A SEPARATE WAR & OTHER STORIES

FOREWORD BY CONNIE WILLIS
A SEPARATE WAR
Joe Haldeman
Our wounds were horrible, but the army made us well and gave us Heaven, temporarily. And a fortune to spend there.

The most expensive and hard-to-replace component of a fighting suit is the soldier inside of it, so if he is crippled badly enough to be taken out of the fight, the suit tries to save what's left. In William's case, it automatically cut off his mangled leg and sealed the stump. In my case it was the right arm, just above the elbow. They say that for us women, losing an arm is easier than a leg. How did they come up with that?

But it was amazing luck that we should both get amputation wounds at the same time, which kept us together.

That was the Tet-2 campaign, which was a disaster, and William and I lay around doped to the gills with happyjuice while the others died their way through the disaster of Aleph-7. The score after the two battles was fifty-four dead, thirty-seven of us crips, two head cases, and only twelve more or less working soldiers, who were of course bristling with enthusiasm. Twelve is not enough to fight a battle with, unfortunately, so the Sangre y Victoria was rerouted to the hospital planet Heaven.

We took a long time, three collapsar jumps, getting to Heaven. The Taurans can chase you through one jump, if they're at the right place and the right time. But two would be almost impossible, and three just couldn't happen.

(But "couldn't happen" is probably a bad-luck charm. Because of the relativistic distortions associated with travel through collapsar jumps, you never know, when you greet the enemy, whether it comes from your own time, or centuries in your past or future. Maybe in a millennium or two, they'll be able to follow you through three collapsar jumps like following footprints. One of the first things they'd do is vaporize Heaven. Then Earth.)

Heaven is like an Earth untouched by human industry and avarice, pristine forests and fields and mountains but it's also a monument to human industry, and avarice, too.

When you recover there's no "if"; you wouldn't be there if they didn't know they could fix you you're still in the army, but you're also immensely wealthy. Even a private's pay rolls up a fortune, automatically invested during the centuries that creak by between battles. One of the functions of Heaven is to put all those millions back into the economy. So there's no end of things to do, all of them expensive.

When William and I recovered, we were given six months of "rest and recreation" on Heaven. I actually got out two days before him, but waited around, reading. They did still have books, for soldiers so old-fashioned they didn't want to plug themselves into adventures or ecstasies for thousands of dollars a minute. I did have $529,755,012 sitting around, so I could have dipped into tripping. But I'd heard I would have plenty of it, retraining before our next assignment. The ALSC, "accelerated life situation computer," which taught you things by making you do them in virtual reality. Over and over, until you got them right.

William had half again as much money as I did, since he had outranked me for centuries, but I didn't wait around just to get my hands on his fortune. I probably would have wanted his company even if I didn't love him. We were the only two people here born in the twentieth century, and there were only a handful from the twenty-first. Very few of them, off-duty, spoke a language I understood, though all soldiers were taught "premodern" English as a sort of temporal lingua franca. Some of them claimed their native language was English, but it was extremely fast and seemed to have lost some vowels along the way. Four centuries. Would I have sounded as strange to a Pilgrim? I don't think so.

(It would be interesting to take one of those Pilgrim Fathers and show him what had evolved from a life of grim piety and industriousness. Religion on Earth is a curiosity, almost as rare as heterosex. Heaven has no God, either, and men and women in love or in sex with people not of their own gender are committing an anachronistic perversion.)

I'd already arranged for a sumptuous "honeymoon" suite on Skye, an airborne resort, before William got out, and we did spend five days there, amusing each other anachronistically. Then we rented a flyer and set out to see the world.

William humored my desire to explore the physical, wild aspects of the world first. We camped in desert, jungle, arctic waste, mountaintops, deserted islands. We had pressor fields that kept away dangerous animals, allowing us a good close look at them while they tried to figure out what was keeping them from lunch, and they were impressive-evolution here had not favored mammal over reptile, and both families had developed large, swift predators in a variety of beautiful and ugly designs.
Then we toured the cities, in their finite variety. Some, like the sylvan Threshold where we'd grown and trained our new limbs, blended in with their natural surroundings. This was a twenty-second-century esthetic, too bland and obvious for modern tastes. The newer cities, like Skye, flaunted their artificiality.

We were both nervous in Atlantis, under a crushing kilometer of water, with huge glowing beasts bumping against the pressors, dark day and dark night. Perhaps it was too exact a metaphor for our lives in the army, the thin skins of cruiser or fighting suit holding the dark nothingness of space at bay while monsters tried to destroy you.

Many of the cities had no function other than separating soldiers from their money, so in spite of their variety there was a sameness to them. Eat, drink, drug, trip, have or watch sex.

I found the sex shows more interesting than William did, but he was repelled by the men together. It didn't seem to me that what they did was all that different from what we didand not nearly as alien as tripping for sex, plugging into a machine that delivered to you the image of an ideal mate and cleaned up afterwards.

He did go to a lesbian show with me, and made love with unusual energy that night. I thought there was something there besides titillation; that he was trying to prove something. We kidded each other about it"Me Tarzan, you Jane," "Me Tarzan, you Heathcliff." Who on this world would know what we were laughing about?

Prostitution had a new wrinkle, with empathy drugs that joined the servicer and customer in a deep emotional bond that was real while it lasted, I suppose to keep in competition with the electronic fantasy. We told each other we weren't inclined to try it, though I was curious, and probably would have done it if I'd been alone. I don't think William would have, since the drugs don't work between men and women, or so one of them told us, giggling with wide-eyed embarrassment. The very idea.

We had six months of quiet communion and wild, desperate fun, and still had plenty of money left when it suddenly ended. We were having lunch in an elegant restaurant in Skye, watching the sun sparkle on the calm ocean a klick below, when a nervous private came up, saluted, and gave us our sealed orders.

They were for different places. William was going to Sade-138, a collapsar out in the Greater Magellanic Cloud. I was going to Aleph-10, in the Orion group.

He was a major, the Yod-4 Strike Force commander, and I was a captain, the executive officer for Aleph-10.

It was unbelievable, surreal; monumentally stupid and unfair. We'd been together since Basic-five years or half a millennium and neither of us was leadership material. Neither of us was even a good private! The army had abundant evidence of that. Yet he was leaving in a week, for Stargate, to become a leader of men and women. My Strike Force was mustering in orbit around Heaven, in two days. Where I would somehow become a leader myself.

We flew back to Threshold, half the world away, and got there just as the administrative offices were opening. William fought and bought his way to the top, trying at the very least to have me reassigned as his XO. What difference could it make? Most of the people he'd muster with at Stargate hadn't even been born yet.

Of course it was not a matter of logic; it was a matter of protocol. And no army in history had ever been so locked in the ice of protocol. The person who had signed those orders for the yet unborn was probably dead by now.

The day and night we had left together was not good. Naturally, we thought of running; we knew the planet well and had some resources left. But the planet belonged to the army. We wouldn't be safe in any city, and would be thoroughly conspicuous in the wild, since we wouldn't be able to survive without the pressor fields, easily detected.

Desertion would be punished by death, of course, and we discussed the possibility of dying together that way, in a final gesture of defiance. But that would have been passive, simply giving our lives to the army. Better to offer them one more time to the Taurans.

Finally, exhausted by talk and anger and grief, we just lay in each other's arms for the last night and early morning. I wish I could say we gave each other strength.

When he walked me to the isolation chamber three hours before launch, we were almost deferential with one another, perhaps the way you act in the presence of beloved dead. No poet who ever equated parting with death had ever had a door slam shut like that. Even if we had both been headed for Earth, a few days apart, the time-space geometry of the collapsar jump would guarantee that we arrived decades or even centuries apart from one another.

