

## BUT AS A SOLDIER, FOR HIS COUNTRY

by

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*Harker awoke to dim lighting, to bells, to panic all around him. Fast, busy footsteps clacked down bunker corridors, scurrying to no visible result and no possible accomplishment. It was wartime. Naturally.*

*He was in the spacesuit he has worn last time, which meant that either this war was soon after that last one or else there had been no great improvements in spacesuits over the interval between. It fit him tightly, with an all-but-invisible bubble helmet close around his head. There was no need for oxygen tanks as there had been on the early models; somehow – the technology was beyond him – air was transmuted within the suit, allowing him to breathe.*

*There was a belt of diverse weapons around his waist. He knew instinctively how to use each of them.*

*A voice in front of him, the eternal sergeant, a role that persisted though its portrayers came and went. “Not much time for explanation, I’m afraid, men. We’re in a bad hole. We’re in a bunker, below some ruins. The enemy has fanned out upstairs, looking for us. We’ve got to hold this area for four more hours, until reinforcements get here. You’re the best we’ve got, our only hope.”*

*“Our only hope” rang hollowly in Harker’s ears. He wanted to laugh, but couldn’t. There was no hope. Ever.*

*“At least with you now, we outnumber them about five to four. Remember, just four hours is all we need. Go on up there and keep them busy.”*

*A mass of bodies moved toward the door to the elevator that would take them to the surface. A quiet, resigned shuffling. Death in the hundreds of haggard faces around him, probably in his own as well.*

*Harker moved with the group. He didn’t even wonder who the ‘they’ were that he was supposed to keep busy. It didn’t matter. Perhaps it never had. He was alive again, and at war.*

“We’re asking you, Harker, for several reasons.” The captain is going slowly, trying to make sure there are no misunderstandings. “For one thing, of course, you’re a good soldier. For another, you’re completely unattached – no wife, girlfriends or close relatives. Nothing binding you to the here and now.”

Harker stands silently, still not precisely sure how to answer.

After an awkward pause, the captain continues. “Of course, we can’t *order* you to do something like this. But we would like you to volunteer. We can make it worth your while to do so.”

“I’d still like more time to think it over, sir.”

“Of course. Take your time. We’ve got all the time in the world, haven’t we?”

Later with Gary, as they walk across the deserted parade field together. “You bet I volunteered,” Gary says. “It’s not every day you get offered a two-month leave and a bonus, is it?”

“But what happens after that?”

Gary waves that aside. He is a live-for-the-moment type. “That’s two months from now. Besides, how bad can it be, after what we’ve already been through? You read the booklet, didn’t you? They had one hundred percent success thawing the monkeys out the last four times. It won’t be any harder for us.”

“But the world will be changed when we wake up.”

“Who cares? The Army’ll still be the same. The Army’s always the same, ever since the beginning of time. Come on, join me. I’ll bet if we ask them nice, they’ll keep us together as a team. Don’t let me go in there alone.”

Harker volunteers the next day and gets his two-month leave, plus the bonus paid to the experimental subjects. He and Gary leave the post together to spend their last two months of freedom.

The first month they are together almost constantly. It is a riot of clashing colours and flashing girls, of endless movies and shows and drinks. It is largely cheerless, but it occupies their time and keeps their minds on *today*. The days sweep by like a brash brass carousel, and only by keeping careful track can it be noticed that the carousel goes around in a circle.

With a month to go, Harker suddenly leaves his friend and goes off on his own. He lets desolation sink in until it has invaded the roots of his soul. He often walks alone at night, and several times is stopped by the police. Even when someone is with him, generally a streetgirl, he is alone.

He looks at things, ordinary things, with new strangeness. The cars going by on the street are suddenly vehicles of great marvels. The skyscrapers that reach above him, their defaced walls and smog-dirtied windows, all become symbols of a world that will not exist for him much longer. He stares for an hour at a penny on the sidewalk, until someone notices what he is staring at and picks the coin up for himself.

