



Andromeda's War (Legion of the Damned)

By William C. Dietz

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After failing at her one shot at vengeance, Andromeda questioned her own resolve. But now her uncle has been killed in a government raid back on Earth, leaving her the last Carletto standing—and the family’s only chance for justice...

A chance that comes when the empress’s ship crashes on a hostile planet. As a legionnaire, Andromeda McKee has countless kills under her belt. But it will be Cat Carletto who has to pull the trigger on the one who really matters...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the *Legion of the Damned* novels

“William C. Dietz is a master of the science fiction/fantasy world and *Andromeda's War* will not disappoint.”—Fresh Fiction

“When it comes to military science fiction, William Dietz can run with the best.”—Steve Perry, author of *The Tejano Conflict*

“Filled with intrigue, danger, and page-turning battle sequences.”—SF Signal

“A pedal-to-the-metal plot jam-packed with intrigue, deep-space adventure, and futuristic combat.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“A fast-paced, deep-space military tale with enough sci-fi details to fire the imagination.”—*The Kansas City Star*

About the Author

William C. Dietz is the national bestselling author of more than forty novels, including *Andromeda's War*, *Andromeda's Choice*, and *Andromeda's Fall*, some of which have been translated into German, Russian, and Japanese. He grew up in the Seattle area, served as a medic with the Navy and Marine Corps, graduated from the University of Washington, and has been employed as a surgical technician, college instructor, and television news writer, director, and producer. Prior to becoming a full-time writer, Dietz served as director of public relations and marketing for an international telephone company. He and his wife live near Gig Harbor, Washington.

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CHAPTER: 1

When asked where his officers were, a British NCO replied, “When it comes time to die, they’ll be with us.”

RICHARD A. GABRIEL and PAUL L. SAVAGE

Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army

Standard year 1978

PLANET ALGERON

Forward Operating Base Vickers sat atop a low mesa located just south of a mountain range called the Towers of Algeron. The FOB was named after a civilian who, according to official dispatches, “. . . Volunteered to fight—and gave her life to protect our legionnaires.”

The truth was quite different. Carly Vickers had been working for the Bureau of Missing Persons, which, in spite of the innocent-sounding name, had been created to find and eliminate anyone who might oppose Empress Ophelia. People like Andromeda McKee. The bitch.

Now, as McKee stood on the top deck of the newly reconstructed observation tower and looked out over a snow-dusted plain, her mind was filled with images of the final attack. Thousands upon thousands of Naa warriors had surrounded the mesa, all determined to kill every Human they could lay their hands on. McKee could “see” them coming, and when she closed her eyes, they were still there. “The CO is looking for you, Lieutenant.” McKee opened her eyes. “Lieutenant.” It sounded strange. But there it was. The Legion had been a place to hide from Ophelia’s synths at first. But now it was something more. The fact that she could become a soldier, and a good one, had been a revelation. Recruit, private, corporal, sergeant, and now lieutenant. She’d come a long way.

Most of her superiors thought she deserved the most recent promotion. McKee knew better. She’d been lucky, that’s all. Lucky enough to survive as others fell. She turned. Corporal Smith had dark skin, intelligent eyes, and an engaging grin. “I could tell the old man that you went AWOL.”

McKee smiled. “Thanks, Smith. Unfortunately there’s no place to go. Keep your eyes peeled. I saw a glint of light just to the right of Finger Rock. A scout probably. Shoot the bastard if he gets too close.”

The tower had four .50 cal sniper’s rifles dedicated to that very purpose. Smith nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

McKee walked over to the stairs and began to make her way down to the ground. Her right calf was still sore where a bullet fired from Vickers’s rifle had passed through it. She was lucky though . . . The bone was untouched, and she was alive.

FOB Vickers had undergone an amazing transformation during the last couple of months. Minefields ringed the bottom of the mesa now. Twenty-three autocannons were dug in on top . . . And the gaps between them were protected by heavy machine guns and mortars.

Two companies of legionnaires had been assigned to the mesa, including two platoons of cavalry, one of which belonged to her. McKee returned two salutes as she followed the path that led down into an underground bunker. It was a good deal larger than it had originally been, and that was a good thing.

A sentry snapped to attention as she entered. The ceiling was intentionally high so that Trooper Is could enter, and like the walls, it was made of duracrete slabs hooked together with rails and pins. The floor was covered with pea gravel. McKee’s boots made crunching sounds as she approached the front desk. It was a sheet of plywood laid across two upended mortar boxes. A sergeant named Nichols sat behind it. She had a mop of curly red hair and a spray of freckles across her nose. “Hey, Lieutenant . . . The major is looking for you.”

“That’s what I heard. Is he available?”

“Yes, ma’am. But watch out . . . He’s pissed about something.”

McKee nodded. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

As she made her way past the com section, logistics, and Intel, McKee caught glimpses of the video being provided by half a dozen surveillance drones. The ops center and the CO’s “office” came next. If a desk surrounded by makeshift partitions could be dignified as such. McKee paused to knock. “Lieutenant McKee reporting as . . .”

“Cut the crap and come on in,” Major Gordon said from the other side of the thin wall.

As McKee entered, she saw that Gordon was stripped to the waist and standing in front of a small wall-mounted mirror. There was white shaving gel on his face, and he was working with a straight razor. “Take a load off McKee . . . We’re about to have company—so it’s time to make myself presentable.”

Gordon was small but muscular, like the bantam-weight boxer he’d once been. His black hair was combed straight back, and for some reason, he had chosen to grow a pencil-thin mustache. McKee sat on an empty cable spool and watched him work. “Company, sir? What kind of company?”

“The *worst* kind,” Gordon replied gloomily. “A REMF (rear echelon mother fucker), a civilian, and a combot.”

“A what?”

“A combot. Meaning an android equipped to make vids.”

McKee felt a rising sense of apprehension. During a recent visit to Earth, she’d been forced to make numerous public appearances, all calculated to benefit the person she hated most . . . Empress Ophelia. No one had recognized her as Lady Catherine Carletto because of the scar that ran from just above her right eye down onto her left cheek. But that didn’t mean she was safe. There was no such thing. She cleared her throat. “So, what’s up? A training vid?”

“Hell no,” Gordon replied, as he wiped the remaining gel off his face. “It’s going to be a McKee vid. Yeah, yeah, I know. You don’t want to do it. Well, let me tell you something . . . There aren’t many people of any rank who have the right to wear the Imperial Order of Merit. And now, having added a Star Cluster to that, you’re a big deal on Earth. So the government sent a combot to make a documentary about you. And yes, you have to put up with it. The brass sees you as their number one recruiter.”

