

7,000 words

# Acid Plains

by Greg Dolph

## Planet Seftin, southern hemisphere

'It gets dark fast here, Dad,' Mark Stone heard his son say, noticing the same thing. Seftin was a homely planet, beautiful in ways, but as always he found the little differences tended to rasp a little bit. Still, he smiled.

'Sure does,' he replied, 'not sure if it's the shorter day, the topography, atmosphere or what but it just seems to drop like stone. One minute still light, next one bam!'

'I wish Mom could have made it,' Jason said, 'she loves camping.'

'She's a doctor, there was an emergency... she'll join us as soon as she can,' Jason's father re-assured him, 'look, totally dark now, that was quick!'

'Don't forget your flashlight!' Raza noted, her face almost hidden behind her barely contained mop of brown curls, only visible because of the nearby campfire. He had the feeling that his youngest child had a very good idea of why the sun seemed to set so quickly - her capacity for scientific facts was immense - but she was probably not sharing because she knew it would bore them.

'Huh? Why,' her older brother Jason asked, 'Ah, no moon.'

He wasn't a slouch on the science side either.

'This planet is doomed,' Raza said, 'no moon to keep the core molten, in a few hundred million years this will be cold and dead.'

'Enough time for some stores then!' Jason joked.

Raza looked jokingly at her sleeve's time readout, 'Just.'

'I've been on truly doomed worlds kids,' Mark said, sitting by the campfire and popping a beer, 'some of them want to take you with them.'

'Tell us about it, Dad,' Jason prodded, 'you said you'd tell us about the war.'

Mark was certain for a second or two that he had better things to do, but then acquiesced as he couldn't actually think of any. 'Why not? Now where to start?'

He took a deep gulp of beer and a deeper breath, with the frown of someone who is going somewhere unpleasant.

'When the Zzagt attacked humanity we were nearly helpless. Sure, we had lots of technology, some of it powerful, but we hadn't fought a real war in 300 years, and had never battled in space. Most of us had never even experienced a real honest-to-god crisis! A two minute power loss was inter-space news, suddenly we're being attacked by unknown aliens!

'Fortunately they blasted a colony, and didn't know where Earth was! We needed time, time to weapon up, to toughen up, to get our heads out of the clouds and into helmets. Crecy 5 is a truly doomed planet, a barren and toxic hellhole! The only reason we were there was because the Zzagt were there too, and we wanted to learn to fight them in a place where it didn't matter if we lost. Crecy was to be our school, where graduation was survival. Anyway, I'll begin at the third battle of Acid Plains....'

**Crecy 5, 15 years earlier**

Captain Mark Stone woke up to pain and war on the surface of a dead and deadly planet. It was likely the sharp agony of his breathing that actually roused him, that or the shooting pain in his right leg. The deep throb in his right arm was pretty up there on the discomfort scale, but not really matching the first two.

'Medic!' He called out, his helmet quiet. There was no answering call, or hiss on the battle-net, or any readouts at all for that matter. The sound of his air recirculation system was absent too, his suit seemed completely dead. Movement without the armor's artificial muscles was clumsy and difficult, and he had to fight down rising panic.

He found his left hand below his chin and he snapped up his dead readout visor, squinting. Fortunately his eyes still worked, the top of the things that still did. He was facing down, how had he gotten there? Fuzzy and confused, he managed to recall the events he could remember. They'd been advancing, that was right, the first time since they landed on this hellhole. He'd been leading his brigade after the Major had taken a hit, missiles and unguided shells zooming overhead, whistling like furies. They'd taken the rise and seen the Zzagt mobile units retreating, their 5 legged vehicles spidering their way across the blasted landscape. He'd ordered his unit forward, to take the next rise, then plunged down the hill, laying suppressing fire as he went. He didn't know what had happened next, maybe it was a mine they hadn't detected, maybe it was a shell or a missile, whatever it was there was a blast and he'd remembered tumbling head over heels before everything had gone blank.

He managed to focus his eyes on his backup atmosphere readouts and they weren't promising, his oxygen was too low, his CO2 too high and the temperature inside his suit was getting way too warm. If he didn't get his suit going soon it was a race to see which he would die unpleasantly from.

