

**Revolt
on the
Iron Planet**

Thomas T. Thomas

REVOLT ON THE IRON PLANET

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It is better to be a warrior in a garden
than a gardener in a war zone.

—Samurai Proverb

Arma virumque cano ...
(Of arms and the man I sing ...)

—Opening of Virgil's *Aeneid*

Chichicastenango

1. Apopliromí

MAJOR JOHN HESSIAN and a section of paratroopers from his own 82nd Airborne Division walked cautiously, weapons at the ready, up the street that on his map carried the grand name of “Fifth Avenue.” It was actually more of a stone-paved, two-lane road between one- and two-story buildings. These structures had walls of exposed concrete, sometimes covered with white stucco. Their roofs varied between red tile and galvanized sheet metal.

Hessian was conscious of not wanting to step into any of the brownish puddles that filled and overflowed the channel cut into the center of the street. Others in his team were also sidestepping the muck—and they were all wearing boots that had just tramped through five kilometers of damp and rotting jungle since they deployed from the U.N. truck convoy.

Every four to six meters—just as they were trained to do in enemy territory—two members of the leading squad would move forward quickly, take covering positions in doorways and alleyways, and let the rest of the section pass them by. But the tactic really didn’t seem necessary.

The town was deserted, at least according to the drone cloud of video-surveillance Seekers and laser-targeting Soakers that his G2 officer, Captain Matt Alvarez, had released on the outskirts, and from the summations that Cassandra, the HQ’s companion AI, whispered at regular intervals into Hessian’s and the G2’s earpieces. Or rather, it was empty of the threats tagged by satellite twenty-four hours earlier. If the *Bejo’ Táak’iin*, Guatemala’s chapter of the “Golden Road” insurgency, had been in Chichicastenango as late as that morning, they were gone now.

Hessian and his team released from the 325th Infantry Regiment was leading a mixed force—one-third American airborne, one-third Spanish *Unidad de Operaciones Especiales*, and one-third members of the famed Greek 1st Infantry Divi-

sion—that had been sent in as part of a U.N. recon group to locate and extract high-ranking Chinese merchant-nationals who were supposedly being held by the Mayan resistance. His own headquarters unit included liaison officers from each of the other two nationalities but, so far, the European forces had declined to integrate and only patrolled in their own squads. Well, that too was the way they had been trained, he supposed.

From Alvarez's display of the Seeker cloud, Hessian noted that the Greek unit was lagging farther and farther behind. And now some of them were actually doubling back against the line of march.

"Cassandra, what's the First Division doing?" he asked through his throat mike.

"Their movement is erratic but purposeful, Major," replied the cool female voice. "They appear to be swarming like ... you would say, like bees around a hive."

"Evaluate the area the Greek force is centered on, please."

Matt Alvarez cocked his head at him but did not interrupt.

"The First Infantry Division appears to be gathering at the Iglesia de Santo Tomas," the AI said. "The church is one street to the west and six streets south of your current position." Hessian remembered passing within sight of the place. Their briefing had said it was built on an ancient Mayan temple platform, and so it was the high point in the surrounding marketplace.

"We sent a squad to look into the church," Hessian said, recalling that the squad he had sent was from the Greek unit. "It's empty. Check it again. Evaluate all current data."

Cassandra paused, a long delay in the AI response time. "Seekers detect subsurface infrared signatures and traces of carbon dioxide, consistent with a large underground presence that evaluates as human."

"Something we missed?" Hessian asked, looking at Alvarez, who shrugged. "People hiding in underground rooms? A catacomb?" And only then did he recall the briefing's cultural notes, suggesting the ancient temple platform itself was honeycombed with secret passages and ritual chambers.

"That is the high probability," Cassandra affirmed.

Hessian switched channels to Lieutenant Winston Banks, who was embedded with the unit from the 1st Infantry Division. "Win, where are you?"

"With the Greek contingent, Major."

