

Space: 2299



11: No Good Deed

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Discovering a planet with a population enslaved by the Dorcons, Koenig resolves to free them. However, the Dorcons have put in place measures that make the natives totally dependent on them and there is only limited time before the moon leaves the system again.

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I.

"You asked for us deputy?" Colonel John Koenig asked the sheriff's deputy when he and Doctor Helena Russell, Moonbase Alpha's chief medical officer they arrived in the small park area located near the main travel tube station that provided transit to other bases on the moon. This area provided an environment designed to be similar to that on Earth where passers by could stop a rest for a while among the vegetation. Now though there were several sheriff's officers present to simply wave any of the few passers by around at such an early hour onwards.

"Yes colonel. We got a report about a pair of individuals acting in a suspicious manner and when we responded we found two people who appeared to be escaped convicts that were both heavily intoxicated." the deputy said.

"Escaped convicts? As in escaped from Moonbase Theta?" Russell asked and the deputy nodded.

"That's what it looked like at first but of course no-one has ever escaped from there." he said.

"No, even if you could dig a tunnel out the lack of air would be a problem." Koenig commented, "So why summon us?"

"Well we ran their faces through our recognition software and the hits that came back said they were two of yours, GDF that is and we thought you'd like them back." the sheriff's deputy said before he stepped aside to allow Koenig and Russell to see as far as one of the benches behind him. On this sat two young women, both of them wearing the form fitting white body suits of prisoners at Moonbase Theta, the moon's maximum security prison. The two women also had their hands cuffed in front of them and looped through one another so that they were effectively tied together as they sat slumped against one another, apparently unconscious, "From the smell of their breath I'd say they'd had quite a lot to drink." the deputy added.

"Alexander and Keynes." Koenig said as he looked at the women. Then he turned towards Russell and added, "From the looks of things I'd say that Keynes isn't being frozen out quite so much any more."

"I guess her helping Alexander escape from the Dorcons must have thawed their relationship." Russell replied, nodding her head, "Now I better take a quick look at them and make sure they haven't poisoned themselves."

"Good idea." the deputy said as Russell walked over to where Alexander and Keynes leant against one another.

Crouching down in front of them Russell checked the pulses of the two women by placing a finger on each of their necks.

"Well they're still alive at any rate." she said before Keynes, the smaller of the two women groaned and began to stir causing Russell to lean in closer. It was then that Keynes leant away from Alexander and instead placed her head on Russell's shoulder.

"John Koenig you are such a beautiful man." she murmured.

"Oh really?" Russell said in a clear voice and Keynes' eyes opened suddenly to see Doctor Russell right in front of her. This prompted Keynes to let out a brief scream that woke Alexander up suddenly as well.

"Doctor." Keynes said.

"What's going on?" Alexander added before she realised that she was wearing handcuffs, "Wait, did we never figure out who had the key?" she added.

"No, so thanks to you we're still stuck like this." Keynes replied.

"Okay, okay. Just complain a bit quieter." Alexander added, wincing.

"Ladies there have been complaints." Koenig said as he stepped closer.

"Colonel Koenig." Keynes said in surprise, not having noticed his presence.

"Yes. The Moonbase Alpha Sheriff's Department called me and Doctor Russell to come and get you. Just in case neither of you were aware it is currently six twenty in the morning so you can understand that this does not leave me in the best of moods. Now I suggest you head back to your quarters and then I'll send Maya to escort you to my office at about ten thirty so that you can explain your behaviour to me." Koenig said.

Not long after he had started his duty shift Koenig looked up at the two men who entered his office together. One of them, the dark skinned man, was one of his subordinates in the Global Defence Force while the older light skinned man was a civilian.

"Captain Kano, Professor Bergman. I was just reviewing the state of construction at Mu, it looks like the shield is nearly complete and should be ready for testing within a couple of days. Now what can I do for you?" he asked.

"Colonel I'd like to launch a probe." Bergman answered.

"I thought we were due to pass through the wormhole soon. In under two hours in fact." Koenig said, looking from his office into main mission where there was a countdown clock visible that showed how long it was

estimated until the moon next entered the expanding wormhole that would take it to another location, most likely in a different star system.

"Yes colonel." Bergman replied, nodding his head, "I'd like to be able to monitor exactly what happens as we transit the wormhole from a remote location. The probe will transmit its findings to a receiver at the observatory at Moonbase Zeta and relay them to us here."

"The professor has given me the specifications of how he wants the probe configured colonel. I can get it done in about thirty minutes and we can have it in space in under an hour." Kano added.

"Very well, I'll authorise it." Koenig said.

"Thank you colonel." Bergman said.

"Colonel obviously this means that we'll be leaving the probe behind. Do you want the first contact package including in the probe?" Kano asked.

"Captain, so far every space faring species we've encountered since leaving Earth has been hostile. I'd rather not leave them a roadmap to our home world when they may be able to reach it well before we can. I know that standard procedure is to include a first contact package on any probe sent somewhere where an intelligent species might recover it but I think we should be more pragmatic." Koenig told him.

"So no package then?" Kano said.

"No package captain." Koenig replied.

"Yes colonel." Kano said before another officer with a major's rank markings on his shoulder came rushing into main mission and came to a halt just inside the entrance.

"They're coming." he called out in an Australian accent, "Turn up the volumes now." and the background noise in main mission began to increase as the volume on every piece of equipment was turned up and the brightness of displays was also increased.

"Who's coming?" Bergman commented.

"Lieutenant Alexander and Alyson Keynes." Koenig said, "They were found drunk in an arboretum dressed as if they'd just escaped from prison and I'd like to hear their explanation."

"Does this have anything to do with the pair of them waking me up at three this morning looking for the key that Alexander gave me yesterday?" Bergman asked.

"Key? Alexander gave you a key?" Koenig said and Bergman nodded.

"Yes, it was sealed in an envelope." he said.

"She gave me an envelope with a coin in it. The same goes for pretty much all the senior staff at Alpha."

Kano added, "They were at my door about half an hour after they came to you professor."

"I'm guessing that the key Alexander gave you was to the handcuffs she and Keynes were found wearing."

Koenig said, "But what I don't get is why didn't they unlock themselves after getting the key from you? They said they didn't know where it was."

"That will be because I didn't give it to them colonel." Bergman said and both Koenig and Kano stared at him.

"You didn't give them the key?" Kano said.

"No. I'd heard about Alexander giving other people envelopes with coins in them so it was obvious that those were decoys to hide the location of the key. I'm sure that you can understand that I wasn't very pleased about being woken up at that hour even if Alyson Keynes has just solved the issue of the limited supply we had of my medicine so I switched the envelope Alexander gave me for another that I put a coin in." Bergman said and Koenig smiled.

"Professor you really are a genius." he said, "Now I need to deal with this issue. I'll send the two ladies to your lab once I'm done. Feel free to make any reasonable demand of them in exchange for the key."

"Of course colonel." Bergman replied before he turned to leave, heading down the steps that led back into main mission.

"I'll go and set the probe configuration colonel." Kano said and Koenig nodded.

"Yes captain, you do that. Make it your top priority." he replied just as Alexander and Keynes were escorted into main mission by another young woman with pale red hair and lieutenant's markings on her uniform. At first glance this woman appeared ordinary but closer examination would reveal her prominent widow's peak, sloping eyebrows and unusually pale eyes with slit-like pupils. Maya was a Psychon, a species engineered from humans by an advanced alien species that had attacked Earth more than a century earlier. Now her species was largely enslaved by the reptilian Dorcons but Maya had been freed by Koenig and now served as his adjutant where her empathic powers and ability to comprehend languages was most useful. Behind Maya both Alexander and Keynes winced with each high pitched bleep or pulsing light that came from the consoles they passed as Maya led them towards the steps up to Koenig's office.

"Colonel I have brought Lieutenant Alexander and Alyson Keynes as you requested." Maya said as she stood in front of Koenig's desk.

"Very good lieutenant. You may return to your station." Koenig said without looking up and Maya walked back down the steps, leaving Alexander and Keynes standing in Koenig's office and still handcuffed together.

Koenig continued to focus on his computer terminal, leaving the two women waiting while the exaggerated sounds and lights from main mission continued to irritate them. When Koenig leant back he looked at

Alexander and Keynes in turn before he addressed them, "Stand to attention!" he snapped and both women flinched at the sudden sound before trying to stand at attention, something not possible while neither of them could place their arms by their sides, "Major Morrow! Major Carter! Join me in my office." Koenig shouted and Alexander and Keynes flinched again.

"Coming colonel." Morrow called out in response.

"Be right there." the Australian officer Carter added loudly and both men hurried up the steps to Koenig's office. Then when they were inside Koenig activated the control to close the wall between his office and main mission so that they could talk in private.

In main mission Maya walked over to a console occupied by a woman with captain's bars on her shoulders.

"Captain Benes I have a question." Maya said.

"Really, what's that Maya?" Benes asked.

"Why is Colonel Koenig behaving as if he was angry? I can tell that he isn't." Maya said and Benes smiled.

"For the same reason we all adjusted our consoles Maya." she said.

"Which is?" Maya said.

"To annoy the hell out of that treasonous bitch Keynes." a young enlisted woman said from close by.

"Spacewoman Baker is correct Maya." Benes added, "Both Tanya and Alyson have consumed far too much alcohol and now they're suffering the consequences. Chief among which is an increased sensitivity to bright pulsing lights and high pitched noises."

"So you are deliberately causing them discomfort. Why? I know that Keynes is widely disliked but I thought Lieutenant Alexander was your friend." Maya said and Baker snorted.

"Not if she's hanging around with Keynes." she said.

"We're doing it for two reasons Maya." Kano said from his duty station while he worked on the probe programming, "Firstly as revenge for the pair of them waking everyone up in the middle of the night looking for a key."

"And secondly?" Maya said.

"It's funny as hell." Benes said.

2.

Inside Koenig's office Alpha's three most senior officers all looked at Alexander and Keynes.

"Why don't you just start from the beginning?" Koenig said and the two women looked at one another.

"We decided to go out for a drink colonel." Alexander replied.

"Dressed like that?" Morrow asked.

"It seemed like a fun idea at the time." Alexander said.

"Your idea I'm guessing." Carter commented.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. It was supposed to be easy. We'd go out, have a few drinks, get a little drunk and then go and find the keys to these handcuffs." Alexander said and she lifted her hands, pulling Keynes' hands up in the process.

"These are Tanya's. The key isn't standard." Keynes said.

"Obviously not or the sheriff's deputies would have released you when they found you." Koenig said.

"Where exactly did you go drinking?" Carter said.

"Oh here and there. I don't remember exactly major." Alexander replied.

"There are a lot of bars here at Alpha." Keynes added.

"Bars needing paying and I don't see any pockets in what you're wearing." Koenig pointed out.

"We found another way to get drinks." Keynes said.

"A lot of drinks." Alexander added.

"Oh I think this is going to be interesting." Carter said.

"Well a guy will buy a drink for an attractive woman if he thinks he might get a kiss out of it." Keynes said and she and Alexander looked at one another again before Alexander continued.

"Yes and if a bar full of guys get to watch while two attractive women kiss one another then every one of them will buy those two women a drink." she said.

"But by the end of the night we were so drunk that Tanya couldn't remember everyone that she could have given the key to and even after we tried going to everyone she could remember giving an envelope to we still couldn't find it." Keynes said.

"What do you think?" Koenig asked, looking at Morrow and Carter.

"Well my wife wasn't happy about being woken up by these two in the middle of the night but I don't think that there's been any serious harm done." Morrow answered.

"Agreed." Carter said and Koenig nodded.

"Yes, the sheriff's office aren't pressing any charges so it's down to me to decide how this will be dealt with." he said and he looked at the two handcuffed women, "Professor Bergman has the keys to your handcuffs."

"The professor? But we went to him." Keynes said, frowning.

"Yes at three in the morning. He swapped the envelope with the key for another with a coin." Koenig told her and Alexander groaned.

"You were both drunk and disorderly. Lieutenant Alexander this will be recorded on your service record and Miss Keynes this will be taken into account in any review of your parole." Koenig went on, "In the meantime you'll both work an extra shift today. I know you're both supposed to be off so it won't interfere with your other work. You'll assist Professor Bergman in his laboratory now off you go."

"So will he unlock us colonel?" Alexander asked.

"I've left that up to him. Now off you go, the professor is expecting you." Koenig said as he opened the wall again and Alexander and Keynes both headed down the steps carefully, not wanting to fall.

"Back to work for us as well I suppose Paul." Carter said, smiling at Morrow.

"Of course. With your permission colonel." Morrow replied and Koenig nodded.

"Yes, you're both dismissed. Let me know when we're about to enter the wormhole." Koenig replied and the other two officers also headed down the steps towards main mission. As they did so the wall slid shut behind them again as Koenig got back to work, not wanting to be disturbed.

"I've got an idea." Carter told Morrow and instead of making his way back to his own console he led Morrow towards Kano, "David are you free?" he said quietly and Kano looked up at him.

"Sure. I've just finished reconfiguring the probe program and I'm waiting for it to upload." he replied.

"All licenced premises have to log their security camera footage with the sheriff's department, right?" Carter said and Kano nodded.

"Yes, to make sure they're complying with the terms of their licence." he said.

"So can you run a facial recognition search on that footage to find out which bars Alexander and Keynes went to last night?" Carter asked.

"Easy. Why?" Kano answered and Carter smiled.

"Just humour me." he said.

"I can't believe you're doing this Alan." Morrow commented.

"Should I-" Kano began.

"Just do it." Carter interrupted, "Trust me you'll like it."

"What are you up to?" Benes said from her console and she moved her chair back so that she could peer over to Kano's console as he began the search.

"Here you go, I've got her." Kano said when Alexander's image was flagged in the logged footage.

"Play it, high speed but be ready to drop to normal playback. You'll know when. Make sure to follow Alexander and Keynes." Carter said and on the screen in front of Kano the security footage began to play at an increased rate.

As instructed by Carter, Kano had the playback follow Alexander and Keynes from the point where they entered the bar to where they sat down and at the high playback speed it was not long before a group of men began to gather around them.

"Here we go." Carter said before the two women leant towards one another and Kano slowed the footage to normal speed just as they began to kiss.

"Is this for real?" he said.

"Oh yes, very much." Carter replied, smiling.

"Oh God." Benes commented, shaking her head and returning to her own console.

"My wife would be furious if she caught me watching this." Morrow said as he leant forwards.

"I don't see you walking away major." Benes said.

"I've already seen some and I won't be in any more trouble if I watch it all." Morrow said.

"What are they watching?" Maya asked Benes.

"Tanya and Alyson making out." Benes told her.

"You're kidding." Baker said, "Lieutenant Alexander sank that low?"

"What is 'making out'?" Maya added.

"Kissing Maya." Benes replied and Maya frowned.

"But why would they be kissing and why is it so interesting?" she said.

"They were doing it to get free drinks." Carter said.

"Well you can see why they got them. How long did they go on?" Kano added.

"I'm hoping a long time." Carter responded.

"And you can see that the reason it is so interesting is because men are largely perverts Maya." Baker said and Carter looked towards her and pointed to the rank markings on his shoulder.

"That's Major Pervert Sir, spacewoman." he said before looking down at Kano again, "David can you give me a copy of this?"

"Sure." Kano responded, "What about you?" he added, looking at Morrow.

"No thanks. My wife really would explode if I took a copy of that." he replied.

"I still do not understand." Maya said.

"For some reason some guys like it when women kiss one another." Baker said.

"I see. Major Carter would you like it if I were to kiss Captain Benes?" Maya said.

"Whoa!" Benes exclaimed, "Can I stay out of this?" then she glanced towards Kano's console and saw the three male officers there looking at her, "And you better not be thinking of saying 'yes'." she said.

"I think we're done." Morrow said and he hurried back to his console.

"So you'll get me that copy?" Carter then asked and Kano nodded before the Australian pilot also returned to his duty station.

"Why is everyone so embarrassed?" Maya asked, looking around at the other command staff.

"So this is a computer model of a wormhole?" Keynes said, looking at the large wall mounted display in the laboratory that was permanently assigned to Professor Bergman. Keynes and Alexander were still handcuffed together and while Keynes had a limited scientific background Alexander was feeling out of her depth as Bergman asked them to carry out tasks.

