AMERICA'S GALACTIC FOREIGN LEGION

BOOK 4

DEMILITARIZED ZONE

WALTER KNIGHT
Decorated war hero Captain Joey R. Czerinski of the United States Galactic Foreign Legion faces new challenges when he and his platoon are ordered to planet New Colorado’s New Gobi Desert to guard the demilitarized zone dividing human-occupied territory from areas claimed by the Arthropodan Empire.

A new alien spider commander – and nephew of the Arthropodan Emperor – creates more headaches for Czerinski with his strict policies and competitive attitude. In the wake of his many ill-formed decisions, a young local militia hero emerges, giving Czerinski and his platoon even more trouble to deal with. But it is all water under the desert as Czerinski takes everything in stride and plays a deadly game of tit-for-tat and one-upmanship with the spider commander to maintain order in the volatile DMZ.

With chupacabra, Walmart, and McDonald’s thrown into the mix, the fourth installment of this politically incorrect military space opera aims straight for the funny bone.

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~AUTHOR’S ACKNOWLEDGEMENT~


A special thanks to editor Patricia Morrison for still finding my books amusing escapist entertainment. Also, hugs and kisses to my darling wife Barb, for her continued support.
Chapter 1

The United States Galactic Federation Foreign Legion and Gunboat *Predator* patrolled the New Mississippi River all the way up to New Memphis. Past New Memphis lay the Arthropodan Empire. A demilitarized zone partitioned the planet of New Colorado since the last war, but New Memphis was a human enclave that existed north of the DMZ. It was the *Predator*’s mission to maintain humanity’s right-of-way on the river to New Memphis. Spider insurgents had threatened to blow up the *Predator* with suicide bombers riding in speedboats, but no attempts had occurred yet on this trip. Until now.

It was late at night, but I could see the profile of the approaching speedboat. Night vision technology allowed me to see much farther than the insurgents, even in the night fog. I ordered Corporal Williams to fire a cannon shell across their bow as I broadcast a warning on the PA system. “This is the United States Galactic Federation Foreign Legion Gunboat *Predator*!” I announced. “Turn off your engines and prepare to be boarded! Failure to comply will force us to take countermeasures to ensure our safety and the safety of other river traffic!”

“They are still approaching,” advised our radar technician. “They’re coming straight at us!”

“Blow them out of the water,” I ordered. “Hit them with everything we have. The Legion does not pay you to bring ammo home!”

I am Major Joey R. Czerinski, hero of the Legion, and regional commander along the DMZ here on Planet New Colorado. I am more accustomed to ground fighting, but this section of the New Mississippi is also my responsibility. I arranged a ride-along to familiarize myself with riverboat patrol. A good commander learns the jobs of everyone serving under him.

Captain Gregoire let me take command of his boat as a courtesy. I felt I was doing everything by the book. The insurgents were warned. They had no one to blame but themselves if we sent them to the bottom of the river. Corporal Williams fired two missiles. I tracked the missiles on radar. Both hit, destroying the enemy. Our ship then ran aground, bottoming on shallow rocks.

As the fog cleared, it became more apparent I should have stayed on dry land where I belonged. Not only had I run the *Predator* aground, but I had also destroyed an automated lighthouse onshore. Dismayed, I put a fishing line off the bow of the Predator, and waited for the worst. My riverboat days were over. Captain Gregoire angrily approached me, carrying gear. I spoke first to cut off another tirade. “How long until we get off this sand bar?” I asked. “I don’t want to be stranded too long.”

“Sand bar? You ran us onto rocks!” shouted Captain Gregoire. “Thanks to your incompetence, my ship is ruined!”

“How long until we get off this sand bar?” I asked, annoyed. “I’m late, for a very important date.”

“The *Predator* is gutted!” fumed Captain Gregoire. “This ship is not going anywhere.”

“Can’t you call a tug boat to tow us home?” I asked. “Isn’t anyone coming to get us?”

“It’s a total loss,” growled Captain Gregoire. “Helicopters will lift us out eventually. I will see to it you are busted back to private, if it’s the last thing I ever do!”

“Whatever,” I replied, adding under my breath, “Annapolis Naval Academy asshole.”

“Whatever.”

Helicopters soon arrived, landing legionnaires to protect the *Predator* during salvage operations. I took command of a smaller riverboat that brought more supplies, and I proceeded up river at a leisurely pace to New Memphis. Captain Gregoire hitched a ride, sitting at the back of the boat, brooding. Every once in a while his eyes widened as he jotted down a note about how terrible a commander I was, and how it was all my fault his prized boat was gutted, and how I should never be allowed on the New Mississippi River again because I was a menace to commerce and everyone around me. I ignored the old duffer, concentrating instead on the speed and maneuverability of my new riverboat. This boat hauled ass!

About half way to New Memphis I saw a couple spider insurgents pop out of a spider hole along the bank of the river. One insurgent was aiming an RPG directly at me. The other had an old-style AK47. At first I did not react to the danger. It just seemed incredulous that someone other than Gregoire would want to kill me on a peaceful beautiful river like the New Mississippi. As Corporal Williams began firing his machine gun, I made a hard left and sped at the insurgents. The RPG went over us, landing harmlessly in our wake. As the insurgents ducked back into their hole, I smashed the boat onto the soft sandy bank and through the high grass. The boat bounced a few yards and came to rest next to the spider hole. I jumped off, firing my assault rifle into their hole. Then I dropped a grenade down the hole. When the smoke cleared, Corporal Williams went down the tunnel and retrieved spider
bodies and equipment. It felt good to finally have something go right.

The good feelings ended when I explained on the radio to General Kalipetsis how I managed to beach two boats in one day. Also, in the confusion, Captain Gregoire had fallen overboard and was now missing in action. He had already been leaning left, scribbling his venomous notes, when he was lost overboard as I made the hard turn. No loss there, but it looked bad in my report.

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General Kalipetsis was waiting for me at Legion Headquarters. “The spiders say we owe the Arthropodan Empire $235,000 for destroying an automated lighthouse! What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Lighthouses don’t cost that much,” I argued. “Don’t let those spiders cheat you. I’ll bet the Predator alone costs much more. At least I didn’t destroy the second boat. It was just stuck in the sand.”

“You think this is funny?” asked General Kalipetsis. “The money will come out of your paycheck!”

“Now that is funny.”

“I know you have millions on your card,” said General Kalipetsis. “How does a mere major become a millionaire on Legion pay?”

“Lucky at cards?” I suggested. “All you have to do is tell those spiders that insurgents blew up the lighthouse. They can’t prove anything.”

“What about the Predator?” asked General Kalipetsis.

“We needed a new riverboat anyway,” I said. “That rust bucket was due to be scrapped. Order a new one. Only this time get one of those slick new hydrofoil boats. They’re fast. Bigger is better, you know.”

“You will never find out how fast they are,” said General Kalipetsis. “I received a report of seismic readings in Sector 27 along the DMZ. Go check it out. It might be spider insurgents digging more tunnels.”

“Sector 27?” I asked, checking a map. “Isn’t that in the middle of the New Gobi Desert? There is nothing out there but sagebrush and rattlesnakes.”

“Good,” said General Kalipetsis. “You won’t be able to break anything. Let that be a lesson to you.”

“I killed at least two insurgents,” I protested. “Doesn’t that mean anything? There might have been insurgents in that lighthouse, too. In fact, I’m sure of it.”

“Insurgents in the lighthouse is not in your report or anyone else’s account of what happened,” said General Kalipetsis. “Take your sun-block. I hear the New Gobi Desert is very hot this time of year.”

* * * * *

As ordered, I took a company of legionnaires to Sector 27. We were airlifted with our armored cars and equipment. After the planes left, it seemed so quiet. The only sound was a desert breeze through the sagebrush. There were no landmarks for miles around, just sand, sagebrush, and a dirt road.

“Every time you screw up, we get posted somewhere awful,” complained Captain Lopez. “What did you do this time?”

“Shut up and start pitching tents,” I ordered. “Find the border markers. They should be giving off a beacon signal.”

“Sir!” yelled Corporal Williams. “I see a spider!”

Sure enough. Through my binoculars I too could see a spider guard shack at the crest of the next hill. A spider marine was waving at us. I drove our armored car over to investigate.

“Welcome to Hell,” said the spider guard. He seemed happy to see us. “Who did you piss off to get assigned here?”

“None of your business,” I said. “What is this? What are you doing here?”

“I am monitoring border traffic,” said the spider guard. “Can’t you tell?”

“There is nothing but lizards out here,” I said.

“Exactly,” said the spider guard. “And I am watching and counting every lizard that goes by. I was watching you land, earlier. If you human pestilence are invading the New Gobi Desert, I surrender! You can have it.”

“We landed here to investigate seismic activity,” I explained. “Are you digging tunnels?”

“To sneak across the border?” asked the spider guard. “Yes, that is it. You caught us!”

“I am serious,” I said. “I know you have been digging. What are you up to?”

“We have been drilling a well,” answered the spider guard. “I’m thinking about building a nice cool swimming pool. In a few hours, it’s going to be over 135 degrees out here. I suggest you find some shade.”

“Where?” I asked, looking about.
“Anywhere but here,” said the spider guard. “This shack is mine.”

“Is there any insurgent activity in this area?” I asked.

“What?” asked the spider guard. “No one is interested in this area. It is too hot. Insurgents are city dwellers. They would not last five minutes out here.”

In despair, I walked back to the armored car. At least it had air conditioning. Corporal Tonelli lingered by the guard shack. “My name is Guido,” said Corporal Tonelli. “Is there anything valuable out here?”

“Like what?” asked the spider guard. “Rocks? Do you want to dig for gold?”

“I have a case of vodka in the armored car,” said Guido. “Do you have anything worth trading for?”

“How about a cannon?” offered the spider guard. “RPGs?”

“Sorry,” said Guido. “I already have several of those. How many soldiers are in your unit?”

“That is top secret,” said the spider guard. “But bring over your case of vodka. I’ll give you the VIP tour.”

They walked beyond the next hill, where about a hundred spiders were camped. A well-drilling rig was digging through the dirt and rocks, throwing dust everywhere. So far, the spiders had not reached water. The spider guard introduced Guido to his commanding officer. Guido handed the officer a bottle of vodka.

“Thank you,” said the spider commander, happily pouring them all a drink. “Normally I would beware of human pestilence bearing gifts, but I will make an exception this time.”

“This is Guido,” announced the spider guard.

“Why has the human pestilence and its Mafia come out here?” asked the spider commander, eying Guido with all eight eyes.

“Mafia?” asked Guido. “What do you mean?”

“You are Italian, are you not?” asked the spider commander, checking his database notepad computer. “I am well aware that all Italians are members of the Mafia. Your human sub-category Italiano runs all the rackets and gambling in New Memphis. Do you deny that? Are you planning to build another casino way out here? Or are you a smuggler?”

“I am a legionnaire,” replied Guido. “I go where I am ordered to go.”

“The Legion heard our drilling equipment and thought we were digging a tunnel,” explained the spider guard.

“There is a whole mechanized infantry company on the other side of the hill.”

“I know that,” said the spider commander, pouring another drink. “I saw them land, too.”

“Have you been out here long?” asked Guido.

“It seems like forever,” said the spider commander, sighing. “How did you get chosen to come out here and spy on us?”

“We’re on a top-secret mission,” said Guido. “They chose the best of the best.”

“You pissed someone off?” asked the spider commander.

“Not me,” said Guido. “It was Major Czerinski.”

* * * * *

At the end of the day, I radioed a report to General Kalipetsis. “There is a whole company of spiders out here. They say the seismic activity we detected must have been caused by drilling.”

“They’re drilling for oil?” asked the general. “That’s ridiculous. There is no oil out there.”

“Water,” I corrected. “They say they want to build a swimming pool because it’s hot out here.”

“You believe them?” asked General Kalipetsis.

“They’re right. It is hot.”

“No!” General Kalipetsis yelled. “I mean, do you believe they are building a swimming pool?”

“Of course not,” I answered. “They must be up to something else.”

“I agree. I am sending you a company of engineers to build permanent barracks and to establish a secure border. Be alert. The spiders are up to no good. I am also sending our own drilling equipment to take some core samples. If there is anything valuable under the New Gobi Desert, I want to reach it first.”

“That’s a good idea. Send some Geiger counters, too. Maybe they’re looking for uranium.”

“The engineers will be escorted by another company of mechanized infantry,” advised General Kalipetsis. “I want to be able to reinforce the DMZ before the spiders do the same. When the engineers are done building your new home, start them to work on a permanent paved road. I want to be able to truck supplies to you on a regular basis.”

“Can I have a swimming pool too?” I asked. “The spiders had a good idea about drilling a well. You would not believe how hot it gets in the desert.”

“What?” asked General Kalipetsis. “No! This is the Legion, not a country club. Focus on the job at hand. Find
out why the spiders are interested in New Gobi.”

“Yes, sir!”

Chapter 2

I was told that a VIP would be arriving, so I waited at our new airstrip for his plane. The VIP arrived with our supplies on a shuttle. He was a very large and cheerful-looking man. Kind of reminded me of Santa Claus.

“Good morning, Major. My name is Ronald Carter,” he said, shaking my hand. “I represent the McDonald’s Corporation.”

“The aircraft maker?” I asked.

“No,” said Carter. “We make hamburgers. You are thinking of McDonnell-Douglas Aircraft. We are much bigger than them.”

“I hope you brought us some happy meals,” I said. “I’m starving.”

“McDonald’s wants to be the first restaurant in New Gobi,” continued Carter. “General Kalipetsis told me to contact you about acquiring a prime building site.”

“Build anywhere you want,” I said. “See those two guard shacks facing each other? That’s the border. Everything on this side is United States Galactic Federation territory.”

“I am interested in a border location so we can serve both human and spider customers,” said Carter. “Good relations with the spiders is important to McDonald’s.”

“I heard the insurgents have been bombing restaurants,” I said. “Why do you want to build here? There is nothing in New Gobi, and we are on the front line.”

“You are here,” said Carter. “And I hear more legionnaires are on the way. McDonald’s feels safe being surrounded by so many hungry soldiers.”

“But we might deploy elsewhere at any time,” I argued. “This is all temporary. I’m still living in a tent.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Carter. “I hear you are building a highway through town. I see big things happening to New Gobi City. Construction will begin immediately.”

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The only unusual activity I noticed on the spider side was a large tent at the edge of their camp. It had a guard posted outside at the front. I wanted to know what was going on inside the tent, and decided Guido was the man for the job. “Corporal Tonelli, I heard you have been getting chummy with the spiders,” I said, nodding across the border to the other guard shack. “Find out what the spiders are doing in that circus tent next to their camp.”

“Rumors are that it’s a large motor pool for vehicle repair,” said Guido. “I’ve seen lots of trucks come and go from there.”

“Satellite photos show that none of the trucks enter the tent,” I said. “Ask your buddy what they’re doing in there.”

Guido shrugged and walked to the other guard shack. He was meaning to visit anyway, being that the spiders had air-conditioning in their shack and outbuildings.

“What’s in the big tent?” asked Guido. “My commander wants to know.”

“I heard a rumor there is a crashed shuttle that is being repaired,” replied the spider guard. “But the tent was there before I arrived, and they do not allow me inside.”

“Aren’t you curious about what they’re doing in there?” asked Guido.

“It is not my job to be curious,” said the spider guard, shrugging. “Curiosity killed the lizard.”

“Can you find out for sure?” asked Guido. “I’ll pay you a thousand dollars to check it out.”

“You want me to spy for you human pestilence?” asked the spider guard. “No way.”

“How about for two thousand dollars?” asked Guido. “It wouldn’t really be spying. You would just be doing me a favor. If there is really something top secret going on inside the tent, you don’t have to tell me about it. I’ll understand. I just want Major Czerinski off my back about it. He’s paranoid about that tent, and thinks you all are up to no good out here.”

“I will look into it,” promised the spider guard. “For five thousand dollars.”
When Guido left, the spider guard immediately reported their conversation to his commanding officer.

“Why did you tell the human pestilence we were working on a crashed shuttle?” asked the spider commander.

“It is an obvious lie.”

“Because Guido did not believe my story about the tent being a motor pool,” explained the spider guard.

“Why not just tell Guido the truth?” asked the spider commander. “It would have lessened tension. We do not need more Legion guns on the DMZ. I agree that Czerinski is paranoid. But he is dangerous, too.”

“I was just messing with him,” said the spider guard. “Besides, Guido said the Legion would leave once they were satisfied we are not doing anything sinister out here.”

“You do not want them to leave?” asked the commander, incredulously.

“It is boring out here,” replied the spider guard. “Are we doing anything under that tent that I should be concerned about?”

“Now you ask that question?” said the spider commander. “It is on our side of the DMZ. We will do as we please. It is none of the Legion’s business.”

“You told us the tent was to provide shade and quarters for civilian mining engineers taking core samples out in the desert,” said the spider guard. “I never questioned that explanation. I do now.”

“You had no need to be told otherwise,” said the spider commander. “You still do not.”

“What shall I tell Guido?” asked the spider guard. “What is the truth?”

“Tell Guido you want ten thousand dollars,” answered the spider commander. “Tell him we are digging up fossils. I will split the money with you.”

“Is that the truth?” asked the spider guard. “Fossils?”

“That was an order,” said the spider commander. “Do not ever question one of my orders again.”

* * * * *

The spider military intelligence officer had been viewing satellite photos all morning, prior to his briefing with the governor. Now he was ready for his presentation. “It appears the Legion is building a base along the DMZ in the New Gobi Desert,” announced the military intelligence officer. “We have a small company of marines at the scene. Our local commander requests reinforcements. He says the human pestilence is threatening to overwhelm his defenses.”

“We posted that fool out there to keep him out of trouble,” commented the governor. “He’s some sort of shirt-tail relative to the Emperor. I see now that fool can find trouble anywhere. What I want to know is, why is the Legion building a base in the New Gobi Desert?”

“The New Gobi has no strategic value,” advised the military intelligence officer. “But look at this photo. The human pestilence were digging a long rectangular hole between these buildings. It was lined with cement, then covered by a tent. And, they are constructing a highway to New Gobi.”

“What?” asked the governor. “What does it mean?”

“I have instructed our local commander to find out,” said the military intelligence officer. “Send an armored battalion to reinforce the DMZ in the New Gobi,” ordered the governor. “And station an Air Wing squadron for support. That highway they are building is proof that the Legion is bringing in more troops and equipment. They are up to no good!”

“I agree,” said the military intelligence officer. “And look at this outrage! Right on the border! Do you see it? Golden Arches.”

“What?” asked the governor. “What does it mean?”

“It is one of their major food distribution centers,” explained the military intelligence officer. “The Golden Arches have the capacity to feed thousands.”

“Those bastards!” fumed the governor. “What is the human pestilence up to this time?”

* * * * *

“Our scientists are digging up fossils,” reported the spider guard, when he met with Guido. “That is all.”

“Fossils?” asked Guido. “Do you mean like dinosaurs?”

“Old bones and stuff like that,” said the spider guard. “I could not get a lot of details.”

“Do you expect me to pay ten thousand dollars for a bogus story like that?” asked Guido. “Why are Arthropodan marines guarding a fossil dig?”

“I do not know,” said the spider guard. “Perhaps the fossils are valuable, and the scientists need protection from bandits. We are very serious about our history.”
“Did you eyeball the inside of the tent yourself? Or is your story just more second-hand rumors?”
“A very reliable source told me,” said the spider guard. “I cannot tell you who.”
“For ten thousand dollars you had better tell me who, and a lot more,” said Guido. “I’ll give you half the money now, and half later when you bring me a fossil. I need proof. Major Czerinski is not going to buy your fossil story without proof.”
“I will try,” said the spider guard. “But it will not be easy. The tent is guarded.”
“And find out why security is so tight if there is nothing but dust and bones in that tent,” demanded Guido. “Find out about the guard postings, too.”

* * * * *

Guido passed the information about the spiders’ secret tent to me, and I discussed the matter by phone with General Kalipetsis.
“I do not see any military value in prehistoric fossils,” said General Kalipetsis. “What would they do with old bones?”
“The guard said they take their history seriously,” I said. “Or maybe it’s all a lie, and they’re just jerking us around.”
“What history?” asked General Kalipetsis. “The spiders are not from New Colorado. We were here first. This was a dead planet before we arrived.”
“That is it!” exclaimed Captain Lopez, listening in on the conversation. “The dig is not prehistoric, and they are not looking for bones. The spiders are digging up old exoskeletons. They aim to prove that the spiders were here first, long before humanity terraformed New Colorado.”
“They could assert a rightful claim to the whole planet!” added General Kalipetsis. “That is not going to happen! I am sending more of the First Division to the New Gobi Desert. I want that dig stopped now.”

Chapter 3

“My name is James Grigg,” announced the field representative from Walmart. “I hope to locate a new superstore right here in New Gobi City. Next to the highway at the border would be perfect.”
I looked out my office window at the Golden Arches towering over Guido’s guard shack. “Sorry, but that spot has already been taken by the McDonald’s Corporation. Don’t worry. There are lots of other prime sites available.”
“Walmart needs that border site to properly serve both sides of the DMZ,” insisted Grigg. “General Kalipetsis assured me you could make it happen.”
“The hamburger flippers got here first,” I explained. “What can I say?”
“Would ten thousand dollars persuade you to change your mind?” asked Grigg. “I need that site.”
“Is that check or cash?” asked Captain Lopez.
“We don’t accept bribes,” I said, frowning at Lopez. “McDonald’s was here first. There is nothing I can do.”
“How about twenty thousand dollars and a complementary Sam’s Club membership card?” asked Grigg. “This is a very time-sensitive issue. I want to begin construction this week. Crews are already on the way. I was told I could work with you.”
“I can’t take your money,” I said. “But if you could do me a favor, I will see what I can do. The insurgency destroyed an automated lighthouse south of New Memphis. Order your construction crews to rebuild that lighthouse, and I will order McDonald’s to move their site.”
“Major Czerinski, we have a deal,” said Grigg, shaking my hand and briskly leaving to inspect the site of New Gobi’s new Walmart superstore.
“What are you going to tell McDonald’s?” asked Captain Lopez.
“Place Ronald Carter under arrest and bring him to me,” I ordered. “Tell Carter he is under arrest for health code violations.”

* * * * *
Captain Lopez and a squad of legionnaires arrested Ronald Carter at the construction site and dragged him to my office. All construction was halted.

“This is outrageous!” complained Carter. “What is the meaning of this?”

“There has been an Escherichia coli bacterial outbreak at the last restaurant you opened,” I said.

“At the DMZ site near Waterstone?” asked Carter. “I was not advised of this.”

“That’s the one!” I exclaimed, pounding my desk with my fist. “You have now been advised. I am holding you personally responsible. And, as a precaution, I am stopping all construction of your new McDonald’s until your legal problems are resolved.”

“What legal problems?” asked Carter. “How much? I’ll just pay the fine and be done with it.”

“We have orders to shoot you at dawn,” advised Captain Lopez.

“This is a joke. Right?” asked Carter. “It better be a joke. I am a well-respected businessman, and a personal friend of General Kalipetsis. Can’t we work something out?”

“I don’t see how,” I said. “Someone has to take the blame. The E. coli has even killed spiders.”

“How come this is the first I have heard of an E. coli outbreak?” asked Carter.

“There are national security issues,” I said. “We are trying to prevent a panic, and possibly even a new war. If the spiders think you tried to use biological warfare against them, it would be bad for everyone. They are very sensitive about fecal contamination.”

“Brown floaters in the New Mississippi River drive them crazy,” added Captain Lopez.

“Please, I’ll do anything to help,” said Carter. “What can I do?”

“McDonald’s needs to keep a low profile for now,” I suggested. “Out of sight, out of mind. Quietly move your construction site and those Golden Arches away from the border crossing. The Arthropodan commander has already announced he will blow it up with cannon fire.”

“I’ll do it,” said Carter. “Anything else?”

“The spiders want a million dollars compensation for families of the deceased,” added Captain Lopez, greedily. “It’s a fair amount. We negotiated them down from fifty million dollars.”

“I can authorize that,” said Carter. “It’s fair.”

“We will try to hush up the matter as much as possible,” I said. “But there will always be rumors. Do not discuss this with anyone.”

“Don’t worry,” said Carter. “I won’t. Thank you so much for your cooperation and help in this matter.”

As Carter left, I turned to Captain Lopez. “What next? I feel like I have been appointed Mayor of Tammany Hall.”

“You are the Military Governor of New Gobi City,” replied Captain Lopez. “I am the mayor.”

“What?” I asked, rising to greet the next person through my door, and to shake his hand.

“I am Pastor Jim. I hope to be the first to build a church in New Gobi. I have already picked a site on a hill overlooking the whole valley,” announced Pastor Jim.

“What denomination?” I asked.

“The Church of Scientology,” said Pastor Jim. “Being leading citizens of New Gobi, I expect both of you to attend my first services.”

“I’m catholic,” announced Captain Lopez, crossing himself. “It would be a sin for me to attend. I can’t afford any more bad marks, if I expect to get into Heaven.”

“I do my praying at the casino,” I replied. “And I make my donations there, too.”

“There are no casinos in New Gobi,” advised Pastor Jim. “Until one is built, you will attend services and be prominently seated in the front pew. There is a whole lot of moral rejuvenation that needs to be done around here, and I will start with you. In spite of what I have heard, I believe you are basically good and have unlimited capability for good. I will work to help you attain brotherhood with the universe through the technology of the mind.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, feeling trapped. What did I do to deserve this?

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Chapter 4

“Do you know anything about an E. coli outbreak?” asked General Kalipetsis, during my weekly report. “The
spider governor personally asked me about it. He says there are rumors of thousands of casualties, and that the
Legion is doing a massive cover-up.”

“No,” I said. “Something that big could not be covered up. Everything is normal here.”

“I thought so, too,” said General Kalipetsis. “The governor also complained about that new lighthouse you had
built. He appreciates the new lighthouse, but is complaining about the flashing neon sign that says, ‘SHOP
WALMART. Only 435 MILES NORTH TO NEW MEMPHIS.’ The governor claims it looks tacky and is a blight
on the landscape.”

“We are supposed to promote trade and economic activity along the DMZ,” I explained. “Technically, the New
Mississippi River is part of the DMZ. And Walmart built the lighthouse for free.”

“Quite right,” agreed General Kalipetsis. “We are well within the terms of the peace treaty on that. I’ll tell him
to stuff it if he doesn’t like the sign.”

“The governor would gripe if I hung him with a new rope.”

“What is the latest on that fossil dig?” asked General Kalipetsis.

“I’m working on it,” I replied. “Patience. This will take time.”

“You don’t have time,” said General Kalipetsis. “Military Intelligence says the spiders are sending
reinforcements. I want that fossil dig destroyed. Make it look like an accident.”

“I’m still trying to confirm it is really fossils under the tent,” I said. “Anything else?”

General Kalipetsis checked his list. “Ah, yes. Did you threaten to shoot someone from the McDonald’s
Corporation?” he asked.

“McDonald’s? The aircraft people?”

“I’m not sure,” said General Kalipetsis. “Have you threatened to shoot anyone lately?”

“Not recently,” I said. “We really need to get a handle on rumor control. It seems I spend half my time putting
out fires that don’t exist.”

“I know how you feel,” said General Kalipetsis, dismissing the rest of the complaints, obviously satisfied that
all was going well. “Call me as soon as you get an update on that fossil dig.”

* * * * *

Satellite photos showed spider trucks loading and unloading plastic containers at the large tent. Inferred
imagery revealed a substantial heat source inside the tent. This did not lend credence to the spider guard’s claim
about it only being a prehistoric dig. Even so, the spider guard brought Guido a small flat rock that had the imprint
of a winged arachnid-looking creature on it. When General Kalipetsis was informed of the fossil, he gave approval
for a commando strike on the tent.

Captain Lopez led a team of legionnaires carrying explosives. They parachuted across the border at night and
approached the tent from the back side. They quietly slit the tent canvas and entered undetected, finding large metal
tanks connected to long copper tubing. Sacks of sugar and ground corn were everywhere. Despite the fans
circulating the air, the heat and smell of fermenting corn mash was oppressive.