It took him a few agonizing moments of shifting around to turn himself on his back so he could reach his suit's emergency controls, the glare of one of the twin suns making him squint. The emergency activation was placed on the outside of the suit for the reason that the person inside it was usually not fit to activate them when they were needed, but in his situation there was no buddy to do it for him and he'd have to manage it himself. He scrabbled for the t-pull, the pain in his ribs white-hot nails with every movement. His fingers managed to snag it a couple of times but he found he lacked the strength in his hand to grip it.

Fog was building up on his faceplate now, making it hard to see. He knew he had at most two minutes before he passed out and dying was not far behind. He fought the urge to snap up his faceplate, although the planet had an atmosphere it was thin enough his blood would boil and corrosive enough to take off a layer of skin in mere moments. He let out a pant of frustration, making another useless grab at the handle before falling back, breathing painfully. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the wreckage of a robotic resupply mule that had obviously taken a direct hit from something unfriendly. One of its tie-downs was loose and he found he could just reach it. Using his good leg and his good arm he somehow managed to struggle closer to the busted hulk, his eyes tearing up at the pain from every labored movement.

Feeling around on the ground his right hand found the loose rope, gripping the loop on the end and tried to wrap it around the t-shaped handle, only to have it slip out and flop back on the ground. Panting harder now, he felt again for the loop and somehow managed to get it again. Working deliberately and carefully, this time he did get the rope around the handle, stars starting to appear in his vision. His lungs were starting to burn, sensing too much carbon dioxide in the air, and he panted out the sweat

which had run into his mouth. His faceplate had long fogged up completely, and he was working entirely by feel.

When he was satisfied he had the rope secure he heaved himself onto his left side, rolling away from the wreckage, the rope (hopefully) pulling the T-handle and saving his life. The rope stretched a bit and he threw his right arm as far over as possible, then was rewarded for his monumental effort with the popping sound of his emergency systems coming on-line. The sound of the recirculation fans, usually annoying, now sounded like a sonata and the welcome cool from the peltier chillers gave almost immediate relief. Within seconds his O2 and CO2 levels were returning to normal, and he let out a bellow of victory. Rather, an attempt at a bellow which came out more of a raspy 'Yes!'

He found he also had power to his suit's mobility systems, or at least some of them. His right leg wouldn't move and his right arm wouldn't move much, so he crawled on his good arm and leg, looking for useful items in the wreckage of the mule, taking care not to get snagged. It was no good, he found, the unit must have been on its way back from a delivery when it got hit, or it had already been picked over because all he could scrounge was a spare fuel cell. Still, it would help power his suit for quite a bit longer if it was full. Weapons-wise he'd lost his rifle with its launcher and all he had was his sidearm. Fortunately he was left handed so he'd be able to draw and use it.

Scrounging a bent pole for a walking stick he finally managed to stand up. There was no sign of human or enemy, just the occasional bits of twisted metal and composites that were strewn across the battlefield like some sort of demented party decorations. He could see the occasional flash of ordinance and hear faint booms that were the best the thin atmosphere could sustain, and figured that was the advancing troops. He had no business there, not with a ruined suit and no comms, he'd either get killed or waste soldier's time that was better used.

Hating to walk out on a fight he nevertheless set out towards where he thought the rear was, the planet's weak magnetic field giving just enough of a reading on his compass to direct him. This meant climbing back up the hill he'd been thrown down in the explosion, a hill covered in loose scree, stone that had been corroded off by the planet's noxious wind. There didn't seem to be a better place to try to ascend, so he started a shuffling, stuttering scabble using his good arm and leg on one side and the pole on the other.

Sweating despite the suit's air conditioning and gritting his teeth with pain he had made it up about one third of the hill when the rock that was supporting his walking stick, weakened by the endless acidic gales it had been subjected to, cracked, and Mark tumbled down to the bottom of the hill on his rear.