"Yes, I've been working on it since we left our solar system. If we're going to be able to navigate a wormhole then we need to understand them. The problem is that we haven't been able to take any truly detailed sensor readings of one as a ship was actually passing through one. We have basic thermal profiles and some other electromagnetic readings taken as alien craft have entered and exited them but those have been opportunistic. Scans from the lunar surface have proved limited, the radioactive emissions from the ruins of Moonbase Mu that hold the wormhole open disrupt everything. Captain Kano and I have devised a plan to use a probe to record our entry into the wormhole that we travel through."

"But won't the probe be left behind? How will you get the data?" Alexander said.

"The data will be transmitted in real time right up to the point where our entry into the wormhole makes it impossible." Bergman answered, "I'm hoping that there will be energy emissions that may give us some clue about what it is that determines our destination and from that how our travel through one can be controlled." "Well I guess you'll find out in about ten minutes professor." Alexander commented.

"What?" Bergman responded and Alexander attempted to point at a clock on another display that was counting down only to find that she could not move her arms far enough while handcuffed to Keynes.

"Your timer shows there's nine and a half minutes until we enter the wormhole again." she said and Bergman's eyes widened.

"I need to get to main mission." he exclaimed and he ran to the exit from the laboratory.

"Hey professor how about taking these off?" Alexander called out after Bergman but the door just slid closed behind him and Alexander looked at Keynes, "I suppose you think this is my fault don't you?" she said and Keynes nodded slowly.

3.

"Professor you're just in time. Less than a minute to go." Koenig said as Bergman rushed into main mission so that he could be there to witness the moon's travel through the wormhole.

"Yes, sorry I'm late. I got caught up with checking the data from Moonbase Mu regarding the shield. That and explaining the computer modelling I've done for wormholes with Keynes and Lieutenant Alexander."

Bergman said before he suddenly paused, "Oh my, I left them in my laboratory still tied together."

"I'm sure they'll keep professor." Koenig said.

"Receiving probe telemetry now." Baker announced suddenly and Bergman hurried to her side.

"Is it what you were expecting professor?" Morrow asked.

"I'll think so, yes." Bergman answered, looking carefully at the stream of data coming from the probe.

"Twenty seconds to go." Benes said.

"Here we go again." Carter said, "Anyone want to take a bet on where we'll end up?"

"No bet here, it's too random." Morrow replied,

"Ten seconds." Benes said, "Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five."

"Everyone brace themselves." Koenig said as he looked out of main mission's windows towards the wormhole that now appeared to fill space over the lunar horizon.

"Four." Benes continued, "Three. Two. One."

For a moment nothing happened, the countdown out by several seconds but inevitably the moon was pulled into the wormhole and everything shook as it was buffeted by the forces involved in travelling from one star system to another. Passing through the wormhole appeared instantaneous to the inhabitants of the moon and once again the blackness of space was now visible over the horizon and while the wormhole itself had shrunk in size to be a bright shining disk in the distance. The only other significant object that Koenig could see through the window was a greenish yellow disc hanging low over the horizon.

"We must be orbiting that." Bergman said as he looked around and out of main mission's windows for himself.

"Looks like the countdown was out by about eight seconds." Morrow said.

"Not bad professor." Koenig said, smiling at Bergman, "Benes what can you tell me about where we are?" he added, looking across main mission at the woman.

"The professor is correct colonel, we're orbiting a rocky planet about three quarters the diameter of Earth. Computer analysis of the atmosphere suggests that it is largely nitrogen, sulphur dioxide and methane." Benes said.

"A nasty mix. I guess we won't be going down there." Carter commented.

"Not if I can help it, no." Koenig said, "What else Benes? There must be something else out there with a significant gravitational pull to have created the Lagrange point."

"Yes colonel. I'm picking up a moon about a third of our diameter ahead of us in the orbital path. We came out at the L-five Lagrange point and according to the professor's calculation program we'll be here for just over thirty-nine hours.."

"Err colonel." Baker said, frowning.

"Yes spacewoman, what is it?" Koenig asked.

"Colonel I'm still picking up telemetry from the probe." Baker answered and Bergman immediately looked back down at the console.

"She's right colonel. This data stream is from the probe we launched to observe our entry into the wormhole." he said.

"Professor, could it be a quirk of the wormhole echoing the data we received at the moment we entered it?" Koenig said as he walked over to where the professor and Baker were watching the data stream.

"No colonel, this is all time stamped." Bergman replied, "Each data packet has a unique time stamp and we can see it progressing normally. This is still a real time signal that is reaching us through the wormhole."

"Colonel the probe telemetry isn't the only signal we're receiving." Benes said, "I'm picking up a radio signal."

"Artificial?" Koenig said and Benes nodded.

"Yes colonel. Frequency modulated about one hundred and twenty-two Megahertz." she said.

"You mean there's someone down on that hellish lump of rock?" Morrow asked, pointing through the window at the planet with its deadly atmosphere.

"No major, I don't think that the planet we're orbiting is the source of the signal. I think it's coming from another planet in the system." Benes replied.

"Find it." Koenig ordered, "And pass that signal to Captain Kano, I want to know what that signal is."

"Yes colonel." Benes responded and while she searched for the source of the mysterious radio signal Kano set to work examining it.

"May I see?" Bergman said as he walked away from Baker's station and to Kano's.

"Of course professor. Here's the signal." Kano replied and he pointed to a pair of visual representations of the signal that was being picked up. One of these showed the radio wave with its constant amplitude but varying frequency while the other analysed the relative strengths of the component frequencies.

"Yes, that definitely an FM signal." Bergman said.

"What sort of technology is required for that?" Koenig asked.

"Oh similar to the level that humanity possessed towards the end of the twentieth century. It's an analogue format that is superior to basic amplitude modulation but the digital formats we've used since then are far superior." Bergman said and Koenig smiled.

"This could work for us." he said, "A society with that level of development is one we could trade with. They probably know enough about the universe to be able to accept the existence of life on other planets and they'll have a manufacturing base that could provide us with resources we're short of."

"What would we offer them in return colonel?" Carter asked.

"Technology." Morrow suggested and Koenig nodded in agreement.

"Exactly." he said, "We've got three hundred years of technological advancement over them. Think of everything we've developed since then, fusion power, efficient interplanetary travel, artificial gravity."

"We actually reverse engineered that from the aliens who attacked us colonel." Bergman pointed out.

"But the point is that we have and they probably don't." Koenig replied, "That gives us something to trade."

"Colonel I think I've isolated the source of the signal but it doesn't look like an industrialised planet." Benes announced.

"Put it on the big screen." Koenig said and Alpha's command staff turned their attention to the large wall mounted screen that Benes sent an image of the planet the radio signal was coming from to.

"Now that looks more welcoming." Carter said when he saw the mix of land that was green with vegetation and wide, blue oceans.

"What's the problem Captain Benes?" Koenig asked as he looked at the image as well.

"Well shouldn't a planet as developed as Earth in the twentieth century be sending hundreds of different signals into space?" Benes responded.

"Thousands probably. If the natives' society was anything like ours then every major population centre should be emitting radio signals. Not just communications either, tracking systems and electrical noise from technology that predates shielding techniques. All of that would be detectable from here." Bergman explained.

"There goes the chance of getting some decent booze." Carter commented.

"Professor can you take a look at those readings. There's obviously something out there and I'd like to know what it is." Koenig said and Bergman nodded.

"Of course." he said.

"Colonel I think this is an audio signal." Kano announced.

"A voice?" Morrow suggested.

"Possibly." Kano answered.

"Can you let us hear it captain?" Koenig said.

"I think so colonel." Kano said.

"Then do it." Koenig ordered and Kano quickly fed the signal into his console's audio processing system before playing it.

The sound that was produced sounded like no human language but it did seem to be produced by a living being from the variation in the tone.

"What is that?" Baker said.

"It's a call for help." Maya responded.

"You can tell that just from a few seconds of it?" Morrow said and Maya nodded.

"Yes Major Morrow, I can sense the desperation." she told him.

"What sort of help are they looking for Maya?" Koenig asked.

"I'm sorry Colonel Koenig but I can't tell that yet. All I can tell is that whoever is sending that signal needs help." Maya answered.

"A crashed starship?" Carter said, "They could be sending a radio signal back to their home planet asking for a pick up."

"Which could mean that they came through a wormhole. They might be able to tell us how the technology works." Morrow added.

"Benes how far away is the planet this signal is coming from?" Koenig said.

"About three light minutes colonel." Benes replied.

"Half an hour by Eagle." Carter commented.

"Major Carter I want a rescue Eagle prepared for launch from pad one as soon as possible, you'll fly it and I'll be your co-pilot. Maya, you're with us as well, we'll need you to figure out how to communicate with the sender of that signal."

"Colonel are you sure it's safe for you to go?" Morrow said.

"Don't worry major, I'll take Master Sergeant Washington and a squad of his men with us as well." Koenig said as he took out his comlock and activated the device, calling Doctor Russell.

"John." she said when her face appeared on his comlock's screen.

"Helena we've picked up a distress signal from a nearby planet. I'm taking a team down to find out what's going on and we might need a doctor." Koenig told her.

"Okay I'll grab a medical kit and join you." Russell said and Koenig smiled.

"I knew you would. We'll be leaving from pad one as soon as everything is prepared." he said before shutting off the comlock.

"Colonel the readings we're picking up from the planet are very unusual." Bergman said.

"In what way?" Koenig asked as he turned towards the professor.

"Well there may not be much in the way of radio signals coming from it but there are other indications of widespread habitation. Thermal readings indicate large numbers of hotspots, many of which are in clusters varying from a few dozen to thousands of them. I think we're looking at domestic fires. Some even look hot enough to be simple foundries." Bergman said.

"So an early industrial society instead of one with widespread knowledge of electronics." Kano said and Bergman nodded.

"Precisely. About a hundred years less advanced than we had hoped. It may still be possible to trade with them though. For example they should have knowledge of fermentation." Bergman said and he glanced at Carter.

"Okay professor we'll see what they have to offer and what we might be able to offer them. In the meantime Major Morrow, Alpha is yours until I get back. Carter, Maya, you're with me."

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The rescue pod fitted to the Eagle was marked on the outside with prominent red and white stripes and inside was equipped with the best medical equipment that could be fitted into a mobile facility. There was also sufficient seating capacity for the squad of armoured soldiers that Koenig had ordered to be brought along as well as Maya and Doctor Russell herself.

In the Eagle's cockpit Alan sat in the pilot's seat while Koenig sat beside him as they prepared for lift off. "This is Rescue Eagle One to main mission. We are secure and the boarding tube is retracted, requesting permission to take off." Carter signalled.

"Affirmative rescue Eagle One." Baker's voice responded, "You are cleared to depart. Safe voyage."

"Thanks spacewoman. Rescue Eagle One out." Carter said before he pulled back on the Eagle's flight controls, firing its ventral thrusters so that the craft rose up off the large red cross-shaped launch pad. Carter then turned the Eagle towards the distant alien planet and accelerated as rapidly as he could up to its practical maximum speed.

"I'm picking up the radio signal." Koenig said.

"Can you get a lock on its point of origin colonel?" Carter asked.

"Not yet, we'll have to get closer but it does look like it's coming from this large continent here." Koenig said and he pointed to an image of the planet on the screen in front of him.

"Okay I'll set a course that takes us towards it and we'll see if we can narrow down the point of origin when we get closer." Carter said.

Koenig then reached for the intercom.

"Maya?" he said into it.

"Yes Colonel Koenig?" she responded from the rescue pod.

"Maya I'm feeding you the radio signal. Can you take a listen to it and see if you can narrow down what it's all about before we get to the planet?" Koenig said.

"Of course Colonel Koenig. Although in half an hour I may not be able to provide a full translation." Maya replied.

"Anything is better than nothing lieutenant. Just do your best." Koenig said before he shut off the intercom again.

The closer the Eagle got to the alien planet where the radio signal was coming from the smaller the possible area for it to be coming from became. However, there were other details about the planet that began to be revealed by the Eagle's sensors.

"This is supposed to be an early industrial planet isn't it colonel?" Carter said.

"That's what Professor Bergman said, yes. Why?" Koenig replied.

"Well I'm picking up orbital structures." Carter told him.

"Orbital structures?" Koenig said as he looked at the Eagle's lidar display.

"Yes colonel and some of them are far too big to be satellites. We're talking about space stations." Carter said.

Sure enough Koenig saw that the Eagle's lidar was detecting a large number of objects in orbit around the planet. These varied in size from just a few centimetres across to almost a hundred metres. These had all the hallmarks of a civilisation that was in the early stages of exploring their solar system, exactly as would be expected from one that was using frequency modulation radio signals.

"It's all inert." Koenig commented as he checked the data from the other sensors carried aboard the Eagle, "No energy readings of any kind. I'd say that this lot has been drifting out here for a long time."

"Hey colonel does anything about that area of land near the coast right there look odd to you?" Carter added, pointing to a coastal region of the planet that was now visible through the Eagle's forward viewports where the largely natural looking terrain gave way to a massive crater.

"I'm picking up massive radiation readings." Koenig said as he looked at the Eagle's sensors once more.

"The sort you'd get from triggering off a nuclear bomb on the surface of a planet by any chance?" Carter asked and Koenig nodded.

"If the reports I saw of the experiments carried out at Mu are anything to go by, yes." he said.

"Looks like that's the only one though. I don't see any other craters." Carter said, studying the rest of the planet that was visible.

"Take us around in a quick orbit. There could be more craters on the other side." Koenig ordered before he activated the intercom, "Okay folks we're in orbit of the planet but we've picked up some unusual energy patterns from the surface so we're going to make an orbit before we land just to make sure that it's safe down there."

"What about that radio signal colonel?" Carter asked.

"I've got a lock on the source. Looks like its about twelve hundred kilometres away from the crater so there shouldn't be any issue with radioactivity there." Koenig answered before after a moment's hesitation he added, "Unless the weather has carried fallout really far."

It was then that the door to the cockpit slid open to reveal Doctor Russell standing in the passageway outside.

"John, what's going on?" she asked.

"Take a look outside Helena." Koenig replied and he pointed through the viewport ahead of him to where there was a cylindrical piece of debris tumbling through space, "Does that look like something that an early industrial society would build?"

"No it doesn't." Russell responded, watching the wreckage as it passed by the Eagle.

"It also looks like someone set off a nuke down there." Carter added.

"A nuclear bomb? Are you sure?" Russell said.

"There's a huge crater and we're picking up extremely high levels of radioactivity." Koenig told her.

"John do you mind if I take a look at those readings?" Russell said.

"Not at all. I'll patch them through to the computer in the pod and while you're reviewing them I'm going to let Alpha know what's going on." Koenig said and Russell nodded.

"Okay, thanks." she said before she left the cockpit again. Meanwhile Koenig activated the Eagle's communication system.

"This is Rescue Eagle One to Moonbase Alpha." he began. He knew that it would take three minutes for his signal to reach the moon and another three for a response to arrive so he did not wait for an acknowledgement before he continued, "We've successfully entered orbit around the planet and discovered wreckage that suggests the inhabitants once had the capability for orbital space flight at the least. There is also a large crater on the surface that appears to be the result of a large nuclear explosion. We have a lock on the source of the radio signal from the surface but I've ordered Major Carter to orbit the planet first to make sure that it is safe to land. We will let you know when we've finished the orbit and how we intend to proceed, until then this is Rescue Eagle One out."

"A nuclear explosion?" Morrow said when he finished listening to the message from Koenig and he looked at Professor Bergman, "Professor can you give us any more information?"

"I'm afraid not major." Bergman replied, "We're much too far from the planet for the radioactivity to be detectable on our sensors. Its just getting lost among the background radiation from the local star. However, I would point out that if the natives have had the technology to launch objects into space and to construct nuclear warheads then it is possible that they could fire one towards us. You'd need more than orbital space flight technology to get a warhead to the moon before we re-enter the wormhole of course."

