

Barren Moon

Maj. Craig Arthur Maybee, U.S. Army

They say money makes the world go around. I say it makes the universe go around!

Gen. Liwei Chang stared down at the barren lunar surface from a small viewport in the Chinese Lunar Orbital Station, awaiting Capt. Yen Ming's response. Chang knew this man could be trusted. In some ways, he saw a younger version of himself in Ming. So stoic and confident, and ready to sacrifice for the greater good of the people. Ming was the perfect example of Chinese values. The Americans, who were so focused on their own individuality and greed, would not appreciate Ming.

Consumed by social media and focused on their heroic glory days, the Americans had slowly atrophied as a fighting force. The issue, Chang thought, was that they were not able to coordinate. The Americans did not work as one. Free speech and free will were for the individual but served no collective good. The Americans could not understand what it meant for a nation to flow like a river. The river, like China, was a collective society, each water molecule coalescing with others into one powerful force, carving its way through any environment and flowing around any obstacle in its path.

"General Chang?" A voice behind Chang snapped him out of his thought; turning, he saw the face of Capt. Yen Ming in a screen on the wall. "We are ready to execute on your command," Ming said with absolute confidence.

"Excellent. Execute immediately!" Chang said, cutting the communication and returning to his thoughts.

The general's work—no, his sacrifices—were always for the greater good of his people. He rarely felt personal pride, rarely sought pleasure in personal gain. However, this time was different. He knew that success in his next task would propel his ascension to the party's inner circle. For the first time in his professional career, his personal satisfaction could benefit both the people and himself.

Chapter 1: Just Another Day

"What are you two watching?" I say with a groan. The U.S. Space Force habit I am in is small. You optimists would call it cozy. I don't bother looking down from my bunk; they all know I am up now and no doubt feel like playtime is over. I am glad for once to be awake. Sleep here is pretty much the only thing to do outside of training and checking equipment. But on the moon, my dreams are always strange. I keep having this recurring dream that I am jumping out of a swimming pool like a dolphin at a waterpark. Before you say I am crazy, apparently it is possible to do that on the moon; I saw it in a Space Force recruiting video, and recruiters never lie!

"Sorry, sir!" chime both specialists Edgar and Carpenter nearly in unison. "We were watching a Pular Mechanics NextTech episode on a new concept for a carbon dioxide to oxygen conversion plant," Edgar states.



(Composite graphic by Chris Gardner, Army University Press; original photos courtesy of pixabay)



“Yeah, just one of them is supposed to reduce the CO2 emissions for an entire super city!” Carpenter adds helpfully.

“Okay, nerds!” I say, wincing as I slide off the bunk with a thump. “Now that I have been serenaded awake with that quality, super useful information, I think I am officially ready for some training!”

I ignore the collective groan and smile. With one boot on and struggling to put on the other, I yell out, “Will one of you troglodytes please get Master Sgt. Stone?”

Before either of them can get up from their seats, Master Sgt. Stone sprints into the room and frantically shouts, “We have a distress call from the SpaceX mining camp!”

Chapter 2: Getting the Call

For a moment, the room falls completely silent. I am the first to react and shout, “You all heard Stone. Get your equipment on and meet me in the pressure bay in five minutes!” This is our Augmented Assault and Rescue (AAR) team’s first call and our primary mission; the only thing we really train for. Well, that and supervising autonomous equipment container drops, but once they are on the ground and establish a connection to the orbital station, they practically run themselves.

With both of my boots finally on, I quickly zip up my Space Force flight suit. In my Space Force “onesie,” I hastily grab a nutrient bar (yum) and a water bag and head to the communications room, where Master Sgt. Stone is staring at the comms equipment.

I notice right away Stone’s blank stare and perplexed look. I say, “Stone, you look like you are the one in distress; what’s up?”

Stone then frantically turns and says, “Sir, it’s gone! The distress call was sent out, you can see it right there,

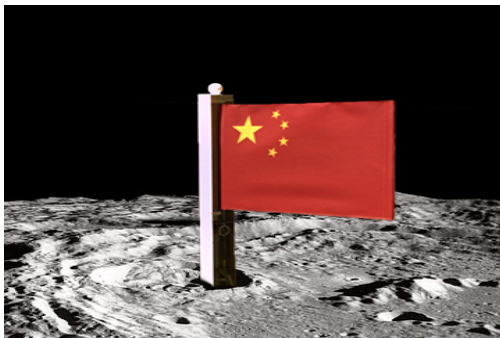
but now there’s nothing! I have tried to respond but I got no response.”

“Okay, no worries. It’s not like we have anything better to do today and the trip will make for some great training,” I say. I take a moment to concentrate on finishing off the last neutron bomb and throwing it into the trash slot. Did I say neutron bomb? I meant nutrient bar, but for the record, they both contain compressed energy and taste like destructive sadness. So yeah, I call them neutron bombs.

