YOU CAN NEVER GO BACK

1

I was scared enough.

Sub-major Stott was pacing back and forth behind the small podium in the assembly room/chop hall/gymnasium of the Anniversary. We had just made our final collapsar jump, from Tet-38 to Yod-4. We were decelerating at 1 1/2 gravities and our velocity relative to that collapsar was a respectable .90c. 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. Mandella!"

He was always very careful to call me "Sergeant" Mandella in front of the company. But everybody at this particular briefing was either a sergeant or a corporal: squad leaders. "Yes, sir."

"You're responsible for the psychological as well as the physical well-being of the men and women in your squad. Assuming that you are aware that there is a morale problem aboard this vessel, what have you done about it?"

"As far as my squad is concerned, sir?"

"Of course."

"We talk it out, sir.""And have you arrived at any cogent conclusion?"

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

"Ridiculous! Every one of us has been adequately conditioned against the pressures of living in close quarters and the enlisted people have the privilege of confraternity." That was a delicate way of putting it. "Officers must remain celibate, and 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. That would be just him and Cortez. Probably 50 percent right. Cortez was awfully friendly with Corporal Kamehameha.

"Sir, perhaps it was the detoxification back at Stargate; maybe—"

"No. The therapists only worked to erase the hate conditioning—everybody knows how I feel about that—and they may be misguided but they are skilled.

"Corporal Potter." He always called her by her rank to remind her why she hadn't been promoted as high as the rest of us. Too soft. "Have you `talked it out' with your people, too?"

"We've discussed it, sir."

The sub-major could "glare mildly" at people. He glared mildly at Marygay until she elaborated.

"I don't believe it's the fault of the conditioning. My people are impatient, just tired of doing the same thing day after day."

"They're anxious for combat, then?" No sarcasm in his voice.

"They want to get off the ship, sir."

"They will get off the ship," he said, allowing himself a microscopic smile. "And then they'll probably be just as impatient to get back on."

It went back and forth like that for a long while. Nobody wanted to come right out and say that their squad was scared: scared of the Tauran cruiser closing on us, scared of the landing on the portal planet. Sub-major Stott had a bad record of dealing with people who admitted fear.

I fingered the fresh T/O they had given us. It looked like this:

I knew most of the people from the raid on Aleph, the first face-to-face contact between humans and Taurans. The only new people in my platoon were Luthuli and Heyrovsky. In the company as a whole (excuse me, the "strike force"), we had twenty replacements for the nineteen people we lost from the Aleph raid: one amputation, four deaders, fourteen psychotics.

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 maneuvers 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, "Fuck you, sir." Idiotic custom.

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

I turned my ring to my assistant squad leader's position 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 ahold of the men and tell them we have to be in the shells by 2000. Evasive maneuvers."

"Crap. They told us it would be days."

"I guess something new came up. Or 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, okay? Little sugar?"

"Roger. Be down in about half an hour."

"Thanks. I'll get on it."

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

"What do you think, Marygay?"

"Maybe the Commodore just wants us to try out the shells once more."

"Before the real thing."

"Maybe." She picked up a cup and blew into it. She looked worried. "Or maybe the Taurans had a ship way out, waiting for us. I've wondered why they don't do it. We do, at Stargate."

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

She didn't say anything while she filled her cup. "Maybe we've stumbled on their version of Stargate. Or maybe they have more ships than we do by now."

I filled and sugared two cups, sealed one. "No way to tell." We walked back to a table, careful with the cups in the high gravity. "Maybe Singhe knows something," she said.

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

"Oh, I can get him directly. We . . ." She dimpled a little bit. "We've been friends."

I sipped some scalding coffee and tried to sound nonchalant. "So that's where you've been disappearing to."

"You disapprove?" she said, looking innocent.

"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 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 looked 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.

2

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 as much as 25 gravities.

Tate was waiting for me in the shell area. The rest of the squad was milling around, talking. I gave him his coffee. "Thanks. Find out anything?"

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

He slurped some coffee. "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."

"Maybe they'll eventually make us obsolete, and we can 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 spacesuit; 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; 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 "2" (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 2.7 and holding steady. When the maneuvers began at 2010, you couldn't feel the difference. I thought I saw the needle fluctuate a tiny bit, though.

The major drawback to the system is that, of course, anybody caught outside of his shell when the Anniversary hit 25 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. So it's not exactly something you can hop out of and come up fighting.

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.

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

"That's the second time," she said, mad. "The first one was on my back—I think that shell doesn't fit right, gets creases." "Maybe you've lost weight."

"Wise guy." Our caloric intake had been rigorously monitored ever since we left Stargate the first time. You can't use a fighting suit unless it fits you like a second skin,

A wall speaker drowned out the rest of her comment. "Attention all personnel. Attention. All army personnel echelon six and above and all navy personnel echelon four and above will report to the briefing room at 2130."

It repeated the message twice. I went off to lie down for a few minutes while Marygay showed her bruise to the medic and the armorer. 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 80 gravities.

"After blasting for approximately a day, its acceleration suddenly jumped to 148 gravities." Collective gasp.

"Yesterday, it jumped to 203 gravities. I shouldn't need to remind anyone here that this is twice the accelerative capability 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, while we were doing evasive maneuvers. 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 an explosion than ones we have observed in the past, so at least their

progress in propulsion hasn't been matched by progress in explosives.

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

"That depends on your frame of reference, Commodore," she answered dutifully. "To me, it's been about eight months."

"Exactly. You've lost about nine years, though, to time dilation, while we maneuvered between collapsar jumps. In an engineering sense, as we haven't done any important research and development aboard ship . . . that enemy vessel comes from our future!" He paused 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, of course, 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 outshoot 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 ... 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 stand by your shells. By the time we are within five hundred million kilometers, you will be in them, and all shell compounds flooded and pressurized. We cannot wait for anyone.

"That's all .l have to say. Sub-major?"

"I'll speak to my people later, Commodore. Thank you."

"Dismissed." And none of this "fuck 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.

My squad had clean-up detail, so I told everybody who was to do what, put Tate in charge, and left. Went up to the NCO room for some company and maybe some 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.

3

We had a get-together with the sub-major 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 that they would be able to handle us better than last time.

But that brings up an interesting point. In our only previous ground contact with the Taurans, we had a tremendous advantage: they seemed not to be able to understand exactly what was going on. As belligerent as they had been in space, we had expected them to be real Huns on the ground . . . but instead they just lined up and allowed themselves to be slaughtered. One escaped and presumably described the idea of old-fashioned infighting to his fellows.

But that didn't mean the word had necessarily gotten out to this particular bunch. The only way we know of to communicate faster than the speed of light is to physically carry a message through collapsar jumps. And there was no telling how many jumps there were between Yod-4 and the Taurans' home base so they could be just as passive as the last bunch, or they might have been practicing infantry techniques for nearly 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 in our cocoons. I played a game of chess with Rabi and lost. Then Rogers led the platoon in some vigorous calisthenics, perhaps 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. By the time my pressure dial read 2.7, we were 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 me and went round and round like a charge in a super-conductor: according to military formalism, the conduct of war divides neatly into two categories, tactics and logistics. Logistics has to do with just about everything but the actual fighting, which is (are?) tactics. And now we're fighting, but we don't have a tactical computer to guide us through attack and defense. Just a huge, superefficient cybernetic grocery clerk of a logistic computer.

And the other side of my brain, which was not quite as pinched, would argue that it doesn't matter what name you give to a computer, it's just a bunch of memory crystals, logic banks, nuts and bolts . . . if you program it to be Ghengis 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 if you teach him well you can take a Zen monk and turn him into a warrior.

Then what the hell are you/we, am I? answered the other side. A peace-loving vacuum-welding-specialist 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 at myself. They don't do it anymore.

And the only reason 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....

The light blinked green and I chinned the switch automatically. We were down to 1.3 before I realized that it meant we were alive, we had won the first skirmish.

I was only partly right.

We were standing in the hall, stretching and groaning, when Bohrs came staggering down the corridor. His face was gray. I took his shoulder.

"What's wrong, Bohrs?"

"Negulesco's squad. They're all dead."

"What?" He didn't nod or anything, just stared at the wall. "And the whole fourth platoon: Keating, Thomas, Chu, Fruenhauf . . . twenty-four in all, crushed to death."

I didn't know what to say. "At least they . . ." I let it trail off. I was going to say, At least they didn't feel anything, but who knows what you would feel?

"Attention, all personnel. Attention. All infantry personnel echelon six and above will assemble in five minutes in the assembly room." The speaker crackled for a few seconds and a new voice came on, a weary voice:

"This is the Commodore. We met and destroyed the enemy vessel at 0254. At 0252, the enemy launched a missile at us, and we expended seven drones intercepting it. It was destroyed . . less than five hundred kilometers from the Anniversary, and many of the ship's electronic systems have sustained ... considerable radiation damage. The life support units for squad bays Five, Six, Seven, and Eight went out while the bays were fully pressurized, and all of the occupants perished." He paused a long time. "There will be a memorial service at 0800 tomorrow. That is all."

The other voice came back on. "All medical personnel report immediately to sick bay. All maintenance personnel report immediately to your prime stations. Lieutenant Pastori report to sick bay."

Marygay and Ching and Rogers and I got dressed and went up to the assembly area in silence.

At the meeting they explained what had happened, very little that we didn't already know, and assigned a burial detail. All squad leaders were on it, and we had to choose a person from each of our squads. I did it by casting dice, and Shockley went along with me. It wasn't too bad except for the ones whose suits had split.

4

We were in a synchronous orbit above the uninhabited side of the one planet-sized chunk in the ring of detritus that circled the cold black pit of Yod-4. From the other side of the frozen cinder, the Tauran base acknowledged our presence by periodically tossing bubble missiles at the Anniversary. We knew how to handle those from the last time. Just touch them with a laser.

Since our attack plans, for what they were worth, were set up requiring four platoons, they took Ching's squad from my platoon and Al-Sadat's from the second platoon. They promoted Ching to prime-sergeant and put him in charge. Gave us four platoons of about thirteen people each.

We were all packed into the assembly area: Cortez came through the door and picked his way to the podium.

"All right, if you all want to shut up . . . quiet!" Cortez had been phenomenally ugly when we first met him, a year ago—or ten!—back on Charon. He didn't improve with age: grotesquely scarred, bald, little white beard, skin the texture of old leather; strong and tough and fast and always in control; hard and intelligent and very cruel in a calculating way. He had fought in the two last wars on Earth, before the United Nations broke down and reformed. He had been a soldier for almost forty years.

"Now the computer's going to show you a graphical picture of our path, the way we're going to approach the enemy base." He gestured, and we turned to watch the holograph screen at the opposite end of the room. It showed a conventional picture of a sphere with lines of latitude and longitude, slowly rotating. The Anniversary was a tiny model up in one corner.

"We've stepped up the time rate by a factor of a hundred. Now watch." A bunch of little lights popped out of the Anniversary and dropped slowly to the planet, weaving around in a complex random pattern. "The four red lights are the scoutships, one for each platoon. The rest"—about twenty white lights—"are programmed decoys, like last time."

The attack plan was pretty simple. We'd drop almost to the surface, on the side of the planet opposite the enemy base. Then we'd fan out and approach the base from all different directions, maneuvering erratically but in a coordinated way, so we'd all hit the base at the same time. The ships would be pre-programmed; no manual control at all (that didn't sit too well).

"Now here's the best recon picture we have." The globe disappeared and an aerial holograph took its place. "Many of these features should look familiar to you, from last time. Of course, we know a little more about their functions now."

A moving arrow pointed to the structures as Cortez talked about them. "The Flower. This is the first target; you remember, it's where the bubbles come from. We better get this out before the ground attack.

"Almost as important, here, these lines of white silo things, the ships. No Taurans are getting away alive this time, except as prisoners.

"These are the targets your scoutships—and the decoys—are programmed to knock out, before you land. Every ship has twenty missiles, Class Three tachs. The attack is coordinated so that every ship will release half its missiles at once, timed for all two hundred and fifty to converge on the base simultaneously.

"If this destroys the Flower and the ships, you'll land immediately and attack. If not, the decoys will continue to seek targets of opportunity while your scoutships concentrate on staying in one piece.

"Each ship also has a gigawatt laser, but we don't know whether we'll be able to maintain one bearing for long enough to burn anything. We'll see."

He rubbed his beard and smiled that funny little smile of his. "If the aerial attack isn't successful, and I have a hunch it won't be, we have to get in there with our launchers and lasers and do the job on foot. Same priority: first knock out the ships and the Flower.

