

DOUGLAS HILL

DAY
OF THE
STARWIND

BOOK THREE OF THE
THE LAST LEGIONARY

A strange tower stands within an impenetrable force-field on a barren planet. Its mystery draws Keill Randor, *The Last Legionary*, in his continuing search for his enemy, the Galactic Warlord.

On the planet Keill, and his alien companion, Glr, must do battle with deadly life forms and with the clones of great warriors. But far greater threats to their lives come from the terrible power of the Deathwing – and then, finally, from the awesome, planet-scouring Starwind itself.

THE LAST LEGIONARY QUARTET

No.1 GALACTIC WARLORD

No.2 DEATHWING OVER VEYNAA

No.3 DAY OF THE STARWIND

No.4 PLANET OF THE WARLORD

for Marni and Ken

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PART ONE

THE MYSTERY OF RILYN

PROLOGUE

Generations of peace had left the people of Jitrell unwary by nature. The planet was rich enough in resources to be nearly self-sufficient, yet not so rich as to attract the greedy or the violent from elsewhere among mankind's Inhabited Worlds. It was close enough to the main space lanes to profit from trade, when it needed to, yet remote enough to be untroubled by turmoil and upheaval on other worlds.

It was just about right, according to its first colonists, when man had been spreading himself among the stars in the centuries of the Scattering. Life was good on Jitrell; life was comfortable. Perhaps too comfortable...

Comfort was definitely uppermost in the minds of the spaceport guards in Belinter, the premier city of Jitrell, in the middle of a balmy summer night. The guards were tending to lounge, to idle, to cluster in groups and exchange murmured jokes and easy chat. The port had not been busy for weeks, and was nearly empty – except for two or three freighter ships whose cargoes had already been forwarded on their long commercial journeys, and a few stacks of commodity containers behind the stout doors of storage depots. Nothing much worth stealing; nothing much worth guarding.

So the guards were totally unprepared for the sight of their command post, with all their outgoing communication systems, apparently beginning to collapse upon itself – as if struck by a giant, invisible club – and then exploding in a thunderburst of flame and flying debris.

The guards were ordinary men, with only basic training, and they reacted like ordinary men. They froze. Shock, bewilderment and fear blanked their minds, paralysed their limbs, for just long enough.

And the others were upon them.

They seemed to come from nowhere, as if the very shadows had given shape to them. Twenty or more men, in dark red, one-piece uniforms, moving in a perfectly co-ordinated attack that was all the more terrifying in its smooth speed and its eerie near-silence.

Some of the attackers rode light, two-man skimmers, hovering on a cushion of gases. Others were on foot, as swift as predators, and as deadly. They came at the guards in a rush, while those on the

skimmers fanned out towards the dark shapes of the freighters and the storage depots.

In seconds both the ships and the depots were also crumpling in upon themselves before exploding in violent bursts of flame. But the Jitrellian guards did not see that happen. The guards were busy dying.

To their credit, one or two of the guards had overcome their panic soon enough to reach for their bolstered weapons. But that merely meant that they were the first to die – in a storm of energy beams from the guns of the attackers.

Those slower guards who were not cut down by the searing beams fell soon enough. The attackers, closing in on their victims, used only their hands – with the easy, almost casual skill that a woodman might show lopping limbs from a tree with his axe.

At the precise instant that the last guard crumpled, a spaceship swept in low over the port, hovering for a landing. It was the shape of a semicircle, like half of a giant disc, with a dark, non-reflecting exterior and no visible insignia. As it landed the attackers moved towards it, with the same speed and coordination, their silence still unbroken. In seconds they were aboard, less than three minutes after their first appearance. The ship lifted swiftly, vanishing into the night sky.

On the ground of the spaceport the huddled forms of the guards lay still, and a last small flame flickered and died within the shattered remains of a freighter.

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The Jitrellians reacted to the news of the attack with a towering but useless rage, tinged with fear. Their rage was useless because there was not the smallest clue to the identity of the raiders, or their purposes. And their fear came from the fact that this was not the first such raid – though it was the most murderous – that had happened on Jitrell within the previous months.

All over the populated parts of the planet, units of the small armed forces were sent to reinforce the guards at spaceports and important industrial sites. And the Jitrellian authorities argued, debated, theorised, yet in the end came to the conclusion that they could come to no conclusion. There was no way of knowing *who*, or *why*.

It was pointless, they said. It was mindless.

But wiser, calmer heads, a long, long way away from Jitrell, studied the reports of the raids – which they gleaned from widespread monitoring devices that the rest of the galaxy did not dream existed. These wiser heads were sure that the raids were not pointless. And they were sure that they could recognise a mind – a very special mind – behind them.

CHAPTER ONE

Like a spearhead with a rounded point, a small spaceship burst out of thick cloud cover, heat shields still glowing from its plunging dive through atmosphere. Its trajectory flattened as it curved down to skim the surface of the planet Rilyn, where the rust-coloured waters of a broad ocean moved sluggishly in slow, flat waves.

Billows of fog reached up to enfold the ship, which was a compact, one-person fighter. Within it the viewscreens showed only swirls of grey. But the man at the control panel – a lean, dark-haired young man in a grey uniform – did not alter his speed. The ship sensors and computer instrumentation gave him all the guidance data he needed. Leaning forward tautly in his slingseat, hands moving over the controls as if they had eyes of their own, he watched the data screens with tireless concentration.

He was Keill Randor, once a young officer in the celebrated Legions of the planet Moros. Now he was the galaxy's last legionary, the only survivor of the swift and terrible destruction of the Legions. But even though he was a man without a planet, without a people, he did not travel alone.

The other occupant of the small, hurtling ship was not human. It was a small, winged alien being, resting on an adapted slingseat that was nearly a perch. From the short body, with its soft leathery plates of skin, the seemingly delicate membranes of the wings extended like half-furled sails. The head was smooth and domed, and above a blunt muzzle two bright, round eyes stared at the control panel with a concentration equal to Keill's. The perch brought the alien's stubby legs and small feet within easy reach of the panel: and those feet, which were in fact hands – three fingers and an opposing thumb – fidgeted as if they too wanted to race over the controls.

The alien's name was Glr, a female of a race called the Ehrilil – from another galaxy, for man had found no other intelligent life in his own galaxy, when he had spread out to populate the Inhabited Worlds. The Ehrilil were a long-lived race, much given to roaming among the stars, and Glr's wanderings had brought her to man's galaxy. There she had eventually met and befriended Keill Randor, and had willingly joined him in the lonely and hazardous quest that had occupied him since the destruction of his world – a quest that had now brought them to the planet Rilyn.

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Keill glanced up at the viewscreens as the fog thinned and fell away. The ship burst out into clear air beneath a dull, overcast sky, and swept over a shoreline where waves flopped heavily against reddish soil. The terrain beyond the shore was typical of Rilyn. It was uniformly flat and almost featureless – a reddish plain with outcrops of dark, bare rock, interrupted here and there by swathes of thick, greenish shrubbery that grew no higher than a few centimetres.

'Hard to imagine people ever wanting to live here,' Keill said idly.

It is usually hard to understand why humans want the things they want. Glr's silent reply formed itself in Keill's mind, for her race was telepathic. And while Keill was not, Glr was able to project her thoughts into his mind, and could pick up his surface thoughts when they were dearly formed. She had met only a few humans whose minds were clear enough for that kind of communication – which was one reason why Glr often claimed to hold a low opinion of mankind.

A smile tugged at the corner of Keill's mouth, but he left the remark unanswered. A smear of a darker red had appeared on the horizon, in the forward viewscreens.

'That's what we want.' His hands moved, and the ship veered slightly, still skimming low over the empty land.

In moments the distant smear showed itself to be an upland region, where the land heaved itself into broad, rolling mounds and hummocks. Everywhere the dark rock thrust up out of the soil, as if striving to become hills – but without success. For the rock surfaces were flattened and razed, scarred with cracks and crevices, creased and pitted by erosion.

It looked almost as if some gigantic weight had settled crushingly on the land, and had then been dragged along to grind away any upthrust peak or rise. And that levelling image was reinforced by the abundance of crushed rock and cracked boulders scattered in the vales and gullies that lay between the flat-topped promontories.

There, too, the reddish soil lay heaped in drifts and dunes, as if it were light sand. Yet it was dense soil, Keill could see, held firmly by the tough green shrubbery and by a rich carpeting of flat vegetation like moss.

Nothing on Rilyn seemed to reach up, to grow vertically towards the light and the sky. The landscape seemed to cower, to prostrate itself, in its empty, silent bleakness.

Do you really hope to escape detection by flying so low?Glr asked, her mental voice sounding testy as the ship skimmed an outcropping.

Keill shrugged. 'Maybe – if whoever's here isn't being careful. There's no point in coming straight down on top of them.'

But if they are being careful, and their detectors are working?

'We'll take the chance,' Keill said.

As he spoke he slewed the ship around another shoulder of rock, and nodded at a broad expanse of open greenery ahead, like a shallow basin. 'We can set down here. If the coordinates are right, the place we're looking for isn't much of a walk from here.'

Walk?said Glr, spreading her wings, her tone implying that Keill had used a dirty word.

But before Keill could reply, he was flung to one side In his slingseat as the ship shuddered and bucked beneath him.

He heard Glr's mental yelp of surprise as his hands flashed over the controls. The power had cut out – the ship's energy drive had stopped. And the electronics were dead, the screens blank, the computer-guidance system silent.

What is it?Glr cried.

There was no time for a reply. The ship struck the ground with a grinding crash, torn shrubbery and red earth fountaining up around it.

But Keill had been flying low and had already begun to slow the ship with its retro rockets. So it struck the shallow basin flat, on its belly, without tumbling – skidding forward, ploughing a deep furrow

across the basin's green surface.

At last friction halted the slide, and the ship came to rest. Keill and Glr, held safe in the slingseats, together expelled the breath they had been holding and looked at each other.

Not one of your better landings. The laughter in Glr's mental voice was slightly shaky.

Keill shook his head. It's some kind of force field, a suppressor. Whoever put it there wouldn't care much how we came down.'

Glr looked at the dead controls. *And what about getting up again?*

'We'll come to that,' Keill said. 'We'll go and find whoever owns the suppressor field – and convince him to turn it off.'

Glr's silent laughter rose as Keill reached for the fastenings of the slingseat. But he did not complete the motion.

The ship had started to move again.

The very ground where it had come to rest fell away, with a rumble of fracturing, collapsing rock. The ship lurched sideways, metal screeching against stone like a death-cry, and toppled with a slow finality into the yawning mouth of the pit that had opened beneath it.

CHAPTER TWO

The ship's downward plunge halted in a few seconds, with a resonant crash. Keill waited a moment, listening, then carefully released himself from the slingseat. The ship had come to rest on its side, so the deck of its inner chamber was tilted steeply, but Keill moved easily up the incline towards the airlock.

Take a weapon. Glr said as she released herself from her perch. *It must be some form of trap.*

'Energy guns won't work,' Keill said. The suppressor field that had knocked out the ship's drive would also affect the guns that used an adapted form of the same power source. 'I'll just have a look – a careful look.'

The airlock had a manual failsafe that opened it readily even without power. Keill waited, sheltering within the lock, watching and listening, his body poised to meet any threat.

But no danger appeared. Only darkness, turned into twilight by the light from the opening in the rock where the ship had fallen through. And a tomb-like silence, save for a few trickles of crushed rock and gravel coming to rest around the ship. And the smell of dust, and of the musty dampness of very old stone.

Keill stepped forward, watchfully, to the edge of the lock, letting his eyes adjust to the dimness.

'It's a cave,' he said to Glr. 'The ship's weight simply broke through the roof of a cave.'

As he spoke he dropped lightly to the ground. Behind him Glr soared out of the airlock, swooping down, on her wide wings to settle on Keill's shoulder.

I dislike caves, she said.

Keill nodded absently, intent on a survey of the ship's exterior. It seemed undamaged by the fall, as it should be: the niconium steel hull had survived far greater impacts in its time. He turned his attention to his surroundings.

It was a high-vaulted cave, not more than twenty metres wide but more than twice as long. There were patches of deeper black here and there in the curved walls that seemed to be niches, crevices, gouged into the rock. Keill stepped further away from the ship, and only then became aware that Glr's grip on his shoulder was unnecessarily fierce, and her wings were half-opening and closing with a nervous restlessness.

'Glr...?' He formed her name silently, in his mind, knowing that she could reach in and pick it up.

Keill, I cannot stay here. The words burst into Keill's mind rapidly, and with a quality that he had never sensed in Glr before. An edge of fear.

'There's no danger, he replied soothingly.

But even as he formed the words, he was proved wrong – by the scratching, slithering noise behind him.

He whirled, into a fighting crouch, while Glr sprang away with a slap of wings. From the deeper darknesses of the crevices in the far wall of the cave, something – *some things* – were emerging.

The creatures seemed to be shaped like large inverted bowls, or perhaps helmets, the colour of the cave's dark stone. But as they pushed further out from their hiding places, Keill saw that the helmet shapes were only their heads – which tapered back into longer bodies, legless, like worms, but thick as a man's thigh. There were no recognisable features, nor did the creatures move threateningly. They had merely pushed their helmet-like heads out, as if waiting.

Keill stepped cautiously towards them. But his boot came down not on rock or gravel but on something soft, that gave beneath him. Reflexively he sprang sideways, staring down with some distaste.

This was a different sort of creature, squeezing out of a narrow crack in the cave floor. It was a dirty white in colour, and seemed to have no fixed shape as it oozed along the rocky surface – sometimes stretching out a long thin projection from itself, sometimes spreading out like a puddle of thick, viscous liquid.

It seemed anxious to get away from Keill, but its anxiety took it too near the wall. From beneath the bulky helmet-head of one of the creatures in the crevices, a long tendril lashed out – almost a filament, so thin that Keill might not have seen it in the dim light had it not been a bright orange.

The tip of the filament touched the oozing creature, and its motion stopped at once, its edges curling up like those of a dry fallen leaf. The tendril then withdrew, and the entire length of the creature

slithered forward, down the wall, moving slowly towards its prey.

The tendril was a stinger of some sort, Keill realised, certainly lethal to the oozing thing. What the tendrils might do to humans was not something he was interested in finding out. As the helmet-head creature slid near, he turned, took two running steps, and sprang to grasp the lower edge of the ship's airlock. He swung himself up with acrobatic ease, and went into the ship to find Glr.

She was sitting in her slingperch, her round eyes fixed on the airlock as he came through. *Caves are unpleasant enough*, she said, still with that edge of fear in her inner voice. *But caves with slimy ground-crawlers ...* A shudder rippled across her body to the tips of her wings.

Keill knew that she would have perceived some of what had happened, through his mind. 'They can't hurt us...' he began.

I do not fear them, Glr replied. *But caves. ...Keill, I am a creature of the air, the sky, openness and freedom. Most of my race have a horror of being underground. Caves, tunnels, pits, all such things are nightmares to me, I cannot control the feeling. I must get out.*

'Then let's get out,' Keill said with a smile. 'Take a lifeline up with you and fasten it so I can climb up. And I'll follow in a minute.'

Thank you, Glr said. She floated on half-spread wings to the airlock, where Keill detached one of the safety lines that could be fastened to a spacesuit if a pilot had to leave his ship in space. They were long strands of extremely tough artificial fibre – far longer than would be needed to reach from the surface down into the cave.

Glr took one end of the line, studiously not looking at the creatures that were still silently thrusting their heads out from the cave wall. *Climb carefully*, she said. And she rose in a sweep of wings towards the welcoming patch of light above.

Keill waited until a firm tug on the line showed that Glr had fastened her end safely, probably to some solid boulder nearby. Then he turned back inside the ship, to open the compartment that held his weaponry.

His eyes drifted across the assortment of beam-guns, useless to him now, and some of the other more sophisticated weapons. What could be used in a suppressor field? Knives and clubs? Pointless – his own barehanded combat skills were far more lethal. But ordinary, old-fashioned explosives...

He took up two small, flat oblongs of black plastic. They were one of the variety of grenades developed by the Legions. A nick of a finger could prime them, and they would explode powerfully enough to devastate a good-sized room. Yet they were designed to be clipped flat to a belt, where they seemed to be no more than innocent decorations or fastenings.

From another compartment he took a plain pouch, two handsbreadths wide, into which he stowed some wafers of food concentrate, a container of water and a basic medikit – the essential field pack of the legionary going into action. It too clipped neatly to his belt.

Now he was as ready as he could be. He stepped out of the airlock on to the tilted side of the ship, reaching for the lifeline. For a moment he glanced around at the cave, thinking how much it looked like a tomb, a place of burial. Then he shook himself, dismissing the morbid thought. Glr was right – caves were unhealthy places. Effortlessly he began his hand-over-hand climb towards the light, towards

the purpose that had brought him to Rilyn.

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That purpose was part of the larger purpose that had been the central driving force in Keill Randor's life – ever since the terrible day when he had returned to Moros, to learn that every man, woman and child of the Legions had been wiped out, murdered, before they could begin to defend themselves, by a mysterious, deadly radiation that had enveloped the planet.

Keill had begun a desperate, vengeful search through the Inhabited Worlds for the unknown murderer of his world. Yet he had realised that his search would probably fail, for he too had been lightly touched by the radiation. It had settled in his bones and was slowly, surely, killing him.

But a near-miracle had intervened. Keill's survival had been noted by a strange, secretive group of brilliant elderly scientists, whom he came to know as the Overseers. They had taken him to their hidden base, inside an uncharted asteroid. And there they had saved his life, astonishingly, by *replacing* all his diseased bones with an organic alloy – which, among other things, was virtually unbreakable.

From the Overseers Keill had at last learned why they had saved him, and why they lived in obsessive secrecy, so that Keill saw them only as robed and hooded figures, and was never to know the position of the asteroid. Their reasons had much to do with the murder of the Legions of Moros.

Before they had hidden themselves away, the Overseers had lived normal lives, deep in their different studies of events around the galaxy. But then, slowly, they began to detect a frightening *pattern* in many of those events. And that had led them to give up normal life, to set up their secret base, from which they sent out unique, nearly undetectable monitoring devices through the Inhabited Worlds.

The pattern they had found had to do with warfare among mankind's planets. It had become dear that more and more small, local wars were breaking out – but not in a random, accidental way. There was some guiding principle at work. Some force, some being, was *causing* them, spreading war like an infectious disease among the Worlds.

The Overseers had learned nothing of who or what this mysterious maker of wars might be, though they had given him a code name, for convenience – the Warlord. But they had no doubt about the Warlord's purpose. By spreading the infection of war wherever possible, he was working slowly towards creating a conflict that would involve the entire galaxy in an ultimate, all-consuming holocaust. And out of the ruins of that final calamity, the Warlord would surely emerge, to rule the galaxy unchallenged.

And the Warlord's methods could also be perceived. He sent out agents to various worlds, who would work their way into positions of power and influence, and then turn the local people towards war – using the human weaknesses of greed, or fear, or patriotic bigotry, or whatever else came to hand. So the infection was spread, and the Warlord's plans developed.

That was why, the Overseers told Keill, the Warlord had destroyed the Legions of Moros.

The people of Moros had learned to fight and to discipline themselves to survive the rigours of their harsh planet. Over the generations they had developed their fighting skills to an amazing degree – and had realised that those skills were the only real natural resource that Moros possessed. So they continued to develop, to train and discipline their children, until they became an almost legendary warrior

race, with a matchless mastery of the arts of warfare. And they made that mastery available, for a price, to other worlds.

