

# Hot Rain

**By Nicholas Stillman**

A free sample

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The two astronauts fell to Earth like statues dropped through the clouds. In the last seconds before touching ground, their huge rocket packs roared to life. A long flame blasted beneath each of them, hurling exhaust at the Bonneville Salt Flats. The computers knew everything. Each spacesuit had eased the men through the atmosphere with smaller, precise thrusts. The human rockets conserved the bulk of their high-explosive fuel for the launch back. When they landed on the crunchy salt, Archibald and Patrick barely wobbled to keep balance. The bottom third of the spacesuits and the salt underfoot blackened without either man feeling a thing.

As protocol demanded, they stood and waited for the spacesuits to cool. The Earth's breeze knocked away their exhaust clouds. The scattering salt crystals rolled to a stop like opaque dice. Archibald opened his visor which Transport had just unlocked remotely. He inhaled the briny air and loved every dry particle. Some of smoke still wrestled with the wind, forming wispy rings which dissipated. He'd never get this on the Moon.

Archibald tapped his big white helmet. He turned to smile at Patrick, nostrils flaring and eyes closed.

Patrick jolted at the signal and opened his visor. "You could have told me through the headset," he said.

"I wanted a moment just for us," Archibald replied. He gazed around, absorbing the blissful blue of Earth's sky. "That smell will pull you down here for more. I've tried to get my wife's cooking to replicate it."

Patrick sniffed once, and Archibald could almost see him shrug through the clunky spacesuit. They both turned. Archibald's eyes took in the white horizon. Patrick's fixated on the three-story bolt spire just a few meters away. Its black, solar paneled surface drank up the sunlight and gave none of it back. Other men from the Moon had assembled it here, like a lone pawn to conquer all of Earth.

"Do you ever worry about the spire?" Patrick asked. "About it scanning you wrong?"

"No," Archibald said. "They threw hundreds of test bags of our blood in its bolt radius. It only shoots the contaminated. I worry more about my kid missing his dad for a few days."

"I worry about catching something down here," Patrick said.

Finding nothing else stimulating, Patrick examined the foot-wide strip of bloodstained salt that encircled the spire. It marked the eight-meter radius from the spire's base. Astronauts had emptied all the bags of lunarian test blood as a marker. They also staked warning signs just beyond the red circumference at each compass point. The aluminum sheets stood like tombstones in the salt pan, stiff and unbending in the wind. Any earthling who crossed the bloodied line would get an instant scan and a lightning bolt to the head.

*Any* earthling. They all had about the same list of sexually transmitted infections.

Archibald stood taller and urinated into his condom catheter. Over these long missions, the spacesuits stored urine for later lab tests. The in-suit drink bag stored colloidal drinking water. He sucked a mouthful through the thin straw the doctor had taped to his face. By Lunar Law, they don't allow you to expose your dick to a desert down here.

Patrick unzipped a stuffy sleeve pouch and fumbled out an energy bar which they did allow. Using those big astronaut gloves, he awkwardly plucked out the drinking straw from his lips.

“Did you check the expiration date on that?” Archibald asked.

Patrick held up the bar and read the wrapper.

“Damn,” he said, tossing away the energy bar.

“Wise move,” Archibald said. “You'll get sick enough seeing the earthlings.”

Patrick ignored Archibald and fished out another energy bar from his sleeve pouch. Its silvery wrapper showed neither brand name nor flashy picture—just a list of ingredients and an expiration date in sans serif.

“Aha,” Patrick said. He tore off the wrapper and bit the bar in half. “I'll only go fiber-free for as long as the doctor orders.”

The dark forms of people appeared on the horizon. They huddled to form a trembling blob. Archibald pried the magnetically clamped minirifle off the hip region of his spacesuit, just to make sure it still came off easily. He looked over the compact long gun and slapped it back on its magnetic strip. One hundred poisonous rounds. Patrick's weapon packed in the same number, in case times on Earth became somehow worse between missions.

Patrick walked to Archibald's side, chomping the last of his energy bar. They watched the earthlings amass. The naked tribe watched back.