"It's going to be a fast and furious attack. We won't have more than thirty seconds from the time we let loose our bombs to the time we roll out on the ground. Be only two or three seconds if the initial salvo gets its targets."

He gripped the podium and said, almost in a whisper, "I will have to have absolute, unconditional blind obedience. I swear to God I'll burn anybody who doesn't follow my orders just like a robot.

"We still have to take a prisoner. Once we have one of the Taurans to interrogate and examine, maybe we'll be able to stop going in on foot. Maybe. The Commodore is sure that he could destroy that base completely, with the Anniversary's armament . . . but that remains to be seen.

"All right. We knock out the Flower and the ships and then, ladies and gentlemen, we go hunting. Once we get a live Tauran, I can whistle up the ships, we withdraw, and the Commodore will see whether he can knock out the base. Assuming the Taurans will sit there and let us leave."

He pulled down the drawing sheet behind him, shook it to randomize the charge, then smoothed it against its backing. He drew a lopsided circle. "This is the base," he said, and drew in symbols showing where the various installations were. It looked like this:

"Now, this dead rock doesn't have a magnetic field, so your inertial compasses will be set pointing toward the geometric 'north' of the planet. From the orientation of the base, it's obvious that the Taurans use the same system.

"First and fourth platoons will roll out about five hundred meters east-northeast of this line of ships at the top. Private Herz!"

"Sir?"

"You will be issued the heavy rocket launcher that belonged to the old fourth platoon. The instant you roll out of that scoutship, check whether any of the enemy ships are still standing. If they are, knock them out.

"After Herz has taken care of that, odd-numbered squads in both platoons advance about a hundred meters while the even-numbered squads lay down covering fire. Then evens come up and pass them while odds cover. Herz, when you get within range of the Flower, kill it."

He pointed to the two Salamis. "We know from Aleph that these structures are living quarters. Don't fire on them unless you have to. Not until I say to.

"Second and third platoons, you'll be doing about the same thing. Who's got the heavy launcher in third?"

"Right here." Corporal Conte.

"While you're taking care of the ships on your side, knock out their communications dome. They may have forces elsewhere on the planet, though it seems unlikely. Still, we don't want them to be able to call for reinforcements.

"Once we knock out the Flower, first and fourth assemble near the east Salami; second and third take the west. Don't bunch up; everybody just get within good striking range and try to find cover and wait for my orders.

"Questions?"

"Lieutenant," I asked, "all this seems to assume that their defensive setup is the same here as it was on Aleph, but Aleph was a jungle world—"

"—and this one is hard-frozen stone. Sergeant, you know there's no answer to that. Aleph is all we have to go on. The structures look similar, and we have to assume they serve similar functions. It's all guesswork until we attack.

"It's possible that our biggest danger won't be from the Taurans but from the planet itself. Charon and Stargate are similar worlds, of course, and we've done hundreds of maneuvers on them . . . but never against a live, unpredictable enemy. You all know what happens if you stumble into a pool of helium two or touch a cold rock with the fins of your heat exchanger. Nobody's suspending the laws of physics just to help you concentrate on the enemy."

Somehow I'd managed not to think about that too much. When we left Stargate the second time, the total number of people killed in training exercises—all three strike forces—was forty-one. That's under controlled conditions, where a hundred people are ready to drop everything and help you. Most of them were heat-exchanger detonations, though; nothing you can do to help in those cases.

"You platoon leaders and squad leaders get together with your people and make sure they know exactly what they have to do. We'll have full gear inspection tonight at 1900, after chop. Unless there are any gross deficiencies, we'll be on ready status from then on."

"Sir," Kamehameha asked, "do you have any idea when the attack is going to be?"

Anybody else, he would have chewed out. "If I knew, I'd have told you," he said mildly. "Within a couple of days, I suspect. Depends on the logistic computer. Anybody else?" No response. "Dismissed."

Then the litany.

5

I was up in the NCO lounge, trying to concentrate on a game of O'wari with Al-Sadat, when we got the word. Everybody had been on edge for the past three days.

The speaker crackled and Al-Sadat looked up at it, letting his handful of pebbles trickle to the floor. We both knew the game was over.

"Attention all personnel. Planetside operations will commence in exactly one hour. All infantry and active support units report at once to your scoutship bays. Attention all personnel. Planetside operations will ..."

My stomach flipped twice and, getting out of the chair, I had to swallow back nervous bile. I'd felt about the same, every time the speaker had crackled in the two days since the first muster. It wasn't simply fear of going into combat—that was bad enough—but also the terrifying uncertainty of the whole thing. This could be a milk run or a suicide mission or anything in between. Al-Sadat and I ran down the corridor and jumped into the lift, hoping to beat our squads to the scoutships.

Marygay was already there and getting into her suit when I slipped through the lock. I had one glimpse of Marygay's white flesh before she closed the front plate and dogged it. I stripped and backed into my own suit, and while I was making the attachments it occurred to me that that one flash might have been the last time I'd see her alive. She meant more to me than anybody else on this ship, probably more than anybody on Earth, but all I felt was a dulling, empty better you than me, dear. I hated myself for thinking it, but it was true.

The relief tubes went on all right, but the biometrical monitors wouldn't stay put on my sweat-drenched skin. I could just reach my tunic without getting out of the suit; managed to dry the spots sufficiently for the silver chloride electrodes to stick. The first platoon was coming through the lock by twos and threes by the time I got everything

hitched up and put my arms in the suit's arms and closed up the front. The babble of conversation stopped and then continued, muted, sound conduction through the metal floor. I chinned Marygay's frequency.

"Ready, dear?"

"William? I guess, I—no, I'm not. Why couldn't they have given us more warning? I was so nervous anyhow, to have it come all of a sudden like that ..."

"I know. Maybe it's better, though, rather than worry about it for days."

"All right get a move on let's go goddammit!" Cortez on the general frequency. Must have been on external monitor, too; all the people getting into their suits turned to look at him. "Let me have Sergeants Rogers and Mandella and Corporal Potter on my freak."

Cortez began a second after I chinned his frequency: "I'll be riding down with your platoon but, Rogers, remember that you're in charge, don't look my way for any kind of help. I've got three other platoons to worry about, and yours is supposed to be the best. And you others, listen up. If Ching gets it, one of you has to take over the fourth platoon. Mandella first, Potter if Mandella gets it. Understood?" We roger'd, but why the hell hadn't he told us sooner?

He clicked back to the general frequency. "Platoon leaders sound off." One at a time: Rogers, Akwasi, Bohrs, Ching. "All right, I'll give it to you and you can pass it on to your platoons after they're all dressed. We attack at 1131—that is, at 1131 we rip over the horizon and let loose all those good bombs. That means we've got to drop out of orbit in . . . exactly nine minutes, twenty seconds. So make your people move."

I couldn't control my shakes, so before I cut in the waldo circuits I swallowed a trank. Otherwise, trembling, I might have broken something. After the trank calmed me down, I took a stimtab to fire the old carcass back up to fighting order, activated my arms and legs, and began walking down the scoutship.

It seemed so big. The Anniversary itself was two kilometers long, but you could only visualize it in an abstract way. A scoutship was nearly a hundred meters of gleaming black metal, and inside the bay you never got far enough away that perspective didn't deform the streamlined shape and make it seem even longer.

Rogers waited back at the assembly area to make sure everybody got their suits and weapons in order. Marygay and Cortez and I entered the ship and strapped in and, speaking for myself, tried to relax a little.

After a few minutes, everybody was strapped down and waiting. Through the skin of the ship you could hear a high-pitched, fading whistle as they evacuated air from the bay. Then a slight bump and, through the porthole by my shoulder, I could see the struts and catwalks slide away and we were in space. It was 1027.

The descent to the surface, which had looked so smooth and graceful on Cortez's simulation, was a bone-wrenching ordeal as the ship twisted and swooped in the predetermined evasive pattern. There was a swabbie pilot up front, but he never touched the controls.

Skimming along the surface was a little easier to take. But the enemy must have been keeping pretty close tabs on our position, because six or seven times the laser flared out at a bubble. You couldn't see it happen, of course; just a green flicker on the tortured landscape rushing below and static electricity making your hair rustle.

1130: "Filters down. Prepare to disembark." Cortez's voice was flat with just a trace of controlled eagerness. He actually liked this crap.

Then a series of quick shudders as the bombs took off toward the enemy. I saw one streak to the horizon and explode in a glare so bright it hurt the eyes, even with the filter. It must have run into a bubble; the bombs didn't have the capabilities for defense and evasion that a scoutship had.

I turned on the pink light on the back of my suit that would identify me as a squad leader and tried to prepare myself mentally for the ejection. The trank was still holding pretty well; the fear was there, but it seemed detached, a memory. I wanted a smoke in the worst way.

Suddenly the base rolled over the horizon and I could see rubble strewn all over the plain; our ships, no way to tell whether they were drones—the Flower was still intact, spewing out bubbles. Ten or twelve ships flared by in different directions. Only two enemy ships were standing.

We decelerated to zero abruptly and my buckles unsnapped themselves, the side of the ship slid away, and I was falling free, less than ten meters from the ground. I was still falling when the ship flared and jumped away.

I landed kind of sloppily on hands and knees and chinned the squad frequency. "First squad sound off."

"One." Tate.

"Two." Yukawa.

"Three." Shockley.

"Four." Hofstadter.

"Five." Rabi.

"Six." Mulroy.

Rogers: "Mandella, get your people on line; your squad goes up first."

"First squad line up on me." They were almost in position already. "Shockley, you're too close to Yukawa. Move this way about ten meters."

In the few seconds we had before advancing, I tried to figure out who was winning. Hard to tell. One of the standing enemy ships exploded as I watched, but the Flower was still bubbling away.

Something looked different about the bubbles—at first I thought it was just a trick of perspective, but then I saw that some of them were actually rolling along the ground! They'd been enough trouble on Aleph, where you just had to keep your head down to avoid them. Cortez shouted over the general frequency for everybody to watch out for the goddam bubbles, they were coming in low.

I supposed there was a chance that they had thought that up independently, but most likely it meant that they had been in contact with the one Aleph survivor. By inference, that meant they'd probably be capable of infighting, if it came to that.

Herz and the other heavy launcher fired round after round at the Flower, without success. The bubbles were too thick and maneuverable that near their source.

Bubbles kept rolling toward us, but—the same as on Aleph one brush with a laser would pop them.

Somebody managed to destroy the last ship. At least none of them would be getting away. Would any of us?

Cortez came on the general frequency in the middle of a sentence. "—the casualty report for later, I don't have time—listen once, everybody! We can't reach the Flower with the heavies. Have to move in, move in fast to grenade range, and saturate the area. Second platoon, can you salvage the gigawatt ship?" So at least one scoutship was down.

"All right, forget it. Odd-numbered squads, move out!"

I got up and started to jog, the rest of my squad spread out in a shallow V-formation behind me. Covering laser fire lanced around us, stopping bubbles—good thing; it's almost impossible to use a laser finger while you're moving. You're liable to hit almost anything except what you're aiming at.

After thirty or forty meters, we went to ground. The second squad advanced and slipped through us while we did target practice on the bubbles.

Then Bergman got it. He topped a small rise and there was a bubble, so close that his body shielded it from our fire. He fired one wild burst and then the lower half of his body dissolved into crimson spray and Marygay screamed. Even with explosive decompression, he didn't die right away but hopped a dozen meters, his death tremors magnified by the suit's waldo circuits. The bubble rolled on, glowing more brightly with its grisly fuel, until Tate recovered and popped it. I was dazed but kept covering my sector automatically.

Second squad went down and we advanced again, trying to ignore the splash of dark-red crystal where Bergman had died. We were within about four hundred meters of the Flower and Cortez cut in:

"All right, everybody hold your positions; grenadiers, open fire on the Flower. Everybody else cover."

Pretty soon we didn't have any bubbles to shoot at, up close. With eight grenadiers firing at once, it was all the Flower could do to protect itself. We walked forward without any resistance and started using our lasers on the building. They were attenuated considerably by the distance, but we managed to pop a few bubbles even that far away. That may have been what made the difference—four microton grenades hit the Flower simultaneously, each one a bright flash and a spray of debris. The bubbles stopped coming out.

"Hold your fire—hold it!" One last grenade sailed in and hit the building right at the ground line, causing one petal to collapse.

"Maybe we'll get our prisoner here . . . first squads out of the first and second platoons, move in fast and take a look."

Goddam, why us? On Aleph, all the Taurans were holed up in the Flower when we attacked, though we later discovered that the Salamis were their living quarters. That had been a surprise attack, too; they'd had plenty of warning this time. I chinned Tate.

