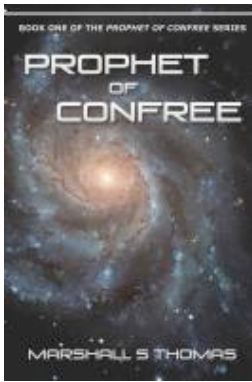


BOOK ONE OF THE *PROPHET OF CONFREE* SERIES

# PROPHET OF CONFREE

MARSHALL S THOMAS



*An ancient enemy threatens the galaxy. Squad Delta of the ConFree Legion stands in the way. At first, Richard is terrified - he is a lover, not a fighter. But he walks through the Legion Gate, and finds himself in a squad of heroes. Ordinary troopers - marching to their deaths for future generations. And Richard becomes Prophet, a soldier of the future. The alien swarm approaches. It is victory or death for squad Delta. Also by Marshall S Thomas - **The Black March, Soldier of the Legion, Slave of the Legion and Secret of the Legion.***

## Prophet of ConFree

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# **Prophet of ConFree**

by

**Marshall S Thomas**

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# PART I

## THIN BLACK LINE





## Chapter 1

### Volunteers

The Legion Gate loomed before me. It was right in downtown Windwood; it fronted a cold grey building with no windows. A Legion cross was carved into the stone above the Gate. It was dark in there; you couldn't see in. Anyone could go in – but not many came out again. The Gate was always open, but only for volunteers.

I was a tall, skinny teen with an ugly shaved head and a bandage across my nose. And I sure as hell wasn't a volunteer. I was standing across the street from the Gate, about as far away as I could get while still remaining on the same street. That Gate scared me. It looked like the entrance to a black hole. Not too many people knew what was inside and even fewer wanted to know. I sure didn't. Yes, it was just like a black hole – mysterious, extremely dangerous and ultimately fatal. On a scale of one to ten, one being a heroic volunteer and ten being a terrified coward, I rated myself about a twelve.

No, I didn't want to volunteer – but I was going to, as soon as I could work up the nerve. I didn't have any choice.

I told myself that I'd wait a bit longer, and see if my friends showed up. They were supposed to say goodbye to me. The thought of leaving Eugarat, forever, was depressing. I really needed somebody to show up – just to say goodbye.

Eugarat was a paradise. I thought it then, when I was growing up there, and still thought it many years later, when I'd seen the best and worst of the galaxy and knew what was what. It was a bloody paradise. I was a brainless teen back then, but I did recognize how special it was. It was a Legion world, torn from a savage wilderness by free men fleeing slavery, violent men determined to create a new world

for their families. They did it, but they had to fight for it. ConFree was born in blood. And people from Eugarat had a reputation as aggressive, troublesome, hardassed warriors. Yugo-rats, they were dubbed by the rest of ConFree. They accepted the name as a badge of honor.

That's what it says in the history of ConFree, and that's what my mom told me, too. I knew all that, even as a kid. I didn't doubt it. They pounded it into our heads in school and my mom reinforced it. I loved to listen to her. The stories about how the Outworlder race colonized the Crista Cluster and formed the Confederation of Free Worlds fascinated me. The System pursued them, and sent in Starfleet, and the colonists responded by forming the ConFree Legion and Fleetcom and declaring war on the System. Born in blood. Those people were my ancestors and they were heroes to me when I was younger, but they never seemed real. It was more like the mythological legends from the olden days. I didn't think it really had anything to do with me.

A paradise – in more ways than one. We lived by the Misty Mountains in Windwood, a lovely little settlement set in a tropical rainforest, and it was really beautiful. Romantic even. My birth name was Richard – Richie for short, Richard Rains in full. I graduated Windwood Middle School at seventeen, and I was having so much fun I didn't want it to end. I spent all my time with my lovely little Windwood honeys and couldn't settle on anybody. They were all a few years younger than me but that didn't bother me. My buddies were jealous of my success with the girls but we were all pretty close so it didn't matter much.

Mom and Dad kept harassing me about doing something with my life and hinting that it would soon be time for me to leave home. I didn't care. I didn't spend much time at home, it was just a place for me to eat and sleep. I thought they were very unreasonable at the time, but looking back on it I can see that I must have been a terrific pain in the butt for them. People who were not productive could be labeled parasites and that would be a major disgrace for my mom and dad. Mom was an artist and Dad was a tech. They were productive people. And their son was a parasite. I knew the score; I knew everything, as they taught us everything in school. But, again, I never quite made the



connection between what they were teaching, and me. I didn't want my paradise to end.

△

"I heard you hit on DeeAnn yesterday at the playground and you were rolling around on the grass with her, sucking on her face. Right?" Jailbait was clearly unhappy. We were behind the Commissary building, propped up against the outside wall. It was a hot moist day, and little beads of sweat were forming on her lovely brow. Jailbait was a tempting little blonde angel. Her real name was Rosa but I had named her Jailbait.

"Nah, that's crazy," I replied. "Where'd you hear that?"

"I'm grounded for one day and you jump on DeeAnn right away. I thought I was your girl. You said I was. You don't care, right?" She was gazing at me with those lovely, haunting green eyes. I couldn't resist her.

"You're my girl, Jailbait. Nobody else." I took her hand. I knew what she wanted. She just wanted to be my girl – that's all. I was ashamed of myself. I treated her so badly. But DeeAnn was hard to resist.

"You're using me – to get your thrills," Jailbait said. I mumbled a halfhearted denial and casually shook my long hair back to get it out of my eyes. I knew she'd love that. I had practiced it a lot, in the mirror.

"I talked with DeeAnn," she continued.

"And what did she say?" Damn! How was I going to get out of this one?

"She admitted rolling around on the grass with you, but said there was nothing to it."

"And there isn't! You're my girl – not DeeAnn."

"You're so cruel." She sounded very sad but didn't pull her hand away.

"Come on," I said. "We're late. Kittykat will be waiting for us inside the Commissary." We were supposed to pick out a farewell gift for Bob. He was Kittykat's boyfriend, and Mark's best friend. Mark was

my best friend. The visit to the commissary should have been a happy occasion.

Δ

The commissary was always fun. It was bright and cool and sparkling clean and they had pretty much everything for sale. ConFree was the galaxy's economic powerhouse. All I could remember from Econ class was the Invisible Hand, but my teacher assured me that's all I really had to know. I never understood that, but it was enough that the concept worked.

Jailbait and Kittykat and I wandered through the commo section, looking for a handset with maximum features and a minimum price tag. Kittykat was a petite little doll with a pixie haircut, extra long legs and very short shorts. I was nuts about her but she manipulated me like an evil sorceress. Bob was her boyfriend and he was signing up for Fleetcom Academy. That meant he was likely never coming back. I admired him. He was making decisions about his life – unlike me. I couldn't say much for his girl, though. She had already asked me if I would help her forget Bob after he left. I knew she didn't care a whit about me; she just wanted to make Jailbait jealous. That was the way she was.

A female sales clerk approached us – an adult. She had ruddy hair and hazel eyes – nice looking.

"May I help you, darlings?" Adults in Windwood tended to be friendly and casual, despite Eugarat's galactic reputation. Personally, I thought adults were space aliens. I couldn't stand them. We called them dinos or dino doo. I guess that means I was still immature.

"Tell you what, if we need your help we'll ask you, all right? Bye bye," I said. It was considered witty in teen circles to be rude to adults, and I guess I was showing off for the girls. I had done it before without problems. I could tell by her expression that I had hurt the lady's feelings, and I felt a little bad about it but I had already said it and it was too late to change it.

"What's your name, boy?" A young man in civvies stood before me, his face expressing a kind of vague concern. Dino doo, I instantly categorized him. He certainly didn't scare me.

"My name? That's none of your damned business! Who do you think you—"

Δ

When the world edged into focus, I was conscious of a burning pain that seemed to be centered around my face. As I slowly took in my surroundings, I realized that I was lying on an airbed surrounded by hospital instruments and readout screens. Silky curtains hung from the ceiling, blocking my view. My face was bandaged and my nose and mouth hurt like hell. An electronic beeping summoned a nurse in white who appeared before me just like an angel. She was young and pretty. She turned off the device and spoke.

"You're awake! Good." She scanned the instruments by my bedside. "Welcome back. I'm Lisa. How do you feel, Richard?"

"Terrible. What happened?" I said, hoarsely. It was a complete mystery to me.

"What happened? You don't know?"

"No. I don't know. Why am I here?" I gingerly touched my nose and found that it was encased in some kind of bandaging. My teeth felt like I had been kicked in the mouth by a horse and more bandaging around my lips made it difficult to talk.

"Well, let's see," she said, reading a d-screen. "Concussion, broken nose, split lip, three front teeth knocked out. My! What did you do?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

"You really don't remember? All right, it says here you insulted someone and he knocked you unconscious. It was in the commissary."

"The commissary?" Oh no! The dino doo! He must have been a psycho or something. You can't just go around hitting people, even I knew that. I was amazed. I could hardly believe it.

Δ

Mom and Dad visited me in the hospital. They both seemed to be very concerned. Mom was crying, and Dad was angry. I tried to reassure them. I was all right; the split lip was mending, they were going to fit me for three new teeth, and my broken nose had been reset with gro-gel and would be fine. But there were other issues, they said. Serious issues. They wouldn't even discuss them with me. Get well, they said. Then we'll talk.

△

I began to realize I was in serious trouble when the local constabulary dropped in for a chat. Since there was very little crime in Windwood, they had plenty of time for me. There were two of them, one male, one female, clad in neat khaki uniforms, settling into the camp chairs by my bed. The male looked like a vid hero with curly black hair and blinding white teeth – Officer Kelto. The female was a sultry temptress with smouldering red hair – Officer Sarah.

"So, tell us, Rich," Officer Kelto said. "Why did you insult those people?"

"I didn't mean to insult anyone," I replied. "I may have been a little brisk with the sales clerk, but—"

"Oh come on, Richard," Officer Sarah said. "We've brainscanned you. We know exactly what you said. Brisk? Bye bye, you said. That was insulting! She was trying to help you and you shooed her away. Where did you study?"

"Windwood Middle," I responded.

"Don't they teach manners there? Don't they familiarize you with the outside world? It is illegal to insult anyone. We are an armed society, and we are polite – all of us! Except for you."

"How about the gentleman?" Kelto broke in. "He politely asked your name and you shouted at him and asked who he thought he was. He was an adult, that's who. And you are a minor. Minors should use the term 'sir' when responding to adult males and 'ma'am' when responding to adult females. That's not just custom, boy, it's law. You did neither."

"I'm sorry. He surprised me, asking for my name. I didn't know who he was, I didn't see why I should—"

"You're lucky. He would have been perfectly justified in shooting you with a vac gun. ConFree will not tolerate rudeness. You must be polite at all times, no matter what."

"It wasn't polite of him to hit me. He gave me all these serious injuries. What's going to happen to him?"

Sarah smiled. "The only thing that's going to happen to him is that you are going to apologize to him for insulting him. Just like you're going to apologize to the sales clerk for insulting her."

"You mean I'm the bad guy? He attacks me and puts me in the hospital and that's all right?"

"That's perfectly all right," the female said. "ConFree citizens do not have to accept insults from anyone. That's the law. Impolite or insulting words may be countered with reasonable physical force."

"Reasonable? I don't feel like there was anything reasonable that happened to me."

"You were lucky. He could have vacted you," Kelto said, again. "The guy that decked you was a Legion vet and those people don't take any crap from spoiled, wise-ass punks like you."

"You really look terrible, Richard," Sarah laughed, as if amused. Then she turned serious. "You are now under arrest. When you are released from the hospital, we will accompany you to District Court where you will be tried and sentenced."

"Sentenced? For what?" I was stunned.

"Insults leading to violence. It's a felony. Very serious."

"But I didn't do any violence! I was the victim of violence!"

"Oh no. You caused it. It's all on you."

"But...but...what's going to happen to me? What is the penalty?"

"The light begins to dawn," Kelto said, with a big smile. "I do believe he now realizes that he did something wrong."

"The penalty...well. Let's see." Sarah pulled a palm screen from a pocket and consulted it. "Multiple offenses against public order. Vandalism against a school building. Fighting on an airbus. Disturbance at a food court. And, oh, look here. Insulting a teacher. Well, there's

more. Nothing too serious, most charges were dropped with a warning, 'cause you were just a brainless kid. But I'm afraid we're past that. You're seventeen now, time to become an adult. Time to accept responsibility. And with a record like yours...well, you'll likely be banished from Windwood. Maybe even shipped offworld. We don't need people like you on Eugarat. Yes, that's what you're facing – banishment. What a shame. You could have made something of yourself, with a little more discipline. But we don't have time for failures, crybabies, or self-centered parasites. Don't try to leave the hospital until you have clearance to do so. We'll be watching you. Goodbye, Richard."

And they got up and left.



Northmark District Court can best be described as austere, although if you are sitting there in the dock in a fluorescent orange jump suit in wrist irons, with your head recently shaved, like I was, it might strike you as scary, cold and brutal. I was seated by myself behind a table facing a row of six judges behind an elevated counter. They were clad in black uniforms. The walls were a bluish metal, bare except for a threatening representation of Deadman and a giant Legion Cross. My new teeth had been installed and I still had a bandage on my nose. The swelling on my lips was going down. A policeman in khaki was posted next to my table. The spectators were behind me. There were a lot of people there, including my mom and dad. None of the kids were there, because it was a school day. At least my buddies – and the girls – were not going to witness my humiliation. I knew this was a terrible day for my mom and dad. I guess I deserved it; that was sure.

