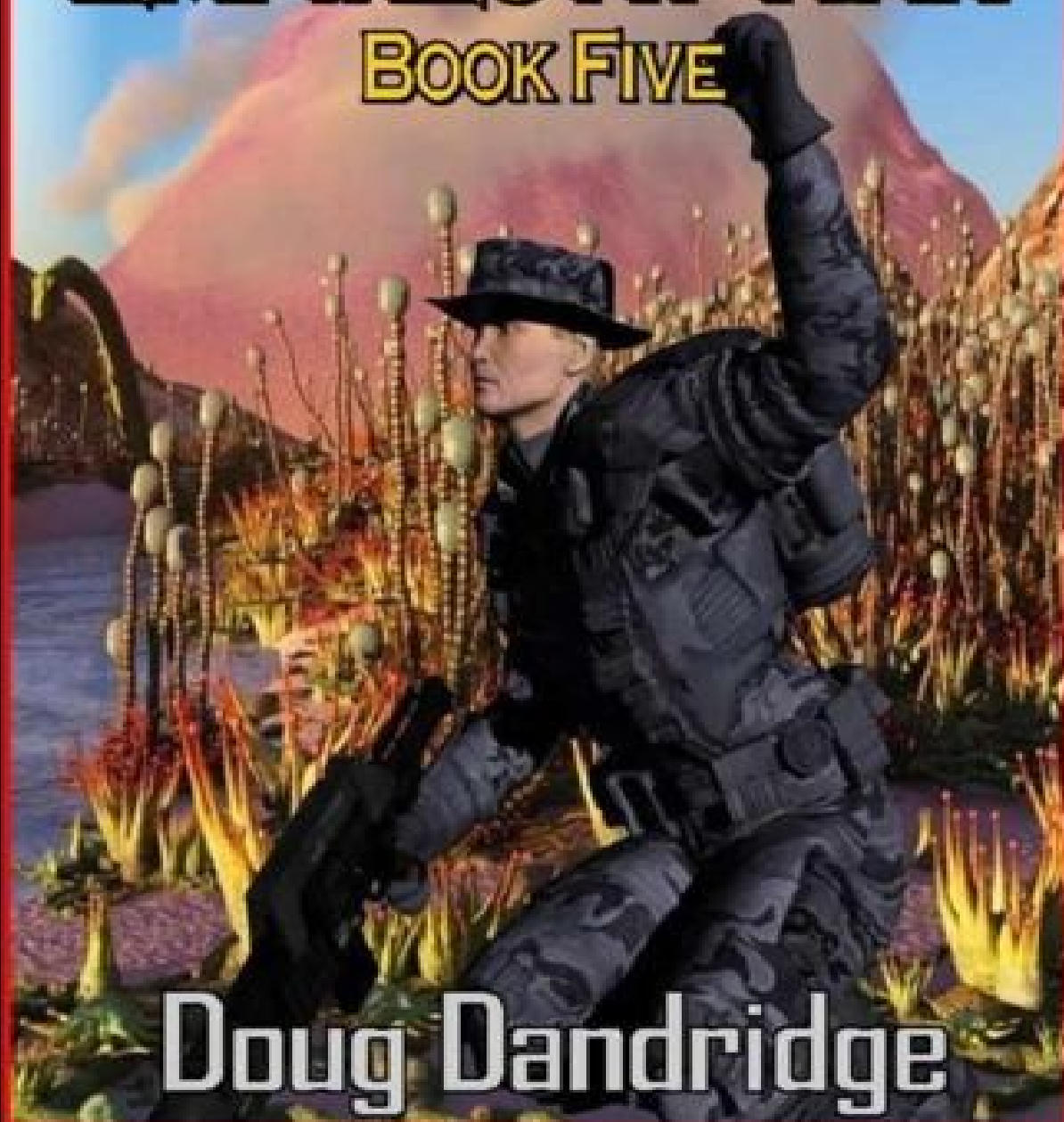


EXODUS

RANGER

EMPIRES AT WAR

BOOK FIVE



Doug Dandridge

Exodus: Empires at War:

Book 5

Ranger

by

Doug Dandridge

She climbed the last meter, looking over the rocks while exposing as little of her face as possible. There were now three people at the entrance, all male. A fourth male was returning from the spring, a full water container in his hand. She studied the men, still not sure what to make of them. That they were using the refuge her family put together went without question. That would not be a problem, since her family had not come, but she still needed it.

She saw another man come out of the cave, this one in partial light battle armor, the type that planetary militia wore. That gave her a bit more hope. If they were militia they would surely have an officer, or at least an NCO, in charge. With that thought she scrambled up the last bit of slope and rose into sight.

The men at the cave all jumped and pointed, and some weapons made their appearance. They calmed a bit as they saw that she was just a child. She didn't like some of the looks that came across the faces of the group. They made her distinctly uncomfortable.

"Where the hell did you come from, girl?" asked the oldest looking of the men, one wearing the torso covering of light battle armor and a partial helmet.

"From the jungle," she said, her eyes looking for a way out, just in case this had been as bad a decision as it was now looking. She looked back at the man. "This place was my family's. We set it up when the aliens came."

"And where is this family of yours?"

"They didn't make it. Are you militia? My father is a reserve officer. Is there any way you can contact him?"

"We were militia," said the man with a sneer. "Until those sons of bitches wanted to throw us away trying to slow them down, for no damned reason. Now we're on our own."

Deserters, she thought with a shudder. *What the hell did I get myself into?*

"How old are you, girl?" asked another of the men, moving toward her.

"Ten," she said, lying, hoping that they would decide she was too young for whatever game they wanted to play.

"You look a lot older than that, girl," said the older man who seemed to be in charge. "We don't have any women here. And you sure could fill the bill."

Thoughts of gang rape started to go through her head, and she started to back toward the plateau where she had climbed onto the small plateau.

"You stop right there, girl," said the man, pulling a pistol from the holster at his side. "We won't hurt you, not really. You play with us, we'll make sure you're protected and fed."

Rebecca knew about sex. She had learned about it in biology courses. And she knew she was too young, and didn't want to have anything to do with it at her age. She would become a sex slave to these men, all of them using her whenever they wanted. Her internal nanites would keep her from getting pregnant, and protect her from disease. Still, the idea of being used by these deserters was not her first choice, or her last.

"Stop," said the man, pointing the pistol at her. "If you take another step I will shoot you."