"Tate, what the hell is the combination for first squad, second platoon?"

"Two left, one right." Of course. Getting addle-brained.

I chinned it as we advanced toward the nearest petal. "Al-Sadat, this is Mandella. Which of us goes first?"

"You're senior, Mandella. Besides, I was ahead at O'wari."

"Yeah. Crap. Okay. Hell, I don't even know how to get into the goddam thing. Burn it down, I guess."

"Mandella, this is Cortez. Don't you burn that door down if you can get in without depressurizing the petal. Once we get our prisoner, you can rape and pillage all you want. Kid gloves until then, understand?"

"Roger, Lieutenant." Maybe they'd open the door for me. That'd be jolly.

I decided a simple plan would be best. Hard to think: scared and suddenly tired. Swallowed another stimtab, knowing I'd pay for it in a couple of hours. But I figured that in a couple of hours I'd either be back in the ship or dead. "Al-Sadat, hold your people back for cover until we get inside, then follow us."

"Roger."

Chinned my squad frequency. "Tate, Yukawa, Shockley come with me—no, Tate, you stay behind, in case—rest of the squad give me a half perimeter about ten meters from the entrance. And for chrissake don't get trigger-happy."

While they were assembling, I took Yukawa and Shockley to the entrance. It was obviously a door, wide and squat with a small red circle painted in the exact center, windowless and with no hardware. Didn't look much like our complicated airlocks.

"Why don't you push on the circle, Sergeant?" That was Shockley, who was technically the most expendable. Smart, though; I'd look pretty silly now, ordering him to do it.

I checked to see that everybody was in position and pressed the circle. The door slid open.

No airlock. Just a long, well-lit corridor full of vacuum and cold. Lots of similar doors lining the corridor. With the uneasy feeling that it was some kind of a trap, I stepped inside. "Okay, squad, follow me." Change frequency. "Al-Sadat?"

"I'm coming."

"Leave your second-in-command with Tate at the door." "I've got a better idea—why don't I send my second up with you and—"

"Knock it off, Al. It's lovely in here. Soothing. Tauran dancing girls."

Cortez: "Will you all cut the crap and get me a prisoner?"

When all thirteen of us had crowded into the corridor, I touched the first door and it slid open. It revealed a softly lit cubicle, empty except for a strung wire hammock and what looked like a piece of abstract sculpture in one corner. I described it to Cortez.

"All right. Leave it alone and go on to the next."

The next cubicle was exactly the same, and so were all the rest, along both sides of the corridor. I would have guessed that they were living quarters, except that they didn't look at all like the dormitory affairs we found on Aleph, inside the Salamis. The inside of the Flower on Aleph had been filled with arcane machinery.

We approached the end of the corridor with caution. Corridors from all the other petals converged there in a large circular hall. In the center was a vertical metallic tube, two meters thick, that was connected with the bubble generator. The hall was littered with rubble and the tube seemed to be standing at a slight angle.

"Al, get your people on the left side of the corridor. I'll take the right. We'll move out along the walls and see what happens."

We spread ourselves evenly around the edge of the circular hall and waited for something to happen. Nothing did. I decided to maybe precipitate some action by having a grenadier launch one down one of the halls. Rabi was well-positioned.

"Rabi—" I didn't finish because suddenly we were all floating a meter off the ground and slowly rising.

"What the hell, Mandella—"

"Shut up, Al. Everybody! Get ready to open fire—we'll burn this thing to the ground if we—"

"What's going on in there, goddammit?" Cortez.

"We're ,going up." That sounded inadequate. "Floating up. Under their control."

Cortez was silent for a second. "Ah . . . all right. Do what you have to do to protect yourself. But remember I need a prisoner. We get one and we're home free."

We floated to a second level and stopped. Everybody jumped onto the railless balcony. Only one corridor on this level. I walked around to it.

"Hofstadter, Rabi, come along with me." We walked down about ten meters to a door at the end of the corridor, just like the ones downstairs.

It also slid open at a touch, but instead of the hammock and sculpture, there were rows of what looked like library-style book-cases, covered with overlapping metal shingles. Each row was a different shade of blue. At the end of one row was a Tauran, looking at us.

The only movement was in his too-many-fingered hands, which undulated nervously. I felt a mixture of revulsion and pity at seeing his bloated/scrawny hourglass-shaped orange body, all huge swellings and ridiculously flimsy limbs—I'd seen so many of those bodies laser-slashed and smoldering in the slaughter at Aleph but still, they weren't human even though they were upright bipeds. You could feel more kinship with an egret.

"Keep an eye on him, Tate." I walked up and down the rows to see whether there were any others. The room was a large doughnut-shaped affair. I hadn't been in its counterpart on Aleph, but Fruenhauf had described it to me as being similar. It was evidently their computer. At last report—I had to keep reminding myself that it had been nearly a decade ago—they hadn't yet figured out what made it work.

The rest of the place was deserted. I made a report to Cortez.

"Good. You and three others stay and guard him. Send the rest back down and we'll go ahead with the battle plan, take the Salamis. They must be in there."

"If they haven't already left, sir."

"That's right. What do you think they would have left in, Sergeant? A matter transmitter? We got all the ships."

Possibly, I thought. They might have a matter transmitter out in the back yard, just didn't think to use it before.

"Let me have Tate, Mulroy, Hofstadter. We're going to stand guard on this ... prisoner. Sergeant Al-Sadat—" That sounded too military. "Al, you're in charge of everybody else. Take them down and join up with your platoons."

"Sure, Mandella. How the hell do we get down?"

"I've got a rope, Sergeant." That was Wiley, demolition "man." Somehow, it wouldn't sound right to call her a "demolition woman."

They filed out and we surrounded the Tauran. His clustered eyes didn't follow Tate and Mulroy as they went behind him; he just kept staring straight ahead, either unconcerned or paralyzed. The soap bubble that held his personal environment shimmered slightly in the light that seemed to come evenly from ceiling, floor, and walls.

There was a meter-high ribbon of window running all around the outside wall. I could see Cortez and the two platoons taking up positions around the east Salami. It occurred to me that perhaps that was what the Tauran was staring at, not us. I switched to the general frequency and positioned myself so that I could watch the Tauran and the Salami at the same time.

Al-Sadat and his men had just left the Flower and were moving toward Cortez when everything started to happen at once.

The far end of the Salami opened and Taurans, seemingly hundreds of them, came boiling out. And they came out shooting.

Each one of them had a box that looked incongruously like a suitcase, handle, clasps, and all, and held a flexible tube that led into the box. They handled it like a laser, fanning it back and forth.

Our laser beams danced through their ranks. If they had stayed bunched up, they would have all been dead in a couple of seconds. But they spread out quickly and took what cover the terrain and buildings allowed.

One touch with a laser would pop their life-support bubble, but to my horror I saw that their weapon was no less effective. All over the plain men and women were whirling and jerking in waldo-amplified agony, dying too slowly. Cortez was screaming.

"Pick a target and hit it! Stay with it till you hit it! Grenadiers, use your fingers—second platoon, third platoon, who the hell's in charge over there? Akwasi! Bohrs! Report!"

I turned to look at the west Salami, farther away, and it was obvious the same thing was happening there.

"Busia! Maxwell! Who the hell's in charge?"

"Busia here, Lieutenant—I don't know, maybe I'm in charge. I can't raise Akwasi or Bohrs. I—ai!" A short yelp and no more transmission.

"Second platoon, third platoon, listen up. You've got weapons superiority, so use it. Everybody-just-pick-a-target. And stay with it until you kill it! We're winning over here and you should be winning too—heavies! Herz! Conte! Knock down those fuckin' Salamis, there might be more inside."

Two quick rockets reduced the west Salami to rubble. The east stood.

"Lieutenant, this is Ching. Herz is dead."

"Well then pick up the launcher yourself. God . . . damn!"

"Luthuli here, I've got it." The first rocket went in low and scooped out a big crater in front of the building. The second knocked off a rounded corner and the third hit it dead center and collapsed it.

I chinned Marygay's frequency. "Marygay, this is William. Are you all right?"

Nothing.

"Are you all right?"

Cortez's voice cracked over the general freak. "Goddammit, cut the private jawin', we haven't won yet. That includes you spectators up there. Luthuli to your right watch out! Good!"

The Tauran was still staring impassively.

My count showed only six Taurans alive to the east, and one of them got caulked while I was counting. I cranked my image amplifier up to twenty log two and looked west, but from this angle it was hard to tell what the score was. Plenty of activity going on.

"All right, that's it," Cortez yelled. "Follow me, let's help the second and third."

What was left of the first and fourth platoons sprinted across the plain after Cortez. They left ten inert figures behind. One of them was Marygay.

Numb, I raised my finger and pointed it at the Tauran. But I couldn't get up any hate for him. I tried to hate Cortez, but that didn't work either. It was as if we were all just caught up in some impersonal catastrophe, and you couldn't blame some individual person or creature for the wrath of the elements.

The battle to the west was over by the time Cortez and his men got there. They had lost twelve. Cortez called for the ships.

I had expected that if we were going to have any trouble with the Tauran, it would be now, trying to get him outside and into a ship. But he seemed to understand our gestures and went along quietly. Whatever it was that had lifted us to the second floor worked both ways; following him, we just stepped over the edge and drifted gently down.

He walked to the ship without any protest and seemed to know what an acceleration couch was. We tried to strap him in, but the belt only encircled his bubble. The swabbie said that was all right; he was going to take it easy anyhow, not knowing how much tolerance a Tauran had for acceleration.

You couldn't help wondering why the Tauran was so docile. It occurred to me that perhaps he was a boobytrap; a bomb that could walk into the middle of the Anniversary and explode. Somebody else had thought of that too, for there was a portable fluoroscope waiting for us when we docked. It didn't show anything unusual.

All things considered, the Anniversary was pretty well equipped for taking a Tauran prisoner. We had a special "brig" which duplicated the atmosphere we had found in the Salamis on Aleph, and a case of food containers from the same source. We turned the Tauran over to the xenobiologists and retired to lick our wounds.

We had come to Yod-4 with seventy-three people and were leaving with twenty-seven, by my count. They hadn't released the casualty figures yet. But there were a lot of familiar faces missing. I had to find out sooner or later, so I went to Cortez. I rapped on the door of his cabin.

"Who is it?" he said gruffly.

"Sergeant Mandella, sir."

"All right. Enter."

He was sitting on his Spartan bunk cradling a coffee cup in both hands. There was a bottle at his feet that I recognized as being some of Lieutenant Bok's homemade booze. "Well?"

"Sir, I wanted to—I had to know . . . know how Marygay died."

He looked at me for a long moment, without expression. Then he took a drink and snorted. "Corporal Potter is not dead."

"Not dead! She was . . . wounded?"

"No. Nobody was wounded. Nobody was wounded and lived."

"Then . . . sir? What happened?"

"Catatonic." He poured a slosh of liquor into the cup and twirled it around, stared at it, sniffed it. "I don't know exactly what happened. I don't really care. She's in sick bay. You may check with Lieutenant Pastori."

She was alive! "Thank you, sir." I turned to leave.

"Sergeant."

"Sir?"

"Don't get your hopes up. Depending on Lieutenant Pastori's evaluation, she may still face a court-martial. There is only one penalty for cowardice under fire."

"Yes sir." Even that couldn't blunt my relief, my happiness.

"You may go."

Halfway down the corridor I met Kamehameha. She had on a fresh tunic and even some cosmetics, God knows where she got them. I threw her a salute and a wink and whispered, "Carry on, Corporal."

6

The only other person in the sick bay waiting room was Ensign Singhe.

"Good afternoon, Ensign."

"In a way, Sergeant. Have a seat."

I sat down. "Heard anything?"

"About Corporal Potter? No."

I crossed to the bulletin board and read a dozen different things that had nothing to do with me. Then Pastori came out. Singhe jumped up but I got him first.

"Doctor—how is Corporal Potter?"

"Who are you, that I should give you a progress report?"

"Uh . . . sir, I'm Sergeant Mandella, from her platoon."

"You'll be reporting to Lieutenant Cortez?" he said with just a faint hint of sarcasm. He knew who I was.

"No, uh, sir, my interest is personal. I'll be glad to report if you—"

"No." He waggled his head loosely. "I'll take care of the red tape. My aide needs something to keep him busy. Sit down. Who are you, Ensign?"

"Personal interest too."

"My, my. Such charms my patient must have had. Still has," he added quickly. "Neither of you ought to worry about this too much. It's a common enough malady among soldiers; I've treated a couple of dozen cases like it since Aleph. Responds very well to hypnotherapy."

