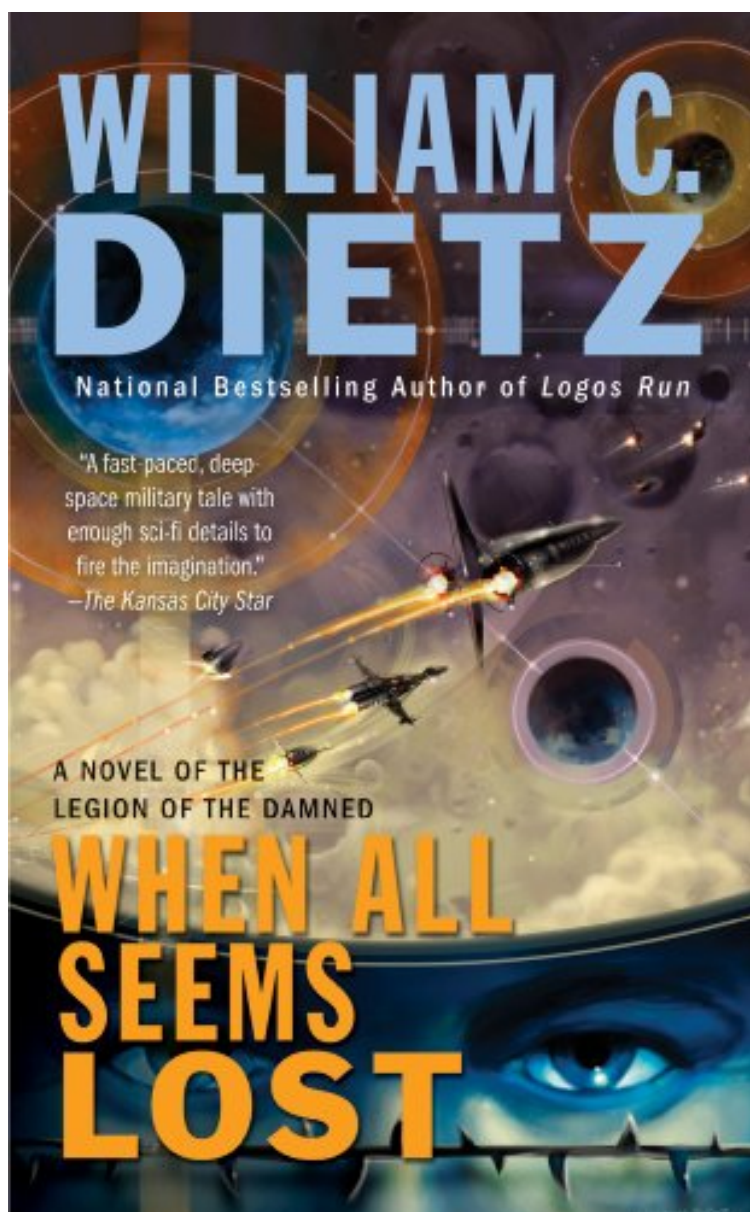


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When All Seems Lost: A Novel of the Legion of the Damned



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Description : Description du produitAn exciting new Legion of the Damned epic tale-from the national bestselling author of For Those Who Fell. captured by the alien Ramanthians and imprisoned in a brutal slave labor camp, the Confederacy's Presidential entourage must keep their identities secret. But diplomat Christine Vanderveen is concerned that some of the prisoners may be tempted to reveal the ruse. Determined to protect the President, she faces down opposition, both alien and human, all the while hoping for rescue. And rescue is on the way-an unauthorized effort, organized by General Bill Booly, manned by a team of volunteers with nothing to lose. Heading it is Lieutenant Tonio Sanchez, Vanderveen's former lover, who

must try to set aside his personal feelings for the sake of the mission.

