

Space: 2299



10: A Friend In Need

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When the moon arrives in a system that appears to have once been occupied by the aliens who attacked Earth a search is launched for any technology they may have left behind. However, the moon's inhabitants are not the only ones interested the alien technology and when one of the search teams falls victim to an attack one of them finds out who their real friends are.

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I.

Captain Benes studied the results of the scans closely and did not notice her colleague Kano approach from behind her.

"Everything okay Benes?" he asked, startling her.

"Don't do that." she replied, shoving him before turning her attention back to her console.

"So what have you found anyway?" Kano said.

"Oh the usual. Lumps of rock and ice. Giant balls of gas. Nothing habitable yet though. You'll be glad to know that the sensors are functioning fine though. Your staff have performed their jobs admirably." Benes told him.

"Then I don't need to have anyone flogged or shot. Now according to the professor's computer program we're here for about three days." Kano said, "That's a lot of time to count rocks in." and then he patted her on the shoulders before walking away, heading towards the main entrance to the main mission command centre of Moonbase Alpha where he encountered another young woman entering the room in the company of a pair of soldiers armed with stun guns. Although the woman was wearing combat fatigues these lacked any of the rank or department insignia that were on the uniforms worn by the soldiers guarding her or any of the Global Defence Force staff manning main mission.

"Hello David." the woman said, smiling but Kano did not respond in kind.

"Miss Keynes." he said.

"Is Colonel Koenig here?" Keynes asked and Kano pointed up the flight of steps at the side of main mission that led to the office occupied by the most senior GDF officer on the moon where he could be seen speaking with a red haired woman who was also in a GDF officer's uniform.

"Speaking with your replacement. Go on up." Kano said, "Now if you don't mind I have places to be." and then he sidestepped around Keynes and her guards before leaving main mission.

Keynes then headed for Koenig's office, the two guards following behind her without speaking.

"Ah Keynes, please take a seat." Koenig said when he saw Keynes get to the top of the steps and the woman he was talking to looked around at her, revealing the facial features that marked her out as something other than human. Maya was a Psychon, an engineered species created from humans taken captive by an alien species that had attacked Earth in the twenty-second century, more than a hundred years earlier. These aliens had disappeared after creating the Psychons but rather than leaving them free this just allowed the aggressive reptilian Dorcons to enslave them instead, seeing the uses of the males' engineered technical aptitude and the females' empathy. After being rescued from Dorcon slavery Maya had joined the inhabitants of Earth's moon as an adviser where her empathic powers and ability to rapidly comprehend new languages was considered a major benefit. More recently she had been granted a commission in the GDF and taken over Keynes' former role as Koenig's adjutant.

"Will there be anything else colonel?" Maya asked.

"No, I think we've covered everything for today Maya. If that reporter keeps up his behaviour I can just revoke his security pass for military briefings." Koenig answered.

"Thank you colonel. I still fail to understand why Mister Coster believes he can make himself popular by being so disruptive." Maya said as she got to her feet.

"Maya if you want any tips on handling the press you know where to find me. I'm right around the corner from your-" Keynes began.

"I'm sorry Alyson," Maya interrupted, "but having be tell others how helpful you have been is unlikely to win you back the friends you lost when you turned on them." and as Keynes' face fell Maya exited Koenig's office, walking back down the steps to main mission.

"Not quite the response you were hoping for Alyson?" Koenig asked and Keynes sighed.

"Hoping for? No. Expecting? Pretty much. I still keep hearing the word 'traitor' whenever I walk through a room."

"So what brings you to my office today then? I take it that you have another logistics report to make." Koenig said and Keynes smiled as she placed the small box she had brought with her on the desk between them and pushed it towards Koenig, "This isn't going to explode is it?" Koenig asked.

"No colonel. Committing mutiny and treason once is my limit for a lifetime." Keynes said and when Koenig opened the box a smile appeared on his face.

"Strawberries." he said as he removed a single fruit from the box.

"From the first crop in our new farm caverns. There are less than a thousand in total and they're supposed to be used for their seeds but I thought we should find out whether or not they're edible before committing to a full crop." Keynes said.

"I thought they were tested while they were being grown." Koenig commented.

"Yes colonel they were but I needed an official reason to remove them. Every plant in our orchards has to be

accounted for or we risk losing everything. The soil we recovered from that habitable planet was just what we needed to bring our farming capacity up to the level where we'll be able to supply ourselves with fresh fruit and vegetables indefinitely." Keynes said.

"I suppose that means that Major Capston and Mister Foxworth's little band of renegades won't be starving to death any time soon." Koenig said. Then he smiled and added, "Although some of them may find life difficult without the heart medication you made sure they didn't steal."

Keynes smiled back nervously.

"Professor Bergman's such a sweet man and I may not have meant to but I put his life in danger when I helped Red Mars rip us out of Earth orbit. I felt I owed him and the least I could do was make sure Major Capston didn't steal all the medicine he needs. It probably only buys him and the others still on the moon that take it an extra year or two-

"But that's time they wouldn't have otherwise and Victor Bergman is our best shot at getting back home." Koenig interrupted.

"Colonel I think you should come and see this." Benes suddenly called out from main mission and Koenig turned towards her.

"What is it captain?" he asked as he stood up and walked down the steps to main mission and to Benes' console.

"Colonel our optical scanners have detected a dense asteroid field about sixty million kilometres away from our location. Most of the mass looks pretty regular for asteroids but there are signs of radioactive isotopes that shouldn't occur in nature." Benes told him.

"Have you detected any ships in there?" Koenig said but Benes shook her head,

"No but given the size and density of the field you could hide an Anderson-class frigate in there and we probably couldn't see it from here." she said.

Koenig reached for his comlock and quickly selected Professor Bergman from the list of contacts.

"Professor Bergman I think we may have need of your assistance." he said into the device.

"I'm on my way colonel." Bergman responded and Koenig put the comlock away again.

While Koenig was summoning Bergman, Keynes had followed him from his office and still accompanied by the guards assigned to watch her she also looked at Benes' console.

"Colonel." she said and both Koenig and Benes looked at her.

"Yes Miss Keynes?" he replied.

"Colonel I've seen those isotopes before." Keynes said.

"Really, where?" Koenig asked.

"When I was studying the technology of the aliens who attacked Earth. The cores of the particle beams they used used them as a reaction source." Keynes said just as an older man entered main mission and waved to Koenig.

"Well I'm here colonel." Bergman said as he also approached Benes' station and then he looked around, "A bit short handed aren't you? Where are your senior staff?"

"Major Morrow should be starting his shift in a few minutes and Major Carter is giving Lieutenant Alexander her first practical flying lesson in a Hawk." Koenig told him.

"She screamed like a little girl." an enlisted woman sat at a console nearby commented with a grin.

"Yes thank you Spacewoman Baker." Koenig said, "Just remember that playing back the recording of that while on duty will be considered insubordination."

"Yes colonel." Baker responded.

"So what do you want me to take a look at?" Bergman asked and Koenig pointed to the console they were gathered around.

"This." Koenig said and Bergman looked down.

"Incredible." he said.

"I told them that the isotopes are found in the beam weapons-" Keynes began before she was interrupted yet again.

"Yes, the particle beam weapon used on alien flying saucers as well as their dreadnought and to protect the bases they built on Earth. The same isotopes were also detected where those weapons had struck metallic objects." Bergman said.

"Are they dangerous?" Koenig said.

"In sufficient quantity, yes. Though a standard space suit will offer protection." Bergman said, "Colonel the half life on these isotopes is considerable so they could be left over from the period we know the aliens were still present but on the other hand we could be looking at the recent use of their technology."

"Meaning that there could be an alien ship or outpost in that asteroid field." Koenig said.

"And we can't see it." Benes pointed out.

"Not from here, no." Koenig responded, "On the other hand if we sent Survey Eagles into it then they could track those isotopes to their source." then he looked towards main mission's entrance just as a man in a major's uniform was entering the room, "Ah Major Morrow," he called out his second in command.

"Yes colonel?" Morrow replied.

"Major we've found something interesting in a nearby asteroid field." Koenig said.

"Sixty million kilometres out." Benes commented.

"Fine so maybe it will take a while to get there." Koenig said, "Anyway we need to organise a flight of Survey Eagles to investigate. I want you to work with Professor Bergman to organise it."

"Colonel I should remind you that those isotopes are related to alien weapon technology. We could come under fire." Bergman said and Koenig nodded.

"Okay. Morrow you better talk to Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi as well. We may need a squadron of Hawks on station to provide support." Koenig said.

"What about our armed Eagles colonel? I know we only have half a dozen here at Alpha but they would give our pilots a fighting chance against anything they might encounter in there." Morrow said.

"I'll leave that up to you and Major Carter. Right now I have a dinner date to get to. Call me when you have an action plan in place." Koenig told him.

2.

Doctor Helena Russell, Moonbase Alpha's senior medical officer, was already in the quarters she and Koenig shared when he returned and she looked up from the couch she was reclining on when he entered.

"Difficult day in the medical section Helena?" Koenig asked and Russell groaned.

"I swear to you John we need to do something about the diet some of our troops are following. Today I had to dis-impact the bowel of one of our technicians and I swear I hosed out enough poop to sculpt a life-sized statue of him." she said.

"Well you might want to hold onto that." Koenig said, sitting down beside her and leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

"Why?" she asked, frowning.

"Have you washed your hands?" Koenig asked and Russell held up three fingers.

"Three times. With very strong soap." she said and Koenig held up the box Keynes had given him.

"Good because you want poop on your hands when it could be used to fertilise more of these." Koenig said and he opened the box, prompting Russell to gasp and her eyes widen.

"Strawberries!" she exclaimed, "John where did you get these?"

"Alyson Keynes gave them to me," Koenig said, taking a strawberry from the box and handing it to Russell before taking out another for himself.

"Keynes." Russell said, staring at Koenig.

"I don't think she was trying to seduce me. I think she's more concerned about keeping an ally." he replied.

"I did warn you about that deal. She committed treason and everyone knows it." Russell said.

"Yes I know, but she's still carrying out the job I need her to and everyone else is giving her a pretty wide berth." Koenig replied.

"Baker shot her." Russell pointed out.

"Yes but with a stun gun." Koenig said.

"She still shot her. Trust me John, she'll probably always be an outcast and sooner or later someone is going to use something more deadly than a stun gun on her." Russell said.

"Well I suppose that means you don't want any more strawberries then." Koenig said and he began to pull the box away from Russell.

"I never said that John." Russell responded as she quickly reached out for another strawberry and she and Koenig smiled at one another.

Lacking landing gear, the Hawk attack craft used to defend the bases on the moon used wheeled tractors as mobile launch and recovery vehicles and entering or exiting one of the craft required the use of a ladder pushed up against the side of the cockpit module.

As she disembarked from the Hawk she had just flown in Lieutenant Alexander almost lost her footing several times as she descended the ladder and when she reached the bottom she sighed and lay face down.

"Oh floor my best friend." she said.

"Oh come on Alexander. It wasn't that bad." the Australian accented voice of major Carter, the head of Moon base Alpha's reconnaissance section said as he jumped from the other ladder put in place against the cockpit.

"Major you shut off the AG field and pulled a ten-gee spin." Alexander said, tilting her head up so she could look at him and he smiled back at her.

Carter was about to speak again when he noticed another pilot walking across the underground hangar towards them.

"Hey Bill shouldn't you be suited up? I thought you were taking a Hawk out to practice with Ramirez once we got back." Carter said when he noticed that the other man was wearing fatigues instead of a spacesuit.

"Maybe Captain Fraser has more sense now that he' had the chance to get qualified." Alexander said and then she reached up towards Fraser, "Could you give me a hand up captain? I think my inner ears are on strike."

"Of course lieutenant." Fraser responded and he took hold of her hand to help her back to her feet, "All the training flights have been cancelled by Major Morrow. Nothing's going up that isn't essential." he added, looking at Carter and the Australian pilot frowned.

"What the hell for? Morrow knows we need pilots to fill these Hawks." he said.

"Well you can ask him yourself major. He asked me to tell the pair of you to meet him in main mission as soon as possible, The rumour is that some sort of alien ship has been spotted approaching and nobody knows whether or not it's hostile. Koenig wants every ship we've got kept ready for launch." Fraser

explained.

"That doesn't add up. They'd have called us back." Alexander said.

"Like I said, it's only a rumour." Fraser replied.

"Come on Alexander, there's only one way we're going to find out what's going on. Let's get changed and head for main mission."

After changing from their spacesuits to service uniforms the two officers made their way to main mission where they found Morrow sat at his console with Bergman sat beside him.

"The colonel's not here." Carter commented, seeing that Koenig's office was empty.

"We can't be in mortal danger then." Alexander replied and the pair of them walked over to Morrow's station.

"You summoned us?" Carter said.

"Yes, take a look at that." Morrow answered and he pointed to main mission's big screen on which was an image of the asteroid field that the presence of the artificial isotopes had been detected in.

"An asteroid field." Alexander said, "Looks pretty dense." and Bergman nodded.

"Yes the mean distance between objects is about five kilometres." he said.

"Wow that is dense. I'd hate to try taking a ship through that." Carter said and Morrow smiled. This prompted Carter to wince, "Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." he said.

"And so you should Alan." Morrow replied, "You see Captain Benes has detected some very interesting radioactive isotopes in there. Isotopes that are indicative of alien technology."

"Now when you say alien-" Alexander began.

"The aliens who attacked Earth." Bergman interrupted, "What the Dorcons and Psychons call the Outsiders."

"You think there's a base in there somewhere?" Carter asked.

"That's one possibility, yes. Of course it could just be the remains of something they destroyed. Unfortunately the density and composition of the field prevents our scanners from determining what it is from Alpha."

Bergman said.

"Which is where our Eagles come in." Morrow added, "We need to get Survey Eagles in there. Armed Survey Eagles."

"So you want combat pilots." Carter said and Morrow nodded.

"Yes. Colonel Koenig has tasked me with coming up with a plan and by working with Professor Bergman I'm formulating one based around you and him taking a Survey Eagle into the asteroid field. You'll be backed up by two other Survey Eagles while a support squadron holds just outside the field. That will consist of at least one other Eagle holding a medical officer and a platoon of infantry, a pair of Swifts for long range surveillance and at least four Hawks. Every ship will be armed of course." he explained.

"What, no Ospreys?" Alexander said and she smiled.

"Since we only have two Osprey bombers on the moon, no." Morrow replied.

It was then that Koenig returned to main mission in the company of Russell and another officer wearing the uniform of a lieutenant colonel. This other man was Tony Verdeschi, the commanding officer of Moonbase Epsilon. Epsilon was the only purely military base on the moon where the majority of the GDF forces were based and this including almost all of the Hawk attack ships as well as the only armed Swift long range scouts.

"You have something for us Major Morrow?" Koenig asked and Morrow smiled.

"Yes colonel, if you'd all like to take a look at this." he said and he handed a tablet to Koenig that showed a list of the ships he planned to deploy.

"All this looks pretty reasonable." Verdeschi said, "I can easily provide a flight of Hawks. The Swifts are doable although that only leaves Epsilon with one spare if something goes wrong."

"I notice you've only got crew assignments for one of the Survey Eagles. Major Carter and Professor Bergman." Koenig commented.

"Ah, yes colonel. That's something I wanted to discuss with you. You see given the distance there would be a significant communication lag so I think that either you or Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi should take charge in person. That way you are in place to react to whatever is found." Morrow said and Koenig and Verdeschi looked at one another.

"You know it's been too long since I last took a Hawk up." Verdeschi said and Koenig smiled.

"Okay so it's settled. You command the Hawk flight and I'll take that support Eagle." Koenig said.

"In that case I should be with you too John." Russell said, "You need a medical officer to monitor the radiation levels."

"Then I guess we just make up the rest of the crews from our existing duty rosters." Koenig said, "Fraser and Kano should do for one of the other ships."

"Which just leaves one more to fill." Verdeschi added.

"Err actually Professor Bergman has something he'd like to say about that colonel." Morrow said and Koenig looked at the professor.

"Really Victor?" he said.

"Yes colonel. I know this may be a bit awkward but I think we should take Alyson Keynes with us on the other Eagle." Bergman said.

"Keynes? Keynes has had a logistics role since her parole." Koenig pointed out.

"Yes but she is familiar with the technology of the aliens. More so than Captain Kano for example. I think that she should be the science officer aboard the third Survey Eagle."

Koenig sighed.

"I suppose so. I was going to make her your assistant before we left Earth's orbit." he said.

"How many guards will you send along to keep an eye on her?" Alexander asked.

"The guards are as much for her protection as to stop her running off and I don't think she'll be in any danger of either aboard an Eagle." Koenig said, "You shouldn't have any trouble handling her."

"Me?" Alexander exclaimed.

"Yes lieutenant, you. We need good pilots to navigate that asteroid field and since you're being trained to fly a Hawk it stands to reason that you're one of our best. You and Alyson Keynes will take a Survey Eagle into the asteroid field and follow whatever search pattern Professor Bergman lays down. Oh and at the end of the mission I expect you to return both the Eagle and Keynes safely to the moon. Do you understand?"

"Yes colonel." Alexander replied.

"Then we all know what we're doing I think." Koenig said, "I'll have Master Sergeant Washington assemble an assault platoon. Tony how soon can your ships be ready?"

"Oh I'm sure they'll all be on the pads as soon as I make it back to Epsilon. Hour and a half max." Verdeschi replied.

