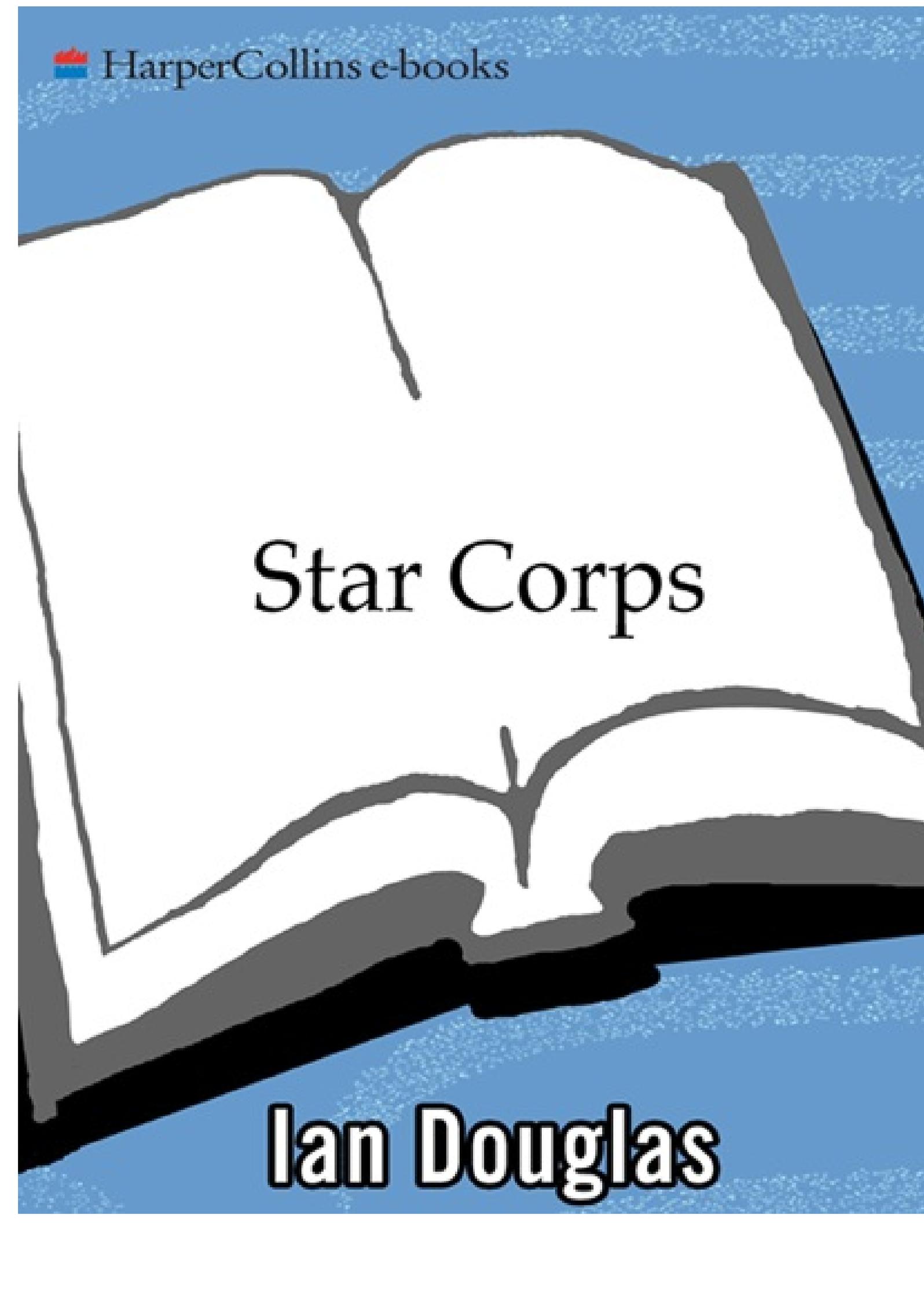




HarperCollins e-books



Star Corps

Ian Douglas

Book One of
The Legacy Trilogy

Star Corps

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*Firebase Frog
New Summer
Ishtar, Llalande 21185 IID
72:26 hours Local Time*

Master Sergeant Gene Aiken leaned against the sandbag barricade and stared out across the Saimi-Id River. Smoke rose from a half-dozen buildings, staining the pale green of the early evening sky. Marduk, vast and swollen, aglow with deep-swirling bands and storms in orange-amber light, hung immense and sullen, as ever just above the western horizon. The gas giant's slender crescent bowed up and away from the horizon where the red sun had just set; its night side glowed with dull red heat as flickering pinpoints, like twinkling stars, marked the pulse and strobe of continent-size lightning storms deep within that seething atmosphere.

