

# AMERICA'S GALACTIC FOREIGN LEGIONS



DIABLO BEER

## BOOK 21

### BREAKING VERY BAD



## WALTER KNIGHT

# AMERICA'S GALACTIC FOREIGN LEGION

## BOOK 21

### *BREAKING VERY BAD*



*by*  
*Walter Knight*

In the twenty-first installment of this preposterous science fiction series, Colonel Joey R. Czerinski has his hands full trying to keep the drug trade and the Arthropodan spider commander under control on planet New Colorado. Stationed at the New Gobi Desert, the Legion battalion suffers hot conditions, but things heat up even more when Major Manny Lopez uses the time machine to bring two grade-A cooks from the past to concoct a special recipe of blue powder to be distributed on New Colorado.

Privates Whyte and Pink, with new identities and a new lease on life, are now working for Lopez and his CIA buddies – and another silent partner who will remain unnamed. As usual, Czerinski is unaware and ineffectual in handling the situation, even when God gets involved!

With one crisis averted, another always takes its place, and thermonuclear war looms on the horizon, but Czerinski's attention is focused elsewhere. Can he keep it together long enough to make another successful wager on football? His motto has always been, 'If you can't handle the heat, get out of the kitchen.' And get out he does when things get really hot in New Gobi City. Time for a little R&R far, far away, in the past. Patton for President, anyone? The laughs continue to the bitter end of defeat.

**AMERICA'S GALACTIC FOREIGN LEGION**  
**Book 21: Breaking Very Bad**  
*by Walter Knight*

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- Zombie Missouri

## ~ACKNOWLEDGEMENT~

I am a fan of the recently concluded *Breaking Bad* television series about a high school chemistry teacher dying of cancer who teams with a former student to manufacture and distribute meth. The writing and acting were phenomenal. Creator Vince Gilligan is my hero. In ***America's Galactic Foreign Legion – Book 21: Breaking Very Bad***, I tried to respectfully spoof and give Walt and Jesse a new lease on life, so they could live long and prosper in a galaxy far, far away. May they not go over to the Dark Side as they break very bad.

I dedicate ***America's Galactic Foreign Legion – Book 21: Breaking Very Bad*** to American hero Delbert Belton. Many thanks to Penumbra Publishing editor Patricia Morrison for making my literary dreams come true.

# AMERICA'S GALACTIC FOREIGN LEGION

**BOOK 21**

*BREAKING VERY BAD*



*by*  
**Walter Knight**





## CHAPTER 1

I am Colonel Joey R. Czerinski, Foreign Legion military commander of a vast desert demilitarized zone on planet New Colorado, separating the United States Galactic Federation and humanity from the Arthropodan Empire and the spiders on our distant colony. An uneasy truce holds, regulating my duties to mostly policing commerce and traffic at New Gobi City, the area's main border crossing point.

I'm not a cop, but some days I feel like it. Drug smuggling endangers the peace. The Empire threatened to take matters into their own claws if humanity didn't clean up its act and stop the traffic of blue powder from the south. Corruption and a porous border aggravated the problem, but reinforcements were trickling in. Just today, Legion recruits specially trained in anti-drug interdiction had arrived. What they lacked in experience, they made up for with enthusiasm.

Privates Valtar Whyte and Jesse Pink stood at attention in my air-conditioned office. Whyte seemed haggard, but Pink was full of energy, barely able to contain his enthusiasm to fight drug-dealing spiders. I gazed at their files, returning their salutes.

"It says here you both are chemical warfare experts," I read out loud doubtfully. "What good does that do me if we don't have chemical weapons, and, per treaty, we're not allowed to use them anyway?"

"Yo, bitch!" shouted Private Pink. "I'm not supposed to be here! This Legion abduction is bogus! Hook me up with my lawyer, pronto!"

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Master Sergeant Green grabbed Pink by the collar and slammed him headfirst into the wall. The dent to both Pink's head and the wall would be permanent. Pink slumped to the floor. I turned my attention to Whyte. "Well? Do you have anything to add?"

"Perhaps we can manufacture our own chemical weapons," suggested Whyte reasonably, wanting to please. "It could be done with the right resources."

"I'm more interested in fighting the local drug problem than creating a nerve gas incident," I explained. "I get a lot of bad press. What do you know about blue powder?"

"Drugs are just simple chemistry. What's there to know?"

"Drug dealers are manufacturing blue powder right here in New Gobi City," explained Major Lopez, my usually stoic XO. "We are losing the galactic war on drugs. Where are they getting the chemicals? How can we stop their supply networks?"

"The Legion is rumored to be corrupt to the core," advised Whyte, eyeing Major Lopez. "I'm just a private. What can I do?"

