

DOUGLAS HILL

**PLANET
OF THE
WARLORD**

v1.0

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**BOOK FOUR OF THE
THE LAST LEGIONARY**

Keill Randor, The Last Legionary, seeking the headquarters of the Galactic Warlord, takes his most desperate risk of all – letting himself be captured by the Deathwing. But the true horror of his enemies is revealed when Keill's mind is enslaved and he is made a member of the Deathwing.

Every scrap of his martial skill and mental strength is called upon as Keill and Glr fight to save the galaxy from the Warlord's monstrous power.

THE LAST LEGIONARY QUARTET

No.1 GALACTIC WARLORD
No.2 DEATHWING OVER VEYNAA
No.3 DAY OF THE STARWIND
No.4 PLANET OF THE WARLORD

*for Pat Williams
(four is a magic number)*

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PART ONE

PRISONER OF THE DEATHWING

CHAPTER ONE

The lean, dark-haired young man was the last to enter the arena. The heat of Banthei's giant sun met him like a wall – made to seem even more solid by the unbelievable noise. More than a hundred thousand Bantheins, in steeply banked tiers rising high above the oval arena, roared their welcome to the fourteen combatants.

Within that avalanche of sound, the young man could hear his own name being chanted by a section of the crowd that was clearly backing him to win.

'Ran-dor! Ran-dor! Ran-dor!'

As the Banthei officials began the opening ceremony, the young man moved into the shade cast by the three-metre height of the arena's containing wall, and stood relaxed, his arms loosely folded. He was slightly above average height, well-muscled, with the balanced litness of the trained athlete. His dark-grey trousers and boots might have been part of a uniform, but with them he wore only a light, loose-fitting shirt that left his arms bare from the shoulders. In that arena, among the mostly hulking and often misshapen forms of the other combatants, he seemed slight, and unimpressive.

He was also the only one of the fourteen who was empty-handed.

Two voices reached him, over the crowd's uproar, from near the edge of the arena.

'I tell y', he's got t' be,' one voice was saying. 'Y' seen him fight. An' somebody seen him dressed, with th' thing on his tunic – y' know, insignia.'

'Sun's got t' y', the second voice scoffed. 'They're all dead, ev'body knows it. Planet blew up, or somethin'.'

The young man in the arena glanced round and saw two flashily dressed Banthein gamblers staring down at him. He turned away again, his face showing nothing of the grim satisfaction that he felt.

The rumours had been spreading fast. Most of the crowd had quickly learned that Keill Randor was the name of the young man who, for four days, had been barehandedly sweeping aside some of the galaxy's finest warriors. Now they were beginning to learn the rest of the story – that Keill Randor was said to be the last known survivor of the Legions of Moros, the renowned martial race that had been wiped out when their planet was mysteriously destroyed.

Not many of the crowd were aware that the planet Moros and the Legions had in fact been murdered, in a monstrous sneak attack by an unknown enemy.

And not one of the crowd would ever know the real reason why Keill Randor, the last legionary, had abandoned the Legion principles of discretion, of keeping yourself to yourself, and had come to compete in the individual combat section of the galaxy's most popular and exciting entertainment event – the annual Battle Rites of Banthei.

The crowd was growing even more feverish as the voices of the officials droned on. Keill let his eyes stray over a section of the huge throng. He knew it was unlikely that he would spot anything in that mass of people. But he also knew that someone else was studying the crowd, on his behalf.

As if on cue, a voice spoke to him – not aloud, but in a silent mind-to-mind communication.

I have never known so many humans cling to one state of mind for so long, the voice said, with a hint of bubbling laughter.

It was the voice of Keill Randor's friend and companion, Glr – an alien being from another galaxy, small, female, winged, and telepathic. She was high above the arena, riding the thermals on her broad, membranous wings, invisible against the sun. And from there she was using her telepathic powers to scan, as best she could, a hundred thousand human minds.

Keill knew that Glr could project with ease, but found most human minds too alien and clouded to be read clearly or in depth. She could take thoughts from his mind, perhaps because the self-discipline bred into every legionary made his mind especially clear. But even then, Keill had to form his mental words with care, as if projecting them on an inner screen for Glr to read.

'We're a bloodthirsty species, I suppose,' he replied, grinning inwardly at Glr's oft-repeated, mocking disdain for humankind.

Children, Glr agreed. Primitive children. But at least no one in that mob seems to be planning to spill any blood. Just to watch it being spilled.

'Keep scanning,' Keill said.

I will. Glr's mental voice took on a tinge of severity. I will expect a great deal of gratitude from you when this is over. Studying human minds in the mass is very like flying at speed into a mountain of mud.

Keill laughed to himself as Glr's voice withdrew. But laughter faded as he caught the words of the official oration, and knew that the opening ceremony was about to end. He began to ready himself – gathering his balance, deepening his breathing, building his concentration and alertness.

Anyone watching would have seen no change in his easy, relaxed stance. But inside, Keill was marshalling and focusing all the power, the speed, the supremely controlled combat readiness of a legionary of Moros.

The other thirteen combatants were also readying themselves in their own way, which

in most cases meant paying attention to their weaponry. Keill surveyed them carefully, for they were winners like himself, whose strength and skills had got them through the eliminating rounds of the first four days. Today would be the two final eliminations – and by the end there would be only two combatants left, to meet in the climactic fight of the sixth day of the Battle Rites.

The Rites had a long history, reaching back to a time soon after the planet Banthei had been colonised, during the centuries of mankind's Scattering throughout the galaxy. The Bantheins had turned out to be an unusually violent, aggressive group, much given to duelling, feuding and, as the colony grew and developed, localised warring. Some wise ruler had decided that it would be better to turn that tendency into a ritual, before the colonists could wipe themselves out.

Over the centuries the Battle Rites had developed into a gigantic, highly commercialised entertainment, drawing visitors and contestants from all over the Inhabited Worlds. At this very moment, Keill knew, elsewhere on Banthei armies of men were marching against one another, guided by intricate battle plans, where victory would be won by the most skilful strategist, without a single shot being fired. On another battlefield, huge high-technology war machines, robot-controlled, were fighting thunderous, earth-shaking battles on land and at sea. Above them, fleets of robot aircraft wove intricate patterns in the skies and blew each other to bits. And even above them, squadrons of robot spaceships clashed at terrifying speeds and with more terrifying weapons.

All these battles would be watched by millions of avid spectators, on giant viewscreens around the planet – and by many millions more throughout the Inhabited Worlds, on vid-tapes. But for all those hundreds of millions of viewers, the main attraction was the individual combat section, when for five days groups of fighting men and women, fourteen at a time, entered the oval arena and fought with bloody fury until only one from each group remained standing.

The winner of the final combat would be, for a while, one of the most famous and admired people in the galaxy. Even the names of the runners-up – those who survived till the fifth day – would be on the lips of humans on nearly every Inhabited World. So already there would be few people in mankind's galaxy who had not heard that one of those survivors was Keill Randor, the last legionary of Moros.

But for Keill himself, it mattered only that *one* person, out of all the billions, knew of his presence on Banthei.

The official oration wound down, the ceremony came to an end. And the crowd screamed expectantly as the combatants began to move, seeking favourable positions, sizing up their opponents.

Keill stood as quietly relaxed as ever, lowering his hands to his sides. In front of him, a bulky figure wearing a light kilt of metallic cloth turned and glared towards him.

Many of the best fighters in the Rites came from the Altered Worlds – planets where the environment, over generations, had wreaked changes on the basic human form. The man now sidling towards Keill was one such – squat and inhumanly broad, with leathery reddish skin, his small hairless head set low in the midst of massive, humped shoulder muscles. In one huge paw he held a weapon that was both a bludgeon and a short sword – a heavy, gnarled club with a razor-sharp blade set edgewise along its length.

There were only two rules governing the individual combat of the Battle Rites. First, quite simply, there was to be no killing. A combatant could wound, maim and disable opponents as much as he liked. But if anyone was killed, even accidentally, the killer would at once be disqualified, fined, and forbidden ever to compete again. Which, it had seemed to Keill, would not be much comfort to the victim... But it was the rule.

The second rule banned all high-technology weapons. Competitors could use only primitive, traditional weapons, and a team of inspectors made sure that this rule was strictly observed.

Keill Randor was the first man for twenty years to fight in the Battle Rites using only his bare hands.

The arena began to echo with the yells and grunts of furious combat, the clash of weapons, as the club-wielder edged warily closer to Keill. Still Keill had not moved. Then the other man's eyes glittered, and he lunged forward, the bladed club slashing with surprising speed towards Keill's legs.

But Keill was no longer there. Without apparently gathering or bracing himself, he had leaped – not just above the weapon, but high in the air, above the very head of the squat club-wielder.

The man had perhaps only just noticed that his opponent was somehow in the air above him, when Keill's boot slammed down with measured precision on the top of the hairless pate.

The impact drove the squat man face-down and unconscious on to the artificial turf that was the arena's floor. By then, using the club-wielder's head as a springboard, Keill had flung himself into a controlled, headlong dive at two other combatants.

One was a heavily built woman, wearing a decorated helmet and body armour, swinging a long two-handed sword. She was facing a tall, powerful man whose body was entirely covered with a pelt of thick white fur, and who was defending himself with a short stabbing spear, a wickedly barbed metal head on a wooden shaft. Neither of them was aware of Keill until he crashed down upon them, all three tumbling to the ground in a tangle of flailing limbs and weapons.

Few eyes in the crowd could have been quick enough to see the movement of Keill's fist. The blow travelled only a few centimetres, but Keill had instantly found the balance he needed to put all his power behind it. As he came to his feet to confront the fur-covered warrior, the woman remained down, gasping and retching weakly, with a deep, fist-sized dent in her armour directly over the pit of her stomach.

The crowd whooped as the furred man feinted at Keill, and then stabbed towards him, lightning-quick, with the short spear. But the point struck only empty air. Keill had spun inside the blow, close to the furred body, with his back to his opponent. As he did so, the edge of his right hand chopped down at the thick haft of the spear, slicing through it as cleanly as if he had used an axe. And in the same instant his left elbow drove backwards in a precise smash against the edge of the white-furred jaw.

He had carefully weighted the blow, mindful of the rules. So it was only the jaw that broke, and not the neck, as the furred man crashed to the ground. The crowd screamed with delirious joy. It screamed again as Keill leaped without pause towards the other competitors.

The untrained observer might have seen them as a tangled and confused mêlée, a wild jumble of heaving, flailing, surging bodies and weapons. But as Keill plunged among them, the combat computer that was the mind of a fighting legionary was sorting all the movements within the tangle, and directing his own movements at incomparable speed. In slow motion it might have looked like a finely controlled and smoothly flowing ballet, as Keill spun, twisted, swivelled and leaped in the midst of the others.

But ballet dancers do not include, in their repertoire, bone-crushing blows of fist or boot. Every eye-baffling move of Keill's brought a moment when an opponent collapsed – into glazed unconsciousness, or with a cracked bone, or with a nerve centre disabled with pain.

Until finally there was only one left, backing warily from the lean figure of the legionary who stood calmly amid the heap of fallen bodies.

The crowd went berserk with joy.

Then the sound faded to a tense, expectant rumble, as the two men considered each other. And in the lull GIr's voice reached tentatively into Keill's mind.

Keill, I hare picked up a trace. Some mind down there is very nervous, very on

edge. *And I glimpsed the mental image of an energy rifle.*

'Can you pinpoint him?' Keill asked.

Yon seek miracles, Glr replied testily. *One individual in this ocean of crazy mudheads for whom you are showing off?*

'Try,' Keill said, smiling inwardly. *'While I get back to... showing off.'*

Glr withdrew, laughing, and Keill turned his full attention back to his last opponent. He was a broad-shouldered man, a head taller than Keill, wearing a leather tabard of deep blue that might have seemed black, had it not rested against the pure and total black of the man's skin. The skin gleamed and shone as if the man were carved in obsidian, and Keill knew that it was nearly as hard – a mutated substance like the chitin of an insect's carapace.

Keill also knew, from the previous days, about the man's weapon – a long steel staff with a heavy club-head at each end. From each club-head bristled slender spikes, like thick hairs, which carried a substance that caused instant, if temporary, paralysis.

Keill stepped forward, his balance precise, his concentration total. The black man also moved forward, spinning his strange weapon as he did so. The spin grew faster as the weapon moved from one hand to the other in a bewildering blur, creating an eerie, menacing howl, forming an almost unchallengeable shield in front of its wielder.

But the skilful spin weaved a pattern, and patterns repeat themselves. It proved to be a serious mistake. Keill's eye was quick enough to detect the pattern – and to interrupt it.

Moving at a speed that made it invisible, his hand clamped on to the long steel staff, halting its spin with a grip that was no less steely. And before either the black warrior or the crowd had fully registered what had happened, Keill struck. Three times, with fist, knee and boot, so swiftly that the blows seemed to be simultaneous, to elbow, kneecap and solar plexus.

The black man hurtled backwards, an arm and a leg numbed, breath driven from his lungs, muscles turned to jelly. He struck the ground heavily, landing in a foolish half-seated position – leaving Keill standing with the two-headed weapon in his grasp.

The crowd shrieked with ecstasy, and then fell silent again as Keill shifted his grip on the weapon. Careful of the poisoned spikes, he slid his hands along the thick rod so that he was gripping it near each club-head, holding it before him. For an instant he was still, focusing his power. Then slabs of hard muscle leaped into corded, sculptured relief on his arms and upper body. Slowly, steadily, as he exerted pressure, the heavy steel rod bent double, until it was a perfect inverted U.

The crowd's thunderous rapture reached new heights, and then rose even higher when Keill turned and casually, as if with distaste, tossed the bent weapon aside. But it had been a studied throw – and the U-shape of metal looped through the air towards the still half-seated form of its owner. The club-heads missed his head, but the inner curve of the U caught him neatly across the throat, so that he toppled backwards wearing his own weapon like an ungainly collar.

And a hundred thousand people were on their feet, howling the name of the man standing alone in the centre of the arena.

'Ran-dor! Ran-dor! RAN-DOR!'

Feeling slightly foolish. Keill did what was called for – raising one hand in a sweeping gesture of acknowledgement. And the entire stadium seemed in danger of collapse as the crowd stamped and shrieked its tumultuous applause.

Glr is right about showing off, Keill thought ruefully. But there's no point in making yourself bait, if the fish doesn't notice you.

If that thought was directed at me, mudhead, Glr's inner voice said sharply, *kindly form it again, more dearly.*

'It was *nothing*,' Keill replied, as he began to walk towards the combatants' exit from the arena, stepping round the medics who were coming out to gather up the losers. *'What*

about that rifleman?

As yet... Glr began. But then her silent voice rose into an urgent shout. *Keill – MOVE!*

With a legionary's unhesitating reflexes, Keill hurled himself into a shallow sideways dive while Glr's warning cry was still forming in his mind.

As he did so, the unmistakable crackling hiss of an energy beam sliced through the air above him.

CHAPTER TWO

Keill's swift dive ended in an athletic shoulder roll, that brought him smoothly to his feet. At once he was up and running, as Glr's voice sounded again in his mind.

I see him! Across the arena from you – near the top! Bright green tunic – and the rifle..!

But the rifle was making its own presence known. Twice more, as Keill sprinted in the direction Glr had indicated, an energy beam crackled dangerously near to him. Then Keill was at the wall of the arena, leaping to catch the top of it, pulling himself effortlessly up and over.

He's turning, running! Glr cried.

So were quite a few thousand people. The shots, the attempted killing, had sent the section of the crowd around the gunman into a screaming panic. Ahead of Keill, the steep ramp that offered passage between the tiers of seats was thronged with terrified, milling people. And among them, near the upper end of the ramp, Keill caught a glimpse of bright green, saw the glint of metal as the rifle was used like a club to clear the gunman's path.

Keill flashed up the ramp, using his reflexes to cleave through the frantic mob; Once again he glimpsed bright green, disappearing into the surging horde who were all trying to get out of the exit at once. In a few strides Keill too was at the exit, battling his way through.

He is moving towards the spaceport complex, Glr's voice came again. Towards our pad!

The stadium containing the arena was the centre of a huge, linked complex of buildings, all devoted to the administration of the Battle Rites. On the tops of some of the buildings special landing pads for spacecraft had been built, reserved for those off-world combatants who, like Keill, arrived in their own ships.

In moments Keill, guided by Glr, was bursting in through the door of one of the buildings, and hurtling up the moving walkway that spiralled through all the levels. There was no doubt that his quarry was still ahead of him. Most of the people on the walkway had drawn aside to its edges, and were staring up with expressions of surprise or fear – as people would do if they had just been thrust aside by a running man carrying an energy rifle.

Keill's headlong rush did not slow. At the topmost level of the building, there was usually a Banthein guard on duty, to protect the landing pad and the privacy of the off-world competitors. But again it was clear that the rifleman had passed this way, for the guard lay inert and bleeding by the entrance.

Keill sprang out on to the open surface of the pad, veering sideways into cover behind the nearest ship. There he waited, listening. The sun's heat was ferocious, intensified by reflection from the plasticrete of the pad, and from the gleaming surfaces of the half-dozen spacecraft, dispersed across the pad's broad expanse.

He came out on to the pad, Glr announced, but he vanished into the ship with green markings. Near ours, at the centre.

Warily Keill edged forward, towards the blunt wedge-shape of his own ship, its

sky-blue Legion circlet glistening. In the space nearest it was an angular, green-decorated vessel, bulging with exterior hardware. Keill crouched low as he drew closer. But the landing pad was silent in the sun's furnace blast. No energy rifle spat its deadliness towards him; no figure in bright green could be seen.

He has gone to ground, Glr said, excitement in her voice. Keill glanced up, smiling, as she swooped down towards him with a thrum of wings.

Between the broad, delicate membranes of the wings Glr's body was slight, less than half Keill's height, covered with overlapping plates of thick, soft skin. Her head was high-domed, with a snubbed muzzle and two perfectly round, clear, bright eyes. Her feet, tucked up beneath her, were in fact hands, small but sturdy and capable.

'Don't come too close,' Keill warned. *'That gunman could pick you off.'*

As he could have picked you off, Glr said sharply, *while you postured in the arena. And you assured me that they would not be likely to kill you!*

'I don't think he was trying to,' Keill said soothingly. *'No assassin would miss by so much, so often.'*

Then what was he doing? Glr demanded.

'When we find him,' Keill said reasonably, *'we'll ask him.'*

And how do we find him?

Keill smiled. *'I go into his ship, and invite him out.'*

Glr was silent for a moment, and then her laughter rose, almost reluctantly. *Try not to get shot. Think of how disappointed all the millions of your admirers would be.*

'I wouldn't dream of it.' Keill grinned. *'Keep watch a moment while I get a gun. He might have some friends in there.'*

As Glr wafted upwards again, Keill moved to his own ship – which, like many other competitors, he used as a dwelling while on Banthei. Once inside, he reached for the tunic of his uniform, which also bore the blue Legion circlet. Despite the heat, he always felt uncomfortable out of uniform for too long.

He did not see the tiny capsule tucked undetectably in the tunic's folds. Not till it burst, with a sound like a muffled sneeze, and enveloped him in a clinging cloud of grey vapour.

Gas, his mind told him, as his vision began to fade and his legs became unwilling to support him. He had time to feel a slight surprise, that anyone had had the technological skill to penetrate the locking devices of a Legion ship. And he even had time, as the greyness drew him down into unconsciousness, to feel a mild regret that he would not after all be taking part in the climax of the Battle Rites of Banthei.

He awoke as always into full alertness, registering that he was naked but unharmed, save for a distant headache and a bitter taste in his mouth. When he opened his eyes, a sweeping glance showed him an empty, indirectly lit room, with totally featureless matt-grey walls, floor and ceiling – the whole room not more than six metres long, about three metres wide. He was alone, lying on a narrow bed that resembled a spaceman's bunk, bonded solidly to wall and floor. At the end of the bed lay his clothes – his full uniform, but without weapons.