"Then we leave in ninety minutes." Koenig said, "Major Morrow since your plan neatly removes every officer who outranks you from the moon you'll be in charge until we get back."

"I'll try not to break anything while you're gone sir." Morrow responded.

Both wearing spacesuits, Koenig and Russell arrived at the launch pad together to find a dark skinned man wearing an armoured version of their suits waiting by the entrance to the boarding tube that led to the Eagle.

"Master Sergeant Washington I take it that your men are aboard?" Koenig asked.

"Yes colonel. An assault platoon equipped for a boarding action against a fortified target. Whether it's a ship or a surface installation my men will take it for you." Washington responded.

"Intact?" Russell commented and Washington smiled.

"Maybe less that it starts off. Collateral damage and all that." he said.

"Just try to avoid making it so it would have been easier to have Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi blast it with his Hawks sergeant." Koenig said as he entered the boarding tube.

"We'll do our best sir." Washington said and he and Russell followed Koenig to the Eagle.

Once in the air lock Koenig and Russell turned towards the cockpit module while behind them Washington sealed the external hatch before making his way into the Eagle's passenger module where his men waited. When they reached the cockpit Koenig and Russell took their seats and strapped themselves in before Koenig activated the communication system.

"This is Eagle One to all Survey Eagles. Report readiness." he said.

"This is Survey Eagle Two ready for lift off colonel." Bergman's voice responded.

"Survey Eagle Three set for lift off." Kano added from his Eagle.

"Lieutenant Alexander here. Survey Eagle Four is just waiting its cargo." Alexander said before the door to the cockpit slid open and Keynes entered, smiling at her as she sat in the co-pilot's seat, "Oh wait, it's here. Survey Eagle Four ready to launch." Alexander added.

"Main mission this is Eagle One, requesting clearance for flight launch." Koenig said.

"Eagles one through four this is main mission. You are cleared to launch. Safe journey." Baker said and Koenig smiled as he grasped the flight controls of the Eagle.

"Copy that. See you soon Alpha." he said before he pulled back on the control column and the Eagle rose up from the cross shaped launch pad.

From main mission Morrow watched the four Eagles take off on the big screen. Meanwhile a second screen close to it showed the four Hawk attack craft and two armed Swifts that were already on their way towards the asteroid field.

"So what do you think Maya?" he said, turning to where Maya stood also watching as the small fleet headed away from the moon.

"I think that Lieutenant Alexander is very angry about her assignment. She holds a considerable grudge against Alyson Keynes." the Psychon woman replied.

"You don't need to be an empath to realise that." Benes commented.

"Do you think she'll try to kill her?" Baker added, "She could just throw her out of the air lock or eject the survey module and say it was an accident."

"I think we can rely on Lieutenant Alexander not to commit cold blooded murder spacewoman." Morrow said.
"Do you have orders for me until Colonel Koenig returns major?" Maya asked.
"I was given only two orders lieutenant. The first was just not to break anything." Morrow replied.
"And the second?" Benes asked and Morrow smiled at her.
"That if I needed to leave you in charge of main mission to remind you not to put your feet up on the colonel's desk." he said.

3.

The solitary Dorcon attack ship had been attracted to the same radioactive traces that had been detected from the moon and the four strong crew of the ray shaped vessel had ventured inside to locate the source. Each of the reptilians had hopes that their scouting mission would result in them discovering valuable Outsider artefacts that they could present to their superiors on their return to earn their favour. Unfortunately for them instead of valuable technology that would see them rewarded they had found only a the debris of a number of wrecked Outsider saucers, something that the Dorcons had plenty of examples of already and in much better condition. However, just at the point when their commanding officer had been ready to abandon their search and continue to the next system they were to survey they had witnessed the arrival of Earth's moon. The Dorcons had remained to observe the moon and a short time later they had seen the craft launched from it.

"Unit leader there is a second wave." the co-pilot said when the attack ship's sensors picked up the launch of the flight of Eagles from Moonbase Alpha, "They are heading for us."

"I don't think so." the Dorcon leader responded, "They have detected the same pattern of radiation that we did and now they hope to claim the source."

"But Unit Leader Nevos, the first wave are their attack ships." the co-pilot pointed out.

"Of course. These humans have no idea what they could be facing. They are escorting their transports with more heavily armed vessels." Nevos said and he let out a hiss of satisfaction.

"You have an idea unit leader?"

"Yes Meken I do. Perhaps we can get something to present to Lord Kollus after all. If I were the humans then I would send survey ships into the asteroid field while the attack ships remain outside, ready to react should their advanced craft be threatened." Nevos said.

"You intend to seize one of their ships unit leader?"

"No. I doubt that we could establish a strong enough lock on one of their ships to be able to get it through a vortex intact. However, the crew are another matter. If we were to overpower the occupants of one ship then we could present them to Lord Kollus. I have heard that he is eager to obtain human captives to interrogate. Some say that his mate wants them for her research. Think what he would give us if we returned living humans to him."

"We could be appointed to the command crew of a warship." Meken replied. Then after a brief pause he added, "But what if there are too many unit leader? We know that those transport ships can carry a large number of humans."

"We will check how many are aboard before we attempt a boarding. If our scanners can't determine it from a distance then we'll use a microphone on the hull." Nevos said, "First though we need to retreat into the field to where their attack ships won't see us. The radiation should allow us to remain hidden as long as we keep our power output to a minimum."

"What about our departure? If we leave the asteroid field the humans will see us. They may try to shoot us down even with some of their own aboard our ship." Meken pointed out.

"Start checking the asteroids. See if you can find two large enough to create a viable jump point within the field. We'll create a vortex without needing to show ourselves. Now get to work. I'll brief the others." Nevos ordered and he got out of his seat and exited the attack ship's cockpit, making his way into the compartment immediately behind it where the other two Dorcon crewmembers were sat passing the time playing with a deck of triangular shaped cards.

"Unit leader." one of them said as they both straightened up.

"The humans have launched ships towards this asteroid field." Nevos told the two Dorcons.

"What do you intend to do unit leader?"

"It presents us with an opportunity. We will attempt to capture the crew of one of their ships and present them to Lord Kollus. Succeed and we will all be rewarded." Nevos replied.

"Tanya we've been sat here for almost half an hour. Are you really going to ignore me the entire time we're aboard this ship?" Keynes asked as their Eagle approached the asteroid field.

"Of course not. We may have to talk to complete the mission Colonel Koenig has ordered us to carry out. On the other hand I have absolutely no interest in making small talk." Alexander answered.

"Oh come on Tanya. We were best friends." Keynes said.

"Yes, 'were', as in past tense. You ended that friendship when you picked Red Mars over the rest of us." Tanya said angrily.

"They were threatening my sister." Keynes said.

"And because of that you helped a terrorist group murder thousands of people and send us hurtling through

space. You'll probably never see your sister again anyway." Alexander said.

"Tanya I-" Keynes began as Alexander reached for a small locker above her head, opening it and removing a reel of bright yellow tape intended for patching minor hull breaches.

"Shut up or I'll use this." she said.

"Oh you'll gag me. Very mature." Keynes commented.

"Gag you? I was thinking more of mummifying you. Now why don't you do us both a favour and get back into the survey module?" Tanya said.

"I can run the scans from here just as easily." Keynes pointed out.

"Yes but then I'd have to look at you." Tanya responded.

"Fine!" Keynes snapped, "Be like that. But just remember that I tried to reach out to you." and she released her safety harness before getting to her feet and leaving the cockpit. Then as soon as the door slid shut behind her she paused to wipe the tears from her eyes before making her way through the air lock to the survey module where she sat down in one of the seats beside a computer console that was connected to the survey Eagle's sensor systems.

"Eagle one to all ships, begin breaking and hold at fifty thousand kilometres outside the field's perimeter."

Koenig said, his order being broadcast to the rest of the ships from the moon and almost in unison the Eagles, Hawks and Swifts all turned so that their main engines faced towards the asteroid field before they began to fire again, slowing them down.

As Koenig had ordered the ships came to a stop relative to the orbital speed of the asteroid field around the system's star fifty thousand kilometres away from the edge and then they turned once more to face it.

"Radiation levels are well within tolerable levels John. Nothing's getting through the hull and I don't think we'll need any decontamination when we get back to Alpha." Russell said as she checked the Eagle's instruments.

"That's good to know. Are you picking up any hotspots?" Koenig asked and Russell shook her head.

"No but the field itself seems to be doing a pretty good job of refracting pretty much everything. I'm not sure I could spot an unshielded fission core a thousand metres inside it." she said and Koenig reached for the communication system again.

"Eagle one to Hawk one." he said.

"Hawk one here colonel." Verdeschi responded.

"Verdeschi are you picking anything up on your targeting sensors?" Koenig said.

"Negative colonel. The sky is clear." Verdeschi answered.

"Okay then I'm proceeding to the next stage of the operation." Koenig said before he switched the communication system to broadcast to all of the assembled craft, "This is Eagle one. Swifts one and two cover our flanks and watch for anything coming out of the asteroid field. All Hawks hold position but keep scanning for targets. Survey Eagles two, three and four you are to proceed to your assigned search areas."

"This is Survey Eagle Two. Orders understood we're moving in." Carter responded and his Eagle began to move forwards again.

"Survey Eagle Three going in." Fraser's voice added.

"Survey Eagle Four here. Orders understood. Moving into position now." Alexander said and soon all three survey Eagles were flying towards the asteroid field again.

Instead of all following parallel courses as they had done along the journey from the moon this time the three Eagles diverged from one another as they headed into the asteroid field. To avoid entering the asteroids at a speed that would risk them crashing into one of the asteroids the three craft all used an initial burst from their main engines before coasting forwards and using their manoeuvring thrusters to steer safely around the lumps of rock.

Almost as soon as they entered the asteroid field they found their sensors almost overwhelmed. As well as the simple physical presence of the asteroids blocking line of sight and thus limiting the range of both visual and radar or lidar detection the radioactive emissions that were the reason for the expedition bombarded the Eagles from all directions.

"Eagle one this is Hawk One, I'm losing our lock on the Survey Eagles." Verdeschi said as he attempted to track the Survey Eagles within the asteroid field.

"Yes we're losing them as well." Koenig replied, "I'm still picking up their transponders though, even if they are bouncing off so many rocks I can't tell exactly where they are. Keep monitoring and we'll see if any of them call for help."

"There. Did you see that?" Nevos said when he saw the heat blooms from the three survey Eagles as they moved towards the asteroid field, leaving behind the other ships.

"Yes unit leader. Three ships are heading into the asteroids in different places while the others are waiting outside the field." Meken replied, "You were correct. They do not know we are here."

"They still think that there is something of the Outsiders here that is worth claiming." Nevos added and he reached for the intercom, "Gortum, Krayas, are you prepared?" he asked.

"Yes Unit Leader Nevos." one of the other Dorcons responded, "We are suited up and have prepared the breaching equipment."

"Good. We will observe how the human vessels manoeuvre before deciding which of them to target." Nevos said before he shut off the intercom.

"Unit leader the human vessels are definitely following different courses." Meken said when he saw how the three survey Eagles were entering the asteroid field.

"Of course they are. We know they have a limited amount of time in any system they visit. A limit that they have no control over. They have to be able to search the largest volume of space in the shortest time."

Nevos commented, "This will lead them to isolate themselves and leave them vulnerable."

"How will we approach unit leader?" Meken asked.

"We'll use limited thrusters only. That should be enough for us to go unnoticed. We won't make a hard seal though. I doubt we could get that close without our ship being seen. On the other hand we should be able to cross the final gap in spacesuits before forcing our way aboard if the numbers are in our favour." Nevos explained and then the two Dorcons began to watch their sensor readouts.

As the Eagles came closer to the asteroid field they became harder to track. Although unlike the Dorcon attack ship they were not taking any specific measures to conceal themselves the unusually strong levels of radiation among the asteroids acted as a natural shield against detection while their main drives remained inactive.

"We can't keep track of them all." Nevos said, "But I think I can keep us within range of two." and he grasped the attack ship's flight controls and briefly fired its thrusters so that it remained between two of the survey Eagles, close enough to monitor them both while still remaining undetected.

"Whoa these radiation levels are high." Kano said as the levels of radioactivity outside the Eagle continued to climb the closer it got to the asteroid field.

"Are we in danger?" Fraser asked.

"I think the Eagle can take it. In fact I think our suits could protect us if we needed to go outside but there's no way that these levels are from a few blasts from an alien weapon." Kano said before he reached for the communications, "Survey Eagle Three to Survey Eagle Two, Professor Bergman do you read me?" he signalled.

"Yes Captain Kano. Although your signal is distorted." Professor Bergman's voice responded but the same distortion he was complaining about aboard his Eagle could also be heard by Kano and Fraser.

"Professor the radiation levels are climbing faster than we expected here. Are you seeing the same?" Kano asked.

"Yes we're seeing it too. I'm reading a twenty-four. What about you?"

"Did you say twenty-four professor?" Kano said, struggling to hear the number given by Bergman.

"Yes captain. Two-four. Twenty-four." Bergman repeated, "What's you reading?"

"Twenty-two. Should we change course towards you? If your reading is higher-" Kano began.

"No captain. Keep to your assigned area for now captain. The radiation levels aren't the only thing to look for. I want specific readings on the isotopes we detected at Alpha. Those are what will lead us to anything the aliens left behind." Bergman interrupted.

"Understood professor. Survey Eagle Three out." Kano replied before shutting off the channel, at which point aboard his own Eagle Bergman turned to Carter.

"You don't think I was too harsh do you major?" he asked.

"No, not by a long shot professor." Carter answered, shaking his head, "David's a big boy. He can accept being given orders." then he frowned, "Although I wonder why Tanya Alexander hasn't contacted us yet?"

"Well she has Alyson Keynes aboard with her. I'm sure that she will keep Lieutenant Alexander informed about anything she needs to know." Bergman said.

"Yes but the question then is will Tanya listen to her?" Carter added.

Aboard Survey Eagle Four, Keynes watched the instrument panel in front of her closely. Like Kano she had watched the radiation levels outside the Eagle climb but she knew to be looking out for spikes of just the specific isotopes associated with the alien weapon systems so she did not bother communicating the more mundane levels to Alexander until the intercom activated.

"Okay so which way do I fly?" Alexander asked.

"Just keep going. I'm not picking up anything worth following yet." Keynes told her.

"If I keep going straight on we're going to crash into an asteroid." Alexander said and Keynes sighed.

"And I would know that if I was up there in the cockpit with you." she said.

"Try it and I'll just lock the door. Now do I go left, right, up or down?" Alexander said.

"One way is as good as another I suppose. Take whichever route takes us nearer to the bigger asteroids. The bigger they are the more likely it is that they could hide something worth finding." Keynes said and then she heard the distinctive 'click' as the intercom was shut off from the cockpit and Keynes let out another sigh. Then she got up from her chair and walked over to the survey module's compact food and drink station. Given that it was expected that a Survey Eagle could spend several days away from a base at a time the module was equipped to supply its crew with more than just plain rations. When she had been released from prison on the moon Keynes had returned to her quarters only to find that it had been stripped of all technology and all there was to eat and drink were cold ration bars and tap water. Therefore, Keynes decided to make the most of her current situation and set the machine to make her a cup of coffee. "Who cares if Tanya's ignoring me? At least I can have coffee here." she said to herself. This had just been dispensed when she heard a chirping sound from the console she had been sat at and grabbing the coffee she rushed back to it. She had set the console to alert her if there were changes in the levels of the isotope that had interested Professor Bergman so much and she saw that a significant spike had just been detected. Sipping at her coffee she used her free hand to focus the Survey Eagle's sensors toward the source of the isotopes. "Tanya I've got a reading." she said into the intercom. "What's the heading?" Alexander asked in response. "Starboard sixteen degrees, upwards by twenty-two." Keynes told her. "Okay, turning that way now." Tanya said as she turned the Eagle towards the source of the isotopes and fired its thrusters again to propel it forwards in that direction. Meanwhile Keynes kept watching the sensor readouts as the strength of the isotope reading increased. Then when the readings dipped slightly she reached for the intercom again. "That's it. We're right on top of it now." she said. "All stop." Alexander replied as she brought the Survey Eagle to a halt. "The proximity sensors are saying that we're next to something." Keynes said. "Yes, we're right over an asteroid. About seventy metres across." Alexander told her, "Can you set us down? I'd like to get some core samples." Keynes said. "Taking us down now." Alexander told her before she turned off the intercom again. Keynes then heard the sound of the Survey Eagle's thrusters firing again as the craft descended over the asteroid before it lurched suddenly when it set down and Keynes quickly pulled her coffee away from the console to avoid spilling any on it.

Q.

"That one!" Nevos exclaimed suddenly and he pointed to the attack ship's sensor display where it showed one of the human craft had just set down on one of the asteroids, "We can approach from behind the asteroid and then make our way around it on foot. They'll never see us coming."

Using limited bursts from the attack ship's thrusters the Dorcon leader guided his vessel through the asteroid field towards the Survey Eagle occupied by Alexander and Keynes, taking a circular route rather than a direct one to lessen the chances of being detected. Nevos then turned the attack ship as it neared the asteroid so that he could land on the opposite side of it to the human vessel.

"We're down. Let's go." he said, releasing his safety harness and getting to his feet. Nevos and Meken then headed into the compartment where the other two members of the crew were waiting, "Gortum, Krayas, pick up your gear we're going now." Nevos told them and all four Dorcon soldiers then sealed the helmets of their spacesuits and made their way into the attack ship's air lock.