"It's a risk we can't afford to take though. Kano bring our defences on line. If we detect a launch we can at least try to shoot down a missile before it gets to us. Have the hangar prepare a pair of Hawks for launch as well. Have Captain Fraser and Ramierez suit up to pilot them. They can pick their own number twos. Benes, alert the other bases to activate their defences as well and then I need to speak to Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi." Morrow said.

Since the moon had left Earth's orbit Verdeschi was the second most senior officer present and he commanded the military forces at Moonbase Epsilon.

"Yes major?" Verdeschi said when his face appeared on the screen in front of Morrow.

"Colonel we've received word from Colonel Koenig and there are signs that nuclear weapons have been used on the alien planet." Morrow told him.

"You're concerned that those weapons could reach us?" Verdeschi asked and Morrow nodded.

"Yes colonel. Professor Bergman has said that it's an outside possibility but if there's any chance at all then-" he said before Verdeschi interrupted him.

"Then it's better to err on the side of safety than end up with another one of our bases ending up like Mu." he said, "Okay major I'll put a flight of Hawks up for rapid reaction and bring our surface weapons on line. If Colonel Koenig needs fire support then we can put five conventional warheads into a target on that planet in under ten minutes. What precautions are you taking?"

"Pretty much the same. With Colonel Koenig and Carter away we don't have many pilots rated for Hawks here so I've just ordered two placed on standby." Morrow told him.

"That sounds reasonable. I'll have our early warning sensors directed at the planet. As soon as there's any signs of an attack I'll have the Hawks intercept." Verdeschi said before he shut off the communication system.

"Excuse me major," Bergman said as he then approached Morrow's duty station.

"Yes professor?" Morrow replied.

"If you don't mind I'd like to head back to my lab. The fact that we're still receiving telemetry from the probe

we left behind on the other end of the wormhole is very interesting and I'd like to look into it more." Bergman said, "Plus I suspect that Lieutenant Alexander and Alyson Keynes will be getting impatient for me to return."

The door to the rescue Eagle's pod slid open and Koenig entered it. Inside the unit of ground troops were talking among themselves and suddenly sat up straight when they saw him enter.

"As you were." Koenig told them as he walked along the pod towards the computer console located about half way along it. This was meant for processing medical samples but was capable of much more and both Russell and Maya were sat in the two chairs in front of it. Russell was focused on the environmental data that Koenig had relayed from the Eagle's sensors while Maya was replaying the radio message over and over again.

"John I think you're right about the nuclear explosion, it was a bomb," she said, "and if these readings are anything to go by it must have happened about twenty years ago."

"Well we haven't picked up any signs of any other nuclear explosions so thankfully it seems to have been a one off. Our scans suggest that the atmosphere is breathable. What we have seen though are signs of settlement all over this continent but nothing to suggest that the people here are capable of even making conventional bombs, let alone nuclear ones." Koenig told her before he looked at Maya and added, "Maya, can you tell me anything about that message yet?"

"A little Colonel Koenig." she replied, "The sender is afraid of something. This signal is intended to attract the attention of someone who can help them overcome this fear."

"What about the language?" Koenig asked.

"I have spotted a number of patterns in the words used. I would prefer to witness it being spoken at first hand though." Maya answered.

"Well we're about to enter the atmosphere Maya so you might just get your chance soon." Koenig replied.

The Eagle entered the planet's atmosphere over the ocean, enabling it to descend to a relatively low altitude without being observed before Alan turned inland and followed the radio transmission towards its source. However, as the Eagle flew onwards at just below the speed of sound the signal was suddenly cut off.

"Think that's to do with us colonel, or just a co-incidence?" Carter said when the signal vanished without trace.

"I'm not sure but since we left Earth I've stopped relying on the idea that anything odd could be a coincidence." Koenig replied, "At least we've got the location of the source recorded. We'll find that and circle before we land. At the first sign of trouble I want you to get us back into space though."

"We should have brought an armed Eagle." Carter commented.

"Maybe so but this is supposed to be a rescue mission, not an invasion. We've got Washington and his men if we run into trouble on the ground but I don't want us taking any unnecessary risks." Koenig said.

Carter continued on the Eagle's current course, taking it straight towards the source of the radio transmission. This was located in hilly terrain and among the hills a number of basic stone structures were visible, a number of which had smoke coming from chimneys set into them.

"Now I know they had to have spotted us." Koenig said as he looked down at the ground through the viewports in front of him, "There's no-one about."

"You think they're hiding from us colonel?" Carter suggested.

"Maya said whoever sent that signal was afraid of something. Maybe they think that we're whatever it is that they're afraid of." Koenig replied.

"Colonel look, there's a tower right on that hill over there. Does that look like a good place to broadcast from and be able to see if anyone comes close?" Carter said when he noticed the tall structure not far from their current position.

"Why yes it does major and it happens to be right where the signal was coming from before it was shut off. Take us in but don't land just yet, I want to see if anyone shows themselves." Koenig said.

Carter flew the Eagle closer to the tower and then around it so that he and Koenig could observe the structure from all angles.

"Looks like nobody's home colonel." Carter said and Koenig nodded.

"Okay we can't put this off any longer. Put us down about twenty metres from the tower, side on." he said.

"Got it colonel." Carter replied and he brought the Eagle into land close to the tower so that the structure was to the starboard side of the craft. This would allow the Eagle's occupants to disembark without being seen from the tower rather than being vulnerable to a sniper concealed inside it.

"We're down." Koenig said into the intercom, "Sergeant Washington stand by to deploy from the port side air lock."

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Washington and his men assembled in the Eagle's air lock module and performed a final check on their weapons before Washington opened the outer hatch.

"Go!" he yelled before he charged down the steps leading to the ground where he dropped into a crouching position beside them.

The soldiers spread out as they disembarked from the Eagle to form a semi circle around the airlock. They were careful not to get too far from the Eagle though, just in case there was anyone watching from the tower who would be able to see them over the craft and potentially shoot at them from behind.

"Clear." Washington signalled when the semi-circle was complete and the officers still aboard the Eagle followed the soldiers out of the craft.

Both Koenig and Carter had weapons in their hands and they hurried to the front of the Eagle where they crouched down to get beneath the beak-shaped cockpit. From here they could study the tower without exposing themselves to attack. The tower appeared to be constructed from a material similar to concrete rather than built from discrete blocks and as well as a door at ground level they saw a number of windows at various levels that no longer contained any glass.

"Contact!" one of the soldiers suddenly called out when he saw a figure break from cover behind the ruins of a wall further down the hill the Eagle and tower were at the top of. The figure began to run back down the hill rather than attack though and the soldiers held their fire.

"Hey!" Koenig called out as he emerged from under the Eagle and looked at fleeing figure, "We heard your signal!"

Despite Koenig's shout the figure continued to run down the hill before Maya stepped forwards and also gave a shout.

"Sar gerrus fall!" she yelled and the figure ground to a halt and turned around.

"Maya what did you just say to him?" Russell asked the Psychon woman.

"We bring help I think Doctor Russell." she replied.

Slowly the figure that had been running away began to walk back up the hill towards the Eagle and the landing party from the moon.

"Lower your weapons." Koenig ordered and the soldiers he had brought with him slowly pointed their rifles towards the ground.

As the figure got closer the landing party were able to get a better look at it and they saw that like them it was bipedal and had had two arms and a head on which sensory organs were located. However, the figure was clearly not human, nor did it appear to have been genetically engineered from human ancestors. The head was significantly taller than a human's was, with a roughly cylindrical shape to it and was hairless. In addition to this the hands, although bearing the same number of digits as a human appeared to possess two thumbs each at opposite ends.

As the figure reached the wall it had been hiding behind a second alien emerged to join the first. This one was shorter than the first but otherwise had the same physical layout. Together the two figure continued to walk towards the Eagle and as they came closer it became apparent that they were talking to one another quietly. Anxious to hear what they were saying Maya began to walk towards them.

"Lieutenant be careful." Washington called out after her when she walked between his men and left the perimeter.

"They do not intend us harm Master Sergeant Washington. They are afraid." Maya respond.

"Think we should follow her colonel?" Carter asked, worried that if the aliens did become hostile then as the only person in the landing party without a weapon Maya would be vulnerable.

"No I think she's got this major." Koenig replied.

Standing face to face with the two aliens Maya repeated her previous statement and the smaller of the two then spoke back to her.

"What did they say Maya?" Koenig asked.

"They want to know where we come from colonel. How much should I tell them?" Maya responded.

"How about the truth?" Russell suggested and Koenig nodded.

"I don't see that it could do any harm." he replied, "Maya tell them the truth."

"Yes colonel, I will try but I am not sure if my command of their language is sufficient." Maya said before she looked back at the two aliens and began to speak to them in their own language. Unfortunately she had had too little exposure to this to be able to build up a large vocabulary but with what she did have combined with a few hand gestures, especially pointing upwards towards space, she was able to communicate that they had come from far away and heard the radio signal sent from here.

The taller alien then looked towards the tower and called out towards it. Soon after this more of the aliens emerged from the building and walked around the Eagle. In total there were a dozen of the aliens, only one fewer than the number in the landing party but none of them were carrying any obvious weapons so Washington and his men did not react.

Now that there were more of the aliens present it was possible to see that their skin tones varied somewhat from a plain grey to having a greenish tone as well on some. The size of the aliens varied as well, with some noticeably larger than the others. In humans this would suggest males and females but there was no way to know if this applied to this species in the same way. One of the apparently male aliens had skin that was more wrinkled than the others, giving him the appearance of being older than the others and he stepped closer to study the landing party more closely.

"You are Psychon." he said to Maya in the Psychon language. This was close enough to English that the humans in the landing party were able to understand him when he said this and also when he glanced at them and added, "But they are not."

"You know of the Psychons?" Koenig asked, "I'm Colonel John Koenig by the way. This is Doctor Helena Russell, Major Alan Carter, Master Sergeant Arnold Washington and of course Lieutenant Maya. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Yes Colonel John Koenig my people know of the Psychons." the alien replied.

"Colonel Koenig I do not think he likes my people." Maya commented.

"Does this witch belong to you Colonel John Koenig?" the alien added.

"Maya is my adjutant. An assistant if you like, but she doesn't belong to me." Koenig told him.

"All Psychons are slaves. The others who came here did so in the service of their Dorcon masters." the alien said.

"I don't like the fact that he's talking about Dorcons colonel. They're nothing but trouble." Carter commented.

"Captain this man's voice is the same one I heard on the recording of the radio transmission. I believe that he is the one who sent it." Maya added.

"That's good to know." Koenig said.

"What do you know about the Dorcons?" Russell asked.

"Come inside, I'll show you. The Psychon can come too if she wants." the alien replied and he looked at the tower on the other side of the Eagle.

"Sergeant Washington, you and your men wait out here." Koenig said.

"Sir I'd feel better sending someone in with you, just in case." Washington told him quietly.

"I trust Maya's abilities sergeant. If she says that these people don't mean us any harm then I believe her. In any case Major Carter and I have our sidearms and Doctor Russell has a stun gun. I think we can defend ourselves long enough for you and your men to come and extract us if it becomes necessary." Koenig said.

"Very well colonel." Washington said and he stepped back.

The GDF officers accompanied the aliens into the tower where they were led up a flight of stairs to a room that contained a number of battered looking cabinets as well as a bulky radio set that had a primitive reel of magnetic tape attached to it, suggesting that the transmission was a recording that could be repeated over and over again.

"Not the sort of thing you'd expect from an early industrial society." Russell whispered when she saw this.

"No. More like the sort of thing you'd expect from one that had achieved the early stages of space exploration." Koenig replied.

"Everything we have been able to save is here Colonel John Koenig, Feel free to examine it." the old alien said, pointing to the cabinets.

"You know it might help communication if we knew your name." Carter said to the alien as Koenig and Russell began to walk towards one of the cabinets.

"I am Avresh Kem of the Near Hills, Major Alan Carter." the alien replied, "You may call me Avresh.

"In that case you can call me Alan." Carter said and he walked over to another of the filing cabinets.

"These are newspapers. Honest to God newspapers." Koenig said, lifting one of the bundles of paper from the cabinet before Russell took another.

"I don't think I've ever seen a printed newspaper outside of a historical collection." she said.

"Yeah, digital distribution pretty much killed them off on Earth." Carter added, looking into the cabinet he had opened. However, instead of newspapers he found this one to be full of folders filled with photographs, "This one looks like it's all pictures." he said.

"There are pictures on these papers as well." Koenig said, unfolding the newspaper he held in his hands to show the front cover that was dominated by a black and white photograph of the mushroom cloud produced by the detonation of a nuclear weapon.

"I can't read any of this." Russell said, flipping through the pages of the newspaper she had chosen, "Maya, can you?"

"I need to hear the language spoken doctor." Maya replied before she looked at Avresh, "Would you mind reading some of this out loud? Also could you indicate what you are reading?" she asked and he walked over to where Russell stood.

"Of course." he said. Then with Maya watching he began to read from the newspaper, pointing a finger to each word as he pronounced it.

"Thank you, I think that is enough." Maya said after a short time during which she was able to associate the various letters with their sounds as well as the meanings of the words.

"You know these photos are pretty enlightening colonel." Carter said from across the room, "I'd say that this planet was invaded."

"Correct Alan." Avresh said, "The Dorcons arrived as if from nowhere. My people had just begun to explore space and we had set up an extensive system of satellites as well as some space stations to observe the rest of our system but we did not see them until they were almost in orbit. We greeted them in friendship but they responded by destroying everything in orbit. Then they did that." and Avresh pointed to the picture of the mushroom cloud on the newspaper, "That was the capital city of one of our most powerful nations and the Dorcons destroyed it in a moment. We had little history of armed conflict and it was unimaginable to us that destruction on such a scale was possible. It was then that they made their landing and issued their demands through their Psychon slaves."

"What did they want?" Alan asked.

"The Dorcons only ever want one thing Major Carter, total control of a planet, its people and its resources." Maya said.

"And that is what they demanded of us." Avresh said, "They wanted us to supply them with food for their empire. At first we refused. We had seen the damage their bomb caused to the environment and knew that they could not bomb the entire planet from space without making it worthless and they had only a handful of ships so they could not invade so instead of surrendering we evacuated our cities and spread out in the countryside, waiting for them to land when we would attack.

"I'm guessing that that idea didn't work." Koenig said.

"No." Avresh answered, "The Dorcons landed only a few troops and used lesser weapons to destroy our industry and what armed forces we had before they withdrew into space again. We could have survived that easily but what they did next has doomed us to slavery. They released a biological weapon, a bacteria that infected us all and killed millions. Then the Dorcons landed once more and repeated their demand, only now in exchange for our providing them with meat and crops they would provide us with a treatment for the bacteria that was killing us. Not a cure of course, without this treatment applied regularly we would die."

"Are we in danger of infection?" Russell said.

"No, the bacteria cannot survive long outside of our bodies. After the initial spraying it was spread only through contact with bodily fluids or from our women to the young that they carried. Now our children are born infected and the only way to keep them alive is to serve the Dorcons." Avresh said.

"Does that sound like something the Dorcons would do Maya?" Koenig asked.

"Normally a planet with the industry needed for even primitive space flight is considered valuable. It would be invaded and occupied, its inhabitants used to produce machines for the empire. This planet may not have been able to produce the most advanced weapons and spacecraft but it could make more basic technology and free up capacity on more advanced worlds for those." Maya replied.

"So this is something different then." Carter commented.

"It could be that the Dorcon lord whose forces discovered this planet did not report the discovery to the Archon. If he had then although the Archon would have provided more resources with which to enslave this planet and its population he would also have expected a greater payment from the lord. By keeping the discovery secret he could claim the world's resources without the tithe demanded of him being increased. By making his sector of space appear more profitable he would raise his profile among his kin and potential increase his own chances of becoming Archon when the current one dies." Maya explained.

"So even Dorcons cheat on their taxes. Maybe we're not so different after all." Carter said before Maya continued.

"Of course the Dorcon lord would not be able to deploy an army to control the planet or even appoint a subordinate to run it without attracting attention so finding an alternate means to keep the planet controlled would be essential. This bacteria sounds like something they would use. It may have been created by a Dorcon female for just such a purpose." she said.