"Battle fatigue?" Singhe asked.

"That's a polite term for it. Another is `neurasthenia.' I think the sub-major calls it cowardice."

I remembered what Cortez had said, and a ripple of fear ran up my back and crawled over my scalp.

"In Corporal Potter's case," he continued, "it's quite understandable. I got the details from her under light hypnosis.

"When the Taurans attacked, she was one of the first to see them coming out of the building. She went to ground immediately, but a couple of other people in her squad didn't. They were cut down in the first instant of the attack. They died horribly and she just couldn't handle it; she felt she was in some way responsible, both because she was their squad leader and because she hadn't said anything by way of warning. Actually, I doubt that there was any time to warn them.

"I suppose she also feels some guilt simply because she lived and they died. At any rate, she went into a state of shock right there and just withdrew completely. In civilian life, and in layman's terms, you would say she'd had a profound nervous breakdown."

That didn't sound so good. "Then, doctor . . . what will your recommendation be?"

"Recommendation?"

"To the court-martial board. Sir."

"What, are they really talking about trying her? For cowardice?" I nodded. "Ridiculous. A normal reaction to an insupportable situation. This is a medical condition, not a moral one."

I guess my relief was obvious.

"Now don't you go telling tales. Sub-major Stott is a good soldier, but I know he thinks discipline is getting poor and he's probably looking for a sacrificial lamb. Nothing you say is going to help her. Just wait for my report. That goes for you too, Ensign. The word is, you didn't get to see her; you don't know anything except that she's resting comfortably."

"When will I"—he looked at me—"we get to see her?"

"Not for at least a week, maybe two. I'm going to . . ." He shook his head. "It's impossible to explain without using technical terms. In a way, it's just making her look at the incident rationally, with a full knowledge of . . . what part of her psychological makeup made her react the way she did. To do this I have to make her regress to infancy and grow up again, pointing out stops along the way that have bearing on the situation. It's a standard technique, ninety-nine percent successful."

We exchanged politenesses and left.

I could have slept the clock around, reaction from the stimtabs, but we had an announcement saying that all infantry personnel would assemble after chop. I skipped chop and asked Tate to wake me up in time.

When I got to the chop hall, everybody was sitting in one corner, the empty seats crowding in on them like tombstones. It hit me with new force: we had left the training center in Missouri with one hundred people, and had picked up twenty more along the way. And now this little cluster of survivors.

I sat and listened to the talk without joining in. Most of it concerned going home: how much the world would have changed in the nearly twenty years we'd been gone, whether we'd have to retrain to get into the job market.

Alenandrov pointed out that we had twenty years' pay waiting for us, and it had been drawing compound interest. Plus a retirement pension. We might never have to work again. Nobody mentioned reenlisting. Nobody mentioned the fact that they might not let us go. It costs a lot to haul twenty-seven people from Stargate to Earth.

Stott walked in and, as we were rising, said, "Sit down."

He looked at the little group, and I could tell by his dark expression that he was thinking the same thing I had. He walked around in front of us.

"I'm not a religious man," he rasped. "If there is anyone here who would like to offer a prayer or a eulogy of some kind, let him do so now." There was a long silence.

"Very well." He reached into his tunic and pulled out a small plastic box. "Normally of course smoking is forbidden on the Anniversary. However, I have made a special arrangement with the maintenance people." He opened the box and inside there was a stack of factory joints. He set them carefully on the table. I wondered how long he'd had them.

He walked back to the door, very stiffly and without his usual briskness, and stopped. Facing out, he said, almost to himself, "You fought well." Then he left.

After a year of abstinence, and as tired as I was, the marijuana hit me hard. I smoked half a joint and fell asleep in the chair. I didn't dream.

After a week, waiting for the analysts to finish up planetside, we dropped through Yod-4 and popped out of Tet-38. We had to make a quarter-light-year circle around Tet-38 to position our-selves for the jump to Sade-20 and thence to Stargate.

It was during this long loop that we were first allowed to see Marygay.

She was in bed, the only person in sick bay. She looked very drawn and appeared to have lost considerable weight. Won't be able to wear her fighting suit, I thought inanely.

I sat by her bed for half an hour, watching her sleep. Ensign Singhe came in and nodded at me and left again.

After a while she opened her eyes. She looked at me for a long moment without expression, then smiled.

"Does this mean I'm well, William?"

"Better, anyhow."

"I thought so. The therapy . . . he took me back to where I was a little baby, made me grow up again. Yesterday we finally got back to the present. I think it's the present—William, how old am I?"

"Ship time, I think you're twenty-two."

She nodded without raising her head from the pillow. "I wonder what the year is on Earth."

"Last I heard it, it'll be 2017 when we reach Stargate." She giggled. "I'll be a middle-aged lady."

"You'll never be a lady to me, dear." I patted her bare arm. "That reminds me," she said, dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "I'm horny."

"You mean that wasn't included in the therapy?"

"Nuh-uh."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

"The obvious. Or maybe call up Ensign Singhe."

"Here? What if Pastori comes in?"

"He'd just take notes. You can't shock a psychiatrist."

The one good thing about these floppy tunics is that you can get out of one in half a second.

7

Pastori's report saved Marygay from a court-martial. The next seven months were uneventful, going from Tet-38 to Sade-20 to Stargate. We still had the regular rounds of calisthenics and inspections, though even Stott must have known that none of us intended to stay in the Force; none of us would ever fight again. It worried me a little, this insistence on maintaining the military life. I thought it might mean they weren't going to let us out.

The more likely explanation was that it was the easiest way to keep order aboard the ship.

The Tauran prisoner had died two days after he was captured. As far as anyone could tell, it wasn't suicide; he seemed to be cooperating with the xenobiologists—maybe he was one himself—but they learned very little, watching him waste away. An autopsy revealed that he had become totally dehydrated, although we had kept him well supplied with water. For some reason he just didn't assimilate it.

And, of course, with the Tauran dead, there went the only reason for our going planetside rather than sitting in a safe orbit and dropping missiles.

Things had shifted around a little bit, so it was 2019 when we arrived at Stargate.

Stargate had grown astonishingly in the past twelve years. The base was one building the size of Tycho City, housing about ten thousand people. There were seventy-eight ships 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 to be out-processed. One other ship, the Earth's Hope II, had returned from fighting while we were gone. They also had failed to bring home a live Tauran.

We went planetside in two scoutships.General Botsford (who had only been a full major the first time we 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 chart.

"You know," he said, too loud, 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, five years' subjective in service instead of two.

"And I don't see why some of you don't want to stay in! Another couple of years and compound interest would make you independently 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 the Taurans' tactics, our weapons are more effective ... there's no need to be afraid."

He sat down at the head of the table and looked at nobody in particular.

"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 than all of you."

Or have a very selective memory, I thought.

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

"We're very short of qualified instructors. 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, I haven't been back in fifteen years, will probably never go 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 and looked at it, smiling. "Most of you have something 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. Your income puts you in a ninety-two-percent income-tax bracket: thirty-two thousand might last you about three years if you're careful.

"Eventually you're going to have to get a job, and this is one job for which you are uniquely trained. There are not that many jobs available. The population of Earth is nearly nine billion, with five or six billion unemployed.

"Also keep in mind that your friends and sweethearts of two years ago are now going to be twenty-one 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 something about this world, I'm going to turn you over to Captain Siri, who just arrived from Earth. Captain?"

"Thank you, General." It looked as if there was something wrong with his skin, his face; and then I realized he was wearing 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 was still in diapers when you people left for Aleph ... to begin with, how many of you are homosexual?" Nobody. "That doesn't really surprise me. I am, of course. I guess about a third of everybody in Europe and America is.

"Most governments encourage homosexuality—the United Nations is neutral, leaves it up to the individual countries—they encourage homolife mainly because it's the one sure method of birth control."

That seemed specious to me. Our method of birth control in the army is pretty foolproof: all men making a deposit in the sperm bank, and then vasectomy.

"As the General said, the population of the world is nine billion. It's more than doubled since you were drafted. And nearly two-thirds of those people get out of school only to go on relief.

"Speaking of school, how many years of public schooling did the government give you?"

He was looking at me, so I answered. "Fourteen."

He nodded. "It's eighteen now. More, if you don't pass your examinations. And you're required by law to pass your exams before you're eligible for any job or Class One relief. And brother-boy, anything besides Class One is hard to live on. Yes?" Hofstadter had his hand up.

"Sir, is it eighteen years public school in every country? Where do they find enough schools?"

"Oh, most people take the last five or six years at home or in a community center, via holoscreen. The UN has forty or fifty information channels, giving instruction twenty-four hours a day.

"But most of you won't have to concern yourselves with that. If you're in the Force, you're already too smart by half."

He brushed hair from his eyes in a thoroughly feminine gesture, pouting a little. "Let me do some history to you. I guess the first really important thing that happened after you left was the Ration War.

"That was 2007. A lot of things happened at once. Locust plague in North America, rice blight from Burma to the South China Sea, red tides all along the west coast of South America: suddenly there just wasn't enough food to go around. The UN stepped in and took over food distribution. Every man, woman, and child got a ration booklet, allowing thim to consume so many calories per month. If tha went over ther monthly allotment, tha just went hungry until the first of the next month."

Some of the new people we'd picked up after Aleph used "tha, ther, thim" instead of "he, his, him," for the collective pronoun. I wondered whether it had become universal.

"Of course, an illegal market developed, and soon there was great inequality in the amount of food people in various strata of society consumed. A vengeance group in Ecuador, the Imparciales, systematically began to assassinate people who appeared to be well-fed. The idea caught on pretty quickly, and in a few months there was a full-scale, undeclared class war going on all over the world. The United Nations managed to get things back under control in a year or so, by which time the population was down to four billion, crops were more or less recovered, and the food crisis was over. They kept the rationing, but it's never been really severe again.

"Incidentally, the General translated the money coming to you into dollars just for your own convenience. The world has only one currency now, calories. Your thirty-two thousand dollars comes to about three thousand million calories. Or three million x's, kilocalories.

"Ever since the Ration War, the UN has encouraged subsistence farming wherever it's practical. Food you grow yourself, of course, isn't rationed. . . . It got people out of the cities, onto UN farming reservations, which helped alleviate some urban problems. But subsistence farming seems to encourage large families, so the population of the world has more than doubled since the Ration War.

"Also, we no longer have the abundance of electrical power I remember froth boyhood ... probably a good deal less than you remember. There are only a few places in the world where you can have power all day and night. They keep saying it's a temporary situation, but it's been going on for over a decade."

He went on like that for a long time. Well, hell, it wasn't really surprising, much of it. We'd probably spent more time in the past two years talking about what home was going to be like than about anything else. Unfortunately, most of the bad things we'd prognosticated seemed to have come true, and not many of the good things.

The worst thing for me, I guess, was that they'd taken over most of the good parkland and subdivided it into little farms. If you wanted to find some wilderness, you had to go someplace where they couldn't possibly make a plant grow.

He said that the relations between people who chose homolife and the ones he called "breeders" were quite smooth, but I wondered. I never had much trouble accepting homosexuals myself, but then I'd never had to cope with such an abundance of them.

He also said, in answer to an impolite question, that his powder and paint had nothing to do with his sexual orientation. It was just stylish. I decided I'd be an anachronism and just wear my face.

I don't guess it should have surprised me that language had changed considerably in twenty years. My parents were always saying things were "cool," joints were "grass," and so on.

We had to wait several weeks before we could get a ride back to Earth. We'd be going back on the Anniversary, but first she had to be taken apart and put back together again.

Meanwhile, we were put in cosy little two-man billets and released from all military responsibilities. Most of us spent our days down at the library, trying to catch up on twenty-two years of current events. Evenings, we'd get together at the Flowing Bowl, an NCO club. The privates, of course, weren't supposed to be there, but we found that nobody argues with a person who has two of the fluorescent battle ribbons.

I was surprised that they served heroin fixes at the bar. The waiter said that you get a compensating shot to keep you from getting addicted to it. I got really stoned and tried one. Never again.

Sub-major Stott stayed at Stargate, where they were assembling a new Strike Force Alpha. The rest of us boarded the Anniversary and had a fairly pleasant six-month journey. Cortez didn't insist on everything being capital-M military, so it was a lot better than the trip from Yod-4.

8

I hadn't given it too much thought, but of course we were celebrities on Earth: the first vets home from the war. The Secretary General greeted us at Kennedy and we had a week-long whirl of banquets, receptions, interviews, and all that. It was enjoyable enough, and profitable—I made a million K's from Time-Life/ Fax—but we really saw little of Earth until after the novelty wore off and we were more or less allowed to go our own way.

