

WINNER OF THE HUGO AND NEBULA AWARDS FOR BEST NOVEL

The Forever War



Joe Haldeman

AS RELEVANT TODAY AS WHEN FIRST RELEASED, THE AWARD WINNING MILITARY SCIENCE FICTION

CLASSIC IS NOW AVAILABLE IN EBOOK FORMATS.

An elite military force returns after a brief interstellar operation to find that more than twenty-years have passed. During their time away Earth has changed drastically and the squad has difficulty reintegrating into the new world order. Hoping to find familiarity by re-enlisting, William Mandella discovers doing so comes with its own set of consequences.

The Forever War won all major science fiction awards including the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus. Ridley Scott, director of *Blade Runner* and *Alien* is currently adapting the classic for film. This is the author's preferred version and includes a Foreword by John Scalzi, author of *Old Man's War*.

PRAISE FOR THE FOREVER WAR

“To say that The Forever War is the best science fiction war novel ever written is to damn it with faint praise. It is, for all its techno-extrapolative brilliance, as fine and woundingly genuine a war story as any I’ve read.” — William Gibson, author of *Neuromancer* and *Spook Country*

*“There are a handful of moments when an American science fiction novel abruptly and seemingly effortlessly satisfied every possible expectation conveyed, not only by the genre’s ambitions, but of those of the whole literary landscape with which it was contemporary; Sturgeon’s *More Than Human*, Dicks’s *The Man in the High Castle*, LeGuin’s *The Dispossessed*, [and] Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. The Forever War is one such book, and like those others still carries with it that air of recognition and possibility.”* — Jonathan Lethem

“Perhaps the most important war novel written since Vietnam...Haldeman, a veteran, is a flat-out visionary...and protagonist William Mandella’s attempt to survive and remain human in the face of an absurd, almost endless war is harrowing, hilarious, heartbreaking, and true...Like all the best works of literature, The Forever War takes you apart and then, before you can turn that last page, puts you back together: better, wiser, more human. Simply extraordinary.” — Junot Díaz

“The Forever War is not just a great science fiction novel, it’s a great Vietnam war novel—and a great war novel, without qualification—that is also science fiction. A classic to grace either genre.” — Iain Banks

“The Forever War is brilliant—one of the most influential war novels of our time. That it happens to be set in the future only broadens and enhances its message.” — Greg Bear

“The Forever War does what the very best science fiction does: It deals with extremes both societal and teleological; it places a frame around humankind’s place in the universe to show us what is outside the frame; and it functions simultaneously at the literal and metaphorical level. Inarguably one of the genre’s great novels, it is also among the finest novels ever written about war.” — James Sallis

“In a literature of ideas, The Forever War is a titan: a book filled with mind-bending ideas about relativistic time distortion and world-shaking ideas about the futility of war. In today’s world, where we think declaring war on abstract nouns like terror is a winning strategy, we need The Forever War.” — Cory Doctorow

“I first read this twenty years ago and have never forgotten the wonder and fury it kindled at the time. Anyone who talks about the glory of war has obviously never read it. A beautifully detailed and intensely personal account of a conflict that lasts for over a thousand years, as told by one grunt who lives through it all. Only a writer as skillful and knowledgeable as Haldeman could use war’s dark glamour to lure the reader in and then deploy the same fascination to show just what kind of effect the orchestrated barbarism can have on the human soul.” — Peter F. Hamilton, author of *Pandora’s Star*

*“It is to the Vietnam War what Catch-22 was to World War II, the definitive, bleakly comic satire.” — Thomas M. Disch, author of *Camp Concentration*, and 334*

“If there was a Fort Knox for science fiction, we’d have to lock Joe Haldeman up and throw away the key.” — Steven King

The Forever War

BY
JOE HALDEMAN



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For Ben and, always, for Gay

WORKS BY JOE HALDEMAN

NOVELS

War Year (1972)
The Forever War (1974)
Attar's Revenge (1975)
War of Nerves (1975)
Mindbridge (1976)
All My Sins Remembered (1977)
Planet of Judgment (1977)
World without End (1979)
Worlds (1981)
There is No Darkness (w/Jack C. Haldeman II) (1983)
Worlds Apart (1983)
Tool of the Trade (1987)
Buying Time/The Long Habit of Living (1989)
The Hemingway Hoax (1990)
Worlds Enough and Time (1992)
1968 (1995)
Forever Peace (1997)
Forever Free (1999)
The Coming (2000)
Guardian (2002)
Camouflage (2004)
Old Twentieth (2005)
The Accidental Time Machine (2007)
Marsbound (2008)
Starbound (2010)

SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS

Infinite Dreams (1979)
Dealing in Futures (1985)
Vietnam and other Alien Worlds (1993)
War Stories (1995)
None so Blind (1996)
Saul's Death and Other Stories (1997)
A Separate War and Other Stories (2006)
Peace and War: The Omnibus Edition (2006)

AWARDS: JOE HALDEMAN

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

- 2010 Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award for Lifetime Achievement
- 2009 Robert A. Heinlein Award
- 2004 Southeastern Science Fiction Lifetime Achievement Award
- 1996 New England Science Fiction Association Skylark Award (along with Gay Haldeman)
- 1989 Interzone Poll All Time Best Science Fiction Author

LITERARY AWARDS

- 2005 Nebula: Best Novel (Camouflage)
- 2004 Southeastern SF Achievement Award: Novel (Camouflage)
- 2004 James Tiptree Award (Camouflage)
- 2002 Asimov's Reader Poll: Poem (January Fires)
- 2001 Rhysling Award: Long Poem (January Fires)
- 1999 Spanish Science Fiction Association Ignotus: Best Novel (Forever Peace)
- 1998 John W. Campbell Memorial Award for Best Science Fiction Novel (Forever Peace)
 - 1998 Hugo: Best Novel (Forever Peace)
 - 1998 Nebula: Best Novel (Forever Peace)
 - 1997 Locus: Collection (None so Blind)
 - 1995 Hugo: Short Story (None So Blind)
 - 1995 Homer: Short Story (None So Blind)
- 1995 Science Fiction Chronicle Reader Awards (None So Blind)
- 1994 Southeastern SF Achievement Award: Short Story (Faces)
 - 1994 Nebula: Best Short Story (Graves)
- 1993 World Fantasy Award: Best Short Story (Graves)
- 1991 Hugo: Best Novella (The Hemingway Hoax)
- 1991 Rhysling Award: Short Poem (Eighteen Years Old, October Eleventh)
- 1991 Nebula: Best Novella (The Hemingway Hoax)
- 1984 Rhysling Award: Long Poem (Saul's Death)
- 1979 Analog Analytic Laboratory: Science Fact (This Space for Rent)
 - 1977 Hugo: Short Story (Tricentennial)
 - 1977 Locus: Short Story (Tricentennial)
 - 1976 Hugo: Best Novel (The Forever War)
 - 1976 Locus: Best Novel (The Forever War)
 - 1976 Ditmar Award (The Forever War)
 - 1976 Nebula: Best Novel (The Forever War)

FOREWORD

Hey Joe, I Read Your Book, or, An Open Letter to Joe Haldeman, Cleverly Disguised as a Foreword to *The Forever War*

Dear Joe:

To get this letter to you started, and to set the scene for a theme I'll get back to, I want to remind you (and share with the onlookers reading this letter to you) about the first time I met both you and Gay, which was at the Worldcon in Glasgow in 2005. I forget the specific manner in which we were introduced—I suspect my editor Patrick Nielsen Hayden may have made the introduction, as introducing science fictional people to each other is something he's very good at. I remember saying hello and then being marvelously flattered as Gay told me that she had enjoyed *Old Man's War*, which was at the time my sole novel, having come out six months earlier. After she was done saying very nice things about it, you said "I've heard good things about it, but I'm afraid I haven't read it yet."

"That's all right," I said. "I've heard good things about *The Forever War*, and I haven't read it, either." To which you laughed, then you and I and Gay went on to have a very nice conversation about other things. So that's how we met.

Let me note two things about our meeting. First, you were *entirely* gracious to me in the aftermath of my attempted witty banter, because in retrospect (i.e., three seconds later) I could see how the comment might have seemed snarky and dismissive, even if it was not meant that way. Fortunately for me, you took it the right way. Second, in terms of high science fictional crimes and misdemeanors, mine in not having read your novel was a far sight greater than yours in not reading mine. My novel was the work of a newbie writer whom only a few people knew existed (thus my pleasure in Gay's having read it at all), whereas your novel was (and remains) a science fiction classic—a winner of the Hugo, Nebula and Locus awards, widely recognized as one of the two cornerstone works of military science fiction, along with *Starship Troopers*. You could be forgiven for not having gotten around to my book. I, on the other hand, did not get off so easily.