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom the NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR of When Duty Calls.Captured by the alien Ramanthians, diplomat Christine Vanderveen must protect the Confederacy's President from both their captors and fellow prisoners. But rescue is on the way, led by Lieutenant Tonio Sanchez, Vanderveen's former lover, who must try to set aside his personal feelings for the sake of the mission.Extrait Surprise, the pith and marrow of war.Admiral of the Fleet Lord FisherStandard year 1906Aboard the Confederacy Destroyer Escort DE-11201, The Lance, in hyperspaceAn almost palpable sense of tension filled the control room as the Lance prepared to exit hyperspace and enter a solar system where anything could be waiting. As with all Spear-Class ships the executive officer and the navigator sat to either side of the captain within a semicircular enclosure. The rest of the bridge crew were seated one level below in what was often referred to as "the tub." All wore spacesuits with their helmets racked beside them. "Five-minutes and counting,"

Lieutenant j.g. "Tink" Ross reported, as he eyed the data that scrolled down the screen in front of him."Roger that," Lieutenant Commander Hol Tanaka acknowledged calmly, as he stared at the view screen and the blank nothingness of hyperspace beyond. The naval officer had thick black hair, almond shaped eyes, and a compact body. The Lance was his first command, and even though the DE was older than he was, Tanaka was proud of both the ship and his crew. "Sound battle stations... . Bring primary and secondary weapons systems on-line... . And activate the defensive screens. All Daggers will stand by for immediate launch. Give me a quick scan as we exit hyperspace, followed by a full spectrum sweep, and a priority-alpha target analysis."The ship's executive officer, Lieutenant KT Balcom, responded with a pro forma "Aye, aye, sir," but there was no need to actually do anything, because the orders had been anticipated and the crew was ready. What couldn't be anticipated however was what the DE would run into as it entered normal space off Nav Beacon CSM-1802. Because even though it was statistically unlikely there was always the possibility that the Lance would exit hyperspace within missile range of a Ramanthian warship. Which, come to think of it, is exactly what we're supposed to do, Tanaka thought to himself. So that the rest of the battle group will have time to drop hyper and respond while the bugs clobber us! The thought brought no sense of resentment.

Just a determination to succeed. Not just for the Confederation, but for Tanaka's parents, who had been among thousands killed when the bugs glassed Port Foro on Zena II. Then the time for reflection was past as the last few seconds ticked away, and DE-11201 entered the Nebor system, which was only a hop-skip-and-a hyperspace jump away from the battle group's final destination inside the sector of space controlled by the Clone Hegemony. Stomachs lurched as the ship's NAVCOMP shut the hyperdrive down and the Lance entered normal space.What followed took place so quickly that Tanaka, his crew, and the ship's computers were just beginning to process what was waiting for them when ten-torpedoes scored direct hits on the destroyer escort and blew the ship to smithereens. All there was to mark the point where the ambush had taken place was a steadily expanding constellation of debris and bursts of stray static. There was no jubilation aboard the Sheen vessels that had been positioned around the nav beacon for more than one-standard month. Because the formerly free-ranging computer-controlled ships were entirely automated and therefore incapable of emotion.But crewed or not, the remote controlled ships made excellent weapons platforms, a fact that was central to Commodore Ru Lorko's plan. And, as luck would have it the stern if somewhat eccentric naval officer, was not only awake at the precise moment when the Lance was destroyed, but present in the Star Reaper's small control room as well. Like all Ramanthians the naval officer had big compound eyes, a pair of antenna that projected from the top of his head, a hooked flesh-tearing beak, and a somewhat elongated body. It stood on two legs and was held erect by a hard exoskeleton. Which in Lorko's case had been holed in battle and patched with a metal plate. A shiny rectangle that had given rise to the nickname, "Old Iron Back." There was a burst of joyful pincer clacking that could be heard throughout the ship as the destroyer's crew celebrated an easy victory. But that came to an end when Lorko spoke over the ship's intercom system. "Do not be fooled!" the officer cautioned. "That was the easy part," he reminded the crew. "It's possible that the destroyer escort was on a solo mission. But, if this is the moment that we have been waiting for, then the DE was little more than the tip of a very long spear. Prepare yourselves and know this... . He who fails to do his best will feel the full weight of my pincer!"And every member of the crew knew that Lorko was not only serious, but fanatically serious, since the Commodore, like approximately 20% of the Ramanthian officer corps, was a member of the rigid, some said inflexible Nira (Spirit) cult. A semi-religious group determined to live their lives in accordance with the Hath, or true path, which required each adherent to follow a very strict code of behavior. One that equated surrender with cowardice, mercy

