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# YOUNG LEGIONARY

By

**Douglas Hill**

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## Young Legionary

**The Last Legionary quartet**

by **Douglas Hill:**

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Day of the Starwind

Planet of the Warlord

**Douglas Hill**

# Young Legionary

The earlier adventures of Keill Randor

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*This one is for BEN*

*(not before time)*

**Ordeal**

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## 1. The Plateau

The silvery, compact flyer arrowed down through the night sky like a falling star. Landing thrusters flaring, it dropped towards the colossal spires and towers of the mountains, which dwarfed it into an insignificant silver speck.

It settled lightly on the bare stone of a plateau, a broad shelf of rock spreading where two of the great mountains leaned their shoulders together. As the flyer's thrusters cut out, stillness returned to the dark spaces among the peaks, where a gusting wind moaned as if disturbed by the intrusion. The side of the flyer lifted smoothly away, spilling light on to the flat rock, and two people stepped out.

One was tall and slender, unmistakably a woman despite the severe cut of her dark-grey uniform, which had flashes of colour at the wrists and a sky-blue circlet on the upper chest. Her long face was hollow-cheeked, with deep lines around the mouth, and her short hair was streaked with grey. Yet she moved with the light-footed grace of an athlete in peak condition.

The other person was a boy no more than twelve years old, slim and dark-haired. He wore no uniform - in fact he wore nothing except a loincloth of grey material wrapped round his hips. For all his slimness, he was wiry and well muscled, and his step was as light and lithe as that of his companion.

Wordlessly, they walked to the edge of the plateau and gazed down into the darkness, where a sheer cliff of rock fell away into invisible depths. The moaning wind gusted into a howl, slashing at them with what seemed like fangs of ice. But the woman seemed indifferent to the cold as she turned to the boy, studying him keenly.

'Now I must again state the full process of the Ordeal.' Her voice was melodious, but held the firmness of years of authority. 'Are you prepared?'

The boy did not move or look at her. 'Yes, Commander Maron,' he said quietly.

She took a deep breath, her eyes still fixed on the boy. 'Keill Randor, you have reached the plateau of years between childhood and manhood. This plateau where we stand is a symbol of that threshold. And the Ordeal that awaits you is a symbol of the hardships and struggles to come in the years ahead. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Commander.'

'In your childhood training,' Maron went on, 'you have shown promise. You must now fulfil that promise. If you succeed in the Ordeal, you will enter your advanced training with the Young Legionaries. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Commander.' Again the ritual question drew the quiet ritual reply.

'The Ordeal,' Maron continued, 'requires you to travel from here down through the mountains, unarmed and unequipped. From the maps you have seen, you know the location of your goal - the Colourless Valley. I and some others will wait there, for *two days*, timed from tomorrow's dawn. If you have not reached us by then, you will have failed the Ordeal. We will then launch a search for you. Have you any questions?'

Keill stared out into the chill blackness, a hundred questions clamouring in his mind. How many others

have failed the Ordeal? How many have not survived it? What will be waiting for me out there? But he knew that most of those questions would answer themselves, eventually. And he suspected that the ritual required him *not* to ask questions - but instead to show himself ready to face whatever was to come, as it came. So he replied simply, 'No, Commander.'

In the woman's eyes, still fixed on him, shone a brief flash of approval. And there was something else in her eyes - a short-lived softening, which might have been sympathy.

'One final thing.' No softening could be heard in her firm voice. 'In the course of your journey you may encounter one special danger. Not only is it the gravest danger you will have ever faced - it is the most deadly danger that *any* legionary can face. Are you prepared?'

Keill struggled to keep his voice calm. 'I am prepared, Commander.'

Maron nodded, and stepped back from the edge of the cliff. 'Then the Ordeal begins. Return safely, Keill.'

That, too, was part of the ritual, and a standard leave-taking among Keill's people. He turned to face her. 'Return safely, Commander.'

Without another word Maron strode away towards the flyer. It closed around her with a soft hiss, and the thrusters flared. Smoothly the little machine lifted from the rock, angling steeply upwards. In moments it was lost to sight behind the looming crags.

Silence and darkness, so complete as to seem almost solid, fell over the plateau where the boy stood - small, nearly naked, totally alone.

For a long moment Keill remained as he was, staring up at the peaks where the flyer had vanished from sight. He seemed unaware of the biting wind, or the chill of the bare rocks that glinted in the starlight like dark metal, as if they were clad in armour.

These were the Iron Mountains, which marched for hundreds of kilometres, range upon range. They dominated nearly a third of the small continent that was the main habitable area, for humans, on the planet Moros.

The Iron Mountains were the bleakest, harshest natural feature in all of that bleak, harsh world. Yet life of sorts could be found, even there - life that was perfectly adapted for survival in that grim environment.

The Ordeal that Keill faced was designed to test the same thing - how capable he was of survival. He would have to survive the elements, and a journey that would have been gruelling even if he had been fully clothed and equipped. He would have to find food and water, and to follow the correct route through the rocky mazes. And he might have to face any of the mountains' various life forms, most of which were as savagely hostile as the terrain itself.

Commander Maron had said that the Ordeal was a symbol of the years ahead of him. But she might also have said that it symbolized the life of Keill's ancestors - those people who had first landed on Moros, and claimed it, during the long-ago centuries when humanity had spread out across the galaxy, in that mighty outward emigration called the Scattering.

History said that those people had chosen to settle on Moros *because* it was bleak and harsh - and so was unlikely to attract other colonists. The original settlers of the planet were a tightly knit, disciplined group with very firm ideas about how life should be lived, how society should be ordered. They wanted

to be left in peace to put those ideas into practice.

In the event, it had not worked out quite that way.

Certainly, though, the ideas were put into practice. A society grew up that believed in equality, in mutual support and responsibility, in *communality*. Its leaders were selected by all the people, and acted as co-ordinators, not as rulers. Orders and discipline were not imposed, from above, in an authoritarian way. They sprang from the *self*-discipline of the people, in which each of them was trained from birth.

For them, self-control and unselfish co-operation became the watchwords of their society, as solid and binding as a blazing religious faith.

So they had to be, on Moros, to ensure survival. For the colonists had not been left in peace.

The planet itself seemed to oppose them, as if presenting them with a prolonged Ordeal to test their fitness to live there. It was hard enough to wrest food and shelter from the rugged land, and the bitter climate. It was far harder when they also had to face the ferocious life-forms of Moros.

Humanity had found no other intelligent beings in all the galaxy. But they had found life-forms in plenty, and Moros was no exception. The difference was that a high proportion of the creatures on Moros were vicious, merciless killers - using all their weirdly alien natural weapons in a savage, endless battle for survival.

That was the lesson of Moros - and the human settlers learned it well. They also learned to fight, fiercely and tenaciously, to survive. And over the generations, with the self-disciplined co-operation that was the mainstay of their community, they developed their fighting skills to an amazing level. They became expert - and more than expert - at every kind of combat, whether unarmed and hand-to-hand, or with the high-technology weapons of human civilization.

So by the time contact with other colonized planets was made - as the Inhabited Worlds developed interplanetary trade and communications - the people of Moros were found to be special, even unique. The rigours of life on their world had turned them into the most skilled and effective fighters in the galaxy.

When they realized that fact, they also realized what the next step in their development might be. And out of that realization had come - the Legions of Moros.

The Scattering, and the centuries that followed, had changed human nature very little. People had taken their aggression and violence out to the stars, along with their hopes and faiths and dreams. They had taken greed, bigotry, power, hunger, fear. And with these tendencies, or *because* of them, they took a continuing readiness to make war. In time, some of the warring human worlds saw the special value in the unique skills of the Legions. And the Legions began to be invited to *hire out* their skills, as mercenary soldiers.

Some of those invitations they accepted. Their skills became their primary natural resource, with which they could trade, and profitably. Yet all the while they had been turning themselves into an unrivalled military force, they had not forgotten their traditions.

Equality, co-operation, communality remained the solid basis for the Legions as for the first settlers. So deeply ingrained were these qualities, by then, that they might have been taken for mutations. Their world knew nothing of greed, selfishness, destructive ambition or other anti-social tendencies. On Moros, anything anti-social was also anti-survival.

And, as the Legions retained their traditional ethics, so they also retained their individual self-discipline

and sense of order. These equalities too seemed bred into them, almost like mutations. But they also formed the basis of the Legion *training*, which began, for every individual, in infancy. And yet the Legions were well aware that each individual has different capabilities, different aptitudes. It was usually clear, early in a child's life, where his or her special talents lay. Then their more specialized training would take different directions, after a series of verifying tests.

And for those children who showed high potential for advanced levels of combat training, the first of those tests - and one of the most demanding - was the Ordeal.

Commander Maron's flyer had been out of sight for many long moments, but still Keill remained motionless. The bitter wind howled around him, but he barely noticed it. He felt paralyzed, like a machine with a broken connection. He did not seem able to think. Only fragments of half-thoughts formed in his mind - and behind them were feelings, and imaginings, swarming like misshapen, menacing monsters.

He could not collect his thoughts, because he did not dare to confront his feelings. So he stood, numbly, staring into nothingness, on the edge of panic.

But self-preservation is a powerful force, especially in a child of Moros. Keill's instincts gathered to jolt him back to reality. And the jolt took the form of an unbidden mental image of his father - tall, straight, with kindly eyes that could see deep into the hearts of people. He heard his father's voice, a memory of words that he had first heard years before.

'Your feelings are like wild creatures. Try to crush them, or to pretend they aren't there, and they'll fight you - and they'll get stronger. You have to accept them, know and understand them. Your feelings belong to you: you can't belong to them. Let them come out where you can see them - and then master them, and make *them* do *your* bidding.'

The words echoed through the dazed turmoil of Keill's mind. The basic, most deep-rooted quality of the people of Moros - self-mastery. He had nearly lost it. And you could not do that on Moros, especially in the Iron Mountains, and survive.

He became aware that his body was shaking with spasms of uncontrolled shivering. Feeling Number One, he told himself. Cold. A few more minutes of this, and I wouldn't be able to move if I wanted to.

But even then he remained still. Because in facing that feeling, of cold, he was forced to face another feeling, the one that was the true cause of his numbed paralysis. Fear. He was wretchedly, soul-destroyingly afraid.

He was afraid of the bleak, cold barrier of the high peaks. He was afraid of losing his way. He was afraid of making some foolish slip or misjudgment, which in this environment could be instantly fatal. He was afraid of the life forms that might be lurking in every shadow around him. Above all, he was afraid of the nameless Something that Commander Maron had said was the deadliest danger *any* legionary could face.

He was afraid of the known, and the unknown. He was afraid of dying, and of failure. He was afraid even to *begin* the Ordeal, because he feared that he might not complete it.

And then, because he was at last confronting his feelings honestly, he recognized another emotion within himself. The recognition shocked him. He was feeling sorry for himself, drowning in a mind-wrecking pool of self-pity.

As he saw that feeling clearly, anger blazed through him - anger and self-loathing at his own weakness. Unable to face what *might* happen, he had nearly given up before anything happened at all.

He glared round at the mountains, letting his anger grow, to fuel his determination and courage. 'Do your worst,' he said aloud to the glittering, indifferent rock. 'Here I come.'

First, he knew, he had to find shelter for the rest of the night. Perhaps, because these ancient mountains were cracked and pitted with age, there might be a crevice, even a cave, on the slopes sweeping down to the plateau. Like - up there?

His eyes, straining to penetrate the darkness, followed the line of the steepest slope up many metres, to what seemed to be a narrow ledge, flat and gleaming in the starlight. Behind it was a patch of darkness so deeply black that it could be some kind of opening.

The climb was not difficult for him, even barefoot. His fingers and toes found plenty of holds among the creases and bumps of the rock face. And the effort warmed him, so that he was no longer shivering when he reached the ledge and found that his guess had been correct. The opening was a small cave - cramped, but a protection from the wind.

The thought struck him that this plateau might have been chosen as the starting point for the Ordeal *because* it offered this shelter. And that seemed even more likely when, inside the inky darkness of the cave, his hand brushed over a heap of dry twigs, as if someone had supplied the means for a fire.

It took a long time, and much patient concentration, before friction of one twig on another produced a thin spiral of smoke. He did not see it, but he smelled it, and it inspired him to greater efforts. He *did* see the faint, ruddy glow that finally appeared. And soon after, the cave was glowing with the light from a small fire, and Keill was curled beside it, feeling warm and relaxed and pleased with himself, drifting almost at once into a contented sleep.

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## 2. The Descent

The light from an ice-blue morning sky brought him creeping painfully out of his nest. The fire had died during the night, but the cave had retained enough warmth to protect his body heat - though not enough to keep him from feeling chilled, cramped and stiff. But a basic Legion routine of exercises, even on that narrow ledge, soon restored his circulation and loosened his muscles.

He looked around at the mighty peaks, lustrous and dazzling in the sunlight, and took a deep breath of the crisp air. Time to get going - first of all, by climbing back down to the plateau.

He was gripping the lip of the ledge, his feet reaching down for a toe-hold, when the creature exploded out of the sky with a grating scream, and struck at him like a spear.

A mountain wyvern, which Keill had seen only in museums. A squat, scaly body, half as tall as he was, with vast black leathery wings and talons that could chip even the rock of the Iron Mountains. And a long, heavy beak, dagger-pointed, that was aimed for the centre of Keill's back.

But the slapping rush of the wings had given his reflexes warning enough. Instantly he had twisted away to one side, dangling from the ledge only by the finger-grip of one hand. The wyvern's beak speared through

empty air, grated briefly on the rock - and then the creature was flapping up in a tight curve that would bring it hurtling back to try again.

Keill regained a two-handed grip on the ledge, and pulled himself up on to it in one flowing motion. As he gained his feet the wyvern was upon him. He flung himself back, towards the cave mouth, and again his speed saved him from the deadly beak. But this time, as the monster flashed past, it struck down with its glinting talons. And four bright red furrows appeared along the length of Keill's left arm.

Screaming, the wyvern wheeled for another attack. But Keill had plunged into the safety of the cave. He now guessed that the cave might once have been a nesting place for wyverns, which would explain the store of dry twigs. And perhaps this one used the ledge as a port of call during a day's hunting. Except this time, it had found something to eat on its doorstep.

The wyvern would not pursue him into the cave, where its wings would be useless. But he had no time to wait in the hope that it would eventually go away. He knew that he might have to go out and fight, bare-handed against those fearsome claws and beak.

A wet warmth on his left hand made him glance down. The wounds on his arm were little more than skin-deep, and could be ignored for now. But the blood was running stickily down to his hand, and he did not want his grip impaired. He began to wipe his palm on his loin cloth - and the shadow of an idea sprang into his mind.

The absurd risk of it made him shiver, but he did not hesitate. He unwrapped the loincloth and shook it out - a strip of ordinary cloth, long enough to wrap three times round his hips, more than half a metre wide. Some weapon, he thought.

He steadied his breathing, gathering his energies and power as he had been trained to do almost from the day he could walk. Then he stepped out to face the wyvern.

The monster screeched, a sound like triumph, and dived. In the last seconds before it reached him, Keill swung the cloth up and held it in front of himself. The terrible beak stabbed into the centre of the cloth. But Keill had swayed aside, so that the spearing point missed him by centimetres. And as he did so he flung the cloth forward, its folds enveloping the head and body of the wyvern.

Blinded, the shrieking monster blundered into the rocky slope. The huge wings flailed, the talons ripped at the entangling cloth. In an instant it would have been free, rising again in fury. But Keill needed only that instant.

His right hand became a blur, its rigid edge slicing with measured accuracy into the chaotic flurry of wings, claws and tattered cloth. It struck perfectly, just at the base of the narrow, scaly head. The snap of breaking bone was barely audible over the raging creature's screams - except that the screams were instantly cut off. And the wyvern tumbled lifeless, head lolling, on to the ledge.

Keill slumped back against the rock, realizing that his stomach was knotted with tension, and that he was panting as if he had been running. Slowly he forced himself back to the relaxed calm that his training demanded, then freed what was left of his loincloth from the wyvern. Nearly half the cloth's length hung in shreds - but it still reached almost twice round his hips, he found, as he rewrapped it. Not that he was troubled by nakedness: his people had no such pruderies. But he knew that his friends would tease him with nonstop merriment if he went back without the only piece of civilization he had taken with him.

Once again he began the climb back down to the plateau, moving with some urgency now. He was going to need water soon, to drink and to wash his wound. Eventually he would need food, though he could fast for a day or two if he had to. But above all, he needed to get going. He had only two days to cover



the distance to his goal - and he had not even left the starting place yet.

From the edge of the cliff on one side of the plateau, he could see a sloping vale far below, its details miniature but clear in the mountain air. A few patches of vegetation on the vale looked promising, and it was on the route he would be taking. But he would have to reach it in a roundabout way: tackling the sheer cliff would be a foolish risk, and would not gain much time.

He left the plateau by means of a windswept, steeply angled rock face that led him towards a deep cleft in the mountainside. The cleft took him downwards in a careful, step-by-step climb, until he was forced into a sideways traverse across another steep slope. So he crept along at a cautious pace, clinging with fingers and toes, as one bare rock face led to another, and another. He thought of how he would look from a distance - like some wall-crawling insect, sidling its slow and aimless way across the looming slopes. But he was not aimless. His mind held a detailed image of his route - and every traverse, every cleft, took him steadily downwards.

It was almost midday before he found a swifter path. Where the flanks of two mountains met, a narrow and almost vertical crack opened downwards for several hundred metres, towards the vale that he had seen from the plateau. The sides of the crack were broken and split, and for Keill were as good as a ladder. He went down it with ease, grateful for the years of barefoot training that had left his soles leathery and tough.

Eventually the crack petered out into a sloping furrow of gravel and loose rubble. There he paused to rest, looking downwards with satisfaction. The strip of gravel widened into an expanse of loose scree, which inclined sharply down to a long, smooth spur of rock. And the spur led down towards the gentle sweep of the vale, with its vegetation that hinted at the presence of water.

He moved forward, wary of the plunging slope of scree, dotted here and there with small boulders. One misstep could send him sliding the full distance in an avalanche of gravel and rock. Under his fingers and toes, small pebbles and trickles of sand slid down and away, like ominous forerunners of the threatened landslide. But he moved on, watchfully. He was aiming for one of the small, rounded boulders that bulged out of the scree, which might offer some solidity. But when his foot touched the boulder, he found it was not solidly fixed. It moved - but it did not slide downwards.

It moved, impossibly, up towards him.

And from under it, or within it, something emerged - and four rows of teeth like needles snapped at his bare ankle.

But the teeth clashed together harmlessly, for again Keill's reactions saved him. He hurled himself backwards, falling, braced to roll and come to his feet, to meet another attack. Except that the impact of his body was too much for the loose scree.

It began to slide. Keill's feet were swept from under him as the slide accelerated. Rolling, tumbling, he felt the fiery sting of scraped skin on elbows and knees. The whole mountainside seemed to be thundering down the slope, with him in the midst of it, blinded by dust, helplessly flailing for something solid to stop his fall.

For an instant a bruising bounce flung him into the air, surrounded by painfully flying pebbles. Instinct twisted his body in the air, so that he struck the slope again feet first. And as he landed he drove both

feet downwards with crushing power. His heels plunged deep into the sliding gravel - and for a breathless few seconds he was riding the landslide, standing upright, ankle-deep.

Then he fell backwards, his feet dislodged. But at that moment he and several tons of gravel reached the bottom of the slope with an echoing roar. Yet he remained on its surface, carried along for many more metres, but not buried.

Slowly he sat up, grimacing at all the areas of pain on his body. He glanced round, then back up at the slope, but saw no sign of the boulder that had turned out to be alive. Probably a stonetoad, he thought, in its camouflaged shell. They were supposed to be venomous as well as vicious - but the landslide seemed to have swallowed this one up.

He stood up carefully, checking himself over. He had lost some skin, but mostly in superficial grazes, though several of them were bleeding slightly. But by some miracle - perhaps because of that wild moment when he had ridden the slide like a skier - no bones were broken.

He knew just how lucky he had been. He also knew that luck had a habit of running out. And he still had a great deal of distance to cover.

He limped away, along the spur of rock that extended out like a great, flattened wall. And shortly he saw, with delight, that his luck had not run out yet. From a narrow crack near the top of the spur, a small underground spring spewed clear mountain water, in a glittering arc that became a cheerily bubbling cascade down to the vale below.

