

Space:2299



03: The Deal On Offer

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When the opportunity arises to investigate an abandoned alien outpost the inhabitants of the moon are quick to take it. However, when disaster strikes the survey mission Colonel Koenig is forced to turn to an unlikely and unpopular source for help...

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I.

The same nuclear explosion that had destroyed Moonbase Mu and opened up a wormhole large enough to drag the entire moon out of Earth's orbit had also killed General Gerald Simmons and left Colonel John Koenig, commanding officer of Moonbase Alpha as the highest ranking Global Defence Force officer left on the moon. In effect he was now in total command of the moon as it travelled at random from system to system, pulled through the wormholes created between Lagrange points where the gravitational forces between two large bodies in space cancelled one another out and created a weakness in the universe itself. The problem with this was that Koenig was a military commander, not a head of government and prior to its leaving Earth's orbit the moon had existed as an extension of humanity's home world rather than in isolation and the moon's settlements had always relied on the flow of goods from Earth to exist. To try and deal with both of these issues Koenig had gathered together in his office representatives from across the moon so that they could discuss their situation.

Some of those present were other military officers, Lieutenant Colonel Tony Verdeschi commanded the military Moonbase Epsilon where most of the moon's defences were concentrated while Major James Capston had been overseeing the construction of a second, larger military base labelled Lambda on what had been called the dark side of the moon while it orbited Earth. The third and final other military officer present was Lieutenant Colonel Helena Russell, with whom Koenig shared a romantic relationship. Russell headed up the medical section at Alpha and all medical personnel on the moon reported to her.

Beyond the military personnel Koenig had gathered other individuals who held positions of authority on the moon. Professor Victor Bergman was a scientist who had come to the moon to research the very wormholes that it now travelled through. Governor Martha James ran the high security prison at Moonbase Theta on the dark side while the attendees at the meeting were rounded out by a group of administrative personnel from the refinery at Moonbase Gamma, manufacturing plants at Moonbase Delta, the food producing facilities at Moonbase Iota and the tourist park at Moonbase Kappa.

"Okay everyone knows why we're here." Koenig said, "I need to know what we need to do to keep the moon operating long enough to get back to Earth and what we can do to speed that up."

"Colonel we need to face up to the fact that there are about sixty thousand people here on the moon and we can't even feed them all." the administrator from Iota said.

"We've got the rations stockpiled for war." Verdeschi pointed out, "We can go three years without producing or importing a single loaf of bread."

"That will make a big difference," Iota's administrator replied, "but it'll only slow things down. Six or seven years from now we'll still have run out."

"Okay so we need to expand our food production." Koenig said, "Any ideas how?"

"What about Lambda?" Russell suggested and she looked at Capston.

"There's certainly plenty of room to start growing crops in the hangars." he said, "It's not like we'll be getting any of the ships from Earth that Lambda was intended to house."

"You've got a full construction crew as well." Verdeschi added, "I bet they could be useful all over the moon in expanding our facilities."

"Providing they can get the materials they need." Capston said.

"What is our manufacturing situation?" Koenig asked, turning to the representative from Delta.

"Uncertain." she answered, "Most production was destined for Earth and now there are a lot of people sat around wondering where their next pay cheque will come from."

"At least we already had our own economy, as small as it is." Koenig said, "But if understand you right then that means we've got manufacturing facilities and skilled workers available to make whatever we need to survive."

"Within limits, yes." the woman from Delta replied, nodding in agreement.

"What limits?" Capston asked.

"The same as you. Raw material." the administrator said.

"The moon doesn't have the wonderful array of resources that Earth does." the mining executive from Gamma added, "We can pull metals and some base elements out of the ground almost indefinitely but there are key elements that just aren't found here."

"Hydrocarbons." Bergman said.

"That's right." the mining executive responded, "You need somewhere with a biosphere to find that sort of stuff."

"That will impact our ability to produce food as well." Iota's administrator added, "Telling us we can use the space under Lambda as new fields is one thing but we need enough fertile soil and seed as well."

"Hopefully we'll come across planets where we can get those things from." Koenig said, "We'll have to be

ready to launch transports to gather supplies at every opportunity." then he looked at Verdeschi, "Did you get chance to take a full stock take of our ships?"

"I did." Verdeschi replied and he looked at his computer tablet as he started to read off the list of the spacecraft available to the moon's inhabitants, "We've got thirty-five Hawk attack ships in working order plus one we're trying to put back together after it was shot down and four more that were held in reserve that we should be able to get operational within a day or so. Obviously we've got plenty of Eagles, more than a hundred in total. Some of those are listed as reserve stock as well and will need some work to get them usable. There are also ten of them that are privately owned. I don't know what your position is going to be on seizing them."

"That won't go down well." the representative from Kappa said, "People are already angry enough at you without you starting confiscating their property."

"At me?" Verdeschi said when he heard this.

"At the GDF. Haven't you seen the net postings? There are people saying that it's all your fault that we're in this situation."

"I've seen them as well. I found leaflets being passed around the mines." the mining executive said, "Someone's whipping up trouble."

"I don't want to start taking what people own." Koenig said, "Although I may consider a system of purchasing. It's not like anyone is going to get much use from an Eagle anyway until we get back to Earth."

"Nine of our Eagles are also fully armed." Verdeschi continued, "I'd advise that we try and improve on that though."

"I agree." the representative from Delta added, "We've got a production line already set up to make Eagles but Hawks are another matter. The ones we've assembled in the past all used drive components shipped in from Kansas. Reverse engineering those will take some doing."

"We also have a handful of long range Swifts." Verdeschi went on, "Fourteen in all if you count the ones in reserve and three of them are armed. Again adding weapons to the others could come in useful. Then finally we've got all the obsolete craft in storage. There are just under fifty old Vulture gunships on the moon that could be used to supplement our Hawks. They're slower and less hard hitting but they're better than nothing. The one issue is that more than half are in private hands and have been disarmed so again we'd need to figure out a way of getting hold of them fairly and refitting them."

"I'll have to think about that." Koenig said, "I'd rather try and keep our modern ships running without raiding museums."

"Speaking of which there are also fourteen old Kestrels about. Although eight of them will need digging out of what's left of the space port at Eta." Verdeschi said.

"Eta?" the representative from Kappa exclaimed "Those things must be fifty years old. Why not just take the old SHADO interceptors from the museum of the Alien War at Kappa?"

"We may have to eventually." Koenig commented, "Now what about the bigger ships? Did any of them survive the loss of Eta?"

"All of the bulk transports were destroyed in their hangars when the Landau crashed." Verdeschi said, "For heavy lifting we're limited to twenty-seven operational Condors. On the bright side we do have a pair of Osprey heavy bombers at Epsilon. They were part of a training exercise and had to make a forced landing when one suffered a life support fault. We can fix that easily enough, though we don't have a lot of the ordnance they're designed to carry right now." Verdeschi then looked at his tablet again and swiped the screen to change to a different list, "I also ran a check on the people we have here on the moon as well. Not counting the existing GDF staff we also have a number of individuals that we may want to try and sign up. We've got five members of the World Army, a pilot from the World Air Force and an eight man dive unit from the World Aquanaut Security Patrol who were all holidaying at Kappa. I found a few law enforcement agents as well but I figured that we'd be better off letting our sheriff's departments get first look at them."

"Okay speak to the military personnel and try to get them onboard. Those divers could be especially useful if we ever need something from under an ocean." Koenig said and then he turned towards Russell, "Doctor, what about you?" he asked.

"We're pretty well stocked with common medical supplies as part of our war reserve John, but as with everything else we were dependent on Earth for supplies of others. Especially anything that was reverse engineered from alien science.

"Yes, the alien plants used to make the medication I take for my heart is grown only on Earth." Bergman said, "I have a supply with me of course but after that-"

"We'll figure something out for you professor." Russell interrupted.

"Okay so what we're looking for is an alien planet selling fertilizer, medicines, advanced machine parts and high explosives." Koenig said. Then he looked at Bergman, "Professor how do you rate our chances of getting back home if we don't all starve, get sick or murdered by aliens?"

"It's hard to say. Every time we pass through a wormhole I hope to learn more about them. After just three

trips I've already been able to improve my ability to predict how long we will stay in any particular place but there is still a lot of work to be done on that. Of course what would really help us is if we could adjust this time period to suit ourselves more. For example if we do find a planet that has the resources we need then we might want to spend longer there so that we can gather as much as we can. Alternatively we may want to speed up our departure, especially if we encounter the Dorcons again." Bergman said.

"Don't tell me about Dorcons." Governor James said, "I've got an entire wing full of them at Theta that my staff are still trying to figure out the correct way to keep healthy without it stopping being a prison."

"Perhaps we should look at getting rid of them." the mining executive said.

"Kill them you mean?" Russell said.

"Or dump them on the next planet we come to." the mining executive said.

"For now we'll just treat them like any other prisoners." Koenig said, "At least now we know their dietary requirements are not much different to ours." then looking back at Bergman he added, "So do you have any suggestions about how to do what you've said?"

"Well the frequency of the wormhole pulling the moon in is based on the radioactive emissions from the remains of Mu. So altering the strength of them should alter the time before it happens again. If we can construct some sort of barrier that we can deploy over Mu then we could block the emissions partially and slow down how long it will be until we enter the wormhole again. I should add that this would also be useful should we find ourselves back in our own solar system. If we can cut the flow of radiation into the wormhole entirely then it will close fully and we won't be pulled back in."

"Not unless someone else triggers off a nuclear arsenal in one go anyway." Capston commented.

"What about speeding up our departure professor?" Koenig said.

"Ah, now that is more difficult though I don't think it's technically impossible." Bergman replied, "We could follow the example of how the Dorcons access wormholes, which I believe was the same way the aliens who attacked Earth did."

"Using the main energy weapons of their ships you mean?" Verdeschi said and Bergman nodded.

"Yes. If we construct a number of X-ray lasers around Mu then we can fire them into the partially open wormhole and the increased energy being input into it will cause it to expand faster." he said.

"X-ray lasers aren't exactly easy to build professor." Koenig said.

"Or power." the representative from Delta said, "You'd need a dedicated fusion reactor for each one."

"Do they have to be close to Mu?" Verdeschi added.

"It would help to keep the radioactive emissions concentrated in one place Colonel Verdeschi. Why?" Bergman said.

"Because a few X-ray laser turrets would add considerably to our defensive capability." Verdeschi pointed out.

"I think a lot of people would be happier if more bases had proper defences instead of needing to wait for Hawks to reach them from Epsilon." the mining executive said.

"That's something else we need to work on." Koenig agreed, "For now I think deploying artillery units from Epsilon to the other bases is the best we can manage but I do like the idea of every base having a proper defence system."

"More work for my construction crews then." Capston said, "But there's something else I'd like to raise. What about the option of not going back to Earth? What if we found a new planet to settle on? We already know that there are other inhabitable planets out here. Maybe we'll never make it back to Earth and I for one would rather be able to live somewhere where I can open a window and go outside and breathe in good fresh air without worrying about decompression."

"Some people might go for that but I don't think we can just abandon Earth." Koenig said, "I for one will stay here at Moonbase Alpha until we either get back to our own solar system or a way presents itself to get everyone off the moon and back to Earth."

Just then the intercom sounded and Koenig activated it.

"We're about to enter the wormhole colonel." Major Morrow, Alpha's executive officer told him.

"Hang on everybody." Koenig told the others in his office moments before there was a brilliant flash of light and the entire moon shook as it was pulled into the massive wormhole, instantly transported across space before exiting the wormhole in another star system entirely. The change of system was noticeable immediately, the previous one the moon had been located in had had a red dwarf star at its centre that emitted relatively little light but this new system was centred around a much hotter star that emitted far more light, "We'll continue this another time." Koenig told the others gathered in his office and as he opened the wall that separated it from the main mission control room he added, "I want to find out if there's anything interesting in this system."

2.

Maya's pale eyes flickered open to reveal her dagger shaped pupils when the moon passed through the wormhole, the Psychon woman taking a few moments to realise where she was. Until arriving on the moon the previous day she like the rest of her people had been a slave of the reptilian Dorcons. Now according to her human hosts she was free. As a female Psychon Maya had strong empathic powers, though hers went beyond that and she had a limited ability to influence the actions of others as well and she immediately felt the deep sense of sorrow that came from the bunk above hers. However, she would not have needed this ability to know that something was wrong with her new room mate, Spacewoman First Class Francis Baker, thanks to the sound of sobbing.

Climbing out of bed Maya stood up and peered into the top bunk.

"Francis, what is the matter?" she asked when she saw Baker lay so that she faced away from Maya and obviously clutching something in her arms.

"I'm sorry I didn't mean to wake you." Baker replied as she rolled over and Maya saw that she was holding a electronic photograph frame, a common device among humans it seemed to her. The frames could store thousands of photographs or video clips and display whichever the owner wanted at any time.

"We just passed through a vortex." Maya said using the Dorcon term for a wormhole, "It was that what woke me. But why are you so sad?"

"It's today." Baker said and Maya frowned.

"Everyday is today. What makes this one so special?" she asked.

"Today was supposed to be my wedding day." Baker said and she showed Maya the picture in the frame of herself and her fiancée at the party to celebrate their engagement the previous Christmas.

"Your wedding day." Maya commented as she took the photo frame and studied the image, "The word wedding means to take a mate, yes?" she asked and Baker nodded, "You were obviously looking forward to it. Did John Koenig pick a man for you that your were happy with?"

"What? The colonel never met Mike." Baker said.

"Then who picked him for you? Your parents?"

"No. I chose to marry him when he asked me. People don't get told who they have to get married. Well it might still go on in some places but it's a horrible idea. Is that how your people do it?" Baker responded.

"It is now, yes. The Dorcons pick our mates so that we can provide them with the best possible slaves for the next generation. Just before I came here an ally of Lord Kollus had arrived with potential mates for me that he was going to chose one from. Their plan was to offer my children to the Archon in exchange for his favour." Maya explained and Baker pulled a disgusted look on her face.

"That's sick. What if you just said 'no'?" Baker said, "Or whatever guy the king lizard picked for you to marry?"

"If I had refused then Lord Kollus would simply have me restrained while the mating took place. If my mate refused then his seed would be taken surgically and I would be impregnated by artificial means."

"Oh that really is sick." Baker said.

"Francis is there some way I may help you be happier?" Maya asked.

"I'm sorry, no." Baker said then she leapt out of the bunk and landed beside Maya, "What I need is some way to keep my mind off my wedding. I'm going to go and ask if there are any duty shifts I can fill. I was supposed to be leaving the moon so I don't have any work to do around here now."

"I must also find out what my function is to be." Maya said.

"Great. Then we can both go and speak to Colonel Koenig together." Baker said.

"Very well." Maya responded and she started to walk towards the exit from Baker's quarters.

"Hey wait, are you just going to go out dressed like that?" Baker said, looking at the hospital gown that Maya had slept in, "Don't you have proper clothes?"

"Only the robe that I had when I came here." Maya said and she walked to where her robe was hung over a chair and picked it up. However, the robe had not been intended to cover Maya's body, instead the intention had been to use it to help her seduce Koenig and so it was short and lightweight.

"That covers even less than your gown." Baker said, shaking her head, "I'd lend you something but I don't think my clothes would fit you very well. Hang on, I think my robe will do and we can find someone else with clothes more your size."

"So what's out there?" Koenig asked as he descended the steps leading from his office to main mission. It was still early in the day and not all of the primary command staff were on duty yet, leaving more junior staff in some of the positions. Two senior officers that were present however, were Major Paul Morrow and Captain Sandra Benes, Alpha's chief communications officer.

"So far nothing colonel." Morrow responded as he reviewed the sensor feed on his console.
"How can there be nothing? We need a Lagrange point to form a wormhole and they only come about when there's something big enough to create one around. Two somethings in fact." Koenig said.
"Colonel I think I have the answer." Bergman said as he walked over to another console where a junior scanning officer sat, "We're at an interplanetary Lagrange point. Like the ones that exist between Earth and Mars or even the ones between the Earth and our own sun."
"Okay so what can you tell me about this system? Is there anything here we can use?" Koenig said.
"The star appears to be type-B main sequence star and there are planets of course." Bergman said.
"Colonel I'm picking up a transmission." Benes announced suddenly.
"Aimed at us?" Verdeschi asked from behind Koenig where he, Russell and Capston had stopped while the civilians other than Bergman had been shown out of main mission, "Perhaps our arrival has attracted some interest."
"No sir," Benes replied, "The source appears to be a planet about thirty light minutes away. They won't have seen us yet. This transmission must have-" and then she stopped suddenly.
"Captain what is it?" Koenig asked.
"Colonel I've got a match on the signal formatting. It's the same as that used by the aliens who attacked Earth." Benes announced.
"Alert all bases. Put all defences on standby." Koenig ordered.
"Colonel wait. We may have an opportunity here." Bergman said.
"What sort of opportunity?" Koenig asked.
"I'm looking at our readings of the planet that the signal is coming from and I don't think it's inhabited. Habitable, yes, but there is no civilisation there at the moment. I think that we are looking at an abandoned colony or outpost." Bergman explained.
"Abandoned? But there's still functional technology down there?" Koenig said and Bergman nodded.
"I think so colonel. Technology that we could potentially salvage for our own use." he said.
"Thirty light minutes is five hours travel in an Eagle." Morrow said and Koenig nodded.
"Professor I know you're only a civilian but-" he began.
"Oh I'll go colonel." Bergman interrupted, "I've spent my entire career studying the wreckage left behind by the aliens' attack on Earth. You can't expect me to pass up the opportunity to visit what could be an intact colony after all this time."
"I should go as well." Russell added and Koenig and Verdeschi both looked at her.
"You doctor?" Capston said, "I don't think that there will be anyone down there in need of your skills."
"Maybe not but we know that a lot of the aliens' technology had a biological aspect to it and that's more my area of expertise. Not to mention the possibility that some of the medicinal plants we want could be growing down there naturally."
"Very well." Koenig said and he looked towards the door of main mission just as the head of its reconnaissance section entered, "Ah Major Carter just in time. I need you to outfit a survey Eagle so that Doctor Russell and Professor Bergman can go the planet we've detected and determine whether there's anything there of use to us."
"Yes colonel. I'll see to it immediately." Carter replied and Koenig then turned back towards Russell and Bergman, "Draw whatever equipment you think you need. If we can get anything from that planet at all, even if it's just dirt for growing food in then I want it."

Baker took Maya to the area of Moonbase Alpha where the GDF's commissioned officers were quartered, her own enlisted status getting them access to the public hallways and then she quickly found a door that was labelled 'LT. ALEXANDER'. She pressed the intercom beside the door but there was no response and so she pressed it again, holding the button down.

"Okay! I'm coming." a voice yelled out from the other side and then soon after the door slid open to reveal Alpha's chief traffic controller in her pyjamas and with her hair messed up, "This had better be good Baker." she said as she blinked from the strong light of the hallway while her quarters remained in darkness, "I was on late watch and didn't finish until four this morning."

"Oh, right. Sorry lieutenant but Maya really needs your help." Baker said and Alexander looked at Maya.

"Maya? Oh right. We haven't met. I'm Tanya Alexander now what can I do for you?" she asked.

"Maya needs some clothes." Baker said.

"Yes she does. Come on in." Alexander said as she stepped away from the door and turned on the lights in her quarters. Then she walked over to her bed and leapt face down onto it, "The wardrobes are over there grab what you need but keep it quiet." she said.

"Are you sure this is a good idea Francis?" Maya asked quietly, "She is not happy about being disturbed."

