

Space: 2299



09: The Survivors

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After an alien spacecraft crashes on the moon contact is lost with a nearby outpost. An investigation leads to the conclusion that some of the alien crew have not only survived and are now at large on the moon but are also undoubtedly hostile to the human inhabitants.

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I.

The spacecraft was on course for the point in space where the gravitational pull of the planet it had just left was cancelled out by that of its single small moon, its crew preparing to open a wormhole that would take them back to their home system.

"How long?" the commanding officer of the vessel asked. Like his crew he was roughly humanoid in form but with flesh that was protected by an exoskeleton and able to swap his four equally sized limbs between the roles of arms and legs at will. This enabled the species to function as bipeds, quadrupeds or use their prehensile feet as additional hands and the controls of their craft reflected this with additional levers and switches located where their feet could reach them.

"One teroc commander." the pilot responded.

"Charge the emitter. This trip has been a waste of our time and I want to get back home as quickly as I can. Our agent needs to explain why he sent us to-" the commanding officer began before all of a sudden there was a massive flare of light from the Lagrange point they were heading towards as a wormhole was opened from elsewhere. Ordinarily this would not have been an issue for the spacecraft, it was still thousands of kilometres away from the Lagrange point where the wormhole was forming and even if the new arrival came out of it on a direct collision course there was more than enough time to turn aside. However, it rapidly became clear that this was no ordinary wormhole. The size of this was several orders of magnitude greater than anything the crew of the ship had seen before and for a few moments some of them began to think that it would expand enough to swallow their vessel before it was fully opened.

The pilot uttered a brief curse in his own language as he pulled on the controls with all four limbs to try and take the ship out of the path of the expanding wormhole but before he could get the ship clear the object that was passing through the wormhole finally emerged from it. A massive dull grey sphere of rock far more vast than any spacecraft appeared in front of them before the wormhole collapsed again. Strangely it did not close and vanish as one would when an ordinary spacecraft had emerged from one, instead it shrank but remained open and shot through space until it reached the new Lagrange point where the gravity created by the mass of the newly arrived object exactly cancelled out that of the nearby planet and its pre-existing moon.

Alarms then sounded throughout the ship as the gravitational pull of this object began to drag the ship towards it. This pull was not particularly strong and the ship was already turning aside but the object was so massive that even at maximum power the flight crew found themselves looking at its rocky surface as they hurtled towards it.

"We're going to crash!" one of them exclaimed in panic.

"Evasive manoeuvres! Full emergency power!" the commanding officer ordered.

"It's too late commander, we're caught in its-" the helmsman began before the ship ploughed into the object's surface.

"Colonel Koenig we're through the wormhole. All bases are reporting in now." one of the Global Defence Force officers in Moonbase Alpha's main mission said, looking over her shoulder to where the most senior officer present on the moon since it had been dragged through a wormhole caused by a massive nuclear explosion stood. Beside the uniformed Colonel Koenig was an older man in civilian clothing who was watching the data being shown on the big screen at the end of the room away from the steps that led up to Koenig's office.

"Thank you Captain Benes." Koenig replied and he turned to another woman who's uniform had a lieutenant's bars on its shoulders, "Alexander what can you tell me about where we are?"

"Looks like we've come out at an L-three point colonel. There's a planet showing up on our scanners but secondary body that would create the opposing gravitational field so it must be on the other side." she told him before a dark skinned man spoke up from another console.

"Computer calculates that we have thirty-three hours and fourteen minutes until we're drawn back into the wormhole colonel." he said.

"Captain Kano can the computer give us our position?" the civilian asked and Kano checked his console again.

"Sorry professor Alpha's sensors don't seem to be picking up any identifiable pulsars. We'll have to wait for the other bases to send any data they can get to us." he responded and the older man sighed.

"I seem to spend a lot of my time waiting." he said, "It's a pity most systems don't have anything interesting in them."

Koenig reached into his pocket and rummaged around for a moment before he removed a banknote and held it up.

"I have five dollars for anyone who can find Professor Bergman something to keep him interested for thirty-three hours and fourteen minutes." he said as he looked around, "Well, anyone?"

"What about the planet" Koenig's second in command, Major Morrow suggested.

"A good idea. Major Carter how soon can you have a survey Eagle prepared?" Koenig asked and the Australian smiled back at him.

"Give me ten minutes and 'll fly him there and back myself colonel." he said.

"Major you might want to rethink that." an enlisted woman sat on the other side of main mission said.

"Yes Spacewoman Baker? Something to tell us about the planet or are you about to give us a better suggestion and claim this cash prize from Major Morrow?" Koenig said.

"It's about the planet colonel. Our scanners have given us some information about the surface. Temperature is forty-degrees at the poles." Baker said and Alexander smiled.

"I could work on my tan." she said before Baker continued.

"We're also picking up high levels of carbon dioxide, winds of up sixty kilometres per hour and atmospheric pressure more than four times Earth sea level standard." she said and Alexander's face fell.

"So no tan then?" she said.

"Not unless you're happy with the tan lines that a pressure suit would leave you with." Carter commented. Then he smiled and added, "At least we won't be losing any more ships to a bunch of malcontents and mutineers trying to desert."

"Well professor do you want to survey the planet anyway?" Koenig asked Bergman but the older man shook his head.

"No thank you colonel. Planetology isn't really my area of expertise." he said.

"I guess the five dollars remains mine then." Koenig said as he returned the banknote to his pocket.

"I might just be taking your money yet colonel." Benes said, looking up from her console.

"Something to add captain?" Koenig said.

"It may be nothing but Moonbase Gamma has just forwarded a report from one of the local mining outposts of an impact when we came through the wormhole." Benes said.

"Well professor?" Koenig added.

"It might be worth investigating colonel. Of course it's quite likely to just be an asteroid, they do tend to collect at Lagrange points." Bergman said.

"So how come ships travelling through them don't just smack into them all the time?" Morrow asked, frowning.

"I suspect that when a ship opens a wormhole in a controlled manner rather than the haphazard and random way our moon is travelling they will be able to conduct a radar sweep through it. Then they can adjust their flight path to avoid any such debris. Of course the actual opening of a wormhole is likely to produce a gravitational disturbance that will shift the position of relatively small objects such as most asteroids." Bergman explained.

"We must figure out how to do that." Kano said.

"Okay Benes if whatever landed turns out to be interesting then my money is yours but I'm hanging onto it for now. In the meantime I want updates on the status of every base and outpost as they come in. Kano let me know if computer is able to tell us just how far from Earth we are this time and keep scanning that planet. There may be something worth looking at somewhere on it." Koenig ordered and then he turned around and climbed the steps back to his office.

The exo-tractor could carry only two people in its enclosed and sealed cabin but the two prospectors Fredericks and Renner considered it adequate to carry them across the lunar surface to where they had sighted the dust plume created by the impact when the moon emerged from the wormhole without them needing to keep their spacesuit sealed. The vehicle was also fitted with a digging mechanism at the front and a crane at the rear that would allow them to uncover a buried object and bring it back to the outpost providing it was not too large. It was pure chance that they had spotted this while the moon's electronic detection systems were still disrupted by the effect of the wormhole and they hoped that this meant they would be the only ones heading for it.

"I should drive." Renner said as she climbed into the vehicle ahead of Frederick.

"Fine." he replied, "Just remember to open the airlock door before we drive out onto the surface. We'll get billed if maintenance has to hammer out another dent."

"Oh ha-ha very funny." Renner replied, "Are we sealed?"

Fredericks nodded.

"Air tight. You can request decompression" he told her and she reached for the control that would begin the decompression of the airlock outside the exo-tractor.

Once the decompression cycle was complete the outer airlock door slid open to reveal the barren lunar landscape outside and Renner started up the engine, driving through the opening.

"Tractor G-seven clear. You can close the door again control." Fredericks said into the exo-tractor's radio.

"Copy that G-seven. Your departure is logged." a controller responded and behind the exo-tractor the airlock slid closed once more.

"How far do you think it is?" Renner asked.

"Well it was over the horizon obviously so two and a half kilometres at a minimum. Probably more if it's larger than ten metres across or so." Fredericks replied.

Although the exo-tractor was not specifically built for speed it was still able to leave the outpost behind so that it passed out of sight in about ten minutes. From this point on navigation became more difficult. The system of satellites that had orbited the moon while it orbited the Earth had all been lost when it was dragged out of orbit and now other means of direction finding were needed. Some more advanced vehicles had inertial navigation systems fitted to them but the exo-tractor lacked such features Fredericks and Renner instead had to rely on their considerable experience of travelling across the lunar surface to keep on course as Renner wove around obstacles in their path.

Even the basic navigation system available to them was able to monitor the distance they had travelled though and from it they knew that they had gone almost fifteen kilometres before they saw what they had been looking for, a new impact crater in the surface of the moon where something had buried itself when it crashed there.

"Right on the bearing you said it would be on." Renner said, smiling at Fredericks and he smiled back at her.

"Did you ever doubt it?" he asked rhetorically and then he reached down to the floor of the exo-tractor's cabin to pick up the two space helmets lying there. He handed one of these to Renner before he started to fit the other to his own spacesuit, making sure that the neck seal was secure before lowering the visor.

"All set." Renner told him when her suit was also sealed and Fredericks activated the controls to draw the air out of the cabin so they could exit the vehicle without losing it. The spacesuits that the two prospectors wore had linings that gripped their bodies tightly to maintain a constant internal volume. This meant that there was no need for them to personally decompress before leaving their vehicle to avoid either their suits inflating like balloons and making movement almost impossible or risking the formation of potentially fatal gas bubbles in their blood. Then when the console indicated that the interior of the exo-tractor was a vacuum as well Fredericks opened the hatch so that he and Renner could leave the vehicle and investigate the impact site up close.

2.

When the chief engineer of the alien ship regained consciousness he found the vessel lying at a slight angle on the surface of the moon. As soon as he started to stand back up he felt the pull of gravity was far lighter than normal, indicating that the artificial gravity field was inactive and he decided that his first priority had to be to take stock of the damage that the ship had suffered. Most of the lights in the engineering compartment were out but there was just enough illumination for him to be able to read the system status displays mounted on the wall. These showed that the ship's primary space frame was still intact, meaning that it was at least in theory salvageable. However, the rest of the system indicators showed that the ship was crippled. It's engines, weapons, sensor, communications and even life support registered as being off line. The instruments that remained functional were operating purely off the emergency batteries and although their level appeared adequate there was nothing to recharge them and they would eventually be drained as well. Unfortunately the damage limited how much the instruments could tell the alien engineer about the rest of the ship and he had no way of knowing from here whether any other compartments remained habitable. A sudden sound from the hatch leading out of engineering made the engineer turn sharply to face it just as it was pulled open by hand, revealing two more of the crew outside.

"Engineer Okkus Rar we did not know that you had survived." one of them said.

"Terrat Hol, Javas Ott, what can you tell me about the rest of the crew?" Okkus Rar asked.

"Dead." Terrat Hol, the alien to have previously addressed the engineer said.

"All of them? Are you certain?" Okkus Rar said.

"Yes Okkus Rar." Javas Ott responded, "We were in our bunks when the impact happened. The rest of the crew including the commander were in the forward section and cockpit. We can't get into any of those sections. It looks like they are open to space."

"Do you know what happened?" Terrat Hol added.

"Only that we have collided with something. Our artificial gravity isn't working so the light pull we are currently under must be coming from whatever we have crashed into. Even this amount means that it is massive though. We will have to go outside to inspect the ship and find out where we are." Okkus Rar told him before there was a distant 'clang' that echoed through the ship.

"It's definitely a ship of some kind." Fredericks said, striking the hull with a wrench to test how solid the object he and Renner had cleared enough dust away from to see what was underneath.

"Well it can't be one of ours. Nothing would have been flying when we came through the wormhole." Renner pointed out, "Do you think that it could be Dorcon?"

"I don't know. Aren't their attack ships pretty flat though? This thing looks like it's more like a long box. I'd say the front end was crushed on impact and took out the crew." Fredericks said and then he noticed Renner starting to smile, "What is it?" he asked.

"This thing hit when we came out of the wormhole, right?" she responded.

"Sure, that's how come we spotted it. Watching the fancy light show."

"So any other ship heading for the wormhole must be able to open one. Fredericks this thing must be able to open them and navigate properly through them. Even if it's damaged something might be recoverable." Renner said and Fredericks smiled as well.

"We have hit it rich this time. Colonel Koenig will have to pay us a small fortune for this." he said.

"Small? I was thinking of demanding a large fortune." Renner replied.

"Good idea. We'd better find a way inside first though. I want to know exactly what it is that we're going to be selling Alpha and the GDF." Fredericks said.

The two prospectors returned to the exo-tractor where they unloaded a pair of equipment packs that they then carried back to the crashed alien ship, setting them both down on the lunar surface and opening them. One of the packs contained a more expansive tool kit than the basic sets the pair carried attached to their spacesuits while the other instead held what looked like a large plastic bag.

The pair began by unpacking the bag, revealing it to have zips running around both ends so that either of them could be opened or sealed. Also in the pack with this were a set of rods that the prospectors rapidly assembled into a frame over which the bag could be slid before they placed it against the hull of the alien ship and began to seal the edges against it with tape. This created a small tent attached to the ship that could be used as a form of air lock simply by opening one end while leaving the other zipped shut. Of course each time that someone wanted to go from the pressurised interior of the ship to the vacuum outside a volume of air enough to fill the emergency air lock would be lost but that was a small price to pay to avoid decompressing the entire ship.

Before Fredericks and Renner could enter the alien ship though they first had to make a hole in the hull and Renner took a pair of hand held cutting torches from their tool kit and handed one to Fredericks before they both stepped into the air lock and zipped the outer end shut, sealing themselves inside. Then they activated their torches and began to cut into the hull of the crashed ship.

"Here! In the holding pen." Terrat Hol called out when he found the section of hull that the sound of cutting was coming from and saw the two bright streams of sparks coming from the torches being used to cut an entry point. The ship's hull was armoured and this was making the process of cutting through it slow going but Terrat Hol could tell that it would not be long before whoever was outside got in even without Okkus Rar to tell him.

The engineer soon appeared beside Terrat Hol and looked at the hull being cut into.

"Get back. We must be ready to defend our ship." he said.

"Without weapons?" Terrat Hol asked.

"Javas Ott has gone to the arms locker. He will be here soon. If not then we must be ready to fight with our bare hands." the engineer told him and to emphasise his point he held out one of his hands and opened and clenched his clawed fist.

Javas Ott then came hurrying around the corner empty handed.

"The arms locker is jammed." he said, "We will have to cut it open."

"There is no time for that, get ready to strike when the intruders come through this hatchway." Okkus Rar ordered and he lifted himself up to the ceiling, using all four limbs to cling onto the various ducts running along it. The other two crewmen also moved into the shadows, concealing themselves where they could easily launch themselves at anyone who came through the hatchway.

A short time later Fredericks and Renner finished cutting their way through the ship's hull and the loose section of plating fell inwards and landed with a 'clang' against the decking.

"Doesn't look like they have power. Must have died with the crew." Fredericks said as he stepped through the hole in the hull first, followed by Renner. Looking around the compartment they had entered they saw that one side of it was divided up into a row of transparent capsules, each of which was large enough to hold a pair of adult humans or one of the reptilian Dorcons that the moon's inhabitants had encountered soon after leaving the Earth's solar system. On the other hand the end in which the prospectors now stood featured a table fitted with what could only be described as restraints.

"I don't like the look of this." Renner said.

"Neither do I but we can leave the military to sort out what all this is for. We should take a look around. There could be stuff in here worth taking to sell privately or just keep as a memento of how we got rich.." Fredericks told her.

"Think they have artificial gravity at all or is it just down because of the power outage?" she responded and Fredericks knelt down and tried to lift one of the deck plates up from the floor to see whether or not there were any gravity emitters beneath. The plate remained stuck fast though and he stood back up.

"We'll have to keep searching. Maybe there's somewhere with some instruments that will show us more of what we've got here." Fredericks said and he walked towards the open hatchway on the opposite side of the compartment to the wall they had made their entrance through.

Fredericks had no sooner stepped through the hatchway though than something lashed out from above and tore open his spacesuit and cut into his abdomen with a single swipe. Thankfully there was enough atmospheric pressure around him to avoid having his internal organs forced out through the wound but he still cried out in agony and collapsed as Okkus Rar dropped down on him from above and dragged him away from the hatchway so that Terrat Hol and Javas Ott could launch themselves through it.

Renner screamed when she saw Fredericks attacked and dragged into the darkness but she retained enough of her senses that when the two aliens charged into the compartment with her she was able to bring up her cutting torch and reactivate it, hoping to use it as a weapon to defend herself. This did her no good however, as Terrat Hol simply reached out and grasped her forearm before squeezing it so tightly that Renner heard the sounds of her bones being crushed and she screamed again only this time in pain. It was then that Javas Ott struck, punching her helmet faceplate so hard that it cracked. The alien seemed to show no signs of pain though after punching the toughened visor and Renner saw him draw back his hand for another strike.