"Maya if this bacteria is all that's keeping the population in line then what would happen if the population suddenly became immune to it?" Russell said.

"The Dorcons would lose control of the world doctor." Maya responded.

"Yes, but what would they do then?" Russell added.

"Maya I think Helena is asking whether the Dorcons would launch another attack." Koenig said.

"That would be complicated colonel. To send an army here would inevitably mean the Archon finding out and realising that he had been cheated." Maya said.

"What about just nuking the planet from space though?" Carter said.

"Such weapons are expensive and each Dorcon lord has only a limited number of them Major Carter. To build and use enough to bombard an entire world would reduce the profits from a sector significantly." Maya told him, "It is far more likely that the lord would just ignore the planet, especially given that its inhabitants lack the ability to travel beyond their own systems and so pose no threat to the security of the empire.

"So if the Dorcons can't invade and they can't just bombard the entire planet from orbit then the locals would be free." Russell said.

"I think so, yes." Maya answered.

"John we might be able to help these people." Russell said, turning to Koenig, "At the very least if I can't find an antibiotic that will destroy the bacteria outright then maybe I can reverse engineer the drug that the Dorcons are supplying so that the locals can manufacture it themselves."

"I do not know this word 'antibiotic' but that is what we hoped for when we began to send our signal." Avresh said, "We did not expect anyone to send an army to fight on our behalf but we hoped that someone could find us a cure for the bacteria that keeps us enslaved. We have-

"Avresh!" an alien voice called out and all of a sudden another alien came running into the room and began to speak rapidly in their own language.

"Maya what's going on?" Koenig asked.

"They say there are enemies approaching colonel." Maya answered and Koenig quickly took out his comlock.

"Sergeant Washington we've been told that there could be hostile forces on approach. Do you have any contact with Dorcons?" he said into the device.

"Dorcons There are Dorcons here?" Washington responded.

"I'll take that as a 'no' then, but this planet has been attacked by the Dorcons. Stay alert for them." Koenig told him.

"The Dorcons do not stay here Colonel John Koenig." Avresh said, "However, there are those among my own people who serve them willingly. They act as agents for the Dorcons in exchange for better treatment."

"Collaborators. Great." Carter said.

"Avresh I assume that these people won't be too happy to find us here." Koenig added.

"No Colonel John Koenig, they will not. Someone must have seen your craft approach and informed the enforcers of it. They may think that it is a Dorcon vessel as we considered when you landed, that is why we hid from you and now they are coming to investigate. We must try to hide all of this before they can find it." Avresh said.

"Wait there a moment Avresh." Koenig said before he spoke into his comlock again, "Sergeant I've been told that the approaching force is likely to be a group of natives. Do you have eyes on?"

"One moment colonel." Washington said before he began to study the terrain surrounding the hill through a set of electronic binoculars and through these he caught sight of a group of aliens approaching on carts drawn by animals The passengers in these carts all wore identical clothing and carried with them what Washington could tell immediately were long guns of some kind, "Colonel we have thirty plus armed hostiles approaching on carts drawn by some local life form. Range three thousand metres."

"Avresh did you hear that?" Koenig asked.

"Yes Colonel John Koenig. They are the enforcers of the Dorcons. They always travel in such groups, that way they can impose collective punishments against entire villages for the actions of just one or two who try to stand up to them." Avresh said.

"Okay, what sort of weapons do they carry? Something that the Dorcons supplied or something your people made themselves?" Koenig added.

"They carry guns left over from before the invasion. Only the enforcers are permitted them." Avresh said and Koenig smiled.

"You and your people stay put Avresh." he said, "My men will take care of this."

"But the enforcers outnumber you three to one Colonel John Koenig." Avresh pointed out.

"Trust us Avresh, these will more than make up the odds." Carter responded and he held up the magnetic accelerator pistol he carried.

6.

Koenig and Carter joined Washington and his men as they deployed along the dirt track that led to the tower, quickly concealing themselves either side of it using whatever natural cover was available to them. A pair of the native aliens had followed the humans and they too hid. While Koenig and Carter were armed only with pistols, Washington and his men all carried larger magnetic accelerator rifles.

“Set for sub-sonic fire.” Washington told his men and the soldiers all adjusted the controls of their weapons so that the rounds would not exceed the speed of sound. Given that the projectiles were propelled using magnetic fields only and did not burn chemical propellant this would make them almost totally silent when they were fired.

“Wait until they’re all within a hundred metres. Take out the drivers first.” Koenig said as he pointed his pistol down the track. Like Washington’s men he and Carter had also adjusted their pistols for subsonic operation so that firing them would not give away their positions.

The scopes attached to the soldiers’ rifles included laser range finders so they were able to monitor the rate at which the armed alien enforcers were closing in on them. Had these been human troops expecting trouble then they would have been searching the terrain around the track for signs of an ambush but instead they appeared to be calmly chatting among themselves with their weapons resting against their shoulders. At the front of each cart was just a driver, without a second crewman to act as a lookout and it was clear that they were not accustomed to encountering organised opposition.

“Fire.” Washington said calmly when his range finder indicated that the rearmost cart was within the hundred metres Koenig had specified and the concealed soldiers unleashed a volley of near silent and flashless projectiles. These hit the drivers of the carts and they either fell forwards only to be run over by their own carts or backwards into the rear sections where the passengers sat.

This sudden attack triggered panic among the other enforcers and while in each cart those nearest to the front immediately dived to take control of the reins the other occupants threw themselves to the floors of the carts. A second volley of fire killed two of the enforcers who had taken control of the carts and although one of these had already brought the primitive vehicle to a halt the other was now dragged off the track by the beasts pulling it where it flipped over and spilled the occupants out onto the ground.

The new driver of the cart to the front of the convoy yelled at the animals in front of him to go faster, shaking the reins to spur them onwards in an attempt to get through the ambush as quickly as possible. The concealed GDF troops immediately focused their fire on this with Koenig and Carter joining in as it came close enough for them to be able to target it accurately with their pistols. The animals pulling the cart were soon hit and they reared up before collapsing dead, causing the cart to flip over them and hurling the occupants forwards to also land in the track where they were rapidly picked off.

The enforcers in the remaining carts were able to disembark in a more orderly fashion and although they still had not positively identified where their attackers were hidden the contours of the terrain gave them a good idea and they opened fire with their own weapons. These were breach loading self loading rifles that lacked the ability for fully automatic fire but they could still be fired rapidly enough to keep the human soldiers pinned down. A fluke shot hit one of Washington’s men but the soft nosed round was not designed to penetrate body armour and although the man let out a cry of pain his body armour protected him against serious injury.

Hearing the cry, a pair of enforcers got up and began to advance towards the injured man’s position but Koenig rapidly shot one of them before the second was brought down by a burst of fire from Washington.

Despite the enforcers now having organised themselves to the point where they could return fire and outnumbering the GDF troops they were still at a massive technological disadvantage. The humans’ weapons fired more rapidly and stealthily as well as having greater ammunition capacity and while most of the humans were protected by body armour the enforcers lacked any such protection and each hit on them reduced their numbers further until the point where they were the ones outnumbered.

Used to being either unopposed or having such an advantage over any attacker that they could easily crush any opposition, the enforcers will to fight soon collapsed when they saw their casualties increasing and they broke and started to run. Some tried to get back aboard one of the carts but they were hit before they could embark. At the same time the other enforcers simply decided to try fleeing on foot but again this was hopeless and the GDF troops cut them down as they ran.

“Clear.” Washington called out when the last of the enforcers had been hit and cautiously the GDF troops emerged from their hiding places to investigate. Koenig was relieved to see that all of his men were still alive, those who had been hit had been protected by their body armour and now were fit enough to return to action if needed. He also saw that the aliens who had followed them had now also emerged from their hiding place and were moving towards the bodies of the enforcers.

"Do you think we did the right thing here colonel? We did just kind of fire first." Carter pointed out when the two officers reached the body of an enforcer.

"Unless Avresh has pulled off a very elaborate hoax on us then I'm convinced that these men were working for the Dorcons." Koenig replied before the sound of a shot from one of the enforcers' weapons rang out and the GDF troops all quickly turned towards the source. However, instead of one of the enforcers having feigned death to launch a surprise counter attack they saw that one of the two aliens who had accompanied them now had a rifle and had just used it to finish off an enforcer who was merely wounded, "Looks like they aren't too worried about who shot first." Koenig added before his comlock sounded and when he looked at the device he saw that it was Russell calling him, "Yes doctor?" he asked.

"John we heard the firing from here. Is everyone okay?" Russell responded.

"Carter and I and all of Washington's men are just fine. The enforcers' rounds couldn't penetrate our armour." Koenig told her before he looked around and saw that the two aliens were now searching the bodies of the enforcers, collecting weapons and ammunition from them, "You can tell Avresh that his people are fine as well. What's your status?"

"I've been collecting blood samples from Avresh and his people to take back to Alpha but I'd like to carry out an autopsy as well. Can you collect a body that isn't too badly damaged? I really need to see how the bacteria affects the natives' physiology." Russell said and Koenig nodded.

"I'll tell Sergeant Washington to pick one out for you and bag it up. I want full quarantine protocols observed though, we can't risk an outbreak of this disease on the moon." he said.

"Don't worry John, I'll be careful." Russell said.

"Good because as soon as you have your samples and the body is loaded aboard the Eagle I want you and Carter to get back to the moon. They need to be updated on what's going on here and to be warned to keep an eye out for any Dorcons ships arriving in the system." Koenig said.

"What about you and Maya?" Russell replied.

"We'll stay here along with Master Sergeant Washington and his men. I suspect that it's going to take more than just medicine to break the Dorcons' stranglehold on this planet. If these enforcers are just motivated by their personal benefit they're likely to try and take control of it so I think we're going to have to provide Avresh and his people with military aid as well. I'm going to assess the situation and maybe meet with any allies that Avresh might have. I may need Maya to translate." Koenig explained.

"Okay John, but you'll still be stranded here." Russell replied.

"Only until another Eagle can arrive with the supplies that Avresh is going to need." Koenig said.

"Understood." Russell said simply before she turned off her comlock.

"So what kind of help were you thinking about colonel?" Carter asked from beside him.

"Well we've just see how ineffective the natives' weapons are against our body armour so I think a couple of hundred sets of that taken from our war stockpile will give Avresh and his people an advantage without depleting our supplies too much. I'd like to give them weapons but the problem there is supplying them with enough ammunition to keep them going." Koenig said.

"What about taking one of these enforcers' weapons back with us to Alpha along with a couple of rounds of ammunition colonel?" Carter suggested.

"You mean reverse engineer them?" Koenig asked and Carter nodded.

"We can three-D scan the rifles, bullet heads and cases and I'm sure a chemical analysis of the propellant shouldn't take too long." he said.

"It's probably a form of nitrocellulose. Our stocks of the materials for those are somewhat limited right now." Koenig pointed out and then he looked around and added, "Unless we can chop up some of this vegetation and ship it back to the moon."

"You did want to trade." Carter replied.

"Yes I did. I think the locals could do with a few more advanced weapons as well for when the Dorcons come back." Koenig continued.

"Shoulder-fired missiles?" Carter said.

"I think that's the best option, yes. We can't spare any heavy weapons and in any case if the Dorcons took them out it would leave the locals defenceless. But if we provided them with twenty or thirty man portable SAMs then the Dorcons could never know if they'd got them all or not and we've got more than a thousand of them back on the moon." Koenig said.

"Okay so I'll get Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi to load up a combat Eagle and send it to you. That way you'll have a way off the planet and be able to defend yourself if the Dorcons return." Carter replied.

"Have Morrow send Keynes as well. It makes more sense for her to take a look at what the locals can offer us from here rather than relaying messages back and forth." Koenig said and Carter smiled.

"Sounds like a plan colonel." he said.

The big screen in main mission showed video footage of a large structure that had been built over the course of several months next to a schematic of the design.

"So it's finally complete?" Professor Bergman said as he stood beside Major Morrow while they studied the two images.

The structure shown in the schematic was a massive dome that was divided up into multiple sections that could be retracted to expose the inside as had clearly been done in the video footage.

"The structure is, yes. With this dome we can cut the flow of radioactivity into the wormhole and according to your research that will extend the time between our trips through it." Morrow replied.

"Has it been tested?" Professor asked.

"No, I've been told that there are still issues with the motors. That's a huge amount of mass to be moved, even in the moon's gravity. It's unlikely that we'll be able to extend our stay here." Morrow answered and Bergman looked at the nearest screen showing the countdown until the moon's next projected entry into the wormhole.

"Even if the dome works as planned then it will be most effective if it is closed as soon after we arrive in a system as possible." Bergman said, miming the closing of the dome with his hands, "Of course closing it entirely will trap us wherever we are."

"At least if we make it back to our own system we don't need to worry about leaving it again before we can evacuate." Kano commented as he approached the other two men, "The issue we're having is with the limiter we've fitted to prevent the dome from being closed all the way by accident."

"I thought that was one of the first parts of the design to be tested." Bergman said, frowning.

"It was, but if you recall the construction of the dome over Moonbase Mu was under the direct supervision of Major Capston. Given his association with Foxworth and his Citizen's Committee we think that they planned to take over control of the dome to strand us in the first system we came to with a habitable planet. We didn't discover the faults" Morrow told.

"We got lucky that the dome wasn't finished when they deserted or we'd all have been stuck there when their little group was wiped out by the Dorcons." Kano added.

"Major we've got an incoming transmission from Rescue Eagle One." Baker announced.

"How far away are they?" Morrow asked.

"Still twenty light minutes." Baker answered.

"They must have sent it just after they left the planet." Kano commented.

"Let's hear it." Morrow told Baker and the big screen changed to show Carter sat in the cockpit of the Eagle.

"Alpha this is Rescue Eagle One. We made contact with the natives on the planet and they've warned us that the Dorcons come here regularly. The moon needs to be ready to fend off an attack if they turn up." he began, "It seems that the Dorcons maintain control over the planet by forcing the natives to work in exchange for medicine to control a disease that the Dorcons deliberately infected them with. Doctor Russell is returning with me to try and find a cure that we can provide to the natives. We have a body aboard that is infected with the disease and even though it isn't supposed to be infectious we're going to need quarantine protocols put in place to move it to the medical section. Colonel Koenig also wants to see about providing the natives with military aid. We've got examples of native weapons to reverse engineer and also the colonel wants to ship some shoulder-fired SAMs to them. He's requested that a combat Eagle is loaded up with thirty of them plus a training unit from Epsilon. He also wants Keynes to go to the planet so she can assess what the locals can offer us in exchange. See you soon Alpha. Rescue Eagle One out."

The big screen then returned to the footage and schematic of the dome constructed to cover the ruins of Moonbase Mu and Morrow looked at Bergman.

"Professor can I assume that Miss Keynes isn't still handcuffed in your lab?" he asked.

"Oh don't worry I released her and Lieutenant Alexander before I came back here to main mission. They're probably both back in their quarters." Bergman replied.

"In that case I think that Keynes needs to get to Epsilon while they load the Eagle and since Alexander isn't currently on duty she might as well be Keynes' escort." Morrow said, "Captain Benes please arrange a quarantine landing pad for the Eagle."

7.

The landing pad that the rescue Eagle was directed to did not extend a boarding tube to the craft so that Carter and Russell could disembark. Instead the cross-shaped pad was lowered down to the underground hangar before a large crane clamped onto the vessel's spine and lifted it off the pad. The crane then travelled along a track mounted on the hangar ceiling to a chamber adjoining the main hangar. Once the Eagle had been deposited in here and the crane had been withdrawn a large door slid shut to establish a seal that would prevent any biological contamination. Only then did a medical team enter the quarantine hangar, all four of them wearing protective suits as they pushed a stretcher between them.

When the Eagle's air lock opened Carter and Russell both emerged, though unlike the medical team neither of them wore protective clothing.

"Doctor Vincent, you can relax." Russell told the leader of the medical team, "The bacteria isn't airborne, it needs a host body."

"You're sure?" Vincent replied and Russell nodded.

"Yes. I was monitoring the Eagle's environmental sensors all the way from the planet. There are samples aboard the Eagle that need moving up to the main medical lab and keeping in isolation though." she said.