But the ethics of the Legions had insisted on one inflexible rule. They would not fight on the side of aggressors, exploiters, fanatics, any of the mad or greedy perpetrators of unjust wars. Most often in their history they had fought on the side of people *defending* themselves against aggression – no matter how high a price had been offered by the other side. And so the Warlord would have foreseen that the Legions could be a barrier to his master plan – and that one day, if they learned of his existence, they could even move against him directly.

So the day had come of the sneak attack, the strange radiation that had spread in seconds through the atmosphere, and the terrible death of Moros.

The Overseers then knew that only they could hope to block the Warlord's evil ambition. But they needed to know more about him. And they needed a way to thwart him here and there, to disrupt his plan and slow it down while they searched for the ultimate means of stopping him.

They had their far-flung monitors – and they also had Glr, who had found her way to them before they had fled to their asteroid. But they needed the aid of a human, one who could move freely around the Inhabited Worlds, and one who stood a chance of surviving the dangers he might meet.

They found what they needed in Keill Randor, the last legionary. And Keill needed little urging to join with the Overseers, and so pursue his own search for the murderer of Moros.

Keill, accompanied by Glr, had twice encountered agents of the Warlord since he had left the Overseers' base. He had learned that the best of these agents formed an elite force, called the *Deathwing* – led by the Warlord's chief lieutenant, known only as 'The One'. Deathwing agents were powerful, skilled and ruthlessly dedicated to the Warlord's purposes. They were also the most likely source of the information Keill needed to locate and identify the Warlord.

So despite the danger – and despite the tact that the Deathwing had soon learned of his existence and the threat he posed to them – Keill knew that he had to pursue these agents of his enemy, relentlessly, until either the Deathwing or he himself was finished.

Now, as he came to his feet above the pit where his ship lay, and stared across the desolate landscape of Rilyn, he felt the hairs on his neck lift and bristle. Intuitively, he knew what was out there.

Somewhere on Rilyn – somewhere near – the Deathwing waited for him.

CHAPTER THREE

So you have come tip for air at last.

The laughter in Glr's voice bubbled, with no trace of the nervousness that she had shown underground. Keill peered up at the overcast sky, and spotted her, a dark speck against the flat grey

cloud, wheeling and dipping with the joy of stretching her wings.

'Can you see anything?' he asked her.

A great deal of ugly rock and green stuff, Glr said, *and something of a haze in the distance.*

Keill nodded to himself. The haze might be part of the heavy overcast, or a distortion caused by the suppressor field. It didn't matter. Whether or not Glr's bright eyes could see into the distance, it was a distance that Keill's earth-bound feet would have to cross.

He moved away at a jogging pace, settling into easy strides that he could maintain tirelessly for kilometre after kilometre. Both the moss-like plant growth and the bare red soil were firm underfoot, and the air was fresh and cool, full of the pleasantly acrid odour of the short-stemmed shrubbery that clung so closely to ground level. As he ran, only the light thudding of his boots interrupted the silence of the desolate land.

Animal life on this planet seems inclined to dwell underground, Glr said, distaste obvious in her voice. *You are the only moving thing I can see.*

'Be sure that you're not too visible' he told Glr. *'Anyone watching will be put on guard by seeing a winged creature on this planet.'*

Anyone watching on this planet, mudhead, Glr replied mockingly, *will have more sense than to look at the sky. They will be looking for a ground-crawler like you.*

Keill chuckled. *'Then reconnoitre ahead. Tell me what I'm going to ground-crawl into.'*

I am yours to command, Glr laughed. Keill glanced up – without slackening his pace, and saw the dark speck soar away, dwindling to vanishing point.

He loped steadily onwards, picking his way through the more open areas that divided the flattened promontories of rock, moving in the same direction that his ship had been travelling in before the suppressor field had halted it.

If not for that field, and his intuitions, he would have been convinced that the planet was uninhabited. And everything he knew about the planet – from information supplied by the Overseers – said that it should have been. Yet humanity had colonised less hospitable worlds. At least Rilyn had a breathable atmosphere, and plant life that proved the presence of water, probably in underground wells and streams. This land mass had a mostly temperate climate – and Keill did not doubt that hard-working colonists could make the heavy red soil fertile, and perhaps find minerals in the seamed and ancient rocks.

Once, Keill knew, there had been a colony. During the centuries of the Scattering a starship reaching this solar system had been delighted to find *two* planets able to support human life. They named one Jitrell and one Rilyn, and planted colonies on both, which began to thrive.

The people of Rilyn even gloated a little when they heard tales of aggressive alien beasts that made life uncomfortable, at first, on Jitrell. Rilyn, its colonists boasted, was more kind. It kept all its animal life tucked safely away underground, in the caves and tunnels that honeycombed parts of the main land masses.

None of the colonists stopped to wonder *why* the creatures of Rilyn lived underground. In any case it was unlikely that they would have guessed – until the time came when the reason became clear, in a terrifying way.

The solar system of Rilyn and Jitrell also contained a small 'rogue' planet. This body had a highly erratic orbit, which swung it far out from the system's sun, and then back in – at irregular intervals, about every thirty years. And its path, as it approached the sun, brought it among the other planets of the system.

Most especially, its orbit brought it calamitously close to Rilyn.

It never came near enough to threaten a collision, even with its erratic orbit. But its passage, the presence of its gravitational field, was near enough to cause a slight wobble in Rilyn's movement round its axis. And that created an enormous turbulence in Rilyn's atmosphere. The turbulence, on the planet's surface, took the form of a wind – of titanic destructive force.

Many of the Inhabited Worlds had their share of hurricanes and tornadoes. But the wind that blew on Rilyn, every thirty years or so, made such storms seem like the gentlest of spring breezes.

So the time came when Rilyn's human colonists learned why the planet's animals had adapted to underground life. Why the plants grew low and flat, clinging to the soil with wide, sturdy root systems. And why the rocks were flattened, crushed and scoured bare.

The wind left almost nothing on the surface. The homes and buildings of the colonists were simply erased – their foundations filled in and smoothed over by the dense red soil and crushed rock driven by the wind as if it were powder. Most of the colonists themselves were never seen again. Even their starship – a huge, solid old veteran that had weathered every kind of storm and obstacle that deep space could throw at it – had been smashed into ten thousand fragments and scattered over half a continent.

When the rogue planet went on its way and the monstrous subsided, the Jitrellians sent a ship. They found a handful of human survivors – who had been sensible enough, as the wind rose, to seek refuge in deep caves. The Jitrellians took the survivors away, while their scientists went to work plotting the orbital path of the rogue planet. Soon Jitrell learned the dismal truth. Rilyn could never support human life, because it had to suffer regularly, every generation or so, the immeasurable force that people on Jitrell had begun to call the Starwind.

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Since then Rilyn had remained uninhabited in all its barren bleakness. Or so it seemed – until the Overseers' monitors gathered some strange information from that solar system.

Reports of unexplained violence on Jitrell, culminating in a savage attack on the main spaceport, concerned the Overseers. Jitrell was a peaceful planet, which did not even have true armed forces – just a civil-control police force and a smaller militia with mostly ceremonial duties. The Overseers were disturbed that anyone should attack such a planet, and with such a high degree of military precision and skill.

As their suspicions grew, the Overseers sent out more monitoring devices – each self-propelled and equipped with the standard interplanetary drive called 'Overlight', that could leap across light-years

in mere seconds. Soon the extra monitors detected something that should not have existed – the presence of technological activity, which meant a human presence, on Rilyn. The Overseers promptly passed on these facts, and their suspicions, to Glr – whose telepathic reach had no limits in space.

All of which had led to Keill Randor moving in an easy lope across Rilyn's rolling terrain, towards the area pinpointed by the Overseers as the centre of the mysterious activity.

But as he ran, Glr broke unexpectedly into his thoughts, every scrap of laughter erased from her inner voice. *Keill – move to your right and find cover. Quickly.*

Instantly Keill changed direction, increasing his speed, running in a low crouch, finding a narrow path among the ragged rocks would hide him from anything except an observer in the air.

'What is it?' he asked tautly.

Two groups of armed humans. Widely separated, but on converging paths.

A mental image formed in Keill's mind, like a three-dimensional aerial photograph. Glr was projecting an image of the terrain as she was seeing it.

He saw the creased and flattened rocks, and himself moving among them like a scurrying insect. He saw, several kilometres away, a group of other insect-shapes, moving very slowly. And he saw a second group, moving much more swiftly in a direction that would have brought Keill face to face with them without Glr's warning.

The swift ones, Glr said, are riding some sort of vehicle. How can that be, in a suppressor field?

Another mental picture formed, and Keill recognised the shape of an old-fashioned skimmer – little more than a rounded platform, almost boat-shaped, with two open seats. It hovered on a down-draught of expelled gases, produced by a chemical combustion engine.

As he explained the skimmer to Glr, Keill let one hand stray across the flat plastic of the grenades at his belt. If the suppressor field allowed combustion, it would allow – as he had thought – other kinds of chemical explosion. He would not confront these strangers bare-handed.

But he would not confront them at all if he kept moving away from them. He stopped and turned.

What are you doing? came Glr's anxious voice. The humans on the skimmers are less than a kilometre away. And they are sweeping back and forth, as if searching for something.

'I want a look at them,' Keill said. 'To find out what they're up to.'

I can tell you that, Glr scolded. They are no doubt searching for you, or for the ship. And they will certainly find you unless you move further away.

Keill nodded, but even so doubled back along his previous route, slipping silently as a wraith among the rocks.

'If they're looking for the ship,' he told Glr, 'It means they don't have a fix on where it came down. Maybe the suppressor field distorts their detectors. And they aren't likely to find the ship, in

a pit under a pile of rubble. Nor are they going to spot me. Tell me what you can see of them.

Very well, Glr sighed. *There are ten of them, on the vehicles, less than a kilometre away. They are male humans, fairly ordinary looking – if humans can ever be said to look ordinary. A ghost of a giggle, vanishing at once. They are wearing uniforms of some sort, and have band weapons on their belts. Anything more?*

'What about the others?' Keill asked.

There are eight of those, also male, also ordinary. They too wear uniforms) of a different sort, and carry weapons of the rifle type, and heavy packs on their backs. They are walking very slowly, and from their postures they are not enjoying themselves.

Keill smiled. *Fine. We'll have a look at them later. How close are the ones on the skimmers?'*

Too close, Glr scolded. *When they see you, and shoot you, do not forget that I told you so.*

Keill grinned. *I'll remember to wave goodbye.'*

He ran easily up a nearby slope, flung himself at full length and wedged his body into a narrow crevice from which he could peer with little more than an eye showing. Beyond his hiding place he could see a swathe of open ground, green with vegetation.

The skimmers moved into view with a mutter of engines, sweeping along in a disciplined, fan-shaped search pattern. Motionless, unblinking, Keill watched as they drew near.

The men on the skimmers all seemed young, well-built, athletic in their movements. Their uniforms were single-piece jump suits, of a dark and shiny red, as functional and plain as battledress – except for small insignia on their collars, like numbers, though Keill could not see them clearly. Aside from the holstered weapons at their hips, they were carrying nothing else – no provisions or forms of survival gear.

Which meant that they had come out from a base of some sort, and would return there when their search was completed.

Keill prepared his mind to inform Glr, so that she could follow the uniformed men, and examine their base. But the words were never formed.

The lead skimmer had curved near where Keill was lying, close enough for him to see the face of the driver. And what he saw nearly stopped his heart with shock.

It was a face he knew – but more than that.

It was the face of a legionary of Moros.

Miclas. A legendary figure in his own rime, even on Moros. One who had become a Strike Group Overleader at the age of twenty. One who had been overall victor four times in succession at the Martial Games of Moros – a feat no other legionary had ever matched, not even Keill Randor, who had himself won the Games twice.

But what Keill had seen was impossible. Because Miclas had been of the same generation as Keill's *grandfather*. The last time Keill had seen him, he had seen an old man – still lean and straight of back, but with thinning white hair and a wrinkled, furrowed face.

While the red-uniformed man on the skimmer had a thatch of thick dark hair, a smooth brow, and could be no more than thirty years old.

CHAPTER FOUR

The shock that Keill felt, seeing the impossible, did not affect his trained legionary caution. Many moments went by before he slid stealthily from his hiding place. But the broad patch of green was empty – no outriders, no one swinging back on the searchers' path. Keill relaxed, and as Glr's questioning voice reached into his mind, told her what he had seen.

What can it mean? she wondered. *Did your Miclas have a son, or a son's son?*

'No,' Keill said. *He had one daughter, who was killed in combat and who bore no children.'*

An enticing puzzle. Glr's voice was bright with curiosity.

'To be solved when we learn more,' Keill suggested. *'Can you keep watch on the skimmers, without being spotted? See where they go and what they do?'*

To hear is to obey, Glr teased. *While you no doubt will go and strive to be shot by the other humans.*

'Not exactly,' Keill said with a smile, as he loped away towards the area where she had spotted the second group of armed men.

The day was wearing on – with a slight darkening of the cloud cover and a gathering of light mist in the deeper gullies – by the time Keill settled himself behind an outcrop. The second group was rounding a rocky corner towards him, with almost no soldierly caution. Their boots clumped and grated on the rocks, metal rattled in their packs, and their voices had been audible nearly half a kilometre away – full of querulous grumbling, tinged with nervousness.

Keill shook his head. If this sloppy, undisciplined group ran into those dangerous-looking men on the skimmers...

As Glr had said, there were eight of them, wearing sky blue uniforms decorated with white trim and plenty of bright insignia. They were very young, some barely into their twenties, all with the fresh-faced look of the entirely inexperienced. Keill smiled wryly as they straggled past, no more than three strides from him but totally oblivious to their surroundings. These youths were no danger to anyone but themselves – all the more so when the bulky laser rifles they carried would be useless in the suppressor field.

Calmly Keill stepped out from behind the rock, into full view.

The eight men whirled in unison, panic in their eyes. The two nearest to Keill swung their rifles towards him, thumbs jammed on to the firing studs.

Nothing, of course, happened. Except that Keill had in that instant crossed the space between them and grasped the muzzles of the two rifles. His wrists seemed to twist only slightly, yet the rifles were whipped from the astonished youths' grip and flung clatteringly away.

'Do you always shoot on sight and ask questions after?' he said sharply.

The two youths stepped back, alarmed and shaken. And another of the group shouldered between them to face Keill. He was short, stocky and round-faced, and there was a trace of anger as well as nervousness in his bright blue eyes.

'Who are you and what are you doing here?' he demanded, in a fair imitation of an officer's bark.

'Oddly,' Keill said, 'that was just what I was going to ask you.'

The blue eyes blazed, and the young man stepped to one side, gesturing to the others. 'Hold him and seek out his weapons,' he ordered. 'Do not hurt him too much.'

The seven moved purposefully towards Keill, who shook his head. 'You don't really want to do that,' he said quietly.

They ignored him, lunging forward, hands reaching out to grasp.

Not one of these hands reached its target. Swaying and twisting among the seven men, he struck each of them with such eye-baffling speed that it seemed as if all the blows landed at once. Yet they were all delicately judged – a half-weighted chop, a fingertip jab, a shoulder block, and so on – all aimed at fleshy areas where they would be briefly painful but not disabling.

The eighth man's blue eyes widened at the sight of the other seven suddenly sitting or lying on the ground clutching bruised bellies or shoulders, rubbing numb arms or legs.

Keill was still again, standing quietly relaxed. 'My name is Keill Randor,' he said, 'and I am here for good reasons that are my own. Your turn.'

The stocky youth looked around nervously, then drew himself up. 'I am Under-Commander Tamanaikl Re Saddeti of the Jitrellian Militia.'

Keill nodded encouragingly. 'And you are on Rilyn to find if the men who raided your spaceport are based here. But your ship came down when it hit a suppressor field, your guns and communications don't work, and you haven't the faintest idea what to do next.'

'Yes... no!' the boy scowled, confused. 'How do you know all that?'

Keill smiled. 'I'm not one of the raiders. Like you I'm here to find out who is on this planet.' He glanced at the other young men, getting to their feet with many angry mutterings and black looks. 'Under-Commander, if you can keep your young heroes from declaring war on me again, perhaps we can sit down somewhere and compare notes.'

The young man glowered. 'Why should we do that?'

'Because there is a force of men near by on skimmers,' Keill said firmly, 'who seem very much at home here, and very disciplined and dangerous. And it might be them, waiting for you, the next time you come blundering around a corner in these rocks.'

The under-commander's eyes dropped for an instant, and a trace of red appeared in his cheeks. 'Very well,' he said sheepishly. 'We will talk.'

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Once settled in some comfort on a patch of soft moss, the young under-commander seemed more cheerful. Even his men lost some of their sourness when they were able to shed their heavy packs and take their ease – though most were still now and then rubbing furtively at their bruises.

The under-commander readily confirmed what Keill had said, and added a few details. After the raid on the spaceport the authorities on Jitrell were organising every kind of search and investigation they could think of, including Jitrellian ships sweeping the planet's territorial space, and squads of militia sent on other ships to make low-level searches of all the other planets of the system.

The ship assigned to Rilyn had met the suppressor field, and crashed, killing the pilot. Since then the young militiamen had been wandering, in the desperate hope that somehow they might emerge from the suppressor field and get a message back to Jitrell.

Keill shook his head. 'I think the field stretches over most of this higher ground. And you were walking towards the centre of it.'

'Where the killers are? The raiders?'

'Most likely.'

'Then who or *what* are they?' the young man demanded.

But before Keill could speak, another of the Jitrellians interrupted, with a glare at Keill. 'We might better ask who this one is, who knows so much. Are we children, to take his word that he is no enemy?'

A babble of sullen agreement rose, subsiding slowly as the under-commander ordered them to silence. And Keill nodded quietly, aware that the young militiamen's bruises were nothing compared to the damage that had been done to their pride.

The young leader turned back to Keill. 'It is a point to be made. We must know more of why you are here, and where you have come from.'

'As to where I'm from,' Keill said evenly, 'the answer is nowhere in particular. But once I came from a planet called Moros.'

'Moros?' said the under-commander, frowning. 'I have heard the name...'

'Moros! Yes!' helped one of the others. 'The planet of the Legions!'

The under-commander looked startled. 'That is so. But the Legions are dead. Did not their planet blow up?'

'Moros was destroyed, yes,' Keill said in a voice empty of emotion. 'But not every legionary died. I survived... and there may be others.'

As he spoke he was seeing again the impossibly youthful face of Miclas, but none of the militiamen noticed the shadow that flitted across his eyes. Instead they were staring at Keill with saucer-wide eyes and expressions mingling awe and delight. All sullenness or anger now was gone: there was no shame in being overcome by a legionary of Moros.

'Will you tell us, sir,' said the under-commander, 'what brings a legionary to Rilyn?'

'It's a long story, under-commander,' Keill began, then paused. 'What is your name again?'

'Tamanaikl Re Saddeti,' the young man said proudly, then, smiled. 'Everyone calls me Tam.'

'Tam, then,' Keill said. 'And you call me Keill – I'm not one of your officers,' Tam's grin grew even wider, but then his round face grew serious as Keill went on.

'You could say that I'm here because my world, Moros, was not destroyed in an accident. It was *murdered*, by... a very ruthless and deadly enemy. And I have good reason to think that the men on this planet, who are almost certainly your raiders, could also help to lead me to the murderer of my people.'

Tam gulped, and the other young men glanced nervously round at the gathering dusk. 'The enemy who destroyed the Legions?' Tam echoed shakily. 'Here?'

'Perhaps not that very person,' Keill said. 'But his agents.'

'Then why, sir... I mean, Keill,' stammered the young man, 'would such people concern themselves with Jitrell?'

'I don't know. There are many questions that need answers. And those men on skimmers may provide them.'

Tam set his jaw. 'Our strength is yours to command, sir... Keill,' he said, his stiff Jitrellian diction even more formal. A murmur of earnest agreement rose among the others.