He talks but little and even his thoughts are shallow. He disengages his brain and lives on a primal level. When he is hungry, he eats; when his bladder or bowels are full, he relieves them. He takes whores to his hotel room for couplings that are merely the release of excess semen. During the last week, he is totally impotent.

He returns to the post when his leave is up and, as promised, is assigned to a room with Gary. The latter still seems

to be in good spirits, undaunted by the prospects of the immediate future. The presence of his friend should brighten Harker up, but for some reason it only makes him more depressed.

For a week, they run him and the other volunteers – three hundred in all – through a battery of medical tests that are the most thorough Harker has ever experienced. Then they lead him, naked, to a white room filled with coffins, some of which are occupied and some of which are still empty.

There they freeze him against the time when they will need a good soldier again.

*It was dark up on the surface, not a night-dark but a dreary, rainy, cloud-dark. A constant drizzle came from the sky, only to steam upward again when it touched the smouldering ruins of what had recently been a city. Buildings were mostly demolished, but here and there a wall stood silhouetted against the dark sky, futilely defying the fearsomeness of war. The ground and wreckage were still boiling hot, but Harker's suit protected him from the temperature. The drizzle and steam combined to make the air misty, and to give objects a shadow quality that denied their reality.*

*Harker looked around on reflex, taking stock. All around him were his own people, who had also just emerged from the elevator. No sign yet of the mysterious 'they' he was supposed to keep busy for four hours. "Spread out," somebody said, and ingrained instincts took over. Clustered together at the mouth of the elevator, they made too good a target. They scattered at random in groups of one, two or three.*

*Harker found himself with a woman – not a resurrectee, just another soldier. Neither of them spoke; they probably had little in common. One was rooted in time, the other drifted, anchorless and apart.*

*The clouds parted for a moment, revealing a green sun. I wonder what planet it is this time, Harker thought, and even before the idea was completely formed, apathy had erased the desire to know. It didn't matter. All that mattered was the fighting and killing. That was why he was here.*

*An unexpected movement off to the left. Harker whirled, gun at the ready. A wraithlike form was approaching out of the mists. Three meters tall, stick-man thin, it moved agonisingly, fighting what was, to it, impossibly heavy gravity. Memories flooded Harker's mind, memories of a planet with a red sun, gravity only a third of Earth's, of dust and sand and choking dryness. And tall thin forms like this one. The men at his side and an army advancing on him. The enemy. An enemy once more?*

*Harker fired. This gun fired pulses of blue that seemed to waft with dreamlike slowness to the alien being. They reached it with a crackling more felt than heard. Static electricity? The being crumpled lifeless to the ground.*

*The woman grabbed Harker's arm. "What'd you do that for?"*

*"It was a ... a ... " What had they been called? "A Bjorgn."*

*"Yes," said the soldier. "But they're on our side now."*

Resurrection is slow, the first time, and not a little painful.

Harker awakes to quiet and white. That is his first impression. Later, when he sorts it out, he knows there must have been heat too. A nurse in a crisp white blouse and shorts is standing beside him, welcoming him back to the land of the living. It's been seven years, she tells him, since he was frozen. There is a war in Africa now, and they need good fighting men like him. She tells him to rest, that nothing is expected of him just yet. He's been through an ordeal, and rest will be the best medicine. Accordingly, Harker sleeps.

The next day, there is a general briefing for all the resurrectees, piped in via TV to all their bedsides since they are still incapacitated. The briefing explains some of the background of the war, how the United States became involved, and which side they are fighting on. Then there is a review of the war to date and a quick, nondetailed discussion of strategy. The colonel in charge closes by thanking these men for volunteering for this most unusual and elite project, and by expressing confidence that they will be successful. Harker listens politely, then turns the set off and goes to sleep when the briefing is over.

