

On the Pole
By Tomas Jech

Chapter 1

Brenner had seen dead bodies before. These had been dead for a fairly long time. The buried limbs and shreds of clothing were mostly obscured by a layer of dirt and rock. As he gazed more carefully at the splintered bones, realized he had never seen dead bodies at all- not in person. He had only seen them on the news, and he had certainly never stood on them.

"You out here for *fun*?" Lyle was making one of his rare insights. He was usually quiet, so the other men turned. Brenner grimaced.

"I didn't say that," Brenner leaned against the pole, digging it into the dry dirt.

"Then was you... what was you caught for?" Lyle rubbed a scar on his arm. He seemed completely unaware of the sudden quiet. Brenner didn't answer.

"He's prawllly married a zerglin if they put 'im onna pole!" Ged let out a strangled laugh, "GADDAMIT, dang flippin gun!"

The men around Ged backed away. Ged had bumped the leg of tripod mounted Nikos laser, "I ain't... Brenner go run the rod, we can't jus' eff around all day."

Brenner grabbed the pole and started off. Lyle lumbered over to the gun, he placed his large hands over the tripod legs with steady care and pushed them down into dirt. He was a strange sight: A hulking leather-skinned man hunched over the tiny dials on the Nikos. He peered through the scope for a moment and then slowly tilted his body away from gun.

"It's zeroed up again," Lyle slowly stepped from between the tripod legs, very careful not to touch. He looked up. By now, Brenner was barely visible on the jagged orange boulders that made up most of the area. Heat waves distorted his distancing form.

Ged nodded, "How're we on sattelite?"

The shorter of the two men standing at the back of the jeep looked at a tiny computer monitor, "We're bout a tenth off- but heck, considerin nobody been out here for this long we're gold!"

Ged looked around at the craters, "a tenth... that's good enough for government work!" He let out another oddly pained laugh, "Git Brenner in the sights."

Chapter 2

Out in the desert sun a figure stirred under a small rocky outcropping. It stumbled forward into the light. Like a man, it walked upright. The figure paused a moment, as if unsure it wanted to continue. Bones of rodents and birds crunched under the heavy metal souls of it's boots. The figure stopped again and looked down at it's feet... his feet. He wanted to sleep. His arms felt heavy. He fell.

He woke what felt like a few minutes later. There had to be a way to get back, to reach someone. He grabbed at his radio, but his arm did not seem to respond. Where was his arm? He suddenly felt nauseated. A few minutes later he was sitting against a rock watching a surprisingly large amount of vomit trail away into a fissure. He felt better.

Now he was walking again, walking fast. He no longer seemed to have trouble balancing

and the sun felt great. He looked down and was surprised to be covering ground at a reckless speed. As he moved across the scarred earth his mind started to slowly piece together his flitting memories. Among the confusion of imagery and partial recollections of conversations, one fact came up again and again: everyone was in danger.

Chapter 3

"He musta killed somebuddy," Ged was sick of standing in the sun. Lyle said nothing, just kept staring through the gun scope.

"His wife mebbe, or a govey..." Ged look over at Lyle, "Might be a psycho, yah I bet it! Put that psycho onna pole!"

The radio buzzed a distorted voice. Ged grabbed at his receiver, "Brenner? Hold the dang button down yah dronehumper!" He released his own call button and waited. One of the men lying in the back of the idling jeep chuckled. Ged walked over to the jeep letting out his wrenching laugh, "A drone bone! You know wha- "

"Base corner stone incline," Brenner's voice rasped through the poor radio speakers. Lyle twisted a few dials on the Nikos and peered for a moment through scope. He looked at a readout on the side of the tripod and nodded to Ged.

"Gawt it! An hurry it up out there," Ged belted into the receiver. He felt annoyed. The sun was bearing down on him with a ruthless heat and he suddenly felt the desperate urge to flee- to leave the desert, the outposts and go somewhere nice... somewhere *safe*. And then, just as suddenly the feeling passed and his uncanny calm returned. The sun did not notice.

