

Toll (A 'Password' Sequel)

by Robert Bee

This story is a sequel to my earlier story "Password." It is best to have read that first to appreciate the setting and characters.

I hope you enjoy it. Have a frabjous day. (RB)

"I'm getting too old for this," Jake Perkins mumbled into his helmet. He located a smooth boulder, one large enough to double as a chair, and lowered his suited behind gently onto it. From there he gazed, gob struck, at the amazing bridge stretching across the equally amazing ravine. Beyond the bridge there was... what? Jake's senses still couldn't take it in. Whatever it was, it was also amazing and Jake felt in his bones that many text books will have to be rewritten and many apologies made to Percival Lowell.

Jake clicked his intercom, readying to report his discovery to base. What to report? He'd omit the 'amazings' from his report of course as they would be self evident to his team. But it was, all the same, shockingly amazing to find an ancient bridge, over a bottomless ravine, leading to the ruins of what appeared to be an ancient city. All within an immense underground cavern.

Beneath the surface of Mars.

"Perkins to base. Come in."

"Bill here. How's it going old timer?" Despite the Spartan conditions of the exploratory base in an extremely hostile environment, Bill Fraser always seemed to stay cheerful... and respectfully disrespectful to his senior team mate.

"Feeling older," Jake replied. "Um... I've something new to report and... ah, I just want to say first that... ah, I haven't been using my happy pills."

"Okay, Jake, duly noted. And recording. Go." Bill had switched to professional mode.

Jake stared at the city... if that's what it was... on the other side of the bridge, shook his head and started his report. "I have progressed into the cavern... the entrance I reported last check in... by approximately one point five clicks. This cavern, it's... amazing." He couldn't help it, the word just slipped out.

"What's so amazing, Jake? It's size?" Bill had flunked English Literature at college... he was planning to be an astronaut, after all... so he found 'amazing' a perfectly functional word.

"Yes, that too," Jake said. "But remember, I'm a klick inside a hill, about a third of that below surface level and... and..."

"And... come on old timer, you can say it..." Bill coaxed.

"I haven't had to use my torch."

There was silence from Jake's intercom.

"Base... are you there?" Jake said.

"Receiving you, Jake, just not understanding you," Bill came in a second later. "Are you saying there are light shafts reaching down from the surface? We haven't spotted anything like that in our surveys."

"And you won't?" Jake said. "No external light."

"Then how..?"

"The roof..." Jake leaned back to stare at the cavern roof, many metres above him, higher than the highest cathedral ceiling. "It's glowing, a yellow-whitish light. It's like daylight down here. I'm even casting shadows."

There was a brief silence again. Eventually, Bill came back on line.

“Um, Jake... have you checked your radiation counter? The glow could be from...”

“Roger that, Bill, checked first time I saw it. Zero reading, so it’s not radio-active rock... thank goodness. I managed to get a closer look when I went through a tunnel. I couldn’t reach it to take a sample, but it looks like some form of... plant.”

Bill’s mid-response silences were starting to annoy Jake. Come on, son, you’re supposed to be a professional.

“Please confirm, Jake. Did you say ‘plant’?” This was from Don Knowles, the senior scientist of the team.

“Howdy, Don, and yes, I did say plant. Or maybe lichen, or fungus. I’m not a botanist or biologist, but it seems to be an organic growth of some kind.” Jake waited for the inevitable pause but was surprised when Don came right back.

“That is amazing Jake, as you said. This is a huge discovery. You have to get...”

Jake cut Don’s gushing off. “I haven’t got to the amazing bit yet.”

Silence.

“I hope you guys are sitting down. I know I am.” Having said that, Jake hauled himself easily to his feet against Mars’s one-third gravity and cautiously approached the edge of the ravine near the start of the bridge. Holding on to a pylon and bracing himself with legs wide apart, he peered down.

