

Space: 2299



04: Manhunt

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Released from prison, Alyson Keynes is required to assist in the search for the Red Mars terrorists that destroyed Moonbase Mu and sent the moon through a wormhole into deep space. However, Red Mars knows that they are being hunted and take steps to remove the threat to them...

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I.

Captain Alyson Keynes of the Global Defence Force found herself close to tears when she checked her appearance in the mirror built into the closets of her quarters at Moonbase Alpha. She was wearing her dark blue formal uniform that included the rank insignia on her shoulders and while her divisional badge and award ribbons were displayed on her chest. What saddened her was that although she had worked for almost ten years to gain all of these and was proud of every one of them, today was probably going to be the last time she ever got to wear any of them officially. After today she would be a civilian, expelled from the GDF for a terrible mistake that had had consequences that no-one could have foreseen.

There was a chiming sound from the door to Keynes' quarters and she looked towards it.

"Come in." she called out. The words meant little, merely serving to tell whoever was standing outside that she was aware of their presence. Keynes had no control over the door herself. Her comlock had been confiscated and every control panel in her quarters had been removed along with every other electronic device, guaranteeing that she would have no access to Moonbase Alpha's computer network and would remain under house arrest.

The door opened to reveal Master Sergeant Washington and a pair of his soldiers. All three men were armed with stun guns holstered on their hips and like Keynes they wore their formal uniforms rather than the combat fatigues that Alpha's troops usually wore on duty.

"It's time. Are you ready captain?" Washington asked.

"Huh. Captain." Keynes commented, "You won't be calling me that for much longer."

"You haven't been dismissed from the service yet." Washington pointed out, "So are you ready or not?"

"Yes, let's get this over with." she said as she walked towards him and held out her hands. In response to this Washington produced a pair of handcuffs that he had been holding behind his back and locked them around Keynes' wrists.

"Come with us." he said, "The court martial board is ready for you."

With the other two soldiers following close behind them, Washington walked beside Keynes as he escorted her through the corridors of Alpha from her quarters to main mission and Keynes suddenly came to a halt just before they got to the door.

"Something wrong captain?" Washington said as he and his men also halted, their hands moving towards their weapons just in case Keynes was about to try and escape at the last moment.

"I haven't been in there since the day we left." Keynes said, "Is everyone in there?"

Washington knew that by 'everyone' Keynes meant the command staff of Moonbase Alpha that she had worked alongside for several years and he nodded.

"The usual staff are on duty." he told her and then he reached out to open the door before guiding Keynes through.

Main mission was staffed by more than a dozen officers and enlisted personnel at that time though neither Colonel Koenig, Moonbase Alpha's commanding officer or his second in command Major Morrow were present. A number of the staff present looked up from their consoles as Keynes was led across the room but she noticed that two specific individuals quickly looked away again when she made eye contact with them. The first of these was Lieutenant Alexander, before the events that had led to the court martial Keynes was about to stand in front of she had been her best friend while Spacewoman Baker had been due to leave the moon and return to Earth to get married. Now she was trapped here like everyone else with no idea when or even if they would ever manage to get home.

Keynes was led all the way across main mission to a set of steps that seemed to lead up to a wall but as she and her escort climbed these steps the wall retracted to reveal Colonel Koenig's office on the far side. In here sat not only the colonel himself but also Major Morrow along with Alpha's chief medical officer Dr Russell, the only woman in the group, pilot Major Carter, Moonbase Epsilon's commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi and Moonbase Lambda's commander Major Capston. All but Capston sat in a row beside Koenig who sat at his desk while Capston sat at one of two smaller desks set up in front of this.

"Release the prisoner." Koenig said and as Washington was removing Keynes' handcuffs from her wrists the wall behind them slid shut once more to separate them from main mission.

"So how do you think it will go?" Baker asked, looking up at the wall now blocking her view of what was happening in Koenig's office.

"It all depends on Colonel Verdeschi." Benes, the officer currently in command in main mission said as she too glanced at the wall.

"Benes is right." Kano, the head of Alpha's technical section added as he walked over towards the console where Baker sat, "Doctor Russell is bound to support the plea deal Colonel Koenig offered Keynes but that

still leaves three votes on the panel. If Colonel Verdeschi votes against it then maybe he can persuade Morrow and Carter to oppose it as well. Of course if he supports the deal then the pair of them are likely to vote along with the others. If three colonels back it then who are a pair of majors to disagree after all?" "She should be shot for what she did." Baker said, glaring at the wall of Koenig's office.

"We don't have the death penalty. Even for treason." Alexander commented without looking up from her console and Baker snorted.

"I can dream can't I lieutenant? She kidnapped me after all. If it does go to a trial do you think I'll get to testify against her?" she said.

"Keynes has already admitted guilt to the court martial. If she was likely to change her plea at the last minute then I don't think she would have refused to have a defence counsel." Benes said.

"Yeah, Lieutenant Alexander dodged a bullet on that, I'd hate to be known as the person who had to defend a traitor." Baker said, it being common knowledge among the command staff that Koenig had appointed Alexander to act as Keynes' defence counsel. Alexander stared at Baker for a moment and then went back to her work, "

Inside Koenig's office Keynes sat down at the vacant desk while Washington and his men sat in the row of seats immediately behind her. Colonel Koenig then reached out and activated the recording system set up in his office to log the proceedings.

"This court martial is now in session, Colonel John Koenig presiding. The other members of the panel are Lieutenant Colonel Doctor Helena Russell, Lieutenant Colonel Tony Verdeschi, Major Paul Morrow and Major Alan Carter. Major James Capston is acting as prosecutor and the defendant has rejected counsel." Koenig said before he picked up a computer tablet and read the charges, "Captain Alyson Keynes the primary charge you are here to face is of treason, that you did knowingly conspire with the terrorist group Red Mars to give them access to the nuclear weapons vault at Moonbase Mu. You are also charged with the attempted theft of an Eagle transport craft, the kidnapping of Spacewoman First Class Francis Baker, assault on an enlisted member of the Global Defence Force and resisting arrest." then he lowered the tablet and looked at Keynes, "Now before we proceed any further I will remind you that you are entitled to an officer or civilian lawyer to act as your defence counsel in this court martial. You have previously indicated that you do not wish to exercise this right. Do you wish to change your mind?"

"No colonel. I will face this court martial alone." Keynes replied.

"Very well." Koenig said, "Captain Keynes you have submitted a plea of no contest to all of the charges against you as part of the deal that has already been put before this panel. Do you still wish to proceed with this?"

"Yes colonel." Keynes said and Capston got to his feet.

"Colonel Koenig as prosecutor I wish to challenge the plea deal that has been entered." he said.

"On what grounds?" Koenig asked.

"The gravity of Captain Keynes crimes." Capston said and he picked up his own tablet to read from, "The death toll-

"We are all aware of how many people died major. There is no need for you to read it out again." Russell commented.

"As the court martial wishes." Capston replied as he sat back down.

"In light of the major's request that the plea deal be rejected does anyone want to change their vote?" Koenig asked, looking at his fellow officers sitting in judgement over Keynes but none of them responded and he turned towards Keynes and Capston again, "In that case we can bring this court martial to a rapid close. Captain Keynes please stand." he said and Keynes stood up, "You have stated that your actions were made under duress, threats that you deemed credible having been made against family members located on Mars. You have also claimed that you were unaware of the terrorists' plans to detonate one of the nuclear weapons stored at Moonbase Mu, believing them to merely be attempting to expose the operation there and have agreed to co-operate fully in the hunt for those directly responsible for the attack on Mu. However, none of this can mitigate your guilt. The level of the threat made against your family does not compare to the devastation and loss of life that resulted from the explosion that destroyed Moonbase Mu and opened the wormhole that pulled the moon out of Earth's orbit. Therefore, the charges against you cannot be dismissed on these grounds. However, you have agreed to a plea deal that this panel has discussed and voted on and by a majority of four votes to one the panel has decided to accept it."

Keynes sighed with relief, having just avoided being sent back to the maximum security prison at Moonbase Theta. Koenig then continued with his judgement.

"Captain Keynes by the terms of the plea bargain you are hereby dishonourably discharged from the Global Defence Force. You will no longer be entitled to identify yourself by the rank you have held to this point and are not eligible for any benefit available to former officers or commissioned personnel. In addition you are banned for life from re-enlisting as either a commissioned or non-commissioned officer in any of Earth's

armed forces. Legally you are considered a felon and must report this conviction whenever your criminal record is required to be provided. In addition to your dishonourable discharge you will be held under house arrest without access to computer systems and prohibited from leaving your quarters without an escort. The deal also requires you to return to work as an unpaid civilian administrative consultant. During your years of service you demonstrated an admirable skill for logistics and you will continue to use that skill for the benefit of the community at large. Do you have anything to say?"

"Yes colonel I would like to thank the court martial for accepting my plea deal." Keynes said as she looked at the five members of the panel and tried to guess which out of them had voted to reject the deal Koenig had presented to her in exchange for her helping Doctor Russell and the scientist Professor Bergman get off an alien planet that they were trapped on after their Eagle was shot down.

"Major Capston, do you have anything to add?" Koenig asked.

"No colonel." Capston said.

"Very well. This case is now closed. Master Sergeant Washington please remove Miss Keynes and return her to her quarters." Koenig ordered, shutting off the recording system.

"Yes colonel." Washington replied and as he and his men got to their feet the wall separating Koenig's office from main mission opened once more.

"She's not in handcuffs. They accepted the deal." Baker said quietly as she watched Keynes being led back through main mission again by the security detail. Looking back towards Baker, Washington saw that she was looking towards him and he brought up one arm slightly, holding out four fingers then just one to tell her the result of the vote by the court martial panel.

Meanwhile in his office Koenig looked at the other officers present.

"Major Morrow, Major Carter, Major Capston, you can all return to your regular duties now." he said and the three majors got up to leave.

"Sorry about that." Carter told Capston, "I suppose you can't win them all hey?" and Capston shrugged.

"It doesn't really bother me." he said, "I've just heard a number of people saying that we should have thrown the book at Keynes for what she did so I thought I'd give the panel the chance to think again. Don't worry, I'm not going to ask about how each of you voted."

"Good. I'd hate to have to report you for jury tampering." Morrow commented with a smile.

"I better get going as well." Russell added, "Who knows what Doctor Mathias has had to deal with in my absence. Are you finishing at the regular time John?"

"Ah no. This business has put me behind schedule. I may need to work late." Koenig responded.

"Okay, well I'll see you whenever you finish." Russell said as she got up and started to walk away.

"I suppose I'll be heading back to Epsilon as well." Verdeschi said but as he started to get out of his seat Koenig held up a hand for him to stop.

"No wait, there's something I want to discuss with you about Keynes' case." he said and after checking that the other officers were all clear of his office Koenig closed the wall again.

"Is this about the deal?" Verdeschi asked.

"In a sense, yes. As you know Keynes has agreed to co-operate with the hunt for the Red Mars terrorists who carried out the actual raid at Mu. I want you to lead that hunt." Koenig told him.

"Me? Wouldn't one of your own officers be better suited? After all they're more familiar with Alpha than I am." Verdeschi pointed out.

"Oh I know that but the problem is that I don't know how deep Red Mars was able to penetrate Alpha." Koenig said and Verdeschi frowned.

"You think there could be another traitor on your staff?" he asked.

"I trusted Alyson Keynes, even considered her a personal friend." Koenig said.

"Plus doesn't she have that massive crush on you?" Verdeschi commented and Koenig winced.

"Don't remind me. Though I'm not supposed to know about that. Helena apparently threatened to do terrible things to Keynes if she tried making a move on me. The issue is though that there could be another agent of Red Mars within the GDF here. That's why I want the investigation led by someone who can come at this with fewer preconceptions."

"Do you want me to bring in a full team?"

"No." Koenig replied, shaking his head, "You can use my security staff. Like you said they're more familiar with Alpha so they can help you out in that regard and they're no more likely to have been compromised than any of your staff."

"You trust me though?" Verdeschi said.

"Of course. If Red Mars had got to you then we'd all be screwed anyway." Koenig replied and Verdeschi looked at the windows in Koenig's office that just few weeks ago had offered a clear view of Earth instead of the unexplored space that was outside now.

"Are you sure we aren't?" he said.

2.

When Verdeschi left Koenig's office he made his way straight out of main mission but then rather than turning towards either the travel tube terminal or a launch pad to take an Eagle back to Moonbase Epsilon he turned towards the area of Moonbase Alpha where the officers' quarters were located. Before he had got even half way to the end of the corridor though he heard someone call out his name from behind him.

"Colonel Verdeschi!" and he turned to see Baker hurrying towards him.

"Yes, Baker isn't it?" he said.

"That's right sir. Spacewoman First Class Francis Baker. I'm the one that Alyson Keynes held hostage."

Baker replied, "I just wanted to thank you for voting against the plea bargain that Colonel Koenig-"

"I'm going to stop you right there Spacewoman Baker." Verdeschi said sternly, "You should know that the deliberation of a court martial board is confidential and not to be discussed anywhere beyond the panel itself. I can't talk to you about that. Now are you supposed to be on duty?"

"No sir, I just finished my shift." Baker said.

"In that case run along to wherever you were going because I have work to do. Unless you'd rather I asked Colonel Koenig to sign you up to another duty shift." Verdeschi told her.

"Yes sir." Baker responded and the two began to walk away from one another. However, just before she turned down a side corridor Baker turned around and called out, "Thank you anyway sir. It means a lot to me."

Verdeschi halted, considering ordering her back to him but then reconsidered. Keynes had held Baker as a hostage when she was trying to escape the moon the situation had obviously been traumatic for the young woman so he decided to drop the issue for now. However, he did take out his comlock and activated the messaging system, typing out a simple message.

Baker thinks it was me that voted against the deal.

Then he hit 'Send' before continuing on his way towards the officers' quarters.

Upon reaching that section of Alpha Verdeschi made his way to Keynes' quarters, finding them easily by looking out for the two armed guards standing watch outside them.

"I take it she's in there now?" he said to them and one of the guards nodded.

"Yes colonel. She's in there and she's alone." he replied.

"Good. I need to talk to her." Verdeschi said and then he pressed the communicator button beside the door.

"Come in." Keynes called out from the other side of the door and Verdeschi used his comlock to open it before entering her quarters. Inside he found Keynes buttoning up the shirt of the plain combat fatigues she now wore while her formal service uniform could be seen in an open closet along side multiple sets of combat fatigues identical to those she now wore.

"Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, I wasn't expecting you." Keynes said as the door slid shut behind him, "I was just about to make myself some dinner but I'm afraid I don't have much to offer you in the way of refreshments."

"That's alright Cap- Miss Keynes." Verdeschi said, momentarily forgetting that he had just been part of the court martial that had discharged her from the GDF. Then he noticed a large number of archaic printed photographs stuck to one wall of Keynes quarters, "I see you've been decorating." he commented.

"What, the photos? Yes. Colonel Koenig didn't allow me to keep any of my electronic picture frames but he went to the effort of printing out a lot of the pictures I had stored on them and left them for me. I've been left a few old printed books to read as well, though I think some of them might be someone's idea of a joke."

Keynes said and she walked over to a cupboard beside her bed and took out a pair of books that she held up for Verdeschi to see. Naturally enough in an age where most books, like photographs, were stored digitally and these were obviously old and their covers showed considerable signs of wear. It was not the condition of the books that made Verdeschi smile though, it was the titles.

"Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky and a book of crossword puzzles." he said, "Let me guess, someone already did all the puzzles."

"Actually no. But I don't have a pen so I can't fill any of them in. I guess it must have been decided that I'd try and stab someone with it." Keynes said as she returned the books to the cupboard, "Now I'm guessing that you didn't just drop by to check out my quarters."

"Correct. Colonel Koenig has put me in charge of the investigation into Red Mars. That means I need to talk to you about everything you know about them." Verdeschi said as he sat down on a nearby chair, "How about we start with how they first contacted you?"

"It was a series of e-mails from an anonymous mail system, the sort that anyone can set up an account with online. I got three messages each from a different e-mail address but that were signed off in an identical manner." Keynes told Verdeschi as she sat down on a chair that faced him.

"And what did these say?" Verdeschi said as he started to take notes on his tablet computer.

"The first one asked how my sister was. This got to me about an hour or two before I heard about the attack that injured my sister. The second reached me not long after I was told that my sister was in hospital after a terrorist attack. The third one sent me an e-mail address that I could use to send messages to. This was another anonymous one and I was told that no e-mails would ever be sent from it. They told me that if I didn't want my sister and her family to be killed then I should let them know and they'd tell me what they wanted." Keynes explained.

"And what did they want?" Verdeschi said.

"You mean did they ask me to help them trigger off a nuclear bomb? Of course they didn't, but they did tell me about the secret nuclear weapons program at Mu. They said that they knew security was too tight for them to ever be able to steal a nuclear weapon but that all they wanted to do was gain access to the storage vault so that they could photograph the weapons and show that we had them. The way they worded it they seemed to think that showing that we were making nuclear weapons would turn all the colonies against Earth."

"And what did you think?"

"I thought that a war was coming and that the colonies were already pretty much united against Earth thanks to groups like Red Mars and their rabble rousing. I knew that nuclear weapons were used as a deterrent to war in the days before the alien attacks on Earth and that maybe if it became public knowledge that we had these weapons the colonies would think twice about starting a war. I thought I was doing the right thing by Earth as well as by my family." Keynes said, "If I'd known that-

"That's okay." Verdeschi interrupted, "So what did they need from you?"

