



Armor

By John Steakley

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The military sci-fi classic of courage on a dangerous alien planet

The planet is called Banshee. The air is unbreathable, the water is poisonous. It is home to the most implacable enemies that humanity, in all its interstellar expansion, has ever encountered.

Body armor has been devised for the commando forces that are to be dropped on Banshee—the culmination of ten thousand years of the armorers' craft. A trooper in this armor is a one-man, atomic powered battle fortress. But he will have to fight a nearly endless horde of berserk, hard-shelled monsters—the fighting arm of a species which uses biological technology to design perfect, mindless war minions.

Felix is a scout in A-team Two. Highly competent, he is the sole survivor of mission after mission. Yet he is a man consumed by fear and hatred. And he is protected, not only by his custom-fitted body armor, but by an odd being which seems to live within him, a cold killing machine he calls "The Engine."

This is Felix's story—a story of the horror, the courage, and the aftermath of combat, and the story, too, of how strength of spirit can be the greatest armor of all.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Armor*:

“*Armor* is a fascinating war-story, a unique take on the military SF genre.... Well worth a read.”—Jamie Sawyer, author of The Lazarus War series

“This is a serious book which shows the violence and brutality of war, the cynicism and hypocrisy with which it is waged, and the real and terrible fears of the combatants.” —VOYA

“The book is gripping, forceful, and compelling. The evolution of the characters is a tour-de-force.” —*Kliatt*

“Well-worth reading.” —*Analog*

“Steakley’s writing is quite good. He has smoothness and polish that are rare in first novels.... the action is so well-paced that the reader’s interest is continually held.” —*Other Realms*

“This book is a must read.... It’s one of those stories where the author understood the human heart and soul so much that there could never be a complete adaptation in any other medium.” —Bleeding Edge Gaming

About the Author

John Steakley is best known for his science fiction writing. He has published two novels, including his acclaimed military science fiction novel *Armor*, as well as four short science fiction and fantasy stories.

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It was then, for Felix, it began. The hatred for the briefing officer had expanded to include his superiors, the captain of the ship, the commanders of Fleet itself, and finally the thick-headed idiot humans who had undertaken something as asinine as interplanetary war in the first place. The hatred blazed brightly, then vanished. From somewhere inside came a shock of all-consuming rage, the nova-like intensity of which startled even him. But then the rage was gone, too. It seemed to shoot away like a comet. What replaced the loathing and fury was something very different, something cold and distant and . . . only impersonally attentive. It was an odd being which rose from Felix and through him. It was, in fact, a remarkable creature. It was a wartime creature and a surviving creature. A killing creature.

The Engine, Felix thought. *It’s not me. It’s my Engine. It will work when I cannot. It will examine and determine and choose and, at last, act. It will do all this while I cower inside.*

ARMOR

JOHN STEAKLEY

To my beloved father,
first (and foremost) John William Steakley—
and to Eagle,
first (and foremost) pal,
this book is gratefully dedicated.
Every single day I love them both.

You are
What you do
When it counts.

—*The Masao*

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PART ONE

FELIX

He drank alone.

Which was odd since he didn't have trouble with people. He had always managed to make acquaintances without much effort. And, despite what had happened, he still liked people. Recently, he had even grown to miss them again. Yet here he was, drinking alone.

Maybe I'm just shy, he thought to himself and then laughed at such a feeble attempt at self-delusion. For he knew what it was.

From his place at the end of the long bar he examined the others in the crowded lounge. He recognized a handful from training. Training was where it had begun. Where he had felt that odd sensation descending upon him like mist, separating him from all those thousands of others around him in the mess hall. It was a dull kind of temporal shock at first, a reaction reverberating from somewhere deep within him. He had somehow felt . . . No, he had somehow *known* that they all would die.

He shook his head, drained his glass. If he was in the mood for honesty he would have to admit that his chances were no better. No better at all. . . .

He paid the credits for a full bottle and then paid the extra credits to take it out of the lounge. It was strictly against orders on a battle cruiser to have a bottle in one's personal possession. But on the night before a drop a lot of things were possible. And as the hour for the drop grew nearer, he noticed that his fellows were beginning to take their drinking more seriously.

Outside the lounge wasn't much better. Lots of bottles had been smuggled out tonight. The ship wasn't

exactly a giant party, but there were enough get-togethers here and there, and enough legitimate crew business here and there, to make it almost impossible to find a quiet place to sit and think. After a while he had settled into an idle rhythm of walking, sipping, smoking, and hunting.

After most of an hour of wandering about the corridors of the immense ship he found himself standing beside the center template strut of Drop Bay One. Drop Bay One was the largest single room in the ship and, since the *Terra* was the largest warship, the largest single room in space. It was over a hundred meters long and sixty wide. Around him in a checkerboard style were the little square spaces for drop assignment. From here it all began. Thousands of men and women would go into battle from this room. At the same moment, if necessary. The overhead was ten stories above him, criss-crossed with the immense cranes that lowered the equipment of war into position. A hell of a big room, he thought. Bigger even than the Hall of Gold back home where he had first stood at age ten beside the boys and girls of the other nobles and watched the coronation. He and the other children had had a tendency to giggle, he remembered, and so had been placed at the far end of the Hall, away from the throne.

Enough of this, he said to himself. *That's over for me now. It's far, far away . . .*

He sighed, shook his head. He perched himself atop the center strut and lay down on his back and stared up at the distant overhead and didn't see it.

"Enough sentiment," he said aloud. "It's time for brainwork. Time, in fact, for a cold logical assessment of the situation." He took a sip from the bottle, lit a smoke, and laughed again. "Fact is, we haven't got a prayer."

Fact was, most everybody in Fleet nowadays was a rookie. Over sixty percent and rising. That meant six months of advanced training. Nine months tops in the military altogether.

Not much hope there.

Still, the equipment was marvelous and many were surprisingly good with it. He remembered his astonishment at discovering clearly apparent aptitude for, of all things, the battle armor. Most found the power suits almost impossibly alien in practice and couldn't bring themselves to react in a sufficiently normal fashion. But he, and a few others, had taken to them easily, readily utilizing their potential as the long-sought key to a machine as extension of man's own puny form.

How odd, he thought, that he should have such bizarre talents. He, of all people, had fit with Fleet's hopes. . . .

And from there his drunken thoughts slipped into the past like most drunken thoughts of terrified humans. He lay back on the template and blew smoke at the distant cranes. He sipped steadily from the bottle.

He feared.

The hours passed.

Lovers in niches surrounding the perimeter of the Bay took advantage of the sexually integrated warrior class. They rocked and moaned and grasped one another. It was a united, if unorganized, effort by each and all to push the tension-taut present far ahead into the horrors of the future. After a while they would rest from their labors, draining the last of the bottles and lighting the last of the cigarettes. And before thoughts turned inward each and all would notice the glow of the cigarette coal coming from the lone figure who lay on the center template strut in the middle of the vastness of Drop Bay One. They would wonder what the hell it was

he was doing there.

Felix, alone and unaware of their curiosity, wondered the very same thing.

* * *

Drop was just under four hours away when Felix reached the chow line. The turnout was sparse this morning. Not surprising, considering the night before. He watched several people back out as the line advanced toward the food. As the smell grew stronger, their faces grew greener until at last they couldn't take it anymore. A broad-shouldered woman wearing a warrior patch and red eyes got so far as to actually have a plate of the heaping whatever placed in front of her before she vomited loudly onto the floor.

She looked around, wildly embarrassed, to apologize at all others in the line, but found only Felix left. Puzzled, she nodded to him and rushed out the door with her palm clamped firmly over her lips. Felix looked around and laughed. He was indeed alone in the chow line. The young woman had actually emptied the place out.

He wasn't surprised, but neither was he affected. He stepped over the grumbling clean-up crew and, to the cooks' amazement, ordered them to heap whatever it was onto his tray.

"I'm hungry," was the only response he would make to their pale faces.

Actually, he was just lucky. Two hours before the rest of the ship had reveille, he had been rudely awakened by the chief of Drop Bay One who had wanted to know just what the hell he was doing sleeping on the center strut. That early start had allowed him to miss the long lines at Medical for a little something for his stomach.

After he found an empty table a fellow from his squad bay, whose name might have been Dikk, appeared beside him.

