

Space: 2299



02: The Empath

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Travelling through a wormhole into another star system the inhabitants of Earth's moon find themselves in orbit around an alien planet inhabited by an intelligent species. Now not only do the moon's inhabitants find themselves attempting to come to terms with being hurled into deep space, they must also contend with an alien Empire that sees them as a resource to be exploited.

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I.

"Maya!" Mentor called out when he entered the cavern in search of his granddaughter. Looking across the cavern, illuminated by lighting units fixed to the walls at irregular intervals, he spotted her crouched beside the river that ran through it, "Maya." he called out again as he picked his way across the flattened stones that made up the floor of the cavern, "Maya you have to come now, it's time. They're here."

Maya turned around to look at Mentor, exposing the pronounced peak in her long red hair and the excessively pale blue eyes with their dagger shaped pupils that were common to all Psychons.

"Have you seen them?" she asked as she stood up.

"No. Their ship had just arrived and Lord Kollus ordered me to come and get you." Mentor replied, "I knew I'd find you down here. I remember your grandmother and I bringing you here as a child."

"I always felt safe here." Maya said as she looked around, "Grandfather I'm scared. What if the man Lord Kollus picks for me is like father?"

"You should try not to think like that Maya. Don't you remember how furious Lord Kollus was after your mother was killed? He flayed your father alive as punishment to show all Psychons what happened if they defied him or any other Dorcon. Whatever man he picks for you will know that if he mistreats you then he will end up the same. Your power is almost as great as your mother's was and Lord Kollus wants offspring he can trade with his allies, not a corpse that has no value to him. Who knows, you may even come to love your chosen mate as your grandmother and I loved one another." Mentor said.

"I just want to run away." Maya said.

"Do that and Lord Kollus will come after you. If he loses you he loses one of the most powerful empaths he could hope to have. He'll do whatever it takes to keep you. Now come along before he sends guards with controllers after you. At least walk into that throne room as the woman you are rather than a puppet with no free will." Mentor said and he held out his hand for his granddaughter to take.

Taking Mentor's hand, Maya went with him towards the palace throne room. As soon as they left the caverns and entered the palace itself they encountered more members of Lord Kollus' staff. Some of these were Psychons like them and there were even a handful of slaves from other species but the majority were Dorcons themselves. Like the Psychons the Dorcons had a physiology that was generally humanoid but their appearance showed their reptilian ancestry clearly, with scaled skin and long snouted heads that extended forwards of their bodies. Of course all of these Dorcons were male, the females remaining isolated while they carried out their studies or created the works of art that lined the palace walls. The palace guards recognised both Mentor and Maya, both of them being the favoured slaves of Lord Kollus and let them pass unhindered until they reached the throne room itself that looked out into the night over the mountain range the palace was built in.

Lord Kollus himself sat in the large ornate throne at the far end of the room while a second, slightly smaller throne sat empty beside him. Meanwhile another Dorcon sat in a third chair on the other side of Kollus. The two reptiles looked at the row of Psychon males that were stood in front of them. All of them had stripped naked and their clothes were piled up in front of them. The exception to this was one male at the end of the line who lay dead on the floor, still fully clothed but with a growing pool of blood coming from the gunshot wound that had taken part of the side of his head off. A small animal sat at the edge of this pool, its tongue lapping at the blood and it was immediately clear to Maya that this row of men was the group from which her future mate would be chosen by Kollus, the Dorcon sat beside him being the ally who had provided them in exchange for a share in whatever they hoped to gain from having her breed with one of the men.

"Ah Mentor you've returned." Kollus said when he saw the two Psychons enter his throne room and he leant towards the Dorcon sat beside him, "See Innask, I told you he could be relied upon. Mentor may be getting on a bit but he's still as sharp as when he served my uncle." he said.

"I take it that this is his granddaughter. The one you say can profit us." Innask said, looking at Maya.

"Yes she is. Maya is strong. Not as strong as her mother was but if we can breed more like her then we can use those offspring to buy our way to greater rank. I'm sure that just one daughter from this Psychon could buy us the assignment of an extra warship each to our squadrons. If we could provide two or three to the Archon himself then I don't think there is anything we couldn't ask for. Maya is young enough that we could get a dozen or more offspring in total from her."

"And the sons?" Innask said.

"Well if they share Mentor's genes then I'm sure that they'll come in useful. Though if necessary we'll do something to guarantee female offspring only, my mate Thallal is quite skilled at such things." Kollus told him.

"Good. Then let me see her. I want to be sure that she is as healthy as the males I'm offering you."

"You heard Lord Innask, come forwards Maya." Kollus ordered and he waved Maya towards him.

"Go Maya." Mentor whispered as he let go of Maya's hand and she walked forwards nervously, her mind

focused on the body on the floor. When she reached the row of men she stopped, standing next to the one at the end and briefly glancing along the row at their bodies.

"Well what are you waiting for Maya?" Kollus asked, "Lord Innask wants to get a good look at you. Take off your clothes." Maya hesitated, looking back at Mentor and Kollus pointed to the body, "That male disobeyed me Maya." he said, "You know I won't shoot you but if I have to then I will use this." and he picked up a small device from beside his chair that looked more as if it had been grown than constructed and Maya immediately recognised it as a controller, a device that gave the wielder total power over a Psychon's will. "My lord perhaps I should leave and-" Mentor said from the back of the room, not wishing to be part of his granddaughter's humiliation.

"No Mentor. I want you where you can be useful to me if I need you." Kollus interrupted before he glared at Maya, "Now take off your clothes girl."

Maya reached for her collar, ready to undo her jacket but before she could start to strip the night sky outside was lit up by a brilliant flash of white light and the entire palace shook as it was hit by an earthquake. The quake lasted for just under a minute and the occupants of the throne room staggered as they tried to maintain their balance as unsecured objects toppled over, however the tremor was not strong enough to inflict any serious structural damage on the palace and no-one was hurt by it.

"What was that?" Innask exclaimed, "I did not think this planet was seismically active."

It isn't." Kollus replied, "Something else caused that.

"Look! Up in the sky!" one of the Dorcon guards shouted, pointing through the throne room windows and as they looked up into the sky the occupants of the throne room saw that somehow there was a new moon in the sky above them.

"What is that?" Innask said.

"I don't know." Kollus replied, "Mentor, Maya, with me to the command centre. I want to know what is happening."

"Where the hell are we?" Colonel Koenig, commanding officer of Moonbase Alpha and now that his superior General Simmons was dead the most senior officer of the Global Defence Force on Earth's moon asked.

"I'm sorry colonel, I don't have a clue." Professor Bergman, the physicist who had come to the moon just to research the potential for wormhole travel without realising that he would be caught up in one himself replied.

"Sensors? Communications?" Koenig said as he turned to face his command staff in Alpha's main mission command centre.

"I'm picking up transmissions from the planet colonel." Captain Benes, Alpha's communications chief replied a she checked her console, "Nothing like anything I've ever seen outside of a simulation though."

"What do you mean by outside a simulation?" Koenig's second in command, Major Morrow responded.

"If anything they look like the signal format that the aliens who attacked Earth used and no-one's picked any of them up for real for over a century. They aren't identical but there are definite similarities." Benes explained.

"Sensors also show a satellite network colonel." Lieutenant Alexander replied from her traffic control console,

"Though I think our arrival here could have had an effect on that."

"That stands to reason. An object the mass of the moon would cause quite a bit of disruption if it suddenly appeared in any system that relied on balancing gravitational pulls." Bergman commented.

"Benes you said the signals were similar to those belonging to the aliens who attack Earth. Could this be their home planet? Or some other world they attacked?" Koenig said, leaning on the edge of her console.

"We'll be in trouble if it is. I doubt we could fight off one of their dreadnoughts." Alpha's technical specialist Kano commented.

"I'm sorry colonel, I just can't tell." Benes answered.

"Colonel if this planet is inhabited by the aliens that attacked Earth then we should be prepared for an attack on us." Major Carter, chief pilot and head of the reconnaissance section suggested and Koenig nodded.

"Lieutenant Alexander bring all weapons on line. Benes get me Colonel Verdeschi at Epsilon now." he said.

"Arming all surface batteries." Alexander announced and all around the outside of Moonbase Alpha an assortment of magnetic accelerator cannons and heavy lasers emerged from their fortified storage bunkers ready to defend the base from attack.

"Contacting Epsilon now colonel." Benes added and when Koenig looked at a nearby screen he saw the face of Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, the commanding officer of Moonbase Epsilon where most of the GDF's forces on the moon were based.

"Colonel what's happening? We can't identify our position." Verdeschi said.

"Tony it looks like that last wormhole has taken us to another star system. Benes has picked up signals from the planet we're now in orbit around but they aren't human. In fact they look similar to the transmissions of the aliens who attacked Earth in the last century. We might be facing an attack and we're going to need Epsilon's defences. What's your status over there?"

"One of the Hawks broke free of its cradle and is out of action but we still have almost forty of them ready to launch with an hour's notice. I can get eight off the ground in two minutes. As for the rest, well I can start loading men and vehicles into Eagles and Condors for deployment wherever you want them."

"Do it." Koenig ordered, "I want all the moon's defences ready in case of an attack. I'll have every base alerted to do what they can but you're our main defensive asset." Koenig then shut off the communication system and the screen in front of him went blank.

"Colonel, Eagles may not be fighters but we do have half a dozen of them that are armed. They can fight." Carter pointed out.

"There are more armed Eagles at Epsilon. Swift scouts as well." Morrow added.

"Get them all ready for launch." Koenig ordered, "Have troops deployed to travel tubes ready to support any base that comes under attack. In the meantime I'm going to try and avoid a fight altogether. Benes, Kano I'll be needing your help to signal whoever lives on that planet and try to tell them that we're friendly. I'll record a message and then I want the pair of you to try and convert it into the format used by the aliens before broadcasting it on repeat." Koenig then activated the main mission recording system, remaining among his staff as he recorded his message instead of doing so privately in his office, "My name is Colonel John Koenig, commanding officer of Moonbase Alpha with a message for the people of the planet we are now orbiting. Our presence around your planet is an accident. Our moon was drawn through a wormhole following an act of sabotage and we were unable to control its travel. We mean you no harm and will not attempt to approach your world without your permission. If you are able to understand this message then please respond. Once again this is Colonel John Koenig signing off." he said before he ended the recording.

"Think they'll believe that?" Morrow said.

Actually major it will be a miracle if the inhabitants of that planet can even understand it." Bergman said, "Unless they are the same aliens who attacked Earth, in which case they would definitely understand English though I doubt they would be sympathetic to our plight."

"Then we'll just have to trust in that miracle professor." Koenig responded.

The Dorcon command centre was staffed entirely by other male Dorcons when Kollus and Innask entered the room ahead of Mentor and Maya.

"My lord." one of the command staff said, bowing in greeting to Kollus.

"Give me your report." Kollus said, "What is our status?"

"We have reports of disturbances from all across the planet at the moment the new moon appeared through the jump point my lord. Damage is heaviest in coastal regions where the gravitational shift affected tides." the officer told him.

"Deaths?" Kollus asked.

"Some. Mainly among the slaves." the officer said.

"And what about this new moon? You said it came through the jump point. How is that possible?" Innask said.

"We don't know my lord." the officer replied before another voice called out.

"It isn't. It is beyond all our science to generate sufficient power in a controlled fashion to open up a vortex large enough to permit something that large to pass through." the voice said and Kollus and Innask both looked towards its source to see another Dorcon entering the command centre. This particular Dorcon still stood taller than their Psychon slaves but was not anywhere near as muscular in build, indicating that this was a female of the species.

"My love." Kollus said as the female approached and when she came close enough he placed his hands on her swollen stomach where the clutch of eggs she carried was developing and his forked tongue darted from his mouth to touch the tip of her snout, something she returned in kind, "I am sorry that your studies have been disturbed."

"There is a limit to what can be learned from study my lord and husband." Thallal said as she looked at the monitors showing images of the moon, "Practical experience is always superior to theory." then she paused for a moment before she added, "There are lights on this new moon. It is inhabited."

"My lord there is a signal coming from the new moon." one of the command staff announced, looking up from his console, "It appears to be of a type used by The Outsiders."

"Impossible!" Innask snapped, "The Outsiders are gone."

"Do not be so hasty Lord Innask. Perhaps the appearance of this new moon marks their return." Thallal said, "We should hear this signal."

"Play it." Kollus ordered and on the command centre's main display an image of Koenig standing in Alpha's main mission appeared. This was distorted due to the hurried conversion carried out by Kano and Benes on the transmission format but it was still enough for the Dorcons to make out his general appearance.

"A Psychon." Innask said before the message started to play and the occupants of the command centre listened to Koenig's message.

"That language." Kollus said, "It reminds me of the Psychon tongue." and he looked at Maya, "Well Maya? What do you think? Give your empathic view on this."

"The language is similar to Psychon but not the same." Maya replied, "Key words are pronounced differently or changed altogether."

"Can you tell what this not quite Psychon is saying?" Innask asked.

"He gives his name. Colonel John Koenig, but I don't think that is his actual name." Maya answered.

"So he lies." Kollus said.

"No. I think colonel is a title, not a name. Look at the others in the image." Maya said and she pointed to where other members of Alpha's command staff were visible, "They wear the same clothing but with different markings. I think they are warriors and he is their leader."

"Warriors. Interesting." Thallal said.

"You have an idea my wife?" Kollus asked and Thallal bowed her head for a moment.

"I do." she said, "The Outsiders created the Psychons as a workforce. The male to be labourers and technicians, the females to be negotiators. Perhaps what we are looking at is the result of their efforts to create soldiers to go with them."

"They send an invasion force." Innask hissed.

"This John Koenig says they do not want to be here." Maya said, "Something went wrong and they could not control how they got here."

"My lord I am receiving a transmission from one of our patrol ships. It has detected an anomaly." a Dorcon technician said.

"Show me." Kollus told him and Koenig's message was replaced with an image of space above the planet that showed the moon. More significantly it also showed a small swirling light between it and the planet.

"A vortex." Innask said, "Though not where it should be."

"This new moon has introduced another gravitational pull. New jump points have been created and the old ones have shifted." Thallal said.

"So why is this vortex still open?" Kollus asked and Thallal looked more closely at the sensor data being sent from the Dorcon patrol ship.

"There is a stream of energised particles coming from this new moon. They originate at a point not far from the source of their message in planetary terms. This leads to the vortex. If I had to guess then I would say that this is holding open the vortex they came through. Look, it is growing. If that continues then the new moon will eventually be pulled into it again."

"Then we must act quickly." Kollus said, "Think of how the Archon would reward us if we could deliver the inhabitants of this new moon to him as slaves. That would more than make up for any loss from the damage this new moon's arrival may have caused."

"I would also appreciate the chance to study these creatures more closely." Thallal said.

"Yes of course. Mentor, what is your technological assessment of them?" Kollus said.

"May I see the signal again my lord?" Mentor asked and Kollus waved to one of the technicians, Koenig's message then reappearing on the screen. This time the image remained still, allowing Mentor to study the background of the image that showed the consoles and instruments of Alpha's main mission command centre, "They have effective computers but I see nothing related to travel through a vortex. a few of their displays appear to show power outputs but without knowing their units of measurement I cannot tell their strength."

"Use our sensors. Compare them." Kollus told him and Mentor walked over to a nearby console, looking over the shoulder of the Dorcon technician sat there.

"The readings fit with a society that uses widespread fusion power though the particles keeping the vortex open are indicative of fission reactions." Mentor said.

"They are more primitive than us then." Innask said and Kollus dipped his head for a moment.

"Yes. A disadvantage we must exploit." he said, "What is the relative position of the orbital dock?"

"On the far side of the planet from the new moon. It has not reported any damage from the gravitational disruption my lord." a technician told him.

"Good. Order them to launch our squadron. Assemble all the troops and raiders possible and order them to attack. Have our patrol ship carry out a scouting run. Plot their defences and evaluate their strength. These creatures will be taught what it means to invade the Dorcon Empire whether by accident or not."

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"Any response to our signal?" Koenig asked but Benes shook her head.

"Nothing colonel." she answered.

"Maybe it's like the professor said and they just didn't understand us." Kano suggested.

"they should still have responded Captain Kano." Bergman said, "If they think anything like us then they would want to establish contact."

"What about those transmissions you have been picking up?" Koenig asked, "Any luck in figuring out what they're saying?"

"I don't know about what they're saying but I think I've been able to figure out their video encoding." Kano said, "Like Benes said, it's a slight variation on the alien communications from the war. If I'm right then this is what they look like." and he pointed to the big screen as he brought up a still image captured from a video message intercepted by Alpha. The image showed the head and shoulders of a Dorcon male in close up as he addressed someone on the other end of the intercepted communications link. The image gave no indication of the Dorcon's function or the nature of the conversation but it did reveal their physiology.

"Feed that down to medical section." Koenig said and he reached for the intercom, "Doctor Russell." he said.

"Yes John?" Russell responded.

"Helena the wormhole has brought us out in another star system around a planet that's inhabited. We're sending you what could be an image of one of the inhabitants. Could you take a look at it and give us your impression?" Koenig explained.

"Sure John." Russell replied and in the medical section she brought up the image of the Dorcon, "Good god. A reptile." she said, "It looks humanoid though. Is this all you have?"

Koenig looked at Kano.

"I can send her the entire video if she wants." he said.

"Do it." Koenig told him before returning to the intercom, "Helena Kano's sending you the video he took that picture from. I'm afraid that we can't tell you what he's saying though. Assuming it is a 'he'."

"That's fine John, I'll let you know what I can figure out from it. Medical out." Russell told him.

"Colonel I've got a contact." Alexander announced suddenly.

