



ENVIRONMENTAL SUIT

A Memoir of the Future.

Humping, that's what they call it. Dragging everything you need to fight a war right along with you. Humping, I guess it shorter to say than 'march or die.' But it all adds up to the same thing. It's a nightmare. A nightmare in space.

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I hate this planet. The weather is crap and it is always trying to kill you.

Every war movie I ever saw, every space opera, showed people heroically fighting their enemies in a breathable atmosphere. And there were lasers, Where the hell are the fancy energy weapons of fiction? Okay, I'm shooting a rail gun because it doesn't require any oxygen to fire. I guess it's an advance in technology, but high-tech laser it's not. In the end, I still throwing around a lead slug, little different than my ancestors in the Civil War. War may be hell, but it's a nightmare version of hell.

The real nightmare is the environmental suit. You need it to breathe. Not to mention the fact the nighttime temperature is -120 Fahrenheit and, in the daytime, it's 260 plus. You can't help but sweat in the suit. Day or night doesn't matter. It's like carrying around your own swamp. It's constantly sticky and moist. You slosh when you walk. When the war started, I couldn't even begin to imagine what I was going to be living through.

Everyone ran to volunteer for this thing. I was one of them. You know, save the planet, fight for humanity. There hasn't been a cause this good since Pearl Harbor. No one ever mentioned the fact you would have to breathe air you could taste. I also think I'm about an inch shorter from lugging around the ARM-47 oxygen backpack. When you wear a suit this long it feels like an extension of yourself. An outer skin. It's almost like you can feel the grimy, acid-laden atmosphere on your flesh. Then again, every 200 hours, I have to change all the rubber seals on the suit.

One of the problems with the suit results from you getting an itch. Once they manifest, they quietly grow from mildly annoying to broadly insane. It's nothing like an itch you get when you go skiing. You don't have to worry about frostbite while you have your glove off, because the acid in the air will cause your hand to fall off. If it's night, at least you don't have to worry about bleeding. Your entire body will freeze in an instant.

You can't stay down here long. They need to rotate us up regularly to the orbital dropships, or things start to happen. Like the time Jackson took off his helmet to scratch his nose. At least I think it was Jackson. It's what the name the dog tag said. Still, I'm not sure what I detest more, being imprisoned in the suit or being crammed into the dropships like sardines in a can.

There are these critters running around on the surface. They remind me of crabs back home. Only these crabs have twenty legs. Lou Spencer, our heavy weapons guy, loves to hear them squish under his feet. I'm still amazed these things can live in this environment. My guess is they get all their oxygen through the foods they eat. They are constantly digging up things. This includes all the mines we plant around the parameter. The only satisfaction we get is when one of them tries to eat the charges and they set them off.

They are not the only things running around underground on this planet. The whole upper plateau is catacombed with lava tubes. Both sides use them to get around without being seen. What this really means is there are no lines on this planet. No rear areas. We don't know where they are, and they don't always know where to find us. But they could turn up at any moment. They do, however, have a 96-hour sleeping cycle. This gives us a break every 64 hours. If they ever learn how to work in shifts, we are screwed.

Molahlehi Letlotlo, who hailed from western Kenya, used to like to paint targets with nail polish on the local rocks and then shoot them until they exploded. I have no idea where he got the nail polish. You don't tend to keep personal items around. After all, if you kept a photo, you couldn't look at it. If you did, the chemicals would melt off the photo paper. This is just before the paper bursts into flame. Even something as simple as a comb is pointless. What are you going to do, take off your helmet to comb down your cowlick?

For Mol, joining up was a great way for him to advance from dirt poor to middle-class. One week of his military pay was worth more than what he earned in an entire year. He's our unit's COMM guy because he speaks the most languages in the group. Language is a constant problem. We almost opened up on a group of what we thought were aliens, but they turned out to be from Mongolia. From the way they were jabbering, who could tell.

