

Space: 2299



06: Spoils of War

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When the wreckage of an alien spacecraft shot down during the alien war of the twenty-second century is discovered on the moon the various factions race to secure it and the resources it contains for themselves. However, advanced technology and materials are not the only things that the spacecraft contains...

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I.

8 August 25th 2157. The moon in Earth's orbit.

The clothing worn by Captain Gay Ellis when she entered the command centre of SHADO's moon base, the front line position in the war against the mysterious alien species that had been attacking Earth for more than two decades consisted of a mix of a silver coloured cut out plastic bodysuit combined with more transparent plastic with a bubble texture to it, all topped with a bright purple wig.

"How do I look?" she asked out loud and Colonel Foster, the base commander looked up from his console and frowned.

"Ridiculous." he said and Ellis smiled back at him.

"Thanks colonel." she replied.

"Are you really wearing that to the party?" Foster asked and Ellis nodded.

"Not just me colonel. The rest of the girls are as well." she said.

"That's right colonel. Though don't expect any of us to sit down. We go 'pop' if we try." one of the female SHADO officers present, a woman with the name 'Harrington' on her combat fatigues said before they were all interrupted by a loud automated voice.

"This is Space Intruder Detector. Three UFOs detected in sector fourteen. Speed sol decimal two five. Heading destination low Earth orbit." the voice said.

"Barry?" Foster said, looking around at another woman sat at a tracking console while Ellis dashed to look over the shoulder of another of the command centre staff for herself.

"Confirmed colonel." the woman replied, "I've got three contacts. No identification transponders."

"Red alert. Scramble interceptor squadron." Foster ordered and a klaxon began to sound.

"Interceptors immediate launch." Harrington said into a microphone in front of her.

In the pilots' lounge located below ground in the base the trio of pilots on standby rushed to a set of chutes and jumped into them. Each of these led down into a hangar that contained one of the interceptors that provided the moon base with its primary striking power. The craft were fairly crude in their design, consisting of little more than the most powerful rocket engine that mankind could produce, a basic cockpit with life support for its single pilot and a large nuclear armed missile mounted in the nose. As a secondary armament a thirty millimetre cannon was mounted beneath the craft but the interceptors were not designed as dog-fighters and this weapon was included for emergency use only.

Ground crews in space suits assisted the pilots into their interceptors before retreating away from the craft and signalling their readiness to launch. At this point the platforms on which the interceptors sat began to rise upwards as the hangars were de-pressurised, allowing the doors above them to be opened so that the interceptors could be taken all the way up to the surface.

"Captain Waterman to moon base control. Interceptors launching now." the leader of the interceptor squadron transmitted as all three craft rose up off their pads in unison. Then as soon as they were clear of the surface they fired their main engines and accelerated away, heading towards the trio of alien spacecraft now approaching Earth.

Although the engines of the interceptors were capable of extremely rapid acceleration, their pilots could not tolerate this for prolonged periods and so they held to two gees. On the other hand the alien craft were able to accelerate and turn much faster without harming their occupants and so the rate at which the two groups of craft close with one another was driven primarily by the actions of the alien pilots.

"Interceptors, course correction." Harrington signalled from moon base, "Steer port one point six degrees. Declination two degrees. Increase to three gees for ten seconds."

"Confirmed moon base." Waterman responded, "Turning now. How soon before we have a firing solution?"

"Still working captain." Harrington told him as he and the other pilots felt the force of their increased acceleration pushing them back into their seats.

As the interceptors closed on the disc shaped alien ships one of them suddenly peeled off from the other two and the automated voice of the Space Intruder Detector gave a warning to the staff at moon base.

"One UFO changing course. Projected destination now lunar surface."

"Arm all flak batteries." Foster ordered, realising that the UFO was about to try and attack moon base directly, "Deploy anti-spacecraft defence tractors."

"What about the interceptors?" Ellis asked, looking over her shoulder at him.

"Send one after the loner but keep the other two on their current heading. We can look after ourselves better than Earth can if those things get into orbit but I don't want to take any chances." Foster told her.

"This is Waterman, steering starboard twenty degrees." Waterman said when he was ordered to pursue the UFO now heading for the moon and then he saw a flash of light pass in front of his eyes, causing his helmet

visor to darken briefly to prevent him from being blinded by the attack. It remained a mystery to humans why the aliens armed their vessels with a powerful energy weapon as its main armament, studies of the damage inflicted compared to the power consumption suggested that they had not found a way around the limitations of such weapons compared to missiles and projectiles. However, there was no doubting that the alien weapons were incredibly accurate and destructive, easily capable of destroying an interceptor with a single direct hit, "Moon base I'm under fire." he exclaimed, "Have you got a firing solution for me?"

"Not yet captain. We're starting from scratch on this one." Harrington told him.

"Then hurry." Waterman said as the moon grew larger ahead of him.

The alien craft descended to a low altitude above the lunar surface before levelling out and heading towards the SHADO moon base. In its path was one of the anti-spacecraft tractors, a vehicle that was nothing more than a mobile missile launcher on a tracked and armoured chassis. Unlike the nuclear missiles carried by the interceptors, these vehicles used conventional explosive warheads and needed a direct hit on an alien spacecraft to bring it down. However, the aliens could no more fly at thousands of kilometres per second low across the moon's surface than human pilots could in their more primitive craft and so the UFO had to slow down considerably as it made its run and this made it vulnerable.

One after another, four missiles shot from the launcher on top of the anti-spacecraft tractor only for the UFO to jam their guidance systems and evade the attacks. Then there was another flash of light as the alien craft fired its peculiar weapon system and the tractor exploded in a brief ball of flame.

"Moon base he's almost to you." Waterman warned, "Where's that damned firing solution?"

"Waterman this is Foster. The computer's still working. It's given priority to the two heading for Earth."

"Well at this rate colonel I'll be in cannon range before I can use this missile." Waterman responded.

"Understood captain. Take the shot, your best guess." Foster told him.

"Copy that moon base. Firing missile." Waterman said as he lined his missile up on the alien spacecraft using the visual aiming sight mounted on top of his console and depressed the two triggers on his control column to fire the interceptor's main weapon.

The missile shot from its mounting and Waterman immediately broke off his pursuit of the UFO and accelerated, wanting to put as much distance as possible between him and the nuclear warhead he had just launched before it exploded. Against a target in open space visual aiming was a poor way to attack, the ranges and speeds involved were too great for the human eye and brain to make accurate shots. However, with the UFO currently operating at a relatively low speed and on a constant heading Waterman had been able to send the missile right into its path and there was a brilliant ball of light as the nuclear warhead detonated in close proximity to the alien craft.

"Did he get it?" Foster snapped when he saw the detonation on the main tracking display.

"Unknown colonel." Barry answered, "EMP has disrupted our sensors."

"If he was still coming for us then our ground units would see him by now." Ellis pointed out.

"On the other hand he could have turned for Earth and gone dark." Foster said, "Tell SHADO control that there could be a UFO heading their way on a ballistic course. Recommend they deploy atmospheric defences to intercept. Other than that good job everyone. We got at least two today. Recall all interceptors and stand down from red alert."

December 14th 2299. The moon. No longer in Earth's orbit.

"Hurry! We don't have long before the next jump." the first of the space suited figures to exit the exo-rover said, looking up at the bright wormhole entrance that was steadily drawing the moon closer towards it.

"Then show us why you dragged us out here now." the woman who followed him onto the lunar surface said and he pointed at the edge of a nearby crater.

"Over there." he said, "You have to see it." before he and the other three people now outside the safety of their vehicle began to bound across the moon's surface, causing clouds of dust to float upwards with each footfall.

The crater that their leader had pointed out to them was elongated and shallow with a large mound at one end. It was to this mound that the group headed where the man who had brought them here pointed at a spot in the ground where he had cleared the lunar dust to reveal something silver coloured underneath.

"Help me clear more. We need to be sure of what this is before we tell anyone." he said and the group quickly set to work, sweeping aside the layer of lunar material that made up the top of the mound and it quickly became evident what it was that they had discovered.

"How can this still be here after all this time?" one of them said as they all stared at the unmistakable shape of the partially buried alien spacecraft, shot down over the moon more than a century earlier.

"Who cares?" the leader replied, "All that matters is that this thing is here, right in the middle of our claim. That means it's ours and the mighty Colonel Koenig will pay us a fortune to get his hands on it. We're rich, richer than we ever thought we'd be."

Colonel John Koenig, the most senior Global Defence Force officer and de-facto governor of the human settlements on the moon sat in his office adjoining main mission and looked at the large structural diagram in front of him. This was being presented by two other men, one a GDF major called Capston and the other an older civilian scientist called Bergman. Since the moon had been dragged out of Earth's orbit and begun travelling randomly through space via wormholes that formed at the Lagrange points between large bodies in space these two men had been working on a way to enact some degree of control over the length of time between trips.

"This shield will enclose the remains of moon base Mu colonel." Bergman said, pointing to the drawing of the large retractable dome, "The more we close it the more the flow of high energy particles from the blast site into the aperture of the wormhole will be restricted and the longer we will have before we are drawn in. Of course if it fully closed then the energy flow will be cut off entirely and the wormhole will close."

"Stranding us wherever we happen to be." Koenig commented and Bergman nodded.

"Indeed." he said, nodding, "Ordinarily we will want a mechanism that will prevent that from happening but if we ever make it back to our own solar system—"

"When professor, when we get back to our own solar system. I have confidence in your ability to unlock the secrets of wormhole navigation." Koenig interrupted.

"Thank you colonel. When we get back to our own solar system we will want to arrest our travel entirely and closing the dome fully will accomplish that." Bergman replied, smiling at Koenig's compliment.

"Or if we find anywhere else we decide to stay." Capston added.

"Capston, have you been talking about this with your friend Mister Foxworth?" Koenig asked, leaning forwards across his desk.

"I think that Mister Foxworth and his Citizen's Committee have a valid viewpoint." Capston answered and Koenig frowned.

"Major, GDF regulations permit officers to engage in limited political activity while off duty but they are not to abuse their rank or position to provide privileged information to anyone who does not have security clearance. Now if you want to go on supporting Foxworth's idea that we should give up on getting home and settle down on the first suitable world we stumble across then that is your right. But while you wear that uniform you work for me. Do you understand?" he said sternly.

"Yes Colonel Koenig." Capston answered.

"Good. Now in that case how long will it take to get this built given our current resources?" Koenig asked but before either of the other men could answer a woman in a GDF captain's uniform came up the steps from the adjoining main mission with a computer tablet in her hands.

"Sorry to interrupt you colonel but you need to see this." she said as she held out the tablet to Koenig,

"Professor Bergman I think you'll find it interesting as well." she added, looking at Bergman.

"So what's so important Benes?" Koenig as he took the tablet and looked at its display.

The tablet showed an image of a crashed alien spacecraft, its distinctive saucer shape identifying it as having been built by the alien species that attacked Earth in the previous century. The all grey terrain suggested that the crash site was located on the moon but there were no further features to suggest a location.

"An alien attack ship." Bergman said, "Here on the moon."

"A lot of them were recovered from the moon professor. Then packed up and shipped off to Earth for people like you to examine and reverse engineer." Koenig replied.

"That picture was taken less than two hours ago colonel." Benes told him and both Koenig and Bergman stared at her.

"You're kidding me." Koenig said but Benes shook her head.

"No joke colonel. Or if it is then it's a very good one. An independent mining team found it about seventy kilometres from here close to one of the smaller outposts. It's right in the middle of their claim and they want to sell it to us." Benes said.

"Sell?" Capston commented, "That's an alien war machine. Declare it a national security issue and seize the thing."

"Not so fast major." Koenig said, "We've got enough problems with agitators trying to portray the GDF as thugs and bullies. If we just swarm in there and take the thing then it'll be a public relations nightmare. This ship is on a private claim so let's do what the miners are asking and negotiate a price for it." then he handed the tablet back to Benes, "Tell the miners that I want to meet with them. Then get in touch with Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, I'm sure that he'll want to know about this as well."

"You're going out there yourself colonel? The outpost isn't on the travel tube network." Benes asked and Koenig nodded.

"Of course. I'll need to sign off on the purchase price anyway so I may as well be in on the talks from the beginning. I'll take Verdeschi and Doctor Russell with me." he told her, "Professor would you mind joining us? Your input on the condition of the ship would be invaluable."

"Of course colonel." Bergman responded right away, "Studying alien technology is my life's work."

"Then it's settled. The four of us will take an Eagle out to this crash site as soon as Captain Benes can arrange a time and Major Carter can get us an Eagle." Koenig said.

"Actually I was going to remind you about the annual hanging of mistletoe today in main mission." Benes said, "If you're heading out then we'll need to delay it."

"You found mistletoe?" Koenig asked, surprised.

"No but Kano was able to three-D print a good copy. We're going to hang that instead but since you're now the senior officer on the moon tradition says that it's you that hangs it and gets kissed by all us girls." Benes pointed out and Koenig frowned.

"I'm not sure what Helena will think of that." he said.

2.

Moonbase Alpha was the largest of the human settlements on the moon, but even by the standards of the other bases that had been named using letters from the Greek alphabet the outpost near to where the alien spacecraft had been discovered was small, being home to fewer than five hundred people. A population of this size still meant that it was impossible to know everyone and when a stranger arrived they did not necessarily stand out.

"So who are they?" the new arrival asked his contact as they looked across the crowded room in the only bar in the settlement.

"The four drinking real beer instead of synthetic piss Mister Garcia." his contact replied, "No-one buys the real stuff unless they've just made a big strike now. It's too expensive."

"And they're telling everyone the source of their sudden good fortune?" Garcia said.

"They've just told people that they've made a strike but won't let on publicly what it is. Fortunately one of them has a bit of a gambling problem and when our boys called round to explain to him the problems with missing payments he told them what they'd found and how much he could pay if he was given a bit longer. What he couldn't tell them was the exact location. He just goes along with the others without paying attention to the navigation system. We could run an aerial search of course but that could take time and we already know that the Earthers are planning to move in and secure the ship. So do you want to go over there and say 'hello'?"

"No, there are too many people around. I think that we should wait until we can make our offer to them a little more privately." Garcia replied and the two men turned to leave the bar.

"An alien ship? Intact?" Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, the commanding officer of the military facility known as Moonbase Epsilon said when Koenig told him about the find.

"It looks that way, yes. Obviously there must be damage or it wouldn't have come down but I think you can understand the significance of the find." Koenig replied.

"That's an understatement if ever I heard one. The alloys that those ships are made from are essential for Hawk production."

"Yes," Koenig agreed, "and since all the facilities for reproducing them are on Earth getting hold of this ship cuts out a stage in the process. For the time being at least."

"John, if it's complete then there could be enough material there for us to double the number of Hawks we have. That's squadrons to cover Alpha, Beta and the civilians at Kappa. Not to mention upgrades to the *Ultra*. Renovating that ship is taking up a lot of resources." Verdeschi said and Koenig smiled.

"Maybe that would make us more popular with the tourists. Even that fool Foxworth couldn't object to extra fighter cover and a longer ranged ship to defend us. Or maybe he could just out of habit." he said.

"How soon can we get the ship?" Verdeschi asked.

"Tomorrow. Oh-nine hundred, that's the earliest that Benes could get the miners to agree to." Koenig said and Verdeschi nodded.

"The I'll see you tomorrow. Bright and early." he said.

When the time came for the bar to close the four miners left with additional bottles of drink so that they could continue to celebrate their good fortune. In their already intoxicated state the four miners did not notice as a man began to follow them soon after they left the bar, remaining close behind them until they reached the quarters of their leader where they all went inside. The man following them waited for a short while to make sure that the miners were not about to leave again before taking out a communicator.

"Level four, corridor six." he said simply before shutting off the device and returning it to his jacket pocket and waiting for the people he had just contacted to arrive.

It was several minutes before Garcia arrived with a group of seven other men. All of them were armed but their weapons were compact enough that they could be concealed beneath their clothing without attracting any unwanted attention. The sheriff's office at the outpost had only three deputies but the proximity of Moonbase Alpha meant that they could quickly summon a force of GDF troops for support if needed and the last thing that Garcia wanted was to get into a pitched battle with the military, especially at an outpost such as this where he could not flee using a travel tube.

"That one." the man who had followed the miners said, pointing towards a door.

"Are they still inside?" Garcia asked and the other man nodded.

"They went in about ten minutes ago. I've heard them inside, sounds like they're having a pretty good time in there." he answered and Garcia nodded back at him.

"Then I think it's time I introduced myself." he said before walking towards the door and pressing the

intercom while his men positioned themselves either side of the door where they would not be seen when it opened.

The miners inside ignored this and so Garcia pressed the button again, holding it longer this time and the door suddenly opened.

"Whatever you're selling we're not interested." the man who opened the door said, the smell of drink obvious on his breath and he started to close the door. However, Garcia quickly reached out and held it open.

"I'm not selling anything. I'm buying." he said and the miner frowned.

"Who is it?" the female miner asked from inside the room.

"Someone who says he wants to buy something from us." the miner at the door replied.

"Tell him to go away. We're not doing any other business until we've got this deal with the GDF sorted." the miners' leader said.

"That's why I'm here." Garcia said, "I want to make you a better offer."

It was at this point that the miner's leader walked over to the door and glared at Garcia.

"Then it'll cost you six million dollars. Now show me the cash or get lost." he said and Garcia smiled.