I figured the haircut and chains meant my fate had already been determined. The judges had all been talking among themselves, going over my file. The truth was not in question. All that was in question was my fate. The search was for justice. Justice, real justice, was scary. I knew that.

"He's had plenty of chances," a blonde female judge said. "And blew them all. He's a slow learner. He keeps repeating himself."

"He's not a slow learner, not really," a male judge said. "Look at the IQ. All his teachers say he has great potential." It was kind of strange watching these judges coming to a decision on my future, because, of course, they were all immortal. Immortals don't age, so they looked like a gang of middle school kids, calmly ruling on my fate. That was scary, too.

"Great potential, which he refuses to apply," the blonde continued. She was not bad looking, I reflected. "If he's not interested in a subject, he refuses to study. If he's interested, he can get A's. "

"That's not a crime. You're off the subject," another male cut in.

"He was counseled on all his misdeeds and it made no difference. He's hopeless. He doesn't deserve further consideration," somebody else said.

"We need to clean the streets," a seemingly young male said. "We need to focus on what these kids are taught. There're too many complaints about teens wising off to adults. I want that to end. This isn't the System. We need respect, and discipline."

"Right, let's give him the death sentence," a raven-haired female said. "That should motivate everybody."

"That's enough!" the lead judge snapped. "There will be no levity in my court!" I was pleased that he had decided against the death sentence – some good news at least. "We're determining this young man's future and we're going to make the right decision," he continued. "What sort of person is he? I mean, aside from his arrogant attitude? Does he have any friends?"

"His parents are quite respectable, and devastated by his actions," one of the males said. "He has a great many school friends, both male and female. We couldn't get any of his peers to comment negatively about him. The girls – all of them underage – particularly like him. Even his teachers – most of them – think he has great potential. But he's lazy and not motivated."

"All right, that's enough. Let's hear from the accused."

The policeman gestured, and I stood up.

"Tell us what you planned for your life," the lead judge said. "What did you want to do?"

I was totally unprepared for his question. What did that have to do with anything? I finally responded. "Um, uh, I thought I'd be a historian."

"A historian? Why?"

"Well, I like history. And I thought it might be nice to...write it. Or teach it."

"That takes many years of preparation, advanced studies, writing skills, and experience. A lot of hard work. You haven't demonstrated much aptitude for anything like that. You recently graduated Middle School. What were your immediate plans?"

"Plans? Well, I didn't really have any. I mean, I hadn't thought about it." This conversation was not going well at all, I realized.

"Hadn't thought about it. I see. Let's see, you're seventeen, out of school, unemployed and living with Mom and Dad. When were you planning on getting a job and leaving home? Age thirty? Age forty? When?"

"I...I was just taking a break."

"You're a parasite. You have no plans and no future. You've studied about ConFree. You know we are a society based on self-respect, respect for others, and honest labor. It seems you don't fit in."

"I'm sorry about my actions. I was wrong."

"It's too late for that. Court, have we reached agreement on the first verdict?" They consulted briefly as I stood there, lightheaded.

The lead judge banged his gavel down so sharply that I twitched. "The accused is GUILTY of one charge of parasitism and one charge of gross insult leading to violence. The accused is BANISHED from Northmark District. He will be detained until Eugarat National Court responds to our notification about the case. We will reconvene at that time. Bailiff, accompany the prisoner to the detention facility. Court is hereby dismissed."

Δ

My cell was small but clean. A bed on a ledge jutting out of the wall, a little squat toilet, a metal sink with no mirror. No furniture. Cold metal walls. A dim light panel overhead that I could not control. Great.



I sat on my bed and pondered my fate. Stupid, I thought. You were stupid. Now you are banished, from all you have ever loved. And more bad news might be coming, depending on what Eugarat National has to say about my case. Maybe they need dummies to clean the streets or something. Or maybe they don't. Then it would be banishment from my own home planet. Would any other ConFree planet want me? Why waste resources on a parasite? Maybe they'd dump me on some alien world. Maybe those ex-System worlds would take me. They always need new slaves, right?

I knew ConFree did not waste resources on parasites. Just like they didn't put criminals in jail. ConFree citizens didn't want their tax money going for such stupid expenditures. Criminals in ConFree don't get rewarded with free board and lodging for the rest of their lives – no, they get a bullet in the brain if they deserve it, or exile if they are lucky.

Dummy! And I thought I would have a bright future. I had laughed at some of the kids who had academic trouble in school. But they'd be laughing at me now. This didn't seem fair to me. It's not as if I was really a criminal. I wasn't a gang member, I didn't steal anything. Except for those stone lions, and that was just a prank. It seemed so unfair, to listen to that long list of childish misdeeds read aloud in public court.

*Life isn't fair! Get used to it.* That was my history teacher. He had a clear view of the universe. If only I had listened to him.

The cell door rattled and squeaked open. Somebody stepped in. The sudden light from the corridor outlined his figure but made it hard to see his features. A man. Now what?

"How you doing?" he asked. A young man, clad in Legion black.

"Not so good," I replied.

"That's not so good, *sir*," he said. "You still haven't learned, have you? Be polite." He looked like a midschool kid, tanned skin, grey eyes, brown hair cut short in the military fashion, standing almost at attention. His confidence told me he was anything but a midschool kid.

"Yes sir," I said.

"Nice quarters," he said, looking around my little cell. "And all at taxpayer expense. Do you like it?"

"Sir, no sir."

"What a shame. Well, you may not be here long. Once Eugarat National responds to your case, you'll be moving out. You may even be banished from ConFree."

"Sir," I said. "Do you think that's likely? Will they really banish me from ConFree?"

"It's very likely. They've been doing that lately. But you can't know for sure until they respond." He walked back to the cell door and banged on it. It opened. "Can you get me a chair?" he asked somebody outside. In a moment he had a metal folding chair and settled into it before my bed.

"You're an idiot, you know," he said, gazing at me curiously.

"Yes sir," I replied. "That part I've figured out."

"Do you want to be banished from ConFree?"

"No sir."

"Too bad. It's likely to happen. Very soon. You'd best get used to it."

"Sir. Yes sir." I wanted to ask him why he cared, but decided not to.

"You know," he said. "Once Eugarat rules on you, that's it. It will be too late then. Too late for you."

I just looked at him. What did he want from me? An apology?

"You don't have much time," he said.

"Sir. Much time for what?"

"Much time to change the situation, and get out of this fix."

He had my full attention now. "Sir. How do I do that?"

"What you do – is take decisive action, to change the situation. Instead of just drifting, and accepting your fate, you take action, and change your fate."

"Sir. That sounds good. What do I do?"

"Well...what was your name again? Robert?"

"Sir. Richard."

"Well, Richard. I can tell you how to walk through that door, if you want to. But the decision will be up to you. Not me. And the decision has all sorts of consequences. And responsibilities."

"Sir. Decisive action sounds good to me. What do I have to do?"

"Simple. You enlist in the ConFree Legion. Now – before Eugarat National rules on you. You meet all our requirements. We're not interested in your schoolboy pranks or your bad attitude. We're looking for tough new recruits, and you qualify. And nobody can stop a Legion volunteer. But that's the point – you have to volunteer. Once you do that, you're committed for the next six years of your life. There's no way out. It's difficult, dangerous work – but very rewarding, if you apply yourself. You'll be rendered immortal right off. When your enlistment expires, if you're still alive, you'll become a ConFree citizen and all these silly charges will go away. But think hard about it. Your enlistment must be completely voluntary. The ConFree Legion only takes volunteers."

Volunteers? The ConFree Legion? My God, I had never even imagined this. I was a lover, not a fighter. What was I going to do in the ConFree Legion? I had always tiptoed around the Legion Gate downtown, hoping nobody paid any attention to me.

"Well, what do you say?" Yes, that was the question. Volunteer? Or banishment. I had no choice!

"Sir. Yes sir. I'll volunteer."

"Good. Good. Sign here." He held out a little d-screen displaying a document. I was stunned. Decisive action – no more words, no more crap. Sign here. Action! I took a deep breath. I touched the little DNA box at the bottom with the tip of my index finger. I didn't even read it.

"I'll be back tomorrow. You stay here until then. Congratulations, Volunteer. The people of ConFree respect your decision and will honor your service." And he walked out the door, taking the little chair with him.

It was nice to hear that the people of ConFree respected my decision. They sure hadn't been giving me much respect so far.

Δ

And that's how I came to be standing before the Legion Gate, in downtown Windwood, a few days later. Three of my friends had finally shown up. I had said goodbye to my parents earlier and asked them not to come to the Gate. My mom had cried and my dad said he was proud of me.

Jailbait was there, and Kittykat. Mark was there, too. The girls had faked excuses to get out of school to say goodbye to me. They brought little notes from the rest of the girls – DeeAnn, Sweetcakes and Judy Dare. Mark had actually crawled out of a bathroom window to make his escape. I felt so touched by that. Just to say goodbye to me! It gave me a lump in my throat. I knew I'd never meet people like these again. Mark was blindly, deliriously in love with Kittykat, and she ignored him as if he didn't even exist. Jailbait was getting all weepy and even Kittykat seemed subdued and uncharacteristically quiet. I kissed both girls and Mark looked like he was getting set to cry.

"Don't open this until you're in," he said, huskily, pressing a little folded envelope into my palm. Poor old Mark was a little slow and many of the kids laughed at him, but I never did. I had grown to like him. He was kind of an outcast. He had no girl, Bob and I were his only friends, and Bob had left already and I was about to.

The Legion Gate loomed before me, right across the street. I had half expected my Legion recruiter to show up there, just to make sure I didn't back out, but he didn't. They wanted volunteers, you see. I had to walk in there on my own.

"All right, I'm going in," I said. "I'm going to miss you all." I couldn't say any more. We did a group hug, and Jailbait was crying and Mark was crying and Kittykat was all pale and blurry-eyed. Will I ever see these kids again? I broke away abruptly and walked through the Legion Gate, gritting my teeth.



I walked down an entry hall lit only by glowing holo shots lining both walls. They showed astounding views of alien worlds, beautiful, mysterious landscapes, glowing under milky, starry skies. Some of them showed Legion soldiers in A-suits, marching into horrific horizons

erupting in flames. I tried not to look at these scenes – I guess I wasn't quite ready.

The entry hall led to a large, bright, open circular area built around a vertical metallic structure that looked like some kind of monument. A black slab was set in the center, set under a Legion cross, and silvery letters rippled slowly over the slab. I knew what that was. I spotted an open office area on the other side of the monument, and walked over there. There were two young men, clad in black Legion uniforms, evidently engaged in conversation. One of them sat behind a large gleaming desk bedecked with d-screens and commo gear. He was pale, dark-haired and had a thin pencil mustache. The ConFree and Legion flags flanked his desk. The other was leaning against the wall, glaring, ruddy-faced, blond hair. He seemed distinctly unhappy.

"...nothing to be done," the mustache was saying. "You know it. There's nothing you or anybody else can do – except to carry on."

"Carry on. Right!" The blond almost snarled.

"Who are you?" Mustache finally noticed me. I was standing before his desk.

"Uh, I'm a Legion volunteer. Sir." I wasn't going to forget the 'sir' any more.

Mustache stood up, looking me over. "Oh," he said. "You're Rains. Richard Rains. We were told to expect you."

"Yes sir."

Then he did something that caught me off-guard. He stood at attention, and saluted me. It was quite a salute. I was so stunned that I did not know if I was supposed to return the salute or not.

"Welcome to the ConFree Legion," he said. "The people of ConFree respect your decision and will honor your service." That one I had heard before. "And that's the last time anyone's going to be saluting you for quite awhile. Now, tell me – why did you volunteer?"

I was ready for that one. "I just want to help," I said.

"Why? Why do you want to help? It's dangerous work. You may be killed."

"I want to do something worthwhile. I want to make something out of my life. I want to serve the people of ConFree."

"He wants to help," Mustache said to his companion, who was watching me with a scowl. "A volunteer. What do you think?"

Blondie came over to join us, looking me over carefully. "A volunteer," he repeated. "Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

"Yes sir. I think so. I just want to help."

"He wants to help," Blondie said. "Great. Are you ready to bleed for ConFree?"

"Yes sir."

"Ready to die for ConFree?"

"Yes sir. If I must."

"Look at him," Mustache said. "He's the perfect volunteer. And they just keep coming."

"Yes," Blondie said. "They just keep coming. Until they're all dead. And we just carry on. No matter what."

"That's right," Mustache said. "That's exactly right. Volunteer, you will be transported to the Veltros star system for basic training. We'll take you to the spaceport by aircar tomorrow. Meantime, report to the ready room – it's out the door to the right. You keep your civilian clothes for now. We'll show you your quarters later. And don't try to leave the installation. That's a one-way gate you came in. And the past is dead and gone."

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*The past is dead and gone.* I pondered the phrase as I entered the ready room. It was a large lounge, full of airchairs and sofas and tables of various sizes. The walls were decorated with large, darkened d-screens and colorful Legion propaganda posters. It was dead quiet and totally deserted – no, not quite. As I entered, a single youth shot up from a chair and snapped to attention, startling me. I looked around quickly to determine who he was standing at attention for and decided that it was for me, because there was nobody else in the room.

"Relax," I said. "I'm not an officer, I'm a new volunteer." He was in civilian clothes, I noted. He looked like about fifteen, very slender with long brown hair and big round eyes, but he must have been seventeen because that was the minimum age for Legion

recruitments. He appeared greatly relieved to learn I was a fellow volunteer.