"Cassandra shows not, by a dozen meters."

"Sorry, I stopped to take a leak. Catching up now."

"So, tell me," Hessian said, "what are your Greeks doing?"

"They're going into the big church, sir," Banks answered.

"Be careful," he said, "Cassandra says there're people in the catacombs. It could be an ambush."

"Not really, sir. They're ... um ... coming out now. Everybody's waving and smiling. I think it's the Chinese traders."

"Well, that's a relief," Hessian said. That meant the mission here was almost done. He turned to the Greek liaison officer, Captain Stavros Laskaris, who would have been listening in on the command circuit. The captain's teeth were bared in a snarl that Hessian found disturbing.

"Wait a minute—" Banks told him over the command circuit. Then the lieutenant was yelling out loud, which blasted in Hessian's ears: "Hey! Guys! Stop!"

The next sound came, not from Hessian's earpiece but through the air from the south: the heavy, two-toned thrum of old-style M86s, antique electrostatic-discharge rifles known among the troops as "cancellers" because of the way they tore bodies apart. The M86 hadn't been standard U.S. Army issue since '97, and even the Spanish contingent carried the newer, more versatile sonic-concussion M100. That left the Greeks with their outdated weapons, rather than the Mayans, because the most advanced technology the *Bejo 'Táak'iin* possessed still threw lead slugs. So the fire was definitely coming from the Greeks at the church.

Hessian remembered, too late, that his mission briefing had included notes about latent hostility between the native Greek populace and the Chinese mercantile empire, based on Greece's commercial servitude as a legacy of China's twenty-

first-century Belt and Road Initiative. Hessian had trusted the professionalism of the 1st Infantry Division to keep such national feelings in check. But he should have integrated the Greeks with his own American troops and held them under close supervision. He caught the liaison officer's eye, and Laskaris was grinning at him, as if to say, "This one is on you."

He keyed his mike to the 82nd Airborne's circuit and called, "All units, move back to the church." He keyed Cassandra and said, "Can you suppress the First Division in any way?"

"Not against friendly troops, Major," she replied.

As the headquarters unit was gathering in on itself to turn around, the cloud of S&S bots under Cassandra's direction that had been patrolling the air above their heads coalesced into a compact mass and swept southward toward the Iglesia de Santo Tomás.

Laskaris put a finger to his earpiece to key its transmission and asked a quick question in his native language.

Before the answer came, they both heard and felt a single explosion, also from the south. The mission was deteriorating rapidly. Hessian was no longer in control of it.

A second later, there came another explosion. Now two dust clouds rose above the rooftops behind them.

"My people say they have resistance at the church ... sir," Laskaris reported.

"Horseshit!" Hessian replied. "My embed and the drones say no resistance."

Before he could quite get that out, the AI was reporting in his ear: "I am detecting a number of subdermal transponders. They were masked before by the masonry walls," she explained, "but now they are outside in the clear. They are not currently moving."

"Whose transponders?" Hessian asked quickly.

"Those registered to the Chinese delegation."

He turned to the liaison. "Stavros, what have your people done?"

Laskaris had the grace to look guilty. But his mouth betrayed a tight smile.

As Hessian led his team back toward the church, he heard Laskaris mutter something that sounded like “ah-po-plee-romy.”

“What was that?” Hessian demanded.

“Nothing ... sir,” Laskaris said defiantly.

“Cassandra, translate the officer’s last comment.”

“Demotic Greek, noun, colloquial ... ‘payback.’ ”

Now Hessian was sure he’d lost control of the mission.

Message from Joanna: My God, John! What happened down there? The news is all over a story about a “massacre in Guatemala.” They are saying the whole Chinese delegation was slaughtered. And it’s supposed to be some kind of army fuck-up, with your unit somehow involved. Please tell me you’re safe. Please tell me you weren’t within a hundred clicks of that Chi-Chi place. Watch out for yourself. Text me soon.

