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PROLOGUE:

BEHOLD THE FACE OF EVIL INCARNATE...

HIS NAME IS H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR, AND HE IS THE LAST OF THE Q'LEE... A CONDITION OF HIS OWN ENGINEERING...

IT WAS SAID OF THE Q'LEE THAT THEY BORE IAL FEELINGS TOWARDS NONE, A TRADITION HONORED BY H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR MORE IN THE BREACH THAN IN THE OBSERVANCE. IT WAS THIS WHICH MADE HIM THE MOST DANGEROUS BEING IN THE GALAXY...

BUT, H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR WAS BORN, LIVED, AND ULTIMATELY PERISHED MORE THAN A MILLION YEARS AGO, SO WOULD BE NO THREAT TO 20TH CENTURY MAN...

EXCEPT FOR THE END RESULT OF THE ACTIONS OF THE LAST HOUR OF HIS LIFE...

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THE RACE OF THE Q'LEE WAS OLD WHEN OUR SUN WAS BORN, AND THEIR KNOWLEDGE WAS VAST...

PROBABLY FOR THIS REASON THE STARSHIP OF H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR WOULD LOOK UNGAINLY AND PRIMITIVE TO HUMAN EYES...

BUT IT HURTLES THROUGH THE VOID AT VELOCITIES MUCH IN EXCESS OF LIGHT-SPEED, AND IT'S LINES ARE NOT SO MUCH PRIMITIVE, AS SIMPLE...

DECEPTIVELY SO...

FOR H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR'S SHIP IS A FLYING WEAPON...

AND HER MASTER SITS SECURE AT HER VERY CORE... SURROUNDED BY CHAOS BOUND TO HIS WILL...

HE REMEMBERS, AS THE SHIP PLUNGES THROUGH THE EMPTINESS...

H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR REMEMBERS THE DEATH-AGONY OF HIS RACE, THE SWEET TASTE OF TOTAL GEN'OCIDE...

HE REMEMBERS THE SURGES OF POWER BENEATH HIM AS HIS SHIP RAINED DESTRUCTION ACROSS THE WORLDS OF THE Q'LEE...

IT IS THE PERSISTENT BLINK-BLINK-BLINK OF A TELLTALE WARNING LIGHT THAT STIRS HIM....

THE EVER ALERT ASTEROID LOCATOR HAS DETECTED A SIZABLE MASS OF VALUABLE HULLMETAL NEARBY...

H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR TWISTS HIS SCANNER INTO FOCUS...

AND SNARLS AN OBSCENITY TOO VILE TO BE PRINTED EVEN IN HIS OWN LOST TONGUE...

THIS IS NO LOOSE ASTEROIDAL MASS.

THIS IS A CAREFULLY CRAFTED PURSUIT VESSEL...

AND THE STYLIZED STAR AND STARSHIP EMBLAZONED UPON ITS HULL IDENTIFIES IT AS A SHIP OF THE FIRST FEDERATION, OF WHICH THE Q'LEE WORLDS WERE FOUNDING MEMBERS...

THE PURSUIT COMMANDER CURLS SIX-FINGERED PAWS AROUND A G-RAIL AND NARROWS HIS BIG, YELLOW CAT'S EYES...

H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR, HEAR ME! THIS IS FIRST FEDERATION VESSEL *LANGSVEL!* WE DEMAND YOUR IMMEDIATE SURRENDER...

H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR'S RIGHT HAND TWITCHES - THE Q'LEE EQUIVALENT OF AN IRONIC SMILE...

THE COMMANDER'S VOICE HAS IDENTIFIED HIM AS A FEL'T'AP, AND H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR KNOWS A FEL'T'AP IS BOUND BY CUSTOM TO TAKE HIS CAPTIVES ALIVE...

SECURE IN THE KNOWLEDGE A SHIP COMMANDED BY A FEL'T'AP WILL NOT SOON ATTACK, H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR SLIPS FROM HIS CRASH-COUCH AND DESCENDS INTO THE BOWELS OF HIS SHIP...

IT IS DARK DOWN HERE, AND SO CROWDED WITH ARCANE MECHANISMS THAT EVEN H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR MUST RUN NEARLY DOUBLED...

IT IS AWKWARD WITH HIS THREE-PART LIMBS, AND HIS COMPLEX JOINTS PROTEST THE UNACCUSTOMED STRAIN...

BUT SOON HE IS AT HIS DESTINATION...

AND COLD, WHITE SHIP'S LIGHT GLEAMS ON THE INDESTRUCTIBLE TEARDROP "SHAPE HANGING SO PONDEROUSLY ABOVE HIM...

