

Space: 2299



12: Backward Path

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With Doctor Russell left behind when the moon passed through a wormhole, Professor Victor Bergman comes up with a risky plan to retrieve her that may also result in Colonel Koenig being left behind. To try and increase the chances of success the moon's inhabitants implement a new system designed to delay the moon's travel but this also offers the terrorist organisation Red Mars the opportunity to prevent Koenig's return.

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"Okay here they are." Colonel John Koenig said to the others sat around the dinner table in his quarters as he carried a pair of trays from the cooking area. Like him the other three individuals present wore the dark blue dress uniforms of Global Defence Force officers. The eldest of them was a man who had a general's stars on his shoulders and a name badge that read 'Simmons' while the other two were a man and a woman who both had the rank of lieutenant colonel. The man's badge identified him as 'Gorski' while the woman was Doctor Helena Russell, the chief medical officer of Moonbase Alpha and the woman who Koenig himself was in a relationship with, "Four steaks prepared to the Koenig family recipe." Koenig added as he set the trays down on the table and handed out the plates that were on them to his fellow diners.

"Well they certainly smell good John." Simmons said, smelling the aroma coming from the large piece of well cooked meat in front of him.

"Yes general, they do." Gorski agreed.

"New rule, no sucking up this evening." Simmons said.

"Of course general." Gorski replied.

"The smell is just the start. Just wait until you taste them." Koenig said as he sat down and he looked across the table at Russell, "Isn't that right Helena?"

"John's secret family recipe is one of the reasons I love him." she responded, glancing at Simmons and Gorski.

The four officers then began to eat, cutting pieces from their steaks before putting them in their mouths and as soon as they tasted them both Simmons and Gorski paused.

"Damn it John if you weren't the best damned astronaut I know I'd bust you down to cook and put you on my staff." Simmons said and Koenig smiled at him before placing a piece of his own steak in his mouth and starting to chew.

"This is good." Gorski added, "Well worth the trip from Mu."

"This would be worth a trip from Earth." Simmons said and he glanced through a window that as well as looking out onto the barren surface of the moon also gave him a view of the Earth. Then after consuming another piece of his steak he took a sip of his drink and turned to look at Russell, "So how did it happen doctor?" he asked.

"How did what happen general?" Russell replied.

"I think the general means how did you die?" Gorski said.

"Exactly doctor." Simmons added, "How did John Koenig kill you?"

"What?" Koenig said, his eyes widening.

"For us it was both a nuclear explosion." Simmons said, ignoring Koenig entirely, "One moment I was a general in charge of the moon and the next there was nothing left of me, no even ashes to put in an urn and send back to my family."

"Same here." Gorski said, "If Koenig hadn't trusted Alyson Keynes so blindly then the pair of us would still be alive."

"There was no way I could have known." Koenig protested.

"You knew that Keynes had family on Mars who could be a liability." Simmons pointed out, "Did you think to check on that?"

"So how did it happen for you doctor? What did Koenig do to get you killed as well?" Gorski said, looking at Russell and she shrugged.

"Oh I don't really know." she told him.

"How can you not know what happened?" Simmons asked.

"He left me behind general." Russell answered, "My Eagle was almost back to the moon when all of a sudden it vanished into the wormhole."

"I couldn't stop that from happening. You know that Helena." Koenig said.

"No but you could have done something to help me John. You could have come after me instead of leaving me all alone with no way to ever catch up with the moon. Instead you abandoned me to fend for myself in a system controlled by the Dorcons. You know what the Dorcons do to their captives don't you John?"

Alexander and Keynes described what happened to Major Capston in great detail, how he was tortured and mutilated. I suppose that will be my fate now thanks to you."

Koenig's eyes opened suddenly and he found himself sitting on a couch. Initially he thought he was by himself but then he heard movement coming from behind him and he looked around, half expecting to discover that he had dreamt not only the meal with his dead and missing colleagues but also the events that had led up to Russell being stranded in a distant star system. However, instead of the woman he had shared

his quarters with since well before the moon was pulled out of Earth's orbit and into a wormhole that had resulted in it travelling from system to system at random he saw someone else in the kitchen area. Although this red-headed woman also wore the uniform of a GDF officer she was only a lieutenant and when she turned to look back at Koenig her pronounced widows peak and pale catlike eyes demonstrated her alien origin. Maya was a Psychon, a species engineered from humans abducted from Earth by the aliens who had attacked it in the mid twenty-second century. Now the Psychon species was split among lines of sex, the males were known for their ability to comprehend and maintain machinery while the females like Maya were powerful empaths, able to read the thoughts and feelings of others. Maya's powers were particularly strong and she was even capable of compelling others to carry out actions dictated by her.

"I'm sorry colonel, I didn't mean to wake you." Maya said.

"No, it's alright. I'd rather not be asleep right now anyway." Koenig replied.

"Doctor Mathias said you should rest colonel." Maya reminded him.

"No there are still thousands of people counting on me. I can't let the loss of-" Koenig began.

"Colonel we are in an uninhabited system." Maya interrupted, "Major Morrow is quite capable of running Moonbase Alpha until we depart. I knew the first moment I saw you and Doctor Russell in person how close you were to one another and I can tell how much her loss has hurt you."

"Maya I know you mean well but I think you should go. I'd really just like to be on my own right now. If I'm going to get the rest Helena – Doctor Mathis ordered then I can't have you distracting me." Koenig said.

"Colonel I know that you-" Maya started to say, sensing Koenig's true feelings.

"That's an order lieutenant! If you'd rather I can summon someone to remove you." Koenig snapped at her angrily.

"Of course colonel. I apologise." Maya replied before she headed for the exit.

After leaving Koenig's quarters Maya made her way to main mission, the nerve centre of operations not only for Moonbase Alpha but also every other settlement on the moon. This section of Moonbase Alpha was always manned and was often a hive of activity. However, the atmosphere as Maya entered the room was far more subdued than normal, the loss of Doctor Russell affecting more than just Moonbase Alpha's commanding officer.

"Maya I thought you were going to stay with the colonel." a nearby officer said when he saw her from his console.

"Yes Major Carter." Maya replied to Alpha's chief pilot, "However, Colonel Koenig ordered me to leave. I expect that he will need further support but right now my presence seemed only to anger him. I thought it best to come here and report to Major Morrow."

"Well he's right up there in Koenig's office." Carter told her and he pointed up the steps leading to the office normally occupied by Moonbase Alpha's commanding officer.

"Thank you major." Maya replied before she walked across the room to the steps and went up them.

The commander's office could be isolated from main mission by a closing wall if the occupants wanted privacy but this was open as Maya went up the steps and she was able to walk right in to where Major Morrow, Moonbase Alpha's second in command sat behind Koenig's desk.

"Ah Maya, how is the colonel?" he asked, looking up at her.

"He is not taking the loss of Doctor Russell well major." Maya answered as she sat down opposite him, "I suspect it will take a long time for him to recover fully."

"I don't think that having to step into General Simmons' role and organise everything on the moon without any significant time off will have helped either. Hopefully the next system we reach will be as deserted as this one." Morrow said and he looked across main mission to a wall mounted clock that was counting down. This was the time remaining according to calculations by the resident scientist Professor Victor Bergman until the radioactive emissions from the ruins of Moonbase Mu widened the wormhole that had deposited the moon in this system enough that it would be pulled back inside. According to this clock the moon would travel to its next random destination in a little under twenty-four hours.

"Major I've got Professor Bergman on the line for you." a young woman in main mission called out and Morrow nodded.

"Put him through to me Baker." he ordered and then he looked at the computer terminal on the desk in front of him just as the face of an older man in glasses appeared, "Yes professor?" he said.

"Major Morrow I was wondering whether it is possible to speak to Colonel Koenig." Bergman said.

"The colonel is indisposed right now professor." Morrow replied, "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Major Morrow, this is really a matter for Colonel Koenig. I think I may have found a way for us to recover Doctor Russell." Bergman said.

Morrow looked across the desk and looked at Maya. She instantly recognised the surprise in his expression and also anticipated what he was about to say.

"I will go and fetch the colonel." she said, "Although he may refuse to answer the door."

"Take Alexander with you. She can override his lock if she has to. I'll have the professor meet you here."

Morrow told her and as Maya got to her feet Morrow looked at the display again and added, "Professor please come to the colonel's office as quickly as possible."

Alexander heard Morrow's order from her console and she got up to join Maya as she came down the steps from the office. Although Alexander's main role was to co-ordinate travel around the moon between the various bases she was also responsible for overseeing Alpha's defences and had stepped into the role of a security chief following Keynes' court martial.

"I heard, I'm coming." she said to Maya.

The two women hurried from main mission to the officers' quarters and to the door of Koenig's personal quarters where Maya pressed the intercom. However, there was no answer and she tried it a second time only to get the same lack of a response.

"I'll try his comlock first." Alexander said, taking her own comlock from her belt and lifting it to her head as she tried to contact Koenig. The result was the same as Maya's efforts to get him to open the door though and all she heard was a recorded message, "It's his answering system." she said, lowering the device.

"Can you bypass the lock?" Maya asked.

"Of course I can. Being security chief has its bonuses." Alexander said and she called up the program used by her comlock to remotely open doors at Alpha. This included a keypad and although the display initially showed the door in front of her to be locked it took just a few button presses to enter her personal override code and the door slid open.

"Colonel Koenig." Maya said as she entered the room.

"I didn't answer the door for a reason Maya." Koenig said from the couch where he was sat with a picture frame in his hands, cycling through the numerous stored images of himself and Russell that it held in its memory.

"Colonel you're needed." Alexander said as she followed Maya through the door.

"Maya's already explained how the moon can run without me for a while longer yet." Koenig commented.

"Colonel, Professor Bergman believes that Doctor Russell can be rescued." Maya said and Koenig suddenly looked around.

"If that's supposed to be a joke-" he began.

"No joke colonel." Alexander interrupted, "He'll meet you in your office."

"I'm on my way." Koenig replied and he put the picture frame down on the table as he got up.

When Koenig reached his office Bergman was already there waiting for him. Morrow was still in the office as well although he had moved out from behind the desk to make room for Koenig and in addition they had been joined by Carter and one of Alpha's enlisted personnel who wore grey camouflaged combat fatigues instead of a dark blue formal uniform.

"Colonel, I thought that any planning for a rescue mission should include Carter and Master Sergeant Washington." Morrow said as Koenig and Maya came up the steps to the office while Alexander returned to her post.

"Good idea." Koenig said as he sat down behind his desk and he looked at Bergman before adding, "So professor, what's your idea?"

"Well colonel if you remember we recently deployed a probe to monitor our passage through the wormhole, intending to gather data right up to the point where we left the system." Bergman said.

"Yes, I remember." Koenig replied, nodding his head.

"Well we continued to receive telemetry from that probe even after we had passed through the wormhole." Bergman said.

"So you've confirmed that that signal was genuine professor? Not just an anomaly." Morrow said.

"Oh yes, quite genuine major." Bergman responded, "And that got me thinking about the exact state of the wormhole in between our trips through it."

"You mean sitting there like it is now?" Carter commented.

"Exactly. A wormhole must have a termination point so that raises the question of where that point is." Bergman said.

"I thought that it led to our next destination." Washington said.

"No, if that were the case then we wouldn't have continued to receive telemetry from the probe. The wormhole has to still be connected to the system we just came from each time we pass through. My theory is that it takes a significant input of energy to cause the other end to shift each time. In our case that energy is coming from the radioactive material left behind at Mu by the detonation of the nuclear stockpile by Red Mars. This could help explain how it is possible to navigate through a wormhole. We already know that they are opened by energy input into a Lagrange point, controlling the destination point is likely to be some function of the focusing of that energy." Bergman explained.

"And because the energy from Mu is totally unfocused the moon's passage through the wormhole each time becomes random." Koenig said.

"That's right." Bergman replied.

"but if the wormhole still connects to the system we just left why is it that we've never been pursued through it by the Dorcons? We've escaped them in the past just by holding out long enough to make it through the wormhole." Morrow pointed out.

"I think that is because the Dorcons don't have the technology to determine where a wormhole ends just by studying one of the termination points major. Perhaps it isn't possible at all." Bergman answered, "If they were to try following us under power then their own engines would cause the wormhole to shift randomly and they could come out anywhere like we do whenever the moon passes through one each time. Times when we've seen multiple ships come through a wormhole they've all been coming through together so we can assume that they all knew where the termination point was to be and they could navigate independently. That isn't possible if the destination is unknown though."

"So how does this help us rescue Helena professor?" Koenig said.

"Because it should be possible for an object, a ship for example, to pass through an already established wormhole without causing the other end to jump to another location simply by shutting down all active power sources, drifting through on a ballistic course and then restarting power systems on the other side." Bergman said.

"That would leave a ship pretty vulnerable to attack when it came out." Carter said.

"Yes and that's why I think the Dorcon's haven't attempted it in their pursuit of us. They know that we have weapons that are quite capable of shooting down their ships and they know that if they tried to follow us through a wormhole then they'd be sitting ducks until they could bring their power back online." Bergman said.

"But if an Eagle accelerated towards the entrance to a wormhole before having all power cut then it could pass through without shifting the other end?" Koenig said.

"I think so, yes colonel." Bergman replied.

"You think?" Morrow commented.

"Well it's not as if I've been able to carry out any practical tests. I suppose we could launch a probe through the wormhole now but-" Bergman began.

"But that would alert the Dorcons when it started transmitting on the other side and they'd be watching for another ship coming through." Koenig interrupted. Then he looked at Carter and added, "Major Carter I want an Eagle prepared for launch."

"Of course colonel." Carter responded, "I can have a combat Eagle ready within the hour."

"I'll get a strike team ready as well colonel." Washington added but Koenig shook his head.

"No, this is something I need to do alone." he said, "All of this is theory. It may not work and I could end up stranded somewhere at random. Plus there's the issue of time. We're at less than twenty-four hours until the moon passes through the wormhole again and the wormhole shifts anyway, stranding anyone still on the other side. I'll take an Eagle along with as many provisions as it will carry back through the wormhole myself and look for Helena. Hopefully we'll be able to get back here before the wormhole moves."

"And if you can't?" Morrow said.

"We know that the last system we were in has a habitable planet and at least some friendly natives who will probably shelter us." Koenig said, "If it comes down to it then Helena and I will just have to wait there for as long as it takes for Victor to come up with a way of navigating through a wormhole so that you can come and rescue us both."

"Colonel there may be a way of giving you more time to carry out the rescue mission." Bergman said and Koenig looked at him.

"You mean the shield dome?" he asked.

"Yes colonel. We've already tested one segment of it and the others are in place. Now seems like as good a time as any to try them out." Bergman replied. The shield they were talking about was a retractable dome that had been under construction around the ruins of Moonbase Mu since not long after the moon was thrown out of the Earth's orbit. This was thick enough to entirely block the flow of energy widening the wormhole so if it was fully closed then the energy flow would be cut off entirely and the wormhole would close, bringing the moon's travels to an end. However, by only partially closing the dome the idea was that the energy flow could be reduced without being cut off and the expansion of the wormhole would be slowed down, prolonging the time before it became large enough to pull the moon back through it.

"Okay but don't take any chances on stranding the moon itself." Koenig said, "If the moon can't keep travelling then we've no chance of getting everyone home again."

"Colonel Koenig there is one thing you do not seem to have considered." Maya said suddenly after having listened to the scientific discussion in silence.

"What's that Maya?" Carter asked.

"Are we certain that Doctor Russell is still alive?" Maya asked.

When she first saw the moon vanish into the wormhole through the viewport of her Eagle, Russell had only been able to stare at the empty space where it had been. She had soon come to her senses though and planned on how she intended to survive.

Having just dropped off a machine to manufacture a drug meant to cure a bacteria that the Dorcons had deliberately infected an entire planetary population with to make them compliant she knew that she still had allies in the system. However, the difficulty was going to be reaching them. There were several Dorcon attack ships as well as a number of cargo transports in the system and her Eagle had no offensive weaponry of any kind. Even if she was able to make it to the surface of the planet landing her Eagle where she had dropped off her cargo would risk leading the Dorcons to the native rebels, therefore she would need to set down some distance away from them and then travel on foot until she could locate them.

Russell saw two problems with this plan though, firstly she needed to be able to get past the Dorcon ships and secondly she needed to be able to survive alone long enough to find allies on the surface. Fortunately her Eagle still offered her the solution to these problems. The craft was equipped with a significant quantity of survival equipment and Russell set about gathering this together, removing it from the various lockers it was held in and loading it into bags that she then stacked on the co-pilot's seat in the Eagle's cockpit module. She wanted all this in the cockpit because she did not intend to land the entire ship on the surface of Mallanas, the system's inhabited planet. Instead she would make a break for the planet even though she knew that this would likely attract the attention of the Dorcons present in the system and they would send at least one of their attack ships after her. When they fired she would trigger the Eagle's ejection system and separate the cockpit module from the rest of the ship. Hopefully she would already be in near orbit around the planet and the debris already present would help conceal what she was doing from the Dorcons, tricking them into destroying the main body and cargo module of the Eagle while she rode the rest of the way to the surface in the cockpit. This would leave her stranded on an alien planet with no way off but at least she would have a chance of surviving.

Before she could return to the planet though she had had to slow the Eagle down after her rush to try and make it back to the moon and she had left the craft's autopilot to handle this while she gathered all the equipment she could, even going as far as to put on a spacesuit and placing a spare with the other equipment just in case the cockpit module was holed by the Dorcons and pressure was lost. By the time she had finished gathering everything she could in the cockpit the Eagle had come to a stop and was just drifting along with the various gravitational fields in the system.