“Go get the guys ready in the pressure bay. I will be out there shortly,” I say, nodding to Stone. Without a word, Stone nods back and starts for the door. Trying to lighten the mood, I smile mischievously and say, “Let’s go big on this one, full gear and equipment loads. It should be fun! Worst case scenario, it’s a comms issue. We get to go for a joy ride on the moon, and Edgar gets a chance to show some new people those sweet tricks our guardian bots can do!”

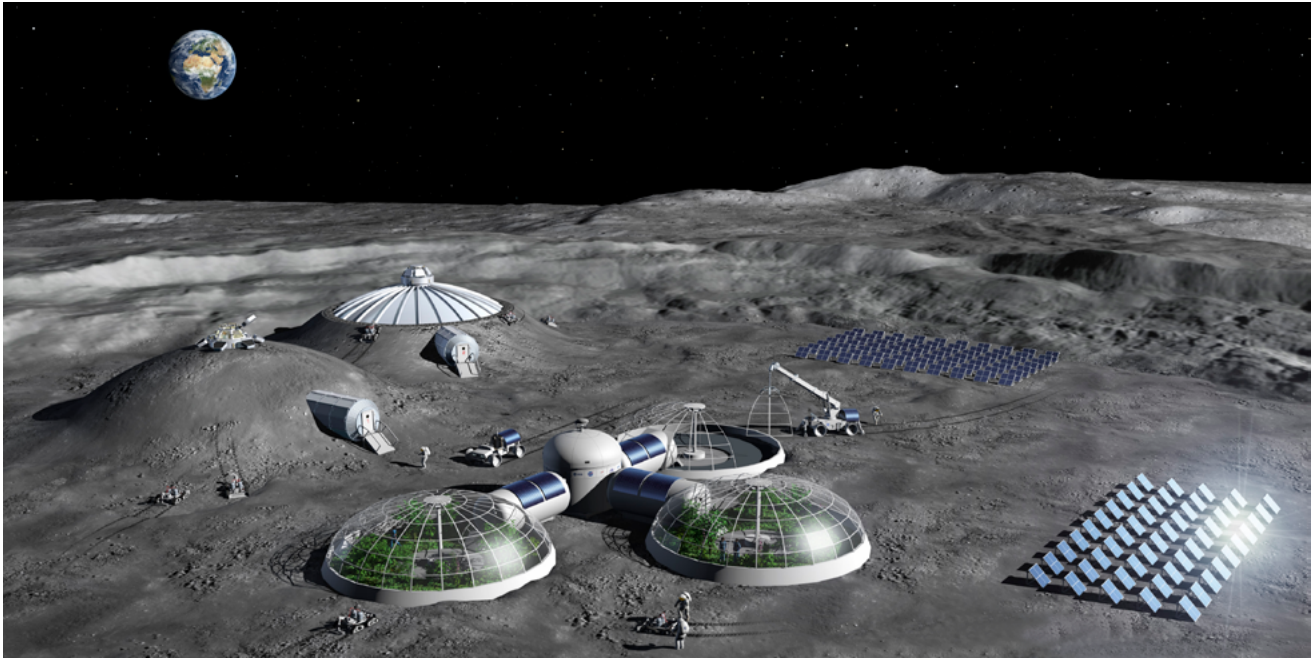
Picking up the communications handset as Stone leaves, I press the transmit button. “SpaceX mining camp, this is Capt. Brock Maxwell, responding to your distress signal. Do you read me? Over.” I repeat this message several times and even try to radio up to my command, but like Stone, I get no response. With a sigh, I recall the solar flare last week that degraded communications for hours.

Shrugging it off, I figure that as long as we can communicate within our team then we are good to go. Exiting the communications room, I lock the door behind me. Funny, there is no one on the moon for miles; satellites watch this place almost 24/7, and yet we still have protocols to lock up. Before heading to the pressure bay, I scan



(Composite graphic by Chris Gardner, Army University Press; original photos from space.com and pixabay)

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(Image courtesy of The European Space Agency)

the crew quarters. I smile, noticing that two specialists have remembered to shut off the media station for the first time in Space Force history.

Chapter 3: Gearing Up

U.S. Space Force Augmented Assault and Rescue teams consist of two specialists, a master sergeant, and a captain. Each team member has specialties, but in emergencies, we are all cross-trained to perform the essential functions of the other members of the team. Spc. Carpenter is an expert at maintaining our sophisticated augmented military gear, as well as keeping our lunar buggies (we call them “bugs”) and Guardian bots running. Carpenter also makes sure our hab doesn’t smell like feet when one of our filters is clogged. Spc. Edgar is our communications and electronic warfare expert. With a degree from MIT, he could have done anything, but he always wanted to go to space; so, he enlisted in the Space Force. Foolish as he may sound, the kid is a genius and can bypass any switch on any network. Master Sgt. Stone serves as our senior noncommissioned officer, my advisor, and the team’s tactical weapons advisor. He’s old, like I think he fought in Afghanistan and Iraq with my father old. Kidding, but seriously, he’s definitely older than anyone on the team. As for me, I’m the AAR team leader responsible for this merry band of misfits. AAR team leaders generally have a degree in engineering and graduate a

two-year Special Purpose Operations and Weapons Course, known as SPOWC. Yeah, that name. I definitely get made fun of by other services, but now I can jump higher and run faster on the moon!