"Information on troop deployments. Since I was in charge of security here at Alpha I created the patrol schedules so I could create gaps for them to be able to move people and equipment through. Plus I was able to warn them whenever anyone got close to figuring out that they were here. Their main requirement from me though was to hack into the security system at Mu so that I could get them through the perimeter, in and out. It was obvious that if they were able to expose the nuclear weapons program that I'd be found out sooner or later and so they also promised to get me to Mars so that I wouldn't be arrested."

"Did you ever try and track where the e-mails came from?"

"Yes, but the information was different every time. It always looked like it came from a physical terminal but when I checked the terminal logs themselves there was no evidence that they had sent the e-mails. In fact it turned out that the terminal supposedly used to send the second e-mail wasn't even connected to the network when the time stamp said it was sent, something to do with a maintenance issue."

"Sound like someone put a tap into the hard line." Verdeschi commented and Keynes nodded.

"That was my guess." she said, "Later on I started being directed to dead drops, sometimes to pick up memory sticks with information on them that Red Mars didn't want to chance sending by e-mail or to drop off something they wanted. Like the transponders to get them through the defence perimeter at Mu."

"Okay thanks." Verdeschi said, shutting down his tablet and getting up, "I'm going to run through this and I'll be back when I need more from you. How do you feel about coming out into the field with the team I put together?"

"Anything to get out of here for a while." Keynes replied.

Carlos Garcia made his way along the wide public passageway at Moonbase Beta that was lined with private businesses. Regarded as a backwater compared to the larger Alpha that was the centre of operations for what was Earth authority on the moon, Beta nevertheless offered almost everything Alpha could but had the advantage of the military presence being much smaller and this made it easier for Garcia and his fellow members of Red Mars to move about without being detected. Knowing that the other members of his group acting as a security detail would have warned him if they detected any surveillance, Garcia did not hesitate before entering the courier office and joining the back of the queue to be served. There were only two people in front of him and Garcia soon found himself standing in front of the courier agent who had recognised him as soon as he had come through the door.

"How's business?" Garcia asked, looking over his shoulder to watch as the previous customer headed back into the passageway outside.

"Slow." the courier agent replied, "Most of my business involved shipping packages to and from Earth and the other colonies. Now all I've got is whatever moves between the bases."

"Speaking of which, I hear that you've just received a shipment from one of our friends at Alpha." Garcia said and the courier smiled.

"Yes I have." he said, using the small control panel set into the counter he was stood behind to lock the outer door, "Come with me." and then he waved Garcia through into the back room. As was to be expected this was lined with shelves, each one labelled with a destination and even though the moon was no longer in Earth's solar system the labels for destinations in it were still present. However, it was nothing on these shelves that interested Garcia, it was the three large containers on the floor with GDF markings on them.

"These arrived first thing this morning." the courier said, "They were supposed to be shipped from Alpha to Epsilon to be stored but our friend was able to divert them to us." and then he opened up one of the containers to reveal the weapons that lay within it. The weapons were not the product of human technology though, these had been brought to the moon by an invading force of reptilian aliens called Dorcons. After meeting stiff resistance and suffering the loss of their command and control the attacking ships had retreated but in the process they had abandoned not only a lot of their equipment but also a large number of their soldiers who now occupied a wing of their own at the prison at Moonbase Theta.

"Heavy." Garcia said as he picked up one of the rifles and the courier nodded.

"Those Dorcons are bigger than us. I reckon these are usable though. Untraceable as well since the Earthers haven't been able to record the markings on them that are probably the serial numbers yet." the courier replied, "There's ammo as well in the other crates but you will need to find someone who can take a look at the batteries they use for their magnetic propulsion. I doubt they'll work off the chargers for any of our magnetic accelerators and if any of the alien chargers have been found by the Earthers then they weren't included with this lot. There is one interesting thing though."

"What?" Garcia asked, putting the rifle back in the container as the courier opened up another and took out a small box that he handed over to the terrorist leader. Opening this up revealed a smaller device that looked more organic than technological. Rounded in shape it fit in Garcia's hand as he removed it from the box and he frowned.

"You've noticed it too?" the courier asked, smiling.

"It's vibrating." Garcia said and the courier nodded.

"I checked on line for people's stories about the invasion and one or two claimed to have seen what looked like Dorcon officers with those. They pointed them towards people like they were a weapon but nothing happened. Sure seemed to piss the Dorcons concerned off though." he said.

"I want to know what it does. Tell our friend to find out." Garcia replied as he returned the strange alien device to its box, "And I want all of this moved to the safe house."

"Of course." the courier said, "There was one more thing though, a message from our friend about developments at Alpha concerning someone else who once worked for us.

"Alyson Keynes?" Garcia said.

"The very same. Her court martial took place this morning and the panel accepted her plea deal. That means that she'll be helping them come after us." the courier told him and Garcia hesitated. Red Mars had taken great pains to make sure that Keynes never knew who she was dealing with but he could not guarantee that there would not be a trail of evidence that would lead to any other member of his organisation.

"Unfortunate." Garcia said, "She did good work for us, but I suppose that now we'll just have to kill her."

3.

Obtaining the use of an office in Alpha's main security section, an area of the base that was staffed by both military personnel and civilian law enforcement officers. Verdeschi reviewed what Keynes had told him and started to compare this with the information available from Alpha's computer network. Although it was impossible to monitor every room and passageway on a base the size of Alpha, that held a civilian population of more than ten thousand people, twenty-four hours a day there was still a vast amount of information available on who was at specific places at specific times and also what equipment was in use. Fortunately even though Keynes had never been able to trace the senders of any of the messages she had received she had saved all of them and this provided Verdeschi with the electronic tags affixed to all e-mails as part of the process of getting them to the intended recipients and this confirmed her story about them originating from locations that they could not possibly have come from.

It was then that a chime came from the office door and Verdeschi looked at where he had left his comlock on the desk in front of him. Connected wirelessly to the door access system the screen now showed an image of the individual in the corridor outside. Expecting it to be one of the security section's staff Verdeschi was surprised to see that the face shown on his comlock was not even human, although she looked very similar. However, the dagger-like shape of the pupils of her exceptionally pale eyes identified the woman as a Psychon, a species that had been genetically engineered from humans abducted from Earth during an alien invasion, abandoned when their creators vanished and then enslaved by the Dorcons. There was only one Psychon on the moon and so Verdeschi knew instantly who she was despite having had little contact with her since her arrival.

"Maya? What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Colonel Koenig asked me to speak with you." Maya responded and Verdeschi picked up his comlock and pointed it at the door before opening it without needing to get up from his seat.

"Come on in and sit down." he said and as she entered the room and sat down, "Why does Koenig want us to talk?"

"Colonel Koenig asked me to serve as a form of ambassador for the people here on the moon, using my empathic abilities to help you communicate with any alien species you may come across." Maya replied as she sat down.

"Yes, he told me about that. Although we haven't run into any aliens since that Dorcon party at the outpost built by the aliens who invaded Earth and created your people."

"That is correct and in the absence of any work to do in respect to establishing communication between the people here and aliens civilisations Colonel Koenig suggested to me that you could make use of my abilities instead. He referred to me as a 'human lie detector'." Maya explained and Verdeschi smiled.

"And how did you respond to that?" he said.

"I pointed out that I am not human. To which Colonel Koenig said I was close enough." Maya answered.

"That you are Maya. Welcome aboard." Verdeschi said and he held out his hand to shake Maya's but she just looked at it.

"That is a greeting, yes?" she said and then she took his hand and shook it.

"You're obviously learning about us." Verdeschi said.

"Yes I am. So far I have learned that I should never speak of what I saw in Lieutenant Alexander's closet and that Colonel Koenig will not decide who I am to have sexual intercourse with." Maya replied and Verdeschi nodded slowly.

"Two very good lessons. Though I don't know much about the first myself." he said and then he turned the computer screen on his desk around so that both he and Maya could see it, "I've been studying the messages that were sent to Alyson Keynes. I've been looking at them from a technical standpoint, the means used to deliver them and their origins and so forth. You're an empath though, can you tell me anything about who wrote them?"

"I am afraid not Colonel Verdeschi. My abilities are based in part on the enhancements made to the senses of female Psychons. If I cannot see, hear or smell whoever is making a statement then I cannot determine their feelings at the time. Text is also prone to being edited when the author is in a different frame of mind. However, if you can get me to the author or anyone connected with them then I will be able tell you how they are feeling. I may also be able to compel them to co-operate." Maya told him and Verdeschi frowned.

"You can do that? Control people's actions?" he said.

"Yes, though it is not easy. Few female Psychons can do it."

"But you can?"

"Yes. That is why I was so valuable to Lord Kollus."

"He was the Dorcon that kept you as a slave, right?" Verdeschi asked.

"Yes, that is right. Lord Kollus still has many Psychon slaves. His plan was to have me breed with a male belonging to an ally of his so that they could give our offspring to high ranking Dorcons and gain more influence with them." Maya replied.

"Okay then I think I have an idea forming. Someone had to hack into Alpha's computer network in order to fake the origins of these messages and there are only certain places where that can be done if they aren't going to leave any traces in the system logs. I propose that we go to one of these with Keynes and you tell me how people are reacting to seeing her out in public. I know that pretty much everyone on the moon knows who she is thanks to the news showing her picture on their bulletins non-stop for about a week, but I'm hoping that you can tell if anyone seems to know more about her than just that. Can you do that?" Verdeschi said and Maya nodded.

"Yes Colonel Verdeschi, I can do that for you." she said.

"Good. In that case we'll meet back here tomorrow at oh nine hundred."

While he was heading back to his quarters Koenig felt his comlock vibrate and then the call tone started to sound. Checking the display he saw that the call was coming from Verdeschi and so he answered it immediately.

"Tony, what can I do for you?" he said.

"I just called by main mission but they said you'd just left."

"Yeah, I'm not caught up yet but I really needed to get back to my quarters. I'll start early tomorrow. How's the investigation going? Did Maya get to you?"

"Yes, I think she could come in useful. I also spoke with Alyson Keynes of course and she's given me a bunch of information about how Red Mars communicated with her. I want to follow up on that tomorrow but I'll need Keynes."

"What do you mean you'll need Keynes?" Koenig asked.

"I mean that I'm going to take a team out tomorrow morning and I want her with it."

"You're using her as bait?" Koenig said, knowing that there was little that Keynes could tell him in the field that she could not tell him from the safety of her quarters.

"Yes, I'm hoping that someone from Red Mars will be close to where it looks like they hacked into the computer network and that Keynes' presence will trigger a reaction that Maya can pick up on. That's why you sent her to me isn't it?"

"It is. Though I was thinking that you'd use her for interrogations. You can have Keynes though. I can delay putting her back to work with logistics for a few days."

"I'll need a technical expert as well." Verdeschi said.

"Then take Kano. There isn't a single piece of human technology that he doesn't understand. I'd have suggested Baker but I'd rather not be hearing how she shot Keynes again." Koenig suggested.

"Thanks, I'll do that. I'll let you know if we find anything." Verdeschi said before he hung up.

Koenig was now almost at his quarters and it took him less than a minute to reach the door.

"I'm home." he called out as the door slid shut and he headed for the bedroom where he found Russell wearing a robe and sat in front of a mirror. On her head was a Stetson hat that she had obviously padded the inside of to make it fit and Koenig looked at the wall where it usually hung along with the pair of antique single action revolvers and gun belt, "That hat doesn't fit you Helena. You'll look stupid if you go out wearing it." Koenig commented as he went over to the bed and sat down on the edge before starting to take off his boots.

"I was just thinking about getting one that did fit me. Then we could wear them together." Russell replied.

"Good luck finding one. We're a long way from Texas." Koenig said. Then he called up his recent messages on his comlock and held it out towards her, "Oh and I got an interesting message from Tony. It seems Baker has got it into her head that he was the one that voted against the plea deal for Alyson Keynes."

Russell took off the Stetson and put it down before turning around to face Koenig.

"John, are you angry that I did?" she asked, "Because I've tried to explain that I saw how people reacted to her presence when you sent her to rescue Victor Bergman and myself from that planet. They were angry. Baker shot her."

Koenig sighed and got back to his feet.

"I know." he said as he walked over to Russell and put his arms around her, "But no, I'm not angry Helena. I'm a colonel in the Global Defence Force and all of a sudden I've found myself as the absolute ruler of the entire moon. I didn't sign up to become a military dictator and I need to know that there are people around me who are still willing to tell me if I screw up or challenge my opinions. That goes double for you. I've always respected what you have to say even if I haven't agreed with it and I don't want what's happened to us all to change our relationship. I need you to keep me human."

Russell smiled and then stood up and kissed him.

"Good. Because I'm going to keep speaking my mind. I disagree with your decision to bring Keynes back but

like you I'll respect it. It's not like I have to work with her very closely anyway. She's your problem from now on. Though my threat still stands. If she makes a move on you personally then I'm going to seal parts of her shut."

Koenig smiled back at Russell and then reached for his hat, removing the padding from inside before putting it on her head where it promptly dropped down over her face.

"That sounds fair enough to me. Now come to bed. I have to be up early so I don't want to waste what time we've got." he said as Russell lifted up the hat to peer out from underneath it.

The weapons that Washington and his men would be taking with them were laid out on a table. For safety reasons none of them were yet fitted with batteries or loaded with projectiles, these were placed beside them for now and the soldiers carrying each weapon would be responsible for loading them. Meanwhile Washington and his squad were donning body armour when the door to the room slid open and Kano entered.

"I thought we were just investigating a computer network node." he said, looking at the soldiers, "You lot look like we're invading a small country."

"I take it that Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi didn't brief you on his entire plan then captain." Washington replied.

"No, I just got to main mission ten minutes ago and Colonel Koenig ordered me to come here and join you" Kano told him.

"Well part of Verdeschi's plan is to use Keynes as bait to see if we can draw out Red Mars while you take a look at how the network was hacked." Washington said.

"Keynes?" Kano commented.

"Yes, Keynes is joining us as well." Verdeschi said as he entered the room behind Washington along with Maya, "Where are our vests?" he added.

"I've got them right here colonel." Washington said and he took a pair of armoured vests from a rack nearby. These had already had labels fitted to them that identified the wearers and he handed the one labelled 'VERDESCHI' to the colonel, "I hope I got your size right." he then said as he opened the second vest and held it out towards Maya. Instead of a proper embroidered label stuck to the front of this vest there was a blank one on which a marker pen had been used to write her name.

"What do I do?" she asked, not knowing how to put on body armour.

"Just stick your arms through the holes. I'll strap you in." Washington said and a pair of his men looked at one another.

"I bet he'd love to." one muttered and Maya frowned, her sensitive hearing enabling her to hear what was said and she immediately understood the context of the statement.

"I do not think that Sergeant Washington's statement was intended as a sexual one." she said.

"Cut it out you two!" Washington snapped, "In fact you just volunteered to clean all this kit when we get back." and the two soldiers groaned, "Captain Kano there's a vest for you over there as well." Washington added as he continued to fit Maya's body armour. Then he paused when he came to the final strap, the one that would pass between her legs, "I better just wrap this one around you." he told her as he looked down at the skirt she wore, "Someone should have warned you to wear pants instead."

"That's my fault, sorry." Verdeschi added just as he finished putting on his own armour.

"Okay now grab helmets and pass them around." Washington said and one of his men began to hand out anti-ballistic helmets from a shelf.

"This goes on my head, yes?" Maya asked when she was handed one that again had a hand written name label on it.

"Not yet. Just wrap the chin strap through one of the straps on your armour." Washington told her.

"I do not understand, why take the helmet if I am not to wear it?" Maya said.

"Public relations." Verdeschi told her, "We're going out in public but it's not a war zone yet. Keeping our helmets off makes us look less like an invading army. We're there to be friends with the people."

"Of course if the shooting starts then make sure you get that helmet off your belt faster than a bullet can go." Kano commented.

"That was a joke?" Maya responded.

"Not a very good one." Kano replied.

"Okay everybody arm up and let's get going." Washington said, "Rifles for all enlisted, stun guns as backup and for officers."

"Not you Maya." Verdeschi added as he and Kano picked up a horseshoe shaped stun gun each, inserted a power cell and then fitted the holsters to their waists, "Now if everybody's ready let's go and fetch Keynes."

9.

Keynes gasped when the door to her quarters opened and she saw a squad of soldiers in the corridor outside instead of just the usual pair of guards to make sure that she did not leave her quarters.

"Miss Keynes," Verdeschi said as he placed a set of body armour and a helmet on her table, "if you'd like to put these on we can start our investigation."

"By getting ready to go into battle?" Keynes replied as she picked up the armour and started to put it on.

"Hopefully it won't come to that. But we need to be ready for all eventualities." Verdeschi said.

"Like I said last night, at least it gets me out of here. I take it that I don't get a gun as well?" Keynes said.

"No." Verdeschi answered.

"So where are we heading?" Keynes asked while she put on the armour.

"You traced one of the messages to a cafe in sector four but it was closed when the message was sent. We're going to check out its network node to see if it was tampered with." Verdeschi told her and Keynes nodded.

"Makes sense. Well, shall we be off?" she replied.

Leaving Keynes' quarters the team headed towards Alpha's commercial district with Washington's squad forming two rows that marched either side of Verdeschi, Kano, Keynes and Maya. As they approached the doorway leading from the area of Alpha where the officers' quarters were located to a public corridor a man in technician's overalls with a bag over his shoulder suddenly leapt through the door and closed it behind him.

"That man was scared." Maya said.

"I didn't recognise him. Plus what's one of our own technician got to be scared of when he sees us?" Kano asked.