The microimplants in Aiken's eyes turned brooding red dusk to full light, while his battle helmet's tactical feed displayed ranges, angles, and compass bearing superimposed on his view, as well as flagging thermal and movement targets in shifting boxes and cursor brackets.

The sergeant studied Marduk's blood-glow for a moment, then looked away. At his back, with a shrill whine of servomotors, the sentry tower's turret swiveled and depressed, matching the movements of his head.

He could hear the chanting and the drumming, off to the east, as the crowds gathered at the Pyramid of the Eye. It was, he thought, going to be a very long night indeed.

"How's it going, Master Sergeant?"

Aiken didn't turn, not when he was linked in with the sentry. His battle feed had warned him of Captain Pearson's approach.

"All quiet on the perimeter, Captain," he replied. "Sounds like the Frogs're pretty riled up down in the 'ville, though."

"Word just came through from the embassy compound," Pearson said. "The rebel abos have seized control in a hundred villages. The 'High Emperor of the Gods' is calling for calm and understanding from his people." The way he said it, the title was a sneer.

Abos, abs, aborigines; Frogs, or Froggers. All were terms for the dominant species of Ishtar... ways of dehumanizing them.

Which was a damned interesting idea when you realized how *not* human the Ahannu were.

"Do you think they'll attack us?"

"It could happen. The ambassador still hasn't answered Geremelet's ultimatum."

A gossamer flitted in the ruby light, twisting and shifting, a delicate ribbon of iridescence. Aiken lifted the muzzle of his 2120 and caught the frail creature, watching it quiver against the hard black plastic of the weapon's barrel in bursts of rainbow color. Other gossamers danced and jittered in the gathering darkness, delicate sparkles of bioluminescence.

"They're not talking about...surrendering, are they?"

"Not that I've heard, Master Sergeant. Don't worry. It won't come to that."

"Yeah. The Marines never surrender."

"That's what they say. Keep a sharp watch. There've been reports of frogger slaves trying to gain entrance at some of the other bases. They might be human, but we can't trust them."

"Aye aye, sir." The Ahannu slaves, descendants of humans taken from Earth millennia ago, gave Aiken the creeps. No way was he letting them through *his* part of the perimeter.

"Good man. Give a yell if you need help."

"You don't need to worry about *that*, sir." He hesitated, looking up at the vast and seething globe of Marduk. "Hey, Captain?"

"What?"

"Some of the guys were having a friendly argument the other night. Is Ishtar a planet or a freakin' moon?"

Pearson chuckled. "Look it up on the local net."

"I did. Didn't understand that astrological crap."

"Astronomy, not astrology. And it's both. Marduk is a gas giant, a planet circling the Llalande sun. Ishtar is a moon of Marduk...but if it's planet-sized and has its own internally generated magnetic field and atmosphere and everything else, might as well call it a planet, right?"

"I guess. Thanks, sir."

Pearson walked off into the gloom, leaving Aiken feeling very much alone. He turned and looked into the southern sky, where the first stars were beginning to appear. Eight light-years from home had not much altered the familiar constellations, though the dome of the sky was strangely canted against the cardinal directions. There was a bright star, however, in the otherwise dim and unremarkable constellation Scutum, not far from the white beacon of Fomalhaut. Aiken might not know astronomy from astrology, but he'd pulled downloads enough to know what he was looking at now.

Sol. Earth's sun. As always, the sight of that star sent a small shiver down Aiken's spine. So far away, in both space and time...

Eight point three light-years. Help from home could not possibly arrive in time.

*Giza Complex
Kingdom of Allah, Earth
0525 hours Zulu*

The trio of TAV Combat Personnel Carrier transports came in low across the Mediterranean Sea, avoiding the heavily populated coastal areas around El Iskandariya by crossing the beach between El Hammam and El Alamein. Skimming the Western Desert at such low altitudes that their slipstreams sent rooster tails of sand exploding into the pale predawn sky, the TAVs swung sharply south of the isolated communities huddled along the Wadi El Natrun, dumping velocity in a series of weaving banks and turns. Ahead, silhouetted against the brightening eastern horizon and the lights of Cairo, their objective rose like three flat-sided mountains above the undulating dunes.

The defenders would know that something was happening; even with stealth architecture, the three transatmospheric vehicles had scorched their radar signatures in ion reentry trails across the skies of Western Europe as they'd descended from suborbit, and the mullahs of the True Mahdi had been expecting something of the sort. The only question was how long it would take them to react.