McKee was about to object when Nichols stepped into the room. “They’re here, sir. On pad two.”

“We’ll be right there,” Gordon said as he buttoned his shirt. Then he turned to McKee. “I’m sorry . . . I really am. But there’s nothing you can do. Just grit your teeth, let the combot do its thing, and the whole thing will be over before you know it. Come on . . . We wouldn’t want to keep our visitors waiting, now would we?”

Apprehension had morphed to fear by that time. And what felt like a rock occupied the pit of McKee’s stomach as she followed Gordon up the back ramp and onto the surface. Clusters of floodlights came on as another two-hour-and-forty-two-minute day came to an abrupt end. That was the result of a rotation so fast that it created a bulge at the planet’s equator. In fact, some of the higher peaks soared eighty thousand feet up into the sky and dwarfed both Everest on Earth and Olympic Mons on Mars.

A fly-form was sitting on the pad, and like all such aircraft, it was piloted by a cyborg rather than a bio bod. Just one of the many things that made the Legion different from the rest of the armed services. Some of the Legion’s borgs were criminals who, having been executed for capital crimes, had chosen life in a brain box over the big nothing. Others were legionnaires who had been wounded so badly that they were left with no choice but to pilot a fly-form, quad, or T-1.

Three figures appeared at the top of the ramp as it was lowered to the ground. The first person to make his way down was a portly colonel dressed in starched camos and wearing a sidearm with ivory grips. Rather than the rough-outs real soldiers wore in the field, he sported mirror-bright barracks boots. A REMF for sure. Gordon and McKee saluted the officer as he arrived on the ground. The response was so crisp, McKee

suspected that the gesture had been perfected in front of a mirror. “As you were,” the colonel said. “My name is Cavanaugh.”

Before Gordon could speak, Cavanaugh turned to introduce his companion. The civilian had shoulder-length black hair, big brown eyes, and olive-colored skin. She was dressed in khakis and desert boots. McKee figured she might weigh a hundred pounds soaking wet. “This is Bindali Jivani,” Cavanaugh said. “She’s a civilian contractor—and we’ll discuss her role shortly.”

That was Gordon’s opportunity to step forward and introduce McKee. “I’ve heard about you,” Cavanaugh said. “Order of Merit and all that. Well done.”

The civilian offered her hand, and McKee shook it. “My friends call me Bindy,” Jivani said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Jivani was so open, it was impossible not to like her. McKee smiled. “Likewise, ma’am. Welcome to Forward Operating Base Vickers.”

“And this is Andy,” Cavanaugh said, as the combot arrived. Like most machines that were designed to interact with Humans, Andy was an android. Meaning a robot made to look like a Human being. In this case a thirtysomething male with light brown hair, beige skin, and a perpetual smile. It didn’t *need* clothes but wore some anyway. They were made of leatherlike tufskin and were too fashionable for Algeron. “I’m glad to meet you,” Andy said brightly. “Please stand closer together. I need a three shot.”

That was when McKee realized that one if not both of Andy’s “eyes” were cameras. She had no choice but to comply and wondered how long Andy would hang around. A couple of days? A week? Hopefully no more than that.

Gordon led the way back to the bunker, with Cavanaugh at his side. That left McKee to walk with Jivani. Andy followed along behind. “It’s very beautiful, isn’t it?” the civilian said, as she looked out over the desertlike wasteland. And it *was* beautiful. Or had been. Back before McKee had seen thousands of people die on it.

“Yes,” McKee answered. “That’s how the whole planet is. Or the parts I’ve seen anyway. Beautiful but dangerous.”

Jivani nodded and said something in a language that McKee knew to be Naa. A Human who spoke Naa! That was rare indeed. Most people relied on computerized translators. “The words you spoke . . . What did they mean?”

“It’s an old folk saying. ‘The blade that gleams can also cut deep.’”

“So you live here?”

Jivani smiled and shook her head. “No . . . I arrived last week.”

McKee wanted to ask more questions, but they were belowground by then. Gordon apologized for the lack of a meeting room as they entered his office. Cavanaugh sat in Gordon’s chair. That left the rest of them to perch on cable spools. “So,” he said. “Let’s get to it . . . I’d like to stay and get a feel for the area—but I promised General Vale that I would join her for dinner at 1800 hours. Annoying, but that’s life.”

McKee got the feeling that Cavanaugh was anything but annoyed by the obligation and looking forward to dinner. *Any* dinner. But especially one that might help to advance his career.

“Yes, of course,” Gordon responded. “It’s my understanding that Andy is supposed to make a vid about Lieutenant McKee.”

“That’s one aspect of the situation,” Cavanaugh agreed judiciously. “But not the most important part of what we need to accomplish. I have a mission for Lieutenant McKee. A tricky mission, which, if successful, will help us to fully secure the planet. I trust both of you know who Chief of Chiefs Truthsayer is.”

“Yes,” McKee answered. Momentarily forgetting to say, “sir.” “He’s the one who sent warriors north to fight Chief Lifetaker’s alliance. They also attacked the village of Doothdown and the legionnaires stationed on this mesa.”

“That’s correct,” Cavanaugh agreed. “And you beat him fair and square.”

“No, sir. I wasn’t in command.”

“Ah, but according to official records, the strategy employed to beat him was *yours*. So you beat him fair and square. And that, according to Ms. Jivani here, means that you are qualified to negotiate with him. A lesser warrior couldn’t. Not according to Naa traditions.”

“I was given access to some relevant intelligence reports,” Jivani said. “The villagers who lived in Doothdown gave you the name Nofear Deathgiver. And it’s safe to assume that Truthsayer has heard of you by now.”

“Precisely,” Cavanaugh said. “So, here are your orders. You will take a mixed force of legionnaires and Naa south, find the chief of chiefs, and give him some gifts. Then you will invite the son of a bitch to come up and negotiate with us.”

McKee knew the mission was next to impossible. In order to carry out Cavanaugh’s orders, she’d have to enter territory that no legionnaire had visited before—and try to find a Naa who hated slick skins in general and her in particular. A suicide mission for sure. But she couldn’t say that. No legionnaire could. So McKee gave voice to the obvious question. “And if Truthsayer says, ‘No’?”

Cavanaugh had bushy eyebrows. They rose slightly. “In that case, it will be your duty to shoot him.”

McKee wanted to laugh or cry. She wasn’t sure which. If she caught up with Truthsayer, and that was a huge *if*, the Naa leader would be surrounded by bodyguards. And were she to so much as lift a finger against Truthsayer, she’d be dead within seconds. A possibility that didn’t seem to trouble Cavanaugh at all.