"Perez, Ford, with me." Washington said without needing to be ordered and then the three soldiers broke into a run, heading for the doorway to try and catch up with the supposed technician. Using his comlock on the move, Washington opened the door before he and his men reached it, enabling them to rush through into the corridor beyond. However, as they emerged into the public corridor there was no sign of the technician but there was a man in a civilian suit whose eyes widened when he saw the three armed and armoured soldiers suddenly appear in front of him, "Did you see a technician come this way?" Washington asked the startled man but he just shook his head rapidly in response and Washington sighed as he looked over his shoulder at where the rest of the team was coming towards him, "We lost him. He must have got around one of these corners ahead of us." and then he looked along the corridor again where there were numerous junctions and doorways, any one of which the man dressed as a technician could have escaped through.

"What do you think that man was here for?" Maya asked as the rest of the team stepped out into the public corridor.

"Aren't you supposed to be the empath?" Kano responded.

"Let's just get on with this." Verdeschi added.

The cafe that Keynes had traced one of the messages sent to her to was located among many more commercial units. At this time of the day there were plenty of people in the wide hallway that connected them all together. The hall had two levels and there were wide landings on either side of the upper level with crossings between them at frequent intervals to enable people to move easily around. As was common for such places a sign in the window of the cafe advertised the capability of their computer network connection in terms of speed and download limits to try and tempt customers in with the promise of being able to browse online while they ate.

It was not just Maya that was able to sense that the civilians present had not expected to see the soldiers in the hallway. Normally this area of Alpha was patrolled only by civilian law enforcement so an armed squad of soldiers was definitely something out of the ordinary.

"Okay here it is." Kano said when he located the network node behind an access panel set into the wall just beside the cafe. As the head of Alpha's technical section Kano was able to open the panel to expose the electronics behind it and plug in the tablet he had brought with him, "This shouldn't take long." he said as he then called up the history of the node.

"It's the traitor!" a voice suddenly called out from along the hallway, "It's Alyson Keynes. Those GDF thugs have the traitor with them. They're protecting her."

"It's her fault that we're trapped here." another voice called out, this one female and the rest of the team looked around to see who it was that was doing the shouting. They saw two people standing in opposite directions from them pointing towards them while the other people in the street were slowing down and looking around at what they were pointing out.

"She's right." someone added when they saw Keynes, "It's the traitor."
"I don't like this." Keynes said softly.
"Don't worry. We're here to protect you." Washington added.
"Colonel Verdeschi there was no surprise from the first two that pointed out Alyson." Maya said as she stared at the man who had called out first.
"You mean that they were expecting her to be here?" Verdeschi said, his hand resting on the stun gun at his hip.
"Yes colonel. Or at the very least they had been told that her presence was likely." Maya replied.
"Sergeant can you and your men detain those two individuals?" Verdeschi asked and Washington nodded.
"I think so." he replied and he pointed out four of his men, half the squad to break off into pairs and apprehend the two people who had just pointed out Keynes and now were yelling more comments that blamed the GDF for the moon having been pulled out of Earth's orbit into deep space.
"They built weapons of mass destruction here on the moon without telling anyone." the woman shouted as two of Washington's men approached her, "They want to silence us!" she added as more insults began to be hurled by the growing crowd.
"Colonel these comments are genuine." Maya said, "I believe that the first two to shout at us have deliberately angered everyone else."
"You don't say." Washington commented and then he saw something fly through the air towards them, "Down!" he snapped as a bottle flew past his head and smashed against the wall not far from where Kano was working.
"Whoa!" he exclaimed as he ducked.
"Okay I think this calls for helmets." Verdeschi said.
"What about appearing friendly Colonel Verdeschi?" Maya asked.
"I'd rather have fewer friends than a concussion." Verdeschi replied as he and the others unhooked their helmets from their armour and put them on. This was just in time as a part filled drinks can struck Keynes on the side of her head and she screamed as she brought her arms up to shield her head.
"Are you okay?" Washington asked and Keynes nodded.
"Fine. Just covered in whatever this stuff is." she replied, looking at the can that now lay on the floor nearby to see what it was that she had been hit by. Fortunately she saw that it was just a soft drink and nothing hazardous to her.
At the same time the two soldiers heading towards the man who had been the first to call out at the team found themselves being jostled by the crowd.
"You aren't wanted here." one said angrily.
"Sergeant we can't get through this crowd without opening fire." the soldier reported using the communication headset each of the soldiers wore to keep in contact when separated.
"Fall back, no firing yet." Washington ordered and the two pairs of soldiers began to pull back to the rest of the team as they formed a ring around the officers they were protecting.
"How much longer captain?" Verdeschi asked.
"I don't know. Five, maybe ten minutes." Kano answered.
"These people are becoming very angry Colonel Verdeschi." Maya said, looking around at the crowd before she noticed a figure standing on one of the crossings between the upper floor landings. This man stood supporting himself on the safety rail as he looked down without joining in with any of the shouting, "Colonel Verdeschi that man above us is waiting for something specific to happen." she said and Verdeschi looked up at him briefly, noticing the long package that was beside the man's feet.
"I think we've got a sniper." he said as he took out his comlock and placed a call to Alpha's sheriff's department, "This is Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi. I have a team in commercial hall six and am surrounded by a large mob of civilians. I'm requesting immediate crowd control. Note that there are suspected Red Mars activists among the crowd including one on an upper floor that may be armed. He's standing on a crossing bridge with what may be a rifle in a case."
"Understood colonel, a unit is on its way now." the operator responded and Verdeschi hung up and then drew his stun gun, keeping it pointed towards the floor for the time being but releasing the safety catch.
"Help's on its way." he said and then after a brief pause he added, "I hope."
A crashing sound from above made the team look towards the upper landing and they saw that two men had just broken a rubbish bin free of its mounting and were now carrying it towards the edge of the landing. Knowing that even if it failed to hit any of his team it could easily come plummeting down on a civilian Verdeschi raised his stun gun and shouted to the men.
"Get back from the edge with that!" but instead of paying attention to him they started to lift the bin up to push it over the safety rail, "Oh crap." Verdeschi muttered to himself and then he pressed the trigger of his stun gun. There was a flash as the laser pulse fired and one of the men was hit, creating a brief plasma burst that shocked his nervous system, causing him to cry out in pain as he collapsed and dropped the bin before it

could be thrown off the landing.

"Murders!" the first of the agitators shouted but fortunately in this case the crowd had clearly seen that Verdeschi had used a stun gun and they knew that he was unlikely to have killed the man he had just shot. It was well known that being hit by a stun gun was intensely painful though and seeing one used by the GDF team did make the mob back away from them slightly, though the abuse continued and more smaller objects were hurled in their direction.

It was then that the first of the sheriff's deputies arrived, two of them entering the hallway on the upper level. However, neither of these deputies were equipped for crowd control and rather than attempting to calm the crowd they made their way along the landing until they reached the crossing where the man with the long package stood and they walked towards him.

"Could you tell me what is in that box?" one of the deputies asked but the man glared at them.

"Why pick on me Earthers?" he asked, "This is discrimination. Look down there at that mob, yet here you are harassing a citizen of Mars." and he pointed at the crowd. As he had expected the two deputies reacted by looking at the crowd below and while they were distracted the man reached into his jacket and pulled out a pistol.

Two shots rang out in rapid succession and the crowd suddenly stopped yelling as they, along with the GDF team turned to look towards the source and they saw the man who had been standing on the crossing now running for the nearest exit while the two deputies lay on the walkway. Verdeschi pointed his stun gun towards the fleeing man but quickly realised that he was likely to be out of the weapon's limited range already and so he lowered it.

"Bring him down." he said and Washington brought his magnetic accelerator rifle up to his shoulder, using its built in optical sight to take aim at the man before firing two shots in rapid succession. One of these hit the fleeing man and he collapsed, crying out in pain and dropping his gun.

"Thomas, with me." Washington ordered and then he and one of his men ran towards a nearby flight of stairs that led up to the upper landing. Now the crowd backed off as the soldiers carrying their rifles in a ready stance made their way through it and a large portion began to back away entirely, heading for the exits before there was any further gunfire. They were not in time however, to get out before both of the agitators who had begun attempting to whip up a mob also produced weapons that they had had concealed and fired them at the GDF troops. Verdeschi felt the impact of a bullet against his armour and he fell backwards, Keynes catching him before he hit the floor. The bullet failed to penetrate his armour but it was still painful and Verdeschi found himself struggling to breathe. Meanwhile the GDF troops around him all raised their weapons and took aim at the two agitators. However, both were beyond groups of civilians that were now panicking and so they could not risk opening fire just in case they hit anyone in the crowd.

"Colonel Verdeschi, are you okay?" Keynes said as she held him.

"I've been shot. Of course I'm not alright." he gasped, his hand pressing down over the impact point on his armoured vest even though the bullet had not gone through, "Go get that guy someone."

Two more of the GDF troopers broke away from the main group but they found getting through the panicking crowd impossible and the two agitators used the confusion to withdraw, heading for the closest exits from the hall. Just moments after they had left several doors opened at once and sheriff's deputies in prominent body armour and carrying shields and large batons came rushing in.

"Disperse! Disperse!" one of them shouted, his voice amplified by the speaker system built into his armour.

This was not necessary however, the gunfire having already prompted most of the crowd to pull back and get out of the hall and the armoured deputies were able to quickly join up with the GDF troops clustered around the network node.

S.

"So how long will this take to build?" Koenig asked, looking at the tablet Professor Bergman, the civilian physicist who had come to the moon to research the very wormholes that now caused it to travel through space. One idea that the professor had come up with was a retractable shield constructed over the highly radioactive remains of Mu that would slow down the opening of the wormholes or, if the moon ever returned to Earth's solar system could be used to cut off the flow of radioactive particles altogether and bring the moon's travels to a halt. The shield that the professor had designed was a massive motorised dome. Split along the middle, the two halves of the dome could be retracted to allow more of the radioactive particles coming from Mu to escape or brought closer together to limit the flow. Closing the dome entirely would cut off the flow of radiation entirely, closing the wormholes that the moon was pulled through completely and ending the moon's travels.

"That rather depends on Major Capston's people." Bergman replied and he looked at the major sat beside him. Prior to the moon having been pulled out of Earth's orbit Capston had been overseeing the construction of another military base on the moon known as Lambda. Without Earth's resources Lambda could not be completed as intended, but the personnel and equipment it held could be used to adapt the moon to better suit its travels and Capston had now become the officer in charge of all of this construction work.

"Well?" Koenig said, now looking at Capston.

"The professor designed it based around materials I confirmed to him that we can produce with what we have here on the moon already." Capston replied.

"Yes," Bergman added, "I thought that it would be somewhat counter productive if we had to hunt for the materials on whatever planets we happened to encounter. Especially since our time in each location is so limited."

"That makes it more a matter of manpower than anything else." Capston continued, "If you can guarantee that I'll be able to dedicate my entire construction force to it then we can probably have the parts built in six weeks and assembled in another ten or twelve."

Koenig sighed and shook his head.

"No, there is too much other work that needs doing. Expanding our farming capability has to take precedence over everything. We're consuming food faster than it can be replaced and our war stocks aren't going to last forever, even with rationing. I want half your crews dedicated to expanding the caverns at Iota for our crops. All other projects will have to divide the other half between them."

"Then we're looking at at least twelve weeks to make the dome and another twenty four to fit it." Capston said.

So about nine months." Koenig said, "That'll have to do then. Professor how sure are you that this will work?"

"As sure as I can be colonel." Bergman answered, shrugging. "I'm a physicist, not a structural engineer but the density and thickness of the material ought to block the radioactive emissions we have measured coming from Mu with your Eagle flyovers. Of course if I come up with any alternative ideas I will be sure to let you know."

"Good. You do-" Koenig began before the communicator on his desk activated and Russell's face appeared on it, "Doctor Russell. What can I do for you?" he asked.

"John you should get to medical immediately." Russell told him.

"Why?" Koenig replied, frowning, "Is there a problem."

"John, Tony's been shot." Russell replied.

Koenig rushed into the medical section to find Verdeschi sat on a bed stripped to his waist while Russell examined the obvious bruising to his chest.

"Thank God for ceramic plates, hey?" Verdeschi said, smiling at Koenig who frowned back at him.

"I thought you'd been badly hurt." he replied.

"No, the vest stopped the bullet. Hurt like hell though." Verdeschi said.

"Did you get the guy who did it?" Koenig asked but Verdeschi shook his head.

"No, he and some other woman managed to slip away but Washington's men managed to take down the sniper that Red Mars sent. Not before he put a pair of rounds into two cops though." he said.

"Doctor Matthias is with one of the deputies now, though I'm afraid that the other one was killed almost instantly." Russell said.

"What about the sniper?" Koenig asked.

"The prisoner is stable and secure." Russell said as she pressed a chemically treated pad against Verdeschi's bruise and he winced.

"Hey that stings." he complained.

"Yes, but it will help in the long run." Russell said.

"So where is he? The prisoner I mean?" Koenig said and Russell pointed towards one of the isolation chambers normally used for holding highly infectious patients.

"In there under guard by Sergeant Washington and his squad." she said.

"I asked that Maya to stay with him as well just in case he starts talking." Verdeschi added, "Not so human lie detector and all that."

"And I had Keynes wait in my office to keep out of the way. I wasn't having her just wandering around here and I know she's not to go anywhere without an escort." Russell added.

"Okay, I'll check on her later. For now I want to see what this sniper has to say for himself." Koenig replied and he turned around and walked over to the isolation room. When used for its intended purpose the door to this room would be sealed, only able to be opened from either side using a comlock belonging to a medical officer. However, in this instance the door was unlocked and Koenig was able to open it and enter the room, prompting the soldiers inside to snap to attention.

"As you were." he said, staring at the man lay on the bed opposite him. Hit in his side, the Red Mars terrorist had medical sealant coating a large area between his waist and the bottom of his ribcage. All of the beds in the medical section were capable of being fitted with restraints to hold violent patients down and a set of these had been used to secure the man by both his wrists and ankles. For now at least though he appeared perfectly still and was making no attempt to escape, "Has he said anything?" Koenig asked.

"Called us all murdering Earthers scum a few times but apart from that he's not said a word. Didn't even ask for a lawyer." Washington answered.

"Really?" Koenig said, leaning on the end of the bed, "Because you really ought to get one. They'll be able to tell you how it's in your best interests to cut a deal with me. You'll be spending the rest of your life in prison anyway given that you killed a sheriff's deputy but there are different sorts of prison cell. We've got a nice little super max wing at Theta where the guards wear enclosed helmets so you can't see their faces. If I send you there then you'll never see another human face again in your life."

The prisoner turned his head away from Koenig without saying anything in response and so Koenig looked towards Maya instead.

"The threat does worry him Colonel Koenig." she said.

"Are you certain Maya? He didn't say anything." Koenig asked, already knowing that Maya did not necessarily require someone to speak in order to judge their mood.

"Quite certain Colonel Koenig. I observed a change in his breathing and dilation of his pupils when you described the condition of the prison you could send him to." she replied and Koenig smiled as he looked back at the terrorist strapped to the bed before speaking to him calmly.

"Hear that? She can tell me what's going on inside that head of yours. I'm told she can't exactly read minds but she'll be able to tell me when you're lying and what scares you so that means I know exactly how to play you. One way or another you will help us." he said, "Sergeant Washington has Colonel Verdeschi given any orders about what is to be done with the prisoner?"

"Officially he's still under Doctor Russell's care but as soon as he's released we'll be taking him to the security section for interrogation." Washington replied.

"Good. If Colonel Verdeschi isn't released by then let me know. I'll find out what this creep knows myself." Koenig said before he turned and left the room.

"Mister Garcia!" a woman's voice called out from outside the room where Garcia was trying to sort through all the information being fed to him by his network of agents and informers across the moon. None of this information came to him directly of course, that would pose too much of a risk if even the most minor Red Mars activist was arrested. Instead it was fed from one layer of his organisation to another, being checked and evaluated at every level before it was delivered by physical means to his safe house for him to review himself, "Mister Garcia!"

Garcia walked to the door and opened it to look out into the large storage room outside. Most of the containers in here held perfectly legitimate goods but these were only to conceal those that contained some of the arms that Red Mars had been able to stockpile. Now just reaching the bottom of the stairs leading up to the landing where Garcia stood was a woman dressed in overalls that were marked with the same logo as was marked on most of the crates.

"What is it?" he asked as she came up the stairs towards him.

"We've just received word from Alpha Mister Garcia." she replied, "The attempt on Alyson Keynes' life failed. Rourke has been arrested."

"Inside." Garcia said, beckoning for the woman to follow him and he stepped back into his office. Then when she followed him through the doorway he closed it behind her and returned to his desk, "Okay tell me everything. What went wrong?"

"Hooper and Lagrande whipped up the crowd like you said but although they made plenty of noise and a few

things were thrown they didn't attack the patrol in any serious way, not even when the guy in charge used a stun gun to shoot one of them. The squad didn't use any live rounds until after the cops showed up and tried to question Rourke."

"How did they pick him out? He was supposed to stay clear until he could get a shot." Garcia said.

"He did but somehow when the first pair of deputies showed up they went right for him. He just went for his pistol and shot them both."

"Did he kill them?" Garcia asked.

"One yes, the other I'm not sure yet. But obviously he couldn't hang around so he tried to take off but he'd already panicked the crowd and the Earthers were able to get a clear shot that brought him down without killing him. When the riot squad turned up the Earthers moved him to the medical section under guard. Do you think he'll talk?"