"Okay let's see if I've got this right." she said to herself as she sat back down in the pilot's seat and strapped herself in, "Target planet identified. Check. Engines online and functional. Check. Setting course for rapid orbital insertion. Firing main drives in five. Four. Three. Two. One."

Russell took hold of the flight controls as she counted down, ready to fire the Eagle's engines and when she reached the end of the countdown she squeezed them tightly. This triggered the four fusion engines that provided the Eagle with its main means of propulsion and the craft accelerated rapidly towards the planet Russell hoped to find shelter on. Even with the engines facing away from the planet she knew that this would create a thermal signature large enough to be detected by the Dorcons but the speed at which this would travel would be limited by the speed of light and she would have a significant head start by the time the Dorcons realised that she was still in the system.

Russell ceased the Eagle's acceleration and immediately fired its manoeuvring thrusters briefly so that her course was altered by about a degree. This did not sound like much but she knew that at the speed she was travelling it could mean the difference between the Dorcons locating her far enough from the planet to shoot her down without her being able to eject in secret and them missing her by tens of thousands of kilometres. Once she had done this though she let the Eagle drift along its course. This would take it past the planet by a narrow margin and Russell intended to fire a second manoeuvring burst when she got closer that would put her into orbit so she could use the planet's gravity to slow her down without needing to use her main engines. The civilisation that inhabited Mallanas, known as the Mallanasi, had achieved limited space flight before the Dorcons arrived and all that remained of their spacecraft now formed the ring of debris around the planet. On the one hand this offered Russell somewhere to try and conceal herself from the Dorcons but at the same time it posed a hazard. If a stray piece of debris struck her Eagle while it was still moving at high speed then the force of the collision could easily destroy it before she had the chance to eject.

The Eagle's passive sensors showed Russell when the Dorcon's detected the engine flare and they began to move out of orbit to intercept her. However, just as she had planned their course took them in the wrong direction, plotting to try and attack her along the course she had been following while accelerating. Russell continued to watch the Eagle's sensors, keeping track of where the Dorcon attack ships were while she

continued to drift towards the planet. That was until her control console let out a 'ping' to indicate that an active sensor pulse had just bounced off the Eagle and would soon reveal her precise location.

"Damn it!" Russell cursed as she took hold of the Eagle's controls again. The sensor pulse had come from a bulky transport ship in orbit around the planet, one of the vessels meant to carry the locals' tribute of foodstuffs back to the Dorcons. Even though the transport was not meant for combat it had to be capable of opening a wormhole and this meant that it was equipped with a powerful particle beam emitter in its nose and this could easily be employed as a weapon if the crew desired.

Luckily for Russell though the Dorcon crew were unwilling to risk combat in their lumbering transport ship, perhaps uncertain about whether they would find themselves engaging a far more manoeuvrable attack ship. Instead Russell guessed that they would be signalling their own attack ships to return and she knew that she had to act quickly.

Instead of waiting to get close enough to Mallanas that she could use it to slow down without attracting attention Russell brought the Eagle's main engines back online. Turning the Eagle to face in the opposite direction, she then fired the engines to slow down as quickly as she could. Her aim was to match the speed of the debris field orbiting the planet so she could move into it and use it as cover. As she was slowing down she saw the Dorcon attack ships turn and also begin breaking before they started to head back towards the planet as well. Fortunately Russell still had enough time to achieve the speed she wanted and move into a debris field before they got within firing range.

The field had once been one of the natives' space stations and was several times larger than Russell's Eagle so it offered her a good hiding place. However, although the Dorcons could no longer find her on their sensors they still knew roughly where she had gone and as they closed in they opened fire. Bright beams of energy began to slice through the wreckage of the space station, breaking it up even further and Russell heard the worrying sound of pieces of shrapnel bouncing off the Eagle's hull. The impacts were not enough to cause any damage but they did indicate that the Dorcons were getting close to her position and Russell decided that the time had come to make her run.

The blast from the Eagle's main engines when fired close to a large piece of debris had an even more destructive effect than the Dorcon energy beams, shattering the large chunk of drifting metal into tens of thousands of tiny tumbling fragments that hurtled away from the Eagle. One of the closing Dorcon attack ships was caught in the path of these and the craft was forced to veer off as fragments ripped into its hull. Russell's Eagle was now out in the open though and there were still three other Dorcon attack ships closing on her location.

Russell placed her hand on the ejection lever beside her seat and flipped the switch built into the end of it. This triggered an immediate alarm, letting her know that the ejection system was now armed. All she had to do to eject the Eagle's cockpit module was pull sharply on the lever. She waited to do this though, knowing that if she ejected at the wrong moment then all that would happen would be that the Dorcons would shoot down the cockpit module as well. However, Russell did not have to wait long before one of the attack ships chasing her fired again and hit the Eagle to the rear of the cargo module, causing it to shake violently and the cockpit was filled with yet more alarms. Russell then pulled the lever as hard as she could and despite its artificial gravity field and inertial dampeners the cockpit lurched as a set of explosive bolts was triggered, propelling the cockpit module away from the rest of the Eagle just a few seconds before it was destroyed in a brilliant explosion as the main fusion core melted down.

This left Russell hurtling toward the planet below. She had already indicated a preferred landing zone and now the onboard computer was doing its best to get the module to this location. If the crews of the Dorcon attack ships knew that she was alive and inside the cockpit module then they gave no indication of it from their actions as none of them attempted to engage the helpless escape craft and Russell hoped that her plan had worked and they mistakenly thought that it was nothing more than debris.

With only a limited supply of fuel for its manoeuvring thrusters the cockpit computer made as few course corrections as possible, guiding the module into the atmosphere and aiming for the landing zone. There was too little fuel for the module to be able to slow down as it sped through the atmosphere and instead as it neared the ground a set of parachutes was deployed instead and the cockpit module floated down beneath these before landing with a sudden bump.

From a hillside on the surface of Mallanas several kilometres from where the cockpit module landed a pair of figures looked up into the sky. They had seen the flaming trail of the cockpit module as it entered the planet's atmosphere and they followed it with interest, uncertain whether it meant the arrival of a friend or an enemy.

"There is nothing here that the Dorcons would want Avresh." one of them said.

"Perhaps not, unless they have been told of our presence here." Avresh replied, "After all the humans have gone and no-one else has a spacecraft in this system. I think this warrants investigation. Kuran I want you to organise a search party and arm them. If it is the Dorcons and there are only a few of them then we should be able to deal with them."

Russell was momentarily dazed by the rough landing of the cockpit module but she soon recovered her senses. As far as she could tell the module had come down intact and there was still power for lighting although several of the bags in the co-pilot's seat had come loose and flown to the front of the module. Checking the state of the contents of these bags could wait though and after she had released her safety harness she went to the back of the module where the exit from the cockpit was located. Despite being a medical officer Russell still had the combat training given to all GDF officers and she drew the magnetic accelerator pistol she had holstered to her leg before pressing the control to open the door. There had been some damage done to the opening mechanism and although the door did release and slide part way open she had to force it wide enough to be able to fit through the gap while still wearing a space suit. As she had hoped the cockpit module had landed some distance from the tower she had met the local resistance at but still close enough that she was able to recognise some of the land marks she had previously seen from the air and she hoped that this would be good enough to enable her to navigate to the tower. Unfortunately her position was very exposed, the cockpit module having come down in open ground and she knew that it would be easy to detect from the air or even anyone who came even remotely close on the ground. Looking around further Russell thought she saw something move and she raised her pistol as a precaution. Whatever she had seen had vanished now though, leaving her looking at empty terrain. However, she still wanted to be more certain about her surroundings and she went back inside the cockpit and retrieved one of the bags of survival equipment she had prepared. This was light enough to be carried with one hand and she carried it back out of the cockpit before she took a pair of binoculars from it and used them to start searching the horizon all around the cockpit module.

The open ground that the module had landed in gave her a good field of view in all directions, with few hiding places for anyone or anything trying to get close to her. However, as she turned she saw something move again and she began to turn back towards it before there was the sharp 'crack' of a projectile weapon being fired followed by the sound of something bouncing off the back of the cockpit module.

Russell immediately dived for cover, regretting that she had only brought a pistol with her. She had taken a rifle from the Eagle's arms locker as well but that was still inside one of the equipment bags in the cockpit so all she had was the pistol. More shots followed the first but Russell was unable to determine where they were coming from. This was not surprising, she knew that the Mallanasi enforcers who acted on behalf of the Dorcon supporting lords were armed with self-loading rifles that used ammunition with smokeless propellants. This meant that a single rifleman could maintain a high enough rate of fire to keep a target pinned down without giving away their position.

Looking back towards the cockpit module Russell considered the possibility of making back inside so she could arm herself with a more effective and longer ranged weapon. Unfortunately the Eagle had not carried any body armour she could wear, she had already seen that the standard anti-ballistic plates used by the GDF for its infantry could stop a bullet fired by the enforcers' weapons but lacking one of them she would have to make do with the far more limited protection offered by the spacesuit she still wore. However, while this would offer some protection from shrapnel it would offer very little against even low velocity bullets so not getting hit was still the best option she had and she stayed where she was.

All of a sudden the shooting stopped and it occurred to Russell that the shooter may have been forced to cease fire to reload their weapon. Seeing this as her chance she quickly got to her feet and turned to head back inside the downed cockpit module. However, as she turned she discovered that the rifle fire had merely been a distraction meant to keep her focused on the general direction that it was coming from rather than to the side where a small group of the enforcers were closing on her, using the cockpit module as cover. The aliens were vaguely humanoid but their hairless heads were relatively taller than a humans and they possessed a second opposable thumb on each hand. The shooting had stopped because this group was now in position and the hidden rifleman did not want to risk hitting his own men.

Russell brought up her pistol but before she could fire the closest of the enforcers leapt forwards her and swung his rifle towards her to knock the pistol from her hand, then he shoved her backwards hard enough that she overbalanced and fell. Before Russell could get back to her feet two of the other enforcers rushed forwards, slinging their rifles before they grabbed hold of her and pulled her off the ground while holding her securely. At the same time two more of the enforcers dashed to the cockpit module's entrance and pointed their rifles inside as they checked to see if there was anyone else inside it.

The first enforcer advanced on Russell and stood right in front of her before he spoke. He spoke in the locals' native language though and Russell could not understand him.

"I don't suppose you speak English do you?" she said and the enforcer hesitated. Although the Mallanasi could not possibly have learnt English they had had contact with the Dorcons and as was common the reptilian aliens made use of their Psychon slaves as intermediaries rather than dealing with the natives directly. The Psychon females used as emissaries were quickly able to learn the local languages and in return they taught some of the Mallanasi their own, enabling them to communicate with the Dorcons directly. Because the Psychons had been engineered from humans they had been given a language by the aliens who created them that was based on the most common human language, English. Although these were not

exactly the same it was possible for someone who spoke either English or Psychon to make communicate with someone speaking the other as long as they chose their words carefully. The enforcer was not one of the Mallanasi who had learned to speak Psychon but he recognised the sound, as well as noticing the similarity in appearance between Russell and a Psychon that he deduced they could be connected. Psychons only appeared on Mallanas in the company of Dorcons though and they never carried weapons so it was obvious to the enforcers that Russell represented something different and their leader knew that it was something that he could not deal with on his own. Looking at his men the enforcer barked orders at them that Russell could not understand. One of them then produced a set of manacles that were locked around Russell's wrists and they began to pull her away from the cockpit while others went inside and began to plunder its contents.

"Kuran, there are more enforcers on the road. At least fifty." one of the Mallanasi rebels said as he walked towards the rebel Avresh had ordered to investigate the mysterious falling object.

"They must have come from the fortress at Harl. They have the doctor." Kuran replied and he looked around at his group of rebels. He had a dozen men in all and they had little experience with the rifles they now carried. They only had these thanks to the human troops who had destroyed a group of enforcers and they had had neither the time nor the available ammunition to practice beyond firing a few shots each. More weapons and ammunition had been delivered by the humans but there had been even less time to distribute these. Outnumbered and outclassed there was obviously no way that his men could take on the entire enforcer patrol but as he looked back through the basic telescope he had been using to observe what was going on around the Eagle cockpit module and he saw some of the enforcers start to leave, taking Russell with them as their captive. A small number stayed behind though and as he watched them Kuran saw them start to unload bags from the cockpit module and begin searching through the contents, "This is our chance." he told his men, "We'll deal with these enforcers and take those bags for ourselves. Maybe Avresh can find something in them we can use to rescue the human doctor before she is given to the Dorcons."

"Come in." Koenig said when someone pressed the intercom at his door while he was packing some final items before leaving on his one-man rescue mission and it opened to admit Washington with a woman in plain fatigues, "Ah Keynes, I assume you've been through the list of equipment I'm taking with me." he added when he saw the woman who had once been his adjutant until she was pressured by the terrorist group Red Mars into giving them access to Moonbase Mu. Following her court martial she was largely under house arrest but the pressure on resources on the moon meant that her outstanding organisational abilities were essential and she had been returned to duty on a limited basis. This decision had been poorly received by many of the GDF command staff but the results she had achieved were undeniably good.

"Yes colonel." she replied, nodding, "Two people could survive for six months using the supplies you're taking even without being on a planet with a biosphere that can support human life."

"I'd still feel better if you were taking a fire team of my men with you sir." Washington added.

"Maybe so master sergeant, but every passenger I take means less room for cargo while simultaneously meaning more supplies are needed if we can't return to the moon." Koenig pointed out.

"One more person reduces survival time to three and a half months, two more-" Keynes began.

"Yeah, I get it." Washington interrupted.

"Plus there are no guarantees that I'll even survive the trip through the wormhole." Koenig added, "If this goes wrong I could be cooked by radiation the moment I enter it."

"Then why take the risk?" Keynes asked, "We know that there is a habitable planet in the system and there are natives that would shelter Doctor Russell and keep her safe from the Dorcons. When Professor Bergman figures out how to navigate through a wormhole we can go back and-"

"We don't know anything about how safe Helena will be. If the Dorcons suspect that she's still in the system they'll hunt her down and the locals can't fight the Dorcons." Koenig snapped back at her.

"Of course colonel, I'm sorry." Keynes said, not wanting to admit that she was concerned that he would be lost because of the romantic attraction to him she secretly held.

"That's okay." Koenig said, walking across his quarters to where a pair of old fashioned single action revolvers and a Stetson hat were hung on the wall. He left the revolvers where they were but he took down the hat and placed it on his head, "Now let's go and see where we're up to with the Eagle."

Koenig headed for main mission to check on the arrangements for an Eagle to take him through the wormhole and when he entered the room he found Carter talking to two other officers from the command staff.

"Ah colonel, I was just going over your mission requirements with Benes and Kano." Carter said.

"So I see. So what have you got for me?" Koenig asked.

"We've plotted a course that will take you through the wormhole colonel." Benes said and she handed him a tablet with a course from the moon to the opening of the wormhole marked on it, "Everything is in there. We can upload it into the Eagle's flight computer and it will handle everything."

"The computer will be able to handle the shut down more efficiently than a human pilot." Kano added.

"Does technical section have anything else for me?" Koenig said and Kano nodded.

"Yes colonel, just one thing." he said, "We're in the process of mounting a modified stealth probe to the Eagle's spine. If you can deploy that as soon as you're through the wormhole then you'll be able to signal us in an emergency. The probe is programmed to take up a position by the wormhole and transmit through it using a low energy communications laser that we'll be able to detect."

"Of course communication would have to be one way colonel." Carter pointed out, "If we tried sending a signal to you using the probe as a relay then since we can't be sure of where you'll be it would have to use a more powerful broadcast give away its position to anyone else who might be listening."

"What sort of emergency do you have in mind? I've made myself clear, I'm going through alone and I don't want anyone to follow me." Koenig reminded his officers.

"Yes sir, but if it becomes obvious that you're going to have to stay behind then you can at least let us know that you and Doctor Russell are safe." Benes said. Then before Koenig could reply another voice spoke from behind him.

"So you're really going through with this insane plan then?" it said and Koenig turned to see a man in a lieutenant colonel's uniform standing in the doorway of main mission.

"Ah Verdeschi, you're here. Good, come with me into my office and I'll fill you in." Koenig said and the two men headed for Koenig's office.

Verdeschi commanded the military installation known as Moonbase Epsilon were most of the GDF forces were stationed and after Koenig himself he was the highest ranking GDF officer left on the moon. Although Major Morrow was the second in command of Moonbase Alpha, Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi was next in

the chain of command for the moon itself. As he sat down Koenig closed the wall to separate them from the rest of main mission and allow them to talk privately.

"When I got the message that you were going back through the wormhole I thought it was a joke." Verdeschi said as he sat down as well.

"Tony I can't just abandon Helena." Koenig replied, "Of course you're going to be in charge after I leave."

"'After I leave' John? Not 'until I get back'?" Verdeschi commented, noticing the wording Koenig had used.

"I'm not under any illusions about this Tony. The chances of coming back from this are slim. It's quite possible that Helena and I will both be trapped when the moon enters the wormhole again and our connection is broken." Koenig said, "Professor Bergman has been working on a way to increase the odds though. He says that the shield over Mu is ready to be deployed."

"So instead of eighteen hours you'll have how long?" Verdeschi asked.

"I don't know." Koenig added, "Until the shield is actually deployed Victor's can't see exactly how much the emissions from Mu have been reduced by. He's making sure that the mechanisms are working properly before final deployment."

"So assuming that you're leaving as soon as you can you may not even know how long you have until the wormhole closes once you're on the other side?" Verdeschi pointed out.

"No, I'll have to rely on being able to detect the wormhole from a distance with the Eagle's sensors." Koenig admitted.

"A pity we haven't figured out how to fly that attack ship Alexander and Keynes captured for us. At least then you could pretend to be a Dorcon." Verdeschi commented, referring to a Dorcon attack ship that the two women had been able to capture intact when its crew abducted them.