"I heard that and I'll be even less happy if you woke me up for nothing. Now see what there is that will fit you. Just remember that you're not an officer so don't even think about taking a uniform."

"Let's see what there is." Baker said as she walked up to the nearest wardrobe and opened it, "I wish this stuff would fit me." she muttered as she then began to search through the contents of the wardrobe, "Maya do you see anything you like?"

"I do not know. I've never had to chose what to wear before." she replied and Alexander suddenly sat up. "Seriously? Something has to be done about that." she said, frowning and then as she dropped back onto the bed she added, "Don't forget to check the other wardrobes as well."

Maya looked along the wall that had the wardrobes built into it and saw that there was also one that was free standing. This was black in colour rather than the white of the ones built into the wall of Alexander's quarters and Maya headed for this. The wardrobe was locked but the key was in the lock and she turned it before opening the door to look inside.

"This clothing does not look very practical." she said.

"Whoa!" Alexander exclaimed, leaping up off her bed and rushing over to Maya, "No, not from there." she said as she pushed the wardrobe shut again and stood in front of it to block it, "This one is private."

"Maya look these will do." Baker said as she took some plain trousers and a short sleeved shirt with the phrase 'I WEIGH LESS IN ZERO-G' written on it from the wardrobe, "I'm sure we can find some more later on."

"You can change in the bathroom." Alexander added, glaring at Maya. Then after Maya had taken the clothes into the bathroom and closed the door behind her Alexander looked at Baker who just smiled back at her, "Not one word Francis. Or else." she said, "Oh and she can keep the pants and shirt since I'm guessing she won't be wearing anything underneath."

"Thanks lieutenant. Sorry we woke you." Baker said.

"You and me both."

Two of Alpha's pilots in space suits were waiting for Russell and Bergman when they arrived at the launch pad where the survey Eagle waited to take them to the alien planet. Each man had a name label on his suit and Russell saw that these read Collins and Mayweather.

"Doctor Russell the ship is prepped and ready. All the equipment is loaded aboard." Collins said.

"Good Let's get going then. I'm guessing that time is of the essence. Right professor?" she replied.

"Well my current estimate gives us seventy-two hours before the moon is drawn back into the wormhole but that is subject to change." Bergman said.

"We can have you there in five. That leaves you two days to have a look around and for us to get back with a margin of safety." Mayweather said.

"Off we got then." Russell added and the four of them entered the boarding tube and boarded the waiting Eagle.

While the two astronauts headed for the cockpit Russell and Bergman made their way into the Eagle's survey module, effectively a small mobile laboratory with enough computing power to analyse the data collected by the vessel's enhanced sensors without needing to feed it all back to Alpha and wait for a response. Bergman sat down at the first console he came to and was starting to strap himself in when he saw Russell open what turned out to be an arms locker and take out a stun gun.

"Should I have one of those as well?" Bergman asked as Russell was fixing the weapon to her belt.

"Can you use one professor?" she asked.

"Actually yes. It may surprise you to know but I have been trained in the use of small arms." Bergman said.

"I didn't know you were in the military." Russell said as she then took a second stun gun from the locker before closing it again.

"It was in my college days as an undergraduate." Bergman said at the same time as he took the stun gun from Russell's offered hand, "I decided to join the officer reserve corps. In fact that is how I met my wife."

"She was in the reserve corps as well?" Russell said.

"No, she was attending an anti-military demonstration at the military base I was on duty at during one of my summer vacations. Her boyfriend at the time had persuaded her to go and while there he decided to try and hit me with his placard. He missed and I shot him with a stun gun much like this one. He screamed, fell backwards and tried to steady himself by grabbing hold of my future wife. Unfortunately for them both all he managed to do was rip off her dress and to cut a long story short by the end of the day she decided that she liked the man who had given her his jacket more than the one who left her standing in public in her underwear." Bergman explained and Russell smiled.

"You're a true gentleman professor." she said she sat down at another console.

"Stand by for take off." Mayweather announced from the cockpit and a few moments later the Eagle lifted off the launch pad and began to accelerate towards the source of the alien beacon.

Bergman already had all of the data gathered by Alpha's own sensors and he began to add to this with the Eagle's as soon as it had taken off, going over every bit of data that could tell him what the aliens had used this planet for and why they might have abandoned it.

"Anything interesting professor?" Russell asked after he had been that this for some time.

"Interesting? Yes. Useful? No, unfortunately not." he answered.

"Why not?" Russell said.

"The signal still looks like a repeating beacon broadcasting at intervals of just over four seconds but the data appears to be encrypted which is odd for a beacon. Normally you want someone to be able to read one of those easily but I can't make out any of the characters in this signal properly." Bergman explained.

"Perhaps the computers at Alpha would have more luck." Russell suggested, "The GDF has been able to break some of the alien cyphers used in the war."

"Yes, perhaps it's worth a try." Bergman said and Russell activated the Eagle's communication system from her console.

"This is survey Eagle one calling Moonbase Alpha main mission. Professor Bergman would like you to run the beacon through cryptography. He says that it looks to be in code and he can't break it form here." she transmitted and then she looked at her instruments to get an exact fix on the moon before she turned back to Bergman and added, "That will take about twenty minutes to reach Alpha." she said.

"And more than that for a reply to reach us as we continue to get further away from the moon." Bergman commented, "Who knows, I may have figured it out myself by the time they reply."

3.

"Kano see what computer can come up with." Koenig said when he had finished listening to the transmission from the Eagle.

"Yes colonel." the head of Alpha's technical section responded.

It was then that Morrow noticed that Baker and Maya had arrived in main mission and were standing just inside the main entrance.

"What are you two doing here?" he asked, walking over to meet them.

"We both need to speak to Colonel Koenig but we couldn't get through to him." Baker said.

"I'm not surprised he's very busy. Is this important?" Morrow said.

"We want to help." Maya told him.

"Neither of us has any work around here. I need something to get my mind off my wedding and Maya needs to know where she fits into life around here." Baker said and Morrow looked at the computer tablet he held.

"I'll see what I can do." he said and he walked over to where Koenig was speaking with Benes, "Excuse me colonel." he said.

"Yes major?"

"Spacewoman Baker and the Psychon woman would like to see you. They've been trying to get in touch but-

"Yes I know." Koenig interrupted, "I saw the messages but haven't been able to get around to them yet."

"You need a new adjutant. Morrow commented and Koenig nodded then looked across main mission.

"One that's not working for Red Mars? I'll see them now. Kano and Benes can deal with the beacon." he said. Then he waved at Baker, directing her towards the steps leading up to his office. Baker nodded and in turn beckoned for Maya to accompany her into Koenig's office.

"Ladies, take a seat." Koenig said as he sat down and used his comlock to close the wall diving the office form main mission, "What can I do for you?"

"Colonel I want to be back on duty." Baker told him.

"I had been planning on just having you replace your friend Harriet Thomas when her leave would have been over at the end of the week." Koenig replied, "Until then I was giving you the time off considering what's happened."

"That's the point colonel, I can't stand sitting in my quarters and just thinking about my wedding." Baker said.

"It was today wasn't it?" Koenig said and Baker nodded.

"I have seen the name Harriet Thomas in your quarters." Maya said, "She was your room mate, yes?"

"She was also going to be my maid of honour. That's why she was back on Earth. Her leave started a week before I was due to finish." Baker said.

"And it would have ended at the start of next week. She was another of the staff in main mission so I was just going to drop Baker's name into the rota in her place from then on." Koenig said, "If you really want to come back to work early though-

"I do. I need to." Baker said.

"In that case I suggest speaking with Captain Kano. He's trying to run an alien beacon through computer so he may need some help." Koenig said.

"I also need to know what role is expected of me Colonel Koenig." Maya added, "Francis has already informed me that you will not be selecting a mate for me."

"No, that's not how we do things around here." Koenig said, glancing at Baker, "As for your role I would like to know more about you before I can offer you a position. Firstly the fact that you already seem fluent in English."

"Yes, it is not far removed from my own language and I was able to determine the rest from your messages and hearing you speak." Maya said.

"That's what interests me. Can you do that with any language you hear?"

"It is what the Outsiders intended Colonel Koenig. When the Dorcons first arrived on our home world it was female Psychons that were able to understand their demands. The males learned the Dorcon language later on." Maya said.

"So if we encounter other alien species you'll be able to communicate with them?" Koenig asked.

"Providing I can hear them speak enough, yes. It would help to be able to listen to them in person though a video message like the ones you sent to the Dorcons would also do. It would just take a while longer." Maya said.

"Well then in that case if you agree then I would like to bring you onboard as an adviser and translation expert. I'm sure you know more about what's out here than anyone else on the moon." Koenig said.

"If that is your desire Colonel Koenig then-" Maya began.

"No Maya, you're not a slave. You have a choice about what you do now." Koenig interrupted, "If you want to stay on the moon then you can. If you want to leave at any point then we can drop you off."

"But does everyone else here not follow your orders at all times?" Maya asked.

"When on duty, yes. But the people here are volunteers. They may not have signed up to a trip through outer space but they joined the Global Defence Force knowing that there was a command structure they had to follow." Koenig told her, "If working for me isn't what you want then you can find something else to do."

"Then I would like to help you Colonel Koenig." Maya said, "I will tell you all I know about the worlds you visit and I will try to help you understand the creatures you encounter."

"Thank you Maya." Koenig said and then he looked back at Baker, "Is she okay staying in your quarters for now?" and Baker nodded.

"Yes colonel, but I think we need to get her some more clothes. I don't think Lieutenant Alexander will appreciate Maya just borrowing hers all the time." she said.

"I do not think I would like to wear all of her clothing anyway." Maya added, "The wardrobe I looked inside-"

"Err, we don't talk about what's in that wardrobe Maya." Baker said before Maya could describe what she had seen.

"Ah, Tanya Alexander's forbidden black closet of mystery." Koenig said, "No Maya, what she keeps in there is not suitable attire for main mission."

"Then you have seen it also?" Maya asked.

"Err no." Koenig replied, "But I have heard the same stories that everyone else has. Now Spacewoman Baker, before you ask Captain Kano if he has any work for you I want you to take Maya here to the quartermaster's and get her sorted out with some clothing. Basic combat fatigues ought to do, just ask Captain Keynes if-" and then he stopped suddenly, "Sorry. I still keep forgetting that she's not with us any more."

"Francis why did the mention of that person upset you?" Maya asked, looking at Baker.

"I'm fine." Baker replied.

"But I could tell that-" Maya began.

"Alyson Keynes was working for the terrorist group that caused the nuclear explosion that initially pulled the moon into a wormhole Maya." Koenig explained and Baker frowned.

"She also kidnapped me to use me as a hostage so she could escape. Thousands of people died because of her and she should be shot for it." she added angrily.

"We haven't had the court martial yet but Alyson Keynes will probably spend the rest of her life in prison." Koenig said.

"You will not execute her for her acts Colonel Koenig?" Maya asked.

"Earth doesn't have the death penalty any more." Koenig said, "That's not something I'm planning on changing."

"More's the pity." Baker added.

"Go and find a quartermaster Maya. I'm sure that they'll have plenty of clothes that fit you. Then later on after you've been paid you might want to think about buying yourself something that doesn't come in camo."

"Professor are you seeing this?" Russell said as she studied the results of the Eagle's sensor seep of the atmosphere of the planet they were heading for.

"Yes, very Earth-like. A little more CO-two than Earth but nowhere near danger levels." Bergman replied, "Promising for obtaining the resources we were discussing at the meeting earlier. An Eagle equipped with a gas scoop could collect tonnes of nitrogen from the atmosphere even if the biosphere itself turns out to be incompatible with our needs." then he heard a chirping sound from his console and he looked to see what it was trying to alert him to, "This is amazing." he said, a smile spreading across his face.

"What is professor?" Russell asked.

"Our sensors have detected an artificial satellite orbiting the planet. Numerous ones in fact and there are energy readings coming from within them. Do you know what this means doctor?" Bergman said and he went on to provide the answer to his own question before Russell could try, "It means that we may actually be able to study intact alien technology. Almost everything left over after the war was damaged in some way. Only the most basic of devices carried by their infantry was ever taken intact. Every ship was shot down first and every vehicle wrecked. The greatest prize, their dreadnought, was completely destroyed by the soldiers that boarded it during the final battle of the war."

Then the console let out a distinct 'ping' followed a few second later by another.

"Something else in orbit professor?" Russell said.

"No. The satellite just scanned us." Bergman replied.

"Hey," Mayweather then said over the intercom, "have you seen those satellites? They just lit us up with lidar."

"Yes we were just-" Russell began before Collins interrupted.

"They just locked on. I'm taking evasive action." he exclaimed and the Eagle lurched as he fired its manoeuvring thrusters to change its facing before he fired the main engines again to alter the craft's heading.

While Collins was attempting to take evasive action the nearby alien satellites were turning to face the Eagle and all of a sudden one of them emitted a sudden directed blast of energy that struck the craft towards its rear where its main fusion reactor was located and once again the Eagle shook. Seconds later the door leading into the air lock in front of the survey module slid open and Mayweather came running in with a fire extinguisher in his hands

"We're hit. We've got a fire in the reactor and the automatic suppression isn't working." he called out and he ran the full length of the module to the door at the rear leading to the reactor section while both Russell and Bergman got out of their seats to take more fire extinguishers from their mountings on the walls. However, just as Mayweather opened the door there was a sudden explosion and he was thrown backwards as flames shot into the module.

In the cockpit Collins saw most of the system status displays suddenly drop to zero readings as power to them was lost, the emergency supply only able to provide limited power to a handful of key systems

"Alpha this is survey Eagle one. We're under fire by alien weapon satellites. I've lost main power and can't make it back. We're going in." he transmitted, knowing that by the time his call for help reached Moonbase Alpha the Eagle would have already either crashed on the surface of the planet or been completely destroyed by the orbiting alien weapon platforms.

Bergman then appeared in the cockpit door, steadying himself against the frame as the Eagle continued to shudder.

"Mayweather's hurt." he said, "Doctor Russell is seeing to him now but he's been badly burned. We need to get him back to Moonbase Alpha if he's going to have any chance of survival."

"Frankly prof I'm not sure any of us will be making it back. We're caught in the planet's gravitational pull and its all I can do to keep us at a suitable angle for atmospheric entry. Now sit down and strap in. This is going to be rough."

Bergman sat down in the co-pilot's seat and fastened the safety harness as Collins struggled with the controls. The alien satellites apparently no longer registered the crippled spacecraft as a threat and so while it plummeted towards the planet below they returned to their idle state.

"Captain Collins, I'm still picking up the alien beacon. Can you try and land us near it?" Bergman said when he saw the familiar energy trace of the beacon that had drawn them to this planet shown on one of the few displays that remained active.

"Yeah I've been trying to follow it." Collins replied, "It'll make it easier for Alpha to find us. Though when you say 'land' I think you're being somewhat optimistic about our condition here."

The Eagle began to shake violently as it entered the planet's atmosphere and through the forward viewports Bergman and Collins both saw the nose of the ship began to glow as the friction caused it to heat up.

"Victor I could do with a hand back here." Russell called out and Bergman looked at Collins.

"I think we're over the worst." he said, "We're at sixty thousand metres and dropping at about five hundred per second."

"Very well." Bergman said, releasing his harness and rushing back into the survey module where Russell was attempting to use a medical kit from its emergency supplies to treat the unconscious Mayweather,

"Captain Collins says we have less than two minutes until impact. What do you want me to do?"

"Help me get him strapped into a seat." Russell replied and between them they lifted Mayweather into the nearest seat and fastened the harness before returning to their own seats and securing themselves just moments before the Eagle struck the surface of the planet.

Collins had been able to bring the Eagle in at a relatively shallow angle and so the four landing struts were the first parts of the ship to make contact with the ground, being ripped off instantly before the belly of the Eagle itself hit the ground. The combination of the Eagle's mass and velocity left a gouge in the ground as rock and dirt was thrown upwards into the air by the force of the impact and vegetation was ripped out of the ground and flung around as well until the spacecraft finally came to a complete stop just as it ploughed into a river with the forward section now mostly submerged while the still burning reactor section and main engines stuck up out into the air.

Inside the Eagle Russell was left shaken by the force of the impact and she did not know how long it took for her to regain her senses but when she did she could feel the coldness of water around her feet as it poured into the ship from somewhere.

"Victor, are you okay? Victor!" she shouted as she looked towards the console where Bergman had been sat but was unable to see him.

"Down here." he croaked from behind the console, "I'm trapped."

"Hold on I'm coming." Russell said, releasing her harness and climbing across the wrecked interior of the Eagle to reach him. Looking over the console she saw that Bergman's chair had collapsed when the side of

the module had been torn open and it was through this hole that the module was flooding. Part of the wall had come away when the hull was breached and now one of the beams that gave the module its physical strength was wedged against Bergman's console and pinning his leg beneath it and he was gasping for breath. Russell pulled at the fallen section of wall, attempting to just lift it clear of Bergman but it remained wedged in place, "I'll be right back." she said and she made her way back across the survey module to an emergency equipment locker. This held tools and supplies intended to be of use in a variety of planetary environments as well as aboard the Eagle itself and so some of them seemed out of place on a spacecraft. Among these anachronistic tools was a large axe constructed from a single piece of machined metal for strength and with the grip coated in an insulating plastic. It was this that Russell took from the locker and she carried it back towards where Bergman lay trapped.

"Wait!" Bergman snapped when he saw this, his eyes wide open, "Do you really need to take my legs?"

"What?" Russell said, frowning before she realised how it must look to Bergman than she was standing over him with a tool designed to chop through thick objects, "No professor, I'm going to try and use it as a lever." she told him.

"Oh. That is a relief." Bergman said, still struggling to breathe.

Climbing back over the console, Russell slid the axe under the wall section trapping Bergman and then lifted the end of the handle. This produced a grinding sound as the piece of metal ground against the console itself.

"Professor Bergman, can you get your legs out?" she asked and Bergman used his arms to drag himself out of the way of the console, wincing in pain before Russell saw that he was clear and let the fallen wall section drop back to the floor with a 'crash', "Victor, you're injured." she added when she saw him in such obvious pain and she rushed to his side to examine him, "Does this hurt?" she asked, pressing gently against his side and Bergman nodded rapidly.

"Very much so." he gasped.

"I think you've broken a couple of ribs. Stay put while I check on the others." Russell said and she left Bergman once again to check on the two astronauts who had flown the Eagle here.

Mayweather was still strapped into the chair he had been in when the Eagle crashed but now the chair itself had been torn free of its mounting and he had been thrown against a nearby wall and Russell could tell instantly that he had broken his neck and been killed. Hurrying towards the front of the Eagle, steadying herself on the wreckage as she navigated the sloping and badly damaged interior she found that the further forwards she went the deeper the flood water inside the Eagle became. More worryingly the closer to the cockpit she got the more the water took on a reddish tinge to it. When she reached the cockpit she found that Collins was also still strapped into his seat and that the water now came up to his neck so that with his head tilted forwards his face was submerged. Russell quickly reached down to lift his head up in the hope that he had not yet drowned but as she did so she saw the source of the discolouration of the flood water inside the Eagle. The front of the cockpit module had caved in on impact and debris from this had impaled Collins through his chest. Now his blood flowed freely into the water around him.

Although all of the flight controls were obviously smashed beyond repair Russell still hoped that some of the underlying systems might still be functional and she took her comlock from her belt and checked the wireless connection to the Eagle's communication system.