"Felix, right?" the man asked.

Felix nodded without interrupting his eating. That foamy something the meditechs had given him made him ravenous.

"Well, I'd be careful with all that food if I were you," said Dikk as he sat down. "It's supposed to be real bad for you if you're wounded. Like in the stomach, you know?"

Felix nodded that he knew and continued eating. He didn't want to say that he thought the idea of not eating before this battle was incredibly naïve. As far as stomach wounds were concerned . . . Anything that could tear through battle armor would leave not a wound but a tunnel.

It wasn't that he didn't appreciate doctors. He did. He was impressed by their knowledge, dutifully in awe of their equipment. But doctors didn't make drops. Doctors didn't have to fight for days at a time without eating anything but what they could carry. Come to think of it, neither did he. Or at least he hadn't until today.

He looked over at Dikk's nervous face and at the hunched shoulders of the handful of others who sat about him in the mess.

None of us have had to fight yet, he thought. But maybe that part was not so bad. What was bad was that they weren't ready.

Something in his face must have made Dikk uneasy. He mumbled something and left the table. Felix realized he had never said a word to the guy. He had a sudden urge to get up and catch him, to ask him if his name really was Dikk after all. . . .

But he didn't. He sat where he was and finished the plate and lit a cigarette and watched the silken plumes rise and twist.

A few minutes later his thoughts rose to him out of the daze of smoke and fear. "We're not ready. We're not even close." Then he started, looking around to see if anyone was nearby. To see if anyone else had heard him. For he wasn't at all sure that he hadn't said it out loud.

* * *

Felix stared at the black scout suit with the unsurprised attitude of one whose emotional spectrum has retreated to just two colors: frustration and disgust. Fear at this point could no longer be thought of as an emotion. It had more the consistency of gravity.

He sat down on the bench across from the now-gaping maintenance chamber that served as long-term lockers. When sealed, an elaborate testing system would commence. An amazingly varied series of forces—from hydro-thermal to magnetically directed laser probing—would come into play. The testing would continue on a more or less constant basis until the chamber was reopened. Most of it was to find a leak. Which was silly for a scout suit, thought Felix. After all, plassteel doesn't leak. You could vaporize it, warp it, tear it even (if sufficient forces were applied just right). But it didn't leak. And scout suit outer armor was 100 percent plassteel.

He snorted. Scout suits. A damn scout?

"Shit," he said out loud. No one could hear him inside his cubicle, so no one could appreciate his display of disgust.

From under his arm he took a wad of crumpled writ he had taped there before drop inspection. They still held inspection, even though everybody already knew it was suicide to carry personal belongings inside the perfect fit of battle armor. They had shown that one to the troops over and over, always dwelling on the scenes of the surgical teams trying to remove religious medals crammed halfway through some idiot's rib cage. Of course one could wear jewelry on one's nose and such where there was some freedom of movement. And many did. But Felix's interest in a nose ring was the same as it was for a religious medal—none at all.

He produced five cigarettes from the writ and lit one and stared at the suit and thought about why he wasn't surprised he had drawn scout duty.

Training again, he decided the source of many first clues. He recalled their excitement at his scores, at his times. They had made him run the tight course twice more before they were convinced.

"Sure got the reflexes for this . . . uh, Felix, is it?"

He had nodded. He should have caught on then.

And later, when that same officer had called him into his own quarters and talked to him about "natural leadership abilities." Cigarettes were offered him. And something cool to drink for the first time in many days. He had accepted both and refused everything else.

He was furious with himself for not having been more careful.

The officer kept trying, kept spouting garbage, but Felix wouldn't budge. He knew it wasn't for him. Though capable of giving orders and probably having them obeyed, he was, of late, an uninspiring man. Not at all what a leader, a real leader, should be.

He sighed and puffed on the cigarette. Looking around he had seen several such men and women, he supposed. But though admiring of their energy, he had little faith in their potential effectiveness. With such a bunch, that kind of leader could likely get chewed in a battle long before decoration time.

And Felix wanted to at least try to live. No blaze of glory. No blaze at all.

So of course they had gone and made him a lousy scout anyway!

He sighed, resting his face in his hands.

* * *

His world shrank toward him. He panicked, as he always had before. Sweat poured down his face. His lips trembled. It was completely, terribly, dark.

He keyed the master switch with a dry tongue. Air, heat, light . . . life began again. For a moment he paused as he always did and simply breathed and stared. It was a foolish fear, he knew. But it was very real to him. Each time he felt the suit close about him, felt the armor seal itself about him, he also felt a deep inner terror that no amount of training could prevent. For with the simple fright of claustrophobia came something else: he feared the suit.

It was a machine. It did not care. It would work if told to. It would not if not. It was no serpent. It would not crush him. It did not crave his flesh.

But still he feared. And later simply breathed and stared and felt relief. This time, as at other times, the suit had chosen to obey him.

He examined the holos on both sides of the faceplate. They seemed far away, deep and wide in their illusion of three dimensions. Thousands of bits of information could be displayed on them. Maps of terrain. Known enemy locations. Distances and probable routes to Retrieval points. Many, many facts. They were blank now.

He worked the keys on the inside of his forearm and the holos showed him where he was: Starship *Terra*, Deck AA12, Warrior Section, Armor Vault One. He ran through the Function series. He made exaggerated gestures with arms, legs, head. Everything worked.

He made Connection and watched the gauge swell as he and his suit drew from the very heart of the ship the thing that seemed in awesome abundance everywhere: Power. Power throughout the ship for thousands and thousands of different uses. And more Power in the combined form of Fleet. And even more from home. Power. Everywhere, sheer Power. Force. Might.

He thought of the tiny sparks that moved and thought and eased more sparks together to form and ease even more sparks, the strength of which would ease together still more, tinier, sparks which, in proper conjunction, made Power. The tiny sparks would then ease beside Power. And together, with awesome brute force and intricate silken precision, wonders could be created. Wonders like the Starship *Terra*, whose marvelous stature and beauty could serve as man's ultimate loving gesture to the darkness which surrounded

him—We are good. We are hopeful. We have built this. See her, the Starship *Terra*, the jewel of our being

But jewels did not long shine when Power was still about. Not when any fool could reach it. Felix, deep within the jewel already, could rend and tear her. He could grind her workings to rubble, blight her glowing entrails. He could disembowel this jewel of Man.

For he had Power.

Inside these layers of plassteel armor even a fool such as he, a dumb broken sonuvabitch with no future and a past he refused, could stomp the idol to clay.

Such power had thrilled him at first. Later, he was appalled. Now . . . now, he didn't care.

Felix read a dial. It was time. He left.

* * *

The Briefing Room mirror created what was termed “Positive Psychological Feedback.” It allowed a simple soldier to see what a monster he was in battle armor. Some psyches had felt it would have a negative effect on some warriors, particularly the females. It was a stupid notion, immediately overruled. All killers like to look the part.

They did. Two meters tall, they weighed six times their norm. Their armored powered hands could crush steel, stone, bone. Armored legs could propel the fastest around 100 kilometers per standard hour. The suit protected them as well, automatically and instantly distributing most concussions in an evenly expanding pattern from the point of impact to the entire surface of the armor. Standard warrior armor carried blazerifles on each sleeve. Hold the arm out, palm down, drop the wrist: blazerfire. Even plassteel would boil before it. The blaze-bombs clipped on racks on their backs provided not only an explosion, but spherical delivery of blazerfire in a single heartbeat.

And there were other gifts. They were, for example, complete. They carried with them all air, food, etc. Deepest ocean or vacuum. They needed no help from home for five standard days. Three, with a major battle a day. Only one, if always fighting.

The mirror helped. They were monsters, they could see that.

Felix took the blaze-rifle, the blazer, from the slot in the long row which had a number to match the one pulsing inside his helmet. He checked it for charge, attached it to his back. Scout suits, much smaller than standard issue, had no blazer capacity built in. Scouts carried rifles used by open-air troops for thirty years. Also, they had fewer blaze-bombs—only nine as opposed to the two dozen the warriors carried. Scouts must be fleet, must be able to realize their much greater potential for speed and agility. And, where warrior suits bore different colors for rank and group, all scouts were black. Flat black. Dull, non-shiny, space black.

