

ALIENS: A Share of the Spoils



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When the ship that boarded the *USS Sulaco* is tracked to a remote colony world Captain Williams and the crew of the *Almayer* are sent to bring its crew back to Earth. However, they soon discover that they have arrived too late to prevent some of the alien eggs the ship carried hatching and they soon find themselves facing not only a nest full of aliens but also other parties eager to acquire one of the aliens in particular.

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<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

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1.

The planet LG-109, also known as Raijin, in the Beta Hydri system already supported life when it was first surveyed by humanity. Although considered unpleasant, the atmosphere was breathable by humans without the need for even the most basic of environmental protection and the cost of setting up terraforming stations to remove the trace gases from the air that could cause irritation to the eyes and throat the colonists were instead told to wear goggles and masks if it bothered them while most buildings were fitted with air scrubbers to filter out these gases. This made it very easy for a person wanting to maintain a low profile to move around without risking being picked up by any of the facial recognition systems that were common on many planets.

One such individual made his way along the shoreline as the sun was setting, heading towards the space port where his ship was docked when an expensive looking car with fully blacked out windows pulled up ahead of him and one of the rear windows was lowered.

"Mister Fowler." a voice called out from inside the vehicle and Fowler came to a halt and peered inside, his hand tightening its grip on the pistol he kept in his pocket. The voice had an East Asian accent, hardly surprising given that the planet was in the Anglo-Japanese arm of human extra-solar settlement and was heavily populated by people with ancestry from the United Kingdom and Japan.

"Do I know you?" Fowler responded, concerned at having been identified by the smartly dressed man in the back of the car. While Fowler wore a military style respirator to hide his features as well as protect him from the atmosphere the car's passenger instead wore tinted goggles and something that resembled a surgical mask.

"No Mister Fowler, you do not. But my superior Mister Ito has been made aware that you have begun to conduct business in this territory. I have been instructed to make you aware that he expects you do the honourable thing and pay your respects to him." the man in the car answered.

Fowler understood what was being said. His activities had come to the attention of a local branch of the Yakuza, the Japanese organised crime syndicates. Although Fowler had hoped to avoid showing up on the Yakuza's radar he was not completely surprised that word had leaked to them about his presence, presumably via one of the customs officials that had been paid off to avoid closely examining and testing the contents of the drums that filled his ship's cargo hold.

"Your boss doesn't need to worry about me." Fowler said, "I'm not trying to cut in on his narcotics business. I'm not selling anything to locals."

"Mister Ito knows about the people you have been meeting with Mister Fowler. Though you have done very well to blend in they have not been so successful. However, regardless of who your intended customers may be there are rules that must be followed if one is to conduct business here and my employer is impatient to receive you. An initial payment of thirty thousand dollars will establish your right to carry out your business here on Raijin, while a commission of fifteen percent will be applied to your takings. Bring the money to the Katana club by midnight tomorrow. You have been warned Mister Fowler." the man in the car told him before he tapped on the glass between him and the car's driver at the same time as he closed the exterior window, at which point the car drove away from Fowler. For a moment he considered drawing his weapon and firing at the departing car but then he reconsidered it. Killing the Yakuza's messenger would not prevent the gangsters from coming after Fowler and his men and in any case the car was likely armoured and the bullets from his pistol would be unlikely to do anything more than scratch the paintwork.

Instead Fowler continued to head back to the space port where he returned to his ship, entering through a cargo loading air lock and pulling the respirator from his face as soon as he was inside its fully pressurised and air filtered interior.

The main area of the ship's hold contained a number of large plastic drums, each one just over a metre tall and carefully sealed. Neither Fowler nor his crew would have been willing to be in the same room as these drums if the seals were not secure, all of them being aware of the dangerous nature of the contents. Despite the danger that lurked inside the drums almost the entire crew of Fowler's ship was in the hold when he returned and all of them were armed, not only as a security measure should someone try to break into the ship and steal any of the cargo but also so that they could make sure that the cargo itself did not cause them any problems.

"How did the meeting go captain?" one the crewman asked.

"The suit wanted to haggle." Fowler replied, "I'm offering his company access to the most valuable cargo in the galaxy and he's trying to knock the price down to a tenth."

"I take it you told him to go-" the crewman began.

"I reminded him that there's more than one company in the galaxy that wants to get their hands on this cargo." Fowler interrupted, "Hell I bet we could even sell it back to Weyland-Yutani. After all, they know more than anyone what this lot is worth."

"Aren't they more likely to just sent a bunch of heavies to try and take them back by force?" the crewman said.

"Probably. Though it didn't take much for him to cave. He'd rather go back to his bosses and tell them that he just spent a hundred-odd million credits than go back to them with the cash and nothing to show for the trip. He's sorting out the payment and he'll be back with the money. Right now we might have another problem though." Fowler explained.

"What's that captain?" another of the crewmen asked.

"We've been made by the local Yakuza and they're looking for their cut. Fifteen percent to be exact." Fowler answered and there were several sharp intakes of breath from around the room. Even eighty-five percent of what the crew expected to receive was a small fortune but the thought of having to give up anything to someone else did not sit well with Fowler's crew.

"You're not thinking about paying them are you?" one of the crew asked and Fowler glared at him.

"What, do you think I'm stupid? That money is ours and once we leave this rotten little planet the Yakuza won't be able to touch us. But until that happens we need to keep watch for anyone hanging around the ship. Thankfully I got the impression that the Yakuza think we're trying to muscle in on their narcotics business here but if they find out what we're really carrying then I doubt they'll wait to try and take it from us." he said as he put a computer tablet that showed an image of an alien egg down on one of the sealed drums.

"What do we do if we catch anyone lurking around?" another crewman asked.

"Make sure they don't get to tell anyone what they've seen." Fowler said, "Make sure you keep it quiet though. Gunshots aren't going to make it easy to keep paying customs to keep their distance. Hogg, Bennett, I want you two up in the bridge. Keep an eye on the close in sensors and monitor comms and sensors. If we do get visitors they might not arrive on the ground and I want to know about them before they're shooting up my ship."

Captain Williams of the United States Colonial Marine Corps kicked his enemy as hard as he could and this produced a metallic 'clang'.

"Has the vending machine wronged you captain?" a familiar voice said from behind him and without needing to look Williams knew that it was Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence.

"Took my two dollars and won't give me a candy bar." Williams replied, "I've been here fourteen hours and I need a sugar rush."

"Well you might need to wait for it. There's a fed in your office asking to speak to you. She didn't say why but Maddie's there with her." Lawrence said and Williams groaned.

"This fed wouldn't happen to be young and attractive would she?" he said and Lawrence smiled.

"Only if you go for the athletic build and piercing blue eyes look." he answered.

"Which means Maddie is probably getting territorial. I better go and find out what she wants." Williams said and Lawrence nodded.

"That might be a good idea." he said and the two marines turned around and began to walk down the corridor towards where Williams' office on Gateway station was located. Just before they turned a corner they heard the sound of someone walking up to the vending machine and then speaking.

"Hey look, free candy."

"Just let it go captain." Lawrence said as Williams scowled.