"What is it?" Koenig asked, "Single craft heading for us from a high orbital position. It looks about the same size as one of our Eagles but its accelerating faster than a Hawk."

"Better than thirty gees?" Morrow said.

"About forty." Alexander replied.

"If they can maintain that they could reach the speed of light in just over a week." Bergman said.

"Do we have a visual yet?" Koenig said and Alexander checked her instruments.

"Hang on colonel. We've lost all the satellites and I'm trying to find a suitable camera. Wait, here we go. This is a feed from a telescope at Moonbase Delta." Alexander said and she brought up the image of the Dorcon patrol vessel on the big screen.

"Incredible." Bergman said when he saw this.

The Dorcon vessel had a body that looked like an arrowhead with rounded edges, then about half way along its length its body suddenly tapered in before stretching back in a narrow tail section that glowed brightly and left a similarly glowing trail behind the ship.

"Professor what are we looking at?" Koenig asked.

"A magnetic drive of some kind I think colonel." Bergman said, "That glow is the plasma being forced backwards and creating the thrust to accelerate the ship."

"We use that sort of propulsion on satellites to maintain their orbits." Kano said, "But we've nothing with that sort of power."

"Colonel I think I should draw your attention to the front of the ship as well." Bergman added.

"That lens?" Koenig said and Bergman nodded.

"That could be a sensor of some kind but it could just as easily be the focusing element of a directed energy beam."

"It's an attack ship." Morrow said.

"Perhaps." Bergman responded, "Or perhaps this ship is intended to be able to open up wormholes to travel between different star systems."

"If they can do that then perhaps they can get us home." Benes said.

"Let's hope so." Koenig replied.

"Main mission this is combat Eagle one." Carter's voice then said over the intercom, "My flight is ready to launch. What are your orders?"

"Major I'm keeping you in reserve for now. We've got an alien ship on approach and we're not sure of their

motives just yet. I'm going to tell Verdeschi that his hawks will be our first line of defence if they turn out to be hostile and the Eagles will be back up." Koenig told him.

"Understood colonel. Fraser and I will be waiting for your call." Carter said.

"Colonel that ship isn't alone." Alexander called out, "I've got three more contacts moving around the planet." then she looked up from her console and added, "Colonel, they're big."

"Show me." Koenig replied and he looked at the big screen to see an image of the horizon of the planet below as viewed from Alpha, around which could be seen three bright points of light as three spacecraft came over it under power.

"Magnifying." Alexander said as she adjusted the feed from the ground based telescope to zoom in on the three new ships.

"How big are they?" Koenig asked as he looked at the trio of vessels that looked like massively enlarged and stretched versions of the smaller ship first observed. Like that vessel these had glowing tail sections and a focusing lens in their prows but in addition to these there were also several obvious turret emplacements and large missiles fixed to their hulls.

"Radar and thermal imaging suggests about four hundred metres colonel." Alexander said.

"Bigger than an Anderson class frigate." Morrow commented.

"No escorts though." Kano added.

"Get me Colonel Verdeschi." Koenig said and Benes nodded before Verdeschi appeared on the monitor in front of him, "Are you seeing what we're seeing?" Koenig said.

"You mean those three big ships coming around the planet? Yeah, we see them. They sure do look like warships from this angle." Verdeschi said.

"Same here, though I'm not willing to bet on them being hostile just yet. This could just be them being cautious." Koenig told him.

"You want us to be just as cautious colonel?" Verdeschi asked.

"Exactly. If they attack then we need to hit those ships as hard and as fast as we can." Koenig answered.

"Colonel I've got multiple launches from the planet." Alexander called out.

"Show me." Koenig ordered and he turned to the big screen where the image of the three approaching capital ships was replaced with a sensor readout showing numerous contacts rising up from the surface of the planet below.

"We've got them as well." Verdeschi said, "They don't look like missiles."

"No, I think that could be their second wave." Koenig said.

"We've got sixty-two craft coming in from the surface. Energy profile matches that first ship." Alexander said.

"That attack is looking more likely then?" Morrow commented and Koenig nodded.

"Alert all bases, get everyone to whatever shelter is available and try to organise whatever defences they can. Weapon section stand by to fire on my mark." he said, "Verdeschi my order stands to take out those capital ships first. At the first sign of trouble launch your missiles and Hawks against them. Hopefully our surface defences will be able to hold off the smaller ships that come near them and we'll use the armed Eagles against the others."

"Colonel the first ship is coming into weapon range now." Alexander announced.

"Benes, any contact yet?" Koenig asked.

"Negative colonel. At least nothing aimed at us. I think I'm picking something up between it and the planet though." Benes replied.

"It's not slowing down." Morrow said as he called up Alpha's short range sensors on his own console to check the progress of the Dorcon patrol ship, "But it is coming right for us."

"Possibly because this the source of our transmission." Bergman suggested, "Colonel it could just their attempt to get a better look at us. Perhaps a warning volley should be fired before you target it directly? Just to let them know we can defend ourselves."

"The patrol ship is in range now my lord." a Dorcon technician said as the occupants of the command centre monitored the patrol ship's progress, "The aliens have not opened fire."

"They have weapons though." Mentor said and he pointed to a nearby monitor that showed one of Moonbase Alpha's magnetic accelerator batteries, "That looks like some sort of projectile weapon."

"On an emplaced weapon like that? How primitive." Innask commented.

"Agreed." Kollus added, "Order our patrol ship to attack. Show them what our weapons can do."

"Energy spike!" Alexander exclaimed and there was a flash from the lens on the prow of the Dorcon patrol ship as it fired its primary energy cannon. The blast struck one of Alpha's outer sections and there was an explosion that could be heard from main mission as it was ripped open.

"Open fire. All weapons fire at will." Koenig ordered, "Tony, all ships immediate launch. Tell Major Carter to get his Eagles in the air as well and make sure that second wave can't hit our undefended bases."

In response to Koenig's order the turrets protecting Moonbase Alpha all turned to track the single Dorcon patrol ship as it made a high speed pass over the base. Travelling too fast for the targeting computers to plot a firing solution for the magnetic accelerator cannons quickly enough Alpha's laser batteries, meant mainly for defence against incoming missiles, engaged the ship first and two of these fired together. One of the beams burned a hole through one of the patrol ship's wings, causing little more than a slight wobble in its flight. However, the second beam instead struck the glowing drive tail and sheered it off. Despite the relatively low gravity of the moon the stricken vessel was still dragged downwards, overshooting Alpha before ploughing into the lunar surface and exploding in a brief ball of flame that lasted only as long as the oxygen inside the patrol ship did.

As the Dorcon ship was crashing into the moon ships from both Alpha and Epsilon were taking off. At Epsilon the Hawks already ready for launch took off directly from their underground hangar, shooting straight up out of the launch shafts under the power of their main engines before they angled themselves towards the three approaching Dorcon capital ships. On the other hand the armed Eagles available at the two bases first rose up to the surface on their cross shaped launch pads before taking off.

"This is Major Carter to all combat Eagles. Form up into a holding pattern. Use Alpha, Epsilon, Iota and Kappa as reference points and circle. As soon as we can see where the aliens' second wave is heading we'll move to intercept them." Carter broadcast and in main mission Morrow looked at Koenig.

"Ten Eagles against more than sixty alien ships." he said, "We better hope Colonel Verdeschi's Hawk's take out those capital ships quickly."

Right on cue Verdeschi then gave Koenig an update on his situation.

"Colonel we've got eight Hawks up and another four will be airborne in five minutes. In the mean time we have a firing solution on those capital ships." he said.

"Then by all means bring them down." Koenig told him and in his own underground command centre Verdeschi nodded at one of his staff who then moved his hand along a row of buttons, pressing them each in turn.

Six buttons were pressed in total and as each one was pressed a missile silo burst open on the surface round Moonbase Epsilon and a large missile burst out on a column of flame. Accelerating even faster than the Hawks could manage and following the guidance of Epsilon's targeting sensors these also angled themselves towards the three Dorcon capital ships, two missiles targeting each vessel. The crews of the Dorcon ships did not sit idly by as these missiles sped towards them, however and their turrets flashed as they sought to shoot them down before they could strike their targets.

One of the missiles exploded immediately, a warhead trigger prematurely by an energy blast, while a second was struck towards the rear and one of its main engines began to splutter. This caused the missile to veer off course and when its computer detected this deviation it triggered its own self destruct. Before any more of the missiles could be brought down by the Dorcons' defensive fire they entered their second stage and their engines cut out. The forward sections of the missiles then split open to reveal the five separate missiles contained inside and these were suddenly propelled forwards of the missiles' first stages by gas charges that also released large clouds of chaff to obscure the missiles from enemy sensors.

"Did their missiles explode?" Innask said when the sensor readouts in the command centre showed the four missiles suddenly become a single large cloud from which no meaningful data could be obtained.

"I do not think so lord." Mentor responded and the Dorcon glared at him, angry at being contradicted by a Psychon slave, "I think this is a means for these aliens to conceal their weapons from the warships' sensors. Lord Kollus I suggest you order the crews of the ships to continue firing at the cloud and to try and steer away from it."

"I will decide on the orders to give my squadron Mentor. Remember your place." Kollus said, "Ordering the ships to turn away would take them too far from this new moon and they would not be able to turn back towards it in time to support our attack ships." then he looked at a nearby technician, "Warn them to treat the cloud as being a threat though." he added.

"Missiles entering terminal stage now colonel." one of Epsilon's command staff told Verdeschi and on the big screen at the front of his command centre he saw the individual missiles inside their protective cloud of chaff entering their third and final stage of flight. Each of the missiles activated its own onboard lidar system to confirm the position of its assigned target and calculated the most efficient intercept course. Then they spun in flight to point along this heading before their rocket engines ignited and they accelerated rapidly.

Despite having been ordered to monitor the cloud of chaff, the Dorcon crews were taken by surprise by the twenty missiles that suddenly emerged from inside it and sped towards them. Once again they opened fire on the missiles with their energy turrets. With their shots travelling at the speed of light there was no need for the turrets to be aimed ahead of the missiles and this reduced their aiming time but there were still too many missiles for the Dorcon ships to be able to intercept them all before they began to strike their targets. The

first missile hit the prow of a Dorcon ship and the large energy cannon mounted there was destroyed in one go before a second missile hit the same ship close to where its drive section joined the main hull and blew a hole right through the structure. Four missiles slammed into a second vessel at almost the same time and the combined explosions were enough to tear the entire ship apart, sending flaming debris in all directions. Some of this debris collided with some of the remaining missiles, causing more of them to explode before reaching their targets but one last missile still got through the combination of debris and defensive fire to hit the third warship amidships, blowing off the two gun turrets mounted close by.

"Good shooting Tony." Koenig said over the communication link.

"We've still got two of them heading for us colonel," Verdeschi replied, "and I've only got half my Hawks in the air so far."

"Half is better than none. They'll just have to do Tony." Koenig said as both moon base commanders saw the first wave of Hawk attack ships now closing with the two remaining Dorcon capital ships.

The Hawk pilots had closed up their formation when the missiles fired from Epsilon entered their second stage, cutting their engines so that they could use the cloud of chaff as a protective screen for themselves. Then as the Dorcon ships emerged from this cloud they found the twelve Hawks of the first group waiting for them.

"Break! Break! Break!" the flight leader ordered and almost in unison the Hawk pilots fired their engines again to split apart before they could be targeted.

It took only seconds for the Hawks' gunners to align their wing mounted magnetic accelerator cannons on the Dorcon ships and the space between them was lit up by the bright flashes of the projectiles as they shot towards the alien warships. Individually these projectiles did little damage against the heavily armoured hulls of the Dorcon ships but collectively they left them venting atmosphere from multiple points. To keep the Dorcon warships in their forward firing arcs the pilots of the Hawks pivoted their attack craft as they passed by their targets without changing the direction of their travel and this enabled the gunners to keep up their barrage for as long as possible and there was an explosion from one of the Dorcon ships as something volatile was struck by a projectile.

The Dorcon crews did not just sit idly by as their vessels were subjected to the Hawks' strafing runs, however and their own turrets returned fire at the nimble attack craft. Several of the Hawks were hit by this return fire and one of them exploded instantly as its main fusion reactor was critically damaged, both crew unable to eject before their craft turned into a ball of flame. This was the only instant casualty though as the hulls of the other Hawks were able to deflect most of the energy. Only on one Hawk was one of its wings sheared off, leaving it lacking one of its main guns and the missile mounted beneath that particular wing while a second Hawk took damage to one of the propulsion pods mounted either side of its fuselage.

"This is Hawk one-four I'm losing drive power." the pilot of the damaged attack craft broadcast, "I can't stay with you."

"Confirmed Hawk one-four. Fall back to the moon and put down wherever you can." the flight leader ordered and the damaged craft turned back towards the moon before accelerating away, "All remaining Hawks, light up those turrets. Let the computers handle them." the flight leader added and in each Hawk the co-pilots marked out the positions of the Dorcon turrets for the onboard computers to auto-target with their dorsally mounted turrets. These turrets mounted smaller versions of the magnetic accelerator cannons found on the Hawks' wing tips and were intended to shoot down incoming missiles, however with no missiles being deployed yet by the Dorcons they were available to target the capital ships instead and with their defensive turrets marked out the computers began firing, turning to track the positions of the turrets as the Hawks continued to slide past the Dorcon vessels into their vulnerable rear arcs.

The Hawks continued to turn as they entered the Dorcons' rear arcs where they could find cover in the warships' engine wakes. This left them facing the same way as the capital ships but now travelling backwards and they fired their main engines again to slow the rate at which they were travelling away from the Dorcons. At the same time the Hawks' co-pilots locked the missiles their craft carried onto the Dorcon vessels, taking advantage of the optimum firing angle they now had they launched their missiles in rapid succession and watched as they raced directly towards the Dorcon ships from an angle where their turrets could not offer them adequate protection.

With no opportunity to equip the Hawks specifically for attacking capital ships, the craft had had to be launched with their default loading of six lighter missiles designed to engage rapidly moving and relatively agile craft such as the Hawks themselves or the older model Vulture gunships more common in humanity's colonies beyond the moon. The warheads carried by these missiles could not match those of the missiles fired directly from Epsilon but in conjunction with one another their explosive power was still significant.

The long drive tails of the Dorcon warships stood out clearly to the missiles' guidance systems and most of them struck these parts of the warships. Aboard one of the ships the drive suffered a critical failure under the repeated missile strikes and the entire tail blew apart, leaving the rest of the ship drifting through space without power and trailing flames and debris. Meanwhile the second ship saw its drive section damaged but

not destroyed and the brightness of the glow from it reduced as the power to the drive had to be scaled back to prevent it from meeting the same fate as the other vessel.

"My lord our ships are crippled." a Dorcon technician called out and Kollus emitted a low growl.

"What do their captains have to say?" he asked.

"Gradas of the *Krin'Dek* intends to put into orbit to return to space dock while Lucon of the *Krin'Sassan* requests permission to abandon his vessel and scuttle it." the technician answered.

"My lord without escort from attack ships-" Mentor said, seeing that the reason the large warships had been so badly damaged by the smaller Hawks was because they had lacked any escorts able to prevent the Hawks from seeking out vulnerable points in their defences.

"Be silent!" Kollus snapped and he lashed out at Mentor, knocking him away.

"Grandfather!" Maya exclaimed as she tried unsuccessfully to catch him before he could hit the floor.

"I'm fine Maya." Mentor said as she helped him back to his feet while the Dorcons ignored them both.

"Order our attack ships to continue. I will take that new moon and all of its inhabitants. Perhaps that will make up for the loss of our warships." Kollus ordered.

3.

"Alpha are you seeing this?" Carter asked from the cockpit of his Eagle, "Looks like the smaller ships are splitting up."

"We see it Carter." Koenig replied, "Looks like they're breaking into two waves. A smaller first wave with most of the ships hanging back."

"Perhaps to evaluate our response." Morrow commented and Koenig nodded.

"We can't afford to give any of them free reign over areas of the moon not covered by fixed defences."

Koenig said, "Carter I want you to split your Eagles into two groups. have one cover Iota and Kappa and the other Delta and Gamma. Alpha, Beta and Epsilon can take care of themselves." he added before turning back to the live link to Moonbase Epsilon, "Tony how quickly can you get those two armed Swifts you've got up into the air?"

"They're already fuelled but given what we saw of that ship you shot down they aren't going to be able to do much against a squadron of them." Verdeschi answered.

"I only want them to be able to hold out long enough to get the remainder of your Hawks into action. Send them to cover the observatory at Zeta on the dark side. The aliens will have to get past us to get around there so I'm hoping they won't bother but if they do then Zeta needs some defence. I know Theta's turrets are geared towards preventing a break out from the prison but at least they've got defences."

"What about Lambda?" Verdeschi asked.

"There's not really anything there worth defending. I'm going to have Major Capston withdraw all his people to Zeta. If it is attacked then maybe the few troops he's got will be able to help out."

"Colonel I think I'm getting a signal." Benes announced.

"What do you mean you think you're getting a signal? Are you or aren't you?" Morrow said.

"It's just random pings but they seem deliberate." Benes said as she double checked her console. Then she lifted her head and added, "Colonel they're coming from Eta."

"Let me see." Kano said as he called up the same data Benes was seeing on his own console, "Confirmed colonel." he said, "Deliberate pings from Eta. I think it's a distress call."

"So Eta wasn't destroyed when the *Landau* crashed into it?" Alexander said.

"Eta's got a large underground section as well." Kano pointed out, "Someone could survive in the deeper hangars."

