BOOK 3
SILENT INVASION
AMERICA'S GALACTIC FOREIGN LEGIONS
WALTER KNIGHT
AMERICA’S GALACTIC FOREIGN LEGION
Book 3: Silent Invasion
by
Walter Knight

The sweeping, satirical military space saga continues...

Decorated war hero Captain Joey R. Czerinski of the United States Galactic Foreign Legion faces even more challenges as the Arthropodan Empire ramps up its plans to take control of the prized planet, New Colorado. Double-crossing friends and adversaries on both sides, out to make a buck, put the Legion at the mercy of spider forces whose careful planning and military strategies seem to ensure Arthropoda will gain control over more territory in a campaign of silent invasion.

As the situation deteriorates for the human occupation, Czerinski realizes he can’t trust anyone, not even his past business partner and constant cohort in mischief, Lieutenant Manny Lopez. The wolves are literally at the door, and Czerinski finds himself backed into a corner, wondering what he can possibly do to save the day and restore the Legion’s control of planet New Colorado. With the odds against him, maybe the only thing Czerinski can do is take a dive and throw the fight – literally.

Nothing’s a sure thing, especially in war – except that through all the ups and downs and continual serendipitous surprises, this ongoing satirical, politically incorrect, sweeping military space opera is sure to entertain.
CHAPTER 1

My name is Captain Joey R. Czerinski, hero of the United States Galactic Foreign Legion, currently assigned to the City of Finisterra, Planet New Colorado, where I am fighting a growing alien insurgency. A recent second battle between human and Arthropodan factions has resulted in the United States Galactic Foreign Legion holding the planet New Colorado as human territory, despite the growing civilian population of spider-like Arthropodans on the planet. As we try to maintain order and control on New Colorado, I fear our position is deteriorating.

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The Emperor of the Arthropodan Empire wanted the riches of New Colorado. Gold, oil, and uranium were discovered by the human pestilence after the last war. It grated on the Emperor that humanity’s windfall was at the expense of Arthropodan effort. A large spider population still lived in the Northern Hemisphere of New Colorado. Immigration was adding to that population. Did not the spider species need the protection of the Arthropodan Empire against continued abuse from the human pestilence? Of course it did.

An Arthropodan fleet of starships bullied its way into orbit around New Colorado. By order of the Emperor, the Fleet secretly provided arms and advisors to a growing insurgency fighting for independence against the United States Galactic Foreign Legion. The Emperor did not necessarily want war with the United States Galactic Federation. At least not yet. The last two wars had gone badly. The Emperor wanted merely to use intimidation and the local insurgency as bargaining chips to negotiate a new treaty annexing the northern part of New Colorado back into the Arthropodan Empire, giving Arthropoda its rightful share of the planet’s wealth. The Emperor’s general staff and advisors encouraged even stronger action, but that was why they were not the Emperor! All comes to those who wait patiently.

“We have the larger space fleet,” advised the Imperial Fleet Commander. “Most of the Legion’s starships are guarding the Coleopteran Frontier on the other side of human space. Our main problem is that the human pestilence may have developed stealth technology that completely hides their starships. Already we have suffered isolated losses that cannot be explained.”

“On the ground they are weak, too,” advised Marine Special Forces Commander #1. “The human pestilence are trying to defend New Colorado with local forces and their Foreign Legion. Again, this is because their main military assets are on the Coleopteran Frontier. We should just take the planet while we have the human pestilence at a disadvantage.”

“The humans have a huge military industrial complex,” said the Emperor. “We are lucky their military might is not pointed in our direction. We need to keep it that way, while seizing our fair share of New Colorado.”

“The human pestilence have an applicable axiom of law: possession is nine-tenths of the law,” commented Special Forces Commander #1. “We will land troops, hold our ground, and negotiate for peace and reasonably stable borders. We will not even need to use nukes.”

“Invasion might provoke a nuclear response,” warned the Fleet Commander. “Humans love to use nukes. They have done so many times.”

“So have we,” said the Emperor. “But if we use restraint, so will they. The human pestilence have to be more cautious about the risk of nuclear war because of the growing population.”

“You can not be sure of that,” said the Fleet Commander.

“New Colorado is a prize,” said the Emperor. “It will not be destroyed with nukes. Not by us.”

“I will land Marine Special Forces troops at strategic points in the North,” said the Special Forces Commander. “Not armies or divisions at first, but small mobile units. They will link up with and arm the insurgency. The human pestilence can’t use nukes against small mobile units. We will explain that our fleet remains in orbit to deter more genocide and the well-documented abuse by the Legion. The Fleet will also deter the Legion from using strategic weapons.”

* * * *

After a brief but heated skirmish, the Legion lost the eastern half of Finisterra across the river. I shook my head in dismay.

“Captain Czerinski, initial reports from East Finisterra indicate that heavily armed insurgents have attacked and captured Pizza Hut,” advised Lieutenant Manny Lopez. “Our troops are falling back to the bridge.”

I could see smoke rising from East Finisterra. We still held the downtown area near the bridge, but all outlying areas had been abandoned. “How did they get so strong so fast?” I asked.

“I am receiving a radio message from the insurgent commander,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “He says he wants to negotiate a truce and establish a permanent border at the river. Do you want to talk to him?”

I snatched the radio. “This is Captain Czerinski of the United States Galactic Federation Foreign Legion,” I said. “We do not negotiate with terrorists.”

“I am not a terrorist,” replied the insurgent leader. “I am the voice of the new government in East Finisterra. Be reasonable. All we want is peace and our own side of the river ... and Pizza Hut.”

“Forget it,” I shouted. “There will be no peace with terrorists. Today you want Pizza Hut, tomorrow you will want Taco Bell!”

“I took Taco Bell five minutes ago!” boasted the insurgent commander triumphantly. “And I am about to seize
“Can we verify that?” I asked, turning to Lieutenant Lopez.

“After we capture your three major food distribution centers, you will have no choice but to surrender East Finisterra or starve,” said the insurgent commander.

“You know nothing,” I countered. “We still hold McDonald’s here on the west side of the river. Your plan is flawed.”

“Tell him we hold a Subway Sandwich Shop, too,” said Corporal Williams. “We will never surrender!”

“Shut up!” I ordered. “I’m being overrun by idiots and junk food bandits.”

“Come on, Czerinski,” urged the insurgent commander. “How long do you think you can survive on just Big Macs and Quarter Pounders? The grease alone will kill you.”

“He’s got a point there,” cautioned Lieutenant Lopez.

“Legionnaires are resourceful and resilient,” I replied defiantly. “Plus we have a Subway Sandwich Shop.” I nodded at Williams.

“Take that, you punk!” shouted Corporal Williams, letting out his famous rebel yell.

“Bologna won’t stop the inevitable,” warned the insurgent commander. “Father Winter will be here soon.”

I turned to Lieutenant Lopez. “Take a column of tanks across the bridge and blast that fool,” I ordered. “Where is our air support?”

“New ground-to-air missiles are keeping our Air Wing at bay,” said Corporal Kool. “And the Space Weapons Platform T. Roosevelt is in a standoff with the Arthropodan Fleet.”

* * * * *

I watched Lieutenant Lopez lead three tanks across the Finisterra Bridge. Immediately the lead tank was hit by an anti tank missile. The tank caught fire. Corporal Williams dragged badly burned Lieutenant Lopez out the rear door. After firing several volleys into East Finisterra, the other two tanks retreated off the bridge.

“Radio Sergeant Green to pull out of East Finisterra,” I ordered, hoping to save my remaining legionnaires. “We will hold at the river.”

“We’re giving up KFC?” asked Corporal Williams. “Those bastards.”

“What we need is a nuke to show the insurgents who the top dog is around here,” I commented. “Do we have any nukes left?”

“General Kalipetsis took all our nukes when the war ended,” answered Corporal Kool. “We don’t have permission to use nukes anyway. Not unless a real war breaks out.”

“This is a real war!” I complained, slamming my fist into the wall as I paced.

“Corporal Tonelli has a nuke,” said Corporal Williams. “I saw it.”

“What?” I asked. “How would Tonelli get his grubby hands on a nuke?”

“It’s an old Arthropodan Air Wing nuke he found when we were fighting in the tunnels of New Disneyland. He kept it, hoping to make some money on the black market.”

“I’ll shoot him,” I mused out loud. “After I get his nuke.”

* * * * *

Sergeant Green got the order to pull back from KFC. He was about to retreat anyway. The insurgents seemed to be everywhere, and they were better armed than usual. Mortars were now falling on his position. Sergeant Green ordered the KFC ovens booby-trapped. His platoon loaded into the armored car and raced for the Finisterra Bridge. Sergeant Green used the cannon and machine gun to cover their retreat. At the top of the bridge, they rammed a burning tank and knocked it out of the way. He watched with fascination as it fell off the bridge, splashing into the water. On the far side of the bridge, they picked up Lieutenant Lopez. Molten metal from the blast splattered Lopez’s face and shoulders, and he was moaning in pain. Corporal Tonelli pulled him up into the armored car.

Medic Ceausescu immediately started an IV, trying to ease the pain and prevent shock. Corporal Tonelli’s trained attack monitor dragon Spot tugged at his leash as Lieutenant Lopez was set down beside him. Smelling blood, the dragon whipped his tongue out and took a tentative nibble of Lieutenant Lopez’s shoulder.

“Get your lizard off me!” yelled Lopez as he drew his pistol and shot at the dragon. “That monster bit me!”

“Bad Spot! No biscuit!” said Corporal Tonelli, jerking the dragon back. Spot still tugged at Lopez’s shoulder. Medic Ceausescu grabbed the pistol from Lieutenant Lopez as another bullet ricocheted off a bulkhead. The round struck Corporal Washington in the arm. Finally Private Tonelli struck his dragon on the snout, breaking its grip.

“No harm done,” announced Guido as he pried Spot loose. “Spot just thought you smelled like a tasty grilled
“Burrito this, you spaghetti for brains New York trash!” yelled Lieutenant Lopez, struggling to get his pistol back.

“He shot me in the arm!” complained Corporal Washington, regaining control of his driving. The big spider legionnaire was usually even tempered, but he was hot now. “I will get you back for that!”

“Just drive,” ordered Sergeant Green. “Get us out of here before they fire another missile. Your arm will grow back.”

* * * * *

At the command center, Corporal Tonelli and Medic Corporal Ceausescu unloaded Lieutenant Lopez. A medical helicopter was called to transport Lieutenant Lopez to the hospital at New Memphis.

“Guido my friend,” I greeted warmly as they entered. “I heard you have a nuke hidden somewhere that you were going to sell on the black market. I want it.”

“Who have you been talking to?” asked Guido. “Just because I’m Italian, you automatically think I’m selling stuff on the black market? I’m tired of being picked on!”

“Not just stuff. You have a nuke,” I said. “I want it to fight off the insurgents.”

“General Kalipetsis won’t go for that,” replied Guido. “You won’t get permission to set off nukes in town or anywhere else.”

“General Kalipetsis isn’t here,” I smiled. “It’s not a big nuke is it?”

“It takes two people to lift,” advised Guido, admitting his guilt. “It’s pretty big.”

“It doesn’t matter. We have to show the spiders who is the big dog on the block. It’s us!”

“If you blow up East Finisterra, you will blow up the Singh Mining Corporation’s gold mine and wreck the whole economy,” warned Guido.

“The insurgents wrecked it all anyway. I can’t think that far ahead. I just want to survive the day. Where is your nuke?”

“It’s in a crate in storage at the brothel. How much are you going to pay me for the nuke? I need a return on my investment. I have partners to keep happy.”

“I was going to have you shot for treason, but I will delay that if the nuke still works,” I promised. “Take the armored car and bring the nuke here. Corporal Williams will assist you.”

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Guido stared at Williams as they left. “I’ll bet you’re the cheese-eating rat snitch who told Captain Czerinski about my nuke,” accused Guido. “Do you know how much money you cost me?”

“What do you care? You’re rich,” said Corporal Williams dismissively. “That nuke may save all our lives.”

“That beat up rusted old spider nuke will probably blow up and kill us when we try to move it,” complained Guido.

“Quit being a cry-baby,” Corporal Williams said. “We need the nuke to win this war.”

“We are not officially at war. Anyway, it’s a matter principle. I trusted you, and you snitched on me. That’s just not done and cannot be forgiven.”

“Sorry,” said Corporal Williams sheepishly. “How can I make it up to you?”

“Just make sure you ignore all the other stuff I have in storage,” said Guido. “Pretend you didn’t see any of it, and don’t snitch on me again.”

* * * * *

When the medical helicopter landed, Medic Ceausescu loaded Lieutenant Lopez. Corporal Washington went along to assist with the stretcher and to have his damaged arm attended to. The arm was about to fall off, and I was concerned he needed medical treatment. Spiders usually do grow back missing parts, but I wasn’t sure. There is only so much the medics can do with duct tape.

Guido and Williams loaded the nuke. The pilot complained about all the extra weight, but I told him tough. He complained more when I told him he was taking a detour.

As a precaution, I radioed the insurgent commander and asked him not to shoot at our medical helicopter because it was full of wounded. He agreed, saying he was watching us closely from KFC. The insurgent commander complained about Sergeant Green blowing up the ovens at KFC, saying it showed a lack of good faith on our part.
But he was above such pettiness and would let the medical helicopter pass. I could see hundreds of insurgents across
the river waving and dancing. They were celebrating their victory. I was determined to put an end to that! The rest of
the city seemed deserted. The local population of spiders and humans had either evacuated East Finisterra or gone
underground into the mines.

The helicopter lifted off, taking a sharp turn toward East Finisterra. Guido set the timer on the nuke and
dropped it out the side door over KFC. Then the helicopter darted southwest toward New Memphis. A ground-to-air
missile arced up from East Finisterra, took a severe turn towards the helicopter, and hit with the force of a hammer.
The helicopter dropped quickly, spinning out of control as it went down.

Lieutenant Lopez braced himself as he looked up at Medic Ceausescu. “Elena, I am sorry for anything mean I
may have said to you.”

“Screw you!” replied Corporal Ceausescu.

“We’re about to die, and the last words on your lips are screw you?” asked Lieutenant Lopez frantically.

“Screw you and fasten your seat belt!” added Corporal Ceausescu.

“Puta,” responded Lieutenant Lopez as he clicked his restraining harness into place just before impact.

The helicopter bounced off trees before twisting to the ground. Medic Ceausescu pulled Lieutenant Lopez from
the wreckage. The pilot died. Guido and Williams stumbled out of the helicopter unhurt. Spot tagged along. With
Corporal Ceausescu’s assistance, Lieutenant Lopez led them away from the crash. It started raining as darkness set
in.

“Some days just aren’t worth getting up for,” commented Lieutenant Lopez, still leaning on Ceausescu.

“Thanks.”

“Drop dead,” replied Corporal Ceausescu.

“I probably will.” Lieutenant Lopez let go of the medic. “I can walk just fine.”

Suddenly the dark sky turned to bright light. They all shielded their eyes and dove for cover as they heard the
sonic boom from the nuke they’d dropped on East Finisterra. The rain turned to mud from the fallout. Everything
was coated with wet clay that came down like snow.

“Take your radiation tablets,” advised Medic Ceausescu as they walked through the muddy forest. “I think that
nuke was larger than the Captain expected.”

“We just turned East Finisterra into glass!” shouted Corporal Williams, giving a rebel yell and shaking his fist
to the east. “Awesome, baby! That’s what happens when you mess with the Legion!”

“Where are we going?” asked Guido as they trudged along.

“If we keep going west, we will reach the highway,” answered Lieutenant Lopez. “We can hitch a ride from
there.”

“This place creeps me out,” complained Guido. He could hear wolves howling up on a nearby ridge. “They’re
stalking us.”

“I heard that the wolves seeded on New Colorado are smarter and larger than normal wolves,” said Corporal
Williams. “They plan their attacks. It’s genetic engineering gone wild. I heard the wolves even wiped out a whole
company of spider special forces.”

“Nonsense,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “El lobo only seeks out the weak. Maybe they smell my blood.”

“You have nothing to fear,” said Corporal Washington. “Fear of man is a survival instinct bred into all wild
animals of Old Earth. It is me the wolves are stalking. They hope I will lag behind.”

“I told you they liked to eat spiders,” said Corporal Williams. “Don’t worry, Washington. We won’t let them
eat you. I say we blast them.”

“Don’t waste your ammunition,” ordered Lieutenant Lopez. He thought he glimpsed a wolf off to the side.
Then it was gone, hidden by the underbrush. “If there are insurgents out here, we don’t want to give away our
position.”

“I just saw the biggest damn wolf there ever was!” shouted Corporal Williams as he fired full automatic into
the forest. “I think I got him!”

Corporal Williams charged off into the forest. The others followed. They found nothing, not even a blood trail.

Finally losing interest in wolves, the legionnaires walked for miles until they reached the North Highway. The
wolves followed.

* * * * *

I looked out the slit windows of the command center bunker. The mushroom cloud still drifted over East
Finisterra. I had seen nuclear explosions before, but this one close up seemed larger than usual. The devastation
across the river was complete. West Finisterra was flattened, too. I expected the course of the New Mississippi River
to change. The paperwork from the environmental impact statement would be extensive. *Damned paperwork!*

Miraculously, the Finisterra Bridge was still standing. Civilians were popping out of their spider holes and wandering about the rubble. The mines and the tunnel system remained intact. Radiation levels were high, and dust was settling everywhere. The spiders weren’t much affected by radiation, but it was something to be avoided by humans. Refugees needed to take radiation tablets before fleeing south to New Disneyland or north to Camp Alaska.

“General Kalipetesis is on the radio,” announced Corporal Kool. “And he doesn’t sound happy.”

“He never is,” I replied, taking the radio. “What?”

“Lose that attitude real fast, mister,” said General Kalipetesis. “Did you explode a nuke?”

“No, sir,” I said. “It must have been the insurgents.”

“Don’t lie to me,” shouted General Kalipetesis. “I need to rely on my commanders to tell me the truth.”

“Is this a secure frequency?” I asked. “Never mind! You took all my nukes. Remember? Besides, our tactical nukes aren’t that big. It must have been a spider nuke.”

“I will not tolerate your deception,” advised General Kalipetesis. “Give me a reason not to relieve you of command.”

“Because my sector is the only place in the North that no longer has an operational insurgency,” I replied. “We killed them all.”

“Insurgents are attacking all the county seats,” said General Kalipetesis. “Be ready to move out toward either New Disneyland or Camp Alaska. And don’t set off any more nukes!”

“I did not explode that nuke,” I argued. “It must have been the insurgents who accidentally blew themselves up.”

“A man is never more truthful than when he acknowledges himself to be a liar,” said General Kalipetesis.

“Spare me,” I replied.

“I’m warning you,” continued General Kalipetesis. “No more surprises. No more nukes. No more lies.”

“That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.”

“You lie so easily. I need reliable information. Don’t you know a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its boots?”

“All I know is we are facing more than just insurgents,” I answered. “There were thousands of heavily armed Arthropodan marines in Finisterra. We need air support. We have one medical helicopter carrying wounded missing south of here, shot down by a SAM. I expect more casualties from the radiation. We have a lot of digging out and rebuilding to do. Fortunately the miners up here are good at digging.”

“Did you blow up the Singh Gold Mine?” asked General Kalipetesis. “The biggest mother load on the planet, and you nuke it. How am I going to explain that to Congress?”

“I have not been across the river yet, so I don’t know about the Singh Mine,” I said. “Are you going to do something about the spiders landing marines down here?”

“I’ll be talking to the Commander of the Arthropodan Fleet later today,” said General Kalipetesis. “They deny landing any troops. He says they are only in orbit to protect the local spider population and to prevent more genocide. Quite frankly, you setting off a nuke on the spider side of Finisterra is not going to help negotiations.”

“Threaten to blow their Fleet out of orbit,” I suggested. “Threaten war. That will get their attention.”

“No one wants war,” said General Kalipetesis. “I can’t make threats like that. We need to contain the fighting.”

“War is a horrible thing,” I said. “Let’s keep it that way so you don’t grow too fond of it. War can’t be contained. It needs to be unleashed.”

* * * * *

“What went wrong in Finisterra?” asked the Arthropodan Fleet Commander. “You assured me the human pestilence would use restraint. Instead, they used a nuke on their own city. Are they insane?”

“It might just be a local commander using excessive force,” said the Special Forces Commander. “Or possibly our team leaders gathered too many troops in one place, providing an irresistible target.”

“Local human pestilence commanders are allowed to use nukes that big?” asked the Fleet Commander.

“Maybe,” replied the Special Forces Commander. “We are looking into it.”

“I thought your Special Forces units would stay dispersed,” complained the Fleet Commander. “You were supposed to assist the insurgency and use hit and run tactics. Instead, you group up inside the city.”

“I ordered my ground units to stay dispersed,” explained the Special Forces Commander. “But the insurgents prefer urban combat. My team leaders report that the locals are afraid of the forest. They complain of monsters.”

“What idiocy is this?” asked the Fleet Commander, losing his temper. “What monsters?”

“There are wild animals that attack in packs at night,” said the Special Forces Commander. “We have killed
several. They are just another beast native to Earth’s forests, put on New Colorado to control pests.”

“What are they, monitor dragons?” asked the Fleet Commander. “I hate dragons.”

“I brought a picture,” advised the Special Forces Commander, pulling out a photograph of a dead wolf. “We shoot them on sight.”

“It is hideous,” said the Fleet Commander. “Are the human pestilence training these beasts to attack our soldiers?”

“No,” said the Special Forces Commander. “The monsters are dangerous to humans, too.”

“Good,” said the Fleet Commander. “I will show this photo to the Emperor when I give report. The Emperor will not be happy if you deviate from the original plan. You are to fight a guerrilla war from the forests so that the Emperor can deny direct involvement. You are not to provoke the human pestilence with large-scale engagements again. Our goal is to negotiate a joint occupation of New Colorado without going to war.”

Chapter 2

The Arthropodan Fleet commander and General Kalipetsis agreed to face-to-face negotiations at Camp Alaska. The Fleet commander landed with five shuttles and a thousand Special Forces marines. They promptly freed about two hundred insurgents held at the detention center, and set up a spider zone of control dividing Camp Alaska.

My battalion was ordered to Camp Alaska. I sat in on the negotiations. Lieutenant Lopez joined us.

“I strongly protest the landing of Arthropodan marines,” announced General Kalipetsis. “Are you trying to provoke a war?”

“No,” replied the Arthropodan Fleet Commander. “Quite the contrary. I am here to stop a war. The marines are merely a needed precaution. You will remember the last time I was here under a flag of truce, I was attacked and injured.”

“By occupying Camp Alaska and freeing dangerous terrorists from prison, you hope to prevent a war?” asked General Kalipetsis. “Excuse me if I doubt your credibility.”

“It is you who lacks credibility,” argued the Fleet Commander. “How many prisoners have died in your gulags? We freed those prisoners to save them from certain death at the hands of the Legion. If they did not die from your abuse, surely the approach of winter would have killed them all.”

“Your troops must leave,” said General Kalipetsis. “They are a provocation and violate our sovereignty.”

“The marines are just temporary,” said the Fleet Commander. “I propose they stay in place only during negotiations. We can agree that both sides will not reinforce existing troops or commit any aggressive acts.”

“What about all the insurgents you just freed?” asked General Kalipetsis.

“I promise to control the locals while we negotiate,” said the Fleet Commander. “That is the easy part.”

I stepped outside and radioed the T. Roosevelt Space Weapons Platform. “I want you to target the five Arthropodan shuttles that landed in Camp Alaska,” I ordered.

“We can’t do that,” replied the Commander of the T. Roosevelt. “We are surrounded by the Arthropodan Fleet. They have threatened to destroy us if we bomb any part of the planet, or make any aggressive moves.”

“That is a risk I am willing to take,” I commented. “I am ordering you to destroy those shuttles. Don’t make me come up there!”

I walked back inside to join the negotiations. “Do you really expect us to believe you will not land more troops or make any more aggressive acts?” General Kalipetsis was saying. “You have broken all your promises so far.”

“Yes, I give my word,” said the Fleet Commander. “The status quo is fine, for now.”

The loud explosions from outside rocked the building. We peered out the windows in time to see the destruction of the spider shuttles.

The Fleet Commander was furious. “What treachery is this?” he fumed. “This is your doing, Czerinski!”

“I am merely enforcing our agreement per treaty not to land large amounts of troops,” I responded. “Be glad I used restraint. I should have bombed much more. I will, the next time you violate the peace treaty.”

“You human pestilence show time after time you cannot be trusted,” replied the Fleet Commander.

“Now we have a new agreement on the table,” said General Kalipetsis. “We accept the new agreement, but will not tolerate more violations. Is that acceptable to you?”

“I agree,” said the Fleet Commander. “It is only my desire for peace that restrains me from avenging your
belligerence."

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The spiders quickly put up a fence dividing Camp Alaska to establish their zone of control. A checkpoint controlled traffic between the zones. Corporal Tonelli and Private Wayne drew guard duty on the Legion side that night. Their opposites on the spider side waved at them to come over and talk.

“Bring Spot,” said Private Wayne. The monitor dragon had been growling across the fence all night. Private John Iwo Jima Wayne, an ex-Arthropodan Special Forces team leader and now a legionnaire, did not trust other spiders. “Be ready for anything.”

As they approached the spider guard shack, a large monitor dragon challenged them. It was restrained by a spider marine pulling on its chain.

“Sorry if Satan scared you,” said the spider marine, patting his dragon on the snout. “He does not like human pestilence or traitors.”

“It will take more than a fat lizard to scare legionnaires,” said Private Wayne.

“Pull your dragon back,” said Guido, as he tried to control Spot. “I don’t want them to fight.”

“Of course you don’t,” said the spider marine. “You would not want your pup to be eaten.”

Guido sized up the other dragon. Its head was huge. Old scars covered its face. Satan was larger and more muscular than Spot. “My dragon has many combat kills,” bragged Guido. “Spot would tear your dragon’s throat out. That would be bad for the ongoing peace negotiations.”

“Care to put money on your brag?” asked the spider marine.

“How much can you afford to lose?” asked Private Wayne. “We won’t risk a combat dragon for chump change.”

“It could be millions,” said the spider marine. “I have many friends who would want to take your money, too.”

“No,” said Guido. “Captain Czerinski would not allow it.”

“No stomach for a fight?” taunted the spider marine. “I heard you human pestilence are squeamish. I will give you two-to-one odds, being that your dragon is only a pup.”

“Do it,” whispered Private Wayne. “Your dragon has seen combat. I know this marine’s dragon. He is pampered, overfed, and fights only at sporting events.”

“I will give you three-to-one odds,” challenged the spider marine. “That is the best offer you will get.”

“Deal,” said Guido. “How much can you afford to bet?”

“As much as you can afford to lose,” said the spider marine. “My commanding officer will hold the bets.”

“All bets will be made through Bonanno Bookies of New Memphis,” said Guido.

“What?” asked the spider marine. “I am not letting human pestilence are squeamish. I will give you two-to-one odds, being that your dragon is only a pup.”

“The fight is off,” said Guido. “It’s the law. We have no choice on the matter.”

“Then it is not happening,” said the spider marine. “I knew you would find a way to worm out of the fight.”

“Ask around,” said Guido. “This much action has to go through Bonanno.”

The spider marine conferred with his partner. Then he made some phone calls. “I have decided to allow all bets to go through Bonanno Bookies,” said the spider marine, glumly. “You will lose your money, anyway.”

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“The destruction of our shuttles needs to be avenged,” insisted the Special Forces Commander. “There was crew aboard those shuttles. This is like a claw slap in the face.”

“No,” said the Fleet Commander. “At least not yet. Look at the big picture. When our mission started, we were arguing with the human pestilence about whether our fleet should stay in orbit. Now we are negotiating borders on the planet’s surface. Our marines have occupied half of Camp Alaska, and we have freed all prisoners. All this happened without a fight.”

“We cannot let them bomb us without retaliation,” said the Special Forces Commander. “To allow their treachery would invite more.”

“All in good time,” said the Fleet Commander. “Camp Alaska is just a crossroads. The prize is the oil and uranium fields. We will extend our zones of influence out from Camp Alaska until the prize is ours. That is the mission the Emperor gave us. We will not deviate from the Emperor’s plan. We will follow orders.”

“Of course you are right, as usual,” said the Special Forces Commander. “That General Kalipetsis is a fool. He will give us what we want. It’s Captain Czerinski I worry about. I think Captain Czerinski acted on his own to destroy our shuttles. And it was Czerinski that used a nuke to destroy Finisterra.”
“General Kalipetsis is smarter than he appears,” said the Fleet Commander. “But I agree. Something needs to be done about Captain Czerinski.”

“Leave it to me,” said the Special Forces Commander. “I will kill him personally.”

“His death has to look like an accident, or at least from unknown causes,” cautioned the Fleet Commander. “Have a subordinate kill Czerinski. I do not want our negotiations team linked to the assassination.”

“I will use nerve agent dipped onto the tip of an assassin’s claw,” said the Special Forces Commander. “Just one scratch will kill him instantly.”

“Remember, we need to be subtle,” said the Fleet Commander. “We cannot be linked directly to his death.”

“Czerinski has a reputation for brawling,” said the Special Forces Commander. “In the chaos of a bar fight, our assassin can easily scratch Czerinski. The Legion may be suspicious, but they will not be able to prove anything.”

“Do it,” ordered the Fleet Commander. “I like your plan.”

“One other thing,” said the Special Forces Commander. “What do you know about this dragon fight between our champion and some Legion dragon? I did not even know the Legion had dragons. I am seeing fliers posted all over both sides of Camp Alaska, announcing the fight.”

“I know all about that. I have two million credits bet on our champion,” answered the Fleet Commander. “I suggest you bet now before the odds increase. I have been given complementary tickets ringside, if you want to join me.”

