We Were Very Happy [Analog Nov 73]

Joe Haldeman

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Scared? Oh yes, I was scared—and who wouldn't be? Only a fool or a suicide or a robot. Or a line officer.

Submajor Stott paced back and forth behind the small podium in the assembly-room/chop-hall/ gymnasium of the *Anniversary*. We'd just made our final collapsar jump, from Tet-Thirty-eight to Yod'Four. We were decelerating at one and a half gravities and our velocity relative to that collapsar was a respectable nine-tenths c. We were being chased.

"I wish you people would relax for a while and just trust the ship's computer. The Tauran vessel at any rate will not be within strike range for another two weeks and if you keep moping around for two weeks neither you nor your men will be in any condition to fight when the time comes. Fear is a contagious disease. Mandella!"

He was always careful to call me "Sergeant" Mandella in front of the company. But everybody at this briefing was a squad leader or more; not a private in the bunch. So he dropped the honorifics. "Yes,

"Mandella, you are responsible for the psychological as well as the physical efficiency of the men and women in your squad. Assuming that you are aware of the morale problem building aboard this vessel *and* assuming that your squad is not immune… what have you done about it?"

"With my squad, sir?"

He looked at me for a long moment. "Of course."

"We talk it out, sir."

"And have you arrived at any dramatic conclusion?"

"Meaning no disrespect, *sir*, I think the major problem is obvious. My people have been cooped up in this ship, hell, everybody has, for fourteen-"

"Ridiculous. Every one of us has been adequately conditioned -against the pressures of, living in close quarters *and* the enlisted men have the privilege of confraternity." That was a delicate way of putting it. "Officers must remain celibate yet *we* have no morale problem."

If he thought his officers were celibate, he should sit down and have a long talk with Lieutenant Harmony. Maybe he just meant line officers, though: himself and Cortez. Fifty-percent right, probably. Cortez was rather friendly with Corporal Kamehameha.

"The therapists reinforced your conditioning in this regard," he continued, "while they were working to erase the hate-conditioning— everybody knows how I feel about that—and they may be misguided but they are skilled."

In our first battle with the Tauran's, we had been so saturated with blind hatred that we'd massacred every last one of them, even though the object of the raid had been to take prisoners. Stott had stayed on the ship.

"Corporal Potter." He had to call her by rank to remind everybody why she hadn't been promoted along

with the rest of us. Too soft. “Have you ‘talked it out’ with your people, too?”

“We’ve discussed it. Sir.”

The submajor could “glare mildly” at people. He glared mildly at Marygay until she continued.

“I don’t think Sergeant Mandella was finding fault with the condi—”

“Sergeant Mandella can speak for himself. I want your opinion. Your observations.” He said it in a way that indicated he didn’t want them much.

“Well, I don’t think it’s the fault of the conditioning either, sir. We don’t have any trouble living together. Everybody is just impatient, tired of doing the same thing week after week.”

“They’re anxious for combat, then?” No sarcasm in his voice.

“They want to get off the ship, sir; out of the routine.”

“They *will* get off the ship,” he said, allowing himself a small mechanical smile. “And then they’ll be just as impatient to get back on.”

It went back and forth like that for a long time. Nobody wanted to put words to the basic fact that our men and women had had over a year to brood on the upcoming battle; they could only become more and more apprehensive. And now a Tauran cruiser closing on us—we’d have to take our chances with it before we were within a month of the ground assault.

The prospect of hitting that portal planet and playing soldier was bad enough. But at least you have a chance, fighting on the ground, to influence your own fate. This bullshit of sitting in a pod, just part of the target, while the *Anniversary* played mathematical games with the Tauran ship… to be alive one nanosecond and dead the next, because of an error in somebody’s thirtieth decimal place, *that’s* what was giving me trouble. But try to tell that to Stott. I’d finally had to admit td-myself that he wasn’t putting on a grisly little act. He actually couldn’t understand the difference between fear and cowardice. Whether he’d been purposefully conditioned into that viewpoint—which I doubted—or was just plain crazy, it no longer mattered.

He was raking Ching over the coals, the same old song and dance. I fingered the fresh Table of Organization they had given us.

I knew most of the people from the Aleph massacre. The only new ones in my platoon were Demy, Luthuli and Heyrovsky. In the company (excuse me, the “strike force”) as a whole, we had twenty replacements for the nineteen people we lost during the Aleph raid. One amputation, four deaders and fourteen psychotics; casualties of overzealous hate-conditioning.

TABLE Of ORGANIZATION

I couldn’t get over the “20 Mar 2007” at the bottom of the T/O. I’d been in the Army ten years, though it felt like less than two. Time dilation, of course. Even with the collapsar jumps, traveling from star to star eats up the calendar. After this raid, I would probably be eligible for retirement, with full pay. If I lived through the raid, and if they didn’t change the rules on us. Me a twenty-year man, and only twenty-five years old.

Stott was summing up when there was a knock on the door, a single loud rap. “Enter,” he said.

An ensign I knew vaguely walked in casually and handed Stott a slip of paper, without saying a word. He stood there while Stott read it, slumping with just the right degree of insolence. Technically, Stott was out of his chain of command; everybody in the Navy disliked him anyhow.

Stott handed the paper back to the ensign and looked through him.

"You will alert your squads that preliminary evasive manoeuvres will commence at 2010, fifty-eight minutes from now." He hadn't looked at his watch. "All personnel will be in acceleration shells by 2000. Tench… hut!"

We rose and, without enthusiasm, chorused, "Hump you, sir." Idiotic.

Stott strode out of the room and the ensign followed, smirking.

I turned my ring to position four, my assistant squad leader's channel, and talked into it: "Tate, this is Mandella." Everyone else in the room was doing the same.

A tinny voice came out of the ring. "Tate here. What's up?"

"Get hold of the men and tell them we have to be in the shells by 2000. Evasive manoeuvres."

"Crap. They told us it'd be days."

"I guess something new came up. Maybe the commodore has a bright idea."

"The commodore can stuff it. You up in the lounge?"

"Yeah."

"Bring me back a cup when you come, O. K.? Little bit of sugar?"

"O. K. Be down in half an hour."

"Thanks. I'll round 'em up."

There was a general movement toward the soya machine. I got in line behind Corporal Potter.

"What do you think, Marygay?"

"I'm just a corporal, Sarge. I'm not paid to—"

"Sure, sure. Seriously."

"Well, It doesn't have to be very complicated. Maybe the commodore just wants us to try out the shells again."

"Once more before the real thing."

"Mm-hm. Maybe." She picked up a cup and blew into it. She looked worried, a tiny line bisecting the space between her eyebrows. "Or maybe the Taurans had a ship 'way out, waiting for us. I've wondered why they don't do it, like we do at Stargate."

I shrugged. "Stargate's a different thing. It takes seven or eight cruisers, moving all the time, to cover the most probable exit angles. We can't afford to do it for more than one collapsar, and neither can they."

"I don't know." She didn't say anything while she filled her cup. "Maybe we've stumbled on their version

of Stargate. Or maybe they have ten times as many ships. A hundred times. Who knows?"

I filled and sugared two cups, sealed one. "No way to tell." We walked back to a table, careful with the rapid sloshing of the soya in the high gravity.

"Maybe Singhe knows something," she said.

"Maybe he does. But I'd have to get to him through Rogers and Cortez. Cortez would jump down my throat if I tried to bother him now."

"Oh, I can get to Singhe directly. We…" She looked at me very seriously and then dimpled a little bit. "We've been friends."

I sipped some scalding soya and tried to sound nonchalant. "That's where you disappeared to Wednesday night?"

"I'd have to check my roster," she said and smiled. "I think it's Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays during months with an 'r' in them. Why? You disapprove?"

"Well… damn it, no, of course not. But—but he's an officer! A *Navy* officer!"

"He's attached to us and that makes him part Army." She twisted her ring and said, "Directory." To me: "What about you and cuddly little Miss Harmony?"

"That's not the same thing." She was whispering a directory code into the ring.

"Yes, it is. You just wanted to do it with an officer. Pervert." The ring bleated twice. Busy. "How was she?"

"Adequate." I was recovering.

"Besides, Ensign Singhe is a perfect gentleman. And not the least bit jealous."

"Neither am I," I said. "If he ever hurts you, tell me and I'll break his ass."

She smiled at me across her cup. "If Lieutenant Harmony ever hurts you, tell me and I'll break *her* ass."

"It's a deal." We shook on it solemnly.

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II

The acceleration shells were something new, installed while we rested and resupplied at Stargate. They enabled us to use the ship at closer to its theoretical efficiency, the tachyon drive boosting it to over twenty-five G's acceleration.

Tate was waiting for me in the shell area. The rest of the squad was milling around, talking. I gave him his soya.

"Thanks. Find out anything?"

"Afraid not. Except that the swabbies don't seem to be scared, and it's their show. Probably just-another practice run."

He slurped some soya. "What the hell. It's all the same to us, anyhow. Just sit there and get squeezed

half to death. God, I hate those things."

"Oh, I don't know. They might make the infantry obsolete. we can all go home."

"Sure thing." The medic came by. and gave me my shot.

I waited until 1950 and hollered to the squad: "Let's go. Strip down and zip up."

The shell is like a flexible space-suit; at least the fittings on the inside are pretty similar. But instead of a life-support package, there's a hose going into the top of the helmet and two coming out of the heels, as well as two relief tubes per suit. They're crammed in shoulder-to-shoulder on light acceleration couches; getting to your shell is like picking your way through a giant plate of olive-drab spaghetti.

When the lights in my helmet showed that .everybody was suited up, I pushed the button that flooded the room. No way to see, of course, but I could imagine the pale blue solution—ethylene glycol and something else—foaming up around and over us. The suit material, cool and dry, collapsed in to touch my skin at every point. I knew that my internal body pressure was increasing rapidly to match the increasing fluid pressure outside. That's what the shot was for: to keep your cells from getting squished between the devil and the pale blue sea. You could still feel it, though. By the time my meter said "two" (external pressure equivalent to a column of water two nautical miles deep), I felt that I was at the same time being crushed and bloated. By 2005 it was at two point seven, and holding steady. When the manoeuvres. began at 2010, you couldn't feel the difference. I thought I saw the needle fluctuate a tiny bit, though, and wondered how- much acceleration it took to,make that barely visible wobble. .