'My thanks,' Keill said gravely. Just what I need, he thought to himself. Eight untrained amateurs stumbling about getting in each other's way. Yet they were willing and well-meaning, and there was a look of something near to hero-worship in their eyes. It would not be easy to leave them behind without both humiliating them and putting them at risk from the more dangerous men on the skimmers. Inwardly, Keill sighed at the problems people created for themselves.

But Tam saw none of that. 'The night approaches,' he announced, gazing round at the shadowed rocks, 'Should we not remain here tonight and make plans in the morning?'

'Good idea,' Keill said, trying not to smile as Tam beamed. 'We'll need to be rested – it's a fair

march.'

'Have you knowledge of where the raiders are, sir?' asked one of the others.

'I managed to... fix the position of their base, from space,' Keill said. It was necessary, he reminded himself, to seem to be operating alone. Not the smallest hint about the Overseers could ever be allowed to slip out, to anyone.

Do you intend to mention me to these humans?Glr's voice entered his mind, sardonically.*Or am I to stay up here until I fall from hunger and exhaustion?*

'I'm sorry,'Keill replied to her, guiltily.'*Come down – but let me explain you, first.*'

Tam and the others had begun busily unpacking food stores and sleeping gear from their packs, but paused as Keill stood up. 'Don't be alarmed,' he said to them, 'but I have a... a companion. An unusual being, winged. She's about to join us,'

As he spoke, eight Jitrellian mouths fell open in unison. Silent on her widespread wings, Glr drifted out of the twilight, to alight as delicately as a puff of mist on Keill's shoulder.

The Jitrellians scrambled to their feet and stared. 'Some... some kind of alien creature?' Tam breathed, fascinated. 'It is native to Moros?'

'Not Moros,' Keill said. 'From... another world.'

'A pet, could it be, sir?' asked one of the others.

'A pet?' He saw no point in burdening the Jitrellians with too much information. There was no knowing who might be interrogating them, in the next few days. 'Yes... something like that,'

And then he had to duck with all his reflexive speed as Glr's sharp little fangs snapped within a centimetre of his ear.

A pet?Glr repeated, laughter bubbling behind her mock anger.*One day, insensitive human, I will take you to my world and let the Ehrlil decide who is the pet!*

Smiling wryly, Keill moved slightly away from the group of Jitrellians. He found a comfortable patch of moss, with a solid boulder at his back, and reached into his belt pouch for his food concentrates. Glr took her share – her wordless distaste echoing in his mind – and hopped up to perch on the boulder.

'Tell me about the men on the skimmers?'Keill said to her as they ate.

Your faithful servant watched them as ordered,Glr replied.*They did not locate our ship – but they did come upon the wreckage of another one. No doubt it belonged to these humans.* Keill nodded, and Glr continued.*That may have satisfied them, for as darkness began to fall they turned back the way they had come. They passed by a safe distance from here, but then the darkness and mist hid them. I have, however, noted the direction.*

'Then you can point me in that direction,'Keill said, '*after first light.*'

I will.The humour had drained from Glr's inner voice.*And I wish it could be sooner, and that*

everything here could be finished swiftly.

Keill stared up at her. *'Why the urgency?'*

Because while I was watching the humans I contacted the Overseers. They told me we have only some days to do what must be done here. Though even they cannot yet tell exactly how long.

'What is it?' Keill asked, half-knowing what the answer would be.

The Overseers' monitors, Glr said darkly, *show that the rogue planet of this system has reappeared. Very soon, Keill, this planet will once again be overwhelmed by what the humans call the Starwind.*

PART TWO

DEATHWING LEGION

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning Keill led the young Jitrellians along the route plotted for him mentally by Glr. She ranged ahead, again flying high enough to be almost invisible against the full overcast sky. And not for the first time Keill found himself envying those sweeping wings.

It seemed that if a single rock or furrow or shrub lay in the way, the heavy feet of the Jitrellians would find it. So their progress was painfully slow, punctuated by stumblings, muffled curses, heavy panting and much rattling of equipment. Keill kept his face and his voice expressionless, knowing that if he urged the young men on he would merely make them more anxious, and therefore more awkward. But inwardly he was chafing. Glr had not yet seen the strangers' base through the distant haze. It was possible that it could be several days' march away, at this plodding pace. And Keill did not have several days to waste – not when the rogue planet was again threatening Rilyn with the Starwind.

That thought led to another. Did Tam and his troop know how near they were to the cataclysm? During the midday break, he casually mentioned the subject.

'The Starwind?' Tam nodded knowingly. 'Yes, soon, our scientists say. But who can know exactly? Not until the planet Qualthorn, the intruder, appears in the night sky. Then we know.'

So, Keill mused, the rogue planet – the 'intruder' – hadn't been detected by the Jitrellians before Tam left his planet. Yet how could he tell them that the planet had now appeared, without having to explain how he knew?

'What if the wind rose,' Keill asked, 'while you –*we* – were still here?'

'We would find a deep cave, and hide.' Tam waved a hand at the rocks around them. 'Here the land is riddled with caves and tunnels, where the creatures of Rilyn have lived and dug for centuries.'

'And what of the creatures?' asked another Jitrellian. 'Do we hide from the Starwind only to be killed by the stone-whips?'

Tam glowered at the speaker, then turned to Keill. 'Our briefing for this mission told us of cave beasts...'

'I've seen them,' Keill broke in. 'You've named them well. They have stingers like whips – but they themselves don't move much faster than stones.' He smiled dryly. 'I'm told the Starwind moves faster.'

A ripple of laughter moved through the troop, and the good humour lasted through the task of restoring their packs and resuming their trudging march.

But Keill's mood grew steadily darker. It was all very well to plan on finding a safe and cosy cave when the Starwind struck. But would the strangers do the same? Their base might be underground – it would be the logical way to build, on Rilyn. But when the wind rose, what if they simply went elsewhere? What if their stay on Rilyn had been planned to end when the Starwind appeared?

Too many questions. And too slow a progress towards the answers.

Glr's clear inner voice broke into his thoughts.

Keill, I can see a shape ahead that may be a structure. Shall I go closer – or shall I attend to the group of armed humans on vehicles directly below me?

'How far are they from here?' Keill asked quickly.

Glr's projected map appeared again in Keill's mind, showing moving dots representing men on skimmers, a few kilometres away. But their course looked like it would bring them directly upon Keill and the Jitrellians.

They are not moving swiftly, Glr said, *so I assume they are not aware of you.*

'I'll get this group into cover somehow,' Keill replied, *and have another look at them – while you might go closer to the structure.*

Your pet obeys, master, Glr teased, before breaking contact

Keill grinned wryly to himself, knowing that it would be a long time before Glr would let him forget that fatal three-letter word. He glanced round for a possible hiding place, and spotted a likely-looking gully to one side. But he let the terrain disguise his change of direction, so the Jitrellians suspected nothing.

Soon, to his relief, the gully deepened and narrowed into a ravine, where the shrubbery grew densely at the edges, providing extra cover. There he halted the troop.

'I'm wondering about those other men,' he told them quietly. 'We don't want to walk into a trap. I'm going to scout ahead for a while.'

'I will come with you,' Tam said at once.

'One man alone runs less risk of being spotted,' Keill said. And can move faster, he added privately. 'Keep your men here, and keep them out of sight – in case the others are out there somewhere.'

Tam agreed, reluctantly, and his men began shedding their packs as Keill moved away. Out of the ravine, he angled back towards the direction that they had been following before. At once he settled again into the loping run that devoured the distance – while shunning the more open areas, winding his way through the sheltering outcrops of rock with all the instinctive stealth of a wild creature.

After a few moments Glr's inner voice returned. *I can see the structure more clearly now. It seems to be a substantial tower, rising from a level plateau. It has few external features that I could see, through the haze that seems to surround it – but there is a semicircular shape on the very top of it that I am sure is a spacecraft.*

A tower? Keill nodded sourly to himself. If anything spelled the presence of the Deathwing, it was the brazen arrogance of building a tower on the planet of the Starwind. It was just the Deathwing style.

But the fact that the strangers' base was a tower could also mean just what he feared – that the occupants might leave Rilyn before the Starwind struck, especially if they had a ship waiting. Would there be time for him to learn what he needed to know?

'Stay there and see what else you can find out,' he said to Glr. 'I'm *coming up to the men on skimmers now.*'

But he was wrong. His sense of direction and of terrain had brought him almost to the point where he should intersect the route of the others. But he could hear no hint of the muttering rumble of skimmers.

Uneasiness began to gnaw at him as he changed direction, changed again, casting back and forth like a hunting animal searching for spoor, stopping now and then and straining his ears to pick up the sound of engines.

Nothing. Then where were they?

Maybe they had stopped, he thought. Glr had said they were moving slowly, so they might be still a kilometre away, idling over a delayed midday meal.

But they might well have unpredictably veered aside from their original path. If so, he would need Glr to come and spot them again from the air. And he would need to hope that they would not come upon the Jitrellians first.

His uneasiness grew. I hope they keep their foolish heads down, he thought.

He changed direction again, retracing his steps back towards the ravine where he had left the Jitrellians. Though he still kept carefully within the cover of the rugged, broken terrain, he speeded his pace, driven by the strengthening feeling that something had gone wrong.

The ravine was a good hiding place: only wild chance would bring the others close enough to spot Tam and his troop. Unless someone among those inexperienced youths did something foolish, or clumsy, and exposed them...

Soon the ravine was in sight, and Keill was moving towards its entrance, crouched low, boots silent on the moss. All his highly tuned senses were picking up a feeling of tension around the place, an unnatural quiet – as if the plants, the rocks, the very air itself were holding still in the presence of danger.

Keill drifted soundlessly forward, his eyes sweeping over the shrub-clad slopes that formed the sides of the ravine. Perhaps it had once been the bed of a stream, for it curved and twisted as only the path of moving water will do. And around one of those curves Keill found what he had most dreaded.

The bodies of five of the Jitrellian youths lay sprawled, sightless eyes staring up at the indifferent Rilyn sky.

Keill knelt beside each, his soldier's mind noting the positions of the corpses, assessing the gaping, bloody wounds in their bodies. They had been killed by some sort of projectiles – bullets fired from guns by controlled explosion, which would not be affected by the suppressor field.

His eye caught the gleam of metal in a thicket of nearby shrubbery, and there he found two more Jitrellian bodies – two who must have been quick enough to try to dive to safety into the dense greenery, but not quick enough to escape the bullets of their attackers.

Keill had fought in too many battles to be disturbed by death alone. But this had not been war – not against young, inept and totally defenceless young men. This had been savage and evil murder.

Anger swelled within him – the controlled anger of a legionary, hard as a diamond, cold as space, fuelling the readiness for combat. A readiness that was complete when the two red-uniformed men came round a curve in the ravine.

One had the face of the legendary Miclas. But he *wasnot* the man Keill had seen before. This version of Miclas was even younger – in his early twenties.

So was the other man moving towards Keill. And he had the face and the tall, broad-shouldered body of another famous legionary of Moros – the great Callor.

Who had died of old age *twoyears* before the Legions had been destroyed.

Keill straightened, neither his anger nor the shock he felt at the others' appearance showing in his face as he stepped easily forward.

The two men carried guns – projectile weapons, as Keill had guessed – bolstered at their hips. But they did not reach for their guns. So they weren't seeking to kill him at once, he realised, nor even to capture him at gunpoint. What, then? Did they think they could take him barehanded?

He was happy to let them try.

Their attack began without warning. And even though Keill had been expecting it, he was surprised – when one of them, with the Miclas-face, suddenly dropped to one side and swung a scything leg at Keill's ankles while the other leaped into the air, a blur of red, and drove a flashing, venomous kick at Keill's face.

They were ferociously fast and skilled. And Keill knew that he had a very dangerous fight on his hands.

But even before the knowledge had formed, he had responded, his own skills and reflexes doing what they had been trained to do from the cradle. He seemed to leap and to drop, both in the same instant, so that he was flying sideways, horizontally in the air, while one kick swept beneath him and the other lashed harmlessly above. Then his left hand struck the ground to brace him, and his own boot lashed out at the knee of the man with the Callor-face.

The kick would have shattered bone, but it did not land. Callor-face parried, and dodged away. Then Miclas-face was up, circling, so that the two were on either side of Keill as he came to his feet.

They sprang at the same moment, but Keill had expected that. He feinted a counter-punch at one, swivelled to meet the other. His forearm blocked a chop at his throat, but his own elbow-smash was parried, and then he had to twist aside from a brutal drop-kick that grazed his tunic at kidney-height.

Again they attacked together, from opposite sides. Again Keill feinted towards one – but it was also a feint when he turned to the other. A boot glanced off his thigh as he leaped away – leaped *backwards*, into a bruising but balanced collision with the attacker behind him. His hands instantly found the grip for a throw – but the other had shifted, twisting into a new, leverage. And it was Keill who was flung off his feet in a perfectly executed counter-throw.

But he had anticipated it – and in fact had planned it. As the other, Callor-face, had made the throw, Keill's hand had snatched with perfect timing and speed at the butt of the bolstered gun. He struck the ground in a neat roll that took the impact, and came acrobatically to his feet with the gun levelled at the others.

The two halted in their tracks, faces showing anger and amazement. Keill began to step towards them, but the motion was not completed.

'Drop the gun!'

The harsh voice struck like an explosion through the ravine. Keill looked slowly around, then opened his hand and let the gun fall.

The man Keill had seen before – the thirty-year-old with the face of Miclas – had stepped into view, with a gun in his hand. But he was not aiming it at Keill. It was pointed at the head of a limp body that the gunman gripped by the collar.

Despite dirt and encrusted blood, Keill had no difficulty recognising Tam.

'This one is still alive,' snarled the man with the gun. 'Keep still, or he won't be.'

Keill turned to face him, half-raising his hands, calm and watchful.

'Excellent.' The gunman glowered at him for a moment, then turned the look towards the two younger red-uniformed men.

'Now perhaps you believe me,' he snapped, 'that you still have things to learn.'

'He was lucky,' the young man with the Callor-face said sulkily, 'We could take him, any time.'

'Your chance may come,' said the gunman coldly. He turned back to Keill with an ugly grin. 'Impetuous youth. Like your young men.' He gestured with the gun towards the fallen Jitrellians. 'No doubt you ordered them to remain hidden – but one of them had to come up for a look around. We saw him before he saw us, and it was his last look at anything.'

He paused, but Keill said nothing, merely gazing steadily at the other.

'Silent and wary, like a true legionary.' the gunman said, with a grating, humourless laugh. 'And I should know, should I not? For I too am a legionary. We are all legionaries here.'

He took a step forward, and his next words struck Keill like daggers of ice.

'You may be the last legionary of Moros, Keill Randor. But here is a new legion – the Legion of Rilyn!'

CHAPTER SIX

Keill sat silently in the forward seat of the skimmer, his hands resting on the sides in full view, as he had been instructed. Around him the other skimmers clustered, as closely as the terrain allowed, as they moved steadily on a route that Keill knew would lead to the tower Glr had spotted. He seemed as calm and controlled as ever, yet within his mind he was frozen with shock and revulsion at the ugliness of what he had learned.

When the gun of the red-uniformed leader had urged him further along the ravine, he had found that this group was ten in number, as had been the other that he had watched from hiding the day before. But they weren't ten different individuals.

Five of them were exactly alike, in every detail – and the details were those of Miclas, as he must have been when a young man.

Three more of them, also exactly like one another, also young, were the images of Callor.

And the remaining two, as youthful as the others, but slightly shorter and bulkier, were precise replicas of another great legionary from the past of Moros – Osrid, the space captain, who had died of a degenerative illness a month before Keill himself had left Moros for the last time.

It needed no great effort of deduction for Keill to realise what they were.

They had to be clones.

Somehow living cells had been taken from the real Miclas, Callor and Osrid, to be bred and developed into these youthful duplicates.

It was chilling enough for Keill to be seeing young versions of legionaries who had been old and venerated when Keill was a boy. It was more chilling to know that the cloning process, the growth of the duplicates, had to have been going on for more than twenty years.

If it was a Deathwing operation – and Keill felt no doubt now that it was – it showed how long the Warlord's plans had been taking shape. And how long the Legions had had an evil, deadly enemy without having an inkling of his existence.

But *why*, Keill asked himself, had the Deathwing cloned legionaries, and obviously trained them to a high level of martial skill? What purposes had the 'Legion of Rilyn' been created for?

And – more immediately – how had the clones' leader *known Keill's name*?

It was almost as if they had been expecting him...

The clone driver of the skimmer ahead of Keill glanced round, ensuring that the prisoner had not changed position. And Keill knew grimly that he would have little chance if he did so. All the clones, even the drivers, were holding their drawn guns in readiness – and their leader, the older Miclas clone, had ordered them to shoot at the first sign of a threat.

They had been told merely to injure Keill – again, an indication that they were keeping him alive for some reason. But they had been told to kill young Tam – who was slumped in one of the other skimmers, still unconscious, from a head wound caused by a bullet that had grazed his skull.

Against that double threat, Keill had no choice but to remain still. The odds had been lessened slightly, when the two clones with whom he had fought had been sent back to their base on foot – as a punishment for their defeat, and to make room in the skimmers for Keill and Tam. But they were still odds that only a fool would oppose. And Keill felt that he had been fool enough already that day.

He could still see, in his anguished mind's eye, the sprawled bodies of the young Jitrellians. But the pain and sorrow that rose within him was matched by his deep-rooted, icy anger. Sorrow could not bring the young men back to life, nor could the guilt he felt for leaving them alone in their clumsy inexperience. But anger might avenge them – and also avenge the insult, the desecration, that had been done to the memory of three revered legionaries of Moros.

There would come a time when that anger could be released. But not yet. And at least the skimmers were taking him where he wanted to go, towards the clones' tower. That was where the answers would be found to the questions and mysteries that had gathered around him on Rilyn – answers that he needed, before he launched any sort of action.

He did not even consider the idea that action might be impossible. To a legionary, no position was totally hopeless while life remained. He had some advantage in the fact that the clones' leader wanted to keep him alive. Also, none of his captors had spotted the two well-disguised grenades at his belt.

And finally, there was a small winged alien high in the dull sky, no doubt watching everything.

Glr's inner voice spoke, perfectly on cue.

Keill, are you intending to stay in that unpleasant cavalcade?

Quickly Keill recounted what had happened, knowing that Glr would soon pass on the information about the clones to the Overseers. Then he explained why he was remaining passive for a while.

I do not like the idea of you being in that tower, Glr demurred. Should you not free yourself, and choose your own time to approach the tower?

'I'd prefer that,' Keill replied. *'But right now my chances are poor.'*

Then I shall improve them, Glr said blithely.

'How?' Keill asked, concern colouring the mental words. *'There are eight guns here!'*

My friend, Glr said, her laughter rising, *if I am not to expose myself to risk, why am I on this dreary planet at all? Watch and wait.*

Her voice withdrew, ignoring Keill's urgent attempt to recall her.

Worry tugged at his mind, as he tried to imagine what Glr might be planning. But at the same time his trained self-discipline resisted the pointlessness of tension. Glr had said 'wait', so he waited – relaxed and still, as only a legionary can be when waiting is necessary. But at the core of his stillness was a fiercely concentrated alertness – which could blaze into instant, lethal action at the first glimpse of a chance.

And eventually, his chance came.

A small dark shape appeared in the dull sky, ahead of the skimmers. Descending, it revealed itself as the form of Glr, soaring on the wide sails of her wings.

The clones saw her at once. The leader snapped an order, and the skimmers slowed, while their occupants stared upwards. Yet even then their discipline held: the gun muzzles did not waver a millimetre away from Keill.

