

THE LUNCHBOX

Howard Waldrop

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It came down on a flame toward the gray and red landscape, hissing through the thin air, lower and lower as the dim sun rose up the edge of the planet. The ground below was turning from shadow to sunlight, and the metal eye of the craft reflected the eye and heart of the sun.

It dropped more slowly still, and the pillar under it changed from bright orange to nothingness and shimmer as the propellants burned away and the nitrogen pressure tanks were emptied in the last twenty feet of the drop. It settled with a small thump, and the legs made the machine plumb level inside their hydraulic casings.

The planet was quiet and still.

The sun beaded the horizon in the deathstill frosty calm of dawn.

Man's first claim to daybreak on Mars.

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The noise rose from stillness to roar to pandemonium inside the Mission Control Room. Cigars were passed around, papers were thrown into the air, the unloosed tension went from desk to desk. Checklists fell like snow in the cyclone of the room.

Then the men resettled at their consoles, ready for the Big Broadcast of 1977. Above them, television commentators were telling the public that what they had just seen was a celebration by the men at the consoles because the first of the Viking series had landed on the red planet, Mars.

Krvl, resting in their den, heard the scream of a ruined xr. Parts of Krvl roused, other parts remained dormant, others were reproducing in a random manner, ready for the formation of a motherbud later in the day.

Krvl shifted himself sluggishly, aware that something was amiss. Xrs roamed at night, and by the slight pulsing in its head, Krvl knew it was dawnlight—when xrs should be dying. They did not scream when they died. And what but an xr went about at night?

And what, except the Kind, destroyed xrs?

Krvl paused moved to the chute-tube of the den. It availed itself of an xr pouch and slid out, leaving its reproducing self behind.

Outside, it was a wonderfully murky morning.

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The first photographs from Mars showed a hummocked landscape of powdered sand and clay grit sized particles. The scanning lens mounted atop the module showed the hummocks. The close-up lens in the bottom of the Viking showed the clay-sized particles.

The scanning camera on top turned completely every two minutes. It recorded a scene each twenty degrees of arc and sent them back after two minutes of rumination within the devices that made up the

innards of the Viking.

The pictures were marvelously sharp and clear, and showed a rolled landscape of dunes. Readings gave back a temperature of -27°F but the temperature was slowly rising in the fairly bright morning sunlight.

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Krvl seeped across warm dunes. He would have to hurry to gather xrs before they died completely in the hot burning sunlight that would come in an hour. Krvl liked to hunt in the morning better than the evening, though chances of getting a near-live xr were much less. This morning, Krvl also wanted to find the thing that had made the xr scream. He had heard a small sound like it often when he retrieved a half-live xr for his meal from the ice vein that ran through his den. But never from above, in the open, at night, that loud.

He sugged down a dune. Already it was warmer. In thirty minutes the heat would become unbearable. He *would* have to hurry. Krvl liked the summer least of all the times.

He came into view of the xr crawl.

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The close-up lens of the Viking began to turn slowly, photographing then relaying pictures back to Earth. First was a photograph showing the third leg of the Viking which showed a discoloration, a darker smudge protruding from beneath the landing leg. When the photograph was relayed a matter of minutes later, the interpreters became tense for the first time. They immediately sent signals to the machine to take a much closer series of pictures of the third leg of the craft.

The scanning camera, meanwhile, showed a patch of darker smudges in a dip between two dunes.

Excitement ran high. The bottom of the Viking opened and a long sticky string uncurled on the ground. The interpreting people got down to work.

They tried to get the long string as near as possible to the third leg of the craft. They tried, but got no closer than four inches.

The string withdrew up into the craft like a long tongue.

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The xrs had shifted a lot during the night. Krvl came over the dunes and saw the thick webbing of them strewn over miles and miles of desert.

He opened his pouch and began gathering them up, putting them inside with the small ends up. He would look back ever so often, and those that had not moved their large ends up, he took out and dropped back to the desert. The sun was very very warm now.

He would have to hurry, or they would lose the rebirth fluid into the air through evaporation.

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The instruments in the craft showed a temperature at minus eleven degrees Fahrenheit as the first of the sample gatherers was fired towards the darker smudge between the two dunes. The small rocket was propelled by liquid nitrogen pressure, and as it left, the nitrogen compressor, powered by the same nuclear generator which ran everything on the craft, sucked in more air from outside, to compress and liquefy.

The small rocket arced out, between the dunes, and landed amidst the darker tones of the camera lens. It sat a few moments, the last of the nitrogen bubbling off, and then a small grapple and net affair slid out, scooped, opened and closed. An activator signaled for the craft to start the winch that would draw the collector back.

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Krvl straightened at the sound. A high thin pop, and then a thud quite near. He looked in the direction of the sound.

There was a slight hiss. He saw deepfrost form around a depression in the midst of the xr crawl. As he watched, xrs began crawling toward the depression, first a few, then more and more, then a virtual riot of them. And with the sun blazing.

All thoughts of xr gathering were forgotten. This was a new and strange thing. As mysterious as the xr scream early this day.

He/she/it walked toward the moving xrs. Krvl scanned the horizon for other signs of strangeness. Out a ways, between the nearest dunes, he saw a much larger depression, and a solitary, curiously flattened xr. More newness.