I picked up the Washington monorail at Grand Central Station and headed home. My mother had met me at Kennedy, suddenly and sadly old, and told me my father was dead. Flyer accident. I was going to stay with her until I could get a job.

She was living in Columbia, a satellite of Washington. She had moved back into the city after the Ration War—having moved out in 1980—and then failing services and rising crime had forced her out again.

She was waiting for me at the monorail station. Beside her stood a blond giant in a heavy black vinyl uniform, with a big gunpowder pistol on his hip and spiked brass knuckles on his right hand.

"William, this is Carl, my bodyguard and very dear friend." Carl slipped off the knuckles long enough to shake hands with surprising gentleness. "Pleasameecha Misser Mandella."

We got into a groundcar that had "Jefferson" written on it in bright orange letters. I thought that was an odd thing to name a car, but then found out that it was the name of the highrise Mother and Carl lived in. The groundcar was one of several that belonged to the community, and she paid 100K per kilometer for the use of it.

I had to admit that Columbia was rather pretty: formal gardens and lots of trees and grass. Even the high-rises, roughly conical jumbles of granite with trees growing out at odd places, looked more like mountains than buildings. We drove into the base of one of these mountains, down a well-lit corridor to where a number of other cars were parked. Carl carried my solitary bag to the elevator find set it down.

"Miz Mandella, if is awright witcha, I gots to go pick up Miz Freeman in like five. She over West Branch."

"Sure, Carl, William can take care of me. He's a soldier, you know." That's right, I remember learning eight silent ways to kill a man. Maybe if things got really tight, I could get a job like Carl's.

"Righty-oh, yeah, you tol' me. Whassit like, man?"

"Mostly boring," I said automatically. "When you aren't bored, you're scared."

He nodded wisely. "Thass what I heard. Miz Mandella, I be 'vailable anytime affer six. Righty-oh?"

"That's fine, Carl."

The elevator came and a tall skinny boy stepped out, an unlit joint dangling from his lips. Carl ran his fingers over the spikes on his knuckles, and the boy walked rapidly away.

"Gots to watch out fer them riders. T'care a yerself, Miz Mandella."

We got on the elevator and Mother punched 47. "What's a rider?"

"Oh, they're just young toughs who ride up and down the elevators looking for defenseless people without bodyguards. They aren't too much of a problem here."

The forty-seventh floor was a huge mall filled with shops and offices. We went to a food store.

"Have you gotten your ration book yet, William?" I told her I hadn't, but the Force had given me travel tickets worth a hundred thousand "calories" and I'd used up only half of them.

It was a little confusing, but they'd explained it to us. When the world went on a single currency, they'd tried to coordinate it with the food rationing in some way, hoping to eventually eliminate the ration books, so they'd made the new currency K'S, kilocalories, because that's the unit for measuring the energy equivalent of food. But a person who eats 2,000 kilocalories of steak a day obviously has to pay more than a person eating the same amount of bread. So they instituted a sliding "ration factor" so complicated that nobody could understand it. After a few weeks they were using the books again, but calling food kilocalories "calories" in an attempt to make things less confusing. Seemed to me they'd save a lot of trouble all around if they'd just call money dollars again, or rubles or sisterces or whatever . . . anything but kilocalories.

Food prices were astonishing, except for grains and legumes. I insisted on splurging on some good red meat: 1500 calories worth of ground beef, costing 1730x. The same amount of fake-steak, made from soy beans, would have cost 80x.

I also got a head of lettuce for 140x and a little bottle of olive oil for 175x. Mother said she had some vinegar. Started to buy some mushrooms but she said she had a neighbor who grew them and could trade something from her balcony garden.

At her apartment on the ninety-second floor, she apologized for the smallness of the place. It didn't seem so little to me, but then she'd never lived on a spaceship.

Even this high up, there were bars on the windows. The door had four separate locks, one of which didn't work because somebody had used a crowbar on it.

Mother went off to turn the ground beef into a meatloaf and I settled down with the evening 'fax. She pulled some carrots from her little garden and called the mushroom lady, whose son came over to make the trade. He had a riot gun

slung under his arm.

"Mother, where's the rest of the Star?" I called into the kitchen. "As far as I know, it's all there. What were you looking for?" "Well . . . I found the classified section, but no `Help Wanted.' " She laughed. "Son, there hasn't been a `Help Wanted' ad in ten years. The government takes care of jobs . . . well, most of them."

"Everybody works for the government?"

"No, that's not it." She came in, wiping her hands on a frayed towel. "The government, they tell us, handles the distribution of all natural resources. And there aren't many resources more valuable than empty jobs."

"Well, I'll go talk to them tomorrow."

"Don't bother, son. How much retirement pay you say you're getting from the Force?"

"Twenty thousand x a month. Doesn't look like it'll go far."

"No, it won't. But your father's pension gave me less than half that, and they wouldn't give me a job: Jobs are assigned on a basis of need. And you've got to be living on rice and water before the Employment Board considers you needy."

"Well, hell, it's a bureaucracy—there must be somebody I can pay off, slip me into a good—"

"No. Sorry, that's one part of the UN that's absolutely incorruptible. The whole shebang is cybernetic, untouched by human souls. You can't—"

"But you said you had a job!"

"I was getting to that. If you want a job badly enough, you can go to a dealer and sometimes get a hand-me-down."

"Hand-me-down? Dealer?"

"Take my job as an example, son. A woman named Hailey Williams has a job in a hospital, running a machine that analyzes blood, a chromatography machine. She works six nights a week, for 12,000x a week. She gets tired of working, so she contacts a dealer and lets him know that her job is available.

"Some time before this, I'd given the dealer his initial fee of 50,000K to get on his list. He comes by and describes the job to me and I say fine, I'll take it. He knew I would and already has fake identification and a uniform. He distributes small bribes to the various supervisors who might know Miss Williams by sight.

"Miss Williams shows me how to run the machine and quits. She still gets the weekly 12,000K credited to her account, but she pays me half. I pay the dealer ten percent and wind up with 5400x per week. This, added to the nine grand I get monthly from your father's pension, makes me quite comfortable.

"Then it gets complicated. Finding myself with plenty of money and too little time, I contact the dealer again, offering to sublet half my job. The next day a girl shows up who also has `Hailey Williams' identification. I show her how to run the machine, and she takes over Monday-Wednesday-Friday. Half of my real salary is 2700x, so she gets half that, 1350K, and pays the dealer 135."

She got a pad and a stylus and did some figuring. "So the real Hailey Williams gets 6000K weekly for doing nothing. I work three days a week for 4050K. My assistant works three days for 1115K. The dealer gets 100,000K in fees and

735K per week. Lopsided, isn't it?"

"Hmm . . . I'll say. Quite illegal, too, I suppose."

"For the dealer. Everybody else might lose their job and have to start over, if the Employment Board finds out. But the dealer gets brainwiped."

"Guess I better find a dealer, while I can still afford the fifty-grand bite." Actually, I still had over three million, but planned to run through most of it in a short time. Hell, I'd earned it.

I was getting ready to go the next morning when Mother came in with a shoebox. Inside, there was a small pistol in a clip-on holster.

"This belonged to your father," she explained. "Better wear it if you're planning to go downtown without a bodyguard."

It was a gunpowder pistol with ridiculously thin bullets. I hefted it in my hand. "Did Dad ever use it?"

"Several times . . . just to scare away riders and hitters, though. He never actually shot anybody."

"You're probably right that I need a gun," I said, putting it back. "But I'd have to have something with more heft to it. Can I buy one legally?"

"Sure, there's a gun store down in the Mall. As long as you don't have a police record, you can buy anything that suits you." Good; I'd get a little pocket laser. I could hardly hit the wall with a gunpowder pistol.

"But ... William, I'd feel a lot better if you'd hire a bodyguard, at least until you know your way around." We'd gone all around that last night. Being an official Trained Killer, I thought I was tougher than any clown I might hire for the job.

"I'll check into it, Mother. Don't worry—I'm not even going downtown today, just into Hyattsville."

"That's just as bad."

When the elevator came, it was already occupied. He looked at me blandly as I got in, a man a little older than me, clean-shaven and well dressed. He stepped back to let me at the row of buttons. I punched 47 and then, realizing his motive might not have been politeness, turned to see him struggling to get at a metal pipe stuck in his waistband. It had been hidden by his cape.

"Come on, fella," I said, reaching for a nonexistent weapon. "You wanna get caulked?"

He had the pipe free but let it hang loosely at his side. "Caulked?"

"Killed. Army term." I took one step toward him, trying to remember. Kick just under the knee, then either groin or kidney. I decided on the groin.

"No." He put the pipe back in his waistband. "I don't want to get `caulked.'" The door opened at 47 and I backed out.

The gun shop was all bright white plastic and gleamy black metal. A little bald man bobbed over to wait on me. He had a pistol in a shoulder rig.

"And a fine morning to you, sir," he said and giggled. "What will it be today?"

"Lightweight pocket laser," I said. "Carbon dioxide."

He looked at me quizzically and then brightened. "Coming right up, sir." Giggle. "Special today, I throw in a handful of tachyon grenades."

"Fine." They'd be handy.

He looked at me expectantly. "So? What's the popper?"

"Huh?"

"The punch, man; you set me up, now knock me down. Laser." He giggled.

I was beginning to understand. "You mean I can't buy a laser."

"Of course not, sweetie," he said and sobered. "You didn't know that?"

"I've been out of the country for a long time."

"The world, you mean. You've been out of the world a long time." He put his left hand on a chubby hip in a gesture that incidentally made his gun easier to get. He scratched the center of his chest.

I stood very still. "That's right. I just got out of the Force." His jaw dropped. "Hey, no bully-bull? You been out shootin' 'em up, out in space?"

"That's right."

"Hey, all that crap about you not gettin' older, there's nothin' to that, is there?"

"Oh, it's true. I was born in 1975."

"Well, god . . . damn. You're almost as old as I am." He giggled. "I thought that was just something the gover'ment made up."

"Anyhow ... you say I can't buy a laser—"

"Oh, no. No no no. I run a legal shop here."

"What can I buy?"

"Oh, pistol, rifle, shotgun, knife, body armor . . . just no lasers or explosives or fully automatic weapons."

"Let me see a pistol. The biggest you have."

"Ah, I've got just the thing." He motioned me over to a display case and opened the back, taking out a huge revolver.

"Four-ten-gauge six-shooter." He cradled it in both hands. "Dinosaur-stopper. Authentic Old West styling. Slugs or flechettes."

"Flechettes?"

"Sure—uh, they're like a bunch of tiny darts. You shoot and they spread out in a pattern. Hard to miss that way."

Sounded like my speed. "Anyplace I can try it out?"

"'Course, of course, we have a range in back. Let me get my assistant." He rang a bell and a boy came out to watch the store while we went in back. He picked up a red-and-green box of shotgun shells on the way.

The range was in two sections, a little anteroom with a plastic transparent door and a long corridor on the other side of the door with a table at one end and targets at the other. Behind the targets was a sheet of metal that evidently deflected the bullets down into a pool of water.

He loaded the pistol and set it on the table. "Please don't pick it up until the door's closed." He went into the anteroom, closed the door, and picked up a microphone. "Okay. First time, you better hold on to it with both hands." I did so, raising it up in line with the center target, a square of paper looking about the size of your thumbnail at arm's length. Doubted I'd even come near it. I pulled the trigger and it went back easily enough, but nothing happened.

"No, no," he said over the microphone with a tinny giggle. "Authentic Old West styling. You've got to pull the hammer back."

Sure, just like in the flicks. I hauled the hammer back, lined it up again, and squeezed the trigger.

The noise was so loud it made my face sting. The gun bucked up and almost hit me on the forehead. But the three center targets were gone: just tiny tatters of paper drifting in the air.

"I'll take it."

He sold me a hip holster, twenty shells, a chest-and-back shield, and a dagger in a boot sheath. I felt more heavily armed than I had in a fighting suit. But no waldos to help me cart it around.

The monorail had two guards for each car. I was beginning to feel that all my heavy artillery was superfluous, until I got off at the Hyattsville station.

Everyone who got off at Hyattsville was either heavily armed or had a bodyguard. The people loitering around the station were all armed. The police carried lasers.

I pushed a "cab call" button, and the readout told me mine would be No. 3856. I asked a policeman and he told me to wait for it down on the street; it would cruise around the block twice.

During the five minutes I waited, I twice heard staccato arguments of gunfire, both of them rather far away. I was glad I'd bought the shield.

