

# Geronimo's Cadillac

By

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We fell from the night like vengeful gods and swarmed across their world like maggots on a corpse. When they started killing us we fell back to the high ground, dug in and fought like human beings.

~

Battlefield weapons vary across the galaxy but the principles are the same. From sharpened stick to Haxzer rods, from brass candlestick to Charm grenade, the aim is to poke holes in the enemy corpus until it stops working.

We found the aliens gave as good as they got.

~

Our Zic, Giminez, had been in charge since Brigadier Caldicott caught the edge of a Haxzer scintillation. The aliens had captured several of our weapons and had quickly learned how to use them.

We built a lean-to for Caldicott up among the things that looked like pine trees, where the gorge narrowed and turned. Ever since we carried him there the 'trees' had been moving away from the hut at about a metre a day. Some headed upstream, some down, each left a deep furrow in the ground.

The lean-to gave our final redoubt a focus. During the day the darkness inside gave Caldicott some respite from his photosensitive wounds, at night we fell back in squads to rest and talk.

Caldicott refused to be evacuated by the Clever-boat. Sometimes he was delirious, most of the time he lay on his back, pale and sweating in pain from his metastasing injuries.

Giminez and I crawled into the lean-to. There was just enough room to crouch beside Caldicott's bed. The air in the gloomy interior tasted sour and sharp, both metallic and organic. Caldicott lay naked on a bed of leaf litter, covered by the lining torn from a combat suit. His skin glistened green and coppery, a wet sheet draped over the bones of his ribs and pelvis. His right shoulder and upper arm formed a livid canker, his left hand fused to his hip in a raw-mince mass of flesh and white bone.

I told him about the cease-fire.

Caldicott opened his hollow eyes. 'What do they want?'

'At the moment, sir, nothing,' Giminez said.

'Time to regroup?' I said.

Caldicott shook his head, 'They've got all the time in the world.'

Giminez traced circles in the dirt with her finger. She looked up. 'Final push.'

Caldicott tried to say something and he started coughing again, struggling for breath. We helped him sit up, he tried to push us away, his free hand pale and thin as a bird's claw. 'Best not to touch... No, don't help... That's an order, soldier.'

We ignored him and avoided touching the weeping edges of his slowly spreading wounds.

I handed Caldicott his water flask. His eyes sparked with sudden enthusiasm. All at once he was back, his smile wide bright and charismatic. 'You know what I'd do?'

'No, sir.'

'I'd go home.' Exhausted by the brief rally, he fell back onto the bed, 'It's all I want to do. All I ever wanted.'

'Sounds good to me, sir.' I looked at Giminez, she shook her head.

'A quiet place, next to water. With a veranda. Somewhere to watch the sun go down.' Caldicott tried to sing, a weak enervated croak: 'Come on boys, take me back...' He coughed, spasmed, fell half off the bed.

'Hell with it.' Giminez scowled, she didn't want to touch him again. She backed out of the lean-to. 'Come on, Greensmith. He's passed out. There's nothing we can do.'

It wasn't hard to get Caldicott back on the bed by myself. He didn't weigh much.

~

As Clausewitz said, the best tactic is to be very strong.

Five hundred to conquer a world, five hundred men and women with the best equipment Earth could provide. We fell from orbit so fast the atmosphere burned around us. Above us lay the logistics and technical support of entire star systems.

We came in peace. They didn't listen so we gave them Plan B instead. We had no choice, they had no choice. Either way we would recruit them to our side of the war raging throughout the galactic arm. Plan B always worked. It had worked against the Goblin Snails and the Bogus Men, it had worked against mankind on planet Earth. It would work here too.

The strategies of war never change. You can attack the enemy from the top of a hill or from the air, from over the horizon or from orbit, but to own a piece of dirt you need troops on the ground. In this war planet Earth, like any backwater world on the galactic fringe, provided the PBI. The Poor Bloody Infantry, recruited from the barbarians as so many empires had done before. We were expendable. We were cheaper than the Als.

~

Mankind's third encounter with aliens started with the sighting of a sun-bound fleet coasting past Saturn. The whole of Earth held its breath, watched them approach with a mixture of terror, wonder and vindication. We speculated about why they were coming to the point of obsession. I think we were in denial. They had a thousand dreadnaughts.

The aliens had glossy black pelts and pointed velvet ears like muscular bipedal Dobermans. They called us Aboriginal Sentients of Planet %08002B. We called them Blink Dogs.

One of them met with President Wu. 'War rages throughout the galaxy,' the Blink Dog said. 'We are here to protect you.'

President Wu spoke well. 'It has taken mankind ten thousand years, finally all our nations are at peace. Earth will remain neutral.'

The blink dog looked into nowhere, black eyes blinking. 'That statement does not cohere with your true nature. Your global society is dysfunctional, it will collapse within two generations. You are made for war.'