"Yet you enlisted for the duration," I bristled, sensitive to phony corruption allegations. "Both of you did, but I'll probably have Private Pink shot. This is the New Gobi Desert. Everything here pokes, bites, or stings. You ever been in the desert? The dry air will suck the life out of you in a day. Remember that, and you'll live another day."

Whyte seemed unfazed by my warning. "In spite of Pink's indiscretion, we were trained as a team. I'll talk to Pink when he wakes up."

"You do that," I ordered. "Report to Corporal Guido Tonelli for orientation at the main gate border

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crossing. Tonelli will square you away and tell you what you need to know to survive the Gobi and to make something of your life in the Foreign Legion. I'm not allowed to ask about your past, but you are being given a chance to make something of yourself in the Legion. Do the Legion proud, and you will prosper. Make a difference. Stay loyal, or your parched bones will be covered by the shifting sand dunes. No one will care or miss you. Understand, legionnaire?"

"Yes, sir."

\* \* \* \* \*

Major Lopez and Whyte carried Pink, still woozy, to his barracks cubical.

"I'm the reason you were assigned here," announced Major Lopez, breaking the silence. "I know you two were chemists on Old Earth before your fugitive status. Now you work for me and the CIA. Ready to cook?"

"Get off me!" shouted Pink, coming to as they set him on his bunk. "My cooking days are over. You can go to hell."

"It's over when the Legion says it's over."

"Does Colonel Czerinski know you're trafficking blue powder?" asked Whyte. "I don't want to cross the Butcher of New Colorado."

"No, this is a top-secret CIA mission. You will cook high-quality blue powder just like you did on Old Earth. After we establish distribution channels, we will drive out competition with my Legion contacts and dominate the planetary blue powder market. Then, we slip a special slow-acting lethal dose of poison into the product, killing every junkie on the planet."

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“Yo, are you out of your mind?” asked Pink incredulously. “You want us to help the CIA commit mass murder? Bullshit. This is on you.”

“Our mission has been approved at the highest levels on both sides of the border. Finally, we’re taking serious steps to win the galactic war on drugs. This time we will eliminate the source of the blue-powder scourge, the low-life users of the criminal underclass. You will appreciate, as a bonus, our enterprise will be very profitable up until D-Day.”

“How profitable?” asked Whyte with genuine interest. “We’ll be partners?”

“Millions for each of you, legal and tax-free. There will be no DEA raining on your party this time.”

“You’re one cold-blooded Mengele son-of-a-bitch, dude,” accused Pink. “I won’t do it. You can’t force me, it’s illegal. You must be insane.”

“Then you will be executed for not following orders. Read the fine print of your enlistment contract. You’re in for the duration.”

“You’re an asshole!”

“We’ll do it,” interrupted Whyte, stepping between Lopez and Pink. “My friend Jesse is just concussed from that blow to the head. He’ll come around when the pain stops.”

“You both blow big time!” Pink screamed.

“He needs rest and some painkiller,” continued Whyte. “You’ll see. Jesse will be fine.”

“Good. I hope so, for both your sakes. Get settled. You start cooking in a week.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“You can’t be serious,” griped Pink after Major Lopez left. “Yo, that Nazi bitch is crazy.”

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“Exactly,” agreed Whyte patiently. “That is why we need to tread lightly until an opportunity presents itself for us to desert. We will cook, make easy money, and flee rich to another planet. We deserve a break after all we’ve been through.”

“I won’t murder my customers. I have pride in my product. I sure as hell won’t be Lopez’s bitch. No way. Even you can’t be serious about mass murder. Is that how you want to be remembered by your family?”

“Of course not. Don’t worry, we’ll figure something out. But in the meantime, you need to get yourself under control. Play along. Hide your crazy. Acting out like you did on Old Earth doesn’t work here. You heard Colonel Czerinski. Everything in the desert conspires to kill us, including spiders. We need to chill in the shade like the creatures of the desert. The Legion has given us a second chance on life, offering restored wealth, health, and status. Fun, travel, and adventure. Be all we can be, an army of two, you and me. We can do this if we work together, Jesse. We deserve better than what we got on Old Earth.”

“You’ll get what you deserve, I’m sure.”

“Please, work with me.”

“Fine, but I’ll kill that punk Lopez when the time comes. And, I’m going to get my crew together to move product.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Major Lopez listened intently to their conversation from a hidden wiretap. No matter about Pink’s treason. It could be managed, for now. Those two fools would do his bidding, or else.

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“I’ll let them have their fun for now,” sneered DEA Special Agent Hanks, a shadowy figure that creeped-out even Lopez. “I’ll wait. But be certain, when this operation is complete, the long arm of justice will reach out across the galaxy and rip their throats out.”