A large window dominated the front wall of Williams' office and this meant that as Williams and Lawrence approached it they could see what looked like two women sat inside. The woman Lawrence had indicated was a Federal agent was sat in a chair in front of Williams' desk while the android Madison Madison, called 'Maddie' by Williams and Lawrence, was sat on the edge of the desk itself and when she noticed Williams walking towards the office she smiled, pointed and waved at him.

"Here he is. My owner and boyfriend." Maddie said when Williams entered the office and the other woman got to her feet.

"Captain Williams?" she said.

"Yes that's me." Williams replied, reaching out to shake the woman's hand.

"Special Agent Warren. Federal Bureau of Investigation." she said.

"What can I do for the FBI Agent Warren?" Williams asked as he sat down behind his desk and Maddie moved to stand right beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"You submitted an alert to Interpol regarding a spacecraft a few months ago. Is that correct captain?" Warren said and Williams nodded.

"Yes, that's right. Maddie here recovered a sensor profile from the logs of the *Sulaco*. The ship was responsible for-" Williams began.

"Interpol has found your ship for you Captain Williams. It's called the *Marlow* and it berthed at Raijin twelve days ago." Warren interrupted.

"Raijin? Where's that?" Williams asked.

"The Beta Hydri system. Twenty Four point three light years from Earth along the Anglo-Japanese arm." Maddie told him.

"Then we need to move." Williams said, "I need clearance to take a team out there and even then it'll take us a month of real time just to get there. Thank you Agent Warren, we'll take care of-"

"Not so fast captain." Warren said, interrupting him again, "This case is under the jurisdiction of the FBI now."

"What? You can't be serious. The crew of that ship boarded a USCM vessel and contributed towards the death of USCM personnel."

"Which is exactly why the Federal Government is sending me to request the arrest and extradition of the crew of the Marlow." Warren said.

"Arrest and extradition?" Lawrence said from just inside the doorway, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that the FBI has sent a request to the authorities on Raijin to prevent the *Marlow* from leaving before I can arrive there with the evidence that proves that the ship illegally boarded the *Sulaco*. At that point they can be arrested and their ship seized. Then both will be returned to Earth."

"So why bother telling us this if you're then just going to tell us to butt out?" Lawrence said, folding his arms as he stared at Warren and she smiled.

"Because the United States Colonial Marine Corps has been asked to provide me with transport and security. Captain Williams, your little trip to Beta Hydri has already been authorised. The only difference is that you'll be answering to me for the duration of it. Now if you don't mind I have work to do before we leave. I'll leave you with my card and you can call me as soon as you've confirmed our departure time." she explained and she got back to her feet, taking a contact card with her details encoded on it from inside her jacket and placing on Williams' desk. Then Lawrence stepped aside as she left the office and the door slid shut behind her.

"I don't like her." Maddie said, frowning.

"You don't like any women that get close to the captain." Lawrence pointed out.

"That's because they don't have his best interests at heart like I do." Maddie replied as she wrapped an arm around Williams, "You don't like her either, do you?" she asked.

"Maddie," Williams responded, "for once you and I are in complete agreement about a woman." and Maddie smiled.

"I knew you loved me." she said before she planted a kiss on his cheek.

2.

Fowler and his men checked their weapons. Their customer had requested a meeting at which he would be able to inspect two samples of the alien eggs Fowler was offering to sell him. This concerned Fowler somewhat, he knew from experience that, if mishandled, the eggs could easily hatch and their contents escape. He had already lost one man aboard the *USS Sulaco* to such an accident and he did not want to lose any more to another accident. However, when the customer was being asked to hand over more than a hundred million dollars it was only natural that he would want to see more than just an image on a computer tablet. Therefore, Fowler had agreed to the inspection but only on strict terms. Firstly he and his men would all be heavily armed to not only protect their investment but also to guard against either an accident or a double cross and secondly the customer would be asked to bring along the two million dollars for the sample eggs, in effect purchasing them at the time of inspection.

The eggs would be transported to the meeting site in the back of an unmarked van, protected by two of Fowler's men armed with shotguns. Meanwhile Fowler and five more men would ride in a pair of smaller vehicles, watching for signs of their being followed. These men would be more heavily armed with a mix of sub machine guns and rifles. Fowler fully expected the customer to be accompanied by similarly heavily armed troops and he did not want to be at a disadvantage if this did turn out to be a trap.

"Make sure to keep the ship sealed up while we're gone." Fowler told Bennett, "I wouldn't put it past the suit to try luring us out to a phony meet with two eggs while he sends a bunch of goons to beak in here and steal the rest of them right out from under our noses. I've made sure that no-one knows exactly how big our crew is so anyone that does try anything won't know if there are just the two of you in here or twenty. Make sure it stays that way." and Bennett grinned.

"Don't worry." he said, patting the silenced sub machine gun he had slung over his shoulder, "If anyone tries anything then we'll make them regret it."

"Good. Now everyone get ready to move out." Fowler said, "I'll ride in the lead car to the meet. I want tail car to stop a couple of hundred metres short and keep tabs on what's going on. I'll leave a channel open so that you can monitor us and if there's trouble then you need to come in shooting, other than that you should keep out of sight."

Fowler and the crew members accompanying him to the meeting then got into the three vehicles prepared for taking them there while Bennett walked over to the controls to the cargo loading ramp, pulling the lever and opening the large door as the three vehicles were started up. The car carrying Fowler then drove out of the hold onto the tarmac the *Marlow* rested on, its headlights coming on as it left the well lit hold and passed into the darkness of night outside. This was followed by the van carrying the alien eggs and finally the tail car before all three vehicles headed off, accelerating gently to avoid disturbing the two eggs being carried in the drums loaded in the back of the van.

From inside the *Marlow's* hold Bennett watched the vehicles exit the hold and as soon as the last of them was clear of the ramp he pushed the lever back to its original position and the ramp began to raise shut again. Fowler watched this from inside his car and the woman in the car with him looked at him.

"What if those two decide to split with the cargo?" she asked, "A hundred odd million divided by two is better than dividing it by ten." and Fowler smiled.

"Don't worry that pretty head of yours Ramirez." he replied and from inside his coat pocket he produced a circuit board, "If they try to take off then they'll have a tough time bringing the engines on line without this."

"The master fusion ignition circuit?" Ramirez said and Fowler nodded.

"I always thought that it pays to take precautions and that includes making sure that wherever I am my ship can't leave without me." he said.

The convoy of three vehicles drove away from the *Marlow*, heading for the exit from the space port landing field. The drivers drove in a cautious manner, not wanting to attract attention from the space port security service or risk disturbing the valuable eggs carried inside the van. Although the occupants of all three vehicles were keeping a close eye out for being followed, their search was limited to watching for other vehicles moving in behind them and no-one noticed the solitary figure in the shadow of a electrical substation that had been watching the *Marlow* when they left and as the three vehicles headed away the figure lifted a radio to his mouth and began to speak into it in Japanese. Moments later a second individual waiting on a roof top just over a hundred metres outside the space port perimeter launched a compact airborne drone designed to evade detection on radar or lidar so that it would not be noticed by the space port scanning systems. The operator directed this drone towards the convoy, flying it towards then from the side until it was located directly over the van in the middle before gently setting it down on the roof of the moving vehicle.