Indeed, it's a measure of the significance of *The Forever War* in science fiction literature that readers and reviewers simply *assumed* a) that I had read it of course, and b) that my own novel of military science fiction was riffing off of yours to some greater or lesser extent. When I admitted to people that, in fact, I had not read your book, I usually got one of two reactions, depending on whether they liked my book or not.

Here's the one for if they liked the book:

Reader: I liked your book, man. I really like how you played the changes off of *The Forever War* in

Me: Well, thank you. But I have to admit I haven't read *The Forever War* yet.

Reader: Really?

Me: Yeah.

Reader: Have you been, like, *trapped in a box* for the last 30 years?

And here's the one for when they didn't like it:

Reader: Jeez, Scalzi, I sure hope you're paying Joe Haldeman royalties for how much you ripped off *The Forever War*.

Me: Well, actually, I haven't read the book.

Reader: Uh-huh. So you're not only a thief, you're also a *liar*.

So it went, for a few years, until, in fact, I actually *did* start lying about whether I'd read the book because I was tired of being *told* how I needed to read it. I *knew* I needed to read it, you know? But I was *busy*. Writing my own books. And, um, being distracted by shiny bits of foil. Yes, that was it. That was it exactly.

Finally, for various reasons, this last year I came to a time and place where I was ready for *The Forever War*. I took it down from the shelf (where it had been, actually, for a few years—did I mention that I am easily distractible?), closed the door of my office, and settled down for a good read.

When I finished it, this was the thought I had about it: *Wow, I'm glad I waited until now to read this.*

Really, I was—and am.

There are two reasons for this. The first is a simple and practical writing matter: If I had known going in about all the plot and character choices you made in your novel, I probably wouldn't have ended up making the same basic choices in mine, because, you know. As a writer I have an *ego*, and I wouldn't have wanted to step in your footprints, and walked a path you had, even if it were better for my novel to have done so. I would have been self-conscious of it; I would have danced around certain footfalls, and I suspect my own novel would have not been the better for it. There's a whole other letter I could write, unpacking this statement and what it means, but I won't get into that now; suffice it to say for the moment that I would have felt like I would have to be original, even to the detriment of being *good*. It's easier on the finished end of the writing process to be compared to *The Forever War* (flattering, too); on the writing end, it would have been an elephant on my head—too much pressure; thanks, no. I'm happy to have missed that. The second reason is that I believe that *The Forever War* was a novel of its time, and its time, for better or worse, has come around again.

It's no secret, to you or me or most of the people peering over our shoulders here, that *The Forever War* comes out of the crucible of the Vietnam War, in which you served, and which as I understand marked you for its own, as it did with many who served in it. Science fiction as a genre has the benefit of being able to act as parable, to set up a story at a remove so you can make a real-world point without people throwing up a wall in front of it. You'd already essayed your experience in Vietnam in the contemporary novel *War Year*, (which I *had* actually read, and gave to my father-in-law, himself a veteran, as a gift), but *The Forever War* was another, bigger bite of that apple—your chance to explain to people who hadn't been there the confusion and bureaucracy, the muddled aims and random horrors, and the alienation that those who went felt when they came back home to a nation and culture that they no longer quite fit into, because both had changed.

I grew up as part of the fortunate generation between Vietnam and 9/11, the ones whose cohort didn't have to experience what war was, save for a few short weeks in Grenada and Iraq, in '91. There's another generation, behind mine, that did not get to be so lucky. Hundreds of thousands of them went to the Middle East and a good portion of them are still there. Thousands have come back with flags draped over their coffins. Tens of thousands have come back injured, physically or mentally or both, and some portion of them feel the same disassociation to the land they've returned to that Mandella and Marygay felt with theirs. Whether one feels the war in Iraq or Afghanistan is right and necessary or not, there's no doubt a generation will be marked by it and claimed by it.

To my mind, there are two things that make a novel a “classic”—a genuine classic, as opposed to merely “old and continuing to sell.” The first is that it speaks to the time in which the novel first appeared. There is no doubt *The Forever War* did this; its awards and acclaim are signifiers of that fact. The second thing is tougher, and that is that it *keeps* speaking to readers outside its time, because what’s in the book touches on something that never goes away, or at the very least keeps coming around.