“That sounded personal,” commented Major Lopez. “What haven’t you told me?”

“Whyte got his Legion reprieve and new identity by doing me a solid on Old Earth, avenging a buddy’s death. But it wasn’t enough. I’ll kill him and Pink myself before we’re through on New Colorado.”



## CHAPTER 2

Badger and Skinny Pete smuggled blue powder across the border from the USGF to the Arthropodan side by duct-taping packets of blue powder to remote-controlled giant desert tortoises. *Ha! Another use for duct tape.*

Smuggling drugs on tortoises was a slow process, but well worth the wait. No one dared mess with a tortoise because they were on the Endangered Species List. Molesting a tortoise was a serious felony on both sides of the border. Badger and Skinny Pete patiently watched their tortoise mule slowly navigate its way through a spider minefield.

“Maybe we should duct-tape blue powder to jackrabbits,” suggested Badger, sweating profusely under the intense New Gobi sun. “At this rate, I’ll be sober before that stupid turtle gets across.”

“Ever try to catch a jackrabbit?” asked Skinny Pete. “It can’t be done. Just chill. He’s almost to the road.”

“There’s no chilling in one-hundred-twenty-degree heat!”

“Get down! Spiders!”

\* \* \* \* \*

A column of Arthropodan Marines crested the hill just as the tortoise reached the road. The lead armored car’s treads cracked the tortoise’s shell open like a green egg. A cloud of blue powder shot up over the spider marines as the column came to a halt.

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A spider officer jumped down to inspect the gooey mess. “What the hell? This is what happens when you don’t pay attention! Do you know how much paperwork this is going to cause?”

“No, sir,” replied the driver.

“Probably a lot. Those slugs with shells, yet another invasive species from Old Earth protected by treaty, are on the Protected Species List. Damn it, this is worse than running over those blue lizards and darter snails.”

“That’s snail darters, sir. They’re fish and don’t live in the desert.”

“See? Extinct already because of reckless drivers like you!”

The driver and other spider marines inhaled deeply as the blue-powder cloud drifted past.

“Don your masks!” ordered a sergeant. “That’s blue powder!”

“Whatever,” replied the driver, sucking up more cloud. “Are we there yet?”

“I’m there,” answered a gunner. “That’s some quality shit.”

“Everyone stop breathing!” ordered the spider commander as he examined packets still taped to the tortoise. “Anyone who takes another breath is under arrest!”

Marines crowded around to get a closer look at the accident. The spider commander reached for binoculars to scan the distant ridge across the minefield. Sure enough, two human pestilence lay concealed in the sage brush.

“I see them, too,” advised the sergeant, a bit wobbly. “A fat human pestilence and a skinny one. Shall we open fire?”

“Capture them for interrogation.”

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\* \* \* \* \*

Spider marines deployed across the border, circling behind Badger and Skinny Pete, taking them by surprise. The spider commander lorded over the hapless smugglers, pointing his pistol. "You're under arrest. Who do you work for?"

"We're independent contractors," answered Badger, proudly. "Hey! You spiders can't arrest us on this side of the border. We're American citizens. We have rights against alien abductions. It's in the Constitution somewhere."

"Answer my questions, or you die on the spot. Who is your contact on our side? Why didn't you use jackrabbits?"

"Shut up with the jackrabbits."

The spider back-clawed Badger across the face with his pistol. Badger spit out a tooth as he tried to crawl away, but was stomped on by spider marines.

"Tell him everything!" shouted Skinny Pete. "These spider dudes mean business. This ain't Albuquerque."

"I can't be killed," boasted Badger in a moment of ill-advised bravado. "I'm the loveable sidekick that survived five seasons!"

"That's harsh, bro," interrupted Skinny Pete, sensitive about critics' comments. "Are you saying I'm not loveable?"

"You're an ugly crackhead," accused Badger.

"Man, that's discrimination against crackheads. Talk about the junky calling the user an addict."

"Who do you work for?" repeated the spider commander, pointing his pistol at Skinny Pete. "Tell me now!"

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“The Legion,” confessed Skinny Pete, groveling at the commander’s feet. “Please don’t shoot me. We’re simple dues-paying members of the Actors’ Guild trying to make a living. Can’t we make a deal? I can tell you the location of the Legion’s blue-powder lab. Just let us go!”

“I’m listening.”

“It’s under the Pizza Hut in New Gobi City.”

“Not KFC?” asked the spider commander skeptically. “That’s where I would have put it.”

“No, it’s under Pizza Hut. I swear!”

“Is the human pestilence subspecies Italiano using Mafia connections to move blue powder across the border?”

“There’s no such thing as the Mafia,” advised Skinny Pete. “Just saying.”