"No please!" she called out but Javas Ott could not understand her words and instead he struck a second time, this time breaking the faceplate open. Then a follow up attack from Terrat Hol came in through the shattered front of Renner's helmet and crushed her skull against the back of it.

Terrat Hol let go of the lifeless corpse and let it fall to the deck. At the same time Okkus Rar entered the compartment from behind them and looked down at the body.

"Interesting." he said, "These creatures resemble one of the slave species of the Dorcons. Although I do not think they are them, there are subtle differences and this one appears to be female. The Dorcons keep their female slaves close at hand."

"Okkus Rar, perhaps whatever this thing we have crashed into is belongs to the Dorcons." Terrat Hol suggested.

"Unlikely. I think that these creatures are beyond the Dorcons' control." Okkus Rar responded as he turned his attention towards the hole in the hull, "Interesting." he said, "They have constructed some kind of air lock. We can use that to get outside."

"And go where engineer?" Javaz Ott asked.

"To wherever these creatures came from of course. They clearly have at least a basic level of technology and we will need parts and equipment to repair our ship." Okkus Rar answered.

"We'll need spacesuits and weapons." Terrat Hol pointed out.

"We have time to get into where they are stored now." Okkus Rar said as he turned his attention to the corpse on the floor of the compartment, "First though we should feed."

"Tony I wasn't expecting you." Koenig said when he saw Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi coming up the steps towards his office. Verdeschi was the second highest ranking GDF officer on the moon, his position as commander of the military orientated Moonbase Epsilon giving him superiority over Doctor Helena Russell who also held the rank of lieutenant colonel.

"I have good news and I wanted to give it to you in person." he replied.

"Then take a seat. Care for a coffee?" Koenig said.

"Thanks but you might want to make it four cups. Morrow and Carter need to hear this as well." Verdeschi said and the two other officers turned towards him when they heard their names.

"Very well. Captain Benes you have main mission." Koenig said and he waited for Morrow and Carter to enter his office before he closed the wall that separated it from main mission.

"There's no need for that. This isn't secret." Verdeschi said.

"No but it makes the others nervous and that's always fun." Koenig replied and he and Verdeschi grinned at one another.

"I believe there was coffee mentioned." Carter commented and Koenig smiled and pointed to the coffee maker at the side of the office.

"Feel free major." he said and the four men quickly made themselves drinks before sitting around Koenig's desk.

"So what's so important that you come all the way here from Epsilon unannounced colonel?" Morrow asked.

"Actually I came via the manufacturing plants at Delta." Verdeschi said, "I paid a visit to the aerospace works boys."

"The aerospace works? Has this got something to do with the Hawks?" Carter said and Verdeschi nodded, passing the computer tablet he had brought with him to Koenig.

"Seven brand new SF nine Hawk attack ships fresh off the production line. Along with launch tractors and a slew of spare parts. See? It's not only Keynes that can work wonders with inventories. Once they'd melted it down the hull of that flying saucer provided them with everything they needed." Verdeschi said.

Koenig smiled as he looked at the images of the newly manufactured military attack craft. The standard spacecraft used on the moon was the Eagle, a multi-purpose craft with a modular construction that allowed it to be heavily customised. The Hawk was an entirely different craft altogether though, optimised for combat it was far more heavily armed than a militarised Eagle and capable of much greater acceleration. Considered vital to the moon's defence there had been forty of the craft based at Epsilon when the moon left Earth's orbit but one of those had been destroyed and not recovered since then and this exposed the greatest problem with the craft, they had until now been irreplaceable. Hawks utilised materials reverse engineered from the saucer shaped raiding craft used by the mysterious alien species that had attacked Earth during the mid twenty-second century and the only industrial plants capable of reproducing these had been on Earth itself. However, when a crashed alien ship was discovered on the moon its hull offered an alternate source of these valuable materials and it had been sent off to Delta to be broken up.

"So how many Hawks do they think they can get out of that one saucer?" Carter asked.

"Oh about seventy or so." Verdeschi answered.

"That almost triples the fleet we have right now." Morrow commented.

"If only there was some way to fix up the Landau. Then we'd have an Anderson-class frigate to protect us as well." Carter added.

"I was thinking deploy thirty of them here at Alpha and another ten each at Beta, Delta and Kappa." Verdeschi said.

"Protect our command structure and industrial plants." Koenig said, nodding.

"What about Kappa? Why focus on a bunch of hotels?" Carter said.

"Morale. Most people there lived on Earth and were only visiting the moon when we left. Seeing that they're protected by state of the art attack ships will probably make them feel more positive towards the military." Verdeschi said.

"God knows we could do with that." Morrow said, "Even after Foxworth and that mutineer Capston left and

took a bunch of our ships with them there are still too many reports in the press that seem designed to whip up anti-GDF sentiment among the civilian population.”

“If anything it’s got worse.” Carter said, “Colonel Verdeschi you’re lucky that Epsilon is a purely military facility.”

“I do have one question though.” Morrow said, “Why specifically bring the two of us in here as well colonel?” and he pointed to himself and Carter.

“Easy. Because I’ve been over the personnel records of every officer at Alpha and Colonel Koenig and the pair of you are the only ones here who are rated as pilots for Hawks. All the other officers can only fly Eagles.”

“How many reserve crew do you have at Epsilon colonel?” Morrow asked.

“Just twenty. Enough for ten ships and that’s without any of my regular crews getting sick or injured.”

Verdeschi said before he looked back at Koenig, “John you need to get a training program running.”

“Bill Fraser’s good. I bet I can have him qualified in a couple of weeks.” Carter said.

“Regular pilots can act as seconds until we can get them qualified as well but that still leaves us three short just to man these seven new ships.” Morrow said.

“Well after Fraser I’d rate Ramirez and Aarden as my best.” Carter said.”

“And I’ve got our seventh.” Koenig said before he heard the sound of clapping from the other side of the wall separating his office from main mission, “What the hell is that?”

3.

“So what do you think they’re discussing in there?” Baker commented, looking at the closed wall at the top of the steps in main mission.

“Nothing good, mark my words.” Alexander commented, “Haven’t you noticed that whenever the top brass get together behind that wall it always leads to trouble?”

“You’re just too much of a pessimist Tanya.” Kano responded before he noticed another person in the uniform of a GDF officer entering main mission. At first glance the woman could pass for an ordinary human but on closer inspection it was easy to see that her red hair had an unusually prominent widow’s peak while her eyes were exceptionally pale and possessed pupils with a dagger shape to them and Kano smiled, “Here’s the hero of the moment.” he said out loud and everyone in main mission promptly stood up and began to applaud.

It was then that the wall to Koenig’s office opened again and the senior officers inside began to descend the steps.

“What’s going on Benes?” Koenig asked.

“The staff were just expressing our appreciation of how Maya handled that press conference last night.” Benes answered.

“I only answered the questions that I was asked.” the newly arrived alien woman said.

“Oh come on Maya that guy Coster was ready to dig himself a hole and jump in to hide after you pointed out that he tried to steal an Eagle before Master Sergeant Washington shot him with a stun gun.” Alexander said.

“Mister Coster implied that the recent mass desertion was due to ineffective leadership by Colonel Koenig. I only pointed out that the charges of excessive force he attempted to bring against Master Sergeant Washington have already been dismissed by a magistrate.” Maya said.

“Thus pointing out how he was up to his neck in it and trying to make himself appear innocent.” Kano said.

“Maya you did well and everyone is very happy with your performance.” Koenig said before he turned towards Alexander, “On the other hand Lieutenant Alexander I believe that you are currently responsible for security here at Alpha.” he added.

“Yes colonel. I wasn’t aware that-” Alexander began.

“That’s the point lieutenant. Things you don’t seem to know. It’s obvious that you need to improve your skill set.” Koenig interrupted.

“Colonel I-” she said before Koenig turned to Carter.

“Major Carter how long do you think it will take to whip this young lady into shape as a Hawk pilot?” he said and Alexander’s jaw dropped.

“A Hawk pilot? Seriously?” she said.

“Yes lieutenant. That’s what Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi came here to discuss. This time tomorrow we’ll have a squadron of seven protecting Alpha and we’re short of pilots. So Major Carter, what do you say?”

“I think I can get her through the course in about a month.” Carter said, “Although when it comes to Lieutenant Alexander I’d rather not use phrases like ‘whip into shape.’ I’d hate for her to get the wrong idea about what’s expected of her.”

“Colonel I’ve got Gamma on the line for you.” Benes said suddenly when a signal came through to her console.

“Okay let’s hear it.” Koenig replied and as he walked over to her Benes turned back to her console.

“Colonel Koenig is here now.” she said into the communication system.

“Colonel its Deputy Schneider, Gamma Sheriff’s Department. We may have a problem out here.” the man in the sheriff’s uniform who appeared on the screen said.

“What sort of problem deputy?” Koenig asked.

“We’ve lost contact with one of the mining outposts. I was expecting a status report from the administration staff there but nothing came through. I tried calling them but no-one answered.” Schneider said.

“A transceiver problem?” Kano suggested when he heard this and the communication system picked it up.

“That was my first thought as well,” Schneider responded, “but when our technical section looked into it they said that the system was working just fine. I would send an Eagle to see what’s going on but right now we’ve only got two here and one of them is undergoing repairs.”

“So you were hoping that we could send someone out to take a look.” Koenig said.

“Yes colonel.”

“Okay we’ll handle it. Just give us the location of the outpost and we’ll send an Eagle. I’ll see about getting more Eagles sent your way as well. We can’t have a base without any craft available for day to day operations. Moonbase Alpha out.” Koenig said and then he turned to Morrow, “Major I want you to take an

Eagle out to the outpost. Captain Benes go with him. Take Doctor Russell and a small force of troops with you. Outposts don't just start ignoring calls for no reason."

"So what do we know about this outpost?" Doctor Russell, Moon base Alpha's chief medical officer asked when she boarded the Eagle and found Benes along with Master Sergeant Washington in the airlock. "It's just a support depot really." Benes told her, checking her computer tablet, "A place where the mines can get spare parts and supplies or just gather together every so often. It looks like there are only nineteen people based there on a permanent basis. Two sheriff's deputies, four administrators, two medics and ten prospectors that work in teams of two."

"That's only eighteen." Russell pointed out.

"There's also a combination of general store and bar run by the nineteenth." Benes told her.

"I would have expected their medical staff to warn us if there was some sort of outbreak." Russell commented.

"It's more likely an accident of some kind. Something that triggered a mass decompression." Washington said, "If there is anyone left I expect we'll find them hiding in some emergency shelter."

"You don't think it was an attack then?" Russell asked.

"If Red Mars had taken the outpost then we'd have heard about it by now doctor. Either they'd be bragging about it in the press or they'd be issuing demands for the release of hostages." Washington answered before Morrow appeared from the cockpit module.

"Ah doctor you're here. Good. We can be on our way. Captain if you're ready." he said.

"Coming major." Benes replied and then while Russell and Washington made their way into the passenger module in the centre of the Eagle she accompanied Morrow into the cockpit where they both sat down and strapped themselves in, "Are those our destination co-ordinates?" she said when she noticed the setting on the navigation system.

"Yes, why? Is there a problem?" Morrow asked.

"I'm not sure major but I think that this outpost is the one that reported the impact right after we came out of the wormhole." Benes told him and he frowned.

"Why did you have to tell me that now Sandra?" he said before switching on the Eagle's communications, "*Eagle One* to main mission requesting permission to launch." he said.

"Confirmed *Eagle One*. Permission granted." Alexander's voice responded and Morrow pulled back on the flight controls.

The Eagle lifted off the cross shaped landing pad and Morrow turned the craft in the rough direction of Moonbase Gamma and accelerated towards it. An Eagle could circle the moon in under an hour at full speed and it did not take long for the investigation team to reach the outpost that was no longer communicating, at which point Benes used the externally mounted cameras to examine the structure. Like all the small outposts scattered across the moon this one was built using common construction blocks combined to provide the internal space required for its mission and in this case that meant a large warehouse of parts and supplies for dozens of smaller outposts as well as living quarters for the occupants and hangar and air lock facilities for their vehicles. Unlike the larger moonbases there was no extensive underground hangar facility for spacecraft though, with only a landing pad large enough to take two Eagles at once on top of the main structure. As she studied the footage from the Eagle's cameras Benes saw that there were no craft landed on the launch pad, nor were there any signs of movement outside the structure. Internally all that Benes could see was that there were no lights shining through any of the windows and she double checked the time.

"That's weird. Someone should be around now." she said, "I'm not picking up any power signatures either."

"See if you can get them on the radio." Morrow told her and she activated the Eagle's communications.

"Outpost Gamma one-six this is *Eagle One* out of Alpha, respond please." she said but there was no reply.

"Okay I'm taking us in. We'll have to work the boarding tube by remote." Morrow said and he flew the Eagle right above the outpost before bringing it to a halt. Then he gradually descended until the occupants heard the sound of the landing gear compressing as the craft touched down and he cut the power.

"Accessing docking control now." Benes said as she tried to get the boarding tube from the outpost to extend and make contact with the Eagle's airlock so that the occupants could cross over to the outpost without the need for spacesuits. However, although the outpost's communication system registered a connection the boarding tube itself did not move.

"Something's wrong. The docking control isn't working." Benes said, "They could have disconnected the remote to try and keep us out."

"Then they're fools. They should have shot us down before we landed." Morrow said, reaching for the intercom, "Master Sergeant Washington are your men ready for EVA?"

"Yes major, we're suited up." Washington responded from the passenger module.

"Good. Captain Benes can't get the outpost's boarding tube to extend so we're going to have to force entry." Morrow told him.

"Understood major. We'll open the door for you." Washington said and then in the passenger module he turned to his men, "Okay men we're going in. Helmets on. Make sure your rifles are set for low velocity use. I don't want us putting any holes in the structure."

The soldiers that Washington had brought with him all wore armoured spacesuits that they now added their helmets to before lowering their visors and walking to the air lock module. Initially Washington entered the airlock with just half his men so that there would be more room inside for them as they unslung their rifles and set them so that the magnetic fields used to accelerate the projectiles they fired would not fire them with enough energy to pierce the outpost's walls. While they were doing this Washington accessed the airlock controls and began the depressurisation process. Then once the air lock was in a vacuum Washington reached for the controls to the outer airlock door.

"Opening outer door." he said, his space suit radio relaying his words to Morrow and Benes.

The airlock door slid open and Washington and his men descended the steps that had deployed in the absence of a boarding tube. At the base of the steps they formed a perimeter, each man covering a different direction while the airlock closed again so that the second half of the squad could enter it and follow the first fire team out onto the landing pad.

"Okay there's our way in." Washington told his men, pointing to a hatch set into the side of the module that housed the outpost's boarding tube.

The soldiers moved quickly across the landing pad, knowing that to be caught out in such an open area was deadly if they came under fire. Then as soon as they reached the outpost hatch Washington attempted to access the controls, only to find that there was no power to operate them.

"Manual controls sergeant?" one of his men said and Washington nodded.

"Get to it." he said, stepping back and pointing his rifle towards the hatchway as two members of his squad moved forwards to open the door without using the powered system. They did this by removing a hull plate beside the door that concealed a large handle and a socket that it could be fitted into. Once this was done then opening the door was simply a matter of the two men turning the handle together.

The first thing that Washington and his men noticed when the door began to open was that there was no sudden rush of escaping air from inside, indicating that the air lock was already in a vacuum. This was not all that unusual in itself but as the door opened wider the lights mounted on the helmets of the soldiers' spacesuits revealed that the airlock's inner door was also wide open.

"Major Morrow we may have a problem here." Washington signalled to the Eagle.

"What is it sergeant?" Morrow asked.

"Major the outpost has suffered decompression. It could just be around the landing pad section but it could also be the entire place." Washington told him.

"Understood. Secure an entry point. We're coming in to join you." Morrow ordered.

"Yes major. Moving in now." Washington replied.

Q.

Washington's troops were deployed in the area just beyond the airlock when Russell, Morrow and Benes entered the outpost behind them, positioned to cover the stair and elevator shafts that led down into the main part of the structure. Russell carried with her a medical kit while Benes had a portable computer terminal. Morrow on the other hand carried a magnetic accelerator rifle of the same kind carried by the soldiers accompanying them.

"Are there any signs of the inhabitants?" Russell asked.

"No doctor. We've not seen anyone alive or dead in here." Washington answered.

"Captain see if you can patch into the local network." Morrow told Benes.

"There's an access point over there." Washington added and Benes nodded.

"Thank you sergeant." she said before making her way across the room and starting up her terminal.

To begin with she tried to access the outpost's computer network wirelessly but her computer could detect no signals so instead she tried a direct connection with a cable joining her computer to the socket. However, once again this met with failure.

"Sorry major, the entire system is down." she said.

"Just like everything else." Russell added, looking around the darkened interior of the outpost, "Have you noticed that there's no more gravity in here than there is outside? The artificial system must have failed."

