

Space: 2299



13: Allies

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The moon arrives in a system that is home to a civilisation that has suffered from a Dorcon invasion and is still suffering from raids by their forces. The subsequent discovery of a group of escaped Psychons in the system offers the moon's inhabitants the possibility of forming not one but two alliances. However, the issue of the attacks on local shipping must be dealt with.

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1.

The wormhole visible through the viewports of Moonbase Alpha's main mission command centre dominated most of the horizon indicating that the Earth's moon, now pulled out of Earth orbit and cast adrift in space, would soon be pulled through it and travel almost instantaneously to another point in space. Although it was possible that the moon would emerge in the same star system most of these jumps through the wormhole had taken it to another system entirely.

The amount of time remaining before the moon entered the wormhole was shown on a display in main mission and from this the command staff could tell that they now had only seconds to go. Colonel John Koenig, Moonbase Alpha's overall commander, who by extension also commanded the moon itself generally preferred to be present in main mission when it was due to pass through a wormhole but on this occasion he was in his quarters and command had fallen to his second in command Major Paul Morrow.

"Stand by everyone." he announced when he saw the countdown dropping below ten seconds and he braced himself. Passage through the wormhole could sometimes be turbulent and the last thing Morrow wanted was to end up flt on his back for no better reason than he forgot to hold onto something solid.

"All systems stable major." Captain Kano, the head of Alpha's technical section said.

"Baker what about the other bases?" Morrow asked, looking towards a young woman sat at one of main mission's consoles. Alpha was just the largest of the bases on the moon and there were several others. While Alpha was effectively a small city with diverse capabilities most of the other bases were dedicated to single functions and all of them were required to work together to survive now that they were cut off from Earth's resources.

"All bases reporting ready major. Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi has Epsilon on alert just in case there's anything nasty waiting for us on the other side." Baker responded and Morrow nodded.

"Well I suppose we'll find out in a few seconds." he said right before the wormhole suddenly expanded as the moon was drawn in.

As expected there was a moment of shuddering as the moon entered the wormhole and the blackness of space was replaced by the bright light inside the strange distortion of spacetime before it returned to normal again.

"Well we're here." Morrow said, looking out of a viewport again and seeing that the wormhole was now barely visible as a point of light in the lunar sky, "Wherever here may be."

"I'm sure Professor Bergman's program will figure it out for us major." Kano commented.

"Yes I'm sure it will." Morrow replied before a woman in a Global Defence Force captain's uniform suddenly spoke up.

"Major I think I have something here." she announced.

"What is it Benes?" Morrow asked.

"Radio signals major. Lots of them." Benes told him and he hurried to her console to see for himself.

"Artificial or from a natural source?" he said.

"Artificial I think major. I think I'm seeing digital encoding." Benes replied.

"Computer confirms that major." Kano added, "There is definite digital encoding in some of those signals. I see if I can figure out the pattern and find out what they mean."

"Find me the source. I'm going to tell Colonel Koenig he needs to know about this." Morrow said.

"Major I've got Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi on the line." Baker said and Morrow nodded.

"Okay I'll speak to him first." he said and he hurried back to his own console and sat down, activating the communication system, "Colonel." he said as the image of Verdeschi appeared on a small screen in front of him. After Colonel Koenig, Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi was the next highest ranking GDF officer on the moon and he commanded Moonbase Epsilon, the primary military facility on the moon where its most powerful weapons and the bulk of the fleet of Hawk attack ships were based.

"Major are you seeing these radio emissions?" he said.

"Yes sir. Captain Kano is trying to identify the encoding structure so we can make some sense of them and Benes is hunting for the source." Morrow explained.

"Have you contacted Colonel Koenig yet?" Verdeschi said.

"No sir, not yet. I was just about to when you called." Morrow told him.

"In that case I'll let you go. I'm keeping my people on alert until we know more about this system. Epsilon out." Verdeschi said before he ended the call and the screen changed to show a stream of data instead of his image.

"Okay, time to tell the colonel." Morrow added.

"You see John, we passed through the wormhole without you in main mission and the moon wasn't destroyed." Helena Russell, the chief medical officer of Moonbase Alpha said to Koenig as they sat in the quarters they shared. Although he had delegated the overseeing of the transition through the wormhole to Major Morrow, Koenig had still watched the process taking place with Russell on a wall mounted monitor while they ate a meal. The moon's transitions through the wormhole remained of sufficient interest to its inhabitants that several of the news channels carried live footage of it along with commentary from anyone they could find with a suitable scientific background.

"Way to make me feel useful Helena," he commented, "Although I suppose it means I could retire and spend the rest of my life in here with you."

Russell laughed when she heard this.

"John you'd go stir crazy in a week." she replied before there was the sound of a comlock activating.

"That's mine. Where is it?" Koenig said, looking towards the source of the sound as he tried to find his comlock.

"Here." Russell said, spotting the handheld device on a nearby chair and she passed it to him.

"Koenig." he said as he held it to his head.

"It's Morrow here colonel. Sorry to disturb you sir but there's something you need to see. We're picking up a large number of radio signals." Morrow said and Koenig nodded.

"Okay I'm on my way. Have Professor Bergman and Maya join us in main mission." he responded before shutting off the comlock, "Sorry Helena, I have to go. It looks like we're not alone in this system."

"Dorcons?" Russell asked. The Dorcons were an aggressive reptilian species that the moon had encountered when it left the Earth's system and since then the Dorcons had been hunting the moon and its inhabitants.

"I don't know." Koenig said as he hurried into the bedroom to change into his uniform, "Morrow just told me that they've picked up radio signals."

"So you have to go and take a look? Like I said stir crazy." Russell said as she also got up, "I'm coming too though. If there are aliens here I want to see them as well."

When Koenig and Russell entered main mission both Bergman and Maya had already arrived and both of these individuals were easy to pick out among the GDF personnel in main mission. Bergman was a civilian and so the grey haired man was the only one not wearing a military uniform while Maya stood out for a different reason entirely. Despite having been given a GDF commission Maya was not human, her species was known as Psychons and they were the result of a genetic engineering project carried out by the mysterious alien species that had attacked Earth in the twenty-second century. Using abducted human captives these aliens had created a species where the males had considerable technical aptitude while the females such as Maya had highly developed empathic abilities. Maya herself was a particularly powerful empath who in addition to sensing the feelings of others also had some ability to influence their actions. Physically she could be mistaken for human from behind but when viewed from the front her facial features gave her away, her long red hair had a pronounced widow's peak while her exceptionally pale eyes had dagger shaped pupils. She had come to live on the moon when she had been rescued from the state of slavery under the Dorcons that most of her people were subject to and since then had become an invaluable asset.

"Okay so what exactly do we have here?" Koenig asked out loud, "Have we just landed in another Dorcon controlled system?"

"No colonel, the signal encoding doesn't match any known Dorcon patterns." Kano responded.

"Maya's confirmed that Dorcon communication protocols are standardised throughout their empire." Morrow added.

"The Archon does not want any of his subordinates to be able to conspire against him in secret." Maya said.

"Any luck in actually deciphering any of the signals?" Koenig said and Bergman shook his head.

"Unfortunately not colonel." he said, "I can't fault Captain Kano's methodology but for the time being we can't communicate with the senders of these signals."

"Do we know where they're coming from?" Russell asked and Morrow smiled.

"Ah now there we do have an answer." he said, "They seem to be coming from several locations in the system but well over ninety percent are coming from the innermost planet. Spacewoman Baker put it on the big screen please."

"Yes major." Baker replied and the big wall mounted display screen switched from a computer generated map of what was currently known about the positions of various planetary bodies and other objects in the system to an image of a specific planet. Just over half of the visible hemisphere was taken up by water, giving the world a passing resemblance to Earth while the landmasses varied in colour from dark green to pale brown. Unlike Earth though the planet lacked any polar icecaps and from the still image it was not possible to identify where the poles were located.

"Earth type? Does it have a breathable atmosphere?" Russell said.

"Spectral analysis suggests it does doctor." Benes told her, "However, we're also picking up localised regions with high levels of radioactivity."

"From the radioactive isotopes we've detected this is most likely the result of the limited use of nuclear weapons." Bergman said.

"How limited?" Russell said.

"We've identified six locations that we think have been subjected to nuclear bombardment." Morrow said, "All air bursts over urban areas."

"Not enough to trigger a nuclear winter obviously." Bergman added.

"I don't think they're at war now either colonel." Benes said.

"Why not?" Koenig asked.

"It was Spacewoman Baker that found it." Morrow said and the gathered officers turned towards Baker's station.

"Well spacewoman? Spit it out." Koenig told her.

"The planet is two light hours away so we don't have any radar data yet colonel but there is considerable passive infrared data. It looks like there is an extensive system of orbital stations and craft moving between them. Nothing on my scans looks like the use of weaponry." she said.

"Let me see." Koenig ordered and Baker adjusted the big screen again to show one of the space stations orbiting the alien world. This station consisted of two main sections, firstly there was a cylindrical central core but the more significant section was the outer ring that was connected to the core by four flat spokes, "Rotational gravity." Koenig added as he watched the station spinning to create gravity in the outer ring.

"That's one of the larger facilities colonel." Baker told him.

"Has Major Carter seen this?" Koenig said, looking at Morrow.

"Yes colonel. Right now he's in the main hangar getting the ground crew to prepare a Swift." he said.

"A Swift?" Russell commented. The primary multi-role spacecraft on the moon was the Eagle but there were also smaller numbers of more specialised craft such as the Swift which was designed to be a long range scout.

"Carter figured the colonel would want to make contact with the inhabitants of that planet in person and a Swift is faster than an Eagle but it can still land on the surface if needed." Morrow said.

"He's right." Koenig replied and then he looked at the countdown clock on the wall that indicated how long the moon was expected to remain where it was, "Sixty-three hours." he commented.

"With the planet two light hours away that makes the round trip by Swift just under twenty-seven hours." Morrow said.

"And if we spend just a day there that adds up to fifty-one hours." Koenig added.

"Which means we have just twelve hours to decide what we want from them." Bergman said.

"What we want?" Russell said.

"Yes doctor. They are clearly an industrialised civilisation with the ability to produce and operate spacecraft. If they're still using rotational gravity then obviously they aren't as advanced technologically as we are but they could still be able to provide us with resources that we are lacking." Bergman explained.

"And what are we supposed to give them in return professor?" Koenig said.

"Well that would depend on exactly how advanced they are but it could be that just providing technical knowledge would be enough." Bergman answered and Koenig sighed.

"Something else we need to work out then. Maya as soon as we are able to make any sense of their signals I want you to start reviewing them. Then we'll need to say 'hello'." he said.

"Of course Colonel Koenig." Maya replied.

"I want Keynes brought in on this as well." Koenig said and Baker suddenly glared at him, "She's our logistics specialist so I want her input on what we might want to ask for. Professor what's your opinion on using the shield at Mu to prolong our stay here?"

"It's possible of course. We could easily triple the amount of time we can spend here. That would give us much more opportunity to conduct trade, especially for bulk goods that may need moving by Condor." Bergman said.

"Then let's do it." Koenig said.

"Colonel I hate to bring this up but there's always the possibility that the locals may not be friendly." Morrow pointed out, "We may want to leave rapidly if they turn out to be hostile."

"Right now they don't know we're here do they?" Koenig said.

"No colonel. It'll be just under two hours before they detect our arrival." Morrow said.

"If they have the ability to travel through wormholes then they could send a ship to us that would be here shortly after." Bergman added, "The planet has two small moons that give them local Lagrange points to open wormholes at. Of course if they don't then we'll be able to observe their reaction two hours after that."

"And you can bet there'll be a reaction." Kano commented.

"I take it Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi has been made aware of all of this." Koenig said and Morrow nodded.

“Yes colonel. He had his forces on standby when we came through the wormhole as a precaution and he’s maintaining that position. He’s holding back from launching anything though just in case that is seen as provocative when the locals detect it.” he responded.

“Very good major. Now everyone has their orders so get back to work. If you need me I’ll be in my office. I have a speech to write.” Koenig said.

2.

"Captain Kano can you adjust the process back a moment?" Maya asked when she heard something among the seemingly random noise that attracted her attention.

"Sure Maya." Kano replied and he began to reverse the process of pattern matching algorithms he was using to try and make sense of the alien radio signals.

"There!" Maya exclaimed and Kano paused the process, running the ongoing broadcast through just the currently programmed decryption process. Sure enough the seemingly random noise that resulted when the digital data was run through an incorrect decryption process was replaced with a series of much smoother sounds.

"Is that speech?" Benes asked from her console when she heard it.

"It's no human language but then I don't suppose they'd be speaking English or Spanish." Kano replied while Maya turned towards Baker.

"Do you have anything that looks like it could be a video signal Francis?" she said then almost immediately added, "Sorry, Spacewoman Baker."

When Maya had first arrived on the moon she had shared quarters with Baker and the pair had become good friends. Now that Maya had been granted a GDF commission though she occasionally forgot the protocol for addressing other GDF personnel.

"Yes lieutenant." Baker responded with a smile, "We're picking up higher frequency signals that could indicate combined audio/visual transmissions."

"Baker I'm sending you a signal processing program." Kano told her, "Load it up and run the intercepted signals through it, Put the results on the big screen."

"Yes captain." Baker said and when she looked at her console she saw the program in her messaging system. It then took just a few seconds to load this into the signal processing system and a smile spread across her face when the screen at the top of her console suddenly began to show clear video footage, "Transferring to big screen now." she added and the command staff in main mission got their first look at the inhabitants of the system they had arrived in.

Alien was an appropriate word to describe the creatures on the big big screen and even though they wore clothing that covered much of their bodies it was still easy to see that they were not humanoid, possessing six limbs that seemed to be made up of two stubby legs at the bottom of their bean shaped torsos while they had two pairs of arms. One of these pairs was located about half way up their bodies and end ended in three short and wide digits while a slightly smaller pair was located at what appeared to be the base of their heads. This was difficult to determine precisely though since they lacked a distinct neck and their heads were merely the upper part of their bodies. Their skin was visible only on their heads and arms and on those present in the image it was a near uniform pale grey with a pattern of brown spots or strips running upwards from their mouths and over the top of their hairless head before disappearing down their backs. The footage that the command staff were watching showed a large number of the aliens seated in a semicircle so that they faced a stage on which a smaller group sat and talked.

"Do they look familiar to you Maya?" Morrow asked, considering the possibility that Maya may have encountered the species while she was a slave to the Dorcons.

"No major, this is the first time I have seen them." she answered.

"So can you tell what's going on?" Benes added and Maya looked at the big screen carefully.

"This is a formal event." she said after a few moments, "When the one in the middle of the stage speaks all the others looks towards him, no her."

"You can tell that?" Benes commented.

"I think so, yes and I think that the difference is in the patterns on their skin. The males have spots while the females have the solid bands instead. I think that female is the most senior officer of a company, the others on the stage are her subordinates while the audience is made up of either local managers or possibly investors. She is explaining her company strategy for the near future." Maya explained.

"I'm never going to get used to that." Kano said and Morrow nodded in agreement.

It was then that another woman in a GDF uniform entered main mission and she came to a halt when she saw the big screen.

"Whoa!" she exclaimed, "Are those the aliens everyone is talking about?"

"What do you mean by 'everyone' Alexander?" Morrow asked.

"Major you know how things are on the moon. Ever since we left Earth every news outlet here has been trying to get a scoop on what's in each system we arrive in and they all have radio receivers. They haven't managed to make sense of anything yet but right before I left my quarters it was all over the news that this system is inhabited." Alexander told him, "I take we've not made contact yet?"

"No, Kano and Maya have only just managed to get us this. The colonel is preparing a message for us to send them once Maya has a good enough understanding of their language to be able to translate it but for now we don't know if they're going to be friendly or not and Colonel Koenig wants us to be ready to defend ourselves. The aliens will realise that we're here in under an hour now so if they can travel through wormholes they'll be with us then. Make sure our defences are ready and working properly." Morrow said and Alexander nodded.

"Yes sir." she replied before walking across main mission to her console and sitting down at it.

Koenig opened the wall that separated his office from main mission when there were just a few minutes remaining before the inhabitants of the innermost planet would detect the arrival of the moon in their system. If they did possess the ability to travel through wormholes then he wanted to be present in main mission when they arrived and he found that all of his command staff were now present.

"What's our status?" he asked as he descended the steps from his office.

"All defences on line colonel." Alexander replied.

"I've got two Hawk launchers in ready position as well." Carter added from his station, "Bill Fraser is the lead pilot."

"So we're ready to fight. Maya how close are we to being ready to talk?" Koenig said, looking towards the Psychon woman who was sat at her console with a set of headphones on so that she could listen to the audio part of the signals that Alpha had detected without disturbing main mission's other occupants.

"I have built up a basic vocabulary Colonel Koenig but there are significant gaps that will need filling before we can make meaningful contact with them. However, I can tell you that these beings call themselves the Toroth and they have an advanced system of global trade in place."

"That's good isn't it?" Baker commented.

"If they're friendly, yes." Koenig replied.

"Colonel I think you should be aware that we've picked up a number of attempts by others on the moon to contact the aliens." Morrow said.

"Do you know who?" Koenig said.

"Anyone with a radio transmitter could try colonel." Kano pointed out, "Luckily none of them seem to have the information that we do about signal encoding and they definitely don't know the local language so all they're sending is a garbled mess."

