

Mirror

by Chris Bunch

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"You wish?" the bartender asked.

"Brandy. Water back." the young man said.

"What breed?"

"Doesn't matter," the man said. "Vegan, maybe, if you've got it. Second growth by choice."

"We've got it." The bartender took the bottle down, reached for a snifter.

"Just put it in a glass," the young man said. "I'm not sophisticated."

The bartender poured, slid it across the bar with a tumbler of icewater.

"Want a tab or pay as you go?"

"Doesn't matter," the young man said again. He stood, dug into a belt pouch, took out two b

"Let me know when these have been used this up."

He shot the drink back, put the glass back on the bar, nodded.

The bartender eyed him closely. The man was drunk, but tightly under control. Another drink went across the bar, and the bartender made change.

"Quiet tonight," the young man said.

"It's early," the bartender told him, nodding at the clock on the compartment readout panel.

"The band doesn't start until Five Zulu. Half an hour distant."

"That's what they said about your Rendezvous, down the passage at Camille's."

This time the young man sipped at his drink. He wore a one-piece, styled after a military shipsuit, about five years out of date. He was very thin, long-faced, with close-cropped hair. The bartender could see, very faintly across his forehead, a scar that hadn't been repaired correctly.

The man stared past the bartender.

"They also told me about your mirror," he said. "That's important."

Indeed, The Rendezvous had a mirror--a huge antique that almost filled the wall behind the bar. It was very clear, very deep, supposedly of crystal with real silver for a backing.

The bartender waited for an explanation, none came, and he went back to his setups.

The three-piece group wandered in and uncased their instruments, old-fashioned keyboard synths. The woman singer came over, got a shot of Alexandrian for her "sore throat," smiled at the young man at the bar, went back to the stage, and the group started playing, not bad, not current, not that good, either.

But the crowd who trailed in at that hour didn't much care about music, unless it was cutting edge, which The Rendezvous couldn't afford.

These were people who didn't want to face whatever waited for them in bed or dreams, at least not sober.

The young man caught the bartender's eye, waved for another brandy, his sixth. The bartender brought the brandy, waved away money.

"Our tap," he said.

"Thanks." The young man looked around. "Different crowd than used to come here ... back during the war."

"I wouldn't know," the bartender said. "I was ... out of town."

The young man caught the reference, grinned wryly.

"I was passing through, on my own way ... out of town...is the only reason I know." The young man touched the scar, as if making sure it was still there, proclaiming something.

He was about to say something more, and someone at the other end of the bar shouted how was he supposed to stay flying if nobody was there to fuel him up.

The young man stared back into the depths of the huge brass-framed mirror hanging behind the bar.

Manhattan Station, like the rest of the City-class stations, had been built quickly during the war, once another "War to End All Wars," now just "the War," soon to be given a historical label, to mark it from the next conflict on the horizon.

It had been a staging area for troop or ship formations to assemble, be given orders, and transship to other star systems for training or battle. As the war got bigger, so did Manhattan with curving passages added here and there, huge assembly areas, now deserted at their end. It was said no one, except a scattering of deserters and maybe some thieves, ever knew all of Manhattan's catacombs.

When the exhaustion of peace came, the troops washed back through the stations toward home.

This current wave was mostly emigrants who'd found home didn't match their memories or hopes and went out to other worlds or the Frontier Sectors. There were a few others passing through--those who'd failed "out there," and were seeping back, lost, forlorn.

But most of them never came into The Rendezvous for longer than a single drink. Most failed to run out of energy, money, or sobriety about midnight.

Around Nine Zulu--all stations and craft still kept the centuries-old Greenwich Mean Time--at the "morning," the drinkers were sodden enough to think themselves sober or know they'd better leave to stay out of trouble, and the band wrapped it up.

The bartender cleaned up, served two or three quick shots to workers who couldn't punch in without reinforcement, closed the computer.

He hadn't seen the young man leave.

He came back the next night, and the next, and eventually became sort of a regular. The bartender never asked him his name, wondered why not, stopped wondering.