He came to his feet, letting his inner control deal with the surge of nausea, and dressed swiftly, then began a careful examination of the room.

Artificial light emerged from a source at the junction of wall and ceiling, where there were also small vents admitting conditioned air. In one corner were minimal plumbing facilities, and on the floor nearby were containers of water and food concentrates.

Everything that the well-furnished cage needs, he thought wryly.

In one end wall was the door, tightly sealed with an almost invisible seam. Keill ran

his fingers over the cool, metallic surface. Then he stepped back, breathing deeply, gathering himself – and launched himself explosively forward. One leg swung up as if he were hurdling some low barrier, and his booted foot smashed against the edge of the door like a battering ram.

Very few kinds of sheet metal would have withstood that powered assault. But this room proved to be clad in a substance that Keill had not encountered before. What had seemed to his fingers to be hard and metallic became, under the impact, soft and yielding, absorbing the power of the kick, as if that very impact had somehow changed the essential nature of the metal. Yet immediately afterwards it was as before – cool and seemingly hard to the touch of a finger, the matt-grey surface unmarked.

He nodded to himself once, acknowledging defeat, and went calmly back to the bed, sitting quietly on its edge. Knowing that he could not break out left him no option but to wait, until something happened to change his circumstances. So he waited, relaxed and still, without the anger or fretful anxiety that would bum away his inner stamina.

Time passed emptily, but his relaxed patience did not fray. At times he rose to rinse his mouth out with water, to chew a few mouthfuls of food concentrates. And eventually, a change occurred. An eerie sensation floated through him, like an inner displacement, as if some unseen force was trying to rearrange the cells of his body.

He was not disturbed, for he knew the feeling. And it confirmed his guess – that he was a prisoner on a spaceship. The odd sensation was the effect of a ship entering or leaving Overlight – the mysterious field that allowed a ship to bypass real space and time, and to leap across the empty immensities between the stars.

Almost at once Glr's voice slipped into his mind. *Welcome hack.*

Keill had expected her, knowing that while Glr's telepathic powers had no limits in space, she could not locate him when he was moving in Overlight. Which meant that the ship carrying him had just re-entered normal space.

'Not much welcome here,' he replied flatly, and described his situation. *'Can you tell me what happened, and where I am?'*

Swiftly, Glr told him. Back at the launching pad she had had to watch, unarmed and outnumbered, as men in uniforms like the rifleman had rushed from the green-marked ship towards Keill's, reappearing shortly with Keill's inert body. They had re-entered their vessel, which had lifted off almost at once. Glr had quickly taken Keill's ship up in pursuit. But of course she had lost them when their ship, reaching deep space, had vanished into the pathless void of Overlight, where they could not be tracked.

Clearly you were right, Glr added. *The one with the rifle was not trying to kill you – just to draw you out of the arena.*

Keill agreed. *'If they are who we think they are, they'll have special plans for me. Now – can you tell me where I am?'*

As I have told you before, Glr replied, *I can pinpoint the location of your mind across the galaxy. Unfortunately, that is almost how far apart we are. You have been most of a day in Overlight – and it will take me that long to catch up with you. The ship you are on is approaching a distant solar system that, according to your star charts, contains one planet inhabited by humans. A world called Golvic.*

Keill felt none the wiser, for he had never heard of Golvic. But behind the barrier of his rigid self-control, he felt a keen anticipation. He had gone to Banthei for the single purpose of exposing himself, making himself bait in hope of bringing a fearsome enemy out of hiding. There could be little doubt that the plan had worked.

Now Keill was sure that the planet called Golvic would provide some new developments in the deadly search that had occupied him for so long.

It was a search that had begun for Keill Randor on the terrible day when he returned to his planet, Moros, and found a dead world, enveloped in a strange radiation that had wiped out all life. Keill himself had come close enough to be touched by the edge of the radiation, and afterwards found that the radiation had entered his bones, and was slowly killing him.

In the time he had left, Keill had gone out among the Inhabited Worlds on a relentless quest for some clue to the identity of the murderer of Moros. But it had seemed hopeless. No one had any information, and his time was running out. Yet, meanwhile, others had been seeking him.

He had been gathered up by a group of mysterious brilliant scientists, whom he came to know as the Overseers. And with their amazing skills and knowledge, they had healed him – by *replacing* his radiated bones. They gave him a new skeletal structure, made of a unique organic alloy – with a special side-effect. The material was virtually unbreakable.

If that had astonished Keill, he was astonished even more by the story that the Overseers had told him, through their elderly leader, Talis. Keill learned that the Overseers too were seeking the murderer of Moros, and had been doing so for some time before the attack on the Legions.

Talis told him that they had become aware of an evil force at work among the Inhabited Worlds. They had been unable to learn, who or what it might be, or where it was located. But its intentions were plain to the Overseers, in their wide-ranging study of galactic events.

The force, or being, was dedicated to stirring up the horror of war wherever possible among mankind's worlds. So the Overseers had given that unknown being a suitable name. They called him.. . the Warlord.

The Warlord seemed to be using the old human failings – greed, fear, bigotry, power hunger – to turn people towards war, to set race against race, planet against planet. It became clear that his ultimate aim was to spread the infection so widely that the whole galaxy would be plunged into conflict. And out of the ruins of that final holocaust, the Warlord would emerge – to rule supreme over what was left of the Inhabited Worlds.

When the Overseers first understood the Warlord's existence, and the nature of his plans, they had left the separate, peaceful lives that they were leading, and had retired to a secret base, built within the interior of an uncharted asteroid. From there they kept up their investigation, sending out a host of unique monitoring devices to scan as many of the Inhabited Worlds as possible. So they hoped to learn more about the Warlord, and how to oppose him.

But they found that he was as secretive and well-hidden as themselves. He operated through agents, who did his work on other planets, sowing the seeds of war, but who had no direct contact with the Warlord himself. And the Overseers began to feel that they, too, needed an agent out among the worlds.

Then came the horror of Moros. The Legions, whose planet's only natural resource had been the martial skills of its people, had always made those skills professionally available to others. But it was well known that they would not fight on the side of aggressors or exploiters or anyone who was launching an unjust war. More often they hired out their services to those defending against such attacks.

Clearly these ethics would have posed a threat to the Warlord. So he had destroyed the Legions, in a pre-emptive strike, before they could learn of his existence and perhaps move against him.

But Keill Randor had survived that destruction, and in him, the last legionary, the Overseers had seen an ideal agent for their purposes. So they had gathered him up and healed him. And so, in turn, Keill had agreed to work with them. With life and hope restored, he had resumed his search for the murderer of Moros, knowing now just how much more was at stake than his own vengeance.

In his quest he was accompanied by Glr, the alien wanderer who had, much earlier, met and befriended Talis and the Overseers, and who had readily joined in Keill's search. Since then they had had several encounters with agents of the Warlord, and had learned much.

They had learned that some of those agents formed an elite group that called itself the Deathwing. The leader of the Deathwing, known as The One, was the only person with direct contact with the Warlord. And eventually, inevitably, the time came when Keill Randor met and faced The One.

He had barely escaped with his life – but The One had also escaped. And since then the Overseers had turned all their efforts to the more particular task of locating The One, hoping that through him they might learn the whereabouts of the Warlord.

During that time Keill had come as close as he ever had to impatience. The Overseers' monitoring devices were concentrated on looking for clues to the location of one person among many billions. And while the Overseers laboured to gather, sift, collate and study the information from the monitors, Keill and Glr remained idle.

So Keill had devised his plan. If he could not go and find The One, he would let The One find him. He was certain that his enemy would not pass up a chance to take revenge for the way Keill had defeated him and thwarted one of the Warlord's central plans. So Keill had gone – with some sense of shame, since it went against the Legions' preference for keeping out of the limelight – to compete in the much-publicised Battle Rites.

As Keill had anticipated, the Deathwing became aware of his presence on Banthei. As he had also predicted, The One did not send men to kill him, but to capture him. It would be the Deathwing way, to seek a more prolonged and satisfying revenge.

The bait had been taken. Now, Keill thought wryly, we have to make sure the bait survives.

CHAPTER THREE

Keill had begun a series of basic Legion exercises, adapted for the cramped space, both to keep himself occupied and to rid his body of the last effects of the gas. So he was upside down, balanced on the splayed fingertips of one hand, when he sensed a change in the light within the room that was his prison.

He came effortlessly to his feet, and found to his astonishment that one wall of the room had become entirely transparent. Beyond it, five men were watching him.

They were all dressed like the rifleman on Banthei, in long belted tunics of bright green, high-collared and reaching nearly to their boot tops. Four of the men also wore bulky protective helmets – and those four seemed to be of the same race. They were all unnaturally tall and thin, with a greyish cast to their skin. Their features were clustered together in the middle of their faces – small puffy mouths, narrow eyes, noses not much more than slits in the grey flesh.

Keill smiled grimly to himself. He had seen a face like that before.

But his outward expression did not change, nor did he move. The four men were carrying energy rifles of very advanced design, aimed unwaveringly at Keill.

The fifth man wore a similar green tunic, but without the helmet, and with an energy handgun strapped at his waist. He was of a different race, closer to the human norm – about Keill's height, though even leaner, with grey hair clipped short and wide-set eyes that seemed to glow with a light of their own. The eyes of a fanatic, Keill thought – or a madman.

And it was the fifth man who broke the silence, his cold voice coming to Keill through the air-vents in the now transparent wall.

'The first thing you must understand, Randor,' he said, 'is that you are entirely helpless. I am required to keep you alive, but my orders say nothing about you being intact, or uninjured.'

Keill digested the information silently. That was final confirmation that the gunman on Banthei had not been shooting to kill. It was even very likely that the man who had fired that gun into the arena was now standing before him.

'You have already discovered the properties of your cage,' the other man was saying. 'The planet Golvic is renowned for its imaginative genius in technology. I strongly doubt if you could ever find a way through these walls. Should you do so, however, these men will be waiting.' One narrow hand gestured to the four riflemen. 'They are all excellent shots.'

He paused, as if expecting a reply. But Keill waited, silent and watchful. The man's eyes flared brighter for an instant, and his lipless mouth twisted in what might have been a smile.

'I am Festinn,' the man said. 'You may freely ask me questions – I wish you to have no doubts or illusions about your position.'

'Is that,' Keill said with studied insolence, 'the standard uniform of the Deathwing these days?'

Again the twisted grin. 'It is the uniform of the militia on Golvic. Some of the Deathwing—' he made Keill a mocking little bow—'wear it out of courtesy while we are there. As we soon will be, all of us.'

'Where I'll no doubt meet some old friends,' Keill said sardonically.

Festinn laughed, an ugly sound. 'You will find many surprises awaiting you, Randor. And you will have plenty of time to savour them.' The light in his eyes blazed up again. 'Because you will never leave Golvic alive.'

The planet Golvic, Glr informed Keill, has come up on the viewscreens. I will be in a landing orbit shortly.

'*Maybe you should stay out there,*' Keill replied. He did not doubt that Golvic, like most worlds, would have orbital detectors scanning the planet's territorial space.

What use am I going to be to you, Glr asked, sitting in deep space?

'*More use than if the Golvicians spot you and blast you out of the sky,*' Keill said.

Perhaps. But you are certainly not going to free yourself without my aid.

Keill smiled. Glr seldom missed a chance to inform him how much he needed her. '*I'm not sure I want to make a break yet. I may be able to learn more as a prisoner than as a fugitive.*'

What more is there to learn, other than the Deathwing plans to kill you? Glr said chidingly. Keill had told her, as soon as she had emerged from Overlight, about his encounter with Festinn.

'*Not yet,*' Keill reassured her. '*They'll have other ideas for me, first. It'll be interesting to find out what they are.*'

Interesting? Glr's repetition of the word came as close as possible to a telepathic snort. *Then while you sit there being interested, I shall land on Golvic.*

According to the ship's detectors, she informed him, much of the land surface of Golvic was bleak, rolling desert. She intended to come down at high speed, and seek a suitable hiding place among the dunes, where the ship should be able to escape discovery.

Once I have landed, she went on, I will wait for night and make my way to wherever you are. Even if the ship is spotted, the Golvicians will not be looking up in the air for its occupant.

'*I suppose that's true,*' Keill said reluctantly. '*And I may well need some of your*

valuable aid.'

Without any doubt, Glr said triumphantly, and withdrew her mind.

Keill lay back on the narrow bed, smiling. Let's hope that nothing too exciting happens before she gets here, he thought idly.

He passed the time that followed with more of the muscle-tuning exercises, alternating with periods of deep relaxation when he sought to tune his mind as fully as his body. Hours later he was still calm, relaxed and alert when he felt the heavy vibration of the ship's descent to a planet's surface. And soon after the landing was completed, the wall of his cage shifted again into full transparency.

Outside, as before, Festinn stood with his four riflemen. Keill began to rise from the bunk.

'There is no need to disturb yourself.' Festinn grinned mockingly. 'A transport is waiting that will take your entire cage. You will remain within it until we reach Golv City, the capital of this world. Also, my men and I will be watching you. I expect the journey to be without incident.'

In a short while, Keill was sitting quietly in his cage within the broad interior of a heavy transport flyer, sweeping across the strange landscape of Golvic. Festinn had not been exaggerating, Keill realised, about the level of Golvician technology. There was the cage itself, with the unique material of its walls which also contained the polarising effect that allowed transparency. There was the silent, invisible tractor beam that had efficiently plucked the cage out of the spaceship and loaded it on the flyer. And there was the appearance of the planet itself.

As far as Keill could tell from glimpses through the transport's forward windows – for Festinn had left the cage wall transparent, to keep a watch on Keill – the capital, Golv City, must have contained most of the population of the planet. The city seemed to stretch to the far horizon – a gigantic, sprawling monster of a metropolis. The buildings were widely spaced at the fringes, especially near the spaceport, but they soon grew more dense, so that kilometre upon kilometre of Golvician architecture stretched below the flyer.

The transport moved unhurriedly, a robot mechanism apparently guided by an invisible power beam. And the air was thronged with other traffic, flyers of every shape and size, weaving intricate patterns among the upper levels of the taller buildings. Below, a minimal amount of ground traffic moved in similarly controlled lines.

Golvicians seem to like their roadways straight, Keill mused. And their buildings, mostly made from what looked like a metallic stone, were as orderly and disciplined. Their heights and breadths varied extensively, with vast skyscraping towers especially prominent, but always the edges were tidy, the corners square, the surfaces smooth and nearly featureless. After a while, the eye might cry out for a curve, a roundness, or any pleasing effect within the vast regimented march of architecture – made even less appealing by the chill, wintry grey of the Golvician climate.

Keill was still studying the cityscape, interested in what it revealed of the technological Golvician mind, when Glr spoke to him.

The ship is safely down, and I have found a place to wait until nightfall. Where are they taking you?

'I'm not sure' Keill told her, briefly describing what had been happening.

Wherever you are, I will find you. Glr's voice grew serious. *Do nothing rash until I come.*

Right now, Keill thought sourly to himself, looking at the walls of his cage, I can't think of anything to do at all.

The sky was beginning to darken with approaching dusk by the time the transport swept in to land, on a broad plasticrete apron in front of an enormous building that dominated the far side of Golv City. It was many levels high but even more immense in breadth, sprouting many extensions, wings, annexes, and other additions that were all as bleakly tidy and uniform as the central structure.

Festinn stood up as the flyer came to rest. 'This can be called the nerve centre of Golvic.' He grinned as if at some private joke. 'Some day soon, it may serve as the centre of the entire galaxy. You will find it... interesting.'

Keill looked at him expressionlessly, but his mind was racing. What did that mean? Was this building Deathwing headquarters? Or could it be a command centre of... even greater importance?

But there was no time to consider the mystery, for Festinn and his four men were approaching the cage, and one of the Golvicians was carrying an oddly shaped object.

As Keill rose to his feet, Festinn's hand seemed only to twitch, and the energy pistol appeared in it.

'Stay as you are,' he snapped.

Keill relaxed, impressed in spite of himself at the other man's dangerous speed.

'This man.' Festinn continued, indicating the soldier with the odd object, 'will enter the cage. You can of course overpower him, but it will serve no purpose. You will still be in the cage, and the man is expendable.'

The Golvician, unaffected by this cold statement, marched towards the cage's door. It slid aside to admit him, then slid back as tightly sealed as before.

'The object he is carrying,' Festinn said, 'is a body-shackle of Golvician design. It carries its own power source – and it is designed to tighten its clasp, if you struggle against it. Should you try to break free, Randor, at the very least it will crush your ribs. It might even kill you.'

Keill remained silent, but smiled within himself. The unbreakable skeleton given him by the Overseers was going to prove its value yet again.

The Golvician did his job indifferently and efficiently. The body-shackle, made from some heavy but flexible metal, fitted like a strait-jacket around Keill's upper body, clamping his arms tightly to his sides. And when the Golvician brought the two edges of its front opening together, they seemed to flow into one another, sealing the body-shackle almost seamlessly.

'You see what care we take with you, Randor.' Festinn said mockingly. 'The Deathwing knows that you can be dangerous. And remember that I have seen you in action, on Banthei.' His eyes glowed hotly. 'Though you might not have succeeded so well, had I been in the arena with you.'

Keill gazed coldly at him. 'Perhaps not – if you'd got me in a body-shackle first.'

The mad eyes blazed. 'I am the Deathwing second in command, and its premier executioner! I need no advantage...' Festinn broke off, calming himself with an effort. 'But you seek to anger me, hoping that *you* will gain an advantage. You will not.'

He turned to the stolid Golvician soldiers.

'Bring him. And keep your guns on him at all times.'

They marched into the mighty building, the soldiers fanning out behind Keill, Festinn leading the way. As they entered, Keill tested the shackle gently, with an imperceptible outward push of his arms. At once he felt its response as it tightened around him. He relaxed the pressure, and turned his attention to his surroundings.

Within the building, they passed through a vast, high-ceilinged entrance hall, thronged

with people who halted and stared as Festinn and the riflemen conducted Keill towards a broad moving ramp that led up from the entrance hall to the higher levels.

Keill noted every detail – the many doors leading from the entrance hall, the positions of militiamen who seemed to be on guard duty, the hectic activity of the place. He glanced with interest at the Golvician civilians, tall and spindly like the rest of their race, garbed in long, flowing robes.

Many of them, he saw, wore thin, colourless cords around their heads – possibly a badge of rank.

Then they were on the moving ramp, ascending without haste. On a higher level they entered a corridor where the floor itself was a moving walkway. At its end stood a pair of impressive doors that led into a broad, equally impressive room.

Keill had been in such a room before. Its walls were lined with complex banks of communicators, data storage consoles, and other high-technology equipment. And the central area was dominated by a huge, heavy table, its surface covered with vid-screens, more computer equipment, sheaves of thin plastic printouts, all the detritus of an operational command centre.

But Keill had spared all that the briefest of glances. His attention had been fixed on the person who had been seated at the table, and who had loomed hugely to his feet as Keill and his guards entered.

A giant figure who seemed to have been shaped almost entirely of golden metal, like a perfect sculpture of the human form carved by some forgotten master.

But, in ugly contrast to the superb metal body, the golden giant had a face of flesh – the grey, puffy, small-featured face of a Golvician. It was made even uglier by the livid scar that puckered the grey flesh at the junction of the face and its golden metal hood.

Festinn's cold voice held a note of savage enjoyment. 'You have met the lord Altern before, Randor, have you not?'

Though Keill had half-expected this encounter, he felt a chill along his spine as the golden giant's small eyes fixed on him with a gaze of pure hatred.

Altern. Leader of the Deathwing. The One.