And this wasn't Earth. There were 150,000 light-years between Sade-138 and Aleph-10. Absolute distance means nothing in collapsar geometry, they say. But if William were to die in a nova bomb attack, the tiny spark of his passing would take fifteen hundred centuries to crawl to Orion, or Earth. Time and distance beyond imagination.

The spaceport was on the equator, of course, on an island they called Paerw'l; Farewell. There was a high cliff, actually a flattened-off pinnacle, overlooking the bay to the east, where William and I had spent silent days fasting
and meditating. He said he was going there to watch the launch. I hoped to get a window so that I could see the
island, and I did push my way to one when we filed into the shuttle. But I couldn't see the pinnacle from sea level,
and when the engines screamed and the invisible force pushed me back into the cushions, I looked but was blinded
by tears, and couldn't raise a hand to wipe them away.
Fortunately, I had six hours' slack time after we docked at the space station Athene, before I had to report for ALSC training. Time to pull myself together, with the help of a couple of slowballs. I went to my small quarters and unpacked and took the pills, and lay on the bunk for a while. Then I found my way to the lounge and watched the planet spin below, green and white and blue. There were eleven ships in orbit a few klicks away, one a large cruiser, presumably the Bolivar, which was going to take us to Aleph-10.

The lounge was huge and almost empty. Two other women in unfamiliar beige uniforms, I supposed Athene staff. They were talking in the strange fast Angel language, and I was listening with a rather slow brain.

While I was getting coffee, a man walked in wearing tan-and-green camouflage fatigues like mine. We weren't actually camouflaged as well as the ones in beige, in this room of comforting wood and earth tones.

He came over and got a cup. "You're Captain Potter, Marygay Potter."

"That's right," I said. "You're in Beta?"

"No, I'm stationed here, but I'm army." He offered his hand. "Michael Dobei, Mike. Colonel. I'm your Temporal Orientation Officer."

We carried our coffee to a table. "You're supposed to catch me up on this future, this present?"

He nodded. "Prepare you for dealing with the men and women under you. And the other officers."

"What I'm trying to deal with is this 'under you' part. I'm no soldier, Colonel."

"Mike. You're actually a better soldier than you know. I've seen your profile. You've been through a lot of combat, and it hasn't broken you. Not even the terrible experience on Earth."

William and I had been staying on my parents' farm when we were attacked by a band of looters; Mother and Dad were killed. "That's in my profile? I wasn't a soldier then. We'd quit."

"There's a lot of stuff in there." He raised his coffee and looked at me over the rim of the cup. "Want to know what your high-school advisor thought of you?"

"You're a shrink."

"That used to be the word. Now we're 'skinks.' "

I laughed. "That used to be a lizard."

"Still is." He pulled a reader out of his pocket. "You were last on Earth in 2007. You liked it so little that you reenlisted."

"Has it gotten better?"

"Better, then worse, then better. As ever. When I left, in 2318, things were at least peaceful."

"Drafted?"

"Not in the sense you were. I knew from age ten what I was going to be. Everybody does."

"What? You knew you were going to be a Temporal Orientation Officer?"

"Uh-huh." He smiled. "I didn't know quite what that meant, but I sure as hell resented it. I had to go to a special school, to learn this language SoldierSpeak but I had to take four years of it, instead of the two that most soldiers do."

"I suppose we're more regimented on Earth now; creche to grave control, but also security. The crime and anarchy that characterized your Earth are ancient history. Most people live happy, fulfilling lives."

"Homosexual. No families."

"Oh, we have families, parents, but not random ones. To keep the population stable, one person is quickened whenever one dies. The new one goes to a couple that has grown up together in the knowledge that they have a talent for parenting; they'll be given, at most, four children to raise."

" 'Quickened' test-tube babies?"

"Incubators. No birth trauma. No real uncertainty about the future. You'll find your troops a pretty sane bunch of people."

"And what will they find me? They won't resent taking orders from a heterosexual throwback? A dinosaur?"
"They know history; they won't blame you for being what you are. If you tried to initiate sex with one of the men, there might be trouble."

I shook my head. "That won't happen. The only man I love is gone, forever."

He looked down at the floor and cleared his throat. Can you embarrass a professional skink? "William Mandella. I wish they hadn't done that. It seems … unnecessarily cruel."

"We tried to get me reassigned as his XO."

"That wouldn't have worked. That's the paradox." He moved the cup in circles on the table, watching the reflections dance. "You both have so much time in rank, objective and subjective, that they had to give you commissions. But they couldn't put you under William. The heterosex issue aside, he would be more concerned about your safety than about the mission. The troops would see that and resent it."

"What, it never happens in your brave new world? You never have a commander falling in love with someone in his or her command?"

"Of course it happens; het or home, love happens. But they're separated and sometimes punished, or at least reprimanded." He waved that away. "In theory. If it's not blatant, who cares? But with you and William, it would be a constant irritant to the people underneath you."

"Most of them have never seen heterosexuals, I suppose."

"None of them. It's detected early and easy to cure."

"Wonderful. Maybe they can cure me."

"No. I'm afraid it has to be done before puberty." He laughed. "Sorry. You were kidding me."

"You don't think my being het is going to hurt my ability to command?"

"No, like I say, they know how people used to be besides, privates aren't supposed to empathize with their officers; they're supposed to follow their orders. And they know about ALSC training; they'll know how well prepared you are."

"I'll be out of the chain of command, anyhow, as Executive Officer."

"Unless everybody over you dies. It's happened."

"Then the army will find out what a mistake it made. A little too late."

"You might surprise yourself, after the ALSC training." He checked his watch. "Which is coming up in a couple of hours."

"Would you like to get together for lunch before that?"

"Um, no. I don't think you want to eat. They sort of clean you out beforehand. From both ends."

"Sounds … dramatic."

"Oh, it is, all of it. Some people enjoy it."

"You don't think I will."

He paused. "Let's talk about it afterward."
The purging wasn't bad, since by that time I was limp and goofy with drugs. They shaved me clean as a baby, even my arms and cheeks, and were in the process of covering me with feedback sensors when I dozed off.

I woke up naked and running. A bunch of other naked people were running after me and my friends, throwing rocks at us. A heavy rock stung me under the shoulderblade, knocking my breath away and making me stumble. A chunky Neanderthal tackled me and whacked me on the head twice with something.

I knew this was a simulation, a dream, and here I was passing out in a dream. When I woke up a moment later, he had forced my legs apart and was about to rape me. I clawed at his eyes and rolled away. He came after me, intention still apparent, and my hand fell on his club. I swung it with both hands and cracked his head, spraying blood and brains. He ejaculated in shuddering spurts as he died, feet drumming the ground. God, it was supposed to be realistic, but couldn't they spare me a few details?

Then I was standing in a phalanx with a shield and a long spear. There were men in front of our line, crouching, with shorter spears. All of the weapons were braced at the same angle, presenting a wall of points to the horses that were charging toward us. This is not the hard part. You just stand firm, and live or not. I studied the light armor of the Persian enemy as they approached. There were three who might be in my area if we unhorsed them, or if their horses stopped.

The horse on my left crashed through. The one on the right reared up and tried to turn. The one charging straight at us took both spears in the breast, breaking the shaft of mine as it skidded, sprawling, spraying blood and screaming with an unearthly high whine, pinning the man in front of me. The unhorsed Persian crashed into my shield and knocked me down as I was drawing my short sword; the hilt of it dug in under my ribs, and I almost slashed myself getting it free of the scabbard while I scrambled back to my feet.

