

The Red Dust of Mars

by Pamela McCaughey (2001)
based on the series "UFO" (1969-71)
created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, and Reg Hill
WARNING: no adult situations, some naughty words

Chapter One

February 20th, 2003

"Are you outta your mind? Transferring *me* to the MarsBase project?" a very pissed off Major Allan Leslie was standing in front of Paul Foster's desk. He'd just thrown down his new orders in rank disgust.

"You have a problem with this, Major?" General Foster sat back in his chair, unperturbed, his fingers steepled.

"Problem? The *problem* is that I'm too fuckin' OLD to be going on this mission!" Leslie fumed, pacing the office.

"So you're fifty-two. So what? The project is possibly being compromised by alien sabotage. They need your expertise up there pronto. In fact, the mission commander asked for you specifically."

"Tom Keith! Keee-rist!"

"I understand there's some issues between you and Colonel Keith, but you're both the best at what you do. Get over it. It's just a temporary assignment."

"*Temporary*?" Leslie exploded, "I don't see anything *temporary* about being away from planet earth for as long as a whole year!"

"Look, Al, your objections are noted. But, this is coming from the top, ok? You're going and that's an order."

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Major Leslie left Paul Foster's New York City Omega office in a huff. He hadn't seen Tom Keith in years, and that was the way he wanted to keep it. Six years earlier, he'd had an affair with Keith's then-wife, Stacy Boyd, currently the MoonBase commander. The marriage had broken up, and in an effort to put everything behind her, she'd asked to be transferred to the moon, leaving both men.

Then, there was the issue of space travel itself. Leslie hadn't worked in space for over a decade. Most of his work for Omega was on good old Terra Firma. A transfer to the MarsBase project could take months out of his life! Both Keith and Boyd were twelve years his junior and could afford to spend that time off-planet. He didn't feel he could.

It wasn't like Leslie to buck an order. But, this time, he felt he'd had to. For personal reasons. Taking these orders would put him back in the company at varying points of his old flame and her now ex-husband. Not the most pleasant prospect he could imagine. There was nothing left but to pack and deal with it as best he could.

* * *

February 22nd, 2003

Joining Leslie on the flight to MoonBase were a number of other officers and SHADO personnel. All were, like Leslie, en route to the MarsBase project. Leslie knew some of them all from various missions and assignments he'd been involved with in the past. Dr. Bonnie Davidson was going to be the project's new Chief Medical Officer/Psychologist. She, and a team of other specialists, were going to spend a few weeks training on the moon, until their scheduled flight left for Mars.

When the Luna One docked at the Moon port, the welcoming committee included Colonel Boyd and a couple of orientation officers, who'd be preparing the latest contingent for their mission on Mars. They saw them to their temporary quarters in the visitors' sphere, and gave them each CDs with their new training itinerary.

Leslie was just settling into his room, and looking at his CD on his laptop, when there was a light tapping at the door.

"Yeah, come in," Leslie grunted, absorbed in reading his CD.

The former silver suits and purple wigs of the female MoonBase operatives had been long ago replaced with comfortable, looser-fitting green uniforms and easy-care hairstyles. Colonel Boyd stepped inside, and the pneumatic doors closed behind her.

"Long time no see," Boyd commented quietly.

Leslie looked her up and down, "Your choice, not mine."

"It was just as much your choice."

"No shit - I couldn't wait around for you to make up your mind!"

"So you got yourself transferred to the other side of the planet."

"Well, at least I stayed on the planet, can't say the same for you."

Boyd sat down, "Look, we've got to work together for a couple of months before you ship out to Mars, so let's call a truce, ok?"

Leslie sat in his seat, chewing his right thumb, as he always did when he was nervous, "Fine. Anything you say, boss-lady!"

"I've been hearing great things about your work, Al."

"I don't hear any complaints about you, either."

"Can't we still be friends, at least? We were once good friends."

"Yeah, till you pushed the envelope."

"I didn't hit any resistance from you, as I recall."

"Yeah, well, I guess we both got kinda wrapped up in each other," Leslie ran a hand through his prematurely steel-grey hair. "If ya didn't leave him for me, what didya leave him for?"

"Tom's not a bad person. He's just got his agenda, and I've got mine. I needed the freedom to move further, and so did he."

"They're having what they think are sabotage problems up there. Paul Foster said Tom asked for me on this project."

"That's not surprising. He always appreciated your abilities, even when he knew you and I were...involved. He's never let his emotions stand in the way of getting his work done. That was part of the problem in our marriage to begin with. The work was always Job One."

"And, what about you? You took the transfer up here and never looked back."

"Better peace of mind that way. No distractions."

"Yeah, I suppose being MoonBase commander isn't such a bad trade-off."

"It has its perks, yes."

"Well, I won't make any trouble for ya."

Colonel Boyd's gray eyes betrayed her as she said, "Al...I did care for you..."

"Not enough. It's always been about *you* and what you wanted. You didn't give a damn about how I felt. Jesus. It's ancient history, now. Who gives a shit?"

"You didn't want to make a permanent commitment any more than I did," Boyd replied defensively.

"Guess we had some wires crossed. But, it doesn't matter. What's done is done. Water under the bridge."

"So can I at least expect you'll conduct yourself in a civil manner?" Boyd got up to leave.

"I'll be a fuckin' choir boy, just you watch and see."

* * *

April 21st, 2003

The Mars orientation and training program was going well. Supplies and techno items were being shipped up from earth to be sent on to Mars - they'd be part of the Mars expedition's payload. Foodstuffs, small pieces of construction equipment, computer components, weapons, clothing, medical supplies and drugs, special space suits for construction work. All in all, the payload would end up as several hundred tons. Not counting the human payload.

From the start, Leslie was briefed on the sabotage problem on Mars. Colonel Keith and the base military commander, Colonel Steven Grean, were both of the opinion that the strange "accidents" which had occurred on the construction sites were not accidents at all - they were calculated alien interventions. One crewman had been killed, and another seriously wounded. Mars was a much bigger place than the moon, and there were more places in which the aliens could hide their ships or a secret base of their own on the "Red Planet." Unexpected equipment failures, power losses, hydroponic garden problems, water recycling glitches - all were happening with an unprecedented regularity - to equipment which had been certified fit for usage and should not have crapped out. But, if aliens were sabotaging SHADO equipment and the construction project, how the hell were they orchestrating their operations without getting caught?

Leslie's dubious attitude about his own effectiveness in this situation stemmed from the fact that he didn't consider himself a security officer. There were a number of security people assigned to the MarsBase already. So far, they only had their suspicions. Leslie's expertise was being called upon so they could determine if the accidents were traceable to alien technology. He wasn't a "goddam policeman" as he informed Colonel Keith the first time they spoke via video uplink.

The new base was being funded by a consortium of First World nations through their infamous "black budgets." Most of them didn't even know what the money was really being utilized for. Three years earlier, even before work was beginning on the International Space Station, a fleet of SHADO ships had landed on Mars, and set up a temporary beach-head, complete with living habitats, hydroponic gardens, water recycling and solar and other energy source plants, scientific research, telecommunications, and all the amenities necessary to sustain life on the harsh Martian surface. Mars' climate was one of extremes - ranging from temperatures as cold as minus 133 Celsius at the winter pole to as high as 27 Celsius on the day side during summer. Smaller than planet earth, Mars nonetheless had two small moons, and a highly varied terrain, which made the choice of the MarsBase location very important.

On the plus side, probes to the planet had detected no active plate tectonics or current volcanic activity. But, the planet's thin, unbreathable atmosphere and less than human friendly

temperatures, meant special care had to be taken in the construction of any habitation units, and workers had to suit up for protection outside. Mars' scant atmosphere was composed mostly of tiny amounts of remaining carbon dioxide, nitrogen, argon and a few other trace chemicals. The permanent ice cap poles were composed mostly of solid carbon dioxide - also known as "dry ice." Strong winds and dust storms were a constant feature on the Martian landscape, and they could blow up just as quickly and dangerously as dust storms in the deserts of earth. The red coloration of Mars' surface terrain was due to the presence of oxidized iron in the regolith, and the pink color of the Martian sky was caused by the fine red dust which was found suspended in Mars's thin atmosphere. The Martian day lasted 1.026 earth days, and the planet's year equaled almost 687 earth days. Its elliptical orbit meant there were specific times when Mars was closer to earth and its moon, and SHADO usually tried to aim its flights to Mars during those times. It was a time and fuel saver. Those working on Mars were daily treated to a bizarre vista out of all their viewing ports - red soil, a pink sky, and two former asteroids which had been drawn into Mars' gravitational pull and remained as Deimos and Phobos - Mars's moons.

