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Solitary Sentinel

by Diorgo Jonkers

The spaceship approaches the hangar. Belinda Mertyl watches it until it lands. She is feeling anxious, because she has been alone on this planet for four months. After what feels like a long time to her, the passengers finally start to disembark. They are led by a tall woman, who Belinda recognises as captain Lovits from their video call earlier.

"Good to finally meet you," the captain says, as she extends her hand. Belinda takes it.

"Welcome. I hope you had a good trip."

"It was uneventful," the captain replies. She studies Belinda for a moment. "We'd like to first get settled in, rest, then we can talk later."

"Yes, of course," she replies with a nod. She is not

looking forward to the "talk", which is going to be a formal enquiry. She greets the other passengers by nodding her head in their direction and saying the occasional "Hello" and "Welcome". They follow her into the building where she directs them to the living quarters.

Three hours later Belinda enters a small conference room. The captain and a man are seated at a table. The captain looks up at the camera mounted in the corner where the walls meet the ceiling. Its red light is on, indicating it is recording.

"I'm doctor Parker," the man smiles at Belinda.

"What kind of doctor?" she asks him. She sits down opposite them.

"A psychologist. But don't worry, I'm not here to evaluate you, just to get a first impression. It'll help me determine if you need to be evaluated. Unless you request an evaluation."

He looks at her, expecting a response.

After a while captain Lovits says, "Is there anything you'd like to say before we begin?"

"Just glad you finally arrived." Belinda smiles.

"Good," Lovits says and looks at Parker, who nods. She continues, "Four months ago you sent an orange report from this outpost. Can you please repeat what you stated in the report?"

Belinda begins, "Nine months ago a sentinel picked up a meteor moving on an intercept course with this planet. We continued to monitor it, to make sure it wasn't going to crash into the outpost or the sentinels.

"Four months ago the meteor crashed about three hundred kilometres from here. Marcus, our supervisor, decided we should gather samples from it, in case it contained any valuable materials. Everyone was eager to go. It was a chance to get out and experience something different. As per protocol, at least one person had to stay behind to monitor the sentinels. I volunteered. They took a ship," she pauses briefly.

She continues, "When they got close to the crater there was suddenly static and I lost contact with them. I tried contacting them again for over an hour. There wasn't even a signal from their black box. I redirected a satellite to fly over the area.

"I saw the wreck of the ship, crashed near the crater. Based on it's state I assumed there were no survivors. I sent a probe, but it suffered the same fate as the ship. That's when I sent the report. I received a message that a ship would be sent to bring replacement personnel and a team to investigate. And here you are."

"Thank you," Lovits says.

"You requested to end your contract," doctor Parkers says to Belinda.

"Yes. I need to leave this place," she says and looks at the walls. "I miss crowds of people."

"Under normal circumstances you'd lose all benefits, including your pension. But an exception might be made, given what you went through. That's if we determine you're telling the truth," Lovits says.

Belinda looks incredulous at her. "My friends died and you're accusing me of lying about it?" she bursts out.

"We're just doing our jobs, Belinda. Following protocol."

Belinda turns her head away, trying to hide her emotions.

After a while Lovits asks, "And nothing else has happened since?"

"No. I continued my duties as best I could. Waiting for you to arrive." She turns back to Lovits and asks, "When will we leave?"

"If everything goes well then we'll leave in about a week."

An hour later the enquiry ends and Belinda leaves the room.

"You think she's telling the truth?" Lovits asks Parker.

"Yes. At least she believes she is," he says, sitting back in his chair. He rests his hands on his stomach.

"She seems stable enough for someone who spent the last four months alone," Lovits remarks.

"Yes, remarkably so."

Belinda feels drained after the meeting. She sees a man standing next to a window in the passage. He is looking out at a sentinel. It looks almost like a giant robot with a single eye, staring up into the sky, motionless and waiting.

"They're much larger than I imagined," he says as she passes by. "How many are there?"

"Four. The other three are in orbit." She stops and looks out at the sentinel. In six months another sentinel will be due for a maintenance check then this one will take its place

in orbit.

"I'm Leroy. I'm one of the lucky ones who's staying behind," he smiles.