He stopped. A group of xrs was being gathered, folded, compacted, crushed into a tight mass before him.

The folding stopped. Then the mass moved, without walking, toward the edge of the xr crawl.

Krvl looked and watched and followed, but could not decide what or how this thing happened.

An invisibility. He reasoned.

Krvl pulled out his twelfth and thirteenth Haze eyes.

He stopped at what he saw. His Haze eyes were good only when the air cleared and the Hazelight came down. Using them now, though, he could barely make out the countryside, but was taken aback at the other thing he saw.

A creature sat far off between the two dunes. With one of its feet it was standing atop the crushed xr, and had extended a claw from itself into the xr patch, where the claw had scooped up some of the things and was pulling them back towards itself.

Carefully, Krvl followed the claw as it was pulled back into the Haze creature. It had no business bothering his crawl.

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The scanning camera showed the collection rocket being pulled back into the Viking. Then the series of landscapes as the camera rotated. Then the rocket, winched closer, and behind it the drag path where the grapple had slid through the sand.

Then more landscape. Then the rocket, still closer. One of the interpreters asked that the camera be frozen on the winching process next time around, he thought he had seen some interesting phenomena. The camera came around. The rocket was close, closer. There were marks behind the dragging grapple which did not seem to be made by its passage. Then the rocket was pulled within the innards of the craft. Then there were more markings on the ground.

The interpreter leaped up.

Some of the monitors showed activity within the spacecraft.

The last picture was sideways.

All was black.

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Krvl had followed the claw until the creature pulled it inside itself. Then he looked at the Haze creature, sitting very high on its four appendages. It looked at him through its single eye.

Krvl gave it a universal greeting, while he assumed a warning stance. It did not move.

Krvl touched it. Nothing happened. Perhaps it was dormant while digesting its food.

Krvl pulled at its leg, lifting it from the ground.

Immediately the creature hissed, and sent its leg forward to the sand. A shower of dust flew up, and the creature rocked and settled on its legs again in the same relative position.

Krvl was very wary now. He asked it why it had entered his domain without respect. It did not answer. He pulled at its leg again. This time it moved violently, rocked toward him and back, sending up a great geyser of sand.

It would not do, Krvl decided, to Have a mindless creature threaten one's food supply.

Krvl took action. The eye was always a good place to start.

On earth, consternation.

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That afternoon, a Kind called Mrgk stood respectfully at the edge of Krvl's crawlpatch and asked to come visit.

Krvl was happy to see them again. Mrgk came in and smelled the xr smell, cold and delicate, on his sensors.

"To devour the xr," said Mrgk.

"To devour the xr," answered Krvl. "I have a new thing to show."

"What is it?" asked Mrgk.

"You will have to use your Haze eyes," said Krvl.

They went into the den, to the back, near Krvl's XT bin.

"Here," said Krvl.

It lay on its back, legs up.

"This is most strange," Mrgk said. "What can it be?"

“I think it some sort of creature of the Haze,” answered Krvl. “I found it raiding my crawl this morninghunt.”

As they watched, the creature let out a hissing scream. It’s legs thrashed in and out, moving up and down, trying to find footing in the air. Just as suddenly, it quit.

“Can it hurt us?” asked Mrgk.

“I think not,” said Krvl. “I blinded it before I brought it back to my humble denning. Or I thought I did. It struggled fiercely much as you just saw, on the way back. I later found a smaller eye on its nether side, which I also removed.”

“It has no other appendages?” asked Mrgk. “Four seem such a small number.”

“It had.” answered Krvl. “Six more clawlike devices, tightly wound inside. I discarded those also, fearing they could be harmful.” He indicated a tangled pile of loops and grapples. “I believe it to be-fully incapacitated now, though seemingly able to live somewhat, like the xr. It moves from time to time.”

“This is a most wondrous creature. We shall have to tell the other Kind.”

“I will take it to the next Meet,” said Krvl.

“Very strange indeed.”

“I have not yet shown the best part,” said Krvl modestly. “After rendering it helpless, I cracked its shell. Inside I found a wonderful newness. Note its stomach is very cold?”

Mrgk bent close, saw the deepfrost forming on its insides.

Krvl dropped a stiff xr into the body. In a few seconds, it swelled, grew, moved, began running about, trying to climb out the slick sides.

“Simply marvelous,” said Mrgk.

“I think this Haze creature was able to make its stomach very cold, so that it could ingest fully live xrs. Imagine,” said Krvl.

“But will it not lose this ability?” asked Mrgk.

“I think not. It remains the same as this morninghunt. It has lost none of its coldness,” answered Krvl.

“Then it is a wondrous find. Wondrous. We shall be able to place xrs in it and then ingest them fully live ourselves. Oh, I can imagine the taste already!”

Mrgk paused. “Do you realize every Kind will try to find one of these Haze creatures, so they will be able to rejuvenate their xrs? You’ll start a craze, Krvl, a positive craze.”

Krvl was pleased. Buds formed quickly on his back.

In front of them, between the four legs, the nuclear generator hummed and the compressor pockpocked, making more liquid nitrogen. The legs suddenly hissed and moved, searching back and forth for footing in the air of the den.