

A squad of young Outworlder troopers from the ConFree Legion face a merciless, all-powerful alien enemy on a mysterious world in the Outvac frontier. Their mission is soon clear - victory or death. Failure means extinction for their species.

Soldier of the Legion

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Soldier
of the
Legion

Marshall S. Thomas

Chapter 1

Fortune's All-Sub Crimson Souls

“Stand by. Red Hawk is on the way.” Snow Leopard’s icy whisper hissed in my ears, though he was nowhere in sight.

A muted red glow bathed the interior of my helmet and the darksight built into my faceplate lit up the black forest better than daylight. It was the dead pit of the night on this obscure world. Merlin and I crouched in our A-suit battle armor in a tangle of undergrowth, surrounded by tall, spooky trees. The silent forest was calm and serene. All appeared to be well.

But it wasn’t.

For what seemed like the thousandth time, I checked my E. The E Mark 1 Multi-Ordnance Battlefield Superiority Rifle was a compact, general-purpose electronic weapon that never malfunctioned and never missed. I raised it and slid the stock against my armored shoulder. Biostats blinked in the upper left corner of my faceplate. My heartbeat had just sped up. I swear I could taste the adrenalin on my tongue. *Deadman!* I would probably start shaking soon.

I was completely protected inside my A-suit, with its powered, lightweight, superdense, self-sealing cenite armor. According to our instructors, it was the most effective personnel armor yet devised. In fact, I had yet to take a single breath of air from this planet’s atmosphere—I was still on suit-air. Suddenly, though, I felt naked.

This was insane! I was insane! Joining the Legion had seemed like a good idea at the time, and now, here I was, about to get killed on our first real action. My past was gone forever and now I was Beta Three. They called me Thinker because I had a tendency to over-think things. I was convinced I should have been re-named Psycho for even being here, but Beta Five had me beat, hands-down. The numbers were our official designations: Snow Leopard was Beta One, our leader; I was Beta Three, and Merlin was Beta Four.

The night was spectacular. I glanced up at stars beyond the treetops. *Velvet hush*, I thought. *It won't last long.*

"You know, Thinker," Merlin remarked thoughtfully, "When they told us the Final Problem was a live fire exercise I kind of thought it would consist of us shooting up lots of targets with live ammo while they shot over our heads. I never suspected the targets would be trying to kill...*us*, that it was a *combat* mission." He sounded a little worried. Merlin was a tech's tech, our own lab rat, an absolute genius. He had headed his own research effort before deciding to join the Legion as a common soldier and sure didn't belong in an A-suit, but there he was, right beside me, peering into the dark.

"Getting scared?" I asked. My heart pounded. It promised to be one hell of a final exam. Planet *Hell* had been bad enough, but that had all been training. We hadn't known about the Final Problem until the last moment. The problem would be different for every squad, of course—a whole lot of opportunities existed out there, a whole galaxy of problems.

"I've been scared since I walked through the Legion gate!" Merlin confessed.

A titanic blast lit up the night, casting an eerie electric green flash over the night sky. Blazing phospho gold tracers ripped over the forest, crackling and screeching. A series of deafening secondaries savaged the earth. Multiple micro-nuke tacstar clouds writhed into the heavens, glittering crimson and gold. Red Hawk, Beta Ten, had just arrived in the aircar and made a good hit on the *Ain't No Lady*. Scratch one slaver starship! The fools had softlanded it downside, but I guess it wouldn't have lasted long in orbit, either.

Legion training took over. "That's it!" I shouted.

Merlin and I bolted forward toward Slavebloc 1, smashing our way through the forest like a couple of human tanks. Xmax, explosive high velocity rounds set on maximum-yield, suddenly opened up ahead of us. That would be Cool Hand, Beta Two and War Hound, Beta Six, hosing down Barracks 2 with their E's. I saw them on my faceplate tacmap, riddling the building from outside, taking their time. Ironman, Beta Seven, and Dragon, Beta Eight, approached Slavebloc 2 from the

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North, opposite us. They held their fire. The tacmap also showed Beta Nine, Priestess, springing to her position where she could cover Barracks 1 when the slavers came tumbling out the doors.

A tacstar flashed and boomed to our left, that terrifying silken rip that always raised the hairs on the back of my neck, followed by an elemental blast from the gates of Hell. Snow Leopard and Beta Five, Psycho, attacked the Headquarters building in the center of the sprawling complex.

