

The Color Red

The rover was airborne momentarily before crashing to the ground. A cloud of red obscured the view from the cabin. Li Xiu Ying double-checked the Nav system and the horizon ahead. Her ETA was 18 hours, give or take a few days. A lot was dependent on the weather. In the back seat, the prisoner was slumped on his side, eyes closed. He moved his lips silently under a face obscured by scraggly, graying hair.

Ying was trying to get a good look. There was simply no chance she knew this prisoner, but the feeling lingered. He wouldn't move his head to give her a better look.

The weather wasn't promising. There were always dust storms on Mars. They weren't like those in the movies she'd watched illegally as a teenager growing up in Beijing. Not destructive things full of flying rocks and fury. They were subtler. The fine Martian dust would penetrate every crack and crevice of the rover until it shut down, leaving the unlucky stranded. The dust was electromagnetic and could damage the Comm system, making it nearly impossible to be found by rescuers.

A wall of dust approached from the east. This wasn't good.

There was an outcrop of boulders and rocky ledges to the west. She entered the updated coordinates into the Nav system and watched as the rover changed course. This landscape always reminded her of a trip she'd taken with her brother and parents as a child to the Gansu Province in the Northwest part of China.

They had visited the Danxia Landform Geological Park. Its red streaked hills and strange geological features stretched to the horizon. She'd found a small yellow lizard and kept it for most of the day, cupped in her hands. It was almost red from the dirt. The flick of its tongue and the scramble of its tiny feet had tickled her fingers. When her brother asked to hold it, he'd promptly crushed it with a rock. She'd cried until her mother had finally consented to perform funeral rites for the little creature.

Her father scoffed and pulled her smirking brother away to examine some rock formation. Mother gently rinsed the red dirt from the lizard. If anyone entered the afterlife wearing red, they would be doomed to wander the earth as a ghost. There was no incense, so mother burned some rolled-up paper. They watched in silence as the burning scraps rose into the darkening sky.

The cab was lit by green emergency lights. Ying was propped against the windshield dozing, trying to keep an eye on the prisoner. She wasn't worried that he'd escape. He wasn't wearing a suit. She just didn't want him to try to hijack the rover or do anything that would get her killed.

The dust swirled and stormed. You couldn't see outside the reinforced windows. Without her handheld gear she would have no way of knowing what time it was or where they were. There was nothing to do but wait.

She was a *Shangwei*, an officer, equivalent to a Captain, in the Ground Forces of the People's Liberation Army. She was delivering the prisoner, a religious terrorist, to Mao City

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headquarters for execution. Like many religious terrorists, he'd infiltrated the colony as a slave and attempted to brainwash the people. He'd been found out and avoided capture by commandeering a rover during a shootout and trying to escape to the Tyrrhena Tera Mountains. She'd caught him, stranded, days in the wrong direction.

She could have left him to die on his own, but the PLA, and the civilians of Mau City, loved a public execution. The Party felt it was good for morale. If worst came to worst and she was forced to walk back, protocol dictated she execute him herself and walk back alone. She could survive for days if she wasn't burdened with him.

He was mumbling under his breath, and Ying was bored. "What's that you say, scum?" she asked.

He looked into her eyes for the first time, and she was struck by the feeling of recognition.

"You speak English?"

"Of course. All PLO officers were required to speak English until seven years ago."

He grimaced at the mention of seven years. "Seven years" referred to the Fall of Atlanta. It was the great victory of the PLA over the coalition of western countries. English was relegated to a secondary language after the defeat. Ying was training with the newly formed Mars Brigade at the Lunar station at the time, and she had regretted not being with her former unit.

"What were you mumbling?" she asked.

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“I said, ‘Every man has a property in his own person. This, nobody has a right to, save himself.’”

Ying sneered. “Religious propaganda. You have no right to your own person. You belong to the People’s Republic. Is this from your Christian scriptures?”

He shook his head. “John Locke.”