For soldiers, precombat inspections serve as a method of assessing the unit’s preparedness prior to the execution of the mission. Stepping inside the pressure bay, I begin to put my suit on and scan the area. I see the team finalizing their checks. Carpenter, who has completed his checks on our suits, the Guardians, and the bugs, is halfway into his suit now. Edgar already has his suit on and appears to be dancing to a song no one else can hear while doing data security tests on our Guardian bots. Lastly, I see Stone checking off the last item on his list, completing the check to ensure our suits are functional and fueled. Stone also makes sure we have essential human stuff like oxygen, water, and food. Each member of the AAR team is issued a gauss rifle. It is each of our responsibility to make sure our weapon is functional, and we collectively go through the checks. Gauss rifles utilize a state-of-the-art battery power cartridge that holds metal bullets. Once the trigger is pulled, those bullets are propelled down the barrel faster than fifty meters per second.

Once I put on my suit, I check that augmentation works. The augmented suit is the heart and soul of the AAR team. It provides a user-friendly augmented reality experience powered by an on-board computer.

All of the suits worn by AAR team members are linked through a mesh network, enabling each member to communicate and share data with all other members. As the team leader, I can see each team member's status in the upper left-hand corner of the suit's heads-up display, or HUD. Seeing all status lights are green, I address Stone.

"Stone, are we all ready to go?" I ask while walking toward the door and the button that initiates decompression.

With a smile only concealed by his visor, Stone responds, "All good, sir. We are ready to rock!" I think that may be a lunar dad joke and chuckle. Taking one more look around, I get thumbs up from each team member and hit the button. With a hiss, all of the air inside the pressure bay is pulled out, and the door opens.