Captain Martin Warhurst, CO of Bravo Company, sat hunched over in his travel seat in the rear of CPC Delta's red-lit troop compartment, crowded torso to armored torso with the men and women of 1st Squad, First Platoon. There were no windows in the heavily armored compartment, no viewscreens or news panels, but a data feed painted a small, brightly colored image within his Helmet Data Overlay, showing the outside world as viewed through a camera in the TAV's blunt nose.

There wasn't a lot to see, in fact—abstract patterns of light and darkness wheeling this way and back with the TAV's approach maneuvers. The area beyond the Giza complex, along the west bank of the Nile, was brightly lit. The extensive archeological digs behind the Sphinx and between the two northern pyramids, those of Khufu and Khafre, were bathed in harsh spotlights reflected from aerostats hovering high above the ground-based beam projectors.

He knew the mission orders, knew the lay of the land and the location of the company's objectives, but it was almost impossible to make sense of what he was seeing on his HDO display. Balls of yellow and red light floated up from the ground—fire from enemy antiaircraft positions. Colored lines and symbols glowed among alphanumeric identifying targets, way points, ranges, and bearings. His cranialink provided analysis, based on data jacked through from the CPC's combat computer. He could see the area marked as the platoon's drop-off point, midway between the Sphinx and Khafre's pyramid.

“Captain Warhurst,” the phlegmatic, female voice of the TAV's AI pilot said in his helmet receiver. “Thirty seconds. Hot LZ.”

“I see it,” Warhurst replied. His grip tightened on his weapon, a General Electric LR-2120 Sunbeam pulse laser, with its M-12 underbarrel 20mm RPG launcher and data hotlink to his Mark VI

armor. He'd been in the Marines for six years and made captain two years ago, but this would be his first time in combat, his first hot drop, his first time in command with a live enemy.

God, don't let me screw it up...

The TAVs made a final course adjustment, shrieking low above the sands between the middle and southern pyramids, their dead-black hulls slipping through crisscrossing targeting radar beams like ghosts, evading hard locks. Air brakes unfolded like ungainly wings as their noses came up, and billows of sand exploded from the hard-driving plasma thrusters arrayed at wing roots and bellies.

"Hold on," the AI's voice said, as deceleration tugged at Warhurst's gut and the steel deck tilted sharply beneath his booted feet. "We're going in."

"Hang onto your lunches, boys and girls," he called over First Platoon's comm channel. "We're grounding!"

A jolt...a moment of suspense and silence...and then another, harder jolt as the TAV decelerated on shrieking thrusters to a slow-drifting hover. With a shrill whine of hydraulics, the first CPC was extruded from the side of the TAV's fuselage on unfolding davits as raw noise banged and shrieked inside the sealed troop compartment. Plenum thrusters already spooling howled now as all four onboard hovercraft personnel carriers swung free of the floating TAV and detached their cables. Sand blasted around the hovercraft as they floated half a meter above the surface, skittering sideways to clear the overhang of their huge, black transport while the TAV engaged full thrusters and rose clear of the drop zone. "Good luck, First Platoon," the AI pilot's voice announced.

"We're clear of the TAV, Captain!" Lieutenant Schulman, the CPC commander, yelled over the vehicle's comm system. Hammer blows clanked and pinged and sang from the hull outside. They were taking small-arms fire. "Objective in sight, range two-three-five. Moving!"

"Roger that!" Warhurst's helmet display feed had shifted automatically to a pickup on the CPC's hull now that the hovercraft was free of its ride. He could see the flash and wink of gunfire in the darkness, the streaking tracers of heavy automatic weapons. Somewhere in the distance a round of H went off with a deep-throated *crump*, briefly lighting the dune shadows nearby. The CPC's turret shrilled as it rotated in its collar above and forward of the troop compartment, and Warhurst felt the steady *thud-thud-thud* of the 50mm autocannon slamming high explosive rounds into an enemy gun position.

The armored Marines remained strapped in their seats, weapons muzzle up between their knees, silent while boiler room noise boomed and banged around them. Once, the CPC lurched heavily to the left as a near miss rocked the hovercraft over on its plenum skirts like a boat listing in heavy seas, but Schulman righted the stubborn, tough-hulled machine and swerved hard as armor-seeking missiles strobed in dazzling cacophony outside.

"Coming up on the drop-off, Captain!" Schulman warned. "Ten seconds!"

"Roger that!" He checked the map on his HDO. They were on target. With a focused thought, he shifted to the platoon freak. "Ten seconds, people! Go to IR!"

With a thought focused through his implant, Warhurst engaged his helmet's infrared overlay, and the red-lit shapes around him faded into gloom, nearly invisible, with only enough heat leakage from joints and peripheral gear to give each Marine in the compartment a faint, ghostly aura.