Slavebloc 1 stared out of the dark, brilliantly illuminated in green by my darksight. The luxurious prefab with four interlocking two-story residential blocs contained a central rec area. Painstaking recon showed that it held both female slaves and their male captors.

“Thinker and Merlin entering Slavebloc 1,” I announced, blasting the door to fragments with a burst of auto xmax. Merlin fired a starflash grenade into the doorway and it spewed about a million glittering white phospho tracers back out the door towards us. We jogged straight into it and I felt the debris ping harmlessly against my armor. The starflash would blind everyone unarmored inside.

“Slave!” Sweety announced, as a scantily-clad female stumbled out of the glittering white smoke, blinded and lost. I had been just about to blast her. Sweety was my suit tacmod. She had proven most useful on Planet *Hell*, saving my butt more than once.

Merlin crouched beside me, E up and scanning. We knew exactly how to clean this place—one slaver at a time. It was just like our training sims. Except that these were real people in front of us.

“Target!” I fired standard-yield x, and Merlin lased it just as glowing green x tracks flashed over our heads. A gory specter appeared out of the smoke, wide-open chest spraying black blood, forehead squirting a thin stream of blood from a single hole. He collapsed to the deck, dropping his DefCorps StarGuard rifle. He wore only shorts. Prominent cheekbones, sparse whiskers, slit eyes and long dark hair. An Assidic. The SG was functionally equivalent to our E, though it was more compact. It was an ugly reminder of System tolerance for the slave trade.

“Target!” Sweety announced again. I’m not sure if I fired or Sweety

fired but the round took off the second enemy's head. He had been stocky and powerful—evidently an Outworlder. He, too, wore only shorts.

Merlin forced a laugh. “We caught them with their pants down.”

“Targets in red!” Sweety colored them on my faceplate. The thick carpet beneath our armored boots probably cost more per square meter than a year's earnings back in my civilian life. We barely noticed the luxurious surroundings, the carpet, rich tapestries, couches, canopied beds and abundant bowls of exotic fruits, all looted from countless worlds, along with the abundance of nubile slaves.

I shouted at the slaves and my suit amplified my voice to godlike proportions, “Get down!”

We advanced into a confusing tangle of female slaves and hostiles armed with SGs—they couldn't see a thing, but the slavers fired x blindly, on full auto. Merlin and I shot short bursts of x, laser, x, laser, each round downing a target.

I remembered my weapons instructor: *The A-suit tacmod assures one-round hits for all ordnance*. Until now it had all been training. A grueling abstraction. Now real people were dying.

Sweety's color scheme enabled us to pick the bad guys right out of the crowd, though even inside the protection of our armor, the racket deafened us. Blood splattered up the walls and girls shrieked. We kept firing, trudging through bodies and exotic debris down one corridor after another, shrapnel pinging on our A-suits, firing more starflash for luck and leaving a trail of corpses in our wake.

“Targets!” Xmax burst all around us, the walls erupting with hits, lasers flashing. Two, three, no, four hostiles, coming right at us! I fired blindly and Sweety did it all, controlling angles and trajectories. The hostiles went down.

We advanced, stepping over body parts amid surprisingly intact corpses—some with their skin shredded away and some with blood still squirting from arteries. We marched through pools of blood, leaving behind trembling young girls huddled against the walls, gasping and splattered with blood. Too scared to shake, I moved in icy shock, an automaton, doing whatever Sweety ordered.

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I noticed Merlin hadn't made any more bad jokes, or spoken at all, for that matter. I didn't feel much like conversation, either.

A hostile lay twitching on the deck. I shot him through the head with a laser burst and felt only cold horror. A Cyrillian, with black satin skin, tribal scars and sharpened white teeth. The slavers had given their group a name, *Fortune's All-Sub Crimson Souls*. They were a diverse bunch. Assidics, Outworlders, Cyrillians, even a few outlaw Mocains and Ormans—the *Crimson Souls* welcomed all. Being a merciless homicidal maniac was the only qualification. They had found a nice hideout here on *Alshana 4*, but their good times were ending fast.

The Legion didn't negotiate with slavers, and we didn't arrest them. We killed them. According to our initial estimate there were more than two hundred fifty of the bastards in the complex. With only ten of *us*, including Red Hawk in the aircar, we had strong motivation to terminate the engagement as rapidly as possible.

"Damn it," someone said on the net. "DefCorps armor!"