“You’re an addict, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been clean a while, but the rush, the sweet temptation, it draws you back. Once you’ve done blue powder, are you ever really free?”

“Liar!” shouted the spider commander, shooting Skinny Pete in the head. Blood splattered across Badger, terrifying the loveable sidekick even more.

“Who is your commanding officer?” the spider commander demanded.

“Major Lopez of the Legion,” answered Badger. “Please don’t kill me!”

“You work for the Cartel? Why are you not using drones to smuggle drugs?”

Glancing at his dead cohort splayed in the sand, Badger recalled Lopez’s excuse for not providing better resources and grumbled, “Tortoises are lame. Low tech is better, my ass.” He looked up at the spider commander. “We told you what you want to know about the lab. So, I can go?”

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"Not likely, human pestilence."

"Can't we all just get along? Some of my best friends are you spiders."

"You spiders?" echoed the spider commander, offended. "I should shoot you in the head now and leave your body slumped over your partner's. Two more fools to be claimed by the New Gobi Desert, two less members of the Actors' Guild. However, the matter needs more study."

Obviously feeling magnanimous, the spider commander spared Badger. "If indeed you putrid jellified mass of human pestilence are as loveable as you claim, you might be useful as a spy for the Empire." The spider commander dialed his translation device down to outlawed Albuquerque Mafia slang and added, "Yo, punk-ass fool, you will be my snitch on the inside, or I'll whack you."

"No way I'll be your alien bitch," protested Badger. "I'm a righteous dude. I don't roll that way."

"*Bitch*. Yes, that's the word I was looking for," agreed the spider commander, fine-tuning the translator beyond politically correct civilized limits. "Yo, biotch! You will do my bidding because I got yo punk-ass bent over between a rock and a much harder substance, probably titanium."

"Say what?"

"Snitch or die!"

"Fine, bro. You got me. I've gone over to the Dark Side. Who would have thought loveable Badger would be a snitch for the alien feds in a galaxy far, far away?"

"Stop whining!" ordered the spider commander, back-clawing Badger across the face again. "You will provide details about human pestilence drug cartels."

"Yes, lord and master gnarly spider dude."

\* \* \* \* \*

Badger wandered in from the desert like Amos Moses, dehydrated and babbling tales of alien abduction. Legionnaires gathered to gawk. At the border crossing gate, Badger hugged his long-lost friend, Jesse. Private Whyte backed away, hoping to not be so conspicuous.

“Thank God you’re here. I heard you escaped Old Earth. The spiders murdered Skinny Pete, but not before torturing and doing unmentionable things.”

“You were probed?” asked Pink. “I don’t think I could handle that. I’d rather die.”

“What’s your name?” asked Sergeant Green, interrupting the love fest.

“Badger.”

“Do you have a last name, Badger?”

“I’m CIA. If you knew my real identity, I’d have to kill you, yo.”

“Like hell, you say,” responded Sergeant Green, grabbing Badger and shaking him. “I will have you shot if you don’t start talking. How do you know Private Pink?”

“Jesse is my bro from back in the real world,” explained Badger, clutching Pink tighter. “Jesse can vouch for me!”

“Get off me!” shouted Pink, wanting to shut Badger up. The fool never knew when to shut up.

“Don’t be like that,” pleaded Badger. “Hook a brother up. What are you doing on New Colorado?”

“Getting a life,” answered Pink. “You’re snitching for the CIA? You wearing a wire?”

“Don’t go there, bro.”

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“Drop your droopy drawers,” ordered Sergeant Green. “Do it now!”

“No way,” protested Badger. “I don’t roll that way. I’m not wearing a wire.”

“He’s a snitch,” exclaimed Pink, shoving Badger.

Legionnaires immediately pummeled Badger, giving him the boot. Snitches weren’t tolerated out on the frontier. Sure enough, upon close examination an alien microchip was found embedded in Badger’s flabby ass. Sergeant Green drew his pistol for summary execution of the traitor.

“Perhaps Colonel Czerinski might want to interrogate the prisoner,” suggested Private Whyte, stepping forward, a voice of reason amid the chaos. “It’s just a thought.”

“You won’t die so easy,” threatened Sergeant Green, releasing Badger from his grip. “You will be killed slow and painful, spilling all your secrets, including your last name.”

“Never! My last name isn’t even in the credits. It’s a secret even to me. I demand representation. I’m a current dues-paying member of the Actors’ Guild. I want a lawyer!”

“We’ll see about that, Mr. Badger. No slimy lawyer, or even a union rep, will save you now.”