The hovercraft slewed sideways, and the aft hatch opened up, ramp dropping and shields unfolding to reveal a cold black sky above the grays and midnight blues and black-greens of a chill desert landscape painted in infrared. Warhurst hit the quick release on his harness and was on his feet ducking to step beneath the hatch. "C'mon, Marines!" he shouted. "Ooh-rah!"

In a double line, twelve Marines stormed down the drop ramp and onto the sand as point-defense lasers on the CPC's upper deck tracked incoming mortar rounds and flashed them to metallic vapor. Warhurst raced ahead, conscious only of the press of the Marines around him, of the rattle and pop of weapons fire, the flicker of muzzle flashes in front of him.

He threw himself down on the slope of a dune, scrambling up and forward until he could bring his weapon to bear. The 2120's sighting camera was linked by computer to his helmet display. A red-glowing reticle crosshairs whatever the laser's muzzle was pointed at, together with flickering numbers giving range, bearing, and probable target ID. He took aim at the muzzle flashes fifty meters to his northeast and thumbed the lever to engage his RPG autolauncher. He let the weapon's sight record the target—dimly seen shapes of yellow emerging from the inky blue-green backdrop. His computer tagged the guns as teleoperated sentries, but the body heat of a dozen enemy soldiers showed as vague shapes through the dune itself and as pillars of moist heat moving above the sand. Field sensors detected the RF leaked by electrical systems, probably the sentries' motors and power packs.

Good enough. He squeezed the trigger. The boxlike hard plastic case of the weapon vibrated within the grip of his gloves as he loosed a burst of grenades, cycling at twelve rounds per second, fanning eight rounds in a spread along the crest of the sand dune ahead. Accelerated to eight hundred meters per second by the launcher's mag driver, each round unfolded in flight, a tiny ramjet engine kicking on as microvanes steered the projectile toward its chosen target. Like steadily glowing fireflies against the night, the string of ramjet-propelled grenades streaked through the darkness, rising high above the sand dune sheltering the enemy gunners, then angling suddenly and sharply down, detonating behind the ridge in a chain of explosions, each as powerful as the blast from a fist-sized lump of CRX-80.

Shrieks and screams rose from the target area as clouds of sand geysered into the sky, mixed with chunks of plastic, metal, and more grisly debris. A running figure showed briefly at the crest of the ridge; Warhurst thumbed his weapon to laser and triggered a pulse. The target flopped out of sight, but Warhurst wasn't sure whether he'd scored a kill or not.

Explosions continued to thump and boom all around them. The other members of First Platoon had spread out along the dune, laying down a devastating curtain of explosive firepower, driving the enemy gunners to cover.

With a thought, he engaged his helmet's data link with the CPC. *What's up ahead?*

The CPC sensors were far sharper and more observant than those packed in a Mark VII combat armor suit. In addition, Lieutenant Schulman had by now deployed a small army of recon floaters,

marble-sized sensor packs riding their magfields across the battlefield, allowing the CPC computer to build up a coherent and complete view of the entire engagement.

A picture inset opened for him at the top of his helmet's field of view. Symbols moved slowly across a 3D model of the surrounding terrain—green squares, circles, and triangles for Bravo Company's Marines; reds for known hostiles; yellows for unknowns. Dropping the resolution to a hundred meters, he was able to narrow the feed to just First Platoon, checking on their position, then open it again to the entire battlefield.

The sand dune ahead was clear. No living targets, no operating machinery or electrical devices. The flanks were clear as well, as Second and Third Platoons completed their deployments to either side. "First Section, First Platoon, move out!" he called over the platoon's command channel. "Second Section, overwatch."

He was struggling to find the right rhythm of command. In a sense, he was wearing two hats—commander of Bravo Company as well as CO of First Platoon. He couldn't neglect one for the other and needed to stay well-grounded in the scope and depth of the entire battle.

This despite the fact that he was only directly aware of the fighting in his immediate vicinity, at squad level. Even his HDO electronics and satellite-relayed downlinks couldn't entirely lift the eternal fog of war.

Scrambling to his feet, Warhurst jogged across the sand until he reached the explosives-chewed berm. A tangle of bodies lay on the far side—Kingdom militia, from the look of them, in a mix of dark fatigues, chamelecloth, and civilian clothing. A black beret on the sand bore the green and silver crescent flash of the True Mahdi. The weapons were mostly Chinese lasers and Shiite Persian K-90s; the charred and scattered fragments of casings, ammo boxes, and squat tripods were probably the remnants of Chinese Jixie Fangyu automated sentry guns, JF-120s.