“There’s this huge ravine blocking my path. About sixty metres across at its narrowest. No idea how deep, I can’t see the bottom, and that’s using my torch and laser pointer.”

“So, a deep underground chasm,” Don said. “What’s so amazing Jake?”

“There’s a bridge across it,” Jake said.

“A natural formation,” Don said, irritation in his voice. “Jake, that ceiling material is...”

“The bridge has been built, with pillars supporting cables supporting a planked deck,” Jake concluded. “It’s a suspension bridge.”

“It’s man made?” Bill whispered.

“It’s something made,” Jake agreed. “I doubt man had anything to do with it.”

Now there was a longer silence.

“Jake... this is Raj.” Raj Singh was the mission team’s medical officer. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Never better, Raj,” Jake replied. “This one third gravity has done wonders for my arthritis. How are you feeling?”

“I’m... come on Jake, you know what I mean. What you’re describing is pretty...”

“Amazing?”

“I was going to say ‘fantastic’” Raj said. “As in fantasy.”

Jake snorted into the intercom. “Well get the couch ready Raj, ‘cos I haven’t got to the really amazing bit yet.” Jake looked closely at the city, with its crazy tessellated walls, spires that didn’t quite go straight up, and windows that weren’t quite square, not to mention too large for earthly use. And the vicious spikes that jutted at a downward angle from every metre of the wall’s top suggested a less than welcoming attitude of its occupants. And despite its impressive height, no part of the city reached the glowing top of the cavern.

He communicated this as best he could to his listeners at base.

After another seemingly endless silence, Don came back on. “Um... Jake, Raj says we can safely assume you’re not imagining all this...”

“That’s kind of him...”

“...so what do you think? A dead city? Or...” a nervous laugh crackled over the ether “... a bustling one?”

“Hard to tell from this side of the ravine. Can’t see any movement,” Jake said.

“Jake, can you cross the bridge for a closer look?” Bill barely contained his excitement. Jake could picture him already composing his paper for the Science Journal – Nobel Prize, here we come.

“Kind of you to suggest that Bill. I’d never have thought of it myself.” Jake moved around the pylon and stood in the centre of where the bridge’s landing met the cavern floor. He tested the landing material with his weight. It seemed solid enough. “I didn’t fall through it, Raj. There goes your fantasy theory.”

“Sorry, Jake, it was just...”

“Forget it Raj. I’d have thought the same. Okay, here I go.” Jake started to walk up the gentle slope towards the bridge’s main deck. He’d gone about ten metres, almost reaching a point between the second pair of pylons when he abruptly stopped. “Oh oh!”

“What do you mean ‘Oh oh’?” From the sound of his voice, Jake could tell that Bill was sitting on the edge of his chair.

“We have a problem. There’s a barrier across the bridge between these pylons. Some sort of booby trap, or a defence mechanism.” Jake carefully took three steps backwards.

“What’s it look like, Jake?” Don asked.

“Dunno, can’t see it,” Jake said.

“Can’t see it? Then how do you know it’s there?” Don was clearly on the edge of his seat too.

“I don’t have to see the wind to see the leaves blowing about. In this case, what I see is a large number of dismembered skeletons scattered about the line between the pylons. Something nasty happened to them, right at this point.” Jake took another step backwards.

“Skeletons?” Don shouted. “What do they look like?”

“Nothing you’d recognise. You either Raj.” Jake reached into his sample bag and picked out a small rock. He walked back towards the pylons, stopped about two metres from them and gently tossed the rock at waist height towards the bridge. There was a sudden blurring of the space between the pylons, lastly only a fraction of a second, but the small rock suddenly became a floating cloud of dust from which some small rock chips slowly floated at one third gravity towards the deck.

“Nice,” Jake said.

“What’s nice?” Don yelled. “Dammit Jake, what’s happening?”