Except for their leader. 'What in space is that?' came his harsh voice from a skimmer behind Keill.

Glr wheeled above them, curving away as if she were a wild creature seeking safety.

'There are no winged beasts on Rilyn!' the leader shouted. 'Is this something to do with you, Randor?'

'I know nothing of this planet's wild life,' Keill said flatly.

At the same time his mind was desperately shouting at Glr. *'You're too low – they'll pick you off!'*

I presume that burst of mudheaded thought was some form of warning, Glr said acidly. *I know*

what I am doing.

Keill concentrated, to form his thoughts more clearly. But he was distracted, his heart jumping within him, when the clone leader's gun crashed without warning.

Glr's wings beat furiously as she sought to gain height.

'Knock it down, men!' the harsh voice ordered. 'I want a look at that thing!'

Other guns boomed around Keill. Not all of them, for at least three remained steady on him. But he hardly noticed them, his eyes fixed on Glr's frantic ascent.

The guns crashed again. And Keill watched in horror as Glr seemed to veer suddenly, one wing drooping to her side.

The other wing nailed weakly as she began a slow agonising spiral, down, down... till she vanished from sight beyond a rocky promontory.

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'Got it!' Miclas yelled. 'Let's go pick it up. But spread out – it may be still alive, trying to get away.'

He pointed at the two clones on the skimmers carrying Keill and Tam. 'You two, stay and watch Randor. Don't take your eyes off him – and shoot if he moves a finger.'

At his gesture, the other skimmers swung round and moved away.

But Keill was scarcely aware of them. Inside his mind he was screaming, '*Glr! GLR!*'

The silent voice that replied was vibrating with excitement as well as laughter. *A convincing performance, was it not?*

Relief flooded through Keill. '*Are you hit?*'

I very nearly had wing perforations, Glr laughed. *But shooting upward is never certain, with handguns.*

'*Where are you now?*'

A long way from where I seemed to fall. They will sorely search for me a while – so if you plan to do anything, I suggest you begin soon.

'I intend to,' Keill said fiercely.

Slowly, cautiously, he turned his head. His two guards might have shot without warning, he knew – but he was relying on the fact that they were young men full of self-esteem who would feel even more bravado when holding guns over an unarmed and apparently defeated captive.

'Stop it there,' said the clone in the seat behind him.

He halted his movement as soon as the clone spoke. But he had turned far enough to take in the details he needed, in his peripheral vision.

When he had been taken at gunpoint to the skimmers, he had learned that only the older leader of the clones was called by the full name of Miclas. The others bore shortened forms of their names, along with identifying numbers corresponding to the numbers worn like insignia on their uniform collars. Keill had heard the leader use the names Mic-4, Cal-31, Os-15, and so on – and the leader had named Mic-12 and Os-9 as the drivers of the skimmers carrying himself and Tam, and now as his guards.

But he was not interested in their names, nor their appearance – only their positions. The clone called Mic-4 was in the seat behind him, gun resting lightly on the top of the skimmer between the two seats. The second clone, Os-9, was in the rear seat of a skimmer to Keill's left and slightly behind him, with Tam still slumped silently in the forward seat.

But even as he looked, he saw Tam's eyelids flicker and open. His body twitched, and one hand reached up to the wound on his head.

For an instant both clones shifted their gaze towards Tam. 'Keep still or you're dead!' snarled Os-9 as Tam swung slowly around to stare at him.

Tam settled back, frowning, glancing towards Keill. 'What are they...' he began.

'Shut it!' Os-9 hissed, raising the gun menacingly.

Tam subsided nervously, and both clones returned their watchful gaze to Keill. He appeared not to have moved a muscle. But in that brief time he had minutely shifted position.

His body was now inclined slightly towards the left; his right leg was solidly braced. Moving, at speed out of the skimmer seat would still be difficult – especially with two guns waiting. But he was far more ready than before.

'I almost wish he would try something,' said Os-9. There was a brittle edge to his voice that told Keill of taut nerves, tense anticipation. 'The brothers were right – he did get lucky, before.'

'That right, Randor?' asked the other clone, Mic-12, lounging in the seat behind Keill. 'Just luck?'

'Put your guns down,' Keill said quietly, 'and try for yourselves.'

The fact that those were the first words he had spoken since his capture – and that they were spoken with a deadly edge wholly different from his apparent placidity – seemed to disturb the two clones. They both laughed aloud, but there was more tension now, in both voices.

'No chance,' said Mic-12. 'We'll just sit here, peacefully, till we get you back to the boss.'

Keill wondered at that. 'You mean when the boss gets back,' he said casually, 'from his little hunt.'

'Miclas? He's just the captain, and a brother,' said Os-9, with a snicker. 'The boss is something else. He'll turn you sick-scared, Randor. Wait'll you see his...'

'Brother, you talk too much,' Mic-12 broke in sharply. 'Shut your mouth and mind your trigger.'

Os-9's face flamed red and his mouth closed with a snap. In the silence, Keill weighed this new information.

The clones had another leader, the 'boss', back at the tower. And apparently that person was not another clone – not a 'brother', like Miclas the captain.

It added up beyond any doubt. At the tower, at the head of this curious force of clones, was an agent of the Deathwing.

Keill wondered briefly if he should after all let the clones take him in, to face this mysterious leader. But in the end it still seemed wiser to free himself, now that Glr had created the diversion. And then, too, there was Tam to consider.

'What about having a look at my friend's wound?' he said. 'It's still bleeding.'

'Let it...!' Mic-12 began. But he was interrupted by Tam himself, as perfectly timed as Keill could have wished. Involuntarily the young man had started, and his hand had reached up again to his injury. The movement drew the gaze of both clones, for an instant. And Os-9, behind Tam, even made the mistake of swinging his gun muzzle towards the Jitrellian.

He had barely begun that move when Keill had finished his.

His hands flashed with the speed of thought across the narrow space between the skimmer seats. His right hand reached towards Mic-12 – while his left hand clamped like a band of steel round the barrel of the clone's gun, the heel of the hand jammed against the muzzle.

Mic-12 had felt rather than seen Keill's blurring movement. Reflexively he pulled the trigger. The bullet should have ripped away most of Keill's left hand, leaving the rest a shapeless, useless mass of bone splinters, torn flesh and dripping blood.

But the substance that the Overseers had used to replace Keill's entire skeleton could withstand even that force.

The bullet merely gouged a painful furrow in the flesh of Keill's hand, as it struck that unbreakable bone and ricocheted away.

And by that time Keill had grasped the front of the clone's uniform and dragged him forward – to make him a shield against the gun of the other clone.

Mic-12 tried instinctively to jerk away from Keill's grip. But Keill did not resist the movement. He let the clone pull back, and went with him – using the momentum to vault smoothly out of the skimmer, towards Os-9.

That was a moment of danger – when Os-9 might have been quick enough, and clear-headed enough, to stop Keill in his tracks by threatening Tam.

But Os-9 panicked at the explosion of movement that he had not even been able to follow properly. He clenched his finger on his trigger, and his gun blasted three times.

One bullet whined over Keill's head. And the other two slammed with finality into the body of Mic-12, who was still stumbling backwards, trying to free himself from Keill's hands.

At the instant Keill felt the impact of the bullets on the man who was his shield, he flung the dying clone away with all his power. The body hurtled backwards, crashing in a flail of limp limbs into Os-9, who was leaping from his skimmer for a clear shot at Keill.

Before Os-9 could regain his balance, Keill had hurdled the body of the dead clone in a long, raking leap, one booted foot driving forward in a murderous kick that smashed against the side of Os-9's jaw.

Keill dropped smoothly from the kick into a balanced crouch, but there was no need for a follow-up. Os-9 sprawled on the moss like a stringless puppet, his broken jaw askew and his head twisted in a manner that showed how cleanly his neck had been snapped.

'Keill, that was...!' Tam's voice was choked with awe. 'I could never have believed...!'

'Later,' Keill said curtly. 'Stay where you are – we're getting out of here.'

He tore at the uniform of Os-9, ripping away a long strip of the light material and binding it tightly round his left hand in a makeshift bandage. Then he took the clone's gun and turned towards the other skimmer, pumping the remaining bullets into the vehicle's engine till it was an unrecognisable dump of shattered metal.

Flinging the empty gun aside, he gathered up the gun of Mic-12, which had fired only the one shot, and jammed it into his belt before leaping into the skimmer seat behind Tam.

'Hold tight!' he ordered the wide-eyed youth.

The engine throbbed into life, and the skimmer shot away at full speed, as if the machine itself were some wild, hunted beast fleeing from deadly danger.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The skimmer was a simple mechanism, steered by foot pedals and with a hand-held accelerator. It was speedy and manoeuvrable – and it needed to be, as Keill flung it into a winding, torturous route among the rocks, at top speed even round blind corners or on the edges of deep ravines.

Several times a yell of fear burst from Tam when the skimmer seemed certain to flip over on a careering turn, or to slam lethally into a wall of rock. But always Keill's reflexes dragged them out of danger, so that after several kilometres – though Tam had been sure at least five times that they would be killed – there was not the smallest scratch on the skimmer's shiny hull.

Keill knew that the other clones, alerted by the gunshots, would be after him by now. Even so, he guided the skimmer in the same direction they had been taking before. It was all the more urgent to have a close look at the tower that was the clones' headquarters, before working out what he was going to do next.

The skimmer engine strained as he swung it over a projecting spur of rock, at once swerving it in

nearly a right-angled turn to avoid another outcrop. In the seat ahead, Tam moaned, covering his eyes.

'Keill, may we slow the speed?' he called plaintively above the engine noise. 'My head hurts, and my stomach grows sick.'

'You'll feel worse if they catch us!' Keill shouted back, accelerating across a patch of moss.

Tam groaned and leaned back, eyes closed. But Keill ignored him, forming a call to Glr, who he knew would now be aloft again, keeping watch with her keen vision.

'How far is the tower now?' he asked.

About three kilometres, as the Ehrliil flies, Glr replied with the ghost of a laugh. *But the other humans are nearer than that to you – and they are on your course, as if they have guessed that you will move towards the tower.*

Keill's mouth tightened. He had hoped that the clones would think that route the most unlikely one for him to take. But their captain was clever, a good officer. And a dangerous opponent.

He forced every scrap of speed out of the skimmer's throbbing engine. The ground seemed to be levelling off, he noticed – the rocks becoming even flatter, with broader and smoother open spaces among them. It made travelling easier – though it also made his skimmer more visible to searching eyes. But Glr was watching, and would know the instant that he was in danger of being spotted. And meanwhile the tower must be growing closer every moment...

Then he glimpsed it, like a spike of metal rearing up in the middle distance. A short distance away he found a vantage point, and halted the skimmer, letting its engine idle as he studied the flat, open plateau before him.

The tower thrust up towards the dull sky of Rilyn, nearly two hundred metres of darkly gleaming metal, flat-sided and square-cornered. There were no apparent breaks or openings in the smooth outer walls – except for two vertical grooves, or channels, nearly as wide as the height of a man, running from top to bottom of the wall facing Keill. If the tower had windows, Keill thought, they would be flush with the walls, and polarised somehow to appear part of the smooth metal, with no edge or seam visible.

But he could see a faint seam at the base of the tower, that might mark the outline of a sizeable doorway. Yet it was hard to be certain. The tower's details were not sharply defined – as if the haze that Glr had mentioned was somehow clinging to it, slightly blurring its edges.

Tam noticed it as well, 'My wound has affected my vision,' he said worriedly. 'The building seems misty.'

'It's not your eyes,' Keill replied, as the answer came to him. 'It must be a force field. The whole tower is completely enclosed.'

And that, he realised, was what lay behind the arrogance of building a tower on Rilyn. Deathwing technology must have adapted the known forms of force field to create an immovable barrier that would withstand even the power of the Starwind.

He looked again at the base of the tower, where the haziness seemed more dense. That, he guessed, would come from the interface of the vertical force field and the horizontal suppressor field,

which also had its centre at the tower.

Keill could think of nothing that could breach those defences. Of course the force field would be shut off, he knew, to let clones out or to let the spacecraft, on top of the tower, lift off. But even then the building would be heavily guarded. From the numbered names of the clones that he had overheard, there would be more than thirty men in each of the three duplicated groups – making at least one hundred men occupying the tower.

For now, he thought sourly, he would have to stay out among the rocks, and reduce the odds by picking off pursuers a few at a time.

As if in direct response to that thought, the tower's hazy surround seemed to flicker, then faded – showing Keill not only that it *was* a force field, but that it had just been shut off. Now he could clearly see the seam of the wide doorway at the base.

As he watched, it opened. Out slid twenty of the two-man skimmers – forty men, in squads of ten men each. They spread out in a semi-circular formation, and began to sweep across the plateau, while behind them the haziness of the force field sprang back into life.

Keill swung his own skimmer around, back among the rocks. So Miclas, the clone captain, was getting reinforcements. It would give Keill that many more to set up ambushes for – but first he had to find a safe place to leave Tam during the dangerous game of hide and seek.

As their skimmer sped among the rocks, he raised his voice to explain to Tam what was to happen,

'But I wish not to hide!' Tam protested. 'I would come with you, and fight! I have no fear of them!'

'Your courage isn't the question,' Keill replied. 'I know about this kind of fighting – you don't. We'll both be safer if you're out of it.'

Tam nodded sadly. 'I see it. I would hamper you.'

'Something like that,' Keill said. 'Don't worry. You may yet get your chance to fight.'

'You will see,' Tam said, eyes glowing. 'I will prove worthy.'

Keill didn't reply, because he had spotted what he had been searching for. A black smear of shadow, at the base of a low wall of rock, had to be the mouth of one of the caves that honeycombed the region. He cut power at once, sliding the skimmer to a halt.

'There's your hiding place,' he told Tam, pointing to the cave mouth. 'Stay inside, and if you hear skimmer engines, get as far into the cave as you can.' He grinned tightly. 'With a little luck, we'll both survive.'

Tam stepped out of the skimmer, looking dubiously at the cave. 'What of the stonewhips?'

'I told you before – they're slow-moving creatures. Just stay out of their way. Stay out of the way of everything.'

He unfastened his belt pouch and took out a vial of dear liquid from the medikit. Peeling away the ragged red cloth from his injured hand, he dabbed some of the liquid on to the angry gash. At once the throbbing pain – which he had not let himself acknowledge, during the wild flight through the rocks – eased to a distant ache. He flexed his fingers, to be sure he had full use of the hand, then rewrapped the bandage before passing the vial to Tam.

'Smear some of that on your head wound. It'll stop the pain and the swelling.'

Tam was staring at him wonderingly. 'Your hand is not smashed? How...?'

'Just luck.' Keill said lightly. To change the subject, he handed Tam his belt pouch, and the gun that he had taken from the clone. 'There's food concentrates and water to keep you going. And if our friends in red find you, get some good use from the gun.'

Tam hefted the weapon, looking worried. 'What will you do, unarmed?'

'I'll get another,' Keill said quietly, 'the way I got that one.'

And he gunned the skimmer away.

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In my opinion, Glr said, *you are in trouble*.

Wordlessly, Keill agreed. In the half-hour since he had left Tam, he had been doing little but running and hiding. He had tried to swing out to the right, hoping to get behind the wide arc of skimmers that had come from the tower. But the first six clones, led by Miclas, had changed direction – and Glr had warned him only just in time before he had driven straight into them.

Now they were close behind him, like predators on a blood-trail. And their forty 'brothers' had tightened their arc, and were closing from the other direction.

Too many to fight, and too many to run from, Keill thought to himself. But maybe not too many to deceive.

'Can you see a deep gully or ravine nearby?' he asked Glr.

For a moment Glr was silent. *About thirty degrees to your left, not far*, she said at last. *What are you planning?*

'I'm going to kill myself,' Keill replied. *It might slow them up a little.*'

Keill...Glr said worriedly. But by then he had seen the gully that she had located – a narrow, deep ditch gouged in the rock, within a profusion of the tough shrubbery.

He pointed the skimmer towards it, gauging distances and timing. At the last instant before the machine plunged over the edge, he flung himself clear in a low, flat dive, tucking into a forward shoulder roll and coming to his feet.

The skimmer crashed into the gully in a crunch of metal, followed by a heavier explosion as the fuel blew up in a fountain of flame and metallic fragments. That explosion was a nice touch that he hadn't counted on. The searchers might be all the more likely to think that he had crashed the skimmer and died – and would waste valuable time examining the wreckage for his charred body.

Now what he needed was a cave of his own, where he could stay hidden until nightfall. If the search continued after dark, he would have all the cover he needed to start reducing their numbers. And he wouldn't have long to wait, for the daylight was already beginning to fade a little.

On impulse he turned back to the edge of the gully. The tough shrubbery was dry enough to burn, and much of it was merrily blazing where the skimmer had exploded. Keill ripped up an armful of the greenery, and with it a substantial bunch that was already aflame. Then he sprang away, running sure-footedly through the crumbled, uneven rock.

From a distance, as the light waned, he could not easily tell whether shadowed areas in the rocks were only clefts or wrinkles, or actual openings. Over there, for instance – could that narrow strip of darkness be a cave mouth?

He found that it could, and was. Inside, the flame in the handful of shrubbery flickered enough to show him that the cave was low-ceilinged, and apparently cut deep into the rock. He moved deeper, glad to see no sign of the stonewhip creatures. Then he halted abruptly.

An odd feeling – like a current of air. And moving *towards* him – out of the dark interior of the cave.

He moved forward again, guarding the flame, and saw that the cave extended itself to become a tunnel – low, narrow, but roomy enough for him to move along.

Keill, beware. Glr's voice was anxious in his mind. *A skimmer has stopped outside the cave you entered. One of the humans is looking in, with some sort of flame-lamp in his hand.*

The clones were good trackers, he thought with annoyance. And, of course, they would have torches not affected by the suppressor field.

An idea struck him. *'Glr, can you keep a mental fix on my position, and look for another opening out of this tunnel that you can guide me to?'*

I will try. The nervousness in her voice was stronger. *But I cannot stay in your mind for long. I can sense the darkness, the stone around you – it is like being in a cave myself.*

'No matter,' Keill said reassuringly, remembering her overpowering fear in the cave before. *'Just make quick contact every few minutes, in and out. And look for an exit.'*

As Glr hastily withdrew, he moved on, carefully setting a fresh portion of the shrub alight from the first one, now nearly burned away. The tunnel curved and twisted as it progressed, and now and then there were smaller tunnels branching off to the side. But Keill kept to the main passage, still led by the faint movement of air that he could feel. It had to come from an opening; he only hoped it would be large enough to let him through.

He moved as swiftly as he could, his flickering flame cupped behind one hand. At times, in the smaller side tunnels or in crevices carved into the walls, he caught sight of faint, obscure movement. They

could only be lurking stonewhips – but he was past each hiding place before any of the ugly helmet-heads thrust itself out into view.

He did not let himself think about what might happen if all his store of shrubbery had burned before he had found a way out of the tunnel.

Keill, I have not yet seen another opening. Glr's voice was tense and strained. *But you are now moving under the plateau where the tower stands – almost directly towards it.*

I'm not sure if that's good or bad. Keill said dourly.

And the human who entered the cave behind you has not emerged, Glr added. *He may be following you.*

Again her mind withdrew. Keill glanced back, but there was no sign of light or movement in the blackness behind him. Knowing there was no choice, he strode on.

The tunnel seemed unchanging. It did not widen or narrow to any great extent, nor did its level alter. The faint waft of air was no stronger or weaker. The almost inaudible slither of stonewhips still came from crevices here and there. Only his supply of the dry shrubbery changed – dwindling steadily as he walked on.