Eagerly he clambered down to the shallow pool at the base of the spur, and waded in to stand under the drenching waterfall. The water was icy, and its effect on his cuts, grazes and bruises was fiery. But those were torments that he welcomed. He raised his face to the water, gulping a mouthful of its frosty purity, feeling dust and sweat and blood sluicing away, feeling recharged, as if the water was some powerful stimulant.

Unwrapping his ragged loincloth, he rinsed it as clean as he could, and dabbed carefully at his wounds. The gashes on his arm, from the wyvern, had crusted over, and began oozing blood again. But they seemed clean, as did the lesser damage from his fall. Reassured, he climbed reluctantly out of the natural showerbath on to a flat piece of dry rock nearby. The vale was warm with sunlight and protected from the wind, and he felt a deep compulsion to stretch out and doze on the sun-warmed rock. But he had no time for lazing. Rewrapping his loincloth, he moved away across the vale.

Now and then something tiny, bright-shelled and multi-legged skittered away from his path. And once something less small and thickly furred sprang out of a clump of dry grass and bounced away like a furry ball. But he merely glanced at them, and walked on. They seemed to be no danger, and they were certainly not potential food. Almost none of the animals of Moros, and only a few of the plants, could be eaten by humans. But, for the moment, the water had eased his growing pangs of hunger. He walked on, lengthening his stride.

### **3. The Foothills**

Beyond the vale stood a lower, secondary range of mountains, like buttresses for the mightier peaks. Here the slopes were less cruelly steep, and the barrenness of the rock was relieved by occasional growths of thorny brush or sparse clumps of brownish grass. But this region was no less rugged - for the

ages had carved it into a complex of ridges and escarpments, deep clefts and ravines. And they slowed Keill's pace as effectively as the higher slopes.

Also, the after-effects of injury were catching up with him, along with a growing weariness. But he kept on, hour upon hour, until deepening twilight told him that he could at last halt. Then he simply found a brambly cluster of vegetation, in a small protected hollow, where he curled up and was asleep almost before his head touched the hard ground.

He awoke at first light, chilled and aching, feeling as if his joints and muscles had set solid, like plasticrete. But he heaved himself to his feet and drove his body into a walk. Soon the stiffness eased, and after another brief session of exercises he was moving as easily as ever. It was just as well - for he knew that he had not yet covered half the required distance, though he had used up half the time. Somehow during this second day he would have to find the energy to quicken his pace.

But as the morning progressed, it became more and more difficult to ignore the dryness of his mouth and his clamorously empty belly, not to mention the continuing pain of his injuries. Even worse, the fight with the wyvern, the fall and all the tensions and exertions of the previous day had drained his energies more than he had expected. So it became harder to keep up the proper pace - all the more so as the air among these lower slopes was still and heavy, and the sun beat down on the glittering stone.

By midday he felt as if flames were smouldering in his body - in his left arm, in the patches of skin scraped raw by his fall and made rawer by the salt of his sweat. His tongue seemed swollen in his dust-dry mouth, his eyes burned in the glare of sun on rock. Yet he toiled on, fighting his inner battle against the miseries that threatened to swamp his determination.

And at last, the mountains seemed to take pity on him. When he struggled to the crest of yet another ridge, the vista before him brought him to a surprised halt. Not another barrier of difficult ravines and gullies, but a broad, smooth basin, several kilometres across. It sloped gently down from the ridge where he stood, and was thickly covered with brown-green grass, dotted with shrubbery and strands of small, gnarled trees.

The map in his mind told him that this mountain meadow provided his avenue into the gentler foothills. It also told him that he should have reached this spot some hours earlier. But that could not be helped - and he forced away the edge of desperation that rose in him. More immediately important was the sight of a herd of whitebuck, creamy fur gleaming in the sun, grazing in the distance. Where they stood, the shrubbery and trees grew with special abundance. And that almost certainly meant water.

As he moved across the grassy plain, a light breeze brushed over his skin like a soothing ointment. His pace quickened a little, and the whitebuck scattered as he drew near. They were no danger: they stood no higher than Keill's hip, except for their huge, upraised ears. He smiled slightly at their fearful squeaking, as their oversized hind legs carried them away in panicky leaps. And he smiled again when he saw the clear brook tumbling across the meadow ahead of him.

All his control was needed to make him sip, and pause, and sip, rather than gulping his belly full. Then he lowered himself full length in the brook, letting the cool water douse the flames in his flesh. Emerging, he inspected himself. His wounds needed medication, he knew, but they would keep a while longer. He knelt by the brook, scooping up more small mouthfuls of water, and took stock.

The meadow was a fertile little island in the depths of the planet's most inhospitable terrain - the bleak mountains on one side, and on the other the foothills that led down into the powdery sands and lethal heat of the desert. His goal - the Colourless Valley - formed one of the main entry routes into the desert from the edge of the hills. It was a great many hours' march away. Which meant that he would have to forego

sleep, and travel most of the night, if he was to reach the valley by dawn the next day.

The water and the rest were reviving him, but he knew their effects would be shortlived. He had also seen that there was nothing edible, for him, in this meadow - and he might not find another water supply between here and the Colourless Valley. But without something to recharge his energies, could he hope to keep going through the night?

The thought crept like an evil whisper into his mind. It was possible, the whisper said, that he was not going to make it.

The idea did not particularly disturb him. Right then he felt no sense of urgency. It was too peaceful. The lulling whisper of the breeze, the gentle chuckle of the brook, the warm glow of the sunlit meadow - there were so few places like this on Moros. This is what life should be like, said the whisper in his mind. Not harsh rock, and pain, and danger. This was paradise - and the voice in his mind saw no reason why he should not stay here, and wait for the others to come and find him.

But there was something else in his mind besides a rebellious, tempting voice. He was a child of Moros - and though his inner disciplines were wearing thin, they were still part of him. As they were of all his people, in the soul, in the blood and bone. The tempting voice within him stopped, as if some unseen hand had closed on some invisible throat. And Keill was on his feet and moving away before his conscious mind had begun to give the orders for movement.

Then shame flooded through him, as he realized how close he had come to giving up. He paused a moment, glowering around at the alluring meadow, at the tall bleak mountains beyond it.

Maybe I won't get there in time, he thought. But I *will* get there. If I have to crawl.

By late afternoon, he was feeling exactly as he had expected. Certainly the foothills now offered fewer hardships: he could follow a meandering tangle of paths through shallow vales and hollows, not needing to tackle the demanding slopes and rises. But still there was little shelter from the sun, and no sign of water among the dusty rocks and stretches of flat brown sand. The blistering fire was blazing again in his wounds. Thirst dried his mouth as if the brook in the meadow had been a dream. Hunger and weariness made his legs feel rubbery, and turned his progress into a halting plod.

And after all the hours of weary travel, his mind had almost disengaged. He was no longer thinking about failure, about possibly being far from his goal when the next day dawned. In this late afternoon, all that was left of his mental energy was concentrated on the next step, and the next, and the one after that...

So he was only dimly aware of the lengthening shadows, as the sun moved lower in the sky. And he was even less aware, as he moved along the floor of a broad, shallow gully, of the strange plants that were scattered here and there in his path.

But he became aware of them when his throbbing left arm brushed painfully against the needle-tips of thorns. He jerked away, stopping and glancing round at the cause of the new hurt. And then he might have smiled, if his lips were not cracked and crusted.

The plants had tall, spindly stems, twice Keill's height, from which trailed a number of slender growths like vines that reached to the ground and penetrated deep into the sand. These stringy growths bore the thorns - but what had stopped Keill in his tracks were the other growths, round and bulbous, that clung to the tops of the stems. Keill had seen only the domesticated sort, and then rarely, for they were hard to cultivate. But he knew what they were.

The Legions called them spikeberries, though each could be as large as a human head. They had a thick outer shell, shiny brown and bristling with their own thorny protection. But inside was a dense, moist, reddish pulp. Cooked in the Moros way, they were a delicacy. Raw, they were bitter and foul-tasting - but they were one of the few plants on Moros that humans could digest.

Reaching carefully past the thorny vines, Keill grasped the spindly stem and shook it. The spikeberries bobbed, bounced and fell, four of them, plump and bulging.

Urgently he searched for and found a narrow, flat shard of stone, and used it like a crude knifeblade to hack the fruit open. When he scooped a handful of the soggy pulp into his mouth, the mixture of feelings was almost unbearable. The pure pleasure of the wetness on his thirst-swollen tongue - but also the stomach-wrenching bitterness of the taste.

Another day he might have spat out the mouthful, gagging. But now, though he winced and shuddered, he forced himself to swallow, and to take another mouthful, and another.

His stomach informed him that it could happily manage all the spikeberries he could pick. He firmly informed his stomach that it would have to make do with two, for now. He knew better than to gorge, after fasting. But he scraped the thorns from the other two so that he could carry them with him for later.

Soon he was moving away through the gully, with his much-tormented loincloth now serving a new purpose, as a carrier for the two spikeberries, together with the flat blade of stone. And once again he was feeling restored, as the moisture and the food poured new energy into his body. He even began to think that he might still reach the Colourless Valley in time, if the food that he was carrying could keep him moving fairly briskly through the night.

But then he rounded a bend in the broad gully, and his hopeful thoughts were swept away like a puff of dust. The way was barred. And what was barring it was about to devote itself to the task of killing him.

Mammoths, the Legions called them. Not really as large as the name implied - no more than half again as tall as Keill. But large enough in their immense girth and ground-shaking weight. Bodies like great grey-blue boulders, with huge humped backs, six short stumpy legs. Their hide was an almost impenetrable armour, and their square, bony heads were even better armed. Wicked tusks curved up from each side of the mouth, and ridges of bone above the tiny eyes sprouted a forest of spikes and prongs, some nearly a metre long.

The mammoths moved in small herds, and ruled the foothills as the wyverns ruled the high peaks. Mammoths ate everything and anything, and had only one response to any creature foolish enough to enter their range of vision. They charged it, killed it, and ate it.

And this herd, about twenty of them, had seen Keill.

Grunting menacingly, heads down, they advanced towards him. Fear sent adrenalin surging into Keill's blood as he edged slowly to his right, wondering if the sloping side of the gully might slow them enough for him to find some refuge on the farther side. But his movement was all the invitation the mammoths needed.

The grunts rose into a strangled roar. Bunched together in a solid mass of monstrous power, the mammoths charged.

Keill fled before them like a ghost. But despite their weight, their six-legged gallop was terrifyingly fast. As he sprinted up the slope, he knew they were gaining on him. And he had not even reached the crest when he realized despairingly that they were only a stride behind him.

Legion instinct made him stop and whirl, to meet death face to face. And the same instinct, or a deeply ingrained combat reflex, propelled him into a standing leap, straight up, as the lead mammoth hooked its vicious tusks up towards his belly.

He leaped, the mammoth lurched forward as its tusks found no target, and Keill came down - his feet slapping firmly on to the enormous heaving breadth of the mammoth's back. For a frozen instant he teetered there as the creature surged ahead. But balance, too, was reflexive in a legionary. As were crazy, suicidal risks - when the only alternative was certain death.

Without thinking, Keill sprang *forward*. One foot struck the boulder-like back of the mammoth just behind the leader. Instantly he found his balance, and leaped again. And so, while the herd's thunderous gallop slowed slightly as it neared the crest of the slope, Keill vaulted lightly from one immense humped back to another, across the entire herd.

It was like crossing a river on stepping stones - except that the stones themselves were moving at speed in the opposite direction, and were heaving and jolting and shifting underfoot. One small misjudgment and Keill would have been bloody pulp on the ground. But even in the choking dust thrown up by the charging beasts, Keill's eye and reactions were automatic, thought-quick and accurate as a computer. His conscious mind had only begun to catch up with what he was doing when he soared off the back of the last mammoth, fell and rolled in a flurry of dust, and sat up astonished to watch the herd disappear over the crest of the slope. In their blind charge, the armour-hided creatures had not even noticed his leap or his weight on their backs. Their charge would probably lead them blundering on for some distance, until at last they would slow, snuffle around grumpily awhile, then wander off. Keill stood up, trembling slightly from the exertion and delayed tension. A thought struck him. Was this, a herd of mammoths, what Commander Maron had meant, when she had spoken of 'the most deadly danger any legionary can face'? If so, he had faced it and survived it. He grinned with relief and delight at what he had done. And the grin became an outright laugh, half-choked by the swirling dust, when he realized that he was still unthinkingly clutching his loincloth, with its precious cargo of food, in the white-knuckled grip of his right hand.

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#### **4. The Valley**

Hours upon hours later, the person who had laughed in the gully seemed a distant and forgotten stranger. Whatever benefit Keill had gained from the two spikeberries, much of it had been used up by the explosion of effort that had saved him from the mammoths. Even so, he had waited until full night had descended on the foothills before using his blade of stone on one of the remaining spikeberries. But this time the small amount of food and moisture was not enough to lift his energies. Fatigue was settling into the marrow of his bones, and every cell cried out for sleep.

Yet he would not stop. Once more he put his body on to something like automatic control, which kept him trudging steadily forward, one step, then another... His mind drifted in a daze, until he found it hard to remember *why* it was that he had to keep moving through the night, step by exhausted step.

When he came to a halt, it took several seconds for his mind to swim back to awareness, to see why he had halted. He had been stumbling along the bare and sandy bottom of yet another hollow, without noticing that the ground was sloping downwards, that the hollow was becoming deeper, narrower, turning into a canyon. But he was forced to notice, when the canyon led him to a dead end.

A sheer wall of solid earth loomed out of the blackness before him, with a heap of rock rubble at its foot.

Equally steep walls rose on either side, boxing him in.

He would need to retrace his steps, which was bad enough. What was worse, he should not have been in a dead-end canyon. He was well off his route. And his exhausted mind, trying hazily to recall the map, would not produce the information he needed. He did not know where the route was. He had lost his way.

But it hardly seemed to matter. He had gone beyond feeling any desperate fear of failure, or feeling much of anything. He thought vaguely of eating the last spikeberry, still wrapped in the loincloth that he was clutching. But he could not muster the energy, or the interest. He let his mind slide back into its half-conscious mists, let his automatic controls take over again, sending him trudging back the way he had come like a robot.

When the wall of the canyon on his right became a manageable slope, it was not a conscious decision that made him wheel slowly and plod up it. Twice he stumbled and fell, once rolling several paces back down in a burst of choking dust. Each time he came to his feet more slowly than before, and plodded on.

The slope crested, and as he started down the other side he fell again, slithering down the bank of powdery sand. This time he did not rise at once. Even his automatic controls could not drag more movement from him. They were too busy trying to keep his eyelids from closing.

But slowly his eyes drooped shut. And blinked open. And closed again.

Then a muscular spasm, the sort that convulses a totally fatigued body as it sags into sleep, jolted through him, and his eyes sprang open once more. Had they closed again, he would surely have slept. And he might never have awakened, ever again.

But his eyes did not close. His blurred mind had vaguely perceived three things - which, together, shocked him awake like a spray of cold water.

First, the land around him was growing more visible. While he had been stumbling back through the canyon, the grey light of dawn had stolen into the sky.

Second, he saw that all the landscape seemed uniformly grey. But it was not only because of the dawn. It *was* grey. All the broad vista of rolling sand, featureless except for a few distant clusters of dead trees, was the same blank, empty, deathlike colour. Which was no colour at all.

The canyon where he had thought he was lost had lain only a few hundred metres from the edge of the Colourless Valley. He had reached his goal. And dawn had just broken. He might still be in time.

Except that there was the third thing he had seen, which was the most immediate and urgent shock that had spurred him into wakefulness.

No more than ten paces away, the sand was moving. Stirring, roiling, bulging upwards, as if something that had been buried was forcing its way to the surface.

And something was.

First a long, flat muzzle, the length of Keill's forearm, lifted into the air. Then a narrow head, crowned with pointed ears that swivelled like antennae. Then a slim, flexible, sinewy body, as long as Keill was tall, like a tube of powerful, lithe muscle. Head and body were covered with short, flat hair the same blank grey as the sand.

A sandcat. The most feared and lethal killer on the deserts of Moros. This creature too Keill had never

seen, but he knew about it. About the razor-edges of the eight claws sprouting from each of the four broad feet. About the unbelievable speed of the thing, and its almost insane, ravaging ferocity.

Sandcats were flesh eaters that also seemed to kill out of sheer blood-lust. Even the larger beasts of this region stayed clear of them, when possible. It was not always possible.

A sandcat burrowed under the sand, breathing through the tip of its muzzle, and waited for prey. Anything that passed too near would be attacked with eye-baffling speed. And those savage jaws could shear through flesh and bone as effortlessly as Keill could bite into the pulp of a spikeberry.

Keill's flesh seemed to be encased in ice. Here, of course, was what Commander Maron had meant by the deadliest danger a legionary could face. The most terrifying beast on Moros. And he was ten paces from it, naked, exhausted, totally exposed.

The sandcat became a blur as it skittered forward a pace or two. Then it halted, muzzle and ears questing. Sandcats were nearly blind, Keill knew, but their hearing and sense of smell more than compensated. Even if he did not move or breathe, it would sniff him out. Even if he had the strength to leap up and run, it would pull him down before he had taken two strides.

So he lay where he was, and a dreadful empty fatalism crept over him. He had suffered through his Ordeal to the very edge of triumph - but now he was going to die, only a short distance from where Commander Maron was probably waiting. The cruel land had tormented him, teased him with moments of hope, then snatched the hope away at the end. It could not be borne. He had had enough.

Almost indifferently he watched the sandcat slither closer in another blurring movement, hissing softly. His face showed no emotion as he watched its muzzle and ears fix on his position - as he watched it gather itself, sinewy body poised like an arrow, the jaws parting slightly to reveal the long rows of greedy fangs.

The hiss rose into an eerie howl. Like an arrow released, jaws gaping, claws reaching, it sprang.

But in the microsecond when it was in mid-air Keill found from somewhere a last fragment of his survival instinct, a last scrap of strength. His hand clenched on the bundle that was his tattered loincloth wrapped round the one remaining spikeberry and the slim shard of rock. With that remnant of strength, he jerked his arm up - and thrust the bundle into the gaping mouth of the beast.

In the same motion he rolled desperately away. But agony exploded in his side, just above his left hip, where a razor claw sliced across his flesh. The roll brought him face down in the choking sand, where he lay feeling his blood gouting from the wound, waiting for the final agony when the sandcat recovered and found him.

But it did not come. He lifted his head, and stared with astonishment. The sandcat was thrashing in a violent frenzy, only two paces away. Its mouth gaped open, and it seemed to be tearing at its own face and throat with those deadly claws.

And Keill guessed. The beast must have automatically tried to swallow what had been forced into its mouth. And, whether because of the spikeberry's tough shell or the blade of rock, the bundle had jammed in its throat. It was strangling - and dying.

But then, he thought, so am I. He looked at the terrible wound in his side, the bright red, arterial blood jetting from it. His eyes were hazy, and his muscles seemed to have turned to water. But that final vestige of his instinct to survive brought his hand down and clamped it over the wound, compressing its edges together. Blackness speckled with red gathered at the edge of his vision, as the agony threatened to drag him into unconsciousness. But he found another scrap of strength, and resisted it. The fountain of blood



slowed to a trickle. And Keill fought to clear his vision, to control his muscles.

After moments that seemed like days, he struggled with infinite slowness to his feet, his hand automatically maintaining the fierce pressure on his wound. Behind him, the sandcat's death throes subsided into stillness. But he hardly noticed. Nor was he really aware - except in the deepest core of his being, where those last shreds of his instincts lay - that he had begun to walk, swaying, staggering, but moving forward.

Twenty minutes later he was no longer walking. But he was still moving - on his knees and one hand, the other hand still relentlessly clamped on his dripping wound. By then he was nearly unconscious. He did not hear the rapid footsteps in the sand. He did not hear the gasp, and the muttered exclamation. But he felt the hands that grasped him and began to lift him up. And the vague movements he made might even have been a struggle.

'Keill, you've arrived,' said a quiet voice. 'Stop now. It's over.' No one could ever be sure, afterwards, whether he collapsed into unconsciousness merely *as* those words were spoken - or because of them.