Next day begins the callisthenics. Being in cold sleep for seven years has taken the tone out of the men's muscles, and they will have to get back into shape before going out onto the battlefield once again. In the exercise yard, Harker sees Gary and waves to him. They eat lunch together, congratulating one another on having survived the treatment. (Only five out of three hundred have not pulled through, and the project is considered a success.) Gary is as flamboyant as ever, and expresses optimism that this war will be over soon, and then they can return to civilian life.

They spend five days more in preparation, then go out into the field. War has not changed in seven years, Harker notices. The guns are a bit smaller, and the artillery shoots a bit farther and with more accuracy, but the basic pattern is unchanged. The jungles of Africa are not greatly different from those of Asia where he learned his craft. The fears he had about being a stranger in the future when he awoke are proving pointless, and gradually his depression wears off. He fights with all the skill he learned in the last war, and learns a few new tricks besides.

The war continues for ten months, then finally breaks. Negotiations come through, the fighting ends. Celebrations are held all over the world at this latest outbreak of peace, but the joyousness is not completely echoed in the ranks of the soldiers. The resurrectees are used to war, and the thought of learning new peacetime skills makes them nervous. They know there is nothing out there in the world for them. They would be welcomed as veterans, but they would be strangers to this time. War is the only world they know.

Ninety-five percent of the surviving resurrectees, including Harker and Gary, sign up for another term of hibernation, to be awakened which needed to fight.

*Harker took the other soldier down behind some rubble and talked with her. "On our side?"*

The woman nodded. "Have been for the last, oh, hundred years or so. Where ... " She cut off abruptly. She'd been about to ask, "Where have you been all that time?" then realised the answer. "It doesn't matter too much, I suppose," she continued. "They can always replay his tape if they need him."

"How much else don't I know?" Harker demanded.

"This is a civil war. Humans and aliens on both sides. You can't tell what side a person's on just by his race." Like Asia and Africa, Harker thought.

"About the only way you can tell is by the armtag." She pointed at her own, and at Harker's. "We're green. They're red."

"What's to keep a red soldier from putting on a green armtag?"

The woman shrugged. "Nothing, I suppose. Except he'd likely get shot by his own side."

"Unless they knew him by sight."

The soldier shook her head. "No. They copied some of our tapes, which means they've been able to duplicate some of our personnel. Don't trust anyone just because you've seen them before. Look for the armtag."

Bolts of energy went hurtling by their temporary shelter. "Here comes the action," Harker said. "Let's move." But before they could, the ground exploded in front of them.

The next resurrection is easier, the doctors having learned from experience. But it is still a shock.

Harker awakes to cold this time. He notices it even before the white of the hospital room. Not that the building isn't heated, but there is a chill in the atmosphere that pervades everything.

The nurse that stands beside him is older than the one he had last time. Her white blouse is not quite so crisp, and she wears a skirt that goes clear to the floor. It's a wonder she doesn't trip over it. The chill is a part of her, too; she is not as friendly as that previous nurse. She tells him brusquely that he had been hibernating for fifteen years, and that the war is now in Antarctica.

He takes the news with quiet astonishment. Of all the places in the world where he'd thought war would never be, Antarctica headed the list. But here he is, and here he will fight. He learns that the United States is fighting China here over a section of disputed territory. So he is back to fighting Orientals, though on new terrain.

Gary is here also, and they renew their friendship. There is a week of callisthenics, as they get in shape once more. The atmosphere, Harker notices, is less relaxed than it was the first time, as though people are impatient to get the resurrectees out and fighting again.

Antarctica, needless to say, has different physical conditions than most of them are used to. They bundle up in heavy boots and thin, electrically warmed coats and gloves. They wear goggles to protect their eyes. Their weapons now fire laser beams instead of projectiles; the lack of recoil takes some getting used to. So does the climate. Cold instead of hot, snow instead of rain, bare plains and snow fields instead of jungles and farms. The terrain under dispute seems no different to Harker than any of the rest that is free for the taking, but his superiors tell him that *this* is what they must have and so this is what he fights for.