IT IS A WEAPON, OF COURSE. THERE IS VERY LITTLE ABOARD H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR'S SHIP WHICH IS NOT. A WEAPON OF IMMENSE POWER, IT'S SHELL SUPER-DENSE HULLMETAL HELD IN THE PERFECT GRIP OF A STASIS FIELD...

NO FORCE IN THE UNIVERSE CAN STOP IT, ONCE IT IS DIRECTED, AND H'R'NATH-KEM TOHR'S FINGERS TYPE OUT THE COORDINATES OF.....

BUT IT REALLY DOESN'T MATTER WHAT TARGET H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR HAD IN MIND FOR HIS ULTIMATE WEAPON...

PROBABLY IT WAS THE HOMEWORLD CAPITOL, BUT WE CAN NEVER KNOW...

FOR H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR HAS NOT CONSIDERED THAT, TO PURSUE A MADMAN, THE FEDERATION MIGHT LOGICALLY SEND.. A CREW OF MADMEN!

THE FEL'T'AP COMMANDER SNARLS ON A RISING NOTE..

000 A COMMAND THAT WOULD NEVER HAVE ISSUED FROM THE LIPS OF AN ETHICAL, SANE, FEL'T'AP...

AND SIX SILVER SLIVERS DART FROM THE UNDER-BELLY OF THE PURSUIT SHIP!

ONE WOULD HAVE BEEN ENOUGH...

H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR'S SHIP PERISHES IN A FURY OF FUSING HYDROGEN— AND H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR WITH IT...

BUT, NO FORCE IN THE UNIVERSE CAN PENETRATE A STASIS FIELD...

UNPOWERED, UNDIRECTED, THE BIT OF FLOTSAM HURTLES AWAY, TRAILING DISSIPATING VAPORS...

VAPORS THAT MIGHT ONCE HAVE BEEN ONE H'R'NATH-KEM-TOHR...

AND THERE IS LAUGHTER IN HELL, THIS DAY...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

SPACE: 1999

EIGHT HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS AGO THE EXPANDING SPHERE OF THE FIRST FEDERATION MET THE EXPANDING SPHERE OF THE WOK EMPIRE...

THE ENSUING WARS ANNIHILATED BOTH SIDES, AND LEFT US WITH VERY LITTLE TO REMEMBER THEM BY...

SHORTLY THEREAFTER, AN UPRIGHT BEAST KNOWN TO HIS DESCENDANTS AS CRO-MAGNON MAN, BEGAN THE LONG CLIMB TO THE STARS...

THIRTY YEARS AGO, WE SUCCEEDED IN THE FIRST SMALL STEP WHEN NEIL ARM-STRONG SET FOOT ON THE MOON...

MUCH HAS CHANGED SINCE THEN...

KOENIG TO MOONBASE ALPHA. DO YOU COPY?

MAIN MISSION, THIS IS KOENIG IN EAGLE TWO. DO YOU READ?

EDITOR: GEORGE WILDMAN
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PART ONE

FLOTSAM

MAIN MISSION TO EAGLE TWO. PAUL MORROW RECEIVING YOU, COMMANDER. PROFESSOR BERGMAN IS STANDING BY WITH ME.

HELLO, JOHN! YOU'RE COMING IN LOUD AND CLEAR. NO INTERFERENCE FROM THE DWARF STAR AT THIS ANGLE.

ANYTHING EXCITING TO TELL US?

'FRAID NOT, VICTOR. LOOKS LIKE THIS WAS ANOTHER WOK OR FIRST FEDERATION WORLD. IT'S BEEN PRETTY THOROUGHLY DEVASTATED.

DOESN'T LOOK LIKE WE CAN EXPECT MUCH SUCCESS WITH OUR SEARCH IN THIS SECTOR...

NONE OF THE WORLDS ARE HABITABLE...

CLIC

THIS IS DOCTOR RUSSELL.

WHAT ABOUT EXOBIOLOGY, MAL? DID YOU FIND ANYTHING ENCOURAGING?

WHIRR

NOTHING TO WRITE HOME ABOUT, DOCTOR. THIS PLANET HAS BEEN SUBJECTED TO THE SAME KIND OF CONCENTRATED BARRAGE WE FOUND ON THE OTHER WORLDS...

THEY ALL LOOK LIKE THE MOON - MASSIVE AREAS OF CRATERING... ONLY WITH ATMOSPHERIC EROSION...

I DID FIND SOME DATA THAT SUGGESTS LIFE MAY BE RE-EVOLVING IN THE SEAS, BUT THAT MIGHT BE WISHFUL THINKING ON MY PART...