The asteroid was far too small to have a gravitational pull of any real significance and the Dorcons moved cautiously across its surface to avoid flying off into space. This limited their speed but it was still not long before the Survey Eagle appeared over the horizon close in front of them and Nevos signalled for his men to take cover.

"Down. We can't let them see us. Some of their ships carry a turret that can be used as an anti-personnel weapon." he warned them, remembering the briefing he had been given on human craft.

"Unit leader should I use the microphone?" Krayas asked.

"Yes. We need to know how many humans are aboard." Nevos answered and as Krayas slung his rifle over his shoulder he took a tubular object from his pack. This had a coiled cable attached to it that he plugged into his spacesuit as well as a tripod he used to set it up on the surface of the asteroid before pointing the other end of the tube towards the Eagle and pressing down the only button it was fitted with.

This projected a low energy laser towards the Eagle, not enough to cause any damage to the hull but the beam promptly began to vibrate in time with the tiny vibrations in the Eagle's hull caused by sound from the inside.

"They are drilling unit leader." Krayas said when he heard the sound of the drill mounted on the underside of the survey module that Keynes was using to take a core sample without needing to leave the safety of the Eagle.

"Yes I can see the drill." Nevos replied as he used a set of magnifiers to examine the Eagle, searching for any obvious weapons that the briefing he had been given may have missed, "What about the crew?"

"I can hear a voice. It sounds a lot like the language of the Psychon slaves but there are differences." Krayas said.

"Yes, the two are similar. The Humans are the base stock that the Outsiders used when they made the Psychons. How many are there?" Nevos said.

"I only hear one. I think it is listing numbers." Krayas replied.

"Perhaps the depth of the drill." Meken suggested.

"Perhaps." Nevos said in agreement, "But they must be talking to someone else."

"Yes unit leader I just heard a second voice. I believe that one of the humans is towards the front of the ship and the other in the centre." Krayas said and Nevos hissed in satisfaction.

"Then we outnumber them two to one. We should hurry while they are distracted by their drilling." Nevos said and he rose to his feet and beckoned for the Dorcons under his command to follow him.

Once more the four Dorcons carefully made their way across the surface of the asteroid until they reached the airlock door on the side that faced them and Nevos looked at Meken.

"Get it open." he ordered.

Meken stepped forwards and steadied himself against the hull of the Eagle as he took an electronic device similar to a human computer tablet from a large pouch on his belt. This was equipped with a wireless transmitter and when Meken activated it the tablet it began to communicate with the Eagle's air lock door and attempted to fool the Eagle into thinking that it was a GDF comlock. This process took just a few seconds before the tablet indicated success. The airlock door did not open immediately though, instead there was a delay while the air was evacuated from the interior of the airlock so that the outer door could be opened without being suddenly decompressed. Only then did the outer door unfold and extend a set of steps down to the asteroid's surface that allowed the four Dorcon soldiers to climb aboard the Eagle.

"Is that what I think it is professor?" Carter asked when the Eagle he and Bergman occupied rounded a large asteroid to be confronted with drifting debris. Although the vessel it had once been had been destroyed long ago it was still possible to tell exactly what it had been.

"A flying saucer of the type used to attack Earth a hundred and fifty years ago." Bergman answered. "The last time we encountered one of those things it still had a bunch of psychotic killers in suspended animation inside." Carter pointed out.

"I don't think we need worry about that with this particular craft major." Bergman said and he looked down at the instruments in front of him, focusing on the visual scan of the flying saucer before magnifying the view and concentrating on the central section where the vessel would have been controlled from. This has been blown wide open to expose the ship's innards. The damage to the flying saucer was enough to enable Bergman to see that the part biological control core of the ship was missing, as was most of the other technologies that would have been inside, "I think that we're looking at more than just battle damage here. I suspect that someone got here before us to take anything that they considered valuable."

"This is the source of those radioactive isotopes though, right?" Carter said and Bergman nodded.

"Oh yes, I can see the particle beam core and it looks like it's exposed. Unless it's sealed in the meantime that will continue to leak radiation for a few thousand years yet." he replied, "Of course just this one ship couldn't be responsible for the readings we got at Alpha, there must be something more."

"Then I guess we carry on looking then professor. Right?" Carter said and Bergman nodded again.

"Yes. We carry on." he replied.

"Looks like all we have are fragments of alien hull metal." Keynes said into the Eagle's intercom, "It's all in the upper layers and highly dispersed. Short of crashing it into the moon and taking it with us I doubt we could harvest enough of the alloys to make it worth the effort. Plus there's the issue of it being radioactive. That would limit its usefulness." then she waited for a response, "Tanya did you-"

"Yes I heard you. Alien metal but not a lot of it and what there is is radioactive." Alexander interrupted.

"So don't you think we should tell Colonel Koenig?" Keynes asked.

"I'll tell the colonel. You just pull that drill back and let me know when we're clear to lift off again." Alexander said.

"Are you sure you don't want me to-" Keynes began before she was interrupted again.

"No. The last thing I want is you radioing Colonel Koenig. Especially when he's in an Eagle with Doctor Russell. I don't want her shooting down an Eagle that I'm aboard because of you trying to flirt with the colonel. Now just get on with stowing that drill. I'll contact Colonel Koenig when we lift off." Alexander said and then she shut off the intercom from the cockpit.

Keynes frowned and then stopped the drill probe from burrowing any deeper into the asteroid and ordered it to retract. She expected this to take just a few seconds but before the process could be completed she heard the sound of the door between the survey module and the Eagle's airlock slid open. Turning around she expected to see Alexander entering the module for some reason but was surprised to instead see a pair of Dorcon soldiers in armoured spacesuits burst into the compartment. Keynes gasped and looked towards the small arms locker located not far away from where she sat. However, even if she had been fast enough to get to it before the Dorcons could shoot her she had no means of opening it to access the weapons inside. The two Dorcons levelled their rifles towards Keynes and then suddenly broke into a run towards her. It was then that she recovered her senses and reached for the intercom again.

"Tanya the-" she began before the aliens reached her and one of them dragged her away from the console while the second clamped a gauntleted hand over her mouth while pressing the muzzle of his rifle up under her jaw.

"What is it now Alyson?" Alexander's voice said from the intercom before there was the sound of a door opening in the background.

When the door to the Eagle's cockpit slid open Alexander was focused on the intercom, "Damn it Alyson I told you to-" she began as she looked around in expectation of seeing Keynes behind her but she stopped speaking when she saw the two armoured Dorcons standing there instead. Cursing, Alexander reached for the stun gun she had holstered on her waist even though the weapon was unlikely to be effective against a heavily armoured target like the Dorcons. Meanwhile one of the Dorcons pointed his rifle down at her and pushed the muzzle against Alexander's throat. Knowing that there was no way for her to even aim her weapon at the two aliens she raised her hands rather than attempt to draw it. The Dorcon then reached down and attempted to pull Alexander out of her seat but she still had her safety harness fastened and the alien could not lift her.

"Hey wait! I'll release it, okay?" Alexander exclaimed as she struck the release on the front of her harness.

Then the Dorcon pulled her again, dragging her from the seat and out of the cockpit. While this alien held her down the second one took her stun gun and tossed it aside. Alexander was then lifted back to her feet and roughly escorted into the survey module where Keynes was being held.

"I tried to warn you." Keynes said when Alexander was shoved through the doorway.

"Fat lot of good it would have done anyway." Alexander said, "I knew I should have locked the door. As well as keeping you out it might have kept them out for a while as well."

Alexander and Keynes were then pushed up against a bulkhead beside one another before the four Dorcons all lifted their helmet visors to reveal their faces more clearly.

"What do you want?" Keynes asked and Nevos hissed.

"Garment off." he said using the Psychon language and he tugged at the sleeve of Keynes' spacesuit.

"I think he wants us to take off our spacesuits." Keynes whispered.

"Who am I to question armed aliens?" Alexander responded.

The two women reached for the fastenings of their spacesuits and released them so that they could remove the outer part of the suit. This left them both standing in just the form fitting under suits as they handed the outer parts to the nearest Dorcons and the aliens simply threw these onto a nearby set of seats before turning back towards Alexander and Keynes.

"Now what?" Alexander asked and Nevos hissed.

"Garment off!" he snapped and Alexander winced.

"Oh come on, it's not like we're hiding anything under-" she began before Nevos suddenly used the butt of his rifle to strike her at the base of her ribcage, right in the solar plexus. Alexander exhaled violently as she had the breath knocked from her and despite the great pain it caused she was unable to cry out. Instead she simply collapsed on the spot, her hands clamped to her chest and struggling to breathe. Thanks to the near identical physiology of the Psychon species Nevos had a good idea of the pain it would cause Alexander while limiting the risk of permanently damaging the prisoner he wished to present to his superiors.

"Garment off." he said again, glaring at Keynes and she just nodded as she began to remove her under suit. With nothing else worn beneath this Keynes was left naked as she handed it over to one of the Dorcons and she tried to cover her chest and groin with her hands. However, Nevos was not done with her yet and he shoved her towards where Alexander was curled up weeping on the floor, still clutching at where she had been hit, "Garment off." Nevos said again.

"Tanya I'm sorry." Keynes said softly as she began to remove Alexander's under suit from her as well but the other woman made no effort to resist as she was stripped and also left naked.

Both women huddled against the bulkhead while the Dorcons stood over them and Nevos looked at his men.

"Lift them." he ordered in his own language, preventing either Alexander or Keynes from understanding him.

Meken and Gortum promptly slung their rifles over their shoulders before reaching down and grabbing the two women by their wrists. The large reptilians then lifted Alexander and Keynes back to their feet, pulling their arms up above their heads and Nevos hissed softly again as he watched them both struggle in vain against the grip his men had on them. Nevos then looked at Krayas, "We will need something to transport them back to our ship and keep them secure while we take them back to Lord Kollus." he said.

"Yes unit leader." Krayas responded and he lowered his visor again to seal his spacesuit before turning around and hurrying back to the Eagle's airlock.

"We've got another one colonel." Kano transmitted from Survey Eagle Three as he and Fraser looked out of their vessel at the alien flying saucer in front of them. This craft had crashed into one of the asteroid field's largest objects and was split in half.

"Intact?" Koenig asked hopefully.

"Sorry colonel this one isn't in any better shape than the others we've seen." Kano said, "If you don't mind me saying colonel I think this place is just a junk yard. Maybe there was something worth having here a hundred years ago but not any more."

Koenig sighed when he heard this and he turned to look at Russell.

"Helena what do you think?" he asked, "Are the radiation levels increasing?"

"Not according to the telemetry we're being fed from the Survey Eagles John." she replied, "All three show levels well within the safety limits."

"In that case we're staying put for the time being. Nothing else is going on back at Alpha and we may turn up something that everyone else has missed." Koenig told Kano, making sure that his order was broadcast to the entire flight of craft. After this though he specifically addressed Verdeschi, "Tony how are your pilots holding up?"

"Cramped but otherwise fine." Verdeschi responded and Koenig smiled.

"I thought that would be the case. I remember a few long sorties in my early days in the GDF. Just make sure that Epsilon has a relief squadron on standby if you do need to withdraw. We're a long way from the moon and I don't want to be caught without cover, armed Eagles or not." Koenig said.

"Understood colonel. Don't worry, we won't leave you exposed." Verdeschi reassured him.

The three Dorcons aboard Survey Eagle Four continued to talk among themselves in their own language while they held Alexander and Keynes up by their wrists while waiting for Krayas to return from their own ship. When the other Dorcon finally reappeared he was dragging a pair of equipment cases with him, each of which was about a metre square in area and half that in depth.

"These should be large enough unit leader." Krayas said as he set the equipment cases down and then bent over to release the latches on their outsides. Opening them revealed that they were fitted with gaskets that would seal them air tight when closed and latched and also that Krayas had already emptied out whatever they have contained aboard the Dorcon attack ship.

"Excellent." Nevos replied and then he turned back towards his two naked captives. Not wanting to have to fight and risk injuring them while forcing them into the cases Nevos punched them both in the same spot he had struck Alexander earlier and both women were prevented from collapsing only by the Dorcons who continued to support them, "Get them in." Nevos ordered and Meken and Gortum dragged the helpless Alexander and Keynes over to the open cases while both were still struggling to breathe. This made it easy to force them inside the containers, curling them into fetal positions before the lids were brought down on top of them and they were plunged into total darkness. All that was required then was to fasten the latches and the two women were trapped.

S.

In main mission most of Alpha's command staff simply got on with their work as they always did but Maya instead concentrated on the big screen where the positions of the flotilla of spacecraft from the moon were shown relative to the asteroid field. The exceptions to this were the three Survey Eagles, none of which could be detected from Moonbase Alpha due to interference from the radioactivity of the asteroid field itself.

"Something bothering you Maya?" Morrow asked from behind her and she looked around at him.

"Are you not concerned for any of them Major Morrow?" she responded, "Colonel Koenig, Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, Doctor Russell and the others?" and she looked back at the big screen.

"Under normal circumstances no." Morrow said as he looked at the big screen as well.

"And these are not normal circumstances?" Maya said.

"Maya nothing since we left Earth has been normal to us. However, we do have one significant advantage." Morrow said and he smiled at Maya.

"You think I am your advantage?" she replied, sensing what he meant and he nodded.

"Exactly Maya. When Colonel Koenig went aboard the Ultra you sensed the creature that attacked his party as soon as it woke up, even given the distance. So if there is anything nasty in there that those aliens-

Morrow began.

"You mean the Outsiders?" Maya interrupted.

"Yes, them. If they left anything too dangerous in there then I'm sure you'd be able to warn us about it in time to warn the Colonel." Morrow told her before he started to walk away, heading up the steps to Koenig's office that he occupied while the colonel was away.

"Something is bothering you isn't it Maya?" Baker said from her nearby console and Maya turned towards her. Prior to Maya being given a commission in the Global Defence Force by Colonel Koenig she had shared quarters with Baker and the two women remained close friends despite Baker being enlisted and Maya an officer.

"I am concerned. Yes." Maya answered, "It isn't something I can sense though but I do remember times when Lord Kollus would send his troops to investigate places that had once belonged to the Outsiders. It was hoped that they would come back with something valuable that Lord Kollus could then present to the Archon himself. More often than not they found nothing. The Outsiders disappeared more than a hundred years ago as you measure time and since then every civilisation capable of space flight has tried to plunder whatever they left behind."

"I'm guessing that you're not just worried about them coming back empty handed though." Baker said and Maya shook her head.

"No but I know that the Outsiders did not leave their property unprotected. Even before the Dorcons enslaved my people we knew to keep away from certain places to avoid what protected them. The Outsiders made Psychon females to be able to sense lifeforms, specifically those they had made but there are threats that are not alive and I can't sense them at all. From this distance I may not even be able to sense anything alive in the asteroid field. For example I can't tell you any more than your scanners can about where the three Survey Eagles are right now." she said.

When the four Dorcons returned to their own ship they knew almost immediately that the seals of the cargo containers had remained intact and their prisoners had survived the short trip across the surface of the asteroid from the sounds of them knocking on the inside.

"Quiet!" Nevos yelled in the Psychon language and he kicked each of the containers once, putting an end to the knocking. Then he turned to his men, "Get those stowed for the trip home. Meken with me. We're lifting off immediately."

While Nevos and Meken made their way to the cockpit the other two Dorcon soldiers made their way to the cargo hold instead where they placed the two cargo containers that held Alexander and Keynes against the wall where they were able to secure them in place with straps. Confident that the women would not be escaping from these they then headed for the passenger compartment behind the cockpit and as they were taking their seats they heard the sound of the attack ship's engines starting up.

The microgravity of the asteroid meant that taking off from it required only the attack ship's manoeuvring thrusters and the craft rose up off the surface without radiating a large energy signature that may have been detectable even through the asteroid field's naturally high radiation level. Still using only the attack ship's manoeuvring thrusters, Nevos then piloted it through the asteroid field towards the pair of large asteroids that Meken had located. The largest of these was more than two hundred kilometres across, while the second was just under half that and their mass meant that the LaGrange points where their respective gravitational pulls cancelled one another out were good enough to form a wormhole. However, before that could be done

Nevos needed to double check where the other human vessels were to make sure that the Dorcons' departure was not detected.

"I can only detect one of the human craft unit leader." Meken said as he studied the attack ship's sensors.

"Has it shown any signs of having seen us?" Nevos asked.

"No unit leader. It is moving on an irregular course that is taking it around us." Meken said.

"Then we go now." Nevos said and he reached out to arm the attack ship's main energy cannon. Rather than aiming this himself he slaved the beam weapon's targeting to the attack ship's navigation controls before he fired and the brilliant beam of light that erupted from the weapon shot through space to the invisible LaGrange point ahead of the ship. The power of the beam was sufficient that when it met this weak point in the fabric of space it tore it wide open, creating a wormhole that was aimed precisely towards the system that the Dorcons were based in and Nevos fired the attack ship's aft thrusters on full power, propelling the craft into the wormhole.

To the Dorcons it appeared as if there was a flash of light as they passed through the wormhole and in the cockpit Nevos and Meken saw that instead of being in an asteroid field they were now in the space above their own world, between the planet and its moon. They were not alone, however and almost immediately after coming through the wormhole they detected a group of attack ships like their own flying towards them in advance of a single much larger vessel.

"Incoming vessel identify yourself." a voice said over the attack ship's radio.