And he doesn't know I'm wearing a military class survival suit, she thought, looking at the pistol, then at the nearby rocks. *They also don't know what kind of weapon I have.*

With that last thought she dove for the ground. Something smacked into her suit, which went rigid from the impact. Rolling over she came to a stop behind the rocks and pulled her particle beam pistol from its holster. A flick of her finger and the weapon's accelerator started humming and whining.

“Come out of there and you won’t be hurt,” yelled the leader. “Make us come for you and it will go hard for you.”

I can imagine, she thought, checking the pistol and seeing that the proton charge was up to full acceleration.

One man came around the rocks and caught the particle beam in the chest. The near-relativistic particles ripped into his body and vaporized kilograms of tissue, dropping him into a smoking heap on the ground.

Rebecca stared at the man for a moment. She had never killed a human. She had of course killed a Ca’cadasan, and many animals, but never another human being. She thought that she should have felt shock. Instead it was rage that was the dominant emotion. Rage that these people had made her a killer of her own kind.

“Fuck you,” she yelled out, looking around the rock and leveling her weapon at the cave mouth. A half dozen shocked looking men stood there, some pointing weapons her way. A couple fired, the worst thing they could have done.

The girl pulled the trigger on the pistol and held it down, swinging the beam across the mouth of the cave. Three men went down with catastrophic wounds while the others ran into the cave. The beam tore into the rock, shattering large pieces that fell into the mouth.

“This is mine,” she yelled, still holding the trigger down even when the weapon stopped firing. “I will be back, and I want you gone.”

She wasn’t sure that was the truth, but in her anger she wanted to panic them. She looked down at the pistol, afraid that she had broken something, and was relieved to see that the blinking light indicated that the proton pack was empty. She only had one left, and she cursed herself for a fool for letting her anger rule her.

Rebecca slipped back over the lip of the plateau and started down the slope. Her shoulder blades cringed at the thought that the men might come out of the cave and shoot at her from above. Her suit might protect her from a few shots, but with enough there was sure to be a hit to her head, or penetration of the suit.

She reached bottom without incident, saying a prayer of thanks before she realized what she was doing. Stopping for a moment, she looked back up at the mountain, wondering what she was going to do now that the refuge was closed to her. *I could wait and see if they leave*, she thought, rejecting the idea as soon as she had it. They might never leave, and she wasn’t sure she could force herself into another firefight. Having to fire back was one thing. Starting a battle in which she intended to kill other humans was quite another.

Rebecca shook her head, knowing that waiting here was not the answer. But where to from here? She checked the map and saw that there were several villages and a minor town within five days walk. There was no guarantee that they were intact, or that she would be able to shelter there if they were. Seeing no other option, she took a compass reading, set her location on the inertial navigation device, and started on her way.

Dedication

This novel is dedicated to writer Kevin J Anderson, whom I met at Dragon*Con 2013. You are an inspiration to me, showing this writer that the future is full of unlimited promise to those willing to work for it.

Contact me at BrotherofCats@gmail.com
Follow my Blog at <http://dougandridge.com>
Follow me at [@BrotherofCats](https://twitter.com/BrotherofCats)

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Please respect the hard work of this author. If you found this book for free on a pirate site, please visit Amazon and buy a copy of your own. I feel that I charge a reasonable price for this work.

For more information on the Exodus Universe, visit <http://dougandridge.net> for maps, sketches, and other details of this work.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank all of my fans, especially those who sent emails and commented on blogs about how much they enjoyed the first four books of this series. Your kind words gave me the impetus to continue through the not so kind words left in some reviews. A special thanks to Ruth de Jauregui, who helped with the covers on all of the Exodus series. Her changes improved all of the covers.

Note for Fans.

I have received some feedback from fans that stated they preferred space action to ground action. I write both in this series. I felt that Cornelius needed to have a book written about his entry into the world of Special Ops, where he will continue to rise through the war, as early in the series as possible. I have big plans for the boy. That said, the next couple of books in the series will be predominantly space action, which does not mean there will not be some political intrigue and ground combat. Future books will focus on whatever aspect of the war I feel needs more development, but all will contain at least some space action.

Books by Doug Dandridge

[Doug Dandridge's Author Page at Amazon](#)

Science Fiction

The Exodus Series

[Exodus: Empires at War: Book 1](#)

-

[Exodus: Empires at War: Book 2](#)

[Exodus: Empires at War: Book 3: The Rising Storm.](#)

[Exodus: Empires at War: Book 4: the Long Fall.](#)

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Cast of Characters

Cornelius Walborski: Former farmer on planet Sestius, where he distinguished himself by killing a score of larger, stronger Ca'cadasans in the jungle. Holder of the Imperial Medal of Heroism and currently a soldier in the Imperial Army.

Sean Ogden Lee Romanov: Sean I, Emperor of the New Human Empire after the assassination of his parents and older brothers. Supreme ruler of the Empire in time of War.

Doctor Jennifer Conway: The Royal Consort, Sean's lover, as well as his personal physician.

Rebecca Goldman: Twelve year old resident of planet *Azure* in Sector Four, the most active sector of the war.

Benjamin Goldman: Rebecca's six year old brother.

Captain Joseph Goldman: Rebecca and Benjamin's father. A civilian Engineer on *Azure* with a reserve commission in the Imperial Army.

Sergeant Devera Sutton: Imperial Army Physical Therapist.

Prime Hunt Leader Sybalis: Leader of the Maurid contingent to the Ca'cadasan Ground Force on *Azure*.

Ted Stephenson: Retired Naval Commando and Engineer, friend of Joseph Goldman, and a tracker and hunter in the jungles of *Azure*.

Brigadier General Walther Jodel: Preacher. Legend in the Imperial Army Ranger Community, and friend and mentor to Cornelius.

Doctor Lucille Yu: Director of the *Donut* Project.

Sergeant Chantamura: Ranger Team Leader.

Staff Sergeant McAllister: Ranger Squad Leader.

Sergeant First Thorwaldson: Ranger Platoon Sergeant.

Lieutenant Schwarz: Ranger Platoon Leader.

Lt. Colonel Su: CO, First of the Three Eighty-Seventh Rangers.

And many other minor characters.

Prologue

“To put it bluntly, your Majesty, they are beating the hell out of us,” said former CNO Gabriel Len Lenkowski. “Until we can concentrate a large enough force to oppose them in Sector Four, we will continue to get beat.”

“What about the new technologies?” asked the young leader of the New Terran Empire, Sean Ogden Lee Romanov. “What about the new ships coming off the line? Most of those will be hyper VII. That should bring us up to parity. And the wormholes should give us an advantage.”