It was just as well. Choice words died on Mark's lips as his hand reflexively pulled his pistol from its holster and blasted a Zzagt gnat hunter-killer unit a second before it reached him. If he'd still been climbing the hill it would have found him unprotected and he would have died then and there. He sat up and maneuvered himself so he was sitting up straight with his back against solid ground in a nearby dip. Where there was one roaming unit there would almost certainly be more, and they'd be attracted to the sound of one of their own's destruction. Mostly they were there for harassment, but enough of them could be deadly.

Ordinarily he would have run and cleared the area before others showed up, but in his state that was impossible, it would be better to make as good a defensive position as he could. Hopefully this would have been a lone unit or its buddies would be engaged elsewhere, if in a couple of minutes they didn't show he figured it would be safe to move.

He did his best to keep calm, but he nonetheless found his eyes darting in all directions and his pulse raced uncomfortably. Briefly closing his eyes he breathed deeply and slowly, lowering his heartbeat and letting the tension flow out of him.

Opening his eyes he let them relax and focus to infinity, looking in one place steadily instead of sweeping his gaze. Off to his left he detected a glint, then two, then more than he cared to count as they headed towards him. His hope that the one he shot had been a loner was misplaced, it indeed had support, and more than he was going to be able to stop with his one pistol.

'Come on then.' He found himself saying, finding himself remarkably calm in the face of what was almost certainly going to be his death. He found himself angry rather than afraid, if they were going to attack him then he was resolved to make them pay for it. It didn't matter that they were robots, they were Zzagt robots, and if he took them out then there's be a few less that could attack one of his buddies.

He found his hand almost caressing his pistol's grip in a light hold he'd never been able to produce before, and aiming it with a precision he couldn't have hoped to have found on the range. Almost without thought he squeezed the trigger while the enemy was still very far off and scored an immediate hit. Then he squeezed again and again, almost every shot finding its mark. He was taking them out with incredible precision and speed, but with every shot they were getting closer and even with his sudden genius with the weapon they would soon get to him. His lips pulled back in a snarl as a growl began deep in his throat, quickly becoming a scream of rage and determination.

His finger started pulling the trigger faster and faster, almost each shot finding its mark and blasting apart an enemy bot, fragments scattering as deadly little knives of their own. His pistol's low charge light went off, pulsing red against a sky filled with the glitter of destruction, and he prepared inside for the end.

Suddenly, with the remaining herd of bots all of 10 meters away a flurry of tiny missiles blasted them out of existence and Mark surveyed an empty battlefield. Shortly after that a pair of boots slammed down on the fractured ground in front of him. The boots were attached to a set of power armor, scratched and battered, but whole. Faded red crosses on barely visible white backgrounds were dotted around here and there, signifying that his butt had just been saved by a medic. A heavily armed medic, he could see.

The Zzagt had no understanding or care about the Geneva Convention or any of the human rules of war, medics were just as much a target as anyone else so there was no restrictions on them carrying weapons. Most carried light defensive weaponry, preferring to let the fighting be done by others while they looked into fixing soldiers up, some still carried no weapons at all, but this one in front of him was loaded for bear, and some of it was definitely not for defense, for instance the assault rifle with the 25mm ordinance launcher.

The medic was scanning the sky all around, visor down. He could tell the medic was talking from the way its head bobbed, but he couldn't hear anything. Mark tapped his hand to his ear in the universal radio out signal, which the medic seemed to understand, because the medic deployed an auto-turret and knelt beside him, plugging in a medical diagnosis unit into his suit before fiddling with things on the back of his head. Although as faded and scratched as the rest of it he could just make out the name Maxwell printed on it. After a moment his radio crackled to life.

'Can you hear me, Captain?' A voice said.

'Yes, yes, I can! It's crackly as hell but it'll do. Thanks a bunch, Maxwell!' He

blurted out, surprisingly glad at the sound of another human. The radio was tinny and the reception was terrible but to him it didn't need to be any clearer.

'Welcome. Call me Max, everyone else does.' Max responded, 'I'm checking your injuries, hold still a moment.'

Mark did so and Max ran a wand scanner down his injured leg and arm, while deploying a pair of baseball sized repair bots on his suit. The bots immediately started crawling around assessing and repairing his suit damage.

'Hurt much?' Max asked.

'Yeah, lots!'