EAGLE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM ONLINE. SYSTEM STRENGTH 32%.

"It'll have to do." Russell said to herself before activating the transmitter using her comlock, "This is Doctor Helena Russell aboard survey Eagle one to Moonbase Alpha. We have crashed on the alien planet. The Eagle's hull is breached and it is taking on water. Astronauts Collins and Mayweather were both killed in the crash and Professor Bergman is injured. We are going to abandon the vessel and seek shelter outside. Send help. Russell out." and then she tapped the buttons on the comlock so that her message would be stored in the Eagle's communication system and continue to repeat until either someone specifically told it to stop or the system ceased functioning entirely.

Returning to the survey module Russell found that Bergman had managed to get to his feet and was supporting himself on the side of a console.

"Victor you should be careful." she said.

"I was concerned that if I stayed on the floor then I would soon find myself underwater." he replied and Russell nodded.

"Okay. I've sent a distress signal but we need to get out before the Eagle floods entirely. Do you think you can climb to the top hatch?" she asked.

"Do I have a choice?" Bergman responded and he started to move towards the air lock module where the Eagle's dorsal and ventral hatches were also located. Meanwhile Russell went to retrieve the axe she had used to free Bergman from under the console and then returned to the emergency equipment locker to gather as much equipment as she could carry, removing rope, emergency rations, survival packs and first aid kits. After loading all of these into a bag Russell also tried the arms locker again on her way to the airlock and

she removed a high calibre magnetic accelerator carbine. Intended to fulfil a similar role to an old fashioned shotgun, the carbine could fire a wide variety of canister rounds that would break open upon firing to release their contents as well as solid slugs and electrical shock rounds that provided a longer ranged non-lethal alternative to the stun guns she and Bergman already carried. She inserted one magazine and a power cell into the weapon before slinging it over her shoulder and then stuffing as much extra ammunition and spare power cells into the bag with the other equipment before carrying all of this to the air lock where Bergman waited for her.

"If the Eagle is underwater then when you open that upper hatch the pressure will release and the entire ship will flood almost immediately." he pointed out.

"So we drown a little quicker." Russell commented as she lowered the ladder leading to the dorsal hatch and then began to climb, leaving the axe at the bottom to keep both hands free, "Ready?" she asked, looking down the ladder and Bergman nodded back up at her. Russell hit the control to open the hatch but nothing happened and so instead she released the cover to the emergency manual control, "This could be tricky." she said before pulling the lever inside and there was a 'thunk' as the motor used to open and close the hatch was disconnected from it, enabling her to simply pull the hatch open by hand. This revealed to her and Bergman that the Eagle was not completely submerged as they looked out of the hatch to see a paler blue sky but as they had known would happen the open hatch provided a means for the air inside the Eagle to escape and the water flooding in began to do so at an accelerated rate.

"Here, take the axe." Bergman said, passing the axe up to Russell and as soon as she had climbed through the hatch he began to climb the ladder after her. Each rung he pulled himself up brought another jolt of pain in his chest but Bergman was still able to make it up to the hatch where Russell helped him out onto the top of the Eagle.

Sitting on the framework that connected the two end sections of the Eagle together as well as holding the central module, Russell and Bergman were just above the surface of the water around the Eagle but they could see that the craft's main engine modules had not entered the river, instead still being over dry land at the river bank.

"We'll have to climb down from there and then find somewhere we can construct a shelter." Russell said, "Hopefully Alpha will get my distress call in about half an hour but it will take at least another five for them to reach us here. Assuming they can find a way to get past those satellites."

"Oh I'm sure that Colonel Koenig will find a way to manage that." Bergman said, "Frankly doctor I'm more concerned about what we might be sharing this planet with. I don't mind telling you that I'm glad we've got these weapons."

The survey Eagle's descent and impact had not gone unnoticed and a solitary Dorcon soldier stood on a rock and used a set of image intensifiers to try and survey the crash site. However, the Eagle came down out of sight and so the reptilian alien soldier lowered the device and turned around to return to his camp where the rest of the crew of the crashed attack ship waited for his return.

"You have something to report Hartak?" the leader of the group said when he saw the scout returning.

"Yes Unit Leader Grast. We are not alone here." Hartak replied.

"That noise?" Grast asked and Hartak dipped his head to agree.

"Was another spacecraft brought down by the weapons left behind by the Outsiders." he said.

"One of ours?" a third Dorcon added, "A rescue ship?"

"No." Grast said, "It is too soon for our absence to have been noticed by Lord Tollun."

"It was not a Dorcon vessel unit leader." Hartak said, "I did not recognise the type but it is definitely alien."

"There could be survivors," another Dorcon said, "and more aliens on the way."

"We cannot allow them to gain control of the Outsiders' facility before Lord Tollun sends help." Grast said,

"Gather your weapons. We will investigate this alien ship and make certain that none of its crew remain alive on this planet. Then if any more aliens arrive we will kill them as well."

9.

"Colonel Koenig we're getting a distress signal from survey Eagle one." Benes called out when Collins' last transmission finally reached Moonbase Alpha. Koenig looked up from his desk and got out of his seat when he heard this.

"Play it." he responded as he rushed down the steps into main mission and came to a halt right behind Benes.

"Alpha this is survey Eagle one. We're under fire by alien weapon satellites. I've lost main power and can't make it back. We're going in." Collins' voice said and Koenig turned to the tracking station where Alexander had now returned to duty.

"Lieutenant are you picking any of these satellites up?" he said.

"They appeared on our sensors about a minute ago." Alexander told him, "They must have been in an inactive or standby mode before that but as soon as they turned on their active lidar they started broadcasting." then she saw the thermal trace of the survey Eagle entering the planet's atmosphere on Alpha's sensors, "I'm picking up their atmospheric entry trail now colonel. It looks like their angle is good so they won't burn up or bounce back into space."

"No but if their Eagle is damaged they might not make it all the way down before it breaks up." Carter pointed out and Koenig glared at him.

"We assume they made it down safely until it's proven that they didn't." Koenig said, "Carter I want you to work with Alexander and Kano to find us a way around those satellites then equip a rescue Eagle to go and get. Remember that we're on the clock here. We aren't leaving anyone behind when that wormhole drags us back in."

The three named officers then gathered together beside a large display at the side of main mission so that they could plan the rescue operation. meanwhile Koenig himself stayed where he was, looking at the big screen that showed an image of the alien planet and now also the satellites that had been detected orbiting it.

"Colonel we're receiving another signal from the survey Eagle." Benes told him and he quickly turned his head towards her.

"Well what are you waiting for captain? Put them through." he told her and Benes started the message playing.

"This is Doctor Helena Russell aboard survey Eagle one to Moonbase Alpha. We have crashed on the alien planet. The Eagle's hull is breached and it is taking on water. Astronauts Collins and Mayweather were both killed in the crash and Professor Bergman is injured. We are going to abandon the vessel and seek shelter outside. Send help. Russell out."

Koenig smiled.

"Don't you worry Helena. Help is on the way." he said to himself quietly.

Russell supported Bergman as they walked across the alien landscape. The environment was suitable for life and a full ecosystem had developed here. However, with no knowledge of the chemical make up of any of the indigenous life Russell wanted to avoid it as much as possible.

"That looks like a cave up there." she said, looking at the side of a rocky hill where an opening was visible, "It'll provide us with shelter."

Bergman nodded.

"Assuming that it's not already home to something." he said.

"That's why I made sure to bring a bigger gun." Russell replied, "Wait here while I check it out." and she helped Bergman to sit down before leaving him with all of the emergency supplies she had been carrying to approach the cave alone with the carbine from the Eagle's arms locker in her hands.

There was a compact flash light mounted on the side of the carbine and Russell switched this on at the entrance to the cave so that she could see deeper into it. As soon as she did this the beam illuminated a swarm of small scaled creatures that let out a collective squeal and fled from the light to reveal the carcass of a larger animal about the size of a horse that they had been feeding on. Russell winced when the stench of this reached her nose but nevertheless she stepped into the cave to investigate its potential further. Inside the cave walls were largely bare rock that had a sandy colour marked with the occasional mineral veins that produced irregular stripes of dark red and blue but the walls were clean of any form of vegetation. The small creatures whose meal Russell had disturbed were still present in the cave but each time she shone the flash light at them they fled, clearly affected either psychologically or physically by exposure to strong sources of light. All of a sudden she heard the distinctive sound of a stun firing from behind her and Russell spun around.

"Professor!" she exclaimed before she came rushing out of the cave, hearing the sound of a second shot before she emerged to see Bergman pointing his stun gun towards a group of quadrupedal creatures about half the size of the dead creature in the cave. These had long tapered snouts that terminated in circular mouths surrounded by sharp teeth while where their heads met their necks the creatures possessed a ring of eyes that went all the around their snouts. One of the creatures was on the ground but there were still another four of them advancing towards where Bergman waited.

Levelling her carbine Russell took aim at the creature closest to Bergman, hoping that it might be some kind of pack leader and she fired. The weapon boomed as the canister broke the sound barrier before breaking open to release a cloud of flechettes that tore into the creature's flesh and it roared in pain as it fell over and began to convulse. The reaction of the other creatures was immediate as they turned on the injured one and charged at it to rip at its flesh with their fangs.

"Come on professor. I think we'll be safer in the cave than out here." Russell said as she hurried to Bergman's side.

"Yes I think so too." Bergman responded and after Russell had picked up their supplies they made their way to the cave as fast as Bergman's injuries would allow while the local predators indulged in their cannibalism behind them.

"Not too fast professor." Russell said as they reached the cave opening and she pointed her carbine into the cave ahead of them, letting its flash light scare of the smaller creatures that had returned to their meal, "They seem to be afraid of the light. Once we make a fire we shouldn't have any trouble from them."

"Good. Now may I sit down for a moment? I'm finding it hard to breathe." Bergman said.

"Yes of course. Is the pain from your ribs getting worse?" Russell asked as she helped Bergman to sit by the wall of the cave.

"Somewhat, yes. But I think I need to take my medication as well. I'm just not used to this physical activity any more." Bergman said and while he reached into his pocket for a container of pills Russell took a container of water from their survival equipment and handed it to him.

"Victor, how many of those pills do you have?" Russell asked.

"I brought enough for three days doctor." Bergman answered before placing two in his mouth and washing them down with the water, "Of course if we're here any longer than that running out of my medication will be the least of our worries." and Russell nodded.

"The moon will be pulled back into the wormhole and we'll be left behind." she said.

"Exactly." Bergman said and then he looked at the half eaten animal carcass that was further back inside the cave, "Do you have any suggestions for what we do with that?" he asked.

"It looks a bit heavy to move." Russell replied, "It's obviously starting to rot so I'm thinking of trying to burn it. The fire will get rid of the smell and as I said we need it to keep the smaller creatures away. They might just be scavengers that feed of dead animals but we can't be sure that they aren't some form of predator as well." Bergman nodded.

"Now we just need to see if the GDF survival packs contain any marshmallows for us to toast over the flames." he said and Russell smiled.

Following the direction in which Hartak had seen the survey Eagle go as it plummeted out of the sky, the Dorcon soldiers that had survived the destruction of their own attack ship eventually found the crash site.

"Hartak was right. That is definitely not one of our ships unit leader." one of them said as they looked at the spine and engines of the Eagle as they stuck up out of the water.

"Did you doubt me Krasan?" Hartak asked.

"I am not familiar with the design. We should proceed with caution." Grast said, "If we are fortunate then at least we will be able to present Lord Tollun with this alien technology to make up for our failure to secure the Outsiders' base."

The Dorcons picked up their pace, hurrying towards the crashed Eagle while keeping an eye out for both survivors of the crash and local predators. The groove that the Eagle had created in its wake as it crashed had partially flooded as water from the river flowed into it and it was easy to see from far away. However, it was only as the Dorcon troops got closer that they saw more impressions in the river bank beside the Eagle and they instantly knew what these meant.

"Tracks." Grast said, the unit leader coming to a halt and looking around him just in case any of the Eagle's crew were lying in wait for his men to ambush them.

"Then there were survivors." Hartak said.

"Yes, this is fortunate." Grast replied, "If any of the crew survived then some of the technology must have also."

"And they will be able to tell Lord Tollun how it works." another Dorcon added.

"Should we follow them unit leader?" Krasan asked.

"Not yet. Hartak, Morl, investigate the wreck. We will wait here and keep watch. Then we will hunt down the

survivors." Grast ordered and the two Dorcon soldiers made their way along the river bank to the wrecked Eagle.

"How do we get inside?" Marl said as Hartak looked at the start of the tracks where Russell and Bergman had climbed down the framework that enveloped the rear section of the Eagle where its reactor was housed. "We climb." Hartak replied and the two Dorcons began to scale the framework. They did not see the dorsal hatch when they reached the top of the Eagle but it was obvious that they would have to make their way along the back of the Eagle to find a way inside and they continued to grab hold of the framework as they moved forwards.

"A hatchway." Morl said when he saw the Eagle's dorsal hatch just about sticking up above the water.

"This vessel has flooded." Hartak said when he saw that there was also water inside the Eagle, "I will investigate." and he passed his weapon to Morl before removing his equipment harness and clothing so that they would not get wet. Once he was prepared to enter the water and with just a waterproof flash light in his hands Hartak lowered himself through the open hatchway until only his head was above water. Give me five narrans. If I am not back out by then come in and get me." he said to Morl. Then he took a deep breath and closed his mouth and nostrils before disappearing beneath the water.

Inside the Eagle Hartak turned on his light and looked around the air lock module. He could see the space suits and helmets stored in here but it was obvious that no-one was inside any of them so he swam downwards, heading for the front of the vessel. He soon reached the cockpit where Collins' body still sat strapped into the pilot's seat only now there were several underwater scavengers picking at his flesh. Even though the pilot was obviously dead Hartak paused here for a while to study his body. Hartak had never seen a human before but like almost every Dorcon he had encountered Psychon slaves and the similarity was obvious. The most obvious difference between this body and a Psychon was its colouration, all Psychons possessed pale skin and eyes with dagger-like pupils. On the other hand both the skin and eyes of this body were dark while the pupils were round. Hartak then turned and kicked to propel himself from the cockpit, swimming back towards the air lock module where he had entered the Eagle and from there made his way into the survey module behind it. There he found Mayweather's body and although his lighter skin was similar to that of a Psychon he had the same darker eye colour and pupil shape as the first body he had seen. Hartak then swam further on until he reached the rear section of the Eagle only to find it filled with the wreckage of the main reactor. Deciding that it was time for him to leave the vessel and report back what he had found to Unit Leader Grast. As he was swimming back towards the air lock though he noticed the open arms locker and although he was no more familiar with human weaponry than with humans themselves he could tell what the purpose of the devices inside the locker was. Only the stun guns that looked more like squared off horseshoes than conventional pistols did not look like weapons as Hartak knew them but their presence beneath more obvious pistols and carbines made their function apparent. It was also clear to Hartak from the gaps in the locker that some of the weaponry it was supposed to contain had been removed. Reaching into the locker he found that he could just unhook one of the carbines from its mounting and remove it and with this in his hand he made his way back to the dorsal hatch.

Morl was still waiting for Hartak when he surfaced and opened his mouth and nostrils to suck in lungfuls of air.

"There are two bodies inside." he told, Morl, "They resemble Psychons but they are not. Plus they have weapons, look." and he tossed the carbine he had taken from the weapons locker onto the roof of the Eagle. "We must tell Unit Leader Grast at once." Morl replied as he helped Hartak out of the flooded Eagle, "He will want to examine this weapon for himself."

"I don't think that a re-entry glider is going to work." Carter said as he, Kano and Alexander continued to discuss the rescue mission, "Sure we might be able to use it to slip a team past the satellites to the surface but then what?" It can't take off again and we need to send in an Eagle to recover it as well as pick up Doctor Russell and the professor."

"It would need transporting by Eagle anyway." Kano pointed out, "Couldn't that ship just wait for the all clear to come in and pick them up?"

"Maybe. But if we're right about the way those satellites work then they come on line again as soon as they detect the glider's heat trail when it enters the atmosphere and we don't know how far the Eagle will have to stay from them to make sure it's not targeted.." Carter said as Koenig approached the group.

"How are things going?" Koenig asked.

"We have a rough plan but nothing for definite yet colonel." Kano answered.

"Damn it didn't I mention that we're on a clock here?" Koenig snapped. Then realising that he had been too harsh he began to apologise, "I'm sorry David but I-"

"It's okay colonel. It being Doctor Russell that's missing can't be easy for you." Kano interrupted.

"How about you just tell me what you do have?" Koenig asked.

"Given that the weapons satellites are using passive scanning we've been looking at our options to get a ship

past them running silent." Alexander said, "A special forces re-entry glider from Epsilon could get past but not back out. That will need an Eagle."

"And we can't get out of the planet's gravity well while running silent." Carter added, "That means we need to be able to shut them down."

"We've managed to identify more than sixty of the satellites in orbit already." Kano added, "We don't know their exact capabilities so an all out assault using Hawks is too risky."

"I don't want to end up losing more pilots than the two people we're trying to rescue either." Koenig replied.

"That just leaves us with the option of landing a team on the ground and having them locate the control centre for the satellites so that they can turn them off." Kano said.

"We're assuming that that is where the beacon is coming from." Carter said.

"Which is handily close to where my projections put the Eagle's point of impact." Alexander added.

"That all sounds like a plan to me." Koenig said, "Run silent past the satellites then shut them down from inside the network."

"There are a couple of problems with the plan though colonel." Carter said, "Firstly we don't know if there are more defences operating at a lower altitude. The second is more serious."

"More serious than being shot down?" Koenig commented.

"That's a chance we'd be taking in any combat situation colonel. This is a technical problem. Quite literally."

"Colonel we need someone who can figure out how the alien control system works. I can figure out how to operate any piece of human technology there is but we're talking about aliens who blended electronics with living matter. That's beyond my area of expertise." Kano said and Koenig winced.

"Professor Bergman is our expert." he said.

"Precisely," Kano replied, "and although we know he survived the crash we also know he's injured but not how badly. He may not be in any fit state to help shut down the system."

"Do you think Maya would know much about it colonel?" Carter asked.

"Not from what she told me about the way Psychons divide functions between their men and women. A male Psychon probably could but she's an empath, not an engineer." Koenig said.

"There is one other person on the moon that has spent a significant amount of time studying alien technology in person colonel." Alexander said.

"We can't bring her in on this though." Carter said.

"The alternative is that we wing it." Kano said, "I'll go anyway and hope that Professor Bergman is well enough to explain to me what to do."

"No." Koenig said, "David I want you to stay here at Alpha. The same goes for you Alexander. Major Carter you will fly the Eagle on this mission." then he looked across main mission and added, "Captain Benes you'll go as our computer expert. Maya may be of some use in translating so she can go and Baker as well since she's asked to be put back on duty. I'm also going to assign Master Sergeant Washington and a unit of his men as escorts just in case there are more defences on the ground."

"Colonel I'm willing to go but I'm not sure that Baker and I will be able to figure out what to do if any part of the system is malfunctioning. Even with Maya to translate for us." Benes said.

"I know." Koenig replied, "That's why I'm going to go and try to get us the only other expert we have." and he turned around and walked out of main mission.

"You know who he's talking about don't you?" Morrow said from his console, "Are you lot okay with that?"

"If the colonel orders me to work with the devil himself then I'll listen to anecdotes about hell all day." Carter said.

"How do you think Baker will react though?" Kano asked.

S.

