

Space: 2299



08: Exodus

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When the moon arrives in a system that includes an Earth-type planet it offers the possibility of gathering vital resources. However, it also prompts demands from some of the moon's inhabitants to demand to be allowed to leave the moon entirely in favour of permanently settling on this alien world regardless of any dangers that may be present.

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I.

The hangars beneath Moonbase Alpha housed more than forty craft, mainly Eagles but with a smaller number of long ranged Swifts and obsolete Vultures and Kestrels included as well. The vast majority of the craft were Global Defence Force craft but there were also a handful of privately owned and operated vessels. Major Alan Carter, head of Moonbase Alpha's reconnaissance section had overall responsibility for ensuring that the fleet of GDF vessels were kept in working order and so when one of the civilian craft was donated to bolster the GDF fleet it fell to him to inspect it.

"I heard there was a problem major." Colonel Koenig, the most senior GDF officer on the moon said as he walked up to Carter.

"Well you could say that yes." Carter replied, "Look at it." and he pointed to the Eagle he was inspecting.

"What's wrong with it? I was told it was in working order." Koenig said.

"Oh it is. So far every system checks out." Carter agreed.

"So what's wrong with it then?"

"Colonel it's green. Who paints an Eagle green?" Carter said and Koenig smiled.

"You're upset about the colour?" he said.

"Colonel look around you." Carter said, waving his arm at the rows of GDF craft, all of them a uniform white,

"You can pick any ship you like and I can guarantee that it will be the same as any of the others. I pride myself that every ship we have conforms exactly to GDF standards and that includes the colour of its hull.

Throw in a green one and it looks out of place. It turns my hangar into an art gallery."

Koenig sighed.

"Look Alan, have it repainted if you want but if it's in working order then I want it ready to be included in the rota by this time tomorrow whether it's green or white. Understood?" Koenig said.

"Yes colonel." Carter responded.

"Good. Now we'll be passing through the wormhole again soon so I need to get back to main mission. I'll leave this to you to sort out." Koenig told him, slapping Carter on the shoulder before he started to walk away. Before he reached the exit from hangar though his comlock sounded and he took it from his belt, "Koenig." he said.

"Colonel are you still in the hangar with Carter?" the voice of Major Morrow, Koenig's second in command asked.

"Yes but I'm on my way back to main mission now. I'll be there before we enter the wormhole." Koenig replied.

"It's not that colonel. It's just that the second Eagle we've been given is on its way down from the launch pad now." Morrow said.

"And is there a problem with it major?" Koenig asked.

"It's blue." Morrow answered just as Koenig heard the sound of the door leading to the elevator that carried Eagles up to the surface to be launched opening. This was followed by a cry from Carter's direction.

"No!" he yelled and Koenig smiled.

"I think Carter is aware of that." he said, "I'll see you in a few minutes."

Main mission was always busy at the the time that the moon was about to pass through the wormhole that had ripped it out of Earth's orbit and now randomly hurled it from system to system and when Koenig entered the room he saw that in addition to the usual military personnel there was a grey haired civilian present.

"Professor Bergman." Koenig said, "To what do we owe this visit?"

"Oh I wanted to see how accurate my jump predictions are becoming." Bergman replied, "Plus I've refined my location program and I'm hoping that we can get a fix on our new location in less than two minutes after we pass through the wormhole."

An expert in reverse engineering the technology of the aliens who had attacked Earth a century earlier, Professor Bergman had come to the moon to try and prove his theory about how they travelled faster than light. This had indeed been proven correct when a terrorist attack destroyed Moonbase Mu in a nuclear explosion large enough to tear open a hole in space that dragged the moon through. Now he was at the forefront of Koenig's efforts to find a way of returning the moon and its many inhabitants to Earth. Most recently he had developed a means of determining their location by monitoring the emissions from pulsars. "And here I thought you were just here for the company." the female lieutenant Bergman was standing beside said, smiling.

"Well of course your company is most pleasant as well Lieutenant Alexander." Bergman replied.

"So how do things look so far?" Koenig said, looking at the readouts shown on the big screen at the front of main mission.

"All sections reporting secure colonel." Morrow answered.

"All flights have touched down." Alexander added.

"Benes what about other bases?" Koenig asked, turning towards another woman in main mission.

"No problems reported colonel. Kappa has large groups congregating in open areas again to watch the transition it seems." she replied. Moonbase Kappa had been constructed as a holiday resort and when the moon left Earth orbit it was left with several thousand civilian visitors stranded there.

"Computer indicates all systems functioning colonel." Captain Kano, the head of Alpha's technical section added.

"Good. How long now Spacewoman Baker?" Koenig asked, seeing the wormhole growing larger on the big screen as more radioactive particles entered it from the ruins of Moonbase Mu.

"Thirty seconds colonel." Baker responded from her console.

"Computer hasn't issued a correction." Kano added.

"Twenty seconds." Baker said and all around main mission the command staff fell silent.

The moon shook slightly as the wormhole expanded to the point that it swallowed the moon and in an instant it was transported from the Lagrange point where the gravitational pull between two large bodies in space cancelled one another out to another. The very first time this had happened the moon had only been transported within Earth's solar system but since then each passage through the wormhole had seen the moon travel to an entirely different star system and this was the case now as the moon appeared surrounded by a sky with radically different star patterns to its previous location.

"Jump complete colonel." Morrow announced as the command staff began collecting status reports from around the moon.

Travel through the wormhole was near instantaneous, regardless of the distance travelled and so this was no indication of how much closer to or further away from Earth the moon was and Koenig turned to Bergman again.

"Well professor? Where are we?" he asked.

"One moment colonel. The program is running." Bergman replied.

"Computer is interfacing with sensor arrays at other bases now colonel Astronomical database is on line." Kano added.

"Err colonel there's something I think you ought to see." Benes said, looking up from her console.

"What is it Benes?" Koenig said.

"The computer has run a sweep of the system and there's something interesting." Benes told him as he approached her duty station.

"What sort of interesting?" Koenig said.

"A planet in the goldilocks zone." Benes replied and as Bergman also turned towards her she added, "Spectral analysis indicates an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere and surface temperature in the habitable range." Benes said.

"Are we picking up any signs of civilisations?" Bergman asked as he rushed to see the results for himself.

"Put it on the big screen." Koenig ordered and Benes transferred the information to the big screen so that everyone in main mission could see both a magnified image of the planet and also the results of the initial computer analysis.

"A habitable world without any signs of a native population." Bergman said.

"Captain Benes, how far away is that planet?" Koenig said, pointing to the screen.

"About eight light minutes colonel." Benes answered.

"Colonel we appear to have exited the wormhole at an interplanetary Lagrange point between that planet and its outward neighbour." Baker said.

"Computer predicts forty-three hours and seventeen minutes until we re-enter the wormhole." Alexander said. Then she smiled and added, "Oh and professor your program indicates that we are in the HD twenty thirty-nine system. That puts us two hundred and eighty light years from Earth."

So we have a habitable planet that's near enough for us to visit and shows no sign of being inhabited by anyone who might try to shoot us down." Koenig said.

Since leaving Earth's system the inhabitants of the moon had encountered habitable worlds before but they had either already been inhabited or been too far away to make trip there via any of the craft available to the moon's inhabitants practical. To find a world that seemed both safe and practical to visit was something entirely new.

"Colonel this planet could be a source of the elements we need here on the moon." Morrow pointed out.

The moon had been dependent on supplies from Earth when it was unexpectedly pulled out of orbit and although a program had been instituted to make the best use of the available resources there was no doubt that eventually the inhabitants of the moon would run out of food and certain medicines. A life sustaining planet offered the chance to obtain what was needed to produce both in unlimited quantities.

"Get me Verdeschi, Carter, Capston and Keynes." Koenig said, "I want then all in my office as soon as possible. Oh and contact Doctor Russell as well. If we're going to be trying to gather medicinal plants then

we'll need a doctor to identify anything that might be useful.”

Edward Foxworth was sat at the table eating breakfast with his wife when they were both disturbed by the sound of his communicator.

“Who would be calling this early?” his wife commented from beside him as he reached out to pick up the device.

“Is this important?” he said when he answered the call.

“Have you seen the news?” the man on the other end of the call responded and Foxworth immediately recognised the voice.

“One moment.” he said, getting up from the table and heading into the next room so that he would not disturb his wife and then he closed the door behind him so she would not overhear what he said either, “Major Capston, I take it that this is important.” he said.

“Of course it is. Now turn on the news. Any channel, they're all broadcasting the same.” Capston told him and Foxworth sighed before activating the large wall mounted video screen and turning to a news channel.

His eyes widened as soon as he saw what was being broadcast, a news anchor was speaking with a scientist from the observatory at Moonbase Zeta while behind the main focus of the transmission was an image captured of the nearby habitable planet. Foxworth muted the screen, not caring what the news had to say about the planet right now.

“What's Koenig said about it?” he asked.

“I've just been called to see him. I'm about to take a travel tube to Alpha but Russell, Carter and that Keynes woman will also be there.” Capston told him.

“So Koenig wants his experts in defence, supply, construction, medicine and transportation does he?”

Foxworth said, “Major Capston I want to know everything that is said in that meeting. In the meantime I have work of my own to do. This planet is the solution to our problems and we need to make sure that Koenig is made to understand that.” he added before he shut off the communicator. Then he hurried back into the other room and sat back down with a large grin on his face.

“Edward what's going on?” his wife asked, looking up from her breakfast and staring at him.

“What's happened my dear is that we may have just found ourselves a new home.” Foxworth told her.

2.

Although Doctor Helena Russell and Carter were both already at Moonbase Alpha, Major Capston had to come from the industrial centre at Delta while Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi had to come from the military base at Moonbase Epsilon. Joining the GDF officers was a woman wearing an unmarked set of combat fatigues who was escorted through main mission by a pair of armed soldiers. Alyson Keynes had been Koenig's adjutant and also the head of Alpha's security before she provided the terrorist group Red Mars with the information they needed to destroy Mu. However, her punishment had been reduced to a dishonourable discharge and house arrest in exchange for her help studying alien technology and also her expertise in logistics. The deal crafted by Koenig was not fully accepted though and she remained a social outcast from her former peers.

"Verdeschi, take a seat." Koenig said when Verdeschi arrived to complete the meeting, "I take it that everyone has seen the results of our initial scans?"

"John this is amazing." Russell said, looking back at her computer tablet. Obviously potentially dangerous as well. Who knows what could have evolved down there?"

"I take it you're worried about disease doctor?" Verdeschi said and Russell nodded.

"Our experience so far with alien biologies is that pathogens don't tend to leap from life forms that evolved on one planet to those from another but I'd hate to suddenly encounter the first one that could while we're stuck out here." she said.

"Is this really a habitable planet?" Keynes said. Then looking at the others around her she added, "Sorry, I don't have access to scan results or news broadcasts like you."

"Yes looks habitable. The oxygen content of the atmosphere is slightly lower than Earth but that's not what I'm interested in right now. I want to know what each of you thinks we should try shipping back to the moon from there." Koenig said.

"Soil and any seeds that look like they could grow into edible plants." Keynes said immediately.

"Water can't hurt." Carter added, "I know our fuel reserves are massive but it can't hurt to stock up."

"All good." Koenig said and then he looked at Russell, "How easy would it be to determine the medicinal use of plants?" he asked.

"On the spot and with certainty? Almost impossible." Russell responded, "But there are certain indicators that I could look for that would point us towards possible candidates. Then I'd have to run further tests back here. We could end up bringing back something that's worthless though."

"Carter what's our current lifting capability?" Koenig said.

"We've got two Eagles down for repair but that still leaves more than a hundred and twenty Eagles around the moon. Obviously we'll need to leave some here just in case they're needed or something goes wrong. But if we commit just a third of our ships to this operation then that's still forty Eagles. Plus we've got twenty-seven Condor heavy lifters that are all operational. I'd suggest using all of them, they're just too useful to forget." Carter said.

"What about the *Ultra*?" Verdeschi asked, looking at Capston, "Is she flyable?"

The *Ultra* was an obsolete warship from Earth that had a propulsion system that could generate thrust from nuclear detonations. It had been dragged through a wormhole decades earlier as a result of using this drive system at a Lagrange point near Jupiter and then salvaged when the inhabitants of the moon came across it later.

"Err not right now, no." Capston replied, "We had to pull the fusion core."

"What was wrong with it? She flew fine when we found her." Carter pointed out.

"Maybe but the strain on that core after all these years stressed the mountings. Even if Colonel Verdeschi gave us back some of the charges for the pulse drive we couldn't fly her in an atmosphere." Capston said.

"That's a shame. That ship could have carried as much as all our Condors combined." Carter commented.

"We'll just have to manage without it then." Koenig said.

"Colonel have you considered another option?" Capston said, "We could evacuate to the planet. If it's as close as these reports say then we could-"

"Major Capston," Koenig interrupted, frowning, "we've been through this before. It is my intension to get every one on the moon back to Earth. What I do not intend to do is strand us on an alien planet that we have less that two days to study."

"The colonists at Proxima Centauri managed fine." Capston said, "We'd have a fixed location from which to try to establish contact with Earth."

"Are you seriously comparing this planet to the Proxima colony?" Carter exclaimed, "That system was surveyed by remote probes years before that expedition was launched and it took them thirty years to get there. Now it takes the best part of a decade to send messages between Earth and Proxima. This system is

almost three hundred light years from Earth. That's more than five hundred years to wait for a reply. We'd be totally alone with no way of leaving once the moon was gone."

"Have you been talking to your friend Mister Foxworth again major?" Verdeschi asked.

"I've warned you about that Citizens' Committee of his." Koenig added, "If you want to be a part of that movement then you are welcome to resign your commission and join it but until then you'll follow my orders and I'm ordering you to determine what materials you want gathering from this planet before we move on."

"Of course colonel." Capston responded.

"Colonel Koenig there's another issue we need to discuss. One that could affect the mission to this planet." Keynes said.

"Really? What's that?" Koenig asked.

"I think the problem with theft of supplies is getting worse. Either that or record keeping is getting sloppier." Keynes said and she handed the paper notepad she had brought with her to Russell, "Doctor take a look at this." she said.

"This is a list of medications. All of them vital." Russell said when she read the list.

"Would it surprise you to know that up to eighty percent of the stocks of these drugs at some bases can't be found?" Keynes said.

"That's impossible. These are all controlled substances. They aren't just handed out at your local pharmacy. Two of them only four people on the moon can prescribe." Russell said.

"Yes I checked that. It looks like there are a lot of transfer orders being issued but the supplies aren't reaching their supposed destinations." Keynes said.

"A problem with shipping?" Verdeschi suggested.

"That's what I considered at first but if that were the case then the recipients ought to have complained and the drugs would be formally listed as lost." Keynes said.

"And an investigation launched." Russell added.

"I think someone is creating fake transit orders between medical sections at different moon bases to cover for the widespread theft of our supplies." Keynes said, "It's not limited to medical supplies either. The other shortages I've raised before are still happening and I think it's getting worse."

"Red Mars?" Verdeschi said, looking at Koenig.

"That's what I thought when Keynes told me construction materials were going missing." Koenig responded.

"Not to mention they managed to steal an entire Swift." Carter added.

"Okay this needs sorting out. We can't just bring supplies from that planet back here and have them stolen whether by Red Mars or just some black marketeer. Keynes give your list of requirements to Major Carter. He can arrange to have them shipped here. Then co-ordinate with Major Capston to find out what's happening to our existing supplies. Colonel Verdeschi I want a Hawk escort for our ships that includes a permanent orbital presence around that planet." Koenig ordered.

"John we've seen no signs of a military threat from this planet. Even if there are natives they obviously aren't that advanced or widespread. We could easily keep out of their way." Russell said.

"That's not what I'm worried about." Koenig told her.

"Then what?" she asked just as Alexander walked up the steps from main mission to Koenig's office.

"Excuse me colonel but I'm getting requests for flight clearance from all over the moon. People want permission to take private ships to the planet." Alexander said.

"That's what." Koenig said, "There are thousands of people here on the moon and I bet most of them would like to be able to just take a stroll under an open sky without having to carry around a ten kilo life support pack. Let them go and it will be a free for all with no way of controlling what they might bring back. Tony I want your attack ships to set up a blockade around that planet. No ship lands there without permission from this office. I don't want anyone bringing back unstoppable monsters or alien herpes."