'Here, this should take the edge off a bit.' Max applied a RX unit to his suit's hypo patch and there was a hiss. Mark felt a prickle in his arm and then an icy coolness coursed through his veins like a mountain river. The pain was still there but it had receded to a manageable level, Max hadn't given him enough to fog him up to the point he couldn't fight.

'One sec,' Max said, then suddenly turned and gunned down 2 gnats in an almost lazy spin move that ended up with the medic kneeling back over his leg, weapon holstered. 'Stragglers.'

'Nice shooting.' He complimented, 'Got a spare mag? I'm almost dry.'

Max handed him a unit wordlessly and he one handedly slammed it in before training his pistol out over the valley floor. 'I'll cover, you do medic stuff. Yo, fix its, get my scanners back up wouldya?'

'Acknowledged.' One of the bots said, and he could feel it crawl up on his shoulders.

After a minute Max stopped examining him and worked on a sl8, tapping out what Mark guessed was some sort of med plan. 'Your right arm has a bad sprain and your ligaments have been shredded,' the medic spoke without stopping, 'your leg is fractured in two places. Could be worse.' Working quickly, Max strapped med-packs onto his wounded arm and leg, then hauled him to his feet. 'Come on, we've got to move.'

As this was happening a six wheeled transport rolled down to the bottom of the hill, obviously summoned, and stopped next to them. 'Here, sit down and cover the back.' Max strapped him and plugged him into the transport's power system. Handing him an assault rifle with an under-slung launcher Max climbed into the driver's seat and said, 'Hang on, this is going to be a bit rough at times.'

The transport took off with a jerk before settling down to a steady pace. It had obviously seen better days and riding it he felt like he was being bounced buck naked over a gravel field but it beat walking. After a moment his scanner readout suddenly came back on-line, his heads-up display flashing to life. It was blessedly clear of anything nearby. 'Hey, my scanner's back up!' The bot had by then climbed back down to his arm and was working on repairing the suits musculature. 'Gaaa!' he said as an especially big jolt nearly cost him a kidney.

'Sorry,' Max said, 'it's all churned up around here. Whoops!'

The transport veered suddenly, 'Mine. Nasty, those.' Max informed.

'Yeah, I know first-hand. Hang on,' Mark said with sudden realization, 'where are we going?'

'To the front, where else?' Max responded.

'You're taking an injured person to the front?'

'You'll be mended in a couple of hours, and they're dug in up there. Besides, it's where the action is, they need me.' Max said.

Mark smiled, you had to appreciate someone who chose to go into danger when

they had a perfectly good reason to go the other way. 'I like your style, Max.'

Max said nothing, instead concentrating on not ending up in a ditch or running over a mine.

'Contact!' Mark shouted, 'Five o'clock, looks like a recon unit.'

'Not good, can you zap it?'

'Not close enough. How close are we to the front?'

'Just over 7 klicks.' Max said. 'Right! Let's lose it.'

The transport suddenly turned and ran down a gully, which widened out into a twisty gorge. Within seconds the enemy recon drone was out of sight.

'This will get us about halfway there, I just have to avoid the acid pools.' Max said.

'How did you find me?' Mark suddenly asked.

'I heard the shooting, and thought that anyone who was taking on a swarm of gnats with a pistol was probably in trouble.'

'You were certainly right about that.'

'Up high!' Max suddenly shouted. Mark saw the gnat swarm at the same time and already had his rifle pointed upwards at them. A couple of blasts and the swarm fell in pieces behind them.

'Lovely shooting,' Max said, skirting another pool of acid.

Suddenly Mark caught a glimpse of dull grey spheres on the ground back the way they had come. 'There's more coming up behind us, but not gnats. I think it's rollers!'

Rollers were something else entirely. Gnats were opportunistic destroyers which roamed the surface in quantity, low on both brains and brawn. Rollers were a bit smarter but a lot bigger with close in weapon systems which could shred even thick armor. They weren't too dangerous as long as you kept them far away.

'Got any mines?' He asked.

'I'm a doctor, not an arms dealer!'