Merlin and I were vaguely aware of an intense firefight raging outside.

"Snow Leopard, Psycho, Dragon. They've got some kind of reaction team. Looks like a whole squad in armor. Get 'em, Priestess." The voice belonged to Dragon, our most experienced soldier. I could hardly believe how calm he sounded. A squad in armor! Bad news, very bad news.

"Dragon, Snow Leopard. Responding. Thinker, Merlin, break off your target and engage their armored squad."

"Snow Leopard, Thinker, tenners!" I replied. The rest of our assigned Slavebloc would have to wait. Merlin and I shot our way out of a door on the east side and ran along the wall toward Barracks 1.

"We're entering Priestess's line of fire!" Merlin and Sweetie exclaimed in unison. We skidded to a halt amid dead and dying slavers littering the plaza in front of the barracks. Two more slavers with SGs charged out and ran right into Priestess's precision xmax, one round apiece. Unarmored, they were torn to pieces instantly, going down spraying blood. *Damned good shooting by our medic, Priestess. A very talented little girl.*

We converged on the enemy squad through the dense white smoke drifting through the plaza. The armored slavers could see through it as well. Five—no, six DefCorps A-suits bounded towards Slavebloc 2. They opened fire on Ironman and Dragon with x as I raised my E and fired auto xmax. Snow Leopard and Psycho moved up on my left as Ironman and Dragon returned fire from the north side of Slavebloc 2.

“Targets!” I watched one of the armored slavers go down in a blinding flash of hits as I walked the xmax down his chest. Another went down as well—an obscene tracery of xmax and laser crisscrossed their path.

“Relax, gals, we can handle this bunch!” I recognized Psycho’s obnoxious whine. Then his Manlink spoke, auto tacstar, ripping open the world. Most of the armored slavers vanished, replaced by dazzling brilliant white hot cores, screeching gibbering actinic gold tracers, precision nuclear flowers writhing upward, with blinding lightning strikes flashing down all around them. Tacstar Goddess, Flower of the Legion, annihilating our enemies. The Manlink was effective tactical, shoulder-fired artillery. Merlin and I fired at the stragglers nonstop, xmax and laser. Priestess, Ironman and Dragon laid down a deadly crossfire of xmax while Snow Leopard switched to laser as the last of those A-suited bastards went down.

The firing stopped, and I got my first look at what a tacstar can do to armored troops. Cenite was supposed to be just about indestructible, however, a direct tacstar hit was beyond the limit. What remained of the enemy squad glowed like a junkyard of fused, blasted, cenite armor. My weapons instructor’s intonations suddenly had real-world meaning. *The tacstar is a micronuke designed for shock troops to rapidly impose tactical superiority over the enemy.* I guess if anyone qualified as shock troops, we did.

“All right, gang,” Snow Leopard said with finality. “Let’s mop up.”

Our helmets now off, Merlin and I ended up in the central hive of the obscenely opulent HQS building. Slaveblock 1 had been impressive, but the slavers had saved the best of their stolen riches for their headquarters. Rare and exotic woods paneled the walls and

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ceilings. Tapestries that surely could have ransomed small planets now lay shredded, blood soaked and crushed by Legion boots. Millennia-old pottery and glassware lay shattered, bits and shards strewn with a careless abandon that must be the stuff of archaeologists' nightmares.

Here the *Fortune's All-Sub Crimson Souls* had planned their raids, counted their loot, and raped and tortured their captives. Here it had ended for many of them. They'd terrorized countless worlds but now their bloody, dismembered corpses littered the floor. Smoke still hung in the air and stunk heavily of gore and exhaust gasses of E's and SG's.

The smell was getting to me. I started to put my helmet back on, but several of the nearby slaves saw what I was doing and gasped, apparently terrified that more fighting was imminent. I stopped. The young, attractive girls, some of them still naked, huddled in groups of two and three in the corners, consoling each other. Most were on one side or the other of absolute panic. Looking them in the eye seemed to calm them down a bit. I don't think they really understood what was happening. Some probably thought we were just another bunch of slavers.

"Whoohoo!" Psycho careened into the room, popped off his helmet and strutted around in his armor, the Manlink thrust out in front of him like a great cenite penis. "Mother did it again! Did you see those stars?" A little guy, he had short blond hair, vacant blue eyes and a wild grin. "Say hello and die! Thank you, Mommy. Thank you!" He stroked 'Mother', his Manlink. "Deadman! I haven't had this much fun since...well, since yesterday!" Psycho had earned a reputation as a total maniac. He'd actually *liked Planet Hell*.