After three months of fighting, Harker is wounded. A laser beam grazes his arm, burning flesh down to the bone. He is taken to a hospital, where they heal the wound quite efficiently – but while they do so, the war comes to an end. The decision arises again whether to reenlist or leave the service. Many resurrectees opt out before becoming too estranged from the world. But the slang of the contemporary soldiers is already becoming unrecognisable, and the few pictures Harker has received of the rest of the 'modern' world seem strange and out of phase. After talking it over with Gary, they both decide on one more try aboard the resurrection express.

There is a new slant to it this time, though. A *very* experimental program, top-secret, is being worked out whereby, instead of putting a man in hibernation, they can record his mind as an individual and reconstruct him later when needed. This will make the system much more manoeuvrable, since they won't have the problem of transporting frozen bodies to and from battlegrounds. This method is a bit riskier, since it hasn't been fully tested yet, but it offers more advantages in the long run.

Gary and Harker sign up and are duly recorded.

Harker was thrown clear by the explosion, but the other soldier had not been so lucky. The left side of her torso had been blown away and guts were spilling onto the steaming ground. Harker shook his head to clear it from the shock, and rolled quickly behind a barely standing section of wall.

It was not nearly so dark now. Energy weapons were being fired, lighting up the countryside with their multicoloured glows. The drizzle continued steadily, and the mists still steamed up from the ground. Like ghosts, Harker thought. But he didn't have much time for thinking. He had a job to do.

There could be no strategy in this type of combat – it was strictly man-to-man, a series of individual battles where the only winners were those who remained alive. Move cautiously, ever alert, looking for someone with the other colour armtag. When you see him, shoot immediately, before he can shoot you. If he's too far out of range, hurl a grenade. Reduce the number of the enemy to increase your own odds. Stay alive. That was the law here on this nameless world beneath a green sun.

Harker emerged from one doorway after killing seven of the enemy, onto a main 'street' – or what had been one – of this city. It was now clogged with heaps of rubble from the fallen buildings; stone, cement, steel, plastiglas jumbled every which way. Among the wreckage were strewn the bodies of thousands of the original inhabitants. They were not human, but it was impossible for Harker to reconstruct what they had looked like. Many of the bodies were in pieces, with an unusually short leg lying here, an oddly shaped arm over there, a limbless, headless

*torso further on. Some bodies were pinned beneath pieces of debris; others had been hideously mutilated by the latest advances in war technology.*

*Harker's stomach felt no unease at what his eyes were viewing. He had seen scenes like this before, many times, in countless places throughout the universe. It took him barely a second to absorb the silent tragedy before him, then he started moving on.*

*A bolt of energy hit his right calf. He whirled and fired instinctively at his attacker, even as he felt himself falling.*

This new type of resurrection is a sudden, frightening thing, a lightning bolt summoning his soul from the depths of limbo.

Harker awakens to sterility, to a place of abnormal quiet. The air smells funny, antiseptic, even more so than most of the hospitals he's been in. His body feels funny too, as though he were floating in some strangely buoyant liquid; yet he can feel a firm couch underneath his back. His heart bangs away inside his chest, much too fast, much too hard.

He is in a room with other men, other resurrectees, all of whom feel equally strange and perplexed. Their number has almost tripled now from the original three hundred, and they have been crowded closely together to fit into one large hall. Harker lifts his head, and after much looking, manages to spot Gary a dozen rows away. The presence of his friend allays some of the alienness he feels here.

"Welcome to the Moon, men," blares a voice from a loudspeaker. There is a reverberation of gasps throughout the room at this revelation of their location. The Moon! Only astronauts and scientists got to go there. Are there wars on the Moon now? What year is this and who – and how – are they expected to fight?

The loudspeaker goes on to give further information. For one thing, they are no longer a part of the U.S. Army. The United States has been incorporated into the North American Union, which has inherited their tapes. The enemy is the South Americans, the Sammies, led largely by the Peruvian complex. The two powers are fighting for possession of the Mare Nectaris, which symbolises the points of disagreement between them. Since the outlawing of war on Earth itself, aggressions have to be released here, on the Moon.