At first, it's hard to feel a real animosity for the other side. We call them Slimes. This isn't their environment either, so they are trapped in similar suits. I hope their itches are driving them crazy. It's odd to see them reacting in the same way we react. Ducking behind rocks and outcrops when the shooting starts. It gives you an odd sense of connection. It makes you want to shoot them in the head so that they don't feel anything. Of course, this assumes you can even tell where their heads are, or even if they have one, or two, or perhaps three.

I only wish they felt the same way about us. There's been some debate about them having any feelings at all. This argument seems to be full of hogwash. I mean, these things are real nasty pieces of work. You need a full-blown sense of hatred to do some of the things they've done. There is no other explanation for it. This is a war where there are no wounded. If you get hit, they send you home in a body bag. Still, when we recover one of us who's been cut off, we find them in pieces. Sometimes, it's nothing more than a smudge on the ground. It gives the concept of overkill a whole new meaning.

Jason Melville found one of the aliens. They were already dead. He strapped about twelve claymores to the body and pressed the detonation circuit. I asked him afterward if he found it satisfying.

"No."

"No?"

"You can only do it once," he remarked.

The one thing I can tell you about this war is no one goes AWOL. Now, don't get me wrong, it's not because no one wants to leave. It's simply because this is the first war in human history where there is simply no place to run. Your choices are doing the job or commit suicide. I can't even begin to tell you how high the suicide rate is at the moment. Currently, it's the number two cause of KIAs. Thinking about this, while sloshing around in my suit with half a dozen itches, none of which I can possibly scratch, and I'm wondering... why the hell isn't it number one?

I have the honor of commanding the fourth section. Although, honor is a relative term. What I really have is the responsibility for writing the letters home. When I figure out how to write someone's parents and tell them their son couldn't take it anymore and blew his own brains out, I'll let you know. It's one of the things which ruins my time off this rock. Perhaps no one else in the platoon is so desperate to remain behind when we are lifted off. If I didn't have to do it to change suits and to get

fresh oxygen, I don't think they'd be able to convince me to leave. I'd have to be ordered off. And even then, I would probably have to think about it twice.

In general, my tenure in command has not been one of the highlights of my life. I stood there and watched as Mark Harrison took one right in the head. I'd just ordered him to take point in one of our lava-tunnel patrols. In my defense, it was his turn. Usually, nothing happens during these patrols. You spend your time humping down one tunnel and then turning on to the next. There are thousands of miles of the damn things, so your odds are pretty good. Still, you spend the whole time on edge, thinking every sound is the enemy. And, of course, inside the suit, you can't smell them, you can only hear loud noises. The result being they can sneak up on you and you'd never know... until it was too late.

I remember Mark seemed so calm on the day. He shrugged his shoulders and moved to the front of our column. I heard the shot though. Looking right at his face, I'm fairly sure he didn't hear a thing. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe he just wanted to screw with me. A sort of, *hey look, you just got me killed* moment. I remember him standing there. He didn't fall over like they do in the movies. He didn't even crumble to his knees. It was nighttime, so the temperature was mind-numbingly cold. His body froze instantly. So, he simply stood there staring back at me. I still remember the look on his face. The dead, staring look which drilled right through you. In fact, I can't get it out of my mind.

The worst thing about the whole affair is I felt so good afterward. There is a sort of odd joy in realizing someone else bought it and you didn't. Then you get hit with this wave of guilt. You start to wonder what kind of a monster you are. Who could be happy someone else is dead? Then comes the realization it all has to do with the fact you are constantly afraid. I mean all the time. It's a hidden fear, an undercover terror. You can't admit it to yourself, but you know it's there. Then, when you see someone else get killed, it's a moment of relief from constantly being afraid. Look, you say to yourself, I don't have to be afraid. Death isn't after me. It's not haunting my every step. Death wanted someone else. It wasn't after me all along.