“Some kind of spatial blender. Bet it does a great coleslaw.” Jake described what he’d done and the result. “Great defence weapon. Question is: Does it being active mean that its owners are still about? Did my triggering it set off an alarm? Is there an army of Orcs rushing towards me from the bowels of the city at this moment?”

Silence. Then Bill came on. “I read that book. Lord of the ... whatsit. So Jake, is there?”

Jake scanned the city’s walls. Nothing... yet. Then he turned his gaze back to the pylons. Something on the right hand pylon, something he hadn’t noticed before, caught his eye.

“Oh oh!” Bill whispered.

“Was that a good ‘oh oh’ or a bad ‘oh oh’?” Bill snapped, the tension making his voice squeak like a nervous teenager.

“I don’t think there are any good ‘oh ohs’ Bill,” Jake said. Very carefully, keeping out of the invisible but deadly line, he moved towards the pylon that had attracted his interest, bent and stared closely at its face. “What on earth is this?” he asked.

“What’s what?” Don said.

“This,” Jake said, moving his glove slowly to point at a smooth, regular orifice in the pylon about a metre above the deck level.

“This what?” Don all but screamed down the line. “Jake, you’re killing us here.”

“Oh, sorry. A bit of rhetorical monologue, helps me to...”

“Jake!” That was a scream.

Jake expertly described the strange orifice in the pylon’s face, along with the stranger characters that were engraved in a metal plate above the opening.

“Well, that’s certainly intriguing, Jake,” Don said, “but I wouldn’t have thought worthy of an ‘oh oh’, good, bad or indifferent.”

“No, but the flashing red light above the plate concerns me. It has an angry look to it.”

“Angry look?” Bill said.

“Yeah, angry,” Jake snapped back. “Add to that, there’s another row of small green lights, like LEDs... hold on...” Jake counted under his breath “about twenty of them... above the red light, and they’re slowly going out, one at a time.” Jake swore silently. “It looks like a count down.”

“Oh oh!” three voices said in unison.

“You said it,” Jake muttered. “I think it’s time for a strategic withdrawal.” He started to back away, down the shallow ramp towards the start of the bridge. At a safe distance from the second pylons, he slowly turned to leave the bridge, having almost reached the first pylons. Instinctively he jerked to a halt, barely stopping himself from falling forward as he did. “Oh shit,” he whispered.

“Is that better or worse than an ‘oh oh’?” Bill asked.

“Give me an ‘oh oh’ anytime,” Jake said. “I think I have a problem.”

Jake stood just short of the line between the first pylons, located a few metres up the ramp from the canyon’s edge. It too was littered with fragments of bones, just as if some unfortunate creatures had suffered the affects of the spatial blender evident at the other line of pylons. Jake described his discovery to his team mates.

“How come you didn’t see it before?” Bill asked.

Bill looked closely at the evidence of carnage before him. “Possibly because there’s a lot less of it than at the other spot, I didn’t notice it. But having seen the other pile of bones, I must have subconsciously recognised it on the way back.”

“Yes, sounds plausible,” Don said. “But why is it a problem? You walked passed it unharmed on the way up. Just walk back through it.”

Jake took another rock from his sample bag and tossed it between the pylons. It disappeared in a cloud of chips and dust as the space between the pylons blurred momentarily. “Yeah, thanks for that suggestion Don. I’ll pass.” He explained what had just happened, then described the red light flashing on that pylon’s face, similar to the other. “I don’t remember seeing that flashing when I first went past,” Jake said.

“Maybe it wasn’t,” Bill replied. “Maybe it was set off by the first one.”

“I think you may be right,” Don said. “But... why?”

Realising he was trapped between the two sets of pylons, Jake walked back up the ramp to the second pair. “Um... the countdown is continuing. It’s down by about a third now, and that’s in only five minutes. I may have only ten minutes left, guys. Ideas?”

“Ten minutes to what?” Bill said.

“I’m not sure I want to find out. That spatial blender gizmo isn’t very encouraging,” Jake said.