Death black, Felix thought as he watched the five other scouts collect and attach their rifles. Then he followed them out of the armory alcove into the Briefing Room proper. The room held twenty-one warriors, group leaders representing two thousand line warriors and one assault commander. Each bore the broad colored stripings of rank and its attendant responsibility. As scouts had no effective rank, they likewise possessed no real niche in the line of command—Warrant Officers technically, but with no command in standard situations. Many enlisted personnel requested scout duty. They sought the partial privileges of officer rank and the chance for rapid advancement much-heralded by the grapevine. In truth, no scout advanced more than a step or two. Instead, they died. Even Felix's paranoid fatalism had not considered this.

Though he had heard, as had all, that the scouts' survival rate was considerably less than line warriors'.

"A lousy scout," he mumbled disgustedly.

The Briefing Officer's helmeted head glanced up at the muffled sound. He surveyed the ranks. There was no way to tell who had spoken. All were on Proximity Band. He returned to his briefing

Paying attention at last, Felix was surprised to hear that the man had not yet begun to discuss details of the assault. Instead, it was a pep talk. Felix realized this alarmed him.

It wasn't the pep talk itself which made him uneasy. It wasn't the Briefing Officer. It was something in that positive, no-nonsense tone of his. Something. . . .

He doesn't believe, thought Felix suddenly. He doesn't believe in the plan. He doesn't believe in us. But he'll be damned if he'll let us carry that. So he's trying to make us believe instead of him.

Felix admired the officer for his concern and for his effort. He also hated him for failing

The pep talk mercifully ended.

"All right," snarled the Briefing Officer in his best Drill-master manner, "it's time to get down to it."

On the wall behind him a large screen warped into light with a holo display of the target area. Felix noted the code on the lower corner of the image and keyed it onto his own holos. The map showed a peninsula some forty kilometers long jutting due north into a vast expanse of ocean. The peninsula terminated in a formation the shape of a large, three-fingered, hand splayed flat over the surface of the water. A choice spot, thought Felix, on Earth or Golden or any other human planet. Loads of sunshine and beach. The ocean frontage would supply fresh sea air to sweep leisurely across sculptured terraces where happy vacationers would collapse contentedly after a long day of water sports and laughter. A choice spot.

Except it wasn't Earth and it wasn't Golden. It wasn't a human place at all.

It was A-9.

And the water wasn't water. It was poison. And the fresh sea air would kill an unsuited human in a second—more poison. And the sunlight did little human good in a place where the average temperature was -20° at high noon. And the breezes were a near-constant hurricane that drove the noxious atmosphere deep into the sandy soil, carving vast furrows into the land, forging riverbeds overnight, toppling mountainous formations in handfuls of years, and giving this nightmare place its name: Banshee.

Only the enemy thrived here. Still another reason, thought Felix, not to go.

"B-team," began the Briefing Officer, "will drop here on the western edge. They will drive northward in a clockwise manner to rendezvous with C-team, who will drive due south to meet them from the northernmost section, the tip.

"The B-team, C-team, rendezvous will take place here, four kilometers due north of the Knuckle." A tiny arrow appeared on the holo showing first the rendezvous point, then the Knuckle itself, a steep crag one thousand meters high in the exact center of the splayed hand.

"We expect only moderate resistance during this stage of the assault. The bulk of the enemy is concentrated around the Knuckle. Nevertheless, there is more here to cover on the western edge than the eastern. And for

that reason both B and C teams will carry nine full groups and two scouts apiece.”

A flood of hatred rose within Felix as the A-team insignia appeared on his ID screen. Simple arithmetic left only two groups for A-team. Only two hundred warriors for half the area.

“Now before you members of A-team get too excited—” too late in Felix’s case—“we want you to know that there has been absolutely no evidence of enemy activity on the eastern side. None at all. Your job will be mostly sightseeing.

“So . . . you will be split up to cover the eastern half. One group, with scout, will drop here, on the far eastern edge. The other group, with scout, will drop here, ten kilometers south. The two groups will converge here, due east of the Knuckle, to await rendezvous with Assault Main, driving northward up the peninsula.

“Don’t worry about the lack of back-up. As I have already stated, there is nothing there. You should spend a boring few hours simply waiting.”

It was then, for Felix, it began. The hatred for the Briefing Officer had expanded to include his superiors, the Captain of the ship, the commanders of Fleet itself, and finally the thick-headed idiot humans who had undertaken something as asinine as interplanetary war in the first place. The hatred blazed brightly, then vanished. From somewhere inside came then a shock of all-consuming rage, the nova-like intensity of which startled even him. But then the rage was gone, too. It seemed to shoot away like a comet or a torch dropped flickering and shrinking into a bottomless well. What replaced the loathing and fury was something very different, something cold and distant and . . . only impersonally attentive. It was an odd being which rose from Felix and through him. It was, in fact, a remarkable creature. It was a wartime creature and a surviving creature. A killing creature.

From a distant place, the frightened Felix scanned himself. He recognized little. Still, what he saw was a comfort of sorts and he concentrated himself toward it, toward the coldness, the callous machine-like . . . *The engine*, he thought. *It’s not me. It’s my Engine. It will work when I cannot. It will examine and determine and choose and, at last, act. It will do all this while I cower inside.*

With furious concentration, that which kept him Felix gave itself as fuel to that which could keep him alive.

There was more to the briefing. More figures of time and distance, more numbers of men and probabilities of enemy. The Engine heard and made note. Felix, watching himself, fueling himself, psyching himself, felt disgust at all that was about to happen and all who had caused it. And once more felt the distance between himself and those about him. Again, as he briefly scanned their armored forms filling the chamber, he thought: They’re all going to die.

* * *

It stood three meters tall and weighed, on average, four times more than a human being—damn near as much as a suited warrior. It had six limbs, two for walking upright and erect, four for work. The upper limbs, call them arms, were incredibly massive, hanging down one and a half meters from two titanic shoulder joints. The arms ended in huge, hulking, two-pronged claws twice the size of an armored human fist. The middle arms were smaller, approximately human size. Curved, two-pronged pincers here for delicate work. The legs were the size of tree trunks, ending with semicircular pads splayed flat to the ground. There were two gnarled knobs on each. Each limb, upper, middle, and lower, had three joints.

The body had three sections: shoulder, abdomen, pelvis. Each was covered with coarse, hairlike fibers spaced widely apart

The head, half again larger than a warrior's helmet, bore a dull globular eye on each side. The mandible-mouth opened in three vertical sections of varying width and shape. Closed, it resembled nothing so much as a smooth-sheened, toothless, human skull. The skin was not skin at all, but bone. Ectoskeleton. The muscles were inside. It was awesomely powerful.

It was the Enemy.

It was an ant.

It was called something else, something long and technical and dreamed up out of range. But scientific jargon had nothing to do with what men had felt when they saw it move, saw it coming. It didn't matter that it had no antennae and walked upright and was too, too, damn big. From the beginning, men had called it an ant.

Felix saw no reason to change that. He stood watching the holo of the enemy in the wall of the passage leading from the Briefing Room. The others had long since filed past. They used their last minutes before drop as a time to be with friends or check equipment or fight panic or yield to it and vomit or to pray with undreamed-of piety.

Felix, alone, watched the ant.

* * *

The screen on the back wall of Drop Bay Four was purely representational. It served no actual purpose in the mechanics of Transit. It merely informed the dropping parties of the various stages. First it would glow white: Attention. Next would come yellow: Transit beginning. Then the yellow would be interspersed with flashing bands of red light: thirty seconds. As the ten second mark arrived, the red bands flashed the countdown. They would turn slowly inward across the surface of the wall until a square had formed. The square would shrink, coalesce, brightly pulsing all the while. If all was well, the red square would turn bright green at the two second mark and the drop party would step quickly forward toward it.

Actually, they were trained to all but throw themselves toward the green square. "Try to bust that wall!" the Drill-masters had demanded. And they would try, surging forward en masse. But they never actually touched the screen, never even left their drop squares. Instead, they would Transit. To the next room, to another Drop Bay, to another ship. To another world.