"Benes, contact Major Capston at Lambda immediately. Tell him to send his troops to reinforce Zeta but to take all of his construction teams and as much of their equipment as possible to Eta and rescue any survivors they find." Koenig ordered.

"Colonel first enemy wave is coming into range." Alexander announced, "They're splitting up again. I've got seven pairs plus one holding back."

"A squadron commander perhaps." Morrow suggested and Koenig nodded.

"And seven pairs gives one pair per base left on the near side." he said.

Just as Koenig expected the pairs of Dorcon attack ships each headed for a different base, swooping down from space at high speed and firing the energy cannons mounted in their noses as soon as they came within range. At extreme range the blasts did little damage, especially to the heavily protected military base at Epsilon but the pulses were able to damage exposed equipment such as communication and detection antennas where these were hit but even the viewports of the bases themselves, including the large transparent domes covering the tourist parks of Kappa were able to resist direct hits at that range.

In response to this the surface mounted magnetic accelerator batteries of Alpha, Beta and Epsilon returned fire, sending volleys of rapidly moving projectiles towards the oncoming alien ships. These were less accurate than the bases' lasers but at the current engagement range they offered far better hitting power and so the targeting computers held fire with the lasers. The Dorcon ships detected the numerous projectiles and began to take evasive action, however the high closing speeds made tight manoeuvres difficult and the cannon rounds ripped through several of them before they could get out of the way. Naturally enough the defences at Epsilon were the most effective with both alien ships approaching the base shredded in a matter of moments. On the other hand the turrets at Alpha and Beta only managed to inflict damage on one target each. At Beta the lead Dorcon attack ship was destroyed utterly when a projectile struck it head on and ripped through the entire length of the ship, including its drive tail while the defences at Alpha just clipped the drive tail of one ship and the glow around it began to flicker as it lost power.

The defensive fire from the surface had not put the approaching attack ships off and they continued to dive towards Alpha and Beta but the two bases defensive batteries did not give up and as they got closer the batteries continued to fire. Already falling behind, the damaged ship heading for Alpha could not take the necessary evasion action and when it became caught in the crossfire from two batteries at once it exploded.

Meanwhile the second craft heading for Alpha had now come close enough that the batteries' targeting computers determined that the surface mounted lasers would be able to inflict significant damage without needing an excessive amount of time to burn through the ship's hull and they too opened fire. Several of the beams hit the Dorcon attack ship and as calculated they were able to instantly blast through its hull. One of the hits was close to where the attack ship's drive tail joined the main hull and the glow suddenly disappeared just as the vessel had begun to level out, sending the craft into a spin as it continued to descend.

"Target's destroyed colonel." Alexander announced.

"Any idea where that one's going to land lieutenant?" Morrow asked.

"It'll be close." Alexander replied, "Within a thousand metres. If there's anything explosive on board we could take damage."

"Okay have a damage control crew standing by. Send them to whatever section is closest to the point of impact and make sure they're prepared to deal with decompression." Koenig ordered, "Now what about the other bases?"

"Epsilon and Beta both report bringing down the ships heading for them colonel," Benes replied, "and Major Carter is signalling now."

"Put him through." Koenig told her.

"Alpha this is combat Eagle one," Carter said as his face appeared on a monitor in front of Koenig, "we're going for the nearest targets first. I'm keeping my Eagles together to get the advantage of numbers."

"Copy that Carter. Good hunting." Koenig replied, watching on the big screen as Carter's two five strong Eagle squadrons moved to engage the pairs of Dorcon attack ships moving towards the food production facilities at Moonbase Iota and the refineries at Moonbase Gamma.

"We form up in pairs with one in reserve. Then we hit each enemy ship with two to one odds while the fifth watches out for any surprises." Carter told the other Eagles of his squadron. Then he glanced at his co-pilot, "Ready Bill?" he asked and Fraser nodded.

"Main cannons charged and I'm deploying the turret now." he replied.

The other Eagles matched this, compact turrets equivalent to the close in defence weapons mounted on the Hawks rising up from the dorsal framework of the craft as they moved to intercept the Dorcon ships.

Seeing the approaching Eagles the two Dorcon attack ships adjusted their course to head right for them and continued to advance at high speed. One of the other Eagles in Carter's squadron opened fire ahead of the others but the targeted attack ship was able to jink in time and the projectiles from the Eagle's cannon flew harmlessly past it. However, the manoeuvre did leave the two attack ships heading in slightly different directions and Carter was quick to take advantage of this.

"Now! Break and attack!" he snapped and the Eagle squadron broke apart to follow them.

Carter took combat Eagle one after the attack ship that was veering off. This made targeting it more difficult by requiring the cannons to be aimed ahead of the attack ship but it also meant that his Eagle as well as that of his wingman were out of the Dorcon's firing arc.

"Firing solution plotted. Opening fire." Fraser said suddenly and he fired a rapid burst from the Eagle's main cannons that tore off one wing of the alien attack ship and debris began to fall from inside it, including something that was obviously not part of the ship itself.

"Are those bodies?" Carter exclaimed when he saw the bulky humanoid forms come tumbling out of the damaged attack ship.

"They sure look like it." Fraser replied, "What do you want me to do about them?"

"Ignore them for now. Alpha can send a rescue Eagle up if the colonel thinks its worth it. We just need to deal with these ships. Do you have another shot?"

"Almost." Fraser said as the Eagle's targeting computer calculated the necessary aim point to be able to hit the Dorcon ship, "Take us to port five degrees." he added and as Carter adjusted the Eagle's facing Fraser saw the lead mark align with the targeting reticule and he fired the main cannons again. This time the burst of projectiles struck the attack ship where its drive tail joined the main fuselage and the craft snapped in two, both parts tumbling wildly towards the surface of the moon below.

While Carter's combat Eagle and his wingman were chasing after the attack ship veering off the other pair of Eagles met the second Dorcon vessel head on. In this engagement the Dorcon fired first and the blast from its nose mounted cannon blew the forward section of an Eagle apart.

"We've lost Eagle three!" the co-pilot of the other Eagle in the pair exclaimed as the pilot broke off to avoid being struck by the remains of the destroyed Eagle and the Dorcon ship flew right past it. This brought it close enough that the computer controlled point defence cannon was able to engage it but the damage inflicted by the lighter weight rounds was minimal.

"Eagle five can you engage?" Carter transmitted.

"Turning now major but my angle's not good." the pilot of the final Eagle replied as he spun his Eagle to face

the attack ship and his co-pilot opened fire with its cannons, the rapidly aimed burst failing to hit the Dorcon ship.

"Damn. Hold on Bill." Carter said, flipping his Eagle around and then firing its main engines to try and lose as much forward speed as possible so that he could give chase to the Dorcon ship.

Meanwhile, having left the Eagles behind the Dorcon attack ship continued to speed towards Moonbase Iota, firing at an exposed lidar array that was tracking the ship's approach. Then the attack ship did something unexpected and as the Eagle crews watched it suddenly began to decelerate, the thrust from its tail now being directed forwards by a change in the magnetic field used to direct it.

"Alpha the enemy vessel is coming in to land." Carter transmitted as he remembered the bodies that fell from the other attack ship when its hull was breached and he realised what was happening, "It's an invasion."

The drawback to having to land to deploy troops was that it made the attack ship vulnerable while it was on the ground and as its airlock opened and the squad of Dorcon soldiers it carried started to emerge Fraser was able to line up the Eagle's cannons on the it.

"Got him!" he snapped as he fired another rapid volley and the projectiles hit the attack ship from above. The ship exploded as the projectiles struck its power plant and the brief ball of flame engulfed and consumed all of the troops it was carrying before they could get far enough away.

"Alpha both targets are down. What about the two heading for Kappa?" Carter signalled.

"You're too late major. They've both made it down." Koenig responded.

"My lord our first wave has been able to land troops at two of the aliens' positions." a Dorcon technician reported, "Our second wave awaits orders."

"Their surface weapons appear well able to bring down your attack ships Lord Kollus." Mentor said.

"Only when they have a direct line of sight." Kollus replied before he looked at the technician, "Order our ships to head for the uninhabited areas and then approach their targets at as low an altitude as possible. The curvature of this new moon itself will shield them from the aliens' weapons." he ordered.

Verdeschi reviewed the status of his Hawks. The attack craft that had been able to launch before the three alien capital ships had been driven off were now all returning to Epsilon and would require refuelling, rearming and repairing before being sent out again. However, as soon as it became apparent that the alien capital ships were no longer a threat Verdeschi had put a stop to the launches and now all of the remaining Hawks were prepared to launch simultaneously.

"Colonel the aliens' second wave is veering away from our bases." one of his command staff told him.

"Alpha are you seeing this?" Verdeschi asked, looking at the communication monitor.

"Yes we're seeing it." Koenig replied, "The survivors from the first wave have set down and are deploying troops. I need you to get your transports into the air and ready to defend our bases from this."

Verdeschi nodded.

"Okay I've got troops standing by at the travel tube terminals and standing by in my remaining Eagles and armour loaded into my Condors. Two loaded with two exo-rovers of infantry each and the other four loaded with tanks." he said.

"Good. Keep them in their hangars for now. I don't want to risk them being hit from the air before they can launch. What about your Hawks?"

"I've got twenty just waiting for the word to launch. That second wave outnumbers them just over two-to-one."

"Okay. Hold back a flight of four to escort your transports and put the rest up. The more of those ships we can take down before they make it to the surface the better." Koenig said before he turned his head suddenly as one of Alpha's own command staff called out to him.

"Colonel we have a breach!" he yelled.

"Where?" Koenig replied.

"Section four. Close to medical. There was a sudden loss of pressure in an outer compartment followed by a fire alert in the corridor outside."

"That ship that crashed. The crew must have survived." Morrow said.

"Sound a security alert and get troops to that section now." Koenig ordered as he took out his comlock and used it to contact Doctor Russell directly, "Helena." he said.

"Yes John?" she responded.

"Helena you could be about to have company. It looks like the crew of one of the alien ships have broken in close to your location. I'm sending troops to deal with them but I need to know that you're safe." Koenig said.

"Don't worry John. We'll seal the door and we're not entirely helpless down here." she told him.

"Good. Stay safe." Koenig said before he shut off his comlock and looked around.

"Now what about the rest of those aliens?" he said.

9.

Dorcon soldiers deployed from their attack ships breached the bases at Delta and Kappa in the same way. They quickly located small outer compartments that had enough room for them all to fit inside and then used an explosive charge to blow a hole they could fit through before entering the bases. Once inside they used patching kits they had brought with them to construct basic seals over the holes. The material of these was strong enough to resist normal atmospheric pressure against them but was easily cut through if the Dorcons needed to get back out in a hurry. Having detected the loss of pressure, the bases' computers sealed them off from the life support system and so they remained in a vacuum until the Dorcons used more explosives to force open the internal doors and air flooded in from the adjacent sections and the Dorcons moved deeper into the bases.

Neither Delta nor Kappa had standing military garrisons but neither were totally defenceless either. Both maintained sheriff's departments that routinely carried stun guns and could call on a limited number of magnetic accelerator weapons that they now turned on the invading alien troops. Both bases were also able to call upon a small number of private citizens with their own weapons. Given the risks of using high powered projectiles in a pressurised environment these were mainly primitive ballistic shotguns and pistols but there were also some more modern magnetic accelerator weapons that had limited muzzle velocities to limit the chances of decompression. Unfortunately the invading Dorcons wore armoured spacesuits that the low velocity projectiles could not easily penetrate and were insulated against the surface conducting effects of the stun guns carried by the police. Therefore, despite their superior numbers and knowledge of the bases layouts the defenders were steadily pushed back by the Dorcons while they waited for GDF troops to arrive and reinforce them.

In Alpha's medical section Russell quickly evaluated their defences. There was an emergency arms locker in her office that she opened to distribute the contents of but this was limited to just a few stun guns that she handed out to her staff, keeping one for herself. While handing the weapons out she also walked up to one of her patients, a young woman in civilian clothing sat on a bed watching what was going on around her with a worried look on her face and dried blood coming from her ears. This was Spacewoman Francis Baker who had been scheduled to leave the moon just before it was pulled through the wormhole and now was trapped here with everyone else. Taken hostage by the GDF officer who had supplied the Red Mars terrorists with the knowledge they needed to detonate the nuclear bomb that had caused the wormhole to open, she had been caught in the blast of a stun grenade when it was used to subdue her captor and had been temporarily blinded and deafened by it. Although Baker had operated in a non-combat role at Alpha she was still a member of the GDF and Russell hoped that she might have recovered enough to be able to help protect the medical section.

"Francis can you hear me?" Russell asked and Baker frowned.

"What?" she replied loudly, "What's happening? I need to get back to Earth. My wedding is in two days."

"Never mind." Russell said, "Doctor Vincent you better take this." and she passed the weapon to her deputy.

"Thanks." he replied as he strapped the stun gun's holster around his waist, "I think. I haven't fired one of these since basic training."

"Doctor Russell! They're here!" the nurse Russell had set as a sentry by the entrance to the medical section suddenly cried out as she fired her stun gun down the hallway outside at the first Dorcon to appear. There was a bright yellow flash as the laser struck its target, producing a small exploding ball of plasma. The Dorcon faltered for a moment as his spacesuit visor darkened to compensate for the flash before he raised his own weapon and returned fire.

The nurse screamed as there was the rattle of projectile fire and she dived back through the doorway as the bullets flew over her.

"The gun didn't work." the nurse exclaimed and Russell began to move towards the doorway, taking out her comlock and using it to close the door from a distance.

"Quick! Barricade this door, everyone." she ordered and both medical staff and the patients able to stand and lift hurried to drag whatever furniture or heavy equipment they could move in front of the door as the Dorcons began to hammer at the other side, "John," she muttered to herself, "your help better get here soon."

Master Sergeant Washington, the most senior infantry NCO at Alpha heard the hammering sound as the Dorcons tried to batter their way into the medical section from well around the corner and he quickly realised what they were doing.

"Come on, this is it." he told his squad as they picked up their pace. Making it to the corner Washington leant around it with his rifle braced against his shoulder and when he saw the pair of Dorcon soldiers attempting to break into the medical section he opened fire. He had limited the muzzle velocity of his weapon to a subsonic

level to reduce the chance of causing serious collateral damage but this meant that the rounds he fired just bounced off the Dorcons' body armour and Washington retreated back around the corner, "They're armoured." he told his men, set your weapons for high velocity operation."

One of his men, after adjusting his weapon as Washington ordered then leapt around the corner to fire at the Dorcons. However, after being shot at once one of the pair of alien soldiers had moved away from the door and knelt down at the far side of the hallway to cover the corner and soon as the GDF soldier appeared he opened fire with his own weapon. Unconcerned about collateral damage, the Dorcon's rounds punched through the human soldier's body armour and he fell backwards with blood pumping from the wounds to his torso.

"Get him back." Washington ordered as he leant around the corner again and fired a second burst at the kneeling Dorcon. This time the bullets he fired were able to pierce the alien's spacesuit and he fell to the floor, dead before he hit it.

At the same time there was a grinding sound as the other Dorcon was at last able to pull the doors to the medical section open and then he started to shove the improvised barricade on the other side out of the way.

"Open fire!" Russell yelled from inside the medical section and all of the staff she had been able to arm with stun guns fired at once, producing multiple flashes of light as the lasers struck the alien. As earlier the armour worn by the Dorcon was able to resist this but the repeated impacts still caused the alien to stagger backwards into the middle of the hallway where he was fully exposed to the fire from Washington and his men and a rapidly fired burst from one of the soldiers sent the alien spinning as he was struck in the shoulder and dropped his weapon.

"Move!" Washington ordered and he and his men charged down the hallway towards the Dorcon as it crawled towards his dropped weapon. Washington reached the Dorcon just as the alien was about to retrieve his weapon and he kicked it away before the Dorcon could grab hold of it. The alien then looked up to see him aiming his rifle straight back down at him and at the same time a pair of the other GDF troops grabbed hold of the alien's arms and pulled them behind his back.

"Washington to main mission." Washington said into his helmet microphone.

"Main mission here. Go ahead sergeant." Benes responded.

"Tell the colonel we have a prisoner." Washington said.

"Tell him to get it into a holding cell as quickly as possible." Koenig said before he turned back towards Alexander, "What about the second wave?" he asked.

"Our Hawks are engaging them colonel. Eight enemy craft shot down by missiles without loss but they're coming in too quickly and they're just charging past our own attack craft." Alexander replied.

"They don't care about our Hawks, they just want to get troops on the surface." Bergman commented from where he stood overlooking a console that was currently unmanned.

"But they don't seem too picky about where they're landing them." Kano pointed out as he watched the sensor readouts on the big screen, "Look, they're veering away from our bases to the middle of no-where."

"Not quite captain." Alexander said and she picked out the sensor trace of the Dorcon attack ship that was closest to the surface just in time to show it suddenly begin to turn, dropping its forward momentum as fast as possible to avoid ploughing right into the moon and pulling up before accelerating again so that it skimmed the surface on its way towards Moonbase Beta.

"He's going to try and come in under our defences." Koenig said.

"At that altitude he might just be able to avoid the surface batteries until he gets to within a couple of kilometres." Morrow said.

"At which point he can offload his troops." Kano added.

"We're going to need teams outside with heavy weapons." Koenig said, "Tony are you there?"

"Still here colonel." Verdeschi responded from his command centre at Epsilon.

"I think it's time to deploy your men. Make sure every base on the near side has at least two platoons at it, one ready for action outside. Send your armour to Iota and Kappa. We can't afford to lose our food production facilities and there are thousands of civilians at Kappa."

"I'm on colonel. They're on their way." Verdeschi said.

"Okay, now get me Major Carter. He needs to know to watch for low flying targets." Koenig said.