"Unless the aliens are able to figure out how to view our signals just like we figured out how to view theirs. Then even without knowing our language they'll know that we're alien." Koenig pointed out, "Can you tell me how they'll react to us being in their system Maya?"

"Not yet Colonel Koenig. However, the broadcast I was about to review contains some disturbing images." she responded.

"Let me see." Koenig said and he walked over to Maya's console and looked over her shoulder. On the screen that she was using to display the video element of the intercepted signals he saw a clear picture of a ray shaped spacecraft that he recognised immediately.

"A Dorcon attack ship." he said and around him the other occupants of main mission looked towards him.

"The Dorcons have been here?" Alexander said.

"It would seem so, yes Lieutenant." Maya replied.

"I don't suppose they came here to trade did they?" Morrow said.

"The Dorcons trade with one another freely Major Morrow. However, if other species have something that they want then they simply take it." Maya said.

"The evidence of nuclear explosions would fit the theory that the Dorcons attacked the planet. We've seen that before." Morrow said, remembering a previous planet the moon had arrived close to. There the Dorcons had used a nuclear weapon to try and intimidate the inhabitants before deploying a biological weapon designed to make them dependent on the Dorcons for the treatment.

"Or they try to. It didn't work out too well for them when they attacked us." Alexander pointed out.

"These people seem to have a reasonable level of technology. Perhaps they were able to protect themselves." Koenig said, "Major Carter, what do you think of their technology?"

"Well I've only got visual and passive EM readings to go on colonel but I'd said they're pretty far behind us. Maybe a hundred to a hundred and fifty years behind." Carter said, "I've been watching their ships manoeuvring to assess their drive technology. They look like fission powered ion drives. Of course they could have combat vessels with fusion drives but I haven't seen any evidence of that."

"You think they could have just discovered controlled fusion and haven't got around to fitting it to commercial ships?" Morrow commented.

"That was the pattern we used when we switched from fission to fusion drives." Carter pointed out.

"Plus if they can build fission drives then they can build Orion type spacecraft like our ultra-class." Kano added.

"Colonel we just passed the point where the locals will have detected us from their home world." Benes suddenly announced.

"Stand by. If they can use wormholes then they could be here at any minute now." Koenig said, "Maya I could do with a translation of 'We are friendly, don't attack.'"

"I believe I can manage that much Colonel Koenig." Maya responded.

"And if they don't listen?" Alexander asked.

"Then we hope that our ships really are better than theirs." Koenig answered.

When half an hour had passed with no signs of wormholes opening anywhere Koenig decided that there was little chance of an imminent attack.

"Okay I think we're safe." he said, "Major Carter tell Captain Fraser that his flight can stand down. Lieutenant Alexander keep our turrets on stand by though and tell the other bases to do the same. I'm going to get back to composing that message. Maya I need to know how their government works and how I should address it."

"Yes Colonel Koenig." Maya replied.

Koenig was just about to return to his office when a woman entered main mission in the company of an armed GDF soldier. She wore fatigues of the same pattern as the soldiers but they were plain grey in colour and had no rank markings on them. The woman was Alyson Keynes and she had formerly held the position of Koenig's adjutant that Maya now occupied. She had been charged with treason and dishonourably discharged from the GDF after the terrorist organisation responsible for the moon being dragged out of Earth's orbit blackmailing her into helping them. Keynes possessed excellent organisational abilities though and coupled with her experience of alien technology she had been given a plea deal that spared her from spending the rest of her life in prison in exchange for putting those skills to use now that the moon was cut off from any resupply and needed to manage entirely on its own. Her freedom was not without limits though and one of those was that she remain largely under house arrest, only able to leave her quarters with an escort.

"Ah Keynes, come into my office please." Koenig said. Keynes and her escort followed Koenig up the steps to his office and as Koenig and Keynes both sat down Koenig closed the wall to isolate them from the rest of main mission, "Sergeant Washington you may have a seat as well." he told the soldier accompanying Keynes. Master Sergeant Washington was the most senior enlisted soldier at Moonbase Alpha and he usually delegated more mundane tasks such as guarding Keynes to much more junior troops.

"Thank you colonel. I heard you were planning to contact the aliens in this system and thought you might need an escort arranging for you. That's why I replaced Keynes' usual security detail." he said and Koenig nodded.

"Yes sergeant. Of course we still haven't been able to establish contact with them but I will want your input on security if we do manage to arrange a face to face meeting." Koenig said before he turned to look at Keynes, "Have you been briefed on what we know about the aliens?" he asked her and she nodded.

"Yes colonel. It's not much obviously but the initial observations give us a vague idea of what they might be able to offer us." she said.

"Which is what exactly?" Koenig said.

"Organic produce mostly colonel. The more we can do to increase the variety of crops we can grow and animals we can breed the less vulnerable we will be to anything that could wipe out our sources of fresh food. We're only now starting to produce as much as we consume and we need to replenish the reserve stocks we had to use up to stop our population from starving. We have adequate supplies of fresh water so that shouldn't be an issue but additional soil for growing crops in is always worth having. When it comes to metals and other raw materials it's more a matter of whether you think we might need them in a hurry. Plus of course whether there is time to load them into our Eagles and Condors before we get pulled into the wormhole again. Though I suppose that's less of an issue now that we know we can follow the moon through an open wormhole." Keynes said.

While it had originally been thought that when the moon passed through the wormhole anyone left behind would be cut off it had been discovered that the wormhole in fact remained open in the previous system visited by the moon until it was exposed to enough energy to cause it to jump to another location, as happened each time the moon passed through. This meant that a ship that shut down its main drive before flying into the wormhole would be taken to the last system that the moon had been in and could then turn around and make a return trip in the same way.

"I'd rather not risk leaving anyone behind in a system the moon has left." Koenig said.

"Of course colonel." Keynes replied before the intercom on Koenig's desk sounded and when he activated it Alexander's face appeared on the desk mounted screen.

"Yes lieutenant?" he said.

"Colonel I think you should come and see this. There are alien ships approaching the moon." she told him.

"I'm on my way." Koenig responded and then as he turned off the communicator again he jumped up from his chair and opened the wall once again so that he could rush down the steps to main mission with Keynes and Washington following him.

"We spotted these ships changing course a few moments ago." Morrow told Koenig and he pointed to the big screen where it was focused on a trio of cylindrical craft that came to a point at their noses and had four bulky engine pods attached at the rear in what looked to be an 'X' shaped pattern.

"They were on our earlier scans of the system at just over one light hour distance colonel." Benes added.

"So if we're just seeing their turn now then they must have made it as soon as they saw us come through the wormhole." Koenig said.

"They're accelerating at a little over two point four gees. Colonel." Carter said.

"Twice the gravity of the innermost planet." Benes pointed out.

"If they're anything like humans then they could consider that the maximum their pilots can endure for a prolonged period." Carter said, "Which supports the idea from their use of spinning space stations that they don't have artificial gravity."

"Do we know what they were doing before they made their turn?" Koenig asked.

"Computer plotted their course colonel." Kano answered, "If they carried on going along their previous heading then they would have come to an asteroid field. There's nothing significant about that on its own but with a rapid burn there they could have used one of the larger asteroids to slingshot themselves towards the third planet located four and a half light hours from us. We've picked up more of the native signals coming from that world as well, just not as many as from the innermost."

"So they were making a low burn cruise to a colony. Just like early human space explorers did." Koenig said, "Benes get me Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi."

"Yes colonel." Benes replied and moments later Verdeschi's face appeared on the big screen in a window beside the main image of the alien spacecraft.

"Colonel Koenig, I take it that you've seen the ships heading this way." he said.

"Yes colonel. According to our calculations they'll be with us in about thirty hours. That assumes that they are able to keep accelerating before they turn to slow down to enter orbit when they reach us." Verdeschi said.

"That fits with our projections as well colonel." Carter commented.

"Verdeschi I want you to put a pair of Hawks in orbit." Koenig told him.

"Just two colonel?" Verdeschi asked.

"Yes, just two. If our scans are accurate then just one Hawk should be more than capable of taking out all three of those ships. Two will make sure that a lucky shot doesn't take down our intercept flight." Koenig said, "They aren't to engage yet though. Their orders are just to wait. We've no proof that they're hostile but I don't want to be trying to launch interceptors only after they've dropped bombs on our bases."

"Yes colonel. They'll launch immediately." Verdeschi said and Koenig nodded.

"Very good colonel. Alpha out." he said before he used a nearby console to turn off the communications link.

"Your orders colonel?" Morrow said when Koenig then remained silent.

"Carry on major. We've got two hours before we see how the alien home planet reacts to our arrival and I'd like to have my message ready before then." Koenig replied.

3.

While main mission was a hive of activity, the command staff were doing their best to find out as much as possible about the inhabitants of the system as well as carrying out their regular duties the medical section had only their ordinary level of work and so was much quieter. There were always a certain number of patients coming into the medical section due to accidents or illness among GDF personnel but at this time none of these were serious and civilians tended to go to their own clinics instead of coming to the GDF medical section. Russell used this opportunity to get her subordinates to check their preparedness for a major incident such as an attack on the moon. Then while she was reviewing the findings of this exercise Russell turned on a civilian news feed in her office.

When the display turned on Russell winced, recognising the particular news anchor shown as a man called James Coster. A few months previously he had been a part of a plot led by a man call Edward Foxworth to leave the moon and settle on a habitable planet. With the aide of a GDF officer who sympathised with this idea Foxworth and a number of his followers had achieved their aim, taking with them valuable ships and supplies. Coster's attempts to join them though had failed though ultimately this had worked out for the better for him, a fact that came to light when it was later discovered that this breakaway colony had been destroyed by Dorcons shortly after it was established and all the colonists either killed or taken captive.

Russell was about to turn to a different channel, amazed that Coster could still be on air instead of sitting in a cell at Moonbase Theta, when she heard him speaking to his guest.

"So with the resources offered by this planet we could remain in this system indefinitely Doctor Mills?" he said and the woman sat opposite him nodded.

"Oh yes. Even though the GDF have yet to release the results of any of their scans the readings taken by the various civilian sources show that the planet has a functional biosphere and an atmosphere suitable for sustaining human life." she said.

"And what about the natives?" Coster asked.

"Of course we will need to come to some accommodation with them and hopefully they will be friendly from the outset. Our observations indicate that our technology is far more advanced than that of the natives so they will clearly have a lot to gain from a trade relationship with us." Mills answered.

"And if they prove to be hostile? What then Doctor Mills?" Coster added.

"Our I'm certain that our technological advantage would give us the edge in any engagement. That would then enable us to seek a favourable negotiated resolution. Or at least it would if we had a proper civilian government." Mills said and Russell sighed.

"Here we go." she said to herself, leaning back in her chair and watching the screen as Mills continued speaking.

"Colonel Koenig's model of leadership is claimed to be intended to facilitate our return to Earth but the truth is that by maintaining our transit from system to system without allowing time for significant and credible debate about whether it would be better to remain in one place he limits the creation of organised opposition to his position. Right now the moon cannot be run without the GDF to maintain communications and trade between our bases. On the other hand a civilian administration could actually be accountable." she said.

"So you don't believe that returning to Earth is something we should aspire to Doctor Mills?" Coster said.

"That's rich coming from you." Russell muttered.

"Of course it is James. However, it is clear that it is not what Colonel Koenig really wants. As soon as we return to Earth he loses his power. Remember that he only commands the moon because he seized power following the death of General Simmons. Now he tells us he wants to return to Earth but his only plan is to find it by accident while we are forced to ration everything from the air we breathe to the medications that keep us alive. On the other hand if we were to find a suitable habitable planet to colonise then we would have unlimited resources to sustain ourselves and also to develop the technology needed to safely navigate wormholes. Once we have that then contacting Earth is just a wormhole trip away." Mills said.

"Thank you Doctor Mills." Coster said before he turned towards the camera and Russell turned off the screen before he could continue speaking. Russell decided that Koenig needed to be made aware of what was being said as quickly as possible. But rather than using the intercom she took her comlock from her pocket instead and used it to call his comlock.

"Helena." Koenig said when he answered, his comlock letting him know exactly who was calling.

"John I think we may have a problem brewing." Russell replied.

"What's wrong Helena?"

"I've just seen a news broadcast from that idiot Coster. I think he's back to agitating for us to stop trying to find Earth. This time he's had some woman on explaining how we should stay in this system and trade with

the locals while we try to develop the technology needed to navigate wormholes." Russell told him, "How is he even still on the air?"

"The judge decided that he only deserved a fine of fifteen thousand dollars and his network paid it for him." Koenig responded, "Maybe next time Washington will shoot him with something more than a stun gun. Thanks for letting me know Helena, I'll look into it."

After ending the call from Russell, Koenig activated the intercom on his desk.

"Maya could you come in here please?" he said.

"Of course Colonel Koenig." she replied and Koenig opened the wall of his office so that she could enter as she walked up the steps.

"Maya take a seat." he told her and she sat down in front of his desk, "I've finished writing the message I want to send so I need you to look over it and see if there is anything that might cause it to be taken the wrong way. I doubt we'll get another shot at this if we mess it up the first time around."

"Of course colonel." Maya replied, "Is there anything else?"

"Yes, I've heard that Mister Coster is making noises again about settling a planet. I need to know where he's getting these ideas from this time and how widespread the support for the idea is. I don't want us getting caught out again and losing more ships and resources like Foxworth and Major Capston cost us." Koenig said.

"I see. Perhaps this is a good time to bring up the messages I have been receiving from various journalists requesting information on your plans. I was going to recommend to you that I hold a press conference but I thought it best to wait until your message was ready to send." Maya said.

"Is James Coster among them?" Koenig asked.

"No colonel. I have not received any direct messages from Mister Coster since his failed attempt to leave the moon with Mister Foxworth and Major Capston." Maya answered.

"He's been at press conferences though?" Koenig added and Maya nodded.

"Yes, he attends and sometimes asks questions. However, his attitude towards my press conferences is to try and ask trick questions to make me say something other than what I should. Of course I am able to tell when he is doing this and he does not like it when I point it out to him." she said and Koenig smiled.

"Having Lieutenant Alexander go after him and start pulling all his communication records would be an abuse of my power but if you pick up anything from him then I need to know about it." he said.

"Yes Colonel Koenig. I will inform you immediately." Maya replied.

"Thank you Maya. You may return to your duties." Koenig told her and she got up to leave his office.

As Maya was walking down the steps to main mission though Professor Bergman entered the room and hurried towards her.

"Maya may I speak with Colonel Koenig?" he asked and she looked back up the steps to where Koenig was sat in his office.

"Yes professor, he is available." she answered and Bergman smiled.

"Thank you." he said before hurrying up the steps, "Colonel I must speak with you." he said to Koenig when he reached the office at the top of the steps.

"Certainly professor. What may I help you with?" Koenig asked as Bergman was sitting down opposite him.

"I've just seen a news broadcast that I thought you should know about." Bergman said.

"The one with James Coster?" Koenig said.

"Yes, that's right."

"Then Helena's already told me about it. I've asked Maya to watch Mister Coster when he's at her press conferences." Koenig said.

"Actually colonel I was more concerned about the woman he was speaking to, Doctor Jane Mills." Bergman replied and Koenig frowned.

"What about her?" he said, "Who is she?"

"I've never met her in person but she has sent me several messages prior to my coming to the moon, She attempted to dissuade me." Bergman told him.

"Did she give you a reason?" Koenig said.

"She first claimed to have great respect for the work I was doing in reverse engineering alien technology and claimed to want to discuss my theories on their ability to travel over interstellar distances." Bergman began.

"I sense a 'but' coming." Koenig commented.

"She warned me against working with the GDF, calling you a destabilising force in the solar system. She seemed quite keen that Earth not increase its technological edge over the colonies." Bergman continued.

"Did you know she was on the moon when she was sending these messages?" Koenig said.

"I had no idea. She was using a commercial messaging system instead of a corporate one so there was no obvious way to tell. If she's here on the moon though I think it would be worth keeping an eye on her." Bergman added.

"I'll ask Lieutenant Alexander to look into her. If she's been here long then we might learn something about who else thinks they should be emulating the late Mister Foxworth. Thank you for alerting me to this." Koenig said.

q.

"So what do you think of them?" Alexander said as she stood behind Carter and looked over his shoulder at the image of the alien craft heading towards the moon that he was looking at.

"Definitely primitive compared to our Hawks but not so useless that we can ignore them." Carter said and then he zoomed in on one of the craft and froze the image, "See these bulges here and here about half way along the main fuselage? I think they're some sort of cannon mount, they're too near the centre of mass to be much use as manoeuvring thrusters. I suspect that most of the manoeuvring is achieved by adjusting the output from the main drives. Can you see here how each of these pods has both forward and backward facing exhausts? When they start to decelerate I think they'll keep their heading instead of turning like we do with our ships."

"Doesn't that mean they've got more excess weight?" Alexander said and Carter nodded.

"Yes, no matter whether they're accelerating or decelerating they'll have all the extra mass of the other drives to overcome. Of course without artificial gravity they can't exactly change velocity or turn too rapidly or they'll crush their pilots." he said.

"Captain I just picked up a heat flare." Baker said suddenly, "It could be a drive signature."

"More of these old fashioned ships?" Morrow said.

"I don't think so. The energy output looks more like a fusion drive than the ion trails I'm seeing from the alien ships heading for us now." Baker replied.