"What sort of samples?" Vincent asked.

"Mainly infected blood but there's also a body for autopsy. I've also brought samples of native soil, plants and moulds. Some of them may have something in them that will kill the bacteria but I'm more hopeful of a synthetic solution." Russell said as the medical team went aboard the Eagle.

The network of underground travel tubes offered a reasonably rapid means of moving between the different bases on the moon. However, very few travel tube cars journeyed to Moonbase Epsilon, the main military facility on the moon. Unlike the other bases where civilians made up the bulk of the population the only civilians at Epsilon were either the dependents of military personnel or civilian contractors working for the GDF and this meant that Alexander and Keynes were the only people aboard the car that brought them to the base where they were met by Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi himself.

"Ah so you two managed to get out of those handcuffs then?" he said when the door to the car slid open to reveal Alexander in her dark blue GDF uniform with a stun gun holstered on her leg while Keynes wore a set of plain combat fatigues that lacked any sort of rank or division markings.

"You heard about that then colonel?" Alexander commented as she stepped off the car.

"Of course. Now if you'd like to follow me we've already got everything Colonel Koenig wanted loaded aboard the combat Eagle and she's fully fuelled." Verdeschi replied.

"What are we shipping?" Keynes asked, "I was only told to come along to assess what resources the planet had to offer. I barely had time for Major Morrow to give me this." and she held up a computer tablet that held detailed information about the moon's supply levels and needs. The terms of Keynes' parole barred her from free access to any of the moon's computer networks so she had to work with a non-networked device that she had to return when she was done.

"Missiles." Verdeschi told her as they walked away from the travel tube and towards the landing pad where the combat Eagle waited, "Colonel Koenig wants to supply the natives with shoulder fired anti-aircraft weapons that can bring down a Dorcon attack ship. There's a training unit with them as well."

"He doesn't expect us to teach the natives how to use those things does he?" Alexander commented, "I've never actually fired one in my life, even in training."

"Don't worry lieutenant. Master Sergeant Washington and a squad of his men are already on the planet with the colonel. I think they'll have that covered. In fact that's also why you're going in an Eagle with a passenger pod instead of a cargo module. There has to be enough room for everyone to sit on the way back." Verdeschi answered.

Upon reaching the landing pad Verdeschi stopped at the entrance to the boarding tube while Alexander went aboard ahead of Keynes. When she reached the Eagle's air lock at the other end of the boarding tube she looked into the passenger module the craft was fitted with and saw that there were dozens of cargo containers large enough to hold a standard GDF man portable missile launcher and a single missile.

"Looks like there's just enough room for me left." Keynes said as she peered past Alexander.

"Officially I'm not to let you have any access to firearms Alyson and I think that a room full of surface to air missiles counts as that. You'll ride up front with me." Alexander responded and Keynes smiled.

"Really?" she said.

"Sure. The only reason you were made to sit in the back before was because everyone was so angry at you. No-one else is here now you can sit in the co-pilot's seat. Besides if we do run into any Dorcon ships then

fighting in an Eagle is much easier with someone else to operate the weapons." Alexander said as she turned in the opposite direction to head into the cockpit.

"Operate the guns? What happened to not letting me have access to firearms?" Keynes commented as she followed Alexander.

"Technically you'd have to be outside to access them and if you try that then I'm letting you float back to the moon." Alexander said, strapping herself into the pilot's seat before running the Eagle's basic preflight checks. Then when she was satisfied that the Eagle was ready to launch she activated the controls to retract the boarding tube and then reached for the communication system, "This is Combat Eagle One to Moonbase Epsilon main mission, requesting permission to launch." she said.

"Confirmed Combat Eagle One, you are cleared for launch. Good hunting." the voice of Epsilon's controller responded and Alexander pulled back on the Eagle's flight controls.

The bodies of the enforcers were unceremoniously buried in a single grave some distance from the track while their weapons and ammunition were taken into the tower to be passed out among some of Avresh's people while others were being wrapped up instead.

"It looks like you're only giving weapons to older people. What about the younger ones? You have enough to arm everyone here." Koenig said to Avresh when he saw this.

"These are the only ones among my group that have any experience with guns Colonel John Koenig. The Dorcons don't care whether we have access to weapons such as these, like yours theirs are far better after all, but our ruling council does not want its authority challenged." Avresh replied and Koenig smiled.

"A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed." he commented and Avresh looked at him and tilted his head.

"I do not understand." he said.

"Something from a country on my planet called the United States of America, or just America for short. The founders of our nation broke away from one of the empires of the day and to try and protect our freedom they made sure that our people would have the weapons they needed to keep tyrants at bay, whether they came from overseas or at home." Koenig explained.

"I see." Avresh said before another of his people appeared at the door and waved to him, "Excuse me Colonel John Koenig, I must go." he said and Koenig nodded.

"Colonel Koenig?" Maya said from beside him and he turned to face her.

"Yes Maya?" he asked.

"Those words you spoke. I saw them in the material you gave me to read about your planet. Do you see the situation on this planet as equivalent to your American Revolution?" Maya asked.

"Not really Maya, no." Koenig replied, "If anything it's more like the occupation of Europe during the Second World War. Then there were resistance cells like this one fighting against an enemy who had invaded their nations as well as the puppet governments that had been installed. They used arms supplied by friendly nations to fight their occupiers."

"But those friendly nations were on the same planet. We will be gone in less than two days and they will be alone again." Maya pointed out and Koenig smiled.

"You're the one who said that the Dorcons would likely give up on this planet Maya." he pointed out.

"But what if I'm wrong? I could be responsible for all these people being killed." Maya said.

"Maya it was my call and it's my responsibility. Maybe this won't work but at least these people will have a better chance of freeing themselves than if we do nothing." Koenig replied before Avresh returned.

"Colonel John Koenig our messengers have managed to reach the nearest town. Word will be sent to other groups such as ours." he said.

"How long will it take for them to get here?" Koenig asked.

"Perhaps three days. They have far to come and we do not have the rapid transport we had before the Dorcons attacked." Avresh answered.

"Then it looks like you'll be meeting them without us Avresh. Hopefully you'll be able to give them good news though." Koenig said.

"You will not be here?" Avresh said and Koenig shook his head.

"No, I'm sorry we won't. We have only a limited time in your system before our moon leaves it again and we can't come back." he said before Washington rushed into the room.

"Colonel Koenig!" he called out.

"Yes sergeant?" Koenig responded.

"Colonel, we've just spotted a re-entry trail in the atmosphere. We're going to have company." Washington told him.

"Come on Maya, we need to check this out." Koenig said and they both rushed from the tower with Washington to where the GDF soldiers were searching the sky.

"It was up there colonel." one of them said, pointing into the air.

"Binoculars." Koenig said, holding out his hand and Washington handed him his binoculars. Lifting these to his face he then began to search for the craft that had just entered the planet's atmosphere. Given the amount of debris that he had seen in orbit Koenig guessed that every so often some of it must enter the atmosphere where it probably burned up before reaching the ground but he was not going to take the chance on this being mere debris when it could also be a Dorcon attack ship filled with enemy soldiers, "Ah yes, there it is. I've got it."

"What do you see colonel?" Maya asked.

"A thing of beauty Maya." Koenig replied.

"He means an Eagle." Washington said, leaning closer to the Psychon.

"I sure do. A GDF SC-seventy Eagle Multi-role interplanetary transport and it's heading this way." Koenig said as he lowered the binoculars and he took out his comlock, "This is Colonel Koenig to approaching Eagle, do you read me?"

"Loud and clear colonel." Alexander responded, "Can you keep transmitting so I can get a fix on your location?"

"Affirmative lieutenant, follow my signal." Koenig told her and moments later Maya pointed into the sky.

"I can see them up there." she said, her superior Psychon eyesight enabling her to see the Eagle before the humans around her were able to do so without magnification.

When the Eagle did come into view of the others it was obviously heading directly for them and it was just over a minute before it swooped down out of the sky and for a moment it hovered above the ground with its engines roaring before Alexander landed as close to the GDF troops as she dared. Then seconds after its engines were shut off the Eagle's airlock facing Koenig opened.

"Colonel you asked for me." Keynes said, smiling as she descended the steps ahead of Alexander.

"Yes Miss Keynes, I need you to work with Maya to see what the locals may have that we can use. Bear in mind that it will all have to fit aboard this Eagle though and possibly one other. I don't want to risk too many trips just in case the Dorcons arrive suddenly." Koenig said.

"What about these missiles colonel?" Alexander added as she followed Keynes from the Eagle.

"Master Sergeant Washington have your men unload the missiles and unpack the training unit. I don't want to waste any time in teaching Avresh's people how to use them. They're going to have to be able to teach the rest of their people what to do after we leave."

"Yes colonel." Washington replied and he looked at his men and added, "Okay men, you heard the officer, let's get those missiles unloaded."



The body of the enforcer was placed in a sealed chamber before Russell began her autopsy. Knowing that it was infected with a potentially deadly bacteria Russell and her staff kept out of the chamber, instead relying on instruments attached to remotely operated robot arms to perform the work.

"There look to be colonies of this bacteria throughout the body." Russell said as she and Doctor Vincent looked at the monitors on the console she was using to control the arms. These showed multiple dark patches on the dead man's internal organs that on closer inspection proved to be clusters of bacteria. "It's eating him from the inside out. How can he have been alive with every organ affected like this? Vincent added.

"Let's see how deep they go." Russell added and she moved one of the robot arms that was equipped with a sharp blade to one of the bacterial colonies before cutting into it.

"Nothing." Vincent said when they both saw that the bacterial colony was nothing more than a surface layer sitting on the outside of the organ, "The organ tissue itself is still perfectly healthy."

"It must be the effect of the counter agent the Dorcons are supplying. I can see the bacteria tapped into a blood vessel here which is probably nourishing the colony but the counteragent could be preventing the colony from attacking the organ tissue itself."

"Speaking of the counteragent I've run an analysis." the voice of Doctor Matthias, another of Russell's senior staff said as he approached the pair with a tablet computer in his hands.

"So what is it Bob?" Russell asked and Matthias looked at the handheld computer to read from it.

"A synthetic protein that can bind with animal cells. However, the protein is likely to trigger an immune response from the body meaning that the protection it provides will only be temporary." he said.

"Very clever. The aliens' own bodies destroy the protection and make them reliant on more from the Dorcons." Vincent said.

"It's abhorrent." Russell commented.

"I also ran some tests using our antibiotics and found that any of the basic penicillin variants will kill it quite effectively. Even the ones we have marked as ineffective due to misuse." Matthias added.

"That's not surprising. Penicillin won't exist here so the bacteria can't have become immune to it." Vincent added.

"Yes but producing enough for an entire planet of people is going to be tough and there could be problems with allergic reactions. We've no idea how the locals will respond to it. For now it's a start and we may have to just ship as much of that to the natives as we can. What I really want though is something that can easily be mass produce with primitive facilities and won't trigger any reactions to it." Russell said.

"Did the natives mention anything about anyone ever recovering or having a natural immunity we could study?" Vincent said.

"No but since they all start taking the Dorcon counteragent the moment they're born they wouldn't notice an immunity unless that person was also cut off from their supply long enough for its effects to wear off." Russell pointed out. Then a smile spread across her face, "That gives me an idea." she said, "Bob can I see that analysis of the counteragent's structure?"

"Of course. What's your idea Doctor Russell?" Matthias responded as he handed the tablet to Russell.

"Everyone on the planet is taking the counteragent and so we know that they can tolerate that long enough for their immune systems to destroy it. Ah yes, here we go." Russell said and she pointed to a section of the report Matthias had given her, "The subject's immune system will destroy the cells impregnated by the counteragent, flushing the resulting metabolic waste out of the body via the bloodstream exactly as in a human body. The immune system doesn't appear to be attacking the bacteria though, it's as if the bacteria isn't recognised as a foreign body and is ignored so the only defence against it is this barrier chemical. Now what if we modified the counteragent so that instead of binding to the subject's organs it binds to the bacteria?"

"You think it will make the subject's immune system attack the bacteria instead?" Vincent asked and Russell nodded.

"I do." she said, "At any rate it's got to be worth a try."

"Well there ought to be enough antibodies in his system for us to use for some reaction tests once we've found something that will make the counteragent bind to the bacteria instead." Vincent said and he turned to look into the quarantine chamber where the body of the enforcer lay.

"Manufacture might be an issue though. I bet that the Dorcons' counteragent requires more advanced equipment than the natives can call on. Otherwise what would there be to stop them making it themselves?" Matthias added.

"Yes, we need to liaise with Captain Kano about that. It may be necessary to provide the natives with

equipment to process raw materials. That's another thing, we need to try to use only the samples that I brought back from the planet as ingredients. Anything the natives can't procure for themselves is going to have to be supplied by us instead."

"Response time is going to be an issue." Verdeschi said to Morrow and Carter as the latter two officers sat in Koenig's office to discuss the state of the moon's defences with him, "It'll take us three minutes to see any Dorcon ships arriving at Lagrange points near the system's inhabited planet and another fifteen for Hawks to get there to cover Colonel Koenig."

"And sending Hawks in closer now weakens our defences if the Dorcons arrive closer to us instead." Carter commented.

"I'm going to push our alert ships further out anyway." Verdeschi said, "We know that there won't be any missiles heading our way from the planet but I've still got a pair of Hawks up there on stand by. Right now they're about ten thousand kilometres out but I can push them to a light minute from the other planet easily."

"That puts them six minutes from the colonel if he needs them and only twelve from us." Morrow said.

"Exactly. It also puts them far enough from a Lagrange point that the pilots can size up any Dorcon force that arrives before they-" Verdeschi began before he was interrupted by one of his command staff at the same time as Baker called out from main mission.

"Major we've got a wormhole." she said.

"Where?" Morrow asked as he and Carter turned towards her.

"The L-five point of the inhabited planet and its moon." Baker responded.

"Then that data's already three minutes old." Carter commented.

"We've got a visual on the ship that came through." Verdeschi said as he was given the same information by his command staff, "Looks like a single Dorcon attack ship heading for the planet."

"So they may not have noticed us." Carter said.

"Baker where is our wormhole in relation to the one that just opened?" Morrow asked.

"It's in eclipse major. The lizards won't have seen it." Baker answered.

"Then unless they're familiar with all the bodies in this system they probably won't realise that we're here." Morrow said.

"Colonel Koenig is on that planet though. Let's hope he spots that Dorcon ship before it spots him." Carter added.

The natives sat on the ground arrayed in front of Washington as he explained the operation of the shoulder fired missiles that had been brought aboard the combat Eagle. To assist him he had a large diagram that identified the various parts of the weapon as well as a training device that was the same shape, size and weight as an actual launcher but used a system of electronics to simulate its operation without needing to risk firing a genuine missile with an explosive warhead. Since among this group of aliens only Avresh spoke the Psychon language well enough to be able to understand English it fell to Maya to translate what Washington said for them. Fortunately the Psychon woman had been able to hear enough of the natives' conversation to become almost fluent in their language.

While Washington was giving his lecture with the help of one of his men the rest of his squad were maintaining a perimeter around the area and watching for any more native enforcers approaching even though according to Avresh it would still be some time before their superiors noticed that anything had happened to them. Although the Dorcons were willing to permit the locals to possess some weapons, it seemed that wireless communications were banned even for the collaborators who served them. At the same time Koenig, Alexander and Keynes were to discuss what his people could offer the humans in return and it was while they were talking that Alexander's comlock began to sound.

"The Eagle's computer just picked something up." she said.

"Let's go." Koenig told her before he looked at Keynes and added, "Stay here and carry on."

Koenig and Alexander ran back to the Eagle and rushed into the cockpit where Koenig sat in the pilot's seat and Alexander in the co-pilot's.

"Got it. Lidar contact at high altitude." Alexander said. Then a moment later she added, "I'm not seeing any transponder."

"Then it's not one of ours. It must be a Dorcon ship." Koenig said.

"Do we launch?" Alexander asked.

"No, there's no time. That ship is heading this way and if we take off it'll shoot us down before we can get ten metres off the ground." Koenig answered, "I'm deploying the turret and setting it for computer controlled operation. If the Dorcons use a missile then we should be able to shoot it down."