Soon he was lighting the last fragment of it, with no end in sight to the tunnel yawning in front of him. And the fragment seemed to last only a few steps before it had burnt down to a stub, scorching his fingers. When he let it drop, the blackness reached out and swallowed him.

Gritting his teeth, he kept moving. But now his advance was heartbreakingly slow – one step at a time, his right hand thrust out ahead to keep him from walking into solid rock if the tunnel curved in the impenetrable dark. He blocked out of his mind the skin-crawling thought of the stonewhips that might be lining the walls, invisibly, waiting to strike out. Grimly, steadily, he moved on.

His out-thrust hand brushed against cold stone, and he drew it back sharply. The tunnel had begun another curve. Even more cautiously, he groped forward. Again his hand touched stone – a projecting bulge of rock, rough and seamed...

Under his hand, the bulge moved.

He flung himself forward, stifling a yell, hearing the hiss as the stonewhip's sting lashed out. He had no idea how near it had come – or how many others were gathering...

And then, around the tunnel's curve, his unbelieving eyes saw a taint gleam of light.

Not from behind him, where the pursuing clone might be. *From ahead.* And a dull, reddish light, not the yellow glow of flame.

As he moved closer the shape of the tunnel regained vague form in the blackness. Rapidly he covered the remaining metres, until he reached the source of the reddish light.

The realisation was crushing.

The tunnel had opened out, into a broad and high-roofed cavern. But the far side of it, where the

hazy redness gleamed, was a wall of smooth, polished metal.

The tunnel had led to the foundations of the tower itself. And the reddish light was obviously from the force field, being emitted directly from the walls themselves, even below ground.

It was a dead end. All the more so when he saw a tiny patch of grey in the high vault of the cavern, and recognised it as a small slit opening in the rock. That was the source of the current of air that he had detected – but it was far too narrow to let him out.

For a moment his mind went as blank as the smooth metal of the tower, as he stared at it, wildly trying to think of a way out of the trap.

And then he saw his own shadow flung large against the metal by a glow of yellow light behind him.

He whirled – to confront a red-uniformed clone with a flaming torch in one hand and an unwavering gun in the other.

But not just any clone. Peering past the brightness of the torch, Keill saw that it was the captain – the older Miclas-clone.

'You make a fine quarry, Randor,' Miclas said with an ugly grin. 'Good training for the young ones. But I'm too wise a head to be fooled by a crashed skimmer – and too good a tracker to miss the signs you left.'

As before, Keill remained silent and watchful, idly hooking his thumbs into his belt – where his fingers trailed over the flat plastic of the grenades.

'I'm not taking any more chances with you,' Miclas went on. 'You get to stay alive – but a bullet in the leg will take the fight out of you.'

Keill saw the tightening of the clone's forefinger on the gun's trigger. At the same time he saw another faint motion, on the cavern wall near Miclas's elbow.

'Do you know,' he asked idly, 'what effect the sting of a stonewhip has on a man?'

Miclas frowned. 'It's too late for your tricks now, legionary,' he growled.

The knuckle of his trigger finger whitened as it put on the final pressure. And then several things happened at once.

Keill plucked a grenade from his belt and flung it, with a blurring snap of his wrist. With almost the same speed, the stonewhip that Keill had seen in the wall beside Miclas lashed out, the tendril stabbing at the clone's gun hand.

Miclas screamed shrilly as he fired, but his injured hand jerked aside, and the bullet sang harmlessly away into the darkness.

A fraction of a second later, the clone vanished in an eruption of dust and rock as the grenade exploded at his feet.

And then, as Keill desperately leaped for the tunnel, the roof of the cave fell in.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A vast weight, which seemed to have a polished metal surface, was pressing down upon him, crushingly, irresistibly. He felt no pain – only a deathly numbness, a near-paralysis, so that his arms and legs moved as if held by thick, clinging glue. Yet still he tried to struggle against the pressure that was seeking to kill him. Somewhere near by a reedy, nasal voice was muttering, the words not clear. With a supreme effort he pushed upwards at the monstrous weight – and miraculously it lifted, as if plucked away by some godlike hand. And now the words of the reedy voice were plainer...

'We'll know soon,' it was saying. 'The knife will tell.'

Keill opened his eyes, coming out of the dream into immediate full alertness. Yet it seemed that not all of the dream had been left behind. The gluey restriction still held his body, so that it was an effort even to move his eyes.

He was lying on a hard, narrow bed. His uniform and boots had been removed, and he was 'wearing only a thigh-length bed-kilt of a light material. There were synthaskin bandages on his injured left hand, and elsewhere on his body – where the rock fall must have gashed his flesh. And around him was a medical clinic of some sort, with banks of high-technology equipment lining the sterile white walls.

He tried to move, to lift himself, but without success. Every cell of his body seemed to ache, as if his body were one oversee bruise. And the feeling of being immersed in glue impaired every movement. He wondered miserably if the rock fall had damaged his nervous system, left him paralysed...

With a huge effort he shifted his eyes further to one side and saw the owner of the reedy voice. A medic, in the usual white tunic – a narrow, bony man whose eyes and teeth protruded just as his hair and chin receded. The medic was making adjustments to a laser scalpel, and Keill remembered the words he had heard upon waking.

'If you touch me with that,' Keill said evenly, 'you'll regret it.' His words sounded slow and far away in his own ears.

The medic jerked his head up, eyes bulging further. 'Ha! Awake? Sooner than you should.' The thin voice and staccato speech seemed designed to grate on the nerves, Keill thought. 'But you can't threaten. The injection will hold for hours.'

Injection? With some relief Keill realised that his body seemed half-paralysed because he had been drugged. The medic read the look in his eyes and nodded, with an unsettling titter. 'Nerve relaxant. Blocks the brain's messages. Slows you down, holds you back, keeps you quiet.'

'While you cut me open?'

The medic glanced at the scalpel in his hand, and set it down with another titter. 'A small incision. Exploratory. You're very strange. Dragged out from under half a ton of rock – should have smashed you like an egg. Like poor Miclas. But you – abrasions and contusions. Not so much as a finger broken.'

'Lucky for me.' Keill said ironically.

'More than luck. Freak bones, maybe. A mutant?' A bony finger prodded Keill's ribs. 'The knife would tell me. But there will be time later. No shortage of time.'

You're wrong about that, too, Keill thought. 'How long have I been here?'

'Brought in last night. Now it's tonight.' The titter rose again as the medic moved away, busying himself at one of the machines, then bustling out of the room.

Unconscious for a whole day? Frustration and anger swept through Keill, and he sought to lunge up from the bed. But the gluey feeling held him. His body moved only slightly, in a terrible slow motion, and pain lanced through his stiff and aching muscles.

He sagged back, fighting down rage and desperation, gathering his thoughts – and finding that not all the thoughts were his own.

You are awake at last. Glr's inner voice held equal mixtures of relief and anxiety. *I feared you might be in coma. What is happening to you?*

Keill explained about the drug, and then told her what had happened, since the explosion in the cave, as far as he knew. *'They're probably going to interrogate me,'* he concluded, *'and in the end they'll get round to killing me.'*

What can I do? Glr asked.

'Right now I have no idea,' Keill said sourly. *'There's no way you can get in here past the force field.'*

Glr was silent for a moment. *I have to tell you,* she said at last, *the clones found Tam, earlier today. He tried to fight them, bravely, but he had no chance. They took him away – still aim – to the tower. I can detect his mind on the same level as you – halfway up the tower.*

Keill ground his teeth with rage. If there were to be any kind of chance that he might escape, it would be even slimmer if he had to worry about Tam as well.

He is a well-meaning young human, Glr added. *I visited him last night briefly – and he was surprised, but friendly and kind, even sharing some food with me.*

'I know what you're saying,' Keill said wryly. *'Don't worry – if there's any chance at all, I'll try to get him out. But I can't do anything lying here like a corpse.'*

You will find a way, Glr said confidently, as her mind withdrew.

Then it's time to start looking, Keill said to himself. He lay perfectly still for a moment, breathing deeply, gathering his concentration and strength as his training had taught him. Then he began to do battle with the drug.

Sweat burst from his skin, and his braised flesh screamed, but he clenched his teeth and fought to move. Left arm first – bring it across the body. Slowly, maddeningly, as if it were not truly attached to him,

the arm lifted, dragging itself over on to his chest. In the same cruel mockery of movement, his left leg bent at the knee, raising itself from the bed. And after what seemed an hour of gruelling, exhausting concentration, he had managed to roll halfway over.

Then he let himself roll back to his original position, feeling the sweat dry as he rested. Some achievement, he thought dourly. At this rate it will take me a year to cross the room.

He was gathering himself for another effort when the medic returned. The bulging eyes glanced over Keill, 'Good, good. Still and quiet,' The narrow head nodded several times with satisfaction. 'Injection will hold a while yet. Then another, and sleep again.'

He tittered as before and moved away. But a trace of satisfaction spread through Keill as well, among the frustration and urgency.

The medic believed that he should still be wholly unable to move. So it seemed that the drug was wearing off more quickly than was normal.

But then legionaries were *not* normal. Their training demanded a peak of health, physical condition and body control far beyond the ordinary. And that had always meant that a legionary was far more resistant to disease – *and* to the effects of drugs – than most people. Keill remembered the surprise even of the Overseers, after they had saved his life, when he had regained consciousness days sooner than they had expected.

It wouldn't give him much of an advantage, he knew – not in this position, and not with another injection due before long. But it was all he had.

Cautiously he struggled to turn his head a fraction. The medic had apparently gone through another door, probably leading to an adjoining room. Keill wondered if that might be where they were keeping Tam. More immediately he wondered if he might chance another effort to loosen himself further from the relaxant drug.

That chance did not come. The medic scuttled back into view, still fussing with some equipment against the wall. And then he halted, jumping as if stabbed, as a voice spoke from the other side of the room.

'Has he regained consciousness?'

It was a carrying voice, though hollow and flat, totally lacking in resonance or richness. Keill could not see its owner, but a chill brushed his spine at the mere sound.

Then the speaker stepped into his view, and the chill deepened.

At first glance the person looking down at him was beautiful, in an inhuman way. A tall, broad-shouldered, imposing figure that seemed to have been carved from gold – or from some smooth and burnished metal that was the colour of gold. It might have been a sculpture of some mighty ancient god. Yet it moved – the flexible seams at the joints hair-thin and almost invisible. For an instant Keill thought the golden figure was a robot, but then he saw the face more clearly, and knew otherwise – sickeningly otherwise.

If the metallic body was that of a god, the face was that of a devil. A devil made of flesh, human flesh, and revoltingly ugly. The skin was a sickly grey, puffy and mottled. And the features were small,

clustered in the centre of the grey face – close-set eyes that lacked brows or lashes, a nose not much more than two gaping slits, a small blubbery mouth held partly open to reveal tiny, blackened teeth.

A cyborg, Keill decided, staring at the being. A cybernetic robot body, with the organic human flesh of the face – and behind it, no doubt, a human brain – linked and melded perfectly into the smooth golden hood that formed its head.

The medic sidled forward anxiously. 'He is conscious. But no movement yet.'

'Are you certain?' The small eyes fastened unblinkingly on Keill. 'He is a man of many talents and resources. Watch him carefully.'

The medic jerked his head in a half-bow and scuttled away. Keill and the golden giant studied each other silently for a moment. Flat on his back and barely able to move, Keill had never felt so vulnerable in his life.

'I am Altern.' The hollow, eerie voice was as expressionless as before.

'And you're the boss here, from the Deathwing,' Keill said, striving to make the muscles of his mouth move properly.

A broad golden hand moved as if brushing the word aside. 'I am aware that you know that name. I am aware that you have many pieces of information about the Deathwing that you should not have, I intend to learn what else you know – and above all how you came to learn what you know.'

Keill was silent a moment, remembering. In his most recent clash with a Deathwing agent, on the Cluster near the planet Veynaa, his enemy had been surprised that Keill knew anything at all about the Deathwing. It was inevitable that the facts of Keill's knowledge – of his very existence – would have been relayed back to the Deathwing leader, who was never called anything but The One.

'I learned it easily enough,' he said at last, mockery in his slow voice. 'I made a vid-call to The One, and asked him.'

Altern's puffy grey face did not flicker. 'That you did not. Equally, you did not learn what you know by your own devices. You are not so clever.'

'No?' Keill replied. 'Then maybe I'm just lucky.'

The hollow voice deepened slightly, sounding even more as if it came from beyond the grave. 'You survived the destruction of your world, though no others did. Twice you found your way to Deathwing operations on other planets, and twice you thwarted us. No one is so lucky. You have been *aided*, Keill Randor. And you will tell me how, and by whom.'

'No,' Keill said quietly, 'I won't.'

The slit nostrils flared. 'In a nearby room lies the Jitrellian officer. I can have him brought here and allow Doctor Rensik to operate on him in unbearably painful ways. The doctor enjoys the use of the scalpel.'

Keill kept his face blank, his voice level. 'I met the boy only a short while ago. He is clumsy, stupid and undisciplined. Do you really think that concern for him would make me say anything to one of

the killers who murdered Moros?'

It was a bluff – but Keill had delivered it with an icy, convincing calm. The golden giant studied him a moment, then again gestured dismissively. 'Indeed. The boy is unimportant. And you seem to have rid yourself of some of the Legion scruples, since your planet died. I may find it even easier to make use of you.'

'Use of me?'

'The Deathwing is not wasteful.' Altern's puffy lips twitched in something that might have been a smile. 'Some thought that you should be pursued and killed outright. But I believed that you might one day find your way here, to this operation – which would have peculiar interest to a legionary. And I felt that the last of the Legions of Moros would have much to contribute here, which would be a satisfactory way to put an end to your meddling. My opinion... prevailed.'

'So you *were* expecting me,' Keill said coldly.

'When our training programme extended to off-planet manoeuvres, computer predictions gave an eighty-eight per cent probability that you would learn about them.' The small eyes glinted. 'Yes, I have been waiting for you.'

'Training?' Keill spat the word. 'That murderous raid on the Jitrell spaceport was *training* ?'

'Quite so. And results were most satisfactory.' Again the mockery of a smile.

'And you really think,' Keill said bitterly, 'that you can somehow force me to work for the Warlord?'

'Warlord?' Altern said, as if tasting the name. 'That is what you name the Master? How suitable... But yes, Randor, I can. This operation is one of the... Warlord's... central plans. The creation of an élite fighting force, as skilled as the legionaries from whom they were cloned. They have been created to fight – whether as special task forces, assassination squads, even mercenaries like your Legions. But always they will serve the Master's purpose. And in the end they will spearhead the final assaults – they and more like them, soon to be developed – that will bring the Master to victory over the galaxy.'

Keill snorted. 'And I'm supposed to come along, carrying the flag?'

'You will fight at their head, Randor, after putting the final touches to their training. Especially now that you have caused the death of their captain – Miclas, who was bred and trained first, to aid me in setting up the operation and carrying it through.' The evil little eyes grew cold. 'I intend to plumb your mind for what it knows – and *how* it knows – about the Master. Then I will empty your mind entirely, of identity, personality, will. And I will *reprogramme* you, Randor, and put your legionary skills to my use.'

Keill bared his teeth, straining to lift himself. 'You'll never do it! If I can't kill you first, I'll die first!'

'You will do neither.' The smooth golden head swivelled towards the door. 'Rensik!'

The skinny medic hurried near, twitching nervously.

'Set up the equipment for a full mind-wipe,' Altern ordered. 'But first prepare the drug that will make Randor answer questions freely, and bring it and him to me tomorrow. Until then, keep him

immobilised.'

The medic nodded. 'Next injection is due soon...'

'Administer it now. Take no chances with this man.'

Rensik nodded again, and scuttled to one side, reaching for a compressor syringe on a nearby cabinet. He hurried to the bed, and before Keill could move within the gluey constriction of his body, the syringe hissed. The heavy numbness at once increased as the new dose of nerve relaxant entered Keill's system.

The golden giant stared down, again wearing the chillingly evil half-smile. 'You should be grateful, Randor. I will be freeing you from unpleasant memories, and giving you a chance to be a legionary again, on a winning side. A legionary of the Deathwing.'

PART THREE

THE MANY AND THE ONE

CHAPTER NINE

As before, Keill rose out of sleep with the cloudy shapes of dreams scattering from his mind – dominated this time by the image of a giant golden hand that closed crushingly on his helpless body. Also as before, he was fully alert the instant that he forced his eyes slowly open.

Little had changed, except that much of the physical pain from his battered body had subsided. The prolonged sleep, and presumably ministrations by the medic – for many of the synthaskin bandages had been removed – had obviously aided his own remarkable resilience and speed of healing.

Yet his improved condition would be of small use unless he could free himself from the nerve relaxant. And he could tell, by the effort of opening his eyes, that he was as firmly held by it as he had been upon awakening before.

He strained to turn his head, enough to see that he was alone in the room. And to see a new piece of equipment against the far wall – something that made his stomach lurch.

A complicated console of machinery, focusing on a spray of long electrodes, emerging like tentacles, each fining down to a thread of metal that was nearly a monofilament. Electrodes that would soon be implanted in his brain...

It was the equipment for the full mind-wipe ordered by Altern – to destroy his personality, to put an end to the man that was Keill Randor and create in its place a Deathwing slave.

Now he had no choice. He had to move, had to get to his feet. He had no illusions that he could win – but he intended to fight so that they would have to kill him. At least then he would not give away the Overseers' secrets, and would not go helplessly into the service of his enemy.

His mind formed Glr's name, and when she responded told her swiftly about the golden giant, and what he was going to do about the cyborg's plans for him.

'We can't help each other now,' he went on. *'Just hope that they shut off the suppressor field so you can get off the planet.'*

There must be a way, Glr said, her voice anguished.

'There isn't,' Keill said quietly. *'I can fight some of the effects of the nerve relaxant, but even then I'll still be moving like a tired old man.'*

If you were a telepath, Glr cried, *I could blast you free of the drug with a psychic shock.*

'But I'm not,' Keill said. *'So...'*

He paused. A shock – jolting his nervous system back into full operation? It could work. And there were other kinds of shock, besides telepathic.

Hope rising within him, he quickly outlined to Glr what he was planning.

Can it be done? she asked worriedly. *It could kill you. . .*

'Either way,' Keill said with a grim silent laugh, *'I win – and the Deathwing loses.'*

As Glr withdrew in a mental cloud of anxiety, Keill readied himself. If his concentration and inner strength had been powerful, during his attempt to move the day before, now it was total. He was no longer merely experimenting. He was battling for survival – his determination, his will, his courage, every portion of his being focused in a final supreme effort. He did not consider the possibility of failure or defeat; they were not in the vocabulary of the Legions. For a trapped legionary, there were only two alternatives. Win through – or die.

Time slid past as Keill fought his tireless, relentless battle against the drug. Once again he forced himself to roll to one side, to draw up his legs. A centimetre at a time, he dragged his legs past the edge of the bed, letting them trail while he concentrated on his upper body. Time and again he felt himself slump back, as the gluey constriction clung to his muscles. Time and again he gritted his teeth and struggled. Until at last he was half-sitting on the edge of the bed, allowing himself to slide in an awkward crumple to the floor.

He paused there, relaxing for a moment, breathing deeply, listening for a movement from outside

the room, in case the sound of his fall might bring Rensik or some of the clones to investigate. But no one came – and he gathered his resources for the next stage in the battle.

Half-crawling, half-sliding, he pushed his way across the floor. His progress was no faster – an agonising centimetre at a time. Yet it began to seem microscopically less difficult as time went on. Was the very fact of his battle helping his resistance – speeding the moment when his body would throw off the effect of the drug? Hope surged, but he put it aside, pouring his concentration with increasing ferocity into his unwilling muscles.

And at last he reached his goal. The nearest bank of medical equipment – some form of diagnostic machine, fed from the same power source that, overall, operated the tower's life support within the force field.