CHAPTER FOUR

For a prolonged moment, Keill and The One stood in silence, their gazes locked. Keill was remembering how he had last seen his enemy – when he had discovered that The One's golden body was not permanently united with his flesh, as a cyborg's body would be. It was an exo-skeleton, a covering of high-technology armour linked by servo-mechanisms to The One's real body. On their previous encounter Keill had wrecked the metal body, and had seen The One as he truly was.

Whatever mutating effect the planet Golvic had had on its human population – and Keill had no doubt that it was one of the Altered Worlds – it had wreaked terrible havoc on the being who was The One. His face and head were normal, for a Golvician, but his true body was horribly misshapen, tiny and twisted, with spindly withered arms and useless legs that were little more than tentacles. Without the golden armour he was nearly helpless, barely able to wriggle along the ground.

Now he had been supplied, by Golvician technology, with a new metal body. Once again he was a golden giant, as fearsome as before, and perhaps for Keill even more dangerous.

The One broke the silence, still without taking his hate-filled gaze from Keill.

'Festinn, you have done exceedingly well.' The voice was hollow and flat, lacking all

life and resonance, as Keill remembered it. 'You shall be rewarded.'

'My thanks, lord.' Festinn's cold tones were tinged with respect.

'But I am preoccupied with many matters,' The One went on, 'and have no time for Randor now. Take him to the guardroom, until I summon you.'

'As you wish, lord.'

The One resumed his seat at the table, still with his eyes fixed on Keill.

'You are a fool, legionary,' the hollow voice said. 'You have been fortunate in the past, and have cost me many good men. But you have been opposing something of whose power you have not the slightest conception. And your time of good fortune is at an end.'

Keill remained silent, and his gaze remained steady – but he smiled slightly, derisively.

The One's puffy lips tightened, and one golden hand unconsciously reached up to touch the scar at the edge of his face. The small eyes shifted towards Festinn.

'Take him away,' The One ordered. 'And, Festinn – *watch him!*'

The guardroom lay deep in the bowels of one of the building's distant wings. Again Keill moved under the guns of the Golvician escort, with Festinn preceding, through a series of broad corridors. The passageways were as straight as the roads of Golv City, and their floors were all moving walkways as before, divided in two, to carry people in opposite directions.

Keill stood impassively throughout their progress, but his mind was busily memorising their route through the labyrinth of the vast structure, noticing that the corridors were almost deserted as they moved farther from the great hall.

And his body was occupied too – exerting unseen pressure against the body-shackle. By the time they had reached the guardroom, the shackle was painfully tight.

The room was bare, windowless and bleak, but it did not seem to have the special features of the cage on the spaceship. As if to underline its lower level of security, Festinn ordered Keill to stretch out on the floor, and positioned the guards within the room, spread out against the walls several paces from Keill, their rifles ready.

Then Festinn left the room, with a final reminder to the guards of the need for total watchfulness. Keill was glad to see him go, knowing how much more dangerous he was than any Golvician soldier. No one became the Deathwing's principal assassin, he knew, without prodigious skills – and an equal capacity for evil.

Ignoring the silent guards, Keill turned his attention back to the body-shackle.

By then the shackle felt like an oversized vice, cramping and squeezing his flesh painfully. But Keill blocked the pain from his mind, and continued to exert pressure. The process was so gradual that the watchful guards could have seen no movement. Yet steadily, the shackle's painful grip was tightening.

'I'll put you into overdrive, Keill told it grimly, and see which of us breaks down first.

Time drifted past. All of Keill's steely concentration was turned inwards, to control his movements, to resist the increasing pain of the shackle's constriction. Within a short while he could feel a patch of heat against his upper back, and guessed with satisfaction that the shackle's inner power source was heating up with the strain. Soon it grew red-hot, adding that pain to the growing torment of the constriction.

But it was only his flesh that was being hurt. His bones, he knew, could withstand more force than the shackle could exert. He continued his outward push, as imperceptibly as before. And the shackle continued to compress him more and more tightly.

At last, one of the guards leaned slightly forward, and gave a small start of surprise.

As the guard stepped forward, Keill closed his eyes to slits, let his mouth sag open, and gave a low, strangled moan. The guard leaned over, and his eyes widened as he

looked at the small dials on the side of the body-shackle. Instantly he turned, with a muffled aside to the others, and hurried from the room.

Keill lay still, while the twin agonies gained in strength – the cruel compression of his flesh, the searing heat at his back. The body-shackle's now white-hot power source was only minutes from burning out, balked finally by Keill's uncrushable bones.

But the door was flung open and Festinn entered, followed by the nervous guard.

'...must be a malfunction,' the guard was saying. 'He has not moved, yet the shackle is crushing him, and seems to be overheating.'

Festinn bent close to Keill, who was lying as if half-dead, his controlled breathing almost undetectable. 'He may be attempting suicide,' Festinn snapped. 'Death before dishonour – just what a legionary might do. But he will not escape The One so easily. Raise him.'

Hands grasped Keill, lifting him roughly from the floor, and Festinn reached to open the invisible seam of the shackle. At once the agony receded from Keill's body. The relief to his bruised flesh was almost overpowering, but Keill ignored it as he had ignored the pain. He saw, through his slitted eyes, that Festinn was examining the shackle closely, with the guard who had gone to fetch him. Two of the other guards were supporting Keill on his feet, while he let his body sag as a dead weight. And the fourth guard stood by uneasily, his rifle barrel drooping.

The bruising of the flesh on his chest and arms did not slow Keill down. Without warning the two guards holding him were flung savagely, effortlessly aside, and Keill was leaping at Festinn.

The assassin's own speed was exceptional. He dropped the shackle, and one hand flashed to the gun at his belt. But he had no chance to fire it. Keill grasped and spun him, in a painful, one-handed restraining hold, while his other hand clamped on to Festinn's gun and wrenched it away. Using Festinn as a shield, Keill backed towards the door.

'How expendable do your men think *you* are, Festinn?' he snarled.

The answer came at once, as the two guards still standing swung their rifles up. But they had no chance to use them. The lethal beam of Keill's gun scythed across their chests.

As they collapsed, their tunics ablaze, Keill caught a movement on the edge of his vision. One of the guards he had hurled aside lay motionless, but the other had recovered his senses, and his rifle. In the instant before it fired, Keill flung Festinn towards it.

The beam bit deep into the assassin's shoulder. And then the two bodies collided, tumbling to the floor in a painful heap, as Keill sprang for the door.

His route lay clearly mapped in his mind, as he sprinted along the moving walkways in the corridors, Festinn's gun ready in his hand. Ahead of him the walkways were still deserted, and so he could spare part of his attention when Glr's voice spoke to him.

Keill, I do not wish to distract you. But you are in grave danger.

'*You don't have to tell me,*' Keill said, and began a quick outline of what had been happening.

There is a greater danger than The One, Glr interrupted, her voice sombre. *From the centre of that building I have sensed emanations that are more frightening than anything I have encountered in this galaxy.*

Keill slowed his headlong rush, puzzled. *'Some kind of telepath?'*

Not precisely, Glr said. *If it is a mind, I cannot penetrate it. Nor do I wish to. It is extremely powerful, and extremely evil.*

Keill was disturbed by her tone as much as her words. It was unlike Glr to be so troubled – there was no lack of courage within that small being.

'I'll go *and have a look*—' he began.

No! The word was almost a scream. *Stay away from it! Get out of that building!*

'I will, soon,' Keill said soothingly. 'But I didn't come here to hide from things.'

Glr might have continued to argue. But she sensed, in the same instant that Keill did, that he had something else to occupy his attention.

From a door along the passage ahead, an armed Golvician soldier was emerging.

CHAPTER FIVE

The soldier made the mistake of freezing with shock, as he saw Keill hurtling towards him. Before he could begin to reach for his weapon, the rigid fingers of Keill's left hand had sunk deep into the soldier's belly – and as he doubled over with an explosive grunt of pain, a hard fist thudded into the bone behind his ear.

Warily Keill peered into the room the soldier had come from, and gratefully saw that it was empty. He dragged the soldier in, swiftly stripped the long green tunic and heavy helmet from the limp form and pulled them on over his own uniform, indifferent to the poor fit. At least the belt had a clip for the energy handgun, so that he could ignore the more unwieldy rifle that the soldier had carried.

He paused for a moment, studying the inert form of the soldier. This one, like some of the other Golvicians he had seen, wore one of the thin, pale cords around his head. If it is a badge of rank, Keill thought, should I take it? He tugged at it briefly, but it was tightly fastened – yet with no visible clip or opening.

In the end, knowing he had no time to waste, he abandoned it. He turned to the door and walked calmly, unhurriedly away along the still-deserted corridor. Until someone looks closely at my face, he thought, I might get away with this.

In fact he was confident that the disguise could have taken him safely out of the building. But instead he changed course. Despite the seriousness of Glr's warning, he needed to know what it was that could stir such fear in his little companion.

There were a few other people in the corridors now, as he approached the building's centre, and he readied himself for instant action if it was needed. But the others moved past indifferently, preoccupied with their own business. Once a full squad of soldiers charged past him, in the opposite direction, but Keill had turned away slightly so that they saw only a green-uniformed back. They rushed on, ignoring him.

On their way to the guardroom, Keill guessed. The alarm must be out by now.

Even so, he continued to move on, rising several levels on the broad ramps. Soon his unerring sense of direction told him that he had reached the central area of the huge rambling complex. And there he began to find that many of the corridors seemed to be leading inwards, towards one section, like the radiating spokes of a wheel. At the ends of all of these corridors there were solid doors, guarded by at least two soldiers.

When he had been balked in this way for the fourth time, he made up his mind. The risk was no greater than if he remained at large in the corridors, where every Golvician soldier would soon be searching for him. Calmly he moved along one of the corridors, towards the heavy doors.

The two guards had obviously not yet heard that an escaped prisoner was at large. They seemed bored and indifferent, barely sparing him a glance as he drew near. But when he did not pause, when his hand reached out towards the doors, their rifles snapped up.

'You know you're not allowed—' one of them began.

He did not finish the sentence – partly because the shock of seeing Keill's non-Golvician face had only just reached his awareness, and partly because in the same moment all his awareness was cut off. Keill chopped down with measured power at the sides of both guards' necks, just at the junction of helmet and high collar. The guards folded

as if their legs had suddenly developed extra joints, and Keill pushed at once through the heavy doors.

Beyond them there was a small, deserted space that led to another set of doors. And these were of thick, multi-layered metal, immensely strong, and tightly locked.

Keill drew his gun. No point now in going backwards, he thought.

The beam from his gun bit hungrily into the narrow seam between the doors. Metal flared and melted under the onslaught, and in a few moments the blazing energy had done its work. The doors sagged open, and Keill slipped through, gun ready.

He found himself on a metal gantry, a narrow platform with a low railing on one side. The gantry ran round the outer perimeter of a broad, deep space – like an enormous open shaft, extending downwards at least two levels, and upwards the same distance.

But Keill was barely aware of those details, nor of the glittering incomprehensible machinery that jutted here and there from the shaft's gleaming metal walls.

His stunned gaze was fixed instead on what the shaft contained.

It floated below the gantry where he stood, near the base of the shaft, supported by an almost invisible force field. It was ovoid in shape, about three times the size of a human body. And it was multi-coloured, its hue changing constantly with the dazzling, luminous flow of energy that bathed its surface.

And from that surface, reaching upwards almost the full height of the shaft, seeming to fill all of its breadth, was a myriad of slender, almost colourless tendrils – hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, the thickness of light cords. They were in ceaseless motion, writhing, coiling, flailing, entwining, as if blindly groping through the air for some unseen prey.

Automatically Keill drew back from the edge of the gantry as some of the pale tendrils swept in his direction. And the unexpectedness of the sight, the mystery and alienness of it. had their effect even on his honed alertness.

So he had no warning when a giant golden arm closed around his throat in a crushing grip, and a golden metal hand clamped immovably on to his gun, jerking it from his grasp.

At once Keill searched for leverage for a throw that would break the grip. And he might have succeeded, despite the frightening strength of the huge metal body. But the golden giant flung him away, towards the edge of the gantry, raising the energy gun.

'Be still, Randor,' the hollow voice of The One said. 'You have trespassed where only I may enter, but I will make you welcome. You have achieved the final goal of your long search. Relish the achievement while you may.'

The words resounded within Keill's mind. Achieved my goal? Can that mean what it seems to mean?

Again a twisting cluster of tendrils swung towards him from the thing in the shaft. As he moved aside, the giant's hollow laughter rang out.

'Do not draw away, Randor. Here is what you wished to find. Here is the object of your quest. Step forward, Randor – and meet the Master.'

Keill felt as if his heart had stopped, as if his body had turned to frozen stone. 'This... this *thing*... is the Warlord?'

'No, legionary.'

The reply came not from The One but from above Keill's head. He looked up, and saw that into the wall of the shaft a deep, spacious alcove had been constructed. He could not see who or what was within the alcove, but the voice had sounded like many people speaking in uncannily perfect unison.

'No, Keill Randor,' the unseen voice repeated. 'That is not the Warlord. I am.'

His mind whirling with shock, Keill climbed a spiral metal staircase, urged on by The One's gun. When he emerged, within the wide chamber contained in the alcove, shock piled upon

shock. He was facing twenty-four Golvicians, of both sexes and various ages, wearing plain robes. They sat in heavy, mechanised chairs, their bodies thin, huddled, withered. And Keill saw that the chairs were life-support extensions, attached to a bulky console at the centre of a circle formed by the chairs, to keep the wasted bodies alive.

But also from the console rose twenty-four thick, smooth cables, like heavy power leads.

Which in a way they were, Keill guessed with sudden horror. Despite their greater thickness, the cables bore a clear resemblance to the tendrils that rose from the thing in the shaft.

And the cables reached out from the console to twine their ends round the heads of the twenty-four seated people.

'What...!' Keill fought the sickness that rose in his throat. 'What are you? What is *it*?'

'Tell him, Altern.' The twenty-four mouths moved perfectly, eerily together, as if their owners were mechanical dolls all working on the same circuit. The single voice that emerged was soft, even mild. 'It will be interesting to assess his reaction.'

The One inclined his golden head. 'Master.' And with an evil pleasure, he replied to Keill's question.

The thing in the shaft, he said, had been named Arachnis. It was the ultimate achievement of Golvician technology. It was partly organic, but also partly pure energy – supplied by the luminous flow of power that washed over it from the energised walls of the shaft. Arachnis was not truly alive, nor did it have a mind. In a way it was like a huge, complex, artificial version of the ganglia in the human brain.

But its function was to *unite* human minds – and, in some cases, to enlarge their capability.

The Twenty-four, continued The One, were its creators, the greatest geniuses of Golvic. At first, Arachnis had been much smaller. But even then, at the beginning, when the Twenty-four had placed the heavier tendrils on their heads, it had done what it had been created for. It had united the Twenty-four into a single supermind.

And that supermind had been growing more powerful as Arachnis, fed by the energies of the shaft, had grown larger. Now the Twenty-four formed the supreme intelligence of the galaxy, said The One. And they had recognised their destiny – to rule over all the Inhabited Worlds.

So they had devised their plan, which meant spreading the destruction of war through a host of carefully selected planets. The plan had also meant the erasure of enemies, The One added with a gloating laugh – including the Legions of Moros.

'And Arachnis serves the Master in another way,' The One went on. 'It provides him with a mental link, through which he can now reach across vast distances, even into space, to control his servants.'

'Servants?' Keill asked hoarsely, hardly able to believe the appalling tale he was hearing.

'Slaves, if you prefer,' The One replied blandly.

The terrible account went on. Some served the Twenty-four willingly, Keill heard, like The One and all the Deathwing. So they were merely guided by their Master's orders, relayed through The One. But others needed to be coerced and controlled. And so they had their minds overcome by the Arachnis link – a fragment of tendril, round their heads.

'Once the initial link is made,' The One said, 'the rest of the tendril can be withdrawn. Yet the connection remains – over almost any distance. And those in the link are powerless, no longer able to control their own being. They can perform no actions, think no thoughts, other than as the Master directs.'

The grey lips twisted in a brutal smile. 'And if the tendril fragment is removed from their heads, their minds seldom survive. They become no more than empty, mindless shells.'

Keill's fists clenched. Even his control could barely hold back the storming rage and hatred that had begun to seethe within him in the face of the madness, the cruelty, the sheer stark evil, that had been spawned by the twenty-four seated figures before him.

The One continued, picturing the day to come when the reach of the Arachnis link would extend the Master's power across the galaxy. By then the Master's plan would be Rearing its climax, in the final holocaust of galactic war. But Keill scarcely heard the words. He was concentrating on regaining his control, building his combat readiness.

He seemed to be standing half-slumped, as if overcome by what he had learned. The One, arrogantly confident as ever, was not even looking directly at him, as he concluded his blood-chilling story.

And Keill exploded into a hurtling leap.

The leap ended with the hammering impact of his boot into The One's golden midriff. As the metal giant staggered back, Keill found his balance and swung round to the Twenty-four.

Inexplicably, they were smiling. Inexplicably, as he regained his feet, The One was laughing.

And Keill, about to leap again, felt as if he had stepped into the clinging, gossamer strands of a giant spiderweb.

He tried to fling himself away, in frantic desperation. But the web-like tendrils of Arachnis clung, entangling him as he fought. And then, besides the hundred-fold grip on his body, he felt a feather-light touch on his brow.

As black despair swept over him like a tidal wave he heard in his mind, remote and fading, Glr's wild scream of terror.

Then silence and darkness descended. And that which had been Keill Randor had ceased to be.

PART TWO

SLAVE OF ARACHNIS

CHAPTER SIX

It was awareness, but without comprehension.

It was perception, but without reaction.

Sight, hearing, all the senses were unimpaired, so that information poured as it always had into the brain. But the mind that inhabited the brain was unable to assess, understand or use the flow of data. The flow by-passed the mind, funnelling directly to those who controlled the brain.

In the same way, messages flowed *from* the brain, along the nervous system, and the body responded as smoothly and efficiently as ever. But the messages originated from a different source, also by-passing the mind that lived within the brain.

The human mind may always remain something of a mystery. It is said that mind cannot perceive itself entirely, and so can never study itself properly. But human minds are

aware of themselves. It is that self-awareness which sets humans apart from beasts, for a beast is said to have no sense of 'I'.

What, though, if barriers are erected within the mind, by some outside force? What if the input of information, the output of governing messages, are rechannelled? What if the inner self, the sense of 'I', is walled off, in a terrible void of isolation that does not seem to differ from the depths of total insanity?

The self, the 'I', will struggle feebly for a while. But, in most cases, it lacks the resources to function in a void. It has been cut off from too many of its necessary connections with the mind – its own 'life support' system.

Somewhere in the brain the memory will still be working, storing information. But the inner self has no access to the data, and so cannot even confirm its own identity.

Somewhere the reason, the imagination, the intelligence will still be working, waiting for some stimulus to spur them into assessing, deciding, responding. But they too are cut off from the isolated self. Neither stimulus nor response reaches past the barriers.

Somewhere even the emotions and instincts are still alive – the capacity to feel anger or fear, to laugh or weep. But their normal channels have also been blocked, and they cannot touch or activate the self.

So after a while, in most cases, the sense of self at the core of the mind will begin to fade, shrivel, dissolve. Slowly, behind the barriers that imprison it, it will die.

Then the brain and body that the self had once inhabited become fully those of a puppet, a robot. And if the outer controls should be removed, the brain and body would be as helpless, as useless, as a puppet without strings, a robot without a power source.

When the tendril of Arachnis wrapped round Keill Randor's head, the barriers were instantly slammed shut in his mind. The tendril broke away, closing upon itself to form a tight cord encircling the skull, but the link remained, even though the brain was no longer directly connected to Arachnis.