"And what if they just use that ray gun their ships all carry in the nose?" Alexander said.

"Actually I'm kind of hoping that that's what they're planning." Koenig replied.

"You are?" Alexander said in surprise.

"Yes. They've probably picked up our lidar and they're coming in to investigate. They might suspect that the natives have rediscovered some piece of technology the Dorcons thought they'd destroyed. They'll come in closer to investigate. Close enough that we can bring them down with one of those shoulder fired missiles you brought from the moon." Koenig explained and Alexander smiled.

Hurrying from the Eagle again, Koenig and Alexander ran towards where Washington was giving his lecture to the natives.

"Washington! We've got incoming!" Koenig shouted, "Get one of those missiles ready."

Washington quickly opened up a case that held a real launcher instead of the training device he had been showing to his audience and moved to a spot further away. Although Maya had not translated what Koenig had said the native audience knew immediately that they were about to witness the missile being fired and they all moved to try and get a better view.

"Keep clear." Washington called out when he saw this and Maya translated his words, waving the natives back as Washington lifted the surface to air missile launcher to his shoulder and looked into the targeting unit.

The missile launcher used a thermal imaging system to acquire a target and with its hull still heated from entry in the atmosphere the Dorcon attack ship showed up clearly to this. A secondary optical targeting system provided enough magnification that Washington was soon able to visually identify the approaching craft as a Dorcon attack ship from its distinctive ray-shaped hull with its nose mounted directed energy weapon that doubled as a means to open wormholes and long tail behind it. With a flip of a switch Washington activated the targeting system and the launcher emitted a bleeping sounds as it tracked the craft until it had locked onto it. At this point the pulses of sound became a constant tone. Being a wholly passive targetting system, there was no chance that the attack ship's defences would be able to detect that it had been targeted from the ground and it continued to fly onwards in a straight line. Washington held his fire for the time being though, waiting for the attack ship to get even closer so that it would have less opportunity to take evasion action or deploy countermeasures that might disrupt the missile's lock.

All of a sudden there was a blast of smoke and flame from the back of the launcher before the missile itself burst out of the front and sped towards the approaching Dorcon attack ship. Shortly after launch the missile's main booster rocket activated and it accelerated to hypersonic speed so that the target would have as little time to react as possible and although the crew of the Dorcon vessel detected the launch of the missile almost right away the pilot was unable to turn far enough to get outside the missile's ability to track it before the proximity sensor detected that it was close enough to its target and the warhead detonated. This sent a blast of shrapnel into the attack ship and tore open the hull.

The effect of this, combined with the damage inflicted on the attack ship's systems put the craft into an uncontrolled spin as smoke and flames billowed out of the hole.

"Excellent shooting master sergeant." Koenig said, patting Washington on his shoulder.

"All in a day's work colonel." Washington replied, "Besides it would have been embarrassing to have missed right after telling all these people how good these missiles are."

Seeing the damaged attack ship continue to plummet downwards while burning, the natives who had paid close attention to Washington as he fired the missile threw their arms up into the air and began to wail.

"What the hell?" Alexander said.

"Maya, what are they doing?" Koenig asked.

"They are celebrating colonel." Maya answered, "They have never seen a Dorcon attack ship destroyed before."

"I guess you can't beat a practical demonstration for proving how effective something can be." Koenig commented.

Moments later the attack ship ploughed into the ground behind another hill and there was an explosion that sent a ball of flame into the air and the wailing increased in volume.

"Colonel look." Washington said as he lowered the missile launcher and looked up into the sky again just as a pair of parachutes opened, "It looks like the crew bailed out."

"Gather your men sergeant, we're going on a hunt." Koenig ordered.

9.

"We brought down the attack ship but the crew were able to bail out." Koenig's image on the screen in front of Morrow said when his signal reached the moon, "Washington is organising his men now and we're going to head out to try and find out where they landed. If we can take them alive then we'll bring them back with us and they can be held at Moonbase Theta with the other Dorcon prisoners. Alexander and Keynes will be staying here so even if we enter dead ground for comlock operation you'll still be able to contact them. We'll update you when we have more information. Koenig out."

"That's a relief." Benes said.

"I'll be happier when we hear that the Dorcon crew have been dealt with. Dead or captured, I'm fine with either." Carter commented

"There is still the issue of whether that attack ship was supposed to check in. It can't radio its base but they must be expecting it to come back at some point." Morrow pointed out, "I want all bases alerted to what's happened so they can plan for an attack."

All of a sudden the screen activated again, only this time it was Russell's face that appeared on it.

"Major we've done it." she said.

"You've found a cure for the Dorcon's biological weapon?" Morrow replied and Russell nodded.

"Yes, we've been able to modify their own drug so that it will bind to the bacteria instead of the victim's organs and enable their body to recognise it. We've only been able to simulate the results but they've all been good." she said.

"I'll have an Eagle prepared immediately doctor. Will one be enough?" Morrow asked.

"That's why I'm calling. I need to speak to Captain Kano. The treatment works by adding an enzyme to a soil sample that I brought back where it acts on a local bacteria that could have been the starting point for the Dorcon weapon, the genetic markers are much too similar to be a coincidence. The problem is that we can't possibly make enough of this enzyme before the moon travels through the wormhole again so we need to instruct the natives on how to produce it themselves. I suspect that the natives don't have the technology that they need to make it themselves so that means that we'll need to provide it to them. Kano should be able to tell me exactly what they'll need for that." Russell explained.

"Okay I'll send him down to medical section now." Morrow said.

"Thanks major and in the meantime please do prepare that Eagle. We're down to less than twelve hours before we enter the wormhole again." Russell said before she turned off the intercom from her end and Morrow turned towards Kano.

"Did you get that?" he asked.

"Yes I heard, I'll get down to medical now." Kano responded as he got to his feet.

It did not take long for Kano to walk from main mission to Alpha's medical section and he made his way straight to Russell's office.

"You wanted to see me doctor?" he said, tapping on the door frame with his knuckles.

"Yes captain, I have a manufacturing issue for you." Russell said as Kano sat down in the chair in front of her desk and she handed him a tablet.

"Chemical processing. To make an enzyme that will be used to treat soil bacteria, right?" he said when he saw what was on the screen and Russell nodded.

"Yes. It requires a concentrated flow of carbon dioxide to raise the acidity of the base ingredients listed on that tablet." she said.

"Okay so we're looking at CO-two scrubbers from a life support system to collect it from the atmosphere and a compressor system to force it into the mixing chamber." Kano said, "I see this needs considerable heating."

"Five hundred degrees. That's nothing to our equipment but I'm not sure how easy temperature controlled blast furnaces are to come by to the natives of this system."

"Technical section can easily build half a dozen ceramic mixing vats with replaceable heating elements. Do these aliens have the ability to manipulate tungsten?" Kano said.

"I don't know. I spoke with the one call Avresh about his radio a little but I wouldn't really know where to start on material technology." Russell replied.

"That's okay doctor. Nothing here looks too difficult. If we want to minimise the need for spare parts then I think a laser based heating system will be best. The only issue there is that the emitters are a strategic resource. We're using all we can make right now to upgrade the moon's defences. I know you're a lieutenant colonel as well but in Colonel Koenig's absence I'll have to run it by Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi." Kano said.

"I doubt they'll be able to power a military grade laser." Russell pointed out.

"That's not an issue doctor. The laser doesn't need to operate at full power. A portable fusion generator

should be able to provide all the power needed to operate one for a couple of years on a single fuel load.” Kano said.

“So what sort of size and weight are we looking at? The natives will need to be able to move them to keep them safe.” Russell said.

“Oh I think that we can keep the weight of each unit under a hundred kilograms and no bigger than this desk. We can easily fit a couple of dozen of them on an Eagle’s freight module.” Kano replied.

“Can technical section make that many and get them loaded in time?” Russell asked and Kano smiled.

“Trust me doctor, this is easy.” he said, holding up the tablet.

Before setting out to hunt down the crew of the Dorcon attack ship Koenig had taken a rifle identical to the ones carried by Washington and his men from the arms locker aboard the Eagle. Only Maya, who despite now holding a GDF commission had yet to be trained in any combat techniques, was unarmed and Washington had assigned a pair of his men specifically to protect her as they made their way through the alien countryside towards where the two parachutes appeared to have come down.

“Master sergeant!” one of the soldiers called out suddenly and the unit came to a halt.

“Do you see them?” Washington asked as he and Koenig went to see what the man had found.

“No but that looks like a chute to me.” he said and he pointed towards a cluster of trees several hundred metres away where there was a large sheet of grey fabric caught in the branches several metres above the ground.

“No sign of the pilot though colonel.” Washington added to Koenig.

“At least it gives us somewhere to start from.” Koenig replied and he started to walk towards the seemingly abandoned parachute while Washington signalled for his men to go that way as well, adjusting their formation to reduce the chance of being taken by surprise to a minimum.

As they got closer it became apparent that the object that had been seen in the trees was indeed one of the parachutes used by the crew of the Dorcon attack ship to escape their stricken vessel. The chords from which the user would be connected to the parachute itself all hung loose beneath it but there was no sign of either the harness or the wearer.

“Looks like one of the Dorcons came down in these trees and got tangled. Then he cut himself free.”

Washington said as he inspected the chords from as close as he could get and saw that they all looked to have been cut through with a blade.

“Which means he must have survived.” Koenig replied, looking at the ground beneath the parachute and seeing the imprint in the ground where the Dorcon had dropped. Then he turned towards Maya, “Okay Maya this is where we need you.” he told her.

“What do you want me to say colonel?” she asked, knowing that Koenig wanted to make use of her language skills. Having lived most of her life in the service of the Dorcons she spoke their language fluently.

“Tell the crew that we know there are only two of them and that they’ll be treated well if they surrender.”

Koenig said and Maya nodded before she began to shout as loudly as she could in the Dorcon language, encouraging the two crewmen of the attack ship to reveal their position and promising that they would not be harmed if they surrendered. However, there was no response to her call and as the human troops looked around they saw no signs of life other than a few small native forms.

“Looks like we’ll have to do this the old fashioned way.” Koenig said and he brought his rifle up to his shoulder.

“Spread out.” Washington called out to his men, “We’re looking for tracks, blood trails or anything that could only have been dropped by someone. Stay within visual contact and report anything that doesn’t seem right immediately.” he ordered and apart from the two troopers who remained by Maya’s side his men formed a circle with Washington and Koenig before they began to walk outwards, expanding the circle as they searched the ground for any signs of the Dorcon they knew could not be too far away.

The two Dorcon pilots watched the human troops from behind a rocky outcrop with some interest. News of the travelling moon inhabited by beings similar in appearance to the Dorcons’ Psychon slaves had spread around the empire, along with orders that any news of sightings were to be immediately reported to the sector authorities so that suitable action could be taken but neither of them had believed that they would ever see one of these ‘humans’ in person. Unsurprisingly to the Dorcons the humans were far less physically imposing than they were but it was obvious that not only did they have the advantage of numbers but they were also far more heavily armed than either of the crewmen. The humans carried rifles and most of them wore prominent body armour for protection against attack while the Dorcons were not infantrymen and had only sidearms for their protection. Their mission was simply to prepare the way for the larger force coming to collect the regular tribute given by the planet in exchange for the drug that would keep the natives alive. They were not intended to engage in personal combat. However, they also knew the potential rewards they could receive if they were able to take any of the humans captive, or better yet secure their vessel for study.

"They came from that direction." one of them said, pointing the way that the human troops had approached from, "Their vessel must be back there."

"If we go that way the humans will see us." the other pointed out, seeing how the humans were covering all directions as they continued to expand the area of their search.

"They will see us when they get here." the first responded as the humans nearest to them continued to come even closer to the rocks.

"Then we must fight." the second said and he double checked his pistol.

As soon as they heard the sharp 'crack' of a shot the humans threw themselves to the ground, those protecting Maya pulling her down with them to try and get her out of the line of fire. One of the Dorcon shots had hit one of Washington's men and he had fallen to the ground, gasping for breath as even though the projectile failed to penetrate his arm the force of the impact did knock the wind from him and another soldier began to crawl towards him while the rest of the unit searched for the source of the attack.

"Maya do you see anything?" Koenig called out, knowing that Maya was more likely to see the Dorcons than an ordinary human. However, she was still searching the rough direction that the first shots had come from when several more were heard in rapid succession.

"Contact!" one of Washington's men yelled when he noticed one of the Dorcons pulling back into cover and he fired a rapid burst from his rifle towards the alien. This burst was not intended to kill the Dorcon, instead it was meant to force him to remain hidden behind the rocks he was using for cover while the rest of the squad advanced towards him. As they advanced the human soldiers kept their weapons pointing towards the rocks and when the second Dorcon appeared close by Washington was able to fire off a rapidly aimed shot from his rifle that hit the alien in the shoulder and the large reptilian howled in pain as he collapsed, his pistol falling from his grasp.

"Hold position." Koenig ordered and the soldiers all came to a halt, crouching down to present smaller targets while continuing to aim their weapons towards the Dorcons' position, "Maya see if you can get them to give up." he added and once again Maya called out in the Dorcon language, promising that the crew of the attack ship would not be harmed and that medical treatment would be made available for the injured alien.

When Maya was finished there was the sound of alien voices behind the rocks as the Dorcons discussed the offer being made to them and moments later an object was hurled out into the open, landing on the ground with a 'thunk'.

"That's one of their weapons colonel." Washington said and then slowly the uninjured Dorcon stood up, walking out into the open before he spoke.

"Maya, what did he just say?" Koenig asked.

"That his co-pilot is injured. He wants to know what treatment you offer." Maya said.

"Do they carry first aid kits or anything similar?" Koenig said and Maya nodded.

"I believe so, yes colonel." she answered.

"Then he can give first aid to his friend and they can both get a proper examination once we're back on the moon. Master Sergeant Washington please secure their weapons." Koenig said as he slung his rifle over his shoulder and reached for his comlock.

In the cockpit of the combat Eagle Alexander sat surveying the surrounding area using the targeting system of the craft's point defence turret. This spine mounted weapon carried a pair of light automatic magnetic accelerator weapons and was meant not only as a defence against incoming missiles but it could also be fired while the Eagle was landed, engaging both air and ground targets to create a secure perimeter around it.

"Koenig to Alexander." Koenig's voice said over the Eagle's communication system and the somewhat bored Alexander sat up straight.

"Alexander here colonel. Go ahead." she said.

"Lieutenant we've located the crew of the Dorcon attack ship and taken them into custody. One of them is receiving medical treatment now but after that we'll be on our way back. What's your status?"

"Nothing much to report here colonel." Alexander said before she glanced over her shoulder and through the open cockpit door. Through this she could see all the way past the air lock module and into the passenger pod where a pair of natives were piling up sacks, "Keynes was able to find out that there are a bunch of farms close by and has swapped our missiles for some magic beans."

"Magic beans huh?" Koenig commented.

"Well beans anyway. I'm not so sure about the magic part but they're supposed to be high in protein and with a soil sample Alyson thinks that we might be able to cultivate them on the moon. She says it'll take more pressure off our supplies and add more variation to our diet." Alexander told him, "Oh and we received a message from Alpha."

"What did they have to say?" Koenig asked.

"That Doctor Russell has found a way to cure the natives of the Dorcon bacteria." Alexander said.

"That's excellent news."

"Yes colonel, but the problem is that actually producing the cure is going to take technology that they don't have so Doctor Russell's asked Kano and the technical department to whip up some machinery that we can give to them." Alexander said.

"Okay, that shouldn't be a problem. In fact tell Kano that he's to load up any other machine tools that he thinks the natives could find useful and that we can spare. Especially tools that could be used to make weapons." Koenig said.

"We're going to arm them? With more than just a couple of dozen missiles that they can't reproduce."

Alexander asked in surprise.

"We are indeed lieutenant. I'm not proposing to hand them the ability to make any weapons that they don't already know about but the more small arms they can make for themselves the less likely they'll fall prey any Dorcon raids." Koenig told her.

"Very well colonel. I'll pass your message on to Alpha. Alexander out."

10.

A round of applause broke out in main mission as the command staff watched the enormous dome segment rise up from the ground on the big screen.