'Great.' He would have to use what was available. An assault rifle with mini-missiles wasn't the ideal weapon to tackle rollers as they could move sideways extremely quickly, however they wouldn't have the ability to maneuver in the restrictive canyon, so Mark figured he could take them out if he picked his moments. He set up a moving map of the canyon in his heads-up display so he would know the upcoming curves.

They hit a straight section and he readied himself. His scanner couldn't return around corners so he would have to rely on enhanced vision as the sunlight didn't penetrate this far down. At the first sight of a roller he pulled the trigger and rapid pulses shot out. The narrow path gave the enemy robot no place to go and the particle beams tore a hole in its armor, causing it to skitter off to one side and explode. The wreckage caught another one, bouncing it up in the air and slamming it against the side wall, where it lay unmoving. He kept his finger on the trigger for few more seconds, scoring a few hits but not stopping the other five devices.

'Got two, five more!' He shouted. 'Step on it, give me more time!'

'I'll try!' Max responded, and the transport seemed to move a bit faster, taking a curve to the right fast enough that a couple of wheels left the ground.

After a snaking few turns the path straightened again for a few hundred meters, and Maxwell twisted the throttle into emergency speed. With a whine the vehicle shot forward, wheels skidding a bit here and there on loose gravel before the traction control could kick in.

Mark kept the rifle trained on the entrance to the section of canyon they were in. He had three missiles in his magazine and each one had to count. Timing was going to be

the key, if he could shoot at the right time he'd catch a roller just as it came out of the slalom and it wouldn't be able to dodge. As they shot down the canyon at breakneck speed his nerves sang out to shoot shoot shoot, but he waited until his instincts told him the moment had arrived before loosing a missile out of the rifle's launcher.

For a second he thought he fired too early but then thought he shot too late as the rollers suddenly came into view. The missile was too late for the first one but it locked onto the second and hammered into it, blasting it into bite-sized fragments. Unfortunately the three behind it and the one ahead were unscathed.

'Got one, four more!' He updated Max. 'Keep it maxed, Max!'

The next curve was more of a dogleg than a real curve, and led to a much wider chamber, he took a quick glance and saw they were skirting dangerously close to a large pond of sulfuric acid, evil looking wisps rising from the surface. Suddenly he had a brain-wave and scanned the walls, looking for a large, loose looking section of cliff-face.

After a moment he found what he was looking for, a big, weathered-looking outcrop of stone that looked like it was hanging by a thread, positioned right over what looked like the deepest part of the deadly pool. Aiming his rifle he locked a missile on what looked to him to be the weakest part of the stone attaching it, and fired.

The missile hit it directly where he'd intended and chunks of stone ripped free, splashing into the pool below but the outcrop didn't seem to budge. Mark blasted it with his rifle, desperately aiming at the same point. The rollers came into view, but he kept his fire on the cliff rather than switching.

'Come on, break!' Mark shouted, 'Please, from one Stone to another!'

As if the stone heard him he suddenly heard a crack through the thin atmosphere as the outcrop broke loose and plummeted down into the acidic pond below. It fell a bit slower in the .8 Earth gravity but still made a very satisfying splash which bathed the trailing three rollers in caustic fluid. They instantly started to smoke and deform, their battle obviously over. The front roller sped on towards them.

'Whoo-hoo! Splash three! One left and it's still gaining!' Mark roared as a curve cut off his view of the last remaining enemy robot. He scanned the map looking for opportunities to catch the last one, but they were running out of canyon and opportunities to squeeze it. 'Hey, when we hit open ground do a sharp right and stop. We'll take it down from behind.'

'Right!' Max shouted back.

This was a gamble, but he figured it was a good one. They couldn't outrun it, the fast robot could run rings around them, and get close enough to use its weapons. If they hugged the wall it might not see them until it was too late to turn. They'd have to be real quick and extremely accurate for this to work.

Max navigated the cart through a turn and then floored it down the straight shot to the canyon exit and the plain beyond, reaching the end the medic slammed on the brakes and skidded around the corner, hiding behind an small outcrop to give them better cover. Mark trained his rifle on the spot where the roller would emerge, and Max swung around, weapon in hand and trained to the same spot.