Eventually the cab came. It swerved to the curb when I waved at it, the door sliding open as it stopped. Looked as if it worked the same way as the autocabs I remembered. The door stayed open while it checked the thumbprint to verify that I was the one who had called, then slammed shut. It was thick steel. The view through the windows was dim and distorted; probably thick bulletproof plastic. Not quite the same as I remembered.

I had to leaf through a grimy book to find the code for the address of the bar in Hyattsville where I was supposed to meet the dealer. I punched it out and sat back to watch the city go by.

This part of town was mostly residential: grayed-brick warrens built around the middle of the last century competing for space with more modern modular setups and, occasionally, individual houses behind tall brick or concrete walls with jagged broken glass and barbed wire at the top. A few people seemed to be going somewhere, walking very quickly down the sidewalks, hands on weapons. Most of the people I saw were either sitting in doorways, smoking, or loitering around shop fronts in groups of no fewer than six. Everything was dirty and cluttered. The gutters were clotted with garbage, and shoals of waste paper drifted with the wind of the light traffic.

It was understandable, though; street-sweeping was probably a very high-risk profession.

The cab pulled up in front of Tom & Jerry's Bar and Grilland let me out after I paid 430K. I stepped to the sidewalk with my hand on the shotgun-pistol, but there was nobody around. I hustled into the bar.

It was surprisingly clean on the inside, dimly lit and furnished in fake leather and fake pine. I went to the bar and got some fake bourbon and, presumably, real water for 120K. The water cost 20K. A waitress came over with a tray.

"Pop one, brother-boy?" The tray had a rack of old-fashioned hypodermic needles.

"Not today, thanks." If I was going to "pop one," I'd use an aerosol. The needles looked unsanitary and painful.

She set the dope down on the bar and eased onto the stool next to me. She sat with her chin cupped in her palm and stared at her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. "God. Tuesdays."

I mumbled something.

"You wanna go in back fer a quickie?"

I looked at her with what I hoped was a neutral expression. She was wearing only a short skirt of some gossamer material, and it plunged in a shallow V in the front, exposing her hipbones and a few bleached pubic hairs. I wondered what could possibly keep it up. She wasn't bad looking, could have been anywhere from her late twenties to her early forties. No telling what they could do with cosmetic surgery and makeup nowadays, though. Maybe she was older than my mother.

"Thanks anyhow."

"Not today?"

"That's right."

"I can get you a nice boy, if—"

"No. No thanks." What a world.

She pouted into the mirror, an expression that was probably older than Homo sapiens. "You don't like me."

"I like you fine. That's just not what I came here for."

"Well ... different funs for different ones." She shrugged. "Hey, Jerry. Get me a short beer."

He brought it.

"Oh, damn, my purse is locked up. Mister, can you spare forty calories?" I had enough ration tickets to take care of a whole banquet. Tore off a fifty and gave it to the bartender.

"Jesus." She stared. "How'd you get a full book at the end of the month?"

I told her in as few words as possible who I was and how I managed to have so many calories. There had been two months' worth of books waiting in my mail, and I hadn't even used up the ones the Force had given me. She offered to buy a book from me for ten grand, but I didn't want to get involved in more than one illegal enterprise at a time.

Two men came in, one unarmed and the other with both a pistol and a riot gun. The bodyguard sat by the door and the other came over to me.

"Mr. Mandella?"

"That's right."

"Shall we take a booth?" He didn't offer his name.

He had a cup of coffee, and I sipped a mug of beer. "I don't keep any written records, but I have an excellent memory. Tell me what sort of a job you're interested in, what your qualifications are, what salary you'll accept, and so on."

I told him I'd prefer to wait for a job where I could use my physics—teaching or research, even engineering. I wouldn't need a job for two or three months, since I planned to travel and spend money for a while. Wanted at least 20,000K monthly, but how much I'd accept would depend on the nature of the job.

He didn't say a word until I'd finished. "Righty-oh. Now, I'm afraid . . . you'd have a hard time, getting a job in physics. Teaching is out; I can't supply jobs where the person is constantly exposed to the public. Research, well, your degree is almost a quarter of a century old. You'd have to go back to school, maybe five or six years."

"Might do that," I said.

"The one really marketable feature you have is your combat experience. I could probably place you in a supervisory job at a bodyguard agency for even more than twenty grand. You could make almost that much, being a bodyguard yourself."

"Thanks, but I wouldn't want to take chances for somebody else's hide."

"Righty-oh. Can't say I blame you." He finished his coffee in a long slurp. "Well, I've got to run, got a thousand things to do. I'll keep you in mind and talk to some people."

"Good. I'll see you in a few months."

"Righty-oh. Don't need to make an appointment. I come in here every day at eleven for coffee. Just show up."

I finished my beer and called a cab to take me home. I wanted to walk around the city, but Mother was right. I'd get a bodyguard first.

9

I came home and the phone was blinking pale blue. Didn't know what to do so I punched "Operator."

A pretty young girl's head materialized in the cube. "Jefferson operator," she said. "May I help you?"

"Yes ... what does it mean when the cube is blinking blue?"

"Huh?"

"What does it mean when the phone—"

"Are you serious?" I was getting a little tired of this kind of thing.

"It's a long story. Honest, I don't know."

"When it blinks blue you're supposed to call the operator."

"Okay, here I am."

"No, not me, the real operator. Punch nine. Then punch zero." I did that and an old harridan appeared. "Ob-a-ray-duh." "This is William Mandella at 301-52-574-3975. I was supposed to call you."

"Juzza segun." She reached outside the field of view and typed something. "You godda call from 605-19-556-2027."

I scribbled it down on the pad by the phone. "Where's that?"

"Juzza segun. South Dakota."

"Thanks." I didn't know anybody in South Dakota.

A pleasant-looking old woman answered the phone. "Yes?" "I had a call from this number . . . uh . . . I'm—"

"Oh. Sergeant Mandella! Just a second."

I watched the diagonal bar of the holding pattern for a second, then fifty or so more. Then a head came into focus.

Marygay. "William. I had a heck of a time finding you."

"Darling, me too. What are you doing in South Dakota?"

"My parents live here, in a little commune. That's why it took me so long to get to the phone." She held up two grimy hands. "Digging potatoes."

"But when I checked . . . the records said—the records in Tucson said your parents were both dead."

"No, they're just dropouts—you know about dropouts?—new name, new life. I got the word through a cousin."

"Well—well, how've you been? Like the country life?"

"That's one reason I've been wanting to get you. Willy, I'm bored. It's all very healthy and nice, but I want to do something dissipated and wicked. Naturally I thought of you."

"I'm flattered. Pick you up at eight?"

She checked a clock above the phone. "No, look, let's get a good night's sleep. Besides, I've got to get in the rest of the potatoes. Meet me at . . . the Ellis Island jetport at ten tomorrow morning. Mmm ... Trans-World information desk."

"Okay. Make reservations for where?"

She shrugged. "Pick a place."

"London used to be pretty wicked."

"Sounds good. First class?"

"What else? I'll get us a suite on one of the dirigibles."

"Good. Decadent. How long shall I pack for?"

"We'll buy clothes along the way. Travel light. Just one stuffed wallet apiece."

She giggled. "Wonderful. Tomorrow at ten."

"Fine—uh . . . Marygay, do you have a gun?"

"It's that bad?"

"Here around Washington it is."

"Well, I'll get one. Dad has a couple over the fireplace. Guess they're left over from Tucson."

"We'll hope we won't need them."

"Willy, you know it'll just be for decoration. I couldn't even kill a Tauran."

"Of course." We just looked at each other for a second. "Tomorrow at ten, then."

"Right. Love you."

"Uh..."

She giggled again and hung up.

That was just too many things to think about all at once.

I got us two round-the-world dirigible tickets; unlimited stops as long as you kept going east. It took me a little over two hours to get to Ellis by autocab and monorail. I was early, but so was Marygay.

She was talking to the girl at the desk and didn't see me coming. Her outfit was really arresting, a tight coverall of plastic in a pattern of interlocking hands; as your angle of sight changed, various strategic hands became transparent. She had a ruddy sun-glow all over her body. I don't know whether the feeling that rushed over me was simple honest lust or something more complicated. I hurried up behind her.

Whispering: "What are we going to do for three hours?"

She turned and gave me a quick hug and thanked the girl at the desk, then grabbed my hand and pulled me along to a slide-walk.

"Um . . . where are we headed?"

"Don't ask questions, Sergeant. Just follow me."

We stepped onto a roundabout and transferred to an east-bound slidewalk.

"Do you want something to eat or drink?" she asked innocently.

I tried to leer. "Any alternatives?"

She laughed gaily. Several people stared. "Just a second ... here!" We jumped off. It was a corridor marked "Roomettes." She handed me a key.

That damned plastic coverall was held on by static electricity. Since the roomette was nothing but a big waterbed, I almost broke my neck the first time it shocked me.

I recovered.

We were lying on our stomachs, looking through the one-way glass wall at the people rushing around down on the concourse. Marygay passed me a joint.

"William, have you used that thing yet?"

"What thing?"

"That hawg-leg. The pistol."

"Only shot it once, in the store where I bought it."

"Do you really think you could point it at someone and blow him apart?"

I took a shallow puff and passed it back. "Hadn't given it much thought, really. Until we talked last night."

"Well?"

"I . . . I don't really know. The only time I've killed was on Aleph, under hypnotic compulsion. But I don't think it would . . . bother me, not that much, not if the person was trying to kill me in the first place. Why should it?"

"Life," she said plaintively, "life is . . ." .

"Life is a bunch of cells walking around with a common purpose. If that common purpose is to get my ass—"

"Oh, William. You sound like old Cortez."

"Cortez kept us alive."

"Not many of us," she snapped.

I rolled over and studied the ceiling tiles. She traced little designs on my chest, pushing the sweat around with her fingertip. "I'm sorry, William. I guess we're both just trying to adjust."

"That's okay. You're right, anyhow."

We talked for a long time. The only urban center Marygay had been to since our publicity rounds (which were very sheltered) was Sioux Falls. She had gone with her parents and the commune bodyguard. It sounded like a scaled-down version of Washington: the same problems, but not as acute.

We ticked off the things that bothered us: violence, high cost of living, too many people everywhere. I'd have added homolife, but Marygay said I just didn't appreciate the social dynamic that had led to it; it had been inevitable. The only thing she said she had against it was that it took so many of the prettiest men out of circulation.

And the main thing that was wrong was that everything seemed to have gotten just a little worse, or at best remained the same. You would have predicted that at least a few facets of everyday life would improve markedly in twenty-two years. Her father contended the War was behind it all: any person who showed a shred of talent was sucked up by UNEF; the very best fell to the Elite Conscription Act and wound up being cannon fodder.

It was hard not to agree with him. Wars in the past often accelerated social reform, provided technological benefits, even sparked artistic activity. This one, however, seemed tailor-made to provide none of these positive by-products. Such improvements as had been made on late-twentieth-century technology were—like tachyon bombs and warships two kilometers long—at best, interesting developments of things that only required the synergy of money and existing engineering techniques. Social reform? The world was technically under martial law. As for art, I'm not sure I know good from bad. But artists to some extent have to reflect the temper of the times. Paintings and sculpture were full of torture and dark brooding; movies seemed static and plotless; music was dominated by nostalgic revivals of earlier forms; architecture was mainly concerned with finding someplace to put everybody; literature was damn near incomprehensible. Most people seemed to spend most of their time trying to find ways to outwit the government, trying to scrounge a few extra K'S or ration tickets without putting their lives in too much danger.

And in the past, people whose country was at war were constantly in contact with the war. The newspapers would be full of reports, veterans would return from the front; sometimes the front would move right into town, invaders marching down Main Street or bombs whistling through the night air—but always the sense of either working toward victory or at least delaying defeat. The enemy was a tangible thing, a propagandist's monster whom you could understand, whom you could hate.

But this war ... the enemy was a curious organism only vaguely understood, more often the subject of cartoons than nightmares. The main effect of the war on the home front was economic, unemotional—more taxes but more jobs as well. After twenty-two years, only twenty-seven returned veterans; not enough to make a decent parade. The most important fact about the war to most people was that if it ended suddenly, Earth's economy would collapse.

You approached the dirigible by means of a small propeller-driven aircraft that drifted up to match trajectories and docked alongside. A clerk took our baggage and we checked our weapons with the purser, then went outside.

Just about everybody on the flight was standing out on the promenade deck, watching Manhattan creep toward the horizon. It was an eerie sight. The day was very still, so the bottom thirty or forty stories of the buildings were buried in smog. It looked like a city built on a cloud, a thunderhead floating. We watched it for a while and then went inside to eat.