Belinda just stares at him. He stops smiling.

"Sorry about what happened to your friends."

She nods her head, then asks him, "You worked at an outpost before?"

"No, first time. Any advice?"

"Follow protocol and you'll be fine."

"Sounds easy enough--"

"Don't get attached to anyone, and be prepared for the possibility of ending up completely alone."

She walks off, leaving him uncertain of how to respond to her last statement.

Later that evening, most of the people are in the mess hall for supper. The hall is large and they only occupy a few tables. Belinda sits by herself, studying the others. Leroy walks over to her table.

"OK if I join you?" he asks.

She nods. He sits then looks around at the large hall. He remembers the orientation video they watched a few months ago. These outposts were built after the war and it could house a hundred fighter pilots, in case the enemy returned. When our technology advanced, we built the sentinels who could detect ships well in advance. Now only a handful of people are needed here.

"How many will stay behind?" she asks him.

"Eight. I heard you're leaving as well."

"Yes," she replies and smiles involuntary.

"That means seven are leaving with you included."

Later that evening, Leroy hears a knock on his door. He opens it to find Belinda standing in the passage.

"Hi," he says.

"Can I sleep in your room tonight?"

"But we just met today," he jokes.

It looks like she is uncertain and about to leave.

"I don't want sex. I just need to fall asleep next to someone."

"Sure." He steps aside and lets her in. She stands in the middle of the room, waiting for him.

"Well, make yourself at home," he says, as he lifts his open hand to indicate the small living quarters. She takes off her shoes and pants then gets into bed. She watches him. He moves to the open suitcase and continues packing his clothes into the built-in wardrobe.

"Was too busy to pack earlier," he explains.

A short while later he climbs into bed and lies behind her. She pulls his arm around her.

"Hold on," he says suddenly. He reaches for his wristwatch, which is lying on the pedestal next to the bed. He uses the watch to take a photo of them lying together. He shows her the photo.

"I'll tell my friends back home I got a girlfriend out here on my first day."

She smiles at his silliness.

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She wakes up alone. Leroy is gone. She jumps out of bed and gets dressed. She opens the door and leans into the passage. It is silent. There are no sounds to indicate people are around. She walks down the passage. After a few metres she starts walking faster. Soon she is running. She prays that yesterday was not a dream.

She bursts into the mess hall. There are a few people having breakfast. Leroy is sitting at a table with another man. She goes to the table.

"Why didn't you wake me?" she asks and sits down.

"Thought I'd let you sleep in, since there's someone else to monitor the sentinels."

She glances at the other man. Yesterday Leroy was sitting with her, today he is sitting with someone else. She feels left out. The feeling of loneliness grows again. She tries hard to fight it off.

"You going to eat something?" Leroy asks her.

"I'll eat later."

She feels a slight dread. Afraid that if she goes to get food then he and the man might get up and leave before she returns to the table.

In a monitor room there are three people working at the terminals. They are busy checking the outpost's logs and camera recordings, including the satellite's recordings, to determine if Belinda told the truth. Captain Lovits enters and sits down. They all turn to face her.

"What's the verdict?" she asks.

"Seems like she's telling the truth," the man in the

middle, Ned, replies. He pops a sweet into his mouth.

"Has anything else happened over the last four months?" Lovits asks. She is looking at the paused video on a monitor, which shows Belinda sitting alone in the large mess hall. The video's date indicates it was recorded three months ago.

"Not so far. We haven't checked everything yet. It'll take us at least a few days to go through all of it."

"Let me know if you find anything."

She turns on the intercom and makes an announcement, "Everyone please meet in the auditorium in one hour. I repeat, everyone meet in the auditorium in one hour."

Belinda hears the announcement and asks Leroy, "Do you know what that's about?"

"No, but I suspect they found something."

She wonders if she is allowed to attend the meeting.

One hour later everyone is in the auditorium. Belinda is the last to arrive. Leroy is sitting among the others, a few seats ahead. She sits alone at the back. Once again she feels left out.

She remembers when she was a teenager she felt like an outcast. In her youth she spent too much time alone. Her few friends hardly ever made an effort to see her. Too often she was the one to visit them. Her loneliness grew as she got older. She knows it was the isolation of this job that attracted her to it. Some part of her fantasised that her friends would miss her and regret not spending time with her. But none of them ever made contact since she moved out here.