“All very true, your Majesty,” agreed the Grand High Admiral of the Imperial Fleet, at least for the moment, until he took his new assignment as the head of the new Battle Fleet. “But new tech takes time to integrate, and it doesn’t always work as advertised, at least not at first. And we still have hyper VI ships coming off the docks. Even our hyper VIIs won’t have the same capabilities as the ships.”

“So what about the wormholes?” asked Sean, looking at the faces at the table one by one.

“We don’t have enough of them to make that much of a difference, yet,” said Lady Hannah, the Minister of War.

Sean looked at her intently. Lady Hannah had come up through the ranks in the Imperial Marines, unwilling to use her social rank to get ahead. She had retired as a Lt. General before getting into politics, and from there to the Cabinet. As such she was much respected by the military.

“Eventually, we will have enough of them to really use them to their advantages. Right now they give us some advantages with long term com, and moving personnel from one place to another.”

“And what about the Stealth/Attack ships?”

“Those are working marvelously with their wormhole heat sinks and com,” said the Minister of War. “But again, we just don’t have enough of them. There are a hundred programs demanding wormholes, and we don’t have enough for all of them.”

“Any thoughts, Mishori,?” asked the Emperor of Grand Marshal Mishori Yamakuri, the Army Chief of Staff.

“There’s nothing much we can do, your Majesty, except reinforce those systems most likely to be attacked,” said the small head of the Imperial Army. “Unfortunately, until the Fleet gets us where we can launch invasions, we are pretty much helpless to do anything else.”

“And that won’t come for some years, if ever,” said Lenkowski, frowning over at his Army counterpart.

“Not meaning any disrespect,” said the Grand Marshal, bowing to the CNO. “But it is a fact we will be fighting a defensive battle for quite some time.”

“I want to hit them on the planets they’ve already taken,” said Sean, turning all the attention in the room back to himself. “The people on *Sestius* told me that they are not as good of ground warriors as we are. So that is where we need to hit them.”

“The problem, your Majesty,” said Lenkowski, looking at the others for confirmation, “is getting troops onto those planets. Any ships we tried to send into an occupied system would be destroyed before they could deliver the troops to the planet. And they, meaning the ships, would never get away.”

Sean sat there for a moment, thinking, holding a hand up to let the others know he was not to be

disturbed. A smile crossed his face. "Wormholes," he said.

"But we don't have wormholes on those planets," said Yamakuri, shaking his head.

"Then we need to get them there," said Sean, his smile growing wider. "And I think I know how we can do it."

* * *

"Attention," yelled the Sergeant Major as the commanding officer entered the room.

Christ, thought Brigadier General Walther Jodel, *The Preacher. Never thought I would enter staff meeting again. And as a friggen general.* Preacher looked over the faces of the men looking back at him while they stood at attention. The stances of the soldiers were not the best he had ever seen, but he didn't expect such with men like these. They were Rangers, just like himself, the elite of the elite, and not really into playing the kind of games the regular Army thrived on.

"At ease," he said, walking toward the empty chair at the head of the table. "Take your seats please, gentlemen."

Preacher plopped back into his chair and again studied the faces around the table looking at him. There was a full colonel, four light colonels, five majors and eighteen captains studying him, as well as the senior NCOs of the brigade and all the battalions. The NCOs had the weathered faces of veterans, but to his eyes all of the officers looked like children, even though he knew most were well over thirty.

"May I say, sir," said one of the light colonels, looking Preacher in the eyes, "how honored we are to be under the command of a legend."

"That's very flattering, Colonel Narovicki," said Preacher, his implant tagging the men in his vision. "Unfortunately, that kind of thinking can get you and your men killed. I'm just a man, another officer in this Army. I am enhanced in exactly the same way as the rest of you, which does not make me a God."

"It's just that we have all heard the stories, sir," said Lt. Colonel Hattaway. There were nodding heads all around the table.

"Well, again, forget the stories. I'm not that young Ranger any more. The young men under your command will be making new legends, and I will tell you how to use them.

"I have talked with the new Emperor, on the way back from *Sestius*," said Preacher, trying to ignore the hero worship and get them on track. "We talked about the way me and my young apprentice, and the civilians known as Freeholders, put a hurting on the Cacas in that jungle. He wants to put us to use doing the same thing on other worlds. Tomorrow I will inspect your units in battalion formations. The Sergeant Major will give you the schedule."

Preacher looked around the room and could see a bunch of unasked questions. He looked at Narovicki, who looked like he was about to bust with his withheld question. "Yes, Colonel?"

"How many of the Cacas did you get sir?" asked the light colonel. All the faces looked at him expectantly.

"I got a couple," said Preacher with a smile. "The young man I was with got about twenty of the bastards. It was unbelievable. He had to be the best I've ever seen."

"What was he, sir?" asked Hattaway. "Ranger, Naval Commando or Marine Recon?"

"He was fucking militia, if you could believe that," said Preacher, thinking back on the young man he had met in the jungles of *Sestius*. "He had some experience as a hunter, but that was about it."

"Where is he now, sir?" asked Narovicki.

"He's in Regular Basic, if you can believe that," said Preacher. "He wants to become one of us."

and I think we'll be very lucky if he makes it through training. Otherwise, the regular infantry will g
that killer." *Just keep your shit together, Cornelius*, he thought, picturing the intense young man
his mind. *Just keep it together, and nothing will stop you.*

Chapter One

A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon. Napoleon Bonaparte.

PLANET RUBY, SUPERSYSTEM, MAY 20TH-JULY 20th, 1000.

“One, two, three, four,” sang the men and women as they ran under the desert sun. That globe had just risen above the horizon an hour ago, and it was still cold as shit outside. *Ruby* was already a cold world, the fourth planet out from a K class star that was the fourth body out from the central black hole. And winter was coming.

Sure beats the heat, thought Private First Class Cornelius Walborski, running at the front of his squad of trainees. The gravity was a bit lighter than *Sestius* as well, though sometimes it was hard to tell with all the gear they were loaded down with.

Camp Determination was over eight hundred thousand square kilometers of military reservation, most of it desert, but also with substantial grasslands and some forest. No real jungles, but there was another planet in the system for that kind of training. Determination was a place to train soldiers in the basic military skills they would need to build on, and to toughen them. And toughen them it did. In his two weeks here Cornelius had put on five pounds of muscle, and while still not the strongest man or woman in the platoon, he definitely was the most determined.