"You paint such a wonderful picture colonel." Alexander said, "I guess I'm to tell them all 'no' then?"

"You guess correctly lieutenant." Koenig replied.

"What are the rules of engagement for the Hawks?" Verdeschi said, "Are they to shoot down unarmed civilian ships?"

"No, warning shots only. If anyone is stupid enough to try landing on that planet then I want an Eagle full of troops standing by to go down and detain them. Then they can be flown back here to the moon and placed in quarantine while we decide what to do with them." Koenig responded, "Now everyone get to work. The forty or so hours we have available to us will go quickly if we waste them. Doctor Russell I'd like a quick word with you though."

Russell remained behind while the others left Koenig's office and she smiled at him when they had gone.

"So what is it John?" she asked.

"Helena you'll be the ranking officer on the planet." Koenig told her, "I'd love to go myself but things are already blowing up over it. By the time that meeting got underway my messaging system was already going wild with requests for meetings from civilian administrators and journalists wanting to meet or speak with me. As much as I'd love to visit that planet myself I can't dump all this on Major Morrow so I have to stay and

Verdeschi has to be here just in case we come under attack. Or to take over from me if I go crazy and start shooting any of the vultures all after a piece of the planet.”

“You need a new adjutant. One that isn't working for a terrorist organisation.” Russell said softly, “Someone who can act as a liaison between you and the people you need to deal with and a barrier to time wasters. There are three candidates right out there now.” she continued and she looked towards main mission, “Kano.”

“Too busy making sure everything keeps running.” Koenig said.

“Benes then.”

“Already swamped with the amount of data we have coming through every time we go through the wormhole.”

“Alexander. Promote her to captain. She's handled being given Keynes' security role well enough.” Russell said and Koenig smiled.

“Can you image the complaints I'd get if she took a riding crop to a journalist?” Koenig replied, “Let's face it Helena we don't have the staff to be replacing senior officers and the nearest reinforcements are two hundred and eighty light years away.”

“Well you need to find someone who knows how to deal with people John.” Russell said, “I'm tired of you coming back to our quarters late all the time because you're dealing with trivial matters that are the job of your adjutant.”

“Someone who knows how to deal with people.” Koenig said, leaning back in his chair and smiling, “You know it sounds like you're describing Maya.”

“Maya? She's not even a member of the GDF, let alone an officer.”

“I know but she could be. I could give her a field commission as a lieutenant. Just because my adjutant would normally be a captain doesn't mean they have to be.”

“Now you mention it, it doesn't seem like such a bad idea.” Russell said, “Plus it could be good for Maya as well. She seems keen to help and having an adjutant that can literally control the minds of people could come in useful.”

“Leave it with me. You better go and brief your own people.” Koenig said and Russell turned to leave, “Oh and Helena?” he added and she turned back towards him.

“Yes John?”

“Take care. As far as I'm concerned you're the most irreplaceable person on the moon.” Koenig said.

Foxworth had already called four different news stations at different bases on the moon to get interviews on behalf of the Citizens' Committee action group he and few similarly minded individuals trapped on the moon when it was torn out of Earth's orbit had set up and all of them had agreed in one way or another. One had just recorded his call, asking him questions to be played back later while the other three each wanted him to come to their studios for in person interviews. This meant that he was going to have to travel between bases rapidly and he was arranging for flights rather than travel tube transit when his communicator sounded.

“Edward Foxworth.” he said into the device.

“Mister Foxworth it's me.” Capston's voice responded.

“Ah major, what did Colonel Koenig have to say for himself?”

“Not only is he refusing an evacuation he's also refusing to let any private flights leave the moon for the planet.” Capston told him.

“He's not ordering them shot down is he?” Foxworth asked.

“No but there'll be troops standing by to arrest anyone not intimidated enough by an SF Nine Hawk attack ship firing gauss cannons in their general direction to turn back.” Capston answered.

“A pity. It would have been useful if we could have given the media footage of one of Koenig's ships shooting down a civilian vessel. We'd remote pilot it of course but the media wouldn't need to know that. Where does this leave Operation Exodus?” Foxworth said.

“My people can make sure that our ships can't be overridden and we've already loaded the *Ultra*. But we've got another problem. Alyson Keynes has noticed that supplies are being diverted and Koenig has ordered me to help her look into it.” Capston told him.

“Can she threaten us?”

“Perhaps. When Keynes was Koenig's adjutant she had a knack for logistics, that's why her plea deal included being brought back into that role. Don't worry though, she can't go anywhere unguarded and I'll replace her guards with my own men. If she does discover anything we'll make sure she can't report back.” Capston said.

“Try to avoid bloodshed major. I understand that you're a military man but let's keep things civilised.”

Foxworth told him.

“Of course Mister Foxworth. We'll keep her out of the way until she can't do any damage.” Capston replied.

3.

"Main mission this is Survey Eagle One we are ready to launch." Carter said from the cockpit of the Eagle he was to pilot to the planet. Beside him sat Doctor Russell while the Eagle's passenger module contained a mix of scientific and combat personnel who would carry out an analysis of the landing zone and protect them against any dangers that may lurk there.

"Survey Eagle One you are cleared to launch." Alexander responded, "Be advised that a Hawk flight has already been despatched. They'll be in orbit around the target about forty minutes ahead of you."

"Understood Alpha. We'll send you a postcard." Carter said before pulling back on the flight controls and the Eagle's launch thrusters roared as the craft lifted vertically off the cross shaped launch pad before the main engines engaged and it accelerated away from the moon.

"So an hour and a half to go right?" Russell asked and Carter smiled.

"Should be smooth flying all the way as well doctor." he replied.

"Radar shows Eagles Two and Three right behind us." Russell said, checking the Eagle's sensors.

"That's good. The others will launch at half hour intervals to make sure we're not all caught out if there is any danger. The Condors ought to be launching now but we're faster than them so we'll land before they even reach orbit. Then we can decide the best places for them to land." Carter said and Russell smiled,

"Something amusing you doctor?" he asked.

"All this effort just for dirt." she said.

"Dirt packed full of nitrogen and carbon doctor. You of all people should know how valuable those are to us." Carter said.

"Oh I do. Major Carter when we get there you and I will be the first off the Eagle. Everyone else stays put until we confirm that the environment is safe." Russell said and Carter nodded.

"Did you bring a flag doc?" he said.

"A flag? What for?"

"To stick in the ground and claim the planet for Earth of course. You'll need a speech as well." Carter said.

"You're the astronaut Alan, I'll leave the honour of being the first human to set foot on the planet to you if that's alright." Russell told him.

"Thanks doc. I owe you one." Carter said.

"That's okay. It makes more sense for you to go ahead anyway. You know, just in case anything nasty is lying in wait and you need a doctor to stick you back together." Russell said and Carter frowned at her.

"You're just a bundle of joy, aren't you?" he replied.

When Keynes had been responsible for military security at Moonbase Alpha, Master Sergeant Washington had reported directly to her. Now though he was responsible for the security detail guarding her quarters and providing an escort whenever she left for work. Knowing that Keynes would be spending an extended period away from her quarters and even away from Alpha itself Washington had chosen lead a four strong unit himself and they escorted her to a travel tube station where they were scheduled to meet with Major Capston. Making their way past the platforms used by the regular commercial travel tube services Keynes, Washington and the rest of the escort party headed for one of the private platforms where chartered or official cars docked and they arrived just as Capston was stepping from a car.

"Major Capston." Washington said as he and the escort party halted, "Escort party to Miss Keynes reporting as ordered."

"Thank you sergeant. Keynes do you have everything you need?" Capston asked, looking at Keynes.

"Right here major. Copies of all my notes and spare clothes." Keynes answered, patting the bag she carried over her shoulder.

"Very good. Master Sergeant Washington I'll take over from here." Capston said.

"Major?" Washington said, confused.

"You may stand down master sergeant. You are dismissed." Capston told him.

"Major are you certain?" Washington said, "My orders are to provide an escort."

"Did Colonel Koenig order you to remain with Miss Keynes while she is working with me?" Capston said.

"No major."

Washington replied.

"Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi or Lieutenant Colonel Russell?" Capston added.

"No major." Washington said.

"In that case I'm dismissing you. Miss Keynes will be working under my supervision and if I need an armed security detail I have a company of my own men to call on. You can return to your regular duties here at Alpha." Capston ordered.

"Very well major." Washington said, nodding and he stepped back.
"Miss Keynes let me help you with that." Capston added, smiling as he reached for Keynes' bag and she smiled as she handed it to him.
"Thank you major." she said, handing him the bag and they began to board the travel tube car.
"What do you suppose that was about?" one of Washington's men said when the hatch closed.
"Maybe the major thinks he can get lucky." another of them commented.
"Just forget it and get back to the security section." Washington told them and as the other soldiers were leaving he took out his comlock, "Washington to Alexander." he said into it.
"Alexander. Go ahead Washington." Alexander responded.
"Lieutenant I've just handed Keynes over to Capston." Washington told her.
"What do you mean 'handed over'?" she asked.
"I mean the major ordered my team to stand down. He boarded the travel tube with Keynes alone and unarmed." Washington said and Alexander sighed.
"I'll let the colonel know." she said, "But Major Capston is entitled to dismiss you and as long as Keynes has an escort she isn't violating the terms of her release."
"Copy that lieutenant. Just remember that I'm around if I'm needed." Washington replied and he shut off his comlock.

Aboard the travel tube car Capston set the controls to take him and Keynes to the partially completed Moonbase Lambda. Before leaving Earth's orbit this had intended to be a second military base, even larger than Epsilon and able to hold not only squadrons of Hawk attack ships but also larger Osprey bombers. Major Capston had been overseeing the construction and now the partially completed base was where he was directing the multitude of construction projects around the moon meant to improve the inhabitants' situation from.

"So give me a summary of what you've found Miss Keynes. Start with Lambda if you wouldn't mind." Capston said.

"Okay." Keynes replied, reaching down and opening the bag that he had set down at her feet. From inside this she took an old fashioned document folder and opened it up, "Lambda holds a large stockpile of construction materials created from raw elements mined and then processed here on the moon. We have an almost limitless supply which makes it odd that anyone would want to steal it. The only explanation would be a large construction project that someone didn't want us to know about. I mean really large."

"How large?" Capston asked.

"If these numbers are right then you could make a good start on another moon base with them." Keynes said and she handed the file to Capston, open to a page filled with columns of numbers.

"Since this issue was raised with me I've been looking into it, the fact that someone was able to get to a Swift from the ruins of Eta as well and I can't find anything to suggest supplies are being taken. They are delivered to me at Lambda and then shipped out to the other bases for their construction projects." Capston said, "Are you sure of these numbers? I mean a thousand tonnes of concrete doesn't just vanish. It has to be kept somewhere."

"With that much concrete you could build somewhere to keep it." Keynes pointed out and Capston smiled.

"Touche." he replied.

"The thing is that there are records of the materials being made at Delta and shipped here but your incoming records don't match Somewhere along the line they are disappearing from the records." Keynes said.

"Are you sure the production plants aren't inflating their figures to make more money?" Capston suggested but Keynes shook her head.

"No major. You see the process of turning the raw ingredients into these materials requires a lot of energy. Now energy is cheap but we can map its usage and everything tells us that those plants were making something. More important than the construction materials though are the missing equipment and supplies that we can't replace. They appeared in our records when the moon left Earth orbit but have since been removed. The drugs are the best example but I don't think that there's any category of equipment that hasn't seen serious disappearances." Keynes explained.

Capston flipped through the pages of the file, obviously just skimming the information.

"Have you any leads on where this is all going?" Capston said.

"Sorry major. I've been able to identify the losses but not the source yet." Keynes replied.

"Well hopefully we'll be able to get to the bottom of it." Capston told her and he smiled.

"Thank you major." Keynes replied, "For your confidence and your trust in me. Ever since I was released from prison everyone acts like I'm about to sabotage everything. You're the first person to treat me like a human being since then."

"Colonel Koenig saw fit to bring you back in a limited role. Who am I to argue with that?" Capston said.

Tranquility Park was located near the centre of Moonbase Alpha. Consisting of a large open area that could

be used for a variety of public gatherings. The location had been chosen for being the site of the first manned landing on the moon back in the twentieth century and a row of statues of the astronauts from those lunar missions had been erected on the surface outside the large viewports.

"What have we got?" Koenig asked Baker as he walked towards the entrance to the park.

"About fifty of them colonel." she replied and she handed him a computer tablet, "I think I managed to get all their names. I'm afraid I don't know who a lot of them are though."

"Don't worry spacewoman. With any luck I'll have a new adjutant soon. This isn't really your job." Koenig said and then he returned the tablet to Baker before using his comlock to open the door leading to Tranquility Park itself.

Immediately he was greeted by a crowd of people aiming cameras and other recording devices towards him and yelling questions.

"Colonel is the planet inhabited?"

"Colonel why won't you permit flights to the planet?"

"Colonel are you planning to evacuate the moon?"

Koenig ignored these for the time being, making his way to the front of the room and standing behind the podium that had been set up in front of the viewport. This meant that Koenig was standing with the row of statues behind him as he set his comlock down on the podium and began to speak.

"As you all know the system that we have arrived in contains a planet that appears to possess an environment capable of supporting human life but that lacks any signs of habitation. I can confirm that I have ordered vessels despatched to more closely analyse the planet to determine whether it can provide us with the elements we need to make the moon fully self sufficient. According to our best estimates these will arrive in orbit around the planet in a little under twenty minutes. In addition to the survey craft despatched, I have also ordered as many transports as was practical to be sent. These will gather whatever resources they can before returning them here. Of course there will have to be a period of quarantine for anything brought back from the planet but it is hoped that we will leave this system with enough resources to sustain ourselves indefinitely." Koenig said, reading a pre-prepared speech from his own tablet before he paused and then added, "I will now take a limited number of questions." and he pointed to one of the journalists who leapt to their feet and raised their hands, shouting their questions again even before being called on.

"Colonel Koenig is it true that you have given orders for any civilian ships attempting to reach the planet to be shot down?" the chosen reporter asked, the others becoming quiet to allow her to speak.

"A flight of Hawks was sent to provide protection to the survey and labour teams. We do not believe the planet is inhabited but this has not been confirmed. An armed escort will help ensure the safety of our people. Clearance will not be given to any private vessels to leave the moon for the planet but that is all I am willing to say. For the protection of our forces there I will not go into specifics regarding their operational orders and rules of engagement. Next question." Koenig said.

"What do you have to say to those who argue that we should relocate to the planet en masse colonel? Is it true that a full scale evacuation would take only twenty-six hours to carry out? Does that give you-" the next chosen reporter said.

"One question at a time please. Let others have their turn." Koenig interrupted, "But to answer the question of relocating our population to the planet my policy has not changed. When the terrorist attack by Red Mars took us out of Earth's solar system I said that I and my staff would dedicate ourselves to finding a way to return us home. This system is approximately two hundred and eighty light years from Earth and I have no intention of stranding us here. So no, there will be no evacuation, especially considering that we have no idea of how suitable this planet is for long term habitation."

Koenig's comlock then buzzed and he glanced down at the device to see a message from Morrow had just appeared on the display.

MAYA IS WAITING IN YOUR OFFICE COLONEL.

Koenig smiled and looked up at the reporters again.

"I'm afraid that's all the time I have for now." he told them and as he walked away they began yelling questions at him again.

Baker accompanied Koenig through the door and as soon as it slid shut behind them she smiled.

"I think that went well." she said.

"In so far as I managed to avoid having them all shot, yes. I don't know how General Simmons tolerated these things. Hopefully I'll have some help soon though." Koenig responded.

As Morrow had told Koenig in the message Maya was waiting in his office when he and Baker returned to main mission. At first glance Maya appeared human but closer examination showed a pronounced widow's peak, sloping eyebrows and most significantly very pale eyes with dagger shaped pupils. Maya's people, the Psychons had been genetically engineered from human captives taken by the alien species that had attacked Earth in the previous century. The result of this genetic engineering was that the males of the species possessed an enhanced technical aptitude while females like Maya were instead empathic, able to

rapidly determine the feelings of an individual even if they could not understand the language being spoken. Maya's abilities went even further than this though and she had demonstrated the ability to influence to actions of others as well.