* * * * *

The fight was Saturday night. Privately owned helicopters brought spectators all the way from New Memphis and New Disneyland. Cable and Satellite TV set up to broadcast the fight planet-wide. A stretch limousine brought Carlos Bonanno to town. Bonanno set up a meeting with Guido and the spider marine dragon handler. Bonanno brought both human and spider muscle to the meeting.

“I thought the whole Bonanno Family got whacked by the Legion in New Memphis,” commented Guido. “Obviously we missed a few.”

“Our misunderstandings are ancient history,” said Carlos Bonanno. “I look to the future. That is where the money is to be made.”

“I’m listening,” said Guido. He brought Private Wayne and Corporal Williams along, but felt uncomfortably outgunned by the mobsters. “What is this all about?”

“I have in this vial an adrenalin-activated poison,” said Bonanno, holding the vial up for all to see. He turned to address the spider marine. “You will inject this poison into your dragon fifteen minutes before the fight. When the dragons clash, the adrenalin will activate the poison and kill your dragon instantly. Your dragon’s throat will be torn out so fast, no one will notice why or how the champion’s guard was lowered for just an instant. You will dispose of the body quickly afterward.”

“I will not agree to that!” objected the astonished spider marine. He got up to leave with the several of his marine friends. “The arrogance of you human pestilence never ceases to amaze me.”

“And the naivety of you spiders never ceases to amaze me,” countered Bonanno.

One of Carlos Bonanno’s bodyguards blocked the spider marine’s path, placing a threatening claw on his chest. “I understand how you feel,” said the spider bodyguard. “To compensate you for your loss, we will give you ten percent of the take. You will be rich. This is an offer you cannot refuse.”

“I do refuse!” said the spider marine. “My dragon Satan is a champion. I will not throw his life away for money!”

“The gambling on this fight has gone planet-wide,” said the spider bodyguard. “There is now too much money involved for us to let this go to chance. Your dragon must lose, because the smart money says so.”

“I do not care about your betting,” said the marine spider. “Who are you to expect me to do the bidding of the human pestilence? You are a disgrace.”

“This is not about the human pestilence,” said the spider bodyguard. “You say you do not care about money? Do you care about the safety of your family on Inhabited Planet #3?”

“How do you know about my family?” asked the spider marine. “What are you?”

“We are La Cosa Nostra,” said the spider bodyguard. “Our organization operates on both human and Arthropodan worlds. We will kill you and your entire family if we can not come to an understanding here and now.”

The spider marine looked to his comrades. “Don’t do it,” said one of the other spider marines. “Death to the human pestilence!” The others joined in the chant.

The spider bodyguard shot the chanting marine in the head. He turned to the dragon handler. “Please, it does not have to end this way. Everyone can be happy and make a profit. It’s just business.”
“Okay. I agree,” said the spider marine, patting Satan on the snout. “You win.”

* * * * *

An hour before the fight, an Italian named Gino walked into my office like he owned the place and tossed two duffel bags full of cash onto my desk.

“What’s this?” asked Lieutenant Lopez.

“It’s both of your cuts,” said Gino. “Fifty thousand dollars each.”

“For what?” I asked, examining the duffel.

“For the fight,” said Gino.

“What about the fight?” I asked. “It’s legal. I’m not shaking you down for a payoff.”

“It’s the law,” said Gino. “The commanding officers get a cut whether you do anything or not. We prefer you don’t do anything.”

“Thanks. I’ll take the money,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “I’m not turning down free money.”

“Nothing is free,” I said, putting my duffel under my desk. “I’ll take my cut. But, when the fight is over, you will conclude your business in Camp Alaska and get back to New Memphis where you belong. Next time, get permission from me before entering Legion territory, or I will hunt down and kill all of you vermin who stray into my territory.”

* * * * *

The two dragons pulled at their leashes. Guido and the spider marine let them close enough to almost taste. Both dragons wanted a kill. Both were released at the same time, to the cheer of the crowd. Spot drew blood first, striking with lightning speed at Satan’s throat. The lunge missed, however, and Spot was only able to bite Satan’s shoulder. Satan shook off the smaller dragon, muscling in for the kill. The poison took hold, shutting down Satan’s brain just as he was about to finish Spot. The hesitation allowed Spot to tear out Satan’s throat, abruptly ending the fight. Guido pulled Spot off the dead dragon and led him around the ring to the cheering of the crowd. The spider marine knelt down to hug his fallen dragon, and to cover Satan with a tarp.

The crowd went wild as Guido continued parading Spot around the ring. They gave Spot a standing ovation. I clapped and cheered, too. I thought I was going to lose my money tonight.

Suddenly, a spider next to me gave me a shove. “Watch where you are going, clumsy human pestilence!” yelled a spider, reaching out with his claw. The spider was jostled by the crowd just as he was about to strike. His claw went wide, scratching Gino instead. Gino fell to the floor in spasms at my feet, and died. Lieutenant Lopez shot the spider in the back of the head. The assassin fell dead on top of Gino. The crowd kept cheering, not noticing my close brush with death.

Chapter 3

“I want to know what happened to Gino,” demanded Carlos Bonanno, pointing his finger at me. “You were responsible for security. That’s what you got paid for.”

“Gino was killed by a nerve gas agent placed on the tip of a spider assassin’s claw,” I replied, tossing the claw on my desk. “The assassin meant to kill me. Gino was killed by accident when he got too close to the scuffle.”


“I shot and killed the assassin,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “How much more justice can you want?”

“It would have been better if you took the assassin alive, so I could find out who sent him,” groused Bonanno. The mobster turned his full attention to Lieutenant Lopez. Lopez was quite a sight, with half his face still bandaged from his previous burns. “What happened to you?”

“War wound,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “A rocket fried me and my tank.”

“Who do you think sent the assassin?” asked Bonanno. “There’s a long list of people and bugs who would like to see you dead, Czerinski. Who did you piss off this time?”

“It was probably either the Arthropodan Fleet Commander or his Special Forces Commander,” I speculated.
“Aren’t you going to do something about it?” asked Bonanno.

“Of course I am going to do something about it,” I said. “I’m going to kill someone. But I am not going to do it now, and it doesn’t concern you. If there is going to be killing done in Camp Alaska, it will be done by the Legion. Not you or any other wise guy.”

“It’s a large galaxy,” threatened Bonanno, getting up to leave. “I will respect your territory, but I will avenge Gino.”

“Keep the claw as a souvenir,” suggested Lieutenant Lopez, handing it to Bonanno. “Be careful of the tip. It still holds enough nerve agent to kill an elephant.”

“I give the Fleet Commander his cut, then he violates our goodwill, and the law, by ordering a hit at the fight,” commented Bonanno, as he picked up the claw and handed it to a bodyguard. “He will pay.”

I watched Carlos Bonanno and his thugs drive away in the stretch limousine. “What do you think he will do?” I asked. “Whack the Fleet Commander?”

“I hope so, but I don’t really care,” replied Lieutenant Lopez. “I’m more interested in what you are going to do.”

“Not that much,” I answered. “I’ll probably just start another war.”

* * * * *

The Empire claimed a large portion of the Arctic oil fields. They sent armored vehicles and Special Forces marines from Camp Alaska to expand their zones of influence. Spider checkpoints did not block traffic or in any way hinder oil rig operations, but taxes were collected on all imports and exports.

General Kalipetsis was furious. He demanded that United States Galactic Federation control be restored in the Arctic. After more negotiations, however, new borders were drawn reflecting the new reality and new spider zones of control.

Lieutenant Lopez took the armored car out to escort Legion survey teams putting up new boundary markers. He met spider marines placing their own markers. The spider markers, however, were twenty miles in error. The difference was important because it put an important oil field inside the spider zone of control. Lieutenant Lopez confronted the spider survey team on the matter.

“You are trespassing by twenty miles,” accused Lieutenant Lopez. “Leave now or face arrest.”

“Our survey is correct,” responded a spider team leader. He reached for his rifle.

Lieutenant Lopez shot the spider team leader. Sergeant Green killed the rest of the spiders with the mounted machine gun. A lone spider escaped by hiding behind the armored car, then running to the forest. As Lieutenant Lopez prepared to go after him, the spider screamed. The sound of wolves tearing the spider apart echoed through the forest.

“That spider is wolf shit now,” commented Lieutenant Lopez, straining to see through the trees and underbrush. “No soldier should die like that.”

“I hate it out here in the sticks,” said Sergeant Green. “There is nothing but wolves, rain, snow, mud, jungle, and big old scary looking trees. It looks like something from a Euro-trash fairytale. Give me concrete below my feet any day.”

A Legion surveyor tapped Lieutenant Lopez on the shoulder. “I was twenty miles off on our survey,” he advised sheepishly. “Sorry about that. The spiders were right. My bad.”

Lieutenant Lopez’s jaw dropped. He looked back at the dead spider marines. “You have got to be kidding. This is a joke. Right? It better be a joke!”

“Oops,” said Sergeant Green. “You screwed up again, sir!”

“I just checked the satellite GPS,” said the surveyor. “The spiders’ survey was right.”

“No, the spiders were wrong,” insisted Lieutenant Lopez. “You change your survey findings. We will move the spiders’ markers twenty miles north as planned, and put our markers next to them. Understand? You better.”

“But that would be an inaccurate survey,” argued the surveyor. “It would violate the Surveyor’s Code.”

“It’s too late to quibble about small details, unless you want to join those spiders,” threatened Lieutenant Lopez. “Drag those spiders out into the woods and let the wolves eat them. We will hide their truck at our repair shop at Camp Alaska, and sell it for parts. No one needs to know what happened here.”

* * * * *

A supply ship from Arthropoda docked with the Fleet Commander’s Flag Ship. Much anticipated personal letters and packages from home accompanied the supplies. One such package was addressed to the Fleet
Commander and dropped off at his cabin, being that the Fleet Commander was on the planet’s surface, negotiating boundary disputes with General Kalipetsis.

The backpack-sized nuke in the package was programmed to explode when opened. Because the package was not opened, a separate timer exploded the nuke anyway. The entire Flag Ship was destroyed, along with its crew.

Another package was sent to the Special Forces Commander, containing the assassin’s claw and a single sheet of paper displaying a black hand.

* * * * *

“The Legion is responsible for the destruction of your Flag Ship,” said the Special Forces Commander. “Proof is this package they sent me. This claw belongs to my team leader. Only Czerinski could have cut it off and sent it to me. And see that black hand on the paper? It’s a human hand.”

“State Intelligentsia is investigating the matter,” said the Fleet Commander. “Both packages were mailed from Arthropoda.”

“Impossible,” said the Special Forces Commander.

“I have made discrete inquiries,” said the Fleet Commander. “Your team leader’s body was cremated. The black hand is a universal sign for the Mafia.”

“That proves my point,” said the Special Forces Commander. “The Mafia is a figment of human pestilence imagination. It’s just a bunch of human thugs doing the Legion’s bidding.”

“The Mafia does exist,” advised the Fleet Commander. “Even on Arthropoda.”

“Human pestilence and spiders working together in an elaborate criminal enterprise?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “Not likely. Surely you do not believe in such conspiracy theories. Are we being spied upon by black space ships, too?”

“How else can you explain a nuke being mailed from Arthropoda?” asked the Fleet Commander. “Do you think the Legion can do that? And on such short notice?”

“Yes, with the help of Green traitors,” insisted the Special Forces Commander. “We have allowed too many Green spiders to immigrate to New Colorado. The traitors are even forming their own Foreign Legion units. We should have killed them all when we had the chance.”

“You would set up death camps for the Greens?” asked the Fleet Commander. “Sociologists say the more contact we have with the human pestilence, the more we think like them. Your last statement seems to prove them right.”

“What do a bunch of think-tank eggheads know?” chided the Special Forces Commander. “The irony is that the human pestilence will eventually turn on the Greens. They have already put the Greens on a reservation located on unwanted desert.”

“I heard Waterstone is a thriving independent country,” commented the Fleet Commander. “And it has been allowed to expand its borders.”

“Whatever,” said the Special Forces Commander. “Let the Greens bunch up in one place. That will only make it easier to nuke them when the time comes.”

“I am not interested in your radical politics,” said the Fleet Commander. “Order your troops to interact with the human pestilence at the zone gates. Make inquires about the Mafia. I want to know more about the Mafia. Lately our military intelligence has been weak.”

“I still do not believe the Mafia exists,” said the Special Forces Commander. “What about the gamblers? Maybe they are upset about something?”

“I do not see what the gamblers would be upset about,” replied the Fleet Commander, glumly. “They took all my money.”

“I lost my money, too,” said the Special Forces Commander. “In fact, the gamblers took everyone’s money. How did our champion lose? It was a sure thing.”

“Sure things are always a sucker’s bet,” lamented the Fleet Commander. “I want you to talk to our dragon handler. I smell something rotten in Camp Alaska.”

“That reminds me. I have a survey team missing. A locator beacon on their truck shows it is now in the human zone of Camp Alaska.”

“All I care about is that the border gets established quickly. If your survey team got lost or killed, you handle it. Get another team out there.”

* * * * *
“What are they doing now?” asked Private Krueger, as he watched the spiders across the fence digging up the streets. “Are they digging more tunnels and bunkers?”

“Spiders live to dig,” advised Private Camacho. “It’s in their DNA. They can’t resist the chance to dig, like dogs digging for a bone.”

“I’ll ask them,” said Corporal Tonelli, walking up to the spider guard shack. “Are you digging for gold? There’s no gold this far north. Everyone knows that.”

“We are putting in cables for more Cable TV,” replied the spider guard. “It’s much superior to your state controlled Satellite TV.”

“But Cable TV is illegal,” announced Guido, shocked and appalled. “I will have to report this!”

“I am so scared,” responded the spider guard. “Cable provides so many more movies and new releases. It is Satellite TV that should be illegal. Plus, we get the Disney Channel.”

“Liar,” said Private Camacho. “You don’t get the Disney Channel.”

“Who cares about cartoons?” asked Guido. “Goofy is lame.”

“We get the Discovery Channel, too,” boasted the spider guard.

“Satellite TV has the Discovery Channel,” argued Guido. “And all the football and soccer you could ever want.”

“Soccer is for pretty boys,” scoffed the spider guard. “Our Fleet Commander ordered the cable put in as soon as possible. He says your Satellite TV is contaminating our culture and brainwashing our babies. And, he says your Fox News Network is not fair and balanced.”

“That’s a lie!” shouted Guido.

“We have the Playboy Channel,” added Private Krueger. “Do you?”

“No,” answered the spider guard. “Do you really? I heard you have spiders on the Playboy channel, too.”


“Can we come over and watch sometime?” asked the spider guard.

“No,” said Guido. “You have to stay on your side.”

“Record it for me,” requested the spider guard.

“Okay,” said Private Krueger. “I can do that.”

“Is the Fleet Commander trying to start another war?” asked Guido. “You better tell them to stop that digging right now.”

“It will not happen,” said the spider guard. “The Fleet Commander does not want us watching human pestilence TV.”

“Doesn’t the Fleet Commander know the Cable Guy is a human, too?” asked Guido.

“Whatever,” said the spider guard. “No one has ever proved that.”

Guido got on the radio and reported the emergency to Lieutenant Lopez. “I warned them, and they refused to stop digging,” advised Guido. “The Fleet Commander himself ordered the installation of Cable TV throughout the spider zone.”

“Those bastards,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “I’ll call in air strikes right away. Take cover.”

A Legion helicopter gunship appeared low on the horizon and destroyed the backhoe, and was actively searching for more targets when General Kalipetsis canceled the air strike, saying that this latest provocation would be brought up first thing during tomorrow’s negotiations. Lieutenant Lopez cursed all staff officers for being weak-kneed pansies and appeasers. “The whole lot should be replaced. Don’t they know half the North has been given away already? And now they’re allowing the Cable Guy to run rampant. Incompetents!” he fumed.

After the Helicopter gunship left, Guido waved a white flag from his bunker at the spider guard shack. The spider guard waved back. They all came out to discuss the situation.

“Guido, what’s up with bombing us?” asked the spider guard, shaking his claw. “I thought you were just kidding about starting a war over Cable TV. Are you human pestilence crazy, or what?”

“I got a call from Lieutenant Lopez,” said Guido. “He says he is sorry about the wrecked backhoe.”

“Not as sorry as the backhoe operator,” commented the spider guard. “Who is going to pay for all that damage?”

“Lieutenant Lopez sends his apologies about the air strike, and wants you to pass it along to your chain of command,” said Guido.

“Sure,” said the spider guard, glancing down the street at the damage and a small fire in one of the buildings. “Next time I have lunch with the Fleet Commander, I will pass it on that the human pestilence is real pissed about the Cable TV, but you’re sorry you bombed us.”

“No hard feelings?” asked Guido.

“Is our poker game still on for tonight?” asked the spider guard.
“You bet your ass it’s still on for tonight,” said Private Camacho. “Bring all the money you can afford to lose.”
“I have no hard feelings,” conceded the spider guard. “As long as you have no hard feelings when me and my crew take all your money!”
“Poker is a human game,” advised Private Krueger. “No spider is going to take our money.”
“Human pestilence cannot play poker,” replied the spider guard. “Your twitchy facial expressions give your hands away so easily.”
“Just bring cash,” said Guido. “I don’t take checks, credit cards, or American Express.”
“Hey, Guido,” said the spider guard. “What can you tell me about the Mafia, or the Black Hand?”
“What?” asked Guido. “Just because I’m Italian, you think I’m connected? That I’m a wise guy?”
“Spare me the innocence routine. I do not know anything about you Italians or wise guys. My team leader told me to ask you human pestilence about the Mafia. Well? What do you know about the Mafia?”
“The Mafia is a myth,” said Guido. “It’s nothing but an urban legend. It doesn’t exist. The Mafia is supposed to be an organized crime syndicate, but there is no such thing as organized crime. Maybe there used to be, but the Mafia never got past Mars. The Legion threw them all out an airlock.”
“And the Black Hand?” asked the spider guard. “What is that all about?”
“A black hand painted on a wall is just a warning,” said Guido. “Its intent is to intimidate.”
“Those gamblers I saw getting out of the black limousine,” said the spider guard. “Aren’t they Mafia?”
“No,” said Guido. “I told you. There is no such thing as the Mafia.”
“Are you sure?” asked the spider guard. “They looked like thugs. And they seemed organized.”
“Put it this way,” said Guido, in a lowered voice. “If those gamblers were Mafia, it would not be healthy for you and me to be having this conversation. It would be wise for you to shut your mouth and not be going around asking questions that could get you killed.”
“I see,” said the spider guard. “One last question. I am not saying that the Mafia exists, but, if the Mafia did exist, would it operate on Arthropoda, too?”
“Yes,” said Guido. “There has been smuggling and business conducted between our worlds a long time before a colony was established on New Colorado. Do you think humans have a monopoly on criminal activity?”
“I see,” said the spider guard. “Thank you for the insight. I will see you at the poker game.”

* * * * *

The spider team leader and his commandos easily crossed the fence into the human pestilence zone. The team’s mission was to find two GPS transmitters. The first transmitter had been found in the belly of a wolf. The second transmitter had been traced to a civilian truck repair shop in the human zone.

When the commandos broke into the shop, they found the missing survey truck. The team leader was disappointed at not finding the missing survey team. He was enraged when he found the truck riddled with large caliber bullet holes, and its cab splattered with blood. The team leader took photographs, then set a large explosive charge inside the truck. A timer would detonate the bomb at dawn. Hopefully, human pestilence culprits arriving for work in the morning would be killed by the blast.

* * * * *

Poker night happened on Saturday once a month in a large Legion tent located directly on the dividing line between the spider and human zones. Officers were not invited, especially human officers, all of whom were rumored to possess mind-reading technology. Poker players are such a paranoid lot to think such rumors could be true.

Both sides brought lots of alcohol. The public was invited, and oil workers, miners, and civilians of all sorts attracted by the loud music crowded the tent. Legionnaires were flush with cash, and spiders were eager to recoup their losses from the dragon fight wager.

By midnight, most of the spiders were winning, and most of the humans were losing. An exception was Private Camacho, who had a stack of money in front of him. Unfortunately for Private Camacho, spiders had better eyesight than humans. With at least eight eyes, a spider could see slight-of-hand card manipulation even when it appeared he was not paying attention. Private Camacho was caught dealing an ace to himself from the bottom of the deck.

“He cheats!” hissed a spider marine. The marine stabbed the ace with his combat knife and held it up for all to see. “How shall we kill him? I vote for slow and painful.”
“I swear I wasn’t cheating!” responded Private Camacho, looking about for help. “Sergeant Green! Help me! These spiders have gone crazy!”
Sergeant Green threw down his cards and tromped over to Camacho’s table. “Captain Czerinski will be upset if you kill him,” advised Sergeant Green. “Personally, I think the Legion would be better off if you gutted him here and now. But, just string Camacho up and let him hang for the rest of the night from a tent pole. Divide up his money between the other players at the table.”

The spider with the knife nodded his agreement and happily raked in the money. Two other spider marines quickly spun a cocoon around Private Camacho and hung him upside down from the roof of the tent. The game resumed as if nothing had ever happened.

Private Krueger staggered over to Camacho. “I told you not to cheat at a spider poker game,” snickered Private Krueger. “You want a beer?”

“I can’t drink beer upside down,” complained Private Camacho. “Man, this is messed up. Cut me down from here!”

“I can’t do it,” replied Private Krueger. “I can sympathize with you. I’ve been there, done that, and do not want to join you.”

“Fine,” said Private Camacho. “Give me the Cerveza. Maybe it won’t be so bad if I’m drunk.”

“It will be worse if you get drunk and puke,” advised Private Krueger, as he handed Camacho his beer.

Across the tent, a fight broke out. A spider marine made the mistake of calling Private Wayne a traitor. The spider legionnaire came up from the poker table brandishing a jagged combat knife in each hand. The other spider drew a knife, too. The spiders circled, occasionally feinting with their knives, trying to position themselves for an advantage. Sergeant Green ordered the two spiders to break it up, but was ignored. The knives whipped out in a blur of movement. When the two spiders stepped apart, the Arthropodan marine was missing his claw. That ended the fight. Private Wayne sat back down to his cards, and the spider marine folded his hand and left.

Private Krueger staggered over to Corporal Ceausescu and told her she had beautiful blue eyes. The medic told him to get lost. Then Private Krueger gulped down his vodka, and told one of the spider females she had beautiful red eyes. They left together, walking arm in arms, hand in claw.

Guido lost all his money. He stepped outside for some fresh air. The dragon handler from the fight was standing at the doorway, smoking a marijuana cigarette.

“Those are illegal,” advised Guido. “Can I have a hit?”

“Being arrested for pot is the least of my worries,” commented the spider marine, passing his joint to Guido.

“The State Intelligentsia arrested me this morning. They wanted to know if the dragon fight was fixed.”

“What did you tell them?” asked Guido, taking another hit off the cigarette.

“I told them to go have sex with themselves in unnatural ways,” said the spider marine. “Then they tied me to a chair and injected me with truth drugs. They interrogated me all morning. I do not know what I told them. I assume I told them everything.”

“That is not good,” said Guido. “If I was you, I would take your money and immigrate to the human zone. Retire to a nice warm beach and drink margaritas all day.”

“I just might do that,” said the spider marine. “You might think of doing the same.”

“I can’t,” said Guido. “Desertion is a capital offense. The Legion would hunt me down.”

“Whatever,” said the spider marine, as he went back inside the tent.

* * * * *

During the early morning hours, Lieutenant Lopez and I did a walk-through at the poker game to see how things were going. The music stopped. All eyes were on us. The poker players stopped playing and put their cards face down on the tables. Someone played an old Earth song on the stereo: ‘Secret Agent Man.’ I cut Private Camacho down and took him into protective custody. When we left, the party and music resumed.

“How does it feel to be a cop?” asked Lieutenant Lopez.

“Shut up, Lopez,” I said. “Not another word. When I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it.”

“Policia!”

* * * * *

At dawn the poker game was ended by a large explosion in the human zone. Alerts went out to team leaders and sergeants, who gathered their soldiers and departed the poker party to man their positions along the Camp Alaska dividing fence. Soldiers on both sides cursed officers who would call an alert on Sunday morning.
Chapter 4

“We should nuke New Memphis,” argued the Special Forces Commander. “New Memphis is the center of Mafia activity.”

“It is also a major inland port,” said the Fleet Commander. “Let’s not start a war quite yet.”

“I was just thinking out loud,” advised the Special Forces Commander. “But, we should do something to send the Mafia a message that we will not tolerate terrorism.”

“I agree,” said the Fleet Commander. “I will authorize a commando raid to hit the Bonanno organization. I leave the details of that raid to you. Do not get entangled with the Legion. Avoid open combat.”

“Thank you sir,” said the Special Forces Commander. “I will use the same team leader who made the successful raid on the truck shop.”

“That was good work,” said the Fleet Commander. “It sent a strong message to those responsible, but also left the Legion guessing as to what happened and why.”

“Why did the Legion kill our survey team?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “Their murders seem so pointless.”

“My spy suspects it was done by a local commander and was not a part of any particular Legion plan,” said the Fleet Commander. “Also, I am having the survey checked for accuracy. There is an important oil find just inside the human pestilence zone that might be contested.”

“You have a spy on General Kalipetsis’ staff?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “How did you do that?”

“All you need to know is that I have an information source inside the Legion,” said the Fleet Commander. “Who is not important. It never ceases to amaze me how much money means to the human pestilence. They have no sense of honor.”

* * * * *

Before the start of negotiations, the Special Forces Commander introduced me to his aide-de-camp Team Leader #1. The Team Leader held out his claw for a cordial shake. I refused, saying “Excuse me if I don’t shake your claw. It will be a cold day in Hell before that happens.”

“Rudeness at negotiations is unbecoming,” replied the Team Leader. “I will remember the slight.”

“Maybe Captain Czerinski is concerned you might have nerve agent applied to the tip of your claw,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “It’s been known to happen.”

“Are you accusing me of something?” asked the Team Leader. “I will not take your insults.”

“Deny involvement in the assassination attempt, and I will shoot you between your eight eyes,” I said. “No one will miss you.”

“Yes, I suspect you would shoot me,” said the Team Leader. “I studied your exploits in Special Tactics College. As one professional soldier to another, I have nothing but the utmost respect for you. Let us start our dialogue anew.”

“Why are we having this conversation?” I asked. “I suspect you just want to make sure you can pick me out of a crowd with your sniper’s scope.”

“I need a private conversation with you, Captain,” said the Special Forces Commander, glancing at Lieutenant Lopez. “It is about a very delicate matter.”

“I have no secrets from Lieutenant Lopez,” I said. “Say what it is you have to say.”

“Oh really?” said the Special Forces Commander. “And Lieutenant Lopez keeps no secrets from you?”

“That’s right,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “What is your problem?”

“On the contrary, I am sure you do keep secrets,” said the Special Forces Commander. “What happened to our survey team?”

“What survey Team?” I asked.

“Ask your Lieutenant,” said the Special Forces Commander. “He knows what happened to them.”

“I’ll talk to you about it later,” I said to Lopez. “Is there a point to all this?”

“So, Lopez does keep secrets from you,” said the Team Leader. “I find this amusing.”

“I don’t know what he is talking about,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “Ask him about the bomb that went off at the truck repair shop. You owe the Chevron-Texaco Corporation big-time for damages.”
“Again Lieutenant Lopez accuses me of something?” asked the Team leader, taking a step forward. “It is you who is the provoker. It was you who ordered an air strike on a construction project.”

“And you are in league with the Cable Guy!” responded Lieutenant Lopez.

“You want to talk to me about minor incidents no one cares about?” I asked. “Why are you wasting my time?”

“You are quite right,” said the Special Forces Commander. “It’s all liquid under the bridge. I want to talk to you about Carlos Bonanno.”

“Bonanno?” I said. “He is just another thug. We kill them off, and more pop up. Bonanno runs the rackets in New Memphis.”

“I want to whack Carlos Bonanno,” said the Special Forces Commander. “And I want your blessing and support.”

“I didn’t know my translation device spoke New Jersey,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “Why do you want to whack Bonanno?”

“We owe Bonanno some payback,” explained the Special Forces Commander. “There is evidence he ordered the nuclear destruction of our Command Flag Ship.”

“I noticed you haven’t been talking much about that,” I said. “Debris is still falling from the sky. What makes you think Bonanno is responsible?”

“It was either Carlos Bonanno or the Legion,” replied the Special Forces Commander. “Was the Legion involved?”


“I know Carlos Bonanno ordered the bombing,” said the Special Forces Commander. “The nuke was mailed from Arthropoda, but it was sent by the Mafia. Do you deny that the Mafia has influence on both our home worlds?”

“No. It probably does,” I said. “Are you sure you want to start a war with the Mafia?”

“The war has already been started,” said the Special Forces Commander. “What I propose is to win the war.”

“You aren’t afraid of the Mafia,” said the Team Leader. “I heard you once bombed the New Memphis Mafia from space.”

“We have had our differences, but I can depend on my superiors not being corrupted by the Mafia. I can’t say the same for your superiors on Arthropoda.”

“That is my worry,” said the Special Forces Commander. “I have already taken that into account.”

“What is it you want me to do?” I asked.

“Just look the other way when our Special Forces commandos cross the border on their way to New Memphis,” said the Team Leader. “My mission will be to arrest Carlos Bonanno and as many of his associates as possible.”

“Why go to all that trouble?” I asked. “Just kill them and be done with it. I might even help you.”

“They will be summarily executed,” said the Special Forces Commander. “But first they will be interrogated. I will find out who are their accomplices on Arthropoda.”

“Just follow the money,” I suggested. “Check bank accounts. Okay, I will help you. I will even share our database for New Memphis so you can ferret them out. A shuttle can drop your commandos at the outskirts of the city.”

“Wait,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “General Kalipetsis needs to know about this. You are talking about allowing spider commandos to kill American citizens. There may be collateral damage. Aren’t you worried about the scandal if this gets out? Do you trust these spiders?”

“He is right,” I said. “You are asking me to take a huge risk. General Kalipetsis needs to be brought on board with this.”