"If we knew how it steered through wormholes we'd already be well on our way home and if we could only fly it within a star system then I wouldn't want to risk losing it." Koenig responded and then he turned his computer monitor so that Verdeschi could see it, "This should bring you up to date on everything going on right now. Maya can help you if you need anything more, she's proving to be a competent officer and an expert at handling the press." he said and Verdeschi smiled.

"Oh yes, I remember seeing her remind that moron that he wanted to run off with Foxworth and Capston." he said, recalling how Maya had dealt with a reporter at a press conference who had a strong bias against the GDF in general and Koenig in particular.

"Bergman, Carter and Kano are all still studying the Dorcon attack ship while Victor is also doing his best to expand our knowledge of wormhole travel in general. Finally Keynes is monitoring our supply situation. For the time being they look okay but they're based on us being able to expand our farming ability without any trouble. If anything does go wrong then-"

"Then we're back to having to find new sources of food before our reserves run out. Yes, I've got this John." Verdeschi said before the intercom activated and Morrow's face appeared on the display screen.

"Colonel launch pad one just called, Combat Eagle One is fuelled, loaded and ready for you to take out." he said but Koenig frowned.

"A combat Eagle?" he said, "Major I wanted a regular Eagle, the moon needs all the armed craft it can get."

"I gave the order to give you a combat Eagle John." Verdeschi told him.

"Tony-" Koenig began but Verdeschi held up his hand.

"Look John you're going to need every advantage that you can get. The production lines for arming our Eagles are up and running as well as those for the Hawks. We can replace the cannons just as easily as the rest of the ship. Now are you going to take the Combat eagle or are you going to order the hangar crew to spend the time it will take to swap all your equipment to an unarmed ship?" he said and Koenig smiled.

"Thanks Tony." he said before he looked at the monitor, "Major, I'll be at launch pad one in ten minutes."

"Yes colonel." Morrow responded and then Koenig stood up and faced Verdeschi who did the same.

"The moon is your Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi." Koenig said and he saluted.

"Thank you Colonel Koenig." Verdeschi replied as he returned the salute, "I'll try not to lose it or break anything before you get back."

When Koenig entered the cockpit of the Eagle he immediately saw the weapon controls that had been added to the console, proving that the craft was one of the moon's precious supply of combat Eagles. These mounted a pair of heavy calibre magnetic accelerator cannons beneath the forward hull section and a pair of lighter cannons in a retractable turret that was stored in the framework of the Eagle's spine. This gave the craft considerable killing power, although it was not a dedicated attack ship like the more heavily armed Hawks were.

Although he was wearing a spacesuit and helmet Koenig still had his Stetson with him and he tossed this onto the co-pilot's seat before he sat down in the pilot's seat, strapped himself in and began the start up sequence.

"Main mission this is Combat Eagle One, I am all set and ready for departure. Requesting permission to take off." he said into the communication system.

"Confirmed Combat Eagle One." Alexander's voice responded, "You are cleared for launch. Good hunting colonel."

Koenig immediately pulled back on the flight controls and he heard the roar of the Eagle's launch engines as the craft rose up off the launch pad. Turning the Eagle towards the wormhole he then began to accelerate. At this point he was still under manual control though and he reached for the console again.

"Alpha this is Combat Eagle One, I'm about to switch over to automatic. Tell Benes that this program of hers had better be right." he transmitted as he engaged the Eagle's autopilot. Already facing in roughly the right direction Koenig saw that the Eagle turned only slightly before its engines came up to full power and the craft's acceleration increased. There was no finesse in the Eagle's manoeuvring to get through the wormhole, the craft was set on a direct course to get to the opening and accelerating. The flight program Benes had prepared though was specially designed to cut the Eagle's engines at the optimum point so that the energy signature would not disrupt the wormhole and cause the termination point to jump to a different location. At the same moment that the engines cut out, many of the Eagle's other systems also shut down to reduce the amount of power that the reactor was required to provide. Artificial gravity had to be maintained just in case the Eagle was exposed to any acceleration forces while passing through the wormhole that could otherwise injure Koenig but the heating and air processing systems did shut down. Not knowing exactly how long it would be before these came back on line, Koenig lowered the visor of his helmet and turned on the suit's independent life support.

"Hold on Helena, I'm coming for you." he said to himself right as the wormhole loomed in front of the Eagle's forward viewports and the craft entered it.

Koenig suddenly felt the Eagle start to shudder and he feared that this meant that the wormhole was shifting so that he would be deposited at some random point in the universe. This did not last long though and the Eagle was rapidly thrown out of the other end of the wormhole. The craft's computer detected the transition and immediately began to restart the systems that had been shut down for the trip through the wormhole. Remembering the probe that Kano had mounted to the Eagle's spine, Koenig ejected this as soon as he was able to and then he turned to the sensor readouts. Despite having an armed Eagle he still wanted to avoid detection for as long as possible and he used only the passive sensors for the time being. It was the optical sensor system that told Koenig what he needed to know, the long ranged telescope fitted to the Eagle allowing him to study the planets in the system and he quickly located one that looked to have Earth-like conditions or at least conditions not far removed from those of Earth. Significantly the space around this planet was littered with the debris of ruined space stations and spacecraft. The odds of happening to arrive in a random system and finding that it contained a habitable planet were slim enough, but for it to also have the same ring of debris around it were too remote to be believable and the only possibility was that Professor Bergman's theory had been entirely correct and that Koenig had just returned to the system that the moon had previously visited. The wormhole that had been previously large enough to swallow the entire moon was now barely a hundred metres across and barely noticeable on the Eagle's sensors as they came back online but it was definitely still there, offering Koenig his only way of returning to the moon.

Checking the communication system Koenig saw that it had come back online and he set it to send only a low power signal that would attenuate within a few hundred kilometres. This meant that it would be unrecognisable as a radio signal to anyone not in the immediate area of the wormhole.

"This is Koenig to Moonbase Alpha," he began, "I have completed transition through the wormhole and have arrived in the target system. Tell Victor he was spot on. Koenig out."



A round of applause broke out in main mission when Koenig's signal was relayed by the stealth probe through the wormhole. By this time Bergman was present in main mission, standing with Verdeschi and Morrow beside Baker's console and Verdeschi placed a hand on Bergman's shoulder.

"Congratulations professor." he said.

"Yes, well done." Morrow added.

"Thank you. I can't say how relieved I am." Bergman replied.

"So Spacewoman Baker are we ready to deploy the shield?" Verdeschi asked, looking down at Baker.

"Mu have indicated that the motors are all online and they have power colonel." Baker told him and he nodded.

"Looks like we're ready then. What do you say professor?" Verdeschi asked.

"I think we should start with a limited closure, say ten percent." Bergman said.

"Spacewoman engage shield to ten percent and put it on the big screen." Verdeschi ordered.

"Yes colonel. Activating shield system." Baker said and the large wall mounted screen at the front of main mission changed to show the camera feed from the ruins of Moonbase Mu. Now there were several curved spike structures around it, arranged in a circle and looking like the teeth of some giant predator. When Baker activated the shield motors these structures began to extend upwards, bending towards one another until they came to a halt.

"Ten percent closure confirmed colonel." Baker announced.

"Readouts from the motors look good." Kano added as he studied the data feed from Mu.

"What about the energy emissions?" Morrow asked.

"Reduced by nine point four percent major." Benes answered, "Computer is recalculating the time until we re-enter the wormhole."

Looking up at the countdown clock the occupants of main mission saw the time change upwards, adding just over three hours to the countdown.

"Looks like it's having the effect we wanted as well." Carter commented.

"How far can we close it before the wormhole will just close entirely?" Alexander added.

"I'm pretty certain that the wormhole will stay open as long as the emissions from Mu are at least three percent of their normal level." Bergman said.

"In that case we should set a limit below that, say a closure that would give a ninety-percent reduction.

Beyond that should need some sort of additional authorisation." Morrow suggested.

"Sounds good to me." Verdeschi said and he looked at Kano, "Captain Kano can you arrange that?" he said.

"Yes colonel. Although I'll need more information on the effects of different rates of closure to calibrate the code." Kano replied.

"Good." Verdeschi said, "Now Baker I want the shield closing to eighty percent. That should give the colonel the maximum amount of additional time without risking closing the wormhole while we get to grips with the effects of the shield."

"Yes colonel." Baker responded before she set the shield to deploy further.

"Yes, I see what you mean." the man stood at the head of the table said. Around him were almost a dozen fellow members of the Red Mars terrorist group. Carlos Garcia was the effective leader of the group on the moon, having been the most senior member present when it left earth's orbit. He had even led the raid that had sabotaged and destroyed the nuclear stockpile at Moonbase Mu that in turn led to the opening of the wormhole that now carried the moon through space, "A Hawk would give us considerable strike power, but how exactly do you propose that we steal one? The GDF isn't going to just leave one lying around where one of our contacts can get us into the cockpit. Even if we could get to one then what do you think we could do with it? Take off? And if we were able to steal one what then? A Hawk needs a specialised launch and landing harness that we don't have."

Garcia was then interrupted as the door opened to permit a young woman to enter the room and everyone at the table glanced in her direction.

"Mister Garcia," she said, "you need to see this." and she walked over to him and handed him a computer tablet.

"What is this?" Garcia asked as he watched the video that was already set up to run on the tablet. The video showed an Eagle lifting off from a launch pad and heading towards the wormhole.

"After it took off that Eagle headed into the wormhole." the woman said and Garcia frowned.

"The GDF threw away an Eagle?" he said.

"Maybe not, it gets better." the woman told him.

"How?" he asked.

"That's more than a regular Eagle, it's a combat Eagle. Not the sort of thing that the GDF are going to just throw away, the best thing though is the pilot." the woman said.

"Pilot? You mean it wasn't being flown on remote?" Garcia said and the woman shook her head.

"No, Koenig's aboard." she said and there were gasps from the others around the table, "The talk from our informant is that he's gone to rescue Doctor Russell."

"So she was left behind?" another of the gathered terrorists said and the woman nodded.

"Her Eagle didn't make it back to the moon before we entered the wormhole again. Now though Professor Bergman seems to have come up with some way for an Eagle to travel back through to the system we were in last." she said,

"How does he get back?" Garcia said.

"Our informant wasn't sure but apparently he has to make it before we leave this system or he'll be trapped." the woman replied.

"That doesn't give him much time." another of the terrorists said, instinctively glancing at his watch.

"That's the other news I have." the woman said, "The Earthers have a way to extend the amount of time we spend in a system. All that construction work they were doing at Mu wasn't a clean up operation like we thought it was."

"Then what was it?" Garcia said.

"They've built a giant dome that they can close over the entire base if they want to. It cuts down on the energy emissions that are widening the wormhole, or if its closed completely will cut them off and close the wormhole entirely." the woman explained, "They partially closed it to give Koenig more time."

Garcia smiled when he heard this.

"So Koenig thinks he has more time because of this," he said, "and if something were to happen to this dome then he may find himself out of time ahead of schedule."

"We've plotted killing Koenig but never had the chance." one of the other terrorists pointed out.

"Yes, but now we don't need to kill him. We can just make sure he never makes it back to the moon." Garcia added and he looked at the woman who had brought him the tablet, "I need to know everything there is to know about this dome." he told her, "If its control systems can be subverted then I want to know how and if they can't then I want to know enough about the structure that we can sabotage it by more direct means."

"Blowing up anything that is big enough to cover an entire base is going to take more explosives than we have available." another terrorist said.

"That's why we need more information. Every structure has weak points where its own mass can be used against it, especially if it has moving parts like this dome must have. Attacking them will require far fewer explosives." Garcia said before he looked at the newly arrived woman and added, "Go, I don't care how you get the information but I want it within two hours."

"Colonel Verdeschi!" Maya called out down the corridor as he was walking towards Alpha's officers' quarters.

"Yes Maya? I was just on my way to unpack." he asked, pausing to look around.

"I thought you should know colonel I have been receiving a lot of communications from reporters about Colonel Koenig's departure." Maya told him as they both continued walking towards the officers' quarters, "They want to know if he is coming back."

"So they know he's gone. Damn, I was hoping that we could keep that a secret. The command staff wouldn't say anything so obviously one of the hangar crew talked." Verdeschi said.

"So what should I tell them?" Maya asked.

"Tell them that the colonel has gone on a survey mission and will return shortly." Verdeschi said.

"You don't think he will though, do you?" Maya said and Verdeschi hesitated.

"He'll be back." he said.

"Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi I can sense when you are being deceptive, even with yourself." Maya told him and he let out a sigh.

"Damn it Maya, you'll pretty much always hear us calling each other by our ranks but in private we're just John and Tony. We've been friends for years, the same with Helena. I just feel that I should have gone with him instead of staying here." he said.

"Colonel Koenig needed you to run Moonbase Alpha in his absence." Maya said.

"Yes and if he thought he had a good chance of returning he'd just have asked Major Morrow to step in. This isn't about running Alpha for a couple of days Maya, this is about having someone who can run the entire moon indefinitely." Verdeschi said. Then he took out his comlock, "I just need to check which are my quarters." he said.

"I assigned you the quarters opposite mine." Maya said and Verdeschi smiled.

"That's convenient." he said.

“Since you treated me to dinner at Epsilon I thought I would offer to return the favour. However, given your comments about the quality of the food in the officers’ mess I thought I would cook for you myself.”

The Eagle’s sensors indicated to Koenig that the space around the planet was currently free of Dorcon ships although whether this was because they were now on the surface or merely hidden over the horizon was unknown. It was also possible that there was a Dorcon vessel right in front of him that he was unable to detect because of the limitations of the speed of light on sensor systems so simply accelerating straight towards the planet at full power was out of the question. However, Koenig was an expert pilot and he knew alternative methods of approaching a target without being detected.

Wormholes could only be created at LaGrange points where the gravitational pull of two or more large objects cancelled one another out exactly and this meant that there was another planet close to Koenig’s position. This was a rocky planet with a highly toxic atmosphere but Koenig had no intention of landing on it. Instead Koenig used brief bursts from his Eagle’s manoeuvring thrusters to enter orbit around the planet without producing an energy flare strong enough that it would be detected from Mallanas itself, however as soon as he was in eclipse he fired the Eagle’s main engines to rapidly increase its speed while remaining in orbit as he circled around it. Then at the last moment he broke out of orbit so that when the Eagle came out of eclipse it was hurled towards Mallanas, the combination of the Eagle’s main drives and the planet’s gravity boosted the craft’s speed to almost ten percent of the speed of light.

Koenig then let the Eagle coast towards Mallanas and he removed the helmet from his spacesuit. Then he reached over to the co-pilot’s seat and picked up his Stetson before placing it on his head.

“Okay Helena, not long now.” he said.

After being loaded onto one of the beast-drawn enforcers’ carts Russell was taken to a building that looked as if it had been constructed before the Dorcons came to Mallanas. It was obviously built from materials more advanced than the natives were capable of using since the destruction of their industry. The effect if this was to make the structure almost invulnerable to attack by any means available to the Mallanasi now and so it made sense to her that the enforcers were now using it as a base.

As soon as the carts drove through the large gateway set into the wall that surrounded the building Russell was removed and taken inside by a pair of the enforcers where they were met by more of them in what looked to be some sort of reception area. To begin with they spoke to one another in their own language but then one of them looked at Russell and addressed her in the Psychon language instead.

“Who be you? Why you being here?” he said.

“Russell, Helena. Lieutenant colonel. Serial number-” Russell replied before the enforcer struck her across her face with the back of his hand. Then he looked at the enforcers holding Russell and spoke to them in their own language again.

The enforcers then began to pull Russell again, dragging her from the reception area and further into the structure. It soon became apparent to Russell that the building was a repurposed prison and that many of the cells remained in use, with other Mallanasi being held in them. As soon as they reached an empty cell the enforcers unceremoniously shoved Russell inside before slamming the door shut behind her and she heard the locked being engaged.

Now that she was alone she took the time to study her surroundings. The cell had few features, just a wooden bunk that lacked even the most basic of padding at one side and a bucket in the corner that she guessed was intended as a lavatory, causing her to wince. There was a window set high up above the bunk and Russell had to stand on this to see out. Unfortunately even from here she could see very little because of the wall that surrounded the prison but she could see several of the carts that the enforcers used for transport and the stable where they kept the animals used to pull them. There was no glass but simple metal bars ensured that Russell could not climb out of the cell. She tested each of these anyway to see how secure they were but none of them moved at all.

After checking the window Russell crossed the cell to inspect the door instead and she found that this was just as secure as the window was. With no apparent means of escape from the cell Russell walked over to the bunk and sat down to wait and see what lay in store for her.

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"These are the best I could do in two hours." the female terrorist told Garcia as she put a tablet down on the desk between them.

"Where did you get them?" he asked.

"From our man at Delta. Members of his union built some of the parts of the dome. He didn't have full design specs but these are pretty good." she answered.

"It's a hydraulic system." Garcia said as a smile spread across his face, "All we need to do is make the system lose pressure somewhere and it will collapse."

"Yes but there's another issue. Some of our man's cell members went out to Mu to deliver the dome components and they said that they saw defences being constructed as well." the woman added and Garcia frowned.

"Did they say what sort of defences?" he said.

"No, all they got a look at were the mountings. They didn't see the weapons themselves." the woman replied.

"So there could be anything from anti-personnel accelerators up to surface to space lasers and missiles."

Garcia commented. Then he paused for a moment before he held up the tablet and added, "This is good though Marta, well done. I'm going to run this by Braun and Conner, they're our best engineers and they'll be able to tell us what's needed to bring this thing down."