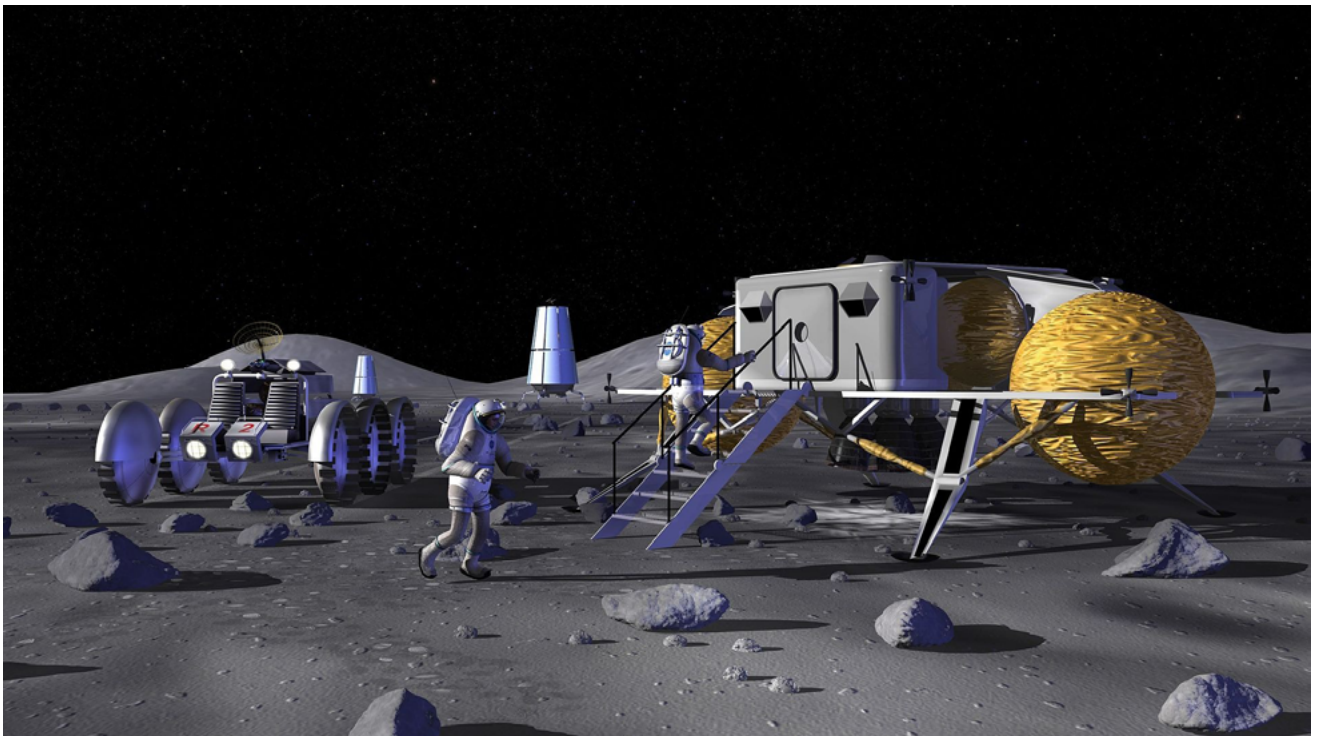
Chapter 4: Enroute

Outside the hab, each of the team members hops on his own bug. Bugs are designed much like the Apollo lunar buggies with two seats and the motor, battery, and storage in the back. Unlike the Apollo lunar rovers, bugs integrate with the augmentation in our suits and can travel greater distances. For this mission, our bugs are loaded with extra ammo, hab repair kits, extra

battery packs, oxygen, water, and of course, "neutron bombs" in case I get hungry for more edible suffering. Taking a moment to update the coordinates of the SpaceX mining camp in my HUD, I share it with the rest of the team. They will not see what I see. A wide purple roadway painted on the lunar surface by our augmented suit indicates the route to the SpaceX camp.

Indicating I want to move out, I begin to creep my bug forward, motioning to the rest of the team to follow. Once each team member is on the move, I press a button on my suit to activate team-wide communication. "Team, you all know there was a distress call from the SpaceX mining camp. As you can see in your HUD, the SpaceX mining camp is about five miles away. We take it slow and maintain proper formation. Edgar, I want you by me, making sure those Guardian bots protect our flanks. Carpenter, you take point. Stone, you guard the rear. Keep your heads up and take this seriously."

The trip is short, only taking thirty minutes, as the augmented software inside our suits traces the most efficient route for our bugs. As we are about to crest the last hill, Edgar breaks radio silence. "Sir, Guardian One has eyes on the SpaceX mining camp ... it looks pretty bad. I'm sending you the live feed to your HUD now." The live video from Guardian One pops up in



(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

the upper right corner of my screen. Taking the whole scene in, I see the collapsed dome of the mining camp, the SpaceX logo deflated over its exterior. Small jets of steam appear around the edges, indicating that whatever atmosphere was once inside the camp is quickly evaporating into space.

Chapter 5: The Investigation

Upon arrival, I notice that the door to the SpaceX pressure bay has been completely sucked off by the vacuum of space and lays several meters in front of the collapsed dome. Attempting to mask the tension in my voice, I radio Carpenter and say, “Carpenter, I need you to send your Guardian bots to sentry mode, one on each corner of our position.” The Guardian bots are just that, bots that serve as our guardians on the battlefield. Circular in shape, Guardians use small thrusters to hover above our position. They are equipped with grenade launchers, automatic gauss rifle, and a vast array of sensors capable of capturing signal and imagery in a wide range of spectrums. They integrate directly with our augmented suits and utilize a limited on-board artificial intelligence when performing certain tasks.

Once Carpenter has the bots moving into position, I sling my rifle and grab ahold of the pressure bay door at my feet, motioning for Stone and Edgar to help me lift it up. Grunting from the effort, I say, “If there is any chance to get some sort of temporary atmosphere inside, we need to do it.” Not missing a beat, Carpenter rushes to his bug and grabs a pack of temporary seals and a tool kit. Putting a sealed pressure door onto a hab is never easy, but Carpenter, as his name suggests, crafted a suitable solution with our emergency patch kit, while the rest of the team brought our gear from our bugs inside.

The main thing to consider when repairing any collapsed hab is equalizing pressure. If someone is on the inside of the next door, the best way to save them is to first create some sort of sealed barrier on our side that can hold air and pressure. Without this barrier, opening the next door to the living quarters would be less than helpful, as the occupant and all of the pressurized atmosphere would get sucked out.

To restore the pressure in our now patched and less than pristine pressure chamber, our team deploys TAKs, Temporary Atmospheric Kits. TAKs are basically a super pressurized, breathable atmosphere