"Snow Leopard, we've ID'd Saint Mongro." Cool Hand stood over a large corpse sprawled in a pool of blood. The dead man's blue, pockmarked face was frozen in a harsh scowl. His filmy eyes stared into infinity. A dead slave girl lay crumpled beside him.

Someone on *Veltros* had said it, and now I understood. *The dead always look the same, like lumps of clay.*

Cool Hand poked Mongro gently with his E, consulted a datacard and muttered to himself, "That's certainly him." Tall and rangy, Cool Hand had a thin, handsome face and wavy brown hair. He seemed

perfectly casual about having found the *Crimson Soul's* notorious leader.

Snow Leopard drifted over and glanced down at the corpse. He removed his helmet, revealing straight white-blond hair, hot pink eyes and a chunky face so pale we could see blue veins pulsing at his temple.

“Record it,” he said coldly, and turned away.

“Get any interesting kills, Thinker?” Dragon asked me. His sweaty forehead sported a nasty bruise, but he didn't seem to notice. He moved like a great cat, balancing his E on one shoulder. His deep-set eyes glared at me. Dragon was a first-class killer. I always felt better with him around, tattoos and all.

I wasn't sure if he really expected an answer. “Well, nothing worth writing home about,” I replied.

He actually smiled. “Good! Keep it that way. Interesting means you let them get the drop on you!”

Before I could figure out how to reply, a commotion broke out down one corridor. Shouting, shrieking, a gang of girls went at it, jumping on each other wildly. A catfight! I ran, but by the time I arrived War Hound and Ironman had separated most of the combatants. One girl writhed on the floor as the others continued kicking and spitting at her, screeching invectives and convulsed with hatred.

My natural voice needed no amplification this time, “Break it up! What is this? Stop that!” I threw the attackers to one side, straddling the downed girl to protect her. The others very quickly learned not to hit me in my armor. Cradling bruised knuckles, they circled like wild dogs, bristling with hatred.

Ironman interrupted, “It's Black Ice, Thinker!” He held several of the slaves back. “That's what they're saying. It's Black Ice!”

Black Ice! I suddenly recognized the girl as a Mocain, hair cut short to the scalp, hooded eyes and no eyebrows. Her pale skin had a greenish cast. As the Deputy Chief of the *Fortune's All-Sub Crimson Souls*, she bore responsibility for the deaths of thousands. The Mocains were our enemies. They were also the System's master race, but this one had turned outlaw. Clad in a torn top, litepants and boots, she bled

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heavily from the nose and mouth. *Black Ice—alive!*

Snow Leopard arrived and took charge. “Priestess, I want a genetic ID on this one. These Mocains all look the same to me.”

Priestess elbowed through the crowd and pressed a medprobe to the girl’s neck, then consulted it and checked Cool Hand’s datacard. Priestess was Beta squad’s angel: dangerously beautiful, with silky black hair, smooth pale skin and vulnerable lips. Every day that passed drew me closer to the realization that I wanted her to be *my* angel. My heart always sped up when she was nearby, but I certainly didn’t want her or anyone else to know it.

“That’s her all right,” Priestess said. “Black Ice. Genetic ID is confirmed.”

“Thank you, Priestess.” Snow Leopard lowered the barrel of his E to the Mocain’s forehead. Her eyes widened for just a frac. Then her head exploded, spraying everyone with blood and gore.

I blinked back the horror. Several of the former slaves shrieked in terror, but more than a few danced gleefully around the room, not bothering to wipe away the blood. They held hands and sang some unintelligible rhyme with wild, feral looks on their faces. I wouldn’t forget this one.

“Prepare to evac the civilians,” Snow Leopard said calmly. He had ice water in his veins. I sometimes thought he could have been a biogen, one of those synthetically grown humans engineered for specific, singular tasks. To me, he was the ultimate squad leader. Only a few years older than the rest of us, he was certainly different. *How could he be unmoved by this?*

Priestess paused beside me and said in a low, hopeful voice, “It’s good, Thinker,” she said. “What we’re doing here is good.”

I looked up at her. “If you say so,” I replied as I reached for an embroidered shawl to wipe the blood and brains from my face and armor. *Welcome to the Legion*, I thought.