The two squads of First Section fanned out along the slope, providing cover as Second Section moved up to join them. Ahead and to the left a blaze of light showed eerily luminescent in Warhurst's IR view. Several man-sized heat sources jogged past the base of a small building with lighted windows. He raised his weapon, switching to RPG and tracking the figures, but a targeting interrupt appeared on his helmet display, blocking the shot. The targets *were* hostiles, no question of that; he'd thought for a moment that his weapon had detected the IFF signatures of other Marines moving into his field of fire. The readout said otherwise. The company's primary objective lay in that direction, just behind the building. His rifle was telling him that a miss might cause unacceptable collateral damage.

Slapping the selector switch back to laser, he triggered a stuttering burst of laser fire on the hostiles, scoring at least one hit. He saw the man beneath the targeting crosshairs flail wildly and go down. The rest appeared to be scattering back across the desert, toward the river.

Advancing again by sections, First Platoon rushed forward, taking small-arms fire from the building but nothing powerful enough to more than ding their armor. A five-ton cargo hovertruck lay on its side half buried in the sand, its turbine box blazing against the darkness. The twelve CPCs drifted slowly among the dunes, laying down intense covering fire. Overhead, the airborne TAVs darted and hovered like immense black dragonflies while the ground units called down fire from the

sky.

Warhurst ran up to the building, a squared-off office module of the sort designed to be moved by truck or floater to where it was needed temporarily. Throwing himself down on the sand, he took aim at the single door. "Come out!" he yelled. At his mental command, his suit's comm suite translated his words into Arabic. "*Yati!*"

Other Marines joined him, and a burst of automatic fire snapped from the module window. Warhurst sent a burst of laser pulses back in reply, burning through the thin plastic walls of the building and eliciting shouts and screams inside.

Someone shouted something in guttural Arabic, and Warhurst's suit translated: "Do not shoot! Do not shoot!" A moment later the door banged open and two KOA troops stumbled out, holding their Chinese lasers above their heads. A moment passed, and two more emerged, supporting a third man, wounded comrade, between them.

"Out! Out!" Warhurst yelled, and Sandoval and Kreuger leaped forward. They pulled the weapons from the prisoners' hands, tossed them aside, and shoved the captives back and away from the building. Michaelson and Smith banged through the door and rolled inside, checking the building, then emerged again to report it secure.

Gunfire crackled in the distance as Second and Third Platoons established a company perimeter. At the building, though, there was momentary peace, an eerie calm. After ordering Kreuger to keep watch on the prisoners, now lying facedown on the sand a few meters away, Warhurst checked in with his other platoon commanders. Both reported the enemy on the run, light casualties, and a secure regimental LZ. Gunnery Sergeant Petro reported that First Platoon now controlled the main objective. The defenders were fleeing...or had been neutralized, one way or another.

Walking out across the desert toward the company's objective, Warhurst opened the command channel. "Backstop, Backstop, this is Sharp Edge One. Objective Stony Man secure."

"Sharp Edge One, Backstop. Roger that. You have some people back here who've been holding their breath ever since you went in."

"Well, don't let them breathe yet. There was heavy—repeat heavy—enemy activity in the LZ." So much for that easy in, easy out they'd promised, Warhurst thought. "Local resistance has been broken, but I don't want to get too fat and happy out here."

Just ahead, Objective Stony Man rose from a broad, steep-walled pit carved into hard-packed sand and limestone bedrock...a long, low, weathered body lying on a pedestal like a crouching lion...the head ancient, secretive, facing east across the black sparkle of the Nile.

The Sphinx of Giza, sentinel of the Great Pyramids, still silent after all these millennia. He could make out a faint, reflective gleam from the plastic shell that had been added a century ago to prevent further erosion.

Warhurst's proximity motion detector chirped at him, and he turned in the indicated direction. A small, gray sphere, marble-sized and pulsing with a superconductor-driven magnetic induction field,

was moving left to right ten meters away. He brought his weapon up, but his targeting interrupt cut in. The object IFFed as a Net News Network remote camera.

Damn, he thought, Triple N, as usual, had better intelligence than the Pentagon. How the hell had they picked up on the Giza op so quickly?

He considered overriding the cutouts and bringing the camera down. Troops in the field had the right to do so if a wandering news camera might reveal positions or movements to the enemy. In fact the mullahs across the Nile in Cairo were probably watching live Triple N news coverage at that moment. He resisted a comic-relief impulse to wave.

Still, the networks were generally pretty good about keeping their equipment back from the immediate front lines, if only because those flying robotic eyes were damned expensive and tended to draw fire. If newsies were around, it was a good sign that the enemy wasn't. Anyway, the one he'd seen was traveling at a pretty good clip, heading toward the river. He let it go.

