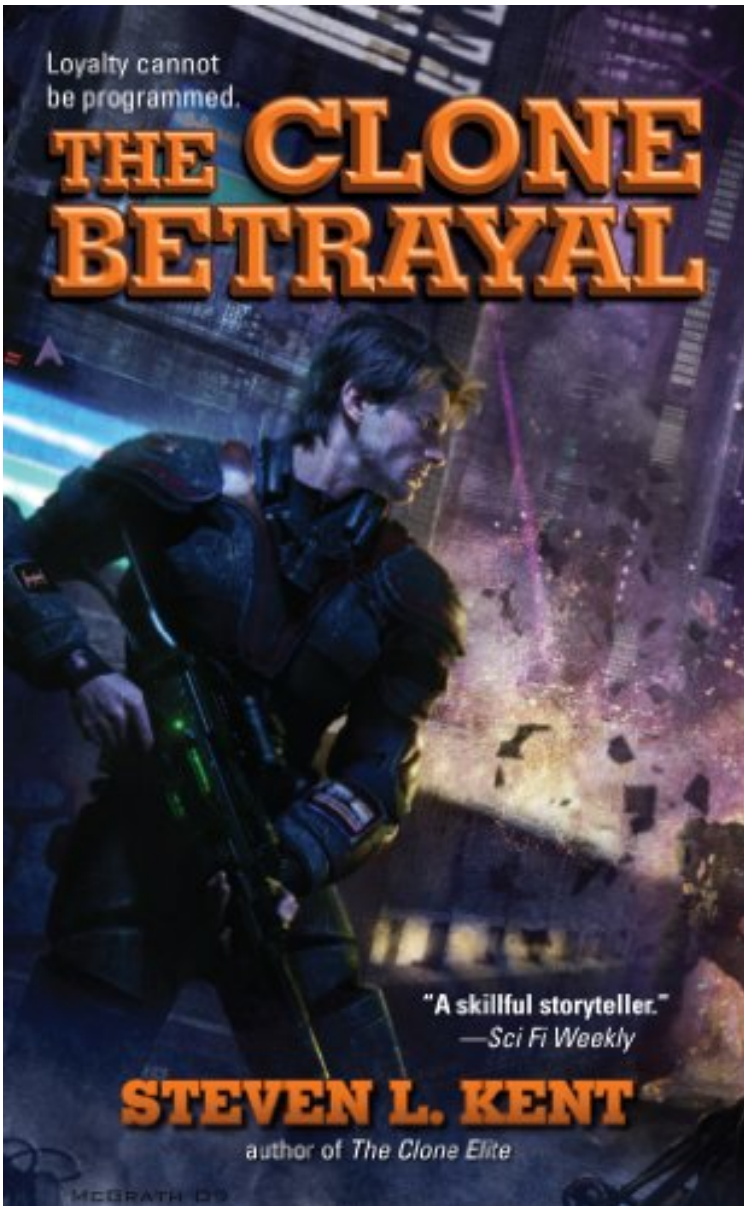


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The Clone Betrayal



Par Steven L. Kent
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurEarth, 2516 A.D. The Unified Authority spread human colonies across the six arms of the Milky Way Galaxy, ruling with an iron fist and a powerful military made up almost entirely of clones.

Then the alien Avatari invadedand when the fighting was over, the U.A. retained control over only two planets: Earth and New Copenhagen. Like the thousands of clones born before him, Lt. Wayson Harris was born and bred as the ultimate soldier. But he is unique, possessing independence of thoughtand an addiction to the rage of battle. So when he and other clone survivors of the New Copenhagen debacle are sent to cool their heels in an isolated "relocation camp," Harris feels on edge. And with good reason. The military brass