The presence of Banshee loomed uncomfortably as Felix entered Drop Bay Four and stepped through the others to the scout position at the very front of the formation. As he took his place, he appreciated at last the decision not to forewarn him of scout duty. One could do anything at all for a warrior's supposed sense of confidence—show him his high test scores, pat him on the back, tell him he was superhuman. None of it would affect in the slightest the growing sense of desperation that began the instant he realized he was going to be the very first of the bunch to touch down on alien soil. Given a few days' notice, the candidate would be, at the very least, hallucinating by drop time. Given a week, a basket case. Given two weeks—nobody would show up.

By springing the assignment on the morning of the drop, there was, presumably, too little time for such paranoia to develop.

Enough time for me, thought Felix sourly.

But only a small part of him thought anything at all. The rest of Felix thought nothing. The rest of Felix was

psyching, psyching. Becoming the Engine.

For no amount of reassurance, no amount of technical data, or surveillance figures or probability curves or anything else—however thorough—had convinced him that he would not be slaughtered a split-second after Transit. And if they were to try for another year, the result would be just the same. Nothing they could say would make the slightest difference to him. For they, They, stayed put. They computed. They theorized. They were pleased at Their brilliance or stunned by Their failure. Perhaps even guilt-ridden at the result.

But from the ship.

Psyching . . . psyching. . . .

Dimly, he had been horrorstruck by his fellow warriors' attitudes. Some had actually complained at being left out of the "big show." None of them, it seemed, felt as he did. They stood about talking, gesturing, laughing. A slight hint of nervousness, of course, but that was damn well not enough.

Are they insane? he wondered. They actually have faith in fools who would throw us into armed combat—by the *thousands*—after less than a year of training? *Madness*, he thought. But, again, only a small bit of him thought anything at all.

Psyching . . . psyching. . . .

The wall, formerly a bland shade of confident blue, turned suddenly white. The hundred regulars assumed formation behind him.

"Attention," said the CO unnecessarily. His voice sounded deliberately bored.

Psyching . . . psyching. . . .

Yellow light appeared at the edges of the screen. It flowed smoothly toward the center in what the psychs had called "color comfort pattern."

"Look alive," said the CO. Someone coughed directly into his microphone. There were several nervous titters. "Shut up, there," said the CO.

Psyching . . . psyching. . . .

Red bands began their pulsing march across the screen.

"Good luck, ladies and gentlemen," purred the even-toned voice of the Transit Control Officer.

"Go get 'em!" urged someone else in the booth.

"Don't worry," assured a warrior, a fierce female voice.

"Shaddup!" growled the CO with a nervous edge to his tone.

Psyching . . . psyching. . . .

As the red squared formed and pulsed, Felix, against all orders and procedures, reached behind his back and disengaged his rifle. He held it in front of him at the ready, safety off. Someone cleared a throat to speak, possibly to object, to chew him out, to. . . .

But it was too late. The red square flashed to green and all were moving forward and there was loud breathing from some and no breathing at all from most and stunned shock from the inhabitants of the Transit Control Booth when they saw that the lead man, the scout, had goddamn near hit the far wall and . . .

. . . and ANTS! ANTS EVERYWHERE!

Felix fired and fired, the blue beam slicing through the ectoskeleton like it was butter and long stiff tentacles slammed into his faceplate as he collided with their hurtling bodies and he tripped on one, still firing, and felt himself fall and, in a desperate lunge to remain upright, brought a plassteel leg forward with such brutal speed that the toe of his boot tore completely through the stumbling ant's midsection. Black fluid spouted but Felix was already gone. . . .

Slamming forward into them, firing wildly about, he had to get, to get out of them, had to, had-to . . . Mandibles flashing by him and at him, tree-trunk arms and legs and claws crossing in front of him. . . . Most didn't seem to know he was there and the few who saw and reacted were blazed down or passed by but still there were more to come and more still, rows and rows of them, he'd been dropped right *into* them and the overworked blazer was signaling frantically of overheating that he swore he felt right through the goddamned plassteel and still there were more—he must keep moving, he must and then—

Then he was through them and past them and in front of him was a long dune of that sand. Without conscious thought he leapt over it with a quick, powered, leap. The dune was perhaps three meters high. His leap carried him perhaps half that distance above it and he was down again, blazer ready, spinning around to cover all directions at once but. . . .

He was alone.

No ants here at all. He was in what looked like a dry river bottom and he was alone. He blinked, straightened up from his crouch, took an instinctive step back toward the way he had come.

And the ants appeared. First one, then three, then nine, a dozen, all clambering over the dune toward him. He blazed them all, severing limbs, melting giant skulls. More came and he blazed them, too, and then more and more from each end of the dune and he was having to swing the gun back and forth to cover them all and it was getting to where he could just barely get the ones at the far ends and then one vaulted at him from the center and he ducked and flashed blazerfire and the headless torso careened into him and he ran.

He stomped madly down the riverbed. The dune, he now saw, was a ridge of sand forming one wall of the bed. He looked for a break, thought of leaping again. But wouldn't that make him a target? Wait! Was he a target now? He twisted to look back over his shoulder.

Dozens of ants rushed toward him, jamming the narrow passage with their writhing flailing legs and heavy swinging arms and *huge* claws. . . . Globular eyes bore down on him. . . .

The Engine Felix skidded to an unexpected stop, took careful aim, and killed them.

There was no place for them to go, no cover to hide behind. They were all jammed together, all headlong urgency and targets doomed. Only when he had gotten them all—forty, eighty, two hundred twitching bodies?—only then did he think to notice that none of them, not a one, had been armed.

He stared at the remains for a moment. He had been told to expect blasters, heat rays that could, eventually, boil his suit on his back. There was nothing here. He ran on.

A gap in the ridge appeared. But it was on the wrong side, back toward the ants, and he thought he should just rush past or maybe sneak by or maybe leap over the opposite wall. Instead, in his indecision, he ran into the open without altering his stride.

It was terrible-terrible, awful-awful. . . . Ants still, more ants still in columns and rows and marching and they saw him and turned toward him, so many seeing and turning at once like they knew him personally and expected and as they burst through the gap he was past it with powered kick and stride. Coming for him—that was bad, very bad, but what was worse was that sight, that terrible-terrible, awful-awful sight, that split-second sight back along their horde to where he had been and where the others were still. The ants were swarming over the others, the dead and dying warriors, his fellows, his humans, being peeled open and apart by too many claws and pincers and mandibles snapping, plassteel shredding and no one getting a chance to fire enough to stop the peeling, shredding, swarming mandibles with globular eyes. . . .

They were all dead or all dying back there.

The riverbed turned, bent to the left and then the right and he came to another gap—on the wrong side again—and *ground* to a stop, staring-stunned-shocked. . . .

Six endless rows of ants poured up from out of a squat cubic structure sitting half-buried in the sand. Those are supposed to be supply dumps! They told us they were only supply dumps!

From behind him came more ants boiling around the bend and he blazed them at first but his blazer got immediately hot—Oh-oh, overload!—and he thought of running and he thought of leaping out of the riverbed and he thought of using a blaze-bomb and it was already in the air, a line drive straight into the crowd at the bend. He dropped and flattened himself and it blew.

They died, the ants. The ridge walls, narrow here, crumbled and closed the riverbed off. But the other gap! He turned and through the new gap they were coming—so *many*. He threw another blaze-bomb into the ranks and it blew as he crouched, ants flying everywhere but still more and more from the cube in the sand, globular eyes, and he aimed more carefully and missed—too much adrenalin—but the next bomb flew true with a slight arcing trajectory only meters above their heads and down into them and right into the mouth of the cube, right on the upward sloping ramp, and blew just right.

The sides of the entrance disappeared outward. The roof kicked high, lifting and opening and then falling and shattering and then the whole damn cube collapsed on itself.

Another blaze-bomb over his shoulder to the other ants already out and coming and he was off and running again. The riverbed veered to the left and left again and dropped downhill. He was accelerating, really moving now. And when he burst out into the open space beyond and accelerated even harder, harder, to the best he had, he knew he had lost them. They couldn't keep up and he was safe now, for now, but alone and the only one left and he concentrated *hard* on the vision of the collapsing cube and what he could do to them instead of that other vision, that terrible-awful sight of peeling plassteel and what they could do to him.

Alone on a hostile planet, Felix the scout, the soldier, the Engine, the killer, ran.

He ran and ran and ran.