Like the rest of her people, Maya had been a slave of the reptilian Dorcons before being rescued by Koenig and Russell and since then had provided help and advice to the inhabitants of the moon in exchange for being given sanctuary.

"Maya thank you for coming." Koenig said as he entered his office and as he sat down he pressed the control to close the wall that separated it from main mission, "Has anyone discussed why I asked you here with you?"

"No colonel. Though I can tell it concerns my role here on the moon." Maya replied and Koenig smiled.

"Yes it does Maya. I understand you've been studying Global Defence Force procedures." he said.

"Yes colonel. To better fit in." Maya said.

"Maya what would you say to joining the GDF as my adjutant?"

"What is an adjutant colonel?"

"An assistant. My assistant. When people want to talk to me they would come through you first. Right now everyone here is busy with their own roles and I have a lot of time wasted by meetings that I shouldn't be in. With you as my adjutant I'd have you to filter out the time wasters." Koenig explained.

"Of course colonel. If you require me to take this role-" Maya began.

"No Maya, I don't require it. The GDF doesn't use conscription. I'm asking if you want the job. If you accept then you will be subject to the same rules as all the other officers around here but you can say 'no' if you want." Koenig interrupted.

"I would be an officer? Are they not your leaders?" Maya asked.

"That's right. Of course you'd have to start at the bottom of the officer tree as it were. I'd award you the field commission of lieutenant." Koenig answered.

"The same as Tanya Alexander? Would I have to behave the same as she does?" Maya said and Koenig hesitated, knowing the stories about Alexander's private life.

"Hopefully not in every aspect. How you spend your private time would be up to you though." he said, "Major Morrow and I would explain your primary duties here while Alexander would arrange for you to receive combat training-"

"I would be a soldier?" Maya said.

"The GDF is a military organisation. Even Doctor Russell has received basic combat training." Koenig replied, "We're not talking much. Just instruction in the correct handling and basic maintenance of small arms. Stun guns and magnetic accelerators. Would that be a problem?"

"I have never considered it colonel. The Dorcons did not permit any Psychon to possess a weapon." Maya replied, "I would be willing to learn though."

"Good. Major Carter would also arrange for you to be given basic pilot training in an Eagle. All GDF officers are encouraged to be able to fly one." Koenig told her.

"Among my people piloting is a male endeavour." Maya pointed out.

"We do things a little differently around here Maya. You'll be allowed to request training in a wide variety of disciplines. To begin with though we'll just get you up to speed on the basics. Of course you'll be provided with a uniform and quarters." Koenig said.

"I will not remain sharing with Francis?" Maya asked.

"No. Spacewoman Baker is enlisted. You'll be entitled to a room in the officers' quarters section.. So what do you say?" Koenig said.

9.

Carter had turned the survey Eagle to use its main drives to decelerate the craft as it approached the planet, using its radar to monitor the remaining distance to it. Then when the Eagle's speed was suitable for entering into orbit he turned it again.

"There it is." he said, smiling when he and Russell saw the planet through the cockpit viewports.

"Incredible. It looks so much like Earth." Russell replied as she smiled as well.

"Or at least it would if we could see cities and a vast network of orbital facilities." Carter pointed out and then after a moment's hesitation he added, "That may not exist any more of course. The shift in gravity when the moon left orbit could have had a catastrophic effect on satellites."

"Benes can you recommend a landing site?" Russell said into the Eagle's intercom.

"Yes doctor." Benes responded from the survey module loaded aboard the craft, "We're still not picking up any indications of sentient life so we don't need to worry about that. The planet is about the same temperature as Earth so I suggest either the northern or southern temperate regions."

"And here was I hoping for a holiday in the tropics." Carter commented.

"Later maybe." Russell said, "Biodiversity is likely to be wider in the tropics so that'll be a good place to look for medicinal plants but for soil for crops the temperate regions will provide material easier to sterilise of existing lifeforms."

"Okay doc. Whatever you say. Taking us in now." Carter said before there was the sound of an alarm in the eagle's cockpit, "We're picking up a wormhole. Kano's been updating our sensors to automatically register them." he added.

"There's another contact on the radar, not one of ours. It's just come through at the Lagrange point between the planet and that small moon." Russell said as she checked the Eagle's sensors herself.

"This is survey Eagle One to Hawks. Has anyone identified the new contact at the L-one point?" Carter broadcast.

"This is Hawk Three. No ID yet major but we're heading in. Sending you our feed now." one of the Hawk crewmen responded as he directed his attack ship towards the newly arrived vessel and one of the Eagle's monitors changed to show the data being fed from the Hawk.

As the Hawk closed in on the new contact a more detailed radar scan revealed the general shape of the spacecraft and both Russell and Carter immediately recognised the stingray-shaped configuration.

"That's a Dorcon ship!" Russell exclaimed.

"Hawk Three this is Eagle One. Engage immediately. No warning shots just destroy that ship before it can retreat." Carter ordered.

Immediately the Hawk began to accelerate at full power, its crew locking onto the Dorcon attack ship. The alien craft saw the approaching Hawk and detected the radar scan and in response it turned to meet the human vessel head on. However, before it could fire its forward mounted beam weapon the Hawk unleashed a ship to ship missile that dropped out of its internal weapons bay before speeding towards the alien ship. The Dorcon pilot moved to evade the missile, maintaining his forward acceleration while also turning as sharply as possible. The missile also turned but the Dorcon vessel was able to slip past it as the missile self destructed when its lock on the alien craft was lost. The Hawk had other weapons at its disposal though and its pilot also turned his craft, cutting the main engines to maintain its direction of travel while still changing its facing. This allowed the pilot to keep the Dorcon attack ship in front of the Hawk while his co-pilot targeted it with the craft's twin gauss cannons and opened fire. The stream of magnetically accelerated projectiles easily punched through the Dorcon hull and the alien ship's engines suddenly died as it began to tumble. Already caught in the gravitational pull of the planet the attack ship now fell towards it uncontrollably.

"This is Hawk Three we have a kill." the pilot signalled as he turned his ship to face the opposite direction to its travel so that the main engine could be used to slow it down.

"Copy that Hawk Three." Carter responded, watching as the Dorcon ship began to break up, "Eagle One-Five do you have a fix on the enemy ship?"

"Affirmative major." the pilot of Eagle One-Five, one of the craft launched from Epsilon carrying troops to both protect the survey and harvesting teams as well as deal with any civilians attempting to run the blockade.

"Good. Follow it down and secure the impact site. If there are survivors then detain them and recover whatever wreckage you can for shipment back to the moon." Carter ordered and Russell looked at him.

"You know there could be more of them?" she said and he nodded slowly.

"With any luck it's just a scout that won't be missed until we're gone but there could be company waiting for us down there." he replied.

"Find us somewhere to land as far from where that ship comes down as possible. I'm going to warn Alpha." Russell told him.

The travel tube car slowed as it approached Moonbase Lambda before coming to a stop at a station. Capston opened the door and stood back for Keynes to leave first and she smiled as she walked past him. Outside the station was clearly incomplete with scaffolding still in place and access panels open. This was not surprising though, most of the construction work at Lambda had been halted when the moon left Earth's orbit in exchange for expanding other bases on the moon instead. Keynes was also not surprised to see a fire team of armed soldiers waiting at the station who snapped to attention as their superior disembarked from the travel tube car behind her.

"Major Capston." an officer accompanying the soldiers said, saluting Capston.

"Lieutenant Marks do you know Alyson Keynes?" he replied as he returned the salute.

"I've not had the pleasure, no." Marks answered.

"What is our status?" Capston asked as they began to walk away from the travel tube car, the soldiers falling in behind them.

"The launch pads are all prepared to receive the shipments from the planet. We estimate that we can unload a full flight of ships and store their cargoes in about twenty minutes." Marks said.

"What about reloading?" Capston said.

"We can load them in about the same amount of time." Marks said.

"Load? What do you have to load?" Keynes asked, confused.

"Lieutenant Marks would you and your men please secure Miss Keynes? We can't have her getting under our feet while we arrange the evacuation but Mister Foxworth doesn't want anyone getting hurt." Capston ordered.

"What?" Keynes exclaimed when she heard this.

"Yes major." Marks responded and he turned to grab hold of Keynes while the soldiers behind her prevented her from escaping. Marks quickly produced a set of handcuffs and locked them around Keynes wrists before pulling her towards him, "This way miss." he said as he and the other soldiers forced her away from the travel tube station.

"What's happening? Let me go!" Keynes protested as she was dragged down a corridor that had been left incomplete when construction stopped until they reached an unmarked door and opened it. The room on the other side contained a number of equipment cases and as soon as the door slid open Keynes felt the cold air indicating that the temperature had been turned down.

The cases were along one wall and extended about half way across the otherwise empty room and Marks dragged Keynes past them before unlocking her handcuffs from around one of her wrists. The hope that he was about to free her was rapidly dashed though when instead he locked the loose end of the handcuffs around an exposed pipe.

"What are you doing?" Keynes called out as Marks backed away.

"Doing what Major Capston ordered me to. Making sure you don't get in our way." Marks told her.

"You can't just leave me here like this though." Keynes said.

"You're ex-military Miss Keynes, you must know the rule of three." Marks said and Keynes sighed.

"Three minutes without air. Three hours without shelter. Three days without water and three weeks without food. Survival one-oh-one." she replied.

"Well this room may be a bit chilly but you won't freeze. The air is cycling normally so you won't suffocate and since we'll be leaving in less than two days I doubt it will take so long for Colonel Koenig to send someone to investigate that you'll die of thirst or hunger." Marks said.

"And what about going to the bathroom? Where does that fit into your plan lieutenant?" Keynes said and Marks stepped through the door back into the corridor before picking up a plastic bucket that had been left there and tossing it towards Keynes.

"There you go. Everything you need." he said before closing the door and using his comlock to seal it, "Come on, we've got work to do and she's not going anywhere." he told the soldier with him and they all walked off down the corridor.

"Ready boys?" Alexander asked, looking at the squad of soldiers led by Washington in the corridor outside main mission.

"Don't worry lieutenant you can count on us." Washington replied before Alexander's comlock sounded to inform her of a message.

"Okay this is it she's coming." she said before darting back through the door into main mission and moments later Maya rounded a corner now wearing the dark blue uniform of a GDF lieutenant.

"Officer on deck!" Washington called out and the squad of soldiers all snapped to attention and saluted as Maya walked past them. Reaching the end of the line she halted just outside main mission and turned around before returning their salute.

"At ease." she said, remembering how she had seen other GDF officers address their subordinates and as the soldiers lowered their arms she went through the door.

"So how did it feel Maya?" Alexander asked from her duty station.

"Strange." Maya replied, "I was raised as a slave. I am not used to having people look to me for orders."

"Maya this will be your station." Morrow told her, standing beside the console that Keynes had occupied when she was Koenig's adjutant and Maya walked over and sat down.

"What do I do?" she asked.

"To start with Kano will set you up with an officer's log in. That will get you access to the colonel's schedule and the communication system. Most requests for meetings with him will come through you. It will be your job to sort out the ones he really needs to attend from the time wasters. Hopefully your ability to pick up on people's motivations will help with that." Morrow explained.

"I've already set up a log in and communication account." Kano added as he walked over to the console as well, "Do you just want me to map your basic account onto it? Your password and ID will stay the same that way."

"That's very kind of you captain." Maya replied, "But I sense that you all think there is something else you should be doing."

"Ah." Morrow replied and he looked at Alexander, "That would normally be Lieutenant Alexander's area of expertise."

"We normally try to prank new officers." Alexander said.

"Ah pranks. You mean like the incident Francis, sorry Leading Spacewoman Baker told me about. Before she was due to leave the moon to get married? You stripped her naked and locked her in a belt designed to prevent sexual intercourse. Then you concealed the key from her."

"Thanks for bringing that up again." Baker muttered.

"What was that spacewoman?" Morrow asked, looking towards her.

"Thanks for bringing that up again lieutenant." Baker said more loudly and Morrow smiled.

"That's better. Maya's an officer now." he said.

"I've got a transmission coming in from Survey Eagle One." Alexander announced loudly and upon hearing this Koenig got out of his chair and descended the steps leading from main mission to his office.

"Put it through lieutenant." he said and Alexander nodded.

Moments later Russell's face appeared on the big screen.

"This is Doctor Russell calling Moonbase Alpha." she said, "I have to report that as we approached the planet a Dorcon attack ship came through the wormhole at the L-one Lagrange point between it and its moon. One of our Hawks engaged the ship and shot it down. Carter has ordered one of the marine units from Epsilon to secure the crash site and recover anything they can. We only detected one ship but it must only be a matter of time before the Dorcons realise that it's missing and come looking. I suggest you take all necessary precautions to defend against an attack. Eagle One out." and then the screen returned to showing a magnified image of the planet.

"I don't like the sound of that." Kano commented.

"Get me Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi and Professor Bergman. I need to speak to them both as soon as possible. Maya I'll need your input as well." Koenig ordered.

S.

Carter flew the Eagle low over a lake that was surrounded by vegetation.

"That looks like a good spot there." he said, looking at an area of relatively flat ground beside the lake that was covered in something similar to grass.

"Take us in major." Russell responded and Carter brought the Eagle in to land.

When the Eagle's engines were shut down both Russell and Carter got out of their seats and made their way from the cockpit to the air lock module where they found Benes waiting for them.

"I take it you two are going first?" she asked as Russell and Carter put their space suit helmets on.

"Yes." Russell replied, "We'll double check that the atmosphere is breathable and Major Carter will utter the words that will live on for centuries as the first ones spoken on this planet by a human being. Which I will record on my comlock of course. You can follow when we know it's safe."

Benes nodded and stepped back into the survey module.

"I'll be monitoring you from in here." she said before the door slid shut.

Russell and Carter carried out their final checks on their spacesuits before Carter opened the external hatch.

"Off you go then major." Russell said, holding up her comlock and recording as he descended the steps to the surface.

"My suit isn't reading any toxins in the atmosphere." he said, glancing at the readouts on his wrist as he paused while standing on the bottom step.

"Me either." Russell replied from the top behind him, "I think you're clear."

Carter grinned, looking straight ahead as he stepped from the Eagle to the ground but as soon as his foot landed he heard a 'squelch' and his face fell as he looked down.

"Oh no." he said.

"You've got to be kidding me." Russell said, still recording as Carter stepped fully from the Eagle and then began to drag his foot across the ground to try and wipe off the substance he had just stood in, "Two hundred and eighty light years just to stand in-"

"Doctor what's happening?" Benes asked over the radio and Russell smiled.

"Err I think Major Carter has learned that it is better to take one giant leap for mankind than a small step for a man. Especially given what is at the bottom of the steps." she said.

"I'm not sure I understand doctor." Benes said.

"Let's just say that we've found evidence of some form of animal life in the area and that you're better off exiting the Eagle on the other side. Or least wiping your feet before coming back aboard." Russell told her and she smiled.

"Please tell me you got that on camera." she said.

"Of course. In the mean time all our instruments suggest that the environment is safe. You can come out now." Russell said, descending the steps and then leaping over where Carter had stepped to land on the ground. Then she opened the visor of her helmet and looked around at the alien world they had landed on. A patch of flowering plants immediately caught Russell's attention and she headed towards them, crouching down to pick one before taking out a scanner to examine its genetic structure for any indication that it held some medicinal value.

At the same time the rest of the Eagle's occupants began to disembark and overhead more craft descended, landing close by to begin the process of gathering the resources needed on the moon.

Given the urgency of the meeting Verdeschi did not attend in person. Instead an image of him appeared on one of the wall mounted screens in Koenig's office while Bergman and Maya sat in front of his desk.

"One moment." Koenig said, activating the control to close the wall separating them from main mission and when it had closed he turned to the screen, "Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi I take it Lieutenant Alexander has filled you in?" he said and Verdeschi nodded.

"Yes. I can put up a squadron of Hawks at thirty seconds notice. The launch tractors are already in position." he replied.

"Professor, you've been studying Dorcon technology, what advice can you offer for fighting off a full scale attack?" Koenig added, turning towards Bergman.

"Unfortunately there isn't much I can say colonel. From the wreckage I've been able to study I can tell you that the Dorcons have at least in part based their technology off that of the aliens they refer to as the Outsiders, just as we have, but that's about it. Obviously their ability to safely traverse wormholes in a controlled fashion indicates that unfortunately their understanding of Outsider technology is more advanced than ours, but the exact capabilities of their ships remain a mystery to me. If I had more intact vessels to study it would help but obviously that is easier for me to ask for than for you to provide." Bergman explained.