"Hello again Colonel Koenig." Governor James said as Koenig stepped from the travel tube at Moonbase Theta.

"Governor I think we've met more in the past few days than we ever did before." Koenig replied, "You know why I'm here?"

"Yes colonel but I'm not sure if I think this is a good idea. The prisoner-" James said as she and Koenig were walking away from the travel tube towards the prison facility itself.

"Alyson Keynes has specialist knowledge that could be used to save the lives of two people governor. In the future her knowledge could also help us out of further situations." Koenig interrupted.

"Of course colonel, I understand that we are in an extraordinary situation that will require unusual methods but there have been issues with Miss Keynes herself." James said.

"What sort of problems governor?" Koenig asked.

"Miss Keynes attempted suicide last night colonel. She used a knife from her meal to cut her wrists. Fortunately for her we are holding her in the isolation wing to protect her from attack by the other prisoners and the guards check on her regularly. The medical staff here were able to close the wounds before she lost too much blood but we've had to take steps to make sure that she can't try to harm herself again." James explained.

"What sort of steps governor?" Koenig said.

"I think it's better if you just see for yourself colonel." James told him.

Governor James then escorted Koenig all the way to the isolation wing of the prison she administered. This part of the prison was reserved for convicts who were at a high risk of being targeted for attack by other inmates and so there were multiple security checkpoints to prevent anyone from the general prison population reaching this section of Theta. Although the prisoners in the isolation section were allowed to mix with one another James took Koenig to the cells themselves instead of the common area where most of the prisoners were gathered and she led him to a cell that was closed and locked.

"This is her cell." James said as she slid open the cover of a small vision block set into the otherwise solid door that blocked the doorway instead of a more mundane barred door like the one used in other wings of the prison. This was another precaution to protect the occupants of this wing, even if another prisoner made it all the way here they would not be able to attack anyone in the cells through a solid door, "Take a look. She won't be able to see you." James added, stepping away from the door and Koenig stepped up to peer through the tiny window.

Inside he could see almost all of the cell and he could see the basic furniture that it contained, none of which came as a surprise to him. However, it was Alyson Keynes herself that Koenig was startled to see. As a consequence of her being admitted to the prison's medical section her standard prison bodysuit had been replaced by a hospital gown. The reason she was still wearing this even after being returned to her cell was because she was physically unable to change her clothing, the prison staff having secured her wrists and ankles to her bed with padded cuffs to prevent her from trying to harm herself again. Even more surprising to Koenig though was the prominent gag that covered most of Keynes' face between her nose and chin.

"Was it really necessary to gag her?" he asked.

"She continued to demand to be allowed to see you colonel, even after she was restrained. The staff felt it necessary to do something about that. That's why I'm not sure that this is a good idea. It took being physically restrained like that to calm her down and I'm worried actually seeing you will be counter-productive." James explained and Koenig sighed.

"Well I came all the way from Moonbase Alpha so I may as well go inside now." Koenig said.

"Of course colonel. If that's what you want. I'll have a guard with you at all times." James told him.

"That won't be necessary governor." he replied, "Unless you're claiming that she can put the evil eye on me then I think I'll be quite safe on my own. Just have the guard wait here until I knock to be let out."

"Very well colonel. If those are your orders." James said and she nodded at the guard standing close by. This man then used his comlock to release the door to the cell and Koenig stepped inside.

"Hello Alyson." he said, "I think we should have a little chat." and then the door slammed shut behind him. Keynes lifted her head from her pillow and looked at Koenig as soon as he entered, initially letting out a muffled grunt as if she had forgotten that she was gagged and then she watched in silence as he walked towards her bed. Reaching underneath this he found the latch that enabled the top section to be raised up at an angle so that Keynes was in more of a sitting position. Then he collected a chair and then placed it at the end of the bed so that he could sit down where she could see him now that he had adjusted her bed. Koenig then activated the computer tablet he had brought with him.

"Two thousand, one hundred and sixty two people were killed in the explosion at Moonbase Mu. Including

Lieutenant Colonel Gorski and my personal friend of many years General Simmons. Added to that are the entire crew of the Anderson-class frigate *Landau* who died when their vessel crashed into Moonbase Eta after losing helm control after they were pulled into the same wormhole the destruction of Mu created. That crash also killed more than seven thousand people at Eta itself, including its entire command staff. Further to that you may have heard that we lost more good people at several bases when we were attacked by the Dorcons, the alien species that we now have almost two hundred of here at Theta. None of that could have happened without you giving Red Mars access to the weapon storage bunker at Mu. Am I correct?" Koenig said and he looked up from his tablet to look Keynes in the face where he could see tears forming in her eyes, "Well am I?" he added after waiting. Unable to speak Keynes nodded, "I saw your message by the way, the one where you told me that Red Mars had threatened to harm your sister and her family. The problem you have is that the threats made to you by Red Mars are not proportional to the harm that was caused as a consequence of your actions so you aren't going to get away with a legal defence of coercion Alyson. A court martial will inevitably mean that you spend the rest of your life in this cell or one like it. On the other hand I may be able to offer you a way out if you are willing to co-operate with me. So are you?" Keynes did not hesitate, nodding as soon as Koenig finished asking the question and he smiled. "Excellent. Now let me tell you what I want from you. We have arrived in a solar system that once appears to have been occupied by the same alien species that attacked Earth in the twenty-second century. A survey Eagle was sent to investigate one of the planets but it triggered some sort of automatic defence system and the Eagle was forced to crash. Both the flight crew were killed but we do know that Doctor Russell and Professor Bergman survived the impact and are now trapped on the planet. Carter, Kano and Alexander have come up with a plan to reach them but getting them off the planet again requires shutting down the defence system. Professor Bergman would probably know how to do that but we know that he's injured so he may not be in a fit state to be examining alien technology. So that just leaves you. You spent time with companies reverse engineering alien technology so you know how some of it works. The first part of the deal I'm offering you is that you go with the rescue team to the planet and help deactivate the defence system. Achieve that and when you get back to the moon you'll be confined to your quarters at Alpha instead of being brought back here. At your court martial you will plead guilty to all the charges of aiding and abetting terrorists and treason. In return you will again be placed under house arrest but you will also return as a civilian to your old duties in logistics. You always did have a flair for that and right now I need a good logistics and supply officer to keep the moon running. Of course the alternative is that you could turn me down, refuse to admit you are guilty to the court martial and get sent right back here." Koenig said and then he got back to his feet, "Let me know when you've made your mind up." he then turned to leave and at the moment he did Keynes let out another muffled cry, "So you'll take the deal?" Koenig asked, looking back over his shoulder and Keynes nodded at him furiously, "Good. I knew you would." he said before he walked up to the cell door and knocked on it. Moments later the door slid open and Koenig stepped out into the corridor, "Tell governor James that I want Alyson Keynes released into my custody immediately." he told the guard.

There were strict regulations concerning the transport of prisoners and so Koenig was issued with a stun gun from the armoury at Theta. He was just in the process of fixing this to his belt when a pair of stern looking female guards entered the room bringing Keynes in with them. Since Koenig had last seen her Keynes had been given back her form fitting prison bodysuit that was plain white in colour and had her prison serial number printed across her chest and back and she now also wore a simple pair of black lightweight boots that stood out against the bodysuit. Despite having been released from the bed she had been secured to her hands were still cuffed in front of her, connected to a belt around her waist and a set of leg irons limited how far apart her ankles could get to prevent her from trying to run away. For some reason the gag Koenig had seen on her in her cell was still in place as the guards marched her up to Koenig.

"We have the prisoner for you colonel." one of the guards said.

"Is all that necessary?" Koenig asked, looking at Keynes.

"Regulations colonel. The governor hasn't revoked any of the restraint instructions." the guard said.

"Fine. Do I need to sign anything?" Koenig said.

"Just here sir." the guard said and she handed Koenig her comlock, the screen showing a declaration that Koenig was accepting responsibility for Keynes' security. Koenig signed using his fingertip and then the guard nodded at him, "She's all yours sir." the guard added and then both of them left the room.

"Okay Alyson, let's get you out of here." Koenig said, taking her by the arm as he guided her to the exit. Koenig returned to the travel tube terminal with Keynes where they boarded the next tube car heading towards Alpha.

Koenig and Keynes were the only passengers aboard the car and Koenig sat her down first and then took the chair opposite her for himself as the doors slid shut automatically and he waited for the car to begin moving. This happened just a few seconds later, most of the acceleration force being cancelled out by the car's localised artificial gravity and inertial dampening. Koenig waited for a few more seconds and then

smiled at Keynes.

"Well I think we must be beyond Theta now so Governor James' orders can't override mine now." he said and he got up, crossed the inside of the car and reached around Keynes' head to release her gag.

"Thanks." she said, gasping as the rubber plug on the inside of the gag was removed from her mouth, "Please could I have some water to get rid of the taste?"

"Sure." Koenig said and he went to the rear of the car where a dispensing machine provided cold drinks.

When he returned he was about to sit down beside Keynes to her left when he changed his mind and moved to her right instead, "Probably better to sit where my weapon is out of your reach." he said as he sat down and he moved around the other side of her as he twisted open the bottle of water, "That's four dollars you owe me by the way."

"I'm sorry colonel. I left my wallet chained to a different set of handcuffs. Speaking of which could you-" Keynes replied, lifted her hands as far as her restraints would allow.

"No." Koenig interrupted, "Firstly you are still a prisoner and secondly Governor James never gave me a key. When we get back to Alpha someone from the security section will unlock your handcuffs when the time is right. In the meantime I'll hold the bottle for you." and he held the water in front of her face so that she could lean forwards to take a drink.

"Colonel I really am sorry for what I did. I just thought-" Keynes said after she had swallowed a mouthful of water but Koenig interrupted her again.

"Don't Alyson." he said, "You'll have every chance to make a statement at your court martial. Right now all I'm concerned about is getting Helena back and if letting you out of prison is going to get that done then that's what I'll do."

"And what if I can't do it?" Keynes asked.

"Then the moon will leave without you and you'll be stuck on that planet for the rest of your life." Koenig answered.

Unit Leader Grast inspected the human weapon Hartak had brought him to examine.

"This does not look like the technology of the Outsiders." he said.

"Nor did the vessel that crashed unit leader," Hartak responded, "but the bodies inside were too similar to the Psychons for it to be a coincidence. There must be a connection between them."

"Perhaps another creation of the Outsiders' science." Krasan suggested, "Perhaps our arrival triggered something more than just the orbiting defences."

"There were no ships in the system when we arrived. No-one to take a warning to anyone else." another Dorcon pointed out, "Besides, why would the Outsiders' own defences fire on a ship they sent here?"

"Take a look around you Neros." Grast said, "Do you see any Outsiders around? They abandoned this place just as they did everywhere else when they disappeared. The orbiting defences are probably malfunctioning. They don't care if they fire on friend or foe. Now what can you tell me about the survivors?"

"We saw two sets of tracks leading from the wreck unit leader." Morl answered.

"I think one of them was injured." Hartak added, "the footprints suggested that one of them was supporting the other. Also only a single carbine had been taken from the armoury. Only one of them was capable of fighting."

Grast tossed the weapon to the ground and picked up his own weapon.

"I have heard enough. We will find these survivors and present them to Lord Tollun so that he can determine what their connection to the Outsiders is." he told his troops.

The Dorcon troops formed themselves into a 'V' shape with Hartak at the front and Unit Leader Grast in one of the positions behind him. This allowed Hartak to take on the role of tracker, following the trail left by Russell and Bergman while Grast could still effectively give orders to his men while they kept watch either side of their formation. The trail led the Dorcons in an uphill direction along the bank of the river and along the way they saw several groups of native animals as they came to drink from it. The Dorcons kept moving past these creatures, none of them were large enough to pose a threat to the soldiers and the Dorcons had no need of the meat at this time.

However, some of the creatures that came to drink from the river were prey to others that lived within it and as the Dorcons were passing by a cluster of grazing creatures that came up only as far as their waists there was a sudden roar as a pack of amphibian predators burst from beneath the surface of the river to attack the grazing creatures. This triggered a panic among the grazers and they scattered, each creature rushing to escape the predators without any thought to anything else around them including the Dorcons. Seeing the some of the pack of animals charging towards them some of the Dorcons took aim with their rifles and opened fire, killing some of the creatures and driving the others in a different direction. This prevented the Dorcons being struck by the fleeing animals but in the process their rifles produced a series of sharp 'cracks' as their ammunition broke the sound barrier.

Russell gathered fallen branches to construct the fire to burn the animal carcass in the cave and while it burned she and Bergman sat in the mouth of the cave from where they could keep watch on the surrounding countryside in the knowledge that the fire behind them would keep anything in the cave from approaching them from behind. This gave them both the opportunity to rest, each of them taking a ration bar and water bottle from their supply. All of a sudden they both heard the sound of gunfire from somewhere in the direction they had approached the cave from.

"Was that gunfire?" Bergman said when he heard the rapid succession of sounds.

"That's what it sounded like to me professor." Russell replied.

"I didn't see another ship come down." Bergman said, "It can't be an rescue team from Alpha."

"That means that we're not alone down here." Russell said and she looked up at the smoke escaping from the cave over their heads and then to the footprints they had both left in the ground, "I never thought about hiding our tracks." she said.

"You're worried that whoever it is that's down here might not be friendly?" Bergman asked.

"Got it in one Victor." Russell answered as she checked her carbine and took an extra magazine of ammunition from the equipment bag and tucked it into her belt, "We'll head deeper into the cave. With any luck we'll find another exit that we can use to circle around and watch who comes to investigate."

6.

When the door to the travel tube opened at Alpha Koenig and Keynes were standing right inside it and Keynes suddenly backed away.

"Something wrong?" Koenig asked.

"There are people out there." Keynes replied.

"Yes the travel tube terminal is a public area." Koenig said

"It's just I don't want to be seen like this." Keynes said before Koenig grabbed her by the arm and dragged her out of the car with him.

"Tough." he said as he pulled her along the platform.

As Keynes had feared the sight of her in her prison issue bodysuit and restraints being pulled along the platform did attract attention from the other people present and Keynes bowed her head, turning it towards Koenig to try and avoid making eye contact with anyone she passed.

"You're doing fine. Here's the exit now." Koenig told her as they neared the stairs leading out of the travel tube terminal and as they left it he took out his comlock, "Koenig to Carter. Where are you?"

"Launch pad seven. The rescue Eagle is fuelled and we're just loading the gear. Then as soon as everyone gets here we can be off." Carter responded.

"Good. I'm on my way now." Koenig told him.

"Do you have-" Carter began.

"Yes, I've got her. She's agreed to help. Koenig out." Koenig interrupted and then he put his comlock away. Koenig escorted Keynes to the loading area of launch pad seven where Carter and Benes waited along with a unit of armoured GDF soldiers led by Master Sergeant Washington.

"You know I honestly didn't believe them colonel." Washington said when he saw Keynes.

"Hello sergeant." she said to him.

"Alyson Keynes has generously agreed to assist you in your mission." Koenig said.

"Yeah I bet she's full of community spirit now." Carter commented, "Get her aboard and strapped in before Baker gets here. I don't think it's wise for them to see one another before the air lock is sealed."

Washington waved at two of his soldiers and they took Keynes from Koenig and led her along the boarding tube into the rescue Eagle's passenger module. There they sat her down in the first seat they came to and began to wrap the safety harness around her.

"Wait." she said, "Aren't you going to uncuff me first?"

"Master Sergeant Washington didn't say anything about that." one of the troops said as the harness was fastened and then pulled tight.

"Yes, because this is so comfortable." Keynes said, frowning.

One of the soldiers then leant in close to her.

"It's better than you deserve." he hissed before both men started to leave.

"You're just leaving me here alone now?" Keynes asked.

"Don't go away." one of them responded as they exited the Eagle.

Back in the loading area Washington questioned Koenig concerning Keynes.

"Colonel I need to know, technically she's still a captain until her court martial-" he began but Koenig guessed what he was about to ask and responded before Washington could finish.

"Alyson Keynes has been taken off duty. She is present as a technical adviser only. You and your men should not follow any orders she gives. If she tries then I want to know about it. I doubt she'll give you much trouble but you can use this if you really need to." Koenig said and he tossed the gag to Washington, "I take it you have keys to her cuffs?"

"Yes colonel. I issued them to my men when I heard what you were planning. I knew she would be turned over to you still cuffed." Washington replied.

"The prisoner is secured aboard the Eagle." one of the soldiers who had escorted Keynes aboard said as they both returned.

"That just leaves us short of Baker and Maya." Benes said and just at the moment she saw the two women heading towards them, "Ah, here they are now."

"Okay everyone aboard." Carter called out, "We launch as soon as everyone is seated and strapped in."

"Colonel I wasn't expecting you to be coming with us." Baker said as she and Maya walked up to the end of the boarding tube where the officers were gathered.

"I'm not spacewoman, I'm just here to see you all off safely." Koenig replied.

"Then what's with the stun gun?" Baker asked, noticing the weapon on his belt.

"Time to get aboard Baker." Benes said, "We need to be leaving."

"Maya just a moment." Koenig said before she could board the Eagle with the others.

"Yes Colonel Koenig?" Maya asked as Koenig pulled her aside.
"Maya there's something I want you to do for me on this mission. Something I need to know." he said.
"Of course Colonel Koenig. What is it?" Maya said.
"There's an extra passenger on this flight Maya. This concerns her." Koenig replied.

Inside the Eagle Keynes looked up from her chair as the GDF troops began to walk past her, heading for the seats at the other end of the module. The rescue module featured seats either side of the central aisle at both the front and rear while the middle section had a compact treatment area on one side while opposite it was a storage area for a variety of different types of rescue equipment all packed in distinctly marked containers to make it as quick and easy to locate as possible.

"Oh you're back." she said as she watched the soldiers file past the empty seats around the one she was strapped to in favour of the ones at the rear of the module, "Are you all seriously going to sit as far from me as you can?"

"You." Baker said suddenly as she stepped into the module and recognised Keynes instantly.

"Francis." Keynes said, looking up at her.

"No!" Baker snapped, "No don't you dare try and talk to me. Do you know what today was supposed to be? It was supposed be my wedding day but I'm stuck here on the moon because of you, you bitch!" and then before anyone could act to stop her Baker began to punch Keynes who could not even lift her arms to defend herself, "I hate you!" she screamed as she struck.

"Hey, no." Washington said from behind Baker and he and another of his men grabbed hold of her, pulling her away from Keynes.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Carter demanded as he and Benes appeared in the doorway to the airlock.

"Just a slight disagreement over seating." Washington said, "Right?"

"I'm not going anywhere with her aboard." Baker hissed, glaring at Keynes.

"Oh yes you are spacewoman. You specifically asked to be returned to active duty and now here you are. So go sit down over there and behave yourself. That goes for everyone." Benes said. Then she looked at Carter and added, "I'll join you up front I think." she said and Carter nodded.

"We'll leave the enlisted personnel to their business." he said and then both of them turned around and headed for the Eagle's cockpit.

"You heard the captain. Go sit down." Washington told Baker and he let go of her, letting the other soldier escort Baker away while he looked at Keynes, "Nothing broken and no blood. You'll be fine." he said.

"I really don't want any trouble sergeant. I'm here to help." she said.

"Well you can start by keeping your mouth shut. I've been told I can use this if I have to." and he dangled the gag in front of Keynes face before he too made his way to the far end of the module to sit down.