Commander Maron's lined face was creased in a smile as she entered the infirmary room, as were the faces of the two young under-commanders with her, whom she introduced as Nexilan and Idris. Keill, lying on a flat pallet under a single sheet, was nearly smothered by a wealth of bandages and by smears of ointments and plastiskin on his upper body. But he was able to respond with a faint smile of his own.

The trio had come for the formal conclusion to the Ordeal, when Keill was required to report all that had happened, and answer any questions. So their faces grew serious as they sat down round the bed, and as Keill, quietly and unemotionally, recounted what had happened, from the night on the plateau to the death of the sandcat.

'I can't remember much after that,' he said, glancing at Maron with faint worry.

She was studying him intently, while beside her Nexilan had lifted his eyebrows almost comically high, and Idris was slowly shaking his head.

Idris broke the silence. 'The boy fought his way through more wildlife than most of us see in a year.'

'On my Ordeal,' Nexilan added, 'I never met anything bigger than a grass beetle. And I was glad of it - the journey's bad enough on its own.'

'I've been asking myself,' Maron put in quietly, 'could I have got through all that? Could either of you?'

Idris shrugged, grinning. 'I'd rather not answer that.'

The others laughed - except for Keill. When Maron turned back to him, she saw that he was staring into space, an expression of glum misery on his face.

Maron's smile vanished. 'What is it, Keill?'

'I feel... foolish,' Keill muttered, not looking at her. 'You talk as if I've done something wonderful. But most of what I did was by luck, plain stupid luck. And some of it was plain stupid, like when I fell on the scree.'

'Of course,' Maron agreed. 'You made mistakes, and you were lucky. But luck is a *gift*, Keill. You can't rely on it - but it can be as priceless as skill.'

Keill nodded, but half-heartedly, still not meeting her gaze.

'Now tell us the rest of it,' Maron said quietly. 'Tell us what is making you act as if you're ashamed.'

Keill jerked his head up as if he had been struck. 'I *am*!' he burst out. 'I am ashamed! I was *afraid*, Commander, most of the time - sick-afraid...' His voice broke, but he caught himself and went on, in a flood of words. 'I wanted to give up, lots of times. I wanted to stay on the mountain meadow - or anywhere, rather than keep going. And right at the start, when I was alone on the plateau, I was so afraid that I wanted to give up *then*! That's why I'm ashamed...'

His voice broke again, and his head drooped. But Maron reached forward and tilted his face firmly towards her. And he saw that she was smiling again - a crinkly grin of sympathy and something very like satisfaction.

'I'm glad you told us,' she said. 'Because those things you felt out there - *that*, Keill, was the Ordeal.'

He stared at her blankly.

'The journey brings great hardship,' Maron went on. 'Cold and heat - hunger and thirst - pain, perhaps, and danger, and gruelling effort. But even a child of the Legions knows how to face such hardships. They are not the true Ordeal.'

'But you said I might meet the most dangerous thing a legionary could meet...' Keill began dubiously.

'You did meet it,' Maron told him. 'But you met it within *yourself*.'

'I don't understand,' Keill whispered.

'You will,' Maron said. 'The Ordeal tests your skills, and your ability to bear hardship. But it also tests what you are made of, in the depths of your being.'

'And I was afraid,' Keill muttered almost inaudibly, 'and wanted to give up.'

Maron shook her head. 'Every soldier feels fear. During a battle, but most of all before it starts. Even legionaries know fear as an old friend. But we learn how to stop it from hindering us. Just as you learned, Keill. You were afraid, and wanted to give up. But you *did not*!'

The intensity in those last words struck Keill like a slap.

'What I meant by the most deadly danger a legionary can face,' Maron went on, 'is a weakening of the *will*. That is the foundation of the Legions, Keill - the will that gives us the inner strength to live as we do, to overcome hardship, to acquire skills. It is our will that takes us into battle, whatever the opposition, and keeps us fighting even when defeat is certain.'

She rose to stand solemnly over him. 'Every legionary has faced a moment of overwhelming *despair*. Some face it in the Ordeal, some meet it later, elsewhere. Despair, Keill, is bred of fear and the prospect of defeat. And it in turn breeds a final destructive desire to give up, to abandon a hopeless fight. Our only weapon against despair is our *will*.'

Keill stared up at her, his eyes held almost hypnotically by her intense gaze as she went on.

'You faced a cruel and harrowing Ordeal. You were wounded and in pain. You were often afraid. Several times you wished to give up. But you kept on - because your will overcame your despair. And at the end, when you were mostly unconscious and nearly half-dead, your blood draining away, you were

still moving, still trying to reach your goal. *By the power of your will alone.*' As the other two legionaries also rose to stand over him, Maron reached into her tunic pocket and drew out a light metal chain. From it dangled a disc of plastic, glowing fiery red in her hand. Ceremonially she slipped the chain over Keill's head - and as the disc settled on his bare chest, its colour changed. The plastic, chemically attuned to Keill's skin, became clear, save for the sky-blue circlet around its edge.

Keill gazed wordlessly at it, at the tiny holo-image of his own face, the coded identification marks, and over them the superimposed letters YL.

'Keill Randor,' Maron intoned formally, 'you have undergone the Ordeal in the true spirit of the Legions, and have emerged with credit. You are a child no longer. You are a Young Legionary.'

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## Responsibility

The quiet hour that always followed the midday meal had just begun when Keill Randor entered his cubicle, sliding the door firmly shut behind him.

It was an hour for relaxing, a time when everyone could do as they chose - for the ability to relax at will, to overcome tensions and renew inner strengths, was as important in the training of a Young Legionary as any of the martial skills. And besides, when you were one of a troop of energetic fourteen-year-olds, living closely together as they would for all six years of their Young Legionary training, you needed every possible moment of quiet and privacy.

Yet the cubicle hardly seemed ideal for relaxation. It was tiny, cramped, sparsely furnished. The bed was a thin mattress on a solid base that served as a work table when the mattress was rolled back. Another low, plain table stood against the opposite wall, holding a vid screen, an array of tapes and discs, and other odds and ends. A narrow locker for clothing stood in one corner. And that was all. If Keill sat at either table, he sat on the floor, which was as smooth and bare as the plasticrete walls.

But it never occurred to any Young Legionary that their cubicles were uncomfortably bleak. Legionaries did not need to be comfortable in order to relax. So Keill settled himself peacefully on the floor and switched on the vid.

Since the summer began, he had been compiling a tape to send to his parents in the northern settlement of Seria, where he had spent his life until he became a Young Legionary at the age of twelve.

Since then, like every other YL, he had lived in one or another of the training centres scattered around Moros - those that specialized in the advanced combat training for which Keill had been selected. Of course he had many periods of leave, which he spent at home. There had been one before the summer had begun, and there would be another when it ended. And his parents were free to visit him whenever they wished.

But visits were usually not made during the brief summer periods, when each YL troop - fifteen young people and an adult leader - was isolated in one or another of the wilder regions of Moros. So Keill was compiling his tape, as a visual 'letter' home.

The summer periods were something of a holiday, a two-month break from the gruelling demands of the rest of the year's training. Naturally, training sessions of various kinds went on every day, but there was also plenty of free time. It was a time for *fun*, as much as anything else, and even the primitive conditions were part of the fun.

They took the minimum of technology - only what they needed to prepare food and to maintain the prefabricated building that they erected as their base, along with vids for study and entertainment. Also, they took a communicator, in case of emergencies - and the adult troop leader brought his energy gun, as the camp's only high-tech weapon. Otherwise, they were on their own, cut off from the rest of Moros.

But the YL camp sites were carefully chosen, from among the less dangerous areas - as much as was ever possible, on Moros. Keill's troop was in the dry, sun-drenched centre of the southern plains - which most people descriptively called the Dustflats - where there were relatively few deadly creatures for at least part of the year.

The herds of silver-horn - bulky grazing beasts whose heads bore small forests of wickedly curved spikes - could be a danger if you got in their way. But by midsummer they had drifted into the cooler north, where the grass still held a tinge of green. And other dangerous beasts would not move on to the plain till the autumn. High summer was the peaceful time on the Dustflats - and Keill's troop had been enjoying itself enormously, in the midst of that unusual peace.

But at the moment Keill was not enjoying himself. He was frowning with dissatisfaction as he watched the playback of his tape. There was no getting round it. The tape was dull, uneventful. Here he was, loving every minute of the summer - and out of all his enjoyment he had made a tape that had the effect of a sleeping pill.

Maybe, he thought glumly, I'm just a dull person. Like Oni is always saying...

It was as if thinking the name had magically produced the reality. The door to his cubicle slid open with a crash, and in burst a slim, brown-haired bundle of exuberance.

'Spine-eels!' Oni Wolda said breathlessly.

'No, thanks,' Keill said, not taking his eyes from the vid. 'I've just eaten.'

Oni grimaced, but ignored the remark. 'They're .ill over the river bank,' she announced. 'Millions of them. Come on!'

And she was gone, in a brown-haired blur.

*Millions* of them? Keill smiled as he got to his feet. Oni was his oldest and his closest friend - they were almost exactly the same age, and had grown up together in Seria. And all the time he had known her, she had been a tireless ferment of energy. Whenever Keill thought about her, the picture that came to his mind was exactly what was happening now - Oni dashing ahead towards some new excitement, Keill following behind, usually with a wry smile.

Still, if there were spine-eels out there, millions or not, they would liven up the tape that he was sending home. Snatching up the small flat packet that held his own vid-camera, he sprang out of the door after Oni.

Outside the cubicle, he ran along the building's central corridor, with other cubicle doors on either side. The building was shaped like an elongated H, with the corridor forming the cross-bar. At each end the corridor led into a wide, rectangular area, with more doors leading to different rooms. One end of the building housed a small generator, a cramped room containing the communicator and some other equipment, and the cubicle of the troop's adult leader. At the other end was the troop room, which the YLs used for their meals and for general relaxation, along with communal kitchens, lavatories and showers.

The main door out of the building was at the end where the generator and communicator were. It was standing open, and through it Keill could see Oni sprinting across the dusty brown grass. He loped after her, priming his camera as he went, and saw that all the others had already gathered at the river bank, including Jerli, the adult legionary who was the troop leader and instructor for the summer. For a moment Keill lost sight of Oni - easy enough to do, among fifteen young people all dressed in shorts and sleeveless shirts.

But then, an outsider might have thought that they all looked much alike in other ways as well. All fifteen were trim, tanned and healthy. They all moved with a smooth, flowing litheness, athletic and muscular. And even when still, they all seemed balanced and poised with a kind of controlled readiness, in the way that an arrow is both still and poised when the bow is fully drawn.

But of course they did not truly look alike - not to themselves, anyway. Keill was more or less of medium height, fairly lean, dark-haired and deeply tanned. Others were taller, or shorter, of differing build and complexion. There was Oni, fair-skinned and slender as a wand. There was Danal, tall, blond and cheerfully ruddy rather than brown. There was little Ferik, short, sturdy and bouncy as rubber. And there was Charrel, small, thin, dark in every sense of the word...

Keill turned away, not wanting to think about Charrel just then. Spotting Oni at last, he joined her at the edge of the river bank. Spine-eels there were. Not the millions that Oni had announced - in fact, not more than a dozen. But no less interesting. They were wriggling slowly through the thick brown ooze that, in the dry season, was all that remained of the river Sloda - which the Young Legionaries had promptly renamed the Sludge. Keill lifted his vid-camera, bringing the creatures into close-up.

The serpentine bodies of spine-eels were as thick as a man's upper arm, three metres or more in length, and could move very quickly in a sinuous, muscular ripple. Their dull red skin was covered with protrusions - some of them like rough pebbles, others spiky as thorns. And just behind their blunt heads, round what would have been their necks if they had necks, was a collar of longer, needle-pointed spines.

Normally the collar lay flat against the coarse skin. But when the creature was roused to attack or defence (usually the former, like most of the lethal creatures of Moros), the spines flared up into a ruff, pointing forward around the head.

And each of the spines on the collar was tipped with venom. A single jab from one of the spines could kill a small child and cause even the fittest adult a great deal of pain and illness, unless the antidote was injected swiftly. And two jabs from the spines could kill anything.

Keill's camera followed one of the horrors, slithering up the river bank as if it intended to attack the barelegged, barefoot young humans. The YLs watched it with amusement, not moving; but their troop leader, Jerli, intervened. The legionary wore the trousers and boots of his full uniform, with a sleeveless shirt. And his flashing kick was precisely aimed, his boot striking between two of the spikes on the eel's body, flinging it back down into the river ooze.

And then Keill lowered his camera, suddenly remembering.

'Spine-eels shouldn't be out on the Dustflats for more than a month yet,' he said to Oni.

'I know,' Oni said off-handedly. 'Looks like somebody forgot to tell *them*.'

Keill had remembered that spine-eels were migratory creatures. Every year, at the end of the summer, they emerged from the swamps that were their usual home, and swept out on to the Dustflats. And they migrated in their hundreds of thousands. The Dustflats became carpeted with the thick, snaky bodies, travelling night and day, non-stop, towards a segment of land where two rivers lay fairly close together.

There the entire community of monsters would come together for several days of mating rituals, and the watershed would be one gigantic entangling of twisting, writhing, spine-eel bodies. Then at last, exhausted by their non-stop courtships, they would untangle themselves, and make their way back again to spend the winter in the swamps and bear their young.

And any living thing out on the plain, when the spine-eels were migrating, had no chance at all. Spine-eels were voracious flesh-eaters - and would attack anything, anytime. There were horror stories of years when the seasonal timing had gone awry, and the migrating mass of spine-eels had met the giant herds of silver-horn, drifting south again at summer's end. The slaughter was said to be indescribable, and the ground would squelch with blood for weeks.

A number of unsettling thoughts came into Keill's mind, but before he could voice them, Jerli was calling to the troop to gather round. As he and Oni went to join them, Keill's eye was again caught by the thin dark figure of Charrel - standing apart as always, his expression sombre, shadowed, bleak.

'He doesn't get any better,' Keill murmured, gesturing slightly towards Charrel.

'The question is,' Oni whispered, 'will he ever?'

But then Jerli was speaking, his voice as dour and gruff as his lined, leathery face. 'These few spine-eels could be just isolated wanderers, or they could be the start of the migration. It should be too early for them to migrate - but maybe they know something we don't. Maybe it's to be an extra-short summer.'

There was a chorus of groans. Summer was short enough on Moros, even in the south of the planet's only habitable continent.

Jerli raised his voice slightly to quiet them. 'If the eels are on the move,' he went on, 'we might not get much warning. As you know, they'll sweep in from the south-east swamps and on to the plains. And there're no settlements down here, no people. Except us.'

His keen glance swept across the listening young people. 'I'll put out a call and see if some flyers can go to look at the swamps,' Jerli continued. 'But that'll take time - and we have to decide. Do we stay, and take our chances that the migration hasn't started? Or do we play safe, and get out now?'

He paused, as a buzz of talk arose. It was standard Legion practice, taken for granted by the YLs. Jerli was an adult and a troop leader, but he was not a dictator - no more than any officer in any unit of a Legion. Leaders did not give orders to be blindly obeyed, did not *impose* discipline - because legionaries, whatever their age and rank, were *self*-disciplined, needing no one to tell them where their duties and their responsibilities lay. The primary job of a leader, or an officer, was to be a focal point for efficient, unified action - as Jerli was now.

'I don't want to give up the summer,' Oni was saying firmly, 'because of a few wrigglers in the Sludge.'

'*Millions* of them,' Keill said sardonically.

She looked at him blankly for a moment, then grinned, remembering her earlier over-enthusiasm.

'All the same,' big Danal put in, 'if they come, they'll come fast. You've seen vids of the migration. And here we'll be, in the way, with only one beam-gun in the place, no transport...'

'We'll set up a watch,' Oni suggested. 'Put someone out on the plains, south-east. It's so flat here you can see into the middle of next week - if we see eels coming, we'll get on the communicator and whistle up some flyers.'

'What if they can't get here in time?' little Ferik asked.

Oni shrugged. 'We get inside the base, and wait. The flyers will be armed, enough to hold the eels back while they lift us out.'

'Or we could send Oni out,' a boy called from the crowd, 'to talk them to death.'

'How would you like to go for a swim in the Sludge?' Oni replied brightly.

The ripple of laughter that followed was again ended by Jerli's voice. 'Does anyone *not* agree with Oni?'

There was a general silence as Jerli's eyes swept over the group - then paused.

'Charrel?' Jerli said easily. 'Are you for, or against?'

The dark boy seemed hardly to have been listening. Now he flashed a wintry glance at Jerli, and shrugged his shoulders.

'What does it matter?' His voice was bleak and harsh.

Jerli opened his mouth to reply, then obviously thought better of it. His face expressionless, he turned back to the others. 'Right - we stay. I'll make that call, and get some flyers over to look at the swamps, as soon as they can.'

As they all began to drift back to the base, Keill and Oni looked over at the thin figure of Charrel, standing hunched by himself on the riverbank.

'He's not only no better,' Oni said thoughtfully. 'I think he's getting worse.'

Keill nodded. 'I wish somebody could do something.'

'Somebody?' Oni echoed. 'I think *we* should do something.'

Keill glanced at her uneasily. Despite the self-discipline and self-control that was ingrained in even the young children of the Legions, the fourteen-year-old Oni could still sometimes let her impulsive, exuberant nature break free. And then, as Keill knew from experience, all sorts of trouble could result.

'Do something about what?' Big Danal had come up to them, with Ferik, in time to hear the end of Oni's remark.

'About Charrel,' Oni said. 'He's sick, and getting sicker. He's keeping all that unhappiness bottled up inside him, like... like a poison. And he needs help.'

Danal raised his eyebrows. 'What can we do that medics and counsellors can't?'

'Medics.' Oni waved a slim hand dismissively. 'We're his friends - we *know* him. If anyone can help him get that poison out, it should be us.'

'You make him sound like a boil that needs lancing,' Ferik said.

'More like a spring wound too tight,' Oni told her. 'Or a primed grenade that needs defusing.'

'I'd still like to know,' Danal said, 'what you think we can do.'

Oni shook her head. 'I haven't worked it out yet. But I will. We can't just let him go on getting worse.'

'Just remember,' Keill said darkly, 'if you start playing around with a primed grenade, it's likely to explode.'

Oni glared at him. 'Maybe that's just what Charrel needs - to explode, to let all his misery out! Would you rather do nothing, and let Charrel ruin his life?'

Keill shrugged wordlessly. The set of Oni's chin, and the light in her eye, told him that there was no arguing with her. In any case, he was worried about Charrel, too, and wished just as much as Oni did that something could be done. But he was no less worried, now, about what Oni might take it into her mind to do.

Charrel's condition had begun only recently, just before the troop had come to the Dustflats. Like the others, he had gone home on leave, only to find that on the very day of his arrival his entire family - parents and two small sisters - had been killed, when a freak storm had wrecked their flyer. Though every individual on Moros knew a good deal about pain and grief - because death was never far away on their harsh planet, or in the battles which the Legions fought throughout the galaxy - the deaths of Charrel's family seemed particularly tragic, particularly cruel.

Having nowhere else to go, Charrel had come back to the troop. But his anguish and grief seemed too much even for the inner strengths and controls of a Young Legionary. He grew silent, cold and bitter, showed a severe loss of concentration and control in training, and kept himself apart from the others, darkly brooding. It seemed that he had begun to hate the world - the world of Moros, where people could die in such random, meaningless ways.

A number of Legion counsellors had tried to help Charrel - but even they could not get past that barrier of misery and hatred. It was obvious that Charrel was on the edge of mental illness. And though there was no special shame attached to that on Moros, the counsellors were deeply concerned - as they would have been if Charrel had a virus infection or some other physical illness.

They had hoped that the relaxation of the summer camp might help. But Keill and the others had known for some time that it had not. They also knew that, at the end of the summer, Charrel would almost certainly be dropped from advanced combat training, and sent elsewhere for treatment - probably a rehabilitation clinic. And the troop was too close-knit a group of friends to want that to happen.

At the same time, Keill did not want Oni to invent some wild scheme for helping Charrel that might make matters worse, and get Oni into trouble. So he was relieved when Charrel did not reappear until the quiet hour was over. Then Jerli divided the troop into separate squads, and took them on to the plains for the afternoon, to practise orientation techniques designed to sharpen their sense of direction. And Keill was relieved again to see that Oni and Charrel were in different squads - and that, in the evening, after toying briefly with his meal, Charrel vanished into his cubicle before Oni or anyone could speak to him.