“We are just killing Mafia,” argued the Special Forces Commander. “The Legion throws Mafia out airlocks all the time. What is the big deal?”

“The big deal is I cannot allow your mission unless General Kalipetsis approves it.”

“That will take too long,” said the Special Forces Commander. “General Kalipetsis will pass the buck. We need to cut through the red tape and just do it.”

“Sorry,” I said. “There is too much risk of something going wrong.”

“How much?” asked the Team Leader.

“What?” I asked.

“How much do you want for your cooperation?” asked the Team Leader. “A million dollars?”

“We can not be bought on this issue,” advised Lieutenant Lopez.

“Two million dollars?” asked the Team Leader.

“They insult us,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “It’s time to leave.”

“Three million dollars? You are a thief to make me offer so much,” said the Team Leader. “Justice demands we get payback on Carlos Bonanno.”
“This is getting ugly,” said Lieutenant Lopez, standing up to leave. “Three and a half million dollars,” said the Special Forces Commander. “That is three and a half million dollars apiece.”

“You have a deal,” I said. “I will make the arrangements immediately.”

“You should have brought a Green spider to do your haggling,” Lieutenant Lopez advised the commander. “You could have saved a couple million.”

* * * * *

When negotiations started, the Fleet Commander introduced a resolution calling for coordinated efforts to fight banditry along the border. I noticed that Team Leader #1 slipped out a side exit, so I followed him. At first the Team Leader appeared to be innocently walking to the checkpoint gate. But then he stopped by a wall and lit a cigarette. The Team Leader looked from side to side, as if checking to see if he had been followed. He took a rag out of his pouch and erased graffiti from the wall. How odd, I thought. The Team leader then walked past the Legion checkpoint, entering the spider zone.

I went to the spot where the Team Leader had been standing. The graffiti must have been put on the wall in chalk, because it was easily wiped off. But I could still see traces of the marking on the wall. It was a human street gang symbol. It was a Roman numeral ‘XIV.’

Street gang graffiti was common anywhere the Legion fought. Tagging was encouraged because it promoted esprit de corps. What was not common was for a spider Special Forces Team Leader to erase gang graffiti that had been printed in chalk. I theorized that this particular tag had been put on the wall as a signal. Perhaps a message would be delivered or sent later to or from a traitor.

I walked up to the checkpoint. Guido was at the gate waving traffic through.

“I want one of your security video cameras pointed at that wall,” I ordered.

“Why?” asked Guido. “I need my cameras pointed at the spiders. It does me no good to have a camera pointed back at our zone.”

“There was a tag on that wall earlier,” I said. “It got erased. If the tagger comes back, I want him identified.”

“You’re talking about the XIV? You don’t need a camera for that. It was Lieutenant Lopez.”

Chapter 5

“You are joining the spider commandos as an advisor,” I said. “I want you to keep them out of trouble. I don’t care if they get killed. Just don’t let them get into trouble.”

“I would rather stay here and help with negotiations,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “I rather like the life of a staff officer.”

“Call it punishment for shooting that survey team and not telling me about it,” I said. “Did you know they are sending out another survey team?”

“I heard the Fleet Commander is raising a stink about the border being marked in the wrong place,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “He’s right, too. We moved the markers.”

“Now you tell me?” I groused. “Oh well. It makes no difference. I’m going out there myself with the armored car and tanks. We are not going to give up that oil field.”

* * * * *

Lieutenant Lopez and about twenty-five spider commandos loaded into a shuttle and left for New Memphis. They landed just outside the city limits. A rented truck was waiting. Lieutenant Lopez got the commandos through the Legion roadblocks and checked into the Marriott Hotel. The Special Forces Commander brought lots of cash. The commandos were split up into teams and promptly sent on their missions of kidnap and mayhem.

“This is the best pizza I have ever eaten,” commented Team Leader #1, as they ate at Bonanno’s restaurant. “Who would have thought that the Mafia could make such good pizza?”

“I say we arrest the cooks, too,” said Commando #97. “If we take them back to Camp Alaska, we can force
them to cook pizzas for us.”

“We are here to arrest Alfonso Bonanno, one of Carlos’s top associates,” said the Team Leader. “We will stay put until he shows up.”

“How about we arrest just one of the cooks?” asked #97. “Who will miss one cook in a city this big?”

“Slavery is immoral and illegal,” insisted the Team Leader. “We have only been here an hour and already you are starting to think like the human pestilence.”

“Fine,” said #97. “I am going back to the salad bar. It is all you can eat night.”

“Bring me another pitcher of beer,” ordered the Team Leader. “And don’t be bringing me Lite beer again.”

“Alfonso Bonanno better show up soon,” said #97. “If he does not, I will be too fat and you will be too drunk to do anything.”

Commando #88, standing at the front door, gave an alarm signal. The Team Leader dispersed his commandos along the wall. The Team Leader stayed seated, trying to look relaxed. In walked two deputy sheriffs, one human and one spider. Immediately the spider deputy sheriff noticed the Team Leader.

“Show me identification,” demanded the spider deputy.

“I do not have identification,” replied the Team Leader. “I lost it in the flood.”

“Everyone needs identification,” advised the spider deputy.

“No one told me I needed identification,” said the Team Leader.

“Are you one of Bonanno’s boys?” asked the human deputy. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

“Yes,” said the Team Leader. “Alfonso will get me my identification. Do you think he will be here soon?”

“He’s here now,” said the human deputy. “I saw him go in the back door as we pulled up. I’ll tell Bonanno you’re here waiting for him. What is your name?”

The Team Leader hesitated, looking around for inspiration. “My name is … Kraft Cheese.”

“Whatever,” said the spider deputy. “The next time you hang out up front, conceal your weapons better. Your showing off like that makes us look bad.”

The deputies then went through a door at the back of the pizza parlor. A waitress handed the Team Leader the bill. The Team Leader sprayed her with a short burst of nerve agent. She dropped to the floor. #97 did the same to the two cooks. Other commandos sprayed several customers. They would all wake up tomorrow with bad headaches.

The two deputy sheriffs and three Mafioso burst through a swinging door at the rear of the parlor with their guns drawn. They died in a hail of automatic gunfire from the spider commandos. The Team Leader examined the bodies, kicking the nearest. “I am not sure, but this one looks like Alfonso Bonanno. What do you think?”

“The human pestilence all look alike to me,” said #97. “I think we need to get out of here fast.”

The Team Leader ignored the warning and rifled through their pockets. Finally he found identification belonging to Alfonso Bonanno. “Our mission is to make arrests and interrogate the suspects,” said the Team Leader. “This will not do.”

“More police just arrived,” shouted #88. “What do we do now?”

“Shoot our way out,” answered the Team Leader. “We will try the back door first.”

As #97 stepped out the back door, he was killed by a shotgun blast. The Team Leader peeked around the doorway. A deputy sheriff fired another blast at him as he ducked back inside. The Team leader tossed a grenade out the door. #88 was firing his assault rifle out the front door. A sheriff’s sniper killed him with a bullet to the head.

“This is the police! You are surrounded! Come out with your hands up, and you will not be harmed!” promised a deputy sheriff sergeant over a loud speaker.

The Team Leader sat down at a table to finish his beer and pizza. One of his commandos called out to him. “Do we surrender?” asked Commando #72. “What are your instructions?”

The Team Leader glanced at the two dead deputy sheriffs on the floor. “Surrender if you want to,” he said. “But, I think we are going to die tonight, no matter what we do. First, I am going to finish this marvelous meal.”

#72 threw a grenade out the front door. After the explosion, automatic gunfire blew out windows and ripped through the building. A shard of glass struck #72 in the neck. He sank to the floor and died. Commando #64, standing next to him, threw his rifle out the front door. “I surrender,” yelled #64. “Do not shoot. I am coming out.”

As #64 stepped outside he was shot and killed.

That left just the Team Leader and a sergeant. By now the Team leader had finished his meal and was washing the pizza down with beer. He got up and walked to the front door. “We have eight hostages!” yelled the Team Leader. “Stop shooting, or they all die! I want to surrender!”

“We have orders not to surrender,” said the sergeant. “We are to take poison first.”

“Go ahead and take your poison pill,” said the Team Leader. “You first.”

“My orders are to make sure you poison yourself rather than surrender,” said the sergeant. “I insist you go
first.”

The Team Leader casually picked up an assault rifle and shot the sergeant. Then he changed clothes with the
dead spider deputy sheriff. He smeared blood all over his face. The ruse worked. When the Sheriff’s Office Fast
Action Response Team (F.A.R.T.) finally entered the pizza parlor, they immediately put the Team Leader in an
ambulance headed for the nearest hospital. The Team Leader easily escaped from the ambulance while en route.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Lopez and the Special Forces Commander sat in a rented car on the street outside Carlos Bonanno’s
mansion. The plan was to wait for Bonanno to come out, follow him, and ambush Bonanno at the first opportunity.
More Commandos waited in cars parked down the road on Elvis Street. Through a scope, Lieutenant Lopez could
see activity in front of the home. Carlos Bonanno, his wife, two children, and bodyguards were getting into the
limousine and a trail car. It was right at dusk when they emerged on the street and sped away.

The commando team followed at a discrete distance. The Bonanno limousine pulled into the parking lot of a
downtown pizza parlor. A police car was parked out front. Soon more police cars arrived, blue lights flashing.

“Team #2 must have made their hit, but they are not answering their radio,” reported the Special Forces
Commander. “Maybe something went wrong.”

“Or maybe they will report in later,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “We will back off for now. We don’t want a
gunfight with the local police.”

_The police had arrived quicker than expected_, thought Lieutenant Lopez. _How did that happen? What went
wrong? As they drove by, he glanced at the large new building next to the pizza parlor. The sign out front said,
‘New Memphis Sheriff’s Office.’_

Lopez aborted the mission to kidnap Carlos Bonanno and his associates. Bonanno would be alert for trouble
now. Future missions would just involve snipers.

* * * * *

“This is Phil Coen, World News Tonight, with breaking news from New Memphis. A gun battle broke out at
Bonanno’s Pizza Parlor, located right next to the Sheriff’s Office. Nine are confirmed dead, including two veteran
sheriff’s deputies, four gunmen, the owner Alfonso Bonanno, and two associates. Sheriff Mike Murphy theorizes his
two deputies walked in on a robbery and got caught in crossfire. The gunmen, all spiders, used military assault rifles
and grenades against deputies responding immediately to the scene from Dunkin’ Donuts across the street. One
spider suspect is still at large. He may be severely wounded.

“In other local news, sheriff’s deputies stopped and detained Foreign Legion Lieutenant Manny Lopez and
about twenty Arthropodan marines at a checkpoint just outside of town. After a brief but intense standoff, the highly
decorated war hero was released after his commanding officer, Captain Joey R. Czerinski, verified by radio that
Lopez and the spider marines were on joint patrols to combat banditry along our newly established borders.

“Just this week negotiators passed a resolution calling for the Legion and the Arthropodan military to
coordinate efforts to fight bandit gangs that take advantage of jurisdictional problems along the border. Captain
Czerinski, who is currently in the field because of increased tensions in a disputed border area of the North, hopes
more such joint operations can cement lasting spider/human working relationships and harmony. General Kalipetsis,
reached by phone at his headquarters in Camp Alaska, said this is proof of improving USGF and Arthropodan
relations, and a desire by both sides for a lasting peace.

“As you all know, USGF and Arthropodan relations have been severely strained, not only because of numerous
border disputes, but also by the ghastly nuclear explosion aboard an Arthropodan Command Ship in orbit around
New Colorado. The Arthropodan Fleet Commander has accused the Legion of possible involvement in that disaster
and for the mysterious loss of supply ships in the area. The Legion denies involvement, but the Fleet Commander
says he suspects the Legion is using a new stealth starship to raid Arthropodan shipping.

“Today on Arthropoda, several spider postal workers were arrested as part of a conspiracy to mail the nuke that
destroyed the Arthropodan Command Ship. The case broke when Arthropodan Intelligentsia investigators found
large deposits of dollars and credits in the bank accounts of several postal workers. When interrogated, all suspects
confessed to involvement in a larger conspiracy. Further arrests are expected.

“The Fleet Commander says that investigators have cleared the Legion of any wrongdoing in the case. The
Commander says he is relieved that a dark cloud of suspicion no longer hangs over negotiations.

“Asked if it was more Green terrorists, the Fleet Commander said that possibility is being investigated, but he
doubts it. He said possible links to organized crime have been found. That statement in and of itself is newsworthy
because Arthropodan authorities have never acknowledged that they might have an organized crime problem. For years there has been speculation that organized crime on Arthropoda and Earth are linked. Asked to comment on that speculation, General Kalipetsis said that the Mafia never made it past Mars, and that they were all thrown out an airlock.”

* * * * *

I rode at the head of a tank column past the disputed oil fields. The Fleet Commander had said the boundary markers in the area were wrong, and that he blamed the Legion for the deaths of a missing survey team. He threatened to take the area by force. We met a column of Arthropodan tanks on a winding dirt road just west of the oil fields. That was a surprise because the spiders were forbidden by treaty from landing heavy armor on New Colorado. My tank and the lead spider tank stopped about one inch apart, facing each other.

“It is a violation of our treaty and the spirit of ongoing negotiations for the Arthropodan military to have tanks and armored cars on New Colorado,” I said, using my loud speaker. “You will surrender your armor immediately.”

“I will not,” replied the spider tank commander, as he popped up out of his turret. “The treaty says the Arthropodan military will not import armored vehicles or tanks to New Colorado. We may have brought down some spare parts, but these tanks were manufactured right here on New Colorado by the locals. Technically, there is no violation of the treaty!”

“If you expect me to believe that, I suppose you’re going to tell me you have some beach-front property in Arizona to sell me, too?” I asked.

“I have never been to the beach,” replied the spider tank commander. “Our land is not, nor will it ever be, for sale.”

My tank driver, Corporal Williams, looked out past the front of his tank. Only about an inch separated the two tanks. He was upset.

“If you had so much as scratched a small chip of paint off my tank, I would have beaten you within an inch of your life, boy!” he shouted, staring at his opposite in the spider tank.

The spider tank then lurched forward, jostling and climbing up on the Legion tank front before bouncing back into place. Hot coffee from Corporal Williams’ cup spilt all over his vest. Williams got out of the tank and inspected the large scratch mark left across the white American star painted on the front. He was furious. “You will pay for that,” said Corporal Williams. “If it is the last thing I do, I will hunt you down!” In frustration, Williams smashed his coffee cup on the turret of the spider tank. A black stain dribbled down the side.

“You human pestilence need to be taught humility,” said the spider tank driver, climbing out of the tank.

“It won’t be by you,” sneered Corporal Williams. “I have eaten your kind.”

“The sooner you human pestilence are exterminated, the better!” replied the spider tank driver. He urinated over the side of his tank onto the Legion tank.

“You bugs have no redeeming qualities,” commented Corporal Williams, shaking his head. He looked up at me for permission to kill the spider driver. I shook my head, indicating ‘no’ clearly. Corporal Williams then took off his helmet and smashed it against a searchlight mounted on the spider tank turret. Glass shattered everywhere.

The spider tank commander jumped down from his turret and shoved Corporal Williams off the tank. The tank commander then gazed at my tank, looking for something to break. The American flag fluttered in the breeze. With sudden inspiration, the tank commander leapt to the Legion tank and reached for the flag. I drew my pistol and cocked back the hammer as I aimed it at the spider. “That is not going to happen!” I said.

By now, other legionnaires and Arthropodan marines were standing by the tank. They all aimed their weapons, too. Sergeant Green pulled his armored car alongside my tank and aimed the mounted machine gun. Tank turrets adjusted their cannon and missile launch elevations to point-blank target range. The spider tank commander took it all in, then jumped back to his own tank.

“For now, this is the new border,” the spider tank commander announced. Spider marines immediately went to work. They posted new border markers, deployed their tanks in a wide defensive position, put up tents and prefab buildings, and strung fence wire. We made camp, too.
Late at night, Corporal George Rambo Washington and Private John Iwo Jima Wayne dressed in Arthropodan marine uniforms and slipped into the spiders’ camp. Wayne wore officer’s insignia. Both legionnaires being spiders, they did not draw much attention. Washington and Wayne carried explosives in their backpacks. As they went from tank to tank, they attached timed charges on the engine and turret of each spider tank. At the last tank, they were finally challenged.

“Halt! What are you doing?” asked a team leader, looking down from his turret. “What is a Green doing in my tank’s engine?”

“You will salute and address me as sir,” ordered Private Wayne. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” said the team leader. “What are you two doing in the dark by my tank? Sir!”

“I am supervising my mechanic as he checks the fluid levels in all your engines,” explained Private Wayne. “This Green is one of our top mechanics.”

“Sir, usually we take care of our own maintenance,” said the team leader. “It is not necessary for you to be snooping through my engine.”

“I will decide if it is necessary!” said Private Wayne. “Usually you tankers are so drunk with vodka that you do not check anything. That is why we are here. And when I want your opinion, I will ask for it!”

“Yes, sir,” said the team leader.

“Your tank seems to check out fine,” said Private Wayne. “I commend you for that.”

“Thank you, sir!” said the team leader. “Thank you very much.”

“Carry on,” said Private Wayne, as they walked away.

“You sounded just like a damn officer,” said Corporal Washington. “I was even scared of you.”

“I had higher rank a long time ago,” said Private Wayne. “I had forgotten what it was like to yell at someone like that. It felt good. I am feeling all sentimental.”

* * * * *

At dawn, the spider tanks blew apart. Engines exploded first. Then turrets were tossed into the air. Legion tanks rolled across the fence line and slaughtered the Arthropodan infantry. After a few minutes, it was over. A few spiders survived by running to the forest, but not many. I radioed our success to Headquarters. General Kalipetsis replied, “An Arthropodan space weapons platform just changed its orbit and will be over your location in about fifteen minutes, Take appropriate evasive action.”

“Can’t you do anything about that?” I asked. “This sucks.”

“We are trying,” said General Kalipetsis. “We were caught off guard. I did not think the spiders would use a strategic weapon against ground targets. Sorry about that.”

“Why not? We do it all the time,” I said. I then switched to company frequency to talk to my men. “There is a ridge two miles south of here. You have fourteen minutes to run there for cover or you will die. Abandon your tanks and heavy equipment and run like hell. The armored car will be leaving in three minutes. If you are injured or too fat to run, hitch a ride. Move!”

As we approached the ridge, the whole campsite behind us exploded as the Arthropodan space weapons platform bombed our abandoned tanks. As the space platform scanned for more legionnaires, the United States Galactic Federation Stealth Starship Shenandoah targeted the space platform with nuclear tipped missiles. The destruction was complete. An escort starship missile cruiser was targeted and destroyed, too.

* * * * *

The peace negotiators skipped breakfast and were sitting across the table from each other in emergency session even before the sun was up past the trees.

“Your provocations never cease,” fumed the Fleet Commander. “You expect there will be no response to your surprise attack?”

“Next time I tell you to stay out of a disputed area, do not just blow me off,” said General Kalipetsis. “And do not be so blithe about smuggling in tanks and armor in violation of the treaty.”

“You vicious and unprompted coordinated attacks on the ground and from space constitute a war crime,” said the Fleet Commander. “If war starts, you will be held responsible.”

“You were the first to use strategic weapons,” said General Kalipetsis. “All I did was react appropriately.”

“Act appropriately?” said the Fleet Commander. “This I am hearing from a general whose Legion has even nuked your own city.”
“I did not nuke Finisterra,” said General Kalipetsis. “Your space weapons platform bombed ground targets in
direct violation of the treaty. It deserved to be blown out of orbit.”

“So you admit to having a stealth starship that has been attacking our shipping all along?” asked the Fleet
Commander.

“I admit nothing of the kind,” said General Kalipetsis. “We may have one or we may have many stealth
starships. Our fleet is prepared and eager to meet your aggression head on.”

“I am reasonable even if you are not,” said the Fleet Commander. “I will pull back my fleet if you do the
same.”

“Agreed,” said General Kalipetsis. “The fleets can withdraw to different hemispheres.”

“I will make it so,” advised the Fleet Commander, giving orders to an aide. “My fleet will stay in the Northern
Hemisphere, while yours will stay in the South.”

“Agreed,” said General Kalipetsis. “For now.”

General Kalipetsis immediately gave orders for the Legion Fleet to change orbit. There was a large window
behind the conference table. General Kalipetsis watched spots in the sky with fascination. It was like the sky had the
pox. How odd, he thought, walking over to the window to get a better look. Now the General could see thousands of
spider paratroopers dropping onto Camp Alaska. He turned on the Fleet Commander. “What is this?” he shouted.

“You started a provocation even I cannot stop,” said the Fleet Commander. “The Emperor himself ordered that
I take Camp Alaska to create a buffer between the Legion and our oil fields. The Legion is ordered to withdraw to
Finisterra and to the New Mississippi River or face annihilation.”

“This is an outrage!” said General Kalipetsis. “You can’t do this.”

“I already have,” said the Fleet Commander. “You are badly outnumbered. The outcome of this little skirmish
has already been decided. You lost. Do not worry. All peace negotiators will be allowed to leave on the Legion
shuttle parked at the airstrip. We will arrange a prisoner exchange later.”

* * * * *

“Hey Guido!” called out a spider guard from the checkpoint across the fence from the Legion guard shack. “I
am going to do you a favor!”

“Oh?” asked Guido. “Excuse me if I put my hand on my wallet while you are doing me this favor.”

“I am serious,” said the spider guard. “You do not have much time. Look up in the sky.”

Guido first looked both ways down the streets. Then he looked to the sky. “What the hell is that? If it’s a
training exercise they are going to drift to the wrong side.”

“It’s an invasion, Guido,” warned the spider guard. “You need to get out of town fast, or you will be killed or
taken prisoner. Because you have taken the money of so many of our marines, I suggest you not be taken prisoner.”

Corporal Tonelli gave that some thought. He dropped everything, and ran like the wind for the airstrip. He had
seen the general’s shuttle land earlier, and hoped to catch the last flight out. Guido just made it, throwing himself
into a seat right next to General Kalipetsis.

“You sure screwed things up good this time, huh General?” commented Guido casually, as he lit a cigarette.

“Yep, you really screwed the pooch big time.”

“When you do right nobody remembers,” replied General Kalipetsis. “When you do wrong, nobody forgets.”

* * * * *

I ordered the armored car destroyed. Then I led one hundred legionnaires south through the forest toward
Finisterra. We got about forty-five miles away before we stopped for a rest. It was well into the night. Spider
helicopters could be heard looking for us, flying a grid pattern. As long as we stayed under the cover of trees, we
would be safe. It started raining, as it does every day in the North. That negated some of the spider technology being
used to locate us from the air and space. The spiders would have to put troops on the ground and find us the old-
fashioned way. Unfortunately, they had plenty of troops, and they knew which direction we were hiking. About a
thousand spider marines waited for us between here and Finisterra.

* * * * *

Wolves hunted in packs. When a scout found prey, he howled, signaling the pack to join him.

A herd of spiders, a thousand strong, was attempting to move at night through forest marshland. The spiders
were strung out over a long distance, winding through the stumps and trees. It was stupid to attempt such a move at
night. But herd animals never were too bright. The darkness would conceal the attack of the wolf packs.

The pack leader answered the call of the scouts. The smell of humans was on the wind, too. Humans gave off a foul, dirty smell. They were camped to the north. Both spiders and humans were dangerous, but there was something about humans that made the pack leader nervous. He hated humans and had no problem killing them. But he also had an instinctual fear of mankind, ingrained by millennia of evolution. Caution was needed in dealing with either humans or spiders. The packs would probe the spider herd at its thinnest flanks.

The wolf pack leader was driven by hatred of spiders. It was a hatred recently learned. Spiders shot and killed wolves on sight. Even females and cubs had been lost. An instinctual need for revenge was something new in the DNA of New Colorado wolves. Perhaps human geneticists were responsible when the planet was seeded with wolves. Perhaps evolution took place naturally. It did not matter. The trait was there, and the wolves’ fury had been building.

* * * * *

“Why are we moving at night?” asked the spider marine team leader. “We should have camped before nightfall.”

“We will camp soon,” replied the spider marine commander. “I did not want to camp at our last stop because there were too many wolves in the area. Their howling is unnerving.”

“It is too wet to camp here,” argued the team leader. The mud was up to his knees. “We can not camp in this muck.”

“Then the human pestilence cannot camp here either,” said the commander. “We will have them trapped, too.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said the team leader. “I think humans like mud. Have you noticed their flat feet? They evolved with those flat feet so that they won’t sink on muddy ground.”

“You might have something there,” said the commander. “Their constant need to consume water is probably because they evolved from slime that crawled out of the river. Their flat feet helped them live in the swamp.”

“We can not attack if we are strung out like this,” said the team leader. “You said we kept moving to get away from the wolves, but they seem to be closer than ever.”

The marine commander gave that some thought, deciding the team leader was right. The wolves are following us, and on both sides! Maybe they are just curious. “Perhaps they hope to scavenge our discards.”

“If we are attacked, how will we defend ourselves?” asked the team leader.

“We outnumber the human pestilence ten to one,” answered the commander. “Don’t be silly. The Legion cannot attack under these conditions. If anything, the forest affects the human pestilence even more than it does us.”

“I am not talking about the human pestilence,” said the team leader. “I am worried about the wolf packs.”

“You fear attacks by dumb animals?” asked the commander. He had not even considered that possibility. Now that he mulled over their situation in a new light, however, their position seemed untenable. “Do not be ridiculous.”

“There have been rumors,” said the team leader. “Attacks have been documented.”

“Isolated incidents are not to be feared,” said the commander. “It is but the whisperings of females and the timid. We are a modern army and a force to be feared. We have automatic weapons, grenades, night vision technology, and air support. Let the wolves and human pestilence fear us.”

“I am wet, cold, rained on, and stuck in the mud. I do not feel all that intimidating,” complained the team leader. “We need to find dry high ground and set up camp soon.”

They heard loud screams and hisses from the rear of the long column, followed by wolf growls and automatic gunfire. Then silence. More shrieks of terror could be heard, this time up ahead, followed by a chorus of thousands of wolf howls all around their position. Spider marines opened up in both directions with automatic rifle and machine gun fire. Every shadow and imagined movement drew rifle fire. Then there was silence as marines reloaded.

There were more screams in the darkness as spider marines got picked off by small packs of wolves. The marines began to group up. It did not help. The grouping increased isolation and disunity, and the marines were rushed one group at a time. There was no command and control between the small squads of spiders. Grasping that, the commander got on the radio and ordered the battalion to form a united perimeter, and to set up the machine guns for intersecting fields of cover fire. The sounds of violent death in the darkness only intensified.

Rustling of underbrush to the commander’s left startled him to the point of immobility. The quickness of the bear-sized wolf allowed the commander only enough time to put a forearm up in self-defense. The huge black hairy monster bit through the commander’s arm like it was a twig. The commander was torn apart in seconds. Wolves were everywhere. The team leader tried to climb a tree. The smooth cedar bark covered by moss and high branches was not conducive to climbing, but he inched up anyway. A large wolf leapt up at the team leader, snatching him
from the tree and shaking him like a rag doll. Death came quick.

* * * * *

By dawn, spider parts and equipment littered the forest marsh. The mud was discolored red from blood. Legionnaires listened to the horrifying carnage during the night. Hours later, six spider marines stumbled into camp and begged to surrender. They seemed in shock. I told the spiders to keep their weapons, and let them follow us to Finisterra. As we walked, no one talked much about what happened last night, or about what might still happen if we did not get out quick before the sun set again. No one there would ever be able to forget.

* * * * *

PRESS RELEASE FROM LEGION HEADQUARTERS IN NEW MEMPHIS:

Military Governor General Kalipetsis today by executive order decreed that the unprovoked killing of any wolf to be a Class A Felony (capital offense). General Kalipetsis said the wolf is vital to the fragile ecosystem of New Colorado because it rids the forest of invasive pests that cause untold harm to the ecology and the quality of life for all. The General went on to say that the ecology of New Colorado has been so abused by war, radiation, and exploitation that he hoped this one small incremental step would be the first of many steps to undo the extensive damage across the globe. He ordered all Legion units to be sensitive to the environment when planning operations.

When asked if coyotes and foxes might get similar protection in the future, General Kalipetsis said, “I don’t give a rat’s ass about coyotes and foxes.”

The general’s order immediately drew praise from the Audubon Society, PETA, ALF, and several Democrats in Congress.

Chapter 7

At Finisterra, the radiation levels were cause for concern. I took anti-radiation pills, but after a while my hair started falling out and my gums started bleeding. The spiders were not affected by the radiation. I’ve been told that cockroaches can survive high levels of radiation, so I guess it makes sense that the spiders would thrive in it.

My company prepared to move southeast to New Memphis, leaving security to a battalion of Green spiders from the Waterstone National Guard. That was fine with me. Finisterra had no shortage of mud. There was certainly a magnificent supply, and I would not miss the place. There was a lot of economic activity in Finisterra. The miners, mostly spiders, were still digging a fortune of gold out of the Singh Mine.

Guido, who still had a large storage unit of contraband in Finisterra, announced a going-out-of-business sale open to the general public. The good stuff like SAMs, RPGs, machine guns, and C-4 sold early before I had a chance to check for illegal sales. I did not want any more nukes put on the market.

Private Wayne was fascinated by a stolen motorcycle Guido had for sale. Guido reduced the price because no one wanted to ride a motorcycle in the North’s cold, wet weather. Guido let Private Wayne take the bike out for a test spin. Private Wayne did a one-wheeler down Main Street, and then sped out of town. He fell in love with the motorcycle.

“You are a natural biker,” commented Guido, when Wayne returned. “Because you’re my friend, I’ll let the bike go for only $1,500.”

“I’ll buy it,” said Private Wayne, not even bothering to haggle. “I love the wind and bugs in my face.”

“Be sure to wear your Kevlar helmet,” warned Guido. “These hogs are dangerous to ride.”

“What are you going to do?” snickered Corporal Williams. “Become a Hell’s Angel?”