"This is Unit Leader Nevos aboard attack vessel seven-three-five. We have completed our survey assignment and have tribute to present to Lord Kollus himself." Nevos responded and then there was a pause as the Dorcon flight controllers considered his statement.

"Affirmative Unit Leader Nevos. You are cleared to land at Lord Kollus' palace. The lord will be expecting you." the controller told him and outside the approaching attack ships returned to their previous patrol pattern.

Lord Kollus, the Dorcon governor of the planet maintained his headquarters in a mountainous region. The temperature here was lower than the cold bloodied Dorcons found comfortable but the palace itself maintained a higher temperature inside that removed the need for the Dorcons to wear insulated or heated clothing.

As Nevos flew towards the palace, weaving through the mountains around the one that the palace was built into he saw numerous construction teams at work expanding the defence systems protecting it. This was part of a process that had been going on for some time now, ever since Earth's moon had suddenly appeared in orbit around the palace and Lord Kollus had sent his forces to claim it. In response to this the humans on the moon had launched a missile attack that had penetrated the palace's existing defences and destroyed the communication system being used to co-ordinate the attack. After the moon had departed Lord Kollus had made it clear that he did not want a repeat of this instance.

The entrance to the palace hangar was located about a quarter of the way up the mountain and appeared to be a wide slit in the rock that had more defensive weapons mounted either side of it. The width of the slit was enough to allow three of the ray shaped attack ships to be able to launch or land at the same time and so it was easy for Nevos to fly his vessel into the hangar without having to slow down to a near stop.

Inside the hangar there were rows of attack ships along each side of the massive chamber and a Psychon ground crewman waved Nevos towards an empty landing spot. Nevos steered his attack ship towards this, hovering above the markings on the floor as he lowered the ship's landing gear before setting down.

As soon as the attack ship set down a group of male Psychons rushed towards it, immediately connecting refuelling lines and plugging in a diagnostic computer to begin the process of determining what maintenance was required before the attack ship could be launched again. Nevos was the first to disembark from the attack ship and another Dorcon approached him from the hangar control room.

"Where is Lord Kollus?" Nevos asked.

"Our lord does not include me on his schedule." the other Dorcon responded.

"I was expecting him to either meet me here or send an escort to take me to him." Nevos said and at that moment he saw a pair of Dorcon warriors approaching him with the markings of Kollus' personal guard on their uniforms with a female Psychon between them.

"Unit Leader Nevos." the Psychon said in the Dorcon language instead of her own, bowing her head in subservience as she stood in front of Nevos.

"Yes. Lord Kollus sent you?" Nevos replied.

"Yes unit leader. He has been informed that you have tribute for him. I am to escort you to and your crew to present this in person." the Psychon said. Nevos knew that what she really meant was that the Dorcon governor of the planet wanted to use an empath to make sure that Nevos and his crew were not intending to try and assassinate him on behalf of one of his rivals.

"Bring out the crates." Nevos called out to his crew and a few moments later they appeared carrying the cargo containers with them and they set them down on the hangar floor at the feet of the Psychon, "Well?"

Nevos added, glaring at the Psychon. She could tell that there were living beings inside the containers and she crouched down to get as close as possible to them to determine their intent, "Well?" Nevos said. "I believe Lord Kollus will be pleased with your tribute." the Psychon woman said as she got back to her feet, "Bring it."

Nevos and his men picked up the containers holding their captives and then began to follow the Psychon woman and her accompanying guards. These escorted them to an elevator that was large enough to hold more than a dozen Dorcons so there was more than enough room for the Dorcons and the crates. The elevator took them to one of the uppermost levels and when the doors opened it was just a short walk for the occupants to get to a pair of large and ornate doors that were protected by more of Lord Kollus' personal guards. These doors opened automatically as the party bearing the crates approached and as they walked through they found themselves in the throne room itself with Lord Kollus sat at the far end while a number of his senior officers were gathered around.

"Ah Shylana," the Dorcon leader said to the Psychon as she walked up to him and bowed, "you are satisfied that my warriors have tribute that is worthy of my attention?"

"They do my lord." she said and he hissed with satisfaction.

"Then approach me Unit Leader Nevos. Bring your tribute." Kollus told Nevos and the four Dorcons walked towards the planetary governor before setting down the equipment containers in front of him.

"My Lord Kollus, as ordered we journeyed to the asteroid fields of the Sha'kas system in search of technology left behind by the Outsiders. We found nothing of their presence that was worthy of you but we did find something that you have stated you wished to obtain at any cost." Nevos said and he signalled to his men to release the latches keeping the equipment cases shut and as they lifted the lids they tipped the cases over.

Alexander and Keynes promptly spilled out onto the floor at Kollus' feet.

Having been trapped in the air tight containers for several hours the two woman had been close to running out of breathable air and now that they were released from their confinement they both gasped for breath, sucking in lungfuls of air and for the moment at least ignoring the fact that they were both naked in a room filled with Dorcons.

"Rogue Psychons?" Kollus said, "I have-" but then he noticed that neither of the women had the prominent widows peak in their hair that Psychons possessed and he got up from his throne, walking forwards for a closer look, "No, not Psychons." he added as he bent down and grabbed hold of both of them by their hair, pulling their heads upwards so that he could examine the pupils of their eyes. Whereas Psychons had dagger shaped pupils like a cat, Alexander and Keynes' pupils were clearly round, "Humans." then he looked at Nevos, "How did you obtain them?" he asked.

"The humans' travelling moon arrived in the Sha'kas system and they launched ships to investigate the same asteroid field you ordered us to search my lord. Inside the asteroids their ships were isolated from one another and my crew was able to board one without alerting the others. Only these two were aboard. We captured them both and brought them here to you in accordance with your wish to obtain human captives."

"Yes, you have done well Unit Leader – no, not unit leader any more. Commander Nevos. The warship *Targos* arrives here in three days and I am appointing you its first officer. Your men are all promoted to unit leader and assigned to the *Targos* as well. Report to Captain Saras upon his arrival."

"Yes Lord Kollus, thank you for this honour my lord." Nevos said and he and his men all bowed their heads in deference to their leader before they backed away slowly.

Meanwhile Kollus looked down at the two naked human women at his feet.

"Humans are devious and dangerous." he said, "See that these two are properly restrained and confined while I decide what is to be done with them."

6.

“Wormhole!” Baker called out when Moonbase Alpha’s sensors picked up the characteristic energy pulse of a wormhole opening.

“Bearing?” Benes responded.

“Seventy-nine by forty-one.” Baker told her.

“I see it.” Benes said as she used her console to see what the sensors had picked up.

“What have we got?” Morrow asked as he rushed down the steps from Koenig’s office.

“Looks like a single vessel just came through a wormhole at the LaGrange point fourteen light seconds away major.” Benes said.

“Can you identify it?” Morrow said.

“Looks like a single Dorcon attack ship major.” Baker replied.

“That could be a scout for a larger task force. Does Colonel Koenig know?” Morrow said.

“He will in a few seconds.” Benes said, “The energy pulse won’t have reached him yet.”

“Then we better get ready to do something about it ourselves. Sound red alert. Deploy weapons and stand by to launch all armed Eagles and get me Epsilon.” Morrow ordered.

“Major we only have two armed Eagles left here at Alpha and you’re the only pilot qualified to fly any of our Hawks.” Benes pointed out.

“Prep the Eagles anyway but remind Epsilon that we’ll need them to provide our fighter cover.” Morrow said.

“John look at that.” Russell said when she saw the energy pulse from the opening wormhole on the Eagle’s sensors.

“That’s a Dorcon ship coming through.” Koenig added when he saw the distinctive ray shape of the vessel that emerged and he reached for the Eagle’s communications, “Verdeschi do you see that?” he transmitted.

“Affirmative colonel. Swift Two just confirmed that it’s a Dorcon attack ship. The moon is closer but unless it makes a run at them they’d have to despatch more of their Hawks to intercept it.” Verdeschi responded.

“You want to engage it yourself?” Koenig asked.

“Yes colonel. I’ll take Hawk two and go full burn. If he’s all on his own then we’ll bring him down before he can let anyone know that we’re here.” Verdeschi answered.

“Go for it Tony. Good hunting.” Koenig said and immediately two of the four Hawks waiting near the asteroid field spun around and then fired their main drives, suddenly accelerating towards the newly arrived Dorcon attack ship.

“What about us John? If more Dorcons arrive we’ve only got a few ships.” Russell pointed out and Koenig nodded.

“We need to pull back.” he said, “I don’t want to abandon the survey yet though.” he said and then he activated the communications again, this time broadcasting to all of the ships that were deployed in and around the asteroid field, “This is Koenig to all ships. Support flotilla is to fall back to the moon. A Dorcon ship has been just arrived in the system and if they arrive in force we can’t afford to be caught out here. Survey Eagles Two, Three and Four are to continue with their mission but maintain absolute communications silence. Signal only if you come under attack and then all ships are to withdraw. We can’t be fighting here and defending the moon as well. Do not, I repeat do not respond to this message. Koenig out.” he said and then he grasped the controls of his Eagle and turned it around, pointing it back towards the moon before firing the main engines.

“That doesn’t sound good.” Bergman said, looking at Carter.

“No it doesn’t professor. Not good at all.” Carter replied and he began to arm the Eagle’s weapons, deploying the point defence turret built into the craft’s framework spine, “How good would you say you were with an Eagle’s weapons then?”

“I know the basics and I’ve seen Colonel Koenig use them in combat.” Bergman told him.

“In that case I’ll take the main guns myself and when I give you the word you’re to put the turret on automatic.” Carter said and Bergman frowned.

“Why not just switch the turret to automatic now major?” he asked.

“Because we’re in the middle of an asteroid field and I don’t want the Eagle’s computer deciding that all the chunks of rock are threats and wasting all its ammunition trying to shoot them down.” Carter pointed out.

As soon as it detected the small flotilla of human ships near the asteroid field the Dorcon attack ship turned towards them to try and get a closer look at what they were doing. This took the ship away from the

LaGrange point where it could open a wormhole and meant that when the Dorcon crew saw the two Hawks accelerating hard towards it they could not simply flee back to their base.

"He's coming. He must have seen us by now and he's still coming." Verdeschi said to his co-pilot and then both men lowered the visors of their spacesuit helmets. This was a standard precaution when going into combat for GDF pilots, meaning that they could continue to fight even if their ship suffered hull damage and decompressed.

"Locking on now colonel." the co-pilot said, arming the missiles that were the Hawk's main ship to ship weapon.

All of a sudden there was a flash of light as the Dorcon attack ship opened fire with its main energy cannon and the beam passed harmlessly between the two human attack craft.

"Looks like he's leading that wrong." Verdeschi said, noting that the beam had crossed the Hawk's flight path several kilometres behind it, "We can't count on them not correcting that. How's that missile lock?"

"Got it." the co-pilot exclaimed.

"Launch." Verdeschi ordered and the other man pressed his trigger.

One of the Hawk's two wing mounted missiles promptly sped from its launch rail towards the Dorcon ship, now following its own onboard tracking system rather than relying on the Hawk and Verdeschi took the opportunity to suddenly change course, hoping to throw off any lock the Dorcons had on them. At the same time the pilot of the second Hawk also adjusted his craft's heading so that the engines pushed it in a different direction that was different to the one Verdeschi had taken. This left the two Hawks flying away from one another and forcing the Dorcons to pick one or the other to follow.

First though the Dorcons had to deal with the incoming missile and they did this by sticking to their previous course. This meant that the missile was closing on them from directly ahead and the Dorcon weapons officer shifted his target from Hawk One to the missile. Then there was another blast of light from the nose of the attack ship as the weapons officer fired its main gun again. Also this was intended for engaging other spacecraft as well as opening wormholes the weapon was accurate enough when aimed properly to engage even small, fast moving targets like the missile heading straight towards the attack ship and the beam struck it head on. The blast annihilated the missile and then the Dorcons turned their attention back towards the two Hawks that were now positioning themselves either side of their own ship.

"Okay let's try this the old fashioned way." Verdeschi said, cutting the Hawk's acceleration to nothing. Then he began to turn the ship towards the Dorcon attack ship, doing his best to continually point towards it as the two ships moved past one another. While he did this the co-pilot switched his controls from missiles to the magnetic accelerator cannons mounted on the tips of the Hawk's stubby wings. These had a certain degree of movement to them rather than being fixed to fire directly forwards and the co-pilot lined them up on the Dorcon vessel, the Hawk's computer automatically compensating for its speed.

"Firing now." he said as he fired a rapid burst of magnetically accelerated projectiles. However, the Dorcon vessel turned at the last moment and rather than striking the centre of the ray-shaped craft just a few of the projectiles struck its wing tip.

This damage still tore off a set of manoeuvring thrusters though and the Dorcon attack ship began to spin. The alien pilot was soon able to bring his craft back under control but in the time this took Hawk Two was able to lock onto it and launched a missile. This time instead of approaching head on the weapon was closing in at an angle that changed continuously and the Dorcon weapons officer was unable to keep track of it. In desperation he fired the main gun again but the aiming of the beam was well off and it missed by a considerable distance. Then before the Dorcon could try a second shot the missile slammed into the attack ship and detonated, the explosion ripping the alien craft apart.

Alexander and Keynes were dragged from Lord Kollus' throne room by four of his inner guard.

"Where are you taking us?" Keynes exclaimed but the reptilian aliens ignored her as they continued to drag their captives along the hallways of the palace. Neither of the women had been restrained by means other than the grip of their Dorcon guards though, but this changed when they were met by another pair of Dorcon warriors and the guards dragging them stopped.

Alexander and Keynes both squealed as they were then lifted up off the floor by their guards while the other Dorcons held out fabric tubes large enough to fit a human being into and despite their kicking the women were forced feet first into these. Puled up to their waists, belts were pulled tight around them before their guards also forced their arms down into the tubes as they were pulled higher. With the belts tightened Alexander and Keynes could get their arms inside the tubes by folding them before another belt at the top of each tube was used to close it off around their necks. This let the women unable to straighten their arms or lift them out of the tubes as well as limiting how far apart they could get their legs, preventing them from moving at more than a walking pace. There were two more belts lower down the tubes that were obviously meant for binding their legs as well but the Dorcons left these slack so that they did not have to carry their prisoners. Instead they just shoved both of them forwards, now gripping them by their shoulders instead of their arms as they forced them onwards.

An elevator took the group down to the lower levels of the palace where its dungeons were located and the guards spoke briefly with the Dorcons in charge before Alexander and Keynes were taken inside. It was immediately obvious that the Dorcons were not overly concerned with the cleanliness of their dungeons as the place was filled with the smell of waste. On the other hand none of the cells that the two women were dragged past seemed to contain any sewage that would be the source of this. After being dragged past a number of barred cells that held a mix of Dorcons, Psychons and even some other aliens that neither of them recognised Alexander and Keynes were brought to one that was empty and both of them were shoved inside before the door was slammed shut behind them, leaving them still tied up.

"Damn this floor is cold." Alexander said as the Dorcons turned around and walked away from the cell, "Sharp as well." and she looked down to see that the floor of the cell was made up of a metallic mesh.

"Why leave us like this?" Keynes said as she tried in vain to pull her arms free either by loosening the belt around her waist or the one around her neck.

"As opposed to what? Why bother untying us?" Alexander replied.

"Well excuse me for asking. I suppose this is just a regular Friday night to you, getting tied up." Keynes said and Alexander scowled at her.

"I'm the one whose does the tying!" she hissed, "Besides, you're the one who made such a problem of herself in prison that the guards had to tie her to her bed and gag her."

"Well I hope someone comes to explain what the procedure is for bathroom breaks soon." Keynes commented.

"Actually I think I already know." Alexander said, looking down at the floor again, "Look down."

Keynes bowed her head to look at the floor and she immediately saw what Alexander had, that the cell floor was a metal mesh. Beneath this though there was something glistening and she realised where the rotten smell of waste was coming from.

"We just go on the floor?" she said.

"And it drops right through and flows away. Well oozes at any rate." Alexander said.

"That's disgusting." Keynes said.

"Well if you hadn't had us set down on that asteroid we might not be here." Alexander said.

"You're blaming me for this?" Keynes exclaimed, "How is any of this my fault?"

"How about if you hadn't sold us all out to Red Mars then we'd still be a short Eagle ride away from Earth?" Alexander responded.

"Seriously Tanya? We're trapped in an alien prison and you're going to throw that at me now?" Keynes said.

"Keynes." a voice suddenly said from close by and both Alexander and Keynes turned in the direction it had come from. Looking through the bars into the neighbouring cell they could just about make out the shape of something on the floor that was covered in a blanket and they shuffled closer for a better look, "Keynes." whoever it was said again.

"Well he knows you." Alexander said, glancing at Keynes.

"And I think I recognise that voice." Keynes replied, "Major Capston?"

"Yes Keynes." Capston croaked and both Keynes and Alexander gasped as the GDF officer who had helped lead the mass desertion from the moon dragged himself part out from under the blanket.

As soon as he reached out it was clear that he was missing two fingers on his right hand and this turned out to be just the start. His left arm was missing entirely and although he did not fully emerge from under the blanket it was clear that his legs went down no further than his knees at most. Worse though was when he raised his head towards the two women and they saw the scarring in his face that was concentrated around where his eyes had both been gouged out.

"Major, what happened to you?" Alexander asked.