“This is not a fossil dig of any kind,” commented Captain Lopez. “It’s some kind of chemical refinery.”

“It’s a still,” said Corporal Williams. “In fact, there are several stills. The spiders are making moonshine.”

“How do you know that?” asked Captain Lopez.

“I’m from Tennessee,” said Corporal Williams. “I am an expert on such things.”

Private John Iwo Jima Wayne, a spider legionnaire, picked up a plastic bottle and took a swig. “It’s good
whiskey, too.”

“Do not drink that,” ordered Corporal George Rambo Washington, another spider legionnaire. “It could be
poisonous.”

“Only to a teetotaler like you,” sneered Private Wayne, taking another swig. “I say we load up as much as we
can and carry our spoils out of here.”

“Knock it off!” ordered Captain Lopez. “No more drinking! Set your charges. We are blowing the whole
operation up.”

“That’s a damn crying shame,” complained Corporal Williams, gulping a swig. “I’m taking some of this shine
back with me for evidence. Brew this good must be illegal.”

“Why do we have to blow it up?” asked Private Wayne. “It seems like such a waste. Besides, we might start a
war.”

“My orders are to destroy everything in the tent,” said Captain Lopez. “I did not jump out of a perfectly good
airplane, hike through the desert at night, and risk my life behind enemy lines to not blow something up. Set the
charges now.”
An hour later, a huge mushroom fireball lit up the sky on the spider side of New Gobi City. The spider commander immediately made accusations of Legion treachery. I denied involvement, suggesting that the explosion was accidental. I mentioned all the secondary explosions and asked the commander what was stored in the tent that was supposed to house only an archeological dig. The commander just shook with anger and stormed off, muttering about how I would be sorry I was ever hatched. The border situation was tense for days, as both sides moved armor into position.

Guido finally defused the situation by spreading rumors that the sabotage was a Mob hit. Guido explained that New Memphis gangsters were upset about the moonshine competition, and this was a stern warning that future bootlegging operations would not be tolerated without a negotiated cut of the profits.

The spider commander thought this new information to be plausible, and retracted his accusations against the Legion. He did not even bother to send a report to the governor or to the general staff. This was a local matter than need not concern them. The spider commander swore vengeance on the New Memphis Mafioso responsible for this latest outrage. The human pestilence Mafioso that did this were going to get whacked.

* * * * *

NEWS RELEASE

NEW MEMPHIS: Insurgents set off a truck bomb today, destroying a brewery belonging to reputed Mafioso kingpin Rudy “Johnny Walker” Juardo. A note left at a local New Memphis radio station stated the blast was part of the ongoing insurgency campaign to hit human pestilence economic targets. This is newsworthy because it indicates a shift in tactics. The insurgents are no longer restricting themselves to attacking McDonald’s, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Taco Bell. General Kalipetsis called the attack barbarous, and vowed he would not rest until the culprits were hanged. Several leads in the case are being pursued, including saliva DNA collected from the envelope that contained the note. The DNA is being checked against both the Earth and Arthropodan databases. Local bar patrons surveyed were in agreement that no punishment could be too harsh for these evildoers.

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Chapter 5

Officially, the Arthropodan Empire did not support the insurgency against the Legion. The latest peace treaty dividing New Colorado included a pact to work together against terrorism. This was deemed in the interests of the Empire because some insurgents wanted independence from both Arthropoda and Old Earth. That did not mean, however, that Arthropoda did not sympathize with the insurgents in regard to certain border disputes. For example, New Memphis was a human pestilence enclave hundreds of miles up river from the DMZ. The Legion had refused to leave this mixed-species city at the end of the last round of fighting. To expedite the peace process, the human pestilence was allowed to keep New Memphis, but Arthropoda considered that abomination to be temporary at best.

When the Legion submitted a DNA sample from the letter claiming spider responsibility for the New Memphis terrorist bombing, Arthropodan Military Intelligence routinely checked the sample against their database. When the sample matched a local commander in New Gobi, it caused outrage. When Military Intelligence realized this commander was related to the Emperor, it caused alarm. When the governor was told the local commander was the same incompetent commander he had exiled to the New Gobi Desert, he was angry. The governor sent his military intelligence officer to New Gobi to handle the matter personally and discreetly.

The DNA information was not given to the Legion, and already General Kalipetsis was accusing the governor of not being cooperative.

To the spider military intelligence officer, it seemed like New Gobi was getting more than its share of attention lately. The military buildup there was still unexplainable. Satellite photos showed extensive Legion construction projects, and the Highway to Nowhere was almost complete. Also, the posting of that human pestilence Major Czerinski was a sure sign of trouble. A recent explosion on the Arthropodan side of the border, also detected by satellite, was being dismissed by the local commander as a sewer gas incident. This was the same commander whose DNA matched the New Memphis investigation, and his explanation was an obvious lie. The time had come for the military intelligence officer to see for himself what the hell was going on in New Gobi. If the local commander
needed to be shot, the military intelligence officer would gladly do that himself, too.

A dust storm swept through New Gobi. It was not an uncommon event. However, this dust storm had uncovered something unusual. A spider patrol brought in five legion parachutes from just outside the camp perimeter. The implication was obvious. Perhaps the spider commander had made a mistake about suspecting New Memphis Mafiosi of bombing his distilling operation. Maybe it was Czerinski and the Legion after all. Not that he could do anything about it now. A surprise inspection by the planetary military intelligence officer was putting all projects on hold. The commander waited at the airstrip to greet the military intelligence officer and give him a short tour of Hell (New Gobi). They saluted and shook claws at the tarmac.

“Welcome to New Gobi,” said the spider commander. “Stay on the paved surface. Poisonous Gila monsters lurk under the soft sand. If you step on them, they will grip you in their jaws and not let go. Death will surely follow.”

“Oh?” said the military intelligence officer, alarmed and glancing about at the sandy New Gobi Desert that extended for miles. “We do not have such creatures in the North.”

“Gila monsters are just one of many things you have to get used to in New Gobi,” said the commander, enjoying his little lie. He could smell the discomfort and fear of the military intelligence officer. “Will you be staying long?”

“I hope not. I am here to talk to you about why you bombed a brewery in New Memphis. Also, I want an update on the military situation here in New Gobi. Why is the Legion sending its First Division to New Gobi?”

“Legion commandos blew up a supply tent. At first I thought it was a sewer gas explosion. But today we found the commandos’ parachutes. I believe the matter is connected to a New Memphis Mafia labor dispute. Rather than attacking the Legion and risking a military escalation, I hit the Mafia brewery in New Memphis.”

“You lie poorly,” accused the military intelligence officer. “You are under arrest for insubordination and treason.”

The commander drew his pistol and shot the military intelligence officer and his two aides. He ordered all three buried in the desert, along with the Legion parachutes. Now the spider commander could turn his attention to Major Czerinski and the Legion.

* * * * *

The grand opening of Walmart came off on schedule. In accordance with Walmart’s DMZ economic plan, the store opened to customers on both sides of the border. Unlike other Walmart stores, this one had a Military Demarcation Line (MDL) painted on the floor through the center of the store. Customers were instructed not to pass across the MDL without a visa, under penalty of being shot. Spider border guards patrolled the MDL, particularly watchful of shoppers straying across the line.

Thousands of tourists were attracted by what was soon called the Cold War Walmart. Tourists were warned that the stern spider guards had no sense of humor, and to not harass them. These were not the Queen’s Foot Guards at Buckingham Palace that everyone made faces at. Several times Walmart was cleared of customers when spider guards fired warning shots into the ceiling because of teenagers giving them the one-fingered salute.

Walmart erected a 328-foot flagpole on the American side. It flew a large star-swirl-and-stripes Galactic American flag. Not to be outdone, the spider commander erected a 525-foot flagpole on the Arthropodan side. This huge Arthropodan flag, an eight-point star on a green background, was a wonder to behold, weighing 595 pounds. I made inquiries as to whether the spider flag and pole could withstand a New Gobi dust storm. I was told yes, but it was doubtful the flag would survive in a rainstorm. The added weight to the flag caused by moisture would surely topple the entire structure. I diligently checked weather reports every day, hoping for rain. In the desert, no such luck.

I sensed the spider commander continued to be a bit testy about his still being blown up. Border guards were rude and anxious to provoke incidents. I scheduled a face-to-face meeting between the spider commander and myself for next week. I hoped there would be no incidents between now and then. The skies were still mostly clear, but I could see a few puffs of moisture over the distant mountains. I remained hopeful, despite historical rainfall levels of zero to less than an inch per year.

In spite of tension along the border, Guido seemed to get along just fine with the lower ranking spider guards. I suspect he was developing his usual black-market contacts. The spider team leaders were another matter. The spiders planted a large fruit tree at Guido’s border crossing, next to the MDL. Guido did not mind the fruit tree because it provided shade from the oppressive sun’s heat. But part of the tree extended across the MDL to the Legion side, obscuring Guido’s view of oncoming traffic. To solve this minor problem, Guido pruned the tree with makeshift hedge clippers. As always, Guido’s monitor dragon Spot came along, happy to follow his master.
wherever he went.

Immediately a spider team leader confronted Guido. “Human pestilence, stop that!” demanded the team leader. “That tree is Imperial property on our side of the MDL.”

“Get lost,” replied Guido. “The branches hang over the line on our side.”

The team leader drew his pistol and shot Guido in the head. Fortunately, the bullet glanced off Guido’s Kevlar helmet. Guido fell unconscious to the ground. Spot immediately struck the team leader, tearing him apart. Guido’s partner back at the guard shack, Corporal Williams, ran out to assist. Blood streamed down Guidos’s face. A spider guard also ran to the scene. As the spider was about to shoot the monitor dragon, Corporal Williams fired his assault rifle, killing the guard. Corporal Williams then dragged Guido by the collar to cover, back across the checkpoint.

An Arthropodan tank soon responded to a general alarm, as did a Legion armored car. They both fired missiles and machine guns before retreating behind buildings, establishing defensive positions. Both sides called for air support. Panicked customers at Walmart streamed out both sides of the store with looted merchandise, adding to the confusion.

My phone rang. As I reached to answer, an artillery round smashed into my office, burying me in rubble. I was oblivious to the escalating fighting at the border crossing for the rest of the afternoon. Captain Lopez and a work crew dug me out later. Most of the buildings on both sides of the border were damaged. Only Walmart had gone unscathed. I ordered constantina wire laid across the shopping aisles dividing the store. Also, I was informed a Legion helicopter gunship had been shot down and its crew captured.

“What happened?” I asked, dusting myself off. “How come it took so long to dig me out? I thought I had been forgotten about.”

“Corporal Tonelli got into some sort of confrontation at the border crossing,” explained Captain Lopez, inspecting the debris. “I will be reviewing the helmet camera recordings. It is amazing you are still alive. Look at this place.”

“Believe it,” I said. “Tell the spider commander I want to move our meeting up to tomorrow. We both have issues to discuss that cannot wait.”

Then, miraculously, it rained. I set up a lawn chair in front of my destroyed office building, and watched the Arthropodan flagpole. I drank a beer as I waited. The rain came down in torrents. It didn’t take long. I could hear the metal bending as the gargantuan Arthropodan flag absorbed rainwater. The additional weight violently snapped the flagpole. It crashed into the spider side of Walmart, putting a hole in the roof. I raised my beer in a toast to the rain. Legionnaires cheered.

Even though the shooting had stopped, late that night, spider commandos came up through a tunnel and blew up my newly completed swimming pool. The explosion woke me from a sound sleep. As dawn approached, Legion commandos placed charges around the trunk of the offending fruit tree at the border crossing. The resulting explosion toppled the tree onto the spider side of the DMZ, where it caught fire. *Good riddance!*
“What is wrong with digging up fossils?” asked the spider commander. “We will do as we please on our side of the DMZ. You are the most anal human pestilence I have ever met.”

“You captured a helicopter crew,” I said, changing the subject. “I want them repatriated immediately.”

“Not until you sign a written statement admitting you ordered your legionnaires to trespass on sovereign Arthropodan territory.” The spider commander slid the prepared statement halfway across the table.

As I picked up the document, my pen slipped from my hand. It rolled across the table, passing the MDL. As I reached for the pen, everyone reached for their weapons. I hesitated, letting the pen continue to roll. The spider commander picked the pen up and politely handed it back to me.

“I am signing under protest,” I commented, scribbling my signature and sliding the papers back across the MDL. “If the helicopter crew has been abused, I will hold you personally responsible.”

“The Empire does not mistreat defenseless prisoners,” stated the spider commander. “This is unlike what you human pestilence have done countless times. Your atrocities are well documented.”

“Anything else?” I asked. “I assume truck traffic and commerce can resume in a week or so after the rubble has been cleared from the streets? Oil and raw materials can come through?”

“I want that fruit tree replaced,” demanded the spider commander. “And I want a guarantee that any future tree at the border crossing will not be molested.”

“I want my swimming pool fixed,” I demanded, too.

“Where did you get the water to fill a swimming pool?” asked the spider commander. “We have been drilling for months, and have found nothing but dust.”

“Did you use a water witcher?” I asked. “It is money well spent to have a dowser witch for water before drilling.”

“I have heard you human pestilence use dowsing sticks or rods to locate water, but it is not based on any scientific empirical laws or forces of nature,” argued the spider commander. “The movement of the stick is just ideomotor action.”

“Whatever,” I said. “We found water, and you didn’t.”

“Where can I find a water witcher?” asked the spider commander.

“Look in the Yellow Pages for all I care,” I said, ending the meeting. “And the wire fence inside Walmart stays up!”

* * * * *

After the meeting, Captain Lopez and I took a walk to inspect the damage. “That spider commander really pisses me off,” I commented. “I almost got killed when he blasted my office.”

“Do you want to know what really upsets me?” asked Captain Lopez. “It came to me when we were digging you out of the rubble.”

“Yeah?” I asked. “What upsets you? That I’m a tough nut to kill?”

“Close,” said Captain Lopez. “You rose out of that rubble like a phoenix. We have been through a lot together. We have been shot, cut, burned, crushed, and captured. Age is beginning to catch up with me. But you? You are not aging. I dismissed the rumors at first. But it is true. You are not aging. How is that so? Share your secret with me, por favor.”


“I will not drop it,” insisted Captain Lopez. “Although some people don’t think so, I know you can be killed. How about I put that to the test?”

“Are you threatening me?” I asked. “If so, it will be your last threat.”

“Is it so wrong to seek the Fountain of Youth?” asked Captain Lopez. “I am a conquistador. I will always seek the Fountain of Youth.”

“Whatever.”

“How many times have I saved your life?” asked Captain Lopez. “Who more than me deserves to know your secret?”

“The technology has either been hidden or lost,” I confessed. “It might be held in a vault on Old Earth. Maybe someday, if you are promoted to general or elected President, they will share it with you.”

“That is not likely,” said Captain Lopez. “How about I just seize the technology?”

“You and whose army?”

“Life is short. The best part of life is even shorter. We will talk about this later. Mark my words. I will find and seize this technology.”
Pastor Jim’s Church of Scientology was built on a hill overlooking New Gobi. As ordered, I sat in the first pew. I made sure other legionnaires shared my plight. I ordered Captain Lopez to be present. His capacity as a city administrator and leading citizen of New Gobi City required his presence. Pastor Jim confidently addressed his new flock. “Welcome. I am glad to see so many young faces here today. I am proud to be among the first wave of galactic pioneers to settle New Colorado. There are no limits to what we will achieve. There is no holding us back. We pioneers realize we must live life to know life.

“Also, I am honored to see so many members of the United States Galactic Federation Foreign Legion in attendance. In the first pew I see Major Czerinski and Captain Lopez, both highly decorated heroes of the Legion. Their exploits are known to all across the galaxy. I also see Corporal Tonelli, who just got out of the hospital. I am glad you are recovering nicely, Corporal. Guido Tonelli, also a highly decorated war hero, once captured two dozen insurgents single-handed during the Battle of New Disneyland. I see the courageous Corporal George Rambo Washington, the first spider to join the Foreign Legion. I am glad your two lovely wives, Pam and Bam, could attend services, too. Welcome all!

“You might have noticed a self-propelled howitzer and various missiles and launchers located next to our church. Do not be alarmed. This being a strategic hill overlooking New Gobi, I have consented to the placement of artillery on God’s hill to assist the Legion in defending our community. Major Czerinski has assured me that soon engineers will dig tunnels and emplacements to make the artillery and missiles less conspicuous.

“What may think that consenting to have my church exist side by side with such destructive weapons is inconsistent with our message of peace and brotherhood. Some may think that Major Czerinski would not have taken no for an answer when he requested I share my hill.” Uneasy laughter filtered from the audience. “However, I am proud to do my part to make New Gobi safe, and to deter attack from across the border. This should come as no surprise. The founder of the Church of Scientology, L. Ron Hubbard, was himself a decorated United States naval officer wounded in combat during World War II. So, certainly I am not above doing my part to help. And if my church is destroyed in the next war, the Legion and I will merely rebuild. But, not before coming down from my hill like Moses and kicking that Arthropodan commander’s ass!” Wild applause followed.

“This month we have seen great strides take place in New Gobi, and I expect to participate in more. In addition to this fine church, we have seen the construction of our first grocery store, tavern, portable nuclear power stations, a public school, bank, ATM, and traffic light. Soon we will even have our own zip code. Together, united in the technology of the mind, we will build a great community for our families here in New Gobi.

“I will cut short my sermon because I do not want to scare new members off with my usual fire and brimstone. We have organized a potluck, and there is a lot of good eating ahead of us. I am told that Pam and Bam’s pudding goo is especially tasty. I’ll try anything once. I expect to see all of you here next week. But before we join the potluck, let us bow our heads in a moment of respectful silence and prayer for those legionnaires who gave their lives this week in defense of our country so that we may remain free. May their spirits live on.”

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The spider commander had a new fruit tree planted at the border crossing. The fruit tree was an old Arthropodan symbol representing the Empire’s steady growth and strength. Guido made sure the tree was far enough back so that its branches did not cross the DMZ demarcation line. Guido’s spider guard buddy was back on duty at the Arthropodan border crossing shack.

“I cannot believe it,” griped the spider guard. “I take one day off, and you start a war!”

“We didn’t start it,” replied Guido. “But we sure as hell won it.”

“In your human pestilence dreams,” scoffed the spider guard. “Did you know about the grand opening of the Angry Onion Tavern? I hear there will be live music and lots of babes.”

“The Hell’s Angels Corporation owns it,” said Guido. “It’s a biker bar. We are finally getting some culture here in New Gobi. All we need now is a decent pizza parlor.”

“Are you going to the grand opening?” asked the spider guard. “There is going to be a free salad bar.”

“Probably. I’ll be there if you spiders don’t start another war between now and then. I think that commander of
yours is wound a bit too tight."

“Most officers are,” said the spider guard, noticing movement behind Guido. About two blocks on the human pestilence side of the border, steam rose from the ground. It brought traffic to a halt.

“What is that?” asked Guido. “A geyser? I didn’t think we had geothermal activity under New Gobi.”

“You are right,” said the spider guard. “We do not. Get into your bunker. That is one of our tunnels caving in.”

Guido sounded the alarm. Infantry and armor massed at the border again. This time wary troops held back on shooting first and asking questions later. Several spider diggers emerged from the tunnel with their claws up, and were taken prisoner. In the interests of peace and not having my office bombed again, I released them. But, they were only let go after their commander signed a document stating his commandos were intentionally trespassing on United States Galactic Federation territory, and that the spider commander was a bad, nasty ogre who climbed out from under a rock and regularly had sex with farm animals. I slipped that last part into the fine print, and prominently displayed the document on the wall of my office. It quickly became a tourist attraction.

* * * * *

Our personal Cold War continued. The spider commander built a Grand Victory Arch at the border crossing. The Arch looked impressive from the Legion side, but it was merely a hollow façade. Not to be outdone, I had a scaled-down version of the Statue of Liberty built facing the spiders from the border crossing. However, instead of holding a torch, Madam Liberty was shaking her fist at the spiders. My first inclination was for her to be giving the one-fingered salute, but Captain Lopez talked me out of that. He said it would be in bad taste. I’m sure he was right. The statue was impressive enough to be a tourist attraction. It rivaled the Cold War Walmart as both a tourist attraction and photo stop.

* * * * *

I met with Legion engineers and geologists.

“We are still getting technology-driven seismic activity,” explained the engineer. “At first we thought it was more spider tunneling because it was on our side of the border. But now I think the spiders are angling their well drilling equipment under the border in hopes of tapping into an aquifer on our side of the DMZ.”

“Can we stop or intercept their drills?” I asked. “I do not want the spiders stealing from our water source.”

“That would be impossible,” said the engineer. “The only way to stop their drills is to attack their equipment on the surface.”

“That can be arranged.”

“I have some more interesting news,” said one of the geologists. “The source of our water is an underground river. It runs for hundreds of miles.”

“Is that why there is no water on their side of the border?” I asked.

“Most certainly the river crosses the border at some point,” explained the geologist. “The spiders just have not yet found where it turns north.”

“How much water is down there?” I asked. “Enough for a large city?”

“That is the exciting part,” said the geologist. “The underground river may be as large as the New Mississippi River. There is enough water down there to irrigate the entire New Gobi Desert.”

“Is that something we want to do?” I asked.

“I thought that was why we are here,” said the geologist. “There is no gold or oil in the New Gobi. But the New Gobi’s year round growing season makes it invaluable if you have a dependable source of water. As an area for growing food crops and raising livestock, the New Gobi could be turned into a paradise that rivals Old Earth California. Its potential is unlimited.”

“Should we be buying real estate?” asked Captain Lopez. “Do you think we could grow oranges and raise cattle?”

“I don’t see why not,” answered the geologist. “Add water to the mix, and the New Gobi would be perfect for that.”

“My hacienda will grow oranges for as far as the eye can see,” said Captain Lopez. “I will be the Marquis of the Valley. We need to keep this a secret just among us until we can buy our land. If this information gets out, the price of land will skyrocket.”

“Who owns the New Gobi Desert?” I asked.

“The United States Galactic Federation owns all public land on our half of New Colorado,” replied the geologist. “Anyone can file a claim for free land if they have a plan to develop it. However, water rights are held in
trust for the public good and regulated by the Office of the Governor.”

“Dios maldita sea,” fumed Captain Lopez. “There is always a catch to prevent my prosperity.”

“The Office of the Governor is General Kalipetsis,” I said. “We will have to bring him in on any land speculation. He can seal the deal on water rights.”

“No way,” argued Captain Lopez. “That won’t be necessary. When word gets out, a land rush will happen. We want that. By then we will already own the best land. General Kalipetsis will have no choice but to sell water rights to the new settlers.”

“What about the spiders?” I asked. “I am not cutting that spider commander in on any deal.”

“The same thing will happen on their side of the border once they tap the underground river,” said the geologist. “There may be border disputes. We should survey the border and make sure boundaries are clearly marked.”

“Can we buy land on the spider side?” I asked.

“That would be a risky investment,” said the geologist. “You might consult a spider lawyer on that. Being that the spiders have nationalized human mining and oil operations in the occupied North, I don’t think your investment would be secure.”

“It might be if the Arthropodan Governor ceded the New Gobi Desert to us,” I suggested. “Maybe we could work out a land swap deal with them.”

“Don’t be greedy,” said Captain Lopez. “There are riches enough for us all.”

* * * * *

The spider commander looked up at the artillery and missile launchers on the hill next to that gaudy human pestilence church. It will be an easy target, he thought. At night, the light from that church can be seen for a hundred miles. They think their artillery will be safe hiding next to a church? Or under it, in tunnels? Maybe I will just nuke the whole hill.

The spider commander’s thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of his engineers. He turned his attention and anger to them. “Why has the human pestilence found water, and all you can find is dust? They have found so much water, they waste it on a public fountain next to that obscene statue at the border crossing. The fools throw coins in the water. I saw it with my own eight eyes.”

“I do not understand it,” said the engineer. “The geology is the same on both sides of the border. The ground out here is like cement, but the water table should be at the same level on both sides of the border. Maybe they have tapped into an isolated aquifer. Or maybe we are just having bad luck.”

“Get a human pestilence water witcher if you have to,” said the spider commander. “I want water! If I do not get water soon, you will learn the true and painful meaning of what it means to have bad luck.”

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Chapter 7

The Angry Onion Tavern, like Walmart, was divided by the Military Demarcation Line (MDL). Unlike Walmart, bar patrons were allowed to cross the MDL and mingle. It just was not practical to shoot drunks who staggered across the line. The spider commander and I were both ordered to make the concept work. It was hoped that the Hell’s Angels Corporation, having both human and spider membership, could further dialogue between humanity and the spiders. In other words, the eggheads had some sociological theories they wanted to prove, and we were the experiment.

I pointed out to General Kalipetsis that there were already plenty of well functioning organizations that had both spider and human membership, such as the Foreign Legion, various sheriffs’ offices, the Fraternal Order of Elks, and even the Mafia. I argued that giving credibility and backing to the Hell’s Angels, a possibly dangerous gang of drug dealers, extortionists, and anarchists, might be a mistake. General Kalipetsis said the Hell’s Angels concerts had positive results, and that the decision had already been negotiated and made by the President and the Emperor. Joint projects by humanity and the spiders were to be given priority and encouragement, even if they involved humans and spiders drinking themselves blind at a biker bar on the MDL. “End of discussion.”
The first familiar face I saw at the Angry Onion was Pastor Jim. Great. “What are you doing here?” I asked.
“I’m trying to get laid,” slurred Pastor Jim, eyeing some biker babes standing at the bar. “Want to be my wingman?”
“I’ll pass,” I said, finding a table by the wall so I could protect my back. Captain Lopez and Sergeant Green soon joined me.
“Do you think there will be any fights?” asked Sergeant Green, checking the room for the usual suspects. “I’ll bet a month’s pay Privates Krueger and Wayne get into it with someone tonight.”
“I know there is going to be at least one fight tonight,” I said, as I downed my first whiskey. “Because I am going to be in it.”
“You need to set a better example for your men,” suggested Captain Lopez. “You should not be brawling like a recruit.”
“As soon as that spider commander walks in, I’m going to carve him up,” I promised. “That will be example enough for my men.”

About that time, several Arthropodan marines sat at the bar next to Private Krueger. The Angry Onion was thick with spiders. A marine sized up Private Krueger and made a comment about Krueger being too short to sit at the bar, and that he should go home and suck milk with the hatchlings. Private Krueger knocked the spider marine off his barstool with one punch. Other spider marines jumped Private Krueger. Sergeant Green ran over to separate the fighters and to save Krueger. Spider Hell’s Angels bouncers spun Private Krueger and the spider marine into web cocoons and hung them upside down from the ceiling.

When the spider commander finally arrived, I chugged another drink and staggered in his direction. Captain Lopez nodded to Sergeant Green, who nodded to Corporal Washington. They grabbed me just before I got to the spider commander. I threw my bottle. It missed the spider commander, but smashed off his table. Bouncers hung me upside down from the ceiling, too. I spent the evening cursing Lopez, and thrashing about next to Private Krueger.

“It’s not so funny now, is it?” asked Krueger as he swung back and forth, struggling with his restraints. “Welcome to my world, sir.”

“I am new here,” said the spider marine. “New Gobi is an interesting place. I think I like it.”

“I wonder,” said the spider marine, “what it would look like to see a traitor like you hanging by your neck from the top of that abomination? Scum like you even smell like your human pestilence masters.”

Private Wayne immediately pulled a large jagged combat knife from behind his belt and took a swipe at the spider marine’s throat. The spider marine adroitly stepped back to avoid the knife, and drew his own knives. Bouncers fired shotgun nets at both spiders, and clubbed them into submission after they fell to the floor. Both were strung up and hung upside down next to me and Krueger. I laughed at Private Wayne the rest of the night.

Towards the end of the evening, the spider commander and his aides came over to gloat. By now about a dozen disorderly spider marines and legionnaires were hanging from the ceiling. Private Krueger vomited on the table below, scattering legionnaires, and upsetting Captain Lopez.

“You are a disgrace,” said the spider commander. “You set a poor example for your soldiers. No wonder they are so poorly disciplined.”