* * *

Felix stood on the uppermost tip of a sand-blasted crag which rose three hundred meters above the desert floor. He stood with his black-helmeted head thrown back, his arms hanging limply at his sides, his legs

braced far apart. His eyes peered intensely into the gray-yellow sky. Inside the helmet he worked frantically at the Emergency Recall key between his teeth.

After several moments he changed frequencies again, as he had done countless times before. And as before, there was no response.

Not on the Emergency Recall.

Not on the Command Channel.

Not on the ship's beacon.

Nothing. There was nothing

He lowered his head and gazed, unseeing, at the breathtaking drop millimeters away. He had to admit it. He was just what he appeared to be. Just what he had been every second since, from the first few moments after Transit to now, standing alone atop this majestic, totally alien, peak. Alone. He was completely and utterly alone.

He had hoped the altitude might make a difference to communications. He had hoped to climb above those blinding torrents of sand and any interference they might have caused him. But perhaps the sand had already done its job. Perhaps it had managed to infiltrate the suit and jam the relays. Or maybe it had that blaster-fire or the impact of those bludgeoning claws. He doubted the last. Despite it all, he was physically unharmed. The suit had held. It was probably the interference from . . . what? The sand? How?

Could be the magnetics, too. Something wrong with them here, they had said. Irregular, shifting, the polar interval was never where it was supposed to be. It was why missiles wouldn't track.

"Unless they've figured it out, too," he muttered at last, voicing it outright. Unless they, too, those masters of warfare at Fleet, had discovered what he had known for hours: they had no chance.

None at all.

"Not here," he said, gazing blankly at the western foothills. "Not on Banshee." For even in this supposedly deserted area, he had seen thousands upon thousands of ants

The blazer-rifle lay at his feet, useless. Its barrel was warped from the heat of overload. The stock looked worse, crumpled and split from having been used in a way its creators had never intended—as a club. The suit had also been changed. The left shoulder was now dark green instead of black where a full twenty-second burst of heat ray had ruptured the thin outer covering of the plassteel. Other parts of the suit bore gray-brown splotches of the sands which had clung to the black ant blood which had clung to the armor. The splotches were mostly thin, irregular streaks, except for those on his arms. There a dense unbroken coating of sand covered the plassteel completely, from biceps to fingers.

Many, many, ants.

Idly, he kicked at the remnant of his blazer and watched it for the long seconds it took to fall. He sighed. Incredibly, he had but 63 percent power remaining after a mere five hours on the planet.

Maybe they have figured it out, at that. And run away. I would.

He turned around and began the long difficult descent with the unhurried manner of a man with nowhere to

go and nothing to do.

“I would,” he said to the wind.

* * *

The warrior, a blonde woman, was dead. But the ant didn't seem to realize that—it kept killing her. Her body shimmered gruesomely beneath the blaster's effect, exposing a meter-long gash in the armor. Scattered randomly about her on the hard canyon floor were the remains of other warriors, some twenty-five in all.

A-team One, thought Felix from his hiding place at the far end of the enclosure. *Now it's just me. I'm A-team.*

He sighed. And then, Engine once more, he pulled his attention away from the carnage, away from the grotesque sight of his fellow humans, some halfway out of their armor, their swollen features fast-frozen in the thin alien air. He would not, could not, stare at them any longer.

Instead, he watched the ant. And waited. He had to. He needed power.

After only ten hours on Banshee, he was down to 24 percent of capacity. At that rate he had less than four left. Four hours until the Larvafern, deprived of laser-induced photosynthesis, would cease to emit oxygen. However, he needn't concern himself with that. He would be dead long before that. The ants would kill him first.

Two hours, perhaps. Two hours before the suit began to slow down. He would no longer be able to fight, no longer be able to dodge and duck. In two hours, he would no longer be able to run. They would have him. He would lie down somewhere. The weight of the armor would force him down. And in some canyon or gorge he would lie and wait, a helpless statue, for the ants. Shuffling slowly up to him and around him, gesturing to one another with heavy claws and snapping mandibles. They would prod him, poke at him, lean over and stare into his helmet, great gray globular eyes his last living sight.

And then, pulling together, they would split the plassteel like a ripe fruit and he would blow out dying, his scream falling about him like frozen ice crystals.

There was no question of hiding from it, no hope of a dignified sleep. Somehow they would find him as they always had before. Felix suspected they could detect armor by some natural process, given enough time. Never having any equipment—only a handful with blasters even—they must possess some inbred instinct. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. What counted was the fact that, so far, they had always, always, found him.

He needed power. He waited.

Three more ants, unarmed, appeared at the far end of the canyon. They gestured. The ant with the blaster stopped killing the dead girl and joined them. They left.

Felix was out of the shadows in seconds. He inspected the corpses. Armor that had retained its integrity, he had been informed, also retained its energy supply. He found a charred warrior and lay down beside it to make hip-to-hip Connection. There was an instant's brief hesitation as the young man, recalling the constant fighting and fleeing of the past hours, screamed silently. Why?

Why continue? He was alone and lost and without hope. Why string it out?

The Engine ignored this, grasping the armored shoulders before him and muscling the corpse into the

bizarrely sensual embrace of Connection. The Engine smiled as the power surged to 42 percent. The Engine refused to die.

A black warrior still carried twelve blaze-bombs. Felix removed nine, made Connection, and raised power to 60 percent.

A sergeant with a broken neck brought it to 71 percent.

The CO's command suit brought it to 87 percent.

Disgusted at gaining only 4 percent, he shoved the next corpse angrily away, refusing to recognize Dikk from the mess hall.

The last possible source was an Asian girl looking far too young to be there. Her legs were twisted under her back, forcing him to lie with his faceplate against hers. He gazed blankly at her delicate features, then made Connection. She screamed.

Felix vomited against his screens. Then he jerked as though electrocuted, throwing himself back and away. But Connection was made and her face stayed close to his, wide and screaming. He gagged and panted and, for just a moment, could not move.

Until at last he, too, screamed, a hoarse sound. "Shut up!"

She shut up. He paused, took a deep breath, and hit the stasis key. In seconds the helmet was, except for a fading odor, clean. He looked at the girl again, who was just then seeming to realize what he was.

"You . . . you're a man?" she asked timidly, like a small child.

"Yes," he replied, nodding.

"I thought you were. . . ."

"I know."

"You're a man," she repeated. "You're human."

"Yes."

"You're not the ants again."

"No."

"I thought you were . . ." she whispered and her eyes flared with growing hysteria.

"I'm Felix," he said quickly, trying to disrupt the momentum of her panic. "Scout, A-team Two."

Her calm firmed somewhat as she focused on this information.

"I'm Taira. Warrior. A-team. . . . You said A-team Two? You're A-team Two?"

"I am," he replied impassively.

"Oh, thank God, thank God! We thought. . . . I thought I was . . . alone! A-team One is . . . is. . . ."

“Hit your tranq key,” he said quickly.

“... they’re all dead! All! The ants were . . . Oh, God!!”

He growled. “Hit your tranq!”

“Huh? What?”

“Key your tranq! Now!”

She blinked uncertainly, obeyed from instinct. From just above her elbow a tiny stream of compressed air shot against her skin, opening a pore and injecting the drug. Felix watched her pupils swell and contract as the tranq took effect. Taira blinked again, shook her head, blinked once more. Slowly, she pulled herself together.

“How many made it?” she wanted to know.

Felix ignored her. “Are you able to move?”

“No,” she replied brusquely, businesslike at last. “My legs are broken.”

Judging from her contorted posture, he could well believe it. “I suppose I could carry you,” he mused aloud.

“How many are. . . . What’s your name?”

“Felix. What’s your power level?”

“Uh . . .84 percent. Pretty low.”

He laughed dryly, felt the disgust welling.

“Okay,” he said. “Key your painers. It’ll be a rough ride and. . . .”

“Felix,” she said slowly, her voice now as cold as his. “You’re alone, aren’t you?”

He met her gaze. He nodded, She stared a moment, then closed her eyes. She sighed loudly.

“Two hundred and four people,” she whispered to herself. She opened her eyes. “Two left.”

He said nothing. His eyes were blank.

“And you’ll carry me?” she asked with more than a trace of bitterness.

“I’ll carry you,” he replied in an even colder tone that told her she was right to think what she thought.

She grimaced, taken aback. Then she relaxed. “All right, Felix,” she said wearily. “I’ll be all right here. Just g. . . .”

