

March Upcountry

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Fans of military science fiction have undoubtedly heard variations on this one: “Join the Marines, travel to fascinating planets, meet exotic natives, and kill them.” But this book’s delivery of the line, by assorted troopers in the heat of battle, is a real team effort—as is the book itself. In this latest offering by Weber and Ringo, who each have individual books to their credit, all these essential elements are present in perfect proportion. They’ve taken SF, mixed it with high adventure on an alien world, and thrown in some great characters.

Prince Roger, heir tertiary to the Throne of Man (his mother, Alexandra, is Empress) is sent off to play diplomat on a world that hasn’t seen a member of the royal family in twenty years. But conspiracy’s afoot, and there’s a traitor on the ship that’s carrying Roger and his contingent of the Empress’ Own Royal Marines. Roger, something of a dilettante with a taste for dandyism, big game hunting, and other incongruous skills, finds himself being protected by loyal Marines even as he wonders why he should deserve such unquestioning loyalty from troops he has never met. After all, he believes his mother has sent him off on this wild goose chase because she thinks he’s worthless.

Barely escaping with their lives, the Marines, Roger in tow, make planetfall on Marduk—where there is a space station, but there’s also activity by enemies of the Empire. The planet itself is not a prime destination: “The locals are hostile and primitive, the fauna is vicious, the mean temperature is thirty-three degrees centigrade, and it rains five times a day — and piracy is rampant.” Unfortunately, they’ve landed a long way from the spaceport, and the months-long march upcountry to get there is through some of the most hostile conditions even the Marines have faced.

Therein hangs the tale. Or the beginning of it, to be more accurate, because this story is far too big for a single book and will be continued in the next volume. The journey, though, is well worth the trip. Roger and his compatriots engage in everything from survival operations to military maneuvers to planetary politics, and the planet and its populace, the flora and fauna, and the scientifically advanced Marines will fascinate readers. So will many of the characters, such as Matsugae the valet, O’Casey the tutor, and Poertena the armorer. Roger, particularly, has unsuspected depths, and as he matures over the course of the journey, he makes quite a remarkable hero. This is the real stuff.

MARLENE SATTER (September / October 2001)

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