"Maybe it's just been shut off. We should get to the control room and see if we can bring anything back on line." Morrow said and then he looked at Benes again and added, "Do you have a floor plan on that thing?"

"Of course major. I downloaded it before we left Alpha." she replied.

"Good. Then kindly tell us the quickest way to the command centre." Morrow told her.

"You are worried about Doctor Russell." Maya said, looking across Koenig's desk at him and he smiled back at her.

"Ah your Psychon powers of mind reading at work again." he said.

"In part yes colonel. However, there is also the fact that you asked me about the requests for equipment to replace that taken by Major Capston ten minutes ago." Maya replied.

"Sorry, it slipped my mind. To answer your question directly though, yes I am worried about her. An entire outpost ceasing communication is bad news. If it was just a technical fault then someone would get into a vehicle and drive to the nearest neighbouring one. I know she can handle herself, she's proven that before and Washington won't let anything happen to anyone if he can help it. But I'd still feel better if I could just hop into an Eagle and fly right out there now myself." Koenig said, "Anyway I believe you said that Keynes thinks the requests are being inflated by administrators keen to boost their stockpiles."

"Yes colonel. Also I have to say that Alyson Keynes is jealous of my new position colonel." Maya said, "I could tell when I was speaking to her."

"Yes well she did used to be my adjutant before she lost her commission." Koenig reminded Maya.

"I know that colonel but I think there is more to it than just that." she replied.

"Are you talking about her personal feelings towards me?" Koenig said quietly, glancing out of his office to see if any of Alpha's command staff were close enough to overhear.

"You know of them colonel?" Maya asked.

"Yes, Helena told me. She also told me that she'd warned Alyson that if she ever made a move on me then she was going to violate her medical oath to stitch parts of Alyson shut. Although she never did specify which parts those were exactly. Anyway Keynes may be somewhat upset that now she has to come through you to get to me." Koenig said, "Do you think that will be a problem?"

"For me, no colonel. On the other hand every time I have spoken to Keynes I have sensed her feelings of detachment from the rest of the crew at Alpha. The people who used to be her friends." Maya said.

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about that Maya. Keynes made her choice to work with the terrorists of Red Mars and now she has to live with the consequences of that act. I'm not about to order anyone to spend their free time with her." Koenig said, "Now talking of people who have burned bridges they shouldn't have what about this reporter Coster, the one who is facing charges for trying to steal an Eagle and join Major Capston's little band of mutineers. Is he still harassing you to try and get an interview with me?"

"He does send multiple messages every day colonel. As per your instructions I have been ignoring these and only responding to him in public briefings. His network still reports that you are hiding from them. Would you like me to meet with him to conduct an interview?" Maya said and Koenig smiled.

"No thank you Maya. Capston and his so-called news network aren't a problem and I've no intention of meeting with him before his trial. I doubt much will come of that anyway. He only used a stun gun and there

were a lot of people trying to get aboard that Eagle. He'll probably just get a fine. I doubt the magistrate will be shipping him off to Theta any time soon." he said.

As they proceeded further into the outpost it became obvious that it was no mere malfunction that had caused all contact with it to be lost, some of the doors had obviously been forced open and there were signs of fighting everywhere. Seeing this Doctor Russell drew the stun gun she had holstered on her waist.

"Looks like someone wasn't so fussy about keeping their muzzle velocity low." Morrow said when he passed through a doorway and noticed that there were holes punched right through the wall beside it.

"Weird. I know bullet holes major and those don't look right to me. They're too large for any standard calibre." Washington said.

"What about a none-standard calibre?" Russell said.

"A custom calibre would suggest criminals with home made weapons." Washington responded.

"There's blood over here. A lot of it." Benes announced as she and the two soldiers at the front of the group reached a junction and looked around it.

"Let me see." Russell replied and she moved forwards to see for herself.

Looking down the side corridor she saw that a large section of the blood was covered in dried blood and that there was a large smear of it extending towards the junction for about a metre or so.

"Does a human body even contain this much blood?" Morrow asked from behind Russell as she crouched down.

"Yes but it takes a considerable injury for it to all come out like this." Russell replied.

"Such as?" Morrow said.

"Someone getting cut in half." Washington told him.

"That's about the only way I can think of." Russell added.

"Couldn't it have come from more than one person?" Benes suggested.

"No." Russell said, shaking her head inside her helmet, "You can see here where the body was removed." and she pointed to the smear.

"That's an interesting point doctor. For all the physical damage and signs of fighting we've seen we haven't seen a single body yet." Washington pointed out.

"If there was only one body here then who tried to crawl away?" Benes then asked and she pointed to where it looked as if there were a row of hand prints leading through the pool of blood on the floor.

"That's odd." Washington said.

"What is?" Morrow responded.

"Those prints don't make sense unless they were made by someone walking on their hands." Washington said.

"To keep the blood off their shoes?" Morrow commented.

"I've got some nice shoes I wouldn't want blood on major but if I had to walk through a pool of the stuff I'd just take them off." Russell added as Washington crouched down and held out one of his hands, spreading out his fingers to match the pattern of the print.

"It's all wrong." he said, "It's too long. You what that reminds me of? A footprint."

"I thought it was decided that walking through blood on your hands was a stupid idea." Morrow said.

"Yes major but what I mean is that I think it's an actual footprint. From a foot. Just not a human one."

Washington said.

"Yes, some apes have prehensile feet." Russell agreed, "I don't think those are ape footprints but I know they're not human."

"They aren't Dorcon either." Washington commented, "This is something new."

"Let's get to the control centre. Maybe we can get some answers there. After that though we need to warn Moonbase Alpha." Morrow ordered.

The outpost's command centre was close by and it did not take the group long to reach it. Unlike the spacious main mission at Moonbase Alpha this room was cramped and only had seating for four people at consoles. As with the other areas of the outpost there were no signs of the staff who would have worked here but there were signs of violence in the form of blood sprayed across the consoles and bullet holes in the back wall of the room. More significantly though the row of windows at the front had been completely destroyed although there were no signs of any pieces of the toughened glass they had been made of.

"I think these were shot out from the outside." Washington said and he walked across the room to peer out through the destroyed windows at the lunar surface three levels below. However, the lights on his spacesuit were not powerful enough to let him make out any small details such as fragments of glass from this distance.

"Explains why attempts to make contact were ignored." Benes said as she sat down on one of the blood stained seats and began to inspect the console.

"I understand how taking out the command centre would cause chaos and make an attack easier but if we're taking about aliens how would they know where it was?" Russell asked.

"They probably studied the outpost from a distance and saw all the antennas right above us." Morrow pointed out, recalling the communication and sensor arrays visible from overhead in the Eagle.

"I think they climbed in through here." Washington said as he studied the edge of the window closely and saw an imprint of what he knew to be lunar dust in the same shape as the print seen in the blood on it.

"So they shoot out the window. They hit some of the controllers but whether or not they are killed by this they suffocate when the air blows out into space." Morrow said, "Then the aliens climb up the outside and come in through the hole they just made. Getting into the rest of the outpost is then just a matter of forcing that door open."

"And with only two sheriff's deputies to worry about they wouldn't have had much opposition." Washington added.

"Benes how are you doing with that computer?" Morrow asked.

"Sorry major, I can get some local readouts but nothing about the rest of the outpost. I think there's a battery backup but the main power is out." Benes replied.

"Very well. Sergeant Washington please escort captain Benes to the power plant and see if she can get the mains back on line. I'll return to the Eagle with Doctor Russell and contact Colonel Koenig, we're going to need more than just one squad of troops to deal with this." Morrow said.

"Colonel I've got Major Morrow and Doctor Russell on the line for you." Baker called out across main mission and Koenig nodded.

"Put them through spacewoman." he replied as he looked at the monitor on his desk just as the faces of Russell and Morrow appeared., "Major. Doctor. How are things looking out there?" he asked.

"Pretty bad John. There's no-one left here." Russell answered.

"Everyone's dead?" Koenig said.

"Probably colonel We haven't found any bodies." Morrow told him, "Just blood and bullet holes. Benes and Sergeant Washington's men have gone to try and restore power but we're going to need help out here."

"John we found tracks that indicate the presence of some kind of alien in the outpost." Russell added.

"Dorcons?" Koenig said.

"No, something we've not encountered before." Russell replied.

"Colonel it looks like whatever it was that hit the moon when we came through the wormhole had a crew and they aren't friendly." Morrow added, "We're pretty close to the impact site here."

"Okay hold the fort until I get there with reinforcements. I'm going to alert Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi as well. If it was some kind of ship that crashed then there could be more in this system. Koenig out." Koenig said before he turned off the communicator. Then he got to his feet and made his way down the steps to main mission, "Alexander, Maya, we're heading out to join Major Morrow and Doctor Russell. It looks like the outpost came under attack from some sort of alien that may have crashed on the moon. Alexander we'll need a technical team and as many troops as we can fit in an Eagle. Baker I want you to tell Professor Bergman to meet us at the launch pad. If there is alien technology to be had then he's the man we need."

"Are there any specific orders for while you're gone colonel?" Carter asked, knowing that with both Koenig and Morrow away from main mission he was next in the chain of command.

"Yes but Kano will be taking command of Alpha." Koenig replied, "We need to locate wherever that alien ship crashed so I want you up there in an Eagle – No wait forget that Carter. Take Captain Fraser with you and take one of those shiny new Hawks we've got down in the hangar up. Fraser needs to learn how to fly one so a nice survey flight should be the perfect opportunity. If you do have to take the ship into combat then you can take over."

"Gladly colonel." Carter said before he took his comlock from his belt and held it to his face, "Bill meet me in the hangar ASAP, you're about to get your first Hawk piloting lesson." he said into it.

"Kano if there are more alien ships around then they could attack while we're gone. I suggest you put the moon's defences on standby and be ready for it. Have every armed Eagle we've got ready for launch."

Koenig told him. Then he paused before adding, "Baker I'll need to speak to Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi as well. Plus I want Keynes."

"Keynes? What for?" Alexander asked.

"I need her to check that outpost's inventory. If anything is missing then she'll be able to tell us." Koenig replied, "Now let's move."

"I've got Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi for you now sir." Baker said.

"I'll take it on my comlock." Koenig replied as he continued to head for the exit from main mission.

"John what's the emergency?" Verdeschi asked when his face appeared on the screen of Koenig's comlock.

"Tony that outpost that went dark was attacked by something. Helena said it was alien." Koenig told him.

"Is the rest of the moon under threat?" Verdeschi said.

"Maybe. I want your forces ready for immediate deployment. Major Carter's going to be searching for the alien ship from the air but I want a ground search in operation as well. I want a company of your men out there along with armour to back them up. We may just be talking about a few aliens but-

"But there could be an army out there." Verdeschi interrupted, "Understood colonel. I'll lead the search myself."

"There," Engineer Okkus Rar said, lowering the welding torch, "the hull is now patched. We can reactivate our life support without losing all our air to space."

"Okkus Rar, what about our engines?" Terrat Hol asked, "Do you know how long it will take to repair them?"

"At present we cannot repair them. None of the equipment we took from the alien base was suitable for powering our engines. We will have to look further afield. Fortunately what we did recover looks to be sufficiently advanced that I am confident the necessary parts will exist somewhere on this travelling world. The only question is where they are." Okkus Rar answered.

"How do you intend us to locate it?" Javass Ott said.

"I expect that it will find us Javass Ott." Okkus Rar told him, "Other aliens will come to discover what happened when they see that the base is not answering any of the efforts to communicate and I expect them to make use of flying transport. We will study this and find a way to bring one down without destroying its engines. We know that their technology, although relatively out of date, is sufficiently advanced that we can make use of their parts for our repairs. If we can secure a fusion plant then we will be able to generate power for our engines. Until then we will have to make do with the portable unit we captured to supply our immediate needs. Now what about weapons?"

"I have examined the weaponry from our armoury and most of it survived the craft Okkus Rar." Javass Ott told him, "That includes the missiles."

"Excellent, we are safe from detection behind our holographic shroud but we will need those if we are to bring down an alien craft. From this moment on one of you must maintain a watch outside. Set up a portable shroud and alert me if you see any more of the aliens or their vehicles." Okkus Rar ordered and the other two crewmen turned and left the room.

S.

When Koenig reached the landing pad where *Eagle Two* was stationed most of the other personnel assigned were already aboard. Only Alexander, Professor Bergman and Alexander had not yet arrived according to the man assigned by Carter as Koenig's copilot.

"I've been told that they're on their way colonel." the copilot told Koenig and he nodded.

"Okay we'll get on board and wait." he said and the two men went aboard the waiting *Eagle*.

Before he turned to enter the *Eagle's* cockpit Koenig turned and looked into the passenger module where he saw the technical team and the extra troops already in their seats. Sat apart from these men and women was a lone woman wearing spacesuit that was lacking in any of the rank or division markings on those worn by everyone else. The only marking was the name 'KEYNES' on the chest pack. While the other passengers were chatting among themselves they were ignoring the woman and she was not attempting to engage them in conversation either. However, when she noticed Koenig in the airlock she smiled at him. In response he nodded at her.

"Colonel you weren't going to leave without us were you?" Alexander said jokingly from behind Koenig and he turned to see her, Bergman and Maya all walking along the boarding tube towards him.

"Of course not but you are the last ones to arrive. Now take your seats and we can be on our way." Koenig told them and he headed for the cockpit. The *Eagle* that had been prepared for Koenig was one of the number of armed craft available at Moonbase Alpha, carrying a pair of magnetic accelerator cannons under the forward section just behind the cockpit module and a pair of lighter weapons in a turret that could be deployed from its spine framework and as Koenig entered the cockpit he noticed that his co-pilot was already in the process of checking the targeting system.

Alexander, Bergman and Maya all turned into the passenger module instead and Alexander came to a sudden halt when she saw that the only three vacant seats were those in the four seat section where Keynes sat alone.

"Oh great. We have to sit with her." she muttered.

"I'm sure it will be fine lieutenant." Bergman told her.

"Okay professor but I'm not sitting beside or directly opposite her. I'm not talking to her and I don't want to have to look at her." she said before she started to move again, walking all the way to the vacant seats and sitting in the seat located diagonally from the one Keynes occupied.

"Tanya I-" Keynes said but she stopped when Alexander suddenly glared at her.

"Good afternoon Miss Keynes." Bergman said as he then sat down opposite her.

"Hello professor. How have you been?" Keynes replied.

"Well I suppose better than I would be had you not been able to intercept the medication Major Capston was planning to steal." Bergman said, referring to the medication he had to take for his heart. This was derived from a plant introduced to Earth's ecosystem by the aliens who had attacked it more than a hundred years earlier. Unfortunately this plant had never been cultivated on the moon and so when it left Earth's orbit the supply on the moon could not be replaced and the people using it suddenly faced the possibility of running out. Almost the entire supply of this drug had been stolen by the group that deserted from the moon, intending to take it all for the users among their number but Keynes had discovered this and been able to hide what they had stolen before they could load it aboard any of their ships.

"I'm glad I could-" Keynes began before Bergman interrupted her.

"If you don't mind Miss Keynes I have a lot of reading to catch up on." he said as he lifted his computer tablet and looked down at the screen, at which point Keynes' face fell and she leant back in her seat.

Meanwhile in the cockpit Koenig had completed the final prelaunch checks and activated the communications.

"*Eagle Two* to main mission, requesting clearance to launch." he said.

"Confirmed *Eagle Two*. Boarding tube is disengaged and you are clear for launch. Be advised that *Hawk One* is already over the target area." Baker's voice responded and Koenig smiled.

"That's just Carter showing off." he told his copilot before he pulled back on the flight controls and there was a roar of engines as the *Eagle* rose up off the launch pad and then flew off towards the outpost.

"I'd say our ETA was about twenty minutes colonel." the co-pilot said.

"Agreed. I want you to keep an eye on our scanners. Watch for anything on the surface that doesn't fit. I don't care how trivial it seems if you see something mark it for Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi to investigate." Koenig said.

"We won't be investigating ourselves colonel?" the copilot asked.

"In an unarmed transport *Eagle*? I don't think so. We'll leave that one to people who can shoot back if they're fired on." Koenig answered.

"Would you think less of me if I let out a really loud girly scream right now sergeant?" Benes asked as she and the soldiers accompanying her looked down at the first corpse they had come across in the outpost. This was in a very poor condition and many of the internal organs were exposed.

"I forgive you if you give us enough notice to turn off our radios first captain. I'd rather not be deafened." Washington replied.

"Okay I won't bother then." Benes said, crouching down to look at the body more closely, "Shot and ripped wide open? Someone wanted to make sure. What do you think these crystals are though?" she said and she pointed to clusters of greenish crystals that covered parts of the body.

"Look up captain. It's lubricant." Washington told her and Benes looked up to where a row of cans of lubricant on the shelves that would have been behind the man when he was shot and she saw the bullet holes that had been punched in them.

"So he was shot and the stray rounds punctured the cans." she said and Washington nodded in agreement. "Then it poured out over him and froze when the power distribution system was shut off." he added.

