

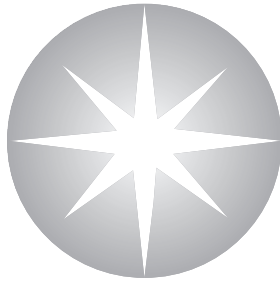
The survivors of Squad Beta are in the grip of the Star, an alien artifact that will take them into another universe and into the past. Only there can they find their missing comrades - and there may be no return.

Secret of the Legion

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SECRET OF THE LEGION



By

Marshall S. Thomas

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Chapter I

Out Of The Oz

Oz, Day 1002: Release. I stood in the cold as the gates slid shut behind me. The sky was grey. Winter was on the way. The jacket they gave me was too thin but I didn't care. I was afraid, but also ecstatic. Free! I clutched the doc case nervously. Everything I owned was in there. And it all flowed from today, the entire future, from this very moment.

I glanced over my shoulder. High stone walls, to keep in the crazies. A cenite plaque, next to the gates:

OZER CLINIC
UNITED SYSTEM ALLIANCE
MINLAW REGIONAL PSYMED FACILITY
DIRECTED SERVICE
NIMBOS SECTOR

Farewell to Oz. I had no regrets at leaving but it would not be easy, starting from zero, making a new life in a strange world. I would try to remember what they told me. Their advice would be temporarily useful, I was sure—until I found out about myself.

Those were my first thoughts, out of the Oz, in the New World. I stepped out onto the road. An aircar shot past overhead, buffeting me with a wave of cold air. I set off down the road, cheap cloth shoes crunching over the gravel. I knew what I had to do—even then. I soaked up everything they taught me, I had parroted it out, I even persuaded myself that they were right. I became

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so good at it that even the Eye thought I was good. If all your reactions are correct, if you even think you're a Goodlib, how can you not be good? I was good—that much I admit. They certainly did their job. And now I was released, into the out. Cured. Harmless. A good citizen.

But there was one thing they had not quite extinguished—only one, a tiny spark, hidden deep deep inside me. I had tried to avoid even thinking about it inside the Oz. But now I was out, and it was growing, already.

I wanted to know who I was—that's all. After all that time, after all the treatment and all the training and all the talking and all my denials, I still wanted to know who I was. Unforgivable, I knew. But I didn't care! I wanted to know who I was—who I had been. I wanted to know about the past. It was evil. It was forbidden. It was socially counterproductive and psychologically destructive and counter to everything that Oz had tried to achieve with me. But I didn't care!

It started to rain. A dark sky, a light rain. I continued walking, overwhelmed with terrifying, anti-pubmor thoughts. I fumbled with the doc case and pulled out the crude city map. My quarters were pre-arranged, my employment all set. The System did all it could—now it was up to me to adjust. They had done a terrific job. It was truly frightening, how much money and time they devoted to my rehab. I realized I was a very unusual case, an exceptional case. The System did not have resources like that to waste on normal crims. I had been important, somehow—very important, to merit such special attention. I did not know anyone else who had been in the Oz for as long as I had, or who had been given more thorough treatment.

Free! I sucked in cold air. My cheap shoes were already soaking wet. It was time to start a new life. I had better concentrate on that first. I could worry about the past later.

They gave me a cube in Agra Worker's Hostel Number 14. The place was pretty miserable—a massive, ancient, crumbling prefab highrise hive, swarming with worker ants. My cube was a tiny closet with a broken window, and a broken bed, and the toilet down the hall. I didn't care. My own cube! It was all I needed. I could hear the people on both sides, but it didn't bother me. I set the doc case on a little table that folded down from the wall. One of the hinges was broken and it was a little wobbly. I struggled out of the wet jacket. Insects scuttled across the dirty floor. The ceiling light flickered.

I opened the doc case. My papers told me nothing—only that I was a

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graduate of the Ozer Clinic. I was a man without a past. I had come out of nowhere, and here I was. I was supposed to accept it, but I was not going to accept it.

I found a cracked mirror on the floor and put it up on the table, against the wall. A pale, clean-shaven youth looked back at me—green eyes, prominent cheekbones, and very short brown hair. I would let it grow out, I decided—my first voluntary act in this new life. An antisocial act, I knew. I stared at myself in the cracked, cloudy mirror. I was an Outworlder—that much I could say for sure. But that told me nothing. I was young and fit. My body was hard and strong and covered with little scars. I had evidently worked with my body, not my brain, in my past life.

The scars were worth thinking about. They were everywhere, little white scars, slash marks, puncture wounds, and places where it looked as if I had been burnt. But most puzzling were the red scars. Almost all my knuckles were disfigured with deep, reddish scars. It looked as if the skin had been burnt right off. And on my left arm it was the same—there was a large red patch on the upper arm just below the shoulder, the same kind of scar as the knuckles, but larger. I wondered about that.

And then there was the left arm itself. It looked the same as the right, but it did not feel the same. I had tremendous strength in that arm—superhuman strength. It wasn't a natural arm. It was artificial, inside—biogenned. I knew it. I could feel the cenite.

Who would have gone to such trouble, and expense, to give me an artificial arm? And why the left? I was right-handed. The arm looked just fine, outside, except for the scars. The skin was perfect—it was real skin, the same as my other arm. There was no clue outside that it was not a normal arm.

I wondered a lot about the arm. I figured it was the best clue I had to who I had been. But I had no idea what it meant.

My employment was nothing to write home about—not that I would have known where to write anyway. The System found me a job as a dishwasher, in a pubfeed. It was all right. I didn't care what I did, and I didn't have any choice. I washed greasy plastic dishes in tepid water, elbow to elbow with a bewildering assortment of sleazers and druggos and broken-down losers. That didn't bother me, either—some of them were good folks. They called me “Loony,” of course—it was no secret where I had come from. Even

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that didn't bother me. One big goon used to taunt me about it a lot, but he stopped after I smashed his face with my bionic left. My co-workers were friendlier after that. They hadn't liked the big guy much anyway.

Oz said when they psych you, it does not affect your intelligence, only your memory of past events. But I can tell you that's crap. I think it makes you stupid. Intentional or not, I don't know. But I found I had to concentrate hard enough to accomplish even simple tasks. It was easy to forget things, too. Of course I did not know how I had been before, but now I found I had to work very hard just to get the damned dishes done correctly. Sometimes I'd forget about lunch. And when I did eat, sitting there at the bench with the others, I would lose myself in the task, sipping warm soup, bringing the spoon up carefully to avoid spilling any. People would be talking to me and I wouldn't hear them.

Sometimes I heard snatches of music in my head, just for a tantalizing frac—terrifying music. I never quite got a grip on it. It wasn't really music, and I never really heard more than a brief flash, but it put a chill on my flesh, even then.

I knew it was from the past.

I learned more about myself as time rolled on. I got better at the job—a lot better. I fixed up the kitchen, I cleaned the filthy sinks and counters and the walls and the floors; I set up a system to sort the dirty dishes and glasses and cutlery; I fooled with the water heater downstairs and got hot water in the pipes and started sterilizing the dishes. When I was through, our product was sparkling. Most of my co-workers were uneasy about this, but it gave me a tremendous satisfaction. Our Super looked at me funny, but did not object.

I thought a lot about that, too. Why this dark sense of accomplishment, this strange urge to change things, to make things better? I knew it was anti-social behavior. Oz would not have approved.

I figured I had been a very strange unit. But that I already knew—otherwise why all the special treatment from the System?

“Loony. Is it there?”

“What?” I looked up in annoyance from my soup. We were all huddled around the table, scarfing up the slop. One of the sexboys from the clean-up crew was leaning over my shoulder. Stu-Two—he was a good little kid, I knew.

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“A secret,” he whispered conspiratorially. “Lou-Ellen is hot on Loony. It wants an approach. Hot and bothered, Loony! Red-hot info, Cit. We guarantee it!”

I looked out the plex to the feeding hall. Lou-Ellen was the doorgirl. She was sitting behind her battered table, wearily reading a comic. She was attractive, tall and slender, smoky red hair and smouldering dark eyes. I had wondered what it would be like with her. I turned my eyes away.

“We don’t think so,” I responded. “But thanks for the info, Stu-Two.”

“If it doesn’t like girls, how about us?” Stu-Two asked, running a hand gently down my arm. I turned and glared at his hand. He pulled it back quickly.

“Well! So touchy!” he sniffed, and turned on his heels. The rest of the gang all laughed.

I learned more about myself every day. Hetero—I was certainly hetero. I felt no attraction to Stu-Two, even though he was a good-looking kid. It had been hard to tell in the Oz. They had put something in the food to stifle the sex urge. But now I knew. I would have liked to get Lou-Ellen in bed, but sex was a very low priority for me right then. Oz had made me slow and stupid, and I did not want any distractions from the task at hand. And the task was to find out who I was, who I had been. Everything else was secondary. A girlfriend would take up time, and I would lose my concentration. I might even accept my situation. Lou-Ellen was fine, but she’d have to wait. I had more important things to do.

There was a System proprop outlet in Agra City, not far from the pubfeed. A library, they called it, run by MinTru, the Ministry of Truth. There wasn’t much in there but Government proprop, but a few of the readers still worked and they had a lot of printed material. I started haunting the place. I needed information, and that was all the information that was available. I went there regularly after work, and would read for hours. I was often alone there, except for the derelicts trying to get out of the cold.

Somewhere in the library, I was convinced, lay the secret of my past. The one thing I knew for sure was that I was not from this world. Nimbos was not my home planet. Oz had told me that openly. Psychees are never released on their home planets, they said. They are sent somewhere else to start a new life where there are no traces of the past.

I read all I could find on robotics and biogens and advanced surgical

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techniques and regeneration. But there wasn't enough information to help me. The material available in the library did not specify who qualified for such advanced, expensive treatment.

I started to read about other worlds. I started to read history. I had no idea what I was looking for, inside the library. But I kept learning more about myself outside the library. It was a long, slow process. It was the little things that did it—things that I knew, instinctively, were wrong. Things they had not been able to erase.

The clothing, for example. The thin, cheap material. The shoddy cloth shoes. I knew I had never worn clothing like that. Coldcoats were supposed to be warm, and shoes—they were not supposed to soak through and come apart at the seams. I was instinctively angry with things that did not work the way they were supposed to. This was hostile, anti-social behavior, I knew.

The filth—that was wrong, too. Agra City was a rotting cesspool, an open sore. And as far as I could tell, all of Nimbos was the same. We all lived like pigs, shivering in the cold, eating once a day, twice if we were lucky, shuffling through dirty streets to our lice-infested cubes. It did not seem right to me.