The Drill Sergeant looked back at the platoon, his critical eye going over each man and coming to a rest on Walborski. *You're not going to break me, you SOB*, thought the PFC, glancing back at his own squad to make sure that they were all keeping up. He was already somewhat of a celebrity with the Drill Sergeants, having been in more combat than most of them, and being a recipient of the Imperial Medal of Heroism for his part in the resistance on *Sestius*. *Even if I did abandon my unit*, he thought, before falling in with Preacher and becoming a one man wrecking crew in the jungle. Having a pregnant wife to take care of made the desertion an easy decision. Unfortunately she died, right after giving the farmer a son. Now there was no one alive who knew about his indiscretion except for Preacher, and he wasn't talking.

“Bergstroms's started to fall behind again, Walborski,” said the man just behind the PFC.

“Christ,” cursed Cornelius under his breath, jumping out of line and trotting to the back of his squad rank. Sure enough, Michelle Bergstrom was again struggling. She was the smallest person in the platoon, and was always having trouble carrying her weight, much less the equipment they piled her down with. When they got to powered armor training her lack of strength would not make that much difference. Here, it was killing her.

“Come on, Bergstrom,” said Walborski, putting the woman's arm over his shoulder and helping her along. “You can make it.”

“I can't,” complained the woman. “I'm going to fall out.”

“The hell you are,” yelled Cornelius, pulling her along. “You volunteered for this shit, and you are going to make it through.” Walborski looked ahead at the rest of the platoon that was opening the distance. *They need people*, he thought, keeping his own breathing under control as he moved the puffing woman along. *They're going to have to start a draft going soon, but right now the volunteers are flooding the training facilities. But even with a draft they're going to need a lot of people. Millions. Hundreds of millions.*

What to Walborski had been an easy run was now hell, him pulling another trainee along with him. He wondered when the run would be over. Only the Drill Sergeants knew for sure. They called the shots here, not a PFC, no matter his record. He could feel the sweat pouring down his face notwithstanding the cool temperature. *We're going to make it*, he thought. *Just to the next curve in the road*. "We're going to make it, recruit. You hear me?"

The woman nodded her head and kept going. "Just to the next curve in the road," said Cornelius shaking his head to fling the sweat out of his eyes. They reached that curve and kept going. "Just one more, Michelle. Come on. You can make it just one more."

Before they got to that next curve the platoon stopped and people started dropping off to the side of the road. Some fell right on their butts, others walked for a moment to cool down. They were still ten kilometers from the barracks, so Cornelius was sure the morning ordeal was not over yet. After a few minute rest Drill Sergeant Martinez called everyone back into the ranks.

"Forward, march," yelled the Drill Sergeant, and the platoon started to walk forward at a quick pace. "And I don't want to see any of you pussies falling out. This ain't no fun run or hike."

Cornelius kept waiting for the command to double time. He knew he could handle it, but he wasn't so sure of Bergstrom. Nor was he sure that he could continue to carry her along. *It might just be best to let her wash out*, he thought, then shook his head at that notion. His job as squad leader was to look after his people. If he couldn't do it then they would put someone else in the position. Not something he wanted.

"Column left, march," ordered the Drill Sergeant as they came up on a dirt path leading off the road. There were vehicle tracks all through the dirt, showing that this way had already seen much use. The platoon marched for about two kilometers and around a hill side until the red flag with black square in the center as visible.

All right, thought Walborski as he recognized where they were. Maybe not the exact location but the range flag was something that he was familiar with from his time in the militia.

"Today we're going to familiarize you trainees with the basic infantry rifle," said the Range Sergeant as he walked up to the column of troops. "Have any of you ever fired a military class man rifle before?"

Cornelius raised his hand, along with a couple of others that he knew had taken some Militia Scout training in secondary school. Cornelius stared as Drill Sergeant Martinez whispered something in the Range Sergeant's ear. The man's eyes grew wide as he looked at Walborski, then he nodded his head and waved some more range personnel forward.

"You will follow the instructions of the range NCOs to the letter," said the Range Sergeant. "First squad, move to the firing line and receive your weapons."

Cornelius moved up with his squad, taking the position to the far right. Everyone here had already fired the weapons in the simulation chambers, so all knew the drill. But for everyone else in his squad firing a real military class weapon was a first. Walborski took the rifle that a Corporal handed to him, making sure to keep the weapon pointed down range.

"Everyone more to the firing line and assume the prone position."

Cornelius did as ordered and was soon laying down with the rifle into his shoulder.

"Load a magazine into your rifle and set the acceleration for one thousand MPS."

Cornelius loaded and set the weapon with an expert's hand, looking over to see that Bergstrom had performed the maneuver to satisfaction, while some of the others were having trouble seating their magazines or setting their rifles. The range personnel ran from position to position helping the

trainees that needed it while making copious references to the intelligence or ancestry of the people question. The Range Sergeant took a quick look at Cornelius' weapon and nodded.

"On single shot, take the targets that appear under fire. The range is now hot."

Several mag rifles fired, sending their supersonic rounds downrange. Unfortunately, there were no targets yet making an appearance, and those who fired impulsively were again castigated by the range personnel. Cornelius waited patiently, rifle to his shoulder, eye to the iron sight. A man size target rose two hundred meters away and Walborski squeezed his trigger, sending the seven millimeter round into the center of its head. The target fell and another rose, this one a bit to the side at three hundred meters. He sent another round into the head, the target fell, and another rose, this time much closer.

Cornelius glanced to the side and saw that Bennett was also hitting every target, if not in the head, at least at center mass. That could not be said for everyone in the squad. Walborski knew that the real weapons they would carry into battle would be much more accurate, and have various aiming and stabilizing systems that would make them much deadlier. But the idea was to make the soldier as accurate as possible without aids.

Cornelius kept knocking them down, and the Range Sergeant walked by and looked down at the PFC. "You're supposed to be aiming center mass, trainee," said the Sergeant.

"I'm making sure they're dead, Sergeant," said Cornelius. The NCO shook his head and walked away.

The next target to pop up was at five hundred meters. He knocked it down in an instant. Targets kept coming up, the ranges kept increasing, until Cornelius was hitting them through the head at twelve hundred meters.

Then it was the turn of the other squads, as Cornelius and his squad field stripped and assembled their weapons after learning these would be theirs for the rest of Basic. The Range Sergeant approached Walborski after the third squad finished shooting.