I also think there’s no doubt *The Forever War* is doing this, too, right now, in this time—it’s a parable whose lessons need to be learned once more. Like its hero, the book has come through time to be part of something; in this case it’s to be a reminder to all those who are looking to come home again—and those who care about them—that there’s someone who’s been where they are now, and who knows what they feel, and why. Maybe it will help them find their way back. I would have missed the power of that if I had read the novel earlier than this. I’m aware of it now—and glad for it.

All of which is to say: Hey, Joe, I read your book.

Everyone was right about it.

Thank you.

Your
John Scal
July, 200

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the definitive version of *The Forever War*. There are two other versions, and my publisher has been kind enough to allow me to clarify things here.

The one you're holding in your hand is the book as it was originally written. But it has a pretty tortuous history.

It's ironic, since it later won the Hugo and Nebula Awards, and has won "Best Novel" awards in other countries, but *The Forever War* was not an easy book to sell back in the early seventies. It was rejected by eighteen publishers before St. Martin's Press decided to take a chance on it. "Pretty good book," was the usual reaction, "but nobody wants to read a science fiction novel about Vietnam." Twenty-five years later, most young readers don't even see the parallels between *The Forever War* and the seemingly endless one we were involved in at the time, and that's okay. It's about Vietnam because that's the war the author was in. But it's mainly about war, about soldiers, and about the reasons we think we need them.

While the book was being looked at by all those publishers, it was also being serialized piecemeal in *Analog* magazine. The editor, Ben Bova, was a tremendous help, not only in editing, but also for making the thing exist at all! He gave it a prominent place in the magazine, and it was also his endorsement that brought it to the attention of St. Martin's Press, who took a chance on the hardcover though they did not publish adult science fiction at that time.

But Ben rejected the middle section, a novella called "You Can Never Go Back." He liked it as a piece of writing, he said, but thought that it was too downbeat for *Analog's* audience. So I wrote him a more positive story and put "You Can Never Go Back" into the drawer; eventually Ted White published it in *Amazing* magazine, as a coda to *The Forever War*.

At this late date, I'm not sure why I didn't reinstate the original middle when the book was accepted. Perhaps I didn't trust my own taste, or just didn't want to make life more complicated. But that first book version is essentially the *Analog* version with "more adult language and situations," as they say in Hollywood.

The paperback of that version stayed in print for about sixteen years. Then in 1991 I had the opportunity to reinstate my original version. The dates in the book are now kind of funny; most people realize we didn't get into an interstellar war in 1996. I originally set it in that year so it was barely possible that the officers and NCOs could be veterans of Vietnam, so we decided to leave it that way, in spite of the obvious anachronisms. Think of it as a parallel universe.

But maybe it's the real one, and we're in a dream.

Joe Haldeman
Cambridge, Massachusetts

INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR

I met Thomas Dunne on a dreary winter evening in 1974, at a crowded party in the Algonquin Hotel. That afternoon my agent, Robert P. Mills, had just told me my novel *The Forever War* was unpublishable. He had shown it to every science fiction editor in town, and they all said it was too controversial.

The party at the Algonquin was an annual event hosted by the Science Fiction Writers of America called the Editors/Authors Reception, and it was serious business. It was where you went to wheel and deal. It was also, incidentally, full of people who had rejected a book I thought was timely and important—not to mention taking up more than two years of my life. So I drank a bit before I got there, and when I got there, the wine was free.

So in fact, the details of my actual meeting with Tom Dunne are a little foggy. I had told *Analog* editor Ben Bova my tale of woe, and he said, “I have a man you have to meet,” and he steered me to Tom, who was not too plagued by writers because at the time, St. Martin’s didn’t publish adult science fiction. Ben, whose magazine was serializing the novel, pitched it to Tom. Tom’s antiwar sentiment was intrigued, and he did agree to take a look at it.

He accepted the book with unusual speed, and it was the start of a close and enjoyable literary relationship. Tom was a careful editor and also a hale-fellow-well-met, whenever I managed to get into town from Iowa.

That hazy night at the Algonquin, though, was a major turning point of my life. If Tom Dunne hadn’t had the courage and acuity to publish that “unpublishable” book, I would probably have gone back to mathematics and wound up drearily teaching. Thanks, Tom.