Yes, we were at war, I knew, and sacrifice was necessary, I knew. But I saw no evidence on Nimbos that the situation had ever been better in the past, before the war.

Most puzzling of all was my reaction to social contradictions. I knew exactly what I was supposed to think, which is why my instinctive reactions frightened me. Everything I saw angered me, but the anger was not at myself, as it should have been. My anger was directed to others. It was thoughtcrime, and I knew I could never tell anyone. It meant that the Oz had failed, after all that effort, to cure me. I slowly came to realize that I was not a Goodlib at all. I was a Bacteria.

It hurt me to think about the meaning of what I saw. The streets were full of predators, darting out of the shadows like wolves, preying on the weak or the slow. It was a daily gauntlet, trying to get past them. As I watched their activity, my anger slowly grew. Murder and rape were everyday events. The thugs were all licensed by the System as charity cases, and citizens were required to contribute when approached. Theoretically you could write the donations off on your taxes, if the thug gave you a receipt. However the charity cases always wanted more than you had, and some didn't even bother to ask—they just took. The police were never in sight, except to clean up the

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mess afterwards, and none of the predators would ever see the inside of a jail cell. Yet if any of the pubfeed employees ever failed to turn over the 20 percent voluntary war donation from what was left of their pitiful monthly salary after the 60 percent income taxes had been taken out, why, we'd get to chat with the local constabulary. They always seemed to find time for that.

I decided that the authorities approved of the crims activity and encouraged it. I was not sure why. I did not dare tell anyone of these conclusions. It angered me. I was not sure why that was, either. My reactions were wrong—all wrong. The reactions of a Bacteria, a Doubter, a Wrecker, a Thinker, a Braincrim. I had just gotten out of the Oz—how could I have gone so bad, so fast? It was frightening.

There was a wonderful System proprop poster that one of the politicals had tacked up on the wall overlooking the staff lunch table. It glowed with colors, the brightest thing in our drab, dreary world. It showed a group of Legion soldiers, clad in sinister black armor, in the ruins of some unfortunate city, gathered around a campfire where they were roasting a baby on a spit. It was an absolutely beautiful shot. The hungry Legion troopers were intent on their task, poking at the baby's burning flesh to see if it was done. A dark cloudy sky was rolling overhead.

We were sitting around the table scarfing down our slop a few days after the poster went up, when big Ando Ord—the goon whose nose I had rearranged—slammed down his bowl in disgust and glared at the poster. We all turned to him in surprise. The old toothless derelict beside me even stopped gumming his soup.

“Scut!” Ando exclaimed angrily, “They eat better than we do!” We all burst into laughter, then shut down hurriedly. I didn't think anybody was going to turn him in—but it could have been a provocation. You could never tell—the SIS was everywhere. The poster came down a few days later.

I forced myself to sit through endless hours of System proprop at the library, slumped before a glowing d-screen. It was the only way to get a general idea of what was happening in the galaxy. I suppose it was funny, actually. I was a sub, shuffling along through trash-strewn streets, in a neighborhood that looked like a demilitarized zone. They had made me so slow and stupid I sometimes forgot to put on my jacket when I went outdoors. And I wanted to improve my mind! I wanted to learn what was happening in the galaxy! Well, I learned what they told me. Even then I realized that what they were

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telling me might not be entirely true, but I figured most of it was probably factual. Remember, I was only a sub.

According to the proprop, the advance of the Variant horde into System vac had been stopped by the DefCorps. The V were aliens, totally evil, totally merciless. They had been plaguing mankind for hundreds of years, and had exterminated over two billion humans. Until recently they had been irresistible. But now the DefCorps had developed the technology to counter the V—and they were doing it.

The CrimCon, however, was doing its best to subvert our efforts by attempting to align itself with the V. That was truly frightening. We were at war with the CrimCon as well as the V, and if the CrimCon and the V were able to cooperate successfully against the System, humanity would surely be doomed. The CrimCon were humans, but I guess it would really depend on how you defined humanity. Officially it was the Confederation of Free Worlds, only it wasn't much of a Confederation, and none of the worlds were free. We called it the Criminal Conspiracy—CrimCon for short. It was a horrific totalitarian galactic empire, and until recently it had been expanding relentlessly. The CrimCon's shock troops were known as the Legion. They were high-tech, fanatic, mindless barbarians, and only the DefCorps could stop them. We had recently gotten a big break, however, in the struggle against the CrimCon and the Legion. The CrimCon had split in two, with major Legion forces breaking off from the CrimCon in a military revolt to form the Lost Command. It was indeed fortunate. The enemy camp was divided and weakened. And it couldn't have happened at a better time for the System.



I got careless one night, walking home late from the library. Normally the scum didn't bother me. It wasn't because I appeared any bigger or badder than anyone else. It was because when I got to the really bad areas I'd haul out a big steel pipe that I kept stuffed into the front of my jacket. I'd walk through the dark with the pipe on my shoulder, and nobody ever bothered me. There were easier targets, the scum probably thought, and why take a chance with the Pipe Man? The subs didn't have firearms. The System was very strict on that. They didn't want the citizenry getting their hands on firearms.

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That night, I forgot to take the steel pipe out of my jacket. I guess I had lost my sense of danger. I thought the scum had gotten the word. Wrong again.

He stalked me right into the hostel and I didn't even see him. The power was on that week, the elevator was working, and I didn't feel like walking up eight floors, so I was going to take a chance that the damned elevator would make it up to Eight without dying.

He leaped into the elevator after me just as I was pressing the floor button, a gigantic, terrifying druggo with wild hair, dark skin oozing with pus and rot, broken bloody teeth and insane red eyes. He whipped a huge razor knife in an erratic arc in my general direction.

"Donation!" he screamed, "Gimme ya wallet or I'll kill ya, subrat!" And something snapped inside me. My left leg came up in a power kick and the ball of my foot landed right on his chin, snapping his head back. I kicked the right leg up as the left was coming down to land on his right knee, which I used as a foothold as my right foot caught him on the left temple. He bounced off the closing elevator door and the knife went flying. I went after his head with my fists as he was going down, smashing his face with all the power in my body. I punched through him, not at him—I felt the bones breaking. I screamed with each blow, four five six seven eight—he was down and twitching on the floor. I hauled the steel pipe out of my jacket and brought it up, then down, shrieking. His skull cracked and blood splattered wildly as I brought the pipe up, down, up, down, up, down, smashing his skull until it was a bloody jellied pulp and his limbs jerked uncontrollably.

I stopped, my heart hammering, the bloody pipe poised over the druggo's lifeless corpse. My face was twitching. The elevator walls were splattered with blood and brains—so was I. I felt shock, but there was something else—ecstasy. That was it. I felt wonderful; I was shaking with joy. A fierce, wolfish grin crept over my face and someone was laughing, an evil, guttural laugh. Was that me?

The elevator door creaked open. We were on the eighth floor. My eyes snapped to the corridor like a cornered rat. Nobody there. I pressed the button for the fifteenth floor and the doors eased closed again. We moved upwards shakily. I would wash the blood off me in the toilets up there, I decided, and walk down to the eighth. I'd leave the body in the elevator, and blow out the hostel's power. That happened all the time, and they wouldn't

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discover the body until they got the power fixed and the elevator opened. It would take days. They'd never figure out who did it.

Ecstatic—that's how I felt. It was terrifying. I thought a lot about that. I decided I must have been an exceptionally violent and dangerous criminal in my former life. My reaction when the druggo attacked had been purely instinctive. I hadn't thought about any of it, I had just done it. And those moves—the kicks and punches—they were flawless, powerful, practiced. I hadn't even known I could do that. I must have been a killer, I thought—a professional assassin. But why the special treatment from the System? The System didn't care about killers. There were hundreds of them roaming the streets outside. The System didn't even bother to arrest them, much less psych them. Why was I so special?



It must have been a few weeks later when The Slime Bug knocked on the door to my cube in the hostel. The Slime Bug was what we called him in the Oz, but not to his face. To his face we called him "Sir." Doctor Antos Schleiman was the official who determined who was ill and who was cured. I had kind of hoped I would never see him again, but there he was, standing in the doorway grinning, a short, heavy, bald little Orman creep with watery blue eyes, and wearing a shabby dark jacket. He looked strange without his white coat.

"Doctor Schleiman!" I exclaimed, "It's good to see it, sir!" I suddenly realized how much I hated the man.

"It's looking fine, William. May we come in?"

"Of course! Please—come in. We're afraid we don't have a chair," I said nervously, gesturing to the bed. The cube was so small the bed took up most of the space. We sat on the edge of the bed, and I activated the hot plate. I had rigged it up myself.

"Would it care for some hot water?" I asked, setting a cup on the hot plate. I suddenly realized I was terrified of the man. He represented the absolute power of the System over my life.

"That would be nice," The Slime Bug said. "How has it been, William?" William wasn't my real name, of course. It was the name they had given me at the Oz—William Fifteen.

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“Oh, just fine, sir. We’ve adjusted well. We are happy. We enjoy the work. It is a new world, just as Super said, but we enjoy it.”

He looked into my eyes, smiling dreamily. He did that a lot. “Well...” he said, “that’s good. We thought we’d just drop by. We like to keep an eye on the graduates, see if everything is all right and help if we can.”

“We appreciate that, sir. It’s nice to know Super is still thinking of us. We often think about the Clinic as well.”

“Tell us, William...” he paused. He often paused, before saying something important. “Is it facing any problems here? Any difficulties in adjusting to the new situation? Difficulties are quite normal, we assure it. As a matter of fact, if it denied there were any problems, we would not believe it. We want to help, William.” He smiled.

I handed him a cup of warm water.

“Yes sir,” I said. “We understand. Of course there were some problems in facing the new reality. But we did as Super said—we did not question. We adjusted. And our initial problems are over. Of course, we learn more every day. But we use Super’s advice, in every new situation.” I shut down. I knew it was best to give the man as little ammunition as possible.

The Slime Bug sipped at his cup, then put it down on the wall table. The table was still a little shaky. “How does it like the job, William?”

“We are happy, sir.”

“But it did not accept the situation there, did it, William?”

“Sir?”

“It instituted a lot of changes in the kitchen, didn’t it, William?”

“Well...yes. Yes, sir.”

“Why was that, William?”

I squirmed, and took a sip from my own cup. “Well sir—it was dirty in there. We thought it needed a clean-up.”