“If only we could figure out what those written characters meant,” Raj lamented. “It might give a clue to...”

“Raj, you’re brilliant,” Jake cried. “Just a moment.” Jake crept closer to the pylon with the plate of characters and the strange hole. “I’ve seen something like this before. Where? It seems to ring a bell.”

Bill gave a nervous chuckle. “Let’s hope for you it’s not a case of ‘For Whom the Bells Toll’,” he said, choosing an awkward time to demonstrate his limited range of reading.

“That’s it,” Jake shouted.

“What’s it?” Bill said, puzzled.

“Toll. A toll gate. This looks just like a toll gate back on Earth. Written instructions – probably of what amount of toll to pay, and a slot to place the payment.” Jake laughed. “This whole set-up is a bloody toll gate.”

There was no response from the other end of the line. Finally, Don broke the silence. “If that’s so, Jake, why all the bones, that spatial blender as you described it?”

Jake frowned into his helmet. Why indeed?

“It sounds to me like the locals have a low tolerance to toll cheats,” Raj suggested. “You don’t pay the right toll, or the toll at all and ... coleslaw.” There was more silence.

“But... why the second blender on the way off the bridge?” Bill voiced the question that was puzzling them all. “It just doesn’t make sense for a simple bridge toll gate to kill off your cash-shy customers. Even for Martians.”

Jake humphed. “I doubt we have any concept of what makes sense to a Martian. But I’ve had another thought. I was wrong. It’s not a toll gate.”

“It’s not?” Bill said.

“No,” said Jake. “It’s a security panel. Like a card swiper to get through a locked door. This is not so much a toll gate as a security gate. Flash your ID into the hole here, and the blender lets you through... unblended.”

“Yes,” Don said. “Brilliant, Jake. If one used an invalid ID, or no ID at all but just walked through, then, as Raj just said... coleslaw.”

“And...” they all waited while Jake processed his next thought “... if there is a group of undesirables and the first one sets off the up-bridge blender, the down bridge blender is activated to catch them as they try to run back off the bridge. Brilliant. Nasty but brilliant.”

Don coughed nervously. “Unless, as is your case, they don’t run off the bridge but stay put, trapped between. What then?”

Jake checked the row of green lights, now down to one third. Maybe five minutes left. “What indeed? That blender barrier might just be a taste of what’s to come. Have you heard of the ‘murder gates’ in English castles?” He gave a shiver inside his warm exploration suit. “No? Invaders are trapped between two portcullises under the castle wall. Then they’re finished off with arrows... or worse.”

“Worse?” Bill said.

“Yeah. Boiling oil. Ummm... does anyone have a valid ID for me to pop in the slot?” He was met by an awkward silence. “If not, this could become a bit sticky. No ideas? Anything?”

Don finally spoke. “Jake... I wish that we could...”

“Yeah, Don. I understand.” Jake lifted his gaze from the pylon panel towards the city beyond the bridge. So near, yet... He would have loved to explore it to uncover an ancient Martian civilisation, so advanced its security devices continues in operation eons after the occupants had passed on. “It’s okay. Comes with the territory. To boldly go and other split infinitives. At least I got to see this... amazing... city. Pity it doesn’t have any...” Jake’s voice trailed off.

“Any what, Jake?” Raj asked, determined to keep Jake occupied for what could be his last minutes.

“Now, that’s interesting,” Jake whispered.

“What?” said Bill. “You’ve thought of a way past the blender?”

“I wish,” Jake said.

“Then what?” Don said. “Come on, man.”

“I think I’ve got company.” Jake straightened and looked to the far end of the bridge, below the towering wall of the city. Something was coming. He strained his eyes, trying to make out features of the approaching ... thing. It was by no stretch of the imagination humanoid in shape.

“What kind of company?” Don asked, back on the edge of his seat.

Jake gave a low chuckle. “Twas brillig and the slivvy toves, did gyre and gymbol in the wabe...” he recited.