### CHAPTER 3

I woke to the sound of air-raid sirens. A single Arthropodan missile slammed into Pizza Hut. Uninvited, DEA Agent Hanks met me at the crater that was once the finest restaurant in New Gobi City. The blast uncovered a cavern containing a large industrial infrastructure. *What the hell?*

"This is bad," commented Major Lopez. "Where do we eat lunch now?"

"I've seen this before," mused Agent Hanks, ignoring Lopez's concern. "There was a blue-powder lab under Taco Bell."

"Taco Bell makes blue powder?" I asked. "Who knew? How long has this been going on?"

"Usually it's fast food chicken, but the drug cartels are expanding their MO. Next it will be Burger King or McDonald's."

"No way," I scoffed. "McDonald's is an American icon."

"Exactly why we must be unrelenting in our war against drugs."

"I'm not a cop," I grouched. "I shouldn't have to get involved in fighting your war on drugs."

"It's not just *my* war. We're all involved, whether we like it or not."

I relented. "I'll order all fast food distribution centers searched, starting with KFC."

"How did the spiders know about the drug lab?" asked Major Lopez, picking through the rubble.

"Drug lab or not," I countered, "it sets a bad precedent, letting them bomb our fast food."

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"I agree the bugs should have warned us," Agent Hanks conceded, "but I say we cut our losses and move on."

"Still, they should have given us a head up," I argued. "I'll send the spider commander a stern warning not to kill our drug dealers south of the border without telling us first."

"They did us a favor. One less dirt bag on our side," advised Agent Hanks, spitting into the pit. "Like it or not, we're all in for the duration, and I'm fighting this war to the death."

\* \* \* \* \*

In traditional Legion manner, I hung Badger upside down for interrogation from a ceiling hook. He defiantly braced for the worst, swinging back and forth, fighting his restraints. *Too bad, so sad for Badger.*

"Go ahead, waterboard me. I'm up for it. Give it your best shot!"

"Waterboard?" I scoffed. "We don't do that anymore. Too messy. I wouldn't want to violate your Constitutional rights. I'm going to stick you in the testicles with a hot poker."

"Okay, I'll talk! The drug lab belonged to the CIA. It was all Major Lopez's idea!"

"I'm not surprised," I accused, turning on Lopez. "Well?"

"It was a sting operation," answered Lopez. "But there was a leak. Badger must have turned traitor. That explains the chip in his ass. I say we shoot him now."

"Not so fast!" interrupted Eugene Depoli, Legion attorney, bursting into the dungeon, waving legal

papers. "I'm here to spring Badger."

"He's a master spy," accused Major Lopez. "The traitor will face a firing squad."

"Bugle Boy?" scoffed Depoli, laughing. "Badger is dumber than a bag of hamsters. He's not a master anything."

"Nevertheless, he's a traitor and will be shot."

"Hard times love a chump, but you're not shooting anyone."

"He's responsible for blowing up Pizza Hut."

"So, eat at Godfathers. Private Badger is a legionnaire, on loan to the CIA, and as such, will be afforded all legalities and protections his Legion and CIA status affords."

"This puss-sack is a legionnaire?" I asked incredulously. "He's not in *my* Legion."

"How do you think he got past Mars?" asked Depoli triumphantly. "You're stuck with him for the duration."

"It will be a short duration."

"Be that as it may, he's a legionnaire."

"Does that mean they have to feed me?" asked Badger. "They haven't fed me!"

"Shut up fool," ordered Depoli. "You have the right to remain silent until I get you out of this mess."

"He won't last one day in the New Gobi."

"Not my concern," replied Depoli. "Badger was specially recruited for his technical expertise."

"What expertise?" I challenged.

"He's a highly trained chemist."

"We'll see about that," I responded, cutting Badger down. He landed on his head, knocked out cold. "Another chemical war expert? I am sending a complaint to Legion recruiting."

"Just because you don't need him anymore

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doesn't mean you can just throw him away, unless you want to pay back his enlistment bonus."

"I'm not paying back anything!"

"As you said, he won't last," threatened Major Lopez. "None of them will."

\* \* \* \* \*

Believing in 'out of sight, out of mind,' I sent privates Badger, Whyte, and Pink on a long-range patrol led by Sergeant Williams along the DMZ, searching for drug traffickers. Sergeant Williams, just returned from Old Earth, had IRS problems. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Like the others, Williams didn't think things through and didn't look at the big picture – something I'd learned to do long ago.

Badger and Pink were proof recruitment shortages were affecting Legion standards. I could sympathize with recruiting people who needed a second chance, even petty criminals. But stupid? You can't fix stupid. I expected both those fools to be casualties of the New Gobi Desert soon. Everything in the Gobi pokes, stings, or bites. Whyte, I wasn't sure about. He probably wouldn't last long either, but we'd see.