"Counter offer." he said, "Give me the alien ship and you all get to live. Three of you anyway." and then he drew the pistol from under his jacket and shot the man who had opened the door. The magnetic accelerator pistol he carried was set to fire its projectiles at a subsonic velocity and so the shot was almost entirely silent. Then before the miner's leader could react he smashed the butt of the gun into his face, breaking his nose. This caused the man to stagger back, clutching at his face as blood poured from his nose and Garcia pushed the door wide open before rushing through with his men. While Garcia closed the door behind him so that they would not be seen by any passers by his men rushed at the miners to restrain them. They attempted to resist, but the effects of drink and being outnumbered meant that they were quickly overpowered and forced to the floor where Garcia's men proceeded to bind them while Garcia himself took out a compact tablet and called up an image of the crashed alien spacecraft.

"Now," he said, holding the tablet in front of the miners' leader, "where exactly can I find this?"

Koenig and Bergman were joined at the launch pad by Verdeschi and Doctor Russell, the senior medical officer on the moon. All four were already in space suits. The flight to the miners' claim would not take long by Eagle and changing into suits on arrival would consume almost as much time as the trip there would.

"Has Benes confirmed the meeting?" Russell asked and Koenig nodded.

"Yes. The miners didn't want to head back out to their claim again last night but they agreed to meet there this morning instead." he said.

"Expect them to be hung over." Verdeschi commented.

"I thought workers on the moon were careful about drinking before going outside." Bergman commented.

"They normally are professor." Russell replied, "But these people know that they are going to get paid enough money that they probably won't need to work for quite some time. They can afford to take a few days off to get over their celebrations."

It was then that a woman's voice called out towards the entrance to the boarding tube that led to the waiting Eagle.

"Colonel Koenig! Wait!"

"Oh no." Russell muttered, "Look who escaped from her cupboard."

"Miss Keynes." Koenig said as the young woman in plain combat fatigues that lacked any form of rank or unit markings ran towards him, followed by an armed soldier.

"Sorry about this colonel. She insisted that she had to see you before you left." the soldier said.

"That's alright Washington." Koenig replied, "What do you want Keynes?"

"I heard about the ship colonel. I should be going with you." Keynes replied, "My experience-

"Your experience in dealing with alien technology is not as good as the professor's." Russell pointed out.

"Thank you for the offer but I already have all the personnel I need. Sergeant Washington please return Miss Keynes to her post." Koenig said and Keynes' face fell.

"Yes colonel. This way miss." Washington said, pointing back away from the boarding tube and Keynes nodded before turning around without saying a word.

"Perhaps we should get going before anyone else tries to join us." Verdeschi suggested.

"Agreed." Koenig replied.

"And in that case I call shotgun." Verdeschi added and Koenig smiled.

While Russell and Bergman took their seats in the Eagle's passenger module Koenig and Verdeschi made their way into the cockpit and sat down.

"This is Eagle one to main mission. We are secure, requesting permission to launch." Koenig signalled.

"Confirmed Eagle one. This is main mission, you have permission to launch. Will you bring me back a souvenir colonel? I'll make it worth your while when you hang the mistletoe." a woman's voice asked and Koenig smiled.

"Sorry Lieutenant Alexander, Colonel Verdeschi and Professor Bergman have already called dibs on anything we find. Maybe next time. Eagle one out." Koenig responded, then he pulled back on the flight controls and the Eagle rose up off the cross shaped launch pad.

"Mistletoe?" Verdeschi said and Koenig smiled.

"It's fake." he said, "We may be light years from Earth but people want to keep on with traditions. One of which is the commanding officer on the moon hanging mistletoe in main mission."

"And since General Simmons is dead that duty now falls to you." Verdeschi said, smiling, "So where does that leave Keynes? She seemed pretty eager to join us, is that because she's trying to get away from everyone else in main mission or because she still has a crush on you?"

"The former I expect. Although as far as I know the latter still holds true." Koenig replied, "As does Helena's threat to sew parts of her shut if she ever tries anything."

"So Keynes doesn't know that you know?"

"I doubt it. Of course that still leaves the matter of Alexander." Koenig said, "Last year we practically had to throw a bucket of water over her to get her off Simmons."

"So now you're worried she might try to tempt you with her forbidden closet of mystery? I'm sure that the doc back there will put her foot down about that." Verdeschi said before the cockpit door slid open and Russell entered.

"Just wanted to let you know that my kit is ready to check the alien ship for contaminants." she said and then she noticed Verdeschi smiling.

"What is it Tony?" she asked.

"Oh just wondering what you think about John here making out with every woman in main mission."

Verdeschi answered, "Are you going to be on hand with a bucket of water?"

"A stun gun more likely. Oh and a suture set just in case Alyson Keynes senses an opportunity to try and steal my man."

"Ah I like the sound of that. 'My man.'" Koenig said as he checked the Eagle's instruments, "We should be able to communicate with the miners now." he added, activating the communication system, "This is Eagle one calling mining engineer O'Brien. Respond please." he transmitted but there was no answer from the surface.

"Maybe they don't have their radio switched on." Russell said.

"Do a fly by. They'll turn their radio on when we fly right over them." Verdeschi said.

"Plus it'll give us a look at that ship." Koenig said and he glanced up at Russell, "Could you tell the professor to patch into our sensors and see what he makes of it?"

"Sure. Just no sudden jolts, okay?" Russell replied before she turned around and exited the cockpit.

Koenig flew the Eagle low over the location that had been given as the alien ship's crash site. The area of the claim was large and although there was a compact prefabricated shelter visible in the distance the area immediately surrounding the crater was empty of anything that looked artificial. However, as the craft flew over the crater it became apparent that not only were there no signs of the miners, the alien spacecraft itself was also missing.

"Hello colonel?" Bergman's voice said over the intercom, "I'm afraid that the alien vessel isn't here."

"Thank you professor, I noticed that." Koenig replied before he switched to the Eagle's external communications, "This is Eagle one calling Moonbase Alpha. Do you read me?"

"Yes colonel." a young woman replied.

"Baker can you confirm the location of that alien ship? And have Alexander check our position as well."

Koenig said and there was a brief pause before Baker responded.

"Looks like you should be right on top of it now colonel." she said.

"Well it's not here. Nor are the miners." Koenig told her.

"Colonel it's Morrow," the voice of Alpha's second in command said, "this could be a trap to get you out there in an unarmed Eagle."

"I can have a flight of combat Eagles out there in ten minutes." Carter, Alpha's chief pilot added.

"No, I'm not picking up any signs of an ambush." Koenig said, "Put Eagles on standby if you want but don't launch anything yet. If the miners moved the ship then a heavily armed force might cause problems. I'm going to set us down so we can investigate on foot."

"I'm guessing we're not going out there unarmed?" Verdeschi commented.

"I didn't plan on being unarmed even if the miners were around. Now we'll take more than just stun guns though." Koenig told him and Verdeschi nodded as he got up to leave the cockpit.

Making his way through the air lock module Verdeschi entered the Eagle's detachable passenger module to find Russell and Bergman sat together.

"Are we there yet?" Russell asked, smiling.

"Yes but it looks like we've been stood up." Verdeschi answered as he walked over to the module's small arms locker and opened it.

"I thought something was wrong." Bergman said, "Our sensors are picking up the extra trace radiation you'd expect from the use of a nuclear missile of the type used in the war but there's no metallic mass down there that could be the ship."

"Was the photo a fake then?" Russell said.

"We don't know yet doctor but Koenig doesn't want to take any chances." Verdeschi said, removing one of the horseshoe shaped stun guns from the locker and connecting its holster to his belt, "Everyone gets a stun gun and a rifle if they want. Do you remember how to use one of these professor?"

"Of course I do." Bergman replied defensively and he got to his feet to approach the locker himself, "I may have trained with an older model but the basics are the same. Besides Sergeant Washington has kindly been giving me a few extra lessons." and then he took a rifle from the locker along with a magazine of ammunition and loaded it into the weapon, "I won't arm it inside though. Just to be on the safe side." he added and Verdeschi smiled.

"Very good professor. What about you doctor?" he said.

"I'll take a rifle too. I don't want to be the only one who stands out. I remember enough of my combat training to know that standing out makes you the priority target." she replied and Verdeschi handed her a rifle as well. Verdeschi was first out of the Eagle onto the lunar surface and he crouched down, lifting his rifle to his shoulder while the others disembarked behind him.

"We should examine the crater" Bergman said, walking up the slope towards the rim of the crater.

"Hold on professor." Koenig called out after him, "Wait for the rest of us. You'll be a tempting target for a sniper up there."

The crew of the Eagle then climbed the side of the crater together and looked over the rim into its centre. There they saw that although the sides of the crater had a naturally uneven surface the bottom of it had a large and even indentation that looked like a perfect circle.

"No meteor impact made that." Verdeschi commented.

"No you're right colonel." Bergman replied, "That is the size and shape that I would expect if an alien flying saucer had been compressing the dust underneath for more than a hundred years."

"Could the miners have moved it?" Russell asked, "Hidden it to make sure that we didn't just take it from them?"

"That could explain why they delayed meeting with us but I don't think so." Koenig replied, "There are no drag marks so it wasn't towed away and that only leaves bringing in an Eagle with a heavy duty lifting winch."

"But if it wasn't the miners then who did this?" Bergman said.

"You mean who on the moon would want to take control of an alien spaceship equipped with an energy weapon capable of demolishing entire sections of a base or destroying anything we've got with a single blast?" Verdeschi commented.

"You mean Red Mars." Russell replied, referring to the terrorist group that had triggered the massive nuclear explosion that caused the moon to be dragged through a wormhole.

"Ah, well now you put it that way I get your point." Bergman added.

Koenig then switched his suit radio to relay a signal via the Eagle to Moonbase Alpha.

"Alpha this is Koenig." he transmitted.

"This is Alpha. Go ahead colonel." Baker responded.

"Spacewoman I need all the tracking logs for the area surrounding the O'Brien claim for the last twenty four hours. Tell Alexander that I need to know if anything was seen hovering over the crash site. Also I need Carter to check the flight logs for any Eagle launches that were equipped with heavy lifting gear." Koenig told her.

"Colonel are you telling us that someone has stolen the UFO?" Carter's voice suddenly added.

3.

All around main mission people looked at Carter in astonishment at what he had just said but they were even more startled when Koenig answered him.

"Yes major, that's exactly what's happened. We may need that flight of Eagles after all. Equip them for a search operation but they need to be armed just in case. We suspect that Red Mars may be involved and if the ship's weapon is still functional then we can be sure that they'll use it." he said.

"Do you want back up out there colonel?" Morrow asked.

"Yes. I want an infantry platoon deployed to secure the area. The crater may be empty but there could be evidence of how the ship was removed somewhere. We're going to go and check out the miners' shelter. We'll be in touch if we find anything. Koenig out." Koenig told his second in command and then the channel was shut off.

"Okay everyone you heard the colonel." Morrow said to everyone in main mission, "Red Mars could have a very powerful weapon in their possession and it's our job to find it before they can put it to use. Carter you had better lead that Eagle flight. Alexander start checking the flight and tracking logs. Benes get in touch with the outpost those miners are based at. See if the sheriff's office can give us any more information on them. Kano with me, I've got another job for you and we'll some specialist help with it."

"Yes sir." Kano, the head of Moonbase Alpha's technical section replied and he got up from his console at the same time as Morrow got up from his.

"He's taking him to her." Baker commented, stressing the word 'her'.

"And you get on with your work spacewoman." Morrow told her, glaring at her briefly before he and Kano left main mission, heading down a short corridor until they reached a door that had an armed guard standing outside it.

"She giving you any trouble?" Kano asked the guard.

"No captain. She pestered the master sergeant to be allowed to speak to Colonel Koenig earlier but she's been quiet since my shift started." the guard replied as Morrow opened the door.

The room on the other side had originally been a storage room before it was re-purposed into a private workspace and signs of its previous function could still be seen in the form of shelves that had been left in place while a desk for a computer terminal had been set up in the middle of the room. Since her release from prison for helping the Red Mars terrorists destroy Moonbase Mu in the nuclear explosion that had opened the wormhole Alyson Keynes had worked here, analysing the moon's supply issues and coming up with ways for the inhabitants to adapt and survive now that they did not have access to the resources of Earth. Despite her previous friendships with the other command staff Keynes was now an outcast and the isolated workspace enabled her to remain separated from them unless it was necessary to bring them together.

"Major, captain. Is something wrong?" Keynes asked when the two men entered the room.

"You could say that. Your old friends have managed to find out about that alien spaceship and took it before we could get to it. Now they might have a functioning alien beam cannon." Kano said and Keynes' eyes widened with concern.

"Major I promise I had nothing to do with this. Ask the guards, there's no way I could have communicated with Red Mars. My terminal isn't even networked." she protested.

"Calm down Keynes. We're not here to accuse you of anything. We need you to help locate the ship."

Morrow reassured her and Keynes relaxed visibly, "You're familiar with alien technology so that means you know what it would take to dismantle one of their attack ships and how they could use its beam cannon.

Captain Kano knows everything there is to know about human technology. Combine that with your logistical expertise and between the pair of you you both know how Red Mars could put the weapon into use, what of our technology could be used to achieve that and where they could find that technology. I want all that information ready for the colonel by the time he gets back." he told the pair. Then he looked at Kano and added, "This will be easier if she has access to a networked computer. Can I rely on you to keep an eye on what she does with it?"

"Don't worry major," Kano answered, nodding his head, "if she even tries to do anything that isn't necessary for this job I'll know it."

"Good. Then get started, time is a factor here." Morrow replied.

The Red Mars terrorist group had spent many years infiltrating the moon in its campaign to wrest Mars from from what it saw as the unjust domination by Earth. During this time as well as smuggling agents and weapons onto the moon the terrorists had set up a network of safe houses in which they could hide people and equipment from the Earth authorities. Some of these were nothing more than private rooms in the major bases located among the unsuspecting population whereas others were complete structures beyond these

bases. The safe house that the alien spacecraft had been brought to was one such structure. When the Chinese government had first begun construction of what later became known as Moonbase Beta it had been a place where components could be assembled and vehicles maintained or repaired. Abandoned almost as soon as the base was declared operational it had swiftly been forgotten, constructed underground for economy and also protection against what had been regarded as the possibility of attack by the coalition of nations building the larger rival base that later became Moonbase Alpha it was almost invisible to craft flying above it and out of sight from Beta itself.

The alien spacecraft had barely fit through the large rooftop doors and it had been a difficult job for the Eagle to lower it in before detaching and flying off before anyone could get suspicious about why an Eagle was hovering over an empty spot on the lunar surface. However, once it was inside the structure Red Mars immediately began their inspection of the ship.

Garcia made sure that he was personally present for this. He knew that as with much of the technology left behind by the aliens there was some risk involved in opening up one of their ships but at the same time he needed the prestige that would go with being the first one to actually set foot inside the ship. He and all of the team he had assembled to inspect the ship and strip it of anything useful to them wore spacesuits while they worked. The aliens had made use of both biological and chemical weapons during the war and although counter agents to all of these were available Red Mars did not have them to hand and so had to take steps to avoid being exposed to any such weapons that may be aboard.

"Radiation levels are low enough to go inside." one of the other terrorists told Garcia while he watched the more technically minded members of Red Mars swarming over and around the alien ship, "We're about to cut our way in if you're happy with it."

"Do it. The sooner we get inside the sooner we get at what the aliens had aboard." Garcia replied and the other terrorist gave a thumbs up signal to a pair of space suited individuals stood on top of the flying saucer where its hull widened at the point where the internal compartment was located. There were hatches located in the upper and lower hull that would permit access to the ship, but the aliens had included potentially lethal security devices in their construction that had cost the lives of a number of human soldiers during the war. These could still be live even after more than a century of being buried on the surface of the moon so using them was not a safe option, cutting through the main hull was the only viable way for Garcia and his men to get inside.

Immediately one of the men activated the plasma cutter he held while his partner took readings using a nuclear, biological and chemical agent detector, ready to alert the others if there were any such contaminants present. Enough alien spacecraft had been recovered and studied over the past century that the internal layout was fully documented and not even considered classified. Virtual models were available on line and Garcia's men made use of the abundance of such information that was publicly available to make their entry at a point where they would cause the least amount of damage to the spacecraft's contents.

"We're through." the man with the plasma cutter called out as a circular section of the hull suddenly came free and dropped into the inside of the ship with a loud 'clang'.

"Are you reading any contaminants in the air?" Garcia asked as he approached the hole, climbing up a ladder onto the top of the hull.

"Nothing." the man who had been monitoring for contamination replied.

"Excellent. In that case I'm going inside." Garcia said and while a ladder was being lowered into the hole he activated the flash lights mounted on his helmet.