The major drawback of the system is that, of course, anybody caught outside of his shell when the *Anniversary* hits twenty-five G's would be just so much strawberry jam. So the guiding and the fighting have to be done by the ship's tactical computer—which does most of it anyway, but it's nice to have a human overseer.

Another small problem is that if the ship, gets damaged and the pressure drops,, you'll explode like a dropped melon. If it's the internal pressure, you get crushed to death in a microsecond.

And it takes ten minutes, more or less, to get depressurized and another two or three to get untangled and dressed. Not exactly something you can hop out of and come up fighting. Only four people have any mobility while the rest of us are trapped in our shells; that's the Navy maintenance crew. They essentially carry the whole acceleration chamber apparatus around with them, their suit becoming a twenty-ton vehicle. And even they have to remain in one place while the ship is manoeuvring.

The accelerating was over at 2038. A green light went on and I chinned the button to depressurize.

Marygay and I were getting dressed outside. The residual fumes from the pressurizing fluid made me unpleasantly giddy and a little nauseous.

"How'd that happen?" I pointed to an angry purple welt that ran from beneath her right breast to the opposite hipbone.

"That's the second time," she said, pinching the skin angrily. "The first one was on my rear—I think that shell doesn't fit right, gets creases."

"Maybe you've lost weight."

"Wise guy." Our caloric intake and exercise had been rigorously monitored and controlled since suit-fitting at Stargate. You can't use a fighting suit unless the sensor-skin inside fits you like a film of oil.

A wall speaker drowned out the rest of her comment. “Attention all personnel. Attention. All Army personnel echelon six and above and all Naval personnel echelon four and above will report to the briefing room at 2130. Attention—”

It repeated the message twice. I went off to lie down for a few minutes while Marygay showed her bruise—and all the rest of herself— to the medic and the armourer. For the record, I didn’t feel a bit jealous.

The commodore began the briefing. “There’s not much to tell, and what there is, is not good news.

“Six days ago, the Tauran vessel that is pursuing us released a drone missile. Its initial acceleration was on the order of eighty gravities.,

“After blasting for approximately a day, its acceleration suddenly jumped to a hundred and forty-eight gravities.” Collective gasp.

“Yesterday, it jumped again. Two hundred and three gravities. I shouldn’t need to tell you that this is twice the accelerability of the enemy’s drones in our last encounter.

“We launched a salvo of drones, four of them, intersecting what the computer predicted to be the four most probable future trajectories of the enemy drone. One of them paid off, very near, while we were doing evasive manoeuvres. We contacted and destroyed the Tauran weapon about ten million kilometers from here.”

That was practically next door. “The only encouraging thing we learned from the encounter was from spectral analysis of the blast. It was no more powerful than ones, we have observed in the past, so we might infer that at least their progress in explosives has matched their progress in propulsion. Or perhaps they just didn’t feel a more powerful blast was necessary.

“This is the first manifestation of a very important effect that heretofore has been of interest only to theorists. Tell me, soldier,” pointed at Negulesco, “how long has it been since we first fought the Taurans, at Aleph?”

“That depends on your frame reference,“ she answered dutifully. ”To me, it’s been about eight months. Commodore.“

“Exactly. You’ve lost about nine years, though, to time dilation, while we manoeuvred between collapsar jumps. In an engineering sense, as we haven’t done any important research and development during that period… that enemy vessel comes from our future!” He stopped to let that sink in.

“As the war progresses, this can only become more and more pronounced. The Taurans don’t have any cure for relativity, though, so it will be to our benefit as often as to theirs.

“For the present, though, it is *we* who are operating with a handicap. As the Tauran pursuit vessel draws closer, this handicap will become more severe. They can simply out-shoot us.

“We’re going to have to do some fancy dodging. When we get within five hundred million kilometers of the enemy ship, everybody gets in his shell and we just have to trust the logistic computer. It will put us through a rapid series of random changes in direction and velocity.

“I’ll be blunt. As long as they have one more drone than we, they can finish us off. They haven’t launched any more since that first one. Perhaps they are holding their fire,” he mopped his forehead nervously, “or maybe they only *had* one. In that case, it’s we who have them.

“At any rate, all personnel will be required to be in their shells with no more than ten minutes’ notice. When we get within a thousand million kilometers of the enemy, you are to be in your shells. By the time we are within five hundred million kilometers, you will be in them, and all shell compounds will be flooded and pressurized. We cannot wait for anyone.

“That’s all I have to say. Submajor?”

“I’ll speak to my people later, Commodore. Thank you.”

“Dismissed.” And none of this “Hump you, sir” nonsense. The Navy thought that was just a little beneath their dignity. We stood at attention, all except Stott—until he had left the room. Then some other swabbie said “Dismissed” again, and we left. I went up to the NCO room for some soya, company, and maybe a little information.

There wasn’t much happening but idle speculation, so I took Rogers and went off to bed. Marygay had disappeared again, hopefully trying to wheedle something out of Singhe.

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III

We had our promised get-together with the submajor the next morning, where he more or less repeated what the commodore had said, in infantry terms and in his staccato monotone. He emphasized the fact that all we knew about the Tauran ground forces was that if their naval capability was improved, it was likely they would be able to handle us better than last time.

But that brings up an interesting point. In the only previous face-to-face contact between humans and Taurans, we’d had a tremendous advantage: they had seemed not to quite understand what was going on. As belligerent as they had been in space, we’d expected them to be real Huns on the ground. Instead, they practically lined themselves up for slaughter. One escaped, and presumably described the idea of old-fashioned infighting to his fellows.

But that, of course, didn’t mean that the word had necessarily gotten to this particular bunch, the Taurans guarding Yod-Four. The only way we know of to communicate faster than the speed of light is to physically carry a message through successive collapsar jumps. And there was no way of telling how many jumps there were between Yod-Four and the Tauran home base—so these might be just as passive as the last bunch, or they might have been practicing infantry tactics for a decade. We would find out when we got there.

The armorer and I were helping my squad pull maintenance on their fighting suits when we passed the thousand million kilometer mark and had to go up to the shells.

We had about five hours to kill before we had to get into our cocoons. I played a game of chess with Rabi and lost. Then Rogers led the platoon in some vigorous calisthenics, probably for no other reason than to get their minds off the prospect of having to lie half-crushed in the shells for at least four hours. The longest we’d gone before was half that.

Ten minutes before the five hundred million kilometer mark, we squad leaders took over and supervised buttoning everybody up. In eight minutes we were zipped and flooded and at the mercy of—or safe in the arms of—the logistic computer.

While I was lying there being squeezed, a silly thought took hold of my brain and went round and round like a charge in a super-conducter; according to military formalism, the conduct of war divides neatly into

two categories, tactics and logistics. Logistics has to do with moving troops and feeding them and just about everything except the actual fighting, which is tactics. And now we're fighting, but we don't have a *tactical* computer to guide us through attack and defence, just a huge, super-efficient pacifistic cybernetic grocery clerk of a logistic, mark that word, logistic computer.

And the other side of my brain, perhaps not quite as pinched would argue that it doesn't matter what name you give to a computer; it's just a pile of memory crystals, logic banks, nuts and bolts… if you program it to be Genghis Khan, it *is* a tactical computer, even if its usual function is to monitor the Stock Market or control sewage conversion.

But the other side was obdurate and said that by that kind of reasoning, a man is only a hank of hair and a piece of bone and some stringy meat; and, no matter what kind of a man he is, if you teach him well you can take a Zen monk and turn him into a slavering bloodthirsty warrior.

Then what the hell are you/we— am I—answered the other side. A peace-loving vacuum-wielding specialist *cum* physics teacher snatched up by the Elite Conscription Act and reprogrammed to be a killing machine. You/I have killed and liked it.

But that was hypnotism, motivational conditioning, I argued back. They don't do that any more.

And the only reason, I said, they don't do it is because they think you'll kill better without it. That's logic.

Speaking of logic, the original question was, why do they send a logistic computer to do a man's job? or something like that… and we were off again.

The light blinked green and I chinned the switch automatically. The pressure was down to one point three before I realized that it meant we were alive, we had won the first skirmish. I was only part right.

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IV

I was belting on my tunic when my ring tingled and I held it up to listen. It was Rogers.

"Mandella, check squad bay three. Something went wrong; Daiton had to depressurize it from Control."

Bay three—that was, Marygay's squad!" I rushed down the corridor in bare feet and got there just as they opened the door from inside the pressure chamber and began straggling out.

The first one out was Bergman. I grabbed his arm. "What the hell is going on, Bergrhan?"

"Huh?" He peered at me, still dazed, as everyone is when they come out of the chamber. "Oh,"s'you. Mandella. I dunno. Whad'ya mean?"

I squinted in through the door, still holding on to him. "You were late, man, you depressurized late. What happened?"

He shook his head, trying to clear it. "Late? Late. Uh, how late?"

I looked at my watch for the first time. "Not too—" Jesus Christ. "Uh, we zipped in at 0520, didn't we?"

"Yeah, I think that's it."

Still no Marygay among the dim figures picking their way through the ranked couches and jumbled tubing. "Um, you were only a couple of minutes late… but we were only supposed to be under four

hours, maybe less. It's 1050."

"Hm-m-m." He shook his head again. I let go of him and stood back to let Stiller and Demy through the door.

"Everybody's late, then," Bergman said. "So we aren't in any trouble."

"Uh—" *Non sequiturs*. "Right, right—Hey, Stiller! You seen—"

From inside: "Medic! MEDIC!"

Somebody who wasn't Marygay was coming out. I pushed her roughly out of my way and dove through the door, landed on somebody else and clambered over to where Struve, Marygay's assistant, was standing by a pod, talking into his ring very loud and fast.

"—God, yes, we need blood—"

Where Marygay had gotten a welt the last time we were in the pods, now she had a deep laceration, nearly a meter long, diagonally across her body. She was covered with a bright sheen of blood and it was still oozing out of the cut, filling the pod.