To the crew of the Dorcon attack ship in orbit around Mallanas, being assigned to escort the transports to this backwater world that was not even officially part of the Dorcon Empire was regarded as a tedious task. The natives offered no resistance and the only real need for the presence of Dorcon troops at all was a reminder to them of what they could do in theory. The missions typically consisted of a few days sitting around and just watching while the transports were loaded before heading back to their base on a Dorcon colony world. Being left in orbit was considered even worse, at least those who landed their ships on the surface would have the opportunity to get out and walk around instead of spending the entire time aboard a cramped attack ship.

However, on this particular occasion things were different. The presence of the travelling moon that had become common knowledge across the empire had provided some excitement for the attack ship crews when they arrived in the system, especially when it turned out that even after the departure of the moon one of their ships had been left behind. After that ship had been shot down though things were returning to their normal pattern and the attack ship crew had nothing to do but wait once again.

At least until one of them noticed something on their sensors.

"We've got a contact." the Dorcon on watch called out from the cockpit and the other crewmember came rushing in.

"Where? What is it?" he asked.

"It's closing fast. Too fast to be anything natural and there shouldn't be anyone else in the system other than us." the first Dorcon told him, "It's running silent too. We only picked it up on opticals when it moved between us and the fifth planet. I've got the sensors locked onto it now though, we can track every move it makes."

"It's too much of a coincidence for it to be raiders. It has to be another human ship." the second Dorcon replied.

"What do we do?"

"Call it in. From what I've heard some of the human ships are as good as ours so I don't want to risk us intercepting it on our own. We'll get another couple of ships up here and then take it out just like we did with the first one."

When Koenig first saw the Dorcon attack ship come over the planetary horizon he took hold of the flight controls again, expecting the alien craft to accelerate and attack. When it remained in orbit though he started to think that perhaps he had escaped detection after all and he began to plan for how he would have to approach the planet now that he knew there was a Dorcon vessel in orbit. He was moving far too quickly to enter orbit himself but slowing down would mean turning the rear of the Eagle towards the Dorcon ship and the thermal flare would give his position away in an instant. The only option open to him was to destroy the Dorcon ship before it could get off a warning.

Koenig suspected that he would be able to manoeuvre the combat Eagle enough to bring his guns to bear on the Dorcon attack ship without giving himself away and he began to calculate a firing solution. His intention was to fire a burst from the Eagle's cannons that would take out the attack ship before it even knew he was here, leaving the way clear for him to decelerate and enter the planet's atmosphere before any other Dorcon ships could be launched to investigate. The attack ship in orbit around the planet was moving at a constant

speed and this made it easy for the Eagle's computer to calculate exactly when Koenig needed to open fire so that the magnetically accelerated projectiles would cross the path of the attack ship at the exact moment it was at that spot.

However, before he could fire the Eagle's sensors picked up another pair of attack ships rising from the surface to join the first. At first Koenig considered the possibility that this could just be a coincidence, but when the three attack ships then broke orbit on a heading that would bring them to within no more than a hundred kilometres from him given his current course and speed he knew that he had been detected. "Okay let's do this." he said to himself and no longer concerning himself with stealth he turned the combat Eagle through one hundred and eighty degrees before firing its main engines to reduce speed before the Dorcons came within firing range.

While he decelerated Koenig checked the energy emissions coming from the Dorcon ships and he smiled when he saw that they were using passive sensors only, at which point he began to recalculate the firing solution. The Dorcons were flying on a straight intercept course, adjusting only to match his deceleration and that made their path highly predictable. As soon as the Eagle's speed had been cut by half Koenig ceased his deceleration and turned the craft again, this time pointing it towards the oncoming Dorcons and he looked at the targeting display on the console in front of him. The computer automatically adjusted its aim point to take into account the relative motion of the Eagle and the Dorcon ships and Koenig gave them a few seconds to notice that he had ceased his deceleration and adjust their intercept course accordingly. Unknown to the Dorcons they were now walking into a trap that no professional human combat pilot would. While Dorcon attack ships made use of a directed energy weapon mounted in their nose that doubled as a means to open a wormhole for interstellar travel, Koenig's combat Eagle was armed with projectile weaponry. This meant that while the Dorcons had to get close enough that the energy of their weapon would not dissipate into space and leave it unable to damage the Eagle, Koenig could in theory fire at them from an unlimited range. Only the ability of a target to turn out of the path of projectiles limited their range but Koenig was counting on the pilots not being able to react fast enough.

Once he was happy that he had one of the Dorcon ships in his sights he squeezed the triggers for the Eagle's cannons and he fired a rapid three round burst from each of them. He suspected that the Dorcons would pick up the magnetic pulse of the firing but he hoped that given their different practices for combat in space they would not realise what they were seeing while the inert and solid projectiles he fired would be invisible to them unless they activated their active tracking systems.

Having fired his cannons from far beyond their usual engagement range Koenig found himself waiting impatiently to see what effect they would have and he let out a cheer when all of a sudden he saw a bright flash of light through the viewport ahead of him at the same time as his sensors registered a spike in thermal energy as one of the Dorcon attack ships simply exploded.

"And that's why you don't mess with Texas boys!" he exclaimed, "Now shall we dance?"

The destruction of one of their squadron took the other Dorcons by surprise. As Koenig had intended they had not immediately recognised the brief magnetic pulses as the firing of a weapon. The Dorcons did have magnetic accelerator weapons in their arsenals but they were not regarded as weapons for space or aerial combat. The six solid projectiles had approached the Dorcons without giving off any energy emissions that they could detect before smashing through the hull of one of the unsuspecting attack ships, one of the striking the fusion reactor that powered it and destroying it in an instant.

"Leader this is Three, Two is gone!" the pilot of one of the surviving attack ships exclaimed to the squadron leader.

"I see that. The human ship is using projectile weapons. Break formation and close from different angles. Don't maintain a constant course and speed for any longer than necessary. Remember it will take time for the projectiles to reach us, the further away we are the harder it will be for them to hit us." the squadron leader responded and the two attack ships immediately peeled away from one another,

"Gotcha." Koenig said to himself when he saw the attack ships split up. By moving apart the Dorcon crews had created a gap between them that was getting wider by the second and Koenig's Eagle was already pointing directly towards this. He quickly fired the Eagle's main engines at full power and the craft accelerated towards this gap, flying between the two Dorcon attack ships while they were still trying to turn back towards him.

In order to follow Koenig the Dorcons first had to decelerate and reverse course and this gave him the time to build up a lead on them as he raced towards Mallanas and the belt of debris surrounding it. Koenig turned the Eagle again to decelerate and as the Eagle pointed its nose back towards the gunships the Dorcon crews began to take evasive action again, not wanting to give Koenig the chance to target them with his cannons.

By the time Koenig reached the debris belt his Eagle had slowed down enough that he was able to manoeuvre into it and use its thrusters to weave between the various wreckage. He guessed that Russell

would make for the same location where they had met the Mallanasi resistance to provide them with the equipment for making the cure for the bacteria they had been deliberately infected with as well as a number of weapons to help them fight off the Dorcons and he steered towards this. There was no beacon that Koenig could detect but he was not concerned about this. He knew that Russell would not be expecting a rescue ship so there would be no point in her doing anything that would attract the attention of the Dorcons. The two attack ships continued to pursue Koenig's Eagle and there was a flash past the cockpit's viewports as one of them fired its beam cannon at him. Spotting a large piece of wreckage ahead, one that looked like a space station that had been left almost intact Koenig headed for it and the Dorcons followed him. As soon as Koenig passed the wrecked space station he veered behind it so that the Dorcons could not see him as he turned the Eagle again. This meant that when the first Dorcon attack ship came around the space station after him he was aligned perfectly towards it and he instinctively fired a sustained burst from his cannons that ripped the attack ship apart. Seeing the destruction of the second attack ship, the pilot of the final remaining one turned away instead of following Koenig to approach from a different direction. While the attack ship was circling around the wreckage Koenig turned his Eagle towards the planet and accelerated, entering the upper reaches of the atmosphere. The heat of entry made the Eagle easily detectable and the attack ship followed him into the atmosphere. There was a brief period during entry into the atmosphere where neither ship could act, the air around the fast moving craft producing a fiery glow of ions that disrupted communications and sensors. Having been the first to enter the atmosphere Koenig's Eagle was also the first to clear this disruption and he put the craft into a steep dive, hoping to be able to lose the attack ship among ground clutter. However, the Dorcon vessel was also able to get through the disruption caused by entering the planet's atmosphere while Koenig was still descending and he was forced to turn at the last moment to avoid a blast from the aliens' energy weapon. "You guys just don't quit, do you?" he said. Although highly manoeuvrable especially in space an Eagle was not designed for atmospheric dogfighting and Koenig knew that the Dorcons had the advantage here. However, he did not intend to go down without a fight and he reached out to activate the Eagle's turret. Designed for point defence, the cannons mounted in the turret lacked the hitting power of the larger calibre main guns mounted beneath the Eagle but Koenig hoped that they would still be sufficient to do enough damage to the attack ship chasing him. Needing to focus his attention on piloting the Eagle, Koenig designated the Dorcon attack ship as the turret's target and let the craft's computer do the rest. He could see on the targeting monitor that the computer was indeed tracking the attack ship as it weaved from side to side but it did not fire the turret while the attack ship remained too far away. Meanwhile the Dorcon crew were able to fire their main weapon again and another beam of energy flashed past Koenig's Eagle as he continued to fly in an evasive pattern of his own. Had the combat still been taking place in space then he would have simply turned the Eagle so that he could bring his main guns to bear on the attack ship but in the atmosphere this would put a great deal of stress on the ship's structure at the speed he was travelling at and so he continued with his evasive flying pattern while hoping that the Dorcons would come closer. All of a sudden an alarm sounded in the Eagle's cockpit. For a brief moment Koenig thought that this was warning him that something aboard the Eagle had failed and he looked around the control console for a visual indication of what this could be. However, he quickly found that the Eagle was still fully functional. The alarm had been coming from the craft's threat warning system, alerting him that the Eagle had just been scanned by a targeting system requesting an Identify Friend or Foe recognition code to which the Eagle had responded with its GDF transponder code. This was followed by another flash outside the forward viewport but this time it came from the ground instead of the attack ship that was still in pursuit of Koenig and the Eagle's sensor picked up the missile that was now racing towards it. The Eagle was equipped with a suite of electronic jammers but these did not engage automatically and Koenig reached out to activate the system manually. Before he could manage this though the fast moving missile streaked past the Eagle and instead exploded directly in front of the Dorcon attack ship. This created a cloud of speeding, molten fragments that the attack ship flew right into. Struck by multiple fragments moving at extreme speed, the forward section of the attack ship was ripped open and the two crew killed instantly. What was left of the attack ship spun towards the ground, burning brightly before it crashed into a wooded hillside and there was a massive explosion that consumed all that remained of it. Koenig now realised why the Eagle's electronic defences had not activated, the computer had recognised the request for identification as coming from a GDF surface to air missile launcher, just like the shipment of weapons that he had authorised be provided to the Mallanasi resistance fighters so that they would have the capability to bring down Dorcon attack ships as they had just done. Significantly this meant that he had just found the very rebels he knew Russell would have sought shelter among and he turned the Eagle towards the location where the missile had been fired from.

Russell turned her head back towards the barred window of her cell when she heard a sound that she had not heard in a number of months, the sound of rotor blades. Getting up and rushing to look outside again and up into the sky she saw an aircraft approaching the prison compound. Possessing a pair of stubby wings that each ended in engines fitted with large bladed propellers the general configuration of this was familiar to Russell, resembling similar atmospheric craft that were still used on Earth by civilians and the World Army, Air Force and Aquanaut Security Patrol. The exact shape was different of course and some of the markings she recognised as being writing in the Dorcon language. Obviously the reptilian aliens also had a use for cheaper atmospheric vehicles for times when craft capable of travelling in space were not needed. As Russell expected them to, the craft's rotor blades tilted upwards as it came in to land so that no runway was necessary and it hovered above the courtyard of the prison for a few seconds before descending vertically and creating a thick cloud of dust that forced Russell to duck away from the window as some of it was blown towards her.

When the sound of the engines ceased she looked outside again and she saw that a small group of Mallanasi enforcers had exited the prison building and were walking towards the landed tilt-rotor vehicle. As they approached it a hatch opened in the side of the vehicle and several figures got out of it. Most of them were obviously Dorcon warriors in body armour but there was another figure with them that Russell could not see clearly because of the hooded cape it wore. All she could tell was that it was much smaller than the Dorcons were. For a moment she considered the possibility that one of the rarely seen female Dorcons could have also arrived at the prison. From what Maya had explained, females in Dorcon society focused their time on the arts and academia though and there seemed little of either to be had here on Mallanas. In addition although they were smaller than the males of the species the difference in size was not as great as what Russell was seeing here and it seemed far more likely that the figure was not a Dorcon at all, perhaps one of the higher ranking Mallanasi who served them instead. As Russell watched, the two groups of figures met with one another before the Mallanasi enforcers turned around and led their newly arrived guests back into the prison building and disappeared from view.

Russell then returned to sitting on the bed but she did not have to wait long before something happened. First she heard the sound of alien voices from outside her cell and she turned to look at the door just as a small hatch was opened so that a Dorcon soldier could peer inside. He stared at her for a few moments before the hatch was closed again and there was a sound of a key being inserted into the lock. The door then swung open and the hooded figure entered the cell while the Dorcons themselves remained outside as the cell door was closed and locked again.

"Who are you?" Russell asked, considering the possibility that she had just received a cellmate. However, the figure then reached up to lower their hood and Russell realised why they had been placed in the cell with her.

The features looking back at Russell were almost entirely human but the pronounced widow's peak in her hair and the catlike appearance of her eyes proved to Russell that she was a Psychon like Maya. By human standards the woman looked to be very young, perhaps not even twenty in Earth years and she was significantly shorter than Russell was. Overall her build was very slender but from this close distance the hood worn by the girl could not hide the fact that she was obviously pregnant.

"Who are you?" the Psychon girl repeated in perfect English.

"Doctor Helena Russell. You're a Psychon aren't you?" Russell replied.

"What is your purpose on this planet?" the Psychon asked, ignoring Russell's question entirely and again in perfect English. Russell knew that female Psychons learned languages quickly but she was still doubted that she could have learned it from just a few words. This made her suspect that the woman had studied the language previously, perhaps from recordings that the Dorcons had made of the initial communications between them and Koenig.

"The people here are sick. I'm a doctor." Russell answered simply. She knew that Maya was capable of detecting lies and so she did not want to chance lying to this girl until she could determine whether she was as capable of doing this as Maya was, "When is your baby due?" she asked, hoping to be able to distract the girl from the interrogation she had obviously been sent into the cell to carry out.

"How many others are with you?" the girl said, still refusing to be distracted by Russell's own line of questions.

"It's just me. Now how about you tell me something about you? Your name for example." Russell said.

"It is known that there are more of you in the system. One of your ships may have been able to escape temporarily but it will be found." the Psychon girl said and Russell's eyes widened. Hers had been the only Eagle away from the moon when it entered the wormhole so there was no way that she could think of that

another one could still be in the system, "You don't know about the other ship." the Psychon girl commented, revealing that her empathic abilities were good enough to read even a non-verbal reaction.

"No. Mine was the only ship when the moon left. I didn't see any others. Your masters should know that we can't send ships through wormholes so there can't be another here." Russell told the girl and she stared back at Russell and frowned.

"You're telling the truth." she said, "You really don't know anything about the other ship that destroyed the squadron sent after it."

Russell smiled when she heard this. Obviously the young Psychon woman knew little about interrogation if she was giving away military intelligence like this. However, this still did not explain the presence of another human craft in the system. With no information to give to the young woman Russell decided to try getting more out of the Psychon again instead.

"I know a Psychon called Maya." she said, "Have you heard of her?"

"No." the young woman replied.

"We rescued her from the Dorcons. Help me get out of here and I'll take you with me?" Russell added.

"There is no escape from the Dorcons." the Psychon said and she glanced back towards the door.

"So how come Maya got away from them? She lives on the moon with us now, you must know I'm telling the truth." Russell said and this seemed to confuse the young Psychon woman so she decided to try getting some more basic information from her, "So how about you tell me your name? You already know mine after all." she said.

"Lynial." the Psychon woman answered and Russell smiled at her.

"Pleased to meet you Lynial. So do you know if you're having a boy or a girl?" Russell asked and she pointed to the young woman's stomach and she nodded in return.

"A boy." she said, holding the large bump of her stomach.

"You know he doesn't have to be a slave to the Dorcons." Russell commented.

"I've seen what the Dorcons do to slaves that try to escape." Lynial replied, "I've seen them gouge out eyes and tongues before abandoning them in the wilderness to die or eject them into space."

"Lynial what if I told you that there were people here who would protect you?" Russell said.

"You mean the rebels? The one you gave weapons to?" Lynial responded and Russell wondered how she knew about the weapon shipments. If an informer inside the resistance had revealed the existence of the rifles and surface to air missiles then they would most likely have told the Dorcons about the cure for the bacterial infection used to control the Mallanasi. Lynial noticed her reaction though and she frowned, "You gave the rebels more than weapons didn't you?" she said softly and she glanced towards the door to double check whether they were being observed. Then when she saw that the hatch was still closed she stepped closer to Russell and added, "Something that can really free them?"

"Yes." Russell said, nodding her head, "We gave them a means to cure themselves of the bacteria the Dorcons infected them with. Maya told us that the Dorcons would probably just abandon the system if they lost control and the rebels had the power to fight back effectively."

"They would, yes." Lynial agreed, "The Archon does not know that my masters are using the resources of this world to boost their contributions to the Empire and he would not be pleased if he found out that they had been hiding it from him. An invasion and full occupation would be too costly, they need the bacteria to maintain control."