“Freeze!” he barked suddenly.

“Oh, come now, Scout. I know what you think you . . .”

“Freeze!” he snapped again, looking past her down the canyon. “Ants!”

Just around the corner of her helmet, he could see the four ants coming back into the canyon. He was in a lousy position to see anything, but he was afraid to attract their attention by shifting. He settled for severing Connection, a slight movement.

“Don’t move,” he said. “They’ll come right by us.”

“I can’t move,” she replied softly. “Where are they now?”

“Shut up!” he ordered bluntly, watching them shuffle across the hard-packed sand. The one with the blaster was trailing behind, he noted.

“Are they close? Do they see us?”

“Shut up!” he snarled.

“*Tell me!*”

Her tone of fear—and pleading—got through. He looked at her. His eyes relaxed a bit. He looked back to the ants. “They’re coming right past us. You’ll probably see ’em when they go by. My view is bad. About twenty meters now. . . .”

“How many are . . . ?”

“Four. Quiet. About fifteen meters, ten. The last one’s back a ways. It’s got a blaster. They’re not looking at us. Five meters . . . There they go. See ’em?”

“No. No, your helmet is . . . Yes! Yes, I see one! Don’t move! Don’t . . . Okay. Okay, it’s moved off. I only saw one . . . and it’s gone past.”

“All right,” said Felix in a dead voice. He took a deep breath. “Sit tight.”

For several seconds their two pairs of eyes flickered about straining to see. They kept their bodies rock-still. Occasionally, they looked at one another. Once, Taira smiled. Felix looked away.

“All right,” he said at last. “There they go. On my side.” He felt her relax. “They’re going away. It’s okay.” He found he had been holding his breath. He let it out in a rush. “Okay . . . okay, there they go. The one with the blaster is first. Now . . . the second. Good. There’s the third right behind him.” He glanced quickly at her, his lips forming a pale smile.

Her eyes shot wide with terror.

He was already moving when the claws clamped down on his shoulders, moving back from her and up. He struck out with a boot, hitting something. He kicked again, felt the claws quiver against the plassteel. He kicked a third time, striking solidly. He spun about, sprung free, and slammed a forearm into the hairy abdomen.

The ant loomed over him. He took a step back, retreating, but the ant closed, grasping his waist with its smaller middle pincers. One of the claws slammed thunderously against the side of his helmet. He ducked the following blow from the other claw and lunged forward. He planted a boot, quite randomly, atop one of the ant’s footpads, pinning it in place briefly. Then he drove upward, slamming his open armored palm against the flat chinlike space below the mandible.

The ant's head popped off.

Felix froze, staring unbelieving, as the gushing torrent of black blood erupted from the gaping spinal shaft. And then the ant fell backward. To his horror, he found himself being pulled along. The pincers still held him tightly to the ant. They landed brutally against the hard canyon floor. Felix twisted wildly, trying to break away. He stole a glance over his shoulder, saw the next one almost upon him.

He groaned. He wrenched back, got a knee against the abdomen, and lurched to his feet. One pincer tore loose from its grip. Another, still clamped to his waist, tore loose from its socket. Felix spun around, to meet the charge with at least. . . .

The second ant crashed into him like a tank, knocking both of them rolling across the headless stump of the first. Felix spun himself on top and clamped an armored hand viselike around the thorax. He shouldered aside a grasping claw and drove a powered fist through the center of the right eye all the way to the brain case. The creature shuddered violently, then became still.

Felix planted his boots on the midsection and leapt forward to meet the rush of the third ant. But he was all wrong, too straight in the air. He collided full-faced with the hurtling ant. Even through his suit, the concussion shook him. The ant seemed to feel nothing. The pincers clamped onto his sides firmly, holding him fast while the upper claws pinwheeled in unison, bashing his helmet from side to side with tremendous force.

Felix felt himself rising helplessly as the ant lifted him off the ground. He had no leverage, no place to run or dodge and the claws kept slamming into him and he reached out, groping for those hideous eyes. But they were too far away, he couldn't reach, and the blows kept coming and his vision blurred . . . and he was losing it, losing all sense of what to do or how, losing, about to die.

And then the two of them, man and ant, were suddenly enveloped in the crimson beam of blasterfire. It was incredible. The last ant was boiling them both to kill him. He felt the intensity increase as it rushed forward to finish it.

Felix, encased in plassteel, could take it a lot longer. The arcing claws became erratic as they, and the rest of the ant holding him, began to literally fry. One claw fell to its side, useless. The other swung, missed, missed again. The ant slumped, stumbled to one side. He felt one boot, then the other, touch the ground. He braced them firmly, grasped the simmering-oozing form before him by thorax and pelvic joint, and lifted it high into the air. The pincers at his waist stretched, disintegrated. Still holding the ant high, he threw his weight backwards, twisting around, and hurled the broiling monster directly into the source of the blaster-fire.

The heat ray ceased abruptly as the last ant staggered backward, clawing at the bubbling ectoplasm spattered about its skull and shoulders. Felix leapt forward and tore the blaster from a claw. He swung it mightily, in a long arc, and slammed it against a leg joint. Exoskeleton splintered loudly and the joint gave. But the ant flung itself forward anyway, against Felix, and the two of them banged to the ground atop one of the armored corpses.

The ant grabbed the blaster, triggering it into the sand below them. Holding the barrel away from him, Felix pounded his free forearm into the side of the thorax. The ant shuddered, stunned, but did nothing to evade another blow. Instead it tried to grasp control of the blaster, discharging it harmlessly all the while. On a sudden impulse, Felix moved the barrel within range of the other claw. The ant grasped it hungrily, both claws on it now, and still firing at nothing.

Felix reared back and slammed out with his forearm again to the completely exposed thorax. The ant

shuddered again but kept both claws on the blaster. So Felix hit it again.

And again. And again. The creature slumped, sagged, as Felix pounded his target over and over with every bit of power at his command. After a while, the claws relaxed their grip, the gray eyes convulsed. The ant collapsed.

Felix clambered to his knees, dragged the blaster free from the lifeless claws . . . and froze.

For a long moment he didn't move. Then he gently lay the blaster on the ground beside him like in some somber ritual. He paused, then gripped the dead ant and dragged it to the side. He sat back on his heels and stared.

It had not been a corpse he had fallen upon. Not then. And the blaster-fire had not been, after all, harmless. Gently, carefully, he picked up Taira's armored arm and lay it across the gaping, smoldering, hole in the center of her faceplate.

"Damn," he said softly.

* * *

It took him six more hours to travel eight kilometers westward for the terrain rose treacherously and there were many ants. He had only 49 percent power remaining. There were no blaze-bombs left. Idly, he wondered why he didn't care.

He sat down in a sand drift and machinelike, Enginelike, went through a communication check. For diversion, he decided to try the ship's beacon first. Nothing. Next came the Emergency Frequency. Nothing. Last came the Command Channel. Unexpectant, unhopeful, and, frankly, bored by it all, he keyed it on.

As if in response, the ground suddenly rocked beneath him from a tremendous explosion less than five hundred meters away. Before the rumbling echo could die, he heard, clear as a bell, a man's bitter voice saying:

"I don't *care* about it, goddamnit! You hear me? I don't care! And I ain't fighting ants any goddamned more! Fuck Earth, anyway!"

Felix stood up. He looked in the direction of the explosion, at the distant and majestic spire. He smiled. He was no longer alone.

He began to run toward the west. Toward the Knuckle.

* * *

The bands were jammed with a hopeless overload of garbled voices. There were frantic exchanges between warriors, impatient officers' directives, sergeants' flat commands. Underlying each was a growing tone of panic. It had been a sporadic chord when Felix first detected it. Now he heard it everywhere—a faint coating.

War sounds were also constant, rumbling, thundering waves of noise occasionally punctuated by another of those heart-stopping blasts that had first told him where he was. After each of these, the chattering would cease for several seconds. And despite himself, Felix would each time envision all having been killed by it. Then, seconds later, the chattering would begin again, a little more desperately.

He was homed in on the center of the transmissions, a point just south of the Knuckle. He had to stop often

to check his bearings, for the terrain had made anything resembling a straight approach impossible. A seemingly endless series of eroded gulleys and draws produced what amounted to a maze of narrow alleys between random groupings of walls five meters high. There was no pattern to either level or direction. And there were many dead ends

He had just completed another bearing check when he noticed he was no longer alone.