'We have learned to delight in peace.'

The blink dog snapped its teeth. 'No, you do not. You revere the acquisition of peace.'

'That is no reason to fight in your wars.'

'Oxygen worlds cannot fall to the enemy. You are either with us or against us.'

In the end they put twenty-one troops down. Their materiel was far beyond anything we have even now, with capabilities that still seem to be a hybrid of science and magic. Three soldiers to a continent. We couldn't touch them. I've discussed this often with Giminez and, swallowing our pride, we both think that was about right.

~

Late in the night the Clever Boat sent another message about Caldicott. We were high in the mountains, the sky very clear, the stars were brilliant and reception was perfect.

'I wish to send an avatar to retrieve your commander,' the Clever-boat said.

'He doesn't want to go,' I said. More to the point, I didn't see why he should be rescued while I was stuck here.

'He is dying in great pain.'

'We're all going to die.' My hand ached. I relaxed my grip on the com, one of the few pieces of our superior equipment that still worked. 'What are you going to do with him? There's no hospital ship, there's no fleet.'

'The fleet still exists, but it is far from here.'

'You know what I mean.' I blinked sweat from my eyes, my hand was shaking again. 'Why are you still here, Clever-boat?'

For a long moment there was silence on the line, the hiss and static of space.

'I am not sure. What about you?'

That was so funny it made me want to spit. I'd never worked out to my own satisfaction if the Clever-boats had a sense of humour. 'See you around.'

'Farewell. Be aware, aboriginal forces have triangulated your position via this transmission.'

I secured the com and fell back. My suit was more than capable of coping with the inbound mortar and artillery fire, but after a month of near continuous use the fuel cell was running low. The explosions from the incoming salvos threw long, flickering shadows through the trees. Amber and red lights glowed ominously on my visor.

~

Another rule of war is that if you want to push forward, or simply hold on to what you've got, you need battlefield support: spares, repairs and tactical surveillance. Caldicott once said it might not be a genuine Rule of War, just a strong suggestion. I think that was his idea of a joke.

Our ultimatum had been rejected, we were nineteen hours into the invasion of another world and ahead of schedule, with local armies destroyed or falling back in disarray.

Without notice, our support fleet broke from orbit, pointed their noses at the galactic rim and jumped. Caldicott relayed the broken, static-filled transmission from the receding flagship as it boosted to superluminal: '...serious but local... reason to continue... as ordered... unexpected development...good...'

All channels stayed silent. Finally Caldicott said, 'This is what we have: full power, max ammo, space platforms in polar orbit, planetary air and orbital superiority.'

'For how long?' Eve Sutherland growled from continent three.

'There is no reason to change our mission plan. The order was to continue, you heard that, the same as everyone else.'

'I heard the word "continue", a whole load of static then some other stuff,' Sutherland said. 'The same as everybody else.'

'What else should we do, Sutherland,' Giminez broke in. 'Open a taco bar?'

That got a laugh but there was a hesitancy to it. I was worried about what I would do if the ships didn't come back, calculating how long my supplies would last. I guess everyone else was too but I never gave it a thought, I was worried about me.

'Let's do this,' Caldicott said.

'Hoo-rah.'

The departure of our fleet gave the locals heart. Air attacks trebled, quadrupled. Our AI platforms fired their EMP cannons and the atmosphere craft tumbled out of the sky. Across the planet ground troops attacked our scattered platoons in battalion strength. Then it was brigades, entire armies. Their heavy ordnance failed to penetrate our kinetic domes. A few

handfuls of weird, springy, wood-skinned ground troops managed to close with us and were killed by their own gunfire rebounding from our ricochet armour.

Then they played their big shot and fired their solitary orbiting X-ray laser at one of our space platforms. It didn't work, X-ray lasers never do. The theory is fine, the technology invariably flawed. A couple of chemical rockets crawled up out of the atmosphere with replacements. We destroyed them before they reached orbit.

When it was over they had nothing and we had 20% average remaining power. It was time for supply drops but as everyone on both sides was very aware there was no fleet. Caldicott broadcast an ultimatum, a final demand for surrender. The enemy were either gamblers in their sappy little brains or they were good guessers. There was no reply.

Caldicott called an open forum.

'Fall back?' Giminez was incredulous.

'We'll be more effective as a single unit. The central plateau of continent two is virtually uninhabited. All teams will make their way there immediately.'

'We can still do this,' Sutherland and Giminez insisted.

'Those are my orders,' Caldicott said.

'We should nuke the fuckers, nuke the cities,' Sutherland shouted. 'Nuke the whole fucking planet.'

'Great idea,' Giminez said, 'I'll get some from stores. No, wait.'