Warhurst returned his attention to the Sphinx once more. After a moment's thought, he slung his weapon, then reached up and unsnapped the catches on his combat helmet. He wanted to see that ancient wonder with unaugmented eyes.

The light surprised him and made him blink. The sky was bright and pale blue, only minutes from sunrise. The Sphinx continued to stare at the eastern horizon, as though patiently waiting for yet another in a chain of three million dawns.

He turned then, facing west, and caught sight of a glorious panorama—the three pyramids rising above the Giza Plateau; the nearest, Khafre's, just two hundred meters away. The upper half of each glowed a brilliant orange-yellow, bathed in light from a sun still below the horizon; the lower halves were still gray with night shadow.

Soldiers! Forty centuries look down upon you! So, it was said, Napoleon had addressed his men in 1798, just before the Battle of the Pyramids. Those enigmatic, artificial mountains had seen more than their share of blood upon the sand already.

Stuttering automatic gunfire punctuated that thought. It sounded like Cooper and Third Platoon were slugging it out with the locals near the base of Khufu's pyramid. He could hear the radio chatter in his earclip speaker.

“Shooters! Shooters on the pyramid, north side!”

“Roger that. I've got 'em.”

“Haley! Wokowski! Circle left!”

“North side clear!”

The fighting was dying down...but this had only been the opening round. The angry mobs occupying the Giza Plateau had retired as usual last night to the comfort and security of Cairo, north and across the Nile, but they would be back as soon as they realized that the UFR/USA had intervened in the crisis militarily, and they would have Mahdi Guards and crack Saladin with them. The Marines

had seized the plateau just west of the Nile; now they would have to hold it.

Warhurst didn't know why the Marines were there, and frankly, he didn't care. Scuttlebutt had it that KOA was threatening to shut down the archeological digs in and around Giza and evict all foreign xenoarcheologists, but the premission briefing had stressed only that hostile forces in the area around the Sphinx and the Great Pyramids—including both regular troops and large numbers of poorly armed militia—were threatening vital American interests in the region and needed to be neutralized...*without* causing collateral damage to the monuments, archeological digs, and foreign personnel in the area. The three TAVs bearing First, Second, and Third Platoons of Bravo Company, 3rd Marines, had lifted off from Runway Bravo at Camp Lejeune just forty minutes ago, traversing the Atlantic south of Greenland on a great circle suborbital flight that had brought them down over Egypt. More troops—2nd Regiment's Alfa, Charlie, and Delta Companies—were on the way; Bravo Company was tasked merely with clearing the LZ and securing the perimeter.

He hoped the relief force came fast. Right now they were terribly exposed—eighty-four Marines, twelve lightly armored CPCs, and three TAVs, holding a few hundred hectares of sand and stone monuments that just hours ago had been swarming with screaming, religious-fanatic mobs.

And those mobs would be back. Guaranteed.

In the east the sun flared above the flat horizon, an explosion of golden light illuminating the dunes and casting long, undulating shadows that filled each depression and indentation in the sand. Warhurst settled his helmet back over his head, resealing the latches.

The counterattack, when it came, would come soon and from the direction of Cairo, fourteen kilometers to the northeast.

*Esteban Residence
Guaymas, Sonora Territory
United Federal Republic, Earth
1055 hours PT*

John Garroway Esteban relaxed in the embrace of his sensory couch, opening himself to the images flooding through his mind. Gunfire snapped and crackled in the distance, as a mob of swarthy men in a mix of military uniforms and civilian clothing swarmed across a bridge, some in trucks or cargo floaters, most on foot. The news anchor's voice-over described the scene as data windows opened with sidebar data. LIVE FROM CAIRO floated in blue letters above the confused and chaotic panorama.

“Demonstrations began in Cairo three days ago,” the anchor was saying, “when the Mahdi declared that the monuments of Giza existed to declare God's glory and that attempts to excavate them in order to prove extraterrestrial influences in ancient human affairs were blasphemous and, therefore, illegal under the religious laws of the Kingdom of Allah. All archeological excavations in Egypt were ordered halted when—”

With a focused thought, John shifted feeds. *Show me the Marines.*

It felt as though he were drifting above the desert. It was mid-morning, and men in chamelearm almost indistinguishable from the sand around them crouched in holes scratched into the shelter of a

dune. Robot sentries, solitary pylons capped by laser turrets, scanned the horizon, as an American flag fluttered in the breeze from a makeshift pole. In the background the scarred and age-smoothed face of the Sphinx looked over the desert, and behind it rose the golden apex of one of the pyramids. A velvety black, stub-winged aircraft circled overhead. “*Silim*,” he whispered, an Ahannu word currently in vogue with the xenophilic set, meaning “good” or “with it.”