Then McKee realized that the government would score a propaganda coup either way. If she brought Truthsayer to the negotiating table, then so much the better. That’s the sort of thing heroes were supposed to do. And if she gave her life in an attempt to kill him, that would suit their purposes equally well. She could imagine the headline. “War hero dies in a valiant attempt to kill rebel leader.” With any luck, Andy would have time to upload video of the assassination attempt just before the machine was beaten to death. “I see, sir,” McKee said. “I like the first option better.”

Both men chuckled, but Jivani frowned. “With all due respect, Colonel . . . That’s a bad idea. If the lieutenant assassinates Truthsayer, that could start a war and make negotiations impossible.”

Cavanaugh frowned. “We *are* at war because Truthsayer decided to bring all of the southern tribes together under his totem. If we manage to kill him, the savages will turn on each other, and the alliance will disintegrate like wet cardboard. At that point, we can slice and dice the tribes as we see fit. Andy . . . Delete

what I said.”

“Yes, Colonel,” the android said obediently. “Your comment was deleted.”

“I object,” Jivani said angrily.

“So noted,” Cavanaugh replied. “Although Andy will delete that, too.” The avuncular manner was gone now. “Listen carefully young lady . . . You were brought here to facilitate negotiations. Not to set policy. So do what you’re being paid for—and keep your personal opinions to yourself.

“Enough of that,” Cavanaugh said dismissively, as his gaze turned to McKee. “A contingent of Naa troops will arrive soon, and I trust that Major Gordon will provide you with some legionnaires. As for me, well, I have a three-hour flight to endure. Good hunting, Lieutenant. If anyone can complete this mission, you can.”

He left, with Gordon in tow. McKee and Jivani looked at each other, and Andy stood. “Please pretend to speak with each other. I need a two shot.” The meeting was over.

—

The next few days were a whirlwind of activity as McKee went about the task of equipping her platoon for what was likely to be a long and arduous journey. Her force included a small headquarters group that consisted of Bindy Jivani, Sergeant Larkin, and the T-1s required to transport them. McKee also had three squads of legionnaires, each of which was made up of four bio bods and four T-1s. That brought the total force up to twenty-nine people. Not counting Andy, who didn’t qualify as a person.

It was a deceptively small number since each cyborg could run at fifty miles per hour, could carry a rider while doing so, and was equal to a squad of bio bods. So judged by that standard, the borgs were the functional equivalent of 135 legionnaires.

In addition, Major Gordon had allocated McKee to have three RAVs (Robotic All-Terrain Vehicles). Each unit consisted of two eight-foot-long sections hooked together by an accordion-style joint. Each RAV had four legs, two forward-facing machine guns, and a grenade launcher. Of more importance was their ability to transport up to four thousand pounds of food, ammo, and spare parts. All of which would be critical during the days ahead.

So McKee was with her old friend Larkin, supervising loading, when the general alarm went off. McKee wasn’t wearing a helmet but had a radio clipped to her body armor. The Klaxon was still bleating as a private stationed in the observation tower spoke. “We have approximately fifty, that’s five-oh, Naa inbound from the northwest at two o’clock.”

It wasn’t a large force but sufficient to send everyone to their defensive positions. That included McKee and Larkin. Their platoon had secondary responsibility for the so-called ramp on the west side of the mesa. The slide area originally had been the most hotly contested spot during the battle months earlier.

Thanks to frequent drills, the last of McKee’s people arrived as she did and took up positions behind the infantry platoon on duty. The scene seemed to leap forward as McKee brought a pair of binos up to her eyes.

The Naa warriors were heavily armed. Even from a distance, she could see that most of them carried Legion-issue weapons scrounged from battlefields or captured in battle. Their heads rose and fell in concert with the huge animals they rode. The dooths were hung with the trappings of war—and galloped along at a good thirty miles per hour. A pace they could maintain for thirty minutes at a time. All for effect? Or as part of an

actual attack?

McKee assumed the former, and Jivani arrived to confirm it. "They're northerners," the civilian said, as she studied the Naa through glasses of her own. "See the totem? The one that looks like a spear, with a crosspiece and a pair of animal skulls? That means they take orders from Chief Spearthrow Lifetaker."

McKee hadn't met him but knew Lifetaker was supposed to be an ally. But, during the recent conflict with Truthsayer's army, the northerner had proved himself to be less than entirely trustworthy. In fact, there were rumors that Lifetaker had played a role in Colonel Richard Bodry's death. The upshot was that this particular group was unlikely to attack. "How do you know that stuff?" McKee inquired as she lowered the binoculars. "Especially since you arrived last week."

"I studied the Naa on Earth," Jivani answered. "I have a masters in Naa studies."

"Naa studies? I didn't know such a thing existed."

"I'm the first graduate," Jivani said modestly. "I took the contract so I could come here and work on my doctorate. It's impossible to travel here without some sort of connection to the Legion."

McKee frowned. "If you go south with us, there's an excellent chance that the people you came here to study will kill you."

Jivani nodded soberly. "I'll have to take that chance."

Major Gordon arrived at that point, and the all clear signal was heard. "We made radio contact with them," he explained. "Remember the Naa warriors Cavanaugh promised you? Well, here they are. Come on . . . It's time to introduce ourselves."

Gordon, McKee, and Jivani picked their way down past the defensive positions to the bottom of the slope. The Naa were milling around. A warrior slid down off his dooth. He had variegated white and gray fur. The ears that stuck up from his skull gave him a vaguely feline appearance.

McKee knew that the Naa had four fingers and opposable thumbs just like Humans did. But their feet were wider and lacked toes. This male was about six and a half feet tall and dressed in a vest and trousers. A fully loaded cartridge belt circled his waist, and he had a Legion-issue sniper's rifle slung across his back. As what? An insult? Or simply the best weapon for a sharpshooter to own? Not that both couldn't be true at the same time.

As soon as the Naa's feet touched the ground, he made straight for Gordon. Once they were close enough, he offered the forearm-to-forearm grip employed by warriors of roughly equal status. His standard was stiff but serviceable. "I am Longsee Sureshot. First son to Spearthrow Lifetaker."

McKee swore silently. *Lifetaker's son!* That would make an already-challenging mission that much more difficult. Everyone knew that Lifetaker and Truthsayer hated each other. So if they managed to catch up with the chief of chiefs, Sureshot's presence would be like salt in an open wound. And who was responsible for that? Cavanaugh, of course. Because he was stupid? Or as an insurance policy? Knowing that if she failed to kill Truthsayer, Sureshot would do the job. Yes, that made sense.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Gordon replied. "I'm Major Gordon, and this is Lieutenant McKee. She will be in command of the expedition."