"Then you see it is possible to escape the Dorcons. Help me get out of here and you can be free as well." Russell said, then she looked at Lynial's stomach and added, "Your son too. He doesn't need to ever be a slave."

"Would you take me back to your moon?" Lynial said.

"I'm sorry Lynial, I can't do that. I can't even get back there myself. Our ships can't travel through wormholes and even if we could steal a Dorcon ship I can't fly it and I don't know where the moon went to be able to follow it." Russell said and Lynial frowned.

"But you were the only ship left behind." she said.

"Yes, I nearly made it back but the moon entered the wormhole just seconds too soon for me to make it." Russell replied.

"So where has this other ship come from? The one that destroyed two of my masters' ships before the rebels shot down a third with your weapons?" Lynial said.

"Wait, you weren't making that up to try and trick me?" Russell said in surprise and Lynial shook her head.

"No. One of your ships destroyed two attack ships. Then the third was brought down by ground fire. The crew sent a warning back to their commander before they were shot down." she said and Russell considered the implications of this. Any Eagle launched from the moon would have been visible to her after the moon itself entered the wormhole so the only possibility was that one had returned to this system somehow after this had happened. Russell knew that an intact Dorcon attack ship was being studied back at Moonbase Alpha but as far as she knew Professor Bergman, Carter and Kano were a long way from understanding how it was able to navigate through wormholes. However a craft from Alpha had returned to Mallanas though

Russell knew one thing, Koenig had come to rescue her, all she needed to do was find a way of letting him know where she was.

"Lynial I really need your help." she said, "That must be a rescue mission and I need you to get word to them about where I am."

"How?" Lynial said, frowning.

"The Mallanasi rebels." Russell said, "If you can get word to them then they can come here and get me out."

"I don't know how to reach the rebels either though." Lynial pointed out.

"If you can get me a map then I can show you where they might be. Where I expect the rescue team will have gone as well." Russell said.

"I'll see what I can do." Lynial told her and then she waked back to the cell door where she knocked on it and moments later the hatch opened again to allow one of the Dorcons waiting outside to look into the cell. Lynial then said something in the Dorcon language and the door was opened to permit her to leave. As the door was slammed shut after her, leaving Russell alone in the cell again. All of a sudden she considered the possibility that Lynial could be trying to trick her, gaining her confidence so that she could provide any information about the resistance that Russell gave her to the Dorcons. On the other hand she could not think of any other way to get word to either the resistance or Koenig.

For reasons of security Moonbase Mu had been given a remote location although it remained on what had been the Earth-facing side of the moon. Before the base had been destroyed there had been only a limited travel tube service that was restricted to GDF personnel and most travel to and from it had been via Eagle. It was possible to reach the base by travelling across the lunar surface, this being how Garcia and his men had reached Mu when they sabotaged the weapons stockpile it held, but the journey was long and could only be undertaken with a vehicle that possessed a life support system. Fortunately for the Red Mars group there were enough such vehicles in private hands on the moon that they could find one that they could then use to drive from the nearest outpost to Mu. They knew that the local sheriff's office would be watching for anyone heading towards Mu in such a vehicle though so they went in a different direction first before turning towards their intended destination.

Marta sat at the front of the vehicle beside the driver while behind them were another four members of Red Mars. Despite the vehicle being fully pressurised all of the occupants wore spacesuits although the visors of their helmets remained open. All of the terrorists were armed, having a variety of magnetic accelerator pistols holstered to their suits while there were rifles lined up at one side. Unlike the pistols the terrorists carried all of the rifles were of an identical pattern, one not made by humans. These had been recovered from a crashed spacecraft belonging to the aliens who had attacked Earth in the previous century. They were designed for humans to use though, being wielded by the human troops the alien invaders pressed into service and brainwashed so the Red Mars terrorists were able to make use of them easily.

"We're coming up on the old perimeter now." Marta announced when she saw that the exo-rover's navigation system showed them getting closer to the site of Mu. This was the cue for the occupants of the vehicle to seal their spacesuits just in case they came under fire. Although fully enclosed and pressurised the exo-rover was not armoured and any hit from a modern weapon was likely to puncture the hull. It was too far to be able to walk back to the outpost they had departed from, but with their spacesuits sealed the terrorists would at least have the chance to repair their vehicle instead of suffocating.

The extensive defences that had been installed around Moonbase Mu had been destroyed in the nuclear explosion but the terrorists were taking no chances about what had replaced them. The driver slowed the exo-rover and Marta concentrated on the optical sensor array fitted to the roof of the vehicle. Using this she searched the ground ahead, looking for the tell tale signs of artificial structures that could house weapons or sensors.

"Keep going." Marta said, "Slow and steady."

There was a rise in the surface of the moon ahead and instead of driving over it the driver of the exo-rover began to steer around it, minimising the chance of being detected. As the exo-rover began to circle around this rise though Marta gasped as the optical sensor revealed what was on the other side.

"What's wrong?" the driver asked.

"It's like glass." Marta replied, looking at the feed from the camera. This showed the lunar surface where the nuclear explosion that had opened the wormhole had melted the dust and tiny stones together into a continuous, shiny surface. There was still some debris on top of the surface, deposited there but the melted nature of the ground showed through.

"There's not much cover." the exo-rover's driver commented as he brought the vehicle to a halt and studied the general shape of the terrain ahead of them. Although the moon lacked an atmosphere through which the force of an explosion could be carried the shock wave the power of the blast could still be carried through the moon itself and combined with the extreme heat that had melted the rock itself this had levelled out a vast area of ground around Moonbase Mu.

Although this meant approaching the dome any closer without being detected was unlikely, it also meant that anything constructed in this area would be easy to spot and surveying this with the camera mounted on the exo-rover Marta was able to pick up several squat structures that had the appearance of weapon emplacements.

“That’s what we’re here for.” she said, focusing on the nearest of the structures. This was an unremarkable building that looked to have been made from pre-fabricated sections with a slot through which the weapon inside could be fired while there was a compact turret mounted on the roof. Zooming in on this slot with the camera Marta saw the muzzle of the weapon that just about poked out from inside the main bunker. This did not have the normal circular opening of a projectile weapon, instead she saw what looked like a lens that suggested the bunker contained a laser cannon. Directed energy weapons were not as common as projectile and missile launchers among human forces but they did have their place so it was not entirely unexpected that at least one would be included in the defence of Mu. Shifting her focus to the turret on top of the bunker Marta saw that it appeared to mount two separate weapons, one had a stubby but large calibre barrel that suggested it was a grenade launcher while beside it was the narrower calibre barrel of a heavy machine gun, most likely a magnetic accelerator weapon. The combination of these weapons gave the bunker the capability of taking out a range of surface targets from light infantry to armoured vehicles. All of the armoured fighting vehicles on the moon belonged to the GDF but the defences had obviously been designed with an external invasion by the Dorcons or some other force in mind rather than just the internal threat of Red Mars. After making sure that the camera had recorded as much detail about the bunker as possible Marta turned it towards one of the adjacent ones and began to make recordings of that as well. If the bunkers mounted different weapons from one another then she knew that Garcia would want to know about it as well.

“What are they doing back there?” the driver said, looking past the defensive bunkers and trying to get a good look what lay beyond them.

The dome covering Mu dominated the horizon, a structure large enough to encompass an entire moon base, but it was not the only evidence of large scale human construction. Between the outer ring of small defensive bunkers and the massive dome itself there was more construction taking place, with several large structures being put in place around the dome.

“I don’t have a clue.” Marta replied. The exo-rover’s rooftop camera indicated that these structures were being dug down into the moon with only the uppermost part visible above ground. However, there was nothing to indicate what the GDF might be about to put in them.

“Could they be missile silos?” the driver suggested.

“Why build missile silos here? The Earthers have those at Epsilon and they don’t seem in a hurry to build them at any of the other bases.” Marta pointed out. Then she shut off the camera and added, “We’ll give what we’ve got to Mister Garcia and let him decide if he thinks it’s important.”

7

Koenig brought the Eagle into land close to the tower where the previous meetings with the Mallanasi resistance had taken place and as soon as he set down he saw several figures armed with rifles appear along with another who was unarmed but had a familiar face as he waved towards the Eagle. Koenig quickly shut off the Eagle's engines and headed for the air lock module, opening the external door and walking down the steps.

"Avresh." he called out to the leader of the resistance.

"Colonel John Koenig. We did not expect to see you again." the alien leader responded in the Psychon language. Most of the resistance spoke only their own language but fortunately it was possible for Koenig to communicate with Avresh and he could function as a translator if needed.

"I didn't expect to be back myself and I wouldn't have made it not for your people bringing down that Dorcon ship on my tail." Koenig replied.

"It seemed only fair. You provided us with the weapons after all." Avresh said, "But why are you back here?" I'm looking for Doctor Russell. Her Eagle didn't make it back to the moon in time and I knew she'd come back here to you." Koenig told him.

"She tried Colonel Koenig, but I fear she was not able to return to us either." Avresh said, "My men saw her ship enter the atmosphere and they went to investigate but when they arrived they were too late to stop the enforcers from taking her."

"But she landed safely? Was she injured?" Koenig said, relieved that Russell had at least made it as far as the planet.

"I am not sure exactly what happened. My people found only the cockpit section of her ship along with parachutes that we think were used to bring it to the ground safely. We think that her ship was damaged and she had to eject that part to survive." Avresh answered and Koenig nodded.

"That's how Eagles are designed." he said, "What happened to Doctor Russell?"

"The enforcers took her away. There were too many of them for my people to fight." Avresh said.

"That's okay Avresh, I understand." Koenig replied.

"The enforcers left only two behind after they took Doctor Russell away though." Avresh continued, "They were unloading the doctor's things from the cockpit. They were easy to overcome and we have taken those things to other hiding places. Do you want these bringing here?"

"No, you can keep them." Koenig said. He knew enough about Eagles to know what sort of personal equipment could be salvaged from one and there was nothing that would pose a threat to the moon if it fell into the hands of the Dorcons. He suspected that they would already have all of it anyway after they destroyed the breakaway group that fled from the moon under the leadership of a group calling itself The Citizens' Committee who had believed that the inhabitants of the moon should seek out a habitable planet to settle on instead of trying to return to Earth, "Can you tell me where the enforcers took her?"

"There is a fortress quite far from here. We think they came from there. Before the Dorcons came it was a prison but afterwards it was used by the enforcers as a base. The strength of the structure makes it invulnerable to the weapons we have. Your missiles might damage it but we want to keep those to use against the Dorcons' ships."

"I understand." Koenig said and he looked back towards his Eagle, "My Eagle is armed though. Its weapons can penetrate concrete walls and destroy Dorcon ships. I used up about half the ammunition for the main guns on my way here but there is still enough left to take on a few more attack ships if necessary. Now what do you think the enforcers will do to Doctor Russell?"

"They will probably give her to the Dorcons. They know she arrived in a spacecraft and she is obviously an alien." Avresh said.

"So they won't harm her?" Koenig asked.

"I do not think so. They would be afraid of making the Dorcons angry if she was killed before they could question her." Avresh said before he suddenly hesitated.

"Is something wrong?" Koenig said when he noticed the change in the alien's expression.

"Perhaps Colonel John Koenig. If the Dorcons question Doctor Russell then they will use a Psychon witch." Avresh said and Koenig knew immediately what he meant. If Russell was questioned by a Psychon then the Dorcons would find out everything she knew about the Mallanasi resistance, including the machine we have been provided with to cure the bacteria they were all infected with.

"We need to hurry Avresh. I need to get Helena out before she can be questioned. Can I count on your help?" Koenig said.

"Of course Colonel John Koenig. We owe you so much." Avresh said.

"I'm going to need to know where this prison is. I'll take the Eagle there and set down as close as I can but if I'm going to be facing a lot of these enforcers then I'm going to need help." Koenig explained.

"Of course Colonel John Koenig. I can guide you to the prison and you will need me to translate orders for my people." he said, "How many do you need?"

"Eight." Koenig said, "If you have anyone with combat experience then they should be included. In the meantime the rest of your people need to abandon this tower. If we're too late then the Dorcons are going to know about it pretty soon."

"Speak, what did the human have to say?" the most senior of the Dorcons said to Lynial when they were shown into an office normally used by the most senior of the Mallanasi enforcers at the fortress prison.

"She was left behind when their travelling moon entered the vortex master." Lynial replied, keeping her eyes looking down at the floor in deference to his rank.

"And what was she doing here?" the Dorcon leader asked.

"The humans came to see if there was anything here to be salvaged." Lynial lied.

"What about the other ship?" another Dorcon added from the side of the room.

"I tried asking but she had no knowledge of it." Lynial said and the Dorcon who had asked the question let out a low growl.

"Then she is lying." he said.

"Well, is she?" the Dorcon leader added, looking straight at Lynial.

"I sensed no lies my lord." she replied.

"Then you asked the wrong questions. We have footage of a second human craft as well as a missile being fired from the ground. There are obviously more humans here." the second Dorcon said.

"I am sorry my lord. Perhaps I could try again, it may help if I had a map of the area around where her capsule crashed. If she knows anything about where the rebels are hiding then her reaction to the map may provide some hint about where they are hiding." Lynial suggested and the Dorcon leader lifted a tablet onto the desk, using it to call up a map of the region before he slid it towards the Psychon woman.

"Take this." he told her and she picked up the tablet, "Now go. Find out what the human knows and don't come back without the information."

As soon as the exo-rover returned to the outpost Marta made her way to the safehouse that Red Mars maintained there. Some Red Mars safehouses were well stocked with weapons and other equipment but the one at this outpost was meant only to be somewhere that a member of the organisation could lay low for a prolonged time if necessary. It was stocked with food and also possessed a communications terminal that had been fitted with a device to make monitoring or tracing any signals more difficult. It would also warn the user if it detected any attempts to do such a thing.

Marta had transferred the mix of still images and video footage that she had recorded to a portable drive that she now plugged into this terminal before she activated it and placed a long distance call to Moonbase Beta.

"Cameron Engines." a voice said, giving the name that was the business used as a cover for another Red Mars safe house. Although the communication terminal had a screen for video and data signals this remained blank, Red Mars limiting the amount of data they put on even channels they believed to be secure just in case it turned out that they were not.

"I'm looking for a G-thirteen thrust controller." Marta said.

"I'm not sure we have one of those." the voice at the other end said.

"An old friend said you could point me to one." Marta responded, completing the coded exchange that identified her as a member of Red Mars.

The line went silent for a while but Marta did not hang up. She knew that now she had identified herself Garcia was being informed that she was calling.

"I take it you have what we need?" Garcia's voice said suddenly, specifically avoiding the use of any names.

"Yes, it was a rewarding trip. Are you ready to receive?" Marta asked.

"Yes, send it now." Garcia told her and she activated the data transfer from the drive, sending all of the recordings to Garcia.

"Do you have them?" Marta said.

"Yes, We'll be in touch if there's anything else we need." Garcia said and the line was suddenly cut off.

"Excuse me Colonel Verdeschi." Alexander said as she entered the base commander's office and Verdeschi looked up from the computer console.

"Yes lieutenant?" he asked.

"Colonel I thought you should know that the proximity sensors at Mu picked something up." Alexander said and Verdeschi frowned.

"What sort of something?" he said.

"A surface vehicle. Optical footage indicates that it was a civilian exo-rover." Alexander told him and she handed him a tablet that showed him an image of the exo-rover that Marta and her team had used to drive from the outpost to Mu, "That's the best shot that the cameras got. It gives us a partial registration plate but not a full tag."

Verdeschi smiled when he saw this.

"Red Mars." he said, "This is exactly what Koenig and I expected. We knew that they'd send someone to take a look at what was going on there sooner or later."

"So that's why you had your people head out and lay the sensors instead of using civilian contractors, you didn't want Red Mars to know when they were being watched." Alexander replied.

"Exactly. We know they have informants but Epsilon is pretty much all military. We've never had any indication of a leak from there." Verdeschi said, "The question is though did they go there just to take a general look around out of curiosity or are they planning something specific?"

"There isn't much left for them to blow up." Alexander said, "I mean there's the dome but do you think that Red Mars has anything big enough to destroy that? Even a Hawk couldn't do it. You'd need an Anderson-class frigate and the last I checked the only one of those on the moon has been smashed to pieces ever since it crashed into Eta."

"There'll be plenty of time to figure out what they're doing after we've caught them." Verdeschi said, "Now that this cell has revealed themselves we should be able to track them down. Pass this onto the sheriff's department at the nearest outposts to Mu. I doubt Red Mars will have driven further than they need to but they might not have been able to reach the closest so we should check at least the nearest six. Have them run this partial plate and tell us whether any of the exo-rovers they have match it.""

"And if they do?" Alexander said.

"Then I'll need Master Sergeant Washington and Alyson Keynes. We'll see if Keynes recognises any faces from local security footage before Washington and his men go in." Verdeschi said and Alexander nodded.

"Yes colonel. I'll get right on it." she said before she turned and walked down the steps leading back to main mission.

As Alexander was leaving Verdeschi leant back in his chair and thought for a moment. Then he sat up straight again and looked into main mission.

"Captain Benes." he called out.

"Yes colonel?" she responded.

"Captain I need a line to Epsilon. I need to talk to Major Mahmoud." Verdeschi told her.