We pulled back. Walking, running, jumping in sub-ballistic leaps, all heading for Caldicott's muster, deep in the foothills of the southern continent's lonely uplands. The inhabitants were technology-lite nomads and attacked us anyway. We wiped them out and they left us alone.

Eve Sutherland died first. The locals got lucky, dropping rocks on her team as she withdrew. The boulders started an avalanche, the rock slide moved too slowly for her kinetic canopy, too fast to evade. We, who can leap star systems and level mountains, killed by having stones dropped on our heads. You might admire them for even trying. I hated them for succeeding.

Sutherland's team deployed and scattered. By the time it was over five were dead from her stolen Haxzer.

The teams from the northern land masses dove into the oceans. Three went in, one came out. Two miles down in the utter dark and terrible pressure one hundred and thirty two men and women simply disappeared.

~

Giminez and I rendezvoused where the gorge opened into the tree-infested valley. We flipped our visors, replacing the cool, filtered, balanced gasses in our lungs with ester-rich, slightly rancid planetary air.

We bumped fists:

'Giminez.'

'Greensmith.'

The forest held a dark green gloominess, silent except for the synchronised metronome-sway of the trees' feathery branches. There was little here for insects and birds hadn't evolved. Giminez slapped at one of the oscillating branches. The whole tree recoiled, lofting its branches into the air like a woman lifting her skirts. A ripple of fading movement spread around us, followed by a sparse rain of downy fronds.

'These things,' Giminez said. 'I look at them and wonder what the hell we are doing here.'

Giminez' open helm framed her handsome, square face. We'd always got on all right. Now her dark skin had a sour sheen, her eyes bruised from superstim overload and an exhaustion we all shared. 'The aliens must know we've been abandoned.'

Giminez always spoke her mind but I didn't like to be reminded. I was too tired, I didn't want to have to think. 'Ok, it doesn't look good, but we're not done yet. The Clever-boat will warn us-'

'Don't trust it. They work for the enemy too.'

'The dead and the dying,' I said, thinking of Eve Sutherland. 'The abandoned and unloved.'

'What's that crap, poetry? Get a grip, Greensmith. Every deep-space action I've seen there's always been two Clever-boats. One for us, one for them. Talking, watching, swapping data. Spying. Ask it.'

She was right, I didn't care. Nobody knew where the Clever-boats came from, the ones that followed our fleets conversed with us, they helped, they made suggestions. We had to assume they did the same for the other side. Their predictive countermeasures were extraordinary, they never took fire because they were never there when you pulled the trigger. We knew because we'd tried, and so had the other side.

'They're observers, they don't care who wins. You're being irrational, Giminez. Get some sleep.'

'They're still not part of the fleet. Like I said, ask it.'

I was too tired. 'Oh, fuck off,' I said without anger.

She grabbed my shoulder. 'Ask it!'

I held up my finger. 'Go spin.'

Giminez glowered at me, her hand dropped to her Haxzer rod.

'It's out,' I said.

'What?'

'You can't shoot me. Your rod is out of juice.'

She stared at me. 'I wasn't going to-' She checked the load meter, her face crumpled and she flung the rod as hard as she could. Her armour-assisted throw sent the rod whirling across the open ground and into the gorge.

The general com came alive: 'Fore!' 'Thanks, Giminez.' 'Nice shot.' 'Hey, I'm trying to take a dump.'

'Screw the lot of you,' Giminez kicked out at a boulder, shattering it.

We were both exhausted, I felt at least as unreasonable as Giminez. I knew she wouldn't have shot me, but she had thought about it. The suits can keep you going forever, providing nutrients, chelating toxins, mopping up free radicals, recycling everything. Lack of sleep still creeps up on you, a grimy, flat feeling that puts you in the awkward squad and looking for trouble.

'Screw us all? Does that include me? Form a queue, ladies.'

She punched me, hard enough for the giros to kick in. My suit lurched, compensating, then every light on the HUD flared red and went out. The suit cut out. I fell onto my back, the chest cracked open and I lay stark bollock naked, writhing in pain as the monitors, catheter, vein-clamps, nerve shunts and other intrusions snaked out of my body.

Giminez shrieked with laughter.

'You fuck, you bitch,' I raved through gritted teeth.

'Greensmith, you're so sexy when you're angry. Oh dear, your dick has shrivelled up.' So would yours if you'd been catheterised for the past month.

'Get me some clothes.'

'You want my bra and panties? I'm not your size.'

Shakily I stood up, teeth clenched, fists bunched. There are few things more impotent than a naked man confronting a warrior in re-entry-capable combat armour. Squawking noises were coming from Giminez's helmet. She held up her hand and listened to the com.

'Yeah, his suit's died.' Giminez said, then looked at me and winked. 'Pissed off? No more than usual.'