"The Dorcons." Capston responded, "They attacked the settlement less than a day after the moon left the system. We didn't stand a chance, they had dozens of their attack ships and even if we'd been able to launch we only had the *Ultra* and a couple of armed Vultures. We tried to scatter and hide but the Dorcons brought in hundreds of troops and hunted everyone down. Those they didn't take as slaves they just killed. Some after they'd surrendered if they didn't look strong enough to work."

"How many of you were brought here?" Keynes said but Capston shook his head.

"No, not here. The Dorcons were under the command of another of their lords. I'd say that about a quarter of the colony survived and were all taken back to his planet. But then another of them arrived, Kollus his name was and he wanted us all turned over to him. The other Dorcon wasn't willing to just give us all up though so he he said that Kollus had to pay for any captives he wanted. Since I was the highest ranking prisoner taken Kollus opted to just buy me and had me brought back here to be interrogated. That's when they did all this to me. They had one of their Psychon witches in the room to ask the questions and if they weren't satisfied with the answers they took a knife to me. Then they just left me down here to rot."

Alexander then turned to Keynes.

"And now they have us to cut into." she said.

"Welcome back colonel, I'm happy you made it here safely." Maya said as she welcomed Koenig and Russell off their Eagle, "You too Doctor Russell and of course Master Sergeant Washington." and she peered around Koenig and Russell to where Washington was leading his men off the Eagle as well and he smiled back at her.

"Thanks lieutenant, it's always nice to be made welcome." he replied.

"So Maya is there any more information about the Dorcons?" Koenig asked as he, Russell and Maya started to walk away from the boarding tube, making their way into a section of Moonbase Alpha reserved for GDF personnel only.

"Nothing yet colonel." she answered, "Major Morrow has had the command staff identifying every potential wormhole point in the system so we can focus our scanners on them but of course not all are within our line of sight and many of those that are are so far away that it would take several hours for us to detect any arrivals at them." Maya said and Koenig nodded.

"What about the medical section?" Russell said.

"As far as I know Doctor Vincent has put all your staff on alert just in case there are casualties." Maya said.

"And the civilian population?" Koenig added.

"The press have noticed the change in our alert status and some media outlets have received private recordings made of Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi's engagement with the Dorcon ship. They are asking for a statement from you." Maya said.

"And what did you tell them Maya?" Russell said.

"That it was obvious they knew that Colonel Koenig was not on the moon so could not give a statement and that if they had no realistic requests they should remain quiet to avoid making themselves look ridiculous."

Maya replied and both Koenig and Russell smiled at one another.

"Maya you are the best adjutant a colonel could have. If General Simmons was still around I'm sure he'd have found a way to transfer you to his staff." Koenig said and then they all paused at a junction, "Look, Helena and I need to get out of these spacesuits. Go and tell Major Morrow that I'll be at main mission in about ten minutes, okay?"

"Yes colonel." Maya responded, nodding before she turned and walked away.

"She really is very good isn't she John?" Russell said and Koenig smiled.

"Helena, no colonel should be without a Psychon to deal with annoying journalists." he said.

7.

When Koenig returned to main mission he found Morrow at his own console instead of in Koenig's office as he was entitled to be while he was in command.

"Not making use of the office?" Koenig asked.

"I just thought it should be ready for you when you got back." Morrow replied, "Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi has called in from Epsilon and confirmed that the Hawks are ready for immediate launch. Not including the flight that escorted you to the asteroid field of course. The same with your Eagle, according to hangar maintenance they estimate that it will be ready to launch again in about an hour and a half. Of course they could skip that and just-

"No." Koenig interrupted, "I don't want to lose an Eagle and its crew that could have been saved just because of a split seal that would have shown up during maintenance. Get the other two armed Eagles set for launch and add the third only when it's been cleared by maintenance."

"Of course colonel." Morrow said and then Koenig looked around.

"What about our scans?" he asked, "Maya said you were checking for potential wormhole locations."

"So far there's nothing colonel." Benes told him, "If the Dorcons are bringing forces into the system then they're where we can't see them."

"Perhaps it was just a scout sent to survey the system. As long as we're gone by the time he's missed we'll be fine." Morrow said and Koenig nodded.

"Perhaps. But I've got a nasty feeling that there's more to it than that." he said before his comlock sounded and when he looked at the device he saw Russell's face, "Helena." he said.

"John I'm in medical section now. It looks like Doctor Vincent had everything pretty much set." Russell told him.

"That's good to hear but if what I've been told holds true then everyone could be sat around on edge for a while yet. The Dorcons still haven't made an appearance." Koenig said.

"Why do I get the feeling that you won't be telling anyone to stand down just yet John?" Russell asked and Koenig smiled at her.

"Ah Helena you know me so well. No, I suspect that we'll be seeing more of them soon." he said.

"Are you going to recall the Survey Eagles?" Russell said.

"Colonel three more armed Eagles could prove useful." Morrow pointed out.

"And if the Dorcons show up then I'll call them back but right now I don't want to risk losing whatever could be in that asteroid field. Besides three armed Eagles coming from the asteroids could throw the Dorcons off balance. They wouldn't know if we had more ships hiding and they'd have to keep watching behind them." Koenig said, "Helena keep main mission informed if you need anything."

"Don't worry John, I'll call you right away." Russell said and Koenig hesitated.

"Wait, strike that. I need you to come to main mission. I want you to take command of Moonbase Alpha." Koenig told her.

"Where are you going colonel?" Morrow asked, frowning.

"Where are we going major. You and I are getting ready to launch again. If three armed Eagles would make our position stronger than a pair of Hawks would as well. Tell the hangar to arm and prepare two of them. Then find us a couple of decent co-pilots who can act as weapons officers." Koenig told him and Morrow grinned.

"Right away colonel." he said.

"But why put me in command John?" Russell asked.

"Because you're a lieutenant colonel who knows how to direct emergency resources to where they're most needed if we come under attack." Koenig answered and then he glanced at Benes and smiled at her as he added, "Plus I can count on you not to put your feet up on my desk."

"What are you looking or Alyson?" Alexander asked when she grew impatient with Keynes standing silently by the bars at the front of their cell and looking down the hallway outside towards the security station at the end.

"What else I am supposed to do? I suppose part of me just thinks Colonel Koenig will find a way to launch a rescue mission." Keynes replied and Alexander groaned.

"Here we go again." she said and Keynes looked around at her.

"What do you mean by that?" she replied.

"I mean you and your little crush on John Koenig. Just because he came to set you free once doesn't mean he'll do it again. How could he anyway? We're probably not even in the same system as we were before." Alexander said. Then in a louder voice she said sternly, "Colonel Koenig is light years away."

"Colonel Koenig? Colonel John Koenig?" a voice said from the cell opposite the one Alexander and Keynes occupied.

"Do you know that voice too?" Alexander asked but Keynes shook her head.

"Who's there?" she called out and looking across the hallway she saw the figure of a man approach the bars of his own cell. Even with his hair in an unkept state it was obvious that he had a very prominent widows peak and his eyes had the dagger shaped pupils that all Psychons possessed. The man's clothing was as filthy as the rest of him but it looked as if it had once been of very high quality. Like Alexander and Keynes, despite being locked inside a cell the Dorcons had kept him bound, but he was restrained with manacles around his wrists and ankles while another length of chain connected these together. These limited his movement but were far less restrictive than the way the two women were bound.

"My name is Mentor." the man said slowly and carefully, choosing his words to try his best to make himself understandable to the humans. Fortunately the aliens who had created the Psychons had seen fit to give them a language based on the dominant human tongue.

"Mentor? Wasn't that Maya's grandfather's name?" Alexander said and Keynes nodded.

"Yes, I think so." she said.

"Yes Maya. I am grandfather to Maya." Mentor said from his own cell and he patted his chest, "You know Maya?"

"We work with her." Keynes told him.

"I work with her. You work in a closet and Maya now as your old job." Alexander said, frowning at Keynes and Keynes glared back at her, "Maya told us you were dead Mentor." Alexander added to the Psychon man.

"No, not dead. Lord Kollus will not allow it. He keeps me here instead, waiting for Maya to return." he said.

"But why would Maya come back here?" Keynes said.

"Lord Kollus intends to hunt her down and bring her back. He wants me to watch as she is shamed and abused." Mentor said.

"You know at this rate I think I'm going to end up disliking this Lord Kollus even more than you." Alexander said, looking at Keynes.

When Kollus returned to his private quarters he found his mate Thallal already there, watching their infant child as it slept nearby.

"Thallal." he said.

"Husband." Thallal responded as she got to her feet and went to greet him. Leaning in close to one another each of them rapidly extended their long, forked tongues so that they touched briefly before retracting them back into their mouths again, "I heard that we have new guests. More humans from the travelling moon."

"You are correct my mate." Kollus said as they both sat down beside one another, "A scouting party I sent to search for anything the Outsiders may have left behind returned with them instead."

"Were they left behind like the one you bought from Lord Grenn?" Thallal said and Kollus hissed with irritation at the mention of the rival who had refused to hand over all of the humans he had taken.

"The Archon himself commanded me to deal with the humans, yet Grenn still kept the captives for himself." he said, "But to answer your question, no it does not appear that these two were left behind. The humans are as interested in the secrets of the Outsiders as we are. We know that they cannot control how they travel, the knowledge of the Outsiders could give them that chance."

"The Archon will be displeased if that happens. He may hold you responsible after having giving you the responsibility to destroy them." Thallal pointed out.

"Fortunately they seem no closer to achieving this than when we first encountered them and we now know that there is nothing in the asteroid field that will help them. In the meantime I have ordered another ship to the system to observe their actions." Kollus said.

"I take it your generals favour an all out attack?" Thallal said.

"They do and I have ordered our forces assembled. However, we have tried a direct assault before and been forced back. The losses we suffered then have yet to be fully replaced and we cannot risk another attack on our own. To destroy the humans we will need help from other lords. I have sent word to the Archon but it may take time for reinforcements to reach us." Kollus explained.

"Can these two captives not be forced to tell you of their strength my husband?" Thallal said.

"Possibly, yes. However, that would risk damaging them and I do not want them harmed in any way." Kollus answered.

"Why such concern?"

"Because they are both female my beloved and I know how much you have wanted to see how well these humans would breed with our Psychon slaves." Kollus told his wife and she hissed with satisfaction.

"Female?" Thallal said, "Are you certain they are of breeding age?"

"You will have to examine them of course but their skin has the smoothness of youth and their chests have the glands the Psychon females use to feed their young. Since they were found crewing one of their space vessels I expect that they are in good health for their species." Kollus said.

"Prime breeding stock then." Thallal said and she hissed again, "Assuming that the guards have not already destroyed their ability to reproduce as they did so quickly with the one known as Capston."

"Quite. Will you attempt to secure their co-operation or will you simply arrange a forced mating?" Kollus asked.

"I would like to see them first my husband." Thallal answered and Kollus reached for a nearby communications panel.

"Yes my Lord Kollus?" the voice of one of his subordinates said.

"The Lady Thallal wishes to observe our new prisoners. Have Shylana and a unit of guards sent to my chambers immediately to provide her with an escort." Kollus ordered.

"Yes my lord." the subordinate replied and then Kollus turned off the communicator.

Thallal then got to her feet and crossed the room to collect the Dorcon equivalent of a computer tablet and she double checked that it had all of the information she expected to need already on it before there was a knock at the door.

"Identify." Kollus called out, his hand reaching for the weapon holstered on his belt just in case this was an assassination plot by one of his rivals. Such things were uncommon in Dorcon society but not totally unknown.

"My Lord Kollus it is your personal empath Shylana and your guards." Shylana's voice responded.

"Enter." Kollus said, keeping his hand near his weapon until the door opened fully and he saw that it really was Shylana and four of his personal guards.

"I am ready. Take me to the dungeons." Thallal said and Shylana bowed her head.

"Yes my lady." she replied.

When they arrived in the dungeon the Dorcons in the security post immediately recognised Lady Thallal and bowed as they permitted her entrance without asking any questions. One of the dungeon guards followed her with his security pass, expecting Thallal to want access to one of the cells. She was also recognised by one of the Dorcon prisoners occupying a cell and he roared as he charged towards the bars, attempting to reach through and claw her on her way past. However, the four elite guards accompanying her saw what he was doing and immediately opened fire with their weapons. Each guard fired a single shot and all four of them hit the prisoner in his legs, causing him to fall to the floor where he rolled around screeching in pain while Thallal and her party passed by his cell without any further acknowledgement.

"Was that shooting?" Alexander said when she heard the gunfire.

"It sounded like it, yes. Wait, someone's coming." Keynes replied before Thallal and her party came into view, walking down the hallway and stopping right outside the humans' cell, "Who are you?" Keynes asked, looking at Shylana while the Psychon woman stood beside Thallal but it was the Dorcon who spoke first as she ordered the dungeon guard to open the cell door. Then as soon as this was done Kollus' personal guards entered first and dragged both Alexander and Keynes into the middle of the cell so that they faced Thallal and Shylana as they followed them, leaving just the dungeon guard waiting in the hallway outside.

"I wish to see them. Remove their coverings." Thallal ordered in her own language so that neither of the human women understood. However, they soon realised the meaning of what had been said as the Dorcons standing either side of them roughly removed the fabric tubes restraining them and both women held their arms to try and cover themselves, "Take their arms." Thallal added and each of the guards pulled one of the human women's arms back behind them, holding them both still as they struggled.

Thallal then raised her tablet and switched on the camera, taking pictures of both Alexander and Keynes individually. Once this was done she then turned to Shylana and spoke to her.

"The Lady Thallal wishes to know if either of you have every given birth to young or if you are currently expecting to." the Psychon said, translating Thallal's question.

"What?" Keynes said in surprise while Alexander scowled.

"Alexander, Tanya. Rank lieutenant. Serial number one eight two nine one one two zero two zero." she said and Shylana repeated her words in the Dorcon language, prompting a growl from Thallal. Then the female Dorcon turned to one of the elite guards holding Alexander and at her command one of them suddenly lifted one of Alexander's arms level at the same time as he drew his knife.

Then Thallal began to speak again.

"The lady Thallal wishes you to know that she has no wish to inflict harm but if you will not co-operate then there are certain parts of your bodies that are surplus to her requirement." Shylana translated for Alexander and Keynes.

"Just answer her Tanya! What does that matter?" Keynes exclaimed before she looked at Shylana and added, "No, neither of have had children and I'm certainly not pregnant. I doubt she is either."

"Alyson Keynes. Traitor and collaborator." Alexander hissed.

"Would you rather have your finger cut off?" Keynes said while Shylana continued to translate everything that was being said.

"The Lady Thallal thanks you for your co-operation." the Psychon woman then said as Thallal spoke again and the Dorcon pulled his blade away from Alexander and returned it to its sheath. Then the guards retrieved the fabric tubes that had been used to bind the two women and began to repeat the process of restraining them while Thallal spoke and Shylana translated what she said, "The Lady Thallal will now consider the use you may be of to her. If you are co-operative then you will be well treated. On the other hand if you attempt to resist you will not be made as comfortable."

With Alexander and Keynes both bound again, Thallal and her party then exited the cell, not waiting for the dungeon guard to lock it again before they headed back down the hallway. Then once all the Dorcons were gone Alexander shuffled her way over to the bars and looked across the hallway.

"Mentor." she said, looking into the cell opposite, "Hey Mentor."

"Yes?" Mentor responded as he walked up to the bars of his own cell.

"Did you catch all that?" Alexander asked.

"Catch?" Mentor said.

"Hear. Did you hear all that?" Alexander said and Mentor nodded.

"Yes. I heard." he replied.

"So what was it all about?" Alexander said.

"Lady Thallal is the mate of Lord Kollus. They want to know what the young of humans and Psychons mixed together would be like. That was their plan for Maya. They wanted your Colonel John Koenig to give her a child." Mentor said and Alexander winced.

"And now they have us to be their test subjects." she said.

"Whether we agree or not." Keynes added and Mentor nodded again.



It was rare that Russell was asked to exercise her military authority by taking command of Moonbase Alpha but she was quite capable of carrying this task out so walking into main mission in her formal uniform was not a daunting experience to her.

"Captain Benes what's the status of our defences?" she asked as soon as she entered the room.

"All weapons deployed colonel." Benes replied, using Russell's rank instead of her position of doctor.

"And the other bases?" Russell added.

"All confirming ready." Benes said.

"Lieutenant Colonel Russell the requests for information from civilians are increasing." Maya added, "Should I inform them that you are now in command?"

"No, they know I'm our chief medical officer. If they hear that Colonel Koenig has handed over command to me instead of someone in the regular chain of command that will just provoke more questions. Just make polite excuses unless they won't take 'no' for an answer." Russell told her.

"What should I do if they won't take 'no' for an answer?" Maya asked.

"Forget about being polite." Russell said and then she turned to the big screen.

"I take it that there have been no further signs of Dorcon activity?" she said and Baker shook her head.

"No colonel. If any more of them have arrived yet then they're keeping a low profile." she said.

"Very good. What about Colonel Koenig and Major Morrow?" Russell asked.

"Launch tractors for Hawks One and Two are in position on launch pads, as are the Combat Eagles we've got available." Benes said, "Combat Eagle Three will be available in under an hour at the latest estimate."

"And co-pilots for the Hawks?"

"Stein and Cavalier. Major Carter had them lined up for the next wave of hawk pilot training." Benes answered and Russell smiled.

"Looks like they may be getting a head start on that training." she said, "Let's just hope it's not a crash course."

Kollus could tell that his mate was in a good mood when she returned to their private chambers.

"All went well my love?" he said and she let out a soft hiss of satisfaction.