“I do not believe in either Hell or angels,” said Private Wayne, adjusting his translation device. Sometimes the meanings of word combinations got lost in translation. He accessed the database. Hell’s Angels was an Old Earth criminal motorcycle gang from California. Origins dated back to disaffected servicemen (possibly airmen) from World War Two. The gang was exterminated centuries ago by the United States Galactic Foreign Legion during the California Unrest.
Private Wayne viewed old photographs and video. He saw Hell’s Angels patches and insignia. Private Wayne was awestruck by the sight of hundreds of Hell’s Angels on motorcycles rumbling down the middle of the road. He saw the brotherhood of it. So what if he was a spider and the Hell’s Angels were just human pestilence? The Hell’s Angels had a military origin, and that was close enough for him. Private Wayne was determined to be a Hell’s Angel.

When the shuttles took the company to New Memphis, Private Wayne had his motorcycle loaded on board. At first the cargo master gave Private Wayne an argument about the Harley being too heavy and a nonmilitary item, but the big spider slipped him some cash, and all was forgotten.

At New Memphis, Private Wayne paid to have his motorcycle painted and chopped, like the bikes he saw in the database. He cut the sleeves off an old Legion jacket and put Hell’s Angels patches all over it, including the Winged Death Head patch, and had ‘Hell’s Angels’ emblazoned across the back. ‘New Colorado’ was also displayed, just under the Death Head.

Private Wayne rode around New Memphis in his new attire. He drew a few stares, mostly from people who had never seen a spider on a motorcycle. The Hell’s Angels were ancient history, so no one paid much attention to the lettering on his back. Private Wayne read in the database that the mortal enemy of the Hell’s Angels was the Mongols Motorcycle Gang. Being that there were no biker bars in New Memphis, Private Wayne sought out the toughest bar he could find to fight his own Mongols. Private Wayne found a tavern called The Longshoreman. It had a sign at the front door that said, ‘No Spiders Allowed.’ Private Wayne walked inside and sat down on a barstool. The biggest ugliest human pestilence he had ever seen immediately confronted him.

“Can’t you read?” asked the giant human. “The sign says no spiders allowed.”

“So kick me out,” said Private Wayne. “Or are you chicken?”

“It is only out of respect for the Legion uniform you are wearing that I don’t throw you through that window,” said the giant. “I used to be in the Legion.”

“Don’t let that stop you,” said Private Wayne. “I have not killed in days. I am feeling the need again.”

The giant human felt a bit uncomfortable about getting in a fight with an obviously unstable legionnaire spider. Besides the sleeveless jacket covered with the odd patches, the spider wore several knives. Bulges under his clothing partially concealed handguns. Who knew what else this crazy spider carried?

“What is Hell’s Angels?” asked the giant. “Are you a spider bible thumper? I don’t think anyone in here wants to be saved.”

“It is a motorcycle gang,” answered Private Wayne.

“I saw your bike when you pulled up,” said the giant. “It’s a cool bike. But you must be crazy to come in here with all your flash.”

“So what is your point?” asked Private Wayne.

The giant backed away and settled at the end of the bar in front of his drink. As he sipped his whiskey, the giant punched ‘Hell’s Angels’ into the database. Several other customers did the same. Then the giant came back over to Private Wayne and tapped on his shoulder.

“Finally work up the courage to try and kick me out?” asked Private Wayne enthusiastically. “I knew I would find my Mongol in here.”

“I don’t know what a Mongol is,” said the giant. “My name is Tiny. I am a longshoreman. I want to join your Hell’s Angels.”

“No way,” said Private Wayne. “You cannot.”

“Why not?” asked Tiny, clenching his fists. “Is the Hell’s Angels for spiders only? I checked the database. It said the Hell’s Angels were founded by veterans. I’m a vet.”

“No, it is not that,” said Private Wayne. “You do not understand. I just came in here to pick a fight.”

“Please,” said Tiny. “You have to let me join. I quit the Legion because the fighting and war never seemed to stop. The war just keeps on going in my head. It sometimes drives me crazy, like you. I’ll fight you if that’s what you want, if that’s what I need to do to get into the Hell’s Angels.”


Other customers crowded around. “I want to join the Hell’s Angels, too,” said a small man who had been drinking too much. “I’m a vet. I fought in the tunnels back when you spiders first nuked New Colorado.”

“I am the only Hell’s Angel,” said Private Wayne. “That is why you cannot join!”

The bar patrons drifted away. A few staggered out to admire Private Wayne’s chopped motorcycle.

“It doesn’t seem fair,” said Tiny. “If we want to be Hell’s Angels, we should be able to be Hell’s Angels. This is America. It’s a free country.”

“Fine!” said Private Wayne in frustration. “You can turn this place into a biker bar, and you all can show up next Saturday on your choppers and be Hell’s Angels. See if I care!”
A week later, Private Wayne rode his motorcycle back to The Longshoreman Tavern. There were five chopped motorcycles set in a row out front, parked in the handicapped space. The ‘No Spiders Allowed’ sign was missing. Several customers wore sleeveless Legion jackets with Hell’s Angels patches on the backs. Even some females sported Hell’s Angels patches. Biker babes? Private Wayne had read about them on the database, too. There were even spiders in the tavern now.

As Private Wayne entered, everyone cheered and held up their beers. Tiny gave him a big bear hug. Free drinks were pushed at him. When all the celebrating died down, one of the few spiders in the tavern came over and sat down next to Private Wayne. He wanted to talk.

“You are a legionnaire?” asked the spider.

“Yes,” said Private Wayne, sensing hostility. “What is it to you?”

“Nothing,” said the spider. “Before you turned traitor, what were you then?”

“I will kill you for that,” said Private Wayne, reaching for his knives and gun.

“I apologize,” said the spider. “I did not mean anything by that. I was just speaking from habit. What were you before the Legion?”

“I was an insurgent leader. Before that I was a Special Forces marine commander,” said Private Wayne. “I have never told that to anyone. I do not know why I told you.”

“I am a special forces team leader that got stranded on a secret mission here in New Memphis,” said the team leader. “I joined the Longshoreman’s Union as a disguise, waiting for the chance to escape New Memphis and to get back to my own lines.”

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Private Wayne. “I will not help you join your old unit. In fact, I may kill you.”

“Working on the docks, I heard about you and your Hell’s Angels,” said the team leader. “Everyone is talking about you. I want to join.”

“Join so you can escape to the North on a motorcycle?” asked Private Wayne. “That will not work.”

“No, you do not get it!” said the team leader. “I want to join the Hell’s Angels.”

“It is you who does not get it,” said Private Wayne. “There is no Hell’s Angels.”

“But I bought a motorcycle,” said the team leader, pointing to the parking lot. “It looks so fine. See how I had it fixed up? I made Hell’s Angels patches and everything. I am ready to ride!”

With that exclamation, the crowd turned and cheered again. “Ready to ride!” they chanted, carrying the two spiders out to the parking lot and placing them on their bikes. More bikes arrived. One by one, the big Harleys were started up. The rumble of engines and blue smoke was intoxicating. A biker babe hopped on to the back of Private Wayne’s bike and held on tight. Her human body was so hot it caused Private Wayne to sweat, even though it was a chilly night.

Private Wayne led the pack of Harleys down Elvis Street through the center of New Memphis. Ten bikers and their biker babes flipped the bird to The Man as they passed the Sheriff’s Office. The entire event was recorded and broadcast planet-wide on Channel 7 World News Tonight with Phil Coen.

Chapter 8

At the next peace negotiations meeting, conducted on a large barge north of New Memphis along the New Mississippi River, the spider Fleet Commander demanded the arrest and extradition of Carlos Bonanno.

“We do not extradite our citizens to hostile nations,” said General Kalipetsis. “Even if they are lowlifes like Bonanno.”

“Excuse me, but you do, and you will,” said the Fleet Commander. “You signed the Anti-Banditry Resolution. It calls for the extradition of criminals who commit acts of violence and murder across national borders and then seek the protection of those borders. Bonanno’s criminal syndicate is part of a criminal network that spans the galaxy.”

“So you say,” said General Kalipetsis. “I am still not convinced. I do not want to set a dangerous precedent that
may be abused in the future."

"I am handing you an Imperial Arrest Warrant for 1,246 counts of murder and terrorism against Carlos Bonanno," said the Fleet Commander. "This is in regards to the cowardly nuclear bombing of my command starship. Attached is a file containing particulars that include written statements, accounts, and confessions supporting the indictment. Even your own subordinates agree that it is time to wipe out the Mafia once and for all."

"My subordinates sometimes act without my authority," said General Kalipetsis, glancing at me and Lieutenant Lopez. "But that is between us."

"Do you accept the validity of the arrest warrant?" asked the Fleet Commander. "Obedience of the law is demanded, not asked for as a favor."

"It is a question of national sovereignty," said General Kalipetsis. "We will not give up any citizen until our relations are normalized. And we certainly will not give in to coercion."

"If you can not reign in your dangerous criminal elements, the Empire may be forced to move you back to the original Demilitarized Zone."

"If pushing us back to the DMZ is your ultimate goal, you will have a long time to wait," said General Kalipetsis. "Hell will freeze over before that happens."

"My ultimate goal is to see the human pestilence swept from this sector of the galaxy," said the Fleet Commander. "But the Emperor still believes there is hope for coexistence. Because I am but a servant of the Emperor, I am now sitting here talking to you and trying to be reasonable. Arrest and extradite the mass murderer Carlos Bonanno!"

"If you are honest about being reasonable, you would withdraw from the oil and uranium fields of the North before war breaks out," said General Kalipetsis.

"Oh, get past that," said the Fleet Commander. "Where would you have us withdraw to? The North Pole? The Arthropodan Empire is here in the North to stay. Get used to it."

"Your aggression will not be rewarded," said General Kalipetsis. "What goes around comes around."

"Your slow-walking stall will not be tolerated," said the Fleet Commander. "You will arrest and extradite Carlos Bonanno in a timely manner, or I will do it for you. Now there is a precedent for you to worry about."

"You just want us to leave New Colorado," said General Kalipetsis. "We will never leave. We brought life to this planet. Before humanity came here, there was no life on New Colorado. We terraformed a barren rock into the lush landscape you see today."

"You brought life to New Colorado?" asked the Fleet Commander. "You human pestilence are so arrogant. There has always been life on New Colorado."

"There was never life on New Colorado until we brought it here," said General Kalipetsis. "Prove me wrong if you can."

"Oh?" asked the Fleet Commander. "If there was never life on this planet, how do you explain the existence of oil?" Oil is a fossil fuel. It took an abundance of life millions of years to create the vast oil reserves of this planet. This planet is part of the Arthropodan Empire. It has always been part of the Empire, and it always will be."

* * * * *

"I feel like the world is closing in on me," said Carlos Bonanno. "I am certain the Legion and the spiders were in collusion to kill my brother Alfonso. And now the spiders want me extradited to Arthropoda? That is not going to happen."

"Maybe we can pay someone off," said Giuseppe Battaglia. "How about that Captain Czerinski and Lieutenant Lopez? They took money at that dragon fight. Maybe they will take money again and do us some favors."

"Those two are just attack dogs for the Legion," said Carlos Bonanno. "We need to pay off someone like General Kalipetsis. The General makes the real decisions."

"But Kalipetsis is already against extradition," said Battaglia. "That would be wasted money."

"It would not be wasted. Call it an insurance policy," said Bonanno. "We need to make sure Kalipetsis does not change his mind. The Family has learned the hard way that we do not want trouble with the Legion. But they can be useful if handled right."

"Can the Sheriff do anything for us?" asked Battaglia. "He has been useful in the past."

"The Sheriff goes with whoever he thinks is going to win," said Bonanno. "I should have killed him a long time ago. We need to buy someone who can make things happen. Someone who can get that Fleet Commander and the Emperor off my back."

"You tried to kill the Fleet Commander over Gino," said Battaglia. "He is still upset. That's what caused this whole problem. Maybe you should just go away for a while so the rest of us can do business. Go south and retire
somewhere sunny.”

“Is that what you want?” asked Bonanno, looking about at the other Mafioso in the room. “If they extradite me or drive me out, any one of you could be next. Think about that!”

“Why don’t we just whack the Emperor?” suggested Louis Gotti. “Our associates on Arthropoda are getting arrested daily. They are plenty upset at the Emperor. If we put a big enough price on the Emperor’s head, spider wise guys will be waiting in line to accept the contract.”

Everyone in the room stared at Louis Gotti and nodded in agreement. It was audacious to even suggest assassinating a head of state. Could Gotti make it happen? The little-known thug boss Consigliere from the docks, who mostly ran garbage and toxic waste rackets, was suddenly talking like a Capo. If Gotti pulled this off, he would be a Capo.

Gotti traveled personally to Arthropoda to take care of business, attending a galactic conference on the latest garbage and toxic waste technologies. He met with his esteemed contemporaries in the field and came to an expensive yet amicable agreement regarding their problem with the Emperor. The Emperor would be whacked. However, Gotti was arrested at the spaceport by the State Intelligentsia as he prepared to leave Arthropoda. They picked him up for general questioning because he was a human pestilence. After a small bribe, he was released.

* * * * *

“You will be happy to know I have been recalled to Arthropoda,” announced the Fleet Commander. “Negotiations will be turned over to Special Forces Commander #1.”

“I hope there are no serious problems or emergencies I should know about,” said General Kalipetsis. “All is well with your family?”

“There is nothing on Arthropoda that you need concern yourself about,” said the Fleet Commander.

“He is probably being promoted to Emperor,” joked Lieutenant Lopez. “Think about what a bigger pain in the ass he will be if that ever happened.”

“Do you know something about the Emperor’s health that I do not?” asked the Fleet Commander.

“No,” said Lieutenant Lopez, trying to keep a poker face. “I was just kidding.”

“Your attempt at humor regarding the Emperor’s health was poor,” replied the Fleet Commander. “Do not do it again. I am sure my recall is for routine discussions about the progress of these negotiations.”

“I’m sure,” said General Kalipetsis, frowning at Lieutenant Lopez.

“I meant no disrespect or ill will toward the Emperor,” said Lieutenant Lopez as he poured champagne into tall thin glasses for everyone at the table. “I propose a toast to the Emperor’s health! May he always get what he deserves.”

“Here, here,” said General Kalipetsis, as they clinked glasses.

“To the Emperor’s health,” said the Fleet Commander. “May the Empire be rewarded for his selfless efforts.”

“I have good news, too,” said General Kalipetsis. “The United States Galactic Federation and the Coleopteran Federation just signed a peace treaty. That means reinforcements will arrive soon, including a large space fleet.”

“I hope you are not thinking about using this change of events or my absence to plot more aggression,” warned the Fleet Commander. “Special Forces Commander #1 is quite capable and authorized to use whatever force is needed to thwart Legion adventurism.”

“When you get back here, you won’t recognize the place,” I promised. “I expect Legion Headquarters will be back in Camp Alaska, and your Fleet to be camping on the moon.”

“Your threats and lame attempt at humor are also ill advised,” warned the Fleet Commander. “I remind you that the Emperor has been in direct video communications with your President, and has been assured that the Legion will be reined in.”

“The President is a long ways away,” said General Kalipetsis. “The worm has turned.”

The Fleet Commander tapped his translation device a couple times as he departed for Arthropoda. Checking the human database for information about worms did not help his understanding of their slang.

After everyone left, I stayed to discuss things with General Kalipetsis. He gave me two small boxes. The first box contained a gold oak leaf for my promotion to major.

“You will be in charge of security for the New Memphis area,” said General Kalipetsis. “Good luck. This is not the only part of the planet that has problems. You will be on your own to handle most things.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said. “Was anything you said about a peace treaty with the Coleopteran Federation true?”

“No word,” sighed General Kalipetsis. “In fact, things are worse than ever on the Coleopteran Frontier. The President is prepared to withdraw from New Colorado, but I talked him out of it. I think doing so would embolden the spiders’ expansionist tendencies. We hold them here, or they won’t be held. As odd as it sounds, the spiders may
still someday be an ally against the Coleopteran Federation. At the very least, we cannot afford to have a war on two fronts. Things will work out here on New Colorado. They have to. It will just take a while.”

“That’s great,” I said, doubtfully. “As long as I don’t get killed first. I don’t think the spiders like us that much. I know they don’t like me.”

“Some do. Some don’t. That other box is captain bars for Lopez,” said General Kalipetsis. “He’s a real go-getter.”

“I will hold on to these for a while,” I said, putting the box in a pouch. “I have some issues to work out with Lopez first.”

“Nothing serious I hope,” said General Kalipetsis. “You two have had each other’s back for a long time.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “He might get killed, anyway.”

* * * * *

A bribed servant at the Imperial Palace informed spider Mafioso ‘Big Legs’ that the imperial motorcade would be leaving the Palace at noon for a conference at the Coleopteran Embassy. The Emperor was concerned about rumors of a new treaty between the Coleopteran Federation and the human pestilence.

Along the route, Big Legs had set two powerful remote-controlled car bombs. Big Legs had a perfect view of the motorcade route from a fifth-floor apartment he rented last week. Big Legs waited with his sniper’s rifle by his side. The rifle probably would not be needed, but redundancy was Big Legs’ trademark. Another sniper hid in the bushes on a grassy berm in a park across the street.

At five minutes past noon, the seven-car motorcade and police escort sped down the main boulevard of Arthropoda. Big Legs had no trouble identifying which car carried the Emperor. The fool was waving to bystanders. As the Emperor’s car passed, the car bomb exploded. The large armored sedan was flipped onto its roof. Police drew their guns and charged into the park as a second bomb exploded.

The Emperor was pulled unconscious from his car by the Fleet Commander, who had been riding in the car behind. The Emperor lay motionless on the ground as chaos raged around them. The Emperor’s brother cradled the Emperor in his arms. Big Legs fired three quick shots. All three rounds struck the Emperor’s brother. One round went through the brother and fatally struck the already dying Emperor in the heart. Big Legs thought about killing the Fleet Commander, too, but had been told to only target members of the royal family.

Big Legs left his sniper’s rifle in the apartment and fled down the hall. He also left the outline of a human Black Hand painted on the wall near his rifle. Taking an elevator, Big Legs was confronted on the first floor by a lone police officer. The officer immediately demanded to see identification. Big Legs reached behind his back as if to pull out a wallet, but instead drew a pistol, shooting the police officer several times. Before dying, the fallen officer radioed for help. Video from the officer’s helmet camera of the assassin was immediately broadcast as Big Legs ran down an alley towards his car. Big Legs was captured by police a few blocks away.

The Fleet Commander helped place the two royals into an aid car. It would not do much good. Both were obviously dead. The front of the Fleet Commander’s uniform was covered in blood. Bodyguards escorted the Fleet Commander to an emergency session Legislative Assembly, where he addressed the entire Empire on TV.

“Our Emperor and his brother were savagely murdered minutes ago on the streets of our Capital. I swear vengeance on all those responsible. I am the sword of the Empire. I will personally sever the heads of all involved in this cowardly act.”

At first, Big Legs resisted interrogation. He was resistant to truth drugs because he had already taken his own drug cocktail. As his own medications wore off, however, Big Legs became more pliable. Big Legs claimed to be part of a huge conspiracy, but would only tell details to the Fleet Commander. Big Legs desperately hoped to make a deal for his life. As unlikely as it might seem, Big Legs thought his life could be spared in exchange for giving up those who ordered the assassination. As Big Legs was being escorted to the Emperor’s Palace, however, he was struck down by a single sniper’s bullet. The sniper escaped.

Intelligentsia investigators arrested all family members and associates of Big Legs. Big Legs’ movements and contacts for the last few weeks were traced to his recent attendance at the Garbage & Toxic Waste Technologies Convention. Investigators used truth drugs to interrogate suspects and delegates to the convention. That led to even more arrests. Nothing came of initial reports that there was a second sniper in the park. However, the trail of suspects and evidence eventually led investigators across the galaxy to New Colorado. It was just as the Fleet Commander had suspected.

By acclamation, the Fleet Commander, himself having some royal blood, was elected Emperor by the Assembly. With blood still wet on his uniform, the Fleet Commander accepted the ceremonial crown and scepter. His first executive order was a general mobilization of the military. The fleets and army were ordered to New
Special Forces Commander #1 summoned all negotiators for a special emergency meeting. General Kalipetsis could not make it, so I filled in.

“Have you arrested the mass murderer Carlos Bonanno yet?” asked the Special Forces Commander, getting right to the point.

“No,” I replied. “We have been through this before. Your arrest warrants have to be approved by General Kalipetsis, and he says there is a question of sovereignty at stake that must be resolved.”

“I now have two more Imperial Arrest Warrants,” announced the Special Forces Commander, waving the paperwork. “They will be served immediately!”

I read the warrants. They included another warrant for Bonanno and a warrant for someone named Louis Gotti. Both warrants were for murder. “What is this all about?” I asked. “Who got killed this time?”

“Bonanno and Gotti conspired to murder the Emperor,” replied the Special Forces Commander. “More arrest warrants will be issued soon, as the investigation expands.”

“The Emperor was assassinated?” I asked. I was stunned. “That is terrible. Surely you do not think the Legion or any part of our government had anything to do with a conspiracy to murder the Emperor, or had any advance knowledge of a conspiracy.”

“That very possibility is being looked into,” said the Special Forces Commander, staring at Lieutenant Lopez. “Your involvement would not surprise me.”

“Who do you think you are looking at?” yelled Lieutenant Lopez. Rising from his seat, he gave the Special Forces Commander a shove. Aides had to pull the two apart. “Are you accusing me of something, punk?”

“This meeting is over,” said the Special Forces Commander. “The Fleet Commander will return soon. Serve those arrest warrants before the Fleet Commander gets back, or he will serve the warrants himself.”

“Are you trying to start a war?” I asked. “That is where this is headed. It will take time to sort this out. Is this just a pretext for war?”

“Soldiers do not want to start wars,” explained the Special Forces Commander. “Wars are started by politicians. Our military is being mobilized. The momentum for war may be bigger than any of us. As much as I hate you human pestilence, I do not want war. Serve those warrants and find those responsible for the murder of the Emperor, and we might yet avert another war.

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Chapter 9

Air-raid shelters and extensive escape tunnels had been dug under all Mafioso residences and businesses in New Memphis since the last dispute between the Legion and the Mob. Simply bombing the Mafia from space, as tempting as that might sound, was not an option this time around. Besides, I wanted to capture as many thugs as I could so that they could be interrogated or turned over to the spiders. I declared martial law and signed arrest warrants for most of the organized crime members of New Memphis. I put up roadblocks so no one could leave town. Top on the list of names were Bonanno, Gotti, and Battaglia.

Legion strike teams stormed all known Mafioso residences, businesses, and properties, with no luck. As expected, Mafia family and associates were able to escape through the tunnels. They knew we were coming, anyway. Frustrated, I had their property burned to the ground. Anonymous tips indicated the riverfront area would be a good place to search next. Lieutenant Lopez and I had just walked out of Legion Headquarters to lead a column of tanks to the docks when Phil Coen of World News Tonight and his camera crew stopped me for an interview.

“Major Czerinski, I am glad to have finally caught up with you,” said Coen, pleasantly. “Is it true you are arresting American citizens and turning them over to the spiders to be tortured or summarily executed? What ever happened to the Constitution and due process?”

“I am not a cop,” I said. “The Legion has not arrested anyone.”

“Is it true you burned down the homes of several of New Memphis’s leading citizens?” asked Coen. “Including the Mayor’s mansion?”

“That was the Mayor’s Mansion?” I asked Lieutenant Lopez. “Is the Mayor on our list?”

“Yes, sir,” answered Lieutenant Lopez. “Giuseppe Battaglia is near the top of the list.”

“How do these people get elected?” I asked. “Oh well. Don’t worry. The Mayor is alive. He escaped out a tunnel and is hiding with his Mafia buddies down by the docks.”

“Did you burn down a pizza parlor next door to the Sheriff’s Office?” asked Coen.

“That was an accident,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “Someone left the gas on from one of the ovens.”

“What proof do you have of any wrongdoing or Mafia involvement?” asked Coen. “Didn’t General Kalipetsis say just this week that the Mafia never got past Mars?”

“As you know, the Emperor of Arthropoda was assassinated,” I explained. “There is evidence a conspiracy originated here in New Memphis. The spider Feet Commander demands that we arrest those responsible.”

“Is it true the spiders allege the Emperor was assassinated by a conspiracy of sanitary engineers?” asked Coen. “How reliable can this information be, and should we trust their word on the matter?”

“Shit happens,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “Garbage happens, too. Truth is sometimes stranger than fiction.”

“Critics in Congress have already questioned whether we have allowed the Legion to become a puppet of the Arthropodan Empire. Legionnaires arresting our own citizens and turning them over to certain death at the claws of the spiders smacks of a loss of sovereignty.”

“Are we broadcasting live?” I asked. “What is the range of your broadcast?”

“We are broadcasting to our satellite,” said Coen. “Then the feed goes planet-wide. Don’t you expect the citizens of New Memphis to resist your infringement on their Constitutional rights and your scrapping of the Bill of Rights in favor of knuckling under to the every whim of a maniacal spider Fleet Commander who once publicly stated that his ultimate goal is to sweep humanity from this part of the galaxy?”

“Martial law has been declared,” I said. “It’s all legal. I would think the citizens of New Memphis would be tired by now of being ruled by Mafioso thugs that obviously rigged elections in the first place and treat the public treasury like it is their own private bank account.”

“Your martial law is illegal,” insisted Coen. “You are just a Legion major. Where is General Kalipetsis? What does the Sheriff have to say about this outrage? Mars?”

“Is the Sheriff on our list?” I asked Lieutenant Lopez, hoping.

“No, sir,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “Do you want him added?”

“Coen wants to know how the Sheriff feels about the martial law. Arrest Coen and his camera crew, and lock them up at the county jail,” I ordered. “That way he can interview the Sheriff in person.”

“You can’t do this!” exclaimed Coen, as he was grabbed by Sergeant Green. “I will sue you for violating my First Amendment rights!”

“My advice to you is never miss a good chance to shut up,” I said. “That should be somewhere in the
Constitution, too.”

As soon as the TV transmission was cut, General Kalipetsis called me on the radio. He had been watching the confrontation live on World News Tonight. “Can’t I leave you alone for two days without you stirring up the press?” asked General Kalipetsis. “What is this about you burning down the Mayor’s mansion?”

“Sir, Mayor Battaglia is on the spiders’ list of Mafioso involved in the conspiracy to assassinate the Emperor,” I explained. “If I don’t find him and the other wise guys, the spiders will invade New Memphis and attempt to make the arrests themselves. I do not have enough legionnaires to stop them.”

“I understand the problem,” said General Kalipetsis. “Do the best you can with the troops available. I will send you some national guard companies, soon. In the meantime, do you really have to hunt the Mayor down on TV like he’s some kind of common criminal or Democrat?”

“But he is a Democrat,” I said. “This whole town always votes Democrat.”

“In that case, just handle it,” said General Kalipetsis. “I have my own problems on the other side of New Colorado with more insurgency activity. I don’t need to be micro managing your problems with Democrats. Did you hear the Greens are pulling out of Finisterra? Waterstone just signed a treaty with Arthropoda promising unlimited immigration quotas and expanded borders in exchange for keeping their national guard inside their borders.”

“That isn’t good,” I said. “We are giving them Finisterra?”

“It looks like it,” said General Kalipetsis. “We will try to negotiate a new treaty for joint governing of Finisterra and mutual respect for property rights and property ownership. But, we may be pulling back to the old DMZ soon. Finisterra is too radioactive for my tastes anyway. Do the best you can, and try not to explode any more nukes.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, ending the transmission.

“Start up your engines! We are moving out to the Waterfront District!”

When my tanks got to the waterfront, we stopped all port operations. There must have been a million logs being loaded onto ships headed south. Irate longshoremen confronted us, but what could they do against tanks, cannons, and machine guns? I told the dock workers to give up all the Mafioso they were hiding. The crowd pushed Victor Gambini, President of the local longshoreman’s union, to the front of my tank.

“Sorry,” I announced. “Gambini is not on my arrest list. You can take him back. I’m only looking for members of the Battaglia, Gotti, and Bonanno organizations.”

“You are getting Gambini,” said Tiny, still wearing Hell’s Angels patches on his vest. “He’s crooked enough. Be happy with that and go away!”

“It’s better than nothing,” commented Lieutenant Lopez. “I’m adding him to our list. Maybe we can trade Gambini for a wise guy, later.”

“What list?” asked Gambini. “You can’t put me on no list! You’re just arresting me because I’m Italian. This is union busting!”

“Fine. We’ll take him,” I said, irritated. Sergeant Green grabbed Gambini and handcuffed him to the turret of my tank. I looked closer at the giant of a man who seemed to be the spokesman for the longshoremen. “What is Hell’s Angels?”

“Hell’s Angels is an organization of motorcycle enthusiasts,” replied Tiny. “What’s it to you?”

“I guess everyone needs a hobby,” I said. “Although I think it’s a bit cold and wet up here to be riding bikes.”

“I’ll worry about the weather,” replied Tiny. “You worry about playing G.I. Joe.”

“If Hell’s Angels is a gang, we will talk again,” I warned.

“You got what you wanted,” added a spider longshoreman, also wearing Hell’s Angels garb. “You can leave now.”

“I’m not going anywhere! I will be here everyday until I get everyone on this list,” I announced, posting the arrest list to a utility pole. “Any information that results in arrests will be rewarded with cash.”

“How much cash?” asked Tiny.

“I’ll pay one hundred thousand dollars for Mayor Battaglia,” I said. “I’ll pay even more for Bonanno and Gotti.”

“Battaglia is hiding at the union hall,” said the spider Hell’s Angel. “I will get him for you.” A posse of Longshoremen marched off to the union hall.

Battaglia was dragged out kicking and screaming. He was handcuffed to my tank next to Gambini. The Special Forces Commander decided to keep them both. The next day, Carlos Bonanno was found dead, hanging from the flagpole in front of the Sheriff’s Office. Attached to him was a note saying Bonanno had been voted out of the Black Hand, and that his business associates wanted nothing more to do with his kind. The note also expressed grief for the Emperor, and denied having anything to do with his assassination.

