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Thirst

By Robert Marvin

Kate pressed play. The video showed Todd looking at the item they found. They thought it was a fossil. How wrong they were.

She paused the video when the fossil was shown in close up. It was a triangular shape with four small pins sticking out from each side. Kate thought it might be its feet. Its red brown color was a great camouflage and blended perfectly in with the ground on Mars. They nearly missed it, but Todd spotted it when they were looking for minerals in the outpost. That was why they placed the research outpost there to begin with. It was too much trouble driving back and forth. They even found artifacts that they suspected to be bones.

The finding was a huge event back on Earth. Everybody thought that astronauts them self were the first life on Mars. The bio team could not wait to get their hands on this artifact and ordered them to bring that thing back to Earth in the next swap which should happen after two days. Kate couldn't wait to get back home. The journey however would take nine months. It was like being born again. They had to wait for the right window of opportunity to head home. Wrong timing could mean longer journey. Possibly an overshoot so they would miss Earth all together. They had power to steer the course but the extra power was also used to run the life support system on board. Taking the chance of using their auxiliary energy to correct the course and speed might help them to arrive home, but not alive.

Kate knew that Todd wouldn't come home alive. She looked quickly at the door to the storage room. It was a metal door with a small rectangular plastic window. The window was covered in pink slime.

Kate pressed play again and watched Todd brush off the dust that still lay over the artifact.

"This is spectacular. It is really well preserved." he said and changed the brush for a scraper. The scraping sound when Todd dragged it over the creature was somehow disturbing.

"If I can just get the hard layer off." he dropped the scraper and it fell on the floor with a metallic clang.

Todd yelled.

Kate always got startled though it was the fourth time she watched the video.

Todd adjusted the camera to show the triangular creature better. The pins were now longer than before. It looked like they were ejected. No wonder Todd screamed.

"What the hell." Todd forgot that he was recording this and Kate watched when the camera showed the table, the floor and his hand picking up the scraper.

When the camera showed the creature again it had retracted its pins.

"It is alive." Kate could barely hear Todd whisper this, but he said it again louder.

She fast forwarded the video until she saw Todd's face in agony. Then she went back few minutes and pressed play.

Two other men had joined Todd. Hans had shown up. He was their biological engineer. He looked skeptical when Todd pointed the camera at him. Hans piercing blue eyes looked into the camera for one moment and then back at Todd. Kate felt uneasy when he looked at her. Even though it was through the camera. His black beard made him even more serious looking. Thinking about it, she realized she'd never seen him smile.

"Are you ready? Look at this." the triangular creature came in view again and Todd began to poke the creature with the scraper.

"Did it respond?" Hans asked.

"Hold the camera Chris." The camera shook a bit and exchanged hands. Chris, their technical officer, was now in charge of the documenting. Chris looked into the camera and grinned. The grin did not help to make him look any better. A rodent was the first thing that came in mind when she saw Chris for the first time. This was his second shift in a row. He might even stay the third shift if they allowed it. He didn't mind. There was nothing waiting for him back on Earth. Or so he said.

"Just look." The scraper ran smoothly over the creature's body.

"Do you know how much time and effort it takes us to get out here Todd?" Hans said. His voice sounded irritated.

Todd stopped scraping.

"I don't understand it moved before." Todd said.

"I think you are getting nuts staying out here for too long. Next time send a video feed." Hans's voice seemed to leave the room while he said this.

"Maybe if you continue to pet it, it will roll over and play dead for you." Chris said and laid the camera on the table. Kate saw a close up view of the creature.

"I am certain I saw this." Todd put the scraper down next to the creature which extracted its pins so fast that Kate could barely see it happen.

Todd screamed when four of the black pins pierced through the gloves and into his flesh. The pins were more like black tentacles now as they swayed around the triangular creature. Todd jerked back his hand like he had burned himself. Kate watched the red brown triangle slowly retract its tentacles. A narrow opening formed on the creature side, revealing a silvery matter that moved in circular motion. The opening, which looked like an evil grin with millions of sharp scissors, closed slowly.

Todd screamed in agony. Kate could hear Hans and Chris run back in the room.

Some cursing was heard through the scream and the camera was picked up again.

Chris pointed the camera at Todd's hand which wasn't bleeding. It was slowly turning pale grey.

"Give me something. Help me." Todd seemed to be in great pain.

"What happened?" Chris asked.

"It stung me. I told you guys. I need pain killers. It is like my hand is being crushed."

Chris pointed the camera at Todd which had a frown on his face like he had seen a ghost.

Kate heard a thudding sound on the storage door and stopped the video where Todd looked back at her with terror in his eyes.

He was back there. They had taken him there and told him to wait while they got help. Kate was the help. The only doctor on Mars and she had no clue what the hell this creature was or what was happening to Todd.