The meal was elegantly served and simple: filet of beef, two vegetables, wine. Cheese and fruit and more wine for dessert. No fiddling with ration tickets; a loophole in the rationing laws implied that they were not required for meals consumed en route, on intercontinental transport.

We spent a lazy, comfortable three days crossing the Atlantic. The dirigibles had been a new thing when we first left Earth, and now they had turned out to be one of the few successful new financial ventures of the late twentieth century . . . the company that built them had bought up a few obsolete nuclear weapons; one bomb-sized hunk of plutonium would keep the whole fleet in the air for years. And, once launched, they never did come down. Floating hotels, supplied and maintained by regular shuttles, they were one last vestige of luxury in a world where nine billion people had something to eat, and almost nobody had enough.

London was not as dismal from the air as New York City had been; the air was clean even if the Thames was poison. We packed our handbags, claimed our weapons, and landed on a VTO pad atop the London Hilton. We rented a couple of tricycles at the hotel and, maps in hand, set off for Regent Street, planning on dinner at the venerable Cafe Royal.

The tricycles were little armored vehicles, stabilized gyroscopically so they couldn't be tipped over. Seemed overly cautious for the part of London we traveled through, but I supposed there were probably sections as rough as Washington.

I got a dish of marinated venison and Marygay got salmon; both very good but astoundingly expensive. At first I was a bit overawed by the huge room, filled with plush and mirrors and faded gilding, very quiet even with a dozen tables occupied, and we talked in whispers until we realized that was foolish.

Over coffee I asked Marygay what the deal was with her parents.

"Oh, it happens often enough," she said. "Dad got mixed up in some ration ticket thing. He'd gotten some black market tickets that turned out to be counterfeit. Cost him his job and he probably would have gone to jail, but while he was waiting for trial a body snatcher got him."

"Bodysnatcher?"

"That's right. All the commune organizations have them. They've got to get reliable farm labor, people who aren't eligible for relief . . . people who can't just lay down their tools and walk off when it gets rough. Almost everybody can get enough assistance to stay alive, though; everyone who isn't on the government's fecal roster."

"So he skipped out before his trial came up?"

She nodded. "It was a case of choosing between commune life, which he knew wasn't easy, and going on the dole after a few years' working on a prison farm; ex-convicts can't get legitimate jobs. They had to forfeit their condominium, which they'd put up for bail, but the government would've gotten that anyhow, once he was in jail.

"So the bodysnatcher offered him and Mother new identities, transportation to the commune, a cottage, and a plot of land. They took it."

"And what did the bodysnatcher get?"

"He himself probably didn't get anything. The commune got their ration tickets; they were allowed to keep their money, although they didn't have very much—"

"What happens if they get caught?"

"Not a chance." She laughed. "The communes provide over half the country's produce—they're really just an unofficial arm of the government. I'm sure the CBI knows exactly where they are.... Dad grumbles that it's just a fancy way of being in jail anyhow."

"What a weird setup."

"Well, it keeps the land farmed." She pushed her empty dessert plate a symbolic centimeter away from her. "And they're eating better than most people, better than they ever had in the city. Mom knows a hundred ways to fix chicken and potatoes."

After dinner we went to a musical show. The hotel had gotten us tickets to a "cultural translation" of the old rock opera Hair. The program explained that they had taken some liberties with the original choreography, because back in those days they didn't allow actual coition on stage. The music was pleasantly old-fashioned, but neither of us was quite old enough to work up any blurry-eyed nostalgia over it. Still, it was much more enjoyable than the movies I'd seen, and some of the physical feats performed were quite inspiring. We slept late the next morning.

We dutifully watched the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, walked through the British Museum, ate fish and chips, ran up to Stratford-on-Avon and caught the Old Vic doing an incomprehensible play about a mad king, and didn't get into any trouble until the day before we were to leave for Lisbon.

It was about 2 A.M. and we were tooling our tricycles down a nearly deserted thoroughfare. Turned a corner and there was a gang of boys beating the hell out of someone. I screeched to the curb and leaped out of my vehicle, firing the shotgun-pistol over their heads.

It was a girl they were attacking; it was rape. Most of them scattered, but one pulled a pistol out of his coat and I shot him. I remember trying to aim for his arm. The blast hit his shoulder and ripped off his arm and what seemed to be half of his chest; it flung him two meters to the side of a building and he must have been dead before he hit the ground.

The others ran, one of them shooting at me with a little pistol as he went. I watched him trying to kill me for the longest time before it occurred to me to shoot back. I sent one blast way high and he dove into an alley and disappeared.

The girl looked dazedly around, saw the mutilated body of her attacker, and staggered to her feet and ran off screaming, naked from the waist down. I knew I should have tried to stop her, but I couldn't find my voice and my feet seemed nailed to the sidewalk. A tricycle door slammed and Marygay was beside me.

"What hap—" She gasped, seeing the dead man. "Wh-what was he doing?"

I just stood there stupefied. I'd certainly seen enough death these past two years, but this was a different thing . . . there was nothing noble in being crushed to death by the failure of some electronic component, or in having your suit fail and freeze you solid; or even dying in a shoot-out with the incomprehensible enemy ... but death seemed natural in that setting. Not on a quaint little street in old-fashioned London, not for trying to steal what most people would give freely.

Marygay was pulling my arm. "We've got to get out of here. They'll brainwipe you!"

She was right. I turned and took one step and fell to the concrete. I looked down at the leg that had betrayed me and bright red blood was pulsing out of a small hole in my calf. Marygay tore a strip of cloth from her blouse and started to bind it. I remember thinking it wasn't a big enough wound to go into shock over, but my ears started to ring and I got lightheaded and everything went red and fuzzy. Before I went under, I heard a siren wailing in the distance.

Fortunately, the police also picked up the girl, who was wandering down the street a few blocks away. They compared her version of the thing with mine, both of us under hypnosis. They let me go with a stern admonition to leave law enforcement up to professional law enforcers.

I wanted to get out of the cities: just put a pack on my back and wander through the woods for a while, get my mind straightened out. So did Marygay. But we tried to make arrangements and found that the country was worse than the cities. Farms were practically armed camps, the areas between ruled by nomad gangs who survived by making lightning raids into villages and farms, murdering and plundering for a few minutes, and then fading back into the forest, before help could arrive.

Still, Britishers called their island "the most civilized country in Europe." From what we'd heard about France and Spain and Germany, especially Germany, they were probably right.

I talked it over with Marygay, and we decided to cut short our tour and go back to the States. We could finish the tour after we'd become acclimated to the twenty-first century. It was just too much foreignness to take in one dose.

The dirigible line refunded most of our money and we took a conventional suborbital flight back home. The high altitude made my leg throb, though it was nearly healed. They'd made great strides in the treatment of gunshot wounds, in the past twenty years. Lots of practice.

We split up at Ellis. Her description of commune life appealed to me more than the city; I made arrangements to join her after a week or so, and went back to Washington.

10

I rang the bell and a strange woman answered the door, opening it a couple of centimeters and peering through.

"Pardon me," I said, "isn't this Mrs. Mandella's residence?"

"Oh, you must be William!" She closed the door and unfastened the chains and opened it wide. "Beth, look who's here!"

My mother came into the living room from the kitchen, drying her hands on a towel. "Willy . . . what are you doing back so soon?"

"Well, it's—it's a long story."

"Sit down, sit down," the other woman said. "Let me get you a drink, don't start till I get back."

"Wait," my mother said. "I haven't even introduced you two. William, this is Rhonda Wilder. Rhonda, William."

"I've been so looking forward to meeting you," she said. "Beth has told me all about you—one cold beer, right?"

"Right." She was likable enough, a trim middle-aged woman. I wondered why I hadn't met her before. I asked my mother whether she was a neighbor.

"Uh . . . really more than that, William. She's been my room-mate for a couple of years. That's why I had an extra room when you came home—a single person isn't allowed two bedrooms."

"But why—“

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to feel that you were putting her out of her room while you stayed here. And you weren't, actually; she has—"

"That's right." Rhonda came in with the beer. "I've got relatives in Pennsylvania, out in the country. I can stay with them any time."

"Thanks." I took the beer. "Actually, I won't be here long. I'm kind of en route to South Dakota. I could find another place to flop."

"Oh, no," Rhonda said. "I can take the couch." I was too old-fashioned male-chauv to allow that; we discussed it for a minute and I wound up with the couch.

I filled Rhonda in on who Marygay was and told them about our disturbing experiences in England, how we came back to get our bearings. I had expected my mother to be horrified that I had killed a man, but she accepted it without comment. Rhonda clucked a little bit about our being out in a city after midnight, especially without a bodyguard.

We talked on these and other topics until late at night, when Mother called her bodyguard and went off to work.

Something had been nagging at me all night, the way Mother and Rhonda acted toward each other. I decided to bring it out into the open, once Mother was gone.

"Rhonda—" I settled down in the chair across from her. I didn't know exactly how to put it. "What, uh, what exactly is your relationship with my mother?"

She took a long drink. "Good friends." She stared at me with a mixture of defiance and resignation. "Very good friends. Sometimes lovers."

I felt very hollow and lost. My mother?

"Listen," she continued. "You had better stop trying to live in the nineties. This may not be the best of all possible worlds, but you're stuck with it."

She crossed and took my hand, almost kneeling in front of me. Her voice was softer. "William . . . look, I'm only two years older than you are—that is, I was born two years before—what I mean is, I can understand how you feel. B—your mother understands too. It, our . . . relationship, wouldn't be a secret to anybody else. It's perfectly normal. A lot has changed, these twenty years. You've got to change too."

I didn't say anything.

She stood up and said firmly, "You think, because your mother is sixty, she's outgrown her need for love? She needs it more than you do. Even now. Especially now."

Accusation in her eyes. "Especially now with you coming back from the dead past. Reminding her of how old she is. How—old I am, twenty years younger." Her voice quavered and cracked, and she ran to her room.

I wrote Mother a note saying that Marygay had called; an emergency had come up and I had to go immediately to South Dakota. I called a bodyguard and left.

A whining, ozone-leaking, battered old bus let me out at the intersection of a bad road and a worse one. It had taken me an hour to go the 2000 kilometers to Sioux Falls, two hours to get a chopper to Geddes, 150 kilometers away, and three hours waiting and jouncing on the dilapidated bus to go the last 12 kilometers to Freehold, an organization of communes where the Potters had their acreage. I wondered if the progression was going to continue and I would be four hours walking down this dirt road to the farm.

It was a half-hour before I even came to a building. My bag was getting intolerably heavy and the bulky pistol was chafing my hip. I walked up a stone path to the door of a simple plastic dome and pulled a string that caused a bell to tinkle inside. A peephole darkened.

"Who is it?" Voice muffled by thick wood.

"Stranger asking directions."

"Ask." I couldn't tell whether it was a woman or a child. "I'm looking for the Potters' farm."

"Just a second." Footsteps went away and came back. "Down the road one point nine clicks. Lots of potatoes and green beans on your right. You'll probably smell the chickens."

"Thanks."

"If you want a drink we got a pump out back. Can't let you in without my husband's at home."

"I understand. Thank you." The water was metallic-tasting but wonderfully cool.

I wouldn't know a potato or green bean plant if it stood up and took a bite out of my ankle, but I knew how to walk a half-meter step. So I resolved to count to 3800 and take a deep breath. I supposed I could tell the difference between the smell of chicken manure and the absence thereof.

At 3650 there was a rutted path leading to a complex of plastic domes and rectangular buildings apparently made of sod. There was a pen enclosing a small population explosion of chickens. They had a smell but it wasn't strong.

Halfway down the path, a door opened and Marygay came running out, wearing one tiny wisp of cloth. After a slippery but gratifying greeting, she asked what I was doing here so early.

"Oh, my mother had friends staying with her. I didn't want to put them out. Suppose I should have called."

"Indeed you should have . . . save you a long dusty walk—but we've got plenty of room, don't worry about that."

She took me inside to meet her parents, who greeted me warmly and made me feel definitely overdressed. Their faces showed their age but their bodies had no sag and few wrinkles.

Since dinner was an occasion, they let the chickens live and instead opened a can of beef, steaming it along with a cabbage and some potatoes. To my plain tastes it was equal to most of the gourmet fare we'd had on the dirigible and in London.

Over coffee and goat cheese (they apologized for not having wine; the commune would have a new vintage out in a couple of weeks), I asked what kind of work I could do.