And through that link, at the unimaginable speed of thought, the supermind of the Twenty-four *reprogrammed* Keill's mind, to make him their puppet, their robot.

If the isolated inner centre of Keill's being had been able to make a noise, it would have been an endless scream.

But it could not. Curled in the void at the core of his mind, Keill's sense of self merely floated – in an endless deprivation, forgetful of the past, unmindful of the future, unaffected by events.

For a while the robot that had been Keill Randor was left mostly alone, in a narrow, bleak room in one of the extensions of the vast Deathwing building. There he waited passively, sitting on the edge of a hard bunk and staring emptily at the wall. He was unaware of the activity that was going on within the mind that was no longer his own.

The Arachnis link did not only wall off Keill's control over his own being. It also gave the Twenty-four full access to all of his knowledge and memories. In no time they had extracted every scrap of information about the Overseers, their hidden asteroid, and their far-flung monitoring devices. They had studied every detail of Keill's life since the destruction of Moros – including the fact of his remade skeleton. And they had dug out all that Keill knew about Glr.

They did not learn where the Overseers' base was located, nor where Glr was hiding on Golvic, for Keill did not know. But every other secret contained in Keill's mind had been uncovered and opened like a book.

In his narrow room, passive as a disconnected machine, Keill knew nothing of what had been revealed. He merely waited, while at the core of what had been his mind his inner self curled more tightly, not even aware of how close it was to its final dissolution.

Yet there was a unique quality within that isolated inner self of Keill Randor. Something that retained a spark of strength, that fought to resist its destruction.

The legendary self-discipline and control of the Legions of Moros did not grow solely from the ceaseless, rigorous training imposed on every legionary from earliest infancy. The training merely reinforced something that was bred into the Legions, implanted in their very genes, over the centuries of their life on Moros. So deeply was it embedded, so unyielding was its strength, that it might have been a mutation in its own right.

It was the resolute, indomitable, diamond-hard *will* of a legionary.

And at the deepest core of the robot-being that Keill Randor had become, his will endured.

It was blind, wordless, cut off from all sense of identity, purpose or control. But it was intact – for it simply fell back on its last, defiant, defensive position, its ultimate resource. The pure determination to survive.

Steadfastly, unconquerably, the will of a legionary kept what remained of the real Keill Randor, the essence of his true self, intact and alive. And waiting.

Days passed, though the robot Keill did not measure their passing. But at last green-tunicked Golvicians came to take Keill from his silent room, through the corridors of the huge building, into the presence of a golden giant, whose grey puffy lips wore an evil smile of triumph. As did the narrow face of another man, waiting with the giant – a man whose eyes glowed oddly, and whose right shoulder was heavily bandaged.

The robot Keill was indifferent to their expressions. He stared straight ahead, empty-eyed.

'His functions, his skills, will be quite unimpaired, Festinn, I assure you,' The One said.

Festinn nodded, gazing thoughtfully at Keill. Without warning he lashed out his left fist, a blindingly swift blow at Keill's face.

But reflexes are automatic, not needing the conscious control of a mind. Keill's reflexes, and all his power and speed, had not been damaged by the Arachnis link. Festinn's fist struck empty air as Keill swayed aside – and then Keill's own hand was chopping down in a counter-blow that might have broken Festinn's one good arm.

But the chop was not completed. Keill froze like a statue, as the controlling supermind of the Twenty-four clamped on its restraints. Then he relaxed, and resumed his former stance, staring blankly into nothingness.

'Excellent,' Festinn said. He stepped closer to Keill, grinning into the empty eyes. 'You are to be honoured, Randor,' he said mockingly. 'The very cream of the Deathwing has assembled, to receive the benefit of your guidance.'

The gloating laughter that followed meant as little to Keill as the words.

Festinn took him then to another room – broad, bare, with a few items of gymnasium equipment scattered at one end. Clustered idly at that end was an assortment of humans – a dozen of them. Some of them seemed wholly normal, almost ordinary, save for a trace of cruelty in the set of their mouths, a flinty coldness in their eyes.

But among them were several whose appearance was weirdly different from the human norm.

Two might have seemed to be Golvicians, at first glance. But the livid green of their covering was not that of Golvician tunics. They were naked to the waist, and the green was the colour of their ridged, reptilian skin.

Another of the group was a skeletally thin woman, her skin a bleached white, looking even more deathlike by contrast with her shock of black hair and her bright scarlet jumpsuit, which had heavy metal bracelets at the wrists.

Another was a misshapen figure that seemed more beast than man – short bowed legs and immensely long arms, dangling almost to the floor, extended even more by multi-jointed fingers three times longer than a normal human's.

Yet another was an unnaturally broad and bulky dwarf – his face almost hidden in a massive black beard, his body covered with segmented, glittering armour like a mosaic made with mirrors – holding in one fist a short, heavy baton of black metal.

Once Keill might have studied them with interest, as examples of the Altered Worlds. But the robot Keill remained empty-eyed, indifferent, as he was led towards them.

'Here comes our teacher,' a sneering voice from the group called out.

The woman in scarlet rose to her feet, bloodless lips set in a thin line. 'Festinn, this is an outrage!' she said sharply.

A chorus of angry mutterings arose in agreement from the group around her.

'Silence!' Festinn shouted, eyes blazing. As the group quietened, he swept the fury of his gaze across them.

'This is by direct order of The One,' he snapped. 'We are well aware of your abilities, your successes, your skill with your own chosen weapons. But now we wish you to extend yourselves!'

His voice took on a conspiratorial tone. 'It is only just. Randor was responsible for destroying The One's earlier plan for a special strike force. So now he can put the final touches on the new one!'

Cold smiles appeared on the faces of some of the group, and there was a rumble of cruel laughter.

'Each of you,' Festinn went on, 'will be responsible for a section of The One's special task force. Each unit must be as formidable, as invincible, as a command group of the Legions of Moros themselves.' He grinned viciously. 'So we will use our tame legionary, to polish your skills with other weapons, besides your favourites. To perfect your ability to kill without weapons. To advance your knowledge of many techniques – infiltration, ambush, high-speed raiding, much more.

'When this course of instruction is over, each unit of the Deathwing will be the equal of an army, on any planet of the galaxy!'

He had won them over. The hard faces now wore coldly eager smiles – except for the woman in scarlet, who stood apart from the others, scowling angrily.

The entire scene meant nothing to the robot Keill. Nor did the intense activity of the days that followed, as the inner programming of Keill's enslaved mind directed his efforts.

Much time was spent in practice with the most advanced weapon of the Inhabited Worlds, the energy gun. There the armoured dwarf proved most adept, for his preferred weapon was the heat-wand, the metal baton that fired a controlled ray of heat, almost as powerful as the energy beam.

With other hand-weapons, the green-skinned reptilian pair came into their own. They were experts with a lethal weapon formed from razor-edged blades, fanning out into a disc-like circle, like the petals of a flower – which gave the weapon its name, the blood-rose. They adapted readily to a variety of other bladed weapons, and weapons to be thrown, that Keill demonstrated.

In unarmed combat, the long-armed monkey-man was outstanding, with his immense agility and wiry strength. His skill was that of the stealthy assassin – those unnaturally long fingers had crushed many a throat. He followed avidly Keill's instructions about the holds and blows, to pressure points and nerve centres, that would instantly disable or kill.

So long, wearying days went by. Soon some of the Deathwing group were detailed to continue the special training of the others, while Keill worked with the less adept. Increasingly, each of them grew more skilled, more deadly. And all of them were being welded into a tight and murderously effective combat unit.

All except the woman in scarlet, who did no more than go grudgingly through the motions, whose angry scowl remained in place whenever she looked at Festinn, or at Keill.

At last what patience Festinn possessed came to an end. The group were in the gymnasium again, where Keill was tirelessly demonstrating a complex counter move, in unarmed combat, designed to leave an attacker with shattered vertebrae. The woman in scarlet was pointedly paying scant attention, and Festinn's eyes were flaring with anger.

'We can't be expected to learn all a legionary's tricks in two or three weeks,' the woman spat.

'You know very well what is expected,' Festinn snapped. 'Now continue at once!'

'Why should I bother?' the woman shouted. She tapped her heavy bracelets meaningfully. 'There's no one alive who can get near enough to use that hold on me!'

'Marska,' Festinn said, his voice dangerously cold, 'you will do so because I order it. Or I may instruct Randor not to hold back, so that you will learn how easily your back can truly be broken.'

'Can it?' the woman raged. 'Let's see how easily he can counter *this!*'

She wheeled, and her right arm snapped forward. And from the bracelet flamed a burst of pure energy – not a beam, but a controlled, shaped bolt, like a fireball.

Keill had been standing several paces away, robot-patient, not even looking at the quarrelling pair. But his reflexes were intact still. He moved almost casually, and the fireball flashed harmlessly past him, to explode against the far wall, blasting a gaping hole in its smooth metal.

The rest of the Deathwing turned to look at Marska – and went very still. There was even a trace of fear in some of their eyes. For Marska's bone-thin body was suspended high in the air, by the crushing grip of two huge golden hands on her wrists. The One had come unannounced among them, and he was angry.

'You will be punished, Marska,' the hollow voice was saying, 'until you understand. I intend the Deathwing to be the supreme fighting force in the galaxy. You will give all your effort to it, fully and willingly, or I will put an end to you.'

The golden hands opened, and Marska fell to the floor in a huddled, terrified heap.

'As for Randor,' The One went on, 'should a time come when he is to be killed, it is I – and only I – who shall have that pleasure.'

He turned to Festinn. 'This period of instruction will shortly end. The spacecraft are now being assembled, and the Master is preparing for transfer.'

Festinn's eyes glittered. 'Then the base has been located, and is suitable?'

'Entirely,' The One said. 'It was not difficult for our technology to locate some of the monitoring devices, and eventually to trace their messages back to their origin.'

He glanced at Keill with a small evil smile. 'How unfortunate that Randor cannot appreciate the irony – that he and his Overseers have provided the ideal command centre, from which the Master can complete his conquest of the galaxy.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

The One's ominous words meant no more to Keill than all the others that were spoken to him in those days. And he was just as unaffected by the change in his routine. Soon after that day, he no longer met and worked with the Deathwing. Now he was assigned more simple duties as an instructor for Golvician soldiers.

'These troops will form the special units led by the members of the Deathwing,' Festinn told him, still taking a perverse pleasure in speaking to Keill as if he could

understand. 'They will strike the final, disruptive hammer blows that will complete the Master's victory, once the final galactic war is ended. Won't you be proud to know how you have contributed to that victory?'

And he laughed viciously into Keill's empty robot face.

In the days that followed, squad after squad of soldiers assembled with Keill for hours of unceasing instruction. Within the Deathwing building they acquired some of the basic skills of unarmed combat – moves and defences that the children of Moros would have mastered by the age of eight. Out in the empty desert beyond Golv City, Keill directed the soldiers' practice with handgun and rifle. He led them through basic assault patterns, and defensive regrouping. He demonstrated the close-combat use of military flyers. He improved their speed, mobility, discipline and tactical awareness.

Through all those days his body moved with all of its former flowing power. He gave orders and instructions with crisp efficiency. Yet the movements, the words, were not his. All his supreme military skills were at the command now of another mind. The blankness of his eyes did not alter for a moment.

But eventually those days, too, came to an end. Keill travelled with the soldiers, and several flyers full of Golvician technicians, to the Golv City spaceport. There he waited passively as the soldiers and some of the technicians filed on to a vast spacecraft, a troop carrier, that finally lumbered with thunderous power up from the port to vanish into the chill grey sky of Golvic.

And Festinn came again to gloat.

'You should know that the Deathwing assault on the new base was successful, almost comically easy,' he said. 'Now those men will prepare the way for the Master. And you, Randor, are to lend your services to the transfer.'

He stepped closer, peering hopefully into Keill's eyes. 'Is there not some part of you left,' he murmured, half to himself, 'to feel anguish over what has been done?'

But there was not. The robot Keill went as blankly as ever about his new duties. They concerned another giant spaceship, the largest type of transport freighter that could be landed on a planet. A small army of technicians laboured in and around it, and Keill laboured among them.

The whole interior of the ship was ripped out, and in the shell a new structure began to take shape. It took the form of a deep well, or shaft, constructed from an unusual metal that arrived at the spaceport in pre-formed sections, to be assembled. Within the shaft a complex array of delicate, high-technology equipment was fitted, all sheathed in the same unique metal, and then tested and re-tested, while more alterations went on in the other sections of the freighter.

Keill did what he had to do, without curiosity or comprehension. In the same way, he dutifully followed Festinn, many days later, into one of the sleek flyers, which carried them swiftly back to the Deathwing building in Golv City.

'The transfer will go smoothly,' Festinn said. 'But you need not be troubled by the Master's departure. His power is immense. He will be able to reach you, even from the new base. Nothing will change.'

As always, the mocking laughter had no more effect on Keill than the words.

But it was true. Even after the great freighter also lifted off with its burden, Keill's days remained the same. The training of new squads of soldiers continued, and so did the constant jibes and mockery from Festinn.

And there were other experiences that continued – things that had been happening throughout all the days and weeks of his robot existence. But these seemed to have their origin from *within* the empty regions of his enslaved mind – though they meant no more to him than outer events.

One of the inner experiences took the form of a frequent, fragmentary image of a large ovoid shape, glowing with the changing flow of the energies that bathed it, sprouting

countless long tendrils that writhed in unending motion, like some giant, alien, undersea plant.

With it came another recurring image, of twenty-four serenely smiling people, wearing what looked like thick coronets around their heads. They seemed always to be whispering, murmuring, tugging, urging, within Keill's brain.

The robot Keill did not understand these images, nor was he troubled by them.

Equally, he was untroubled by another awareness, within his robot-mind. It appeared less often than the others, and mostly at night, while Keill lay on his narrow bunk and stared obliviously at the bare ceiling, waiting for the greater oblivion of sleep.

This further awareness was of some unknown presence, roaming through the reshaped channels and passages of his mind. There it seemed to be searching, probing, testing the strengths of the barriers that had been imposed by the Arachnis link.

The presence did not ever remain for long. Nor did it have any effect on the barriers, or on Keill. It might have been a dream – if it is possible for robots, or puppets, to have dreams.

Once again, a time came when Keill was taken away from a morning of instruction with the new Golvician squads, and marched through the corridors of the building to the huge room that had been the Deathwing command centre. Now a good deal of the equipment had been removed, though several computer units and communication devices remained. So did the broad, heavy table at the room's centre – and behind it sat Festinn, his shoulder now healed and no longer bandaged, his eyes glowing as mercilessly as ever.

'You may be pleased to know,' he smiled mockingly, 'that you are to suspend your duties as instructor for a while. There is another task for you.'

He rose and moved forward, watching Keill's eyes, still hoping for some glimmer of response, some hint of pain and despair.

'We have been receiving many reports,' he went on, 'of disruptive activity, minor sabotage, in Golv City. It seems some kind of winged alien creature is on the rampage. And you know all about that creature, don't you, Randor?'

The robot Keill replied, directed by the power that owned his mind, in a voice as bleak as a polar wind. 'I know about her.'

'Her?' Festinn leered, arching his eyebrows. 'Yes, of course, it is female, isn't it? You must tell me more about that relationship, one day.' The ugly smile faded. 'But for now, it will be your task to put an end to the relationship. The creature has eluded the militia for weeks. But it will not elude you, Randor, since you know it so well.'

Festinn leaned closer, eyes ablaze, almost spitting the words into Keill's face.

'You will go out into the city, in the company of myself and a squad of riflemen. You will lead our search for this creature. And when we locate it, wherever it may be hiding – then *you*, Randor, you personally, will kill it.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

The chill climate of Golvic had produced a biting wind, with frequent scudding bursts of rain that felt like particles of solid ice. It was enough to make Festinn duck his head and wince with discomfort, while the six Golvicians following him huddled as deeply as they could into their tunics' collars and plodded sullenly on.

Keill moved at the head of the file of men, efficient and single-minded. He felt no

discomfort from the knife-edged wind; he felt no concern over the reason for the expedition. His robot-mind had been given its directive. Without hesitation he was going about his duty.

Under Festinn's command they had been touring Golv City for some time, sweeping above the wintry streets in a sleek, fast flyer. At intervals they had landed, to look closely at places where signs remained of the winged creature that Festinn had said was at large in the city.

At one spot, in a seedy backwater of the giant city, with low, crumbling buildings and ill-dressed residents, they had studied damage to a foodstore, from which packets of food concentrates had been stolen. The thief could not have been a Golvician, because the access had been through a nearly inaccessible upper-storey window, and there had been no sign of the use of a ladder or other climbing equipment.

At another spot, a building worker had chanced to look out of a window and had seen the wrappings of some food-concentrate packets on a ledge. He had been amazed, and had reported it, for the ledge was high on one of the more lofty towers of the city. And the windows, in deference to Golvician weather, were not designed to open.

At still another place, in a sector of the city containing the huge, solid structures of heavy industry, a maintenance worker had actually caught a glimpse of the winged creature, swooping towards him within the shadowy expanses of a giant power station. But it had only been a glimpse, for a blow on the head had sent him toppling into darkness.

Moments later, nearly a third of Golv City had been plunged into darkness, when a major feed line into the power grid had been skilfully disrupted.

Now Keill and the other searchers were returning to the flyer after examining the scene of the latest, and perhaps most serious, event. A Golvician militiaman, returning to barracks the previous night, had been attacked. He had not seen his attacker, but had heard an odd sound, as if someone had been flapping a sheet of cloth above him.

When he awoke, with a bruised and aching head, his energy gun had been missing.

Back in the flyer, relaxing with the Golvicians in its heated interior, Festinn turned inquiringly to Keill.

He knew that by then the Twenty-four would have reviewed the data. And that small portion of their supermind which controlled Keill Randor would have access to everything that Keill's mind contained about the winged alien, to form their conclusions. Those conclusions would be communicated to Festinn through Keill himself, speaking under their guidance, as if he was merely a mechanism, a walking communicator.

'The creature called Glr,' Keill said, 'is engaging in random activity.' His voice was as empty as his facial expression, showing no awareness of the words' meaning. 'There is no visible pattern. It is doubtful whether she has any fixed base, or any logical, predictable plan of action.'

'Then, with respect,' Festinn replied, 'how are we to find it?'

'She is clearly seeking to attract attention, perhaps hoping to draw me out from the Deathwing headquarters. She may believe that she can release me from Arachnis.'

The dead voice of Keill, speaking so flatly of his own enslavement, might have caused an ordinary man to shudder, Festinn merely raised a curious eyebrow.

'Can it do so? It is telepathic...'

'She cannot do so with mental powers alone,' Keill's empty voice replied. 'She can make only superficial contact with human minds. And even if she could reach deeply enough into my mind, she could not overcome the controls of Arachnis.'

'Surely it cannot hope to get close enough to remove the link physically,' Festinn mused. 'Which in any case would destroy what is left of Randor's mind.'

'She may not be aware of that,' the dull voice replied.

'Indeed,' Festinn said with a twisted smile. 'Clearly, then, we must continue the search – with you, Randor, as bait. The creature will undoubtedly show itself at some point.'

'No doubt,' Keill said. 'She is a telepath. She knows precisely where I am at any moment.'

Festinn laughed coldly. 'And that, Randor, will be its undoing.'

For the next few hours they continued their search more or less at random, sweeping the flyer over the entire area around the scene of Glr's attack on the militiaman. Frequently they landed on the roofs of the taller buildings in the area, emerging to search more carefully. And when they did so, Festinn and the men under his command no longer huddled so deeply into their tunics. They were watchful and cautious, knowing that they were now hunting not just a winged enemy, but a winged enemy armed with an energy gun.

But the search proved fruitless. And by the time that the first tinges of dusk had begun to darken the overcast sky, Festinn was feeling thoroughly disgruntled, as well as half-frozen. He was even beginning to doubt the conclusion of the Twenty-four, that Glr would sooner or later show herself if Keill was out in the city.