Then I realize, I've got to write the letter. Those good feelings you are living flow out of you like water out of an upside-down glass. You can feel the happiness leaving you. It's like a little death. Now you are thinking, *you lucky bastard. You're dead.* You don't have to write any stinking letters to the relatives, the girlfriend, the grieving widow. *You lucky bastard. I wish I was you.*

I miss eating. It's the one thing I do for myself when I get back on the ship. There is no eating in the suit, no drinking. I've never gotten used to the irony. You're walking around, up to your knees in slimy water and there is nothing to drink. Your mouth feels like it is in the desert, while your feet are wading in a fetid swamp. You can fight in the suit, only you can't take care of yourself. You miss the simple pleasures of eating and drinking. The simple maintenance of life. I've read about past wars where you drowned your troubles in alcohol. But not out here. Here it's binge eating. Our parties are like raves with food. Sometimes, eating until you vomit. You wouldn't think you miss hurling, but you do. You can't do that in your suit either.

You learn to feel ambivalence toward your suit. On the one hand, it's a brilliant piece of art. It's not anything at all like the white, clean spacesuits of your average space opera. The whole thing has a rough texture to it. The surface doesn't even seem like a cloth. It doesn't have one color, it matches. Whatever your surroundings look like, your suit becomes the same color. The only time it's white is on board ship.

When the color bleeds out. First to gray and then to a dull finish. By the time you hang it up, the surface has gone to an eggshell kind of grime. At the same time, it's your prison. You exist inside it and only inside it. In many ways, it's like a medieval torture device, the iron maiden, only without the spikes. Yet, some days, the spikes would feel more comfortable.

This planet has a strange beauty to it as well. When I first heard we'd be going there, I heard about the constant need for environmental suits. My first thought was a barren, lifeless world, devoid of anything to give the landscape any character. I had visions of the surface of Venus. It made you wonder why we were fighting over it. Everyone always feels the same at first. What are we doing here? Why not just let the bastard Slimes have this world. It doesn't seem like it's worth a drop of anyone's blood. It seems like a perfect piece of revenge. It's a hot potato filled with poison. Here, you take it. Bye now.

But there is a strange imposing beauty here. It's almost mesmerizing. I never imagined trees on this world, but what trees. Tall, majestic. They are like no national park you have ever seen. Each tree has only a single leaf. It grows wider as the tree grows up. Branches spirt out from the trunk to support the leaf's growing edges. The bigger ones reminded me of a giant open umbrella. It spreads out over you like a canopy. In the hot daylight, their shade is like breathing real, unfiltered air.

Our rail guns fire sabots. It's a bit like firing a shotgun only using grapeshot instead of pellets. Mostly because our scientists could never figure out where the critical organs were in the Slimes. You could pump regular bullets into one of them and not notice any effect. You had to hit them with basic overkill. Our grapeshot is even HE rounds. After they struck you, they'd explode. Harry Zegan used to like to cut the trees down by shooting rounds into the trunks. You see, he had this theory, the alien Slime's were tree lovers. It was his plan to cut all of them down. He kept telling us it would make them leave. Harry would fire off round after round into the base of a tree. The explosions would blow off tiny, wet, mushy chunks of the tree until it finally fell over. The leaf always shook when a round hit the tree. You could see the ripple effect. Then it would rip like a sail in the thunderstorm on the way down.

The trees also acted as a rough antenna. When you sat under them you could occasionally get some of the Slime transmissions. Sometimes the transmitter was almost close enough to see. Other times, they'd be miles away. They had an odd chirping and clicking tone to their language. No one at home knew how to translate it. This is what made the transmissions so odd. If you listened long enough, I mean really listened, they started to sound like real words. It sounds crazy and impossible to believe. You've got to be out there, under one of the trees to truly understand. It can't adequately be explained to someone else. It has to be experienced.

Battalion used to send us out on listening missions, where we did nothing but sit under those trees. Sit and listen. Two or three outposts would try to triangulate directions from the broadcast to pinpoint where they were. So, you just had to sit there and listen. Harry hated those missions. If you ask me, it was the real reason why he kept blasting trees to bits. Can't be assigned to listen under the trees when they aren't any trees.