In any case, the YLs had other things to think about. None of them had needed to be told why Jerli had chosen to take them south-eastwards, or why the legionary had carried the camp's only energy gun that afternoon.

There had been no sign of spine-eels. And Jerli had told them that, the next day, flyers from the nearest settlement - in the hills, several hundred kilometres to the north - would come out to inspect the land to the south-east. But it might all take a day or two, Jerli added - so the YLs would need to be alert.

No one had advised or ordered Jerli to take his troop elsewhere, and he had not asked for advice. Legionaries made those decisions for themselves. Help would come swiftly, if it was asked for. But until then, Jerli and his YLs were expected to know what they were doing.



After the evening meal, Jerli suggested that, since it was Oni's idea to put a sentry out on the south-east plains, she should take the first watch. And by the time she trailed wearily back to the base in the morning - having seen no sign of spine-eels - Charrel had again finished his meal and had left the troop room.

But then the troop drew lots for the day's guard duty, and the job fell to Keill. He was reluctant to leave, because he badly wanted to keep an eye on Charrel and Oni. But there was no way to explain his reluctance to Jerli. So he clipped the energy gun to his belt, as Oni had done the night before, and set out south-eastwards.

It was a day that tested to the limits his ability to wait and watch, patiently, with no loss of alertness. He had nothing to do but wander idly around, occasionally run through some standard limbering-up exercises, or practise drawing the energy gun. He had no company except the unrelenting sun, a few swirls of wind, and the smaller forms of Dustflats wildlife - tiny, multi-winged flying creatures that bit, and tiny multi-legged crawling creatures that bit.

And the flat sweep of land to the south-east remained empty of spine-eels, or anything else.

The only break in the monotony came near the end of the day, when giant, swollen, loweringly dark clouds began to build up on the western horizon, the forerunners of one of the fearsome storms of the Dustflats. And Keill might even have welcomed that distraction, if he had not known that the open plain was no place to be during one of those colossal outbursts, when the land would be savagely pounded by ferocious electrical discharges.

But at least the approaching storm gave him a reason to hurry back to the base, which would relieve one of the things that have made the day seem even longer - his anxiety about what Oni might be up to.

His springy lope took him swiftly back to the camp, where he turned the gun over to Jerli. By then the storm clouds had moved across most of the sky, filling the air with ominous rumblings. And there was a storminess also in the frown that creased Jerli's brow.

'All this interference in the air has blanked out the communicator,' the legionary said gruffly. 'So I still haven't heard if the flyers spotted any spine-eels.'

'The land was empty as far as I could see,' Keill pointed out.

'Doesn't mean much,' Jerli growled. 'Spine-eels move fast. And if it rains, and the ground gets slippery, they'll move faster. We'll just have to be alert. Wish this storm would break...'

Jerli began to turn away, then swung back to Keill. 'Talking of storms, I never saw so much tension in a YL troop as I've seen today - something you're supposed to have got over ten years ago. What's happening among you people?'

Keill hesitated for an instant, torn between two sets of loyalties. At last he merely shrugged. 'I've been out on the flats all day.'

It was not the most satisfactory answer, but Jerli merely stared piercingly at him for a moment, then grunted and strode away.

But Keill found out what the legionary meant when he entered the troop room for his evening meal. There seemed to be as much electricity in the room as there was in the threatening, rumbling sky outside. Some of the troop were still eating at the long, low table on one side of the room, while others who had finished had moved to the padded benches scattered around the rest of the room. But no one was relaxing.

Everyone was covertly watching Charrel, looking even more troubled than usual, sitting at one end of the table and poking darkly at his food - and Oni, sitting nearby, her eyes fixed on him.

As Keill sat down at the table, suddenly uninterested in eating, Danal slid over beside him. 'She's been trying to talk to him all day,' the blond youth whispered. 'She's got the idea that if he talks it all out with us, he'll get everything out of his system and feel better.'

'She could be right,' Keill said.

Danal shook his head. 'At first Charrel just snarled at her, told her to go away. Then he went quiet and tried to ignore her. And in the end he walked out of training and went off somewhere. He got back just before you did - and he still won't talk to Oni or anyone.'

He paused, and the two of them glanced worriedly down the table at the pale, hunched Charrel. 'The way he is now,' Danal continued, 'he could crack up completely.'

A deep bass rumble of thunder seemed to punctuate Danal's ominous prediction, and Keill felt suddenly chilled. 'Then we'd better tell that to Oni,' he said decisively. He pushed back his plate and began to rise.

But at the same instant, Charrel too had abruptly stood up. His thin body seemed stooped, as if there was an agony in the centre of his being, and a muscle was twitching uncontrollably in his jaw. And it twitched even more when Oni jumped up to stand in his path.

'Don't run away, Charrel,' she said fiercely. 'Stay and talk. You have to let us help.'

'Get out of the way,' Charrel mumbled, moving to get past her.

But Oni moved as well, to block his path. 'I'm not letting you go.' Her voice was filled with determination. 'You can't keep running away. If you can't deal with your feelings by yourself, then let us help you. You can't cut yourself off from the whole world.'

The words, the reference to the world that Charrel felt he hated, acted like a trigger. Charrel's thin face went stark white, save for splotches of red on each cheekbone. His eyes went wide, staring. And he screamed.

'Get out of my way!'

As he screamed, he lunged at Oni, a hand thrust out to brush her aside. Oni, balanced and ready, grasped his wrist, and began to swing him back towards the table to prevent his escape.

Charrel's other hand lashed out, with eye-baffling speed. But Oni was fractionally quicker. The slashing chop that would have broken her wrist merely brushed against her fingertips as she jerked her hand away.

But then Oni's inner controls slipped slightly too. Her other hand blurred into an automatic, reflexive counter-punch. The heel of that hand slammed into the side of Charrel's face, and sent him into a clumsy, flailing, half-somersault over a bench before he struck the floor.

He lay there for an instant, half-stunned, then came to his feet. Now all of his face had flushed bright red, save for the lurid bruise beginning to show on his cheek. And there was a fleck of spittle at the corner of his mouth, as he stared at the others, and screamed again.

His words were barely intelligible. They were words of rage, and hatred, and deep festering pain. Tears poured from his eyes, his hands writhed, his face twisted and jerked. His voice rose to shrillness, till the

final words became a shriek, as he turned and sprang to the door.

And those final words, at least, had been wholly clear.

'I'm getting *off this* filthy planet!' Charrel had shrieked.

As the door slid shut behind him, a titanic, earth-rattling explosion of thunder directly overhead announced the breaking of the storm. More thunder followed, and more, deafening blasts punctuated by livid bursts of lightning crashing down at the earth like giant spears of lethal energy. And then the rain erupted, a solid cascade of water that pounded on the plasticrete building like some monstrous manic beast striving to break in.

The Young Legionaries had stood motionless, numbed with shock and distress, after the explosion of violence and Charrel's hysterical outburst. Now the new violence of the storm brought them back to themselves. Everyone began talking at once, in low voices, looking worriedly at Oni. And Oni turned woeful, frightened eyes to Keill.

'It all went wrong, didn't it?' she said.

Keill searched for some words of reassurance. 'He would have cracked up anyway, sooner or later,' he said at last, trying to sound convincing.

'I didn't mean to hit him...' Oni began.

But she was interrupted, by a voice that cracked like a whip.

'What in the name of Moros is going on?'

It was Jerli, looming in the doorway, tight-lipped and grim. 'Charrel just rushed by me, with a bruised face, looking like the world had ended,' the legionary snapped. 'What have you been doing?'

Keill took a deep breath, but Oni touched his arm. 'I started this,' she said quickly. 'I'll explain it.'

Looking Jerli firmly in the eye, she told him what had happened. She did not disguise the fact that the idea and the responsibility were hers, and did not try to make excuses. And when she was done, Jerli was silent for a moment, studying her.

'*Adolescents*,' he growled, a world of sourness in the word. 'There's a lot I could say about what a dangerous, stupid, *juvenile* thing you've done. But I'll say it later. Right now I'll try to go and do something to help Charrel.'

'Can he be helped?' Danal asked nervously. 'He seemed...I've never seen anything like it.'

Jerli's expression did not change. 'I have. Anyone can crack under too much stress. Read your history - it happened a lot in the early days, when Moros got too much for some people. These days, we know more about preventing it, and about curing it if it does happen.' His hard gaze struck at them all. 'But that doesn't allow you to feel better about what's happened. And I mean *all* of you. You're all responsible.' His eyes glinted coldly. 'Or maybe I mean you're all *irresponsible*.'

As he turned stiffly away, Oni seemed to crumple slightly, within herself - stricken, and close to tears. And all the others were pale and silenced. In the close, communal, interdependent world of the Legions, there was no worse charge, no harsher accusation, than irresponsibility.

Above them a monstrous bellow of thunder sounded like a cavernous echo of the word. And the rain

seemed to redouble its battering on the building, as if seeking to erase the offence that had been committed within it.

'What do we do now?' Danal muttered.

'Wait,' Keill said quietly. 'Jerli will do what he can, and when the storm ends he'll get someone to come for Charrel. They'll be able to help him.' His voice tightened. 'They'll *have* to.'

But he was wrong. A moment later, the door slid open again, and several of the young people gasped. Jerli strode back in, his eyes blazing, his clothes dripping wet.

'Charrel's gone,' he said flatly. 'His cubicle's empty, and the outer door was open. And he's taken the gun.'

'We have to go after him!' Oni cried, starting forward.

'We can't,' Jerli snapped. 'I've been out. You can't see for more than a metre in this rain. And away from the building, we'd be the tallest things on the prairie - just asking for a lightning bolt.'

'But Charrel could be killed!' Ferik said.

'He could be,' Jerli said bluntly. 'So could we, if we go out there. So we'll start after him in the morning. Just hope that he has enough left of his training, and his sanity, to survive the night.'

That night was one of the longest and most sleepless that Keill had ever known. The storm seemed immovable, as if it had come purposefully to attack the camp with barrages of thunder, furious batterings of rain. Several times lightning seemed to strike the building itself, and countless other blasts hammered the ground around it. Yet that onslaught seemed minor, compared to the turmoil within the minds of the Young Legionaries, lying awake and suffering in their cubicles.

For his part Keill kept going over and over the incidents, seeing all the things he might have said and done, and guilt grew within him till it was an agony. But mingled with it was an almost equally painful sympathy - for Oni, who would be feeling a far more terrible torment. Several times he began to get up, thinking of some semi-comforting words that he might say to her. But always he sank back - for she had told them all, in an agonized whisper, that she wanted to be by herself that night.

So Keill stayed where he was, twisting and turning, thinking about the idea of *responsibility*, wondering how one word could contain such a world of misery.

He fell into a fitful sleep just before dawn, at a time when the storm finally stopped besieging the camp, and had begun to drift rumblingly away. But it was a short-lived sleep. The thin greyness of first light had just begun to outline the narrow window of the cubicle when Jerli's terrible yell echoed through the building, and brought all of them spilling out into the corridor, startled and shaken.

'Charrel...?' Oni asked. There was a desperation in her voice that matched the wan paleness of her face.

But Jerli looked at her as if he did not see her, as if he did not know the name she had spoken. His voice seemed almost flat, compared to the yell that had awakened them, and to his terrifying words.

'The land to the south-east,' that flat voice was saying, 'is alive with spine-eels.'

No one moved. No one spoke, or even breathed.

'They're moving fast,' Jerli went on, 'because the ground is wet and slippery, the way they like it. They'll be all over us in two hours, maybe less.' His mouth twisted. 'And the storm shorted out the communicator. It's useless.'

Wide-eyed, the YLs stared at the legionary, and to Keill it seemed that the air had turned to ice.

'Can we make a run for it?' Danal asked.

'Run where?' Jerli asked coldly. 'We're in the middle of the plains. It would take us days of flat-out running to get to the hills, and we can't run that far without stopping. But the eels don't stop - and they can move nearly as fast as we can.'

Keill glanced around. 'Will the building keep them out?'

Jerli swung his piercing eyes towards him. 'The walls, maybe,' he said shortly. 'But the windows won't. Maybe not even the doors - not when they start piling the weight on, trying to get at us.' He paused, surveying them. 'Put on boots and trousers, for what little good they'll do. Then start looking for things to use as weapons. We'll barricade ourselves at one end of the building, and try to hold them off.'

'We could do with the beam-gun,' someone muttered.

Jerli snorted. 'We could do with the communicator, too. One of you might start working on it - in case it can be fixed in time. We'll make our barricade at that end, and use the communicator room as our last line of defence. Any questions, or ideas?'

There were none. In grim silence, the Young Legionaries turned away to prepare for battle.

It took seconds for them to pull on the trousers and boots of their uniforms. Then half the group began the search for weapons, while the rest began to build the barricade. Benches and tables from the troop room were wedged and jammed across the central corridor, where it led into the open area at the end of the building that held the communicator room. The heavy table on which the troop ate was braced against the outer door of the building, and shorter bench seats and other smaller pieces of furniture were wedged into the window frames of the two narrow windows in the area that was to be their battleground.

The construction went on with a swift, smooth efficiency. Elsewhere in the building, with the same speed, other windows were blocked as much as possible, and doors reinforced, until the defenders ran out of furniture. And by then the weapon-gatherers had completed their task.

The kitchen had yielded several knives and other sharp instruments, and these were shared out. Others had to make do with broken table legs and lengths of stout plastiwood, which they whittled to sharp points. Many of them, including Keill, wrapped spare uniform tunics around one arm, as a shielding pad.

Then, when the last of them had retreated into the area at the end of the building, and the last piece of furniture had been wedged into the barricade, they were ready. Jerli checked them over, with a glint of approval in his eyes as he noted their calmness, their relaxed but poised stance. He hefted the slim metal bar that he had chosen as a weapon, slapped it across his palm, and nodded.

'Let's get into position,' he said. He glanced towards the communicator room, where Danal was bent over the open casing of the machine. 'Any luck?' he called.

Danal glanced up and shook his head. 'I'm trying to remake connections without the right materials,' he said briefly. 'It could take hours.'

Jerli nodded. 'Then we'll have to try to see that you get hours.' He grinned sourly, and most of the group

returned the grin. But Keill saw that Oni was not smiling. She was staring into nothingness, her eyes dark and haunted. And Keill knew that what was troubling her was not the approach of spine-eels.

If proof was needed that a dash across the open plains would have been futile, it came when the Young Legionaries realized that Jerli had *underestimated* the spine-eels' speed. Less than an hour and a half had passed since Jerli had first alerted them, when they heard the sounds from outside the building.

They were scraping, shuffling, slithering sounds, like something being dragged over the wet grass outside. The noise was faint and sporadic at first, but then it began to swell in volume - and went on swelling, as if it would never stop getting louder, as if it was trying to rival the thunderous pounding of the rain, the night before.

Only this time something was literally besieging the building, with a murderous intention to break in.

Keill moved to the window, and peered through a gap between the window frame and the short bench that partly filled the opening. And his blood seemed to congeal in his veins.

The broad stretch of dusty grass beyond the building was now a seething, writhing blanket of spine-eels, stretching away from the building as far as Keill's angle of vision allowed him to see. And all that countless, swarming, venomous horde seemed to have a single purpose. They were homing in on the building, where their senses told them they would find food.

Keill turned away, looking at Oni. '*Millions* of them,' he said lightly.

She threw him a wan smile, at the reminder of her exaggeration on that day - it seemed years ago - when the first spine-eels appeared. But the smile faded, as she returned to what Keill knew was her own private, inner battle - trying to overcome her feelings of guilt and failure, so they did not interfere with her combat skills.

Keill turned back to the window, hefting the long-bladed knife that he had acquired, identical to the one that Oni gripped. The scratching, slithering noise was all around them now, as the monstrous swarm assailed the building, seeking a way in. And Keill realized that the sheer weight of them, as they massed mindlessly against the walls, would eventually break down the flimsy defences.

It occurred to him, with a calm and resigned sureness, that none of them would be alive by the end of the day. Except Charrel, if he lived through the storm, he thought to himself wryly. At least, whatever else we did to him, we may have given him a head start...

But the thought fled. The plastiglass before him splintered, and an ugly blunt head, its ruff of lethal spines erect, thrust in through the gap between the window frame and the small bench. The eel fell back at once, gouging a clear slime where Keill's knife had slashed across its head. But another replaced it, and another...

Coolly, with all his speed, Keill slashed and stabbed. With one hand he braced the bench against the broken window, thankful for the wrapping of his uniform tunic round that arm, and kept up his methodical defence. Then Oni was beside him, her eyes calm and bright, her own blade flashing. As eel after eel oozed into the window threateningly, they drove them back - striking smoothly, without panic or hysteria, their blades weaving in and around each other in perfect unison, like a moving curtain of steel.

Behind him Keill heard a muffled crash. The other window had given way, he knew, but he did not turn, knowing that the other YLs would be in action too. His mind was concentrated wholly on this window,

on stabbing, slashing, evading the eels' spiky thrusts, timing his movements around Oni's, all at a speed that the eye could barely have followed. He ignored the first signs of weariness in the hand and arm that held his knife, ignored the sweat streaming from him, mingled with the slime-blood of dying eels. He was a blank-faced, cold-eyed machine that stabbed, and slashed...

And then he paused. The window frame was packed solid with the twitching bodies of dead and dying eels. In a moment, he knew, the pressure from the living eels behind them would force that wedged mass through the window, and the battle would begin again. Automatically he maintained his own pressure on the small bench still blocking most of the window, locking his left arm into a rigid bar. But he rested his aching right arm for a moment, and glanced behind him.

What he saw was not encouraging. Ferik and another girl were fighting a similar battle at the open area's other window, and most of the rest of the group were at the barricade across the mouth of the central corridor. Eels had broken into the other end of the building by their thousands, and were attacking the barricade just as they were attacking the walls and windows - with the sheer weight of numbers.

With fierce determination, the other YLs were resisting, and so far the barricade was holding. So far...

But then Keill heard the grinding groan of tortured metal, and turned with horror.

The main door from the outside had visibly bulged inwards. Jerli was throwing his weight against the heavy table that was bracing the door, but the metal had given way at one of the door's lower corners, and eels had begun to squeeze through the gap. Jerli's metal bar was a whistling blur as it struck, again and again, non-stop.

'Help him!' Keill yelled. 'I'm all right here!'

Oni flashed to Jerli's side, her blade sweeping down into battle. But then the door groaned again, and the gap widened. More eels poured in, and three of them struck out simultaneously.

Both Jerli and Oni side-stepped neatly, their weapons lashing down. Two of the eels convulsed into their writhing death throes.

But the third, only injured, struck again - just as Jerli's left foot slipped for an instant on a patch of the slime-blood.

The spines of the eel's ruff went through his boot as if the leather were paper.

Oni sliced her blade down to behead the eel, shouted for help, and caught Jerli as he started to topple. Instantly two of the others sprang from the barricade to face the new wave of eels slithering in through the gap in the broken door. Meanwhile, Oni had cut through Jerli's boot, dragged it off, and was half-carrying him into the communicator room.

She would open the wound, Keill knew, to let some of the poison drain, and would put a tourniquet around the leg. Jerli would survive - if any of them did...

But then Oni was bursting out of the room, her eyes alight.

'Danal's got the transmitter working!' she shouted. 'He doesn't know what frequency, and he can't receive - but he's put out a call for help!'

No one cheered, or responded in any way, for they were all too busy trying to stay alive. But Keill knew that the fierce hope that had surged up in him had been repeated in each of the others, like a burst of adrenalin.

Even so, he reminded himself, we don't know if anyone will pick up the call - or if anyone can get here in time...

But once again thinking gave way to action. His left arm was trembling with the strain of resisting the crushing pressure against the bench wedged in the window. And more eels were beginning to force their way past the obstacle.

As before, his knife went into its flickering, swirling pattern of stab and slash. As before, he became a machine, focused on nothing else but killing spine-eels. He was only dimly aware of the relief of pressure on his left arm, and then realized that Danal was beside him, taking the weight of the bench, wielding the metal bar that Jerli had carried.

'I've put the transmitter on automatic SOS,' Danal said through clenched teeth. 'Go help Oni!'

Keill glanced around, and leaped, all in the same motion. One of the pair of YLs at the door was down, the stab-wound from an eel visible in the patch of blood at her torn knee. Her partner was hauling her away, and Oni was defending the doorway on her own.