"Yes husband. You were correct when you said that the female captives were both of child bearing age. I suspect that we would be able to get at least five offspring from each of them, possibly twice that many if pregnancies could be repeated as often as possible." Thallal said, "I would need to carry out further tests beforehand though to ensure their fertility. Neither of them claims to have borne children before and Shylana did not sense any deception. Resistance, yes but what they said was accurate." she said as she sat back down.

"So they will not co-operate then?" Kollus asked.

"Perhaps. One appeared more willing than the other to endure suffering to defy us." Thallal said.

"And do you have a remedy in mind for this resistance?"

"Several are possible but a number have potential negative side effects that could affect the usefulness of the prisoners. Keeping them restrained is one option but if our experience with Psychons is anything to go by there are limits to how long we can maintain restraint before toxins will begin to build up in their bodies that could harm a child. Drugging them presents the same problems. All that is left after that is surgery."

"Surgery?" Kollus said.

"Yes. One option would be to sever the spinal cord to induce paralysis from the neck down. That would prevent them taking any action to resist impregnation or harm themselves or the child after it. However, it brings with it the risk of rendering them unable to give birth or possibly their death, neither of which is acceptable. Therefore, the only remaining option is amputation. By removing their limbs we remove their ability to resist and the risk of death is minimal." Thallal explained.

"That sounds severe." Kollus said.

"But practical. In any case I suspect that it will be necessary only on the one called Tanya Alexander. The other one, the one called Alyson Keynes was less resistant and I think will be more easily intimidated. Especially if she sees the consequences of resistance first hand." Thallal said.

"You mean removing her companion's arms and legs and then letting her see what is left?" Kollus said.

"Exactly." Thallal answered.

Then a thought occurred to Kollus.

"What did you say were the names of the prisoners my love?" he said.

"Tanya Alexander and Alyson Keynes." Thallal told him.

"Alyson Keynes." Kollus said and he hissed.

"You know the name husband?" Thallal asked.

"I think so, yes. You recall that under interrogation the one called Capston explained to us how their moon travels?" Kollus said.

"Yes, there is a constant radioactive leak from the ruin of one of their bases. It keeps the vortex open." Thallal replied, "I confirmed the validity of this explanation."

"Well he also gave us the name of the human he held responsible for this. He gave us the name Alyson Keynes."

"How did she cause this husband?" Thallal asked.

"The human Capston said that she betrayed the others to a different faction of their kind for profit." Kollus said and Thallal hissed with pleasure.

"Then perhaps she can be induced to co-operate with my research if we can offer her something of value in return. Superior living conditions perhaps or limited choice on the Psychon male that I will select to impregnate her." Thallal said.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps this makes her more useful to us in other ways." Kollus said and he got up from his seat, "I must leave you now my love. I must meet with my generals and discuss this with them." he added before he left their quarters again.

"Another one. How many does that make now professor?" Carter asked when the wreck of another flying saucer came into view between two asteroids.

"I think that this will be number eight for us." Bergman responded and he looked at his tablet and nodded, "Yes, number eight."

"And it's in no better condition than any of the others." Carter commented.

"No, from what we've seen here so far I think that this asteroid field is nothing more than the remains of a battlefield that has already been picked clean. Of course that does leave us with a few interesting questions." Bergman said.

"Professor just imagine I'm a pilot and not a super genius." Carter said.

"Well first there is the question of who would the aliens have been fighting against? There's no evidence that there was ever a civilisation in this system that they would have attacked. But there's something far more obvious than that. Possibly far more disturbing as well." Bergman replied and Carter frowned.

"You're still being pretty cryptic here professor." he said.

"We so far you and I have seen eight wreck flying saucers. Why haven't we seen any signs of who or what they were fighting against?" Bergman pointed out and Carter winced.

"Strewth professor, you really know how to make a man nervous don't you? Are you saying that there could be something out here that could wipe those aliens out without them being able to score a single kill in return? Even we did better than that during the war and our technology was centuries behind theirs."

"I think we should be collecting some of this wreckage for closer examination back on the moon. The material may not be of much physical use in its current state but it could offer some clues as to the type of weaponry that was used to do this." Bergman told Carter and the Australian pilot sighed.

"You know that's going to mean going outside don't you?" he said.

"Yes I'll-" Bergman began.

"Oh no professor. Spacewalks are a two man task. You pick out a decent piece and I'll get us close enough for an EVA." Carter interrupted.

"Of course captain." Bergman responded and he looked down at the sensor display again, focusing on the Eagle's lidar to try and identify a piece of hull debris from the flying saucer that would fit inside one of the radiation shielded containers carried aboard the Eagle, "Here." he said, pointing to the screen, "According to our lidar there are several pieces less than half a metre across right there. How close can you get us?"

"Oh I'd say about twenty metres. We can cross that in a couple of minutes with propulsion packs." Carter replied.

"Then I suggest we get started captain." Bergman said.

Carefully Carter manoeuvred the Survey Eagle closer to the drifting wreckage of the alien flying saucer before matching the wreckage's relative speed and heading. Carter and Bergman then both got out of their seats and made their way out of the cockpit to the Eagle's survey module where they collected a shielded sample container before returning to the airlock. In here there were personal propulsion units designed to fit over the life support packs the two men wore as part of their spacesuits and they helped one another put these on.

"You know to use one of these professor?" Carter asked and Bergman nodded.

"Yes, although it has been a while. I was taught when I was in the Officer Reserve Corps." he said before he lowered his helmet visor to seal his suit.

"Well just call out if you need help." Carter told him as he sealed his suit as well. Then he reached for the nearby controls to evacuate the air from the airlock.

The process of pumping out the air took less than a minute and then Carter opened one of the outer doors. Standing in the doorway that was now open to space he initially steadied himself by grabbing the door frame before he simply stepped out into space.

"Coming professor?" he said.

"Right behind you major." Bergman responded as he took stepped out of the airlock with the sample container in his hand, "This way I think." he added as he gripped one of the control units for his propulsion pack and triggered a short blast of compressed gas that set him moving away from the Eagle towards the wreckage of the flying saucer.

"Don't get too far ahead professor." Carter cautioned Bergman as he followed the older man.

Reaching the wreckage did not take long using their propulsion packs and Bergman began to inspect the various drifting pieces of alien hull metal for one that looked suitable.

"That one I think." he said and he pointed to a jagged piece of metal about forty centimetres across.

"Okay professor so how you want to do this? Do we just grab it?" Carter asked.

"No I don't think so." Bergman replied as he opened up the sample case, "Take hold of one end of this and we'll just move ourselves in close enough to catch the metal in this box. That way we don't risk tearing our suits on it or getting any contaminants on ourselves."

"I got it professor." Carter said and as Bergman had told him he took hold of one end of the open sample container. Holding this between them the two men used their propulsion packs to move closer to the piece of debris that Bergman had selected so that it simply drifted into the box.

"Got it." Bergman said, smiling as he reached out and lifted the lid of the box closed again and began to fasten the latches.

"Anything else while we're out her professor?" Carter asked and Bergman paused and looked around.

"Well the thought of exploring the inside of this ship is tempting but I don't think that it would reveal anything new. Besides if the Dorcons suddenly show up I don't want to be caught out here when their attack ships arrive." he said.

"Good thinking professor. Come on, let's get your souvenir back to the Eagle." Carter said before the two men used their propulsion packs to turn themselves around and then to take them back to their waiting Eagle.

9.

The trio of senior Dorcon commanders entered Lord Kollus' throne room, walked towards their leader and bowed.

"You summoned us my lord?" one of them said as they they straightened up.

"I did. I wish to speak to you about our plans to attack the humans' travelling moon." Kollus replied.

"Our scout ship has yet to return Lord Kollus." a second Dorcon commander said, "We have not been able to assess the humans' defences."

"Even with that information we are likely to suffer significant losses, correct?" Kollus said.

"Yes my lord. The humans' weapons are effective and may have improved since our first engagement." the third officer answered.

"Then we would be better off being able to subvert these somehow prior to an attack." Kollus said.

"Yes Lord Kollus. The problem is how to do this. We would need to infiltrate an advanced unit onto their moon first and even then they would not know where to strike." the first Dorcon commander said.

"Unless we first infiltrated a single agent onto their moon to guide our advanced force." Kollus said.

"Yes my lord but a single agent would have to take with them all the necessary supplies and equipment and be vulnerable to discovery." the third officer pointed out.

"Unless that agent was one of the humans themselves." Kollus said and he held out a tablet that showed an image of Keynes to his senior officers, "This is one of the captives currently held in our dungeons. My mate Thallal wishes to use her and the other in her research but I have an alternative idea in mind. This prisoner is called Alyson Keynes and she is an outcast among her people. She is known to have betrayed them for profit and I think that we can turn this to our advantage."

"Bribe her into becoming our agent?" the first commander said and Kollus hissed.

"Yes." he said, "I propose to return her to the humans' moon with a transmitter she can use to communicate with our forces and give them the strengths and locations of the humans' defences. Then our advanced force can destroy as many of them as possible before our main force launches its attack. The second prisoner may also be convinced to agree to our terms if the alternative is the repeated forced matings that Thallal has planned for them."

"Why not just have the prisoners tell us the nature of their defences now my lord?" the second commander asked.

"Because we may not have enough time to draw up a new attack plan before their moon moves to another system and if we keep her then the other humans will have the chance to alter their defences and make her information useless to us. As soon as their moon travels through the wormhole again we will lose track of it, however we will find it again eventually and when we do this Alyson Keynes or her comrade can transmit up to date details of its defences to us." Kollus explained, "As well as helping us to take the runaway slave Maya alive."

"What will you offer them my lord?" the first commander said.

"A life of comfort." Kollus replied.

"And will you give it to her?" the third commander added.

"If they co-operate with Thallal in her research, yes. Otherwise they can spend their days limbless on slabs while my mate finds suitable Psychon males to impregnate them." Kollus said.

"While your plan is not without risk it is far less than that of a direct assault without the intelligence she could supply my lord. I support your idea." the first commander said.

"It has the advantage of buying us time to build up our own forces and makes us less reliable on the co-operation of other lords who may expect to be compensated." the second added and Kollus looked at the third.

"And you?" he asked.

"The Archon may question why you allowed the humans to escape my lord." he responded, "Hopefully having a spy among them will be enough to convince him that you remain effective."

"And if he decides otherwise would you be bidding to take my place as brigade leader?" Kollus said, "Do you think you have what it takes to be a lord?"

"I am a soldier my lord. Ruling a world and managing the Archon's tribute is not my area of expertise." the other Dorcon said and Kollus hissed.

"Go." he ordered his commanders, "Prepare a transmitter small enough that a human can smuggle it on their person but powerful enough to be able to signal one of our ships." he ordered, "In the meantime I shall make the offer to our two prisoners."

The Survey Eagle included a sealable examination unit and when Carter and Bergman returned to it the loaded the sample container into this.

"Now let's take a look at what we've got." Bergman said as he moved to the console beside the chamber. This console included controls for a pair of robot arms that he used to open the container and as soon as he did this one of the console's displays warned him and Carter that the contents were radioactive.

"Good job that chamber's sealed professor." Carter commented and Bergman nodded.

"Yes, of course the scanning equipment inside it is somewhat limited but it should let us take some initial readings." he said as he lowered a scanning probe from the ceiling of the sealed chamber, "Remarkable." he said as he looked at the data coming from the probe.

"Found something interesting professor?" Carter asked and Bergman smiled.

"Oh yes Major Carter." he answered, "We know from experience that the material that the alien saucers were made of is incredibly durable, yes?"

"Oh yes." Carter replied, nodding, "I've seen test footage of cannon rounds just bouncing off."

"Well watch this." Bergman told him and both men looked into the sealed chamber through the transparent front face as Bergman used the robot arms again. This time having them pick up the sample of hull metal between them and then he ordered the arms to try bending the piece of metal. Ordinarily a piece of the alien hull metal as thick as the sample would have more than enough strength to resist being broken by the lightweight robot arms but on this occasion the metal simply snapped in two.

"Whoa!" Carter exclaimed, "What the hell happened professor? That piece of metal shouldn't have just snapped like that."

"Exactly." Bergman said, "But you see this particular sample has been subjected to some force that has left it riddled with hairline fractures. That may explain the radioactivity of this asteroid field, whatever did this to this piece of alien hull metal also fractured all of the saucers' weapon cores and as the contents decayed the isotopes escaped through these fractures."

"So what the hell could do this professor?" Carter asked but Bergman shrugged.

"Well in theory an immensely powerful gravitational field but the fact that the wrecked saucers we've seen are largely in one piece rather than having been compressed like an auto-mobile at a scrapyard suggests that rather than a field we are dealing with some kind of contained beam that exerted a focused pull on one section of the ship at a time."

"So the ship as literally torn apart?" Carter commented and Bergman nodded.

"Exactly." he said. Then he frowned.

"What's up professor?" Carter said when he saw this.

"I was just thinking that we've not seen anything in this asteroid field worth fighting over yet. In fact ship to ship combat inside ought to be incredibly risky." Bergman said and Carter smiled.

"You can say that again professor. It would be a case of every man for himself. You couldn't hold any sort of formation and ships couldn't support one another. Before we got dragged out of Earth's orbit the GDF was wargaming ways of dealing with colonial Vultures that had pulled back into dense asteroid clusters." he said.

"And what did you come up with?" Bergman asked.

"Stay well back and fire in a few heavy missiles. Blast apart the rocks and try to set up a chain reaction to flush the enemy out into open space where we could engage them." Carter answered.

"And with gravity based weapons like the ones that did this to the hulls of those flying saucers you could easily shatter as many asteroids as you wanted." Bergman pointed out.

"So why bother coming in after them?" Carter said, frowning.

"I don't think they did major. I think that whoever destroyed these flying saucers did so in open space. I think that they were protecting a facility built on a large planetoid. Something perhaps three or four times the size of Ceres in our own asteroid belt. Then they turned their weapons on the planetoid and destroyed it as well, leaving behind the wreckage of the flying saucers and this asteroid field. Alexander and Keynes may have found traces of an outpost that was on the planetoid when it broke apart." Bergman said.

"The colonel has to know about this." Carter said.

"Agreed. I'll put this sample back in the container and then I think we should get to where we can send a secure laser transmission back to Moonbase Alpha." Bergman responded.

"We have to figure out a way to get out of here and back to Moonbase Alpha." Keynes said, leaning against the bars at the front of the cell and looking along the hallway again.

"Oh of course. That's easy isn't it?" Alexander replied, "All we need to do is unlock that door, get past the guard post, find our way to the hangar and steal a ship. Then we'll figure out how to fly it and also how to navigate through wormholes to take us back to the moon. I do have one question though."

"What?" Keynes asked with a sigh.

"In your head when we stage this escape are we still tied up like this all the way or do you have a way to get us out of these things as well so that we can do it all naked instead?" Alexander said and Keynes frowned.

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life being continually raped just to provide children to an alien to use as guinea pigs in whatever experiments it has planned Tanya." Keynes said.

"Oh and you think I do? I'm just not so foolish as to think that we can just walk out of here before we're turned into human incubators." Alexander said before Keynes saw a pair of Dorcon soldiers coming down the hallway towards their cell.

"They're coming this way." she said and the Dorcons walked up to the cell before halting right outside the door, "What do you want?" Keynes asked the aliens but neither of them responded, unable to understand what she was saying anyway.

Instead one of the Dorcons unlocked the cell and both aliens entered it. Each of them then walked up to one of the two women and grabbed hold of them with one hand. Then they used their free hands to push rubbery gags into their mouths that prevented them from crying out as they were taken from the cell and down the hallway.

Keeping a firm grip on the women, the Dorcons moved more quickly than they could shuffle while they were wrapped in the fabric tubes and both Alexander and Keynes fell, only for their guards to switch to dragging them along the floor behind them until they reached a small featureless room that contained just two metal chairs that were fixed to the floor. Alexander and Keynes were forced to sit in these. A single belt was enough to pin the women to their seats before the Dorcons pulled the straps around their legs tight to pin them together even though they were unable to rise to walk. With the prisoners secure the two Dorcons then exited the room again, leaving Alexander and Keynes alone and unable to move or speak.

Shortly after the door opened once more and Lord Kollus entered with Thallal, Shylana and a pair of Kollus' elite personal guards and the Dorcon leader looked down at the two women before he began to speak.

"Lord Kollus has decided to make you an offer regarding your futures." Shylana translated for him and at the same time the two guards pulled the gags from Alexander's and Keynes' mouths.

"I could give you a list of where he can stick his offer but I'm not sure about Dorcon anatomy." Alexander hissed, glaring at the Psychon while Keynes just gasped for breath.

"The Lady Thallal has planned to cross breed you with suitable Psychon slaves but Lord Kollus has an alternative for you." Shylana continued, not bothering to translate Alexander's response for Kollus.

"You mean an alternative to being continuously raped?" Keynes commented.

"The Lord Kollus is willing to instead return both of you to your moon." Shylana said.

"What's the catch?" Alexander asked, knowing from Maya's tales of Dorcon society that the alien warlord was unlikely to be willing to just turn her and Keynes loose.

"All that the Lord Kollus would ask in return is that you act as his agents." Shylana said.

"You mean sell everyone else on the moon out? Not a chance." Alexander exclaimed.

"Do this and when Lord Kollus' forces conquer your moon you will be permitted to live in comfort with slaves of your own at your command." Shylana continued, once again without translating Alexander's response for Kollus.