Clear air passages - stop the bleeding - protect the wound - treat for shock—I worried the first-aid kit off my belt while I checked her mouth; she was breathing all right. Cracked the seal on the bandage and unrolled it. It was a few centimeters short but would have to do, so I laid it gently down the length of the wound. It was saturated with blood by the time 1 fumbled out the ampoule of No-shock, laid it against her arm and pushed the button.

Then there was nothing else I could do and it hit me: Marygay was dying. I felt hollow and helpless, clamped my jaws and swallowed against sudden nausea.

"Mandella!" Struve had been talking to me.

"Yes?"

"I said, anything else you can do?"

"No." I stirred my finger through the ointments and ampoules in the kit. "Can you think of anything?"

"I'm no more of a medic than you are." Looking up at the door, he kneaded a fist, biceps straining. "Where the hell are they? You have morphi-plex in that kit?"

"Yeah. You don't use it when you have internal—"

"There!" Doc Wilson crowded through the door, followed by two medics with a stretcher. They worked fast, saying nothing to us or to each other. One medic verified Marygay's blood type, rubbing the blood off the tattoo on her hip. He nodded to the other, who ran a needle into her thigh and started giving whole blood from a plastic bag.

Doc Wilson pulled on a pair of transparent gloves and gently lifted the soaked bandage off, dropped it-to the floor, inspected the wound while he unrolled a new bandage. It was the same length as mine had been; he unrolled another and overlapped them, then fixed them in place with transparent tape. He measured her temperature, pulse and blood pressure.

"Surgery A," he said to the medics. "I'll be up in a half-hour." He turned to Struve. "Anybody give her any medication?"

“No-shock,” I said.

“O. K.” He turned to go.

“Doc! Will she-”

“No time.” He strode through the door.

“No *time*?” But he was gone.

“Haven’t you heard, man?” One of the medics was fiddling with the stretcher, unfolding a vertical extension that would hold the blood-bag. “Don’t you know the ship was hit?”

“Hit!” Then how could any of us be alive?

“That’s right. Four squad bays. Also the armor bay. At least we won’t be landing on Aleph—not a fighting suit left on the ship, we can’t fight in our—”

“What—which squad bays, what happened to the people?”

“No survivors.”

Thirty people. “Who was it?”

“All of the third platoon. First squad of the second.”

Al-Sadat, Busia, Maxwell, Negu-lesco. “My God.”

“Thirty-one deaders and they don’t have the slightest idea of what caused it. Don’t know but what it might happen again -any minute.“ He looked up at the other medic. ”Ready?“

“Yeah.” He had removed all of the support tubes while we were -, talking. He held -The blood-bag in his teeth to keep it higher than Marygay and the two of them lifted her slowly out of the pod.,

“It wasn’t a drone, they say we got all of the drones. Got the enemy vessel, too. Nothing on the sensors, just *blam*! and a third of the ship torn to hell. Lucky it wasn’t the drive or the life-support system.”

I was hardly hearing him. Pen-worth, LaBatt, Smithers. Christine and Frida. All dead. Marygay dying, that was even worse. I was numb.

“Let’s go.” They carried her out and I started to follow. In the corridor they told me to stay, it was too crowded upstairs.

I felt suddenly weak and sat down in the corridor. Sat for a long time with my head between my knees, trying not to think, shutting everything out, trying to relax myself back into shape.

The squawk-box crackled. “All personnel. Attention, all personnel echelon six and above. Report immediately to the assembly area unless you are directly involved in medical or maintenance emergencies.”

After it had repeated the order three times I stood up and headed in that general direction.

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V

Halfway to the assembly area I realized what a mess I was, and ducked into the head by the NCO lounge. Corporal Kamehameha was hurriedly brushing her hair.

“William! What happened to you?”

“Nothing.” I turned on a tap and looked at myself in the mirror. Dried blood smeared all over my face and tunic. “It was Marygay— Corporal Potter—her suit… well, evidently it got a crease, uh…”

“Dead?”

“No, just badly, uh, she’s going into surgery—”

“Don’t use hot water. You’ll just set the stain.”

“Oh. Right.” I used the hot to wash my face and hands; dabbed at the tunic with cold. “Your squad’s just two bays down from Al’s, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see ”what happened?“

“No. Yes. Not *when* it happened.” For the first time I noticed that she was crying, big tears rolling down her cheeks and off her chin. Her voice was even, controlled. She pulled at her hair savagely. “It’s a mess.”

I stepped over and put my hand on her shoulder. “*Don’t touch me*!” she flared and knocked my hand off with the brush. “Sorry. Let’s go.”

At the door to the head she touched me lightly on the arm.

“William…” She looked at me defiantly. “I’m just glad it wasn’t me. You understand? That’s the only way you can look at it.”

I understood but I didn’t know that I believed her.

“I can sum it up very briefly,” the commodore said in a tight voice, “if only because we know so little."

“Some ten seconds after we destroyed the enemy vessel, two objects, very small objects, struck the *Anniversary* amidships. By inference, since they were not detected and we know the limits of our detection apparatus, we know that they were moving in excess of nine-tenths the speed of light. That is to say, more precisely, their velocity vector *normal* to the axis of the *Anniversary* was greater than nine-tenths the speed of light. They slipped in behind the repeller fields.”

When the *Anniversary* is moving at relativistic speeds, it is designed to generate two powerful electromagnetic fields, one centered about five thousand kilometers from the ship and the other about ten thousand klicks away, both in line with the direction of motion of the ship. These fields are maintained by a “ramjet” effect; energy— picked up from interstellar gas as we mosey along.

Anything big enough to worry -about hitting (that is, anything big-enough to see with a strong magnifying glass) goes through the first field and comes out with a very strong negative charge all over its surface. As it enters the second field, it’s repelled from the path of the ship. If the object is too big to be pushed around this way, we can sense it at a greater distance and manoeuvre out of its way.

“I shouldn’t have to emphasize how formidable a weapon this is. When the *Anniversary* was struck, our rate of speed with respect to the enemy was such that we traveled our own length every ten-thousandth

of a second. Further, we were jerking around erratically with a constantly changing and purely random lateral acceleration. Thus the objects that struck us. must have been guided, not aimed. And the guidance system was self-contained, since there were no Taurans alive at the time they struck us. All of this in a package no larger than a small pebble.

"Most of you are too young to remember the term, *future shock*. Back in the Seventies, some people felt that technological progress was so rapid that people, normal people, just couldn't cope with it; that they wouldn't have time to get used to the present, before the future was upon them. A man named Toffler coined the term, *future shock*, to describe this situation." The commodore could get pretty academic.

"We're caught up in a physical situation that resembles this scholarly concept. The result has been disaster. Tragedy. And, as we discussed in our last meeting, there is no way to counter it. Relativity traps us in the enemy's past; relativity brings them from our future. We can only hope that next time, the situation will be reversed,. And all we can do to help bring that about is try to get back to Stargate, and then to Earth, where specialists may be able to deduce something, some sort of counterweapon, from the nature of the damage.

"Now we could attack the Taurans' portal planet from space, and perhaps destroy the base without using you infantry. But I think there would be a very great risk involved. We might be… shot down by whatever hit us today. And never return to Stargate with what I consider to be vital information. We could send a drone with a message detailing our assumptions about this new enemy weapon… but that might be inadequate. And the Force would be that much further behind, technologically.

"Accordingly, we have set a course that will take us around Yod-Four, keeping the collapsar as much as possible between us and the Tauran base. We will avoid contact with the enemy and return to Stargate as quickly as possible."

Incredibly, the commodore sat down and kneaded his temples. "All of you are at least squad or section leaders. Most of you have good combat records. And I hope that some of you will be rejoining the Force after your two years are up. Those of you who do will probably be made lieutenants, and face your first real command.

"It is to these people I would like to speak for a few moments; not as your… as one of your commanders, but just as a senior officer and adviser.

"One cannot make command decisions simply by assessing the tactical situation and going ahead with whatever course of action will do the most harm to the enemy with a minimum of death and damage to your own men and materiel. Modern warfare has become very complex, especially during the last century. Wars are not won by a simple series of battles won, but by a complex interrelationship between military victory, economic pressures, logistic manoeuvring, access to the enemy's information, political postures—dozens, literally dozens of factors."

I was hearing this but the only thing that was getting through to my brain was that a third of our friends' lives had been snuffed out less than an hour before, and the woman I loved was dying upstairs, and he was sitting up there giving us a lecture on military theory.

"So sometimes you have to throw away a battle in order to help win the war. This is exactly what we are going to do.

"This was not an easy decision. In fact, it was probably the hardest decision of my military career. Because, on the surface at least, it may look like cowardice.

“The logistic computer calculates that we have about a sixty-two percent chance of success, should we attempt to destroy the enemy base. Unfortunately, we would only have a thirty percent chance of survival— as some of the scenarios leading to success involve ramming the portal planet with the *Anniversary* at light-speed.” Jesus Christ.

“I hope none of you ever have to face such a decision. When we get back to Stargate I will in all probability be court-martialed for cowardice under fire. But I honestly believe that the information that may be gained from analysis of the damage to the *Anniversary* is more important than the destruction of this one Tauran base.” He sat up straight. “More important than one soldier’s career.”

I had to stifle an impulse to laugh. Surely “cowardice” had nothing to do with his decision. Surely he had nothing so primitive and unmilitary as a will to live.

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The maintenance crew managed to patch up the huge rip in the side of the *Anniversary* and repressurize that section. We spent the rest of the day cleaning up the area; without, of course, disturbing any of the precious evidence for which the commodore was willing to sacrifice his career.

The hardest part was jettisoning the bodies. It wasn’t so bad except for the ones whose suits had burst.

==========

Marygay came out of the operation alive but in pretty bad shape. Her intestine had ruptured under pressure and she’d developed peritonitis. Under these conditions, Doc Wilson said, her condition was very grave; he could keep her alive indefinitely in normal gravity or less, but he didn’t know whether she would survive the period of acceleration before collapsar jump.

The week that followed was slow hell. I screwed up the most routine chores and snapped at everybody and couldn’t sleep for worry and gathering grief. Marygay’s condition got no better, no worse. I was allowed to see her a few times but she was so doped up I think she hardly recognized me.