“How about its co-workers? Did they approve of the changes?”

“Well...we did not ask, sir.”

“We see. So one of its first acts was to challenge its environment.”

“It’s because the Clinic was so clean, sir. We were comparing it to the Clinic. And nobody complained, sir. If anyone had said anything we would have stopped immediately. But nobody did. We realized it at the time—that it could have been interpreted as a challenge, sir. But we didn’t mean it that way.”

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“We see.”

“Did we do wrong, sir?”

“Well...it depends on its motivation. Tell us, William...” he paused, again. I listened carefully. “It’s been spending a lot of time at the library, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why is that, William?”

“Well sir, we are anxious to learn about our new environment. As Super suggested, total immersion. There’s nothing to do after work. We remembered what Super said. And so we’ve been reading, and watching, to become a better citizen.”

“What does it read?”

“Proprop, sir. Information bulletins. The history of Nimbos. Science updates. Social commentary. Citizen alerts. Whatever is on, sir. We figure—the more we learn, the better we’ll be able to fit in. And the info screen at the hostel is dead.”

“We see. How many hours?”

“Sir?”

“How many hours per night is it in the library?”

“Oh...it varies, sir. Two...usually two hours.”

“Is that normal, William? Is that normal behavior?”

I was silent.

“Speak up, William. Don’t be afraid.”

“Well, no sir. We guess not.”

“Of course it isn’t. Why does it do that, William? Why the library?”

“It’s because we’re just out of the Clinic, sir. And everything is new. And Super encouraged us to learn from the environment.”

“One doesn’t learn about one’s environment in a library, William. The real world begins when it steps out of the library’s front door.”

“Yes sir.”

“Tell us, William...” he paused again, peered into his cup, took a sip, and then placed it carefully back on the wobbly table. I was watching him like you’d watch a highly poisonous snake. “What would it say if we suggested it return to the Clinic for some more treatment?”

“Does it think we need more treatment, sir?” My mind was reeling. They wanted me back! Did they know about the killing?

“We don’t know, William. Perhaps. Tell us what it thinks.”

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“We think we’re adjusting well, sir. But Super knows best. We don’t mind returning to the Clinic. If Super believes we could benefit from more treatment, we’ll be happy to do so.” I dared not resist anything the man said. I knew he hated resistance.

The Slime Bug looked at me mournfully, and then nodded his head. “Good,” he said. “It was always most cooperative, William. That’s wise. We don’t think it needs to go back yet. But a word of advice—accept your reality. Stop trying to change it. And don’t spend so much time in the library. It’s not healthy.”

“Yes sir.” I felt a great relief. I was not going back, and he didn’t know about the killing. I was very happy about that. Almost as happy as when I had made the kill.



Winter came, and stayed. It was agony walking to and from work in the cold. Howling winds from the arctic wastes laid siege to the city for months. We wore sleazy, thin jackets to work, and shivered in our drafty cubes at night.

I had to cut down on the visits to the library. I had been warned. I was starved for information, but there was no information; and I dared not ask any questions of anyone. I shuffled through my new life blindly, at a dead end. It appeared that I would never find out who I had been.

And then the dreams began.

At first it was always the same—a raging, violent nightmare, exploding in light and sound. It swirled around in my mind like a gibbering phantom, a hot rush of emotion, suddenly there, overwhelmingly there. A glittering sky full of lights, rushing over me—fireworks, the whole sky erupting, every color in the spectrum, bursts of actinic green, phospho white, elektra blue, shocking pink, a million smoking tracers covering the sky. Hot metal rain and a wild electronic shrieking in my ears—lightning, flashing right in my face, titanic bursts of thunder, striking me blind and deaf.

I screamed, helpless before my fate, wriggling in the mud like a worm, bathed in icy sweat. The sky burst into flame. A horrific vision, the gates of Hell, spitting flaming fingers of doom—a white-hot, roaring star, falling down to the earth to incinerate us all. I burst into flames, shrieking in horror.

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I would awake gasping and thrashing in the dark, my throat paralyzed, adrenalin racing. It happened a lot.



The pawnshops did a lot of business in Agra City, but this time I was the only customer. It was warm and stuffy inside. Snow was falling out in the streets, it was cold as a frigid bitch, and I still had only the one thin jacket the Oz had issued me. I was fingering a thick, glossy nitex coldcoat—a police field jacket. Some starving cop had probably traded it for something to eat, or some crazed druggo had killed a cop and pawned his clothes. I turned away in regret. I had saved up a few credits but I knew there was no way I could afford the jacket.

They usually had a lot of military and police equipment. It was high quality stuff and much in demand. I hovered over the glass counter as the bald gnome behind the bars concentrated on his sex book. He wasn't worried about shoplifting, I knew. He was more observant than he looked, behind his armored plex, and the door didn't open unless he triggered the release.

Nightsticks, armored goggles, field spotters, belt pouches, police gloves, a few knives. One of the knives caught my attention. A big, black cenite blade—a massive, coldly functional instrument.

“Could we see the knife?” I pointed it out. The gnome stirred, waddled over to the counter, retrieved the knife, and slid it under the plex in the goods tray. I picked it up.

It was a single piece of cenite. The finely checkered grip felt as if it were molded to my hand—the balance was perfect. A razor sharp blade, with tough little sawteeth on the false edge. The damned thing was beautiful.

“Does it have a sheath?”

“No.”

“How much?”

“Sixty-five.”

“We're serious. How much?”

“All right. Fifty-five. Serious.”

“We can't afford that. Nobody can afford that. It doesn't even have a sheath.”

“That's a DefCorps knife. It's worth a lot more than fifty-five.”

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“We’ll give you fifteen credits.”

“Sorry.” The gnome retrieved the knife. I turned wearily and headed for the door.

“Thirty,” he said. My hand was on the push bar but he hadn’t triggered the door.

“We don’t have thirty,” I said. The door was still locked.

“Twenty-five,” he said. “Bottom price.”

“We can give it twenty,” I said. “It’s all we have.”

“Twenty! God’s ass! Done! Don’t show it around—civilians aren’t supposed to have these.”



I awoke in a blind panic, drenched in sweat, my heart hammering. It was cold. I lay there, staring up into the dark. It was the pit of the night. I never knew what time it was at night. The guy in the next cube had an alarm chron that woke me up in the morning, but I had nothing.

I sat on the edge of the bed and flicked the hotplate on. A battered metal cup of water was already there. It was getting to be a nightly routine—a wild nightmare, get up, have a cup of hot water, ponder the future and wonder about the past, and then drift back to an uneasy sleep.

I never could really get a grip on the dreams. It was a sky full of sparklers—almost like fireworks. Falling softly, gently, like hot rain. But there was a tremendous, ear-splitting din, all around me, like a battlefield. And I was squirming in the mud, as this horrific sky came right at me. A sky full of lightning and fire—raging white-hot flames, blasting me to a crisp.

There were other people, too. They were around me, somehow. Voices. I couldn’t see them, but I could hear them. They were calling out to me in my dreams. I could hear them in my dreams. But when I awoke that part just faded away. Who they were, and what they were saying, I could not remember.

Night after night—strange voices, calling out to me under that awful sky. Voices from the past. I knew it. This wasn’t some fantastic nightmare, this was my past. What was that wild sky? Who were the voices? They had been calling me urgently—they had something important to say.

I closed my eyes as the cup of water heated up. Tonight there had been something else, something vitally important. I strained to remember it. And it

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floated around in my head like a mist. A pale, frightened face, a young female, a massive blast of burning gas, a horrid flaming metal hand, reaching out to me, and someone shrieking my name—my name—my name!

It faded. I couldn't even see the face anymore. But I had seen it in my dreams. A girl, terrified. A metal hand. And the fire, again. She had called out my name, but I couldn't remember it. My name—good God! Who was she? I would have to dream it again—I must try and remember my name!

I sipped tepid water in the dark. It was still and cold—there was frost on the window. I hadn't lost my past. It was all inside me. And I was going to get it back! It was all I had to live for—all I had.



Without the library, there was not much to do. I started exercising. I pushed the little folding table back into the slot in the wall and that gave me the narrow space between the bed and the wall. I did crunches, I did push-ups, I did leg lifts and squats. I exercised for hours, every night, my mind blank, my muscles getting harder and harder. I didn't know where I was going, I didn't know what the future held, but it was a nasty world out there and I wanted to be ready.

When I got tired of exercising, I would put the table down and sit on the bed and take out the knife and gently place it on the table and worship it. I didn't think I had ever seen anything quite so beautiful, so perfectly functional, so perfectly deadly. I would caress it lightly along the hilt, and it was like touching a love slave. It was cold and dead but brutally utilitarian, as clean as an arrow, the final product of a thousand years of knife design. Cold black cenite, aching to leap into my palm, eager to do my will. You could tell just by looking at it that it served a totalitarian state, a state without mercy or pity.

The edge was like a razor. I didn't care—I wanted it sharper. I would sit there far into the night, hypnotized, sharpening it against a flat oiled steel skillet I had lifted from the pubfeed. And the cenite blade would sigh against the steel, a faint whining, hour after hour, and my eyes would grow heavy, and flicker, and sometimes I think I was doing it in my sleep.

“Will you please stop doing that?” I stopped, the voice still echoing in my mind—a female voice, annoyed. And I was coming back but I still had it, the

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floodgates of my mind, still open. A warm wave, rushing over my skin, then fading. It was so clear that I almost cried out as it faded. What was it, what was it? A girl, sitting just to my left, dark hair, I couldn't quite focus on her but...what was she doing? What...and a child. A child! Pinched little face... and a huge presence. A giant, in shadows. His eyes, glowing...fading, fading, fading.

I was frozen over the knife, my skin crawling, flooded with emotion. The past! Surfacing, right there in my rotten little cube. Gone! It was gone, now, but it had been there, for just an instant, a flash of the past. I could still hear her voice; I could hear every word; how could I ever forget it? "Will you please stop doing that?" she had said. She had been upset. And the child—I could almost see him. A pale face, that's all I could remember—no features, but it seemed to be a little boy. The girl—I couldn't make out her face either. And the giant—what the hell? An impression of a huge, menacing hulk of a man, a beast of a man, moving in the dark like a great snake.

I tried, but it would not come back. I slowly started sharpening the knife again. It must come back! Who were they? Who were they? My holy God, who was I? I was going to go insane, if I didn't find out.