"Speaking of which." Benes said as she got back to her feet and looked around, "I think that's what we're here for." and she looked towards a doorway labelled 'Power Plant'.

The door to this room had been left open when the power went out and looking inside Benes and Washington saw that there did not appear to be any physical damage to any of the controls or the bulky fusion reactor at its centre.

"Looks like someone just flipped a switch and turned it off." Washington commented.

"Let's hope so. Restarting a fusion reactor I can do. Repairing one is more of a problem." Benes said as she walked over to a control panel and pushed one of the buttons, "Let's hope the back up battery is still charged." she added.

Moments later there was a whirring sound and all around the power plant control room displays flickered to life, showing Benes that the fusion reaction in the reactor had now restarted.

"I think you're supposed to say 'let there be light'." Washington said and Benes smiled.

"I'm not God sergeant. An angel maybe but nothing more." she said as she used her comlock to connect her spacesuit radio to the Eagle on the rooftop landing pad, "Benes to Major Morrow," she said.

"Captain our systems are suddenly reporting a connection to the outpost." Morrow responded, "I take it that that is your doing?"

"Kano's not the only who can turn a reactor back on major. Maybe now we can find out just how badly damaged the outpost is." Benes said, "By the way we actually have a body down here."

"Is it one of the outpost staff?" Russell asked.

"I think so. From the look of what's left of the clothing it was the guy on duty here in the power plant when it was attacked. He's real mess though. Even after he was shot something tore open his ribcage."

"I wonder why his corpse wasn't taken as well?" Morrow commented.

"It might have something to do with the chemical that got spilled all over it major." Benes suggested, "It's covered in frozen lubricant."

"I'm on my way down now. Have Sergeant Washington leave a couple of men with it." Russell said.

"And I'll meet you in the outpost control room." Morrow said, "Let's see if we can give Colonel Koenig some answers by the time he arrives."

"Colonel I've got the outpost beacon dead ahead." Koenig's copilot told him.

"A beacon? Benes must have got something working then." Koenig replied, "What about other contacts?"

"I've got Major Carter's Hawk ahead of us as well and a flight of other ships at the limit of scanner range."

"Coming in from Epsilon?" Koenig asked and his copilot nodded.

"It looks like it colonel, the bearing is right." he said.

"Then that will be Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi with his armoured unit." Koenig said, "Let's see what Major Morrow has to say." and then he activated the Eagle's external communications, "*Eagle Two* calling Major Morrow, do you read me?"

"Reading you colonel." Morrow's voice said in response, "Are you close by?"

"Close enough to see that Benes has been able to start turning things back on." Koenig told him.

"Understood colonel. Be advised that you should be able to land and extend the boarding tube by remote but the outpost is still in a vacuum. We're still trying to assess how many holes need plugging before we try pumping more air back in." Morrow warned him.

"Understood. Everyone here has a suit on anyway. We'll be with you in about five minutes. *Eagle Two* out."

Koenig said before he switched from the Eagle's external communications to the intercom, "Okay everyone we'll be landing in about five minutes. Power has been restored to the outpost but it's still not pressurised so suits need to be sealed. When we land everyone is to disembark. All troops will deploy according to Master Sergeant Washington's instructions while the technical team will await instructions from Captain Benes."

Professor Bergman, Alexander, Maya and Keynes are with me. We'll be heading for the outpost command centre." he told the Eagle's passengers.

As the Eagle flown by Koenig came in to land Javas Ott watched through a portable visual scanner and as soon as he saw the craft start to descend he activated its recording function.

"Javas Ott to Okkus Rar." he transmitted back to the crashed vessel.

"Go ahead Javas Ott." Okkus Rar responded.

"An alien ship is approaching the base and think it intends to land. There is imagery on channel four." Javas Ott told the engineer.

"I am looking at it now." I see light from the horizon as well. Can you see it?" Okkus Rar asked.

"Yes Okkus Rar. That appeared a number of terocs ago." Javas Ott answered.

"Then why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it was necessary Okkus Rar."

"It shows that the base power has been restored. There must already be aliens present there. These are reinforcements." Okkus Rar said before he turned his attention to the Eagle itself and he growled in disappointment, "That ship cannot open a wormhole." he said, "It lacks an energy projector."

"Yes Okkus Rar. Is that a problem?" Javas Ott said.

"Yes Javas Ott. The focusing lens of our projector is damaged. It will need replacing and we do not have an intact spare. The aliens are our only source." Okkus Rar told him.

Two members of the technical team had placed a sheet of metal across the ruined window and as Benes watched were just finishing welding it into place when Koenig entered the outpost's compact control room. "All set captain?" he asked.

"I think so colonel." she replied, glancing at him before looking at the two technicians, "Well boys?" she asked.

"It may not be any good as a window but it'll keep the hole plugged. I guarantee it." the welder equipped technician replied, climbing down from the console he had been stood on.

"All set colonel." Benes said.

"Good. The other technicians have been able to repair or seal enough doors around the administrative section that we should be able to pump some air back in and get rid of these helmets.

"How big an area are we talking about?" Benes said and she and Koenig both turned towards a display showing a floor plan of the outpost.

"Well in here of course." Koenig said, pointing to the control room on the floor plan, "Plus the main computer room here, the medical section and these offices and that briefing room. I wanted to include this corridor along here so we'd get direct access to *Eagle One* without needing suits but the technicians who surveyed it found a hole that is proving difficult to patch. That means anyone who needs the bathroom is going to have to use their suit waste system."

Benes winced when she heard this. Although it was quite possible for a human to carry out bodily functions in a spacesuit the system that allowed this was not comfortable to use and genuine toilet facilities were always preferred.

"At least it will give the technicians an incentive to either give us access to an Eagle or fix enough of the outpost that we can turn the plumbing back on." she responded.

"I don't know about that captain." Koenig said, "They're all enlisted men and I've met a lot of enlisted personnel that would put up with some discomfort themselves if it means getting to watch officers squirm." and then he looked towards the two technicians and added, "Isn't that so spacemen?"

"Normally I'd agree with you colonel. But we could never do that to Professor Bergman." one of them replied with a smile, "Although there is a chance that someone may just apply a bit of glue to the seal of Miss Keynes' suit so she can't get it off even when the plumbing is fixed."

"Well tell them not to. Understood?" Koenig said sternly but before the technician could reply Koenig heard Morrow's voice over his radio.

"Colonel the technicians out here have confirmed that we're set. Corridor A-seven will be our airlock until we can get D-six patched and regain access to the launch pad." he said.

"Very good major. We're set here as well." Koenig responded before looking at Benes and adding, "Okay captain, give us some air to breathe if you wouldn't mind."

"My pleasure colonel." she said, leaning across a nearby console to begin the process of bringing the life support system back on line in the sealed section of the outpost that the team from Moonbase Alpha now occupied, "Pumps operating." she said when the console confirmed that the system was back online.

Initially there was no indication that air was being pumped back into the control room and surrounding section but as the pressure built up there was enough air present to carry the sound of it coming out of the vents and when this ceased Koenig looked at the oxygen sensor on the control room wall that was designed to warn the occupants of a drop in pressure or oxygen level.

“Twenty-one percent.” he said and then he reached for his helmet, grabbing hold of it between his hands and twisting it to remove it from his suit before he took a deep breath, “A little sterile but perfectly breathable.” he added and as the others in the room also removed their helmets he reached for the intercom, “Okay we have air people. You can open or remove your helmets but keep them to hand. We don’t know if any of our seals will fail and I don’t ant to lose people because they left their helmet somewhere out of reach.”

6.

Escorted by a pair of the troops brought aboard *Eagle One*, Russell led Maya to the corridor where the largest of the blood stains was located. This was beyond the section that had been sealed so that it could be repressurised so all four were still wearing full spacesuits as Russell crouched down and pointed to the imprint left in the blood.

"Does that look familiar to you Maya?" she asked and Maya looked closely at the imprint.

"I'm sorry doctor but I don't think I saw any creatures that left footprints like that while I was a slave to Lord Kollus. That is not to say that other Dorcon warlords will not have encountered them though." she replied and Russell sighed.

"That's okay. I was just hoping that you might be able to tell us what we're up against here." she said and then she stood back up again, "Okay that's all. Let's get back to the control section. I'd like to be able to get this helmet off."

"Doctor Russell do you read me?" Washington's voice said over the radio before Maya could respond to Russell.

"Russell here sergeant. Go ahead." she responded.

"Doctor I'm down in the mess hall and I think you should come and see this." Washington said.

"Why? What have you found?" Russell asked.

"I think it's the rest of the outpost staff. Or at least what's left of them. It's kind of hard to tell what came from who." Washington told her.

"I don't like the sound of that." Russell said to Maya before telling Washington, "Okay sergeant I'm on my way."

The outpost's shared mess hall was located on the surface level of the structure and consisted of a number of long tables with seats down each side. Food for those dining came either in concentrate form from dispensers set into one of the walls or the kitchen that joined onto the dining area itself and it was in the kitchen area that Washington and his men had made their gruesome discovery.

The work surfaces of the kitchen were covered in pieces of human bodies, many of them identifiable by function but randomly mixed so that it was impossible to tell exactly which pieces had come from the same body originally.

"I'm no doctor but I get the feeling that there isn't going to be enough here to put all these corpses back together is there?" Washington said to Russell.

"I think you're right sergeant." Russell replied as she walked along the row of bloody remains, now frozen by the prolonged exposure to low temperature.

"These are leg bones aren't they?" Maya asked when she noticed a pile of long bones and Russell looked towards them.

"Yes. Femur, patella, tibia and fibula." she said.

"So what happened the flesh from around them?" Maya said.

"That's what I was wondering. That should be plain muscle shouldn't it doctor?" Washington added.

"Yes, some of the largest muscles in the body. Not one of which seems to be here." Russell said.

"The Outsiders used parts of living creatures for their machines didn't they?" Maya pointed out, using the name applied by the Dorcons to the aliens who had attacked Earth and in the process created Maya's people, the Psychons.

"So the people here could have been just a source of spare parts to something." Washington said.

"We better ask Professor Bergman. He knows more about the aliens' technology than anyone else on the moon. I think we better warn Colonel Koenig that this section is best left depressurised until it can be cleaned as well. If we pump air back in here earlier then all this is likely to start to rot."

The trio of Condor heavy lift craft from Moonbase Epsilon set down on the moon's surface just long enough that the armoured vehicles they held in their cargo bays could drive out onto the surface and speed away from them. Six of these vehicles were military versions of exo-rovers, sealed transports on a wheeled chassis and in the case of these examples each one fitted with a turret mounted magnetic accelerator cannon and a smaller calibre weapon in a coaxial mount. Inside their pressurised hulls they each carried a full squad of armoured soldiers until they need to deploy from the rear mounted airlock to storm an objective. On the other hand the final two vehicles were heavier tracked exo-tanks, each one mounting a large turret with an equally large cannon capable of penetrating most known armour.

"Down and clear. Dust off and retreat." Verdeschi ordered the Condors from inside the exo-rover he was riding in.

"Copy that colonel. Good hunting." the voice of one of the pilots responded as the transports rose up again and turned back towards Epsilon.

"This is Verdeschi to all search units," Verdeschi then broadcast to his armoured force, "you have your search areas so spread out and deploy to them Signal when you're in position. Tanks one and two head for the outpost and take up sentry positions there. Colonel Koenig is on site so he'll be giving you orders unless you're needed to support the rest of us. Everyone else your orders are clear, search your allotted areas and report anything out of the ordinary. Verdeschi out."

"Tanya could you help me? My zip is stuck." Keynes asked Alexander but the other woman glared at her.

"The colonel didn't say anything about taking off our suits Alyson." she pointed out.

"No but I've got an itch I've been dying to scratch and I can't through this suit. It'll just take a minute." Keynes said.

"Then go find someone who cares about your itch." Alexander told her before turning away and Keynes frowned.

"Keynes." Koenig's voice then called out as he entered the briefing room where most of the team from Alpha had gathered to discuss their deployment.

"Yes Colonel Koenig?" Keynes replied, smiling as she turned towards him.

"You better get that helmet back on. I want you to go down to the main stores with a copy of the outpost manifest and see if anything other than the staff is missing from it." Koenig said and then he looked at Alexander, "Alexander you too."

"Me colonel?" Alexander asked.

"Yes lieutenant, you. I can't have anyone going anywhere alone and you're best qualified to both keep an eye on Keynes and assist her in taking stock of what might be missing." Koenig told her and she frowned, "Now lieutenant." he added.

"Yes colonel." Alexander said and she turned to pick her helmet up before putting it back on.

Entering or leaving the section that had been pressurised again required Alexander and Keynes to enter a short stretch of corridor that had a door at each end then radio Benes in the control room to extract the air before they could then exit into the areas of the outpost that were still in a vacuum.

"This way." Keynes said, checking the floor plan on her tablet and pointing towards what seemed to be the quickest route to the outpost's large storage area.

"Just walk. I'll be right behind you where I can keep an eye on you." Alexander replied.

"Oh come on Tanya-" Keynes began.

"And it's Lieutenant Alexander to you. You lost the right to use my first name when you sold us out to Red Mars." Alexander interrupted and Keynes stopped talking, continuing to walk towards the storage section in silence instead.

The large warehouse chamber was divided into sections by wire mesh barriers and the gates to each of these were labelled by a serial number and in many cases a description of the contents. In addition to the official supplies kept here some of these sections were privately operated and these had locks on their gates that all appeared to be intact, suggesting that no-one had removed anything from them. On the other hand some of the official supply sections had clearly been ransacked, with packages strewn across the floor although it was impossible to tell at a glance whether or not anything had been taken.

"I think we should start with this one." Keynes said, pointing to one of the ransacked storage sections that was labelled 'MACHINE TOOLS' and the contents of some of the containers inside that had been broken open when they were pulled from their shelves showed that it contained an assortment of tools and other light machinery.

"After you." Alexander replied, waving Keynes through the open gate and after Keynes had gone through she followed her inside. Given the size and weight of many of the containers inside this storage section it was not surprising that there was a lightweight forklift inside as as Keynes walked up to one of the shelving units and began to read serial numbers off containers Alexander instead made her way to the forklift and sat on its seat, watching the other woman.

"Tanya how long is this going to last?" Keynes said suddenly after a short time spent being watched.

"You tell me. You're the logistics expert that Colonel Koenig ordered to take stock of the supplies." Alexander replied.

"No I mean you and me." Keynes said.

"There is no you and me. You made the decision to turn your back on everyone that thought you were a friend instead of trusting us. You made your bed and now you have to lie in it. Alone. You precious Colonel John Koenig isn't going to be leaping into it anytime soon. I tell you what though why don't you try offering him some personal favour openly. I'd like to see Doctor Russell carry out that threat of hers. Maybe it would shut you up." Alexander snapped back at her.

"This is ridiculous." Keynes muttered as she turned around again and returned to inspecting the cargo containers.

By consulting a copy of the outpost's manifest that she had downloaded to her tablet Keynes was able to use the serial numbers to determine if anything had been removed from the shelves without being logged, checking each shelf in turn. It soon became clear to her that there was a large container missing from one of the lower shelves that according to the manifest held a portable fusion reactor. Ordinarily this was a mundane if expensive piece of equipment but in the wrong hands the power it could generate could be used to power a number of far more dangerous pieces of technology.

"Excuse me Lieutenant Alexander ma'am but I require the assistance you were ordered to give me." she said and Alexander sighed as she got off the forklift.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I think there's a portable reactor missing." Keynes told her, "Of course it could just have been put on the wrong shelf so I need to check back there behind everything that's come off the upper shelves. I need your help to shift some of this stuff."

"Very well. Which one first?" Alexander said and Keynes pointed to a container that was about two metres long.

"This one." she said before she made her way to stand at one end of it. Alexander then moved to the opposite end and both women bent down to take hold of the handles, "Okay lift." Keynes said and together they lifted the container between them, finding it to be very heavy.

"Why did Sandra have to activate the artificial gravity in this section too?" Alexander commented before she and Keynes both felt a 'thump' from inside, "What was that?" Alexander asked.

"I don't know. Something just hit the inside of this container." Keynes answered.

"Isn't the packing supposed to stop stuff shifting around though?" Alexander pointed out and Keynes looked around again and saw two large blocks of foam nearby that were the right size to fit neatly inside the container she and Alexander now held.

"Not if it's been taken out. Let's put this thing down." she said.

"I'm not arguing with that." Alexander responded as they set the container back down on the floor and Keynes knelt beside it, bending over to place her helmet directly against the top before she knocked once on the container. Almost immediately she heard a second knock coming from inside.

"Tanya listen." she exclaimed and Alexander also knelt down so she could rest her helmet against the container and be able to hear any sound coming from inside. Keynes then knocked twice on the container and she smiled as there were two further knocks in response.

"Holy crap, There's someone trapped inside here." Alexander said.

7.

"Muscle tissue?" Bergman said as he scrolled through pages of documents on his tablet.