Several of the ships in the first landing fleet carried heavy excavation equipment, so the actual construction could take place. People like project commander Tom Keith had gone out in the first wave to co-ordinate the whole undertaking. In time, the original personnel were to be replaced with new SHADO workers, so different phases of the project could be completed. Being assigned to the MarsBase project meant losing literally years out of one's life, off-world, and most of the personnel who'd accompanied the first wave were married couples, or those who felt they could serve SHADO best by applying their considerable talents to the project. The selection and training of workers had taken several years during the mid-to-late 1990's. It was easily the most ambitious task SHADO had ever executed.

Another plus Mars had for doing heavy excavation was that the gravity level on the Red Planet was much less than Earth, and even the moon. Lighter metals, such as aluminum or light steel, brought from Earth, had an increased strength for load-bearing needs in building and construction. Lunar astronauts could bounce and jump about in the moon's one sixth gravity, but Mars-naughts could jump as high as a several story building with Mars' 0.4 gravity! Although a person's mass would not change on Mars, their muscles would be somewhat stronger, but four hours a day of high activity exercise was required by everyone on Mars to reverse the lower-gravity induced calcium loss. Not to mention supplements.

Special considerations also had to be taken to get the humans used to the differences in the day lengths, so their inner "clocks" would not be too radically affected, as well as the severe psychological effects of living and working in a dangerous environment for so many years at a time. Unlike the MoonBase people, or Skydiver sailors, vacations and leaves were possible. They could easily communicate with their families at home. The MarsBase personnel had far fewer options, and their telecommunications were slightly delayed. And, because most of their equipment was for the work of construction, there were fewer facilities available for entertainment, except for a library of DVD movies and music. And, there was no such thing as cable TV on Mars!

The Mars people also worked long hours in a hostile environment and they were constantly being assaulted by dust storms and excessively cold temperatures. With all the sacrifices they had to make in order to start the project, they had to be a very dedicated lot. But, they also had to be getting weary. Tiredness, and constant hardship, along with the psychological effects, had to be taking its toll on them.

The night before Leslie was due to ship out to Mars, he had a visitor.

Instead of being dressed in her on-duty SHADO uniform, Colonel Boyd was casually attired. She invited herself in, armed with a couple bottles of SHADO's finest non-alcoholic beer (all that was allowed on MoonBase!).

"I thought we'd toast to your successful assignment at MarsBase," she smiled.

Leslie chewed his thumb thoughtfully, "I probably won't find anything except a buncha tired, burned-out workers." He accepted the bottle of bogus beer. As one Interceptor pilot 20 years earlier had observed, "Not a drop is sold till it's three weeks old!"

"Al, it's not just burn-out. It's far more than that. One man is dead, another injured. If they can't halt the accidents and SNAFUs, they're going to be seriously behind schedule. SHADO can't afford those kind of losses."

"S'pose you're worried about how Tom's reputation is gonna look if the project is in trouble."

"Nobody wants to see this project derailed - you and I both know how vital getting that base up and running is. Once it's operational in every sense, it'll become the jumping off point for further exploration of our solar system, and beyond. We might stand a chance of eventually finding the aliens' world itself and taking the battle to *them*. Especially if you folks at Omega manage to plug that alien propulsion core you found a few years ago into one our own ships."

"Yeah, we're still tryin' to match our technology to theirs. They're so far ahead of us. It's not easy."

"I'm worried about you, Al."

"Don't be. I can handle myself - you know that."

"I know you didn't want this assignment. And, I know your reasons."

"You think? Listen, I've got three years before I can retire to a nice Omega or SHADO teaching job. The last thing I want is to be gallivanting all over the solar system at my age." He tipped up the bottle and took a long swig.

"You didn't answer my calls just before I was transferred up here. Were you that pissed at me?"

"Just didn't see any point to it, that's all. It was over by then."

Boyd lowered her head, "I've missed you."

"Yeah, you had a real good way of showin' it, too."

"Why can't you just dispense with the sarcasm for once and hear me out?"

"Say whatcha gotta say. I got an early morning."

She took a deep breath, "When I left to come here to MoonBase, I was pregnant. After I got here, I had a miscarriage. It was your child."

Leslie looked up at her sharply, his green eyes registered shock, "Why didn't ya tell me?"

"You wouldn't return my calls, remember? Once I lost the baby, it seemed a useless exercise."

He turned his head away for a moment, "My kid. You sure of that?" The words were hard, but the voice that said them was not.

"You know it was."

Boyd watched as Leslie chewed his thumb again, "So why are ya tellin' me now?"

"I don't know. I guess you're right. It doesn't make a damn bit of difference."

They sat together in an uneasy silence. Finally, Leslie sighed and said, "Look, my life has turned out pretty much the way I wanted - except for *this* assignment. At this point in my

career, I just wanna put in my time, do my thing, and take a teaching package. I don't want any complications. We both made a mistake six years ago, but we don't have to keep payin' for it. What happened, happened. And, now it's over."

"Is it really over?" Boyd's voice was wistful.

"Yeah, it's over. I'm tellin' ya it's over. End of discussion."

Boyd leaned forward and planted a kiss on Leslie's forehead, "Have a safe trip."

* * *

May 1st, 2003

"We've got some last minute crew changes," Colonel Boyd announced as the Mars-bound people were having their last debriefing, "Sergei Romanov will be taking over as mission pilot. And, I'll be your new mission commander. Colonel Marc Masson was felled last night with pneumonia and Commander Donald Ritchie was scrubbed because of a blood sugar level problem. The doctors think he may have diabetes, and if so, he can't sustain a long-term mission like this one without special testing and medication. As you can imagine, they're both very disappointed. However, I believe Romanov and I will fit into the mission well."

"Is our countdown still on?" asked Leslie.

"Yes, and Colonel Romanov and I have had all our preflight check-ups and shots early this morning, when Ritchie and Masson were factored out. So there won't be any change in our Mars flight - we'll leave as scheduled."

The space travelers filed out to get suited up. Leslie hung back until the room was empty and Boyd was shredding her documents, "What'd ya do? Use voodoo on Masson and Ritchie so they'd miss the mission?" he asked.

"This came as much of a shock to me as it did to you. But, like you, I have my orders."

"Pretty convenient. Didja volunteer for this?"

Boyd fixed him with a basilisk stare, "I think somebody's ego has gotten way out of control."

"Just curious," Leslie grinned, like a naughty schoolboy.

"I think you should content yourself with thinking about the mission ahead of us," Boyd moved past him out into the corridor, "Pardon me, I have to get suited up."

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The trip to Mars was not going to be an overnigher. It would actually take three months to reach their destination. SHADO's advanced technology had sped the process up somewhat, from the original 6 months, especially when the newer ships traveling to Mars were not as large, cumbersome or packed with specialized equipment as the original flights were. SHADO scientists had recently found a means to utilize the moon's lesser gravity for a quicker, more fuel efficient means of making it to the "Red Planet." It was the trip back which would take longer. Losing almost a year of his life in space was just one of the reasons Leslie had been so unwilling to accept the assignment.

For the others, the prospect of such an assignment was a step up in their careers. Granted, the mission gave new meaning to the term "isolation pay", but for anyone who wanted to expand the limits of their abilities or to "boldly go where no-one has gone before", the assignment was the absolute pinnacle.

Living conditions on board the Mars-bound ship, the Aries Five, were not roomy or comfortable. Unlike trips from the Earth to the MoonBase, which could be done in a day, the Aries Five was designed to keep personal space to a premium, and therefore there were separate male-female sleeping quarters, but everything else was communal. Personal gear was

stored in labeled lockers. The travelers on board would have to get used to the confined atmosphere - and they'd end up getting VERY personal with each other by the time they got to Mars!

During the voyage out, there would be a variety of systems management tasks, not to mention experiments and astronomical observations to keep busy with. Except for the flight crew, all would have their own daily round of tasks to perform. Even Leslie, who was an alien tech expert, had his own set of jobs to complete. Also, the occupants of the Aries Five were to be slowly phased into the Mars day time period so they would be acclimatized by the time of their arrival.

* * *

The Mess Hall was a small compartment, built to house fifteen people at a time. Since most of the travelers worked in shifts, the crew complement of 60 had the option of eating and socializing at different time periods. Like the Mir and NASA space shuttle crews, the Aries Five people ate reconstituted and microwaveable items. They also had to spend some time daily in front of special sunlights to get extra Vitamin D and help stave off Seasonal Affective Disorder, and exercising on workout equipment. All the crew were consuming supplements, special minerals and vitamins, to protect them from suffering adverse losses of healthy muscle tone and bone density, plus mineral deficiencies. They were all on specialized plans to maintain their good mental and physical health.

Everyone was on a sizable daily ration of supplements. It became an unwritten "law" that nobody discussed medium-rare steaks, premium beers, or any other of the delicious foods earth people normally took for granted. It was just too hard on them all to imagine how many years it might be before they could get Earth-side again and enjoy such delectables. Life on board the Aries Five was a regimented existence, and on Mars it would be even more so in some ways.