with treachery, and love for anything other than the Ramanthian race as weakness. Which explained why Lorko, like so many other members of the Nira, had severed his relationships with his mates. But what wasn't apparent to the crew was what the straight-backed officer felt deep inside. Which was a tremendous sense of relief and anticipation. Because in order to gain command of the Sheen ships, the carrier Swarm, and half-a-dozen smaller vessels, Lorko had been forced to go straight to Grand Admiral Imba for approval. Thereby offending a number of superiors as well as risking what had been a successful career on what many considered to be a stupid idea. Because the whole notion of waiting for an enemy convoy to drop out of hyperspace struck many as not only a tremendous waste of time but a poor use of scarce resources. Which was why Lorko had been given exactly thirty-standard days in which to try his plan before returning to fleet HQ for reassignment. Now, three full days past the end of his allotted time, Lorko had what he had gambled on: a victory. Not a major victory, but a victory nonetheless, which might be sufficient to forestall a court of inquiry. Or, as Lorko had just explained to the crew, the Confederate DE could be the precursor of a much larger force. Which, were he to destroy it, would not only vindicate the naval officer but quite possibly result in a promotion. But with the seconds ticking away, it was time to take action. "You know what to do," the commodore said to the Star Breaker's Captain. "Do it." A good deal of time and computer analysis had been spent coming up with what Lorko and his subordinate officers believed to be the standard intervals employed by Confederate battle groups as they entered potentially hostile systems. And that number was five-standard minutes give or take thirty-seconds. So, given the fact that one-minute-twenty-six seconds had already elapsed, it was time for the Sheen vessels to open fire. Not on a specific target, but on the exact point where the ill fated DE had left hyperspace. Because according to Lorko's analysis that was where the next ship would most likely exit as well. And the next, and the next, until the entire formation lay before him. An assemblage of ships that might be less than, equal to, or larger than Lorko's modest fleet. A threat but only if the enemy vessels were allowed to respond. So the remotely operated Sheen vessels opened fire with their extremely powerful energy cannons, and where their pulses of bright-blue light converged, an artificial sun was born. Lorko was committed at that point, because while the Sheen ships could maintain a sustained fire for up to eight-minutes, their accumulators would have to recharge after that. And while the machine-ships were armed with missiles they carried a finite number. All of which meant that if the theoretical force arrived later than expected it might break out of the trap and attack not only the Star Reaper but the more vulnerable Swarm. Thereby turning what could have been a magnificent victory into one of the worst naval disasters in Ramanthian history. Lorko would commit suicide of course, assuming he survived long enough to do so, but it would be humiliating to arrive in the next world carrying such a heavy burden of shame. Nav Point CSM-1802 shimmered within a cocoon of lethal energy as the seconds ticked away. Aboard the Confederacy Battleship Gladiator, in hyperspace the battleship's primary Command Control (CC) computer was generally referred to as "Big Momma" mostly because she had a soft female voice. It echoed through miles of corridors, hundreds of weapons stations, and even found its way into the spacious cabin normally reserved for admirals but presently occupied by the Confederacy's extremely competent, but slightly pudgy President and Chief Executive Officer Marcott Nankool. Who, being confronted with the plate full of pastries that had been brought in for the enjoyment of his staff, was struggling to ignore the calorie laden treats as the computer spoke via the ship's ubiquitous PA system. "The ship will drop hyper in five, repeat five, minutes. Secure all gear, check space armor, and strap in. Primary weapons systems, secondary weapons systems, and tertiary weapons systems have been armed. All fighter aircraft are prepared for immediate launch... . Marine boarding parties are on standby at locks one through thirty-six. All supernumerary personnel will don space armor and remain where they are until the ship secures from battle stations. I repeat... ." But none of the six men and women who had been sent along to assist the Chief Executive during high-level talks with the Clone Hegemony were interested in hearing Big Momma's spiel all over again. And, having already struggled into their ill-fitting "P" for passenger space suits some fifteen-minutes earlier, the staffers were content to let the CC computer drone on as their discussion continued. "That's utter bullshit," Secretary for Foreign Affairs Benjamin Hooks said contemptuously. "There's no god-damned way that the clones are going to agree to an alliance with us. I mean, why should they? We're getting our asses royally kicked while they sit around and congratulate each other on how superior their DNA is!" The slender Dweller required a mechanical exoskeleton in order to deal with the Earth normal gravity maintained aboard the Gladiator. One of his servos whined as the diplomat shifted his weight. "Maybe," Ambassador Omi Ochi countered cautiously. "But consider this. Regardless of the way the manner in which they mate, or don't mate as the case may be, the clones are still human. That means they