CHAK

MAIN COMPUTER IS STANDING BY, COMMANDER.

WE'LL BE READY TO ASSESS ALL DATA AS SOON AS YOU BEGIN TRANS· MITTING IT.

GOOD, CHANO. WE'LL JUST COMPLETE THIS FINAL ORBIT, BEFORE RETURNING TO *ALPHA*. YOU CAN EX· PECT OUR FIRST TRANS· MISSION AS SOON AS WE CLEAR THE DWARF'S INTERFERENCE...

I'LL GO BACK AND START CO· RELATING THE DATA, COM· MANDER...

THAT'LL SAVE US SOME TIME WHEN WE'RE THROUGH THE DEAD ZONE.

GOOD IDEA, MAL. THE MORE DATA WE HAVE PRO· CESSED THIS TIME...

...THE LESS TIME WE'LL HAVE TO WASTE ON THE NEXT PLANET!

YEAH. Y'KNOW, THIS IS GETTING TO BE A BORE, COM· MANDER! FIFTEEN PLANETS SURVEYED IN THIS QUAD· RANT, ALL THE SAME...

LUCK OF THE DRAW, MAL. WE CAN'T HAVE EXCITEMENT *ALL* THE TIME...

MOMENTS LATER...

COMMANDER, WE'RE ENCOUNTERING SOME VARIANCE. CAN YOU BOOST YOUR SIGNAL?

NOTHING TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT, PAUL. WE'RE ON THE PERIPHERY OF THE INTERFERENCE ZONE...

I'M CLOSING DOWN TRANSMISSION UNTIL WE'RE CLEAR. I'LL RE-ESTABLISH CONTACT IN FIFTY SEVEN MINUTES...

DID YOU COPY THAT, MAL? WE'LL BE CLEAR OF THE DEAD ZONE IN JUST UNDER AN HOUR...

ROGER, COMMANDER. I'LL BE READY TO BEGIN DATA-FEED BY THEN...

BUT, AS MAL BURNS PROGRAMS THE EAGLE'S COMPUTERS...

HIS HAND, AWKWARD IN THE HEAVY SPACE GLOVE, TOUCHES A SMALL CONTACT...

AND CUTS OFF HIS INTERCOM...

SO, A FEW MOMENTS LATER...

MAL, MY MASS INDICATOR IS PICKING UP A BODY PARALLELING US. SPACE DISPLACEMENT IS SMALL, BUT IT MASSES ABOUT HALF A TON...

MAL?

MAL, DO YOU COPY?

PUZZLED, KOENIG UN-BUCKLES HIS SAFETY HARNESS...

AND RISES TO INVESTIGATE...

MAL, DIDN'T YOU HEAR? I SAID THERE'S A BODY TRACKING US...

IT'S ONLY ABOUT AS BIG AS A HAND-GRENADE, BUT BY IT'S MASS IT COULD BE...

"...DANGEROUS..."

THE RACE OF THE Q'LEE WERE VERY SMALL BY HUMAN STANDARDS...

R'NATH-KEM-TOHR HIMSELF STOOD NOT MUCH TALLER THAN AN AVERAGE MAN'S INDEX FINGER...

HIS ULTIMATE WEAPON WAS SLIGHTLY LARGER THAN AN OLDSTYLE HAND GRENADE...

AND AFTER A MILLION YEARS OF DORMANCY, MUCH OF ITS POWER HAS PULLED AWAY...

STILL, IT CARRIES ENOUGH RESIDUAL ENERGY TO DETONATE WITH THE FORCE OF A MAN-SIZED SUPER-NOVA...

MORE THAN ENOUGH FORCE TO SUNDER AN EAGLE...

KOENIG'S SPACE-SUIT PROTECTS HIM FROM THE WORST OF THE TERRIBLE HEAT AND RADIATION...

BUT THE SHOCK OF THE BLAST IS ANOTHER MATTER...

UNABLE TO BRACE HIMSELF, KOENIG IS HURLED WITH STUNNING FORCE AGAINST A BULK-HEAD...

NOT ENOUGH TO RENDER HIM FULLY UNCONSCIOUS, THE BLOW NEVERTHELESS LEAVES HIM TOO DAZED TO PROPERLY REACT TO THE SITUATION...

HE HAS BARELY THE WITS ABOUT HIM TO GRAB AT A DOOR-FRAME AS THE EXPLOSIVE DECOMPRESSION SUCKS EVERY LOOSE OBJECT INTO THE VOID...

BUT, HIS GLOVES WERE NOT DESIGNED FOR SUCH A GRIP...