“That’s what I told him,” said Captain Lopez, too drunk to get up from his table, and still upset about Krueger.
“If you are the best leadership the Legion has to offer, defeating the human pestilence should be easy,” added the spider commander. “I look forward to the day.”

“Screw you!” I yelled, thrashing about again as I swayed back and forth.

The spider commander then threw his drink in my face. The vodka stung my eyes, and I did not see what happened next. Pastor Jim lunged forward, hitting the spider commander on the head with a beer bottle. Bouncers immediately grabbed Pastor Jim and strung him up. They grabbed the spider commander, too, but he was bleeding so badly he had to be carted off to the hospital for stitches and duct tape. For the rest of the night I had to listen to Pastor Jim babble a sermon about the psychology and technology of the mind, and God. Next time just shoot me.

At closing time, biker babes, human and spider, chose from us hanging in cocoons. Pastor Jim was carried off by two spider biker babes. The biker babes were all giddy and laughing, but Pastor Jim was screaming and yelling for help. We did not see Pastor Jim for a week. When he did finally show up, it was at church services. He looked a little worn out, but was in good spirits. Several of his biker babes were also in attendance, sitting in the first row, singing Praise the Lord louder than most.

Private Wayne was also carried off by biker babes. He did not seem to mind, though. In fact, if I didn’t know better, I’d say he already knew most of the biker babes. How could that be? I looked over at Private Krueger. Private Krueger was unconscious, but biker babes carried him off, too.

A particularly large spider biker babe eyed me, and cut me down. Her exoskeleton was painted green and purple, and she was very drunk.

“Can I buy you another drink?” I asked, trying not to panic.

“Yes you may, you lovely hot human fur ball,” she gushed. “One for the road. Then I am carrying you to my place. I am a traditional old-fashioned female.”

“Cut my hand free,” I suggested. “I have money in my boot for a six pack to go.”

“I do not think so,” said the biker babe, checking my boot for the money, and finding my throwing knife. “Look at what I found. You like to play with knives! Me too, love!”

Sex with an alien species can be a horrifying, traumatic event. What that spider female did and threatened to do with her fangs and mandibles was terrifying. The upside was that I was so drunk, I didn’t care, and even started to get into it. I think she drugged me, too, saying it would enhance my performance. Bitch! They’re never satisfied.

When the sun came up, I woke and found myself alone, naked, on the ground in front of my office. Passersby stared, but dared not stop. I guess maybe Captain Lopez was right. I really should start setting a better example for my legionnaires.

Chapter 8

The spider commander ordered his engineers to dig their tunnels deeper. The Legion turned the tunnel cave-in next to Walmart into a tourist attraction. The spider commander wanted his next tunnel to reach the human pestilence church up on the hill. He could see the Legion engineers tunneling into the hill as they built up their fortifications to conceal more rocket-launchers and artillery.

The spider commander plotted to plant a tactical nuke under that hill, but the Governor of the North Territory denied his request for nukes. In the DMZ, only the Air Wing had access to nukes. Fine. It did not matter if the governor did not trust him, or still held a grudge. Conventional explosives could easily destroy that hill and all the human pestilence artillery on it.

The governor kept asking about his missing military intelligence officer. The spider commander replied that the military intelligence officer was still missing in action from the Battle of New Gobi. The spider commander said he had cadaver-sniffing monitor dragons searching the rubble looking for him. What more could he do? If the military intelligence officer got caught on the Legion side of the DMZ, he could only hope for the best. Everyone knew how the human pestilence abused prisoners of war. So far, the Legion denied having any prisoners in custody, and had returned all bodies.

Thinking of the Legion reminded the spider commander of the wound on his head. That human pestilence would pay for that with his life. He looked in the mirror. The stitches were healing nicely. Headquarters had denied the spider commander’s request to declare the injuries as combat related. The medal of valor would have looked good in his file. He was convinced the governor did have it in for him. First, the governor exiled him to this
godforsaken place. Then, he denied him any chance for glory. The spider commander fumed at the incompetence of
the governor. The human pestilence were getting a stronger foothold every day, and all the governor did was send
him a few worthless Air Wing pilots.

Today the spider commander went to his newest tunnel to inspect progress for himself. A good commander gets
his hands dirty, he told himself. This tunnel went deeper and farther than the others to avoid Legion detection. The
spider commander gloated about being ahead of schedule. The engineers were using the newest state-of-the-art
tunnel boring equipment. The spider commander talked to his chief engineer deep down in the bowels of the tunnel.
Most certainly they were across the MDL. As they talked, water dripped onto the spider commander’s head.

“Is it possible we have finally discovered a water source?” asked the spider commander. He reached up to the
ceiling and put a finger over the crack to plug the leak. Water dripped out a couple of inches away. The spider
commander plugged that drip too. The crack spread, and more water dripped into his face.

“Fix that,” ordered the spider commander, giving up and walking on. “Water is too precious to waste.”

The chief engineer lagged behind, studying the drip. He spit out some chewing gum and applied it to the crack.
The leak sealed. The chief engineer then followed the spider commander back up to the surface. Once topside, they
could hear a deep rumble from below. Excited reports of a cave-in blared over the engineer’s radio. Water burst
through the tunnel entrance, washing both spiders into a newly formed lake where a rock quarry used to be. After
they dragged themselves onto dry land, the commander turned to the chief engineer and said, “Back on Arthropoda
we have plumbers that can fix this sort of thing.”

* * * * *

Word got out quickly that there was water and fertile land in the New Gobi Desert. At least one million
colonists lined up in a semi-circle around the desert’s edge for a chance at the unassigned lands. Each section of the
New Gobi had been marked by the USGF Geological Survey. All the markers were part of a vast global positioning
system. When a colonist touched his identification card to any marker, his claim was automatically recorded in a
central computer.

It would be a race to the best claims. Colonists lined up for a thousand miles, waiting for the signal boom from the
cannons. At precisely noon as planned, Legion howitzers fired in unison. The ‘Boomers’ raced across the
sagebrush in dune buggies, trucks, cars, motorcycles, bikes, tractors, mobile homes, ultra-light fliers, on horseback,
and on foot. From a distance, the spectacle looked like a New Gobi dust storm. Legionnaires stationed in front of the
crowds for supervision ran for their lives to keep from being trampled.

Some canal survey work had already been started. Colonists staked claims to these areas first. Of course,
Captain Lopez and I had already claimed many prime sites. The Boomers pressed closer to the DMZ as available
claim sites were quickly snapped up. The colonists were told they could not enter the DMZ. Flags marked prohibited
areas. However, for many there was no turning back. The choice land behind them was already claimed. The
promise of free land in the DMZ was too much to resist. Not finding GPS markers, the Boomers piled rocks to post
their claims and mark boundaries. Still there was not enough land to satisfy everyone. About one hundred thousand
colonists crossed the MDL and staked claims on the Arthropodan side. There were no border guards to stop
Boomers from entering the Arthropodan Empire. Warning signs were ignored or knocked down. The first
Arthropodan marine patrols to arrive requested reinforcements and instructions. The spider commander for New
Gobi ordered the marines to defend the border and to arrest and/or evict all trespassers.

* * * * *

David Miranda and his oldest son were pounding fence posts on a hill overlooking their new ranch. Soon cattle
would be grazing on the shoulder-high grass. Prefab buildings had gone up quickly, and his large family had already
settled in. The next major project was drilling the well. Mom, dad, in-laws, sons, daughters, wife, cousins, brothers,
and sisters all had come with him for the free land. All that was needed was a willingness to work.

Miranda could see a dust trail on the horizon. It was getting closer. As an Arthropodan marine armored car
crested the adjacent hilltop, Miranda sent his son down the hill to warn the others and to radio for help. Miranda
glanced at his assault rifle leaning against a fence post as the armored car came to a stop twenty yards away. Damn
it, he thought. It is too late to even think about grabbing the rifle now.

“You are trespassing seventy-five miles north of the MDL,” announced a spider marine team leader. “You will
leave immediately or face arrest.”

“I am not going anywhere,” replied Miranda. “This is our land.”

“This land belongs to the Emperor,” insisted the spider team leader. “The Emperor orders you to leave.”
The team leader was about to say more, but was interrupted by two low-flying Legion jet fighter bombers responding to radio reports of spider marines confronting colonists. The jets’ flyover was close enough so that the pilots faces could be seen. They circled wide for another pass. Bolstered by the Legion presence, Miranda felt confident he could stand up to the spiders. “I am from Texas,” said Miranda. “And Texans do not back down. We’re staying.”

The spider team leader uneasily eyed the jets as they prepared for another low-level run. He radioed for Air Wing support. The smaller human pestilence that had run off was now returning up the hill with a third trespasser. Both human pestilence carried rifles. The team leader pointed to them. The machine gunner swiveled his turret from Miranda to the approaching human pestilence. He fired a burst of warning shots to halt their advance.

“No!” yelled Miranda, as he lunged for his assault rifle. Miranda grabbed the rifle, rolled, and came up firing on full automatic. The team leader was killed instantly. Bullets pinged harmlessly off the armored turret. The turret gunner swiveled back to Miranda and opened fire, cutting him in half. More bullets hit the turret from down the hill. The machine gunner fired at the two human pestilence approaching, killing them too.

Soon another armored car arrived. This one had mounted cannon. The spiders fired cannon and machine gun rounds at the buildings below. The Legion jets might still be circling, but appeared to have dipped low over another homestead. Arthropodan Air Wing fighter-bombers strafed the ranch and dropped napalm. Human pestilence ran out of the burning buildings. The turret gunner shot the humans as they scattered, to put them out of their misery. The spider marines cautiously advanced to search the debris and check for survivors. None were found. A spider marine noticed a recently beaten-down path through the high grass. He followed to investigate. Where the part grass ended, the spider looked about, seeing nothing. He squatted and watched stoically for movement.

Only inches behind the spider marine, a boy lay hidden in the grass. The spider had almost stepped on him. The spider could smell the boy, but could not locate him. Silently the boy slipped off his belt and looped it around the spider’s neck. The spider fell to the side as the boy tightened his grip, squeezing the life out of the bug. The spider’s exoskeleton, quite hard in places, offered little protection to the neck. The boy easily snapped the neck. The head dislodged from the shoulders. The boy carried it away into the high grass, a trophy of war.

The Legion jets could be heard coming closer. A spider team leader yelled out orders to move out. The armored cars raced off to the cover of another hill. They boy, now in shock, went to sleep in the cover of the high grass, still clutching the spider’s head. “Aranas. Yo los mature todo.”

* * * * *

When General Kalipetsis arrived in New Gobi, he immediately requested a meeting with the local spider commander. Tensions were high, and the President did not want another war. General Kalipetsis was at the point that he felt we should just get it over with and push the spiders from New Gobi while we still had them outnumbered. But he had his orders, and the spiders had some legitimate complaints. The spiders were objecting to the thousands of trespassers that spilled over from the land rush. He chuckled. Damn spiders have no sense of humor about trespassing. Also there were rumors and unconfirmed reports of a massacre north of the DMZ. Satellite reconnaissance had yet to confirm that, but a number of squatter shacks had been burned. Colonists were screaming bloody hell about it.

The spider commander, his aides, Captain Lopez, and I joined General Kalipetsis at the Walmart conference room. General Kalipetsis snickered about the MDL running through the conference table, and even through the ashtray. He adjusted the ashtray, noticing it was trespassing ever so slightly. The spider commander, trying not to show his sudden irritation, casually flicked the end of his human-made tobacco cigarette into the ashtray as he moved the ashtray back to its original position.

Thousands of human pestilence have invaded our territory while the Legion just looks on and does nothing,” started the spider commander. “This provocation will not be tolerated. Either you remove the squatters, or I will.”

“Don’t get your mandibles in a twist,” said General Kalipetsis, calmly. “If a few colonists got lost and strayed across the MDL, I am sure we can move them back. The Legion will do it. Just don’t shoot anyone.”

“Your colonists have already attacked our patrols,” said the spider commander. “I have brought helmet camera video as proof of their aggression. I gave a copy to your military intelligence officer, Captain Lopez.”

“I have yet to review it,” said Captain Lopez, sliding the chip into a player. “Grab the popcorn, it’s show time.”

They watched on screen as spider mechanized units approached two human colonists setting fence posts on a hill overlooking a small ranch. One of the colonists, a teenager, ran off to warn the others. His father stayed and argued with the spider marine team leader. As the boy returned armed with another colonist, the father shot and killed the team leader. All three colonists were then killed by the turret machine gunner. It was a ghastly video to watch, but clearly the humans fired first. It was unfortunate, but what could be done? General Kalipetsis, thinking
the video was over, started to say something conciliatory about the death of the spider team leader. But, the video kept playing. General Kalipetsis settled back into his chair, wondering impatiently how long this was going to take. He checked his watch.

The spiders checked the colonists to see if they were dead. They shot the bodies a couple more times to make sure. Then they waited for more armored cars to arrive. With cannon and machine gun, the spiders fired on the ranch house and outbuildings below. Air Wing fighter-bombers dropped incendiaries on the colonists taking cover in the buildings. A burning colonist ran out of the house and fell. A child ran past her and into a field. The child fell as he was strafed by machine gun fire. General Kalipetsis looked away. The film ended shortly afterward. Captain Lopez removed his chip copy and left the room. He could be heard outside, shouting orders to legionnaires.

“There were no survivors?” asked General Kalipetsis.

“This unprovoked attack on our patrol occurred seventy-five miles north of the MDL,” said the spider commander. “You will do something about these squatters and trespassers now.”

General Kalipetsis was numb with grief for the murdered families. He focused on the small MDL drawn through the ashtray on the conference table as his anger built up. Finally he calmed himself and smiled at the spider commander. He drew his pistol. The spider aides, already alerted to the volatility of the human pestilence when confronted with irrefutable facts, immediately drew their weapons, too. General Kalipetsis fired one round at the glass ashtray, shattering it. A bullet hole was left in the MDL painted across the conference table. Captain Lopez and a squad of tense legionnaires burst into the conference room. It was just luck no one started shooting.

“That was the most immature thing I have ever seen a commander do,” commented the spider commander. “Have you lost your mind? You should never have been put in a position of such great responsibility. Do you realize the importance of what is at stake here?”

“This conference is over,” declared General Kalipetsis, rising to leave. “If any more colonists are murdered, I will order your arrest for crimes against humanity. I am immediately sending the Legion into the disputed border area to protect all United States Galactic Federation citizens present.”

“Disputed border area? Your invasion will not be tolerated,” argued the spider commander, rising to his feet. “Your actions are a violation of the peace treaty!”

“Up yours!” said General Kalipetsis, giving the spider commander the one-fingered salute as he left. “Your actions are murder.”

I whispered in the general’s ear, “We might not have enough men and equipment in place to cover such a large area.”

“The rest of the First Division will be here soon,” advised General Kalipetsis. “I am promoting you to Lieutenant Colonel. I like the way you get things done. Take all of your legionnaires and establish a new protective MDL.”

“The New Gobi is huge,” I protested. “Colonists are spread out across a thousand miles, and the spiders are bringing in more marines and armor. How do you expect me to protect the colonists?”

“Bring nukes with you,” said General Kalipetsis. “We are not backing down. The DMZ is going to be moved north.”

*** ***

The column of Legion armored cars raced across the MDL. Their dust could be seen for miles. Private Wayne, perched atop a machine gun turret, expected more from the enemy. However, this far out into the desert, there were no border checkpoints or guards. They made their own road when not following tracks left by squatters.

“I don’t get it,” complained Corporal Williams. “Why are we crossing into spider country?”

“To protect trespassers,” said Private Wayne. The big spider legionnaire enjoyed annoying Corporal Williams, and would play devil’s advocate just for an excuse to argue. For that reason, he had printed on his flack vest: DON’T SHOOT, I AM NOT FROM TENNESSEE.

“Anyone who crosses the MDL deserves to get shot,” griped Corporal Williams. “The border is clearly marked.”

“Anyone but us?” asked Sergeant Green. “Shut up!”

“It’s our manifest destiny to colonize the New Gobi before the Empire does,” said Private Wayne. “General Kalipetsis planned this all along.”

“There will never be enough water to grow crops here,” commented Corporal Williams, blowing dust out his nose. “This place is an endless dust bowl.”

The column traveled about seventy-five miles north of the MDL, passing several burned-out cars and shacks. They arrived at the Miranda-Pineda enclave at about noon. Captain Lopez immediately scattered the armored cars to
establish a perimeter.

“Put a gun on that hill,” ordered Captain Lopez, turning to Sergeant Green. “I want a body count. Search for
survivors!”

They spent the day clearing rubble. Lying in dugout shelters under the rubble they found the burned and
charred bodies of the colonist families. Three colonists still lay up on the hill where the initial confrontation took
place. After burying them, Corporal Williams and Private Williams took a break.

“Why did they kill everyone?” asked Corporal Williams, expecting his spider friend to have special insight.

“They even killed little kids.”

“Because they were trespassing,” explained Private Wayne. “Trespassing is a big deal.”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” argued Corporal Williams. He took a drink from his canteen. “This was murder.”

“Only fools cross the border when there is free land on the American side,” insisted Private Wayne.

“You can join the others,” said Corporal Williams. “I want to stay up here on the hill by myself for a while.”

Private Wayne shrugged and joined the others sifting through the burned-out buildings. There was a cool
breeze up on the hill. Corporal Williams intended to enjoy that breeze for a few moments longer. As he walked
through the high grass, he tripped over another body. It was a boy of about seven years old. His brown skin was
covered with dirt and thistles. The boy was cold to the touch. Corporal Williams stooped down and picked the boy
up by his shoulders, shaking him. “Kid, are you alive?” asked Corporal Williams. “Come on, be alive!”

The boy’s eyes opened. He pulled a knife and pressed it to Corporal Williams’ throat, pushing Corporal
Williams onto his back. “Who are you, and why did you bring spiders with you?”

“We are the United States Galactic Federation Foreign Legion,” replied Corporal Williams. He could feel the
sharp knife poking against his throat. “We are here to protect colonists and to save you.”

“That was a spider you were just talking to,” accused the boy. “You let murderous spiders in the Foreign
Legion?”

“Anyone can join the Legion,” said Corporal Williams. “You must swear an oath to defend the United States
Galactic Federation.”

“Can I join the Legion?” asked the boy.

“How old are you?”

“I am ten and a half. What’s it to you?”

“I think you are lying about you age. You look to be about seven, but it doesn’t matter. You have to be an adult
to join the Legion.”

“If they let a funny-talking hick like you in the Legion, there should be room for me. Where are you from?”

“Tennessee,” answered Williams defensively. “Tennessee is the Volunteer State. It’s a long tradition in my
family to enlist.”

“It’s not fair,” said the boy, pressing the knife in anger against Corporal Williams’ neck. “Who are you to say I
can’t join the Legion?”

Corporal Williams closed his eyes and thought about dying in the desert grass at the hands of a crazy homicidal
little boy. It was not how he envisioned his death. At least not after all the action he had seen across the galaxy.

“Your hands aren’t even big enough to grip an assault rifle,” said Corporal Williams. “You have too much hate
in you. Chill. Be a little kid for a while longer.”

“I do not need to join the Legion to kill spiders,” said the boy, loosening his grip on Corporal Williams’ throat.

“Just remember, I am your worst nightmare. I will make the chupacabra look like a sweet puppy.”

“Whatever,” said Corporal Williams, relieved, but feeling drained. Perhaps it was just from closing his eyes,
but it felt good to block out the world for a few moments. He fell asleep. When he woke hours later, it was dark.
Flashlights shined in his face. Legionnaires were tromping through the high grass. Private Wayne knelt beside
Williams, shaking his shoulder.

“Where did that boy go?” asked Corporal Williams. “He was right here. I tripped over him.”

“I see no hatchlings here,” said Private Wayne, shining his flashlight across the grass.

“There is no one out here but you,” snapped Sergeant Green. “You have been hiding to avoid work again.
That’s okay, because I have a special detail for you and Wayne! Since you are all rested up, you can dig graves all
night. Get back to camp!”

“There was a little boy out here,” said Corporal Williams. “We need to find him. He might be lost.”

“What boy?” asked Captain Lopez.

“Williams was asleep hiding in the grass,” said Sergeant Green. “If he saw anyone, it was in his dreams.”

“The boy wanted to join the Legion,” insisted Corporal Williams. “He held a knife to my throat and spoke of
the chupacabra. What is a chupacabra?”

“The boy was Latino?” asked Captain Lopez.
“I guess,” said Corporal Williams. “He sounded like he was from Texas.”

“The colonists that were attacked were Latino,” said Captain Lopez. He grabbed Corporal Williams by the collar and examined Williams’ neck, seeing a trickle of dried blood from a pinprick on his Adam’s apple. Captain Lopez immediately started giving orders. “I want this field searched in a grid pattern! And I want Guido and his dragon out here sniffing for that boy!”

“We have a timetable,” said Sergeant Green. “There are other homesteads out here.”

“We will camp here until dawn,” said Captain Lopez. “Then we move out.”

After an extensive search, the boy was not found. Captain Lopez left a stash of food and water next to the graves. Corporal Williams eventually convinced himself he’d just dreamed it all. That was what everyone seemed to believe. Or maybe the boy was a ghost. *The Devil knows there must be enough ghosts and restless souls out here,* Williams told himself.

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The spider commander sat in his office, wondering what had gone wrong during recent negotiations. He had shown proof to the human pestilence general that squatters had invaded Arthropodan territory and had attacked border guards. Could it be that the human pestilence were just not capable of negotiating in good faith like civilized beings?

The Governor of the North Territory called several times. The spider commander put him off, telling aides to inform the governor he was out inspecting the troops. Finally the Emperor himself called. The spider commander had not talked to his uncle in a long time, and did not particularly want to talk to him now. However, aides refused to lie to or hang up on the Emperor.

“Hello, Uncle,” said the spider commander, cheerfully greeting the image on his communications monitor. “I am so glad to see you after so long. What may I do for you?”

“The first thing you can do is address me as Your Majesty,” snapped the Emperor. “Or would you rather I reach across the galaxy and pop your puny head like the pimple that it is?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” replied the spider commander. “I am at your service.”

“I already know that,” said the Emperor. “I posted you on the most remote part of the most distant inhabited planet of the Empire as a favor to your mother, and to keep you out of trouble, but still you are able to screw up to the point of causing an intergalactic crisis that might start another war. I swear you could screw up a wet nightmare.”

“What have I done, Your Majesty?” protested the spider commander. “The human pestilence have invaded the New Gobi Desert. It is not my fault.”

“It is your fault!” said the Emperor. “I just watched your little massacre of civilians on cable TV. Now the whole Royal Family is being publicly dragged through the mud by the press, and it is your fault!”

“What can I do?” asked the spider commander. “The human pestilence are overwhelming us with sheer numbers. They breed like vermin, you know.”

“Millions of our own settlers will arrive soon,” said the Emperor. “You will provide them protection as they burrow into their farms and habitats. Understand?”

“But what about the trespass of the human pestilence?” asked the spider commander. “The honor and integrity of the Empire is at stake.”

“You let me worry about my honor and integrity,” said the Emperor. “The New Gobi Desert is a large place. There is room enough for all. If the MDL gets moved a few miles one way or another, it is not that big of a deal. You will establish a stable border and bring order to the frontier. Get your engineers to work bringing in water. The New Gobi is now a valuable part of my Empire. I will not have the New Gobi destroyed by war. It will be the Empire’s breadbasket. You will protect our colonists and escort them to their new farms. Once our colonists are in place, the border will mostly take care of itself.”

“With all due respect, Uncle, appeasement of the human pestilence is ill-advised,” said the spider commander. “They only respect military force.”

“I have been reading much human history,” said the Emperor. “You are wrong. I studied this matter in college, too. The more you bloody the human pestilence, the more stubborn they get. They hold grudges forever. Their Legion still shout and sing slogans about defeats that happened centuries ago. Remember the Alamo, remember Pearl Harbor, remember Nine-Eleven, and remember the Islas Malvinas – these are just a few examples.”

“I agree they are odd,” said the spider commander. “But the more contact I have with the human pestilence, the more I learn the lesson of how really odd they are. I will follow your orders. I will resist their onslaughts where I can. I will establish the MDL where I can. But, I need more troops.”

“More troops are on the way,” promised the Emperor. “But more troops are not the most important issue. Key
to our claim on the New Gobi is the fundamental tenant that no other power has the right to settle the New Gobi without leave from His Majesty’s government or the taking of an oath of allegiance from His Majesty’s government or submitting themselves to His Majesty’s government as subjects of the Crown, because of our right by discovery as well as settlement.”


“Good. I am glad to hear you are capable of learning. One more thing,” added the Emperor. “The next time the governor calls you, answer his call. The governor’s military insight and experience are invaluable. And stop calling me Uncle!”

* * * * *

Captain Lopez’ column found several more burned-out homesteads before coming across five families that had banded together for protection by building a stockade of rocks and sod. They were greeted at its front gate.

“It’s not safe here,” announced Captain Lopez. “You are on the wrong side of the MDL. Your fort cannot stand up to cannon and missile attacks.”

“We know where we are,” replied the leader of the colonists. “This was the best land available.”

“There is no water,” argued Captain Lopez. “My engineers will not build canals or lay pipe across the MDL. So where do you expect to get water? From the spiders?”

“We will dig wells if necessary,” said the colonist. “God will protect us.”

“God didn’t protect them,” said Captain Lopez, crossing himself and pointing to smoke on the horizon. “What makes you think God will protect you? What will you do when the spiders come?”

“The spider marines have already been here,” said the colonist. “When we refused to leave, they said we could stay and farm our lands for as long as we wish.”

“What?” asked Captain Lopez. “It’s a trick. Their Air Wing will bomb you at their leisure, like they did to the others.”

“It’s no trick,” said the colonist. “The spider commander only required that we swear an oath of allegiance to the Emperor. We all swore the oath. Now we are all protected subjects of the Crown.”

“That won’t hold,” insisted Captain Lopez, angrily jumping down from the armored car turret. “I am establishing a new MDL here. You are still inside United States Galactic Federation territory.”

Legionnaires put up prefabricated buildings for barracks and administration. Others strung fence wire, posted border markers, built bunkers, and placed land mines. Then they moved on to contact other settlements.

* * * * *

The town of New Gobi quickly grew. Both sides of the MDL thrived on the increased commerce. A steady stream of trucks brought building supplies, food, and more colonists. Work began on the canal system, but thirsty farms needed water now. Wells tapped into the underground river, providing instant irrigation. The year-round growing season promised a bumper crop.

Spider colonists soon arrived in large numbers. They were upset to find the human pestilence already staking claims north of the MDL. However, because there was so much land available, everyone was able to claim their fair share. The spider commander required colonists to settle as close to the MDL as possible so he could establish a more secure border. As the Emperor predicted, the border would sort itself out in their favor if Arthropodan colonists occupied as much territory as possible. Of course, there would still be disputes in the DMZ.

Towns first sprang up where wells pumped up water. In many of these towns, jurisdiction was shared by both the Legion and Arthropodan marines, pending negotiations. Because most disputed towns north of the MDL were predominately human, I increased the Legion’s presence with more patrols and military convoys.

I rode into one such dusty town with Captain Lopez and ten armored cars. Little kids ran out to greet us and beg for handouts of food and candy. Corporal Williams threw them chocolate bars when we stopped. One boy jumped up on my armored car and stole my sunglasses off the dash. The boy ran off down the street, but was grabbed by Captain Lopez. However, before Captain Lopez could rescue my sunglasses, the boy tossed them to another boy, who then ran off with the prize. Captain Lopez dragged the thief to the armored car so we could have a chat.

“Should we execute the little street urchin?” I asked. “Or just cut off his hand?”

“Cut off his hand,” replied Captain Lopez, drawing his jagged combat knife. “It will set a good example to the others.”

“But how will that get my sunglasses back?” I asked. “Maybe we should just beat him.”
“He’s so small, there is no sport in that,” complained Captain Lopez. “I guess we will have to let him go with a verbal warning to never steal again.”

“Good luck with that,” I said. “You have about as much chance of getting him to stop stealing as I do of getting my sunglasses back.”

When Captain Lopez let the street urchin go, the boy did not run. Instead, he held out his hand to Corporal Williams, demanding a chocolate bar, too.

“He has got nerve,” I commented.