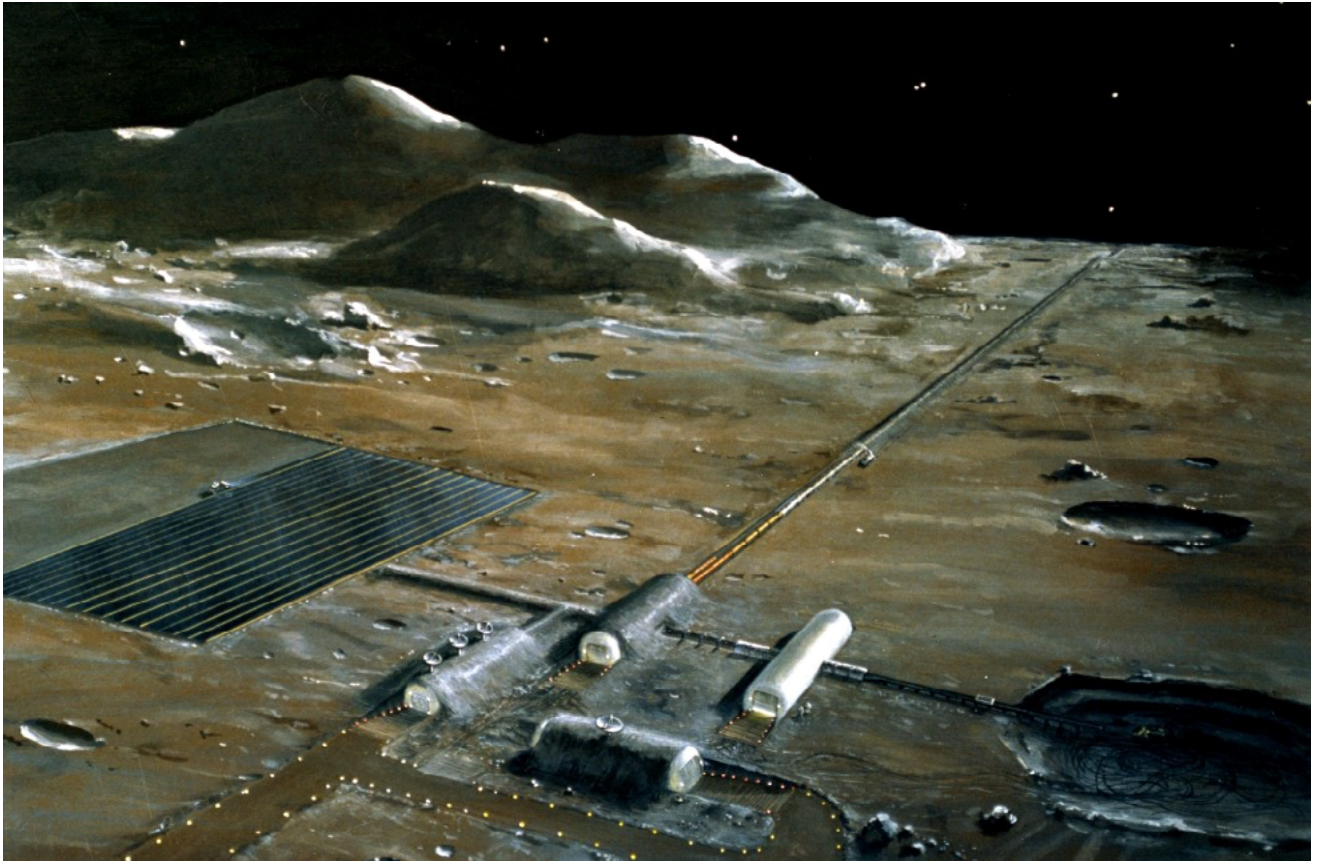
in a can. Once Carpenter indicates the TAKs have equalized the pressure, I walk up to the door to the living quarters and manually open it. The door slides open easily. A little too easy. I can see right away that for whatever reason, someone inside must have left the door to the living quarters partially open when the pressure bay lost atmosphere.

Looking around the room, I see three bodies lying on the floor, the atmospheric mist from our TAKs swirling around them. Both Edgar and Carpenter look as if they are going to be sick, but Stone stays resolute and focused, saying, “They look like they have been dead for a while.” Looking past the bodies, I notice the SpaceX command center across the room and motion Edgar over to it. The SpaceX hab is the standard small hab configuration and as such is almost identical to ours. Scanning the room, I notice something that strikes me as odd. The bathroom door is closed. Normally, in habs, like airplanes on Earth, bathroom doors remain open when not in use. In space, closing the door offers more than just privacy. Closing the bathroom door in a hab temporarily seals the occupant inside, creating a temporary atmosphere that redirects air to special scrubbers, keeping the hab universally fresher. Curious, I walk up to the door and try to open it. To my surprise, it’s locked!

“Carpenter, do we have stable atmosphere in here?” I yelled excitedly. “Like, can I take off my helmet right now without dying?” This gets Stone’s attention.

Turning his head, Carpenter replies with a hesitant “Yessss,” drawing out the s for emphasis. “Sir, please don’t do that,” Stone admonished.

Ignoring Stone, I continued. “I’m not going to take my helmet off, but this door is locked, and I think there is someone inside.” Forgetting the two, and possibly my wits, I decided to knock on the door. As both Stone and Carpenter look on with disappointed looks on their faces, I place my head against the door, with my helmet on of course, and listen. This doesn’t help at all; the helmet itself has augmented speakers for an atmospheric assault and adjusts automatically to the ambiance of the room. To my surprise, I hear a knock back. Then another. Both Stone and Carpenter’s faces turn from concern for me to concern for the situation. Without warning, the door opens with a whoosh and a woman, in the most raggedy space suit I have ever seen, steps out.