"I've been having a terrible chocolate craving," Dr. Davidson sighed, as she looked over all the treat foods for the day, "I need a fix."

Colonel Romanov looked up from his tech manual, "Is there anything left?"

"Just a bar and a few bags of pretzels. I guess it's the bar or nothing." She opened the small hatch and picked out the plastic wrapped chocolate item.

"Well, in a few hours, there'll be a new selection to choose from - we're almost at the end of this Mars day cycle right now. Speaking of which, shouldn't you be asleep?"

Davidson shook her head, "I can't."

"The caffeine in that chocolate bar isn't going to help, you know."

"I thought it might alter my mood somewhat."

Everyone on board knew her husband, Colonel Masson, had been sidelined off the mission due to pneumonia. He wouldn't be able to rejoin her for at least 6 months - until the Aries Six mission came out. Out of the 60 people aboard the Aries Five, 50 were slated to remain at the MarsBase, and the ship's crew of ten would return to the Moon.

Insomnia was a chronic problem among some of the Aries Five people. Their bodies were rebelling against getting used to the extended Mars day, even though it wasn't a long extension, and working on different shifts was taking its toll, as it could on MoonBase and on Earth. Dr. Davidson had passed out sleeping meds whenever someone had been too many hours without sleep, and that person's tasks were divvied up amongst some of the others until they were up and about. Everyone in the crew began to feel very protective of one another, and although they came from many different backgrounds and disciplines, they worked as a cohesive team

very early into the flight.

Leslie and Boyd did not see that much of each other. They generally functioned on opposite duty shifts - one was sleeping while the other was working. It made things easier on the long flight out to Mars, and both were eager to keep their past relationship a secret from the others in the crew. When in each other's company, they were correct, civil and professional.

In addition to all the mechanical, chemical, and scientific supplies, the ship was also carrying fresh frozen food supplies and seeds and small plants for the MarsBase's hydroponics section. Tiny tomato and strawberry plants, North American type kiwi plants - all had been started on MoonBase, transferred to the Aries Five, and would be carefully tended and nurtured to be replanted on Mars in the indoor arboretum and garden or hydroponics area. Because of the problems with trying to transport live animals, a new shipment of flash frozen meats was on board, and the Mars workers tended to live 6 days vegetarian, one day with meat. It was economical, and they were able, through the consumption of powdered eggs and dairy products, and certain green leafy veggies, to obtain healthy doses of protein by assimilation into their bodies, as well as through supplements. The human body required certain nutrients which could only be absorbed through regular digestion. Even human waste was recycled and utilized for a variety of purposes on Mars.

On board the Aries Five, there was little in the way of recreation. There was a small stock of the latest movies available to view, some recent musical releases for their listening pleasure, and a few games, such as chess, backgammon, magnetic cards and computer games which were easily downloaded from the main computer onto any individual's laptop. Weekly plenary sessions, in which the different disciplines discussed and planned their part of the mission on Mars took place, and they received updates from MarsBase itself weekly. The crew members all took their turns practicing space walks, to continue their training for working in Mars' lighter gravity, and some exterior examination and maintenance had to be done to the ship on a regular basis, which gave the crew some extra training. In short, they were all kept so busy, there was little time to get bored or feel homesick, as the earth and its moon got smaller and smaller in their view ports.

SHADO practiced, among its space crews on extended missions such as this, zero tolerance for sexual activity. The organization, as a whole, frowned on such personal behaviour. Much of this was due to the desperately close quarters everyone had to live in, and any such emotional entanglements were more than likely to evoke unwanted jealousies, resentment and just plain discomfort. Once they arrived on MarsBase, and were assigned to their own personal quarters, the restriction was relaxed, especially for those married couples who'd volunteered to serve together on the "Red Planet."

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September 1st, 2003 - Mars orbit assumed...

By the time the Aries Five assumed orbit around Mars, the crew was very eager to leave their titanium space prison. Even the red dust of Mars was preferable to the sterile atmosphere of the ship they'd been cooped up in for just over three months.

The Aries Five was scheduled to land, using a slow curving trajectory, that would take them out of orbit and place them a short distance from the MarsBase itself. They'd been in constant communications with MarsBase for several days before the landing, coordinating everything on the Martian surface with the staff there. Their landing location was a smooth plane about a kilometer from the Base, and the Base Commander was coming out to meet

them, along with equipment to begin transferring their new supplies and materials. For months before their arrival, the Mars scientists had been synthesizing synthetic chemicals to refuel the Aries Five and send it back to the Moon.

MarsBase had been designed originally to house up to five hundred SHADO staffers, including military personnel who would protect the installation. Small Mars hoppers, reminiscent of the moon hoppers of the 1980's, specially designed for the different gravity level on the Red Planet, had been sent out in the second wave of ships several years ago. There was also a fleet of Mars-styled Interceptors, equipped with the very latest in SHADO tracking and destruction technology to keep the aliens from interfering with the construction of the base. The military people were under the command of Colonel Steven Grean, and they ran regular training and reconnaissance missions every second day. Right from the beginning of the project, when SHADO was sending up probes and landers, there had been immense concern about alien interference or sabotage. And, with good reason.

The aliens, over their many decades of coming to earth, had manufactured the means to get them by each new SHADO-created form of defense. Every few months, SHADO was faced with a new menace as the aliens adapted themselves and their own technology to get to Earth and established beach-head bases from which they could operate long-range without having to spend a lot of effort getting by SHADO's considerable phalanx of outer space defenses. By setting up Earth-bound bases, the aliens could collect minerals, humans for experimentation, and other natural resources, and stockpile them until another alien expedition could retrieve them for transfer back to their home world. SHADO and Omega expended a huge percentage of their budgets, not so much in space anymore, but on Earth itself, ferreting out these secret bases, and foiling the aliens' collection operations. Of course, once the MarsBase had been established, exploration and protection were not the only aspects of its mandate, though surely they were the highest goals. Adapting Martian soils, finding usable minerals, water, and other chemicals was on-going for the research team stationed there.

If they were watching carefully, and they most likely were, the aliens would have realized the MarsBase was a facility aimed at long-range Earth protection and exploration out beyond their own solar system. Omega and SHADO had been working overtime to find a way to utilize the captured alien propulsion core they'd found in northern Canada several years earlier. If they could incorporate it into their own technology, they could then venture out, using Mars as a jumping off point, and find a way to follow the aliens back to their own planet someday soon. It was one of the highest priorities for the sister organizations.

* * *

September 3rd, 2003

Once the equipment, consumables, and other cargo items were transferred to MarsBase, the new personnel were debriefed, quarantined briefly to be examined for any illnesses, and then permitted to mix with the indigent population of the installation.

Major Leslie was given a personal debriefing by the Base Commander, Colonel Tom Keith, and the base's military chief, Colonel Steven Grean.

"The material you sent me on your 'accidents' here still doesn't sound like sabotage. And, you've got no physical evidence of any alien tampering. I can check out the accident sites, but I think this has been a wild goose chase, fellas," Leslie commented, sipping his coffee.

Col. Grean pushed some reconnaissance photos across the boardroom table to Leslie, "Take a look at these - I think you'll find them very interesting."

"When were these taken?" Leslie scanned the photos carefully.

"The first set of photos were snapped the night before the Aries Five landed. The second set was taken just last night."

"Where's this site?"

"About five hundred kilometers away - it's a dead volcano. There's been no volcanic activity on Mars for centuries," Col. Grean explained.

Leslie chewed his thumb nervously, "Yeah, the aliens love subterranean or underwater sites to hide in. Any chance I could go out and take a fly-over?"

"We can book you in on tonight's mission. Still think this is a wild goose chase?" Colonel Keith asked, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

"We'll know more after tonight's rekkie mission. You want to fly or just observe?" asked Col. Grean.

"I haven't been behind the controls for years - I'll just observe."

"Fine - you can sit in with me tonight."

* * *

"I understand Dr. Davidson started her psychological evaluations on the people here already," Colonel Boyd sat down across from Tom Keith in his office.

"She started with the research teams today. It'll be a couple of weeks before she finishes. Dr. Davidson seems to be fitting in well. Those personnel who are not adapting will be going back with Aries Five for a long rest."

"What about you? How are you doing here?"

"It's probably the biggest challenge of my career."

"That doesn't tell me how you're doing."

"For your information, I'm doing fine. Not that it should really matter to you."

"Tom, just because we're divorced, doesn't mean I don't still worry about you."

Keith looked away for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts, "I promised myself I wasn't going to let this get personal."

"Why did you ask for Al Leslie on this mission?"

"If I can ask for the best, why not?"

"He's a little long in the tooth for this kind of trip, you know."

"I don't recall his age being any barrier to your having an affair with him six years ago."

Boyd raised an eyebrow and sighed, "Touche, my dear," she got up, "I'll submit a list of provisions and fuel requirements to you as soon as Col Romanov gets his report made up." She turned to leave.