"Congratulations Professor Bergman." Morrow said to the civilian scientist and he reached out to shake the man's hand.

"That is only one segment out of seventy-two major." Bergman pointed out.

"Maybe so professor but it proves that it can be done." Carter added, smiling as he watched the segment reach its maximum extension.

"Major, professor," Benes said when the segment stopped moving, "measurements indicate that the segment is in position. If the other seventy-one are all deployed to the same extent then it will leave just a fifty metre hole at the top for the radiation from Mu to escape through."

"That should be enough to keep the wormhole open and expanding. But it will trap up to eighty-percent of the emissions within the dome." Bergman said.

"So for example if we'd been able to do that when we arrived in this system we could stay here for a week instead of a day and a half?" Carter asked.

"Yes, that's right Major Carter. The rate of expansion of the wormhole is roughly proportional to the amount of energy that is put into it." Bergman answered, "Of course once we can slow down our travel there is also the issue of speeding it up and steering it."

"Your X-ray lasers?" Baker said.

"Yes, once those are completed and we have the power to operate them we should be able to at least triple the energy output of Moonbase Mu's nuclear storage site." Bergman said.

"Assuming we ever get them completed." Carter added and then when he saw Kano entering main mission he added, "And here's the guy to ask."

"Ask what major?" Kano responded.

"When the professor's X-ray lasers will be ready." Benes told him.

"Unfortunately those are still some way off. As I was telling Doctor Russell earlier all our resources for the production of lasers are focused on expanding out defences. Plus of course we need to build about twenty fusion plants to power them." Kano explained.

"Well at least what your section came up with for the dome appears to have worked." Morrow said and he pointed to the big screen.

"You've deployed a segment. Is that the only one?" Kano replied.

"For now yes. We wanted to be sure that we wouldn't cut off the entire energy flow and strand us here." Morrow said.

"Still, it's about forty thousand tonnes of armour plating by Earth weight. Getting even one to move is pretty impressive to me David." Carter commented.

"I'm sure the colonel will agree when he gets back as well. Which shouldn't be too long now." Morrow added.

"He's coming back already? I thought he was going to wait for Doctor Russell to take the cure and the machinery down to the planet." Kano said.

"No, they have prisoners and one of them needs medical attention. The combat Eagle took off about a quarter of an hour ago. They'll be half way back now." Morrow said, "How soon will the freighter Eagle be ready to go?"

"It's ready now. Doctor Russell was heading for the launch pad when I left her." Kano said and Morrow reached for the intercom on the closest console to him.

"Main mission to Doctor Russell." he said into it and moments later Doctor Russell responded.

"Yes major?" she said.

"Doctor I understand you're heading for the Eagle on launch pad two." Morrow said.

"That's right. Captain Kano told me that it's fully loaded and ready to launch." Russell replied.

"It is but there's no pilot assigned to it yet." Morrow told her.

"Major, in case you've forgotten I am a qualified pilot. Just because I don't have Hawk pilot's wings doesn't mean that I can't handle an Eagle as well as most officers." Russell said.

"Doctor, Colonel Koenig and his party are already on their way back. If you head to the planet alone then there won't be anyone there to assist you." Morrow said.

"I don't need any assistance major." Russell said, "Avresh speaks enough Psychon for us to understand one another so I just need to explain to him how the treatment is made and administered. Thanks to Captain Kano's people all the technical part is just a push of a button. I don't even need to unload anything, I'll just leave the entire freight pod behind, I'm sure that we can afford to lose it. I don't need a pilot major, I just need clearance to launch when I'm aboard."

"Oh very well doctor. There's nothing else up right now so you'll have priority clearance." Morrow said before he looked towards the nearest countdown display, "Don't forget that allowing for travel to and from the planet you'll have under two hours on the surface."

"Trust me major, I'll be watching that clock closely." Russell replied.

The freighter module was a simple open platform to which several cargo containers had been fixed and this meant that when Russell boarded the Eagle the rearward facing door of the airlock was sealed and she could access only the cockpit. The preflight checks required had been carried out by the technical team who had loaded the Eagle and so when Russell sat down all she had to do was strap herself in before disconnecting the boarding tube and contacting main mission to let them know that she was ready to depart. "Freighter Eagle One to main mission, requesting permission to launch." she said.

"Confirmed Freighter Eagle One, you are cleared for launch." Benes responded and Russell pulled on the flight controls to take off.

As Russell flew the Eagle towards the system's inhabited planet she saw another craft heading back towards the moon on her lidar and then she smiled when she saw the friendly transponder signal.

"This is Combat Eagle One, Helena do you read me?" Koenig's said, his face appearing on the screen on the console in front of Russell and Russell smiled.

"Loud and clear John. My Eagle is fully loaded with everything needed to get those people on the planet free of the Dorcons." she responded and there was a slight pause as the signal travelled the vast distance to Koenig's Eagle and a reply came back.

"Glad to hear it Helena. Bear in mind that the moon will be leaving this system in a couple of hours. Don't take too long down there." Koenig said.

"Don't worry John I've got every incentive to get back to the moon before it leaves. After all it's your turn to cook dinner. Russell out." Russell responded before the two craft passed by one another on their opposing flight paths.

Since the combat Eagle had been launched from Moonbase Epsilon, Koenig landed it there instead of returning straight to Alpha and when he disembarked he found Verdeschi waiting for him with a unit of armed troops.

"I understand you have prisoners for us." Verdeschi said and Koenig nodded, looking around just as Washington and his men escorted the two Dorcon pilots from the Eagle.

"Yes, these two were the pilots of an attack ship. As you can see one of them is injured so I want him checked out by your medical section before either of them are moved to Theta." Koenig said.

"Colonel Koenig." Maya said.

"Yes Maya?" Koenig asked.

"Colonel since the prisoners do not speak Psychon or English perhaps I should remain here to assist Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi." Maya suggested.

"That's a good idea Maya." Koenig replied.

"I'd appreciate the help." Verdeschi added.

"There's also cargo that needs unloading and moving to Iota." Koenig said.

"Farming equipment?" Verdeschi asked.

"Beans. Alyson traded your missiles for them." Alexander commented as she and Keynes disembarked from the Eagle behind everyone else.

"Okay we'll get them unloaded and transferred. Are there any other orders?" Verdeschi said.

"Other than the obvious one to remain on alert until we're through the wormhole, no." Koenig replied and Verdeschi nodded.

"Don't worry about that." he said before he looked at Maya and added, "Okay Maya, if you'd like to come with me we can get these Dorcons seen to."

While Verdeschi and Maya oversaw the Dorcon prisoners being moved to Epsilon's medical section to be examined the Eagle's other occupants all headed for the travel tube terminal to take them back to Moonbase Alpha and once there Koenig headed straight for main mission.

"What's our status?" he asked.

"We're still on alert for the Dorcons entering the system colonel but I've given the order to start securing for entry into the wormhole." Morrow said and Koenig nodded.

"Very good. I take it that there's been no more indications of Dorcon activity other than that one attack ship?" he said.

"No sir. Everything's been quiet." Morrow said and then he smiled, "There is one more piece of good news though." he added.

"Good news? Now that I could do with." Koenig replied.

"We've tested the movement of the first segment of the dome over Moonbase Mu and it worked flawlessly." Morrow told him.

"That's amazing news. What about the other segments?" Koenig said.

"Engineers are just finishing work on their motors. Kano estimates that it'll be done within a day and then we can delay our exit from any system that looks like it has useful resources by a factor of five." Morrow told him.

"Or stop travelling through the wormholes entirely if we happen to arrive back in our own system." Carter commented.

"Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves just yet." Koenig said, "For now let's just focus on getting out of here before we're up to our necks in Dorcons."

In a star system far away a pair of Dorcon officers approached an ornate door that was guarded by two Dorcon warriors in equally decorated armour. The guards did not move as the officers advanced, voices in the earpieces they wore telling them that the two men were authorised to pass through the doorway they were protecting and the door swung open automatically.

"Brigade commander, you wished to see me?" the Dorcon sat in the large throne at the far end of the room that the officers strode into said as they knelt down and bowed their heads.

"Lord Ortrull our convoy is ready to depart for the Mallanas system." the more senior of the two kneeling officers said.

"And this should concern me why? Mallanas is a trivial system that we use to inflate our production figures for the Archon." Ortrull said.

"Yes my lord, but the scout vessel we sent has not reported in. It is overdue." the brigade commander said and Ortrull turned to look at another nearby military officer.

"General you assured me that the inhabitants of Mallanas lacked the ability to do us harm." he said.

"They do my lord. Even when we first invaded their planet their weapons were primitive. They may have been able to bring down an attack ship with a lucky shot then but not now, the weapons we let them keep cannot even penetrate our infantry's body armour. It is useless against our attack ships." the general said.

"Then how do you explain the loss of one of our ships general?" Ortrull asked.

"A technical fault my lord, that is all." the general answered.

"My lord, general, the ship had just undergone an overhaul." the lower ranking of the kneeling officers said.

"We will find out what happened when we recover the ship. If the maintenance crew is at fault then they will be punished." the general said.

"Of course general. Just to be on the safe side though I would like to increase the convoy's escort. I would like to double the number of attack ships and add a destroyer as well. If the Mallanasi have-" the brigade commander said.

"The Mallanasi have done nothing. They are a weak and beaten people now ruled by corrupt leaders who are interested only in preserving their life of ease." the general interrupted without thinking and Ortrull let out a low growl, knowing that the general's dismissive attitude towards the Mallanasi could equally be applied to him.

"Mallanas is not worth sending significant forces to. If it cannot be held it will be abandoned and its inhabitants left to die from the bacteria we infected them with. After a week or two without the cure we can bring in slaves workers from other worlds." Ortrull said, "Brigade commander you will send no more ships than normal. I do not want the Archon getting suspicious about why we are moving large forces to irrelevant systems."

"Of course my lord." the brigade commander replied.

"You are dismissed." Ortrull added.

"Thank you my lord." the brigade commander said as he and his subordinate got up to leave, walking back out of the throne room in silence.

"What will you do? We both know that the missing attack ship was in perfect working order." the lower ranking Dorcon officer asked the brigade commander as soon as the throne room door had swung shut behind them.

"Lord Ortrull's orders were specific, no extra ships will be sent to Mallanas." the brigade commander replied, "However, he was less specific about the amount of troops they can carry. Send word to the barracks that a full company is to be deployed about the transports. If the Mallanasi are getting any ideas about fighting back then we'll remind them of the power of the Dorcon Empire."

II.

Although the radio signal was no longer being transmitted from the tower, its location on the planet had been programmed into the Eagle's guidance system and this directed Russell to the correct location. Not wanting to advertise her presence on the planet to anyone other than the underground resistance group that she was going to meet Russell repeated the process of entering the planet's atmosphere over the ocean and then turning inland to take her into the hilly terrain where the tower was located. The sun had set now, making it less likely that the Eagle's approach would be observed but Russell still did not want to take the chance on being seen from the ground. As had happened when the first rescue Eagle had made its approach to the tower all of Avresh's group had hidden themselves from view but this time they emerged from hiding as soon as they recognised the distinctive beak-nosed shape of an Eagle, many of them bearing burning torches to provide illumination in the darkness.

Even though it was now dark Russell could see that there was a patch of ground close to the base of the tower that already looked to have been blasted by the vertical thrust engines of the two other Eagles to have landed here previously and so she steered the freighter Eagle towards this location before setting it down. Russell's final act before powering down the Eagle was to release the clamps that held the freight module in place fixed to the craft's frame-like spine and she heard the sound of it drop the short distance to the ground. As soon as the Eagle's engines were shut down the crowd of Mallanasi waiting outside the Eagle moved closer, surrounding the airlock's outer hatch just as Russell opened it from the inside. As she descended the steps to the ground she noticed that unlike the previous time she had been here, now a number of the Mallanasi were carrying primitive rifles although there were no signs of the surface to air missiles that they had been provided with.

"Doctor, do you bring us good news?" Avresh asked and Russell smiled at him.

"I do Avresh. Very good news." she replied and she walked towards the cargo module that now rested at ground level, separated from the Eagle's lifting body, "These crates hold the equipment you need to produce a medicine using just a few basic ingredients that are available all around you. Anyone that takes that medicine will be cured of the bacterial infection that plagues your people permanently."

Avresh turned to the gathered crowd of Mallanasi and told them what Russell had just told him and they all threw their arms into the air and wailed in celebration.

"My people thank you doctor." Avresh said as he turned back towards Russell.

"This tablet contains all the information that you need to administer the medicine." Russell replied, taking a compact tablet from her belt and handing it to the native leader, "When the power runs out you can recharge it using the portable generators built into the equipment I've brought you."

"You will be remembered well for this Doctor Russell. For the medicine and the weapons your Colonel John Koenig gave us." Avresh said.

"On that subject Colonel Koenig ordered more than just the equipment needed to make the medicine be brought to you." Russell said and she walked along the cargo module to the second set of containers that had been secured to it, "These contain machine tools that you can use to make more weapons similar to those." she told Avresh and she pointed to one of the rifles held by another of the aliens, "The instructions on how to use them are all on that tablet I gave you. I suggest that you distribute these machines among your people, it will make it far harder for your council or the Dorcons to find them all. None of them are that heavy so you should be able to transport them on a cart. Now if some of your people could give me a hand getting one of these crates off the transport I'll give you a demonstration of how the medicine is made and then I'll administer it to your people here."

As soon as the medical staff at Moonbase Epsilon had finished examining the two Dorcon pilots and confirmed that they both well enough to be moved the two aliens were taken to a travel tube car that was specially adapted for the transportation of prisoners and each of them was secured in a separate cell. Verdeschi was taking no chances on them escaping though and he detailed a full platoon of his men to escort them to Moonbase Theta where they could join the other Dorcon prisoners being held at the maximum security prison.

"You're staring at me Maya. Do you think I'm going over the top?" Verdeschi asked when he noticed Maya looking at him while they watched the Dorcons being escorted onto the travel tube car.

"No." Maya replied swiftly and she looked away from him again, "The Dorcons are dangerous."

"Well hopefully this level of security will convince them not to try anything before they can be handed over to the prison staff at Theta." Verdeschi said and then he turned towards Maya, "So what are your plans now? Are you heading straight back to Alpha or are you in the mood for something to eat first? Our officers' mess suffers from the same problem as those everywhere else but the food is edible."

"Problem?" Maya commented and Verdeschi smiled.

"The food in an officer's mess is always the worst military food Maya, it doesn't matter which branch of the service you're in. Then the enlisted men's mess before you get to the best food in the sergeants' mess." he said.

"Why is that?" Maya asked.

"Because it's sergeants who write the duty schedules for them. They send new chefs to practice on officers and keep the best for themselves. So what do you say?" Verdeschi said and Maya smiled.

"I would like to accept your invitation Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi." she replied.

"Good. Just one thing though Maya, now we're both off the clock it's not Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, it's Tony. Got it?"

"Yes, I understand Tony."

Having watched Russell go through the process of manufacturing a small batch of the drug that would destroy the bacteria in their bodies it was the turn of the Mallanasi to try for themselves and Russell watched them carefully loading shovelfuls of soil into one of the hoppers while vegetation was loaded into another. With both hoppers full the process could begin and the machine hummed as it filtered carbon dioxide from air drawn in as part of the cooling system and mixed it with chemicals and bacteria drawn from the soil and vegetation to produce the antibiotic that would destroy the bacteria that infected all of the Mallanasi. This was then mixed with material left over from the vegetation to put it into the form of easily swallowed capsules and after a few minutes these began to pour from the output chute of the machine into an open topped hopper. Once again when they saw this the Mallanasi began to wail in celebration.

"Our modelling shows that your people each need to take one of these capsules in each of your planet's days for a total of fifteen days." Russell told Avresh, "It's important that they do as well. You can't give the bacteria the chance to become resistant to this treatment."

"Is that likely?" Avresh asked.

"Not really, modern medicines have overcome most of those issues but it can still happen. If they do though then your scientists may be able to make use of this." Russell answered and she produced a small plastic tube from her pocket, "It's called Penicillin." she said, "It's a type of mould that we use to make an anti-biotic of the same name. Some people may have bad reactions to it though so that's why I'm recommending the use of the synthetic drug instead for now."