Sureshot looked at McKee and back again. "The lieutenant is female."

“That’s true,” Gordon acknowledged. “But it doesn’t matter. She will be in command.”

Sureshot was about to object when Jivani intervened. “Lieutenant McKee has a Naa name. It is Nofear Deathgiver.”

Sureshot’s expression changed. He turned to McKee and offered the forearm-to-forearm grip previously shared with Gordon. “I know of the battle for Doothdown. Everyone does. I thank you on behalf of my people.”

McKee accepted the grip and thought she saw something other than gratitude in the Naa’s gray eyes. Admiration? Yes, but of the sort Human males directed her way. Or had before the disfiguring scar. “You’re welcome,” McKee said. “But the females of Doothdown fought like true warriors. They are the ones who deserve the credit.”

Sureshot stared at her for a moment as if considering a truly novel idea. He knew, as his entire tribe did, that Doothdown’s males had been elsewhere, thus opening the village to possibility of an attack. But viewing female Naa as warriors? That was something new. Sureshot nodded. “What you say is true . . . Although none can doubt what you accomplished. We will follow you.”

Gordon looked from one to the other. “Good. That’s settled then. Let’s bring your warriors and animals up onto the mesa. There’s plenty of room north of the observation tower.”

—

During the next two days, McKee repeatedly took her combined force down onto the plain, where she put them through every sort of evolution she could think of. And there were plenty of problems. The Naa had radios now, but no notion of radio discipline, and frequently spoke over each other. However, Naa, *all* Naa, put the need for personal glory ahead of unit objectives. That meant they were reluctant to follow orders. Especially slick-skin orders. The fact that the Naa didn’t have a formal chain of command made things worse.

Fortunately, Sureshot had trained under the tutelage of his father up north and seen how effective the Legion’s methods could be. So in response to McKee’s urgings, he divided his force into five subgroups, each led by the equivalent of a noncom. Then he told them to do whatever Lieutenant McKee and Company Sergeant Larkin said. And that was where the problem came in.

McKee’s reputation was such that the warriors were willing to submit. But even though Larkin had fought in Doothdown, he wasn’t known to them. So it was just a matter of time before he gave an order that one of them didn’t like.

When the conflict arose, it was the result of Larkin’s ordering a squad of Naa to ride drag. That, it seemed, was the position normally assigned to inexperienced males when the Naa went to war. So to tell any of Sureshot’s handpicked veterans to ride at the end of the column constituted an unbearable insult. A problem made clear when their leader, a ruffian named Largemouth Eatbig, refused to fall back and called Larkin a long list of insulting names. The result was a fight, which a couple of T-1s managed to break up.

McKee was riding at the head of the column at the time. Immediately after receiving word of the dustup via radio, she ordered her T-1 to turn around. Sureshot accompanied her. They arrived to find a standoff at the point where the trail dipped into a bowl-like depression. Patches of snow were hiding where the pale yellow sun hadn’t been able to find them, and there were lots of hoofprints in the mud.

The adversaries had dismounted and were facing each other from ten paces away. Both had backers, some of whom were fingering their weapons. It was a critical moment. If McKee backed Larkin, which was the obvious thing to do, the Naa would see it as favoritism. And when the chips were down, they might leave the Humans in the lurch.

On the other hand, if McKee couldn't find a way to back her company sergeant, it would have a disastrous effect on Human morale. That left her with a very fine line to walk.

McKee dropped to the ground and made her way over to a point between the combatants, where she paused to look around. "Post some pickets, Sergeant Payton . . . Human *and* Naa. Once they are in place, the rest of the company can gather around."

As Payton went to work, McKee addressed herself to those who were still present. She was wearing a translator, which meant the Naa could understand her. "This company will have to fight during the days ahead. And when it does, there is no way to know what the circumstances will be. We may engage the enemy at a distance—or we may be forced to battle them hand-to-hand."

"So," McKee continued, "Company Sergeant Larkin and Lead Warrior Eatbig are going to put on a demonstration of hand-to-hand-combat techniques. No weapons will be permitted." It was a thin fiction but a necessary one in order to maintain some semblance of military discipline. Cheers went up from both camps, the combatants began to shed weapons, and more people arrived.

McKee had already begun to experience doubts, but it was too late to change her mind. She looked at Larkin, saw him wink, and felt a little better. He understood. But could he deliver? Eatbig was shorter, but thicker, and very confident. Still, Larkin had been raised in the slums of Esparto . . . And spent a good deal of the last year fighting on Orlo II and Algeron. That meant there was reason to hope.

Payton arrived with a large group of Humans and Naa. They flooded in to surround the combatants. "All right," McKee announced, as Larkin and Eatbig stepped forward to face each other. "You can begin the demonstration."

The Human danced, threw a punch, and saw it connect. Eatbig flinched as the legionnaires cheered. But the moment of victory was short-lived.

As Eatbig bored in, Larkin launched a kick. The Naa grabbed the Human's boot and gave it a twist. The legionnaires uttered a common groan as their champion went down.

Larkin hit, rolled to his knees, and was trying to rise when Eatbig kicked him in the side. McKee heard Larkin grunt and saw him fall over. He rolled over onto his knees but was struggling to breathe. "Stand!" someone shouted. "Get up!"

It did no good. Larkin remained where he was, head down, with one knee on the ground. "That didn't take long," Sureshot said, as Eatbig lumbered forward.

"It isn't over," McKee predicted, as Larkin launched himself up off the ground. The top of his head hit the Naa's midriff and Eatbig fell over backwards. Now it was time for the Naa warriors to groan as Larkin straddled Eatbig and went to work with his bony fists. Left right, left right, the blows fell until the Naa gave a mighty heave and threw Larkin off. Then he rolled to his feet and stood with blood running out his nose.

Larkin circled the Naa, looking for an opening, saw one, and sidled forward. That was when Eatbig threw a fistful of dirt at the Human's eyes and went in swinging. Larkin staggered as the blows landed, lost his

balance, and fell. Eatbig uttered a Naa war cry and took to the air. But rather than land on top of the noncom, the warrior slammed into solid ground. Mud splattered away from his body.

The opportunity for a devastating follow-up was there—but the legionnaire was still wiping dirt out of his eyes. That gave Eatbig the time he needed to stand and attack his opponent yet again. Strangely, the partisan cheering had given way to silence as the noncoms met face-to-face and began to trade powerful blows. There was no attempt to duck now . . . Just a brutal contest to see which person could take the most punishment. As Larkin took a blow, a mixture of spittle and blood flew from the side of his mouth, and McKee regretted authorizing the fight. But it was too late.