And so he was on the threshold of calling off the search, for the day, when the communicator in the flyer crackled into life.

'Sir!' The Golvician voice held a note of urgency. 'The winged creature has been located – on the main route to the spaceport! It has fired on two military flyers, and disabled them!'

Festinn gestured abruptly to the soldier at the controls of the flyer. 'Get us to the spaceport – top speed. And stop at nothing!' The vehicle leaped forward with a throaty roar of power, and Festinn leaned forward to the communicator. 'Did anyone return the fire? Was the creature hit?'

'No, sir. It showed itself for an instant, crippled the flyers, and was gone before anyone could shoot. But the pilots brought the flyers down safely, sir.'

'Then they are as lucky as they are stupid,' Festinn snapped. 'See that the spaceport guards are more alert.' He switched off and turned to Keill. 'The spaceport... Do you think your friend is planning to desert you?'

'I do not know what she is planning,' Keill said tonelessly.

'Of course not.' Festinn smiled. 'But you can tell me one thing. How fast can the creature fly?'

Keill looked out of the flyer's window. The buildings on either side seemed to be blurred and smeared, such was the speed of the vehicle's hurtling flight. And across the gulf of space, through the Arachnis link, the Twenty-four assessed his perceptions, compared them with data from his memory, and framed his reply.

'Not as fast as this, even in a short burst. Much less fast, over a distance.'

'Excellent.' Festinn settled back with satisfaction. 'Then we shall overtake it. Are you looking forward to seeing your friend again, Randor?' The cold laugh rang out. 'Once you have killed it, I may also let you have a last look at your own spaceship. For old times' sake.'

He laughed again. But Keill merely stared woodenly ahead at the darkening sky around them.

Full night had begun to gather by the time the flyer came within sight of the lights on the spaceport perimeter. There was a brighter area of light within the perimeter, as well – which, as they swooped down near ground level, defined itself as a merrily blazing fire.

Festinn did not need the breathless report over the communicator to know that Glr had reached the spaceport only moments before. And she had managed, without being spotted, to fire at and explode a power unit in a storage area.

'Let it burn!' Festinn was raging into the communicator. 'Put every man to the task of

finding that creature! Let me know the instant it is located!

But in fact it was Festinn himself who first had precise knowledge of Glr's location.

As the flyer dropped even lower, skimming the ground in a sweeping curve towards the spaceport entrance, an energy beam, stabbed towards it from the night sky. It struck with blazing accuracy at the front of the vehicle, melting and burning its way through the housing of the engine.

With power cut off, the flyer plunged to the ground. Bouncing, skidding and slewing over the rain-wet surface, it finally struck some unseen obstacle and rolled crashingly – once, twice, a third time – before finally coming to rest.

Almost immediately, Keill was squeezing out of a shattered window and coming to his feet. His reflexes and balance had as always operated automatically, curling him into a tight protective ball, so that he suffered only minor bruises in the crash. He was already moving away before Festinn and the others, groaning and dazed, had begun to disentangle themselves painfully from the shattered machinery.

'Randor!' Festinn shouted. 'Stop – wait there!'

But if Keill heard, he did not obey. He took his primary orders through his programming, via the Arachnis link. And he had been programmed to seek a winged alien, and kill it. When he had first emerged from the wrecked flyer, he had caught a glimpse of broad, membranous wings, soaring into the darkness towards the central area of the spaceport.

And like the obedient robot that he was, he had leaped in pursuit, freeing his energy gun from his belt as he ran.

Elsewhere on the broad plasticrete expanse of the spaceport, he could hear the cries of many men, the sound of running feet and clattering machinery. Some men were hurrying towards the wrecked flyer; others were still milling around the scene of the fire, some distance to Keill's left. But the noises held no meaning for him, and he ran on, ignoring them.

The icy wind moaned around him, dashing a flurry of bitter rain into his eyes. He blinked – and as his vision cleared, he saw again the ghostly suggestion of wide wings in the air ahead.

His hand became a blur as he snapped up the gun and fired.

But Glr had swerved, telepathically sensing the shot before it was fired, and the deadly beam missed. Keill ran on, peering into the darkness, all his automatic alertness poised, ready to kill.

The strange pursuit continued, towards a dark cluster of unlit buildings that loomed on the far edge of the spaceport. Keill sprinted round the scarred expanse of a landing pad, caught another glimpse of the shadowy wings, fired again. But again Glr had swung aside in time, and again the shot missed its target as she once more vanished into the darkness.

Keill slowed his pace as he neared the buildings. On one of them, wide doors yawned open, a patch of deeper blackness. It was a compact spaceport hangar, which might be used to house one of the smaller, individualised types of spacecraft. So its doors should not have been open, at night, unguarded.

Unless someone, or something, had just opened them.

It was not Keill's reasoning, for he could no longer reason, but that of the controlling power he obeyed. It sent him moving forward, with caution, to slip silently in through the gaping doors.

Darkness swallowed him. He was aware, near him, of the shape of a spaceship, but it meant nothing to him. His hearing was tuned to catch a whisper of movement, a sweep of wings through the air.

The small portion of the supermind that was attending to Keill plucked from his memory the fact that his alien companion's round eyes had exceptional night vision. A flicker of concern became a command, sent out on the Arachnis link. Slowly Keill began to back

out of the hangar.

But... was that a rustle of wings, just on the threshold of hearing, high above him?

In the instant that the sound reached him, Keill fired towards it. The blazing beam of energy lit up the darkness for a fractional moment, illuminating the hull of a blunt, wedge-shaped spaceship, with a sky-blue circlet glinting on its side.

The sight was meaningless to Keill. His shot had struck only the wall of the hangar, had revealed no sign of a winged creature. He continued to back away, almost blind for an instant in the aftereffects of the beam.

The rush of wings came, unexpectedly, from behind him. A small, firm body struck powerfully against the back of his head, and broad membranes of wings folded down over his upper body.

Reflexively, Keill had maintained his balance under the impact, and had without pause struck upwards and back with the deadly chopping edge of his hand. But the folds of a wing blocked and impeded the blow, tangling Keill's hand for a brief instant.

The instant was long enough. Keill felt sharp talons on the ends of small fingers rake painfully up the side of his head, leaving bloody furrows on his scalp.

Then the talons hooked over the thin cord that formed the Arachnis link – and ripped it away.

CHAPTER NINE

An impossible, unbelievable agony that was beyond agony exploded inside Keill's head. Every cell of his brain, every nerve fibre, felt as if it had burst into livid flame.

All the normal connections and patterns that had been blocked, bypassed or diverted by the Arachnis control had snapped simultaneously back into their regular formations. And, like limbs that have been unused for a long time, and are suddenly called upon to function at top output, they shrieked their protest in the form of excruciating, unbearable pain.

Keill staggered and reeled forward – unaware that he was screaming, unaware of the strong little hands that grasped his tunic and kept him upright, on his feet, while great wings beat above his head. Before he could fall, Glr half-dragged him back into the impenetrable darkness of the hangar where his ship lay. She propelled him around the ship, as far away from the hangar's yawning doors as possible. And only then – among an array of machine parts and tools, the usual clutter of a spaceport hangar's maintenance area – she let him collapse to the hangar floor.

Keill knew nothing of that. For him there was nothing but pain, the overwhelming shock of his brain's abrupt reassembling of its own functions. And more – even beyond that agony there was the growth of a greater torment.

In that explosive moment of his mind's restoration, he had regained his self-awareness, his knowledge of who and what he was. And he had regained access to his memory. In one overwhelming blast of realisation, he remembered everything that had happened to him – what he had been under the Arachnis control, what he had done, what had been done to him.

A tidal wave of revulsion, guilt, horror and hatred swept over him in that single convulsive moment. And with that moral torment heaped on top of the psychic agony of his restored mental functions, his mind tottered upon the brink of oblivion. Not the merciful release of mere unconsciousness, but the oblivion of total insanity, of mind-death. His mind cried out for the peace of forgetfulness, of blank non-awareness. It swayed upon the threshold of its own destruction, and reached yearningly towards it...

But it did not cross the threshold. Two forces went into action within the storming,

boiling confines of his agonised mind, and rescued it.

Freed from the barriers that had left it suspended in disconnected darkness, his unyielding will asserted itself. Before, it had known only that it had to survive. Now, reconnected with reality, it knew *why*. And it reached out through all the areas of his mind, and fought the desire for oblivion. It confronted the crippling agony, and fought to make it bearable. It confronted the sweeping waves of remorse and revulsion, and fought to quell their power.

It snatched Keill's mind back from the black edge of madness – and it summoned up all the resources of a legionary's self-discipline, and flung them into the struggle for mastery.

And as Keill's will went into battle, it was aided by the second force. Another presence entered into Keill's tortured mind – the healing, gentle presence of Glr, wrapping invisible wings comfortingly around Keill like a mother holding an injured child. Surely, carefully, her mind touched the flashpoints of Keill's mental anguish and sought to calm them, to bring the healing balm of understanding, reassurance and love.

The slow stumbling retreat of Keill's mind from the edge of the abyss, the slow restoration of self-control, seemed to be timeless – to extend over aeons of suffering. But when at last he opened his eyes, it was to find that only moments had passed since Glr had lowered him to the cluttered floor of the hangar.

He was unbelievably weak, feeling half-paralysed as his nervous system re-learned how to accept messages from his own brain. The agony within his head remained as fiery and blinding as before.

But he was Keill Randor again, legionary of Moros, no longer slave, puppet, or robot. And a fierce joy rose in him, to aid the task of restoration.

Glr was perched beside him, among the clutter on the floor, with an energy gun nearby. Keill looked into the round, bright eyes – and though he was too weak, too mentally shaky, to form a thought clearly enough, he had no doubt that she would sense the fullness within him, the flooding of gratitude that he wanted to express.

In turn, he sensed Glr's voice softly, carefully within his mind, echoing with relief and thankfulness – and with something that, if the two words had been spoken aloud, might have been a sob.

Welcome back.

Then, despite the pain-wracked exhaustion of his mind, Keill wanted to frame some of the swarm of questions that needed answers. But he could not – for their time had run out.

Without warning, the lights of the hangar blazed on, obviously controlled from some outside source. Beyond the doors of the building, Keill heard the clatter of many boots on the plasticrete.

And Glr snatched up her gun and flung herself into the air, as the Golvician militia burst into the hangar.

Raging at his own weakness, Keill fought to rise. But his body moved sluggishly, painfully, still unwilling to respond to the dictates of his brain. It seemed to take him forever merely to roll partway over, and to force his upper body into a sitting position.

And while he struggled, Glr plunged into furious battle.

Six armed Golvicians had come through the door. But they had come with too much clumsy incaution, and Glr's gun had cut down two of them before the remaining four were able to take cover at the sides of the hangar.

From there they began a furious fire fight, their guns blazing and crackling almost without pause. Yet Glr remained miraculously unhit, as she wheeled and swooped, darting into cover behind the bulk of the spaceship which also sheltered Keill, bursting out again to return the Golvicians' fire.

In a moment another Golvician screamed and fell, his green tunic a smoking ruin. A second tried a sudden rush towards the ship, but before he could reach the safety of its

shadow Glr's energy beam had slashed across his legs to send him tumbling in a screaming, bleeding heap.

Keill heard within his mind the high-pitched whoop of Glr's battle-cry. And it galvanised him to greater efforts in his grim struggle to make his body obey him. His hands swept out to find leverage, and brushed across the ice-smooth length of a slim metal rod. He clutched at it, recognising it as an extension rod for the electro-probes used to reach deep into the mechanisms of a spaceship. It was just what Keill needed.

Bracing himself on it, as an old and crippled man might lean his weight on a stick, Keill lurched to his knees. But there he halted, frozen by a movement he had glimpsed at the edge of his vision.

A previously unseen access hatch at the side of the hangar had slid open. And framed in it, Keill saw the stealthy figure of Festinn, gun in hand.

The Deathwing assassin took in the scene at once. Keill, unarmed and on his knees, looking half-paralysed and helpless. And Glr, still engaged in combat with the two remaining Golvicians, but entirely exposed to Festinn's position.

The mad eyes blazed like twin beacons of murderous joy, as Festinn raised his gun.

Keill did not call to Glr. For one thing, he dared not distract her from her own fight. For another, the appearance of Festinn had acted upon him like a jolt of electricity, bringing with it a renewed surge of the revulsion and hatred that had so nearly swamped his mind, moments before.

But now the force of those emotions was channelled into a gigantic burst of vengeful rage, which called up reserves of strength from the deepest areas of his being.

As the assassin's gun steadied, its deadly muzzle tracking Glr's rapid swooping flight, Keill hefted the slender metal rod in one hand, drew it back, and flung it.

The smooth end of the rod struck precisely between the glittering eyes. And such was the power of the fury behind the throw that the metal smashed onwards through flesh and bone, to bury itself in the depths of Festinn's brain.

Less than an hour later, Keill and Glr were seated, or perched, at the controls of his ship, in deep space, and locked in determined argument.

Glr had managed to flush out and finish off the last Golvician attackers in almost the same moment as Festinn's body had crumpled to the floor. Then she had urged and half-supported Keill as he staggered into the ship – his own ship. From her special sling-perch, she had taken the controls, lifting them off in a crashing escape straight through the roof of the hangar, just as a larger force of militia had poured in through its doors.

Once safely out of Golvic territorial space, Glr had begun to answer the swarm of questions in Keill's mind. It was a sombre and fearsome story.

From her hiding place, after she had landed Keill's ship, she had been telepathically aware of the unbearable moment of Keill's capture by the Arachnis tendril. What happened then to Keill's mind had very nearly done serious damage to her own mind, Glr said. But she had recovered herself quickly, and had quelled her terror and rage enough to reach out with her mind across the stars to Talis, the leader of the Overseers.

The old man had also been almost overwhelmed by despair and sorrow when he heard Glr's news. But he too had rallied quickly. He and Glr realised that every corner of Keill's mind would now be open to the Twenty-four – the Warlord. And that supreme, evil intelligence would do everything it could to locate the Overseers.

So Talis decided to send the Overseers to safety, though he himself made up his mind to remain on the asteroid, and would not be budged by Glr's desperate urgings.

Meanwhile, Glr had kept watch on events on Golvic. She had watched with glum misery as flyers searched the wilderness for Keill's ship, and found it, once the Twenty-four

had learned from Keill's mind where it might be hidden. She had then made her way unseen to the city, and had even spied on some of Keill's own robot activities.

And she had filled her days with many other things – including the grimly enjoyable game of disrupting what she could in Golv City, while eluding the men sent out to hunt her. By doing so she hoped that one day the Deathwing would send Keill after her – so that she could try to lure him to some safe place, on his own, and perhaps release him from his evil bondage.

At that point in her narrative, Keill's eyes had darkened. 'I came very close to killing you,' he said.

Since they were alone, he could speak aloud, knowing that she would pick up the thought behind the words. And his voice shook with the memory of that deadly pursuit at the spaceport.

Glr laughed quietly. *I was beginning to fear you would. Otherwise I would not have risked removing the tendril so drastically – which came close to killing you.*

'No matter,' Keill said. 'We're both alive. The Warlord will find out just how alive we are.'

You are aware, Glr said forlornly, *that the Twenty-four and the Deathwing have the asteroid.*

Keill's eyes clouded with pain. 'I know. They traced it through the monitors. I even helped them prepare the assault.'

You are not to blame, Glr replied soothingly. *But certainly they succeeded. I lost contact with Talis's mind many days ago. In the same way, Keill, as I lost contact with yours.*

Keill slumped back into his sling-seat, wrapped in numbed horror as he contemplated the kindly old man who had created the Overseers, who had saved Keill's life, who had been concerned above all for the safety of the galaxy, and not at all for his own.

And now that old man was a prisoner of the Warlord, a puppet-slave of Arachnis.

'Somehow, then,' Keill said through clenched teeth, 'we're also going to have to locate the asteroid.'

I know its location, Glr said. *Talis gave me the co-ordinates.*

Keill stared at her. He remembered, at the beginning of their travels together, how Glr had explained that while she could reach across interstellar distances to touch Talis's mind, she had willingly submitted to a hypnotic block implanted by Talis, as part of his obsessive secrecy. The block had prevented her from pinpointing the position of the asteroid base. But now, Talis had clearly lifted the block – when the need for secrecy no longer existed.

'Then if you know,' Keill said fiercely, 'let's go!'

And that was when the argument broke out.

Glr insisted that Keill was in no condition to dash off into what would be a fearful battle, against terrible odds. Keill was determined not to delay a moment more than necessary before launching an assault on the asteroid. Glr urged him to rest, promising that with her healing telepathic aid he would have recovered full control of his mind and body in no more than a day or two. He insisted that there was not a day or two to spare. She grew annoyed, and scolded. He grew more determined, and resisted.

In the process he tried to raise himself from his slingseat. But the burst of strength that had come to him in time to destroy Festinn had been temporary. His legs trembled; his arms seemed to be made of lead.

He sagged back into the slingseat, sweating, and turned with a shaky smile to Glr.

'Your point has been made,' he said. 'But whatever it takes to get me back to normal – can we make it happen quickly?'

It will be quick, Glr promised him. *I know your resilience, your powers of recovery. After a day's rest, and some special treatment from me, we can set out. By the time we*

reach the asteroid, you will be ready.

A muted shadow of her bubbling laughter sounded in her mental voice. *After all, my friend – you will need to be at your best, when you go to save the galaxy!*

PART THREE

ASTEROID APOCALYPSE

CHAPTER TEN

Glr was proved right about Keill's condition. After he had resigned himself to a period of rest, he slept for the span of nearly a full day. It was a deep and healing sleep, made more so by Glr's gently soothing presence that he vaguely sensed, like a lingering, peaceful dream, within his mind.

As carefully as before, but now more thoroughly, her mind moved among the still pain-racked centres and channels of his mental being, the after-effects of shock and disruption. She was like warm sun-light, like the soft breath of a summer breeze – and where she passed storms were quelled, menacing clouds were driven away, tranquillity began to gather.

When Keill at last awoke, he found himself refreshed, alert, free of pain. Even his head-wound, from Glr's claws, had been treated and was healing well. His mind was clear, his self-control restored. His body responded readily to his every command. And he retained, like the fleeting shadow-memory of a dream, a sense of the healing presence that had floated through his mind as he had slept.

He stared at Glr wonderingly. 'I didn't know you could do such things. I thought nearly all of a human mind was closed to you.'

Not closed, Glr said. Just mostly very alien. Her laughter was still muted. I have been with you a long time, Keill. I can reach depths in your mind that I could reach in no other. And while I may not understand all the human strangeness that I find there, I can recognise pain and turmoil.

'Then perhaps,' Keill said softly, 'you can also see just how huge a debt of gratitude I feel I owe you.'

Glr's round eyes gleamed. *You repaid a good part of the debt, she laughed, with that makeshift spear back in the hangar. Not a bad throw, for an invalid!*

Keill laughed, but there was ferocity as well as humour in his voice – a fierce gladness that he had been able to deal with Festinn as he had, and that he was now able to deal with the rest of his enemies.

Glr caught his mood at once. Her wings half-flared as she shifted her position, her small hands reaching for the controls.

I will take us into Overlight, she announced. You may continue preparing yourself for what we must face, a few hours from now.

As the formless void of Overlight blotted out the stars on the viewscreens, Keill rose

from the slingseat, marvelling at how easily his body moved, and began his preparations. He selected weapons and equipment, and checked them with a legionary's thoroughness. He ate hugely, a refuelling meal of food concentrates, while Glr nibbled at a portion, complaining as always about the intolerable food on humans' spacecraft. He even had time to put himself through a series of limbering exercises, testing his strength, speed, reactions and stamina – and feeling pleased that he seemed to be wholly himself again, unimpaired.