"What could we possibly tell you that would be worth turning us loose anyway?" Keynes said and this time Shylana translated what she said, waiting for Kollus to reply before she spoke again.

"Lord Kollus requires information about your moon's defences in terms of strength and deployment. This will allow his forces to neutralise them with minimal loss of life before a full scale invasion can take place. He also wishes you to assist in the recapture of the runaway slave known as Maya." Shylana said.

"Definitely no." Alexander said but Keynes remained quiet.

"What does that one think?" Kollus asked Shylana when she translated Alexander's reply but Keynes did not provide one.

"She is thinking about how she is known as a traitor my lord." the Psychon woman responded, "I cannot tell whether she is willing to accept your offer though."

Kollus let out a low growl. Although Shylana was a competent empath she lacked the power that Maya possessed to get deeper into a person's thoughts.

"Ask her again." Thallal said.

"What is your answer Alyson Keynes?" Shylana said and Keynes eyes' widened at the mention of her name, "Yes we know who you are and how the other humans see you." Shylana added when she sensed Keynes' surprise.

"If I agreed what would stop me from just changing my mind after you'd let me go?" Keynes asked.

"Eventually Lord Kollus will take your moon with or without your help. If you betray him then you suffer for it." Shylana told her after Lord Kollus told her how to respond.

"Tanya if we agree then we get to go back to the moon." Keynes said and Alexander glared at her.

"So you'll sell us out again? Once a traitor, always a traitor." she hissed.

"Tell Lord Kollus I'm willing to consider his offer." Keynes said.

"You bitch! If could get loose I'd kill you!" Alexander screamed at Keynes while Shylana told Kollus what Keynes had said.

"What would you need me to do?" Keynes added.

"You will be given a compact data transmitter module." Shylana said as Kollus explained the details of his plan, "Enter into this everything you discover. It will then send this to any of our ships that first broadcast the correct coded sequence."

"Seriously I'm going to kill you." Alexander shouted and Kollus waved at her as he addressed one of his guards.

"Silence her again." he ordered and the guard force the rubbery gag back into Alexander's mouth.

"My access to strategic information is limited." Keynes said, "I need a way to make the moon's senior staff more sympathetic to me."

Shylana then looked at Kollus as she told him what Keynes had said.

"She has something specific in mind." she added.

"Ask her what." Kollus said.

"What do you need?" Shylana asked.

"Can I use that tablet to draw on?" Keynes responded, looking at the tablet that Thallal held, "I'll need my arms free as well."

"Lady Thallal, the prisoner wishes to draw something on your tablet." Shylana told Thallal and she looked at Kollus.

"Permit her." Kollus said and then he looked at the guard behind Keynes and added, "Free her arms."

Then as Thallal activated her tablet and brought up a drawing application the Dorcon guard undid the strap around Keynes' neck, allowing the woman to lift her arms out of the fabric tube. With this now tucked under her armpits so that her chest was still covered she reached out and took the tablet handed to her by Thallal. As Keynes had expected this device had a simple touch screen interface and by moving her finger tip across the surface she was able to begin to draw on it, creating the outline of a flower.

"There's a flower that looks like this." she said as she held out the tablet so that Shylana and the Dorcons could see the drawing on the screen, "It's purple in colour and was introduced to our planet by the aliens you call the Outsiders. Do you know of it?"

Thallal looked closely at the image and pictured the flower in her mind.

"Husband that is a medicinal plant. Rare and valuable but we do have a stock." she said to Kollus.

"Ask the human what she wants with it." Kollus ordered Shylana.

"The Lord Kollus wants to know the significance of this plant." Shylana then told Keynes.

"We use it to make a medicine that some of our people are dependent on. Our supply of the medicine is limited and we don't have any of the flowers or the seeds to produce more. If I could take some of the seeds back with me then I could claim to have discovered them in storage on the moon. I'd have saved the lives of everyone dependent on it and they'd all be indebted to me. One of them is very influential." Keynes said while Shylana translated for the Dorcons.

"We can spare some of the seeds if that is what it would take to ensure the completion of your plan." Thallal told Kollus.

"Then once we are done here you should fetch them my mate." Kollus replied before he looked at Shylana and added, "Tell the prisoner that her request is accepted. We will give her the seeds if she will act as our agent."

"Lord Kollus agrees." Shylana said to Keynes and Keynes then looked at Alexander.

"We'll need to make her death look like an accident." she said, "She won't keep quiet about our arrangement but I can't return to the moon without her. She has to die."

"What do you suggest?" Shylana asked, sensing that Keynes had a plan.

"Just keep her tied up like that and strap her into the pilot's seat of our Eagle. Then have one of your soldiers shoot out the viewport. After she's suffocated we can put her spacesuit back on but without her helmet. It will look like an asteroid hit the viewport and depressurised the cockpit, killing her in the process." Keynes said.

Wide eyed, Alexander looked at her and shook her head as Shylana was repeating Keynes' plan for Kollus.

"Being a party to the killing of her comrade will help ensure her loyalty to us." Thallal pointed out and Kollus hissed in agreement.

"Yes. I think we can proceed. I will have a ship prepared to take the prisoners back to the Sha'kas system while you bring the seeds." he responded.

10.

"Lieutenant Colonel Russell we're picking up a secure laser transmission from Survey Eagle Two." Baker announced.

"Aren't they supposed to be maintaining a total communications blackout?" Russell asked from Koenig's office.

"Even if there were any Dorcon ships around I doubt that they'd be able to intercept the signal." Benes commented.

"Okay let's hear it." Russell said and she looked at the monitor on the desk in front of her.

"This is Professor Bergman aboard Survey Eagle Two calling Moonbase Alpha." Bergman said as his face appeared on the screen. Russell knew that there would be a significant lag in communication caused by the distance between the moon and the asteroid field so she did not try to reply and instead let Bergman continue speaking, "Major Carter and I have recovered a hull fragment from an alien flying saucer and examined it. The results of this examination suggest that the wrecked craft we have discovered here were destroyed in a battle with a much superior and previously unknown foe. I also think that this asteroid field is the remains of a planetoid that was destroyed by this same foe. I don't think that there is anything here that we can make use of and I am recommending that our mission be terminated and we return to the moon."

"Benes get me Colonel Koenig." Russell said and a few moments later the image on the screen changed to show Koenig sat in the cockpit of one of the Hawks on standby for launch.

"Helena, have the Dorcons shown up?" he asked.

"No John but Victor Bergman just signalled." Russell told him and he frowned.

"I told him to maintain radio silence." he said.

"They used a secure laser John. He said that he's analysed a piece of an alien saucer and found that it was destroyed by something we haven't seen before. John he's recommending calling off the survey." Russell explained.

"In that case do it. Tell the survey Eagles to return to the moon. They can finish off anything they're working on but I want them all back here ASAP. As soon as they land I'll stand down as well and Bergman can explain to me what he's found." Koenig said.

"Okay, I'll send the order now." Russell replied before she shut off the channel and turned towards the staff in main mission, "Okay that's it. Call our people home." she said.

Keynes was untied and given a robe to wear before being escorted back to the hangar where an attack ship was being prepared for launch. On the other hand Alexander remained bound and gagged as she was carried aboard the ship and strapped into a seat. Before Keynes was allowed on board though the two spacesuited Dorcon crew approached her with the faceplates of their helmets raised.

"I am Flight Officer Grolsu and this is my second Harsek." one of them said to her in the Psychon language which, given its similarity to English was just about understandable to the two human women, "These are for you." he added and he handed a small bag to Keynes.

Looking inside this she found a device that looked similar to the tablet she had used earlier but sized to fit in the palm of her hand. This was obviously the data transmitter she was expected to store all data concerning the moon's defences in. The other item inside the bag was a clear plastic packet that was filled with what looked like hundreds of seeds and she smiled when she saw these, knowing the potential they had.

"Thanks." she said as she put the transmitter and seeds back in the bag, "Now shall we get going?"

"This ship is mine." Grolsu said sternly, "Get aboard and remain seated. We will pass through a vortex into the asteroid field where your ship is located."

The Dorcons then escorted Keynes aboard the ship and sat her down opposite the struggling Alexander. Harsek also sat down in this compartment, his hand resting on the weapon holstered on his belt as a clear indication that he was there to watch over both the human women while Grolsu went into the cockpit to fly the ship.

It did not take long for Grolsu to get the attack ship ready for launch and it rose up off the hangar deck before rapidly accelerating out through the massive doorway into the open air among the mountains. From there Grolsu angled the attack ship upwards and flew it out of the planet's atmosphere, heading for the closest LaGrange point so he could open a wormhole back to the system where Earth's moon was located. Knowing that he was to emerge in an asteroid field he slowed the ship down to a near stop before he used the main gun to open the wormhole though and then flew into using only its manoeuvring thrusters.

"We have cleared the vortex." he announced over the intercom as he then began to follow the course given to him that would take him to the asteroid where Survey Eagle Four was landed.

As soon as he saw the Eagle on the surface of the asteroid Grolsu turned his attack ship to face in the same direction and positioned above the human craft. Then he adjusted the attack ship's position so that its ventral hatch lined up with the dorsally mounted docking tube of the Eagle before descending over it, using the attack ship's docking clamps to latch onto the Eagle's spine. Using the same technology that had been used to open the Eagle's airlock earlier, Grolsu was able to fool the Eagle's computer into extending its dorsally mounted docking tube so that it created a seal around the attack ship's ventral hatch and connected the ships together. Grolsu then got up from his seat and made his way into the passenger compartment behind the cockpit.

"We have a seal." he said and Harsek also rose from his chair before both of them walked to the ventral hatch and opened it. Looking down they saw that the Eagle's dorsal hatch was already open and they could see right down into its airlock module where a ladder had extended to allow people to climb between the two ships.

"The ship should be empty." Keynes told them and then she glanced at Alexander and added, "You'll need to carry her down and take her into the cockpit."

"I'll go first." Grolsu told Harsek before he climbed down through the hatch into the Eagle, pausing at the bottom of the ladder and looking around. The inner doors at the front and rear of the airlock were still closed after it had been used by the crew that had abducted Alexander and Keynes and Grolsu opened each of them to look into the survey module as well as the short passageway that connected the airlock to the cockpit at the front of the Eagle. Looking back up the ladder Grolsu watched as Keynes came down it and stood beside him.

"We need to get her into there." she said, pointing towards the cockpit and Grolsu looked up again.

"Send down the other human." he called out and in the attack ship Harsek returned to where Alexander sat, still struggling in vain to get free. He then unstrapped her from the chair and picked her up, carrying her to the hatch. Alexander tried to kick out her legs to prevent the Dorcon from lowering her through the hatch and he hissed angrily at her.

"Be careful not to hurt her." Keynes said, "If there are any visible signs of violence then the plan won't work." Harsek hissed again as he struggled to get Alexander through the hatch but her struggles could not stop him indefinitely and he was soon able to lower her down to where Grolsu took her from him.

"I have her." he said as he gripped her tightly to limit her struggling.

Then once Harsek had also climbed down into the Eagle the two Dorcons carried Alexander towards the cockpit while Keynes followed close behind them.

"There, sit her there." Keynes said and she pointed to the pilot's seat that Alexander had occupied earlier and she watched as the Dorcons sat Alexander down, "I'll strap her in." Keynes added, crouching beside Alexander to fasten her safety harness. Then she smiled, "Any last words to say Tanya?" she asked and she pulled the gag from Alexander's mouth.

"Let me out and I'll kill you!" Alexander snapped, "I'll rip your-" but before she could finish Keynes pushed the gag back into her mouth.

"I was thinking that you might change your mind at the last minute. That would have made things easier."

Keynes said as she stood up again and then she looked at the Dorcons, "I need to get dressed. Is it okay if I go do that in private?"

In response Grolsu hissed at her.

"Go. Be fast." he said and Keynes nodded before she slipped past the Dorcons and dashed into the survey module, closing each door she passed through behind her so that the two aliens could not watch her change from the robe.

The spacesuits that she and Alexander had been wearing were still exactly where they had been thrown and Keynes quickly retrieved her under suit and pulled it on. Then after she had put on the outer part of the spacesuit she took the seeds and transmitter she had been given from the robe's pocket and slipped them into the spacesuit instead.

Keynes was not done yet though and instead of heading back to the Eagle's cockpit she quickly went through the pockets of Alexander's spacesuit until she found what she was looking for.

"Got you." she said as she held up Alexander's comlock and with this in her hand she hurried to the survey module's small arms locker.

With Alexander's comlock in her possession Keynes was easily able to open this and inside she found the usual selection of magnetic accelerator pistols, carbines and rifles along with power cells and magazines for all of them. Keynes selected one of the pistols and quickly loaded it. Then she adjusted the muzzle velocity to be subsonic, although this would lower the damage potential of the weapon it made it safer to fire in a pressurised environment like the interior of the Eagle.

Meanwhile in the cockpit the Dorcons were becoming impatient for Keynes to return.

"Go and fetch her." Grolsu said and Harsek hurried from the cockpit, heading towards the centre of the Eagle.

As soon as the Dorcon opened the door and stepped into the survey module Keynes turned and used Alexander's comlock to close the door behind him. This distracted Harsek, causing him to look behind him for a moment and Keynes took advantage of this to take aim with her pistol and when Harsek turned back towards her she fired.

With the pistol's muzzle velocity reduced to a subsonic level the shot made almost no sound. Keynes knew that the spacesuit worn by the Dorcon likely offered sufficient protection to stop such a low velocity round which was why she aimed for the alien's head and with Harsek facing her the projectile passed through the open front of his helmet while the faceplate was raised and struck him in one of his eyes. Like humans, Dorcons had only a thin layer of bone behind their eyes and the projectile easily penetrated this before passing through Harsek's brain and embedded itself in the back of his skull.

Keynes then ran forwards, leaping over the Dorcon's body and opening the door. Then she closed it again after passing through and held the pistol behind her as she calmly walked towards the cockpit.

"Where is Harsek?" Grolsu demanded when he noticed her.

"He went back to your ship for a rifle." Keynes replied and Grolsu hissed.

"He doesn't need a rifle." he said.

"He will to put a round through that viewport." Keynes said and she pointed towards the viewport in front of Alexander, "We've done tests on the moon and your sidearms won't be able to penetrate it."

Grolsu then looked towards the viewport and Keynes saw her opportunity, bringing her pistol out from behind her back and pointed it at the back of his head. Then when he turned back around she fired it again, shooting him in the face as she had done with Harsek. Grolsu immediately fell backwards and landed across Alexnader. Seeing this Keynes tucked her pistol into her belt and reached down to drag the bulky alien off the other woman before pulling the gag from her mouth again.

"Tanya are you okay?" she asked.

"What the hell is going on?" Alexander demanded.

"I'm sorry it was all I could think of. I knew we didn't have a hope of escape from the Dorcon palace but when their leader offered to send us back here I knew we'd have a shot. Of course I wasn't sure if that Psychon would have sensed what I was up to but I guess I got lucky." Keynes explained.

"I thought you were going to kill me." Alexander said.

"Yes, sorry about that but I could hardly explain my plan to you when we were never alone." Keynes pointed out, "Now let me get rid of this thing." and then she grabbed hold of Grolsu's body with both hands and began to drag it from the cockpit.

"Hey untie me." Alexander called out.

"Hold on. Stay there." Keynes replied as she struggled with the weight of the Dorcon corpse and Alexander frowned.

"I can't believe you just said that." she said when Keynes returned to the cockpit, "Now untie me and let me get dressed."

"Not so fast." Keynes replied and she sat in the Eagle's co-pilot's seat and began to prepare the ship for lift off, "I think the communication antenna's damaged." she said, "Either something hit the ship while we were away or it happened when the Dorcons docked. Oh well hopefully no-one will get too spooked when they see what we've got for them."

"What do you mean?" Alexander asked and Keynes looked at her.

"Have you forgotten what we've got clamped on top of us? A perfectly intact and operational Dorcon attack ship. An attack ship that can navigate through wormholes." she said and then she reached out to engage the Eagle's engines.

"Hey you can't fly this ship!" Alexander exclaimed.

"Yes I can. I qualified as a pilot like every other GDF officer. Well except Maya of course." Keynes said as the Eagle rose up off the surface of the asteroid.

"But your flight status was revoked with your rank. Now untie me and that's an order." Alexander told her,

"Is that the thanks I get for saving us both from being turned into sex slaves? Now just sit back and enjoy the ride." Keynes replied.

II.

Koenig was still wearing his spacesuit when he returned to his office to meet with Bergman and Carter who were also both still wearing the spacesuits they had worn aboard the Survey Eagle.

"So you're saying that there was an outpost here?" Koenig asked Bergman.

"I suspect so, yes colonel." Bergman answered.

"On a planetoid that was destroyed?" Russell said and Bergman nodded.

"I saw a piece of alien alloy snapped in half as if it was fine china colonel." Carter said.

"The effects of a weapon based on the focused application of gravity." Bergman added, "I don't think that there's anything left in that asteroid field worth our time. That's why I recommended ending the survey." Koenig nodded.

"Yes, I think you made the right call." he said and then he looked down the steps into main mission, "What's the status on the other Survey Eagles?"

"Captains Fraser and Kano are on final approach now colonel." Baker replied, "Survey Eagle Four is just entering visual-" she continued before she paused, "Colonel I think you should see this." and she put the image of the approaching Eagle on the big screen.

"That's a Dorcon ship." Carter exclaimed when he saw the alien vessel attached to the back of the Eagle.

"So who's in command of that Eagle?" Russell said.