think, see, hear, feel, and taste things just as you do. So, who are they going to side with? The bugs? Or beings similar to themselves?" Foreign Service Officer (FSO)-3 Christine Vanderveen had shoulder-length blonde hair, very blue eyes, and full red lips. Though not senior enough to participate in the increasingly heated discussion she thought the serious-faced Dweller was essentially correct. After dithering around for a shamefully long time, the famously insular clones would eventually be forced to align themselves with the Confederacy, which, while not exclusively human, was certainly humanistic insofar as its laws, culture, and traditions were concerned. "That makes sense ambassador," Secretary Hooks allowed stolidly. "Or would, if the clones had a brain between them! How do you explain their continuing dalliance with the Thrakies? The furballs don't look human to me." The discussion might have gone on indefinitely, but having given both sides an opportunity to express their opinions, Nankool wanted to move the meeting forward. "Both of you make good points," the moon-faced Chief Executive said soothingly. "But the fact remains... . We're on the way to the Hegemony in an effort to gain support from the clones. And, based on the fact that they invited us to come, there's the possibility that Omi is correct. So, let's plan for success... . Assuming the Alpha Clones are open to a military alliance they're going to want some say where command decisions are concerned. General Koba-Sa... . How much input could you and your peers tolerate before your heads explode?" All of Nankool's advisors knew that General Booly and the rest of his staff wouldn't want to surrender any authority so everyone chuckled as the Hudathan worked his massive jaw as if preparing it for battle. The officer had a large humanoid head and weighed two-hundred and fifty-two pounds. He wasn't wearing a kepi so the half-inch high dorsal fin that fan front to back along the top of his skull was visible, as were his funnel-shaped ears, and a thin-lipped mouth. Though white at the moment the officer's skin would automatically darken when exposed to cold temperatures. The Hudathans had once been the sworn enemies of nearly every sentient species, but rather than remain imprisoned on the dying planet of Hudatha, Koba-Sa's people agreed to join the Confederacy. And a good thing too, since the big aliens were fearsome warriors, and many of the Confederacy's other members were not. Koba-Sa's voice was reminiscent of a rock-crusher stuck in low gear. "The clone army was bred to fight," Koba-Sa said approvingly. "And gave a good account of themselves during the rebellion on LaNor. But their senior officers lack initiative at times and spend too much time on the defensive. My people have a saying. He who waits for the enemy should dig his own grave first." Vanderveen didn't like Under Secretary of Defense Corley Calisco for any number of reasons. Because Calisco was a man who could typically be found on every side of an issue. But what bothered her most was the way he would stare at her breasts, and then lick his lips, as if he was able to taste them. So, when the under secretary opened his mouth, the foreign service officer fully expected Calisco to slime the Hudathan. But that was the moment when the four mile-long Gladiator exited hyperspace, passed through the remains of the three warships that had gone before it, and came under immediate attack. The ship shuddered as a volley of missiles exploded against her shields, Big Momma began a rhythmic chant, and the conversation was over. Aboard the Ramanthian Destroyer Star Reaper off Nav Beacon CSM-1802 The third ship to emerge from hyperspace managed to kill one of the Sheen vessels with her weapons and destroyed a second by ramming it! A display of courage and determination very much in keeping with the code of the Hath and therefore to be admired by Commodore Lorko and his senior officers. And now, as the other Sheen ships expended the last of their ordinance, and the Swarm's fighters began to die by the dozens, the Ramanthians had to wonder if they were about to become victims of their own trap. But the fanatical Lorko wouldn't back down, couldn't back down, were he to face his peers again. So, despite of the fact that his flagship was only a quarter of the Confederate ship's size, the Commodore ordered the Star Reaper to attack. And waited to die. But Lorko didn't die nor did anyone else aboard the Ramanthian destroyer. Because as the battle continued a Flight Officer named Bami was pursuing a zig-zag course through a matrix of defensive fire when he saw a quarter-mile wide swath of the battleship's metal skin suddenly appear in front of him as a shield-generator went down. Fortunately Bami had the presence of mind to fire all four of his Avenger missiles before pulling up and cork screwing through a storm of defensive fire. There was a huge explosion as one of the Ramanthian's weapons struck a heat stack and sent a jet of molten plasma down the ship's number-three exhaust vent into the decks below. That vaporized 120-crew beings, cut the fiber optic pathway that connected the NAVCOMP with Big Momma, and forced the computer to hand over 64.7 percent of the Gladiator's weapons to local control. And, without centralized fire control, it was only a matter of time before the Ramanthian fighters found another weak point and put the Confed vessel out of her misery. Of course Bami didn't know that, but the explosion spoke for itself, and the flight officer was thinking about the medal he was going to get when his fighter ran into a chunk of debris and exploded.

