guys!" Psycho objected. "It was a joke! Remember when we used to laugh? Everybody's suddenly so damned sensitive—is this a Legion squad or a garden party? Pardon me for living!"

"Just shut down, all right?"

"Aah, what a downer. It was a joke!"

\* \* \*

"Just relax. It will only take a few marks." Two young A-techs were working the suit robot, a slim young Assidic male and a pale little blonde Outworlder girl. They were fitting Tara for her A-suit, guiding her slender arms into the molds as she stood in the machine. A-suits were individually fitted, but the robot automated the entire process. The techs silently fitted the molds over Tara's arms and legs and adjusted the links.

"Put your head back a little," the blonde said. "That's it. We're almost done." Tara was encased in a massive metal cocoon. The rest of the squad stood around watching, crowded into the fitting room. It was as silent as a chapel except for a muted hum from the robot. Tara's eyes were almost closed. She was gazing vaguely into space somewhere up near the ceiling, and appeared terribly vulnerable and fragile. Perhaps it was her beauty, that awful unearthly beauty that never seemed quite real. The Assidic and the blonde were both troubled by it, I could sense. And as I watched her there was a pale light, faintly illuminating her face. She was like an angel, a captive angel trapped in some hellish instrument of degradation. I blinked my eyes, and the light was gone. Priestess watched in silent fascination beside me. I grasped her cool hand and her slender fingers locked around mine. I could see only death in our future. I wondered why Tara was with us. She might be a good psycher but from what I knew of the O's, no human could ever come close to grappling with their psypower. Tara should not be here, I thought. She's...different. We have all chosen death, but Tara should not be wasted in our hopeless

cause. Holy or unholy, any way you count it, there's no reason to waste her talents here. But here she is, just as much a soldier of the Legion as any of us.

"That's it! Your A-suit will be ready shortly. Who's next?" The robot hissed and snapped and unlinked itself, and Tara stepped out carefully, shaking her hair loose.

"What can you do for the big guy?" Snow Leopard asked. Gildron stepped forward at a gesture from Tara. A giant, clad in the *Maiden's* elektra-violet tunic and an extra-large camfax cloak.

"This is going to be quite a challenge," the Assidic said, grinning.

"What do you think?" the little blonde asked. "He's taller than the robot!"

"No, we can do it," the Assidic responded. "We can raise the maxes. It can be done, I remember. Get me the manual."

"You're sure he can handle an A-suit?" Snow Leopard asked Tara.

"No problem," Tara replied. "And he can fire an E or an SG with the best. I taught him myself."

"He must obey orders," Snow Leopard said quietly. "The first hint of trouble and we leave him behind—remember!"

"He'll do what you say—I've told him. There'll be no trouble!"

Gildron got his A-suit. The techs said it was the largest suit on record. Armored and armed, he appeared truly formidable. But I had a bad feeling about the mission. We might have been A&A, but I didn't think it was going to ward off whatever was coming—not for an instant.

A trail of crucified humans leads the Legion squad to the Mound, an alien outpost where certain death awaits them. Beta Three knows they are all going to die but he is no longer afraid. All he wants is revenge.

Slave of the Legion

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