It's spooky, listening. Half the time we'd go up there and simply turn the radio off so we couldn't hear it. Sooner or later command sends someone down to read you the riot act.

I'll admit I prefer a straight-up fight myself. Sometimes they'd sneak up to us and a firefight would breakout. All hell would break loose. Explosions everywhere. Artillery going off. Screaming. Did I

mention this already? They scream just like us. We have this in common with the Slimes, the screams. When you hear a scream over the speaker, you don't know if it is them or us. What identifies us is the obscenities. In combat, you wind up saying them. It doesn't matter what your upbringing was or if your parents ever swore. You swore like a sailor under fire. It's natural.

Most of the language tended to be derogatory terms for women. The real ugly stuff. The kind of thing that would get you a huge slap if you were on a date. Terms you not only didn't want your mother to hear you say but phrases you hope your mother couldn't even imagine you even knew. This is how we met Ludmilla.

We were returning fire from a group of the Slimes who had jumped us on the trail. The fire was hot and heavy. The language over the COMMs started going in the usual direction. Then we heard this big booming voice. It sounded like the drumbeats of one of those huge eastern drums. "You boys, you western boys," Ludmilla would joke, "You have no idea what you are talking about. You have no more of an idea about what it feels like to slip between two luscious thighs, then you know about sucking on your own mother's tit."

At first, the chatter went silent. It was one thing to say such crap in the locker room, by it was another thing to do it in public. "Pussies," Ludmilla spat back into the mike. It didn't take long for the chatter to come back with some zingers. She really kicked the conversation up another notch. As the swearing intensified, so did the fire. Or maybe it was the other way around. We threw so much ordinance out in their direction, we couldn't believe there were enough of them left to throw the volume back we were catching. It didn't seem to let up for a moment.

"Let's get to it. I thought you western boys were good at killing. Don't you boys know how to murder?"

It's not murder, you tell yourself, it's survival.

It ended as almost all these things do. First, the crescendo of loud and violent explosions which make you think your eardrums are about to burst, and then silence. When the echo stops in your helmet, you look around at the desolation. It takes a moment to realize you are out there all alone. The enemy has pulled out. You look down at your belt pouch and you realize you are empty. You got nothing left. It's almost as if both sides simply ran out of ammo.

We never got met Ludmilla, or even see her. No one ever found the body.

After the fight, we counted the Slime bodies.

Mu-Mu used to like to play music when we did this. Not your funeral dirge, but some African ballad from Angola about the land of the dead. A sort of welcome to the next world theme song. I never learned if he was playing it for us or them. He bought it a few days back, so today we did our count in silence.

They got three more of us, beside Ludmilla, and we got nine of them. We counted it as a good day. Although none of us know how many of them there are in the first place. Are they overburdened with population and won't even miss nine individuals, or did we just wipe out an entire town?

They don't look like us. For all I know, it the only cause for this war. We tend not to like things that don't look like us. Maybe they are the same. We certainly don't look like them. They are odd-looking

creatures; I'll give them that. No obvious head, eyes, ears, or even any discernable internal organs. It may be the only good thing about wearing the suit. I don't have to smell the damn things.

I hope their suits feel worse than ours. They are incredibly thin and unbelievably rubbery. But they also have no zipper and no buttons or snaps. I have no idea how they get into them. If there is any justice in the universe, they are poured over them hot and they can't get out of them until they are dead. I must admit, I hope this is not the case. I'd hate to think our killing them is a release.

I remember the first one I killed. I came across it in a narrow ravine. It was moving along and didn't seem to notice me. They have these long weapons which shoot missiles like the points of a long spear. Nasty things, I can tell you, but they take some time to load. This one was dragging it behind him. The Slime was either tired or it didn't care. I only vaguely remember what happened next. I wasn't thinking, I was acting on impulse. There is no memory in my mind of me raising the gun, but I must have. Blind fear can do this to you.