"We can't ignore the chance. Even if he doesn't we sent him from Beta and the Earthers will be able to find that out eventually. One way or another they're going to be coming looking for us. Beta may not be their stronghold like Alpha is but they still have more firepower here than we can call on everywhere on the moon. Start passing the word to all our informants, we need to know what Koenig is planning."

6.

"Colonel Verdeschi." Morrow said when Verdeschi entered main mission, "How are you feeling?"

"Sore." Verdeschi replied and then as he walked towards where both Benes and Kano sat together at a console he called out to them, "Have you managed to find anything?" he asked.

"Possibly colonel." Benes responded.

"We've been through everything we found on him, including the rifle in that box and we found a few things that we might be able to trace." Kano added.

"So he did have a weapon in there." Verdeschi commented as he reached their console and leant over them to see what they were doing, "That's not a rifle though." he added when he saw that Benes was holding an identity card with a picture of the sniper on it and was comparing the details to the various databases of the moon's inhabitants.

"No." Benes agreed, "Like all the other weapons that the terrorists used this morning the rifle was an old fashioned firearm rather than a magnetic accelerator and it was never registered on the moon so we can't find out where it came from. But this ID card is a different matter."

"Don't tell me that's actually a genuine ID?" Verdeschi commented.

"Oh no, it's fake." Kano told him, "But it's more than just a cosmetic fake that a teenager would use to buy beer under age. All the smart data is there as well and that we can track."

"It started out as a genuine card but it's been altered. The card was issued to a cargo loader at Eta. Of course given that Eta's been destroyed that means that no-one from there is going to be reporting their ID card as missing. Most likely someone in one of the salvage teams found it and passed it on to Red Mars." Benes said.

"That's an interesting point. Maybe we need to think about doing something about ID cards from Eta. What have you got from this one though?" Verdeschi asked.

"Since Red Mars went to the trouble of giving him a functional card we can track its use just like a properly issued one and we got a hit pretty quickly." Benes answered.

"He arrived on a travel tube early this morning. We got a hit from facial recognition as well." Benes added and she called up an image taken by a security camera located at the ticket barrier of Alpha's main travel tube terminal. This had a square over one of the faces in the crowd and Verdeschi saw that this was the Red Mars terrorist.

"Where did the tube car come from?" he said.

"Beta originally but it stopped off at a few smaller settlements on its way here. I asked Alexander to ask Beta what information they could give us." Benes told him.

"Which amounts to not a lot." Alexander said as she then approached the console as well, "Feeling better colonel? I heard you took a bullet for Alyson Keynes."

"I don't think that the man who shot me was aiming for Keynes. I think that the sniper was meant to kill her." Verdeschi responded, "Assuming that Red Mars was trying to kill her and not just protecting that network node."

"You think they are though, don't you? Weren't you using her as bait to draw them out?" Alexander pointed out.

"Yes. Obviously they had to send that sniper and we also ran into someone acting strange in a corridor near her quarters so it does look like they're taking an interest in her." Verdeschi agreed.

"So what did you manage to get out of Beta?" Benes asked.

"Apart from a lesson in how to swear in Mandarin?" Alexander responded. Like Moonbase Alpha, Moonbase Beta had been established before the nations of Earth entered their more recent period of international co-operation and while the nations of Western Europe and North America had co-operated to build Moonbase Alpha they had excluded many other nations from taking part in the project and as a result China had set up a second base of its own. Even after the increasing level of global co-operation unified the command structure on the moon Beta retained a large population from China and both Mandarin and Cantonese were widely spoken by its administrative staff, "The identity card found on the prisoner has not been used there since it was issued. However, the cameras at their travel tube station weren't functioning from about twenty minutes before the tube car that brought him here left Beta so-

"So he could have used a different ID card to get aboard the tube from the one he used when he got off it here." Verdeschi interrupted.

"Pretty much, yes. I've got to say colonel, that camera fault seems pretty convenient to me as well."

Alexander added and Verdeschi nodded in agreement.

"Same here. Though I do have to ask if he used a different ID card to board the tube from the one he used to get off it here then what happened to that card?" he said.

"Either he disposed of it, hid it somewhere he could go back for it or passed it onto someone else." Kano said.

"He obviously had to have met with someone here." Benes added.

"How do you know?" Verdeschi asked and she pointed to the image on the screen.

"Notice how he isn't carrying a box big enough to fit a rifle inside?" she said and the others around her looked closer at the image from Alpha's travel tube station. Just as Benes had said the crowd around the man meant that in order to hold a box of the size and shape he had had with him in the commercial hall he would have had to hold it vertically and he clearly was not.

"Probably one of the other two." Kano said.

"Speaking of which, have you been able to track either of them down yet?" Verdeschi asked.

"Sorry colonel we haven't had time but we did manage to find surveillance cameras that had them on so we can try running them through facial recognition." Benes answered.

"Try?" Verdeschi commented.

"The angles were poor. We were pulling footage from the commercial units and my guess is that they knew the viewing angle of every last camera in that hall and how to avoid them colonel." Kano said.

"Keep trying." Verdeschi said, "Doctor Russell released the sniper from the medical section as well so he's now sat in an interrogation room and I intend to get some answers from him. I'll need a copy of everything you have."

The man known to Red Mars as Rourke sat alone in the interrogation room, his arms held out in front of him where they were handcuffed to a metal bar that ran across the desk. A single camera mounted in the corner of the room recorded everything that happened inside and when Verdeschi reached the security section he found Washington and Maya both watching the feed along with a man in civilian clothing that wore a sheriff's badge on his belt.

"I take it that he's as quiet as ever sergeant." Verdeschi said and Washington nodded.

"Didn't say a word during his transfer or since we shut him in there." he said and then he pointed to the sheriff, "This is Detective Farron by the way."

"Pleased to meet you colonel. I'll be handling the case against him for shooting our people." Detective Farron said as he and Verdeschi shook hands, "Assuming the GDF doesn't cut him a deal and let him walk as well." Verdeschi and Washington glanced at one another for a moment, knowing immediately that the detective was referencing the deal Koenig had arranged with Keynes for her co-operation.

"Maya can you tell what this guy is thinking just by watching him on this screen?" Verdeschi asked, choosing not to respond to the comment from the detective.

"Yes Colonel Verdeschi. The image is clear enough that I can pick up on his facial expressions and I have been told that the audio feed is good so I should be able to determine his state of mind from them. However, that will require him to look directly at the camera which so far he has not done."

"Okay in that case you're coming in with me." Verdeschi told her, "Sit beside me at the table and let me know what he's thinking. Whisper it though. I don't want him knowing for sure if he's been caught out."

"Of course Colonel Verdeschi." Maya replied before they both entered the interrogation cell.

The sniper looked up at the pair as they walked over to the table and sat down in the two chairs on the opposite side.

"How about we start with your name?" Verdeschi asked.

"You have my ID." the man replied.

"Yes but we know it's fake. How about your real name?" Verdeschi said but the man just stared at him.

"How about you let me call my lawyer?" he said after a pause and Verdeschi smiled.

"How about we call them for you? Just give us your name and the name of your lawyer and we'll tell them to come and advise you to make a deal before you spend the rest of your life in a room that makes this one look like the finest suite over at Kappa." he replied but the man did not answer, "No? Okay then we'll carry on with just the three of us. You arrived by travel tube from Beta on a fake ID but it's not the ID you used to board the tube at the same time that there was a convenient failure of the security cameras at the tube station. Once you got here you met with your co-conspirators who provided you with an unregistered rifle that you then took into a public space while loaded with jacketed ammunition. Do you know what happens if a round like that hits a weak spot in the outer hull? You get a rupture, that's what. Which is why possession of FMJ rounds is banned here on the moon. Soft lead and plastic only. Of course if what you intend to shoot is wearing a kevlar vest with a ceramic trauma plate fitted then a soft nosed round isn't going to do anything more than give them a really bad bruise. Trust me, I know that from experience. The same goes for that pistol you used to commit one count of murder and one of attempted murder against a pair of sheriff's deputies. We have some nice body camera footage of that by the way. Your friends managed to keep out of the way of most of the fixed security cameras but there were two of them pointing right in your face. So how about you start co-operating? Your friends just left you there, you don't owe them anything."

"You don't know anything about me Earther." the man hissed and Maya leant towards Verdeschi so that she could whisper in his ear.
"He is afraid of what will happen to him." she said softly, "But his strongest reaction was when you mentioned his meeting with whoever gave him that rifle." and Verdeschi nodded.
"Okay let's focus on your rifle. Where did you get it from?" he asked. Once again the man remained silent and Maya whispered in his ear.
"He has calmed slightly. He thought you knew more before you asked that." she said and Verdeschi nodded again, this time taking out his comlock and accessing the messaging system, calling up Washington's own comlock.

Check the rifle. There's something about it he doesn't want us to know.

Then as soon as the message was sent he put the device away again and looked back across the table.
"Sorry about that. Messaging people in the middle of a conversation is rude I know. But I just thought of something that was urgent. Now where were we? Oh yes, you refused to tell us how you got the rifle, so how about we focus on you instead. What's your name?"

"The rifle." Washington said when he looked at the message from Verdeschi on his comlock and he looked at the detective stood behind him, "Are you okay waiting here and keeping an eye on the interrogation?"
"Sure. I've got all the evidence I need to put this guy away for the rest of his life. I just want to make sure you lot don't screw it all up for me." Farron responded and Washington sighed.
"Whatever." he said before he turned and hurried away.

The rifle that Rourke had had with him in the box had been unloaded and locked away in the security section's secure evidence storage unit and for safety reasons the ammunition had been removed and logged separately. Not certain exactly what it was about the rifle that he needed to examine Washington asked to see both and was brought two different clear plastic bags with evidence labels on them. Washington laid both the rifle and its ammunition out on the table in front of him, putting the evidence bags and the box that the rifle had been hidden inside beneath it so that he would have more room to work.

Although the GDF used magnetic accelerator weapons almost exclusively for its small arms, Washington was still familiar with old fashioned firearms and he began by examining the manufacturer's markings. Unsurprisingly these suggested that the weapon had been manufactured on Mars by a company called Syria Planum Ballistics. Although there was no wildlife on Mars to hunt and a rifle as long as this would be of no practical use for home defence, target shooting ranges were just as popular in the colonies as they were on Earth. The only difference was that away from Earth all shooting ranges were limited to using ammunition guaranteed not to be able to pierce a colony's outer walls. For this reason most firearms made in the colonies were designed to only be able to take calibres of ammunition that were not used on Earth, meaning that the types of rounds available could be limited to less dangerous ones. However, the rifle that Washington was now looking at was chambered for a common Earth round that at one point in the past he knew had been used by the armed forces of several nations. In an attempt to justify manufacturing a weapon that if mishandled could cause a pressure leak the rifle was marked as an 'Export Model' but Washington could not help but suspect that the weapon's manufacturer was sympathetic to the cause of Red Mars or any of the other less well known anti-Earth terrorist groups since the cost of shipping a rifle all the way from Mars to Earth would make it far more expensive to buy than a locally manufactured equivalent. However, given that the moon was now lost in deep space there was no way for Washington to request further information on the rifle or its manufacturer from the Martian authorities that, officially at least, were still allied to Earth. However, the man who had been caught in possession of this weapon would also have known that and so whatever he was hoping to hide must be discoverable just by examining the weapon itself and so Washington continued to study it closely.

There was nothing unusual about the way the rifle operated and no markings other than those of the manufacturer that gave Washington any idea of what the sniper was trying to hide. However, there was one obvious modification that had been made to it. Stuck to the side of the weapon so that the ejection port was completely covered by it was a fabric bag that would catch and hold any empty bullet casing from a fired round or any round that was manually ejected. Given that this was an obvious optional extra that did nothing to increase the performance of the rifle Washington could only guess that it had been added because the sniper did not want to leave behind any casings from his weapon but did not want to have to spend the time finding where they had all gone before making his escape. Doubting that this was because the casings were considered too valuable to leave behind, it had to mean that there was something about them that Red Mars did not want the authorities at Alpha from finding out and so Washington put the rifle down again and opened the bag of ammunition.

The rifle held its bullets in a transparent detachable box that allowed a user to see exactly how much ammunition they had remaining but Washington was not satisfied with looking at them through the plastic and so removed the top round from the magazine for a better look. Unlike the rifle, the bullets and their

casings bore no markings at all and Washington immediately knew that this was suspicious. Ammunition manufacturers marked the bottom of their bullet casings to make them easily identifiable but the bases of these rounds were blank. This suggested that they had been made by someone who did not want to advertise their identity. Machining metal to the tolerances required of firearms and ammunition required a certain degree of technical knowledge and equipment but the moon was awash with technically minded people and their tools so this on its own was not enough to point Washington to a suspect. Washington took a deep breath as he stepped back from the table, looking at the rifle and ammunition laid out on it and as he watched one of the bullets he had placed on it rolled forwards and dropped to the floor before rolling beneath it. Sighing, Washington got down on his hands and knees and crawled under the table to recover the bullet and it was then that he noticed something on the box that the rifle had been packed in. On one edge there was the remains of a label that someone had attempted to remove however, rather than coming away in one piece the label had broken and whoever had been attempting to remove it had been forced to try and scrape away the pieces individually. Obviously they had given up trying to do this and instead settled for obscuring the information on the label with a marker pen. Smiling, Washington took out his comlock and activated it.

"Captain Kano I think I have something for you." he said.

"Great, what?" Kano responded from main mission.

"I think I've found what's left of a shipping label on the box that rifle was packed inside. It looks like someone had a good go at removing and destroying it. If I send you a picture can you see if you can recover it?"

Washington asked.

"Sure sergeant. Send it over and I'll get right on it." Kano answered.

Using the camera built into his comlock Washington photographed what remained of the label and transferred it to Kano.

"Do you have it?" he then asked.

"Yes, I've got it." Kano told him, "Now let's see what we've got here, I just need to load it into my terminal."

The process of moving the image from Kano's comlock to his console just a few seconds and he was soon looking at an enlarged image of the label that someone had tried to destroy. To a human eye it looked like a large black blob of ink but Kano knew that what looked like a single colour to a person was often made up of many different ones in varying combinations and the software on his terminal allowed him to adjust the ratio of these colours with a swipe of his hand. To begin with the colour remained uniform even as it started to acquire a greenish tinge but then as Kano continued with his gradual change a pattern of bars started to form with the solid mass of colour and Kano smiled.

"Congratulations sergeant, I think you just found a shipping bar code." he told Washington, "I'll let you know if it leads to anything."

Kano then turned off his comlock and saved the adjusted image to his tablet and carried it across main mission to Alexander's console. Given her responsibility for monitoring traffic around the moon she also maintained the shipping database. There was far less movement of goods now that the shipping routes to Earth and the colonies were cut off but the system was still in place and Kano hoped that she would be able to help him.

"Lieutenant I've got a job for you." he said.

"Yes captain, what is it?" Alexander asked in response.

"Take a look at this. I think that it's a shipping label. Can you reconstruct the missing parts to tell me where it came from and where it was delivered to?" Kano said, showing her the image on his tablet but Alexander frowned.

"I don't know." she said, "Looking at that it's obvious that most of the code is missing. You've got, what, about half a dozen bars at the end? I mean one of them will be a checksum but that will only narrow down the possibilities for the missing data, not tell me exactly what it was."

"Can you at least try?"

"Sure, give me half an hour but I'm not promising anything." she said and Kano smiled.

"Your best is all I ask for." he said before he glanced at where Koenig sat in his office, the wall still open and he whispered, "Just don't tell the colonel that I ask for anything less than perfection, okay?"

"Your secret is safe with me captain."

7.

Rourke had steadfastly refused to answer any questions about himself or his involvement with Red Mars and Verdeschi was becoming frustrated with the lack of progress. Therefore, he was relieved when the door to the interrogation room slid open and Washington walked in with a smile on his face and a tablet in his hand.

"Ah Sergeant Washington, you have something for me?" Verdeschi asked.

"I think so colonel." Washington replied and he handed Verdeschi the tablet, showing him the image of the obscured partial bar code in both its original and colour shifted form along with the result of the database search that Alexander had carried out to find the most likely match for it.

"Trigger Engineering." Verdeschi said out loud and then he looked at Maya.

"He had a strong reaction to that Colonel Verdeschi." she whispered to him, "He is familiar with the name."

"That's all I needed to know." Verdeschi said, getting to his feet and looking at Rourke, "Well it looks like you may have missed your chance to co-operate. Of course I'll make sure that your friends don't know that." he then added before walking out of the interrogation room.

"Colonel Verdeschi why did you say that?" Maya asked as she followed him from the room.

"You're the empath aren't you? You tell me." Verdeschi replied with a smile on his face and Maya stared at him.

"You want him to be afraid of the other members of his group. You think that if they think he co-operated with you then they will try and kill him." she said and Verdeschi nodded.

"He was probably sent to kill Keynes because she cut a deal with us. Now maybe he'll be on their hit list and that will scare him enough to be more co-operative." he said, "Am I right?"

"Yes Colonel Verdeschi, he is very afraid." Maya replied.

"Trigger Engineering?" Koenig said as he and Verdeschi sat in his office.

"Yes. Benes ran a check and its a small metalworking outfit here at Alpha. They specialise in high tolerance machine parts. Just the sort of place to be able to make bullet casings that won't split when fired. Alexander has been checking on their shipping records and it seems that they move a lot of goods between here and Beta." Verdeschi told him.

"I take it that you intend to raid this place?" Koenig asked.