"Maya what can you tell me? How will the Dorcons react to the loss of their ship when they realise that it's missing? And how long until they do?" Koenig then asked Maya.

"That will depend colonel. As you know there are many different Dorcon lords all seeking to prove to their Archon that they can bring him the most wealth for their empire. If that vessel belonged to just a minor lord and had not been expected to check in for some time, if it was conducting a survey mission for example, then we may have several days as you measure them before the absence of the ship is noted and as little as just another single ship may be sent to see if the first has suffered an accident of some kind. On the other hand it could be the scout vessel for a large patrol group, in which case more ships could arrive in the system without warning in a very short time and that could include more powerful vessels." she said.

"Colonel we've shown that we can hold off a few of their capital ships here on the moon," Verdeschi said, "but if a battle group suddenly appears near the planet then I don't fancy the chances of the ships we have there fighting them off much."

"If we send the rest of our Hawks to cover them then we'll be leaving the moon wide open." Koenig pointed out and Verdeschi nodded.

"Yes but there is another option open to us. We can always fit our two Ospreys with nukes and send them." Verdeschi suggested.

"I didn't realise that you'd been able to mate the nuclear devices from the *Ultra* with any of your missiles Colonel Verdschi." Bergman replied.

"We haven't but they can be deployed as old fashioned ballistic weapons and triggered remotely." Verdeschi said.

"So just toss them out of the front of a fast moving ship then break off before the explosion?" Koenig said and Verdeschi nodded.

"Crude I know. But maybe a nuclear blast will make the Dorcons back off." Verdeschi responded.

"Okay do it. How long will it take to prep the ships and get them into orbit around the planet?" Koenig said.

"They can be there in under two hours. I assume you'll want it keeping quiet though?" Verdeschi said.

"Yes. We've had enough people whipping up anti-GDF sentiment over the nuclear program at Mu without giving them another excuse to use it against us. Besides I'd rather not start a panic about a possible Dorcon invasion. It could cause problems with the work crews on the planet's surface. If they down tools and demand to be returned to the moon then we'll never get the resources we need." Koenig said.

"Someone may start asking why we're sending both our bombers to the planet colonel." Verdeschi pointed out.

"Our official line will be that they are being sent to provide additional logistical support." Koenig replied.

"I suppose that is true in a way." Bergman said, "Of course it will be fire support instead of additional cargo space that is being provided."

"Maya do you think you can handle telling people that?" Koenig asked, turning to Maya.

"I understand lying colonel. I witnessed Lord Kollus attempt to deceive his rivals and sometimes he required me to assess their reactions." she said and Koenig smiled.

"Good. In that case I think we have a plan." he said as he opened the wall of his office again.

Keynes tugged at the handcuffs chaining her to the pipe attached to the wall but it was fitted securely enough that she gave up and instead rubbed her chained wrist as well as she could manage to try and relieve the pain. Then she looked around at her surroundings more closely, her breath forming a cloud of vapour in front of her face.

Like the corridor outside the room showed signs of being incomplete, with brackets fitted to the walls for mounting equipment that had yet to be installed. The crates that had been placed in the room before Keynes was imprisoned there bore various labels about their contents but many of these appeared old and none gave any indication of why the contents would require keeping cool. The small size of the room meant that Keynes was able to reach across to the crates and she grabbed hold of the nearest and pulled it towards her until she was able to comfortably reach the latches and open it up one handed. As soon as she lifted the lid of the crate she saw why it needed to be kept cool, inside it was filled with trays of medicines. Each plastic tray had dozens of small bottles lined up on it and these were shrink wrapped to hold them in place. It was obvious that these were some of the medicines that had been stolen and all of a sudden how it had been achieved became obvious. In his role overseeing the expansion of the moon's facilities Major Capston and his men had access to every single base and could move almost unlimited amounts of material between them without arousing suspicion. Faked requisitions could be filed to coincide with the presence of some of his men so that they could be asked to carry out a transfer between bases or equipment could simply be hidden until it could be moved. Moonbase Lambda also made an ideal hiding place. Keynes doubted that every member of Capston's staff were in on his scheme but the partially completed nature of the base meant that those who were not could easily be kept in the dark by closing down access to unfinished areas such as this one to anyone not involved.

Closing the lid of the crate, Keynes pulled another one closer to her and opened this one as well. As she had

expected this was also filled with medicines of varying types. This time she recognised the name of the drug printed on the packing label.

"This is Professor Bergman's heart drug." she said to herself.

The drug was one of the medicines derived from a plant introduced to Earth during the alien invasion of the mid twenty-second century and could not be reproduced on the moon where there were none of this plant. Significantly this medicine was used by Professor Bergman for his heart and the limited supply on the moon meant that he was at risk of running out in just a few months. Keynes did not know exactly how much of the medicine Bergman needed to take but the amount she was looking at in the crate was obviously a sizeable amount.

Immediately Keynes tore open the covering of the tray and grabbed as many of the bottles as she could with one hand and then stuffed them into the pocket of her combat fatigues. The problem was that her pocket now bulged visibly and Keynes did not want her captors to realise that she had taken anything from the crates or they would take it back. Also it occurred to her that the amount she had taken may not last long and she wanted to find a way of taking it all.

Unable to hide recovered medicines on herself Keynes looked around for anywhere she could hide them but no storage units had been installed yet that she might be able to use. However, it was the incomplete nature of the room that also offered Keynes a solution. The wall panels of the room were designed to clip over a frame before fasteners were used to secure them in place. While the panel beside Keynes had been clipped to their frames though she saw that the fasteners had not yet been screwed in place and this meant that the panel could be removed without the need for a tool.

This was still not an easy task however, the weight of the panel was difficult to lift free of the frame while Keynes had the use of just one hand and she struggled to get it moving. Once the panel was a few centimetres above its resting place though she was able to slide her foot beneath it and use that for additional leverage. She did not lift the panel off the frame it was mounted on though, instead she crouched down to get her shoulder under the panel and peered behind it. As she had hoped there was a sizeable void there and had she not been handcuffed to the pipe she could have used this to attempt to escape.

Fortunately this void was large enough to suit her immediate purpose though and she quickly emptied her pockets of the heart drug, tossing the bottles behind the wall.

The crates filled with medicines were not within reach while Keynes crouched where she was so she undid one of her boots and slipped it beneath the panel so it would not drop all the way closed when she was forced to lower it again when she moved out from beneath it herself to pull the crate closer. Her boot was positioned lengthways against the frame so that the sole would support the panel with enough room for her to get the trays of medicines from the crate behind the wall as quickly as possible. Then when the crate was empty she closed it again and fastened the latches before pulling another crate towards the wall and opening it as well to reveal the stolen medicines contained inside.

Foxworth sat down opposite the reporter while the final checks were being carried out to the camera.

"How widely will this be seen?" he asked.

"Our station just broadcasts at Kappa and Delta." the journalist replied, "But it will be available to view online from anywhere on the moon and we're hoping that some of the other networks will pick it up as well."

"I hope so. What I have to say needs to be heard by everyone." Foxworth said.

"We're set. The studio is signalling now." the producer said from behind the camera and she raised a hand to indicate that they were broadcasting live.

"Thank you Kate." the journalist said, having heard the introduction given by the news anchor in his earpiece, "I'm James Coster and I'm here with Edward Foxworth, leader of the Citizens' Committee. Mister Foxworth thank you for agreeing to speak to us."

"You're welcome James. It's a pleasure to be able to-"

"Mister Foxworth if I may get right to the point what is the background of the Citizens' Committee?" the journalist interrupted.

"We formed to ensure that the civilian population on the moon has a voice." Foxworth replied, "As you know the law gives supreme overall authority on the moon to the Global Defence Force, meaning that the most senior officer is our de-facto head of state. However, that law was written while we were in orbit around Earth and had recourse to our elected officials there. It was not meant to create a military dictatorship."

"But each base has its own civilian administration." the journalist pointed out.

"Of course it does James but each of those local administrations is entirely dependent on the GDF for protection and the distribution of resources. This despite the nuclear explosion that took us out of Earth's orbit having taken place at a GDF facility. The Citizens' Committee was founded by a number of individuals such as myself who were concerned that the military are not capable of running a government, that they should be subservient to us rather than our masters."

"So far none of the bases have had their governments compromised by the GDF." Coster pointed out.

"Perhaps not, but tell me this James why does Colonel John Koenig get to decide for every man woman and

child on the moon that they must stay here? Our travel through space is random and the odds of accidentally arriving back in our own solar system or even Proxima Centauri out of the hundred million stars in our galaxy are remote. We should be prepared to abandon the moon and relocate to another habitable planet.” Foxworth replied.

“A planet such as the one in this very system?” Coster asked and Foxworth nodded.

“Precisely like that one.” he answered, “Of course there is the possibility that the environment of this particular planet may be toxic to us, rendering it useless as a new home but on the other hand it could be ideal. It could possess an environment where we can walk on the surface without a sealed pressure suit and life support pack and where even with the current rationing of food supplies we will inevitably run out in under a decade. Now the GDF has a survey team on the planet this minute, evaluating the environment with a view to plundering it of anything useful whereas what they should be doing is evaluating whether or not we can establish a permanent settlement there. If so then an evacuation should be arranged as swiftly as possible, before the moon once again passes through the wormhole and this system is lost to us.”

“Ah yes the evacuation. I understand that the Citizens' Committee has produced a report on that issue concerning how such an evacuation would be carried out and how long it would take. Can the moon really be evacuated in twenty-six hours Mister Foxworth?” Coster said.

“Yes, easily. In fact that is a conservative estimate based on the situation we currently find ourselves in, where no preparations have been made for an evacuation but we are presented with an opportunity like the one at hand.” Foxworth responded, smiling.

“I have a copy of that report here.” Coster said, lifting up a tablet and looking at the screen, “It treats the distance to the hypothetical planet as irrelevant. Why is that?”

“Simply because we do not need to concern ourselves with getting every man, woman and child from the moon to a new new planet along with all the necessary equipment for starting a new life there before the moon enters the wormhole once more. All that is required is to get far enough away from the moon to not be dragged into the wormhole with it. This means that we can focus our initial efforts into simply launching supplies into space and leaving them to drift before we commence transporting people to the planet in question. After that it is simply a matter of sending Eagles back into space to recover them.” Foxworth said.

“But there are more than a hundred thousand people on the moon while the rated lifting capacity of the craft available to us is less than a third of that.” Coster said.

“For regular operation, yes that is true. However, that is based on round trips at their maximum range. It may prove uncomfortable for the duration of the journey but most of our craft can take up to twice their rated capacity in an emergency. Plus that figure is based on the number of lifting frames we have for our Eagles, the most common craft available to us when it should be based on the capacity of the available modules capable of transporting passengers. Such modules can be carried into space before being ejected towards their destination. After that the Eagle can return to the moon for another module while the first continues towards its target. At the other end these can be recovered in the same way as our supplies.” Foxworth explained, “The one difficulty is that control of most of these vessels is in the hands of one man, Colonel John Koenig and he has made clear his refusal to even consider any point of view other than his own. Indeed his officers are refusing permission for any civilian flights to approach the habitable planet in this system and he has placed a force of warships around it to prevent anyone from reaching it even if they are able to get away from the moon. Furthermore I am already hearing rumours that lunar defences are being readied in secret. The planet is not inhabited so what purpose can these be for if not to shoot down our own vessels in clear violation of the right to explore and settle?”

6.

"So how's it going lieutenant?" Baker asked as she set a mug of coffee down at the edge of Maya's console. "Difficult." Maya replied, "The requirements of organising Colonel Koenig's schedule are very complicated. I am still familiarising myself with them."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out." Baker said before all of a sudden a large cluster of messages appeared on one of the console's displays and the list continued to grow, "Looks like the colonel is suddenly in demand." Baker commented.

"A lot of these are from those people I believe are supposed to be called 'reporters' although I have heard Colonel Koenig, Major Morrow and Lieutenant Alexander also refer to them as 'jerks', 'cretins', 'agitators' and 'worthless consumers of valuable oxygen.'"

"Yeah, perhaps you should stick with reporters when you're dealing with them Maya." Baker suggested.

"Did I just hear the phrase worthless consumers of oxygen?" Morrow commented as he walked over to the console as well, "What do the press want now?"

"This one wants to ask Colonel Koenig about an interview given by Edward Foxworth." Maya answered before opening another message, "As does this one."

"So Foxworth's been running his mouth off again and some idiot gave him air time." Morrow said and then he frowned, "There are a number of official addresses among those as well. See what they want." he said and Maya opened one of the messages that came from one of the moon's local politicians.

"The Mayor of Moonbase Gamma is requesting a meeting to discuss the points raised in the interview as well. She is accusing Colonel Koenig of exceeding his authority in ordering defences to shoot down civilian craft. I did not know that the colonel had given such an order." Maya said.

"He hasn't but I bet it was spun that way in this interview everyone's asking about. Maya see if you can find it online and give it to Colonel Koenig." Morrow said and Maya nodded.

"Yes major." she said.

Finding footage of the interview did not take long and Maya copied it to her tablet before getting up and walking up the steps to Koenig's office.

"Ah Maya, is that for me?" Koenig asked, looking up from his console.

"Yes colonel. Major Morrow indicated that you may wish to see it." she answered, handing him the tablet.

"So what is it?" Koenig said.

"It is an interview that Mister Foxworth has just given." Maya told him and he frowned.

"Foxworth? I've been doing my best to ignore him and his merry band of self appointed busybodies." he said.

"I have received many requests from members of the press and the leaders of your bases for meetings with you to discuss what Mister Foxworth has said." Maya told him and he nodded.

"Let's see what he has to say then. Have you seen this?" Koenig responded and Maya shook her head.

"No colonel. I brought it straight to you." she said.

"Then take a seat and we'll watch it together. I want you to tell me what Foxworth's thinking." Koenig ordered and while Maya sat down he transferred the interview to his computer terminal before playing it back.

Koenig and Maya both watched the interview in silence, Koenig focusing on what Foxworth said while Maya also paid attention to his expressions and body language.

"He is confident." Maya said as soon as the interview ended and Koenig turned towards her, "He believes that he is making progress in his aims and the way he mentions your name indicates that he thinks he has you at a specific disadvantage."

"I don't suppose you can tell me exactly what he's up to can you?" Koenig said.

"Not from that footage no colonel. I am sorry." Maya replied.

"Don't worry Maya there's no need to be. You've already given me more information than anyone else could have done. It's clear why the press are asking for a response though so I want you to prepare one. Tell them that it's just not possible to guarantee that any planet we encounter is safe for long term habitation in the small windows available to us and an evacuation would risk stranding us on a planet we can't survive on." Koenig said.

"Yes colonel. What about the preparations we are making to fight off a Dorcon attack?" Maya said and Koenig hesitated.

"Leave any mention of the Dorcons out of your briefing for now. I don't want to start a moon-wide panic. Tell them that we haven't verified that there aren't any dangerous lifeforms on the planet yet and are maintaining the strictest quarantine procedures." he said.

"Of course colonel." Maya said before turning to leave.

"Oh and Maya?" Koenig called out after her.

"Yes colonel?" she said.

"Don't be afraid to let those idiot reporters know that you can sense their feelings and motives. They're more interested in trying to trip you up to make themselves look good than actually tell their audiences the truth so anything that disrupts them is going to be good for you." Koenig told her.

"Yes colonel." Maya replied before returning to main mission.

As she was descending the steps outside Koenig's office he turned to the communicator built into his desk and activated it.

"Lambda." the voice of the officer who appeared on the screen said.

"I want to talk to Major Capston." Koenig said.

"The major is-" the officer began.

"Now captain. Right now." Koenig interrupted in a stern voice.

"Putting you through to his comlock now colonel." the captain said and moments later his face was replaced with an image of Capston's via his comlock's video function.

"Ah Colonel Koenig." Capston said, "I was about to call you. We have a problem."

"Yes major I'm sure we do. Though I'm guessing that we're talking about different ones. How about you go first?" Koenig said.

"It's about Alyson Keynes colonel." Capston said and Koenig frowned.

"What about her? If she's asking for access to restricted information then give it to her. I think she can be trusted." he said.