The horseman had lost his little round shield, but his sword was coming around in a flat arc. I just caught it on the edge of my shield and as I had been taught chopped down toward his unprotected forearm and wrist the twisted away, but I nicked him under the elbow, lucky shot that hit a tendon or something. He dropped his sword and as he reached for it with his other hand, I slashed at his face and opened a terrible wound across eye, cheek, and mouth. As he screamed a flap of skin fell away, exposing bloody bone and teeth, and I shifted my weight for a backhand, aiming for the unprotected throat, and then something slammed into my back and the bloody point of a spear broke the skin above my right nipple; I fell to my knees dying and realized I didn't have breasts; I was a man, a young boy.

It was dark and cold and the trench smelled of shit and rotting flesh. "Two minutes, boys," a sergeant said in a stage whisper. I heard a canteen gurgle twice and took it when it was passed to me—warm gin. I managed not to cough and passed it on down. I checked in the darkness and still didn't have breasts and touched between my legs and that was strange. I started to shake and heard the man next to me peeing, and I suddenly had to go, too. I fumbled with the buttons left-handed, holding on to my rifle, and barely managed to get the thing out in time, peeing hotly onto my hand. "Fix bayonets," the sergeant whispered while I was still going and instinct took over and I felt the locking port under the muzzle of my Enfield and held it with my left hand while my right went back and slid the bayonet from its sheath and clicked it into place.

"I shall see you in Hell, Sergeant Simmons." the man next to me said conversationally.

"Soon enough, Rez. Thirty seconds." There was a German machine-gun position about eighty yards ahead and to the right. They also had at least one very good sniper and, presumably, an artillery observer. We were hoping for some artillery support at 1:17, which would signal the beginning of our charge. If the artillery didn't come, which was likely, we were to charge anyhow, riflemen in two short squads in front of grenadiers. A suicide mission, perhaps, but certain death if your courage flags.

I wiped my hand on the greasy filthy fatigue and thumbed the safety off the rifle. There was already a round chambered. I put my left foot on the improvised step and got a handhold with my left. My knees were water, and my anus didn't want to stay closed. I felt tears, and my throat went dry and metallic. This is not real. "Now," the sergeant said quietly, and I heaved myself up over the lip of the trench and fired one-handed in the general direction of the enemy, and started to run toward them, working the bolt, vaguely proud of not soiling myself. I flopped on the ground and took an aimed shot at the noise of the machine gun, no muzzle flash, and then held fire while squad two rushed by us. A grenadier skidded next to me, and said, "Go!" It became "Oh!" when a bullet smashed into him, but I was up and running, another round chambered, four left. A bullet shattered my foot and I took one painful step and fell.
I pulled myself forward, trying to keep the muzzle out of the mud, and rolled into a shallow crater half filled with water and parts of a swollen decaying body. I could hear another machine gun starting, but I couldn’t breathe. I pushed up with both arms to gasp some air above the crater’s miasma and a bullet crashed into my teeth.

It wasn’t chronological. I went from there to the mist of Breed's Hill, on the British side of what the Americans would call the Battle of Bunker Hill. The deck of a ship, warding off pirates while sails burned; then another ship, deafened by cannon fire while I tried to keep cool lead on the kamikaze Zero soaring into us.

I flew cloth-winged biplanes and supersonic fighters, used lasers and a bow and arrow and leveled a city with the push of a button. I killed with bullets and bolos and binary-coded decimals. Every second, I was aware that it was a training exercise; I felt terror and sorrow and pain, but only for minutes or hours. And I slept at least as many hours as I was awake, but there was no respite somehow while sleeping, my brain was filled with procedures, history, regulations.

When they unplugged me after three weeks I was literally catatonic. That was normal, though, and they had drugs that pulled you back into the world. They worked for more than 90 percent of the new officers. The others were allowed to drift away.
We had two weeks of rest and rehabilitation in orbit, unfortunately, not on Heaven after the ALSC experience. While we were sweating it out in the officers' gym, I met the other line officers, who were as shaken and weak as I was, after three weeks' immersion in oxygenated fluorocarbon, mayhem, and book learning.

We were also one mass of wrinkles from head to toe, the first day, when our exercises consisted of raising our arms above our heads and trying to stand up and sit down without help. The wrinkles started to fade in the sauna, as we conversed in tired monosyllables. We looked like big muscular pink babies; they must have shaved or depilated us during the three weeks.

Three of us were male, which was interesting. I've seen lots of naked men, but never a hairless one. I guess we all looked kind of exposed and diagrammatic. Okayawa had an erection, and Morales kidded him about it, but to my relief it didn't go any further than that. It was a socially difficult situation anyhow.

The commander, Angela Garcia, was physically about ten years older than me, though of course by the calendar she was centuries younger. She was gruff and seemed to be holding a lot in. I knew her slightly, at least by sight; she'd been a platoon leader, not mine, in the Tet-2 disaster. Both her legs had the new-equipment look that my arm did. We'd come to Heaven together, but since her regrowth took three times as long as mine, we hadn't met there. William and I were gone before she was able to come into the common ward.

William had been in many of my ALSC dreams, a shadowy figure in some of the crowds. My father sometimes, too.

I liked Sharn Taylor, the medical officer, right off. She had a cheerful fatalism about the whole thing, and had lived life to the hilt while on Heaven, hiring a succession of beautiful women to help her spend her fortune. She'd run out of money a week early, and had to come back to Threshold and live on army rations and the low-power trips you could get for free. She herself was not beautiful; a terrible wound had ripped off her left arm and breast and the left side of her face. It had all been put back, but the new parts didn't match the old parts too well.

She had a doctor's objectivity about it, though, and professional admiration for the miracles they could accomplish by the current calendar, she was more than 150 years out of medical school.

Her ALSC session had been totally different from ours, of course; an update of healing skills rather than killing ones. "Most of it is getting along with machines, though, rather than treating people," she told me while we nibbled at the foodlike substance that was supposed to help us recover. "I can treat wounds in the field, basically to keep someone alive until we can get to a machine. But most modern weapons don't leave enough to salvage." She had a silly smile.

"We don't know how modern the enemy is going to be," I said. "Though I guess they don't have to be all that modern to vaporize us." We both giggled, and then stopped simultaneously.

"I wonder what they've got us on," she said. "It's not happy juice; I can feel my fingertips and have all my peripheral vision."

"Temporary mood elevator?"

"I hope it's temporary. I'll talk to someone."

Sharn found out that it was just a euphoriant in the food; without it, ALSC withdrawal could bring on deep depression. I'd almost rather be depressed, I thought. We were, after all, facing almost certain doom. All but one of us had survived at least one battle in a war where the average survival rate was only 34 percent per battle. If you believed in luck, you might believe we'd used all of ours up.

We had the satellite to ourselves for eight days—ten officers waited on by a staff of thirty personnel—while we got our strength back. Of course friendships formed. It was pretty obvious that it went beyond friendship with Chance Nguyen and Aurelio Morales; they stuck like glue from the first day.

Risa Danyi and Sharn and I made up a logical trio, the three officers out of the chain of command. Risa was the tech officer, a bit older than Sharn and me, with a Ph.D. in systems engineering. She seemed younger, though, born and raised on Heaven. Not actually born, I reminded myself. And never traumatized by combat.

Risa's ALSC had been the same as mine, but she had found it more fascinating than terrifying. She was apologetic about that. She had grown up tripping, and was accustomed to the immediacy and drama of it and she didn't have any real-life experiences to relate to the dream combat.
Both Risa and Sharn were bawdy by nature and curious about my heterosex, and while we were silly with the
euphoriants I didn't hold back anything. When I was first in the army, we'd had to obey a rotating "sleeping roster,"
so I slept with every male private in the company more than once, and although sleeping together didn't mean you
had to have sex, it was considered unsporting to refuse. And of course men are men; most of them would have to go
through the motions, literally, even if they didn't feel like it.