2. Nolo Contendere

THE STOCKADE AT Fort Belvoir, outside Washington, DC, was more like a hospital than a prison: lots of greenish, multi-layered, bullet-proof glass instead of bars, but still the same intricacy of interlocking doors. And armored guard booths instead of nursing stations.

Joanna Hessian, JD, was cleared on the visitor list and admitted to the private conference room designated for lawyers to meet with their incarcerated clients. It was probably one of the few rooms in modern America, Joanna reflected, that was not under continuous surveillance by video and audio feeds that were simultaneously examined by dedicated AIs for potential threats and violence. Attorney-client privilege still meant something, even in the military.

She was there to see her twin brother John, younger than her by forty-five minutes—and she never let the Major forget that fact. He was being held under charges related to his alleged complicity in the massacre of twenty-seven trade representatives from the People’s Republic of China in Chichicastenango, Guatemala, three months earlier. The actual killing, it was now understood, had been carried out by the unit of Greek infantry attached to John’s reconnaissance force. That was not in dispute, a fact that Joanna freely stipulated in responding to the U.S. Army’s charges against him. What was in dispute was whether they were acting on his orders and under his control at the time of the massacre.

Joanna understood the motives for the attack—as did most of the rest of the world.

China’s century-old Belt and Road Initiative had bought and paid for operations at the Greek port of Piraeus, adjacent to the capital of Athens—site of the legendary “wooden walls” defending Western Civilization from Persian invasion in the fifth century BCE. Control of the port essentially meant Chinese control of the entire Greek economy, and with economic

power had come political influence. Within eighty years, the supposedly ancient Greek democracy had been dismantled in favor of a Chinese puppet state, and soon all of southeastern Europe had eventually become a Chinese trading colony. Naturally, some Greeks still resented this. And, naturally again, some of them had gravitated to the storied 1st Infantry Division of the otherwise defanged and impotent Greek Army.

After she had been admitted to the room, the door on the opposite wall opened and John entered. He was unattended and, thankfully, unencumbered by shackles or handcuffs. It was a sign of respect that they did not expect him to use violence against her or try to escape—although, under all these layers of security, where could he escape to? John was wearing a light-green prison jumpsuit, without insignia but with his first initial and surname, followed by his Department of Defense ID number, on a tape stitched to its left breast, and “U.S. Army Corrections System” stenciled across the back.

She studied her brother. He was thinner, with harder lines in his face, and the once-boyish carelessness was just about ground out of him. His dark hair was showing its first gray at the temples and over his ears. That was new and likely caused by stress. His dark eyes were hooded with suspicion, and that was also new.

“How are you doing, John?” Joanna asked.

“Terrible! What’s happening to my men? They won’t tell me anything in here.”

“Your unit from the Three-Twenty-Fifth has been reassigned, of course. The Spanish special forces contingent under your command was sent home.”

“And the Greeks?”

“All of the soldiers present at the massacre have been repatriated and ... executed,” she said quietly.

John sighed. “I suppose that should settle the matter,” he said. “The Chinese government has their testimony at the trial, don’t they?”

"Well ... there was no trial. Not even an affidavit from the commanding officer, Major Dukas. Which still leaves the question of your involvement in the massacre."

"That's easy, I had none. I was as shocked as everyone else."

"And yet, the charges say you let the Greek team patrol on their own—under their own command structure, without U.S. Army liaison of equal rank present, out of sight of your drones, and at the back of the column."

"That was the table of organization and the protocols sent down from the U.N. Department of Peace Operations," he said. "They specified independent forces and loose control. It was a coalition effort, not a joint strike. And no, not out of sight, because Cassandra had drones in the air at all times."

"Your briefing warned of latent Greek sentiment."

"And yet the U.N. assigned them to the operation."

"The Chinese are still furious," Joanna said simply.

"Then they should be more careful about buying a country and crushing its soul."