Two days before collapsar jump, I was supervising routine maintenance on the pods and an idea that had been forming all along suddenly crystallized. I put Tate in charge and ran up to the infirmary. The nurse on duty calmed me down with a cup of soya and I had an hour to think over the plan while Doc Wilson worked on somebody’s arm. Finally I got to see him.

==========

“We’re giving her a fifty-fifty chance, but that’s pretty arbitrary. None of the published data on this sort of thing really fit.”

He drew a cup of soya and sat down, sighing. “So you’ve got an idea.”

“Well… look, Doctor, I don’t know much about medicine, but I *do* know physics. Now, isn’t it safe to say that her chances are better, the less acceleration she has to endure?”

“Certainly. For what it’s worth. The commodore’s going to take it as gently as possible, but that’ll still be four or five G’s. Even three might be too much; we won’t know until it’s over.”

I nodded impatiently. “Yes, but I think there’s a way to expose her to less acceleration than the rest of us.”

“If you’ve developed an acceleration shield,” he said, smiling, “ you better hurry and file a patent. You

could sell it to Star Fleet for a considerable—"

"No, Doc, it wouldn't be worth much under normal conditions; our shells work better and they evolved from the same principles." "Explain away."

"We put Marygay into a shell and flood—"

"Wait, wait. Absolutely not. A poorly-fitting shell was what caused this in the first place. And this time, she'd have to use somebody else's."

"I know, Doc, let me explain. It doesn't have to fit her exactly, just so long as the life support hookups can function. The shell won't be pressurized on the inside; it won't ' have to be because she won't be subjected to all those thousands of kilograms per square centimeter pressure from the fluid outside."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"It's just an adaptation of— you've studied physics, haven't you?"

"A little bit, in medical school. My worst courses, after Latin."

"Do you remember the principle of equivalence?"

"I remember there was something by that name. Something to do with relativity, right?"

"Uh-huh. It just means that… there's no difference being in a gravitational field and being in an equivalent accelerated frame of— it means that when the *Anniversary* is blasting five G's, the effect on us is the same as if it were sitting on its tail on a big planet, one with five G's surface gravity."

"Seems obvious."

"Maybe it is. It means that there's no experiment you could perform on the ship that could tell you whether you were blasting or just sitting on a big planet."

"Sure there is. You could turn off the engines, and if—"

"Or you could look outside, sure; I mean isolated, physics-lab type experiments."

"All right. I'll accept that. So?"

"You know Archimedes' Law?"

"Sure, the fake crown— that's' what always got me about physics, they make a big to-do about obvious things and when it gets to the rough parts—"

"Archimedes' Law says that when you immerse something in a fluid, it's buoyed up by a force equal to the weight of the fluid it displaces."

"That's reasonable."

"And that holds no matter what kind of gravitation or acceleration you're in— in a ship blasting at five G's, the water displaced, if it's water, weighs five times as much as regular water, at one G."

"Sure."

"So if you float somebody in the middle of a tank of water, so that she's weightless, she'll still be weightless when the ship is doing five G's."

“Hold on, son. You had me going there for a minute, but it won’t work.”

“Why not?” I was tempted to tell him to stick to his pills and stethoscopes and let me handle the physics, but it was a good thing I didn’t.

“What happens when you drop a wrench in a submarine?”

“Submarine?”

“That’s right. They work by Archimedes’ principle—”

“Ouch! You’re right.” Jesus. Hadn’t thought it through.

“That wrench falls right to the floor just as if the submarine weren’t ‘weightless’.” He looked off into space, tapping a pencil on the desk. “What you describe is similar to the way we treat patients with severe skin damage, like burns, on Earth. But it doesn’t give any support to the internal organs, the way the acceleration shells do, so it wouldn’t do Marygay any good…“

I stood up to go. “Sorry I wasted—”

“Hold on there, though, just a minute. We might be able to use your idea part-way.”

“How do you mean?”

“I wasn’t thinking it through, either. The way we normally use the shells is out of the question for Marygay, of course.” I didn’t like to think about it. Takes a lot of hypno-conditioning to lie there and have oxygenated fluorocarbon forced into every natural body orifice and one artificial one. I fingered the valve fitting embedded above my hipbone.

“Yeah, that’s obvious, it’d tear her—say… you mean, low pressure—”

“That’s right. We wouldn’t need thousands of atmospheres to protect her against five G’s straight-line acceleration; that’s only for all the swerving and dodging—I’m going to call Maintenance. Get down to your squad bay, that’s the one we’ll use. Dalton’ll meet you there.”

==========

It was five minutes before injection into the collapsar field and I started the flooding sequence. Marygay and I were the only ones in shells; my presence wasn’t really vital since the flooding and emptying could be done by Control. But it was safer to have redundancy in the system and besides, I wanted to be there.

It wasn’t nearly as bad as the normal routine; none of the crushing-bloating sensation. You were just suddenly filled with the plastic-smelling stuff (you never perceived the first moments, when it rushed in to replace the air in your lungs), and then there was a slight acceleration, and then you were breathing air again, waiting for the shell to pop; then unplugging and unzipping sand climbing out—

Marygay’s shell was empty. I walked over to it and saw blood.

“She haemorrhaged.” Doc Wilson’s voice echoed sepulchrally. I turned, eyes stinging, and saw him leaning in the door to the locker alcove. He was unaccountably horribly smiling.

“Which was expected. Doctor Harmony’s taking care of it. She’ll be just fine.”

==========

VI

Marygay was walking in another week, “confraternizing” in two, and pronounced completely healed in six.

Ten long months in space and it was Army, Army, Army all the way. Calisthenics, meaningless work details, compulsory lectures-there was even talk that they were going to reinstate the sleeping roster we’d had in Basic, but they never did, probably out of fear of mutiny. A random partner every night wouldn’t have set too well with those of us who’d established more-or-less permanent pairs.

All this crap, this insistence on military discipline, mainly bothered me because I was afraid it meant they weren’t going to let us out. Marygay said I was being paranoid; they only did it because there was no other way to maintain order for ten months.

Most of the talk, besides the usual bitching about the Army, was speculation about how much Earth would have changed, and what we were going to do once we got out. We’d be fairly rich: twenty-six years’ salary all at once. Compound interest, too; the five hundred dollars we’d been paid for our first month in the Army had grown to over fifteen hundred dollars.

We arrived at Stargate in early 2023, Greenwich date.

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The base had grown astonishingly in the nearly seventeen years we had been on the Yod-Four campaign. It was one building the size of Tycho City, housing nearly ten thousand. There were seventy-eight cruisers, the size of the *Anniversary* or larger, involved in raids on Tauran-held portal planets. Another ten guarded Stargate itself, and two were in orbit waiting for their infantry and crew to be out-processed. One other ship, the *Earth’s Hope II*, had returned from fighting and had been waiting at

Stargate for another cruiser.

They had lost two-thirds of their men and it was just not economical to send a cruiser back to Earth with only thirty-nine people aboard. Thirty-nine confirmed civilians.

We went planetside in two scout-ships.

==========

General Botsford (who had only been a major when we’d first met him, when Stargate was two huts and twenty-four graves) received us in an elegantly-appointed seminar room. He was pacing back and forth at the end of the room, in front of a huge holographic operations cube. I could just make out the labels and was, astonished to see how far away Yod-Four had been—but of course distance isn’t important with the collapsar jump. It’d take us ten times as long to get to Alpha Centauri, which was practically next door but, of course, isn’t a collapsar.

“You know — ” he said, too loudly, and then more conversationally, “you know that we could disperse you into other strike forces and send you right, out again. The Elite Conscription Act has been changed now, extended, five years’ subjective service instead of two.

“We aren’t doing that, but— damn it!—I don’t see why some of you don’t *want* to stay in! Another couple of years and compound interest would make you wealthy for life. Sure, you took heavy losses but that was inevitable; you were the first. Things are going to be easier now. The fighting suits have been improved, we know more about Taurans’ tactics, our weapons are more effective… there’s no need to be afraid.“

He sat down at the head of our table and looked down the long axis of it, seeing nobody. “My own memories of combat are over a half-century old. To me it was exhilarating, strengthening. I must be a different kind of person from all of you.” -

Or have a very selective memory, I thought.

“But that’s neither here nor there. I have an alternative to offer you, one that doesn’t involve direct combat."

“We’re very short of qualified instructors. You might even say we don’t *have* any—because, ideally, the Army would like for all of its instructors in the combat arts to have been combat veterans.

“You people were taught by veterans of Vietnam and Sinai, the youngest of whom were in their forties when you left Earth. Twenty-six years ago. So we need you and are willing to pay.

“The Force will offer any one of you a lieutenancy if you will accept a training position. It can be on Earth; on the Moon at double pay; on Charon at triple pay; or here at Stargate for quadruple pay. Furthermore, you don’t have to make up your mind now. You’re all getting a free trip back to Earth—I envy you, !• haven’t been back in twenty years, will probably never get back—and you can get the feel of being a civilian again. If you don’t like it, just walk into any UNEF installation and you’ll walk out an officer. Your choice of assignment.

“Some of you are smiling. I think you ought to reserve judgment. Earth is not the same place you left.”

He pulled a little card out of his tunic £id looked at it, half-smiling. “Most of you have on the order of four hundred thousand dollars coming to you, accumulated pay and interest. But Earth is on a war footing and, of course, it is the citizens of Earth who are supporting the war with their tax dollars. Your income puts you in a ninety-two percent income tax bracket. Thirty-two thousand dollars could last you about three years if you’re very careful.

“Eventually you’re going to have to get a job, and this is one job for which you are uniquely trained. There aren’t that many others available-the population of Earth is over nine billion, with five or six billion unemployed. And all of your training is twenty-six years out of date.

“Also keep in mind that your friends and sweethearts of two years ago are now going to be twenty-six years older than you. Many of your relatives will have passed away. I think you’ll find it a very lonely world.

“But to tell you more about this world, I’m going to turn you over to Sergeant Siri, who just arrived from Earth. Sergeant?”

