

Armor

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ARMOR

JOHN STEAKLEY

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

You are
What you do
When it counts.
-The Masao

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PART ONE

FELIX

He drank alone.

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

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

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

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

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

Outside the lounge wasn't much better. Lots of bottles had been smuggled out tonight. The ship wasn't exactly a giant party, but there were enough get-togethers here and there, and enough legitimate crew business here and there, to make it almost impossible to find a quiet place to sit and think. After a while he had settled into an idle rhythm of walking, sipping, smoking, and hunting.

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

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

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

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

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

Not much hope there.

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

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

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

He feared.

The hours passed.

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Felix, right?" the man asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A few minutes later his thoughts rose to him out of the daze of smoke and fear. "We're not ready. We're not even close." Then he started, looking around to see if anyone was nearby.

To see if anyone else had heard him. For he wasn't at all sure that he hadn't said it out loud.

* * *

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

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

He snorted. Scout suits. A damn scout?

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

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

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

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

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

He had nodded. He should have caught on then.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sighed, resting his face in his hands.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

He made Connection and watched the gauge swell as he and his suit drew from the very

heart of the ship the thing that seemed in awesome abundance everywhere: Power. Power throughout the ship fo...

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