Garcia climbed down the ladder and once he was at the bottom he looked around the interior of the alien spacecraft and smiled. The ship possessed just a single circular chamber that was organised into a series of concentric circles, matching its external design. The technology of the aliens blended the mechanical and electronic with the biological, sometimes to the extent that their devices were entirely grown and the appearance of the spacecraft's contents matched this. However, after all the time that it had spent buried on the moon's surface many of the biological components had turned into nothing more than dessicated husks. At the very centre of the spacecraft was the computer core, a squat column that rose up a metre from the floor before it tapered inwards sharply to a much narrower column that went all the way up to the ceiling and it was here that most of degradation of biological parts had taken place. Surrounding this was a ring of couches for the crew. The alien attack ships were capable of being operated by just a single crewman but they could carry up to eight if the mission demanded it. As Garcia shone his helmet lights at the couches he saw that three of them were occupied by figures in space suits. Although he had expected nothing different, Garcia was still disappointed that the crew of the ship all appeared to be human. The aliens themselves had visited Earth in the early stages of their attacks but they had done so in secret, abducting humans to be used as slave soldiers or subjects in their experiments. Therefore, it had been humans controlled via implants in their brains that had carried out the open attacks against Earth and it had not been until the very end of the war when human forces had finally got a look at their enemy. A fourth body was located on the floor beside one of the couches and Garcia wondered whether he had survived the crash only to die afterwards, either

from injuries sustained in the battle or when the liquid breathing system used by the crews of these ships used up all of its oxygen and the fluid then filling his lungs drowned him inside his spacesuit. Beyond the circle of crew couches were the storage racks for their weapons and Garcia smiled when he saw that these looked full. If nothing else then Red Mars would be able to make use of the pistols, assault rifles and machine guns it contained. There were also a number of grenades and a pair of launchers among the weapons and despite their age, the explosives inside these would still be stable enough to be of use as well. Finally the wall around the outside of the compartment was lined with storage lockers for additional equipment as well as numerous cryogenic cylinders designed to store human beings for transport. These cylinders were how the aliens would have transported their captives away from Earth but they also had a secondary role, allowing the attack ships to function as troop carriers with up to an additional thirty troops carried in suspended animation.

“Secure all these weapons.” Garcia told the next man, “Then I want all this ship’s systems going over to find out what still works. Anything we can’t use we’ll see if we can sell.” then he smiled and added, “Maybe Koenig will still be able to buy some of this after all.”

9.

Crossing the lunar surface on foot was time consuming but it meant that Koenig and Verdeschi could study the ground more closely, hoping to find something that would offer an explanation to what had happened to the alien spacecraft. However, among the various tracks left by people and surface vehicles there was nothing that stood out.

As they got closer to the miners' shelter the crew of the Eagle saw an exo-tractor fitted with digging equipment parked next to it. The vehicle looked undamaged although its cabin was open, exposing the interior to the vacuum outside.

"This looks to be in good working order." Verdeschi said, "Whoever took the ship wasn't interested in stealing anything else or they would have taken that too."

"Do you think that anyone's inside there?" Bergman asked, breathing heavily.

"You okay there professor? You sound out of breath." Koenig commented.

"Oh I'm fine. I just need to-" Bergman began before he suddenly dropped his rifle and fell to the ground.

"Victor!" Russell exclaimed as she rushed to see to him, plugging a medical scanner into a port on his spacesuit, "John it's his heart. We need to get him inside quickly." she said and Koenig nodded.

"Looks like we need to get in there." he said, looking at Verdeschi and then the shelter. Both men rushed to the shelter's air lock. However, before they could open it Verdeschi grabbed hold of Koenig.

"It's wired." he said, pointing to where the control panel for the outer door looked to have been prised away to leave behind a warping of the panel rim.

"Definitely Red Mars handiwork." Koenig replied before setting his radio to link with their Eagle again, "Alpha this is Koenig. We have a medical emergency, and not enough time to get back to our Eagle what's the ETA on that surveillance flight?"

"Colonel Koenig this is Major Carter, we're on approach now." Carter's voice responded, "What's your location?"

"We're by the miners' shelter but the door has been rigged." Koenig told him.

"Understood colonel. We're on our way down now." Carter said.

The flight of three armed Eagles was almost over the crater when Carter received Koenig's message and he peeled his ship away from the other two, heading for the structure that was clearly visible on radar.

"I've got visual contact with the colonel's party." his co-pilot said and Carter nodded.

"Thanks Bill. We better let the troops know. If there's a bomb out there then Washington and his men need to know about it." he said.

"I'm on it." Fraser replied and he activated the Eagle's intercom.

"Master Sergeant Washington are your men ready to deploy?" he asked.

"One squad the air lock now, everyone else waiting in the rear. It's pretty crowded in here so I hope we're setting down soon." Washington answered.

"Two to three minutes sergeant. We'll be evacuating a casualty and Colonel Koenig has warned of a possible explosive device in the area. Have your men ready to disarm it." Fraser told him.

"Understood captain. We'll clear the gangway as quickly as we can." Washington said and then he looked around the air lock that was filled with men in armoured spacesuits, "Okay I want one fire team per door. We need to get out of here as quickly as possible so the casualties can be brought aboard. Tell Hooper that he needs to be in the second wave with his bomb disposal kit."

As soon as the Eagle touched down the doors on both sides of the air lock module opened and steps extended down to the surface so that the troops inside could quickly disembark. Seeing Russell knelt beside Bergman, Washington and his fire team bounded towards them.

"What happened doctor?" he asked.

"It's his heart. I need to get him into the Eagle and out of this suit to take a proper look at him." Russell told him.

"You heard the doc. Pick him up and get him into the air lock." Washington told his men and they slung their rifles before picking Bergman up and carrying him back to the Eagle between them while Russell followed, her monitoring device still plugged into Bergman's suit.

While this was being done Washington and the second fire team made their way towards the nearby shelter where Koenig and Verdeschi waited.

"Take a look at this sergeant." Verdeschi told him and he pointed at the damage to the lock panel.

"Oh yeah, that looks bad." Washington replied, "I've seen this before. There's a charge rigged inside the circuitry that's triggered by the signal to open the door. That sends a blast of shrapnel out at whoever opens the door. The charge itself is generally too small to kill but the shrapnel will rip a hole in an un-armoured suit like yours too big for a regular patch."

"Red Mars will have known that whoever came after the ship would want to check out the shelter and left it to catch them." Koenig said.

"Given how important that ship is I'll bet they knew that you'd be coming here as well." Verdeschi added, looking at Koenig, "This trap was set specifically for you."

"Well it's nice to feel so important." Koenig replied, grinning back at him. Then he looked at Washington and added, "I still want to know what's inside here." he added and Washington nodded.

"Hooper will be here to defuse the trap just as soon as Doctor Russell has Professor Bergman aboard the Eagle." he responded.

Inside the Eagle one of the soldiers helped Bergman into the passenger module and sat him down while Russell removed her helmet and then his. Bergman was still conscious but obviously struggling to breathe and Russell began to unpack her medical kit.

"Take this and breathe deeply." Russell said, reaching above Bergman's head to the box that held one of the Eagle's emergency oxygen masks. Normally these were intended to be used if the cabin suffered a life support failure or loss of pressure but it could also be used to deliver oxygen for medical purposes by adjusting the gas mixture as Russell then did, "Do you understand?" she added and Bergman nodded as he took the mask and placed it over his face, "Have you been feeling unwell recently?" Russell asked and Bergman shook his head.

"No. I've felt fine." he managed to reply from behind his mask.

"And what about your medication? No side effects?"

"Ah." Bergman commented and Russell frowned.

"Professor have you been taking your medication?" she said.

"Of course. It's just – well it's just that I've been rationing it. You said the supply on the moon is limited so I've only been taking it three times a day instead of four." Bergman admitted.

"You know professor for a super genius that is a stupid mistake. You were prescribed that amount for a reason. Do you have any of your pills with you now?" she said and he nodded, "Good. Then I want you to take a dose now, two tablets. Then another in an hour. After that take the proper amount prescribed to you, your attempt at making your medicine last could have killed you. Apart from that that you sit here and breathe deeply from that mask. I'll get Major Carter to keep an eye on you, I need to get back outside just in case anyone gets hurt by that booby trap."

Returning to the lunar surface Russell saw that the armoured soldiers had formed a cordon around the shelter, far enough away they hoped to avoid any shrapnel that would be produced by the charge rigged to the air lock door. Hooper, the demolition expert brought along as part of Washington's force had carefully opened up the control panel again without disturbing the wiring to see how the bomb was connected to it.

"Doesn't look too complicated." he said, his radio passing this on to all of the other people present.

So you can defuse it then?" Koenig asked.

"No need colonel." Hooper replied as he closed the control panel again and then he took several metal rods from a pouch on his leg. These rods were threaded at the ends and Hooper began to connect them to one another to form one longer rod.

"Hooper are you about to do what I think you're about to do?" Koenig said just as Hooper stepped back from the air lock and moved to the side.

"Fire in the hole." he responded and the others present all ducked as he reached out with the pole and used the end to press the air lock control button, triggering the explosive. The bomb went off silently in the vacuum but there was a bright flash and a brief burst of flame before a cluster of plumes of dust were thrown up from the lunar surface beyond the cordon after the shrapnel passed harmlessly by the soldiers in the low gravity before finally falling to the ground, "All clear." Hooper added.

"Damn it Hooper, give us a bit more warning before you do that again." Washington said.

"Never mind that now." Koenig added, "Let's go and see whether there's anything inside that's actually worth trying to kill us over."

As soon as the alien beam cannon and small arms were removed from the spacecraft Garcia had them packed up and left the safe house with them, intending to show them off to more of his supporters as proof of his success. For now the weapon from the alien spacecraft remained non-functioning for lack of power but the very fact that he had it was a propaganda coup. It meant that Red Mars had the firepower to openly challenge GDF forces. He took with him most of the other Red Mars members present as well, leaving only those technical experts needed to dismantle the ship and assess what out of its systems were working and useful. Most of their focus was on the power system in the hope that it could be made to work and provide a power source for the beam cannon that had already been removed. However, while most of the Red Mars technicians were working on this one of their number was instead inspecting the suspended animation

chambers. Operating by means of an energy field that effectively froze time without the need for more conventional cryogenic preservation, the technology of these chambers was something that humanity had not been able to reproduce even after more than a century of trying and the examples that had been captured intact were immensely valuable and the money that even one could bring if it was sold could be used to buy arms or bribe officials.

The problem with examining alien technology was interpreting the signals output from their control devices. Only a handful of Earth based companies and universities had access to such equipment and Red Mars had been forced to improvise using what information about the subject was available on the moon's public computer networks. However, certain things about the alien systems were easy to determine, such as when something had power and when he saw a tiny red light blinking beneath several layers of circuitry and cables he called out.

"Hey this is still live." he said, the radio of the spacesuit he still wore carrying his voice to all of the other Red Mars technicians at work in the ship and they looked around at him.

"Can you tell where the power is coming from?" one asked.

"It must be a battery of some sort." another said.

"Could we use it to jump start the main power core?" a third suggested.

"We still don't know if the core will start up again." the first pointed out.

"Looks like its coming from down here somewhere." the man studying the suspended animation capsules said, leaning closer to the hole in the floor the circuits were under. However, as he did so the narrow torch he was using knocked against one of the circuits and fell from his grasp, clattering down as far as the base of the circuit box and causing him to curse, "Hang on, let me just grab my light." he said and he reached down as far as he could, trying to retrieve the light. He could not still look into the hole as he leant down and he had to feel for the torch, however just as he took hold of it he accidentally pushed its metal casing against an already damaged circuit and there was a sudden 'crack' sound as a component shorted out.

"What did you do?" one of the others asked as the man quickly pulled his arm out of the hole, now holding his work light again.

"I don't know. I-" he said as he looked into the hole only to see that the light had now gone out and moments later there was a hissing sound as the suspended animation capsules all around the outside of the room began to open.

The men inside the spacecraft watched the covers lifting from the capsules and saw that inside each of them was an adult human wearing a tight bodysuit and masks over their faces that had hoses running up to the tops on the capsules out of sight. These people did not fall as the capsules opened, each one being held in place by a harness across their chest.

"Who the hell are they?" one of the technicians asked.

"Earthers." another replied, "Earthers from a hundred years ago who were probably being taken to be experimented on. You can bet they died in those tubes a long time ago."

"A pity." one of the others said as he approached a capsule that contained a slender woman, "I wouldn't mind being the first man this one had seen in a hundred years." and then he lifted her head so he could see her face and added, "Can you imagine how grateful she'd be for-" and then he gasped as her eyes suddenly opened. Staring at him, the woman reached out with both arms and took hold of the arm he had used to lift her head, grabbing it at the wrist and elbow. Then she twisted his arm sharply and his gasp became a scream of agony as it broke.

S.

The woman sat reading in the quarters she shared with Baker was clearly not an ordinary human although it was only possible to tell this by studying her face, her pale blue eyes had dagger-like pupils more akin to those of a cat than a human while her ginger hair had a pronounced widow's peak. Maya was a Psychon, a member of a subspecies of humanity that was the result of one of the experiments carried out by the aliens who had attacked Earth on their captives. The Psychons were divided by sex, the males had been engineered for their technical aptitude while the females were empathic, able to read the feelings of other just by watching them or even a recording and enabling them to quickly learn languages that they were exposed to. Maya herself was a particularly powerful empath, highly prized by the Dorcon species that had enslaved her people when the aliens responsible for their creation had abruptly vanished. Not only was she able to sense the feelings of others, she could also sometimes compel them to act as she wanted them to. Rescued from the Dorcons by Koenig when the moon first left Earth's solar system, Maya now lived at Moonbase Alpha and was studying hard to fit in with her human liberators.

This studying was suddenly interrupted when she sensed an unexpected psychic cry and she let out a gasp, dropping the tablet she had been reading from to the floor of the room. This was just the first of a series of psychic cries that Maya sensed, something that she had only felt once prior to this and she pulled herself out of her chair and reached for the comlock that she had been issued so she could move around Alpha. Hit by another of the psychic cries she fell to the floor just as she activated the comlock and it dropped from her hand and bounced away from her.

"Medical section, Doctor Vincent." the man who appeared on the comlock's screen said but Maya did not respond, being curled up in a foetal position and quivering on the floor.

"Well lieutenant?" Morrow asked Alexander as he stood behind her console..

"No luck so far major." she answered, "I've checked every launch from Alpha over the last twenty four hours and none of them were equipped for heavy lifting. Of course that's not to say that Red Mars doesn't have some alternate modules hidden somewhere that they could have set down and swapped to when they were outside our radar coverage. I'm trying to check with the other bases but Beta is being as obstructive as ever. Short of going out there myself with a team of marines I don't think we're going to get any answers from them today."

"By which time Red Mars could have fired the alien cannon right through main mission." Morrow commented. Then he looked towards Benes, "Captain, please tell me that you have more." he said.

"Sorry major. The local sheriff's office just says that apart from a few minor infractions to do with excessive drink none of the miners involved have any records and they won't go knocking down any doors on just our say so. Apparently they're more worried about the miner's union than Red Mars."

Morrow sighed

"Damn it. When did everyone decide that paying attention to the GDF command structure here was optional?" he said but before anyone could offer a response his comlock activated and he pulled it from his belt to see Doctor Vincent's image on the screen, "Yes doctor?"

"Major we've received a call from Maya's comlock but she's not responding. I'm worried she might be hurt." Vincent said and Baker looked up from her console when she heard this.

"Maya?" she said.

"I've got Maya's comlock located in her and Baker's quarters major." Benes said as she quickly checked her console.

"Doctor, Maya is in her quarters. I'm on my way there now with Baker to let you in." Morrow said before shutting off his comlock and turning towards Benes, "Sandra you're in charge until I get back." he told her and she glanced up the steps leading to Colonel Koenig's office.

"Can I sit in the big chair?" she asked.

"If you want but keep your feet off the table." Morrow replied, "Come on Baker, let's go."

Morrow and Baker rushed from main mission to the enlisted personnel's quarters where Baker and Maya shared accommodation and they arrived there at about the same time as Doctor Vincent and two medical orderlies with a wheeled stretcher.

"If you wouldn't mind spacewoman." Morrow said and he stood aside for Baker to open the door with her comlock.

"Maya!" she exclaimed when she saw her Psychon room mate still curled up on the floor and she began to move forwards only to be held back by Morrow.

"Let the medics do their job." he said as Vincent hurried in and crouched beside Maya.

"Maya can you hear me?" he asked. Then he looked up at the orderlies, "She's still breathing. Get her to

medical immediately." he told them.

"Will she be okay?" Baker asked.

"I sorry, I don't even know what's wrong with her." Vincent replied, "Remember that despite her ancestry she isn't entirely human and the only source we have for any medical conditions that may affect Psychons is Maya herself."

"We'll accompany you to medical if that's okay doctor. Maya may appreciate Baker being there and I can't help but wonder whether it's more than a co-incidence that she is suddenly taken ill when a spaceship built by the same aliens who created her people is dug up."

"Where the hell is everyone?" the Red Mars enforcer asked when he and a second member of the terrorist group stepped from the airlock into the hangar where the alien spacecraft was being disassembled. When they had left with Garcia and the weapons the room had been a hive of activity as their technicians picked apart the alien craft to determine what was usable or saleable. Now however, the entire room was silent.

"Maybe they're all on a break." the other man suggested and he lifted his spacesuit visor.

"Or maybe they opened up their suits and one of them accidentally triggered a cylinder of poison gas we missed and they all dissolved into pools of blood and fat. That's what some of the alien gases did you know." the first said and the second man instantly closed his helmet again, "Go check the other room just in case. I don't believe that not one of them would stay in here with this thing."