"Oh," he said, "good. I thought you were a trooper because of the haircut."

I smiled. "No, the haircut came before the enlistment."

"Really? Here, want some dox? They've got a doxmod – free dox." He hurried over to a wall unit and it popped out a fresh cup of dox. He handed it to me. "Have a seat. You like dox?" He seemed even jumpier than I was. We both settled down in airchairs and he was looking into my eyes intently. He seemed so young he almost looked like a girl.

"Yes, I love dox," I said, taking a careful sip of the hot foamy brew. "This is great."

"So they made you get the haircut before enlistment? How long you been in? Man, you really look beat-up. Did they beat up on you? What happened?"

I smiled. "What happened," I repeated. "Good question. I've been asking that myself. No, they didn't beat me up. That also happened before I enlisted. But I guess you could say it was part of my...motivation. Yes. I understand we'll be getting new haircuts during induction on Veltros. How long have you been in?"

"Two...whole...days," he said, as if it was more than any human should have to endure. "I've been the only one here. Except for them. I'm really glad to see you."

"Where are you from?"

"Sunglen. It's way out in the Pine Barrens. Windwood was the closest Legion Gate."

"What made you want to enlist?"

"Clearly you're not fam with Sunglen or the Pine Barrens. It's the armpit of the world. And my girl...well, short story, she dumped me. And I really cared about her. How about you?"

"Your story makes sense compared to mine. Well, I had a lot of reasons but bottom line is I thought it was the right thing to do."

"That's pretty idealistic, I'm impressed. Do you know anything about Veltros?"

"Yeah, it's the Legion's premier basic training center. Everybody gets run through Veltros. Only it's a long star run from here. Did they tell you you'd be leaving tomorrow?"

"Yes, they did."

"Good. We'll be going together. Looks like just the two of us."

"Great! That's great!" He took a big gulp of dox and held out a fist. "Arie Gaignon. It's great to meet you."

"Richard Rains," I said, touching knuckles. "Likewise. I'm from Windwood. Recently graduated from Windwood Middle."

"Same here, Sunglen Middle. It wasn't much of a school, but I liked it – until she dumped me. I was on track, gymnastics and contact."

"Wow! Really? You're a real athlete." He sure didn't look it.

"Yeah, I guess so. I liked it. But that's all gone now." The past is dead and gone, I thought.

"Did you see the Monument to the Dead?" he asked. "In the plaza?"

"Yes – I noticed it when I first arrived but I didn't pay much attention."

"That's got all the names of all the Legion troopers who died defending the people of ConFree. Immortals all. That's what they told me. An endless list, they said."

"Yeah, I know about the monument. They've got it in every Legion installation."

"You seem to know a lot about the Legion," Arie said.

"I've studied history, that's all. It seems strangely inappropriate that the first thing new Legion volunteers see after walking through the Gate is a list of Legion dead."

"I'm sure there's a reason for it."

"Yeah, me too. What do they make you do here? Any duties? Processing?"

"No, they said just wait for the aircar tomorrow. I've been lying around sipping dox, mostly."

"Is there a mess hall around here, or something to eat?"

"Sure, come on, I'll show you."

△



*Prophet of ConFree*

Arie and I stood in the backblast of the aircar as it settled onto the landing pad on the roof of the Legion installation. It was a bright, clear day and Eugarat's two moons were both visible overhead as the crash doors of the car slid open. Mustache said goodbye to us from the carport personnel door. I still didn't know his name. We scrambled into the car, finding seats and strapping in. It was a Legion military transport car, with two troopers up front piloting it. Arie and I were the only passengers. We lifted off abruptly, gained altitude rapidly and headed roughly southwest towards Temple Mount and the starport. We had a fabulous view of Windwood as we shot over it heading for the future. A seemingly endless green forest, with a neat little settlement nestled in the trees. I could see downtown, the civic center, the hospital, Windwood Middle School, my own little residential neighborhood, rust-red roofs scattered through the forest. I spotted the teen club up on a forested hill, and even the playground on the edge of the botanical gardens. Last view, I thought. That was my home. I wondered if I would ever see it again.

Arie and I had talked a lot the night before but finally fell asleep in our quarters, exhausted. Now Arie was quiet, and I still felt very tired. I hadn't gotten much sleep, the first night of my new life. Suddenly I remembered – Mark's note! It was still crumpled in my trousers pocket, I hadn't even thought about it before. I pulled the little note out of the envelope.

When and if you come back I will be going with Kittykat.  
Good luck. Mark R. Kane.

## Chapter 2

### The Dark Lady

"ATTENTION!" The voice was at max volume and it cut through the buzz of random conversation like an electric shock. There must have been close to a hundred of us, volunteers from all over Eugarat, crowded into a spotless white assembly hall with the Cross of the Legion on the wall behind the raised dais. "This is your initial intelligence test," the voice continued. It was coming from one of four black-clad Legion troopers who had just entered the room. "Shut down! Then form rows of ten, facing front. NOW, bodies! Why are you standing there?"

We hustled to form the rows in silence except for the shuffling of bodies. We were still in civvies and had no idea what was coming. The building we were in was part of the Temple Mount spaceport complex. From what I gathered from the other bodies, some of them had been waiting weeks for this event. Arie and I had arrived just in time for the space flight to Veltros, which was set for the following day.

Arie and I found a place midway into the second row and then did our best to become invisible. We could hear the Legion troopers discussing us as the people at the rear did their best to form one last row that evidently did not add up to ten.

"They get scruffier every time, don't they?"

"Deadman! See the one with the bone in his nose?"

"You want to rip it out or can I?"

"That girl looks like she could kick ass."

"I don't think that's a girl."

"STAND AT ATTENTION! SILENCE! Now the intelligence test will continue. First man in the first row, here —" he pointed at him.

"You say ONE and the rest of you count off, two, three, four, et cetera. Can you do that? Let's hear it. NOW!"

"One." It was barely audible.

"WHAT?"

"ONE!"

"That's better. Continue!"

"Two!"

"Uh, three!"

"Four!"

"Um, five. I mean, five!" This continued with several hopeless screw-ups until the last man confirmed there were ninety-six of us. We were mostly young males, almost all Outworlders, with a sprinkling of females as well. It was a motley crew.

"ATTENTION!" We didn't know how to stand at attention but we gave it our best. It was silent. A new trooper entered, making his way to the dais and standing behind a lectern. He dropped a field cap onto the lectern. He was flanked by the other troopers. He appeared as young as the others but you could tell immediately he was not the type you'd want to challenge to a bar fight. He stood there glaring at us for some time. Then he spoke.

"Is this the best we could do?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," one of the troopers answered.

The officer sighed. "All right, volunteers, pay attention. You are about to be inducted into the ConFree Legion. Tomorrow you will be transported to Veltros for Basic Training. That's all you have to know for now." He spoke in a low voice; I had to strain to hear him. "You should know that your act of volunteering is greatly appreciated by the people of ConFree. It comes at a very dangerous time in galactic history. Great events are underway that are going to threaten ConFree's future and perhaps the future of humanity as well. The ConFree Legion is all that stands between our sworn enemies and the women and children of ConFree. And, after Basic, *you* are going to be the ConFree Legion. Think about that as you repeat the Oath of Enlistment. Generations of Legion troopers before you have taken this oath, and we all take it very seriously. Now, eyes front, salute with right fist over

your heart, and repeat the words you see on the screen. Attention to the colors!"

The lights abruptly cut off, plunging us into darkness. A huge screen appeared behind the dais, glowing with light, and it revealed a great flag, the black flag of ConFree with a silvery Legion Cross in the center, seemingly flapping in a brisk breeze. We could hear the wind whipping past and the flag cracking in response. The Legion Cross was shimmering with silvery light – almost as if it was on fire.

White letters suddenly appeared on the screen, scrolling across from right to left. The officer led us with a solemn voice, crystal clear, his fist to his heart. I slammed my fist over my own chest and repeated the words in time with his.

"I am a soldier of the Legion. I believe in Evil – the survival of the strong and the death of the weak. I am the Guardian. I am the sword of light in the dark of the night. I will deliver us from Evil." The dark hall reverberated with our words as the flag continued to flap boldly and the words continued to scroll over the screen.

"I accept life everlasting and the death of my past. I will trust no Earther worm nor any mortal man, but only the mark of the Legion. I have burnt the book of laws to serve the Deadman's cause as a soldier of the Legion."

I was almost paralyzed before that wild flag, hypnotized by that burning Legion cross. My eyes were watering. I knew about the Legion. I had studied history. Every word was true, I knew. I had never imagined in my wildest nightmares that it had anything to do with me. And here I was!

"I am the slave of the Future, at the gateway to the stars. Where I can see – eternity. For I walk in the shadow of death and yet I fear no evil, for I am the light in the dark, I am the watch on the mark, I am a Soldier of the Legion."

I was stunned. It was true. I was a soldier of the Legion. Me!

"I will have no talk with Evil. The arts of death are the tools of life. And in the end I will send a maxburst to advise the O's come by surprise, and though we kill them where they stand we know it's death's dark land, for a soldier of the Legion."

The lights snapped back on, the flag and the screen were gone, and we stood there frozen in shock. The officer turned to face us. "Welcome to the ConFree Legion. Proceed through the doors to your left for issuance of fatigues and boots."

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"SIMULATE ATTENTION!" One of our black-clad minders ordered. We may have been inducted into the Legion but we sure weren't soldiers yet. We did our best to stand at attention. It was very early the next morning and we were formed up in ten squads outside on the spaceport grounds, ready for our new life. They had yanked us out of our bunks, shouted us into our new fatigues, boots and field caps, given us five in the latrines and then marched us out into the dark without breakfast. The eastern horizon was now glowing ochre and the stars were fading. The still dawn revealed a fantastic sight a short distance away – a massive assault shuttle, glowing a luminous pink, vac black in shadow, seemingly growing out of the ground. A sinister Legion cross was emblazoned on the skin. It was a titanic dart, deadly, invulnerable, and scarred by the dust of the cosmos. I could barely make out the designation up front, *Hot Drop*.

Beautiful, I thought. Our shuttle to the stars.

"Do you really think there's any hope for these folks?" Some of the Legion troopers were chatting while inspecting our ranks.

"They'll do all right. Believe it or not. Providence will cure them."

"How do I look?" Arie whispered. We were braced together in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Squad.

"You look great," I whispered back. "The girls will love you."

"Girls? They got girls? You're dreaming." We really did look good, all of us, in new khaki fatigues that fit us perfectly after we walked through the autotailor, and supple synleather boots that also fit us perfectly after we stood in the autoshoe for a couple of frags. Even the khaki field caps looked good, transforming us into a pretty good imitation of a bunch of soldiers until you looked a little closer and noticed the long hair and assorted mustaches and beards. We each had

a small belpak for those few personal items that we were allowed to retain. The fellow with the bone in his nose no longer had it, and all earwear and body piercings were either gone or in the belpaks.

"All right, bodies. SILENCE! One column! Follow me!" Our leader marched off towards the ship, and we followed, guided into a column by the other troopers. The quiet of the new day enveloped us. I was fascinated by the shuttle. I had never been in space before. Strange, I thought, how one's fate is determined. I wise off to a sales clerk and the next thing I know I'm in the ConFree Legion. They should put up warning signs about that. But I knew it was my own damned fault.



"Bodies, take your seats and strap in. We are green for upside." The ship's announcement caught us as we were filing through a narrow tubular corridor lined with webbed personnel seats, two on each side.

"Second squad, sit! Stay!" Our Legion minder was a bundle of laughs. He was a slim, wiry Outworlder clad in Legion black. I slipped into a seat that appeared to be up against the ship's fuselage. It was kind of hard to tell; they had dragged us through a confusing maze of corridors and bulkheads. Arie took the aisle seat beside me. The seats were made of poly fiber webbing, seemingly indestructible, possibly designed for troopers in A-suits.

"Man, I'm lost," Arie said. "I hope this thing doesn't crash, 'cause I don't know which way is out."

"Say, look at this," I said. Lights were starting to come on and a long, flat panel suddenly came to life, full of light and running along the fuselage by my side. It gave me an excellent view of the spaceport and a bunch of cargo groundcars zipping along nearby.

"Is that a window or a d-screen?" Artie asked. I touched it with my finger. It felt like solid plex.

"Beats me," I said. "But it's a nice view. I think it's a digital view." The 3<sup>rd</sup> squad was settling in behind us and the 1<sup>st</sup> was ahead of us.

"Probably a safety feature," Arie said. "I'm sure it's not for our amusement. How do they know we're all here?" There had not been

any security nonsense – we had just marched up the entry ramp and onto the ship.

"They know," I replied. "What do you think these buttons are?" We each had a little gold button fused to our fatigue jackets.

"I guess it's too late to desert."

"Don't leave me behind – you're the only soul I know." There had been zero time so far to chat up our fellow victims.

"Attention the ship! Final warning. Secure all packs and bodies. Crew, stand to launch stations. All personnel strap in." A few warning chimes sounded urgently. I braced myself.

"Lifting off. Temple Port, the Hot Drop is launched. Have a good day!" Outside the ground slowly dropped away although there was no noise and no sensation of movement inside the ship. I gaped at the view – the spaceport drifted away dreamily to one side.

"That's it?" Arie asked. "I thought we were going to blast off."

"Not even a countdown," I said. "Haven't you done star travel before?"

"No, have you?"