"Location?" Morrow asked.

"An asteroid field about half a light hour away from us." Baker told him.

"Nothing we have could have got that far from us this fast." Kano pointed out.

"And we'd have detected the launch anyway." Benes added.

"Run it through the system captain." Morrow told her, "Maybe it will match something we've encountered before."

"Yes major." Benes responded.

"You know that pretty much every fusion powered ship we've encountered since leaving Earth has been hostile don't you?" Carter commented.

"Our luck has to change sometime doesn't it?" Morrow replied.

"Yes but will it change for the better or for the worse?" Carter said.

"Major I've got a match. A close one at any rate." Benes announced and Carter winced.

"Here we go." he said.

"What is it captain?" Morrow asked Benes.

"The closest match we have on record is a Dorcon attack ship sir." she replied.

"But it's not exact?" Morrow said and Benes shook her head.

"Not quite. It's outside the range of drive signatures we've seen so far. Not by much but the difference is there." Benes said.

"A different class of Dorcon ship maybe?" Carter suggested and Morrow looked towards Alexander.

"Did you see any other types of ship when you and Keynes were taken to their base?" he asked.

"The Dorcons weren't exactly interested in giving us a guided tour major. Most of what I saw consisted of cells." Alexander answered and Morrow then turned towards Maya instead.

"Maya can you tell us anything about the different ships that the Dorcons use?" he asked.

"I know that the various lords use a variety of spacecraft but I know little of them. Such things are more of a matter for the male Psychons who maintain them than females such as myself." Maya said.

"It's close enough that we could have a Swift there in under four hours. Assuming the colonel would go for launching a ship now." Carter said.

"I doubt it. We don't know how the local aliens will react to us sending ships all over their system." Morrow responded.

"Something to ask them about perhaps?" Kano suggested, "Maybe they can tell us what it is."

"We need to establish contact with them first." Alexander pointed out.

"Something I believe we are now ready to attempt." Maya added.

"You've completed your translation Maya?" Carter said and she nodded back at him.

"Yes Major Carter I have. At least enough to be able to provide a translation of what Colonel Koenig wishes to communicate to them in his first message." she replied.

Eagle Park was the location of mankind's first landing on the moon. The landing site itself remained outside Moonbase Alpha and the only change that had been made was the addition of a row of statues of the Apollo program astronauts from that era. This was overlooked by an observation gallery that was also frequently

used for official events and rather than delivering his speech from his office Koenig had decided that he would use Eagle Park instead.

"Everything's ready colonel." Kano told Koenig as he and Maya walked up to the podium that had been set up in a position so that the row of statues and the base section of the Apollo lunar landing module would be visible behind him.

"So I just read my speech normally?" he replied and Kano nodded.

"That's the idea colonel." he said, "With Maya's help we've compiled a set of text subtitles that can be added to your broadcast after we've finished recording it."

"How long will that take? I'm keen to get the message sent as soon as possible. The shield over Mu may have extended our stay here but time is still of the essence." Koenig said.

"Just a few minutes. We've broken it down into individual sentences and we'll apply them to the video once we have the timing to work with." Kano explained.

"Okay then let's get this done." Koenig said as he stepped behind the podium and both Kano and Maya stepped back out of the viewing angle of the camera that had been set up in front of it.

"Ready." the technician standing beside the camera said and Koenig nodded.

"Do it." he said.

"Rolling." the camera operator told him and Koenig began to speak.

"My name is Colonel John Koenig, commanding officer of Moonbase Alpha and governor of this moon. By now you will have detected our arrival in your system and I have no doubt that you will be attempting to determine who we are and what we want so I would like to reassure you about our intentions. My species is called human and we come from a planet far from here called Earth. As you can see from this transmission we have been able to replicate your communications and at least in part translate your language. Our presence in your solar system is an accident and we have no hostile intent towards you. We have observed your vessels heading towards us and although we have launched our own ships as a precaution we will not take any action against them unless provoked but we are capable of defending ourselves.

"The wormhole that brought us here will also take us away again in a short time but while we are here we are interested in establishing contact with you and possibly arranging trade between us. To communicate with us you may transmit your messages on this channel. We will be monitoring it continuously and we can understand you. Alternatively if you do not wish to establish contact then we will not attempt to force the issue and when the time comes for us to leave this system we will depart as we arrived, in peace. Thank you for listening. This is Colonel John Koenig and I eagerly await your reply."

"Okay we've stopped recording." the camera operator said and Koenig looked at Kano and Maya.

"So how do you think it went?" he asked.

"I could sense your sincerity colonel." Maya answered.

"Do these aliens have empathic abilities like you?" Kano added.

"No. I found no evidence that the Toroth have any such ability." Maya said.

"Then we'll have to hope that they are willing to trust me." Koenig said before his comlock sounded and he took it from his pocket, "Koenig." he said.

"Colonel I think you should come to main mission." Morrow told him.

"Is something wrong major?" Koenig asked.

"Maybe colonel. We've just seen how the aliens reacted to our arrival." Morrow answered.

"So what did they do?" Koenig said.

"Colonel it looks like they've launched every ship they have." Morrow said.

"It looks like there's another wave coming over the horizon now." Baker announced.

"Confirmed. Six ion trails. Contacts accelerating at two point four gees." Alexander added.

"That brings the total to thirty-eight." Benes commented as she looked at the image on the big screen that plotted the movements of the alien craft now heading towards the moon.

These were grouped into four waves, including the initial flight of three that had been detected previously. The remaining craft were divided into two waves of fourteen and fifteen ships, all of which shared the same design as the first three.

"Thirty-eight." Carter said, "If that's all they have then we've got nothing to worry about. We've got more Hawks than that and I doubt they are even a match for our combat Eagles, let alone Hawks."

"Still best not to take risks though. Alexander pass the ETA for the alien ships to all the other bases and instruct them to have their defences ready unless explicitly told otherwise before then." Morrow ordered.

"What about Colonel Verdeschi's Hawks?" Carter asked.

"I'll leave that up to Colonel Koenig to decide." Morrow answered just as Koenig, Kano and Maya walked into main mission.

"What am I deciding now?" Koenig said out loud.

"Ah Colonel Koenig, thank you for returning so quickly." Morrow said and he pointed to the big screen, "As

you can see the system's natives appear to have launched their entire fleet. We've identified a total of thirty-eight ships of the type we detected earlier heading towards us in a total of four waves."

"Unless they have any technology that we aren't aware of yet then that's nothing we can't handle." Carter added.

"Hopefully we won't have to. My speech is recorded so we can send it as soon as Kano's applied the translation." Koenig said and Kano nodded.

"I'll get on it right now." he said before hurrying to his console beside the primary computer interface and sitting down to begin adding the alien subtitles to the video of Koenig's speech. Meanwhile Koenig turned to Maya.

"Maya I think the time has come for you to hold your press conference." he told her.

"You wish me to present your speech to the press Colonel Koenig?" she replied.

"Yes, play it in full for them so there's no doubt about my intentions. The other bases will have seen the approaching ships as well so I doubt that the media won't have heard about them from someone. You can give them our current intelligence assessment of their capabilities and reassure them that we don't consider them a serious threat to the moon if attempts at peaceful communication fail." Koenig said.

"And if that little rat Coster shows up try and figure out what his angle is this time." Carter commented.

S.

Maya's press conference was held in Eagle Park where Koenig had recorded his speech not long before and she stood behind the same podium marked with the emblem of the GDF as he had while he spoke. However, instead of the single camera set up directly in front of the podium there were instead about a dozen set up at the sides and rear of the area while rows of chairs for reporters had been placed in the centre of the room. In addition to these changes a large screen had been set up beside the podium that Maya could operate remotely using her tablet.

When Maya walked up to the podium she looked at the assembled journalists and noticed that Coster was among them exactly as she had expected.

"Good afternoon." she said to the crowd, "Thank you for attending this special conference that is being held to inform you of everything we know so far about the inhabitants of this star system and our efforts to establish contact with them."

"There are alien ships approaching the moon and we know that a flight of Hawks has already been launched to intercept them. Does Colonel Koenig intend to shoot down any alien ship that comes within range?"

Coster called out.

"Questions will be taken later Mister Coster." Maya replied, "However, if you intend only to disrupt this event then you will be removed before this happens. Are you willing to behave?" Maya then paused, looking directly at Coster. With her empathic abilities she was able to sense when particular reporters were trying to either present trick questions so that they could engineer a response that could then be presented out of context or even derail the entire press conference.

"I was only attempting find out what our illustrious leader is planning." Coster said eventually and Maya sensed his anger at her refusal to reply directly to his question.

"Then I suggest you pay attention instead of disrupting proceedings any further." Maya said before she addressed the crowd in general again, "As you are aware the innermost planet of this system appears to be home to an intelligent alien species. They are capable of spaceflight and we believe that they have at least one outpost or colony on another of the system's planets. Moonbase Alpha's technical section has been able to determine the method used by these aliens to encode their digital signals. In turn this has given us access to enough of these signals to built a translation database large enough to permit Colonel Koenig to address them directly. His message includes an explanation of our presence in this system and also a request to meet for the purposes of trade. Colonel Koenig has been advised that our technology is sufficiently advanced that it could be used to barter for resources that are still lacking on the moon. This message has been sent but as of yet it will not have reached the alien home world. The aliens have detected our presence by this point though and they have responded by launching a number of vessels that appear to have the configuration of attack ships. The performance of these indicates that they are inferior to our Hawks so they are not considered a serious military threat to the moon at this time. It should be noted that some of the intercepted signals that have been viewed show Dorcon attack ships and the response from the inhabitants of this system to our arrival could be due to a belief that we are Dorcons."

"Is there any indication that a Dorcon force could be on its way?" one of the reporters suddenly called out but Maya sensed no intention to disrupt the press conference, only impatience to get that piece of information.

"No there is not." she answered, "Now if I can direct your attention to the screen I will show you the message from Colonel Koenig that has been sent to the aliens. Once this has been played I will then answer questions."

Maya then indicated the screen that had been set up beside her and as the gathered reporters turned towards it she used her tablet to begin the playback of Koenig's speech.

The gathered journalists and their camera operators also turned their attention to the screen and watched as the speech was played for them. The journalists made notes during the speech, writing brief quotes they could use for reference when it came to asking questions once the playback was completed. Although it was standard practice to provide copies of any footage played during a conference such as this the camera operators also filmed the screen, enabling their news agencies to gain access to a copy immediately and broadcast it as part of their live programs covering the press conference.

As soon as the end of Koenig's speech was reached Maya shut off the screen and looked at her audience.

"I will now take questions." she told them and hands were raised.

"Lieutenant."

"Lieutenant if I may."

Maya listened to the journalists calling out to her for a few moments, noticing that Coster was among them.

"Yes Kate Thompson." Maya said, picking out another reporter.

"You raised the issue of trade and Colonel Koenig talked about that as well. What is it that you think the aliens can provide?" the woman asked.

"It is hoped that additional sources of food and live soil will be available to expand the range we have available and improve our resilience to anything that could destroy individual crops. In addition to this the inhabitants of the system may be able to provide raw materials that are difficult for us to find or produce on the moon." Maya explained.

"And what technology will the GDF turn over to the aliens?" another reporter suddenly asked without waiting to be called on first.

"That will be the purpose of negotiations." Maya replied. She then began to point to another journalist who had their hand raised to ask a question but before she could Coster stood up from his chair and loudly interrupted.

"What about the people on the moon? Will they be allowed to apply for refugee status and leave? Or does Colonel Koenig intend to keep everyone here on the moon?" he called out.

"That has not been discussed and we do not know whether the aliens will accept refugees." Maya replied.

"But will it be discussed with the aliens and will someone other than a GDF officer be allowed to talk to them?" Coster added just as loudly.

"Mister Coster you have now asked multiple questions without being called upon. I realise that your recent broadcast attempted to portray the idea of the entire moon remaining in this system as the most logical course of action but there is nothing to support that. Colonel Koenig certainly does not support the idea put forth by your guest that we should use what appears to be our military superiority to force compliance by the native inhabitants."

"He just wants to force us to comply with his plan to wander through space in the hope that we will stumble across Earth at some point." Coster said.

"Mister Coster I do not think that Colonel Koenig would lose any sleep if you departed the moon as long as you do not take vital resources with you as your previous friend Mister Foxworth did before his expedition was wiped out by the Dorcons. Possibly the same Dorcons who have already visited this system." Maya said and then before Coster could try asking another question she pointed to a different reporter that she had seen raise a hand to ask a question, "Yes Mister Ford?" she said.

"That was a nice put down." Russell said when she saw Maya bring up Coster's connection to Edward Foxworth. She was watching the press conference live on the wall mounted screen in her and Koenig's quarters while Bergman sat beside her on the couch. While they watched the broadcast Koenig was standing in the cooking area and the smell of roasting meat wafted across the room.

"Maya does seem to have settled into her role well doesn't she?" Bergman commented and Russell smiled.

"Oh she's a natural. Alyson Keynes did that job for years but I don't think she could have handled these recent conferences anywhere near as well as Maya. Being an empath is a definite advantage." she said before there was a chiming sound from the front door, "John can you get that? I'm entertaining Victor." Russell called out.

"Coming." Koenig replied as he quickly checked that everything he was working on could be left for a few moments before hurrying to the door and opening it.

"John." Morrow said from the hallway with his wife stood beside him, "Kaitlin and I found a stray. I hope it's okay that we brought him along." and he glanced to where Verdeschi also stood close by. Like Koenig and Russell both Verdeschi and Morrow were wearing civilian clothing instead of their GDF uniforms.

"Of course, come on in and we'll see that he gets fed." Koenig replied and he stepped aside to allow his guests to enter his quarters, "Dinner's pretty much done but we're still waiting for Maya to arrive."

"I don't think she'll be too long. She looks to be finishing up now." Russell said as she and Bergman both got up off the couch to greet the new arrivals.

"Victor it's good to see you again." Verdeschi said as he and Bergman shook hands. With Verdeschi based at Moonbase Epsilon the two men did not get to meet face to face on a daily basis like Alpha's officers did.

"Likewise. Helena and I were just watching Maya holding her latest press conference." Bergman replied.

"I caught some of the opening on the travel tube. How did the rest go?" Verdeschi said.

"That idiot Coster was there." Russell commented and Verdeschi shook his head.

"Why is he still allowed into these events after what he did?" Morrow's wife Kaitlin asked.

"I think he'd consider a ban as some sort of badge of honour." Koenig told her. Then he smiled and added, "Besides putting him in the same room as Maya every now and again lets me know if he's up to anything else."

Koenig's comlock then beeped to indicate that it had just received a message and he glanced at it and smiled.

"Good news John?" Verdeschi said.

"Maya's on her way now. That means I can make final preparations. Perhaps Tony and Paul can organise the drinks." Koenig replied before he looked at Bergman and added, "You're sure you're okay with steak Victor?"

"Oh yes. I'm not that dogmatic about keeping kosher." Bergman responded.

"Good, then you should take a seat while I finish off preparing them. Made to the Koenig family recipe." Koenig said and while he, Verdeschi and Morrow went over to the cooking area Russell, Bergman and Kaitlin took their seats around the table that had been laid out for a total of seven people. Verdeschi and Morrow then returned with a pair of buckets filled largely with ice but with bottles of beer embedded in this so that they remained cool.

"Here you go, help yourselves." Morrow said.

"No glasses?" Bergman said.

"I can get you a glass if you want Victor." Verdeschi replied as he took a bottle from one of the ice buckets and used an opener to remove the top. Then he took a quick drink directly from the bottle before there was a chiming from the front door, "That ought to be Maya. I'll get it." he said and he headed for the door. As Verdeschi had expected it was Maya standing outside and he waved her in. Having come directly from her press conference Maya was still wearing her GDF uniform but she removed the jacket and her tie when she entered the room and Verdeschi took the jacket from her to hang up.

"Take a seat. Steaks will be ready soon." he told her.

"I hope I've not delayed the meal." she said.

"Of course not." Russell said from the table, "We were watching your press conference so we had some warning of when you'd be done."

"Okay steaks are ready." Koenig called out as he brought the first two plates to the table, "Pure Texan beef." "From cattle that have never been within a quarter of a million kilometres of Texas?" Verdeschi commented.

"Just be glad they were cows. If anything happens to that herd I may need to start improvising." Koenig told him.

When everyone had a plate in front of them Koenig sat down and they all began to eat.

"This is very good." Bergman said.

"Yes colonel, thank you for including me." Maya added and around the table the others all winced, causing Maya to frown, "I do not understand. Did I say something wrong?" she asked, even without her empathic powers she could have determined that she had just said something she should not have but she could not tell what that was.

"This is an informal dinner Maya. You can discuss work and anyone who isn't here but strictly no ranks." Morrow explained.

"Or you put five dollars in the glass." Russell added and she used her knife to tap the side of an empty wine glass positioned in the centre of the table.

"I'll cover you for this one Maya." Verdeschi said, taking a five dollar note from his wallet and putting it into the glass.

"Thank you Tony." Maya responded with a smile.

"So do you think that the aliens will respond favourably to your message John?" Kaitlin asked, "A lot of people I've spoken to are quite anxious about them."

"Anxious?" Verdeschi commented.

"They're worried that we've encountered another hostile species." Kaitlin said.