"That's almost half your force gone." Innask said as another of the attack ships was hit by a missile and became a cloud of debris hurtling through space.

"Perhaps. But the survivors are past the aliens' attack vessels and by the time they are able to come about our ships will have reached the surface." Kollus said. Then he stepped closer to a console that showed sensor readings taken from the first wave of attack ships as they flew over the moon, evaluating the way in which the human population was distributed, "Order our ships to concentrate their attacks here and here." he said, pointing towards Moonbase Gamma and Kappa. Of the bases that lacked fixed defences Kappa was

the largest, offering the Dorcons the maximum yield in prisoners with the least risk while the refineries of Kappa were surrounded by small, scattered outposts where mining teams worked to dig valuable minerals out of the ground. Although these miners were spread out over a large area and relatively few in number compared to the occupants of the major bases they were totally undefended and thus easy targets, "Remember, I want prisoners that I can present to the Archon."

"Yes my lord." the Dorcon technician replied.

While Kollus was giving his orders Maya and Mentor watched the Dorcons from behind them and Maya leant towards her grandfather.

"What chance do you think these people have against the Dorcons grandfather?" she whispered.

"I don't know Maya." Mentor replied quietly, "They have weapons that are effective but they seem outnumbered and still at a technical disadvantage. I fear that if they are not all enslaved then it will be because they all died fighting."

"Something to say for yourself Psychon?" Thallal said suddenly, turning her head towards the two Psychons.

"Perhaps they think these aliens have come here to free them?" Innask suggested and Kollus threw back his head and let out a brief succession of barking sounds, the Dorcon equivalent to laughter.

"Step forwards Mentor and bring your granddaughter with you." he said, stepping to the side so that Maya and Mentor could see the displays following the battle more easily, "Watch your liberators succumb to our power just as your own people did."

"That's another one Alpha." Carter transmitted with a smile on his face as Fraser fired their Eagle's main cannons again to bring down another Dorcon attack ship just as it slowed before levelling out.

"Great shooting major. Keep up the good work" Koenig said. Then he turned back to the link being maintained with Epsilon, "Verdeschi I think it's time you launched those last Hawks while they can still do some good."

"Agreed colonel." Verdeschi replied, "I was thinking of splitting them between Kappa and Gamma. They seem to be attracting the most attention. It looks like six ships a piece."

"Do it." Koenig said, nodding, "And divert the Condors heading for Iota. The aliens seem to be ignoring it for now. We can send some of Alpha's infantry from here if they do come under attack but I think that armour would be better employed at Gamma."

"Yes colonel, I'll send the order now. They should be able to make it there in about a quarter of an hour." Verdeschi said.

"Fifteen minutes." Kano commented, looking at where Morrow stood close by, "Think any of those miners will be left by then?"

A platoon of infantrymen from Epsilon came rushing from the Eagle that landed at Kappa as soon as the boarding tube could make contact and the air lock open.

"Thank God." the unarmed civilian administrator there to meet them in the reception area said when she saw the heavily armed and armoured troops, "We can't stop those things."

"Where are they and how many are there?" the platoon leader asked.

"About forty of them at last count and they're heading this way. Another ten minutes and you'd probably have to fight your way off that Eagle." the woman said.

"Just point." the platoon commander told her and she stretched out her arms in the direction of the advancing Dorcons.

The platoon leader waved his men forwards and they hurried from the reception area and out into the large dome beyond it. Rather than being a tightly packed network of compartments and interlinking corridors like most of the bases were, Moonbase Kappa resembled an typical vacation spot on Earth with wide open spaces between ordinary looking buildings filled with amusements and areas dedicated to specific recreational activities. Of course all of this was contained within the transparent armoured domes that offered a view of the grey lunar surface contrasting with the green grass inside the dome.

Locating the Dorcons from here was simple. The sounds of gunfire could easily be heard coming from the direction of their advance and the platoon leader had his men spread out and take cover, all pointing their weapons in the direction of the Dorcons. The platoon waited as a group of four armed humans came rushing towards them, periodically turning to fire their weapons in vain at the armoured Dorcons that now also came into view beyond them.

"Get down!" the GDF platoon commander hissed and the armed humans from Kappa smiled as they realised that they were among a sizeable military force before they too took cover."

"About time you got here." one said as he crouched beside the platoon commander.

"Just watch us make up for lost time." the platoon commander replied, "Harris, Edgars, Johnson. Make them bleed." he ordered.

The three named soldiers were armed with the platoon's squad support weapons, larger versions of the

standard magnetic accelerator rifles carried by the other troops fed from bulky drum magazines and they opened fire with these weapons in unison. With no real opposition to their invasion before now the Dorcons had taken to advancing in the open, trusting in their armoured spacesuits to protect them from the weak small arms fire they had encountered. However, the three squad support weapons now being used were set to fire high velocity projectiles that penetrated the Dorcons' body armour with ease.

Taken totally by surprise by the sudden strong defence being offered a quarter of the Dorcons, including their commanding officer fell before they even realised what was happening. Taking command of the remaining Dorcon soldiers, the unit's second in command had his troops scatter and seek cover.

"Fire at will." the GDF platoon commander ordered and the rest of his troops joined in the firing, engaging any target they could find while the Dorcons remained confused.

The Dorcons did not just try to hide though and when they determined where the fire being aimed at them was coming from they returned fire, the two sides exchanging fire with one another from behind cover with neither of them risking a charge to close quarters.

While Kappa was being invaded the numerous mining outposts around Gamma were also being targeted by the Dorcons. Landing their attack ships close to the outposts, the Dorcons would force their way in through the airlocks and subdue the occupants, killing those who put up too much of a fight as an example to the rest. Then they brought sealed cargo containers from the holds of their attack ships that they loaded their prisoners into. These had built in anti-gravity units so that even when loaded with human captives it took just one Dorcon to push it back towards their attack ship.

One such group was about half way between the outpost they had just raided and their ship when a trio of human vessel flew over their heads. On their approach to the moon the Dorcons had encountered both Hawk attack craft and multi-role Eagles but the Condors that now flew overhead were significantly bigger than either of these and as they set down several hundred metres away the large doors on their cargo modules dropped open to form ramps that the vehicles they contained suddenly drove down. From one of the Condors came a pair of wheeled exo-rovers. These differed from the basic civilian version in being covered with thick armour intended to protect the vehicle from attack and also in possessing a turret mounted towards the rear. Meanwhile each of the other two Condors unloaded just one vehicle each, heavier tracked exo-tanks that mounted large magnetic accelerator cannons in their unmanned turrets. Despite all of these vehicles being able to maintain a fully pressurised environment inside their sealed hulls their interiors were in a vacuum, their occupants in spacesuits that were plugged into their vehicles' life support systems to preserve their own suits' supplies. This was done to avoid sudden decompression should their hulls be breached and in the case of the troop carrying exo-rovers to allow their passengers to disembark quickly without needing to wait for an airlock to cycle.

As soon as the first of these was clear of its Condor transport the commander marked the landed Dorcon attack ship as a target for his gunner.

"Target bearing six four degrees. Range seven hundred metres. Fire for effect. Standard AP." he ordered.

"Target acquired. Firing." the gunner responded as he brought the turret around to bear on the attack ship and the moment his cross hairs lined up on the alien vessel he fired the tank's main gun, propelling a large calibre armour piercing dart at more than five thousand metres per second out of the barrel. These projectiles smashed all the way through the Dorcon attack ship with ease causing the life support system to leak oxygen that was promptly ignited by a spark from the smashed electronics and the entire ship exploded in a brief but intense ball of fire.

There was still one more attack ship landed close by and realising the power of the human vehicles speeding towards them the Dorcon troops immediately abandoned the two cargo containers they were pushing and all began to run towards this to try and escape. Unfortunately for them there was no cover between them and their vessel and all four of the human armoured vehicles opened fire on them with their mounted automatic weapons and most were easily cut down. Only two of them made it as far as the attack ship and another tank round blasted this one apart just as easily as the other.

One of the exo-rovers then moved in closer to investigate the two cargo containers now floating just above the moon's surface. The squad of troops disembarked from their transport and advanced on the nearest container before their sergeant reached out to touch the side after which he rested his helmet against it and banged on it with his fist. In response to this he heard a hammering from inside the container, the sound travelling directly through his helmet and also what sounded like muffled shouts.

"Get on the horn to Colonel Verdeschi." the squad leader exclaimed, "The aliens are taking people."

"My lord our troops are reporting that they have established beachheads in the primary targets and raids on the secondary ones are meeting with some success but the aliens are responding with troops of their own. the advance is stalling." a Dorcon technician said and Kollus dipped his head.

"Launch the third wave." he commanded, "The aliens' own attack ships would have to turn around again to

be able to intercept them and that will deplete their fuel reserves even further."
"Yes my lord." the technician responded.

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"Colonel I'm picking up more launches from the planet." Alexander said.

"How many?" Koenig asked.

"Looks like a similar number to the aliens' last wave." she told him.

"Our Hawks can't keep doubling back." Morrow said, "They'll run out of fuel."

"Colonel may I make a suggestion?" Bergman said suddenly and both Koenig and Morrow looked at him.

"Right now I'm open to almost anything professor." Koenig replied.

"Well the sensor readings we're getting from that planet indicate particularly strong EM emissions coming from a location here in this mountain range." Bergman said and he pointed to the monitor he had been studying carefully.

"Kano can you bring that up on the big screen?" Koenig said and Kano nodded.

"Transferring the image now colonel." he said as the image on Bergman's monitor now appeared on the big screen.

"Yes, there." Bergman said, "You see where there's a structure of some kind embedded in the side of that mountain? Well that's where the emissions are coming from."

"A command and control centre?" Morrow said.

"That seems likely. Even aliens must need some way of directing and monitoring what is happening." Bergman said.

"Colonel Verdeschi did you catch that?" Koenig said, turning back to the link with Epsilon again.

"Yes I heard it, we're plotting a firing solution now." Verdeschi responded.

"I think there are two sources colonel." Benes said, pulling up detailed information on the sensor readings on her own console "One is continuous and regular and looks like a sensor array while the other is more intermittent and random, very similar to the communications we've been monitoring."

"Verdeschi we want one missile with warheads programmed to hit both targets. Communications are the primary, sensors the secondary." Koenig ordered.

"We've got our firing solution now colonel. The missile is ready to go." Verdeschi told him.

"Then fire at will." Koenig said.

Erupting from its launch silo, the missile from Moonbase Epsilon angled its trajectory towards the alien planet while it was still in its primary stage of flight, building up as much speed as possible. The next oncoming wave of Dorcon attack ships were not being launched directly from Kollus' palace and so the missile did not have to pass directly through their formation to reach its target, preventing them from attempting to shoot it down before it entered its second stage of flight and the missile broke open to release the five independent warhead vehicles and the cloud of protective chaff. In order to confuse any anti-missile defences that might exist around the target site the five warheads did not all act the same as they entered the planet's atmosphere. Two of them sped directly towards the targets, plunging straight down on them from above while the other three spread out and acted in a similar way to the Dorcon attack ships of the previous wave and descended rapidly to a low altitude before levelling out and starting to weave their way through the mountains towards their targets.

"My lord the aliens launch their weapons against the palace!" a Dorcon technician exclaimed.

"They dare attack me?" Kollus responded with fury, "Activate the defence grid. Bring those weapons down before they can reach us."

"Defence grid on line my lord. Only two of the weapons now appear aimed at us. The others are veering off." the defence officer announced.

"What are their targets?" Kollus asked.

"Unknown. There is nothing of value at their predicted impact points." the defence officer answered.

"My lord Kollus perhaps their weapons are not as reliable as your own." Mentor suggested and then he smiled at Maya briefly.

"Or perhaps the aliens seek to copy how we attacked their settlements." Thallal added.

"Keep monitoring those other weapons as well." Kollus ordered, "I don't want any of them to get through."

Concealed defensive turrets sprang from their hiding places in the mountain and pointed skywards. The palace sensors quickly locked onto the two missiles coming straight down out of the sky and there were pulses of energy as the turrets opened fire. One after another the two missiles were hit, both of them exploding before they could get anywhere near their targets and at this point the defence turrets levelled out as the palace sensors searched for the remaining three missiles.

All three of these approached at low altitude through the gaps between the surrounding mountains, each one taking a different path determined by its own onboard guidance computer. When the first missile appeared

the palace defences reacted immediately and a turret swung towards the missile and fired, striking it about half way along its length. The energy blast cut the missile in half and both pieces impacted harmlessly on the side of the mountain below the palace, the warhead not detonating. However, the second missile appeared just as the turret was engaging the first from a direction where no other turrets had a clear line of fire to it and before the first turret could turn to realign itself the missile suddenly pulled up and then dived straight down to impact on the Dorcon sensor array from above. The warhead detonated on impact and not only was the sensor array blown apart but the shock wave splintered the rock of the mountain around the array and the debris tumbled down the side of the mountain. It was then that the third missile flew between another pair of mountains and once again the Dorcon defences tried to respond. However, with the main sensor array destroyed the turrets had to rely on their own localised targeting sensors that had a much narrower field of focus and they could not react as quickly. Because of this before any of the turrets could get a target lock on the missile it too suddenly veered straight up before plunging down on top of the Dorcon main communications array and like the sensor array before it, it too was blown apart and buried in rubble from the mountainside.

Back inside the Dorcon command centre the occupants looked around themselves in alarm as monitors suddenly went blank as the sensor feed was cut off and communication with the attack force was lost.

"Damage report!" Kollus yelled.

"Main sensors and communications arrays destroyed my lord." a technician responded.

"Then we have no contact with our forces." Innask said.

"We can still reach them through secondary relays my lord." another technician commented.

"And how do I direct the battle through a secondary relay where every order is placed in a queue and I have been rendered blind?" Kollus snapped at the technician, "Issue the recall order."

"A recall?" Innask asked.

"These aliens are not as weak as we first expected. Better to recall what we have left now than lose it all." Kollus said.

"My lord what of the troops on the surface of the new moon?" a technician asked.

"If they can make it back to their ships in time then evacuate them. Otherwise abandon them. I have more troops here to replace them but I cannot replace the attack ships we could lose waiting for them." Kollus ordered.

In the domes of Kappa the fighting remained a stalemate with neither side having the numbers to dislodge one another from their positions. This was starting to change however, as word came that extra reinforcements were on their way from the bases that had seen fewer Dorcon attacks.

All of a sudden a Dorcon attack ship was seen rising up from the surface outside one of the domes and the Dorcon troops looked up at their vessel as it began to retreat. Before it could rise much beyond the height of the dome however, it exploded in a brief ball of flame and there was the sound of debris landing on the transparent dome and scraping along it as it slid back down to the bottom and a Hawk suddenly sped past, prompting a cheer from some of the human fighters. Then two more Dorcon attack ships rose up off the surface and both angled themselves upwards before speeding off into space it became apparent that there was more going on than just a redeployment of their forces.

"They're pulling out!" a man in a sheriff's uniform called out to more cheers.

"That still leaves with the ones already inside to deal with." a GDF soldier pointed out but then something odd happened.

The firing from the Dorcon lines ceased abruptly and from behind an overturned passenger cart that formed part of their position in this area of the dome an object was hurled out into the open. The humans quickly saw that it was a Dorcon combat rifle that its user had deliberately discarded. Then the alien itself appeared, having now removed its helmet to expose its head entirely and with its arms held out by its side to show that its hands were empty it slowly advanced towards the human lines.

"Shoot it!" someone yelled.

"No! Stand down!" a GDF squad leader responded, "I think its surrendering."

"Colonel we're getting reports from all across the moon, alien ships taking off and troops left behind giving up." Benes announced.

"The emissions from both the enemy sensor and communications arrays have stopped colonel." Bergman added, "I'd say that Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi's missile strike did the trick nicely."

"Hear that Tony? You just saved the moon. Try not to let it go to your head." Koenig said and the image of Verdeschi on the communication monitor smiled.

"I'll try colonel. But what about the retreating alien ships? They'll pass by our Hawks again on their way down. Should they engage?" Verdeschi asked.

"The aliens could be vulnerable colonel." Morrow pointed out.

"They could also be carrying our people as hostages. Koenig said, "Let them pass."

"Colonel are we just going to let our people be taken?" Alexander asked.

"Of course not but there's nothing we can do to get them back while those ships are in flight. As Benes said the enemy are abandoning their troops here on the moon and I'm hoping that the alien commander will be willing to do a swap." Koenig answered. Then he looked at Kano, "Captain Kano I want you to work with Captain Benes. The pair of you need to come up with a way that we can reliably communicate with these aliens."

"Err colonel we don't even know what language they speak." Alexander pointed out.

"Maybe not but if they're using communication protocols that are similar to those used by the aliens who attacked Earth in the twenty-second century then perhaps they will understand that language." Bergman suggested.

"Subtitles on a video message perhaps?" Benes said and Kano nodded.

"That should be straight forward enough." he said we can do real time subtitles and we have files on that language and alphabet.

"Good. In the meantime I want to get a good look at who it is we're dealing with." Koenig said before he activated the intercom, "Doctor Russell would you mind doing me the pleasure of accompanying me to Theta?" he asked.

"Why John Koenig," Russell responded with a smile on her face, "you take me to such romantic destinations."

6.

Moonbase Theta was one of just three bases built on what had been considered the dark side of the moon when it was still in orbit around Earth, the others being the deep space observatory at Zeta and the partially constructed military base at Lambda that would have become the moon's primary line of defence had war broken out between Earth and the colonies beyond the moon. Theta itself was a high security prison built to house several thousand criminals judged to be too dangerous to risk them escaping on Earth as well as the majority of individuals convicted of crimes here on the moon itself. The base was surrounded by light defence batteries intended to deter an attack or breakout that would fire on any unauthorised vehicle that approached.