"It's friggin hot," mumbled Ged.

Some distance away, Brenner wiped sweat off of his bald head. The day had been long and slow. The same furious sun burned the air around him as he walked along the base of a small plateau. His was a dangerous job, but he was not accosted by the same bouts of dread that plagued the rest of the crew. He wanted to be out here, away from people and politics. Away from the failed relationships and the soured dreams. Most of all, away from the military. He lifted his receiver.

"Base contour plateau," Brenner stood motionless immediately after speaking. He held the pole steady and upright.

"Goooooooooooot it," Ged's voice popped through the radio a few moments later.

Brenner continued on, enjoying the quiet boredom. He briefly wondered what crap Ged was feeding the other crew members about him. He'd probably return that night to hear the crew whispering about fantastical murders and scandalous political schemes. They would never guess the truth. He was chuckling to himself when he heard the scream.

Chapter 4

All of the members of the Long Gate field crew had, at one time or other, been involved in activities not suitable to public well being. Normally those people deemed criminals by the colonial council were sent off to serve in the military, but there were a few that even the military had no use for. Some fortunate criminals had bad legs, or poor eyesight. Others resisted the rigorous chemical treatments and surgery required to become complacent and effective soldiers. And others still were simply too short for the bulky standard issue armor. These rejects of both society and prison ended up in fringe territories doing high risk menial tasks. The most loathed of these task -with the possible exception of processing raw vespene gas- was surveying old warzones with the Long

Gate crew.

Lyle barely remembered a life outside of the Long Gate. At 18 he had been caught stealing a military craft. He had been one of the few who actually *wanted* to join the fight. To kill the vermin that had wiped out everything he cared about. He had signed up eagerly with nothing to lose, but was declined because his body rejected the mandatory awareness enhancing stimulants. A few weeks later he had tried to fly away on a Wraith fighter jet, only to crash it into the hangar doors. He had been "assigned" to the Long Gate crew for a 40 year sentence. Today marked half of his sentence served.

"I think he ain't do nothin'," Lyle was still peering at Brenner through the scope.

"Eh?" Ged was chewing loudly on some unidentifiable chunk of jerky, "he git a mag nail down there yet?"

Lyle did not answer, but Ged did not wait for an answer. He grabbed the radio and spat out a glob of frayed colorless meat.

"Brennyboy! git that nail in the graand and get us a readin or we're leavin yeh out here!" Ged smiled. Lyle looked up at him warily. Ged started to tell him to get back on the gun when Brenner's voice came back to them.

"I can't," the radio fizzed for a few moments as if Brenner had continued holding the call button down after speaking. As soon as it cut out Ged was back on.

"Brenner git that point set, I swear I'll kill yah if we gotta come out here again tomarra!" Ged released the button. The two men in the jeep were sitting up listening to the conversation, Lyle peered through scope. The radio indicated that Brenner's line had gone dead.

Brenner had been slow to find the source of the cry that had pierced his silent day. He had climbed around for a while before he saw the body lying out on a flat rock in the sun. It was a marine. Slates of armor and padding still covered much of his body. The armor that was still on was chipped and broken. Brenner could see a fleshy arm sticking out from behind an immense shoulder brace. He was about to check the body for a pulse when he saw that it was heaving rhythmically. He tried to hoist the marine, but the armor was so heavy he only managed to roll the marine over.

"Ahhhg," Brenner gasped at the marine's twisted face. The veins bulged like worms and the cheeks were flushed a sickly orange. Brenner tried to back away but the marine's dangling pink arm had suddenly latched onto his side. The grip was vicious. Brenner cried out falling forward onto the marine's chest plate.

"You... are you recon?" The marine's breath stung Brenner's face, "where is command?"

"Aaaah..." Brenner pulled at the marine's arm. It wrenched deeper into his ribs, threatening to to break skin. The hand suddenly released. Brenner coughed and doubled over onto the ground next to the marine, crunching down on his radio set. The marine threw up.