You wonder if they feel the same way. Was it afraid of me when it saw I was standing there? Maybe it sensed me, I don't know, the damn things don't have eyes. It might have been my imagination, but it seemed to turn in my direction. It could have simply been walking. They have this funny way to get around, half sloshing, half waddling. In some ways, it works exactly like you'd imagine a blob of jelly to work. But, I'm not sure if it noticed me. It didn't run, I can tell you.

The way some people tell it, they don't want to kill the Slimes, they just want them to go away. I can tell you, without reservation, I learned to want them dead. They seem to have no trouble killing us. They didn't think for a minute about Bob, Louis, Xian Bao, Giovanni, Biff, Lucas, or Kozar Aleskeevich. He wouldn't have blinked a piece of protoplasm if the situation had been reversed.

There he was walking down the trail. In the back of my mind, I struggled with the idea, and it had only now struck me, it might be a female. I have no idea if these things even had sexes. Maybe, they simply grew until they were too big and then split into two puddles of slime. Maybe it's a kid. On his planet, do they wait until you are a certain age before they go running off to kill us? Or, is he like some 14-year-old tribal boy with an AK-47? I didn't take the time to sort it all out.

I don't even recall pressing the trigger. One minute it was walking along, not paying attention, the next minute my weapon was discharging. At this range, I couldn't miss it. All six balls smashed into the creature, right through his suit. Breaching the suit doesn't kill these creatures right off, they can last for a while. A second later I heard the dull thud of the HE going off inside it.

The last ball must have been near the surface. Protoplasm sprayed all over the ground. The thing rocked and swayed back and forth. Finally, it didn't exactly fall, it sort of spread out flat, like a gummy bear melting in an oven. I walked over to it and watched as it finished spreading out on the ground. Just to one side, I spotted a flower. It was the first flower I'd seen on this stinking world and there it was. There had been plenty of the umbrella trees, but this was the first time I'd seen a flower. Tiny, it had a ball-shaped petal at the end. The beautiful red petal was so heavy it made the stem bend over. It was so tiny I might have missed it. Except there it was, growing right next to my first kill.

There is nothing left to bring back, it's all a pasty goo. The new attached MI guy kept asking us to bring back a body for them to study. They repeated it over and over like a mantra. Finally, one of them came

out with us to bring one back on his own. A nice specimen for the lab table. We killed twenty of them, before nightfall. Of course, he went back empty-handed. But at least he stopped asking us.

I have no idea what happens when they die. For all I know, I've just made a story. They could wind up telling tales of this Slime for eons. His brave heroic fight on a nameless planet orbiting a tiny red dwarf star. They don't have dog tags as we do. I hate having to collect these stupid slivers of metal. In the end, we don't get heroic stories or heartwarming songs sung about us. We get to be a number. The long number forever joined with our names on a stupid piece of metal. If we are very, very lucky we might get our names on a list in our hometown papers. The names of the ones who won't be coming back. Those who fell, leaving only a strip of metal behind on a world no one could live on.

None of it mattered though. He was dead and I wasn't. End of story. I reloaded my weapon. This action was automatic as well. I don't remember doing it. It was simply the next time I looked down, there it was, loaded and ready to go. Ready for my next kill. Sometimes I think about this. How I can do all this without even considering what it means. The quiet times, when I'm sitting all by myself on the dropship, waiting for my suit to come back from cleaning. Sometimes I'm sure I did the right thing, sometimes I think I'm an asshole. *Screw it, I tell myself, they need to be dead.*

At night though, when I'm dreaming, I see more of them. This time they don't hesitate, they see me first. I watch helplessly as I see the Slime bring his weapon up. I can hear the stupid pop sound they make, like an underwater spear-gun going off. I stand there, I don't even move. I can feel the thing tear through my chest. It's ice cold. Might as well be an ice sickle. The pain spreads across my body, reaching for my head like it's a burst of lightning flowing through my frame. Before I even realize it, I can see my dad looking down at me. "You stupid asshole," he grumbles. I never know what is worse the embarrassment of failure or being dead. It seems like a toss-up to me. But I never learn the answer, because this is when I always wake up.