(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

After a few minutes of introduction and explanation, we find that the woman's name is Emily Daniels, a system engineer at the SpaceX camp. There were only four people assigned to the SpaceX mining camp. Emily happened to be closest to the bathroom when the pressure bay doors had blown. Fearing the hab doors would be next, she grabbed a radio and a space suit and hid in the bathroom.

"Took you guys long enough," Emily says, after slipping into one of our extra suits and sealing the helmet.

"We aren't a pizza delivery service, ma'am," Stone replies, not concealing his frustration that Emily is implying we took our time. Divesting from the conversation quickly, I scan the room again. My eyes land on Edgar, who is plugged into the SpaceX command terminal, lines of code sailing by faster than I can read. He is in full augmentation mode, the equipment in his suit helping him rapidly digest and understand the data faster than any human alone. Suddenly, the text stops scrolling, and begins to slowly scroll up, then down again. Edgar isn't looking up. Sensing something is wrong, I begin to head toward him. Before I am

halfway to him, Edgar yells, "Sir, I don't think this was an accident!"

Chapter 6: Loose Ends

Gen. Chang wished he could see from his window, but he refused to let his emotions take control of his actions. Gathering himself in an attempt to remove all emotion from his voice, he asks, "So, you are sure the mining operation is shut down?"

"Yes, General, our team performed exceptionally," responds Ming with a deferential tone.

Through his window, Chang imagined seeing the SpaceX mining camp's dome collapse, and with it, his work nearly completed. He could ask Ming for a visual but that would take a few seconds and was not worth his time. He trusts Ming. But trust was not as important as the collective good of the party, or the people. He had to be sure, so he asks, "Are there any loose ends? Did we take care of that Space Force team?"

Ming, always a professional, responded promptly. "My team saw the Americans enter the camp twenty minutes ago. We are setting up an ambush now. All

communications have been blocked in the area. We will be ready for you to make an official statement to the Premier in the next hour.”

“Excellent. Be sure to notify me when you have closed this account,” Chang said, and ended the communication.

Chang had to keep looking forward and let Ming deal with the now. He needed to focus on his message to the Premier, which was really a message to the world. The Chinese lunar expedition had discovered the U.S. Space Force and SpaceX teams were tragically killed in an accident. The Chinese would, of course, publicly investigate the accident. They already had crafted evidence that the American people would believe the whole thing. After all, controlling information on the moon was easier than on Earth. The Chinese investigation teams would be thorough in their efforts, providing a wealth of infor-

his wrist, we are all looking at an augmented three-dimensional image of the moon in the center of the room.

Sounding like an obnoxious museum tour guide and pointing at a flashing red arrow on the map, Edgar says, “We are here. About three hours ago, there was a highly encrypted burst transmission sent from here.” Another red dot appears on the image of the moon, about a kilometer north of our current position. “Then one single sustained transmission for about thirty seconds at that same location, then nothing.” As Edgar finishes, a red circle appears around the red dot indicating the last transmission.

“I ran a trace on the transmissions and they are closely correlated with transmissions coming from the Chinese orbital station.”

Before Edgar can continue, Stone cuts him off. “That is hardly an indication of Chinese involvement in what looks to be an accident!”

“With my heart in my chest, I rush to Edgar’s side. ‘Who is General Liwei Chang?’ Edgar says, not looking up from his work. ‘Isn’t that the Chinese general in charge of the scientific expeditions here on the moon?’”

mation to the U.S. public while carefully denying any contrary information from reaching Earth.

Chang would take his time with the investigation. It was time enough to help the Americans forget about their Helium-3 mining operations on the lunar south pole. It was time enough for the Chinese to take their place. It was time for China, not America, to be the leading supplier of Helium-3. No, Chang thought, it was time for China to be the wealthiest nation in the universe.

Chapter 7: Unraveling

With my heart in my chest, I rush to Edgar’s side.

“Who is General Liwei Chang?” Edgar says, not looking up from his work.

“Isn’t that the Chinese general in charge of the scientific expeditions here on the moon?” Stone yells from across the room before continuing his debriefing of Emily. Looking at the screen, I see that whatever Edgar has found is highly encrypted. Growing impatient, I ask, “Edgar, what exactly did you find?”

Nodding, Edgar turns around and motions for the rest of the team to come forward. With a few flicks of

“I know, I know!” Edgar says excitedly. “But it did get me thinking. Why is the entire SpaceX command console here encrypted?”

“Wait! It’s completely encrypted? Are you sure?” Emily says with a gasp.