"Your generosity will be remembered Doctor Russell." Avresh said as he took the tube and Russell smiled.

"You're welcome Avresh. Now I need to be leaving, the moon will be leaving your system in less than an hour and I need to get back." she said.

"Of course, I understand. I wish you and the other people on your moon a good journey." Avresh said before he backed away.

Leaving the Mallanasi to continue working the machine Russell returned to the nearby Eagle lifting body. The freighter module still sat on the ground below the Eagle but it was not connected and when the Eagle's vertical thrust engines fired it was left behind while the lifting body itself rose up into the air. Once clear of the ground and the abandoned freighter module Russell fired the Eagle's main engines and the craft accelerated rapidly through the atmosphere, first heading back out to sea before Russell began to gain altitude and she flew the Eagle out into space. Then she reached for the communication system and activated it so she could let the moon know that she was on her way back.

"Russell to Moonbase Alpha main mission. I make it about forty-five minutes before the moon enters the wormhole again so I should arrive with about fifteen to spare. Make sure you're got a launch pad waiting for me okay? I'd hate to have to just land on the surface. Russell out." she signalled before the sensors of the Eagle sounded an alert.

Koenig smiled when he heard the message from Russell, relieved that she would be returning to the moon before it was forced back into the expanding wormhole. Already the distortion in space dominated the view outside main mission's windows and it was obvious that the moon's remaining time in the system was limited. However, moments after the message from Doctor Russell had finished playing Benes looked up from her console.

"Colonel we've got another wormhole opening. Same Lagrange point as the last one." she announced.

"Show me on the big screen." Koenig ordered and he turned towards the large wall mounted screen just as Benes sent the feed from Alpha's long range visual sensors to it. This showed the newly opened wormhole, one much smaller than the one the moon was about to be dragged into and just emerged from it were a pair of Dorcon attack ships. The wormhole remained open however, as three more vessels came through before these were followed by another pair of attack ships of the design now familiar to the inhabitants of the moon.

"What the hell are they?" Carter said when he saw these ships on the big screen.

The three vessels that came through the wormhole after the attack ships were elongated ovoids, similar in size to Dorcon warships but lacking the flattened profile and winged hull.

"Colonel those ships don't match anything we've seen previously but their energy emissions are similar to other Dorcon craft that we've seen." Kano said.

"Is Maya back yet? She might know what they are." Baker suggested.

"She's still at Epsilon." Alexander responded.

"Benes, call Maya on her comlock." Koenig said, "Send her an image of one of those ships and see what she has to say."

"Yes colonel." Benes responded.

"Carter what are the odds that Helena can outrun those ships?" Koenig then asked, turning towards the Australian.

"From what we know about those ships, not good colonel. Even with just the lifting body and a single body an Eagle will only make ten percent of light speed and from what we've seen of Dorcon attack ships they can keep pace with our Hawks at twice that." Carter responded.

"Her only chance is to go dark and hope they don't illuminate any active sensors in her direction." Morrow said.

"And if she does that she won't be able to make maximum speed." Carter pointed out.

"You mean she won't get here before we enter the wormhole." Koenig said.

"No colonel, she won't." Carter replied.

As soon as she saw the Dorcon attack ships come through the wormhole Russell knew that she was in trouble. Her Eagle was unarmed and even if it had been a combat variant she had no more than the most basic of combat flight training and lacked a co-pilot to share the flying and fighting duties. Having only just left the atmosphere of the planet Russell's Eagle was still on an orbital trajectory that did not require the use of the main drives and the Dorcons were not manoeuvring in a manner that indicated that they had detected her presence yet. Russell guessed that the massive amounts of debris locked in orbit around the planet were the reason for this and rather than make a break for the moon at maximum power she continued to orbit the planet instead, doing her best to blend into the debris while hoping that the Dorcon craft would all either retreat due to the presence of Earth's moon in the system for reinforcements or land on the planet below and give her the chance to escape before they could catch up to her.

However, rather than flee or land the Dorcon ships also settled into orbit around the planet, only higher than the one in which the debris field existed and they spread out as if searching for something. Given that they had not appeared to detect her Eagle Russell guessed that they were instead hunting for the previous attack ship to have come through the wormhole. Knowing that if she fired her Eagle's engines to break orbit she would be seen, Russell stayed where she was and watched for an opportunity.

"Colonel we've lost our lock on Freighter Eagle One." Alexander said, "There's no engine flare and no transponder."

"Good girl Helena." Koenig said, "She's using the debris to hide herself. Carter, how long until she has to break cover and come back if she's going to get here before we enter the wormhole?"

"About twelve minutes if the countdown is correct colonel." Carter responded.

"Helena will be using the same countdown as we are so let's assume it is. She should break cover in no more than twelve minutes. Do we have any word from Maya on what those ships are yet?" Koenig said.

"Maya and Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi are heading for Epsilon's main mission now colonel." Benes replied, "I'm sending an image to her comlock. Wait, I've got a reply." Benes added and she transferred the signal from Maya to a speaker.

"Captain Benes those ships look like transports. They can be used to carry troops but they are more often used to move cargo. They are armed with an energy weapon in the nose so they can open wormholes but they are not designed for combat." Maya's voice said.

"What about speed Maya? Can they keep up with an Eagle?" Koenig asked.

"I'm sorry Colonel Koenig, I don't know that." Maya answered.

"Okay Maya, never mind." Koenig said.

"Colonel those attack ships could attempt to cut Doctor Russell off. She can't open a wormhole but they can." Morrow pointed out, "If she tries to run then they re-open a wormhole at the same Lagrange point they arrived at and jump to the new point that exists between us and the planet we're orbiting."

"Okay. Weapon section I want us ready to shoot down any Dorcon ship that tries something like that. Alert all the other bases to watch for any other wormholes opening in close proximity." Koenig said just as Bergman entered main mission.

"What's happening?" he asked when he saw the greater than usual level of activity in main mission this close to the moon passing through the wormhole.

"A Dorcon squadron came through a wormhole just as Doctor Russell's Eagle was taking off from the system's inhabited planet." Carter told him.

"Is she okay?" Bergman said.

“She’s fine professor.” Koenig reassured him, “She’s hidden her Eagle in the debris surrounding the planet but she only has twelve minutes to start back before she won’t be able to reach us in time.”

12.

Russell repeatedly looked back and forth between her Eagle's sensor display and the countdown clock showing her how long she had until the moon entered the wormhole and left the system, stranding her here if she had not made it back in time. The presence of a habitable planet meant that she would not have to worry about whether she would die of suffocation when her Eagle's life support system eventually lost the ability to scrub carbon dioxide from the air or starvation when its food supplies were exhausted but she did not relish the thought of being the only human being on a planet of aliens, even if some of them did appear to be friendly.

At its maximum practical speed the Eagle could reach the moon in half an hour and although it was theoretically possible to push the craft even faster doing so risked seriously damaging the drive system that Russell needed to be able to slow down again as she approached the moon so for her that was not an option. Therefore, as the countdown clock got ever closer to thirty minutes she became more nervous. The Dorcon ships that had come through the wormhole continued to orbit the planet above its equator, having spread out equally so that they could maintain a line of sight to every point on the surface at once. This meant that between them the ships also had a line of sight all around the planet and would be able to detect any craft that tried to approach or leave, including Russell's Eagle.

At thirty-two minutes before the moon left the system Russell decided that she had waited long enough. The Dorcons seemed to be in no hurry to either leave or land and with time running out she decided that the only option open to her was to make a run for it. Grabbing hold of the Eagle's flight controls she turned the craft to face towards the moon and then fired its main drives at full power, propelling the Eagle out of the debris field she had been sheltering in at a fantastic rate.

The Dorcon ships orbiting the planet that had a line of sight to the Eagle when its engines were fired detected the energy flare. Initially they just scanned the Eagle, suspecting that it might be the missing attack ship that they had been ordered to find but as soon as they realised that it was not one of their own craft three of the attack ships broke out of orbit as well and began to give chase while the fourth remained in orbit to protect the three transports.

"This is Russell to Moonbase Alpha, I hope you're reading this because I'm coming back now and I've got company. There are three Dorcon attack ships following me." Russell transmitted.

"Get me Epsilon now. I need to talk to Verdeschi." Koenig ordered when he heard Russell's message and Verdeschi's face appeared on a screen in front of him. Behind him Koenig could see the command staff in main mission of Moonbase Epsilon and also Maya as she studied the sensor data being collected.

"Yes colonel?" Verdeschi asked.

"Verdeschi have you heard Doctor Russell's signal?" Koenig said and Verdeschi nodded.

"Yes colonel. We heard her report and our sensors have confirmed three hostile targets behind her. It doesn't look like they're pushing their ships at full power but they'll still overtake her in about ten minutes. All defences are on standby." he answered.

"Good. Look, I want you to launch a missile at those attack ships now." Koenig told him.

"A spoiling attack?" Verdeschi said.

"Yes. At this range hitting a ship will be difficult but if the pilots break off to evade the missiles then it will give the doctor the chance she needs to out run them." Koenig replied.

"Okay colonel we're on it." Verdeschi said before the screen went blank.

"You heard the colonel, I want a firing solution against those attack ships. Assign two warheads to two ships each and the lucky third only gets targeted by one. I don't care which ones you pick." Verdeschi ordered as soon as he had finished speaking to Koenig.

"Targets locked sir." one of the officers from Epsilon's weapon section responded a few seconds later. Verdeschi knew that due to the limitation of the speed of light the sensor data being used for this lock would already be out of date but the guidance software of the missile that he was about to order launched would be able to compensate for that, continually updating its lock from its own onboard sensors before releasing the five individual warheads it contained.

"Launch missile." Verdeschi ordered, looking out of a nearby window that overlooked the hatches of Moonbase Epsilon's numerous missile silos to see a plume of fire as a missile erupted from one of these and sped off into space in the approximate direction of the system's inhabited planet.

It took just over two minutes for Russell to detect the missile launch from aboard her Eagle and she knew that during that time the weapon would already have travelled a significant distance towards her. The

Dorcons closing in behind Russell also detected the launch a few seconds later and from this they determined where Russell's Eagle was heading. However, they had little data on human spacecraft and weapons so they did not immediately recognise this new sensor contact as a missile, considering it another ship launched to escort the Eagle that they were approaching. However, just a few seconds of sensor data was enough to convince them that this was a missile instead of a ship from the way it accelerated to a significant fraction of the speed of light. The effect of this was exactly what Koenig had hoped it would be with two of the attack ships suddenly peeling off from their pursuit while the third instead attempted to use Russell's Eagle as a shield by moving into the human craft's shadow.

It was just after this happened that the first stage of the missile broke open to release the five smaller missiles that it contained and each of these activated its own individual rocket engine. The targets for these missiles had been assigned randomly by the weapons staff at Moonbase Epsilon and now two of them headed for one of the turning attack ships and another two for the one trying to use Russell's Eagle to protect it. This left only one more missile that arced towards the second fleeing attack ship while the remains of the first stage now just tumbled through space.

Russell gasped as a pair of missiles sped so close by her Eagle that she was able to see the bright blur of their rocket plumes passing by the viewport in front of her. These two missiles easily kept their lock on the Dorcon attack ship right behind Russell while the energy flare from her Eagle's engines meant that for a few moments the Dorcon crew lost track of the missiles and when they suddenly reappeared around the sides of the Eagle it left no time for the Dorcons to react. At the last moment the pilot tried to turn aside but he was too late and both missiles exploded right in front of the attack ship, the fast moving shrapnel released in the explosion ripping it apart.

Of the other three missiles two of them failed to keep up with the turning of the remaining two attack ships and they sped past them without detonating. Unable to turn around to make another pass at their targets these two missiles then self destructed, the shrapnel spreading out harmlessly. However, the third of them slammed into one of the attack ships it had locked onto before it exploded and the blast consumed the alien vessel along with it.

This still left one of the Dorcon attack ships but in order to avoid the missile attack launched from the moon it had been forced to turn too far off course and there was not enough time for it to be able to either catch up with Russell's Eagle or reach a Lagrange point it could use to jump closer to the moon before she was able to reach it and instead of making a vain attempt to continue the pursuit the alien pilot began to slow his ship down ready to turn back towards the Mallanasi.

"That's it. The coast is clear." Carter exclaimed when the destruction of two out of the three Dorcon attack ships and the decision by the third to give up the pursuit was detected by Moonbase Alpha. However, before Koenig could breathe a sigh of relief Kano spoke up.

"Colonel, the computer is recalculating our jump countdown." he called out.

"Recalculating? Why?" Bergman asked as he rushed to Kano's station.

"I don't know professor but the computer has decided that the original calculation was inaccurate and it's updating.

"What's the change?" Koenig said with a sense of foreboding and both Bergman and Kano looked at him with dour expressions.

"Computer just cut four and a half minutes off the clock." Kano told him.

"What about Doctor Russell?" Baker said.

"She's not going to make it." Morrow replied.

"She'll miss us by about two minutes." Benes added.

"Professor what about that shield over Mu? Can we deploy it to slow down our jump?" Koenig said.

"I'm sorry but that can't be done right now colonel. Only a few of the segments are functional, not enough to make any difference to the countdown." Bergman told him.

"Doctor Russell can still make it to the surface." Carter said and everyone turned towards him.

"Major Carter, even at maximum deceleration it isn't possible to bring that Eagle into land before-" Bergman began but Carter did not let him finish.

"She doesn't need to land it." he interrupted, "If she delays her deceleration then she might be able to crash land instead of making a controlled landing."

"Colonel that could work. Especially if she ejected at the last moment, that would slow the cockpit even more right before impact. The inertial dampening system of an Eagle cockpit can make even an impact at extreme speed highly survivable.

"Carter call Helena now. Tell her exactly what she needs to do." Koenig ordered.

"Doctor Russell this is Major Carter." Carter's voice said over the communication channel from Alpha shortly before Russell was going to begin her deceleration, "The computer just updated the countdown and it looks like you won't be able to make your landing." Carter continued and Russell felt a knot in her stomach, "You're

going to have to crash land instead. You need to wait until you're just a light second out and then burn as hard as you can to slow down. You won't be able to come to a complete stop in time so the Eagle will crash. You need to eject at one hundred metres and the inertial dampening system will make sure you come out of this okay. Just in case you better get into a suit though. We won't be able to come and get you until we're through the wormhole so if you have a hull breach you'll have lost all your air before then. Alpha out." Russell quickly got out of the pilot's seat and rushed from the cockpit to the airlock where there were several spacesuits stored. After putting one of these suits on she rushed back to the cockpit, sat back down and strapped herself in. By this time the point at which Russell would have begun her deceleration if she was going land normally had past and she was committed to Carter's admittedly risky plan. The Eagle had already been turned so that it was facing away from the moon, ready to fire its main engines to slow the craft down as it got closer and Russell held her hand ready to squeeze the flight controls to begin this process. Now instead of the countdown though she focused her attention on the navigation system, watching it to indicate the point at which Carter had told her to begin her deceleration.

"Freighter Eagle One holding steady at point one C." Alexander said as she tracked the approach of the Eagle.

"Estimated point of impact?" Morrow asked.

"Bearing between one zero and two zero degrees, distance thirty to forty kilometres from Alpha." Alexander replied.

"Fraser's already in a rescue Eagle. He'll be in the air sixty seconds after we're through the wormhole. Two minutes after that he'll be at the impact site." Carter said and Koenig nodded without speaking.

"Range one light second." Alexander exclaimed, "Heat flared detected, she's going full burn. Eagle is decelerating."

"Will she make it?" Morrow asked.

"Forty-five seconds until impact." Alexander said.

"Wormhole entry in seventy seconds." Baker added.

"Come on Helena, you can make it." Koenig said to himself softly, staring at the image of Russell's Eagle now that it was close enough to the moon to be tracked in near real time.

"Sixty seconds to wormhole entry." Baker continued, "Fifty. Forty. Thir-" but before she could finish there was a sudden flare of light and the moon shook as it was once again dragged into the wormhole and instead of crashing on the surface the Eagle being piloted by Russell just flew through empty space.