'Steady, steady.' Mark said.

No movement was visible in the plain, and besides a puff of wind it was utter silence. The sky was a stark black, with a band of hazy pink on the horizon, savagely beautiful.

'It's coming, you hear?' Max whispered.

Mark could indeed hear the very faint humming, whining sound of the roller as it sped down the canyon, louder and louder as it got closer.



'Steady.' Mark leaned into his rifle.

As the roller came into view it was obvious that the whining sound was due to a massive malfunction as the back half of the robot was melted away and smoke was coming out. As they watched incredulously it went out of control for a bit and one of the sides fell off.

Mark and Max shared a laugh, the tension easing for a moment.

'Let's get outta here, huh?' Mark said.

'Yes, by all means!' Max swiveled back around and seconds later they took off across the smooth plain, a rooster-tail of loose rock being kicked up behind them. It was now a straight shot to the next ridge where the forces were dug in, but Mark knew that their trouble was far from over as they would have to dodge enemy units and cross the Teflon Sea. The unique chemistry of the area had combined to form a completely smooth, glassy surface that was almost completely frictionless and strong as steel. Wheeled and tracked vehicles would get no grip on it, and no treads would be able to cut into it either. It was also impossible to walk on, even with auto-balanced armor suits and the grace of a dancer. Getting across that meant you either flew, or used thrusters to steady yourself and keep up your speed against the thin air resistance. They had a kilometer of good old-fashioned rocky ground to traverse before they got the edge of the plain, then just over 2 kilometers of slick, then another half of a klick to safety.

'We're going to have to get across the Teflon Sea, how's your thruster fuel?' Max shouted back to him.

Mark checked his readout, '1.4 kilograms. You?'

'About the same. It should do. What's that?'

Mark was already viewing the object of Max's attention through his rifle's scope. 'More rollers, must've come through the canyon after us after the last batch. I count about fifteen ... no, twenty of the things.'

'Bloody hell, we are popular today! I'd better get us on the glass, quickly! I don't expect they'll follow us on there. I'd rather have picked a better crossing point...' Max responded.

'What's wrong with this one?' Mark queried.

'This spot is exceptionally rough.'

Max's word was exceptionally true, the pounding through the overworked suspension was severe, almost rattling off one of the repair bots, and he worried about whether the machine would make it. Aiming and shooting was going to be next to impossible with this ride, so he just hunkered down and endured. After a moment or two the juddering subsided, and he was able to aim and keep an eye on their latest company.

The rollers had been slowed down a bit by the roughness of the terrain, but were still gaining on them at an alarming rate. They were going to make it to the plain before them, though, and the rollers, if they followed, would be utterly helpless.

'Coming up to the plain's edge in 5 seconds!' Max informed him, and then shortly after they were on it and immediately skidding. Most of the rollers skidded to a halt at the edge, but two didn't slow down on time and slid off in useless directions, out of the fight for good. One unit, instead of slowing down sped up directly toward them and jumped the last meter or so onto the smooth surface. This one got the angle right and was coming straight towards them, and they couldn't do much to get out of its way.

'Max, we have a problem!'

Max looked around from the front, busy using suit thrusters to keep them straight, 'Persistent, aren't they? It doesn't look like it can aim very well though.'

This observation was certainly true, the enemy machine had matched their direction exactly, but was unable to aim its weapons as it required contact with solid ground to function. It was at this point spinning around, but Mark could tell that at some point its guns would spin past the exact point to blast them to pieces.

It was time to take it out before it had that chance. He swung his weapon around

to aim at the marauding robot and then discovered another drawback to driving on a frictionless surface – the movement of his arms caused the opposite movement in the cart, which slew to the left, and he couldn't get his rifle around far enough to target the roller. He quickly reversed his movement and the cart righted, but he was no closer to blasting the thing. It was going to have to be a team effort.

Before he could speak the sky lit up, weaponry from both sides crossing overhead, some to attack and others to attack the attackers. Someone from their side must have seen them and were laying down some cover. Flashes of light were accompanied by blasts and thuds of explosives, making it hard to see, hear and put one thought against another. In the few seconds the roller had gotten closer, it's momentum bringing them inevitably into contact.