“Raj, I think he’s lost it,” Bill said in a whisper.

“No need to whisper, you illiterate pup,” Jake laughed nervously, watching his alien visitor approach along the length of the bridge, its intent quite plain to Jake. He gave a quick glance at the green lights. Only three to go. Oh well, he’d been resolved to become Martian coleslaw at the hands of some unimaginable alien device, but now this. Which would come first, he thought idly as he savoured the last minute of his life.

“Jake, please, what’s happening,” Don said.

“It’s been an honour knowing you guys,” Jake said softly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to greet the Jabberwocky. Perkins out.”

After three unsuccessful attempts at raising Jake on the intercom, Bill gave up. “Did he really say Jabberwocky?” he asked Raj. “What could he mean by that?”

Raj simply shrugged and shook his head. “Your guess...”

“No good guessing,” Don interrupted. “We have to find out. From his last transmission, he didn’t sound very hopeful that whatever it was coming towards him was a friendly.”

“Find out how?” Bill protested. “He’s cut us off.”

“My god,” Don waved his arms in frustration. “We’re supposed to be space explorers, not desk jockeys. We go out there and find out. Now, before Jake’s problem gets even stickier.” He headed for the locker and started to pull his surface exploration suit out. Before beginning to climb into it, he ran quickly but methodically through the safety check list, finishing with the status of the dual air tanks. He put his left leg into the one-piece suit, then stopped. He looked over his shoulder at Bill and Raj who were watching him in surprised silence from the communications desk. “What part of ‘we’ didn’t you understand?”

“We can’t all go,” Raj said.

“No, but two is a lot safer than just one. Bill, you’re with me. I need your brawn to back-up my brain. No offense...”

“None taken,” Bill said. As if released from a trap, he jumped from his seat and headed towards his suit locker.

Don continued to snap out orders. “Raj, you contact George with the other exploration team. As Mission Leader he should be told what’s happening. Play back the record of Jake’s transmission. I doubt they’ll be able to get back in time to be of help, but who knows. Tell George we’ll be going down the cavern entrance following Jake’s path. We’ll report what we find when we get there. Got that?”

“Is this wise?” Raj said.

“Possibly not, but old-timer or not, Jake’s team. Hell, he’s family. We can’t leave him to face the Jabberwocky or whatever it is alone.” Don pulled an arm into the suit. “Besides, he left his vorpal sword behind.”

“His what?” Bill said, checking his air tank.

Don sighed deeply. “Just get your suit on, son.”

Jake and his Jabberwocky faced each other across the blender barrier, Jake having to crane his neck within his suit helmet to look up at the creature’s head. Jabba, as Jake had decided to call it, was huge, at least as tall as an earthly elephant. Its head resembled a desiccated skull of a giant ox, with giant helical horns facing slightly backwards. The head perched atop a long desiccated neck. Hell, Jake realised, the whole thing had a desiccated look, like the remains of a beast found in a drought stricken field.

Its torso, which must have once been lizard shaped, was supported by four gangly legs, with knee joints bending backwards, bird-like. Each leg ended in large feet, like an elephant’s, except the toes had large curved talons. Wicked, Jake thought. Another pair of legs... or were they arms... protruded from the front of the torso, waving gently before it. Arms, Jake decided when he noticed a set of opposing thumbs on each.

Jake stood still, staring at the apparition before him. He couldn’t transmit what he saw even if he wanted, his mouth was dryer than a Martian sand storm. Well, he thought in his last moments, at least I got to see this... whatever it is.

His eyes drifted to the pylon’s panel, just as the last of the green lights went out. He held his breath, waiting. Would he feel anything? Would he have time to scream?

No, there was not time, as the row of green light all relit as one and the red light above them, previously flashing angrily, went out. Jake tore his gaze from the panel, released his held breath and looked back up at Jabba’s head.