In an office decorated in a traditional Japanese style a grey haired man sat surrounded by women dressed in the garb of oiran, the ancient courtesans of Japanese culture when a larger man entered the room and bowed towards him.

"Mister Ito," the newcomer said, "the tracker is in place. If Fowler attempts to flee we can follow him."

The agreed location where Fowler and members of his gang would meet with their corporate customer was located in a warehouse located three kilometres further along the coast from the space port. There was a harbour here where ships moved cargoes between the city and settlements on other parts of the planet that were too large or heavy to fit aboard aircraft, yet not valuable enough to warrant using a spacecraft to carry them. As planned the car bringing up the rear of the convoy came to a halt several hundred metres short of the warehouse, the driver pulling into an alleyway where it would hopefully escape notice unless the occupants were called upon to help their crew mates. Meanwhile the van and lead car continued towards the warehouse, driving through the open gateway in the fence surrounding it and towards the large door that also stood open.

"Looks like they got here before us." Fowler said into his radio, "Everyone keep an eye out for an ambush." When his car entered the warehouse Fowler saw that sure enough his customer had already arrived there and the smartly dressed man now stood in the centre of a large open area surrounded by cargo containers. Beside him stood a second man in a suit and long coat and another in overalls carrying a pair of briefcases while a pair of masked bodyguards wearing bulky body armour and armed with pulse rifles stood behind them. Two more such guards stood just within the warehouse, one either side of the door and as soon as the van was inside one of them pushed the large button that lowered the rolling door behind it. Fowler had expected the customer to bring his own armed security with him, after all he was supposed to be carrying two million dollars in untraceable cash and if nothing else the company that he worked for would want to make sure that he did not just bolt with the money himself. Four guards did not concern Fowler much, including the two men he had in the van with the eggs his crew had five members in the warehouse and that would increase to eight, a two to one advantage, if he brought in the three men waiting in the car nearby. Fowler and the two others in his car got out of their vehicle and all pointed their weapons towards the two men in suits while Fowler also looked around to see if there were any more corporate guards hiding elsewhere in the warehouse that could shift the odds against his crew. In response to this the four armoured guards pointed their pulse rifles back at them.

"Stand down." Fowler's customer ordered, "I'm sure Mister Fowler is just being cautious."

"Nobody said anything about being locked in." Fowler said as he kept his rifle trained on the man in the suit. "Now, now, I'm sure you can appreciate the need for privacy. Here, perhaps if Oswald shows you the money we brought with us that will put you more at ease." the client said and when he nodded at the man carrying the briefcases the other man walked towards Fowler and his crew members. Setting both of the cases down on the hood of the car the man then opened each one in turn to reveal the bank notes inside them, "Finding so much cash on short notice was not easy. Especially on a planet that does not use dollars as currency." the customer continued, "But it is all there. We can wait while you count it if you want." and Fowler smiled.

"Ramirez, check it's all there." he said.

"Right captain." Ramirez replied as she slung her sub machine gun over her shoulder and began to check the bundles of bank notes.

"I take it that the samples I requested are in the van?" the customer asked, "When you are satisfied that I have brought the money I said I would I would like your people to take them out of the van. Oswald and Doctor Dice will then examine them to make sure that they are what you have claimed they are."

"You know those things are dangerous, right? You men might not want to get too close." Fowler reminded the customer and the man smiled back at him.

"Of course Mister Fowler. Doctor Dice will remain at a safe distance while Oswald carries out the initial examination. Fortunately he is an android and as such is in no danger from being infected should there be an accident." the customer explained and Oswald smiled at Fowler as well.

"Fine but remember, you've paid for them and if anything you do destroys them you're not getting a refund."

Fowler said before looking at Ramirez, "He has paid, hasn't he?" he asked.

"The money looks good." she answered, nodding as she sealed up the briefcases again and Fowler lifted his radio to his mouth.

"Bring out the merchandise." he transmitted and the two men in the van opened up the side door and carefully unloaded the two drums containing the alien eggs, placing them a few metres from the vehicle before stepping back from them with their shotguns in their hands.

While Fowler's men had been unloading the eggs Oswald had fitted a communication headset to his head that included a compact video camera that sent its feed directly to the tablet computer Doctor Dice produced from beneath his coat while he too put on a headset. The android then advanced on the two drums and removed the lids from both of them before peering inside.

"They appear to be the ovomorph stage of the species categorised as Xenomorph XX-one-two-one." Oswald said calmly, "I shall now commence the examination."

At the Katana Club Ito looked up at the clock on the wall of his office as it chimed.

"Mister Fowler is tardy." he said, turning to the two large men whose extensive body tattoos could just about be seen protruding from beneath their suits and high collared shirts standing just inside the doorway, "Handa, is the tracker still in place?" he asked.

"It is oyabun." one of the men by the door replied, bowing slightly as he addressed Ito by the title given to the leader of a Yakuza group.

"Then you and Nakao should take some men and locate Mister Fowler. Remind him of his invitation." Ito ordered.

"Yes oyabun." Handa said and he and the second man both bowed before leaving the room.

The two men proceeded down into the private garage of the Katana Club where more tattooed men waited along with the gang's supply of vehicles. In addition to the luxury cars used for transporting senior members of the Yakuza there were several more anonymous vehicles ranging from motorcycles to a light goods vehicle that could be used to move people or goods around without attracting much attention and when Handa and Nakao shouted instructions to the other Yakuza present these men rushed for the nearby racks that held an assortment of small arms, including a large number of automatic weapons and picked them up along with a quantity of spare ammunition. Once they had armed themselves the Yakuza began to embark in some of these vehicles, two mounting motorcycles while another dozen got into three highly polished cars that all had their windows blacked out. Another Yakuza rushed to the exit, opening the garage door as the vehicles were being started and he watched as they all sped out into the night before closing it again.

Following the signal from the drone that was still fixed to the top of Fowler's van, the Yakuza convoy headed towards the coast and then followed the road towards the warehouse where the meeting was taking place. Knowing that there were no traffic cameras along this section of road and that the police were unlikely to have a presence here the Yakuza drivers all accelerated so that they would reach their destination sooner. However, as the vehicles that made up the convoy sped past the car waiting in the alleyway the three members of Fowler's crew sat inside could not help but notice them and they immediately realised what was going on.

"Captain you've got incoming. Looks like the Yakuza are on to you. I'd say they're no more than two minutes out." the driver radioed as he and the other two men checked their weapons then he tossed the radio onto the back seat of the car and started up its engine.

Inside the warehouse Fowler heard the radio message through his earpiece and his eyes widened.

"We've got company coming." he said and he looked at his customer, "How long until your tin man is done?"

"What are you talking about?" the customer asked.

"I mean that the Yakuza are on their way." Fowler told him.

"The Yakuza? What business is this of theirs?"

"They consider anything that goes on here on Raijin as their business, they run the underworld here. They think we're trying to muscle in on their drugs trade and demanded a cut. I had hoped that we could conclude our business and all be away from here before they got wind of this meeting but it seems I was wrong."

"Check the perimeter." the customer ordered his guards and then he looked at Dice, "Doctor how much longer will this take."