\* \* \* \* \*

The patrol dispersed for ambush deployment along a remote trail leading from the border. Scorpion drug smugglers traveled the area frequently. It was only a matter of time before the patrol made contact.

"I have a plan," advised Private Whyte, crouched behind rocks on a ridge overlooking the trail. "But it

will take money.”

“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face,” Pink groused. “That’s your problem.”

“I mean it. This will work. The problem isn’t the problem. The problem is your attitude about the problem. You hear me?”

“I have a plan, too. It’s called staying alive this time!”

“Smoking marijuana, eating Cheese Doodles, and masturbating is not a plan,” argued Whyte, angrily grabbing Pink.

“Yo, get off me,” replied Pink, shaking Whyte’s hand off his arm. “Everything takes money. You always think you’re so smart. See where your smarts got us? In the Foreign Legion, that’s where!”

“The Legion is not so bad,” commented Badger, opening an MRE. “At least they feed us.”

“We’re an elite unit,” advised Whyte, ignoring Badger. “There are rumors Colonel Czerinski is charged with guarding a time machine humanity shares with the spiders. That time machine is our freedom.”

“It’s not a rumor,” advised Sergeant Williams, overhearing their conversation as he made his rounds. “I’ve seen it. But, you’ll never get close to it. Because of past glitches, access is restricted.”

“If I could go back in time, I could make things right,” reasoned Whyte. “I could get my family back.”

“You can’t undo the past,” scoffed Sergeant Williams. “It’s been tried. Life moves forward, not back. What would you do? Go back and kill yourself to do it all over again?”

“Why not? It’s got to be better than this. Microchips gave me back my youth, but what good is that without family?”

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"AWOL is not an option," warned Williams.

"Wouldn't you like to go home and have a second chance?"

"The Legion is your second chance," admonished Sergeant Williams dismissively. "Don't blow it."

A motion detector alarm activated. Sergeant Williams checked his communications pad, then motioned to the others that there was movement on the trail. In minutes, the first scorpions appeared, laden with heavy backpacks as they ambled along the trail at a steady pace. Sergeant Williams let out a rebel yell as he threw a grenade. The lead scorpions died. Others fled or burrowed into the dunes. A survivor twitched, struggling to free himself from his backpack. Sergeant Williams finished him off with a bullet to the head.

"Watch your partner's back," ordered Sergeant Williams, probing the sand with a bayonet. "Those bugs can resurface anytime!"

Private Whyte checked the dead scorpion's backpack. It was full of blue powder. It also contained cash, as good as money. He pocketed the cash and a packet of blue powder.

"Collect those backpacks as evidence," ordered Sergeant Williams. "Help is on the way to dig those scorpions out."

As if on cue, a scorpion emerged from the sand, stinging Whyte on the shoulder. The telson broke off on Whyte's protective vest, but not before injecting venom. Whyte fired his assault rifle into the scorpion as he fell unconscious into a hallucinatory state.

\* \* \* \* \*

Demons swirled about in Whyte's mind as the

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poison took effect. It seemed so real. A black hooded skeletal apparition wielding a long sharp Walmart-tagged scythe pressed the blade menacingly to Whyte's throat.

"You cheated Death once, but not this time!" taunted the Grim Reaper. "I have you now."

"This can't be happening," cried Whyte, dropping to his knees. "You aren't real."

"Oh, I'm real enough," replied the Grim Reaper as he drew blood from Whyte's throat. "Aren't you going to beg for your life? Most legionnaires cry for mama when we meet, but not you, Mr. Whyte. You're a special case. The Legion used its time machine to steal you from me, but I'm taking you back!"

"What did I ever do to deserve this!" pleaded Whyte, clutching his throat and gasping for air. "All I ever wanted was to raise and love my family."

"You will join your family in Hell," promised the Grim Reaper, now face to face with Whyte, the stench of his putrid breath causing Whyte to gag. "No one cheats Death!"

"No!"

Whyte slapped the Grim Reaper alongside his boney head with a packet of blue powder. The powder exploded in a cloud of dust. The grim reaper fell back, dropping his scythe. Whyte's hallucination stopped.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pink jerked Whyte away from the scorpion, pulling the telson out of his shoulder. A medic injected anti-venom vaccine as Whyte lay on the ground. "There was a monster," cried Whyte. "He was going to take me to Hell!"

"Not today," advised Sergeant Williams, kneeling

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beside Whyte. “Good job, legionnaire. You made a difference. You’re a survivor. I admire that. You killed that nasty scorpion, but good.”

“What about the monster?”

“Calm yourself. Let the anti-venom take effect. There are always going to be monsters. The Legion will deal with them later. The only monsters here now are in your head.”