“Thank you, General.” It looked as if there was something wrong with his skin, his face; and then I realized he was wearing face powder and lipstick. His nails were smooth white almonds.

“I don’t know where to begin.” He sucked in his upper lip and looked at us, frowning. “Things have changed so very much since I was a boy.

“I’m twenty-three, so I wasn’t even born when you people left for Aleph… well, for starts, how many of you are homosexual?” Nobody. “That doesn’t really surprise me. I am, though”—no kidding— “and I guess about a third of everybody in Europe and North America is. Even more in India and the Middle East. Less in South America and China.

“‘Most governments encourage homosexuality—the United Nations is officially neutral—they encourage it mainly because homolife is the one sure method of birth control.”

That sounded specious to me. In the Army they freeze-dry and file a sperm sample and then vasectomize you. Pretty foolproof.

When I was going to school, a lot of the homosexuals on campus were using that argument. And maybe it was working, after a fashion. I'd expected Earth to have a lot more than nine billion people.

"When they told me, back on Earth, I was going to be talking to some of you codgers, I did some research—mainly reading old faxes and magazines.

"A lot of the things you were afraid were going to happen, didn't. Hunger, for instance. Even without using all of our arable land and sea, we manage to feed everybody and could handle twice as many. Food technology and impartial distribution of calories—when you left Earth there were millions of people slowly starving to death. Now there are none.

"You were concerned about crime. I read that you couldn't walk the streets of New York City or London or Hong Kong without a bodyguard. But with everybody better educated and better cared for, with psychometry so advanced that we can spot a potential criminal at the age of six—and give him corrective therapy that works—well, serious crime has been on the decline for twenty years. We probably have fewer serious crimes in the whole world than you used to have—"

"This is all well and good," the general broke in gruffly, making clear that it was neither, "but it doesn't completely mesh with what I've heard. What do you call a serious crime? What about the rest?"

"Oh, murder, assault, rape; all the serious crimes against one's person, all are down. Crimes against property—petty theft, vandalism, illegal residence—these are still-"

"What the hell is 'illegal residence'?"

Sergeant Siri hesitated and then said primly: "One certainly shouldn't deprive others of living space by illegally acquiring property."

Alexandrov raised his hand. "You mean there's no such thing as private ownership of property?"

"Of course there is. I… I owned my own rooms before I was drafted." For some reason the topic seemed to embarrass him. New taboos? "But there are limits."

Luthuli: "What do you do to criminals? Serious ones, I mean. Do you still brainwipe murderers?"

He was visibly relieved to change the subject. "Oh, no. That's considered very primitive. Barbaric. We imprint a new, healthy personality on them; then they are repatterned and society absorbs them without prejudice. It works very well."

"Are there jails, prisons?" Yukawa asked.

"I suppose you could call a correction center a jail. Until they have therapy and are released, people are held there against their will. But you could say it was a malfunction of the will which led them there in the first place."

I didn't have any plans for a life of crime, so I asked him about the thing that bothered me most. "The general said that over half—your-population is on the dole; that we wouldn't bB able to get jobs either. Well?"

"I don't know this word 'dole', Of course you mean the government-subsidized unemployed. That's true, the government takes care of over half of us. I'd never had a job until I was drafted. I was a

composer.

“Don’t you see that there are two sides to this business of chronic unemployment? The world and the war could be run smoothly by a billion, certainly two billion people. This doesn’t mean that the rest of us sit around idle.

“Every citizen has the opportunity for up to eighteen years free education—fourteen years are compulsory. This and the *freedom* from necessity of employment have caused a burgeoning of scholarly and creative activity on a scale unmatched in all of human history. There are more artists and writers working today than lived in the first two thousand years of the Christian era! And their works go to a wider and more educated audience than has ever before existed.”

That was something to think about. Rabi raised his hand. “Have you produced a Shakespeare yet? A Michelangelo? Numbers aren’t everything.”

Siri brushed hair out of his eves with a thoroughly feminine gesture. “That’s not a fair question. It’s up to posterity to make comparisons like that.”

“Sergeant, when we were talking earlier,” the general said, “didn’t you say that you lived in a huge beehive of a building, that nobody could live in the country?”

“Well, sir, it’s true that nobody can live on potential farm land. And where I live, *lived*, Atlanta Complex, I had seven million neighbors in what you could technically call one building—but it’s not as if we ever felt crowded. And you can go down the elevator any time, walk in the fields, walk all the way to the sea if you want…

“That’s something you should be prepared for. A lot of cities don’t bear any resemblance to the random agglomerations of buildings they used to be. Most of the big cities were burned to the ground in the food riots in 2004, just before the United Nations took over the production and distribution of food. The city planners usually‘ rebuilt along modern, functional lines.

“Paris and London, for instance, . had to be rebuilt completely. Most world capitals did, though Washington survived. It’s just a bunch of monuments and offices, though; almost everybody lives in the surrounding complexes: Reston, Frederick, Columbia.”

Then Siri got into specific towns and cities—everybody wanted to know about his home town—and, in general, things sounded a lot better than we had expected. In response to a rude question, Siri said that he didn’t wear cosmetics just because he was a homosexual; everybody did. I decided I’d be a maverick and just wear my face.

We consolidated with the survivors from *Earth’s Hope II* and took that cruiser back to Earth while analysts assessed the *Anniversary’s* damage. The commodore was scheduled for a hearing, but, as far as we knew, was not going to be court-martialed.

Discipline was fairly relaxed on the way back. In seven months I read thirty books, learned how to play *Go*, taught an informal class in elementary physics, and grew ever closer to Marygay.

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VII

I hadn’t given it much thought, but of course we were celebrities on Earth. At Kennedy the Sec-Gen greeted each of us personally-he was a very old, tiny, black man named Yakubu Ojukwu—and there were hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of spectators crowded as close as they could get to the

landing field.

The Sec-Gen gave a speech to the crowd and the newsmen, then the ranking officers of *Earth's Hope II* babbled some predictable stuff while the rest of us stood more-or-less patiently in the tropical heat.

We took a big chopper to Jacksonville, where the nearest international airport was. The city itself had been rebuilt along the lines Siri had described. You had to be impressed.

We first saw it as a solitary gray mountain, a slightly irregular cone, slipping up over the horizon and growing slowly larger. It was sitting in the middle of a seemingly endless patchwork quilt of cultivated fields, dozens of roads and. rails converging on it. The eye saw these roads, fine white threads with infinitesimal bugs crawling on them, but the brain refused to integrate the information into an estimate of the size of the thing. It couldn't be that big.

We came closer and closer—up-drafts making the ride a little bumpy-until finally the building seemed to be just a light gray wall taking up our entire field of vision on one side. We moved closer and could barely see dots of people; one dot was on a balcony and might have been waving.

"This is as close as we can come," the pilot said over an intercom, "without locking into the city's guidance system and landing on top. Airport's to the north." We banked away, through the shadow of the city.

The airport was no great marvel; larger than any I'd ever seen before but conventional in design: a central terminal like the hub of a wheel, with monorails leading out a kilometer or so to smaller terminals where airplanes loaded 'and.am-… loaded. We skipped the terminals completely, just landed near a Swissair stratospheric liner and walked from the chopper to the plane. Our pathway was cordoned off and we were surrounded by a cheering mob. With six billion on relief, I didn't suppose they had any trouble rounding up a crowd for any such occasion.

I was afraid we were going to have to sit through some more speeches, but we just filed straight into the plane. Stewards and stewardesses brought us sandwiches and drinks while the crowd was being dispersed. And there are no words to describe a chicken-salad sandwich and a cold beer, after two years of synthetics.

Mr. Ojukwu explained that we were going to Geneva, to the United Nations building, where tonight we'd be honored by the General Assembly. Or put on display, I thought. He said most of us had relatives waiting in Geneva.

As we climbed over the Atlantic, the water seemed unnaturally green. I was curious, made a mental note to ask the stewardess; but then the reason was apparent. It was a farm. Four large rafts (they must have been huge but I had no idea how high up we were) moved in slow tandem across the green surface, each raft leaving a blue-black swath that slowly faded. Before we landed I found out that it was a kind of tropical algae, raised for livestock feed.

Geneva was a single building similar to Jacksonville, but seemed smaller, perhaps dwarfed by the natural mountains surrounding it. It was covered with snow, softly-beautiful.

We walked for a minute through swirling snow—how great not to be exactly at "room temperature" all the time!—to a chopper that took us to the top of the building; then down an elevator, across a slide-walk, down another elevator, another slidewalk, down a broad stationary corridor to Thantstrasse 281B, room 45, matching the address on the directions they'd given me. My finger poised over the doorbell button, I was almost afraid.

I had gotten fairly well adjusted to the fact that my father was dead—the Army had had such facts waiting for us at Stargate—and that didn't bother me as much as the prospect of seeing my mother, suddenly eighty-four. I almost ducked out, to find a bar and desensitize, but went ahead and pushed the button.

The .door opened quickly and she was older but not that much different, a few more lines and hair white instead of gray. We stared at each other for a second and then embraced and I was surprised and relieved at how happy I was to" see her, hold her.

She took my cape and hustled me into the living room of the suite, where I got a real shock: my father was standing there; smiling but serious, inevitable pipe in his hand.

I felt a flash of anger at the Army for having misled me—then realized he couldn't be my father, looking as he did, the way I remembered him from childhood.

"Michael? Mike?"

He laughed. "Who else, Willy?" My kid brother, quite middle-aged. I hadn't seen him since '93, when I went off to college. He'd been sixteen then; two years later he was oh the Moon with UNEF.

"Get tired of the Moon?" I asked, handshaking.

"Huh? Oh… no, Willy, I spend a month or two every year, back on *terra firma*. It's not like it used to be." When they were first recruiting for the Moon, it was with the understanding that you only got one trip back. Fuel cost too much for commuting.

The three of us sat down around a marble coffee table and Mother passed around joints.

"Everything has changed so much," I said, before they could start asking about the war. "Tell me everything."

My brother fluttered his hands and laughed. "That's a tall enough order. Have a couple of weeks?" He was obviously having trouble figuring out how to act toward me. Was I his nephew, or what? Certainly not his older brother any more.