Even in the millisecond that it took Keill to get to her, she had put an end to four eels - but four more took their places, and forty behind them, and forty thousand behind them...

Once more Keill and Oni began their deadly duet - stab, slash, side-step, skip back from a thrust of spines, stab, slash...

Keill barely heard a shrill yelp from Ferik, which meant that she too had been struck. He paid no attention to the throbbing weariness of his arm, the burning in his lungs. He did not even hear the new sound, at first, for it was distant, muffled by the scratching and slithering of spine-eels around the building. But when the sound was repeated, much nearer, he knew at once. One of the most familiar, yet just then one of the most unexpected, sounds he could have heard.

The hissing crackle of an energy gun. *Outside.*

'They've come!' he shouted, the exultation lending new strength to his arm as he slashed at two more lunging eels. But the next sound almost made him miss his stroke.

A voice, from outside, raised into a carrying yell. '*Get back from the doorway!*'

Automatically, Keill and Oni sprang back, and an energy beam blazed into the heaving tangle of spine-eels forcing their way through the opening. The writhing bodies erupted into flame under that withering blast. And for a suspended moment, the doorway was clear.

But Keill and Oni hardly noticed. They were looking at each other wildly - for they had recognized the voice, and could not believe it.

'*Charrel!*' Oni breathed.

As one, they leaped back to the door, and stared through the gap at a scene from nightmare.

It *was* Charrel. Still wearing only the light summer garb, barelegged and barefoot, yet wholly unharmed. The thin, dark figure was standing in the centre of what looked like an island - an island of dead spine-eels, and clear ground created by the panicky retreat of others. And from the island, like a bridge, an equally clear stretch of ground extended up to the doorway.

As they stared, Charrel raised the gun and fired another short burst, blasting a small knot of eels that had



started to slide towards him from the rear. Clearly he had carved a passage through the entire swarm of eels in just that way. That was startling enough. Even more startling, he seemed calm, controlled, alert.

'I'm coming in!' he shouted.

Swiftly he moved towards the door, along the clear path that he had made. Again he fired, and again, blasting eels that tried to bar his way. Without breaking stride, he swung smoothly around, and charred a few slithering up behind him. He was only about twenty metres away, and seemed sure to make it.

But then, whether by accident or intent, eels on both sides of the clear path surged towards him at once.

He was almost quick enough. The energy beam swept destructively across one group of attackers, in the same instant as he sprang high and forward towards a clear patch of grass. But as he left the ground, one eel whipped its armed head into the air - and the deadly spines grazed Charrel's ankle.

And when he struck the ground, that foot crumpled beneath him.

But even before he had landed, Keill and Oni were moving. Flinging aside the huge table, they leaped, together, their boots smashing against the half-broken door.

The door exploded outwards, slamming on to the ground with an impact that crushed several eels. And they were out and running, twin blurs of speed, along the narrow path that Charrel's gun had cleared - and that was now rapidly closing.

The blinding speed of that dash seemed to baffle even the eels themselves. Oni and Keill fled past them like gusts of wind weaving among them, hurdling their clusters. Many of the spiky heads rose, swaying, but only a few struck out, and those struck empty air as the two Young Legionaries flashed past.

Then they reached Charrel. He was half-kneeling and, despite the pain of his poisoned wound, was calmly firing short bursts of the energy gun to keep a clear space around him. As Oni grasped his arm and helped him to his feet, Keill snatched the gun and maintained the firing.

'I didn't think we'd ever see you again,' Oni said to Charrel, her voice choked with emotion.

'Had to come back,' Charrel replied, through teeth clenched against the agony in his foot. 'Felt... responsible.'

There's that word again, Keill thought to himself.

Then they were moving forward, half-carrying Charrel, Keill's gun slashing at spine-eels that surged up to intercept them. They plunged through the wrecked door, and big Danal was there to manhandle the bulk of the heavy table back across the open doorway.

And the attack continued.

But now Keill held one of the planet's most advanced weapons, and with it he seemed to be everywhere at once. At the two windows, blasting eels back from the openings. At the barricade, when sudden bursts of eels threatened to swamp the defenders. At the doorway, where Danal was grimly braced against the table, to ease that barrier a few centimetres aside and fill the doorway with charred eel bodies.

During one of those moments, Oni arrived, with six spare charges for the gun. 'These won't last for ever,' she said quietly.

'Neither will we,' Keill replied with a half-smile. 'Time for a Strategic withdrawal.'

The others responded to Keill's call with relief. Most of them had passed the point of total exhaustion, and were now fighting on nerve and will alone. Yet they moved in a co-ordinated flow, retreating into the communicator room.

Danal and Keill were the last to enter, and Danal stood by with some others to brace the door against the intolerable pressure that massed eel bodies would soon bring against it. But they left the door open a crack - through which Keill would be using the energy gun, to keep the eels back as long as possible.

The communicator room was cramped and windowless, over-full with all fifteen of the Young Legionaries crowded into it, unbearably hot and airless. Yet there were no murmurs of complaint or signs of strained nerves. Oni and two others were tending the wounded - who now included Charrel as well as Jerli, Ferik and others. The rest of the YLs simply stood where they were, calm and quiet.

Each of them knew that when the last charge for the gun was drained, it would be knives and clubs again - until at last, inevitably, they would be overwhelmed. Yet there was no terror, no despair in their eyes. They would fight until they could fight no more, and then they would die. As legionaries always did, against impossible odds.

For what he expected to be the last time, Keill glanced around, seeking Oni. She was bending over Charrel - but, somehow aware of his glance, she turned her head and met Keill's eyes. They held the gaze for a fractional second, silent, expressionless. Then both turned away at once, back to their tasks.

A writhing collection of eels had by then massed at the door, exerting their mindless pressure. Two bursts of the energy gun dispatched them - and another mass slithered up to take their place. Keill fired again, concentrating, using the barest minimum of energy each time, to prolong the gun's usefulness as long as possible. At once he seemed to become a machine again, as if the gunfire was computerized. His entire being was focused on the door's narrow opening, on the patch of floor beyond it.

The defenders had killed many hundreds of the creatures, but outside that door, outside the building, were tens of thousands. And each one of them was compulsively, obsessively determined to break through the door that shielded the humans. But Keill was no less compulsive and determined as he fired, paused, fired again, steady and calm as a robot.

That ferocious concentration seemed to blank out other awarenesses, to cloud the senses that were not being used. He saw nothing but the narrow gap in the door, heard nothing but the slither of eels and the crackle of the gun, muted by the roaring in his ears...

Then he dimly realized that Danal had punched him on the shoulder. But he could not work out why - or why Oni was beside him, laughing. In fact all of the troop was laughing, and shouting, with what sounded like joy.

And then Keill's perceptions widened out enough to tell him that the roaring was not in his ears, but outside - the bellowing of a mighty machine.

In that instant, all the eels he could see through the narrow gap of the door were incinerated by a raging surge of energy flame. And there were tall figures in dazzling suits made of flexible metal, flinging the door open, staring with relief and admiration as the Young Legionaries stumbled out into freedom and safety.

When Keill had rinsed off as much as he could of sweat and eel-slime, he emerged from the washroom

of the giant cruiser and joined Oni, sitting between Jerli and Charrel - who were awake and propped up to one side of the passenger area.

Keill was still hardly able to believe that Danal's desperate message, flung out on the hastily repaired transmitter, had got through. In fact he had learned that it had been picked up in a settlement six hundred kilometres away. There its urgency had been grasped at once, and it had been relayed to the settlement nearest to the Dustflats. Shortly, the battle cruiser had blasted off from that settlement, carrying a dozen well-armed legionaries in protective clothing.

Keill had been astonished to know that the whole process had happened in only twenty minutes. To him, it had seemed like as many days. But then the cruiser had landed, and the rescuing force had cleared a path and had swept the exhausted Young Legionaries aboard the ship, leaving the empty building to the hungry and thwarted spine-eels.

The rescuers had also brought along the antidote to the eel venom, and the wounded were already beginning to recover, as the giant cruiser thundered through the upper atmosphere towards the settlement.

Keill dropped down beside Oni, noting that she was looking sombre, and that Jerli was grinning his tough, twisted grin.

'I just told her,' Jerli explained, 'that she was still wrong, about what she did to Charrel, but I was wrong too - about what I called her, and all of you.'

'*Irresponsible*,' Oni murmured, as if tasting the ugliness of the word.

But Charrel shook his head firmly. 'If you're going to talk about blame,' he said, 'it's mine. Oni wasn't wrong. I was sinking into a pit of misery that I'd dug for myself, and she dragged me out. The hard way.'

His smile was twisted as well, and his eyes were shadowed. 'When she did... what she did, it was like something had *broken*, in my mind. I wanted to get away from all the pain and the effort, away from the whole world. And I took the gun, so no one could stop me.' His eyes dropped as a tremor shook his thin body. 'I must have been insane for a while. And nearly got everyone killed.' Jerli grunted. 'True enough. But be glad of the word "nearly".'

And be glad that you got your sanity back - in time.'

'It was strange,' Charrel said. 'Out in that storm I was nearly hit by lightning twice. And somehow it jolted me back to myself.'

'Finishing off the shock treatment Oni started,' Jerli said bluntly.

Charrel nodded. 'I remember being surprised that I was out in the middle of nowhere, crying like a baby, with a storm like the one that... that killed my family, doing its best to kill me. So I hid in a hollow till morning, and started back - and saw the spine-eels.'

'And came charging in at them,' Jerli growled. '*Adolescents*.' As before, the word was spoken in that weary, *knowing*, adult way that seems especially designed to irritate young people.

'What happens now?' Keill asked, irritatedly.

Jerli shrugged. 'Everybody faces the consequences. Charrel may need some time in a rehab clinic, but he'll come out all right. He's not the first to break when a lot of outside stress is piled on top of YL training. And he's already started to mend himself.'

Oni looked at Jerli with a steady gaze. 'And me?'

Jerli leaned forward slightly, looking at her sternly. 'You,' he said, 'will have to live the rest of your life with the knowledge that, because you thought you could play amateur psychologist, your best friends were nearly killed.'

Oni stared at him, white-faced.

'And that, I think,' Jerli went on grimly, 'will be punishment enough.'

The heavy silence that followed was broken by his snort of harsh laughter.

'Don't look so shaken,' he said to Oni. 'All I'm saying is that you'll have to live with the memory of your mistake. Like all of us do.' His mouth twisted. 'I could tell you a few stupid things I did at your age...'

'But won't YL Command do anything?' Oni whispered. 'Send me away...?'

Jerli snorted again. 'They'll probably just tell you to do more work on your control, learn a little restraint. Maybe take a few lessons from Keill, here.'

Keill flushed at that, as Jerli grinned and went on. 'Oni, the Legions don't punish honest mistakes. What you did was wrong, but you started out with good intentions. Which just shows that you've got a lot to learn.' He glanced round at all of them. 'But that's what these six years are for - to be your learning time, to make your mistakes and learn from them. No one expects YLs to be adults at fourteen. When you've finished training and finished growing up - *then* you'll be expected to think and act like adults.'

The legionary sank back, his grin a little weary. 'One thing, though, Oni. Could you try to make your next mistakes slightly less dangerous for the rest of us?'

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## Demolition

The endless, star-pierced blackness of deep space filled the viewscreens, the stars whirling past in a crazy dance as the little ship thundered into a tight spiral. Acceleration thrust Keill deep into the sling-seat, but his hands were steady on the controls as he dragged the ship out of the spiral, then flung it backwards into a howling loop.

Stars, nothing but stars, on every screen. *Where is she?* he asked himself, for the third time.

Searching, his ship twisted sideways, twisted again. And there she was. Another single-person fighter, blunt wedge-shape with the sky-blue Legion circlet, sweeping through its own intricate pattern of manoeuvre.

Keill smiled savagely as the other ship grew larger in his central viewscreen. His hand hovered over the firing stud of his forward guns. *Oni*, he thought, *you're dead*.

But even as he stabbed the firing stud, the other ship seemed impossibly to stagger in mid-space, to pull away as if folding back in upon itself. Keill's energy beam blazed through nothingness - and as his hands raced over the controls, his ship's drive screaming near to overload as he swept it away into a twisting roll, the upper rear screen showed the other ship flashing down at him like a missile.

Now it was Keill's turn to plunge into reckless evasive action. But the other ship clung to his tail as if its

pilot could read his mind. And in milliseconds, Keill knew, its energy beams would be scorching out towards him...

But in that fraction of time, the viewscreens went blank, the muffled bellow of the ship's drive cut off, the controls became lifeless, and behind Keill the airlock of his ship slid open.

Sighing, Keill released himself from the sling-seat and moved towards the lock. He stepped through it into a wide, high-ceilinged, cavernous area, where computer banks whined and muttered to themselves, and Young Legionaries in grey one-piece coveralls went briskly about their various tasks. And to his left, Oni was emerging from the door of her own simulator.

Like the one Keill had just left, it was a small, ovoid metal chamber containing a precise replica of the interior of a one-person Legion fighter. The controls that Keill and Oni had been handling fed into a master computer, which supplied their viewscreens - at unimaginable speeds - with simulated visuals of space, and spaceship combat. The computer combined the guidance instructions of the two young pilots, so that they could stage their mock battle exactly as if they were in deep space, and were deadly enemies.

The cavernous area that held the simulators, along with a great deal more space technology, was in the heart of the Legion Space Centre, an enormous complex of buildings occupying one entire side of the giant spaceport at Morostin, the capital city of Moros. Part of that complex was set aside for the space-combat training of Young Legionaries - and Keill, Oni and the rest of their troop had been there now for nearly eight months.

Oni grinned brightly at Keill as they walked away from the simulators. 'I had you then. That would have been two out of three.'

'Never,' Keill said. 'I was a microsecond away from breaking free.'

Oni snorted delicately, and turned towards a small, grey-haired legionary moving towards them, limping slightly. 'Dorvey, tell him. I had him, didn't I?'

Dorvey, whose wrist insignia showed him to be an under-commander, shook his grizzled head. 'You two don't need to shoot each other,' he growled. 'You each committed suicide about twice, just now.'

Despite the gruff tones, both Young Legionaries laughed. Dorvey was always gruff. Some YLs, at the start of their space-combat training, thought that he had been soured by the terrible back injury that had given him his limp, and that had forced him out of his combat group and turned him into a YL instructor. But they soon learned to spot the twinkle in the deep-set eyes, and to recognize the concern and affection behind the grumpy exterior.

'Next time,' Dorvey went on, 'we'll leave the simulators and get back to the practice control panels. You've got to stop trying to bend the ships in half. They don't have hinges.'

Keill and Oni groaned.

'But right now,' the legionary said, in a slightly different tone, 'Commander Adrec wants you.'

'Why us?' Keill asked with surprise.

Dorvey scowled. 'I suppose we could stand here and speculate about that for a while. But it could be the Commander might be planning to *tell* you. And you've got about a minute and a half to get there.'

He had barely finished speaking when both of them turned and fled.

At full speed, they raced through the mazy corridors of the Space Centre. Commander Adrec's room lay almost a kilometre away from the YL training area. So they sprinted, weaving smoothly among the others who thronged those corridors - most of them adult legionaries, who sometimes turned and smiled after the speeding figures that never so much as brushed against the shoulder of anyone else in their path.

Finally they skidded to a halt, scarcely out of breath, glanced at each other nervously, then walked as calmly as possible into the sanctum of Commander Adrec, who was in charge of the entire Space Centre.

Adrec was a bulky, immensely muscular man, yet without a gram of spare fat on his body. He did not simply sit, but loomed, behind his huge cluttered table, and glanced up from beneath bushy dark eyebrows, sweeping Keill and Oni with a glance that weighed and assessed them.

They were very different, these two sixteen-year-olds. Keill Randor, dark-haired and strong-boned, of medium height and weight but with a solid, athletic leanness and a breadth of shoulder that hinted at strength and stamina. Oni Wolda, brown-haired and softer-featured, the same height as Keill but slimmer, yet with a lithe, springy smoothness that spoke of controlled muscular power as well as grace. They wore identical light-grey coveralls with the YL flash at the shoulder, loose-fitting enough to allow freedom of movement, but not so much as to disguise the fact that Oni was a shapely young woman. Both stood at ease, looking calmly at the Commander, poised and quietly waiting.

Adrec's nod was minimal, almost undetectable, but to Keill and Oni it was as good as a medal.

'I'm taking you away from training for two days,' Adrec said, coming to the point at once. 'Dorvey says you're the best he's got, so you're most able to take the time off.'

Both Young Legionaries had to work hard to keep their faces calm, not showing the delight they felt at this unexpected commendation.

'Three off-worlders are visiting the Centre,' the Commander went on. 'From the planet Haxxar, which seems to be going to war with a neighbouring world, and is thinking about commissioning some of our strike groups. But you know that the Centre is short-handed, with everyone getting a fleet ready for the war in the Galitronelta system. So I want you two to attend the Haxxarians, and show them round the Centre.'

Neither Keill nor Oni was able to control a faint flicker of surprise. But Adrec did not notice. He was reaching for a button on his desk console, switching on a holo-viewer.

'These are the three,' he said. 'You'll know from looking at them that I'm not giving you a soft job.'

Keill and Oni turned to look at the viewer, feeling a high curiosity - that swiftly became mingled with misgivings.

They saw the figures of three men, one of medium height, the other two standing nearly a head taller. All three had dark hair, thick and long, and were deeply tanned. The shorter one was solidly muscled; of the others, one was lean and taut as a whip, the other was a barrel-chested, huge-bellied giant of a man. And all three were garishly dressed - skin-tight leggings, knee-high boots, tight sleeveless tunics cut away at the throat - all in loud primary colours. The clothes seemed designed to display the bulge of biceps, the hairy breadth of chest, the tree-trunk thighs. As well, each man had a heavy burden of personal decoration - gleaming headbands, neckbands, armbands, wristbands, rings, metal studs on their broad belts and more.

Keill noticed all those details with mounting surprise - but his misgivings came from the men's faces. Each of the three wore an expression that mingled watchfulness with haughtiness. And each carried, built into a wristband, the slim deadliness of a vibroknife, in a spring release. As well, the shorter man - behind whom the other two stood, about half a pace away, as if in deference - wore an ornate energy gun, clipped to his belt with a jewelled fastening.

Commander Adrec indicated the shorter Haxxarian. 'This one is called the Lord Iln ka'Stil, quite an important figure on his world. He is to be addressed as "Lord". The other two are the Sires Vra fe'Lahi' - that was the lean one - and Byhl si'Cilln' - the fat one. 'You'll call each of them "Sire".'

'Commander - ' Keill broke their silence at last. 'The weapons...'

Adrec nodded heavily. 'Legion Central Command has permitted them to carry their weapons on Moros. It seems that every man goes armed on Haxxar - which is part of the problem.' The heavy eyebrows descended as Adrec gazed dourly at the holo-pic.

'Haxxarians place a high value on what some humans call the "masculine virtues". Strength, courage, honour and so on - which some cultures see as exclusively male.'

He paused as a faint flare of distaste appeared in the depths of Oni's eyes, instantly quelled. With another infinitesimal nod, he went on.

'But the main concern on Haxxar seems to be *pride*. Male pride, if you like. Which is said to lead to arrogance, touchiness and a good deal of undirected aggression.' Adrec gestured at the holo-pic. 'Haxxarian men have a complex code that permits duelling with knives - even to the death - over various kinds of insults. And high aristocrats like the Lord Iln carry beam-guns, and apparently can use them on anyone from a lower caste who offers them insult.'

Adrec paused again, studying the two young faces. 'I have not been on Haxxar, nor has anyone in the Legions' Central Command. So we have not verified these accounts. If they are true, of course, then acting as their guides may not be easy or pleasant. But as visitors to Moros, they ought to be on their best behaviour. And while they are our guests, they will of course be treated accordingly. By everyone.'

Keill and Oni nodded. No more explanation was needed. Courtesy, tolerance, consideration for others were as much a basic part of a legionary's upbringing as were walking and talking.

But Oni could not contain her question. 'Commander,' she asked quietly, 'are the Legions really going to contract to fight for... for those people?'

Something very like a smile tugged at one corner of Adrec's mouth. 'These three are emissaries - they have come to Moros to assess us, to see if we are *worthy* of being hired.' The slight stress had a sardonic edge. 'But, since no Legion officer has been to Haxxar, their visit will also give *us* a chance to assess *them*. Though they may be unaware of it.'