Chapter 5

Ged had only been on the Long Gate crew for 5 years, but his abrasive attitude quickly propelled him to the top of it's meager hierarchy. He hated every minute working out in the field, and he would often say so. He had been a businessman before the incident. Every sale and trade between rival factions of the Terran colonies was either instigated or directly delivered by Ged. Even the Protoss tribes (who liked to imagine their enormous fleets of battleships orbiting the nearby planets were invisible) had provided

Ged with intermittent business. He sold every seemingly unimportant commodity from household appliances and prepackaged food to decks of cards and old magazines. It was commonly believed among Ged's friends and competitors that if the mindless and bloodthirsty Zerg ever opened a dialog with humanity, it would be because Ged had managed to sell them a TV dinner.

At 30 years of age, Ged had been nearing fame. But it all changed after his trial. For the first year of his life sentence old colleagues would come out to visit him, just to see for themselves how low Ged had fallen. Now at 42, Ged bore little resemblance to the fresh young businessman that had stopped wars with shipments of pornography and microwaves. His skin had leathered, his eyes had become slits of moisture and his humor had become bitter and crude. But even the young Ged would have lacked the bravado necessary to stay out in the wastelands at sundown.

"We could come look for him tomorrow..." a crewman was trying to break the thick silence that had followed Brenner's last radio transmission. Ged had been sitting in the jeep's passenger seat for fifteen minutes watching Lyle methodically pack up the Nikos.

"This place has been dead for years... his battery probably just cut out," the crewman had lost satellite signal and was now sitting on his field computer in the makeshift flatbed on the roof of the jeep. He felt like he was on a throne.

"Shutup shutup! Less just get outta here... Lyle!" Ged was moving into the driver's seat. Lyle wasn't moving, he was staring out at the rocks. Suddenly Lyle looked up. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he just breathed out. He put the Nikos, still half assembled, into the back of the jeep. The two other crewmen jumped down and took seats. Lyle saddled up in the back with the gun. They drove off.

Chapter 6

Brenner had managed to grab the pole. One end of it was sharp, it was a spear now. The marine was still retching and heaving on the ground. Brenner lifted himself gingerly and backed away. The marine didn't appear to be armed. Brenner's ribs felt broken.

"I have to get to command... huaaaaakk... command... it should be here," the marine vomited again. It was not normal. There was a rattling sound, a strange violence to the movements. Brenner now noticed the marine's arm was missing an elbow. There simply was no clear place where the arm bent. That didn't make any sense. Even now, the marine was supporting his weight with the seemingly boneless tubelike arm.

"It... yeah, it was here," Brenner remembered it well, but had not realized this was the place until now, "it was... it was *right* here..."

"I killed them... oh... huaaaarrrrkuaha... but I had to, I HAD TO..." The marine suddenly turned. He was transformed, a new strength was in his expression, "The zerg are here, I have to warn command."

"We know the zerg were here," Brenner watched the marine's eyes dart around. His face was a mangle of stretched skin. Brenner leveled his spear and continued to back away.

"You know? You're a civilian... where is the armor?" The marine walked steadily toward Brenner, "Did they reposition? go airside?"

The marine stopped. He looked up and scanned the sky, "it's too dark to see..."

Despite himself, Brenner looked up for a moment as well. A few stars were visible, but there were stringy clouds covering most of the evening sky. In that moment he stepped on a loose rock and went tumbling backwards. He fell for longer than he anticipated, and

when he finally did hit the ground- it was smooth and metallic. He lay there with mild surprise as he drifted into unconsciousness.

Chapter 7

Ged was cursing the darkness, the path, the job, and anything he could think of. The crewmen were holding down loose machinery as the jeep bumped madly down through the rocky wastes. The craters littering the landscape were large and hard to navigate. Ged managed to get the vehicle stuck twice since their hurried departure.

"Might want to slow down..." one of the crewmen was looking pale.