THE HURRICANE WINDS CONTINUE TO PUSH RELENTLESSLY AGAINST HIM...

UNTIL...

HIS GRIP FAILS...

AND JOHN KOENIG, COMMANDER OF MOONBASE ALPHA, UPON WHOSE SURVIVAL MUST ULTIMATELY DEPEND THE LIVES OF 300 MEN AND WOMEN...

IS HURLED INTO THE AIRLESS MAW OF SPACE...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

SURVIVAL

PART TWO

THERE IS NO SOUND IN SPACE - NO SCENTS. ONLY THE NUMBING COLD OF THE EMPTINESS BETWEEN THE STARS...

AT LEAST, THIS CLOSE TO A STAR, KOENIG HAS THE SMALL RELIEF OF KNOWING THERE IS ENOUGH HEAT TO KEEP THE MOISTURE ON HIS EYE FROM FREEZING...

HE WILL NOT BE BLIND FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE...

ALTHOUGH THAT IS A SPAN WHICH CAN NOW BE MEASURED IN SECONDS...

BUT, EVEN IN HIS GROGGY STATE KOENIG'S ASTRONAUT TRAINING GOES INTO EFFECT...

INSTINCTIVELY HE EXHALES, FORCING ALL THE AIR FROM HIS LUNGS, DELAYING THEIR OWN EXPLOSIVE DECOMPRESSION...

YET, EVEN SO HE HAS BUT FIFTEEN SECONDS BEFORE THE PRESSURES WITHIN HIS BODY RUPTURE HIS SKIN, KILLING HIM...

JOHN KOENIG KNOWS FOR AN INSTANT THE ACRID TASTE OF DEATH...

AND IN THAT MOMENT IMAGES FLOW PAST HIS MIND'S EYE...

IMAGES OF A SPECIAL FLIGHT TO THE MOON— WHAT SEEMS NOW LIKE A CENTURY AGO...

OF INEXPLICABLE DANGER TO MOONBASE ALPHA... OF MEN DYING FROM...

... RADIATION POISONING, DOCTOR RUSSELL?

YES, COMMANDER, BUT... WHERE IS THE CONTAMINATION COMING FROM?

OF VICTOR BERGMAN'S SOLUTION: MAGNETIC VARIANCE CAUSING A BUILD-UP OF ACTIVITY IN NUCLEAR WASTES DUMPED ON THE MOON'S FAR-SIDE...

OF THEIR DESPERATE EFFORTS TO PREVENT...

CHAIN REACTION!

KOENIG'S MIND RELIVES THE BLINDING FLARE OF...

DETONATION!

ONCE AGAIN ALPHA'S HORIZON ERUPTS NUCLEAR FURY...

AND A TRAGEDY TOO TERRIBLE TO BE CONCEIVED OCCURS AGAIN...

AS THE MOON IS TORN AWAY FROM EARTH...

FLOATING...

FLOATING...

BUT... THAT IS NOT THE MOON...

CONTINUED AFTER NEXT PAGE

SPACE

HELMET!

BY COINCIPENCE, KOENIG'S OWN, TWO' ANY HELMET WOULD DO...

KOENIG

IF HE CAN REACH IT, THAT IS...

AND HE HAS ALREADY WASTED SIX PRECIOUS SECONDS...

FALLING THRU SPACE AT 100 THOUSAND MILES AN HOUR: A DYING MAN, AND A SLIM HOPE OF SURVIVAL-

BUT THE FORCE OF HIS EXPULSION HAS SET KOENIG TUMBLING...

HE TWISTS, TRYING TO ANGLE HIMSELF FOR A DESPERATE PLOY...

KNOWING THAT TOO GREAT A TWIST WILL ONLY SEND HIM SPINNING...

GENTLY...

GENTLY...

EYES LOCKED ON THE HELMET, KOENIG FINDS THE CONTROL CIRCUIT ON HIS WRIST BY TOUCH...

ALREADY HIS FINGERS ARE GROWING NUMB, HIS LUNGS ACHING...

NOW!

KOENIG OPENS THE VALVE ON HIS LEFT-HAND AIR-TANK...

PRECIOUS OXYGEN SPEWS INTO THE VOID...

BUT NEWTON'S LAW HOLDS TRUE: "FOR EVERY ACTION, THERE IS AN EQUAL AND OPPOSITE RE-ACTION..."

HELP!

KOENIG MOVES!

SLOWLY... PAINFULLY SLOWLY... BUT HE MOVES.!!

JOINTS POP AS KOENIG STRAINS TOWARDS THE HELMET...

GOT IT!

HIS SKIN IS DRUMHEAD TAUT...