* * * * *
A long column of spider tanks approached New Memphis from the northwest. Their first contact with the Legion was at a Legion checkpoint. Guido was asleep in the guard shack when Corporal Williams woke him and excitedly pointed at the tanks. The lead tank was parked behind a weighted lift-up gate barrier. It was too late to run, so Guido walked up to the gate like he owned the whole planet.

“You are causing a traffic jam,” accused Guido. “What do you think you are doing? Pull over to the side of the road and let cars go by!”

“I have orders to occupy New Memphis,” said the tank commander. “The Empire will govern New Memphis jointly with the Legion.”

“We will see about that,” replied Guido, calling me at Legion Headquarters on the phone. “I don’t believe you.”

“I have no knowledge of anyone making a deal to allow spider tanks to invade New Memphis,” I answered. “I didn’t think the spiders are even allowed by treaty to have tanks anywhere on the planet’s surface.”

“There must be a hundred tanks at my gate,” said Guido. “Do something!”

“Try to hold them until I can call an air strike on your position,” I ordered.

“What?” asked Guido. “What do you mean ... on my position?”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Trust me. Help is on the way.”

Guido threw down the phone. “You can’t pass this checkpoint,” he told the tank commander. “You have no authorization.”

“I have my orders,” said the tank commander. “I am either passing by you, or over you.”

“Let me see your orders,” said Guido. “Do you have that in writing?”

“No,” admitted the tank commander. “The Special Forces Commander himself told me to proceed to New Memphis.”

“You are risking a war, and you don’t even have written orders?” asked Guido, incredulously. “What kind of an outfit are you running? What if you got the orders wrong? What part of New Memphis are you suppose to go to? Did your Special Forces Commander say to just come to the edge of town, or go downtown, or maybe to the docks? Which is it?”

“No, he did not specify,” said the tank commander, now uncertain of his position. “I just assumed he meant to occupy all of New Memphis.”

“You assumed?” asked Guido. “Do you have any idea what damage your tank treads will do to the streets of downtown New Memphis? And what about all those parked cars? Are you just going to run them over to get by? Who is going to pay for all the damage you are going to cause?”

“Not me,” said the tank commander. “I guess the Emperor will pay.”

“Are you sure?” asked Guido. “You better be sure, because if the Emperor gets a bill for millions of credits damage, he is going to be on you like a fly on dog poop.”

“I never thought of that,” said the tank commander, calling his headquarters for clarification of his orders. As he talked, Guido and his monitor dragon jumped up on the spider’s tank. Guido did not like talking up to the tank commander and was not through giving him an earful. When the tank commander finished, he addressed Guido.

“You are a prisoner of war. We will occupy all of New Memphis.”

By now, Spot had climbed up on to the turret and was inches from the tank commander, growling. The dragon clamped on to the tank commander’s shoulder and held it.

“Call Headquarters back,” said Guido. “Tell them it is you who has been captured. If you don’t, Spot will tear you apart.”

The tank commander stared into the eyes of the monitor dragon, something very few have done and lived. “I command a hundred tanks and support vehicles. If you kill me, you will surely be killed, too.”

Guido gave Spot a hand signal. The dragon began shaking the tank commander.

“Okay! Please!” screamed the tank commander. He agreed to call Headquarters, and reported the problem at the checkpoint. Then he handed the radio to Guido. “The Special Forces Commander wants to talk to you.”

“Hello! This is Guido,” said Corporal Tonelli. “You’re going to be in big trouble if you think you can just barge into New Memphis without any consideration for how much damage your tanks will cause.”

“Guido?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “You are being invaded by overwhelming forces. Do you not understand? Surrender at once!”

“Are you trying to start a war?” asked Guido. “Because you are about this close.”

“Yes,” said the Special Forces Commander. “And this is the first shot! You are dead.”

“You had better double check with your Emperor on that,” said Guido. “I am not allowing these tanks to enter New Memphis unless you post a thirty million dollar damage deposit.”
“What?” said the Special Forces Commander. “That is outrageous.”

“Twenty-five million dollars is as low as I can go,” said Guido. “I doubt any of your tankers even have a driver’s license. And you will have to take the treads off the tanks and replace them with tires. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” said the Special Forces Commander. “But we will have to truck the tires in.”

“You do that!” said Guido. “I am texting an account number for the transfer of funds for the damage deposit. No one goes anywhere until that is done.”

“I want some of that money, too,” said Corporal Williams, waving his card.

“Shut up,” ordered Guido. Then he called Legion Headquarters on the phone. “Where is that air support I was promised?”

“Sorry,” I said. “We have nothing. The ‘Air Farce’ is busy with insurgents on the other side of the planet. General Kalipetsis says we are on our own. I have maybe one helicopter, but I can’t risk losing it to SAMs.”

“The spiders say they will agree to joint control of New Memphis,” said Guido. “And they are willing to post a damage deposit.”

“I am getting word of that here, too,” I said, checking faxes and text messages. “Let them through.”

“Major Czerinski says you may pass,” said Guido, lifting the gate. “Show me the money.”

“The transfer is done,” said the tank commander, handing Guido his card. “Our Special Forces Commander contacted the Emperor. His Majesty landed on New Colorado to take charge personally. The Emperor said his original orders were to occupy New Memphis, not start a war. You were right.”

“Spot! Let go of that spider,” ordered Guido. “You may pass when your tires arrive. Travel in groups of no more than five tanks so you will not block traffic. Obey all traffic lights and stop signs. Go the speed limit for trucks. Do not run over parked cars. And make sure you do not double park!”

* * * * *

The column of Arthropodan marine tanks drove down Elvis Street through the center of New Memphis. Both human and spider civilians waved enthusiastically. Most of the humans waved with the one-fingered salute. The spider marines waved back. Face to face contact with the public and the spider marines was mostly civil. Some anti-spider graffiti appeared on walls. ‘Spiders go home’ was the main theme. A sign in the parking lot of the Longshoreman Tavern stated, “No tanks allowed. Violators will be towed at owner’s expense.”

Legion tanks shadowed the spider tanks to make sure civilians were not abused. For the most part, the spider marines were polite and well disciplined. The arrival of Arthropodan Intelligentsia State Security Police investigators did not go so smoothly. Accustomed to instant obedience and no back-talk on Arthropoda, the Intelligentsia often got upset by rude comments and a lack of cooperation. The Intelligentsia were demanding and threatening, and it did not go over well in New Memphis. Also, their black uniforms were reminiscent of old Nazi war movies. They certainly spoke and acted like Nazis.

The Intelligentsia were going house to house, looking for Mafia conspirators. They were getting frustrated by the lack of success and cooperation. Humans and Americanized spiders did not like being pushed around and searched by the Gestapo, and they were open in their hostility.

Two Intelligentsia officers entered the Longshoreman Tavern, following up on a tip given to them by the Legion that Louis Gotti and his associates frequented the dive. The Intelligentsia did not think to bring backup officers because they had never needed help before. Intelligentsia’s orders were the law, and were never questioned—at least not back on Arthropoda.

“Attention everyone!” announced the ranking Intelligentsia officer. “Has anyone seen the fugitive Louis Gotti? I know Gotti and his gang have been here.”

The Intelligentsia officers looked about, expecting someone to step forward, but were met only with silence. They saw a couple spiders sitting at the bar and approached, hoping for a better response.

“You! Have you seen Louis Gotti?” asked the Intelligentsia officer.

“Yeah I have,” answered a young spider. He wore a Hell’s Angels vest and spoke English. “Gotti was in here a couple hours ago, punking your mother.”

“My mother has never been to New Colorado,” replied the Intelligentsia officer. The crowd laughed loudly and pressed in to get a better look at the confrontation they knew was coming. The Intelligentsia officer checked his translation device to make sure it was operating correctly. “What is so funny?”

“I am laughing at the thought of you flying through that plate glass window and landing hard on you ass in the parking lot,” threatened the Hell’s Angels spider.

“I have no intention of flying anywhere,” said the Intelligentsia officer. “I certainly will not fly through a window. Why do you dress and speak like the human pestilence? Have you no pride? What is this Hell’s Angels you
wear on your clothes?"

“I was born here,” said the spider. “I dress like this because I want to. It’s called freedom. I will dress as I please, you fascist pig.”

The Intelligentsia officer drew his pistol. Tiny, who had been standing behind the Intelligentsia officer, picked the cop up over his head and threw him through the plate glass window. The crowd grabbed the other Intelligentsia officer and tossed him through the window, too.

About an hour later, the two Intelligentsia officers limped back to the tavern with marine tanks in tow. The crowd scattered at the sound of the tanks crunching cars and motorcycles in the parking lot. The spider tanks fired cannon shells into the Longshoreman Tavern, destroying the building. Legion tanks, who had been shadowing the spiders, immediately fired missiles at the spider tanks. All three Arthropodan marine tanks caught fire and were abandoned. Drunk bar patrons and Hell’s Angels danced in celebration on the turrets.

Radio distress calls went out from both sides. Legionnaires and Arthropodan marines, both eating at the same Dunkin’ Donuts across from the Sheriff’s Office, received the call at the same time. It was a race to see who could get to their tanks first. The tanks circled Dunkin’ Donuts, using the building for cover, trying to get a clear shot. Finally both sides opened fire at once, destroying Dunkin’ Donuts in the process. Air support was requested by both sides, but shoulder-fired SAMs kept helicopter gunships at bay.

The Sheriff’s Office withdrew its deputies to the County Building. When that happened, the civilians rioted. Kids threw Molotov cocktails from rooftops at spider tanks. Soon whole blocks of downtown New Memphis were on fire. Human and spider civilians, watching the riot on TV, ran out of their homes and looted liquor stores, grocery stores, and Radio Shack.

The Special Forces Commander, viewing live video of the battle and riot, called me on the phone. We agreed to separate our forces, dividing New Memphis. The spider marines got downtown, and the Legion got the port. Both sides agreed to rebuild Dunkin’ Donuts as soon as possible and allow joint access. The Hell’s Angels rebuilt the Longshoreman tavern, changing the name to the Outlaw Tavern.

Chapter 10

When the Emperor arrived, he immediately toured Downtown New Memphis. He was upset about the damage and ordered the downtown area rebuilt. Also, the Emperor brought his son.

“I heard there is a job opening for the position of mayor,” said the Emperor. “I am appointing you Mayor of New Memphis. The administrative experience you gain will do you a world of good and will pad your résumé.”

“I do not want to be mayor,” replied the Prince, annoyed. “You are the Emperor. Make me a general and let me conquer the rest of New Colorado.”

“The exuberance of youth,” said the Emperor with a sigh. “Humor me. Do a good job as mayor, and maybe later, if you are still interested in a military career, I will appoint you as second lieutenant.”

“Second lieutenant? What good is it to have the Emperor as my father if second lieutenant is the best you can do for me?”

“Experience will help you do a better job in whatever career field you choose,” said the Emperor. “There is no point being appointed as a general if you do a poor job because you don’t have a clue.”

“I might as well stay in school rather than endure the slow torture of this boring place,” complained the Prince. “I am determined not to let schooling interfere with your education,” advised the Emperor. “Now is a great time to be on New Colorado. Think of it as an adventure and a learning opportunity.”

As the royals crossed the street to get some coffee at what was left of Dunkin’ Donuts, about a hundred Hell’s Angels rolled by. Each biker waved as they rode past. The Prince returned their one-fingered salutes with his own finger-extended wave.

“Who are they?” asked the Prince. “That was so cool.”

“Their jackets say Hell’s Angels,” said the Emperor, checking his translation device. “I think they are another human pestilence religious cult.”

“Are they Mormons?” asked the Prince. “I read about the Mormons in my Earth history studies.”

“Maybe,” said the Emperor. “It is hard to keep track of all the many human pestilence religions.”

“I noticed a lot of spiders with them,” commented the Prince. “That shows progress toward inter-species
harmony and goodwill. I will need that to govern a mixed species city like New Memphis.”

“See,” said the Emperor, proudly. “You are learning important lessons already.”

“So why did the human pestilence get the port, and all we got was the burned-out downtown area and a wrecked donut shop?” asked the Prince.

“We got City Hall and the Sheriff’s Office,” said the Emperor. “Have patience. Soon we will have it all as we establish our authority.”

A lone biker left the Hell’s Angels formation and doubled back to see the royals close up and personal. The biker was a beautiful female spider. Her body paint displayed the colors of the rainbow. She had extensive body piercing. Bells and charms chimed softly in the breeze.

“Are you the Prince Charlie I saw on Cable TV?” she asked. “You looked hot on the tube, but baby you sizzle in person!”

“My father is the Emperor,” said the Prince. “I did not know my arrival was also being covered by the local media.”

“Baby, can I have your autograph?” asked the female biker, pulling out a Sharpie marker. “I can’t wait to see my girlfriend’s reaction when she finds out I met Prince Charlie in person.”

“Certainly,” said the Prince. “Do you have some stationary I can write on?”

“Just put your tag on my chest,” said the female spider, unbuttoning her vest. “Don’t be shy. Put it on me next to my heart.”

“This is highly unusual,” replied the Prince, embarrassed. “What is your name? I will write a comment next to my signature.”

“My name is Rainbow,” said the biker babe. “I want you to write, ‘You were awesome all last night. I love you. Hugs and kisses, Prince Charlie.’”

“I will not write that,” said the Prince, as he finished his signature. “I would not want to harm your reputation.”

“How sweet. No worries about that,” said Rainbow. “Can I have a kiss?”

“What?” asked the Prince, taking a step back. “Commoners do not kiss royals without being asked first.”

“Females are a bit more pushy here on New Colorado,” explained the Emperor, standing by and observing the odd exchange between his son and the female spider. “I blame it on their pioneer spirit and the radiation. You will get used to it.”

“I see,” said the Prince. “Fine. I can adjust to local customs, if it will make the peasantry happy. I will accept one small kiss.”

“I’ll show you local customs,” said Rainbow, as she leapt from her Harley and tackled the Prince. Rainbow wrapped all eight limbs around the Prince as she kissed him and tore at his clothing. Bodyguards pulled Rainbow off the Prince to prevent an unauthorized royal mating. The whole event was recorded and broadcast repeatedly on Cable TV’s Global News Tonight and on the Playboy Channel.

“Wow!” yelled Rainbow. “You have the hottest mandibles on the planet! Would you like to go for a ride? Put something exciting between your legs? Harleys are the best.”

“Not likely,” said the Prince, still catching his breath. “That two-wheeled death machine looks unsafe and should probably be outlawed.”

“It’s safe if you wear your helmet,” said Rainbow, as she put on her Legion Kevlar helmet. “Speaking of outlaws, meet me at the Outlaw Tavern sometime. I’ll buy you a drink.”

“I will pass,” said the Prince.

“Oh come on,” said Rainbow. “Eye-candy like you should not go to waste. Don’t make me beg.”

“The Prince has a busy schedule, especially now that he is the Mayor of New Memphis,” said the Emperor. “Now run along to church with your other Angel friends.”

“Whatever,” said Rainbow. “You are the mayor? How about taking care of some parking tickets for me? Pretty please. I will be really appreciative, if you know what I mean.”

“No!” said the Emperor. “The Prince cannot concern himself with such trivial matters.”

“Who is this ogre?” asked Rainbow. “You better run along your own self before I slap you up the side of your head.”

“I am your Emperor,” announced the Emperor, using a deep voice. “Do you not recognize me? Do you not have my photograph portrait prominently displayed in the main room of your home? It is the law, you know.”

“Get real,” said Rainbow. “This is not the Empire. This is the United States.”

“I beg to differ,” said the Emperor. “New Memphis is now part of my Empire. Even among the human pestilence, possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” said Rainbow. “But I will take a picture of the Prince and put it on my nightstand next to my bed. He’s a dream.”
"I do not give out pictures of my son," said the Emperor.
"How did a stud muffin like Prince Charlie come from the likes of an old coot like you?" asked Rainbow. "Get lost."
"You will not address His Majesty in such a rude manner," demanded the Special Forces Commander, reaching for his sidearm.

Rainbow peeled rubber as she quickly rode away, giving the Special Forces Commander the one-fingered salute. A Legion armored car rounded the corner just as she left. Lieutenant Lopez stopped the armored car beside the royals.

"Did any of you see a pack of Hell’s Angels go by in the last few minutes?" asked Lieutenant Lopez.
"Yes," said the Prince. "They went towards the docks. I believe they are going to church."
"That’s not likely," scoffed Lieutenant Lopez. "We need to wipe out those Hell’s Angels before their disease spreads. Cable TV did an expose on them last week. Because of that free publicity, there are now Hell’s Angels chapters sprouting up all over New Colorado."
"Freedom of religion is guaranteed in the Arthropodan Empire," advised the Prince. "Frankly, your intolerance shocks me. By executive order, my first official act as Mayor of New Memphis will be to establish a sanctuary for the Hell’s Angels against Legion persecution."
"Are you Prince Charlie?" asked Lieutenant Lopez. "I saw you on TV. You are even dumber in person than you appeared to be on TV."
"Only Cable TV covered the arrival of my son," said the Emperor. "Are you watching Cable now, Lieutenant Lopez?"
"I view all media as part of my military intelligence duties," said Lieutenant Lopez. "It’s a never-ending struggle, keeping track of you spiders."
"You will not win," added the Special Forces Commander. "The Cable Guy is everywhere. Cable is the future."

* * * * *

Louis Gotti dyed his skin and hair albino white. Gotti still had cash in his pockets, but it was quickly running out. The Legion had frozen all his bank accounts and assets. Friends and associates turned against him the same way they did against Battaglia. Gotti was determined not to meet the same fate. As Gotti walked along Elvis Street, a bunch of motorcyclists splashed him with mud. Gotti shook his fist at them. A few minutes later, a speeding Legion armored car rounded the corner. Gotti ducked back into the nearest doorway. It was a bank. Perfect, he thought, and whispered to himself, "I could rob this bank and use the money to get out of town."

"Don’t do it," a voice said.
Gotti had only whispered, but the warning voice was loud and clear. But there was no one in the bank doorway. There was only an ATM.

"Are you short of cash?" asked the ATM.
"I will be soon," answered Gotti. "What’s it to you?"
"I can help you," said the ATM. "Tell me your situation."
"My assets are frozen," explained Gotti. "I need a new life. I need a new identity. You can’t help me with that."
"I can solve all of those problems," boasted the ATM. "If you qualify."

Gotti looked closer at the ATM. A small unassuming plaque read, 'United States Galactic Federation Foreign Legion Recruitment Center: Fun, Travel, & Adventure awaits you in the Legion.'

"I don’t qualify," said Gotti. "The Legion wants to kill me and feed me to the spiders."
"Put your thumb on my pad, and I will review your situation," promised the ATM.
"I don’t want to be in your database," replied Gotti. "You will turn me in to the Legion or the spider Intelligentsia."

"I promise to do no such thing as long as you consider my offer," said the ATM. "Trust me. I am your friend."
Gotti put his thumb on the pad. A pin pricked him, drawing blood. Gotti pulled away, cursing. "Why did you do that?"

"I wanted a DNA sample and blood print for the contract," said the ATM. "I see no court-ordered arrest warrants. Your résumé is impressive for a wise guy. You have financial and organizational skills. You are experienced with firearms, a skill always appreciated in the Legion."
"No warrants?" asked Gotti. "What about the spider warrants?"
"The spiders do not matter," said the ATM. "We will be at war with them soon."
"But Major Czerinski wants to arrest me and give me to the spiders," said Gotti. "How do I get around that?"
"Local commanders have their priorities, and I have mine," said the ATM. "Recruitment quotas must be met. I
will issue you a new ID card. Your new name will be Private Sylvester Gardenzio Stallone.”

“`I am not enlisting yet,” said Gotti. “I need time to think this out.”

“I will give you five minutes before I inform the Sheriff’s Office that the fugitive Louis Gotti is hiding in the lobby of a bank, and that I have a verbal recording of his plans to rob that bank.”

“Do you have any idea what happens to snitches?” said Gotti, trying to think of something he could do to an ATM. He thought about pulling its plug, but the ATM didn’t seem to have a power source. Giving up, Gotti accepted his new Legion identification card and written orders instructing him to report to Legion Headquarters in New Memphis immediately.

“Do not think about going AWOL,” warned the ATM. “I injected a viral sized computer chip into your blood system. The details about that are in your copy of the contract. The chip will report your status in the Legion if you try to pass any scanner.”

“You violated me,” accused Gotti. “I’ll get you for this.”

“Be happy, Private Stallone. “You just earned a fifty thousand dollar enlistment bonus and the chance to do something worthwhile with your worthless excuse for a life. Good luck, Private Stallone. Have a nice day.”

* * * * *

Gotti had a few drinks, then reported to Legion Headquarters. Sergeant Green gave him a uniform, an assault rifle, ammunition, and directions to one of the Legion roadside checkpoints. Sergeant Green told him not to come back until properly relieved and sober.

“Guido?” exclaimed Gotti, after arriving. “Is that you? What a stroke of luck! Long time no see.”

“I can’t believe!” replied Guido. “The whole galaxy is looking for you, and you hide in the Legion?”

“Don’t worry,” said Gotti. “I am Private Sylvester Stallone now. The name has a regal ring to it. But don’t worry, I’m only staying in long enough to pay someone to get this tracking chip out of my body.”

“Good luck with that,” said Guido. “It can’t be done. I’ve had experts examine mine. If you tamper with the chip, it explodes and gives you a heart attack or a brain aneurism.”

“Great. I’m stuck in the Legion?” asked Gotti. “That Sergeant Green is a real jerk. I don’t think he likes Italians.”


“So I’ll claim to be from Northern Italy. I’ll be a skiing wise guy fool from the Italian Alps. Haven’t you heard of the Alps?”

“No. I’m from New York City.”

“And I’m from Jersey,” said Gotti, shrugging. “I’m just saying my people came from the Alps of Northern Italy. You know, it is all part of my new identity. I promise this is just temporary.”

“The Legion isn’t so bad, once the spiders stop shooting at you,” said Guido. “There is even some money to be made on the side.”

“Yeah right. Nickels and dimes. So what are you doing out here in this guard shack? Are you supposed to be a traffic cop?”

“I am supposed to search suspicious vehicles for bombs and drugs. And I’m supposed to keep the whole spider army out. It’s a piece of cake.”

“I’ll tell you what. You search the cars for bombs, and I’ll search the cars for drugs. I don’t do bombs.”

“That’s not what I hear. Seriously, you screwed up. You can’t hide in the Legion. Someone will recognize you.”

“I’ll just keep my head down,” promised Gotti. “I’ll do a good job and not attract attention. Eventually an opportunity will present itself. It always does.”

* * * * *

Three bank robbers entered the New Memphis Bank, spreading out in the lobby. A fourth robber waited outside with the getaway car. All wore ski masks. The first robber, a spider, drew a nine millimeter pistol and took a female hostage. The second robber, also a spider, immediately spray-painted the security cameras. Then he threatened the tellers with his pistol and demanded two bags be filled with hundred dollar bills. The third robber, a human, pulled an assault rifle from under his long coat and demanded all customers drop to the floor. At the same time he pointed his assault rifle at the bank’s security guard. The guard slid his pistol across the floor and joined the customers in the prone position. The bank robbers planned to be inside the bank no longer than two minutes. After driving to the spider/human dividing line, they planned to change cars and enter the spider zone.
After Gotti finished his whiskey, he smashed the bottle and staggered across the street to the New Memphis Bank. Gotti had it in his mind to rob the New Memphis Bank. He had decided that the Legion was not the life for him, no matter what Guido said. He had gone from Capo to Crappola, and it did not sit well with him. Drunk and still in Legion uniform, Gotti checked his assault rifle. Flicking the switch to full automatic, Gotti sprinted through the bank’s double doors, firing wildly into the ceiling to get everyone’s attention. Two spiders wearing masks immediately put their hands up above their heads and dropped their pistols. A human with an assault rifle quickly turned. Gotti shot him several times. One of the spiders standing with his hands up was hit by accident. Customers began savagely beating the other spider robber into submission. Other customers rushed to Gotti, slapping him on the back and congratulating him and the Legion for a job well done.

Soon, Sheriff’s deputies, TV reporters, and Lieutenant Lopez in an armored car full of legionnaires arrived. There was more shooting outside. Gotti dived for cover next to a dead bank robber. The getaway driver was killed after a short but intense gun battle. Sobering a bit, Gotti smeared blood on his face as deputies and a TV camera crew approached to ask questions. Bright lights lit up the area as the TV camera crew got into position for interviews.

“Private Sylvester Stallone, this is a proud moment for you and the Legion. You thwarted bandits who have been responsible for a string of robberies and murders all over the North,” informed Phil Coen, of World News Tonight. “Explain to us your thoughts as you were facing down three heavily armed bank robbers all by yourself. How much did your extensive Legion training and combat experience help you survive such a desperate confrontation?”

“It was me or them,” said Gotti. “I refused to be killed without at least taking some of the evildoers with me.”

“Amazing!” exclaimed Coen. “Private Stallone, I have been told you only recently enlisted in the Legion. Where are you from? Would you like to say anything to family and loved ones back home?”

“I am from the Italian Alps,” said Gotti, covering his face and attempting to smear more blood. “My family is dead. They died in an avalanche.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” said Coen. “How does it feel for an ordinary soldier to be suddenly thrust into such a violent confrontation? To be a hero?”

“Isn’t that what legionnaires do every day?” asked Gotti.

“Quite right,” said Coen. “Heroes like you are an inspiration to us all. Sometimes we forget how difficult it is for our far-flung soldiers on the front lines, alone, far from home, fighting for our freedom. A brave, good-looking legionnaire like you will probably be put on recruitment posters for the Legion. How does it feel to have your picture broadcast across the galaxy, inspiring humanity to fight back against crime and lawlessness on the Spider Frontier?”

“No,” said Gotti, still covering his face. “I can’t have that.”

“You are too modest,” said Coen. “You are a true hero. The world wants to reach out and touch you.”

“I’m sure of that,” added Gotti.

“Get away from Private Stallone, you pack of vultures,” snapped Lieutenant Lopez. “Can’t you see he is seriously injured? He may even be in shock!”

Lieutenant Lopez led Gotti to the armored car. Coen and his camera crew followed with their lights and cameras. Medic Ceausescu taped a gauze patch across Gotti’s face after they entered the armored car. They raced to the hospital.

“Talk about blind dumb luck,” commented the ATM.

* * * * *

When Prince Charlie declared a sanctuary for the Hell’s Angels, it was big news. The publicity caused even more interest in the bikers. Now, those who joined the new Hell’s Angels chapters were traveling to New Memphis to see where it all started. New Memphis was the cradle of the Hell’s Angels. It was their Mecca. Posters and fliers all over New Colorado announced a benefit concert sponsored by the Hell’s Angels in New Memphis to help biker members who could not afford to buy their own Harleys. The world was flocking north to attend the event.

Guido and Gotti waved the Harleys past their checkpoint. Blue exhaust smoke choked the air around the two legionnaires. The Emperor and the Special Forces Commander looked on in dismay.

“The human pestilence has tricked us,” said the Special Forces Commander. “The Hell’s Angels are not peaceful Mormons. They are a violent criminal gang on two wheels. And now their numbers are swelling. Look how many are coming to town.”

“I agree. Lieutenant Lopez was right,” said the Emperor. “We should have wiped them out before their disease spread. Now, the Hell’s Angels are part of the landscape.”
“We should at least bar them from entry into our zone,” suggested the Special Forces Commander. “Then these gangsters will just be a problem for the human pestilence and the Legion.”

“Not yet,” said the Emperor. “I want my son to learn a valuable lesson the hard way, not to be so impulsive. Besides, I am more interested right now in those two legionnaires at the guard shack. Ever since the bank robbery, informants have been calling in saying that the newest hero of the Legion and Louis Gotti are one and the same.”

“So, just snatch him for interrogation,” suggested the Special Forces Commander. “It will not be difficult. I will do it myself.”

“All in good time,” advised the Emperor. “We want to maximize the scandal as a diversion when we push the Legion out of New Memphis.”

* * * * *

Lieutenant Lopez and I joined the Emperor and his entourage as they viewed packs of Hell’s Angels arriving for the concert. The bikers were gathering at the county fairgrounds. Musicians were already setting up sound equipment on stage.

“The cat is out of the bag now,” I said to Lieutenant Lopez, as we stood with the Emperor. “We will never get rid of these flee-bitten bikers. I was hoping this would just be a fad, but look how many there are!”

“Your cat needs to be picked up by the tail and tossed off a bridge,” commented Lieutenant Lopez. “I told you so. It’s not too late. Just give me the word, and I’ll bring tanks to the fairgrounds and wipe them out while they’re all in one place. Or, better yet,” whispered Lieutenant Lopez, glancing furtively at the Emperor, “we can call in an air strike and blame it on the spiders. Otherwise, when they leave, the Hell’s Angels will be like dandelion seeds blowing in the wind, taking root everywhere.”

“If you carry a cat by the tail, you will learn a lesson you can learn no other way,” I replied. “No. There are too many TV cameras here. Hell’s Angels martyrs will do us no good.”

“You human pestilence created this mess,” added the Special Forces Commander, overhearing parts of our conversation. “You should deal with this anarchy yourself.”

“I see a lot of spiders on those bikes,” I said. “Do you want me to deal with them, too?”

“Sure,” said the Special Forces Commander. “I will even help you do it.”

“Enough!” said the Emperor. “A few stoned bikers listening to your odd human music is not the end of the galaxy. I am more interested in those two legionnaires at the checkpoint. Are they not members of the human subcategory group, Italians?”

“Don’t play games with me,” I said. “I have received the same anonymous tips about Louis Gotti as you since the bank robbery. I’ve checked Private Stallone’s records, finger prints, and DNA against Gotti’s. They do not match. That cannot be faked So let it go.”