Chris and Hans had put the creature in a sealed container and took it with them back to the headquarters, just in case it should strike again. Hans was eager to do his own experiments.

Two days went by without Kate daring to open the door to check Todd's vital signs. For all she knew this could be contagious. It looked like it.

The first five hours Todd was sweating like someone was pouring water on his head.

"Have a drink Todd. You need to drink a lot." Kate told him, but when he tried to drink the water, they stored in plastic bottles on the shelf, he threw it up. First he vomited just water, and then it changed to pink water. When he started throwing up blood, Kate decided to call for help.

But there was no answer. There was always somebody to answer. Kate knew about the sandstorm that was coming. If she wanted to head back, the time would be now. But she decided to stay with Todd. She didn't know if that was a good or a bad decision.

Maybe the sandstorm had ruined the radio contact. It had messed up other equipment before.

Kate heard another thud on the door. She stood up and walked up to the door. She barely saw through the slimy plastic window, but well enough to not see Todd.

"Todd?"

There was another thud to the door. It was like someone was hitting the lower part of the door.

"Todd where are you?"

Maybe he was in such a bad shape that he couldn't stand or even talk. What kind of a doctor are you? Are you going to sit and wait while the man is dying? It was just the way he was dying that scared her. After Todd threw up the blood he started to shrink, like air was sucked out of a bag. His skin was all wrinkled, not like he was old, but coarse wrinkles at strange locations on the body. It was like the fat and the filling in his body was eaten from the inside. If this was contagious she wouldn't want to catch this. She considered putting on the space suit and go in, but that meant opening the door. If this thing that was killing Todd was airborne, it would spread out through the outpost.

Kate decided not to open the door. A sound like metal being clawed from the other side grabbed Kate's attention. She tried to see what was below the door on the other side when fingers that looked like bare bones with too big skin gloves touched the window. The skin on the finger seemed to stick to the slime on the window. Some of it fell off like ashes from a cigarette.

Kate's intuition told her to step back. She could see Todd's blond hair, or what was left of it. He shook violently and Kate noticed how his hair fell off as he shook. She watched Todd's face which was more like a mummified skull than a face of a man. He was clearly blind as his eyes were shrunken into the orbits. Kate could see skin peeling off his forehead revealing a pink wound. His face disappeared from the window. His hand was still there like it was holding on to life itself. Kate listened to the squeaking sound as he slid down the door.

She stared at the door in horror for few moments and then turned to the radio. She had to get help.

"Chris, Hans, somebody?" She could barely stand to be in there much longer.

Kate looked at the weather information. The wind speed was up to 112 miles per hour. It could even get worse.

She got an idea. Maybe she could ask the swap crew if they had heard anything from the headquarters. It was quicker than trying to contact Earth. Half an hour wait for a reply to

"Hello" was more than her patience allowed at the moment.

"Pioneer One this is Pioneer Two, over." They were supposed to be two days away. If everything was ok they would answer after a few seconds. The wait felt like forever.

"This is Pioneer One. Send message. Over." answered a masculine voice.

Kate felt the knot in her stomach loosen up somewhat.

"Rodger Pioneer One. Message follows. This is Doctor Kate Owen at the research outpost. The contact to Mars base has been lost. Are you able to contact Mars base? Over."

While she waited for a reply she noticed a blond hair on the computer screen that made her think about Todd again. She was about to pick it up when she remembered how his hair fell off. Could it be that his DNA was now circulating through the air conditioning system? Kate looked at the air vent. She had also noticed the dry skin flakes that Todd left on the window. Maybe it was now all circulating through the outpost.

She had to get out of there. She didn't want to end up like Todd. Dried up like a mummy while she was still alive. She couldn't imagine the pain Todd was going through.

"Rodger Pioneer Two, that's negative." Kate didn't recognize the voice that replied. Maybe it was a new recruit.

"Rodger Pioneer One. Good copy out." she replied.

Kate went to the airlock where she stepped backwards into the grey spacesuit. She zipped up the inner suit that was supposed to keep her warm, which it barely did. But it did its

job keeping her alive though. The weather station showed that the wind was picking up and the temperature was minus 76 degrees.

She locked the suit. The sucking sound always scared her when it got airtight. The oxygen should kick in any second now. She watched the digital sensor in the helmet. Air pressure turned green and she felt the cold oxygen fill the helmet. She tried to breath and could feel that the mechanism was working as it should. She pressed the lift button and the floor began to lower her down.

The rover was a white vehicle on six big tires. The housing was mainly a thick acrylic glass ball where the driver could see everything from the ground up. Not unlike her own helmet, just a bigger one.

Kate climbed aboard and fastened the seat belt. Sensors and computer screens lit up when she started the rover. The oxygen level turned green. She took off her helmet.