STAY CALM!

HELMET IN PLACE...

CONNECT HOSE...

BUT HIS IMPROVISED THRUSTER IS OFF-CENTER...

HE BEGINS TO TWIST AWAY FROM HIS TARGET...

HE WILL HAVE ONLY ONE CHANCE....

ALREADY HIS EXTREMITIES ARE TURNING PURPLE...

LOCKED...

AIR!!!

IT IS "BOTTLED AIR" OF COURSE...

RECYCLED PERHAPS A HUNDRED TIMES SINCE THE MOON LEFT EARTH...

IT IS TASTELESS NOW, AND SMELLS FAINTLY METALLIC...

BUT TO JOHN KOENIG IT IS THE NECTAR OF THE GODS...

BREATHING SLOWLY, EVENLY, KOENIG REVIEWS HIS SITUATION...

THE SHATTERED FORWARD SECTION OF EAGLE TWO IS STILL WITHIN REACH.

IT IS ALSO HIS ONE HOPE OF RETURNING TO MOONBASE...!

ACTIVATING HIS RIGHT WRIST CONTROLS, KOENIG EXPELLS AIR FROM HIS RIGHT TANK.

SO HURRY THIS TIME.

HE RELEASES THE AIR IN SHORT BURSTS, MOVING SLOWLY...

TEN MINUTES, AND HE IS BACK AT THE EAGLE, STILL WITH PLENTY OF AIR IN HIS TANKS.

HAND OVER HAND, HE DRAWS HIMSELF ACROSS THE JAGGED REMAINS OF THE PASSENGER MODULE...

FOR A MOMENT HIS THOUGHTS TURN TO MAL BURNS.

THE YOUNG EXO-BIOLOGIST IS NOWHERE TO BE SEEN, NO DOUBT VAPORIZED ALONG WITH THE EAGLE'S REAR SECTION...

SADLY, KOENIG TURNS TO THE TASK AT HAND...

AND DISCOVERS MAL BURNS' SWIFT, PAINLESS DEATH MIGHT BE ENVIABLE...

A PIECE OF SCHRAPNEL HAS VIOLATED THE FORWARD FUEL TANKS...

FUEL HAS BEEN BOILING INTO SPACE FOR SEVERAL MINUTES...

KOENIG WISHES HE COULD CURSE HIS LUCK, BUT SOMEHOW THE STRONGEST EXPLETIVES HE KNOWS ARE NOT ENOUGH...

HIS FUEL ALMOST GONE, HE HAS ONLY THE RESERVE TANKS ...

AND THIS CLOSE TO A STAR, THEY WILL BE BARELY ENOUGH TO POWER THE EAGLE'S ATTITUDE JETS ...

KNOWING IT TO BE HOPELESS, KOENIG TRIES THE TRANSMITTER...

KOENIG IN EAGLE TWO, CALLING MOONBASE. DO YOU COPY, MOONBASE?

HIS ONLY REPLY IS VISUAL STATIC ON HIS COMM. SCREENS.

DIDN'T EXPECT IT TO WORK, REALLY. I'M STILL WITHIN THE INTERFERENCE ZONE...

THOSE WOKS WERE CLEVER ALRIGHT.

THEY WERE ABLE TO ALTER A STAR'S ELECTRO-MAGNETIC FIELDS, CREATING THIS JAMMING EFFECT...

PROBABLY THEY DID IT TO KEEP FIRST FEDERATION PLANETS FROM CALLING FOR HELP WHEN THE WOK FLEETS ATTACKED...

THE JAMMING EFFECT HAS COLLAPSED CONSIDERABLY IN THE MILLION-ODD YEARS SINCE, BUT IT'S STILL DOING ITS JOB... PREVENTING ME FROM CALLING FOR HELP!

IN FACT, MOONBASE WON'T EVEN KNOW WE'RE IN TROUBLE, YET.

I WOULDN'T BE CLEAR OF THE INTERFERENCE, EVEN UNDER POWER, I...

WAIT... SOMETHING ON THE SCANNER...

ANOTHER ATTACK?!

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BLAST IT! I'VE BEEN SO WORRIED ABOUT STAYING ALIVE I'D FORGOTTEN SOMEONE MIGHT BE PLANNING THE OPPOSITE...

C'MON! C'MON! INTERFERENCE ISN'T *THAT* BAD... I SHOULD BE ABLE TO GET RESOLUTION...

AND IF I DO? THE LASER POWER PACKS ARE SHATTERED...

EXCEPT THE EMERGENCY COMM-LASER. AT CLOSE RANGE THAT COULD...