"I do. Of course I need your approval for that." Verdeschi answered.

"Then you've got it. What's your plan?"

"I was thinking of trying a remote override of the door but I figured that these guys would be smart enough to have taken the possibility of that into account and rigged the hardware. They may have also set up a surveillance system in the hallway so I'm going to make my own door."

"An external breach?" Koenig said and Verdeschi nodded.

"I know I need your say so for that as well." he said, "But I've checked the floor plan and unless they've done any major structural changes without your people knowing about them then the main section of their workshop is adjacent to the exterior wall. I want to take a unit in moon buggies out there and blast our way in."

"I take it that you've checked the engineering specs with Kano to make sure that there's nothing critical running through the wall you intend to blow a hole in."

"Yes. Officially the only things running through that wall are power conduits for the workshop itself. No major utility lines and no O-two lines to trigger a bigger explosion." Verdeschi said, nodding.

"In that case you have a go lieutenant colonel. You will try and bring some of them back alive won't you?"

Corpses can't answer questions after all."

"I'll try. Mind you if the sniper we've got locked up in the security section is anything to go by they won't be talking."

Verdeschi and Washington's strike team exited Alpha in a small convoy of moon buggies, each one holding four men in armoured space suits. Heavier military vehicles were available at Moonbase Alpha that would have removed the need for the soldiers to don spacesuits until they reached their destination but these were more obvious and the chance of the Red Mars terrorist cell being alerted was much greater than using the far more common moon buggies. Also contained within the small open topped vehicles was a portable air lock. This was little more than a large bag that could be fixed to an outside wall to create an air tight space on the moon's surface. Then when the wall was breached it would limit the amount of atmosphere that could be lost.

When the outside of the workshop came into view Washington brought the lead moon buggy to a halt and turned off its engine.

"Okay this is it. Dismount and let's get that airlock set up." he ordered, the radio built into his space suit broadcasting his words to the rest of the strike team. This communication was encrypted so that even if anyone was listening in they would not be able to understand what was said.

Moving as quickly as the low surface gravity would allow, the strike team made their way from the moon buggies to the outside wall of the workshop and began to deploy their air lock. This required them to lay out the bag on the ground before assembling and sliding the supporting framework into it and only then were they able to enter it. An adhesive was used to secure the air lock to the wall and the seal was tested by releasing a small amount of air from a spare tank brought along for that purpose. The amount of air released was nowhere near sufficient to allow someone to breathe inside the air lock but it was enough for a pressure meter to detect its presence.

"We've got a seal." Verdeschi said, "Set the charge and make us a hole."

A coiled shaped charge was fixed to the workshop wall visible at the end of the air lock and the soldiers took up positions either side of this so that when the section of wall surrounded by the charge was pushed outwards by the difference in pressure they would not be struck by it. Although all of the soldiers carried magnetic accelerator rifles they left these fixed to the life support packs mounted on their backs while they drew the stun guns holstered on their belts instead, the intention being to try and take prisoners. However, should any of the terrorists happen to be wearing armour that would block the pulsed laser blasts of the stun guns then the soldiers still had their conventional weapons to fall back on.

"According to the check Captain Benes ran on this workshop it's a perfectly legitimate business." Verdeschi said, "That means that there could be innocent civilian customers inside as well as the four people who officially work there."

"Not to mention any other terrorists who might not appear on the official record." Washington added as he also took out his comlock, using it to connect with the detonator fitted to the shaped charge and when he was satisfied that everyone was in position he looked at Verdeschi.

"Do it." Verdeschi said and the strike team all looked aside to avoid the flash of the explosion as Washington promptly triggered the charge.

Although there was no air inside the air lock for the sound of the explosion to travel through, the shock wave also travelled through the ground and the soldier felt it shaking beneath them. At the same time the section of the wall blown free by the charge was pushed into the air lock by the force of the air pressure inside the workshop that immediately rushed in after it until it was equalised. Inside their spacesuits the soldiers heard the growing rush of air as the pressure increased until it equalised and the sound stopped. This was the signal for the strike team to move through the hole into the workshop and they charged into the workshop with their weapons held at the ready.

Although the strike team had been unaffected by the flash and shock wave from the explosion it had stunned everyone inside the workshop and a pair of soldiers grabbed hold of a man supporting himself by leaning on a piece of machinery while he attempted to regain his senses. However, while they were restraining him a man who had obviously been protected from the effects of the blast burst out of an adjacent room with a magnetic accelerator carbine in his hands and he fired at the two soldiers. Obviously concerned with his own safety, the terrorist had limited the muzzle velocity of his weapon so that there was no chance that any of the rounds would penetrate the walls of his workshop and cause decompression, but this also meant that their ability to penetrate body armour was massively reduced and although both soldiers fell to the floor when they were hit by the burst of projectiles neither was seriously injured. On the other hand the man they had been in the process of binding was also hit by two of the rounds and he was killed instantly as they passed through his chest.

Reacting to the armed man's appearance both Verdeschi and Washington turned their stun guns on him and fired in rapid succession. Both energy blasts hit the man and he screamed in pain as he collapsed on the spot.

"Spread out. There are probably more of them. Oh and someone check on those two." Washington ordered, pointing to the two fallen soldiers as he continued to move through the workshop.

"Contact!" one of the strike team called out when he saw movement from behind more machinery and he went to investigate, expecting to find another disorientated terrorist cowering behind it. However, what he actually found was a man that had been wearing ear defenders when the explosion took place and had avoided being stunned by it. Therefore, he had been able to prepare himself to respond to the attack and he was holding a fire extinguisher that he swung at the soldier with enough force to send him falling backwards. Knowing that it would take too long to cause any serious injury to the armoured soldier with his improvised weapon the terrorist dropped it to the floor and dived on top of the soldier even as blasts from stun guns were passing overhead. He then ripped the soldier's rifle free of his life support pack and returned fire, spraying projectiles around the workshop. Given that the strike team had only been intending to use their magnetic accelerator rifles if they encountered armoured resistance their rifles were still set to provide a high enough muzzle velocity to penetrate body armour and when two of the team were hit they both fell to the

floor with blood pumping through the holes in their space suits. The magnetically accelerated rounds still lacked the penetrating power needed to pierce the walls of the workshop but some did manage to pass through the toughened fabric of the air lock fixed to the outside. Fortunately this was designed to be self sealing and although there was a brief rush of escaping air that caused a number of the smaller and lighter unsecured objects in the room to fly towards the hole it rapidly died down as the fabric closed itself up again. The brief and limiting drop in pressure was still enough to instil panic in the terrorist with the rifle, the fear of being blown into the vacuum of space a very real one for anyone who lived their life in a pressurised environment and he ceased firing. The brief window of opportunity that this gave to the strike team was enough for one of them rush from his current hiding place to stand beside an inner wall from where he had a clear shot with his stun gun and he fired it. The pulse struck the terrorist but the sudden shock to his nervous system caused his finger to tighten on the trigger of the stolen rifle again and he unleashed another burst that emptied the weapon's magazine. Fortunately by this time the rifle was aimed away from both the members of the strike team and the exterior wall and the only result of this was that the magnetically accelerated rounds embedded themselves in an internal wall instead.

"Check the other rooms. Make sure they're clear." Washington ordered when the team started to reach the doorways leading to other rooms within the workshop unit. Then he and Verdeschi burst into the room that the man armed with the magnetic accelerator carbine had emerged from. This was clearly a store room, with boxes stacked on shelves all around it, but there was also a section of floor that had been lifted up to reveal a set of stairs leading downwards to what would be a level below the lunar surface. This was darkened and the two men paused at the top of the stairs while they both activated the flash lights mounted on the sides of their helmets.

"Perhaps better if I go first colonel. Stay behind me and keep me covered." Washington said when Verdeschi was about to lead the way down into this basement level and Verdeschi nodded.

"I'm used to enlisted men holding doors open for me." he replied as Washington started to make his way slowly down the steps. With each step he took he checked the next one before taking it just in case any trip wires had been taken. This meant he spent most of his time looking downwards and relied on Verdeschi coming down behind him to watch out for anyone in the basement that might be aiming a weapon towards him. However, both men reached the bottom of the stairs safely and then looked around them.

Like the room above, the basement was obviously used as a storeroom, however the items kept in here were all things that Red Mars would not want Alpha's sheriff's department or the GDF coming across. A number of the cases that were in the room were clearly marked as being the property of one military or another or alternatively with the logos of well known arms manufacturers. One of these, marked with a GDF serial number was open and inside there were a pair of magnetic accelerator carbines identical to those used by the terrorist who had shot such a weapon at the strike team. A gap in the inside of the case where another weapon should have been telling the soldiers that the carbine he had used had been taken from this case.

"These are ours." Washington said as he read the markings on the side of the case, "Look, there's even a stamp from Alpha."

"Colonel Koenig's not going to like that. It calls into question just how much support Alyson Keynes gave Red Mars." Verdeschi replied while he examined some of the other containers in the room and noticed that a large number had come from Mars itself, possibly a result of the known large number of sympathisers to their cause that existed inside the Martian government.

"Master sergeant can you hear me?" one of the other members of the strike team asked via radio from the floor above.

"Yes, I hear you. What is it?" Washington responded.

"We've cleared the area, no further enemy contacts. That leaves one of the four we were expecting unaccounted for." the other soldier told him.

"Okay. Make sure the prisoners we have are secured and get them to the security section and get the sheriff's department to watch out for the fourth suspect. Then have an ordnance disposal team get down here. We've found an arms cache in a hidden basement and they'll need to make sure that it's safe to move."

Koenig looked at the carbine Verdeschi handed to him.

"Shooting our own guns at us." he said and Verdeschi nodded.

"Benes is running the serial numbers now." he said, "What will you do if it turns out that Keynes supplied them to Red Mars?" and Koenig sighed, setting the carbine down on his office desk.

"I'm not sure. At the very least I'd have to warn her that she was supposed to give us a full run down on the assistance she gave to Red Mars. I may have to have her transferred back to Theta until we can be sure that she's holding up her end of the bargain." Koenig said.

"That will make some people around here happy." Verdeschi said and he glanced from the office to main mission itself where Baker saw him looking towards her and suddenly looked down at her console instead.

"Colonel Verdeschi." Benes suddenly called out from her console.

"You have something captain?" Verdeschi asked and he and Koenig got up and walked down the steps from Koenig's office towards the console where she sat.

"Yes sir. There's a match for that carbine serial number you gave me in computer's records." Benes answered.

"So the markings on the crate were genuine then." Koenig said and Benes nodded.

"Yes colonel, it looks that way." she said.

"So what did you find?" Verdeschi said.

"The weapons were delivered to the moon in June twenty-two ninety seven. Then they were listed in every stock check taken until August this year." Benes told him.

"A month before we left Earth orbit." Verdeschi pointed out.

"Yes, but that carbine was also issued to an Eagle flight on the twenty-second of September. That means that it had to have still been in our armoury by then. The system then logs them as having been destroyed." Benes continued.

"They didn't look very destroyed to me." Verdeschi commented.

"Still, that puts Keynes in the clear now." Koenig said, "She had no access to the armoury by that point. Unfortunately it also confirms that we have another mole working for Red Mars at Alpha."

"Hopefully we'll learn more once your ordnance people have given us the all clear to start examining the rest of the arms we found in the workshop. Of course it would be easier if we could turn Maya loose on the prisoners we took. Didn't you tell me that she's supposed to be able to manipulate people as well?" Verdeschi said.

"Yes, I saw her compel a Dorcon soldier to open a door he was guarding. The problem is that if I allow that then we're going to be on some very shaky legal ground. It's bound to count as forcing someone to incriminate themselves and it could collapse any prosecution." Koenig said, "Hopefully now that we've got four people in custody and another being actively sought we might be able to get one of them to co-operate by limiting any deal to the first one that breaks."

"Actually we're still looking for three people." Verdeschi said and Koenig frowned.

"Three?" he said.

"There are still the other two loose from the attempt on Keynes' life." Verdeschi reminded him, "They weren't at the workshop so maybe they're part of a second cell."

"Great. Another one. Does Red Mars have more people at Alpha working for them than I do?" Koenig joked before he sighed and added, "Well at least we've seized those weapons. With any luck that'll put a dent in their operation for a while."

8.

"How much did they get Leon?" Garcia asked when he was told about the raid on the workshop.

"Everything." the man who had brought him the news replied, "As far as we know the GDF surprised the cell and took the entire cache." and Garcia swore.

"What about their computer?" he said, aware that even though the cell was supposed to regularly wipe their computer of incriminating information it was still possible that the GDF would be able to recover some of it.

"I don't know. There was a gunfight so it could have been damaged but from the sounds of it they wouldn't have had time to deliberately destroy it." Leon said.

"Then find out. Our friend ought to know if the Earthers are trying to put data back together. If they are then get him to stop them. I don't care what it takes. We'll sacrifice his cover if we have to but the authorities at Alpha can't be allowed to get their hands on what might be left in those computers. Do you understand me Leon?"

"Of course Mister Garcia. I'll pass a message-" Leon began.

"No, there's no time for that. You need to do this yourself. Just make sure that whatever you do can't be traced back to us." Garcia interrupted.

"Yes Mister Garcia." Leon said before he hurried from the room. Meanwhile Garcia sat down and considered the implications of the GDF being able to track any of the weapons contained in the cache they had just seized or following lines of communication back to the warehouse. Even though he hated to admit it, there was a real chance that this could happen and he needed to find a way to make sure that the structure of Red Mars on the moon was not simply decapitated.

"Well there are no serious side effects from the stun guns that I can find." Russell said to Verdeschi and Maya when she left the interrogation room that the last of the two Red Mars terrorists she had been called to examine had been placed in and she looked around at the bank of monitors that showed all three of the Red Mars prisoners now being held here in their interrogation rooms, "Oh and that guy in number one has a Martian military tattoo on his left shoulder."

"That figures. We've known for a long time that certain units of the Martian armed forces were little more than Red Mars in uniforms." Verdeschi said before the entrance to the security section slid open and Morrow entered the room with a smile on his face, "Major, what are you doing here?" Verdeschi asked.

"I thought I'd come down and give you the good news in person."

"You think you have uncovered a major lead in this investigation." Maya said.

"Remind me never to be around you when I'm planning a surprise party for anyone." Morrow commented and he handed his tablet to Verdeschi, "But yes, I think I've found something very interesting." he added.

"Maintenance logs for the security section?" Verdeschi said when he saw what was shown on the tablet.

"Yes. It occurred to me that whoever hacked the communication system to pass messages to Keynes might also be capable of hacking into other systems as well and since we knew that weapons had found their way from our armoury to Red Mars then maybe whoever passed them on bypassed our security electronically." Morrow explained.

"Makes sense." Verdeschi said, "If they could tamper with the logs then they could have weapons diverted."

"And I think that's exactly what happened." Morrow said, "I don't think those weapons ever made it onto the Eagle. I checked with Major Carter and he conformed that it was just a regular supply run so there was no need for the crew to be armed."

"So someone intercepted the weapons between here and the Eagle, then altered the armoury logs."

Verdeschi said.

"You know who it is, don't you Major Morrow?" Maya asked and Morrow grinned.

"I've got a good idea." he replied and he pointed to the tablet, "If you look here then you find that there was a Senior Spaceman Greening assigned to carry out a repair to the environmental system in the armoury on the eighteenth. Checking further back I found his name in the schedule for testing communication lines. Including a node in the commercial hall where you were ambushed."

"It says here he normally works in the hangars." Verdeschi said when he scrolled to a new page that showed the personnel record for Greening and Morrow nodded.

"Correct. His normal posting is keeping our spacecraft running." he said.

"Is it usual for such a person to carry out work not part of their normal assignment?" Maya asked, "The Dorcons would not look kindly on any Psychon slave who left their regular work area."

"A spacecraft technician needs to know how to fix a wide variety of different systems." Verdeschi told her,

"That means if there is a need for extra personnel anywhere else they are the best source of them. They've probably encountered whatever problem needs fixing on a ship at some point."

"And obviously he took advantage of being assigned to the armoury to hack the system." Morrow added, "I also ran a check against any duty shifts that he may have shared with Alyson Keynes just in case there was any more obvious contact between them."

"Did you find anything?" Verdeschi said.

"No, but when I expanded the check and used Keynes' statements about making dead drops I did find several correlations where Greening could have picked up whatever she dropped of before passing it on to Red Mars."

"Is this Greening on duty now?" Verdeschi asked.

"Yes, in hangar four until seventeen hundred." Morrow told him.

"Good. Then let's go and have a little word with him." Verdeschi said.

Leaving the security section the two officers, accompanied by Maya made their way to one of Alpha's massive subsurface hangars where its fleet of Eagles and other spacecraft were stored.

"There he is. Over by that Swift." Morrow said, just facing towards where a sole technician was visible working on one of the handful of long range reconnaissance craft that had been stationed on the moon when it left Earth's orbit and the trio headed towards him.

"He is calm." Maya commented as she watched the technician work without looking around.

"Good. That means he doesn't suspect that we're on to him." Verdeschi responded before he called out, "Greening."

Greening looked around to see who it was that that was calling out his name. When he saw the group walking towards him he moved away from the craft that he was working on, apparently to return the tool he was using to a nearby trolley that came up to his waist.

"He is nervous. There is something in that box he wants to be close to." Maya whispered.

"Hopefully thinks he's about to get chewed out for screwing up a repair." Verdeschi responded.

"Yes colonel?" Greening asked, standing beside the trolley.

"Senior Spaceman you normally work maintenance in the hangars, correct?" Verdeschi asked.