“Ah, so, *political* propaganda. His ideas have died with your civilization.”

He smiled and moved the hair from his face with his shoulder, revealing watery green eyes in a deeply weathered face. “Civilizations struggle, some triumph, others are eliminated. Such is history; such is the history of civilization for thousands of years.”

A look of grudging respect crept to the corners of her mouth and eyes. She’d always appreciated wit. “So, you know Mao. Only it’s ‘classes’ not civilizations.”

“I know what it’s supposed to be.”

The dust swirled outside. The only sound inside the cab was the occasional whir of a fan or the click of the settling rover.

The vacuum was jammed, and the battery was dead on the solar blower. The storm had passed, but the dust remained thick. Ying moved around the rover. She struggled to see well enough to shovel out the tires through the mask of her suit.

It was no use. The dust was too thick to recharge the batteries anyway. They weren't getting out of here for a few days at least. By herself she had food enough for six days. With the prisoner, only three. She should kill him now, but, it could get lonely out here. She'd give it a day.

The area she'd put the rover in was a series of large boulders surrounding a dead volcano. The rover was wedged between a boulder on one side and the mountain on the other, giving it some protection. Everything was tinted red as far as she could see. She climbed back into the cab.

He was bleeding all over her seats. She hadn't noticed it before. It must be getting worse because he couldn't hide it. He had a wound in the torso from when he'd escaped. He didn't complain, but his face twisted into a grimace when he shifted in the seat. The blood pooled, turned to mud in the Martian dust, and then dried. She pretended not to notice.

It was the end of the second day, and she was deciding when to kill him. Should she let him know it was coming, or, kill him in his sleep? Another storm had come, nearly burying the rover completely. She'd been out the entire morning making sure the door stayed clear and functional. She had to be able to dig out when the storm passed. If she executed him tonight, she could have enough food for several days. More if she went on half-rations.

"Well, I never imagined you would be the last woman I saw before I died." He'd stopped shifting in the seat. He was looking at her with knowing eyes. "I wasn't with my wife when she

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died. She was in Atlanta with the man she married after me, there at the end.” He smiled ironically. It looked out of place on him, like the smile of a much younger man.

“I thought you Christians didn’t believe in divorce.”

He looked out at the dust and the dark. “It’s permissible, when one party is unfaithful. I tried to live as if there were no God for a while, but it never took.”

“Too bad. You wouldn’t have ended up on your way to the gallows if it had.”

“It would have been somewhere worse. Besides, we both know I’m not going to make the gallows. You’ve already breached protocol by feeding me this long. I figure I’m almost out of blood anyway.”

She shook her head. She didn’t like him anticipating her actions. She could survive a long time on a little food. She broke a ration pack in half and handed part to him.

“Thanks,” he said.

“You love your wife, still?” she asked, “There are more women.”

He smiled and wiped the crumbs with the backs of his bound hands. “There are many woman, but there was only one Her. I’m sort of a one-woman man, I guess, in my heart, if not my dick. Of course, that’s easy to say now. Maybe I just imagine myself that way.”

She felt her cheeks blush at his impropriety.

“So why come here? If you broke the rules of your religion...why risk your life to come and brainwash colonists?”

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He sat silently for a minute. Then, “I could give you the official answer, but there’s not much point to that now. I guess the truth is, it’s the only thing I felt I had left. The last thing worth dying for.”

The low battery indicator on the rover started beeping and the lights dimmed automatically. They had maybe two days of air left.

When the man finally fell into a fitful sleep, Ying thought through their situation. The rover was all but lost. The door was completely stuck. She had maybe a day and a half before the emergency exit in the roof was totally covered. Her best chance of rescue was her suit. If she could walk, she had 12 hours of oxygen. That would likely be enough for her handheld equipment to recharge and make a connection with the satellites.