"You've a hell of an eye, Walborski," said the Sergeant, smiling. "And I know from your record that you wouldn't flinch if you had to take out an enemy. Have you ever thought of going to sniper school?"

"I want to be a Ranger, Sergeant," said Cornelius, seeing the suggestion as something that might sidetrack him.

"The Rangers need snipers too," said the Sergeant, nodding. "And if you get through Ranger school, sniper school will be a snap."

"Anything that lets me kill Cacas," said Cornelius, staring into space.

"You scare the hell out of me, son," said the Range Sergeant, looking down at his feet, then back up at Cornelius. "And with the shit coming down the pike, that's a good thing. We're gonna need scary bastards for what's coming."

Cornelius reached up and grabbed the chain that hung around his neck under his shirt. His fingers played with the wedding ring on the chain. It had been his. Katlyn's had disappeared with her body. It was the only reminder he had of her, beside their child. And it reminded him of why he hated the aliens, and why it was so important to make them suffer for what they had done.

Air transport took them back to the barracks, where they ate lunch and then did some more time on the simulators. Cornelius liked jacking into the machines, playing the part of an infantryman in combat. The machines sped them through twenty hours of real time simulation in an hour, then switched over to hand to hand for another hour. After that was an hour of real hand to hand, training

the muscles to do what the mind had already mastered.

~~No one wanted to spar with Walborski, so again he found himself sparring with the instructor.~~ The man handled the trainee easily, though Cornelius did get in a few licks from the aggressiveness. He welcomed the bruises he picked up, knowing that sparring with an expert would make him that much better at what he wanted to get better at, killing Cacas.

Before dinner came weight training, after the next in the series of booster nanite shots that were helping to put muscle on all the trainees. Cornelius found himself working out with Private Markheit, the strongest man in the platoon. Cornelius couldn't do the number of reps that the bigger man performed, but he could handle the same amount of weight for fewer repetitions.

After dinner it was more training, including another run and some calisthenics. When it was time for lights out all of the trainees fell into their racks and passed out from exhaustion. All except Walborski, who, like most nights, was still of a restless state of mind despite the physical fatigue. Katlyn was still on his mind, his childhood sweetheart and the love of his life, the mother of his son. Killed by the Cacas on *Sestius*, and still his only reason for living. His only purpose, revenge.

That was the last thought on his mind as he fell into a deep sleep. He had a few dreams, most from the implanted routines the Army used to train their minds even while asleep. He was fighting, stripping a heavy beam weapon when Drill Sergeant Martinez strode into the barracks and knocked the two cans together that roused the soldiers from bed. Cornelius jumped out of his rack ready to face a new day, one more getting him closer to his goal.

* * *

A month into training came their first introduction to powered armor. Cornelius had worn the militia version on *Sestius*, a sorry form of protection thirty years behind what the Army wore. Externally the Mark XII light combat armor was not the newest thing. It was last decade's armor, but with nano-upgrades it was internally as state of the art as any suit in service.

Drill Sergeant Martinez came striding out onto the parade ground wearing the very same armor they were being introduced to. He moved easily, like a man who was wearing a normal nanoweave uniform, and not fifty kilos of armor and servos.

"Most of you will be wearing this form of armor in the near future," said the Drill Sergeant looking over at the standing trainees. "Those of you going on to combat arms training will also be introduced to the other armors, the medium and heavy suits. But for those who are assigned to light infantry units, as well as most supporting roles, this will be the armor you wear. Those of you unfortunate enough to become REMFs may be allowed to work most days sans armor. It would behoove you to make sure that you are up on your skills with this armor. There is no telling when an enemy may force you to don your suits and go into combat. Against our current foe you are very likely to find yourself in a battle situation. Even if you are assigned to a position here in the Supersystem. Even if you are assigned to a position on *Jewel*."

The Drill Sergeant jumped into the air, going high enough to dunk a basketball if a net had been near. He landed and turned back to the trainees. "Without armor, in modern combat you are dead irradiated meat. This armor will give you limited protection against light amp and projectile weapons as well as battlefield radiation. It is still a good idea to not present oneself as a target. Limited protection means just that. A long enough blast from a laser, or a heavy enough round travelling at high enough velocity, and you are dead."

"What about particle beams, Drill Sergeant?" asked one of the trainees with a raised hand.

"The best defense against a particle beam is not to get hit," said Martinez, the mask on his su

lifting and showing his face. "The suit will protect you against a near miss, but a direct hit by a military class particle beam will fry your ass. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Drill Sergeant," yelled the platoon in loud voices, as they had been trained, the hard way to do.

"Now the suit carries its own weight as well as your own, and will allow you to pick up an additional two hundred kilograms. It is incorrect to say that it will double your strength. If you are exceptionally strong it will not double that strength. If you are exceptionally weak," said Martine looking pointedly at Bergstrom, "it might quadruple your strength, or more.

"To me, the most amazing thing about the suit is how it enhances your senses. Hearing range and sensitivity increases, though loud noises will be damped before they get to dangerous levels. Vision range is increased, delving into both the infrared and ultraviolet spectrums, and you can zoom your sight as if your eyes were twenty power lenses. When you are in a hostile environment," the mask came down on the helmet and sealed, "the suit will provide breathing gas. It will also seal punctures, in its skin and in yours, and the autdoc feature will provide medical care, up to and including stasis shots. If you are killed the suit may save your life, allowing for later resurrection. Don't count on that, though. Secession of life functions is never a good thing."

The Drill Sergeant took off in a run, moving much faster than a normal human being. The Drill Sergeant ran around the barracks, then jumped over a bench before coming to a stop in front of the platoon. "Now, I want everyone to get into their suits and we will run the obstacle course. Myself and Drill Sergeant Hazard will check you out before you are allowed to do anything with them. So get in the suits and back into formation. Five minutes trainees. Fall out."

Cornelius took off for the barracks, where the suit cubbies had been installed near their racks. He hit the panel on the front of the cubby and the doors opened, then folded back. Walborski looked over the suit for a moment, his critical eye not finding anything wrong. With a nod of his head he stepped into the suit, remembering the difficulty of strapping on the militia armor that had been his only experience so far with battlefield augmentation.

The suit closed up around him like a second skin, the seams closing to form unitary armor that was difficult to penetrate. The helmet closed around his head, all but the faceplate, which stayed up. His implant linked with the suit and his smile widened as he noticed how much his hearing had improved. He ordered the mask to close with a thought. The dark room was now lit up like a spotlight had been shone into a window. He looked at a spot on the wall and the image jumped out at him of a smudge, so sharp he could make out the fingerprint whorls.