Two warriors stood shoulder to shoulder in a clearing a few meters in front of him. Felix stared at them, too delighted with their very existence to speak. By the time he had gathered his wits enough to call out, one of them was already speaking

“Don’t try to stop us,” said a man’s nervous voice.

It was the last thing he would have expected to hear. He took an instinctive step toward them, then stopped. There was something wrong with these two. They seemed to edge away from him, like children, like schoolboys caught. . . . And then he had it: deserters.

“Don’t try to stop us,” said the nervous voice again.

“All right,” replied Felix dully.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” said a second voice, equally as strident as the first.

“Then don’t,” answered Felix blandly.

The two exchanged glances, then stared at him some more. They were privates, he saw from their markings. They began to ease by him slowly, not trusting him.

“Don’t try anything,” warned the first.

“All right.”

“We don’t want to fight you,” said the second.

“Fine.”

“We’re going now,” said the first.

“Where?”

For just an instant, they hesitated and Felix thought he had gotten through to them. But then they were gone around a bend and out of sight.

“Where?” he asked again. “Where will you go? This is Banshee!”

There was no reply.

He keyed a dose of stimule into his system. He had had another less than an hour before, but suddenly he felt very weary.

* * *

The war sounds increased as he grew nearer. The great blasts had continued as well. The floors of the gulleys

were being filled by the cascades of sand pouring down from atop the shaken walls. He must be getting very close. He leapt easily over a particularly large deposit and hurried down the widening passage beyond. And then he was surrounded by perhaps a dozen warriors stomping past him from the opposite direction. He held out a hand to stop them. A heavy warrior's glove slapped it away.

"Get out of the way, damn you," shouted someone. "Can't you see the beacon?" The group disappeared the way he had come without slowing.

Dismally, Felix considered the possibility that the entire assault force was now composed of deserters running away from this battle only to encounter, inevitably, more fighting. Each would, in turn, flee from the new battle, only to run into another and another. For where, on a hostile planet, can a warrior desert to?

He noticed the Transit Beacon for the first time. Beacon? Why, he wondered, would they run *away* from that? Transit was the only way home. He raced off toward the source, the way he had been headed all along.

He dashed around a corner of the maze and collided head-on with something coming the other way. It was another black suit.

"Come on! Get up!" cried the other scout, a woman. She grabbed his shoulders and tugged.

Felix leapt to his feet unaided. "Go on, if you want," he said disgustedly. "I won't tell anyone."

"Huh?" asked the other scout, genuinely puzzled. "Tell who? What?"

"Never mind," Felix answered, starting off again toward the beacon.

The scout stopped him with a gloved hand on his arm.

"Are you crazy?" she asked.

He shook his arm free. "Are you?" he retorted angrily.

A split-second before the shock hit them, he saw it coming.

And then he was flying sideways in the air against the side of one of the embankments which was already crumbling as he hit it. Great chunks of sand fell down upon him, covering him. He struck out wildly, shoving at the sand, trying desperately to keep from being buried, from disappearing beneath it forever, trapped and held by Banshee herself, for her children the ants and more sand fell on him and around him and the ground trembled with a terrible sense of fragility and then it was over.

He sat on the floor of the gulley, buried in sand to his waist. Directly in front of him, the other scout's helmet bobbed abruptly into view with a hissing rush of sand. Felix got to his feet and helped dig the rest of her out.

"What *was* that?" he asked.

"Another goddamn tank. What else?" she replied bitterly.

"A tank . . .?" he repeated dully.

She looked at him closely. "Don't you know?" she asked. "Where've you . . . Uh-oh! Another beacon."

Felix saw it on his own holo. The beacon was quite near this time.

“Damn!” she exclaimed. “It’s right on top of us! Come on!” She made a step in the direction she had been traveling before—away from the source.

Felix hesitated, bewildered.

“Move!” she commanded desperately and he found that he was already moving with her, blindly following.

They raced down several passages, careening wildly around corners, bouncing off walls, until they slammed together against the solid bank of a narrow cul-de-sac.

“Shit!” she spat bitterly. “Another dead-en. . . .”

This blast was closer. It was much worse. They thudded back and forth against the walls of the cul-de-sac like insects shaken in a bottle. The walls swayed, warped, bowed outward at them . . . but held. They were not buried.

It took him a moment to clear his head. He found her on hands and knees at the base of the wall across from him.

“What the hell *is* that?” he demanded.

She raised her helmet slowly to eye level and regarded him for a beat. Then: “You really don’t know?” she asked in a quiet, thoughtful, tone. “Where have you . . .? Who are you?”

“Felix. A-team.”

She sat up. “A-team? We thought they were all dead.”

“They are.”

“Huh? But you just . . . Oh. You’re it, huh?”

“Yeah.” He paused, seeing it all, briefly, once more. “Tell me about the tanks.”

She straightened, rose slowly to her feet. “The ants get the Transit Beacon somehow. They home in on it. I don’t know what this is they’re using. Not like their mortars, obviously. Some kind of rocket, maybe. They don’t have any exhaust, though. I’ve seen ’em. More like a streamer. . . .”

“Anyway, we all run like hell when we see the beacon indicators ’cause we know what’s about to happen. Now you do, too. The Hammer is about to fall.”

Involuntarily, Felix glanced upward. “Why don’t you just tell the ship to stop Transit?”

“What ship is that?”

“Huh?” He turned and stared at her faceless helmet.

“The *Terra* was hit. We haven’t heard from her in . . . not in a long while, anyway.”

“But the Transit. . . .”

“Those are the jeep carriers. Automated. Robot pilots.”

He stood there for a second or two before saying: “Damn,”

“Uh-huh,” replied the scout. “Damn. Well. I have a place I’m supposed to be. We’ve a rendezvous of sorts.” She read dials. “It’s not far.”

She led the way through the maze, stopping often to check her bearings. Twice he thought he heard her mumble to herself, but said nothing to prompt her. They saw no one else for several minutes.

Suddenly she stopped.

“They’ve figured it out,” she said, half to herself. “They’ve stopped shelling.”

Felix listened, nodded. “They’ll be looking for us.”

“Yeah. Then we fight again. And then we move again. Then we fight.”

“You’ve moved before?”

“Twice. It delays things a little, not much.”

She turned and faced him then, shoving out a gloved hand.

“I’m Forest,” she said. “Third Scout, Forward Group One.”

“Felix,” he said, returning the handshake.

“You want to hear it all? The whole deal? We won’t have time later. Or maybe you don’t care?”

He found himself smiling. “Maybe not. But give it to me anyway.”

“Right.” said Forest, leading off again through the maze. “First of all, it was easy.”

Ten thousand warriors had made simultaneous Drop on the “wrist.” They drove due north toward the Knuckle, arriving at the edge of the maze well within estimated time limits. They quickly arranged themselves within the classic semicircular battlefield pattern and waited for A, B, and C Assault teams to arrive. They had excellent communication with the *Terra*, good morale and, at that point, nothing to report.

An hour later, the *Terra* stopped transmitting abruptly, in mid-sentence. All efforts to reopen communications were to no avail. No one was really worried though. The weather, someone suggested. Two hours later, however, and all were getting awfully nervous about being alone. The idea of losing contact had, frankly, never occurred to anyone.

Nervously, all eyes turned to the Knuckle.

And, on cue, it opened . . .

The ants came in waves that were perhaps half as wide as the Warrior emplacements. They came right at the center of the humans’ strength. Because of clever positioning, the ants in the front ranks were clearly visible long before they reached the trenches. Also, only one or two in ten actually carried the blasters, which were of dubious value anyway considering the length of time they must remain centered on a single target.

So it was just what the human commanders could have wished for.

The first wave was literally obliterated without a single human life being lost. Likewise the second wave and the third.

The commanders could find no evidence that the ants were trying to flank them, so they drew in most of the forces from each end of the emplacement, leaving only scouts at the edges.

The fourth wave came and went the way of the others. Then the fifth died as well and the sixth and the seventh and by now everyone was having a helluva good time killing ants. It was easy. More, it was fun.

The ants stopped coming for a while and everyone cheered until they remembered that they still couldn't talk to the ship. Until B and C teams straggled in carrying bodies and missing many more.