Even on board ship, when they got rid of the sleeping roster, there was still a lot of switching around. I was
mainly with William, but neither of us was exclusive (which would have been considered odd, in our generation).
Nobody was fertile, so there was no chance of accidental pregnancy.

That notion really threw Sharn and Risa. Pregnancy is something that happens to animals. Sharn had seen pictures
of the process, medical history, and described it to us in horrifying detail. I had to remind them that I was born that
way I did that to my mother, and she somehow forgave me.

Risa primly pointed out that it was actually my father who did it to my mother, which for some reason we all
thought was hilarious.

One morning when we were alone together, just looking down at the planet in the lounge, she brought up the
obvious.

"You haven't said anything about it, so I guess you've never loved a woman." She cleared her throat, nervous. "I
mean had sex. I know you loved your mother."

"No. I didn't know whether to elaborate. "It wasn't that common; I mean I knew girls and women who were
together. That way."

"Well." She patted my elbow. "You know."

"Uh, yes. I mean yes, I understand. Thanks, but I … "

"I just meant, you know, we're the same rank. It's even legal." She laughed nervously; if all the regulations were
broken that enthusiastically, we'd be an unruly mob, not an army.

I wasn't quite sure what to say. Until she actually asked, I hadn't thought about the possibility except as an
abstraction. "I'm still grieving for William." She nodded and gave me another pat and left quietly.

But of course that wasn't all of it. I could visualize her and Sharn, for instance, having sex; I'd seen it on stage and
cube often enough. But I couldn't put myself in their place. Not the way I could visualize myself being with one of
the men, especially Sid, Isidro Zhulpa. He was quiet, introspective, darkly beautiful. But too well balanced to
contemplate a sexual perversion involving me.

I was still jangled about fantasy, imagination; real and artificial memories. I knew for certain that I had never
killed anyone with a club or a knife, but my body seemed to have a memory of it, more real than the mental picture.
I could still feel the ghost of a penis and balls, and breastlessness, since all of the ALSC combat templates were
male. Surely that was more alien than lying down with another woman. When I was waiting for William to get out
of his final range-and-motion stage, reading for two days, I'd had an impulse to try tripping, plugging into a lesbian-
sex simulation, the only kind that was available for women.

For a couple of reasons, I didn't do it. Now that it's too late the only trips on Athene are ALSC ones I wish I had.
Because it's not as simple as "I accept this because it's the way they were brought up," with the implied
condescension that my pedestal of normality entitles me.

Normality. I'm going to be locked up in a can with 130 other people for whom my most personal, private life is
something as exotic as cannibalism. So rare they don't even have an epithet for it. I was sure they'd come up with
one.
Table of Organization

Strike Force Beta
Aleph-10 Campaign

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ECHN</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1ECHN</td>
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Supporting: 1LT Otto (NAV), 2LTs Wennyl and Van Dykken (MED), Durack (PSY), Bleibkey (MAINT), Lackey (ORD), Obispowich (COMM), Madison (COMP): 1Sgts Mastenbroek (MED), Anderson (MED), Szoki (MED), Eraser (MED), Henne (PSY), Neelson (MAINT), Ender (ORD); SSgts Krause (MED), Steinseller (MED), Hogshead (MED), Otto (MED), Yong (MAINT), Jingyi (CK), Meyer (COMP); Sgts Gould (MED), Bonder (MAINT), Kraus (ORD), Waite (REC); Cpls Friedrich (MED), Haislett (MED), Poll (SEX), Norelius (SEX), Gyenge (ORD); Pvs Curtiss (MAINT), Senff (CK), Harup (ORD).

FOR THE COMMANDER: Olga Torischeva BGEN
APPROVED STFCOM STARGATE 12 Mar 2458
STFCOM
The lounge was a so-called "plastic room"; it could reform itself into various modes, according to function. One of the Athene staff had handed over the control box to my first executive function as executive officer.

When the troop carriers lined up outside for docking, I pushed the button marked "auditorium," and the comfortable wood grain faded to a neutral ivory color as the furniture sank into the floor, and then rose up again, extruding three rows of seats on ascending tiers. The control box asked me how many seats to put on the stage in front. I said six and then corrected myself, to seven. The Commodore would be here, for ceremony's sake.

As I watched the Strike Force file into the auditorium, I tried to separate the combat veterans from the Angels. There weren't too many of the latter; only fourteen out of the 130 were born on Heaven. For a good and unsettling reason.

Major Garcia waited until all the seats were filled, and then she waited a couple of minutes longer, studying the faces, maybe doing the same kind of sorting. Then she stood up and introduced the Commodore and the other officers, down to my echelon, and got down to business.

"I'm certain that you have heard rumors. One of them is true." She took a single note card from her tunic pocket and set it on the lectern. "One hundred sixteen of us have been in combat before. All wounded and brought here to Heaven. For repairs and then rest.

"You may know that this concentration of veterans is unusual. The army values experience and spreads it around. A group this size would normally have about twenty combat veterans. Of course this implies that we face a difficult assignment.

"We are attacking the oldest known enemy base." She paused. "The Taurans established a presence on the portal planet of the collapsar Aleph-10 more than two hundred years ago. We've attacked them twice, to no effect."

She didn't say how many survivors there had been from those two attacks. I knew there had been none.

"If, as we hope, the Taurans have been out of contact with their home planet for the past two centuries, we have a huge technological advantage. The details of this advantage will not be discussed until we are under way." An absurd but standard security procedure. A spying Tauran could no more disguise itself and come aboard than a moose could. No one here could be in the pay of the Taurans. The two species had never exchanged anything but projectiles.

"We are three collapsar jumps away from Aleph-10, so we will have eleven months to train with the new weapon systems … with which we will defeat them." She allowed herself a bleak smile. "By the time we reach them, we may be coming from four hundred years in their future. That's the length of time that elapsed between the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the first nuclear war."

Of course relativity does not favor one species over the other. The Taurans on Aleph-10 might have had visitors from their own future, bearing gifts.

The troops were quiet and respectful, absorbing the fraction of information that Major Garcia portioned out. I suppose most of them knew that things were not so rosy, even the inexperienced Angels. She gave them a few more encouraging generalities and dismissed them to their temporary billets. We officers were to meet with her in two hours, for lunch.

I spent the intervening time visiting the platoon billets, talking with the sergeants who would actually be running the show, day by day. I'd seen their records but hadn't met any of them except Cat Verdeur, who had been in physical therapy with me. We both had right-arm replacements, and as part of our routine we were required to arm wrestle every day, apologetic about the pain we were causing each other. She was glad to see me, and said she would have let me win occasionally if she'd known I was going to outrank her.

The officers' lounge was also a plastic room, which I hadn't known. It had been a utilitarian meeting place before, with machines that dispensed simple food and drink. Now it was dark wood and intricate tile; linen napkins and crystal. Of course the wood felt like plastic and the linen, like paper, but you couldn't have everything.

Nine of us showed up on the hour, and the major came in two minutes later. She greeted everyone and pushed a button, and the cooks Jengyi and Senff appeared with real food and two carafes of wine. Aromatic stir-fried vegetables and zoni, which resembled large shrimp.

"Let's enjoy this while we can," she said. "We'll be back on recycled Class A's soon enough." Athene had room enough for the luxury of hydroponics and, apparently, fish tanks.

She asked us to introduce ourselves, going around the table's circle. I knew a little bit about everyone, since my XO file had basic information on the whole Strike Force, and extensive dossiers of the officers and noncoms. But
there were surprises. I knew that the major had survived five battles, but didn't know she'd been to Heaven four times, which was a record. I knew her second-in-command, Chance Nguyen, came from Mars, but didn't know he was from the first generation born there, and was the first person drafted from his planet—there had been a huge argument over it, with separatists saying the Forever War was Earth's war. But at that time, Earth could still threaten to pull the plug on Mars. The red planet was self-sufficient now, Chance said, but he'd been away for a century, and didn't know what the situation was.