"No. I guess it's not as noisy as advertised." That's when the drive kicked in. We could hear it all right, a frightening, unending shriek. The vibrations ran through the ship and we were pressed into our seats by the acceleration. Antimat drive, I knew. Unlimited power, and all for us.

"All right, that's more like it!" Arie exclaimed, over the noise.

"Well that's it, our journey has begun. There's no turning back now."

"Are you always this philosophical?"

"No, it started when I signed up for the Legion." Outside a fiery glow was flickering around the viewport. I quickly looked away.

"This is kind of, uh, scary. When does it end?" Arie asked. The drive continued roaring away and the G's continued building. It was getting downright uncomfortable. I felt a bit worried, but I didn't want Arie to know it. What if something went wrong? We'd all die, vaporized in a giant blast of gas.

"It ends when we reach escape velocity," I replied. "It's not easy breaking away from a planet's grav and entering orbit."

"Stand by for orbit," a metallic voice announced. "Stand by for zero G. All personnel remain strapped in."

The roar cut off abruptly. The G's ceased and we were suddenly weightless, still strapped into our seats. I stole a glance out the viewport and was rewarded with a stunning, magical view of Eugarat, a gigantic orb streaked with white clouds, blue oceans glittering in the sun like liquid gold. I could only see a small portion of the planet but it was enough to bring a lump to my throat. The atmosphere was clearly visible against the black of space, an amazingly thin, insubstantial blanket of air covering the planet, seemingly just waiting to be blown away. What a beautiful planet, I thought. My own planet! We're microscopic worms, I thought, wriggling in a thin sheet of life.

"Look out there," I said. Arie was already leaning over to get the view. He was pretty much speechless. So was I. Everyone was gaping out the viewport, but there wasn't much conversation.

△

"Man, I don't feel so good," Arie said. He looked a little green. We had been weightless for quite awhile and forbidden from getting out of our seats.

"Well, don't puke on me," I said. "There's some vomit bags just under your seat." The sense of balance in my inner ear was going, I was getting dizzy, and my stomach did not feel good, either. I couldn't figure out where my field cap had gone.

"Are we ever gonna get wherever we're going?"

"Why yes," I said. "Wow! Look at that!" Something had just appeared on the viewport. A silvery ship, reflecting sunlight, just like some perfect toy, a long long way away. A starship. Our destination. At that point I knew very little about starships, but that amazing vision transfixed me. I didn't know if it was a cruiser or a tacship or a battlestar or a junker transport, but I can tell you it was one of the most utterly beautiful things I had ever seen in my short life. Look at that!

"Wow!" Arie exclaimed. "Is that our ship?"

"That's affirmative, Arie. That's our lovely ship. That's what will take us to Veltros, and Providence. And our new life."



"Man! What are you, a prophet? What's our new life going to be like?"

"It's going to be terrific!" I was convinced of it, I'm not sure why.

"Well, maybe you're right. I'm starting to feel better already."

"Look at that ship!" We were getting closer. A silent, glowing silver starship, an indestructible jewel set in that inky vac, an artificial human star, an incredible refuge for wandering souls in a hostile merciless cosmos. It was a huge cylinder, bristling with scores of cargo containers affixed to the ship like metallic parasites. One tiny cargo shuttle slowly detached itself from a container that it had just delivered to the mother ship. The ship glowed with lights and one gaping cargo door was open, black in shadow.

"That's the *Dark Lady*," our nameless minder told us from his seat, looking back over the squad. He was medium height, with piercing grey eyes and close-cut brown hair. "She's a Fleetcom star transport. She'll take us to Providence. First class, all the way."

As we neared the *Dark Lady*, details became clearer. Besides the cargo containers I noted two tiny shuttles, affixed to the starship like lifeboats, and an empty docking blister between them. Those delta-shaped shuttles were the same type as our shuttle, the *Hot Drop*, and I was pretty sure we would dock right between them. It clarified the size of the starship – it was truly immense, blinding us with reflected sunlight, blotting out the stars. The cargo shuttle I noted earlier was gliding away from the ship, its task complete.

"Stand by for docking. We are go for docking." I continued gaping at the incredible scene outside. I could no longer see Eugarat – just that lovely ship, as we glided closer and closer, in a silent glorious ballet of blinding starlight and inky shadows. Closer and closer, settling right into the docking port.

"Capture. Docking confirmed, all seals confirm secure. Stand by for ship grav." The shuttle shuddered briefly, then stilled. Several warning chimes dinged.

"Activating ship grav. Stand by and secure any loose gear." Gravity returned and we settled gently into our seats. My field cap fell lightly to the deck from wherever it had been floating. My balance

center began to reorient itself. My stomach still felt kind of queasy. The *Hot Drop's* artificial gravity had just been switched on, to assist us in getting up and moving into the *Dark Lady*.

"Man. Why didn't they do that before?" Arie objected.

"All right, bodies. Listen up," our squad leader instructed us. He did not appear to be any older than we were. "Follow me into the ship. When we enter the personnel portal, we will lose the shuttle's artificial gravity just before we enter the field of the starship's grav. Just make sure you keep at least one hand on the guide rails or you may lose your balance and float away, or fall and break your head. I'd hate for anything like that to happen because it would look bad on my record. All right, release your restraints, step into the aisle and follow me in an orderly manner. If possible. Squad, stand! Heel!"

I remembered from science class they had once tried to explain to us how a ship's artificial gravity system worked, but I never understood the explanation. I do remember that they said if science could figure out how to use AG to propel a starship it would revolutionize galactic transportation and communications. But they hadn't been able to do it. Starships used antimatter drive and artificially enlarged quantum wormholes and they worked just fine so I didn't see why they would need another method of star travel. But what do I know?

We filed into the starship along the personnel portal and it wasn't so bad. I got a little dizzy near the center of the portal as we lost the grav but we regained it quickly. Our leader marched us under the open entry hatch topped by a heraldic shield that proclaimed CS DARK LADY \* TS-86, depicting a sultry, captivating, scantily-clad female with long, flowing black hair. A couple of Fleetcom folks, clad in black, manned a com station at the entry gate but ignored us as we marched past. I was so ignorant at that point that I didn't know if they were officers or real people.

We marched along a wide, spotless corridor with a glowing ceiling. I was getting used to the ship grav. It seemed a little heavy to me, but what did I know? We soon found ourselves in a spacious entry hall that intersected with several other corridors. Our minders guided us past a counter manned by two more Fleetcom types, evidently clerks,

monitoring some d-screens. As we approached the counter, the line slowed down. When I got there a low, musical tone pinged soothingly, a d-screen instantly filled with data and then glowed green. One of the clerks read the data, extracted a little ID card from a slot below the d-screen, and slid it over the counter to me.

"Rains?" he asked.

"That's me."

"Place this ID over your suit ID button and don't ever be without it. If you lose it, you will be instantly detained. See your super for further info. Next."

I moved on and examined the new ID. Under the heading TS86 Dark Lady, the little metal card identified me as Rains, Richard, classified me as PERS CARGO and provided a long Legion serial number. There was no pix. I placed it over the little gold ID button on my tunic and it affixed itself there.

"So we're cargo," Arie said, fooling with his new ID. "Is that good or bad?"

"I think it's good. If we're cargo, maybe we won't have any duties and we get to relax."

"I wonder if they feed pers cargo."

"All right, bodies. Heel! Second squad, follow me!" He still hadn't given us a name. We followed, shuffling along another corridor, then into a wide personnel elevator. It shot down abruptly and then snapped open in the midst of a row of other elevators lining a wall along a wide corridor. We followed our minder along to a grand foyer with a dizzying view of both upper and lower levels. Random crew members bustled past us as if they had something to do. We paused by a balustraded marble railing and I could see up several levels. Richly carpeted personnel staircases wound up and down. Fleetcom was not into luxury but the overall effect was satisfying – clean, functional, and Spartan. I don't suppose it was real marble, but a damned good imitation.

"This is Deck 15A, Midships," our leader told us. "Your quarters are in Pers Cargo Hold 33. Remember it. Now pay attention and follow me. On a starship you walk on greensides." We followed along another corridor, evidently into the heart of the ship. Little green

lights dotted the wall from time to time on our left side. An unmanned cargo pallet shot past on my right, almost hitting me. That wall had little red lights. *Walk on greensides. Fine.*

"All right, this is it. Cargo Hold 33." We entered a little alcove that led to a narrow corridor with closed bunk beds sealed into the wall, three high. Further down the corridor another squad was milling around.

"Time for introductions. I am Trooper Two One of Eugarat Temporary Training Squad Two. I am responsible for watching over you rejects until I can deliver you all to Providence, where you will become someone else's problem. On the table there, in the bin marked with the numeral two, you will see a pile of comsets. Take one. They are set to our squad freq and only our squad freq. I am Two One on the net. Do not bother me unless it is important. The comset has a map of the ship, shows where your mess hall is, and shows where you can go and where you cannot go. I would prefer that you sit on your bunks for the whole voyage, but you don't have to. Just keep your ID and comsets on, stay out of everybody's way, don't talk to officers, and stay out of trouble. You have no duties, but that can be changed if you prove troublesome. Any questions? Good!" He turned to leave.

"Sir! Sir! I have a question." One of our squadies was waving his hand urgently. Oh no, I thought. Trooper Two One paused, glaring at him.

"What." The word reeked with annoyance.

"Um, how long will the voyage last?"

"You will be notified when we arrive." And he turned on his heel and departed.

Δ

"It's nice to know our CO is so concerned with our welfare," Arie said. We were seated in one of the mess halls, stuffing our faces. It had been a long day, we were starved, and the food was absolutely delicious. They had separate tables there, the place was spotless, and we were very happy.

"Yeah, he's a gem, isn't he?" I replied. "Concerned, sensitive, eager to please, always upbeat and considerate. You know you can go to him with your personal problems, right?"

"Better keep your voice down, or you'll be cleaning toilets," Arie grinned. The mess hall was getting crowded as most of our ten squads had found their way here. What a day! I took another sip of dox. Hot and steamy, foaming, tingling. Heaven!

"I told you things were going to get better, didn't I?" I said. "Forget him. This food is amazing."

"Is he an officer, or what?"

"I don't think so. He's a new guy. Doesn't look like he even has a war name yet. He's been in awhile, been through all the initial training and now he's just waiting for a real assignment."

"How do you know that?" Arie asked.

"I think that's how it works. He's not from Eugarat, I can tell you that. He's assigned to the Dark Lady."

"Yeah, sounds like he used to work with dogs, not people."

"Well, he needs a name. Let's call him Doggie."

"Fine by me."

"STAND BY FOR VAC RUN RED," a metallic female voice advised calmly but loudly. "DUTY CREW TO STARDRIVE STATIONS. STARSEAL ALL PORTS AND HATCHES. PREP FOR ENTRY. COUNTDOWN UNDERWAY." A musical tone sounded once, twice, and continued.

"What in the world is that?" Arie asked in alarm. "What do we have to do?"

"Relax," I said. "The vacheads are continuing with their meals. It's only our guys who are looking around uneasily."

"What's a vachead?"

"A vachead is a Fleetcom guy. I heard one of our squad leaders using the term. We're boots, they're vacheads." The musical tone continued beeping away.

"All right, but what's vac run red?" Arie asked.

"It means we're about to power into stardrive. Didn't you study any of this stuff in science class? Even I know that, and I'm no scientist."

"I hated science," Arie admitted.

"I didn't like it much either," I replied. "Maybe that's why we're boots and they're vacheads."

"GREEN FOR LAUNCH. LAUNCH UNDERWAY. LAUNCH SUCCESSFUL. CRUISING VAC RUN RED. DUTY CREW REPORT STATUS. SECURE FROM LAUNCH." An almost imperceptible shudder rippled through my body. A strange, faint pressure built inside my head. The musical tones sounded again, then stopped.

"Man, that was quick. Are we in stardrive yet?" Arie asked, his dox cup poised halfway to his mouth.

"Yeah, I think so. Feels kind of...funny."

"Feels all right to me," Arie replied, looking around in surprise. The vacheads had not paid any attention to the announcements. I knew extended stardrive was unpleasant for many individuals, and painful to some. I sure hoped it would not give me any nasty side effects. The artificial wormhole that cocooned around our ship generated tremendous forces, positive and negative pressure that could rip us to atoms if anything went wrong. The technology that formed and held open the wormhole also shielded the ship and everyone inside, but with all those cosmic forces rippling around our ship it was not surprising that some people got bad headaches or blurred vision.

It was a small price to pay for being able to travel around the galaxy like gods.

Δ

"I got the sked," Arie announced. We were in the cargo lounge, sitting at a small table, experimenting with our comsets. The lounge was crowded, mostly with cargo vacheads. Some of them were diligently studying plastic textbooks – maybe cramming for exams, I thought.

There was a whole lot of info in our comsets about the *Bold Lady*. "Here we are," Arie continued, peering into his little comset screen. "Current Jump. Destination System Veltros. A bunch of stats about the jump. It's 6.2 light years from Eugarat. Wow."

"Practically in our back yard," I said. "So when do we get there?"

"Let's see...ETA 379/06/11 at 1306 ship's time."

"That's...day eleven? That's tomorrow."

"Oh! I was expecting a longer trip."

"Well, it is just next door, still in the Crista Cluster," I said. "Of course, star jumps don't always work out that way. Sometimes a jump to a star hundreds of light years away turns out to be faster than to a closer star."

"You'd better shut down those comments or they may make you an officer, and I'll never see you again."