The creature slowly cocked its ungainly head and looked sideways at Jake in an almost human gesture of ‘what do I have here?’ Jake tried to imagine what Jabba saw. A small two legged, two armed creature with an all white hide, a slightly humped back and a nearly spherical transparent skull. Hardly imposing. Nor a threat.

Jake looked past Jabba, beyond the bridge towards the ruined city. Were there more of its kind coming? But no, there appeared to be only this one. The one standing a few metres from him, towering over him, fully in command. It looked skeletal, with dried skin barely covering its bones, yet it had walked the bridge and now stood over him. Staring down at him. Jabba stood like this, unmoving, for what seemed to Jake as an eternity. Then the long neck lowered the head till it was level with Jake’s helmet, moving forward till Jake thought it would surely turn into dried coleslaw. It stopped, short of the danger line, and stared, with seemingly empty eye sockets. And stared.

Oh boy, Jake thought. What now, Lewis Carroll?

His question was answered when, as Jake watched in powerless hope, Jabba conjured a flat square object into its left hand, for want of a better description, and placed it in the slot in the pylon panel. At that moment, it seemed to Jake that all his New Year fireworks came at once.

Through the deadly thin atmosphere of subterranean Mars, the sound of a thousand sky rockets impossibly roared, causing Jake to try to cover his ears with his gloved hands but failing because of his helmet. The space between him and Jabba, the space previously occupied by the spatial blender, was now a towering wall of coruscating light, throbbing through the full colour spectrum and beyond, with colours earthly artists had never dreamed of nor scientists had ever detected. The wall of colour reached up to the cavern’s lofty ceiling and stretched to either side of the bridge out of Jake’s sight, colours flowing like a waterfall grander than any Niagara.

Jake fell backwards, his senses reeling from the onslaught. On his back he squeezed his eyes shut but could not hide from the fluorescing light as the barrage continued. Then, as he thought he could take no more, in an eye’s blink, it stopped. The world beyond his eyelids continued like a psychedelic dream, with green and pink spots swimming in an orange afterglow and his ears rang like a megadose of tinnitus, but gradually it slowed and he felt able to open his eyes.

He snapped them closed immediately, a reaction to his thought: I’ve lost my mind. Jabba has somehow scrambled my brain. To test this theory, he recited Carroll’s nonsense verse The Jabberwocky in full. Reassured that he hadn’t lost all his marbles, though he still had the presence to wonder if Lewis Carroll had lost his, Jake slowly opened his eyes again.

No, he hadn't been imagining it. Jabba was no more. Or at least no more a desiccated wreck of leathery skin and bones. Before him now stood a majestic creature, full of flesh and healthy hide glowing with a shining salubrity. Its reptilian body now had two sets of glorious wings spaced down its back, bisected by a row of scaly fins, and a tail the length of its body. Jake finally looked up at the creature's head... Jabba's head, for he realised that this was still Jabba, though changed. The large oxen head was no more but, with two dazzling rows of teeth restored, flaring nostrils and eyes as large and deep as Earth's largest emeralds, Jake knew he was looking at the stuff of earthly fantasy, the foe of Boewulf and Bilbo Baggins. Draco.

Then the dragon smiled.

Jake braced himself for a fiery finale when, to his surprise and no small relief, the dragon, or Jabba, reached forward its right arm and offered the hand to him. Jake stared for a brief moment at the large clawed hand hovering half a metre from his face, then he reached up with his own right hand and gently gripped it. With an effortless heave, Jabba pulled Jake to his feet, released his hand and turned to face the city. Jake recovered his balance and faced the same way.

He promptly fell back on the bridge's deck.

Jabba wasted no more effort on Jake but strode gracefully across the bridge, stopping only halfway to look back with those huge emerald eyes and a flick of a forehead as if to say 'are you coming?' then continued across the bridge.