I was on autopilot the next day at the pubfeed, washing the dishes, trying to summarize what I had learned about myself. I was an Outworlder, racially—but it told me nothing. There were billions of us, unarmed and powerless, kept in check by a vigilant United System Alliance and USICOM, the Interstellar Commission, monitored by the benevolent Mocains and their humanitarian intelligentsia, the Ormans, and a host of allied races. We were an evil, violent people, I had learned at Oz, with a bad historical record, but under the System we were meeting our obligations to the rest of humanity.

I knew I had come from a lower-class background. I found polite speech difficult. I instinctively wanted to say "I" and "me" and "you", rather than the proper "we" and "it". That was typical lower-class Outworlder speech, typical sub.

An evil, violent background—I seemed to be fascinated by weaponry and police equipment. It was an unhealthy obsession with evil tools, I knew. I must have been a soldier, or a policeman, or a criminal. All those scars, the

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dream of a burning sky—it was like a battlefield. And my reactions, when confronted by that druggo. I should have submitted, as required by law. My reactions were criminal, and unbelievably violent.

Certainly, I had been evil—perhaps a master criminal, or a political mercenary or an interstellar pirate chief. Someone important—otherwise the System would not have devoted so many resources to my rehab. Ordinary criminals did not get such treatment. Hence, I was not ordinary. It must have been somehow political.

And the arm—how to explain that? Despite all I had read in the library there was no real clue to who rated such expensive treatment. The arm should have been the best clue of all, but it led nowhere. And if I made any further inquiries of anyone, it would get back to The Slime Bug, and I would be back to the Oz.

Ando Ord sneezed at the next sink, a tremendous roar, spraying his germs over all the dishes. Terrific. And that was another thing. I had noticed that I never got sick. Everybody else would be wheezing and coughing and sneezing and hacking, but I never even got the sniffles. It was downright eerie. The pubfeed was crawling with germs, but I never caught a thing.

How long, I asked myself, must I wait? Must I grapple with these phantoms every night for the rest of my life? I had been psyched, but I knew my past was not really gone. They had told us openly how it was done. People think psyching involves erasing your memory, but that's not true. Memories cannot be erased, Oz told us, but they can be suppressed, permanently. The mind-gates to the past can be shut and locked, leaving your conscious mind outside, cut off from the past. That's what they said. They knew how the brain worked, and they could manipulate it. It meant that my past was all still there, in my mind, locked up by the System for the good of society.

But little pieces of the past were leaking out past the gates, from time to time, in my sleep, swirling around in my head. It was driving me crazy. I knew I couldn't take it much longer.



Chapter 2

Illumination

The door to my cube crashed open violently, awakening me suddenly from an exhausted sleep. I caught a split-frac glance of a shadowy figure colliding with the wall table and going down quickly, then a second figure and the room erupted, a crackling flash, white-hot lightning dancing on my skin, shooting over my body, slamming me back onto the bed. I felt a quick, overwhelming burst of agonizing pain, short-circuiting all my nerves, going directly into my brain. Then it all faded away.

“Are we all right?” A ghostly, girlish voice.

“Aah...scut! Right in the nuts!” A deep bass.

“Told it we should have gone first.”

“Gaaahd!”

“Keep its voice down! Looks like these walls are made of paper.”

I was slowly coming back, but every nerve ending was shrieking and I felt as weak as a newborn baby. One of them found the light switch and the feeble light panel flickered to life. They had closed the door. The people in the adjoining cubes had certainly heard the racket, but they weren't going to interfere, that was for sure. I tried to focus on the intruders, two of them. A wiry Cyrillian male, now slumped over in agony on one knee, skin so black it was almost purple, fierce slit eyes, sharpened white teeth, clad in a thick coldcoat. His companion was a slim little blonde girl, pale skin, delicate features, ice blue eyes, short tousled wispy hair, also in a coldcoat. She was holding a Police shock gun. I remembered the Cyrillian now—he had been

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hanging around outside the hostel for a few days. I had taken him for a plainclothes cop.

“What the hell was that?” the Cyrillian whispered through clenched teeth.

“Wall table,” the girl replied. “It took it right off the hinges—dummy!”

“We don’t think it’s funny!” he hissed.

“It’s got no sense of humor!” she whispered back.

The Cyrillian stood up shakily, and they turned their attention to me.

“Is that it?” The Cyrillian asked. The girl looked me over calmly. I tried to move, but a wave of pain overwhelmed me. I could only lie there in my worn jox and torn u-shirt, gasping. I was helpless and terrified. These two crazies were going to murder me, I knew—I was dead!

“Looks like it,” the girl said. She picked up one of my hands and examined the knuckles, then let it fall back to the bed. Her companion took a look at the scar on my left arm.

“See this?” he asked.

“Take some solids,” the girl said. The black took a holscan out of one pocket and began cracking off shots of me lying there in agony on the bed. The girl laid my left arm over my body so the scar would show in the shots. She was leaning over me now, looking into my face. She touched my cheek gently with sharp fingernails.

“We’ve found it,” she said. “It’s changed a little, but this is it. Definitely. We remember it!”

“Do the genetic ID,” the Cyrillian said.

“We don’t need it. This is Beta Three. Does it think we don’t remember it? It found us on Katag, it trailed us through a trackless desert. We remember it!” She was blinking her eyes rapidly, breathing hard. “Identification is positive. We don’t need the genetic ID.”

“Then let’s get outta here.” The Cyrillian peered nervously out the broken window.

I slowly began to comprehend what was happening. My past had just kicked in the door. All of my questions were about to be answered! But I was still terrified—who were these people? I had no idea what they wanted. For all I knew, they could be planning to butcher me and have me for dinner.

“Does it remember us?” the blonde asked. She was kneeling by the bed, one hand on my shoulder. She was simply lovely, like a creature from another world.

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I tried to talk, but could not. I shook my head. It hurt.

“It doesn’t remember us,” she said to the Cyrillian. “They’ve psyched it all right. Bastards!” She clutched my hand and squeezed. “Don’t worry, Beta Three. We’re here now, and we’re going to take it back! It can depend on that!” Her face was shining with determination as her sharp fingernails dug into my hand.

“Perhaps we should leave the room for a bit?” the black suggested.

“It’s not funny, Pandaros!” the girl snapped.

“It’s got no sense of humor!” the Cyrillian replied, grinning.



“Remember,” the Cyrillian said ominously, “one false move and we do it the hard way.” I was standing shakily before the elevator. Luckily it was working again—I don’t think I could have made it down the stairs, in the shape I was in at that moment. And I didn’t want to know about the hard way. The easy way was hard enough.

“Don’t worry,” the little blonde assured me as the elevator door creaked open, “Things get better from here on!” They had let me dress and put on my cloth shoes and threadbare jacket, and now we were going out, into the night. I stumbled into the elevator. It was an effort just to move my limbs—there was no way I was going to be able to fight them.

It was cold out in the streets. Filmy plastic trash blew past us as we headed away from the hostel. They had not let me bring anything—not the knife, not even my ID. The Cyrillian was barking into a comset in a strange language. A blacked-out aircar appeared from the shadows, hissing along a few marks over the pitted pavement. A door slid open and they hustled me in and climbed in after me. The driver was another Cyrillian. We took off abruptly, rising. Cyrillians—damn! They were mercenaries, with an evil reputation. There was nothing at all I could do. Whatever was going to happen, they had me.



“Have a seat,” the blonde said. It was a stunningly luxurious apartment, pale peach carpeting, emerald green marble, and rich cocoa-colored leatherette airchairs and sofas. Whoever these people were, they were well financed. I settled into one of the airchairs, testing my muscles. Everything still hurt.

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There were more Cyrillians there. One of them was on a comset. “Agreed,” he said. “Twenty G for two hundred K. Twenty two hundred hours exact. It knows the place. See it.” I looked around. A low marble table was piled high with little bricks of something wrapped in bright green plastic. There was a trademark on the plastic—a blazing sun.

“Senso,” I said. “It’s smuggling senso.”

“Importing,” the blonde corrected me.

“Pure pleasure,” the Cyrillian flashed me a frightening smile—his teeth had all been sharpened, a savage mouthful of fangs. “Take senso and it dies! But it dies real happy. Personally, we never touch the stuff.”

“Finish off the deliveries,” the girl ordered, “tonight. And get me the docs. We’ve completed our mission here. Now we do the docs and lift. Where’s Nelson?”

Senso, I thought—a dirty business. A little flake of senso gave you a full body orgasm that lasted for hours. Pure pleasure—the Cyrillian was right. Senso freaks would pay all they had for more of the stuff. Like rats in some mad scientist’s experiment, they’d trigger the pleasure centers until they died of sheer sensory overload, lack of sleep, dehydration and starvation. It was a deadly plague, and highly illegal.

“The docs, Whit.” One of the Cyrillians dumped a pile of equipment on a nearby table.

“Thanks, Nelson,” the blonde said. “Set up the ID holo.” She turned to me. “Would it like some dox?”

“Dox?” I asked. “Sure.” Dox was an unimaginable luxury on Nimbos.

She brought over a cup and popped it open. The rich aroma hit me immediately. I accepted the cup as she settled onto the edge of the table, watching me carefully.

Silky hot dox burnt its way past my tongue and down, and it was probably the best thing I’d ever tasted. The girl was gazing at me in fascination as I sipped the dox. The Cyrillian, Nelson, was setting up some equipment.

“Our name is Whit,” she said suddenly. “Doesn’t it remember us?”

“We remember nothing,” I said.

“Well, we remember it,” she said, “very well. Does it want to know about its past?”

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I paused, and put down the dox. “Yes,” I said, “we do.”

“Good,” she said. “That’s good. We’re going to tell it everything. But we have to do it slowly. A little at a time—do we understand?”

“We understand. It wants to break the bad news slowly. Let us guess—we were a major senso dealer, right? We were responsible for the deaths of millions, right? Isn’t it afraid the cops are going to kick in that door?”

“No, we’re not. And it wasn’t a senso dealer. We’ve paid our taxes. The System knows all about us, and leaves us alone. Does it really think we could do this without the System’s blessing? The senso is nothing—forget it. It simply allows us to move around freely in System vac. And that’s what we needed to get to you. No, senso has got nothing to do with its past.”

“Head up, please.” The Cyrillian, Nelson, was aiming an ID scanner at me. It cracked, and he turned away.

Whit popped open a dox of her own. “That’s Pandaros over there,” she said, gesturing to the Cyrillian who had almost emasculated himself crashing through the door to my cube, “and this is Nelson.” Nelson nodded to me. He was fooling with the equipment. I didn’t say anything.