"Spacewoman get me a channel to that Eagle." Koenig ordered and Baker nodded.

"Moonbase Alpha calling Survey Eagle Four, respond please." she said and then the command staff waited nervously to give the transmission time to reach the ship and for a response to arrive. However, although the Eagle continued to approach the moon there was no response from whoever was aboard.

"Their communications could be out." Carter suggested.

"Alexander and Keynes could be hurt and have put their ship on autopilot." Russell added as an alternative.

"Yes or Dorcons could be flying that ship and unable to understand what we're saying." Koenig said and he looked at Carter, "Major as soon as that ship is close enough try to bring it in on remote." he ordered.

"Yes colonel." Carter replied, nodding and he hurried to his duty station. His console included a set of controls similar to those used to pilot an Eagle and he immediately set to work trying to connect the console to the flight controls of the approaching Survey Eagle. However, with its communication system damaged, no such link could be made, "I'm sorry colonel, I can't establish control." he said.

"They're still heading this way colonel." Benes added and Koenig nodded.

"Okay we plan for all eventualities." he said, "I want every landing pad except for one sealed. Helena you and I will meet that Eagle there along with Maya, Sergeant Washington and a squad of his men. Captain Benes if that Eagle makes any aggressive moves then I want it shot down."

As Keynes flew the Survey Eagle towards Moonbase Alpha an alarm sounded in the cockpit.

"They're targeting us." Alexander said.

"I know that. But look, they've specifically left one of the launch pads open for us. Now shush, this is going to take some careful handling." Keynes replied as she turned the Eagle so that it once again pointed in the direction of travel after she had used the main engines to slow the craft down as quickly as possible. Now that most of the Eagle's speed relative to the moon had been shed she switched to using just its manoeuvring thrusters.

"So untie me and let me do it. You're out of practice as well as not being allowed to fly or land an Eagle." Alexander told her.

"I got this." Keynes said and Alexander frowned at her.

With the Eagle's systems still warning that the craft was being scanned by Moonbase Alpha's targeting systems Keynes steered the craft towards the sole landing pad that remained in position, the large red cross making it easy to spot from above. Fortunately the cross shaped landing pad was significantly larger than an Eagle and so even with the ray-shaped Dorcon attack ship attached to the back of the human craft it was possible to land so that the landing pad could be lowered into the subsurface hangar without obstruction. This took careful manoeuvring by Keynes though to make sure that the attack ship's wings would line up with the widest part of the landing pad. As soon as she set the Eagle down Keynes shut down its engines and released her safety harness. The when she got up she reached down to Alexander and released the belt around her neck.

"There you go, you should be able to get out now." she said before leaving the cockpit and heading to the airlock while Alexander struggled to get free.

"The Eagle has landed colonel." Benes told Koenig through his comlock and he nodded.

"Deploy the boarding tube." he ordered and then he looked at Washington and the squad of armoured soldiers waiting in the boarding area, "Okay sergeant, deploy your men."

"You heard the colonel." Washington called out, "Everyone into position."

Using portable shields for cover, the soldiers deployed to cover the hatch to the boarding tube from multiple directions while the tube itself was extending towards the Eagle on the landing pad outside, locking onto the airlock module to create a seal.

"I think we should move back." Koenig told Russell and Maya who were standing beside him and the three officers retreated to one of the exits from the boarding area so they could easily take cover if the Eagle turned out to be carrying a Dorcon assault force.

"Seal established. The tube is pressurised." Washington said when he saw the status display beside the board tube change and his men readied themselves.

A few seconds later the status display indicated that the boarding tube was at full pressure and then shortly after that the door slid open. Rather than a squad of heavily armed Dorcons charging attempting to storm Moonbase Alpha though there was just Keynes standing in the boarding tube in her spacesuit.

"Keynes would you mind explaining what's going on?" Koenig asked as he stepped into view, "And where's Alexander?"

"Tanya's in the cockpit. You might want to check on her in case she needs a hand though." Keynes answered, stepping out of the boarding tube.

"I'm on it." Washington said before he signalled for one of his men to accompany him into the Eagle.

"Now would you mind explaining the story behind that Dorcon attack ship you have stuck to your Eagle?" Koenig said as Keynes approached him.

"Yes colonel. We were boarded by Dorcons who took Tanya and myself back to the home base of Kollus. He requested that we act as his spies here on the moon and I pretended to accept. Then when he returned us to the Eagle I was able to ambush the two Dorcons, killing them before they could kill Tanya." she explained before there was a scream from inside the Eagle.

"What the hell was that?" Russell exclaimed and Keynes smiled.

"Oh I think Sergeant Washington just found Tanya." she said and then she reached into the pockets of her spacesuit and took out the data transmitter she had been given by Kollus and handed it to Koenig, "Colonel this is the device I was supposed to use to signal to the Dorcons."

"Can this transmit faster than light?" Koenig asked as he took the device from her but Keynes shook her head.

"I don't think so colonel. I think it's just supposed to signal to any scout ship that happened to find us. I was supposed to put details of our defences in it." she said and then she looked at Russell, "I also asked them to give me these. I said it would help make people here trust me more."

"What are they?" Koenig asked.

"Seeds." Russell replied and she smiled, "Keynes are these for the species I think they are?"

"I hope so. I drew the flower from the plant used for Professor Bergman's medicine. With them we should be able to start growing our own." Keynes said.

"Oh my God." Koenig said suddenly, looking towards the boarding tube as Washington and the other soldier reappeared with Alexander standing between them, now holding the fabric tube that had been used to bind her up in front of her, "Lieutenant I think you should go and get dressed. Then you can explain to me properly what happened."

"Yes colonel." Alexander responded before she hurried away, doing her best to keep her back away from the grinning soldiers.

"Colonel I must also report that when held by the Dorcons we encountered Major Capston. The Dorcons destroyed the colony he and Mister Foxworth tried to establish. Everyone who deserted is now either dead or a prisoner of the Dorcons. From the look of Major Capston I suspect that those who are dead are better off." Keynes said.

"Do you think that we can rescue them?" Russell asked.

"I don't even know where they are. Major Capston said that the colony wasn't attacked by Kollus' forces. He was traded after being captured." Keynes said before she looked at Maya and added, "Maya we met another prisoner as well. He said his name was Mentor and that he was your-"

"My grandfather." Maya interrupted, her eyes widening, "My grandfather is still alive." and then she suddenly leapt forwards to embrace Keynes, "I'd given up hope." she added.

"Maya you have my word," Koenig said, "I'll do whatever I can to secure his release. He and I had a deal and bringing him here to Alpha was part of that."

When the bowl of food and jug of water were passed through the bars of his cell Mentor saw that it was Shylana that had delivered his meal to him instead of the usual serving slave.

"The humans are gone." she said to him and he nodded.

"Yes, I watched Kollus' personal guards come for them." he replied as he walked to the front of the cell to collect his food, "Were they taken to Thallal?"

"Lord Kollus wanted to make them his spies among their people. He gave them the choice." Shylana told him.

"Surely they would not agree?" Mentor said.

The one called Alyson Keynes did. They plan to kill the other and return her to their moon." Shylana answered and Mentor gasped.

"No, I can't believe it." he said, shaking his head.

"Keynes was lying." Shylana said, "She plans to try and escape. She did her best to try and hide it from me by giving answers and making statements that were vague but I still sensed her true intention."

"And you didn't tell Lord Kollus?" Mentor asked.

"No." Shylana replied, shaking her head, "We have few opportunities to act against the Dorcons and I thought that this might give us at least one small victory."

Koenig closed the wall that separated his office from main mission so that he, Russell, Verdeschi, Bergman, Carter and Kano could hold their discussion in private.

"So tell me what we have." he said as he sat down behind his desk.

"A big fat intelligence find." Verdeschi responded first.

"This is the first time we're getting a look at an intact Dorcon ship." Bergman said, "We've dozens of wrecks but there's a world of difference between that and a working example."

"One I can't wait to try out." Carter added.

"Aren't you concerned about crashing it?" Russell asked.

"Trust me Doctor, I know what I'm doing. I'll have the thing taken out into space the same way Keynes landed it. Then I'll try a few moves to get the feel of her before she's brought back on top of an Eagle again. Landing and taking off will come later." Carter answered.

"I'd really like to get a look at the computer." Kano said and Bergman nodded.

"Yes, I want see how the targeting system interfaces with the navigation computer. That sort of information is key to successful navigation through wormholes. Colonel this could be the key to getting us back home." he said.

"And now that we have those seeds the pressure is off getting it done before we run out of your medication Victor." Russell added and Bergman smiled.

"So they are the right seeds then?" Koenig asked and Russell nodded.

"Yes John, Keynes did well to ask for them. The seeds are what we make the drug Victor uses from so I'm going to split off about a quarter of them and set them aside to produce some of the drug directly if our supplies drop too low. Meanwhile I'll use the rest to cultivate new crops. With any luck they'll start to produce seeds of their own in four or five months."

"That's good to know doctor. I was worried that I'd die out here of something as undignified as a heart attack." Bergman said.

"Of course this still leaves the issue of Keynes." Verdeschi said, "She should have released Alexander and turned control of the Eagle over to her immediately." and Carter nodded.

"That does break the conditions of her parole colonel." he added.

"Yes and I've spoken to Alexander about what happened." Koenig responded, "She's going to handle it."

12.

Forbidden from having any electronic devices in her quarters, Keynes was reading from an old fashioned paper book. Similarly the photographs that decorated the room were simple printed hard copies rather than being displayed on a modern electronic photo frame that could store and cycle through thousands of images. When her door chimed to indicate that there was someone in the hallway outside she could not control the door but she still looked up and called out.

"Come in." she said and the door slid open to reveal Alexander standing outside in her duty uniform with a holdall slung over one shoulder and a stun gun holstered on her belt. Walking through the open doorway Alexander then used her comlock to close the door behind her but not before Keynes noticed that the two guards who would normally be on duty outside were not there, "What happened to the guards?" she asked. "They've been stood down. I asked to be your escort personally." Alexander answered, "Now get up."

"My escort?" Keynes said as she put her book down and got to her feet.

"Now where's your prison uniform? You'll need to put it back on where we're going." Alexander told her and Keynes winced.

"I'm being sent back to prison? Just because I didn't untie you and let you fly us back to Alpha?" she said in amazement.

"Just get changed Alyson. Unless you'd rather I stun you." Alexander said, her hand moving towards the stun gun.

"Fine, but this is ridiculous. It was a joke Tanya." Keynes said as she walked over to a closet and opened it. Inside most of the clothes hung up were sets of plain combat fatigues like the ones she was already wearing but among them there was also a plain white bodysuit. Keynes took this out along with a pair of lightweight boots and brought them back to the bed.

"Now get changed." Alexander told her and Keynes sighed and shook her head as she began to undo her clothing.

Alexander waited and watched as Keynes changed, removing her fatigues and underwear before putting on the prison uniform and boots.

"There, happy now?" Keynes said and Alexander walked over to the bed beside Keynes to set down her holdall and opened it.

"Hold out your hands Alyson." she said and Keynes groaned, knowing what was coming. Sure enough as Alexander reached into the holdall Keynes heard the sound of chains jangling and she sighed. Alexander then turned around and locked a set of handcuffs around Keynes' wrists and Keynes immediately realised that something was not right about them. The weight of the restraints was heavier than those used when she had originally been arrested but more obvious was the bright pink fur that was wrapped around them. This at least provided some cushioning against the metal but they were still secure and this was not normal.

"Hey these aren't prison issue." she said as Alexander crouched down to fit a set of similarly furry leg irons around her ankles.

"Do you think I'd really rely on that standard issue junk? A kid could pick those locks. No, these are from my collection. Now sit down." Alexander told her and she pushed Keynes back onto the bed before turning around and walking over to the kitchen unit.

"Tanya what's going on? If I'm being sent back to prison I ought to be able to speak to Colonel Koenig first. I shouldn't just be dragged off in these ridiculous things." Keynes protested and she held up her cuffed hands. Alexander did not respond to her question though. Instead she returned from the kitchen unit with a plastic mug that she set down on the bedside table. Then she reached into the holdall and produced a box of wine with a built in tap and she put this down beside the mug, "Seriously Tanya, what are you doing?"

"Just shut up and drink this Alyson." Alexander told her as she filled the mug with wine and then handed it to her, "Or would you rather I just poured it down your throat?"

Keynes took the mug and then took a sip of the wine, wincing at the flavour.

"This is disgusting." she said.

"Well it's not my fault that the nearest vineyard is about seven thousand light years away at the moment. Your Red Mars friends saw to that. Now hurry up and drink it."

Keynes gulped the wine from the mug down and then gasped when it was empty before coughing.

"There." she said, tipping the mug upside down to demonstrate that it was empty. Alexander then took the mug from her and refilled it before handing it back again.

"Drink." she said.

Reluctantly Keynes took the mug and once again drank the contents before Alexander refilled it for a third time.

"Am I supposed to drink that entire box?" Keynes asked.

"No if I know you this should be just about enough." Alexander said.

"Enough for what?" Keynes said before she began to drink.

"Enough that you'll be just tipsy enough that you won't be able to think up any lies." Alexander said as she walked over to a nearby chair and sat down facing Keynes and leaning forwards, "Do you know why I hate you Alyson?" she said.

"You've made that clear. You think I'm a traitor. Everyone does." Keynes replied, "I've told that Red Mars threatened my sister and her family but-

"Oh shut up about that Alyson. You turned your back on everyone. We were best friends and you just cut me out." Alexander interrupted, "Did you know that I was supposed to be your defence at your court martial? But you decided that you'd refuse any council."

"I was guilty Tanya. I didn't need defending. It was pointless Colonel Koenig ordering you to-"

"Koenig didn't order me Alyson, I volunteered!" Alexander snapped, "I volunteered just so you wouldn't have to go through that alone. But you had to play the martyr and go it alone."

"I didn't know." Keynes said.

"Of course not, you wouldn't let anyone near you. I tried visiting you in prison to talk to you about it but you'd already tried slitting your wrists and you wouldn't stop demanding to see your precious John Koenig that the guards had strapped you down and gagged you so you wouldn't die on their watch or keep annoying them. Even then all you could think about was your silly little schoolgirl crush on John Koenig. The rest of us didn't count for anything did we? You know I split up from my boyfriend? He dumped me because he didn't want to be associated with a member of the GDF and I didn't even have my best friend to turn to because you decided to leave all that behind." Alexander responded angrily, "I even spent hours printing out all those damned photos for you." she added, pointing to the photographs on the wall.

"You did that? But I thought-"

"You thought it was Colonel Koenig perhaps? Why would he waste his time on you?" Alexander said.

"Tanya I'm sorry. I just didn't realise what you were trying to do for me. I really thought everyone was so mad at me that they wanted nothing to do with me."

"Yeah well everyone was mad at you. They still are." Alexander said.

"But why send me back to prison? What I did can't have been that bad." Keynes said and Alexander smiled.

"Oh I'm not taking you to prison Alyson." Alexander said before she stood up and began to undress, putting her clothes, comlock and stun gun down on the floor beside the chair. This revealed that under her uniform instead of ordinary underwear she was wearing a prison bodysuit identical to the one that Keynes was now wearing.

"Tanya what are you doing?" Keynes said as Alexander walked back to her holdall and took out a set of prison issue boots that she then put on.

"Getting ready." Alexander replied as she locked another set of leg irons around her ankles. Sitting beside Keynes she then used a third set of leg irons to link their legs together before handcuffing herself, passing the cuffs through Keynes' arms to bind them together, "Okay shall we go?"

"Go where? What's going on Tanya?" Keynes said, confused.

"We're going out drinking." Alexander said, "Come on, I've got a lot of catching up to do."

"In handcuffs?"

"Why not? It'll be fun."

"Well for starters I'm under house arrest, remember? If I get caught going out I'll be sent back to prison in chains for real." Keynes pointed out.

"Alyson you can go where you want with a suitable escort and that's me. No-one is going to arrest you for breaking your parole." Alexander told her.

"And what are we supposed to do for money in these outfits?" Keynes added.

"Oh I wasn't planning on either of us paying for drinks. We're gorgeous and wearing skin tight clothes. I'm sure we'll find plenty of guys willing to buy us drinks." Alexander said and Keynes frowned.

"Do we have to be chained up?" she said, holding up her hands and pulling Alexander's arms in the process.

"Kind of, yes."

"Why?"

"Because I don't have the keys." Alexander said.

"What? You left the keys in your apartment?" Keynes exclaimed.

"No. I gave them to someone." Alexander replied and Keynes sighed.

"Who?" Keynes said and Alexander shrugged.

"I don't know." she said.

"Tanya, how can you not know?" Keynes asked.

"Because I randomised it."

"Randomised it?"

"Yes, I put the keys in an envelope and then put some coins in other envelopes. Then after sealing them up I

gave them to people to look after. After we're done drinking we'll just go to them and ask for the envelopes back until we find the one with the key inside. Come on it'll be fun." Alexander said, "There is just one thing I need to now first though."

"Go on." Keynes said nervously.

"In prison they had tied you to a bed and gagged you when Colonel Koenig came to offer you the plea deal. Were you hoping that he was there to free you or that he'd come to ravish you while you were utterly helpless?" Alexander said and then she smiled. Seeing this Keynes smiled back at her.

"Oh God Tanya, I'd let you chain me to this bed for the rest of my life if John Koenig would just ravish me every night," she said, "Now can we go so I can finish getting drunk?"