The two terrorists split up, one heading for the area set aside as living quarters where the technicians could eat and sleep while the other made his way between the cases of tools that had been obtained for the task of taking apart the alien spaceship as he made his way towards it. The ship was propped up on six metal stands, positioned roughly equally around the saucer shaped craft's circumference and as the terrorist got closer he saw that one of the hatches in the underside had been opened. It was quite possible that the technicians had figured out how to open this safely and done so to provide them with easier access to its interior or if in doing so they had triggered a booby trap and that was the reason why there appeared to be no-one around.

Walking up to the hatch, the terrorist looked up into the ship and he smiled as he saw the tips of someone's fingers, still wearing their spacesuit. Deciding that whoever it was that was above him must be too engrossed in their work to be paying any attention to what was happening outside the terrorist reached up to take hold of the hand, expecting that he would give whoever it was a sudden surprise when he did this. However, it was the terrorist himself that suddenly leap backwards and gasped as when he grabbed hold of one of the fingers the gloved hand came falling out of the spacecraft. The terrorist fell backwards and landed with a crash as he knocked over a rack of tools while dropping both the severed hand and also the carbine he held. It was then that a man jumped down through the hatch and landed in front of the terrorist. Looking up he realised that he did not recognise this man and he frowned, thinking that he had seen all of the technicians the last time he had been here. Adding to his confusion was the red bodysuit that the man wore, although it could easily have been the under suit for a spacesuit it was not a model that he was familiar with. The man's head had been shaven at some point and his hair was just starting to grow back, however this was not enough to disguise the scarring or strange lumps at the back of his head where something had been surgically implanted under the skin next to the man's skull. Then he noticed the markings on one of the bodysuit's sleeves and recognised them as alien.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded but the man did not respond. Instead he reached down to the floor and picked up the dropped carbine, studying it closely as a second man in an identical bodysuit jumped down through the hatch. This one as armed with a simple metal bar and both it and his hands were dripping with blood and the terrorist reached for the pistol he had holstered under his shoulder but as he drew the weapon the second man swung the bar and sent it flying from his grasp. Having determined how the carbine functioned the first man then turned weapon towards its owner and released the safety catch before pulled the trigger once. The carbine was an old fashioned ballistic weapon that used a chemical propellant for its ammunition and the weapon roared as the man fired a burst of bullets into the terrorist while empty casings flew from the side of the weapon.

In the next room the other terrorist had found was obviously a trail of blood across the floor and he followed it as far as a body of a man who had been savagely attacked. Both of his legs had been broken and lay at unnatural angles and when the terrorist rolled him over he saw that the dead man had had to drag himself across the floor with just one hand, the other begin used to try and keep closed the deep wound to his abdomen that would have otherwise allowed his internal organs to drop out of him. The terrorist lifted his visor again, gasping as he looked away and concerned that he might vomit when all of a sudden he heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire from the hangar.

With the shotgun that he was armed with held ready to use he burst back into the hangar and looked around but saw nothing.

“Jack?” he said as he crept across the hangar, heading in the general direction of the spaceship that dominated it, “Jack where are you?”

Continually looking at the alien spaceship instead of to either side of him the terrorist managed to miss the silent figure concealed behind a large tool case that rose up slowly as he passed by before suddenly lunging at him. The silent man reached around the terrorist to grab hold of his weapon, pulling it across the terrorist's chest and there was a loud booming as the shotgun went off. With his weapon held uselessly against his own body, the terrorist could only try and struggle to get free of the still silent man's grip but this was in vain, the silent man was stronger than he was and he could not get free. It was then that a woman appeared from behind another large tool case and calmly walked up to the terrorist. Her head had been disfigured in the same way as the man's had with something implanted under her skin. Without any hint of emotion she reached into his open helmet and placed a hand either side of his head before she placed the tips of her thumbs over his eyes and proceeded to press down hard while he screamed in agony.

6.

"Benes get your damned feet off my desk." Koenig said as his face appeared on the screen mounted on his desk and Benes suddenly pulled her feet off and sat up straight, putting down the tablet she had been reading from, "What are you doing there? Where's Major Morrow."

"Medical section with Baker. Maya was suddenly taken ill and Doctor Vincent is trying to figure out what's wrong with her." Benes said, "Major Morrow thinks that it could be connected to the alien ship somehow."

"That's what I'm calling about. There's nothing here to give us any idea of what happened to the miners. How did you get on with the sheriff at their outpost?" Koenig asked.

"Nowhere. I'm trawling through their records myself but there's not much to go on. The sheriff won't get involved without proof that something is wrong. Alexander has been working on trying to track the ship used to move the alien craft but again she's come up with nothing. Either the launch from Alpha was disguised and the Eagle module swapped at another location or it came from somewhere else. Unfortunately Beta are being about as helpful as the outpost sheriff." Benes said and Koenig frowned.

"Okay in that case I'm heading to the outpost myself with Master Sergeant Washington and his men. Someone set a bomb at the miners' shelter here and if that isn't enough to get the local sheriff involved then I'll declare martial law to get things done." he said, "Let Doctor Vincent know that Doctor Russell will be returning to Alpha. Professor Bergman's been taken unwell and she wants him back in more comfortable surroundings than sat in the back of an Eagle breathing through an emergency mask."

"Yes colonel. I'll pass the message on." Benes said.

"Oh and one more thing Benes." Koenig added.

"Yes colonel?"

"Keep your feet off my desk." Koenig told her and then the screen went blank.

"Found it." Keynes said suddenly and Kano looked up from his own terminal. The pair of them were working in a private office while a guard stood just inside the door to monitor Keynes.

"What have you got?" Kano asked as he rolled his chair towards her.

"A fusion reactor powerful enough to power an alien beam cannon." Keynes replied, "I knew the numbers didn't add up when I was looking at the reports Koenig gave me when he asked me to assess our resources."

"Let me see." Kano said and Keynes pointed to an entry in the database she was studying.

"Series K fusion core. As used in Vultures. Designed to be as light and compact as possible while still putting out enough power to accelerate a ship at ten gees and maintaining an artificial gravity field."

"From the figures you gave me that will put out enough to fire the weapon. Not at full power mind you I saw one of them tested and that needed to be hooked into a-" Keynes began but Kano interrupted her.

"The series K is a restricted model." he said, "In output terms, not ownership. Problems were found in the output regulator circuitry that caused failures if the current peaked at more than twenty kiloamps.

Components blew right of the board so the things were throttled back to a fifteen kiloamp maximum limit."

"So what would happen if they took that off and let the reactor function at full power?" Keynes asked.

"Well push the existing circuitry past its limit and it'll just melt. There's nothing especially volatile about it so the reactor would just shut down until the board could be replaced. On the other hand that reactor wasn't even new when it was installed in the Vulture. With the limiting components in place it had a proven track record for reliability. Component technology has moved on since then though and the regulator circuitry could be replaced with a newer equivalent using off the shelf parts. Where is the reactor?"

"It was at Gamma but disappeared from the records about four months ago. About the same time as a major ore shipment was being routed via Beta to Earth." Keynes said, "Thing is, the despatch details from Gamma record the shipment as being heavier by about two and a half tonnes to what is then recorded as being loaded into a flight of Eagles. The number of crates was the same though. Can a series K reactor be broken down?"

"Not easily, no." Kano answered, "But it would be possible to have the reactor hidden in one crate, then remove it and take some ore from each of the others to even out the weights."

"That would work. Loaders really should be recording the mass of each individual crate that gets put aboard a ship but in reality if they're all part of a single shipment then they'll just record the total amount. That's what happened here." Keynes added.

"So now there's a reactor with enough output to power an advanced alien weapon system floating around somewhere at the same base where Red Mars set up shop for who knows how long? We need to take this to Major Morrow."

"I should really keep working on this. If Red Mars do have the cannon and reactor then they're going to need a way to get it into battle." Keynes said.

"Maybe," Kano replied, "but you're only allowed network access under my supervision so come with me. We can let Major Morrow decide what our next step is. Now come on, I'd hate to have to have the guard stun you."

"Really?" Keynes said as she got out of her seat, "Because most people around here seem pretty willing to have me shot and not just with a stun gun either. Are you sure you're not one of them?"

"Ask me when we're finished." Kano replied.

"I've been told that the weapon will work once it's been reassembled." Garcia told the woman on the other end of the communication link. Neither of them could see one another's faces though. The link was a covert one hidden among data transfers between bases that the GDF were unlikely to be monitoring and this limited the available bandwidth to sufficient for an audio transmission only.

"And the power source?" the woman asked, her voice coming through as distorted. This was another security precaution. Even if the Earth loyal authorities on the moon did stumble across the conversation their automated voice recognition system would not be able to identify anyone involved in the conversation.

"We have our own source but I've got people looking at the original. That will give us a better rate of fire at full power than what we can achieve with ours. I need to know whether you can get me a suitable vehicle to mount it on."

"You should have kept the Eagle you used to move the wreck." the woman replied.

"And point the GDF right to us? We needed that in a hurry and had to move more openly than I wanted but that's back in the main hangar now. We had to burn one of our fake identities to get that. Six years of false data trails gone in minutes and if you can't come up with a ship then all of it was for nothing."

"I might be able to get one of the reserve Eagles from Iota." the woman said, "The problem is that right now the Earthers are rushing around looking for anything that will fly themselves. They're pulling all the reserve ships out of storage and bringing them back into service. Ideally you want something with more power anyway, a Condor maybe. The problem is that there are fewer than thirty of them on the moon and the Earthers monitor them all carefully."

"We wouldn't have anywhere to hide something that big in any case." Garcia pointed out.

"Then what about a Swift? Right now long range reconnaissance isn't a priority for the Earthers." the woman suggested.

"There are fewer Swifts than Condors on the moon." Garcia said, "If numbers are an issue then isn't a Swift even more difficult?"

"Maybe not. There were several of them at Eta when the base was destroyed. The Earthers have been going through and recovering what they can from there but it's slow going and they're more interested in the Condors and Eagles. We might be able to replace one of the Swifts they've recovered but not processed with one that they've already written off without them noticing. Alternatively there's always our friend at Zeta. Maybe she can arrange for one of their two to be transferred and for it to never arrive." the woman explained and Garcia nodded his head, smiling.

"The current estimate is that the cannon will be assembled in six hours. Contact our friend at Zeta. Tell her that we need the Swift by midnight tomorrow. Be careful about letting her know why though. She works for us out of her hatred of the GDF, if she knows we're planning to use the ship as a weapon's platform then she might not help us." Garcia told the woman.

"Yes, pacifists are strange that way. Okay I'll see to it now." the woman said and then the connection was suddenly broken as she deactivated her end of the communication link.

It was then that the door to the room Garcia was using as his office slid open and a man rushed in

"Mister Garcia we may have a problem in the hangar." he exclaimed.

"What sort of problem?" Garcia replied, frowning. Now that Red Mars was poised to be able to make devastating attacks on GDF targets the last thing he wanted to hear was that there were problems that would delay them.

"The two men who went back to the shelter where the ship is didn't check in on time. I sent another pair of men out there just to see why not and they didn't come back. They've been gone an hour now. I'd try radioing but you ordered a total blackout." the man told Garcia.

"Damn. If the Earthers have already found that hangar then they could be coming after us. We need to know what's going on out there. Get me half a dozen men and an exo-rover. I'm going out there to see what's happening for myself." Garcia replied.

7.

The outpost that the miners had operated from consisted of a single large structure and lacked most of the features of the larger moonbases. This included individual landing pads for spacecraft and instead of setting down at a clearly marked spot craft landing at the outpost could either set down on the lunar surface and have the occupants disembark outside or there was a point where the outpost structure suddenly narrowed and created a shelf large enough for ships the size of Eagles to land on. Boarding tubes could then be extended from the outpost, moving to create a pressurised link to the structure.

"Outpost control this is Eagle one out of Alpha. We are on approach to your platform." Koenig transmitted as he flew towards the outpost at low altitude.

"Understood Eagle one. You are cleared to land." a voice responded.

"I guess now we find a parking spot." Koenig told Verdeschi.

"Looks like we have a lot of choice. I only see one other ship down there." Verdeschi replied as he looked at the outpost through the cockpit viewport and saw only a solitary Vulture currently landed there. The turret from this craft was missing, indicating that it was a civilian vessel but other than that it looked complete.

"I'll take us in right by that boarding tube." Koenig said as he brought the Eagle in to land on the platform, setting the craft down close to one of the outpost's boarding tubes, "Let's go and say 'hello' to the locals shall we then?" he added as he was shutting down the engines.

Getting out of their seats, Koenig and Verdeschi made their way to the Eagle's airlock where Washington and a fire team of his men already waited. Like Koenig and Verdeschi the soldiers still wore their spacesuits but they also had kept their helmets on for the additional protection they offered.

"Still no seal colonel." Washington said from beside the air lock's outer door and Koenig frowned as he took out his comlock.

"This is Koenig. What's the hold up on docking?" he signalled.

"Err, hold on colonel. We're just having a technical problem here." the traffic controller's voice responded without a video signal to accompany it.

"Then switch your air lock to manual and we'll just do an EVA." Koenig said sternly.

"That's okay colonel, we've got it sorted now." the controller said and then the channel went dead.

"They're panicking." Verdeschi said, "Probably wondering what they've got themselves into by not complying with your request to check out those miners."

"And they haven't even seen how many of us there are yet." Koenig replied, smiling at him before there was a tone from the air lock control panel.

"Seal established." Washington announced and he lowered his visor, sealing his helmet before he brought his rifle up to his shoulder. Around him the other soldiers did the same so that when the air lock door unfolded they were all covering the boarding tube with their weapons, "Forward." he ordered and the soldiers advanced quickly along the boarding tube until they exited it at the other end, deploying to cover all approaches while a startled looking man in combat fatigues who had a stun gun holstered at his waist and a pair of technicians in overalls looked on.

"Clear!" Washington shouted before Koenig and Verdeschi followed them out of the Eagle.

"I take it that you are the sheriff of this facility." Koenig said.

"Err, yes that's right. Sheriff O'Neill." the uniformed man answered, "I've been looking into the background of those miners your people asked about but--"

"Don't waste your breath O'Neill." Verdeschi interrupted, "We know what you've been doing."

"Just give us the references for their quarters and we'll go and take a look ourselves." Koenig added at which point one of the technicians stepped forwards.

"Now see here Colonel Koenig, all these soldiers and guns may impress some people but I know what the rights of those miners are. Unless you have clear evidence linking them to a crime then their quarters are--"

"Let me guess, a union man." Verdeschi said, "Well mister union man we recently had a front row seat to a bomb that was set on the air lock of a shelter that the people we want to speak to used as a base of operations. Now either they set it for us or maybe someone set it for them."

"Basically either you tell us where we need to be looking or we bring enough men here to search everyone's quarters." Koenig added.

"Level four, corridor six. It's where there team leader lives." O'Neill said and the union representative glared at him angrily, "Of course my department will--"

"Just keep on doing what you have been doing Sheriff O'Neill." Koenig said, "Nothing."

The interior of the outpost was cramped and when Washington and his men formed two columns they took up most of the width of the corridors they moved down, attracting stares from the occupants who had to press themselves against bulkheads to get out of their way. O'Neill and the union representatives followed

the GDF troops, neither of them wanting to risk Koenig and his men acting without being observed. Meanwhile Koenig and Verdeschi ignored them until they reached the door of the mining team leader's quarters.

"this is your ground O'Neill, do you want to knock?" Koenig asked and O'Neill stepped forwards, obviously moving towards the door to knock.

"You might want to bear in mind that someone set a bomb on another door belonging to these people." Verdeschi commented.

"Err perhaps I should let your men handle this colonel." O'Neill said and Koenig smiled.

"Wise choice. Sergeant Washington do the honours." he responded.

Washington moved forwards and inspected the locking panel beside the door.

"No sign of tampering colonel." he said and Koenig nodded.

"Knock." he said and Washington lifted his visor before he pounded on the door with his fist.

"GDF! Open up!" he yelled but there was no response, "Richards, do your magic." he added, stepping back before one of his men slung his rifle and took out an electronic lock pick.

Removing the cover of the lock panel the soldier connected the lock pick and in moments there was a hiss as the door slid open to reveal the inside of the apartment where all four of the miners lay dead.

"No evidence of a crime taking place?" Koenig commented, glaring at O'Neill as Washington and his men rushed into the apartment to check the bodies.

"The blood is all dried." Washington announced, "This happened a while ago."

"Pack up the bodies." Koenig ordered, "We'll take them back to Alpha and Doctor Russell can examine them there. Unless you have any objections about us carrying out the investigation Sheriff O'Neill?" he added, glaring at O'Neill.

"I heard Maya was taken ill, what happened?" Russell asked as she hurried into Alpha's medical section, an orderly pushing Bergman along behind her in a wheelchair and she rushed over to where Maya lay in a bed surrounded by various monitors showing her vital functions.

"I don't know. She tried calling us but passed out before she could tell us what was wrong. I tried an adrenaline shot but her readings didn't shift at all." Vincent replied.

"You can help her can't you?" Baker added from where she and Morrow stood nearby.

"I hope so." Russell said.

"What happened to the professor?" Morrow said.

"I thought I could make my medication last longer if I just took a little less each day." Bergman replied.

"You mean the medication that Alyson Keynes stopped you getting more of?" Baker commented.

"Could everyone stand back please?" Russell said as she leant over Maya's bed and examined her.

"She's obviously unconscious but her brain activity is registering as if she's wide awake." Vincent told her,

"I've never seen anything like this."