“We can hardly believe it,” Whit said. “Cinta will be pleased.”

“Who’s Cinta?” I asked.

“It’ll find out. By the way, its designation is Beta Three. Did we tell it that?”

“Beta Three...” I repeated. It brought nothing to mind. “What kind of a name is that?”

“It’ll find out. It’ll find out everything. We owe it, Beta Three—we owe it. That’s why we’re here.”

“What if we don’t like our past?”

“It’s not a matter of liking it or not. It’s a matter of unfinished business, of debts to be paid, and promises to keep. It’ll see. It can’t imagine how many people have been looking for it, and how much effort has gone into it. And we found it! Cinta will be pleased!”

“Beta Three,” I repeated. “Beta Three.” It was a strange name, but it was all right with me. Fine, I thought, I’m Beta Three. It’s a start. I picked up the dox cup. I decided I may as well relax and enjoy the ride—I certainly hadn’t been going anywhere back in the pubfeed. And I had wanted to know about my past. Well, here it was—good or bad, I was going to find out.

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I awoke suddenly in shock, fighting a blind panic, arching up in bed and smashing my forehead sharply against the bed's overhead—someone in the room! I gaped open-mouthed at the girl in the doorway to my cube—a vision of languid beauty, short tousled blonde hair, blinking pale blue eyes, leaning against the bulkhead totally at ease. It was Whit—looking me over. I rubbed my aching head. I had almost brained myself. I was sitting up in the bunk, twitching—not a good way to wake up! The lights were on. I remembered now. I had not been able to find the switch, and had collapsed into bed completely exhausted and slept a dreamless sleep. We were on the P.S. *Stardust* on antimat drive, in the cold maw of the eye of the hole, balanced precariously between creation and extinction. I could feel it on my skin—and I knew, in a sudden flash, that I had been here before. I shivered.

“We’re sorry,” Whit said. “We were just checking. Did it sleep all right?”

“Fine,” I said. “Fine.” It was all I could think of just then. Checking? Checking what?

“We have a big day planned for it, Three. Might as well get up. Breakfast in the rec room.” She didn’t take her eyes off me. She seemed calm, but there was certainly something else there.

“Right. Give us a few fracs.”

“Take its time. There’s no rush, Beta Three—no rush at all.” I looked at her sharply. Her face was flushed. She ducked out the door and it slid shut again. Strange.

The little cube was spotless and icy cold. The head was a vertical closet, also spotless. I had never imagined such luxury, such fanatic, sterile perfection. I hit the shower and closed my eyes.



“So it sees, we’re really old friends,” Whit said. We were sipping dox over our breakfast. A couple of Cyrillians were lounging over the remains of their meal at the next table. I had been astounded by the abundance and high quality of the food. The rec room was another miracle of compact and totally functional design. The dox was like a powerful drug. I could not

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remember ever tasting anything so rich. It was making my head spin. I put down the cup. It was marked with the logo of the Personal Ship *Stardust*.

“We wouldn’t be here without it, Beta Three,” Whit continued. “We owe everybody—but mostly we owe Cinta and Beta. Cinta arranged it, but it was Beta Three and Eight and Nine that stepped out of that awful night and freed us. Does it remember? We remember—we’ll never forget. We owe it, forever. Beta, and Cinta.” She was glowing. Her eyes were clouding over. She was lost for a moment. Then she laughed. “Memories. Good and bad. We’re nothing—we’re stupid, just as Cinta said. But we pay our debts. Touch us, and it’s done. We see it as an angel. A dark angel, raising the dead. Doesn’t it remember anything?”

I blinked, suddenly realizing that she had just offered to sleep with me. Things were happening entirely too fast for my taste.

“No, we don’t,” I said. “It promised it was going to tell us about our past. We’re still waiting.”

She bit her lip, and got up. “Come with us, Beta Three. It’s time.”



I settled into an airchair before a dark d-screen. The instrumentation was new to me, but a lot of things were new to me. It looked a bit like a starlink. Whit slipped into another airchair beside me. The door had slid shut behind us, leaving us alone in the little cube. It was dead quiet.

“How much does it know about the war?” Whit began calmly.

“With the CrimCon? We only know what we’ve been told,” I responded. “The System and the CrimCon are at war. The System is slowly winning, but it’s a protracted struggle that has lasted for generations, and may last for generations more. The CrimCon has recently split into two warring, power-hungry factions, and this may ultimately prove decisive. The break-away faction is called the Lost Command.”

“And what about the Variants?”

“The V? The aliens continue to attack System worlds, but the DefCorps is learning how to counter them. The CrimCon attempted an alliance with the V, and encouraged them to move into System vac. The alliance failed, because the V learned they could not trust the CrimCon.”

“Very good,” Whit smiled. “Is that what the System taught it?”

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“Yes, it is.”

“And do we believe it?”

“We believe nothing,” I said, “except what we experience ourselves.”

“A wise policy. Tell us more about the CrimCon.”

“CrimCon—the Criminal Conspiracy. Confederation of Free Worlds, we think they call themselves. An evil, racist, genocidal, totalitarian dictatorship, ruling solely by force over half the inhabited galaxy. A cabal of obscenely rich, all powerful plutocrats, responsible for the deaths of billions of defenceless non-Outworlder peoples.”

“Good! Very good! And the Legion?”

“They’re the CrimCon’s terrorist shock troops. Fanatic, mindless, brainwashed barbarians, motivated by cash and loot and pointless violence. They’re programmed to rape, torture and kill. They eat babies, too.”

“Excellent. Tell us—does it remember Andrión Two? Does it remember the last time it saw us?”

“We remember nothing.”

“Think! An aircar, falling into the dark. We were both in there, with a squad of troopers. Lasers and xmax, flashing outside, following us down. We were personally so scared we wet our panties, and Beta Three was right beside us. Doesn’t it remember?” Her pale blue eyes were glowing.

“No,” I said. “We don’t remember.”

“We leaped out of the car and ran with the troopers. It had a death grip on our arm. Then everything started blowing sky-high, and those armored bastards came right out of the flames, firing. It let go of our arm and fired back. Doesn’t it remember?” Her pale face was twitching.

I just looked at her.

“We don’t recall anything like that,” I said. “It’s an interesting story. What were we doing in the aircar? Who were the troopers with us? Who were the guys in armor? And who were we? Is it going to tell us, or just go on asking us if we remember things?”

Whit shook her head, turned her eyes away, and looked around the cube. Then she looked back, right into my eyes. “They were Legion troopers, Beta Three. The ones in armor were the CrimCon—from ConFree. And it—it was with the Legion, too. It’s a soldier of the Legion, Beta Three, sworn to the Legion. It took an oath to protect and defend the people of ConFree from all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

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“None of what it says makes any sense,” I objected, after the initial shock wore off. The Legion, I thought—those were the guys that had been roasting that baby, in that great proprop shot we had pasted over the staff lunch table. My head was swimming, I didn’t believe everything the System told us, but I knew the Legion were barbarians. They routinely tortured women and children to death, just for kicks, and gang rape was their national sport. Surely I could not have been with those scum!

“If we were with the Legion,” I asked, “why were CrimCon troopers firing at us? Why would they fire on their own people?”

“That’s why it’s here, Beta Three,” Whit replied sadly. “That’s the source of all its troubles. And that’s what caused the Lost Command to split off from ConFree. Does it doubt us? Feel its left arm.”

“It’s artificial. We know that.”

“It’s a Legion arm, Beta Three. Biogenerated. It lost the original on Mongera, fighting the V and the System, for the Legion. Does it doubt it’s a Legion trooper? Who else would go to so much trouble? Would the System? Those scars on its knuckles, on its arm. Legion tattoos, Beta Three. Dead troopers—its comrades. Lasered off by the System, or maybe by the CrimCon, to hide its identity. Does it notice it never gets sick? Stick around another hundred years, it will notice it doesn’t age either. It’s a Legion immortal, Beta Three—a soldier of the Legion.”

“A soldier of the Legion.” I considered it. I guess it did make some sense. I was in tremendous shape, even after all that time in the Oz. There was no spare fat on me, and it was not just because of the starvation rations they had fed us on Nimbos. My muscles were whipcord tight, and hard as iron. That mugger in the elevator—I had demolished him with my hands and fists. I had reacted as savagely as a jungle animal, and I had felt no remorse for his death. And it was true, I never did get sick. And the arm...immortal? Immortal! System proprop claimed it was because Legion troopers were doomed to fight forever, until they were killed, even if it took hundreds of years.

“The CrimCon captured it, Beta Three, when we were running together from that aircar on Andrion Two. They almost got us as well, but the Legion troopers that were with us hustled us out of the area.”

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“It’s nonsense,” I objected. “Why was the CrimCon fighting the Legion?”

“We don’t know the full story, Beta Three. We know only what Cinta has chosen to tell us. But we can tell it that it is one extremely important unit. Cinta told us that elements in the CrimCon allied themselves with the System, to oppose the Legion and to capture both Cinta and it. They didn’t get Cinta but they got it. They psyched it, and gave it to the System—we don’t know why. It wasn’t easy, tracking it down. But we did it. And now we’ve got it back!” Her eyes were glowing, and a fierce grin arose. “Cinta will be ecstatic.”

“Why did they want us? What did we have that was so important?”

“We don’t know, Beta Three. Cinta never told us. But we do know it had something to do with a little trip that it took with Cinta—we can’t even tell it about that. Whatever it was, it precipitated the breakup of ConFree—the CrimCon—and the foundation of the Lost Command. What does it know about the Lost Command?”

“Insane, genocidal war criminals—a gang of ruthless, merciless, marauding bandits, armed with antimats and hungry for blood—something like that.”

“Yes, yes...right. Something like that. It consists of several Legions that have broken away from ConFree and formed their own sphere of influence. We used to be terrified of the Legion, Beta Three. We were on the Legion death-list, once—maybe we still are, but it doesn’t matter any more. Cinta fooled us for a long time, it was good, but we’re not stupid. We were pawns, the whole time—and Cinta was the only one who knew. It doesn’t matter. We love that woman. We’ll follow it right into Hell, if it wants. We’ll never leave our Cinta.”

“It sounds as if this Cinta person is the one with all the answers. Is that why we’re in this room?”