'Max!' Mark shouted against the cacophony, 'I can't get a bead on it! It's the torque, it's spinning the cart around! You've got to thrust us to the right so I can shoot the thing!'

'Understood! Here goes,' Max replied, then tapped left suit thruster. The cart started to swing around, but so slowly their enemy would reach them before he could get his weapon on it. 'More Max! Give it some juice!' He encouraged.

Max obliged, giving a good burst, and the vehicle swung around alarmingly fast. Mark tried to get a shot in and scored a few hits, but the spin took them around too quickly for him to really zero in.

'Whoa, too much!' Max said, 'Let me slow it up.'

As the cart spun around this time the medic applied a burst of right thruster, too much again as the rotation went the other way.

'RRRRRR!' Max growled in frustration, hitting short blips on the left to get it moving in the right direction.

'Hurry Max!' Mark yelled, the roller was going to be in range in moments.

'Less haste, more speed, less haste more speed.' Max was mumbling over and over, struggling to get the cart into position.

Mark would have argued that a combination of both haste **and** speed would have worked just great right then, but didn't want to cause a distraction, so he hit the comment back and watched the roller slide uncomfortably close to its kill range.

Finally, Max got the combination of thrusters right and the cart spun and stabilized where Mark could get it in his sights. He promptly did just that and with a long, sustained burst chewed the roller into pieces seconds before it would have done the same to them.

Mark just panted for a second, fighting exhaustion from the injuries and the pain. 'Nice driving Max.'

'We'll see in a minute.' Max said, barely audible over the sound of the battle raging around them.

It took Mark a few moments to figure that one out, then realized that they were skidding sideways across a frictionless surface that was not going to stay that way much longer, if they didn't get pointed the right way again their ride was going to come to a swift and very uncomfortable end.

Max was using suit thrusters again, trying to get the cart oriented in their direction of travel, but was obviously having problems.

'I'm dry!' the medic exclaimed, 'I used up all my thruster fuel, we'll need to use yours!'

'Here, take my can!' Mark responded, reaching for his fuel cylinder.

'No time! Point your legs in a V, one to the left and one to the right, blip which one

I tell you to.'

'Understood!' Mark said, and complied. 'Ready!'

'Left!' Max shouted, and Mark blipped his left leg thruster, skewing the cart farther in the wrong direction.

'Gaaa! It's backwards! Right! Right again! Right Right Right!'

Mark blipped his right thruster, twice, then just gave it a good burst, swinging the cart around fast.

'Leeeeeft! Left Left!' Max shouted. 'Now right, good.'

Mark spared a glance at the map, the edge of the plain was not on it, but it had to be coming up soon. This guess was confirmed when Max suddenly throttled up so they would hit more normal ground running.

'Coming up to the edge. We're off center! Left!' Max ordered. 'Left! Now Right! We're still off a bit, hang on!'

Mark clipped his rifle into his harness and put a hand on his two repair bots, then clenched his teeth.

Their cart hit slightly off center to the left, causing the vehicle to skew around. Max compensated, then overcompensated as the cart's wheels lifted into the air on one side then the other, before slamming back down on the rock.

'Whoo-hoo!' Max shouted gleefully. 'That was awesome!'

They were getting close enough to their own lines now that their radios could overpower the jamming and send recognition signals. Mark's map suddenly got an update showing the position of the entry points, essentially tunnels into the ridge.

'Max, there's an entry almost right ahead! Go for it!'

'I see it! 300 meters!' Max responded.

Overhead a Zzagt smart shell had gotten through the defense net and was homing in on them, a friendly micro-ball managed to knock it off course, and it slammed into the ground in front of them instead, blowing a crater 10 meters wide and sending pulverized rock in all directions.

Max's reactions were fast but the medic couldn't possibly stop the cart in time. The transport went sideways and smashed into the bottom of the crater, grinding to a stop.

It was Marks's second time to pick himself up after an explosion that day and he felt he was getting the hang of it as he unstrapped himself in record time and stumbled up to the driver's seat. Max had obviously taken more of an impact but the medic was moving so he hit the harness release and levered the smaller figure up.