Lillian Mathes just came from Earth, with less than twenty years' collapsar lag, and she said they weren't drafting from Mars at that time; it was all tied up in court. So Chance might be the only Martian officer in service.

He had a strange way of carrying himself and moving, wary and careful, swimming through this unnaturally high gravity. He told me he'd trained for a Martian year, wearing heavier and heavier weights, before going to Stargate and his first assignment.

All of them were scholarly and athletic, but only Sid, Isidro Zhulpa, had actually been both a scholar and an athlete. He'd played professional baseball for a season, but quit to pursue his doctorate in sociology. He'd gotten his appointment as a junior professor the day before his draft notice. His skin was so black as to be almost blue; with his chiseled features and huge muscularity, he looked like some harsh African god. But he was quiet and modest, my favorite.

I mainly talked with him and Sharn through the meal, chatting about everything but our immediate future. When everything was done, the cooks came in with two carts and cleared the table, leaving tea and coffee. Garcia waited until all of us had been served and the privates were gone.

"Of course we don't have the faintest idea of what's waiting for us at Aleph-10," the major said. "One thing we have been able to find out, which I don't think any of you have been told, is that we know how the second Strike Force bought it."

That was something new. "It was like a minefield. A matrix of nova bombs in a belt around the portal planet's equator. We're assuming it's still there."

"They couldn't detect it and avoid it?" Risa asked.

"It was an active system. The bombs actually chased them down. They detonated four, coming closer and closer, until the fifth got them. The drone that was recording the action barely got away, one of the bombs managed to chase it through the first collapsar jump."

"We can counter the system. We're being preceded by an intelligent drone squad that should be able to detonate all of the ring of nova bombs simultaneously. It should make things pretty warm on the ground, as well as protecting our approach."

"We don't know what got the first Strike Force?" Sid asked.

Garcia shook her head. "The drone didn't return. All we can say for sure is that it wasn't the same thing."

"How so?" I asked.

"Aleph-10's easily visible from Earth; it's about eighty light-years away. They would have detected a nova bomb 120 years ago, if there'd been one. The assumption has to be that they attacked in a conventional way, as ordered, and were destroyed. Or had some accident on the way."

Of course they hadn't beamed any communication back to Earth or Stargate. We still didn't. The war was being fought on portal planets, near collapsars, which were usually desolate, disposable rocks. It would only take one nova bomb to vaporize the Stargate station; perhaps three to wipe out life on Earth.

So we didn't want to give them a road map back.
A lot of the training over the next eleven months had to do with primitive weapons, which explained why so much of my ALSC time had been spent practicing with bows and arrows, spears, knives, and so forth. We had a new thing called a "stasis field," which made a bubble inside which you had to use simple tools: no energy weapons worked.

In fact, physics itself didn't work too well inside a stasis field; chemistry, not at all. Nothing could move faster than 16.3 meters per second inside including elementary particles and light. (You could see inside, but it wasn't light; it was some tachyon thing.) If you were exposed to the field unprotected, you'd die instantly of brain death no electricity and anyhow freeze solid in a few seconds. So we had suits made of stuff like tough crinkly aluminum foil, full of uncomfortable plumbing and gadgets so that everything recycled. You could live inside the stasis field, inside the suit, indefinitely. Until you went mad.

But one rip, even a pinprick, in the fabric of the suit, and you were instantly dead.

For that reason, we didn't practice with the primitive weapons inside the field. And if you had a training accident that caused the smallest scratch, on yourself or anyone else, you got to meditate on it for a day in solitary confinement. Even officers; my carelessness with arrow points cost me a long anxious day in darkness.

Only one platoon could fit in the gym at a time, so at first I trained with whoever was using it when I got a few hours off from my other duties. After a while I arranged my schedule so that it was always the fourth platoon. I liked both Aurelio Morales, the squad leader, and his staff sergeant, Karl Hencken. But mainly I liked Cat Verdeur.

I don't remember a particular time when the chumminess suddenly turned into sex; there was nothing like a proposition and a mad fling. We were physically close from the beginning, because of our shared experience at Threshold. Then we were natural partners for hand-to-hand combat practice, being about the same physical age and condition. That was a rough kind of intimacy, and the fact that officers and noncoms had a shower separate from the other men and women gave us another kind. Aurelio and Karl took one side, and Cat and I took the other. We sort of soaped each other's backs, and eventually fronts.

Being a sergeant, Cat didn't have her own billet; she slept in a wing with the other women in her platoon. But one night she showed up at my door on the verge of tears, with a mysterious problem we'd both been dealing with: sometimes the new arm just doesn't feel like it belongs. It obeys your commands, but it's like a separate creature, grafted on, and the feeling of its separateness can take over everything. I let her cry on my shoulder, the good one, and then we shared my narrow bed for the night. We didn't do anything that we hadn't done many times in the shower, but it wasn't playful. I lay awake thinking, long after she fell asleep with her cheek on my breast.

I still loved William, but barring a miracle I would never see him again. What I felt for Cat was more than just friendship, and by her standards and everyone else's there was nothing odd about it. And there was no way I could have had a future with Sid or any of the other men.

When I was young there'd been a sarcastic song that went something like "If I can't be with the one I love, I'll love the one I'm with." I guess that sort of sums it up.

I went to Elise Durack, the Strike Force psychologist, and he helped me through some twists and turns. Then Cat and I went together to Octavia Poll, the female sex counselor, which wound up being a strange and funny four-way consultation with Dante Norelius, the male counselor. That resulted in a mechanical contrivance that we giggled about but occasionally used, which made it more like sex with a man. Cat sympathized with my need to hold on to my past, and said she didn't mind that I was remembering William when I was with her. She thought it was romantic, if perverse.

I started to bring the subject up with the major, and she brushed it off with a laugh. Everyone who cared aboard ship knew about it, and it was a good thing; it made me seem less strange to them. If I had been in Cat's platoon, above her in the direct chain of command, she would be routinely assigned to another platoon, which had been done several times.

(The logic of that is clear, but it made me wonder about Garcia herself. If she became in love with another woman, there wouldn't be any way to put that woman someplace outside of her command. But as far as I knew, she didn't have anybody.)

Cat more or less moved in with me. If some people in her platoon resented it, more were just as glad not to have their sergeant watching over them every hour of the day. She usually stayed with them until first lights-out, and then walked down the corridor to my billet often passing other people on similar missions. Hard to keep secrets of that
sort in a spaceship, and not many tried.

There was an element of desperation in our relationship, doomed souls sharing a last few months, but that was true of everybody's love unless they were absolutely myopic one-day-at-a-timers. If the numbers held, only 34 percent of us had any future beyond Elephant, which is what everybody called Aleph-10 by the time we angled in for our second collapsar jump.

William had tried in a resigned way to explain the physics of it all, the first time we did a jump, but math had defeated me in college long before calculus kicked me permanently into majoring in English. It has to do with acceleration. If you just fell toward a collapsar, the way normal matter does, you would be doomed. For some reason you and the people around you would seem to be falling forever, but to the outside world, you would be snuffed out instantly.

Well, sure. Obviously nobody ever did the experiment.

Anyhow, you accelerate toward the collapsar's "event horizon," which is what it has instead of a surface, at a precalculated speed and angle, and you pop out of another collapsar umpty light-years away-maybe five, maybe five million. You better get the angle right, because you can't always just reverse things and come back.

