

From the Desk of LT Gian Webb

Raise the Flag 2023 Fiction Competition #1

Surviving The Pit

Sergeant Bill Barclay

20 ABY

In the face of galactic eternity, a year is nothing but a drop in the ocean. But when every day is a fight for survival, time stretches on. But so is life on XC-50391, known as The Pit by us poor denizens of this forsaken land. Nothing is given here. Each day is full of fearful surprises. The horrible noise of the croaker rats eats away at our psyche while the acid in the air and the ground threatens to eat away our flesh.

That accursed acid is what brought us to this planet in the first place. The Empire needed it for the precise etching of cloaking stygium crystals. And if they were going to shell out to make this land livable, they were going to pack in as many industrial uses as they could. Life wasn't too bad all things considered. The Empire made up for this dismal post with plenty of rations and luxuries rare to see this far out. But that was when the Empire still came around. One year ago, just before last winter, was the last time we heard from them. Our cargo shuttle went up, but never came back. That winter was horrid. Communication with the Empire's fleet was completely silent, and many lives were lost in the harsh environment. It was as if hell had frozen over.

There was no way that we could survive another winter. This past year has been hard enough in fair weather. Technicians became hunters, manufacturing equipment became water purification machines, we adapted, and would have to continue to do so. While the prospect of another winter is bleak, we have dedicated the resources of an entire imperial industrial colony towards solutions.

Five months ago, Lieutenant Commander Rodney Kissinger was caught in falling debris while working to disassemble crystal etching equipment. We had long run out of raw crystal material, and the equipment could prove valuable for our continued survival. He lost both legs and suffered extensive damage to his renal and nervous system. In a last-ditch effort, Kissinger opted to have his being fused into the machines around us. The scientists were certain that they could use untested theories to bind his consciousness to a databank; and he went along with it, he had nothing to lose. And so we went about constructing a new body for the Lieutenant Commander. Our factories had parts galore, and we were even able to get new legs from the remnants of a droid who had found the wrong end of an ion blaster after surprising a guard patrol the previous month. Machine joined to bone, wire replaced nerves, and Rodney Kissinger rose again.

To survive the winter, it was decided that we should all go the way of LC Kissinger. Food was in short supply, but our reactor could power mechanical bodies for decades to come. So, in the intervening months we ransacked the factories and took plasma cutters to our droids. Each person assembled their own mechanical upgrades in preparation to fuse man with machine. Physical ailments could be mended, and we could now carry with us every tool for survival. The hope was that when the Empire returned one day they could forge for us new bodies through cloning technology, it was the least that we deserved for going through this ordeal.

We learned of weaknesses through the second life of Rodney Kissinger. His personal databank was far too fragile. Even with his metal improvements, The Pit took its toll, and he died again, this time forever. The rest of us could not afford the same fate. The giant processor for the factory was unplugged from its machines and made to be our future home. Each mind would be separate, and in control of its body, but together we would be safe.

But I spoke with Kissinger, or what was left. The others may have been blinded by hope for a future, but I saw differently. He was gone, and I was scared. We gathered together, three thousand weary survivors, ready to make a last-ditch attempt at survival. And when the moment came, and we stepped together into new future, I ran. I now sit across from the body which had been fashioned for me. With spiked climbing apparatus and my

salvaged stormtrooper armor, it now sits as a silent judge of what I've done, and perhaps a warning of what is still to come.

21 ABY

Winter has made its dark presence known, the thaw has come, and still I live. I am a lone man, lost among sentries of his past. The others still roam these halls, their servos and motors march through the days like none of this ever happened. The cold durasteel of the Empire, acting out its wishes for eternity. My friends and compatriots are all gone. I hope that they live on in some file, perhaps to be reborn one day. But the husks with whom I now cohabit on this planet are nothing but uncaring strangers.

The machines have forgotten that they are part flesh, and The Pit punished them for that folly. Days after they crossed over, hunger forced me out from my hiding. I saw them going about their motions, and they saw me. There was no recognition in their eyes, memories seemed to be lost in translation. But they knew I was no foe, from my imperial garb I suppose, and they made no move to hinder me. As former friends came and went, I watched the acidic planet take its toll on their unprotected flesh. The winter, once our greatest fear, graciously crept in, preserving the organic components of these terrible machines. But the spring thaw arrived, with it came rot, and I was forced to take drastic action.