“Yes to both. Just a frac.” Her slender fingers flashed over the controls. She adjusted the screen so I was just out of the picture. She flashed me a quick smile, and nervously brushed back her short wispy blonde hair with one hand. The screen filled with light. “It will take a few fracs to make the connection,” she said. I watched her, my mind in neutral. It was going to take awhile for me to sort it all out, I knew. I was a dishwasher—what did I know about the Legion? It was ridiculous, I thought. They must have the wrong

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person! Surely I would remember something, if it were really true. The screen crackled suddenly, and flashed blue-white.

“Is it true?” A female voice, from the d-screen. I couldn’t see her features—Whit had turned the screen away from me.

“Absolutely!” Whit was beaming, triumphant. “We have Beta Three, Commander. And it’s right here. Just for it, Cinta. Happy birthday—with love, from sub.”

“Let us see.” There was no emotion in the voice. Whit reached out a finger and swivelled the d-screen around to face me.

A stunning image of beauty gazed at me out of the screen. She was exquisite—pale brown skin, lustrous shoulder-length auburn hair, exotic Assidic eyes and a wide, sensual mouth. The smouldering eyes, the high cheekbones and the very fine facial features suggested the blood of the Conqueror, a chill ghost of the bloody past. Yet she was so fragile and perfect she looked like an angel, fallen to earth through some heavenly tragedy. I knew this was no ordinary girl. As her gaze fell on me she sucked in her breath and one hand went up to her lips, an involuntary gesture. She had paled, ever so slightly, and now she was frozen, taking me in. Then the hand came down, and her lovely face was a stony mask.

“We thank it, Whit,” she said quietly.

“Pandaros helped us,” Whit said. She was still beaming proudly. But I hardly heard it. My mind was swirling madly, my gaze rivetted on the vision in the screen. Her voice! ‘Will you please stop doing that?’ The words were echoing in my skull. This girl, Cinta—she wasn’t just on the screen, she was in my mind as well. I knew her! She had come to me one night in my dreams, back in my filthy cold little cube in Agra Workers Hostel Number 14. I had been sharpening my knife, lost to the world, and she had come out of my mind, out of my past, cutting past all those barriers like magic, hissing right in my ears—‘Will you please stop doing that?’ She had been upset. And there had been a child—and something else—a beast, a giant...yes, there was no doubt—this was her, my past!

“I remember you!” I exclaimed. Then I stopped, shocked. I had said “I”, and “you”. That was CrimCon vocabulary, sub talk. Strange—it had just popped out.

“I remember you, too, Wester,” the vision said calmly, “and I’m very pleased you’re getting your memory back.” The color was coming back to her

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face now. And she was talking CrimCon too! “I’d like to welcome you back. What exactly do you remember?” Somehow her speech sounded perfectly natural. The you’s and I’s didn’t bother me at all.

I squirmed, uneasily. “Uh...nothing. Really. We just...I just...seem to remember it. You. Your face. Your voice. That’s all. Nothing else.”

She was silent for awhile, looking out of that flickering d-screen, glowing out of the dark. And my whole world seemed to focus in on her, right there, in that shimmering field of light. Had I really known this angel?

“Then it’s true,” she said. “You’ve been psyched.”

“That’s affirmative. They told us...they told me I was a dangerous criminal.”

“You were dangerous all right, Wester, but you weren’t a criminal. You were mostly inconvenient, to ConFree. They probably felt uneasy about killing one of their own, after they had extracted all you knew. So they turned you over to the System. The slimy bastards! This is what we’re dealing with, this is our enemy, this is how bureaucracies deal with moral dilemmas—they make you go away. What did they do to you, Wester? You look terrible!”

“Sorry...if we don’t come up to its standards,” I said coldly. “We’re just a dishwasher, after all. And those people may be its enemies—but they’re not ours.” I was a little upset. I guess things were happening a bit too fast for me to absorb it all. The Oz had made me stupid, after all, and I had no idea what was happening here.

Cinta just stared at me. I couldn’t read her at all. She licked her lips, and my heart leaped. “You’re not a dishwasher, Wester. You can forget that right now. Everything you remember is crap. It’s all a lie. You’re not a citizen of the System, you’re a soldier of the Legion, born in ConFree, and you’ve got a date with destiny. Your past is what’s really real, and that’s hidden deep in your mind. But we’re going to get it back for you, Wester—don’t you worry about that at all. I pledge that from the bottom of my soul. I swear it on Deadman. I’m going to get you your past back, and when I do we’re going to finish what we started, and ConFree’s going to regret it, and the System’s going to regret it, and the O’s—the V—they’re going to regret it, too.”

“Sounds like we’ve got a lot of very powerful enemies,” I said, uneasily. “Assuming you do get my memory back for me, is anybody going to be happy about it?”

She smiled, a white flash smile that took my breath away. “Yeah,” she

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said, “the good guys are going to be happy. We may be outnumbered, but we don’t give a damn about that. We’re on a mission from God, Wester—and you’ve been walking point. I’ve got an E with your name on it, and it’s getting lonely. I’m really glad to see you, Wester. I’ll admit it. I’ll even admit it in front of Whit. I’ve missed you, Wester. We all have. You can’t imagine how good it is to have you back.”

“Well...” I was more than a little nervous. I knew an “E” was the Legion’s standard-issue battlefield superiority weapon. “Thanks. We...I...uh...how about introducing yourself? Oh and, uh...I thought my designation was Beta Three. Am I ‘Wester’ too?”

Another pearly smile. What a doll! “Sorry, Wester. Yes, you’re Wester, and Beta Three, too. My name is Cintana Tamaling, alias Cinta, alias Antara Tarantos-Hanna, alias Tara, alias Indigo Frost...I’ve used up a lot of names. You used to call me Tara. We’re old friends—we’ve been through a lot together. Yes, just call me Tara. That name used to be a secret, but all the secrets are gone now. We’re standing right under the stars, waiting for the future, whatever it may be. Life or death, it’s the same to us. We’re going to do the right thing, Wester—wherever it leads. Just a frac!” She leaned to one side, distracted. Someone was saying something to her off-screen.

“Sorry, Wester—got to go! Whit, take good care of it. Brief it on everything. Get Redhawk on the link and make sure it’s all going smoothly. We’ll get back to it. Oh, and Whit...thanks.”

“It was nothing, Cinta!” Whit was glowing again. She was obviously fond of Cinta. The screen flashed, cracked once, and faded. Silence settled over our little cube. Whit appeared very pleased with herself.

“So,” I said, “where was she calling from? If she’s close enough to use a link, and I’m so bloody important to her, why didn’t she come in person?” I was trying out my sub talk, and I didn’t care any more what anyone thought. It seemed perfectly natural to me.

“It’s not exactly close,” Whit replied. “Cinta’s in Dindabai, with the Lost Command. It’s about as far as it can get from System vac—twelve hundred light years or something like that.”

“Dindabai. So—she’s with the Lost Command.”

“Affirmative. And from what we’ve gathered, Cinta is a rather important unit with LC headquarters. Just for its info.”

“We see. And we’re in stardrive, out of Nimbos Sector.”

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“That’s right.”

I just looked at her. They must have thought I was pretty stupid. Just a dishwasher—what the hell will he know. They probably thought they could tell me anything they wanted, and I would believe it. Well, they were in for a big surprise.



“Hi. Want some company?” I opened my eyes. I was lying on my back by the pool, toasting in the warm rays of the sun racks lining the overhead. It was Whit, clad in a skimpy black two-piece swim mini that didn’t conceal much. Her long shapely legs were knocking my eyes out.

“Sure.” I blinked, running my eyes over her slender, perfect figure.

“How’s the water?” She didn’t wait for a response, but dove right in. She hardly made a splash. She was obviously at home in the water. A swimming pool in a starship—these people were seriously crazy, as well as criminally wealthy. The System had taught us that wealth was evil. Whit and her friends were certainly either criminals or CrimCon—maybe both. And I was going to find out.

When she came back from her swim she settled down beside me, shaking the water from her short blonde hair, flashing me a cheery smile. Her nipples were fully visible against the wet top, and those legs were really distracting. She certainly knew it.

“Does it like the pool?” she asked.

“Fine,” I said. It was warm and peaceful. The reflection from the water was glimmering off the ceiling. The two of us were alone by the pool.

“Would it like to mate with us?” Whit asked, touching me lightly on one leg. Nothing like the direct approach, I thought.

“Of course I would,” I replied. “But not now. There are a few things we have to clear up first. You can tell your buddy Cinta that her patsy doesn’t believe a word of the story you two have cooked up. Just tell her this is one dishwasher who’s not buying it. She’s going to have to find herself another fool.”

Whit had suddenly flushed. “What does it mean?” she gasped.

“You think I’m stupid,” I said, “and maybe I’m not as bright as I should be, because of the psyching, but I’m not stupid. Starlinks don’t work across

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galactic zones, they don't work in stardrive, and they certainly don't work in realtime. Your Cinta—or whatever her name is—is probably on board this ship. So why don't you tell her to show herself? She's not fooling anybody." I closed my eyes and lay back on the warm tiles. I didn't have anything further to say, and it was wonderful just lying there in the warmth. I had exercised thoroughly, had a good swim, and now I was just soaking up the rays. I had already decided I was not going to believe anything these people had to tell me.

"Kaga, is it there?" I opened my eyes. Whit had got up and was standing a few steps away, speaking into a wristcom she had picked up off a poolside table. Look at those legs! Little beads of water were trickling slowly down those long silky legs. What a ride that would be! My eyes moved up to her lovely, tender little rear, pale cheeks seemingly straining to pop out of that skin-tight black mini. I wanted nothing more than to slip the mini down and take her up on her offer, right there by the pool. I should have probably mated with her first, and only later told her that I didn't believe her. Well, I was just a sub after all—sometimes we weren't too bright!

"Kaga here," the response came.

"Kaga, bring us the Beta Three hardfile, from our desk. We're at the pool."

"The pool? Will do."

She settled down beside me again. I didn't get up. She had a towel around her neck.

"We're sorry it doesn't believe us, Beta Three," she said. I did not respond. "It saved our life, Beta Three, on Katag. And we'll never forget that. We wouldn't deceive it. We're going to prove to it that we're telling the truth. Why should we lie? What do we have to gain?"

I looked over at her. "How should I know?" I replied. "I'm just a sub. I'm an ex-criminal who's been psyched. And you need a patsy—to do something for you. What better choice than someone who doesn't know who he is? You feed him some half-truths, suck him right in, and next thing he thinks he's a soldier of the Legion, and he's off on whatever suicidal venture you've cooked up for him. And if he's caught or killed, who cares? He's a psycho, a nobody, a throwaway, to do your dirty work. Nobody will even know he's gone. Nobody will care! What is it? A political assassination? Espionage? Ripping off a rival senso dealer? Let's have the punch line."