"At least another twenty minutes." Dice told him, "The eggs are genuine but we need to be certain that the facehugger stage creatures they contain are viable."

"The Yakuza will be here in two." Fowler said.

"Then the deal's off Fowler. Give me back the money. We can talk again when you've dealt with your territorial arguments with the Japanese mob." the customer demanded.

"No chance. The money is mine and the eggs are yours. I'm out of here." Fowler hissed, snarling at his customer and then he looked at his gang, "Come on, we're leaving." he told them.

"Not so fast Mister Fowler." the customer said as he drew a pistol from beneath his jacket and pointed it at Fowler's back, "Leave the money."

Fowler turned around and he and his gang all raised their weapons, an action that was duplicated by the corporate guards present before one of the pair stood by the door saw headlights outside.

"They're here!" he exclaimed as the motorcycle riding Yakuza sped into the warehouse grounds. One of the gangsters pulled a weapon that looked like an oversized shotgun from a mounting on his motorcycle that normally kept it hidden from view and fired a grenade towards the warehouse door. The projectile exploded on impact with the door, blasting a hole in it large enough for a man to step through. More significantly though it damaged a number of the links that connected the horizontal sections of the door together and a large part of it just collapsed to the ground, leaving enough room below for the two motorcycle riders and the

cars behind them to drive straight through into the warehouse.

The first rider to race through the doorway was struck by a burst of fire from one of the corporate guards' pulse rifles, causing him to topple from his motorcycle and slide across the floor. Meanwhile the second rider was able to bring his motorcycle to a rapid but controlled stop and fired a burst from a sub machine gun at the guard. The rounds struck the guard's armoured chest plate and bounced off but the guard still staggered back as the first of the Yakuza cars came screeching to a halt inside the warehouse. The doors on this vehicle burst open and four Yakuza sprung out of the car with weapons already in their hands and Nakao fired a rapid burst from his rifle at the second guard by the doorway. Once again these hit the guard's chest plate but in this case the explosive tipped rounds blew holes right through the composite material and sent fragments right into the guard's chest cavity. Nakao barked orders in Japanese at the other three Yakuza to have got out of the car and they began to spread out as they exchanged fire with Fowler's gang and the other corporate guards just as the second Yakuza car sped into the warehouse and the driver swerved sharply to avoid crashing into the rear of the first one.

Lacking any combat programming, Oswald remained standing by the drums holding the alien eggs not knowing what he should do now and before his processors could come to a suitable decision one of the Yakuza fired at him and milky white fluid exploded out of the holes punched into his body by the explosive rounds. As he fell Oswald's now inert body struck the nearest of the drums holding an alien egg and knocked it sideways so that it in turn hit the second drum and both of them fell over, causing the leathery looking eggs to spill out onto the floor.

Fowler and his crew had taken cover behind their own car as soon as the Yakuza entered the warehouse and then began shooting at the rival gangsters straight way. When he saw the drums topple over Fowler cursed and looked at Ramirez.

"Ramirez, grab the cash." he told her.

"No!" the customer yelled when he heard this, "Guards, don't let them get away." and he fired his own pistol at Fowler. The bullet hit Fowler in the side and he fell to the floor.

"Captain!" Ramirez exclaimed but Fowler held up a hand.

"The vest stopped it." he wheezed, "Just get the cash and let's get out of here." then he reached for his radio and brought it to his mouth, "We're pulling out. We're going to need back up ASAP."

"Understood captain, we're on our way." the driver of the car waiting in the alleyway responded.

The gun battle taking place inside the warehouse now turned into one of three factions all battling one another. Fowler and his crew were trying to clear a way out of the warehouse through the Yakuza while defending themselves against the customer's guards who fired at Ramirez when she tried to grab hold of the money still laid out on the car the crew was using for cover. Thanks to their presence behind the vehicle it was also being hit repeatedly by gunfire from the guards and the Yakuza. The customer and his guards also fired at the Yakuza, hoping to be able to drive them off while the Yakuza themselves fired at everyone else while they tried to get to Fowler.

Recovering enough from the impact of the bullet Fowler got back into a kneeling position and fired his rifle towards where the customer cowered behind a small crate along with Doctor Dice. His burst missed the customer but one of the rounds that hit the crate penetrated all the way through to the other side with enough energy left over in it to also pass right through Doctor Dice and the man screamed for a moment as he collapsed.

"Got it!" Ramirez exclaimed as she was able to drag one of the briefcases from the car, sealing it shut before the money it held could spill out onto the floor. Then she handed the case to another member of the crew while she turned her attention to the second case.

The sound of squealing brakes heralded the arrival of the other car from the *Marlow* and the three occupants emerged from it with weapons in their hands that they fired at the Yakuza. Taken by surprise, three of the Yakuza fell to this gunfire before they could react and the remaining gangsters spread out further in search of positions that would give them cover from all the directions they were coming under fire from. One of them, the rider of the second motorcycle ran towards the van that had been used to transport the alien eggs from the *Marlow*, firing his sub machine gun one handed at one of the corporate guards as he went. The man then slid to a halt beside the open side door of the van where he crouched down while he paused to reload his weapon and it was just as he had taken a fresh magazine of ammunition in his hand that he heard a sound like something wet being prised apart. Looking around him he saw that the top of one of the alien eggs had just peeled itself open and something inside seemed to be moving. All of a sudden the facehugger contained inside the egg burst out and ran towards the nearby Yakuza. Instinctively the man pointed his weapon at the creature and pulled the trigger, only to realise that in his rush to reload he had yet to chamber a round from the new magazine. Hurriedly he pulled back on the bolt of his weapon but before he could try firing again the facehugger leapt at him, spreading its legs out wide. The facehugger landed against the front of the helmet the Yakuza wore and the tail coiled itself under the helmet around the man's throat. At the same time there was a hissing sound and smoke came from beneath the facehugger as the creature released a small amount

of the acidic compound it used for blood, using this to melt through the front of the helmet to reach the face of the man wearing it and allowing its spindly and multi jointed legs to push inside the helmet to wrap around the man's head. For a moment the Yakuza biker let out a scream but this was rapidly muffled as the facehugger pushed its proboscis into his mouth and down his throat. At the same time the creature released enough of the paralysing toxin it carried to disable the struggling Yakuza and the man fell to the floor and lay still.

Fowler swore when he saw this, having already witnessed such a thing happen to one of his men aboard the *Sulaco*.

"We need to get out of here quickly." he hissed before another burst of gunfire hit the car he and his crew were using for cover and the vehicle shifted slightly when one of its tyres was shredded.

"Well this thing isn't taking us anywhere." one of the other *Marlow* crewmen said as he felt the car move behind him.

"We need the van." Fowler said, looking over the car, "It's the only thing heavy enough to get us through those cars anyway." and he looked at where the exit from the warehouse was now blocked by the three cars that the Yakuza had arrived in.

"That means taking us right past that other egg." Ramirez pointed out, knowing that the second alien egg was prone to hatch at any moment if it was disturbed.

"Not if I go in through the driver's side door and bring it here." the man who had driven the van to the warehouse said and Fowler nodded at him.

