

Password (By Robert Bee)

The flat red ground was strewn with pebbles and rocks towards the horizon in all directions. The soft orange-pink sky was relentlessly uniform, offering no clouds to lend a sense of distance.

Not that Jake Perkins needed a sense of distance. He knew that it was a mere eight kilometres to the horizon, if he ever got that far, and if he did, it would be another eight kilometres of pebbles, rocks and red dust to the new horizon, and so on and so on.

Welcome to Mars, Jake thought cynically.

He turned and looked back the way he had come. Jake could see his foot prints, or more accurately boot prints, stretching back in a near perfect line towards the horizon in that direction. He knew, if he could see that far, the line wasn't perfectly straight as he'd had to circle around a crater about five kilometres back. About two hundred metres across, it was only five metres deep at the centre, but Jake hadn't risked the short cut across. Who could tell how deep the soft powder in the bowl was, ready to consume him like quicksand? So he'd skirted the rim, adding an extra hundred metres to his trek.

He chuckled at the thought. A hundred metres. What was that compared to the forty kilometres he'd already trudged from his crippled MEC? Martian Explorer Car? More like Monumentally Expensive Crap. Wait till he got back to Base, he'll give the project engineering manager a royal serve, preferably a good one-third gravity boot up the bum.

Jake turned his back on his tracks. That's if I ever get back to Base, he thought, consciously acknowledging for the first time a niggle of doubt he'd managed to keep submerged till now. For the tenth time since he'd started his trek, Jake checked his suit's chronometer. Unlike the MEC, it was still working. Like clock-work, Jake thought, suppressing a giggle, an early stage of Mars fever. Then he checked the suit's air supply and water gauges. Nothing to giggle at there. He hit his radio's transmit button.

"Perkins to Base... Perkins to Base, come in."

There was a delay of seconds. Jake was about to call again when a voice spoke crisply in his ear piece. "Base to Perkins. Acknowledged." Then the formal tone turned jovial. "It's Bill here, Jack. How's the hiking, old man?"

"It's not exactly 'valdere, valdera' out here Bill. Thankfully it's also not mountain tracks I'm wondering on."

"You've lost me there, Jake" Bill said.

"Never mind, an old man's joke", Jake shook his head ruefully. How did they ever talk an old astronaut like me to take this trip with a bunch of kids? Not one of them was over twenty six. I'm getting too old for this Buck Rogers stuff. "Look Bill, can you pin-point my location? How far am I from the Saint Bernard?"

"Saint...? Oh, you mean the ERSU?"

"Yes Bill, the Emergency Re-Supply Unit. God, what did they teach you at college?"

"Mostly avionics and astro-engineering, Jake. I didn't take the unit on religious saints. I'm an agnostic and..."

"Just tell me where the ERSU is Bill, okay?"

"Keep your helmet on, Jake, I'm checking... right, I've got you pegged..."

"Very funny", Jake said.

"What?... "

"Never mind", Jake sighed.

"Right... boy, you're a fast walker, the distance you've traveled".

"Comes from having three legs", Jake chuckled, then cut off Bill's puzzled reply. "And hence my need for re-supply. Bill, I'm down to only ten percent oxygen and less than that in water. This is getting serious out here, son."

"Calm down, old feller. It's not a matter of life or death just yet."

"It is from where I'm standing, Bill. Let's cut the chatter, just tell me how far to the ERSU?"

"Hold a second..." Jake could imagine Bill's fingers flying over the computer's keys, triangulating the ERSU's position with his.

"Um, Jake, you'd better keep walking while I work on this. You might need all the air you've got." Bill's voice had lost its jovial air.

"Oh great", said Jake, "which direction?"

"Keep your present course, I'll give you a correction in a minute. Base out."

Jake resumed his steady march, made slightly easier by Mars's one-third earth gravity, but also frustrating as he seemed to spend as much time bouncing up and down in the thin air as he did going forward. But now the niggle of doubt had fully surfaced and transformed into a grip of cold dread. If he didn't locate the ERSU with its store of oxygen and water he was, in simple terms, a goner. Thankfully, since they started wide ranging exploratory surface missions, they had the foresight to place fully automated re-supply units in strategic locations. Theoretically, there was always one within a suit-air-tank range of any likely exploration route.

This was the first time an ERSU had been needed in a real life... or death... situation. And I have to be the test dummy, thought Jake ruefully, just when his radio crackled again.

"Base to Perkins..."

"Perkins here."

"Jake, the ERSU should be..."

"Should be?"

"Sorry, is... located exactly five point three kilometres from you now. Veer ten degrees left of your current course... that's 080 magnetic... and you'll land right on it", Bill said.

"Thanks Bill, but it's going to be close", Jake said, changing course and picking up speed.