When the speedy preparations were done, he returned to the slingseat, to wait patiently for the emergence from Overlight. As he waited and watched the viewscreens, he saw not the grey void, but a crowding host of memories.

One memory in particular stood out – the image of his world, Moros, as he had last seen it, enveloped in the radiant haze that had ended all life upon the planet. And he heard again the dying words of his then closest friend, Oni Wolda, who had dragged her ship away from the dead planet to warn Keill, and to launch him on his mission.

Avenge us, Keill, Oni had said. Avenge the murder of Moros.

There's more to it than that, Oni, he told the ghostly memory. There's an evil that we never guessed at, threatening all the galaxy, certain that it can't be stopped. But it can be – and will be. And Moros will be avenged.

Only moments later the cells of his body felt that eerie, disorientating shift, and the greyness on the viewscreens gave way to the star-dappled blackness of space.

Keill reached for the controls, sending the ship forward on normal planetary drive, operating its long-range detectors. Soon they produced the information he sought.

A small spherical body, moving slowly through the incalculable emptiness among the stars. Not an orbiting body, for there were no suns or planets near enough. It was certainly the asteroid, its path following the co-ordinates that Glr had put into the ship's computer.

And it was not moving alone on that path. Close to it, in its wake, the detectors showed a collection of even smaller bodies – minor asteroids and rocky chunks of space rubble.

Keill pointed them out to Glr. 'I didn't know the Overseers' asteroid had company.'

I was only told of them once, while I was with the Overseers, Glr replied, *and did not think them important.*

Keill shrugged. 'Maybe they aren't, except to show that the asteroid was once part of a larger planetoid, a few million million years ago. But on the other hand...'

His fingers flicked over the controls, sweeping the ship sideways on to a new course. 'It's likely that the Deathwing have their own detectors, watching space around them. So we'll come at them through all that rubble.'

You will wreck the ship, Glr warned.

'Don't worry,' Keill said. 'We'll get through. It's just the cover we need, to get close before they spot us.'

Setting the computer guidance system, he rose from the slingseat and moved swiftly to the neat stack of equipment that he had set out earlier. Much of the stack was formed by the sections of a Legion spacesuit. Fully protective, but remarkably light and flexible, it allowed the unhampered mobility that a legionary needed in combat.

When he had donned the spacesuit and carefully checked it, he gathered up his weapons. Two energy-guns that clipped to a belt on the suit. Two extra energy charges, which he felt sure would be enough. And four small, flat plastic objects – the special grenades of the Legions – that also fastened to the belt.

Keill's battle plan was blatantly simple. He knew that he had little chance of reaching the surface of the asteroid undetected, once he had emerged from the cluster of space rubble. So he intended to go in at top speed, his ship's guns blazing, and blast his way through the asteroid hull – relying on Glr's telepathic reach to guide him to an area where he would not be putting Talis at risk.

He was not concerned about who else might be at risk when his ship smashed through the hull and brought with it, into that area, the vacuum and absolute zero of space.

Once inside, he would leave his ship, protected by his spacesuit -and then he would take things as they came.

I know there is no suit for me, Glr said. But am I to wait quietly while you go out to fight alone?

'Not for long,' Keill reassured her. The hull of the asteroid, he told her, would be like the exterior skin of any human space station. It would contain a self-sealing substance, that would swiftly flow into the gap made by Keill's ship, sealing the hull so that atmosphere could be restored.

Then I can come out and join you, Glr said with satisfaction, flaring her wings.

'Then you come out,' Keill corrected her, 'and locate Talis, to see what you can do for him.'

Keill, from what you told me there must be forty Golvician soldiers in the asteroid, Glr protested. *And there are twelve Deathwing killers, besides The One. You will need me.*

Keill shrugged. 'Even counting the Twenty-four, that makes less opposition than I had when I last tackled The One.'

You do not have the Starwind to help you now, Glr pointed out.

'The Starwind nearly killed me,' Keill reminded her. 'Anyway – I'm going to be raising up a storm of my own.'

He poured on the power, and the ship surged forward in a great glittering arc through the emptiness.

Within minutes, their goal had appeared on the view-screens – the cluster of space rubble, and on its far side the larger bulk of the asteroid. Within a few seconds more they were near enough to see greater detail.

'Look at it,' Keill breathed.

Once the asteroid might have presented a normal, undistinguished surface of flat rock and shallow craters, like any number of similar wandering bodies in space. That had been the Overseers' camouflage. But now the surface showed deep scars, great rents and gashes, through which the glint of metal showed from the exposed hull that was the artificial skin of the Overseers' base.

Nor was it damage that could have been caused by meteor showers, or minor collisions with space debris. This damage came from a savage attack by human weapons of great power.

'Talis must have put up quite a fight,' Keill said.

Glr agreed. *Let us hope that the Deathwing is not manning the defences so thoroughly... Keill!*

Her shriek had been caused by the sudden arrival of the first fragment of the space rubble – a huge, sharp-cornered boulder looming in the forward viewscreens.

But Keill's reflexes were untroubled. The ship veered away, its drive howling, then twisted again to avoid another rocky lump. 'Try to be calm,' he advised Glr absently, his hands a blur over the controls.

Calm? Glr flared, as the ship flashed among a scattering of smaller rocks, none larger than a man's head, all capable of disabling most spacecraft if struck at that velocity.

Then she fell silent, knowing that Keill needed no distractions. The space rubble, which had looked so small at a distance, contained some chunks of rock considerably larger than the ship. And there were countless more of the smaller lumps lying in wait among the spaces between.

There was a faint jolt, then another, as the ship spiralled up and around one of the larger bodies. But they had been only glancing blows, grazes, that did not harm the ship's tough hull.

Again the ship's drive bellowed in protest as Keill dragged it back upon itself, like a living creature trying to bite its own tail, to force it through a gap between two giant fangs of rock. Then it was swerving sideways again, weaving and fishtailing, before suddenly bursting out into open space, with the curving bulk of the asteroid appearing to rush towards it at a terrifying speed.

Glr flung her mind across the rapidly narrowing gap.

Keill, Talis is safely on the other side of the asteroid. And look... there!

Keill had seen it too. A fearsomely broad, jagged scar on the surface of the asteroid, showing a sheen of smooth brown at its centre.

'That's the sealant!' Keill shouted. 'They've already made a hole for me – what's on the other side, can you tell?'

Swiftly Glr's mind reached out again, sensed the presence of human minds, caught a mental glimpse of a cavernous chamber, a high domed roof...

I think it is the large chamber where your ship was kept, she said urgently, when you were with the Overseers!

'Perfect!' Keill yelled. 'Anyway, if it isn't, we're about to find out!'

As he spoke, he cut the ship's drive, fired his retro rockets at full power, and slammed a hand on the firing studs of his forward energy guns.

The retros thundered, the guns blazed. A dark redness swam across Keill's eyes for a brief moment, as the terrible deceleration took effect. As his vision cleared, he saw the enormous gash in the asteroid's skin, filling the viewscreen, being blasted open again by the furious impact of the guns.

Then his ship smashed into the centre of the smoking, widening gap. Again the redness blurred Keill's vision as the ship's forward plunge was checked – by the impact as well as by the retros – and then was halted completely by a grinding, splintering collision with some object within the asteroid.

Keill could not see what it was, for the forward screens had blanked out, wrecked by the destructive plunge. But in any case he was not looking.

The ship had scarcely come to rest, a portion of its stern still jutting out into space from the hull of the asteroid, when Keill had sprung to the airlock, and through it, both guns leaping into his hands.

One swift glance told him that Glr had been right – it was the high-domed chamber where the Overseers had kept his ship. And the object that his ship had finally struck had been a huge curved section of metal, clearly designed to be put in place as a permanent repair to the yawning gap in the hull.

There had been a few technicians working on the repairs. But they had worn spacesuits, and so some had survived the explosive entry of his ship.

Charred bodies huddled among the wreckage showed that they had not all survived the blast of his retros and ship guns. But at least two were still standing.

They were green-tunicked Golvicians, and they were resilient enough to recover from their shock in time to reach for their weapons. But they got no further. As Keill sprang from his ship his own guns flamed, and cut the two men down with their guns only half-raised.

Keill spared an instant to check his ship. Its blunt nose seemed even blunter now, somewhat crumpled, and there was a good deal of damage to the exterior, including some of the viewscreen scanners. But none of the damage looked serious from where he stood.

The fact that he had come through the material of the hull's sealant, and not through the much tougher metal of the hull itself, had been a piece of luck. He could probably fly his ship out – if he lived to do so.

He glanced at the rear of the ship. The self-sealant in the asteroid's hull was flowing round the new gap, and would soon hold the ship in a solid grip to allow atmosphere to flow back into the chamber. Then Glr could get on with her part of the job.

'See you soon!' He flung the thought at Glr as he turned and ran towards the nearest door out of the chamber.

But he had taken only a stride when the door was flung open.

Ten space-helmeted Golvicians burst into the chamber, guns ready. And as Keill dived towards the skimpy cover of nearby wreckage, scattered by his ship's entry, another door clanged open on the far side of the chamber.

Ten more armed soldiers advanced – positioned to pin him down in a deadly crossfire.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Energy beams crackled around Keill as he flattened himself behind the inadequate cover. Only an instant remained before one of the beams would find its mark, but he was not going down easily. In that instant, while the first group was still bunched within the door, he flung one of his four grenades towards them in a high arc, and then rolled quickly away to turn his guns against the second group.

It proved unnecessary. Just as the grenade exploded, in a flat crash of sound, a huge burst of energy lanced through the air from behind Keill. It swept in a broad swathe of destruction along the wall of the chamber – and the second group of Golvicians, reacting a split-second too late, were scythed down as they tried, panicking, to turn and run.

Keill rose to one knee. The floor of the chamber at each doorway was littered with unmoving, Golvician bodies. The grenade had flattened the first group – and Glr had fired the powerful portside guns of Keill's ship at the second group.

'How did you do that?' he asked wonderingly. *'The viewscreens are out.'*

I looked through your eyes, Glr replied simply. *Not too accurately, at first, but effectively.*

'That's cut the odds a bit,' Keill said with gratitude. As he spoke he was resuming his rush to the door of the chamber, hurdling the dead soldiers in his path.

Outside the chamber, a broad corridor led towards the heart of the asteroid – and there were no soldiers in sight. He sprinted along the corridor, remembering another time when he had fled through the interconnecting passages that honeycombed the asteroid's interior. He had then been seeking escape from what he had wrongly assumed to be captivity, by the Overseers. That was before old Talis, his face hidden in the dark cowl of his robe, had revealed to Keill the monstrous truth about the Warlord. It all seemed a long time ago – but now it had brought him full circle, back at last to the asteroid where his quest had begun.

And where it would be finished, Keill promised. A silent vow – to the dead Legions, to Glr and the Overseers, to himself.

He swung into a narrower side passage, slowing his pace, moving with wary care. His concentration and alertness were tuned to their highest pitch. All his speed, his power, his uncanny combat skills were poised and ready.

And more. Because he was launching into the final desperate battle – because he was one against so many – something else arose within Keill, fuelling and focusing his skills.

The awesome, irresistible battle fury of a legionary.

It was never the blind, foaming fury of a berserker. It was cold, defined, controlled. And within Keill, it was composed mostly of a pure and towering vengefulness. For the murder of Moros, for the pain and horror that Keill himself had suffered – but also for all the

death and destruction, all the terror and cruelty, that the Warlord and his minions had spread through the galaxy.

It was as if Keill had released a ravaging beast within himself. Yet the beast that was his battle rage was kept on a tight rein, disciplined and directed, a formidable extra source of power during his plunge into the last battle.

There could be no quarter, no mercy, no prisoners. And certainly no surrender. A legionary in his battle fury, facing monstrous odds, fought on until he died, or until no more enemies remained.

So for a while Keill Randor ceased to be a man. As he moved through the corridors of the asteroid he was a predator, a killing machine, a relentless force of terrible, inescapable retribution.

The narrower passage that he had entered was intersected by a steep gangway, rising to the next level. From above he heard movement, and he sprang up the gangway, his soft-soled boots silent on the smooth metal floor. He emerged in front of a group of three green-uniformed soldiers, obviously hurrying to get behind him and cut him off.

Compared to Keill's supreme combat readiness, everyone else was moving in slow motion. He had slid sideways into a compact crouch and fired three times before the soldiers' eyes had finished widening in shock. The three men spun and crumpled, their hoarse cries of fear cut sharply, off. Before they had hit the floor Keill was leaping past them towards another gangway.

He knew, with fierce satisfaction, that by now the entire asteroid would be close to panic. The psychological effect of his ship's unexpected, destructive entry would have been strong enough. But the fact that they would surely now know who it was – Keill. Randor, impossibly escaped from the living death of the Arachnis slavery – would be badly affecting the nerves of his enemies.

So would the fact that he would now seem to have vanished into the mazy depths of the asteroid – to have become a will o' the wisp, eluding those sent to destroy him, appearing out of nowhere with unsettling suddenness to destroy the destroyers.

He expected that The One would eventually gather the Deathwing and make a stand, preferring to let the soldiers risk the open fighting in the corridors, knowing that Keill would have to come and face them. But there would be time to think about that in a while. First, he intended to whittle the odds down further. He wanted no Golvicians coming at his back when he went to confront the Deathwing.

Up the next gangway, into a deserted corridor. Two metres away he saw one of the smooth doors, like the interior hatchway of a spaceship, swing open a crack. Without breaking stride, Keill leaped, slamming a boot in a ferocious flying kick against the door.

It burst open, half-ripped from its hinges, and the soldier who was waiting behind it to ambush Keill was flung crushingly against the far wall of the narrow room beyond the door. The angle of his neck, as he slid to the floor, showed that he would not be getting up again.

Keill had already rushed on, not sparing a backward glance. Ghr had calculated about forty Golvicians on the asteroid – and more than half of those had been put out of action in the first devastating assault that followed the entry of Keill's ship. Now he was cutting down the rest of them, a few at a time.

The surviving Golvicians, hunting in small groups, began to be more wary. But it did them little good, as Keill weaved his deadly way through the network of passages.

One moment he was ghosting through a series of connecting rooms to emerge suddenly behind a nervously watchful trio of soldiers – disappearing abruptly as their corpses toppled. Another moment he materialised in front of six soldiers who were rushing to the lower levels to guard the asteroid's life support systems and artificial gravity unit. Their panicky shots went wildly astray – and then Keill led them away from the life support area,

led them into one of the stout-walled outer rooms where part of the asteroid's defensive system was located. As they charged in after him, Keill slipped out through a separate hatch, leaving another of his grenades behind, primed and ready. No one in that room escaped the carnage.

Nor did the backup troop, also sent hurriedly to protect the vital life support area. Among the solid, bulky shapes of the machinery Keill played a lethal game of hide-and-seek, luring them into traps, cutting them down one at a time, finally closing with the last man and finishing him with a savage chop that crushed his throat.

In the brief lull that followed, Keill took a moment to fit new charges into his energy guns. No other soldiers seemed to be threatening his position – but then there were probably few, if any, left. And the Deathwing was not likely to risk the life support system by coming in after him with any heavy weapons. In that pause Glr reached her mind to him.

I have left the ship, she reported. Atmosphere was restored quite soon. The Deathwing has moved Talis, and I am making my way to him.

'Where?' Keill asked crisply.

If you remember the large recreation room, Glr replied, where Talis first explained everything to you...

'I remember. Near the centre, on the next to topmost level.'

Exactly. They are moving towards that room, with Talis. Next to it lies a deep vertical shaft that has been cut into the heart of the asteroid, to contain the Arachnis thing.

Keill nodded grimly to himself. The Deathwing was, as expected, gathering in their defensive position.

'Give me time to get there first,' Keill told Glr. 'And be careful.'

Why? The word held hint of Glr's laughter. There are only a few Golvicians left – and they are searching for you in areas where they fervently hope you will not be found. The inner voice became grave. It is you who must take care. There are twelve of the Deathwing, and The One, awaiting you. And what I can sense from their minds is... disturbing.

As her mind withdrew, Keill clipped his recharged guns on to his belt and moved towards the passage that would take him most quickly to the section of the asteroid that Glr had specified. The corridors were empty – so Glr was right, that there would be little more resistance from the Golvician soldiers. Only the Deathwing remained.

And he did not need Glr's reminder. Any Deathwing agent was dangerous – that was why The One chose them. And he knew exactly how much more dangerous this group was, especially the mutants. He could remember all too clearly the hours and days of combat training that he himself had given them, to improve and extend their skills.

But he was not troubled. The woman in scarlet, Marska, had been right. It took more than a week or two for anyone, even a Deathwing mutant, to achieve the combat level of a legionary. It would not be easy to oppose the thirteen of them, well-armed and highly skilled as they were. But it would not be impossible.

Then the thought struck him, with a flash of grim humour. Thirteen of them, including The One. It'll be just like the Battle Rites of Banthei.

Except nobody's cheering – and there's no rule against killing.

There was a ghost of a smile on his lips as he raced through the corridors unhesitatingly, even eagerly, towards the final confrontation.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Keill came to an abrupt stop as he entered the wide passageway that led, at its far end, to

the door into the asteroid's recreation room. The corridor was empty and silent, the door firmly closed.

His mind worked at computer speed, seeking a possible battle plan. He knew the Deathwing would be waiting for him inside, expecting him. Somehow he had to go through that door and into some kind of cover without thirteen weapons cutting him to pieces.

A faint scuffling sound at his back interrupted his thoughts. He was already whirling and leaping before the green-tunicked Golvician, who had entered the corridor behind him, realised that the scrape of boots had betrayed him. The man went down, under the axe-blade edge of Keill's hand, with a faint look of puzzlement on his face.

Keill looked down at the body, toying with a thought. It had worked for him once before, and though he wouldn't fool the Deathwing for more than a second or two, that might be all the time he needed.

It was worth a try. Swiftly he tore off the spacesuit that he still wore, and wrenched the tunic from the soldier crumpled at his feet. The tunic was bulky and loose, even when worn over Keill's own uniform. He transferred his guns and his two remaining grenades to his belt, inside the tunic, and closed only one of the tunic's fastenings, so that he could reach the weapons easily. Then he placed the heavy helmet on his head, and was about to move away when his eye was caught by a small detail of the Golvician uniform.

The seams of the trousers carried a kind of trimming, or piping – a stiff, tight roll of fabric, formed into a stout cord, very light in colour. It looked a little like another kind of pale-coloured cord in his recent experience...

Steely fingers ripped away a length of the piping from the fallen man's uniform. Then Keill removed the helmet and twined the cord round his head, knotting it firmly at the back, before replacing the helmet. The cord was clearly visible, tight across his brow.

Ready at last, he strode calmly down the corridor towards the door to the recreation room. As he moved, he forced all expression out of his face, made his eyes blank and empty.

He knew that he was relying on illusion, but he also knew that he did not need to maintain it for long. He was counting on the fact that people did not always look at the faces of men in familiar uniforms – not at once, anyway. The Deathwing eyes would be drawn to the green Golvician tunic and helmet – and to the cord, the imitation of the Arachnis tendril.

By the time any of them had seen past these superficialities, it might well be too late for them.

His expression as dead as that of the robot Keill had been, he reached up and knocked with metallic resonance on the door.

There was a pause. Then the door slid slightly open, and to one side of the opening Keill saw a flash of scarlet. So Marska had come to answer the knock – and was sensibly staying out of any line of fire.

But she had in turn glimpsed the green uniform, perhaps had even noted the cord showing beneath the helmet.

'A soldier, alone,' she snapped, obviously speaking to others in the room behind her. She moved slightly more into Keill's view. 'What do you want?'

Wordlessly, Keill stepped into the room.