"It must be related to her empathic abilities. Some sort of psychic shock." Russell said.

"She had some sort of episode when you and Colonel Koenig went aboard the *Ultra*." Morrow said, "It was as if she sensed the creature aboard the space station waking up. I thought it could be connected to the alien spacecraft we're looking for."

"Major that's it." Russell exclaimed, "She's picked up on something that was too much for her. Normally if we want to wake someone up we'd use a stimulant like adrenaline but in this case all it probably did was make her more receptive to whatever did this to her in the first place."

"I didn't know." Vincent said.

"Don't worry doctor, I'm not blaming you. I would have tried the same thing." Russell said as she dashed to a medicine cabinet and took out a cartridge for an injector unit and loaded it. Returning to Maya she pressed the muzzle to the base of the neck, "I'll start with a low dose. I don't want to knock her out myself." she said before pulling the trigger and as soon as the sedative was fired into Maya the young woman's eyes opened wide and she let out a gasp.

"Maya!" Baker exclaimed.

"Maya can you hear me? Can you tell us what happened to you?" Russell asked.

"Screams. I felt screams." Maya said, "So many of them. Suddenly woken and all alone with no-one to tell them what to do."

"Like the thing that was aboard the alien space station?" Baker asked but Maya shook her head.

"No, this was different. That was something acting on instinct, solitary and wanting to feed. There were many more this time and much closer. They have a desire to kill but need to be guided." she said.

"Looks like your theory about this being related to the alien spacecraft is right major." Russell said and Maya frowned.

"What alien spacecraft?" she said.

"Maya someone found a spaceship that belonged to the aliens who created your people here on the moon."

Russell said.

"The Outsiders are here?" Maya said using the name for the aliens who had attacked Earth that was used by the Dorcons and thus her own people as well.

"Not that we know of." Morrow answered, "The vessel found was one of their attack ships. They were operated by human crews controlled by brain implants of some kind."

"That's probably what you detected Maya, the implants." Russell said.

"What makes you think that doctor?" Morrow asked.

"Think about it major. Psychon males have a natural aptitude for technology as we understand it. They can supposedly determine the function of any machine they are exposed to very quickly and learn how to operate and maintain it." Russell answered

"That is correct." Maya added, nodding.

"Whereas females are empathic, able to sense the feelings of living beings and understand how they communicate. In Maya's case she can even affect their behaviour. We know that the technology of the aliens who created the Psychons was at least in part based on bioengineering, so what if they intended for Psychon females to be able to maintain their biotechnology in the same way as the males could maintain everything else? That could explain why Maya is sensitive to their creations."

"But hang on a minute." Baker said, "If Maya sensed something from that alien spacecraft then doesn't that mean that its crew are still alive and here on the moon with us?" and Russell and Morrow looked at one another.

"Main mission this is Morrow." Morrow said into his comlock as he raced for the exit from the medical section.

"Main mission here major." Alexander replied as her face appeared on his comlock screen, "Kano and Keynes are here to see you by the way. They're waiting in the colonel's office to keep Keynes away from everyone else."

"Never mind that now Alexander. You're who I want to talk to. I want a full security alert all across the moon. The crew of that alien ship aren't dead and they could be loose somewhere. If they are then Red Mars could be the least of our worries." Morrow told her and Alexander's eyes widened.

"Yes major, I'll get right on it." she replied before Morrow shut off his comlock.

"This is Moonbase Alpha main mission to all stations," Alexander said into her headset, her message being carried to the control and security sections of every base and outpost on the moon, "security alert. All personnel are to prepare to receive deployment orders. A hostile force is believed to be present on the moon. Further instructions will follow."

Everyone in main mission looked at Alexander when they heard this.

"What's going on?" Kano asked from Koenig's office and he started to descend the steps to main mission with Keynes getting up to follow him, "No you wait there." he told her before looking at the guard, "Stay with her and make sure she doesn't get out of that chair. Stun her and tie her to it if you have to." he added.

"Don't worry, I'll do as I'm told." Keynes said, sitting back down again.

"Major Morrow says that the crew of the alien ship are on the loose." Alexander said.

"How many?" Benes asked but Alexander shrugged.

"The major didn't say." she said.

"Just one is bad enough." Kano said, "We've all read the reports from the war. The people taken by the aliens came back as relentless killers, they won't make any distinction between military and civilian and anyone who falls into their clutches will be lucky to be killed quickly. The consequences of them getting into a civilian area don't bear thinking about. I wouldn't wish them on my worst enemy."

8.

Garcia sat beside the exo-rover's driver as the vehicle made its way towards the safe house that held the alien spacecraft. With the hangar doors camouflaged to look like the surrounding lunar surface the only hint of the safe house's presence was the smaller personnel air lock located a short distance away, built into a low hill so that the hill itself overhung the door, concealing it from every direction except directly ahead. Parked close by this were a pair of moon buggies, their bright yellow colour standing out against the grey of the terrain.

"Hold here." Garcia ordered and the driver brought the vehicle to a stop.

"Doesn't look like anything's wrong." he said.

"Then where is everyone?" Garcia replied, "We're close enough for a short range signal now though. Try your communicator."

The driver then took out his personal communicator and turned it on.

"This is Rover Six calling Sanctuary Beta Four, do you read me?" he transmitted before he and Garcia waited to see if there would be any reply. However, when nothing came the driver looked at Garcia, "Shall I try again?" he asked.

"No." Garcia replied, "If anyone else is monitoring that channel it will just help them pinpoint our location." he then undid his harness before he got his feet and exited the exo-rover's cab, making his way into the rear passenger compartment where six of his men sat. Like Garcia and the driver these men were all wearing spacesuits and they were also armed with a mixture of human built weapons, "No-one's responding to our signals. We're going to check it out." Garcia told them.

To save time on cycling the exo-rover's compact air lock enough times for all of the Red Mars terrorists to disembark from the vehicle the entire passenger compartment was instead de-pressurised, allowing Garcia and all six of his troops to exit the vehicle one after another while only the driver remained inside. Then Garcia pointed towards the entrance to the airlock and they began to walk across the lunar surface towards it.

All of a sudden the man at the front of the group held up his hand for the others to stop.

"What's wrong?" Garcia asked.

"Tracks." the man answered, "Lots of them and all leading away from the air lock."

Garcia moved forwards to see for himself. Sure enough the lunar surface was covered with multiple sets of footprints in the grey dust, all of which were leading away from the air lock.

"Those aren't like any tracks I've seen before." Garcia said, noticing the strange patterns inside the footprints.

"No," the other man added in agreement, "I've seen every tread and boot style there is on the moon and that doesn't look like any of them."

"At least we know it's not GDF but we still need to find out what's going on around here. We better get inside." Garcia ordered and the group began to move again.

The air lock's outer door was closed when they reached it but it opened as soon as the panel was pressed. However, the moment that the doors slid open Garcia and his men saw what had happened to one of the previous Red Mars members sent to check on what was happening in the safe house. The man had been tied to one wall of the air lock with both the helmet and life support pack from his space suit removed, after which it appeared that the air lock had been cycled, evacuating all of the air from inside so that he suffocated. This was not the first time that Garcia had seen someone who had died like this, Red Mars itself had used this as a means of murder and intimidation in the past and his immediate thought was that perhaps some faction of the organisation on the moon intended to try and seize control away from him.

"Inside." he said, "Anything that doesn't identify itself gets shot."

The Red Mars team then entered the air lock, most of them doing their best to avoid looking at the suffocated man on the wall. The air lock also doubled as an elevator that descended to the lower level of the safe house, enabling the occupants to step right out of it into the hangar where they immediately found another badly damaged body. This time the body was of a woman whose spacesuit had been cut wide open from the neck to the groin. Then a similar injury had been inflicted on the woman wearing it. The expression frozen on her face at the moment of her death suggested that she had been aware when this injury had been inflicted. "Somebody took her weapons." another of the Red Mars terrorists noted and Garcia saw that he was right, the holster hooked to her belt was empty and there was no sign of the rifle or other primary weapon she would have been armed with either. The loss of the weapons also pointed towards the culprits being a faction from Red Mars since they would want to add them to their own armoury. However, Garcia had heard nothing recent about anyone else wanting to displace him. In fact morale among Red Mars members was currently high, their efforts to portray the GDF as being responsible for the moon being pulled into a wormhole were

paying dividends and the subsequent loss of regular supplies from Earth had created a black market that the terrorists were making moves to control. Added to this was the issue of the tracks leading away from the air lock outside. Apart from being of an unknown pattern there was no indication of how the people who had made the tracks had got into the safe house to begin with. The only tracks led away from it and the only other way in was through the main hangar doors in the ceiling.

It was then that Garcia realised where the only place the people who had made the tracks could have come from and why their tracks matched no human made spacesuits. He advanced cautiously towards the alien spacecraft that still dominated the hangar, his rifle held ready to fire. As he got closer he saw the two other bodies of the men sent to check on the status of the examination of the ship and this seemed to confirm his suspicions. Seeing that the hatch was now open he headed for that and climbed into the alien ship.

The interior of the alien ship was now a charnel house, with the mutilated bodies of the technicians scattered around. However, what concerned Garcia were the suspended animation capsules around the edge of the sole internal compartment, all of which now stood both open and empty.

"Everyone out." Garcia ordered as he rushed from the spacecraft and looked around, wondering whether all of the alien soldiers released from suspended animation had left the safe house or if any of them were still lurking somewhere among the gathered tools. Then when his men did not react he added, "What are you, deaf? I said everyone needs to get out of here, now."

"What's going on?" one of his men asked and Garcia looked back towards the alien spacecraft.

"Those idiots we left to examine this thing managed to wake up its passengers. Now they're all on the loose somewhere." he told them.

The four-strong survey team had disembarked from their moon buggy when they reached their destination, a crater located a short distance from Moonbase Beta that had been listed as a potential site for one of the new defensive batteries being installed to protect the moon's inhabitants now that it had been cast adrift in space. The job of the survey team was to assess the mineral content of the ground so that its suitability for mounting a heavy weapon could be determined.

"Move to the left." one of the surveyors told the individual laying out the reference markers on the ground inside the crater.

"Hey," another said from beside their moon buggy when he looked up from the portable computer terminal he was looking at to see the lights from a number of spacesuits as a large group of figures came walking towards them. "who the hell are they?"

The four members of the survey team all looked towards the figures advancing towards them apparently from out of the moon's empty wilderness.

"More to the point where the hell have they come from?" another of the surveyors asked, "We're five kilometres from Beta. No-one walks that far."

"Plus Beta is in the other direction." the team leader said. Then he checked that his suit radio was set for a wide band broadcast and called out, "This is Survey Team Leader Chen to the party approaching, identify yourselves."

"An Eagle must have come down out there somewhere. They're trying to make it back to a base." one of Chen's team suggested.

"This is Survey Team Leader Chen. Do you require assistance?" Chen broadcast. Then he looked at the surveyor stood by their moon buggy, "Let Beta know that we could have a medical situation out here. They better send some transport for these-" but before he finished the helmet belonging to the woman by the moon buggy suddenly burst open and there was a puff of dark red fluid as a high velocity projectile smashed right through her head.

It was then that the three other members of the survey team noticed the strange design of the spacesuits being worn by the approaching figures. Unlike the bulky suits worn by the survey team these were tight fitting, bright red in colour with undersized silver helmets and armour plates at key points on their bodies. More ominously though it was clear that several members of this group were armed.

"Let's get out of here!" one of the surveyors exclaimed and Chen nodded as he and the other two surviving team members hurried towards the moon buggy.

Unceremoniously dragging the headless body of his dead subordinate from the side of the buggy, Chen dropped it to the ground as he climbed in and started the lightweight vehicle's electric engine.

"I'm in!" the last of the three to get aboard the buggy called out and Chen put his foot down on the accelerator pedal. The buggy set off immediately and Chen steered it in an arc to take it back towards Moonbase Beta. However, the open topped moon buggy offered its occupants no protection from being shot and at the next shot from one of the alien controlled soldiers struck another member of the survey team. This time it was the life support pack on the man's back that was actually hit and this produced a sudden jet of gas from the punctured air tank.

"His O-two tank is hit!" the other team member exclaimed as the shot man began to panic, instinctively feeling for the hole to try and cover it with his hands.

"Plug him into the buggy's supply." Chen ordered. Despite being open topped most moon buggies carried a supply of oxygen that would extend the amount of time a team could spend outside in them and the other team member began hurrying to connect their shot comrade's spacesuit to this.

More shots then hit the buggy itself and the vehicle lurched suddenly, sending the two passenger flying into Chen and causing him to swerve sharply. This took the buggy up a steep slope and before Chen could brake the vehicle rolled over and ejected all three of its occupants. In the low gravity Chen bounced as he landed and flew even further from his team the moon buggy before he finally came to a halt. Disorientated it took him some time to recover and look around to try and locate the others. He saw one of them, who it was he could not tell from the angle he was looking from, pinned under the upturned moon buggy. Blood staining the crashed vehicle as well as the grey lunar dust told him that whoever this was they were already dead. A movement in his peripheral vision made Chen turn and he saw the final member of his team trying to flee on foot, bounding across the surface of the moon while the impacts from multiple projectiles produces tiny plumes of dust around him before several finally hit him and his body rolled forwards.

It was as Chen began to get back to his feet that he realised that there was someone else standing close by and he looked up at one of the mysterious figures in their red and silver space suits. Now that this figure was much closer he recognised the design from images he had seen in history books of the enemy soldiers during the alien war in the twenty-second century. The visor was a dark green colour owing to the colour of the fluid that filled the helmet and Chen could not make out any of the figure's facial features before he pointed an ordinary looking pistol at Chen and fired.

Alpha's main mission was a hive of activity when Koenig and Verdeschi returned. All of the senior command staff were present including Russell who was sat in Koenig's office with Maya while everyone else worked to collate reports coming in from all over the moon. Meanwhile Keynes still sat in Koenig's office as well, away from Russell and Maya and still under guard.

"Can someone tell me exactly what is going on?" Koenig asked, "Who's invading us?"

"The aliens colonel." Carter replied, "I'm trying to organise some airborne searches."

"Aliens? As in the aliens that made that missing ship?" Verdeschi added.

"I think Maya sensed them waking up. They must have been in suspended animation when the ship crashed." Morrow told him, looking up the steps into Koenig's office.

Koenig and Verdeschi then went up the steps to join Russell and Maya.

"Maya what happened?" Koenig said.

"It was like what happened when you woke the creature aboard the Outsiders' space station colonel." she replied, "Only worse. That was just one primitive mind and far away. I lost count of how many I sensed this time, all intelligent yet wanting nothing but to kill but without any idea of who."

"That ship must have been a troop transport intending to land a force either on Earth or here on the moon." Verdeschi said and Koenig nodded.

"And now we've got to deal with the contents." he said.

"John I've got a theory that the aliens may have intended Maya's people to act as controllers for their creations, with females like Maya controlling their biological creations while the males controlled the machines." Russell said.

"Does that mean that Maya can tell these mind controlled killers to just surrender?" Verdeschi asked.

"That would be a first." Koenig responded, "By all accounts they fought to the death during the war."

"Those few who were incapacitated had to be kept restrained to stop them attacking their guards. That was until the aliens' suspended animation technology was acquired. As far as I know they are still preserved back on Earth until someone can figure out a way of helping them." Russell added.

"Hang on, if Maya can control these alien soldiers then could that give us a way to deal with them?" Koenig asked, looking at Maya, "We've seen her compel a Dorcon guard to do what she wanted."

"That was difficult colonel," Maya pointed out, "and it was concentrated on just one individual."

"How many of these alien troops could we be facing?" Verdeschi asked.

"Carter?" Koenig added, looking back into main mission.

"Sorry colonel, I'm not that familiar with alien ships." Carter replied.

"Thirty." Keynes said suddenly and the other occupants of Koenig's office turned to look at her, "What? I studied alien technology, remember?"

"So why not speak up earlier?" Koenig said.

"Because everyone around here would rather ignore me anyway." Keynes replied.

"Damn it Keynes we don't have time for this now." Koenig exclaimed, "Not only do we have Red Mars running around with a weapon that could reduce this place to rubble, now I've also got up to thirty psychopaths-"

"Sociopaths." Russell commented, "They know the difference between right and wrong, their behaviour is calculated to instil fear in potential victims."

"Whatever." Koenig said, frowning and then he looked back at Keynes, "If you aren't going to help then there's no point in you being here because there is a lot of work to do."

"Doctor Russell's theory could explain something that was never figured out about the aliens colonel."

Keynes said, "Apart from a distress beacon their spacesuits don't contain any sort of wireless communication equipment so no-one ever figured out how they co-ordinated their actions. Of course having their lungs filled with fluid meant that they couldn't talk to one another but they didn't have anything technological to take the place of vocal communication either."

"Are you suggesting that they use some sort of extra-sensory perception?" Morrow asked.

"I don't know. But the only other theory that was put forwards was that they were so totally brainwashed that they had no higher level reasoning left in them and that everything they did was pre-programmed." Keynes answered.

"Colonel! I think we've found them." Benes suddenly called out.

"What is it captain?" Koenig responded.

"Beta reports that they received part of a request for emergency aid from one of the survey teams checking out sites for the new weapons." Benes told him, "The signal was cut off so they sent out an Eagle to see what was happening. They found the survey team dead and their vehicle wrecked."