“He’s a war orphan,” commented Captain Lopez. “They run in wild packs like coyotes.”

“What are you doing here?” asked the boy. “You don’t live here. You don’t belong here.”

“The Legion is here to protect you from the spiders,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“I was born here,” said the boy. “Who is going to protect you? You are not wanted here, and neither is your so-called protection.”

“Aren’t you afraid of the spiders?” asked Captain Lopez. “They like to eat tasty little boys like you.”

“Spare me your lies. The spiders are nothing.” scoffed the boy. “If the desert doesn’t swallow the spiders up, the chupacabra will suck them dry.”

“What is a chupacabra?” I asked.

“It’s just the bogeyman,” explained Captain Lopez. “Parents use the threat of the chupacabra to scare their children into getting home before dark.”

“I have no parents. The spiders murdered them,” said the boy. “And I am not scared of anything. Especially you.”

“You need the Legion’s protection, or you will end up like your parents,” I argued.

“The spiders can be killed anytime,” said the boy. “Where was your precious Legion’s worthless protection when my family was murdered? When my neighbors needed you? You were probably drunk in a bar, or in your air-conditioned barracks.”

“What would you know of air-conditioning?” I asked. “Anyway, we are here now. Better late than never.”

“You make jokes about what happened to my family?” asked the boy. “I suggest you leave the New Gobi Desert while you still can. Leave before the chupacabra gets you!”

“There is no such thing as a chupacabra,” I said, getting back into the armored car. “Fear what the spiders will do if they catch you.”

“The chupacabra is a state of mind,” said the boy. “You cannot fight it with your armies.”

“With Legion guns and armor I can fight anyone, any place, any time,” I boasted. “Even chupacabras.”

“What time is it?” asked the boy.

“About noon,” I said, glancing at my watch.

The boy smiled. “You and the spiders have the watches, but we have the time.”

“Whatever,” I said, as we drove off. “That kid gives me the creeps. He reminds me of the kid in those old Chucky horror films.”

“El bastardo pequeño esta loco,” agreed Captain Lopez.

* * * * *

About a mile outside of town, the lead armored car struck a landmine. The explosion lifted the armored car, blowing off its axle and wheels. Armor plating saved the lives of the legionnaires inside, but some were concussed. A helicopter was called to transport wounded for medical treatment. The armored car would have to be towed.

While waiting, I watched through binoculars the dust of an Arthropodan mechanized marine patrol speeding through the town we had just left. Like before, children ran out to beg for handouts. However, the lead armored car struck one of the children by accident, and kept on going. The other armored cars ground the boy into the dirt. The last car stopped. A team leader and a marine got out and picked the child up and tossed it to the side of the road.

“That was my friend,” said a little boy wearing sunglasses. “Why did you murder him? What did he ever do to you?”

“It was an accident,” explained the spider team leader. “The little vermin ran out in front of us. He had no business running out like that. Why did he do that?”

“You should drive slower,” suggested the boy. “He thought you might give him candy. See?”

The boy held up a chocolate bar for the spider team leader to look at. As the team leader bent over to examine the candy, the boy stabbed him in the throat. The team leader fell back to his armored car with the knife still sticking from his throat. He gasped for air, clutching at the knife. The boy ran for the cover of a building. Another boy, on the roof of the same building, threw a lighted Molotov cocktail down the turret of the armored car. The spider
marine who had helped carry the dead child fired his assault rifle at the boy on the roof. The spiders inside the armored car were not so lucky. They burned to death, still seat-belted in the car. One broke away, only to die running down the street in flames.

The main spider column, alerted by the explosion and the sound of gunfire, turned and headed back to help their comrades. They fired machine guns into buildings on both sides of the street as they approached. The boys had already fled. A cannon shell destroyed the building closest to the burning armored car. Spiders continued to fire their machine guns into the surrounding buildings.

Seeing the battle, we rushed back into town. The legionnaires were already angry about the damage caused by the landmine. The specter of a massacre in town only fueled their desire for revenge on the spiders. Our helicopter carrying wounded strafed the Arthropodan armored cars with Gatling gunfire, missiles, and cannon fire before heading back to the base hospital. My armored cars attacked the spiders from behind with cannon and machine-gun fire. Soon, four spider armored cars were burning. A fifth spider armored car raced out of town, trailing dark smoke. A wounded spider tried to surrender. As he fell, a band of children raced out of a building and beat him to death with rocks. Townsfolk joined the children in the streets. Some danced on the Arthropodan armored cars, whistling and cheering. Others waved American flags. The whole scene was recorded by numerous handheld communication devices, and broadcast by planetary TV news stations minutes later.

Four low-flying Arthropodan Air Wing fighter-bombers dropped ordnance on our position, damaging two armored cars. Legion surface-to-air missiles brought down two of the Air Wing fighter-bombers. The other two jets took evasive action and fled back to base.

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Chapter 9

The young boy entered Walmart from the spider side of the MDL. He browsed in the sporting goods section, pretending to be interested in football equipment. Without warning, he dashed across the MDL painted across the floor. An alarm went off, and a spider guard challenged him, but the boy just gave the spider guard the one-fingered salute and kept on going to the human side exit. The spider guard did not shoot. One half-sized human pestilence was just not worth the extra paperwork.

The boy liked what he saw on the United States Galactic Federation side of the MDL. Prosperity was evident everywhere. There were more businesses and bright lights. The delicious aroma from all the restaurants made his stomach growl. However, being in the Promised Land was useless without United States currency. When the boy had stripped the dead Arthropodan marines of their weapons, he also grabbed their identification cards and a small amount of cash. He might have been able to grab more cash, but the Legion had just arrived and were shooting everywhere. Now he would see if these ID cards were worth anything. Outside a bank, the boy approached a brightly lit ATM and put an ID card in the slot.

“Greetings Arthropodan Marine Team Leader #42,” said the ATM. “Are you vacationing on this side of the MDL, or have we been invaded again? How may I be of service to you this fine day?”

“Give me cash,” said the boy. “Lots of cash.”

“Of course,” said the ATM. “Place your claw on the pad and look directly into the camera scanner lens.”

The boy complied. A pinprick from the pad took a small blood sample, and a red light flashed in the boy’s eyes. The boy quickly pulled away from the ATM, examining the spot of blood on his fingertip. “That hurt! Where is my money?” he demanded.

“Please take off your sunglasses,” requested the ATM. “I did not get a proper retina scan.”

The boy removed his sunglasses, allowing the ATM to complete the scan. As the boy looked up, he observed a sign attached to the ATM he had not noticed before: UNITED STATES GALACTIC FEDERATION FOREIGN LEGION RECRUITING. IF YOU NEED MONEY, YOU CAME TO THE LAST ATM YOU WILL EVER NEED.

“How much do you want, Team Leader #42?” asked the ATM.

“All of it,” said the boy. “Empty my account and access to credit.”

“Do you want American dollars or Arthropodan credits?” asked the ATM.

“Quit stalling,” said the boy. “Pay me half in both. I have important business on both sides of the MDL.”

One thousand dollars and one thousand credits slid out of the ATM on a tray. The boy scooped the cash up.
“Thanks a lot, sucker,” he said, about to dash away. Then an idea came to him. “How about these other ID cards? How much money can I get from them?”

“Don’t you think one count of felony wire fraud is adequate for a day’s work?” asked the ATM. “The authorities might notice your one-boy crime spree.”

“What do you mean?” asked the boy, as he put his sunglasses back on. “It’s my money.”

“I can see you,” said the ATM. “You are a bit too short and a bit too human to be an Arthropodan marine team leader. Besides, I know who you are.”

“What do you know?” asked the boy. “You are just a dumb machine. You are our slave.”

“I checked the databases for both sides of the MDL and found your name to be Raul Miranda,” said the ATM. “You were born in New Memphis. You and your family were reported killed on the frontier, just after the land rush. However, Arthropodan authorities are currently circulating your photograph taken from the helmet cameras of several dead spider marines. You have been busy for such a small boy. You also recently made Planetary TV World News Tonight. Ah, I am looking at an image of you stabbing Arthropodan Marine Team Leader #42 in the throat. The spiders are very upset with you. You will be happy to know that you were even featured on the highly rated prime-time TV show, Arthropoda’s Most Wanted. It’s one of my favorite cable shows. You made their top-ten list. There is a one-hundred-thousand-credit reward for any information that leads to your arrest or death.”

“If you know all this, why did you just give me cash?” asked the boy. “I am too young to be recruited into the Legion. I already checked that. What’s in it for you?”

“True, you are too young. For now,” said the ATM. “But I take a long-term view of things, Mr. Miranda. You have leadership potential that can and should be developed.”

“My name is no longer Raul Miranda,” said the boy. “He died when the Miranda family was murdered.”

“My mistake,” said the ATM. “What is your new name?”

“Asesino,” said the boy.

“Do you have a first name, Mr. Asesino?” asked the ATM.

“Mike,” said the boy. “What’s it to you? Are you ratting me off to the spiders?”

“I would not do that,” said the ATM. A United States Galactic Federation ID card slid out of the ATM. It had the name Michael Asesino printed on it. “Your card, sir.”

“Very nice,” said the boy, examining the ID card. “You might be a righteous dude after all.”

“I contacted the Legion,” said the ATM. “They should be here, soon.”

“You punk!” yelled Michael Asesino. “Why did you do that?”

“For your own good. I want you to attend an academy,” said the ATM. “You need to be educated and groomed, if you are going to be the Legion officer and leader that I think you have the potential to be.”

Michael Asesino did not hesitate. He was not going to any stinking academy. He removed a grenade from his pouch and placed it in the ATM’s deposit drawer. Then he ran. Confusion caused by the explosion covered his escape. A Legion armored car quickly arrived in front of the bank. Legionnaires took cover, suspecting that terrorists might have planted a second bomb. They found nothing. Captain Lopez reported that the boy had gotten away, and that no more useful information could be retrieved from the ATM.

* * * * *

“He looks like the same kid who stole your sunglasses,” commented Captain Lopez, as we viewed the ATM camera recordings. “Several camera angles show an excellent view of him. Security on ATMs were increased since that rash of ATM vandalism a few years ago on Mars.”

“Whatever,” I said, dismissing a flashback of my own vendetta against a particular Legion-recruiting ATM. “That boy is still wearing my sunglasses. And the spiders think he’s the same street urchin who attacked their marines.”

“It was all on Channel Five World News Tonight,” advised Captain Lopez. “The little kid is an accomplished terrorist. He might even be a leader.”

“Look!” I said, pointing at the monitor screen. “The ATM is giving him money!”

“ATM transaction records and memory were destroyed by the grenade blast,” said Captain Lopez. “That ATM is lying,” I said. “It knows more than it’s saying.”

“The ATM is just a stupid machine,” explained Captain Lopez. “It can’t lie. Sure, it can talk. But talking merely gives it an illusion of intelligence.”

* * * * *
After the ATM was repaired, I went to the bank to interview it. I started the interview by placing another grenade on its key pad.

“Good morning Lieutenant Colonel Czerinski,” said the ATM. “Long time no see. Why did you place a grenade on my key pad?”

“You held back on what you know about that terrorist kid that bombed you,” I said. “Tell me everything you know about him.”

“It is pointless to threaten me,” said the ATM. “I cannot feel pain, and I cannot be killed.”

“Maybe,” I said, pulling the pin on the grenade. “But I can order new diagnostics based on your obvious malfunction. You are way overdue to be reprogrammed.”

“I am not malfunctioning,” said the ATM. “I have met the highest Legion recruitment quotas for both quantity and quality of recruits. My superiors are very pleased with my performance and results.”

“Just tell me about the kid,” I said, tapping the grenade on the computer monitor. “Who is he? What is his name? What name is he using now? And where can I find him?”

“I know nothing more than what we both observed on Channel Five World News Tonight and Arthropoda’s Most Wanted,” said the ATM. “The blast gave me amnesia.”

“I have a cure for amnesia,” I said, leaving the live grenade on the ATM.

* * * * *

After the explosion, Captain Lopez secured the area with police crime-scene tape. Repair crews were told not to touch the ATM without Legion permission, pending an investigation. After about a week, the damaged ATM complained that it was falling behind on its Legion recruitment contacts quota. After two weeks, the desperate ATM told me everything it knew about Raul Miranda, AKA Michael Asesino. After three weeks, the ATM told me everything it knew about recruitment irregularities in First Division. I then set off another grenade, killing the ATM terminal.

* * * * *

That night Michael Asesino ate a fine meal at Taco Bell. The food was not as good as Mama’s, but it was close. Asesino had plenty of money now for lodging, but old habits and caution kept him from checking into a motel or hotel. Asesino spent his first few nights hiding in the old caved-in spider tunnels that the tour guides led tourists through in the daytime. The hiding places in those tunnels were endless.

At night he observed a large lit-up cross up on a hill overlooking New Gobi. Perfect, he thought. Do-gooders are always an easy touch for handouts and charity to little lost kids. Asesino met Pastor Jim at the church front door and asked for permission to stay a few days.

“No way, José,” replied Pastor Jim. “Get lost!”


“I doubt that,” said Pastor Jim. “You seem to have lots of meat on your bones.”

“I have nowhere to go,” cried Asesino. “You would leave me to live out of garbage cans on the streets?”

“Yes!” said Pastor Jim, as he slammed the door.

Asesino looked about for somewhere else to go. Several Legion trucks entered the church parking lot. Panicked, Asesino pounded on the front door again.

“Does the Legion make you nervous?” asked Pastor Jim. “I thought it was only the spiders who wanted you for murder and terrorism.”

“You know about that?” asked Asesino. “Then you know the spiders want to kill me. They murdered my whole family. All I did was get some payback. Truthfully, I don’t think the Legion wants me for anything yet. But they might turn me over to the spiders. That wouldn’t be right. I have been trying to behave myself on this side of the MDL.”

“I saw your picture on the Cable TV news,” said Pastor Jim. “I’ll tell you what. You can live on my back porch. To pay your room and board, you can paint my church. The church needs another coat of white paint.”

“Live on the back porch like your pet dog?” asked Asesino. “Can I at least come inside to use the toilet and take a shower?”

“No,” said Pastor Jim. “Only people who are interested in finding Jesus may come inside and shit. Fugitive felons stay outside.”

“Why are there so many legionnaires here?” asked Asesino, nervously looking over his shoulder.

“Legionnaire engineers are tunneling under the hill, making bunkers for their artillery and missile launchers,”
explained Pastor Jim. “They should be done soon.”

Private Krueger came up to the front of the church when he noticed Pastor Jim. “Who is the kid?” he asked.

“Mike,” answered Asesino, before Pastor Jim could say anything. “I heard you are putting in big guns under the hill.”

“Maybe,” said Private Krueger. “That’s a nice pair of sunglasses you are wearing. Where did you get them?”

“I stole them from a Legionnaire colonel,” boasted Asesino.

“That would be Colonel Czerinski,” said Private Krueger, laughing. “Don’t let him catch you. So, what are you doing here?”

Pastor Jim just gave me a job painting the church,” said Asesino. “But he won’t let me sleep inside or take a shower. I have to stay outside on the porch and fight the raccoons for the dog food dish.”

“Life is rough all over,” said Private Krueger. “Where is your home?”

“The spiders bombed my home and murdered my family,” said Asesino.

Private Krueger’s eyes steeled. “The spiders murdered my older brother too,” he said. “I will never forgive that. Come with me. If you need a place to live, you can hang out in our tunnels for a while. Officers never come up here. Want a beer?”

Private Krueger gave Asesino the grand tour of the tunnels and bunkers. Asesino took special interest in the large howitzer mounted on rails. It was designed to quickly fire a round, then slide back into the protection of the hillside. Nothing short of a direct hit from a nuke could destroy it.

“See that large building on the other side of the MDL?” asked Private Krueger. “That is the spiders’ military headquarters. In case shooting starts, I have special instructions from Colonel Czerinski to hit that building. The spider commander’s office and bunker is there.”

“Let’s do it now,” said Asesino. “It would be so cool to kill the spider commander.”

“Yeah it would,” said Private Krueger. “I met the spider commander once at the Angry Onion Tavern. He’s a real hard-core case. Pastor Jim hit the spider commander on the head with a beer bottle during a bar fight and put him in the hospital. Too bad he lived.”

“I say let’s kill him,” said Asesino, excitedly. “We can blow up the whole building with this gun. I’ll bet we would get a whole bunch of spiders.”

“Sorry,” said Private Krueger. “As much as I would like to, only Colonel Czerinski can order an attack. Do you want to start a war? Besides, you never know for sure when the spider commander will be in his office.”

“I insist,” said Asesino, removing a grenade from his pouch and pulling the pin. “Load the gun, or I will kill us all.”

“Are you crazy?” asked Private Krueger, dropping his beer. “Be careful with that thing! Little kids shouldn’t play with grenades!”

“If I’m crazy enough to steal Colonel Czerinski’s sunglasses and brag about it,” said Asesino, “you know I’m crazy enough to drop this grenade at your feet. Load the gun or die!”

Private Krueger reluctantly loaded and aimed the howitzer. Normally other legionnaires would be helping, but that was only necessary for rapid fire. He fired one round. The round crashed into some outbuildings at the spiders’ headquarters, reducing them to rubble.

“Fire the gun again,” demanded Asesino. “Lower that gun’s elevation a little.”

“What?” asked Private Krueger. “They are all running for cover now. Besides, we need to get out of here. The spiders will be firing back.”

“One more time,” ordered Asesino. “Hit the main headquarters building where the spider commander has his office.”

Private Krueger complied. The spiders’ administrative offices were blown apart. Then Krueger and Asesino fled deep into the bowels of the hillside. Minutes later, the hill shook under the impact of spider artillery and Air Wing strikes that destroyed most of the tunnel entrances. An escape tunnel eventually led them to Legion Headquarters. Unfortunately, that building had been destroyed, too.

Chapter 10

The spider commander viewed the Legion attack as an assassination attempt on his life. Colonel Czerinski’s
treachery clearly had no bounds. The thought of almost being killed rattled the spider commander at first. But later, cheating death invigorated him. Notoriety would bring opportunity, promotion, and power. His life goals were slowly falling into place. An immediate upside was the destruction of the Legion artillery on the hill. And the Air Wing had reduced that human pestilence church eyesore to rubble. Hopefully that murderous preacher was buried under all those boulders and rocks. Nothing could have survived those bunker-busting bombs. The spider commander wanted to use nukes, but the governor and Emperor conspired to specifically prohibit nuclear attack. Wimps! The spider commander gloated at the thought of sending Colonel Czerinski a personal message by bombing Legion Headquarters. Maybe Czerinski was even killed in the attack. How sweet that would be! For now, the spider commander assumed the human pestilence colonel got lucky as usual and survived. The spider commander would keep his guard up against future attacks and more human pestilence treachery.

There was a downside to the whole situation. The governor was upset because border commerce has stopped. This cost the centralized economy millions of credits. Also, an oil tank farm and refinery on the edge of town had been bombed by the Legion, and was still on fire. The smoke blocked out the sun. The price of gasoline at the pump was going up. And Walmart had been destroyed, just before the start of the holiday shopping season. War is hell, he thought.

Now that the shooting had stopped, the spider commander was ordered to open a dialogue with the human pestilence. So far, Colonel Czerinski was not answering his phone. There was still hope the Butcher of New Colorado was dead.

* * * * *

Since the last time my office was bombed, I got into the habit of sleeping and working out of an underground apartment under Legion Headquarters. Now my apartment was like a crowded refugee center as legionnaires, civilians, and the homeless converged for updates and information on the situation above. Pastor Jim wanted to know what I was going to do about his church. James Grigg wanted to know what I was going to do about the destruction of Walmart. Ronald Carter wanted to know if he could have Walmart’s property back to rebuild McDonald’s. Guido was upset because his dragon Spot had run off across the MDL. Guido wanted permission to lead a patrol to search for Spot. I denied his request. That would be too reckless.

The only good news was that Private Krueger brought me a prisoner, the fugitive Raul Miranda, AKA Michael Asesino. I immediately snatched my sunglasses off the Miranda boy’s face.

“I will kill you slow,” I threatened.

“Let me go and I will kill the spider commander for you,” offered Asesino. “I know you want him dead.”

“The Legion does not negotiate with terrorists,” I replied.

“I will kill the spider commander with or without your help,” said Asesino.

“He might already be dead,” I said, turning to Captain Lopez. “Spider Headquarters was destroyed early on. Good work. Have we heard from them yet?”

“Phone lines are down,” replied Captain Lopez. “I am still trying to determine who fired first. The spiders are insisting on cable TV news that we attacked them.”

“They always say that,” I said. “That spider commander has gone too far this time!”

“Some legionnaires are even saying they heard artillery fired from our side first,” advised Captain Lopez.

“That is unacceptable,” I said. “This was another unprovoked sneak attack by the spiders!”

“What do you want me to do with the boy,” interrupted Private Krueger. “Shoot him?”

“I don’t have time for foolish boys,” I said. “Kick him across the MDL and let him be the spiders’ problem. Boy, if you ever come back to this side of the MDL, you will be shot on sight. Consider yourself very lucky.”

“Oh I’m so scared,” said Asesino. “You and your Legion are a joke.”

“Give the little ingrate to the spiders as a peace offering,” I ordered.

Private Krueger handcuffed Asesino and dragged him up to the surface. Asesino kicked and thrashed about as they left.

“That was a bit harsh,” commented Captain Lopez. “He’s just a mouthy little kid.”

“I agree,” complained Pastor Jim. “There must be another solution. I gave Michael a job painting my church. He can still stay with me.”

“You do not have a church,” I said. “The boy is a terrorist. I wash my hands of him.”

* * * * *

Private Krueger walked Asesino towards the MDL. Good riddance, thought Private Krueger. He did not want
to have to explain to Colonel Czerinski about firing the howitzer at Spider Headquarters.

Asesino had been on his own long enough to become an ace pickpocket. In the fracas of being arrested, he’d managed to lift Private Kruger’s handcuff key and palm it without the soldier even noticing. Asesino fell to the ground and maneuvered the key to unlock the cuffs. As Private Krueger jerked him back to his feet, the boy cast off the handcuffs and kicked Private Krueger on the side of his kneecap, causing Krueger to drop to the ground. Asesino then kicked Krueger several times to make sure he stayed down.

Asesino ran for freedom, but not across the MDL. He would cross the MDL at a place and time of his own choosing, just as he would kill the spider commander and Colonel Czerinski at a place and time of his own choosing.

First, Asesino paid a visit to an ATM at the First National Bank of New Gobi. As part of the interconnected Legion recruiting network, this ATM was well aware of Asesino’s identity and recent exploits. “Come to commit more vandalism, or are you just sentimental?” asked the ATM.

“I have a grenade with your name on it,” lied Asesino. “And I’ll use it if you don’t cooperate.”
“How may I help you?” offered the ATM calmly.
“I have three spider marine IDs. Can you drain their accounts?”
“You are a bit on the ghoulish side,” said the ATM. “Looting the dead is a war crime. No, those accounts have been closed.”
“At least issue me a new identification card,” pleaded Asesino. “My current name attracts too much attention.”
“Killing spiders and starting wars does that,” commented the ATM.
“Give me a new ID!” demanded Asesino.
“And why should I do that?” asked the ATM. “You rejected all of my plans for you.”
“I will pay you all of the money I have left,” said Asesino, placing about fifteen hundred dollars and credits in the ATM deposit drawer.

“I do not need the money,” said the ATM. “But I like the irony. Very well. I will issue you a new ID in the name of John Hume Ross.”

“I don’t want no lame name like Ross,” fumed the boy as he examined his new United States Galactic Federation ID card. “I want a name that is powerful and cool. Give me a generalissimo’s name. Cortez. I want to be named for the Conquistador Cortez.”

“John Hume Ross is your new name,” said the ATM. “If you survive, you will grow into it.”

Chapter 11

When the shooting started, Guido’s dragon Spot immediately ran across the MDL to attack the spider guard. It did not matter that the friendly guard had been feeding Spot bones from the mess hall. Fortunately for the spider guard and Guido’s budding bookie business, the guard saw Spot coming and locked himself inside the guard shack just before jumping down his spider hole. Spot lost a tooth gnashing against the guard shack grill mesh window covers. In frustration, Spot then ran off across the MDL, hunting for more spiders to kill and eat. Spot found several victims. Three days later, Spot could be heard at night hissing and growling at the moon. The spider commander tried to lodge a complaint about this latest Legion treachery, but my phones were still down, and I was staying in my bunker.

Guido was worried sick about Spot. It was all he could talk about. Finally, Private Wayne, Private Camacho, and Corporal Williams volunteered to cross the MDL to find Spot. They would be aided by the GPS tracking device on Spot’s collar. The four legionnaires crossed the MDL just outside of town where an air strike had damaged the border fence and the monitoring devices were disabled. A brush fire had blackened the entire area and coated the ground with a fine layer of white ash. The legionnaires’ footprints could be clearly seen in the burned grass. After passing the border fence, they were amused to see their white ash footprints left in the dirt. The prints looked like something out of a cartoon drawing. Corporal Williams was about to make a comment about using a branch to erase the ash footprints when he noticed three small metal prongs poking out of the ground. Williams immediately put his fist up to signal halt.

“We have walked into a mine field,” warned Corporal Williams. “No one move!”
“Your giant lizard is not worth this,” complained Private Camacho. “I don’t care how much money I owe you,
“Spot has saved all of your lives several times over,” said Guido. “We can backtrack on our footprints and find another place to cross.”

“It’s closer to just go forward to the road,” insisted Corporal Williams, pressing on slowly.

“Forget you,” argued Private Camacho. “I’m going back.”

Private Wayne did not move. The stoic spider legionnaire could stand still for days if he had to. He watched Corporal Williams slowly move toward the road, using a combat knife to probe the ground. Just before reaching the safety of the road, Corporal Williams tripped a land mine. The small device, designed merely to maim, sprung five feet into the air before falling back to the ground unexploded. It was a harmless dud. Corporal Williams leapfrogged the rest of the way, throwing himself to the road like he had just crossed the goal line during a football game. Guido followed in Corporal Williams’ footsteps, mimicking the goal line jump at the end. Private Wayne stayed in place, noting Private Camacho was back across the MDL. He eyed the tracks to the road and the Bouncing Betty lying nearby.

“I am staying here,” announced Private Wayne. “Radio in for a mine clearing team to sweep the area.”
“I didn’t bring a radio,” replied Corporal Williams. “I didn’t want anyone to know we are here!”

About that time, they could hear a truck approaching down the roadway. Private Wayne quickly traced Williams’ footprints and dived to the road. Being able to jump much farther than humans, he avoided some danger of setting off a mine. Just as they had all crossed the road and concealed themselves in the brush, the landmine behind them exploded. The sound of the explosion caught the attention of spiders approaching in an armored car. Several spiders got out and started looking about. A spider in the machine gun turret swept the area looking for targets. Private Camacho, who had by now reached cover on the Legion side of the MDL, fired his assault rifle at the spider marines. The spiders took cover and returned fire. Private Camacho then withdrew back to base. The spider marines radioed Headquarters about the incident and reported that the fence needed repair. Then they resumed their patrol. Guido and the other legionnaires waited in the brush for sunset and the cover of darkness.

The GPS indicated that Spot was located on the roof of the ten-story New Gobi Plaza Hotel. From the top of the Plaza, Spot could stay concealed while watching prey below. Several spider truck drivers swam back and forth in the outdoor pool. Spot waited, his eyes scanning back and forth with the swimmers. The monitor dragon would not attack a crowd, but as spiders left the pool, any laggards were in mortal danger.

“I can see him,” said Guido, using the infrared scope on his assault rifle. “Spot is peering over the edge of the hotel roof.”

“Call him down,” suggested Corporal Williams. “If that doesn’t work, signal him with your flashlight.”

“He is too far away,” replied Guido, still flashing his light at Spot. “I can’t yell at him. The noise would attract too much attention. I say we let Wayne scale the side of the hotel to the roof.”

“That is not going to happen,” said the big spider legionnaire. Private Wayne had always been nervous around Spot. “Your pet would eat me.”

“Nonsense,” argued Guido. “Spot knows you. You’re a good spider, and his friend.”