"Stacy - I'm sorry things didn't work out. I guess... we all made our mistakes."

She looked back at him, "To coin someone else's phrase - it's all water under the bridge."

* * *

Leslie suited up to fly with Colonel Grean on the evening mission. A small squadron of Interceptors was planning to fly over the possible alien base site to do some more investigation. It didn't take the small air group long to fly over their target, using the same cloaking technology the Moon base Interceptors incorporated. They scrambled their cloaking frequencies several times to keep any alien detection equipment from picking them up. Leslie manned the photographic equipment on board, while Col. Grean flew in close to the dead volcano cone.

The newest series of photos confirmed what the others had shown - there was definitely some sort of alien construction activity inside the volcano, no matter how discreetly they'd tried to conceal it.

"If there's a nest of aliens inside that cone, we're gonna have to clean them out," Leslie stated, with the surety of a pest control agent, "What've we got here for hardware and equipment?"

"We can place most of the air fleet at your disposal, along with our Mars hoppers - we have a dozen of those," Col. Grean told him.

"Great. We're also gonna need some high level explosives, some personal weapons, and I get to pick my team. I'd prefer to have some personnel that's had some experience with flushing out alien installations."

Colonel Keith appeared relieved, "We'll get you whatever you need for this mission."

"Can you people here set up a secure space in case we get some survivors to be interrogated?"

"Consider it taken care of. I'll have one of the sections sealed off before you leave for the alien base."

Leslie looked down at his wrist chronometer, "I'd like to get this mission under way as soon as possible - let's schedule a briefing in two hours, and we'll get all our equipment arranged in the meantime."

CHAPTER TWO

September 4th, 2003, 4:00 am

Eight of the dozen Mars hoppers available were organized into four teams of two, with Leslie commanding the assault. Colonel Grean and his flight of Interceptors would provide ground cover for the hoppers in case there was a big skirmish with the aliens.

The mission would provide a two-part result: 1) the crews in the Mars hoppers would invade and destroy the alien base in the volcano cone, removing all alien technology for research and any captured aliens for interrogation, and 2) the air arm would provide support to the ground crews, and confirm the base's destruction with aerial photography and satellite video footage.

Of course, the most dangerous aspect of the mission was for the ground crews to exit their Mars hoppers, enter the cone, find the alien base, and eradicate it. They had no real idea how many aliens could be inside the installation, or how much of a fight they might put up. And, as always, they hoped the mission would bring them additional opportunities of discover and remove alien technology for research purposes.

The teams were suiting up when the female contingent came in. Dr. Davidson was coming along in one of the hoppers, which would double as a med-evac vehicle in case the aliens caused some injuries.

Leslie looked up, startled, when he saw Colonel Boyd come in with the good doctor, "What are you doing here?" he asked.

Boyd smiled, "Oh, I've been assigned to keep you out of trouble - Colonel Grean decided my experience on MoonBase might be useful to this mission."

"Remind me to have a word with that boy when we get back," Leslie growled, "Whose team are you on?"

"Let's just say I'll be keeping a very close eye on you."

* * *

The Mars hoppers were far more powerful than the original vehicles designed for use on the moon in the 1980's. They were a technological step up from the current moon hoppers, with power packs able to recharge themselves from auxiliary solar power, serious weaponry and a plethora of technological gadgetry for everything from long range minerals scanning to astronomical observation equipment. They were considered the "tanks" of the Mars base installation, well-protected from the Martian elements and strong enough to withstand a small incendiary weapons blast. Carrying energy bolt cannons and capable of launching small missiles, reminiscent of the American Smart Bombs from the Middle Eastern War of the early 1990's (but "smarter" and more effective!), the Mars hoppers were vital to the protection of the Base and the further exploration of the Martian landscape by its staffers.

Crews of eight could man the hoppers: pilot, co-pilot, a communications officer, a weapons technician, and exterior workers for exploration and minerals recovery. They carried food rations, a clean water supply and medical kits, plus a small "head" for the crew to use on long range excursions. For this particular trip, 32 SHADO people had been assigned to the hoppers.

By the time the hoppers got into position, everyone's nerves were drawn pretty tight. Even the most experienced personnel felt it. This was the first time humans had faced off against the aliens on another planet in the Sol system. Special considerations had to be taken into account because of the Martian environment, and special weapons, created expressly for

the MarsBase, would get their first real test in battle on this mission.

A small team set off up the side of the volcano cone to do some reconnoitering, led by Leslie and Boyd. Their job would be to get a closer view of things, and decide how to deploy their forces to get inside and attack the alien base there. The group of seven, in their special Martian space suits, carefully climbed the cone and over the side. They crept around the frozen magma of the cone's interior, and down into the lower areas.

And there it was. Sitting there semi-disguised as a pile of ancient lava outcroppings. But, to the trained SHADO and Omega eyes fixed on its location, it was not naturally made by a lava flow of thousands of years ago. It was made by intelligent hands, to *look* as natural and unobtrusive as possible.

Boyd's voice came over the comm-links they were all wearing, "What now?"

Leslie replied, "Time for the fly boys to get to work," he switched frequencies, but the team could still hear him, "Leslie to Grean, you can start you attack run on my mark. After you soften them up, we'll bring up the assault team and do the mop up."

About ten minutes later, Leslie ordered Grean's pilots to start their aerial assault. The rekkie team crouched for protection behind the magma outcroppings, and although they couldn't hear the attack, they could feel the Martian ground shake with the barrage the Mars SHADO aircraft were directing at the alien base.

The aerial attack did not last long, and by the time Leslie and his team came out from hiding, the assault team had joined them on site. They quickly set up their portable cannons, and were ready to utilize them as cover for the teams going into the wrecked base.

Enough damage had been done from the air, that the top of the base was collapsed in on itself, and the SHADO and Omega people carefully picked their way through the rubble and the lava rock to scour the wreckage for alien survivors. They also wanted to penetrate into the structure to examine it and find out exactly what the aliens had been doing in that location. It was going to be a tricky matter to get in there safely.

"I hope I don't have to remind everybody about watchin' each other's back," Leslie said over the comm-link, "Let's get in there and get out without any losing anybody. If anybody's gonna die, it should be the aliens, not us."

* * *

Deep inside the alien base, rubble covered the smooth floors, and silver-clad alien bodies lay where they'd dropped during the aerial assault. Machinery and equipment blinked and smoked, depending on how damaged it was. Leslie's team had divided up and some of the team were busily examining equipment, determining whether any of it could be moved for further research. Some of the personnel were tramping the corridors looking for survivors to take hostage or neutralize.

"What do you think this base was used for?" Boyd asked Leslie, as they surveyed the damage inside.

"Looks like a standard alien outpost to me, but I can't say for sure that the sabotage was bein' carried out from this location. A lot depends on catalogin' what equipment they've been using here. From what I've seen already, I think they were doin' scientific research. But, they coulda been up to other activities."

"Major Leslie," called in one of the other team members, "We need you to come down to level three to see something - right now!"

"Yeah, I'm comin' - I can't be everywhere at once."

* * *

Leslie and Boyd climbed down the ladders between levels until they reached the right one. The aerial barrage had killed much of the base's power, and the elevators were deemed unsafe to use. Dr. Raychaudhuri met them at the bottom of the ladder.

"Whaddya got, Doc?" Leslie asked her.

The doctor led them down a corridor and up to a set of sealed doors they'd just managed to open a short time before, "We scanned this room before trying to unseal the doors. There were life-forms registering, but not now. I think you'll be very interested in this, Major."

The three space-suit clad officers entered a large room, banked with rows of clear tubes, two meters tall. There was a veritable cornucopia of scientific equipment in the room too, but that wasn't what stood out to the SHADO people. It was what was inside the glassed in tubes. For inside the tubes were babies. Babies with silver eyes. All dead.

* * *

"Christ!" Leslie felt his breath whistle out with his words, "What the hell is this place?"

Raychaudhuri replied quietly, "I think, for want of a better term, this is...was...an alien nursery."

The two women watched as Leslie wandered around the room, looking in the tubes, looking at the alien equipment. He was strangely silent. He seemed wrapped in thought. They didn't know whether to disturb him or not. Finally, Boyd ventured to say, "Al, have you seen something like this before?"

Still somewhat distracted, Leslie turned to his companions, "I didn't see it...I heard about it..."

"This is quite a discovery," Raychaudhuri's usually clipped Indian voice sounded excited, "I didn't expect to find anything like this here."

"This is going to have to go to the top brass," Leslie spoke up, "I need to talk to Straker right away."

* * *

Leslie made the trek back to his Mars hopper and got on the horn to the MarsBase, "I need to get patched through to Straker on Earth - how long will that take?"

"It could be a couple of hours, sir, given our position in orbit around the sun, and being able to bounce the message off the Moon to SHADO Control."

"Get on it then - make this message the highest priority! I've gotta get in contact with Straker asap. Fully coded for the highest security."