Joe Haldeman
Cambridge, Massachusetts
June 2000

INTRODUCTION BY THE PUBLISHER

I first met Joe and his charming wife, Gay, in May of 2011 at the Nebula Weekend hosted by the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America. Both he and my husband, author Michel J. Sullivan, were participating on a panel entitled, “Old Ways, New Ways.” Michael was just starting his career, having signed with Orbit for *The Riyria Revelations*, and Joe of course was a legend, a Grand Master that even the moderator, Jack McDevitt, introduced with unmasked awe.

After the panel, Joe and Gay graciously asked us to join them for lunch. Unfortunately, we already had other plans and I was more than a little disappointed. Luckily for me, I found myself on a couch next to Gay later in the hospitality suite.

We started chatting about ebooks, and I was mentioning what great success I had been having with both Michael and the science fiction writers that Ridan Publishing represents. Gay astounded me when she mentioned that *The Forever War* was not in ebook and she only recently learned that the rights were theirs. She told me about her plans to put it out herself and I applauded her initiative. Having done this many times, I knew that something which would be trivial for myself could be very time consuming for someone who had no prior experience. So I offered to produce an ebook format if she sent me an electronic copy of the manuscript. After all, it wouldn't take me too long and I thought it was imperative that this classic find a wider audience in the new world of ebooks.

A few weeks went by and I didn't hear from either Joe or Gay, so I reached out again and asked how getting the raw manuscript was going. They wrote back indicating how they were caring for an ailing friend, and of course they are busy with other things. While I never dreamed they would take me up on the offer, I expressed my desire to put the book out through Ridan Publishing and that way they wouldn't have to do anything. I was both shocked and delighted when an email returned from Gay stating, “Oh, Robin, what a fine offer! We just talked it over and would like to take you up on it.”

Having a work of this stature entrusted to Ridan is beyond my wildest imagination. I guess that just shows that you do reap what you sow and karma really does exist. A gesture of generosity has turned into the dream of a lifetime, and I'm thrilled to play a small part in bringing this classic to a whole new world of ebook readers. It is a timeless story as relevant today as when it was first penned over thirty-five years ago. Enjoy.

Robin Sullivan
July 2011

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The Forever War

BY
JOE HALDEMAN

PRIVATE MANDELLA

One

“Tonight we’re going to show you eight silent ways to kill a man.” The guy who said that was a sergeant who didn’t look five years older than me. So if he’d ever killed a man in combat, silently or otherwise, he’d done it as an infant.

I already knew eighty ways to kill people, but most of them were pretty noisy. I sat up straight in my chair and assumed a look of polite attention and fell asleep with my eyes open. So did most everybody else. We’d learned that they never scheduled anything important for these after-chop classes.

The projector woke me up and I sat through a short tape showing the “eight silent ways.” Some of the actors must have been brain-wipes, since they were actually killed.

After the tape a girl in the front row raised her hand. The sergeant nodded at her and she rose to parade rest. Not bad looking, but kind of chunky about the neck and shoulders. Everybody gets that way after carrying a heavy pack around for a couple of months.

“Sir”—we had to call sergeants “sir” until graduation—“most of those methods, really, they looked...kind of silly.”

“For instance?”

“Like killing a man with a blow to the kidneys, from an entrenching tool. I mean, when would you *actually* have only an entrenching tool, and no gun or knife? And why not just bash him over the head with it?”

“He might have a helmet on,” he said reasonably.

“Besides, Taurans probably don’t even *have* kidneys!”

He shrugged. “Probably they don’t.” This was 1997, and nobody had ever seen a Tauran; hadn’t even found any pieces of Taurans bigger than a scorched chromosome. “But their body chemistry is similar to ours, and we have to assume they’re similarly complex creatures. They *must* have weaknesses, vulnerable spots. You have to find out where they are.

“That’s the important thing.” He stabbed a finger at the screen. “Those eight convicts got caulked for your benefit because you’ve got to find out how to kill Taurans, and be able to do it whether you have a megawatt laser or an emery board.”

She sat back down, not looking too convinced.

“Any more questions?” Nobody raised a hand.

“OK. Tench-hut!” We staggered upright and he looked at us expectantly.

“Fuck you, sir,” came the familiar tired chorus.

“Louder!”

“FUCK YOU, SIR!” One of the army’s less-inspired morale devices.

“That’s better. Don’t forget, predawn maneuvers tomorrow. Chop at 03:30, first formation, 04:00. Anybody sacked after 03:40 owes one stripe. Dismissed.”