Oni and Keill smiled slightly in return. They both knew that the Legions did not offer their martial skills to anyone who wished to use them for unacceptable purposes. They would not fight on the side of exploiters, or fanatics, or power seekers. Often they took a smaller fee to help *defend* other people against just such aggressors.

And, as they received their final instructions from Adrec and took their leave of him, both of the Young Legionaries had already begun to feel that the Haxxar contract might be one that the Legions would refuse.

'You'll have to watch yourself,' Keill said teasingly the next morning, as they made their way back to the Commander's room. 'Don't want you fighting a duel with his lordship, first thing.'

Oni lifted her chin. 'Don't worry,' she said loftily. 'I will seem to be made of solid plasticrete - like you.'

Keill shook his head with pretended disbelief, but he knew she could do it. Since that time of violence and near-death on the Dust-flats, which their troop now called the 'summer of the spine-eels', Oni had worked hard at her inner controls and self-discipline. Of course the impulsive enthusiasm of her nature remained: Legion training did not teach young people to repress or suppress emotional reaction. It taught them to master and control their emotions, so that efficient functioning would not be hampered by anger, fear, unhappiness or anything else.

In the past two years, Oni had brought her inner controls on to a par with Keill's, though his had always been the quieter, less excitable nature. And there was no apparent difference between them, in calm, relaxed poise, as they entered Adrec's room to confront the three off-worlders.

The trio seemed much as the holo had shown them, though the huge one seemed even bulkier in all his abundant flesh, and the shorter one seemed to have put on some weight since the holo was made. Their clothing was just as garish, though in different colours. And their weapons - vibroknives, the energy gun - were still visibly in place.

'Your guides, Lord Iln,' Adrec said quietly. 'Keill Randor - Oni Wolda.'

Keill and Oni inclined their heads politely, but the shorter Haxxarian merely swept them with a disdainful glance and swung back to face Adrec. 'We are to be shepherded by striplings,' he said sharply, 'one of them a *female*?'

Adrec's face remained as impassive as granite. 'It was explained to you, Lord Iln, that if you visited at this time, all the legionaries of the Space Centre would be occupied with other duties. These are two of the leading trainees among the Young Legionaries, who can guide you as well as anyone.'

Lord Iln shot another glance at Oni. 'On Haxxar,' he said icily, 'women are shielded from the eyes of men by robes and hoods. They are required to be modest, humble, quiet and obedient - in short, *feminine*.'

'On Moros,' Adrec said, his voice as expressionless as his face, 'legionaries contribute to the community according to their ability, not their gender. If your world hires Legion strike groups, they will contain women and men, each as fully capable as the other.'

Lord Iln sniffed dubiously, but behind him the thinner of his two tall companions, Sire Vra, twisted his face in a sneering smile. 'No matter, my lord,' he said insinuatingly. 'This little guide may have her compensations.'

His meaning was obvious. For some moments Keill had been aware that Vra's gaze had become something of a leer, as it travelled over Oni's trim shape. And Oni too was aware of it, though she did not look directly at Vra, for her expression had become stony.

The bulky Haxxarian, Sire Byhl, chortled, and the Lord Iln flashed his companion a wicked grin, then turned back to Adrec with a curt nod. 'Very well, we will accept these guides. They may now begin showing us all the *wonders*' - the sarcasm was heavy - 'of your space fleets.'

Without a word or a flicker of expression, Keill and Oni inclined their heads again, and turned towards the door, to begin the guided tour.



The day that followed became one of the longest Keill had ever known. Not that it was boring, for Keill and Oni were as proud as any legionary of the technological establishments of their world - and the Space Centre at Morostin was the biggest and finest of them. So normally they would have enjoyed showing visitors around, especially interested off-worlders.

But these off-worlders were not interested. They seemed determined from the start to be bored, unimpressed and disdainful.

When they visited the area devoted to ship construction and fitting-out, the Haxxarians sneered at the tact that human technicians, not robots, were working on some of the finer details. Keill tried to point out that only the flexible, creative minds of humans could manage some of the delicate alterations that were often needed. But the Haxxarians yawned, and did not listen.

In the ship repair section, the three visitors laughed scornfully at the number of damaged spacecraft scattered around the gigantic area. 'Not a good advertisement,' the Lord In said. Oni tried to explain just how many Legion ships were then involved in military actions around the galaxy - of which these disabled ships represented less than two per cent. The Haxxarians turned away indifferently, leaving her in mid-sentence.

So it went through the rest of the day, in all the other specialized areas of the Centre. Through it all, the over-dressed Haxxarians scoffed and sneered. And through it all, neither Keill's nor Oni's expression changed. Nor did their voices express anything but a cool politeness.

Yet anyone who knew them would have not missed the tiny flares of angry fire that appeared now and then, instantly quenched, in the depths of Oni's hazel eyes. Especially when the Sire Vra sought every opportunity to brush against her, or let a hand rest upon her. But Oni was always balanced, and uncannily quick. She would simply slide away, leaving Vra pawing empty air, yet making her evasion seem casual and accidental.

As for Keill, his own dark-brown eyes grew darker still - not because of Vra's antics but because of Sire Byhl. The giant Haxxarian constantly sought to jostle Keill, to shoulder him aside, to jolt him with an elbow. Yet Keill, also, easily managed not to be in the way of those minor physical aggressions. And Sire Byhl began to become annoyed.

Keill and Oni had a brief period of release, when the visitors took their midday meal with Adrec and other officers. But the afternoon continued the process. And it threatened to come to a head late in the day, when the Haxxarians were being shown round the YL area of the Centre.

They paused briefly to watch a troop of YLs run through some basic loosening-up exercises, to help relax them after the day's concentrated work. Predictably, Sire Vra merely leered at the lithe teenagers, in the shorts and sleeveless shirts that were their normal exercise wear. But Sire Byhl was glowering, as he watched the smooth co-ordinated movements.

'Like robots,' the huge man growled. 'Maybe these people all are robots.'

'This one's not,' Vra said, gesturing at Oni and snickering. 'Definitely flesh and blood.'

But Byhl turned his heavy gaze on to Keill. 'I'm thinking this one's a robot,' he rumbled. 'Is that it, boy? That why you don't react to anything? You a robot - or a coward?'

Keill's face and voice remained expressionless. 'Neither - Sire.'

Byhl snorted with disbelief. 'On Haxxar, boy, anyone insults a man, they fight to the death. What would you do, if you're insulted?'

Keill lifted an eyebrow slightly. 'If you mean with *words*, Sire,' he said flatly, 'I'd laugh.'

'Would you, now?' Byhl took a step closer, his broad red face looming half a metre above Keill's. 'And what if you were attacked, not with *words* but with a fist or a weapon?'

Unblinkingly, Keill gave him the honest Legion answer. 'It would depend on circumstances, whether I would retreat or counter-attack. Sire.'

Byhl's fleshy mouth twitched into an ugly grin. 'Circumstances? I wonder what circumstances would make you do, right now, if I was to smash your little robot face.'

A spasm of worry flashed across Oni's face. The Haxxarians saw nothing, but she was aware that Keill had gathered and poised himself, adjusting his balance, focusing the flow of power through his body. She had every faith in Keill's inner controls but if Byhl pushed Keill into a position where Keill had to defend himself, Oni knew the Haxxarian would regret it.

She racked her brain to think of a way to divert the huge man's bullying. But it proved unnecessary. The Lord In rested a firm hand on the huge man's shoulder.

'You would do well, Byhl,' he said sharply, 'to remember our purpose here.'

Byhl swung his red face towards the shorter man, glowering. But the glower subsided, and the huge man turned away, muttering.

Oni released the breath that she had been holding, and flashed Keill a quick consoling smile. But the shadow behind Keill's eyes had darkened further, and his answering smile was wintry.

At least, though, that first day of the guided tour was at an end, and Oni and Keill had only to conduct the Haxxarians back to Commander Adrec's room. On the way, the Haxxarians chatted among themselves as if the two YLs were not there. But their remarks did nothing to improve Keill's or Oni's temper.

'It seems to me,' Lord In pronounced, 'from what we have seen, that the reputation of the Legions of Moros owes more to good public relations, and the attentions of the galactic media, than to actual quality.'

'Perhaps they invent their own legends, Lord.' Vra laughed. 'To keep their fees high.'

In smiled ironically. 'Perhaps so.' He glanced at Keill. 'Perhaps tomorrow, boy, we will inspect the place where the legends are created?'

And the three turned into Adrec's office in a burst of mocking laughter, leaving Keill and Oni struggling against the anger that threatened to burst their self-disciplined control.

They were halfway back to the YL area, each absorbed in an inner struggle against fury and frustration, before Oni broke the silence.

'We have to do something,' she said tautly.

'About what?' Keill asked. 'The Haxxarians?'

'No, about ourselves. To unwind. Or we'll never get through tomorrow.'

Keill agreed. Even within a legionary, tensions and stresses could build up, and had to be released. And right then, Keill had never felt so tense in his life. 'What do you think? A close combat session?'

Oni shook her head. 'The way I feel, I'd forget to pull a punch, and take your head off.' She paused for a moment, thinking - and then her eyes began to sparkle. 'Remember what we used to do, back home, when everything got too much for us?'

Keill blinked - then remembered, and laughed aloud with sheer delight. 'Demolition?'

'Demolition.' All of Oni's exuberance shone from her smile. 'Let's see what we can find.'

It took them very little time. The materials were close at hand - in the YL stores, and in areas of the Space Centre under reconstruction. Speedily they carried everything to one of the empty combat rooms, where walls and floor were lightly padded, and set it all up.

Slabs of plastiwood, stacked half a metre deep, resting across two benches. Thick plastiwood planks and beams, some also stretched across benches, others leaning at an angle against the walls. Thick, flat chunks of plasticrete, of different shapes and sizes, also strategically placed on the benches or braced against the walls. And at one end of the room, two tall, solid cylinders of plasticrete reinforced with embedded steel rods - each cylinder like a section of a pillar, each bigger around than either Keill or Oni.

Then the two of them changed into shorts and sleeveless shirts, and stood, barefoot and bright-eyed, at the opposite end of the room from the pillars, surveying the intricate maze they had created.

'Is this to be a race?' Keill said with a grin.

'No race,' Oni replied cheerfully. 'A duet.'

'Fine,' Keill said. 'Let's go.'

Without seeming to gather themselves, the two exploded into action.

Only a highly trained eye could have followed their flashing movements over the following few seconds. And the owner of such an eye might have been too busy dodging the flying shards and splinters, as Keill and Oni weaved and leaped and twisted among the tangle of objects, and left behind them a trail of - demolition. In one fractional instant Keill would be pivoting smoothly to drive his other foot against a thick sheet of plasticrete leaning on the wall, smashing it into fragments and springing away before the fragments hit the floor. In the same instant Oni would be leaping high, hammering a foot down to turn a stack of plastiwood slabs into kindling. Together they struck with closed fists, and two piles of plasticrete chunks vanished into rubble. Together they chopped with the edges of their hands at the bulk of solid beams, and snapped them like twigs.

Together they punched and pounded and slammed and kicked until every object they brought into the room - including, unintentionally, two of the supporting benches - was smashed, destroyed, demolished.

Finally, still in unison, they each took two running steps and rose into the air, hurtling feet-first, each driving one leg forward like perfectly timed battering rams against the two great cylinders of reinforced plasticrete. The smooth solidity of the material seemed to be blasted apart, as if by an explosion within it, and the steel reinforcing rods were bent like saplings in a hurricane.

And in the midst of the strewn chaos of debris, Keill and Oni stood, grinning sweatily at each other, with not a gram of tension or anger left in either of them. Entirely relaxed, they did not even start at the

unexpected growl from the doorway behind them.

Dorvey stood there, eyebrows raised quizzically, but amusement showing deep in his eyes. 'I hope you can clean everything up as fast as you wrecked it.'

Keill and Oni nodded sheepishly. 'We'll clean it,' Keill promised.

The grizzled instructor scowled. 'I've got a message for you from Adrec. Says you did well today - he's pleased. Especially with how you handled that little episode in the YL area.'

Keill and Oni looked surprised. 'How did he know about that?' Oni asked.

'I told him,' Dorvey said shortly. 'I've been keeping an eye on you off and on all day, even if you didn't see me. Or anyway keeping an eye on those three clowns.'

Keill understood at once. Of course the visitors would have been watched, discreetly. How else would the Legion Central Command be able to assess the Haxxarians, and know whether or not to accept the contract?

'Adrec also says,' Dorvey went on, 'you're to pick up the visitors at their *ship*, tomorrow morning. That's where they're living - they didn't care for the accommodation we offered. They've got a leisure craft, nearly as big as a battle cruiser, and supposedly all fitted out inside like a palace.'

'It would be,' Oni said.

Dorvey silenced her with a frown. 'Anyway, you meet them there, on the edge of the space-port. You'll be going with them on some short flights, in a couple of ships - the ten-person fighter-raider, and the ultra-cruiser. There'll be other people around, so you won't have a repeat of today's problems.'

Oni and Keill sighed with relief.

'Thought you'd like that,' Dorvey grunted. 'And here's something else you'll like. Your job will be finished by early afternoon tomorrow. The Haxxarians say they'll be leaving sooner than they planned.'

The two young faces brightened.

'So then,' Dorvey went on gruffly, 'you can get back to learning how to handle a *ship's* controls as well as your own!'

But behind his frown, the old legionary's eyes were twinkling.

The next day, Dorvey was proved right. The problems of the previous day were not repeated. Certainly the presence of adult legionaries had something to do with the change, during the short demonstration space-flights. The Haxxarians still did not seem overly impressed with Legion technology, but there was none of the open sneering and disdain of the day before. And while Sire Vra still leered at Oni occasionally, and Sire Byhl glowered at Keill now and then, they kept their distance - while Lord Iln had actually favoured the two Young Legionaries with a curt nod when they had arrived, that morning, at the off-worlders' glittering leisure-craft. So Keill and Oni were able to relax and enjoy the morning. It was always a pleasure to go into space in any of the Legions' fighting spacecraft. And it was another, unexpected pleasure when they were invited to the midday meal - almost a banquet, by the Legions' frugal standards - that was to be the formal send-off for the visitors. There Adrec had given them another faint nod of approval, which pleased them even more. And so did the fact that the Haxxarians continued

to behave themselves, making chilly but polite conversation with the Legion officers throughout the meal.

'I wonder if Adrec said anything to them about yesterday,' Oni whispered.

'Maybe he sent Dorvey around,' Keill replied quietly, 'to give them some instruction.'

Oni just managed to stifle her giggle. By then the guests were making their farewells, with a promise to contact the Legions soon about commissioning their services. And neither Keill nor Oni failed to notice that the legionaries were politely non-committal about what their answer would be.

Finally the Haxxarians set off for their spaceship, with Keill and Oni accompanying them for the last time. And then, at the landing ramp, as Keill was about to begin the formal goodbyes, Lord Iln interrupted, looking almost friendly.

'Why don't you young people come in,' he said, 'and look around our ship? It is well worth seeing.'

'I'm sure it is, Lord,' Keill said doubtfully, 'but we...'

'No, come,' Iln said. 'I feel I should offer something as compensation, for occasions yesterday that might have been... misunderstood. Come - you will enjoy it. The Sires and I will be *your* guides, for the while.'

The offer was tempting. Keill and Oni were both curious about the ship's interior. They were also slightly suspicious of the Haxxarians' change of attitude - but that, too, aroused their curiosity more than anything else. And of course a refusal would have been discourteous, which for Keill and Oni was impossible. So they agreed, and were ushered up the landing ramp.

The ship's control room and other functional areas were plain and functional, as they had to be. But the living area was, as Dorvey had said, like a palace. Yet it was a palace that the two Young Legionaries viewed with rather more amazement than admiration.

The floor was a heavy softness of carpet, but its colour was a swirling sickliness of yellowish-brown. Heavily upholstered furniture stood here and there - custom-moulded chairs, broad settees, awash with rich fabrics and decorated cushions. But the colours were as lurid as those of the Haxxarians' clothes, clashing almost painfully - and far too many gaudy precious stones were sewn into the folds of the costly cloth. One whole wall was an entertainment console, with vid and holo-viewers, shelves full of tapes and discs, computerized three-dimensional games, and many more hugely expensive technological toys. Another wall was also lined with shelves holding a collection of fantastic and startling objects - some ornamental, some perhaps mementoes of visits to distant planets. But almost all of them, to the eyes of Keill and Oni, were ugly and distorted, often downright offensive.

At the far end of the room stood a huge, ornate table, made of a heavy dark plastiwood like the shelves, extensively carved, as were the bulky, high-backed chairs that stood round it. But again the shapes formed by the carving were distorted and repellent, and there was far too much precious metal inlaid on the plastiwood surfaces. And on shelves behind the table, unattractively shaped glass containers held some of the galaxy's most expensive, and most vividly coloured, intoxicating drinks.

Keill and Oni stared at all the overdone tastelessness with faint feelings of nausea, both racking their brains to think of some courteous words to say that would not expose their true feelings. But when they turned towards their hosts, they found that there was no longer any need for courtesy.

The Lord Iln had flung himself on to a settee at one end of the room, the opposite end from where the great table stood. He was smiling, but coldly. Friendliness had vanished as if a switch had been thrown.

His two companions were also grinning, just as unpleasantly, as they stepped in front of the Young

Legionaries. Their vibroknives had leaped into their hands, the deadly blades humming faintly, no more than silvery blurs with the speed of their slight vibration.

And behind them, the airlock had slid firmly shut.

'No prize was ever netted more easily,' Iln said, sounding almost bored.

'I still think we might've taken Adrec or someone,' Byhl growled.

'To do so might have been troublesome,' Iln said firmly. 'These two fell into our hands without trouble. In any case, the Legions seem to value their children - and these two are supposed to be especially admirable among the trainees. They will serve.'

'Serve how?' Keill asked. His voice seemed to tremble a little, and Byhl's grin widened at the sign of fright.

'As hostages, boy,' Iln said dismissively. 'Haxxar is about to go to war. And while we are not likely to ask the Legions to fight for us, we do not particularly want them to *oppose* us. We heard last night that the enemies of Haxxar may seek your people's services - but with you in our possession, we can insist that the Legions turn that commission down.'

Iln turned to glance at a decorative timepiece among the shelves-ful of ornaments. 'Byhl, set the guidance system for automatic liftoff, before any of those dullards out there becomes suspicious. Then make our *guests* comfortable.'

Byhl snorted crudely, eyes fixed on Keill. 'This little robot doesn't need comfort,' he growled. 'What he needs, instead of all that pretty exercising, is to find out what it's like to face a *man*, in a *real* fight.'

'As for this little one,' Vra said, leering at Oni, 'I've a mind to teach her a few other things about Haxxarian men.'

Keill heard a muffled noise from Oni. He knew perfectly well that it was one of her barely stifled giggles. But he saw, from the gleeful light in Vra's eyes, that the Haxxarian had taken it for a sob of terror. Just as Byhl had mistaken the slight quiver in his own voice, a moment earlier, for fear rather than what it was - controlled anger.

And those mistakes gave him an idea. He let his shoulders slump, let his knees sag a little, made his breathing sound ragged. To Byhl, he looked like he was about to faint with fear. And Oni picked up her cue at once, and sobbed again, a sound like a low whimper.

The two Haxxarians turned and grinned at each other, for a brief instant, sharing a sadistic enjoyment of their victims' terror.

That, too, was a mistake. And they were not given time to make another.

In that instant, Keill's left hand flashed out in a sweeping curve. Its edge, like a blade, smashed against the beefy wrist of Byhl's knife-hand. The faint but audible *crack* of a snapped bone was followed almost at once by a giant expulsion of breath, as in the same flowing motion Keill pivoted on his left foot, and sank his right fist more than wrist-deep into Byhl's bulging paunch.

Just as he had moved, he saw, at the edge of his vision, Oni going into action with equally devastating speed. She had leaped straight into the air, acrobatically swinging both legs up in front of her. One boot sent Vra's vibroknife spinning away, just as the other boot crunched shatteringly on to the point of the lean man's jaw.

Byhl was flung backwards by Keill's blow, crashing into one of the softly bulky chairs, where he sat foolishly, only semi-conscious, face purpling, mouth gaping, as he fought to get air into his tormented lungs.