(Which we hoped was all that happened to the first Elephant Strike Force. They might be on the other side of the galaxy, colonizing some nice quiet world. Every cruiser did carry a set of wombs and a creche, against that possibility, though the major rolled her eyes when she described it. Purely a morale device, she said; they probably didn't work. I wondered whether, in that case, people might be able to grit their teeth and try to make babies the old-fashioned way.)

Since we were leaving from Heaven, we were required to make at least two collapsar jumps before "acquiring" Elephant. That soaked up two centuries of objective time, if such a thing exists. To us it was eleven fairly stressful months. Besides the training with the old-fashioned weapons, the troops had to drill with their fighting suits and whatever specialized weapon system they were assigned to, in case the stasis field didn't work or had been rendered useless by some enemy development.

Meanwhile, I did my Executive Officer work. It was partly bookkeeping, which is almost trivial aboard ship, since nothing comes in and nothing goes out. The larger part was a vague standing assignment to keep up the troops' morale.

I was not well qualified for that; perhaps less qualified than anybody else aboard. Their music didn't sound like music to me. Their games seemed pointless, even after they'd been relentlessly explained. The movies were interesting, at least as anthropology, and the pleasures of food and drink hadn't changed much, but their sex lives were still pretty mysterious to me, in spite of my affection for Cat and the orgasms we exchanged. If a man and a woman walked by, I was still more interested in the man. So I did love a woman, but as an actual lesbian I was not a great success.

Sometimes that gave me comfort, a connection to William and my past. More often it made me feel estranged, helpless.

I did have eight part-time volunteers, and one full-time subordinate, Sergeant Cody Waite. He was not an asset. I think the draft laws on Earth, the Elite Conscription Act, were ignored on Heaven. In fact, I would go even further (to make a reference that nobody on the ship would understand) and claim that there was a Miltonian aspect to his arrival. He had been expelled from Heaven, for overweening pride. But he had nothing to be proud of, except his face and muscles. He had the intelligence of a hamster. He did look like a Greek god, but for me what that meant was that every time I needed him to do something, he was down in the gym working out on the machines. Or off getting his rectum reamed by some adoring guy who didn't have to talk with him. He could read and write, though, so eventually I found I could keep him out of the way by having him elaborate on my weekly reports. He could take "This week was the same as last week," and turn it into an epic of relentless tedium.

I was glad to be out of the chain of command. You train people intensively for combat and then put them into a box for eleven months of what? More training for combat. Nobody's happy and some people snap.

The men are usually worse than the women, at least, when the women lose control it tends to be a shouting match rather than fists and feet. Cat had a pair who were an exception, though, and it escalated to attempted murder in the mess hall.

This was ten days before the last collapsar jump—everybody on the ragged edge between Lain Mayfair and "Tiny" Keimo, who was big enough to take on most of the men. Lain tried to cut her throat, from behind, and Tiny broke her arm at the elbow while everybody else was diving for cover, and was seriously strangling her trying to kill her
before she herself bled to death when the cook J.J. ran over and brained the big woman with a frying pan.

While they were still in the infirmary there was a summary court-martial. With the consistent testimony of forty witnesses, Major Garcia didn't have any choice: she sentenced Lain Mayfair to death for attempted murder. She administered the lethal injection herself.

I was required to be a witness, and more, and it was not the high point of my day. Mayfair was bedridden and, I think, slightly sedated. Garcia explained the reason for the verdict and asked Mayfair whether she would prefer the dignity of taking the poison herself. She didn't say anything, just cried and shook her head. Two privates held her down by the shoulders while Garcia took her arm and administered the popper. Mayfair turned pale and her eyes rolled up. She shook convulsively for a few seconds and was dead.

Garcia didn't show any emotion during the ordeal. She whispered to me that she would be in her quarters if anybody really needed her, and left quickly.

I had to supervise the disposal of the body. I had two medics wrap her tightly in a sheet and put her on a gurney. We had to roll it down the main corridor, everybody watching. I helped the two of them carry her into the airlock. She was starting to stiffen, but her body wasn't even cold.

I had a friend read a prayer in Mayfair's language, and asked the engineer for maximum pressure in the airlock, and then popped it. Her body spun out into its lonely, infinite grave.

I went back to the infirmary and found Tiny inconsolable. She and Mayfair had been lovers back on Stargate. Everything had gone wrong, nothing made sense, why why why why? My answer was to have Sharn give her a tranquilizer. I took one myself.
We came tearing out of the Elephant's collapsar about one minute after the defense phalanx, the ten high-speed intelligent drones that had multiple warheads, programmed to take out the portal planet's nova-bomb minefield.

The first surprise was that the minefield wasn't there. The second surprise was that the Taurans weren't, either. Their base seemed intact but long deserted, cold.

We would destroy it with a nova bomb, but first send a platoon down to investigate it. Garcia asked that I go along with them. It was Cat's platoon. It would be an interesting experience to share, so long as a booby trap didn't blow us off the planet. The deserted base could be bait.

We would have a nova bomb with us. Either Morales or I could detonate it if we got into a situation that looked hopeless. Or Garcia could do it from orbit. I was sure Garcia could do it. Not so sure about me or Aurelio.

But while we were down in the prep bay getting into our fighting suits, there came the third surprise, the big one. I later saw the recording. The main cube in the control room lit up with a two-dimensional picture of a young man in an ancient uniform. He popped in and out of three dimensions while he spoke: "Hello, Earth ship. Do you still use this frequency? Do you still use this language?"

He smiled placidly. "Of course you won't respond at first; neither would I. This could be a trap. Feel free to investigate at long range. I am calling from a different portal planet. I'm currently 12.23 million kilometers from you, on the plane of the ecliptic, on an angle of 0.54 radians with respect to the collapsar. As you probably know by now.

"I am a descendant of the first Strike Force, nearly half a millennium ago. I await your questions." He sat back in his chair, in a featureless room. He crossed his legs and picked up a notebook and began flipping through it.

We immediately got a high-resolution image of the portal planet. It was small, as they usually are; cold and airless except for the base. It was actually more like a town than a base, and it was as obvious as a beacon. It wasn't enclosed; air was evidently held in by some sort of force field. It was lit up by an artificial sun that floated a few kilometers above the surface.

There was an ancient cruiser in orbit, its dramatic sweeping streamlined grace putting our functional clunkiness to shame. There were also two Tauran vessels. None of them was obviously damaged.

All of us 5-and-above officers were on the bridge when we contacted the planet. Commodore Sidorenko sat up front with Garcia; he technically outranked her in this room, but it was her show, since the actual business was planetside.

I felt a little self-conscious, having come straight from the prep bay. Everyone else was in uniform; I was just wearing the contact net for the fighting suit. Like a layer of silver paint.

Garcia addressed the man in the chair. "Do you have a name and a rank?"

It took about forty seconds for the message to get to him, and another forty for his response: "My name is Man. We don't have ranks; I'm here because I can speak Old Standard. English."

"But your ancestors defeated the Taurans, somehow."

"No; the Taurans showed up now and then. Before the battle they showed up now and then."

"But there are" she began.

"Oh, you mean the Taurans in orbit. They've been there for hundreds of years. So has our cruiser. We have no way to get to them. This place is self-sufficient, but a prison."
"I'll contact you again after I've spoken to my officers." The cube went dark.

Garcia swiveled around, and so did Sidorenko, who spoke for the first time: "I don't like it. He could be a simulation."

Garcia nodded. "That assumes a lot, though. And it would mean they know a hell of a lot more about us than we do about them."

"That's demonstrable. Four hundred years ago, they were supposedly able to build a place for the captives to stay. I don't believe we would have any trouble simulating a Tauran, given a couple of hundred captives and that much time for research."