Koenig and Russell travelled to Theta underground, using the moon's network of travel tubes that connected all of the major bases together and when they arrived at the terminal at Theta they were met by the governor and two of her officers, both wearing protective vests and armed with batons and stun guns.

"Governor James thank you for seeing us on such short notice. How are your new inmates?" Koenig asked as he and Russell shook hands with the governor and then began to walk away from the terminal, led towards the cells by her.

"So far they haven't caused us any trouble." she replied, "Of course I've got a full company of your soldiers here at the moment keeping an eye on them."

"How many do you have?" Russell said.

"Just under four hundred." James told her, "I've had to clear an entire wing so I could get them all in one place and isolated from the other prisoners. Colonel I do need to ask you about the long term care aspect of these prisoners. I've only had them in the cells for a couple of hours but already my medical staff have had to try and treat injuries that were sustained in the fighting without knowing anything about their anatomy."

"I'm sorry about that governor but we are doing our best to find out about their biology." Russell said.

"Plus I'm hoping that they won't be here long." Koenig added, "I want to try and organise a swap with whoever's in charge of the aliens down on their planet. That's why I'm here, to see if any of them can offer any help in that regard."

"Really?" Governor James said, frowning, "How are you going to talk to them? The best we can do to give them orders is point with batons to get them to go where we want them to. Or get two or three guards to physically drag one of them."

"Don't worry governor, we've got an idea about that." Koenig replied and he held up his comlock.

Just then they approached a junction in the hallway where a pair of guards were marching a small group of female prison inmates past, one of whom Russell recognised.

"Uh-oh." she said.

"What's wrong?" Koenig asked.

"It's Alyson Keynes." Russell said and Koenig looked at the group of prisoners as well.

"Uh-oh." he said just as the officer who had passed information to the Red Mars terrorist group turned and looked back at them.

"Colonel!" she shouted out, "Colonel Koenig, please you have to listen to me."

"Keep moving." one of the guards said sternly and she shoved Keynes forwards.

"No. I have to speak to Colonel Koenig. I need to explain-" Keynes said as she pushed the guard back.

"Move!" the guard snapped, drawing her baton and she jabbed Keynes in the side with it to deliver a jolt of electricity that brought her to her knees.

"Perhaps we should find another way around." Russell suggested and James nodded.

"We can cut through C block instead." she said and she led Koenig and Russell down a different hallway while Keynes continued to call out behind them.

When they finally made it to the wing where the captured Dorcon troops were being held they found Master Sergeant Washington standing outside with a group of his soldiers, all of them still wearing full body armour and carrying their rifles. With them were a pair of prison guards who had added to their standard armour vests with full riot armour that also protected their heads and limbs.

"Giving you any trouble sergeant?" Koenig asked.

"Not much colonel. Without their armour they're just as vulnerable to a stun gun blast or shock baton. Not many have kicked up a fuss anyway, most were taken prisoner after the enemy ships started to withdraw so they surrendered to us voluntarily anyway rather than being captured."

"Okay let's take a look at them." Koenig said and James looked at one of the nearby prison guards.

"Open the gates." she ordered and the guard nodded before using his comlock to open the bars blocking access to this wing of the prison.

Inside the wing there were more guards in riot gear as well as more soldiers standing back from the cells so

that they would have plenty of opportunity to use their weapons if the Dorcons in any one cell managed to break out.

The cells themselves appeared as alcoves that stretched deep into the walls, providing the occupants with nowhere to hide. Inside each of these was a three level bunk, a toilet and a sink while the open end was blocked with a movable transparent barrier that enabled the guards to see everything that took place inside. These cells lined both sides of the prison wing, with three additional layers stacked on top of the lowest to provide four levels altogether that were connected to one another by staircases at regular intervals.

The Dorcons had been placed in the cells in pairs, stripped of their armour and spacesuits to leave them in just the under suits they had been wearing, a situation that with the lack of ordinary human facial features made telling them apart difficult.

"They look healthy enough to me." Russell commented as she and Koenig walked along in front of the cells with Washington following behind them.

"For now, yes." Governor James said, "We haven't tried feeding them yet and I'm not sure how we're going to go about doing that. The standard foodstuffs for prisoners are processed survival rations but we don't know whether these aliens will be able to process that. I could just let them pick what they wanted if I brought in fresh food but I don't now how that's supposed to be taken care of in terms of cost now and when word gets out to the other prisoners that the aliens are being treated better than them they could riot."

"I've got my people going over what we think are their own rations. Hopefully we'll be able to determine from them what they can eat." Russell replied.

"Any idea which of them is in command?" Koenig said, looking at Washington.

"It's hard to say colonel. I don't think that any of their version of officers were taken prisoner." Washington replied, "Some of their space suits did have markings on that could have indicated ranks but I couldn't tell you which of them had what marks on their suits."

"In that case I'll just try one at random." Koenig said and he came to a halt outside one of the cells and tapped on the transparent barrier with his fingers. Then when the Dorcons inside looked at him he waved them closer. Understanding the gesture, the two aliens approached the inside of the barrier and looked through it at Koenig, both standing significantly taller than him and having to look downwards, "Now let's see if this works." he added as he activated his comlock and selected a translation program he had installed, "My name is Colonel John Koenig and I am in command here." he said into the comlock. The device then ran his words through the translation program, turning them into the equivalent from the language of the aliens who had attacked Earth in the previous century, playing these back instead. Koenig smiled as the words were played for the Dorcons but the reaction from the aliens was quite different.

Both of the cell's occupants yelled something back at Koenig and began to pound on the barrier between them. Then one called out loudly in their own language, prompting the Dorcons in the other cells to also begin to shout and pound their fists on the transparent barriers of their cells.

"Looks you said something upset them John." Russell said as she and Koenig looked around at the clearly agitated aliens.

"Colonel perhaps you should leave." James said and Koenig nodded.

"Well it was worth a shot." he said.

"Okay so phase one of trying to talk to the aliens was a failure." Koenig announced when he and Russell returned to main mission at Alpha, "How are things going at this end?"

"I think that we've got a subtitle routine up and running colonel." Kano said from beside Benes.

"Oh good," Russell commented, "now you can start a riot on the alien planet."

"Well if I do it might just create enough of a distraction to let us go in and rescue our people." Koenig replied.

"Speaking of which," Morrow said, picking up a computer tablet, "we've got the figures in and it looks like there are just thirty-eight people unaccounted for. These all come from three of the mining outposts near Gamma."

"So we swap the almost two hundred alien prisoners for thirty-eight of our own people." Koenig said as he looked at the tablet that provided him with a breakdown of the deaths and injuries suffered during the attack in addition to a list of the people presumed to have been taken prisoner by the Dorcons.

"They'll be getting the better end of that deal." Alexander commented.

"Hopefully that makes it more likely that they'll go for it." Koenig said, "Of course we need to make sure we can carry out the swap before that wormhole sucks us back in and we land somewhere else. Somewhere that hopefully won't have any more of these aliens living in it." then he looked at Bergman, "Professor how long do we have?" he asked.

"I've been trying to calculate that colonel and so far the only figure I can give you is between twenty-seven and thirty-four hours. My predictions will become more accurate the closer we get to the time."

"In that case it's show time." Koenig said, "I'll record the message in my office." and then he and Russell headed up the steps to where Koenig's office was located. With the wall between his office and main mission

retracted the two appeared as a single large room but Koenig used his comlock to close the wall and cut them off from one another so that he would not have any background noise from main mission in his message before he sat down at his desk and noticed that the computer monitor was telling him that he had an unread message that had been delivered to his office but not his comlock.

"So what do you think I should say Helena?" he asked Russell, ignoring the message for now.

"Keep it simple John." Russell replied, "Tell them that we both have prisoners and that if they agree to trade then we can both go our separate ways and never bother one another again."

"I suppose I'll need to offer to meet to agree the arrangements." Koenig added and then he turned to the communication system built into his desk, "Okay here goes." he added before he activated it and it began recording, "This is Colonel John Koenig of Moonbase Alpha. Following your attack on our moon we have taken just under two hundred of your soldiers prisoner. They are alive and being well treated. We know that you were able to take a number of our own people during your attack and I wish to negotiate for their release in exchange for the release of all of your people that we are currently holding. I am willing to meet face to face to discuss this but must request that negotiations commence as soon as possible. As such I stand ready to leave to meet with you within the hour. It is my hope that despite the violence there has been between us to this point we can still come to a diplomatic arrangement. Once again this is Colonel John Koenig signing off." and he shut off the recorder, "So how was that?" he asked, looking at Russell.

"If you think I'm letting you go to that alien planet alone then you've got another thing coming." Russell said.

"I wasn't thinking of going alone. I'll take along a co-pilot of course and I want someone from the medical section who can assess the state of the prisoners they're holding."

"Then I have the perfect candidate. Me." Russell said.

"Helena I-" Koenig began.

"Don't you dare tell me you don't want me to get hurt when you're planning on travelling to a planet inhabited by aliens who launched an unprovoked attack on us." Russell interrupted.

"Okay, okay, I won't." Koenig said, raising his hands, "But I also don't intend on going down there unarmed. Are you okay with carrying a weapon? A proper weapon I mean, not just a stun gun."

"I'm fine with it. Will you be taking any of Washington's men along?" Russell asked.

"No. Just you, me and a co-pilot. Carter probably. He can watch our ship while we get the prisoners released. we should be able to fit them all into an Eagle if we're the only ones going but there won't be room if the passenger module is filled with troops."

The technical staff in Kollus' command centre worked frantically to try and restore some semblance of normal operation. The palace's main sensor and communication arrays were beyond repair and needed to be reconstructed. In the meantime Kollus had his staff attempting to rig up a temporary replacement from mobile equipment. This would not be good enough to allow him to co-ordinate another attempted invasion of the moon but it would at least allow him to co-ordinate a defence of his own planet. A large number of the staff at work were male Psychon slaves, known for their technical aptitude while the others were members of the command staff themselves.

"Lord Kollus." Mentor said, walking up to the Dorcon leader.

"Yes Mentor?" Kollus responded without looking at the slave.

"My lord we are detecting another transmission from this new moon. It appears to match your own signal format." Mentor said.

"Possibly some of your troops still hold out." Innask suggested.

"Are we able to display the message yet?" Kollus said, now looking at Mentor.

"We can my lord." the Psychon replied.

"Then show it to me." Kollus ordered and Mentor nodded at one of the other Psychons working in the command centre.

Moments later the main display screen shifted to show Koenig sat behind his desk and Kollus growled.

"The alien leader. Colonel John Koenig." he said as Koenig began to speak.

"Interesting." Thallal said as she watched the message play back, "They add the language of the Outsiders to their message."

"I take it your Psychon can read that?" Innask said, glancing at Maya."

"Of course she can. Maya, translate for us." Kollus ordered.

"The writing repeats the words of this John Koenig." Maya said, "He says that he knows your troops took prisoners and proposes to exchange them for the troops you left behind on his moon. He wants to meet with you to discuss-"

"He dares to try and negotiate with me?" Kollus bellowed.

"Those are his words but he is hiding something." Maya said nervously.

"So he would deceive me as well." Kollus added.

"An ambush." Innask suggested, "The ship they send will be a weapon."

"My lord if they wished to destroy you then they could just send more of their missiles. they have already shown that these can penetrate your defences." Mentor pointed out and Innask snarled at the Psychon for daring to contradict him. Fortunately he did not dare strike the slave of another Dorcon.

"He asks for the meeting to take place soon. The word 'hour' is used, probably a way in which they measure time. I think he expects something to happen soon and he wants to have finished negotiating with you by that time." Maya continued.

"My mate this could present us with an opportunity." Thallal said, reaching out to put a hand on her mate's shoulder.

"How?" he asked.

"Consider this, this Colonel John Koenig is obviously the product of more of the Outsiders' genetic engineering and his people may be genetically compatible with the Psychons the Dorcon Empire has already subjugated." Thallal said.

"You are suggesting that we could cross breed them?" Innask said and Thallal glanced at him briefly before she turned back to Kollus.

"They are obviously resourceful but wild. Perhaps the offspring of these creatures with the Psychons would produce something useful to the Empire. Something that the Archon himself would reward you for." she said, "Colonel John Koenig is obviously their leader, the best of them. Perhaps he could be the mate you have been looking for for Maya."

"Interesting." Kollus said.

"But what about our agreement?" Innask asked, instantly knowing that this would cut him out of the opportunity to trade the offspring of Maya and any of the male Psychons he had brought along with him.

"You told me that you brought with you the best specimens of male Psychons in the Empire." Kollus said, "If this Colonel John Koenig can be used to impregnate Maya then I am sure that your Psychons can be used to impregnate any of the females from this new moon. Our deal will still stand but with just a slight modification."

"My lord we still cannot launch another invasion of this new moon." Mentor pointed out.

"No but by offering us a meeting this Colonel John Koenig has provided us with the delay that we need to repair our systems as well as sending for reinforcements." Kollus said.

"Reinforcements? From where?" Innask asked.

"Karratachan's world is just three jumps away." Kollus said, "He has four warships and more than three hundred attack ships. With just half that we can crush these aliens."

"He'll want a share of the spoils." Innask pointed out but Kollus grunted.

"With what we stand to gain there will be more than enough spoils for all of us." he said then he looked at Maya, "Maya can you communicate with these creatures face to face?"

"Their language is almost the same as our own and I have heard enough that I think I can talk with them. Plus the more I hear the better I will become at-" Maya began.

"That's all we need to know." Kollus said, "When this Colonel John Koenig arrives you will meet him and escort him to my throne room. There I will keep him waiting long enough for Karratachan's forces to arrive."

7.

Carter and Kano sat on the other side of Koenig's desk, each man holding a tablet computer on which they had the results of the initial examinations of the Dorcon technology that had been captured during the failed invasion of the moon.

"Their attack ships seem analogous to our Vultures." Carter said, "They're obviously combat craft but with the added feature of a transport capacity and thanks to their technology I'd say that they can outperform our Hawks one on one."

"So they're not like our Eagles then? Multi-role craft with added combat capability?" Koenig said.

"I don't think so colonel. Of course we're just going off our observations of the things. The only physical evidence we've got is twisted wreckage which is a pity. If the professor's theories about forward firing energy weapons doubling as a means of opening a wormhole for a ship to pass through are right then these things can travel between star systems."

"Which is just what we need to get home." Koenig commented before he looked at Kano, "So what about you captain?" he added.

"Most of what we found was fairly analogous to our own equipment." Kano replied, "They use projectile weapons like we do but we haven't found any controls that would adjust the muzzle velocity. Either there's some more complicated way of doing it or they aren't bothered about punching holes in hulls. There was one interesting thing though. We found this on the body of what we're guessing was an officer." and he held out a small plastic container that Koenig recognised as a standard handheld enclosure. Taking this from Kano he opened it to see what was inside and when he did he looked straight back at Kano.

"Does this come from where I think it does?" he asked.

"We think it was made by the aliens who attacked Earth, yes." Kano said and Koenig stared at the organic looking device, "Though I've not seen anything like it in the literature. Normally I'd ask Keynes what she thought but obviously I can't do that now she's going to be spending the rest of her life in prison."

"What about Professor Bergman?" Carter suggested, "He must have studied alien tech more than anyone else on the moon. That little traitor Keynes included."

"The professor is occupied with figuring out how to predict how long it will take for us to be pulled back into the wormhole." Kano replied

"Colonel we're receiving a transmission from the surface. Audio and visual." Benes suddenly called out and Koenig came rushing from his office.

"Gentlemen we'll have to continue this later on." Benes put the transmission on the big screen."

Benes promptly transferred the incoming transmission to main mission's big screen and an image of Kollus sat on his throne appeared with armed guards standing either side of him. Then Kollus began to speak in his own language and as he did so an obviously synthesised voice repeated his words in broken English.

"Colonel John Koenig. Lord Kollus is who I am." the voice said, "I am for the Dorcon Empire. Your intent to meet is good. You will be welcomed. Soon is when you can come. My weapons do not attack." and then the image on the screen froze as the end of the message was reached.

"So now we have a name for them. Dorcons." Carter said.

"Dorks." Alexander muttered, smiling.

"The invitation you were hoping for colonel?" Morrow asked.

"I hope so." Koenig replied.

"Colonel I've got a launch." Alexander announced.

"Show me." Koenig replied and he made his way to her console where she showed him the sensor readout.

On this he saw a single Dorcon attack ship heading away from both the alien planet and the moon, apparently making its way towards the alien planet's own natural satellite.

"Now where is he going?" Koenig.

"I've got a power surge. I think he's charging his weapons." Alexander said.

"There's nothing out there to shoot at." Benes commented.

"He's coming up on the Lagrange point between the planet and its own moon." Morrow said as he studied the sensor data on his own console.

"Professor you may want to see this." Koenig said and when Bergman did not respond he looked at him and called out, "Hey professor!"

"I'm sorry colonel I was just-" Bergman began as he hurried over to Koenig and Alexander, "My word, this is amazing." he said as the Dorcon attack ship fired its main weapon into empty space and as the high energy beam intersected with the Lagrange point there was a flash of light and a wormhole identical except in size to the one that had brought the moon to this system opened up and swallowed the ship."

"They invite you down there right as they're sending a ship to another system? I don't like that colonel. It

reeks of a trap." Carter said.

"Yes, they could be going for reinforcements." Morrow added, nodding in agreement.

"It doesn't change anything." Koenig said, "The moon will still be pulled back into the wormhole once enough energy from Mu has entered it. All you need to do is hold out until then and all I need to do is hope that I can make it back from that planet in time with our people."