I zipped up my coverall and went across the snow to the lounge for a cup of soya and a joint. I’d always been able to get by on five or six hours of sleep, and this was the only time I could be by myself, out of the army for a while. Looked at the newsfax for a few minutes. Another ship got caulked, out by Aldebaran sector. That was four years ago. They were mounting a reprisal fleet, but it’ll take four years more for them to get out there. By then, the Taurans would have every portal planet sewed up tight.

Back at the billet, everybody else was sacked and the main lights were out. The whole company's been dragging ever since we got back from the two-week lunar training. I dumped my clothes in the locker, checked the roster and found out I was in bunk 31. Goddammit, right under the heater.

I slipped through the curtain as quietly as possible so as not to wake up the person next to me. Couldn't see who it was, but I couldn't have cared less. I slipped under the blanket.

"You're late, Mandella," a voice yawned. It was Rogers.

"Sorry I woke you up," I whispered.

"S'allright." She snuggled over and clasped me spoon-fashion. She was warm and reasonably soft. I patted her hip in what I hoped was a brotherly fashion. "Night, Rogers."

"G'night, Stallion." She returned the gesture more pointedly.

Why do you always get the tired ones when you're ready and the randy ones when you're tired? I bowed to the inevitable.

Two

“Awright, let’s get some goddamn *back* into that! Stringer team! Move it up—move your ass up!”

A warm front had come in about midnight and the snow had turned to sleet. The permaplast stringer weighed five hundred pounds and was a bitch to handle, even when it wasn’t covered with ice. There were four of us, two at each end, carrying the plastic girder with frozen fingertips. Rogers was my partner.

“Steel!” the guy behind me yelled, meaning that he was losing his hold. It wasn’t steel, but it was heavy enough to break your foot. Everybody let go and hopped away. It splashed slush and mud all over us.

“Goddammit, Petrov,” Rogers said, “why didn’t you go out for the Red Cross or something? This fucken thing’s not that fucken heavy.” Most of the girls were a little more circumspect in their speech. Rogers was a little butch.

“Awright, get a fucken *move* on, stringers—epoxy team! Dog ’em! Dog ’em!”

Our two epoxy people ran up, swinging their buckets. “Let’s go, Mandella. I’m freezin’ my balls off.”

“Me, too,” the girl said with more feeling than logic.

“One—two—heave!” We got the thing up again and staggered toward the bridge. It was about three-quarters completed. Looked as if the second platoon was going to beat us. I wouldn’t give a damn, but the platoon that got their bridge built first got to fly home. Four miles of muck for the rest of us, and no rest before chop.

We got the stringer in place, dropped it with a clank, and fitted the static clamps that held it to the rise-beams. The female half of the epoxy team started slopping glue on it before we even had it secured. Her partner was waiting for the stringer on the other side. The floor team was waiting at the foot of the bridge, each one holding a piece of the light, stressed permaplast over his head like an umbrella. They were dry and clean. I wondered aloud what they had done to deserve it, and Rogers suggested a couple of colorful, but unlikely, possibilities.

We were going back to stand by the next stringer when the field first (name of Dougelstein, but we called him “Awright”) blew a whistle and bellowed, “Awright, soldier boys and girls, ten minutes. Smoke ’em if you got ’em.” He reached into his pocket and turned on the control that heated our coveralls.

Rogers and I sat down on our end of the stringer and I took out my weed box. I had lots of joints, but we were ordered not to smoke them until after night-chop. The only tobacco I had was a cigarro butt about three inches long. I lit it on the side of the box; it wasn’t too bad after the first couple of puffs. Rogers took a puff, just to be sociable, but made a face and gave it back.

“Were you in school when you got drafted?” she asked.

“Yeah. Just got a degree in physics. Was going after a teacher’s certificate.”

She nodded soberly. “I was in biology...”

“Figures.” I ducked a handful of slush. “How far?”

“Six years, bachelor’s and technical.” She slid her boot along the ground, turning up a ridge of mud and slush the consistency of freezing ice milk. “Why the fuck did this have to happen?”

I shrugged. It didn’t call for an answer, least of all the answer that the UNEF kept giving us. Intellectual and physical elite of the planet, going out to guard humanity against the Tauran menace.

Soyashit. It was all just a big experiment. See whether we could goad the Taurans into ground action.