"That attitude is not going to help you, John." Although, privately, Joanna agreed with him. "You have to understand that, as our major trading partner—the world's dominant trading partner, in fact—and our foremost military ally, the Chinese are in a position to call for compensatory justice. In short, they want your head."

"Through a U.S. Army court-martial?" His voice was bitter.

"No, before the International Court of Justice. It was that, or a trial in Beijing."

"And a guilty verdict would be ..."

"Life in prison, probably, coming out of The Hague. Death, if you end up in China."

"And the Army would *allow* that?"

"Well, they won't relinquish *that much* jurisdiction, not over a U.S. citizen. But you can guess they don't want a court-martial here, either."

"So, what's the solution?"

"I have worked out a deal. But it's not one you're going to like." She took out her pad and pulled up the document. It ran to twenty pages of acknowledgements and stipulations, but only the last two specifications mattered. "They want you to enter a plea of *nolo contendere* to the charge of negligence in command and accept demotion by two ranks, that is, back to first lieutenant."

John's face got angry, then it became resigned. "At thirty-five, I'll be the oldest first looey in the Army. And I'll never see promotion again. Why don't they just cashier me?"

"Because the Army wants to keep you under their thumb—and quiet."

"That's a lousy deal! I could still take my chances at The Hague."

"I'm sorry, John. But it was the best I could do, considering ..."

"Then I suppose I could just quit. Become a civilian."

"That would open you to Chinese extradition."

"So ... there's no running away from this?"

"Not really. Not any good options."

"Okay ... Where do I sign?"

She pushed the pad across the table toward him. At the bottom was the glowing, blinking square waiting for his thumbprint.

3. Reassignment

AFTER HIS RELEASE from the stockade, 1st Lieutenant John Hessian was assigned to Fort Benning in Georgia. He was nominally in charge of a platoon of troops just out of basic combat training and then on to advanced individual training. They were now taking the three-week course at the Army Jump School, preparatory to joining his old unit in the 82nd Airborne. But Hessian's job was a sinecure, because the school's sergeants—who were a lot closer to their last jumps, either in practice or combat, than he was—did the actual training. Hessian just took the salutes and filed the paperwork.

That was until the morning Colonel William Jefferson Davis of the 325th came down from Fort Bragg specifically to see him. The colonel was a big man, two inches taller than Hessian's six feet and twenty pounds heavier, and his presence filled the temporary office, which was barely larger than Hessian's desk. Davis looked for a place to put his Army Combat Uniform patrol cap and ended up hooking it onto the corner of the desktop monitor.

"Hell of a mess you got yourself into, John."

"No doubt, sir," Hessian replied quietly.

"You know, a lot of your fellow officers at Bragg wanted you to take the damn court-martial, get everything out in the open ... clear your name."

"That would have been *one* course of action, sir."

"But that's not what the brass wanted and ... Oh, hell! A bad mess."

"Yes, sir."

"Between us—and I can't say this officially—that massacre would have gone down no matter what you did. You could have been right there, and those First Infantry boys would have shot the Chinese anyway, probably killed you and your headquarters section to boot."

"I might have offered *some* resistance ... sir."

“Yeah, every soldier thinks that. Anyway, I’m not here to commiserate. General Sherman”—that was Major General Harkin “Hardass” Sherman, senior officer of the 82nd—“has decided what we’re going to do with you.”

“That’s good news, sir.” He was about to hear the fate of his Army career.

“We’re going to put you out of reach of the Chinese by sending you to the furthest place from both Guatemala and Beijing that we can think of.”

Hessian tried to triangulate a point on the globe equidistant from those two places and could only come up with somewhere near the South Pole.

“We’re putting you in charge,” Davis continued, “of the security detail for the U.S. embassy at Hellas Planitia.”

It took him a moment to recalibrate. “But that’s—”

“Yes, the U.N. administrative complex. On Mars.”

“Is this the brass’s idea of punishment duty ... sir?”

“More like a new chapter in your life—space cadet!”