I cut the lining out of my suit with a shard from the shattered boulder. The legs, back and shoulders made a barely adequate trousers and a ragged vest. It would have to do. The only alternative was Caldicott's cancer-stained armour, and the thought of climbing naked into that biohazard made my skin crawl.

Giminez sat on a rock and watched me, broadcasting my muttered profanities. 'You're a scrawny-arsed tramp, Greensmith.'

I felt less vulnerable with something covering my backside. 'Thanks so much for all the help.'

She shrugged, 'It's way better your suit died now than during the next attack.'

That did it. 'And when do you think that will be? Tonight? Tomorrow? I shall look forwards to fighting with no armour, no weapon. How excellent, how wonderful. One of those wobbly trees has got more chance than me.' A crimson vapour rose up, I couldn't see, I couldn't hear anything except the wordless roar of distant shouting.

Giminez had me down on the ground, pinned by the immovable tonnage of her suit. 'Feeling better now?'

I glared at her, my head felt thick. I couldn't remember what I'd been screaming, but I knew if I'd had a weapon, one that would have made a difference, I'd have used it. My hands hurt, the skin on my knuckles torn, the nails ripped. I turned them over and yelped with the pain from my left wrist.

'It's not broken.' Giminez said. 'I checked.'

She dragged my dead suit down to the gorge mouth, behind our line, and slung it over the gap between two low boulders so I'd have some shelter. I didn't thank her.

Back up by the lean-to I took a dozen rotation grenades from Caldicott's spare magazine. Giminez followed me, I still felt thick-headed, ferociously angry. Wordlessly Giminez removed the activator from the launch tube so I could arm the grenades. Then she handed me two of her own.

Suddenly I felt like the arsehole I was acting. 'Thanks.'

'You're welcome.'

A whistling, rushing noise came from the mouth of the gorge – incoming artillery. 'Stay here,' Giminez said. Her visor swung shut and she ran down the gorge in thirty-foot power-assisted strides. A turn in the gorge protected Caldicott and myself from the shrapnel as artillery pounded our line. I sat behind a walking pine and hugged my knees. Anger dissolved into lonely fear and I wept.

The noise of the bombardment was horrific. Shockwave after shockwave blew clouds of dust and grit into my hair, eyes, nose, mouth. I felt utterly naked, totally helpless, more alone and vulnerable than I could ever remember. I rolled onto my side and curled into a ball. After ten minutes the damned tree began creeping away from me. It made me want to laugh. I thought if I did I might not stop, that I might run towards the gunfire.

Darkness fell and finally the barrage stopped. For the next few minutes I heard the chatter and hum of our own armaments. When it died away I could hear Caldicott singing

inside the lean-to and for a moment I envied him. Giminez walked slowly back up the gorge through the deepening gloom. She sat beside me and opened her visor.

'Well,' she said. 'That's the lot for now.'

The next day I walked down to my suit-shelter. It had survived the bombardment well. If I wanted, I could shelter there. I sat down on a nearby rock. A few red specks showed on the soles of my feet, bright against the dirt and grime.

Down the line a few grunts were taking out the walking corpses. After each attack there were always a few enemy survivors lurching through the debris of the battlefield. All had bits missing, limbs, part of the trunk and head. Every single one of them tottered or crawled towards us on sappy splintered limbs. Some were still armed, a theoretical danger. What had started as necessity soon turned into a game to see how many shots you could put into one, how many chunks you could blow out of it before it stayed down. The answer was always Quite a Lot.

Giminez and I looked out across the no-man's land where the stream coming out of the gorge lost itself in the mud, debris and wreckage of the battlefield. 'A pity the aliens aren't more like us. You might find a pair of shoes.'

I felt like I could sleep for a hundred years. My beard stubble, uninhibited by suit retardants, was starting to itch. 'We're the aliens here, Giminez. They're the locals.' I wondered why I'd never thought that before.

Faint cheers came from a group a couple of hundred metres away as their armless, weaponless victim lurched to its feet and blundered forwards.

Yesterday we'd levelled the forest in front of the gorge mouth to make a field of fire. Now the trees at the edge were creeping back, uncoiling their slow roots. If we were still here in a couple of weeks we'd have to do it again. Giminez looked out across the barren landscape, 'I don't feel alien.'

'Neither do they. Anyway, they don't need shoes, they've got wooden feet.' I hefted the two grenades she'd given me. 'Thanks for yesterday.'

'Don't want to have to beat you up again.'

I said nothing. Giminez tapped me on the shoulder. 'You all right?'

I looked into her dark eyes. 'No.'

She patted my cheek with an armoured hand that could crush rock and punch through five centimetres of solid steel. 'You'll be all right.'

~

Nothing happened for days.