"Will," Mr. Potter said, "I don't mind telling you that your coming here is a godsend. We've got five acres that are just sitting out there, fallow, because we don't have enough hands to work them. You can take the plow tomorrow and start breaking up an acre at a time."

"More potatoes, Daddy?" Marygay asked.

"No, no . . . not this season. Soybeans—cash crop and good for the soil. And Will, at night we all take turns standing guard. With four of us, we ought to be able to do a lot more sleeping." He took a big slurp of coffee. "Now, what else ..."

"Richard," Mrs. Potter said, "tell him about the greenhouse."

"That's right, yes, the greenhouse. The commune has a two-acre greenhouse down about a click from here, by the recreation center. Mostly grapes and tomatoes. Everybody spends one morning or one afternoon a week there.

"Why don't you children go down there tonight . . . show Will the night life in fabulous Freehold? Sometimes you can get a real exciting game of checkers going."

"Oh, Daddy. It's not that bad."

"Actually, it isn't. They've got a fair library and a coin-op terminal to the Library of Congress. Marygay tells me you're a reader. That's good."

"Sounds fascinating." It did. "But what about guard?"

"No problem. Mrs. Potter—April—and I'll take the first four hours—oh," he said, standing, "let me show you the setup."

We went out back to "the tower," a sandbag hut on stilts. Climbed up a rope ladder through a hole in the middle of the hut.

"A little crowded in here, with two," Richard said. "Have a seat." There was an old piano stool beside the hole in the floor. I sat on it. "It's handy to be able to see all the field without getting a crick in your neck. Just don't keep turning in the same direction all the time."

He opened a wooden crate and uncovered a sleek rifle, wrapped in oily rags. "Recognize this?"

"Sure." I'd had to sleep with one in basic training. "Army standard issue T-sixteen. Semi-automatic, twelve-caliber tumblers—where the hell did you get it?"

"Commune went to a government auction. It's an antique now, son." He handed it to me and I snapped it apart. Clean, too clean.

"Has it ever been used?"

"Not in almost a year. Ammo costs too much for target practice. Take a couple of practice shots, though, convince yourself that it works."

I turned on the scope and just got a washed-out bright green. Set for nighttime. Clicked it back to log zero, set the magnification at ten, reassembled it.

"Marygay didn't want to try it out. Said she'd had her fill of that. I didn't press her, but a person's got to have confidence in their tools."

I clicked off the safety and found a clod of dirt that the rangefinder said was between 100 and 120 meters away. Set it at 110, rested the barrel of the rifle on the sandbags, centered the clod in the crosshairs, and squeezed. The round hissed out and kicked up dirt about five centimeters low.

"Fine." I reset it for night use and safetied it and handed it back. "What happened a year ago?"

He wrapped it up carefully, keeping the rags away from the eyepiece. "Had some jumpers come in. Fired a few rounds and scared 'em away."

"All right, what's a jumper?"

"Yeah, you wouldn't know." He shook out a tobacco cigarette and passed me the box. "I don't know why they don't just call 'em thieves, that's what they are. Murderers, too, sometimes.

"They know that a lot of the commune members are pretty well off. If you raise cash crops you get to keep half the cash; besides, a lot of our members were prosperous when they joined.

"Anyhow, the jumpers take advantage of our relative isolation. They come out from the city and try to sneak in, usually hit one place, and run. Most of the time, they don't get this far in, but the farms closer to the road . . . we hear gunfire every couple of weeks. Usually just scaring off kids. If it keeps up, a siren goes off and the commune goes on alert."

"Doesn't sound fair to the people living close to the road."

"There're compensations. They only have to donate half as much of their crop as the rest of us do. And they're issued heavier weapons."

Marygay and I took the family's two bicycles and pedaled down to the recreation center. I only fell off twice, negotiating the bumpy road in the dark.

It was a little livelier than Richard had described it. A young nude girl was dancing sensuously to an assortment of homemade drums near the far side of the dome. Turned out she was still in school; it was a project for a "cultural relativity" class.

Most of the people there, in fact, were young and therefore still in school. They considered it a joke, though. After you had learned to read and write and could pass the Class I literacy test, you only had to take one course per year, and some of those you could pass just by signing up. So much for the "eighteen years' compulsory education" they had startled us with at Stargate.

Other people were playing board games, reading, watching the girl gyrate, or just talking. There was a bar that served soya, coffee, or thin homemade beer. Not a ration ticket to be seen; all made by the commune or purchased outside with commune tickets.

We got into a discussion about the war, with a bunch of people who knew Marygay and I were veterans. It's hard to describe their attitude, which was pretty uniform. They were angry in an abstract way that it took so much tax money to support; they were convinced that the Taurans would never be any danger to Earth; but they all knew that nearly half the jobs in the world were associated with the war, and if it stopped, everything would fall apart.

I thought everything was in shambles already, but then I hadn't grown up in this world. And they had never known "peacetime."

We went home about midnight and Marygay and I each stood two hours' guard. By the middle of the next morning, I was wishing I had gotten a little more sleep.

The plow was a big blade on wheels with two handles for steering, atomic powered. Not very much power, though; enough to move it forward at a slow crawl if the blade was in soft earth. Needless to say, there was little soft earth in the unused five acres. The plow would go a few centimeters, get stuck, freewheel until I put some back into it, then move a few more centimeters. I finished a tenth of an acre the first day and eventually got it up to a fifth of an acre a day.

It was hard, hardening work, but pleasant. I had an earclip that piped music to me, old tapes from Richard's collection, and the sun browned me all over. I was beginning to think I could live that way forever, when suddenly it was finished.

Marygay and I were reading up at the recreation center one evening when we heard faint gunfire down by the road. We decided it'd be smart to get back to the house. We were less than halfway there when firing broke out all along our left, on a line that seemed to extend from the road to far past the recreation center: a coordinated attack. We had to abandon the bikes and crawl on hands and knees in the drainage ditch by the side of the road, bullets hissing over our heads. A heavy vehicle rumbled by, shooting left and right. It took a good twenty minutes to crawl home. We passed two farmhouses that were burning brightly. I was glad ours didn't have any wood.

I noticed there was no return fire coming from our tower, but didn't say anything. There were two dead strangers in front of the house as we rushed inside.

April was lying on the floor, still alive but bleeding from a hundred tiny fragment wounds. The living room was rubble and dust; someone must have thrown a bomb through a door or window. I left Marygay with her mother and ran out back to the tower. The ladder was pulled up, so I had to shinny up one of the stilts.

Richard was sitting slumped over the rifle. In the pale green glow from the scope I could see a perfectly round hole above his left eye. A little blood had trickled down the bridge of his nose and dried.

I laid his body on the floor and covered his head with my shirt. I filled my pockets with clips and took the rifle back to the house.

Marygay had tried to make her mother comfortable. They were talking quietly. She was holding my shotgun-pistol and had another gun on the floor beside her. When I came in she looked up and nodded soberly, not crying.

April whispered something and Marygay asked, "Mother wants to know whether ... Daddy had a hard time of it. She knows he's dead."

"No. I'm sure he didn't feel anything."

"That's good."

"It's something." I should keep my mouth shut. "It is good, yes."

I checked the doors and windows for an effective vantage point. I couldn't find anyplace that wouldn't allow a whole platoon to sneak up behind me.

"I'm going to go outside and get on top of the house." Couldn't go back to the tower. "Don't you shoot unless somebody gets inside . . . maybe they'll think the place is deserted."

By the time I had clambered up to the sod roof, the heavy truck was coming back down the road. Through the scope I could see that there were five men on it, four in the cab and one who was on the open bed, cradling a machine gun, surrounded by loot.

He was crouched between two refrigerators, but I had a clear shot at him. Held my fire, not wanting to draw attention. The truck stopped in front of the house, sat for a minute, and turned in. The window was probably bulletproof, but I sighted on the driver's face and squeezed off a round. He jumped as it ricocheted, whining, leaving an opaque star on the plastic, and the man in back opened up. A steady stream of bullets hummed over my head; I could hear them thumping into the sandbags of the tower. He didn't see me.

The truck wasn't ten meters away when the shooting stopped. He was evidently reloading, hidden behind the refrigerator. I took careful aim and when he popped up to fire I shot him in the throat. The bullet being a tumbler, it exited through the top of his skull.

The driver pulled the truck around in a long arc so that, when it stopped, the door to the cab was flush with the door of the house. This protected them from the tower and also from me, though I doubted they yet knew where I was; a T-16 makes no flash and very little noise. I kicked off my shoes and stepped cautiously onto the top of the cab, hoping the driver would get out on his side. Once the door opened I could fill the cab with ricocheting bullets.

No good. The far door, hidden from me by the roof's overhang, opened first. I waited for the driver and hoped that Marygay was well hidden. I shouldn't have worried.

There was a deafening roar, then another and another. The heavy truck rocked with the impact of thousands of tiny flechettes. One short scream that the second shot ended.

I jumped from the truck and ran around to the back door. Marygay had her mother's head on her lap, and someone was crying softly. I went to them and Marygay's cheeks were dry under my palms.

"Good work, dear."

She didn't say anything. There was a steady heavy dripping sound from the door and the air was acrid with smoke and the smell of fresh meat. We huddled together until dawn.

I had thought April was sleeping, but in the dim light her eyes were wide open and filmed. Her breath came in shallow rasps. Her skin was gray parchment and dried blood. She didn't answer when we talked to her.

A vehicle was coming up the road, so I took the rifle and went outside. It was a dump truck with a white sheet draped over one side and a man standing in the back with a megaphone repeating, "Wounded . . . wounded." I waved and the truck came in. They took April out on a makeshift litter and told us which hospital they were going to. We wanted to

go along but there was simply no room; the bed of the truck was covered with people in various stages of disrepair.

Marygay didn't want to go back inside because it was getting light enough to see the men she had killed so completely. I went back in to get some cigarettes and forced myself to look. It was messy enough, but just didn't disturb me that much. That bothered me, to be confronted with a pile of human hamburger and mainly notice the flies and ants and smell. Death is so much neater in space.

We buried her father behind the house, and when the truck came back with April's small body wrapped in a shroud, we buried her beside him. The commune's sanitation truck came by a little later, and gas-masked men took care of the jumpers' bodies.

We sat in the baking sun, and finally Marygay wept, for a long time, silently.

11

We spent that night in a hotel room in Sioux Falls, talking more than sleeping. It went like this:

Earth was not a fit place to live, and by all signs it was getting worse rather than better. And there was nothing to hold us here.

But the only people allowed in space were members of UNEF.

Therefore we had to either join up again or try to learn to live with the crime and crowding and filth and so on.

We had been promised training positions if we reenlisted. We could be assigned to the moon if we asked, and would have commissions. All these things would make army life a lot more tolerable than it had been.

And except for the combat, we had been happier in the army than during most of our stay on Earth.

We took the morning flight to Miami and monorailed to the Cape.

"In case you're interested, you aren't the first combat veterans to come back." The recruiting officer was a muscular lieutenant of indeterminate sex. 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 the Force, since they extended the draft law, but had just been on inactive status. I scrutinized the paper.

"There's nothing on this about the guarantees we were given at Stargate."

"That won't be necessary. The Force will—"

"I think it is necessary, Lieutenant." I handed back the form. So did Marygay.

"Let me check." She left the desk and disappeared into an office. After a while 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, made our financial arrangements, and caught the next morning's shuttle. We laid over at Earthport, enjoying zero gravity for a few hours, and then caught a ride to Luna, setting down at the Grimaldi base.

On the door to the Transient Officers' Billet, some wag had scraped "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 we both gasped at the same time:

* *ORDERS * *ORDERS * *ORDERS

THE FOLLOWING NAMED PERSONNEL:

Mandella, William 2LT [11 575 278] COCOMM D CO GRITRABN

AND

Potter, Marygay 2LT [17 386 907] COCOMM B CO GRITRABN

ARE HEREBY REASSIGNED TO:

LT Mandella: PLcomm 2 PL STFTHETA STARGATE

LT Potter: PLCOMM 3 PL STFTHETA STARGATE.

DESCRIPTION OF DUTIES:

Command infantry platoon in Tet-2 Campaign.

THE ABOVE NAMED PERSONNEL WILL REPORT IMMEDIATELY TO GRIMALDI TRANSPORTATION BATTALION TO BE MANIFESTED TO STARGATE.

ISSUED STARGATE TACSD/1298–8684–1450/20 Aug 2019 SG: BY AUTHO STFCOM Commander.

* *ORDERS * *ORDERS * *ORDER S

"They didn't waste any time, did they?" Marygay said bitterly.

"Must be a 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 couldn't shake the feeling that we were going home.