While Avresh was gathering a force of resistance fighters Koenig changed from his spacesuit into a set of combat fatigues that he could wear a set of body armour over before he began to unload the supplies he had brought along with him in the Eagle. If the mission to rescue Russell was successful and they were able to return to the wormhole before it closed then these would not be needed and Koenig saw no reason why the resistance shouldn't have what they could make use of instead. On the other hand if the rescue operation failed or took so long that the wormhole closed before Koenig and Russell could reach it then it made sense to have all the supplies already at a secure location. As he brought each container from inside the Eagle he handed it to a Mallanasi who in turn loaded it onto one of the carts they had brought to the tower so that they could evacuate all of their own equipment from inside it. Of greatest significance to them was the radio transmitter that they had been able to assemble and that had first drawn the attention of the inhabitants of Earth's travelling moon. Koenig had brought far more advanced communication equipment with him but the resistance was more familiar with their own transmitter for the time being.

"Colonel John Koenig." Avresh called out as he approached the Eagle and Koenig turned around to see him and a group of eight other members of the Mallanasi resistance following him. All of the Mallanasi, including Avresh himself were armed with rifles that looked like those used by the enforcers working for the Dorcon supporting leaders of the planet but from their new condition Koenig could tell that they were instead taken from the batch that had been made on the moon to arm the resistance with. The superior manufacturing techniques available at Moonbase Alpha meant that these weapons, despite their cosmetic similarity to enforcer-issue rifles were lighter, stronger and more reliable. If they were going into battle against a well trained and experienced paramilitary force then Koenig doubted that this slight technical edge would be enough to offset the almost complete inexperience of the resistance fighters but from what little he had heard about the Mallanasi enforcers they were used only to dealing with opposition from small groups armed with nothing more advanced than knives. Certainly the engagement between a unit of GDF troops and a larger force of enforcers had favoured the GDF so heavily that it had been almost one sided.

"Avresh." Koenig responded, "I assume that these are the men who will be coming with us?"

"They are. These two used to be enforcers themselves before they joined us." Avresh told him and he pointed out two of the resistance fighters that accompanied him.

"Good." Koenig said, nodding his head, "Your men should fight in two groups with each one led by these two."

"That was what I was thinking as well Colonel John Koenig." Avresh agreed.

"I don't suppose either of them know the layout of this prison or where Helena might be being held?" Koenig asked.

"I fear not." Avresh responded, "This base is remote and few ever go there, only the enforcers that are garrisoned there and those unlucky enough to be taken there as prisoners."

"What sort of prisoners are we talking about here Avresh?" Koenig asked, "Are they political prisoners or regular criminals? If they could be useful to you then we can pack as many as we can carry into the Eagle but I'd rather not be turning murderers and thieves loose on your people."

"They are hostages Colonel John Koenig, relatives of Mallanasi who are influential but not supporters of the lords. The lords keep them imprisoned but alive in order to ensure the continued loyalty of their relatives. If the reports I have heard are right then there are up to a hundred others held at that prison." Avresh explained and Koenig smiled.

"Then the more of them we can free the better for you. I'm sure all those influential Mallanasi would be grateful to you for releasing their relatives." he said.

"Yes, it would definitely help us. Those Mallanasi could help us distribute the cure more easily than our own limited organisation." Avresh replied.

"That's our plan then. We get in and while we're hunting for Helena we release as many of the other prisoners as we can. A hundred people will be standing room only in the Eagle though." Koenig said.

"There will be carts and riding animals at the fort Colonel John Koenig. If we could seize those then perhaps they can be used to transport our people away from there." Avresh said, "You and the doctor will then be able to return directly to your moon while we make our way to safe houses."

"That sounds like a plan to me." Koenig said, adjusting the Stetson he still wore slightly, "Now let's finish unloading these supplies and then we can go."



Garcia looked at the wall mounted screen as it played back the video footage taken by Marta on one part while other areas of the screen showed the still images.

"These look like a mix of ground and short ranged space defences." one of the two men in the room with Garcia said. This man was Braun while the man sat beside him was Conner and they were the Red Mars engineers who had studied the information obtained about the dome itself. If overcoming the defences around Mu were going to require any form of custom weaponry then these two men would be the ones to design it.

"Yes. I see turrets with high elevation but no missiles." Conner added in agreement.

"The Earthers could be worried about the high levels of radiation acting as a natural jamming system." Braun suggested and Garcia frowned.

"You told me that we could collapse a segment of the dome with a conventional missile. Are you now saying that that won't work? That the radiation will jam the missile's guidance system?" he said and the two engineers looked at one another.

"It could if it was strong enough." Conner commented.

"We could add extra shielding to it." Braun suggested.

"That poses the problem of weight though." Conner pointed out, "We've already had to reduce the fuel load just to get the larger warhead on the Archer missile to make sure that we have enough power to take out the valve."

"What are you saying? Can this be done or not?" Garcia said sternly and he frowned at the two men, appearing to be on the verge of losing his temper.

"It can." Braun said, "There's just going to be a problem with the weight of the missile that will limit its maximum range."

"Limit by how much?" Garcia asked.

"I expect that once we've added the extra shielding needed then the missile's range will be limited to about ten or twenty kilometres." Conner said.

"More if it's launched from a higher altitude." Braun added, "Of course if you do that then there's a much better chance that the Vulture will be detected before it even gets that close."

"What sort of range do those defences have? You said they were short ranged. How short is short?" Garcia said.

"No more than ten kilometres. Less against surface targets because of the terrain." Conner told him.

"That's unless there's something in one of those bunkers that we don't know about." Braun added and he pointed to one of the larger bunkers closer to the dome that were still under construction.

"You think that the Earthers could already have finished the ones on the other side of the dome?" Garcia asked.

"We can't discount the possibility entirely." Braun said, "Of course there could even be weapons we don't know about in the ones we can see here. It depends how deep they go."

"If we were still in orbit around Earth I'd be asking for a surveillance flight between the moon and Earth to grab some overhead images of the area." Conner said.

"Well we aren't around Earth and any ship that flies over Mu is going to be seen and intercepted." Garcia replied, "I can get Marta to go back for another look but it'll take time."

"The Vulture can go in low." Braun said, "Any long ranged weaponry is going to have to be guided anyway and we can fit countermeasures. At the very least the Vulture ought to be able to get its payload away before being fired on. Just to be sure though I'd pick a pilot who was—"

"Who was what?" Garcia asked when Braun stopped speaking in the middle of his sentence.

"Pick a pilot who was expendable." Braun replied.

Russell looked at the map Lynial presented her with and frowned. As with human maps there were numerous symbols and markings that denoted particular features but these were different and Russell had no way of knowing what any of them meant. She expected that Lynial could understand them all but she did not want to have to go through each symbol in turn and find out what it meant so instead she focused on just trying to find the location of the tower where she had met the Mallanasi resistance.

"I think it's in this area somewhere. If I got my navigation right after I ejected then I landed about ten kilometres from it I think and the carts headed in pretty much the opposite direction." she said.

"I do not understand 'kilometres'." Lynial replied, "I can tell that they are a measure of distance but I do not know how far.

"Right, of course." Russell said and she looked across the cell towards the door, "Well I'd say that there is

about two metres from me to the door. A kilometre is one thousand metres, so five hundred times the distance from me to the door.”

“The Dorcons use the torran to measure distance.” Lynial said as she moved to stand midway between Russell and the door before she then backed away from Russell half way to the door and stopped, “This is a torran between us.”

“So do the Dorcons have large multiples of this for longer distances?” Russell asked and Lynial nodded.

“Yes, they have words for a thousand or a million torrans.” she answered.

“Well the thousand would be able about one and a half kilometres.” Russell said, “That means I’d have landed about six or seven of them from where I met the resistance. Of course then there’s the question of how far from here I crash landed in the first place.”

“I had to translate for the enforcers when they were telling my masters where they found you.” Lynial told her, “They said that it was about four torrshals away. A torrshal is a thousand torrans.”

“Okay so that’s about six kilometres. That would put the resistance about sixteen kilometres away or not much more than ten of those torrshals.” Russell commented, “That’s going to be too far for you to walk in a reasonable amount of time though. Especially in your condition.”

“There may be a way but it would be risky.” Lynial said, “I could get the enforcers to take me most of the way and drop me off. The problem would be that my masters would come looking for me very quickly.”

Russell considered this. It seemed likely that the Dorcons would use their tilt rotor aircraft to hunt for Lynial since it would not only allow them move quickly, it would also give them the advantage of being able to search for her from the air and the ability to see over many obstacles at ground level. She knew that the resistance on Mallanas had been provided with surface to air missiles that they must have already put to good use if they had brought down a Dorcon attack ship and if they could destroy an attack ship then one of these missiles would easily be able to do the same thing to a tilt rotor aircraft. However, this would rely on the resistance being in place to attack the aircraft as well as them being willing to use up one of their limited supply of missiles on what may not seem like a particularly valuable target. There was also another issue that occurred to her.

“If the resistance see you with the enforcers they may not trust you.” she pointed out to Lynial, “They associate Psychons with the Dorcons anyway.”

“Do you think they would just kill me?” Lynial asked and Russell considered this. The resistance group led by Avresh had seemed reasonable to her but she had not witnessed them dealing with any prisoners. All of the enforcers that had been engaged by Washington and his men had been killed. From what she knew of the resistance they had not been able to run a military campaign before now and there was no way to predict how they might react to any Psychon who appeared at one of their secret camps and claimed to be bearing a message from someone the Mallanasi hardly knew. She suspected that the resistance would not simply kill her out of hand no matter what though and this offered a solution.

“I could write you a letter.” she suggested to Lynial, “The Mallanasi won’t be able to understand it but as long as anyone from Alpha is with them it will prove that I sent you. All I need is paper and something to write with.”

“I’ll get them.” Lynial replied with a nod.

None of the Mallanasi had flown before and Koenig made sure that each of them had something to be sick into if flight turned out to make them nauseous. This was especially important for Avresh who would be sat in the cockpit with Koenig and the Mallanasi leader clutched several plastic bags in his hands as a precaution. “Does this make sense to you?” Koenig asked, looking at the alien as he in turn studied the console in front of him. This duplicated all of the functions of the console in front of Koenig’s seat but Avresh would not be using most of them. All he needed was the navigational display that Koenig had set. This was split between a large scale map centred on the position of the tower and extending out more than fifty kilometres in all directions while the other part of the display showed a more magnified view of an area one tenth of that. At present this was also centred on the tower but it would change in real time to follow the Eagle’s position at any time.

“Yes Colonel John Koenig.” Avresh replied and he pointed to the larger scale map, “The fortress is in this area here.” and Koenig nodded.

“Okay that’s not far. At full power we can be there in a matter of minutes. Tell your men that we’re about to take off. That button there.” Koenig said and he pointed to the button that would activate the intercom headset that Avresh wore. The Mallanasi pressed the button and spoke a few words in his language and at the same time Koenig powered up the Eagle’s engines.

“They will be ready now.” Avresh said and he leant back in his seat and gripped the sides of it tightly.

Koenig pulled back on the flight controls and there was the roar of engines as the Eagle rose up off the ground and turned towards the location of the prison that Avresh had indicated. Koenig had been truthful when he said that the journey would not take long. Even at the speed of sound it would take less than a minute to travel the distance between the tower and the enforcer’s base and in an atmosphere such as the

one that Mallanas possessed the Eagle was capable of flying more than three times this speed. However, Koenig also wanted to avoid detection just in case there were any other Dorcon attack ships in the area. His sensors did not show any airborne targets but there was more than enough ground clutter for a good pilot to hide in. Flying at high speed was dangerous at low altitude so Koenig kept the eagle's speed very low, less than half the speed of sound and in addition to enabling him to keep his altitude to a minimum it also gave Avresh plenty of opportunity to study the navigation system and issue corrections to Koenig about their heading as they were needed.

"That's it." Avresh said suddenly, "Colonel John Koenig the fortress is right there." and he pointed to a spot barely two kilometres ahead of them. Koenig glanced at the navigation display and saw where Avresh was pointing. The location of the enforcer base was on the far side of a line of tall hills that Koenig was keeping behind to avoid being seen but he knew that the time had now come to reveal their presence and he pulled back on the flight controls again so that the Eagle's nose tilted upwards and at that moment he increased power to the engines, pushing it through the sound barrier and there was a loud 'boom' that made all of the Mallanasi aboard tense up.

The Eagle sped over the top of the hill and almost immediately the prison compound came into view right where Avresh had said it would be. The Eagle sped towards the prison and just a few seconds later Koenig cut the engine power and fired its breaking thrusters to bring it to a halt above the prison.

"What's that doing here?" Koenig exclaimed when he saw the Dorcon tilt rotor craft in the courtyard below. "That is a Dorcon vehicle Colonel John Koenig. The enforcers must have summoned them." Avresh answered.

"Well they won't be flying home in it." Koenig said and he lowered the nose of the Eagle so that its main cannons pointed directly at the alien aircraft. Squeezing his triggers Koenig fired a rapid burst from the Eagle's guns that ripped through the tilt rotor vehicle as if it was made of paper.

With the Eagle making its final approach at supersonic speed Russell only became aware of its presence when Koenig fired its breaking thrusters. At this point though Russell still did not know that the newly arrived craft was an Eagle, one fusion driven rocket engine sounded much like any other and she initially suspected that another Dorcon vessel, this time an attack ship had arrived. It was only when she heard the far more recognisable sound of a Combat Eagle's main cannons being fired that she realised that the rescue she had hoped for had arrived at last and at the sound of the explosion that destroyed the tilt rotor craft she rushed to the window of her cell to see what was happening.

It was then that the cell door was opened again and Lynial entered with a pair of enforcers.

"It seems we do not need the writing materials after all." Lynial said and then she glanced at the enforcers, "Don't worry, they don't understand us." she told Russell, "We can talk freely. My masters are going to fight whoever has come to rescue you."

"Just stay close to me Lynial. This will all be over soon." Russell replied as the two armed enforcers just stared at her across the cell.

Koenig heard the sound of gunshots as they bounced off the hull of the Eagle. Even though the craft was not particularly heavily armoured its hull was more than thick enough to be impervious to the handheld firearms that the enforcers were armed with. Of greater concern to him was the possibility that there could be Dorcon troops with more powerful weapons still on the ground and he quickly located an area of the courtyard that was open and large enough for him to be able to safely set the Eagle down before bringing it in to land.

As the Eagle descended Koenig deployed and armed the turret and as a unit of enforcers came rushing from around a corner he opened fire on them, using a sustained burst to take them all out in one go.

"Okay let's go." Koenig said as he released his safety harness and he quickly got to his feet and rushed from the cockpit.

Avresh called out to the other Mallanasi in the Eagle's passenger module, telling them that they were about to disembark and they all got up out of their seats and hurried to the airlock module where Koenig and Avresh were. Koenig opened the hatch that faced away from the prison building, not wanting to enable any snipers get a line of fire on the rescue team as they were disembarking from the Eagle and he ran down the steps while they were still in the process of deploying. Avresh and the other Mallanasi followed Koenig down the steps and at the bottom they split up. Avresh and one of the teams of four resistance fighters continued to follow Koenig while the second team ducked down and crawled beneath the Eagle. Here they lay prone and pointed their rifles towards the prison. From behind the Eagle Koenig could hear the sound of rifle fire as more enforcers moved into position to defend the prison and this was joined by fire from the resistance fighters under the Eagle, firing at openings where they thought the enforcers were shooting from. Much of this fire was ineffectual, the shots fired from inside the building simply bounced off the Eagle's hull while the Mallanasi hiding beneath the craft were insufficiently experienced for their shooting to be accurate enough to hit targets inside a building.

The fire coming from inside the prison did prevent Koenig from simply charging out from behind the Eagle towards the nearest entrance to the prison building though and he came to a halt just behind the cockpit module.

"Avresh we need to break down that door." he said, pointing across the courtyard and past the burning wreck of the Dorcon tilt rotor vehicle.

"I agree Colonel John Koenig. But how do we get there?" Avresh responded.

"With this." Koenig told him and he plucked a smoke grenade from his chest, "This will give us cover while we run. Are your men ready?"

Avresh turned to the other Mallanasi and spoke to them, at which point one of them slung his rifle and took a large axe from the pouch on his back. Koenig was about to arm and throw the smoke grenade when all of sudden the door to the prison burst open and a pair of Dorcons came rushing out while two others took cover within the doorway itself. The reptilian aliens were only lightly armed and wore no body armour, their heavier weapons and armour having been inside the tilt-rotor vehicle when it was destroyed. As soon as they were clear of the doorway the two charging Dorcons took cover behind a low wall and continued to fire over it although Koenig noticed that they fired only one or two shots each before they took cover again and he guessed that they had only a limited supply of ammunition that they could not afford to waste by firing shot after shot without a clear target.

Koenig tucked his grenade back into the load carrying gear he wore with his armour and brought his rifle back to his shoulder. Had he been firing at targets behind mundane brick structures he would have been tempted to set the muzzle velocity of his rifle to its maximum so that he could try to shoot right through their cover but he suspected that the prison building was made of more durable materials and that even his magnetic accelerator rifle may not penetrate any of the walls. Instead he dropped to one knee and levelled his rifle, aiming for one of the Dorcons behind the wall. Then as the alien rose to fire his pistol again Koenig squeezed off a single shot and the magnetically accelerated projectile punched a hole right through his chest.

In response the other Dorcon behind the wall fired back at Koenig and he felt the impact of the projectile at his shoulder. The armoured pauldron attached to Koenig's body armour deflected the bullet away harmlessly but he did still fall over and one of the Mallanasi reached out to pull him out of the line of fire while a second fired several shots from his rifle towards the Dorcon. The large alien warrior screamed in pain as he was hit by at least one of the rounds and he collapsed behind the wall he was using for cover.

"Colonel-" Avresh began.

"I'm fine. It'll take more than a low velocity pistol round to get through this armour." Koenig interrupted as he got back up and picked his rifle from the ground.