He reached out a hand. There was no doubt now: he was moving ever so slightly faster, more easily. But it would still be some time before all of the drug had worn off naturally. And too much time had already passed. The medic might be back in the room any moment. His desperate plan had to be carried through.

The machine's power lead pulled away from the wall, with a faint snap of a spark. With slow, fumbling fingers, Keill peeled the insulation further back from the thick cable. Then he took a grip on the bare wire – and without hesitation plunged it firmly back into the power socket.

It was a livid blaze of white fire blasting into him – through every cell, along every nerve. His mouth opened in a soundless scream, his body arched and leaped in a giant convulsion, stiffening, jerking, contorting. But the terrifying spasm lasted only a second – for as his body flailed, the cable that he gripped was torn free of the socket.

Released from the agony, he collapsed limply to the floor, half-unconscious. His heart was battering against his rib-cage; his lungs were unwilling to accept air; every muscle seemed to have turned to water. But the centre of his being, where his discipline and will existed, fought the weakness and coldly dragged him back to consciousness. He forced his eyes open, gasping with deep, ragged breaths, and raised his hand feebly to wipe the streaming sweat from his eyes.

And a surge of elation swept him – swept aside the weakness and pain, even the agony of his fingers where the wire had scorched the skin.

The hand that he had raised to his head had moved easily, normally.

The shock had done its job. His nervous system was free of the drug.

The elation, and his limitless determination, raised him from the floor. Unwilling to risk standing, he crawled back towards the bed and struggled to lift himself into it. Only then did he allow himself to relax, to slump on to the hard mattress and let weariness and reaction claim him.

Rest was all he needed, he knew. The effects of the fearsome shock would not last long – his astonishing physical fitness would soon reassert itself, bringing his heartbeat back to normal, restoring strength to his body. He would lie still, regathering and readying himself. Anyone who came in now would assume he was still drugged – and he could carry on the pretence as long as necessary.

But soon he would be himself again – with all his faculties and skills, awaiting their moment.

Glr entered his mind with a cry of delight as she sensed what had happened. *And now?* she asked.

'I'll stay quiet awhile. Keill told her. 'But I won't wait around for Altern to use his truth drug, and the mind-wipe.'

Please do not, Glr said. *There is another reason why you must act soon. Last night, while I sat sleepless among these miserable rocks, I glimpsed the stars through gaps in the cloud.*

For a moment Keill was puzzled by the triviality of the remark. Then he grasped her meaning, just as her inner voice sombrely confirmed it

Correct. During the night, quite a stiff breeze sprang up out here.

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Urgency nearly disrupted the clarity of Keill's mental reply. *'Glr, if the Starwind's rising, you'll have to find cover. Get back to the ship, in that cave.'*

Not yet, she said firmly. *There still might be a way I can aid you. And at the moment it is merely a windy day.*

'Glr...!' he began. But then he was aware that she had left his mind, to prevent further argument. And in any case there was no more time for talk – or for rest.

Four armed clones had entered the room. They were three Callors and a Miclas – but Keill was less interested in their faces than in their hands.

The guns they carried were not projectile pistols, but up-to-date energy beam-guns – which, of course, would operate inside the force field, just like all the other powered equipment. Clearly Altern was taking no chances, even though Keill was supposed to be drugged and immobile.

He allowed his body to remain limp, apparently helpless, as two of the clones lifted him roughly from the bed. While the other two held their guns fixed on him, he was deposited in a special chair standing against a wall near by – on wheels, sturdy and metal-framed, with a high back and an adjustable leg support. Keill slumped in the chair, letting himself sag to one side, as the four guards wheeled him from the room.

The door opened on to a broad, circular area, giving Keill his first glimpse of the layout of the tower. At the centre of the open area were elevator shafts – tubes of energised metal, with flat metal discs sliding up or down within them, riding on some form of magnetic force. Each disc was large enough to hold six persons, clustered tightly together – and there were four of the shafts within the circular area, one pair back to back with the other. And around the area, solid doors gave access to every room on that level.

Within the elevators themselves, the discs never stopped, but moved steadily at three-metre intervals. It was a familiar enough design, so that Keill knew that a disc reaching the top would slide over to enter a descending shaft, and those at the bottom would move to a rising one. He also knew that the walls of the shafts would be solid except at the level of each floor, where an opening allowed passengers

to step on or off the moving discs. Doing so would not be difficult for a normally mobile person, but there was a heavy thump and jerk as the guards dragged Keill's chair on to a disc.

As they did so, one of them misjudged the weight of Keill's sagging body, and a corner of the metal chair scraped against the wall of the elevator shaft.

'Watch it!' yelled another clone, dragging the chair hastily back. 'You trying to disrupt the power?'

'Right,' said a third clone with a snicker. 'We're supposed to go up, not down.'

There was a general laugh, which subsided as the disc rose steadily up the shaft. But Keill had filed away that scrap of information. The discs were powered directly from the walls of the shaft – and that power seemed easily vulnerable to disruption.

If he was ever going to make a break, he knew he would need all the disruption he could get

Carefully he noted all the other details he could see, as the smooth ascent continued. Each level of the tower was more than three metres high, floor to ceiling, and the floors were thick – leaving a space of several seconds when the disc was fully enclosed, between the various openings in the shaft on each floor.

And every level seemed to be laid out alike – the circular area around the elevators, doors opening from it to give access to the various rooms. And of course the rooms would have interconnecting doors, as the clinic had.

It was a simple and functional layout. And it meant that there was no way to leave the building, or to move up and down within it, except by the elevators. Not very encouraging, Keill thought, for anyone planning to escape. Especially not when he would also need to find Tam, and take him along. Yet he calmly went on studying the surroundings, probing for something that might offer him the edge of a chance...

Finally, on a higher level, the clones heaved the chair off the elevator disc and wheeled it in through the nearest door. It led to a remarkable room. An office, or a control centre, extending the full width of the tower, it was filled with complex hardware of every sort. A variety of computer and data storage consoles, serving many different purposes, mingled with communications devices of every shape and size. Keill stared at it longingly. Somewhere in that bulk of machinery might be a communications link leading directly to the headquarters of the Deathwing. Only a few metres away from him – but it might as well have been light years.

The golden figure of Altern was standing at a long metal table, itself bearing tidy piles of machinery and material – smaller communication devices and calculators, sheaves of the thin plastic wafers of computer printouts, star charts, and more. But Keill's eye was caught by the expanse of window behind the golden giant. He saw the sky of Rilyn – with torn rags of cloud scudding across it, patches of sun-bright pale sky shining through.

Altern followed his gaze.

'This planet's regular storm has begun to build,' he said in his empty, hollow voice. 'It is, of course, why we chose this planet – because it is almost never visited.'

'I would have thought,' Keill replied, moving his mouth slowly as he had when drugged, 'that you'd have the sense to build an underground base.'

'The Deathwing does not hide in caves. The force field will easily withstand the windstorm. It is a symbol, if you like – of how the Master will meet force with greater force, and defeat it.'

There it was again, Keill thought. That eternal arrogance, the smug pride and self-satisfaction that the Deathwing always showed – as if belonging to it bred a conviction of superiority in its members. In past encounters, Keill had turned that arrogance to his own advantage. And now he might be able to do so again.

'Let's hope you have a power failure,' he muttered.

'We will not,' said Altern, 'And it would not help you if we did.' The smooth golden head turned. 'Rensik!'

From a corner of the room that Keill had not yet looked towards, the skinny medic hurried forward.

'Inject the truth drug,' Altern ordered.

Still slumped as if helpless in the chair, Keill remained relaxed and motionless. He was aware that Rensik was fussing with another compressor syringe. And he was aware that Altern had snapped an order at the clones, so that two of them turned smartly and marched from the room, while the other two took up positions behind Keill's chair, one on either side.

But most of his awareness was turned inward. It was assessing his physical condition, noting that his heartbeat and breathing had returned to normal, that strength and vitality were flowing back into his body. And again he was gathering that strength, directing it, letting it build and swell within his control, the way a river will build its awesome pressure behind the controlling barrier of a dam.

Then the medic bustled forward, syringe at the ready. And the dam burst.

Keill exploded into action.

CHAPTER TEN

Keill powered his body into a backward roll, using the inclined chair for leverage as he swung his legs up and over. The whiplash movement was so swift that the two clone guards had barely begun to register it when Keill's feet sledge-hammered into their faces and flung them into crumpled heaps across the room.

The impact had not slowed Keill's movement. The back roll brought him smoothly over on to his feet, facing the table where Altern stood. Rensik still had not moved, though his jaw had begun to drop – but the golden giant was quick enough to reach one huge hand towards a beam-gun resting on the corner of the table. Effortlessly Keill swept up the chair where he had sat and flung it at Altern, sending him

reeling backwards. Then Keill turned and sprang for the door.

He rose in the air in a leaping kick, his foot driving forward at precisely the centre point of the door's mass. The door did not merely open; it was blasted off its hinges by the force of the kick – and took with it the two other clone guards, who had been posted outside, and who had started to enter the room at the sound of the burst of violence from within.

Hardly pausing in his smooth flowing movement, Keill reached down to wrench the energy guns from the fallen guards' holsters. The circular area was deserted, but as he leaped towards the nearest elevator, a beam of energy sizzled past his shoulder – from inside the room, where Altern had recovered his balance. But then Keill was on a downward elevator disc, hidden within the solid walls of the shaft.

He knew exactly how many levels he and his guards had risen – and leaped from the disc at the floor where the clinic was. The area around it was empty, for the tower's other clones would only now be receiving the alarm from Altern. Soon enough, though, they would be storming through the tower looking for him. Every second would count from now on. But Glr had said that Tam was also on the clinic level – and he was not leaving Tam behind.

He burst in through the clinic door, gun ready, but the room was empty. Near the bed where he had lain, he saw a locker, and inside it found his uniform and boots. He pulled the clothing on without a wasted motion, and almost laughed aloud. Altern had made another mistake. The square of plastic that was his second grenade had not been recognised: it was still on his belt.

He went through the nearest door at a dead run, hoping to find Tam. But there was no one, again, in the room he had entered.

Instead, there was something that brought him to an abrupt halt.

He was in a laboratory. It was nearly the size of Altern's control centre, and nearly as full of computer hardware and other complex equipment. But the main purpose of the laboratory seemed biological, or biochemical. Large containers of chemicals and viscous liquids lined the solid metal counters. There were oversized electron microscopes, vacuum chambers, heating devices and more.

Keill felt an icy chill as he guessed where he was. Here was the scientific heart of the entire operation on Rilyn. Here was the birthplace of the clones – where the original cells from the three legionaries were induced to grow and reproduce, and form their youthful duplicates.

He moved towards the nearest counter for a closer look -but then whirled and crouched as a tiny rustle at the doorway alerted him. Even as he registered the presence of two clones, one on either side of a frightened Doctor Rensik, his guns were flaming. The clones dropped in their tracks, before they could fire, smoke trailing from their uniforms where the lethal beams had struck.

'Don't, don't,' Rensik babbled. 'Don't kill me!'

Keill straightened, gesturing around him. 'Are the original cells here?'

'Original? Oh – yes, yes, here,' Rensik quavered.

'Show me. Carefully.'

The medic scurried past Keill, and opened the heavy door of a metal cabinet. A gush of

refrigerated air swept out. 'They are here,' Rensik chattered. 'Soon we begin again – another batch. Another Legion.'

'No,' Keill said harshly. 'You don't.'

He moved forward, staring into the cabinet at the tiny vials that held in suspension all that remained besides Keill himself of the Legions of Moros.

'No,' he repeated, half to himself. 'They deserve a better death than this.'

He sensed the movement even as Rensik began it. The medic had snatched up his favourite implement, the laser-scalpel, but he had no chance against the speed of Keill's turn. The axe-edge of Keill's hand smashed against his wrist, and the scalpel twisted around just as Rensik pressed the stud. The needle-point beam swept in a compact arc, opening the medic's skinny throat from ear to ear.

Keill sprang back as the corpse slid to the floor, blood fountaining. Again his eyes sought the cabinet where the original cells lay. A diversion, he thought, to take some of the clones away from the hunt. And to put a final end to this ghoulishness.

He slipped his one remaining grenade from his belt and tossed it, almost gently, into the refrigeration cabinet 'Rest in peace,' he said quietly. Then he turned and ran.

He was halfway across the adjoining room when the laboratory erupted in a thunder of smoke and flame. The shock of the blast struck him like a giant hand, but he rode the impact, using its impetus to hurl him against the interconnecting door to another room, slamming through it at top speed, balanced and ready.

A room like the one where he had lain – and a bed, in which he saw Tam, staring wide-eyed towards him. And one clone guard at the foot of the bed, whose gun fired harmlessly wide as the beam from Keill's gun blazed a gaping hole in his chest.

'Keill!' Tam gasped. 'Where did... what is...'

'Don't talk,' Keill grated, crossing to the bed. 'Can you move?'

'I was drugged,' Tam said weakly, 'but it has nearly worn off.' He sat up, swung his legs to the floor, his face contorted with effort. He too was wearing only a thigh-length bed-kilt.

'My clothes...' he said, looking hopefully at Keill.

Keill moved swiftly to a nearby cabinet, chafing at the loss of precious seconds. He could hear the crackle of flame in the ruined laboratory, but he knew that even that destruction would not divert every clone...

And he knew it all the more when a different crackle heralded the energy beam that bit into the cabinet beside his hand.

'Don't move,' said a voice, 'or the next one kills your friend.'

He froze, poisoning himself.

'Throw the guns away, very slowly,' the voice went on.

Gritting his teeth, Keill let his energy guns drop to the floor, and carefully, slowly, turned.

Ten red-uniformed men – a full squad of clones – clustered in the doorway, guns fixed on himself and Tam.

The one who had spoken, a Callor wearing a number three, stepped easily towards Keill. 'The boss predicted you'd come this way,' he said scornfully. 'It's too easy.'

Keill said nothing, but watched in surprise as Cal-3 slid his gun back into his holster, and his nine men, grinning, did the same.

'Altern wants you back in one piece,' Cal-3 said. 'But he won't mind if you've got some new bruises.'

None of Keill's astonishment showed in his face. They were going to try to take him alive – since Altern obviously still wanted to carry through his plans.

'You're good, Randor,' Cal-3 went on arrogantly, 'but not that good. It's time you learned that we're legionaries too.'

No, Keill said silently, you're not. You only have the bodies, and some of the skills. A great deal of skill, there was no doubt about that. But the clones knew nothing of the true Moros training, from infancy. They knew nothing of the background, the traditions, the example of generations, that motivated each legionary to strive to perfect himself or herself.

There was no way that the clones could have become legionaries *inside*, where it mattered. In the heart and the mind and the will – in the discipline and self-mastery.

And in any case, Keill had fought legionaries – in the uninhibited, exhilarating violence of the Martial Games of Moros. Where legionaries tested themselves against one another in every form of competition, including hand-to-hand combat, and only the light regulation padding saved the losers from crippling injury, or death. The first year Keill had reached the final round, he had confronted five other legionaries, in an all-in free-for-all. Afterwards it had taken more than a month for his injuries to mend – but he had won. And the following year he had won again.

No, the clones could have no conception of what it really meant to be a legionary. They were mockeries, travesties, skin-deep imitations. And he was ready for them. All the coldly burning anger that had been born within him when he first discovered what they were – all the vengeful determination to erase this ultimate Deathwing outrage against the memory of Moros – flared within him, feeding and strengthening his readiness.

'If you really were legionaries,' he said to them, his tone biting like a whip, 'you wouldn't have to boast about it.'

As he expected, fury blazed in the eyes of Cal-3. In a blur of movement he feinted a blow with one fist, and lashed a brutal kick at Keill's groin.

But even before the kick was fully under way, Keill had read it and countered. He stepped inside it, and struck upwards with a short, perfectly judged elbow smash that drove deep into Call's lower ribs.

Air whistled from the clone's sagging mouth as he was lifted off his feet by the power of the blow. Then he crumpled, face purpling as he strove to breathe, lips flecked with blood as fragments of his crushed ribs stabbed into his lungs.

Keill stepped away, almost casual in his relaxed calm. The other clones looked at each other grimly, then began to edge forward, some sidling away so that their movement brought all nine of them in a circle surrounding Keill. Still they did not reach for their guns: pride, and the order to cause no permanent injury to Keill, held them back.

Within the circle Keill tuned his awareness to its highest pitch – alert to every intake of breath, every rustle of clothing, from the clones behind him. As if he could see backwards, he knew where each of them stood, how each was positioned. And the slide of a boot on the floor was all the warning he needed, to let him drop into a crouch, perfectly balanced, and without looking drive a precisely aimed, ferocious kick backwards, at the knee of the clone trying to spring on him from behind.

The crack of splintering bone was audible above the clone's shriek, before he collapsed, fainting from the agony. Still Keill did not look round, but straightened – the entire movement having been so swift that the other eight had only begun to tense themselves to react.

But they were going to move any second, Keill knew – and this time there would be no one-man bravado. This time they would all attack at once.

No point, Keill thought, in letting them take the upper hand.

With not the slightest warning, without seeming to set himself in any way, Keill leaped – a standing jump that became a mid-air twist, ending with the meaty sound of his boot striking the solidity of a skull.

But as the owner of the skull toppled, the other clones were upon him.

They were strong and quick, and fought well as a team. Chopping blades of hands, battering fists, crushing kicks rained in on Keill from all sides.

Yet it seemed that they were trying to hit a wraith, a spinning, dodging will-o'-the-wisp – and one that had also apparently grown extra limbs and joints. However swiftly a clone struck, whatever unexpected angle the blow came from, Keill always seemed to have an extra millisecond to block or parry, to weave aside or slip beneath.

And every defensive evasion became in the same flowing motion a counter-attack. A forearm block by Keill, halting a chop at his throat, would smoothly extend itself into a savage hooked punch at a clone's face. A twist of Keill's body away from a kick led to a wrenching grip on the clone's leg, hurling him full into the leaping rush of another.

In one instant Keill was gripping the shoulder of a clone, swinging him around off-balance, so that the clone took a murderous punch aimed at Keill. In another instant Keill was falling backwards away from a lashing kick, turning the fall into a perfect backspring that slammed his boots into a clone's face on the way.

Yet the clones were not amateurs, not untrained, clumsy brawlers. They too could dodge and parry and counterpunch. Often their vicious attacks broke through Keill's defences, and though even then he could ride the blows, and so lessen their force, he was battered and bruised within seconds of the first

onslaught.

Yet he realised in the first of those seconds that the clones' orders were still holding them. They were seeking only to *disable* him. And their training was very properly directing their most punishing blows to crack a rib, smash a knee, splinter a forearm.

The clones could not have known the impossibility of breaking any bone in Keill Randor's body. But they did learn, quickly – though for them too late – that the controlled and deadly battle fury of a legionary, fighting for his life against heavy odds, shows no mercy and pulls no punches. When Keill landed *his* most punishing blows, with precision and perfect timing, the clones that were their targets simply never got up again.

And all of this, all of the combat that stormed and raged ruinously through the confines of the room, happened at the speed of instantaneous reflex and reaction, so that few eyes could have followed the separate incidents within the furious, shadowy blur of battle.

It seemed that one moment Keill was hardly visible under the onslaught of eight red-uniformed men. And almost the next moment, he was standing among seven fallen bodies, while the eighth clone, taken in an intricate one-handed throw, sailed gracefully over his head and crashed with finality against the wall.

Brushing an ooze of blood from his cheekbone, where a fist had slashed his flesh, Keill turned back towards Tam – and froze. The clone whose knee he had smashed, lying on the floor with his face grimacing in agony, had nonetheless managed to drag out his beam-gun. Keill knew he had no chance to reach him before he fired.