“Just before dawn this morning,” the narrator said, “elements of the 3rd Marine Division were suborbited into Giza, neutralizing local forces and setting up a defensive perimeter, establishing what President LaSalle called ‘a safe zone to protect both American and Confederation interests in the region.’”

For minutes more, he took in the scenes relayed from the battlefield, views of American Marines crouched under cover, of robotic fliers patrolling sandy wastes, of a team of Confederation archeologists debarking from a transatmospheric lander and being escorted by Marines to the base of the Great Pyramid.

The scene blurred and shifted, and John found himself sitting in a folding chair in the White House Rose Garden. President LaSalle stood behind a podium a few meters away, her face drawn and tired, as though she’d been up all night. “One of my predecessors,” she said, “called the U.S. Marines the Navy’s police force. In fact, for the past 150 years they have been the *President’s* police force, the first of this nation’s military forces to be deployed to any spot on the globe where our vital interests are being threatened. I did not make the decision to deploy our young men and women to this region lightly. Ongoing excavations at Giza are in the process of uncovering remarkable discoveries of inestimable value in understanding our past and the nature of repeated extraterrestrial interventions upon this world of ours thousands of years ago. It is vital to all of us that these discoveries remain intact, that they not fall into the hands of radical religious extremists....”

For John, it was as though he were sitting right there with the reporters, listening to the President’s speech. The clarity and realism of the noumenon’s sensory input were nearly as sharp as real life. His implant was an expensive, high-end set, with almost two thousand protein processor nodes grown from microscopic nanoseeds scattered throughout his cerebral cortex and clustered within the nerve bundles of the corpus callosum. His father had insisted on a top-of-the-line Sony-TI 12000 Series Two Cerebralink, complete with social interactive icon selection, high-speed interfaces, emotional input, and multiple net search demons, and for once John was happy that his father was who and what he was, able to pull that much thrust. The 12000 was an executive model, the sort of cranialink nanohardware favored by high-powered CEOs and techers, light-years beyond what the other kids had had for schoolinks.

John was eighteen and well into his first year of online university work. Carlos Jesus Esteban was determined that his son would get his degree in business management. John knew that his father might differ with him about his future career, but at least—

A yellow light winked against the upper right corner of the news window in John’s mind. *Shit!*

He mindclicked the link, closing the window, but the warning program he’d written for his Sony-TI simply wasn’t fast enough to beat the parental insertion. The window froze before it collapsed completely, then expanded again to show President LaSalle caught in foolish-looking mid-word.

His father's noumetric icon exploded into his consciousness, a mustached giant, vast and stern, in a violet business-smartsuit, with lightning flickering about his brow. "What the hell are you doing?" The elder Esteban's voice was like thunder, and John, out of long-polished habit, cringed, then flared back.

"This is *my* feed!"

"You think so, smart kid? *I* bought you that fancy nanoware, and I won't have you nouming that damned political pornography. Not as long as you're in *my* house!"

The image of President LaSalle winked out, and John floated alone in cyberspace with his father. He tried to adjust his own icon presentation so he felt less like a tiny satellite orbiting a planetary giant, but he found the mental input controls beyond his reach. His father was running his noumenal feed now.

Pretty soon I'll be able to noum what I want to. The thought came to mind unbidden.

Somehow—could his father *do* that?—Esteban caught the thought or its echo. "What do you mean by *that* crack?" his father said. "Where do you think you're going?"

John felt the shifting cybercurrents of moving data packets. Damn! His father was sifting through his files. If he found out—

"What are you hiding, *muchacho*? Huh? What do you have in here?"

Abruptly, desperately, John mindclicked and severed the link. He sat once again in his sensory couch, the familiar surroundings of his home E-room around him. He lay there for a moment, breathing hard. Damn, damn, *damn* his father! These encounters always left him shaking, weak, and feeling violated. Just because his father felt that he had the right to monitor everything that he did on the net...

Sometimes that translated as the right to monitor everything that he thought, and to John, that blatant invasion of privacy, self, and boundaries was as personal and as direct as a slap across the face.

If his father was angry at him for following Triple N's coverage of the Egyptian crisis, he would have been absolutely furious to learn that in a few days' time his son would be leaving home for good.

Tough, he thought. John Garroway Esteban had been a free agent since turning eighteen three months ago. For much of his life he'd dreamed about being a Marine, ever since his mother had told him about her ancestors, the Garrows, and the roles they'd played in wars from Korea to Mexico.

Soon he would be a Marine himself, and he could kick off the mud of this damned planet and begin to see the worlds.

Silim!...

