

Anticipation

by Chuck Kallenbach II

(This story originally appeared in *Lotus Noir* magazine.)

Jossel Swin stared at the bright columns of light just over the hill ahead. Typical of mining operations on Ganymede, they burned off a radioactive material called truginium.

He wore standard Earther low atmo armor, lightly pressurized and shielded against the radiation streaming through Ganymede's thin atmosphere. Behind the front plate of his helmet, his face was long and drawn.

His squad was only a hundred meters from the mines they came to destroy. That would provide a crippling blow to put the Tinmen in their place.

"They should save it, not burn it off. If they knew what was going to happen..." Swin muttered to himself as Corporal Kenjan Hallist approached.

"What was that sir?" Hallist said. "We're here to blow up these mines, remember?"

"Of course, corporal," snapped Swin. "The mission. I'm sorry about you, though."

"Excuse me, sir?" Hallist was sure he misheard.

"Prepare the charges, corporal." Swin turned back toward the truginium columns. Hallist called out to Pataki and Robson, the demo team who would place the charges on the open mine shafts.

Swin turned and barked his orders. "Pataki, take four men to the right. Robson, take your four straight ahead to the other shaft. Get those charges placed." Both teams moved out.

"Should I stay with you then, sir?" asked Hallist.

"Suit yourself. It doesn't matter," replied Swin, sitting down on a large rock. "They'll be ambushed soon, and you'll try to kill me. The mission will be accomplished, though." He looked up at the corporal, who was getting scared. "I want you to know something, Hallist. You think it doesn't have to be this way, but it does." Swin took two small devices from his pocket.

"It shouldn't take long, sir. They'll be in place in a couple of minutes." Hallist spoke slowly, as if trying to calm a child. "They get clear, they blow the charges, and we get out of here." A trickle of sweat ran down his back.

"Won't be that long." Swin put the objects down and Hallist realized what they were.

"Sir, why do you have the detonators? They should be with Robson and Pataki." said Hallist. A red indicator now flashed on each remote, meaning that the charges were primed.

"Ah, there are the Mavericks," muttered Swin. Hallist turned toward the sound of plasma rifle bursts. Swin quietly picked up his own rifle.

A scream came across the comm circuit. "Man down! Man down! We're taking fire!" Hallist saw them down the hill.

“Sir, you can’t detonate until they’re clear! You have to wait!” Hallist wheeled around, his rifle ready.

Swin fired his F.L.I.C. once, and Hallist’s chest armor shattered. He fell heavily to the ground. “It doesn’t matter, Hallist!” he screamed. “It doesn’t matter!” He threw aside the rifle and picked up the detonators.

Jossel Swin looked over the edge of the hill at his squad. Six still stood, two were down, and all were pinned by the Mavericks.

“You were all going to die anyway. But now the mission will still succeed.” He smiled to himself, and thumbed the buttons.

Twin charges roared below. The shock blasted Swin off his feet, and debris rained down on him. Then it was silent.

“They’ll find out that I killed them all, and I’ll be stripped down to private. Unacceptable casualties, they’ll say. I killed a dozen Mavericks too... doesn’t that count for anything?”

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