"And, what's the message, sir?"

"I've found Orion."

* * *

September 5th, 2003

General Edward Straker fell back into his seat when he received Leslie's decoded security message and report from Mars. In fact, he felt as though someone had just sucker punched him in the stomach.

"I've found Orion." That was all - a terse, three word blow to the solar plexus. His gaze swung from the message in his hand over to the incomplete piece of artwork on the wall. It had hung there for almost three years. It was the head and shoulders of an infant. An infant with silver eyes, painted by the infant's own mother. An infant named Orion.

Straker got out of his chair and walked to the painting, tracing the artist's signature with his finger. "I've found Orion." What did Leslie's cryptic message really mean? Only a few SHADO and Omega personnel knew the true story of what had happened to former NASA

astronaut Tina Kovac after she came back from her first and only mission. And, late last year, in the sands of Egypt, a clue pointing to the Orion constellation had been unearthed, giving them reason to believe the aliens might have originated from that area of space.

He pushed a button on his desk intercom, "I need to send a priority message back to Al Leslie on Mars. How soon can you send it out for me?"

The operative on the other end of the line paused before speaking, "...it'll be at least seven hours to Mars if we bounce it off the Moon, sir."

"Damn!" Straker said to himself, and then realized the operative was still waiting for his answer, "Alright, this is what I want the message to say..."

* * *

September 9th, 2003

Al Leslie and Stacy Boyd sat down across from Dr. Raychaudhuri in the med-centre at MarsBase. They'd read her prelim report - the same report Leslie had sent on to General Straker.

"I haven't had time to do any postmortems on the adult aliens we found dead in the volcano base. I've been working on some of the infants. Things would go faster if I didn't have to do all the autopsies myself...Dr. Davidson has been correlating all the written data for me and entering the material into the computer. But, the cause of death for the alien babies appears to have been the loss of power to their individual incubator units. This likely happened during the aerial barrage. All the life support systems for the incubators shut down and the babies asphyxiated in their tubes."

"And, there's no question these infants have human DNA? How could that happen?" Boyd queried.

Before Raychaudhuri could respond, Leslie said, "Three years ago I was part of a mission that destroyed an alien base in Canada. We found out that the aliens were kidnappin' local women and using them for breedin' research."

"These infants were definitely human-alien hybrids - I would say the aliens have been successful in combining our DNA with theirs. For what purposes I'm not certain. I could put forth a number of different hypotheses..."

Leslie chewed his thumb, "Doc, I don't know what theories the SHADO eggheads have come up with, but that nursery, or whatever it was we destroyed over there at that base, is the aliens' steppin' stone to something big," he paused for a moment, "Is there any way of isolatin' the human DNA in any of those babies so you can identify the donors?"

"Well, it would take a little more time, but I could probably come up with some DNA sequences. The problem is that I wouldn't have anything to compare them against."

"You mean you'd need a possible human donor's DNA information to get a match?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Let me get in touch with SHADO Control and Dr. Jackson there. I might be able to get him to send you some human DNA donor information."

Raychaudhuri and Boyd both looked at Leslie incredulously, "How the hell would Dr. Jackson know anything about human-alien hybrids?" Boyd demanded to know, "We just found them!"

"Because, three years ago, SHADO had one of those hybrid babies - alive."

* * *

Both Dr. Raychaudhuri and Colonel Boyd did double-takes at Leslie, "How the hell ..." Boyd sputtered in shock.

Leslie sat back in his chair, "Nutshell time, I guess. Like I said, three years ago, one of our female operatives was kidnapped on a mission in Canada and held by the aliens in an underwater base. We rescued her and got the hell outta there before SHADO and Omega blasted the place to rat shit. After we got back, she turned up pregnant. Jackson handled the case. I never really saw the kid, but I heard from Alec Freeman that it was a human-alien hybrid. When the woman and the kid disappeared, Paul Foster, and me and a group of other operatives were sent to Canada to get her back. Paul and I were there the night she got into an alien ship and left Earth for good. She took the kid with her. She said somethin' about her kid bein' a new Adam for the aliens."

The two women sat across from Leslie, dumb-founded, "You mean she actually went back with the aliens?"

"Managed to get access to a top secret report after - Jackson said the kid had been preprogrammed on the genetic level to psychically interfere with the mother and get her to return to the original alien base site for pick-up - the kid was like a homing device. Sounded pretty weird, but there wasn't any other explanation. Straker was beyond pissed off. I think he'd had some sort of personal stake in this business - somethin' between him and the woman. But, the upshot was that we'd lost the first known alien-human hybrid."

"And, now we've found a whole room full of them...dead," Raychaudhuri said aloud.

"Yeah, well, the question here is - whose human DNA are they carryin' ? That's what Straker's gonna want to know."

* * *

December 12th, 2003

Major Leslie sat down across from Colonel Tom Keith. He had come to give his final report to the Base commander. They had spoken any number of times in the last few weeks on business, but had always carefully avoided anything personal.

"The Aries Six is scheduled to land here in forty-eight hours," Keith commented, "I take it you'll be on that flight home, along with Dr. Raychaudhuri, and Stacy."

"Yeah, it'll be good to get back to ol' Terra Firma. The Doc's comin' with us to bring back those alien adult and infant bodies for more research work to be done on them."

Keith threw Leslie's report CD on the desk. Finally he said, "I asked Stacy to stay here on Mars. But, she's going back to MoonBase. I just wondered if you had anything to do with her refusal."

Leslie shifted in his chair, "Look, Tom, what's done is done. It's all water under the bridge. Until I took this assignment, I hadn't even seen her for years. If she's opted to come back on the return flight, it's not because of me. Her commission as MoonBase commander was only suspended while she took this assignment. My guess is that she'll go right back there to work."

Keith nodded slowly, eying Leslie intently, "Your final report wasn't exactly very complimentary to our staff here."

The Major shrugged, "They're doin' the best they can under pretty hazardous conditions. But, between Dr. Davidson's psych reports and my investigation of the so-called sabotage incidents, they're just not up to snuff. They're tired, and that's when SNAFUs and mistakes get made. It played out that way this time. It was human error, not alien intervention. For that, we should be grateful."

"We run a very complicated installation here. It's taken us a lot of time to become established and safe in an otherwise hostile environment. I would prefer not to see anything

truly negative end up in the hands of the Astrophysical Commission."

Leslie knew Keith was referring to the overseeing body for the international consortium that financed SHADO and Omega secretly. He knew how many years it took Tom Keith to convince first Straker, and then the Commission, to spend the money to develop the MarsBase.

"D'you really think I'd do or say somethin' to put this mission in jeopardy? I know how important this Base is. But, I can't soft-pedal the problems here just because you're afraid your fundin' will get stopped," he saw the expression on Keith's face and knew he'd struck a raw nerve, "It's my job to investigate, explain, and make recommendations. That's what my report will do. I'm not lookin' to cause trouble. But, I gotta tell it like it is, Tom."

"You're sure this report isn't just coming out because you didn't want this assignment in the first place."

"Look, I admit I didn't wanna come out here. I even told Paul Foster I didn't wanna do this trip. But, the discovery we made here at the alien base was worth it in the end. I'm glad I ended up with this assignment after all. My report is just an honest appraisal of the problems and challenges you guys are facin' here."

"From your perspective."

"Yeah, from my perspective. A fresh perspective," Leslie was getting impatient, "Look, Tom, you've been here for well over a year. And, so have a lot of your other people. Did it ever occur to you that you guys can't see the forest for the trees anymore? There *are* problems here and those problems need to be fixed."

"According to you."

"You've had one person die and another one injured. The causes surroundin' those incidents need fixin'. This isn't a hate campaign, Tom. This is me doin' my job. The job I was sent out here to do. And, if you faced the truth, you should be goin' home too. I know this project is your baby, but you and the others are stretchin' yourselves too thin. It's time ta pack it in and bring in some fresh minds and bodies. At least for a few months."

"I can't go home - not just yet. As you've pointed out, we have some work to do here to make this base operate better and safer. That's a responsibility I can't just walk out on."

"Well, just make sure ya don't confuse what's good for this base with whacha want for yourself."

* * *

December 16th, 2003

By the time the Aries Six touched down at the MarsBase, the crew was glad to make their deposit of supplies and get out of the confines of their small ship. There were only three Mars-bound crafts constructed, and they took it in turn to ferry missions out to the red planet. Commanding the Aries Six was Don Ritchie, and his second in command for the flight was Colonel Marc Masson, Dr. Davidson's husband. The Aries Six came out with skeleton crew, and those staff members who needed some R&R would also be returning. The ship's cleared cargo space meant they'd have plenty of room to bring back the alien bodies found at the base.