*Marine Planetary Base
Mars Prime, Mars
1914 hours Zulu*

Some 210 million kilometers from John Esteban's E-center musings, Colonel Thomas Jackson Ramsey—"TJ" to his friends—touched the announce pad at the doorway to the office of his commanding officer. The door slid open in response. "General Cassidy? Reporting as ordered, sir."

"Enter," William Cassidy said without looking up from his work station.

Ramsey entered, centering himself on the hatch, hands clasped stiffly at his back. He didn't know why he'd been summoned here. He didn't think he was in trouble, but with Brigadier General Cassidy—a tough, no-nonsense character with dark mahogany skin, silver hair, and a hard-ass attitude reputed to curdle milk at fifty meters—you never knew.

"At ease, at ease," Cassidy said after a moment. He pulled the link circlet from his head and tossed it aside on the desk, then rubbed his eyes. "Drag up a chair."

Ramsey floated a glider chair across the deck and anchored it with a thought. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

"Yes, damn it. You've got new orders."

Ramsey's eyebrows lifted themselves toward his hair line. "Sir? I've only been here eight months." The usual length of off-world deployments was two years.

"I know. And I'm going to hate like hell to lose you." Cassidy gave him a sidelong look. "What's your famsit?"

Curiouser and curiouser. A Marine's family situation was only raised for offworld deployments. "No current contract, sir. I had one before I shipped out for Mars." Cheryl hadn't been willing to wait for him, and he couldn't say he blamed her. It still hurt, though....

"Any kids?"

"No, sir. Do I take it that I'm being reassigned out-Solar, General?"

"I guess you could say that. It's volunteers only, and it's long term. *Very* long term. But it's carrying a Career Three."

"Goddess! Where are they sending me?"

"That," Cassidy said, "is classified. They won't even tell me. But they want you back on Earth so they can talk to you about it. Open up and I'll pass you what I have."

Ramsey uplinked to the local netnode with a coded thought and tuned to the general's channel. Information flickered through his awareness, resolving itself into stark words hanging before his mind's eye. There wasn't much.

FROM: USMCSPACCOM, QUANTICO, VIRGINIA

TO: THOMAS JACKSON RAMSEY, COLONEL, USMC HQ DEPOT USMC MARS PRIME

FROM: DWIGHT VINCENT GABRIOWSKI, MAJGEN, USMC

DATE: 2 JUN 38

SUBJ: ORDERS

YOU ARE HEREBY REQUIRED AND DIRECTED TO REPORT TO USMC SPACCOM WITH YOUR COMMAND CONSTELLATION, DELTA SIERRA 219, FOR IN-PERSON BRIEFING AND POSSIBLE VOLUNTARY REASSIGNMENT.

THE IP PACKET *OSIRIS* (CFT-12) WILL BE MADE READY TO TRANSPORT COMMAND CONSTELLATION DELTA SIERRA 219 TO USMC SPACEPORT CAMP LEJEUNE, DEPARTING MARS PRIME NO LATER THAN 1200 HOURS LT 3 JUNE 2138, ARRIVING CAMP LEJEUNE SPACEPORT NO LATER THAN 9 JUNE 2138.

OFFERED MISSION REQUIRES FAMSIT CLASS TWO OR LOWER. RECENT CHANGES IN INDIVIDUAL FAMSITS SHOULD BE UPLINKED TO USMC SPACCOM PRIOR TO SCHEDULED DEPARTURE.

OFFERED MISSION ASSIGNMENT CARRIES CAREER THREE RATING.

SIGNED: D. V. GABRIOWSKI

This, Ramsey reflected, would not be an ordinary duty reassignment. Career Three meant a *big* boost to his career track...the equivalent of a major combat-command assignment or a long-term independent command, possibly both. The famsit requirement could only mean a long deployment, a couple of years at least.

Where the hell were they sending him, Europa?

Which reminded him...

“They want my whole constellation to go Earthside with me,” he said.

“I know Captain DeHavilland and Sergeant Major Tanaka are at Cydonia,” General Cassidy replied. “A C-5 has already been dispatched to bring them in. The rest of them are here at Prime, aren’t they?”

“Actually, sir, I was thinking of Cassius. He was seconded to Outwatch when I was assigned here. He’s been on Europa for eight months.”

“I don’t have any information about your sym, Colonel. But this is damned hot. I would imagine that Quantico has already made provisions to bring him back as well.”

If so, this assignment *was* hot, hotter than a class-four solar flare. The Corps was not in the habit of casually shuttling command constellations from Mars to Earth just for a briefing...and sure as Chesty Puller was a devil dog, it wasn’t in the habit of ferrying a lone AI symbiont all the way back from Outwatch duty in the Jovians.

Where were they being sent?

He had a pretty good idea already—there weren't that many possibilities—and the thought both thrilled and terrified....

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