"There's no need to worry about the ships they're sending towards us. Every simulation my people have run shows our Hawks wiping them out with minimal losses." Verdeschi told her.

"Plus we're far enough from their planet that we'd get plenty of warning if they have the capability to launch a missile attack this far out." Morrow added.

"Well hopefully it won't come down to that." Bergman said before he looked at Russell and added, "Helena do you think that the planet's biosphere will be suitable for providing us extra food?"

"So far everything I've suggests that it's possible. Of course the medical section will have its work cut out for it studying anything that we are provided with. At the very least we should be able to get some additional soil that we can modify to make suitable for growing crops even if we can't get anything immediately edible." Russell replied.

"Ahmed's suggested that we might want to ask about lumber." Verdeschi said, mentioning his second in command at Moonbase Epsilon, Major Mahmoud.

"Yes, Alyson's listed that in her report. She looked at it as a useful material and also a source of carbon." Koenig replied.

"What about what that woman has been talking about? Letting people leave the moon?" Kaitlin asked.

"So you've seen her as well?" Russell replied.

"It's hard not to. She seems to be popping up all over the place right now." Kaitlin said.

"Just like Foxworth and his Citizen's Committee." Verdeschi said.

"We haven't actually given any thought to asking the aliens about taking in people from the moon." Koenig said, "My strategy is still to return to Earth and leaving people behind isn't part of that plan."

"Do you intend to stop unauthorised launches?" Bergman said.

"Not yet, no." Koenig answered.

"When Coster was asking me questions he seemed to be purely interested in making mischief. I don't think that there is a plan to leave the moon." Maya added.

"Foxworth and his Citizen's Committee were planning that for months. Plus they had Capston's help." Verdeschi pointed out.

"Alyson hasn't mentioned anything about missing supplies." Koenig said, "When Foxworth and Capston left with their group they'd tried to plunder our supplies for their colony."

"Hopefully the fact that their colony was destroyed by the Dorcons soon after they left will make people think twice about staying behind." Morrow said.

"I suppose that if the other ship we have detected in the system turns out to be a Dorcon vessel as well then it will reduce any enthusiasm for remaining here" Maya commented.

"What other ship?" Bergman asked.

"Main mission detected what looked like the energy emissions from a fusion drive. Since all the craft used by the Toroth seem to use either fission based nuclear ion drives or basic chemical rockets it suggests that there's someone else around." Koenig explained.

"We picked up the same emissions at Epsilon as well." Verdeschi added after swallowing a mouthful of his steak, "I've got my people watching out for it and plotting the best intercept course if we decide to go after it."

"And if it isn't a Dorcon ship?" Russell said.

"Then I'd certainly like to know who it belongs to. If they come from another star system then maybe they can tell us how to get home." Koenig replied.

6.

Benes sat in Koenig's office, her feet up on his desk while she read from a computer tablet. Most of the usual command staff and everyone who outranked her were either off duty or in the case of Carter attending to matters elsewhere on Moonbase Alpha and this left her in command.

"Captain I just picked up that energy flare again." Baker announced and Benes lowered her tablet.

"Same place?" she asked and Baker nodded.

"Yes captain. In the asteroid field. The source is definitely eclipsed though, what I see here is a reflection from another asteroid." she said.

"Sounds like someone's trying to avoid being seen." Alexander commented from her station.

"I don't think it's worth bothering the colonel with just yet." Benes said, "Log it and Captain Kano can see what the computer makes of it later."

"Yes captain, logging data now." Baker said before she suddenly spoke up again, "Captain we've got activity from the alien ships."

"What sort of activity?" Benes asked, getting to her feet when she heard this and starting to walk down the steps to main mission.

"I'm not one hundred percent certain but I think they just switched to their forward drives. They're slowing down." Baker told her.

"Let's see." Benes said as she reached the bottom of the steps and then she walked across main mission to Baker's station. Looking at the sensor display she saw what Baker was talking about. While the alien ships had been accelerating towards the moon their drive emissions had appeared as a ring around the ships themselves but now the emissions pointed directly at the moon in most cases, "It's too soon for them to be decelerating if they're going to enter orbit or even get here." Benes added.

"The initial three ships are still accelerating towards us." Baker pointed out, indicating on the screen the three sensor contacts that represented the initial flight of alien ships that had diverted towards the moon, "The two main waves both look to be just slowing down while the last one we detected appears to be turning away."

"Can you tell where they're heading?" Benes said.

"It could be that asteroid field that the first group was heading for." Baker said.

"Which could mean that they're going to use it to manoeuvre around to get to their colony." Alexander said and then she checked the time, "Colonel Koenig's message was sent just over four hours ago." she commented.

"Enough time for the aliens to receive it, listen to it and then order their ships to break off." Benes said and she looked towards her own usual station where a more junior officer was sat in her place, "Lieutenant is there any indication that the aliens have attempted to contact us?" she asked.

"Sorry captain, not that I can tell." he answered.

"Maybe they're still figuring out what to say to us." Alexander suggested.

"But if they turned most of their fleet aside that has to be a good thing." Benes said, "I think we need to let Colonel Koenig know."

The meal was over and plates were being loaded into the cleaning unit when Verdeschi's comlock sounded. "Sorry about this." he said to the others as he reached for the device and took it from his pocket, "Verdeschi." he said into it.

"Lieutenant Colonel we may have a situation." the voice of one of his subordinates at Moonbase Epsilon told him just as Koenig's comlock also activated.

"I don't like the sound of this." Russell said, "Both of them suddenly being contacted out of the blue."

"Koenig here." Koenig said into his own comlock.

"Colonel most of the alien ships heading for the moon look like they're turning back. They're slowing down already and from our calculations they'll fall short by a long way. Only the first three are still heading this way it seems. We haven't received any messages from the aliens directly but the timing for the start of the deceleration is a good fit for it being a response to your message." Alexander told him.

"Okay lieutenant you can tell Benes to get her feet off my desk, I'm on my way to main mission now." Koenig responded before turning off the comlock and looking at the others, "It looks like most of the alien ships are turning back."

"That's what I've just been told as well." Verdeschi added, nodding his head in agreement.

"I think we should all head for main mission to check this out." Koenig said and Maya looked at him.

"Colonel I am the only one wearing a uniform." she pointed out.

"On this occasion I think we can let the dress code slip Maya. It would take Tony rather a long time to head back to Epsilon for his uniform after all." Koenig replied.

Morrow's wife Kaitlin was the only one of the dinner guests that did not head for main mission after they were told about the change in the alien ships' behaviour and the others arrived in single group.

"Show me what we've got." Koenig said and he and the others looked towards the big screen. Here an image of one of the main waves of aliens ships was shown and it was clear from the bright glows visible on the fronts of the ships' drive modules that they were slowing down.

"At the rate they're slowing down they'll come to a halt about one light hour away from us, roughly midway between us and their home world." Benes told him.

"What about the other waves?" Verdeschi asked.

"The second main wave is also slowing down. The last group has diverted and looks like it's heading for their colony world." Benes answered.

"All since they would have received my message?" Koenig added and Benes nodded.

"Yes sir, but they still haven't responded directly," she said.

"I think recalling their fleet is a pretty clear response captain." Koenig commented.

"And a very promising one at that." Russell said. Then she looked at Koenig and added, "Maybe we'll be able to leave this system without having any trouble at all."

"Err we've also detected signs of another ship on the system." Benes said.

"The fusion powered one?" Morrow said.

"Yes major. Spacewoman Baker picked up another energy flare from the same asteroid field." Benes responded.

"Let me take a look." Koenig said.

"Hold on, I want to see this too." Verdeschi added.

"And me if it's okay." Bergman said.

"Of course professor. I'd value your input." Koenig told him and the three men walked over to Baker's station where she had already retrieved the recording of the energy emissions.

"There you are colonel." she said, pointing to the display, "A brief high energy burst reflected off this asteroid here."

"Yes that looks like a fusion drive alright. They're trying to stay in the shadow of that other asteroid." Bergman said.

"So they know we're here and they're trying to hide from us." Verdeschi said, "Sounds like they could be hostile to me."

"Or afraid." Russell suggested from across main mission, "That ship could belong to another species that we've never encountered before."

"Certainly seeing our moon arrive in the system could be intimidating." Bergman said, "I suppose it could also be a prototype ship that these Toroth are testing. I'd certainly want to keep an experimental craft hidden if there was a risk of it being destroyed."

"For now they're too far away to bother us anyway." Koenig said, "We'll keep monitoring them and see if we can identify them. Verdeschi keep your people working on an interception plan though. If it does turn out to be a Dorcon ship then I'd rather they weren't able to head back to their base and warn anyone about us being here. The last thing we want is a squadron of their capital ships turning up."

"Colonel we're picking up an incoming signal." the officer sat at Benes' usual station suddenly announced, "It's very strong and it looks like it was beamed directly at us using the aliens' encoding format."

"Looks like your replied just arrived." Verdeschi said.

"Is it an audio or visual signal?" Koenig asked the junior officer.

"Definitely video sir." he replied.

"Then put it on the big screen. Let's find out what they have to say." Koenig ordered. Then he glanced at Maya and added, "Maya we'll need you to translate I think."

"Of course Colonel Koenig." she replied, "Although I must remind you that I am not fluent in their language yet."

"As long as you can give us the basics of what they're saying it will be good enough lieutenant." Koenig told her, "A more accurate translation can come later."

"Yes colonel." Maya said before the image on the big screen changed to show the signal sent by the Toroth. This signal showed a mix of male and female Toroth standing in a line while a single male stood in front of them. Moments after this image appeared this male then began speaking.

"He introduces himself as Kull-Ken, leader of the governing council of the Toroth. I recognise his name from some of the signals I listened to earlier." Maya said, picking out the proper name and remembering the sound from some of the signals she had previously listened to.

"Straight to the top." Verdeschi commented before Maya continued with her translation.

"The individuals behind him are the senior ministers of his council and they thank us for our greeting. As a gesture of goodwill they are pulling most of their fleet back but he warns us that they are keeping their planetary defences active. The three ships that are still heading towards us are intended to act as

emissaries. They will be able to provide information about their planet and their culture without the delay for radio signals. They will also be able to evaluate what we may have to offer to one another in trade before the council can decide if they agree." she said before the transmission came to an end.

"Well Maya, what do you think of them?" Koenig said.

"I believe they are being sincere colonel. This was an attempt to establish contact on a friendly basis.

However, I also think that there was a certain degree of nervousness." Maya replied.

"If they've seen our Hawks then they may have figured out how much more advanced we are than them."

Verdeschi pointed out.

"It worked." Russell said with a smile, "Peaceful contact with an alien species."

"Then we had better make the most of this." Koenig said, "What's the ETA of those ships still heading our way?"

"About twenty hours now colonel." Alexander told him.

"Then we have plenty of time to prepare." Koenig said, "Maya keep researching their language. When those ships arrive we're going to need you to issue them with landing instructions and then act as translator when I meet with them."

"Will they be coming here to your office colonel?" Morrow asked and he glanced up the steps towards Koenig's office.

"No." Koenig replied, shaking his head, "I don't want to give them access to the most critical area of Alpha right away. Lieutenant Alexander I want Eagle Park configuring for a diplomatic function."

The limited acceleration and deceleration of the Toroth ships meant that there was plenty of time to carry out the work necessary to turn Eagle Park into an area suitable for hosting a diplomatic function. This was not the first occasion that the location had been used for such a purpose but it was the first time it had involved providing for alien guests. Fortunately the video signals that Moonbase Alpha had intercepted illustrated how Toroth furniture was constructed and Alpha's technical section was able to use this to produce chairs and tables of suitable shapes.

"We're all going to look like fools if these Toroth turn out to be half a metre taller or shorter than we're expecting captain." Alexander said to Kano when she arrived to inspect the progress made.

"Don't worry about that Tanya." Kano replied with a smile, "We found an image among the signals that showed several of them carrying out maintenance on one of their attack ships. Maya seems to think that it was a recruitment advert for their military. Anyway, from that we can gauge how big they are compared to their ships and we know exactly how big they are from the observations we've been making."

"So they're the right size then?" Alexander added and Kano shrugged.

"Well close enough I hope. The additional information Maya's gathered from that message from their government tells us that there are only three of them coming here anyway. One ship will land and the other two will remain in orbit." he said.

"Where Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi's Hawks will watch them like-" Alexander began before she stopped and frowned.

"Like hawks?" Kano suggested with a smile.

"Yes I could have put more thought into that couldn't I?" Alexander replied before her comlock sounded,

"Alexander here." she said into the device.

"Lieutenant is everything ready down there?" Koenig asked and Alexander looked at Kano who nodded back at her.

"All ready colonel." she answered him.

"Good because the alien ships will be entering orbit in about five minutes." Koenig told her.

"I'm on my way colonel." Alexander replied.

7.

When Alexander came rushing into main mission she saw that an image of the three alien vessels, now shadowed by a pair of Hawk attack ships was being shown on the big screen. Koenig, Russell and Morrow were both standing beside Carter at his console and looking at the image on the big screen but as Alexander entered the room Koenig noticed her.

"They just entered orbit." he said.

"They are requesting landing instructions." Maya added.

"Okay I'm on it." Alexander replied and she hurried to her own station and sat down, "I'm adjusting the beacon at landing pad four to the alien signal format now. You can tell the aliens to set down there." she added.

"Is that EVA team set at the landing pad?" Morrow asked Carter and the Australian pilot nodded.

"Two men suited up and waiting to assess whether we can get a seal with the boarding tube." he said.

"Okay Maya tell the aliens to land but not to disembark until we know if they need suits." Koenig said before he looked at Russell and while Maya was telling the Toroth to follow the beacon he added, "You're sure our air will be okay for them?"

"As sure as I can be. Our spectral analysis of their home world's atmosphere shows it to be slightly denser than ours but it has a similar mix of gases. Don't worry." she responded.

"One of the alien ships has broken formation colonel." Baker announced.

"They have acknowledged our instructions Colonel Koenig." Maya added.

As the alien ship descended towards the surface of the moon it steered towards Moonbase Alpha, following the guidance beacon that had been altered to broadcast in the Toroth format. Initially the ship continued to use its ion drive but as it came closer to the base the pilot switched to a chemical rocket that was mounted in the tail of the main body instead and reorientated the craft so that the nose pointed directly upwards while the chemical rocket countered the moon's gravitational pull.

"Alien vessel is above the landing pad now." Alexander announced when the ship positioned itself directly above the bright red cross-shaped landing pad, "Altitude two thousand three hundred and seventy-four metres."

The alien ship hovered for a moment before the pilot reduced the output of the chemical rocket slightly and it began to descend slowly. As it came closer to the landing pad the ship rotated along its length for a time before this rotation ceased suddenly.

"I think they just aligned their air lock to our boarding tube." Carter said as he studied an image of the alien ship on his console, "See, this is it here." he added and he pointed out the section of the alien ship's hull that appeared to be a separate piece to the surrounding area.

"What do you think the chances are of establishing a seal with the boarding tube?" Morrow asked.

"The hull is curved instead of flat around the hatch like our ships but it might not be so much that the tube won't still seal." Carter answered.

"Well we'll just have to see what our EVA team say." Koenig commented.

"Alien vessel now at one hundred metres altitude." Alexander announced.

"The crew are signalling colonel." Maya added, "They are counting down the distance in their own units."

"Tell the EVA to stand by." Koenig said and Carter reached for the intercom.

"EVA team standby. Arrival of alien vessel is imminent." he said into it.

The alien ship came to a halt just above the landing pad and hovered for just a moment before it dropped the remaining distance to set down resting on its engine modules and Maya looked up from her console.

"The Toroth report landing safely colonel." she announced and applause broke out around main mission at the realisation that they were about to make first face to face contact with another alien civilisation.

"Okay Helena, Maya, with me. Let's go and meet our guests. Lieutenant Alexander please warn Eagle Park that we'll be on our way." Koenig ordered.

At the landing pad the boarding tube moved out from the Alpha terminal slowly. Normally a boarding tube would be fully pressurised as it was extended towards a human vessel but on this occasion the hatch at the end was open so that the two technicians in spacesuits stood just inside could see out clearly and this made it necessary to decompress the tube itself, sealing it at the terminal end only.

The normal automatic system for extending the boarding tube was also rendered useless because of the design differences between human craft and the Toroth attack ship so instead its extension was controlled manually from main mission by Carter, guided towards the hatch by the two technicians inside it.

"Almost there major. Up about another twenty centimetres" one of the technicians said as the alien ship's hatch appeared ahead of him.

"This seems pretty similar to aligning with a Kestrel." Carter said, thinking back to the few times he had dealt with the antiquated craft humanity had produced during its first wave of reverse engineering the technology of the aliens who had attacked Earth in the twenty-second century. Although now more than a century out of date a few of them still remained operational and on the moon as reserve craft.

"That's it major. The hatch is right in front of us now." the technician said.

"Copy that. Extending tube." Carter responded and the boarding tube moved closer to the alien ship's hull.

"Hold there." a technician said when he saw the docking seal get within a few centimetres of the hull and Carter brought the tube to a halt, "Okay extend the seal." the technician added.

The seal was an expanding rubberised gasket that stretched out to press against the alien hull around the hatch and the two technicians watched closely as it filled the gap between the boarding tube and the Toroth ship.

"Okay how's that? Sensors register a seal." Carter said.