I was starving. If I had found any shoes I'd have eaten them. The stream seemed devoid of life apart from sparse colonies of thread-like worms and some armoured beetles. I took water from above the lean-to, lit a fire and boiled it in my helm. The walking pines had clusters of globular, wooden fruit the size of my two fists. I pulled some down and cracked them open. Curled inside each one were two or three legless creatures with green fur and five-fold tails. Sleepily they opened their gold-flecked eyes and swayed upright, balancing on their splayed tails. I killed one, cutting off its head and slitting it open with a shrapnel splinter. Inside was a soft, pinkish, fibrous mass with no discernable organs beyond a darkening behind the eyes.

Everyone was low on power but I managed to persuade Wightman to run toxicity and levo tests on the animal's tissues. I boiled one and it dissolved into scummy grey soup. The second one I ate raw, digging the pith out with my fingers. I hadn't eaten real food for months,

the resinous, nutty flavours of the pith dazzled my taste buds and sat in my stomach like a lump of lead.

Still nothing happened. The sun shone, I got badly sunburnt and spent three painful days in the shade. The soles of my feet started to toughen up. Now everyone stayed down at the gorge mouth with only Giminez making her twice daily trips to report to Caldicott.

All through the quiet time Caldicott clung on, long periods of silence interspersed by involuntary cries of pain, hallucinatory babble, and fragmentary singing. With nothing else to do I became his nurse, I fetched water and emptied his honey-pot and did my best to keep him clean. It was pitiful, he hadn't eaten for days. I tried to feed him some of the nut-creatures, but he refused, wanting only water.

'He should do us all a favour and die,' Giminez said.

'He's a fighter, this is his last battle. He's not going to go easily.'

'Stubborn bastard,' Giminez said without sympathy. 'Why do you think nobody comes up here any more?'

The space platforms were still working, still shooting down the occasional aircraft that dared skim our airspace. As sonic booms rumbled in the next valley Wightman and Xiong came to see me. Xiong, slight and slender, was dressed in the remnants of his suit lining.

'You take care of him,' Wightman told me. 'Help him eat, find food.'

'Ok.'

Wightman hesitated, reluctant to leave.

'What's going on?' I said.

'We think they're regrouping. The Clever-boat thinks their hierarchy is locked in some kind of debate.'

I nodded. 'Endgame.'

Wightman glanced at Xiong, looking remarkably vulnerable beside Wightman's massive armour.

'You'd better get back.' Xiong said, then stood on tip-toe and kissed Wightman. I heard him whisper, 'I'm not scared.'

'I helped you, now you help me.' Wightman told me before closing his visor and trudging back down the gorge. 'This is how you pay me back.'

Over the next few days more suits failed: Brandt, Nelson, Escobar and several others joined us. I looked at their clothes. 'I think I've started a trend.'

Brandt and Nelson went out into no-man's land and retrieved some enemy weaponry, conventional automatic rifles and such. We worked at modifying the stock and trigger so we could hold the damned things. In the end we gave up and tried mounting them in bipods. It gave us something to do.

Brandt's beard grew out blonder than his hair. He flexed his muscles. 'We'll stick together, fight as a unit.'

'You must do as you think best.' Xiong said softly. 'I will fight beside Andreas Wightman.'

Between us we could move our empty suits and dragged them together to make a crude blast shelter down at the front line.

We relied on each other more than we had ever done before. For food we picked more fruit from the walking pines. Out in the valley forest the swaying feather-trees flowered, producing bunches of waxy, almond scented star-shaped blooms dripping with nectar. Caldicott was still refusing to eat, Xiong, Brandt and I dissolved the nectar in his water and took turns helping him drink and keep clean.

'He's a tough bastard,' Brandt said one time. 'You got to love him for that.'

~

Mankind's first alien contact was a scrap of torn metal, a ripped and perforated bulkhead of titanium alloy whirling up from the galactic core. And we rejoiced that finally there was proof we were not alone.

Second contact was a graveyard of tumbling wreckage half a parsec wide. Dozens of deep-space dreadnoughts floated there, chopped, diced, shredded, surrounded and intermingled with vacuum-dried gobbets of flesh, shattered bone, smashed chitin, fur, feather and scales of their inhabitants.

We considered our expanding bubble of electromagnetic transmissions, our radio, TV and telecom signals, three hundred light-years across with Earth at its centre.

~

Incoming!' Brandt dived into our shelter.

Xiong and I followed. Nelson stood outside, frozen.

'Come on!' I cried. The barrage crept towards us across no-man's land, shattering rocks, spewing debris high into the air, and blasting apart the trees that had crept out from the forest edge over the past weeks. Hot shrapnel buzzed through the air, stone splinters splattered hissing into the churned ground. Nelson turned and ran back up the gorge.

'Piss on him,' Brandt growled, dragging out one of the modified enemy guns.