It was low-ceilinged and spacious, as he remembered. When he had seen it, it had been furnished with several heavy, comfortably cushioned bench seats, along with a scattering of small tables, freestanding light fixtures and a few vid-screens and tape-viewers. Now some of the furniture had been pulled back, clustered together to form something of a barricade, leaving a broad open space between it and the door.

All that Keill noted during his first step into the room.

'What do you *want*? Marska repeated, her voice showing both puzzlement and irritation.

Another stride forward. The woman in scarlet began to step away from the door as well, beside him, reaching out to grasp his arm. By then, though his eyes seemed wholly blank and motionless, Keill had scanned the Deathwing and their defences.

Some of them were grouped behind their makeshift barricade on the far side of the room. Four or five of them there, he estimated, though others might be hidden from his view. The rest were scattered more widely, though just as well protected. Near the corner farthest from Keill, he glimpsed the lustre of gold, and knew where The One was.

Predictable, he thought wryly. That corner held the only other exit from the room.

Another stride forward.

The woman in scarlet had grasped his arm by then, and tried to halt him, but he resisted the tug of her skeletal hand. One or two of the others were half-rising, peering towards him. He saw the bulky figure of the black-bearded dwarf, with his mirror armour, and next to him the ugly pair with the reptilian green hide. There too was the man with the long monkey arms, crouched half out of sight.

Very like the Battle Rites, a part of Keill's mind said, remembering the odd collection of mutants in the arena in Banthei.

The rest of his mind was concentrating hard. Only a fractional second remained, he knew, before the illusion broke. But his three paces into the room had brought him close to one of the heavy bench seats that had not been taken into the Deathwing barricade. Its bulk of metal and plastic might protect him, too, for a while. If he could just make one more step...

But his time had run out.

Marska had continued to advance with him, black eyes peering suspiciously from the stark white face. Suddenly the expression on that face changed, and her harsh voice rang out.

'It's you! *Randor!*'

She started to fling herself back, started to snap her arm up, to release the blazing death of a fireball-from the heavy bracelet at her wrist. But Keill had begun to react before her first word was fully spoken. He grasped Marska and swung her around in front of him, just as the fireball erupted. It blazed towards the far corner, sending three of the Deathwing diving for cover as it exploded against the wall. Then, lifting Marska's skinny body, he flung himself forward, holding her like a shield, towards the bench seat.

Some of the Deathwing were quicker than others, and almost as quick as Keill. Three energy beams blasted towards him as he leaped. Two missed entirely – but the third stabbed into the narrow body of Marska.

As she screamed in her death-pain, Keill hurled her aside and dived headlong into the welcome shelter of the bench. Even as he struck the floor, one of his two remaining grenades was sailing towards the barricade.

The floor trembled with the shock of the explosion. Then the air of the room seemed to be filled with the crackling blaze of energy guns, the crash and flame of other weapons, and the pain-filled cries of those whom the grenade had left alive.

Odds cut down a bit more. Keill thought grimly. But I can't stay here forever.

He shrugged swiftly out of the heavy green tunic, and flung the helmet and cord off his head. His guns seemed to spring into his hands. Already the cushions were aflame on the bench sheltering him, and the metal and plastic were beginning to melt under the withering onslaught of the Deathwing weapons.

But suddenly the firing halted. And the silence was filled with the hollow shout of The One.

'You are going to die, *now*, Randor! Look – see the form your death will take!'

Letting no more than an eye show past the edge of the half-destroyed bench, Keill

looked. And sickness welled up within him.

Advancing openly towards him across the room came an aged man, with a deeply lined face and a straggle of white hair, his tall but stooped body draped in the folds of a long, plain robe.

Talis.

The heavy cowl hood of the robe was thrown back. So Keill could not only see the old face for the first time, but could also see with revulsion the thin, pale cord wrapped around the wrinkled brow.

Talis, enslaved by the Arachnis link, controlled by the Twenty-four – advancing on Keill with an energy gun clutched in both of the long, thin hands.

The gun blazed. The beam bit deeply into the floor, a few centimetres from where Keill lay.

The Deathwing will be enjoying this, Keill thought bleakly. Sending Talis to be my executioner, knowing that I'm not likely to shoot him.

But while they're enjoying themselves, he thought, they'll relax a little. Maybe just enough.

Talis's gun fired again, the beam burning deeply into what was left of the bench protecting Keill. As it did so, Keill replaced his left-hand gun at his belt, and slid the fingers of that hand under the heavy metal base of the bench. It was free-standing, he was relieved to find, not fixed to the floor. He gathered his strength, sought the leverage he needed.

Then in one smooth surge of power he came up off the floor, bringing the bench with him, upended. And in the same movement he flung it into the path of the advancing Talis.

The old man tumbled reflexively backwards, losing his balance as he tried to avoid the toppling bulk of the bench. And Keill dived – one hand slapping on to the floor, the arm forming a rigid pivot as he swung his body around horizontally, and swept Talis's feet from under him.

Talis crashed down, the gun spinning from his hand, the white head cracking painfully on the floor, stunning him.

Sorry, old friend, Keill thought. There was no other way.

But the speed of his movement left the thought behind. He had let the sweep of his body continue so that he came, crouched and ready, to his feet. His left-hand gun leaped again into his hand, and both weapons blazed out their fiery death. The battle fury surged within him as he hurled himself forward against the Deathwing.

He was a shadow, a whirlwind, a blur of non-stop motion at the utmost limits of his almost inhuman speed. As he moved he was spinning, swivelling, dodging – he was half-falling, rolling, springing up again – he was leaping, whirling, twisting... The room was criss-crossed with the flaming beams of Deathwing guns – yet they slashed through empty air, for somehow, miraculously, Keill was never there.

And yet also, somehow, within the dizzying, blinding speed of his rush, his own guns were finding their marks. Two more of the Deathwing fell with charred and gaping wounds in their bodies, in the first micro-seconds of that storming charge.

The others were leaping away from the barricade, striving to regroup themselves in the face of that awesome attack, when Keill came among them.

If he had been a whirlwind before, now he was a tornado. Still at the eye-baffling upper limit of his spinning, twisting, hurtling motion, the computer-swift mind of a fighting legionary wove a smooth pattern of destruction among the Deathwing group. Yet the Deathwing too were fighting for their lives.

Out of the wild mêlée a hand struck at Keill wielding the white-hot blade of a therm-knife. But the edge of Keill's hand blocked the blow and broke the wrist that struck it,

while as part of the same motion one of his guns sliced another attacker nearly in half.

The long-armed monkey-man sprang on to Keill's back, unnatural fingers clutching for his throat. But Keill reached back to grasp one wiry wrist, and smoothly flung the man over his head, hearing bones crack as the man struck the far wall.

Out of the midst of the furious battle Keill saw the flashing movement of the reptilian mutants, saw the glitter of the two blood-roses leaving their hands, razor-sharp circular blades spinning with deadly speed. But Keill was already flowing into a perfect back somersault, and firing to both sides at once, so that the green-skinned killers were falling, their scaly chests half-incinerated, before the blades passed through the spot where Keill had been.

The whole onslaught, from the beginning of Keill's charge, lasted only a few seconds. And then Keill was alone, leaping away from a heap of twisted, bloody corpses, towards the door at the far end of the room.

His computer mind had already done its sums. Three Deathwing agents out of action at the first, from the grenade; Marska making four; and now seven more overwhelmed in that terrible close-quarters slaughter.

That left two – who had discovered the better part of valour, and were making a dash for the far door. One of them was the bearded, armoured dwarf.

And the other, well in the lead, was the towering golden figure of The One.

Keill went after them in a headlong rush.

The dwarf wheeled, raising the short baton that was his preferred weapon – the heat-wand. Keill's body arrowed forward in a smooth, flat dive, one hand taking the impact, as the wand flared. The narrow ray of unbearable heat hissed harmlessly over his head, and Keill's gun fired at once in reply.

But when his beam struck, he realised the nature of the dwarfs shiny armour. The mirror-bright substance deflected the energy beam, harmlessly, to one side.

Surprise might have delayed some men for a fatal instant, as the heat-ray blazed once more. But the reactions of a legionary are not slowed by surprise. Even as he rolled smoothly aside from the ray, Keill fired again – into the centre of the dwarf's unprotected face.

As face and beard vanished in a bloom of flame, Keill was up and running, slamming out through the door that had allowed The One to escape.

An empty corridor.

He flung himself along it, towards the end that formed a T with two branching passages. Both empty.

But one of the side passages led to a dead end, and another bulky metal door. And was there a hint of some sound beyond the door? An eerie sound, like the whisper of a distant wind, just on the threshold of hearing?

He was at the door and through it in an instant. And then he stopped, rooted, his blood seeming to congeal into ice.

It was as if he had stepped back in time. He found himself on a narrow metal gantry, stretching across one side of a broad, deep, metal-lined shaft, where strange energies glowed and radiated.

From the depths of the shaft, yet reaching high above the gantry where Keill stood frozen, rose the thousands of writhing, flailing, seeking tendrils of Arachnis.

But there was something else – something immeasurably worse.

In the air above the shaft, the air that was sickeningly alive with the threshing tendrils, he saw Glr – with a hundred or more of the tendrils coiled and tangled round her.

One wing was still partly free, but was beating only feebly, as the monstrous tangle drew her down.

Down towards the blazing luminescence of pure, lethal energy that surrounded the

body of Arachnis.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Keill's frozen pause ended as soon as it began. He sprang forward to the gantry railing, his guns blazing. The withering beam swept like a scythe through the tangled cluster of tendrils that held Glr, slashing at them again and again.

As the severed ends fell away, Glr's wings came free. They thrust down with thunderous power, lifting her up as Keill swung the searing blaze of his guns across other tendrils that groped up towards her.

At the same time, he was weaving and dodging at the gantry's edge, for more of the tendrils had writhed their way in his direction. He needed all his self-control to keep from flinching back, as he remembered how those filaments had found a grip on him once before – and what had then followed...

Yet his primary concern was for Glr. If her mind had been trapped by the Arachnis link, if only for a moment, she Would now be in the grip of that shattering agony of sudden release.

But as she wheeled towards the gantry, wings booming, her voice came into his mind, seeming unaffected.

Get back, Keill, while you can!

But Keill stood his ground. Wielding one gun in scythe-sweeps across the tendrils that lashed in his direction, he leaned over and fired the other beam in a steady burst down into the well of the shaft. As he did so, he saw with a jolt of surprise that the Arachnis monster, glowing in all the shifting colours of the luminous energy around it, had grown immensely. The ovoid shape now filled the entire breadth of the shaft, and bulged upwards almost to the height of the gantry.

Surprise also jolted him when the furious beam of his energy-gun had no effect, except to create a small patch of extra brightness where it struck the rippling blaze of the energised surface.

No use! Glr cried as she wheeled above him, evading the clutching grasp of more tendrils. *It lives on energy!*

Keill nodded to himself. The energies that bathed Arachnis did not extend upwards to protect the tendrils, but would certainly absorb the blast of his gun when aimed at the body of the matter. At once he shifted the crackling beam of his gun to the wall of the shaft itself, which held the complex mechanisms and power sources that were the monster's life support. But the energised metal showed no more effect than had Arachnis itself.

Keill's left-hand gun was still sweeping its beam back and forth through the air, to keep the grasping tendrils at bay from himself and Glr. It seemed that for every dozen that he cut down, several dozens more flailed up to take their place. There must have been hundreds upon hundreds of thousands, now, of the tendril extensions from the vastly enlarged body of Arachnis.

And if neither the body nor the shaft that supported it could be harmed... how could it be destroyed?

Below him he saw the ends of the tendrils he had severed, drifting down to the upper surface of the monster. They vanished at once, vaporised in a flare of radiance by those swirling luminous energies.

Come away! Glr's voice entered his mind like a whip. *Guns are no use against it – but it is helpless without the Twenty-four!*

Her broad wings swept her towards the door that had led Keill on to the gantry, and he followed her at once. Of course she was right. Even though Arachnis could not be harmed by a hand-gun – and maybe not even by my ship's guns, he thought bleakly – it was not the true enemy.

If he could find the Twenty-four and deal with them, Arachnis would no longer be guided by a superintelligence, and would be rendered nearly harmless.

If...

Outside the door they paused. Glr wheeled down to settle on his shoulder, small fingers clutching him in a fierce clasp.

I feared that the massed force of the Deathwing might be too much even for you, she said.

Keill smiled fiercely. 'They may have thought the same. Shows the danger of over-confidence.' Then his expression grew serious. 'But how did you get tangled with Arachnis?'

I was coming by another route, Glr replied, annoyance in her voice, *to see if I could aid you. But before I reached you, The One burst out of the room – and when he began firing at me, I fled. The door I chose led to Arachnis, and it caught me before I could escape.*

'And your mind..?' Keill asked worriedly.

The Arachnis link is made to enslave human minds, Glr laughed. *I shielded against it with no difficulty. That is why the Twenty-four were using it to drag me down and kill me with its energies – until you came along.*

'That's more of my debt repaid,' Keill said. His mouth tightened. 'And there are still some debts to pay here, before we're done.'

Glr agreed. *The One has joined the Twenty-four,* she announced. *I can sense their minds, though I cannot look into them.*

'Where are they?' Keill asked urgently. He had seen no sign of a spacious alcove in the wall of the Arachnis shaft, as there had been on Golvic.

On the other side of the shaft wall, Glr told him. *The heavier tendrils that link them to Arachnis now pass through the base of the wall.*

Into his mind she projected a picture, a diagrammatic map of the asteroid's interior. A glowing spot of light indicated a spacious room – close by, and on the same level where Keill was standing.

'Right,' Keill said quietly. 'I'll go and visit them.'

Keill, we must be careful... Glr began.

'Not *wē*,' Keill interrupted. He gestured towards the door to the recreation room, down the corridor, where smoke was drifting out, a hint of the carnage that had occurred within it. 'Talis is in there-probably still unconscious, but alive. He's an Arachnis slave, like you said. You must help him.'

Glr was quiet for a moment. *I would like to come with you,* she said at last, *but you are right. Talis needs me.*

'You can free him, safely?' Keill asked.

I believe so. He is old, but his mind is strong and clear. And he has not been under their control as long as you were. He should survive.

'Good.' Keill grinned tautly. 'I'll try to do the same.'

Keill. Glr's voice was heavy with concern. *The Twenty-four will be much more powerful, now that Arachnis has enlarged so greatly. I can sense terrible strengths within their united mind. And they and The One will be waiting for you.*

'I know,' Keill said harshly. 'I'm counting on it.'

Once again, Keill plunged into the network of corridors. But this time his route was more direct – and he met no opposition on his way to the room that Glr's mental map had indicated.

Its door was tightly shut. And Keill was well aware that ruses or disguises would be no use, this time. There was only one way in – just as there had been only one way for his ship, into the asteroid. A flat-out, frontal assault.

He plucked his fourth and last grenade from his belt, and readied his energy guns. Not a great deal of firepower left, he knew – but he would probably be facing only whatever weapon The One was carrying. It was unlikely that the Twenty-four would join a fire-fight. They were generals, not soldiers.

In any case, he would tackle The One bare-handed, if necessary. He had done so before.

With a snap of the wrist he sent the grenade spinning towards the metal door, and dodged back from the bludgeoning force of the explosion.

Then, as billowing smoke and flame clogged the opening where the door had been, he sprang through.

At once he swerved to his right, letting himself fall to the side, his gun seeking a target through the dark clouds of smoke.

There, directly ahead... A huge, looming figure of golden metal.

He was firing in the instant that he saw it. And despite his swift sideways motion, his balance and accuracy sent his beam directly at the heart of the golden giant.

At it – and through it, harmlessly, as if it was not there.

And in the next instant, it no longer *was* there. The golden figure faded and vanished, leaving Keill staring at empty air.

Then cruel, hollow laughter sounded from beyond the smoke cloud.

And from it an energy beam crackled – and blazed agonisingly into the flesh of Keill's left shoulder.

He spun, half-falling, one gun dropping from suddenly nerveless fingers. And the hollow voice sounded again.

'Throw the other gun behind you, Randor, out of the room, or my next shot will remove your head!'

Slowly, cold anger rising within him, Keill tossed his other gun away, and turned in the direction of the voice. As he did so, Glr's worried voice came to him.

Keill...?

'I'm all right,' he said grimly. 'They used some kind of illusion.'

An image, projected by the Twenty-four, Glr said. Keill, the growth of Arachnis has awakened a huge telepathic power in their mind. I sense it clearly – and there is no way of telling what it can do!

'All right,' Keill said. 'It's my problem now. You get Talis to the ship.'

He stood still, balanced and ready, forcing himself to ignore the livid pain of his seared arm, as the last of the smoke cleared.

He saw a broad, sparsely furnished room, with one wall that was entirely transparent – through which he could see the loathsome, flailing tendrils of Arachnis, and the upper bulge of its glowing body.

He saw, near the opposite wall, the seated figures of the Twenty-four, in their chairs round the bulky console of their life-support, from which the twenty-four cable-like tendrils reached out to entwine round their heads.

And he saw The One stalking towards him, puffy lips parted in a vicious grin, great hands cradling an energy rifle that was trained on the centre of Keill's torso.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'Come forward,' The One said, his hollow voice gloating. 'Very slowly and carefully.'

Keill stepped farther into the room. His arm felt as if it was still on fire, but he moved it imperceptibly and found that, despite the pain, he still had some use of it. He glanced around the room again, seeking something that he might turn to his advantage.

The transparent wall panel? Clearly it was part of the shaft wall, which had looked so solid from the other side. So Golvician technology was able to polarise that metal, to make it transparent from one side, just like the wall of the cage that had carried him to Golvic.

The One followed his gaze, and his smile widened. 'Do not develop false hopes, Randor. The metal is as impervious from this side as from the other. In any case you would not enjoy making renewed contact with Arachnis.'

Keill remained silent, watchful, as he continued to move forward, poisoning himself.

'Stop.' The One gestured with the rifle, and Keill halted. Still too far away, he thought sourly, to try to beat that rifle.

The One looked inquiringly towards his master, and Keill looked as well. The Twenty-four were frowning slightly, exactly the same expression on the face of every one of them.

'I am displeased, Altern.' Again the unsettling sound of twenty-four soft voices speaking in perfect chorus – and again the reference to themselves as one person. 'He is far more resourceful and dangerous than you had led me to believe.'

A shadow flickered across The One's small eyes, and Keill recognised it as fear. 'He has been fortunate. Master,' The One said defensively.

'He has escaped Arachnis, and survived.' the soft voice said. 'He has come here, fought his way through an entire detachment of militia, and wiped out the elite of the Deathwing. That is not merely good fortune. It is as well that I decided to destroy the rest of his people, if this is what one legionary can do.'

'But he has done only superficial harm,' The One insisted. 'The asteroid can be repaired, the militia are replaceable, and I can rebuild the Deathwing in no time.' The gloating smile reappeared. 'Whereas we have finished off the old fool who employed Randor, and will soon finish him off.'

'Not soon. Immediately.' A whiplash of command had entered the soft chorus of voices. 'Kill him now, where he stands.'

Keill did not seem to move, but he was gathering himself, ready for a last desperate rush.

'Master...' There was a pleading note in The One's voice that made Keill's skin crawl. 'You know how long this man has opposed me. Let me have my revenge more sweetly, more slowly. You may even find the process... amusing.'

The Twenty-four were silent for a moment. 'I understand your feeling, Altern,' they said at last. 'But you have faced him alone before, and failed to kill him.'

'True,' The One said, glowering at Keill. 'But now he has no weapon, and he is injured. And my new body is stronger and more invulnerable than the last one.'

Keill considered those words gloomily. When he had fought The One before, hand to hand, the golden armour had resisted his fiercest assaults, for a considerable time. If this replacement was even tougher...