But it was another beam-gun that flashed, and it was the clone whose body jerked with the impact of the deadly energy. Young Tam had picked up one of Keill's guns, during the brief seconds of the combat, and had used it in time.

Keill grinned at him savagely. 'Couldn't have done better myself.'

Tam's face was deathly pale, but he managed an answering smile. 'I thought they would kill you.'

'They might have,' Keill said, 'if whoever trained them had cured them of over-confidence.' He glanced round swiftly. 'Now we have to get out of here. There'll be more along soon.'

'Have we a chance?' Tam asked.

'Always a chance,' Keill grinned. He glanced towards the cabinet that held Tam's clothing, but then a better idea struck him. Quickly he stooped and began dragging the red uniform off one of the fallen clones. 'Here you are,' he told Tam. 'You're going to be a brother.'

Tam looked bewildered, but pulled on the uniform at Keill's urging.

'Now look outside, and see if we have company,' Keill told him.

Tam obeyed, then beckoned to Keill. The open area beyond the door, round the elevators, was clear. Obviously the laboratory fire was occupying many of the clones. And no doubt they all imagined that the squad of ten sent by Altern would have no trouble subduing one man.

Thrusting a beam-gun into his belt at the back, Keill hurried Tam towards the nearest elevator shaft, handing another gun to the Jitrellian.

'Stand with your back to the elevator opening,' he said, 'holding the gun on me. Anyone on the other levels will see me under guard, by someone in a red uniform. We just might get away with it.'

Tam looked dubious, as they stepped together on to the next disc. But he took his position as instructed, while Keill stood opposite him, hands raised, wearing a glum, defeated look.

The energised metal walls of the shaft slid past as they descended. On the next level, clones about to step on to a rising disc whirled, guns ready, but paused with puzzled looks as Keill and his 'guard' went down past them. On the next level and the next the pattern was repeated, as clones waiting to ascend watched them pass without challenging them.

But as another level approached, before their disc reached floor level, one clone jumped towards the shaft. 'Move, brother,' he shouted. And Tam had the presence of mind to step forward just in time as the other man crowded on to the disc behind him.

The disc slid steadily down. The newcomer, an Osrid with the number twenty, hardly glanced at Tam, who was anxiously trying to keep his face hidden, but stared curiously at Keill.

'Shouldn't you be taking him up to the boss?' he said at last

Tam shook his head – but Keill could see that the young Jitrellian was close to panic, knowing that he would be exposed at any second. Then the memory of his earlier ride on the elevator stirred in his mind.

Before anyone could speak again, Keill said idly, 'Something wrong with the power? This thing's slowing down.'

Os-20 glanced round at the shaft, then laughed. 'Not likely, legionary. These elevators don't change speed unless the walls get damaged somehow.'

'That's what I hoped you'd say,' Keill replied. His hand seemed only to twitch, but then there was a beam-gun in it. Slowly Os-20's jaw fell open.

'Cover him, Tam,' Keill snapped – and turned, firing the gun in a sweeping downward arc against the walls of the elevator shaft.

Energy hissed and crackled as the metal split, molten globules running down its surface. And beneath their feet the disc leaped and bucked, as the magnetic support from the shaft walls was disrupted.

'You'll kill us!' wailed Os-20, stumbling to his knees.

But then it was too late. The disc jerked again, as – though Keill did not know it – did all the other discs in the linked pattern of descent down the shaft. Then the disc tilted slightly under their feet, and began to accelerate downwards in a plunging fall.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Keill fought to keep his balance as the disc tilted in its crazy plunge. If he had guessed wrongly about the nature of the magnetic power in the walls, he knew that it would be his last guess of any sort. There was a long way to fall...

But he had not been wrong. Within seconds the disc settled and began to slow, as the magnetic grip of the walls reasserted itself. Yet as it did so, the restored disc slid down to one of the floor-level openings in the shaft – into full view of two clones with guns in their hands.

They were ready and they were quick. Their guns flashed at the very instant that Keill fired. But none of the beams hit their targets. Os-20, half-dazed with fear, had lurched to his feet at just the wrong moment, blocking much of the opening. All three beams blasted into him, and he was dead before he began to fall.

By then the disc had slid away, down into the solid shaft before the next level. Ignoring Tam's white-faced look of alarm, Keill swung his gun and fired once more into the wall.

As before, the disc jerked, and began to fall at an accelerating speed – whisking past the next level's opening. As before, it slowed and righted itself within seconds – only to be accelerated again by a blast from Keill's gun.

On they fell, speeding and slowing, while the levels slid by. Keill could not be sure how far they were now from ground level, but guessed that it must be near. There seemed to be fewer clones as they descended: obviously most of them had hurried to the higher levels, where the action was. But he knew it would not be long before they were moving as rapidly downwards, after him.

Then the disc struck bottom, and as it slid sideways to take its place in the ascending shaft, Keill leaped off, dragging Tam with him. A quick glance around showed no sign of clones on this level. Turning, he swept the lowest section of the elevator with the deadly beam from his gun – and in a flaring shower of sparks the disc came to rest, the shaft's magnetic energy collapsing finally upon itself.

One set of elevators out of action, he thought. That might slow them down a little.

On this lowest level, he saw as He looked more carefully around, there were no room partitions. The whole area was open, the entire breadth of the tower. Part of it seemed to be used for storage: containers, spare skimmers and other objects were stacked at the far end. On one side of the elevator shafts, a wide ramp led upwards, presumably used by skimmers as well as men. But what lay nearer the elevator caught Keill's attention especially.

A broad, squat shape of metal – large as one of the rooms on the upper levels, but an apparently solid casing of matt-black metal fixed immovably to the floor. From within the casing Keill could hear the hum and rumble of mighty machinery.

He knew what he had found – he was sure of it. The power source of the tower's force field.

As he studied the metal casing, Tam moved wearily up beside him. 'It is a surprise to me,' he said

in his stiff Jitrellian diction, 'that we still live.'

'We're not out yet,' Keill said. As he spoke he was reaching for the gun in the holster of Os-20, whose body still lay in the elevator shaft. Then Keill leaped towards the great bulk of humming machinery, his fingers swiftly disassembling the guns, freeing their energy charges.

Tam watched, horrified. 'Keill – if you remove the control caps, the charges will go critical! They will explode!'

'That's the idea,' Keill snapped, bending to press the freed energy charges against the base of the metal casing. 'Just hope it'll be enough. Now – run!'

They fled up the ramp, flinging their weight against the heavy metal door at the top. It opened on to a broad but short sweep of corridor – the entrance-way of the tower, and as deserted as the lower level. At the near end Keill saw the seams in the metal where the wide outer doorway would open. At the far end, the remaining elevators rose and fell, with no one on the discs. But there soon would be, Keill knew.

Then beneath his feet the floor shuddered, and the heavy door leading to the ramp trembled and boomed, as the energy blast exploded. Keill leaped to the controls that opened the tower's great door, and felt a fierce delight as it swung ponderously open.

There was no sign of a red haze. The force field no longer existed.

But as he and Tam rushed through the opening, delight turned to dismay. A sweep of choking dust struck them, borne on a blast of air that made them reel.

The Starwind was reaching gale force – and still rising.

You seem to have won the war, Glr's inner voice said joyfully.

'Only a battle,' Keill said. *'The clones will soon be pouring down here.'*

What can I do?

'Protect yourself,' Keill said sharply. *'Why didn't you tell me the wind was this strong? I'm sending Tam out – you and he can find a cave somewhere.'*

Not I, Glr replied. *I told you earlier – I would rather face the Starwind at its worst than lose my sanity under the ground.*

'Then try to reach the ship!' Keill said. *'The suppressor field will be off as well as the force field.'*

Should I not join you in the tower? Glr asked dubiously.

'The tower won't be standing much longer,' Keill said desperately. *'I've got to be out of here by then. I could never reach the ship in time, on foot, but you could – and come back for me.'*

If you survive that long.

'I will,' Keill insisted. *'And when you bring the ship, also do something about that spacecraft on top of the tower.'*

Glr paused for a moment. *I had almost forgotten that. We cannot let the metal one escape, can we?* Her laughter was bright. *Very well – I will bring the ship. Stay alive.*

'You too,' Keill said softly, aloud. But the Starwind seemed to snatch the words from his mouth, as if mocking the idea that a small winged being could expect to survive the growing power of the storm.

Tam had turned questioningly when he spoke, but Keill silenced him with a gesture. 'Get out of here,' he ordered. 'Find a cave, as deep as you can.'

'And you?' Tam asked doubtfully,

'I'm staying awhile. The Starwind will flatten the tower before long – but first I want to find a way to get at the leader of all this.'

Tam blinked solemnly. 'I will stay and fight at your side.'

'You've fought enough today, and fought well,' Keill said. 'It's no longer your fight. You'll take cover, and let me do what I'm here for.'

The young Jitrellian straightened. 'If that is your wish. I would not want to impede you. And my world will always remember you with honour.'

'Don't plan my funeral just yet,' Keill said wryly. 'Now go!'

He watched Tam hurry out into the grip of the wind, vanishing into the swirls of dust almost at once. Then he turned, glancing up at the blank ceiling as if wishing his eyes could pierce the metal.

If only there were some other way to reach the upper levels. He gazed longingly at the elevators, but knew he could not risk that route again...

And as he gazed, a descending disc slid down into his view, crowded with armed clones.

They began firing wildly as soon as they spotted him. He snapped a shot towards them, heard a cry of pain, but the others' beams were sizzling too close around him. And the next disc, he knew, would be bringing more.

He wheeled and sprinted away, into the teeth of the Starwind.

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The blast of wind struck at Keill like a furious, gigantic beast – a beast that deafened him with its roaring as it tried to hurl him off his feet. Half-blinded by the dust, he stumbled away from the doorway, angling sideways so that he soon came to the smooth metal wall of the tower. He glanced back – but if the clones had followed him into the storm, they were not visible in the rage of dust and wind.

One arm flung across his face, Keill pushed forward, hugging the tower wall. There the wind

edded and gusted, twisting back upon itself as the expanse of smooth metal blocked its forward sweep. And like a deeper bass note beneath the howl of the wind, Keill could hear the tower creak and groan under the assault,

Altern had relied too much on his force field, not conceiving of the possibility that someone might shut it off. So there was no failsafe – and the tower would crumble and be swept away, before this day was over, just as the first human structures on Rilyn had been swept away so long before. The only question was whether Altern would escape the tower's fall.

Or, Keill thought, if anyone would – including himself. The wind's force seemed to have grown even in the short time he had been outside. Worriedly he shaped a questioning call in his mind.

There was no reply.

Of course he could not speak to Glr unless she reached with her mind into his. And she would be concentrating more on survival, as her membranous wings did battle with the Starwind. That's why she doesn't reply, he told himself. That has to be why...

At his shoulder the tower wall suddenly ended in a sharp corner. He had come to one of the vertical grooves that ran up the full height of the wall. It was about a metre and a half wide and about a metre deep, probably providing extra support for the high sweep of metal. But this groove, he found, also had another function.

There was a flat, oblong platform of thick metal, fitting neatly within the groove at the height of Keill's chest. Beneath it was a metal casing that seemed to contain the machinery of some kind of energising magnetism.

For whatever reason – to carry cargo down from the spaceship, or for maintenance on the outer wall – the tower had offered another way it could be ascended.

An external elevator.

Through choking flurries of dust he located the controls, on the wall beneath the platform. He slammed his hand against the activating stud, then vaulted on to the platform as it began to rise, without haste, along the vertical groove.

Grouched at its edge, Keill looked down, gripping the platform as the wind tried to drag him from his perch. By the time he had risen to the first level, he could no longer clearly see the ground, in the sweep of windborne dust. Equally he would not be visible to searching clones – and perhaps none of them would think of the external elevator.

So Keill fed his hope as the elevator carried him up the tower, which was groaning ever more painfully as the Star-wind's violence swelled.

And then hope faltered. The elevator platform shuddered, slowed and came to a halt. There it rested, as if it had become welded to the metal sides of the groove.

Keill moved towards the edge, but jerked back as an energy beam sliced into the metal. The clones had found him – and he was neatly trapped, to be picked off at their leisure.

He snapped a quick shot downwards, not sure if he had hit anything, but knowing that the threat

of his gun might hold them back briefly. Then he glanced round, his mind racing, while the Starwind howled like a thousand devils, gleeful at the prospect of victory.

Around him the tower seemed now to be vibrating slightly under the wind's onslaught. But Keill kept his balance, and leaned forward slightly to peer at the expanse of smooth metal wall on either side of the groove. There ought to be windows on every level of the tower, he knew, even if they were so polarised that they could not be distinguished from the metal, to an outside observer. Not even one as close as he was – not in that storm of blinding dust.

He slid his hand along the wall. Smooth metal, for half a metre – that would be the solid vertical supports at each side of the grooves. But then... the slight, almost undetectable line of a seam, under his fingers. The kind of seam that even Deathwing technology would have to leave, between the metal of the wall support and the polarised plastiglass of a window.

At once he swept his gun's blast of energy along the line where he thought the seam might be. And instead of an eruption of molten metal, there was the splintering crash – almost inaudible in the wind – of collapsing glass. He had an entrance, back into the tower.

He accepted the offer without hesitation. Though the devil-voice of the Starwind shrieked in anticipation, he tucked the gun away and leaned out into the full force of the blast, reaching with one hand to clutch the lower edge of the window-frame, where the plastiglass had fallen away. Then he swung out – dangling for a breathless instant with only the strength of one hand, and the strength of sheer determined will, keeping him from being plucked away like a leaf from a tree by the raging wind.

But his other hand at once reached up and found its hold, and then he was raising himself with acrobatic smoothness, up and over the edge of the window.

In the room, he did fractionally hesitate – with astonishment. Luck, or fate, had stopped the elevator beside the window of the room where he had been interrogated – the control centre of Altern.

But there was no one inside. Only the array of complex equipment that Keill had noted before, along with a cloud of hurtling sheets of paper and plastic, swept from the broad table by the wind that stormed in, a beast robbed of its prey, through the shattered window.

Keill moved towards the door, then paused. He wanted to hurry to the roof of the tower, in case Altern was seeking to escape on the spacecraft. But he also knew that the ranged rows of technology might hold some information, some clue or hint, that could reveal the whereabouts of the Deathwing leader, The One – or even the Warlord himself.

With feverish speed, he moved to the banks of equipment, scanning the computer and data storage consoles, fingers stabbing at their keys. Display screens flashed up data, but it was disjointed, meaningless. He needed time to make sense of it – time he did not have.

Yet he worked on, forcing himself not to think of how the tower would be shuddering and creaking under the Starwind's relentless assault. And especially not to think of how Glr, too, would be running out of time, as the ravaging wind grew more terrible every moment.

His eyes blurred as the wind hurled dust like needles through the air. Even the computer's clatter was nearly drowned by the mad howling of the wind. So it was not a sound that alerted him. It was some instinct, bred of his unbelievably tuned awareness, that gave his reflexes their warning. It gave him just a microsecond to begin to whirl and crouch.

But that was not quite enough to take him clear of the savage, clubbing blow to the side of his head – from a giant, golden fist.

The glancing blow flung Keill off his feet, slamming him into the row of computers. He sagged to the floor, battling to retain consciousness, as Altern reached down to pluck the beam-gun from his belt and fling it out of sight across the room.

The puffy face, contorted and even more mottled with fury, drew close.

'I am going to kill you, Randor – painfully and slowly. You have destroyed a key element in the Master's plan. You are of no further use to me.'

'The One won't be pleased with you,' Keill said, trying to gain time while his head cleared from the effects of the blow.

The thick lips twisted scornfully. 'You are a fool. Do you think the Master would entrust this operation to *any* agent? Here I have used a name, for convenience – but among the Deathwing I have another name, that is no name.' The eerie voice seemed to slice effortlessly through the rage of the wind. 'Randor – *I am* The One!'

CHAPTER TWELVE

The words that Keill could scarcely believe he had heard seemed to whirl round the room, as a huge gust of wind, slicing in through the window, echoed and amplified them into a demonic howl.

Altern... The One. The great golden cyborg was not merely another powerful agent of the Warlord, He was the mysterious head of the Deathwing himself – the Warlord's principal aide.

For a blinding second Keill's mind reeled at the thought of what he might have done with that information, if he were not trapped and disarmed within a tower that would soon be like flimsy paper in the swelling might of the wind.

But in the same instant he recovered his control. If the words of The One had been intended to freeze him with shock and terror, they failed. Instead, they galvanised him. The effects of The One's attack were swept away, as adrenaline surged through his body, fuelling his battle readiness.

And just in time, for the golden giant was carrying out his threat to kill him.

The One's huge metal foot stamped down crushingly towards Keill's groin. But Keill wrenched his body aside in a twisting roll – and rolled again as The One struck out a second time in a sweeping kick. It missed Keill by centimetres, slashing past him to crumple the front of a computer as if it were made of cloth.

As it did so Keill came to his feet, backing away swiftly, ducking under another clubbing swing of a great golden fist. Before the giant could strike again, Keill had lashed a kick of his own, hammering his boot with concentrated power into the golden metal midriff.

At once he was spinning away, out of teach, and his mind too was spinning. Such a kick would have crushed bone, splintered wood, at least dented heavy sheet metal. And Keill had expected that the complex mechanisms of the cyborg's body would not withstand that kind of impact.

But though The One had been briefly jolted, the unique golden metal of his torso showed not the slightest mark or blemish. And he was advancing as menacingly as before.

Keill backed away, poised and watchful. The One seemed to have no special combat skills – but clearly he did not need them, with that metal body to protect him. Of course the puffy grey face was mere flesh. The One carried his great hands high, as if aware that his face must be guarded. But even so...

Keill sensed the presence of the broad metal table behind him, and without warning dived towards it, with a half-turn, his hand slapping on to its surface as if he intended to vault over it. But instead he swung his body round in a full circle, on the rigid pivot of his arm, driving both feet together like a battering ram at The One's head.

The giant staggered back, but he had flung up his huge hands in time against the blow, and the inhuman strength of those hands blocked and absorbed its force. At once Keill found his balance, and this time did dive smoothly across the table, regaining his feet to face The One across the breadth of metal.

But the giant simply took hold of the table and lifted it -nearly half a ton of metal, lifted as an ordinary man might pick up a light board. Then he flung the massive weight of it at Keill.

Instantly Keill dropped to the floor, and the table sailed over him, plunging with a shattering burst of fragments through what was left of the window. The Starwind burst through the enlarged opening with even greater power, howling its fury. And even The One was halted, driven backwards a stumbling step or two, by the awesome blast.

Keill came swiftly to his feet, pressing the advantage. He closed on the giant, feinting with stabbing fingers towards the knee, then dropping away to drive a lightning kick against the knee, hoping that the need for flexibility at the joints might have reduced the strength of the metal seams.

But his guess was wrong. The huge leg barely moved under the Impact. And this time The One was quick enough to deliver a counterblow of his own, kicking savagely at Keill as he twisted away.

The kick glanced off his ribs, and he felt his tunic rip, felt the blaze of pain from tormented flesh, and knew that any bones but his would have been snapped by that kick. As he came to his feet again, fighting for balance and vision in the dust-laden storm of wind, he wondered if he could use the secret of his bones to his advantage – as he had done before, in hand-to-hand combat with Deathwing agents. But to do so he would have to give The One an opening – and there were too many parts of his body that were*not* unbreakable, if they came into those inhuman golden hands.

Much better, he thought as the giant lunged towards him, to find the beam-gun that had been flung so arrogantly aside.