Rolling behind the barrage came a mass of armoured vehicles, self-propelled guns and armoured infantry. Our armoured troops annihilated the first wave, and the second. Brandt, Xiong and I crouched under our armour, squashed together, breath mingling, vulnerable as moulting crabs. Thirty feet away Wightman stood in his suit, absorbing fire, multi-tubes thumping, Haxzer rod glittering, collapsing enemy infantry into billows of furiously dividing cells. There was nothing we could do. To go out there was to die.

During the third wave Brandt clutched my arm. 'Look.'

A naked man crawled away from our defensive line. We watched him crouch behind cover, gather himself and race across open ground. All at once I felt his terrible vulnerability, the rock splinters and burning shrapnel whirring through the air around his flesh.

Then I saw two together, a man and a woman creeping and darting, too far away to recognize. A salvo of explosions erupted across our line of sight and they were gone. Xiong cursed and turned away.

'They made it.' Brandt said. He shook Xiong by the shoulders. 'They made it!'

Xiong pulled free and started priming grenades. 'Listen to our fire.'

We listened. The wall of noise was breaking up, falling apart into spatters and bursts interspersed with shrieks from the multi-tubes. The enemy pushed hard, armour clanking, grinding, straight at us. A dozen air-fighters roared in, skimming low along the valley, missiles leaped from their wings like fire-tailed fish. Incandescent light lanced down from orbit, slicing the missiles apart mid-flight. More beams stalked the twisting, darting aeroplanes and each machine became a tumbling, disintegrating fireball. One cartwheeled into the ground, gouged a blazing furrow through the convulsing forest.

We held them. The last wave broke, turned back, engines roaring and coughing. Brandt clambered out of our shelter, screaming incoherently, fist held high.

'Five more.' Xiong pointed at the empty suits, the naked men and women slipping away.

Another armoured wave ground towards us over the wreckage of the last. Wightman launched a salvo from his multi-tubes then jumped over to our shelter, visor smoothly rolling back.

'You're drawing fire,' Brandt shouted above the gunfire.

'The line's too wide, we're pulling back.'

Xiong wrestled with one of our modified guns. 'Bring some ammo.'

'Leave it.' Wightman said.

'No.'

'I said leave it.'

Xiong glared at Wightman, snapped the bipod closed and released the magazine. Throwing the ammo to me he hefted the gun, head and shoulders clear of cover.

'Get down!' Wightman jumped between Xiong and the advancing armour. Almost immediately heavy calibre bullets chewed the rocks around him, ricocheting off his armour straight back along their trajectories. Six hundred feet away I saw the turrets of three massive machines swivel towards us.

'Fuck,' Brandt flung himself back into our shelter. I was right behind him as the guns opened fire.

The salvo straddled our position. Flung against the rocks, deafened, peppered by rock splinters and shrapnel, Brandt and I lay stunned. I tasted blood, my nose was bleeding. Brandt shook me, dishevelled, wildly shouting. My ears rang. We crawled outside.

Wightman lay on his front, covering Xiong. I slapped his armour and he rolled away into a crouch. Brandt reloaded the heavy machine gun, the enemy armour less than two hundred metres away. Infantry spilled off their backs as they came, crouching, firing, bounding towards us on springy kneeless legs. Bullets buzzed and zipped overhead, and then, the terrifying, sparkling whirr of a Haxzer.

Wightman was howling, a thin hysterical screech.

Blood pumped from a gaping hole in Xiong's throat, his chest a wet red mess. Wightman cracked his suit, stepped out, cradled Xiong. Xiong smiled weakly, tried to lift his head. He said something too quiet to hear. Blood filled his mouth.

Wightman struggled to his feet, Xiong in his arms. He looked straight at me. 'Help me,' he said. Then he blew apart and guts and blood sprayed my face.

Everything went at half speed.

Beside me Brandt methodically pulled back the firing pin on the captured auto-gun. He pulled the trigger and empty casings spun lazily through the air.

A twin line of impact-plumes passed a few inches in front of my feet. I watched them, fascinated by their symmetry. The lines ended in the tangle of bloody meat that twitched and jumped with each impact. All that was left of Xiong and Wightman.

Sound and motion crashed back to normal. Brandt fired explosive bullets on full auto. I threw rotation grenades: one, two, three. Enemy infantry went to ground as the tanks scythed apart.

I drew back my arm to throw another grenade. When I cast, nothing flew from my hand. I didn't understand why my fingers wouldn't open. I looked at my arm. My forearm ended in a hanging flap of skin, bloodless muscle, a jagged stub of white bone.

'Brandt...' I wailed.