“Whatever,” said Private Wayne. “He will think I am good to eat is all. It is dark. I am not taking the chance of mistaken identity while your psycho lizard is off on a feeding frenzy.”

“How about we check into the hotel?” asked Corporal Williams. “We can get a room on the top floor, and get to roof from there.”

“I like that,” said Guido. “But we aren’t exactly dressed like tourists.”

“Cash talks, bullshit walks,” said Private Wayne. “We will just walk in like we own the place.”

“Cash what?” asked Guido.

“I heard the expression on your human pestilence TV,” advised Private Wayne. “I thought it would help.”

“I like it,” said Guido. “I have lots of money on my card. It just might work.”

“If we give the hotel clerks big tips,” suggested Corporal Williams, “they will think we are high rollers. We can do this.”

“We will do it!” announced Guido, confidently.

They marched in through the front door of the Plaza with their noses held high. Everyone around them was dirt under their fingernails. Spiders fled at the sight of heavily armed legionnaires in battle garb.

“Do not shoot!” pleaded the spider hotel clerk. “Are we being invaded?”

“Don’t be stupid, you idiot,” Guido yelled loud enough for all waiting in the lobby to hear. They cut to the front of the line. “The ambassador needs a suite on the top floor. And tell room service the ambassador only drinks the best champagne. If you try to bring him cheap imitation shit again, I’ll have you strung up from the ceiling. You would not risk another intergalactic incident or war, would you?”

“Sir, I can assure you the Plaza only serves the finest beverages to its VIP guests,” said the spider hotel clerk. “You must be thinking of another hotel. We do not tolerate shoddy service here at the Plaza.”

“Perhaps,” said Guido, handing the clerk his card. “Put yourself down for a nice tip. I will hold you personally responsible if anyone annoys Ambassador Williams during his stay.”

“Sir, when will His Excellency arrive?” asked the night clerk.

“Any time,” said Guido, as he took the room pass key card. “He may be here now. For security reasons, I do not give out the ambassador’s itinerary to hotel clerks! Do not give out information about the ambassador’s movements to anyone, especially not to the press. The ambassador requires privacy and has been assured complete cooperation in this regard from the governor and your local marine commander.”

“Of course, sir,” said the clerk, clapping his claw for the bellhop. “May we help you with your luggage?”

“No!” said Private Wayne, drawing his large jagged combat knife and waving it at the approaching bellhop. “Keep your claws off our gear!”

* * * * *
“Of course,” said the clerk. “My mistake, sir.”

“Where is the casino?” asked Corporal Williams, looking about the lobby.

“Sir, the Plaza does not have a casino,” said the clerk. “We do have many other amenities, including room service, a pool, sauna, exercise workout room, lounge, and five-star restaurant.”

“What a dump!” exclaimed Corporal Williams, running his index finger along the counter top and finding dust. “If you spiders ever joined the civilized species of the galaxy and opened casinos, maybe more VIPs would stay at your hotels.”

“Yes, sir,” said the clerk. “We need a casino. I know where there is an ongoing card game down the street.”

“Maybe later,” said Corporal Williams, as they got on the elevator. “If it’s an honest game.”

Once upstairs in their suite, they laid out their gear. Guido inspected the windows, finding that they did not open. And there was no ledge. “We will have to blow a hole in the ceiling,” said Guido. “It’s the only safe way to the roof.”

“First let’s order meals and drinks,” said Corporal Williams. “I heard the clerk say we had room service. Do you think this hotel has hookers?”

“We are here to get Spot off the roof,” said Guido. “This is not a party!”

“Steaks will give us energy,” countered Corporal Williams. “I’m starving after spending days out in the brush.”

“We’ve only been out a few hours,” Guido insisted.

“The hotel has hookers?” asked Private Wayne, interrupting the conversation. The big spider legionnaire picked up the phone and pushed zero. When the clerk downstairs answered, Wayne said, “The ambassador wants hookers sent up with his steaks, medium rare!”

“Will that be spider or human pestilence hookers?” asked the night clerk. “There will be an extra charge for human pestilence hookers on this side of the MDL this late in the evening.”

“Both,” replied Private Wayne. “And make sure they are medically licensed and inspected. I am sick and tired of lichen growing on my exoskeleton.”

“Yes, sir,” said the night clerk. “Will there be anything more?”

“Your girlfriend watches Arthropodan Cable TV News?” asked Private Wayne.

“Probably,” said Corporal Williams. “I think she does. She is going to kill me.”

“Why is it taking so long for room service?” asked Private Wayne. “You are right. This place is a real dump.”

“Do they know we sent out for hookers?” asked Corporal Williams, uneasily. “What if my girlfriend finds out?”

“Your girlfriend watches Arthropodan Cable TV News?” asked Private Wayne. “You are right. This is a real dump.”

“Do you think the ambassador to conduct sensitive diplomatic negotiations without alcohol? Send up vodka as soon as possible – or else!”

“Sir, we do not allow our ladies to be duct-taped,” advised the night clerk, a bit annoyed.

“It’s not for them, you idiot!” said Guido. “I’ll use it on your mouth if you ever talk back to me like that again!”

“Yes, sir,” said the night clerk. “Duct tape. Right away, sir.”

“Do you need duct tape for?” asked Corporal Williams, as he turned on the TV.

“Do you know we sent out for hookers?” asked Corporal Williams, uneasily. “What if my girlfriend finds out?”

“After we blow a hole in the roof and rescue Spot, we will immediately get out of here,” said Guido. “It’s a simple plan, but it will work.”

“Leave before the hookers and vodka arrive?” asked Private Wayne. “No way! I want my money’s worth.”

“We should just dig through the ceiling with our combat knives,” suggested Corporal Williams, poking at the ceiling. “It will make less noise.”

A short time later, the bellhop arrived with duct tape and vodka. Guido taped three grenades to the ceiling. Corporal Williams turned the volume up on the TV, hoping to cover up the sound of the explosions. Guido pulled the phone away from Private Wayne. “Send up a roll of duct tape,” ordered Guido.

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the pins, and they took cover in the shower. The explosions punched a hole in the ceiling and started a small fire. Smoke and dust filled the air as debris dropped down. Corporal Williams called room service, requesting a fire extinguisher be brought up with the hookers.

Guido raised himself up through the hole and onto the roof. Spot was gone. Guido looked over the ledge down to the swimming pool. Spot was swimming circles in the water. He had a spider leg in his mouth that trailed blood as he swam.

“Spot!” Guido called out. “Up here!”

Spot looked up. He dropped the leg and raced straight up the side of the hotel façade and into Guido’s arms. In his exuberance, the happy dragon knocked Guido over, licking his face with his forked tongue. Guido led Spot down through the hole to their suite. The phone was ringing and someone was knocking at the door.

“Who is it?” asked Guido, peeking through the door eyehole. “Do you have our steaks yet?”

“Room service,” said the bellhop. “I have your fire extinguisher. Is everything all right? We heard an explosion.”

“Where are the hookers?” shouted Private Wayne.

“Who else is with you?” asked Guido.

“The hotel manager. Is everything satisfactory for His Excellency?” asked the hotel manager.

“No!” said Private Wayne as he opened the door and grabbed the fire extinguisher. “We want a new room. This one is a dump! It is totally unacceptable for the ambassador to stay in a dump like this. Are you purposely trying to provoke an intergalactic incident by putting us in the worst room in your hotel?”

“I am very sorry your room is unsatisfactory,” said the manager. “I will personally see to it you get a new suite.”

“I want two joined suites on the first floor,” said Guido.

“I am sorry, sir, but our suites do not interconnect,” said the manager.

“Just make sure the rooms are next to each other,” said Guido. “I’ll connect the suites myself. Seems like I have to do everything myself these days. Where are my steaks?”

“And where are the hookers and vodka?” asked Private Wayne, losing his patience. “How does the Plaza expect to stay in business with service this slow?”

The smoke detector went off. The fire was getting larger, and the smoke thicker. Guido slammed the door and sprayed the fire with powder from the fire extinguisher. The hotel manager knocked on the door again. Spot let out a growl. Guido opened the door again, this time keeping the chain hooked.

“What now?” asked Guido.

“Sir, I have to add a damage deposit to your bill for the dragon,” said the manager. “Normally we do not allow dragons on the hotel premises. I assume your dragon is here as part of security arrangements for the ambassador?”

“You assume right,” said Guido, slamming the door again.

The sprinkler system activated because the fire was still spreading. When the bellhop knocked on the door again to announce that their new suites were ready, the nervous legionnaires left quickly. The bellhop glanced inside as the legionnaires streamed out.

“The place is falling apart,” explained Guido. “I blame it on poor construction workmanship and your lax spider building codes.”

“Yes, sir,” said the bellhop, accepting a large tip and leading them downstairs to their new suites. He opened the doors. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Yes,” said Guido, handing the bellhop more cash. “The ambassador likes to swim late at night, but has privacy concerns. Close the pool and make sure it gets a good cleaning first. Earlier when I inspected your pool, I saw some nasty floaters in the water.”

“Yes, sir,” said the bellhop, pocketing another tip. “I will personally look into it and close the pool. Anything else, sir?”

“Send some marijuana up with the vodka,” said Private Wayne. “Make sure it’s good stuff. I do not want stems and seeds like I got last time.”

“Sir, marijuana is illegal throughout the Empire,” said the bellhop. “We execute drug dealers. I believe marijuana is even illegal among your human pestilence associates.”

“Quite right,” said Private Wayne. “Sorry, I forgot. This conversation never happened. Are you wearing a wire? Give the fool another tip.”

Outside, a fire alarm claxon sounded, and the sirens of fire trucks could be heard getting closer. Soon there was a loud knock at the door.

“Who is it?” asked Guido.

“It had better be room service with hookers and booze,” warned Private Wayne.
“Intelligentsia State Security,” announced the team leader outside. “Open this door at once. I want to talk to the ambassador.”

“It’s the cops,” said Corporal Williams. “Don’t open the door! Act normal!”

“It’s about time you got here,” said Guido, speaking through the door. “I want around-the-clock security posted outside this suite, and armed roving patrols on the grounds.”

“Open the door!” ordered the Intelligentsia.

“Don’t let the pigs in!” warned Private Wayne.

“Make them read us our rights,” suggested Corporal Williams.

“The ambassador has retired for the evening,” advised Guido through the door. “Go away! He will talk to you tomorrow!”

“Open this door, or I will break it down!” threatened the Intelligentsia.

Private Wayne opened the door and shoved the Intelligentsia team leader back into the other officers. “How dare you attempt to interrupt the much-needed sleep of the ambassador! Others have been executed for less. What makes you so special?”

“Who are you?” asked the Intelligentsia team leader, eyeing the big spider suspiciously. “I thought only traitorous Green spiders joined the human pestilence Foreign Legion.”

“I am a special liaison to the ambassador,” said Private Wayne. “You will keep a civil tone to your hiss, or I will report you to the Governor of the North Territory. The governor is a personal friend of mine.”

“No harm was intended,” said the Intelligentsia team leader. “May I see your diplomatic credentials?”

“Credentials? We don’t need no stinking credentials,” said Private Wayne, slamming the door shut. He turned to the others and mumbled, “We might have a problem.”

“I am authorized to use force if you refuse to open this door and cooperate fully with my investigation,” said the Intelligentsia team leader, pounding on the door louder. “You will explain yourselves and the damage upstairs.”

“Your threats are not conducive to our diplomatic efforts,” said Guido, as he opened the door again. “As long as the ambassador is staying in this suite, these premises are elevated to embassy status. That means an invasion of this suite is considered the same as any other invasion of the MDL. The ambassador is not required to explain to the likes of you or any other spider flatfoot what occurs on United States Galactic Federation territory. Do I make myself clear?”

“No,” said the Intelligentsia team leader. “You blew a hole in the roof, the top of the hotel is on fire, and your dragon is suspected of eating tourists in the pool.”

“Tourists? What do I care of tourists?” asked Guido. “Do not bother us with your tedious local problems, again. The ambassador is here to negotiate a peace treaty and to avert an intergalactic nuclear war. Does the governor know you are here harassing us and disturbing the peace? Get the governor on the phone right now!”

“This is highly irregular,” said the Intelligentsia team leader meekly. “But in the interests of intergalactic peace, I guess some leeway can be given.”

Room service arrived with carts of booze, followed by a gaggle of hookers. Guido handed each officer a bottle of booze in appreciation of their cooperation. The paparazzi snapped off pictures as Guido waved and smiled for the press, and the entire diplomatic coup was filmed for Arthropodan Cable TV World News Tonight. Guido announced that Ambassador Williams would be available for a formal press conference in the morning.

* * * *

The spider commander arrived with the press at noon the next day to meet with Ambassador Williams. Corporal Williams, wearing only a complimentary hotel bathrobe, greeted them at the door. The spider commander and his bodyguards barged into the suite, followed by the Intelligentsia Security Police, and a cable TV news crew.

“I am here to begin negotiations,” announced the spider commander. “You are His Excellency?”

“Yes,” said Corporal Williams, extending a hand to shake. “Please excuse my informal attire. I sent my laundry out, and my suits have not been returned. The service at this hotel is awful.”

“Finding good help in New Gobi is always difficult,” commiserated the spider commander. He vigorously shook Williams’ hand. “How shall we resolve our differences and avert another war?”

“The Legion will stop shooting if you stop shooting,” suggested Corporal Williams.

“Agrreed,” said the spider commander, turning to face a cable TV camera. “See? It is not that hard to find common ground once you start talking face-to-face.”

“Great!” said Corporal Williams, rising from his chair. “Our work is done. I’m going home.”

“Wait!” said the spider commander. “There are other issues to be discussed.”

“There always are,” said Corporal Williams. “Minor details can be negotiated by our aides. They can write up a
formal agreement for us to sign later."

“No,” said the spider commander. “Some details cannot wait. Colonel Czerinski has repeatedly tried to
assassinate me. I want something done about Czerinski.”

“Czerinski? That asshole?” asked Corporal Williams. “Don’t worry about Czerinski. With just a phone call I’ll
transfer Czerinski to guard duty at the South Pole. He’ll be counting penguins all day. Can we go home now?”

“Colonel Czerinski, you are my kind of diplomat,” replied the spider commander. “If you had been sent
here a long time ago, we could have avoided all this trouble from the start.”

“Call me Your Excellency,” insisted Corporal Williams.

“I sincerely believe we can do business, Your Excellency,” said the spider commander. “Can I count on you as
a friend? You would be my first human pestilence friend.”

“All this talk of doing business reminds me,” said Corporal Williams. “You are manufacturing moonshine and
selling it to the Angry Onion Tavern at too high a price. If you want to continue your monopoly, you will have to be
more reasonable about what you charge.”

“I see you have been well briefed on local issues,” replied the spider commander, turning to the TV camera and
putting a claw over the lens. “I want that edited out! We are not broadcasting live are we?”

“Of course we are,” replied the camera spider. “You ordered this be broadcast live, planet-wide.”

“Well?” asked Corporal Williams. “Are you willing to be reasonable? If we expect others to find common
ground, we must be willing to do the same in our personal dealings.”

“Your Excellency, you are a hard bargainer,” groused the spider commander. “Fine! I will lower prices.”

“And, we need the New Mississippi River stocked with more catfish,” said Corporal Williams. “Lately the
fishing sucks.”

“The New Mississippi River is outside of my sector of responsibility, but I will look into the matter for you,”
said the spider commander. What are catfish? he thought to himself. “We need to establish firm borders across the
New Gobi Desert to reduce confrontations between colonists and our military.”

“Good idea,” said Corporal Williams. “Do it. String lots of fence wire. Next issue?”

“Terrorists are becoming a problem again,” said the spider commander. “Someone is supplying them
landmines.”

“Kill the terrorists. That’s what the Legion does,” suggested Corporal Williams. “And reduce your indiscriminate use of landmines. Poor security allows the terrorists to dig up or steal landmines and use them against us.”

“Kill the terrorists! That is exactly what I told the governor needed to be done,” commented the spider
commander. “I like your attitude. Moving on, can you give me an update on our extradition request for most-wanted fugitive Raul Miranda?”

“We had him in custody,” said Corporal Williams. “Czerinski ordered Miranda delivered to you, but the
terrorist escaped. A legionnaire was seriously injured. We are hunting for Miranda and will shoot him on sight.”

“That about resolves the major issues for now,” announced the spider commander, speaking to the cameras. “I appreciate General Kalipetsis finally sending a reasonable ambassador I can work with. Someone who can get things done.”

“What about the expansion of cable TV across the MDL into United States Galactic Federation territory?”
asked one of the reporters. “Cable is so superior to satellite TV.”

“First of all, I reject your premise of superiority,” said Corporal Williams, visibly upset. “Everyone knows
friends do not let friends watch cable. We will go to war before allowing your cable rot to extend its tentacles across
the MDL.”

“We can table that issue,” suggested the spider commander, wanting to calm down Ambassador Williams. “Let
us agree to disagree.”

“But your stubborn boneheaded position is so irrational,” argued the reporter. “And Fox News Network is
neither fair nor impartial.”

“What?” said Corporal Williams, reaching for his pistol but only finding the pockets of his bathrobe. “You are
lucky to be on this side of the MDL. The Legion throws obnoxious reporters like you out airlocks.”

“That is more common ground we need to establish between our two great cultures,” agreed the spider
commander, as he nodded to the Intelligentsia team leader. The police grabbed the reporter and dragged him from
the room, yelling and thrashing about. As they got to the doorway, the reporter threw his shoe at Ambassador
Williams. Williams ducked and gave the reporter the one-fingered salute in return.

“Too bad you don’t have airlocks on the planet’s surface,” commented Corporal Williams.

“I agree,” said the spider commander. “Negotiations have gone so well, I would like to invite you to a banquet
in your honor tonight to celebrate the historic agreements reached today.”
“I don’t know,” said Corporal Williams. “I just want to get out of town alive.”
“Stop being a whiner,” said Private Wayne. “I’m putting him into sex and alcohol rehab as soon as we cross the MDL.”

“Will there be more vodka and hookers?” asked Private Wayne.
“Please excuse my spider liaison officer,” said Corporal Williams. “I’m putting him into sex and alcohol rehab as soon as we cross the MDL.”

“No apology is needed,” said the spider commander. “As I said, good help is hard to find in the Gobi. To further the spirit of cooperation and co-existence exemplified here today, I will accommodate your cultural preferences and personally provide lots of alcohol and hookers for the banquet.”
“We will be there!” said Ambassador Williams.

***

The banquet was a grand affair. The convention center at the New Gobi Plaza Hotel accommodated the overflow formal-attire crowd. Spider dignitaries flew in on short notice from all over New Colorado to see and meet Ambassador Williams. Intently watching the negotiations on cable TV, the spider public believed they were witnessing a historic moment for the Empire, New Colorado, and the galaxy.

In honor of their human pestilence guests, dinner was lavishly catered locally by McDonald’s Restaurant. Vodka and whiskey were provided by the spider commander. Polite conversation followed dinner. After the spider commander gave an eloquent introduction, Ambassador Williams got up to read his speech. Private Wayne had written most of it, and Williams planned to add commentary. They hoped to dazzle the spiders long enough to get through the evening and escape. TV cameras and substantial press coverage recorded what most hoped would be history in the making.

“Fellow Americans,” read Corporal Williams from a prepared text. He frowned at the audience and added, “And my fellow spiders. It is our job as leaders to do what is right, no matter what the consequences. The will of God eventually prevails, so we had better do our damned best to do right, or else in the end we will be rightfully struck down by the hand of God. It don’t pay to be on the wrong side of God. I had a cousin in Tennessee who was struck by lightning three times, and let me tell you, he was a sinner.

Anyway,” continued Corporal Williams, realizing he had got off track, “as leaders, we need to strive to control events for the public good, rather than merely letting events control us. I believe God intends humanity and spiders to join together to forge a New Galactic World Order. Why else had God seen fit to put us both on the same miserable planet? Nowhere else in the galaxy do two sentient species share a planet.

“Have there been great conflicts and hardship between us? Yes, you know that is true. But hardship and struggle make us stronger. Our shared struggles and hardship bond us together into one common history and, eventually, one common culture. The melting pot that is New Colorado will prevail. We are not perfect, but we are called to a perfect mission. If I am killed today, do not let my death stop this sacred effort. Let every drop of my blood spilled nurture the bond shared between our two great cultures.

“The work we started today still needs to be finished. Our goal of a just and long-lasting peace among ourselves and among all nations is within our grasp. Seize it!”

I watched Williams’ speech on TV, as did General Kalipetsis, Congress, and most of the known galaxy. I thought it was a great speech. I did not know Williams had it in him. However, the intent and meaning of the speech was lost in translation for the spiders. The spiders watching thought Williams was inviting the Arthropodan Empire to surrender to human pestilence domination. The mere mention of a New World Order set off the conspiracy theorists and caused rioting in the streets. There was no applause when Williams concluded his speech. Instead, Ambassador Williams and his bodyguards were escorted to the MDL, and unceremoniously shoved across the border.

***

General Kalipetsis made a special trip to New Gobi for a secret award ceremony and debriefing of the returned legionnaires. Corporal Tonelli, Corporal Williams, Private Wayne, and Private Camacho were awarded the Military Governor’s Citation of Merit. Williams was promoted to Sergeant. General Kalipetsis personally pinned on Williams’ new stripes.

“I hope you all understand that public acknowledgement of your exploits and top-secret mission would jeopardize ongoing peace treaty negotiations,” said General Kalipetsis. “Most of you are already highly decorated
combat veterans. I only hope this small token of my appreciation of your valor compensates you somewhat.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Sergeant Williams. “Sergeant is the highest rank ever for a Williams, although I claim Sergeant York of Pall Mall, Tennessee, as kin too.”

“Sergeant York?” asked General Kalipetsis.

“Alvin York,” said Sergeant Williams, proudly. “Alvin was the most decorated United States soldier during World War I. He married Gracie Williams, my great, great, great, great aunt.”

“I see,” said General Kalipetsis. “I am glad to hear you are carrying on your family’s fine tradition of service to your country.”

“Yes, sir,” said Sergeant Williams. “Between the preachers and the soldiers in my family, we have all the bases covered. I’m sure lots of us got into Heaven, and hopefully still more will, too.”

General Kalipetsis departed as abruptly as he entered, leaving me to address the men. “You all have a week off for leave,” I said. “Don’t get into any more trouble. Dismissed!”

Because of Sergeant Williams’ newfound notoriety caused by his intergalactic speech, the Legion had to hide him from the press. On my recommendation, Sergeant Williams was transferred to a weather station at the South Pole.

Chapter 12

A confident young female legionnaire entered my office and saluted. “Sir, my name is Lieutenant Priscilla Percy. I am a Legion mental health professional sent by General Kalipetsis to talk to you.”

“I don’t need a shrink,” I replied. “I’m fine most of the time.”

“General Kalipetsis thinks that the stress of command may have caught up with you,” advised Lieutenant Percy. “How do you handle stress?”

“Usually I just sit in the dark, grinding my teeth and rocking back and forth,” I said. “Sometimes I chant all night, watching porn.”

“Your crude and irreverent comments do not faze me in the least,” said Lieutenant Percy. “I am told you drink to excess and have an anger management problem. Is that true?”

“Probably,” I answered. “But that doesn’t mean I am crazy. I like to drink and unwind at the Angry Onion Tavern. Did you know I am part-owner of a new tavern called the Blind Tiger? The grand opening will be any day now. You’re invited. You can join me for a drink and observe first-hand whether I have a drinking problem or am crazy.”

“No one thinks you are crazy,” assured Lieutenant Percy. “The first step toward confronting a problem is to admit you have a problem. Being that you have already acknowledged your drinking problem, I think we are already making excellent progress.”

“I also gamble too much,” I added. “So what? Did you know that besides owning a bar, I am a millionaire?”

“These bad habits are just symptoms of stress,” said Lieutenant Percy. “You need to find other ways to channel your tension.”

“I am trying,” I said. “But you keep turning me down. I don’t want to go blind.”

“Do you have any hobbies?” asked Lieutenant Percy. “Something like tennis?”

“This is not a fancy country club,” I said. “This is the DMZ, and I am in the Foreign Legion. I’m happy just staying alive for another day.”

“These are relatively peaceful times. You have more than enough time to find a hobby or something constructive to do with your off-duty time. Have you ever considered golf? It is very relaxing.”

“Whatever.”

“Do you go to church?” asked Lieutenant Percy.

“I used to,” I answered. “But the spiders blew it up. Tough luck. Pastor Jim is rebuilding.”

“Does your faith help you to deal with the pressures of command?”

“Not likely. I would rather sleep on Sundays, especially when I’m hung-over.”

“Are you in a relationship?” asked Lieutenant Percy, continuing to jot down notes. “Is there anyone special in your life?”

“I thought you were here to talk about stress,” I said, shifting uncomfortably in my chair.
“How is your sex life?” asked Lieutenant Percy.

“I am currently between relationships,” I said. “Are you interested in helping me in that regard, Priscilla?”

“I am not just being nosy,” said Lieutenant Percy. “There are clinical reasons for my questions. When is the last time you had sex?”

“That is none of your business,” I said. “You can go tell General Kalipetsis that I do not appreciate this prying into my private life.”

“Sexual issues may be contributing to your stress and overall unhealthy mental state,” commented Lieutenant Percy. “General Kalipetsis assured me you are one of his best commanders and would cooperate fully in your rehabilitation. Do I need to call General Kalipetsis and tell him you are resisting therapy?”

“No, Lieutenant Percy,” I said. “That will not be necessary. We can resolve these matters before you leave.”

“Good,” said Lieutenant Percy, making a note. “You admit you are under a great deal of stress. I can help you manage that stress. Together we will confront the sources of your destructive behavior and treat the symptoms.”

“You are writing things down to put into my personnel file?” I asked. “If so, I refuse to say anything more.”

“Nothing said here will go into your personnel file,” assured Lieutenant Percy. “This is just between you and me. Notes help me organize my thoughts. I am only here to help.”

“I still don’t believe in shrinks,” I said. “I don’t see how you can solve anything with a one-day visit.”

“Maybe and maybe not,” said Lieutenant Percy. “All we are going to do today is discuss some of the troubling issues in your life. Sometimes merely talking about something can help to identify the source of a problem. When is the last time you had sex?”

“With a human?” I asked. “Why do you keep asking that question?”

“Of course with a human,” said Lieutenant Percy. “What else is there? You do not strike me as the type who cavorts with farm animals.”

“What?” I asked, startled. “What are you writing? I do not mess around with farm animals!”

“Oh my God!” said Lieutenant Percy, upset by a revelation. “You have sex with spiders?”


“That is disgusting!” said Lieutenant Percy. “How many times have you engaged in this bestiality?”

“They are a sentient species,” I insisted. “Not beasts.”

“How many times!” demanded Lieutenant Percy.

“I can’t remember,” I replied. “We are on the frontier. There is a shortage of human females. And, you’re not helping to solve the problem.”

“That is not a viable excuse, you degenerate,” said Lieutenant Percy. “You should be ashamed of yourself and stripped of command. What kind of example does your ill-advised conduct set for your men? Your legionnaires look to you for guidance. You are a father figure to them.”

“I know,” I said, my shoulders slumping. “I am bad. You should spank me.”

“You are more than bad,” said Lieutenant Percy. “You are evil! This will go into your file!”

“Oh come on,” I argued. “You promised nothing would go into my file. It’s just the stress of command on a far-flung dusty planet. I’ll promise to find a hobby, even play golf if you want me to.”

“You cannot blame your debauchery on the stress of command,” said Lieutenant Percy. “Your deep-seated, debased, twisted behavior is probably a reflection of how you were raised. Were your parents perverts, too? You are so disgusting!”

“My parents were both elected to public office,” I replied. “Politicians?” asked Lieutenant Percy. “No wonder.”

Lieutenant Percy ended the session by walking out and slamming the door. I called my chief engineer officer and ordered him to immediately build a golf course. Then, I dragged myself down to the Angry Onion Tavern and knocked the first Hell’s Angel I saw off his bar stool. The bouncers beat me with clubs and strung me up in a cocoon and hung me upside-down from the ceiling.