"Looking good major. Try bringing up the pressure." one of the technicians said and Carter began the process of pressurising the boarding tube. Inside it the two technicians monitored the build up of pressure, confirming that the seal against the hull of the Toroth ship was good, "Pressure at full and stable major." the technician said when it reached the typical pressure that was maintained in Moonbase Alpha and remained at that level.

"Okay guys, time to knock." Carter said and the technicians looked at one another.

"Okay here we go." one of them said and then he banged his fist against the alien hatch.

Moments later there was a 'clunk' sound from inside the alien ship and the hatch slid back into it before sliding to one side. This revealed a compartment inside the alien ship that was lined with equipment lockers. More significant than these though were the three aliens in spacesuits standing just inside the door. For a few seconds the technicians and the aliens just stared at one another before one of the technicians reached up and removed his helmet before the second technician copied this.

"Now what?" he whispered to the first, who just smiled for a moment.

"Now we get them to follow I suppose." he said and he started to back away from the end of the boarding tube, beckoning for the aliens to follow him.

In the waiting area at the other end of the boarding tube Koenig waited with Russell and Maya. In addition to them Master Sergeant Washington was present with an honour guard that stood in a line extending from the hatch leading to the boarding tube.

When the hatch slid open the two technicians stepped out and quickly moved aside so that the Toroth crew could exit.

"Honour guard to attention!" Washington ordered and the soldiers snapped to attention as the aliens emerged and stood in front of the hatchway before they removed their helmets. The markings on their heads revealed that one of them was female while a pair of males stood just behind her and she looked towards the three officers standing ahead of her. Almost immediately the female's attention was drawn to Maya and she spoke to the Psychon in the Toroth language.

"You are Psychon." she said.

"Yes. Colonel Koenig and the other humans rescued me from captivity under the Dorcons." Maya responded. Then she leant towards Koenig and in English she added, "She is familiar with my people."

"Is that going to be a problem?" Koenig asked.

"I'm not sure." Maya answered.

"Try telling them that they're welcome and introducing us." Russell suggested and Maya nodded before she looked at the Toroth again and started to speak in their language. Among the words though Koenig and Russell recognised the use of their own names as well as Maya's and with each use of a name Maya indicated the person she had just named. In response to this the female Toroth also began to point towards herself and the two males behind her in turn as she named them.

"She is Senior Pilot Tar-Vas and the two men with her are Space Officers Lig-Nor and Hom-Dom, her weapons officer and engineer." Maya translated as Tar-Vas continued to speak, "She has been ordered to initialise negotiations with us and exchange cultural information."

"Thank her and ask her party to come with us and we can begin our negotiations." Koenig said and Maya translated the instruction.

"She agrees colonel." Maya added when Tar-Vas then issued a brief response.

The trio of GDF officers led their alien guests from the waiting area at the landing pad directly towards Eagle Park and Maya noticed the Toroth looking closely at their surroundings and talking among themselves. Then Lig-Nor looked at Maya and spoke to her.

"He would like to know how long all this took to build." Maya told Koenig.

"You can tell them that Alpha was built over several decades, starting with a small outpost of about three hundred people and growing to the point where we now have around twenty thousand people, including a

large civilian population.” he said and Maya translated this for the Toroth, finishing just as they reached Eagle Park.

Here the chairs for the three aliens had been set up along one side of the rectangular table that was placed close to the large viewports overlooking the statues outside. The other side of the table had four conventional chairs set up for the three GDF officers who had met the Toroth at the landing pad while Professor Bergman sat in the fourth and he stood up when they entered.

Part of the large chamber had been separated from the rest by a simple rope barrier that was guarded by a pair of armed soldiers. On the other side of this there were more than a dozen journalists and camera operators and all of them turned towards the aliens as soon as they appeared.

“Colonel Koenig what can you tell us about the visitors?” one of them called out.

The Toroth appeared to realise the purpose of the journalists and they raised their lower sets of arms in greeting.

“This gesture is the equivalent of a wave.” Maya told the journalists before Koenig responded to the journalist who had spoken.

“Please allow me to introduce Senior Pilot Tar-Vas and her crew Space Officers Lig-Nor and Hom-Dom. We will be discussing a trading relationship as well as exchanging cultural information. Lieutenant Maya will be functioning as our translator but it may not be possible for you to be able ask direct questions of our guests. The talks will be recorded though and once it has been reviewed for security made available to you. Now I must ask you to leave while we begin our talks.” he said. Then while the journalists were leaving the room Koenig and the other officers moved around the table to join Bergman and the Toroth walked over to the chairs that were obviously meant for them. They looked at Bergman and then Tar-Vas spoke again, prompting a brief reply from Maya that included the words ‘Victor Bergman’ that made it clear that Maya was telling them who he was.

“They wished to know who the professor was. I have explained that he is here to discuss scientific matters.” she said.

“Okay let’s get things started then.” Koenig said and he sat down. Upon seeing this the others around the table also sat down and Koenig glanced at Maya, “Could you ask our guests to start by telling us something about their planet and its history? I’d especially like to know about their encounters with the Dorcons.”

“Yes Colonel Koenig.” Maya replied before she turned to the Toroth and translated his request for them.

As soon as Maya had finished this translation Tar-Vas began to speak and Maya listened before providing the humans with a translation.

“The Toroth united as a species about fifty of their years ago and began to explore their solar system.” she began as Tar-Vas continued to speak, “They were in the process of colonising another world when the Dorcons appeared and attacked. They dropped several nuclear bombs in an attempt to force their surrender but the Toroth refused and instead fought back. They fitted weapons to their transport and exploration ships and attacked the Dorcon vessels in space. They suffered many losses but they were able to severely damage the Dorcons’ main vessel. This forced the others to retreat and since then the Toroth have been doing their best to improve their defences. Unfortunately as we have seen their ships are vastly inferior to Dorcon vessels and they would still not be able to stop a major Dorcon force. For the time being though they are able to protect their home world and main colony from the raiding vessels that are still lurking in the system. However, they would value anything we would be willing to trade that they could use to improve their defences.”

“I bet they would.” Koenig commented and he glanced at Bergman, “Victor what do you think would be the most efficient way of providing them with military aid?”

“Oh I think that fusion power and artificial gravity would be the best technology to provide them with colonel.” he responded, “The problem is of course that whatever we give them would take time to adapt to their existing vessels, especially if they are going to be changing their primary power source.”

“Maya tell them that we have technology that we think could help them.” Koenig said and Maya translated this. Then she listened to the reply before she responded.

“Tar-Vas says that her people would also be interested in any information we have about how to travel between star systems.” she said.

“Well I can certainly tell them the theory of wormhole travel.” Bergman said.

“Do they understand that we don’t know how to control our travel?” Russell asked Maya.

“I will check doctor.” she said before turning to the Toroth and translating the question, “They say that even partial information would be appreciated. They have no way of knowing where the Dorcons will appear.”

“That sounds like they don’t know that wormholes can only form at LaGrange points.” Bergman said.

“I do not know how to translate LaGrange points professor.” Maya said.

“Perhaps just tell them the places where the gravity of two or more large bodies cancels out.” Bergman suggested and Maya nodded before she translated this for the Toroth.

“I’d like to know more about Dorcon activity in the system.” Koenig added, “How often do they visit and in what strength?”

Once again Maya translated the question and then while the Toroth were responding she translated this response into English.

"As far as the Toroth can tell the Dorcons maintain a permanent presence in the system. They have never seen more than one attack ship at a time but from intercepted signals they believe that there are at least four vessels that are used to conduct raids." Maya said.

"How does that fit with Dorcon tactics Maya?" Russell asked.

"Lords will often stage raids against weaker targets. From what Tar-Vas has told me it sounds as if a Dorcon lord attempted to expand his territory without support from The Archon himself. When resistance was stronger than expected the lord withdrew before suffering losses he could not afford to replace or that would be noticed by The Archon. Now he uses opportunistic strikes to try and gain resources he can add to his own." Maya said.

"Maya tell the Toroth about the vessel we've picked up that looks like it has a fusion drive. If it isn't one of theirs then we may have found one of these raiders." Koenig told her and she translated this for the Toroth. As soon as the aliens heard about the mysterious sensor contact they exchanged glances and Maya could tell that what they heard concerned them.

"The ship is not of Toroth origin Colonel Koenig." Maya said when Tar-Vas replied, "It must be one of the Dorcon raiders."

"Then I think we should offer the Toroth a demonstration of our capability." Koenig said.

Although Koenig had decided to hold the initial talks with the Toroth at Eagle Park he invited them to Moonbase Alpha's main mission to witness the launch of the force being sent to intercept the suspected Dorcon raider lurking in the nearby asteroid field. Consisting of four Hawks and a pair of armed Eagles carrying soldiers in armoured spacesuits these were to be launched from Moonbase Epsilon and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi himself aboard one of the Eagles.

"The Hawks can make it to the target in about two and a half hours at their maximum practical speed but the Eagles will take twice that so the Hawks will stick with them." Carter explained and Maya translated for the Toroth. She saw immediately that the Toroth were startled by the information about how long it would take the moon's strike force to reach the asteroid field so far away and Lig-Nor then spoke to confirm this. "He says that their fastest ships would take at least four times that to reach the asteroid field from here. The Toroth have only seen performance such as that described by Major Carter from Dorcon ships." she translated.

"As far as we can tell, other than their ability to navigate through wormholes our ships are just as advanced as Dorcon ones are." Koenig said.

"Colonel Koenig, Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi is reporting that his force is ready to launch." Benes announced and Koenig nodded.

"Tell them good hunting captain." he said. Then as Benes was passing the message on he turned to Maya and added, "Maya tell our guests that they are welcome to use our communication system. I think it might be a good idea if they told their government why we're launching a force of attack ships."

The four Hawk attack ships flew in a vertical square formation ahead of the two combat Eagles to provide them with a defensive screen just in case the Dorcon attack ship believed to be lurking within the asteroid field ahead of them. In order to slow down enough to be able to enter the asteroid field with a reasonable degree of safety all six human vessels had turned to face back towards the moon while they used their main drives to decelerate.

"Colonel I think we have something." Verdeschi's co-pilot told him as he monitored the Eagle's sensors, "An energy flare close to that large asteroid to starboard."

"Verdeschi to squadron, target asteroid bearing twenty-six degrees to starboard." Verdeschi broadcast to the other craft, "Hawks One and Two circle it clockwise and we'll follow you. Hawks Three and Four go counter clockwise. Eagle two head in with them. Let's see if we can flush these lizards out."

One at a time the pilots of the four Hawks as well as the second Eagle confirmed their orders and they all adjusted their headings towards the asteroid before circling around it in both directions, intending to trap the Dorcon ship they suspected was hiding behind it between them.

"There!" Verdeschi exclaimed when the manta-ray shape of a Dorcon attack ship came into view and he activated his Eagle's communications system, checking that it was set to broadcast and receive according to Dorcon standards, "Attention Dorcon craft this is Combat Eagle One, you are outnumbered and outgunned. Power down your engines and surrender. If you attempt to flee or take any hostile action then you will be fired on."

Although Dorcons did not speak English many of them did speak the language of the Psychons which was very similar in its vocabulary and grammar so Verdeschi hoped that the crew of this particular vessel would be familiar enough with that language to understand his order. However, what he did not expect was for the monitor on his console to suddenly activate and show the face of a female Psychon.

"Human vessel do not attack." she said, "I repeat do not attack. We surrender."

"What do you think colonel?" Verdeschi's co-pilot said, looking at him.

"There could still be Dorcons aboard that ship. I'm not taking any chances." he replied before he activated the intercom, "Squad stand by to deploy."

Verdeschi then began to manoeuvre his Eagle closer to the alien vessel, doing his best to keep out of the forward firing arc of its nose mounted energy weapon. He knew that vessels such as this could also carry missiles but those would require a sensor lock that the Eagle's own sensors would warn him of.

It was known that an Eagle was capable of docking with a Dorcon attack ship but Verdeschi did not want to take the risk of having his ship in physical contact with a potential enemy so instead he brought it to a relative halt about fifty metres away from the target before he activated the intercom again.

"Sergeant Haynes we're in position. Deploy your men." he said.

"Yes colonel. We're moving out now." the sergeant commanding the boarding party responded and Verdeschi switched to the Eagle's external communications again, "Attention Dorcon vessel you are ordered to release your ventral hatch and prepare to be boarded. If you do not comply you will be fired on."

"We understand. The hatch will be opened and we will offer no resistance." the female Psychon responded. It took just a few minutes for the squad of troops carried aboard the Eagle to exit from one of the air lock doors. Then using the propulsion packs mounted on the backs of their suits they moved through space towards the Dorcon attack ship. Although each soldier was armed with a magnetic accelerator rifle and wearing an armoured spacesuit they were extremely vulnerable during this crossing. The Dorcon vessel was equipped with close defence weapons that could rip through their armour like paper or alternatively the pilot could suddenly engage the main drive and incinerate them before they could move out of the way. Fortunately the soldiers had a deterrent to any actions that might threaten them in the form of the Eagles and Hawks that now surrounded the attack ship and had their cannons and missiles locked onto it, a fact that the attack ship's sensors would be telling the crew.

Moving around the attack ship the soldiers landed on the ventral hull, using their magnetic boots to clamp themselves to the surface.

"Combat Eagle One this is Haynes. We're in position and trying the hatch now." Haynes transmitted back to Verdeschi's eagle and then one of the soldiers activated the hatch control panel.

Just as Verdeschi had instructed the hatch was not sealed and it opened to provide access to the interior of the attack ship.

"Team one with me. We're going inside." Haynes told his men and along with half of the squad he entered the airlock before the hatch was closed behind them. Almost immediately air was pumped into the compartment and then the interior door slid open. Still alert for an ambush, the GDF troops aimed their rifles through the open doorway.

"Don't shoot. We will not resist." the female Psychon who had communicated with Verdeschi said from outside the airlock.

The soldiers quickly moved into the next compartment and positioned themselves to cover as much of it as possible. This was clearly a storage and passenger compartment and as well as the female Psychon who had spoken there was a second female and three male Psychons present. None of them were armed though and the soldiers lowered their weapons.

"We're in. Team two we'll cycle the air lock for you." Haynes broadcast.

"What's your status Haynes?" Verdeschi asked.

"We're in the rear section of the ship sir. There are a total of five Psychons here. Two females and three male." Haynes told him.

"What about the flight crew?" Verdeschi added.

"I'm going to check the cockpit now colonel." Haynes said and while two of his men remained in the rear compartment he beckoned for the other to follow him. Moving towards the front of the attack ship the two soldiers came to the hatch leading to the cockpit and through this they saw another pair of male Psychons, "Colonel we've got two more male Psychons in the cockpit. No sign of any Dorcons." he signalled.

"Okay I'm going to dock the Eagle and come over there myself. I want to find out what they're doing here in this ship." Verdeschi replied.

Verdeschi brought his Eagle in beneath the Dorcon attack ship, extending its dorsal docking tube. This enabled the two vessels to be docked to one another so that Verdeschi could move from the Eagle to the attack ship without needing to put on a spacesuit and carry out an EVA. When he exited the attack ship's airlock he found all of the Psychons gathered in the ship's rear compartment.

"This is everyone that was aboard colonel." Haynes told him and he nodded.

"Thank you sergeant." he replied and then he looked at the female Psychon he had spoken with over the communication system, "I'm Lieutenant Colonel Tony Verdeschi of the Global Defence Force. Would you mind telling me who you are and explaining what you're doing in this system aboard this ship?"

"My name is Kirith and this ship belongs to us now Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi." she replied, "It was assigned to the second wave of forces sent to seize control of the innermost planet. We were supposed to land and support the invasion, myself and Lyssa to provide translations and assist with interrogations of prisoners while the men were to provide technical support for the Dorcon forces. Our masters did not expect the level of resistance they encountered though and instead of finding a defenceless planet ripe for conquest the invasion force was ambushed. This ship was hit and the Dorcon pilots injured. That was when we saw an opportunity to escape and took it. The Dorcons were killed while they were weakened and we took control of the ship. Unfortunately it was damaged and we could not open a wormhole so instead we fled to the outer system where we have been carrying out repairs while we decide where we will try and go. This system is not safe."

"The Toroth have told us about raiding ships still visiting the system. What do you know about them?"

Verdeschi asked and Kirith glanced at the other Psychons for a moment before she replied.

"We have seen them Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi. We assumed that they were hunting for us so we have tried to remain hidden every time we see ships arrive in the system. We did the same when we saw you arrive." she said.

"Not attending to our guests colonel?" Carter commented when Maya escorted the Toroth from main mission but Koenig and Russell remained behind.

"No." Koenig replied, shaking his head.

"Maya is going to fill them in on what she knows about the Dorcons while we consider what we want from them in trade." Russell added.

"And what will be giving to them?" Carter asked.

"Technical knowledge mainly." Koenig answered.

"You know colonel I think that they could ask about our ships. Even I could tell they looked pretty excited to see how our Hawks and Eagles performed and I don't have Maya's abilities. They're going to want them." Carter said.

"I don't even know if the Toroth could reproduce Hawks. We can only make as many as our stocks of material from that alien ship will allow." Koenig pointed out. Although the industrial facilities on the moon could manufacture Eagles with relative ease there were major structural components of Hawks that required advanced alloys that could not be manufactured on the moon. These alloys came from the spacecraft used by the aliens who had attacked Earth and although humans had been able to reproduce them this had only been possible at a handful of Earth based facilities. If a crashed alien spacecraft had not been discovered on the moon then production of Hawks would have been impossible.