"That's right Victor. We found multiple bodies that had been stripped of large amounts of flesh down in the kitchen." Russell replied

"And you thought that it could be related to the technology of the aliens that attacked Earth?" Bergman responded, "Well I'm sorry to disappoint you but I don't recall any references to humans being filleted for their muscles. The aliens tended to engineer the biological components for their machines."

"What about the more obvious answer?" Koenig asked from where he and Morrow stood close by and Morrow winced.

"You're not serious." he said.

"You mean food." Maya commented, sensing what Koenig was thinking and he nodded.

"Who knows what those unknown aliens might eat." he said.

"John that's awful." Russell said, "With a few notable exceptions humans abandoned cannibalism centuries ago."

"There are species who consume other sentient beings of their own and other species doctor." Maya told her, "Before the Dorcons discovered us there were some cannibalistic Psychon tribes."

"Please tell me you've abandoned that idea Maya." Koenig said.

"Largely yes colonel. Although there are stories of Psychons cast aside by their Dorcon lords who feed off the dead." Maya replied.

"John if the aliens did take the people here as food then they're likely to stage further attacks to get more. Without knowing how many aliens we're dealing with or their exact dietary requirements we don't know how long what they took from here will last them." Russell said before Koenig's comlock sounded and he lifted it to his face.

"Koenig." he said into it.

"Colonel it's Alexander." Alexander's voice said, her spacesuit radio lacking a video transmission function.

"Go ahead lieutenant. Has Keynes found something missing from the stores?" Koenig said.

"Possibly yes colonel but it's what's in here that shouldn't be that's more interesting." Alexander told him.

"Which is what exactly lieutenant?" Koenig said.

"We think we've found a survivor colonel but he's inside an air tight cargo container and we can't open it in a vacuum. We need help to get him to the pressurised section." Alexander replied and Koenig turned towards a nearby group of soldiers.

"Get down there now. Bring that container back to the infirmary." he ordered.

Okkus Rar reconnected a cable cluster he had isolated to carry out repairs to the auxiliary control consoles in the crashed ship's engineering section. With the cockpit utterly destroyed by the impact with the moon's surface the ship would have to be flown from engineering instead and for that Okkus Rar needed to repair the necessary controls. The instant that the connection was made a bank of consoles came to life and Okkus Rar was satisfied to see that this included all of the back up flight control functions. As the console came to life though it began to emit an odd pulsing sound and Okkus Rar realised immediately that this was coming from the ship's communication system. Despite being buried under a thick layer lunar dust radio waves were still able to penetrate deep enough to reach the ship's radio receiver. With no other of his species' vessels in the same system and the crewman on lookout maintaining radio silence until he saw something worth reporting this noise had to be coming from the moon's inhabitants. This also accounted for the unintelligible nature of the sound, the encoding of the signals was clearly different to that used by Okkus Rar's own people and the ship's communication system was doing its best to interpret what it was picking up. However, the ship that had brought Okkus Rar to the moon was a survey ship intended for scouting out systems that could contain advanced civilisations and as such its communication system was designed to be able to interpret any conceivable communications format. All Okkus Rar had to do was set the decoding process in motion. The alien engineer waited as the communication system applied a series of automated decryption routines to the digital signals it was detecting until all of a sudden the noise resolved itself into recognisable speech. He could not understand the language being spoken but again the ship's communication system offered him a solution. It could not automatically translate unknown languages but the system did include a database of many known ones, including that of the Psychons who Okkus Rar's people had encountered via their occasional and often violent dealings with the Dorcons. The language being spoken in the signal the ship was detecting was obviously not an exact match for the one spoken by the Psychons but it was close enough that the communication system was able to provide Okkus Rar with a rough translation to his own language in real time.

The engineer listened to this carefully, the signal was clearly civilian in nature and it appeared to be a discussion between a group of at least four of the moon's inhabitants about their situation. This proved very revealing to Okkus Rar who quickly discovered to his disappointment that his ship had crashed into a rogue moon rather than a massive spacecraft and that its travels through wormholes were random and the result of a massive nuclear explosion rather than the deliberate development of the technology needed to open and navigate through them in a controlled fashion. This made obtaining the parts needed to repair the ship's main energy emitter was thrown into doubt. Okkus Rar did not give up hope completely though and he adjusted the channel setting to see what other signals he could detect. The next frequency he found a transmission on was garbled and he guessed that this was a military channel with heavy encryption to prevent eavesdropping by an enemy. Whether or not the communication system would be able to break this encryption was unknown but Okkus Rar did not want to waste any time on the matter and so he continued to search through different channels until he found another that had something on he could listen in on and this turned out to be far more useful than a group of aliens sat around complaining about what they saw as the deprivations they were suffering on their travelling moon.

The signal that Okkus Rar had detected this time was a conversation between just two of the moon's inhabitants who were discussing the supply of components for a project to improve their defences against attack. Among the weapons being constructed were a number of high energy lasers and one of the participants in the conversation was being asked to provide the focusing lenses for some of these. Lenses that Okkus Rar might be able to adapt to use in opening a wormhole.

"Javas Ott, Terrat Hol, attend me in engineering immediately." Okkus Rar said into the intercom, the system automatically relaying his order to Terrat Hol who was out on the surface of the moon keeping watch. Javas Ott was able to reach engineering almost immediately but it took a while longer for Terra Hol to return, by which time Okkus Rar was ready with all the information he wanted to be able to proceed.

"You summoned me engineer?" Terrat Hol said as he entered the engineering compartment.

"Yes, I have been able to repair our communication system and it has yielded important results." Okkus Rar responded.

"Is there a rescue vessel in the system?" Javas Ott asked.

"No but I have been able to intercept, decode and translate transmissions from the inhabitants of this moon. Their similarity to the Dorcons' slaves extends as far as their language. The translation supplied is crude but sufficient to convey the meaning of what is said." Okkus Rar answered.

"Moon? How did our helmsman miss a moon?" Javas Ott responded.

"The moon is a rogue one, torn loose from its orbit by a powerful explosion. Now it moves through space at random. The inhabitants cannot control it. Such travel is beyond their level of technology." Okkus Rar told him.

"If the aliens cannot access wormholes then how can we obtain the parts we need to escape?" Terrat Hol said.

"The aliens may not understand wormhole technology properly but they do have similar technologies that we can take advantage of. For example although they mainly use projectiles and guided missiles as weapons they do employ directed energy weapons on occasion and right now the inhabitants of this moon are undergoing an extensive program of expanding their armament. This includes a number of laser projectors that will require the manufacture of focusing lenses that we can use to repair our own projector." Okkus Rar explained. The he turned to the bank of displays behind him that were now fully functional and focused on one that showed a computer generated map of part of the moon, "I intercepted a conversation between settlements located at these two points." he said, pointing to two highlighted points on the map, "The first settlement is a major one and it is this that the laser cannons discussed in the conversation are meant to protect. On the other hand this settlement here is much smaller. About the same size as the one we obtained the fusion reactor from. This is where the lenses are being made."

"You propose to attack it?" Javas Ott asked.

"I do. But our timing must be exact." Okkus Rar replied, "The completed lenses will be transported to their destination by a spacecraft. If we attack at the time that it is there then we also have the opportunity to seize its fusion plant. The generator we have now will run our secondary systems indefinitely but it will not allow us to take off or even power the beam emitter we need to open a wormhole. Hopefully one of their spacecraft will have the power we need."

"The target looks far Okkus Rar." Terrat Hol commented, looking at the scale of the map.

"It is. We will need the vehicle the aliens who entered our ship used to get here to reach the target. We will also need it to carry the fusion reactor from the aliens' spacecraft back here afterwards. With any luck though using it will also help mask our approach. Especially if the aliens still have their search craft above us."

"Alpha this is *Hawk One* on approach. Do you have that tractor ready for us?" Carter asked over the Hawk's radio as the craft returned to Moonbase Alpha. The Hawk itself had adequate fuel reserves for a long interplanetary journey but there was a limit to how long he and Fraser could remain fully alert and so they

returned to Moonbase Alpha while a second Hawk was deployed from Epsilon to take their place. In order to keep weight to a minimum Hawks were constructed without any landing gear and since the vast majority of Earth's Hawk fleet was based either aboard space stations or Anderson-class frigates this was not considered a problem. However, there were squadrons like those deployed to the moon that needed to land rather than dock with a larger vessel and for this a special launch and recovery tractor was used. These wheeled vehicles mounted a docking cradle on their backs designed specifically to carry a Hawk and the craft could land in one of these and be supported without needing landing gear. Then when it came time to launch the docking cradle would be raised into a vertical position and the Hawk's main engine would provide all the power needed for a rapid take off.

"Confirmed *Hawk One*." Baker's voice responded, "Tractor is waiting on landing pad one. We'll bring you into the hangar as soon as you confirm down and safe."

"Thanks Alpha." Carter said and then he glanced at Fraser who currently had the Hawk's controls, "Okay Bill the flying lesson is over for today. I better carry out the landing."

"Okay major you have control." Fraser replied.

"I have control." Carter confirmed as he took hold of the controls in front of him and he steadily reduced the power to the Hawk's engine, steering it towards the waiting docking tractor.

"*Hawk One* this is tractor. Be advised our cradle is at twenty degrees." the driver of the tractor transmitted, letting Carter know the angle at which he needed to keep the Hawk at for the smoothest possible landing.

"Copy that. Coming at twenty degrees." Carter responded as he adjusted the Hawk's angle of flight before finally bringing the craft in to land on the tractor, shock absorbing springs compressing as the Hawk lost the last remnants of its momentum. Once this was done the driver of the tractor lowered the cradle back into its default horizontal position, "*Hawk One* to main mission we are down and safe." Carter then transmitted.

"Confirmed *Hawk One*. Welcome home and congratulations on the first Hawk landing at Moonbase Alpha. Engaging platform lift now." Baker said and through the Hawk's viewports Carter and Fraser saw the landing pad start to descend.

Ordinarily a boarding tube would be extended to a craft on the landing pad so that the occupants could disembark directly into Moonbase Alpha but not only was a Hawk situated on a docking tractor out of the range of alignment for a docking tube it also lacked a suitable side hatch for one to make contact with. Therefore, the only way into and out of a Hawk was for the craft to be taken down into the underground hangar where Moonbase Alpha's fleet of support craft were housed.

As soon as Carter and Fraser had disembarked from their Hawk they made their way straight to main mission where Kano was standing at the top of the steps leading to Koenig's office.

"Alpha is yours major." he said.

"Not just yet thanks Kano." Carter responded as he walked over to the console he usually occupied and checked it, "I just dropped in to see how things are going before I grab a shower and something to eat. Has Colonel Koenig checked in?"

"Not since they confirmed that they'd established a pressurised section to work from." Kano told him before he looked at the smiling Fraser, "I take it your flying lesson went well Bill." he added.

"Trust me David piloting a Hawk is an experience not to be passed over. If you think you've got power in an Eagle just try opening up the drive on a Hawk. Although I do recommend that you make sure any fillings you have are secure because if they aren't then they'll shake right out of your mouth." Fraser told him.

"Maybe I'll get the chance one day." Kano commented.

"Hey what's this message?" Carter asked suddenly when he noticed a message on his console that had been sent to him from one of the moon's smaller outposts.

"I haven't checked your console." Kano replied as he walked over and looked at the console as well, "UFO sighting?" he added as he read the subject.

"Looks like someone's reporting seeing a UFO. It should have been sent to traffic control, not reconnaissance. It's not the first time someone's made that mistake though." Carter said.

"I'm sorry major I-" the man sat at the traffic control console where Alexander usually sat began.

"It's not your fault lieutenant." Carter interrupted, "Some people just think I'm more likely to send a fleet of Eagles screaming out to investigate every meteorite impact than traffic control is." then he frowned and added, "Hey this comes from the direction where we've been searching in. It's about a hundred kilometres out but the bearing is about the same. Anyone out that way could have seen whatever it was that landed."

"Someone else saw the ship?" Fraser said.

"Saw? They've sent a video file. It looks like some amateur astronomer filmed it." Carter said as he opened the attached file and watched its contents. He quickly stopped the playback of this video before transferring it to main mission's big screen, "Take a look at this." he said and the gathered officers all looked towards the big screen as he restarted the playback.

The footage began with the bright light of the moon's transit through the wormhole before the star field of the system it had arrived in was shown and among the points of distant light was one that was much closer and in motion against the background.

"Was that an engine flare?" Fraser said when the point of light became suddenly much brighter.

"Trying to take evasive action." Carter said, nodding in agreement.

"I'll bet. Seeing the moon suddenly drop out of a wormhole would be enough to convince anyone that we had the right of way." Kano added.

The point of light continued to come closer and revealed itself to be a solid object, one that came into clearer view as the camera making the recording began to track it automatically.

"Auto focusing. Nice. This set up was good." Carter said.

The alien craft did not remain in the picture for very long though as it dropped over the lunar horizon and vanished before there was a brief flash of light.

"That looked like an explosion." Kano commented.

"Well it can't have been destroyed but something definitely went up. I think this confirms that the alien ship crashed rather than made a controlled landing." Carter said before he skipped back to an earlier part of the video file where the aliens' ship could be seen as a solid object rather than a flare of light, "Think that gives you enough to run image enhancement on and show us what we're looking for Kano?" Carter asked and Kano nodded.

"I'll run it through computer." he said.



“Okay bring it into the infirmary.” Russell said as the cargo container believed to hold a survivor of the alien attack was brought back to the pressurised section of the outpost.

“Sergeant we’ll need a section of your men.” Koenig told Washington as he accompanied Russell towards the infirmary.

“John I don’t think a survivor of a brutal attack needs be surrounded by soldiers when they’re released from this.” Russell said.

“And if it isn’t a survivor at all? This could be an alien who got separated from the others.” Koenig pointed out.

“Maya can you tell me what’s inside here?” Russell asked, looking across the room.

“I’m sorry doctor but unless I can see or hear someone I can’t read them.” Maya responded.

“Okay fine, but can we keep the firing squad back while I open this up?” Russell said.

“You won’t know we’re here doctor.” Washington replied.

With the container moved into the infirmary Washington and a team of his men stood to the side of the room while Russell stood right next to the container itself and Koenig stood beside her.

“Hold on a moment.” Koenig said before looking over his shoulder, “Maya can you get in here as well?” and he waited for Maya to join them before nodding at Russell, “Whenever you’re ready.” he said.

Russell placed her hands on the two release latches for the container before pressing down on them together. As soon as she did this there was a sudden rush of escaping air and the lid of the container sprang open. Washington and his men raised their rifles as a figure suddenly sat upright and let out a gasp but Koenig held out his hand.

“Stand down!” he snapped and the soldiers lowered their weapons again.

The container held a woman in a civilian medic’s uniform and with her she had an oxygen cylinder and mask that looked as if they had been taken from this very infirmary.

“Oh thank God.” she exclaimed when she looked around and saw the GDF issue spacesuits that her rescuers were wearing.

“My name is Doctor Helena Russell, chief medical officer at Moonbase Alpha. Who are you?” Russell asked the woman.

“Carol Ross. I’m the medical officer for this outpost.” she answered.

“Carol I’m Colonel Koenig.” Koenig said and she nodded.

“Yes, I recognise your face from the news.” she said.

“Can you tell us what happened here?” Koenig added.

“Monsters, that’s what happened. They broke in and started killing people.” Ross told him.

“Did you get a look at these monsters?” Koenig said.

“Yes, I saw them alright. There were at least three, maybe more of them. Roughly humanoid but the proportions were all wrong. They were wearing spacesuits though so I couldn’t make out much other than their faces. They seemed to have an exoskeleton, either that or they had some sort of mask on underneath their helmets. They were armed as well and they gunned down or ripped apart anyone that they came across. Those that didn’t suffocate when they decompressed areas as well. That’s why I decided to hide in this thing.” Ross explained and she patted the outside of the container she still sat in, “I grabbed an oxygen cylinder from an emergency aid station and emptied it out so I could climb inside and pull the lid down. Of course I had no idea how long it would be before anyone found me but I reckoned that I had enough air to last about a day and the pressure wouldn’t build up so much that I got the bends as soon as you popped the lid and let the excess pressure out.”

“Breathing from that oxygen cylinder will have helped as well.” Russell pointed out.

“Yes, that’s what I thought as well.” Ross agreed, “Mind you I thought I was done for when I felt the container move not long after I’d got into it. I knew it had to be the aliens and I thought they’d found me.”

“They may have removed some equipment from your stores. I’ve got people checking it out now. It was them that found you.” Koenig told her, “Now can you tell us how the aliens got here? Other than a handful of footprints right below where your command centre is located our search teams have found no physical evidence outside so far.”

“I’m sorry, no. The first we knew of the attack was when a decompression alarm sounded. They seemed to be up here though so I guessed that they came from a ship of some sort.” Ross said before she looked around again and noticed that everyone else she could see was wearing a GDF issue spacesuit.

“Are there any other survivors?” she asked.

“I’m sorry Carol. You’re the only one we’ve found.” Russell told her.

"And what about her? She's not human is she" Ross said, turning towards Maya, "I think I've seen her on the TV as well."