Maya was the last of the rescue team to board the Eagle and as she walked past Keynes she looked down at her, pausing for a moment as Keynes back looked up at her with a startled look on her face when she saw the distinctive features of Maya's alien face. Maya then joined the rest of the team in the block of seats at the far end of the module where Baker had saved her a seat next to her.

"We're all set back here." Washington said into his helmet microphone and moments later there was the sound of the Eagle's engine starting up.

"Why is that woman chained up over there?" Maya asked.

"That's Alyson Keynes." Washington told her.

"All of this is her fault." Baker added.

"You are very angry." Maya replied.

"You bet I am. Five hours flight time and I have to spend it in here with her?" Baker said.

"She won't cause you any trouble at all. I promise." Washington said, "In fact if she says one word to you then it will be her last before we get to where we're going." and he handed the gag to Baker, "Happy now?" he asked.

"No." Maya said, "She is not." then she looked towards Keynes, "Neither is she." she added as the passengers in the module felt the Eagle rise off the launch pad.

"Who cares about her?" Baker said and then one of the infantrymen sat close by leant towards Maya.

"Hey, Maya isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes, that is right." she replied.

"So is it true you can read minds and that that's how you know what people are thinking?" the soldier said.

"I have a limited telepathic ability yes, but my empathic power also relies on other things as well." she said.

"Such as what?" Washington said, curious about her abilities.

"Subtle physical clues that my senses are able to pick up on." Maya said, "Slight movements and stress in speech patterns and so on. Psychon females have more acute senses than males. Doctor Russell believes that all of my senses are greater than a human's."

"All of them?" another soldier asked, "So you can smell like a bloodhound then?"
"I do not know what a bloodhound is." Maya said, "But my sense of smell is more sensitive than a males and probably better than a human's as well."
"Really?" the soldier said and he held out his hand, pointing one finger at Maya, "So pull my finger." he said.
"No Maya don't!" Baker exclaimed but she was too late to stop Maya innocently reaching out and pulling the soldier's finger, at which point he broke wind loudly and grinned.
Almost instantly Maya winced as her superior sense of smell detected the odour while the others glared at the offending soldier.
"Damn Hollis, did you have to do?" Washington said to him, "We're all in here for five hours or more."
"Sorry sarge. But you know what they say, better out than in." Hollis responded.
"Perhaps we should chuck you out with the rest of the trash then." Baker commented and she glanced over her shoulder toward Keynes, "Oh God that's rank." she added.
"What the hell have you been eating Hollis?" Another soldier said and he wretched.
"The smell is very bad." Maya added as she covered her nose and mouth in a vain effort to limit the smell reaching her.
"I can't take it any more." Baker said and she reached up to the small cupboard above her seat. This was a standard fitting in the module with one above every seat within it and when Baker opened it up a full face covering oxygen mask connected to a valve inside the cupboard by a long flexible hose fell out that she promptly pressed over her face and began to fasten it.
"Good thinking there spacewoman." Washington said as he also reached above him, "Come on lads you know the drill. Gas, gas, gas." then after he had fitted the mask over his head he reached out to grab hold of Hollis' arm as the other soldier was reaching upwards, "Not you trooper. You caused this so you can breathe it in deep."
"I don't know how to fit the mask." Maya said as she watched the soldiers around her donning them.
"Here, let me help you." Baker said, getting out of her chair to help Maya fit her mask as well.
"Hey can somebody help me please?" Keynes called out as she tried looking up at the cupboard above her head that she could not reach while her hands remained bound to her waist.
"If anyone deserves the gas chamber then it's her." Baker said as she sat back down.

In the cockpit Carter frowned when he noticed a warning light on the flight console.

"That's odd." he said.

"What is?" Benes asked.

"We could have a problem with life support. The emergency oxygen supply has been activated." Carter told her, "You better go and check."

Benes nodded and got up out of her chair before exiting the cockpit and making her way back to the rescue module.

"Is everything alright in-" Benes began as she opened the door and then the smell hit her, "Oh God what happened?" she said, seeing the passengers at the other end of the module wearing their oxygen masks.

"Sorry captain." Hollis called out, "That one's on me."

"Oh that's disgusting." Benes said backing out of the module and closing the door behind her.

"Wait, Sandra." Keynes called out but Benes was already gone.

"So what's going on back there?" Carter asked when Benes returned to the cockpit.

"Gas leak." she replied.

"Gas leak? I'm not reading anything on my panel. Where's the gas leaking from?"

"Spaceman Hollis." Benes said.

"Can we slow down a moment?" Bergman asked as he started breathing heavily, "I need to rest."

"Your ribs?" Russell asked and Bergman nodded.

"The pain is getting worse." he told her.

"I think there's daylight up ahead. We're almost out of the cave. I tell you what, you stay here and I'll go on and see if I can see anything from there." Russell said as she set down the bag filled with their equipment and she tossed a flash light to Bergman and took out a set of compact binoculars for herself before running to the cave exit she had only just noticed. This was little more than a crack in the rock but it was just about wide enough for her to squeeze through to the outside and Russell found herself standing on a ledge part way up a rock face.

Russell tried to get her bearings from here but having travelled underground with no means of determining how far her trail had turned in relation to landmarks above ground she had trouble identifying which way she was looking and it was only when she noticed the river that she was able to tell which way she and Bergman had come to reach the cave.

Lifting her binoculars to her eyes Russell studied the terrain along the path she and Bergman had taken and

she saw the tracks they had left behind. Then all of a sudden she saw a Dorcon soldier appear, his head angle downwards to study the ground at his feet as he followed the tracks. Then behind him Russell saw more of the Dorcons appear for a total of nine of them in their 'V' formation. All of the Dorcons were armed with the rifles Russell had previously seen their troops use and seven of their number wore body armour and helmets for protection. On the other hand the two remaining Dorcons wore lighter weight flight suits and helmets of a different design. It was clear to Russell that the alien soldiers were following the tracks she and Bergman had left on their way from the crashed Eagle, which presumably meant that the aliens had discovered that as well and they would inevitably find Russell and Bergman in their hiding place. Rather than risk being seen by the Dorcons as she observed them Russell then retreated back through the gap in the rock into the cave and hurried back to where Bergman was now sat leaning against the wall.

"Professor can you move?" she asked.

"I think so. But a hand up would be nice. I take that all is not well?" he responded.

"No it isn't." Russell replied as she helped him back to his feet, "There's a unit of Dorcons heading this way."

"Dorcon? Then this is one of their planets? It doesn't belong to the aliens who attacked Earth, these so-called Outsiders?"

"No I don't think so. I saw seven soldiers and a pair of what looked like pilots. To me that sounds like the occupants of an attack ship that got shot down like we did. If it was anything other than Dorcons then I'd be tempted to try and communicate with them to see if we can help one another get of this planet but-

"But everything we know about Dorcons tells us that their only interest in us would be as potential slaves."

Bergman interrupted.

"Exactly Victor. I'm afraid that you don't have any choice but to move now." Russell told him.

"I'll manage doctor." he replied and while Russell was picking up the rest of their equipment he began to walk towards the exit from the cave.

Hartak held out one arms as he lowered himself down onto his knees.

"Unit leader I can see smoke from ahead." he said as the other Dorcons also lowered themselves down and Hartak pointed to where the smoke from the fire in the cave continued to billow out and rise up into the air.

"This is their camp." Grast told his troops, "Zuctan and Nerrak you will remain here." he then said to the two flight crew and each of them dipped their heads in agreement, "Hartak and Krasan will come with me to approach the target from straight on. Morl and Neros will circle to the left and Sircuk and Trun will head to the right. Advance and halt as soon as you get visual contact with the target. Do you understand?"

"Yes unit leader." the other Dorcons replied and Grast dipped his head.

"Good. Now go. Lord Tollun will reward us for this prize." he said.

The Dorcon troops dashed onwards, leaving the two flight crew of their attack ship behind while they moved in to attack what they believed to be the location of the two human survivors from the Eagle. The Dorcons split up as their commanding officer had told them to and they surrounded the cave entrance as they closed in on it, each small group coming to a halt when they saw the cave mouth and could tell that the smoke was coming from inside.

"They are underground unit leader." Trun transmitted with the communicator built into his armour.

"Yes, I can see the cave now. My unit will watch the cave from our position. I want the other units to move in from the sides. Use the ground to hide your presence while you advance to a distance of about ten strides from the cave. If the aliens react we will be ready for them. If not then you will move in the rest of the way and storm the cave." Grast ordered in response.

"Yes unit leader." Trun replied.

The two pairs of Dorcon soldiers then began to close in on the cave from either side, moving cautiously to avoid being detected by the survivors they thought were inside. While they did this Grast and his group kept watch, using the optical sights of their rifles to maintain surveillance on the cave opening. The daylight outside the cave was fading by this point and this made observation of the interior of the cave much easier. However, it was still not enough to enable the Dorcons to see any signs of movement inside it.

"Be cautious." Grast told his men, "This could be a lure to draw us in. Trun and Sircuk remain where you are. Morl and Neros move in."

"Yes unit leader." Morl responded and he and Neros suddenly broke into a run and charged towards the cave, grinding to halt only when they reached the entrance, "Surrender!" Morl yelled out as he and Neros then burst into the cave, their rifles braced against their shoulders and ready to fire. However, rather than a pair of survivors from the crashed Eagle all they found was the burning animal carcass and a dropped wrapper from a ration bar.

"Unit leader there is no-one here." Neros transmitted while crouching down to pick up the wrapper and examine it, "However, they definitely were here at some point. They have left evidence behind."

"What sort of evidence?" Grast asked.

"It is just litter unit leader." Morl answered as he looked at the wrapper Neros was holding and he reached

out to take it from him. Inspecting the wrapper closely he noticed a small piece of the bar was still caught inside where it had stuck to the wrapper and he sniffed at it cautiously, "It looks like the wrapping from food unit leader." Then he looked at the fire burning further into the cave, "It appears that while they were here they were trying to burn an animal carcass. Possibly to cook it for its meant but the way in which the fuel is arranged around it suggests that they were burning to prevent its decay attracting scavengers."

"What indications are there as to where they went?" Grast asked and the two Dorcons stood inside the cave looked around, studying the floor carefully.

"There are no tracks leaving the cave." Morl said.

"Neither are there tracks going deeper into the cave." Neros added as he walked past the fire and studied the cave floor there, "However, that may be because the ground in here is rocky. Footprints will not form."

"I'm on my way in." Grast responded, "Everyone rendezvous at the cave. Zuctan and Nerrak that means you as well."

The Dorcons gathered at the entrance to the cave while Grast inspected the area where Russell and Bergman had made their camp temporarily, searching for anything else that they may have left behind. The wrapper was all that had been dropped though and after a brief search the Dorcon leader marched back out of the cave.

"We must find these aliens." he said, "They must have gone deeper into the cave so that is where we will go. We will search every possible passageway and turning until we have them. They cannot escape us."

7.

"Those satellites are about half a million kilometres ahead of us now." Carter said, "I don't want to get closer than one light second while we're still emitting."

"Then we should be thinking about going silent." Benes replied and Carter nodded. However, before he could respond the intercom activated.

"Captain Benes I think we might need you back here." he said.

"What's the problem sergeant?" she asked.

"Oh it's just that Miss Keynes would like to use the bathroom. Since my troops are all male, Maya's new at all this and I'm concerned that Spacewoman Baker is more likely to try and drown Keynes in a toilet than help her use it that only leaves you."

Carter laughed and Benes frowned at him.

"What?" he said, "I thought you two were friends."

"Were. Past tense. Treason and kidnapping changes that." Benes replied, "Besides, what about our turn? Won't you be cutting the power for it."

"Good point. Everyone better steer clear of the bathroom when we turn." Carter said.

"Sergeant Washington tell Alyson to cross her legs a while longer. We're about to make our breaking turn and start running silent. I'll be back to help her once we're done. Oh and there'll be no more intercom use after it, okay?" Benes said.

"Understood captain. I'll pass it on." Washington said and then the channel went silent.

Benes then activated the Eagle's external communication system.

"This is rescue Eagle two calling Moonbase Alpha. We are about to decelerate and commence silent running. There will be no further communication from us until we land on the surface." she transmitted. Then she suddenly thought to add, "I hope. Rescue Eagle two out." and then she turned off the communications, shutting down the system entirely rather than just ending the transmission to eliminate its energy emissions. Benes then did the same to the Eagle's sensors and reduced the power flowing to other systems, "Comms and active sensors off line." she said, "Secondary systems reduced to twenty-five percent."

"Okay let's get this done. Performing one-eighty turn now." Carter said and he fired the Eagle's manoeuvring thrusters to turn the ship without affecting its heading so that it was now travelling backwards, "Firing engines on full thrust in three. Two. One." he added before he triggered the Eagle's main rear facing engines at full power and with the ship's artificial gravity field and inertial dampeners only operating at a quarter of their normal capacity the occupants of the Eagle were pressed into their harnesses towards the rear of the ship until Carter shut down the engines and the Eagle began to drift towards the planet and its automated defence system. As a final touch Carter turned the Eagle so that it faced the planet once again, ensuring that he would be able to keep it in view through the viewport in front of him until the time came to power up the ship's systems again, "That's it." he told Benes, "Now we just wait to see if we all get killed trying to slip through the satellite network."

"That's all you have to do maybe. I have to go and nursemaid our prisoner." Benes reminded him, "Try not to shake the ship about, okay? I'm not cleaning anything up that gets spilled."

"I'll try." Carter responded as Benes left the cockpit.

Although the Eagle was still travelling at significant rate in terms of planetary travel, many thousands of kilometres per hour it would still take some time for the ship to reach the layer of defence satellites orbiting the alien planet and all Carter could do in the meantime was sit and wait. The satellites emitted only a minimal amount of power in their standby mode and the Eagle's passive sensors were not enough to detect these. Therefore, as long as the sensor display remained clear Carter knew that they were safe, the satellites not having powered up to target their weapons at the Eagle. There was the slight risk of a collision with one of the satellites, neither they nor the Eagle while running silent able to move out of one another's way. But the risks of this were minute. Even if there were thousands of satellites in orbit around the planet they would only occupy a small fraction of the space around it.

Carter was still watching the sensor display when Benes arrived and he glanced up momentarily.

"So how did it go?" he asked.

"As awkwardly as you'd expect. Helping someone use the bathroom requires a level of closeness Alyson and I never had." she replied.

"Should have brought Tanya then." Carter commented.

"What's our situation?" Benes said as she sat down and strapped herself back in.

"Flying blind. We can't see them but hopefully they can't see us either. If the readings taken from Alpha were right then we should be coming up on the defence perimeter at any time now." Carter answered.

"There, look!" Benes said suddenly and she pointed through her viewport to a tiny white dot that did not

move with the rest of the stars visible beyond the planet they were heading towards.

"Okay that looks like it could be a satellite." Carter said, "A pity the cameras aren't facing it. We could have tried to get a better look at one close up."

"Even that's close enough for me thank you very much major." Benes replied, "When will you bring the power back up?"

"As soon as we hit the atmosphere. I'll need to adjust our entry angle to make sure we don't bounce off or burn up. That's when we'll find out whether those satellites will target a craft that's already inside the perimeter based on whatever automatic program is running them.

Carter and Benes continued to wait as the Eagle drifted ever closer to the planet and all of a sudden one of the alien defence satellites came into view ahead of them.

"That looks close major." Benes said.

"It looks bloody close." Carter replied, "You know the odds of us hitting one of those things ought to be thousands to one."

"Maybe it's our lucky day. Or unlucky day." Benes said as the satellite continued to grow in the viewport.

"Still no sensor readings." Carter said as he checked the sensor display again, "They don't know we're here."

"Here it comes." Benes said as the satellite ahead of the Eagle rushed towards them still. Now that they were getting closer to it though it became apparent they were not on a collision course and both Carter and Benes turned their heads to watch as it zoomed past them.

"Hey, you know what this means?" Carter asked, looking at Benes and smiled.

"What?" she replied.

"It means the plan's working. We just got past the satellites." Carter told her and he reached forwards to take hold of the Eagle's controls again, "Get ready to give me power again. We should be in the atmosphere in a few seconds. You'll know when we do."

"Ready." Benes said as she also reached out for the console in front of her and moments later the Eagle lurched violently as it suddenly encountered resistance to its forward movement.

"Now!" Carter snapped and Benes hurried to reactivate all of the Eagle's systems while he brought its engines back on line.

"Lidar." Benes said as an alarm sounded, "Those satellites just woke up and they're scanning us."

"We're coming in too steep. Here goes nothing then." Carter said and he fired the Eagle's ventral steering and launch thrusters, lifting the Eagle's nose so that it would not dive into the atmosphere at such a steep angle that it simply burned up.

Benes gripped the arm rests of her seat as the Eagle's angle of entry lifted, watching the sensor readings for any indication that the satellites they had just slipped past were locking onto the Eagle with their lidar.

However, the output from the satellites remained constant as the Eagle continued to descend until all of a sudden the lidar emissions ceased completely, "We made it!" Benes exclaimed, "They didn't fire while we were below them."

"David's going to so smug about that." Carter said, grinning as he levelled the Eagle out now that it was well into the atmosphere and apparently out of danger, "Now do you have a fix on that beacon?" he asked.

"Steer right twenty-two degrees." Benes told him as she checked for the beacon that had brought the previous Eagle to the planet in the first place.

"Steering right twenty-two degrees. If our readings from Alpha were right then the survey Eagle should have come down pretty close to here." Carter replied.

The booming sound from the sky made Russell and Bergman look upwards and they saw the Eagle flying high above them. The pair had been trying to put as much distance between themselves and the caves as possible while also sticking to terrain that they could cross without leaving visible footprints as much as possible.

"Victor it's a rescue team." Russell exclaimed.

"Yes and that Eagle made it through the satellite defences." Bergman responded as Russell reached for her comlock.

"This is Doctor Russell calling Eagle. Do you read me?" she transmitted, hoping that the Eagle was close enough for the signal to reach it.

"This is rescue Eagle two reading you clearly doctor." Benes replied, "What is your status?"

"I'm fine but Professor Bergman is injured. He has at least one broken rib and needs medical attention as soon as possible."

"Copy that doctor. We're coming around to pick you up. Keep transmitting to give us your location." Benes told Russell.

"Understood captain but I need to warn you that there are Dorcons on the planet. At least one attack ship's worth of them. I don't know what the state of their vessel is but I saw nine Dorcons, all armed. What weapons do you have?" Russell warned the Eagle crew.

"Our vessel is unarmed doctor but we have personal arms and a squad of infantry to protect us." Benes said, "Can you give us the enemy's position?"
"Still inside a cave complex the professor and I vacated when we saw them coming I hope." Russell said.
"Understood doctor. We'll be keeping an eye out for them. This is rescue Eagle two out." Benes replied.
Russell made sure that her comlock was fixed to keep transmitting its location to the Eagle overhead before she put it away again and she and Bergman looked at one another.
"Just in time I think." Bergman said as he winced in pain again.

Back aboard the Eagle Benes made her way into the module where the passengers sat.
"We've made contact with Doctor Russell." she announced and the passengers smiled with relief to hear that the objective of their mission was alive, "Professor Bergman is with her and his injuries will require attention. We intend to land and pick them up, then make our way to the source of the beacon. Hopefully we'll be able to shut down the satellites from there and get out of here safely. According to Major Carter we now have about fifty five hours before the moon gets pulled back into the wormhole and leaves the system so we've got about forty-eight to find the controls to the satellites and shut them down if we don't want to get left behind."
"Doesn't sound like there's much for your troops to be doing." Baker said to Washington.
"I wish that were so spacewoman but unfortunately there's a fly in the ointment." Benes said.
"There's something hostile on the planet isn't there?" Washington said, "What is it? Something else the aliens left behind?"
"Dorcons." Benes said, "Doctor Russell says she saw a small force that looks like the crew of one of their attack ships. presumably they got shot down as well."
"Then there can only be a few of them, right?" Baker said.
"Maybe, but maybe we're not the only ones to have sent a rescue ship." Washington said, "Never mind having forty-eight hours to get the job done, we need to get out of here as quickly as we can before more Dorcons show up and figure how to get past those satellites like we did."