"I think your earlier prediction about me cleaning toilets is more likely."

"Well, in that case, I'll probably be right at your side. You must have been a good student. Did you do a major in middle school?"

"I majored in girls, and minored in being a wise-ass. It's why I'm here."

"That's funny, I majored in girls, too. And minored in contact. And the girl part is why I'm here."

"Fellow souls in Purgatory," I said, offering my fist. He tapped it with his. "What are we doing next?"

"Well, I'm not sure. I mostly wanted to see the view, but with all the viewports sealed for stardrive, that's out."

"They've got a neat chart of our route here on the com. Take a look." I slid my comset over to him. The full-color route chart depicted our star jump as a golden line slicing through an inky background dotted with glowing blue-white stars. The more prominent Crista Cluster stars and associated nebulae were labeled in red text, and a text box to one side contained the voyage stats.

"Sarana, Lotus and Marala are all closer than Veltros in space-time, according to this," I said. "You've never been off-planet before, right?"

"No. Never."

"I wonder what planets we'll see – assuming we make it as soldiers of the Legion."

"There you go again. Off into the future. What do you think?"

"I think it'll be wonderful," I said, softly. I was overwhelmed with strange visions. What would we see? Where would they send us? I

remembered those eerie holos that lined the entry hall of the Legion Gate on Eugarat.

"Don't get too carried away, my friend," Arie said. "Remember we've got to get through training first. I heard there are a lot of drop-outs. What do you think will happen if we don't make it?"

"We're in the Legion for six years, no matter what. If we fail to make the grade as regular troopers, there's plenty of other work to do. The Legion has work for everyone. That's what they say."

"What kind of work?"

"Honest work. Cleaning latrines, maybe."

Arie laughed, and resumed scanning his comset. "This ship is like a small city," he said. "Command, Operations, Security, Engineering, Cargo, Supply...any place in particular you want to see?"

"Beats me. What else is there?"

"Communications, Medical, Science, Nav...galleys, gym, reactor...hmm. Here we go. Let's take a stroll. I've spotted something on the deck plans." He pocketed his comset, popped on his field cap, and headed for the doorway. I followed.

Δ

"Neat?" Arie asked. We were standing in a little alcove labeled SHIP'S STORE. It was full of all sorts of magical things we had never seen before. A young vachead sat silently behind a counter piled high with stardrive souvenirs, knick-knacks, candy and snacks, infodrives, newscans, toiletries and medication for stardrive symptom.

Arie held up a black silky shirt with the logo of the *Dark Lady*. It was spectacular. I found a black field hat, also with the *Dark Lady* logo. I had seen plenty of crew members wearing this hat. Oh no, I couldn't turn this one down.

"May I help you, gentlemen?" the vachead asked.

"How much for the hat?" I asked.

"It's beautiful, isn't it? It's free, but you have to sign up for six years in Fleetcom."

Arie burst out laughing. I just stood there like an idiot.



"Only kidding!" the vachead said, smiling. "It's five credits, and you don't have to sign up for Fleetcom. Unless you want to do it the hard way."

"I think I'll just pay the five credits," I said. Good one, I thought. He got me on that one.

"Are you gentlemen new Legion recruits?"

"That we are."

"Well, good luck to you. Everyone admires the Legion, you know. Even we vacheads. We're all on the same team, boots and vacheads. No matter what."

"Well, thank you," I said. He seems quite serious, I thought.

Δ

"What was that all about?" Arie asked me as we walked away from the Ship's Store. He had bought the *Dark Lady* shirt.

"I don't know. I guess he knows joining the Legion is serious business. Life and death stuff. That's what it sounded like."

"Wonderful. Well, we'll find out tomorrow, won't we?"

"Yeah. That's affirmative."

"Hold it," Arie said. "What's this?" Two lovely little honeys were approaching us along the corridor. They appeared to be in their mid-teens. One was a bit taller than the other, slim and sensual, honey-colored hair to her shoulders, dazzling naked legs, all sweet innocence. The other was a strawberry blonde, shorter hair, exquisite petite features, lightly freckled, long shapely legs, arm in arm with her companion. They were visions from heaven, clad only in two-piece swim suits that left little to the imagination. They were carrying towels and wore sandals and stylish sunglasses. Thank you, God!

And thanks for the greensides rule – they were almost on us now, peering curiously through their sunglasses.

"Hello!" I said, smiling. "Um, going swimming?"

"Yes," the taller one answered. "What was your first clue?" It was turning ugly fast.

The petite blonde lifted up her sunglasses to see us better. "What are those uniforms?" she asked.

"We're Legion soldiers," Arie said, brightly. "Do they have a swimming pool on this ship?"

"No, we're using a bathtub," Honeyhair replied. She was not making it easy.

"Legion soldiers! Wow!" the little blonde exclaimed. "I've never seen uniforms like those before." She was still gently clinging to her lovely companion, holding onto one arm, her other arm draped around Honeyhair's waist. Somehow it seemed overwhelmingly erotic.

"We're volunteers," Arie said. "We're headed for Providence basic training on Veltros."

"You volunteered? Wow, that's crazy!" Blondie exclaimed. "Aren't you afraid of getting killed?"

"Sure we are," I said. "But we volunteered anyway."

"Why?" Honeyhair asked. It sounded like a challenge.

"We volunteered." I replied, "so that you two honeys can go to the pool in peace without being enslaved by Systies or eaten by Omnis. That's why." It shut her down for a few frags.

"Can you show us where the pool is?" Arie cut in. "We want to go swimming, too."

"There's not enough room in the tub for four," Honeyhair said, trying to recover. She appeared to be exquisitely bored.

"Just follow us," Blondie said. "And don't mind Sheila. She loves you already, I can tell. Do you have a pool pass?"

"A pool pass! Uh...no."

"They won't let you in without a pool pass. Just ask your Super, he'll give you one. See you there!" And they moved on. Damn it!

Arie was on his comset instantly. "Pool...pool..." he muttered. "Here it is! Off limits. Off limits! The whole area is off limits to us. Damn it!"

"Just ask your Super. Somehow I don't think that will work."

"Well, if we try to get in without a pass, they'll detain us and we'll spend the rest of the trip cleaning toilets. Right?"

"I'm afraid you're right."

"All right, all right. We wait until the pool closes and ambush them outside."

"Didn't you say the whole area was off limits?"

"Oh damn. Yes – the whole deck! It's for civilian passengers. If we even show up there, alarms are going to go off. Damn."

"Let's not lose hope. Back to the lounge. They loaded the whole ship's directory in our comsets, for our convenience, right? Probably just so we wouldn't be asking a lot of questions and bothering anyone. So see if there's a civilian passenger list."

"Yes! Good idea. But who do I look for?"

"Sheila. Sheila anybody. We'll figure it out."

"And what good does that do us?"

"Look, we arrive in Veltros tomorrow. We don't have time to do anything with these girls now. But they are presumably bound for Veltros as well."

"How do you know that? Maybe they're the captain's kids, or something. Maybe they stay on the ship."

"Check the passenger lists," I said, patiently. We stepped through the doorway to the cargo lounge and headed for a table. "This is a long-term project. It'll be worth the wait."

"The Legion isn't going to make it easy. Basic training – they'll be running our asses off." Arie was scanning the comset directory.

"Stop whining. Didn't you see those girls? Angels! I aim to see them again."

"I'm going to be dreaming about them all night. Man! That little blonde – what a treat! Like a human lollipop."

"Stop it. Just find a passenger list."

"All right, all right."

"*We want to go swimming too,*" I said. "Good one. Not very imaginative, but good."

"*Um, going swimming?* You big dummy! I thought you majored in girls."

"I lied. I majored in being an idiot."

## Chapter 3

### Providence

It was almost noon the next ship's day, and Arie and I were heading for the shuttle dock with a loose mob of our khaki-clad compatriots. We were in orbit around Veltros, and had all been summoned to gather for the shuttle drop into our future. As we were moving through a wide corridor, a giant simport suddenly snapped into existence along one wall. It blasted us silently with glaring light, startling me. By that time I had figured out that the viewports on this ship were actually simports, vid images of the exterior view. The *Dark Lady* was as tight as a virgin and had no need for actual viewports. However, they were extremely realistic images.

We stopped. Everybody stopped to gape. A gigantic planet hung before us, blazing reflected sunlight, blotting out the stars, so massive and threatening that I was half afraid we would crash into it and perish. It was stupifyingly beautiful, great green oceans streaked with silky white clouds, tiny magical microscopic islands of red earth and black rocks set in the ocean, and finally a great purple continent sliding into view, stopping the ocean, a miniature volcano spewing black ash into the atmosphere, wild blue mountain ranges and barren mottled badlands and a spidery tracery of glittering rivers reflecting sunlight like molten silver, and great golden lakes winking at us, teasing us. Dark thunderclouds hung low over the land, lightning flickering inside. I squinted and I could see the thin film of the atmosphere that guarded the planet against everything that was out there. Veltros! What a view. We couldn't see a sign of life, but somewhere down there was Providence, where the Legion was going to hammer us into soldiers.

"Welcome to Veltros," I whispered to Arie.

"Man! Look at that," was all he could say.



It was a bumpy ride down on the *Hot Drop*, once we entered the atmosphere. The shuttle vibrated and hummed as the skin glowed red in protest. We had a great view out the simport. We were falling into nightside, and soon we could see the soft white mist of inhabited areas through the night. Despite the rough ride, I felt no discomfort this time. Once we entered the at, the planet's gravity and the shuttle's momentum tugged at us.

"So do you think the girls are headed downside, too?" Arie asked.

"Why come all this way and then stay on board? Sure they are. Maybe not on this shuttle, but they'll come."

"But how long will they stay?"

"Long enough for us to contact them and hit on them and persuade them to stay longer."

"They're just kids. They have to do what Mom and Dad tell them."

"Are you kidding? Did you ever do what your mom and dad told you?"

"Well, sometimes. I mean, until I joined the Legion."

"We'll find them. And it'll work out. They love us, remember? That's what the blonde said."

"The Prophet speaks. Well, I hope you're right." Arie turned his attention back to the simport. The ship's directory had provided us with Honeyhair's name – Sheila Dantos – and the pool pass list had allowed us to deduce that Blondie was Katrina Weyvoulias, who was listed right next to Sheila on the list. Sheila and Katrina, thumping in our hearts. Sheila was accompanying her parents, and Katrina was escorted by a female Weyvoulias who was probably her mother. Arie had already claimed Blondie as his own so I was left with Honeyhair, but I didn't mind. She was the most lovely creature in the galaxy so her acid comments didn't bother me at all.

It was all set – and all we had to do was regain contact and tell the girls that we loved them. What could possibly go wrong?

Δ

"Squad heel! No talking! Come! Follow me!" Doggie was leading us. I was thrilled to be on Veltros. We were filing away from the *Hot Drop* through a huge spaceport ablaze with lights. A starry night greeted us overhead but one horizon was bleeding with an ochre glow. I didn't know if it was sunset or sunrise. The air was cool and smelled of wet vegetation. The grav seemed a bit heavier than Eugarat. The other squads were with us. We were evidently headed for a large airbus that was lit up, awaiting our arrival. It had a logo shield on it and as we neared I made out the words: LEGION TRAINING COMMAND.

"Board! Now! Move it! Go!" Doggie was in his element. We followed 1<sup>st</sup> Squad up the steps into the airbus, and Arie and I dropped into our seats.

"Man, I'm getting tired of all this travelling," Arie complained. "Are we there yet?"

"Not yet. Just a little longer."

"How many times do Legion soldiers eat per day? Once?"

"It's still early. Perhaps breakfast will be awaiting us upon arrival."

"Ha! You're a funny guy."

Once everyone was aboard, the airbus lifted off silently and glided away into the night. The bus had panoramic plex windows but there wasn't much to see out there. The seats were very comfortable. I settled back and closed my eyes.

Δ

"Out! Now! Move it!" The interior lights flashed on. I couldn't have been asleep long, for Providence was not far from the starport. We stumbled out under a dark sky but a rosy dawn revealed a far-off mountain range and a nearby peak silhouetted by crimson. We were in an open space surrounded by endless rows of low white modular buildings set out in neat patterns.

"Form up! First squad right here, second squad behind – NOW, damnit!" We hustled to obey. The squad leaders were up front

consulting with some officers. Despite the early hour, the place was busy. Columns of khaki-clad troopers trotted past us along spotless white roads. Some wore shorts and sleeveless tops, some were in camfax fatigues, but all were jogging. A squad of girls in running gear passed as we were lining up.

"You'll be saw-reeee!" one of them shouted. I didn't doubt it.

"Sir! Eugarat Transport Platoon Two Nine reports all present or accounted for!" somebody shouted.

"All right, you've got the data – get 'em moving."

"Second squad – come! Follow me," Doggie commanded. We followed, walking along in single file, each squad behind its leader. We walked silently through a vast portable city, hundreds of white low modular buildings of various sizes, each labeled with numbers or functional descriptions. As we walked, the sky slowly lightened. A cool breeze touched us. We were the only group that was walking – everyone else charged past us, trotting. Some were chanting but I couldn't make out the words.