The two Dorcons in the doorway were all that blocked the path of the rescue team getting into the prison and Koenig fired his rifle again, this time using a short burst to try and increase his chance of hitting. However, the alien he was aiming at simply ducked back into the building and all Koenig's fire did was blast a chunks from the external wall, thus proving that the prison was made of durable material. The two Dorcons did not stand their ground though, instead they decided that they were clearly outgunned in the doorway and they fell back to leave the way open for the rescue team to get inside. As soon as he saw this Koenig took the smoke grenade from his chest again and this time he wasted no time in pulling out the pin and tossing it ahead of him.

A few seconds later the grenade burst open and a thick cloud of grey smoke began to form, expanding to provide an obscuring barrier between the Eagle and the doorway.

"Come on!" Koenig called out as the cloud formed the barrier he wanted and he ran towards the open doorway with his rifle held in his shoulder just in case the Dorcons reappeared. Although it seemed unlikely to him that there were any Dorcons other than the two who had just retreated inside the prison Koenig was taking no chances and he checked inside the building before he entered. Behind him the Mallanasi resistance fighters followed with Avresh and his group first while those who had been firing from under the Eagle brought up the rear.

"Which way?" Koenig asked as he looked around the empty entrance area. There were several exits from the room but no obvious indication of which way would take them to where Russell was being held.

"That sign indicates the direction prisoners would be taken when this was still an ordinary prison Colonel John Koenig. I see no reason why the enforcers would have changed that." Avresh said and he pointed to one of the wall mounted signs. Although Koenig was unable to understand any of the writing on it he could tell the significance of an arrow that pointed towards one of the exits and he made his way towards this doorway. The door itself was unlocked and when he opened it Koenig found himself looking down a long hallway.

"Okay let's see where this leads." he said before he began to run down the corridor. As he ran the door at the far end of the corridor opened and a uniformed enforcer appeared. Koenig raised his rifle but it was Avresh that fired first, shooting from his hip and his shot clipped the enforcer. The uniformed Mallanasi fell to the floor, calling out as he clutched at his wound. A second shot then rang out as another of the Mallans

resistance fighters fired his rifle as well and the already injured enforcer was hit again, causing him to slump to the floor in a lifeless heap.

When Koenig reached the body of the enforcer he noticed a set of mechanical keys hooked to the dead alien's belt and he reached down to take these.

"These may come in handy." he said, passing them to Avresh.

"Agreed Colonel John Koenig. What is your plan now?" Avresh replied as he took the bunch of keys from Koenig.

"For starters someone needs to carry this as well." Koenig said, picking up the dead enforcer's rifle, "We'll give it to the first of your people that we free. Any cell we get to we'll open and the prisoners can come along with us. We'll ask each of them if they've seen Helena."

"Colonel we've got a hit on that exo-rover." Alexander announced and Verdeschi got out of his chair and came down the steps to stand beside her at her console.

"Let me see." he said.

"Here sir." Alexander replied, pointing to a photograph and data packet submitted from one of the moon's more remote outposts, "From the sheriff's department at an outpost that's about three hours drive from Mu. Their logs show that it was gone for about seven hours recently."

"So it drove to Mu and came back again. Do we have any images of the occupants?" Verdeschi asked and Alexander nodded.

"Yes, local CCTV caught them all getting in and out again. There was no way they could hide their faces without it looking suspicious. I guess they were just hoping that no-one would suspect they were up to anything out of the ordinary. I've already forwarded the images to Captain Benes for processing." Alexander said.

Verdeschi then looked at Benes.

"Does computer have anything for us on them?" he said.

"Not yet colonel. Although the full registration plate I've been given has the exo-rover registered at Beta."

"Beta. What a surprise." Verdeschi muttered, knowing that Beta was a hotbed of illegal activity where Free Mars were known to operate.

"What about our response team?" Verdeschi added.

"Major Carter is waiting on launch pad five with an Eagle now." Morrow told him, "Washington is aboard with a strike team and Miss Keynes."

"Okay, send this packet to them and see if Keynes can identify anyone. Then clear the Eagle for launch." Verdeschi ordered.

Vulture gunships predated Eagles and Hawks by several decades. They had been designed as combat craft that had a limited space for troops or cargo and in their original configuration were armed with a pair of turret mounted magnetic accelerator cannons and several hard points for externally mounted ordnance. While the introduction of the more modern craft had seen them removed from front line service with the GDF they had continued to be used by colonial forces and also by civilians who had bought demilitarised craft relatively cheaply on the surplus market. This meant that it had been straight forwards for Red Mars to acquire a small number of the craft, along with the parts they needed to rearm them in the years before the moon left the Earth's orbit. These were then scattered around the moon in hidden hangars at remote outposts and settlements where the GDF would not notice them while they were quietly converted back into the gunships they were supposed to be.

The example picked for the attack on the shield dome over Mu had been only partially rearmed by Red Mars. They had been able to remount the external missile hard points openly by masquerading the craft as being intended to carry out airborne surveys of the lunar geology using ground penetrating radar systems mounted in external pods that different from missile launcher mounts only slightly. It was then just a matter of improvising an adaptor to get these to carry Archer space to surface missiles instead of commercial sensor pods. However, the Vulture still lacked the turret. For this attack though the absence of the magnetic accelerator cannons was not considered a drawback. The plan was that the Vulture would launch its modified missiles along with a number of decoys and then immediately withdraw. Just in case any close in defence was required an old fashioned ballistic cannon had also been mounted in a pod that could be carried on one of the external hard points and this could be used in the suppression of any defences or to deal with any Eagle transports in the area to assist with the mysterious construction.

The pilot and co-pilot selected for the attack checked the weapons carried under the wings carefully before they boarded the craft and strapped themselves into the cockpit. Each of these had been surrounded by a false cover that gave them the appearance of scientific equipment instead of armaments so that the Vulture could take off from a commercial launch pad at Moonbase Gamma where most of the ore mined on the moon was processed instead of having to be moved to somewhere more private before being armed. Although there was always a slight risk of the weapons being discovered this meant that the attack could take place sooner and the time for Koenig to get back through the wormhole would be reduced by a greater amount.

"Control we're set." the pilot said when he had confirmed the Vulture's systems were all operating properly.

"Copy that Vulture five-one-seven. Stand by for transit to launch pad." the voice of the controller responded.

The crew of the Vulture then saw a large crane moving across the ceiling of the underground hangar towards their craft and was lowered over it. Attaching to the framework spine of the Vulture, the crane lifted it up a

short distance and began to carry to towards the cross-shaped pad inside the shaft located at the centre of the hangar. Once the Vulture was placed on this the crane retreated and the shaft was sealed before the pad began to rise, taking the Vulture up to the surface.

"Vulture five-one-seven requesting permission to launch." the pilot said.

"Confirmed Vulture five-one-seven, you have permission to launch." the controller said and the pilot took off immediately.

Moonbase Gamma was far enough away from the ruins of Moonbase Mu that it did not look suspicious for the pilot to immediately turn his craft in that direction before he accelerated away.

The cell block still used to hold prisoners was just on the other side of the door that the enforcer had come through. The block was arranged with the cells along either side of a wide hallway while there were twin walkways overhead that gave access to another two rows of cells. The presence of rows of tables in the hallway suggested that it doubled as either an area for prisoners to mix while not in their cells or possibly where they would eat their meals but right now all of the cells were closed and their occupants locked in. There were more armed enforcers present here, assigned to guard their prisoners and as the rescue team entered the cell block these fired down at them from the overhead walkway. Almost immediately two of the Mallanasi resistance fighters fell dead, both shot by the enforcers before they could find cover. Koenig responded to this attack by taking cover behind one of the tables. This was fixed to the floor to prevent it being picked up and thrown by a group of prisoners so he was unable to turn it over to use as a makeshift barrier but it was the best cover available to him while he returned fire, using his rifle on automatic. Although the walkway was fitted with a safety rail this did nothing to obscure the enforcers who were relying entirely on the advantage of having the high ground and Koenig's first burst sent one of them tumbling over this rail only for his body to land in the mesh that prevented anyone from leaping from the walkway to the floor below.

"I'll keep them pinned down. Start unlocking these cells and see if anyone knows where Helena is." Koenig called out.

Covered by Koenig and the other Mallanasi resistance fighters, Avresh stayed close to the wall at one side of the cell block as he ran to the first of the cell doors and looked inside. Seeing the cell on the other side empty, he then moved on to the next and checked inside. This time he saw a Mallanasi cowering at the back of the cell and so he quickly began checking through the keys recovered from the dead enforcer until he found the one that fitted the lock.

"Quickly." he told the prisoner, who looked at him in surprise. When the prisoner realised that the figure standing at the doorway was not an enforcer he hurried towards Avresh, "We are looking for a specific prisoner," Avresh told him, "she looks similar to a Psychon but she is not one."

"I have seen Dorcons with a Psychon. The enforcers led them to the isolation area that way." the prisoner replied and he pointed along the cell block to the far end.

"Here, take this key and free as many as you can. Be careful though, there may still be enforcers or Dorcons close by." Avresh said and he took the key that had opened the cell from the others and handed it to the prisoner before he dashed back towards Koenig, ducking behind the table beside him.

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

"He recalled seeing the Dorcons themselves along with one of their Psychon slaves being led that way Colonel John Koenig." Avresh said and he pointed along the cell block, "They must have been going to see your Doctor Russell."

"Sounds good to me. Let's deal with the last of these guys and get down there." Koenig replied. There were only two enforcers remaining on the walkway now and Koenig emptied what was left of his rifle's magazine at one of them. The sustained burst struck the enforcer repeatedly and he collapsed on the spot. Koenig then hurried to reload while around him the Mallanasi continued to fire at the last of the enforcers but then something happened that was not what Koenig had expected.

The final enforcer suddenly gave out a shout and stopped firing his rifle down at Koenig and the resistance fighters. At the same time the Mallanasi around Koenig all stopped firing as well and they looked towards him and Avresh.

"What did that guy up there just say?" Koenig asked.

"He said that he wants to surrender Colonel John Koenig." Avresh answered, "What should we do?"

"What do you normally do with prisoners?" Koenig said.

"We have never taken prisoners before." Avresh said and Koenig's eyes widened in surprise for a moment before he remembered that the Mallanasi resistance movement had not had significant access to weapons before humans had arrived to arm them.

"Okay then here's what we do for now. Tell him to toss his weapon down the stairs ahead of him and then come down with his hands above his head where we can see them. Then we'll lock him in one of these cells until we're leaving. Then you can take him with you." Koenig said and Avresh began to call out instructions in the Mallanasi language.

Moments later the enforcer's rifle was thrown down the stairs that led up to the walkway above and the enforcer himself followed it with his hands held high. One of the resistance fighters, one of the individuals that Avresh had identified as an ex-enforcer himself then rushed forwards and grabbed hold of the surrendering man, taking his keys and extra ammunition from him before shoving him towards an open cell and pushing him inside then slamming the door shut behind him.

"Will that do Colonel John Koenig?" Avresh asked and Koenig nodded his head.

"Yes, now let's go and get Helena." he said.

"Target range one hundred kilometres." the co-pilot of the Vulture told its pilot.

"Any signs that they've spotted us?" the pilot asked.

"I can't tell. All the sensors on this thing are picking up is the radiation from Mu. If anyone's using a low energy microwave band radar then it would just blend in." the co-pilot answered.

"It would also be incapable of picking out its own return signals from the background. I think we're safe, I'm taking us in." the pilot said and he continued to fly towards the dome.

"Hold on I'm picking up a couple of engine flares, we're not alone." the co-pilot said.

"Probably Eagles for the construction we were warned about." the pilot suggested.

"I don't know." the co-pilot responded, "They don't look like they're-" and then he hesitated before his eyes widened, "Good God! They're Hawks!" he exclaimed.

"Hawks? What the hell are Hawks doing out here?" the pilot said.

"Heading right this way." the co-pilot told him.

"Then launch the damned missiles and we can go." the pilot told him.

"Hold on we're not in range yet."

"How long?"

"Just a few more seconds, I've got the lock we just need to be a little closer."

"Any closer and those Hawks will shoot us out of the sky." the pilot said.

"Firing." the co-pilot responded and he fired all of the Vulture's missiles in unison.

Five missiles sped from the gunship's external mounts in one go. Three of these moved faster than the other two and the defences around the dome began to track them automatically. However, before the turrets could attempt to shoot down the three lead missiles they exploded of their own accord and spread a cloud of reflective particles all around. These were designed to confuse sensors by bouncing energy signatures in random directions. Normally such chaff was used only in an atmosphere where air resistance would be enough to keep it aloft for a prolonged period. However, in the low gravity of the moon's environment its fall was much slower than if it had been under Earth's gravity anyway and it only needed to conceal the two Archer space to surface missiles for a few seconds.

Although the cloud of chaff was able to block the sensors of the ground defences as the pair of live missiles sped towards their targets it could do nothing to stop the Hawk attack ships from simply flying right through it emerging on the far side just as the missiles were approaching it. Hawks were heavily armed with magnetic accelerator cannons and missiles and they also carried a point defence turret like the one fitted to a combat Eagle that carried a pair of smaller magnetic accelerator weapons. The crews of the Hawks had set these to full computer control and as soon as their craft penetrated the chaff cloud their targeting systems flagged the two Archer missiles as hostile and opened fire on them. The modified missiles had only limited agility and they were easy prey for the Hawk's computer controlled defensive fire, both of them exploding in rapid succession while still far short of their target while the Hawks sped after their primary target.

"They're gaining on us." the co-pilot said as he watched the Hawks approaching the Vulture from behind.

"Of course they are. They've got twice the acceleration we have." the pilot pointed out as he did his best to turn the attack ship around. However, being unable to slow down and simply reverse course was making it difficult to get clear of the two more modern attack ships.

"Well can't you do anything?" the co-pilot asked and the pilot thought about this.

"Just one thing. We may as well try to take at least one of those Earther ships out with us. I'm arming the cannon." the pilot said.

"You're doing what?" the co-pilot exclaimed.

The pilot cut all power to the Vulture's main engines, leaving only the vertical thrust units powered so that the gunship did not simply crash into the lunar surface and then turned the craft to face the oncoming Hawks while continuing to travel in the same direction. Looking at the targeting system the Vulture's pilot moved to line the cannon up on one of the Hawks but before he could do this the two GDF attack ships opened fire in unison with the magnetic accelerator cannons mounted on the tips of their stubby wings. Both of these were perfectly targeted and the streams of fast moving projectiles tore through the older craft and its crew, turning the Vulture into a cloud of wreckage that tumbled at random into the lunar surface.

"Hawk One to Moonbase Epsilon, target destroyed. Shield dome still intact. Returning to base." the pilot of the lead Hawk signalled.

"Colonel, Major Mahmoud confirms that his Hawks have shot down the attacking ship." Alexander said,

"They report that the shield dome is still intact."

"Confirmed colonel." Baker added, "All shield data showing systems are operating normally."

"Very good." Verdeschi said, "Now it's just up to our strike team to see if we can deal with the cell in that exo-
rover."

"I'm sorry, none of them look familiar." Keynes said as the Eagle was approaching the remote outpost.

"You're certain?" Washington asked.

"When they were blackmailing they didn't exactly introduce me to all of their operatives here on the moon. I mostly communicated via dead drops and audio only messages." Keynes answered.

"You don't think they were following you to keep an eye on you though?" Washington suggested.

"I considered it, yes but I don't recall seeing any of these faces hanging around." Keynes replied.

"Then I guess you should just stay back and try not to get in the way." Washington said before Carter spoke over the intercom.

"On approach now. Two minutes to touch down." he said.

The outpost did not have the extensive underground hangar facilities that the larger moon bases possessed but the Eagle still landed on a pad that was marked with a large red cross before a boarding tube extended from the outpost structure to make contact with its airlock module.

When the occupants of the Eagle disembarked they were met by a pair of sheriff's deputies, a man and a woman. Ordinarily deputies would patrol wearing lightweight body armour and armed with batons and stun guns but these two were far more heavily equipped. Each of them wore a reinforced armoured vest that looked comparable to the GDF infantry armour that the new arrivals wore and they were also armed with magnetic accelerator carbines that fired clusters of projectiles in the same fashion of a shotgun.

"Major Carter?" the female deputy asked, approaching Carter and his co-pilot.

"That's me." Carter responded and he reached out to shake her hand, "This is Master Sergeant Washington. He and his men will be dealing with the Red Mars cell you've found for us."

The woman then nodded.

"Thanks. We've lost track of one of them right now but the rest seem to have quartered themselves at one of our cheaper hotels." she said.

"I take it you've got someone watching them?" Washington commented.

"We're patched into the cameras mounted outside the front and we've faked an incident at the rear so we can put uniformed deputies there without it looking like we're keeping them blocked in." the female deputy said.

"Sounds good to me." Carter said, "How about you show us the way?"

Russell and Lynial listened nervously to the sounds of gunfire from the nearby cell block. Even through the thick walls of the prison Russell could recognise the sharp sounds of an accelerator rifle firing on automatic. Unlike with the more primitive firearms carried by the Mallanasi enforcers, an accelerator weapon did not rely on explosive propellant and the only sound came when the projectiles broke the sound barrier. She knew that the Dorcons used similar weapons but the sound gave her hope that rescue was close at hand. The only worrying thing was that it sounded as if there were only a few, perhaps even just one accelerator weapon being fired. So either the rescue party from the moon was very small or they had already taken casualties. All of a sudden the shooting of both accelerator weapons and firearms ceased and there was quiet from the cell block. The two enforcers in the cell with Russell and Lynial exchanged nervous glances and spoke to one another.

"They are considering checking on what is going on." Lynial told Russell, knowing that neither of the guards would understand what was being said.