"Go." he said and the man leapt out from behind the car and ran towards the van, firing one blast after another from his shotgun at the Yakuza and the customer's guards.

Meanwhile the Yakuza had also seen what had just happened to their comrade and Handa pointed towards him.

"Tanaka, Kichida. Go and help Ishii. Whatever that thing is, get it off him." he ordered and the two men just ran towards the van at the same time as its driver was returning to it. The driver fired his shotgun at the men and Kichida was knocked off his feet when the blast hit him, his concealed body armour preventing most of the pellets from entering his body, while the only one that missed the protective vest just grazed his arm. In response Tanaka fired his sub machine gun at the driver just as he turned around and a cluster of bloody holes appeared suddenly in his back before he fell, his shotgun falling from his grasp and sliding across the floor of the warehouse. Tanaka then helped Kichida back to his feet and the two men ran for where Ishii lay helpless. While Tanaka provided covering fire Kichida examined the facehugger that had attached itself to Ishii. This was made difficult by the motorcycle helmet that he wore, in melting through this with its acidic blood, the facehugger had become embedded within it and only its back was properly visible. Kichida attempted to simply rip the facehugger away from Ishii but the creature's grip was too tight and his attempt met with failure. In addition to retaining its grip on Ishii, the facehugger's tail also began to tighten around the man's neck and Kichida realised that he was not going to be able to use brute force to get it off.

The close proximity of the two Yakuza triggered the second alien egg to hatch as well and Tanaka saw the facehugger start to crawl out of it. Having seen what the first creature did to Ishii, he turned his weapon towards the newly hatched facehugger and fired just as the creature leapt through the air. The facehugger was not aiming for Tanaka and most of the bullets in the burst passed by it harmlessly but one passed through one of the facehugger's legs and severed it at the knuckle to blow off the tip. This caused some of its blood to spray out as it flew passed Tanaka and he screamed in pain as the corrosive fluid splashed across his face and into his eyes. Turning to see what was happening Kichida saw the facehugger coming towards him with its legs outstretched to its sides and its tail hanging beneath it. The Yakuza brought up his hands defensively and he caught facehugger before it could wrap its legs around his head, however the creature was still able to extend its proboscis towards his mouth and wrap its tail around his throat, coiling it tight and squeezing to cut off his breathing. Kichida continued to struggle, but unable to take in oxygen he weakened rapidly and the facehugger quickly pushed passed his hands, using its tail to drag itself to his face where it secured itself to his head and pushed its proboscis down his throat. The paralysing poison was then released and this finally brought Kichida's futile struggles to a stop.

"We need to move." Fowler said and he suddenly rushed out from behind the car towards the van, pausing only to grab the keys to the vehicle from its dead driver while his crew laid down covering fire that made sure neither the Yakuza or corporate guards could target him. Fowler then pulled open the door to the van and climbed inside, ducking down behind the dashboard when a bullet that could have come from almost anyone inside the warehouse passed through the windshield. Inserting the key and turning it, Fowler was relieved when the van's engine started without difficulty, "Get in!" he yelled.

"No!" the customer yelled when he realised that Fowler and his crew were about to leave with the money he had handed over for eggs that had hatched prematurely. Given the loss of these and the involvement of the Yakuza it was unlikely that he would be able to complete the deal to purchase the rest of the eggs Fowler claimed to have and, therefore the only way to salvage anything was to recover the money. However, the

moment that he leapt up from behind the crate he exposed himself to fire and Nakao promptly shot him, a cluster of bullet holes appearing across his torso.

With their leaders dead the two remaining corporate guards began to fall back. Having surveyed the warehouse carefully prior to the start of the meeting with Fowler they knew every way in and out and they moved in turn towards a fire exit at the rear of the building, alternating between moving and providing cover fire that ensured that the Yakuza could not simply run them down as they withdrew. At the same time Fowler put the van into reverse and backed up, turning the steering wheel so that the vehicle turned sharply and crashed into the car. This enabled the rest of his crew inside the warehouse to open the back doors of the van and leap inside before slamming them shut again.

"We're in!" Ramirez yelled.

"Hold on." Fowler told the people in the back of the van and, putting the van into a forward gear, he put his foot down hard on the gas pedal.

The van lurched forwards and a Yakuza who was unable to move out of the way in time was sent flying through the air as Fowler refused to slow down for him. He kept the pressure on the gas pedal even as the van struck one of the Yakuza's cars and there was a loud 'crash' at the moment of impact that was followed by a grinding sound as Fowler used the van's mass and engine power to push the car out of the way.

Not wanting Fowler or his gang to escape, the Yakuza tried to turn their full attention to the van but the other members of his crew from the tail car fired sustained bursts from their weapons that forced the gangsters to take cover. A number of rounds still hit the van though and its lightweight construction could not prevent these from passing right through, forcing its passengers to throw themselves to the floor as the bullets whizzed past overhead. One random round hit one of the passengers mid dive and he fell the rest of the way to the van's floor before lying still. The gunfire hit nothing vital of the van itself though and the van was able to push past the Yakuza cars and sped out of the warehouse, at which point the crew members from the tail car got back in their own vehicle and set off after it, the Yakuza firing futile bursts of gunfire at them as they fled.

"Enough." Handa ordered and the Yakuza ceased fire. Then he turned his attention to where Ishii and Kichida lay motionless, the alien parasites still attached to their faces, "What are those things?" he added.

"I don't know." Tanaka responded as he checked the two men, "But Ishii and Kichida are still alive."

"Then get them into the vehicles. Perhaps if we get them back to the mansion then they can be saved. Somebody let the oyabun know what has happened here."

"He will not be happy about this Handa." Nakao commented and Handa looked at him.

"Then just be thankful that it will be I who has to pay the price for failure." he replied.

3.

With Fowler having radioed ahead to warn of their return, the hatch to the *Marlow's* cargo hold opened as the two vehicles approached the ship carrying the survivors of the failed meeting. The two crew members he had left behind were waiting inside the hold with weapons ready just in case this was some sort of trap and as soon as the car followed the van into the hold Bennett threw the lever to close it again.

"What happened? How did it go?" he asked.

"It was an ambush." Ramirez answered as she disembarked from the van.

"The client double crossed us?" Bennett said.

"No." Fowler told him, "The Yakuza knew about the meet somehow. Everything was going just fine until they turned up in force and everything went to hell. We lost both eggs and the customer's dead so we don't have a buyer for the rest right now."

"At least we made it out with the cash captain." Ramirez pointed out and Fowler nodded.

"Yes, that will give us some breathing room while we set up another buyer but we need to get off Raijin. The Yakuza are bound to be coming after us. Besides which, if what we've been told about those aliens is true then I don't want to be on this planet when the creatures inside those Yakuza guys hatch out." he replied.

"Hatch out?" Bennett commented.

"Oh yeah, the reason we lost the eggs is that those Yakuza morons managed to make both hatch out and now they've got two guys serving as incubators for giant insect killing machines." Fowler told him, "So let's plug this back in and take off." then he reached into his pocket for the fusion ignition circuit he had removed from the *Marlow's* control systems to make sure that the ship was still there when he returned to the space port. However, his eyes widened when he took hold of the circuit and he swore as he removed it from his pocket to reveal the hole made by the bullet that had hit him. In addition to the hole where the bullet had passed through the material of the printed circuit board had cracked all around, breaking several of the copper tracks and caused numerous components to either crack as well or break off entirely.