Aboard the Confederacy Battleship Gladiator The front of Captain Marina Flerko's uniform was red with the blood of a rating who had expired in her arms fifteen-minutes earlier as she entered Nankool's cabin and stood across the table from him. "I'm sorry, Mr. President, but the Gladiator is dying." Nankool's face was pale. "And the rest of the battle group?" Flerko's voice cracked under the strain. "Destroyed, sir. The moment they left hyperspace. The bugs were waiting for us." "Your advice?" "Surrender, sir." The officer answered grimly. "There is no other choice." Calisco swore and Vanderveen felt something cold trickle into the pit of her stomach. Only a small handful of beings had been able to escape from Ramanthian prisoner of war (POW) camps, or been fortunate enough to be rescued, and the stories they told were universally horrible. In fact many of the tales of torture, starvation, and abuse were so awful that many citizens assumed they were Confederate propaganda. But the diplomat had read the reports, had even spoken with some of the survivors, and knew the stories of privation were true. And now, if Nankool accepted Flerko's recommendation, Vanderveen would learn about life in the POW camps first hand. Nankool's normally unlined face looked as if it had aged ten-years during the last few minutes. His eyes flitted from face-to-face. His voice was even but filled with pain. "You heard the Captain.... What do you think?" "We should fight to the death!" Koba-Sa maintained fiercely. "Give me a weapon.... I will meet the Ramanthians at the main lock." "They won't have to board," Flerko said dispiritedly. "Eventually, after they fire enough Avengers at us, the ship will blow." "Which is why we must surrender immediately!" Calisco said urgently. "Why provoke them? The faster we surrender the more lives will be saved!" "Much as I hate to agree with the Under Secretary of Defense, I fear that he's correct this time," Ambassador Ochi put in wearily. "There's very little to be gained by delay." "I think there is something to be gained," Vanderveen said firmly, causing all of the senior officials to look at her in surprise. "Losing the battle group, plus thousands of lives is bad enough," the diplomat added. "But there's something more at stake.... If we allow the Ramanthians to capture the President, and the bugs become aware of who they have, they can use him for leverage." "Not if they don't capture me," Nankool said grimly. "Captain.... Hand me your sidearm." "Not so fast," Vanderveen insisted. "I admire your courage Mr. President. I'm sure we all do--but what if there's another way?" "Such as?" Ochi inquired skeptically, as the deck shook beneath their feet. "We need to find a dead crew member with at least a superficial resemblance to the President and jettison his body," the diplomat replied earnestly. "Once that's accomplished we can replace him." "Damn! I think she's onto something," Secretary Hooks said approvingly as he made eye contact with Vanderveen. "Your father would be proud!" The FSO's father, Charles Winter Vanderveen, was a well known government official who had long been one of Nankool's principal advisors. And while the elder Vanderveen would have been proud, he would have also been beside himself with worry, had he been aware of what was taking place millions of light-years away. "We must act quickly," the young woman said urgently. "And swear the crew to secrecy." "I'll offer to surrender," Flerko put in. "Then, assuming that the bugs accept, we'll stall. That should give us as much as half an hour to find a match, put the word out, and implement the plan." "What about the hypercom?" Koba-Sa growled. "Can we notify LEGOM on Algeron?" Having lost the converted battleship Friendship, on which it usually met, the Senate had been forced to convene on the planet Algeron. Until recently it would have been impossible to send a message across such a vast distance unless it was sealed inside a message torp or carried aboard a ship. But, thanks to the break-through technology that had been stolen from the Ramanthians on the planet Savas, crude but effective hypercom sets had already been installed on major vessels like the Gladiator. "Yes," Vanderveen said decisively. "They need to know about the trap so the navy can find a way to prevent the bugs from laying another one just like it. Plus, they need to know about the rest of our plan as well, or the whole thing will fall apart." Under normal circumstances any sort of suggestion from such a junior foreign service officer would most likely have been quashed. But the circumstances were anything but normal, there was clearly no time for formalities, and Nankool nodded. "Agreed. Make it happen." Aboard