"Alexander get me Captain Hai." Koenig said and Alexander nodded.

"Already working on it colonel." she replied and as Koenig sat down at his desk the face of the GDF officer who commanded the small garrison present at Beta.

"Yes colonel?" he asked.

"Captain have you heard about the missing survey team?" Koenig asked.

"Only just colonel. We heard from the rescue team that went out to investigate. I'm getting my men ready to deploy now. The survey team was several kilometres away though, hopefully the enemy troops won't have enough capacity in their life support to reach us here." Hai answered.

"They can last for weeks." Keynes said when she heard this and when the other present looked at her she continued, "The alien liquid life support system contains a massive amount of oxygen. Plus it provides fluids and nutrients to sustain them without needing to remove their suits. Important since clearing their lungs of the stuff can be quite time consuming."

"Did you get that captain?" Koenig said and Hai nodded.

"Yes colonel. What are your orders?" he said.

"Your priority is to protect Beta. Work with the sheriff's office to secure as many of the access points as you can. We don't have an exact number for how many you're facing but there could be as many as thirty." Koenig told him.

"Thirty? That's more men than I have colonel. I hope this is serious enough to get the sheriff to co-operate."

"Remind him that his skin is on the line as well. Quite literally if these aliens act the same way as their raiding parties did during the war. I'll organise a force to hunt them down outside from here." Koenig ordered.

"Yes colonel. I'll get right on it." Hai said and the screen went blank.

"Major Carter we're going to need those armed Eagles again. Are they ready to launch?" Koenig called out as he got to his feet and walked to the top of the steps leading down to main mission.

"I've got the second flight on the pads now colonel. They can dust off as soon as you give them a target."

"Just have them head for Beta and circle for now. Maybe they'll get lucky and spot the enemy from the air." Koenig said.

"And if they do?" Verdeschi asked.

"Then attack. No warnings, just take them out." Koenig replied, "Baker I've got another job for you." he added and Baker looked up from her console, "Get the time of that emergency call from Beta and compare it to the time Maya sensed the alien troops waking up. We know how fast a person can move across the surface on foot so that should tell us roughly how far they could have come in that time."

"A search area?" Verdeschi said and Koenig nodded.

"Keynes give Baker what you know about the alien suits. We'll need to factor in them getting into them." he continued and he saw Baker frown at the suggestion of having to work with Keynes, "Just write everything on a tablet for her. Kano I want you to pull up details of every shelter and outpost in the target area Baker gives you. Red Mars won't have been working on that ship out in the open. They'll have had a dry dock where they can work without suits and not have to worry about being seen." he added before looking at Verdeschi again, "With any luck they'll have slaughtered the Red Mars people who took their ship and saved us the need to deal with them, but we still need to secure that cannon."

9.

"Garcia the GDF are moving." one of the Red Mars operatives at the workshop the alien beam cannon had been relocated to said, walking up to Garcia while he was drinking a mug of coffee.

"Here?" Garcia replied. This safe house was located within Moonbase Beta itself and evacuating the equipment it now held, especially the alien spacecraft weapon would be difficult at short notice.

"I don't think so. We've got word that one of the survey teams the Earthers have been sending out to pick places for their new weapon batteries was killed. The GDF suspects the aliens we woke up." the man told him.

"Hold on, how do they know about that already?" Garcia said, looking around at the other Red Mars members in the workshop and wondering whether any of them were informants for the GDF.

"I don't know but I've had reports from all over the moon about GDF troops kitting up and sheriffs calling in all their men suddenly. Beta is the only place that they're making a move though."

"If they know about the aliens then they must suspect that they're coming here. That means they'll want to secure all the entry points." Garcia said and he looked at the workshop's three private air locks. Each of these was large enough to hold an exo-rover and they would provide a tempting entry point to anyone wanting to invade Beta. Garcia knew that although there were around thirty alien troops only a handful of them would be armed since he had ordered all of the alien weapons removed from their ship. However, the GDF would be working under the assumption that all of the aliens were armed and want to do everything they could to ensure the security of the base, which meant securing all the obvious ways in and out.

"Get everything covered up now." Garcia yelled, "We could have Earthers on their way. They aren't looking for us though so let's see if we can fool them."

"You should get out of sight as well." the other Red Mars operative told him, "You're on their most wanted list."

"Right at the top." Garcia added with a smile before he added, "I want a dozen men with me. We'll arm ourselves with the alien weapons. If the Earthers do figure out that something's wrong then we'll have a little surprise for them. I doubt that there'll be that many of them."

"Mister Garcia." another Red Mars member called out as he rushed up to him.

"What now?" Garcia replied, expecting further bad news.

"There's a call for you. She says it's urgent." the man told him and Garcia nodded.

"I'm on my way." he said and the other man then led him into a back room that had an entrance that was designed to be invisible from the outside when closed. Meanwhile inside the room was filled with the supplies such as weapons and explosives as well as one of Red Mars' secure communication devices.

"It's me." Garcia said into the device, deliberately not mentioning his name.

"I have what you wanted." a distorted woman's voice told him, "It turned out to be easier than I thought."

"How so?" Garcia asked.

"Because someone went to all the trouble of uncovering a working Swift that they then just left behind. If you ask me we're not the only ones trying to get ships that Koenig doesn't know about. The difference is that we aren't as sloppy as them. Shall I have it brought to you?"

"No. There's been a problem and the Earthers are on alert." Garcia told her.

"Do they know what's happening?" the woman on the other end of the link asked.

"Not about you but they know we have the alien ship. There were aliens in suspended animation and they got out. We lost everyone in the safe house at the time and now the aliens are loose somewhere." Garcia explained.

"So what do you want me to do with this Swift?"

"Just be ready to bring it here as soon as the Earthers have dealt with the aliens. It shouldn't take us too long." Garcia ordered before someone in the workshop outside the private room gave a shout.

"Sheriffs heading this way!"

"I've got to go." Garcia told the woman, "I'll let you know when the coast is clear." and he shut off the communicator.

More men came rushing into the room with Garcia, all of them armed with some of the best weapons available in the workshop. This included a number of the alien made rifles and Garcia accepted when one of these was handed to him. The door to the room was pulled shut, concealing it from the outside and Garcia now turned to a monitor that connected to a hidden camera in the workshop that showed everyone inside the room what was happening in the workshop.

There was no sound on the feed but Garcia watched as one of the Red Mars members in the workshop went over to the entrance and opened it to reveal a pair of men in sheriff's uniforms, both armed with rifles and wearing heavier body armour than was normal. These two men stepped into the workshop, apparently

invited by the man who had opened the door to them and although they turned their heads to look around they did not move far from the entrance.

"This is good." one of the other men in the hidden room with Garcia said softly, "I know those two deputies. Both are on our payroll."

"How trustworthy are they?" Garcia whispered back.

"Not very I'd say. They think they're being paid off to look the other way about safety regulations. If they knew that you were here they'd turn you in in a heartbeat." the other man told him.

"They can be counted on not to want to see what's under any of those covers though?" Garcia asked, looking at where the parts of the alien beam cannon and reactor were covered in large plastic sheets.

"I think so." the other man answered and then as Garcia watched the man who had opened the door to the two sheriff's deputies took a bundle of bank notes from his pocket and handed it to one of them. The deputy took the money and gave it a quick check before passing half to his partner. Then after they had concealed the money the pair turned around and exited the workshop.

"So what did they have to say?" Garcia asked when he emerged from the hidden room, his rifle still in his hands.

"They warned us about the aliens and advised us to keep the outer doors locked. They're going to report back that we're welding them shut until the all clear is given." the man who had spoken with the deputies told him and Garcia nodded.

"Good. Now what state is that cannon in?" he said.

"Everything looks intact. Although this is my first time near one of these things. We really need to test fire it to be sure." the other man replied.

"Then get it ready to be mounted on a ship. With the distraction that these aliens are causing for the GDF we may have an opportunity to do just that." Garcia told him.

All of the major bases on the moon were connected by a network of subsurface tunnels along which magnetically propelled travel cars could travel at high speeds. The interior of these travel tubes were normally kept in a vacuum to eliminate air resistance to the cars and this permitted access points to be placed on the surface above the route of the tunnels without the need for complicated air locks.

The formerly human soldiers now operating under the influence of the alien implants in their heads gathered around one such access point as soon as they discovered it. Without a specific target in mind they defaulted to causing as much death and destruction as they could and that meant investigating even the smallest indication of human settlement. The hatch lifted up easily to expose a ladder shaft that ran down into the darkness below, unable to see as far as the bottom, one of the armed aliens instead tucked his pistol into a pocket on his spacesuit and began to climb down.

Upon reaching the bottom of the ladder the alien soldier found himself standing in the travel tube itself. This had a roughly circular cross section but with a level metal walkway running along the bottom. Spaced equally around the circumference of the tunnel were the rails used to generate the magnetic fields that propelled the travel tube cars. Each rail consisted of a series of electromagnets that combined to maintain the propelling field. The size and spacing of the magnets was designed so that several of them on each rail would be acting on a tube car at once. This meant that a failure in one of the units would not stop a car from moving, however the destruction of several in a row, especially along the lower rails could and as more of the alien soldiers climbed down into the tunnel their attention was drawn to these.

"Eagles in the air now colonel." Carter reported as he watched the feed from the launch pads showing the three armed spacecraft taking off, each one carrying a unit of soldiers that could be deployed if they encountered targets that could not easily be taken out from above.

"I've checked with Epsilon," Verdeschi added, "There's a squadron of Hawks on stand by if they're needed and I've ordered them to prepare transport for armoured ground units. Even once we've dealt with the aliens we still need to find that ship and its cannon."

"Don't remind me." Koenig commented, wincing and he looked towards Baker's console where Kano was standing beside her, "Any joy on finding where that ship is yet captain?" he asked.

"We may have a lead colonel." Kano answered, "There are few old underground shelters close to Beta that the Chinese abandoned once they'd constructed the base itself. Some of them might be big enough to hold that alien ship."

"At least one of them is still drawing power. I should have it isolated soon." Baker added.

"Very good. Let me know as soon-" Koenig began before Alexander interrupted him.

"Colonel I've got a red light in a travel tube between here and Moonbase Beta. A number of the accelerator elements have failed."

"Okay Kano get a maintenance team out there. Alexander make sure that there's a security team available to escort them." Koenig replied.

"Colonel the elements have failed in all six of the tracks." Alexander added and Kano looked towards her.

"At the same time?" he asked.

"Within a few seconds of one another. All along the same section of track." she answered. Then as her console updated she added, "In fact we just lost another. Colonel, something's in that tunnel taking out the rails. If a car hits the gap then it probably won't have enough energy to make it across."

Kano rushed over to Alexander's console and looked at the display for himself.

"Colonel this shouldn't be happening. There has to be someone in there attacking the rails." he said.

"And I'm sure we can all guess who it is." Koenig replied.

"Colonel it gets worse." Alexander added, "There's a passenger car heading right for that section now."

Although the security alert in force all across the moon had resulted in travel between bases being severely limited the travel tube cars already under way had to be allowed to reach the next base before they could be stopped. Operating on automatic, the travel tube car speeding along the tunnel the alien troops had entered continued on its way. It continued in that state until it encountered the section of tracking where the magnetic propulsion units had been disabled. No longer being carried along by the magnetic fields of the tracks the car initially continued merely under its own momentum. However, the magnetic fields also held the car off the lower tracks and without them the car dropped and began to drag along them, producing a shower of sparks in the process. The effect of this on the tube car itself was felt instantly by its passengers as they were flung forwards while a loud screeching filled the inside of the car.

This continued long enough for the car to come to a halt by which time the severely disorientated passengers were all crowded at the very front of the interior compartment. One of them managed to drag himself back to his feet, bleeding from a deep cut to his arm and clutching his other hand over this he staggered towards the emergency panel and opened the cover to expose the communicator and medical and fire fighting supplies behind it.

"Hello?" he said into the communicator, breathing heavily, "Can you hear me?"

"This is main mission Alpha." Alexander responded, "What is your status?"

"There are people hurt in here. The car crashed, it must have come off the rails somehow." the man said.

"Understood. Can you secure the hatches?" Alexander asked and the man frowned.

"What?" he said before there was a sound from the other side of the hatch midway along the left side of the car. This was an internal door, there being a small air lock on the other side that would allow rescuers to enter the car without exposing the interior to the vacuum outside, "Wait, someone's already here." the man added.

"Jam the door! Now!" Alexander yelled but even as the man was turning around the hatch slid open to reveal two figures in red and silver spacesuits, one armed with a carbine and the other with a simple metal bar.

Stepping into the main compartment the pistol armed figure immediately began shooting into the mass of people towards the front of the tube car. Looking on in horror as his fellow passengers were being murdered the man by the emergency panel grabbed hold of the fire axe included as part of the equipment. The axe still left him at a disadvantage against the alien armed with a gun but it was better than nothing and he charged towards the two space suited figures with his weapon held high.

Before he could get to them though the figure armed with a pistol turned and shot him. The bullet struck him in the stomach, causing a non-lethal wound as many of the other shots fired by the alien seemed to have done and the man collapsed. As he lay on the floor screaming in pain the second alien stepped forwards and bent down to pick up the axe. This was then passed to the pistol armed alien before the other began to swing the metal bar, beating the helpless man repeatedly while the alien now armed with an axe as well tucked their pistol in a pocket and then advanced on the other passengers before hacking at them with the axe.

"Turn it off!" Koenig snapped as the bloody scene played out on main mission's primary big screen. Then he turned to Carter, "How soon major?" he asked.

"Eagles will be at the access point in five minutes." Carter responded.

"Not fast enough." Morrow commented.

"Just tell them to get there as fast as they can." Koenig said.

10.

The troops carried inside the Eagles were ready to deploy as soon as the craft set down. To speed the process up the entire passenger modules had been decompressed so that all that was needed to be done was to open the outer airlock doors and the occupants could rush out onto the surface. The Eagles landed one at a time, deploying their passengers while the other two circled overhead to provide cover.

Master Sergeant Washington was in the first platoon of troops to be deployed on the surface and he bounded towards the inspection hatch as soon as he exited the Eagle.

"Captain Fraser, I can see the hatch from here." he said as soon as it came into view, "It's open and there are tracks all around it. Lots of them."

"Understood sergeant." Fraser responded from the Eagle that was now providing air cover while the second craft deployed its troops, "There's no sign of activity on the surface so they must have all gone down there."

"Somehow I just knew you were going to say that." Washington muttered.

"What was that sergeant?" Fraser asked.

"Nothing captain. I'm at the hatch now." Washington said and he looked down into the ladder shaft, "Climbing will take too long. Get the line feeder set up." he ordered and a pair of troops rushed forwards carrying a folded metal frame that had a drum of cable and a motor attached to it. This was set up over the open hatchway, supporting the cable drum directly above it while Washington climbed into the shaft and stopped at the top of the ladder, shutting off the lights mounted on his spacesuit and waiting while a length of cable was un-reeled. Taking this in one hand and holding his rifle in the other he then stepped off the ladder. At the same time the motor was turned on and this began to rapidly deploy more cable from the drum, lowering Washington down the shaft as quickly as could be done without injuring him when he reached the bottom. As he descended another soldier climbed into the shaft before he took hold of the cable and also stepped off the ladder. This was repeatedly several times before Washington reached the tunnel at the bottom of the shaft and he quickly let go of the cable and moved out of the way for the next soldier.

With the tunnel naturally unlit it was easy to pick out the lights mounted on space suits and this was why he had turned off the ones mounted on his own suit. On the other hand the alien troops had no greater ability to see in the dark than an ordinary human and they had had to keep their suit lights switched on, providing Washington with an easy target to aim for.

"Contact in the tunnel." he said, his words being transmitted up the shaft to the Eagle circling overhead and then relayed to Moonbase Alpha.

"Master Sergeant Washington this is Colonel Koenig you have permission to engage. There are no friendlies present." Koenig responded.

"Copy that Alpha." Washington said and just as the soldier to have followed him down landed behind him he raised his rifle and fired a burst of magnetically accelerated projectiles down the tunnel towards the lights. Caught entirely by surprise the alien troops in the tunnel were easy targets and Washington saw a number of them fall even before the soldier behind him joined in the firing. However, the aliens were intelligent enough to realise that it was the lights on their spacesuits that were making them targets and they swiftly extinguished these, plunging the entire tunnel into pitch darkness. There was some sporadic return fire but this was random and the only shot that hit any of the GDF troops was a low velocity round that was deflected by the man's body armour. Most of this fire came from magnetic accelerator weapons so there was no flash to give away the firers' positions and even this soon halted as each side waited for the other to do something that would give away their position.

"Should I chuck a chem light down there?" the soldier crouching beside Washington asked.

"No. Light one up and they'll see it before it leaves your hand. Has anyone down here got a launcher?" Washington said.

"Right here sergeant." another soldier said from somewhere in the darkness.

"Good. Then send an illumination shell down that tunnel. I want to see what those aliens are up to." Washington ordered.

The soldier proceeded to load a chemical light round into the grenade launcher mounted under his rifle barrel and then fired it blindly along the tunnel towards the travel tube car. This activated a short distance after leaving the barrel of the weapon and lit up the tunnel around it as it flew. In the low gravity of the tunnel the round easily made it all the way to the car itself before dropping to the floor and lighting up the area around it, including the aliens now pressed against the walls while others were obviously in the process of moving through the narrow gap either side of the car between it and the tunnel wall to get to the other end of it.