"You shouldn't ask Michael, anyhow," Mother said. "Loonies talk about Earth the way virgins talk about sex."

"Now, Mother…"

"With enthusiasm and ignorance."

I lit up the joint and inhaled deeply. It was oddly sweet.

"Loonies live a few weeks out of the year on Earth and spend half that time telling us how we ought to be running things."

"Possibly. But the other half of the time we're observing. Objectively."

"Here comes my Michael's 'objective' number." She leaned back and smiled at him.

"Mom, you *know* … oh hell, let's drop it. Willy's got the rest of his life to sort it out." He took a puff on the joint and I noticed he wasn't inhaling. "Tell us about the war, man. Heard you were on the strike force that actually fought the Taurans. Face to face."

"Yeah. It wasn't much."

"That's right," Mike said. "I-heard they were cowards."

"Not so much… that." I shook my head to clear it. The marijuana was making me drowsy and lightheaded. "It was more like they just didn't get the idea. Like a shooting gallery, they lined up and we shot 'em down."

"How could that be?" Mom said. "On the news they said you lost nineteen people."

"Did they say nineteen were killed? That's not true."

"I don't remember exactly."

"Well, we did *lose* nineteen people, but only four of them were killed. That was in the early part of the battle, before we had their defences figured out." I decided not to say anything about the way Chu died. That would get too complicated. "Of the other fifteen, one was shot by one of our own lasers. He lost an arm but lived. All of the others… lost their minds."

"What—some kind of Tauran weapon?" Mike asked.

"The Taurans didn't have anything to do with it! It was the Army. They conditioned us to kill anything that *moved*, once the sergeant triggered the conditioning with a few key words. When people came out of it, they couldn't handle the memory. Being a butcher." I shook my head violently a couple of times. The dope was really getting to me.

"Look, I'm sorry." I got to my feet with some effort. "I've been up some twenty—"

"Of course, William." Mother took my elbow and steered me to a bedroom and promised to wake me in plenty of time for the evening's festivities. The bed was indecently comfortable but I could've slept leaning up against a lumpy tree.

==========

Fatigue and dope and too full a day: Mother had to wake me up by trickling cold water on my fa£e. She steered me to a closet and identified two outfits as being formal enough for the occasion. I chose a brick-red one—the powder blue seeming a little foppish—showered and shaved, refused cosmetics (Mike was all dolled up and offered to help me), armed myself with the half-page of instructions telling how to get to the General Assembly, and was off.

I got lost twice along the way, but they have these little computers at every corridor intersection that will give you directions to anyplace, in fourteen languages.

Men's clothing, as far as I was concerned, had really taken a step backward. From the waist up it wasn't so bad, tight high-necked blouse with a short cape; but then there was a wide shiny functionless belt, from which dangled a little jeweled dagger, perhaps adequate for opening mail; and then pantaloons that flounced out in great pleats and were tucked into shiny synthetic high-heeled boots that came almost to your knees. Give me a plumed hat and Shakespeare would've hired me on the spot.

The women fared better. I met Marygay outside the General Assembly hall.

"I feel absolutely naked, William."

"Looks good, though. Anyhow, it's the style." Most of the young women I'd passed had been wearing a

similar outfit: a simple shift with large rectangular windows cut in both sides, from armpit to hem. The hem ended where your imagination began. For modesty, the outfit required very conservative movements and a great faith in static electricity.

“Have you seen this place?” she said, taking my arm. “Let’s go on in. Conquistador.”

We walked in through the automatic doors and I stopped short. The hall was so large that going into it, you felt as if you’d stepped outdoors.

The floor was circular, more than a hundred meters in diameter. The walls rose a good sixty or seventy meters to a transparent dome—I remembered having seen it when we landed—on which gray drifts of snow danced and blew swirling away. The walls were done in a muted ceramic mosaic, thousands of figures representing a chronology of human achievement. I don’t know how long I stared.

Across the hall, we joined the other hardy veterans for coffee. It was synthetic, but better than soya. To my dismay, I learned that tobacco was rarely grown on Earth and even, through local option, was outlawed in some areas in order to conserve arable land. What you could get was expensive and usually wretched, having been grown by amateurs on tiny backyard or balcony plots. The only good tobacco was Lunar and its price was, well, astronomical.

Marijuana was plentiful and cheap. In some countries, like the United States, it was free; produced and distributed by the government.

I offered Marygay a joint and she declined. “I’ve got to get used to them slowly. I had one earlier and it almost knocked me out.”

“Me too.”

An old man in uniform walked into the lounge, his breast a riotous fruit salad of ribbons, his shoulders weighed down with five stars apiece. He smiled benignly when half the people jumped to their feet. I was too much a civilian already, and remained seated.

“Good evening, good evening,” he said, making a patting sit-down motion with his hand. “It’s good to see you here. Good to see so many of you.” Many? A little more than half the number we started out with.

“I’m General Gary Manker, UNEF Chief of Staff. In a few minutes we’re going over there,” he nodded in the direction of the General Assembly hall, “for a short ceremony. Then you’ll be free for a well deserved rest, put your feet up for a few months, see the world, whatever you want. So long as you can keep the reporters away.

“Before you go over, though, I’d like to say a few words about what you’ll want to do *after* those months, when you get tired of being on vacation, when the money starts to run low…” Predictably, the same spiel General Botsford had given us at Stargate: you’re going to need a job and this is the one job you can be sure of getting.

The general left after saying that an aide would be by in a few minutes to herd us over to the rostrum. We amused ourselves for several minutes, discussing the merits of re-enlistment.

The aide turned out to be a good-looking young woman who had no trouble jollying us into alphabetical order (she didn’t seem to have any higher opinion of the military than did we) and leading us over to the hall.

The first couple of rows of delegates had abandoned their desks to us. I sat in the “Gambia” place and

listened uncomfortably to tales of heroism and sacrifice. General Manker had most of the facts right but used slightly wrong words.

Then they called us up one by one and Dr. Ojukwu gave each of us a gold medal that must have weighed a kilogram. Then he gave a little speech about mankind united in common cause while discreet holo cameras scanned us one by one. Inspiring fare for the folks back home. Then we filed out under waves of applause that were somehow oppressive.

I had asked Marygay, who had no living relatives, to come on up and sack with :me. There was a crowd milling around the formal entrance to the hall, so we hustled the other way,, took the first escalator up several stories and got totally lost on a succession of slidewalks and lifts. Then we used the little corner boxes to find our way home.

I'd told Mother about Marygay and that I'd probably be bringing her back. They greeted each other warmly and Mother settled us in the living room with a couple of drinks and went off to start dinner. Mike joined us.

"You're going to find Earth awfully boring," he said after amenities.

"I don't know," I said. "Army life isn't exactly stimulating. Any change has got to be—"

"You can't get a job."

"Not in physics, I know; twenty-six years is like a geologic—"

"You cart't get *any* job."

"Well, I'd planned to go back and take my Master's degree over, maybe go on…" Mike was shaking his head.

"Let him finish, William." Mary-gay shifted restlessly. "I think he knows something we don't."

He finished his drink and swirled the ice around in the bottom of the glass, staring at it. "That's right. You know, the Moon is all UNEF, civilians and military, and we amuse ourselves by passing rumors back and forth." "Old military pastime." "Uh-huh. Well, I heard a rumor about you…" he made a sweeping gesture, "you veterans and went to the trouble to check it out. It was true."

"Glad to hear it."

"Yeah, you will be." He set down his drink, took out a joint, looked at it, put it back. "UNEF is going to do anything short of kidnapping to get you people back. They control the Employment Board and you can be damned sure you're going to be undertrained or overtrained for any job opening that comes along. Except soldier."

"Are you sure?" Marygay asked. We both knew enough not to claim they couldn't do a thing like that.

"Sure as a Christian. I have a friend on the Luna division of the Employment Board. He showed me the directive; it's worded very politely. And it says 'absolutely no exceptions'."

"Maybe by the time I get out of school—"

"You'll never get *into* school. Never, get past the maze of standards and quotas. If you try to push, they'll just claim you're too old-hell, I couldn't get into a doctoral program at *my* age, and you're—"

"Yeah, I get the idea. I'm two years older."

“That’s it. You’ve got the choice of either spending the rest of your life on relief or soldiering.”

“No contest,” Marygay said. “Relief.”

I agreed. “If five or six billion people can carve out a decent life without a profession, I can too.”

“They’ve grown up in it,” Mike said. “And it may not be what you would call a ‘decent life’. Most of them just sit around and smoke dope and watch the holo. Get just enough to eat to balance their caloric output. Meat once a week. Even on Class I relief.”

“That won’t be anything new,” I said. “The food part, anyhow—it’s exactly the way we were fed in the Army.

“As for the rest of it, as you just said, Marygay and I didn’t grow up in it; we’re not likely to sit around half-blown and stare at the cube all day.”

“I paint, ” Marygay said. “I always wanted to settle down and get really good at it.”

“And I can continue studying physics even if it’s not for a degree. And take up music or writing or—” I turned to Marygay, “or any of those things the sergeant talked about at Stargate.”

“Join the New Renaissance,” he said without inflection, lighting his pipe. It was tobacco and smelled delicious.

He must have noticed my hunger. “Oh, I’m being a hell of a host.” He got some papers out of his purse and rolled an expert joint. “Here. Marygay?”

“No thanks—if it’s as hard to get as they say, I don’t want to get back into the habit.”

He nodded, relighting his pipe. “Never did anybody any good. Better to train your mind, be able to relax without it.” He turned to me. “The Army *did* keep up your cancer boosters?”

“Sure.” Wouldn’t do for you to die in so unsoldierly a fashion. I lit up the slender cigarette. “Good stuff.”

“Better than anything you’ll get on Earth. Lunar marijuana is better, too. Doesn’t mess you up so much.”

Mother came in and sat down. “Dinner’ll be ready in a few minutes. I hear Michael making unfair comparisons again.”

“What’s unfair? Earth marijuana, a couple of J’s and you’re a zombie.”

“Correction: *you* are. You’re just not used to it.”

“O. K., O. K. And a boy shouldn’t argue with his mother.”