With a yell Cornelius ran out of the barracks, faster than he had ever moved before. He had a urge to continue out into the desert, but a glance at the two Drill Sergeants made him consider the wisdom of that. *They told us to get into formation, and when they say that shit they mean it.* So Walborski went to his position at the lead of his squad and snapped to attention. The suit locked in place, and the PFC felt he could stand there all day, the suit supporting him.

The Drill Sergeants came around and checked their suits. Walborski was glad to see that Michelle Bergstrom passed inspection with ease. *She's a smart woman*, he thought, watching as one of the athletes of the squad failed his once over. Cornelius shook his head as the trooper was made to open his suit and get back in it, then close it up properly. The man was then sent on a run around the barracks as punishment. Many laps around the barracks.

"Should have known you'd get it right, Walborski," said Drill Sergeant Hazard, her sharp eye checking his suit. "You've been in these before?"

“No, Drill Sergeant,” said Walborski in his best parade ground voice. “All I’ve ever been were piece of shit militia rigs.”

“And that’s what you were in when you killed all those Cacas?” asked the Drill Sergeant, his eyes widening.

“Yes, Drill Sergeant, until I had to leave the armor behind.”

“Platoon, right face,” yelled out Martinez. “Forward march. Double time, march.”

The platoon ran in a double time, covering the ground much faster than they could have without the suits. They ran for ten kilometers, reaching the obstacle course that had nearly killed them all weeks past. After forming up they were sent through the course by squads.

Cornelius ran flat out toward the first obstacle, leaping into the air and clearing the three meter wall. He landed at a run at the other side, then took a dozen quick steps and jumped up the five meter wall, gripping the top and pulling himself over. *I could get used to this*, he thought, trying to imagine what the medium and heavy suits would be like.

Next up was the cargo net, and again it was negotiated with the greatest of ease. Cornelius was almost to the top when another suited figure passed him. He recognized Bergstrom’s suit by its diminutive size. Then she dropped down the other side and took off with the grace of one of the deer that lived on the reservation. *Now she’s in her element*, he thought as he went over the top and let himself drop the ten meters to the ground. The suit took up the impact, and he took off, determined to catch the woman.

It normally took a trainee a half an hour to get through the course. Cornelius had done it in little as twenty minutes. The suit took him through in ten minutes.

They played with the light armor for another couple of days, then were back to training with just their own muscles. Bergstrom was once again having problems, but training with the armor seemed to have increased her determination, and she fought through all the obstacles, as did all the rest of the platoon.

Finally the day came they had all been waiting for. Graduation. Everyone stood in formation on the drill field for a final time, the other platoons in the company lined up to their left, while the other companies of the battalion continued down the field.

Cornelius stood at the head of his squad, a position he had held the entire nine weeks of training. He wondered if he would have lasted the regular twelve weeks of training, before it had been shortened so they could get more people quickly through the pipeline. *Of course I would have*, he thought, looking toward the other side of the drill field where new barracks were going up, the expansion of Camp Determination proceeding at breakneck speed.

Every trainee was wearing their dress blues, each with a weapon qualification medal on their left breast. Some had rank on their sleeves, private or PFC stripes. Only one other person had another medal, and Cornelius looked with pride on the Imperial Medal of Heroism he wore around his neck. And much of that pride was that he had been cut no slack due to having that medal. He had wanted to leave it in its box for this ceremony, but had been told in no uncertain terms that it was his, so he would wear it.

As he passed by the reviewing stand the General in charge of the base rendered the hand salute first, observing the protocol that went with the medal. Every other platoon behind him had to salute first.

Normally there was a short leave that came with graduating basic. That also had been dropped due to the contingencies of war. Cornelius was just as happy to get on the transport to another camp across the continent, where he would undergo infantry training, and get him one step closer to home.

goal.

* * *

The Emperor sat with his head in his hands, thinking about what he had just learned from the staff officer. *Over a billion dead*, he thought, looking again at the list of systems in Sector Four that had fallen.

"We've been able to get soldiers into most of those systems," said Grand Marshal Mishori Yamakuri, pointing a finger at the holo map. "The wormholes are working."

"Yeah," said Sean, looking at the map with a concerned expression. "So we're getting more young men and women into the firing line on planets the enemy has already all but taken. But is that benefiting us?"

"We have had a favorable exchange rate so far," said the Army Chief of Staff. "I wish I could report some crushing victories. Unfortunately, I would be lying. But in a war of attrition we are accomplishing what we need to do. Their ground troops are dying, even in the places where we are fighting without control of the orbitals."

"And what do you think we need to put on those planets?" asked Sean, running the casualty figures through his head. "More heavy infantry?" He thought of what he had seen of the Marine heavy infantry on *Sestius*. But of course they had controlled the orbitals there. The medium infantry on the planet had fought hard, but had still had its head handed to it, due to the fact that the enemy had air and space superiority.

"I think we need more special ops forces," said the Army Chief of Staff. "Rangers from my service. Naval Commandos and Marine Recon from my sister service." Mishori nodded toward Grand High Admiral Sondra McCollum, the CNO. "We need soldiers who can strike quickly and quietly, while not attracting undue attention from above."

"So get those people where we need them," said the Emperor, looking at both Chiefs, then over to field Marshal Betty Parker, Commandant of the Imperial Marine Corps.

"The problem, your Majesty," said Parker, "is that those people are in limited supply. It takes a special person to make it into special ops. And due to the adjustments we make on them, they are not always available. They have to be volunteers."

"Not that we'll have much trouble getting volunteers," said McCollum. "The problem still lies in getting the right people."

"So, how many do we have on hand right now?" asked Sean.

"Let's see," said Mishori, calling up some information on his flatcomp. "I have seventy-five battalions, plus some reserves. So let's say eighty thousand Rangers."

"We have three hundred companies of Naval Commandos," said McCollum, looking up from her comp. "Plus reserves. So maybe sixty thousand."

"And thirty thousand for us," said Parker.

"So a total of one hundred and seventy thousand," said Sean, nodding his head. "That seems like a lot."

"The total manpower of the Imperial Military is well over two hundred million," said Mishori, shaking his head. "So it is a very low percentage, about point zero eight five percent."

"Look," said Sean, leaning forward. "We've got shortages in everything. Negative matter, wormholes, hulls. But we can augment these people with some nanites and training. So let's get some more special ops people in the pipeline. Without diluting the quality. We're going to have another three hundred million people in uniform before the year is out. So surely you can get another two

hundred and fifty thousand augmented soldiers out of that.”