WAIT...

THAT'S NO ATTACKER! IT'S...

THE OTHER HALF OF THE EAGLE!!

KOENIG, THIS IS YOUR LUCKY DAY... SORT OF!

YOU MAY HAVE COME WITHIN INCHES OF OBLIVION, BUT...

KOENIG

IF THE ENGINES ARE STILL FUNCTIONAL, I MAY BE ABLE TO COUPLE UP TO THAT SECTION...

...AND POWER BACK TO ALPHA!

NO WAY I COULD LAND, OF COURSE, BUT I SHOULD BE ABLE TO ACHIEVE ORBIT...

KOENIG

FIRST THINGS FIRST, THOUGH.

I CAN'T GET OVER WITH THE EXTRA MASS I'M PACKING,

SO...

BETTER NOT RISK MECHANICAL SEPARATION. COULD BE DAMAGE...

FIRE THE EXPLOSIVE BOLTS...

NOW!

MOMENTS LATER THE SEPARATED CONTROL MODULE ARCS THROUGH SPACE, TOWARDS THE EAGLE'S ENGINE POD...

IT IS A TRICKY, DANGEROUS COURSE. THE INTERVENING SPACE IS A JUNKYARD OF EAGLE DEBRIS...

BUT, JOHN KOENIG IS AN EXPERT PILOT, AND ARRIVES AT HIS GOAL WITHOUT MISHAP...

AT FIRST GLANCE, THE GIANT ENGINES APPEAR LARGELY UNDAMAGED...

BUT KOENIG IS NOT A MAN TO JUDGE BY ONE GLANCE...

USING A SMALL BACK-PACK ROCKET HE CROSSES TO THE EAGLE FRAGMENT...

SLOWLY, CAREFULLY, HE MAKES HIS WAY ACROSS THE INTRICATE MECHANISMS...

RACING FIRST ONE CIRCUIT, THEN ANOTHER.

KOENIG

SOME DAMAGE, BUT I'LL GET A BETTER IDEA IF I CAN GET THE INTERNAL SYSTEMS TO GIVE ME A READ-OUT!

THEN I CAN...

MAL!! HOW!?!

EVENIN' COMMANDER! NICE OF YOU TO DROP IN!

COULD I PREVAIL UPON YOU TO GET ME A HELMET FROM THE EMERGENCY LOCKER?

I'M ALMOST OUT OF AIR IN HERE!

ALMOST NUMB FROM SHOCK, KOENIG COMPLIES...

BURNS

PASSING THE HELMET THROUGH A ZIPPERED "AIR-LOCK"!

THANKS, SIR. BUT WHAT KEPT YOU?

BURNS

KOENIG HAS TO SMILE THEN. EVEN IN THE FACE OF DEATH, MAL BURNS INDEFATIGABLE SENSE OF HUMOR PREVAILS

REMIND ME TO HAVE A CHAT WITH BERGMAN, COMMANDER. THESE SURVIVAL SYSTEMS LEAVE SOMETHING TO BE DESIRED.

WHEN THE... WHATEVER- BROKE US IN TWAIN, THE PLASTI-SEALS ACTED AS IF IT WAS A STANDARD HULL RUPTURE...

UNFORTUNATELY, THE OL' LOVE-CHILD WHO DESIGNED THIS UNIT NEVER CONSIDERED THE BREAK MIGHT EXPOSE THE SEALS TO DIRECT SOLAR HEAT. THE PLASTIC MELTED, AND CUT ME OFF FROM THE EMERGENCY LOCKER ... AND THE HELMETS!

CHUCKLING AT HIS COMPANION'S IRE, KOENIG EXPLAINS HIS PLAN TO LINK THE COMMAND POD TO THE SURVIVING ENGINES...

TETHERING HIMSELF TO THE EAGLE, MAL BURNS SETS ABOUT ASSISTING HIS COMMANDER...

FOR NEARLY HALF AN HOUR THE TWO MEN FLOAT IN THE EERIE SILENCE, STUDYING THE CONTROL LEADS AS THEY SNAKE THROUGH THE REMNANT OF EAGLE TWO.

IT'S NO GOOD, MAL. THE SET-UP IS FUSED BEYOND HOPE...

I COULD REPAIR IT ENOUGH FOR A LINK-UP IF WE WERE IN THE MAINTENANCE DOCK ON ALPHA, BUT...

...BUT THEN, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TO, AS WE'D NOT BE IN THIS MESS, EH, SIR?

WELL - IT'S BEEN NICE KNOWING YOU, COMMANDER.