One night the woman singer made it obvious that the young man would be welcome to go home with her, if he wished.

He smiled politely, didn't respond, fixed his attention into the mirror.

The singer, who was sure that anyone who didn't think she was the heir to Piaf, Holiday, and Lavand, and lovelier to boot was utter scum, stalked back to the stage and spat out the ancient

"Je Regrette Rien," all the while staring at the young man, who didn't appear to be listening.

An hour or so later, the young man was approached by another Rendezvous regular, a sleek older man with a precise manner and pursed lips, and offered a drink. The young man

accepted the drink, listened to the other's evident proposal, shook his head firmly.

Normally the bartender did no more than listen to whatever his customers wanted to tell him no more. A few years ago, he'd been somewhere it wasn't considered safe to ask someone about his past.

But one night he'd had a letter that reminded him of things he thought he'd be able to forget, taken a bottle from the bar to his room, and drunk himself senseless.

The next night he allowed himself a single malt liquor when he opened up, and was very careful with anything sharp or powered.

The hangover was the reason he gave himself for asking the young man what he was doing Manhattan Station: waiting for something or someone, or working?

The young man looked surprised.

"Drinking myself to death," he said, and there was no smile on his lips. "That's why I come here. You stay open late enough."

"Oh," the bartender managed.

"I figure I've just about enough money to make it."

The bartender couldn't find words for a minute, decided, for an unknown reason, to plunge deeper:

"What do you see in that mirror?"

The young man looked at him, and a smile came, was gone, and he returned to his study.

Somehow, and he wasn't sure how, he learned the young man was living in one of the rabbit warren hotels nearby that'd once been bachelor officers' quarters, now just places where no one asked questions as long as the rent was paid and you didn't get too loud.

It was a good place for a man with no expectations except death.

The bartender kept a few snacks--salted nuts, heattab sandwiches, taro chips and such--hand for anyone trying to level out a bit.

If the young man was trying to drink himself to death, he gave good evidence, for the only food he touched at The Rendezvous was an occasional palm full of nuts.

He drank about four brandies for every glass of water, generally had two or three waters a night ... or, rather, a morning.

He barely showed his drunkenness, save his speech became more precise the later it got. When he left, he walked a straight line, but moved as carefully as he spoke.

Two customers were arguing about a scandal. A high-ranking Star Commander had been caught taking kickbacks from a supplier, and was to be court-martialed.

"Oughta hang the bastard," one muttered.

"Why?" the other said. "No different than anybody else in the service, takin' what they can get when they can get it, right?"

He turned to the young man, who didn't reply.

"Just dump him out the nearest airlock," the first insisted. "Officers with that kind of rank deserve better."

"Nice thought," the young man said. "But a court-martial can't impose a capital penalty for financial malfeasance. The best they can do is a fine, five years imprisonment and a dishonorable discharge."

"And how do you know?" the second man demanded, a little belligerent for being ignored. "I know, friend," the young man said, a calm certainty to his voice. "Believe me, I know." The nearby bartender waited for more, but, as usual, nothing came, except a request for another brandy.

"Look at this," the young man said, unusual animation in his voice. He held out a medal, bright and gaily-colored silk. "You know what this is?"

The bartender nodded. He had one of his own, with some other pieces of gilt and metal, in small leather boxes at the bottom of his shirt drawer.

"I saw this up on Sixth Level, in a damned pawnshop," the young man said, voice quivering with incipient rage.

"So?" the bartender asked. "People get hard up. Or maybe what it meant it didn't mean anymore to the guy who won it." He wondered why he hadn't thrown away his medals.

"Still not right," the young man said. "It was a hell of a war, wasn't it?"

"Most are," the bartender said, uncomfortably.

The young man put the medal on the bar top, and stared at it for a change.

"I remember a mirror once," the young man said.

The bartender stopped cutting *tafagas* into strips, listened.

"We'd done an insert on...hell, I don't even remember the planet. The main city'd been declared open, but at that stage of the war nobody paid much attention to things like that.