He slid under The One's reaching hand and sliced up at the face with a lethal chop. But the other giant hand was there to block, clamping on to Keill's wrist and wrenching it with ferocious strength. For an instant they were almost face to face – close enough for Keill to see the look of surprise in the tiny

eyes as Keill used the impetus of the wrenching twist to complete a forward half-roll that gave him leverage enough to drag his wrist free from the terrible grasp.

We could go on like this for ever, he thought, backing away. But the tower isn't going to be standing much longer. Where is that gun?

Even as he completed the thought, he saw it. Just a glimpse of it, lying neat the far wall, almost invisible in the driving torment of the dust. But The One was standing in the way.

Cautiously Keill began to circle, edging nearer to his goal. The golden giant seemed unaware of Keill's purpose, single-mindedly, fanatically intent on savage murder. He lunged forward again, but Keill dodged and slid away, a step or two closer. Again the giant stepped near, huge fist lashing out. And as Keill surged aside he saw an opening, and struck fiercely upwards with his own fist.

It took The One just at the junction of the golden hood and the grey flesh of the face – and though Keill's fist had travelled less than half a metre, it was delivered with a focused balanced power that had Keill's entire weight behind it.

The giant staggered back and half-fell, the blubbery lips opening in an inaudible cry. And Keill turned and dived towards the place where he had seen the gun.

But it was no longer there.

A sheaf of plastic computer printouts had scudded across the floor before being snatched up and flattened against the wall by the wind. And it had slid into the gun, sweeping it away.

Keill stared around frantically, and saw it again, only a few strides away, against the wall. But The One had regained his balance and was plunging towards him, fingers curved to grasp like great golden claws, dark blood oozing from the side of the puffy face.

Poising himself, Keill waited for half a second's space, then moved forward – straight into the giant's grasp.

His hands flicked up, thrusting the clutching hands aside, and in the same motion gripping the huge wrists. Then Keill flung himself backwards, back and down to the floor. The momentum of The One and Keill's grip on his wrists brought the golden body hurtling forward. And Keill swung his legs up, his boots taking the giant in the middle of his torso and lifting him up and over in a smooth, curving arc – towards the gaping space that had been the window.

If The One had been only a few kilograms lighter, he might have hurtled out through that gap into the raging grip of the Starwind. But even Keill had barely managed the throw, despite his finely judged leverage and timing, with the awesome weight of that metal body. And The One crashed against the wall just below the empty window frame, with an echoing metallic thunder that not even the wind's bestial roar could completely drown.

At once The One was clambering to his feet. The golden body seemed twisted slightly, one leg slightly askew, as if the impact of the fall had dislodged some of the cybernetic circuits within. But there was no doubt that he was still functioning well enough to continue the murderous combat.

Except that as he began his charge, an irresistible, blasting gust of wind burst through the window. It swept Keill off his feet, for all his uncanny balance, sprawling him full length on the floor. And

it staggered the great bulk of The One, so that he too lurched away to one side, slamming against the same wall.

With all his prodigious metallic power he fought to recover, to resume the attack. But then it was too late.

That wild gust of wind had hurled Keill directly on top of the beam-gun that he had been seeking. And he simply snatched it up and blasted a fist-sized molten hole through the precise centre of The One's golden torso.

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For a moment Keill waited – but there was no sign of movement or life in the fallen metal body. At last he thrust the gun into his belt and moved to the door, dragging it open a crack against the huge pressure of the wind, and peered out. There was another, smaller room beyond, which seemed deserted.

But just as he was about to move into it, a door at the other end of the smaller room began to move – and he caught a glimpse of dark-red uniforms.

Quickly he let his own door close. So there were clones still in the tower. Their training, he thought, must have included a high degree of blind loyalty, if they were so ready to risk their own lives to seek out The One. For they must have known that there would be no room for them in the small spacecraft on the tower's roof.

He heaved at a computer console next to the door, toppling it in a burst of sparks across the doorway. That and the force of the Starwind would hold the clones back awhile. Long enough for him to take the only chance he had left.

He slid towards the window, barely glancing at the golden form of The One, huddled face down and motionless against the wall. For a moment he paused, crouching low beneath the window, while the wind pounded and screamed through the room. He was aware, separately, of all the different wounds and bruises that throbbed in his body, and how much the savage battles of that day had taken out of him.

He also knew that what he was planning would have been difficult enough on a calm, still day when he was wholly fit and rested.

His mouth twisted in a wry half-smile. As his training captain had liked to say, only a dead legionary gives up.

He used another fraction of a second forming Glr's name in his mind. But again there was no reply. For a moment his shoulders sagged – because he knew that if she had reached the ship, she would respond. And if she had not reached it by now..., then she never would.

Outside the tower, the Starwind was reaching hurricane force. And not even Glr could fly in that shrieking, dust-laden hell.

Then he straightened, his expression cold and determined. There was still the spaceship on the tower, and somehow he would find the strength to reach it. Somehow he would survive, to avenge Glr – by finding the Warlord.

He reached up and took a firm grip on the edge of the window-frame. Then he slid up, and over, swinging out into the monstrous grasp of the storm.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As he hung from the window edge, the Starwind bellowed and clawed at him, flailing his body against the wall as if he were a dangling strip of cloth. Pouring every scrap of his strength and will into the steely grip of his hands, he braced himself for the nearly impossible – when he would release one hand and try to swing sideways, back on to the platform of the external elevator.

He gathered himself, and let his right hand go. And in that fraction of time the Starwind seemed to whirl back upon itself. A gigantic gust struck Keill's swinging body, scooped him up and hurled him past the corner of the vertical groove, down on to the solid metal rectangle of the elevator.

'That's the second time you've helped me,' Keill said aloud into the wind, remembering the gust that had staggered The One. 'Are you on my side now?'

It almost seemed that it was. The wind no longer threatened to sweep Keill off the elevator at any second. Instead, its titanic gusts were plastering him, almost to immobility, against the inside of the vertical groove.

He glanced up. It was a long way to go, and very little chance he would get there. The tower was now not merely trembling, but vibrating enormously, like a vast tuning-fork. And the structure seemed to have taken on a definite sideways lean. Time was running out, for anything above ground on Rilyn.

He set his jaw, fought his way to a sitting position across the groove, his left side towards its inner wall. He was just tall enough so that his shoulders pressed against one of the side walls of the groove, while the soles of his boots touched the other.

Much of a legionary's training took place in the harsh, unforgiving terrain of the Iron Mountains of Moros. So the techniques of the climber were second nature to Keill, including the method of ascending a wide crack in the rock – a fissure or 'chimney'. He had to brace his back against one side and his feet against the other, and move up step by sliding step, using friction and the strength of his legs to keep position.

Keill had done it many times. But not on a wall of smooth metal, in the midst of the most terrible windstorm in the galaxy.

Nevertheless, he began to climb.

All of his ferocious concentration gathered to focus and direct his strength. His legs were like bars of rigid steel, their lateral force keeping him braced within the groove. Pushing with his hands beneath himself, he slid his back upwards a centimetre or two. Then one foot moved up; then the other. Then the process was repeated – only a tiny advance each time, so that there could be no chance of a hand or foot slipping, toppling him back where he began.

Sweat burst from his body, as the wind swirled and stormed within the groove, trying to fling him upwards, slamming at his body as if it would break him in two. His lungs laboured to draw breath as the air was snatched from his gasping mouth by the wind. Pain grew in his legs as the cruel pressure took its toll on his muscles.

He felt all these things, but locked them away behind the diamond-hard barrier of his concentration.

With agonising slowness, but without pause or let-up, he climbed the tower.

All sense of time drifted away, so that he could have been climbing for minutes or days. All sense of other dangers was put aside, so that if the tower had toppled at that moment, Keill would have maintained his position until he struck the ground. Even the overwhelming, demented fury of the wind receded from his awareness, till it seemed no more than a distant roaring in his ears. He did not look up, or down; his eyes saw nothing but the wall of the groove ahead of him, And he climbed.

Slide the back up a centimetre or two. Then one foot up; then the other. Repeat the process. Repeat it again. Again. Again...

A century seemed to drift past. A millennium – an eternity. A small area of Keill's mind began to inform him, in cold, rational tones, that even a legionary's strength and determination had its limits – and that he had reached his. He continued to climb.

The small area of his mind told him that the tower was now leaning more severely, that metal supports were bending and cracking, with huge rumbling crashes of tortured metal, that it was an interesting question whether his strength or the tower's would give out first. He continued to climb.

The small, rational area of his mind went silent, and prepared itself for death.

Then his upper back slid painfully across a sharp edge of metal. Reflex flung his left arm out, and miraculously the clutching fingers found a grip, and held. There was no inner wall to the groove any more; there were no side walls.

He was at the top.

With the last desperate remnants of his strength he dragged himself sideways, on to a flat surface of metal, and rolled. For an instant the wind crushed him motionless to the metal surface where he was lying – then flicked him away, almost contemptuously. He rolled again – and fell.

The roof of the tower had been constructed some three metres below the top of its thick walls, so that it formed a broad well. Keill had rolled across the thickness of the wall, and had toppled down on to the roof.

Even then his legionary Instinct twisted him as he fell, so that he landed on hands and feet, absorbing the impact, before sprawling full length in an exhausted heap.

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It seemed the most pure and delicious pleasure – to lie there, letting the agony of his tormented muscles

drain and fade as they relaxed, gulping deep breaths in the relative protection of the roof-well. He wanted to lie there for ever, just resting and breathing.

But then he forced his head up, to look around. And what he saw on the far side of the roof wrenched him, cold with shock and disbelief, up into a half-crouch.

The semicircular shape of the spacecraft was still there, also protected by the roof-well, and held fast by solid clamps on its landing pad. Even so, it was quivering and heaving under the impact of the wind, as if it were about to leap into the sky of its own accord.

But it was not the ship that froze Keill with horror. Nor the sight of two armed clones, also crouched low to avoid the full monstrosity of the wind. Instead it was an object lying on the roof just beside the spaceship's open airlock.

A giant human shape of golden metal.

Keill's mind blurred under the impact of the unthinkable. The One could not have survived, to reach the roof. That blast of energy exploding into the golden body would have permanently destroyed all the complex mechanisms of even the most advanced cyborg. The One must have been killed...

Then Keill looked more closely, and the sickening, ghastly realisation struck him.

The smooth golden hood of The One's body was empty, faceless. And a seam had been opened across the metal shoulders and down the chest. Something... had emerged. The One was not a cyborg, not a being in which mechanism and organism were *permanently* united. The metal body was simply an exo-skeleton – like a vastly complicated suit of golden armour, containing a myriad of high-technology servo-mechanisms, that operated the body at the command of the wearer.

Keill had killed the vehicle – but not the passenger. The loyal clones had obviously carried The One up to the roof, and freed him from the wrecked metal body so that he could make his escape.

And then, revealed for an instant within the spaceship's airlock, Keill saw The One as he truly was.

A tiny, twisted, deformed shape, scarcely human, of mottled grey flesh. Unable even to walk, it wriggled and dragged itself with short, spindly arms, while legs that were little more than twisted tentacles trailed behind it. The head was out of proportion, huge on the grotesque body – and Keill caught a final glimpse, as it half-turned, of the puffy face, the blubbery lips contorted with effort.

Then the creature had wriggled out of sight. The airlock slammed, the heavy clamps fell away from the ship as its energy drive bellowed into life.

With a raging yell of his own, Keill sprang up, his gun flashing into his hand. But the ship lifted at once, yawing and swerving as the wind's fury struck it, and Keill's beam merely flamed harmlessly against a jutting portion of undercarriage. He fired again, begging the wind to strike the ship down – but the wind seemed to sweep it upwards, aiding its flight, flinging it so rapidly that Keill's shots flashed through empty air.

And then Keill had to throw himself flat on the roof, for energy beams were slashing dangerously around him. The two clones – mindlessly loyal even after their leader had left them behind to die – had spotted him, and were firing furiously.

Keill raised his gun to fire back, as the clones crept determinedly towards him. But the gun only flared weakly in his hand. The energy charge was spent.

He flung it aside and gathered himself for a final rush. So he had made that agonised, suicidal climb only to watch The One flee to safety, while he met his death under the clones' guns. Very well, he thought, let it come. It had been a good fight, a good try.

The clones' guns came up, and Keill leaped towards them, knowing they were too far away, knowing that they would cut him down before he was halfway to them.

An energy gun blazed, its beam crackling as it kneed out But the clones had not fired.

It was a beam striking from the sky. And the two clones were hurled backwards as molten metal erupted where the beam sliced into the roof.

Then they were both flung into oblivion as a gout of rocket-flame swept the roof clear.

Retro-rockets. The retros of Keill's ship, plunging through the titanic frenzy of the Starwind towards the tower.

And a wild, wordless, telepathic battlecry filled Keill's mind. A cry that was not his own.

'Glr!' His own heart-stopping exultation could not prevent him from knowing what had to be done, or from forming the mental shout with care. *'Get that other spaceship!'*

Keill, the tower is falling! It will be down in seconds!

'Get the ship!' Keill yelled. *'Destroy it!'*

He watched his ship pull up, its drive howling as it fought both the force of the turn and the hurricane power of the Starwind. But Glr was a pilot to be reckoned with – and hope surged within Keill as his ship arrowed away, vanishing in seconds into the darkened maelstrom of the sky.

Beneath him the roof tilted. Metal screeched and buckled – and a deep, widening crack split open the tower wall at one corner, running across the roof like a terrified living thing.

Keill was flung to his hands and knees. He waited there, unmoving, watching the final torment of the tower that would bring him his death.

The Starwind shrieked, proclaiming its final, ultimate victory.

And then its shriek was joined by the thunder of a spaceship's drive. Keill again heard the roar of retros, felt the blistering heat of their flame surging above his head.

Lifeline! Glr screamed in his mind. *Take it!*

He glanced up and saw the slender thread of the lifeline, swinging towards him from the open airlock as the ship flashed past above him. Glr's skill had timed the sweep perfectly. The lifeline slapped across his chest, and his reflexes were swift enough. He clutched it, and was yanked instantly off his feet.

From somewhere he found the strength to hang on to the line, and the extra strength to form the most urgent thought of all.

'The ship – what happened?'

Gone, Glr said swiftly. *Into Overlight as soon as it reached deep space – before I could get near.*

Keill's heart sagged. So The One had made good his escape, vanishing into the faster-than-light drive where he could not be pursued. For an instant the taste of failure struck at his will, sought to loosen the grip that was nearly tearing his arms from his shoulders as the ship curved up and away, and as the colossal force of the Starwind struck at him in a final desperate fury.

But then the line was being automatically reeled in, the safety of the airlock growing closer. While beneath him the tower came apart in a rending, grinding thunder, a blossoming orange-red explosion, vast metal fragments crashing and crumpling towards the ground, only for the Starwind to gather them up again, and fling them away into the sky like a flurry of dry leaves.

PART FOUR

AFTERMATH

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Keill's spaceship hurtled upwards, out of the atmosphere of the planet Jitrell, the forward viewscreens displaying the welcoming expanses of deep space.

'A friendly people,' he said idly, speaking aloud, his fingers making final adjustments at the controls.

Mudheads, every one, Glr replied. *But generous enough with their food.*

Keill laughed. 'Generous with most things.'

True, Glr said, her own laughter bubbling. *I shall always enjoy remembering your*

embarrassment when Tam was determined that you should have his medal.

Keill shook his head ruefully. 'I think he was secretly relieved when I wouldn't take it. Anyway, he deserved it.'

And I?Glr teased. *Did I not deserve some official honour?*

'They couldn't have stopped you eating long enough to present it,' Keill grinned.

But the grin faded as he remembered just how much Glr deserved, for what she had been through. She had given him only the barest outline of her harrowing fight through the Starwind. But he had understood that her struggle had been a terrifying counterpart of his own climb up the tower. She, too, had fought to advance and to survive for what had seemed eternities – while with every wing-beat the wind had threatened to dash her down against the rocks or snatch her up impossibly high, to suffocate in the upper atmosphere.

But in the end, by some miracle of determination and direction-finding, she had reached the cave where the ship lay. And then, she told him with a note of shame, she had collapsed into unconsciousness as soon as the airlock had closed behind her. When she had finally awakened, and found strength enough to move, she had been unable to tell how much time had passed. She had blasted the ship into the sky, using both the drive and the forward guns to free it, in terror that she would reach Keill and the tower too late.

'You nearly did,' Keill had said lightly when she had finished her story. And then he had a further glimpse of the suffering that she had undergone – because for once Glr had had no light-hearted reply to make. Instead, a shudder had rippled through the small body, and a cloud had seemed to sweep across the brightness of her round eyes.

That had been just after they had fled the collapsing tower, to the safety of deep space. There they had waited out the storm of the Starwind, watching as the planet's atmosphere became like a monstrous living thing, in the writhing contortions of a final agony. Even after they had fled, the wind continued to rise, so that it seemed as if the very solidity of Rilyn would be split and shattered. But at last it reached its peak, and began to fade, as the rogue planet that was its cause swung further away from Rilyn.

When the storm was spent Keill and Glr plunged back down, landing near the spot where the tower had stood. Hardly a sign was left that any structure had ever stood on the plateau – only a riven hole in the earth, and a few enormous shards of metal from the tower walls, driven like gigantic knives deep into the very rock itself. The surface of Rilyn was as silent as before, scoured and desolate, with almost no trace of the tough shrubbery or the green carpet of moss. They would need many years before the remaining few fragments of roots could grow and sprout and spread again,

Keill had used his communicator to contact the Jitrellian authorities and explain some of what had happened, then had begun his own search for Tam. In the end it had been Glr who spotted him, from the air, lying half-dead at the mouth of a cave, having crawled out when the wind had dropped.

But he had revived quickly in his delight at seeing Keill alive – and when a substantial force of armed Jitrellians had landed, Tam had insisted on joining them, and Keill, in a thorough combing of the surrounding terrain, in case any of the clones had also survived.

They had come upon several battered bodies, pulped beyond recognition, in caves that had been

too open, or shallow. And then in the bowels of a deeper cave they found two clones who had managed to stay alive. Even then their stony loyalty to the Deathwing could not be put aside: they resisted, injuring three Jitrellians before the combined laserifles of the rest of the force cut them down.

Then the Jitrellians thankfully left the desolate destruction on Rilyn and swept back to their home world, bearing Keill and Glr and the delighted Tam to be greeted as conquering heroes. Tam told his story over and over, to the authorities, to the media, to anyone who would listen. But Keill stayed as far out of the limelight as he could, making no mention of the word Deathwing or of a golden, metallic giant.

During his captivity in the tower Tam had decided that the clones were a new variety of space pirates who had set up a base on Rilyn. And Keill did not contradict the story, which became the official version. Then, as soon as he could without hurting Jitrellian feelings, he had escaped from the ceremonies and the celebrations, and had taken Glr and himself off-planet, into the peaceful anonymity of space.

As the ship left Jitrell's atmosphere, Keill released control to the computer guidance system and let himself sag back into the slingseat. He and Glr would now drift awhile, resting and recuperating from the injuries and the batterings that they both had suffered. But he knew that this time of peace would not last long. The Warlord had suffered a major setback – but he was far from defeated. There was no telling how soon, or where, the next battlefield would present itself.

He glanced towards Glr, whose round eyes were staring into space as if she were again reliving that final, hideous day of the Starwind.

'You must have contacted the Overseers by now,' he said, a wry irony in his voice. 'I suppose they complained that I let The One get away.'

Not in so many words. They were too delighted about knowing who and what he is. They believe that, with luck, they might be able to locate such a creature, if he comes within reach of their monitors.

'Maybe they will,' Keill said. 'Because I have a feeling that The One and I are going to meet again,' His voice grew steely-cold. 'And next time only one of us will walk away alive.'