"The Moon!" Gary exclaims when they can finally talk together. "Can you believe it? I never thought I'd make it up here. Don't it knock you on your ass just thinking about it?"

Callisthenics are not necessary, since their bodies have been recreated in as good a shape as they were in when they were first recorded. But they do have to spend almost two weeks undergoing training to be able to deal with the lighter gravity of the Moon. There are also spacesuits they have to become accustomed to, and whole new instincts have to be drilled into the men to take care that nothing will rip their suits, the portable wombs they carry against Nature's hostility.

Projectile weapons are back, Harker notices, in use as antipersonnel armament. On the Moon, in spacesuits, a small sliver of shrapnel is just as deadly as a laser beam. Rifles that fire the lunar equivalent of buckshot are relied on heavily by the infantry in the field. Orbiting satellites cover their advances with wide-angle energy beams that Harker doesn't even begin to understand.

It is an entirely different style of fighting, he finds. Totally silent. There are radios in their spacesuits, but they are forbidden to use them because the enemy could triangulate their position. The soldiers make no noise, and on the airless surface of the Moon, the weapons make no noise. It is a battle in pantomime, with silent death ready to creep up at any time.

Gary is killed the third week out. It is during a battle at the open end of the crater Fracastorius, which proves to be the turning point of the war. Gary and Harker are part of a line advancing cautiously across the pockmarked plain, when suddenly Gary falls to the ground. Other men along the line fall too. Harker goes to the ground, feigning death so that the Sammie snipers will not waste any more ammunition on him. But Gary is not feigning it. Harker, otherwise motionless, can turn his head within the helmet and see the tiny tear in the right side of his friend's spacesuit. The wound would have been minuscule, but the explosive decompression has been fatal. Gary's eyes are bugged out, as though in horror at death, and blood is bubbling at his nostrils and mouth.

Harker cries for his friend. For the last time, he cries.

He lies there for three hours, motionless, until his air supply is almost exhausted. Then he is picked up by a Sammie sweep patrol and taken prisoner. He sits out the short remainder of the war in a Sammie camp where he is treated decently enough, suffering only a few indignities. When the war ends, he is exchanged back to the N.A.U., where, still numbed from Gary's death, he allows himself to be retaped and rerecorded for future use.

*Harker fell and hit his head against a block of stone rubble. The helmet withstood the blow – unlike the primitive ones he had worn at first, which would have cracked open – but it started a ringing in his ears which momentarily drowned out the pain impulses coming from his leg. He lay there stunned, waiting for death, in the form of the enemy soldier, to claim him. But nothing happened. After a while his head cleared, which only meant that he could feel the searing agony in his leg more deeply. It was hardly an improvement.*

*If the soldier had not delivered the killing blow, it could mean that Harker's reflex shot had killed or wounded him. He had to find out quickly; his life might depend on it. He twisted around painfully, his leg pulsing with agony. There, about thirty metres down the street, a spacesuited body lay flat on the ground. It wasn't moving, but was it dead? He had to know.*

*Harker crawled over the field of death, over the remains of shattered bodies. The front of his spacesuit became caked with mud and some not-quite-dried blood that had an inhuman, oily consistency. The drizzle was becoming*

*harder, turning to rain, but still steaming up from the radioactively heated ground. Clouds of vapour fogged his way, hiding the object of his search. Still Harker crawled, keeping to the direction he knew to be the true one.*

*His leg was on fire, and every centimetre of the crawl was hell, a surrealist's nightmare of the world gone mad. Once he thought he heard a scream, and he looked around, but there was no one nearby. It must have been a hallucination. He'd had them before on the battlefield, under pain.*

*He reached his goal after an eternity of crawling. He could detect faint twitches; the enemy was still alive then, though barely. Harker turned him over on his back to deliver the death blow, then looked into the man's face. It was Gary.*

All the resurrections now seem to run together in his memory. The next one, he thinks, is Venus, the place of hot, stinking swamps, of nearly killing atmospheric pressure and protective bubble-pockets of life. These are the first aliens he has ever killed, the tiny creatures no more than twenty-five centimetres high who can swarm all over a man and kill him with a million tiny stabs. At first it is easier to kill nonhumans, less wearing on the scruples. But eventually it doesn't matter. Killing is killing, no matter whom it is done to. It becomes a clinical, mechanical process, to be done as efficiently as possible, not to be thought over.