“I am not so sure I trust your investigation,” argued the Special Forces Commander. “I want to perform my own tests and investigation.”

“If anything happens to Private Stallone or Corporal Tonelli, there will be serious consequences,” I warned. “They are both heroes of the Legion. Am I clear on that?”

“You are ill-advised to be making threats,” said the Special Forces Commander. “It is an unhealthy habit of yours.”

Lieutenant Lopez and I walked away, continuing our inspection. Lieutenant Lopez asked the obvious question. “Are you sure that isn’t Gotti? Computers lie all the time. I could interrogate him to make sure,” he offered. “I’ll squeeze the truth out of him and Guido.”

“I’m sure, for now,” I said. “Although we may need to transfer Private Stallone to the other side of the planet if these rumors persist.”

“Denial isn’t just a river in Egypt,” advised Lieutenant Lopez.

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Chapter 11

The Hell’s Angels expected a few thousand fans to attend the concert. What they got was about a half a million. Plans to make money off the event at the gate were quickly dashed when ticket booths and fences were knocked
down. Boats were abandoned at the docks as were cars along the roadways. Humans and spiders alike walked the
rest of the way to the fairgrounds. Entrepreneurs sold them rain gear, tents, and food along the way. It would not be
enough. Days before the concert, it was clear the fairgrounds could not handle the sanitation needs of a half million
humans and spiders camping outside in the rain. The fairgrounds soon turned to garbage-laden mud.

The Prince wanted to speak to the audience before the music started, and was on site days before. As naïve as
he was, even the Prince could see there were going to be serious problems. The Prince ordered Arthropodan marines
to dig and build public latrines. He talked me into airlifting food and blankets. I also provided a pre-concert
legionnaire band to keep the swelling crowd from getting more restless. I feared that a bored, wet, cold, hungry
crowd might riot.

It seemed odd that military resources were being used when the Hell’s Angels definitely had an anti-
establishment bent. Oh well. Most youth did. And most of the crowd was there for the party. I set up a United States
Galactic Foreign Legion recruitment ATM at the Fairgrounds entrance, hoping to attract recruits. The ATM was
destroyed by gunshots early on.

TV crews arrived to film the concert for the various galactic news organizations. The concert was being
advertised as an epoch event. TV broadcasts would go out to all of New Colorado, Earth, and Arthropoda. Also, the
promoters hoped to make money from movie rights. If there was a riot, that might turn into a documentary. Reality
TV cameras kept filming twenty-four hours a day.

Medic Ceausescu set up an aid station at a central location. Before the concert even started, the aid tent was like
a triage center. All ailments seemed to be drug related. Drug users having bad trips complained of being chased by
spiders. That symptom was magnified when the real giant spiders showed up. I also used the aid station as
headquarters for Legion activities.

The Prince officially started the concert with a speech. “As Mayor, I welcome the Hell’s Angels and friends to
New Memphis. This concert symbolizes a bridge of friendship connecting our two sentient species. Feel the love!”

The crowd cheered the Prince like he was a Messiah. The Prince fed on their applause for ten minutes before
continuing. “By executive order, I created this sanctuary for the Hell’s Angels that made this concert possible. There
are a few more guests here than we expected.” The Prince got even more applause. He soaked it in, loving every
moment.

“Remember to be civil and polite at all times. Love thy neighbor. But there are always a few rotten fruit in
every basket. Report all lawbreakers to your nearest marine or legionnaire. Also, it has been brought to my attention
that illicit drug dealers have snuck into the concert, intent on spreading their wares.” The crowd applauded the
loudest yet. The Prince waved at the adoring crowd as he patiently waited for the cheers to die down.

“You may not be aware, but trafficking in dangerous illegal drugs like marijuana or other assorted
hallucinogens is punishable under Arthropodan law by summary execution. Please turn in these criminals and
perverts the moment you see them. Thank you. Have a great time at the concert!”

The boos were deafening. The crowd spent the next half hour chanting obscenities and throwing beer bottles at
anyone who appeared on stage without a musical instrument in their hands. The Prince had to be evacuated behind a
line of Arthropodan marine tanks on the perimeter. The Legion aid station was torn down and medications looted.
Legionnaires pulled back to the perimeter to set up another aid station.

Hell’s Angels came on stage to calm down the crowd, promising that drug distribution outlets would be
maintained. Finally the music appeared ready to begin. A rough looking musician and his band strutted onto the
stage. I have always been told that history repeats itself. But looking at the size of this mega concert, I doubted there
had ever been anything like this, or that there ever would again. This concert lived up to its billing as being a one of
a kind cosmic event. The bandleader snatched the microphone and yelled at the audience before beginning his song.
“Give me an F!” The audience gave him an F. He yelled, “Give me a U!” The audience gave him a U. “Give me a
C!” The audience gave him a C. And so it went. History was made.

Days after the Hell’s Angels concert, the Prince was feeling pretty good about himself. There had been a few
problems, even a few deaths, but for the most part the concert was a success. The concert showed humans and
spiders were gradually coming together. The Prince enjoyed the media attention. The concert was being described as
a defining moment in galactic history. There was even a report that trade barriers were being dropped and that
Harley-Davidson motorcycles were being imported to Arthropoda. Several Hell’s Angels chapters were being formed
on the spider home world.

Today it was back to work. The Prince chaired his second City Council meeting. He felt he was getting a good
grasp of what it took to be an administrator. That would make the Emperor (dad) happy and hasten the Prince’s
departure date from New Colorado and back to civilization. An Empire could not be ruled from one of its colonies. He needed to return to the seat of power. The Prince breezed through the routine city affairs deftly. Garbage collection, paving and repairing streets, speeders in school zones, extending the water district, bulldozing a pit for all the garbage from the concert, overcrowding at the county jail, skateboarders on sidewalks, and cats without licenses, were all handled with meticulous care.

Then came time for members of the public to bring up new business. The Prince did not like this part of City Council meetings, but had been informed that tradition required that the peasants have a chance to vent. So, the Prince patiently prepared to listen to their drivel.

“Why are you not elected?” asked a young human female. “What right do you have to Lord over us? I demand that you follow the city’s charter and stand for election.”

“The Emperor appointed me as mayor,” said the Prince. “He did so against my will for your own good. He explained to me that you are like children that need to be guided. Left to your own devices, you would muck it up.”

“The Emperor is your father?” asked the human female. “I do not accept your rule by royalty, your nepotism, or your blatant corruption.”

“Nothing compares to the corruption you allowed before,” responded the Prince. “You elected Mafia to run New Memphis. That is proof you humans cannot be trusted with the franchise of voting.”

“What about me?” asked a young spider. “You do not trust spiders with the right to vote, either.”

“Our species has no history of allowing peasants to vote. You are not qualified. In the long run, you would only cause harm to yourselves and to your communities.”

“That bites,” said the human female. “Dude, who do you think you are?”

“Yeah, that sucks!” said the young spider. “Who died and made you king?”

“Arrest them both,” ordered the Prince, pounding once with his gavel. “This meeting is adjourned.”

Chapter 12

The Emperor sat in on negotiations because he wanted to address important issues himself. It was time to push the Legion out of New Memphis, and he wanted to make sure it was done right. The Emperor had pushed the Legion easily enough out of Camp Alaska, and he did not expect much resistance here either. General Kalipetsis was weak, and would not stand up to Imperial will. He told Kalipetsis so.

“Louis Gotti traveled to Arthropoda to pay assassins to kill our Emperor. Gotti was detained on Arthropoda but released before implicated in the conspiracy. Now, I find out that Gotti has enlisted in to the Legion in hopes of escaping justice. Major Czerinski informs me that Gotti is a hero of the Legion and has his protection. It is an outrage that Gotti found sanctuary in your marauding Legion. I am outraged, and all of New Colorado is outraged. Even your own human pestilence press is outraged. I demand Gotti be arrested and handed over to the Empire. If you refuse, I have ordered tank commanders in New Memphis to take Gotti by force. Imperial marines are mobilizing as I speak,” warned the Emperor.

“When the Legion was forced out of Camp Alaska and Finisterra, the economic loss to New Colorado and the United States Galactic Federation was substantial. The loss to our prestige was greater. Gold, oil, and uranium still cannot get to market unless brought through the Port of New Memphis. New Memphis is the ultimate economic prize in the North, and the Legion will not leave. Economics and pride, however, are not the driving forces behind my decision to stay in New Memphis,” said General Kalipetsis. “New Memphis is a large American city. It always has been, and it always will be American. The abomination of Arthropodan marines occupying even one small part of any American city will no longer be tolerated. As I speak, legionnaires in New Memphis and hidden in the forest have surrounded your troops and are advancing. You are under arrest.” General Kalipetsis drew his pistol and pointed it at the Emperor.

“You have started a war you cannot win,” said the Emperor. “Your treachery will not stand. You will be tried and executed as a war criminal.”

“I have ordered stealth starships to destroy your capital of Arthropoda if any provocations are made by the Imperial Fleet in orbit around New Colorado,” said General Kalipetsis. “You cannot stop an attack on your home world. You have always known that, yet you persisted with your violent adventurism. Did you really expect us to put up with your foolishness forever?”
“You are bluffing,” said the Emperor, inching his hand closer to his sidearm. “Put your gun away. I know you will not use it. If you dare attack New Memphis, my fleet will nuke the entire city.”

General Kalipetsis shot the Emperor. Stunned bodyguards just stood there, then surrendered. I directed legionnaires to disarm the spiders and transport them off the barge.

“Who is in charge of the Empire now?” asked General Kalipetsis.

“Why? It is a little late for you to be thinking of that,” replied the Special Forces Commander. “What possible interest would you have in the succession process? You will not live through this day.”

“I need to know who to talk to when negotiations resume,” said General Kalipetsis. “Are you in charge?”

“Me, the Emperor? Not likely,” said the Special Forces Commander. “I am but a common soldier who came up through the ranks. When will I be repatriated? Before this area is nuked, I hope?”

“Soon enough,” said General Kalipetsis. “You will radio your troops in New Memphis and order them to leave. I will allow all to drive by truck to Finisterra. All armor and tanks will be abandoned. No quarter will be given to any who stay.”

“Commanders will not obey my orders unless you release me from your custody,” said the Special Forces Commander. “Maybe it is you who should surrender or leave.”

“If I release you,” said General Kalipetsis, “will you withdraw from New Memphis?”

“It is a little late to be negotiating a peaceful resolution to the mess you caused,” said the Special Forces Commander. “But I will do whatever the new Emperor orders me to do.”

“How long before we find out who the new Emperor is going to be?” asked General Kalipetsis.

“We know now,” said the Special Forces Commander. “It is the Prince.”

“Then I will negotiate with the Prince as soon as possible,” said General Kalipetsis.

“You are taking this better than I thought you would,” I said. “I expected threats of vengeance and all sorts of saber rattling. What will be the Prince’s reaction?”

“As I said before, we are all going to be nuked,” said the Special Forces Commander. “Did you expect less?”

“I expect you to try to talk the Prince out of a full-scale thermonuclear exchange between our home worlds,” I said. “It is in both our interests not to go to war.”

“As I said earlier, it is probably too late to take back what you have done,” said the Special Forces Commander. “It was the Emperor’s policy to push you human pestilence as far as possible without starting a war. It appears New Memphis is as far as you can be pushed before your self-destructing tendencies kick in. I will strongly explain that to the Prince.”

“And if the Prince decides to declare galactic war?” I asked. “What then?”

“I will shoot the fool myself,” said the Special Forces Commander.

* * * * *

The Special Forces Commander was soon repatriated to the spider zone of New Memphis. As he entered the Prince’s bunker at the Sheriff’s Office, the Special Forces Commander was immediately searched and disarmed by bodyguards. Artillery and rockets could be heard outside, but the Prince seemed unconcerned. He focused on the Special Forces Commander.

“Well?” asked the Prince. “The human pestilence released you? Do you have a message from them? Or were they just feeling magnanimous?”

“Never expect mercy from the human pestilence,” advised the Special Forces Commander. “Your Majesty. There was a confrontation when your father demanded that the Legion hand over Gotti and leave New Memphis. General Kalipetsis shot the Emperor. The General now orders that we leave New Memphis. If we call on our space fleet for help, their stealth starships will attack Arthropoda. I advise we leave while we still can. There will be no quarter if we refuse.”

“My father is dead?” asked the Prince. “Does that mean I am the Emperor?”

“Yes, for now,” replied the Special Forces Commander. “Unless there is a coup at home, you are our Emperor. But we need to abandon New Memphis and avoid war with the human pestilence until you consolidate your power.”

“We outnumber the Legion in New Memphis,” argued the Prince. “Why should we withdraw?”

“We are too isolated to use our strength in numbers,” explained the Special Forces Commander. “We can punish the Legion by punching through their lines, but then we have nowhere to go. We have a huge logistics problem. We cannot get supplies and fuel to New Memphis. We have no nearby reserves. Our troops have been reluctant to deploy in the forests because they are afraid of wild animals. The nearest help is in Finisterra and Camp Alaska.”

“You may be right,” said the Prince. “New Memphis does not matter. I need to get back to Arthropoda to seize
power before the Assembly decides some senator should be Emperor.”

“May I speak frankly?” asked the Special Forces Commander.

“You might as well,” said the Prince. “We may all die soon, anyway.”

“The Assembly will not accept you willingly,” advised the Special Forces Commander. “You are too young, and they do not yet respect you.”

“I realize that,” said the Prince. “I have planned for this day. I have friends in place in Arthropoda who will follow my orders. I will be ruthless to anyone who opposes me, and reward those loyal.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” said the Special Forces Commander. “I understand. May I have my weapon back?”

“Not until I leave,” said the Prince. “I have learned a lot since coming to New Colorado. My father was correct that the experience would be a benefit. I will shuttle to Camp Alaska before beaming back to Arthropoda. I will take enough of the Fleet with me to force my will on the Assembly. You will fight on for a while, then negotiate a withdrawal to Finisterra. After you are safely away, nuke New Memphis.”

“You are upset about the murder of your father?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “Nuking New Memphis is dangerous.”

“My father got too greedy, and he paid for it,” said the Prince. “I will not be reckless with my Empire. But to allow his murderers to go unpunished would set a bad precedent. They might think they can murder me, too.”

“You do not fear further retaliation by the human pestilence?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “They have already threatened to attack Arthropoda if we use the Fleet.”

“So, do not use the Fleet,” said the Prince. “Do it yourself.”

“Remember what the human pestilence did to the Formicidaen Empire? The Ants as a species are almost extinct,” said the Special Forces Commander. “It is better that we not risk war unless we are certain about the outcome. As you said earlier, you need to consolidate your power on Arthropoda.”

“You are right,” said the Prince. “I should demonstrate that I put the good of the galaxy ahead of personal matters. Send a message to their President saying so. Tell him I will spare New Memphis. I will free all prisoners at the County Jail. And, I will not hold grudges against General Kalipetsis and Major Czerinski, even though they should be brought up on war crimes.”

“You are showing wisdom beyond your years,” said the Special Forces Commander.

“Not quite,” said the Prince. “After you are well on your way to Finisterra, and the Legion has occupied all of New Memphis, you will nuke the city. Place a remote-controlled nuke at the top of the Sheriff’s Office building.”

“But what about the possibility of starting war?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “You risk massive retaliation.”

“We have been at war all along. It has been a silent war. This has been a silent invasion,” said the Prince. “We will claim the Legion set off the nuke. Remember what they did to Finisterra? We owe them for that. The President won’t know for sure who set off the nuke, because his own people have lied to him before. They may be lying again, for all he knows. And he considers the Legion to be expendable anyway.”

An audio/video device had been planted on the Special Forces Commander. I listened to his conversation with the Prince. Later I watched him supervise the placing of the nuke atop the County Jail. When the Prince’s shuttle left, we were ready with a SAM to shoot it down. Unfortunately, two shuttles left New Memphis at the same time. The first shuttle was easily shot down. The second shuttle, carrying the Prince, took evasive action and escaped.

As ordered, the Special Forces Commander fought on in an effort to draw in more Legion troops. Arthropodan tanks punched through Legion lines, driving to the port, where they damaged the docks. Lieutenant Lopez arrived as the spider tanks were pulling back. Sergeant Green aimed an anti-tank missile at one of the departing spider tanks. The missile hit the sloped armor and bounced off.

“Is that the best you have got?” asked Lieutenant Lopez.

“You can do better?” asked Sergeant Green, tossing a missile launcher at Lieutenant Lopez.

The tank’s turret swiveled toward them as Lieutenant Lopez took aim. Both fired at about the same time. Lopez and Green ducked as the explosion collapsed the building around them. The tank caught fire. Spiders climbed out and surrendered.

“That is how it is done,” said Lieutenant Lopez, dusting himself off.

“Only because I softened them up for you,” said Sergeant Green. “And still you almost got us killed.”

As Lieutenant Lopez was getting up from the rubble to supervise the prisoners, Sergeant Green pulled him back to cover. “Not so fast,” insisted Sergeant Green. “There is a sniper just down the block. He almost got me earlier. He let the others go by, then took a shot at me. I think he’s hunting officers. It’s a good thing I like you so much.”
“You’re on my Christmas card list, too,” said Lieutenant Lopez. Lopez used his binoculars to scan the city block ahead. There were several two-story buildings and lots of windows where a sniper could hide. “Corporal Tonelli and Private Stallone! Get up here!”

Guido and Gotti crawled up to the wall Lieutenant Lopez was using for cover. Lieutenant Lopez told them to check the burning spider tank for survivors or wounded. Guido and Gotti were not happy as they sprinted to the tank. Guido tossed a grenade into an open tank hatch. As Lieutenant Lopez scanned the buildings ahead, he saw movement and a metallic reflection in one of the upper windows. He fired another anti-tank missile, destroying the upstairs. The sniper’s body and rifle flew out into the street.

Another spider tank arrived. This one was flying a white flag. Its commander announced on a loud speaker that they wanted to negotiate a withdrawal from New Memphis. After some haggling, the spiders were told to get out of town by sundown. Lieutenant Lopez called me on the radio.

“What is your location?” I asked.

“In front of the Sheriff’s Office,” replied Lieutenant Lopez. “The spiders have cleared out.”

“Perfect,” I said. “There is a remote-controlled nuke on the top floor of the Sheriff’s Office. Take Tonelli and Stallone with you and disarm it.”

“Say what?” asked Lieutenant Lopez. “I’m out of here.”

“That’s an order,” I said. “Disarm the nuke. Here is your chance to be a hero.”

“You can get your mother to disarm the nuke,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “I’m through being a hero of the Legion. Been there, done that.”

“I’ll pay you twice what the spiders paid you,” I said.

“You know about that?” asked Lieutenant Lopez. “How long have you known?”

“Since you were putting your tag by the gate in Camp Alaska,” I said.

“Sorry about that,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “I didn’t tell them much. I was just stringing them along to take their money. I was being a double agent.”

“I’ll tell you what,” I said. “If you disarm the nuke, I’ll call us even. Otherwise, you can join your spider friends in Finisterra.”

“Are you serious?” asked Lieutenant Lopez. “After all we have been through together?”

“Disarm that nuke, or I’ll put you in front of a firing squad for treason,” I threatened.

“Afraid to shoot me yourself?” asked Lieutenant Lopez. “You don’t want to look me in the eye because you know it would be wrong, after all the times I’ve saved your sorry ass!”

“If it will make you happy, I will join the firing squad,” I said. “And I’ll keep the blindfold so I can look a traitor in the eye as he gets what he deserves.”

“Fine,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “I will do it. But we are not even. You still owe me.”

“Whatever,” I replied.

“How am I supposed to disarm a remote-controlled nuke?” asked Lieutenant Lopez. “Do I cut the red wire or the blue wire?”

“I would go with the blue wire,” I said. “Ask Guido. He’s our expert on nukes.”

“That is not comforting,” argued Lieutenant Lopez. “Guido only steals and sells nukes.”

“I’m color blind,” said Guido, overhearing the radio conversation. “I don’t want to go.”

“Me either,” added Gotti. “I didn’t sign up for this.”

“Are you sure about the blue wire?” asked Lieutenant Lopez.

“You are wasting time,” I said. “Tell everyone else to evacuate.”

Lieutenant Lopez, Guido, and Gotti went upstairs. They found the nuke in a wooden crate on the top floor. Lieutenant Lopez examined the nuke, looking for a remote-control attachment that he could rip off. He saw nothing. The nuke had a control panel, but no on/off switch. There were no exposed wires. No one brought any clippers. Lieutenant Lopez directed Guido and Gotti to assist carrying the nuke downstairs. They put the nuke in a Sheriff’s Office van and nailed the crate shut.

There were three spider prisoners sitting on the sidewalk nearby. They were the tankers captured earlier. Lieutenant Lopez cut their restraints and removed their blindfolds.

“Usually we execute and eat our prisoners,” announced Lieutenant Lopez, addressing the tank commander. “But a truce has been called, and I have been ordered to repatriate all of you. Take this van and drive it to Finisterra ASAP. If you stop for any reason, I will call for an air strike. Do you understand?”

The spiders all nodded. Lieutenant Lopez threw the van keys to one of the spiders and watched them drive off. Along the way, the driver pointed to the crate in the back of the van. “What’s that?”

The tank commander scanned the human writing on the crate. “It says ‘Happy Birthday, Puta.’”

“What does that mean?” asked the driver, as they sped out of town.
“I do not know,” replied the tank commander. “The translation device has problems with human slang. I think it is some kind of friendly greeting. Do not worry about it. Be careful, and keep your eyes on the road. We do not need to die in a crash after all we just went through.”

“It’s a good thing you told me to be careful,” said the driver. “I would have surely wrecked without that fine piece of advice, sir.”

* * * *

The Special Forces Commander did not want to abandon his armored cars and tanks. He would need his armor to defend Finisterra. As many tanks as possible were loaded on flat haulers. If necessary, the armor would be hidden in the forest and retrieved later.

The convoy stretched for miles. Trucks loaded with infantry led the way. Legion drones circled high above, targeting each vehicle. Missiles fired from helicopter gunships and ground launchers sought out each tank, truck, and armored car. The destruction was so complete that many spiders fled their vehicles rather than waiting to be hit. The Special Forces Commander, riding in a fast command car, escaped to Finisterra. Most of his command did not.

Some legionnaires felt guilty about the slaughter. This seemed more like murder than war, because the killing was so easy. But they got over it. Orders were given to not target the Sheriff’s Office van. The van got half way to Finisterra before its nuke exploded, killing the rest of the convoy.

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Chapter 13

The wolf had been watching the isolated oil rig workers with interest for weeks. It noticed that the humans had cleared out, leaving only the hated spiders. The wolf often scouted between the outbuildings at night, unchallenged. The wolf could see the spiders through the windows, but the metal grills were too strong to push in. The wolf had seen the spiders use the doorways, and now tested a door. The door stood firm. The wolf sniffed the doorknob. It had clearly seen spiders turn doorknobs before entering. The wolf pawed at the doorknob, then gripped it between two paws. The door easily opened. The wolf ran off to join the pack and pass on what it had learned.

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The oil rig worker now felt the cold chill of a breeze as he watched TV. Somehow the Arctic air was getting inside. Gripping his assault rifle, he checked the front door again. The door was wide open. The oil rig worker could see more wolf tracks in the snow. He quickly shut the door and locked it. Then he did a quick search of his small company-built home and locked the back door.
In the morning the oil rig worker checked on his two co-workers. They had not answered their phones. He found their cabin doors ajar. Blood trails led from the cabins to the forest. His friends were missing. The oil rig worker ran to the office to call Camp Alaska on the radio. As he sat at the desk, speaking into the microphone, he glanced out the front window at the snow. The oil rig worker could see his reflection in the window pane. The last image he ever saw was the glass reflection of two yellow eyes behind him.

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CIA Special Agent Hobbs and several zoologists arrived at Legion Headquarters with written orders to establish first contact and diplomatic relations with the wolves. I told Special Agent Hobbs he was crazy and to go away. Later, I got a phone call from General Kalipetis, ordering me to humor the eggheads and to cooperate fully with the CIA. General Kalipetis was already upset about the nuke being set off, even though I proved beyond any doubt that I was not responsible. He ordered me to personally escort Special Agent Hobbs and Dr. Smith deep into the forest to set up camp and provide protection until their experiments were completed.

We set up camp near where the nuclear explosion had blocked the roadway. Radiation and forest fires prevented us from getting closer to prime wolf habitat near Finisterra. I brought two armored cars and about twenty legionnaires. By now I had developed a phobia of wolves. At first I refused to even get out of the armored car at night. I told Lieutenant Lopez to get the camp set up.

“What’s the matter, Major?” asked Lieutenant Lopez. “El lobo makes you nervous? Or are you just afraid of the dark?”

“I have some map work to go over on the computer,” I explained. “I don’t like this mission. Do you remember what the wolves did to that spider regiment south of Camp Alaska? That was unnatural in so many ways.”

“No one knows for sure what happened,” replied Lieutenant Lopez. “Maybe a few slow spiders got attacked.”

“You and I listened all night to a thousand spiders get massacred and eaten. The prisoners we captured confirmed what happened. We saw the blood trails and abandoned equipment.”

“The prisoners were probably lying to mask their escape after getting lost in the woods,” argued Lieutenant Lopez. “Don’t tell me you are buying into the eggheads’ theory that the wolves are smart enough to coordinate military operations.”

“No, they’re wasting their time in that regard. But those wolves are nasty critters, and this is their element. All I’m saying is that I give them their due.”

“I’ll agree with that,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “That’s why I’m sleeping in the armored car, too. If Hobbs and the eggheads want to pitch tents and dance with wolves, that’s their problem.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “Sentries will be posted in the armored car turrets. I do not want any legionnaires to be picked off by wolf attacks. There are too many rumors about that sort of thing lately.”

“The eggheads are setting up a perimeter of motion detectors, video cameras, and a trap cage,” said Lieutenant Lopez. “That should be enough for now. Dr. Smith thinks sentries would scare the wolves away.”

“What kind of doctor is he?” I asked.


“Before I forget, I have something for you,” I said, tossing Lopez a small box containing captain’s bars.

“General Kalipetis promoted you. He thinks you are a real go-getter and wants you to lead Military Intelligence back at Headquarters.”

“I’ll take the rank, but what does Military Intelligence mean for me?” asked Captain Lopez. “I get a desk job?”

“It means that starting tomorrow you get to babysit the eggheads, not me,” I said.

“It will be a short assignment,” replied Captain Lopez. “These fools are going to get themselves killed for sure, poking around after wolves.”

* * * * *

At about 0200 hours, a lone wolf scout entered camp. He had been watching all night. Now that the campfire had died down, the wolf felt safe taking a closer look. He ignored the raw meat left in the cage trap. The wolf sniffed at a large tent, pawing at the zipper until the door flap opened slightly. He sniffed, then moved on to the armored cars.

Corporal Washington sat asleep in the cab of his armored car. The large green spider could sleep soundly in any position, and liked to sleep in the cab because he could not stand the body odor of the human legionnaires at close quarters. Private Wayne was doing the same thing in the other armored car.

The wolf looked in the driver’s side window at the sleeping spider. With his paw, the wolf pulled down on the
door handle. It clicked as the door popped ajar. Corporal Washington immediately woke up and pulled the door shut, locking it. The wolf gnashed his teeth against the window, leaving a saliva smear dripping on the glass. And then he was gone.

Corporal Washington climbed up into the turret and fired the mounted machine gun into the woods where he thought the wolf retreated. Everyone woke up to find Corporal Washington still yelling, “Wolf!”

“We are not here to kill the wolves,” said Dr. Smith. “We are here to establish a rapport with them.”

“I suppose that’s why you brought the trap cage?” I asked. “If you catch a wolf in that thing, he is not going to be happy.”

“I need to conduct tests on a live specimen,” explained Dr. Smith. “I want to test the wolf’s IQ.”

“Good luck with that,” said Corporal Washington. “You will need a larger cage.”

“I told you the New Colorado wolves are larger than Earth wolves,” I added.

“They’re meaner, too,” said Captain Lopez. “El lobo likes to eat gringos like you.”

“These wolves are a protected species,” I said. “You are not allowed to trap them.”

“Have you actually seen any wolves?” asked Dr. Smith.

“No,” I admitted. “But I have seen their tracks. Their feet are huge.”

“I have big feet, too,” said Special Agent Hobbs. “And I’m going to stick one up your ass if you don’t tell your legionnaires to stop shooting at wolves on sight. This is not a hunting trip.”

“That wolf opened the door to the armored car,” said Corporal Washington. “It tried to eat me!”

“What happened is you fell asleep and got the crap scared out of you,” said Hobbs. “You fall asleep again on guard duty, and I’ll give you a lesson about who you really need to fear around here.”

“The forest is a dangerous place to be talking so tough,” said Private Wayne. “You might end up here permanently, if your mouth keeps writing checks your ass can’t cash.”

“Major Czerinski,” said Hobbs, turning nervously to me. “Control your spider legionnaires. What are spiders doing in the Legion anyway?”

“Risking their lives,” I said. “Get used to it. And don’t upset them. Spiders can be a bit volatile.”

“That spider threatened me,” complained Hobbs. “That is insubordination. I want him up on charges.”

“I’m sure his true intent was lost in translation,” I said. “It’s a cultural misunderstanding. Private Wayne is one of our better recruits.”

“Fuck you,” said Private Wayne, trying to make his intent more clear. “Fuck you and the glyptodont you rode in on.”

“See?” I said. “He is not threatening you. He merely got his greetings mixed up. Happens all the time. Welcome to the Foreign Legion.”

“What do you mean, the wolf opened the door?” asked Dr. Smith, frustrated at the lack of focus on important matters. He now questioned Corporal Washington. “Do you mean you left the door open, and the wolf was pawing at it?”

“No,” answered Corporal Washington. “The wolf snuck up on me and pulled the latch down to open the door.”

“And that’s when you woke up?” asked Hobbs. “I will be reviewing the video. This will not be allowed to happen again.”