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Kaga entered. He was one of the Cyrillian crew, a sinister black shadow. He put a doc case on the table, let his cold gaze wander briefly over Whit's body, and then withdrew.

"Take a look," Whit said, emptying the doc case on the table. Several little metal ID cards and a few solcards tumbled out. Whit withdrew a plastic printout from the case. "Your whole life is here."

I drew up a chair and picked up one of the gleaming metal cards. My face looked up at me from an image plate, young and confident. My hair was short and my skin was burnt dark from the fierce rays of some alien star. The Legion cross was etched into the metal at the top. That symbol was hated by billions in System worlds. It represented the triumph of the Outworlders—not to mention genocide and mass murder. There was a long number etched into the top of the card, and under it a live text box with words running through the window: 22 LEGION TRAINING COMMAND. ADVANCED COMBAT TRAINING—HELL COURSE. CERTIFICATION OF COMPLETION. FULLY FIT FOR COMBAT. REASSIGNMENT AUTHORIZED TO ACTIVE UNIT.

"Why is it marked invalid?" I asked.

"It's a souvenir, we gather. These were found in its personal effects on Andrion Two, Cinta told us. It evidently did its advanced training in some place called Planet Hell. This was its ID card at that time." I picked up another metal card. Another image, me again, seemingly even younger. Pale, wide-eyed and scared. The same number across the top, and another text box: 22 LEGION TRAINING COMMAND. VELTROS BASIC TRAINING. CERTIFICATION OF COMPLETION. REASSIGNMENT AUTHORIZED TO ACT.

It was also marked INVALID. There were several other metal cards, but I was getting the idea. Whit was toying with one of the holcards. She triggered it, and the image burnt its way into the air, mils from my face.

A disorderly gang of young troopers, males and females, dressed in camfats, grinning at the holcard, splattered with mud, celebrating something. I was right there in the middle of them, grinning confidently. One guy in the back row was seemingly about to plunge a hot knife into somebody else's back. I looked at the holo a long time. Arrogant, foolish young troopers. Innocents, grinning in the face of death. Was that really me? Had I really lived through such adventures? Did I really know these people? Kids, just out of school. I looked into every face. What had they meant to me? My skin was crawling. Strangers, all of them. I couldn't remember any of them.

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“Here’s its Legion ID,” Whit said sadly. “This one’s still valid.”

Another metal card, boldly emblazoned with the Legion cross. The image was me again, tanned, alert, grim, wearing a black tunic. There was a text box along the top that read: 22 LEGION, 12 CER, CAT 24, BETA 3. CONFEDERATION OF FREE WORLDS, MINISTRY OF WAR. CONFREE LEGION, OUTVAC SECTOR COMMAND. MILSPEC: UNRESTRICTED. STATUS: ACTIVE. EXPIRATION: INDEFINITE. SERVICE: 22L, VBT, ACT, 22/12CER/CAT24B, ATOM’S ROAD, ANDRION 2, COLDMARK, ANDRION 3, ANDRION 2, MONGERA, VEDA 6, ULDO 3, ANDRION 2.

At the very bottom of the card there was another textbox with a warning notice: THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT SUBJECT, DESIGNATION BETA 3, IS A CITIZEN OF THE CONFEDERATION OF FREE WORLDS AND A MILITIA VOLUNTEER ON OFFICIAL SERVICE WITH THE CONFREE LEGION. THE MINISTRY OF WAR OF THE CONFEDERATION OF FREE WORLDS AND THE CONFREE LEGION HIGH COMMAND HEREBY REQUEST ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN TO PERMIT SUBJECT UNHINDERED PASSAGE FROM ANY POINT OF ORIGIN TO RETURN TO CONFREE VAC, AND NOTIFIES ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN THAT ANY ATTEMPT TO DETAIN OR HARM SUBJECT WILL BE CONSIDERED AN ACT OF WAR AGAINST THE CONFEDERATION OF FREE WORLDS.

“It reads more like a declaration of war than an ID card,” I commented.

“It’s a nasty galaxy out there,” Whit responded, “and the Legion is not too popular. However, everyone knows they mean exactly what they say. An ID card like that demands a lot of respect.”

“Sounds like I had an interesting career. Twelve CER—what’s that?”

“Twelfth Colonial Expeditionary Regiment—your unit. It was annihilated on Uldo. It’s no longer active.”

“Annihilated.” I don’t know why, but an icy wave was creeping through my veins.

“Most of its friends are dead,” Whit said matter-of-factly. “But those of us who are left would very much like it to remember us.”

“I’ve heard of Uldo,” I said. “Wasn’t it the first DefCorps-Legion effort against the V? And the Legion betrayed us?”

“It wasn’t the first. And it wasn’t the Legion that did the betraying. It was the DefCorps.”

I pushed the ID cards aside. “You’ve gone to a lot of trouble. These

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are good ID's. I'll keep it in mind, should I ever need any help with documentation."

Whit activated another holo. I was standing there smiling, one arm over the shoulders of a stunning beauty. It was Cinta—Tara, Whit's buddy. We were both dressed in Legion camfax, relaxed and happy. And right between us, gazing shyly at the holscan, stood a little boy. A pre-schooler, leaning against our legs, right at home. We were each holding him by a hand.

And my head was spinning, again. 'Will you please stop doing that?' It was all I had to make their story true. It had come to me in the night, long before Whit and her Cyrillian had kicked in my door. I could still remember it all, whirling around in my head. There had been a boy, a child—and I knew this was that child. I knew it.

"That was Andrion Two, after Uldo," Whit said. "The last shot we had of it."

"Is Cinta my wife? Is that my son?"

Whit laughed. "It is confused, isn't it? No, Cinta belongs to nobody. And that's not its son. It's...an orphan."

"You were lying to me about the starlink."

"No, we weren't. Cinta was calling it from Dindabai. We're not lying to it."

"That's impossible—we've done a little reading. The laws of spacetime prevent it."

"The device we were using is Cinta's own creation. Cinta said it doesn't violate the laws of spacetime—it simply bypasses them. It goes into an area where they don't apply."

"Cinta created it? Nonsense! How stupid do you think I am? What is she? A spacetime physicist? An antimat engineer? If there was such a device, it would revolutionize galactic communications and probably star travel as well."

"We don't doubt it. Cinta had a lot of...unusual...help. Afraid we can't be more specific, but it's true."

"Nonsense. I don't believe a word of it."

"We've got its entire service record here."

"I don't want to see it. It's nonsense."

"Cinta warned us it was extremely stubborn. We can see that now. What will it take to persuade it that we're telling the truth?"

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I looked away, up to the lights on the ceiling. “I’m not sure,” I said. I had known Cinta—that much I believed. And the child. My hand moved over to the holo. Perhaps it was true. Perhaps it was all true, even the part about the starlink. How would I know? I was just a sub, after all.

“Cinta promises it will get its memory back, Beta Three—it promises! It will spare no expense.”

“De-psyching? And how do I tell it from psyching?”

“We can’t help it if it doesn’t want help, Beta Three.”

I looked calmly into her pale blue eyes. “I want my past back. If you can do that, I’ll do whatever you want. Assassination, drugs—whatever. But it has to be real. Don’t try to fool me. I’ll know the difference!”

Whit held out one hand, palm up. “Deal.”

I smacked it lightly with a fist. “Then do it.”



A slight shudder ran over the ship. I closed the datapak. I knew we had just exited stardrive—and I knew I had done this before, in my previous life. I thought of it that way now—my previous life. The datapak was full of details about my previous life. I glanced at the chron on the wristcom Whit had given me. It was way too early. Something was wrong. Then the door to my spotless little cube slid open soundlessly and Whit was suddenly there.

“Want to see something?” She seemed bright and cheery.

“Sure.”

“Follow us.”

She took me to a small room furnished with several reclining airchairs. There was nothing else in the room.

“Take a seat.” She collapsed into one of them. I chose another.

“So now what happens?” I asked.

“Illumination,” she said with a faint smile. She jabbed at something on the arm of her chair, and the ceiling cracked open.

Nuclear light flooded us, dazzling me, glittering phospho-hot, burning over my flesh, cutting the room into brilliant arcs of blazing liquid metal and icy black shadows. An observation port, I thought—polarization zero. My pupils were slowly widening now after the initial shock. I sucked in my breath. Two massive stars were burning above us, a double star system—a young

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electric blue giant glowing like the moment of creation, spitting holy actinic rays to light up the galaxy—and a companion star, a glittering, icy emerald-white sun, a precious galactic gem from Heaven’s cosmic mine, married to the blue giant by a sparkling twisted highway of phospho gas, diamond dust, God’s necklace, a holy road in the vac paved with a billion stunning gems. The two great stars were illuminating the universe, swirling in a mad cosmic dance, dazzling my eyes, crawling over my skin, crackling silently. The eyes of Heaven, God’s own lighthouse. A beacon, a warning on the perilous shoals of infinity as we rush blindly into the dark, mindless and lost.

I was stunned, paralyzed, frozen and helpless, flattened against the airchair like a worm wriggling before the face of God. The warm rays of those alien stars were kissing my flesh, the image burning into my retina for all time. The double star was so brilliant it blotted out everything else in the sky. There was only that incredible, massive, glittering vision—the blinding blue giant, the elektra-green white, joined by that astounding magical road of holy dust, an eerie, impossible marriage that could only have been arranged by the gods.

The floodgates of my mind burst wide open and I heard it—the music of the stars, rushing over me like an irresistible evil drug, exploding in my mind, hissing in my ears. It was the stars—I could hear them! Massive red super-giants, roaring, the breath of hell. Ancient dead black dwarfs, moaning, billions of lonely light years of regrets and longing. Shimmering, silvery nebulae, sweet far-off melodies from the edge of infinity. Insane black holes, deadly gateways to other universes, howling total destruction. Hot yellow suns, crackling and spitting, full of life. Stars, stars, galaxies of stars, whispering in my mind. My skin was ice cold. This was the terrifying music I had heard, ever so briefly, in my dirty little hole in the workers’ hostel. The music of the stars!

By the time Whit finally restored the polarization, banishing the images, I was stunned and twitching.

“How’s it doing, Beta Three?” It was almost a whisper. I did not answer. My eyes were full of tears.

“That was the Two Sisters,” she explained. “Cinta showed it to me once—the bitch! We were in the vicinity, so we thought we’d give it a look-see. Our own idea. What does it think?”