are looking for someone to blame for the decimation of the U.A. republic. And who better to scapegoat than those who were born to be sacrificed? But Lt. Harris is about to respectfully disagree with all the firepower he can muster. Extrait Earth date: October 3, a.d. 2516 Location: Fort Bliss, outside El Paso, Texas Planet: Earth Galactic Position: Orion Arm I sat alone on a row of aluminum bleachers overlooking a parade field on which squads of newly recruited natural-born soldiers drilled. I paid no attention to the platoons doing jumping jacks and running. Instead, I concentrated on squads learning how to fight with pugil sticks. I had endured these same drills nine years and two wars ago. Boot camp was tougher back then, we had veteran drill instructors. The natural-born DIs drilling these boys were fresh out of diapers themselves. Sergeant Major Lewis Herrington quietly came up and sat on the bleachers behind mine. I would have demanded a salute from anyone else. As the highest-ranking guest of the Clonetown detention facility, I had that right; but Herrington and I were members of an exclusive club. He and I had both survived the final battle of the Avatari war, a claim only four people in the entire universe could make. He did not need to salute. "How do they look, sir?" "Like conquering heroes," I said. As natural-borns, the five thousand recruits on the field came in all shapes and sizes. Many of them did not fit well into their government-issue tees and shorts.

There was a time when one size fitted all enlisted men because every enlisted man came from the same helix. Some clones packed on a few extra pounds in the orphanages and some reported to boot camp looking skinny. I had five inches on everybody going through boot camp, but that's how things go when you are a one-of-a-kind clone. Herrington, who had just turned fifty, had more white hair than brown. He was the oldest inmate in our little camp, but he was bred in a laboratory and born in a tube like the rest of us. We were all created for the same calling, to serve in the military. He had gone through boot camp thirty years before me, but he saw what I saw standard training. Some of the natural-born recruits on the parade ground looked like they could fight, but most of them looked better suited for writing poetry. Unlike us, they grew up civilians, never suspecting they might one day be drafted. Many of them were clearly less than enthusiastic about their new life in the military. Perhaps as many as a hundred soldiers had paired off for sparring with pugil sticks. In one match, a tall, lanky kid came out swinging against a short, chubby opponent. The short one looked like he wanted to drop his stick and beg for mercy. The whole point of skirmishing with pugil sticks was to simulate long rifles and bayonets at close range antiquated stuff, but a good discipline builder. The sticks were four feet long with padded ends, not that "padded" meant "soft." A solid blow with a pugil stick could break an opponent's ribs or leave him with a concussion. The combatants were supposed to hold their hands a shoulder's width apart and pivot the stick back and forth while they struck with the ends; but this tall kid came out choking one end of the stick with both hands and swinging it like a baseball bat. If the shorter kid had even the slightest idea about how to fight, he could have blocked one of the other guy's crazy-ass swings and sent him down for the count; but the kid kept backing away. I could not decide which bothered me more, the rube swinging his damn stick like a bat, the miscreant cowering in fear, or the pathetic specimen of humanity masquerading as a drill instructor. The man leading the squad was a lieutenant. The Army of the Unified Authority no longer had any actual sergeants to drill its recruits. Sergeants were noncommissioned officers. The military had not seen a natural-born below the rank of lieutenant for over two hundred years. Now that they were building their "more invested" army, they had to use officers to train the first generation of grunts. When it came to the in-your-face nastiness needed to drill new recruits, the silver-spoon boys of the officer corps just did not cut it. Having eliminated their cloned conscripts, the natural-born officers now found themselves performing tasks formerly relegated to clones. From here on out they'd use natural-borns to rush enemy strongholds, peel potatoes, and mop latrines. The satisfying irony of the situation did not go unnoticed around Clonetown. Down on the parade grounds, several platoons had pugil stick fights going, but Herrington spotted the fight that interested me at once. "God help them if they ever go to war," he said. "Those boys would need to improve just to qualify for shit." "They're not all like that," I said. Just a few feet away from the brute and the wimp, two boys went toe-to-toe, really hacking at each other. Neither man showed any inclination to defend himself. With all the blows they were taking, it looked like they were pummeling each other with pillows. Their drill sergeant should have stepped in and decked them both. It was late in the afternoon, with the sun still high in the sky. The day had cooled from miserable to unpleasant, and long shadows stretched across the desiccated ground. Behind us, veterans with actual fighting experience headed back to camp. Clonetown was a fifteen-acre compound built to house ten thousand men and currently hosting thirty thousand. Dual barbed-wire fences surrounded the compound, and sharpshooters with rifles manned the towers along the outer fence, but we were allowed to leave the compound during the day. I came here every day to watch the high comedy of

these natural-born recruits; but once the sun went down, I had to report back. We had nightly roll calls, violations would not go unnoticed. After roll call, the guards closed the gates, and we turned in for the night.