"They sent us up to screen some of the mucketies' villas, on this ridgeline above the city.

"Screening. Yeh." The young man snorted, emptied his glass. "All it was, was an excuse to loot, really.

"Anyway, we broke in this one mansion. The owner'd scampered, but he'd left some of his women. Girls, actually.

"They ought not to let kids in a war, at least not girls. What happened next wasn't real ... " voice trailed off, then picked up:

"That mansion had a mirror like you've got. Damned near as big.

"You ever see what happens when you grenade a mirror?"

"No."

The bartender waited, but the young man said nothing for a time, then:

"Dry out tonight," and shoved his glass across the bar for another round.

The young man stopped rubbing at the scar on his forehead, which had become a new habit.

"Did you ever march in a parade?"

"Yeh," the bartender said. "After I signed up, they gave us one." He grinned. "They should've waited til we had some training, because there we were, wearing all kinds of civvies, nobody knowing how to keep in step, not even a uniform, bumping into each other."

"But it was still a parade," the young man said.

"Yeh. With bands, and pretty girls throwing kisses, and their vid numbers, not that we'd have a chance to get near a public box anytime soon."

"Did you get a parade when the war was over?"

The bartender's smile vanished.

"No. No, we didn't. Guess people had a better way of spending their time by then, and we were old news."

"Nobody ever let me march in a parade," the young man said. "Not ever."

The bartender noticed the young man's face was drawn in, as if his flesh was being slowly consumed, and the skin drawn tighter and tighter over his skull.

The man was also showing the brandy more, slurring his words slightly as the morning wore on, but never enough to be cut off.

The bartender stopped buying him rounds, vaguely hoping the young man would find another bar to finish his night in, but he never complained.

He talked more, but always obliquely, never making whatever point he was trying for.

"We had a mirror like yours, once," he said. "Bigger, maybe not quite as nice. It was in this big house we took a lease on.

"That was back when I was a kid.

"We moved around a lot. It kept the creditors looking, I guess. My father did ... well, did what he did, and sometimes they caught him at it.

"Anyway, this mirror covered a whole damned wall. I was, what, maybe ten then? You could look in the mirror, and see the reverse of the street and the city.

"I always wanted to see a real reverse. Instead of damned gray winter, which is all I remember about that planet, I wanted summer, or spring. I didn't want to see the people go huddled up in coats, breathing fog out, but green, rolling down to a lake or maybe ocean, and no buildings, but some kind of park or something.

"Somewhere where it'd always be summer, and I could step through the mirror and live in that world, and there'd never be winter any more, nor some ... other things.

"I always hated winter. That's what's nice about being in space, in a station or a ship. The winter, the cold is outside, always, and if it comes in, you're dead and you don't care.

"Once, I was staring in that mirror, and I saw my father coming downstairs, with my mother behind him. They were all dressed up, and--"

The young man's voice broke off, and his hand shook violently. He steadied it with his other hand, and the bartender looked away. He looked back when the man banged the empty glass down on the bar.

"Another one, please."

The bartender took the bottle down.

"Sometimes you don't want to be looking in mirrors," the young man said.

"Why? What happened?"

The young man laughed humorlessly.

"My mother, just as soon as the funeral was over, sent me off to a military school."

The bartender started to ask again, saw the expression on the man's face, turned away.

It was early, and the young man appeared quite sober. He ordered two brandies as he sat down.

"Why not a double?" the bartender asked.

The young man shook his head. "Won't work. I've got to pace myself."

The bartender set the drinks down, got the water back. The young man, rather than knocking the first back, swirled the brandy around the shot glass.

"Remember, a few nights ago, we were talking about the war?"

"Yeh."

"You ever hear of the Doublegangers?"

The bartender thought. "Nope ... wait a second. I heard the word, sort of like that, once. But I don't remember what it was."

"Like in doppelgangers," the young man said. "The story was they could take somebody who was all shot up, too bad to put back into a fighting suit, and duplicate him."

"Sort of, anyway. Anyway, these doubles were to be used in combat only, the story went, and when the war was over, they were to be destroyed."