“Yes, and it’s deleting itself, just like the old ransomware viruses back in the day. Except without the ability to pay to make it go away,” Edgar responds. Before we can cut him off again, he continues. “The good news is that I was able to stop it from both encrypting and deleting. Then by transferring the encrypted data to my suit, I was able to decrypt the remaining data. That’s the bad news. I found a remote execution command sent to SpaceX to release the seals on both the pressure bay and the hab. It was sent in Mandarin. I was able to translate some information from the Mandarin files, including a message directly to Gen. Chang from a person only identified as ‘Ming.’”

“Dr. Ming?” Emily asked, questioning. “He’s one of the Chinese scientists here on the moon, conducting research on Helium-3.”

Edgar, shaking his head, says, “I don’t think he’s a scientist, Emily. There are encrypted maps inside the data that show large deposits of He3. Problem is that there are Chinese mining facilities placed on top of the SpaceX facility here. Also, he doesn’t write like a scientist. He makes clipped statements like a military officer. No offense, sir! I ran a scan with speech pattern analysis suite in my suit on all of Ming’s communications. The analysis didn’t show a match between the scientific documents with his name on him and the actual message traffic we are seeing here.”

No one speaks as Edgar’s statements still ring in our ears. I am about ready to step in to break the silence when Edgar’s eyes then go wide. Clearly on to something, Edgar asks, “Sir, have you been able to reach anyone from command?”

“Actually, no, I got nothing before we left, figured it was just a solar flare like last week,” I say. Which in my defense is fair, I think. AAR teams usually operate for weeks without communications from higher command. We do check in and provide updates as needed. However, most communications to and from the lunar surface are done by automated computer systems that relay information back and forth.

Snapping me out of my thoughts, Edgar says, “Sir, we are being jammed! Moreover, I was able to triangulate the emissions to here.” The same red ring on the image of the moon starts flashing.

“Wait, is that the same location that the Chinese communications came from?” I say, asking the obvious question while picking up my rifle.

“Yes, sir,” Edgar says, getting the hint that we are about ready to move.

Walking to the pressure bay, I am quickly joined by Stone. I can tell he can’t wait to leave this half-destroyed base. “Stone, I don’t have a full picture of what’s going on here, but I do know we need to shut down that jammer and relay what Edgar found to command!”

With a slightly giddy tone, Stone says, “You got it, sir! We can go on a field trip, but if this goes sideways, you’re the one that has to tell Dad!”

Chapter 8: Adapting

Before everyone can get to the pressure bay, my plans (which aren’t even plans yet) immediately change when Carpenter comes running over to Stone and me.

“Sir, Guardians One and Two are picking up movement about a kilometer to our north. The Guardian’s onboard system has identified four armed personnel in four vehicles, and moving in a tactical formation. Sir, I have confirmed Guardians assessment; these guys are armed and inbound to our location.”

“Good work, Carpenter!” I say, then turn to Stone. “Tactical formations? That doesn’t sound like a scientific expedition.”

Gearing up and quickly exiting the SpaceX base with Emily, we take up positions, with the four Guardians spread out in front of our formation. The Guardians are piloted by Carpenter, who shelters in a nearby crater to our rear with Emily. With Stone, Edgar, and me in defensive positions on the edge of a crater, all there is to do now is wait for the Chinese to arrive.

A grueling minute later, the Chinese can now be visibly seen in tactical formation, heading in our direction. It is clear from our scans that they have not discovered our positions yet. As I flip through sensor feeds and the imagery provided by the Guardians on my HUD, an idea strikes me.

Smiling, I say, “Hey Edgar? Can you hack into Chinese suits?”

His response is immediate; he likely has a similar idea. “Sir, normally, no. However, based on the information left on the hacked SpaceX terminal, I have a pretty good idea of how their suits handle message traffic. I think at the very least I can gain access and shut off their communications. Once I gain access to their suits, I will know more about what I can and cannot do,” he says, clearly getting excited about the prospect of using his skills against a real threat.

When the Chinese are only three hundred meters away, I aim my gauss rifle in their direction. In my HUD I see a familiar bright blue dot; that’s where my gauss gun is aimed at the moment. Next, I start scrolling through a list of fire solutions in my HUD and select the option for “1x2,” which stands for one shot, two bullets. A series of red diamonds appear, indicating I now authorize the Guardians to begin tracking enemy targets. While the gauss rifles fire much like a normal rifle, the 1x2 mode allows targets that are fired upon to be simultaneously engaged by the Guardians. Thus, one shot, two bullets. With the targeting solution set, and the Chinese still advancing on our position, I begin to get nervous. I don’t think anyone has actually engaged

in combat on the moon before. What sort of precedent are we setting if U.S. forces shoot first? What would the fallout be if the Chinese see my actions as an act of war? I know the suits recordings would show the whole thing, but these days, videos aren't as ironclad proof as they used to be. Fake videos are easy to make, and real videos are often difficult to verify. If possible, we need to take the Chinese alive.