The legionnaires went back to sleep in the armored cars. Hobbs and the scientists excitedly viewed the video. When they saw the size of the wolf, they became concerned. It was the size of a bear. They became more concerned when they saw the wolf open the tent flap and look inside. Special Agent Hobbs did not even bother watching the rest of the video. He ran to my armored car and knocked on the door.

“What?” I asked. “We have a long day ahead of us and need some sleep.”

“May I sleep inside the armored car?” asked Hobbs.

“You have got to be kidding.”

“I am a bit concerned that the wolf may come back,” explained Hobbs. “And he might bring his pack.”

“No,” I said. “There is no room. It’s funky enough in here as it is.”

“I have to sleep in a more secure place,” pleaded Hobbs. “General Kalipetsis ordered you to give the CIA your utmost cooperation. That means keeping me safe.”

“Fine,” I said. “There is plenty of room in the cabs. Go talk to either Corporal Washington or Private Wayne. Maybe they will let you in. But you cannot sleep here.”

Special Agent Hobbs went around the armored car and looked in the driver’s side window. Corporal Washington was sound asleep again. Hobbs knocked on the window. Corporal Washington woke up immediately and opened the door.

“Stop trying to sneak up on me,” said Corporal Washington. “I was not sleeping. We spiders just have a stoic look at times.”
“Don’t worry about it,” said Hobbs. “I just wanted to apologize about earlier. I’ll do the same to Private Wayne later.”

“I accept your apology,” said Corporal Washington, closing the door. “Don’t let it happen again.”

Hobbs knocked on the door again. When Corporal Washington opened the door, Hobbs pushed past him. “I’m sleeping here, Corporal,” announced Special Agent Hobbs. “Get used to it.”


In the morning, a supply truck brought a larger cage. Dr. Smith still wanted to capture a wolf for testing, so he gave Corporal Williams a tranquilizer rifle. Corporal Williams built a tree platform where he lay in wait with the rifle, looking out over the camp. The doctor hung a deer carcass by a rope as bait. He also hoped to lure the wolf in by playing wolf howls and injured deer sounds on a loud speaker.

At about midnight, the wolf came back. Corporal Williams shot him. The wolf looked up at Williams, snarled, and fell over. We dragged the wolf into the new cage.

Dr. Smith put a collar on the wolf. The collar carried a tracking device and a video camera transmitter. When the sun came up, the wolf awoke. He pulled at the collar and tested the cage by smashing against it. The cage easily held. Dr. Smith and the other scientists spent all day testing the wolf. They gave the wolf food, but it refused to eat. They tried word association, hoping to build a vocabulary, but the wolf only snarled. One scientist showed the wolf flash cards, but was ignored. They even coaxed Corporal Washington to rattle the wolf’s cage, but the wolf reacted the same as with the humans. At dinnertime, the wolf began howling at the moon. Late that night, the howl was answered by a far-off wolf scout.

“I always say be careful what you wish for, you just might get it.” I listened to the far off howl. “Your wolves are coming. Now what?”

“We should be safe in the armored cars,” said Dr. Smith. “We will observe pack behavior from the safety of the gun turrets.”

“Then I get to mow the wolves down with the machine gun,” said Captain Lopez. “It will be fun.”

“I know you are just trying to get my goat,” said Dr. Smith. “I do not expect simple legionnaires to understand the importance of my work. But the highest echelons of the United States Galactic Federation are watching us and are expecting positive results. I will not let them down.”

“El lobo isn’t a dog that you can train,” said Captain Lopez. “These wolves are wild animals. And they hate you. At least, that wolf in the cage hates you. Look at his eyes.”

“I hope you are correct,” said Dr. Smith. “Hate is a sign of abstract thought. It’s a sign of intelligence. If that wolf can hold a grudge, then maybe it can do much more. Perhaps it can also love.”

“That wolf would love to eat you,” I added.

“Do you want the wolves to be your slaves?” asked Captain Lopez. “Do you plan to train wolves to jump through hoops, like in a circus?”

“The CIA wants to know if the wolves can be partners with humanity against the spiders,” answered Dr. Smith. “Can the wolves be a form of pest control? I am tasked with finding an answer to that question and more.”

“Is that true?” I asked Agent Hobbs. “Do you really want a wolf protecting your back?”

“I was sent here to get answers,” explained Special Agent Hobbs. “Don’t be so surprised. It was your report that started this whole thing. It’s better that we do the research first. For all we know, the spiders are already recruiting the wolves to fight us.”

“That will not happen,” said Private Wayne. “We spiders will never be compatible with any of your hideous Earth monsters.”

“Even that statement is a positive,” said Dr. Smith, scribbling notes on a pad. “The Legion sees the value of exploring these possibilities. Didn’t your General Kalipetsis declare the wolves a protected species? He implemented that executive order long before the CIA or I took an interest in the wolves of New Colorado. General Kalipetsis saw their military value.”

“You messed with the wolves’ DNA, didn’t you?” I asked. “That is why you are here. You want to see if Frankenstein can be put back into its test tube.”

“That is not true,” said Dr. Smith. “Rumors like that are spread by the ignorant.”

“You scientists once claimed Czechoslovakian wolf dogs were a myth and a figment of the public’s imagination, too,” I said. “But they were real.”

“It will not work,” insisted Private Wayne. “The wolves will not partner with humanity.”

“Why not?” asked Special Agent Hobbs. “What would a spider like you know about it? Humans and wolves are from Earth. We have a shared history. Dogs are man’s best friend.”
“I have studied your literature,” said Private Wayne. “Have you not read Little Red Riding Hood? I thought it was mandatory reading for your babies. Your own literature says a wolf cannot be trusted. You teach that to your young.”

We all laughed. Private Wayne got more agitated. “I have also read about the Three Little Pigs!” he added. We laughed louder.

“I am serious!”

“Did you read about the Boy Who Cried Wolf?” asked Guido, still laughing. “Or about Lupa raising Romulus and Remus?”

“A sentient species that does not retain or value the lessons recorded in its literature is doomed to repeat its mistakes,” fumed Private Wayne as he left to sleep in the cab of his armored car. “I have nothing more to say to you human pestilence on this matter.”

* * * * *

“Satellite reconnaissance shows there are still forest fires caused by the nuclear explosion east of Finisterra,” said the Intelligence Officer. “There is interesting Legion activity just east of the blast site. Images show two armored cars and about two dozen legionnaires.”

“What is so interesting about that?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “The area is well within the Legion zone of control.”

“They have caught and caged a large wolf,” said the Intelligence Officer. “Some of the human pestilence do not carry weapons. I suspect they are civilian scientists studying the wolves.”

“I want to know more about what they are doing,” said the Special Forces Commander. “Keep an eye in the sky on them. Drop a team in if you think it will help. What kind of research are we doing on wolves?”

“None,” said the Intelligence Officer. “We have offered a bounty on wolf pelts and shoot them on sight. There are requests from industry in the North to exterminate the wolf population with nerve agent, but you have denied those requests.”

“The new Treaty forbids severe ecological damage,” said the Special Forces Commander. “The human pestilence specifically cited wolves as an important protected species in their fight against invasive pests.”

“Then the humans are violating the Treaty by trapping that wolf,” said the Intelligence Officer. “I think the humans want to make strategic use of the wolves and are doing military research along those lines. Remember the North Massacre?”

“Rumors blow wolf attacks way out of proportion every time they are retold,” said the Special Forces Commander. “It is treason to repeat rumors that flame defeatism.”

“I am your Intelligence Officer. I have the numbers at my claw tip,” said the Intelligence Officer. “What if the human pestilence are trying to coordinate and train wolf attacks against us? What if it is already happening?”

“I would use the nerve gas, but it kills everything else, too,” said the Special Forces Commander. “The deer hunters and the Arthropodan Rifle Association would be pissed. Did you know the new Emperor is an ARA member?”

“I propose we start our own wolf research department,” said the Intelligence Officer. “I can start catching wolves immediately.”

“Do it,” said the Special Forces Commander. “I do not want Arthropoda to fall behind on wolf research. If monitor dragons can be trained for the military, why not wolves?”

* * * * *

I set a folding field chair in front of the wolf cage. The wolf growled and backed away from the bars and wire mesh. I offered it a bone shaped dog biscuit. The wolf refused, even though it looked hungry. I put the dog biscuit back in my pocket.

Bored, I got up and strolled to the forest’s edge and relieved myself. I saw sudden movement to my right, and drew my pistol. As I turned to take aim, I tripped on the uneven ground and fell onto my back. I lay there in the ferns, listening. I could hear something approaching, but did not dare move for fear of being noticed. I gripped my pistol in both hands, combat style, holding it close to my chest.

Two wolves converged on me from each side. One of the wolves stepped on my chest, pinning me to the ground and taking by breath away. The other wolf grabbed my wrist in its jaws, causing me to drop my pistol. I was led by the wrist into the forest. With my free hand I pressed my radio microphone to call for help. The sound of the radio squelch startled the wolf gripping my wrist, and he tightened his hold. I groaned and let go of the microphone.
Captain Lopez answered, asking for my location. The other wolf ripped the microphone speaker cord off my shoulder.

After walking about a mile, we stopped at an outcropping of rocks. The wolf let go of my wrist. I sat down on a rock, rubbing out the pain. Both wolves stood guard as we waited. Other wolves came by to take a look at me and to get a sniff. Some growled, but most were silent.

I took the dog biscuit out of my pocket and offered it to one of my guards. The wolf refused. I then made a show of taking a bite of the biscuit and pretending it tasted good. “Yum, yum,” I said. “See Fido, it’s not poisoned. It tastes great. It’s light but not filling. This biscuit tastes much better than I would. It’s full of vitamins and is more nutritious, too.”

Again I offered the dog biscuit to the wolves. Again they refused. I rose to stand and stretch my legs, wanting to test their reaction. Both wolves growled and advanced on me. I sat back down on my rock to make them happy. **Happy wolves are good wolves,** I thought to myself. A large wolf came by and stared at me. The two guards backed away, respecting its size and status in the pack. The large wolf had old scars about its face and eyes, and had a chewed up ear. He lorded over me, pressing ever closer. I leaned back, not wanting his jaws to get too close to my face. I slowly reached behind my back and gripped my large jagged combat knife tucked inside my belt. Before I could strike, the wolf deftly snatched my cap off my head, and was gone.

* * * * *

Back at camp, Captain Lopez was preparing to lead a squad of legionnaires to find me. They had found my pistol and hoped to follow my tracks. Guido’s monitor dragon was already pulling on its leash, wanting to follow my scent. Just as the squad was assembled, a lone wolf scout emerged from the forest, carrying my legionnaire cap. Captain Lopez signaled for the others not to shoot. Spot immediately lunged at the wolf, but Guido pulled the dragon back and kept him on a short leash. The wolf trotted up to the cage and placed the cap on top. He gave the wolf inside the cage a curt greeting, then disappeared into the tree line.

“If I had not seen that for myself, I would never have believed it,” said Dr. Smith. “Do you realize what this means? It means these wolves have evolved beyond anything we ever could have hoped for. They are a sentient species. They can plan ahead several actions at a time and can contemplate more than what is in front of them. They are no longer merely reactionary beasts.”

“Whatever,” said Captain Lopez. “They’re just one more thing on New Colorado that can kill me.”

“Not if we can communicate with them,” insisted Dr. Smith.

“We already have communicated,” said Captain Lopez. “They want a prisoner exchange. Free the wolf.”

“I think you are right!” exclaimed Dr. Smith. “We will know soon enough after viewing the video transmissions from the wolf’s collar.”

Corporal Williams lifted the cage door, but the wolf did not leave right away. First, it growled at Corporal Williams. Then, it walked over to Guido and challenged the dragon with more growls and posturing. Guido held Spot back. The wolf, satisfied the dragon would not fight, went over to one of the armored cars and urinated on a tire. Then it ran off into the forest.

* * * * *

When the released wolf got to my location, it charged, growling and snapping its jaws. I jumped back to avoid being bitten. As it lunged again, I took a swipe at it with my combat knife, just missing its throat. The wolf was amazingly agile for being so large, and easily avoided my knife. The wolf then slowly circled, preparing for a killing strike. I had no illusions about my impending death. Suddenly, the larger wolf with the chewed up ear confronted the other aggressive wolf. The two wolves violently smashed against each other in frontal attack, teeth gnashing and fur flying. As quickly as it started, the wolves stopped fighting and were gone. I was alone. I sat there for a while. When Captain Lopez and the others arrived, Lopez just handed me my cap. “You owe me big time,” he said.
The Arthropodan Military Intelligence Officer accessed the human pestilence database and read all he could find on canines in general and on wolves in particular. He ordered team leaders to hunt and trap wolves and bring a live wolf back to Headquarters for examination. The team leaders seemed reluctant, and so far none had come back. Impatient with his subordinates’ slow progress, the Military Intelligence Officer decided to do his own field research. He visited George’s Pet Shop & Grooming Center of West Finisterra to see what these canines were all about.

“Do you have any wolves for sale?” asked the Military Intelligence Officer. “I prefer a puppy. They are more manageable.”

“No, sir,” said George. “It is illegal by the Military Governor’s executive order to sell wolves or to traffic in wolf parts or hides. It’s a capital offense.”

“Finisterra is now a part of the Arthropodan Empire. It is a capital offense not to cooperate with Imperial authorities,” warned the Intelligence Officer. “I will decide what is legal or illegal, and I want to buy a wolf puppy.”

“Whatever,” said George. “I don’t sell wolves.”

“Then who does?”

“No one,” said George. “It is illegal.”

“Do you have a German shepherd for sale?” asked the Military Intelligence Officer. “I read on your human pestilence database that German shepherds and wolves are similar breeds.”

“We sold our last German shepherd last week.”

“I want a canine now. What else do you have? It has to be German, and the more aggressive, the better.”

“I could sell you a Dachshund,” said George. “They’re German. You aren’t going to eat him are you? It’s illegal to eat dogs.”

“I had never thought of that,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “Do they taste good?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said George. “People used to eat dogs a long time ago, but it is frowned upon now. I do not sell my dogs for laboratory experimentation. What assurance do I have that the Dachshund won’t be abused?”

“I give my word as an officer,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “I am considering using guard dogs to protect vital military installations. But first I need to see if they can be properly trained.”

“Dachshunds are very smart, protective, and loyal,” said George as he brought Sampson out on a leash. “And Dachshunds are very expensive.”

“Money is no object,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “Do you take VISA?”

“Of course,” said George. “May I see your ID? You will also need to buy accessories to keep your Dachshund happy. You don’t want an unhappy Dachshund.”

“What?” asked George. “Oh, yes. Right. You need to buy dog food, a dog leash, a rubber chew bone, a dog bed, a special Dachshund blanket, and a fetch ball. This species gets real testy if you don’t play fetch. And for free I am throwing in dog care instructions. Be sure to walk your Dachshund regularly so that he gets his exercise. Fat Dachshunds are not good.”

“Thank you,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “Is there anything else I need to know?”

“If you call him by name, he will come and obey commands,” said George. “Sampson is already house trained. You can tell Sampson is particularly intelligent. See the smart bumps on his forehead?”

“He has bumps on his forehead, but dents on top,” observed the Military Intelligence Officer. “What does that mean?”

“Oh my,” commented George, surprised by the alien’s close attention to detail. “Sampson might be bi-polar. It’s nothing to worry about, as long as he gets his vitamins.”

“Excellent,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. He walked Sampson on a leash down the street to Headquarters.

Pedestrians got out of Sampson’s way as they walked. A number of female spiders commented on Sampson. “Those creatures are dangerous,” said a female spider. “Are you not afraid to be handling it?”

“I am a soldier,” boasted the Military Intelligence Officer. “I risk my life for the Empire every day. But do not worry. This Dachshund is highly trained. I will show you.”

The Military Intelligence Officer was pleased that the Dachshund not only might have military value, but it appeared to be a babe magnet, too. He reached into his bag and pulled out a small rubber ball. Sampson barked and hopped up for the ball, wagging his tail excitedly. The Military Intelligence Officer unclipped the leash, and threw the ball. “Sampson! Fetch!” he ordered.
Sampson ran after the ball. Growling, he grasped the ball in his mouth and kept on running, away from the Military Intelligence Officer. The officer chased Sampson all over West Finisterra, but the Dachshund was too quick to be caught. Finally, the Military Intelligence Officer gave up, sitting down by a street curb to catch his breath. Sampson then came back and placed the ball at his feet. The Military Intelligence Officer threw a web over Sampson and made plans to attach a GPS device on this obnoxious canine.

* * * * *

The next day at Headquarters, the Military Intelligence Officer showed Sampson to the Special Forces Commander. The Commander was not impressed. “What is this?” he asked. “I order you to capture wolves, and you bring me a wiener dog?”

Sampson immediately started barking and pulling on his leash. The Military Intelligence Officer pulled Sampson back, comforting him with a gentle pat on its head. “The big mean Special Forces Commander did not mean it. He is sorry.”

“What?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “Have you lost your mind over that wiener dog?”

“Sir, please do not use the W-word around Sampson,” pleaded the Military Intelligence Officer. “Dachshunds are very sensitive.”

“Get that Earth vermin out of my office before it makes a mess on the floor,” ordered the Special Forces Commander. “Who knows what diseases it might carry. Get it out, or I will shoot it myself!”

“Sir, this Dachshund is a highly trained hunter and tracker, and has already proved invaluable in my research on canines and wolves,” explained the Military Intelligence Officer. “He was very expensive to acquire, I might add.”

“You were cheated,” said the Special Forces Commander. “That creature is too small to have military applications. Give me a dragon any day.”

“Notice how Sampson is always sniffing about,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “Its sense of smell is perhaps its most acute asset.”

“So?” replied the Special Forces Commander. “It is an ankle biter.”

“Yes, I was meaning to warn you about that,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “For my laboratory investigative purposes, the Dachshund’s small size merely makes it more manageable. It still has the same traits and characteristics as the wolf. And already tests on Sampson have given us a new weapon in the war against the wolves.”

“I doubt that,” hissed the Special Forces Commander, as he watched Sampson lift his leg by the corner of the desk. “What is he doing now?”

“By searching the human pestilence database, I discovered that our scent can be masked by the scent of common Earth animals. I have manufactured synthetic skunk odor that, if rubbed on our exoskeleton, masks our odor from Sampson, and most certainly, wolves, too. This breakthrough will make our troops invisible to the wolves at night. I believe wolves do not see well at night, and our night vision technology we will have a distinct advantage.”

“Is that what that smell is?” asked the Special Forces Commander. “I was meaning to talk to you about your grooming hygiene. Does this skunk odor wash off?”

“Eventually,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “The human pestilence make a product called Skunk Off. I am trying to obtain a retail sample so we can duplicate the process for issue to our troops.”

“Yes, yes, you do that,” said the Special Forces Commander. “I want my commandos to be issued the skunk mask as soon as possible. Good work!”

* * * * *

The gods of war smiled on the Arthropodan Special Forces team leader today. He led his commandos behind enemy lines and successfully filmed legionnaires and scientists working with wolves and doing their experiments. But today the team leader was rewarded for his efforts with a bonus. The team leader located most-wanted war criminals Gotti, Czerinski, and Lopez. Priority was given to capture Gotti for trial, but permission was given to kill all three. The Legion had moved a battalion up to the border, but the team leader had the element of surprise on his side. Covered head to foot by camouflage nets, the commandos slowly crept past pickets and sentries into the Legion camp. Most-wanted Gotti would be the easiest target. The assassin was posted on guard duty on the perimeter. The team leader would capture Gotti personally. Fame, fortune, and promotions were all in the team leader’s grasp. All he had to do was reach out and take it.
The command tent, bristling with antennas, was a prime target. Czerinski and Lopez had been seen coming and going from the tent. A spider commando placed explosives by the tent and on a generator next to it. He finished setting the timer and turned to leave.

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I exited the command tent via a side flap and nearly collided with a spider commando. He sliced at me with a large jagged combat knife. I just had time to raise my forearm in defense. I caught the knife blade in my metal prosthetic hand and twisted it from the spider’s grip. I then cut the spider commando across his gut. He pulled away, clutching at his exoskeleton, trying to keep himself together. I drew my pistol and shot the spider twice in the head.

I kicked the commando to make sure he was dead. That is when I saw the explosives. I yelled out an alarm to evacuate the command tent. Several explosions destroyed the tent, a generator along with some fuel, and an armored car. There was some scattered gunfire in the confusion as other spider commandos tried to withdraw.

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Guido and Gotti had been sitting in a improvised log bunker on the perimeter. Guido was already upset about having to pull perimeter guard duty again. Czerinski seemed to have it out for both him and Gotti. Perhaps he knew about Gotti. Or maybe Czerinski just did not like Italians. But now, Guido could smell the odor of skunk. He did not think skunks had been seeded on to New Colorado, but the skunk smell was very distinct.

“Is that you I smell?” asked Guido, turning to Gotti. “You smell like something crawled up your ass and died. What did you eat earlier?”

“I didn’t do anything,” said Gotti, checking his armpits. “I smell it too, but it’s not me. Perhaps you stepped in dragon shit again.”

“It smells like skunk,” said Guido, checking his boots for guano. He found none. Guido looked out from his bunker, trying to locate a source of the smell. Perhaps a rotting carcass was hidden in the brush. The sounds of explosions and gunfire from camp put both legionnaires on alert. As they checked to their rear, two spider commandos threw a web net over them. Guido and Gotti fell helpless to the ground.

“This one is Gotti,” said the Special Forces team leader. “Kill the other human pestilence.”

“Wait,” said Guido. “I know you.”

“Guido?” asked the team leader. “Is that you? You lead a charmed life, and you owe me money.”

“There is twenty thousand dollars in my left boot,” said Guido. “You are welcome to it.”

“It is not enough,” said the team leader. “Fixing that dragon fight in Camp Alaska wiped me out.”

“If you kill me, my dragon will hunt you down and kill you slow,” threatened Guido. “But we’re friends. There is ten thousand more dollars in my right boot.”

“I am more afraid of wolves than that worn out old dragon of yours,” said the team leader, as he took Guido’s boots and money. “But this is a start. How much money do you have on your card?”

“Millions,” said Guido. “I thought we were tight. You would rob and kill me for a few dollars?”

“No of course not, Guido,” said the team leader. “I will kill you for free. I only want two hundred thousand dollars more for the trouble you are causing me. You can make a transfer from your card to my card.”

“What would keep me from canceling the transaction after you leave?” asked Guido. “The bank will not approve a transaction that large unless they talk to me first.”

“Your electronic checks are always good,” said the team leader. “I am not worried about that. It would be bad for future business if word got out you welched on a check.”

“No one would blame me for canceling a check written under coercion,” said Guido.

“Coercion?” asked the team leader. “I am not forcing you to do anything. I am only asking for just compensation for money you cheated out of me. Not killing you is treason. Would you have me take that risk without compensating me?”

“Fine,” said Guido, entering the transaction into his note pad. “I can see friendship means nothing to spiders. It’s done. Check your card.”

“Hey!” said Gotti. “What about me? I can pay you, too!”

“You have nothing I want,” said the team leader. “Your life has no value.”

“Sure it does,” said Gotti. “There is a key on a chain around my neck. The key is to a bank safe deposit box full of jewels. It’s yours if you let me go. Cut this web off me.”

The team leader snatched the chain off Gotti and tossed it to Guido. “Gotti, you are under arrest for criminal conspiracy and murder. You will stand trial on Arthropoda and then will be executed.”
“So we have a deal?” asked Guido, struggling with the web restraints. “You are taking Gotti and letting me go?”

“Not yet,” said the team leader, drawing a large jagged combat knife and poking the tip just under Guido’s chin. “I want some information. What is the Legion and its scientists doing with the wolves? Tell me about their experiments.”

“The eggheads think they can make friends with the wolves and train them to attack spiders,” said Guido. “They’re crazy.”

“The wolves are already attacking us,” said the team leader. “What have the scientists accomplished? Tell me all you know, or else.”

“They have some wolves eating handouts of dog food,” said Guido. “Most wolves still refuse all food put out for them. The scientists are trying to establish a common language by using hand signals and short commands. They are having some success. We have a kind of truce with them in that the wolves have not probed our positions or attacked recently. But you can tell by the look in the wolves’ eyes that they can not be trusted. The wolves hate us with every fiber of their being. Only fear and common sense holds them back.”

“The wolves have common sense?” asked the team leader. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” said Guido. “What I mean is fear of humanity is bred into them from their ancestors’ experience on Earth. But they are getting bolder.”

“Interesting,” said the team leader. “I will let you live and leave you here.”

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AP NEWS RELEASE

Arthropodan authorities today announced the arrest of most-wanted fugitive Louis Gotti. The Mafioso kingpin had been sought in connection with the conspiracy that carried out the murder of the Arthropodan Emperor. Arthropodan sources say Gotti was hiding in plain sight by enlisting in the United States Galactic Foreign Legion and assuming an alias.

Gotti was captured when his Legion unit strayed across the border and was confronted by Arthropodan customs officers. Gotti has already confessed to traveling to Arthropoda, where he paid Mafia associates to assassinate the Emperor. Gotti is expected to be tried and executed next month.

In other galactic news, the new Arthropodan Emperor announced the choosing of a Queen. Rainbow, an Americanized brown spider from New Colorado, was presented at Royal Court today to a surprised press corps and to an adoring public. Apparently the secret romance blossomed during a recent rock concert at New Memphis. It is hoped that Queen Rainbow will be a voice of reason and moderation to the young Emperor. The last few Emperors have favored military adventurism to solve border conflicts on New Colorado.

The Emperor described his fiancée as an ‘independent thinker’ and an ‘awesome biker babe.’ Queen Rainbow caused raised eyebrows and stretched mandibles when she stated she will retain dual citizenship.

In other news from New Colorado, the Special Forces Commander and newly appointed Governor of the spider North Territory, said he is looking forward to face-to-face negotiations with General Kalipetsis to resolve Arthropodan claims on New Disneyland. The Special Forces Commander stated that the predominately spider population of New Disneyland demands inclusion back into the Empire. Arthropodan armored units have recently been moved to the sparsely populated Battle Creek area, ostensibly for training purposes and routine rotation. Elements of the Legion’s First Division have also been moved to Battle Creek, also for training purposes. Battle Creek is about half way between Finisterra and New Disneyland. The Special Forces Commander also insisted on interviews with inmates held at the New Disneyland prison to investigate reports of abuse of Arthropodan citizens and to ensure that no political prisoners are still being held.

When asked to comment, the spider Mayor of New Disneyland said he looks forward to participation in the upcoming negotiations and hopes all parties involved are committed to principles of democracy and the rule of law.

General Kalipetsis, when asked about the prospect of turning New Disneyland back over to the spiders, said, “What? Are you crazy? If the border is moved at all, it should be to the New Mississippi where it divides Finisterra. I am sick and tired of concessions to the spiders that only encourage their imperialistic tendencies. We need to stop pussyfooting around with those spiders.” When asked to comment on reports that the fugitive Gotti had been hiding in the Legion, General Kalipetsis said, “Enemy propaganda has no bounds. I can assure you that enlists are thoroughly screened and checked by computers for criminal records. Computers do not lie.”
Chapter 15

Sergeant Nesbit was seeing a lot more gate traffic than usual going through the Battle Creek checkpoint. Traffic was mostly spider oil rig workers going home to New Disneyland for the holidays. Sergeant Nesbit approached yet another truck full of spiders to check their papers. This one would be different.

“Show me your identification, residency permit, work permit, embedded computer chip information, and library card,” said Sergeant Nesbit. “What is your destination and business in America?”

“I am taking oil rig workers home to New Disneyland to celebrate Christmas,” said the spider driver, producing the necessary documentation.

“Since when do spiders celebrate Christmas?” asked Sergeant Nesbit.

“I will take any excuse for a three day weekend,” said the driver. “We have a saying: ‘When in America, do as the Americans do.’”

“What company do you work for?” asked Sergeant Nesbit, as he scanned the driver’s ID bar code. Sergeant Nesbit also scanned the driver’s embedded computer chip and did a retina scan.

“I work for the Chevron Oil Corporation,” said the driver. “Security seems kind of tight. What is up?”

“Ilegal immigration is increasing,” said Sergeant Nesbit. “The Legion has been tasked with cracking down at the border. Step out of the truck. I want to check your passengers.”

About twenty spiders were seated in the rear of the canvas-covered truck. Sergeant Nesbit again went through the routine of checking papers and doing the required scans. As he walked between the two rows of spiders, he almost stepped on a Dachshund.

“What’s with the wiener dog?” asked Sergeant Nesbit. “Is he your Christmas dinner?”

The Dachshund angrily snarled and pulled on his leash. A spider grabbed the dog by its collar and tried to comfort it.

“Sampson is sensitive about being called names,” said the spider, patting the dog’s head. “I would never consider having him for dinner.”

Sergeant Nesbit scanned the spider’s retina. No match was found in the database. He made the necessary data entry. “Are you a newly employed worker?” he asked. “Who do you work for?”

“The Arthropodan Imperial Oil Corporation,” answered the spider. “Why?”

“I thought you all worked for Chevron,” said Sergeant Nesbit. “Why don’t you?”

“All of Chevron’s human pestilence assets in the North are being nationalized,” replied the spider. “Maybe it’s not common knowledge yet.”

“You’re right,” said Sergeant Nesbit. “It’s news to me.”

Sergeant Nesbit checked the spider’s documentation again. Everything checked out. This spider was just another oil rig worker. But, it was obvious that the spider was not an oil rig worker. In fact, none of these passengers ever worked on oil rigs. They did not smell like oil rig workers, and had no telltale oil and grease stains on their exoskeletons. The spiders were all well groomed and orderly, like spider Boy Scouts. No one was even drunk. Sergeant Nesbit aimed his scanner at the Dachshund. An embedded chip instantly gave ownership and bill of sale information: George’s Pet Store & Grooming of West Finisterra. Champion breed Dachshund named ‘Sampson’ sold via VISA credit card to Arthropodan Marine Special Forces Military Intelligence Division.