"I suppose. Potter," she said to me, "go down and tell the fourth platoon there's a slight change of plans, but we're still going in ready for anything. I think the best thing we can do is get over there and make physical contact as soon as possible."

"Right," Sidorenko said. "We don't have the element of surprise anymore, but there's no percentage in sitting here and feeding them data, giving them time to revise their strategy. If there are Taurans there."

"Have your people prepped for five gees," Garcia said to me. "Get you there in a few hours."

"Eight," Sidorenko said. "We'll be about ten hours behind you."

"Wait in orbit?" I said, knowing the answer.

"You wish. Let's go down to the bay."

We had a holo of the base projected down there and worked out a simple strategy. Twenty-two of us in fighting suits, armed to the teeth, carrying a nova bomb and a stasis field, surround the place and politely knock on the door. Depending on the response, we either walk in for tea or level the place.

Getting there would not be so bad. Nobody could endure four hours of five-gee acceleration, then flip for four hours of deceleration, unprotected. So we'd be clamshelled in the fighting suits, knocked out and superhydrated. Eight hours of deep sleep and then maybe an hour to shake it off and go be a soldier. Or a guest for tea.

Cat and I made the rounds in the cramped fighter, seeing that everybody was in place, suit fittings and readouts in order. Then we shared a minute of private embrace and took our own places.

I jacked the fluid exchange into my hip fitting, and all of the fear went away. My body sagged with sweet lassitude, and I let the soft nozzle clasp my face. I was still aware enough to know that it was sucking all the air out of my lungs and then blowing in a dense replacement fluid, but all I felt was a long, low-key orgasm. I knew that this was the last thing a lot of people felt, the fighter blown to bits moments or hours later. But the war offered us many worse ways to die. I was sound asleep before the acceleration blasted us into space. Dreaming of being a fish in a warm and heavy sea.
The chemicals won't let you remember coming out of it, which is probably good. My diaphragm and esophagus were sore and tired from getting rid of all the fluid. Cat looked like hell and I stayed away from mirrors, while we towed off and put on the contact nets and got back into the fighting suits for the landing.

Our strategy, such as it was, seemed even less appealing, this close to the portal planet. The two Tauran cruisers were old models, but they were a hundred times the size of our fighter, and since they were in synchronous orbit over the base, there was no way to avoid coming into range. But they did let us slide under them without blowing us out of the sky, which made Man's story more believable.

It was pretty obvious, though, that our primary job was to be a target, for those ships and the base. If we were annihilated, the Bolivar would modify its strategy.

When Morales said we were going to just go straight in and land on the strip beside the base, I muttered, "Might as well be hung for a sheep as a goat," and Cat, who was on my line, asked why anyone would hang a sheep. I told her it was hard to explain. In fact, it was just something my father used to say, and if he'd ever explained it, I'd forgotten.

The landing was loud but feather-light. We undamped our fighting suits from their transport positions and practiced walking in the one-third gee of the small planet. "They should've sent Goy," Cat said, which is what we called Chance Nguyen, the Martian. "He'd be right at home."

We moved out fast, people sprinting to their attack positions. Cat went off to the other side of the base. I was going with Morales, to knock on the door. Rank and its privileges. The first to die, or be offered tea.

The buildings on the base looked like they'd been designed by a careful child. Windowless blocks laid out on a grid. All but one were sand-colored. We walked to the silver cube of headquarters. At least it had "HQ" in big letters over the airlock.

The shiny front door snicked up like a guillotine in reverse. We went through with dignified haste, and it slammed back down. The blade, or door, was pretty massive, for us to "hear" it in a vacuum; vibration through our boots.

Air hissed in that we did hear and after a minute a door swung open. We had to sidle through it sideways because of the size of our fighting suits. I suppose we could have just walked straight through, enlarging it in the process, and in fact I considered that as I sidled. It would prevent them from using the airlock until they could fix it.

Then another door, a metal blast door half a meter thick, slid open. Seated at a plain round table were Man and a woman who looked like his twin sister. They wore identical sky-blue tunics.

"Welcome to Alcatraz," he said. "The name is an old joke." He gestured at the four empty chairs. "Why not get out of your suits and relax?"

"That would be unwise," Morales said.

"You have us surrounded, outside. Even if I were inclined to do you harm, I wouldn't be that foolish."

"It's for your own protection," I extemporized. "Viruses can mutate a lot in four hundred years. You don't want us sharing your air."

"That's not a problem," the woman said. "Believe me. My bodies are very much more efficient than yours."

"My bodies?" I said.

"Oh, well." She made a gesture that was meaningless to me, and two side doors opened. From her side a line of women walked in, all exact copies of her. From his side, copies of him.

There were about twenty of each. They stared at us with identical bland expressions, and then said in unison, "I have been waiting for you."

"As have I." A pair of naked Taurans stepped into the room.

Both our laserfingers came up at once. They refused to fire. I snatched the utility knife from my waist and threw it, and Morales did the same. Both creatures dodged the weapons easily, moving with inhuman swiftness.

I braced myself to die. I hadn't seen a live Tauran since the Yod-4 campaign, but I'd fought hundreds of them in the ALSC. They didn't care whether they lived or died, so long as they died killing a human. But these two didn't attack.
"There is much to be explained," one Tauran said in a thin, wavering voice, its mouth-hole flexing and contracting. Their bodies were covered with a loose tunic like the humans’, hiding most of the wrinkled orange hide and strange limbs, and the pinched, antlike thorax.

The two of them blinked slowly in unison, in what might have been a social or emotional gesture, a translucent membrane sliding wetly down over the compound eyes. The tassels of soft flesh where their noses should have been stopped quivering while they blinked. "The war is over. In most places."

The man spoke. "Human and Tauran share Stargate now. There is Tauran on Earth and human on its home planet, J’sardlkuh."

"Humans like you?" Morales said. "Stamped out of a machine?"

"I come from a kind of machine, but it is living, a womb. Until I was truly one, there could be no peace. When there were billions of us, all different, we couldn't understand peace."

"Everyone on earth is the same?" I said. "There's only one kind of human?"

"There are still survivors of the Forever War, like yourselves," the female said. "Otherwise, there is only one human, although I can be either male or female. As there is only one Tauran. I was patterned after an individual named Khan. I call myself Man."

We'd supposedly been fighting to save the human race. So we come back to find it replaced by this new, improved model.

There were sounds to my left and right, like distant thunder. Nothing in my communicator.

"Your people are attacking," the male said, "even though I have told them it is useless."

"Let me talk to them!" Morales said.

"You can't," the female said. "They all assembled under the stasis field, when they saw the Taurans through your eyes. Now their programmed weapons attack. When those weapons fail, they will try to walk in with the stasis field."

"This has happened before?" I said.

"Not here, but other places. The outcome varies."

"Your stasis field," a Tauran said, "has been old to us for more than a century. We used a refined version of it to keep you from shooting us a minute ago."

"You say the outcome varies," Morales said to the female, "so sometimes we win?"

"Even if you killed me, you wouldn't 'win'; there's nothing to win anymore. But no, the only thing that varies is how many of you survive."

"Your cruiser Bolivar may have to be destroyed," a Tauran said. "I assume they are monitoring this conversation. Of course they are still several light-minutes away. But if they do not respond in a spirit of cooperation, we will have no choice."

Garcia did respond in less than a minute, her image materializing behind the Taurans. "Why don't we invite you to act in a spirit of cooperation," she said. "If none of our people are hurt, none of yours will be."

"That's beyond my control," the male said. "Your programmed weapons are attacking; mine are defending. I think that neither is programmed for mercy."

The female continued. "That they still survive is evidence of our good intentions. We could deactivate their stasis field from outside." There was a huge thump and Man's table jumped up an inch. "Most of them would be destroyed in seconds if we did that."