Dr. Raychaudhuri had worked hard, during the time the Aries Six was en route to Mars, to isolate the human DNA and to autopsy all the adult alien bodies, of which there had been such a considerable number. They'd had to store some of them in the Base's exterior buildings. She wanted to provide the most up-to-date reports for General Straker when she arrived back from Mars. She had not originally been meant to return so early, but in view of her work on the alien bodies, another doctor was being sent on the Aries Six to replace her, while she came back to Earth to complete her research. It took a good many hours to transfer the alien bodies

into storage on the Aries Six, and they were scheduled to lift off December 17th.

Many of the Base's personnel turned out to say good-bye to their comrades who were returning to MoonBase or to Earth. There were hand-shakes and not a few hugs all the way around. And, promises to keep in touch and keep the staff apprised of the progress on the alien research. The Aries Six, with Commander Ritchie at the controls, lifted off beautifully on a clear Martian morning, with the pale shadows of the red planet's two moons, Deimos and Phobos, still visible in the pinkish-colored sky. This was expected to be a routine flight home.

Chapter Three

December 19th, 2003

Those on board the Aries Six quickly became accustomed to their on-board lifestyle again. Everyone was very busy with their shipboard duties. A Mars trip was never a pleasure cruise. Colonel Ritchie was second-officered by Colonel Boyd for the trip back, and Major Leslie was assigned to her watch. They had studiously avoided each other whenever possible on Mars, and filed separate reports to SHADO Control. Boyd had not quizzed Leslie up on his last meeting with Tom Keith, but her own meeting with her ex-husband had been stiff and impersonal. He'd asked her to consider staying on Mars, but she declined, citing her commission as commander of MoonBase as her reason. She had a feeling Tom didn't believe her - that he may have been attributing her refusal incorrectly to residual feelings for Al Leslie. While Colonel Boyd may indeed have had a renewed attraction to the older Omega alien technologist, she worked hard to conceal it. Leslie had made his own views known to her. Whatever had happened between them in the past was over.

Aries Six had a very small bridge. There was barely room for the CO, the astro-nav officer and the communications operator. The ship was equipped with SHADO's special cloaking device, however, out this far, it was mostly to escape back to the Moon unseen by the aliens. They also carried the Alien-Tect, a scanning device designed several years earlier to better detect incoming alien ships. Colonel Boyd had been commanding MoonBase when the Alien-Tect had been put through its initial shake-down trials. Their weapons array and shielding technology were new, and so far, not one of the Aries expeditions had cause to utilize them, although they were always scanning the heavens for incoming alien ships...

"I've got a series of bearings at three-niner-five-five-seven," Colonel Romanov reported to Commander Ritchie.

"Meteorites?"

"They're coming in too fast, sir," Romanov was taking extra readings at his comm station. He turned from his data stream, "Alien ships! Five...no...seven!"

"Raise shields!" Commander Ritchie hit the klaxon and looked over at Boyd and Leslie, "You two man the pulse cannons, Romanov and I will load the torpedoes from here!"

Those on the bridge could hear the excited voices of the others on board as they signed in for their battle duty stations. Boyd and Leslie got up from their consoles and headed out to the Aries Six's two cannon gunner positions, on the port and starboard sides of the ship. They strapped in, put on their headsets and waited for the Aries' on-board targeting computers to feed them firing co-ordinates for the alien craft which were coming quickly closer.

"Can you get a message out to MoonBase that we're under attack, Romanov?" Ritchie asked him, all the while his hands were dancing over the torpedo firing console.

Romanov's voice was drowned out as the first alien salvo stitched across the outside hull of the Aries Six, pulverizing some of her sensor arrays, "...negative, sir, our comm array just went down...!"

Meanwhile, as the Aries Six shook violently, Boyd and Leslie were firing repeated volleys at the alien ships strafing them from side to side. Other crew members were busily doing damage control, putting out small fires with extinguishers as circuits overloaded under attack, and doing equipment damage scans.

"Launching torpedoes from bays three and seven," Commander Ritchie reported tersely. Romanov saw his fist strike the air when one of the torps took out an alien ship in a blaze of

pyrotechnic glory.

"It's like chasin' goddam gnats!" Leslie complained as his tracers filled the blackness of space - and he didn't hit a single alien ship, "They're too fast!"

Boyd's voice came through the comm-link, "They're different ships, Al! They're faster - more maneuverable! They're more like fighter jets!"

"C'mon, you alien bastards!" Leslie recalibrated his targeting computer and resumed firing.

"Torpedoes away from bays two and six!" Ritchie intoned. He watched one collide directly with an alien ship, and saw the other streak away, only to explode harmlessly.

"We can't take any more direct hits, sir!" Romanov warned the commander, "We've lost some exterior scanning equipment, and the comm tower is just hanging by a thread!"

"How are the shields holding up?"

"We're down by 32% - that last blast did some serious damage!"

Ritchie re-loaded all his torpedo bays and fired in a spread pattern. He knew he had to make each one count, because unlike the pulse cannons which could fire as long as the ship had enough power, the torpedoes were limited in number. Romanov looked up to see another alien ship whirl through an explosion, but it veered off helplessly - obviously suffering severe damage from that last torpedo.

In the cannon bays, Leslie and Boyd were getting frustrated. Their firing was only causing minimal damage, no direct hits, and there were still four alien ships out there, chasing the Aries Six like an angry swarm of hornets, stinging and buzzing about.

"They just hit the cloaking condenser!" Romanov reported.

"Damn it!" Ritchie knew their shields were only good for the actual hull, but the sensor arrays and comm links were all prime targets. It was as though the aliens knew exactly what to hit and went for them. With a renewed anger, Ritchie readied more torpedoes, "Let's get some hits up there!" he admonished Boyd and Leslie in their cannon bays.

As if in answer to that order, Boyd fired a spray of cannon fire, "Got him!" she crowed, "Spray just ahead of their trajectory - that one flew right into it!"

Leslie followed suit and watched another alien ship explode in his sights, "Works!" he yelled back over his headset.

"Don't get cocky!" Ritchie warned him, "We've got two left!"

Romanov fired his own torpedoes from bays one, four and five, and watched as the resulting explosions sent another alien ship reeling away, mortally wounded.

"He's leaving! The bastard's leaving!" Leslie yelled as the last alien fighter streaked off, leaving the two injured ships to fend for themselves.

* * *

The damage report was substantial, but fortunately there were no fatalities. The entire crew made it through the attack alive and relatively unharmed.

"The damaged alien ships are in pretty poor shape. What sensors we have working show them with zero life signs. There doesn't appear to be any energy activity on board, either. In fact, if they continue drifting on their current trajectories, they'll likely crash land on Mars itself," Boyd reported, "But, we have less than 50% shields left and no cloaking left."

"Shit," Commander Ritchie cursed, "We're sitting ducks with our cloaking device gone! Can we make the necessary repairs?"

Romanov looked up from his list, "Not for the cloaking, sir, no. But, we can repair the comm tower and some of the other sensor arrays. It'll mean somebody has to do some exterior

work."

"We've got some torpedoes left, and they didn't hit our solar power streamer," Leslie added.

Ritchie nodded, taking stock of everything, "Our first priority is to get that damn comm tower back in operation so we can contact both the Mars and MoonBase and let them know what's happening out here. You can bet the aliens will be back, and in bigger numbers to finish us off. Get the techs to see what they can do to bolster our shields - we're going to need all the protection we can get," Ritchie looked at the Engineering Chief, "Can we move any faster?"

"We were already at optimum speed when the aliens attacked. If the techs have to reroute power from the engines to the shields, we'll end up traveling even slower."

It was obvious to everyone that was not an option. The Aries Six couldn't afford to take any longer getting back to the protective space of the Moon, where the Interceptors could help them fend off any more attacks, "Alright, people, do the best you can," Ritchie told them, "Now, who wants to space walk out there?"

* * *

Romanov volunteered to go out to work on the comm array, but it was a two person job, so Leslie agreed to go out with him. Engineering Chief Tupper took the Aries Six down a bit in speed, to give the men one less problem to cope with while stationed on the outside of the Aries hull. Their special suits not only provided them with all the protection necessary for a walk in the hostile environment of deep space, but came with small jet devices for greater maneuverability, and lots of umbilical cords they could attach to any area all over the Aries to allow them to work.

"You guys ok out there?" Commander Ritchie asked as he watched the two men go out through the starboard airlock.

Leslie gave his commander the standard "thumbs up" gesture, as he started up his jet pack and followed Romanov. They skidded slowly across the Aries hull and up onto the top of the ship to examine the comm array and see what they could do to fix it.

Although almost detached from the hull, and badly burned, the comm array still responded to Romanov's sensor equipment, "Commander, I think we can salvage it. I brought some spare parts out with me. It'll take an hour or so, but we should be able to resume communications after we get it repaired. And, well take a look at some of the other systems while were up here, too, sir."

Commander Ritchie returned to his place on the Aries bridge, "That's good news, Romanov, keep me posted. As soon as you two get things up and running again, we'll test it put by sending a message through to MoonBase."