the Ramanthian Destroyer Star Reaper Commodore Lorko was still in the destroyer's control room when the vessel's com officer entered with the appalling not to mention somewhat repugnant news. The extent of the junior officer's disgust could be seen in the way that he held his head and the position of his rarely used wings. "I'm sorry to interrupt Commodore, but the enemy offered to surrender." "They what?" Lorko demanded incredulously. "They offered to surrender," the com officer reiterated. It was all Lorko could do to maintain his composure. Because by dishonoring themselves, the humans and their allies had effectively dishonored him, and reduced what could have been a glorious victory to something less. It didn't seem fair.... Not after the risks Lorko had taken, the resistance he had overcome, and the blow that had been dealt to the enemy. But such was Lorko's pride and internal strength that none of that could be seen in the way he held his body

or heard in the tenor of his voice. "I see," the Commodore replied evenly. "All right, if slavery is what the animals want, then slavery is what they shall have.... Order the enemy to cease fire, and once they do, tell our forces to do likewise. Send a heavily armed boarding party to the battleship, remove the prisoners who are fit for heavy labor, and set charges in all the usual places. Once the animals have been removed I want that vessel destroyed. Captain Nuyo will take it from here.... I'll be in my cabin." And with that Lorko left. Though Nuyo wasn't especially fond of the flinty officer, he understood the significance of the blow dealt to Old Iron Back's honor, and felt a rising sense of anger as Lorko departed the control room. "You heard the Commodore," Nuyo said sternly, as he turned to look at the com officer. "And tell the battle group this as well.... Mercy equates to weakness and weakness will be punished. Execute." Aboard the Confederacy Battleship Gladiator fires burned unabated at various points throughout the ship's four-mile long hull, the deck shook in sympathy with minor explosions, and gunfire could be heard as Ramanthian soldiers shot wounded crew members, people who were slow to obey their commands, or any officer foolish enough to identify him or herself as such. An excess for which they were unlikely to be punished. Klaxons, beepers, and horns sounded as streams of smoke-blackened often wounded crew beings stumbled out of hatches and were herded out into the center of the Gladiator's enormous hangar deck. The fact that the bay was pressurized rather than open to space spoke volumes as did the fact that rank-after-rank of battle-ready CF-184 Daggers were sitting unused. The simple truth was that the ship had come under attack so quickly that Captain Flerko had never been able to drop the Gladiator's energy screens long enough to launch fighters. But there was no time to consider what could have been as Vanderveen and a group of ratings were ordered to make their way out toward the middle of the launch bay where large metal boxes were situated. One of the prisoners, a gunner judging from the insignia on her space black uniform, was wounded and been able to hide the fact until then. But the sailor left a trail of blood droplets as she crossed the deck and it wasn't long before one of the sharp-eyed troopers noticed them. Vanderveen shouted, "No!" but fell as a rifle butt struck her left shoulder. The diplomat heard two shots and knew the gunner was dead. It was Nankool who pulled the FSO to her feet before one of the troopers could become annoyed and put a bullet into her head as well. "Get going," the President said gruffly. "There's nothing you can do." Vanderveen had to step over the rating's dead body in order to proceed, and realized how lucky she'd been, as a burst of automatic weapons fire brought down an entire rank of marines. The Ramanthian troopers were largely invisible inside their brown-dappled space armor. Their helmets had side-mounted portals through which their compound eyes could see the outside environment, hook-shaped protuberances designed to accommodate parrot-like beaks, and chin-flares to deflect energy bolts away from their vulnerable neck seals. The vast majority of the alien soldiers wore standard armor, but the noncoms were equipped with power-assisted suits, which meant the highly leveraged warriors could rip enemy combatants apart with their grabber-style pincers. So that, plus the fact that the bugs carried Negar IV assault rifles capable of firing up to 600 rounds per minute, meant the aliens had more than enough firepower to keep the Gladiator's crew under control. Something they accomplished with brutal efficiency. Some of the Ramanthians