—“It still takes time to train them, your Majesty,” said Parker. “I wish it didn’t, but it takes a year to train a Recon Marine. And I’m sure as long to make Rangers and Commandos.”

Sean sat there, looking at his service chiefs in disbelief, wondering how many more billions of subjects he would lose in that year.

Chapter Two

You can't say civilization don't advance... in every war they kill you in a new way. Will Rogers.

PLANET AZURE, JULY 30th, 1000.

Dad is going to kill me, thought twelve year old Rebecca Goldman, looking into the blue tinted forest of Azure. *Why the hell did Benjamin have to go running off when I wasn't looking.*

The white F1 star was starting to slant to the west, and there were still six hours of the sixteen hour temperate day to go. Rebecca looked up at the sun, glad for once that it was summer, despite the heat. In the winter she would have only had a twelve hour day at this latitude, and a long sixteen hour night. Not that the jungles of the class two planet, the second most dangerous of the life classifications, weren't dangerous in the day. They were just much more dangerous at night.

Her eyes started to hurt slightly from looking up at the star, despite her protective contacts. Her skin was burning slightly as well, despite her dark brown skin. That part didn't worry her much. At most she would get a slight sunburn from this day, and her skin nanites would heal that within hours.

"Benjamin," she yelled out, looking into the jungle, with was writhing slightly as the plantimals moved, trying to get the most light they could reach around the canopy of the true plants. "Where the hell are you, you idiot?"

They had Temple tonight, and mom and dad would know something was wrong if they didn't show up before nightfall. She checked the calendar in her implant, tempted for a moment to call for help. She decided against the course of action, hoping she could still get the little twerp and not get into trouble for not watching him.

Why the hell did mom and dad have to get the little shit a kitten, she thought, remembering that she was actually looking for two children. Shavu'ot was two months ago by the Galactic calendar that almost everyone used to track religious and Empire wide holidays across the huge expanse of space and time. That same calendar was used to track official birthdays and ages, though the five hundred and ninety four day local calendar was used for planetary holidays and events. Religious groups were allowed to use either scale as they wished, and Rebecca's family, as Moderate Jews, followed the Galactic Calendar based on the old Earth measure. And her parents had gotten Benjamin a kitten for the celebration.

She studied the life in front of her. She wasn't too worried about the plants, though there were some nasty specimens on the planet. As long as she didn't rub against any of the known hazardous ones she would be fine. The plantimals were another story. The fourth macroscopic kingdom of the planet, all possessed movement, some limited, some not. There were carnivores, herbivores and omnivores among the strange creatures. And of course there were the animals, some of which were truly horrible.

Rebecca steeled her courage and went over the fence into the biome beyond. Nothing from the kingdoms of the planet were supposed to be able to make it past that barrier. She felt the low level sonics as she passed, rattling her teeth. Enough to discourage any animal or plantimal. On the human side of the barrier the nanites would take over. Anything from the plant and fungal kingdoms would be attacked as soon as it entered forbidden space. She knew that right now she was being assaulted by the microorganisms of the planet. Most would not find a foothold on her totally foreign cells. The ones that did would be attacked by her own nanites.

“Benjamin,” she yelled walking slowly under the canopy of blue leafed trees. “Benjamin, where are you.”

Some of the plantimals oriented to her voice and she stopped yelling. None looked like carnivores this close to the human habitat. Those were normally hunted out to keep from gathering numbers so close, but she wasn't willing to take any chances. There was some rustling through the shrubbery, animals. But were they trying to get at her, or away from her?

There was a squeal, and a plantimal of a type she hadn't seen before hefted a struggling small legged animal up on a spiked branch. The animal was small, less than ten kilograms, and had smooth blue tinted skin. It squealed again, and the plantimal moved it over a central orifice and dropped it into an ingestion chamber.

She was trying to find a path that wouldn't take her near the carnivore when something else came along that made both the way and the danger moot. The beast was at least four meters high to the shoulder, and must have weighed a couple of tons in the heavy gravity. It walked up to the plantimal and started to munch on it, ignoring the spiked branches that bounced off its hard scaly hide.

Rebecca thought she had heard something. She wasn't sure, but she started in that direction checking her pistol to make sure it was set where she wanted it. Everyone on this developing world carried a weapon. Everyone, as soon as they were considered old enough to be trusted with a weapon. Six year old Benjamin wasn't of age, and the most he would carry would be a sonic that was hoped to be capable of chasing any native animals away.

Rebecca moved on, through the shadows that still let in enough light from the white star to see clearly. There were paths through the foliage, made by large herbivores that needed space to move their bulks. And used by the large carnivores that hunted them. Her heart was beating fast at the thought of running into one of the latter.

“Help,” yelled out a voice from deeper in the jungle. The low hum of a sonic sounded as well, and then the deep roar of something that was not enjoying the touch of sound.

“Benjamin,” yelled Rebecca, breaking into a run through the foliage, trusting in luck to not run against anything that might hurt her. *Why did I come out here*, she thought, her eyes darting in all directions as she ran. *I should have called Rescue in on this one.* With that thought she sent a message through her link. Punishment was the last thing on her mind now. Survival was.

The yells were clearer now, along with more roars than could be accounted for by only one creature. The sound of the sonic was continuous, something really beyond the capability of the small device, which was sure to overload any moment.

Rebecca took in the scene in the small clearing as soon as she entered. There were a half dozen hell hounds in the clearing, their lean three meter long bodies moving around a tree on the other side. Muscles moved smoothly under their blue tinted skins, and their muzzles were retracted, showing an alarming array of sharp teeth. One of them yipped and moved away, the victim of the sonic. As she moved Rebecca saw her younger brother sheltering in the bowel of the tree, sonic on his right wrist swinging around, while his left arm held a small ginger kitten tightly. She could see the tears rolling down the face of her little brother, and all anger was gone for the moment.

Rebecca had never shot a living thing in her life. Her dad had made sure she had spent some time on the range, until she was proficient with the mag pistol. Now she took aim at the closest of the hell hounds and squeezed, sending the high velocity round center mass into the carnivore. The beast yipped as the round tore through its chest, then fell bonelessly to the ground. She switched aim to another and squeezed, putting a round into its hind quarters. Not a kill, but the wounded beast moved back. She shifted her feet and fired at another, the round cracking by the head of the beast in a clear

miss.