“Damn it! It wasn’t in my head!”

“I know, son. You cheated Death. Not many can say that. Thanatos will not be happy. He will seek revenge. He stalks all legionnaires. But for now, you’re a Hero of the Legion. No one can take that away. Savor the moment while it lasts.”



## CHAPTER 4

At battalion formation, I pinned a Hero of the Legion Medal on Private Whyte for killing a scorpion drug trafficker in hand-to-claw combat. *Good job, legionnaire.* Agent Hanks gave Whyte a DEA Medal of Merit. The two tried to hide their recognition, but their eyes were locked in hatred. *Damn, they all know each other.*

I'm becoming resigned to the fact that Legion recruiters are accepting volunteers from the past. So be it. If today's generation isn't interested in saving the galaxy, let the CIA recruit as many as they want through their time machine. Bring on the best of the best from the past. Join the Legion, meet interesting species, kill them. We'll be the 'Legion of the Dead' soon. Clearly a significant portion of my command are castoffs of time.

Company Commander Captain Columbus trailed behind me and Major Lopez. Columbus sashayed about with that flashy sword. *Really? Who does that?* A legionnaire's past was confidential, but too many recruits were coming through the time portal. I continued inspecting the ranks, hiding my alarm.

After dismissal, Master Sergeant Green hung back to talk to Private Whyte. "Whyte, after-action reports indicate you hallucinated as a result of the scorpion sting. Do you remember?"

"No, not to my knowledge," answered Private Whyte. "Why?"

"Did you not report to Sergeant Williams seeing monsters? Maybe you even saw the Grim Reaper?"

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"Don't be silly. Of course not. There's no such thing."

"Do not lie to me."

"Sergeant, what's this about? I did my duty, killing a scorpion drug dealer. Let it be."

"Fine. Go get drunk with your buddies. Do not think the Grim Reaper will just forget about you. He never forgets."

"Whatever. I won't get drunk, but I will celebrate surviving by drinking a beer or two with my comrades. Thank you for your concern, sergeant. I can take care of myself."

\* \* \* \* \*

At the Blind Tiger Casino, Private Whyte surveyed the rough crowd. *Beauty truly is in the eye of the beer holder.* None of the females of any species compared to what he had at home. All turned to salute the newest Hero of the Legion.

"To Valtar Whyte!" toasted Sergeant Williams raising a beer. "A warrior, our newest Hero of the Legion!"

Legionnaires and biker babes rushed forward to pat Whyte on the back and offer more beer. Whyte felt more alive than he had since leaving Old Earth. Officers kept saying the Legion is the same as family, but until now he didn't believe it. Even Pink and Badger seemed to be in good spirits.

"This place is crazy," advised Pink, joining Whyte at a table. "We go out and kill drug dealers, then come back here and the place is overflowing in blue powder."

"And alien chicks are hitting on me," added Badger. "Spiders like fat guys. Who knew?"

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Whyte glanced at the bar. Sure enough, spider babes were waving claws in their direction, and scorpions were shaking their stingers. It was alarming. Whyte gulped his beer and reached for another. “Are you seriously contemplating sex with a bug?” asked Whyte. “Is that even possible?”

“It’s more than possible,” answered a female scorpion caressing Whyte’s neck from behind. “You survived a sting. I like that in a human. Let me take you to the dark side of places you never contemplated.”

“No, thank you,” replied Whyte, brushing her claws away. “I prefer humans. Besides, I’m married.”

“That’s not what I hear.”

“You heard wrong. Get away from me.”

“Party-pooper,” she pouted, now eyeing Badger. “How about you, big boy?”

“I’m going for it!” shouted Badger, standing up. “You are female, right?”

The scorpion babe stung Badger in the neck. He flopped into her claws, and she carried him out the door. Sergeant Williams let out a rebel yell as the crowd cheered.

“That’s not right,” whispered Pink. “That’s some sick shit.”

“Badger never was too bright,” agreed Whyte.

“I mean everyone just going with it. I don’t think it’s safe.”

“It’s not,” advised Sergeant Williams, seating himself. “But you only die twice. You’re in the Legion now. Live life to the fullest. The Grim Reaper will take you soon enough.”

“He almost got me,” commented Whyte. “The Grim Reaper is real.”

“Damn right he’s real,” said Sergeant Williams,

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letting out another rebel yell, taking a swig of vodka. "He's coming for us all!"

"We can cheat Death if we can use the time machine," suggested Whyte. "You've used it. Help me get through."

"I'd go with you if I could, but security is tight. It's guarded by both legionnaires and spider marines. Colonel Czerinski and the spider commander both need to be present to open the vault door. An army couldn't get to it."

"There has to be a way."