"I'm in, sir," I hear Edgar say, pulling back into the present. Seeing an opportunity to potentially deescalate the situation, I ask, "Can I talk to them? I want to let them know we are here and inquire about their intentions."

Without hesitation, Edgar says, "yes, sir. I have engaged the simultaneous translation software. You will sound like a computer with a British accent speaking Mandarin, but they will be able to understand."

These back doors allowed Chinese commanders to remotely monitor their subordinates' suit cameras and data to ensure that trust was not misplaced and control was absolute. Smiling at the thought of his Party's foresight, Chang pulled up Ming's camera feed.

To his astonishment, he was staring at an American. Tilting his head down slightly, he checked to see if the feed was working correctly. The authentication code matched Capt. Ming's, but clearly this was not Ming. Before he could ponder this troubling turn of events any further, the man began to speak. Well, it wasn't a man; more like a computer with British accented speaking Mandarin.

"Gen. Chang, this is Capt. Brock Maxwell of the United States Space Force. Before we proceed, I want to reassure you that your men are safe. They are currently in the custody of the United States and will be released

“Chinese soldiers, this is Capt. Brock Maxwell of the United States Space Force. You are trespassing in a U.S. commercially designation zone, protected by the U.S. government. Please state your intentions clearly.”

A moment later I see a Chinese flag icon pop up in the top right of my HUD and select it.

"Chinese soldiers, this is Capt. Brock Maxwell of the United States Space Force. You are trespassing in a U.S. commercially designation zone, protected by the U.S. government. Please state your intentions clearly. We are armed and will fire if you proceed. Over." All there is for me to do now is wait for a response.

Chapter 9: Implosion

Gen. Chang had never been a patient man. Sure, he pretended to be from time to time. Such is the way of any good Chinese leader. Be patient, but be ready. That was what all of his instructors had explained to him about the Chinese active defense strategy. It was based on waiting for the enemy to present opportunities and the preparedness necessary to exploit them. He was exploiting an opportunity now though, and patience, he figured, could be replaced by violence of action. During the creation of the Chinese lunar security forces, the senior party officials wisely recommended that back doors be placed in all astronauts' spacesuits' software.

as soon as they can be safely returned to Earth for trial. We have information concerning your government's involvement in the death of three SpaceX employees for the purposes of taking over their mining operations here in the lunar south pole. This information, along with the data recovered from the SpaceX mining camp and your astronauts' suits, has been transferred over to the United States government. In the following days, your government will be contacted by the United States Department of State in an effort to negotiate the release of your astronauts. Have a better day. Maxwell out!"

Epilogue

I probably should lie to you all and say that we had a massive firefight on the moon and prevailed against the Chinese because of superior American firepower, but as is the case in combat, it is more about luck than anything else. While Edgar hacks the Chinese suits, Carpenter maneuvers the four Guardian bots as close as possible to the Chinese soldiers. Just before the Chinese crest the last hill, Carpenter hides all four Guardians in a lunar crater. This is all Carpenter's

work, though I'm sure Stone is guiding him the entire way, like a jockey gently guides a horse around a race track. Once in place, all Carpenter has to do is wait for my command and we will spring the trap. I figure all I will have to do is wait until they are close, swarm the Guardians in for a good old fashioned show of force, and they will surrender. I do just that. I give the command and Carpenter goes to work.

The enemy, unfortunately for us, gets a vote. Upon seeing the Guardians surrounding them, the Chinese don't surrender, not even close. What they do is shoot one of the Guardians and fall back into a defensible crater to engage the other three drones. Yeah, that backfired. The good news is that as I rack my brain trying to figure a way to peacefully end this before I lose the remaining three drones, Edgar takes action. Edgar, who now has complete access to the Chinese suits, takes it upon himself to reduce their oxygen and give them all a maximum dose of pain killers, courtesy of the automatic medical care suites in each of their suits. What a mess.

It takes almost three hours to get the four Chinese sleeping beauties back to our hab. We have to make a side trip to a jammer where I let Stone use his explosives for the first time on the moon. Boom. Once back at our base, I release a statement to the Chinese and then call my command. Why did I do it in that order? I figure it was better to ask for forgiveness than for permission. Plus, Carpenter is pretty shaken up at the loss of his drones. I think he even named them. Emily ends up getting picked up by another lunar SpaceX mission tasked to refit the destroyed mining base. Edgar even helps them upgrade their cybersecurity. As for the Chinese soldiers, it is almost a week until someone comes down from Space Force command to secure them for transportation. I think they are actually happy to be taken by the end of it. Turns out, Ming and his team had enough of our hospitality. That might have something to do with the generous amounts of neutron bombs they ate. Who would have thought they were universally hated by everyone? ■