Larkin turned a full circle, launched a kick that connected with Eatbig's jaw, and sent his adversary flying. There was a thud as the warrior hit the ground and lay staring at the sky. Larkin staggered, found his balance, and paused to wipe the blood off his lips. "Damn . . . That bastard can take a punch."

It wasn't planned, at least McKee didn't think so, but the comment struck just the right note. There was laughter followed by applause from Humans and Naa alike. And it grew stronger as Larkin went forward to give his opponent a hand. McKee was happy to seize the opportunity. "Well, done! I think all of us learned something today . . . When the enemy has the upper hand, throw dirt in his eyes."

All of them laughed. McKee waited for it to die down. "Now listen, and listen good. The drag position is extremely important because the enemy may attack us from behind. So if a noncom assigns you to the rear guard, you will obey. And remember this . . . *Everyone*, Human and Naa alike, will rotate through that position, and *everyone* will walk point. Now mount up. We have work to do."

"You were lucky," Sureshot said, as they returned to their mounts. "It could have gone the other way."

"The outcome was never in doubt," McKee lied.

Sureshot laughed as he walked away.

—

The company was assembled on the flat area in front of the ramp. McKee could feel the weight of Major Gordon's gaze and knew he was up on the mesa watching through binoculars. Almost an entire day had passed since the fight between Larkin and Eatbig. The sun was little more than a yellow smear in a gray sky—and snowflakes were twirling down as McKee gave the order. "Move out!"

Three can-shaped drones went first. As they sped away, the machines spread out to cover a mile-wide swath of ground with their sensors. A party of three Naa scouts went next. Sureshot was one of them, and McKee knew they would see and understand things that her legionnaires wouldn't. It was *their* planet, and they had a visceral connection to it.

Next came McKee on a T-1 named Sam Vella and Jivani on a cyborg named Dor Cory. Each bipedal Trooper I was eight feet tall and weighed half a ton. They were equipped with three-fingered pincer hands, or interchangeable shovel hands, and could run at speeds up to thirty-five miles per hour. Each cyborg was armed with a Storm .50 caliber machine gun and underbarrel grenade launcher. And the RAVs were carrying the launchers and rockets required to equip four of the T-1s should that become necessary.

Andy was traveling on its own. McKee had hoped that the robot would be unable to keep up and quickly learned that it could. Not only that, but the combot was fast enough to dash ahead in order to capture shots of the column coming straight at the camera or passing by it.

Such jaunts were dangerous, but McKee never complained. It was her fervent hope that Andy would step on a mine, fall into a deep ravine, or run afoul of a Naa war party. Any of which would allow her to write the robot off.

Most of the column consisted of alternating squads of legionnaires and Naa. They were followed by the RAVs, four construction droids that McKee had wheedled out of the FOB's supply officer, and a rear guard presently under Larkin's command. Under normal circumstances it would have been regarded as a substantial force—but the company was nothing compared to the tens of thousands of warriors that Truthsayer could send against it.

McKee's thoughts were interrupted by a voice in her helmet. "Charlie-Six to Alpha-One. Good hunting, over." McKee tried to come up with something snappy to say, failed, and clicked her mike twice by way of an acknowledgment.

Thanks to satellite imagery, the Legion knew where all of the villages in the southern hemisphere were, which meant McKee knew, too. And that would have been valuable intelligence if she had orders to attack one of them. But McKee wasn't looking for a settlement . . . She was looking for a single individual. And Truthsayer could be anywhere. That's why the Legion's Intel people had agreed to provide her with a guide. A southerner named Longtalk Storytell, who, according to her orders, ". . . Will join the expedition at a point south of FOB Vickers."

That didn't mean much since it didn't say where they would meet. And if Storytell failed to show, she was to ". . . Proceed according to your best judgment." Which meant that all the responsibility for whatever happened would rest with her.

Despite the rather uncertain arrangements where Storytell was concerned, McKee felt better and better as the mesa dwindled behind them and eventually disappeared. Because here was what any junior officer worth his or her salt desired, even if it was fraught with danger. And that was an independent command.

So McKee took pleasure in the cold, crisp air as she sent Vella up and down the column. She made a point out of falling in step with legionnaires to chat. And thanks to the translator she was wearing, McKee could do the same thing with Sureshot's warriors.

The purpose of the exercise was to learn their names, gauge personalities, and listen. The latter was very important because having come up through the ranks, McKee knew that while some enlisted personnel were full of shit, others had good ideas. Things they were willing to share with officers who would listen.

Meanwhile, noncoms were being tested; squads were being rotated through every possible position so that the weak links could be identified. It was a process McKee would have enjoyed if it hadn't been for the omnipresent Andy. But she had learned to ignore the machine's incessant requests for tight shots, additional takes, and sound bites. As a result, Andy was more like an annoying insect than a serious problem.

After three two-hour-and-forty-two-minute days had come and gone, McKee called a halt. Then she gave orders for Larkin to throw up a marching camp not unlike those used by the Romans. It consisted of a ditch backed by a dirt rampart. And that, as it turned out, was *not* something the Naa were accustomed to, a fact that became abundantly clear when Sureshot came to see her. "Sergeant Larkin ordered my warriors to dig a ditch," the Naa said, "and warriors do *not* dig ditches. When it is time to rest, they seek high ground that offers both cover and forage for their dooths."

"High ground of the sort you describe is not always available," McKee countered. "But, even if it were, I would dig a ditch around it. We are in enemy territory, and the southerners might throw a thousand warriors

at us. Should that happen, you will be glad of every advantage that you have, including a well-dug ditch and rampart. Fortunately for all of us, the T-1s and the construction droids will do half the work. But when it comes to preparing defenses, it's important that *everyone* lend a hand. Here's a shovel."

Sureshot looked her in the eye as he accepted the shovel. It was difficult to know what he was thinking, but McKee thought she saw annoyance mixed with something else. Something that had more to do with males and females than war. But she already had someone. Or hoped she did. His name was John Avery. *Major* John Avery, and she had served with him on Orlo II. What was he doing now? she wondered. And what would he think of the promotion? They could see each other legally now that both of them were officers. *If* they lived long enough to do so. "Come on," she said. "Let's show the troops how it's done."

So the perimeter ditch was dug, and rations were distributed, much to the amusement of the troops—who took the opportunity to sample each other's food. Then it was time for the legionnaires to return to work. Each bio bod was responsible for performing maintenance on their T-1, with the exception of Jivani, that is, who didn't have the necessary training. She was trying to learn however . . . And had taken to wearing a sidearm.