"She's disappeared." Capston replied and Koenig hesitated, unsure of how to respond, "She was under guard in a room set aside for her to work in when the officer I'd assigned to her was called away. By the time she got back Keynes was gone. It looks like she was able to open up an unfinished wall and get out without the guards outside noticing." Capston said.

"She's never shown any inclination towards absconding before." Koenig replied, "Are you sure this wasn't an abduction?"

"There were no signs of a struggle colonel. Obviously I was the one that dismissed the security detail you assigned so the responsibility for this is mine."

"Never mind that now major. I'm more concerned with why she'd vanish now." Koenig said.

"Colonel have you considered that she may have been planing this for some time? At Alpha you kept her surrounded by a full security detail while I gave her more freedom. Perhaps she was waiting for that.

Perhaps she realised that she'd never be able to escape from Alpha so deliberately engineered a situation where you'd send her somewhere else."

"Are you saying that supplies aren't being stolen?"

"I'd be surprised if some weren't being taken to sell on the black market but the figures Keynes showed me would require high level action to carry out." Capston said, "Colonel I've got people hunting for her now and I've given orders that she's to be taken alive but I don't have enough troops to scour every corner of this base as well as make sure all those transports coming back are unloaded so I've concentrated on making sure she can't leave. The travel tube station is locked down and all the hangars are sealed. The nearest other base form here is Zeta and even that's too far for someone to walk so my people are also checking all the moon buggies and exo-rovers. I figure that if we can at least keep her here then once all this is dealt with I can organise a more thorough search."

"Okay that all sounds good. In the meantime I'd like to ask you about your friend Edward Foxworth. He's just given another interview trashing my intention to return us to Earth and Maya thinks he has something up his sleeve. Has he said anything to you about it?" Koenig said.

"Colonel I've never kept it a secret from you that I think we should be looking for a new planet to settle on rather than holding out the remote hope that we'll happen to stumble across Earth again but you are my superior and Foxworth knows that. Our conversations have revolved around him wanting me to try and talk you around to his point of view. Nothing more. If he's planning anything then he hasn't brought me in on it. Anyway I don't think you need to worry about him. He's never struck me as the sort to stage a rebellion."

With only one hand available to work with the process of moving the stolen medicines from the crates they were stored in to the void behind the open wall panel was time consuming and difficult. The trays on which the small bottles of tablets were mounted were lightweight and flexible so when Keynes tried to pick them up from just one end they would bend and she was concerned that this would enable some of the bottles at the end of the packaging to slip out under the opening in the shrink wrap. The idea of losing even one or two bottles from each tray did not worry Keynes much, the moon stood to lose far more than that if Capston was able to remove everything but if even a single bottle rolled out of Keynes' limited reach then the next time that the door opened whoever entered the room could realise what she had been up to and all her effort would be for nothing.

As each crate was emptied Keynes pushed it aside and then stretched out her arm to grab the next and pull it towards her. It was while she was doing this that she cursed her small size, at barely more than a metre and a half tall she felt the handcuffs digging into her wrist as she stretched."

"Why couldn't you be taller Alyson?" she muttered, wincing from the pain as the metal dug into the flesh of her hand.

Carter had already changed out of his spacesuit when Russell returned to the Eagle and found him in the survey module with Benes, both of them studying the data feeds from the other craft.

"Anything to report?" she asked as she set down her sealed sample case and began to remove her own spacesuit.

"The first Eagles are ready to launch back to the moon." Benes answered.

"What about decontamination?" Russell added, tugging at a boot that was stuck on her foot.

"By vacuum." Carter said, "The cargo containers will be opened to space. Somehow I doubt that any life form that can survive an hour and a half in space would evolve on the surface of a planet like this. By the time the Eagles get to the moon anything living inside that dirt will be dead and we'll just be left with the base chemicals we're after."

"The soil is also being filtered before loading. The work crews have reported getting it far down enough that nothing over a centimetre across is being loaded." Benes added.

"So how about you doc? Find the cure to the common cold out there?" Carter asked. Looking at the sample case.

"Give me a hand with these boots would you Alan?" Russell responded, sitting down and holding out a foot. Then as he crouched down and began to pull on the boot she continued, "I found a few flowering plants with genetic structures similar enough to some medicinal species found on Earth that they may prove useful. The case contains four complete plants along with a number of seeds we can use for cultivation. Unfortunately everything here looks like it evolved naturally. I was hoping that the planet could be another world that the aliens who attacked Earth could have had a presence on and we'd find examples of their handiwork."

"Such as the plant Professor Bergman's pills are made from?" Carter said right as Russell's boot finally came free of her foot.

"Thanks." she said, raising the other foot, "And yes I was specifically hoping to find some of those plants. Without them I don't see Professor Bergman or any of the other people on the moon taking the drug created from them surviving to the end of the year."

"We could always try somewhere else on the planet." Benes suggested, "Perhaps the more tropical areas would yield better results."

"It's a possibility but frankly wherever we try I'd be looking at random. At least here we have more than two hundred pairs of eyes exploring and feeding back everything they find to that console of yours. That's why I came back. I thought I'd grab something to eat and see what results you've had. Maybe something will show itself." Russell said.

"Condor Two brought several moon buggies with it in addition to the exo-tractors doctor." Carter said when he had just pulled off Russell's other boot and he stood back up, "We can cover more ground with them."

"Thanks. By the way, did we get a reply from Alpha about that Dorcon ship?" Russell said.

"Oh you're going to love this." Carter said, "Colonel Koenig and Verdeschi have sent the Ospreys. Both of them and they're loaded with nukes."

"What the hell are they thinking sending nuclear weapons?" Russell exclaimed when she heard this.

"I think they're thinking that a nuclear blast might persuade the Dorcons to back off while we make a run back to the moon." Carter said and Russell sighed.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." she said.

7.

When the door to Bergman's laboratory chimed he looked at his comlock to see who was outside and he saw Alexander and Maya standing in the corridor. Hurrying to the door he smiled as it opened and stepped back to allow the two women to enter.

"Lieutenants, do come in." he said, "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"It's business I'm afraid professor." Alexander replied, "Maya has to give a press conference in twenty minutes and Colonel Koenig says that you may be able to help with part of it."

"I require your input about the report Mister Foxworth's Citizens' Committee compiled about evacuating the moon. Colonel Koenig said that you had read it." Maya added.

"Please sit down." Bergman said, "Yes, I've read that report."

"And?" Alexander asked.

"It was trash. It was clearly compiled by an assortment of lawyers and public relations agents." Bergman answered."

"So the numbers are wrong?" Alexander said.

"Oh no the numbers are correct but they were gathered without any thought to what they meant. For example the carrying capacity of an Eagle's passenger module is quoted correctly and it's true that it is possible to exceed those numbers but the report talks about ejecting modules into space filled with people. Nowhere have they taken into account the difficulties in actually operating a spacecraft as complicated as an Eagle. Lieutenant Alexander you're a qualified pilot, what happens if you run an Eagle constantly without any maintenance between flights?"

"It breaks down." Alexander said.

"Precisely. Only according to Foxworth's plan one Eagle can be used to fly half a dozen modules into space and dump them and their passengers there to wait their turn to then be collected and deposited onto a planet with totally unknown surface and atmospheric conditions. The operation Colonel Koenig has authorised to gather resources from this system is going to push our ships to their limits with just an hour or so to service them between flights but Foxworth's plan wouldn't even give them that. In addition to the lifting bodies there is the issue of the modules themselves. They do have independent life support systems, that's true enough but it's so that they can function as emergency escape vessels should something happen to the lifting body. They aren't independent spacecraft and to use them as such is just downright dangerous. Let me tell you this, Mister Foxworth's report isn't a plan to evacuate the moon it's a plan to kill half its inhabitants before they even set foot on another planet." Bergman said while Maya made notes on her tablet.

"Thank you professor. This information may be very useful." she said and then she looked at Alexander, "I think I have everything I need." she added and Alexander nodded.

"Thanks professor." she said, "We better get going. We don't want to keep those idiots from the press waiting."

"Nervous?" Alexander asked as she and Maya approached Tranquility Park where a group of journalists had once again assembled to hear the GDF's official response to Foxworth's interview.

"I have never had to address a crowd before but I have prepared what I'll be saying." Maya responded.

"Well if it helps just picture them in their underwear." Alexander said and Maya frowned as they walked.

"Why would this help?" she asked.

"Because that would make them less threatening." Alexander said.

"Then why do people speak of your underwear as being more threatening?" Maya said.

"Never mind my underwear. We're here." Alexander replied and she opened the door to Tranquility Park.

The journalists had not been told that they would be being addressed by Maya and they paid no attention as the two women officers walked into the room, expecting Koenig to arrive at any moment.

"It's starting." Kano called out across main mission.

"What is?" Morrow asked.

"Maya's press conference. I thought we should watch it." Kano told him.

"Hold on I'm coming down." Koenig announced from his office before he, Morrow, Baker and several other members of the command staff made their way to Kano's console to watch the broadcast.

Maya walked up to the podium and looked at the gathered journalists, recognising the man who had interviewed Foxworth among them. None of them acknowledged her presence though and they continued to talk among themselves. Alexander had followed Maya and now stood with her back against the viewport behind them and Maya looked at her.

"Your first test." Alexander said, smiling and Maya instantly sensed that she intended her to get the attention of the journalists by herself.

"My name is Lieutenant Maya." she said clearly and the journalists all suddenly turned towards her. Pausing for a moment she studied the crowd and sensed their dissatisfaction with her presence in place of Koenig's, "I am the adjutant to Colonel Koenig and have a statement to make regarding misleading comments levelled at him during a recent news broadcast." she added.

"Are you accusing the press of inventing stories?" Coster suddenly called out from where he sat but Maya ignored him, knowing that he was attempting to prevent her from making her prepared statement and instead focus the attention of the journalists on him.

"At this moment there are more than two hundred officers and enlisted men of the Global Defence Force engaged in an operation to recover elements that do not occur on the moon from a planet in this system. This planet exists in the so-called goldilocks zone where it is possible for an environment hospitable to human life to exist. Because of this certain groups who have argued against the stated policy of returning to Earth have suggested that an evacuation should be organised to relocate the population of the moon to this planet entirely. I am here to dismiss this idea. The report on which it is based is known to be flawed, failing to take into account the practical limitations of the technology available to us as well as unknown factors regarding the planet. This report has been subject to a professional review and rejected in its entirety, therefore using it as the basis for any news report is extremely dangerous. This could have been confirmed with a simple query to main mission at Moonbase Alpha. Secondly it has been implied that orders have been issued to arbitrarily destroy civil vessels approaching the planet and again this is false. Given that the senior medical officer at Moonbase Alpha, Lieutenant Colonel Helena Russell, has yet to sign off on the safety of the environment flight clearance is not being granted for craft to approach the planet at this time. The occupants of vessels that violate this exclusion zone will be treated in the same way as any other violators of such rules would. Unauthorised flights put at risk the safety of military and civilian personnel and to encourage them is highly irresponsible. I will now accept questions." she said and Coster immediately leapt to his feet.

"Miss Maya-

"Lieutenant." Maya interrupted and Coster frowned.

"Lieutenant Maya why won't Colonel Koenig face us with this information?" he said.

"Colonel Koenig is the senior officer on the moon. As his adjutant it is part of my duty to present information and so I am here instead." Maya replied

"But who are you? You aren't human so can-" Coster began and Maya once again sensed that he was more interested in focusing attention on himself than any reply she gave.

"I gave you my name at the start of the presentation. Perhaps the person sat next to you could help you while another journalist is given the same opportunity to ask a question as you have just had." she interrupted before pointing to a second journalist, one she noticed smirking at her put down of Coster. This was important, Maya wanted to avoid anyone who might play into Coster's hands by continuing his line of questioning.

"You mentioned flaws in the report compiled by the Citizens' Committee. Would you care to expand on that?" the woman Maya chose asked.

"Of course. The lifting capacity of the fleet available to evacuate the moon is less than a third of that needed to move the entire population even without any of the equipment that would be essential to maintain anything other than a stone age society. This would require every craft available to operate around the clock without any downtime for servicing. The wear this would place on the vessels would inevitably lead to breakdowns that have not been taken into account by the Citizens' Committee fronted by Edward Foxworth. Neither have the consequences of settling on a planet that has dangerous factors not obvious from a basic survey. These could be as basic as the existence of dangerous lifeforms or atmospheric fluctuations caused by seasonal variation or even the proximity of hostile aliens who may attack a static colony after the moon has left the system and continues to travel through space." Maya answered, "Now I will take one more question," and when Coster raised his hand again she added, "from someone who has not yet had the chance."

"Lieutenant Maya could you explain your presence? I understand that you are now Colonel Koenig's adjutant but as my fellow journalist pointed out it's obvious that you aren't human." the third journalist said.

"That is correct. I am a Psychon. Specifically I am the individual rescued by Colonel Koenig and Lieutenant Colonel Russell from the Dorcon planet the moon encountered when it first left your solar system. Some of your outlets have reported on my presence on the moon now in an advisory role. Colonel Koenig has now seen fit to award me a commission with the GDF and I hope to demonstrate to him and you that I am worthy of the honour given to me. Thank you. That is now the end of this press conference. Further questions may be sent to me directly via electronic means." Maya said and then she looked at Alexander and nodded before the two women headed for the exit.

Several of the journalists tried calling out other questions as they headed out of Tranquility Park but Maya ignored them and when Coster tried to step into their way she quickly sidestepped him. This did not

immediately dissuade Coster from following them but as soon as the exit leading to Alpha's command section opened a guard moved to block his path.

"This is a restricted area." he said sternly as Alexander and Maya departed. Then when the door slid shut behind them Alexander placed her arm around Maya's shoulders.

"Well I think that went well. You put that Coster guy in his place. Did you picture him in his underwear?" she said.

"No. That man is not interested in getting the answers to legitimate questions. He only wants to advance his own career and he sees keeping people focused on him as a means to do it. I believe that he may also be working closely with Edward Foxworth." Maya replied.

"In that case he may actually be worth paying attention to." Alexander commented.

"Yes major?" Foxworth said when he answered his communicator and saw Capston's face.

"I take it you saw the press conference?" Capston asked and Foxworth nodded.

"Yes it was very disappointing. I was hoping that the information I'd given to Coster would let him put Koenig on the spot but that woman shut him down instead. If that's the best he can do I think it's a good job that we won't be here much longer. Unfortunately it does make our task much harder. I had hoped to be able to stir up widespread dissatisfaction with Koenig among local authorities. Now though she's made us look incompetent. I'll be having words with the team that wrote our report. It obviously needs amending to remove the technical issues. Perhaps we could " he replied.

"We may have a bigger problem than that Mister Foxworth." Capston said.

"Is there a technical issue?" Foxworth said, obviously concerned.

"No it's that woman from the news. Maya, Koenig's new adjutant." Capston answered.

"What about her?" Foxworth said, his concern turning to uncertainty.

"To put it crudely she can read minds. If I have to deal with Koenig from now on I'll probably have to go through her and she may realise what we're up to." Capston told him.

"But you're at Lambda and she's at Alpha. Are you seriously telling me that she can read your mind from that far away? If she can then Koenig would have uncovered us already. We have other people much closer after all." Foxworth said.

"It's more than just being psychic. As I've heard it explained her senses are heightened and she can pick up on things from your body language and tone of voice. Even over a communication channel she'd know if was hiding something or lying." Capston said.

"Then I suggest you avoid all contact with Moonbase Alpha's command staff Major Capston. I take it that there are at least some of your officers who are unaware of our activities?" Foxworth asked.

"Yes, I only brought in people I was certain could be trusted." Capston said.

"Then find one that you don't trust and have them intercept all your calls. What did you do with that Miss Keynes?" Foxworth said.

"One of my men left her tied up in a storeroom. Don't worry she'll be a little chilly in there but she'll still be alive when Koenig's people find her."

"And have you told Colonel Koenig anything about why she isn't sending him reports?" Foxworth said.

"I told him that she'd absconded. That it looked like she escaped into the structure of the base and that I'm locking it all down to make sure she doesn't get away." Capston said and Foxworth smiled.

"Then there you have your answer Major Capston. Have your subordinate tell Koenig or any of his people including this mind reading alien that you are personally hunting the fugitive Miss Keynes. I take it that there is somewhere on the base that you can conceal yourself in and direct our operation while not being available to anyone looking for you who isn't working for us?" he said.