"You coming?" Harry called out. "It's time to move. We need to get going. They want us down in Tunnel 93."

"Yeah," I replied, "The last thing I need is for some embedded journalist to come along and ask what it feels like to kill one of the Slimes."

"Best not to think about it," Harry suggested.

"Think about what?" I answered. "I've already forgotten it. What the hell are we doing out here anyway?"

"Dammed if I know," Harry replied. "Dammed if any of us know."

Jason Melville joined us. "I hear you get a prize if you kill one."

"What?" Harry asked. "Do you get rotated out of here?"

"No, you get an extra ration PX card on the ship."

They took us back up to the dropship a few hours afterward. I remember it was only a few hours later because my hands were still shaking. We'd been in a firefight, so there had to be a debrief with battalion. They were still trying to learn everything they could about the enemy. We were sitting on a

bunch of makeshift chairs made from boxes in a cargo bay, suits half off. We looked like hell. In walks a major, uniform pressed, buttons shiny. The whole squad jumped to attention, our trousers half-way down our legs. At first, I took an instant disliking to him. His uniform was clean and dry. There was a shine to his boots. He was even wearing all his ribbons. What a prick. Then I started focusing on the hardware, a real Full Monty. The slang term for when you have them all. At the top was the Combat Infantryman's badge. I instantly mellowed. This man had been in the shit. He knew what it was like to stand where I stood.

"At ease," his voice was commanding, calming and laid back all at the same time. We relaxed, but only a little bit. The clean uniform was still putting everyone off. I'd gone back to taking off my trousers when I caught the one noticeable ribbon out of the corner of my eye. You almost never see one of these up here. I heard there were a few people who had earned them, but this was the first person I met who was wearing one. I think I stared for a minute. It's no shame for me to admit there was a little awe. It's a simple ribbon. Purple with white edges. The ribbon for a Purple Heart. The award you get for being wounded. This guy had been hit and he was still alive. A thousand scenarios went through my head, but in each one, the trooper ended up dead. It's what happened out there. You didn't get wounded, you just got dead. I couldn't imagine getting wounded.

He came over to me and patted me on the shoulder. "Nice work out there."

I'm afraid I wasn't sincere. "Thank you, sir"

He seemed to look at me as if he was impressed, but it didn't make any sense. "I watched the video footage," he explained. "You got two with one round."

"No, sir." I didn't want to take any credit for more than I had done. Hell, I didn't even want one notch on my belt, I had no desire for two. "There was only the one."

He seemed to think I was being falsely modest, but I had no idea what he was talking about. "The big one," he smiled at me, "and the little one behind it." He unrolled a plasti-screen and pressed the play button. I could plainly see the Slime I had shot. I watched him explode for the second time. The major was running the footage in slow-motion. As my slime exploded, I noticed an unexploded ball continue down the trail, exiting the first creature's body. The ball whizzed way down, struck a second one and then detonated. I hadn't even seen this one. Even after I checked out the body. They simply looked like one long pile of ooze.

He patted me on the shoulder again, "Nice shot."

I stared at the footage. I hadn't even seen the second one. It was blind luck. And if I hadn't gotten the second one, he'd have gotten me for sure. Make me a smudge on the rocks. No debrief, only a grave marker. I blinked. Jesus, I hadn't even seen him.

The major gave me an understanding smile, almost a wink. I think he knew. "Battalion is putting you in for a medal. I'm going to co-sign the recommendation myself."

We got an extra rest rotation cycle on the dropship. There's not much room on a dropship so you are mostly stuck in a room which resembles a Tokyo micro-hotel. The only thing different about it is the fact you can be plugged in. I don't mean you can listen to music on your headphones. No, in this case, the

device projects a dream into your head, like a reverse MRI machine. You can select what you want from a whole menu of locations. Then the bed puts you to sleep. Once you enter dreamland you have a lucid dream about whatever you selected. We call these slots the Rec Room. There's not enough room to exercise on the ship and leave turns out to be incredibly expensive. Too expensive for the government to bend over and pick up the tab. So, whenever a unit needs a break, it's Rec Room city for them.