'We've gotta move, c'mon!'

'Wait, wait!' Max said, and grabbed a backpack with important looking symbols on it and a rifle. 'Okay, sprint it!'

Max did a good impression of someone who'd been just hit in the head trying to run, and Mark did a good impression of someone whose suit was too damaged to even try, although the bots had brought some mobility back. The pair made quite a sight, shuffling and tripping along the last 200 meters or so towards friendly territory.

When they were 50 yards short Mark's map suddenly flashed a warning, this one accompanied by a harsh shrill for attention. If his pulse hadn't already been at full it would have shot up.

'Hornets! Closing fast! Go Go Go!' Mark shouted and they both moved a bit faster, Max helping him along. Launchers boomed and plasma cannons made their coughing gerk noises. Hornets were nasty flying robots which made the Gnats cute pets in comparison. You could shoot down gnats with small arms, but Hornets were armored

and extremely maneuverable. Some of the hornets disappeared off his screen, wiped out by the outgoing defensive fire, but there were many more, and it was going to be close.

Mark foresaw a complication. They were going to enter the fortifications in an outer airlock, it would take them a minute to cycle through during which the hornets would come up the tunnel and blast the door, killing them and possibly entering the base. However, he had a plan.

'Max, run ahead and get the door open, be ready to close it as soon as I'm through. Go!' Max saw the wisdom in this and sprinted ahead, suited hands grappling for the airlock controls. Mark did his hobbling run as fast as he could, the pain from his wounded leg and arm getting past the painkillers. As he gained the entrance to the tunnel the hornets were seconds behind him and he saw the lock swung open towards them and Max shot in, ready to shut it the instant he went by.

Instead of running straight for it he extracted the final missile from his rifle's launcher, hit a button on the side and jammed it between one of the tunnel supports and the roof. He then moved at maximum shuffle, throwing himself through shouting 'Fire in the hole!'

Max had the door closing before he was even in, as soon as he heard the clang Mark hit a recessed red button on the side of his launcher and the room vibrated with an enormous explosion, followed by the rumbling sound of a cave-in. Any hornets that had gotten into the tunnel were either destroyed by the explosion or crushed by tons of solid rock, and the ones outside turned and ran out of range, many being picked off as they went.

Mark rolled on his side, the transparisteel door showing a solid mass of collapsed tunnel rock outside. They were as safe as they were going to be. Max was manipulating the airlock controls, and there was a hiss as the system first injected an acid neutralizing spray, then a water spray to decontaminate them before pumping in a breathable atmosphere. While it did so Max sunk down on one side of the airlock door and Mark shuffled to the other, panting.

A tone and green light flashed, telling them that the air was breathable and both gratefully took off their helmets. Mark looked over at his companion and found himself looking at the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Her short, dark hair was matted and crusted with who knows what, and she had a nasty bruise on her cheek from a blow that had broken the skin, no doubt the result of the recent crash. Somehow beyond all that she was somehow radiant to him, and Mark knew was that this was someone special.

'That was close.' Max said in a luxurious English accent. Mark's radio had been so bad he hadn't known whether he was talking to a man, woman or robot, but now that he heard her voice he could have swam in it.

'Yeah.' Mark responded, suddenly having no idea what to do or say, so he simply stuck out his hand and said 'Mark Stone.'

'Carol Maxwell.' She said, taking his hand in a firm grip. 'Nice to meet you.'

'Carol, will you marry me?' Mark blurted out.

She took a moment to consider this, obviously taken aback. 'Can you cook?' She finally asked.

'Uh, actually yeah. Why, you can't?'

'No, I'm just too lazy.'

The airlock filled with the sound of easy laughter.

**Seftin**

'Anyway, so that's how I met your mother.'

'So you asked her to marry you right there?' Jason asked, incredulous. 'I mean, don't you normally get to know someone first?'

'I thought I had,' his father explained. 'In the middle of a war you don't waste time. Anyway, she didn't say yes right then.'

'I'm glad she did though,' Raza said.

'Me too, kiddo,' Mark said earnestly, 'Me too.'

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