"The *Ultra*." Capston replied, smiling, "I've got our people loading it now and making sure it's ready for launch. I can direct my part of the operation from there."

"Good. In the mean time I will have our supporters advance to the next stage." Foxworth told him.

A cluster of civilians entered the waiting area of a launch pad at Moonbase Kappa and walked directly towards the entrance to the boarding tube. The display above the door indicated that there was a craft currently on the launch pad but that access to it was forbidden. All the major moon bases kept a number of craft on standby for immediate launch but they were not intended for civilian use and so the door did not open when the controls were pressed. This did not dissuade the crowd though and they began hammering on the door. However, this only served to attract the attention of the local sheriff's office and a unit of deputies soon came rushing to the launch pad.

"Get back! Get back! This Eagle is not for public use. Leave the area immediately." one of them yelled as they pushed their way through the crowd to get to the door and dragged the individuals attempting to force their way aboard the Eagle away from the door. None of the crowd resisted when the sheriff's deputies acted, not even those who had been attacking the door and they all retreated a short distance. However, they did not disperse as they had been ordered to and instead they began shouting at the deputies and demanding to

be allowed aboard the Eagle so that they could travel to the planet.



"Colonel I think we may have a problem." Baker announced.

"What's wrong spacewoman?" Koenig replied, leaving his office and descending the steps to main mission.

"We're getting a lot of local security alerts from multiple bases colonel. There are groups gathering at launch pads and demanding to be allowed to travel to the planet." Baker told him.

"Colonel I'm getting the same alert from Alpha's launch pads. The sheriff's office is asking for help."

Alexander added.

"I don't like this." Koenig said, "Lieutenant Alexander I want troops deployed to all Alpha's launch pads. Alert the garrisons at other bases to stand by just in case they get asked for assistance as well." Koenig then turned towards Maya, "Maya I want you to monitor these crowds. See what you can pick up about them."

"Colonel I think you should see this." Morrow commented and he pointed to the big screen as he transferred the footage he had seen.

"Where is this?" Koenig asked as he looked at the image of a crowd gathered at a launch pad. This was large enough to be crammed into the waiting area with very little room for anyone to move and a number of the members of the crowd were waving banners.

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"Now why don't I think that that crowd just happened to have those banners handy?" Koenig commented.

"A pre-arranged mob." Morrow responded.

"Any thoughts Maya?" Koenig asked.

"They have a role to play." Maya answered and Morrow frowned.

"A role?" he said and she nodded.

"Yes major. They have been given instructions to follow. Their protest is not spontaneous." she explained.

"And look who's joined them." Alexander said, rolling her eyes when she saw Coster at the back of the crowd with a camera operator.

"Now isn't it convenient that he was able to arrive so quickly?" Kano said.

"Someone tipped him off." Koenig said, "Maya take a look at the security footage of the other protests. I want to know if you get the same feelings from all the mobs and if anyone stands out as someone we should investigate further."

"Yes colonel." Maya replied.

"I'll make sure she has the feeds." Kano added and Koenig nodded.

"The sooner we get away from here the happier I'll be." he said.

When the last of the crates containing the stolen medicines emptied Keynes pulled her boot out from under the wall panel and it dropped back into place with a dull 'clump'. Keynes froze when she heard this, worried that someone would have heard the noise but the door to the storeroom remained shut. She then looked around at the crates she had moved across the room. It was obvious that they had been moved and Keynes knew that she needed a way of hiding what she had done.

Knowing that she would never be able to get all of the crates back into the exact positions they had started in so she decided that she would make it appear that she had wanted to move them for some purpose other than gaining access to their contents. After putting her boot back on she pulled the crates closer she began to pile them up alongside the wall she had opened, creating a raised surface on which she then sat and waited for her captors to return.

"Ready doctor?" Carter asked when the preflight checks were completed and Russell nodded.

"Ready major." she said.

"Benes what's our status?" Carter said into the intercom.

"Work crews have loaded the first wave of Eagles and Condors. They'll continue digging so that they'll have a stockpile to load as soon as they return. The biological survey units are still logging and collecting samples. They'll transmit their results to the moon for Doctor Russell to evaluate." Benes responded.

"In that case we're all set. Launching now." Carter said and he pulled back on the Eagle's flight controls.

The Eagle's thrusters roared as the craft rose up off the ground before its main engines fired and it rapidly

accelerated forwards, ascending through the atmosphere until returning to space. The survey Eagle was not alone though. Around it were other Eagles being used to transport simple dirt back to the moon while behind them came larger Condors that were also filled with dirt. When they were clear of the planet's atmosphere the cargo vessels opened their holds to space, evacuating all of the air inside to deprive any life forms that had been scooped up along with the dirt of the oxygen they needed to survive. Combined with the extreme temperature of outer space it was hoped that this would provide an effective means of sterilising the cargo while preserving the chemical elements within the dirt itself.

"Survey Eagle One to Moonbase Alpha." Russell said, activating the Eagle's communication system, "We're on our way back now. Have a pot of coffee waiting for us when we land would you? Eagle One out."

Capston watched the approach of the returning craft on a screen in the cockpit aboard the *Ultra*. The warship's active sensors themselves were by necessity inactive. Had they been operating then the emissions could have alerted anyone with a suitable receiver to the fact that the vessel was not as inactive as he had told Koenig and the moon's other senior officers. Instead a hard line between the *Ultra* and Moonbase Lambda had been set up so that data could be sent to the warship without arousing suspicion. As far as any of the personnel on the base that were not part of the plans Capston and Foxworth were making were concerned this link was simply to provide the work crews aboard the *Ultra* with a reliable link to the communication and supply databases they needed access to while they renovated the ship for future use. "How many of those will be coming here?" he asked one of the enlisted men who were monitoring the sensor feed.

"All of the Condors and all but two of the Eagles major. The other Eagles are the survey ship that is returning to Moonbase Alpha and a troop carrier heading for Epsilon. There's another Eagle outbound from Epsilon now to replace it as part of the blockade." the enlisted man answered and he pointed to another sensor contact on the screen that was apart from the others and heading in the opposite direction.

"Okay sergeant, make sure that only our people are in the hangar and get the first load of equipment ready for putting aboard the ships as soon as they're empty. I'll be in my cabin if you need me." Capston ordered and the enlisted man nodded.

"Yes major." he replied.

Capston then exited the cockpit, making his way to the somewhat cramped compartment that had doubled as both the sleeping quarters and private office of the *Ultra*'s commanding officer when it had been an active warship. Sitting down he then activated the private communication channel, placing a call through to Moonbase Kappa.

"Yes?" Foxworth asked when his face appeared on the screen.

"Mister Foxworth I thought you may like to know that the first wave of ships is on its way back from the planet." Capston told him and he smiled.

"Excellent news major. How long will it take to get the equipment loaded?" Foxworth replied.

"It shouldn't take much more than an hour. Anything over two and we'd start to have problems in keeping it hidden. We can't afford any breakdowns so my maintenance crews need to be able to run diagnostics and sort out any obvious problems. The diagnostics will take about half an hour by which time the material being brought back will have been unloaded and any repair work needed can be carried out but if that takes too long then Koenig may start asking for updates." Capston told him.

"Of course. Of course. Now what will you be sending first?" Foxworth said.

"Basic construction supplies." Capston said, "I've been looking over the aerial survey data and there's a favourable looking spot that the gear can be air dropped to about twenty kilometres from where the digging is going on. Our ships will all approach from that direction and jettison their cargoes when they're over it."

"What about the orbiting blockade? Won't the Hawk pilots notice that?" Foxworth pointed out.

"No, their attention will be focused on space, watching for any unauthorised ships approaching from the moon." Capston answered.

"Very well major, if you're sure. How many trips will we get?"

"If all goes to schedule the Eagles will all make two more runs back and the Condors one each before they make their final one with the digging equipment." Capston said.

"Which will not be unloaded I take it?" Foxworth responded.

"No. There'll still be enough room aboard the ships for our people to squeeze in among the gear. The only things that will need loading are the medical supplies. They need to be kept in a controlled environment so we can't risk just dumping cargo containers full of them out over the countryside. It shouldn't take too long though I hope. that's going to be even more important that time around. We won't have time for the full maintenance checks before launch and we need to make sure that everyone not involved in Operation Exodus is securely isolated." Capston said.

"Will there be violence?" Foxworth asked with uncertainty, "You know how I feel about bloodshed Major Capston."

"There may be some resistance, yes but by this time we'll already have emptied the armoury here and only

my men will have weapons. Stun guns may be painful but they are rarely lethal so at worst we'll be giving a few more people bad migraines when they wake up rather than filling them with bullet holes." Capston reassured him.

"Good. Where will they be held exactly?"

"The medical section. It can be isolated to enforce a quarantine and we can easily cut off its communication with the rest of the moon. My men will make their move as soon as we get confirmation that the ships are on their way back for the final time." Capston told him.

"Good. I need you to be ready before we have the others make their public move. If the worst comes to the worst then we'll have a few fewer mouths to feed when we set up our new colony but we can't do without the men and supplies you've assembled over there at Lambda major." Foxworth said.

"Don't worry Mister Foxworth. We've put months of planning and effort into this. Nothing can possibly go wrong. Once we launch that's it. It will be too late to send any other ships after us and Koenig wouldn't dare just shoot us down out of spite. Capston out." Capston replied with a smile and then he abruptly shut off the channel.

"Ah the first man to set foot on the planet." Koenig said when the door to the boarding tube opened and Carter stepped out into the waiting area, "So how was the auspicious occasion?"

"Not as glamorous as you'd think." Russell said from behind Carter and then she noticed that Koenig was holding something behind his back, "What have you got there John?" she asked and he smiled as he brought his hands round in front of him to reveal the pot of coffee in one hand and the three mugs in the other.

"Just as you requested Helena." he replied, "Corporal Soshi over there has the whitener and sweeteners for those who want them." and he glanced towards one of the soldiers present.

"Yes, what's with the added security?" Russell said, looking at the armed and armoured troops present as she took a mug and Koenig started to pour coffee into it.

"I suspect Edward Foxworth." Koenig told her, moving on from her mug to the one Carter took, "There are protestors at launch pads all across the moon that have standby Eagles at them demanding permission to be allowed to travel to the planet."

"But that's ridiculous." Russell responded, "I've only done basic blood checks on us to make sure we're not carrying anything contagious. Who knows what could be lurking in other parts of the planet?"

"Ooh is that coffee?" Benes said suddenly as she exited the boarding tube and Koenig smiled as he held out the final mug for her.

"For some of my favourite officers." he responded before looking back at Russell and adding, "Whose ranks have grown by one by the way."

"Wait did someone get promoted colonel?" Carter asked.

"Maya. I've given her a field commission as lieutenant." Koenig answered.

"So I take she accepted the job offer then." Russell said and Koenig nodded.

"She's now my new adjutant and if I might say is adapting well. She handled a press conference better than I think I could have managed." he said.

It was at that moment that Koenig's comlock sounded and he passed the coffee pot to Benes.

"Colonel Koenig." Maya's voice said as soon as Koenig answered the call.

"Yes Maya?" Koenig responded.

"Colonel I think you should return to main mission immediately. Mister Foxworth is giving another interview." Maya told him and he sighed.

"I'm on my way." he said.

"So what do you think has caused these protests Mister Foxworth?" Coster asked as he sat opposite Foxworth.

"Well obviously there is a widespread desire among the population of the moon to find a more hospitable home. We know that the resources on the moon do not lend themselves to sustaining human life indefinitely and alternatives need to be found." Foxworth replied.

"But what about the potential pitfalls of settlement raised by the GDF?" Coster added and Foxworth smiled.

"Since the earliest days of human exploration there have always been strong, brave individuals who have taken risks to expand the limits of our knowledge. This spirit of adventure cannot be crushed by petty bureaucrats and their risk culture. In ancient times colonists set sail across oceans knowing that they would never return home and in the aftermath of the alien attack on Earth thousands departed our home solar system knowing that theirs was a one way journey. Now the people of the moon ask for the same right to explore. To expand. To settle and build homes for themselves." he said, reciting his preprepared answer to the anticipated question.

"Some say that the protests are endangering lives by interfering with the operation of the standby Eagles at the affected bases." Coster commented.

"A nonsensical claim." Foxworth countered, "Not one of the Eagles has been boarded and none of them has

been called into action. Furthermore I am assured that when asked to back away from the entrances by officers of the law the crowds did just that. Answer me this James, have there been any arrests? Any at all? No, of course there have not. Not one protestor has caused any damage to property or injury to another human being. They are peacefully expressing their opinion, that is all. On the other hand I understand that the GDF at Moonbase Alpha has seen fit to deploy heavily armed combat troops to the launch pads there in a shocking provocation. I understand you witnessed their deployment yourself. Can you tell me if you witnessed any violence that would justify this?"

Coster did not answer the question though, instead sticking to the role of questioner.

"So do you encourage these protests to continue and for others to join them?" he asked.

"I support the right to peaceful protest in a free society." Foxworth responded, "However, I have no intention of joining any of them myself and I would recommend that anyone else considering joining the protests first speak with those who have organised them. It is better to maintain a constant presence than have a larger one that must disperse as those protesting require food, drink and rest. Constant pressure on the GDF is more likely to gain the results we all seek than gatherings so large that the authorities are able to deem them unsafe and disband them by force. Above all though the protests must remain non-violent. Even a single incident of violence will tar everything that is being achieved. People must not let the fact that our time in this system blessed with a habitable planet push them towards rash action if we are to make ourselves heard."

"Thank you Mister Foxworth and now back to Janet at the desk." Coster said when Foxworth finished and the light above the camera indicating that it was recording went out.

"I think that went very well." Foxworth said to Coster as the pair walked towards the exit from the studio where the interview had taken place.

"Do you think it will work?" Coster said.

"I think so, yes. We know that we can count on those we've been working with to behave themselves and hopefully that interview will limit any undesirable elements from joining in." Foxworth answered.

"And you'll make sure to tell me when to be at a launch bay when the action starts?" Coster added.

"Why of course I will. You've been very helpful to me Mister Foxworth and you'll find that I reward those that I find helpful." Foxworth said, patting Coster on his shoulder.

9.

Lambda was one of the few moon bases built to be capable of handling the larger Condors, the others being Epsilon and the now ruined Eta. In the case of the military orientated Epsilon and Lambda this was intended so that they could handle Osprey bombers and Epsilon could only house a handful. On the other hand it had been intended that when completed Lambda would be used as a base for at least a full squadron of Ospreys to be used for launching attacks on the rebellious colonies in Earth's solar system. This meant that there was plenty of room inside the main subsurface hangar to offload the cargoes of dirt they brought back from the planet and it was tipped out onto the floor before exo-tractors fitted with bulldozer blades were used to push it out of the way.

The official plan was that after being given basic maintenance the Condors and Eagles at Lambda would be launched back towards the planet empty but instead while the dirt was being moved away from the transports a second ground team hurriedly began to load equipment aboard.

When this process was complete the Condors were moved back into the adjoining launch bay while Eagles were loaded onto the elevators that would take them back to the surface launch pads so that they could be launched again, the swarm of craft returning to the habitable planet.

The Hawk attack craft and Osprey bombers took no action as the vessels returned from the moon, all of them being expected and the transports flew past them unchallenged. Rather than head directly down to the areas where more of the planet's nitrogen and carbon containing dirt they all entered the atmosphere earlier so that they were able to descend to a low level easily before levelling out. The route the transports now followed towards the dig site took them over the area chosen to be the site of the new colony planned by Foxworth and Capston.

Approaching this the transports opened their cargo bays while still in flight and the cargo containers loaded inside them slid out, tumbling down before they automatically deployed parachutes. These stabilised the containers' falls and slowed them rapidly so that instead of being smashed to pieces when they hit the ground they landed intact, waiting to be recovered while the transports that had dropped them flew onwards as if nothing had happened.

Koenig leaned back in his chair as Russell, Carter and Benes entered his office and sat down.

"So now you've had chance to organise your thoughts, what do you have to report?" he said.

"Analysis of the soil samples show that it definitely contains the elements that we need to grow crops. As soon as its been properly sterilised and the growing chambers are built we can use it to create new farmland." Benes answered.