"I'm not 'upposed tuh be here " Ged was not talking to anyone in particular, "I don't belong 'ere."

"You should probably slow down..." the crewman was gripping his seat.

Lyle was calm. He kept his bulk solidly around the neck of the Nikos and stared steadily forward. The jeep lurched over the crest of another crater.

"He didn't do nothing," Lyle said it quietly.

"You say sommat?" Ged gripped the wheel tightly, "almost there."

Lyle just kept staring forward. The jeep lurched again, another crater rim.

"This speed is... unsafe," the crewman had closed his eyes.

"You wanna go git him?!" Ged suddenly screamed, "git out and go! go on!"

"I'm jus sayin..." Lyle was infuriatingly calm. The jeep skidded violently and came to a jumbling halt.

"HE!!! HE DID SOMTHIN!! HE DID SOMTHIN!! WE ALL DID OR WE WOULDN'T BE IN THIS GADDAM PLACE!!!" Ged had his head against the wheel. The two crewmen were silent, ignoring the machinery that had crashed upon the sudden halt. Lyle said nothing. Ged raised his head slowly.

"ok... let's go get him."

Chapter 8

Brenner woke leaning against a wall. The first thing Brenner noticed was the stillness of the air. There was no wind. He opened his eyes slowly. On his left he was staring down a long metallic hallway. He looked over to his right.

"Bout time you come around," The marine was sitting next to him, eerily illuminated by the small red strips of florescent lighting that lined parts of the corridor. Brenner jerked away and scampered a few feet before collapsing.

"It was cleansed, wasn't it?" the marine was holding Brenner's spear loosely across his legs, "You fell quite a ways... this might help yah walk."

The pole skidded over to Brenner's feet. He looked at it for a moment. It seemed out of place and strangely weathered against the cool gray-blue of the floor.

"Yeah... we bombed the hell out of this place," Brenner hoisted the walking stick gingerly, "for three months... just blankets of fire."

The marine chuckled, "And us down here... "

Brenner looked at the floor. The marine stood up and walked under the ruptured ceiling.

"We ain't getting back that way," the soldier kicked some of the rocks that had fallen down with Brenner.

"So... you found the command center," Brenner said this in a cavalier tone. He suddenly regretted the remark, "I uh..."

"I think I'm a little late," the marine turned with a contorted expression. Brenner realized it was a smile.

"I can't believe it survived the shelling," Brenner stood up wincing, "I can't believe *you* survived the shelling..."

Out of nowhere there was a patter of feet and the marine was launched bodily through the air. Brenner stumbled out of surprise. The marine hit the ground with a thud. He was a tangle of limbs on the floor a few feet away. Brenner stood as quickly as he could, he limped over to the fighting pair and raised the tip of his pole. He hesitated.

The assailant was growling and slobbering. The marine had rolled the attacker over for a moment and Brenner saw that it was another marine. He brought the spear down. The creature resisted violently but Brenner held the pole steady. After a few moments the grasping arms went limp.

"That stick of yours ain't much of a weapon," The marine had rose to his feet and examined the dead man pinned to the ground.

"Saved your ass..." Brenner pulled the pole roughly from his victim. Sickly blood erupted from the wound.

"I'm Butler..." the marine looked briefly at Brenner and then bent down over the corpse.

"Brenner."

"This was a man..." Butler prodded the man's bloated head with his armored hand, "I think the zerg are still here."

"But it's been years..." Brenner was looking at Butler's strangely mutilated arm, "you almost became one of them too..."

"Let's see if the comsat is up," Butler turned away from Brenner and looked down the poorly lit hall. There was a scurry of movement at the far end.

"Oh fuh-"

"Come on!" Butler grabbed Brenner roughly with his gloved arm. They took off down the hall away from the rapidly nearing shapes. Brenner fell behind, still winded and injured from his fall. Butler continued on- surprisingly swift with the clanking armor weighing him down.