"Colonel before you go would you indulge me for a few minutes?" Bergman said.

"What is it professor?" Koenig asked.

"This image." Bergman said, pointing to the still frozen image of Kollus in his throne room on the big screen.

"What about it?" Koenig said.

"Have you noticed that there is a mirror visible in the corner?" Bergman said, pointing at the screen, "I think there's a figure in it that does not look like one of these Dorcons."

"Benes zoom in on that mirror." Koenig ordered and Benes nodded as she selected the area of the image around the mirror and zoomed in on it.

"They're human beings." Alexander said as the picture on the big screen showed a pair of human looking if blurred figures reflected in the mirror with another Dorcon standing behind them.

"Benes, can you enhance the picture so we can get a good look at them?" Koenig said.

"I think so. Running it through the program now." Benes replied and the image slowly became clearer, showing both Maya and Mentor.

"They don't look very human to me." Carter said when he saw the dagger shaped pupils in their pale eyes as well as their sloping eyebrows and peaked hair.

"Let me check the software." Kano said, "Maybe it didn't run right."

"It's working perfectly. I know what I'm doing. That's what they look like." Benes responded defensively.

"So who the hell are they?" Carter said.

"Friends of the Dorcons? Or perhaps other prisoners." Morrow said.

"I'll try and remember to ask while I'm there." Koenig said and then he turned around, "Carter is our ride ready?"

"Eagle five is fuelled and on launch pad two now. It's in the VIP configuration so we've got the defensive turret if we need it." Carter replied.

"I hope we don't major. Morrow, Alpha is yours until we get back." Koenig said and the two men walked out of main mission.

At the entrance to launch pad two Koenig and Carter found Russell waiting for them. Instead of her usual medical scrubs Russell now wore her dark blue GDF service dress uniform with her lieutenant colonel's rank markings on her shoulders to match that worn by Koenig and he smiled when he saw her dressed this way.

"Something amusing you Colonel Koenig?" Russell said.

"It's just I keep forgetting how good you look in that uniform." he said, "Oh what am I saying? You look good in everything. Now let's get aboard and be on our way. Oh by the way another little mystery has cropped up that you may be able to help us with when we get there."

"Really, what?" Russell asked as the three of them walked down the boarding tube and boarded the waiting Eagle.

"You'll see when we get there I hope." Koenig said, making his way to the Eagle's small arms locker and then taking three magnetic accelerator pistols from inside it, handing one each to Russell and Carter before taking the third for himself and wrapping the belt and holster around his waist and fastening it in place, "Make yourself comfortable Helena, Carter and I will fly us there." he added.

Maya was doing her best to hold back tears as she stood alone in front of Kollus, Innask and Thallal. at Thallal's suggestion Kollus had ordered Maya to swap her normal clothes for just a robe that barely came down to her knees and now she stood holding this wide open while Thallal inspected her.

"This ought to do." the female Dorcon said, "Maya is considered attractive among her people and if this Colonel John Koenig is anything like the male Psychons were when we first encountered them then he will take any female he judges worthy."

"Then why bother with the robe? Send Maya to him naked." Innask suggested.

"We cannot risk him suspecting that we are trying to distract him." Kollus said, "If he just takes Maya into his ship he could decide to abandon his people in favour of her and leave. Then his forces on the new moon will be able to send wave after wave of missiles that we can't guarantee to intercept before Karratachan arrives with his forces."

"You should try to make sure he knows you are wearing nothing underneath the robe though." Thallal said, "Do not fasten the front too tightly and keep your legs apart when you sit down. I will be watching you from my study."

Just then the communicator that Kollus wore on his forearm beeped and he raised it.

"Yes?" he asked.

"My lord an alien ship approaches from the new moon. With our sensors disabled we were unable to detect it until it entered the atmosphere but it is definitely heading for the palace." the voice of one of Kollus' command staff said.

"I will be with you shortly." Kollus replied.

"And I shall return to my studies." Thallal added as the Dorcons all began to exit the throne room, leaving Maya there alone and as soon they turned their backs on her she quickly closed her robe around her and tied its belt.

"Show me what you have." Kollus said as he and Innask entered the command centre and they both looked at the display that showed an image of the Eagle now heading through the mountains towards the palace. The craft flew at a higher altitude than the three missiles that had come in through the mountains earlier, enabling various surface cameras to monitor its approach.

"It is one of their secondary war machines my lord." the technician said, "Data from our attack on the new moon suggests that it lacks the speed and manoeuvrability of the craft that destroyed our warships. This specific example also seems to lack the main projectile cannons that the ones used to resist us had mounted beneath their forward section."

"Alert the guards just in case this is some sort of trick. Colonel John Koenig could be sending soldiers to try and get inside our defences. Then send Maya to the landing pad to greet our guests."

The palace was built high enough in the mountains that snow covered much of the surrounding terrain and Maya shivered as she felt the icy cold blast of air against her when the door to the palace's main landing pad opened. The robe she wore was totally inadequate to protect her from the cold as she stepped outside, its fabric too thin and covering too little of her skin and she winced as her bare feet touched the surface of the landing pad itself, hoping that Koenig would arrive quickly so that she could get back inside.

Then she heard the sound of an engine in the air and she searched the sky for its source until she saw the bullet nosed shaped of an Eagle appear from between two neighbouring mountains and she watched as it angled towards the landing pad.

Inside the cockpit of the Eagle, Koenig and Carter looked out of the viewports and saw Maya standing alone on the landing pad.

"Looks like there's someone down there to welcome you colonel." Carter said and he frowned, "Doesn't look like one of those lizards though."

"Let's take a closer look." Koenig responded and he looked at the instruments in front of him to bring up a feed from the one of Eagle's externally mounted cameras and he instantly recognised Maya, "That looks like one of the people we saw reflected in the mirror." he said.

"Yeah but who in their right mind dresses like that up here in the mountains?" Carter added when he saw how Maya was dressed.

"Perhaps its some sort of weird alien tradition." Koenig said as he released his harness and started to climb out of the co-pilot's seat, "Take us down."

"Yes colonel." Carter replied and as Koenig left the cockpit the Eagle continued to descend towards the landing pad.

Maya watched as the Eagle came into land and she closed her eyes and smiled as the warm air from the downward thrust of its ventral engine exhausts washed over her. Instinctively she also pressed her hand on the front of her robe to keep it from being blown open by the blast. The landing pad was large enough for several spacecraft the size of an Eagle and Carter set it down some distance from Maya to avoid the force of the engines injuring her. However, this meant that Maya had to walk even further across the cold surface as the sound of the Eagle's engines died and the outer airlock door facing her unfolded to form a ramp down to the landing pad.

It was then that Maya saw Koenig emerge from the Eagle, recognising his facial features from the messages he had sent from the moon. One of the first things she noticed about him was that he had a weapon holstered at his waist and for a moment she considered the possibility that he might use it on her if she made a mistake. Then to her surprise Doctor Russell appeared from behind him, also with a weapon at her waist. The first message sent from the moon had featured women in the background but Maya had not considered their presence relevant at that point. In both Psychon and Dorcon society the roles of males and female were radically different and there was no crossover other than on their fringes. Studying Russell, Maya tried to determine what her presence on the planet might signify when all of a sudden she realised what the connection between Koenig and Russell was.

They were in love.

For some reason Koenig had chosen to bring his mate along with him and Maya considered the possibility that this was how his people conducted themselves, that a leader would be accompanied everywhere by a mate. This obviously had implications for Kollus' plan to have Koenig and Maya mate with one another but Maya knew that before being enslaved by the Dorcons, Psychon society had included examples of the wives

of powerful Psychon males helping to hold down a younger female while their husbands forced themselves on them to produce children or sometimes just for the enjoyment of the male and his wife. If Koenig's people followed that pattern then Maya could still be forced to mate with him.

While Maya studied Koenig and Russell, they were also studying her and both considered the reasons for her state current of near total undress.

"That can't be normal." Koenig whispered to Russell.

"She looks freezing." Russell agreed, "I mean I know she's an alien but she looks very human. Too human in fact. Remember how the aliens that attacked Earth experimented on people?"

"Perhaps she'll tell us if we ask nicely." Koenig said.

"Well let's ask inside. Never mind if she doesn't feel the cold. I do." Russell replied.

"I'm Colonel John Koenig and this is Doctor Helena Russell." Koenig announced as he and Russell walked up to Maya.

"Greetings Colonel John Koenig and Doctor Helena Russell. My name is Maya and Lord Kollus has sent me to greet you." Maya replied and Koenig and Russell looked at one another in surprise.

"You speak English?" Russell said.

"English is your language?" Maya commented.

"Yes that's right." Russell told her.

"The Outsiders gave us both similar languages." Maya said, "The differences I was able to determine from the messages sent by Colonel John Koenig."

"John is good enough." Koenig said, "But who or what are these 'Outsiders'?"

"I am sorry John but please may we speak indoors? I am very cold." Maya said, unable to stand the temperature any more.

"I'm sorry. Please led the way." Koenig said and as they headed towards the doors to the palace he glanced back over his shoulder at the Eagle, a brief action that Maya noticed nevertheless.

A pair of armed Dorcon guards waited inside the palace and Koenig and Russell halted when they saw them, Koenig placing a hand on his sidearm.

"They will not harm you John." Maya said, walking calmly between the Dorcon troops, "Please come this way."

"Sure. Why not?" Russell commented.

"I do not know." Maya said.

"Huh?" Koenig said.

"I do not know why you would not come with me now that you are here." Maya said.

"It's just a figure of speech Maya." Russell told her.

"Oh. I am sorry. I should have known." Maya said then she pointed to a set of stairs, "The throne room is this way."

"Throne room huh? At least it sounds like we're dealing with the guy at the top." Koenig said as they climbed the stairs until they reached a set of ornate doors on the landing at the top that had another pair of armed Dorcon troops standing outside who did not react as Maya opened the doors to allowed them to enter the throne room.

Inside the throne room looked just as it had done in the message from Kollus but apart from Koenig, Russell and Maya there was no-one else present as the doors closed behind them.

"So where's this Lord Kollus then?" Koenig asked, looking around.

"He will see you when he can." Maya said. Then after a moment's hesitation she added, "He sent me for you."

"Yes you said." Koenig said as he continued to look around the throne room at the decorations that included a large number of images of what he thought was the same Dorcon as had spoken in the message accepting the offer of talks shown either in armour or meeting with others of his species in places similar to this room, "But why make you nearly freeze to death?"

"Lord Kollus has ordered me to offer myself to you. He wants you to know what he is offering." Maya said and both Koenig and Russell looked at her in surprise.

"When you say 'offering yourself to him' do you mean that he's supposed to have sex with you?" Russell said.

"That is correct." Maya replied, "I did not know that John would be bringing his mate with him Helena."

"His mate?" Russell commented.

"Yes, I could tell as soon as you got out of your ship. That is what the females of my people do. We are empaths." Maya explained.

"So a fruit basket wasn't enough?" Koenig said, "Look Maya, I just want to get my people back and get out of here."

"You are in a hurry. I saw that in your message. But why?" Maya asked.

"Because our moon won't be here much longer." Russell said.

"The wormhole that brought us here will pull the moon back in again and we'll end up at some other random spot." Koenig added and Maya frowned.

"You are not part of an invasion? The Outsiders did not send you?" she said.

"Who are these Outsiders?" Koenig asked.

"The Outsiders are the ones who made us. Who made you. They gave us our language." Maya said.

"Our language is English. Or at least this one is." Koenig said. Then a thought occurred to him, "These Outsiders, were they about yay big, grey, really skinny with big heads and big black eyes?" he asked, holding out his hand at shoulder level.

"None of my people ever saw them. The first of us woke up after they had left but the Dorcons have described them in a similar way, yes." Maya said.

"Maya these Outsiders didn't create us, they attacked us more than a century ago." Russell said.

"Yes and one of the first things they did was abduct thousands of people to use in experiments to create an army to use against us. I guess they must have taken some of those captives further away than we thought and created your people from them." Koenig added, "How do the Dorcons know them?"

"The Outsiders attacked the Dorcons also, not long after the Dorcons developed interplanetary travel. Then all of a sudden the Outsiders just disappeared and no-one knows what happened to them. All that is known is that some of their bases remain. It is at the base on the planet the Dorcons called Psychon that we were created. We were primitive when the Dorcons arrived and they enslaved us." Maya answered.

"Well we are nobody's slaves and I'd like to keep it that way." Koenig said, "Now when will this Lord Kollus be turning up?"

"You should wait here." Maya said, "I will try to find out." and she turned around and hurried out of the throne room.

As soon as the doors closed behind her Russell turned to Koenig and punched him on the arm.

"Ouch! What was that for?" he exclaimed.

"Fruit basket? Really John? Some lizard sends a poor half naked girl to stand in the freezing cold so she can have sex with you and all you can think of is 'fruit basket'?" Russell snapped at him.

"Oh just be glad that we're having this meeting here Helena. Who knows what he would have expected me to give to him if we did at Alpha." Koenig replied.

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Instead of heading for the command centre where she knew Kollus would be working on rebuilding the planet's defence systems Maya went looking for her grandfather, ignoring the stares she got from other Psychon slaves as she ran through the lower levels of the palace."

"Grandfather!" she called out when she saw Mentor speaking with several other older Psychon males about the work they were being told to carry out by the Dorcons.

"May? What are you doing here? And like that." Mentor replied.

"Grandfather I have to talk to you." Maya said.

"Very well. In here." Mentor said and he guided her into a nearby room where they could speak privately,

"Now tell me what is so important that you violated Lord Kollus' orders to take care of this Colonel John Koenig."

"Grandfather John did not come alone. He brought his mate with him and does not want me. But that is not what is important. I know why they are in a hurry to get their people back. The new moon is going to leave again. The accident that brought them here will take them away again and they do not know where to. Grandfather perhaps we could escape with them." Maya told him.

"He will take us with him?" Mentor asked.

"I think so. I did not ask but if he cares for his people enough to come here for them then surely he will be willing to help us if we help him. Grandfather they have weapons." Maya said and Mentor considered this point.

"Yes, that might just work. Wait here while I go and check on where the captives from the new moon are being held. Then I will speak with this John myself." he said.

Leaving Maya in the room Mentor headed even deeper down through the palace to where its dungeons were located and when he reached them he went to the guards' control post.

"What are you doing here slave?" the duty officer said, glaring at Mentor from behind his console.

"I am collecting data for the Lady Thallal, mate of our Lord Kollus. She wants to know about the captives from the new moon. How many are available for her projects?" Mentor asked.

"All thirty-eight are still here. Tell her that I have already had five queries about samples for dissection from other females." the guards said.

"Of course." Mentor replied, bowing his head before he turned and hurried away, making his way as quickly as possible to the throne room where Koenig and Russell still waited and both of them turned to look at him when he entered. Mentor had not had time to study the differences between English and the Psychon language and so as he spoke he did his best to keep things as simple as possible, "Mentor." he said, patting himself on the chest.

"I guess that's your name." Koenig said, "John Koenig."

"Helena Russell." Russell added and Mentor nodded.

"Good. Maya's father's father I am. She tells me of you, of your moon that will go away."

"Yes, the wormhole is pulling it back in." Koenig said.

"We don't have long. Just a few hours now." Russell said, "We need to get our people and get out of here."

"So if you could get that Lord Kollus-" Koenig began before Mentor interrupted him.

"Kollus no help John and Helena. Mentor can help if John and Helena help Mentor." he said and Koenig and Russell exchanged glances.

"What do you want?" Koenig asked.

"Take us." Mentor answered.

"You mean you and Maya?" Russell said and Mentor nodded.

"Yes. Me. Maya. You take us, I help you. I show you your people. Thirty-eight." he said.

"Thirty-eight missing people from the moon, John it's them." Russell said.

"Sounds like the best deal we're going to get. Koenig said, "But what will Kollus do when he finds out that you're helping us?"

"Be angry. Send guards." Mentor said.

"In that case we'd better be ready." Koenig said and he took out his comlock, "Carter do you read me?" he transmitted.

"Loud and clear colonel. Look, you need to get a move on. Alpha's been on the line and Professor Bergman has been revising his estimates as to how long it will take for the moon to be pulled back into the wormhole. Unless you want to be left behind we need to be lifting off within the hour."

"Understood Carter. It looks like we're going to have to break the prisoners out. We've found someone willing to help us with this but it does mean that there's going to be trouble. Are you ready for it?" Koenig said and inside the Eagle's cockpit Carter smiled.

"Ready and able colonel." he said, looking at the section of the control panel labelled 'POINT DEFENCE'.
"Good. Koenig out." Koenig said, turning off his comlock and putting it away again as he looked at Mentor,
"After you." he said.

"Guards. Not let you out. Use your weapons." Mentor said.

"Sure, why not?" Koenig replied, drawing his accelerator pistol.

"Silenced?" Russell suggested as she did the same and Koenig nodded.

"No sense in advertising our break out." he said and both he and Russell adjusted the settings on their pistols so that the rounds would be fired at a subsonic speed, eliminating the noise that came from a projectile breaking the sound barrier, "Okay we're ready when you are." he added when they were done and Mentor turned around and opened the throne room doors again, calmly walking out into the hallway. He came to a halt in front of the guards and turned to face them.

"I have orders from Lord Kollus." he said and as the two Dorcons focused their attention on him Koenig and Russell darted between them, pressed their weapons to the sides of their heads and fired a single round each.

"Weapons." Mentor said as the bodies of the guards collapsed to the floor.

"You know how to use them?" Russell asked, surprised that a slave would be given knowledge of weaponry.