I was feeling a little vulnerable, so I selected my boyhood bedroom. The thing is exceptionally good at reading your memories and reconstructing them for you. The sun was streaming through my window. I had a whole wall of Legos my dad and I had built together. They covered an entire wall. There were haunted houses, scenes from famous movies, and of course, a whole fleet of spaceships. I think my dad would have been impressed I got to be on one. Although, he wouldn't have been pleased to learn where I ended up.

The bed felt as soft as I remembered it. In some ways, the Rec Room is better than any dream you've ever had. It feels much more real. The key is the tensile memories. The machine reminds your brain what everything feels like. Even things you thought you had forgotten. The smells are good too. I could smell my mother baking cookies in the kitchen. I ran my hand over the bedspread, luxuriating in the soft fibers and the warm feeling of the blankets. It seemed like it's been ages since I could feel anything like this. It was a little slice of heaven.

I walked over to my old bookshelf. In the Rec Room, you can even read. Something else you can't do in a standard dream. Although, you can only reread books. Things you have already read. I saw some of the old books I had to read when I was in High School. I couldn't read those, I just skimmed them when I was a kid. The shelves were filled with space opera and astronaut exploration adventures. Sadly, they were farther from the truth than a one-armed man becoming a basketball all-star forward.

Still, I pulled one down off the shelf and settled down onto the bed. I only read about half a chapter when I started to get drowsy. I didn't want to fall asleep. There was plenty of time to sleep later. Right now, I was home and I wanted to enjoy it. Putting the book down, I headed down the stairs and into the garage. Inside was my old XJ-71, the first car I had ever owned. It was a hopelessly complicated thing and it only worked when it felt like it. It was one of the last cars they build with wheels, so it needed a road to drive on.

Sitting down in the front seat, I pressed my thumb into the start pad, and it recognized my thumbprint. The engine roared to life. The rattle and the vibrations were somehow comforting. Even though every shudder the car gave felt like it was going to shake itself apart. I took it out of the driveway and ran it for a spin around the lake. My breathing relaxed as I whizzed by familiar trees and watched the ducks landing in the water. My mind drifted in the mellow atmosphere.

I woke up with a start. The emergency klaxons were ringing. Something was going on. It was all-hands-on-deck. All Rec Room leaves were canceled. Hurrying down to the ready room, I threw on my suit. At least they had the time to clean it out. Although, before I'd even gotten the final zipper pulled up, I could feel the moisture start to build up at my feet. I'd be walking in my own sweat in less than half an hour.

Once we were on the surface, I could see what command was worried about. There was a plume of smoke on the horizon. The Slimes didn't land on the planet as we did. There ships where one-way

tickets, crashing onto the surface. The slimes were being reinforced. It was a race to get there. If we could get to the ship before they all spread out, we could get a few of them before they got started killing us. It was a race.

The wreckage wasn't too far distant. It seems like they miscalculated this time, crashing too close to one of our drop zones. We hustled our way over to the crash site. Fortunately, the smoke made it easy to head in the right direction. The plume was tall, extending maybe a mile into the air. We humped our way over. We could hear their gibbering on our headsets, even though we weren't under any of the umbrella trees. They were close.

The whole thing turned out to be a wasted effort. They were all gone by the time we got there. Still, we had to secure the area until the recovery boys could get here from the fleet. They needed to look around and see what technology they could recover from the wreck.

Harry Zegan and I huddled down behind a rock. The slimes were gone, but this didn't mean they might not come back. "This crash site reminds me of the lander they got last month." The landers were the shuttle carriers bringing us back and forth to the dropships. "The slimes picked it off right after it dropped a platoon on the high ridge, so there was only the pilot on board."