~~Awright blew the whistle two minutes early, as expected, but Rogers and I and the other two stringers got to sit for a minute while the epoxy and floor teams finished covering our stringer. It got cold fast, sitting there with our suits turned off, but we remained inactive on principle.~~

There really wasn't any sense in having us train in the cold. Typical army half-logic. Sure, it was going to be cold where we were going, but not ice-cold or snow-cold. Almost by definition, a portal planet remained within a degree or two of absolute zero all the time—since collapsars don't shine—and the first chill you felt would mean that you were a dead man.

Twelve years before, when I was ten years old, they had discovered the collapsar jump. Just fling an object at a collapsar with sufficient speed, and out it pops in some other part of the galaxy. It didn't take long to figure out the formula that predicted where it would come out: it travels along the same "line" (actually an Einsteinian geodesic) it would have followed if the collapsar hadn't been in the way—until it reaches another collapsar field, whereupon it reappears, repelled with the same speed at which it approached the original collapsar. Travel time between the two collapsars...exactly zero.

It made a lot of work for mathematical physicists, who had to redefine simultaneity, then tear down general relativity and build it back up again. And it made the politicians very happy, because now they could send a shipload of colonists to Fomalhaut for less than it had once cost to put a brace of men on the moon. There were a lot of people the politicians would love to see on Fomalhaut, implementing a glorious adventure rather than stirring up trouble at home.

The ships were always accompanied by an automated probe that followed a couple of million miles behind. We knew about the portal planets, little bits of flotsam that whirled around the collapsars; the purpose of the drone was to come back and tell us in the event that a ship had smacked into a portal planet at .999 of the speed of light.

That particular catastrophe never happened, but one day a drone limped back alone. Its data were analyzed, and it turned out that the colonists' ship had been pursued by another vessel and destroyed. This happened near Aldebaran, in the constellation Taurus, but since "Aldebaranian" is a little hard to handle, they named the enemy "Tauran."

Colonizing vessels thenceforth went out protected by an armed guard. Often the armed guard went out alone, and finally the Colonization Group got shortened to UNEF, United Nations Exploratory Force. Emphasis on the "force."

Then some bright lad in the General Assembly decided that we ought to field an army of footsoldiers to guard the portal planets of the nearer collapsars. This led to the Elite Conscription Act of 1996 and the most elitely conscripted army in the history of warfare.

So here we were, fifty men and fifty women, with IQs over 150 and bodies of unusual health and strength, slogging elitely through the mud and slush of central Missouri, reflecting on the usefulness of our skill in building bridges on worlds where the only fluid is an occasional standing pool of liquid helium.

Three

About a month later, we left for our final training exercise, maneuvers on the planet Charon. Though nearing perihelion, it was still more than twice as far from the sun as Pluto.

The troopship was a converted “cattlegon” made to carry two hundred colonists and assorted bushes and beasts. Don’t think it was roomy, though, just because there were half that many of us. Most of the excess space was taken up with extra reaction mass and ordnance.

The whole trip took three weeks, accelerating at two gees halfway, decelerating the other half. Our top speed, as we roared by the orbit of Pluto, was around one-twentieth of the speed of light—not quite enough for relativity to rear its complicated head.

Three weeks of carrying around twice as much weight as normal...it’s no picnic. We did some cautious exercises three times a day and remained horizontal as much as possible. Still, we got several broken bones and serious dislocations. The men had to wear special supporters to keep from littering the floor with loose organs. It was almost impossible to sleep; nightmares of choking and being crushed, rolling over periodically to prevent blood pooling and bedsores. One girl got so fatigued that she almost slept through the experience of having a rib push out into the open air.

I’d been in space several times before, so when we finally stopped decelerating and went into free fall, it was nothing but relief. But some people had never been out, except for our training on the moon, and succumbed to the sudden vertigo and disorientation. The rest of us cleaned up after them, floating through the quarters with sponges and inspirators to suck up the globules of partly-digested “Concentrate, High-protein, Low-residue, Beef Flavor (Soya).”

We had a good view of Charon, coming down from orbit. There wasn’t much to see, though. It was just a dim, off-white sphere with a few smudges on it. We landed about two hundred meters from the base. A pressurized crawler came out and mated with the ferry, so we didn’t have to suit up. We clanked and squeaked up to the main building, a featureless box of grayish plastic.

Inside, the walls were the same drab color. The rest of the company was sitting at desks, chattering away. There was a seat next to Freeland.