I didn’t answer. The stars—scut! They had me, now.

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“Thought it might trigger something, Beta Three—that’s all. It’s a soldier of the Legion, after all. It belongs out here with the stars. Not down on Nimbos, in the gutter.”

The stars! I closed my eyes, overwhelmed. Soldier of the Legion—I was a soldier of the Legion!

“Sorry if it didn’t work, Three. We’ll try something else. Pretty, wasn’t it?”



“Thinker! I’ll be damned! It *is* you! Deadman’s death! I’ll be damned!” Beta Ten was bug-eyed with amazement, peering at me in wonder from the d-screen of Cinta’s impossible starlink. I was somewhat taken aback as well. Beta Ten was a pale, intense young man with splotchy skin, long tangled reddish hair and a scruffy, sparse beard. According to Whit his warname was Redhawk. He didn’t look like a mass murderer. He didn’t even look like a soldier, but he was wearing Legion camfax.

“We did it, Tennie—just for it!” Whit was squirming beside me, beaming at the screen.

“You’re a bloody genius, girl—a magician! Thinker! How are ya?” A manic grin split his face as he addressed me again.

“I’m fine,” I said. “Uhh...afraid I don’t remember you. And who’s Thinker? I thought my name was Beta Three.”

“*You’re* Thinker, Three! It’s your warname! The bastards psyched you! They erased you, Three! They erased everybody, the whole squad, one way or another. They just wiped us out, wrote us right out of history. Well, they’re not going to get away with it, Three! We owe it to One to get the past back. That’s why I’m doing what I’m doing for Cinta—for the LC. You think I like this crap? Skulking in the dark, nosing around in Central Datacall? I hate every frac! But I’m going to see those cowardly ConFree Inner bastards don’t get away with it! I tell you, Thinker, I’ve never seen such bad morale before—it’s so bad it’s close to rebellion. And they know it! That’s why they don’t dare move on the LC. They’re afraid they’ll give the orders and nobody will respond! Man, that would be a first for the Legion, wouldn’t it? Remember Andrion Three? Remember Mongera? Remember Uldo? We charged into Hell for the Legion, for ConFree, blind. And now they want us to target our

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own! Deto! They can haul me away in cuffs; they can put me up against the wall. I'm not worried! Nobody will pull the trigger!"

"Afraid I don't remember any of those places," I responded calmly. Redhawk was twitching on screen. His pale blue eyes were glowing, and little specks of saliva were visible at the corners of his mouth.

"Get me the hell out of here, girl," he said wearily to Whit. "I'm sick of it!"

"That's the plan, Tennie," Whit responded soothingly. "Nothing's changed. But first it's Yida, then Dindabai—and only then do we...re-unite." She reached out with slender fingers and her tapered silver nails clicked lightly against the d-screen.

"You'd better wear your dispo panties, girl, 'cause they're not going to survive that event!"

"That's affirmative, Tennie." A faint smile from Whit—she was blushing.

"Thinker, welcome back!" Ten appeared to have snapped out of his depression. "Whit told me she's briefed you on Beta. Now let me tell you what I've found out. I'm right smack in the heart of a Legion hive here, in Aircar Control for Quaba Station. We're on Quaba Seven, and Quaba Station is Hqs for Fleetcom—Fleet Command for the Black Fleet. We support Outvac Sector Command, or what's left of it after the LC broke away. As I think you know, Fleetcom is sitting on the fence right now, claiming to be loyal to ConFree. And I'm dead meat if they detect what I'm doing. Anyway, here's what happened. I was your aircar driver on Uldo. When the dust settled after your attack on the Mound, they ordered me to stay put. I promptly disobeyed orders. I flew directly to the Mound, and walked right in. The Legion had secured the site, but it was an awful mess. I found Merlin. He was dead—the medics were recovering the body. Then the security folks caught up with me and carted me away." He paused, and wearily shook his head.

"Merlin," I said. It meant nothing to me.

"Merlin was Beta Four," Ten continued. "He was my blood brother. And yours." He sighed, then continued. "I was detained for awhile. Then a couple of ConFree drones dropped in with a Legion escort, and gave me the word. They told me there had been no survivors. Everyone in Beta was killed—that's what they said. Then they reminded me that the entire mission was classified Ultra Cosmic and I was to never discuss it with anyone. They

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said there were details about the mission that could not be revealed to me, or to anyone else. They said it was so important they were going to change my Legion serial number. They said my old identity had to end. Beta Ten's name went up on the death list, on the Legion Monument to the Dead, and I was reassigned here with a new designation.

"Well, my slot here is not too demanding. I had a lot of time on my hands. So I was checking out the Monument one day, calling up designations on Datacall. Anyone can do it. Well, I found my number all right. Dead as hell. Then I called up everybody in the squad. And, sure enough, they were all there—all listed as killed on Uldo. 'Died in Service'. That's what it said. You too, Thinker. But Cinta had been with you, and she was not listed. Neither was Gildron. I figured it was because they were not officially part of the squad. But I wondered about that. And I thought—well, how do I know any of them are really dead? I'm listed, and I'm not dead. The only one I know who died for sure is Merlin, because I saw his body myself.

"In Hqs I had access to all personnel records for Outvac Sector Command. There's nothing sensitive about it. I started with my own records—both the old file and the new file. The genetic ID had been altered, of course, but there were certain physical similarities between the two allegedly different individuals that were exactly the same. Height, eye color, blood type—all the same. They hadn't bothered to change it. They probably figured it would be an impossible task to track anyone down using those guidelines alone. And it's not until you get into the file that you've got the holo. A different pix, but it was certainly me.

"Well, I can tell you, they had good reason to be confident. I called up the old files for every member of Beta. They all ended with combat deaths on Uldo. I took down basic physical features—sex, height, blood type, and anything else I thought they might have not bothered to change. I did one person at a time, scanning the entire sector personnel listing. I wasn't expecting any luck on the more unusual features, like Snow Leopard's pink eyes or Dragon's tattoos, but I tried anyway.

"It took a long, long time, but I had plenty of time. I'm not finished yet, but I've already made one good hit. I didn't find you, Thinker, but I found Dragon—Beta Eight. Eight is alive, and he's in Systie vac, just like you. Yida, specifically. They changed his designation, psyched out a false bio for him, and then recorded his resignation from the Legion. Dragon, resigning from

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the Legion—ridiculous! The Legion was his life. But there's no doubt it was him. It was Dragon, glaring at me right out of the holo, tattoos and all, even though the tattoos were not mentioned in the physical description. Dragon survived Uldo, Thinker. He's alive, and he's on Yida. Voluntarily or not, I don't know."

"Cinta found it," Whit cut in.

"That's right," Redhawk continued. "I learned he was alive and had left the Legion. I also had the date and place. That was enough to track him out of Legion vac. He headed straight for the System—I had no idea where. Damned if I knew why he'd do that. I brooded about it for quite awhile. I was completely helpless. I couldn't contact anyone, and the last port of call listed for Cinta's ship, the *Maiden*, was Uldo. After that, it just vanished from the records.

"That's when Whit walked into my office. That's when my world turned right around. Cinta tracked Dragon to Yida—she's got the System wired."

"Sounds like she's got the Legion wired as well," I commented.

Redhawk laughed. "I suppose so. This link is a real kick. Anyway, that's why you're headed for Yida. I wish I could come with you but I can't. We want you and Whit to contact Dragon. Bring him with you, if he'll come. Tell him what you know about Beta. Ask him what he knows. We don't know what his story is—maybe they've psyched him, too. If they have, Cinta wants to un-psyche him. Just like she's going to do for you."

"Why is Cinta being so helpful to you?"

"I've been extremely helpful to her. And don't forget she was with Beta on the Uldo mission. She doesn't talk about it much, but she's rather intense on the subject. When I told her about Dragon and said I wanted to contact him, she agreed completely—and mounted a major expedition to recover both you and Dragon."

"Was it Cinta who tracked me to Nimbos?"

"Yeah. She found me, and she found you. I don't know how. But she's got the resources of the Lost Command behind her."

"So we're off to Yida."

"Right," Redhawk said. "Damn, it's good to have you back, Three. Damn!" He was positively glowing.

"Yida," I said.

"You, and Whit. Bring him back alive, guys!"

ILLUMINATION

“We’ll do that,” Whit said.

“And then get me outta here! I can hardly wait!”

“Likewise,” Whit said. “See ya!” And she cut the connection.



I awoke with a start, and almost brained myself again on the overhead. The images were still swirling around in my head. They just wouldn’t go away. The adrenalin was still flowing, and my guts were churning. It was pitch black. The deck was icy. I sat on the edge of my little bunk, mindless light years from everything I knew, rushing into the future. I strained to remember it. I knew it wasn’t a dream. It was the past, my own secret past, whispering in my ears.

And it was all flames, superhot burning gas roaring all around me, shrieking blue-hot white-hot brilliant incandescent flames, swirling everywhere. There was no escape and I was running right into it. She was up ahead, lost and doomed, burning, holding out one glowing metal hand. I could almost see her face, behind the mask, pleading, crying, calling out my name—”Thinker! Thinker! Thinker!”

My name. I pulled out the wallchair and straddled it, fumbling at the desk console in the dark until I found the holcard. I activated it and both squads appeared, Beta and Gamma, shimmering in a brilliant cone of light.

My name—Thinker. That was what those voices had called me, back in the Agra Workers’ Hostel. Surely that was it. And now I was remembering it. Was it just suggestion? Redhawk had told me my warname. Or was it real? Real? Since when is a dream real? But my past was real—more real than the present.

Beta—and Gamma. Faces from the past, unknown to my present self. A gang of young soldiers in camfax fatigues splattered with mud, grinning and excited, celebrating something. The high morale was obvious. My eyes were drawn to a girl with tangled black hair and dark liquid eyes. She was clutching a muddy medpak, looking vaguely off into the distance.

Was this the girl who had been calling my name in my dreams, from out of those impossible flames? I knew the designations by now. She was Beta Nine, Priestess, the medic. Why did I think it was her? There were other girls. Perhaps I should ask Whit about Beta Nine. Or—perhaps I shouldn’t. The

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dreams were all I could believe. They were all I had that was real. I didn't want any further input. No, perhaps I should not ask.

Beta Nine—Priestess. Why Beta Nine?

The survivors of Squad Beta are in the grip of the Star, an alien artifact that will take them into another universe and into the past. Only there can they find their missing comrades - and there may be no return.

Secret of the Legion

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