She tried the radio.

"Mars base, over." Kate didn't expect any answer and set the GPS destination to *home*. That is what it was after all, at least for the time being. The GPS showed a straight line for seven miles. That was a long way in this weather with no roads. She opened the outer door and brown dust filled the bay.

Normally she would wait out a storm like this. It was mandatory to wait them out. But this was a different

situation. She drove the rover slowly into the storm.

The dust began to polish the rover. Kate could see the acrylic glass getting more matte every minute, as if it wasn't already hard enough to see through the window.

Small rocks smashed against the rover, bigger rocks shook it violently when they hit. Kate could only hope that the glass would hold against such an impact. The banging and the screaming of metal being bent echoed inside the rover. Kate put on her helmet again. Just to be on the safe side.

At this speed she would need to spend an hour in this storm. She didn't really think that the vehicle could last that long. Though the glass held, other mechanism could get easily damaged by the impact of big rocks and the fine dust was even more dangerous.

Kate gave the rover a little more power to speed it up. The shaking became more severe when the rover drove over large rocks. It threw her violently to the sides and back and forth. She could barely see on the GPS because of the shaking.

The drop! She had forgotten all about it. A small crater in the ground, about one meter deep, that they always had to bypass just a little after they left the base. They had marked that spot on the GPS and she was close. Too close.

The blinking dot that was supposed to be the rover was just in front of the drop marker. She was in so much hurry to get back that she totally forgot about it.

Kate turned slowly to the right, trying to remember how

long the crater was.

All she could see was dust wherever she looked. She could be driving with her eyes closed and it wouldn't matter.

Kate felt for a second like the rover was airborne and she felt it tumble down left wheel first.

The impact when the rover hit the ground left a big crack in the acrylic glass. She had driven the rover face first into the crater.

She hung there for a minute getting her senses back. At least she knew where she was. The base was about 100 meters from the crater. But getting out into the storm just in the spacesuit was a suicide. If she could walk in this wind at all, she would be vulnerable to the flying boulders.

She looked around. The electricity was out. Staying here wasn't an option. Her oxygen supply showed maybe an hour left. This storm could last for weeks.

Wait and die or go for it? She loosened the belt that held her in the chair and climbed to the exit. Just before she opened the rover she noticed the shaft of the sledgehammer. The rover had a full set of tools if something needed to be fixed. There among was a sledgehammer with a wooden shaft. They never needed it, but now it gave Kate a good idea. She grabbed the sledgehammer. It felt heavier than she expected.

She tried her suit radio.

"Mars base, if you read me, I am at the crater. I crashed the rover and I need help." the only reply was a static

buzzing sound in her ear. Why didn't they answer her?

"Mars base, I'll walk the rest. I'm heading out. Please reply." She waited a minute for a reply, using the time to gather the courage to go outside.

She opened the door and dust filled the rover. If she just could keep her orientation right she might make it. The base should be around one hundred feet in front of her.

She could feel pebbles and bigger rocks hit her body and helmet. The glass was getting matte fast. Kate turned to the direction she believed the base was and used the sledgehammer as an anchor weighing her down. Kate even tried to drag a line with it as she walked, just in case she would need to get back. She knew though that the oxygen supply, wouldn't last for a second chance. When she saw the lines fill up and disappear behind her, she gave up making them. She started counting her steps towards the base.

When she had counted to eighty three_a big rock hit her right calf. She screamed and nearly fell. She mustn't fall. Falling meant disorientation and death. She clamped her teeth together and continued.

Her oxygen supply showed barely ten minutes left.

"Ninety two." she counted and had trouble breathing as she was so exhausted. She leaned against the sledgehammer that kept her from falling.

"No more, I can't no more." Kate looked at the oxygen sensor. Three minutes left.

"Mars base?" this was useless. She fell to her right knee and the pain in her calf sharpened her senses. What was that? She saw something just in front of her, something metallic. She got a little closer and realized that she was just outside the compound. Now she had to find the entrance.

Which way? She tried to visualize the compound in her mind. The blinking warning sign about low oxygen supply forced her to take a decision. There were three entrances to the compound. And if she followed the walls to the left, she should find at least one, if she wasn't at the wrong end.

She started the walk keeping her right hand to the wall and steadying her with the sledgehammer.

She saw the entrance in front of her. One minute of oxygen left. The entrance was lit up. She could only hope that the door opener worked.

"Please work." She pressed the black plastic covered button that her life depended upon. The oxygen level showed zero and was blinking rapidly.

The entrance door opened. Kate had hard time breathing. The helmet suddenly felt like an airless bag over her head. She had to get into the airlock before she fainted. The door closed slowly behind her and she rushed to the airlock. She thought that she could hold her breath for two minutes three max. She had heard about someone holding their breath for fifteen minutes which in her case was a bit optimistic.