The Naa had similar responsibilities. Their dooths had to be fed, groomed, and treated for various maladies. All of which consumed a couple of hours. Once their chores were completed, it was time to stand guard or sack out—depending on where each individual fell on the watch list. That, at least, wasn't subject to controversy since the Naa had strict traditions where sentry duty was concerned.

The eight-hour rest period passed without incident, and although the process of breaking camp went more slowly than McKee would have preferred, the column was under way by 0830. The second day was much like the first insofar as the weather was concerned—with cloudy skies and the occasional snow flurry.

But the landscape had begun to change. The previously flat plain had begun to break up into clusters of low-lying hills, gullies, and islands of rock. That made the terrain more interesting to look at but dangerous as well since there were plenty of places for enemies to hide.

So McKee added two T-1s and their bio bods to the party of Naa scouts, knowing that the cyborgs could "sense" things that the locals couldn't. Examples included heat and electronic signals. But in spite of the scouting party's best efforts, it was a drone that made first contact.

All of McKee's bio bods were cross-trained in at least two disciplines, and Corporal Dara Boyer was the company's lead com tech. Which meant that in addition to maintaining her T-1, the legionnaire had to keep the company's drones up and running, too. Her voice flooded McKee's helmet. "Alpha-Four-One to Alpha-One. Over."

"This is One . . . Go. Over."

"Drone 2 has a contact on channel seven. Over."

"Roger that," McKee said, as she brought channel seven up on her HUD (Heads Up Display). The video was projected on the inside surface of McKee's visor and gave her a drone's eye view of a middle-aged Naa. He had a scarf wrapped around his head, was wearing a dooth-leather jacket, and was seated with his back against a slab of gray rock. If the drone was a surprise to him, he gave no sign of it. His command of standard was excellent. "It's about time you people showed up," he said. "My name is Longtalk Storytell. I was going to stay hidden until you arrived, but the bastards spotted me. Now I'm pinned down and running out of ammo."

“This is Alpha-One,” McKee replied. “What can you tell me about the surrounding area?”

There was a pop as someone fired a distant rifle, and McKee saw rock chips fly as the slug glanced off a rock. Storytell smiled grimly. “Humans like to say that a picture is worth a thousand words . . . So tell your drone to make the picture larger but to stay low. Your machine makes a nice target.”

McKee gave the necessary order, and the drone obeyed. As it zoomed out and floated sideways, she was able to peer through a gap between the rocks. A heavily rutted road led up into the gap that separated two hills. The fortification sat atop the elevation to the right. It boasted a crooked flagpole from which a brightly colored pennant drooped. “That’s Graveyard Pass,” Storytell said. “Assuming it’s in the picture. It changes hands on a frequent basis. At the moment, it belongs to a bandit named Hardhand Bigclub. You can force your way through the gap or take a 150-mile detour to the east.”

McKee ordered the drone to pull back. “Roger, that . . . What’s your present situation? Over.”

“I’m surrounded,” Storytell replied. “I killed three of them, but I’m running out of bullets. It’s only a matter of time before they nail me.”

That was very bad news indeed. McKee needed the Naa in order to find Truthsayer. “Hang in there . . . Help is on the way. Over.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Storytell said. “Tell your drone to land. Otherwise, they’re going to—”

McKee never got to hear what the Naa was going to say. She heard a clang and saw an explosion of light. That was when the transmission cut to black, and a tone sounded. Drone 2 was dead.

CHAPTER: 2

The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him.

NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

The Prince

Standard year circa 1513

PLANET EARTH

Over thirty-six years, Carlo Veneto had risen from street urchin to gigolo. Then, powered by a clever mind, he made the nearly impossible journey from a wealthy matron’s bedroom to her drawing room. That’s where he dazzled her friends with his wit and made a name for himself. From there it was a small leap into the Byzantine world of royal politics—and a carefully engineered “chance” encounter with the equally rapacious Princess Ophelia. It was what one critic called “A match made in hell.”

The attraction was mutual and quickly consummated in Ophelia’s bed. Veneto became her secretary a few weeks later. And from then on he had her ear. Not her mind, however. Because close though they were, Ophelia knew better than to give anyone full access to her thoughts. So there was a line that Veneto was never allowed to cross. Nor did she expect him to sleep with her every night. And that suited him just fine.

Because valuable though his relationship with Empress Ophelia was—Veneto had come to regard the physical aspect of it as something of a chore. So the freedom to pursue more intense sexual experiences was welcome indeed. And, as Veneto’s long, grueling workday finally came to an end, the opportunity for some

relaxation was very much on his mind.

After donning street clothes, Veneto examined himself in a full-length mirror. It was something he did frequently and for good reason. The thick, curly hair, the strong bladelike nose, and the sensuous lips were important assets.

Confident that his good looks were intact, Veneto strode through the richly decorated living room to the private elevator that carried him up to the roof. Ophelia and her son Nicolai occupied most of the palace, but that still left room for the three-thousand-square-foot apartment that Veneto had all to himself.

A pair of bodyguards were waiting. They were on his payroll rather than the government's—and were experts at a number of martial arts. Both men had been subjected to psychological loyalty programming in return for large amounts of money. Given his destination, a larger force would have been nice—but too many escorts could attract the kind of trouble he hoped to avoid. Because, according to a popular axiom, “Anyone worth guarding is worth attacking.”

Veneto entered the air car and sat in the back. The leather-upholstered seat began to squirm in an effort to make Veneto feel comfortable, and his favorite drink appeared at his elbow. It was dark, and as the car lifted off, Veneto could see the lights of Los Angeles spread out all around. Over the years, the metroplex had grown to encompass more than one thousand square miles. Some of that was relatively flat, but there were thickets of buildings that soared hundreds of feet into the air. Lights representing thousands of air cars, buses, and other flying vehicles wound their way between such structures and battled each other for space.

Not Veneto's limo, though. Thanks to its owner's importance, and the coded transmissions associated with it, the air car's pilot was free to go wherever she chose. A wedge-shaped high-rise glowed up ahead. The tower was hundreds of stories tall and clad with solar panels. The limo's running lights blipped across rows of highly reflective windows as it circled prior to coming in for a landing.

The bodyguards exited first, with their long dusters open to reveal the stubby assault weapons that dangled under their arms. Then, having assured themselves that the pad was safe, the taller of the two waved Veneto forward.

Veneto paused to pull a formfitting mask down over his head before exiting the car. Anonymity was important both for the sake of Ophelia's reputation and his own safety. Some criminals, especially members of the so-called Freedom Front, would shoot him on sight. Other less political gangs would hold him for ransom. Neither prospect had any appeal.