"Yes sir." Greening answered.

"But you carried out maintenance work in the security section last month." Verdeschi added.

"I've been assigned all over the past few weeks." Greening replied, "Those lizard aliens made a mess of a lot things and someone has to fix them all. Most of my work is here though."

"And you were on duty when a supply Eagle was launched on the twenty-second that for some reason had been listed as needing a rack of magnetic accelerator carbines on board. More weapons than there were crewmen in fact." Morrow said.

"Possibly major. I see so many Eagles take off that I can't be expected to remember every one of them. I just remember the ones where there's something interesting." Greening said

"We have the records of you signing off on that Eagle being ready to launch." Morrow said, "Funny thing is that there were no carbines in the manifest even though the armoury sent them here."

"Maybe the armoury screwed up." Greening suggested.

"Oh someone screwed up alright because the three carbines that were logged as being sent here instead ended up in a Red Mars arms cache. As it happens there are several other instances of Red Mars activity here at Alpha that can be linked to your-" Morrow said.

"Major Morrow get down!" Maya yelled suddenly and she dived at Morrow, pushing him out of the way as Greening reached into a compartment at the back of his tool trolley and took out a magnetic accelerator pistol. He fired this at Morrow and if Maya had not pushed him out of the way the round would have gone straight through his chest. Instead it clipped his arm and he gave out a cry as he fell, Maya landing on top of him.

"Don't do it colonel!" Greening hissed as he turned his weapon towards Verdeschi while he was still reaching for the stun gun holstered on his hip. Around them in the hangar the other technicians on duty all stopped what they were doing as soon as they heard the gunshot and looked around to see Greening threatening Verdeschi with his pistol. Noticing them starting to move closer he fired his weapon again at an angle that took the round well over anyone's head before he pointed it right back at Verdeschi, "Everyone stay back." he called out around the hangar, "If I see anyone go near a comlock I'll shoot them. Now colonel I want you to take that stun gun from its holster and toss it away. If it even starts pointing in my direction I'll blow your head off. Now do it."

"Okay, stay calm." Verdeschi said as he slowly lifted the stun gun from its holster and then threw it aside, "Morrow, are you okay?"

"Aside from being shot? Yes. I'll live just as long as I can get to Doctor Russell before I bleed out or this gets infected." Morrow replied.

"Okay so now what?" Verdeschi asked Greening, "Sooner or later security section will figure out what's going on in here and a hostage rescue team will come crashing through the doors."

"I intend to be gone by then. You will as well. The three of us are going on a trip in an Eagle." Greening said.

"Three?" Verdeschi commented.

"Yes, three. You me and her. I need you to fly the Eagle and her as a hostage to make sure that you and all of Koenig's goons do as they're told."

"Maya's not military. You should leave her out of this." Verdeschi said.

"It is alright Colonel Verdeschi." Maya said as she stood up and then stepped towards Greening.

"Not too close." Greening said, swinging the pistol towards her.

"Of course not." Maya said and she stopped moving towards him. However, she continued to speak to him,

"You do not want to do this." she said, "Give your weapon to Colonel Verdeschi."

"What the hell are you-" Greening began before Maya interrupted him.

"I said give your weapon to Colonel Verdeschi." she said slowly, each word burning deep into Greening's subconscious and all of a sudden rather than firing the pistol again he held it out towards Verdeschi who looked on with astonishment, "Take it quickly Colonel Verdeschi." Maya told him and he quickly snatched Greening's pistol away from him before the technician could come to his senses.

"Maya call a medic." Verdeschi said as he pointed the weapon back at its startled owner, "I'm going to take Senior Spaceman Greening here to the security section. His friends in Red Mars might be keeping quiet for now but I get the feeling that he'll be more co-operative."

"You know it would be nice to go an entire week without having to treat a gunshot wound." Russell said while she sealed the wound on Morrow's arm.

"I was just lucky Maya was there. She knew what Greening was going to do before he even pulled the gun."

Morrow responded and both looked at where Maya stood next to Verdeschi watching.

"A pity she didn't figure it out soon enough to stop him from pulling the trigger." Russell commented as she went back to treating the wound.

"The man who shot Major Morrow made a spontaneous decision to attack him. I could do nothing to stop him reaching for his weapon." Maya replied.

"You knew he had something in that trolley though." Verdeschi said.

"Yes Colonel Verdeschi. However, I did not know what it was. I cannot read minds." Maya reminded him.

"No but if you had been armed then maybe you could have drawn your weapon before Greening pulled his." Morrow pointed out.

"That's a good point actually." Verdeschi said, "Maya, has anyone discussed teaching you how to shoot?"

"I'm not so sure that John will go for that." Russell said, "After all he wants Maya to be able to act like some sort of ambassador, not a body guard or assassin."

"Still, having her able to protect herself could come in useful. Perhaps we ought to run it by Koenig." Verdeschi suggested.

"Run what by me?" Koenig asked as he entered the medical section just in time to hear his name being mentioned.

"Verdeschi and Morrow were just discussing conscripting Maya into the GDF." Russell said with a smile, "Of course neither of them bothered to even ask her what she thought of the idea."

"It wasn't quite like that colonel." Verdeschi added, "Morrow and I just thought it might be useful if Maya knew how to protect herself."

"You mean teaching her how to use a weapon properly?" Koenig said.

"That and maybe some hand to hand training." Verdeschi replied.

"So what do you think of the idea Maya?" Koenig said, turning to look at her.

"When you took me in I promised to do whatever you asked of me. If you want me to become a soldier then that is what I shall do." she responded and Koenig sighed.

"Damn it Maya you aren't a slave any more. Your service to us is purely voluntary and I'm not going to force you to adopt a combat role. On the other hand it may be a good idea if you were able to protect yourself." he said.

"What would I have to do?" Maya asked.

"You'd need to take a course in how our weapons work and how to handle them safely plus some training in unarmed combat." Koenig said.

"Then I would like to learn to defend myself so that I may serve you better." Maya said.

"Okay then I'll speak to Master Sergeant Washington about getting you checked out. In the meantime how is my executive officer? Rushing down here from main mission when my senior staff are shot is getting dull." Koenig said.

"It was just a flesh wound fortunately." Verdeschi said.

"It's still the first time I've been shot and I'm hoping it'll be the last." Morrow added.

"Hear hear." Russell responded, "I have enough to do without pulling bullets out of people."

"Okay now that we've got all the pleasantries out of the way can someone tell me what's going on on my base? I just had Alexander rushing into my office to tell me that Morrow had been shot." Koenig said.

"I found evidence that connected Senior Spaceman Greening to the missing weapons from our armoury colonel and as it turns out my suspicion was correct. He may also have been how Red Mars communicated with Keynes." Morrow told him.

"Who's Greening?" Koenig asked, not knowing the names of every one of the thousands of GDF personnel stationed at Moonbase Alpha.

"A hangar technician. Which of course means that he got sent all over the place when extra skilled bodies are needed. Which they have been recently of course." Morrow said.

"And where is he now?" Koenig said.

"Sweating in an interrogation room. I haven't spoken to him yet though, I thought I'd let the gravity of his situation sink in more first. In the meantime Kano is going over Greening's quarters. We don't know how long he's been working with Red Mars or even why. Hopefully Kano will be able to find out something that will help provide the answers to either of those questions." Verdeschi replied and Koenig nodded.

"In that case I'll leave you to put the pressure on Greening. I'm going to go and speak with Keynes again. Maybe she had some contact with him without realising what he was up to. Knowing who he is might jog a few more memories from her." he said and he started to turn away. However, Verdeschi spoke up before he could leave.

"Colonel if you're going to visit Keynes then there's something you might like to consider." he said.

9.

When the door to her quarters slid open to reveal Koenig standing outside Keynes leapt to her feet.

"Colonel," she said excitedly as he stepped inside and the door slid shut behind him. For a moment she considered how this meant that the pair of them were now stuck inside her quarters alone, something that she had long desired but then she remembered that Koenig would undoubtedly be in possession of a comlock and thus able to open the door remotely whenever he wanted to.

"Keynes, I have some questions for you. You might want to sit down." Koenig told her as he sat down on one of the chairs in Keynes' quarters. Disappointed that he had not chosen the small couch that would have allowed her to sit directly beside him, Keynes nevertheless sat down in a chair next to Koenig.

"Is something wrong? I've answered every question that-" she began.

"No, no you've done nothing wrong but information has come to light that I thought you should be aware of."

Koenig said as he took out his comlock and used it to call up an image of Greening from his personnel file,

"Do you know this man?" he asked, holding the comlock so that Keynes could see the image clearly.

"Senior Spaceman Greening." Keynes said, reading the name from the bottom of the screen, "No, I don't think so. I mean I may have seen him around Alpha but I wouldn't know him to speak to. Why?"

"We think that he was how Red Mars communicated with you. He's a hangar technician who also had access to the communication system and the armoury." Koenig told her.

"The armoury? What's the armoury got to do with any of this."

"Sorry, I forgot you won't have heard. Sergeant Washington traced the rifle recovered from the man we suspect was sent to kill you in the shopping hall to a workshop that he and Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi then raided. They recovered several weapons from that raid that had come from our armoury. Fortunately the date they were taken on was after you had already been arrested so we knew that it wasn't you. Morrow then traced the security breach to this Greening and when he was confronted he pulled a gun." Koenig explained and Keynes' eyes widened.

"Was anyone hurt?" she asked.

"Yes, Morrow took a bullet in his arm but it doesn't seem to be serious. Verdeschi is going to be quizzing Greening about his links to Red Mars and I said that I'd see if you could provide any more information now that we have another suspect from within the GDF." Koenig answered.

"Apart from me you mean?" Keynes commented.

"Sorry, that came out wrong."

"Colonel I wish I could help you but whoever it was that was contacting me made sure that I couldn't follow a trail back to them whether electronic or physical." Keynes said and Koenig nodded.

"Thank you anyway and if you happen to remember anything please let me know as soon as possible." he said as he got back to his feet, adding "The guards outside will contact me if you ask them to." before Keynes could point out her lack of any means of communicating any further than someone standing right outside the door of her quarters.

"I will colonel." Keynes said, nodding back at him.

"Oh and there is one last thing." Koenig said.

"Yes colonel? What is it?" Keynes asked.

"Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi told me that you might appreciate this." Koenig said while reaching into his trouser pocket and from inside he produced a simple ball-point pen that he held out to Keynes, "Now I'm trusting you not to try and use this as a weapon." he said.

"Of course not colonel." Keynes responded, smiling as she took the pen, "And thank you for the photographs by the way. It was very thoughtful of you." but Koenig frowned when he heard this.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"The photographs you had printed out." Keynes said, pointing to where many of these were now stuck to the wall of her quarters and Koenig shrugged.

"I just gave orders for this place to be cleaned out. I didn't discuss any non-essential items being handed over." he said.

"Then who left them for me?" Keynes said, looking at the photographs again.

"Beats me. Maybe you still have a friend here on Alpha." Koenig suggested and then he used his comlock to open the door, prompting the two guards outside to reach for their weapons just in case this was an attempt by Keynes to escape, "At ease." Koenig told them as he walked through the doorway, closing it behind him and leaving Keynes to study the photographs covering her wall and wonder whether one of the faces shown in them was the person who had left them all here for her to find.

Verdeschi was on his way back to the security section with Maya when his comlock sounded and he

answered it.

"Verdeschi." he said.

"Colonel it's Captain Kano. Have you questioned Greening yet?" Kano asked.

"No, I was just on my way there with Maya now. Why?" Verdeschi answered.

"I've been going through his comlock records and I've found a series of messages to him demanding money. A lot of money colonel, each demand is for several thousand dollars and there are more than a dozen of them. They're accompanied by threats of what will happen to him if he fails to pay. It looks to me like Senior Spaceman Greening was heavily in debt to the sorts of people that don't run credit checks before giving you a loan." Kano said.

"That is a lot of money. Any indication what he wanted the money for?" Verdeschi said.

"Actually I don't think he ever got his hands on any money. The messages suggest he was gambling a lot and losing big. He deleted these from his comlock but I was able to dig them out of the archive. The dates suggest that this is an ongoing issue but he was able to pay off the people he owed money to before they carried out any of their threats. Benes is running a check on his official financial records now but I'm guessing that the money for this didn't come from his salary." Kano explained.

"You think Red Mars was paying him off?" Verdeschi said.

"Given the numbers I'm looking at I'd say it's a given colonel." Kano answered.

"Thanks captain. That information should come in very useful. Let me know if you turn anything else up." Verdeschi said before shutting off his comlock and looking at Maya, "Kano's found us a motive for why Greening was working for Red Mars. Now I need you to help me figure out what he gave them."

"Of course Colonel Verdeschi." she replied.

Greening was being held in an interrogation room identical to those holding the Red Mars terrorists and the feed from the camera was shown alongside them when Verdeschi and Maya reached the security section.

"Giving you any trouble?" Verdeschi asked the junior officer on duty.

"No colonel, he hasn't even asked for a lawyer like the others have." the officer replied.

"And have any of the others told you who their lawyers are?" Verdeschi said.

"No sir. It's obvious that they just want access to the communication system." the officer said and Verdeschi considered this.

"Perhaps we should consider letting one of them try to make a call and monitor where it's placed to. I'm sure Kano can rig something up that will block the call from getting through." he said.

"Do you think they'd make a call right to one of their friends?" the officer asked.

"Probably not. But it may be worth considering." Verdeschi said before he noticed how closely Maya seemed to be paying attention to the screen that showed Greening as he sat handcuffed to the table in front of him, "See anything interesting?" he asked her.

"He is afraid. Very afraid." Maya said without taking her eyes off the screen, "All of the others show a degree of fear but his is stronger. He knows he is alone now."

"Then let's take advantage of that." Verdeschi said, "We'll go in and question him now. There is one thing though Maya."

"Yes Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi?" Maya asked, looking away from the screen and towards him.

"He probably knows about your empathic abilities, I understand they've been discussed all around the GDF personnel at Alpha." Verdeschi said.

"Yes, that is likely." Maya agreed.

"In which case it's a waste of time you just whispering to me about whether or not he's telling the truth. This time I want you to just say out loud whatever you get from him. Do you understand?"

"Yes Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi. I will do as you ask."

"Good. Then let's go and see what he has to say for himself." Verdeschi said and he made his way to the room where Greening was being held.

Inside he and Maya sat down opposite the prisoner and Verdeschi looked at him.

"Senior Spaceman Greening, you have been busy today haven't you? Attempted murder, treason and mutiny all with one pull of a trigger. That presents us with something of a problem now doesn't it?" he said.

"You don't scare me. I have friends." Greening said.

"He's lying." Maya said, "He knows he is alone and that scares him."

"Get out of my head you witch!" Greening hissed.

"Good isn't she?" Verdeschi said with a smile, "With Maya here with me I'll know instantly whether or not you're telling the truth and she's just confirmed what I suspected."

"And what's that?" Greening said, snarling at Verdeschi.

"That you know that Red Mars isn't going to do you any favours now. They aren't planning any sudden daring raids to free you. Hell, we've got a bunch of them in the other interrogation rooms and no-one's made any attempt to break them out. As for you, you aren't even one of them really. You're just an idiot with a gambling problem who happened to meet their needs. Although I have to say that I don't see you as someone worth

paying thousands of dollars to on a regular basis.” Verdeschi said and Greening averted his gaze.

“He didn’t think you knew about the money.” Maya said, “He thought that he had been able to hide his debts.”

“Very big debts. Lucky for you that Red Mars came along and offered you money right when you needed it though, isn’t it? Perhaps a bit too lucky.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Greening said and Verdeschi glanced at Maya.

“He really doesn’t Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi.” she said.

“What I mean is that it seems very convenient that Red Mars came along to bail you out with a large amount of money on numerous occasions. I bet each time you lost a lot big on some bet and someone threatened to break or remove a part of your body a Martian with a lot of spare cash came along, right?” Verdeschi said but Greening did not answer.

“He thinks that is a fair description of his relationship with the terrorists.” Maya said.

“But I bet he never bothered to stop and think about what a lucky coincidence it was.” Verdeschi said, “I bet that it never occurred to him to look into who he was running up debts to. Do you know how Red Mars funds its operations? In addition to the donations from sympathisers?” Verdeschi asked but before Greening could speak he answered his own question, “Organised crime. Robbery, forgery, drug dealing and illegal gambling. I wouldn’t be surprised if whatever game of chance you were trying your hand at was rigged. Red Mars needed you to be in debt so that they could own you by owing it. Then they offer you money to pay off your debts in return for a favour before starting the process again when they need something from you again. They didn’t pay you one cent for what you did for them Greening, all they did was pass their own money around in a circle. From them to you and then right back to them again before they make another demand and then show up to offer to pay off the debt to themselves.”

“No.” Greening said, shaking his head, “It can’t be true. They were desperate for my help.”

“Really? So what was so important that they paid you thousands of dollars a time to do for them? What makes you such a valuable asset?” Verdeschi asked.

“I think that you have made your point Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi.” Maya said, “Senior Spaceman Greening wants to make a deal.”

“I bet he does. Prison could be hard without our co-operation.” Verdeschi responded as if Greening was not even in the room, “He’s someone who collaborated with the terrorist organisation that caused us to get hurled into deep space. Even when they were a quarter of a million kilometres from Earth they could still get messages from home but now they’re cut off the same as us and I doubt that he’ll be very popular with the general population. Keynes had to be placed in isolation after being stabbed.”

“Just tell me what you want!” Greening snapped, “Do you want me to beg? Okay, I’ll beg. I need protection.”