The airlock door opened and she hurried in, pressing the

close button as soon as she was inside. Now it was just waiting for the red light above the door to turn green.

Come on, come on. She dropped the sledgehammer and hit the wall rapidly with her fist. She loosened the helmet and heard a hissing sound as the last of the oxygen streamed out from the helmet. The light turned green and the oxygen came rushing into the airlock.

"I made it. Oh my God I made it." Her face and body was covered with sweat. She dropped down to her knees and breathed the freshly released air. She felt a burning sensation in her leg. When she got out of the suit she noticed that her leg was red and swollen. She was lucky that it didn't break.

After a few minutes she looked at the entry to the compound and stood up. She opened the door. There was nobody in the white hallways. She thought about calling *honey I am home*. But for some reason she decided to stay quiet and alert.

The radio room would be her first destination. She would give those idiots a good talking to and then head for the showers. They would probably blame her for crashing the rover, but they had better answered her call. She was nearly killed out there. To hell with the rover, it could be fixed after the storm.

The door to the radio room was open. A tingling sensation went through Kate's body. She didn't really want to enter the room to see what was inside.

"Mars base this is Pioneer One over."

Kate forgot all about the anxiety when she heard the broadcasting from the swap crew on the radio and hurried to the room. What she saw made her stop in her tracks and backtrack a bit.

"Mars base this is Pioneer One over." Kate looked at Chris staring at the wall. At least she thought it was Chris. His face was all shrunken. The dried eyes seemed too big for the orbits. His clothes were hanging on him.

Where were the others? She looked around in the hallway, nothing. No sound what so ever.

She really wanted to answer the man on the radio, but stepping inside the room felt wrong, so wrong. When Kate looked closer at Chris face she saw what he was looking at. A camera lay on the table near his hand.

Kate walked in the room and picked up the camera. The battery was nearly dead.

She went through the recordings selecting the day she lost contact.

She noticed Hans talking into the camera and selected the next file. There was more talking. One recording was of that thing they had found. Now it was in an airtight container and Wright, their geologist, was pouring water over it. The reaction from the creature was fierce. It had all its tentacles out. Some pressed against the sides of the container other reached towards the source of the water. Kate saw how the water seemed to evaporate instantly when it touched the

creature. Wright seemed amazed by the magic trick of evaporating water. He also seemed afraid and stepped back. Kate didn't want to continue watching, she liked Wright. He was maybe her only real friend on the base. He could talk about rocks and Mars dust for hours. Kate didn't mind, she loved to be in his company. She continued to watch the video.

The container seemed to shrink a bit, like the tentacles pressed against the sides were pulling it inwards. Then it suddenly exploded covering everything in mist which suddenly got a pink color.

"Wright, get out of there." Hans cried.

The camera shook while Hans rushed out from the lab. He waited for a short while in the doorway while the pink mist cleared.

The creature had four of its tentacles pierced through Wrights head and held him up like a doll. She could see the silvery grin again. The tentacles retracted slowly, pulling Wright towards the silvery grin. Kate stopped the video. Couple of tears tickled her cheeks and she wiped them away with her sleeve.

She browsed through the files until she saw Chris in the radio room.

"What happened here Chris?" She pressed play.

He looked scared and was already starting to dry up. She could see it on his face. And his eyes were matte and foggy.

"Please if you see this. Stay away. What we have found..."

he stopped to swallow which seemed to be hard for him.

"Wright and John are dead. I believe that Todd is dead too. I have been getting transmission from Kate but I can't answer her. I think that the storm ruined the radio somehow. I have been trying to contact Pioneer One to tell them to stay away from the compound." he paused and swallowed some more.

"Hans fled, but I think it got to him too. God I am so thirsty." Chris looked away from the camera.

The battery sign on the camera was now blinking.

The frown on his face showed pain that was steadily increasing. The low moan from Chris turned suddenly into a growl and a scream. He started to shake fiercely. Few seconds passed and he stopped shaking.

Chris looked into the camera. Kate looked at his eyes that used to be deep blue and sparkling with life. Now they were only dull grey and faded out into the whites.

"If there ever was intelligent life on this planet, this thing would surely have ended it." He coughed and Kate saw his lips turn red. The blood dripped out of his mouth. She looked at the desk where Chris lay dead. There certainly had been blood there and Chris lay on top of it.

She watched him cough into the camera. The picture got all sparkled with red dots.

The battery went dead and the picture of Chris disappeared.

"Mars base, this is Pioneer One. Estimated time of arrival is nineteen hours. Over."

She heard a hissing sound which she thought was from the radio. She turned down the volume of the radio. The sound was still there. It came from the hallway and seemed to be getting louder.

Kate felt thirsty.