Brandt looked round, jumped back, picked up the grenade and flung it away. An alien infantryman swayed up beside Brandt's gun, blue static dancing between the twin prongs of its weapon. Its ring-whorled eyes held me as it aimed the weapon at Brandt. Now my arm

bled, a fountain of blood. I aimed the jet at the alien's gun as it fired and Brandt shrieked and fell. Now my last rotation grenade detonated behind the alien. A blast that would have sliced me apart staggered the bark-skinned thing, splintering its legs like a shell hitting a tree.

I flung myself into Wightman's bloody suit, fumbling the controls with my left hand. The suit hissed shut, probes and sensors entered my body. The suit clamped a pneumatic seal round my ruined forearm. The HUD showed two point seven percent. Fleeting I wondered how Wightman had managed to conserve so much power.

The alien was still alive, split open, shattered, and still moving. Calmly it lifted its sputtering weapon. I scooped Brandt in my left arm and jumped.

The suit lofted me a hundred feet above the battle. Pain tore up my arm and I screamed, the sound horrible in the confines of the helmet. Wightman's suit administered antibiotics, pain killers, anti-shock drugs. I felt them flow like ice in my veins. To my left and right other suits were rising, arcing back into the gorge. Far below a scatter of naked men and women scrambled away from the mass of alien armour and infantry rolling over our positions. I passed out.

~

Giminez glanced up at the sharp bang from the top of the gorge. A few seconds later a dusty cloud of grit and rock fragments hissed down through a stand of walking pines a few hundred feet away. Like me she was out of her suit, dressed in the ragged lining. She gave me The Look, the one that said 'Not long now'.

The night after we fell back she and a few others had gone back and mined the gorge mouth and ledges. Now they were slowly, carefully being cleared. The latest detonation showed the locals had reached the bend in the gorge.

Giminez squatted next to me. 'Get out of here, Greensmith. Call the Clever-boat, take Caldicott with you.'

'You go.' The thought of going up in one of the retrieval pods to the clever-boat scared me. Even this place seemed preferable.

'I like it here.'

Brandt hobbled over. 'Hell, take me.' he said, then coughed, clutched his ribs and moaned. I'd saved his life but cracked his ribs, holding him too tight when I'd jumped. We heard the clanking roar of armoured vehicles and fell silent. Down at the bend in the gorge the stubby barrels of armoured machines slid into view.

'Shit, what happened to the lookouts?' Giminez punched my good arm. 'Suit up.'

Brandt counted under his breath, 'One, two... four... seven.'

I hated Wightman's suit, hated the bloodstains, the display that now read one point zero five, and the empty multi-tube magazines. More than anything I dreaded the chime that announced a transmission from the clever-boat. Every time I climbed in, while the stink of it was fresh in my nostrils, I heard that musical bell. This time was no different.

'Many people need retrieval, need comfort. I can dispatch a pod.'

'Not now, we're entering combat.'

'The excision of your arm was performed under non-sterile conditions-'

'No shit.'

'-an anaerobic infection is temporarily dormant.'

I didn't know who cut and cauterised my shattered forearm. It didn't hurt, and I still had the elbow. I was getting used to the feeling of lightness. And wanting to cry whenever I looked at it.

The clever-boat stayed silent and I sighed with relief. Then the transmission chime sounded again.

'I am broadcasting this on all channels,' the Clever-boat said. 'The aboriginal forces are offering a cease-fire. I have accepted on your behalf.'

The armoured vehicles backed out of sight. I stood in my suit too stunned to react. All around me other suits were opening, the wearers stepping out into the air. Men and women dressed in rags emerged from cover and gathered round. Brandt hugged the man next to him. Giminez sank to the ground.

We had lost.

I remembered Wightman torn apart by shells, Xiong dying in his arms, the shattered alien still moving. I felt utterly exhausted. I opened the suit and went out to join them.

~

It got worse.

~

News that bad made me tremble inside. I thought I was going to be sick. I wanted to but I couldn't. We gathered round the few functioning suits, our heads pressed against the helms, and listened to the clever-boat.

'Your home world has suffered Friendly Fire and been contaminated by an accidental release of self-reproducing biological countermeasures.'

'We've got to go back,' Brandt said. 'We can help.'

'Your fleet will not return. All ships are in orbit around Earth, all crews have landed. Survivors now form part of a population pocket of approximately one point six million people in south-east Australia. Time to extinction is three to seven weeks.'

It drove home like the head of a cold harpoon. In a few weeks we would be all the humans there were. It was too much to bear. I walked away.

Giminez found me in the forest. She walked up to me, unsmiling, and pushed me. I took a step back. She pushed me again, harder. I shoved her back. Then she punched me in the chest. I blocked her, kicked her leg. She tried to knee me in the groin. We grappled, fell, rolled across the ground.

She pinned me down, both hands on my shoulders, her knee between my legs. I felt her relax, her hand lifted slowly and touched my cheek. "Sorry."

Our faces were close together. Hesitantly, gently, she kissed me. I kissed her. We kissed each other.