could speak standard, while others wore chest-mounted translation devices, and the rest made use of their rifle butts in order to communicate. "Place all personal items in the bins!" one of the power-suited noncoms ordered via a speaker clamped to his right shoulder. "Anyone who is found wearing or carrying contraband will be executed!" The so-called bins were actually empty cargo modules, and it wasn't long before the waist-high containers began to fill with pocket knives, wrist coms, pocket coms, multi-tools, glow rods, and all manner of jewelry. Vanderveen wasn't carrying anything beyond the watch her parents had given her, a belt-wallet containing her ID, and a small amount of currency. All of it went into the cargo container and Vanderveen wondered if the Ramanthians were making a mistake. A good mistake from her perspective, since it would be difficult for the bugs to sort out who was who, once the military personnel surrendered their dog tags. A factor that would help protect Nankoo's new identity. Which, were anyone were to ask him, was that of Chief Petty Officer Milo Kruse. A portly noncom who had reportedly been incinerated when molten plasma spilled out of the number three exhaust vent into the Gladiator's main corridor. Now, as various lines snaked past the bins, a series of half-coherent orders were used to herd the crew-beings into groups of one-hundred. Vanderveen thought she saw Ochi's exoskeleton in the distance, but couldn't be sure, as a Ramanthian trooper shouted orders. "Form ten ranks! Strip off your clothing! Failure to comply will result in death." Similar orders were being given all around, and at least a dozen gunshots were heard as the Ramanthians executed prisoners foolish enough to object, or perceived to be excessively slow. Meanwhile, Under Secretary of Defense Calisco hurried to rid himself of his pants, but was momentarily distracted when he looked up to see that one of his fantasies had

come true! Christine Vanderveen had removed her top and had unhooked her bra! She had firm up-thrust breasts, just as he had imagined that she would, and the official was in the process of licking his lips when Nankool's left elbow dug into his side. "Put your eyeballs back in your head," the President growled menacingly, "or I'll kick your ass!" So Calisco looked down, but continued to eye the diplomat via his peripheral vision, which was quite good. Vanderveen stood with her arms folded over her breasts as a Ramanthian officer mounted a roll-around maintenance platform. Meanwhile a cadre of naked crew beings, all picked at random from the crowd, hurried to collect the discarded clothing and carry it away. "You are disgusting," the officer began, as his much amplified voice boomed through the hangar deck. "Look at the bulkhead behind me... . Read the words written there. " For glory and honor." That was the motto you chose! Yet you possess neither one of them."The deck shuddered, as if in response to the alien's words, and a dull thump was transmitted through many layers of durasteel. Some of the Gladiator's computer controlled fire-fighting equipment remained in operation, and the ship's maintenance bots were doing what they could to stabilize the systems they were responsible for, but without help from her crew the ship was dying."Why are you alive?" the Ramanthian demanded through the loud speaker on his shoulder. "When any self-respecting warrior would be dead? The answer is simple... . You aren't warriors. You're animals! As such your purpose is to serve higher life-forms. From here you will be taken to a Ramanthian planet where you will work until you can work no longer. Or, perhaps some of you who would prefer to die now, thereby demonstrating that you are something more than beasts of burden."The officer's words were punctuated by a bellow of rage as General Wian Koba-Sa charged through the ranks in front of him. A Negar IV assault rifle began to bark rhythmically as a Ramanthian soldier opened fire and Vanderveen saw the Hudathan stumble as he took two rounds in the back. But that wasn't enough to bring the huge alien down and there was a cheer, as Koba-Sa jumped up onto the maintenance platform. The formerly arrogant Ramanthian had started to back pedal by that time, but it was too late as the Hudathan shouted the traditional war cry, and a hundred voices answered. "Blood!" And there was blood as Koba-Sa wrapped one gigantic hand around the Ramanthian's throat and brought the other up under the flared chin guard. The helmet didn't come off the way the Hudathan had hoped it would, but the blow was sufficient to snap the bug's neck, even as Koba-Sa fell to a hail of bullets. Then all of the prisoners were forced to hit the deck