"Unit Leader Grast." Zuctan signalled using his communicator. The two flight crew of the downed attack ship had been left at the mouth of the cave to ensure that the survivors from the crashed Eagle would not be able to loop back through the caves to escape the same way that they came in and as such they also heard the sonic boom as the rescue Eagle decelerated on its way down. It took only one look into the sky when they heard this to realise that it was not one of their own attack ships and that instead their quarry was receiving reinforcements.
"What is it Pilot Zuctan?" Grast responded, the channel slightly distorted by the amount of rock between them that the signal had to try and penetrate.
"Unit leader, another alien craft has entered the atmosphere. I cannot be certain but this one looks to be coming down intact." Zuctan told him.
"Intact? Then they can control the orbiting defence net." Grast said, "Grast to all troops, I am changing our mission parameters. Zuctan and Nerrak are to observe the alien craft and watch where it lands. Everyone else head back to the cave entrance. We will take this alien craft intact and compel the occupants to show us how to deactivate the orbiting defence net. Then we will add them and their ship to our offering to Lord Tollun."

Russell waved into the night sky as the Eagle circled overhead, its running lights illuminating the ground below as Carter brought it into land.
"This is it Victor, that's a rescue Eagle." she said as she observed the red and white striped pattern on the side of the module, "They'll have the medical supplies I need to treat you."
"Thank you." Bergman gasped, "I not sure how much more of this I could take."
A roaring sounding from overhead heralded the arrival of the rescue Eagle and Russell and Bergman watched as the craft came into land about fifty metres ahead of them. Then as they walked towards it the air lock on their side unfolded to form a ramp and Washington and his squad of soldiers came rushing down it. Most of the troops had their rifles held at the ready and they spread out at the bottom of the ramp before they dropped into kneeling positions to keep watch as Washington himself and two other members of the squad rushed towards Russell and Bergman.
"Doctor Russell we brought a stretcher." Washington announced, pointing to the stretcher than one of his men carried.
"Good. Victor you can rest now. These men will carry you the rest of the way." Russell replied and Bergman nodded as he tried to breathe, "He probably has at least one broken rib so be careful how you secure him." she added to the two GDF soldiers as they unfolded the stretcher.
"Doctor, what can you tell me about the Dorcon forces you saw?" Washington asked as the soldiers were

helping Bergman onto the stretcher.

"Not much. As I said, from the number I saw they looked like the crew of an attack ship. Most were soldiers in body armour but there were two that looked more like the flight crew. All of them were armed and they looked like they were following the trail Professor Bergman and I left after we abandoned our Eagle. How many troops do you have with you?" Russell replied and Washington glanced back over his shoulder.

"You're looking at them all doctor." he told her, "Major Carter, Captain Benes, Baker and Maya are still inside the Eagle of course but they're probably going to have their work cut out for them figuring out how to disable the orbiting defences."

"Then you haven't done it already?" Russell said.

"No. Major Carter managed to slip us past them by running silent but he doesn't think the same trick will work on the way out. we've got a fix on the source of the beacon so as soon as we're all loaded the major will fly us there and hopefully we'll be able to find a way to shut down the satellites before the moon leaves the system again." Washington said and Russell nodded.

"Okay then. Let's get the professor aboard and be on our way. Maybe we can get out of here before those Dorcons can catch up with us." she said.

With Bergman loaded onto the stretcher the two GDF troops carried him back into the Eagle with Russell and Washington following them. When he reached the top of the ramp into the ship Washington turned around and called out to the rest of his men.

"Back inside. we're taking off." he told them and then he stood just inside the air lock as the soldiers came rushing back on board.

Meanwhile Russell followed the soldiers carrying Bergman into the rescue module itself and she came to a surprised halt when she saw Keynes sat just inside it in her prison issue bodysuit and restraints."

"What's going on? Why is she here?" she asked.

"Colonel Koenig-" Keynes began.

"Unfortunately no one other than her and Professor Bergman know anything about alien technology." Baker called out from the other end of the module. Then she looked at the soldiers now placing Bergman's stretcher in the Eagle's treatment area, "Mind you now that we've got the professor I guess we don't need her any more so we can just dump her. Or at the very least gag her and leave her right there until we get back to Alpha."

"Don't be so hasty spacewoman." Russell replied as she walked past Keynes to get to the treatment area, "Victor's hurt."

"I thought you said I'd be fine." Bergman said and then he winced as Russell began to remove his shirt as he lay on the treatment bed.

"You will be Victor. But first you need to be examined." she told him.

"Everyone's aboard." Washington said into his helmet microphone as he entered the module behind the last of his men to come back aboard and then he steadied himself against the door frame as he called out, "Hold on, we're taking off."

Russell reached up to the full body scanner positioned above the treatment bed to steady herself as well as the Eagle rose up into the air and then turned towards the source of the alien beacon. Then as the ship began to fly level again she returned to her examination of Bergman.

"Doctor how are you and the professor?" Benes asked as she entered the module and walked up to Russell.

"Oh I'm fine but I don't like the look of this." Russell said and she pointed to the large pattern of bruising to the side of Bergman's chest.

"Is it bad?" Bergman asked.

"It could be worse. I don't see any signs of internal bleeding." Russell told him, "But all the physical exertion you've had to carry out hasn't done you any good. I need to make sure that fluid won't build up in your lungs or you could develop pneumonia."

"I take that he can't help with observation of the alien facility then." Benes said.

"Frankly I don't think the professor should be doing anything other than resting." Russell replied and Benes sighed.

"Okay Alyson, you're up." Benes said as she then walked over to where Keynes was still strapped into her seat and she released the harness, "Carter wants either you or the professor up front to monitor the sensors." and she pulled Keynes to her feet.

"Aren't you going to untie me?" Keynes asked as Benes then physically turned her towards the front of the Eagle and began to push her towards the cockpit.

"Don't push it Alyson." Benes told her. She then accompanied Keynes to the cockpit and as soon as the door slid open she looked down at Carter, "Doctor Russell is treating the professor so you'll have to make do with Keynes major."

"Fair enough. Strap her in." Carter replied and Benes pushed Keynes towards the co-pilot's position that she had vacated.

"So you're still keeping me chained up?" Keynes asked as she sat down.

"You're here to advise and we know that you can fly and Eagle Alyson." Benes replied, "We're not giving you access to the flight controls so just sit still while I secure you."

"Fine. Whatever. I'm just trying to help you know." Keynes said, frowning as she once again had a safety harness fastened around her that in her restrained state she could not undo by herself.

"You can help by watching the ground surveillance sensors." Carter told her, "Since this is a rescue ship we actually have some pretty good search capabilities so I want you to let me know what alien activity shows up on them."

"Okay major." Keynes replied and then she winced as her harness was pulled tight and she scowled at Benes.

"Too tight?" Benes asked.

"Oh no, just fine." Keynes said and Benes shrugged.

"Suit yourself." she said before turning to Carter and adding, "I'll be in the back getting ready." and then she left the cockpit.

"Well? Did you see where the alien craft went Zuctan?" Grast asked as he emerged from the cave.

"Yes unit leader." the Dorcon pilot responded and he pointed towards the horizon, "It landed over there briefly but then took off again and headed to the south."

"The direction of the Outsiders' fortress." Nerrak added.

"They must be intending to reactivate it." Grast said and he let out a nervous growl, "We must stop them before they are able. Who knows what may be inside?" then he looked around, double checking how many of his troops were present. Seeing that only Sircuk and Trun had yet to return from inside the cave he took the decision to start without them, "Zuctan and Nerrak will remain here and wait for Sircuk and Trun. As soon as they arrive you are all to follow us to the Outsiders' fortress. Everyone else with me." and he waved his troops after him as he began to walk towards the south.

8.

Koenig closed off his office wall as Kano and Alexander sat down in front of his desk.

"So what can we do for you colonel?" Alexander asked.

"It's about Alyson Keynes." Koenig replied and Kano and Alexander exchanged glances.

"I take that she won't be going back to prison when Major Carter's rescue team make it back from the planet then?" Kano said and Koenig shook his head.

"No. Keynes has organisational skills and specialist technical knowledge that could help us, especially now that we are cut off from Earth." he said.

"With all due respect colonel, she used those skills and knowledge to help Red Mars." Kano pointed out, "She could use them against us again, especially now that we are cut off from Earth." and Alexander frowned momentarily.

"I know. That's why I want the pair of you to make the necessary arrangements." Koenig said, "Kano you know our technology and Alexander you know Keynes. You're her best friend."

"Not so much any more it seems, colonel." Alexander said.

"Whatever." Koenig responded, "Of course there will be a court martial that will have to approve the offer I made to Keynes but after that I'll be returning her to her quarters. I want the pair of you to go over them in fine detail. There has to be no way that she can use anything in there against us. She'll be under effective house arrest and her quarters need to reflect that."

"I can do that." Kano said, nodding, "It's just a few panels that need taking out and blanking off."

"Tanya I need you to check any hiding places she may have as well." Koenig said, turning towards Alexander, "Just remove everything for now. We can check it for any potential security risk later and return whatever's safe depending on how well behaved she is."

"Do you expect her to try and cause trouble colonel?" Kano asked.

"No. I think she'll be happy enough to be out of the cell at Theta. Though if she does I'll make sure she wishes she was back there." Koenig answered before the intercom on his desk sounded and Morrow's face appeared on the display in front of him, "Yes major?" he said.

"Colonel we've just heard from Captain Benes aboard the rescue Eagle." Morrow told him and Koenig smiled.

"Excellent. Then they made it through the satellite system." he said.

"Yes sir. They also said that they've picked up Doctor Russell and Professor Bergman and are on their way towards the source of the alien beacon." Morrow continued, "However. there is an issue that I think you should be made aware of colonel."

"What's happened? Are Helena and Victor both safe?" Koenig said, concerned.

"Doctor Russell is fine and she expects the professor to recover from his injuries colonel. However, Doctor Russell reported seeing a unit of Dorcon troops on the surface. From their numbers she suspects that one of their attack ships was shot down by the satellites as well. Colonel it could only be a matter of time before more Dorcon vessels arrive to investigate why that one disappeared. If there was more than one in the system then others could already have gone for help."

"Damn." Koenig said to himself, "Okay major sound red alert. Bring all defences on line and alert the other bases. I'll contact Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi myself." and then he shut off the intercom before reactivating it to contact Moonbase Epsilon.

"Yes colonel?" Verdeschi said as his face appeared on the display.

"Verdeschi we've got a problem. we could be up to our necks in Dorcons at any moment. I'm ordering all stations to red alert." Koenig said and Verdeschi nodded.

"Yes colonel. If the Dorcons make an appearance then we'll ready for them." he said.

"There's more colonel. If we are forced to engage the Dorcons then they may try and shoot down our rescue Eagle when it returns from the planet. I want a flight of Hawks launched to provide an escort. Have them loiter at about a million kilometres from the planet. That seems to be beyond the range of the satellites so they should be safe enough. Their orders will be to rendezvous with the rescue Eagle after it returns to space and make sure it gets back here safely. They are not to withdraw to try and protect the moon from attack, is that clear?"

"Crystal clear colonel. I'll brief the pilots and they can be in space in ten minutes. Then it's about two and a half to three hours to get them on station at the position you've given." Verdeschi said.

"Excellent. I'll keep you informed of any further developments. Koenig out." Koenig said before he shut off the communication system again.

"What do you want us to do colonel?" Alexander asked, "Should we return to main mission or do you want us to deal with Alyson's quarters first?"

"Carry out my orders regarding Alyson Keynes quarters. We can summon you back to main mission if the Dorcons do arrive before you're done." Koenig said, "Oh and one more thing."

"Yes colonel?" Kano asked.

"I want a full list of everything taken from Keynes' quarters for review. Right down to the last pair of socks." Koenig ordered.

"The beacon is dead ahead. Less than five thousand metres now." Keynes said as she continued to focus on the Eagle's ground search sensors.

"What about the Dorcons?" Carter asked but Keynes shook her head.

"No sign of any activity. Should I be looking out for warm or cold blooded creatures?" she asked.

"I'm not actually sure." Carter said, "I bet the doc knows though. Ask her."

Keynes then frowned and made it obvious as she tried to lift her bound arms.

"How?" she said.

"Oh right." Carter said and he activated the intercom himself, "Doctor Russell can you tell me whether Dorcons have warm or cold blood? Keynes needs to know for the sensors."

"They may be close to Earth reptiles in most aspects of their physiology but they are most definitely warm blooded. Their normal body temperature is slightly higher than ours in fact. They should show up perfectly well on a thermal scan unless they have some technological means of blocking it that we're not aware of."

"Thanks doctor. Let everyone know that we'll be touching down in about two minutes if Keynes give me the all clear." Carter said and then as he shut off the intercom he looked at Keynes and added, "There you go." he told her.

"I still think you could just untie me and then I could work the intercom myself." she muttered.

"I warned you not to push your luck." Carter said sternly.

"Fine. Two thousand metres. No sign of any alien activity, Dorcon or otherwise. It looks like the signal is coming from a pyramidal structure." Keynes said.

"Okay I see it." Carter replied now that he knew what he was looking for and spotted the straight edges of what could only be an artificial structure, "I'm going to circle and see what we can see."

Carter angled the Eagle to the side of the alien pyramid and flew in an arc so that he could examine all sides of it visually while Keynes continued to monitor the Eagle's sensors. The beacon registered strongly on these now and Keynes tried thinking back to her internship spent reverse engineering alien technology to see if she could place the nature of the beacon.

"I think this is a challenge." she said, "Like one half of an IFF system."

"Identify friend or foe?" Carter asked and Keynes nodded.

"That's right. I think that an alien ship approaching the planet would reply with a clearance code as soon as it picked this up." she said.

"And then be let past the satellites." Carter added and Keynes nodded again.

"I think so."

"That's good. That means that the controls to the satellites are probably somewhere inside then. I'm taking us in." Carter said and he angled the Eagle's nose downwards so that it descended towards the landing pad Keynes had indicated the presence of before levelling out to touch down, "Okay we're down." he announced over the intercom, "Everyone out." then he looked at Keynes and added, "Not you. You stay put and keep monitoring those sensors until you're needed."

Carter then got out of his seat and left Keynes alone in the cockpit, satisfied that she was secure and could not interfere with the Eagle's systems. Reaching the air lock he was in time to see Washington and his men deploying to establish a perimeter.

"So do you have a plan for this captain?" he said to Benes when he saw her stood with Baker and Maya. Benes had armed herself with a magnetic accelerator pistol from the Eagle's small arms locker but neither Baker nor Maya carried a weapon.

"Washington and his men will breach the door and then we'll explore the inside of the building." Benes told him as she handed him another pistol and a holster, "Russell is still working on the professor and she doesn't think that he's up to any more wandering about so we'll have to rely on Keynes for technical support when it comes to the aliens. As soon as we find something that looks like a control room we'll bring her in and see what we can do about shutting down those satellites."

"Well the outside is intact and the beacon works so there's every reason to believe the inside will be in just as good condition. Someone needs to keep an eye on Keynes though. I don't mind leaving her alone for a few minutes in the cockpit but I'm not so sure about leaving her alone in there if she manages to get free while there's only the doc and the professor in the module. She could detach it and take off, stranding us here." Carter said.

"I could wait with her." Maya suggested, "I will know if she is planning to betray you."

"Again." Baker muttered.

"Okay. Do you have a comlock?" Benes asked and Maya held up the device she had been issued with so that she could move around Moonbase Alpha..

"Francis explained to me how to use it." she said.

"Good. Then go and sit in the cockpit and don't touch anything. If you need help then call for Doctor Russell or myself." Carter said.

"Here, take this as well." Baker said, smiling as she passed the gag she had been given to Maya, "She can't lie to you if she can't talk."

"She also can't warn us if she spots the Dorcons or anything else on the sensors." Carter said, "Now come on spacewoman, we've got work to do."

As Carter, Benes and Baker exited the Eagle and walked down the ramp to the alien landing pad Maya made her way to the Eagle's cockpit, pausing in the doorway to look around the compartment she had not seen before.

"Where's Carter?" Keynes asked when she looked up to see Maya.

"He has gone to explore the Outsider's outpost." Maya replied, sitting down in the pilot's seat that Carter had vacated.

"So they left you to make sure I don't try and escape?" Keynes said, "Lucky you."

"You do not think I am lucky." Maya said, "You are not happy about being here at all are you?"

"Can you blame me? Maya isn't it? We haven't been properly introduced."

"Yes, my name is Maya. Colonel Koenig rescued me from the Dorcon Lord Kollus. Now he has asked me to help you humans get back to your planet." Maya said and she noticed Keynes draw in breath when she mentioned Koenig.

"So you were a prisoner as well?" Keynes asked.

"I was the chief empath to Lord Kollus. One of thousands of Psychons he kept as slaves." Maya said and Keynes smiled.

"At least you're someone who can't say their life was ruined because of me, even if I didn't know what the terrorists were planning." she said.

"My grandfather was killed during our escape attempt. Had your moon not arrived above my home then I would still be a slave but he would still be alive." Maya pointed out and Keynes' face fell.

"So you're going to blame me for that? You may as well. No-one else seems interested in hearing my side of the story." she said, turning away from Maya to face forwards and look at the sensor display as well.

"They think you will betray them again." Maya said, "Are they right?"

"No!" Keynes exclaimed, "Look, I was blackmailed into helping Red Mars. They put my sister in the hospital and threatened to kill her and her family if I didn't help them. I just thought they were going to take pictures of what was going on at Mu, honest. How are they going to threaten me now? The Red Mars people on the moon are stuck just like the rest of us. They can't contact their friends on Mars any more than we can contact Earth. But now everyone sees me as nothing but a traitor. They won't even trust me enough to untie me long enough go to the bathroom by myself." and Keynes sniffed as she fought back tears.

"I do not blame you for my grandfather's death Alyson Keynes, but you are right that the others do not trust you any more." Maya said, "Even if I do."

The main door into the pyramid was large enough to take the team's Eagle sideways and the tapered top made it obvious what it was intended for.

"Looks big enough for an alien saucer." Carter said as he looked at the massive door and compared it mentally to the recreations he had seen of the flying saucer type spacecraft used during the alien attacks on Earth of the mid twenty-second century.

"The armour plating doesn't look like anything special. We should be able to blast through with a standard shaped charge line." Washington added as he examined the structure of the door.

"Do it." Carter replied, "Just a hole big enough for us for now though. No need to bring down the entire door, especially if it turns out that there's an intact saucer inside there." Then as two of Washington's men began to fix a flexible shaped charge line to the door, forming a circle about two metres across, the rest of the team backed away.

"All set sergeant." the demolition team said when the circle of explosive was in place and a remote detonator fixed to it and they too backed away.

"Okay fire in the hole." Washington announced and Carter, Benes and Baker all clamped their hand over their ears as they turned away from the door. Washington and his men had ear protection built into their helmets and so all they did was turn around so that they would not be looking straight at the charge as it exploded and then Washington used his comlock to connect to the detonator and triggered it. Despite being forewarned about it, Baker still flinched at the sound of the explosion and she instinctively grabbed hold of Carter.