One of the enforcers then began to advance towards the open cell door and he peered out into the corridor outside. He looked back at the second enforcer and said something before advancing out of the cell with his rifle held ready, heading in the direction of the main cell block. Not long after he disappeared from view though there was a clatter, followed by the sound of something soft but heavy hitting the floor.

"What was that?" the second enforcer called out but there was no reply and he quickly brought his rifle up to his shoulder, waiting for a target to show itself.

Russell saw her chance and she leapt towards the enforcer, throwing the chain of her manacles over his head and pulling it tight around his throat. At the same time she gave a loud shout.

"In here!" she yelled as the enforcer dropped his rifle and reached up to try and free himself from Russell's grip.

As the pair struggled Koenig suddenly appeared in the doorway and pointed his rifle into the cell. When he saw Russell fighting with the enforcer he lowered the weapon though, not daring to fire it just in case he hit the wrong target. Instead he charged and swung his rifle like a club, striking the enforcer over his head with the butt as hard as he could. The blow was strong enough to stun the enforcer and as the alien collapsed Russell pulled her manacles free.

"John!" she exclaimed as she threw herself towards him and they embraced.

"I couldn't leave you behind." he replied.

"But how did you get here?" Russell asked, "The moon was pulled into the wormhole and there weren't any other ships left."

"Victor Bergman figured it out Helena. The wormhole stays open after the moon has gone through and we can go through it as long as we aren't emitting too much energy." Koenig explained to her and she smiled.

"So we can get back to the moon? We aren't stuck here?" Russell said and Koenig smiled.

"That's right. We're going home." he said and then he noticed the young Psychon woman, "Who's this?" he asked.

"John meet Lynial. I told her she could come with us." Russell said.

"I will serve you loyally." Lynial added and as she bowed her head Koenig frowned.

"How old are you?" he said, noticing how young she looked.

"By my masters' measuring of time I am seventeen years old." Lynial told him.

"Didn't Maya say that Dorcon years are slightly shorter than ours?" Koenig said, looking back at Russell.

"I think she's about fifteen." she replied.

"Then never mind serving anyone, when we get back to the moon you're going to school." Koenig said to Lynial, "Now let's get out of here. I don't want to take the chance that someone got off a call for help and there are more Dorcon ships on the way."



The remote lunar outpost lacked the wide open areas that the commercial areas of Moonbase Alpha had but the hallway outside the hotel that the Red Mars terrorists had been tracked to was still wide enough for several people to be able to walk down it side by side. Remaining around a corner and out of sight of the hotel Carter and Washington studied the front face of the hotel on a tablet that was hooked into one of the nearby security monitors.

"What sort of place is this?" Carter asked.

"Cheap." the female deputy answered, "They hire out dormitories instead of private rooms so they're popular with work crews. According to our check of the current guests your targets are in dormitory number five."

"If they're all in one room that's going to make things much easier." Washington commented.

"Do you think they're armed?" Carter said.

"They could be. The footage we found of them going inside showed them with bags. They'll only have handguns though, the bags weren't big enough for rifles." the deputy said.

"Just as long as they don't have grenades." Washington commented and Keynes winced.

"How optimistic." she said.

"Being pessimistic makes you less reckless." Washington replied and he looked at Carter, "We should get this done quickly. Sooner or later someone in that hotel is going to realise that we're here."

Carter nodded.

"Go." he said.

Washington and his men brought their weapons to their shoulders and dashed across the hallway towards the hotel entrance. The sight of heavily armed and armoured GDF troops charging towards the hotel caused passers by to stop in astonishment and watch. The soldiers themselves ignored the startled looks as they rushed into the hotel where the lobby was almost deserted, only a member of staff was on duty behind the desk.

"GDF official business." Washington said and the staff member raised their hands. He did not raise his voice though, not wanting to alert their targets to their presence in the hotel. There were signs on the walls that pointed the way to each dormitory and Washington led his men up a flight of stairs to a landing that had several dormitories along it. The soldiers moved quietly along the landing until they reached the door labelled '5' where they took up positions on either side of it, "Okay, pop it." Washington ordered and one of his men took out his comlock, using it to override the door's locking mechanism and it slid open.

The Red Mars terrorists were all gathered around a table eating when the door opened unexpectedly they either leapt to their feet or dived for cover as the GDF troops burst into the room.

"GDF! You're all under arrest!" Washington yelled.

The terrorists had no intention of surrendering though and instead a gunshot rang out as one of them fired an old fashioned pistol. The low velocity round struck one of Washington's men but it was unable to penetrate his armour. More of the terrorists were reaching for weapons and Washington's men immediately opened fire, using short bursts at each target. Half of the terrorists were cut down in the first volley but the others were able to duck out of the way in time. One of them retrieved a magnetic accelerator pistol from a bag left behind one of the bunks in the room and he fired it over the bed twice in rapid succession before ducking back out of sight. Both of his shots hit one of Washington's men, one of the projectiles embedding itself in his armoured vest while the other hit the man's leg and he collapsed immediately. Washington turned towards the bed and fired his rifle again, this time firing a longer burst than normal to give him a better spread of projectiles. These tore through the bed that the terrorist was using for cover as if it was not even there and Washington heard the clatter of a pistol falling to the floor.

This left only two of the terrorists remaining and Washington saw another of them fall as he was hit repeatedly when he leant out from behind a wardrobe before he could fire his own weapon. In the sudden confusion of the battle the last terrorist had made a dash for the bathroom at the end of the room and was now out of sight, giving no clues about what he intended to do. With no other choice open to him Washington signalled for his men to advance, all of them keeping their rifles trained on the open doorway ahead of them. The GDF troops were about half way across the room when all of a sudden the terrorist leapt into view. In one hand he held a detonator switch that was connected by a pair of wires to the explosive he held in the other.

"Free-" he yelled before the GDF troops opened fire in unison, knowing that they had only moments before he triggered the bomb he held. The terrorist died the moment that the first of the projectiles struck him but the soldiers kept on firing until the bomb and its detonator fell from his hand and he also fell to the floor.

"The targets are all down major, no survivors." Washington's voice said from Carter's comlock.

“Okay check the bodies to see if there’s anything that could lead us to the missing one.” Carter responded, frustrated that the tactical team had been unable to take any of the terrorists alive.

As she stood listening to this Keynes looked around and among the faces staring at the group, apparently curious to find out what was happening she saw one that looked familiar for some reason. Then she glanced down at the tablet that contained the images of the Red Mars terrorists taken from the outpost’s surveillance footage and she saw the face of the woman looking at her from along the public hallway.

“Carter! She’s there!” Keynes exclaimed and as Carter turned around Marta realised that she had been seen and turned to run.

“I’m after her. Stay put.” Carter told her and as he drew his stun gun he looked at the male sheriff’s deputy and added, “With me.”

“They have released the prisoners.” one of the surviving Dorcons said to the other as they both backed away from the entrance to the cell block that they were peering through.

“They will be heading for the humans’ ship. We can still stop them escaping.” the other responded and the two alien warriors hurried back down the corridor to the entrance area, “We should target the humans first.” the Dorcon said, “The Mallanasi will not be experienced fighters.”

The two Dorcons took cover, one concealing himself behind the desk while the other went through another doorway and hid in a side room while they waited for the rescue team and the freed prisoners to arrive. They could not see the door leading to the cell block and it was only the sound of the door opening again followed by voices speaking in a language they could not understand that alerted the Dorcons to the arrival of their targets. At this moment both Dorcons revealed their presence, one leaning over the desk while the other leant around the door frame as both searched for their favoured target.

Both aliens soon saw Koenig and began to bring their weapons to bear on him, however Lynial sensed their intention before they could fire and she leapt forwards.

“Colonel lookout!” she yelled, pushing him aside right at the same moment as the Dorcons both fired their pistols. The two projectiles struck Lynial, one passing through her shoulder while the other struck her in the side of her chest. The young Psychon let out only a brief cry as she fell and Russell rushed to her side. At the same time Koenig and the Mallanasi brought their weapons to bear on the Dorcons and opened fire. Koenig aimed his rifle at the Dorcon behind the desk and fired a sustained burst at the alien. He had set his rifle to fire rounds at a subsonic velocity when he killed the guard silently outside Russell’s cell and the weapon was still configured to do this, limiting the penetrating power of the rounds. This meant that projectiles that would otherwise have punched right through the desk and hit the Dorcon on the other side instead lodged within the woodwork. However, he fired enough rounds that some passed over the top of the desk and hit the Dorcon in his head as he was trying to duck out of sight again. Although from Koenig’s point of view the alien simply continued to move down out of sight he knew that he had hit the reptilian and he heard the sound of his pistol falling to the floor as well. Satisfied that he had neutralised his target he swung his rifle around towards the doorway the other Dorcon had fired from. Here he saw the places all around the door where it had been hit by rounds from the Mallanasi semi-automatic rifles. Evidently none of the Mallanasi’s fire had hit the Dorcon though since the alien momentarily glanced back through the doorway only to retreat back out of sight without firing when he came under fire again.

Koenig knew that his rifle could not penetrate the wall but he still reset it to fire with a high muzzle velocity and he fired several short burst through the doorway as he advanced towards it. The Mallanasi ceased fire as Koenig advanced and blocked their line of fire and this tempted the surviving Dorcon to try and return fire at Koenig before he could get close enough to see around the door frame to where the alien was hiding. The Dorcon fired instinctively as he emerged but the poorly aimed shot passed by Koenig without hitting him and before he could fire again Koenig unleashed another short burst that struck the Dorcon in the centre of his chest and sent him tumbling backwards.

“John she’s dying.” Russell said when Koenig turned towards her and saw her kneeling beside Lynial. The young Psychon was still conscious but obviously in great distress. Russell had her hand clamped over the wound to the woman’s chest but this could not stem the flow of blood or enable her to breathe without coughing up blood with each breath.

“Can you save her if we get her back to Alpha?” Koenig asked.

“I can try, but we have to leave now.” Russell answered.

“We will get her to your vessel Doctor Russell.” Avresh said before he directed a pair of Mallanasi to help move the critically injured Psychon.

Carrying Lynial between them and guided by Doctor Russell, the two Mallanasi loaded the young woman aboard the Eagle.

“Will your people be okay now Avresh?” Koenig asked the Mallanasi leader before he boarded the craft as well.

“They will thanks to you and your people Colonel John Koenig. We will be away from here before more

enforcers or their Dorcon allies can arrive. Then we will begin to distribute the cure.” he responded and Koenig smiled at him.

“Then I’ll wish you good luck Avresh but we have to leave. If the wormhole-” Koenig began but Avresh interrupted him.

“I understand Colonel John Koenig but remember that you will always be welcome here.” he said.

Koenig then turned and hurried into the Eagle’s cockpit. He had not shut down the craft’s systems when he landed so the Eagle was already ready for take off and as he pulled back on the flight controls there was the roar of rocket motors as it rose into the air. On the ground outside the Mallanasi looked up and watched the Eagle depart, wailing in celebration.

Marta ran through the hallways of the outpost, knowing that Carter and the sheriff’s deputy were following her. She turned as often as she could, hoping to fool her pursuers into going the wrong way but the disturbance she created as she pushed past people or the sound of her footsteps on deck plating in empty hallways was enough to let Carter and the deputy know which way she had gone. The sheriff’s deputy was able to call in their location as they ran and as Marta was running down an empty corridor that linked two sections of the outpost together she saw an emergency bulkhead door slide shut in front of her, blocking her escape route. With no other choice she turned to face her pursuers just as they appeared at the far end of the corridor with weapons in their hands that they aimed at her. The deputy’s accelerator carbine did not concern Marta as much as Carter’s stun gun did, she had no intention of being taken alive but that left her with only one possible way out.

“Give up, there’s no escape.” Carter called out but Marta smiled at him as she began to reach into her jacket, “Drop it!” Carter yelled, expecting her to produce a pistol but to his horror she instead took out a grenade that she armed with a flick of her thumb, “Fire in the hole!” Carter exclaimed and both he and the deputy turned and dived for the exit from the corridor just as the grenade went off. The explosion was powerful enough to tear open the hull of the outpost, exposing the corridor to the vacuum of space.

The sudden drop in pressure triggered an alarm and the bulkhead at the other end of the corridor also slid shut just moments after Carter and the deputy had made it past. The two men then stared at the closed door, knowing that there was no chance that Marta could have survived the grenade explosion or sudden decompression and Carter took out his comlock.

“This is Carter.” he said into it, “Target is down. No chance of survival.”

In the passenger compartment of the Eagle, Russell worked frantically to save Lynial. Unfortunately it was clear that the young woman needed major surgery to repair the damage done by the Dorcon projectiles, especially the one that had passed through her chest and the Combat Eagle was not equipped for her to carry this out. All she could do was try to stabilise her to keep her alive long enough to reach the medical section of Moonbase Alpha.

“Coming up on the wormhole now.” Koenig shouted from the cockpit.

“Hurry John.” Russell responded just as the sound of the Eagle’s engines died.

“Hold on.” Koenig called out and the Eagle began to shudder just as it had done the first time he had passed through it. This lasted for just a few seconds again and when it ended Koenig found himself looking at the familiar sight of the moon directly ahead of the Eagle, “Helena we made it. We’ll be back at Alpha in five minutes.”

“Tell them I need a medical team at the landing pad and tell them to clear a surgery.” Russell said before Lynial unexpectedly reached up and grabbed her shoulder.

“Syron.” she gasped.

“What?” Russell said.

“Syron. It is what I will call my son.” Lynial told her before she lost consciousness.

“John! Hurry!” Russell yelled.

"I came as quickly as I could." Maya said to Verdeschi when she rushed into the waiting area beside the launch pad. Then when she noticed Doctor Vincent also present with a full medical team she added, "What's happening?"

"Colonel Koenig's Eagle made it back through the wormhole. He'll be landing any minute now but he said to have an emergency medical team waiting." Verdeschi told her.

"Is Doctor Russell hurt?" Maya asked.

"I don't know. The colonel didn't say. I'd for him to have gone through all that just for-" Verdeschi began before he trailed off.

"I know what you mean Tony." Maya said quietly before the hatch to the boarding tube opened to reveal Koenig standing with Lynial in his arms and Russell beside him.

"Vincent quickly, we've got to get her into surgery." Russell exclaimed as a stretcher was being pushed towards the doorway.

"Who's that?" Verdeschi said as he watched Koenig lie Lynial down on the stretcher and while the medical team began to push the stretcher away Vincent was already attaching monitoring devices to Lynial.

"She's Psychon." Maya commented when she sensed a similar mind to her own.

"John what happened?" Verdeschi said, walking over to Koenig as Russell went with the medical team.

"She's called Lynial, she was a slave to the Dorcons on Mallanas. Helena promised her that she could come back here with us but she was shot, they shot her instead of me." Koenig told him.

"Colonel perhaps I should go with the medical team. When Lynial wakes up I should be there." Maya suggested and Koenig nodded.

"Go." he told her and she turned to hurry after the medical team.

"What about things here Tony? Did anything happen while I was gone?" Koenig added, turning to Verdeschi.

"You could say that. Red Mars made a play to take out the shield dome. Fortunately we got enough warning to be able to have a couple of Hawks lying in wait for them. Carter and Washington took a tactical team to take out the cell." Verdeschi said.

"How did it go?"

"Pretty well, though it could have been better." Verdeschi said, "We didn't manage to take any of the terrorists alive so we don't have any more leads about their leader but Carter and Washington were able to take them all out and we have their vehicle along with the alien weapons that were in it so at least that's something. I have to say though John, it's good to see you and Helena again. At least your mission was successful."

"Successful? I think we've yet to see just how successful it was Tony. I don't think Helena will see it that way if that young girl dies." Koenig said.

By the time Lynial was taken into the operating theatre the medical section's computer system had already received significant data from the monitoring devices attached to Lynial and the room's displays showed a variety of this in both text and graphical format.

"Her pulse is weakening," Vincent said, "and her blood pressure is crashing."

"I know." Russell replied, "We've got to get the projectile out of her lung. Get me a surgical probe."

All of a sudden an alarm sounded and without even looking at the various displays around them Vincent knew what this meant.

"She's gone into arrest. We're losing her!" he exclaimed.

"Cardio stim shot. Quickly." Russell said and when she held out her hand one of the medical team handed her an injector. Pressing this to Lynial's chest she injected the muscle stimulant directly into her heart. Lynial convulsed for a moment as the drug took effect but the data shown on the nearby displays then went back to showing declining life signs.

"We're still losing her Doctor Russell." Vincent said, "Circulation to the brain has been disrupted by the shoulder wound. I think there's a bone fragment that's cut the artery."

The alarm then sounded again as Lynial's heart stopped for a second time and Russell pressed the injector to her chest again. However, this time she did not activate the device.

"Doctor Russell, are you alright?" Vincent said.

"No, anything but. We can't save her. She's just lost too much blood. All we're doing is putting another life at risk by trying." Russell said. Then she looked at him and added, "Prepare for an emergency C-section."

When Koenig entered the medical section he found Russell in her office alone and he walked up to her and embraced her.

"There was nothing I could do John." she said, "She was too badly injured to survive."

"I'm sorry Helena. If she hadn't pushed me out of the way she'd still be alive." Koenig replied.

"It's not your fault John. It was those damned Dorcons. Don't they have any respect for life? Murdering helpless young girls? Infecting entire planetary populations with deadly bacteria?" Russell said before there was the sound of an infant crying from elsewhere in the medical section.

"At least you saved her son." Koenig said and Russell smiled slightly.

"Syron." she said, "Lynial wanted to call him Syron."

"Paul Morrow and his wife are with him now. They'll look after him." Koenig said.

"Well Psychon males are supposed to be technical geniuses. Maybe in twenty years he'll find us a way home." Russell said and Koenig laughed.

"Twenty years? Is that how long you think it will take?" he replied.