"Nevertheless John, they could ask." Russell said.

"And if we turn them down then that could sour our relationship." Koenig added, frowning.

"What about offering them something else colonel?" Carter suggested and both Koenig and Russell looked at him.

"What are you thinking about Carter?" Russell said.

"Vultures." Carter replied and Koenig hesitated while he considered this.

The SAF-4 Vulture was a type of spacecraft older than Eagles or Hawks but combining the functions of both craft. Capable of acting as a transport ship as well as carrying significant ordnance, dating to when human space combat theory had held that it was better to build vessels capable of a wider range of mission roles than specialist types that were superior at a more limited range of roles. Although obsolete there were still several dozen of the craft on the moon where the GDF had held them in reserve as well as more in civilian hands.

"Interesting." Koenig said, "Giving them say a dozen vultures plus some spare parts would give them an instant defence squadron capable of taking on a small Dorcon raiding force while they reverse engineer the technology to build something of their own or adapt their existing fleet."

"Maya's studying of them seems to show that their society has similar ethical values to our own so it's not like we'd be giving advanced weapons to a tyrannical regime." Russell added.

"Then I think we have a plan." Koenig said and he turned towards Kano, "Captain Kano I'm going to need the engineering specs for Vultures from computer. Captain Benes inform Moonbase Epsilon that we're going to need a dozen Vultures loading with spare parts and preparing for remote flight."

"Remote flight colonel?" Benes said.

"Seems like the right move to me." Carter said, "We can send them into orbit around the Toroth's home world and they can collect them from there."

"Seems like all we need to do now is decide what we're going to ask for in return." Russell said.

9.

"So how are you keeping this ship running?" Verdeschi asked the Psychons.

"We scavenge." one of the males said, "Many places in this system with tools and materials we need."

"As Surtan says we have found stocks of parts left here by the Dorcons when they retreated. As they took over Toroth outposts in the outer system they began to adapt them to their own use and were not able to take with them. Plus there are some supplies that the Toroth abandoned when the Dorcons attacked.

"Okay then." Verdeschi said, nodding his head, "I think it's best that you come back with us to the moon. We already have one Psychon among us and I expect that there won't be any issue if you want to stay as well. On the other hand if you'd rather not then we can at least help you out with fixing your ship."

The Psychons looked at one another for a few moments before Kirith looked at Verdeschi again.

"Forgive us Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi," she said, "but we are not used to receiving help from strangers. Runaway slaves of the Dorcons are rarely welcomed anywhere. Our masters are known for coming to take their property back."

"Yeah well that boat has already sailed." Verdeschi said and he smiled.

"That is a metaphor. You are not concerned." Kirith replied, easily reading Verdeschi's confidence.

"Yes, as I mentioned we already have a Psychon among us. She's called Maya and she helps us out dealing with the aliens we encounter." he said, "We rescued her from a Dorcon called Lord Kollus and he seems to have taken it personally."

"What if we refuse to go?" Surtan said suddenly.

"Then you can stay here and my ships will head back to our moon. Our sensor readings suggest that the engines on this ship could do with some repairs though and I suspect you'll find those easier in a fully equipped hangar even if most of your crew do have an innate understanding of technology." Verdeschi told him.

"May we have some time to discuss this Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi?" Kirith asked.

"Of course, but don't take too long. If the Dorcons return to this system then I'd rather have my ships back on the moon instead of isolated out here." Verdeschi said. Then after a moment's pause he added, "I'll take my men back to our ship. If you want to accept my invitation then you can just follow us down and we'll take your ship back with us. If not then seal your airlock and we'll disengage."

"Thank you Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi, we will consider your offer." Kirith replied.

"So how did it go colonel?" Verdeschi's co-pilot asked when Verdeschi returned to his Eagle's cockpit.

"It's a pity we couldn't have brought Maya with us." he replied, "I'm not so sure that they trust us entirely."

"If there are women among them then won't they be able to tell you're telling the truth?" the co-pilot pointed out.

"Maybe. But we know that Maya is a particularly powerful empath. The two women in this group may not have the same level of sensitivity." Verdeschi said, "All we can really do is hope that they at least agree to come back to the moon with us, then Maya can talk to them as well and we may have found our way home."

"How are they going to get us home colonel?"

"Have you forgotten the roles each sex plays lieutenant? The women are empaths but the males are able to comprehend machinery so that means-" Verdeschi began before his co-pilot smiled.

"That they'll be able to explain to us how to navigate through wormholes." he interrupted.

"Exactly lieutenant. Of course first of all we have to hope that they trust me enough to come back to the moon with us." Verdeschi said.

"I don't like it." Surtan said when the inner door of the airlock slid shut to isolate the Psychons from the humans in the Eagle below their stolen vessel.

"They said that one of us is already among them." Lyssa reminded him.

"I don't think that they intend to make us slaves. That Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi seemed to be honest."

Kirith added, "Although he did seem to think that we would be useful to his people somehow."

"So we'd be slaves again if we went with them." another of the males said.

"No Dallon, I don't think so. I think we would be expected to co-operate with them but we would not be forced to serve." Kirith replied.

"I agree." Lyssa added.

"The Dorcons are already hunting them. It wouldn't be safe." another of the males added.

"Mallam is right." another agreed, "We're just a handful of runaway slaves. The Dorcons may hunt us but they won't waste an entire battleground on running us down."

"Tavar when Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi told us that the Dorcons were hunting them he did not seem concerned." Kirith said.

"He believes that his people are strong enough to fight them off for a time." Lyssa said.

"For a time?" Tavar said.

"We know their moon moves. If the Dorcons do find them then they will have only a limited window of opportunity in which to attack." Kirith pointed out.

Tavar then looked towards the last Psychon, an older man who had not yet spoken.

"What do you have to say about this Hennor?" he said, "We're here because of you after all. You're the one that turned us away from the Dorcon warship that would have taken us back to Lord Gorrus and it's your plan we've been following since then."

"I think we should go to the human moon." Hennor answered, "But only Kirith and Lyssa should go among them to begin with. We need to know if we really can trust them and if they can protect us. Above all we need to avoid this Maya, the last thing we need is her telling the humans what we are thinking until we know whether staying with them would be a good idea."

Returning to Eagle Park, Koenig sat with Russell and Bergman to put his offer of trade to the Toroth. It was obvious that none of the trio of Toroth would be able to accept any offer on behalf of their government but they would be able to pass it along. Before telling the Toroth what he was offering them though, Koenig wanted to confirm that they were willing to offer something in return.

"From our scans of your planet we believe that you have these resources available." he said, sliding a tablet across the table towards Tar-Vas. The tablet had been configured to display information in the Toroth language and Koenig hoped that the translation had been carried out correctly as he watched the three aliens studying the screen. Then Tar-Vas lowered the device and spoke.

"Tar-Vas does not understand colonel. She says that all we have asked for are a few farm animals, plants, wood and dirt." Maya translated.

"Maya can you explain to them that the things on that list are all things that do not occur naturally on the moon and that we are looking to expand our supply of. We hope that the items on that list will allow us to widen our sources of food as well as providing the raw materials for certain plastics that are difficult to make without organic compounds." Koenig said.

"Information on their general biosphere will be needed so we can assess how compatible it is with ours. Ideally I'd like to be able to take a blood sample from one of our guests." Russell pointed out and Maya nodded as she translated this information. Then she waited for the response from Tar-Vas, something that came quickly.

"Tar-Vas would like to know exactly what we will be offering for these materials." Maya said.

"I will provide copies of all of my notes regarding wormhole formation and travel as well as the location of Earth. If you are able to find a way of navigating wormholes before us then it will allow you to contact our home world." Bergman said, "There will also be files on nuclear fusion and artificial gravity."

While Bergman was speaking Koenig reached out for the tablet and picked it up. Then he tapped a symbol at the top of the screen that swapped the list of resources the moon's inhabitants wanted from the Toroth for the specifications of a Vulture.

"There will also be twelve of these ships." he said as he returned the tablet to Tar-Vas.

The three Toroth leant together to look at the tablet and each of them let out a gasp.

"Does that mean the same as when we do it Maya?" Bergman asked and Maya nodded.

"Yes professor." she replied, "They are clearly impressed by what they are seeing."

"Maya tell them the ships we're offering them are one of our older designs but they will offer much greater performance than what we've witnessed in-" Koenig began and Maya started to translate his words for the Toroth. However, before he could finish Hom-Dom looked up from the tablet and spoke.

"Hom-Dom says that the performance data for the Vultures is vastly superior to Toroth technology." Maya said.

"Tell them that their performance isn't as good as a Dorcon attack ship but they will give them a fighting chance." Koenig added and Maya translated this for him.

"Tar-Vas expects that the Toroth government will be willing to accept these terms colonel." Maya said when Tar-Vas responded and Koenig smiled.

"Excellent. In that case I think perhaps we should let our guests communicate with their government." he said before he noticed Alexander appear in a nearby doorway and signal to him, "Yes lieutenant?" he asked.

"Colonel I'm sorry to interrupt." she said.

"It's okay lieutenant, we were just finishing up here. What can I do for you?" Koenig replied.

"Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi is returning to the moon sir." Alexander told him.

"Did he find whatever was hiding in the asteroid field?" Koenig asked.

"You could say that colonel. He's bringing a Dorcon attack ship back with him." Alexander said.

"He took it intact?" Bergman said excitedly when he heard this.

"It needs repair but it is largely operational." Alexander said, "When the colonel's men went aboard they found it crewed entirely by Psychons."

"My people were aboard the ship?" Maya asked, surprised at the news and Alexander nodded.

"Yes. Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi reported that there are two women and five men. Apparently the Dorcon crew were injured and that allowed the Psychons to overpower them and seize control of the vessel. They've been scavenging from abandoned Dorcon supply dumps while they try to fix the damaged systems aboard their ship." she explained.

"John if they've been stuck aboard a damaged ship since the Dorcon invasion then they could need medical help." Russell pointed out.

"I'd really like the opportunity to speak with the men of the group." Bergman added, "If their technical aptitude is as good as it has been made out to be then they could assist me greatly with understanding Dorcon technology. Particularly controlled wormhole travel."

"Lieutenant Alexander, when Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi's squadron returns to the moon I want that attack ship landed here. Helena you can offer them a medical examination then I'm going to want to speak to either all of them together or just a representative if they'd rather."

"Colonel Koenig perhaps I should be present to welcome them." Maya suggested and Koenig nodded.

"Initially, yes." he answered before he glanced at the Toroth, "However, I need you to be available to attend to our other guests since you're the only one who can understand them."

Verdeschi left his co-pilot to fly the Eagle while he exited the cockpit and made his way to the passenger module that the craft was fitted with. In here the squad of soldiers he had brought from the moon were sat in the seats nearest the cockpit while the Psychons had chosen to sit towards the rear of the module. Verdeschi walked past the soldiers and stood about half way along the module, looking towards the Psychons.

"I've just received word from the moon." he told them, "We'll be setting down at Moonbase Alpha, the largest settlement on the moon where Colonel John Koenig, our most senior officer is located. He wants to speak with you as soon as possible."

The Psychons looked at one another for a few moments before Kirith spoke up.

"Lyssa and I will meet with your Colonel Koenig." she said, "The rest of our group will remain with our ship to make repairs."

"Of course." Verdeschi replied, "I'm sure the colonel will be glad to meet you."

The size of a standard landing pad meant that an Eagle could land on one even with a Dorcon attack ship docked to its spine and still be capable of being lowered down into the underground hangar but it required greater care to make sure that the ray-shaped alien craft did not overhang the edge of the bright red cross.

"Looking good colonel." Verdeschi's co-pilot said when Verdeschi hovered the combat Eagle above the landing pad using its ventral thrusters to maintain its altitude.

"Okay here goes. Descending now." Verdeschi responded and he reduced the power to the thrusters so that the docked spacecraft descended gently to the landing pad and set down in the centre, "Main mission this is Epsilon Combat Eagle One, we're down."

"Welcome back colonel." Alexander responded from main mission, "Deploying boarding tube now."

The boarding tube was able to locate the Eagle's airlock module automatically and required no manual guidance as it extended out from the structure of Alpha and it quickly made contact.

Verdeschi and his co-pilot both exited the cockpit and made their way to the airlock where they were joined by the soldiers and the Psychons.

"As soon as we disembark the Eagle and your ship will be taken down into our hangar." Verdeschi told the Psychons.

"Can we remain aboard? Kirith and Lyssa will go with you but we want to begin work as soon as possible." Hennor said and Verdeschi nodded.

"That should be fine." Verdeschi replied before he looked at his co-pilot and added, "Stay aboard with them. Make sure that the hangar crew know they are supposed to be there."

Verdeschi led the two Psychon women from the Eagle and he smiled when he saw Maya as soon as he stepped from the boarding tube and found her standing in the waiting area with Master Sergeant Washington and a pair of other soldiers.

"Lieutenant colonel it is good to see you safe." Maya said before she noticed Kirith and Lyssa behind him, "Welcome to Moonbase Alpha. My name is Maya." she told them.

"I am Lyssa and this is Kirith. Lieutenant Colonel Verdeschi has told us about you. He said you were once a slave of Lord Kollus." Lyssa replied.

"That is correct. Colonel Koenig was able to rescue me and gave me sanctuary here." Maya told her.

"You wear their uniform." Kirith commented looking at the various badges that Maya's GDF uniform was marked with.

"Yes, Colonel Koenig offered me the position of his official assistant. Adjutant is the term used and I accepted. I now hold the rank of lieutenant." Maya said.

Kirith glanced at the soldiers behind Maya before she spoke again.

"You have authority over them?" she asked.

"I do. The humans have accepted me into their ranks." Maya said and the other two Psychon women noticed a smile appear on Verdeschi's face.

"More than just their ranks." Lyssa commented.

"Perhaps that's a discussion better left for another time." Verdeschi said, "Maya, I assume that Colonel Koenig is waiting for us?"

"He is, in his office with Doctor Russell and Professor Bergman. I will escort you there now." Maya said before she turned to leave.

As Maya had said Koenig was in his office with Russell and Bergman waiting for Verdeschi and the Psychons to arrive and he stood up as they were led up the steps from main mission. In anticipation of all of the Psychons coming to his office enough chairs had been laid out in a semicircle in front of Koenig's desk. "Welcome to the moon. I'm Colonel John Koenig, commanding officer of GDF forces and de-facto lunar governor. This is Doctor Helena Russell my chief medical officer and Professor Victor Bergman. Victor came here to research the possibility of wormhole travel and since we left our system has been doing everything he can to reverse engineer the technology we encounter and get us back home again." he said.

"Colonel Koenig this is Kirith and Lyssa." Maya said.

"I understood that there were also five males with you." Koenig said.

"They chose to remain with their ship and start repairs colonel." Verdeschi told him as he sat down in one of the vacant chairs.

"Are any of your crew in need of medical attention?" Russell asked.

"No, we were able to escape the Dorcons with only minor injuries that we were able to treat ourselves." Lyssa answered.

"I suppose that's good news." Bergman commented.

"Well now that we're introduced I think we should begin to discuss how we can help one another." Koenig said and then he looked towards Maya and added, "Maya perhaps you could go and see to our other guests."

"Of course colonel." she replied before heading back down the steps and as she departed Koenig closed the wall to give the people remaining in his office some privacy.

"I'm sure you've realised by now that Maya is a part of the command structure here on the moon." Koenig began, "That may not be something that interests you but I'd still like to extend an invitation to you to stay here with us. There are a number of bases and I'm sure that at least one of them would be somewhere that you could settle."

"What would you expect in return for letting us stay with you colonel?" Kirith asked.

"You'd have to abide by our laws of course but you'd be treated the same as any other person. Maya has done an excellent job of helping us deal with the various alien civilisations we've encountered so far but having you two as well would be a major boost. Plus Victor is keen to discuss wormhole travel with the men who are part of your group and I'm sure that our technical section would welcome their help as well." Koenig said.

"So we would be conscripted into your military?" Lyssa commented.

"If you'd rather find civilian employment then that's fine too." Koenig replied.

"I'm a civilian and my work is considered vital on the moon." Bergman added.

"I'm sure you can see the benefit of life here on the moon compared to being cooped up on a spaceship the size of a Dorcon attack ship." Russell said.

"It's true that our ship wasn't designed for long term habitation." Lyssa said.

"There are still certain pieces of information that I would expect you to provide in exchange for sanctuary here." Koenig said.

"Such as?" Kirith asked.

"Such as all the information you have on the Dorcons. Especially the raiding ships they've been sending to this system." Verdeschi told her.

"We're negotiating with the Toroth for resources and their planetary security is a big concern for them." Russell added.

"How long will we have to make up our minds Colonel Koenig?" Kirith said.

"We have only limited control over how long we can stay in a system." Koenig told her, "We've already extended our stay to make trading with the Toroth easier but eventually the moon will be drawn into the wormhole. It would be best if you made up your minds before then."

"Following us through the wormhole is possible but you would have no way of knowing how long it would remain open after we move to the next system." Bergman said.

"Don't think that your only choices are coming with us or remaining on your ship though." Koenig continued, "There are representatives of the Toroth here on the moon and they may be willing to consider giving you sanctuary. I'm sure they'd welcome your input to upgrading their technology and dealing with the Dorcons."