The aliens didn't have a lot of artillery besides mortars and a few short-range, shoulder-fired missile launchers. Now and then they'd hideout near an LZ, just to pick off a lander. This group had done a good job hiding in the tunnels. They came out at the exact right time. "They let the lander get high enough so the pilot wouldn't survive the crash, then they fired," Harry continued. "He was on the COMM system the while time. The engine when out and he started cursing like a mad dog."

"Bring it down on top of the bastards," one of his platoon buddies called up.

"Drop it right on top of them," another called out.

Harry pawed the ground with his foot as if drawing a picture of the incident. "The pilot put the lander in a nose-dive and headed right for the entrance to the tunnel where he took fire. 'Geronimo,' he screamed out over the mike." Harry let out a serious grin. "It was a beautiful sight, I'm telling you. The fuel tanks lit the whole valley on fire. Messed up the slimes pretty bad."

As Harry was finishing the story it started to rain. It rained a lot on this stupid planet. But there wasn't a single lake on the entire surface. The acid-rainwater either froze or evaporated in the extreme daytime heat. The rain was a problem in the suits, they were not equipped with wiper blades. Most of the guys carried an extra cloth in an external pocket. You'd get out the cloth occasionally, to wipe off your facemask. For a little bit, you could see again. After a while though, the cloth would get water-logged and you'd end up only moving the water from one part of your faceplate to another.

This is when you started to see things. The steam and the water would mix to create illusions. Every rock seemed to take on a human form... or worse yet, they'd take on the form of an alien blob. It was impossible not to see them. The water would move down your helmet and you would swear the rock moved. You could almost make a clock out of the whole affair. Rain, followed by saturated cloths, followed by nervous chatter on the COMMs, followed by the explosions of rounds against the immobile rocks. There was always some guy who tossed in a few grenades as well.

I was sitting right next to Harry as the rain started to come down. We looked at each other with a knowing glance. How many friendly fire deaths would we suffer, and would it be us this time? I sat and started to fidget. I couldn't help myself. Just thinking about it made me squirm.

"Remember Denis?" Harry asked.

"The medic, yeah." They still assigned a medic to each unit. Even though it ended up being a waste of time. We'd always wind up training the medic how to use a rifle. We needed riflemen, not medics. Dennis had been our medic for a couple of weeks, but it wasn't working out. Dennis could barely hold himself together. He wasn't cut out for combat. Some people aren't. We were setting up for an ambush when the slimes started shelling us.

In an instant, the sky was lit up with balls of light. The ground seemed to turn into a sea of flame.

"Dennis started screaming his head off," Harry recalled.

"I thought the captain was going to shoot him, just to shut him up."

"And the sun was just about to come up."

The terminator on this planet was an extremely fine line. The planet rotated so slowly you could watch it move across the landscape. Light on one side, darkness on the other. If you were heading into the night, the temperature would drop on its way to bone-chilling cold. But after the terminator passed, there would be a space of about ten minutes when the temperature was normal. This night there wasn't a cloud in the sky, so you could see the terminator clearly.

"It passed right over Dennis and he let out a huge sigh. It was as if it was five o'clock on his nine-to-five day job." Harry had a fond look on his face as he relayed the story.

"The kid just snapped," I added.

"Walked right out into the open and took his helmet off. I could see him from where I was crouched after the mortar attack. The damn kid acted like he was about to take a shower."

"He was dead before anyone could reach him."

Honestly, I never thought I would get any form of PTSD. It was because I didn't expect to survive. With all the death and destruction, I saw around me every day, I figured it was bound to get me. How could you avoid it? You don't see what I saw and then figure, *yeah, I'll get out of this in one piece*. I never reported for any of my psychological screenings either. I didn't figure I needed to report. We all assumed if you didn't pull a Dennis, you'd last until they killed you. I wasn't planning on living long enough to get PTSD.

This was 40 years ago, but I still remember it like it was yesterday. The nightmares still come back every night. Every stinking night. There they are, the damn Slimes. But what is worse is... I'm wearing the suit again.