"There isn't, but if you can think something, I'm in. I want to go back to Tennessee in the worst way. I got back to Old Earth once, but the IRS nailed me. Next time, I'll be smarter."

"Next time I'll be smarter, too."

\* \* \* \* \*

I met the spider commander for our monthly inspection of the time machine, and to discuss stuff like their bombing Pizza Hut, an iconic American institution and provider of the best salad bar on New Colorado. He'd become arrogant and needed to be taken down a notch or two.

We strolled past the security detail of legionnaires and spider marines charged by treaty with safeguarding the time machine. At the vault, we placed hand and claw on the identification scanner, opening the large steel door. All appeared to be in order. Neither side could use the time machine without the other's approval or knowledge. The door closed, leaving our staff behind.

The problem with meeting in a vault was that it was in a vault. A door in the floor opened, leading to

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my private quarters deep under the bunker. I poured the spider commander a vodka as we made ourselves comfortable on couches.

“You can’t just bomb Pizza Hut!” I yelled, starting the tough negotiations. “It’s just not done.”

“I already did,” replied the spider commander. “The galaxy did not come to an end. Treaty allows pursuit of criminals and enemies of the Empire, including drug cartel gangstas.”

“I hope you realize Pizza Hut will sue. There will be endless litigation and appeals.”

“Our lawyers will tell your human pestilence lawyers they have no jurisdiction over internal security matters of the Empire. End of appeal.”

“Don’t do it again, or else.”

“Whatever,” replied the spider commander derisively. “I am more concerned about your provocative military build-up. I will not tolerate more American adventurism.”

“What build-up?” I asked innocently. “The Legion suffers from recruitment shortages. There’s no build-up.”

“Your president should implement a draft. Human pestilence are self-centered and have no sense of duty or responsibility.”

“We kicked your ass in the last five wars.”

“You cheated. You’re cheating again, recruiting soldiers from antiquity, fitting them with Fountain of Youth chips, and bringing them to the present to guard our time machine. Do you not see irony in that?”

“It’s not my idea.”

“It is a conflict of interest and jeopardizes security, allowing time-traveling mercenaries to guard our time machine. You would let inmates guard the

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asylum?”

“Legionnaires are not mercenaries. They’re American citizens, and an elite military unit. They’ve left the past behind. Their confidentiality is sacred. It’s the law, guaranteed somewhere in the Constitution. I cannot inquire about a legionnaire’s past. What’s past is past. Security is as good as ever.”

“That is what I am afraid of. It is bad enough you and I use a backdoor for special missions. What we do borders on treason.”

“It is treason, if we get caught,” I conceded. “But it’s important to have options in case of emergency, and it’s profitable, too. Why not be compensated for the risk and responsibility we take?”

“You had better not double-cross me.”

“We are trusted guardians of the time machine. Your emperor and my president gave us certain discretionary powers because of our proven loyalty and good judgment. How many times have we saved the galaxy? A dozen?”

“At least.”

“There you go. No one cares if we get rich or make a few personal errands through time, as long as we get the job done.”

“Just keep me informed of your personal errands and vendettas,” warned the spider commander. “Keep your motley collection of Mafia legionnaires in check.”

“There’s no such thing as the Mafia.”

“I mean it! Keep that mad dog Major Lopez and his CIA buddies on a short leash, or I’ll kill him myself. I have proof Lopez was behind the blue powder lab under your Pizza Hut.”

“Whatever.”

“Don’t ‘whatever’ me!”

“Lopez isn’t so easy to kill. Don’t worry, I’m

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managing Lopez.”

“You had better!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Whyte stepped outside the Blind Tiger for some fresh air. Like a blur, he was attacked from the side, shoved against the wall. Agent Hanks press his big meaty hand to Whyte’s throat and squeezed.

“My mission on this planet is to put you in jail for the rest of your sorry-ass life,” threatened Hanks. “I don’t know what your plan is, but I’ll be watching.”

“I lost everything, just like you,” explained Whyte. “I just want a second chance.”

“Bullshit! I know you. I won’t rest until you are brought to justice.”

“Can’t we just get along?”

“No! You’re cooking again. You, Pink, and that stupid moron, Badger. You’ve got your whole crew here!”

“Not quite.”

“Yeah, too bad about Skinny Pete. That’s how you will end up.”

“I’ve cheated Death before, I’ll do it again. Now, let go of me.”

Agent Hanks released Whyte from his grip, even straightening his collar. “I’ve got all the time in the galaxy.”

“What if you could do it all over again? Would you?”

“Damn straight. I’d shoot you down like a rabid dog.”

“Until we meet again,” threatened Whyte, walking back into the Blind Tiger to join his new friends, his new family. “Thanks for the warning.”