"Now what do we do?" Hogg exclaimed.

"We buy a new one." Fowler told him, "And while we're waiting we make sure that no-one gets into this ship that shouldn't be here."

A squad of marines worked to load their equipment aboard the Conestoga-class attack transport *Almayer*. The mission brief for the expedition to Raijin did not include combat but it was standard procedure for even the most basic of missions to take along a full range of equipment.

"How's it going?" Williams asked as he walked up to Lawrence and Maddie as they supervised the loading procedure.

"We're on schedule to leave by twenty-hundred hours just like you wanted captain." Lawrence replied.

"But the loading of the ammunition is taking longer than it should." Maddie added.

"Who did you detail for that job?" Williams said.

"Gunn." Lawrence said, frowning, "I figured he could screw it up."

"Looks like you figured wrong." Williams said, "Go find him and find out what's taking him so long. Remind him that he can still be dishonourably discharged right up until the point where his term of service ends. In the mean time I'll be on the bridge if anybody needs me. I want to make sure the maintenance teams have been doing their job properly as well. No point getting all our kit aboard if the ship won't go."

"Okay, I'll get right on it." Lawrence said and he started to walk away, heading for the nearby ammunition store.

The ammunition store consisted of numerous armoured storage rooms located adjacent to the outer hull of Gateway station. These were designed so that any explosion inside one of them would be channelled through the outer hull while the blast doors remained sealed. Although this would undoubtedly result in any storage room where such a blast occurred being immediately decompressed and all of the contents being lost into space, it would ensure that the damage did not spread in a chain reaction that could threaten the structure of the entire station. Knowing exactly which of these storage units held the ammunition that Gunn was supposed to loading aboard the *Almayer*, Lawrence made his way straight to it and found the blast door open and the fork lift just inside. Lawrence was tempted to call out Gunn's name but then he had another idea instead and crept into the storage unit, looking around for any indication where Gunn was. Among all the pallets of ammunition for everything from small arms up to drop ships and main battle tanks there were no visual clues as to where Gunn had got to but Lawrence got a hint when he smelt the smell of tobacco smoke and he scowled. Walking quickly towards the source of the smell he rounded a pallet filled with air to surface missiles to find Gunn using his foot to put out a cigarette.

"Jeez gunny." Gunn said with a grin, "Can you believe someone was stupid enough to light up a cigarette

among all this lot? One slip and 'boom', we'd all be sucking vacuum."

"Is that the sort of stupid that makes someone think they can ignore their duties to take a cigarette break and they lie about it when they get caught red handed Gunn?" Lawrence snapped.

"Honest gunny I-"

"Secure that mouth Gunn!" Lawrence said, jabbing a finger at the marine, "You are a worthless waste of space and when this mission is over the corps is going to be well rid of you. Now get back on that forklift and get the ammo loaded aboard the *Almayer* because if we aren't ready to leave on time then I'm going to see to it that you spend what little time is left of your tour scrubbing every head between here and Beta Hydri with your toothbrush. Do you understand me marine?"

"Yes gunny." Gunn responded, standing at attention.

"Good. So get back on that forklift before I decide to make you move it all by hand." Lawrence told him sternly and then without waiting for a response he turned around and marched out of the storeroom.

Corporal Lewis and his co-pilot Corporal Thompson were already in the *Almayer's* bridge running the standard checks needed prior to the launch of a starship when Williams entered the room.

"Captain." Lewis said.

"Corporal Lewis. Corporal Thompson. How's she looking?" Williams responded as he walked over to the strike team's dropship crew.

"So far so good captain." Thompson answered, "The latest software updates were installed yesterday so we might want to double check that there aren't any emergency patches to it before we launch." and Williams smiled at the suggestion that improvements to the software that controlled every aspect of the *Almayer's* operations may in fact cause problems instead of solve them.

"We were just about to head down to the hangar to check the dropships." Lewis added.

"Very well. I'm just here to check the command systems anyway." Williams said, sitting down at the command console and activating it before the two corporals left the room. Meanwhile Williams called up the *Almayer's* main command system and began to check through the list of mission orders that had been provided to the ship's computer. These orders would guide the actions of the *Almayer's* computer while the crew were in hypersleep for the voyage from the Sol system to Beta Hydri. Travelling faster than light created massive time distortion aboard a starship and without being able to slow the ageing process to almost nothing the crew would all die of old age during the month of real time it took the *Almayer* to reach their destination. Therefore, it was essential that the computer could act on its own should any problems occur. However, the remote possibility that someone could upload a set of commands intended to make sure that the ship or crew never reached their destination meant that wise commanders would review them for themselves prior to departure. Any unusual or unexplained commands could then be flagged and either queried or, if necessary simply deleted.

Initially as far as Williams could tell, the orders issued to the *Almayer* for this mission consisted of just the standard package. These bound the ship to protect the lives of its crew and to respond to any distress signals it received along the way but other than that the ship was to remain at a constant speed and wake its occupants as soon as it reached Beta Hydri and it decelerated to sub light speed, thus eliminating the time distortion that the crew needed to be protected from. However, at the bottom of the list he found a non-standard command had been added, one that his USCM authorisation could not access even though he was the ship's commanding officer. To prevent a commanding officer from reviewing an order was highly irregular and Williams was just about to query this when he heard a woman's voice from behind him.

"Captain Williams." it said and he looked towards the doorway to see Agent Warren standing there with Maddie just behind her.

"Sorry about this." Maddie said, "I told her you were busy but she insisted."

"That's alright Maddie. Agent Warren do come in and take a seat. I need to tell you that there might be a slight delay to our departure while I check something out." Williams said.

"Is there a problem Captain Williams?" Warren asked as she sat down at the nearest console and crossed her legs.

"If we're a hypersleep tube short then I could share with you captain." Maddie suggested, smiling at Williams and he winced as Warren glanced at the android.

"No Maddie. There's an issue with the command system. There's a command that I can't access." Williams replied.

"It wouldn't happen to have the serial number one four six two eight zero would it?" Warren asked.

"Yes, why do you know what it is?" Williams responded.

"Can we have the room?" Warren said and Williams looked at Maddie again.

"Maddie could you leave us alone please? Oh and close the door." he said.

Maddie frowned, obviously displeased at being sent away but she could not refuse an order from Williams and so she stepped back out into the corridor outside the bridge and closed the door behind her.

"I'm sorry about Maddie." Williams said to Warren, "She's-

"She's a pleasure model?" Warren interrupted.

"How did you know?" Williams responded in surprise.

"I was warned about her captain. But even if I hadn't been I've encountered robots like her before. She looks too young to be a regular Marine Corps model and the way she tries to cling to you at all times makes it obvious. Is it true you won her in a card game?" Warren said and Williams nodded.

"To be fair at the time I just thought that Colonel Decker had got lucky in getting an android assigned to him that looked like her. I didn't realise that she was his personal property until I won her and she was delivered to me at home." Williams explained, "Just don't ask me to describe what happened then though." he added before Warren could reply.