"You okay?" he asked and she nodded.

"I hate explosions." she replied.

"Then perhaps the military wasn't the best career choice for you spacewoman." Washington said as he put his comlock away and switched on the flash light mounted on his rifle, "So who's up for finding out what's inside?" he asked.

"Lead the way sergeant." Benes said, "You're the one with body armour and a big gun after all."

The shaped charge had cut a neat hole in the door and blown the section of metal cut free into the interior of the pyramid. This enabled Washington to stand just by the hole and shine his light into the building to see what was in there.

As expected the chamber on the other side of the door was a large empty space where one of the spacecraft used by the aliens who had built the pyramid could be stored and maintained. Unfortunately the hoped for intact example of such a craft was not present and as Washington's men leapt through the hole they were able to spread out in the wide empty space on the other side.

"So where to now captain?" Carter asked as he and Benes stepped through the hole one after another and looked around the hangar. As was typical of the alien architecture what looked like an ordinary structure on the outside had a much more biological appearance on the inside with oval doorways that contracted shut and pulsing veins of fluid set into the greenish walls that served to carry both data and power around the structure.

There were several exits from the chamber, some of them on the ground floor they were currently stood on while others led away from a raised landing that overlooked the hangar from one side and another was accessible by walking down a ramp. This clearly indicated that the pyramid was just the externally visible part of the alien structure and that it could be far larger than was otherwise apparent.

"I'm not sure." Benes admitted, "I've never done this before. Perhaps we ought to bring in Alyson and see what she says."

"You may not have been inside an alien base before but I have." Washington said, "A simulated one at any rate. Remember the aliens built a number of bases across Africa, Asia and South America during the war and some of them were stormed by our troops. Some of our training exercises are based on those raids. What do you want to find?"

"A command centre would be useful." Benes replied and Washington nodded.

"Those were located on central levels for maximum protection from attack." he said.

"So we go up." Carter said.

"Up it is." Benes added.

The sound of the explosion carried far in the quiet of the night and Grast and his unit came to a suddenly halt, dropping into crouching positions as they searched all around them for signs of an ambush.

"That came from the Outsider fortress unit leader." Hartak said and Grast dipped his head in agreement.

"We must hurry." he said, "The aliens may be attempting to destroy the fortress before we can examine its secrets." and the Dorcons got back to their feet and began to hurry towards the alien pyramid.

As soon as the structure came entirely into view Grast waved for his men to stop and take cover while he took out a set of binoculars that he used to study the structure. The binoculars included an electronic light amplification system and so Grast was able to look at the structure in perfect detail even in the dark, although he was limited to a black and white image rather than full colour. However, this was enough for him to make out the Eagle sat just outside the pyramid and also the hole that had been blown in the door to clear an entrance.

"The aliens have forced their way inside." he said.

"Forced unit leader? But why would they need to do that?" Krasan asked.

"Perhaps there is a fault with the doors." Hartak suggested, "Or perhaps we are mistaken about the connection between these aliens and the Outsiders."

"Never mind that now." Grast said while he returned his binoculars to their storage pouch, "We still have a long way to go and we get going while we still have the cover of darkness."

9.

"Sergeant"! In here!" one of the GDF troops called out as he opened a wide doorway and looked into one of the rooms inside the pyramid and Washington rushed to see what he had found. Inside the room there were numerous free standing controls stations set around a raised central section. These control stations resembled flowers in their structure, with a number of curved petals arranged in a circle around where the operator would stand and where these curved outwards at the top there were various controls set into their surface. Meanwhile the raised section in the centre of the room was covered with small circles that glowed in a variety of colours with no apparent purpose.

"Major Carter. Captain Benes I think we've found your control room." he shouted and the two officers rushed to see for themselves, Baker following close behind them.

"So what did your simulated missions tell you about this place sergeant?" Carter asked.

"That every time one of our assault teams made it as far as this the aliens or their slave troops had already trashed it to stop us taking it intact." Washington said.

"Any sign of a light switch?" Benes said as she examined the walls either side of the door.

"What about this panel?" Baker suggested as she walked over to the panel that matched the one in the corridor outside that had opened the door. This was circular and had several prominent buttons arranged in a ring around a three larger ones in the centre.

"Okay I think we're going to need Alyson now." Benes said and Baker frowned.

"It's just a light switch. Surely we can-" she began.

"Keynes knows more about this stuff than anyone else here spacewoman," Carter interrupted, "and I don't know about you but I'd like to be out of here as soon as possible. This place gives me the creeps."

Benes took out her comlock and lifted it to her head.

"Maya can you hear me?" she asked.

"Yes Captain Benes. I can hear you." Maya's voice responded.

"Good. We've found what we think is the alien control centre but we need Alyson Keynes' input to figure out how it works. Can you bring her?" Benes told her.

"Of course Captain Benes. But how will I know where you are?" Maya asked.

"We left a trail of markers so we'd know which way we'd come. Just follow those." Benes answered.

"Very well Captain Benes we will be with you shortly." Maya replied.

As Maya put her comlock away she looked across from her seat to where Keynes was strapped down into hers.

"You heard that?" she asked.

"Yes. I'm needed. Aren't you worried I'll try and overpower you?" Keynes responded.

"No. You seem resigned to your situation as unpleasant as you are finding it." Maya said while she released the harness holding Keynes down. Then she helped the other woman to her feet and led her from the cockpit.

Rather than disembarking from the Eagle right away, Maya led Keynes into the Eagle's rescue module where Russell was in the process of giving Bergman a sedative to control his pain.

"Do you need something Maya?" Russell asked.

"No Doctor Russell. I just wanted to tell you that I have been instructed to take Alyson into the pyramid. You and Professor Bergman will be alone here." Maya told her.

"Thanks." Russell said, nodding, "I'm hoping that by the time Victor wakes up we'll already be back on Alpha but I really ought to stay and keep an eye on him. I'll lock the hatch though just in case the Dorcons turn up."

"Very good Doctor Russell. I shall inform Major Carter and Captain Benes." Maya replied.

"Maya wait." Russell called out as Maya then turned to leave with Keynes.

"Yes Doctor Russell?"

"Aren't you taking a weapon? You are escorting a prisoner." Russell said and she pointed to the small arms locker.

"I do not know how to use your weapons Doctor Russell. Plus Alyson Keynes is not my prisoner. She will not try to escape me." Maya told her.

"If you say so Maya." Russell commented.

Maya then led Keynes from the Eagle, closing the outer airlock door behind them with her comlock as soon as they were off the ramp.

"Thanks for that Maya." Keynes said as she hobbled along beside Maya, her movement limited by the chain between her ankles.

"For what? All I did was tell the truth. I believe that you regret your role in the events that have stranded your

people far from your planet and you want to make amends. However, I am not the one you need to convince of your sincerity." Maya replied and then she stopped as they reached the hole in the hangar door to make sure that Keynes was able to get through given the height of door left beneath the hole. Inside the pyramid Maya stopped again when she saw how dark it was.

"Can you see the markers that were left for us Alyson?" she asked.

"Use your comlock." Keynes told her.

"I do not understand." Maya replied and Keynes sighed.

"Take it out and turn it on." she said and Maya did as she was told, "Good, now find the torch application. It'll turn the camera's flash LED on so you can use it like a flash light."

"Thank you Alyson." Maya said and as soon as she shone the light from her comlock onto a nearby wall she saw a white marker stuck beside one of the interior doors, "This way."

Following the trail of markers was easy, the only problem being when there were stairs to climb. These proved difficult for Keynes and she needed Maya to help steady her as she went up them. However, the pair soon reached the room believed to be the pyramid's command centre where Benes and Baker were inspecting the various control consoles.

"Ah Alyson, there you are." Benes said as she and Maya entered the room, "Perhaps now we can get somewhere." and Baker snorted.

"Lights would help." Carter commented.

"That's easy. The lights were about the only systems recovered intact from these places during the war." Keynes replied, "Every panel had a control for them. I think it was marked with a set of four characters. The aliens' word for lights."

"It is pronounced 'yiac'." Maya said.

"I think I've got it." Benes said as she studied the console she was stood at, "This was on all the others I've looked at." and she tapped her finger on the button beside the label, immediately triggering a circle to appear on the console display, "Okay so now I've got a blue circle."

"I suppose you're still keeping me chained up, right?" Keynes asked, looked at Carter.

"You don't need your hands free to advise us." he answered.

"May I at least go over there and look at the control console? Remember, I'm trying to do this from memory of devices put back together after the aliens trashed them." Keynes said.

"Oh be my guest." Carter said and Keynes shuffled across the room to join Benes at the console.

"Right, this looks like one of their slider systems." she said, "If you press the middle and hold it then the lights will come on. I'm guessing its a dimmer system so you can adjust the brightness."

"Guessing? Oh great." Benes said as she pressed the circle. Sure enough the ceiling mounted lights came on and as Benes held her finger down they gradually became brighter and a ring began to form around the circle she was pressing to show their setting. Benes allowed this to get to about half way before she let go and the light remained on.

"So now that we can see, what do we need to look for to shut down those satellites?" Carter asked.

"We need to bring the main controls on line." Keynes said as she looked around at all of the largely inactive consoles and displays, "The problem is that given the damage all the systems we were able to examine after the war we rigged our own start up routines."

"Any ideas Maya?" Baker said, "You know the alien language, don't you?"

"I do." Maya replied, nodding in agreement, "As well as giving us a language similar to yours, the Outsiders spoke amongst themselves enough around the first Psychons that the females of that time were able to learn theirs as well and that knowledge has been passed down."

"Even without any of these aliens you call Outsiders around?" Washington commented.

"Yes. Our Dorcon masters considered it useful when plundering places such as this." Maya pointed out.

"Think this place is why those Dorcons Doctor Russell saw are here?" Benes suggested to Carter.

"If it is then you can bet they'll be heading this way." he said and he took out his comlock, "Carter to Doctor Russell, do you read me?"

"Yes, I read you major." Russell responded from the Eagle.

"Doctor we suspect that the Dorcons will be heading this way. Is the Eagle secure?" Carter asked.

"Maya locked it as we left." Keynes said.

"Yes it's secure but there's not much I can do to stop the Dorcons getting inside the pyramid if they do show up. This Eagle doesn't have any external weapons."

"Don't worry about that doctor. Just make sure that you're ready if they try to break into the ship and give us a heads up if you spot anything if you wouldn't mind. We'll try and send some men down to help you if you need it but right now we need everybody up here to try and figure out how the aliens who built this place designed it."

"Understood major. I need to keep an eye on Victor but I'll program the Eagle's computer to alert me if it detects any movement outside. Russell out." Russell told him before she shut off her own comlock.

"Maya I don't suppose you know what we need to do to turn on the rest of these control panels do you?" Benes asked.

"I am sorry Captain Benes." she replied, "That knowledge was already known to the Dorcons before I was born. They and Psychon males would have it but I do not."

"Have you noticed that the panels you would be looking at if you faced this raised area in the centre of the room each have touch panels on both sides?" Keynes said as she looked from one control station to another and saw the same small panels in the same places in each cluster of consoles.

"Do you think I should try pressing them?" Benes asked.

"Well I can't try it can I?" Keynes responded and she lifted her cuffed hands as high as her restraints would allow.

"Enough of the smart mouth." Carter said.

"Maya do you still have that gag?" Baker added and Keynes sighed.

"Try it Sandra." she said and Benes placed her hands either side of the console so that she could touch both the panels at the same time.

"That's Captain Benes to you." she said as she pressed them at the same time.

All of a sudden all of the consoles around her lit up as they came on line. In addition a column of light appeared in the central area of the room and in the middle of it a holographic diagram of what could only be the planet the pyramid was built on appeared, complete with a ring of bright red dots circling it.

"Those look like the orbital defence satellites." Carter said, "How do we shut them down?"

"I'm guessing we'll find a weapons panel somewhere among all of these controls." Keynes replied, "That should have a large central control interface with a pair of narrower ones either side."

"Okay you heard the lady. Spread out and see what you can find." Washington told his troops and they now joined in checking out each of the control stations in turn, looking for the configuration on the petal like structure that Keynes had described. They went from one cluster of panels to another as well as to wall mounted consoles and pressed the side mounted touch panels to activate them until Baker saw the configuration Keynes had described appear in front of her.

"Found it." she called out, "Now what?"

"Now turn those satellites off." Carter said.

"How?" Baker asked.

"Let me see." Keynes said as she made her way towards the console Baker was stood at while Baker glared back at her and scowled as Keynes stepped into the control station with her to examine the weapons console, "The core is live." Keynes added.

"The what?" Carter asked.

"The computer core." Benes said, "I don't think we've ever been able to examine one."

"That could be filled with data that could make getting back to Earth easier." Keynes said, "All their data on wormhole travel for example."

"We need to find that core." Carter said, looking around, "Is it in here?"

"No. Like us the aliens linked all their systems around the base to their computer core. We do it so that data can be shared and backed up so it's likely that the aliens did it for the same reason." Keynes said.

"There was a section of their bases in addition to the command centre that the aliens always trashed before our troops could take them intact." Washington added, "It was on one of the lower levels near their power plants."

"Benes if we can find the computer core can you unplug it?" Carter asked.

"We don't know whether it's hot swappable or not." Keynes commented.

"Keynes, how long will it take you to shut down those satellites?" Carter said.

"Probably just a few minutes." Keynes replied.

"Good. Washington I want you to leave two of your men here with Baker, Maya and Keynes while they shut down the satellites and then find the controls to shut down the core without blowing it up. In the meantime we're going to go and find it and when Baker gives us the all clear we'll disconnect the thing and haul it back to Alpha."

"Yes major." Washington said, "Ford, Jones. You two stay put and make make sure this place stays secure. Everyone else follow me. We're going for the computer core."

Baker watched as most of the team then exited the control centre before she looked at Keynes.

"Okay, now tell me how to shut down the satellites and then get the hell away from me." she said sternly.

"You don't need to be-" Keynes back..

"I don't care about your opinion on what I need Alyson. You're nothing now. I've got the highest rank here so either you just get to the point or I'll have Ford and Jones over there get rid of you." Baker snapped.

"Tap the symbol of one of the satellites in the main display." Keynes said and Baker did as she was told. This then produced two sets of data in the displays to the side, "Maya could you double check that these are serial numbers? The last time I did this all this data was run through a translation program." Keynes asked

and Maya made her way to the control station as well. Given the lack of space inside it with both Baker and Keynes already sharing it she peered over the console from the outside and then nodded.

"Yes, those look like serial numbers." she said.

"In that case pressing one should bring up the option to shut it down." Keynes said.

"There are over a hundred at least." Baker pointed out.

"Try pressing the bar at the top of each list instead." Keynes told her and Baker pressed the bar at the top of the left hand list, producing a pop up message in the alien language that Maya translated.

"It is asking what action you want to carry out on the selected weapons." she said, "In order the options are disarm, manual target or programmed fire."

"Okay so this one disarms them, right?" Baker said, hovering her finger over the option at the top of the list and looking at Maya who then nodded back at her. Baker then pressed her choice and on the large holographic display in the centre of the room the representations of the defence satellites began to wink out, "It worked." Baker said with a smile.

"Now do the other half." Keynes said.

"I know that." Baker responded as she repeated the procedure for the remaining defence satellites and they too disappeared from the hologram, "Now get the hell away from me and just find that computer core interface."

"Does that mean you're finally going to release me? Because I can't work these consoles tied up like this." Keynes demanded.

"Do either of you two have a key to Alyson's cuffs?" Baker asked, looking towards the doorway where the two soldiers left to guard them stood.

"I've got one." Ford replied.

"Toss it here then." Baker told him and he threw the key to her. Catching it she then held it up right in front of Keynes' face, "There is no way in hell I am using this key to untie you. You kidnapped me and tried to use me as a human shield to cover your escape. If it was up to me then we'd leave you here like that when we go back to Alpha. Now get away from me and find the controls that Major Carter wants finding. Trooper Ford can help turn them on since you incapable of doing it yourself." she snapped.

10.

The Dorcon troops used the pyramid for cover as much as possible as they advanced towards the landing pad beside it that the Eagle sat on, but for the last few metres they had no choice but to break cover and run across the open. Not knowing whether the Eagle was equipped for self defence or not Grast sent Hartak and Krasan forwards first, having them head for the Eagle before he and Morl ran alongside the base of the pyramid to the opening created in the hangar door.

Unknown to the Dorcons although the Eagle was unarmed its sensor detected the movement of the alien soldiers and immediately informed Russell via her comlock.

"Carter," she said into the device as she made her way towards the cockpit, leaving the unconscious Bergman in the rescue module, "something just triggered the Eagle's proximity alarms." and then when she reached the cockpit she sat down in the pilot's seat and checked the displays in front of her, "It's the Dorcons. They're right outside now."

"Are they trying to break in?" Carter asked.

"No." Russell replied as she watched more of the Dorcons appear from around the pyramid, "Two seem to be checking out the Eagle while the others are gathering around that hole you blew in the pyramid's front door."

In the room that held the alien computer core Carter looked around at the assembled GDF troops.

"Spread out and take cover." he told them, "The Dorcons could be on their way at any moment." and the soldiers then split up and did their best to conceal themselves among the strange alien equipment that looked part constructed and part grown organically. The computer core was easily recognisable, a narrow column in the centre of the room that had bundles of organic looking cables spread out from it to the other equipment present before disappearing into the walls. Not wanting to see this damaged the GDF soldiers headed away from it to take cover. While they did this Carter and Benes dashed for where Washington was taking cover so that he could target the way in and joined him behind the machine, both of them drawing their pistols.

"Zuctan, Nerrak, see if you can find a way into the alien ship." Grast ordered, "Above all though do not damage it. The rest of us will go inside the Outsiders' base to locate the crew. If you cannot fathom how to operate this vessel then we will force them to tell us." and then he leapt through the hole blown in the door ahead of the rest of his men.

Inside the hangar the Dorcons paused to look around and they immediately saw the first of the markers used to show the path the humans had taken.

"They make this easy for us." Neros said.

"Do not be too confident." Grast warned him, "It could be an ambush. We will follow these markers but be careful, the aliens could have left traps along the route in anticipation that we would follow them."

The Dorcons then proceeded deeper into the pyramid, following the same markers that had guided Maya and Keynes to the command centre. Eventually they reached the staircase, here the trail of markers now split into two. One heading up the stairs towards the command centre and the other down to where Washington had led the bulk of the team in search of the computer core.

"They have either divided their forces or seek to trick us into doing that." Sircuk said when he saw this.

"These markers head in the directions of the main system housings below us and the command centre above. I think they are genuine." Grast said.

"Shall we split up as well unit leader?" Neros asked and Grast dipped his head.

"Yes. The system core is more essential so we will focus on that." he said, "Neros, you and Trun will head up to the command centre to scout out how many of the aliens are there. If you can take it then do so but wait for the rest of us if their numbers are too great."

"Yes unit leader." Neros replied and he and Trun then began to move cautiously up the stairs, holding their rifles at the ready in preparedness for an ambush before Grast looked at his remaining troops.

"The rest of you follow me," he ordered and the remaining Dorcons began to move down the stairs instead.