"I am a Psychon male. Machines I understand." Mentor said as he bent down to scoop up one of the Dorcon rifles and took extra ammunition from the dead guard's belt.

"I thought you were empaths." Koenig said, "Maya told us that was what she was."

"Males know machines. The females empaths. Maya is much more, very strong. She can even make you do something." Mentor said.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that." Koenig commented as he picked up the second rifle and slung it over his shoulder. The weapon seemed bulky in his hands, having been designed for an alien grip but he was confident that he would be able to aim and fire if he need arose, "What about you Helena?"

"Sounds like those studies into the different way infants react to images of different things depending on their sex." Russell said, "The aliens must have taken that to an extreme when they created the Psychons."

"Hurry now. Maya waiting this way." Mentor said and he started to run down the hallway.

"This is Eagle five calling Moonbase Alpha." Carter said, his face appearing on the communication monitor.

"This is Moonbase Alpha main mission. Go ahead Major Carter." Benes responded.

"Colonel Koenig just contacted me and he says that the negotiations aren't going to be taking place." Carter said.

"Did you say that the negotiations aren't happening?" Morrow said when he heard this."

"That's right Alpha. He didn't say why but he did say that he's found someone inside the palace that's willing to help him stage a breakout. Hopefully we'll still be bringing the prisoners back but we could be coming in hot. Will you be able to give us cover?" Carter asked.

"I'll talk to Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi but I can't promise anything. Professor Bergman thinks it's risky for us to stage any launches within an hour of us entering the wormhole again just in case his calculations are off."

"Understood Alpha, but just for the record if Colonel Koenig and Doctor Russell aren't back in time for me to make the departure window then I'll be staying put too. I'm not going to abandon them here." Carter said and Morrow nodded.

"Understood Alan. Good luck. Alpha out" he said before shutting off the channel.

"Are we really going to leave them all behind?" Kano asked.

"What choice do we have?" Morrow answered, "There's nothing we can do to prevent that wormhole from pulling us in whenever it wants to. Right professor?"

"Yes, I'm afraid that's correct." Bergman said, "We are at the mercy of the radioactive emissions from Mu combined with various local factors that I'm having trouble determining so far."

"We might be able to give them a hand if they do end up trapped here though." Morrow said and he turned towards the console where Carter usually sat in his role as the head of the reconnaissance section, where Captain Fraser now sat instead, "Bill I want you to prep another Eagle." he said.

"A rescue team?" Fraser said.

"No. I'm, not risking any more lives on this. The Eagle needs to be ready for robot operation, programmed to land somewhere away from the alien defences. We'll load it with supplies that the colonel, Doctor Russell and Carter can use if they do end up stuck on that planet." Morrow explained.

"Got it. It shouldn't take more than half an hour." Fraser replied.

"Good." Morrow said, "Now get me Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi. I need to ask him if he can put some Hawks up to provide a protective screen for Eagle five if it does bring uninvited guests back with it."

Thallal's study was filled with everything she needed for her research from a library of printed texts to a

computer that provided her with access to the full extent of the knowledge contained in the planetary database. There were also chairs laid out so that a group of females could in theory discuss their research but given the way in which any major scientific advance could be used to improve the position of a female's mate within the Empire's hierarchy there was far less co-operation between females than there could have been.

On the wall a large monitor showed the throne room where Koenig and Russell waited. Thallal had watched as Maya left them, annoyed that the Psychon would leave without first having mated with Koenig and she was considering the options open to her to force Maya to submit to a mating when all of a sudden she saw Mentor enter the throne room instead.

"What are you up to Mentor?" she said to herself as she watched, irritated that the equipment set up to monitor the throne room did not include sound. Then she watched as Koenig and Russell drew their weapons before Mentor opened the throne room doors and distracted the guards outside long enough for the two humans to kill them and Thallal hurriedly activated the communication panel in front of her to get in contact with the palace's command centre, "Kollus the aliens are loose. Mentor is helping them." she said.

"Mentor has betrayed me?" Kollus responded with surprise.

"Yes, he helped Colonel John Koenig and the female that arrived with him kill the guards you left outside the throne room." Thallal said.

"What about Maya?" Kollus asked.

"She left before Mentor arrived and without mating with Colonel John Koenig. Mentor arrived later." Thallal told him.

"Then she must be part of this as well. She and Mentor will suffer greatly for this. They will both beg for death." Kollus said before he abruptly shut off the channel. Then he looked towards one of the guards in the command centre, "Find the aliens, find Mentor and find Maya." he ordered, "I want Mentor and Maya alive but do as you wish with the other two."

A klaxon sounded as Mentor guided Koenig and Russell into a staircase.

"I'm guessing that's because of us." Koenig said.

"They must have found the bodies of the guards." Russell added.

"Hurry. Maya down this way." Mentor told them, beckoning for them to follow as he descended the stairs towards the lower levels of the palace.

"I'm hurrying." Koenig replied.

Mentor led them down the stairs until he reached the level where he had left Maya and he opened the door to peer through.

"Careful." he said, "Most down here are slaves but some will help Dorcons to gain favours."

"Do you have anything we can use to keep out of sight? A disguise of some kind?"

"Dis-guise?" Mentor replied as he struggled to understand that word.

"Something that will make us look different to how we do." Russell told him and he smiled.

"Ah yes. No." he said and then he darted out of the stairwell.

"I love a clear answer." Koenig said as he hurried after Mentor and Russell followed him.

The level they were now on was far less luxurious than those of the palace that Koenig and Russell had previously seen and it was obvious that it was not intended for any of the high ranking occupants of the palace to have to come down here. However, the palace guards anticipated that Mentor would head for the lower levels of the palace and from around a corner Mentor heard the familiar sound of Dorcon voices as a patrol yelled at some unfortunate Psychon slaves.

"Dorcons. No way around that is quick and easy." he said as he came to a halt.

"How many?" Koenig asked and Mentor risked a quick look around the corner. There he saw a pair of Dorcons wearing body armour yelling at a group of four Psychons as they tried to determine whether or not this group were the ones they were hunting for. Obviously if either of these guards had met Maya or Mentor before then they could not remember exactly what they looked like and also had no idea what either of the humans from the moon looked like either.

"Two." Mentor said.

"Let me take a look." Koenig said and he too peered around the corner. When he saw that they wore armour he adjusted his pistol again, increasing the muzzle velocity setting to give him a better chance of penetrating it, "Helena you better increase the power of your weapon. These guys are armoured."

"So what do you want to do?" Russell asked.

"There are Psychons stood right beside them. We won't have a clear shot unless we can get them to move some how." Koenig said but then Mentor suddenly stepped around the corner and brought his rifle up to his shoulder before firing a single shot that echoed down the hallway. The round hit one of the Dorcons' armoured vests and the alien fell back, clutching at where he had been hit and howling in pain but not seriously injured.

"Oh crap." Koenig said before he too jumped around the corner in time to see the second Dorcon rolling for cover in an alcove on the other side of the hallway. This took him away from the Psychons and Koenig took the opportunity to fire his pistol as fast as the mechanism would allow him to. Several of his rounds struck the Dorcon and rather than ending up concealed in the alcove he came to a halt sprawled across the floor. Meanwhile Mentor fired his rifle again and although only one of the three shots he fired hit the prone Dorcon this hit a more vulnerable point in his armour and he slumped back, blood pumping from the wound that had killed him.

Mentor then hurried along the hallway to the body of the Dorcon he had just killed while the other Psychons looked at him in astonishment.

"Mentor what have you done?" one asked.

"I am getting out of here." Mentor told him and while Koenig and Russell approached him from behind he reached down to pick up the dead guard's rifle and handed it to the Psychon who had just spoken, "Here, take this and gather as many of our people as you can. There is room for them all on the new moon. Meet us in the main hangar. We will fly there in Lord Kollus' own ships. Go now, before more guards arrive." he said and the other Psychons hurried away down the hallway as fast as they could.

"I only understood about half of that," Koenig said, having caught certain words that Mentor had spoken in the Psychons' own language, "but it sounded like you were inviting all your people to the moon. I don't know if that's possible."

"Plus what happened to avoiding your people in case they were collaborating with the Dorcons?" Russell asked.

"They are." Mentor replied, grinning, "Two will go to the Dorcon masters and tell what I told them."

"So now they'll think we're heading for their hangar instead of getting out on the Eagle." Koenig said, smiling.

"Yes, yes. With good luck to us they may even lock the hangar tight and not let any of their own attack ships be able to take off." Mentor said.

"Even better." Koenig said, "They won't be able to send any ships after us when we leave in the Eagle."

"Now come. Maya is not far." Mentor added, waving for Koenig and Russell to keep following him as he set off again.

"Hang on a moment." Russell said as she went to the body of the Dorcon and picked up his weapon, "I'm taking one of these as well."

"My lord we have a report from the guards sent to the lower levels." a communication technician told Kollus.

"Have they found Mentor and the aliens?" Kollus asked.

"Not yet my lord but they have been approached by Psychons with news of them. They killed two guards and are planning on hijacking ships from the palace hangar. They intend to stage a mass breakout of the Psychon slave force, moving them all to the new moon." the technician reported.

"Send troops to protect the hangar. Lock it down completely and suspend the refuelling and rearming operation. Let's see how well they think they can escape without any fuel to reach their supposed sanctuary on this new moon." Kollus ordered.

"Won't that stop you launching your ships in support of Karratachan's forces when they arrive here?" Innask pointed out.

"Karratachan won't need my ships to defeat these creatures." Kollus said, "Besides this way the only loses that will be taken will be his."

"My lord!" another technician called out suddenly, "The guards have found Maya."

9.

Maya was still sat alone in the room where Mentor had left her when all of a sudden the door slid open and two Dorcon soldiers burst in, pointing their rifles towards her.

"Get down on the floor Psychon slave!" one yelled, "Face down and put your arms out."

Maya did as she was told lying face down on the floor and holding her arms outstretched either side of her while one of the Dorcons ran his hands over her, searching her for anything she might try and use to escape. Finding nothing he reached to his belt and while the other Dorcon soldier was reporting in that they had captured her he produced a set of rigid single use handcuffs and pulling Maya's arms behind her back he snapped these cuffs around her wrists.

"Up!" he then shouted at her, dragging her back to her feet as both Dorcons moved back towards the still open doorway. However, the moment that the first Dorcon stepped through it there was the sound of a gunshot and he fell dead as Koenig appeared, leaping over the corpse into the room.

With one hand being used to keep hold of Maya the second Dorcon was not ready to fire his rifle and he shoved her aside so that he could grip the weapon properly with both hands. He was not quick enough with this though and as soon as Maya was out of his line of fire Koenig fired his pistol again. The bullet hit the Dorcon at the base of his neck and he dropped his rifle to clutch at his throat in a vain attempt to try and stem the bleeding before Koenig fired a second shot to finish him off.

"We need the keys to these cuffs." Koenig said when he saw that Maya was bound, "Check the guards for them."

"There are no keys." Maya replied, "They must be cut."

"Are there any cutters around here we can use?" Russell asked Mentor.

"Perhaps. But we will need to look." he replied.

"Okay sorry about this but you'll have to wait until we get to the Eagle." Koenig told Maya as he helped her back to her feet.

"Come here, I'll give you a hand." Russell said, reaching out to help Maya balance while her arms were bound.

"Right then, we've got Maya. Now where are my people being held?" Koenig asked, looking at Mentor.

"The dungeons. Down more." he replied, pointing down towards the floor.

"Oh great. More stairs." Russell said.

When the group exited the stairs on the dungeon level they found their way to the control post blocked by a barrier made up of diagonal metal bars that had not been closed when Mentor had been down here earlier and he turned to look at Koenig.

"They are warned." he said.

"How strong are these bars?" Koenig asked, reaching out to touch them.

"Stop!" Mentor exclaimed and he grabbed Koenig's wrist before he could touch the bars, "Look. One touch and 'zap'." and he looked down at the floor. Koenig then did the same and saw that this particular section of the metal grating that made up the floor was separated from the others by what looked like a plastic barrier a few centimetres wide and also that the barrier did not quite meet the floor, there being a narrow gap between them.

"Electrified." Koenig commented as he realised the reason for this. Obviously the barrier formed one contact in a circuit and the floor either side of it the other. Anyone standing on the floor and touching the barrier would complete the circuit. Obviously for such a thing to work through clothing and footwear the voltage involved would have to be very high, "So now what?"

"Now Maya will show her power. Why Kollus finds her so valuable." Mentor said, "Go hide there. Be ready." and he pointed in the other direction to where the corridor turned and went out of sight and handed Koenig his rifle, "Use these. Switch here for rapid fire." he told Koenig, pointing out the fire selector to him.

Then as Koenig and Russell moved out of sight Mentor lay down on the floor beside the electrified barrier, "Now Maya." he said and Maya took a deep breath and let out a scream.

The sound of the scream attracted the attention of a pair of nearby Dorcon guards and they came rushing to investigate. They instantly saw Mentor lying on the floor as if he had just been shocked by the barrier while Maya stood further back, not on the isolated section of floor and with her hands cuffed behind her back.

"These could be the Psychons we have ordered to watch out for. Go and tell the supervisor. I'll keep watch on her." one of the Dorcons told the other and he dipped his head before turning around and hurrying back down the corridor towards the dungeon section.

Now that there was only one Dorcon on the other side of the barrier Maya looked directly at him and spoke calmly, focusing her mind on him.

"Now open the gate." she said.

For a moment the guard hesitated, knowing deep down that he should not do what he was being told to do by a mere slave but he was unable to resist and he took his pass key from his belt and placed it against a nearby reader panel. The barrier immediately began to slide back and at the same time Maya backed up against the wall beside her. Upon hearing this Koenig looked at Russell.

"I think that's our cue." he said and both officers leapt around the corner holding their alien rifles as best they could before opening fire down the corridor.

The two bursts of fire cut down the closest guard, just beyond the gate straight away and then Koenig and Russell turned their weapons on the second Dorcon as he turned around and started to raise his own weapon to return fire.

"Very good." Mentor said as he looked up and Koenig reached down to help the older Psychon back to his feet, "Now be fast. Dorcons know we are here now."

"Hold on." Koenig said and he looked at Maya, "So she can just make people do things?"

"It take effort John." Maya replied, "And it is difficult to control someone who is part of a group. Individuals are more vulnerable."

"I'll bear that in mind." Koenig commented and then they dashed through the now open gateway and hurried down the corridor.

Koenig was the first to reach the doorway to the control post and looking through it he saw another Dorcon in the process of reporting the gunfire to the command centre.

"Back away!" he yelled instinctively but the alien did not understand him and instead reached for his sidearm. Before the Dorcon could draw this Koenig fired the alien rifle again, firing bullets into the alien's chest until the weapon clicked empty and he tossed it aside and drew his own pistol instead, "Looks like a security post." he said.

"Yes. Watches dungeon." Mentor replied as he entered the room behind Koenig and began to work the console, watching the images on the banks of monitors on the wall as he did so. Several of these had been smashed when Koenig fired his rifle but there were enough left for him to see that they showed the feeds from security cameras throughout the palace dungeon.

"Look!" Russell exclaimed suddenly when she saw the unmistakable sight of human beings on one of the monitors, "Those are our people."

"More guards as well." Koenig added when he spotted a Dorcon walk past the cell on the monitor.

"Is he armed?" Russell asked.

"I couldn't tell." Koenig said.

"No gun. Just stick to shock." Mentor said.

"The Dorcons make sure that if a prisoner is able to take a guard's weapon through the bars of their cell they would be able to use it to attack the others." Maya added, "There will be ranged weapons at the control desk if the guards need them though."

"So do you have a plan for this Mentor?" Russell asked, "Are we supposed to just march down there with Maya in handcuffs and tell the guards that this is a prisoner transfer from cell block AA-twenty-three?"

"Or we could just go in there and shoot the place up." Koenig suggested.

"Good idea John Koenig." Mentor replied with a smile.

"The dungeons? They must be trying to free their people." Kollus said when he was told of the call from the main dungeon security post that had been abruptly cut off by gunfire, "I will take a unit of troops down there myself. Send another squad to secure their vessel. This Colonel John Koenig may be try to get back to it when he finds out that he cannot steal any of our ships."

Carter was sat in the cockpit of Eagle five using its external cameras to monitor the landing pad without betraying his presence inside the craft when the palace doors opened again and a group of Dorcon soldiers in cold weather gear came rushing out.

"Uh-oh. I don't like the look of this." Carter said to himself, sitting up straight in the pilot's seat and watching the Dorcons spread out under the direction of the individual Carter took to be their squad leader. There was equipment on the landing pad that the Dorcons used for cover as they deployed themselves and Carter reached for the controls that would activate the Eagle's point defence turret. Then he noticed that instead of deploying themselves behind the landing pad equipment from his point of view they were in front of it and Carter saw them aim their weapons towards the palace doors instead of at the Eagle.

"Colonel Koenig." Carter said, activating the communication panel and he waited while Koenig picked up his comlock.

"Go ahead Alan." he replied.

"Colonel that hornet's nest you've stirred up in there has spilled out on the launch pad. I've got a squad of about a dozen aliens outside now."

"Are they trying to get in?" Koenig asked.

"No. In fact they seem to be ignoring the Eagle, they obviously don't know I'm in here. They've set up an ambush for anyone coming out of the mountain." Carter said.

"Us in other words." Koenig said, "Can you take them out?"

"Easy. the point defence turret can nail them all in about twenty seconds I reckon. But if I do that then-

"Then the Dorcons will just send more troops and destroy the Eagle." Koenig interrupted, "Okay hold off for now. We'll let you know when we're almost with you and you can deal with them then. In the mean time watch for any reinforcements and keep me up to date. Koenig out."