It took Romanov and Leslie forty minutes to solder and repair the comm array. They notified the Commander, who was having one of the other assigned bridge officers test it from the comm console. Leslie suggested they look at some of the other fritzed systems while they were waiting to hear if the comm link was back on-line.

The cloaking condenser was too fried to be repaired in space. It would be a matter for the tech and engineers back on MoonBase, "The cloaking condensers are totally shot. There's nothin' we can do to fix them in space," Leslie reported.

They moved on to some of the other sensor arrays. These were more promising. Leslie reported back to Engineer Tupper and explained to her over the comm-link.

"Can you just talk us through this one?" Leslie asked Tupper, "There's no point in puttin' anyone else at risk out here."

"Just feed your diagnostic readings back into me, and I think we can get it up and running."

"Standby for the data stream - we'll patch it through the bridge," Romanov reported, "How are those comm tests going?"

Commander Ritchie broke in, "Going good. We should be ready to send a message to MoonBase shortly."

"As soon as you boys get back inside, we're going to fire things up and head off at top speed. If we've got to fly naked, we'll do The Streak all the way back to MoonBase..." Ritchie's voice broke up into static.

Romanov tapped his helmet and then stared, open-mouthed, as Leslie's hand went up - indicating a group of UFOs heading right for the Aries at top speed...

* * *

"...holy flying shit! They're headed right for us!..." Romanov couldn't hear Commander Ritchie, but he got Leslie's cursing right in his ear.

The squadron of UFOs came pounding in on the Aries, unleashing a barrage of firepower that caused the Aries to shudder under Romanov's and Leslie's space booted feet. The two men started to move as fast as they could to the nearest airlock hatch. They could feel the Aries moving to change course, and as the ship veered off, the men's boots lost their magnetic lock on the hull, and they started to float away, tethered to the Aries only by two umbilical lines. They felt like two runaway kites in the fist of a nasty schoolboy!

Hand over hand, the two men struggled to pull themselves in closer to the Aries, and to the airlock, by walking down their umbilical lines. The Aries kept shifting, making defensive maneuvers, and they could feel the pulse cannons every time they discharged, which was about 60 times a minute! They could see the Aries firing off torpedoes at the UFOs, and knew that fire from either their own ship, or the UFOs could finish them off before they ever got into the airlock.

Romanov was the first one to make it to the side of the Aries hull. He anchored himself quickly to the airlock door and started to pull Leslie in faster than the big man was pulling himself in. He felt a sharp tug on Leslie's line, and looked up in horror, to see Leslie go flying off, his umbilical cord severed by alien firepower. Romanov shouted into his own voice-comm, and knew Leslie could no longer hear him. He saw Leslie bump along the Aries' hull and finally come to rest on one of the sensor arrays near the bottom. Was he still alive out there?

* * *

Boyd and Raychaudhuri dragged Romanov in through the airlock and helped him pull off his helmet, "Where the hell is Leslie?" Boyd demanded.

"The aliens hit his umbilical cord! He's down on the lower sensor array - I don't even know if he's still alive!" Romanov was babbling and obviously upset.

"Let's get him out of this suit," Boyd told Raychaudhuri, "I've gotta go out there and get Leslie!"

The doctor looked at Boyd, "You can't go out there - we're under attack!"

"I know that," Boyd's voice was grim as she started undressing Romanov, "Which is why I can't leave him out there - every minute he's still there - he's a sitting target for the aliens - or even our own firepower!"

In moments, Boyd was suited up, while Raychaudhuri gave the shocked Romanov a pressi-jet spray sedative, "Sergei," Boyd asked, "Is there any juice left in your jets?"

"Yes, I think so...I hardly used them myself," he replied.

"Good, I may have to fly down there to get him...", Boyd turned towards the airlock, and hooked on her own umbilical cord, "Mitali, help me get out there..."

* * *

Boyd stepped outside the airlock into hell. Small fires had erupted on the Aries' hull - stoked by God knows what - as there was no oxygen in space to support flames. She felt, rather than heard, the *poom-poom-poom* of the pulse cannons as they fired on the alien ships - she saw two of them explode into a cascade of stars. The Aries shifted under her magnetic boots repeatedly, and she realized what a difficult time Romanov and Leslie must have had trying to get back to the airlock. This rescue wasn't going to be easy...

She cautiously crawled down the underside of the ship's hull, hoping the alien ships wouldn't notice her, and spotted Leslie's white spacesuit lying against the sensor array, just as Romanov had reported. She knew her umbilical cord would never be long enough to reach that far, so she unhooked it. Using the jet pack on Romanov's suit, now hers, she jolted herself just enough to round the curve of the hull, and make her way closer to Leslie. She sailed up to him soundlessly, and grabbed onto the sensor array to join him.

Inside his helmet, she could see Leslie, his eyes closed. She used her gloved hand to knock gently on the visor, and saw his eyes open, saw the look on his face as he saw her there in front of him. Had he been unconscious from the drop? She held up two fingers to him, and she could see his mouth move in the word "*two*." Good! He was alive and thinking!

Boyd used American Sign Language to communicate to Leslie her intention to take him back to the airlock. Leslie signed back that he was running out of air and he was entangled in the sensor array - he couldn't get his jet pack off, and since he was connected to the jet pack, he was stuck there.

Signing again, Boyd, told him she could unhook him from his own jet pack and take him back with her. He shook his head and signed that none of the jet packs were meant for two passengers at a time. "*It's our only choice! It's all we've got! It has to work!*" Boyd signed to him impatiently. She pulled herself over and started to unhook Leslie from his jet pack, then she hooked him to herself, "*Put your arms around me*," she mouthed to him as they came together, "*We can maneuver better that way.*"

Leslie grinned through his helmet visor as he clamped his arms around her neck, "*Like old times...*," he mouthed, but his smile was grim, and she knew his comment was gallows humour at best.

Boyd gently pushed the throttle on her jet pack, and they moved off slowly. Foot by foot, they began to close the distance between themselves and the airlock hatch on the upper side of the Aries' hull. It was going to take a feat of jet pack control on Boyd's part to get them up there in one piece. Leslie could see the sweat on Boyd's brow as she concentrated, watching over his shoulder, trying to move ever faster. The jet pack was pushed to the limit - Leslie was right - they weren't meant for two passengers together - it didn't have enough juice to get them anywhere fast - and they needed speed if they were to escape the aliens' notice!

They both knew the Aries was taking a pounding, and they could see the tracer and pulse fire all around them. Leslie could see the fireworks reflected in Boyd's helmet visor like some sort of colored light show. He knew she was studiously trying to maneuver them up the side of the ship's hull, without putting them into anymore danger than was possible. Every second they spend outside made them a moving target the aliens might manage to hit. Debris sailed past them from a destroyed alien ship.

An eternity passed as the linked team slowly flew up the Aries and thumped soundlessly

into the metal hull near the airlock. Boyd looked down and saw the power gauge on the jet pack read "Empty." She hooked herself to the hanging umbilical cord and saw Raychaudhuri frantically trying to get the airlock open. Boyd nodded to Leslie and mouthed, "*Get inside! Now!*" She unhooked him from herself, and pushed him towards the opening airlock. She saw him float inside, and saw the airlock's outer door close on him. It would take a minute or so for the airlock door to recycle enough for her to enter.

She never saw the alien ship that slid up and around the Aries' hull and fired point blank at the struggling figures on the human ship. Leslie, now inside the Aries' airlock, staring through the window port, cried out helplessly as Boyd's body careened off into space, her umbilical cord broken, her jet pack empty.

Chapter Four

March 15th, 2004

The Aries Six finally arrived, battered but not defeated, at MoonBase. The Interceptors flew out to meet her and followed her in. They could see the broken and burned off sensor arrays, the ruined cloaking condenser, the huge areas of scorched metal on her hull. It would mean some time in dry dock before the Aries Six would fly again. For all the ship had gone through, the crew would report only one casualty, but there would be no body for burial.

Her cargo of dead alien bodies, passengers and crew unloaded, the ship went into immediate refit on site. Some of the MarsBase personnel were slated to return to Earth for some R&R, some of them had reports to file with SHADO HQ. Some of them had further research work to conclude. The Moon Shuttle Luna One was busy taking passengers and other items back Terra Firma.

Reports were being avidly studied on the Aries Six's ordeal in space. Not only would the Mars-bound ships have to be improved and altered, but the engineering experts were studying the videotape taken of the new alien spacecraft which had attacked the Aries. They would have to devise newer and deadlier forms of pulse cannon and torpedoes to deal with them.

The question also arose, of course, over why the aliens had attacked the Aries Six. Never had one of the Martian ships been faced with an actual dog-fight in space, even though they'd been made as ready for battle as possible. Were the attacks alien revenge for the destruction of their own base on Mars? Were the aliens even capable of an emotion such as revenge? Why had they waited so long before taking on a SHADO space craft? All these questions and many more were being considered by SHADO and Omega's top scientists and theorists.