Inside the Eagle Russell used the display of her comlock to monitor the feeds from the external camera system from inside the rescue module. Not only did this enable her to remain with Bergman just in case he needed further medical intervention but it also meant that if either of the alien flight crew climbed up onto the cockpit module and looked in through the forward viewports they would see only an empty cockpit. On the other hand with the two Dorcons so close to the Eagle it was difficult for Russell to keep them in view at all times as they kept on entering blind spots between the fields of view of the various cameras mounted outside the vessel. Fortunately for Russell one purpose of the cameras was to enable the crew to carry out a visual

inspection of key systems mounted on the outside of the Eagle from the safety of the cockpit and so whenever they went near to any of these she could see them. This included the four sets of steering thrusters mounted on the outer faces of the landing gear modules. These were designed to steer the Eagle in space and although the thrust they produced was significantly lower than either the main propulsion drives at the rear of the craft and the take off and landing thrusters located beneath the hull they were still capable of outputting a significant amount of power and Russell knew it.

Picking up the carbine she had taken from the survey Eagle earlier Russell hurried into the cockpit while the two Dorcons were pre-occupied inspecting one of these sets of thrusters as they tried to determine how the ship operated. Even though she was a Doctor, Russell still had the minimum qualification necessary to fly an Eagle and she knew where to find all of the controls including those for the onboard test routines. The purpose of the test system was to give a maintenance crew the ability to directly trigger any single system aboard the Eagle without having to run through any others at the same so that they could be tested in isolation from one another. However, as she called up the menu for this Russell had another use in mind entirely. Selecting the drive test system she rapidly navigated through the options to chose the control thruster group that the two Dorcons were examining and pausing only as long as it took for her to double check that they were still stood next to the thrusters she triggered it.

Even though the test routine ran only a fraction of the possible power through the engine it still produced a blast of flame from each of the four individual thrusters that took the Dorcons by surprise as it engulfed them and they staggered back, screaming in pain. This was exactly what Russell had expected and as quickly as she could she rushed from the cockpit with her carbine in her hands to the air lock where she opened the external door and ran down the ramp before it had even finished unfolding completely. One of the Dorcons saw Russell emerge from the Eagle with her carbine and he began to raise his rifle before she shot him first. Meanwhile the second Dorcon, almost completely blinded by the blast of flame he had taken to his face and having dropped his rifle fumbled for the pistol on his belt before Russell shot him as well.

Concerned that the sound of the thruster test firing and the gunfire would attract more Dorcons to the Eagle, Russell then ran back inside and sealed the hatch behind her before she took out her comlock again.

"Russell to Carter," she transmitted, "I don't know about their infantry squad but the two Dorcons outside are down.

When they got to floor of the pyramid that the white markers showed the human team had left them at Neros and Trun took turns in moving from one corner to another while the other kept watch and in this manner they were quickly able to get from the stairs to the corridor where the command centre was located and from there they could see the lights from inside spilling out.

"Unit Leader Grast," Neros said softly into his communicator, " we have located the command centre and there are aliens here. They have brought some of its systems on line."

"Can you tell how many there are?" Grast responded.

"Not yet unit leader but I can hear them talking. I recognise a few words of their language from the Psychons'."

"Advance and investigate. Attack only if you think you have the advantage." Grast ordered.

"Yes unit leader." Neros replied before he shut off his communicator and he and Trun crept slowly towards the command centre's open doorway.

When they reached it Neros was about to peer through into the room when all of a sudden Jones, who had been stationed close by it to maintain a watch for the Dorcons spotted them both and called out a warning to the others.

"Contact!" he yelled at the same time as he fired his rifle towards the doorway. One of the rounds from the burst clipped Neros but the shot was deflected by his armoured shoulder pauldron.

Now that they had already come under fire the Dorcons had no hesitation about returning fire at the humans and Neros fired a prolonged burst around the doorway towards Jones. The combination of the control station he was using for cover and his own body armour stopped many of the rounds fired at him but some found weak points at joints and his neck and Jones fell backwards, clutching at his throat and choking as blood filled his lungs.

Nearby Keynes let out a startled cry as she tried to dive for cover but because of the limitations placed on her movement by her restraints she overbalanced and fell to the floor, landing not far from Jones' body.

Meanwhile behind her Ford unslung his rifle and moved to engage the Dorcons, firing rapid individual shots to try and keep them pinned down while not expending too much of his own ammunition. In response to this Trun held his rifle around the door frame while Neros was reloading his weapon and fired back in the same manner, spraying rounds across the command centre as Baker and Maya also took cover. Ford made it as far as a control station in front of the doorway and paused in anticipation of a target presenting itself which it did when Neros rolled through the doorway and Ford opened fire immediately. His burst struck the Dorcon repeatedly but the hits were not immediately lethal and Neros was able to let off a burst of his own that struck

Ford in the chest and punched right through his body armour so that he fell dead at the same time as Neros also expired.

Knowing that there was another armed Dorcon outside the command centre Keynes looked around and saw Jones' rifle on the floor barely a metre away from her by his body. The problem was that there was no way that she could operate while handcuffed.

"Baker! Give me the keys." she shouted across to where she could see Baker cowering behind another control station but Baker ignored her, instead reaching for her comlock.

"Major Carter we're under attack." she signalled, "Ford and Jones are both dead. Help us."

Keynes then saw the remaining Dorcon soldier enter the command centre, searching for more human troops. "Francis you have to give Alyson the keys." Maya called out and Trun spun around just in time to see Maya duck back behind the control station she was hiding behind.

"Damn you Francis." Keynes muttered as she wriggled across the floor towards Jones' body. She could not use the rifle that she kicked out of the way to reach him but he also had a pistol holstered on his belt and it was this that Keynes took hold of instead.

Trun then saw Baker cowering behind another nearby control station and he growled as he darted towards it and pointed his weapon down at her. Baker screamed and brought up her hands in front of her.

"No please!" she cried out and she shut her eyes tight before she heard the sound of a shot. Realising instantly that she had not been hit Baker opened her eyes again to see Trun stagger before there was another shot and part of the side of his head was blown off. She then watched as the alien collapsed and his rifle clattered to the floor beside her.

"Francis are you okay?" Keynes asked and Baker looked towards her, seeing the pistol she had clasped between her hands.

Instinctively Baker reached out and snatched up the Dorcon rifle on the floor beside her. This was bulky compared to a human rifle and in the hands of someone as small as Baker it appeared huge.

"Drop the gun." she shouted at Keynes, aiming the rifle towards her before her unfamiliarity with the weapons and the strange way she was holding the grip meant for alien hands caused her to let off a short burst that flew just over Keynes.

"Okay." Keynes said, tossing the pistol aside as well as she was able to. Baker then dropped the Dorcon weapon and ran over to pick up the pistol instead.

"Good, now stay still." Baker ordered her, keeping the pistol trained on her as she also picked up Jones' rifle.

"Understood spacewoman. I suggest you do your best to stay hidden. We've got company coming as well now but we'll come up and get you when we can." Carter told Baker when she reported in. One of Washington's men stationed by the staircase had reported the Dorcon troops coming down and now the humans inside the main system core room were getting ready to face them. Unlike the command centre, where the lights and trail of markers had made it clear where the group there was, the group led by Carter had never activated the lights and by using some extra markers they had made it look as if they had carried on past the room when in fact they were positioned to be able to fire out through the doorway as soon as the Dorcons appeared.

"There won't be a command." Washington told his men over their squad communication network, "When I open fire you open fire. I want short controlled bursts."

As in the case of Neros and Trun the troops under Grast's command took turns to move only in their case they did so in pairs and when the first two of them appeared they dashed past the door without looking into the room. Washington saw this through his rifle's optical sight that provided enough light amplification to give a clear view of what was beyond the doorway and he readied himself to fire, exhaling and holding his breath as he waited for the next pair to appear. Then as soon as they did he squeezed his trigger and fired off a three round burst that sent Morl tumbling along the floor.

As soon as Washington fired his rifle his men copied him and the barrage of fire at the only other visible Dorcon ripped holes all over his body.

"Ambush!" Grast yelled at his two remaining troops as he and Krasan turned back towards the doorway while Hartak ran forwards from the other direction and pressed himself up against the wall beside it, reaching for a grenade from his webbing before unscrewing the metal fragmentation casing from around it. Grast dipped his head in agreement when he saw this and while Hartak finished removing the core of the grenade he leant around the door frame and fired into the room. Then as he ducked back out of sight Hartak primed the grenade core and roared as he tossed into the room.

Without the fragmentation casing the grenade produced a bright flash of light and loud 'bang' that overwhelmed the senses of the humans defending the room and just long enough for the three Dorcons to burst through the doorway without being cut down by a volley of magnetically accelerated projectiles.

The explosion had caused one of Washington's men to overbalance and fall out into the open and when he saw this Hartak opened fire, spraying the unfortunate soldier with bullets of his own.

It was then that Washington was able to recover his senses and return fired, hitting Hartak in his abdomen. "Fire at will!" he shouted as the Dorcon dropped his rifle as he fell to the floor, screaming in pain and clutching at the wounds he had suffered while Grast and Krasan both took cover rather than attempt to get him out of the humans' line of fire before Carter fired several shots from his pistol in rapid succession that ended Hartak's screams.

Krasan then began to exchange fire with the human troops, both using rapid bursts to try and keep the other pinned down and while he was doing this Grast crawled around the outside of the room, using the machinery it contained for cover as he tried to get behind where Carter, Benes and Washington were hiding, having identified their position from Washington's shouted order even if he had not understood the exact words. Still trying to keep the human soldiers suppressed Krasan fired a burst from his rifle that went wide of any of them and instead the projectiles he fired struck the main computer core in the centre of the room. This produced several rapid flashes and an acrid smell as the electronics inside were disrupted before the entire core burst into flames.

"Damn!" Carter exclaimed, "We needed that thing." then all of a sudden he heard a roaring sound and he looked around just in time to see Grast burst out from behind a piece of machinery and charge towards him. Carter attempted to aim his pistol at the Dorcon but before he could line it up on him Grast kicked the weapon from his hand and sent it flying into the darkness, then as Benes also turned towards him he brought the butt of his rifle down on her head and sent her sprawling across the floor.

Seeing this, Washington dropped his rifle rather than waste the time it would take to aim it and launched himself towards Grast before he could strike again, tackling the Dorcon to the floor where the pair of them wrestled for control of Grast's rifle.

While the two unit commanders fought with one another Carter crawled to where Washington's rifle had landed and picked it up. He initially pointed the pointed the weapon towards Grast but could not get a clear line of fire while Washington remained so close to him so instead he turned it towards Krasan. The other Dorcon was still exchanging fire with the remaining human soldiers, neither group able to get a clear shot at the other before another burst of suppressing fire forced them to take cover again. Carter noticed there was one of the pulsing fluid lines running right above where the Dorcon had taken cover and although he had no idea of the effect rupturing this would have he decided that dousing Krasan with the contents could be the distraction that was needed to deal with him. Lining the rifle up on the root like fluid line, Carter squeezed the trigger to unleash another rapid burst that put a pair of holes in it while the third shot missed by a narrow margin and embedded itself in the ceiling. Immediately the fluid from inside the line came spraying out under pressure and splashed over Krasan. The fluid stung where it touched his skin, seeping under his armour to collect where he could not reach and the Dorcon roared as he ripped at the catches holding his body armour in place at the same time as he rolled out of the path of the spray. However, this also brought him out into the open without his rifle and Carter fired again, hitting his just as he released his armoured chest plate and it fell away. With little other than Krasan himself to slow them down this set of projectiles tore right through him and Krasan suddenly stopped moving as he slumped to the floor and a pool of Dorcon blood began to form around him.

On the other side of the room Washington was finally able to rip the rifle from Grast's grip and he hurled it across the room. However, as he did this Grast struck at him with his fist and knocked Washington from on top of him. Then with a roar Grast leapt at where Washington had landed and wrapped his hand around the man's throat as he landed on top of him. He did not get the chance to try strangling Washington though as at the moment he started to tighten his grip he felt a sharp pain in his abdomen and looking down he saw Washington's hand wrapped around the knife he had just slid beneath his body armour. Grast let go of his grip on Washington and reached to try and grab hold of the knife himself but before he could do so Washington twisted the blade to open out the wound and then pulled it free before pushing Grast aside. The Dorcon landed on the floor beside him, his hands pressed as tightly over the wound as he could manage in a vain attempt to stem the flow of blood.

"Curse you alien. Lord Tollun will take revenge for what you have cost him." Grast gasped, tasting blood in his mouth as well from the internal damage done by the knife wound and as Washington got to his feet he and Carter exchanged glances.

"Do you have any idea what he just said major?" Washington asked.

"Beats me. I'm just a pilot." Carter replied, shrugging and then he tossed Washington's rifle back to him.

II.

Washington fastened the safety harness around Keynes to strap her into her seat as the team boarded the rescue Eagle before returning to the moon. Keynes wriggled for a moment, attempting to find some way to sit comfortably and as she did so she looked up to see Baker walking past to her seat at the far end of the module, past where Bergman was still laid out in the treatment area.

"Francis I saved your life." Keynes said, "Do you understand that I'm not your enemy now? Why not just sit down here with me so I can-"

"So you can what?" Baker snapped at her, "Apologise? Take back what you did? No, I'm not interested in forgiving you."

"I'm not going to stop trying." Keynes replied.

"Oh really?" Baker said and she looked at the open arms locker that was nearby, "Sergeant is it true that those stun guns are really painful?" she asked.

"Like you can't imagine." Washington replied, nodding, "The plasma effect makes it feel like you're on fire."

"Good." Baker said and she suddenly grabbed one of the weapons, released the safety and fired it at Keynes who cried out in pain before slumping forwards against her harness, "Okay I'm done." Baker said as Washington reached out to snatch the stun gun from her, "Now can we just gag that bitch so I don't have to listen to her self pitying lies all the way back to Alpha?"

Koenig stood waiting at the end of the boarding tube when the rescue Eagle returned to Moonbase Alpha with a pair of soldiers in combat fatigues but without any visible body armour.

"John." Russell said as she exited the Eagle first and the pair embraced one another tightly, "Thank you for not abandoning us."

"Did you think I would?" Koenig replied and then he watched as a pair of Washington's soldiers brought Bergman from the Eagle on a stretcher.

"Take him to the medical section." Russell told them.

"How is he?" Koenig asked.

"He'll be fine though I would recommend not sending him out on any more missions before his ribs have a chance to heal properly." Russell said, "I better go with him."

"Okay but don't spend too much time with him or I'm going to start to get jealous." Koenig said with a smile and Russell smiled back.

"Well he does have a very impressive-" she began before pausing long enough for Koenig to frown before she added, "mind." then she let go of Koenig and followed the two stretcher bearers.

Koenig remained outside the Eagle watching as the rest of the occupants disembarked and when he saw Baker and Maya appear he called out to them.

"Baker, Maya, over here please." he said, stepping clear of the boarding tube.

"Yes colonel?" Baker said as she stood in front of him.

"I heard about your little stunt with the stun gun spacewoman." Koenig said sternly.

"Yes colonel." Baker replied.

"Well do you have anything to say about it?" he asked.

"No colonel. Other than I'm not sorry about it." Baker said.

"According to regulations I should be organising a court martial." Koenig said, "On the other hand I already have one of them to organise for Alyson Keynes. But after that she'll be back working with the rest of us and I'm only going to warn you this once that I won't tolerate any more behaviour like that. If you attack her again then I'll have no hesitation in seeing you held to account. For now though I'm going to put this incident down to you coming back to work before you were ready. Now get back to your quarters and don't come near main mission until there is a shift available for you. Is that clear spacewoman?"

"Yes colonel. Crystal clear." Baker said and then she looked at Maya, "Come on, let's go." she added.

"I need to speak to Maya first." Koenig said and Baker nodded before walking away. Then Koenig turned to Maya and added, "Well?"

"I spoke to Alyson Keynes like you asked Colonel Koenig and she is sincere about trying to make amends. I do not think that she will betray you again. In fact I noticed an interesting reaction from her when your name was mentioned." Maya told him.

"Never mind me. It's Keynes I'm interested in." Koenig said, "I just needed to know if she was playing me."

"No, she is not as you say 'playing' you. However, I do not think that the others of the crew will be as welcoming to her as you are willing to be. It is not just Francis Baker that was angered by what she did."

Maya said.

Koenig nodded as he saw Carter and Benes exit the Eagle as well with no-one behind them.

"Hang on, where's Keynes?" he asked them.

"We heard you'd be here with an escort for her so she's still aboard waiting for you colonel." Carter replied,

"We kept her secure."

"I don't like the sound of this." Koenig said and he beckoned for the two guards behind him to follow as he went aboard the Eagle.

As he stepped into the airlock he heard the sound of muffled sobbing and he turned into the rescue module to find Keynes still strapped into her chair, restrained and gagged as she had been when the guards at Theta had first brought her to him. Meanwhile the key to her restraints had been left on the seat opposite hers, right in view but far out of her reach and Koenig sighed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think that their reaction to you would be quite this bad." Koenig said as he undid Keynes gag and then picked up the key to finally remove the handcuffs and leg irons from her.

"Thank you colonel." she said.

"Come on, let's get you back to your quarters. I've made sure that they were made ready for you." Koenig told her as she got out of her seat and she walked beside him from the Eagle while the two guards followed behind them.

Koenig remained silent as he escorted Keynes to her quarters, speaking only when they came to a halt outside her door.

"It'll take about a week to properly organise your court martial." he told her, "Until then you are under house arrest and are not leave your quarters without an escort. The guards will remain here to make sure of that and also to protect you from any reprisals."

"Reprisals? From Red Mars for cutting a deal with you or from my former friends and colleagues?" Keynes asked.

"Either." Koenig answered, "Now in you go. I have work to be getting on with."

All of a sudden Keynes lunged at Koenig and wrapped her arms around him, squeezing him tightly.

"I knew you wouldn't leave me in that cell." she said as Koenig signalled for the guards to stand down when they reached for their stun guns.

"I did what I had to for the good of everyone. I wasn't doing you a favour." he said, pulling her arms away from him before he started to walk away,

"Inside please miss." one of the guards then told Keynes while the other used his comlock to open the door and Keynes nodded, backing into her quarters so that she could watch Koenig as he walked away.

The moment that the door slid shut again Keynes noticed that the control panel beside it had been removed and replaced with a blank plate and she turned around to look at the rest of her quarters, gasping when she saw what had been done to them.

Every effort she had gone to to personalise her quarters had been removed down to the digital picture frames all of her photos were stored on. Every single piece of electrical equipment had been removed along with every control panel and power socket. Even her bedsheets had been replaced with a brand new set.

Rushing to the kitchen area Keynes began to open cupboards and drawers only to find that they had been emptied of their previous contents, including all of the eating utensils. Now the only food she could find were several boxes of survival ration bars and although she had been provided with a number of mugs there was nothing to drink other than water from the taps.

Keynes then went to the wardrobes to see if she was expected to remain dressed in her prison issue bodysuit or she had at least been left a change of clothes. Here she found that once again everything that had been hers had been removed and replaced by several sets of unadorned combat fatigues and several packets of brand new plain underwear.

However, as she searched through her cupboards she did find one that held a number of nondescript boxes and she pulled these out and opened them to examine the contents on the bed. Inside each of the boxes she found hundreds of old fashioned hard copies of the photographs she had had stored in the frames that had been removed. Obviously someone had taken the time to download them and print them out for her. Among these Keynes found a picture her with Russell, Benes, Alexander and Baker that had been taken at Baker's supposed farewell meal. Keynes stared at the image of them all huddled together and smiling at the camera before she fell back onto her bed and with the photo still clutched in her hands she began to weep again.