"Don't worry, I won't. Now about this command code." she said.

"Yes, the reference number is the same as the one you just gave me. Do you know what it is?" Williams said.

"Yes, it's an FBI communications code. It will make sure that the bureau is copied in on the ship's mission logs and manifest. It's the only way that we can make sure that the chain of evidence remains solid for anything that we bring back. Examples of alien lifeforms for example." Warren told him.

"Seriously? The FBI wants to bring back some of those aliens to Earth. Have your bosses not read my reports about them or do they just have a desire to see most of the human race wiped out?" Williams exclaimed, horrified that anyone could want to bring living examples of the aliens he had faced aboard the *Sulaco* and then again on the moon LV-426 back to Earth itself.

"There's no need to worry captain. The Interstellar Commerce Commission's quarantine procedures will be followed to the letter. It's just that if we are going to bring a case against the crew of the *Marlow* then we will need to prove that they are in possession of the aliens you saw aboard the *Sulaco*. Since that was only known source of these creatures before you nuked it from orbit it means that we can connect the *Marlow's* crew to the operation on LV four two six. But only if we have an alien that we can show to the court, even if it is via a live video link. As soon as we're done with them the bureau will make sure that all the creatures are destroyed. Then the science boys can study the remains to their hearts' contents."

"Seems like it would be easier just to shoot down the *Marlow* with any aliens they still have onboard." Williams suggested.

"And how would we know if the crew had already dropped any of their cargo off anywhere else captain?"

Warren asked, smiling and Williams smiled back at her.

"Good point." he said, "Though I'm not happy about this secret command code. The *Almayer* may be being deployed under the authority of the FBI but I'm still responsible for the lives of everyone aboard."

"I'm afraid that it has to be that way captain. This mission won't just end with you dropping bombs from orbit. After we get back to Earth with the crew of the *Marlow* in custody federal prosecutors have to build a criminal case against them and even the slightest indication that the military has been able to interfere with evidence could see all our hard work thrown out of court. Is that what you want?"

"No, of course not. But the content of these commands could directly affect the operation of this ship. There is no such thing as being too paranoid when it comes to space travel. If this ship breaks down we could drift through space for decades before a salvage team happens to stumbled across us."

"Well you can try asking the Justice Department for clearance to see the contents of the order but even if the Attorney General does grant it, it'll take several days for a response to come back. We're talking about government bureaucracy here after all." Warren said and Williams nodded.

"Yeah, I get it." he replied, "Why just have one form to fill in when you can make someone fill in ten instead?" "Quite."

"Okay then, I'll trust that your top secret command won't interfere with the *Almayer*." Williams said.

"Good. Now I have a request for you Captain Williams."

"Go on."

"I'm aware that the colonial marines command and control system in combat provides you with live feeds from cameras carried by each marine. I'd like access to that feed." Warren told Williams.

"Of course, I can provide you with a copy."

"No captain, I want access to the live feed." Warren interrupted.

"Evidence again?" Williams asked and Warren nodded.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. No-one can claim that anything has been edited out of or into the footage if I have an original recording."

"Sure, I can do that. Of course it'll need a lot of bandwidth to live stream an entire team's worth of footage to you." Williams pointed out.

"I know, the Justice Department has thought of that though and my computer is quite capable of handling the data. I will need access to your network though." Warren said.

"I'll get Maddie on it." Williams told her and she winced.

"I was afraid you'd say that." she said.

"Don't worry. Maddie may be clingy but at least she follows any order I give her. It's part of her desire to please me that's built into her core programming." Williams said, "Now is there anything else you need to discuss before we depart?"

"No, I think that just about covers it." Warren answered.

"Good. Now have you flown interstellar before?"

"Worried I might not be able to take hypersleep captain? Don't worry, I've had my medical. I'm not going to have a heart attack when the stasis kicks in and out."

"That's good, though I hope you don't mind my marines staring at you in your underwear." Williams said.

"Don't worry captain, I'm a big girl and I'm not going commando. I can look after myself." Warren responded and then she smiled and added, "Though sometimes it's nice to have someone take care of certain things for me as well."

"Are we ready to depart yet Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence?" Williams asked as he walked across the *Almayer's* cargo hold to where Lawrence and Maddie stood together just inside the hatch leading from the ship to Gateway.

"All supplies present and correct captain, though we are currently one man short." Lawrence told him.

"Let me guess, Gunn." Williams said.

"Right first time." Lawrence replied and Williams sighed.

"The sooner he's out of the Corps, the better. If he took the effort he puts into avoiding doing his duty while just about doing enough to avoid being court-martialled into actually doing it he could have been a sergeant right now instead of a private." he said.

"True. I hear Agent Warren is aboard though." Lawrence commented, glancing at Maddie.

"Maddie been filling you in then?" Williams said.

"Sort of. I've been hearing all about the provocative way she crosses her legs." Lawrence answered and Williams frowned at Maddie.

"Provocative?" he said.

"Can you, or can you not tell me whether she was wearing underwear captain?" Maddie replied defensively and folding her arms in front of her.

"Yes but that's only because it happened to come up in conversation." Williams said.

"Really? Your conversation included a Federal Agent's underwear?" Lawrence commented, confused.

"Only in passing." Williams said, glancing at Lawrence before turning back towards Maddie, "Look Maddie, Agent Warren has asked for access to our operations network. I want you to hook her computer up."

"Sure. Give me the details of it and I'll add it to the list of cleared devices and she can log right on." Maddie said.

"No." Williams told her, "It's important that this is done right. I want you to hook her computer up yourself. She's in her cabin, now go and get her computer."

"Fine, I'll get right on it." Maddie responded before turning around and walking away.

"So what about Gunn?" Lawrence asked.

"Give him an hour and then log him as AWOL, but I'm not delaying our departure. It's going to take us a month to reach Raijin as it is and that's far too long for my liking. Too much can happen in that sort of time."

Though the Katana Club was the centre of Yakuza operations in Raijin's capital, the gangsters' planetary headquarters was located outside the city. Here the wealthy elite of the colony maintained large private estates. Known as 'the mansion' the estate owned by the Yakuza was located on an island in the centre of a large freshwater lake that was surrounded by several smaller islands, each of which had another structure built on it and was connected to the main island by an enclosed bridge. In keeping with their culture, was built in the style of the Azuchi-Momoyama period of Japanese history when the nation was unified by a period of civil war. This gave the mansion, including the outer buildings the look of an ancient fortress, access to which was limited to a large bridge from one of the smaller islands to the mainland, a landing pad located in one of the courtyards on the primary island or a dock also located on the main island. Of course all of these structures were designed to filter out the irritants in the atmosphere so that the occupants could move around freely without the need for protective masks or goggles.

Ishii and Kichida were brought to the mansion by road in the back of a van that drove across the bridge from the mainland and was then hurried to the mansion itself. The privacy of the mansion made it the ideal place for injured Yakuza to receive medical treatment from the gang's own doctors rather than sending them to ordinary hospitals that would report suspicious injuries such as gunshot or stab wounds to the police. Therefore, when the two Yakuza with alien facehuggers were taken from the back of the van they were carried straight into an infirmary equipped with the most modern medical technology available.