"Butler!" Brenner couldn't seem to keep up, he was losing sight of Butler through the twisting hallways. Suddenly he couldn't see Butler at all. He kept running, but his leg was badly hurt and he didn't know where to go. He could hear the crazed half-zerg marines gaining ground.

"DOWN," Butler burst from a door in front of Brenner. In his arms he carried an assortment of military grade armaments. Brenner let himself fall, sliding past the armed marine and into a computer terminal. There was a burst of light and inhuman screeching as Butler opened fire. Brenner slid against the terminal and watched as five grotesquely deformed soldiers fell to the ruthless stream of bullets. One of them slammed into a far wall and violently exploded, clattering Brenner's teeth. Butler was knocked back by the shock and lay next to Brenner still attempting to fire the empty rifle. Butler stopped.

"Gimme one of those," Brenner gestured at the rifles scattered on the ground.

"I thought..." Butler glanced at Brenner, who was still curled up under the computer, "you had your stick..."

Chapter 9

Ged and the crew had not made it very far before running into their own problems. When Ged hit the first lumbering marine, he thought he was going to have another murder on his conscience. But when Lyle (who had studied the zerg in his youth) examined the marine, and revealed to Ged that the body had been infested and crazed, Ged rejoiced. When the other ten infested marines ran in from the darkness, Ged cursed his luck again.

"I thought this place was wiped clean!!" Ged was navigating the craters even more wildly than before. Numerous silhouetted shapes rushed along side the jeep. Every now and then one marine would attempt throw himself at the jeep, blowing up like a human landmine mere yards from the grinding tires.

"FASTER!!!" One of the crewman was lying across the seats. The other was tossing machinery out the window, in hopes of lightening their load. Lyle sat unmoving.

"TOSS THE NIKOS!!!" one of the crewmen called back to Lyle, "shame it ain't a real gun."

Over the next hour the marines eased their rushes and it appeared as though the jeep had outrun them. Ged pulled the jeep up to the last location Brenner reported in. It wasn't long before they found the large gaping hole that had collapsed under Brenner a few hours earlier. Ged was just beginning to feel slightly optimistic when the whole earth began to shake.

Chapter 10

Butler and Brenner had not found the comsat station. They had, however, found the control office. Butler had managed to hold the room while Brenner bumbled around looking for a way to close the blast doors.

"CLOSE THE DOORS!!" Butler yelled over the firing of his rifle.

"I'M WORKING ON IT!!" Brenner started hitting buttons and pulling levers. He ran from terminal to terminal looking for something that was still on, still emitting light. In his panic he tore off a panel near the doors and gazed dumbly at the tangle of cables and wires. He raised his weapon and began to fire into the clump.

"EASY, BRENNER!! cease fire..." Butler was standing next to him, "They're gone... don't waste the ammo."

Brenner breathed deeply looking at the mess of wires he had been shooting fruitlessly, "they'll be back."

"There's gotta be some way to send out a signal here," Butler was looking at the vast

array of terminals and displays. All of them were dull and blank.

"Nothing is on... " Brenner was still catching his breath.

Butler tried pushing some buttons. The room was silent. Brenner leaned against the panel he had so carelessly torn from the wall. Upon a second examination, it looked fairly important. It almost looked like some sort of steering lever. He pulled it.

Chapter 11

The reports on the following events were vast and numerous. However, there was a general consensus among many of the major news organizations on what happened. The remainder of this report is a summary of that consensus:

The buried zerg-infested command center still had sixteen functional escape engines. Those engines, once activated by a party within the building, caused the command center to ascend through the rocks and slowly into partial orbit of the planet. A second party, whose names have not been disclosed, managed to infiltrate the command center during its initial take off.

Authorities orbiting the planet soon discovered the rogue military structure, and began strategically shelling it. Both parties inside managed to vacate the flying structure by way of a docked fighter aircraft. One of the crew in question was quoted to say, "I've flown one before." All parties are currently being held for questioning on the Odyssey Battle Cruiser.

The End