But the thought broke off, as the Twenty-four came to a decision. The frown cleared from all their foreheads, at once, and twenty-four simultaneous smiles curved their lips. 'Very well. Deal with him as you wish. And if you get into difficulty, I can perform a further test on

the newest gift conferred on me by Arachnis.'

That would mean the telepathic power, Keill knew. Gllr might know what to do about it – but there was no time to contact her. The One was lowering the energy rifle, his cruel smile broadening.

'Be grateful, Randor,' he said. 'You will have some extra moments of life after all.'

Keill watched him, expressionlessly. Here it is again, he thought – the Deathwing arrogance, the total belief in the superiority of those who follow the Warlord. That supreme overconfidence had been the undoing of the Deathwing before, in encounters with Keill. Perhaps it would be so again.

The golden giant was fumbling with the rifle, and Keill saw with surprise that he was removing the energy charge. Casually The One flung the charge into the far corner of the room – and then gripped the empty rifle and effortlessly bent it into a twisted, useless shape.

'No weapons, Randor,' he grinned savagely. 'Just our bare hands – to the death.'

But the grin on the grey face faded at once, for Keill had already begun to move. One running stride and he was launched into the air like a projectile, boots hammering forward in a ferocious drop kick. One boot slammed with crushing force into the centre of the great golden chest, where Keill knew the almost invisible seam of the armour lay. The other boot struck upward, towards the mottled flesh of the face.

But The One was protecting his face, the one exposed area of his true body. A vast golden hand had flashed upwards, to block that blow. And the battering impact of Keill's other boot, against the chest, had only staggered him.

Keill came to his feet lithely, circling away, thinking hard. The One moved much more quickly now than he had in his previous armour. And he had spoken the simple truth about the strength of his new body. That kick, Keill knew, would have damaged a plate of niconium steel. But the broad golden chest showed not a scratch.

The One raised a hand, unconsciously, to the jagged scar at the edge of his grey face – a legacy of his earlier encounter with Keill. 'You will not catch me that way again,' he snarled.

He leaped forward, hands clutching. Keill spun away out of danger, but was again surprised at how much more speed The One had acquired, as well as strength. One of the hands had grasped an edge of his tunic, and had torn the fabric as if it were paper.

Again Keill twisted and dodged away from a hurtling attack. And as he evaded the deadly grasp, his right hand chopped savagely up at the puffy face.

But The One was swift enough, turning his head so that the edge of Keill's hand struck the metal of the golden hood, and rebounded harmlessly. And Keill was barely able to fling himself backwards in time to avoid a brutal counter from one massive golden fist.

So the pattern of the battle was maintained. The One advanced, swinging swift, clubbing blows, or reaching out to clutch Keill in the terrible grip of his hands. And Keill retreated, dodging and evading, striving to find a way to make his counterattacks effective against that impervious armour.

And as the battle went on, Keill grew uneasily aware that the injury to his arm, and the huge output of energy in his earlier assault on the Deathwing, had taken a toll even on his supreme resilience. He was soon breathing heavily, and there was the faintest of sensations in the muscles of his legs that warned of the approach of exhaustion.

Time to change tactics, he thought grimly.

He had retreated most of the way across the room, and now there was a wall close to his back. As The One charged once more, Keill feinted a slash at the eyes, feinted once more as if to dodge to his right, then with blurring speed moved in towards the golden body. The One's murderous blow swept millimetres past his face – and then Keill had grasped the

metal arm, adjusted his stance, and used the giant's own impetus to fling the metal bulk up in the air and over, crashing into the wall.

The One bounced up as if he had been made of rubber rather than metal. But by then Keill had turned, and was running.

Not towards the door, to escape. But towards the far corner of the room, where The One had casually flung the energy charge from his rifle.

He knew exactly how to alter the mechanism, so that the energy flow would be disrupted. The resulting explosion could kill everyone in the room. He intended to use that threat to hold The One at bay, until Glr could get there with a gun. It was his only chance...

His hand was just reaching down to scoop up the energy charge, when the inside of his head seemed to erupt in an explosion of enormous, intolerable pain.

It lasted for only a microsecond, before it was cut off as suddenly as if a switch had been thrown. But the brutal agony, no less overpowering than the pain when Glr had torn away the Arachnis link, had driven him to his knees, and left him momentarily dazed and shaken.

He remained where he was, trying to regather his strength, as The One stepped forward and kicked the energy charge out of reach.

'Most effective,' said the chorus of the Twenty-four. 'I had wondered if he had some special resistance, when he escaped from Arachnis. It seems not.'

The One replied, but Keill did not hear the words. He was listening to another voice – inside his head.

Keill, that was a psychic blast, Glr said rapidly. Part of the Twenty-four's new mental power. I shielded you at once, as I did on Veynaa.

'Can you keep it up?'

It is immensely powerful, in human terms, Glr said. But I can withstand it. Shall I come to your aid?

'See to Talis first,' Keill said. 'I'll try to hold out. And if I don't...'

The image in his mind showed Glr what he wanted. If he lost this final battle, she was to take his ship out, and use every particle of its firepower to destroy the asteroid and its occupants.

If you wish, Glr said bleakly. But you must survive!

'There's no law that says so,' Keill told her. 'But I won't go down easily.'

The entire exchange, at the speed of thought, had taken the briefest of moments. In that time Keill had come to his feet, fighting off the last effects of the psychic blast, as The One advanced once more.

The battle resumed. Again Keill began a blow that smoothly became a lifting hold, swinging The One off his feet and hurling him halfway across the room.

That might shake some of those mechanisms loose, inside the armour, he thought.

But as before The One came at once to his feet, unharmed, and charged back to the attack. Again Keill dodged, and gripped, and threw. Again the giant form hurtled to the floor. But first, the lunging blow of The One had found a target. Not the side of Keill's head, where it had been aimed – but the muscles of his left shoulder, only centimetres from the gaping wound in his arm.

The pain of the arm blazed up overpoweringly, and Keill staggered slightly as he fought for control. In that moment The One was upon him, swinging a terrifying kick that smashed against Keill's side.

Ordinary ribs would have been pulped, but the unbreakable alloy of Keill's bones survived the impact. Yet the immense power of it flung him back, vision blurring, half-falling at the feet of the nearest member of the Twenty-four.

He fought to clear his head. The One was advancing again, unhurriedly, certain now that Keill was on the edge of defeat. And at the same time, the smiles widened on the faces of the Twenty-four, and they leaned slightly forward, their eyes narrowing slightly. Keill realised that they were hurling another psychic blast at him, to ensure the victory of The One.

He felt nothing, for Glr's sturdy mind-shield had operated at once. But he contorted his face as if in agony, let his body tense and convulse, then sagged limply to the floor.

The Twenty-four sat back, nodding with satisfaction. The One's advance slowed, deferring to his master. And that momentary pause was just long enough for Keill to overcome the effects of the punishing kick, and gather himself.

Without warning, he launched himself from the floor. Not towards the golden giant – but into the midst of the circle of the Twenty-four.

Simultaneous expression of shock appeared on their faces. 'Altern!' they shrieked. '*Stop him!*'

Panic-stricken, yet still moving as one, the Twenty-four struggled out of their chairs, flinging their wasted bodies towards Keill. The great tentacles of Arachnis attached to their heads twisted and tangled as they moved, impeding The One's lunging rush.

And Keill reached to the console with his right hand to clutch a handful of the thick tendrils.

They were smooth, clammy, writhing slightly in his grasp. He struggled to get a firmer grip, while sweeping his injured left arm backwards to free himself from the clawing, flailing, shrieking mass that was the Twenty-four.

The renewed pain from the movement threatened to weaken his hold on the tendrils. And then The One was plunging through the tangle of bodies, swinging a fist like a huge golden club down on to the wrist of Keill's hand, where it clutched the Arachnis tentacles.

Again Keill's vision blurred as the new pain of the bruised flesh lanced up his arm. But neither his wrist nor his grip had been broken – and still he fought to find the leverage he needed.

'Kill him, fool!' screamed the frantic Twenty-four.

The giant lunged forward again. The grey face was contorted with fury, and there was a fleck of foam at the corner of the puffy lips. The sudden, unexpected turn of events had thrown The One almost into a frenzy – and though his speed and strength remained, all caution had been flung aside.

With a heave of his shoulders Keill sent several of the Twenty-four sprawling. And in a movement too swift for any of their eyes to follow, he swung himself up and around, using his grip on the Arachnis tentacles as a pivot, and met The One's charge with a crippling smash of both boots into the giant's unguarded face.

The One fell back, crashing to the floor in a sliding, threshing clatter of metal limbs. And Keill swept the remaining members of the Twenty-four aside, and reached both hands to the tentacles of Arachnis.

But one of the Twenty-four, finding strength in terror, regained his feet. Before Keill could stop him, he had slapped his hand on to a small lever at the side of the console.

Behind Keill, the great glass panel that was one wall of the room slid smoothly open.

And a hundred, a thousand, of the writhing tendrils of Arachnis whipped in through the opening, ready to enclose Keill in their web-like trap.

He had no hope of preventing one of the tendrils from finding a grip round his brow. There was only an instant before he would again be a slave-robot of Arachnis, at the total mercy of the Twenty-four.

In that instant he wrapped both his arms round the clammy bulk of all the tentacles rising from the console, and jerked backwards, in an irresistible, balanced explosion of power.

The thick tentacles writhed, stretched – and gave way.

Their coiled ends ripped free of their grasp on the twenty-four heads.

And the Twenty-four went insane.

The screams that filled the room were no longer in chorus, but a shrill and ragged discord. The twenty-four bodies no longer moved in unison, but twisted and shuddered and convulsed in separate, agonised contortions. Some clutched their heads and curled tightly upon themselves, squealing in anguish. Some fell thrashing and foaming to the floor. Some toppled silently, and lay motionless, struck instantly dead by the unbearable disruption of their union with Arachnis.

And the tendrils of the Arachnis monster, no longer directed by the united supermind of the Twenty-four, waved quietly in the air, brushing harmlessly past Keill as he watched the grisly death agonies of the Warlord.

But beyond that horror, there was a different movement. The giant golden body of The One was clambering slowly to its feet. The grey face was now a mask of red, from Keill's ferocious kick. But the metal body was intact.

Bellowing with the wordless fury of a monster run amok, The One charged.

And Keill sprang, his own battle fury rising to a crescendo, to meet the charge head-on.

He slid easily below the huge, clutching hands. He swayed away from the battering impact of the mighty body. But as he evaded, he also gripped, and held, and pivoted.

The One's charge provided the momentum, and Keill provided the strength and leverage. He came smoothly up from his crouch – and The One came up with him.

For a fragmentary second, like the isolated single frame of a film that freezes an action for the blink of an eye, the golden giant hung suspended in the air, supported by the steely rigidity of Keill's extended arms.

And then the throw was completed, and The One flew in a smooth arc through the air – hurtling out through the open panel in the wall, into the blazing, luminous embrace of Arachnis.

When Keill reached the window, a second later, he saw the huge body lying on the bulging upper surface of the monster. The arms and legs were struggling weakly, as the furious energies that bathed Arachnis bit deep into the golden armour.

In another instant the metal began to melt and run. Keill saw the central seam of the armour gape open – and inside, he glimpsed the deformed limbs of The One's true body, writhing in agony. Then they were gone, and only crisped and blackened fragments remained.

And almost at once the whole ghastly sight ceased to exist, as the energies of Arachnis reached the power source within the golden armour, and what was left of The One vanished in an eruption of light and flame and vaporised metal.

PART FOUR

AFTERMATH

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Below the sculptured sweep of a broad patio, shaped from glistening translucent stone, the ocean extended to the distant haze of the horizon – a calm, turquoise ocean, the precise mirror image of the calm, turquoise sky of the planet Arkadie. The patio was bathed in the sun's warmth, the unique spicy fragrance of the ocean, and the unbroken silent tranquillity for which Arkadie was famous over half the galaxy.

Keill Randor lay at the patio's edge, on a body-contoured recliner, letting the sun put the finishing touches on the task of healing his injuries. High above the patio, Glr soared in leisurely circles, relishing the gentle currents of air beneath her wide wings.

But part of her attention was focused, worriedly, on Keill. During the weeks of their stay on Arkadie he had been growing more and more silent, withdrawn. Glr was increasingly disturbed by his seeming inability to wrench himself out of a gloom that she did not fully understand.

At the moment, her telepathic perception told her, he was once again reliving those last climactic moments on the asteroid...

He drew back from the volcanic blast of energy that signalled the death of The One. Around him, the bodies of the Twenty-four had stilled – some dead, the rest with minds shattered beyond repair. As he moved to the door of the chamber, sparing them only a glance, weariness and pain nearly made him stagger. But even so he did not make his way directly to his ship.

Instead he went again into the bowels of the asteroid, to the life-support area. There he found tools, and worked for several moments among the complex machinery. Only then did he retrace his steps towards his ship.

Entering, he brushed aside Glr's mixture of concern over his wounds and delight at his victory, and went to kneel by an improvised sleep-pad that she had placed behind the slingseats, for old Talis. There was no pale cord now around the white head – and though the aged face bore deeper lines, etched by the agonising removal of the Arachnis link, Talis's eyes were open. And they were focused on Keill.

'Thank... you...!' The whisper was barely audible.

Keill nodded, and clasped the thin old shoulder. *'Will he live?'* he asked Glr silently.

'With my help, she assured him. *Which you need as well.*

'Shortly?' Keill said. *'When the job is done.'*

He sank into his slingseat, reaching for the controls. Thunder erupted from the retros, and the ship's hull creaked ominously as Keill poured on power. But the sealing substance, gripping the ship within the gap in the asteroid's skin, gave way first. And the ship blasted out of the gap, arrowing away into space.

Glr had only begun to ask her question when Keill gestured to the rear viewscreens, the only screens still operating. 'Watch,' he said aloud. 'I rigged a feedback loop in the power energiser...'

No further explanation was needed.

In the screens the asteroid seemed to tremble. Orange flame gouted from the gap where Keill's ship had been.

And then the entire substance of the asteroid was swallowed up in a gigantic, convulsive detonation. It filled the screens like a mini-nova – and the shock wave swept the ship even farther away, in a titanic blast of force.

When the aftershocks died away, the screens were nearly empty. Even the cluster of space rubble that had been trailing the asteroid had been scattered over millions of kilometres by the blast. And the asteroid itself, with all its contents – including the Arachnis monster – had been wholly destroyed, disintegrated, in that final cataclysm. Only a ghostly

cloud of space dust now drifted, silent, amid the emptiness.

And then at last Keill closed his eyes, and let his body sag into the slingseat...

Afterwards Glr had been very busy. Much of the time she was reaching into the mind of old Talis, as she had done with Keill, sending her soothing, healing telepathic presence to repair the damage done by the breaking of the Arachnis link. At the same time, outwardly, she was using all the resources of the ship's medikit on Keill's injuries, especially the terrible charred gouge in his left shoulder.

And meanwhile she had set the ship's computer guidance and sent it into Overlight, towards a planet that Keill had once told her of. Arkadie, planet of the endless summer, where the environment and the people created a haven of peace and tranquillity that was deemed priceless by its galactic visitors.

There time and proper medical care had completed the healing that Glr had begun. Talis himself recovered enough to use his own supreme medical knowledge to patch Keill's arm wound, grafting muscle fibre and skin, so that the arm would be restored as good as new. And since then the three of them had simply enjoyed Arkadie – the rest, the peace, the ease of undemanding days.

Except... there was the darkness within Keill, growing more worrisome for Glr as each balmy day progressed.

Now, from her soaring height, she saw Talis striding on to the patio towards Keill. She curved her wings and swooped down, settling on the patio's balustrade as Talis came up.

'I have good news,' the old man was saying. 'It may even brighten your mood.'

I trust something will, Glr said tartly. Because of their proximity, she could project into both minds at once.

Keill glanced at her with a crooked smile. 'Am I being as glum as all that?'

The stones of this patio, Glr replied, *have been brighter company*.

Talis smiled, then turned his amiable gaze on Keill. 'If you could tell us what is troubling you, we might be able to help.'

'If I knew,' Keill said with a shrug, 'I'd help myself.'

'Perhaps it is nothing,' Talis said thoughtfully.

Keill and Glr both looked at him, surprised and puzzled.

'I mean it literally. Perhaps the trouble is that there is no trouble.'

Keill shook his head tiredly. 'I don't understand that.'

'It seems obvious,' Talis said. 'Since the death of your world you have lived with danger. You have searched the galaxy for the murderer of the Legions. You have fought terrible battles. And finally you have confronted the Warlord and his minions, and destroyed them. Now it is over. You have nothing left to search for, nothing to fight.'

'You may be right.' Keill's voice was low and bleak. 'I've been thinking about Moros lately – more than for a long time. And I've been feeling a little... lost.'

'Vengeance is very single-minded,' Talis said gravely. 'It can spur a man to great deeds – but when it is done, it leaves an emptiness behind, a vacuum.'

'That's me,' Keill said.

'Just so,' Talis went on. 'You are a warrior, and you have won your war. Now you feel you have no purpose – and you cannot even go home, for you have no home. Nowhere to go, nothing to do.'

And so, Glr put in acidly, *you sink so far into depression and self-pity that even I cannot drag you out*.

Keill swung round sharply – but the glare in his eyes died away, replaced by a rueful

smile.

'All right, I suppose I deserve that. But now you've identified the disease, what's the cure?'

Keill, there is an entire galaxy out there, filled with peculiar and fascinating things. We can go and look at them!

Again Keill shook his head. 'I've had enough planet-hopping for a while. Anyway, I can't just go wandering. I have to pay my way. But the only way I know is the Legion way – and I've had enough fighting, too, to last me a while.'

'But that is my good news!' Talis interrupted. 'You know that I have been in touch with the other Overseers. And we have been making certain... inquiries.' A smile lit up the wrinkled face. 'Keill, there were many sizeable fees still owed to the Legions, for their services, when Moros was destroyed. We have traced them, and I am arranging to collect them – for you, the sole surviving legionary. You will be a very wealthy young man.'

Keill stared at him for a long moment. 'I... I don't know what to say...'

While you grope through the mud in your head for words of gratitude, Glr said, I have an idea for you. Her round eyes gleamed. If you have had enough of this galaxy, we can leave it. We can go to mine, and meet my people, the Ehrilil. You will find the experience improving.

Keill turned his dazed stare towards her. 'What are you talking about? You know I'd never make it.'

Talis nodded in agreement, well aware that the empty grey void of Overlight had a dire effect on the human mind, over a long period of time. And the incalculable distance between galaxies required a ship to be in Overlight for months. Even a legionary's disciplined mind would crumple, during such a voyage.

Glr sighed. *I know how weak humans are. But remember that I have grown very familiar with what passes for your mind, Keill. I could place you in a temporary coma, and you would sleep peacefully between the galaxies.*

Keill's eyes widened. 'Suspended animation? You could do that?'

Easily. I might even manage Talis as well, if he would join us.

Talis raised a long hand with a laugh. 'I am too old, and have been hidden away for too long. I wish nothing more than to go back to a normal life, in this galaxy.'

But Keill scarcely heard him. He was sitting up, gazing unseeing into the distance, excitement flooding through him. If the barrier of distance could be lifted... The thought of it! Another galaxy... meeting the Ehrilil... seeing alien worlds that no human eye had ever rested on before...

And while we are there, Glr broke in, I could ask my people to design a ship – suitable for both of us. With an Ehrilil drive that can cross between galaxies in weeks, not months. Her wings flared excitedly. Think of that, Keill – other galaxies, a whole universe of wonders and adventures!

Keill seemed stunned. Slowly he turned to Talis, who smiled and nodded with encouragement. Then he looked back at Glr – and a wide grin spread across his face.

'That's it,' he said at last. 'That's what we'll do. We'll go and look at the universe!'