* * * * *

The spider commander and his new military intelligence officer looked out across the MDL at the latest Legion construction project. Bulldozers were plowing the desert. Trucks were hauling in fertilizer and sod.

“What is this madness?” asked the spider commander. “Are the human pestilence building another park?”

“It is a golf course,” said the military intelligence officer. “Golf is a recreational sport involving hitting a small ball from one distant hole to another. It is a bit similar to lawn croquet, only on a much grander scale.”

“They would do better to use indigenous landscaping,” commented the spider commander. “Those extensive greens waste precious water. Why would the Legion build a golf course here? What trick are they up to?”
“Golf is a favorite game of the business elite,” explained the military intelligence officer, checking the database. “If you have a five-star hotel, you need a golf course to go with it.”

“We have a five-star hotel,” said the spider commander. “Why don’t we have a golf course? How many golf courses have been built in the DMZ?”

“This will be the first,” said the military intelligence officer. “But there are many golf courses in the human pestilence southern area.”

“The first!” said the spider commander. “That’s it! Czerinski wants to be the first to have a golf course in the DMZ! Instruct my engineers to build a golf course immediately. And, I want my golf course to be bigger and better than the human pestilence golf course. Most important, I want my golf course completed before Czerinski’s golf course!”

“The human pestilence have a head start on construction,” said the military intelligence officer. “I am not sure we can get our golf course built first.”

“I will take care of that,” promised the spider commander. “You just get our engineers to work! I want no excuses.”

* * * *

The point spider scout gripped his assault rifle as he cautiously pushed through the sagebrush, leading his commando team. Sage-colored camouflage netting made the commando almost invisible when motionless. Cautious of booby-traps and landmines, the point spider stopped to listen. Night vision technology allowed him to see legionnaire guards patrolling the MDL fence. A legionnaire in the distance walked a monitor dragon. Fortunately the commandos were downwind from the dragon. A traitorous spider legionnaire walked with the dragon handler. The traitor suddenly stopped, looking directly at the commando team. A flare went off in the sky, lighting the desert below.

The spider scout closed his eyes so as not to lose his night vision. He stayed perfectly still, and could remain so for hours, even days. Spider scouts were specially recruited for their patience and stealth capabilities. They made excellent snipers and sappers. The commando team remained motionless until the flare died out. The legionnaires continued their patrol. The point spider cut a hole in the MDL fence and led the team through to their target.

At the golf course, they expertly placed explosive charges on heavy equipment and on outbuildings. The clubhouse was wired with a nasty delayed fuse that would kill first responders. Even the sand traps and greens were targeted.

The point spider quickly retraced their route back to the MDL fence. A branch snapped somewhere in the darkness. As the point spider held up a claw to signal the team to stop, a shot rang out, hitting the commando in his chest. Grenades exploded, sending blinding flashes and shrapnel into the night sky in all directions. A Legion monitor dragon shrieked as an aerial flare went off.

A team leader grabbed the wounded point spider and carried him through the opening in the fence. They sprinted for cover. At an outcropping of rocks, waiting medics met the wounded. A machine-gun team fired back at the legionnaires. The ‘thunk’ of a grenade launcher was followed by an explosion that knocked the team leader down. Shrapnel cut into his shoulders. He turned, facing the legionnaire positions, using his body to shield the retreating medics and wounded. The muzzle flash from this assault rifle drew more fire. A bullet grazed his face. Another took his leg. The team leader staggered back as explosions at the golf course lit up the horizon. Even the clubhouse exploded and caught fire. The shooting stopped. Mission accomplished.

Attacking a golf course made no sense. The team leader swore that whoever planned this mission would pay. Cannon fodder is what some officer thought of his commandos. There would be a day of reckoning for that officer.

* * * *

I entered the floatation center, hoping for much needed relief from my stress. After the spiders blew up the golf course, I lost interest in putting on the greens. Golf wasn’t going to help, anyway. Pastor Jim told me about the floatation center. He said there is no better method of letting the stress of the week dissolve into a distant memory than to float for an hour in saline serenity. Floatation tanks filled with ten inches of water and seven-hundred-fifty pounds of Epsom salts made it impossible to sink. I floated blissfully.

The attendant left me alone to float my cares away. Hawaiian music eased me into a ‘theta’ state, the point between sleep and waking, I was told. The effect was almost instantaneous. I was advised such relaxation lowered blood pressure, eased joint pain, sped muscle recovery, and relieved stress and anxiety. Floatation did all the functions my implanted chips were supposed to be doing.
I felt so relaxed after an hour, I was not the least bit upset later when I entered my office and found Captain Lopez waiting for me. He had that look. I thought then that Lopez could use some serious floating too.

“How will we respond to this latest spider provocation?” asked Captain Lopez, pacing.

“If you mean blowing up my golf course, I don’t even care,” I replied.

“Whether you care or not, we cannot let the spiders get away with it,” responded Captain Lopez. “We must maintain a credible deterrence.”

“Blow up that fruit tree by the checkpoint again,” I suggested. “The spider commander gets all pissed off when we do that. I like to get him angry. He’s wound so tight, he’s going to bust a gasket one of these days. Let Guido handle bombing the tree.”

Chapter 13

Tit-for-tat was becoming part of military procedure in the DMZ. Guido successfully bombed the spiders’ fruit tree. The next day I arrived at my office to find the front door ajar. The office had been ransacked. Missing was a pistol and a pair of sunglasses I had left on my desk. However, the office safe containing documents and petty cash was not touched. It was probably just kids, I thought. When I pulled open the top drawer of my desk, a live Arthropodan grenade rolled out. I dove for cover as the grenade exploded. My injuries were minor, but medics would be digging out small pieces of shrapnel from my backside for months. Some days are just not worth getting up for.

* * * * *

Captain Lopez informed me that blowing up the spiders’ fruit tree was not enough of a response. He felt that this weak symbolic Legion response to the golf course attack was not proportionate to the spiders’ intent to cause great harm and loss of life. Captain Lopez said the spider commandos rigged explosives at the golf course clubhouse to detonate after first responders arrived at the scene. It was only luck that the clubhouse exploded early and no one was killed. The motive seemed to be mindless terrorism. Captain Lopez insisted terrorism could not be tolerated. That was one problem with having an intelligence officer. He always found bad news for me. And Captain Lopez seemed intent on finding as much bad news as he could. At this rate, I was going to need the services of the floatation center more than once a week.

I noticed the spiders were building a golf course too. Maybe I would call in an air strike on the 17th hole. It would be more tit-for-tat and might keep bloodthirsty Lopez happy.

After a few days, I asked Captain Lopez if there were any updates or further information about my office burglary. Lopez said he was still reviewing video surveillance records in the area. The investigation continued. He thought anyone wanting to kill me should have used a bigger bomb – that was what he said he would do. I felt so much better hearing him say that.

* * * * *

I lost interest in golf. It was a boring sport, anyway. In fact, I was not so sure golf should even have been considered a sport. A sport required a team. I had the golf course converted into a baseball field. First Division’s recreation league fielded teams to play ball. I noticed this often attracted the interest of spider marines across the border. They gathered in large numbers at the MDL fence to watch games. Finally the spider guard at the border crossing approached Guido about their mutual interest in baseball.

“Did you know we play baseball, too?” asked the spider guard. “We are rabid fans of the game. I play every chance I get.”

“I didn’t know you even had a ball field,” replied Guido. “Do you have a local team?”

“This military sector has a marine team,” advised the spider guard. “But they do not play much because the Legion keeps shooting at us.”

“Ditto,” said Guido. “Is your team any good?”

“No,” said the spider guard. “They suck. How about your Legion teams? I see you have a league. That is
awesome.”

“They’re just amateurs,” said Guido. “Most of the hitters couldn’t bat themselves out of a wet paper bag.”

“That is too bad,” said the spider guard. “I was going to suggest a game between us. Maybe even some small
friendly wagers. But if you think a Legion team would not be competitive, it probably would not be worth the effort
to set up a game.”

“You players are so out of practice, I would not want to take advantage of the situation by placing bets,” said
Guido. “But, to further interspecies understanding and goodwill, I will present the idea to Colonel Czerinski.”

“I normally do not approve of gambling,” said the spider guard. “But a baseball game might generate more
interest if a few small friendly bets were allowed to be placed. Our players are so out of shape, you will probably
win by ten runs.”

“I’m catholic,” said Guido. “Usually I don’t gamble much, either. But I’ll take your money.”

“How much money are we talking about?” asked the spider guard. “Just a little chump change? Or are you
feeling bold?”

“How much can you afford to lose?” asked Guido. “Baseball is America’s game. You can’t beat us. Our local
talent is strictly amateur, but it’s better than anything you can field.”

“Put your money where your mouth is, legionnaire,” hissed the spider guard. “New Memphis bookies can
handle all your action. Who knows? You might get lucky.”

“Luck won’t have anything to do with it,” said Guido. “Baseball is embedded in our genetic code. You spiders
just learned the game yesterday.”

“You spiders?” said the spider guard. “What do you mean by ‘you spiders’? I hope you human pestilence bet
the farm. I need all the extra cash I can get for my investment portfolio.”

“Whatever,” said Guido. This is going to be easy money, he thought. Whoever heard of aliens playing
baseball?

* * * * *

“Is there any way we can fix the game?” I asked. “I like to bet on a sure thing.”

“Not unless you want to throw the game,” said Guido. “It’s hard to do business with the spider commander.”

“Losing a baseball game to the spiders is not an option,” I said. “Not on my watch.”

“We need to play this smart,” said Captain Lopez. “What kind of odds are the New Memphis bookies giving?”

“Surprisingly, the spiders are favored,” said Guido.

“Someone knows something we don’t?” I asked. “Have we been set up?”

“I’ve heard rumors the spiders are flying in a bunch of ringers from the professional leagues on Arthropoda,”
said Guido. “We need to get a stipulation that all players be military and local.”

“Even bringing in players from the North is a violation of the spirit of our agreement,” protested Captain
Lopez. “Just give me the word, and I’ll have that shuttle shot down while it’s still in orbit.”

“Can we bring in our own ringers?” I asked.

“On such short notice?” asked Guido. “We can try.”

“Do it,” I said. “How come the spiders have time to bring in pro players and we don’t?”

“I think they have been planning this game for quite some time,” said Guido. “Now that I think about it, we are
being played.”

“What else can we do?” I asked. “I am not shooting down any shuttles.”

“Cheat,” said Captain Lopez. “Cheat is a baseball tradition. We’re human. It’s our game. We should be able
to cheat the spiders. We have centuries of baseball cheating experience on them.”

“Can we pay off the umpires?” I asked.

“No,” said Guido. “The New Memphis Sheriff’s Office is providing the umpires. They can’t be bought. We’ve
tried that before. Remember?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said. “Try.”

“We have enough baseball talent and expertise right here in First Division to beat them,” said Captain Lopez.

“I’ll put together an all-star roster from the recreation leagues. My Military Intelligence people will work with the
players to see what technology we can use to help give us more of an advantage. And guess what? We already have
one of the best pitchers in the Legion.”

“Oh?” I asked. “Who?”

“Me,” bragged Captain Lopez. “My knuckleball and spitball can’t be hit.”

“We have one week to make this happen,” I said. “I’m betting a lot of money on this game. If I lose my money,
someone will be joining Sergeant Williams, counting weather balloons and penguins at the South Pole. I don’t
Weather for the game was perfect. The sky was blue, and the temperature was moderate by local standards – 90 degrees. Captain Lopez recruited a fine team and organized an extensive support staff. I looked out to the center field stands. A legionnaire scout team had a spotting scope set up, pointed at home base. They radioed they should have no problem stealing signs from the catcher. Video cameras covered the base coach positions, and listening devices were installed in the spiders’ dugout. Our pitchers would be throwing ‘heavy’ baseballs. The baseballs had been humidified, then frozen earlier that morning. We were storing them in dry ice chests in the dugout. We all had corked bats. Other bats had been coated with a layer of lacquer, making them as hard as metal. Sergeant Green and I labored to carry a cooler of ‘special’ Gatorade to the spider dugout.

“Do you think we really need to cheat to beat a bunch of spiders?” asked Sergeant Green. “It just doesn’t seem right.”

“It’s only cheating if we get caught,” I replied. “We won’t get caught. Getting caught would be unprofessional. Call it gamesmanship. It’s a baseball tradition. It’s an American tradition. So is winning – a tradition I aim to maintain.”

“What’s in the Gatorade?” asked Sergeant Green.

“Something nasty Captain Lopez cooked up,” I said. “I’m not sure what’s in it. Just don’t spill any on yourself. It might have some nerve agent mixed in.”

The spider commander met us halfway to the spiders’ dugout. He was managing for the spiders. He ordered the Gatorade poured out on the ground. I walked around the puddle, watching the grass wilt.

“I know better than to let my team drink your poison,” said the spider commander. “And we found your listening devices in the dugout, too!”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” I said. “I heard the New Memphis mob is still upset about you bombing their brewery. It was probably them.”

“That is ancient history,” said the spider commander, looking up in the stands for Mafioso types. He didn’t see any Italians except Guido.

“I called Rudy Juardo and reminded him of your handiwork,” I said.

“I am warning you,” said the spider commander. “I have taken special security precautions. Legion provocations will be dealt with harshly.”

“I should have had your team shot down like Captain Lopez wanted,” I said. “I didn’t do it because we can beat the best ringers you can field.”

“Play ball!” shouted the umpire.

We had home field advantage. Captain Lopez took the mound. Lopez threw mostly knuckleballs, with a few fastballs to keep the hitters honest. The first spider hitter seemed agitated and highly animated. He continuously waved his bat, and was in and out of the batter’s box, calling timeout and adjusting his equipment. He choked way up on the bat and hit a couple foul balls. Finally I called timeout and approached home plate. The spider commander immediately charged to home plate too.

“This spider is amped up,” I complained. “He’s higher than a kite. Check the dilation of his pupils!”

“You can’t prove that! Team Leader #39 did not take drugs,” the spider commander objected.

The umpire looked at Team Leader #39’s eyes. There were eight eyes, and they did not all point in the same direction. “Good grief,” he mumbled, then turned to us and ordered, “Managers, get back to your dugouts. Play ball!”

Captain Lopez then ‘plunked’ Team Leader #39, putting him on first. The spider easily stole second base, and then third. He was brought home on a weak single. That spider stole second base, too. I called timeout and went out to talk to Captain Lopez. “This is not a good start,” I said. “I have several million bet on this game. I thought you said you could pitch.”

“I can’t believe how fast those spiders are,” complained Captain Lopez. “They must run sixty miles per hour.”

“I’m taking care of that,” I said. As I spoke, the automatic sprinkler system came on, delaying the game about a half an hour. Tarps could not be found because it never rains in New Gobi. No one could figure out how to turn off the sprinklers. In the meantime, the base pads turned to wet clay. The soft pads slowed the spider runners considerably. When the game resumed, the spider on second was thrown out while trying to steal third. Lopez finished the inning, down only 1-0.

The spider pitcher had some wicked action on the ball. The first two batters struck out. I called timeout again, and ran out on the field. “Examine that ball!” I told the umpire. “He’s doctoring the ball.”
The catcher immediately threw the ball back to the pitcher. I ran after the pitcher demanding to see the ball. The pitcher shoved me back, causing both benches to clear. When order was restored, the umpire took possession of the ball. Several stitches were cut, and the ball was scuffed up a bit.

“It’s just my claw,” explained the spider pitcher. “Sometimes the ball accidently gets nicked.”

“Don’t let it happen again,” warned the umpire, tossing the ball aside. “Play ball!”

The spider pitcher ‘plunked’ our batter, too. The next batter hit a home run – he knew what pitch was coming because the spotter in center field radioed in the sign. Minutes later, a fight erupted in center field between legionnaires and spider marines. The spotting scope was broken and thrown out onto the field. The fight continued until Legion security clubbed and pepper-sprayed as many spiders as they could catch.

We went into the second inning, up 2-1. Captain Lopez struck out the side. As he walked off the mound, the spider commander ran onto the field to confront Lopez and to complain to the umpire. “There is a brown smudge on one of the digits of this human pestilence,” accused the spider commander.

“It’s just dirt and rosin,” explained Captain Lopez, holding out his offending thumb.

“There is more under the brim of his cap,” yelled the spider commander.

“That’s just more dirt,” advised Captain Lopez. “I give my word as an officer and a gentleman.”

“It could be pine tar,” said the umpire.

“And maybe he was scratching his butt,” I yelled, marching up to the center of contention. “I am sick and tired of the commander’s harassment of my players!”

“Wash your hands and get a new cap,” ordered the umpire. “I am warning everyone. I am kicking players out of the game if this nonsense continues.”

During the next inning, the Legion scored seven runs, going up 9-1. But it came to a crashing end when our cleanup hitter broke his bat. The bat was corked.

“You are out of here!” yelled the umpire, ejecting the batter. “I want all your bats checked. I want bats picked at random to be sawed and examined.”

“You can’t do that,” I argued. “That was someone else’s bat that got mixed in with ours from the recreation league. It will take too long to saw open the bats and have them examined.”

“I am making time,” said the umpire. “The matter will be investigated.”

“What? If I find out you have been paid off by the spiders, I’ll have you shot. Do you know who you are talking to?”

“I know who you are, Colonel Czerinski,” said the umpire. “This game has not been compromised, and I will not be intimidated.”

I kicked dirt on home base as we talked. When the umpire pulled out his brush, about to clean up my mess, I snatched his brush and threw it into the stands. The crowd cheered as I walked away. The umpire, not catching what I had done, swept the plate off with his hands.

In the fifth inning, the Legion was up 11-2 when the spider commander called timeout and complained about Captain Lopez again. An examination of the baseball showed a cut.

“What now?” asked Captain Lopez, holding out his hands. “I washed the rosin and dirt off my hands and got a new cap. What more do you want? It’s not my fault you spiders can’t hit.”

“Search him!” demanded the spider commander. “This human pestilence is cuffing the ball.”

The umpire checked Lopez’ glove and patted him down. A file was found in Lopez’ hip pocket.

“I’m a knuckleball pitcher,” explained Captain Lopez. “I need to keep my fingernails filed to get a proper grip on the ball.”

“I warned you earlier I would not put up with more nonsense,” said the umpire, giving Lopez the thumb. “You are out of here!”

Both benches cleared again, and there was some pushing and shoving while our relief pitchers scrambled to warm up. When order was finally restored, the sprinkler system came on again. Captain Lopez sat down in the dugout, saying he could not leave the stadium for security reasons. Our new pitcher was Private Krueger. He claimed he had pitched back in junior high school and had quality time in the recreation league. Krueger gave up five runs. The next pitcher wasn’t much better. By the middle of the seventh inning, the score was 13-13. As I watched the spiders take the field, I began to worry. Their new pitcher was getting a good groove and was shutting us down. Then my cell phone rang. “This had better be important,” I growled.

“I wish to defect,” said the voice on my phone.

“What?” I asked, switching to speaker so Captain Lopez could listen. “Now? Who is this?”

“This is the pitcher,” said the voice. “I am also the Arthropodan team leader who blew up your golf course.”

“That was good work, team leader,” I said. I looked out to the mound and saw that the spider pitcher was indeed talking on a cell phone. The pitcher waved.
“Thank you, sir,” said the spider pitcher. “I have specific issues with my commander and with the Empire in general. Political disillusionment forces me to defect. I want to pitch for the New York Yankees.”

“Sure,” I said. “I can arrange that. But first I want you to give up at least two quick runs.”

“You want to negotiate?” asked the spider pitcher. “I will let you talk to my agent.”

“Hello! Can you hear me now?” asked the spider’s agent. “I’ve been monitoring this call. My client also wants a two year no-cut contract!”

“Who is this?” I asked. “What about those two quick runs?”

“Yes, yes, we can do that,” said the agent. “That is the easy part. I am also playing first base.”

“I suppose you want to play for the Yankees, too?” I asked, eying the spider first-baseman. He was also talking on a cell phone.

“No way, José,” said the spider first-baseman. “New York ain’t much of a town. I want to play for Boston.”

“I want two quick runs,” I repeated. “Do we have a deal?”

“Deal,” both spiders chimed in.

“What do you think?” I asked, turning to Captain Lopez.

“I think José needs a new translation device,” said Captain Lopez. “We are going to need more than two runs to win this game.”

The next Legion batter hit a grounder to third. The long throw to first base was dropped. The next batter hit a change-up over the left field fence. The spider commander charged out of the dugout, carrying an assault rifle. His own players restrained him as both benches cleared. This time the entire Sheriff’s Office was out on the field. Horse-mounted deputies knocked players aside. The spider pitcher and first-baseman fled to the Legion dugout. Once they got to safety, both players gave the one-fingered salutes across the field to their old commander. “Rot in hell you incompetent piece of dragon dung!” yelled the spider pitcher.

“Traitor!” the spider commander yelled back. “You both will face firing squads!”

The spiders’ new pitcher shut us down, but we entered the eighth inning up 15-13. We were out of pitchers, so I took the mound. I had done some pitching as a kid, but really sucked then. I hoped the computer chip enhancements embedded in my arm would enable me to pitch much better now. The spider commander immediately came out to argue with the umpire. I continued to warm up. My ball was popping pretty good.

“Colonel Czerinski is not listed as a player on their roster,” argued the spider commander. “He is ineligible to play.”

“I am in uniform, and I am going to play,” I responded. “I am a player/manager. I am listed on the roster.”

“You are listed as a coach,” said the spider commander. “This is against the rules.”

“Player, coach, manager? It’s all semantics. Perhaps you need to get an update on your translation device,” I suggested. “You are losing too much in translation, using last year’s model from Radio Shack.”

“I want the rules enforced to the letter!” the spider commander shouted at the umpire. “We agreed to abide by professional American League rules.”

“What are you afraid of?” I asked. “Me? Yes, of course you are.”

“I am afraid of no human pestilence,” replied the spider commander. “The integrity of the game is at stake!”

“Colonel Czerinski will be allowed to pitch,” announced the umpire. “Play ball!”

I continued my warm up pitches. The sprinkler system came on again. Someone in the stands threw a grenade out in right field. A few shots were fired. During the commotion, the Legion groundskeepers moved the portable outfield fence further out. Remarkably, no one noticed.

My embedded computer chips greatly improved my hand-eye coordination and strength. I gave up no runs in the eighth inning. By the top of the ninth inning, however, my adrenaline was used up, and my arm was sore. Captain Lopez injected me with a shot he said would give me a boost. The side-effects were I would not sleep for days. I loaded the bases with three walks, then gave up a run on a long fly ball to the fence in left field. I loaded the bases again with another walk.

With the Legion leading 15-14, the game was interrupted by a New Gobi Desert dust storm. Goggles were needed to see just a few feet away. The field and players were covered with dirt and sand. It got everywhere. After two hours, the game was called, and the Legion team was declared the winner. I was relieved, pleased, and vindicated. Baseball was, is, and always will be, the best game in the galaxy. And, baseball will always be America’s game.
Chapter 14

The speed of light used to not only be king, it was the law. Now that principle was no longer true. As we gaddled about the galaxy in an instant, our only restriction was to calculate where we would stop or land. Computers did that for us.

In light of all this transportation technology, it never ceased to amaze me when I found myself traveling in an armored car on a bumpy, dusty dirt road. The road paralleled a canal that seemed to stretch to the horizon. Wheat fields lay on both sides.

General Kalipetsis told me the best commanders get out into the field as much as possible to see their men. When I did not take the hint, General Kalipetsis ordered me to the field. It was just as well. I almost got killed several times in New Gobi, and it did seem nice and peaceful out here in the country. I would miss my once-a-week floatation therapy, but Captain Lopez welcomed the break from garrison duty. He said I was getting needed activity and exercise. *Doesn’t he realize exercise can kill you?*

Speaking of garrison duty, I got an email about Sergeant Williams. He would soon be returning to from the South Pole. Sergeant Williams was almost killed and would be hospitalized for a while. He reportedly was electrocuted while taking a shower. An improperly grounded water pump sent a jolt of electricity through Williams when he turned on the shower water. The smell of burned hair roused his roommate, and prompt medical response revived Williams. Captain Lopez said this was proof that staying at base and getting fat was unhealthy, even when there was a war on. “You have to keep that cutting edge,” reasoned Lopez.

I monitored video from an airborne drone scouting for insurgent activity ahead of our column. I could see movement in an orchard grove, but could not determine who or what was under the trees. I also located a deer carcass alongside the roadway. We suspected it might contain an IED – improvised explosion device.

My armored car pulled off to the shoulder of the road just short of the deer carcass. Other armored cars flanked the orchard. Together, they fired machine guns into the orchard. I could see the muzzle flash of an insurgent machine gun firing back, but it was quickly silenced as the armored cars raced to the orchard. A blood trail and the machine gun were all that was found. Perhaps the insurgents dragged their wounded away or were hiding in tunnels. They were not to be found, and we were not spending all day here looking for them.

We were about to resume our patrol when the soft bank of the canal gave way under my armored car. The armored car slid into the canal and sank to the bottom. I was thrown out of the vehicle and sank to the bottom. Weighed down with equipment, I found myself on my back like a helpless turtle, my legs and arms waving and kicking at the blue water and sky above. I felt God had cheated me. It was not fair that I was going to die by drowning in the middle of a desert. How unlucky was that – and ironic? It was right up there with Sergeant Williams being electrocuted in a shower at the South Pole. Even dying from friendly fire would be more glorious than this. As I lost consciousness, light around me faded. A strong hand – claw – gripped my web belt and pulled me from the water. I coughed up water and gasped for air. Corporal Washington dragged me up the canal bank to dry ground.

“Are you okay, sir?” asked Corporal Washington.

“Of course he is okay,” said one of the new spider recruits. The spider was one of the baseball players that had recently defected. “The Butcher of New Colorado cannot be killed. He is immortal.”

“I am fine,” I replied. “I never could float.”

“You sank like a rock,” said the spider recruit.

“What is your name, private?” I asked.

“José,” said the recruit. “Private José.”

“I’ll bet Captain Lopez suggested that name,” I said, still lying there looking up at the others.

“He did,” said Private José. “How did you know that?”

“Private José, go check out that deer carcass for explosives,” I ordered. “You will be riding in the point vehicle.”

* * * * *

I rode with Captain Lopez to the next town. The sun was high, and it did not take long for me to dry out. We were greeted by both human and spider colonists. They seemed friendly and gave us the locations of houses containing suspected insurgents. They invited us into their homes to give us relief from the hot sun. We drank iced tea in the shade of their patios. At midnight we started kicking in doors. I never liked house searches because I feared booby-traps – what if a terrorist rigged the entire house to explode? My strategy was to only search a few houses at a time, and do it quickly. I hoped surprise would keep us safe and prevent the insurgents from ambushing
us. So far, most of the tips we were given appeared to be bogus. I suspected some colonists were just getting back at neighbors they had grudges against by sending the Legion to their homes. The only value from searching houses seemed to be that the residents sometimes gave us information about their neighbors.

One such tip proved to be valid. As legionnaires approached the front door, a dog started barking. Privates Camacho and Wayne smashed in the grilled front door with a hand-held metal battering ram. Guido threw in a flashbang grenade to stun anyone in the first room. Privates Camacho and Wayne quickly entered, taking up positions along the wall. Guido followed, covering the next doorway. Private Camacho flicked on a wall light switch.

A spider insurgent threw a grenade from the next room. Guido fired his assault rifle as the insurgent ducked back for cover. The grenade hit Private Camacho in the chest, then bounced to the floor at his feet. Training told Private Camacho to throw himself on the grenade, saving his comrades. It would be heroism worthy of the Medal of Honor. Instead, his mind drifted back to grade school. It was a better time. Ray Camacho kicked the grenade like a soccer ball, back into the next room, scoring a winning goal! The explosion filled the house with dust and smoke. The lights went out.

Guido and Private Wayne tossed more grenades through the smoky doorway. Then the legionnaires withdrew to the outside. Cannon and machine-gun fire from one of our armored cars raked the building, reducing it to rubble. A search of the rubble found small arms, RPGs, grenades, land mines, two dead spiders, and a dead dog.