DON'T BE SO QUICK TO SOUND THE TRUMP OF DOOM, MAL. THERE'S ONE OTHER TRICK WE CAN TRY...

QUICKLY, AND SIMPLY (FOR THE ONLY ENGINEERING BURNS HAS DONE AGENETIC) KOENIG OUTLINES HIS PLAN...

BURNS

INTENTLY, THE TWO SET TO WORK...

KOENIG

FIRST, THE STARBOARD ENGINE HOUSING - WHICH HAS SUSTAINED MAJOR DAMAGE, AND NOW REPRESENTS JUST SO MUCH DEAD WEIGHT - MUST BE REMOVED.

THE COUPLINGS SEVERED, KOENIG MANEUVERS THE USELESS BELL-HOUSING OUT OF THE "LINE OF FIRE"...

HIS OPERATION WILL BE TRICKY ENOUGH, WITHOUT OBSTACLES...

THEN, THE MOST DANGEROUS MANIPULATION:

THE PORT HOUSING IS REMOVED AND RE-ALIGNED...

PRIMER SET, COMMANDER!

GOOD...

TUBING IS RECONNECTED, FOIL WRAPPED AROUND SENSITIVE FUEL LINES...

THE THRUSTER NOW POINTS THRU 90° TO THE AXIS...

ALRIGHT, MAL, THAT'S ALL WE CAN DO - EXCEPT PRAY...

...AND GET THE HECK OUT OF THE WAY, SIR!!

STAND BY! ALPHA SHOULD BE NOTICING WE'RE OVERDUE NOW...

KOENIG

WITH THE STAR'S INTERFERENCE TO CONTEND WITH, THEY'LL BE DEPENDING ON VISUAL SIGHTING IN THEIR SEARCH FOR US...

AND IF THIS WORKS ....

...ENGINES FIRING...

...IT SHOULD BE LIKE SENDING UP A...

"...A FLARE."

THE EFFECT IS CALLED A "PINWHEEL."

IT IS NOT UNLIKE THE FIRE-WORKS CHILDREN PLAY WITH ON THE FOURTH OF JULY, OR GUY FAWKES DAY...

SAVE THAT THE ARMS OF THIS PARTICULAR PINWHEEL ARE AS HOT AS THE SURFACE OF A STAR, AND REACH SEVERAL THOUSAND FEET INTO SURROUNDING SPACE...

AND, EIGHTY THOUSAND MILES AWAY...

PROFESSOR BERGMAN— I THINK YOU'D BET-TER LOOK AT THIS...

WHAT IS IT, PAUL? THE EAGLE?

DON'T KNOW, SIR. IT APPEAR-ED ABOUT FIF-TEEN SECONDS AGO...

HMMM! TRACKING A LATERAL PATH AWAY FROM THE STAR...

...BUT AT RIGHT ANGLES TO ALPHA.

COULD IT BE EAGLE TWO, VICTOR?

I SINCERELY HOPE NOT, HELENA. LOOK AT THE RATE OF SPIN!

IF THAT'S A MALFUNCTION-ING EAGLE, THE CREW WOULD BE SPLATTERED ALL OVER THE INTERIOR LIKE TOOTH-PASTE... BUT IT *COULD* BE SOMETHING ELSE...

SCANT MINUTES LATER...

BERGMAN TO RESCUE EAGLE... ALAN, YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE TO DO?

CONFIRMED, PROFESSOR.

I'M TO BACK-TRACK THAT CRAZY PINWHEEL, LOOKING FOR A WRECKED EAGLE...

AND AN HOUR AND TWENTY-SEVEN MINUTES LATER...

JOHN!

JOHN, IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU. WELCOME HOME!

IT'S GOOD TO BE HOME, VICTOR...

DID YOU ANALYSE THE INFORMATION I SENT FROM OUR EAGLE'S DATA-LOG?

YES. AND IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT ANOTHER ATTACK, YOU CAN RELAX.

THE WEAPON YOU RAN INTO WAS LOCKED IN A TIME-RETARDER FIELD...

YET, EVEN IN STASIS IT SHOWED MICRO-METEOR DAMAGE. IT WAS PROBABLY A MILLION YEARS OLD — A LAST RELIC OF THE WARS.

PITY TO LOSE SUCH AN ARTIFACT.

PITY?

VICTOR, YOU'LL FORGIVE ME IF I DON'T SHARE YOUR SORROW.

WELL, MAL,.. YOU WERE COMPLAINING ABOUT THE MONOTONY.

WAS THIS ENOUGH EXCITEMENT FOR YOU?

EXCITEMENT? HECK, NO, COMMANDER!

I MEAN WE SURVIVED IT, DIDN'T WE?