Then we were opening each other's clothes, single-minded, filled with a cold and hungry passion, ravenous for some kind of comfort. Some way of being together without thinking, without talking, without hurting.

Afterwards we lay in a temporary peace. I held her with my bad arm and stroked the soft, black stubble on her head with my hand. We lay on the dead needles under the walking pines and looked up at the sky through the branches. One of the wooden fruit split open. A green-furred, legless creature squirmed out and fell, opened its five-fold tail like a canopy and drifted down. The breeze caught it, lofting it up above the tree tops and away into the cloud-strewn sky. Soon another followed, and another.

'I like it here,' Giminez said and started crying.

A weight lifted from me then. I helped Giminez to her feet and we slowly walked back to the camp.

Caldicott didn't understand. The thin nectar syrup I gave him to drink seemed to be all his ruined body needed but he was incapable of holding onto a thought.

We gathered together in a half circle in front of his shack, nearly three hundred of us. There was complete silence. The enormity was just too much. Wind stirred the canopy of trees above our heads. Just then Caldicott sang a hoarse fragment of his song.

'Come on boys, take me back. I'm going for a ride...'

His cough was pitiful but I envied his ignorance. I walked over to Wightman's suit and called down the Clever-boat.

~

I couldn't stop thinking of them as aliens. Life on this planet had never made full separation between plant and animal, everything had something of both. It was beautiful and it was very strange, and sometimes frightening. Beyond the basics, we struggled to understand each other.

They sent an ambassador, a negotiator, a sacrifice, something for the wood-pile. She (I'm going to call it she) was tall, slender and graceful. She swayed like a fern, a feather, her movements were both slow and quick. Her eyes were empty pits, her skin was fine-grained and whorled like a Maori's tattoos on pear wood. She really did have flowers in her hair.

We tried to communicate, we really did. We ached for understanding, them and us, and it was sad and frustrating. We could touch, we could speak, we could walk together, share food, and yet we could not *know*. What it finally came down to was an exchange of statements, of facts.

This is what we learned:

They don't have names, they have statements of intent. At the time we met our ambassador was 'Pollen-strewn anther'.

Our attack helped them in some way. "Winnowing the chaff" or "Pricking out the seedlings" are about the closest we came to understanding why.

We destroyed so many but they were grateful. Now we were the last humans they wanted to help us.

They gave us what we asked for and left us alone.

~

The Clever-boat came back once. I met its avatar on the cliffs above the gorge. Down in the valley, where we had fought and killed and died, was a small town, farmland and ponds.

'What's going to happen here, Clever-boat?'

'I believe there is insufficient genetic diversity. At first technology will help you thrive. Then there will be decline.'

'We'll die out?'

'The population must pass through a genetic bottleneck.'

I imagined Giminez with children on her knee. Then I tried seeing myself beside her. Something had softened in Giminez, the way she looked at people, how she spoke to them. I couldn't decide if it was weakness or growth. I felt like I was being left behind.

'Why were we picked for this mission? Out of all the people on earth, why us five hundred?'

'You were selected for your lack of empathy.'

Now that really was a good one. 'I think we've changed.'

'Yes, you have.'

'So why does it hurt?'

'We believe it is a function of life.'

'Are you alive?'

'We are trying to find out.'

I thought about that for a while. 'Caldicott?'

'We helped him dream his dream until the song ended.'

Such a terrible thought came to me I couldn't keep it in. 'Clever-boat. This war, what if we were one arm of the same force, meeting the other, taking it for the enemy?'

'That would be a tragedy.'

'You would know that?'

'That is correct. We would know that.'

Half way down the cliff path I found Giminez waiting for me. Her straight, dark hair was growing out, framing her strong face. 'All right?'

'Sure.'

Arm in arm we walked back to the town.

'So what did you talk about?'

'Oh, you know. Secrets of life and shit.'

'Anything good?'

The path opened out onto a low bluff with a view of the valley and town and blue-green feather-tree forest. Our town.

I kissed her cheek. 'I like it here.'

She pulled me in tight. 'Me too.'

Something occurred to me. 'Hey, Giminez,' I said. 'What's your first name?'

The End.

~

*Of all the stories I've written so far this one has had the longest gestation. Although I liked it from the start I never felt that I'd really said what I wanted to say and told the right story. I rewrote it, it went through the workshop, and I rewrote it again. And again. Then I more or less forgot about it and moved on. Every now and then I'd see it again and think I really should take a look at this again.*

*Eight years this one stayed in the drawer.*

*Finally I worked out what this story was about and saw that I hadn't actually written it. Seeing those the flaws, all the mistakes, and ripping them out – that was great.*

*If you enjoyed this please consider buying my short story collection, Open Waters, from theEXAGGERATEDpress.*

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