Koenig put his comlock away and looked at Russell and Mentor. The group was now just outside one of the entrances to the main dungeon section, closest to where Mentor had told them the guard post was and were poised to open the door.

"So you think there are three guards in there?" Koenig asked and Mentor nodded.

"Yes. Three. Two walk around, the other watches." he said.

"That guy's going the most difficult to deal with if he's the one with access to firearms." Koenig said, "Will he know when we open the door?"

"No. The guard watches the cells, not the way in. Unless he is warned." Mentor said.

"Which is a possibility given that you shot up the other security post already." Russell pointed out.

"Then we just need to be as quick as we can with this. Is your pistol still set to subsonic?" Koenig said and Russell nodded, "Good. Then we'll try and take out as many of them as we can before they even know we're here. Mentor be ready to back us up if we need heavier firepower."

"Yes John Koenig." Mentor replied.

Koenig and Russell were standing right in front of the door with their pistols aimed at it when Mentor opened it for them and they found themselves looking down an empty corridor that was lined with barred cells for most of its length on both sides. On the other hand at the end nearest them one wall was blank while the opposite was where the security post was located and movement could be heard from inside it. The three Dorcon guards had indeed been alerted to the security threat and all of them were in the process of arming themselves with short barrelled weapons from the arms locker in the office when they heard the sound of the door opening and one of them stepped out into the corridor to see what was going on, calling out in his own language as he did so. The Dorcon gasped when he saw Koenig and Russell but before he could raise his weapon the two GDF officers shot him dead.

"Down!" Koenig snapped and he and Russell threw themselves to the floor as a second Dorcon appeared in the doorway and fired his weapon. Similar in function to a shotgun, the stubby carbine fired a blast of projectiles that spread out as they flew over Koenig and Russell. In response to this Russell fired her pistol at the Dorcon, aiming low to save time and her shots hit him below his knee. The Dorcon promptly let out a roar of pain and collapsed on top of the body of the first guard where Koenig fired another shot that put an end to his cries.

Meanwhile the third guard remained inside the security office and instead fired his weapon randomly through the open doorway. This prompted Koenig to crawl to the other side of the corridor and then get to stand right beside it. Ejecting the partially used magazine from his pistol he inserted a fresh one to maximise the number of shots he had available and then pointed the muzzle of the weapon around the door frame before pulling the trigger repeatedly, firing at random into the office until he heard the clatter of a weapon being dropped to the floor and the softer 'thump' of a body joining it.

"Clear." Koenig said as he looked into the office and saw the final guard lying dead on the floor as he had expected, "Now how do we open those cells?"

"Keys." Mentor replied, rushing forwards to search the closest guard. Finding a key to open the cells, he held it up and smiled.

"Helena go with him. Make sure our people are okay. I'm going to see how many of these weapons are any use to us." Koenig said, and he looked at the open weapons locker on the wall that still held several compact ranged weapons.

Accompanying Mentor along the corridor of cells Russell looked into some of them and saw that each held groups of creatures. A number of them were Psychons, split apart into separate male and female groups while she also saw one cell that held Dorcons but there were also creatures from other species that she knew nothing of.

"Where do these creatures come from? Why are they here?" she asked.

"To become slaves. Or to be given to the female for their science." Mentor replied.

"To females?" Russell said.

"Yes. Dorcon males lead and fight. Dorcon females make art and science. Is that not how it is with you?"

"No we pretty much do what we want as long as we are able." Russell replied and Mentor frowned.

"Odd. Sounds difficult." he said and then he smiled, "Ah, your people." and he rushed up to the door of the

first cell that held a group of miners taken from the moon."

"I'm Lieutenant Colonel Russell and I'm here to rescue you." Russell told the prisoners as Mentor unlocked the cell, "Come on. Is anybody here hurt?"

"No, but there's a woman in the next cell with a broken arm." one of the miners replied as they rushed out into the corridor and Russell nodded.

"Okay I'll see to her. Go that way and Colonel Koenig will hand out what weapons we've been able to get hold of. We have a ship waiting to take us all back to the moon." she said and then she followed Mentor to the next cell where a smaller group of humans was being held. These were all female and Russell realised that the Dorcons had split up their human captives in the same way they did their Psychon ones, on the basis of sex probably in the belief that humanity practised the same division of purpose of the sexes that both they and the Psychons did.

"Out. Out." Mentor told the women, stepping back to allow them to exit the cell and Russell immediately saw the woman who was cradling her arm against her.

"I'm a doctor. Let me see that." she said, heading to the woman's side. Examining the arm she quickly saw that it was indeed broken and that it was in urgent need of treatment, "Come on, there'll be something we can use as a splint down here and we'll get you proper treatment back at Alpha." Russell then began to help the woman back towards the security office when she realised that Mentor was not following, "What are you doing?" she asked, looking around at him.

"I must free the others. Maybe some will escape." Mentor replied and he rushed to the next cell and unlocked that as well.

"Don't take too long." Russell said as she began to head for the security office again.

"Where's Mentor?" Koenig asked when she reached him as he handed out Dorcon weapons to the freed human captives and explained as best he could how to use them.

"Back there opening the other cells." Russell replied and they both looked along the corridor to where groups of various aliens were now emerging from their unlocked cells. Mentor himself was now at the far end of the corridor, unlocking the cell furthest away from them when all of a sudden the door at the end of the corridor slid open to reveal Kollus and a unit of his personal guard.

"Grandfather look out!" Maya cried out when she saw this but her warning was not quick enough to prevent Kollus from lashing out with the butt of his weapon and knocking Mentor to the floor.

"John Koenig!" Mentor yelled, looking straight at Koenig, "Go! Get Maya away!" and then Kollus' guards began to beat him as he lay helpless on the floor.

"No!" Maya screamed before Kollus himself opened fire down the corridor, cutting down several of the released prisoners and the woman with the broken arm fell against Russell with blood pouring from her mouth.

"Let's go!" Koenig ordered and he fired his pistol back towards Kollus, a round hitting the Dorcon leader but failing to penetrate the armoured vest he wore.

"No, we have to help my grandfather." Maya exclaimed, "I won't leave without him."

"We can't." Koenig told her and before Maya could respond he bent down to pick her up, lifting her over his shoulder and carrying her from the dungeons.

"No! Put me down!" Maya screamed but with her hands still bound behind her back she could do nothing to get free of Koenig's grip.

"Hurry, this way everyone." Russell said as she waved the escaping humans through the exit from the dungeon. Behind them they could hear the commotion of the other released prisoners attempting to fight off the Dorcons and the sounds of gunfire as they were mercilessly cut down.

Making it to the stairs Koenig took out his comlock as he began to climb, keeping a grip on Maya with his other arm.

"Carter we're on our way." he signalled, "Prep the ship for launch and light up those Dorcons outside."

10.

"Copy that colonel." Carter said with a smile and he reached for the controls to the Eagle's point defence turret. He had already carefully plotted the position of each of the Dorcon troops outside on the landing pad and fed that in to the targeting computer. Now all he needed to do was arm the turret and set it to automatic operation.

This took just the flip of one switch and the Dorcons outside turned their heads when they heard the sound of the turret unfolding from inside the Eagle's spine and turn in their direction. Then before any of them could react the twin mounted magnetic accelerators mounted in the turret, similar weapons to the squad support weapons used by the GDF infantry, opened fire. Expecting any threat to come from inside the palace rather than the ship they believed to be empty the Dorcons were totally exposed to the turret's fire and before any of them could even attempt to warn the command centre that they were under attack all of the Dorcons on the landing pad were dead.

"Colonel you're clear." Carter signalled, "I'll open the door for you and be waiting."

When the palace door flew open and Koenig and Russell led the freed human captives out onto the landing pad they saw Carter standing in the Eagle's airlock with a rifle and they could hear the craft's engines idling in readiness for take off.

"This way." he called out before disappearing back into the Eagle.

Koenig was first up the ramp and he set Maya down.

"Helena take care of her. Get some cutters and free her. Don't let her get off the ship though. We can't turn around and come back for her if she does." he said.

"Got it." Russell replied and as Koenig rushed into the cockpit she waved the other humans coming up the ramp into the Eagle's passenger module.

"No, I can't leave without my grandfather." Maya protested as Russell closed the airlock behind the last of the captives.

"He told us to get you out of here so don't even think about trying to brainwash me into letting you off this ship." Russell replied and then she reached for the intercom, "John we're set. Take off now."

"Go." Koenig told Carter from the co-pilot's seat and the Eagle rose up off the landing pad just as Kollus and his guards came rushing out of the palace.

"This is Lord Kollus," Kollus said into his communicator, "Launch attack ships now. That vessel must not get back to the new moon."

"But my lord you ordered the fuelling of our attack ships to be ceased. We don't have any that can be launched." a technician responded and Kollus roared in anger as the Eagle escaped between the mountains.

"Major Morrow Eagle five is heading back now." Alexander reported when her sensor readouts showed the Eagle exiting the planet's atmosphere.

"Benes can you raise them?" Morrow asked.

"They're making contact now sir. Putting you through now." Benes replied.

"Colonel it's good to see you safe." Morrow said when Koenig's face appeared on a screen in front of him,

"Was your mission a success?"

"Mostly. One of the prisoners was killed but we've got the rest of them aboard." Koenig said.

"You should be picking up a flight of Hawks any time now colonel." Morrow added, "Colonel Verdeschi was able to launch them as an escort. We aren't picking up any other launches from the planet yet though."

"No and hopefully there won't be any. A friend helped us take care of that on the ground." Koenig told him.

"And is this friend coming back with you?" Morrow said.

"No, unfortunately not. Though we do have someone else coming along who I think may be a lot of help if she'll agree to stay. Carter says our ETA is about ten minutes from now. How does that fit with the projections for when the moon will enter the wormhole again?" Koenig replied.

"That gives you plenty of time colonel." Bergman responded before Morrow could, "I'm currently estimating that we have just over an hour left."

"We had a robot Eagle filled with relief supplies just in case you didn't make it off the planet in time." Morrow said and Koenig smiled.

"I'll try not to take it personally that you had so little faith in my abilities major." he said.

"I'll look forward to the formal dressing down in person in shall we say fifteen minutes sir?" Morrow said and Koenig nodded.

"See you then. Eagle five out." he said before closing he channel.

Upon the Eagle's return to the moon Russell took the freed captives and Maya to the medical section while Koenig and Carter hurried to main mission.

"Report." Koenig said as he entered the room.

"All sections have prepared for entry into the wormhole as best we can." Morrow said.

"Yes, given our still limited understanding of wormhole travel I've advised that everyone be inside a proper shelter when we make the transition." Bergman added.

"Very good and what about us?" Koenig asked.

"All systems functioning colonel." Kano answered.

"All lunar defences are on line just in case as well." Alexander added.

"Good. We can't risk any more Hawk or Eagle launches now but hopefully the Dorcons don't have anything that our surface weapons can't deal with that can get to us in time." Koenig said.

"Err colonel, Professor Bergman, I think you should see this." Alexander said suddenly and both men rushed to her console, "Sensors just picked this up. From the range these readings are about four minutes old."

"A wormhole." Bergman said, "From the L-five Lagrange point between this planet and its own moon considering their respective orbits."

"Alexander put it on the big screen." Koenig ordered and around main mission the command staff of Alpha gasped as they saw the four Dorcon capital ships emerging from the wormhole surrounded by swarms of smaller attack ships.

"Looks like their reinforcements just got here." Kano commented.

"They're trying to communicate with the planet." Benes said, "Though I don't now if they're being successful"

"There's no way we can fight that off." Carter said.

"Benes get me Colonel Verdeschi. Tell him to stand by to launch every missile he's got left." Koenig said and Benes nodded. However, before she could contact Verdeschi Bergman spoke up.

"Colonel wait." he said, "I don't think those ships are a threat to us."

"Professor there must be hundreds of them." Carter said.

"Yes but that wormhole is three light minutes from our position and those ships exited it at less than one percent of the speed of light. Unless their capital ships are capable of much greater acceleration than we have already seen then the only way that any part of that force to reach us before we depart is for the smaller, faster ships to split off and leave their larger assets vulnerable as they were at our earlier encounter." Bergman explained.

"So they either screw up and lose their big ships to our missiles or they miss us altogether?" Carter said, smiling, "I like it."

"Keep all surface defences on stand by." Koenig ordered, "Tell Colonel Verdeschi to be ready to fire his missiles on my command only. Until then we wait."

All the command staff in main mission could do from that point on was watch the alien armada as it approached them, also watching the countdown until the wormhole would pull the moon back into itself. The ships of the armada began to accelerate as they headed towards the moon but its commander did not risk leaving his capital ships without escorts and their speed remained too slow to manage an intercept before the wormhole suddenly expanded to swallow the moon and the armada was left chasing after empty space. Meanwhile in main mission Koenig recovered quickly from the shock of travel through the wormhole and he looked around to see if everyone else was alright.

"So where are we now?" he asked.

"The astronomical equivalent of the middle of nowhere I believe colonel." Bergman said, "Red dwarf star and a few planets but nothing that I would associate with an advanced civilisation."

"I'm not picking up any transmissions from anywhere but here on the moon colonel." Benes announced.

"And no wormholes other than the one we just came through." Alexander added, "Which is growing slowly again at a few centimetres a minute right now but at least those alien ships couldn't follow us."

"I am grateful for small mercies." Koenig said as he started to walk towards his office, "Now if people could start to try and figure out a way of getting back to Earth I'm going to write up what just happened in my report."

Climbing the steps to his office Koenig closed the wall behind him and sat down just as the intercom activated and Russell's face appeared on the screen.

"Helena." he said.

"John I take it from that flash of light, the shaking and the fact that that planet isn't visible in the sky any more we made it through the wormhole." Russell said.

"Yes, we made it. Have there been any injuries reported?" Koenig asked.

"A couple of cuts and bruises. People still aren't used to it yet but nothing serious. I just wanted to let you know the results of my examination of Maya." Russell said.

"And?"

"And her DNA is almost perfectly human although there are a few genes associated with mental

development that appear to have been altered somehow. Plus there are a few traces of what I'd say were feline traits. But she's close enough to us that I think Psychons and humans could produce viable offspring if they tried. Probably what the Dorcons were hoping for."

"Cat DNA explains the eyes then." Koenig said, recalling Maya's dagger like pupils, "But she can live with us safely?"

"Oh yes. She can eat what we can and she's not carrying any infections that will wipe us all out. In fact she's in good health apart from the stress of having just lost her only living relative. I've discharged her from medical though. I sent her with Baker. There's an extra bunk in her quarters given that her room mate was on Earth when we got pulled out of orbit so it seemed like the logical choice for now."

"Okay I was just about to write up what happened. I'll see you later Helena."

"Bye John." Russell replied and her image disappeared. Koenig was just about to start working on his report when he noticed the notification on his monitor again that told him he had an unread message and he reached out to bring it up. As soon as he did so he was surprised to see an image of Alyson Keynes appear on the screen, still dressed in her dark blue GDF captain's uniform. Obviously this had been pre-recorded before the explosion at Mu and Koenig was tempted to just turn off the playback but he let it run instead.

"Colonel Koenig," she began, "by now Red Mars will have released details to the press across the system that prove Earth has been developing nuclear weapons and you will find out that I helped them get past Mu's defences and I wanted to explain why I did what I did. Firstly though I just wanted to say how sorry I am about what happened. I'm sure you and the others will feel like I betrayed you after all the years we spent working together all but I had no choice. The attack on Mars that put my sister in hospital was a warning to me that Red Mars could get at my family. The authorities there won't protect them and the GDF can't so I had to go along with what they wanted. I knew that they'd never be able to get a nuclear weapon out of Mu even with my help so I agreed to get them inside so they could expose what is going on there. Hopefully the news that Earth has a nuclear arsenal that the colonies can't match will make them think twice about taking any actions that might lead to war. In the long run I'm hoping that my actions will end up saving lives and I hope that you can find it in you to forgive me for what I did. Goodbye John. Stop recording." and as the screen went blank Koenig leant back in his chair and stared out of the windows into space.

In the dungeons beneath Kollus' palace Mentor had a cell to himself. This was not one of the pens used for holding would be slaves, instead it was where the Dorcon leader kept those he intended to keep locked away for ever. In addition to being behind the barred cell wall Mentor was also chained hand and foot to limit his movements within the cell.

"Not much of a victory was it Mentor?" Kollus said from outside the cell.

"Maya escaped. That is all that matters." Mentor replied.

"Yes, she escaped for now but for how long? The sector governor and even his cousin the Archon himself are very angry at what happened Mentor. If I told them that you were still alive then I'm sure that they would have you flayed alive for what you did. I on the other hand have a different idea. You see thanks to the creatures from the travelling moon, these humans as they are called, I will have to make cut backs here to be able to meet the level of tribute I promised in exchange for being granted this world and I need to find a way to compensate for that. Fortunately the Archon has agreed that all information about the travelling moon is to be sent here to me and when I find out where they are I am going there to take your granddaughter back, along with as many of the humans as I can. The rest of them will be slaughtered of course but they'll all have it better than you or your precious Maya. You know I had planned to present her with one of the finest examples of your species as a mate but that is no longer the case Mentor. When I get her back I will place her in the cell right over there and I will let you watch as I send one male after another, the very worst of your kind I can find, in there to enjoy themselves with her. You will get to witness her suffering Mentor and you will know that it is all because you both betrayed me."

"No Lord Kollus!" Mentor called out as the Dorcon turned and walked away, "Maya is innocent in this. It was all my doing. Leave her alone." but the only sound that Mentor heard in return was the door to the section slamming shut as Kollus left him alone to consider the future of himself and Maya when she was recaptured.