The five male Psychons exited the Eagle only when the launch pad had been lowered into the underground hangar. Here they watched as a team of hangar technicians move a large crane into position above the docked Eagle and attack ship before attaching it to the central fuselage of the Dorcon vessel.

"Hi there." a voice said from close by the Psychons and they looked around to see Carter smiling at them, "I'm Major Carter, head of Moonbase Alpha's reconnaissance section but you can call me Alan."

"You command?" Hennor asked.

"Kind of. My people pilot all the GDF ships in this hangar. Those guys crawling all over your ship are from the technical section and they know what they're doing. They've done this before." Carter answered.

"Dorcon ships have been here?" Surtan commented and Carter nodded.

"Yeah, a couple of our people were able to capture one intact. We've been taking a look at it and trying to figure out how to fly it through a wormhole so we end up where we want to rather than where the wormhole itself decides to dump us. So far we've not had any luck with that but with our experience of it combined with yours I think we should be able to fix your ship up pretty quickly." he said. Then he smiled again and added, "Though I don't think I'm alone in hoping you'll decide to stay anyway. I'm sure we could do with your help."

"Major we're all hooked up here now!" one of the technicians who had been connecting the Dorcon vessel to the crane then called out.

"Okay someone's going to have to be inside that ship of yours when it's moved." Carter told the Psychons, "Once we lift it off the Eagle we'll move over there to that repair bay." he continued and he pointed to a vacant spot between a pair of Eagles that were partially dismantled, "That means we'll have to lower the landing gear. Our technicians can do that of course but I figured you might be happier having one of your own do it."

"Yes." Hennor responded and he turned to Tavar, "Tavar go and wait in the ship."

"You can lower the landing gear any time after you've been moved away from the Eagle." Carter added before he called out to the waiting technicians, "Okay one of the crew will see to the landing gear. Give him chance to get aboard."

"Sure thing major." one of the technicians responded and Carter then turned to Tavar as well.

"Can you pulse your running lights?" he asked.

"Yes, that can be done." the Psychon answered.

"Then do that to let us know when you're ready." Carter told him.

Tavar walked calmly back towards the Eagle that still rested on the cross shaped landing pad now many metres beneath the moon's surface. The hangar technicians watched as the Psychon boarded the Eagle again and then waited while he climbed up into the Dorcon attack ship that was still docked to its spine. Shortly after this the running lights built into the attack ship pulsed once.

"Okay he's all set." Carter told the technicians, "Get her moving."

At a signal from one of the technicians the hangar control staff disengaged the Eagle's docking clamps by remote control and the crane took the full weight of the Dorcon attack ship as it was lifted from the Eagle's spine. Once clear of this the crane began to move the attack ship sideways and it was at this point that Tavar lowered its landing gear so that when it reached the repair bay the crane was able to lower it to the floor without causing any further damage.

"There you go. I'll leave you to get on now but I need to give each of you one of these." Carter said and he held out a set of cards to the Psychons.

"What are they?" Dallan asked.

"Payment cards. They'll let you buy food from our enlisted men's mess. Trust me the food there will be better than the ration packs we'll be giving you. Each of these has been loaded with fifty dollars which should be enough to see you through a couple of days. If you need anything else just ask one of the hangar crews but be careful about wandering too far. The hangar is considered a restricted area." Carter explained.

"Of course. Thank you for your assistance Alan." Hennor said and then the Psychons watched as Carter walked away.

"Do you think he will be back?" Surtan asked.

"I don't know. We must tread carefully though, there is nothing to be gained by antagonising any of the humans. Who knows, maybe we will end up staying with these people after all." Hennor responded.

"So how are things going in here?" Russell said when she entered the quarters that had been provided to the Toroth. Alpha's technical section had worked hard to adapt the furniture to suit their different body shapes using some of the intercepted signals as a guide but they had also left some more conventional chairs for Alpha's staff and Maya was sat on one of these when Russell arrived.

"I have been telling the Toroth about our travels and they have been telling me about their world." Maya replied, "Understandably they are particularly interested in our encounters with the Dorcons."

"Well if it's okay I'd like to take some blood samples. We need to know if our biology is compatible enough that we can use the foodstuffs we're asking for." Russell said as she set a medical kit down on the table between Maya and the three aliens.

Maya translated this for the Toroth and all three stood up and each pulled up a sleeve on the flight suits they wore.

"They are happy to oblige doctor." Maya said.

"Thanks. I don't suppose that they could point out the best spot to draw blood from could they?" Russell said and Maya spoke to the aliens once more. This prompted Lig-Nor to point to a spot midway along his exposed forearm.

"Excellent, thank you." Russell said as she walked up to his with a hand held blood sample taker. Pressing this to Lig-Nor's arm the device quickly extended a needle into the Toroth's arm until it encountered a blood vessel and extracted a small amount of the fluid. With the sample taken Russell swapped the sample cartridge that included the needle used to draw the blood for a fresh one, writing on the first cartridge that this came from Lig-Nor before she moved onto the next Toroth and repeated the process.

Maya and the Toroth then watched as Russell inserted the cartridges of blood into a portable analyser that she had brought with her. This examined the chemical and biological makeup of the Toroth's blood.

"They are wondering what your tests say doctor." Maya said when the Toroth spoke among themselves briefly.

"I'm glad to say that they tell me that we are close enough biologically that we ought to be able to eat the same foods though we may need them in different quantities of course. Fortunately we're also different enough that I don't think there is any danger of cross species infection." Russell said and Maya translated this for the Toroth, at which point Tar-Vas responded quickly, "What did she say?" Russell asked.

"She asked if since we can eat one another's foods if it would be possible to try to some of ours. The rations they carry aboard their ship leave a lot to be desired in terms of taste." Maya said and Russell laughed.

"I guess some things are a constant across the universe. The terrible taste of military survival rations for one. I'll get something sent over as soon as possible but I'll take these samples back to the medical section and run some allergen tests before sending anything just to make sure. In the meantime our water should be safe enough for them to drink." she said and she packed her equipment away again. As she did this Lig-Nor spoke again.

"Doctor do you know anything of how the talks with the other Psychons are going?" Maya asked.

"Keen to speak with some of your own people?" Russell commented.

"I have considered humans my people for some time now doctor. Ever since Colonel Koenig asked me to wear this uniform." Maya told her and Russell smiled.

"Of course, I'm sorry Maya." she said.

"There is no need to apologise. However, the Toroth are keen to know what the Psychons can tell them about the Dorcon raiding ships. They have been trying to expand outwards to reclaim their outposts further from their home world but the Dorcons have ambushed and destroyed every ship that ventures that far. The Toroth do not have the military resources to escort them without weakening the defences of their home world and their colony on the second planet." Maya explained.

"Well when I left Colonel Koenig had offered them a place amongst us and told them that we expect them to tell us what they know about the Dorcons but the two women hadn't given a response. They wanted to talk it over with the men first." Russell said before Maya's comlock sounded and she plucked it from her pocket.

"Maya." she said into the device.

"Maya you're needed in main mission immediately. We've just received a response from the Toroth." Benes told her.

When Maya and the Toroth returned to main mission there was an image of the Toroth leader Kull-Ken on the big screen. However, this time there was no crowd of Toroth behind him and he instead stood in front of a large flag. Both Koenig and Verdeschi were also present in main mission and they stood with Morrow beside Benes' station.

"Ah Maya, we received this a few minutes ago. I'd like you to watch it and tell us what he's saying." Koenig said and he pointed to the big screen, "Captain please play it again."

"Yes colonel." Benes responded and the image on the big screen began to move and speak.

"On behalf of the Toroth people Kull-Ken thanks us for the generous offer we have made and it is with great pleasure that he accepts. He understands that what we are asking for is mundane when compared to what we are offering. His government is already determining how much material they can transfer to us but if we have cargo ships that can reach them in time then they are willing to fill as many as possible. He also expresses the hope that we will be able to master controlled wormhole travel and organise formal diplomatic relations between our people. As a final note he also wishes to thank us for our efforts to track down the Dorcon pirates that have been plaguing his people." Maya said.

"Congratulations Colonel Koenig." Morrow said with a smile, "When we get back to Earth they may have to make you an ambassador."

"And leave Moonbase Alpha? I don't think so." Koenig replied.

"Looks like you'll have to wait a while longer to take over around here." Verdeschi joked.

"There are also some data files attached to the signal." Koenig told Maya, "One looked like a full language database we could use to build an automated translation program and there were also details of the Dorcon attacks starting with the main invasion and then the raids afterwards."

"Colonel do you want to issue a response to the message?" Maya asked.

"Yes but first we need to think about what to say. We need to decide exactly which ships we can use to collect cargo from them." Koenig answered.

"You want to arrange a convoy?" Verdeschi suggested and Koenig nodded.

"Yes, we'll check with the Toroth government before they launch but I'd like to use every Eagle and Condor that we can." he replied.

"I'd suggest a Hawk escort. Even if we're using combat Eagles to boost our transport capacity they can't really protect an entire convoy against Dorcon attack ships, let alone a capital ship if they happen to send one of them." Verdeschi pointed out.

"How many were you thinking of? I don't want to leave us defenceless and I don't want the Toroth to think we're sending an invasion force." Koenig said.

"I think four ought to be enough without leaving us vulnerable or looking too threatening." Verdeschi responded.

"Okay. We'll run that by the Toroth as well. In the mean time can you check with your people about the Vultures? I want to launch them as soon as possible." Koenig said.

11.

Washington escorted Kirith and Lyssa to the hangar where they joined the rest of the escaped Psychons aboard their stolen attack ship.

"What did their leader have to say?" Hennor asked as he took a break from the repair work he had been carrying out and sat down.

"He repeated the invitation to stay here on their moon and join their cause." Kirith answered.

"And what is their cause exactly?" Dallan said.

"They want to return home and they think we can help. You in particular." Lyssa said, "They think that you are the key to understanding Dorcon wormhole technology."

"And so we are. We could show them how to direct a wormhole to any place in our galaxy that they desire but what would they offer us in return?" Hennor said.

"They don't intend to make us slaves but they do think that we would want to live under their rules like the one called Maya does." Kirith told him, "Their offer is obviously sincere and we would be free to chose our own path here among them."

"You think we should accept?" Tavar commented.

"I think we should consider it, yes." Kirith replied.

"Life on this moon would be easier than being cooped up aboard this ship or some abandoned outpost for the rest of our lives." Lyssa added.

"When we've fixed the navigation system we won't need to stay aboard this ship. We can find a place of our own." Mallam pointed out.

"Where the seven of us lead simple, primitive lives while we watch our supplies dwindle." Hennor said.

"You sound like you've made up your mind to stay Hennor." Surtan said.

"Maybe I have Surtan." Hennor responded, "I've been a slave all my life and now I'm being offered freedom."

"We are free Hennor." Surtan said, snarling.

"Free? We may not be slaves any more but I'd hardly call us free. I don't fancy taking our chances among the Toroth given how we came to this system which gives us the choice of spending the rest of our days taking whatever we can from the outer system or stranding ourselves on some planet we know nothing about." Hennor said.

"What does staying with the humans get us though?" Surtan asked.

"Allies." Lyssa said and Hennor smiled.

"As Lyssa said it gives us allies who can protect us when the Dorcons come after us. In exchange all they're asking for is help with one technical problem to get them home. After we've given them that and we're among however millions of them there are on their home world we can sell the rest of what we know to whoever will pay us the most and we can live out the rest of our days in luxury that even the Archon himself couldn't imagine." he said.

"We should take a vote." Surtan said.

"No, there's no need for a vote. We'll fix this ship and when we're done anyone who wants to leave in it can but unless anything changes I'm going to be staying." Hennor said, "Now I'm hungry. How about we find out what the food around here is like?"

Koenig, Verdeschi and Carter sat in Koenig's office with Maya and the three Toroth to study the material the Toroth had provided to them about the Dorcon raiding ships. All of these had been recovered from the flight recorders of destroyed ships and they consisted of two different types of material, the first were scans of the raiding ships that confirmed they were all of the attack ship class that were now familiar to the inhabitants of the moon. The second collection of data came from the destroyed vessels' communication logs and showed the video transmissions that they had received. It was the scans that interested the GDF officers the most though and they watched these on a wall mounted screen.

"The Dorcons demand the surrender of ships they attack but then destroy them anyway." Maya said as Tar-Vas explained what the Toroth knew of the attacks that had taken place on their transports while the officers watched footage of the attack ships closing in on Toroth vessels.

"Do your crews know this?" Carter asked and Maya translated the question for the Toroth.

"It took some time to recover the flight recorders and until then it wasn't known exactly what had happened to the Toroth ships. When the recorders were found though a warning was issued to all future crews that the Dorcons would not take any notice of the surrenders they were demanding. Since then the Toroth ships have done their best to try and outrun them." she then added as the Tar-Vas answered the question.

"And given the power of their ion drives and lacking artificial gravity they don't stand a chance of doing that." Carter said.

"Hopefully providing them with fusion drives will improve things." Verdeschi said.

"Maya are these tactics typical of Dorcon raiding parties?" Koenig asked.

"When they demand the surrender of a ship or planet it is because they want it as intact as possible colonel. If their demand is refused then they will destroy a target out of spite but I have never heard of them destroying anything they might be able to turn to their own use." Maya told him.

"Even a ship that is obsolete by their standards?" Verdeschi said.

"If it could be upgraded for less than it would cost to build a new one, yes. Remember that every Dorcon lord is pledged to provide the Archon with a minimum level of tribute so any saving they can make will make them look better." Maya said.

"Maya if you watch some of these signals from the Dorcons do you think you could figure out why they are destroying ships out of hand whether they've surrendered or not?" Koenig said.

"Of course colonel." Maya responded.

"Okay let's go with the oldest one first." Koenig said and he brought up one of the communication records on a wall mounted screen and started it playing.

The video message consisted of footage of a Dorcon pilot sat in the pilot's seat of an attack ship. He looked directly at the camera as he spoke.

"This is unusual colonel." Maya said when the Dorcon had said only a few words.

"Why?" Koenig asked.

"This Dorcon is speaking the Toroth language colonel." Maya said.

"He's not using some sort of translator?" Carter said and Maya shook her head.

"No, this is a spoken voice but-" she said before she stopped speaking.

"Is something wrong Maya?" Verdeschi said.

"The words that are being spoken do not seem to be coming from the Dorcon at all. They are a threat but the Dorcon shows no sign of trying to be intimidating." Maya told him.

"Could he just be reading the words off a script? Maybe he doesn't know what they mean." Carter suggested.

"No, the pronunciation is too clear. If he was reading from a script without understanding then there would be elements he would mispronounce. It is also unusual for a Dorcon to learn the language of a species other than their own. Many will pick up a reasonable amount of the Psychon language but that is more for convenience than a desire to communicate with us. They expect us to learn their language instead and the same would apply to any other species. If they need translators they use female Psychons like myself." Maya explained.

"Let's move onto the next one." Koenig said and he started another of the messages playing back on the screen. This had the same format as the first with a Dorcon delivering a threat. The main difference was that this individual was the co-pilot of his ship with the pilot visible beside him but not speaking.

"Colonel this has the same issue as the first message. The words spoken do not match the mannerisms of the Dorcon speaking them." Maya said as she watched it.

Koenig paused the playback and activated the intercom.

"Captain Kano can you come to my office?" he said.

"Of course colonel." Kano responded and Koenig opened the wall to allow him into the office as he walked up the steps from main mission.

"Captain I want you to take a look at the Dorcon messages included in the data package from the Toroth government. Go over every detail and let me know if you find anything out of the ordinary." Koenig told him.

"Yes colonel. Is there anything in particular you want me to look for colonel?" Kano asked.

"Maya says that the behaviour of the Dorcons in the video doesn't match their appearance. Can you tell if the video has been edited in any way to make it look like they said something that they didn't and the sound was then dubbed on over the top?" Koenig said.

"I should be able to, yes colonel." Kano responded.

"Good. Carry on captain." Koenig told him.

The ability to manipulate recorded images and sounds had existed for centuries on Earth and there were well tried methods to detect forgeries. What Kano had to go on though made his task difficult in the extreme. Firstly he did not have access to the original recordings, those were still on the Toroth home world, secondly the recordings were not in a standard format that Moonbase Alpha's main computer was designed to process so Kano had to work through the format translation program he had created and although he was confident that it worked well enough to enable records to be played back he knew that there could be flaws in the process that would hamper a forensic examination. Lastly he was trying to deal with dialogue that was in a totally alien language. This final issue was of lesser importance than the others though since Kano would largely be examining the digital data rather than listening to the audio track himself.

Despite these differences in the recordings he had been asked to examine Kano still approached them in the same way as he would for an ordinary human signal. This meant examining frames of the video and looking for any indication that it had been constructed from different elements combined. This would be most obvious

from differences in lighting with different parts appearing to be illuminated from different angles or lit with differing intensities of light. However, examining the footage in this way showed no such variations. It was still possible that the video footage was fake but if it was then either it was a single scene that had been manipulated or someone had gone to a great deal of effort to find elements that could be perfectly blended together.

Having found nothing obvious in the video portion of the recordings Kano moved on to the audio where he started by looking for the tell tale signs of splicing. The most common form of audio forgery remained taking multiple recordings of a person speaking and changing the order of their words to create new dialogue. Because it was very unusual for there to be absolutely no background noise such edits would frequently leave odd spikes in the audio where such noises abruptly stopped and started. Once again Kano did not find any of the tell tale signs of tampering with the recordings but he did notice something that did seem out of place.