The rest was a blur. I did what I was told and moved like the efficient machine the Legion had forged. Now that the area was pacified, tech-teams moved in to gather what intelligence they could

from the ruins. We sedated many of the former slaves, and evacuated the lot of them off-planet to our ship, the cruiser C.S. *Spawn*. The lifies, our med-techs, took custody of them. I didn't envy them their jobs. There would be many tearful reunions as the Legion reunited them with their families, but I knew that despite our best med-tech and therapy, many would never be quite sane again.

I was exhausted, tired beyond anything I believed possible. It was time to report. Our squad assembled, still in armor, hauling weapons and equipment, in the Captain's small office. We struggled to fit everyone inside. Snow Leopard stood at attention in front of the Captain's spartan desk. The Captain waited patiently.

Snow Leopard was all business, "Sir! Squad Beta reports successful completion of the mission on *Alshana 4*. Two hundred sixty one slavers terminated, six hundred eight female captives recovered. Squad had zero casualties. Thirteen captives were killed in the crossfire. Thirty were wounded and are under treatment."

"Thank you, Beta." The Captain stood up, dressed in his blacks. He appeared to be very young, but in the Legion it was hard to tell. Our biotech kept us young and virtually immortal. His slightly slanted eyes hinted at a little Assidic blood. "It's a shame about the captives, but it can't be helped. You did a good job, troopers." The Captain knew all about how the raid went. Everyone knew that he'd closely monitored our every move. Snow Leopard's report was just a formality.

"Let's see," the Captain said, sifting through a pile of printouts and datapaks on his desk. "All right." He picked up a printout. "Snow Leopard, based on the results of your Final Problem on *Alshana 4*, your squad has been certified by 22 Legion Training Command as graduates of the *Hell* Course and fully fit for regular combat. Reassignment is authorized to an active-duty unit." He paused and looked up, smiling, "Congratulations to all of you and welcome to the ConFree Legion."

We greeted the news with a stunned silence. Finally Psycho said, "Aw right!"

It had been a long hard road, but we'd done it. *We'd arrived!*

"Thank you, Sir!" Snow Leopard spoke up. "On behalf of Beta, we thank the Legion!"

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The Captain chuckled with a knowing expression. “I’ve got your assignment here, too. 22nd Legion, 12th Colonial Expeditionary Regiment—that’s the Black 12th—CAT 24, Second of the Ship—BE 14, *Atom’s Road*. That’s the *Spawn’s* battlestar. She’s a good ship.”

“Sir! We are honored to be assigned to *Atom’s Road*!”

“We’ll be underway to *Atom* as soon as we transfer your refugees. *Atom* will be starlaunching as soon as we arrive. The entire 12th has been recalled and will be on board. We’ve got a major mission, boys—a Systie intrusion into ConFree vac. It’s very serious. We’ll be facing the DefCorps this time, not some halfassed slaver gang with a little borrowed DefCorps hardware.”

“Sir! We won’t fail you! What’s the target?” Snow Leopard asked.

The Captain looked down at his notes. “*Andrion 2*,” he said. “It’s in the Outvac—quite a ways out. Over 750 light-years from the Crista Cluster. Nobody’s ever been there. But we’ll fix that.”

“Yes, Sir!” Snow Leopard sounded supremely confident.

The Black 12th, the 12th Colonial Expeditionary Regiment, under the 22nd, the Black Legion! The 22nd had an ancient and glorious history. In the Plague War, it had been known as the Rimguard, and the Rimguard motto, Deliver Us From Evil, had a special meaning for all Outworlders. We still carried those words on our blacks.

I swallowed hard. *Into the Outvac. Seven hundred and fifty light-years. I must be insane!* In a few days, I would really do it. Until now there had always been the vague idea that if I wasn’t good enough or brave enough the Legion would just send me back home. I didn’t expect or want to go back—it was just a kind of mental back door or escape hatch. Nice to know it was there. It was just a dodge, a way to avoid accepting the full reality and consequence of joining the Legion. Some part of me hadn’t quite grasped my decision to forever leave my old life behind.

Not anymore. The final string was cut and I was suddenly dizzy.

Then Psycho was shoving me, “Come on, Thinker, wake up! Time to go and get out of these stinkin’ suits and grab some eats!”

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The meeting was breaking up and I was impeding the rough flow of tired, armored troopers making their way out of the Captain's office.
"Yeah," I said. "Time to go."

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