The high-rise belonged to a wealthy family who wanted to know what Ophelia was going to do before she did it so they could invest their money accordingly. A service Veneto was happy to provide up to a point. He knew better than to take the service too far—and his friends were happy to take what they could get.

Veneto stepped up to a reader, so that the building's security system could scan his retinas. A thumbprint was required to complete the process. Doors parted, and the bodyguards entered. Veneto waited for a hand signal before stepping aboard.

The doors closed with a whisper, and the platform fell so fast that Veneto felt a couple of pounds lighter. It slowed after thirty seconds or so and coasted to a gentle stop. The doors slid open, and Veneto followed the bodyguards into a tiny lobby located two levels beneath the streets. A four-digit code was required to enter a narrow passageway that led out into the Deeps. Multicolored signs crawled, slid, and blipped across the structures around him. Neon glowed, spotlights roamed, and ad blimps floated above.

Veneto knew that the power required to run the businesses around him had been obtained by tapping into LA's grid. Ophelia could put a stop to that . . . But it would take an army to do so, and the government had a lot of other priorities at the moment. The alien Hudathans being primary among them.

Veneto pushed work out of his mind so as to take everything in. He loved the bars, the strip clubs, and the sleazy ambience of it all. The Deeps reminded him of the environment he'd grown up in, the difference being that most of New York's combat zone was aboveground.

So as Veneto walked past the beggars, the robotic Sayers, and the hookers who waited in doorways, it was like a symbolic homecoming. The locals noticed him. How could they fail to? But none dared approach the man in black. Not with two bodyguards in tow.

The two-block journey to the Sweet Dream Sim Salon was delightfully uneventful. Unlike most of the establishment's patrons, Veneto had enough money to buy a sim system and have it installed in his apartment if he wanted to. But if he did so, Ophelia would learn about the purchase within a matter of hours and disapprove. Besides, the weekly visit to the Deeps was part of the fun.

Anyone could stroll through the front door and into the sleekly furnished lobby beyond. But then it was necessary to enter a kiosk and provide a nine-digit alphanumeric code before being allowed to enter "The Inner Sanctum." That was where a scantily clad hostess was waiting to take Veneto to a "dream box."

Secure in the knowledge that his bodyguards would remain outside and be there to protect him, Veneto followed the young woman into the boxlike room. Then it was time to remove his ankle-length cloak and hang it up before stretching out on the couch. The hostess was waiting. "Are you ready, sir?"

"Yes."

Veneto could smell her perfume and see her nipples as she leaned forward to insert the lead into the very expensive socket hidden under the hair near his temple. Then he was gone . . . Carried away on a wave of euphoria. Thanks to computer-driven virtual-reality generators, the sim world was a place where *every* experience was available no matter how obscure or perverted it might be. And such scenarios were so realistic, they were indistinguishable from what sim designers referred to as "Set One." Their designator for the real world.

There were all sorts of things clients could do while immersed in the sim world. Some chose to live life as an ant, or a flower, or a bird of prey. But most chose some form of sex. Sadomasochism, rapes, and orgies were common. And Veneto had tried most of them.

But before he could choose one of the icons floating in front of him—what sounded like the voice of God reverberated through his seemingly disembodied mind. It wasn't the *real* voice of God of course—but it felt that way. "Good morning . . . Or is it evening? Who knows down here? Not that it matters. My name is Colonel Red."

Veneto felt a stab of fear. *Colonel Red*? He knew that name. Millions of people did. Colonel Red was the nom de guerre of the man who led the Freedom Front. A rebel group that claimed responsibility for having assassinated Earth's governor months earlier. Veneto struggled to take control of his body. If he could pull the plug . . .

Laughter echoed as if from somewhere far away. "No, you can't break free. Not until your half-hour sim is over. Yeah, we spent a lot of money following your movements and hacking this system. But it was worth every credit. Now you're mine. Any questions?"

Veneto knew that the system could “hear” him and assumed that Colonel Red could, too. “What . . . What are you going to do to me?”

“What the hell do you *think* I’m going to do to you?” the voice demanded angrily. “You and the bitch you work for killed thousands of people including my brother and my sister-in-law. I’m going to kill you.”

“*No*, don’t do that,” Veneto said desperately. “I can pay you . . . I can . . .”

“You can *suffer*,” Colonel Red said darkly. “Just a little at first. Then more and more until the pain generates enough stress to stop your heart.”

That was when Veneto found himself on a conveyor belt. He was unable to get off but discovered that he could raise his head just enough to see the glowing oven. Then came the heat. Nothing too severe at first—just enough to make him sweat. But as Veneto neared the open door, he felt hot. *Very* hot. And thirsty. Then his clothes caught fire, and the *real* pain began. Indescribable, searing, burning pain. He could smell his own charred skin as the fire consumed his legs and approached his genitals. Then Veneto screamed, and the sound was so loud that his bodyguards heard it. They looked at each other and grinned. The boss was having a good time.

—

Tarch (Duke) Hanno had just arrived in his office and was preparing to wade through the e-mails that were waiting for him when one of his subordinates entered the room. Her name was Crystal Kemp and her expression was bleak. “Sorry to interrupt you, sir . . . But I have some bad news. Secretary Veneto was assassinated last night.”

Veneto was no great loss. Not to Hanno anyway . . . But the fact that someone had been able to successfully target Ophelia’s private secretary was of considerable concern for the government and his department in particular. Especially if it turned out that the assassin or assassins were on the list of people the Bureau of Missing Persons had been ordered to kill. That would be something his enemies could blame on him. So Hanno had a reason to look concerned. “Why, that’s terrible! Please . . . Sit down. Do they have the assassin?”

Kemp was a carefully-put-together fortysomething blonde with a reputation for ruthless efficiency—and a perfect fit for a high-level position in the Bureau. As Kemp perched on the arm of a guest chair, she shared what she knew. It seemed that Veneto had been killed while on a sex safari in the Deeps. The body was discovered by a Sim Salon attendant and reported to Veneto’s bodyguards shortly after the secretary’s “dream” came to a close. There were no signs of violence, so all three of them assumed their client had died of natural causes.

But as the body was being transported up to the surface, the Freedom Front issued a statement detailing the circumstances of Veneto’s death and the way the assassination had been carried out. That was followed by a lengthy screed accusing Empress Ophelia and her government of mass murder plus a long list of other offenses.

Hanno thanked Kemp, and she was leaving as the comset on his desk began to chirp. His secretary’s face was visible on a small screen. “Excuse me, Tarch Hanno . . . But a priority one security meeting has been scheduled for 10:00 A.M.”

“Okay, tell them I’ll be there.” Hanno glanced at his watch. It was 9:21. He’d have to hurry. “And call for my car.”