Who were these people? I was amazed at the diversity of racial types in the troopers jogging past us. Our own Eugarat group was straight Outworlder, but it looked like the Legion had been recruiting all over the galaxy. I had studied race in midschool and so I was not surprised to see plenty of Assidics, who were obvious by their light brown skin, black hair, high cheekbones and slightly slanted eyes. These were the descendants of Saka the Invincible who had raised hell with the rest of the inhabited galaxy until his empire had overexpanded and collapsed. They were now strong allies with ConFree and the Outworlder race against all the slave states that had arisen in the wake of the collapse of the System, and a new race was arising as a lot of Outworlder males were attracted to Assidic females and a lot of Assidic males were turned on to Outworlder females. They had taught me that much in midschool but we didn't have many Assidics on Eugarat, and the rest of these exotics really surprised me. There were jet-black Cyrillians with slanted eyes like the Assidics, and as they ran past chanting, I could see the sharpened white teeth for which they were famous – or infamous. From time to time, exceptionally large troopers jogged past us, almost like giants, with shaved heads, invisible eyebrows

and pale, slightly greenish skin. These were Mocains, Greenies, the old System's master race, and they had been our most formidable human enemies. What were they doing in the Legion? True, most of the troopers were Outworlders, but there were also plenty of others – including many I could not identify. They did not seem to be Outworlders and I couldn't ID any special ethnic traits. Perhaps they were Inners from the System – but what were Inners doing in the Legion?

Surprising, I thought. I knew the Legion accepted anyone who was willing to bleed for ConFree, but I had also been taught that multi-ethnic nations or empires were weak, not strong, and that they always resulted in serious internal conflict and ultimate collapse.

"Squad halt! Right face. That's it, that wasn't so hard, was it? All right, here's where we say goodbye. It's been fun, hasn't it?" Doggie asked. We were facing a giant building of white stone with a shield that proclaimed LEGION TRAINING COMMAND over a large entryway atop an imposing marble staircase where a whole gang of black-clad Legion troopers was evidently awaiting us, grimly eyeballing us and cracking their knuckles. The black ConFree flag hung limply from a huge flagpole in front of the building. I looked around. Long columns of khaki-clad volunteers were converging on this building from several wide, intersecting personnel roads. It evidently wasn't just Eugarat folks who were showing up here today. The other columns revealed a diversity of ethnic types and a goodly number of females as well as males.

"Now walk up the stairs and say hello to the nice men," Doggie said. "This squad is hereby disbanded. I will remember you all with great fondness. Any questions? Good! Now get up there." And he turned and walked away.

Δ

"NOW! NOW! NOW! Whattaya, deaf dumb AND stupid? MOVE IT!"

The blackies, as I thought of them, had swarmed over us like attacking pirates and hustled us into the building and along a grand



corridor while doing their best to terrify us into submission. We were instantly torn into smaller groups, and then into individual bodies, each beset by two or three blackies shouting contradictory things into our faces. Arie disappeared. Finally I was shoved into a line that led into a room with a sign that proclaimed MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS.

"STRIP! Off with your boots, off with your clothes, off with your shorts and tees and socks, the belpak too, drop everything into the bins on your left, pick up a pack from the counter on your right, put on the shorts and tops, then move on." I danced around doing what they wanted. I noted that the females had evidently been diverted to another room, too bad. The new shorts and sleeveless tops were khaki, too.

"Out the door. Go, go, keep moving!" The blackies shoved me into the next room. Two medical types in white approached me, one male, one female. They gently pushed me up against a giant machine, evidently some type of body scanner, guided my head into the proper slot, and pushed my arms and shoulders into place.

"All right, don't move." Several blinding flashes later, they sent me on my way with white hot spots dancing before my eyes. The blackies harried me into the next room.

"Waddaya, blind? Stand in line!" We shuffled slowly forward towards some white-clad medics on both sides of the line. An icy breeze rippled over my right arm and one of the medics shot me in the arm with a little needlegun, then made an adjustment and did it again. My left arm then got cold and somebody else zapped me a few times over there. Then another injection in the left biceps. Both arms felt numb. I was pushed sideways and my left arm guided into a device extending from the wall. It closed over my arm.

"Don't move," a medic said. I felt another needle sliding into a vein. They were taking blood. When it released my arm, there was a little bandage on it.

We were forced into another room, a latrine, with urinals lining one wall.

"Right face! Open the container with your name on it, pee into it, then close the container and place it on the upper shelf. Do NOT piss on the floor! NOW, bodies!" Pee on command, fine, it was the first

chance they'd given us this morning so it wasn't a problem. My bottle was right there before me. I guess that meant their program was well thought out.

△

"Sit down. Don't move!" It was haircut time. We plopped down into a long line of barber chairs and the barbers poised over us with their instruments.

"How would you like your cut, sir?" my barber asked.

"Could you make it a bit longer on top, please?" I said.

"It will be my pleasure, sir." He whisked over my head with an airlaser and quickly annihilated what little hair I had left.

"Is that satisfactory, sir?" He showed me the result in a mirror – completely bald.

"Excellent, thank you," I replied.

"Move it, bodies! Quit screwing around!" I was hustled into the corridor with a gang of other victims.

△

"One moment please. Open your mouth." In the next room an anonymous medic in white, a female, poked something into my mouth while a second medic, a male, snipped a little tuft of my arm hair.

"Go in there!" A blackie commanded. It was a small office. A youngish medical type sat relaxed behind a desk, his white smock open, looking up from a d-screen.

"Rains?" he asked.

"Sir yes sir." I responded.

"Sit down." He gestured at an airchair. "Want some dox?" He was a clean-shaven Outworlder with carelessly combed sandy hair and dark brown eyes.

"Sir yes sir! Thank you sir." What a break! I could hardly believe it. He ordered a fresh dox from a brewer by his desk and handed me the cup as I settled into the chair. Breakfast!

"Well, let's see," he said, looking over his d-screen. "Oh, I'm Doctor Waverly. Just forget my name, you probably won't see me again. Anyway...it looks pretty good. Your vision and hearing are both close to perfect, as they should be at your age. If they deteriorate over time, both can easily be restored. Your general health is excellent. Oh, what happened with your front teeth?"

"Somebody knocked them out, sir."

"Ah. And the nose?"

"Same guy."

"Hmm. Well, the artificial teeth are fine. And the nose is mending well. Aside from that, there were a few minor internal problem areas the scans revealed but nothing major. Those problems are now under repair and you don't have to worry about them. We've given you reds and whites – that is, nanoreds and nanowhites, to build up your body and counter anything nasty that gets in. How's the dox?"

"Superb, sir."

"Good. Among other things, you're drownproofed now. And invulnerable to all those diseases that used to plague mankind for centuries."

"Drownproofed, sir?"

"Yes – that's the nanoreds, artificial red blood cells, respirocetes – nanoparticles. We just flooded you with them. You can now sit at the bottom of a swimming pool for a couple of hours without breathing, or run for hours without tiring. Lots of oxygen in your system. You'll get guidance on that during Basic. The nanowhites, on the other hand, nanoparticles of white blood cells or leucocytes, will protect your system from all unwanted invaders. Well, let's see what else we have. Blood fine, urine fine, we've got your DNA now and it will follow you wherever you go. If you lose any limbs or organs they will be regrown from your own DNA. We can even grow a whole duplicate of you if we want to."

"You mean, you could produce a whole squad of Richard Rainses? Sir?"

"A whole platoon, if we wanted. We've also got a full memory scan – just took it from you, in there. So if you have brain trauma, and lose your memory, we can restore it – up until today's date. We do these

scans periodically for combat soldiers – just in case. It's awkward to build new memories from zero."

"That's amazing, Sir."

"Yep. I did notice your muscles are kind of flabby. Oh, it's all there, and all healthy. Just civilian slack, that's all. Basic will slap you into shape, along with the supplements you'll be eating with your meals. By the time we're through with you, you'll be a superman. Like all Legion troopers."

"Does that include the Immortality Gene, sir?"

"You'll get that a little later in the course. Now, your brain probe revealed quite a bit. Nothing abnormal. Your IQ is fairly high. Not exceptionally high, but fairly high. You have all sorts of potential there. Our IQ results show potential but it's up to you to reach that potential. Have you thought about OCS – officer candidate school?"

"I've been focused on basic training, sir."

"Well, that's a good attitude. Just keep it in mind for the future. Your IQ qualifies you for consideration."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me. Thank your mom and dad. One last thing, you've now got a Legion c-cell injected under your skin. It will show your medical history and, later, all Legion assignments. It will be autoupdated for the rest of your career. Well, bottom line is you've passed your medical and qualify for unrestricted service. Congratulations."

"Thank you sir."

"Next stop. Out that door. The instructors will toss you into the right room."

"Yes sir. Thank you sir."

Δ

"Don't stand there like a dummy! Open the door and go in!" the black uniform shouted at me. The little light over the door had just blinked from red to green and my reaction was evidently not fast enough to suit my latest tormentor. I pushed the door open and let it close behind me. I stood at attention before a black-uniformed official

sitting behind a desk. I suspected he was an officer, but I was so new I didn't even know how to tell. He looked up at me. He looked quite young, black hair, a little black mustache.

"Rains?"

"Sir yes sir."

"Why did you want to join the Legion?"

"Sir. I wanted to help, sir, to do my duty and defend ConFree."

"Well said. Now tell me why you really joined the Legion." His gaze shifted to his d-screen. I knew he had my whole history there.

"I got in trouble and was facing exile from my home planet. A Legion recruiter suggested that I volunteer. "

"I see. So you volunteered."

"Yes sir."

"A reluctant volunteer."

"No sir! I am not reluctant."

"You had no choice. Right?"

"I did have a choice, sir. I could have chosen exile. But I chose the Legion."

"How can we trust you?"

"I'm here, sir. I'm fascinated by what I've seen so far. I'm going to make a good trooper."

"Oh really."

"Yes sir."

"Tell you what, Rains. We don't want people who don't want to be here. If you want, you can stop this process right now. I'll invalidate your enlistment, we'll put you back on the ship and send you back to Eugarat, and you take your chances with the courts. Exile may not be so bad. At least, nobody will be shooting at you. Just sign at the bottom." He slid a portascreen across his desk to face me. I looked at it, and it looked at me.

"Sir no sir. I don't want to go back to Eugarat."

"Are you certain? This is a one-time offer. Your only chance."

"I don't want it, sir."

"Good. Good. In that case, proceed through that door and continue your processing. And congratulations on your choice, trooper."

Trooper, I thought as I walked out the door. He called me trooper. It felt good.

Δ

"Find your name, take your bin, and proceed outside. Now, bodies. Now!" The bins were the same ones where we had abandoned our clothing earlier. Now they were lined up on a beltway along the corridor, overflowing with clothing packs, hats, new boots, belts, field manuals and miscellaneous equipment. I found mine labeled Rains, Richard, and hauled it outside into a disorganized mob of recruits clad only in shorts and sleeveless tops. It was a clear day but getting warmer. The girls were back with us, and they all looked good in their khaki panties and near transparent khaki tops. No bras, I noticed. They hadn't been scalped, but their hair was considerably shorter. They didn't look happy, but I suppose we didn't either.

"SILENCE! Form into squads, facing front. Listen for your squad assignments!" There was such a babble of voices from the blackies that it was hard to hear. However, I heard my name from the nearest blackshirt and headed for him. Surprisingly, most of the people in my immediate vicinity were assigned to him, too. Perhaps there was method in their madness.

Three black Legion fighters shot past us close overhead just like a trio of massive darts, and the shock wave almost deafened me. Providence was a noisy place.

"Delta squad, pay attention now! Sound off when I call your name!" Our leader was a muscular Assidic who looked kind of like a human airtank. "Oswego, Kakatarn; Surinto, Jarleman; Rains, Richard..." We sounded off. Arie was not there. Too much to hope for, Richard, I thought. Who were these people? Males, females, I just had confusing glimpses as we lined up in formation behind our bins.

"All present! Good. Follow me at double time and don't drop your bins." He took off at a trot and some of the other squads were breaking away, too. It wasn't easy jogging barefoot while carrying that big heavy damned bin full of weighty junk.

We wound up at a squadmod, as I later learned it was called – a portable white plastic modular building built specifically to house one Legion squad. The designation was printed over the doorway: 1/4 Delta. We were all gasping from the exertion, but our Assidic primitive urged us inside. We stumbled in and stood there in confusion looking around as he barked orders. The interior was also white, spotless, seemingly brand new and well designed – a transparent roof let in the sunlight. Five bunks lined each wall to the left and to the right. A small central area featured a circular table and plastic benches and a kitchen mod. To the rear were heads separately designated for males and females, and a small separate room with a closed door marked Training Instructor.

"All right, let's MOVE – we don't have much time," our leader exclaimed. "Choose a bunk, drop your bin by the foot of the bed, open the clothes packs, put on khaki fatigue trousers long and khaki blouse long. Put on black socks and brown leather boots and green web belt NOW, bodies. NOW!"

Another confusing dance ensued. He hadn't said to strip off anything so we wore our undies and sleeveless top under the new clothing and were ready in record time. At least it seemed to me that it was record time.

"Field hats – NOW!" We scrambled, donned the hats and stood there, gasping. I sneaked a look around at my companions. One, two Outworlder males – three, counting me. A male Assidic. A male, olive skin, unknown ethnicity. Two females, a blonde Outworlder angel and a black Cyrillian girl. That's seven. Squads are supposed to have ten. WTH, over.

"Attention! Stand at attention before your bunks! Just don't move a muscle." He re-opened the main door and a trooper in black strolled in.

"Sir!" our leader said. "Your squad is ready for inspection." Our visitor took his time looking us over. He was medium height, slim and wiry, close cut brown hair, piercing grey eyes – oh no. No! It was Doggie.