“Not when she’s right,” she said, strangely without humor. “Well! Do you children like fish?”

We talked about how hungry we were, a safe enough subject, for a few minutes and then sat down to a huge broiled red snapper, served on a bed of rice. It was the first square meal Mary-gay and I had had in twenty-six years.

==========

VIII

The next day, like everyone else I went to get interviewed on the cube. It was a frustrating experience.

Commentator: “Sergeant Mandella, you are one of the most-decorated soldiers in the UNEF.” True, all of us had gotten a fistful of ribbons at Stargate. “You participated in the famous Aleph-null campaign, the first actual contact with Taurans, and just returned from an assault on Yod-Four.”

Me: “Well, you couldn’t call it—”

Commentator: “Before we talk about Yod-Four, I’m sure the audience would be very interested in your *personal* impression of the enemy, as one of the very few people to have met them face-to-face. They’re pretty horrible-looking, aren’t they?”

Me: “Well, yes; I’m sure you’ve seen the pictures. About all they don’t show you is the texture of the skin. It’s pebbly and wrinkled like a lizard’s, but pale orange.”

Commentator: “What do they smell like?” Smell?

Me: “I haven’t got the faintest idea. All you can smell in a space-suit is yourself.”

Commentator: “Ha-ha, I see. What I’m trying to get, Sergeant, is how *you* felt, the first time you saw the enemy… were you afraid of them, disgusted, enraged, or what?”

“Well, I *was* afraid, the first time, and disgusted. Mostly afraid—but that was before the battle, when a solitary Tauran flew overhead. During the actual battle, we were under the influence of hate-conditioning—they conditioned us on Earth and triggered it with a phrase—and I didn’t feel much except the artificial rage.”

“You despised them—and showed no mercy.”

“Right. Murdered them all, even though they made no attempt to fight back. But when they released us from the conditioning… well, we couldn’t believe we had been such butchers. Fourteen people went insane and all the rest of us were on tranquillizers for weeks.”

“Ah,” he said, absent-mindedly, and glanced over to the side for a moment. “How many of them did you kill, yourself?”

“Fifteen, twenty—I don’t know; as I said, we weren’t in control of ourselves. It was a massacre.”

All through the interview, the commentator seemed a bit dense, repetitive. I found out why that night.

==========

Marygay and I were watching the cube with Mike. Mom was off getting fitted with some artificial teeth (the dentists in Geneva supposedly being better than American ones). My interview was on a program called *Potpourri*, sandwiched between a documentary on Lunar hydroponics and a concert by a man who claimed to be able to play Telemann’s *Double Fantasia in A Major* on the harmonica. I wondered whether anybody else in Geneva, in the world, was tuned in.

Well, the hydroponics thing was interesting and the harmonica player was a virtuoso, but the thing in between was pure drivel.

Commentator: “What do they smell like?”

Me (off-camera): “Just horrible, a combination of rotten vegetables and burning sulfur. The smell leaks in through the exhaust of your suit.”

He had kept me talking and talking in order to get a wide spectrum of sounds, from which he could

synthesize any kind of nonsense in response to his questions.

“How the hell can he do that?” I asked Mike when the show was over.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Mike said, watching the quadruplicated musician play four different harmonicas against himself. “All the media are censored by the UNEF. It’s been ten, twelve years since Earth had any objective reporting about the war. You’re lucky they didn’t just substitute an actor for you and feed him lines.”

“Is it any better on Luna?”

“Not as far as public broadcast. But since every one there is tied into UNEF, it’s easy enough to find out when they’re lying outright.”

“He cut out *completely* the part about conditioning.”

“Understandable.” Mike shrugged. “They need heroes, not automatons.”

Marygay’s interview was on an hour later, and they had done the same thing to her. Every time she had originally said something against the war or the Army, the cube would switch to a close-up of the woman interviewing her, who would nod sagely while a remarkable imitation of Marygay’s voice gave out arrant nonsense.

==========

UNEF was paying for five days’ room and board in Geneva, and it seemed as good a place as any to begin exploring this new Earth. The next morning we got a map— which was a book a centimeter thick—and took a lift to the ground floor, determined to work our way up to the roof without missing anything.

The ground floor was an odd mixture of history and heavy industry. The base of the building covered a large part of what used to be the city of Geneva, and a lot of old buildings were preserved.

Mostly, though, it was all noise and hustle: big g-e trucks growling in from outside, shedding clouds of snow; barges booming against dock pilings (the Rhone River crawls through the middle of the huge expanse); even a few little helicopters beating this way and that, coordinating things, keeping away from the struts and buttresses that held up the gray sky of the next floor, forty meters up.

It was a marvel and more and we could have watched it for hours, but we would’ve frozen solid in a few minutes, with just light capes against the wind and cold. We decided we’d come back another day, more warmly dressed.

The floor above was called the first floor, in defiance of logic. Marygay explained that the Europeans had always numbered them that way (funny, I’d been a thousand light-years from New Mexico, and back, but this was the first time I’d‘ crossed the Atlantic). It was the brains of the organism, where the bureaucrats and the systems analysts and the cryogenic handymen hung around.

We stood in a large quiet lobby that somehow smelled of glass. One wall was a huge holo cube displaying Geneva’s table of organization, a spidery orange pyramid with tens of thousands of names connected by lines, from the mayor at top to the “corridor security” people at the base. Names flicked out and were replaced by new ones as people died or were fired or promoted or demoted. Shimmering, changing shape, it looked like the nervous system of some fantastic creature. In a sense, of course, it was.

The wall opposite the holo cube was a window overlooking a large room which a plaque identified as the "*Kontrollezimmer*." Behind the glass were hundreds of technicians in neat rows and columns, each with his own console with a semi-flat holo surrounded by dials and switches. There was an electric, busy air to the place: most of the people had on an earphone-microphone headset, talking with some other technician while they scribbled on a tablet or fiddled with switches; others rattled away on console keyboards with their headsets dangling from their necks. A very few seats were empty, their owners striding around looking important. An automated coffee tray slid slowly up one row and down the next.

Through the glass you could hear a faint susurrus of what must have been an unholy commotion inside.

There were only two other people in the lobby, and we overheard them say they were going to look at "the brain." We followed them down a long corridor to another viewing area, rather small in comparison to the one overlooking the control room, looking down on the computers that held Geneva together. The only illumination in the viewing area was the faint cold blue light from the room below.

The computer room was also small in comparison, about the size of a baseball diamond. The computer elements were featureless gray boxes of various sizes, connected by a maze of man-sized glass tunnels which had air locks at regular intervals. Evidently this system allowed access to one element at a time, for repair, while the rest of the room remained at a temperature near absolute zero, for superconductivity.

Though lacking the nervous activity of the control room, and far from the exciting hurly-burly on the floor below, the computer room was more impressive in its own static way: the feeling of vast, unknowable powers under constraint; a shrine to purpose, order, intelligence.

The other couple told us there was nothing else of interest on the floor, just meeting rooms and offices and busy officials. We got back on the lift and went to the second floor, which was the main shopping arcade.

Here, the map-book was very handy. The arcade was hundreds of shops and open-air markets arranged in a rectangular grid pattern, with interlacing slidewalks defining blocks where related .shops were grouped together. We went to the central mall, which turned out to be a whimsical reconstruction of medieval village architecture. There was a Baroque church whose steeple, by holographic illusion, extended into the third and fourth floors. Smooth wall mosaics with primitive religious scenes, cobblestones laid out in intricate patterns, a fountain with water spraying from monsters' mouths… we bought a bunch of grapes from an open-air greengrocer (the illusion faltered when he took a calorie ticket and stamped my ration book) and walked along the narrow brick sidewalks, loving it. I was glad Earth still had time, and energy and resources, for this sort of thing. There was a bewildering variety of objects and services for sale, and-we had plenty of money, but we'd got out of the habit of buying things, I guess, and we didn't know how long our fortunes were going to have to last.

(We *did* have small fortunes, in spite of what General Botsford had said. Rogers' father was some kind of hot-shot tax lawyer, and she'd passed the word—we only had to pay tax at the rate set for our *average* annual income. I wound up with $280,000.)

We skipped the third floor, mostly communications, because we'd crawled all over it the day before, when we went for our interviews. I was tempted to go speak to the person who'd rearranged my words, but Marygay convinced me it would be futile.

The artificial mountain of Geneva is "stepped"—like a wedding cake—the first three floors and the ground level about a kilometer in diameter, rising about a hundred meters; floors four through thirty-two the same height but about half the diameter. Floors thirty-three through seventy-two make up the top cylinder, about three hundred meters in diameter by a hundred and twenty meters high.

The fourth floor, like the thirty-third, is a park; trees, brooks, little animals. The walls ate transparent, open in good weather, and the shelf (the roof of the third floor) is planted in heavy forest. We rested for a while by a pond, watching people swim and feeding bits of grape to the minnows.

Something had been bothering me subliminally ever since we arrived in Geneva and suddenly, surrounded by all these gay people, I knew what it was.

"Marygay," I said, "Nobody here is unhappy."

She smiled. "Who could be glum in a place like this? All the flowers and—"

"No, no… I mean in all of Geneva. Have you seen anybody who looked like he might be dissatisfied with the way things are? Who-"

"Your brother…" "Yeah, but he's a foreigner too. I mean the merchants and workers and the people just hanging around."

She looked thoughtful. "I haven't really been looking. Maybe not."

"Doesn't that strike you as strange?"

"It is unusual… but…" She threw a whole grape in the water and the minnows scattered. "Remember what that homosexual sergeant said?,They diagnose and correct antisocial traits at a very early age. And what rational person wouldn't be happy here?"

I snorted. "Half of these people are out of work and most of the others are doing artificial jobs that are either redundant or could be done better by machine."

"But they all have enough to eat and plenty to occupy their minds. That wasn't so, twenty-six years ago."

"Maybe," I said, not wanting to argue. "I suppose you're right." Still, it bothered me.

==========

IX

We spent the rest of that day and all of the next in the United Nations headquarters, essentially the capital of the world, that took up the whole top cylinder of Geneva. It would have taken weeks to see everything. Hell, it would take more than a week just to cover the Family of Man Museum. And every country had its own individual display, with a shop selling typical crafts, sometimes a restaurant with native food. I had been afraid that national identities might have been submerged; that this new world would be long on order and short on variety. Glad to have been mistaken.