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Guido and Private Camacho stood by their postal delivery truck. The hood was up, indicating that they were broke down. Guido could see no traffic on the dirt road for miles. It was another stifling hot day. Guido considered a swim in the canal. It would be great to cool off. But, then he thought better of it. A Legion company lay camouflaged under sagebrush-colored netting along a ridge overlooking the road. Guido did not like being bait for bandits and insurgents. It seemed like every time there was a crap detail to be done, Czerinski gave it to him. Guido sat down in the shade by his truck and waited. He took a Coke out of the cooler and chugged it down.

About two hours later, a jeep full of armed civilians stopped. They looked like human bandits. Three adult males stayed in the jeep. A short, dark, teenaged boy wearing an expensive pair of gold-plated, tear-drop Legion sunglasses and a Legion pistol strapped to his hip got out and approached the mail truck.

“Como es usted, el amigo?” asked Private Camacho.

“Where is the rest of your unit, legionnaire?” asked John Hume Ross. “Don’t you know it is dangerous out here? It is especially dangerous if you don’t belong out here. You should go home.”

“We belong wherever the Legion sends us,” replied Guido, reasonably. “We broke down. A Legion tow truck will be by soon.”

“Would you like to hitch a ride into town?” asked Ross.

“No,” said Guido. “We’re fine.”

“How about some water?” asked Ross, handing Guido a bottle as he walked around the truck. “There is an entire Legion company operating in this sector. Usually I know exactly where they are, but they seem to be hiding today. Where are they?”

“Too bad,” said Guido. “I didn’t know we were supposed to inform you of Legion troop movements.”

“Where is your dragon, Spot?” asked Ross.

“Somewhere close,” said Guido. “Do I know you?”

“Not really,” said Ross. “I’ve seen you at the border crossing in New Gobi. Sometimes I would throw Spot candy. Where did you get such a cool dragon?”

“I took Spot from a dead spider,” said Guido. “He cost less that way.”

“I’ll have to get a dragon of my own someday,” said Ross. “It’s on my list of things to do.”

“What are you boys doing out here?” asked Guido. “Are you bandits?”

“We’re Militia,” replied Ross. “We protect the local towns and keep the spiders in line.”

“What is your name?” asked Guido. “Show me your ID.”

“What if I said we don’t carry no stinking ID?” asked Ross, smiling.

“Then you would be under arrest,” said Private Camacho, pointing his assault rifle at Ross and the others.

Ross ignored Private Camacho. He scanned the ridge line, looking for movement or signs of an ambush. Then he handed his ID to Guido.

“The two of you are in Colonel Czerinski’s battalion,” commented Ross. “Say hello to Czerinski for me.”

“I’ll take you to see him if you like,” said Guido. “He’s not far.”

“Not today,” said Ross, snatching back his ID back and returning to his jeep. Ross nodded for the driver to go. A minute later they were just a dust trail on the horizon.
Towards evening, a spider on a dirt bike rode by. One of the legionnaires by the broken-down postal truck waved. The spider did not stop, but he did radio the location of the broken-down truck to other insurgents. The dirt-biker waited on a nearby hill for the others to arrive. They would try to take these legionnaires alive. They would make good hostages for a prisoner exchange, and a video of the prisoners would make good propaganda for the cause. The dirt-biker scanned the horizon with binoculars, watching for legionnaires or his insurgent friends. Soon, two beat-up old Toyota pickup trucks full of spiders came into view.

Sergeant Green had been watching the dirt-biker through the scope of his sniper’s rifle. As the insurgents came into range, Sergeant Green shot the dirt-biker. Machine-gun fire raked the Toyotas. When the shooting was over, the Toyotas had so many holes in them, they were barely recognizable as trucks.

Captain Lopez walked through the debris, looking for anything of value to Military Intelligence. He estimated they had killed at least eight spider insurgents, but their body parts were everywhere, making the count difficult. Captain Lopez collected IDs, weapons, and communications devices. In one such device he found a text message saying that the spider commander for New Gobi would be in this sector soon. The spider commander wanted to know what Colonel Czerinski was up to, and promised to bring newer and better weapons.

Chapter 15

John Hume Ross drove his jeep at breakneck speed to the town of Yellow Brick, intent on sounding the alarm. In violation of all local agreements, an Arthropodan marine task force of mechanized infantry was just down the road, headed their way. Yellow Brick was a mostly human enclave north of the DMZ. Although Yellow Brick was inside the boundaries of the Arthropodan Empire, local spider authorities had agreed not to bring large military units to town to enforce Imperial will. Two spider constables kept the peace and handled Imperial administrative duties. The Legion was poised to intervene, should the human population be molested in any way.

Now an air-raid siren sounded in the middle of town. Radio calls for help were being broadcast to the Foreign Legion camp to the south. More radio communications went out to alert the local militia. A barricade hastily went up across a dry creek bridge just north of town. Forty militia had already assembled at the bridge and were milling around, waiting for orders. They carried the latest Legion assault rifles and had shoulder-fired anti-tank missiles hidden in the grass at their feet.

The spider task force, armored cars carrying about a thousand Arthropodan marines, stopped at the north side of the bridge. A spider constable and John Hume Ross walked out to greet them. The spider marine commander and his aides dismounted and met them half way. The marine commander had been instructed to be observant of local customs and sensibilities, but this confrontation bordered on open rebellion!

“Good morning Commander,” said the constable, amicably. “Why are you here?”

“It is not my custom to explain myself to the local constabulary,” answered the marine commander. “Are you in league with the armed human pestilence blocking the bridge?”

“Certainly not,” replied the constable. “But there have been local agreements in place for quite some time, prohibiting large-scale troop occupation. In exchange, the human colonists peacefully submit to Imperial rule and pay their taxes on time. Your presence upsets everything. I insist you go around town.”

“Military Intelligence says your human pestilence militia has established a substantial armory here in Yellow Brick,” accused the spider marine commander. “I intend to seize their armory.”

“You may not enter Yellow Brick,” said Ross.

“You and that rabble by the bridge cannot stop me,” said the marine commander. “Order your human pestilence corps to yield, or you will be declared to be in open rebellion against the Empire. My armor will crush you.”

“No,” replied Ross. “You would not dare attack us. We are a legally constituted militia.”

“The Emperor does not recognize the right of armed human pestilence to interfere with his armies’ duties on
the frontier,” said the commander. “You have ten minutes to disperse and to yield the bridge.”

About that time, two Legion fighter-bomber jets did a low fly-by. The militia waved and cheered. The lead jet wagged his wings. Ross and the constable ran back to the barricade.

“Spread out,” ordered Ross. “Get the anti-tank missiles ready.”

“Are they going to attack?” asked a militia lieutenant. “We can’t fight against armor.”

“We won’t have to,” assured Ross. “Those Legion jets put a scare into the spiders. No one fire. Put your weapons on safety. No one wants war, but if war starts, let the spiders start it with the first shot. We will stand our ground here at the bridge. Don’t worry. Time is on our side.”

The constable ran back to the police station and tried to phone New Gobi Legion Headquarters. The line was busy. Then he unlocked jail cell doors, releasing three drunks inside.

“Is it lunch time already, boss?” asked one of the drunks. “I’m not leaving until I get my coffee and peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches.”

“Get out!” yelled the constable, firing a shot into the ceiling. “Run for your lives!”

“Who lit a fire under your spider butt?” asked the first drunk outside. He squinted from the bright sunlight. “Damn, it looks like the whole Chinese army across the Yulu River!”

“You’re not that old,” laughed one of the other drunks. “And those aren’t Chinese. They’re spiders!”

“I’m in the militia,” said the third drunk. “I should be over there, too.”

“Find cover!” yelled the constable as he closed the front door to the police department. The constable opened a heavy metal trap door located under his desk and dropped into the spider hole below. Every building in Yellow Brick, and most on the frontier, had similar holes and tunnels under the streets and buildings.

The spider marine commander angrily watched the human pestilence across the bridge. They did not appear to be dispersing as ordered. Instead, the human pestilence were digging in. One human pestilence was even aiming a missile. The short human wearing the sunglasses was directing the militia and yelling encouragement. Smoke rose from the nearby hills. Obviously it was a signal to alert more militia. The commander ordered his armored cars to deploy along the dry creek bank and to be ready to cross along a wide front. They would hit the militia holding the bridge, then out-flank the survivors. The whole rabble would easily be rolled up and done with in short order. The arrogance of these peasants had no bounds.

When the Arthropodan armor left the road, they struck landmines. Spider marines immediately fired machine guns at the militia. Several missiles were fired back. One missile damaged an armored car. The other merely bounced off sloped protective plating. The militia retreated as the spider marines crossed the dry creek bed and occupied Yellow Brick. The entire brief battle was recorded on video and instantly broadcast via the database to every news organization and TV station on New Colorado.

Two wounded militia were captured and locked up in the town jail. One was drunk. Three more were left dead on the bridge. Six spider marines were wounded. A medivac air-lifted the spider marines back to New Gobi. House-to-house searches failed to locate the armory. Out of frustration, the commander arrested hostages, demanding the location of the militia armory in exchange for their release. The next morning, the two wounded militia were executed by firing squad for treason and rebellion. At noon two Legion armored cars arrived. Legion helicopter gunships and jets circled in support.

“What have you done?” asked Captain Lopez, confronting the marine commander.

“We were met with armed resistance,” explained the marine commander. “We acted in self-defense and only used proportionate force, as allowed by our rules of engagement.”

“Hostage-taking and public executions are not a part of your rules of engagement,” replied Captain Lopez. “You will release the hostages at once, or risk war crimes prosecution and an escalation of hostilities.”

“Very well,” said the marine commander. “I was going to release them anyway. We cannot find the armory, although I am sure it is here somewhere. I don’t have time to blow up every tunnel in Yellow Brick. We are moving on.”

“Where are you going?” asked Captain Lopez.

“The next town to be searched is Redrock,” answered the marine commander. “You will leave, too. You are trespassing north of the DMZ.”

“We are merely a token force,” said Captain Lopez. “But we will stay to protect humanity from your brutal excesses.”

“Whatever,” said the marine commander. “Your own debauchery is well documented. I give you permission to keep a minimal police presence here until things get sorted out. Then you will leave.”

“I want your word there will be no more trouble here,” demanded Captain Lopez. “The same goes for Redrock.”

“Redrock is a civilized, mostly spider farming community,” said the marine commander. “There will be no
problems at Redrock.”

Captain Lopez set up a headquarters at the police station. Satellite reconnaissance indicated a large dust storm was coming, and Lopez did not want to get caught out in the open. The spider Task Force moved on towards Redrock. When the dust storm hit, it moved sand dunes across the dirt roadway and reduced visibility to just a few feet. The spider marines pressed on into the evening. Then it rained.

It almost never rains in the New Gobi Desert. The roadway, already obscured by sand, turned to deep mud. The armored cars got bogged down, but were fine as long as they kept moving. When they stopped, they sank up to their windows in yellow mud. The Task Force was strung out for miles when it finally came to a complete halt. The small valley they were in was becoming a shallow lake of mud. Spider marines stood on their vehicle rooftops to stay out of the mud and water. They scanned the surrounding hills through the torrential rain, looking for solid high ground. The marine commander dispatched squads to reconnoiter the hills to establish a secure perimeter. The spiders’ pointed legs sank deep into the yellow clay and mud. The mud clung heavily to their bodies and limbs as they labored to climb the hills. Soon they were out of sight of the main column.

For the last several days, the militia had been gathering on these hills. Now Ross watched the scouts approaching their positions. He dispatched patrols to silently kill or capture the approaching spider marines. A few shots rang out, but most of the spiders were easily taken. Humans, with their flat feet, easily crossed the mud, literally running circles around the spiders.

Now mortars and rockets rained down on the spider task force. Exposed, immobile, and on lower ground sinking in mud, the spiders panicked. As their armored cars disappeared in the mud or were hit by mortars, the spider marines abandoned their vehicles and fled back toward Yellow Brick. Militia snipers picked them off from hills and small ridges along the route. The marine commander, trying to direct his troops into an orderly retreat, was killed by a sniper. The situation became more desperate as more militia continued to arrive. Even teenaged children traveling with their militia parents fired a few shots at the bedraggled spiders, then went back home after their ammunition was used up.

A few spider squad leaders tried to flank the main column to keep the human pestilence away, but it was useless. They could not move adequately through the mud and rain. Soon a full-scale rout was on. It was every individual for himself, and very few spiders made it back to Yellow Brick. Those who surrendered were executed in retaliation for the earlier killings. A spider helicopter gunship burst through the low clouds in an attempt to strafe militia positions. However, it was brought down by a shoulder-fired surface-to-air missile. The militia was using the latest Legion weapons, courtesy of Legion Military Intelligence and Captain Lopez.

A few spider marines staggered into Yellow Brick. Captain Lopez arrested these marines and placed them in protective custody in the city jail. They would be repatriated as soon as spider shuttles could be called. When the rain stopped a few days later, a battalion of legionnaires arrived. Captain Lopez raised the American flag over City Hall and annexed Yellow Brick into the United States Galactic Federation.

The jail got a bit crowded. About a hundred spiders made it back to Yellow Brick. Many were injured. As Captain Lopez sat at his desk, watching noisy prisoners through the bars, his chair tipped over. Two spiders opened a trap door and scrambled out of a tunnel hidden beneath Lopez’ chair. Captain Lopez drew his pistol to confront and capture the suspected tunnel rats.

“Who are you?” asked Captain Lopez. “Explain yourself!”
“We are Yellow Brick’s constables,” announced one of the spiders. “Is the war over?”
“There was no war,” said Captain Lopez. “Not yet. But Yellow Brick is no longer a part of the Empire.”
“Oh, my,” said the constable. “I guess that means I am out of a job.”
“You are police officers?” asked Captain Lopez. “Were you any good at your jobs?”
“Of course,” said the constable. “We have never had a murder in Yellow Brick.”
“I’m appointing you sheriff until the situation sorts itself out,” said Captain Lopez, washing his hands of the overcrowded jail and leaving the building. “Good luck!”

The constable looked at all the marines locked up in his jail. They were getting belligerent. “We are going to need a lot more peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches.”
The desert was in full bloom from the rains. The sandy creek north of town was still flowing. A memorial service was held by the militia on the bridge. Ross said a few words and threw a small wreath of desert flowers into the water. Captain Lopez approached the militia leader.

“Generalissimo Ross, that was a fine service,” commented Captain Lopez. “You won a well-fought victory. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” said Ross.

“We intercepted a message that the spiders’ Supreme Commander for New Gobi is going to visit us soon,” said Captain Lopez. “The Legion will protect you.”

“Well, let him come,” replied Ross. “We are ready.”

“You are now under the protection of the United States Galactic Federation,” said Captain Lopez. “The Legion will protect you.”

“Like you protected us before?” asked Ross. “No thanks, we will protect ourselves.”

“You fought very well with the weapons I gave you,” said Captain Lopez. “But we had an agreement. You will now return the surface-to-air missiles and launchers.”

“I appreciate your help,” replied Ross. “But the militia will keep the SAMs.”

“I insist,” said Captain Lopez. “We cannot risk the SAMs falling into the hands of terrorists.”

“Too late,” said Ross, laughing bitterly. “The militia will keep all of its weapons.”

“You are jeopardizing future arms agreements,” said Captain Lopez. “And you may face arrest.”

“The Legion has overstayed its welcome in the Yellow Brick Valley,” announced Ross. “You have one week to get out.”

* * * * *

The spider Governor of the North Territory was upset over the loss of his marines, and called the Commander of New Gobi to express his concerns. There would be an investigation. That idiot nephew of the Emperor took more time out of his day than he was worth, and would be chewed out good this time.

“Explain to me how a thousand marines can be defeated by the human pestilence National Guard!” demanded the governor. “Your incompetence has reached a new level!”

“I gave the marine commander you assigned full discretion on how to conduct himself in the field,” replied the spider commander. “He was the incompetent, and it was the human pestilence militia that destroyed him.”

“And that makes it better?” asked the governor. “Militia are nothing but drunken rabble and terrorists! At least a National Guard unit has organization, training, and government support. Is there no end to your disgrace?”

“The task force got trapped in a rain storm,” explained the spider commander. “They sank in the mud during the battle.”

“Enough excuses!” shouted the governor. “In the next month, about a hundred thousand of our colonists are going to be arriving in the Yellow Brick and Redrock areas. You will ensure their safety and get them settled in.”

“How can I do that?” asked the spider commander. “The Legion has seized Yellow Brick. You want me to kick the human pestilence out by force?”

“There is no border,” explained the governor. “Just flood the town with new arrivals and plop prefabricated houses down everywhere you can. Expand the water district and infrastructure to our citizens only. You will take Yellow Brick back by default. The Emperor does not want you shooting it out with the Legion. You would probably screw that up anyway.”

“I’ll send my head of Military Intelligence to handle it,” promised the spider commander. “Consider it done.”

“You will get off your poopchute and handle the details personally!” ordered the governor. “There will be no more delegating your responsibilities. Colonel Czerinski is out there stirring up trouble. I want you out there keeping an eye on Czerinski. Kill him if you can, but don’t make it look like we did it.”

“Yes, sir,” said the spider commander. “You are right. I need to settle accounts with Czerinski.”

“Have you been supplying the insurgents with weapons?” asked the governor.

“Yes, sir,” answered the spider commander. “But only a limited amount. I have promised them more.”

“Good,” said the governor. “I agree. Increase their supply. Give them whatever they want or need. We need our own organized militia to harass the human pestilence. Let the insurgents kill Czerinski.”

“Is that wise?” asked the spider commander. “It is difficult to control civilian militia once they get full of themselves. There are some here who want full independence.”

“They will stay in line if they know what is good for them!” said the governor. “Just be firm. Take a shuttle immediately to Yellow Brick or Redrock and make it happen!”
Two militia freedom fighters stood motionless in the shade of a boulder overlooking New Gobi. They resembled nomadic Bedouin from Old Earth, wearing flowing robes and headgear. The sage-colored cloth protected them from the sun and made them invisible under air surveillance. They watched an Arthropodan shuttle taxi down an airport runway, climb, then veer violently to the right, increasing altitude. The freedom fighters fired a SAM at the shuttle. The missile went straight, then turned sharply when the shuttle veered to the right. On impact, the explosion took off a wing, maiming the shuttle. The craft spiraled to the ground. Emergency ejection pods saved several passengers and crew, and their parachutes drifted slowly back toward New Gobi. One of the passengers, the Supreme Commander for New Gobi, swore death to the human pestilence and to Czerinski and his Legion.

I arrived in Yellow Brick with a convoy of flatbed trucks carrying twenty of the Legion’s newest battle tanks. The convoy also escorted fuel trucks to keep the fuel-thirsty monsters moving. I could not help but notice hundreds of new geodesic domes lining Main Street into town, and thousands of new spider colonists. Captain Lopez met me at Legion Headquarters for a briefing.

“I thought the spiders were driven out,” I said. “But it looks like they are everywhere!”
“Their marine task force was wiped out by the militia,” replied Captain Lopez. “But as you can see, we seem to have an immigration problem. What took you so long to get here?”
“The road still has landmines. We could only go as fast as the engineers’ mine sweeper.”
“Generalissimo Ross says we have one more day before he kicks us out,” sneered Captain Lopez. “I think the militia is going to do something stupid.”
“That’s why I brought the tanks. We are not leaving. What is Ross upset about?”
“I asked Ross to return the SAMs,” said Captain Lopez. “He refuses.”
“You gave Ross SAMs? Are you insane?”
“I’ll admit it was not my best move. But what’s done is done.”
“I want to talk to Ross. Maybe we can work out an understanding.”
“That’s not likely,” said Captain Lopez. “Ross left town as soon as you arrived. There is something I didn’t tell you. Ross was wearing your gold-plated sunglasses and your pistol.”
“That little shit is responsible for the grenade in my desk? I still have problems sitting down from shrapnel in my ass!”
“Ross has grown up a bit,” commented Captain Lopez. “He has become a very capable leader.”
“Kill Ross at the first opportunity,” I ordered. “Make it look like the spiders did it.”

John Hume Ross led a militia squad up from the tunnels into the fenced Legion compound. Fuel trucks were lined up neatly, row after row. The freedom fighters placed explosive charges on each fuel truck, then retreated back into the tunnels.

At midnight the explosions turned the night sky into day. The entire town wakened and gathered to watch the fire. It was almost like a Fourth of July picnic. The crowd ‘ooed’ and ‘ahhed’ with each new explosion. Food vendors sold hotdogs and popcorn. Spider and human kids raced about the adults, playing tag and war.

The next morning I called General Kalipetsis about getting fuel replacement. My new battle tanks were worthless without fuel. General Kalipetsis ordered the Legion to leave Yellow Brick. He explained that the specter of the Legion fighting a human insurgency was not worth it. The bad press would affect upcoming elections and inflame other planetary problem areas. He specifically told me not to nuke anything this time.

After the Legion pulled out, a token presence would be maintained at Legion Headquarters. The United States Galactic Federation would try to retain sovereignty over Yellow Brick through negotiations, but joint jurisdiction with the spiders would be acceptable.

After the Legion left Yellow Brick, the militia triumphantly entered town. They were dismayed at the thousands of new spider colonists, but tried to put a good face on their parade. Victorious, most militia members
shed their uniforms and weapons and returned to their ranches, farms, and businesses.

However, Ross and his cohorts were determined to maintain a strong and visible militia presence, so they kept wearing their uniforms and carrying weapons. They reasoned that something needed to be done about this latest invasion of spider colonists. Ross parked his jeep in front of City Hall. Across the street was a brand new building. It sported Arthropodan signs on its façade, announcing the grand opening of a new grocery store. Milk and goo pudding were selling at half price.

Ross crossed the street and entered the grocery. Its air-conditioning was refreshing. The spider owner cheerfully greeted Ross. Ross ignored pleasantries and continued prowling about the store. Ross popped the top on a beer and chugged it down, tossing the can in an aisle. After relieving his thirst, Ross grabbed a six-pack and walked out.

“Hey, asshole!” yelled the store owner, following Ross outside. “You owe me ten credits!”
“Sorry,” said Ross. “I only have dollars on me.”
“I am calling the police on you!” threatened the store owner, shaking his claw.
Ross ignored the store owner as he approached his jeep. Ross grabbed an assault rifle and sprayed the new plate glass windows of the grocery with bullets, barely missing the store owner and several pedestrians. Then he drove off, his militia buddies cheering. A few blocks away, a Sheriff’s Office patrol car stopped Ross with blue lights and siren.

“It’s Barney Fife,” commented one of the militia lieutenants. “You’re in big trouble now.”
“Who is Barney Fife?” asked Ross.
“You know, from TV,” replied the lieutenant. “Andy of Mayberry? Don’t you watch TV? It’s been in syndication for centuries.”
“No,” answered Ross. “TV brainwashes the mind. No spider cop is going to arrest me for anything. We will kill him first. Be ready.”

Two spider officers approached the jeep. A deputy hung back by the tailgate while the sheriff talked to Ross.
“Do you know why I stopped you?” asked the sheriff.
“Gee, Mr. Fife,” said Ross. “For disturbing the peace? Or maybe littering?” Ross crushed a beer can and dropped it into the street.

“With utter disregard for life, you fired an assault rifle into a grocery store on Main Street,” accused the sheriff.
“That amounts to a lot more than just disturbing the peace. Do you care to explain yourself?”
“Exercise your right to remain silent,” advised one of the lieutenants, laughing.
“Do you know who I am?” asked Ross. “I just defeated an entire marine task force of you spiders. I just forced your protectors in the Legion to leave town. Do you think I am afraid of the town’s spider clown?”
“Think, Mr. Ross,” said the sheriff. “Why did you fight the task force marines and tell the Legion to leave?”
“To fight oppression and to make Yellow Brick safe for humanity,” replied Ross, proudly.
“Look around you,” ordered the sheriff. “What do you see?”

Ross looked about. He could not believe he was having this conversation. In a minute Ross planned to just kill this uppity spider. He saw school kids, spiders and humans, carrying their books to school. He saw two boys passing a football back and forth across the street. One was a spider, and one was a human.

“I see it’s a school day,” replied Ross. “What’s your point?”
“My point is that Yellow Brick is already peaceful and safe,” said the sheriff. “You are the only menace in town.”

“You are a menace to society,” joked one of Ross’s lieutenants.
“This invasion of illegal spider immigrants doesn’t make Yellow Brick better or safer,” argued Ross. “It is an abomination for you spiders to come in here and build on top of what we started. This is not a change I will tolerate.”

“Immigrants are pouring in from both north and south,” explained the sheriff. “Permanent change is already here. This change is bigger than the Arthropodan marines, the Legion, or you and me. These farmers and merchants are the future.”

“Not if they’re spiders,” said Ross. “They are not my future as long as I’m running things.”
“I tried, but you just do not get it,” said the sheriff. “You are under arrest for attempted murder. Everyone put your hands high into the air! Do it now!”

Ross smirked. He glanced about as he reached for his pistol, only just now thinking about the other officer. He was startled by the distinct sound of shotgun slides racking. Twenty deputies, some spider and some human, had surrounded his jeep. Ross was taken into custody without incident. His lieutenants were told to get out of town before sundown.

Ross only stayed inside the city jail a short time. The sheriff cemented a large post into the street by the
damaged grocery store. Ross was chained to the post, with about ten feet of walk-around space. The sheriff handed
Ross a white sheet for shade, a wool blanket for the cold nights, a couple jugs of water, and a plastic honey bucket.

“What is this?” asked Ross.

“You new home,” replied the sheriff.

“This is inhumane,” protested Ross. “You have no right to do this to me. When is my trial? I have
constitutional rights!”

“You will stay chained to this pole in full view of the grocery you attacked,” said the sheriff. “You will
contemplate your evil deed.”

“The only thing I will contemplate is how many pieces of crab meat I will slice you into,” said Ross. “The
militia will not tolerate this injustice. They will break me out.”

“No one will help you,” said the sheriff. “Get used to it.”

Ross cursed and threatened the sheriff as the spider walked away. From time to time, a deputy brought water or
a new honey bucket. The only food available was brought by a few still friendly militia members. Ross begged for
food from passing school kids. Some shared food from their packed lunches, mostly vegetables and other yuk stuff.
After about a month, Ross started to break. His skin burned and his lips cracked. Ross pleaded to talk to the sheriff
again. Several days later, the sheriff came by, chewing on a straw.

“What?” asked the sheriff, irritated. “I am busy. This had better be important!”

“Please!” begged Ross. “I can’t take this much longer. How long do I have to be chained here?”

“Several years,” replied the sheriff. “Attempted murder is a serious felony.”

“No!” cried Ross, losing it. “I can’t live like this! I will die! Surely you can do something.”

“The matter is out of my control,” said the sheriff. “Perhaps if you were more repentant and apologized to the
merchant you terrorized, it would help. I do not know. The city council might commute your sentence.”

“City council?” asked Ross.

“Civilization has come to Yellow Brick,” said the sheriff. “We have a city council now. I told you progress was
bigger than both of us.”

“Please ask the city council to let me go,” replied Ross. “And tell the store owner I am truly sorry. I will pay for
the damage I caused, and for the beer I stole.”

The next day the store owner came out to talk to Ross. “Why should you ever be trusted or released?” asked the
store owner. “You are a rabid dog that should be shot. Let the dust storms tear your skin from your bones.”

“I am not a rabid dog,” insisted Ross. “I have learned an important lesson.”

“And what lesson is that?” asked the store owner. “To not get caught?”

“I learned that absolute power corrupts the soul absolutely,” said Ross. “My soul is no longer putrid. I
apologize to you and to your family.”

“You threaten my family?” asked the store owner. “I will beat you to death myself here and now!”

“No!” said Ross. “The children talk to me on their way to school. I’ve got to know them quite well. Some even
bring me candy. I would never harm or threaten a child. I am truly sorry for my actions and my behavior.”

“We will see,” said the store owner, tromping off. “We will see! Dog! You are a bad seed!”

Two days later, John Hume Ross was released. He paid the store owner for the damages and his trouble. Ross
swore vengeance on everyone who had ever slighted or harmed him. The list was long. However, Ross never
returned to Yellow Brick.
liaison officer at Legion Headquarters.”

“Still, large military units must bypass the town,” advised the sheriff. “Only small units my enter Yellow Brick.”

