

gray sky

1, 415 clicks outside Gusev City, heading south-south-east. 500 meters above the Doritos desert—Mars.

Umberto passes the downed freighter's impact point at half-throttle, following the terrain around in a wide arc, visually assessing the damage from his helo's cabin.

The charred debris is smeared across eight clicks of red, rocky desert. A smoldering dark stain on once-scenic landscape. This one could be bloody.

"Tokyo?" he says into the live headset, "I don't know what kind of beacon you think you're reading there but I can assure you, it isn't a pleasure craft."

rescue on a budget

The Helo's port door slides open with a hiss, letting in ozone-scented Mars air.

Umberto steps outside, PDA scanning the wreckage for databox or crash tube locaters.

"We're sending you Mars-sat imaging now," says the comms man back in Tokyo, tinny and distant in the earpiece. "Try walking east about half a click, there's a huge chunk of something there. Our analyst said it's the bridge, but one of the ship's architects seems to think it's crew quarters, at a glance. He's getting back to us."

Umberto treads through the ashen mud, toward more towering masses of smoking wreckage.

"If you guys would spring for the search and rescue package, I could do this from the air."

"Hey don't look at me," snaps the comms guy, "I'm still waiting for them to buy me a chair. I do this job sitting in a window frame, I nearly fell out before."

Umberto begins to scan the bigger pieces as he passes. "Okay Steve, you have a tough life too. Jeez."

The PDA flashes a low-level radiation warning.

"Hey Tokyo this stuff is reading kinda hot. Should I be wearing a suit or something?"

"Ahhh... Tokyo will have to get back to you on that."

life raft

“The architect nailed it,” Umberto tells comms, “it’s crew housing.”

He makes his way down the steeply-sloped interior corridor, rubber shoes gripping tentative on stainless steel.

A tungsten strip on the front of Umberto’s flight suit glows harsh white, lighting the way ahead. In his hand, the PDA flashes an alert.

“Tokyo, I’m seeing an activated crash tube still in its rack.”

Umberto turns left through torn-open crash doors, into a large room lined by suspension-mounted alloy cylinders.

A display on one of the pods strobes blue, green and red.

He goes to it, pulling the release on a panel marked ‘Rescue’. The front half of the crash tube shielding slides forward before rolling open, revealing a woman enveloped in translucent blue gel, sealed behind plexiglass.

She takes short, anxious breaths from a small o2 tank.

Conscious but frightened, her eyes dart about adjusting to the light, before settling on Umberto.

He punches a flashing red disc and the safety glass slides away, releasing gelatinous goo over his suit from the waste down, the girl collapsing in his arms.

Umberto drags her clear and lays her down coma style, removing the tank’s mouthpiece, wiping gel and wet hair from her face.

“Can you hear me?” he asks. “Are you hurt?”

“We can’t stay here,” she tells Umberto, eyes wide with fear.

“It’s okay, I’m with an evac firm based out of Asia. I’m taking you to Isidis for medical care.”

“Not there,” she says. “Nowhere on Mars is safe for me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There aren’t meant to be survivors. The alliance will come for me. Probably you too.”

“Um... what?”

The woman shakes her head, fighting back tears.

“We have to *go*,” she says with an urgency that Umberto rarely hears. “Please! We don’t have time for you not to trust me.”

“It isn’t about trust. If I take you off-world our billing department will go to town on your insurance.”

“Sir... if you don’t take me off-world in the next ten to fifteen minutes, you and I are likely to be found amongst the next downed freighter’s wreckage.”