"Biological reports are mixed." Russell added, "Some plants with basic properties similar to species from Earth that have medicinal uses have been found and samples taken but as far as I can tell all of them are indigenous to the planet, there's no indication that any alien species have been introduced."

"So the aliens who attacked Earth have done any tinkering here then?" Koenig said and Russell shook her head.

"No, none that I can find." she said.

"I don't suppose there's any point in gathering fresh food stocks from the planet is there?" Koenig asked.

"Yes and no. By the time I'd made certain that food wasn't toxic to us it would probably have spoiled. On the other hand we can bring back seeds and grow test crops. Those that prove edible can be added to our farm stocks."

"How long will that take doctor?" Carter said.

"Root vegetables shouldn't take more than a few weeks but fruit producing trees would take years to establish." Russell said.

"I take it you'll be concentrating on the vegetables then." Koenig commented and Russell nodded.

"Yes. Samples will be brought back by the second wave of survey teams. I've ordered them to observe the local animal life. Whatever they eat will give us a clue to what we may be able to eat." she said.

"Good, now what about our ships? Are they holding up?" Koenig said, turning to Carter.

"They're running fine. The planet's atmosphere doesn't contain anything that's putting any more stress on them than they'd normally encounter if it was Earth's so I don't think we'll encounter any problems there." Carter replied before he looked around the office and main mission, "I notice Keynes isn't here." he added, "Don't you normally involve her in supply issues like this?"

Koenig sighed.

"Is something wrong John?" Russell commented.

"Major Capston reported that Alyson Keynes absconded at Lambda." Koenig said.

"You're kidding? Why do that now?" Benes responded.

"I don't think she would." Koenig said, "Which means that something has happened to her. Most likely someone involved in the theft of our supplies wanted to prevent her exposing their operation. Major Capston didn't mention any signs of a struggle though. He said she escaped into the incomplete structure and is hunting for her on the basis that she doesn't want to be found. I'd send more troops to help with the search but with Foxworth agitating his supporters we need to keep them here."

"Do you really think he'd resort to violence? I know he disagrees with your intention of returning to Earth but I didn't think he'd endorse that sort of action." Russell said.

"Publicly he's insisting that all protests must be peaceful but Maya says that everything looks very stage managed, as if the crowds he says are nothing to do with him or his Citizens' Committee are working to a script." Koenig told her, "Right now she's going over the most recent interview Foxworth gave to see if she could-" he continued before noticing Maya coming up the steps from main mission, "In fact here she is now. Maya, do you have any news?" he asked her.

"Yes colonel." she replied, "I have studied the interview Edward Foxworth gave to James Coster and it has revealed something interesting."

"So Foxworth is behind the protests?" Koenig said.

"Yes colonel." Maya told him, "When asked about the cause he blamed it on widespread dissatisfaction among the moon's population with your policy. However, he knows that the idea of returned to Earth still enjoys popular support even if the GDF itself has been blamed for events beyond its control."

"So he's bluffing then. Trying to promote his cause?" Carter said.

"I don't think so major. I think that this is planned to achieve a very specific goal, settling on this system's habitable planet." Maya said.

"Does he have a ship of his own?" Carter said, looking at Koenig, "Maybe he'll make a run for it at the last minute, when we have to pull our ships out before we're sucked into the wormhole again."

"Then he's a fool." Russell said, "One Eagle can't carry enough people and supplies to set up a viable settlement without making us of locally available resources as well and we still don't have a complete idea of what the risks presented by the local ecosystem are."

"Edward Foxworth is not acting alone doctor." Maya said, "I can tell that he is acting as the head of a movement, not an individual."

"That reminds me of something." Koenig said and he turned towards main mission, "Lieutenant Alexander could you come here a moment?" he called out.

"Coming colonel." she responded, leaving her duty station and walking up into Koenig's office, "Yes colonel?" she added.

"Lieutenant what is the level of private flight activity on the moon at present?" Koenig asked.

"The level is slightly above normal I'd say but the flight paths I'm being given are strange." she answered.

"Strange how?" Koenig said.

"A lot of people with private craft are wanting to get away from the major bases and to the smaller outposts." Alexander explained.

"If stolen supplies have been moved away from the major bases they could be loaded aboard those ships while our troops are distracted by the protests." Carter suggested.

"Hence the scripting. Foxworth doesn't want them cleared too soon." Koenig said, "Lieutenant Alexander I want you to get in touch with the local sheriffs at the outposts people are heading for. Tell them to watch for any activity around their ships and to check any cargoes loaded aboard them thoroughly. If anything comes up as stolen we'll have them."

"Yes colonel." Alexander replied.

"Colonel there is something more." Maya added.

"More?" Koenig commented.

"Yes colonel. When Edward Foxworth was being interviewed both he and James Coster knew what the other was about to say. Not word for word, but in general terms. The interview was staged in the same way as the protests are being, made to look spontaneous but in fact well scripted and organised." Maya explained.

"That will be how Coster was able to get to the protest here quickly enough to get the first coverage. He knew ahead of time it was going to happen." Alexander said.

When the Eagle and Condor transports returned to Lambda again the process of exchanging the dirt they carried for supplies was repeated. This time around the supplies to be loaded were basic field rations that would guarantee a food supply that would last the new colony for almost a year before fresh crops could be grown. Once again these were loaded in containers fitted with parachutes and the transports followed a flight path that took them over the proposed colony site before ejecting these. The containers landed among the first set dropped, waiting along with them for the settlers to arrive and open them while the transports flew on.

Foxworth and his wife were packing their belongings when there was a chiming sound from the door to their

rented apartment.

"Hopefully that will be the man to take these things to the Eagle." Foxworth said as he walked towards the door but when it slid open he instead saw a woman in a sheriff's uniform standing outside, "Ah deputy. Do come in." he told her, stepping back to give the woman room to enter, "There's no problem I hope."

"I'm just here to give you a heads up sir." the female deputy replied, "Our department has been given orders to start searching private spacecraft. The order came down from Moonbase Alpha fifteen minutes ago."

"On what grounds?" Foxworth said, frowning.

"Health and safety. Only ships actually ready for flight are being targeted." the woman answered.

"Koenig's people must have noticed us spreading our ships out to prevent them being locked down."

Foxworth said.

"Sir if they find any of our supplies-" the deputy began but Foxworth interrupted her before she could finish.

"There are no supplies for them to find." he said, "I've made alternative arrangements for them to be shipped to the planet."

"What are they?" the deputy asked.

"Oh you don't need to know that young lady. All you need to do is trust that when we arrive at our new home we will have everything we need to begin constructing a colony right away. Now go and reassure the others that everything is still on track. Those not assigned to vessels at the major bases should head for the travel tubes now and make their way to the outposts where their transports will be waiting for them when the time comes." Foxworth told her and she nodded.

"Of course Mister Foxworth." she said before turning to leave and Foxworth walked her to the door.

"Edward this won't be a problem will it?" his wife asked him when the door closed behind the deputy.

"No dear, of course it won't. Although I think I should speak to Major Capston about this. Koenig may not stop with just searching a few old Vultures."

10.

"The transports are on their way back now and my Hawks and Ospreys are right behind them." Verdeschi told Koenig over the communication link from Epsilon, "With any luck we'll be long gone before the Dorcons come looking for that attack ship."

"According to Professor Bergman's calculations we'll enter the wormhole again in less than five hours."

Koenig replied, "That's still enough time for them to drop a task force into the system."

"Not enough for them to launch a full scale invasion though." Verdeschi pointed out.

"No, there is that." Koenig agreed just as Alexander walked up the steps to his office.

"Colonel may I have a moment of your time please?" she asked and Koenig nodded.

"Of course lieutenant. Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi and I were just discussing our status." he said.

"I've been in touch with the sheriffs' offices at the smaller outposts as you requested colonel and they've come back with the results of the searches." Alexander said.

"Searches?" Verdeschi commented when he overheard this.

"Yes, Lieutenant Alexander noticed an odd pattern in civilian flight activity. A lot of privately owned craft have been flying from the primary bases to the smaller outposts." Koenig told him.

"That is odd." Verdeschi responded, "Those outposts are largely mining towns. Not much there to interest anyone wealthy enough to be able to afford their own ship."

"I thought that maybe they could be positioning themselves to take onboard the missing supplies before heading off to the planet with Foxworth." Koenig said, "Whoever took them has to have them stashed somewhere and the outposts would make much better hiding places than a base with a heavy GDF or law enforcement presence." then he looked at Alexander and added, "So what did they find?"

"Nothing I'm afraid colonel. Not so much as a single first aid kit bearing GDF markings bought off the surplus market." she told him.

"Another dead end then." Koenig said.

"They could still be planning a rush for the planet with just the basic supplies aboard their ships." Verdeschi suggested but Koenig shook his head.

"I don't think so." he replied, "If it was just one or two ships then maybe I could go along with that idea but we're talking dozens of ships here. Foxworth is definitely up to something and he's been planning it meticulously. I don't believe that he'd rush things by going without adequate supplies. If we could track the missing ones down then maybe we could figure out what his plan is."

"Sounds like a job for Alyson Keynes. Only she's disappeared." Verdeschi said.

"The timing of that is too convenient as well." Koenig commented.

"Agreed." Verdeschi said, "But do you think that she was abducted to stop her uncovering what happened to the missing supplies or did she escape to join the thieves?"

Koenig then looked back at Alexander.

"Lieutenant you're her best friend, what do you think?" he said.

"I was her best friend colonel." Alexander corrected him, "That ended when Alyson decided to work with Red Mars and turned her back on the rest of us."

"I'm sorry Tanya, I didn't mean to poke a sore spot there." Koenig said.

"That's okay colonel. Having said that I don't think that even after all that she'd stoop to joining a rebellion and fleeing to an alien planet we know very little about." Alexander told him.

"That just leaves abduction then." Verdeschi said.

"Yes and I think it's about time that Capston gave me an update on his progress in looking for her. I'll get back to you later. Alpha out." Koenig said and he switched off the communicator before getting up from his seat. He and Alexander then descended the steps to main mission together and Koenig walked over to Benes' station, "Captain Benes I need to speak to Major Capston. Can you put me through?"

"Yes colonel. Do you want to take it in your office?" she replied.

"No, here will do fine." Koenig told her.

"Putting you through to Lambda now colonel." Benes said and a GDF lieutenant appeared on the screen in front of them both.

"Lieutenant where is Major Capston? I need to speak with him." Koenig said.

"I'm sorry colonel but the major is unavailable. He's still leading the search for the fugitive and is in an area of the base without comlock coverage." the lieutenant responded and Koenig hesitated, waving at Maya to beckon her towards him. Then when she was standing beside him he replied to the lieutenant.

"Lieutenant for the past two days you've kept on telling me that Major Capston is unavailable and all I've had is messages saying that there has been no progress in the search for Alyson Keynes. When exactly will he be available? And before you answer I suggest you consider very carefully who the ranking officer on the

moon is." he said.

"I'm sorry colonel. I have sent word to the major that you've been trying to contact him but the only reply I've had is by messenger to the effect that he will inform you as soon as there is any news on his search." the lieutenant said.

"Very well lieutenant. Make sure that he does. Alpha out." Koenig said sternly and he reached out to turn off the channel. Then he looked at Maya, "Well Lieutenant Maya, what did you think about his response?"

"The lieutenant was very concerned colonel. He wanted to carry out your order but he is unable to contact Major Capston directly." Maya told him.

"Still sounds very convenient to me." Koenig said.

"Lambda is a big base and with so many sections incomplete there are large communication dead spots." Morrow said.

"Which makes for a handy excuse." Carter added, "Colonel why don't we take an Eagle out there and speak to him face to face?"

"I suppose Capston could just be worried about having to face me." Koenig said, "We've had our disagreements since we left Earth and now Keynes disappears on his watch. Maybe going out to Lambda in person is the best thing to do."

"And what if you get lost among the construction work colonel?" Morrow asked, "We'd have to send another search party out for you."

"Plus we go back through the wormhole in a few hours. Do you really want to be stuck at Lambda when that happens colonel?" Kano added.

"I get the point. But if Capston hasn't checked in by the time we're through the wormhole I'm taking a platoon of troops out there myself to find both him and Keynes." Koenig said.

"That's a nice flower you have there Doctor Russell." a voice said while Russell was examining a sample under a microscope and she looked up to see one of her assistants standing in the doorway of her office.

"Doctor Vincent, thank you." she replied and she glanced at the pale yellow flower in a sealed jar, "The genetic structure is similar to Earth's poppies. I'm hoping that we'll be able to cultivate them to use as source of pain killers."

"As it happens that's actually what I came to see you about." Vincent said, "We've just got a call in from Beta. They're asking if we can send back any of the pain killers they sent us three weeks ago. Their stock is getting low and they think they'll run out in the next few days."

"They didn't send us any pain killers three weeks ago or ever. Or ever for that matter." Russell said, frowning.

"Exactly, only they say that they sent four entire cartons on your order." Vincent replied.

"Damn!" Russell hissed, leaning back in her chair, "Keynes was saying that supplies were being stolen using phoney transfer orders. I just didn't think anyone would have the nerve to try and use any of our names."

"Isn't that how scams usually work?" Vincent commented, "Make claims that are too brazen to be false before asking for something in a way that it can't be tracked?"

"That doesn't mean I'm any less happy about it." Russell said and she leant forwards again, activating the communicator on her desk, "Medical section to main mission." she said and Baker's' face appeared on the screen in front of her.

"Yes doctor?" Baker asked.

"I need to speak to Lieutenant Alexander." Russell told her.

"Putting you through now doctor." Baker said and her face was replaced by that of Alexander.

"Lieutenant Alexander have you got anywhere with tracking down the stolen supplies?" Russell asked.

"Sorry doctor. We've conducted searches but come up blank so far." Alexander answered.

"Well someone used my name to transfer four cartons of pain killers from the medical section at Beta three weeks ago. There may still be a trail to follow there." Russell told her.

"Thanks doctor. Not that I don't trust the sheriffs at Beta but I'll get in touch with their medical section myself and see what they've got." Alexander replied.

"Thank you lieutenant. Russell out." Russell said and she shut off the channel.

"So what do we do about the missing drugs from Beta?" Vincent asked.

"Send them replacements from the central reserve." Russell told him, "But don't trust them to the regular transit routes. I want you to draw them out in person and take them to Beta yourself. Don't give them to anyone other than a member of their medical section's senior staff. I'm telling you Ben, if someone doesn't do something about these thefts soon then people are going to start dying."

"There they are." Capston said, watching the cluster of blips on the remote fed sensor display that represented the ships now well on their way back from the system's habitable planet.

"Those Hawks and Ospreys aren't taking any chances are they major?" one of his men said and he pointed to the signals that were labelled with the transponder codes of the combat vessels, "Look at the way they're hanging back as if to make sure no-one suddenly turns around and makes a run back to the planet."

"They won't be around when we take off will they major?" another officer asked.

"No, they've been operating far longer than the transports. Verdeschi will want them back in the hangar for maintenance and he won't be launching anything else with so little time before the moon gets sucked back into that wormhole." Capston replied.

"That's something I won't miss." the first of the other officers commented, "That made me sick to my stomach every time."

"Is that why you signed on for this?" Capston said, smiling at the man. Then before he could reply Capston added, "It's time. Tell Foxworth that we're about to make our move."

"It's time." Foxworth said as he shut off his communicator and his wife smiled at him.

"Oh Edward, you mean we'll finally be able to leave this dreary place? One week for a business meeting you told me." she said and he smiled back at her.

"Yes my dear. By this time tomorrow we will be standing on a new world. A world that I will control." he replied.

Sat at his desk, Coster took his communicator from his pocket when it sounded. The caller identification showed it as a text message coming from an unknown caller but rather than just dismiss it as a nuisance call Coster checked the message anyway and smiled when he saw what it said.

PREPARE FOR DEPARTURE.

As soon as he read the message he deleted it just in case his phone was checked by anyone else and then got to his feet.

"James where are you going?" one of the editorial staff asked when she saw him heading for the exit.

"I just got a message from a source. He says he can give me an exclusive about the GDF lying about our food supplies." Coster lied.

"Great, when can you get this on the air?" the editor asked.

"Hopefully by this time tomorrow." Coster answered.

"Well don't forget a cameraman then." the editor told him and Coster smiled.

"I've already got one waiting for me." he replied.