Then back on the Moon again – or is it Mars? – fighting other humans. The spacesuits are improved this time, tougher, but the fighting is just as silent, just as deadly.

Then a war back on Earth again. (Apparently that outlawing of war on the mother planet has not worked out as well as expected.) Some of the fighting is even done under the oceans, in and around large domes that house cities with populations of millions. There are trained dolphins and porpoises fighting in this one. It doesn't matter. Harker kills them no matter what they look like.

This war is the last time Harker ever sets foot upon his native planet.

Then comes the big jump to an interstellar war. He is resurrected on a planet under a triple sun – Alpha Centauri, someone says – and the enemy is two-foot long chitinous caterpillars with sharp pincers. They fight valiantly despite a much more primitive technology. By this time Harker is no longer sure whom he is working for. His side is the one that resurrects him and gives him an enemy to fight. They give him shelter, food, clothing, weapons and, occasionally, relaxation. They no longer bother to tell him *why* he is fighting. It no longer seems to matter to him.

Wake up and fight until there is no more killing to do; then retreat into purgatory until the next war, the next battle. The killing machine named Harker has trod the surfaces of a hundred planets, leaving nothing but destruction and death in his wake.

*Gary stared up into Harker's eyes. He was in pain, near death, but was there some recognition there? Harker could not speak to him, their communicators were on different frequencies, but there was something in Gary's eyes ... a plea. A plea for help. A plea for a quick and merciful death.*

*Harker obliged.*

*His mind was numb, his leg was burning. He did not think of the paradox of Gary still being alive though he had seen him die on the Moon years (centuries? millennia?) ago. He knew only that his leg hurt and that he was in an exposed position. He crawled on his side, with his left elbow pulling him forward, for ten metres to a piece of wall. He lifted himself over it and tumbled to the ground. If not completely safe, he was at least off the street, out of the open space.*

*He reached for the first-aid kit on his belt, to tend his leg. There was none there. That idea took a full minute to sink into his mind: THEY HADN'T GIVEN HIM A FIRST-AID KIT. He felt a moment of anger, but it subsided quickly. Why should they give him a kit? What was he to them? A pattern called out of the past, an anachronism – useful for fighting and, if necessary, dying. Nothing more. He was a ghost living far beyond his appointed hour, clinging to life in the midst of death. A carrion eater, feeding on death and destruction to survive, for he had no purpose except to kill. And when the killing was done, he was stored away until his time came round again.*

*He sat in the rubble with his back against the crumbling wall, and for the first time since Gary's death on the Moon, he cried.*

Asia.

Africa.

Antarctica.

Luna.

Venus.

Pacifica.

Alpha Centauri 4.

The planet with the forests.

The world with oceans of ammonia.

Planets whose names he's never even bothered to learn.

The ghosts of billions of war dead assault his conscience. And Harker cries with them, for them, about them, over them, to them.

*There was a movement. A man in a red armtag. A strangely familiar figure. He hadn't seen Harker yet. Without thinking, Harker's hand raised the gun to fire.*

*His motion attracted the other's attention. The soldier, with reflexes as fast as his own, whirled to face him. It was himself.*

*"They copied some of our tapes," he had been told. Exactly. Then they could make themselves a Harker, just as this side could. He wanted to laugh, but the pain in his leg prevented it. It would have been his first laugh in uncounted incarnations. This was the ultimate irony – fighting himself.*

*The two Harkers' eyes joined and locked. For one joyless instant, each read the other's soul. Then each fired at the other.*