Am I coming? Jake thought. Where exactly am I going, is more the point. Climbing carefully to his feet, he looked ahead at the vibrant city, blooming with life as dragons of all colours and sizes filled the previously empty streets, appeared in the previously empty giant windows and looked down from the previously empty roof tops. He suddenly realised how light the whole scene was. It was as if...

He looked up to the cavern ceiling. This time he didn't fall down as he half expected to see what he saw. There was no cavern roof but a clear pink-blue sky all the way to the horizon. He pivoted where he stood. A horizon in all directions. On an impulse, he walked carefully to the edge of the bridge and looked down into the void.

There was a no void, just a gently flowing river of clear blue water. As he stared, open-mouthed, a long flat boat appeared from under the bridge, floating downstream. On board was a party of dragons, some sunbaking, others nibbling on food of some description. All that was missing were the poles and boater hats.

A sudden thought struck Jake. He checked his environmental instruments, then checked them again. With a mental shrug, a scientific equivalent of 'what the heck', he reached up and unlocked his helmet faceplate. He opened it slowly, ready to snap it shut in an instant. But he didn't have to. The air was as full and sweet as back on Earth. He left his faceplate fully open.

Despite his sense of discombobulation, routine and discipline kicked in and he thumbed his intercom. "Jenkins to base... Jenkins to base... come in." No reply, nothing but static. He was not really surprised.

In a slight daze, Jake followed Jabba across the bridge. He was at the halfway point when the fireworks went off again, this time from behind him. He stared at the towering wall of colours curtaining the bridge pylons, admiring their beauty, no longer stunned. He was getting an inkling of what had just happened.

He was confident now of where he was going.

He just wasn't at all clear about the when.

Don Knowles stood at the first pylon, waiting for the younger Bill Fraser to catch up. He bent and looked at the scattered fragments of bones in the line across the bridge. He felt a rush of relief that none of them looked fresh, though the knowledge of what must have happened to the bones' owners sent a slight chill down his spine.

"He's not here," Bill said as he joined Don.

"Not inconsistent with what we heard over the radio," Don replied. "The question is, where is he?"

They both stood still, examining, from what they judged a safe distance, the bridge's pylons and its deck. They had already passed the 'amazed' stage, though they now fully understood how Jake must have felt when he first came upon the bridge, the ravine and the ancient city pressing the vaulted ceiling on the other side. After a minute, Don took a deep breath and started onto the bridge.

"Whoa, wait," Bill cried. "Remember the blender."

Don stopped with a start. "Yes, but according to Jake, that only kicked in after he'd triggered the blender between the second pylons."

"And it may still be 'kicked in' as you put it," Bill said. "What makes you think it has reset itself since?"

Don pulled a small rock from his sample bag and carefully tossed it across the pylon's threshold. The rock gracefully fell at a third gravity to the bridge deck – intact. "QED," Don said, with a slight nod.

“QE what?”

“Never mind,” Don waved the query away. “We should be safe to proceed.” He took one step, then stopped short of the pylons. “But then again...” He reached into the sample bag, withdrawing another rock. With more effort than before, he tossed the rock across the space between the two sets of pylons. They watched it arc through the air and reach the second pylon line. A sudden blurring of the atmosphere was followed by a descending shower of dust and rock chips.

“Oh oh,” they whispered in unison.

“That’s a bit of a worry,” Don said. “According to Jake, that will have triggered this one near us now, so we won’t get past this point.”

“Better to be stuck here than stuck between them,” Bill said.

“You’re right there,” Don said. “But the question remains. Why isn’t he... or his remains... somewhere in that murder gate area?” He did a slow rotation, searching the area, then stopped to stare across the bridge towards the ancient city. “Where are you Jake?”

(Yes, where is Jake? Or more to the point... when is Jake?

Dragons on Mars? Where’s Edgar Rice Burroughs when you need him?

We’ll follow Jake and Jabba’s adventures in the next as yet untitled instalment of ‘Password-Toll-TBA’.)