Garcia paused. "Then explain why you haven't."

"One of my directives," the male said, "is to minimize casualties among you. There is a genetic diversity program, which will be explained to you at Stargate."

"All right," Garcia said. "Since I can't communicate with them otherwise, I'll let you deactivate the stasis field but at the same time, of course, you have to turn off your automatic defenses. Otherwise, they'd be slaughtered."

"So you invite us to be slaughtered instead," he said. "Me and your two representatives here."

"I'll tell them to cease fire immediately."

All this conversation was going on with a twenty-second time lag. So "immediately" would be a while in coming.
Without comment, the two Taurans disappeared, and the forty duplicate humans filed back through the dome.

"All right," the male Man said, "perhaps there is a way around this time lag. Which of you is the ranking officer here?"

"I am," I said.

"Most of my individuals have returned to an underground shelter. I will turn off your stasis field and our defenses simultaneously.

"Tell them they must stop firing immediately. If we die, our defenses resume, and they won't have the protection of the stasis field."

I chinned the command frequency, which would put me in contact with Cat and Sergeant Hencken as soon as the field disappeared.

"I don't like this," Morales said. "You can turn your weapons on and off with a thought?"

"That's correct."

"We can't. When Captain Potter gives them the order, they have to understand and react."

"But it's just turning off a switch, is it not?" There was another huge bang, and a web of cracks appeared in the wall to my left. Man looked at it without emotion.

"First a half dozen people have to understand the order and decide to obey it!"

The male and female smiled and nodded in unison. "Now."

Thumbnail pictures of Karl and Cat appeared next to Morales. "Cat! Karl! Have the weapons units cease fire immediately!"

"What's going on?" Karl said. "Where's the stasis field?"

"They turned it off. Battle's over."

"That's right," Morales said. "Cease fire."

Cat started talking to the squads. Karl stared for a second and started to do the same.

Not fast enough. The left wall exploded in a hurricane of masonry and chunks of metal. The two Men were suddenly bloody rags of shredded flesh. Morales and I were knocked over by the storm of rubble. My armor was breached in one place; there was a ten-second beep while it repaired itself.

Then vacuum silence. The one light on the opposite wall dimmed and went out. Through the hole our cannon had made, the size of a large window, the starlit wasteland strobed in silent battle.

The three thumbnails were gone. I chinned down again for command freek. "Cat? Morales? Karl?"

Then I turned on a headlight and saw Morales was dead, his suit peeled open at the chest, lungs and heart in tatters under ribs black with dried blood.

I chinned sideways for the general freek and heard a dozen voices shouting and screaming in confusion.

So Cat was probably dead, and Karl, too. Or maybe their communications had been knocked out.

I thought about that possibility for a few moments, hoping and rejecting hope, listening to the babble. Then I realized that if I could hear all those privates, corporals, they could hear me.

"This is Potter," I said. "Captain Potter," I yelled.

I stayed on the general freek and tried to explain the strange situation. Five did opt to stay outside. The others met me under the yellow light, which framed the top of a square black blast door that rose out of the ground at a forty-five-degree angle, like our tornado shelter at home, thousands of years ago, hundreds of light-years away. It slid open, and we went in, carrying four fighting suits whose occupants weren't responding but weren't obviously dead.

One of those was Cat, I saw as we came into the light when the airlock door closed. The back of the helmet had a blast burn, but I could make out VERDEUR.

She looked bad. A leg and an arm were missing at shoulder and thigh. But they had been snipped off by the suit itself, the way my arm had been at Tet-2.

There was no way to tell whether she was alive, since the telltale on the back of the helmet was destroyed. The suit had a biometric readout, but only a medic could access it directly, and the medic and his suit had been vaporized.
Man led us into a large room with a row of bunks and a row of chairs. There were three other Men there, but no Taurans, which was probably wise.

I popped out of my suit and didn't die, so the others did the same, one by one. The amputees we left sealed in their suits, and Man agreed that it was probably best. They were either dead or safely unconscious: if the former, they'd been dead for too long to bring back; if the latter, it would be better to wake them up in the Bolivar's surgery. The ship was only two hours away, but it was a long two hours for me.

As it turned out, she lived, but I lost her anyhow, to relativity. She and the other amputees were loaded, still asleep, onto the extra cruiser, and sent straight to Heaven.

They did it in one jump, no need for secrecy anymore, and we went to Stargate in one jump aboard Bolivar.

When I'd last been to Stargate it had been a huge space station; now it was easily a hundred times as large, a man-made planetoid. Tauran-made, and Man-made.

We learned to say it differently: Man, not man.

Inside, Stargate was a city that dwarfed any city on the Earth I remembered—though they said now there were cities on Earth with a billion Men, humans, and Taurans.

We spent weeks considering and deciding on which of many options we could choose to set the course of the rest of our lives. The first thing I did was check on William, and no miracle had happened; his Strike Force had not returned from Sade-138. But neither had the Tauran force sent to annihilate them.

I didn't have the option of hanging around Stargate, waiting for him to show up; the shortest scenario had his outfit arriving in over three hundred years. I couldn't really wait for Cat, either; at best she would get to Stargate in thirty-five years. Still young, and me in my sixties. If, in fact, she chose to come to Stargate; she would have the option of staying on Heaven.

I could chase her to Heaven, but then she would be thirty-five years older than me. If we didn't pass one another in transit.

But I did have one chance. One way to outwit relativity.

Among the options available to veterans was Middle Finger, a planet circling Mizar. It was a nominally heterosexual planetet or home was now completely a matter of choice; Man could switch you one way or the other in an hour.

I toyed with the idea of "going home," becoming lesbian by inclination as well as definition. But men still appealed to memen not Man and Middle Finger offered me an outside chance at the one man I still truly loved.

Five veterans had just bought an old cruiser and were using it as a time machinea "time shuttle," they called it, zipping back and forth between Mizar and Alcor at relativistic speed, more than two objective years passing every week. I could buy my way onto it by using my back pay to purchase antimatter fuel. I could get there in two collapsar jumps, having left word for William, and if he lived, could rejoin him in a matter of months or years.

The decision was so easy it was not a decision; it was as automatic as being born. I left him a note:

11 Oct 2878

William-

All this is in your personnel file. But knowing you, you might just chuck it. So I made sure you'd get this note. Obviously, I lived. Maybe you will, too. Join me.

I know from the records that you're out at Sade-138 and won't be back for a couple of centuries. No problem. I'm going to a planet they call Middle Finger, the fifth planet out from Mizar. It's two collapsar jumps, ten months subjective. Middle Finger is a kind of Coventry for heterosexuals. They call it a "eugenic control baseline."

No matter. It took all of my money, and all the money of five other old-timers, but we bought a cruiser from UNEF. And we're using it as a time machine.

So I'm on a relativistic shuttle, waiting for you. All it does is go out five light-years and come back to Middle Finger, very fast. Every ten years I age about a month. So if you're on schedule and still alive, I'll only be twenty-eight when you get here. Hurry!

I never found anybody else, and I don't want anybody else. I don't care whether you're ninety years old or thirty. If I can't be your lover, I'll be your nurse.
-Marygay
OLD-TIMER HAS FIRST BOY
Marygay Potter-Mandella (24 Post Road, Paxton) gave birth Friday last to a fine baby boy, 3.1 kilos.
Marygay lays claim to being the second-"oldest" resident of Middle Finger, having been born in 1977. She fought through most of the Forever War and then waited for her mate on the time shuttle, 261 years.
The baby, not yet named, was delivered at home with the help of a friend of the family, Dr. Diana Alsever-Moore.
Table of Contents