“Jeff—feeling better?” He still looked a little pale.

“If the gods had meant for man to survive in free fall, they would have given him a cast iron glottis.” He sighed heavily. “A little better. Dying for a smoke.”

“Yeah.”

“You seemed to take it all right. Went up in school, didn’t you?”

“Senior thesis in vacuum welding, yeah. Three weeks in Earth orbit.” I sat back and reached for my weed box for the thousandth time. It still wasn’t there. The Life Support Unit didn’t want to handle nicotine and THC.

“Training was bad enough,” Jeff grouched, “but *this* shit—”

“Tench-hut!” We stood up in a raggedy-ass fashion, by twos and threes. The door opened and a full major came in. I stiffened a little. He was the highest-ranking officer I’d ever seen. He had a row of ribbons stitched into his coveralls, including a purple strip meaning he’d been wounded in combat, fighting in the old American army.

Must have been that Indochina thing, but it had fizzled out before I was born. He didn’t look that old.

“Sit, sit.” He made a patting motion with his hand. Then he put his hands on his hips and scanned

the company, a small smile on his face. “Welcome to Charon. You picked a lovely day to land, the temperature outside is a summery eight point one five degrees Absolute. We expect little change for the next two centuries or so.” Some of them laughed halfheartedly.

“Best you enjoy the tropical climate here at Miami Base; enjoy it while you can. We’re on the center of sunside here, and most of your training will be on darkside. Over there, the temperature stays a chilly two point zero eight.

“You might as well regard all the training you got on Earth and the moon as just an elementary exercise, designed to give you a fair chance of surviving Charon. You’ll have to go through your whole repertory here: tools, weapons, maneuvers. And you’ll find that, at these temperatures, tools don’t work the way they should; weapons don’t want to fire. And people move v-e-r-y cautiously.”

He studied the clipboard in his hand. “Right now, you have forty-nine women and forty-eight men. Two deaths on Earth, one psychiatric release. Having read an outline of your training program, I’m frankly surprised that so many of you pulled through.

“But you might as well know that I won’t be displeased if as few as fifty of you, half, graduate from this final phase. And the only way not to graduate is to die. Here. The only way anybody gets back to Earth—including me—is after a combat tour.

“You will complete your training in one month. From here you go to Stargate collapsar, half a light-year away. You will stay at the settlement on Stargate 1, the largest portal planet, until replacements arrive. Hopefully, that will be no more than a month; another group is due here as soon as you leave.

“When you leave Stargate, you will go to some strategically important collapsar, set up a military base there, and fight the enemy, if attacked. Otherwise, you will maintain the base until further orders.

“The last two weeks of your training will consist of constructing exactly that kind of a base, on darkside. There you will be totally isolated from Miami Base: no communication, no medical evacuation, no resupply. Sometime before the two weeks are up, your defense facilities will be evaluated in an attack by guided drones. They will be armed.”

They had spent all that money on us just to kill us in training?

“All of the permanent personnel here on Charon are combat veterans. Thus, all of us are forty to fifty years of age. But I think we can keep up with you. Two of us will be with you at all times and will accompany you at least as far as Stargate. They are Captain Sherman Stott, your company commander, and Sergeant Octavio Cortez, your first sergeant. Gentlemen?”

Two men in the front row stood easily and turned to face us. Captain Stott was a little smaller than the major, but cut from the same mold: face hard and smooth as porcelain, cynical half-smile, a precise centimeter of beard framing a large chin, looking thirty at the most. He wore a large, gunpowder-type pistol on his hip.

Sergeant Cortez was another story, a horror story. His head was shaved and the wrong shape, flattened out on one side, where a large piece of skull had obviously been taken out. His face was very dark and seamed with wrinkles and scars. Half his left ear was missing, and his eyes were as expressive as buttons on a machine. He had a moustache-and-beard combination that looked like a skinny white caterpillar taking a lap around his mouth. On anybody else, his schoolboy smile might look pleasant, but he was about the ugliest, meanest-looking creature I’d ever seen. Still, if you didn’t look at his head and considered the lower six feet or so, he could have posed as the “after” advertisement for a body-building spa. Neither Stott nor Cortez wore any ribbons. Cortez had a small pocket-laser suspended in a magnetic rig, sideways, under his left armpit. It had wooden grips that were worn smooth.

“Now, before I turn you over to the tender mercies of these two gentlemen, let me caution you again:

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