"The general population cannot possibly feel safer with these speckers protecting them," Herrington commented. "The average citizen doesn't know and doesn't care," I said. "As far as John Citizen is concerned, the sun still rises in the east and the sky is still blue. He sleeps cozy in his bed every night safe in the knowledge that Congress has his back." Down on the parade ground, the drill instructor finally broke up the mismatch between the tall guy and his squat victim. I actually felt sorry for these new recruits. How many hundreds of years had passed since the days when the regular Army was made up of regular men?

Herrington sat in silence watching the recruits for a couple of minutes, then asked what we were all wondering: "Sir, how long do you think they're going to keep us locked up out here?" "You got someplace to go, Sergeant?" I asked. "No, sir." I knew three answers to his question. As an officer, my job was to give the party line a simple, "We'll leave as soon as we receive our orders, would suffice. Then there was the honest answer, the answer Herrington deserved. That answer would be more along the lines of, "Wherever they send us, it won't be any better than this. But there was a third train of thought, one that I even hid from myself.

The new Army had approximately sixty thousand new dumb-shit recruits guarding the thirty thousand trained fighting machines now residing in this camp. They had the guns and the numbers, but we had the know-how, and the experience. If we decided to make a break, some of us would survive. Down on the parade grounds, the drill instructor yanked the pugil stick out of the hands of his timid recruit and shook it in the air. He demonstrated the proper way to hold the stick by waving it in the man's face. I could not hear him from this distance, but it looked like he was giving the entire platoon a good drubbing. You learn how to read DI body language in boot camp. It's a lesson you never forget. "The guys we had in our platoon back on New Copenhagen . . . I bet we could have taken every man on that field," Herrington said. "I bet we could," I said, knowing he was both joking and speaking a truth. We couldn't really have routed five thousand men with forty-three Marines, but we would have given them a beating they would not have soon forgotten. We had a veteran force of forty-three fully trained and seasoned fighting Marines. Forty of them did not make it off that planet. "Hooah, Marine," I said. "We would've knocked them flat on their asses." Herrington watched the raw recruits for several seconds, then said, "General Smith wasn't even on New Copenhagen. Why does

Congress give a shit what that speck thinks?" I heard what Herrington said, but a different thought ran through my mind, and I laughed. Herrington misread my laughter. "Do you think it was our fault we lost those planets, sir? Do you think the clones ran scared?" He sounded defensive. Even though he thought of himself as natural-born, Herrington grouped himself with the synthetics. He was an enlisted man. In our world, the terms "enlisted" and "cloned" were synonymous. "I just had this mental image of Smith leading a squad of grounded fighter pilots into the Avatari cave," I said. That was the first time I thought about the cave that the aliens had dug on New Copenhagen without an involuntary shudder. That cave . . . I took a full platoon and two civilians into that cave. Nearly fifty of us went in, but only four of us made it out. On that mission, I discovered a newfound appreciation for Dante and the hell he traveled through in the Inferno. "General Glade said he would . . ." Herrington began. I cut him off. "Herrington, they have us locked up in a camp in a desert. Who do you think cut the orders that put us here?" "General Smith was the one who . . ."

"And has Glade done anything to get us out?" As commandant of the Corps and a survivor of New Copenhagen, Glade was generally seen as one of the good guys by most Marines. "Son of a bitch," Herrington whispered. "Yeah, son of a bitch," I repeated. "These days, it's a whole lot better to be a son of a bitch than a bastard bred in a tube." Herrington snickere...