While the machinery inserted into their bodies was designed to last for decades, organic vestiges of life were not so fortunate. The planet took its toll on those who I once called friends, especially once the warmth of spring arrived, which ushered in rot and decay. I was forced to go about the grisly process of removing the soft tissues. Each body was carefully harvested, and the parts placed into cold storage. Perhaps when they return the Empire can still construct a new life from those remains. The mechanical effigies of life did not seem mind at all, in fact they seemed grateful (as grateful as metal can be) when I released what parts remained out of the freezers. What I had to do will live with me forever. One cannot simply forget spending months cutting into the people who they were once

closest to. But I tell myself that this was for the best. The factory is rid of disease and rot, and now I don't have to watch my fellow imperials slowly melt and degrade under the constant pressure of time.

I am now surrounded by figures of metal and bone. Skeletons march about their duties, animated by jerry-rigged mechanics. But I am alive, and I shall remain so. Communications still remain silent, but I hope that one day I will see the Empire descending planetside again. It is now a race against time, will this cursed planet manage to kill me before the Empire returns? Only time will tell.

27 ABY

The Pit has not yet brought me down. The sun continues to rise and fall, and still I stand in defiance of death. My workers of bone and durasteel keep the order of the Empire in our little corner of space. The creatures they once were have become my sustenance, together we carry the banner onwards. It is a glorious final act of loyalty, one they freely give. Now as one we face this hostile land, armed with technology and cunning.

Deep within this facility I chanced upon a lost shipment. Sitting all alone for me to find. Within this case, millions of credits of processed stygium crystals. Our grand work, forgotten in the rush of survival. With no Empire shipyards in sight, this grand treasure falls under my domain. With the manufacturing facility, and my droids, I could stay invisible forever. The Pit has always wanted me gone. Maybe now its dream will come true. I shall become a shadow on this blighted planet. A lonely phantom, surviving against all odds.

TK-1204

31 ABY

Our Admirals aboard the *Hammer* continue to bring us to strange new lands. There were no complaints from the troops, we were pleased to feel solid land below our boots, no matter how harsh the environment. XC-50391, we learned the planet's name on the transport down. It's

been 12 years since any communication with the imperial facility down below. There was a general pessimism surrounding the odds of anything still being recoverable, but engineering seemed keen to find some crystals or other.

In the split second between the transport doors opening and my helmet's filters activating, an acrid taste hit the back of my throat, an early hint as to the land which lay ahead. Before us were bubbling pits that gave off ghastly green steam. Orders were to avoid the liquid, so we crept over thin strips of solid land with tensions high. Before us stood the Imperial facility. Still standing proud after all these years, but lacking the signs and sounds of life. Just an eerie mechanical hum, emanating across this acrid swamp.

Tensions were only raised when, 14 minutes after exiting our ships, an explosion burst from the ground on our right flank. Somebody wanted to keep visitors out. And for their trouble they killed a trooper and injured three more. More than just the nature of this planet was hostile, and that would not be the end of our troubles. Moments later, two horrible creations emerged from the brush. They were droids with the bleached bones of humanoids affixed to themselves, like some grisly trophy. They approached us with alarming speeds, arms outstretched like they intended to seize us, no doubt to add us to their grim collection. These beasts stood no chance against our unified blaster fire. But we had come to realize that a reconnaissance mission had quickly become a fight directly from our nightmares.

The approach to the facility was quiet, though many of us wished for a fight. The feeling of eyes watching and the eerie silence was worse than anything these bots could throw at us. Scouts scanned the building and reported back bad news. Within the building were thousands of the dark creatures. Each was equipped with the carcass of this unfortunate Imperial remnant. All except one. Seated on a throne of junk there was reported to be an unmoving machine. It was made from stormtrooper armor and had grisly spikes protruding from its back. But this shell seemed to have not claimed a life, perhaps its target had escaped, maybe there were others on this planet. Most importantly, these creatures seemed unaware of our presence, which could only play in our favor.

Bill Barclay

Soldiers arrived today. They marched onto The Pit in the same armor I proudly wore for many years. But these were no Imperials. They donned the garb, but that didn't fool me. I saw them fire upon their own subjects. Poor imperial citizens who have struggled for so long on this dastardly planet, cut down by those meant to be their saviors. I know not what has happened to the Empire in the past dozen years, but these imposters knew where we were and had their equipment. I was pleased when a trap that I had set for wildlife deployed on these interlopers. I hope that they too can experience this hell for what it is. And I will be there to see it all. I am a noise in the wind, a rustle in the grass, sensed but never seen. I will live forever, and these soldiers will fear me. My peers gave the ultimate sacrifice so I could carry the Empire's banner, and no pretenders will stop me now. And if they should pick this land clean and leave, I will bring the hell with us. The Pit is vengeful, but I know how to beat it.