Vra went hurtling away from Oni's kick, careering into a light table, sliding with it against the far wall where he lay in a dazed and tangled heap.

By then the Lord Iln, staring with shock, had managed to fumble his energy gun from his belt. But he did not have time to aim it. Keill swept up Byhl's dropped vibroknife, still humming, and threw. The lethal blade, able to cut almost anything except the harder steel alloys, buried itself in the plastimetal of the gun's mechanism, jerking it from Iln's grasp.

'Now your knife,' Keill told Iln sharply. 'Throw it out into the room.' He glanced at Oni. 'This one's yours.'

Oni had already scooped up Vra's knife, holding it poised to throw. She grinned and nodded. Warily, Lord Iln took his knife from his wrist and tossed it away from him.

Before it struck the floor the knife that Oni was holding had flashed through the air, its humming blade biting into the handle of Iln's weapon, both knives spinning away into a corner.

Then the two Young Legionaries advanced towards Iln.

'He came to see if the Legions were worth hiring,' Oni said in a softly menacing tone.

'Didn't care much for what he saw,' Keill said, in a similar tone.

'Maybe he needs to see a little more,' Oni replied.

'Something quick,' Keill said. 'The ship will lift soon.'

By then they were standing directly before Iln, gazing down at him as he pressed himself back against the gorgeous cushions of the settee, watching them nervously.

Oni looked at Keill, her eyes sparkling with all of her wild exuberance.

'*Demolition!*' she said, in a wicked whisper.

Keill laughed aloud.

Indifferently, they turned their backs on the cowering Iln. With a sweeping gesture, Keill invited Oni to begin. With a graceful bow, she thanked him, and agreed.

Then she giggled, and flung herself into the air in another standing leap. One boot flashed up, high above her head, to crash into one of the glass-and-metal light fixtures.

Its shards had barely begun to fall when Keill took a running step and launched himself, feet first, at the upholstered bulk of the chair where Byhl still sat, dazedly coughing and retching. Keill's boot flashed past Byhl's head, and drove into the back of the chair - with a power that even that lush cushioning could not absorb.

Like all the other furnishings, the chair was securely fixed to the floor, for stability during flight. But Keill's kick ripped it free of those fastenings, tore the back of the chair away, and sent its pieces and Byhl as well flying across the room in a tumbling, clattering chaos.

Demolition had begun.

Keill and Oni moved through that garish, over-decorated room like tornadoes and firestorms, like cataclysms and holocausts. An upward sweep of Oni's flashing boot was combined with a downward slash of the steely edge of Keill's hand - and shelving broke and splintered, and all the ugly ornaments and souvenirs crashed resonantly to the floor. At once some of the sturdier ones, still unbroken, were swept up and flung around the room with deadly accuracy - exploding into the centre of the vid-viewer and holo-screen, and turning a shelf-ful of off-world intoxicants into pools of bright liquid and splinters of glass.

Keill took another running step and leaped high, tucking into a neat somersault, then driving his descending boot down on to another set of shelves, so that vid-tapes and discs erupted out into the room in a crazy cascade. Oni sprang after him, one boot reducing three-dimensional games to one-dimensional rubbish, the other crumpling the steel cabinet of the holo-console.

And on they went, with eye-dazzling speed, with controlled, concentrated power. Every article of furniture was blasted from its moorings, by sheer force of bare fist or boot. They reduced upholstered chairs to heaps of jewelled rags, reduced scattered occasional tables to kindling, reduced other equipment and fixtures to twisted, shattered ruin, ripped the sumptuous carpet like paper as furniture tore away from its floor fastenings.

And finally they were at the far end of the room, falling upon the high, solid plastiwood chairs, chopping them into a rubble of splinters with hands like axes. Two sweeping kicks in unison, and two of the legs of the great table - legs thicker than Keill's thigh - snapped away like dry sticks. Then they were both leaping high once again, twisting with perfect timing, both slamming their boots down at precisely the same instant on the tilted, gleaming, massive table top. And under that awesome impact the table collapsed explosively in upon itself, split into fragments as if it had been thin glass.

Coming to rest, Keill and Oni glanced round. At the other end of the room, the Lord Iln sat huddled, and the sounds he was making sounded like weeping. The two looked at each other, the wild light still in their eyes. Without a word, in perfect harmony, they flung themselves into three beautifully executed, dazzlingly swift forward handsprings, the last of which sent them flying feet first against the bulging back of the settee where Iln was sitting.

The settee came away from the floor with the grinding scream of tortured metal, and flew backwards - torn, cushions flying, the broad back hanging askew - to collide thunderously with the end wall, and then collapse on the floor, upside down. From beneath it only the toe of one of the Lord Iln's boots could be seen, twitching slightly.

And in the middle of the wreckage, Keill and Oni sank to their knees, suddenly weak with wild laughter.

Until the airlock of the ship slid abruptly open, and a voice with the ring of cold iron sliced across their hilarity.

'What have you people *done*?'

Laughter vanished as Keill and Oni leaped to their feet. In the airlock was Commander Adrec and three legionaries, with energy guns at their belts and an air of grim readiness.

One of the three was Dorvey, and his had been the voice that had put an end to laughter and wildness.

'They were intending to abduct us, as hostages,' Keill began to explain.



'We had to stop them,' Oni put in quickly.

Dorvey glanced round, grizzled eyebrows drawn down in a ferocious glower. He took a limping step forward and picked up the splintered remnants of a chair leg. Unbelievably, his frown deepened even more. 'You mean the chairs and tables and things were going to take you hostage?' His gruff voice was deeply ironic. 'So you had to smash everything up to protect yourselves?'

'No...' Keill said, flustered.

'No,' Dorvey growled. 'What you mean is that you had taken such a dislike to our visitors that you decided to put on a little display for them, show them a thing or two.'

Keill and Oni looked shamefaced. 'I suppose that's right.'

'I *suppose*,' Dorvey snapped. 'Such behaviour is childish, reckless and completely unforgivable.'

Then he did something so totally out of character that for a moment Keill and Oni did not recognize it for what it was.

He chuckled.

'Or at least,' he added, 'it would be under any other circumstances. But with these three...'

His hand blurred, and the fragment of chair leg flew across the room - to shatter the decorative timepiece that had somehow survived the destructive collapse of the shelving.

'You missed a bit,' Dorvey said, eyes twinkling.

As Keill and Oni began to smile, wonderingly, Dorvey glanced past them. Adrec and the other two legionaries had dragged the Haxxarians into the centre of the room. Only the Lord Iln was fully conscious, and he seemed to be having trouble with a broken rib or two.

Adrec confronted Iln, his face like granite. 'Your actions, Lord Iln, would deserve severe reprisal - if these young people had not already provided quite a bit of that. So you are free to go. But here is something to think about on your way home.' Adrec's eyes glinted like ice. 'We now know that Haxxar is planning a war against a planet that you have exploited for generations, and that is now trying to resist your exploitation. The Legions would never help you fight such a war. And as it happens, tomorrow we will receive an envoy from that other world, seeking to commission us for *its* fight - against Haxxar.'

Iln stared at him with pain-filled eyes where fear had begun to reveal itself.

'So it may be, Lord Iln,' Adrec went on grimly, 'that you will meet legionaries again - in battle. And you will then wish that they could be as *gentle* with you as Keill and Oni have been, today.'

## Games

Keill stood on the narrow platform, looking out at the long stretch of darkness that lay before and below him. He was wearing the full uniform of a legionary, the 'YL' flashes no longer on his shoulders - and he stood in a legionary's combat-ready posture, balanced, alert.

From above, a pinpoint spotlight was the only disruption of the darkness. It wrapped both Keill and the narrow platform in a soft glow - and, for Keill, made the rest of the darkness even more impenetrable. To a watcher, he would have seemed to be floating in mid-air, surrounded by inky emptiness. And there were, Keill knew, a great many watchers.

Some of them sat behind one-way glass in the right-hand wall of the long, high-vaulted chamber that stretched, invisible, before Keill. There were at least a dozen people behind that wall, sharp-eyed official judges. And there were vid- and holo-cameras, which meant that, indirectly, he might be being watched by almost the entire population of Moros, except for those on active duty.

But he did not let himself think about all the eyes that might be on him. It was the long chamber's other wall and the ceiling that concerned him now - where a complex array of obstacles and dangers would present themselves, when the lights came on.

And he would have to cross that obstacle course through the *air* - using whatever handholds and footholds became available.

He was not sure whether there was any kind of safety precaution below him. But not even that uncertainty got past his iron self-control. Still he waited, calm, relaxed, ready.

The chamber where he stood was called the Abyss. And its unpredictable, trap-strewn obstacle course was the event that ended the first week of the Martial Games of Moros. Then the lights blazed on.

In the instant before the chamber bloomed with light, Keill had sensed a faint movement in the air in front of him. The burst of light showed it to be, as he expected, a slender rope, which had uncoiled from the ceiling - and which was swinging lazily away from him. But he had already launched himself from the platform in a smooth, arching dive, with almost no measurable time lapse between the eruption of light and his leap.

His hands found the rope, and his body swung forward. In that instant, his eyes adjusting at once to the brightness, he swept a fiercely concentrated glance over what lay before him.

The long chamber seemed cluttered with objects, hanging in mid-air. Other ropes dangled from the ceiling, and more were stretched horizontally from wall to wall. A few small, flat platforms hung from high-tension wires, swinging slightly, and some sturdy bars also swung from wires, like trapezes. On the far wall - opposite the one behind which the judges sat - were many niches and ledges, and a number of metal rods jutting out, horizontally, from the wall's smooth surface.

It all looked too easy. Any gymnast could have swung from one handhold to another across that chamber, to where a second narrow platform waited as the goal. But there was more to the Abyss than that.

Behind the wall with the rods and ledges was a high-function computer. It positioned all the ropes, trapezes and so on, in a random pattern different for every competitor. But the computer would also be tracking Keill's movements. At any time, from any direction, the computer might launch some unexpected, frightening attack. And also, some of the handholds that awaited Keill could be hidden traps.

But the human brain is a computer too, and Keill's was working at maximum speed. In that one sweeping glance, as he swung forward on the first rope, he had selected a likely route through the complexity of objects, with several alternatives.

He had also spotted the almost invisible tripwires on some of the small hanging platforms, the powdery substance on some of the ropes that would burn his hands like acid, the sheets of non-reflective plastiglass that hung as nearly unseen barriers here and there across the Abyss. And he knew that the computer that was his enemy had many more tricks, still hidden, up its non-existent sleeve.

But Keill's computer-mind, making its instantaneous assessments and judgments, existed in the body of a legionary - a new legionary, eighteen years old and perfectly honed in its flexible strength and blinding speed.

All of which he needed at once, as the hidden computer attacked.

From the surface of the wall, in a silent burst of compressed gas, a slender metal shaft flashed out. Its head was blunted, so if it had struck Keill it would only have cracked a rib. But with a reflex twist of back and stomach muscles Keill had arched upwards and away, so that the missile arrowed harmlessly past, at the same moment as Keill's hands released their grip.

The extra momentum of that twisting evasion proved useful. Before him hung one of the almost invisible sheets of plastiglass, but he had swung himself above it. One boot struck firmly on the top edge of the thin plastiglass, from which he leaped again into mid-air. The leap took him to one of the horizontally stretched lengths of rope. But as his weight came on to the rope, one end of it broke away.

He began to fall. But his reflexes were equal to it. He had fallen less than a metre when he swung a leg forward and twined it round another vertically dangling rope.

It was one of the powdered ropes, which he dared not touch with his bare hands - but it could not affect the cloth of his uniform. And again momentum carried him forward, now hanging head-down, the rope securely twisted round his leg. That pendulum swing took him towards the computer's wall, where a narrow ledge awaited him.

His fingertips found the ledge as he kicked free of the rope, bringing his feet up, knees bent to absorb the shock as his boots slammed against the hard plastic. At once his legs straightened powerfully, and he flung himself into a backwards, curving dive, towards one of the projecting metal rods.

Had he remained for a tenth of a second longer where he had been, gripping the ledge, he would have fallen - for the ledge had suddenly retracted into the wall's blank smoothness. But he did not notice the ledge's movement, for he was facing another threat, which he had seen almost too late. Only the faintest of hums warned him - that the bar he was diving towards was electrified, with a current that could half-paralyse him.

But even in mid-air he adjusted, and it was his forearm that struck the electrified bar, and the inside of a bent elbow that gripped it - an elbow covered with the non-conductive cloth of a Legion uniform.

Swivelling on that unconventional grip, he swung all the way around the bar to gain momentum and released, soaring out towards one of the trapezes hanging away from the wall. Now he was more than halfway through the course, still moving at blinding speed, and the trapeze seemed perfectly safe.

But the air around it was not.

The backs of his knees caught the trapeze just as he had planned. But as they did so, the computer fired a crackling, scorching ray, aimed for the space into which his body was swinging.

The ray, looking and sounding like a deadly energy beam, was in fact a ray of condensed light that would merely have caused a stinging sunburn. But Keill remained unburned. Though the swinging trapeze was

carrying him forward, a muscular surge dragged his shoulders and head up out of danger. As the ray sizzled through the spot where his face had been, his legs released their grip on the trapeze.

He had lost some forward impetus, avoiding the ray, but his straining fingertips just managed to reach another horizontal rope. This rope held firm - but the computer was far from finished. From different spots, *two* more of the blazing rays of light struck out at him. And he reacted instantly - by letting go and falling.

Almost directly below him was a small hanging platform, its inviting surface criss-crossed with hair-thin wires designed to entangle feet. But Keill did not intend to stand on the platform. His steely fingers caught its edge, and he swung forward, using the platform as an ungainly trapeze.

It carried him through another soaring mid-air arc, to one of the real trapezes, which he urged into another sweeping swing. And he was a microsecond away from releasing his grip, to hurtle once more through mid-air to a new handhold, when a faint flicker of movement at the upper edge of his vision warned him. He barely managed to check himself, to cling to the trapeze bar with desperate fingertips, before the steel-mesh net dropped silently down in front of him.

When the trapeze had swung back, and forward again, Keill did let go, flying smoothly out across emptiness towards what was to be his last handhold. Another of the vertical ropes, and beyond it, the goal - the other narrow platform, just reachable from that final rope.

Like a pendulum on the rope, Keill swung backwards, picking up speed. Then the forward swing began, and Keill poised himself for the instant when he would sweep his body forward in a powerful burst of acceleration, to get the maximum distance into that last sailing leap when he let go.

In that instant the lights went out.

In the total darkness, Keill could not even see the rope he held, let alone the little platform that he had to reach. But he did not falter. His mind held a precise image of the platform, and the distance to be crossed. He released the rope, flew out into the empty blackness.

For a fractional second, sheer instinctive terror battered at his mind. But his inner control held firm against the surge of fear. And then his boots smacked firmly on to the unseen platform - and as he found his balance and turned, the lights flashed on again.

He was through, safe and unscathed. And with very few faults - except perhaps the judges might see that sudden drop to avoid the two rays of light as a half-error. So he waited with an edge of anxiety behind his relaxed posture, and watched a screen on the judges' wall.

Lights gathered on the screen, spelling out his surname, and his competitor number. Then came the word FAULTS, and after it another digit. Zero. No faults.

And the final number, giving Keill's completion time, showed him and every other follower of the Games - which meant nearly everyone on Moros - that his time was by far the best of the day. And that it was only three-hundredths short of the record, for the Abyss, set some forty years before by a legendary Games winner named Miclas.

There was no applause or cheering, for there was no live audience, only the people at the other end of the vid- and holo-transmissions. There was nothing but the cold white light of the computer's data on the screen. Yet Keill's control had not had to work so hard that day as they did now to hold back a huge, happy grin.

Keill and the others of the YL troop that had been together for six years of training were living in Legion barracks, now that they were graduates waiting for assignment. And when Keill entered the barracks rec room that evening, most of the others of his troop were gathered intently around the vid, watching a report on the day's events in the Games, with plenty of replays, analyses and predictions. For a moment Keill hung back, unwilling to seem too eager to watch the account of his own success. Especially not with Oni there, nursing the injury that had kept her out of the Games.

She had torn some knee tendons in a fall, when some gymnastic equipment had given way while she was training for the Games. The medics had flatly forbidden her to compete, which had been a crushing disappointment. But her self-control and her naturally sunny personality had overcome even that misery. And there was not the faintest hint of jealousy or sourness in her expression, when she saw Keill hesitating in the doorway. Instead, her face lit up in a bright and teasing grin.

'I was sure you'd taken a dead-end route in the Abyss,' she-laughed. 'You took a terrible chance.'

'I had to,' Keill said with a smile, moving into the the room to join the group.

'Keill!' big Danal burst out, staring gleefully at the vid. 'You've moved up to third!'

Now at last there were cheers, and merry pummellings of congratulation, as the vid reeled out the current placings of leading competitors. Keill's achievement in the Abyss had indeed lifted him into third place among the individual events. And now at last Keill could grin with pure pleasure - feeling just as gratified to see that all the others from his troop had ended the first week of the Games among the top twenty-five.

'You really *could* win it,' little Ferik said to him delightedly.

Keill shrugged. 'There's still six days left. And first-timers...'

'We know, we know,' Oni broke in, with mock-exasperation. 'You keep reminding us. "No one has won the Games at the first time of trying for eighty-two years." But why don't you think about the other side of that fact - that it *has* been done, and *can* be done?'

And you're the likeliest of all of us to do it.' She grinned again. 'Except me, of course, if I was out there.'

'You're right about that part,' Keill said, glancing at Oni's heavily wrapped knee.

'Oh, come on,' Oni laughed. 'You win it this time, and I'll win it next time, and we'll go on taking turns for the next twenty years.'

They both burst out laughing at the sheer bravado of that unlikely prediction, and settled back to watch the vid. The Games seemed to be dominating the evening's transmission - but then the Games were, during those two weeks, uppermost in the minds of everyone on Moros, whether they were competing or not. They had all the importance among the Legions that a major religious ritual might have on other planets.

The special nature of life on Moros - with the emphasis on self-discipline, and on mutual support and communal co-operation - had from the very beginning made most kinds of anti-social behaviour impossible, unthinkable. So legionaries did not fight among themselves, did not divide into aggressively opposed groups or communities. But at the same time the Legions were *human*, with normal human tendencies to aggression, violence, combative spirit. And they knew that even their astonishing self-discipline might not always be enough to restrain those basic, instinctive urges. They had to find some

form of harmless, even positive, release.

That release came in healthy, friendly competition - based on an awareness that individuals were *different*, which is not the same thing at all as superior or inferior. So those peaceful competitions came to be regularized and organized - and, over the generations, evolved into the demanding, combative delights of the Martial Games of Moros.

Any adult could compete in the Games, if he or she wished. And each year thousands of them did enter - for the fun of it, or to test their skills against their fellows. The Games offered many different kinds of simulated combat, including team events that might pit different strike groups against one another in mock-battles in space, or large-scale ground manoeuvres, or guerrilla raids, or four-day sieges. All of this was great fun, outstanding entertainment for those who preferred to watch rather than compete. It was also a superb way to maintain skills at top fighting readiness.

But there were also the most popular events, the individual combat sections - where Keill and the others of his newly graduated YL troop were taking part, now that they had turned eighteen and could enter the Games for the first time.

The first week of the individual competitions included athletics, tests of skill (weaponry competitions, marksmanship, barehanded power hitting) and gymnastics, culminating in the Abyss.

And that week also served as a process of elimination. At its end there would be a 'cut', and only the top one hundred and twenty-eight in the standings would go on to the second week - the most exciting part of the Games, the face-to-face, hand-to-hand combat.

Keill and Oni were feeling proud, that night in the rec room, that every one of their troop would make the 'cut' and go on into the second week. And they were also feeling deeply relieved - because of something that had been said to them, months before, during the final stages of their YL training before graduation.

What was said had surprised them greatly, and distressed them - for it had been wholly unexpected, and had seemed somehow *wrong*, going against some of the traditions of the Legions.

Keill could well remember his faint sense of shock, on that day. He and the others had been summoned to the troop room early one morning, and had been surprised to find the tall, lean form of Over-Commander Maron waiting for them. They had all known that Maron had been promoted, since the days when she had overseen the Ordeals that they had gone through when they were twelve. Now she was the Commanding Officer of the *entire* YL training programme. And Keill and the others had felt a high curiosity about what had brought her to talk to them.