11.

Capston had ensured that the armoury staff at Lambda were entirely loyal to him and Foxworth so that when more of the soldiers loyal to them arrived they could be issued with weapons without any questions being asked. Respecting Foxworth's instruction that bloodshed was to be avoided every one of the rebellious soldiers was issued with a stun gun while two members of each of the teams they were divided into were also issued with magnetic accelerator carbines that fired clusters of projectiles in a similar fashion to shotguns. This represented only part of the weapons held in the armoury though and as the groups of armed and armoured troops were heading out to round up the rest of Lambda's staff the armoury staff themselves began to loot the rest. Heavy weapons were already stored in dedicated carrying cases that could be stacked on trolleys to be moved to the hangar while rifles, carbines and pistols, along with their ammunition were removed from their storage racks and quickly tossed into more crates brought into the armoury so that they too could be taken to the hangar.

Lambda's command centre was the primary target for Capston's troops. Many of the personnel on duty there were a part of Capston's plot but there were also a significant number who were not and these needed to be secured before they realised what was happening and attempted to warn Colonel Koenig.

"Nobody move!" the leader of the team that burst into the command centre yelled.

"Everyone do as he says." the senior officer present, who was of course also a part of the plot, said and his staff remained seated.

The armed troops then began to move through the room, ordering all of those not allied to them to get to their feet and escorting them out into the corridor. From here they were taken to Lambda's medical section, where all of the captive base personnel were being taken. Most of Lambda's medical personnel were not a part of the plan and they too had been detained by a unit of troops sent to secure the medical section. Here the captive troops were watched closely while their captors smashed all the communication equipment and removed all of the medical instruments, packing them for transport to the hangar as well.

Capston was in the process of strapping a stun gun to his belt when one of his subordinates appeared in the doorway of his quarters aboard the *Ultra*.

"Lambda has been secured major. All personnel not aligned with us have been taken to the medical section." the man said as Capston looked up.

"Did anyone manage to get word out to Koenig?" he asked.

"No sir. The operation ran exactly as planned. No one knows that we control the base." his subordinate answered.

"Good. In that case I'm heading over there now to supervise the final loading myself. We can't afford any mistakes at this stage in the operation. Once we take off we won't be able to come back for anything we've forgotten." Capston said.

The vast majority of the personnel aboard the transport ships returning to Moonbase Lambda were loyal to Capston. Only a handful of the work teams who had not been aboard to witness the dropping of the supplies were unaware of what was being planned and as soon as they disembarked from the ships they were taken into custody and escorted away to the medical section with the other prisoners.

"Okay let's get a move on." Capston ordered his men and he turned towards the large stacks of crates that had been moved into the hangar, "I want all this stuff loaded by the time I get back. We still need to fetch the drug supplies."

Keynes looked up when the door to the storeroom she was imprisoned in when she heard the sound of the door opening and Capston walked into the room accompanied by a pair of soldiers, one of them dragging a wheeled trolley behind them.

"Haven't you ever heard of knocking?" she asked, "I could have been using my bucket in here." and she looked at the empty bucket beside where she sat on some of the storage boxes she had moved towards her.

"What are you doing?" Capston replied, staring at her.

"Nothing." Keynes replied and she tugged on the handcuffs binding her wrist to the pipe, "I can't exactly go far can I?"

"Why are you sitting on those crates?" Capston asked, staring at the pile of crates that had clearly been moved from their original location.

"Sitting on it." Keynes said.

"What are you up to?" Capston said sternly, drawing his stun gun and pointing it at Keynes.

"Okay I admit," she said as she got to her feet, raising her free hand, "I was trying to hide these two metre

long crates from you by sitting on them. Now really I just wanted somewhere to sit. Do you expect me to sit on the floor? It's metal and freezing cold. These are coated in plastic so they're warmer. Plus I'm closer to this." she added and she tugged at the handcuffs again.

"Get them loaded." Capston told the two soldiers and they nodded as they darted forwards, picking up one of the crates between them and carrying it to the trolley. Keynes held her breath at that point, wondering whether they would notice that the crates were lighter than they ought to be and check the contents.

However, any lightness of the crates was either put down to the fact that there were two of them lifting them or ignored completely as the soldiers finished stacking the crates before securely strapping them down.

"All done major." one of them said and Capston nodded.

"Good, now get them aboard the *Ultra*. We'll be leaving within the hour." he ordered and the two soldiers then dragged the trolley out of the room before he turned to follow them, returning his stun gun to his holster.

"Hey! What about me? You can't just leave me here like this." Keynes called out and Capston halted just outside the door and looked back towards her.

"Here's the key then." he said, producing a handcuff key from his pocket and holding it up. However, when Keynes held out her hand ready to catch it he simply dropped it to the floor at his feet in the corridor instead of tossing it to her before walking away after his men and without bothering to close the door.

Russell entered main mission with just under fifteen minutes until the moon entered the wormhole and found the command staff there double checking that everything was prepared for the journey to whatever star system they would arrive in next while Professor Bergman had once again arrived not only to check the accuracy of his wormhole entry predicting program.

"I just need to speak to John." she told Maya as she walked past and the Psychon woman nodded.

"Yes doctor." she replied.

"Helena, what brings you here?" Koenig said when Russell got to the top of the steps.

"I just thought I'd check in about the results of my initial study." Russell replied as she sat down.

"Is it good news?" Koenig asked.

"Well we will have a source of prescription pain relief once we can get a crop of the plant I brought back up and running. I haven't had a chance to go through any of the other samples that have been delivered to me so far. What about the dirt that was brought back though? My samples indicate that it will be good for farmland but do we have enough space to create it dug out yet?" Russell asked.

"Not yet. I don't have a final figure for how much soil has been brought back yet either. For both of those we're going to need Major Capston to tell us once he stops hunting for Alyson Keynes." Koenig answered.

Aboard the *Ultra*, Capston sat in the captain's seat in the cockpit and looked at his officers.

"What's out status?" he asked.

"All systems on line. Conventional drive is hot and ready." one of them answered and he nodded.

"Time until the moon enters the wormhole?" he added.

"T-minus twelve minutes." another officer responded.

"Alert Mister Foxworth, we're ready to launch and he can send the go signal any time he wants." Capston ordered.

The message from the *Ultra* reached Foxworth's communicator just as he was boarding his private *Eagle* as it sat on a launchpad that was still in a hangar beneath Moonbase Kappa along with his wife and several other members of the Citizens' Committee. With the protests blocking the main public boarding areas Foxworth and his party had instead been granted to the hangar by a technician who had proven easy to bribe.

"Ah, it appears Major Capston is ready. We can alert the others." he said and he pressed 'Send' on a message he had preprepared on his communicator.

In a matter of seconds this message was relayed around the moon to major moon bases and smaller outposts to his followers in key locations. At the boarding areas the protesting crowds suddenly surged forwards. In some cases sheriffs' officers attempted to hold them back but the protestors unexpectedly revealed themselves to be armed. In accordance with Foxworth's wishes to avoid fatalities the armed protestors had been issued only with stun guns but these were adequate against the sheriffs' officers as long as they did not hit their armoured vests. In addition to this sudden assault from the protestors, a number of the sheriffs' deputies themselves were revealed to be working with Foxworth and they unsealed the boarding tubes leading to the standby craft on the launch pads. However, rather than sealing their craft from the inside some of the crews of these craft left their hatches opened and waved the protestors aboard, directing as many to seats as possible while instructing the others where to stand and hold on during the flight. Those crews that did seal their *Eagles* were shocked to find that some members of the crowds were carrying comlocks encoded with the identities of GDF officers who could override the lockouts. Storming the *Eagles*, the crowds swiftly overwhelmed the outnumbered crewmen and dragged them from their vessels.

At Moonbase Alpha the story was different though, the GDF troops deployed in support of the sheriffs gave them the numbers to hold back the crowds and they were heavily armoured enough that the stun guns' pulsed energy projectile blasts had no effect on them. Also among the crowds at Alpha was Coster and his camera operator.

"Come on, this is it." he told the camera operator as the crowd moved forwards and they rushed towards the line of sheriffs' deputies and GDF troops along with them.

The line of troops protecting the launch pad held though and in front of Coster a man armed with a stun gun was suddenly knocked to the floor when a baton knocked one of his legs out from beneath him.

"Give me that!" Coster snapped, grabbing hold of the weapon and pulling it from the man's grasp. However, he was unfamiliar with the operation of a stun gun and as he spent vital seconds studying it there was a flash of light and Coster screamed in agony as Master Sergeant Washington shot him with his own stun gun.

12.

"Washington to main mission, the crowd is attacking at launch pad one." Washington reported and Alexander turned towards Koenig as she hurried down the steps from his office.

"Colonel I've got security alerts coming in from every launch pad." she called out.

"Carter get the stand by Eagles off the pads." Koenig ordered, "Benes alert the other bases to do the same."

"Colonel the other bases are also reporting that the protestors are now storming the Eagles. We're also getting reports of unauthorised launches from other outposts." Benes replied.

"Colonel I'm accessing the launch details now. The registrations match the civilian craft that were moved from the larger bases. This was planned." Carter added.

"Foxworth." Koenig said, scowling, "Kano, he's got an Eagle. See if you can find it."

"Computer says the Eagle registered to Edward Foxworth is currently ascending from the hangar at Kappa." Kano replied.

"What are Kappa playing at?" Morrow exclaimed.

"It looks like their system is under attack. They're locked out of their own launch controls." Kano said.

"Is there anywhere not under attack by our own people?" Koenig said in frustration.

"No reports from Epsilon or Lambda colonel." Benes responded and Koenig was about to tell her that the question had been rhetorical when he suddenly realised the significance of Moonbase Kappa.

"Seriously. Nothing from Capston's command?" he said, "Captain Benes I want to talk to Major Capston now. Tell that lieutenant that's been giving us the run around that I'll have him court-martialled if he doesn't put us through."

"Yes colonel." Benes said before she looked up from her console again and added, "Colonel I have Major Capston on the line for you now."

"Let me see." Koenig said, rushing to her side and he saw an image of Capston sat aboard the *Ultra*, "Major what the hell is going on?" he said.

"Colonel I tried to do this in a civilised manner but you just wouldn't listen. As per your request you may consider this my resignation. Oh by the way, your little minion Alyson Keynes is handcuffed to a pipe in a storage room at Lambda. A few of my own people who I didn't trust to join me can be found there as well in our medical section. *Ultra* out." Capston said and then the window went blank as he shut off the channel.

"Colonel shall I contact Epsilon and have Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi arm his missiles?" Benes asked.

"We could still bring them down if they won't give up." Carter added.

"No, there's no way we'd get them all." Koenig replied and he sighed, "The civilian ships wouldn't even realise that they'd been targeted and Capston could use the *Ultra*'s weapons to shoot down anything we aimed at him. Let them go. Damn that Capston, we had our own people working against us the whole time."

"Lieutenant, launch now." Capston ordered and the *Ultra*'s pilot smiled.

"Yes major." he said and the *Ultra*'s engines roared as the craft rose up from the surface of the moon, the back blast from the thrusters creating a cloud of lunar dust.

The *Ultra*'s pilot turned the ship towards the planet that was to become the new home of Foxworth, Capston and their followers. The Eagles and a pair of Condors that had taken off from Lambda formed up around the old warship as if to escort it away from the moon when in fact it was only vessel among them that carried any weaponry.

More ships, a mix of Eagles and Vultures launching from other bases joined this squadron and soon there were more than forty craft loaded with passengers and supplies heading towards the planet.

Behind them the moon drew ever closer to the expanding wormhole and Capston smiled when there was a brilliant flash of light as the moon was finally drawn inside and vanished forever, leaving the fleet of fleeing ships behind.

"Goodbye Colonel Koenig," Capston muttered, "And good riddance too."

"I've got Mister Foxworth calling sir." one of the officers in the cockpit with him said.

"Put him through." Capston ordered and Foxworth's image appeared on one of the screens in front of him.

"Mister Foxworth, you made it out alright then?" he said.

"Yes, though that was never in question. Given that I had little need of the money in my account on the moon it was easy to bribe a labourer with more than he would earn in a year." Foxworth responded, "Now what about you? Were you able to get everything we need loaded for the last shipment?"

"Yes Mister Foxworth. Koenig and his people will have to do without of course but if they'd just listened to reason then they'd all be right here with us now." Capston replied and Foxworth smiled.

"Very good major. In that case I'll see you on the surface in a couple of hours." he said before he ended his transmission.

"How many did we lose?" Koenig asked when the moon exited the wormhole in yet another alien system. "Tracking indicated sixteen Eagles, four Condors, a dozen Vultures and of course the *Ultra*." Alexander answered, "How many people were aboard them isn't known, neither are the supplies they took." "Your orders colonel?" Morrow said. "Make sure our launch pads are secure first." Koenig ordered, "Then get me an Eagle and a tactical team. We need to make sure that Lambda is secure as well."

Keynes stared at the doorway to the room she had been imprisoned in. Left wide open by Capston she could see the key to her handcuffs on the floor of the corridor outside, far out of reach and without them she could not get to the doorway and escape. Hearing footsteps from outside she looked up, wondering whether Capston or some of his men were returning but it was Koenig that appeared in the doorway wearing an armoured vest over his combat fatigues and carrying a rifle and Keynes sighed.

"Colonel Koenig," she said, tugging on the handcuffs binding her to the pipe, "you finding me tied up and helpless is starting to become a habit."

"One I hope you'll be breaking." Russell responded as she appeared beside Koenig and it was her that bent down to pick up the key.

"It was just a joke doctor." Keynes said.

"Of course it was Alyson. Are you injured at all?" Koenig said and he and Russell entered the room and walked over to her.

"No. I think Major Capston was under orders not to hurt me." Keynes answered before Russell unlocked her.

"Then let's get you back to Alpha and I'll make sure you're okay." Russell said.

"Wait doctor, you need to see this first." Keynes said and she turned around to try removing the wall panel.

"Here let me help." Koenig said, slinging his rifle before helping lift the panel free from the wall's frame and Russell gasped when she saw the piles of medical supplies behind it.

"Where did these come from?" she exclaimed.

"Major Capston had then stored in crates in here with me." Keynes replied, "I saw some of Professor Bergman's heart drug among them so decided to help myself to a few bottles. Then I figured why stop there? So I lifted the panel and emptied the crates.

"Good work." Russell said, reaching out to pick up one of the trays of medication, "John these are irreplaceable." she added and Koenig smiled.

"I just wish I could see the looks on Foxworth's and Capston's faces when they discover that their medical supply crates are empty." he said.

"They aren't entirely empty." Keynes said.

"So they got away with some of the medication? Oh well at least we have these." Russell said.

"No doctor, I emptied the crates." Keynes responded and Koenig frowned.

"Alyson, what's in them?" he asked.

"Well Major Capston's people left me that bucket in case I needed the bathroom but I didn't want it stinking the place up so I used an alternative I could seal up." Keynes answered, smiling back at Koenig.

Eagles and Vultures were scattered around the grassy plain as tents were being erected but the *Ultra* dominated the view from the top of the hill that Foxworth stood on when Capston came to tell him about the missing medical supplies.

"How much did we lose?" he asked.

"Everything that was being kept at Lambda I'm afraid." Capston admitted.

"You fool Capston!" Foxworth snapped, glaring at the other man, "How you be so stupid as to imprison that Keynes woman in the same room as those supplies? They were essential. Essential you understand? You know that two members of the Citizens' Committee itself rely on the drugs you were entrusted with. Unless we can find something here to take their place in a matter of weeks we can expect them both to die."

"Mister Foxworth I-" Capston began before there was the sound of a sonic boom from overhead and the two men looked upwards to see a stingray shaped vessel fly over.

A beam of light erupted from the nose of the craft and cut through a row of parked Eagles, consuming them in flames.

"The Dorcons!" Capston exclaimed as people began to run around in panic, some seeking weapons to defend themselves while others sought hiding places instead.

The Dorcon attack ship was not alone though and more of them appeared behind the first, descending towards the ground to deploy the troops they carried. The reptilian aliens wearing body armour and gas masks were met by sporadic bursts of gunfire but they had achieved total surprise and the humans were unprepared to mount a co-ordinated defence.

"No!" Foxworth said as he watched in horror, "This isn't how it was supposed to be! Do something Capston, you're the military man. Do something."