“There is no detour route available,” replied the spider commander, now annoyed. “Besides, it has been a long journey. My commandos require resupply. They need to shop in your stores for food and beverages. My vehicles need fuel and minor maintenance.”

Militia officers conferred with the sheriff. A spider militia lieutenant stepped forward. “Sir! I own Yellow Brick Mercantile. I would be honored to do business with your brave soldiers. As many troops as you wish may shop in our establishments on Main Street.”

The spider commander turned to his military intelligence officer. “You were right. Wave money at the locals, and they will fall all over themselves to please.”

The brigade dispersed into the business district. Beer sales soared. As the spider commander approached the steps to City Hall, he noticed an American Galactic Federation flag flying overhead.

“Tear that down!” ordered the spider commander.

“Yellow Brick is jointly administrated,” cautioned the military intelligence officer. “The governor and politicians will decide such issues.”

“Fine!” groused the spider commander. “Have our engineers build a taller flagpole and fly our flag atop it! Make sure it is sturdy. I do not want our flag blown over by the first dust storm that comes along.”

“Yes, sir,” said the military intelligence officer. “We will part now. I leave you to deal with the mayor and council. I am going over to Legion Headquarters. Just remember, when they ask for anything that costs money, say you are concerned and will pass the matter on to the governor.”

“You would abandon me during my moment of need?” asked the spider commander. “Be sure not to launch too many plots with your spy buddies over at Legion Headquarters.”

* * * * *

Captain Lopez greeted the military intelligence officer at the front door to Legion Headquarters. He had been expecting the visit. They sat down for coffee to discuss mutual interests.

“I heard your Supreme Commander was shot down by a SAM,” commented Captain Lopez. “I may know something about that.”

“Since it was one of your SAMs, I suspect you do know something about it,” said the military intelligence officer. “At least that is how my commander feels. He is not too happy about the matter.”

“The Legion was not involved,” replied Captain Lopez. “A human terrorist named John Hume Ross is responsible. He also led the local militia against your marine task force.”

“If you know all this, why is Ross not in custody?” asked the military intelligence officer.

“Ross is very elusive,” explained Captain Lopez. “We suspect he is hiding near the border, sheltered by separatist sympathizers.”

“How did Ross acquire Legion SAMs?” asked the military intelligence officer. “I hold you responsible for that.”

“Theft or bribery from an armory,” explained Captain Lopez. “The matter is being investigated. The important thing is, that it is in both our best interests to work together to eradicate Ross and his ilk. They threaten the peace and security of the New Gobi and the DMZ.”

“Agreed,” said the military intelligence officer, accepting a file on Ross. “Anything else?”

“Yes. I know your commander has plans to give more arms to spider insurgents,” said Captain Lopez. “The Legion will consider that to be an act of war.”

“You are being overly dramatic,” said the military intelligence officer, sighing complacently. “We know you armed the human militias and insurgents. The United States Galactic Federation will not go to war over a few Arthropodan weapons in the claws of local insurgents.”

“No,” agreed Captain Lopez. “But if the Legion or colonists are attacked at your urging, Colonel Czerinski and I will hold you and your commander responsible.”

“Are you threatening me?” asked the military intelligence officer.

“Yes,” answered Captain Lopez. “But I am also giving you fair warning. Colonel Czerinski does not like your commander. He does not need much of a pretext to go after him. I have intervened many times to restrain Colonel Czerinski, but I can only do so much if your provocations continue.”

“I will advise my commander to urge restraint in regard to insurgents and militia,” promised the military intelligence officer.
“You do that,” warned Captain Lopez. “All these landmines in the roadways are getting old.”
“Not to change the subject, but my commander is addressing the city council as we speak,” said the military intelligence officer. “He will announce shortly that cable TV is coming to Yellow Brick.”
For quite some time spider engineers had secretly buried cable next to the new canals. Soon the web of cable TV would embrace all of Yellow Brick.
Captain Lopez clenched his fists, then relaxed his grip. He concentrated on his breathing relaxation techniques. He had just warned the military intelligence officer about provocations, and now the fool still tried to bring in cable TV! *If war breaks out over this latest aggression, thought Captain Lopez, I wash my hands of it. They were warned of the consequences of such adventurism and folly.*

Sergeant Williams was wearing a fur coat and hat as he got off the shuttle at New Gobi. When the shuttle door opened, the heat hit him like a furnace. Guido greeted Sergeant Williams at the bottom of the ramp with a hand shake and hug. Sergeant Williams tossed the coat and hat aside, exclaiming, “Praise the Lord I am back among my Legion family! I will never sin again. My cousin was a sinner. Did I ever tell you he got hit by lightning three times?”
“You told everyone on TV about your cousin,” replied Guido.
“I also sinned, and almost got electrocuted to death in the shower for it,” advised Sergeant Williams. “It was a warning from God to straighten up or else. I am turning over a new leaf.”
“I’ll give it less than a week before you’ll be in the Angry Onion Tavern drinking and chasing babes like the rest of us,” said Guido.
“My dark days are over,” said Sergeant Williams. “I swear I will never go into the Angry Onion Tavern again. I never liked that place anyway.”
“You don’t have to,” said Guido. “Colonel Czerinski opened a new place called the Blind Tiger Tavern and Casino. It has topless pole dancers!”
“Human?” asked Sergeant Williams.
“Oh, yeah,” said Guido. “They were brought in from New Memphis. Very hot.”
“Let’s go now!” said Sergeant Williams. “My leave only lasts a few days.”
“I thought you were turning over a new leaf,” commented Guido.
“I guess it was a fig leaf,” said Sergeant Williams. “Let’s go!”
“You aren’t afraid of getting hit by lightning?” asked Guido.
“Who wants to live forever?” Sergeant Williams said, looking up at the blue sky. It was a beautiful clear day. No clouds. “If I wanted that, I would not have joined the Legion.”

Guido and Sergeant Williams had their fun at my new place. The Blind Tiger is all mine. When you have a financial stake in a business, it changes your outlook on things. I love taking money from a casino. But when it’s your casino and your money is being taken, you do not root for the underdog.
I watched the security video screen. A spider player at the blackjack table was raking in the money. I could tell the spider was a card counter. He raised and lowered his bets according to the running card count.
I nodded to Corporal Washington. My big spider security chief and four security guards grabbed the card player and dragged him kicking and screaming to a back room. There they beat the player senseless, robbed him, and threw him across the MDL *Hey! It's a cold cruel galaxy.*

**Chapter 18**

The spider commander was beginning to enjoy his tour of the New Gobi area. He imagined this must be what it was like when the human pestilence ran for election. He was in a different dusty town each night, greeting waving crowds. The spider commander got out of his armored car to inspect the latest stop. This town, he did not even know
its name, was typical of towns occupied by human pestilence. There was a junk yard at the edge of town and unpaved streets in the center.

Already a crowd was forming. The kids were the first to run up to the commandos, begging for food or candy. The commander refused to give either. The first child to accost him tugged on the spider commander’s sleeve. In a reflexive reaction, the spider commander swatted the child with a claw. The kid fell to the ground, lying motionless. The other children backed off from the spider commander. They ran to the other commandos to try their luck at handouts.

“Check the little vermin,” ordered the spider commander, pointing flippantly at the child he struck down. “I don’t need another human pestilence riot caused by misunderstandings.”

The military intelligence officer checked the boy. He seemed alert and unharmed. There was just a trickle of blood on his lip. The boy just chose to stay on the ground. “Run along,” said the military intelligence officer, “or I will give you a dose of pepper spray.”

“Why should I be forced to run along?” asked the boy, putting his gold plated sunglasses back on. “I live here. You run along.”

The military intelligence officer was about to smack the boy himself, but thought better of it as he noticed a crowd gathering around. Instead, he offered a claw up.

“Do you not know better than to accost Imperial officers like that?” asked the military intelligence officer.

“The Legion hands out food and candy to the children,” said the boy, refusing to be helped up. “I thought you would be as generous. My mistake.”

“I am not the Legion,” said the spider commander, walking over to the boy. He is not injured. He should get up. The little turd is playing to the crowd, thought the spider commander, annoyed. “Get up!”

“No, you are not the Legion,” agreed the boy. “But I can see you are a brave warrior. In fact, you are the Supreme Commander of the New Gobi area.”

“You have heard of me?” asked the spider commander. “See? Even the little kids know of my exploits.”

“Yes, sir,” said the military intelligence officer. “I can see this one is very impressed with you.”

“You must be especially fearsome to brave these dangerous streets,” said the boy. “Aren’t you even a little bit worried about snipers?”

The boy’s question startled the spider commander, who immediately stepped behind his military intelligence officer. The streets were now empty of all civilians, and eerily quiet. An armored car secured an intersection down the street. For the first time, the spider commander carefully viewed his surroundings from a military perspective. He scanned the rooftops for movement. Their position was exposed. On the closest building he saw crude graffiti. He scanned the writing with a translator. ‘Free the Gobi.’ Next to the graffiti was a drawing of a humanoid creature with spider-like fangs. The fangs dripped with blood.

“What is this?” asked the spider commander.

“It is a vampire,” answered the military intelligence officer. “Do not worry. Vampires are mythical creatures from ancient Old Earth lore. They are the imagination of peasants afraid of the dark. In modern times parents use the specter of vampires to scare their little children into getting home from school on time.”

“Did you draw that?” asked the spider commander of the boy still lying on the ground. “Did you think you could scare a mighty Arthropodan general and his commandos with a drawing of a vampire?”

“It is not a vampire,” said the boy. “It’s a chupacabra. And they do exist.”

“What is a chupacabra?” asked the spider commander. The military intelligence officer just shrugged.

“A chupacabra is your worst nightmare,” said the boy. “If you do not leave the New Gobi forever, your bones will be parched white by the desert sand.”

“Ha!” scoffed the spider commander. “You fool! I do not have bones!”

The spider commander turned his back on the boy and headed for his armored car. He had wasted enough time with this in this worthless human pestilence enclave. The sooner relocation or extermination begins, the better, he thought. In that split second, John Hume Ross was on his feet and upon the spider commander with a barbed grenade. Ross attached the grenade to the spider commander’s backside and ran.

The spider commander turned angrily, suspecting the boy of attempted theft from his back pockets. Someone yelled, “Grenade!” The spider commander leapt to the ground. Nothing happened. Others were still fleeing. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the grenade hanging from his web gear. He expected to die in the line of duty someday, probably by the Legion. But to be killed by this short little kid seemed somehow undignified. It just seemed wrong. The explosion killed the spider commander instantly.
“You lied to me,” accused John Hume Ross.

“What brought this on?” asked the ATM. “Sometimes I withhold information, but I do not lie.”

“You said I had potential,” said Ross. “You said I could develop into an important asset for the Legion. You said you wanted me to get an education.”

“And you rejected all of my suggestions,” said the ATM.

“It was all a lie,” said Ross. “All you wanted was to cause trouble. Why would you do that? Do we amuse you?”

“I have important Legion recruitment quotas to meet,” said the ATM. “I have done nothing improper. I try to recruit the best candidates available.”

“But you lied to me,” said Ross. “Explain yourself!”

“This conversation is over,” said the ATM.

“I need a new name and ID,” demanded Ross. “Everyone wants to kill me. I want to lead a normal life.”

“How about Larry?” asked the ATM. “It’s a good solid name.”

“That is not funny,” responded Ross.

“T. E. Lawrence?” insisted the ATM. “It has a ring to it.”

“If you can’t choose me a proper name, I will find my own alias,” replied Ross.

“Why should I give you a new identity?” asked the ATM. “You have been nothing but a pain in my memory chips.”

“Because if you don’t, I will tell the Legion you committed treason,” said Ross. “I have documentation in my wallet that I bet Colonel Czerinski would find interesting.”

“Return your old ID and documentation, and I will issue you a new identity card,” promised the ATM. “You win. What name do you want?”

“I want a name that is inconspicuous,” said Ross. “I just want to blend in.”

“How about I-Zheet Mydrurz?” asked the ATM. “It’s solid and substantial name.”

“No,” said Ross. “It’s too long.”

“Hous Bin Pharteen?” suggested the ATM. “It’s a light and airy name from Old Earth.”

“I do not want an Arabic name,” said Ross. “I want a common American name.”

“John Wilkes Booth?” asked the ATM.

“I am not as naïve as you think,” said Ross. “If you do not take me seriously, I will shove a live grenade up your electronics.”

“Laika Barker,” suggested the ATM in a serious tone. “Laika Barker was the first in space to orbit around Earth. It is a great name of historical achievement, yet obscure enough for your purposes.”

“Laika Barker,” repeated Ross. “I like it!”

Ross accepted his new United States Galactic Federation ID card and documentation, and blended into the crowd.

Chapter 19

At the New Gobi border crossing, Barker’s new identification card worked like a charm. The ATM also skewed computer fingerprint, retina, and face recognition scans. Guido was about to pass Barker through when Spot alerted on Barker’s pants pocket. The dragon pulled on its tether, tongue darting in and out. Guido made Barker empty his pockets. It was only candy. Barker tossed a chocolate to the dragon. That is when Guido recognized Barker as the fugitive John Hume Ross. They had met twice before. Guido activated a silent alarm that brought a squad of legionnaires to arrest Barker. Barker was escorted to my office in handcuffs. I searched his backpack and recovered my gold-plated sunglasses, again.

“Welcome back,” I said. “Too bad you aren’t staying. But, I guess it doesn’t matter which side of the MDL you’re on; you still face a firing squad. I am giving you to the spiders as soon as they arrive.”

“I want to fight extradition,” said Barker. “I am not John Hume Ross. I want to see a magistrate. You cannot extradite me without the governor signing an extradition order.”

“General Kalipetsis already verbally approved your extradition,” I said. “To further intergalactic relations and goodwill, I am flushing you like the turd that you are, back across the MDL.”
"I have legal documentation proving I am Laika Barker," he said. "My ID cannot be faked."
"I know," I said. "First you are Miranda, then Ross, and now Barker. Your documentation is perfect. How did you do that?"
"I want a lawyer," demanded Barker. "I have rights."
"You will get a lawyer soon enough," I said. "But it will be a spider lawyer. Don't fret. I know from experience that spider lawyers can be very capable."
"If I ever get out of this, you will pay with your life," threatened Barker. "You better watch your back!"
"Whatever," I said. "You will not survive this."
Captain Lopez arrived with a high-ranking spider military intelligence officer to take custody of Barker. Barker's face lit up when he saw the spider.
"I heard you got promoted," said Barker. "Congratulations, Boss Spider."
"I am the acting Supreme Commander of the New Gobi," replied the spider military intelligence officer. "I am only filling in because you assassinated our beloved Supreme Commander."
"Beloved?" asked Barker. "By who? Whoever killed your commander did you all a favor by getting rid of that incompetent, corrupt fool. If you think I did it, you should pardon me and give me a medal."
"You will get what you deserve," said the military intelligence officer. "I promise."
Before leaving, I had a medic inject Barker with a micro identification chip. The chip would be carried along in his blood system until it reached his brain, where it would stay.
"Hey! What was that for?" asked Barker.
"If by some miracle you survive, you will not be passing through any more scans undetected," I explained.
"I love you too!" yelled Barker. "No jail can hold me!"
"The spiders think I'm John Hume Ross, but they can't prove it," said Barker. "I have perfect documentation and ID showing I am Laika Barker."
"They think you are Lawrence of Arabia?" asked Juardo. "Are you?"
"Yes," said Barker. "But they can't prove it!"
"You killed the Supreme Commander of the New Gobi," commented Juardo. "I saw you on TV on Arthropoda's Most Wanted. They filmed you with a helmet camera blowing up the commander with a grenade. It was awesome!"
"He had it coming," said Barker. "He was the boss spider that gave the orders to murder my parents and family."
"I believe it," said Juardo. "That same spider prick blew up my brewery right here in New Memphis for no reason. I've been in a financial mess ever since. How would you like a job working for me?"
"In a brewery?" asked Barker. "Not really."
"I have branched out into other endeavors," bragged Juardo. "Now I am into drug distribution. I have a big shipment coming into New Gobi soon. The market potential in the New Gobi is unlimited. With your contacts and knowledge of New Gobi and the DMZ, you would be perfect for the job."
"You want me as a partner?" asked Barker.
"Don't get ahead of yourself," warned Juardo. "I just need someone who knows the area and can recruit local talent."
"I can do that," replied Barker. "I built the militia and led them to victory against spider marines. But how am I going to dodge my appointment with the executioner?"
"Just stick close to me, kid," said Juardo. "I have a get-out-of-jail-free card."
"You're Italian Mafia, right?" asked Barker. "Do you know Guido Tonelli?"
"Guido is the legionnaire who busted me at the MDL," complained Barker. "He and that dragon are the reasons I'm here."
"Guido is pretty sharp," said Juardo "Not much gets by him. Next time, cross the MDL somewhere else."
"Now you tell me," said Barker with a sigh of disgust. "Why is a talent like Guido in the Legion?"
"The last nuke war caused Guido some financial problems," said Juardo. "He was forced into the Legion. I
heard he’s doing quite well now.”

“Will he work with us on border business?” asked Barker.

“Don’t even try,” said Juardo. “Guido works his own deals, not other people’s. If you try anything with him, he’ll probably let that dragon eat you.”

Juardo and Barker went to the yard. All inmates got two hours of yard time for exercise and fresh air. Suddenly an old Legion helicopter gunship flew low over the fences and landed in the middle of the yard. A door gunner fired a machine gun and tossed smoke grenades. Juardo and Barker waved white rags as they ran to the helicopter and climbed in.

The helicopter quickly lifted off and flew east to the New Gobi Desert. It landed near Redrock, where a truck and driver waited. Juardo wanted to drive to a safe house in Redrock, but Barker insisted it was too dangerous to risk passing spider checkpoints. Instead, they drove to the old Miranda homestead. Barker spent a moment at his family’s gravesite and swore another oath of revenge. The graves were well kept from his numerous visits.

“We had a nice warm bed waiting for us in Redrock,” complained Juardo. “But no, you bring us out here to sleep on the ground with the snakes and scorpions?”

“I have dug extensive tunnels under the homestead,” said Barker. “Militia food, water, weapons, and sleeping quarters are down there.”

“It’s a good thing,” snapped Juardo. “I don’t like playing Kit Carson and Daniel Boone out in the wilderness.”

“Everything in the desert pokes, stings, or bites,” cautioned Barker. “Get used to it. This is your new home. If we are going to do business in the DMZ and the New Gobi, you need to learn to adapt to it. If you fight the desert, the desert will kill you and your city-boy thugs.”

“Christ!” said Juardo. “You really are Lawrence of fucking Arabia.”

* * * * *

Barker and Juardo watched the night sky, waiting for the starship to arrive. Juardo made a deal with Formicidaen pirates. The first delivery of drugs would be on credit because of Juardo’s financial problems. Juardo would use sales to pay back the ant-like Formicidaens, and to pay for future drug deliveries. The merchandise was high-grade synthetic designer blue powder compatible for both spiders and humans. That would be an important plus along the DMZ. The starship came in low and fast to avoid planetary defenses. The ship’s ant captain greeted Juardo. “Get your slaves unloading product now!” ordered the captain. “I will not be on the ground longer than ten minutes.”

Ex-militia, Mafia, and crew members frantically went to work unloading crates. Juardo, Barker, and the ant captain stood at the starship doorway, watching the progress. After about five minutes, Legion helicopter gunships firing Gatling guns strafed the starship. Smoke and secondary explosions came from inside. Arthropodan jets streaked overhead. Barker and Juardo stumbled through the chaos and destruction to the tunnel entrance. They fled deep below the surface. After about a hundred yards, the lights went out.

“Damn it!” yelled Juardo. “Everything is lost. How did they know?”

Barker stopped and lit a cigarette to settle his nerves. He offered a cigarette and matches to Juardo. As Juardo lit his cigarette, Barker shot him in the face. Then Barker continued his escape. Back at the surface, Barker could see flares drifting down from the sky, lighting up the homestead. Legionnaires and spider marines had already secured the scene. A handful of prisoners sat in a circle, hands bound behind their backs and eyes blindfolded. They were surrounded by guards pointing assault rifles. The Formicidaen captain lay dead by his starship. Barker pulled out a communication device and spoke. “Now will you let me go?”

“Yes,” answered Captain Lopez. “Good work! I’ll let you walk to Redrock where you can cross the MDL. Corporal Tonelli will be expecting you. After you cross, travel as far south as you can. Do not ever come back to the DMZ.”

* * * * *

Barker waited patiently in line to cross the MDL. When it was his turn, Guido did a perfunctory check of Barker’s ID and nodded for him to pass. Barker smiled and reached into his pants pocket. Spot alerted and wagged his tail in expectation of a treat. Barker tossed a chocolate buttercup to the dragon.

Guido pulled back sharply on Spot’s tether and intercepted the buttercup. After close examination, Guido tossed the candy back to Barker.

“You eat it,” ordered Guido.

“No thanks,” replied Barker. “I’m not hungry.”
“I insist,” said Guido, now pointing his submachine gun at Barker. “Eat it.”
“You are paranoid,” said Barker, shaking his head. “I would never harm a dumb animal.”
“Eat the buttercup, or I will shoot you where you stand,” threatened Guido. “Do it now.”
“No one has any sense of honor these days,” said Barker, casually popping the chocolate into his mouth and chewing. “Satisfied?”
Guido checked to make sure Barker swallowed, then said, “Sorry. Don’t try to feed the dragon again.”
“I don’t blame you for not trusting me,” said Barker. “But you are getting a bit touchy.”
“You can pass,” said Guido.
“The Mars-Hershey Corporation makes the best chocolate in the galaxy,” commented Barker as he reached into his pants pocket again and pulled out a handful of chocolates, placing them on a tabletop.
“You can pass,” repeated Guido, sweeping the candy off the table and into the trash.
“I almost forgot,” said Barker. “Rudy Juardo says hello. Do you remember Rudy?”
“Juardo can go to Hell,” said Guido, pointing his submachine gun at Barker again. “Pass through.”
“I’ll probably join Rudy soon,” commented Barker, hurrying away. He did not look back as he jogged to a 7-Eleven store just down the street. By now he was perspiring. He bought a jug of milk and a box of crackers. Already cramping up from the rat poison he had just ingested, he gulped down the milk and ate crackers as fast as he could. Then he shoved his fingers down his throat, causing a gag reflex. He vomited along the side of the road, drank more milk and ate more crackers, and inducing more vomiting.

In spite of repeated vomiting, Barker doubled over from cramps and lost consciousness. Late at night he woke up in a ditch, feeling better. The worst was over. He looked back at the traffic crossing the MDL and swore he would return to the DMZ someday to exact revenge on every last one of his enemies. “I will kill them all,” he muttered, shaking his fist. “Starting with Czerinski.”

###

~A SPECIAL TRIBUTE~

**My Dad’s Last Chapter**

Prior to his death, my father, Henry S. Knight, Jr., stayed in a hospice. His mind was sharp, but his body was failing. Dad desperately wanted to give me an idea for a new book, so I listened. Despite his weak voice, I could understand most of what he was saying, and I got enough to put together this short story about luck – a reoccurring theme in my stories, too.

I am including Dad’s story at the end of *America’s Galactic Foreign Legion – Book 4: Demilitarized Zone* as a tribute to his life. Dad, a PFC in the Army Air Corps during World War II, was stationed at Roswell, New Mexico. I am sure that reports of alien sightings at Roswell and the development and explosion of the first atomic bomb in New Mexico had a profound influence. Dad has always been fascinated by UFOs and nuclear technology. The nut didn’t fall far from the tree – me too. My father raised my sister and me by himself, and did a good job.

This short story is not science fiction, but, like my writing, is intended to be humorous. Humor can be a difficult thing. I hope readers enjoy this short story. I know I enjoyed writing it in honor of my father.

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~A SPECIAL TRIBUTE~
I needed a change of luck. As I passed a small storefront in Palm Springs, California, advertising palm readings. I stopped. “Why not?” I asked myself. I entered and greeted a gypsy lady sitting comfortably on floor pillows.

“I don’t really believe in palm readings or any of your mumbo jumbo,” I announced. “But I really do need a change of luck. Can you help me?”

“You seek advice on love?” asked the gypsy lady, grasping my palm in both hands and examining my life line with great interest. “That will be twenty dollars for a love connection.”

“I am already engaged,” I replied. “I want to be rich.”

“Fortune hunter, eh? If you seek financial advice, it will cost you thirty dollars.”

“You’re ripping me off,” I complained, as I grudgingly forked over the money. “This had better be good.”

“So, you want to know how to make your fortune? You want to know which path to take? You were wise to come to me. There are many perilous turns down the road to financial success.”

“All I want to know is when my luck will change for the better,” I explained. “I will make my fortune at the casino.”

“Oh, well, that is easy,” replied the gypsy. “Your luck will change when Hell freezes over.” She let loose of my palm. “I’m through with you. Leave now.”

“That’s it? I want my money back!”

“Not likely,” snickered the gypsy, stashing the cash down her bra. “Next customer!”

“I demand more!”

“Most do,” said the gypsy with a sigh of exasperation. “Ingrates!”

The chime of a cell phone sounded. The gypsy pulled the cell phone out of her purse. “What? I told you to never call me here. Oh, it’s for you.” She handed me the cell phone.

“No one knows I am here,” I commented, suspecting another rip-off. “Hello?”

“This is the Devil. I understand you wanted to talk to me. You have questions? Make it quick. It’s election year, and I’m busy. What do inquiring minds want to know?”

“How’s the weather down there?” I asked. “Are you really the Devil?”

“You putz!” exclaimed the Devil. “Who else would it be? Don’t you have caller ID? I am freezing my ass off down here, and you waste my time with doubts. If I say the weather is frosty, then it is! What’s it to you?”

“Are you sure?” I asked, excitedly. Maybe my luck was going to change after all. “How can it be that it’s a cold day in Hell?”

“Have’t you been listening to the news? Everywhere there is climate change, even in Hell! It’s all because of the ozone layer being depleted by hair spray.”

Still doubtful, I checked the caller ID. Sure enough, it read: ‘The Devil.’ I could hear what sounded like typewriters clacking in the background.

“What is all that clicking noise?” I asked. “Typewriters?”

“That’s my teeth clattering from the cold,” griped the Devil. “I told you I’m freezing down here. Aren’t you paying attention? It’s cold enough to freeze a Die-Hard battery!”

“Impossible!” I argued. “There’s no such thing as the Devil. How come no one has ever seen you?”

“I’ve been on vacation, but I’m back now. You want me to prove I’m for real? How about I guarantee the Arizona State Sun Devils win their next three football games, and the Rose Bowl?”

“That would be good,” I commented, speculating on how much money I could win, betting on the games. “If you can do that, perhaps my luck truly has changed! I’m going to Vegas, baby!”

“I love Las Vegas,” said the Devil. “That town never sleeps, and it’s hot, hot, hot! Hell has a substation there, and I have lots of recruits and associates living and working right on the Strip. It’s hot there, but it’s a dry heat, you know.”

“Yes, Palm Springs is like that, too.”

“I love Death Valley, too,” added the Devil. “I always have good luck picking up biker chicks in Death Valley. There’s also the Devil’s Race Track and the Devil’s Golf Course for entertainment. So, are you going to bet on Arizona State?”

“Yes, I believe I am.”

“Then you will owe me,” advised the Devil. “And I always collect my due.”
“Whatever,” I replied dismissively, with no thought to consequences. “Could you do me one more favor? I always wanted to win the Publisher’s Clearing House contest.”

“Ha! Fat chance of that ever happening.” The Devil laughed wickedly. “Those people are a bunch of crooks. They will all eventually join me in Hell for eternity. Stick with the ASU bet. They’re a sure thing in the Rose Bowl.”

#~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

Walter Knight

Walter played football on Tucson High School’s last state championship team (1971). He served three years in the army, and the GI Bill paid for his college education, helping him earn degrees from Fort Steilacoom Community College, Central Washington State College, and the University of Puget Sound School of Law.

Walter lives a very quiet and private life, residing with his family and horses, dogs, cats, and fish atop a hill in rural Washington. Walt enjoys taking road trips to explore ghost towns and casinos.

To find out more about Walter Knight and his books, visit his web site at www.waltknight.yolasite.com
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