Marygay and I planned a travel itinerary while we toured the UN. We decided we'd go back to the United States and find a place to stay, then spend a couple of months traveling around.

When I approached Mom for advice in getting an apartment, she seemed strangely embarrassed, the way Sergeant Siri had been. But she said she'd see what was available in Washington (my father'd had a job there and Mom hadn't seen any reason to move after he died) when she got back, the next day.

I asked Mike about this reluctance to talk about housing and he said it was a hangover from the chaotic years between the food riots and the reconstruction. There just hadn't been enough roofs to go around; people had had to live two families to a room even in countries that had been prosperous. It had been an unstable situation and finally the UN stepped in, first with a propaganda campaign and finally with mass

conditioning, reinforcing the idea that it was virtuous to live in as small a place as possible, that it was sinful to even *want* to live alone or in a place with lots of room. And one didn't talk about it.

Most people still had some remnant of this conditioning, even though they were detoxified over a decade before. In various strata of society it was impolite or unforgivable or rather daring, to talk about such things.

Mom went back to Washington and Mike to Luna while Marygay and I stayed on at Geneva for a couple of days.

==========

We got off the plane at Dulles and found a monorail to Rifton, the satellite-city where Mom was living.

It was refreshingly small after vast Geneva, even though it spread over a larger area. It was a pleasingly diverse jumble of various kinds of buildings, only a couple more than a few stories high, arranged around a lake, surrounded by trees. All of the buildings were connected by slidewalk to the largest place, a Fullerdome with stores and schools and offices. There we found a directory that told us how to get to Mom's place, a duplex on the lake.

We could have taken the enclosed slidewalk but instead walked alongside it, in the good cold air and smell of fallen leaves. People slid by on the other side of the plastic, carefully not staring.

Mom didn't answer her door but it turned out not to be locked. It was a comfortable place, extremely spacious by starship standards, full of Twentieth-Century furniture. . Mom was asleep in the bedroom, so Marygay and I settled in the living room and read for a while.

We were startled suddenly by a loud fit of coughing from the bedroom. I raced over and knocked on the door.

"William? I didn't"—coughing— "come in, I didn't know you were…"

We went in and she was propped up in bed, the light on, surrounded by various nostrums. She looked ghastly, pale and lined.

She lit a joint and it seemed to quell the coughing. "When did you get in? I didn't know…" "Just a few minutes ago. But what about you? How long has this… have you been…"

"Oh, it's just a bug I picked up in Geneva. I'll be fine in a couple of days." She started coughing again, drank some thick red liquid from a bottle. All of her medicines seemed to be the commercial, patent variety.

"Have you seen a doctor?" "Doctor? Heavens, no, Willy. They don't have, it's not serious, don't-"

"Not serious?" At eighty-four. "For Chrissake, Mother." I went to the phone in the kitchen and with some difficulty managed to get the hospital. —..

A plain girl in her twenties formed in the cube. "Nurse Donalson, General Services." She had a fixed smile, professional sincerity. But then everybody smiled.

"My mother needs to be looked, at by a doctor. She has a—" "Name and number, please." "Bette Mandella." I spelled it. "What number?"

"Medical services number, of course," she smiled.

I called in to Mom and asked her what her number was. “She says she can’t remember.”

“That’s all right, sir, I’m sure I can find her records.” She turned her smile to a keyboard beside her and punched out some code.

“Bette Mandella?” she said, her smile turning quizzical. “*You’re* her *son*“! But she must be in her eighties.”

“Please. It’s a long story. She really has to see a doctor.”

“Is this some kind of joke?”

“What do you mean?” Strangled coughing from the other room, the worst yet. “Really—this might be very serious, you’ve got to—”

“But, sir, Mrs. Mandella got a zero priority rating ‘way back in 2010.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“S-i-r…” the smile was hardening in place.

“Look. Pretend that I came from another planet. What is a ‘zero priority rating’?”

“Another—oh! I know you!” She looked-off to the left. “Sonya, come over here a second, you’d never guess who…” Another face crowded the cube, - a vapid blond girl whose smile was twin to the other nurse’s. “Remember? On the stat this morning?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “One of the soldiers—hey, that’s really max, really max.” The head withdrew.

“Oh, Mr. Mandella,” she said, effusive. “No wonder you’re confused. It’s really very simple.”

“Well?”

“It’s part of the Universal Medical Security System. Everybody gets a rating on their seventieth birthday. It comes in automatically from Geneva.”

“What does it rate? What does it mean?” But the ugly truth was obvious.

“Well, it tells how important a person is and what level of treatment he’s allowed. Class three is the same as anybody else’s; class two is the same except for certain life-extending—”

“And class zero is no treatment at all.”

“That’s correct, Mr. Mandella.” And in her smile there was not a glimmer of pity or understanding.

“Thank you.” I disconnected. Marygay was standing behind me, crying soundlessly with her mouth wide open.

==========

I found mountaineer’s oxygen at a sporting goods store and even managed to get some black-market antibiotics through a character in a bar in downtown Washington. But Mom was beyond being able to respond to amateur treatment. She lived four days. The people from the crematorium had the same fixed smile.

I tried to get through to Mike but the phone company wouldn’t let me place the call until I had signed a

contract and posted a twenty-five thousand dollar bond. I had to get a credit transfer from Geneva. The paperwork took half a day.

I finally got through to him. Without preamble: “Mother’s dead.”

There was a lapse of about a second while the radio waves wandered up to the Moon and another lapse coming back. He started and then nodded his head slowly. “No surprise. Every time I’ve come down to Earth, the past ten years, I’ve wondered whether she’ll still be there. Neither of us really had enough money to keep in very close touch.” He had told us in Geneva that a letter from Luna to Earth cost a hundred dollars’ postage—plus five thousand tax. It discouraged communication with what the UN considered to be a bunch of regrettably necessary anarchists.

We commiserated for a while and then Mike said, “Willy, Earth is no place for you and Marygay; you know that by now. Come to Luna. Where you can still be an individual. Where we don’t throw people out the air lock on their seventieth birthday.”

“We’d have to rejoin UNEF.”

“True, but you wouldn’t have to fight. They say they need you more for training. And you could study in your spare time, bring your physics up to date—maybe wind up eventually in research.”

We talked some more, a total of three minutes. I got a thousand dollars back.

Marygay and I talked about it for hours. We went to bed and still talked, couldn’t sleep, rattled on for hours saying the same things over and over.

Life on the Moon would be hard. Few luxuries, military discipline, long hours, constant danger from the environment.

Life on Earth was comfortable.

We could sit back and have our needs taken care of, smoke the doctored dope until nothing looked wrong and we were as satisfied as all the other civilians seemed to be.

But right now our minds were clear and we could see that the price of this happy order was total surrender to the collective will. Who wants to be a happy zombie?

On the other hand, being realistic, we would have little enough “free will” back in UNEF. It would be better, of course, than before, being officers—but UNEF could honor its contract for a year or two and then suddenly have us back out in a Strike Force.

But maybe they were telling the truth and didn’t want us for expensive cannon fodder; maybe they needed experienced soldiers to train new recruits, to crack the shell of Pollyannish conditioning that every civilian would have.

We talked about these things and for the first time we talked about love. Whether love would better flourish under one set of constraints or the other. Whether the game was worth the candle in either case.

Maybe our decision might have been different if we hadn't been staying in that particular place, surrounded by artifacts of Mother’s’ life and death. But we stopped talking at dawn, when in the cold gray light the proud, ambitious, careful beauty of Rifton turned sinister and foreboding; we packed two small bags and had our money transferred to the Tycho Credit Union and took a monorail to the Cape.

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X

“In case you’re interested, you aren’t the only combat veterans to have come back.” The recruiting officer was a muscular lieutenant of indeterminate gender. I flipped a coin mentally and it came up tails.

“Last I heard, there had been nine others,” she said in her husky tenor. “All of them opted for the Moon… maybe you’ll find some of your friends there.” She slid two simple forms across the desk. “Sign these and you’re in again. Second lieutenants.”

The form was a simple request to be assigned to active duty; we had never really gotten out of UNEF, since they had extended the draft law, but had just been on inactive status. I scrutinized the paper.

“There’s nothing on here about the guarantees we were promised at Stargate.”

“What guarantees?” She had that bland, mechanical Earth-smile.

“We were guaranteed assignment of choice and location of choice. There’s nothing about that.on this contract.”

“That won’t be ”necessary. The Force will…“

“I think it’s necessary, Lieutenant.” I handed back the form. So did Marygay.

“Let me check.” She left the desk and disappeared into an office. She was on a phone for a while and then we heard a printer rattle.

She brought back the same two sheets, with an addition typed under our names: “GUARANTEED LOCATION OF CHOICE LUNA AND ASSIGNMENT OF CHOICE COMBAT TRAINING SPECIALIST.”

We got a thorough physical checkup and were fitted for new fighting suits. The next morning we caught the first shuttle to orbit, enjoyed zero-G for a few hours while they transferred cargo to a spidery tachyon-torch shuttle, then zipped to the Moon, setting down at Grimaldi base.

On the door to the Transient Officers’ Billet, some wag had scratched, “Abandon hope all ye who enter.” We found our two-man cubicle and began changing for chow.

Two raps on the door. “Mail call, sirs.”

I opened the door and the sergeant standing there saluted. I just looked at him for a second and then remembered I was an officer and returned the salute. He handed me two identical ‘faxes. I gave one to Marygay and our hearts must have stopped simultaneously.

“They didn’t waste any time, did they?” Marygay said bitterly.

“Must be standing order. Strike Force Command’s light-weeks away. They can’t even know we’ve re-upped yet.”

“What about our…” She let it trail off.

The guarantee. “Well, we *were* given our assignment of choice.

Nobody guaranteed we’d have the assignment for more than an hour.“

“It’s so dirty.”

I shrugged. “It’s so Army.” But I had two disturbing feelings:

That all along we knew this was going to happen.

That we were going home.

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