“You can start by telling me what it was that you did for Red Mars.” Verdeschi said.

“By and large I just reported on GDF movements. I work the hangars so I knew when Eagles were being launched and that meant that Red Mars could make sure that they weren’t caught out in the open moving people or guns between bases.”

“Guns you helped supply. How many of our weapons have ended up in the hands of Red Mars?” Verdeschi asked.

“A dozen maybe. I don’t know exactly.” Greening answered.

“How can you not know?” Verdeschi said.

“He is telling the truth.” Maya commented.

“Most of what I sent them wasn’t functional, stuff that had been damaged during operation so I was able to have it marked as beyond economic repair without anyone asking any questions. Red Mars took what I sent and cannibalised multiple guns to make a few that worked more or less. Plus I was able to get that pistol for myself. I got that before Red Mars came to me, when I first started getting into debt. I figured that I could do with something to protect myself with. Then when I was sent to the armoury I figured that getting them a few fully functional guns would result in a big pay off and I could just walk away.” Greening explained.

“Only you didn’t walk away, did you?” Verdeschi said.

“I blew it all in a week. Or so I thought. If I’d realised that I was being cheated then-” Greening said, trailing off before finishing his sentence.

“He does not know what he would have done.” Maya said.

“How did you communicate with them?” Verdeschi asked.

“After I was first approached in person I got messages from different numbers that told me what Red Mars wanted me to do. Each one started with a code so I’d know it was from them.”

“What was the code?” Verdeschi said.

“Four number fours at the start and end of the message.” Greening said and Verdeschi smiled.

“Figures.” he said.

“Why is that significant Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi?” Maya asked.

“Mars is the fourth planet in our solar system and four number fours joined at the base in a cross pattern are often used as a symbol of Martian separatism. Their supporters often use variations of the number four to

identify themselves to one another." Verdeschi told her before he looked back at Greening, "Now how did you get those weapons to Red Mars? Did you take them to the workshop?"

"What workshop? I wasn't going to go wandering around the base with a load of black market weapons, even if they were probably scrap. No, the handover took place in the hangar. I made sure that the weapons or whatever else I was told to send to them got loaded onto specific transports heading for Beta."

"Beta? Everything went there?" Verdeschi said and Greening nodded.

"As far as I can tell Beta is where Red Mars is headquartered here on the moon. Some guy called Garcia runs it." Greening said.

"You met their leader?" Verdeschi said, surprised.

"No, they tried to keep me in the dark but I overheard a couple of them talking to one another when I arrived to make a trade. I thought about looking him up but I didn't think I'd be able to do it without attracting attention. I did notice that all of the flights I loaded stuff onto went to the same hangar at Beta though so I'm guessing that Red Mars has someone working for them there." Greening responded.

"That's okay, I'm sure we can take it from here." Verdeschi said as he got to his feet.

"What about me? What happens to me now?" Greening asked.

"That depends on the court martial. Keynes cut a deal that got her out of prison because she has skills we need that very few other people have whereas on the other hand you are far more replaceable. You will be looked after though. You will go to prison but you won't be left to fend for yourself in there I promise."

When Verdeschi and Maya left the interrogation room Maya waited for the door to slid shut behind them before she looked at Verdeschi.

"Is something wrong Maya?" Verdeschi asked.

"Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, when you told Senior Spaceman Greening that the group Red Mars was responsible for his debts you did not know whether what you were saying was true or not, did you?" Maya said.

"No I didn't. Red Mars does fund itself through organised crime through, most terrorist groups over the past few centuries have. It was more of an educated guess than something I could prove, but at least it got Greening to drop his tough guy act. Now I'm going to go and see what I can come up with using the information Greening just gave us. If I need you again I'll let you know." Verdeschi told her and Maya bowed her head before turning around and walking away.

10.

"How's the arm Paul?" Verdeschi said when he met Morrow in a corridor near main mission. Alpha's executive officer now had his arm in a sling.

"Numb. Doctor Russell stuck a pain killing tab on and I can hardly feel a thing. I just went to check in with Colonel Koenig." Morrow replied.

"I was on my way there myself. I've just come from the security section where I spoke to our friend Senior Spaceman Greening."

"Oh yes? Did he have much to say?" Morrow asked.

"Enough. He tried to act tough to begin with, just like the rest of the Red Mars lot we've picked up but he's not a fanatic like them and he told us everything he knew in exchange for lenience. In fact he may have just given us the means to smash Red Mars here on the moon entirely."

"That's excellent." Morrow replied, smiling, "In that case I'll let you get on. The sooner Red Mars is dealt with the better."

The two men then both carried on heading in their separate directions, Morrow heading towards his quarters while Verdeschi went into main mission, he and Major Carter exchanging nods as he headed to where Lieutenant Alexander was sat.

"Lieutenant you're running GDF security on the moon now aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes colonel." she replied, "Colonel Koenig figured that since I was responsible for our external defences I may as well run our internal ones as well."

"Good. In that case there's a name I'd like you to run for me. Garcia." Verdeschi said.

"Garcia. One of ours?" Alexander said as she brought up the security database on her console.

"I don't think so. All I have is that name and the suggestion that he's located at Beta." Verdeschi said.

"Okay, it may take a minute or so if we have to link to Beta." Alexander pointed out.

"That's fine. I want that name checking against our intelligence system. I've been told that he's running Red Mars here on the moon so it's possible that he's already been flagged for something." Verdeschi said.

"Let's find out. The problem is that we don't hold a full intelligence archive. All that was kept on Earth and we'd just put in a request when we needed the information. Or with Mars but there was next to no chance of anything coming back from them even though Red Mars membership is supposed to be illegal there as well."

"Then let's just hope that he did something to cause us to flag him here." Verdeschi said.

"A-ha." Alexander said, smiling when her query returned a result from the database, "Carlos Garcia. Citizen of Mars. No matter what false identity he may adopt for day to day use he couldn't hide his real one from immigration. They would have spotted a false passport in a heartbeat so he came here under his real name four and a half years ago."

"Four and a half years? Nothing since then?"

"Not that I can find but like I said, he could be using a false name now." Alexander replied.

"So why was he flagged?" Verdeschi asked as he looked at the image taken from Garcia's passport on her screen.

"Overstaying. Like anyone he's entitled to travel to any country or colony that he wants without a visa as long as he doesn't stay there more than three months. He came in as a visitor at Kappa but officially he never left the moon so he was automatically flagged for the sheriffs to look out for. There's no record of him having come to their attention though, so he's been keeping out of sight for the last four years." Alexander said.

"Keeping out of sight and plotting to commit mass murder." Verdeschi added, "Run that picture through our facial recognition system here and at Beta. Let's see if Mister Garcia has stepped out in public anywhere where there's a camera."

"That could take a while colonel." Alexander said and Verdeschi nodded.

"Just let me know the moment you find anything." he said, "I'm going to let Colonel Koenig know what we've found. Can I have a copy of that picture?"

"Sure, I'll send it to your comlock." Alexander responded and as soon as he saw that the picture had been copied across to the device he headed for Koenig's office.

The wall that divided the office from main mission was open and Verdeschi was able to go straight inside, holding out his comlock for Koenig to see the screen.

"The face of the man behind all this." Verdeschi said.

"Doesn't look like a mug shot to me." Koenig responded.

"Unfortunately that's because we haven't caught him yet. Verdeschi told him, "This picture is four and a half years old but it is of Carlos Garcia who, according to Senior Spaceman Greening runs Red Mars here on the moon."

"So you got him to talk? Good because Keynes said she knew nothing about him." Koenig said.

"Kano's investigation of his communication history helped. He found messages demanding money to settle gambling debts. I've got a hunch that Red Mars arranged these to begin with and I used that to persuade him to tell us what he knew."

"And now we have a name and a face." Koenig said, still looking at the image on Verdeschi's comlock. Then he passed the device back to him, "So what's your next move?"

"Alexander is running a facial recognition check to see if we can find out where this Garcia hangs out and as far as I know Kano is still checking Greening's communications and computer files. Of course there's still the computer from the workshop to take a look at as well. I don't expect any answers before tomorrow now though." Verdeschi told him.

Kano was just about to finish work for the day when all of a sudden Greening's comlock chimed to indicate that it had just received a new message and out of curiosity he checked to see what it said. Immediately he saw that it began with the string '4444' that indicated a message from Red Mars. The message sender had not even attempted to mask their own communication details but Kano knew that the device used to send this message would not be used again and was probably stolen anyway. However, the fact that the message had just arrived gave him an opportunity and he acted quickly, taking out his own comlock.

"Kano to main mission." he said into it.

"Main mission, Baker here captain." Baker's voice responded.

"Baker I need a trace on the source of the message that's just come in on Greening's comlock. Do it quickly before they have chance to shut off their own device." Kano ordered.

"Yes captain. I've got the source identity code here, tracking now. It looks like it comes from Moonbase Beta. Node one-one-three-eight." Baker told him.

"Great. Is Lieutenant Alexander still there?" Kano asked.

"Yes sir, she's running the facial recognition check for Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi." Baker answered.

"Then give her the details of that node. She needs to find out what's near that node and possibly focus her search there." Kano told her.

"Yes sir. I'll do that now." Baker said and she got up from her console and hurried across main mission to where Alexander was still busy.

"Yes?" Alexander asked as Baker came up to her.

"I've just had Captain Kano on the line. He wants you to check out the area surrounding communication node one-one-three-eight at Moonbase Beta. It was just used to relay a message to Greening's comlock." Baker said and Alexander looked down at her console.

"Let's see." she said as she called up details of the layout of Moonbase Beta, instructing her console to identify the node used to send the message, "Node one-one-three-eight is located here." and she pointed to where the node had been highlighted on the map.

"What's there?" Baker asked.

"It's a commercial district, industrial units and warehouses. There's also a private hangar and launch pad right here close to a travel tube station." Alexander said.

"So it's easy to get in and out of and nobody would pay any attention to large crates being shipped in and out at all hours." Baker said.

"Just what any self respecting terrorist organisation wants." Alexander agreed, nodding her head, "Thankfully there are cameras in that section though so I should be able to isolate them and see if our Mister Garcia has made his presence known there recently."

"What if the cameras have been tampered with? Didn't Red Mars manage that at the tube station at Beta?" Baker pointed out.

"Yes but that was a temporary fault. The longer something like that goes on for or the more times it happens the more likely someone is to notice the pattern. I think that-" Alexander began before her console chimed.

"Has it found something already?" Baker asked.

"Yes, a positive match for Carlos Garcia. Oh this is good." Alexander said, smiling as she looked at the image now shown on her console, "Look, the camera is in a public corridor but it points towards this large doorway here and Garcia is standing right on the other side. He's not looking directly at the camera but there's enough there for a ninety-five percent match."

Russell winced when she took her first sip of the wine Koenig had poured to go with their meal.

"Christ John this is disgusting." she said.

"Unfortunately it was all I could get." Koenig said, "People are starting to hoard luxuries like wine and there's not much available right now."

"I wish there was less of this vintage. Where does it even come from?" Russell asked and Koenig checked the label again.

"A delightful vineyard located on Rhea it would seem." he said.

"One of Saturn's moons? So the grapes that went into this were grown in artificial soil under artificial light, subject to artificial gravity and artificial pressure. No wonder it tastes like liquid plastic." Russell said.

"I'd get used to it if I were you Helena. This is the sort of thing we're going to have to put up with once we starting making our own." Koenig commented.

"In which case John I can rest easy about the level of liver disease I'll need to treat because I foresee very few people developing drinking problems in our future." Russell said and then Koenig took a sip of wine as well and he too winced.

"Yes, that is bad isn't it. Want a beer instead? I still have some of that in the refrigerator." he suggested.

"Oh yes please John." Russell said and Koenig got up to head for the kitchen. However, before he could take more than a few steps his comlock sounded.

"Koenig." he said as he answered without checking the identity of the caller.

"Colonel Koenig it's Spacewoman Baker."

"Yes Baker, what can I do for you?" Koenig asked.

"Lieutenant Alexander has found Carlos Garcia." Baker said, "He's-"

"I'm on my way now." Koenig interrupted and he shut off the comlock.

"You're leaving?" Russell said.

"Sorry. I think we may be about to bring down Red Mars' operation here on the moon." Koenig told her and she leapt to her feet as well.

"Then I'm coming too. I'm not missing out on this if I can help it." she said.

After changing back into their GDF uniforms Koenig and Russell hurried to main mission where in addition to Alexander and Baker they found Morrow, Kano and Washington.

"We're just waiting on Carter, Benes and Colonel Verdeschi." Morrow said just before all three arrived together.

"This had better be good." Verdeschi said.

"It is. I promise." Alexander replied, "If everyone would please turn their attention to the big screen." and she transferred the captured image of Garcia to the big screen that dominated the wall at one end of main mission.

"Carlos Garcia. Where and when was that captured?" Verdeschi asked.

"Moonbase Beta, two days ago. Right where Captain Kano suggested we look." Alexander answered.

"A message came through to Greening's comlock while I was studying it and Baker managed to trace the source. I'm guessing that it was a disposable comlock but it was left on long enough to find out where it was at that time." Kano said.

"Very good work captain." Koenig said, "Now where is he exactly?" and he pointed to the big screen.

"A warehouse in a commercial area of Moonbase Beta. I've checked the layout and it's close to a hangar, travel tube and also has its own airlock." Alexander said.

"Beta's garrison could take that place in under an hour." Washington said.

"The problem is that we don't know how closely Red Mars are monitoring the garrison at Beta." Koenig pointed out, "For all we know they're keeping a watch on their security section round the clock and at the first sign of a raid being prepared they'll abandon their position and we'll miss them."

"Sending troops in by tube is going to provide a similar problem." Verdeschi added, "We can't get from here to Beta fast enough to stop word reaching them if they have any informers around."

"Or reporters." Benes commented, "Ever since Colonel Verdeschi's team was fired on in the shopping hall I've been noticing a lot of them hanging around."

"Then that just leaves flying a strike team there." Carter said, "You did say that there was an airlock didn't you?"

"Yes there is. The warehouse has an airlock large enough to take a pair of exo-rovers." Alexander said.

"So land a couple of squads in space suits on the surface and go in that way." Carter said, "It's a quick flight to Beta. Plus it doesn't matter who sees us loading up. They won't know where we're heading like they will with a tube car."

"Is a direct assault wise?" Russell said, "If that warehouse is Red Mars' head quarters then they could put up a fight and if they think they're going down they may decide to take as many people down with them as they can."

"You mean trigger a bomb?" Koenig asked and Russell nodded.

"That place could be filled with explosives." she said.

"I don't see any other way around it." Koenig said.

"We'll need two Eagles. At least one of them armed." Verdeschi said.

"Why two colonel?" Benes asked.

"As well as our strike force we need a blocking force to make sure that when we're breaking in through the air lock Garcia and his gang of thugs aren't escaping deeper into Beta. If we land an ordinary looking transport at the landing pad right next to the warehouse then the troops from that can cut off their retreat

while our main strike force heads in through the air lock. I think it has to be that way around as well to stop them from decompressing the warehouse and taking out our strike team even if we have a blocking force on the surface outside. Meanwhile our main strike force will land as soon as we know that Red Mars don't have their own people outside acting as sentries." Verdeschi said.

"And if they do?" Russell asked.

"Then I'm guessing that's where the armed Eagle comes in." Carter said and he nodded, "Okay I'll fly in the combat Eagle and I'll get Fraser to pilot the second one."

"I'll fly shotgun with you and monitor things from above." Verdeschi said before he looked at Koenig, "If Red Mars do decide to try messing with any of the systems I could do with someone on the ground to block them." he said and Koenig nodded.

"Captain Benes I want you to join the blocking team. Fly with Fraser as his co-pilot and then patch into the local network when you land." he told her.

"Yes colonel." she replied.

"What about Beta?" Russell asked, "Officially you ought to warn their administrative staff that you're about to launch an attack."

"And I will." Koenig replied and then he smiled, "The moment that the feed from our strike team says that they are breaching the air lock. That way there's no chance of Red Mars being tipped off. Now off you all go. You've all got jobs to do so get to them and for those of you going in on the raid good hunting."

II.

"Transport Eagle two you are clear to launch." Alexander said.

"Copy that Alpha this is Transport Eagle two launching now." Fraser responded and on the big screen the occupants of main mission watched the spacecraft rise up off the cross shaped launch pad. Then once the ship was clear Alexander spoke again.

"Combat Eagle one you are clear to launch." she said.

"This is Combat Eagle one, taking off now." Carter replied and a second Eagle, this one armed with a pair of magnetic accelerator cannons beneath the forward hull module also rose up off its launch pad. To further confuse anyone that might be monitoring military flights departing from Moonbase Alpha the two spacecraft headed in different directions. Fraser flew his transport directly towards Moonbase Beta as if it was on a supply run while Carter flew his armed Eagle on a different heading, travelling several kilometres from Alpha before he too turned towards Beta.

"Eagle two has a good head start on us now." Carter told Verdeschi as they both looked at the glowing engine exhaust from the other Eagle ahead of them, "They should be able to land and get down into the hangar before anyone outside on the ground can get a good look at us and see that we're anything more than just another transport ship."

"Good." Verdeschi replied and then he activated the intercom, "Master Sergeant Washington what is the status of your team?"

"First and second squads locked and loaded. Ready to go the moment we touch down colonel." Washington replied from inside the passenger module the Eagle carried.

"Very good sergeant. Be advised that our ETA at Beta is ten minutes." Verdeschi told him.

