

The Expedition
Jack Bennett (2022)

‘Landing in 3, 2, 1.’

Klaus floated out of *Starship 2* and landed on the powdery, vast surface of Mars. He couldn’t believe they were there. It was his first mission, and he was eager to get started.

‘Wassup, Earthlings?’ Noah, one of his crewmates, said, starting a Tik Tok, while eating a Kit Kat that Dr Phillips, the ships botanist, had given him.

Noah tried to get Klaus in the vid, but Klaus was not interested. Jammie, the navigator, was on social media too, posting on Insta, *#onmars*. Klaus ignored them and started to unload equipment from the ship’s hold. He knew it was only a matter of time before his crew of twenty-one would want to be fed. As he placed the last telescope down, something didn’t seem right. Then, he saw them.

Paw prints in the dust.

Strange.

He decided to follow the prints. One, two, three sets of prints. Then, the paw prints stopped. He looked back at his crew. A frown creased on his face as a terrible realisation took hold—

Twenty.

Someone was missing.

As interesting as the paw prints were, Klaus knew his priority was his crew. He decided to look in all the places he could think of before alerting the other members.

He checked the hold.

Nothing.

He checked the ship.

Nothing.

He checked the annex.

Still nothing.

Valuable time was slipping away. He had to tell his crew.

As he was walking to the main hall, he saw more paw prints. He was getting more curious by the minute, but he couldn’t be distracted. At least, not yet.

‘Attention everyone,’ Klaus said, as he entered the hall. ‘It has come to my attention that we are down one crew member. I’m not yet sure, but it seems Dr Phillips has gone missing.’

There were gasps throughout the crowd, but as trained professionals, everyone knew what they had to do and they immediately went into response mode.

A search and rescue team started investigating.

A team stayed on the ship in charge of communications.

The rest of the crew kept at their posts.

Being a family man, Klaus made a personal commitment to ensure that Dr Phillips would be returned safely to his family.

As he searched, Klaus inspected the paw prints. The second pair lead into the distance, and he followed them to a big crater. At the bottom was a cave. He went in. The cave smelt of canines. He went a bit further. He couldn’t believe his eyes; it was a pack of space dogs, and they were *talking*?

Klaus listened. They appeared to be planning something. He had to alert the others, but just as he thought he escaped the cave, the pack of dogs swarmed around him.

‘Why are you at our meeting?’ growled the dog’s leader, Laika, looking curious.

Klaus stiffened, despite feeling sheepish. ‘There are two reasons. Firstly, I was wondering who or what belonged to the paw prints I’m seeing everywhere. And secondly, one of my crew members is missing, and I was wondering if you knew anything about it.’

The dogs looked at each other, startled. Laika stood in front of Klaus. ‘That’s interesting. We were having a meeting about one of our pack members who has gone missing.’

‘So, it wasn’t you who took our crew member?’

‘Not at all,’ said Laika. ‘We thought you might have had something to do with our missing dog.’

Satisfied that both were innocent parties, Klaus and the dogs decided to create an alliance and search for the missing crew members together. When they got back to Klaus’s base, he explained the talking dogs to his crew, then he and Laika went to the meeting room to discuss their plans.

Laika came up with the first plan. ‘I know of a ruin close to our cave, but legend has it that it is haunted with evil spirits. Still, we could look around and see if there’s any clues.’

Klaus gathered five of his finest crew and headed out with the dogs. He looked back to tell Noah to update headquarters.

Wait a second—Where is Noah?

Another member down.

The crew were growing more concerned by the minute.

At the ruins, the intrepid crew couldn't believe their eyes. The ruins were a series of sprawling architectural fragments that led to a large solitary rock with a door. Small brown crumbly particles laden with biscuit-like flakes traversed the path.

Laika's primal instincts screamed *danger* at him.

The door looked ominous, but they had no choice. They had to enter. The passageway was dark, but they could see light in the distance, which they followed to a room. Inside, they saw the horrifying sight of Noah, Dr Phillips, and the missing dog hanging from their feet over a roaring fire.

'Help! Help!' the captives shouted as soon as they saw their crew.

Klaus stood still for a moment, thinking of what he should do.

'Mmmmmm.'

Who was that?

Someone else was in the room. Klaus looked around the corner, and his mouth dropped. Aliens were munching on Kit Kats.

'Could this day get even crazier?' he whispered.

Being heroic, Klaus burst into the room with his M16 rifle to save his fellow crew members and the dog, but the aliens had something else planned.

One of the aliens pressed a big red button that detached the ropes holding up the hostages. Without hesitating, Klaus jumped over the fire, and one by one, grabbed the three captives. Then he charged at the aliens, but there was an opening in the floor with spikes. Klaus fell, thinking he was a goner.

Laika sprinted and jumped to save Klaus. After a moment of thanks, they got back to work. They still had to capture the aliens.

By this time, Laika had sent a telepathic message to the other dogs, and they had surrounded the aliens.

'Charge!' shouted Klaus, as they leapt forward and captured the last of the aliens.

'Any last words?' Noah said to the aliens, feeling cool, with his TikTok recording.

The aliens looked sad. 'All we wanted were Kit Kats,' one said said.

Klaus handcuffed them and took them back the ship.

'We'll take it from here,' said Laika.

'They're all yours,' Klaus said.

Klaus and Laika shook hands—well, hand and paw—and Klaus watched the dogs take the aliens away.

‘Well, that was an interesting start to the expedition, but now, we better get back to work,’ Klaus said to the crew.

They laughed and Noah ended the Tik Tok recording.

Vowing to take the crew members back to their families, all remaining Kit Kats were locked in the hold, and the ship was programmed to head back to Earth.