Although the encoding of the transmissions was in a digital format the eventual output was by the nature of sound waves an analogue pattern and it was here that Kano found a pattern that was definitely out of the ordinary.

"Colonel Koenig I think I have something here." Kano said into the intercom.

"Okay captain I'm on my way." Koenig responded and a few moments later he descended the steps from his office to stand beside Kano, "Okay captain, show me what you've got." he said.

"There's something in the audio of these signals that doesn't make sense colonel." Kano replied and he called up a set of waveforms on his console.

"Okay, what am I looking at?" Koenig asked.

"Each of these waveforms is that according to our limited translation database is the word equating to 'surrender' being pronounced by each of the Dorcons. Sometimes it's the pilot and sometimes the co-pilot that delivers the message but each time they have exactly the same pattern of pronunciation. They have different pitches to their voices as you would expect for different people but they place exactly the same emphasis on different parts of the word as one another." Kano explained.

"Exactly the same?" Koenig said and Kano nodded.

"Yes colonel." he said and he pointed to the waveforms on the screen in front of them, "You can see here that the pattern of the waveform has peaks of exactly the same relative values. The only differences are in the frequency and loudness of the sound. See this peak here? It's twenty percent bigger than this preceding peak in every example. Colonel the only way I can see this happening is if all of these audio tracks were compiled using the same voice synthesizer program. All that was done was that the pitch and volume were adjusted to make them seem like they were being spoken by different individuals when in fact they were all produced by a single program. I suspect that the video footage is all animated. There are no irregularities between different elements of them because they're one hundred percent fake. The animator just blended the models together and set their light source."

"I think this pretty much rules out the Dorcons." Koenig said, "They'd have no reason to fake transmissions in this way. Even if there was just one ship they could swap crewmembers around to make it look like they were more of them." then he looked at Benes, "Captain Benes put the images of the attack ships recorded by the Toroth on the big screen please." he ordered.

"Yes colonel." Benes said and she placed a collection of still images taken from the data files supplied by the Toroth on main mission's big screen. Each of these showed a single Dorcon attack ship viewed from various angles.

"Thank you captain." Koenig said, "Major Carter what do you think? Are those all the same ship?"

"They certainly could be colonel." Carter answered, "You can see different markings on some of the images but that's just a matter of painting them. If the methods used by the Dorcons to apply paint that can remain in place on a ship that can move from vacuum to atmosphere as we do then changing any of those shouldn't take much more than about eight or nine hours. Twelve at the most."

"And these images have been taken over several months. More than enough time to repaint the ship between attacks." Koenig said, "Now major do you think that that ship could be the same one as is down in our hangar right now?"

"Colonel do you really think that the Psychons attacked those Toroth ships?" Baker asked from her station.

"They say that they've been scavenging for supplies in the outer system when they could have just surrendered to the Toroth. Considering how eager the Toroth are to get our technology I don't see any reason why they wouldn't have given the Psychons sanctuary in exchange for help from the Psychon males and the opportunity to examine their ship." Koenig said, "Lieutenant Alexander do we have a location for our Psychon guests?"

"Security indicates that they are in the mess hall colonel." Alexander told him and he nodded.

"Good. Carter can you interface with an attack ship's communications system?" he said.

"Yes colonel, but it has to be done directly. Dorcon ships aren't compatible with our remote operation systems. All the gear is in our attack ship." Carter said.

"Then let's go. We may not have long before the Psychons finish eating." Koenig said.

Koenig and Carter hurried to Moonbase Alpha's hangar, making their way to where the Dorcon attack ship that had been captured and was now being examined to try and determine how its systems, especially its wormhole navigation functioned. This ship had several portable computer terminals plugged in to enable human engineers to monitor its functions and one of these was connected to the communication system in the cockpit. Carter quickly unplugged this and wrapped the interface lead around the terminal.

"Okay colonel I can plug this into their ship and it should let us see exactly who they've been talking to recently," he said.

"Good. If they're telling the truth then they shouldn't have been talking to anyone before we arrived." Koenig said before the two men exited the attack ship and hurried from it to where the Psychons' vessel was docked, "Spaceman, is that ship empty?" Koenig asked a nearby technician who was part of a group carrying out maintenance on an Eagle.

"I think so colonel. The Psychons left about twenty minutes ago." the main responded and with this confirmation Koenig and Carter boarded the alien vessel and made their way into the cockpit.

In here Carter located the access panel that covered the ship's communication system and opened it before plugging the computer terminal into it.

"Okay let's see what you've been saying." Carter said as he started up the computer.

The computer immediately began to connect to the attack ship's own computer and accessed the communication system. Despite being operated by a different Dorcon lord to the attack ship already in the possession of the moon's human population this vessel used the same operating system and communication software and therefore, the human designed interface was easily able to establish a connection.

"Are we in?" Koenig asked when he saw strings of text start to scroll down a window on the computer screen and Carter nodded.

"Yes colonel, we're in," Carter replied, "and whatever they've been doing in this system they haven't been maintaining radio silence."

"You've found signals in the log?" Koenig said.

"Yes, quite a few of them. They aren't regular transmission though, from the looks of them they're data bursts instead of audio-visual." Carter said.

"You mean like a highly detailed simulation of a Dorcon issuing a demand to surrender?" Koenig suggested.

"Exactly like that colonel. I think I've found one of the files they sent." Carter responded.

"Can you show me?"

"I think so colonel." Carter said and he accessed one of the files he had found. A new window promptly opened up on the computer display and a video file began to play. As Koenig had expected this appeared to be a video of a Dorcon attack ship pilot speaking directly to the camera. The audio was in the Dorcon language but Carter's computer also included a copy of Alpha's translation program that provided a text output in English for the two GDF officers to read. As Koenig had suspected this was a demand for a transport ship to come to a halt and surrender along with the threat to destroy it if it failed to comply.

"That's good enough for me." Koenig said as he took his comlock from his pocket and he activated the device, "Koenig to Lieutenant Alexander." he said into it.

"Alexander here colonel." she responded.

"Lieutenant, Major Carter and I have found evidence that the Psychons are really responsible for the pirate activity in the system. Alert Master Sergeant Washington and have them taken into custody immediately." Koenig ordered.

12.

The seven Psychons were all sat around a single table in the mess hall. Being the middle of the afternoon by lunar time there were few other diners present but it was still staffed just in case anyone wanted to take a meal either early or late to fit in with their duty shifts. Without knowing what any particular dish would taste like the Psychons had bought a variety of different ones between them so that they could sample each and they were in the process of doing this when Kirith happened to notice movement from the corner of her eye and she glanced towards one of the entrances.

Just outside the mess hall she spotted a pair of soldiers in armoured vests with stun guns holstered on their legs. She had seen other soldiers like this patrolling the military sections of Alpha but as soon as she saw these particular men she knew that they were not here by chance.

"We have to go!" she hissed, "They're coming to arrest us."

"Why?" Dallan asked.

"Why do you think? They must have figured out what we've been doing." Kirith responded.

"Our ship isn't ready. Where do we go?" Lyssa said.

"The humans have an attack ship of their own remember? It's supposed to be fully functional so we'll just take that one instead." Hennor said as he started to get to his feet.

As the group the Psychons began to walk away from the table, heading towards one of the other exits from the mess hall as they saw this the two soldiers entered the room behind them.

"Stay where you are!" one of them called out as both placed their hands on their holstered weapons.

Acting quickly Hennor reached out to a nearby table where a pair of Alpha's technicians sat eating and grabbed hold of a knife. Then he dragged one of the startled technicians to his feet and pressed the blade to the man's throat.

"Back!" he snapped, "Your weapons, drop them."

As the soldiers watched Surtan took a knife from by the second technician and also placed it to his throat.

"Up." he said and the second man slowly got to his feet.

"Just let them go. No-one's been hurt yet." one of the soldiers said but neither of them risked drawing their stun guns just yet.

"Your weapons. Now." Hennor said and one of the soldiers nodded at the other before the pair of them both slowly took their stun guns from their holsters and set them down on the floor by their feet.

Tavar quickly dashed forwards to pick up the two stun guns but as he bent down to pick them up one of the soldiers suddenly lunged at him. Tavar was unable to pick up either weapon before he was tackled but he was able to kick both towards the other Psychons and Mallam scooped one up as it came towards him. It took just a second for him to comprehend how the energy worked and he fired it at the soldier wrestling with Tavar. The beam hit the armoured man in his upper arm, missing the armoured vest that he wore and that would have absorbed the energy of the beam entirely. Instead the plasma created by the beam sent a massive jolt of pain through his nervous system and he screamed as he released his grip and Tavar rolled away. Dallan quickly picked up the second stun gun as Tavar was getting back to his feet and the Psychons continued towards the exit, Hennor and Surtan still holding knives to the throats of their hostages.

The second soldier watched them leave before he crouched down to check that his comrade was still breathing and at the same time he activated his comlock.

"Man down in the enlisted mess." he said, "The Psychons have escaped. They are armed and have hostages."

"What is happening?" Tar-Vas asked when Maya returned her comlock to her pocket after being contacted.

"Colonel Koenig has identified the pirates who have been attacking your ships." she told the Toroth.

"You mean the Dorcons are in our system again? Will you colonel send ships to destroy them?" Hom-Dom said.

"No, the pirates are the Psychons we encountered in the asteroid field." Maya responded.

"We saw the Dorcons in the communication records of our destroyed ships." Lig-Nor pointed out.

"Those were faked. The originals have been found aboard the attack ship that the Psychons were aboard. They wanted your people to think that the Dorcons were responsible." Maya explained.

"Then what happens now? Your Colonel Koenig promised them sanctuary on your moon." Tar-Vas said.

"That was before we found out that they had attacked you. Colonel Koenig has given orders for the Psychons to be arrested and now they have taken hostages." Maya said.

"Then they won't be given sanctuary? On behalf of my government I must ask for them to be handed over to us. They have killed our people and they must be made to pay with their own lives." Tar-Vas said.

"I know Colonel Koenig and he is an honourable man. He will not give the Psychons sanctuary now. I will

pass on your request for them to be handed over to you but I do not know what his response will be. The humans do not practice capital punishment even for those criminals who have caused deaths themselves. He may insist that they are imprisoned here instead." Maya replied.

"And what about you? These pirates are your people." Hom-Dom pointed out.

"No. The humans are my people now. Although I do not necessarily understand their attitude towards the punishment of criminals." Maya said.

"Alexander what's going on?" Koenig said into his comlock.

"The Psychons are heading towards the hangar colonel." Alexander told him, "They just used the comlock of one of their hostages to open a hatch. I'm going to lock out both hostages' comlocks now."

"Hold off on that lieutenant." Koenig told her, "Use the comlocks to track their movements and have our forces surround them. They're obviously looking for a way off the moon so let's take advantage of that. Lock down all standby Eagles and send every soldier in the hangar area to me to cut them off."

"Yes colonel. Sergeant Washington will be with you in five minutes." Alexander said.

"Understood. Koenig out." Koenig said before turning off the comlock and he turned to Carter, "We better arm ourselves just in case the Psychons get here ahead of Washington." he said.

The two officers quickly disembarked from the attack ship and hurried across the hangar towards an emergency station. Most of the equipment kept here was for medical or firefighting purposes but there was also a secure locker that Koenig had to open with his comlock, his identity being confirmed through facial recognition from the device. Inside this there were several stun guns and also a number of magnetic accelerator weapons that were the primary personal arms of human forces. Koenig and Carter each took one of the rifle sized weapons from the locker, along with ammunition for them. While they were loading their weapons the technicians working in the hangar began to evacuate, ordered by their superiors to leave through exits that would take them away from the approaching Psychons.

"So where do you think they'll come in from?" Carter asked and Koenig pointed towards one of the hangar's access points.

"That's the most direct route from the mess hall. They don't know the layout of Alpha well enough to try and throw off pursuit so they'll probably be heading straight here as fast as they can." Koenig replied before another doorway slid open and Washington entered with a squad of his men, all of them wearing body armour and carrying magnetic accelerator rifles the same as those Koenig and Carter had just armed themselves with.

"Colonel last reports have the Psychons three minutes from here. We should take cover." Washington said and Koenig nodded.

"I suspect they'll come from that direction sergeant." he said, pointing out the same door he had just indicated to Carter.

"That fits with what we've been told as well sir." Washington replied, "I recommend that we deploy beneath the Eagles to the left and opposite of the door. We'll cut them off from their ship."

"Their ship can't fly. Colonel if they're going to escape then they'll have to try taking our attack ship." Carter said.

"Then that's where we deploy. We'll let them get far enough into the hangar that they can't easily retreat and go to ground." Koenig ordered.

Koenig, Carter and Washington's squad quickly made their way to where the captured attack ship was located in the hangar and deployed to target anyone approaching it, taking cover behind servicing equipment and cargo containers so that they would be as difficult to spot for anyone approaching from the direction the Psychons were expected to enter the hangar from.

The armed men did not have to wait long before they heard the sound of a door opening followed by rapid footsteps as the Psychons entered the hangar, still holding their two hostages. Already knowing where the captured attack ship was located they turned towards it and came closer.

"Can you take out the two with the hostages without hitting our people?" Koenig whispered to Washington.

"The closer they get the better." he replied, peering down the optical sight of his rifle as he aimed it between a pair of spare parts crates.

"Then wait for my word." Koenig told him. Koenig watched the Psychons getting closer, looking around for any signs of opposition. He continued to wait until the Psychons were about twenty metres from the attack ship, well within the hangar and with nowhere to retreat to without being in the GDF troops' line of fire and then he called out to them, "Release your hostages and surrender! We have you surrounded!"

Looking around them the Psychons now saw GDF troops revealing themselves as they aimed their weapons towards them. Immediately Hennor and Surtan turned to place their hostages between them and as many of the soldiers as they could while Dallen and Tavar pointed their stun guns back at the soldiers.

The two female Psychons could tell that Koenig was serious about them surrendering and as they saw the soldiers as well the two women knew immediately that they were ready to fire.

"Hennor they'll shoot." Kirith said softly.

"Just keep moving towards the ship," he responded and he pulled on his hostage to drag the man towards the attack ships again while the GDF troops continued to aim their rifles at the Psychons but without firing them.

Looking at the hostage Kirith noticed that he was checking the positions of the armed humans and she realised immediately that he planned to try and overpower Hennor.

"Hennor look out!" she exclaimed just before the hostage lifted his arm to elbow Hennor in the face.

Thanks to Kirith's warning Hennor was able to evade the blow and he used the base of the grip of his knife to strike the side of the man's head. At the same time Tavar suddenly fired his stun gun at the closest soldier and the beam hit him in his shoulder. However, the pulsed energy projectile could not penetrate the ceramic and polymer body armour that he wore and he remained standing. However, seeing his men coming under attack left Koenig with only one choice.

"Fire!" he yelled and there was a volley of gunfire.

The magnetic accelerator rifles carried by the GDF troops could have their muzzle velocities adjusted and for a close range engagement against unarmoured targets the soldiers had reduced this to subsonic to try and avoid collateral damage from projectiles passing straight through their target. With no sonic boom this reduced the sound of the gunfire to almost nothing before the bullets struck their targets. Although all of the Psychons were considered hostile the GDF troops targeted those who posed a direct threat only, meaning that the unarmed Mallam and both women were ignored for the time being while on the other hand Dallan and Tavar were hit repeatedly and both men fell dead in an instant. With hostages to act as human shields Hennor and Surtan posed more difficult targets though and each of them was targeted by just a single man. Washington shot Hennor in the base of his neck when his struggle with his hostage exposed him and he too fell dead. Surtan kept his hostage in front of him though and it was only one of the GDF soldiers positioned to his side that had a line of fire. His shot hit Surtan in his shoulder and he screamed as he dropped his knife and the technician he had been holding hostage dived out of the way as quickly as he could.

This left the remaining Psychons exposed but there was no second volley of fire now that they posed no threat to anyone and Koenig called out another ultimatum.

"Get down on the floor, you are all under arrest," he shouted.

Mallam looked briefly to where one of the stun guns had landed but before he could attempt to retrieve it Kirith put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't," she said, "It's over," and then she raised her hands above her head before lying down on the hangar floor, followed by Lyssa and Mallam.

"So what's on your mind John?" Russell asked as she walked up to Koenig in main mission while he was staring out of a viewport into space. Typically when anyone did this there attention was on the wormhole, especially when the moon's entry into the wormhole was as imminent as it was then.

"Just looking towards the Toroth's home world and wondering if I did the right thing," Koenig responded.

"Turning over the Psychons you mean?" Russell said and Koenig smiled.

"Tar-Vas indicated that they will likely be executed. In the years before Earth was united it was common for countries that didn't have the death penalty to refuse to extradite criminals to countries where they could be executed yet here I just handed them over just so we'd be guaranteed of getting a few supplies," he said.

"They know we don't execute people John. Maybe they'll commute the death penalty in this case out of respect for us," Russell suggested.

"Well I suppose we'll find out eventually," Koenig said.

"You think we'll see the Toroth again?"

"Of course. Sooner or later we'll find a way home and then we'll have the ability to come back here to establish more permanent relations with them."

"Then just focus on that John. At least we know we have friends here and it's all down to you," Russell told him.