"Understood colonel. We'll switch to our suit oxygen supplies thirty seconds before arrival." Washington said. The two Eagles continued to fly straight towards Beta with Eagle two reaching it ahead of the armed craft following it.

"Looks like there is activity on the surface." Benes said as she checked the Eagle's sensors and saw several contacts that represented people on the surface of the moon. Having people outside the various bases was not uncommon, although until the full effects of travelling through wormholes could be understood there was an unwritten rule that everyone returned to the safety of a base or enclosed vehicle before this happened.

"They aren't moving about much." Fraser noted when he looked at the sensors as well.

"I'll let Colonel Verdeschi know. They look like sentries to me." Benes said and she activated the Eagle's communications system, "Eagle one this is Eagle two. Be advised that your passengers will not be alone when you set down. You may wish to take action. I'm forwarding our readings now." she transmitted and she sent the sensor readings their Eagle was recording to the following craft.

"Copy that Eagle two." Verdeschi responded, "Will take suitable action. Eagle one out."

Verdeschi studied the data sent from the other Eagle and he saw the mysterious figures deployed to protect the air lock that was their target and one in particular stood out to him, "See that guy there?" he said, pointing to the figure, "I think that container next to him looks big enough to hold a shoulder fired missile launcher."

"Target number one?" Carter asked and Verdeschi nodded, "Okay, I'm taking us in." Alan added.

After gaining clearance from Moonbase Beta's traffic controllers, Fraser set Eagle two down on the bright red cross that was the landing pad and the boarding tube began to extend from the base towards the hatch on the port side of the craft.

"We're down." Fraser announced over the intercom while both he and Benes undid their harnesses and then both officers rushed from the cockpit to find one of the two squads of soldiers carried aboard the Eagle already positioned inside the airlock. Since they were not expected to perform any operations out on the surface these troops did not wear spacesuits but each one had a bulky satchel clipped to his belt that contained an oxygen mask that could be used if Red Mars proved capable of manipulating the local environmental systems. While Benes and Fraser were armed just with pistols, the soldiers were also armed with rifles and they raised these as soon as a seal between Eagle two and the boarding tube was confirmed while Fraser opened the hatch.

"Go!" the squad leader snapped and the soldiers rushed forwards, exiting the Eagle and running down the boarding tube into Beta. Here a civilian administration agent was waiting and he gasped when he found himself facing a squad of heavily armed troops.

"What's going on?" he exclaimed as the soldiers rushed around him and Benes followed them from the Eagle.

"This is a military operation. Please stand clear. Though you could tell me where the nearest access point to your environmental systems is." Benes said before she took out her comlock to communicate with the Eagle,

"Fraser we're secure here." she transmitted.

"Understood." Fraser responded, "We're taking Eagle two down to the hangar now. We'll make sure that no-one gets out that way.

With Eagle one's cannons aimed forwards, Carter turned the Eagle itself to line them up on the figure suspected of having a weapon capable of bringing it down and as soon as the figure was at the centre of his sights he squeezed the triggers built into the flight controls to fire a short burst of magnetically accelerated projectiles. These struck the surface of the moon in a tight cluster around their intended target, one of them hitting the figure directly and ripping him apart. Even without this the energy released by each impact hurled debris from the lunar surface in all directions and several pieces of this also ripped their way through what little remained of the Red Mars terrorist.

"Bang on target major." Verdeschi said when he saw the figure and the container he suspected contained a missile launcher simply vanish under the hail of powerful projectiles.

"Still more to go yet colonel." Carter responded and he fired the Eagle's cannons again. This time he also twisted the flight controls so that the projectiles impacted over a much wider area, relying on the combination of direct hits and the debris ripped up to deal with the remaining Red Mars sentries.

"Think they heard that inside?" Verdeschi commented, knowing that although sound could not travel through the vacuum of space it could still be transmitted through the ground to the nearby moon base.

"I'm sure Washington and his men will soon find out." Carter responded before Verdeschi activated the intercom.

"We're going down now. Sixty seconds." he announced and in the passenger compartment Washington and his squad got out of their seats and made their way into the air lock with their weapons held at the ready.

Most of the troops were armed with magnetic accelerator rifles but two of them instead had just their sidearms. This meant that they were able to keep one arm free for the heavy anti-ballistic shields that they carried. Even if there was no cover readily available for the strike team they could provide it for them.

The strafing run took Eagle one right over the target zone and Carter spun the craft in mid flight to face the opposite direction so that he could use its main engines to slow it down before taking it down to land among the debris created by his own shooting.

Washington had already run the air lock's decompression process by the time the Eagle set down on the surface and he was able to open the hatch immediately. Taking advantage of the low gravity he did not waste time deploying the steps before he gave the order for the squad to disembark.

"Go!" he ordered, his voice raised even though the microphone in his helmet would have picked up a whisper and broadcast that to his men just as easily.

In pairs the GDF troops leapt from the Eagle to land on the moon's surface and then began to bound towards the air lock. Meanwhile from the upper framework of Eagle one a turret mounting a pair of rapid firing magnetic accelerators rose up and swung towards Moonbase Beta to provide the advancing infantry with cover and this proved its worth when there was the muzzle flash of a firearm being fired and one of the soldiers was hit. Fortunately the low velocity round struck his heavily armoured chest plate and failed to do anything more than knock the man over in mid bound.

"I've got him." Verdeschi said from the Eagle's cockpit and he swung the turret around to face the terrorist who had managed to survive the initial aerial assault before firing a sustained burst that struck the man repeatedly.

"Keep moving." Washington ordered his men, "We don't know if he was able to warn his friends so they could be expecting us now. The faster we get there the less chance they have to prepare."

Inside the warehouse the door to the room Garcia used as his office suddenly slid open and Leon rushed in.

"They're here. The GDF just landed an Eagle outside and they're heading right for us." he exclaimed.

"Is everything ready?" Garcia asked as he jumped up out of his chair and grabbed a magnetic accelerator rifle from on top of his desk.

"Just as you asked but we don't have enough-" Leon began.

"That doesn't matter. Just get everyone ready to fight." Garcia interrupted and he rushed out of the room into the main warehouse itself. Normally Garcia kept fewer than twenty members of his organisation with him, a core of eight well trained former Martian soldiers and a number of agents such as Leon whose job it was to liaise with the various cells scattered across the moon. However, having expected an attack three of those cells had been brought to the warehouse to help with the plan to prevent the GDF from destroying the resources stored within it. About a quarter of the Red Mars members present were deploying on the raised walkway that Garcia now stood on, their weapons trained on the inner door of the air lock that opened onto a widened section of the walkway where there was also a large platform lift for moving cargo between the upper walkway level and the lower main storage level. Right now this lift was being lowered so that it would not be available for the GDF strike team to use. In addition as many of the crates normally stacked close to

where the lift was located on the lower floor had been removed, meaning that there would be little to no cover for the GDF troops as they exited the air lock. The rest of the terrorists were concealing themselves among the remaining crates, ready to ambush the strike team as they attempted to clear it. "We've just checked the landing pad and the hangar." another of the Red Mars terrorists said as he rushed up to Garcia, "We've got Earther troops on their way down."

"We're at the air lock now. We're overriding the lock." Washington transmitted and from Eagle one his words were relayed back to Moonbase Alpha's main mission . As soon as he heard this Koenig took out his comlock and began to type a message.

"Do you want to let Director Li know about this now?" Morrow asked.

"That's what I'm doing." Koenig replied as he hit 'send' on the message he had just typed.

"A text message?" Morrow said and Koenig shrugged as he put the comlock away again.

"It'll do." he said.

12.

Washington and his men did not waste time waiting for the air lock to pressurise fully. Instead they began to fix a shaped charge to the inner door as soon as they were inside the air lock and the moment that the outer door was sealed again this was triggered, blasting a large hole through into the warehouse.

"Fire in the hole!" Washington yelled as he tossed a stun grenade through the hole and this was joined by three more such explosives, all of which detonated a few seconds later and with the tow shield equipped troops in the lead the squad charged out of the air lock.

In a room the size of the warehouse the stun grenades had not been able to incapacitate all of the terrorists and those on the far side of the walkway opened fire as soon as they saw the first GDF soldier appear.

Fortunately this was one of pair with a shield to protect him and the trooper dropped to his knees and took cover behind it as soon as he felt the impact of the first shot. Behind him Washington pointed his rifle over the shield and returned fire, sending a burst of rounds across the warehouse that sent the terrorist toppling over the side of the walkway.

"Spread out. Get down to the lower level." Washington ordered. He could see that the lift was not in place for his men to use but there was also a ladder and the strike team had brought ropes with them as well.

Washington himself remained where he was, firing his rifle at any terrorist that showed themselves while the shield in front of him protected him from their return fire. The second soldier equipped with a shield knelt beside the first so that their shields met to form a single wider barrier and another rifle armed GDF soldier took up a firing position beside Washington, the pair of them laying down covering fire as the rest of the squad split into two uneven groups. One of these consisted of five men while the other had only two in it. The largest of these used their ropes and the ladder to descend to the lower level and it was while they were exposed while doing this that one of them was hit several times and he fell from the ladder to land in a heap at the bottom. On the other hand the smaller group remained on the walkway, circling around to get closer to the terrorists also up on the walkway and also to fire down on those below. With no cover available to them this pair alternated between moving and firing so that one of them was always laying down suppressing fire for the other while they ran.

On the level below the larger part of the strike force split up again into two pairs and began to make their way through the stacks of crates. The Red Mars terrorists concealed among these appeared just long enough to fire at the soldiers before falling back, forcing them to follow deeper into the warehouse. Fortunately the weapons they were armed with were all made up of low velocity handguns, shotguns and a few sub machine guns that posed little threat to the well protected soldiers. The more dangerous rifles with their higher velocity ammunition that was more likely to penetrate body armour were in the hands of the terrorists on the walkway and they were busily engaged against Washington's group and the pair of soldiers making their way around the walkway.

"We've got a doorway ahead. We're going to check it out." one of the soldiers on the walkway transmitted as he and his comrade neared the doorway leading to Garcia's office. The door was not closed and as the two soldiers came close to it they could see through into the room beyond and they saw the maps fixed to the wall, "This could be the command centre." the soldier transmitted.

"Garcia could be in there." Washington responded, "Try and take him alive."

"Yes sergeant." the soldier said and when he and his comrade reached the doorway they leapt through into the room beyond. From here they could see the desk in front of them and the chair on the other side. This was turned to face away from the doorway but it was still obvious that there was someone sat in it.

"Carlos Garcia you are under arrest!" one of the soldiers shouted, both of them taking aim at the chair, "Turn around and stand up slowly."

The chair then spun around slowly but it was not Garcia that was sat in it. Instead it was Leon that got slowly to his feet, explosives strapped to his chest and a trigger in one of his hands with his thumb pressed down on the button.

"Free Mars." he said, frowning at the two soldiers and he let go of the button.

The explosives produced a massive fireball when they detonated and this enveloped both of the soldiers standing in the office as the blast hurled them both back against the wall behind them with enough force to crush them inside their space suits. The wall was insufficiently strong to contain the force of the blast and it exploded outwards into the main warehouse, sending shrapnel flying in all directions. The fireball that accompanied this also spread out to fill a large volume of the warehouse. A number of the crates stored within it had volatile contents and when the blast wave tore them open the flames ignited what was inside to create a chain reaction that spread across the entire warehouse to consume not only the GDF strike team but also the Red Mars terrorists attempting to defend it.

"What the hell was that?" Benes said when she heard the sound of a distant explosion. This was accompanied by a sudden klaxon sounding to warn people of a fire nearby and she looked at the screen of the computer tablet she had connected to Moonbase Beta's computer network so that she could monitor the state of the environmental systems. The readout from this showed that the temperature inside the warehouse had just risen drastically and that a major fire had been detected. In response to this Moonbase Beta's life support system had just cut off the supply of oxygen to the affected area. However, there was no indication of whether or not anyone was still alive inside, "Master Sergeant Washington, I'm reading a major fire in the target area. Are you alright?" she asked using her comlock but there was no reply so she tried contacting Fraser instead, "Fraser we've got a fire in the warehouse and I can't raise the strike team." "I thought I heard an explosion." Fraser responded, "I think we should move in and check it out." "Copy that, we're heading in as well." Benes said and she looked at the squad of troops around her, "We're moving in. The strike team could be in trouble." she told them. "Be careful captain." Verdeschi said from Eagle one where he was monitoring their communication, "This could be a trap to draw your units out of position. "Carter's lifting off. We're going to move in closer and see if we can see anything from the air." "Copy that colonel. We'll keep in touch." Benes said before she and her squad began to move. Benes and the squad of soldiers accompanying her made it to the warehouse ahead of Fraser's squad and she pressed her hand against the door to feel for heat. Sure enough the door was warm to the touch, indicating that there was a significant fire on the other side. "What's going on?" Fraser called out as he and the other squad of soldiers came rushing towards Benes and hers. "There's a fire on the other side of this door alright. Red Mars must have decided that if they couldn't keep hold of the warehouse they weren't going to let us have it either." she told him. "Can you get the door open?" Fraser asked. "Probably, but if there's a fire on the other side then that could let it spread." Benes pointed out before another group appeared riding down the wide passageway outside the warehouse on an electric cart, this was a damage control team in protective clothing and the cart was loaded with fire fighting equipment. "Get back." one of them called out, "There's a fire in there." "We know, I've tapped into the environmental monitors." Benes replied, "There's a GDF strike team in there. They were raiding a Red Mars safe house so there could also be unexploded munitions." "Thanks for letting us know." the firefighter said as the rest of his team began to unpack their equipment, "Now get back and let us do our job."

Back in Alpha's main mission Koenig used his comlock to contact Russell.

"Helena the raid's gone wrong. It looks like Red Mars triggered a bomb of some kind when the strike team went in. You better go. I'll have a rescue Eagle on the pad for you." he said and Russell.

"I'm on my way John." Russell responded.

An Eagle equipped for emergency rescue and medical missions was always kept on stand by at Moonbase Alpha and when Russell and a pair of medical orderlies rushed to the board tube the craft was already being raised up from the hangar to the launch pad.

"Rescue Eagle three you are clear to launch." Alexander told the pilot and the Eagle rose up off the launch pad before turning towards Moonbase Beta and accelerating towards it.

By the time that the Eagle reached Beta and Russell and her team disembarked the fire in the warehouse had been extinguished and there were already civilian medical personnel from Beta present outside the warehouse. The power of the explosion had killed almost everyone inside the warehouse, both Red Mars terrorists and GDF troops. Fortunately for Washington and his team on the walkway by the air lock the combination of their distance from the centre of the blast and the heavy shields they were behind had protected them. All four had still been injured from being thrown backwards but they were all conscious when Russell arrived and being seen to by the civilian medical staff.

"Sergeant Washington, what happened?" Russell asked as she rushed up to where Washington was sat on a stretcher.

"I'm not sure exactly." Washington replied, "Two of my men went after Garcia and then there was a massive explosion. I don't know if they found him or not but someone in that room triggered a bomb that did this. Colonel Verdeschi's in there now with some of the others and the leader of the damage control team to assess what happened."

Just then Verdeschi emerged from the warehouse into the hallway, still wearing the spacesuit he had worn while acting as Carter's co-pilot but now without the helmet.

"Doctor Russell." he said when he saw her, "What's the prognosis?"

"May I?" Russell asked one of Beta's medical staff and the man nodded as he handed her his computer tablet, "I don't see anything life threatening here." she said, reading the reports on the four soldiers,"What

about in there?"

"In there is a mess." Verdeschi replied, "That bomb destroyed pretty much everything so I doubt that we'll be getting any forensic evidence out of it. We still don't even know if Garcia was in there when all this happened. We found what looks like another of the tunnels we've been finding in these Red Mars safe houses so he and who knows how many others could have slipped away while they left more of their group behind to buy time for them to escape with their lives."

Russell sighed.

"Fanatics willing to die for their cause even though we're light years away from the planets it is all about." she said, "I just hope that there aren't many more of them still here on the moon or we won't need to worry about the Dorcons or any other alien threat killing us all, we'll do it for them ourselves."

"Come in." Keynes said when her door chimed and she smiled when it slid open to reveal Koenig, "Colonel, what brings you here this time?"

"I brought you some more reading matter." Koenig said, entering her quarters and he handed Keynes an envelope filled with hard copy documentation.

"What's this?" she asked.

"This is our situation. It tells you how many people we have here on the moon and what resources we have. It also explains our current plans for making those resources stretch to cover what we need. Logistics was always your strong point so I want you to go over all of this ready for your first shift next week." Koenig explained.

"Back to work?" Keynes said and Koenig nodded.

"That was the deal." he said, "You carry on doing the job you did so well before. Just now as a civilian."

"And under constant guard." Keynes commented, "So what about Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi's investigation into Red Mars? Did he get to the bottom of who was behind Greening?"

"We managed to identify a man called Carlos Garcia and raided his safe house." Koenig said.

"I sense a 'but' coming." Keynes commented.

"But it looks like he could have escaped. Hopefully though we did enough damage to set his operation here back enough that he won't bother us again."

In the back room of a building Carlos Garcia studied images of people's faces on a computer tablet that he had been given.

"All these people volunteered?" he asked and the woman standing in front of him nodded.

"Your plan to whip up anti-GDF sentiment is working among parts of the population. That lot will more than make up for the people we lost in the warehouse and we got more than eighty-percent of our supplies out of there before the GDF arrived." she said.

"This is good." Garcia said, setting down the tablet, "Let the Earthers think that they've beaten us while we use the time to regroup. Then we'll hit them when they least expect it."