Maron told them that she was visiting all the troops like theirs that were going through the advanced combat training. And she was visiting them to talk about the Martial Games.

'You won't need reminding,' the tall, grey-haired woman had said, 'that you are being trained to join the forward combat units that you all know as *Spearhead* groups. You also know that you will receive your assignments some weeks after graduation. And I imagine that most of you, perhaps all of you, will by then have entered this year's Martial Games.' She smiled a wintry smile. 'Most eighteen-year-olds do, especially advanced-combat trainees.'

They all smiled in return, and nodded agreement, and waited.

'But I have come to tell you something that you do *not* know.' The smile had vanished from Maron's

lean, lined face. 'I want to *encourage* you - all of you - to enter the Games. For one very important reason. It is that whether you are assigned to a Spearhead unit or not will depend entirely on *how you perform in the Games*'

The entire group went perfectly still. Each of them was struggling to control a gasp of surprise and shock.

'Over-Commander... ' It was Oni, irrepressible as always, yet carefully keeping her face and voice quiet and calm. 'Do you mean that how we have performed in six years of training won't matter as much as how we do in two weeks of the Games?'

Maron nodded, her face as expressionless as Oni's. 'I mean just that. The Games will be a crucial test - a final examination, if you like. It is an examination that you *must* pass, no matter how outstanding you may have been in all your YL training.'

She surveyed the group silently for a moment, then turned her gaze back to Oni. 'Your question suggests that you think this process is unjust. Nevertheless, it is the Legion requirement. After the Games, when the final standings have been settled, each of you will report to me, individually, to receive your assignments. That is all.' She strode briskly out of the room, leaving fifteen upset and puzzled Young Legionaries in a huddle of nervous talk. And their feelings had been very clear.

It *did* seem unjust. It did not seem to be the Legion way, to ignore six years of training and achievement, to make their crucial assessment of the troop on the basis of a mere two weeks of competition - when any number of things might go wrong, for any number of unexpected, accidental reasons.

As, indeed, things had gone wrong for Oni, who was not taking that 'final examination'. And that could mean that, just because of a damaged knee, she might fail to receive the Spearhead assignment towards which she had been working and training - with outstanding success - for six years.

Now, in the barracks rec room, Keill fell glumly silent for a moment, thinking about how deeply that injustice would distress Oni. And she needed only a glance to guess what he was thinking.

'Stop worrying about me,' she said quietly. 'There's no point in brooding about it. You just concentrate on the Games - and win them.'

Keill laughed quietly. 'Maybe not.'

Oni glared at him. 'Why not? Just because it hasn't been done for eighty-two years? Try another statistic I dug up earlier. It's been fifty-six years since a first-time competitor finished Week One among the *top five*!' Her eyes sparkled. 'And you're third!'

'With six more days to go...' Keill muttered.

'Don't be so boring!' Oni cried. 'No one knows better than me how good you are. You know it, too, if you're honest with yourself - you have everything that's needed to win the Games. So go and win!'

Keill smiled wryly at her, but Oni knew him well enough to spot the steel-hard glint in the depths of his eyes, the glint of that ferocious determination and strength of will that was as much a part of Keill Randor as his supreme combat skills.

'You're right, as usual,' he said. 'I *do* think I might be able to win, and I'd like to win. Not just for personal satisfaction, either. It's occurred to me that if I *did* win, it might give me a little leverage, some bargaining power.'

Oni raised her eyebrows. 'For what?'

'For making a formal and official complaint,' Keill said gravely, 'if you don't get a Spearhead assignment just because of an injured knee.'

'Me?' Oni said, startled. 'Don't go risking your own reputation for that.'

'Reputation.' Keill snorted. 'That's not important. I feel as sick about this "final examination" as you do. And if you lose the assignment you deserve, through no fault of your own, I'll take on the Central Command itself, to get you reinstated.' His smile was grim. 'If I'm the only first-time winner of the Games for eighty-two years, maybe they'll pay some attention.'

Some days later, Keill sat on the edge of the treatment table, while a great many parts of his body vigorously complained about how they felt. But he knew that those complaints could be safely ignored. They came from bruised flesh, strained muscles and tendons, and a lurid purpling on one side of his face. In other words, nothing that medication and loosening-up exercises could not overcome, in time for the next day. And he was thankful for that - and for a great deal more.

He had just come through Day Four of the second week of the Martial Games, and he had not yet been eliminated. But he was the only one of his YL troop who still remained in the competition.

And no one knew better than Keill how microscopically close he had come, more than once, to defeat and elimination. And how the odds against him were lengthening every day.

After the first day, he had been filled with hopes. The one hundred and twenty-eight remaining competitors had been divided into sixteen teams of eight each. Then the teams were set against one another, with padded staves and clubs and other non-lethal weapons. At the end of the day, eight teams - sixty-four competitors - had been eliminated.

Thanks to the regulation protective garb - light flexible body armour that left arms and legs bare, padded gloves and boots, light helmets - only eleven of the losers had had to spend more than a day in the care of the medics. And Keill had emerged in a winning team, with scarcely a bruise to show.

Perhaps, despite his self-discipline, he had become slightly overconfident. On the second day, the remaining sixty-four were divided again, into groups of four. But with a difference - each group fought *within itself*, each individual against each of the other three, in a wild free-for-all without weapons. Keill had very nearly not survived the unexpected moment when the other three had, by coincidence rather than planning, struck at him all at once.

But he had evaded two of the blows and had at the same time-taken out the two who had struck them. And he had survived the crunching impact of the third blow, and had then fought a prolonged hand-to-hand duel with that person, determinedly ignoring the fact that it was little Ferik from his own YL troop.

After nearly a quarter of an hour of non-stop attack and counterattack, Ferik made a millisecond error, leaving herself open for a devastating knee-slam that would have smashed her ribs if it had not been for the body armour. So it was Ferik and the other two who were carried out, and Keill who had gone on to be one of the surviving sixteen on Day Three.

That had been the first day of one-to-one combat, again with non-lethal hand weapons. Keill had had a light staff about a metre and a half long, but the smiling legionary who opposed him had shattered it in half



a second and had then set about Keill with the short truncheon that he carried. Eventually, bruised and battered, Keill had resorted to the dangerous gambit of offering an opening, and relying on his own blazing speed when the truncheon flashed into the opening to finish him off.

He had counter-punched with both fists simultaneously - an almost impossible feat of balance and leverage. One fist had blocked the truncheon - his knuckles were still slightly swollen, and might have been crushed if the combat glove had not absorbed some of the impact. And Keill's other fist had found its target, though his opponent had nearly managed to twist his head away. Keill had since heard that the smiling legionary's jaw was knitting very well.

And now Day Four had ended, and Keill was deeply thankful that his own jaw was still more or less intact. The day had brought more one-to-one combat, but this time unarmed, and Keill had faced a long-legged woman who seemed made of whipcord and spring steel. Her first attack had nearly been the end of the fight - a dazzling move composed of feints upon feints, ending with a totally unorthodox falling twist-and-kick. Her foot had nearly taken the side of Keill's face off.

If the impact had not flung him several metres away, giving him a fifth of a second to recover before the woman could follow up, he would have been out of the Games. As it was, he had fought a defensive battle for the next five minutes, without rising from the floor. But when he did at last take his chance to regain his feet, he had seen a glimmer of hope.

The woman's style was almost too unorthodox, as if she expected a newly graduated Young Legionary to be hidebound by the standard techniques of his training. So Keill reached into the areas of imagination that bordered on foolishness, and countered unorthodoxy with total craziness, trying to perform the impossible. His movements stopped being flowing and became contorted, as he tried to create combinations of grips and blows that were physically uncombinable.

And in the end, though he took more punishment, his attacks disturbed the woman's timing just enough so that Keill's overhead leap, ending in an awkward leg clamp, opened the way for the simplest and crudest of head butts. It was totally unexpected, and worked perfectly. Though Keill had seen stars, he could stand unaided while the woman was helped away by medics.

At least, though, she had been able to turn her head and grin at him through a mask of blood. And Keill knew that transplants would be provided for her front teeth.

And now there were only two days left. Day Five, semi-finals, more one-to-one combat - and then the day of the final, when all of Moros would be briefly silenced as nearly the entire population crowded round their vids and holo-screens.

I have, he told himself, just to taste the words, a one in four chance of winning the Games.

He might have gone on to remind himself of the negative side of that statement - that the odds were still four-to-one against him. But he was interrupted by a harassed-looking medic, who made a curt apology for keeping Keill waiting, prodded painfully at his bruises, peered closely at the purplish swelling on his cheek, and pronounced him able to continue.

Keill did not feel particularly able as he swung himself off the treatment table, clutching the medications that the medic had barely remembered to hand over before rushing off to his next task. But he managed not to groan as he smeared the medication on to the bruises and swellings, before moving to his locker and slowly beginning to get dressed. As he fastened his tunic, he was aware of someone moving behind him, and was turning when the quiet voice spoke.

'I see the medic cleared you.'

'Weary as he was, Keill straightened a little as he recognized the legionary facing him. A man something like an older version of Keill himself - medium height, lean and wiry, dark-haired. But the man's hair was iron-grey, and his tanned face was lined and creased from more than forty years of an exceedingly eventful life.

Helt Urquad, Overleader of one of the more legendary Spearhead strike groups in the Legions - and winner of the Martial Games four years previously. Since then Urquad had been off-planet, on active service in other parts of the galaxy, when the annual festival came round. This year was his first chance to try to join the ranks of the much-admired few who had won the Games more than once. And he, too, was among the four semi-finalists. Keill nodded respectfully, with a faint smile. 'I don't feel as healthy as the medic says I am.'

Urquad's grin deepened the creases round his eyes. 'I've often told Nadee that a day would come when she'd meet someone crazier than her.'

Nadee was the name of Keill's wildly unorthodox opponent, that day. The comment, and the implied praise, caused Keill to grin in response, and then to wince as his bruised face complained.

'You surprised me a little,' Urquad went on in his quiet voice. 'I've heard a few things about you - and my impression was that you're usually a little more... restrained.'

Keill managed to hide his surprise that Urquad should ever have heard anything about a mere YL graduate. 'I have a friend, Oni Wolda,' he said, 'who always tells me I'm too cautious. So - I try to get over it.'

Urquad laughed. 'Nadee would testify that you've done pretty well. Just like Oni has managed to learn a little caution, on top of that wildness.' As Keill looked startled, Urquad went on: 'I know Oni - we're distantly related. Too bad she couldn't compete this year. She must have been disappointed.'

'Probably,' Keill said at once, with a defensive edge in his voice, 'but she doesn't show it.'

Urquad nodded approvingly. 'Well, it's possible that you or I, or both of us, will be feeling disappointed this time tomorrow. Semi-finals are the worst, somehow. To get so close, and then get nothing...'

'I don't know how I'll feel if I lose tomorrow,' Keill said carefully, 'but I think I'd come round to being glad to get *this* far, first time.'

'Right,' Urquad said. 'From what I've seen, you could go all the way - in a year or so. Good luck tomorrow.'

With another friendly nod, the grey-haired man turned away. Keill watched him leave the room, with a springy, athletic stride. *He doesn't seem to have a single bruise*, Keill thought. And behind that thought was another, with a slightly rankled air to it. *A year or so? Maybe I'll surprise you, Helt Urquad, and go all the way this year.*

He slammed his locker and left the room, his mounting determination almost overshadowing his aches and pains.

The next morning, sleep, medication and exercises had almost erased the aches, while the determination had grown stronger. It was like an extra injection of adrenalin. Keill felt relaxed, calm, but highly charged - like a humming machine waiting to engage its gears - as the flashing light above his competition number summoned him on to the combat floor.

And he might have expected it. The computer flashed up another light, and Keill's opponent entered from the far side. Helt Urquad.

No smile now, no friendly nod. The two men, now seeming even more alike in their combat gear, circled for a moment, watchfully studying each other. Then both lean bodies became blurs of intertwining motion, punctuated with the dull smacks of strike and counter-strike. Urquad had led with a scything kick that had unbelievably changed direction halfway, into a strike upwards at the groin. Keill had managed not only to block the kick but to catch the ankle, taking it with him in a sideways rolling fall that might have whipped the older man off his feet - had Keill not had to release to evade Urquad's other foot, which nearly separated him from his head.

Then they were both up again. A flurry of blows seemed to suggest that each man had suddenly developed eight hands. But only one of those blows landed, and that one - Keill's finger-jab at the throat - had been deflected on to the hard bone of Urquad's elbow. They separated for an instant, the jab's impact point flaring a bruised red on Urquad's arm.

And Keill felt a surge of hope. He was quicker. Perhaps no more than a hundredth of a second - but enough to be detectable. The twenty-five years between their ages made at least that much difference in their skills.

Again they closed, their hands flickering into near-invisibility as they sought to strike, to chop, to grip. Again each attack met a counter, or a lightning evasion. But again one blow from the edge of Keill's hand had not quite been deflected, and had numbingly connected with Urquad's forearm.

Both men now were sweating heavily, and their breathing had increased - Urquad's slightly more than Keill's. As they closed again, Urquad's evasion of Keill's slamming kick at a knee was almost ragged, while Keill effortlessly twisted away from the counter-kick. Urquad's eyes were narrowed with concentration, glinting deep within the creased folds around them. And Keill again felt a blaze of hope as he feinted and swayed, the move pulling the older man around in a half-turn that left an opening as obvious as a door.

Urquad seemed not to move, for Keill struck with a matchless speed so that his fist seemed totally to disappear. But that fist struck an immovable object that stopped it dead.

Keill did not even have the time to realize that, while Urquad could not match him for speed, the older man had simply *anticipated* the blow. Urquad's left hand had begun moving even before Keill had started to strike, and had met Keill's fist like a barrier of steel.

And Keill did not even see the elbow smash that came out of nowhere. Nor did he feel a thing when his limp, unconscious form struck the floor three metres away from where Urquad was standing.

Three days later, Keill walked carefully through the door of Over-Commander Maron's outer office. He had been kept in the clinic overnight, as a precaution, though he had regained consciousness within minutes of his crushing defeat. But no bones had been broken, and he had been allowed to drag his aching body and doubly-bruised face back to the barracks. There he had watched the vid with keen interest and enjoyment, while Helt Urquad fought a gruelling half-hour battle with the other finalist - to emerge at last, covered with blood and holding his broken wrist, the overall individual winner of the Martial Games.

At that point Keill had had to beg Oni and the others to stop making comical remarks to him about the way he had been beaten. Not because he minded being teased about it - but because both sides of his

face were now swollen, throbbing and discoloured, and even the faintest of smiles was an agony.

At least, he thought, there was little chance of needing to smile when he faced Over-Commander Maron.

The tall grey-haired woman studied him. 'You'll remember Helt for a while,' she said, gesturing towards Keill's battered face.

He nodded carefully. 'I'll remember every minute of the last two weeks,' he said, 'for a long time.'

'That's as it should be,' Maron agreed. 'The Games are pointless if they don't leave every competitor something to think about.' Her keen eyes held Keill's gaze. 'What have they left you to think about, Keill?'

He returned her gaze blankly, taken aback. 'I'm not sure. A lot of things. I suppose mostly I've been thinking about next year, and competing again, if I'm not off-planet or something.'

Maron nodded, still watching him. 'And you will probably do very well, again. But haven't you been thinking about how you did this year - how close you came to the final, how you might even have won the Games? How do you feel about being defeated, right on the threshold of victory?'

Keill shrugged slightly. 'All I feel is lucky - that I didn't meet Helt Urquada a lot earlier.'

Maron's sharp gaze grew more intent. 'No feelings of disappointment, or resentment?'

'I don't feel like that,' Keill said, even more taken aback. 'Maybe a little disappointment, but with myself. I suppose I learned how much I still have to learn - but that gives me a clear idea of what to work on, for next year.'

'Good.' Maron sat back. 'Now - you will want to hear about your assignment...'

'Before that, Over-Commander,' Keill broke in awkwardly, 'may I ask you something?'

Maron raised an eyebrow, and gestured to him to proceed.

Keill took a deep breath. 'You told us that whether we were assigned to a Spearhead unit or not would depend on how we did in the Games. And that still seems unfair. I know I reached the semis, but I also know that I made it by good luck, as much as anything. And then there's Oni Wolda - who might have done even better than me, except that *bad* luck kept her from competing at all. It won't be right if I get a good assignment, while Oni and the others have to lose out, through no fault of their own.'

But then he faltered - for he saw an unusually broad smile forming on Maron's lined face.

'I'm very glad,' Maron said quietly, 'that the future of your friends is so important to you. And you're right - it *would* be unfair, if you were all to be judged as you think you are. But in fact you have all done extremely *well* in the Games. And Oni Wolda has done the best of all of you. She will certainly be assigned to a leading Spearhead strike group. And so will the others of your troop.' Maron leaned forward intently. 'And so will you, Keill - though I was in some doubt about it, until now.'

Keill had difficulty keeping his mouth from sagging open. 'I don't understand...' he said faintly.

'As I told you before your graduation,' Maron replied, 'you were to undergo another test - a final examination. All your training has been a series of tests - and of course the Martial Games are also a test, for any legionary who enters. But we were not interested in whether you could win, Keill. We were testing your ability to *lose*.'

Keill merely blinked, feeling dazed.

'You'll know,' Maron went on firmly, 'that it is not pride or arrogance when I say that the Legions are the supreme warriors of the galaxy. And so legionaries - especially young ones - are not accustomed to defeat. In war, in true combat, legionaries tend to win. Or else they die, because they will not give up. Also, here on Moros, we merely fight mock combats in training, where there are neither winners nor losers. But in the Games, Keill - there legionaries can taste the bitter flavour of true defeat. Because there can be only *one winner*, each year.'

Once again her smile blossomed. 'So in the Games,' she went on, 'we give our Young Legionaries their final test - to see how each of them confronts the fact of losing, of being defeated. Oni Wolda confronted it from the beginning, when she could not compete - and she managed superbly to overcome her frustration and disappointment. So did the others, as they were eliminated, one by one. But I was worried about you, Keill. You came very close to winning the Games, and so avoiding that final test.'

'What would you have done if I had?' Keill asked warily.

'Assigned you to a back-up support group, not a Spearhead,' Maron said at once. 'At least until we saw how you met *that* disappointment.'

Realization came to Keill with a jolt. He remembered the words of Helt Urquad, in the treatment room the night before the semifinals. It was obvious, now. The older legionary had been offering a subtle, kindly *warning* - about defeat, and disappointment.

Then Keill smiled despite his aching face. 'Then I should be glad I lost,' he said.

'Exactly,' Maron said with a nod. 'And by losing well, you have proved yourself finally. You have been assigned - with Oni, by the way - to one of the Spearhead strike groups under the command of an Overleader of whom you have some knowledge. Helt Urquad.'

She laughed aloud as Keill's delighted expression became a wince of pain.

'You may know that Helt thinks, as do I and the rest of the YL Command, that you are going to be quite exceptional, Keill. We expect you to be a strike leader within your group, before too long. And Helt is convinced that you are capable of winning the Martial Games, some year soon, and perhaps more than once.' She smiled again. 'So now you have a good deal to live up to, in the years to come.'

Keill thanked her, stumbling over the words in his turmoil of happiness, and took his leave. But for a moment, as he closed her door behind him, an odd thing happened. As if an icy wind had blown over him, and a shadow had fallen across his eyes. It was the coldness and darkness of some eerie sense of *premonition* - which arose from Maron's last words. 'The years to come.'

But then Keill brushed the feeling away. This was no time to be having weird premonitions. As Maron said, he was standing on the threshold of exactly the life that he had always dreamed about living. And he intended to live up to every one of the expectations that Maron and the others seemed to have for him. He had the will to do so, and the determination. And he had plenty of time.

All the time in the world...

## **Postscript**

Only a few years after Keill Randor first took part in the Martial Games, the entire population of Moros was wiped out by a deadly radiation, created by an evil and mysterious being known only as the Warlord. But Keill survived the radiation, and as the galaxy's last legionary—set out on a grim quest to find the Warlord and avenge the murder of Moros.

The story of that quest, the dangers that Keill faced and the strange allies that he acquired, can be found in the four books of Douglas Hill's LAST LEGIONARY QUARTET- *Galactic Warlord*, *Deathwing Over Veynaa*, *Day of the Starwind* and *Planet of the Warlord*.