"SURVIVED IT?!" OF ALL THE...

YAWP!

ONLY KIDDING COMMANDER! ONLY KIDDING!!

END



the PRESENCE

Captain Alan Carter maneuvered *Eagle I* over the arid terrain of this sere, brown planet. A tiny, silvery speck was visible in the vast dome of space. It was Earth's runaway moon to which *Eagle I* would return after investigating the planet which Commander Koenig had hoped would be capable of supporting human life.

"Look, Commander!" Captain Carter said, "That's the ruin of a great city. And those vast depressions look as though they might have once been great seas."

Commander Koenig stared at the television screen. The lens was on *zoom* and he could plainly see other cities built on what had once been the shores of large bodies of water.

"Our spectroscope indicates an atmosphere composed chiefly of methane, nitrogen, and carbon gasses if oxygen ever did exist here, it has been depleted or destroyed. There are no indications of life."

Commander Koenig had transmitted this information to Professor Victor Bergman in Moonbase Alpha. "Very well, John," Professor Bergman replied. "Are you returning now?"

Koenig peered into the television screen, momentarily undecided.

"We've still got a few hours before you begin to draw out of range, Victor," Moonbase Alpha's commander answered. "We'll land and try to determine exactly what happened here."

Captain Alan Carter guided *Eagle 1* lower, crossing the largest city below, then coming back. John Koenig saw what appeared to be level, clear space near the center of the ruined city and the space pilot landed the shuttle gently. Around them there was a dismal gray jumble of shattered burned - looking structures. Suddenly, Koenig grunted.

"Look, Alan!" he exclaimed. "There are skeletal remains in the streets. I'm going to investigate."

Carter saw the bones and they worried him. "Do you think it's wise, Commander? There may be radiation fall-out or..."

"There isn't, Alan. Our sensors would have detected anything like that." Captain Carter said no more as John Koenig swiftly donned the silvery suit which would protect him from contamination outside. He donned the transparent bubble helmet, checked his oxygen supply, spoke to Captain Carter with the radio and then moved to the air-lock through which he could safely exit.

As the air was released, the atmosphere of this strange planet flooded the exit port. Commander Koenig climbed down to the surface, noting the gravity which was not as great as Earth's had been but which was about twice that of the lunar surface.

He switched on the built-in camera which would photograph the environment every five seconds. It would be valuable for analysis later. Commander Koenig walked to the first skeletal figure lying on the hard, gray surface. It looked like a kind of street paving Koenig had never seen before. And the skeleton was unlike any living thing the man from Earth had ever seen. Koenig reached out and turned the roundish portion which had apparently been the head. At his touch, it crumpled to ash. He realized he couldn't bring a complete skeleton back to Alpha.

After thirty minutes, Captain Carter's voice sounded in his ears.

"Time to return, Commander," Carter reported. "Our base will pass out of range in another hour."

In the air-lock, Koenig removed the disposable suit he had worn, careful not to touch anything on which dust or debris might have settled. Divested of this outer covering, Koenig pushed the 'open' button and stepped back into Eagle 1. Then, he re-opened the exit port doors and ejected the contaminated items he had used. The interior of the air-lock was then flushed and irradiated with gamma rays. Both John Koenig and *Eagle 1* were uncontaminated.

Or so Commander Koenig thought. Back at Moonbase Alpha, Alan Carter and John Koenig were admitted to a van which shuttled them to Dr. Helena Russell's domain, Moonbase Alpha's hospital.

Through glass ports in the van, Dr. Russell studied both men. They showed nothing until infrared light had bathed both figures. Then, Commander Koenig's right hand emitted a whitish glow.



"Oh, no," Helena Russell breathed. "Some life form exists on his skin."

Technicians examined John Koenig's skin through the ports. Helena Russell analyzed, fed figures into a computer, and she returned fifteen minutes later. Nozzles were attached to fixtures on all sides of the sealed van. Then, at a signal from the beautiful physician, both men were bathed in a fine spray that lasted sixty seconds while both men shut their eyes tightly and did not breathe. Then, a rinsing spray was employed. Now, when the infrared lights bathed the men, there was no contamination. Dr. Russell signaled a technician and the van was opened.

Koenig emerged and looked at Dr. Russell. "What was it, Helena?"

"A fungus, John. It was spreading rapidly until the fungicide we used destroyed it. If we hadn't caught it in time, Moonbase Alpha would've been wiped out."

John Koenig nodded. Another deadly peril of unknown space had been dealt with but there would be more. He sighed. Would they ever find the home every inhabitant of the runaway moon prayed for night and day?