The officers got together and gave the warriors make-work to keep them from thinking too much and it worked for a while until there simply wasn't anything else for them to do and they got a chance to sit down and look at what they had done.

"That's when I knew," said Forest. "That's when a lot of people saw it."

It was the bodies of the ants. There were thousands of them. Thousands and thousands and thousands. There were more than the entire loaded complement, not just of the *Terra*, but of the entire wing. There were too many. Too damn many.

The next wave was more than a wave. It was a solid mass. The first attacks had been only scouting missions, they realized, as they watched the choking, boiling rush swarm toward them. Just scouts.

They called it the first assault. During its half-hour length, two thousand warriors died. One out of every five humans.

"What's incredible," said Forest, "was that we held at all."

But they did hold. Against that assault and against the next and the next. But by then all was a mass of warfare and death and smoke and blistered ants and ruptured plassteel and some officer got smart and called for troops to move back and dig in at another spot.

About then the mortars started falling, coming from the Knuckle itself and it got so bad that they moved again almost immediately.

"We weren't just retreating. We were running. But then we found a real good spot and dug in a little better than ever before. We had the best of the best left, you know. And plenty of power left. And we blew big holes in 'em then. Big, big, holes.

"But, dammit, we were still getting chewed. We should have just run like hell and I told 'em so. But they wouldn't listen to me. Those idiot officers . . . Felix, they still didn't know what was going on. Not even then. They hadn't seen the fighting from up front like the rest of us. They still thought the Knuckle was a goddamn mountain fort."

"Isn't it?" asked Felix, puzzled.

"Felix," she said slowly, stopping and looking at him. "That is no fort. It isn't even a mountain."

"Then what is it?"

“It’s a hive.”

* * *

The warriors hastily erecting the fortification couldn’t have numbered much more than twenty-five hundred.

“Where are the rest?” asked Felix.

“I guess this is it. Except for some stragglers.”

“This couldn’t. . . . You mean you lost three-fourths of your entire force?” Felix couldn’t believe it.

“Well, we had about twice this before the Transit idiocy. But the Hammer did a bad job on us. Hold on here, Felix. I’ll see if I can find someone for you to report to.”

She trotted off down the lines. Felix watched a squad of warriors demolishing large sections of the sandy ridges on either end of the barricade to inhibit encirclement. Another group was busy leveling the maze for about fifty meters straight out in front, to provide a flat killing area for the enemy to cross before reaching them. It looked, he thought, like they would be in a good spot in any normal encounter. But this was not normal. The ants were not. . . . He shook his head briefly to clear his mind of the image of those waves and waves. He wondered how it had affected those around him. He watched them go about their duties in what seemed to be a trancelike haze.

Forest reappeared. “Can’t find anybody much. Colonel said you’re with me for now. Right?”

“Sure.”

She went to a stack of blazers surrounded by piles of assorted bits of equipment. She picked out two, handed him one.

“This blazer’s almost empty.”

“Yeah,” she replied calmly. “I gave you the one with the juice in it. Clubs, Felix. Welcome to the interstellar Stone Age.”

“I thought we had plenty of power.”

“Not for blazers they tell me. Okay—we’re the backup team for this area.” She waved an arm at an area behind the barricade perhaps twenty meters wide. “The procedure is to let breakthroughs alone. The line warriors ignore them. We, that’s you and me, are supposed to get them as they come through. Go for the head first. If you can’t reach that, try for the thorax.”

“What about the eyes?”

“The eyes are good, too. Yeah, I guess you must have done this once or twice before just to get here. Well, try not to look too bored, huh? You’ll spoil it for me.”

She laughed and started toward the barricade, waving for him to join her. “Come on. We’re scouting some.”

He wanted to say something that matched her bravado. He wanted to laugh with her while he could. Or just smile. But it was too far away from him already. Slowly, but with growing speed, he felt the Engine rise, felt it gather itself and surge forward to the front of his consciousness. And once again, he felt the rest of him

begin to fade

They stepped across the barricade of packed sand and dropped the two meters to the floor of the killing area. He looked about at the scarred pattern of the pulverized dunes made by the planted explosives. The entire area held a gritty, gray-black coating that made an unpleasant crunching sound under his boots. He saw that certain areas of the sand had been shocked into something resembling glass.

“Key the command frequency,” she said as they approached the maze walls. “The CO wants to know what we see before everybody else does.”

He nodded to himself and made the connection.

She stopped when they reached the edge of the maze, gazing back and forth at the various possibilities. “We need some height,” she mumbled as if to herself. She picked a narrow gorge that rose steeply and began to climb. He followed silently.

They followed the passage through several turns, always rising. Around a sharp bend, they came to an abrupt dead end. She turned and looked back in the direction they had come as if she could see through the walls. “Okay. This is probably far enough. Up we go.”

With that she bent quickly into a crouch, seesawed her arms for balance, and leaped to the top of the far wall. Felix gauged the height. He leaped after her. He misjudged his leap and banged a thigh against the lip, sending a spray of sand into the air. But he was up.

“The world’s greatest athlete,” she said when he had knelt down beside her.

“What?”

“That’s what they’d say on Earth if I could have done that without a suit. Look at the jump we just made. Seven meters easily.”

Felix glanced down, nodded.

“You from Earth?” she asked.

“No,” he replied.

“I am,” she said cheerily. “Born and bred. Ever been there?”

“Yes.”

She looked at him at last. She had noticed the change in him. But she felt the need to talk and began to rattle on again. It was all about her childhood on Earth and about her decision to sign up some six years before. Some of it was about some man, either a lover or relative, Felix was not all sure.

He wanted to listen, wanted to help her out. He felt her need acutely and knew it would be much better for her if he could manage to respond. Perhaps it would even be better for him. She was, after all, Third Scout for the Forward Group, quite a high rank. Perhaps she knew better. Mostly, though, he just wanted to help.

But this was a distant want, coming from a distant place where all his human thoughts were thrust during what he had come to think of as the Enginetime. The rest of him, the Engine, was scouting.

Below them could clearly be seen the entire lengths of some two dozen passages in the maze. Bits and pieces of several dozen more were also in sight. It was a good spot for them.

Felix's eyes raked back and forth across the lines of curving passages, from left to right and back again. He would make two of these scans at a time. And then he would look upward at the most incredible sight he had ever seen.

He had no idea what the Knuckle was made out of. He supposed that it might very well be composed of the same sort of material used to make the ants themselves. He had read somewhere once about some forms of insect life that created their homes in this manner. He wondered if the same pattern would hold true for these ants, these three-meter-tall ants.

These monsters. . . .

"Forest?" asked a sharp commanding voice in his earphones.

"Forest, here," she replied.

"You in position?"

"Yessir."

"All right. Look, the Can is coming down your way pretty soon. You need to make Connection?"

"Yessir. I could use it."

"What about the other scout with you? Felix is it?"

Felix looked at her, nodded.

"Yessir. He needs it, too."

"Very well. One of you stays while the other comes back. Then rotate again. I want someone scanning the whole time. Got it?"

"Yessir. Will."

"Right. Out."

"Forest out. You want to go first?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I figured you'd say that. You sure turned into the quietest damn. . . . Oh, shit. See it?"

Felix followed her gaze. He saw it. An ant. Then another and another.

"Colonel, this is Forest again."

"Right, Forest. You got something?"

"Yessir."

“Right. How many do you see?”

“About twenty or. . . . No, make that forty or. . . .”

“It’s probably just a scouting party. Sit tight while I. . . .”

“Eight, ninety . . . one hundred and fifty, seventy. . . .”

“. . . mark the spot on the grid. Now, Forest. . . .”

“Yessir? One ninety, two twenty-five, two seventy-five. . . .”

“Forest, I want you two to stay put out of sight and wait until the main force arrives.”

“Three hundred fifty, four hundred, call it five hundred. . . . did you say something sir?”

“Yes, I did. Forest, are you paying attention?”

“Six hundred, seven hundred . . . I’m a listening, Colonel. You were saying something about this being a scouting party.”

“That’s right. Just scouts, I’m 90 percent sure. . . .”

Felix watched some two thousand ants boiling throughout the maze almost underneath him and thought about idiot officers and running away.

Users Review

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