"Open fire!" Washington ordered and his men fired their rifles in unison.

The aliens still in front of the travel tube car could do nothing but throw themselves to the floor, hoping to avoid the hail of bullets. Washington noticed that there was no return fire from the aliens this time, not even any random suppressing fire to try and cover the retreat of those making their way around the travel tube car. "Something isn't right here." Washington said as he reloaded his rifle, "They ought to be shooting back." "Isn't it good that they aren't?" one of his troops asked.

"No. It's strange and I don't like strange. All troops advance but keep laying down fire. If they are up to something I don't want to make whatever it is easy for them."

The GDF troops then began to advance along the tunnel towards the car, still firing whenever they saw movement. However, the aliens still did not return fire and whenever one moved it was in an attempt to reach the gaps beside the car.

As they got closer to the car Washington and his men saw the mutilated bodies of some of the passengers lying in front of it along with a number of the aliens. There was also damage to the front of the travel tube car it looked as if the aliens had ripped open coverings to access some of the car's electronics. Parts from these then appeared to have been used in the mutilation of the civilian corpses, with circuit boards snapped and the sharp edges used as improvised blades for cutting flesh.

"Did we hit them?" one of his men asked, obviously worried about shooting civilians.

"Look at them, they don't have suits on." another pointed out, "They'd have suffocated long before they hit by anything we fired."

"These aliens aren't armed." Washington commented as he noticed the lack of guns among the alien bodies.

"Someone was shooting at us." one of his men commented.

"See if you can see them on the other side of the car." Washington ordered, "I'm going to check out the inside."

The aliens had forced open both of the air lock doors at the same time, giving them easy access to the travel tube car but exposing the interior to vacuum. Apart from a handful of bullet holes in the walls this was the extent of the damage inflicted to the car. On the other hand the bodies of the passengers had fared much worse. Again it appeared that the passengers had already been dead when the air lock was forced although that appeared to be a small mercy. There was blood smeared all around the inside of the car while a number of the bodies had been totally dismembered, their parts jumbled together so that it was impossible to get an accurate count.

Washington stepped over the pieces of several bodies to get to the emergency panel. The communicator's screen was splattered with blood but it still appeared functional and it offered Washington a way to contact Moonbase Alpha directly instead of relying on relaying signals back along the tunnel, up to the surface and then via the Eagle. Connecting to the communicator with a short data cable, Washington activated the device.

"Alpha this is Washington." he said.

"Go ahead Washington." Alexander responded.

"Lieutenant, the travel tube car is secure but we were too late to save any of the passengers." Washington reported.

"What about your own losses sergeant?" Alexander asked.

"None. The aliens fell back rather than fight. That's what I wanted to warn you about, they're heading back down the tunnel towards Alpha. Unless they get out at another access point they could try and break into the station. I recommend you deploy a machine gun team to cover it. They don't appear to have many weapons so they shouldn't be too much of a threat." Washington told her.

"Washington could you say that again?" Koenig said as he stepped into view behind Alexander on the monitor.

"The alien bodies we found were all unarmed colonel and the fire we took from them was minimal. They were wearing the regular armoured suits I've seen in the history books but I've not seen any weapons. They do have some but they took them all with them." Washington explained.

"This doesn't sound right." Koenig said when he heard this.

"Could the aliens have retrieved the weapons from their fallen comrades?" Morrow suggested, using his console to join the .

"I don't think so major." Washington answered.

"Keynes what do you know about the personal small arms carried aboard an alien attack ship?" Verdeschi said, looking at where Keynes still sat.

"Every ship taken complete had enough weapons for the regular crew plus a full load of troops. Pistols, rifles and grenades." she replied, "They were kept in unsecured racks that any of the occupants would have access to."

"So if Red Mars got inside then they could just have looted the thing before they woke up the passengers." Verdeschi said.

"Okay so we're facing a group of aliens that are armed only with whatever they've been able to scavenge from Red Mars. Which by the sounds of it isn't a lot." Koenig said.

"John I can take care of this." Verdeschi said, "Just give me an exo-rover and crew. The travel tube tunnels are big enough to take a rover. We can just drive down it until we find them. A few small arms won't be any match for an exo-rover's cannon."

"Okay do it." Koenig said, nodding.

"Colonel I would like to go as well." Maya said, suddenly getting to her feet.

"Maya this is a combat operation. I know you've been learning to shoot but-" Koenig began.

"Please colonel." Maya interrupted, "If I was made to control the Outsiders' creatures then maybe I can control these soldiers. You said that the Outsiders made slave soldiers of your own people. Maybe I can save them."

"If she goes then I better go as well to make sure she's okay. Plus if there's the possibility that we can take those people alive and also recover the suspended animation capsules from their ship then we can end this without any more bloodshed." Russell added and Koenig sighed.

"All of a sudden I'm putting more than just the crew of an exo-rover in harm's way." he said, "Okay then, off you all go. Lieutenant Alexander let the security section know that Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi and his team are on their way. They'll need an armoured exo-rover and a fire team of troops." then as Verdeschi, Russell and Maya were leaving he turned to Kano and added, "Kano can I rely on you to make the arrangements to get that rover into the tunnel?"

"Yes colonel. I'll get right on it." Kano responded and he headed back to his own duty station.

"Then hopefully that just leaves us with the question of where Red Mars is hiding that UFO." Koenig said.

"I think I've got a lead on that colonel." Baker announced, "I've been checking the structural drawings that Captain Kano provided me with for the work shelters used when Moonbase Beta was being constructed and it looks like only one of them could be used to store that ship and it's close enough to the site of the attack on the survey team for the aliens to have walked from in the available time scale."

"Let me see." Koenig replied, moving to look at Baker's console. This now showed the design file for one of the sub surface structures used during the construction of Moonbase Beta with the original Mandarin text notes now translated into English.

"It even had its own power source, a small scale fusion plant that was left in place so that it could be used as an emergency shelter even when Beta was first brought on line as the official Chinese presence on the moon." Baker told him.

"So no need to draw from the main grid." Koenig said, nodding.

"Do you want me to send Bill Fraser in to take a look colonel?" Carter asked but Koenig shook his head.

"No." he replied, "Fraser and Washington need to be available if those aliens head back to the surface before Verdeschi can deal with them. You and I will take an armed Eagle out there ourselves with a unit of troops. Keynes you're with us."

Keynes sat up straight and frowned.

"Me?" she said, confused.

"Yes you Miss Keynes. We're hunting for a sizeable piece of alien technology and as you like to remind us you are one of the few people around who has studied it. I would take Professor Bergman but he's still in the medical section."

"Thanks to her cutting him off from his medication." Baker muttered.

"Spacewoman Baker one more comment like that and I'll assume you're volunteering to come along and act as Miss Keynes' assistant." Koenig said, glaring at Baker and she averted her gaze, "Good. Now come on, we've got a spaceship to find."

It did not take long for word of the alien attack on the travel tube car to reach the press and Garcia found out about it by watching the news reports. Unable to get reporters to the scene of the attack yet, computer graphic diagrams were being used by studio based reporters to explain to viewers what was believed to have happened. However, this was adequate to tell Garcia what he needed to know.

"This is it." he said to the other Red Mars terrorists present in the workshop, "The Earthers will be hunting for those aliens before they can hit another civilian target and make them look weak. Is the cannon ready to be installed on a ship yet?"

"Just finishing up now Mister Garcia." one of the technicians replied.

"Good. In that case I'm going to make the call and have our Swift brought in while the Earthers are distracted by the aliens. Load the cannon on a rover and get it out there, it needs to have been installed by the time the aliens have all been killed."

II.

The armoured exo-rover was lifted between the lower pair of a set of travel tube tracks using a crane meant for lifting the cars themselves at a servicing point. Normally the vehicle was intended to carry a full squad of soldiers in addition to its crew but on this occasion only a single fire team was being carried, much of the rest of the room being taken up by Verdeschi, Russell and Maya. Despite the interior being fully pressurised the occupants still wore space suits, just in case the aliens turned out to be better armed than was now thought and also so that they could exit the vehicle in a hurry if they needed to.

"The plan is simple." Verdeschi said to the assembled troops while the exo-rover was being lifted into position, "The rover will be driven along the tunnel with its viewports blanked out and using its thermal imaging sensors to see by so the headlights won't give us away. We expect the enemy to be coming straight at us from the other direction and when we see them we'll engage them directly."

"After giving Maya a chance to make them surrender." Russell commented and Verdeschi smiled.

"Of course doctor." he replied before looking at the armoured soldiers again and adding, "There is a chance that Maya may be able to exert some control over the enemy troops so we're going to let her try and get them to stand down. If they do then they'll be restrained and treated as prisoners of war, otherwise we'll engage them with the exo-rover's weapons. We don't expect much resistance but I'm not taking any chances. One thing to be aware of though is that Master Sergeant Washington and a platoon are also coming down the tunnel so we need to be careful what we're shooting at. The aliens may try and leave the tunnel at an access point but if they do then there's a flight of Eagles with more men aboard waiting for them up there. Any questions?"

Embarked in the exo-rover, Verdeschi sat in the two man turret with the gunner and watched through the viewing optics as the air lock that gave access to the travel tube network opened. Electrically operated, the exo-rover then moved quietly into the air lock and Verdeschi checked that the thermal imaging equipment was working.

"In position now colonel. Air lock cycling." the driver said from below him.

"Proceed." Verdeschi ordered and as the second air lock door slid open the exo-rover drove into the tunnel. Without headlights the interior of the tunnel was pitch black but the resolution of the exo-rover's thermal imaging sensors was good enough to detect the differences in heat radiation from the walls and tracks in the tunnel. Using this the driver kept the armoured vehicle between the lower rails as he continued to drive along the tunnel towards the approaching alien troops.

"Okay we're on our way. I'll call out when we have contact." Verdeschi announced over the internal intercom.

"So what do you need to do to get control of the alien troops Maya?" Russell asked, looking across the interior of the exo-rover's passenger compartment.

"I'm not sure doctor. Normally if I am going to try and influence someone's behaviour I need to be standing with them and speaking to them. From what I have been told about these people though that will not be an option. I am hoping that by getting close enough I will be able to make contact with whatever part of them it was that I sensed when they woke up." Maya answered.

"So the plan to end this without a shot fired relies on her doing something she doesn't know is possible because she's never done it before?" one of the soldiers in the exo-rover commented and then all four members of the fire team started to recheck their rifles.

"This is Eagle four lifting off." Carter said as he pulled back on the Eagle's controls and the craft rose off the launch pad. Then after checking his instruments he glanced at Koenig in the co-pilot's seat and added, "ETA is about fifteen minutes." he said.

"Thanks." Koenig replied, "According to the design schematics Kano provided this place has two main ways in. There's a personnel air lock that doubles as an elevator going down to the main level and also the large roof doors. That will be how Red Mars got the ship in there to begin with."

"What about the ship they must have used to hoist it out of its crater to begin with?" Carter asked.

"No, there's enough room for one or the other, not both. I expect that they hired an Eagle to do the lifting instead of having one to hand." Koenig said.

"At least that means we don't need to worry about them having fixed that cannon to it." Carter commented. The door to the cockpit then slid open to reveal Keynes standing on the other side. Although she wore a standard issue GDF spacesuit just like the ones Koenig and Carter wore, all of the places where unit and rank insignia would be attached were blank.

"Something wrong?" Koenig asked.

"Well since no-one wants to sit near me I thought I'd come up here and find out exactly what my role in this is supposed to be." she replied, "I doubt you're planning on giving me a weapon and having me join in the raid."

"You got that right." Carter said.

"I'll be leading the assault personally." Koenig told her, "Your role will technical support if we come across anything made by the aliens. We'll send images back to you so that you can tell us whether or not it's dangerous."

"Okay, I won't let you down colonel. Thank you for-" Keynes began.

"No need to thank me Keynes. Like I said at Alpha you're the only person qualified for this job." Koenig interrupted, "Now sit down here. I need to go and get ready."

"Get ready?" Keynes commented, frowning.

"He's leading the raid." Carter reminded her, "Do you think he's going in without armour?"

The Swift flew low over the moon's surface to avoid being picked up on radar, hiding among the surface clutter. The Swift resembled an Eagle in its general configuration but there were numerous differences that related to its role as a long range reconnaissance craft. Most obvious of these were the massive fuel tanks and solid spine in place of the open framework of an Eagle, while its fusion plant powered only a single large engine at the rear instead four smaller ones. In addition to this there were several large directional thrusters that were much larger than those found on Eagles located at key points all over the craft, including two mounted at the rear of its angular cockpit module that also doubled as an emergency drive system if the crew had to abandon ship in it.

Garcia and the Red Mars technicians from the workshop watched the approaching vessel from their convoy of moon buggies along with a single exo-tractor that pulled a large trailer behind it on which the alien laser cannon and fusion reactor had been strapped.

"She's coming in to land. Head straight for her." Garcia told the driver of his moon buggy and the man steered towards where the Swift appeared to be landing.

The Swift landed in a shallow valley where it was hidden from the view of Moonbase Beta and by the time that the convoy arrived its crew had already shut down its engines.

"Get to work." Garcia ordered told the technicians while he climbed out of the moon buggy and began to head for the ship, "I want that cannon mounted on the Swift as soon as possible."

As Garcia neared the Swift the air lock door midway along its hull unfolded to form a set of steps leading up to it and standing just inside he saw one of its crew.

"Mister Garcia, I don't think we were spotted but I'd rather not stay here too long. We spotted GDF Eagles prowling about." the crewman told him as he entered the airlock.

"I know. They're hunting for aliens though, not us. But I still want to get this done as quickly as possible so we can move the ship somewhere safer. One of the safe houses near Gamma I think. The Earthers must know that the alien ship is somewhere near Beta by now so this place isn't safe for us any more. What's the condition of this vessel?" Garcia replied while atmosphere was being pumped back into the air lock and he and the crewman removed their helmets before the man responded.

"Fully operational. We found signs of recent repair so it must have been damaged when that frigate smashed into Eta but whoever did the work didn't send it on to one of the other bases. My cell leader thinks that there's someone trying to get control of ships that the GDF don't know about." he said and Garcia nodded.

"Yes, she said as much to me." Garcia told him, "We're going to have to find out who that is eventually but for now I just want this cannon mounting."

"We've got heat signatures ahead of us colonel." the exo-rover's gunner said when the first heat source that was obviously not part of the tunnel structure appeared on his targeting display.

"I see them." Verdeschi replied, "Driver halt here." he added and as the driver was bringing the exo-rover to a halt Verdeschi reached for the radio, "Verdeschi to Washington do you read me?"

"Loud and clear colonel. Go ahead." Washington responded.

"Sergeant we're in section six of the tunnel. What is your location?" Verdeschi asked.

"Still some way from you sir. We're in section fourteen." Washington answered.

"Okay thanks. In that case I think we just found what we're looking for. Verdeschi out." Verdeschi said and then he switched over to the exo-rover's internal intercom, "Okay Maya, we've got alien troops less than a hundred metres in front of us now. If you're going to use that voodoo of yours on them then now is the time." he said.

In the passenger compartment Maya looked at Russell and frowned.

"Doctor Russell, what is voodoo?" she asked.

"Just try and get the aliens to stop, okay?" Russell told her.

Maya nodded, took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment as she concentrated. However, then she opened her eyes again and shook her head.

"I can't do it." she said.

"Maya I've seen you force a Dorcon guard to open a door." Russell reminded her.

"Yes, but the guard was right in front of me and I was able to speak to him directly. I can't even see these men. When I sensed the things that the Outsiders put in their bodies it was them calling out to me in the same way as the creature aboard the space station." Maya said and Russell took out her comlock, using it to connect to the turret.

"Tony we need to get Maya outside." Russell said.

"Outside?" Verdeschi replied.

"Maya says that she needs to be able to at least see whoever it is that she's controlling." Russell told him.

"Okay, have the troops use shields and deploy beside the rover. When the aliens get closer we'll turn on the headlights and give you a nice clear view of them will that be enough?" Verdeschi said and Russell looked at Maya.

"I don't know." Maya said.

"We'll give it a go Tony." Russell told Verdeschi.

The occupants of the exo-rover's passenger compartment put on their space helmets and while Russell was double checking that Maya's was correctly fitted the four soldiers took a pair of large rectangular shields from a storage rack and fixed them to the arms of two of their number. These men then drew their sidearms while the other two unslung their rifles.

"Ready when you are doctor." the leader of the fire team said and Russell nodded.

"Very good corporal." she said, "We won't all fit in the air lock so we'll decompress this compartment instead."

Exiting the exo-rover from the rear the two shield equipped soldiers felt their way around the side and moved towards the front of the vehicle, stopping beside the cab while the two soldiers armed with rifles followed them and in turn Russell and Maya brought up the rear.

"We're in position now." Russell signalled.

"Stand by doctor. Enemy troops now sixty metres away. Fifty-five. Fifty. Lights on!" Verdeschi said and all of a sudden the exo-rover's headlights were turned on, filling the tunnel with light.

The combination of their helmet visors and the coloured fluid that filled them protected their wearers from the sudden glare but the alien troops instantly opened fire at the exo-rover with the few weapons that they had before they saw that their shots were ineffectively bouncing off its armoured hull.