Hanno hated the government complex located north of the metroplex and had gone to considerable lengths to make sure the Bureau's offices remained downtown. Now he had to pay the price for that by hurrying up to the roof, where an air car swooped in to pick him up. However, thanks to a priority routing from LA's air-traffic-control computer, the car's pilot was able to put the vehicle down with minutes to spare.

Hanno hated to be late for meetings but didn't want to look hurried either. So he was careful to maintain a normal pace after he passed through a checkpoint and stepped onto the moving sidewalks that carried him through a maze of gleaming passageways to the Security Center. Then it was necessary to undergo a second check prior to being admitted.

It was a big room, twice as large as it needed to be to accommodate the seventeen people who were present, eighteen now that Hanno had arrived. There were the usual greetings including one from Lady Constance Forbes, Director of the Department of Internal Security (DIS), and his main rival. She thought the Bureau of Missing Persons should be part of the DIS and sought to undercut him whenever she got a chance. Hanno offered a half bow and took a seat across the oval-shaped table from her.

Minister of Defense Tarch (Duke) Ono had responsibility for chairing such meetings. Ono's head was shaved, and his suit looked as if it had been spray-painted onto his chemically enhanced body. He nodded to Hanno. "Now that everyone is here, let's begin with a review of what we know so far."

What followed was a recitation of what Hanno already knew, except that it was supported with vid clips, still photos, and preliminary lab reports. All of which suggested that the Freedom Front's claims were true. Veneto had been assassinated and in a very unusual way. But as Hanno scanned the faces around him, he was unable to find any that looked especially sad. Veneto had been someone to fear not love. "So," Ono said, as the presentation came to an end. "The empress is very upset. Secretary Veneto was not only an important member of her staff but a close personal friend as well."

Ono didn't say, "lover," and didn't need to. Everyone knew. And Hanno wondered how the empress felt about Veneto's visits to the Deeps. Because she had to know. Even if Veneto thought she didn't. "At this point," Ono continued, "our task is to formulate a recommendation. Should Veneto's death be characterized as an assassination? To do so would give Colonel Red and his followers a propaganda coup. On the other hand, such an admission could be used to justify the sort of crackdown that is long overdue. Every garden must be weeded from time to time."

The moment that Ono mentioned Colonel Red, Hanno knew what to expect. Forbes cleared her throat. She had perfectly cut bangs that fell to her eyebrows, high cheekbones, and cold eyes. "*Colonel Red?*" she inquired innocently. "Isn't he on the list of people that the Bureau of Missing Persons is supposed to find and neutralize?"

All of the officials turned to look at Hanno. And there wasn't much he could say since all of his efforts to find Colonel Red had been for naught. So all he could do was launch a counterattack. "Lady Forbes is correct . . . Colonel Red *is* on our list. And it's true that we've been unable to capture or kill him. That's because he, like thousands of other criminals, continues to live in the Deeps. The very place where Secretary Veneto was killed and the DNI was supposed to sterilize months ago." Point and counterpoint. All eyes went to Forbes. But, before she could respond, Ono stepped in.

"Amusing though this game is—we don't have time for it. Both of you are correct to some extent—and both of you share responsibility for this debacle. That brings us back to the question of how we want to position Veneto's death with the public."

"We could take it in the opposite direction," the woman in charge of the Department of Public Information

offered. “Veneto had a secret life and died as a result of a sim-induced heart attack. That would keep the Freedom Front from calling his death a victory.”

“True,” Forbes allowed. “But it would suggest that Veneto wasn’t properly vetted—and would reflect negatively on the empress. Why didn’t *she* know? Why didn’t *we* know? That’s what people would ask themselves.”

Hanno decided to seize on what looked like an opportunity. “I agree with Lady Forbes. The first option is best. Let’s call the assassination what it is—and use it to justify an all-out attack on the Deeps. Maybe we can bag Colonel Red and clear the cesspool out for good.”

Even Ono looked at Forbes. She nodded. “I agree. Our sewers are full of rats. Let’s exterminate them.”

—

The alarm began to beep, so Rex slapped it. Then he yawned and swung his bare feet over onto the cool floor. A short walk took him into the bathroom, where he stared at the bleary-eyed image in the mirror. There were gray streaks in his otherwise black hair, bags under his eyes, and a deathly pallor to his skin. Sun. He needed sun. But there was no day or night down in the Deeps. It never rained, it never snowed, and it was never too cold. Some people professed to like that, but Rex Carletto wasn’t one of them. He ached to go up top and feel whatever was waiting to be felt.

But visits to the surface were rare, and had to be, since he was a wanted man. Did the government know that Rex Carletto and Colonel Red were the same person? No, he didn’t think so. But Rex was number 2998 on the list of people the Bureau of Missing Persons was looking for, just ahead of his niece Cat, who was 2999. So he had to remain hidden. That didn’t mean he was helpless though . . . The Veneto assassination proved that.

The thought made him feel better. So Rex went to work scraping the stubble off his cheeks. He was almost finished when Hiram Hoke’s voice came over the intercom. “Hey, boss . . . Are you awake?”

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Nothing good. A large force of heavily armed people is closing in on the club.”

“The club” was a night spot that the Freedom Front had taken over a couple of months earlier. A lot of renovations had been done, and some were still under way. Rex felt the first stirrings of concern as he ran a washcloth over his face. “Who are they?”

“That’s the strange thing,” Hoke replied. “Rather than a single gang, it looks like all of them are coming after us. The Sayers, the Combine, and hundreds of street people.”

Now Rex was worried. Gang raids were a common occurrence in the Deeps. Most were aimed at taking over some real estate or looting an especially prosperous business. But if the Sayers *and* the Combine had joined forces against him, there had to be a larger and more compelling reason behind it since they had countervailing interests. “Okay,” Rex said. “Pull the lookouts back, activate the perimeter defense system, and sound the general alarm. I’ll be there shortly.”

Rex chose to put on combat gear rather than street clothes. Doing so reminded him of all the years spent in the Legion—and all the battles he’d fought for the empire. Now, with Ophelia on the throne, it was time to fight against rather than for it. He chose an assault rifle from the wall rack in his bedroom and left for the

front of the club.

There was no such thing as high ground on Level 3 of the Deeps. And with three shared walls, plus a ceiling and a floor, there were five directions from which an enemy could attack. All they had to do was blow a hole through a partition and charge through. That's why all the rooms could be sealed off, and a fast-response team was waiting to respond to any breach. Still, if an enemy created enough holes and was prepared to create more, they would be able to enter. And that was true of every business on every level.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kerri Goodman:

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