"You'll be right. It'll only take you one minute to hook up and replenish your supplies." Bill paused, then added "God speed, Jake."

"That's comforting, coming from an agnostic", Jake said. "But thanks anyway. Perkins out."

The ERSU was the prettiest jumble of metal Jake had seen in many a year. Painted blue to stand out against the red landscape, Jake

imagined it was also someone's idea of an oasis, without the palm trees. He checked his air gauge. Nine minutes of supply left. Without the ERSU, that would have been a death sentence.

Jake approached the ERSU, two man-high one metre diameter tanks sitting on a squat platform with six legs. There were numerous pipes and nozzles, the most important one having a big black arrow pointing to it, with the letters O2 above the arrow. "Yes, there is a god", Jake muttered.

Carefully, Jake removed the connector tube from the rack on the O2 tank's side, connected it to the input valve of his suit, then to the tank's nozzle. With a silent prayer, he slowly turned the nozzle anti-clockwise and watched his suit's air gauge.

Nothing happened.

He turned the nozzle further until it came against the stop.

Still no oxygen flowed.

Fighting a rising tide of panic, Jake desperately examined the ERSU more closely. "Shit", he cursed. "Read the instructions, dummy."

Above the arrow there was a panel with the words "O2 Feed Control" on it. Reading further, it said: "Open panel and initiate Feed Pump before opening supply nozzle."

"Oh, brother." Jake quickly closed the nozzle, then opened the panel door. There were two push buttons, one green, the other red. Above them was a small keypad with an LCD display. A large green key on the keypad said "Initiate Process". Jake pressed it.

He looked at the LCD display and then understood the old drowning man cliché about seeing your whole life pass before you. The LCD said "Enter Password."

After his life review brought him up to the present, he muttered "What password?", then hit his radio transmit button. "Perkins to Base... urgent... respond."

Bill must have been sitting on his radio as the response was immediate. "Jake, how's..."

"Cut the crap Bill, this is urgent. I've got eight minutes of air left and the bloody ERSU wants a password."

"A password?"

"Yes, a password. Quick, what is it?" Jake watched his air gauge ticking down towards seven minutes.

"I've no idea. I'll grab the ERSU manual." Jake could hear the frantic flipping of pages over the radio.

"Why do they have a password, for God's sake?" Jake asked in a rising voice.

"I think it's to keep the Russians from using our supplies", Bill replied while still skimming pages.

"What Russians? We're the only ones on Mars" Jake screamed.

"Good point... ah, here it is." Bill read under his breath, then stopped.

"Come on", Jake prompted. "Spill it."

"It just says..." Bill whispered, "... enter Password. Sorry Jake, that's it."

"Sorries can wait. I've got six and a half minutes. Get onto Houston and get that password", Jake snapped.

"But..."

"Do it...now!" Jake yelled into his helmet, almost deafening himself.

"Roger that, Jakel. I'll get back. Base out."

Jake knew he was a dead man. He had six minutes of air left and the return message time from Mars to Earth was seven minutes. That was assuming Houston could answer the question immediately. I'm not going to die wondering, he thought, and keyed in "ERSU" and hit 'enter'.

"INVALID PASSWORD" the LCD said.

Jake keyed in "OXYGEN".

"INVALID PASSWORD".

He keyed in "LIFE".

"INVALID PASSWORD".

He keyed in "GIVEMEMYBLOODYOXYGENYOUUSELESSLUMPOFSHIT".

"INVALID PASSWORD".

Jake checked his air gauge. Four minutes. He looked up at the orange-pink Martian sky, so beautiful. At least he had got to see that. He considered his options. Either wait till his air ran out and he slowly and painfully suffocated, or remove his helmet and breath in the poisonous sub-zero atmosphere for a quick end. He took a deep breath and checked his air gauge again. Three minutes for some last meditations.

Six minutes later, Jake's headset burst back to life. "Base to Perkins... Jake, are you there? Jake, answer..., no, no..." Bill's voiced cracked with emotion. "Oh Jake, if only you could hear me, I've got the password... too late... too late."

The funereal silence was broken by a quiet chuckle. "Late, maybe, but not dead."

"Jake? What... how..?" Bill blurted.

"You studied avionics in college. I studied English literature. While you were talking with Houston, I remembered my Lord of the Rings. The LCD didn't say 'Enter the Password', it said 'Enter...'"

"...Password" they yelled together.

"And I did. The rest, as they say in the classics, was oxygen." Jake heaved a huge sigh. "I don't mind saying though, it would be good to be back at Base out of this suit. When is my pick up arriving?"

"About two hours. Does that suit?"

"Fine. I'll just wait here."

"I have to say old timer, you must have nine lives", Bill laughed.

Jack returned the laugh. "And don't forget my three legs."

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