"GDF! Drop your weapons!" the fire team corporal yelled.

"They don't have radios corporal. They can't hear you." Russell reminded him but the aliens still noticed the presence of the soldiers beside the exo-rover and they turned their fire on them instead.

"Down!" the corporal yelled and Russell pulled Maya down as the group behind the shields all ducked while projectiles either flew over them or hit the shields.

"So tell me doctor, if those aliens can't hear us then how exactly is she supposed to get them to stand down?" the corporal asked and Russell looked at Maya.

"Well Maya, what's your plan?" she asked and all of a sudden Maya leapt back to her feet.

"Stop!" she yelled, staring at the alien troops.

Without radios to receive a transmission and with no air in the tunnel to carry the sound of her words the alien troops could not hear Maya's shout but nevertheless they all abruptly froze, keeping their weapons held level.

"Maya what just happened?" Russell asked as she slowly rose up beside Maya.

"I don't know doctor. I just focused on having them stop just as I would when trying to influence someone else's actions." Maya replied, "It is not normally that easy."

"Nice work Maya." Verdeschi said from inside the exo-rover, looking at the frozen aliens in disbelief through one of the vehicle's viewing optics, "But now what do we do with them exactly?"

"I suppose we get them back to Alpha." Russell said, "No-one ever found a way of removing the implants in them but if the suspended animation capsules in their ship can be recovered then we can put them back into hibernation until we can figure something out."

"We'll need to disarm them first doctor." the corporal pointed out and Russell nodded, "Okay Dethan, you're with me." he added and then he and the other rifle armed soldier moved out from behind the two shields and headed for the aliens.

One by one the soldiers began to take the weapons from the hands of the armed alien troops, ejecting the magazines before tossing them aside to be recovered later. However, while they were doing this the corporal suddenly noticed that the pistol held by one of the aliens was quivering.

"Err, this guy isn't quite frozen." he said and he looked around at the other aliens, hunting for more signs of movement.

"Maya?" Russell said.

"I don't know." Maya said as she looked at the aliens, "They don't-" but then before she could finish the alien that the corporal had noticed moving suddenly pushed the soldier back before he could take the weapon and shot him from point blank range. The shot hit the corporal's armoured chest plate and was stopped before it could puncture his suit but then the alien fired a second shot that punched right through the

visor of his helmet before hitting him in his forehead and killing him instantly, a jet of escaping air coming from the hole in his visor as he collapsed.

The other soldier reached for his rifle but before he could unsling the weapon two more of the aliens suddenly sprang back to life and grabbed hold of his arms while a third turned around and fired a burst from his own rifle into the soldier. The aliens that still possessed their weapons then began to turn their attention to the group still standing beside the exo-rover and began to fire, walking towards them while their comrades began to recover the weapons taken from them and also from the bodies of the two soldiers.

Doctor Russell and Maya ducked back behind the shields while the two soldiers carrying them returned fire with their sidearms. The aliens paid little attention to this, the rounds failing to penetrate their own armoured spacesuits. Russell also drew her own sidearm, despite knowing that the stun gun would also be useless against an armoured target. However, while they were focusing on the group beside the exo-rover the aliens ignored the exo-rover itself and so were unprepared when all of a sudden its main cannon was fired. The magnetic accelerator weapon was capable of firing a range of different ammunition and in this case a beehive anti-personnel round had been selected. This turned the cannon into a massive shotgun type weapon that fired a cloud of several hundred tiny flechettes at the aliens. The velocity of the individual flechettes was too low for them to have the penetrating power to pierce the aliens' body armour but there were enough of them in the cloud to find gaps between the armour plates and several of the aliens fell dead. This initial shot was then followed up by a burst of automatic fire as the gunner switched to the co-axially mounted machine gun and a stream of high velocity rounds was fired down the tunnel. With no cover available to them, the aliens were easy targets and the rounds fired by the machine gun were easily able to penetrate their armour. Each hit by multiple rounds, the aliens fell to the floor of the tunnel as a brownish mix of blood and the fluid that filled their suits leaked out.

"You okay out there doctor?" Verdeschi asked when the firing finally stopped and Russell peered over the top of the shields.

"Fine." she replied, then as she looked at the bodies of the alien troops on the other side of the shields she sighed and added, "We almost saved them."

12.

"The ship is here." Koenig transmitted when he and his men entered the Red Mars safe house and saw the alien attack ship in front of them. Koenig then headed straight for the ship's open hatch while the troops spread out to cover the entire hangar, "Looks like some of it is missing though."

"Can you send me an image?" Keynes asked from the cockpit of the Eagle and Koenig used his comlock to send footage of the alien ship to her, "The cannon's missing. It looks like someone's opened up the power plant as well."

"So in other words Red Mars are still running around with the weapon?" Koenig responded.

"I'm afraid so colonel." Keynes said.

"Okay. We'll keep searching. With any luck Red Mars left something we can use to figure out where they went. Koenig out."

Keynes then leant back in her seat and looked at Carter, smiling.

"What's got you so amused." Carter asked.

"It just feels good to be back in a cockpit again. In fact just being back aboard an Eagle without being shot with a stun gun, being strapped to a chair and left bound and gagged." Keynes said.

"Yes I recall, I was there." Carter replied, "Mind you the time before that weren't you kidnapping Baker to use as a hostage?" and Keynes frowned.

"How many times do I-" Keynes began before Carter interrupted here.

"That's weird." he said.

"What is major?" Keynes asked.

"There's a ship down there. A few kilometres from Beta." Carter answered.

"One of the other Eagles? Could they have found something?" Keynes suggested.

"No, Fraser and the others are providing air cover over the travel tube route." Carter said, "Besides, this looks like a Swift."

"A Swift? But there are only a few of those at Alpha, Epsilon and Zeta." Keynes said.

"Yes and all those are accounted for. The only other Swifts were at Eta when it was destroyed. Somebody must have got to one before Major Capston and his men could."

"We've just been scanned." the Swift's pilot announced over the intercom and Garcia turned away from the panel where the monitoring system for the additional fusion reactor was being installed, "Looks like we've got an Eagle heading this way."

"Is the weapon ready?" Garcia asked one of the technicians working on installing the alien cannon.

"The cannon, yes. But the reactor upgrade hasn't been fitted, it's output is still limited." the technician told him.

"Does the targeting system work?" Garcia said.

"What? Yes, it can be fired from here or the cockpit. It's fire arc is limited though so-"

"That'll have to do. It only needs to bring down an Eagle." Garcia said before he looked around at the other technicians, "Everyone not needed to fly this ship gets off now. The Earthers have just provided us with a live target."

Garcia was among those who then got off the Swift, bounding across the lunar surface towards the vehicles that had brought them here from Beta. Then as they were getting aboard these vehicles the Swift's directional thrusters fired and the ship rose up off the ground, turning to face the approaching Eagle.

"She's taking off. Looks like she's turning towards us." Carter said as he saw the Swift taking off on the Eagle's sensors. Keynes then leant forwards to access the Eagle's optical sensors, zooming in on the craft. The image she found herself looking at showed that the Swift had been modified by the addition of new equipment mounted along the dorsal hull between the two primary fuel tanks.

"Major that's the core from the alien beam cannon." Keynes said and Carter activated the Eagle's communication system.

"Alpha this is Combat Eagle Four, we have contact with an unidentified Swift taking off near Beta. Keynes has confirmed that it is armed with the alien weapon system." he said.

"Understood Eagle Four." Alexander responded, "I'm diverting Captain Fraser's flight back to assist you and Major Morrow is ordering Epsilon to launch Hawks now. You just need to make sure that Swift doesn't escape."

"Don't worry Alpha. That Swift isn't getting away from me. Eagle Four out." Carter said.

"Actually it looks like that's exactly what its doing." Keynes told him and Carter saw that although it had been heading towards them when it first took off, now the Swift was turning away.

"He must have spotted the other Eagles on his radar. He's got enough of a head start on them to keep out of their range. It's up to us now so sit back and just let me fly." Carter replied.

Now wanting to fly away from the Eagles closing on its position, the pilot of the Swift turned his craft away from them and then fired its main engine, using this thrust to kill its speed before accelerating in the opposite direction. During this time Carter closed in on the Swift in his Eagle, bringing the craft's twin magnetic accelerator cannons on line and taking aim. Squeezing the triggers built into his flight controls Carter fired a rapid burst of high velocity projectiles at the Swift only to miss by a narrow margin as the craft continued to change its velocity.

"Damn, nearly had him." Carter muttered before the Swift's main engine suddenly shut down and the craft stopped accelerating as its crew once again changed tactics. However, before Carter could take advantage of its now constant velocity Keynes noticed a sudden increase in the craft's thermal energy output.

"Alan break off! He's about to fire!" she snapped and Carter twisted the flight controls to adjust the Eagle's heading just enough that when a beam of brilliant energy erupted from the alien cannon now mounted on top of the Swift's hull it missed the Eagle.

"That was a close one." he said.

"The Swift's turning again. Slowing as well." Keynes said.

"Looks like he's lining us up for another shot." Carter said, "How soon can he fire again?"

"I'm not sure. From the looks of these readings that shot wasn't at full power. That could mean that Red Mars hasn't been able to upgrade the reactor regulation. They'll need to wait a minute or so for it to cool down before they're able to fire another shot." Keynes replied.

"Then let's make that minute count." Carter said.

The Eagle's heading needed little adjustment to put it back on an intercept course with the Swift and the two craft hurtled towards one another rapidly.

"Major give me control of the turret." Keynes said. Combat Eagles like the one she and Alan were in also mounted a pair of magnetic accelerators in a turret. These were lighter than those mounted beneath the ship's forward hull module and were intended for defensive use, intercepting incoming missiles or for use on the ground as an anti-personnel weapon. Being turret mounted it was not possible for a pilot to operate these weapons while in flight.

"What? No way." Carter said.

"Oh what am I going to do? Shoot us down?" Keynes said and Carter sighed.

"Fine, arming turret." he said and the targeting display for the turret appeared on the screen in front of Keynes at the same time as the turret itself extended from the framework structure along the Eagle's dorsal hull.

Carter prepared to fire another burst from the Eagle's main guns but the Swift pilot suddenly turned away from the Eagle by a few degrees, just enough to take it out of Carter's line of fire.

"Damn it!" Carter hissed as the two craft passed by one another at high speed and at that moment Keynes fired the turret.

The Swift had largely passed by the Eagle by this point but some of the projectiles still hit the craft towards the rear. These lacked the destructive power to bring down the Swift but they still penetrated its hull in several places. Most of these hits were to the main fuel tanks and plumes of gas appeared as the contents began to escape before the self sealing lining was able to plug the gaps.

"He's hit." Keynes said, "Not enough to stop him but it looks like he lost fuel. A few more hits and I'll rip that tank wide open."

"I think you got more than just the fuel tank." Carter said, "Look at the way he's turning."

Keynes checked the Eagle's sensors and saw that the Swift pilot had rolled his craft while going into a turn, suggesting that at least one of his directional thrusters was no longer working.

"He'll be able to fire again in a few seconds." Keynes said and Carter nodded.

"Call out when you see that energy spike. I'll let him think I'm trying for another head on run and break off. Then you try strafing him again." he said.

"Got it." Keynes said and she began tracking the Swift with the turret while also monitoring its energy readings, "There!" she exclaimed when these readings showed another massive build up of power and Carter turned the Eagle again. However, this time the Swift did not fire its cannon, the gunner seeing the Eagle's manoeuvre before wasting the shot. Once again the two ships flew past one another and Keynes fired the turret as soon as the Swift came close enough to give her a reasonable chance of a hit. Once again she fired enough shots that inevitably some of them hit the Swift but again the damage was insufficient to shoot it down. However, this time there was the flash of a secondary detonation in the engine module and for a few seconds flames spewed from the hull breach this created before the Swift's fire suppression system kicked in.

"I think you hit a thrust chamber. That'll slow him down." Carter said before a voice called out over the communication system.

"Eagle Four this is Eagle One. Major Carter can we be of assistance?" Fraser said and Carter glanced at the sensors to see the three Eagle's of his flight closing fast, having slowed down and turned to engage his Eagle the crew of the Swift had given the other Eagles the chance to catch up with them and now they faced four opponents instead of one.

The crew of the Swift had also seen the three Eagles approaching though and seeing them as a greater threat they turned to engage them. With their cannon already primed to fire the Swift's crew were able to attack immediately and there was another flash of light as the beam erupted from the cannon towards the unsuspecting Eagles. The beam hit one of the Eagles dead on, burning all the way through it and the craft exploded from the inside.

"Eagle Two is down!" Fraser exclaimed.

"I see it captain." Carter said, "Be advised the enemy appears to have a sixty second cool down time before firing again. Make the most of it."

"Understood major." Fraser responded and then the two surviving Eagles of his flight opened fire simultaneously.

Still being at extreme range meant that none of their shots hit the Swift but they did force the pilot to break off again and this brought it back towards Carter and Keynes once more. Seeing the swift cross his sight, Carter fired instinctively and this time several of the projectiles in his burst struck their target head on.

"You got him." Keynes said excitedly as she saw pieces of the Swift blown free and one of its fuel tanks ripped open beyond the capability of the lining to compensate for the damage.

The damaged Swift now began to turn again, this time away from the Eagles entirely and then its main engine fired as its pilot attempted to escape. However, with its drive damaged the Swift could no longer outrun the Eagles and Alan turned to follow.

"Rookie mistake." he said as he matched the Swift's course and lined up the Eagle's cannons on its engine flare before squeezing his triggers again.

This time Carter was firing at a target showing no motion relative to his line of fire and the entirety of the burst struck the Swift. Some of the rounds were incinerated by the extreme heat of the exhaust from the fusion drive but the rest easily punched through its hull and tore apart its power plant. This collapsed the magnetic field surrounding the high energy plasma inside the fusion core and this expanded rapidly, consuming the Swift in the heat of a miniature and short lived sun.

"You did it. Target destroyed." Keynes said and then her face fell.

"What's wrong?" Carter asked

"It would have been nice to recover that cannon. That's all." Keynes answered.

Russell, Verdeschi, Bergman and Carter all sat in Koenig's office as they reviewed the outcome of their attempt to recover the alien ship intact.

"I'm afraid that the biological core or main computer was fully degraded colonel." Bergman said, "Combined with the loss of the weapon system I'm afraid we won't be learning anything about the aliens' wormhole technology."

"At least you're no worse off than when we started professor." Verdeschi said and he smiled as he continued, "Although I've got to say I wouldn't have minded getting hold of that cannon myself. Even if we couldn't figure out how to use it to open a wormhole to a known destination it would have made a good weapon for the *Ultra* to compliment the upgraded missiles and magnetic accelerators we're giving it. Mind you, at least we took the rest of the ship near enough complete. Melting down the hull will give us a massive head start on expanding our Hawk fleet."

"It'll still take a few months though." Carter pointed out, "In the mean time we're down one of our militarised Eagles. If we're going to be using them in an aerospace superiority role then we really ought to think about upgrading them. If we'd had just one ship to ship missile between them then we could have brought down that Swift without losing a ship and its crew."

"Perhaps between you and Kano you can come up with something." Koenig said, "What about you Helena?"

"Well since we failed to save any of the alien troops it means that we now have all of their suspended animation capsules. It'll take a bit of work to install them all in medical section but at least we'll have a way to preserve critically injured people while we arrange treatment for them. I'm afraid that there were no samples of the plant the professor's medication is made from aboard though so we still need to locate some."

"Hopefully soon." Bergman commented.

"Yes but in the meantime I expect you to keep taking what you have Victor." Russell told him.

"Don't worry doctor, I've learned my lesson." Bergman replied.

"And at that point I think we'll draw this meeting to a close." Koenig said as he opened his desk drawer and took out a small box, "I have another matter to attend to."

"What's this?" Bergman asked.

"Watch and see professor." Verdeschi told him as they all got to their feet and walked towards the top of the steps leading down to main mission and Russell hooked her arm under Koenig's.

"If I may have your attention please." Koenig called out, opening the box to take out the artificial piece of mistletoe it contained.

"At last." Alexander commented and she produced a black lipstick from her pocket that she began to apply to herself.

"As you all know in previous years General Simmons hung a piece of mistletoe here in main mission each Christmas. He was then of course rewarded with a kiss beneath it from each of our wonderful female command staff." Koenig said.

"While his wife was a quarter of a million kilometres away." Russell added, smiling.

"We may be far from home and far from the nearest mistletoe but I intend to keep alive the tradition of hanging it even if this is printed from plastic." Koenig continued, "However, given that Doctor Russell is right here I think that it would be somewhat awkward for me to be kissing every woman in the room. Therefore, I am handing over the duty of hanging it to someone else whose sterling work will hopefully get us home and who I'm sure would welcome a kiss from all the beautiful ladies present. Professor Bergman would you do the honours?" and Koenig held out the fake mistletoe towards Bergman.

"What, me?" Bergman said, confused.

"I know you don't celebrate Christmas professor, so Happy Hanukkah." Koenig told him.

"Come on professor." Benes called out, "You wouldn't want to let us girls all go home without getting kissed would you?"

"Well since everyone seems so keen I have no choice to agree." Bergman said as he took the mistletoe and looked at the smiling command crew.

"You'd better have taken that medication of yours professor." Carter said to him quietly, "Because Tanya Alexander is about to put it to the test."