The captain addresses the crowd, "We've confirmed the

details of the report we received four months ago. A meteor crashed on this planet, and a ship with a crew of six set out to examine it. Something caused the ship to crash near the meteor's crater. Then a probe was sent out which also crashed. Tomorrow morning me, Xaheed and Klein will take a rover to the crash site. Our goals will be to determine what caused the crashes, if it's a threat to the outpost, and to return the bodies for autopsies and burial."

"What if the meteor caused the crash?" someone asks.

"That's unlikely, but I'm not ruling it out."

"For all we know it could be some kind of weapon."

"We'll take extra precautions. Once we get halfway we'll periodically stop and send out a probe to scan ahead and take readings, to make sure it's safe to proceed."

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The following morning Belinda and a small crowd watches the rover leave. She spent the evening alone and has not spoken to anyone this morning. After a few minutes the other people return to their duties, leaving her alone with her thoughts. In silence she watches the rover disappear over a hill.

At the halfway mark the captain orders the rover to stop. They are all wearing spacesuits. Xaheed pushes a few buttons and a probe is released from the roof of the vehicle. It hovers for a moment then flies off in the direction of the crater, which is still out of view. The probe travels for about one kilometre then stops to take readings.

"Getting data now. Oh, crap!" Xaheed exclaims.

"What?" Lovits asks him.

"There's some kind of radiation outside."

"Can it get through the rover's shielding?"

"No, doesn't seem like it."

"Let's assume it's from the meteor," Lovits says.

"This far away?" Xaheed asks.

"It's been lying there for four months. The radiation could've spread. Only one way to find out. Take the probe another kilo closer."

A few minutes later Xaheed says, "Radiation's stronger."

"Take it another kilo closer," Lovits says.

They wait for the probe to make its journey.

"Yes, more concentrated the closer it gets. It's starting to affect the probe," Xaheed says, looking worried.

"What do we do now?" the driver, Klein asks. Her hands are gripping the steering wheel.

"Can you tell how far it's spread in the last four months?" Lovits asks.

"Hold on." Xaheed is busy at the computer, then says, "It's already reached the outpost."

They are all silent for a moment.

"The buildings are shielded, right?" Klein says, turning around to look at them.

"Yes, but we've been outside a few times," Lovits replies. "How strong's the radiation at the outpost?"

"Should be minimal. Not enough to trigger the outpost's warning system. But we've no idea what even a small amount of it can do."

"We need to take concentrated samples back for analysis. Move the probe as near as possible to the crater and take samples. Air, rocks, soil. Then we get the hell out of here."

She picks up the radio and calls the outpost. She explains to them what they found and tells them to set up a lab outside. No one must go outside without wearing protection.

A few hours later the rover stops next to the lab near the outpost. The probe places the samples into containers. They put on hazmat suits and proceed to analyse the radiation.

"This stuff is damn weird," Xaheed says. He is looking at the preliminary report on the computer screen. A short while later another report pops up on the screen.

"The analysis is done," Xaheed says. He is skimming over the report. "Yes, normal shielding can block it... Incredible dispersion range... What's this?"

Lovits waits impatiently.

He reads out loud, "'Warning. Unusual degradation of organic organisms. It seeps back through time and degrades organism to remove all traces of organism's existence.'"

They are both silent for a moment.

"I'll be damned," Xaheed says. He sits back in his chair. His mind reeling at the meaning. He turns and stares uncomfortably at the radioactive samples.

The captain gets up and starts moving towards the lab's exit. "We have to get off this planet as soon as humanly possible."

Later everyone is boarding the spaceship. The captain and

Leroy are the last to board.

"Is everyone on board?" Lovits asks him.

"Yes, all fourteen."

"Good, let's get out of here."

Leroy takes a last look at the outpost. Its empty buildings are silent. He closes the ship's door. He has a nagging feeling that he forgot something, but cannot put his finger on it. He glances at his wristwatch. Behind the time there is a photo of him lying alone in bed. He cannot remember why he took that photo of himself.

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