"Not killed, destroyed. After all, they were hardly human."

"They were in a hurry in those days, and there was some pretty ersatz product going out."

"True enough," the bartender said. "I remember some of the ships and missiles we got that were supposedly been final line inspected a dozen times. Fire 'em, and they went psst. We always thought there might be moles who'd worked their way into being inspectors ... but nobody ever heard anything, knew anything for sure."

"About that, and a whole lot more."

"That's the truth," the young man said. "So if these doublegangers existed, who knows what kind of memories they'd have. Or if they'd have memories at all. But they'd have to put in something, so the poor ... thing, I guess is the only label you can use ... wouldn't just sit there and creep everybody around him out."

"You believe that?" the bartender asked. "You think that's possible to build creatures like that?"

The young man twirled his glass, then said, as if he hadn't heard the bartender's questions, "I wonder, if that story's true, how many of the doublegangers decided they didn't want to be switched off when the war was over, and took off in any direction they could."

"But where could someone ... something ... like that run to?"

"But he...it would surely run rather than just march in to the nearest scrapyard and jump in the recycler."

"It seems reasonable to me that whoever built them would have had to put some kind of instinct for self preservation in, wouldn't they?"

The bartender felt a chill.

"I guess it was like the old poem," the young man said, and recited lines in a language the bartender didn't know. The young man saw the bartender's bewilderment, grinned, translated.

"A soldier dies a hero's death, but the war's still going on. So they dig up the corpse, filled him with a fiery schnapps, and off he marched to die another hero's death."

The young man lifted his brandy.

"Here's to fiery schnapps."

He drank.

"And war stories that are probably nothing more."

Two nights ... mornings ... later, the bartender had finally let the last drinker out into the midday swirl of the passage, and was cleaning up, yawning, looking forward to his bed. He saw a gleam on the floor, picked up a cardkey with a hotel's name on it.

It was under the stool where the young man normally sat. He'd gotten a bit drunker than usual that night, and had even staggered a little going out the door.

The bartender tucked it into his pocket to give the young man when he came in the next night. But he never did.

One of his first customers ordered a beer, drained half of it.

"Guess you'll have to cut back on your brandy order," he said.

"Why so?"

"You know that guy that comes in, never says nothing to nobody, just drinks and stares at himself in your mirror?"

"Yeh. Sure."

"He dropped deader'n a pistol in a lift two junctions down. Saw him myself, on my way to work. Looked like he'd been dead for a week. I didn't stick around."

The man yawned.

"Gimme another beer, then tab me out. Time for me to be home and in bed, anyway."

The bartender kept taking out the cardkey and looking at it. When he closed the bar, he went to the young man's hotel, asked the morning deskman what room the key fit.

"I *surely* can't tell you something like that," the man said. "For all I know, you might be a thief trying to go through an honest man's--"

The bill the bartender passed across the desk vanished, and the clerk ran the card through his reader.

"Twenty seven," he said.

The bartender went to the lift, up a level, and down a shabby corridor.

He found 27, slid the card into the lock, and the door slid open.

The room inside was almost bare, spotless as it would have been as a BOQ. The bed was made, and there were a dozen suits, the practical, out-of-style jumpers the young man had favored, in the open closet.

The vid had been turned to the wall.

He went through bureau drawers, found underwear, not much in the way of personal belongings, that medal he'd been shown, and some money, enough to have kept the man drinking for another twenty days or so.

There was a blank writing tab on the desk and, next to it a bulky green portfolio. The bartender had one just like it that held his discharge papers, citations, other personnel documents.

But he'd seen other folders like it used for other purposes by civilians.

The bartender picked up the portfolio, started to unseal its tab. He stopped, and stared at the folder for long minutes.

Then he took it into the bathroom, turned on the recycler, slid the portfolio in, and listened

the dull hum until it stopped, his face completely expressionless.

He locked the room carefully, dropped the cardkey on the lobby desk, and went down the passage, thinking it was time for him to move on, find a planet to work from for awhile.