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The Forever War

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Extract

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Private Mandella

1

'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 brainwipes, 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, pre-dawn maneuvers tomorrow. Chop at 0330, first formation, 0400. Anybody sacked after 0340 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'd 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.

' 'Sallright.' 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.

2

'Awright, let's get some goddamn *back* inta 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 'Aldebaraniam' 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.

3

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 'cattlewagon' 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 groused, '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 came. 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, on 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 will go to Stargate collapsar, half a light year away. You will stay at the settlement on Stargate I, 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:

'Two months ago there was not a living soul on this planet, just some leftover equipment from the expedition of 1991. A working force of forty-five men struggled for a month to erect

this base. Twenty-four of them, more than half, died in the construction of it. This is the most dangerous planet men have ever tried to live on, but the places you'll be going will be this bad and worse. Your cadre will try to keep you alive for the next month. Listen to them . . . and follow their example; all of them have survived here much longer than you'll have to. Captain?' The captain stood up as the major went out the door.

'Tench-*hut*!' The last syllable was like an explosion and we all jerked to our feet.

'Now I'm only gonna say this *once* so you better listen,' he growled. 'We *are* in a combat situation here, and in a combat situation there is only *one* penalty for disobedience or insubordination.' He jerked the pistol from his hip and held it by the barrel, like a club. 'This is an Army model 1911 automatic *pistol*, caliber .45, and it is a primitive but effective weapon. The Sergeant and I are authorized to use our weapons to kill to enforce discipline. Don't make us do it because we will. We *will*.' He put the pistol back. The holster snap made a loud crack in the dead quiet.

'Sergeant Cortez and I between us have killed more people than are sitting in this room. Both of us fought in Vietnam on the American side and both of us joined the United Nations International Guard more than ten years ago. I took a break in grade from major for the privilege of commanding this company, and First Sergeant Cortez took a break from sub-major, because we are both *combat* soldiers and this is the first *combat* situation since 1987.

'Keep in mind what I've said while the First Sergeant instructs you more specifically in what your duties will be under this command. Take over, Sergeant.' He turned on his heel and strode out of the room. The expression on his face hadn't changed one millimeter during the whole harangue.

The First Sergeant moved like a heavy machine with lots of ball bearings. When the door hissed shut, he swiveled ponderously to face us and said, 'At ease, siddown,' in a surprisingly

gentle voice. He sat on a table in the front of the room. It creaked, but held.

'Now the captain talks scary and I look scary, but we both mean well. You'll be working pretty closely with me, so you better get used to this thing I've got hanging in front of my brain. You probably won't see the captain much, except on maneuvers.'

He touched the flat part of his head. 'And speaking of brains, I still have just about all of mine, in spite of Chinese efforts to the contrary. All of us old vets who mustered into UNEF had to pass the same criteria that got you drafted by the Elite Conscription Act. So I suspect all of you are smart and tough – but just keep in mind that the captain and I are smart and tough *and* experienced.'

He flipped through the roster without really looking at it. 'Now, as the captain said, there'll be only one kind of disciplinary action on maneuvers. Capital punishment. But normally *we* won't have to kill you for disobeying; Charon'll save us the trouble.

'Back in the billeting area, it'll be another story. We don't much care what you do inside. Grab ass all day and fuck all night, makes no difference . . . But once you suit up and go outside, you've gotta have discipline that would shame a Centurian. There will be situations where one stupid act could kill us all.

'Anyhow, the first thing we've gotta do is get you fitted to your fighting suits. The armorer's waiting at your billet; he'll take you one at a time. Let's go.'