Doggie! Our new squad leader. Oh no – this was not going to work out at all.

"I see seven bodies, trooper," Doggie said. "Please explain."

"We have two body holds, sir. Our aircar driver has not yet been designated – word is all air assets are to be assigned later. The other body is also on hold. No details yet, sir."

Doggie slowly took us all in. He paused briefly before me, then moved on, looking over every recruit.

"Thank you, trooper," Doggie said, "I take command of this squad. You are relieved." The big Assidic saluted Doggie and left the squadmod.

Doggie glanced at his chron, then spoke. "Welcome to Training Squad Delta of the First Training Platoon, Fourth Training Company, First Training Battalion. I am your training instructor and squad leader. My name is William Tregon and my designation is Delta One. You will address me as 'sir'. My mission is to make you into Legion soldiers. I aim to accomplish that, but you are all going to have to cooperate for that to happen. If I sense any resistance, I'll toss you out of the squad instantly, and if that happens, your future will be dark. Basic is not going to be easy but millions of Legion recruits have done it, and graduated. I advise you to obey orders, keep your eyes and ears open and your mouths shut. And no whining! I am going to get to know all of you, intimately, but we'll do the introductions later. Right now we all have an important appointment. Outside! On me!"

We lined up facing the squadmod at his direction. "Dress right!" he shouted. "Right arm out, touch the shoulder of the man to your right. Straighten the line. I will give this command again when we arrive. When we get there you will stand at attention until notified otherwise. There will be no talk and no movement. All right, follow me, double time."

He took off jogging. We didn't know exactly what "double time" meant, but we had a general idea. We trotted after him, along a winding network of personnel roads through the base. The rest of the base seemed to be on the move, too – so many recruits, all in khaki, hustling down the roads in squads, all coming together into a huge parade ground. Hundreds – thousands – of new recruits, now slowing and marching into the assembly area. Doggie guided us into our proper places, and we lined up, did the right dress, and stood at attention.



*Prophet of ConFree*

There was a mass of humanity there. We had squads in front and behind us, and all around. It was a beautiful day, pale blue sky, no clouds, heating up quickly. The parade ground was rock hard, but I could tell it was dirt and not concrete. Many generations of Legion troopers had trained here, I reflected. We faced a distant dais with two tall flagpoles displaying the ConFree and Legion flags.

As we stood there silent and motionless, I was kind of stunned by the sight. I was surrounded by thousands of new recruits, every race in the galaxy, all clad in khaki, all anxious to learn all they could, all pledged to live and die for the people of the Confederation of Free Worlds, all united in one great effort. What a pure, simple objective. And what a moving sight – this wasn't a vid or some proprop effort. These were real people, thousands of them, young people, just kids, boys and girls just out of midschool, volunteers from all over ConFree, and the Legion was going to forge them into a fearsome instrument to defend the women and children of ConFree, to hunt down our deadliest enemies and hammer them into submission.

And now I was part of it. Me, Richard Rains. Who the hell was I? Nobody, I knew. But here I was, nevertheless, in the midst of this mighty host. I may not have been anybody before, but I was somebody now. I knew it. I was a soldier of the Legion – or would be, if I made the grade.

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"Welcome to Veltros Training Command!" Loudspeakers blasted the words over the assembled recruits. The distant dais was now awash with black-clad officers. A merciful light breeze was calming my fevered brow. It was getting hot, and we had been braced at attention for some time. "I am Commander Keth Durriss, C.O. of the Basic Training Course. Our mission here at BT is to build you all into soldiers and to instill in you all the skills and knowledge you will require to succeed in your mission. And your mission is the Legion mission – to counter, attack and destroy all the enemies of the people of the Confederation of Free Worlds. It is a life and death mission for you, and for our civilization. It is vital that you absorb all that we teach you,

and then go on to Advanced Combat Training and then to an active Legion unit. Your instructors are our most experienced warriors. Listen to what they say, obey orders and don't fight the program. We will teach you what you need to know to stay alive and to confound our foes."

The commander paused briefly, and it appeared that he was looking over the troops. "You are the future," he said, slowly. "The future of ConFree. You are all volunteers, and you have all qualified for BT. You are the cream of ConFree youth. The strongest, the smartest, the best qualified raw material in the galaxy. You are the thin black line that will never retreat, that will never surrender. You are the spiritual descendants of the Eighth Legion, who died on Uldo so that we might live. "

As he spoke, I looked nervously around me, and wished that I could become invisible. Strong? Smart? Best qualified? I was none of that. How the hell did I get into the Legion? Somebody hit me in the face, and it all happened. I surely didn't belong here. Descendants of the Eighth Legion? I knew history – the entire legion had been annihilated on Uldo by the Systies. Not one trooper had surrendered. They had fought to the death. Good Lord, I'm not a suicidal fanatic. I don't belong here. How long before they find out?

"Now, BT is not easy. Some of you will drop out voluntarily and others will be dropped for cause. That's all right – we don't want either category. Either way, you will continue in the Legion and do useful work. But if you want to serve ConFree and the Legion best, and to see history, and to make history, and to stand boldly in that thin black line, I urge you to give it all you've got, and never give up. My best advice for BT: Open your mind and close your mouth. We'll do right by you."

He said more – a lot more, but I didn't hear it. My mind was aflame. What was I doing here? How could I compete with the others? What should I do? Maybe I should have taken that ship back to Eugarat, my tail between my legs. But I didn't. I didn't. And he had called me "trooper". Maybe there was hope for me. Maybe.

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"All right folks, let's get to know each other, shall we? Have a seat." We were back in the squadmod. Doggie gestured to the central table, and we cautiously slid on to the little benches, wondering what was coming next. After the welcoming ceremony, Doggie had marched us to a giant mess hall where we joined what seemed to be half the base for lunch. I looked around for Arie but didn't spot him. Since none of us had eaten since the previous day, lunch was most welcome. We each were given a sealed hot tray full of delicious food, soup and salad and tasty meats and carbs and veggies and fruits. We had no choice of menus but we had no complaints either. I swear it was the best meal I had ever eaten – maybe just because I was starving. Doggie gave us 15 marks and then marched us back to the squadmod, directed us to use the heads and then ordered us to the table to sit and stay. Yeah, it sure looked like he was used to working with dogs.

"Normally," Doggie said, "I'd order ten minutes of strenuous exercises at this point, and watch you barf out your meals, just for my amusement. But just to show you what a nice guy I really am, we're going to do a social thing instead. I know a lot about each of you, but I'd like to hear more from yourselves. And I'd like each of you to get to know your comrades here in Delta Squad." He was leaning casually against a wall as we sat around the table. "It's all about teamwork, you see. And the teamwork is going to start right here. You seem to be a close-mouthed bunch. Let's see if anybody knows how to talk. I'd like each of you to say a little about yourselves. Name, where you came from, background, maybe why you signed up and what you hope to accomplish. Don't be too wordy. Just give us a brief summary."

Silence.

"Don't all speak up at once," Doggie said.

More silence.

"We can do the exercises if you'd like. All right, Overmar, we'll start with you. Speak."

Overmar was a young Outworlder male. I had wondered about him. He had dark brown eyes and deeply tanned flesh that spoke of years outdoors under the sun. There was something about him – a quiet confidence, an exceptional alertness and a sense of maturity and

experience that set him apart from his colleagues. Or maybe it was just my imagination.

Overmar stirred, looked around carefully, and spoke softly, "My name is Harold Overmar," he said. He paused, calm and thoughtful, and resumed. "That's about it."

We burst into laughter. Even that frosty blonde honey cracked a smile. It was the first time I had seen her do that.

Doggie was also laughing. The guy is human after all, I thought. "All right," Doggie said. "Thanks for sharing that with us, Overmar. You'll be our mystery man for awhile. Moving right along – Surinto, how about you? And give us some details, all right?"

"Certainly," Surinto said. This was the fellow with olive skin. He was slender, his facial structure was delicate and his eyes were brown. From his shaven head, it appeared that his hair was black. "My name is Jarleman Surinto. I am from Veda. I recently graduated from the University of Victoria with a doctorate of science in human development. My thesis was on racial evolution in the Outworlder Diaspora."

We all sat there, stunned. Had we heard that right?

"Yes, I was puzzled when I saw that PhD in your file," Doggie remarked. "Can you tell us what motivated you to join the Legion?"

"Well, ConFree has treated me well, and I wanted to give something back."

"But surely you would be more suited to a commission, to OCS. With your educational background, they'd snap you up right away."

"Ah yes, that was suggested but I turned them down."

"Why?"

"I wanted to serve in enlisted ranks."

"And why is that?"

"I promised myself that I would do it."

"Can you tell us why?"

For awhile I thought he was not going to answer. Then he did. "Have you heard of the Ringgold incident?" he asked.

"Yes." Doggie appeared startled.

"I lost my whole family – everyone I loved. I was left with nothing. I finished up my doctorate and then walked through the Legion Gate."

We were all speechless for a moment. I had not heard about the Ringgold incident. Then Doggie spoke up. "We're sorry to hear that, Surinto. All right – Rains. Speak."

"My name is Richard Rains," I said, "and I'm nobody. I just graduated middle school on Eugarat, and I realized I was going nowhere fast. I decided to do something worthwhile. And here I am."

"Good. Oswego?" That was the Cyrillian girl. So far I hadn't heard her say a word. I wasn't sure if she was sullen or just shy. She looked around nervously and spoke.

"I am Kakatarn Oswego. I am from Mica 3. I also recently graduated from middle school. The people of ConFree gave me an education, and I appreciate it. I want to serve in the Legion for the people of ConFree and become a citizen, if I can." She sounded perfectly sincere. I watched her as she spoke. I was fascinated by her. Although her skin was black, she did not have the sharpened teeth that I thought was a Cyrillian trademark. Her pearly teeth were perfectly formed, regular, and very white. Her black hair was glossy smooth. And her face – the features were delicate, clean and lovely. She had clear, light brown eyes, and her skin – it was almost like satin. The girl with satin skin, I thought. She was a honey.

"Thank you, Oswego. All right, Burns. Let's hear it."

Burns was a young Outworlder, and he gave us a big smile. He had fair skin with a few freckles and bright blue eyes and a hint of blond stubble on his shaven scalp. "My name is Byron Burns," he began. "My family are reunification refugees from Katag 2 – that's in the Pherdan Federation. I was just a kid on Katag, but I can still remember it. We were slaves. The Kats hated Outworlders, and I had to fight my way through elementary school. Everything they taught us was a lie. When I was old enough, my dad taught me the truth but warned me never to repeat it, or we would all face PsyMed. When we arrived in ConFree, we were overjoyed. The reunification program meant liberation and freedom for thousands of Outworlders. I vowed right away that I was going to join the Legion on my seventeenth

birthday. And I did. I'm real happy to be here!" And he smiled again. Strange, I thought. He loves and appreciates ConFree. He sees the truth. I've had the truth all along but never appreciated it. I was just a selfish parasite. Maybe I'm learning something here. Maybe.

"Well we're glad you're here, Burns. Zhang Loo-wah-kee." Doggie seemed to have some trouble with the name. "Give us a few words."

"Sir yes sir!" This was the handsome young Assidic male, slanted eyes, pale brown flesh, classic high cheekbones and a black sheen on his shaven scalp. "My name is Zhang Lwoki." He sat at attention, almost like a biogen except biogens were normally a bit more relaxed. "I am from a military family. My father and mother and elder brother were in Fleetcom. I opted for the Legion. We believe it is our duty to serve the people of ConFree, sir!"

"Well I'm glad to hear that, Zhang. In looking through your file, I see very strong evidence that you should have applied direct to OCS rather than entering enlisted ranks. Why didn't you do that?"

"Sir! It is forbidden. In our family we are pledged to enter the military as enlisted, and work our way through the ranks, by merit, to officer status if we deserve it, sir!" I had very little doubt that he would deserve it, and that he would probably reach general rank, assuming he avoided death on the battlefield. I knew ConFree was fortunate to have allied itself with the ethnic remnants of the old Assidic Empire. They had been formidable foes and now they were formidable allies. Even a bit scary, I thought. I could just imagine him ordering me to follow him in a suicidal charge into a DefCorps crossfire.

"Good. Thanks. That leaves you, Fordwater. Go ahead." Fordwater was the little blonde angel that I had been admiring from a distance.

"My name is Celinia Fordwater," she said, in a voice that was barely above a whisper. "I'm from Magna 4." She was so petite and her pale face was so flawless she looked about fourteen but I knew she had to be at least seventeen. Her hair was so blonde it appeared almost white and her eyes, I could see now, were a startling icy grey. "Magna 4 was a difficult environment and the Legion gets a lot of volunteers

there, but I liked it," she said. "I wanted to stay, but I refuse to be exploited. That's why I'm here."

At first Doggie looked like he was going to ask for more details, but he evidently decided against it. "Thank you, Fordwater. All right, take fifteen and don't leave the squadmod. We're going to go over tomorrow's activities." I knew Magna 4 was an extremely challenging iceworld with exceedingly valuable ore deposits. Fertile ground for exploitation, if nothing else.

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"All right, is everyone ready? Got full canteens? Good!" Doggie faced us as we lined up outside the squadmod. We were wearing field hats and clad in khaki shorts and sleeveless tops and running shoes, canteens hooked to web belts. It was a fresh clear morning, a cloudless sky. Veltros's rising sun was blood red on the horizon. "Go easy on the water, as there'll be no refills. There's only one rule: Finish the run. If you drop out, you'll be dropped from the squad. And no helping – we all make it on our own. Keep that in mind. Now, follow me. Double time!" And he set out, down the road.