Sergeant Nesbit activated an alarm on his belt. Tanks, armored cars, and legionnaire infantry converged on the truck and took all the commandos into custody.

Usually illegal immigrants were just identified, claw printed, and sent back across the border. Spies, however, were sent to my office to be interrogated. Being that I had just arrived and was just getting settled, I did not have time for extensive interrogations. All of the spiders refused to answer my questions, so I detailed Corporals Tonelli and Williams to transport them by bus to the New Disneyland Prison.

* * * * *

Guido and Williams entered the prison bus and walked down the aisle, checking prisoners and their restraints. When they got to the Military Intelligence Officer, they stopped. Guido grabbed the spider next to the Military Intelligence Officer, dragging him off the bus.

“Where are you taking my team leader?” asked the Military Intelligence Officer. “I protest our treatment.”
“I’m going to shoot him,” said Guido. “So shut up.”

“He has rights afforded to him under the rules of war and recent treaty agreements,” protested the Military Intelligence Officer. “You will be held personally responsible for his well being and safety!”

“We are not at war,” replied Guido, giving the team leader a shove off the bus. “All of you may be shot for being spies.”

Guido led the team leader to an outbuilding and cut the spider’s restraints.

“I knew you would get me out of that mess,” said the team leader, trying to give Guido a hug. Guido pushed him away. “Guido, you are a true friend!”

“I want my money back,” demanded Guido. “All of it!”

“I saved your life at Camp Alaska, and out there in the sticks,” said the team leader. “Remember? We are even. I even gave you the key to Gotti’s safe deposit box.”

“There was nothing in it except gambling records and IOUs,” complained Guido. “I should shoot you now.”

“I had no way of knowing that,” said the team leader. “It is my intent that counts. Gotti said it was full of jewels.”

“Where is Gotti?” asked Guido. “I want him back, too.”

“It is too late for Gotti,” said the team leader. “Gotti has already been transported back to Arthropoda to be tried and executed. Are you going to let me go or what?”

“Like I said earlier,” said Guido. “I’m going to shoot you.”

“Oh come on,” argued the team leader. “Let’s work something out. You said I owe you money? I am willing to settle up. How much do you think I owe you?”

“All of it,” said Guido. “Give me your card.”

“I spent some of it,” commented the team leader, handing Guido his card. “I bought real estate on the river in Finisterra. I am building a new hotel casino. You could be my partner.”

“You spent my money on worthless land in Finisterra?” asked Guido, drawing his pistol. “It’s too radioactive in Finisterra. Everything there glows in the dark. The last time I was there, my hair fell out.”

“It is being cleaned up,” said the desperate team leader. “I also bought land in Battle Creek. I bought the entire strip along the border. It is a perfect location for casinos, warehouses, drug distribution, brothels, auto sales, and pizza parlors. So, do we have a deal? Are we partners?”

“You bought land with my money,” said Guido. “That means we are already partners. I’ll make you a deal you can’t refuse. The biggest cut belongs to me.”

“Anything you say, Guido,” said the team leader. “But only because you are my friend.”

“Yeah right,” said Guido, as he led the team leader outside. Guido escorted the team leader across the border before taking the others to New Disneyland. “I’ll be contacting you later. I expect a nice return on my investment.”

“It will be easy money,” promised the team leader. “This planet is ripe for the picking.”

“If you are so smart, how come you let a dork like Sergeant Nesbit catch you?” asked Guido. “Why were you sneaking across the border, anyway?”

“We were up to no good,” admitted the team leader, as he crossed through the border gate. “You be careful. Trouble might be coming.”

When Guido and Williams returned to the bus without the team leader, everyone was silent. The commandos assumed the worst. Even the legionnaires present said nothing. Brooding most of the way, the Military Intelligence Officer vowed revenge. But first, he needed to make sure. “Where is my team leader?” he asked. “What did you do to him?”

“I told you,” answered Guido, smirking. “I shot him.”

“Do you want to be next?” asked Corporal Williams, snickering, but trying to keep a straight face.

“All atrocities have witnesses,” said the Military Intelligence Officer, rising to his feet. “Your name and ugly face will be remembered.”

“Back into your seat!” ordered Guido as he shoved the spider. “Are you going to be a troublemaker?”

The Military Intelligence Officer slipped his claw out of his shackles and struck Guido alongside his helmet, knocking him to the bus floor. As the spider raised his foot to stomp Guido, Corporal Williams hit the officer in the chest with a rifle stock. The Military Intelligence Officer collapsed backwards between the seats. He went into a seizure, arms and claw thrashing violently. When the convulsions abruptly ended, the spider lay still for about a minute before anyone attended him. The bus driver pulled over to the side of the road.

“He is dead?” asked one of the commandos, now checking for a pulse. “You murdered him, too.”

“I didn’t murder anyone,” said Guido. “That was self-defense.”

“He is still in chains,” said the spider. “And, you shot our team leader!”

“I didn’t shoot anyone,” said Guido, but no one was listening. After some shouting and pushing, the prisoners
finally settled down. The bus started up and continued on its journey. Guido seat-belted the corpse securely.

“Have you no respect for the dead?” said the spider next to the corpse. “This is unacceptable.”

“Tough,” said Corporal Williams. “He can be buried at New Disneyland after the coroner checks him.”

“He is losing body fluids,” complained the spider commando. “Let us give our commanding officer a proper burial now.”

“He’s beginning to stink,” complained the bus driver.”

The corpse had a nasty smelling bowel movement. The spider next to the corpse jumped up and vomited green and yellow chunky fluid out across the aisle. Vomit splattered onto Guido’s boots. Corporal Williams, a sympathetic vomiter, threw up, too. Guido ordered the bus driver to pull over, and they carried the corpse off the bus.

Commandos dug a shallow grave, said a few words, and buried their comrade. Not a word was uttered by anyone for the rest of the trip. The spiders just gave Guido and Williams their best ‘mad dog’ stares until they arrived at New Disneyland.

*A * * *

A claw pushed through the soft dirt to the fresh air above. It looked like something from a zombie movie, or an ancient *Buffy* rerun. The Military Intelligence Officer wiped wet dirt from his face as he emerged from his shallow grave. It would be a long march back to the North Territory. Now he would see to it that the human pestilence would pay dearly for their atrocities.

A lone wolf scout howled on the next hill. He was on the scent of prey. The Intelligence Officer briskly walked north. “I would give a year’s pay for a rifle,” he grumbled. The wolf seemed to be getting closer. Then he heard the rumble of engines. Fearing legionnaires, he was about to dash into the forest. But, it was just motorcycles. It was a large group of motorcycle enthusiasts. They were a rough looking bunch of both humans and spiders. He felt surrounded. Suddenly fighting off wolves seemed appealing.

“Did your car break down?” asked a human female biker. “What are you doing way out here in the middle of nowhere by yourself?”

“I am communing with nature,” replied the Military Intelligence Officer. “I like being by myself.”

“You will be communing with wolves if you stay out here,” advised the human female. “Do you need a ride? You can ride bitch with me.”

“Yes. Thank you,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “You are very kind.”

The Military Intelligence Officer wrapped his four arms around the female human. Not being familiar with human customs and taboos, he put his hands and claw on all the wrong places. The female human immediately gave him a sharp elbow to his mid section. “Yo, Mr. Hands!” she yelled. “Don’t be groping me! We just met. I don’t even know your name!”

“I am sorry,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “I thought it appropriate to hang onto whatever appendages were available.”

“You thought? That was your first mistake,” said the human female. “I’ll decide what is available and appropriate.”

“I apologize,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “My bad.”

“What is your name?” asked human female.

“I do not have a name,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “I have only my rank.”

“Rank? I’ll call you Hands,” said the human female. “My name is Amber. I’m Amber because I’m always red-hot.”

“Yes, you are a very warm-blooded human pestilence,” said Hands, as he held onto her again. “Is this better?”

“No!” said Amber, slapping his appendages away. “Get your hands off my breasts.”

“I think he likes you,” commented another female biker, a spider. She had been listening intently to her friend’s conversation. “If you do not want him, I will take the big boy off your hands.” The spider female reached out and caressed Hands’ backside.

“Get back on your bike!” said Amber. “I saw him first.”

“My name is Black Widow,” said the female spider. She opened her vest, revealing a large red hourglass painted on her exoskeleton chest. “Do you think my tat is pretty?”

“You are very beautiful,” said Hands. “You remind me of Queen Rainbow.”

“Do you know Rainbow?” asked Amber, excitedly. “Rainbow is one of our sisters!”

“That makes you princesses,” said Hands. “You are beautiful princesses, indeed.”

“That is so sweet,” said Amber. “Do you really think I’m beautiful?”

“Yes,” said Hands. “You have an exotic beauty to you.”
“Do you want me?” asked Amber. “I am available now.”
“What?” asked Hands, tapping his translation device. *This piece of junk needs adjustment,* he thought.
“You said I am beautiful,” said Amber. “What do you find attractive about me?”
“Your long, flowing, purple hair is very attractive,” said Hands. “And the mythical beast you have tattooed on your arm is very charming.”
“That is not mythical,” said Amber. “It’s a scorpion. They’re real.”
“Well, it looks very hot on you,” said Hands, hoping he was getting a grasp of proper human pestilence slang.
“And you carry yourself very proudly. I like that.”
“Why are you covered in dirt?” asked Amber. “You look like someone buried you alive.”
“I buried myself trying to keep warm in the forest,” said Hands. “It is an old survival trick. It must have worked. I am alive.”
Amber shrugged. “I’ve had filthier riders,” she said. “But when we get to Battle Creek, I am giving you a bath. You do take baths?”
I am very much looking forward to a hot bath,” said Hands. “I must look disreputable.”
“I do not think he quite understands you,” said Black Widow. “He thinks he will be bathing by himself.”
“Not likely,” said Amber. “This big guy is a keeper.”
“What do you mean keeper?” asked Hands, now feeling uncomfortable. He was used to brushing off pushy spider females, but this human female took him by surprise. And, she seemed dangerous. Amber carried several knives, and at least one gun. He had misunderstood her intentions until now.
“What to do,” he thought.
“I think he is a virgin,” said Black Widow. “Oh my.”
“Nonsense,” said Hands. “I have had lots of conquests.”
“Not with humans,” said Black Widow.
“It’s not that unusual,” said Amber, shrugging as they started their bikes. The Hell’s Angels waited as a Legion convoy went by. Human and spider legionnaires waved and shouted approvingly at the biker babes as they went by.
“What are you riding to Battle Creek?” asked Hands. “There is nothing much there.”
“We are delivering drugs to the border,” said Amber. She reached into a pouch and popped a pill. “Want one? It will give you an entirely new outlook on the day.”
“Are those mind-altering drugs?” asked Hands.
“I hope so,” said Amber, still offering a pill. “These pills are worth a lot of money.”
“No thank you,” said Hands. “Do you not realize the misery that results from drug-dealing? Drugs cause brain damage.”
“My homes have been nuked three times,” said Amber. “I can handle the danger. If others can’t, that’s their problem.” The motorcycle lurched out onto the roadway. “Hold on tight! Groppe me if you want!”
Hands held on tight as the bikers hit the road. When they passed the Legion convoy, he even joined in and gave them the one-fingered salute.

Chapter 16

I met General Kalipetsis in a conference room just prior to another round of negotiations with the new Governor. The captured Dachshund was at my side.
“Why are you riding to Battle Creek?” asked General Kalipetsis. “It might have fleas. I really don’t need the distraction.”
Sampson growled at the general, pulling at his leash and snapping.
“This dog represents the spoils of war,” I said. “It was captured with those spies we caught last week at the border crossing. I am giving you the Dachshund as a gift.”
“Nonsense,” said General Kalipetsis. “I can’t be seen walking a stupid little wiener dog like that. I have a reputation and image to maintain. I see a bright career in politics in my future.”
“General Patton, the greatest American general ever, had a little mutt that followed him around everywhere. There was nothing wrong with Patton’s reputation.”
“General Patton?” asked a surprised General Kalipetsis, now checking the database. “By God, you’re right. He had a bull terrier named Willie – William the Conqueror. And Willie even had his own set of dog tags.”
“I guarantee the Governor will be extremely irritated when he sees Sampson,” I said. “He knows the Dachshund was with the spies.”

“It will be worth it just to upset the Governor,” commented General Kalipetsis, taking Sampson by the leash. “I like the name Sampson. It sounds strong and biblical. Get Sampson his own set of dog tags, too,” General Kalipetsis ordered. “Come on, wiener dog, lets go meet the enemy.”

Sampson continued to be upset, barking and snarling until they were seated at the negotiations conference table. The Governor noticed the Dachshund. His mandibles twitched as he made an entry on his note tablet.

“I have five demands that are not negotiable,” announced the Governor, reading from a list. “One, the Legion recently kidnapped twenty humanitarian aid workers at a border crossing right here in Battle Creek. These missionaries are to be released immediately. Two, I want face-to-face interviews with all Arthropodan citizens still detained at the New Disneyland Prison. Three, I want permanent observers in place in New Disneyland to guarantee that spiders with duel citizenship are not abused. Four, I demand open elections to determine when New Disneyland will be brought back into the Empire. And five, I demand that little wiener dog be returned immediately. He is the property of the Arthropodan military.”

The Dachshund lunged at the Governor, attempting to chew an ankle.

“That canine is valuable, highly trained Imperial property,” said the Governor, getting out of his chair and leaning forward. “You will release him at once!”

“Why?” I asked, also rising. “So you can eat him for lunch?”

The Governor removed his dress white gloves from his belt and slapped me across the face. “I challenge you to a duel on a field of honor.”

“I threw a punch at the Governor, but General Kalipetsis and his aides pulled me back, causing my swing to go wild. “Are you serious?” I yelled.

“Choose your weapons,” said the Governor. “I believe that is your Old Earth custom.”

“Dueling was outlawed centuries ago,” I said, now calm. “I will not participate in a duel or any other grandiose spectacle.”

“Coward!” accused the Governor. “I have read your human pestilence history on the database. All your great warriors duelled. Even your modern presidents duelled.”

“It’s illegal,” I repeated. “Dueling has been relegated to the dust of antiquity.”

“You are just chicken,” said the Governor. “I have researched the matter. Dueling is only illegal on Earth. There is no such prohibition on your ill-begotten colonies.”

“Go ahead and fight him,” suggested General Kalipetsis. “I think you can take him. You aren’t afraid are you?”

“Yes,” I answered in a low voice. “He was Special Forces before he became Governor. Besides knowing martial arts, that bug probably has some nasty fighting tricks up his claw.”

“Choose your weapons,” repeated the Governor. “If you dare!”

“Tanks,” I said. “Howitzers at dawn.”

“Duels are fought with personal weapons,” said the Governor. “I suggest sabers.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I said. “How about I just shoot you now and get it over with?”

“Challenge him to a boxing match,” suggested General Kalipetsis. “Hopefully no one will get killed.”

“Boxing?” asked the Governor, checking the database. “What is boxing?”

“Boxing is fighting for sport with padded gloves,” said General Kalipetsis. “It’s been a traditional sport on Earth for centuries.”

“I like boxing,” said the Governor, after viewing hits on the database for several minutes. “I will float like a butterfly, and sting like a bee.”

“I accept,” I said. “Care to put a wager on the outcome?”

“Not money,” said the Governor.

“Chicken?” I asked. “Put your money where your mouth is.”

“If I win, the Legion will immediately agree to all demands stated earlier,” said the Governor.

“The Dachshund stays,” said General Kalipetsis.

“Fine,” said the Governor. “And if, by some miracle of God, you win?”

“All Arthropodan military units must withdraw to East Finisterra,” I demanded.

The Governor hesitated. “I agree,” he said. “I cannot lose. My three fists and one claw will easily defeat your two puny fleshy hands.”

“Keep trying to convince yourself, and maybe the delusion will seem real after a while,” I taunted. “Just
remember, reality sucks, and then you die. I look forward to seeing your lips, or whatever, hit the mat.”

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When the Hell’s Angels got to Battle Creek, the town was full of legionnaires. Both the spider Governor and General Kalipetsis were in town for treaty negotiations. Both sides wanted to impress the other and had beefed up their military presence.

The Hell’s Angels were turned away at the border for being outlaws. That was fine with Amber. She did not need to cross the border to meet her contact and conduct business. Amber merely needed to wait until he came on duty at the spider checkpoint. When her contact finally arrived, Amber ran up to greet him with a handshake and a hug. The Military Intelligence Officer recognized the contact, too. It was his long-lost team leader.

“Sir!” exclaimed the team leader. “You escaped? I thought you were sent south to the New Disneyland Prison. I am so glad to see you.”

“And I thought you had been shot dead by the Legion,” said the Military Intelligence Officer. “I am glad to see you, too. You are dealing drugs? How long has this been going on?”

“I can explain,” said the team leader. “This is just a small part of a large business plan.”

“You two know each other?” asked Amber. “How is that possible?”

“He is my commanding officer,” said the team leader. “He is in charge of Military Intelligence for this entire sector.”

“You’re a narc?” asked Amber, drawing her pistol. “You’re dead!”

“Wait!” warned the team leader. “Not here. Shots will draw too much attention. Put that gun away.”

“Just give me the money, and we’ll make the transaction,” said Amber. “You do have the money?”

“I am a little short,” said the team leader. “I need more time to raise it. You know I am good for the money. I have it. I just have a small cash flow problem.”

“I don’t know that at all, and I am not a credit agency,” said Amber, now pointing her nine millimeter at the team leader. “If you think you can burn me like this, you have made your last mistake.”

The Military Intelligence Officer grabbed the gun from Amber and shoved her away from the guard shack. Amber and the other Hell’s Angels quickly dispersed from the border crossing as legionnaires and spider soldiers, attracted by the commotion, came running up to investigate. The Military Intelligence Officer placed his team leader under arrest, and ordered him interrogated for accomplices. Then, he joined the Governor at the negotiations to brief him.

* * * * *

The fight between the Governor of the North Territory and myself promised to be even bigger than the dragon fight. Legion engineers bulldozed an airstrip in the forest so that fight fans and the media could fly in. Engineers also built an outdoor arena. The fight was being promoted as ‘The Second Battle of Battle Creek.’

The unofficial betting line from New Memphis had me favored at two to one. However, most legionnaires from First Division were not placing their bets until they got the nod from Guido. And, Guido was not placing his bets until he had a chance to talk to me first. I summoned Guido to my office to talk to him about another matter.

“Corporal Tonelli, we don’t get to talk often enough,” I said. “But I’ll get right to the point. At the negotiations today, the Spider Governor handed me an Imperial warrant for your arrest. It seems they think you are involved in a conspiracy to smuggle dangerous drugs across the border. Your co-conspirator is one of the spiders that you let escape your custody. Interestingly, the charging officer is the other spider that escaped your custody. When I add to that the incident with Gotti being captured while you two were on guard duty together, I think you have some serious explaining to do. If the spiders don’t put you in front of a firing squad, the Legion probably will.”

“Legionnaires can’t be extradited to a hostile power,” said Guido. “I deny any wrongdoing.”

“Let me shoot him,” said Captain Lopez. “I’ll bury him myself.”

“Forget the legalese,” I said, ignoring Lopez. “General Kalipetsis wants this matter resolved. Come clean, or this won’t end well for you.”

“Technically I am guilty of everything,” said Guido. “But there are extenuating circumstances. I only survived Gotti’s abduction because I paid off an old spider friend. Later I let him escape to square us and to try to get some of my money back. You can understand that can’t you? That same commando used my money on land speculation and to fund some questionable deals, maybe involving drugs. But there is another more important and urgent matter that I need to discuss with you.”

“More important than charges of treason, drug trafficking, and multiple counts of criminal conspiracy?” I
asked. “This I have to hear!”

“Yes,” said Guido. “You need to take a dive when you fight the Governor. Preferably, not until the third round.”

Thousands bought tickets for the fight, with the proceeds going to the First Division’s Widows and Orphans Fund. The media was broadcasting the fight across the galaxy. Even Cable TV promised to have secret cameras at the fight. Rumors were that the President and the Emperor would attend the fight, and special secure box seats were being built. The betting odds from New Memphis had increased in my favor three to one.

The referee was the Sheriff of New Memphis. During pre-fight preliminaries, he walked to both corners to check each corner and to say a few words about what he expected from us. The Sheriff wanted no head-butting, biting, clutching, kicking, or spitting. When the Sheriff checked my gloves, he immediately became suspicious. When I was forced to remove my gloves, the Sheriff found a roll of coins in each glove. The Sheriff advised me I would lose a point for unsportsmanlike conduct. I told the Sheriff I knew where he lived.

The Sheriff made the same inspection of the Governor’s gloves, and found a mysterious brown powder. When the Sheriff slapped the gloves, the powder hung in the air and stung his eyes. Its smell burned the throat and nose. When asked about the powder, the Governor dismissed it as a minor detail and told the Sheriff to go talk to the trainer. A point was deducted, and the fight was delayed until new gloves could be found. In the meantime, the Governor strutted around the ring, playing to the audience and yelling, “The human pestilence will fall!”

ROUND ONE: After we touched gloves in a show of sportsmanship, my first few punches were thrown below the belt. The Sheriff separated us and penalized me a point. I argued that spiders didn’t have testicles and so it didn’t matter where I hit him, but the Sheriff insisted that all boxing rules would be enforced. I continued to hit low. I kept my forearms tucked in and my gloves up, trying to protect my face and midsection. The Governor, who was lighter and quicker on his four feet, circled and jabbed. I was cut above my left eye early on by the Governor’s claw. Even padded, the claw was a formidable weapon. I threw a lot of punches and expended a lot of energy. I hoped to wear the governor down with low punches and punches to his midsection. However, when the bell rang, ending the first round, the Governor seemed as fresh as ever. My blows seemed to bounce off the spider’s exoskeleton. Not only did my punches seem to have no force left in them, but my arms were getting tired and heavy. I had to throw my whole body forward to deliver a punch. This was not a good start, but I think the scoring was even.

ROUND TWO: I was still breathing hard, but the rest as I sat in my corner did me good. I came out with a flurry of low punches. By now the Sheriff had given up trying to stop all the low blows, and I ignored his warnings. Gradually, the Governor lowered his fists to protect against low blows. My arms were getting heavy again. I needed to end this with one big punch. When the Governor lowered his gloves to protect himself, I feinted low and landed a roundhouse punch to the Governor’s face. My prosthetic hand gave the blow extra impact, knocking the Governor flat on his back. The referee began counting, but the Governor slowly got back up. One of his mandibles was broken and hanging from his bleeding face. The Governor nodded to the ref that he wanted to continue. The Governor circled, cautiously throwing jabs to keep me away. I tried to finish him off by throwing a series of head punches, but the Governor just danced out of range and ducked my punches. I was disappointed, but it did not matter. I was too tired to finish him off. My punches had no snap left in them. Even when I landed a punch, it had no effect. I tried to hold onto the Governor, scraping him with my glove laces and hitting him with elbows. By the end of the round, the Governor had hit me in the head with multiple punches. When the bell rang I staggered back to my corner.

ROUND THREE: I hoped I might be ahead on points because I had knocked the Governor down with the hardest punch of the night. Now, I was evading punches, hoping to rest my arms and get my second wind. It didn’t work. My strategy only gave the Governor more confidence, and I was still dead tired. He chased my about the ring. One punch to the head hit me so hard that the back of my neck hurt. As the end of the third round neared, the Governor caught me with a claw hook to my chin. I dropped to the canvas like a bag of potatoes. As the Sheriff began the ten count, the Governor leaned down and hissed in my ear, “Third round, just like Guido wanted. Good
Guido brought a suitcase of money by my hospital room. My jaw was broken, wired shut, so Guido did most of the talking.

“Major, you put on a great show,” said Guido. “You had me worried in the second round when you knocked the Governor off his feet. I actually thought for a moment that you were trying to win the fight.”

“Not me,” I mumbled.

“Sorry about your jaw getting broken and that nasty cut above your eye,” said Guido. “The Governor sends his apologies, too.”

“Whatever,” I mumbled again.

“If it’s any consolation,” said Guido, “the Governor is in the hospital, too. I think they’re using super glue to put his face back together again.”

“That does make me feel better,” I said. It hurt to talk.

“Almost every legionnaire in First Division bet against you after I gave them the word,” said Guido. “They’re all rich now. You’re everyone’s hero. Even General Kalipetsis made money.”

“When I get out of the hospital, I’m going to shoot someone,” I promised. “I don’t know who yet, but you had better make yourself scarce.”

“What are you upset about?” asked Guido. “Everyone, including you, made good money. What is your problem? Pride? Ego?”

“Did that fight just happen?” I asked. “Or was it planned? Was I manipulated?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Guido. “It was your idea to fight the Governor. All I did was see an opportunity to make some money. That’s what I do.”

“Maybe,” I said. “You had better hope I don’t find out otherwise.”

* * * * *

When I got out of the hospital, I was ordered by General Kalipetsis to supervise a fair and open referendum to decide the fate of New Disneyland. The ballot would ask whether New Disneyland should join the Arthropodan Empire or stay in the United States Galactic Federation. I thought the mostly spider population would vote overwhelmingly to go back to the Empire, but surprisingly polling data of registered voters showed sentiment to be close. Many spiders had no desire to be ruled by an Emperor and his Intelligentsia.

The Governor hired a public relations firm to sway public opinion. They put advertisements on TV and radio, and placed yard signs everywhere. There was no real organized effort by the Legion. General Kalipetsis released a few prisoners, and told me to make sure my legionnaires were nice to the citizenry and to not cause any incidents. No such luck.

A few days before the referendum at 0230, the New Disneyland Sheriff’s Office received a suspicious persons report. What they found was legionnaires driving an armored car loaded with stolen pro-Empire yard signs. A patrol car with two deputies pulled the legionnaires over for questioning.

“Stealing yard signs? In uniform? While driving an armored car?” asked one of the deputies. “Can you get more stupid?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” said Corporal Williams. Williams pointed at Private Wayne. “It was his idea.”

“The Empire sucks, and so does the Emperor,” said Private Wayne, finishing another beer and throwing the can in the back. “All empires suck.”

“You’re a spider,” said the deputy. “I would think you would want to join the Arthropodan Empire so you can be ruled by your own kind.”

“I may be drunk,” said Private Wayne. “But I know the difference between freedom and tyranny. I do not want to be ruled by anyone.”

“Someone has to run things,” said the deputy.
“You humans take freedom for granted,” said Private Wayne. “You assume the rest of the galaxy does, too. I have got news for you. The fact of the matter is that the rest of the galaxy is watching New Disneyland with great interest. This will be the shot heard around the world.”

“You are confused and drunk,” said the deputy, nodding to his spider partner. “And you are under arrest for vandalism and elections tampering.”

Private Wayne retreated back to the armored car. He climbed up the turret and pointed the machine gun at the deputies’ patrol car. As the deputies jumped to the side, Private Wayne fired about a hundred rounds into their car. Corporal Williams jumped back into the armored car and drove away as fast as possible. The deputies’ bullets pinged off the armored car as Williams sped back to Legion Headquarters.

Private Wayne was prophetic when he said his shot would be heard around the world. A dash camera mounted on the deputies’ car recorded the entire incident. The video was broadcast later on Cable TV, Satellite TV, Earth TV, Martian TV, Arthropodan TV, and the Universal Database. Debate raged on the major news networks and talk shows. Members in Congress demanded that the two drunk legionnaires be arrested and their commanding officer be relieved of command. Phil Coen, World News Tonight, confronted me about the growing scandal and charges of elections tampering.

“Major Czerinski, please explain to our viewers why your two legionnaires are not arrested and in jail for Constitutional rights violations,” said Coen. “Or do you condone their conduct? Can the Legion still be trusted to supervise a fair and open election?”

“The referendum vote will be fair and honest.”

“I again ask, do you condone drunken legionnaires stealing campaign signs and shooting up police cars?” asked Coen. “Shouldn’t you not only avoid impropriety, but also even the appearance of impropriety?”

“No, of course I do not condone what happened,” I said. “But I think it is ironic that you are missing the symbolism of what happened.”

“There is nothing that anyone could miss,” said Coen. “The video has been played and replayed repeatedly on all the major news networks. It is very clear your legionnaires are guilty of abuse of their authority.”

“Private Wayne is just a poor drunk legionnaire,” I said. “However, I think he made a very astute comment. The analogy he drew between that incident and events during the birth of our nation at Lexington and Concord is extraordinary.”

“I don’t follow,” said Coen.

“Access Lexington and Concord in the database and read about the other shot heard around the world. Private Wayne, a spider, knows more about our history than you do. Maybe Private Wayne was clumsy about the way he expressed himself, and maybe he will pay severely for that, but do not think his shot was not heard loud and clear around the world, too. In fact, his shot was heard across the galaxy. The days of kings and emperors are numbered. Once you let freedom out of the box, it’s not so easy to put it back.”

Phil Coen of World News Tonight refreshed his memory by punching Lexington and Concord into his communications pad on the database. So did millions of other viewers.

“So you are advocating armed insurrection?” asked Coen. “Didn’t you get enough bloodshed fighting the insurgency?”

“You are an idiot,” I said. I then knocked him out with a sucker punch.

* * * * *

The day before the referendum, the Governor of the North Territory made a paid political speech on New Disneyland TV and radio. “There has been much debate lately about whether returning our home to Imperial rule will mean loss of so-called freedoms you now enjoy. Nonsense. I assure you that the Empire will respect local customs that have evolved here in New Disneyland. My philosophy is that if it’s not broken, do not fix it. You will continue to elect your mayor and some local officials. Not only will you enjoy the pride of Arthropodan rule and culture, but you will benefit from the enormous economic prosperity of the North Territory. And, you will shed the humiliation of being ruled by the human pestilence.”

The vote was 50.2% to 49.8% to join the Arthropodan Empire. As agreed, the Legion pulled back to the old DMZ. Arthropodan tanks and mechanized infantry, followed by the Intelligentsia, occupied New Disneyland. The silent invasion was now over, and a complete success.

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~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.

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