as the Ramanthians opened fire on the helpless crowd, and didn't stop until an officer repeatedly ordered them to do so, and many of the soldiers had emptied their clips. Dozens of bodies lay sprawled on the deck by that time, but there was something different about the crew beings still able to stand, and the emotion that pervaded the hangar. Because rather than the feeling of hopelessness that filled the bay before Vanderveen sensed a strange sort of pride. As if Koba-Sa's valiant death had somehow infused the prisoners with some of the Hudathan's headstrong courage. And, rather than attempt to humiliate the POW's as the previous officer had, Vanderveen noticed that his replacement was content to line the survivors up and march them past tables loaded with blue ship-suits and hundreds of boots. All taken from the Gladiator's own storerooms. But there was no opportunity to check sizes, or to try anything on, as the prisoners were herded past. The best strategy was to grab what was available and trade that for something better later on. And it was during that process that one of ship's main magazines blew, people struggled to keep their feet, and the entire operation went into high gear. The Ramanthians were afraid now... . Afraid that the ship would disintegrate with them still aboard. So Vanderveen and all of the rest were herded into the waiting shuttles. The air was warm thanks to the heat from their engines and heavily tainted with the stench of ozone. It didn't take a genius to figure out that there were more prisoners than the twenty shuttles could hold. And Vanderveen knew that meant that some of the Gladiator's crew would be left behind. Other people began to realize the same thing and there was a mad rush to board the space ships. Guards fired over the crowd in a futile attempt to stem the flood, suddenly realized that they could be left behind, and hurried to join the fear-crazed mob. Vanderveen wasn't sure she wanted to board one of the shuttles, especially if there was an opportunity to enter one of the Gladiator's many escape pods instead, but never got the chance to do more than think about the alternative as the people behind the FSO pushed her forward. Naked bodies collided with hers, an elbow jabbed her ribs, and the man directly in front of the diplomat went down. Vanderveen attempted to step over the body but couldn't, and felt the crewman's back give as she was forced to put her weight on it, and tried to shout an apology as the river of flesh carried her up a ramp and into one of the shuttles. There were bench-style seats along both bulkheads, but no one got the opportunity to sit on them, as the lead POWs were pushed forward and smashed against the bulkhead. Fortunately Nankool was there, ordering people to be calm, and somehow convincing them to do so. Then the ramp was retracted, Vanderveen felt the shuttle lift off, and start to move.

There were lights, but not very many, and only a few view ports. However the diplomat was close enough to see dozens of screaming-kicking prisoners sucked out of the launch bay into the airless abyss of space as massive doors parted. The shuttle jerked back and forth as the Ramanthian pilot was forced to thread his way through a maze of floating debris before finally clearing the battle zone. Then, as the space ship began to turn away, there was a massive explosion. Bright light strobed the inside the of the shuttle, but there was no sound, as the Gladiator came apart. Someone began to pray, and even though Vanderveen had never been very religious, she bowed her head. The journey to hell had begun.

From Publishers Weekly
The seventh Legion of the Damned novel (after 2004's For Those Who Fell) continues the unapologetically brutal military SF saga with a pedal-to-the-metal plot jam-packed with intrigue, deep space adventure and futuristic combat. With an interstellar war looming, Marcott Nankool, the president and CEO of the Confederacy of Sentient Beings, and his entourage are captured by the Ramanthians, a ruthless insectoid race bent on nothing short of complete dominion over all other intelligent species. Keeping their identities a secret, the POWs are shipped to a labor camp on a remote jungle planet about to become the hatching ground for billions of newborn (and ravenous) Ramanthians. Against the orders of the ambitious and unethical vice president, Legion Gen. William Booly and Capt. Antonio Santana mount an all but impossible rescue mission. Blending hardcore military fiction with elements of sociological science fiction la Alan Dean Foster's Commonwealth saga, this adrenaline-fueled Clancyesque adventure is Dietz in top form. (Oct.)

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