"You can trust Maya." Russell said.

"She's proven herself several times." Koenig added, "That's why I made her my adjutant. She does my press briefings which is where you've probably seen her."

"Oh right, yes. That reporter is saying he's going to do an expose about her." Ross said and Koenig and Russell looked at one another before looking at Maya.

"How come we didn't know about this?" Koenig then said to no-one in particular, "Morrow." he called out.

"Yes colonel?" Morrow responded from the next room as he moved to the doorway.

"Major do you know anything a journalist asking questions about Maya?" Koenig said.

"Sorry colonel, no." Morrow responded.

"It has to be that worm Coster." Russell said.

"He doesn't like me. That much is obvious." Maya added.

"This is a topic for another day. Right now we've got hostile aliens to deal with." Koenig said as he took out his comlock, "Koenig to Verdeschi, are you there Tony?" he said into it.

"Yes colonel." Verdeschi responded as his face appeared on the device's screen.

"Lieutenant colonel have you found anything yet?" Koenig asked.

"Sorry colonel we're still drawing a blank from our ground units and our Hawk cover. Wherever those aliens are, they're well hidden." Verdeschi said.

"John is it possible that they've already left the moon?" Russell suggested.

"I doubt it. Someone would have seen them taking off." Koenig said, "We're just going to have to hope that we can find them before they decide to attack another civilian target."

Now wearing his regular GDF uniform again instead of the spacesuit he had worn while flying the Hawk, Carter returned to main mission.

"Kano do you have anything for me yet?" he asked and Kano smiled.

"You're going to love this." he said and he pointed to the big screen as he used it to display an image of the alien spacecraft.

"Computer rendered this from that footage I was sent? How accurate do you think it is?" Carter said as he looked at the image.

"Oh I'd say pretty good. It's a composite image built up of renderings taken from every frame of that clip in which the ship is visible. The frame rate was a standard sixty hertz so that gave computer well over a hundred to use to build this. At the very least enough to give us something that we can use to try and find it." Kano told him.

"Is that a pilot?" Carter said when he noticed what looked like a humanoid figure sat inside the transparent front end of the ship.

"I think so. It only covered a few pixels in each image but by putting them all together computer came up with this." Kano said and then he swapped the image for one of a figure that looked human apart from its face that was clearly alien with significant external bone structure, "There wasn't enough data for anything below the neck so the facial reconstruction has just been grafted onto a human body. Computer thinks that it's humanoid so it seemed logical. Again it should give us something to go off."

"With a face like that it would be hard to mistake it." Carter said as he studied the appearance of the alien.

"I don't know. I had a blind date on a deployment to Io once that didn't look that much different." Kano joked and the two men smiled.

"He's been making that joke for an hour." Baker commented.

"That figure gives us a scale doesn't it?" Carter said, ignoring what Baker said and Kano nodded.

"Yes. We can safely assume that the alien is between one and a half and two and a half metres tall then we can extrapolate a reasonable size range for the ship. Even if it's outside that range we can still estimate things like the maximum number of aliens that that ship could hold if their technology is on a par with our own. Other than the ability to open a wormhole of course. You'll notice the large beam emitter along the ventral hull." Kano said as he brought up the image of the alien ship again.

"Just like Dorcon attack ships and those flying saucers SHADO faced." Carter said.

"And like the one Professor Bergman had planned for his Super Swift." Kano replied, nodding.

"David I know you. You've already run the numbers haven't you?" Carter said, smiling and Kano smiled back at him before bringing up a third image. This was a line drawing showing front and side elevations of the alien ship as well as a plan view, all of which had been given dimensions.

"These numbers represent the length, width and depth of the ship." Kano said, "We've got three figures for each depending on how big you want to say that alien pilot is. One and a half, two or two and a half metres tall. For two metres the ship is about forty metres long to within two metres either way. Thirty metres if the alien tends towards the shorter end of the scale or fifty if it's taller."

"If they can overwhelm an entire outpost then I doubt we're looking at the smaller end of the scale." Carter pointed out, "What sort of crew compliment are we looking at?"

"If we compare the ship to a Swift since it's obviously built for long range missions then there could be up to eight aliens aboard. On the other hand if it's more like an Eagle in terms of mission duration, which it could be if it can just hop between star systems through a wormhole, then that number goes up to a possible fifteen." Kano told him.

"Fifteen aliens shouldn't be too much for the colonel to handle, not with all the extra forces he's got out there from Epsilon but 'd like to know more about that ship." Carter said, "Baker can you get me a line to Epsilon? I need to speak with Captain Nowak."

"Putting you though now major." Baker responded as she established a communications link to the officer left in charge of Moonbase Epsilon in Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi's absence.

"Epsilon, Captain Nowak here." the officer said in a thickly East European accented voice when his face appeared on the big screen, the picture now splitting between him and the alien ship design.

"Nowak our technical section has come up with a rendering and some analysis of the alien ship we're hunting for. We 're going to send it out to Colonel Koenig and also to you. I want your pilots briefed on what we can tell them." Carter told him.

"Of course Major Carter. I have a flight of four Hawks on standby for immediate launch." Nowak replied.

"If our analysis is right then they should be enough to take the alien ship down without too much trouble. Just make sure your crews know what they're likely to be up against." Carter said.

9.

Verdeschi watched the exo-rover's visual scanner closely for anything that looked out of place on the moon's surface. Unfortunately this part of the moon had been used for mining for several decades and the result of that was a great deal of equipment that had been abandoned when it broke down. The locations of this scrap were not logged so each one needed to be investigated so that it could be confirmed that it was not of alien origin. Although it was believed that the alien ship had not made a controlled landing so far there were no signs of an impact crater from above and this would have been obvious even if the ship had been totally buried on landing.

"This is unit five calling Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi do you read me?" a voice said over the exo-rover's radio.

"This is Verdeschi. Go ahead unit five, have you found anything?" Verdeschi responded.

"Negative colonel. We thought we had a hit on the thermal scanner but it turned out just to be a reflection from an old solar unit. We're moving onto sector four-two."

"Understood unit five." Verdeschi said before closing the channel and he leant back in his seat and sighed, "This is getting us nowhere fast. Those aliens must have some sort of stealth tech better than we have." he added.

"We've got another hit on the magnetic detector colonel." the exo-rover's driver said and Verdeschi leant forwards again.

"Okay let's see what junk someone left here this time." he commented as he aligned the roof mounted camera with the magnetic anomaly that had been detected. It was quite possible for rich veins of metal ore to trigger a magnetic detector but on this occasion as Verdeschi had expected it had been triggered by a piece of partially buried junk jutting up out of the dust covered lunar surface. As far as Verdeschi could tell this was just a piece of digging equipment that had a tear in it that was probably the reason for it being abandoned in the first place and he was about to lean back again when he noticed something else close by, "That looks like a medical kit." he said, "A brand new one at that."

"Do you want to take a look colonel?" the driver asked and Verdeschi nodded.

"Yes. Someone must have been out here recently to have dropped that and maybe they encountered the aliens here as well." he replied as he released his safety harness and then lowered the faceplate of his spacesuit helmet to seal it. Then he got up and went into the rear compartment of the exo-rover where the squad of soldiers it carried were tightly packed together.

"Are we deploying colonel?" the squad leader asked.

"Yes sergeant. I've spotted something I want to take a closer look at. It's not much but it's more than we've seen up till now." Verdeschi answered.

"Okay grunts you heard the colonel. Get those suits sealed and check those rifles." the sergeant ordered and all around the compartment the soldiers lowered their own faceplates, now breathing from their spacesuits' internal air supplies and made sure that their weapons were ready for use.

The exo-rover included a dedicated airlock at the back of the vehicle but this could only hold three men at most and so to speed up the deployment of the squad Verdeschi sealed the hatchway he had just come through from the driver's compartment. This allowed him to decompress the entire passenger compartment, turning it into an air lock instead. Then once this was complete both the inner and outer airlock doors could be opened at once so the entire squad could deploy rapidly one after another.

The soldiers formed a small perimeter around the rear hatch before Verdeschi followed them out onto the surface and then he pointed.

"This way." he said and he began to walk to where he had seen the medical kit.

"I'm not picking up any signs of movement other than you colonel." the exo-rover's driver said as the vehicle's turret turned slowly, its targeting system hunting for any signs of alien activity.

"Good. I'm about five metres away from the kit now." Verdeschi responded, looking directly at the dropped medical kit and it was then that he noticed the reddish brown stain on the side, "That looks like blood." he said.

"What was that colonel? I didn't quite get that." the driver said.

"I said I think there's blood on the outside of the medical kit." Verdeschi repeated.

"Stand to." the sergeant ordered and the soldiers escorting Verdeschi immediately dropped to their knees and raised their rifles, ready in case they were fired on while Verdeschi walked up to the medical kit and crouched down beside it.

The medical kit was lying in a set of tyre tracks that looked to have come from either an exo-rover or a smaller exo-tractor. Given the lack of erosion on the moon it was impossible to determine whether these had been made just a few minutes or even decades earlier. However, Verdeschi did see what he believed to be

the second half of the tracks and he saw that this passed over the piece of junk that had been detected by the exo-rover's magnetic scanner. The logical conclusion was that the medical kit had been loaded onto the exterior of the vehicle and then when it had driven over the junk had been knocked loose and fallen into the tracks left behind it.

Checking the kit for any signs of a booby trap before he touched it, Verdeschi picked the kit up to examine the cover more closely. As he first thought the large stain on the outside looked like blood and now that he had it in his hands it felt different to the kits he had handled before. Cautiously he opened the kit and the moment that he broke the seal there was a sudden puff of red vapour as the contents were exposed to the vacuum of space.

"Whoa!" Verdeschi exclaimed and he quickly sealed the medical kit again.

"Colonel what's wrong?" the squad sergeant asked.

"This may be the case for a medical kit but it looks like someone's using it to move raw meat inside. It's packed full." Verdeschi said, "Everyone back to the rover. We need to get this to Doctor Russell right away."

Koenig, Russell, Bergman, Morrow, Benes and Maya were all gathered together in the somewhat cramped command centre studying the data sent from Moonbase Alpha about the alien spacecraft.

"Look familiar to you Maya?" Koenig asked.

"Yes Colonel Koenig." Maya answered, "I have never seen such a ship in person but as the favoured empath of Lord Kollus I was present at many of his military briefings. The Dorcons encountered ships such as these on a number of occasions. As far as I know they fought frequently although there was never a full scale war."

"What about their technology? Do you know anything about that?" Morrow added.

"I know little of such things Major Morrow. That was for Psychon men to concern themselves with." Maya said, reminding him of the difference between Psychon sexes where males were highly technically adept while the females were highly empathic.

"You must recall something that was said Maya, even if you didn't understand it." Koenig said.

"I remember sensing how Lord Kollus felt during the briefings Colonel." she responded.

"And how was that?" Russell said.

"Concerned that some of those ships would come to his world. He was concerned that his defences would not be able to detect them." Maya said.

"Sort of stealth technology perhaps." Bergman suggested and then he looked at Koenig.

"Is that why we can't find them? They're invisible?" Benes commented.

"That would make sense captain, yes." Bergman said, "Although I can't think of how total invisibility to all our detection systems would be achieved."

"I'm sure if you could then we'd already have invisible Eagles professor." Koenig said.

"What about the aliens themselves Maya? Can you tell us anything about them?" Russell said.

"The Dorcons considered them almost a match for themselves one on one." Maya said.

"Okay so not as strong as a Dorcon. But potentially still stronger than a human being." Morrow said when Alexander suddenly appeared at the doorway.

"Room for one more?" she asked.

"If you can find room lieutenant." Koenig said.

"I'll squeeze in here next to Professor Bergman then." Alexander said as she stepped into the room and stood right beside Bergman. Then she handed a computer tablet to Koenig, "There's definitely a fusion reactor missing from stores. Little miss sell out confirmed it. Oh and I checked the vehicle hangar logs and there's an exo-tractor missing as well. Wait for this, it's registered to the two prospectors who made the original report about a mystery impact. My bet is that they went out to try and find it and then never came back."

"They may have inadvertently led the aliens right here." Russell pointed out and Morrow nodded in agreement.

"All they'd have to do is follow the tractor's tracks right back here." he said.

"Can we do the same to locate their ship?" Maya asked.

"I checked and three other vehicles went out and back in again after the prospectors left in their exo-tractor." Alexander said.

"So the tracks we're looking for will have been driven over already." Koenig responded and then he looked at Maya and added, "Unfortunately that means there isn't going to be a trail we can identify."

"I might be able to help you out there John." Verdeschi said as he appeared in the doorway as well and looked into the control room, trying to find space to stand in.

"What's that colonel?" Morrow said, looking at the plastic bag Verdeschi held by his side.

"A present for Doctor Russell." Verdeschi replied and he held out the bag towards her.

"And I didn't get you anything Tony." she said as she took the bag.

"It's pretty messy doctor. I found that in a set of tracks that could have come from the missing exo-tractor."

"What is it?" Benes said, peering into the bag as Russell opened it and she winced, recoiling away in disgust, "Is that what I think it is?" she said

"Muscle tissue, probably from a thigh from the size of it and a heart." Russell said.

"You gave her a heart. How romantic." Alexander said sarcastically as she winced as well at the mention of what was inside the bag.

"I find flowers work better," Koenig said,

"And that's why we're a couple instead of me and Tony." Russell replied, "Was all this in the medical kit bag that's in here as well?" she added and Verdeschi nodded.

"Yes, that's what attracted my attention. I think the aliens are using the exo-tractor to get around and they hit a piece of half-buried junk that knocked it loose." he said.

"John I'll have to examine this to make sure of what it is and where it came from." Russell said.

"You are afraid that there could have been another attack we haven't heard about?" Maya commented as she sensed Russell's thoughts.

"This part of the moon is littered with small outposts. Some of them are just exo-rovers that are parked where someone needs to work for as long as they need to be there before moving on." Russell replied.

"Tony I want the rest of your search units to try and follow the tracks from that tractor. See where they go. With any luck they'll lead us right to that alien ship." Koenig said, "Lieutenant Alexander I want you to continue checking the outpost's stores. The cover from that medical kit probably came from here so see if there are any others missing."

"May I work separately from Alyson Keynes this time colonel?" Alexander replied.

"You have a problem with Keynes lieutenant?" Verdeschi said.

"Let's just say that pretty much everyone thinks that you were in the right when you voted against her plea deal lieutenant colonel." Alexander said and he frowned, "I know the voting of the court martial is confidential but it's common knowledge around Alpha."

"Alexander get out." Koenig said sternly, "Find Keynes and get back to work. Now."

"Yes colonel." Alexander responded before she left the control room, squeezing past Verdeschi.

"Okay anyone who isn't at least a major get out as well. Go find somewhere else to be." Koenig continued,

"Oh and Maya?"

"Yes colonel?" Maya said.

"Maya anything you may sense about Alyson Keynes' court martial is strictly confidential and not to be discussed with anyone. Even those who were there. Do you understand?" Koenig asked.

"Yes Colonel Koenig." Maya said before she also left the room with Bergman and Benes.

Alone with his senior officers in the control room Koenig closed the door.

"So does anyone have any ideas about how to put a stop to all these rumours about the voting in Alyson Keynes' court martial?" he asked.

"This is what I warned you about John. It's all very well deciding that we need Keynes' skills but the other officers and enlisted personnel don't like the fact that she's a traitor." Russell said, she having been the one actual desecrating voice among the five officer panel made up of the four present plus Major Carter. Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi had in fact voted to support the deal Koenig had made with Keynes after she provided the terrorist group Red Mars with the information needed to penetrate the defences of Moonbase Mu and trigger the nuclear weapons being manufactured there, thus triggering the events that had seen the moon ripped out of Earth's orbit. The assumption among the rest of Moonbase Alpha's crew though was that Verdeschi was the one most likely to oppose it and many had hoped he would have been able to convince Morrow and Carter to join him in doing so.

"I know and you were right." Koenig replied.

"It's a bit late to be changing your vote now colonel." Morrow commented.

"Especially given that it was your deal that was put before us." Verdeschi added.

"Oh I've not changed my mind about anything. I still think that the deal was the better option but that doesn't stop Helena having had a point." Koenig said.

"Well I'm just enjoying all this popularity I seem to have with your subordinates for apparently having voted to punish an evil super villain." Verdeschi added.

"Alexander and Keynes were best friends before all this. If you can't even get her to get along what chance do you have with anyone else?" Russell pointed out.

"Maybe that's the problem. Your people knew Keynes before all of this happened and they're taking her actions personally." Verdeschi said, "Maybe if Keynes was moved then she'd find it easier getting people to accept her again."

"That sounds like you're trying to steal her away from Alpha Tony." Koenig said.

"Her skills with logistics are undeniable and it's hard work trying to locate all the resources needed to build enough weapons to defend every single base." Verdeschi replied.

"Well unfortunately I need her at Alpha for the same reason. She has a knack for finding things or spotting when we don't have them so giving her to you is out of the question I'm afraid." Koenig told him.