~~The pack reoriented on her, ignoring the small morsel they had trapped under the tree. It was good that they were ignoring her brother, not so good that they were coming at her. She knew there was no way she could take out the four beasts before they tore her apart. There were no trees in sight that looked climbable, plus the beasts were good climbers themselves. She said a quick prayer and shot down one of the beasts, then closed her eyes as the last three headed for her, blood in their eyes.~~

The crack of rounds sounded through the clearing, and Rebecca looked up to see a trio of armored humans falling from the sky. Rescue had arrived, and a few shots chased the remaining hell hounds back into the jungle. Moments later she and her brother, kitten in hand, were being lifted up by the large aircar with the Rescue logo on it.

* * *

“What in the hell were you thinking, little girl?” asked Joseph Goldman, looking down on his daughter.

Rebecca hated being called little girl, a term her dad was careful not to use on her, unless he was very angry.

“Well, answer me.”

“I messed up,” she said, trying to keep the tears out of her eyes. “I wasn’t watching, and the little shit got away from me.”

“Don’t call your little brother that name,” yelled her mom, Sarah. “How in the hell did the kitten get out of our yard anyway? I thought the chip was supposed to prevent that.”

“It wasn’t chipped,” said Joseph, a pained look on his face.

“You gave your child an animal that wasn’t chipped?” asked Sarah in her most frigid tone.

“I assumed it was,” said Joseph, looking down. “It will be, now.”

Rebecca smiled inwardly. The pressure was off of her, for the moment, though her dad would not forget, and she would hear about it again. That dad had gotten a kitten without the chip that kept domesticated animals and pets from wandering off of peoples’ property, and into the dangerous jungle, put him in the hot seat with her mom.

Finally the parents settled the argument, for the moment. It was time for dinner, and her mom was not about to let the children go hungry just to continue a fight. As Moderate Jews they didn’t keep a Kosher table, though her mom tried to keep it as close as possible. There was corned beef, potatoes and a salad, and from the way he ate it was as if the little shit hadn’t been scared half to death just hours before.

The next day was school, and Rebecca thought she would spend some time playing with her VR console before bedtime. She really didn’t like school. She liked learning, especially about her home world, the planet that would be her own at least until she reached adulthood. She just didn’t like the socializing, the main purpose behind still holding classroom instruction.

She had just plugged into the VR and was in a world of her own when she was booted out, and she turned toward her door to see her dad standing there.

“I am still angry that you let your brother get out of your sight,” said the man in a soft voice. “You take some responsibility for it. Shouldn’t have given him an unchipped cat like I did. Still, you have some fault.”

“And I am very sorry,” said Rebecca. *Next time I’ll lock him in his room.*

“I know you are, honey. And I also want to tell you how proud I am of you. You should have called Rescue as soon as you knew where he had gone. But if you hadn’t have followed him when you did he would be resting in the bellies of those hell hounds.”

~~And they would have gotten belly aches from his proteins, thought the child. Earth life was not nutritious to Azure forms. Which wouldn't prevent the dumb animals and plantimals from devouring any they could get their eating orifices on.~~

"Come here," said her dad, holding out his arms. She ran into them, and he held her in a tight hug. "I don't know what me and your mom would do if anything happened to either one of you."

After her father left she decided to jack into the planetary net for a moment before going to sleep. Most of the news was about the war, and almost all of it was conjecture and guesswork. She knew the old enemy was back, and that systems had fallen in their Sector, IV. Otherwise it was the same old propaganda about how they were not in danger and the military would protect them. *Does that include my dad*, she thought, remembering that he was a member of the reserves. He hadn't been called up, yet, but there had been many conversations about that possibility around the dinner table.

Rebecca crawled into her comfortable bed as soon as the clock hit her bedtime. It had been an exhausting day. She set her wake up time in her implant, then set her reticular activating system to put her into a deep sleep.

Chapter Three

Ten soldiers wisely led will beat a hundred without a head. Euripides.

PLANET RUBY, SUPERSYSTEM. JULY 21ST-SEPTEMBER 20TH, 1000.

Camp Furious was almost indistinguishable from Determination at first look. Same vastness of desert and grasslands, with a bit more forest. Same barracks buildings that looked like they had been put up several centuries before, probably because they had been. Cornelius' curious eyes picked out some of the differences as the air transport came into the landing field. There was a vast vehicle park to the north of the infantry training center, and to the south was some of the most chewed up landscape he had ever seen. It reminded him of the blasted lands that populated the surface of *Sestius IV* when the Ca'cadasans came.

One more stop, he thought as the air bus came in for a soft landing. He grabbed his duffle bag and followed the men and women from the forward seats out the door and into the cool air. More than a score of air buses were on the field, men and women coming out of all of them, bags on their shoulders. Sergeants started to yell, and the walking turned into running. Other NCOs stood at different spots on the tarmac, holding up guidons. Walborski glanced around until he saw one that was blinking red, meshing with the program in his implant to show him where he was supposed to be.

He ran over to the Sergeant, coming to a halt in front of that man. "Infantry?" said the man looking Walborski over closely, then down at the flat comp he was holding. "Walborski," said the man as Cornelius gave him a loud acknowledgement. The man looked at him more closely, and Cornelius knew his fame had preceded him.

Maybe when I get to Ranger school the looks will stop, thought Walborski, who wanted nothing more than to be just another one of the troops.

More people started gathering around, and the Sergeant pointed them to a line and ordered them to form up. Walborski saw other people running to the other positions, people who would be training for armor, artillery or some of the different combat support jobs. Walborski saw some of the other people from his old squad go to those other formations. Some people from his platoon came over to the infantry group, and overall they were the biggest grouping. More sergeants seemed to appear by magic, and they started motioning the newly arriving people into more formations, until a dozen platoons were formed.

Air buses took off, and more landed, and the groups grew. This happened several more times until what looked like a battalion was formed up by the infantry guidon.

When everyone was formed up to the Drills Sergeants' satisfaction they started to march, every man and woman with their duffle bags on their shoulders. When they walked through the gate to the landing field they executed a column left, then march on for a half kilometer, which Cornelius figured was what it took to get the entire battalion out of the gate and onto the road heading toward the barracks.

"Double time," yelled the Senior Drill Sergeant, a tough looking man by the name of Master Sergeant Francois, identified on Cornelius's implant, who walked at the head of the line. The man turned slightly as he called out the order, and Cornelius was thrilled to see the Ranger tab on the NCO's shirt sleeve.

The run was almost fifteen kilometers, and many of the soldiers were huffing and puffing by the

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