We followed, through morning mists, jogging through the massive base. From time to time we spotted other squads also up and running. I felt great. I had enjoyed a dreamless sleep before being shocked awake by Doggie clanging a huge metal bell. Ten marks in the head, then out into the morning with no breakfast. Fine – we'll have a little run. I could do that.

We headed roughly south, I could tell from the position of the sun, past a massive aircar base, past a military hospital, then into undeveloped land along a footpath towards a big, irregularly-shaped mountain ridge that was cast into shadow. It looked as if our footpath would take us there.

"Think we're going up that hill?" I asked Overmar, who was jogging beside me.

"Yep."

"Think we'll go to the top?"

"Yep."

"Damn. How many K do you think it is?"

"Six and a half K to the top and maybe another six or so K to return, depending on what route we take."

"How do you know that?"

"It's in your Basic Field Manual. I was looking over the maps last night."

"How long do you think it will take?"

"Depends on how fast we go."

"Right. Thanks!"

"Sure." He wasn't even sweating. It looked like he was in good shape. I wasn't so sure about myself. I hadn't done any athletics in school, other than chasing girls around.

Δ

Half way up the hill, I was beginning to worry. I was getting tired, sweat was pouring off my brow, and a hot haze was swirling around my head. The foot trail was clear of vegetation, torn from the environment by generations of Legion recruits, winding around cliffs and ravines and boulders and trees, always upwards. Our pace had slowed but Doggie was always there to urge us on. It was hot as hell. The sun was beating straight down on us. Tree roots were tangled up all over the trail and it was easy to trip over them.

"Did I say to slow down?" Doggie asked. "Keep going. The girls can do it, can't you? Put that canteen away. You're going to need it later."

Overmar showed no sign of weariness. Surprisingly, neither did Fordwater, the little blonde honey. Zhang, the Assidic, appeared invulnerable to any discomfort. The rest of us were ready to drop – except, of course, Doggie.

Δ

"All right, we're here!" Doggie announced. "Take five, have some water." I collapsed to the ground, my shaking hands fumbling at my canteen. We were at the summit. It was evidently a terrific view, as



Overmar and Fordwater and Zhang were standing together taking it in. A faint breeze touched my burning skin. Thank you, Lord. Doggie was looking us over curiously while sipping from his canteen. The rest of us, Burns, Oswego, Surinto and me, were flaked out prone, gasping for oxygen. All I wanted at that point was to retain consciousness until we arrived back at the squadmod.

"That's it, ladies. Up! Another squad is on the way! Get up! Heel! Follow me!"

It took everything I had, but I staggered to my feet and set off. At least it will be downhill, I thought.

And that was our first jog to the top of Mount Sweat, as some witty long-lost generation of recruits had named it. We were to do that little run just about every day for the whole course, and it didn't get any easier. It got harder, as Doggie stepped up the pace. It wasn't really a mountain, of course. It was more like a big nasty hill, or series of hills, but it sure seemed like a mountain when you were scaling it.

I had never done anything that strenuous before. It was hard; it was very hard, and yet I had done it without passing out or throwing up. I wondered if the nanoreds had anything to do with that.

When we arrived back at the squadmod Doggie gave us 15 marks in the heads to shower, ordered us into khaki fatigues, then marched us to the mess hall for lunch, which was also breakfast. For another 15 marks, it was just like being in Heaven. Again I looked around and again there was no sign of Arie.

From the mess hall we were marched to Dron Hall, an impressive giant two-story edifice of white stone that housed numerous large classrooms. Doggie showed us into one and we found ourselves joining the rest of our training company, a total of ten training squads or one hundred tortured souls. We fit neatly into a long rectangular room and took our places in assigned seating, comfortable airchairs behind shelves that featured darkened d-screens before every seat and plenty of room for the field manuals, handouts and media aids that were already stacked there for our convenience. Our civilian names glowed on a little tab for the instructors: mine read RAINS, R. Several Legion troopers looked us over from a dais up front that featured a lectern and plenty of fancy electronic aids. A huge d-screen covered the

wall behind the dais. It showed a spectacular aerial overview of Providence Training Center.

"Welcome to the Fourth Training Company of Class 379 of the Providence Basic Training Center of Veltros Training Command," one of the troopers greeted us. "This is where much of your learning will occur. Don't worry about my name. Your instructors are all interchangeable. During the first part of this course, you will be engaged in physical training about half the time and intellectual training the other half. You will often be physically exhausted when you arrive here. But you'll recover. Just don't doze off. You'll be sorry if you do. That said, what you will learn here is absolutely vital to your future. Your instructional staff will do all in their power to ensure you understand what we teach. However, we do not encourage questions. Just open your mind and all will become clear."

Some of the instructors were lounging against the walls, looking us over. "You will first learn all that a good citizen should know," the speaker continued. "Some of this will duplicate what you learned in middle school, assuming you went to a reasonably good school. You will learn about history – the human diaspora into the galaxy, the origins of the United System Alliance, the Age of Chaos, Assidic expansion under Saka the Invincible, the Yellow War, the Popex, the foundation and growth of ConFree, the Race Wars, the appearance of the Omnis, the Plague War, the Outvac Wars, and a lot more. You will learn about the conflict with the Systies, the System political philosophy and the collapse of the System. You will learn ConFree political philosophy and the differences between slavery and freedom and why free peoples often choose slavery when given a choice." I noticed that his black uniform had only one insignia on it, a little silver device over his left breast. The others also had it, but no other insignia.

"You are also to be familiarized with all the science you can absorb, starting with the basics and working up to everything that will keep you alive in combat – antimats, wormholes and stargates, cloaking, E-sims, holo science, hyperspace, quantum comms, and a whole lot more. You will become intimately familiar with all Fleetcom, Legion, DefCorps and Omni weapons systems. You will memorize everything relating to Legion, DefCorps and Omni infantry weapons, and will

become experts in..." From time to time I snuck looks around at the assembled troopers. I didn't dare look directly behind me, for fear of attracting attention, but there was no sign of Arie. Where was he? He should be in this group! Surely he hadn't been dropped already? There was no way to find out. We had no access to any base directory or means of communication – not even a comset.



Mornings, it was exercise. Almost always we did the run to Mount Sweat and back. I was no longer afraid of it, although that didn't make it any easier. I figured I had done it the first time, so I could do it again and again. As many times as they wanted – fine. And sometimes it was just the calisthenics, out in front of the squadmod – lots of them. Pushups, sit ups, pull ups, crunches, squats, jumping jacks, lunges. I was not initially in the best of shape, but I could do most of those exercises except the pull ups. I could do pull ups too, with great difficulty, but I hated every frac. The pushups and sit ups and crunches were pretty easy for me. I didn't much like the squats, either, but I endured. Sometimes we would do the calisthenics, and then set off for Mount Sweat, too. Fun fun fun! We were getting harder, and stronger. And all the time we were outdoors, we could hear the song of the Legion – lots and lots of firing, single and autofire, way off in the distance. Sharp explosions, cutting through our routine. Sometimes aircars would whistle over the base, and the horizon would erupt in flames, ugly roaring black clouds ripping up into the sky.

It seemed to me that there was no set schedule, but of course there was. The problem was that we the victims did not know what it was. The only thing we could depend on was that every moment of every day was occupied by our schedule – even sleep time. There was no free time at all.

Nights, I would lie in my bunk exhausted, knowing that I would be asleep in moments. But sometimes, in my feverish state, I would hear a strange low chant, just barely audible. I was always too tired to investigate it, and it wouldn't last long, but it was a puzzle for awhile. Finally I realized what it was. It was Oswego, the Cyrillian girl, a few

bunks away, mumbling to herself. I decided to ignore it. I was just too tired to deal with it.

It wasn't until a few nights later that I realized that somebody was whispering in my ears. I opened my eyes and the mysterious voice stopped instantly. Nobody was there – and Oswego was clearly asleep. After I awoke in the morning, I examined the headboard. There was a tiny meshwork opening there that I had not noticed before. Sleep-ed! Of course! They didn't want to waste all those hours of sleep without continuing our education. I almost laughed. Fine, fine with me. Sleep and learn. Brilliant!



Even though we were together days and nights, we were kept so busy that we hardly had time to chat. I did not learn much more about my squadies than what they had said during the initial introduction session. That didn't help me much because nobody except maybe Surinto had told the truth, or at least the whole truth. I sure hadn't. Overmar had said nothing, Burns had explained where he came from, but nothing else. Oswego's statement had been sweet and convincing, but she was silent and sullen and pretty much unapproachable. The petite blonde, Fordwater, was cold as ice and seemingly suspicious and hostile. She was as tough as nails, excelled at the calisthenics, and never tired. Zhang's story was believable and convincing. People were already calling him 'Saka' after Saka the Invincible. He didn't seem to mind. I wanted to learn more about Overmar as I was convinced there was a lot more to learn. Also Surinto's tragedy did not explain why a professor had joined the Legion as a lowly enlisted man – tragedy or not.

I knew Doggie was learning more about his squad, as he would call individuals into his office in the rear of the squadmod for one-on-one conversations. He didn't seem interested in me, but he spent a lot of time with Overmar and Zhang.

From time to time, I would gain little insights into my squadies through random incidents that would briefly illuminate things like a lightning flash in the night. One day we were taking five during exercises in front of the squadmod. Doggie was lounging by the

doorway, impatiently looking at his chron when two male Cyrillians clad in training fatigues sauntered past. One of them flashed a big smile and said something that I did not catch. Without a word, Oswego charged over to them instantly and delivered a tremendous right fist to the face of the one who had spoken. He staggered and almost fell, a dark welt rising on one cheek. Then he recovered, bared his sharpened teeth and stepped menacingly toward Oswego, who was shrieking at him in some unknown language, her face twisted with hate. I ran over to her and found that Overmar and Zhang were by my side. We got ahold of Oswego and pulled her away from the Cyrillian, whose own buddy was by then restraining him.

"What was that all about?" Zhang asked her.

"He insulted me!" she said. She was still livid, glaring at the two as they retreated. The one who had been injured shouted something at her, presumably in Cyrillian, and she shouted something back, furious, struggling to escape us.

"They're not human!" she said. "They're cockroaches! They should be exterminated!"

"Calm down, girl," Overmar said. "I don't think they're gonna mess with you again. That was a good right cross."

"All right, break's over," Doggie said. "Let's get back to work." He had witnessed the whole incident and had not intervened. He seemed...well, pleased.

I wondered what Oswego had against Cyrillians. She was a Cyrillian, after all. It was strange.



We had just been released from class in Dron Hall and were heading for the exit with a crowd of other recruits when I spotted Arie. He was near one wall with a couple of companions, fooling around with some heavy equipment that was enclosed in armorite cases. I broke off from my squad, overjoyed to see him.

"Take a look at this one," somebody said. The speaker was a very large recruit who had stopped, facing Arie. He had three buddies

with him. "He looks just like a girl. Hey, you – are you a girl?" He laughed aloud.

Arie answered calmly, looking the giant over. "You're a little confused, aren't you?" he said. "Didn't your parents teach you about the birds and the bees?"

"Why you little runt, I'm gonna pound you into the pavement!" One arm went out towards Arie and the other was drawn back in a fist. I charged forward, enraged. That's my buddy!

Before I could even get there, the big guy's arms flew out by his sides and his head snapped back abruptly. Then he crashed down to the deck, the back of his head smashing on the marble floor. What the hell? His face was smashed and bleeding, his nose and mouth gushing blood. He tried to raise his head once, then collapsed. I had missed the action because the giant's body had hidden Arie from my view.

"Richard!" Arie appeared delighted to see me, ignoring the bleeding body on the deck. "How ya been, man?"

"Arie! Are you all right? What happened?"

"Ah, nothing – don't worry about him. Glad to see you, man!"

"Likewise. I thought he was going to stomp you into the ground. I was worried about you! What happened?" The big guy's buddies were trying to revive him.

"Oh, don't worry about me. I can handle creeps like him. I've got a pretty good front face kick."

"Front face kick? Wow!"

"Come on, Arie!" one of Arie's companions said. "We've got to get moving."

"All right, I'm coming. Richard, we'll catch up later. I've got to go." He wrestled one of the armorite cases off the floor.

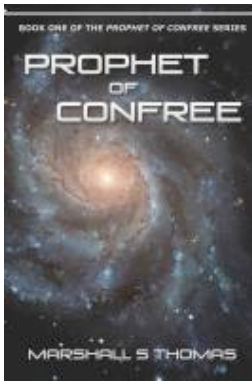
"What unit are you with?" I asked.

"Can't tell you right now – they're keeping me busy. Don't worry, I'm fine. I'll be back in touch soon as I can. How are you?"

"Uh, I'm fine."

"Aw right, hang in there. I'll see you soon! Isn't it fun? Got to go!" And he took off.

*Isn't it fun?* I thought about that one for awhile.



*An ancient enemy threatens the galaxy. Squad Delta of the ConFree Legion stands in the way. At first, Richard is terrified - he is a lover, not a fighter. But he walks through the Legion Gate, and finds himself in a squad of heroes. Ordinary troopers - marching to their deaths for future generations. And Richard becomes Prophet, a soldier of the future. The alien swarm approaches. It is victory or death for squad Delta. Also by Marshall S Thomas - **The Black March, Soldier of the Legion, Slave of the Legion and Secret of the Legion.***

## Prophet of ConFree

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