“Can’t blame me for trying.” Verdeschi responded and Koenig sighed.
“Looks like I’m going to have to keep trying then.” he said.

10.

Learning to operate the exo-tractor had not been difficult for Okkus Rar but he still needed more practice to be able to master fine control. Fortunately the ability of the vehicle to cross rough terrain meant that he was able to drive over most obstacles instead of having to go around them. There was not quite enough room inside for either of the other two surviving crewmen though and so both of them clung onto the exterior of the vehicle where they kept watch around them, ready to open fire with the rifles they carried if it appeared that they had been detected. A portable holographic shroud had been loaded aboard the vehicle but this had only a limited power supply and so the aliens were keeping this ready for an emergency, relying on the fact that they were riding in a human vehicle to remain anonymous.

"Okkus Rar the alien outpost is ahead." Terrat Hol said when he first saw the light being given off from the structures. Unlike the previous outpost that the three aliens had attacked which had a single main structure this one had a number of smaller structures that were interconnected by enclosed passageways while two landing platforms were located on the outer edge of the settlement, "I think I can see an alien craft there already."

Okkus Rar brought the exo-tractor a halt and then brought a set of electronic magnifiers to his spacesuit faceplate so he could study the outpost closely, focusing on the craft he saw on one of the landing platforms. Unfamiliar with human spacecraft designations the alien engineer had no way of knowing that it was a Vulture, the forerunner to both the Eagle and the Hawk. Designed as an attack ship armed dual turret mounted magnetic accelerator cannons as well as mounts for external ordnance it also possessed a transport compartment for either passengers or cargo. This gave it an appearance similar to a Hawk but with a much wider rear fuselage to accommodate the transport compartment. The positioning of this meant that the craft could not have a large centrally mounted engine like a Hawk though and instead a Vulture's main propulsion came from the two side mounted engine pods. Also unlike the more modern Hawk a Vulture actually possessed landing gear like an Eagle so it required no landing tractor like a Hawk. Superseded in GDF service by more versatile Eagle in the transport role and faster, more agile and better armed Hawk in the attack role Vultures were still used by the fleets of Mars and the solar system's other colonies but many more had been disarmed and sold off into civilian service as this one had. Okkus Rar could tell that something had been removed from the upper hull of the craft but he had no way of knowing that this was where its turret had once been mounted. All that mattered to him was that it had a fusion reactor at its heart that could be transported back to his own ship and mounted aboard it to provide power.

Fortunately this outpost appeared no better defended than the last one the three aliens had attacked and so satisfied that resistance would be minimal Okkus Rar set down his magnifiers again and continued to drive towards it.

"Stand by." he told the other two aliens, "We will secure the alien craft first. Then while I removed the reactor I want you two to locate and seize a focusing lens."

"Yes engineer." Javas Ott responded.

The terrain immediately around the outpost was flat and open, meaning that the exo-tractor was in plain view as it approached the landing pad and the vehicle's radio activated.

"Unidentified exo-tractor state your purpose." a calm sounding voice ordered but without the translation function of his ship's communication system Okkus Rar could not understand any of what was being said. However, he did realise that this meant that the vehicle had been detected.

"Be alert. The inhabitants know we are approaching. I doubt they know we are not of their species yet though." he told the crewmen on the outside of the exo-tractor.

Continuing to ignore attempts by the outpost to establish contact Okkus Rar drove the exo-tractor right up to the landing platform on which the Vulture stood before coming to a sudden halt. It was then that all three of the aliens riding on the vehicle disembarked and Terrat Hol pointed to a nearby ladder that ran up one of the supports that held the landing platform above the surface.

"There, that looks as if it will take us up to the alien ship." he said.

"Take the lead Terrat Hol." Okkus Rar ordered and while he and Javas Ott kept watch from the bottom of the ladder Terrat Hol climbed to the top and then darted across the platform to before crouching beside the Vulture near where the outpost's boarding tube made contact with the rear access hatch.

"I am in position. You may follow." he radioed to the other two aliens waiting below and a few moments later he saw Okkus Rar appear at the top of the ladder and the engineer hurried towards him before Javas Ott also appeared and sprinted across the platform to join the others.

Okkus Rar then inspected the boarding tube that connected the Vulture to the outpost. In common with the boarding tubes at large bases such as Moonbase Alpha, this was an enclosed flexible walkway with a rigid airlock module at the end, the front of which was contoured to match the standard hull shape of Vultures

Swifts and Eagles. There were also doors on either side of the airlock that allowed it to be used with non-standard craft as well though and Okkus Rar unhooked an electronic scrambler from his space suit that he held to the control panel beside the door facing them. The scrambler then began to emit a rapidly changing series of electronic pulses intended to trick the airlock into opening the door and sure enough after a short delay it slid sideways, thinking that there was a ship docked against it. Having this door open to space produced a massive rush of escaping air from the boarding tube and the three aliens had to fight to overcome this as they climbed inside. Once they were all through the doorway Okkus Rar turned off the scrambler and it slid shut again, stopping the rush of air but not silencing the alarms that had been triggered by the decompression.

"Javas Ott secure the alien vessel." Okkus Rar ordered as he positioned himself at the side of the airlock and pointed his rifle along the boarding tube towards the landing platform's assembly area. While Javas Ott darted into the Vulture Terrat Hol took up a matching position on the other side of the airlock from Okkus Rar and also aimed his rifle along the boarding tube, just in time as a pair of maintenance workers arrived to investigate the alarm. The two workers ground to a halt when they saw the aliens in their spacesuits. Neither of them recognised the aliens for what they were thanks to the helmets that obscured most of their heads but it was obvious that they were pointing weapons along the boarding tube. Before they could either turn and try to escape or summon help though Okkus Rar and Terrat Hol both opened fire, sending rapid bursts of magnetically accelerated projectiles into the two workers all they both fell dead in an instant.

Aboard the Vulture Javas Ott stepped from the boarding tube into the rear compartment. In this particular craft this was empty while fixing points for cargo retaining straps were fitted to all of the walls and ceiling. A single hatchway led forwards and Javas Ott opened this, pointing his rifle through it as the door slid aside to reveal the short corridor that connected the rear compartment with the Vulture's cockpit. As with the later Eagle this was lined with equipment lockers and also a compact wash room. At the far end of this corridor was another doorway to the cockpit and this currently stood open, revealing it to be empty.

"The alien vessel is secure." he radioed to Okkus Rar.

"Good. Remain on guard while Terrat Hol and I locate a suitable focusing lens. Do what you can to locate and disconnect the reactor while we are gone." Okkus Rar told him before he and Terrat Hol moved down the boarding tube and into the outpost itself, stepping over the bodies of the two workers they had killed.

There was a sudden flash of light as the two aliens exited the boarding tube and found themselves facing a man in a dark uniform with a prominent metal badge on the armoured vest he wore over it. They had encountered a pair of such men at the last outpost they had attacked and it was obvious that they represented some kind of security force. The flash had come from the energy weapon that the guard held but even though the blast hit Okkus Rar it was unable to penetrate his own armoured spacesuit.

"Sterling to control we're under attack!" the sheriff's deputy said into his comlock as he backed away from the aliens but before he could escape Terrat Hol fired another burst from his rifle that hit the man. The burst struck his armoured vest but this failed to save his life, the projectiles moving too quickly to be stopped by the armour that was designed to be as light as possible while still protecting against slashes and stabbing attacks rather than rifle rounds. The aliens were unable to understand the deputy's words but they both understood that he had been raising the alarm and they picked up their pace as they ran to the nearby elevator and descended to the passageway that connected the landing platform with the nearest of the outpost buildings.

"Two units are following the tracks directly. They seem to be heading in this direction in a roughly straight line." Verdeschi said, pointing to the map shown on one of the command centre's screens.

"That looks like pretty rough ground." Morrow commented.

"The sort that an experienced driver would avoid but someone new to using an exo-tractor would drive right across." Koenig pointed out.

"The sort of driver who was new to navigating on the moon?" Morrow added and Koenig nodded.

"What about the rest of your vehicles?" he asked, looking at Verdeschi.

"There are two out on the flanks just in case the tracks are a trap of some sort. The fifth exo-rover is bringing up the rear with the two tanks and of course there's the Hawk overhead." Verdeschi explained.

"I think we should load up the Eagles and be ready to move out as soon as we get a fix on the location of the alien ship." Koenig said, "Tony you and I will take *Eagle Two* with Maya and as many troops as we can fit aboard. Morrow you'll take everyone else aboard *Eagle One* back to Moonbase Alpha."

"Excuse me Colonel Koenig but taking Maya suggests that you want her to be able to advise you if you encounter the aliens themselves. Possibly even to communicate with them." Bergman said.

"That's right professor. Do you have an objection to that?" Koenig replied.

"No colonel of course not, but I think I should accompany you as well so I can study their ship. I do know how to use a weapon if you're concerned about losing a soldier." Bergman said and Koenig smiled.

"Okay Victor you're in. You'll ride up front with me so you can watch the sensors." he said.

"I guess that puts me in the back." Verdeschi commented before the outpost communications console activated.

"Colonel it's Alpha calling." Benes said, looking around at the senior officers.

"Put them through captain." Koenig ordered and Carter's face then appeared on a screen.

"Colonel we've just received a distress call from another outpost about fifty kilometres from your location. They say that they're under attack by aliens." Carter told him.

"Have they spotted the ship?" Koenig asked.

"No colonel but they did say that they detected an exo-tractor that refused to respond to attempts to communicate shortly before. They think that's how the aliens arrived." Carter answered.

"That limits their numbers." Verdeschi pointed out.

"Colonel the outpost has a small sheriff's force but they aren't equipped for military operations." Carter added.

"Okay tell them we're on our way. Send the co-ordinates to *Eagle Two* and advise the outpost to try and avoid engaging the aliens if they can help it. Koenig out." Koenig said and as he shut off the channel he turned to the other officers present, "This is it. We're moving out." he told them.

"What about our ground units?" Verdeschi asked.

"Have them keep searching for the alien ship. An exo-tractor can't carry the entire crew and I don't want to miss a dozen other killers just to catch three or four." Koenig told him.

With Bergman sat beside him in the cockpit of *Eagle Two*, Koenig took off from the top of the outpost and turned towards the one that was under attack.

"Those sensors clear enough Victor?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you colonel." Bergman responded, "How long until we get to the outpost?"

"About five minutes at full power. Of course then we have to find the aliens. Hopefully the outpost staff will be able to at least track them safely." Koenig answered.

Meanwhile in the rear of the *Eagle* the gathered soldiers were checking their weapons while Verdeschi opened the arms locker.

"Okay Maya what are you more comfortable with?" he said.

"I'm sorry Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi but I don't know how most of your weapons operate." she replied.

"Really?" Verdeschi said.

"I've only just managed to get her checked out on that stun gun." Washington commented from nearby, pointing to the weapon holstered to Maya's spacesuit.

"In that case you just stick by me and keep your head down Maya." Verdeschi told her and she smiled back at him.

"Of course lieutenant colonel." she said.

II.

It was in the second outpost module they entered that Okkus Rar and Terrat Hol located a workshop that was clearly meant for grinding lenses from the materials the inhabitants gathered from the ground around them and lined up along one wall they saw a number of completed lenses packed in plastic frames ready for shipping.

"There they are." Okkus Rar said, "They look close enough for us to be able to use."

The alien engineer then began to rush across the workshop before there was a loud booming sound and he was knocked off his feet by the impact from a primitive shotgun blast. As with the stun gun earlier the pellets failed to penetrate the armour of his spacesuit but the force of the impact still disorientated him temporarily. The man with the shotgun chambered another round and was about to fire again when Terrat Hol shot him first and then rushed to check on Okkus Rar.

"Engineer are you injured?" he asked.

"No, I am fine." Okkus Rar answered as he checked his spacesuit for signs of damage. The last thing he wanted after all this was to die on the moon's surface simply because a tiny projectile from such a crude weapon had put a hole in his spacesuit.

Finding no signs of significant damage to his suit Okkus Rar got back to his feet and went to the lenses to inspect them more closely. They were not identical to the one used aboard his ship but they did appear to be close enough in size and curvature to be useful. A beam projected through such a lens would be less powerful and have less range than one projected through an ideal lens but it would still be enough to both open and direct a wormhole. Slinging his rifle over his shoulder Okkus Rar picked one of the lenses up, holding it by the handholds built into the frame and then he looked at Terrat Hol.

"Now we should get back to the alien ship and remove its reactor. You will have to cover me." he said.

"Outpost control this is Colonel Koenig aboard *Eagle Two* out of Alpha on approach." Koenig transmitted as he saw the outpost appear through the Eagle's forward viewports. At the same time he cut the power to the main drives and used the manoeuvring thrusters mounted on the craft's four landing gear pods to turn it through one hundred and eighty degrees before firing the engines again at full power to slow it down. In his hurry to respond to the attack on the outpost Koenig had accelerated to such a speed that even with the Eagle's main fusion drive now decelerating it as rapidly as possible it still flew right over the outpost before coming to a stop, hovering above the surface under the power of its vertical lift thrusters.

"Confirmed Colonel. This is outpost Gamma Four Six control. I hope you've got a lot of guns aboard that Eagle because nothing we've got has been able to slow those aliens down. Sheriff Foster will meet you at landing platform three." the voice of one of the outpost control staff responded and Koenig saw lights begin to flash on a landing platform that had a large '3' stencilled on it and he then guided the Eagle towards it. A boarding tube extended from the outpost to meet the Eagle as soon as Koenig landed it and he was in the airlock with Verdeschi, Bergman, Maya, Washington and two soldiers when the Eagle's external hatch opened to reveal a man in a sheriff's uniform standing in the boarding tube outside. As Koenig had been told to expect the man had a badge on his armoured vest that had the name 'Foster' on it and he smiled when the hatch opened.

"Colonel Koenig am I glad to see you." Sheriff Foster said.

"Yes you are." Maya responded.

"Rhetorical Maya." Verdeschi whispered to her.

"Oh. Sorry." she said.

"Sheriff Foster what's your situation?" Koenig asked as he stepped from the Eagle and the two men began to walk along the boarding tube with the others following them.

"We did as you said and pulled everyone back. All my men have are these stun guns and they're useless against an armoured target. We're used to dealing with a bit of petty theft, brawling and some narcotics. Alien invasions aren't what we're equipped for." Foster explained.

"Have you been able to track the aliens?" Verdeschi asked.

"To some degree, yes. Control used the fire control system to try locking down the entire outpost but the aliens have some sort of device they can use to override our locks. We couldn't keep them penned in on platform one but every time they opened a door it showed up in the control centre." Foster said.

"So where are they now?" Koenig said.

"They went as far as a workshop before they started double back towards platform one." Foster said.

"A workshop? That sounds like they were after something specific." Koenig commented, "What is it used for?"

"It's a private manufacturing company that makes various glass products. Right now they have a big contract from you lot to make lenses for laser cannons. The ones you're supposed to be installing to stop alien ships landing on the moon in the first place." Foster told him.

"Lenses for laser cannons?" Bergman commented, "Colonel the alien ship may have suffered damaged to the beam weapon it uses to open a wormhole. The aliens will need a replacement."

"Can they just use one of our lenses for that?" Verdeschi asked.

"Oh, I don't see why not." Bergman replied, "The exact properties of the lens may differ but as long as the weapon itself is capable of channelling the energy needed to open the wormhole then almost any lens will do."

"Sheriff Foster, show us the way." Koenig told the sheriff.

"Javas Ott we are approaching you now. We have the lens we need." Okkus Rar radioed ahead to the alien crewman he had left in the Vulture to guard it, not wanting him to mistake his returning comrades for humans and accidentally open fire on them.

"Understood engineer. The alien vessel is still secure and I have been able to locate the main fusion reactor in the aft section. I have shut it down and disconnected all of the internal linkages but we will need to access it from the outside to remove it." Javas Ott responded, "There is one more thing as well Okkus Rar."

"What is it?" Okkus Rar asked.

"I am in the cockpit now and I can see another craft on one of the other platforms. It is different to this one and landed barely two terocs ago." Javas Ott told him.

"The aliens could have called for assistance. We will hurry." Okkus Rar said and he and Terrat Hol picked up their pace, hurrying back to the landing platform.

When they got there they found Javas Ott waiting for them in the boarding tube with his rifle held at the ready.

"Here, take this." Okkus Rar told him, holding out the lens, "Terrat Hol and I will remove the reactor while you get this back to the vehicle."

"Yes Okkus Rar." Javas Ott replied and he slung his rifle over his shoulder before taking the lens from the engineer. With his hands free Okkus Rar was then able to take out the scrambler again and use it to trick the door they had used to enter the boarding tube to open once more. Again this produced a sudden rush of air and an alarm as the atmosphere began to escape into space. This time though the aliens were moving with the flow of air as they exited the outpost to stand out on the platform again. From here Javas Ott headed back to the ladder leading down to the surface. Now outside the outpost's artificial gravity field he was able to carry the lens one handed and this allowed him to descend the ladder while he held it. While he was doing this Okkus Rar and Terrat Hol ducked beneath the Vulture and located an access panel beneath the vessel. Okkus Rar had brought with him a number of tools that the two prospectors had had with them and using one of these he was able to open the hatch to expose the reactor inside.