She removed the medic kit, then his bloody shirt. The wound in his side was deep. He had lost a lot of blood. She set about cleaning the wound and sealing it. She dressed it with the light from a flashlight. At one point she looked up and saw him watching her. She looked down quickly. Later, when she looked up again, he was asleep. She wondered if she had imagined his eyes on her.

Time passed. Ying dozed. She sat, and she watched. His voice brought her out of her reverie.

“Tell me a story about you, as a little girl. What were you like?”

She shifted in her seat, wondering how long she had been out. Noting, not for the first time, that he never tried to escape or harm her.

“I remember once, we were at the zoo. I loved to visit the pandas,” she started, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“I was walking along a wall that led to the panda house. It was really in bad shape, with stones out of place and ivy growing all over. It was dangerous, but I wouldn’t come down. I fell and broke my arm. My mother and father saw me fall, and my father cursed, and then said we would have to leave the zoo and go to the hospital. I decided not to cry. I refused to touch or move my arm, but I pretended I was fine. We went to the panda house, and the rest of the zoo.

“Later, when we went home, my parents looked closer at my arm and realized that it was broken. We had to go to the hospital and have pins put in.” She paused, her hands tracing the long-healed break. Her eyes found his, and she smiled, shyly. “I got to see the pandas.”

He smiled, his wrinkles deepening. “Reminds me of my daughter. She did something just like that as a little girl.”

There was something about the smile. “Teacher Aaron?” she asked.

The smile dropped from his face and his eyes locked on hers. “I think you have me confused...?”

“I knew it.” She said, “I recognized you. You’re just older. It’s me, Ying? You taught me English online when I was young, like seven or eight.”

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He frowned. “I wish it was me. I did teach, but never online. I was always kind of a Luddite. I’m sorry, I’m sure you would have been a great student.”

Ying felt foolish. “I’m sorry. How ridiculous would it be if it was true, and we met here? You just remind me of him. That’s all.”

“Well...ridiculous is the one who is surprised at anything in this life.”

He was feverish and going in and out of consciousness. Two more days had passed. The lights in the cab were as dim as possible. A warning alarm chimed silently in the background reminding her that she should have killed this man and been gone hours ago. Instead, she was feeding him the last of the rations and wiping his forehead.

He coughed, and blood splattered her cheeks. She rinsed his lips and her face silently. He seemed to grow calm. She sat back down and watched, wondering what to do. Delaying the inevitable. She’d never killed a man at close range.

He started speaking. “I remember the first time I saw my wife. She had this golden hair, all in curls. Curls like you’ve never seen. She smelled so...so clean.” His eyes were closed, and she could tell he was remembering.

“My daughter looked just like her. She loved to dance. After supper, I’d put on music and scoop her in my arms and we would twirl, laughing until we cried.

“I could make my son laugh like no one else. I’d do these...funny voices. Once he wet himself he laughed so hard.” Ying scooted close to him and took his hand. His grip was tight. He was holding on with everything he had.

“She was pregnant with another baby. Would have been the oldest. We lost it, at only 7 or 8 weeks. Not even long enough to know if it was a boy or girl. I never felt so close to my wife as I did walking through that rainy afternoon, downtown outside the hospital. We held hands and cried, and, it sounds stupid, but we were truly like one person in that moment.” He spat blood and grimaced in pain, eyes clenched.

He was quiet for a long while. Then, “I wasn’t there for them, in the end. And it was all for nothing. It will all be forgotten.”

Her hand was in his. There was his raspy breathing, and the alarm. Outside, the dust and wind and dark. The sound of her gun detonated through the cab, and all was quiet.

In a few minutes, she would be out of the rover, suit in place, with 12 or 13 hours to hike back to Mau City. Or signal for help. Or die trying.

For now, she cleaned the blood from his peaceful face, pulled a small New Testament from the pocket of his jacket, and tore out a few pages. She spoke an underlined section of words over his body. It read, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.”

Her hands twisted the pages. With her lighter, she lit them on fire and watched the words dissolve into the Martian dark.