March 20th, 2004, SHADO HQ, England...

The memorial service for Stacy Boyd was held at SHADO HQ. Many of the MarsBase people who knew her were in attendance. It was a somber service, the eulogy spoken by Commander Ritchie. He praised her professionalism, her courage, and even her foolhardiness, in attempting to rescue a fellow crew member. Allan Leslie sat alone, staring at the floor. When it was over, he didn't stay behind for the reception. Funerals depressed him, and this one was way over the top.

Later on that day, Straker renewed his acquaintance with Dr. Raychaudhuri, as they met for a private briefing.

"As you can see, I've started with the reports on the adult alien autopsies," Dr. Mitali Raychaudhuri indicated the stack of CDs for Straker's perusal.

"I'd prefer to start with the reports on the infants," Straker's said brusquely, "I think Dr. Jackson was able to provide you with the necessary human donor DNA data. What's the bottom line, Doctor?"

Raychaudhuri's beautiful Indian face was serious as she replied, "All the alien-human hybrids have mitochondrial DNA from the same human donor," she paused for a moment, "They were all conceived from one woman - the donor whose DNA information and tissue were provided to me by Dr. Jackson."

The General rested his finely-chiseled chin on one tightly-clenched fist. Raychaudhuri watched as he seemed to be fighting himself for control. Finally, he sat back and looked at her, "There's no doubt?"

"I'm as certain as I can be, sir."

Straker staved off the inevitable answer for a moment, "What do you think the aliens

were planning to do with them?"

"We've only got theories at present..."

Straker cut her off again, "Try me..."

"According to Dr. Jackson's reports, several breeding bases were destroyed on earth in 2000. The base on Mars might have been a similar project, but planted safely away from the danger of discovery. Have you read Major Leslie's final report on the alien base itself yet?"

"Yes, he sent it to me while he was en route home. It's his view that the base was not the source of the sabotage. In fact, he still believes there is no evidence to back up the idea of the aliens tinkering with our installation there. He thinks all the incidents were SNAFUs caused by over-stressed staff. Finding the alien base may have been an accident."

"I concur. When our people took that base apart, and Major Leslie started examining all the equipment there, he said over eighty percent of the base's focus seemed geared to the work in the baby lab."

"But, why Mars, of all places?"

"Their earth bases were being destroyed by SHADO and Omega. Maybe they decided it was safer to move their operations to another location. Close to Earth, but not *on* Earth, where there was a lesser chance of them being discovered."

"If their own intelligence gathering is any good at all, they had to know we were setting up a base of our own on Mars."

"I think they did know. They were cleverly, if not perfectly, concealed in that old volcano cone - and quite a distance away from us. I can only posit the theory that they assumed we were too busy with our own base to look for theirs."

Straker digested what she'd said, "And, there's no way the aliens caused the so-called sabotage at MarsBase?"

"The Major has had plenty of time to investigate fully. He's managed to find non-alien answers for each and every incident. The staff, many of whom came back on Aries Six, were stretched to the limit. We sent back a group of the worst ones with Aries Five. While the work being done there is absolutely vital, the personnel are understandably having a difficult time adjusting. Dr. Davidson has done psych tests on the entire staff and some of them will probably have to go home with Aries Seven. Replacing the staff every few months is absolutely necessary to keeping that project on track."

"We knew we were likely to run into problems of this sort when the idea of the base was first proposed. What about Colonel Keith? He's been there since the first expedition."

"Dr. Davidson wanted to send him home for some R&R. He'll finally agreed to return with the Aries Seven. Colonel Masson is remaining to take over for him. It really took Major Leslie's final report to convince him."

"Mars is not the most hospitable place," Straker mused aloud, "But, vital if we're going to get out of our own solar system."

"That's a given, sir, but we still have to accept the fact our staff are human, and need to be spelled off or given opportunities to return home. It takes a large part out of a person's life to travel there and stay to work."

"Which is why I don't understand why the aliens would want to go to Mars. Why put a baby lab there? Why not set the lab up on their home world? Why travel millions of miles in space for this?"

"General, they may indeed have labs on their home world for that purpose. The point is, they created a lab here in our system, and any comments by me in regards to that, are going to

be purely conjectural. Did they bring the necessary materials here to conceive the babies, without recourse to bringing them, fully formed, millions of miles from their own system? I don't know. And, as for their initial purpose in combining human and alien DNA, there are a number of theories, none of them provable."

"What's your take on this?"

"Dr. Jackson makes the point in his report of saying he believes the aliens are working to create a hybrid which will be loyal to themselves, but usable on earth as a fifth column invasion force at some point. These hybrids will be able to eat and breathe like us, and pass for humans in appearance."

"Do you agree with this theory?"

"I don't disagree with it, sir, but it may not be the only answer. We know the aliens have been experimenting with doubling up on human organs. These infants could be part of a program dedicated to "growing" better organs, with more resistance to Earth's atmosphere. I'm sure other SHADO and Omega thinkers with access to our research could imagine many other theories."

Straker nodded, "How many of the infants were there again?"

"We counted a total of twenty-nine in the life tubes and a further twelve in cold storage, as I said in my prelim report. My autopsies proved the last twelve were already dead when the aliens put them away - perhaps for further analysis. Something must have gone wrong because they just didn't survive, and the aliens may have kept them for their own research purposes. But, the other twenty-nine had been thriving until we bombed their base."

"Forty-one hybrid babies," Straker calculated, "And, all conceived from one human donor. How the hell could they create so many babies from one single donor in less than two years?"

"The mechanics of it is something experts in procreative medicine would be able to explain more fully, sir. I'm an exobiologist, an expert in alien biology. I know more about the aliens' bodies than I do human bodies. But, based on what I *do* know, the aliens would need advanced fertility technology to create these hybrid babies. Just how they actually do it is not completely clear to us yet."

"The human donor whose DNA is in each of those alien babies gave birth to a hybrid two years ago. I saw the child born. The pregnancy ran the usual nine month course, the same as for human infants. How could forty-one babies come from one woman?"

"Sir, the tubes in which those infants were being held were designed to mimic the womb. They were being "grown" in those tubes the same way they would have grown naturally inside a woman's uterus. Conception may not have even taken place inside the human donor. They may have simply acquired her DNA, her eggs, and blended them with their own DNA. In other words, they've moved from the initial stages of their breeding program, in which they kidnapped human women and bred hybrid babies on them, to a more complicated, but faster, means of producing these children. We humans don't have any such processes as yet. There's talk of human cloning, and many Earth countries have placed a moratorium on that kind of research, but you know that isn't really going to stop it from happening."

"Evidently, the aliens have no such ethical, moral or religious issues to ponder."

"We know the aliens have been desperate for many years. Desperation tends to overcome such concerns. And, they don't see us as their equals. They think of us as lab animals, much the same way we think of rabbits, rats, and guinea pigs. It's always been hard for humans to come up against that cold hard fact - that we're gauged on the same end of the food chain with

the rodents, as far as the aliens are concerned."

"And, the human DNA matches with the human donor we had here?"

"There's no doubt of it, sir. The DNA donor was...is...Tina Kovac."

Straker swallowed before saying, "Doctor, I wonder if I could have a look at one of your infant specimens?"

Raychaudhuri got up from her seat, "I'll get you some scrubs to wear..."

* * *

March 25th, 2004, Straker's Office

"I understand you're looking for a transfer, Al," Straker tapped the ashes off his cigarillo as he looked over his desk at his senior alien technologist.

Leslie shifted in his chair nervously, "Yes, sir."

"Paul Foster told me you weren't too keen on working in space anymore. Said you thought you were told old to go back into space."

"Things have changed," Leslie replied quietly.

For once, Straker's expression softened. Foster had filled him in on the dynamics between Leslie and Boyd, and of course, SHADO's CO was well aware that Boyd had lost her own life saving Leslie, "You're sure you want to do this?"

"I think my skills would be of use up there, yes, sir."

"Alright, Al, I've signed new orders for you. You are hereby transferred to the MarsBase for the next six months. You're scheduled to leave for the Moon in two weeks to join up with the Aries Seven flight."

Straker saw the look of relief on Leslie's face - had he feared Straker would turn his request down? "Thank you, sir." He got up and left.

Looking down at Dr. Raychaudhuri's file CDs, Straker sighed. He had some serious reading to do. The good doctor had accessed some vital information on human reproductive medicine for him to read, along with her reports on the alien infants and their all-too human DNA. He thought of Al Leslie - the man who initially didn't want to go to the MarsBase and he was now the man who couldn't get back there fast enough - the man who asked for a transfer to the Red Planet. What would he find in the red dust of Mars? Was he running *away* from something - or running to something? Straker shook his head - like himself, Leslie was a man with a ghost. He looked up at the infant's portrait on his office wall - how many ghosts would there be?

THE END