"There are four fasteners holding the reactor in place. Hold it up while I undo them" he told Terrat Hol and then when Terrat Hol positioned himself under the reactor to take its weight with all four of his limbs Okkus Rar began to undo the bolts that secured it to its mounting. As soon as two of these were undone Terrat Hol began to feel the weight of the reactor pressing down but thanks to the one sixth gravity outside the outpost he was able to continue to support it while Okkus Rar undid the other two bolts. Then with the engineer's help Terrat Hol lowered the reactor to the platform and between them they were able to drag it to the ladder. The reactor was still too heavy for either one of the aliens to carry down the ladder on their own and they could not carry it between them but fortunately there was a basic winch on the exo-tractor and Javas Ott threw a line up to them. By attaching this to the reactor and then letting out more line the aliens were able to lower the reactor down to the surface before they began to load it onto the exo-tractor.

"What is that?" Maya said when the alarm began to sound.

"Decompression." Foster told her, "This happened when the aliens first arrived as well."

"Then maybe they are leaving." Bergman suggested as the sheriff took out his comlock.

"Foster to control, where's that alarm coming from?" he signalled.

"Landing platform one. Same as before." the controller responded.

"Then the aliens are leaving." Verdeschi said.

"Which means they think they have what they came for." Koenig replied, "Professor you need to come with me."

"Of course. Where are we going?" Bergman said.

"Back to *Eagle Two*." Koenig told him, "Sheriff Foster I need you to lead Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi to the nearest airlock. If the aliens are outside again it will be quicker to go after them on the surface."

"And what are you going to do colonel?" Foster asked.

"Get our Eagle into the air. If the aliens do have everything they wanted then they could already be aboard that exo-tractor and if they are then they won't be able to outrun an Eagle." Koenig said.

The aliens loaded the Vulture's fusion reactor into the exo-tractor's digging bucket and were just about to embark again when Terrat Hol noticed lights moving on the lunar surface.

"Aliens!" he exclaimed when he looked around and saw the large group of figures in armoured spacesuits bounding across the surface in the low gravity and he immediately brought his rifle to bear and opened fire. "Maya get down." Verdeschi said when he saw the alien turn, knowing that her spacesuit offered much less protection than the armoured variant worn by Verdeschi, Washington and the other soldiers.

The rapid burst of projectiles fired by Terrat Hol clipped the helmet of one of the soldiers and produced a plume of escaping air through the crack it created.

"I'm losing air!" the man called out, clamping his hands over the crack in an attempt to stem the flow.

"I have him." Maya responded, leaping towards him as she removed the reel of emergency tape from a pocket in her suit and she began to stick this over the crack in the man's helmet to seal it again.

Meanwhile the other soldiers all returned fire and Terrat Hol jerked as he was hit repeatedly. The first few rounds were stopped by his own spacesuit armour but it was not long before the concentrated volley of fire found a weak spot and punched through into the alien within.

Terrat Hol cried out as he died and Okkus Rar grabbed hold of Javas Ott just as he was about to get into position to fire on the approaching human troops.

"No." he told him, "Terrat Hol is dead. The reactor is loaded now so we must leave. We'll use the shroud to cover our escape."

"Yes Okkus Rar." Javas Ott responded, grabbing hold of the side of the exo-tractor as he climbed aboard the vehicle.

Okkus Rar climbed back into the enclosed cabin and started the exo-tractor's engine, turning the steering column sharply as the vehicle lurched into motion to get it facing the correct way before he began to accelerate. As he performed the turn he heard a 'crack' and the hiss of escaping air as the human soldiers opened fire on the exo-tractor and one of the rounds punctured the cabin. Luckily for Okkus Rar he was still wearing his spacesuit and helmet so the loss of cabin pressure did not concern him. However, there was the possibility that the humans would hit something more vital if they carried on firing at the exo-tractor and so Okkus Rar reached down for the holographic shroud that was lying on the floor by his feet and turned the device on. In an instant the field activated and the human troops were startled to see the exo-tractor suddenly disappear before their eyes.

"That's a neat trick." Washington said.

"One that stops us following them." Verdeschi said before he looked at Maya, "Maya I don't suppose that you can tell us where they are by sensing the aliens inside or something can you?" he asked.

"I am sorry Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, my powers do not work that way." Maya answered.

"Colonel Koenig I'm sorry but we've lost them. We got one but two others made it aboard their exo-tractor before they got away." Verdeschi told Koenig over the radio just as *Eagle Two* was taking off.

"Lost them how?" Koenig asked.

"Lost them as in they were there one minute but vanished the next. It must be that stealth tech Maya indicated that they might have. Oh and colonel it wasn't just the lens for a laser cannon that they were after. It looks like they stole the fusion reactor from the Vulture that was at the outpost as well." Verdeschi told him. "Another fusion reactor? That makes two of them. It's not like you can turn them into a bomb so I wonder what they need with them both?" Koenig said.

"Colonel it's possible that the alien ship suffered severe damage when it crashed on the moon." Bergman pointed out, "The first reactor may have been just enough to help them survive but to escape they need something that is far more powerful to power their engines."

"So can you think of any way of penetrating this stealth technology of theirs Victor?" Koenig said.

"Not without knowing how it actually conceals them colonel." Bergman answered before he smiled and added, "But I have found one slight flaw with it."

"That was fast." Koenig commented.

"Not really, I still can't penetrate their stealth technology but when it comes to travelling across a soft surface then their stealth field isn't going to stop them leaving tracks." Bergman said and he pointed to a monitor showing the feed from one of the Eagle's externally mounted cameras. On this a set of imprints left behind in the moon's surface by a tracked vehicle. Following these across the barren surface of the moon Koenig and Bergman saw that they came to a sudden end as if the vehicle that had created them had been lifted off it by a spacecraft. However, instead of the end point being fixed the two men could see the tracks continuing to appear.

"So the exo-tractor is at the end of those tracks." Koenig said, "Hold on professor we're going in."

Although it was normal for the co-pilot of an armed Eagle to operate the weapons it was quite possible for the pilot to do so himself, especially when it came to the forward firing cannons mounted beneath the forward

section and Koenig armed these as he lowered the nose of the Eagle, lining up the targeting display in front of him with the end of the tracks before he squeezed the triggers built into the flight controls.

“Okkus Rar an alien craft approaches. It’s heading right for us.” Javas Ott said when he noticed the Eagle above them turn and start to descend.

“They must be following the tracks we are leaving behind.” Okkus Rar said and he turned the exo-tractor’s steering column just as the Eagle opened fire.

12.

Koenig and Bergman saw the plumes of dust from the surface as the projectiles fired from the magnetic accelerator cannons struck it but the imprints from the exo-tractor's tracks continued to appear, the only difference being that instead of appearing in a straight line they were now weaving back and forth.

"Colonel Koenig, whatever field is being generated to keep that vehicle invisible I suspect it extends some distance around it and is hiding the tracks for a short distance." Bergman said.

"So we'd need to know how big that field was to even have a chance at hitting them other by random chance." Koenig said.

"With our weapons, yes colonel. However, if you were to bring in a Hawk for a missile strike then any hit within about fifty metres or so should do. Exo-tractors aren't well armoured after all." Bergman suggested.

"Maybe not professor but I'd rather keep the Hawk we have on station looking for the alien ship and bringing in another will take time. Speaking of which do you think there's any way that we'll be able to detect that?"

Koenig said.

"Actually yes colonel, I think it will be quite easy." Bergman responded and Koenig frowned.

"Easy? What sort of stealth tech is easy to penetrate?" he said.

"Well assuming that it has the same flaw as what we are seeing here, the screen that hides the alien spacecraft will do nothing to hide its exhaust plume. That should show up quite clearly when they take off. Of course once they are outside the moon's gravitational pull then the crew can just shut off their engines and drift. But for as long as they have to fight against gravity they will be vulnerable." Bergman explained and Koenig smiled.

"So we just drop in behind them and open fire at their exhaust." he said.

"Yes colonel."

Okkus Rar stopped the exo-tractor about two hundred metres short of where he knew the ship was located. He did this for two reasons, firstly he did not want to risk the shroud fields surrounding both the ship and the exo-tractor interfering with one another and creating a disruption that could potentially be detected by the humans pursuing him and Javas Ott. Secondly by stopping where he had it meant that the exo-tractor was parked on a rocky incline that was free enough from dust that the vehicle left no tracks. Before he disembarked from the exo-tractor though he took out his electronic magnifiers again and used them to search the surrounding terrain and as he had feared he saw that he and Javas Ott were not alone.

From where he was he could see a pair of wheeled armoured ground vehicles that each mounted powerful looking guns in turrets on top of their hulls. Then beyond these he caught a glimpse of something much heavier looking that had a turret that dominated its hull. The human fighting machines were approaching slowly from the direction of the first outpost that he and the other survivors of the crash had raided and he guessed that they had discovered the trail left by the exo-tractor as it left there. Thankfully Okkus Rar knew that they would soon encounter the rocky terrain where no tracks would be left. He doubted that this would cause them to give up though and it was inevitable that eventually they would stumble across the crashed ship. Searching the sky Okkus Rar saw that as well as the craft that had been shadowing the exo-tractor since leaving the human outpost there was another craft of a different type circling above the advancing ground vehicles and he knew that this gave him and Javas Ott just a short window off opportunity.

"We must hurry. We might just make it under the ship's shroud before we are seen." he said as he climbed out of the exo-tractor. Leaving the shroud that concealed the ground vehicle behind was a risk but having it fall into human hands was preferable to remaining trapped on the moon forever. The two aliens then unloaded the fusion reactor between them, each holding it with one hand while Okkus Rar carried the lens in his free one.

"How long will it take to install this?" Javas Ott asked, looking at the reactor as they started to walk away from the exo-tractor..

"Perhaps ten terocs. The technology is simple. All that is needed is to mount it and connect it to our fuel supply and power distribution net via a limiter to ensure its output matches our needs. Then we can take off." Okkus Rar told him.

"What about the lens Okkus Rar?"

"The lens can wait. We can't get to the ventral hull to install it without digging out the ship anyway. Better to get into space where we can wait shrouded until this moon leaves this system and then we can carry out the repairs to the main weapon." the engineer responded. Then he paused and looked back at the exo-tractor, forcing Javas Ott to stop as well, "The boundary of the shroud should be about here. When I say 'go' we run as fast as possible for the ship. With luck the alien ships overhead will not spot us before we get under the cover of the ship's shroud."

"I understand Okkus Rar."

"Good, now go!"

The two aliens broke into a run, bounding across the surface of the moon in the low gravity towards where they knew their ship to be located and as soon as they penetrated the holographic shroud that protected it the vessel appeared as if from nowhere ahead of them, partially buried in the moon's surface. The aliens continued to move as quickly as they could to their ship and went back aboard. Once inside Okkus Rar went to a nearby panel and shut off the artificial gravity, enabling the pair to move the fusion reactor to the engineering section where Okkus Rar began the task of connecting it to the ship's engines. As he had claimed this did not take long, the most complicated part being securing the necessary connections given the differences in size and shape of the various connectors necessary. However, once the reactor was in place and secured using cargo retaining straps he crossed the room to the main console where he sat down and at the flick of a switch all of the ship's primary systems came on line.

"Power system stable and operating at sixty-four percent." he said.

"Is that enough for take off?" Javas Ott asked.

"Yes, more than enough in this gravity. Now secure yourself." Okkus Rar ordered.

To Bergman in the cockpit of *Eagle Two* it appeared that part of the moon's surface suddenly exploded as a plume of dust flew upwards for no apparent reason.

"Colonel I-" he began guessing that the alien ship was taking off from this point.

"I see it. Going in now." Koenig interrupted, turning the Eagle and firing its main engines to send it towards the launch site. However, once the alien ship had blasted its way clear of the surface there was no sign of it as Koenig looked out of the viewport in front of him, "Professor where is he?" he asked.

"Five degree starboard and left the nose another twenty." Bergman told him as he studied the Eagle's sensors for the thermal trail left by the alien ship's fusion drive.

"*Eagle Two* to *Hawk One* do you read me?" Koenig transmitted.

"Reading you loud and clear *Eagle Two*. We are en route. We have the enemy on our sensors and will have a missile lock in about ten seconds." the co-pilot of the Hawk responded.

"Colonel a missile won't work. It'll just lock onto the exhaust trail and go wide." Bergman said, "This has to be done the old fashioned way. Direct fire with guns."

"While wearing a blindfold. You may as well ask me shoot an apple off someone's head." Koenig muttered before returning to the radio, "*Hawk One* negative on missile launch. Engage with guns only and lead the target. *Eagle Two* out." he transmitted.

"Okkus Rar I have two alien craft closing from behind." Javas Ott warned the engineer who was now piloting their ship from his console.

"They will have seen the effects of our take off. I doubt they can track us though, the sensor antennas I saw on the craft we took the fusion reactor from looked far too primitive. Another teroc and I'll shut the engines down and we'll be safe anyway." Okkus Rar responded.

"Now colonel! Seventy degrees up and fire!" Bergman exclaimed as the Eagle's sensors showed it to be passing through the alien ship's exhaust trail.

Koenig immediately pulled back on the control column he held and squeezed the triggers for the twin linked cannons mounted beneath the Eagle. Keeping these pressed down he fired a sustained burst of fast moving projectiles as he continued to bring the Eagle's nose up, creating an arc of them that initially missed the alien ship before sweeping across it.

The impact of the projectiles ripped through the alien ship's engines and through the engineering compartment on the other side, destroying both the engines and also the stolen fusion reactor powering them. This triggered a chain reaction as the fusion reactor's core burst open and super heated plasma filled the engineering compartment, killing both Okkus Rar and Javas Ott instantly before reaching the remaining fuel stocks and consuming them in an inferno that lit up the sky ahead of *Eagle Two*.

"Colonel you did it. Target destroyed." Bergman said as debris appeared on the radar and Koenig smiled.

"Just call me William Tell." he said.

12.

"So what can you two tell me about these aliens?" Koenig asked Russell and Bergman when they sat in his office.

"From the autopsy I performed on the body Verdeschi recovered they appear to be physically very resilient John. I doubt that a stun gun would do much more than slow one down and make them very angry." Russell replied, "I'd say that their environmental needs are not much different to our own though. They seem to be warm blooded like we are and the air tanks of the space suit contained oxygen. I'm sorry to say that our

thoughts about their diet have proven correct though. The alien definitely consumed human flesh a few hours before he died.”

“I see and what about their technology Victor?” Koenig said, turning towards Professor Bergman.

“Like Doctor Russell I haven’t had that much to go on I’m afraid, but what I did have proved rather interesting.” Bergman responded and he glanced down at his comlock screen on which he had his notes, “Most of what was recovered appeared to be simple variations of our own technology. I suppose there are only so many ways of launching a projectile and using magnetic fields has proven to be the most reliable given the reduction in moving parts so it’s not really surprising that the two weapons we recovered both worked that way.”

“Would you say their weapons were more advanced?” Koenig said and Bergman paused to think for a moment.

“My tests indicate that their rifles can fire their projectiles with a greater velocity than ours can but they manage that by being heavier. Something that might not bother them as much as would one of us. Like us they use composite materials for their body armour and it seems that it offers a similar level of protection.” Bergman continued.

“So at least we can expect our troops to be able to hold their own if it does come down to a larger engagement.” Koenig commented and Bergman smiled.

“Yes, that would be my assessment as well.” he agreed, “When it comes to dealing with their ships I’m afraid that I can’t offer any advice. The craft you shot down had already been damaged in the crash so can hardly be taken as a prime example. Plus I’m afraid that we weren’t able to recover any significant wreckage. Everything but a few fragments was destroyed in the explosion.”

“But you can penetrate their stealth technology?” Russell said.

“I’m afraid not doctor.” Bergman told her, “I found ways around it because of how the aliens were using it. A target in space that is not manoeuvring, performing active scans or firing weapons will not produce any emissions that we can detect. It will be totally undetectable.”

“Not surprising given what Maya had to say about the Dorcons’ opinions of them.” Koenig said.

“There is one piece of good news regarding the aliens’ stealth technology though colonel.” Bergman added.

“What’s that Victor?” Koenig asked.

“The example that was inside the exo-tractor the aliens were using when our troops finally found it is still in working order and appears very simple to operate. Of course we only have one and I’m loath to try and dismantle it to reverse engineer the technology behind it but I think that we may be able to make use of it. The radius of the field is just about large enough to hide an Eagle or a Hawk.” Bergman answered and a smile spread across Koenig’s face as he leant back in his chair.

“So you’re saying we could have our very own invisible spacecraft? One that the Dorcons can’t detect?” he said.

“Yes colonel. That’s precisely what I’m saying.” Bergman said.

“You’re right professor. That is good news.” Koenig responded.