"What happened?" the Yakuza doctor asked as his patients were wheeled into the infirmary on stretchers and he began to examine the parasites attached to their faces.

"We were sent to take the man Fowler to the oyabun. We were expecting to interrupt a drug deal but he was attempting to sell these – things." Handa explained and he snarled, staring at the facehugger as he hissed the final word, "They hatched from some sort of eggs that had been stored in drums. We attempted to remove them in the warehouse but any attempt to interfere with them just caused them to tighten their grip. We stopped before they could choke these men."

"Doctor Goto, what are they?" Nakao added.

"I don't know. Though they are definitely not indigenous to Raijin." Goto answered and then he looked at one of his assistants, "Nurse, I require a sonic scalpel. If these creatures cannot simply be pulled off then I will have to cut them off instead."

One of the nurses handed Doctor Goto a bulky sonic scalpel as he covered his nose and mouth with a surgical mask.

"Be ready with a tray to catch the digit as it falls." Goto added and the nurse nodded before fetching a tray that she held close to Ishii's head as Goto leant in and the scalpel began to whirr as he activated its energy field. The sonic field created by the scalpel caused the molecules of the facehugger's surface tissue to vibrate rapidly until it split and there was a sudden spurt of green fluid that was accompanied by an acrid smell, "Nurse!" Goto snapped and the nurse moved the tray to catch this. However, the moment that the facehugger's blood hit the tray there was a hissing sound as it swiftly melted through the plastic of the tray. A few drops of the blood also splashed onto the nurse's hand and she let out a sudden shriek, dropping the melting tray to the floor of the infirmary where it landed with a clatter as she stepped back and stared in horror as her hand blistered where it had been touched by the blood.

"Quickly!" Goto snapped as several of the other Yakuza in the infirmary swore in surprise, "Get that hand under water." and he and his second nurse helped the injured one to a nearby sink where they placed her burned hand under the tap and turned on the water to irrigate the wound and hopefully dilute the facehugger's acidic blood sufficiently that it would cease burning.

"Look at the floor." Nakao said, pointing to where the tray had landed. There was little left of the plastic now, the facehugger's blood having dissolved most of it and in addition to this there was now a fist sized hole in the ceramic tiled floor itself where the blood had also managed to burn its way into the material.

It was at that moment that Ito appeared in the doorway of the infirmary in the company of the four women dressed as oiran who stood either side of him.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded, "Why have I been summoned here?"

"I apologise oyabun." Handa responded, bowing to his superior, "As you can see Fowler's business was not what we thought it was. We caught him trying to sell these creatures to another foreigner. We attempted to capture him but he was able to escape after Ishii and Kichida were attacked by the creatures. We brought them here so that Doctor Goto could remove them."

"Unfortunately I do not know if that is possible oyabun." Goto added as he approached Ito.

"Why not?" Ito asked.

"According to Handa attempting to prise the creatures free only results in them tightening their grip around their victims' necks. I have just attempted to cut one free but it appears that their blood, or whatever fluid their bodies contain is highly corrosive." Goto said.

"Then what do you suggest doctor?" Ito said and Goto looked back at his patients.

"The only other option would seem to be the administering of a suitable toxin to the creatures to either kill or anaesthetise them. Hopefully at that point we will simply be able to pull them free without risking the life of our people. It would help if the species could be identified though. There may be data available on how to remove them from a victim."

"Very well, you may continue. Until we have answers we cannot risk moving against Mister Fowler and his crew again. We have no idea how many more such creatures they may have available to them and I want a means of dealing with them before we risk another encounter." Ito said before he turned to Handa, "As for you, you were supposed to bring me Fowler, yet he escaped and now two of our own people hangs in the balance. You have failed us Handa."

"Yes oyabun. I understand." Handa replied and he held out one of his hands with just his little finger outstretched. All of a sudden one of the four women with Ito produced a traditional Japanese knife, or tanto, and with one swift movement she severed the finger in punishment.

4.

Ito left Doctor Goto to try and identify the alien parasites attached to the faces of the two Yakuza as well as monitor their condition. Despite Ito having no official duty to the two incapacitated men, the nature of the Yakuza meant that he still insisted on receiving regular updates about the two men and he was relieved to see that appearances aside, the men appeared to be in good health. It was obvious that the facehuggers were keeping the men alive by providing them with oxygen and this only served to deepen the mystery surrounding them.

Between making his reports to Ito, the doctor studied every source of information he could locate about the alien lifeforms encountered by humans but he could find nothing even remotely similar to the facehuggers. He knew that it was possible that they were of a species only discovered recently, in which case they may not yet have been properly catalogued and that would explain why they were considered so valuable that the crew of the *Marlow* would be selling them. However, this presented a problem of its own. Goto knew that he could put out a public request for information but in doing so he would undoubtedly draw unwanted attention to the Yakuza here at the mansion. As he tried to solve this dilemma he looked up from his desk and through the window into the isolation room where Ishii and Kichida lay and his eyes widened when he saw that although they were both exactly where he had left them, neither of them now had a facehugger attached to them.

Leaping to his feet, Goto ran to the window of the isolation room and looked inside, trying to determine where the facehuggers had got to. With no signs of the alien parasites he ran back to his desk and picked up the intercom handset.

"This is Doctor Goto in the infirmary. I need four men down here with weapons immediately." he said before hanging up without waiting for a reply. Then he ran back to the window and looked into the isolation room again, hoping that the facehuggers had not managed to escape and were now at large in the mansion but unwilling to go inside alone and unarmed to find out. However, when the armed Yakuza he had requested arrived they were not alone.

"Doctor Goto, what is happening?" Ito demanded, having been alerted to the request.

"Look oyabun." Goto responded, pointing through the glass, "The creatures are no longer attached to our men."

"Where are they?" Ito asked.

"I don't know oyabun. That is why I summoned these men. We need to make sure that they have not found a way to escape." Goto answered.

"Is the room not sealed?" Ito said.

"Against contamination, yes. But these creatures are something different. They may be able to break through our quarantine barriers, especially considering their ability to release acid that can eat through stone." Goto pointed out and Ito looked at the four armed men who had accompanied him.

"Get in there. Find those creatures." he ordered.

Goto rushed to the door into the isolation room while the four men drew the pistols they were armed with and opened it, allowing them to enter the room ahead of him. Then he closed the door behind himself to make sure that the facehuggers could not use it to escape if they were still present.

Holding their pistols out in front of themselves, the four armed Yakuza spread out and began to search the isolation room for the missing facehuggers. Having all seen how the creatures could easily incapacitate a man they moved cautiously, making sure that as they peered into all the recesses of the room their pistols were ready to fire. Meanwhile Goto rushed to the two men that still lay motionless on the treatment beds and checked their vital signs. Thankfully both men were still quite clearly alive but they remained in a comatose state and unresponsive as Goto studied them.

All of a sudden there was a cry of alarm and a pistol shot rang out, causing all of the other Yakuza in the room to turn and point their weapons in the direction of the man who had just fired.

"Get back from there." Goto exclaimed when he saw that the man who had just fired his weapon was pointing it behind a row of compressed gas cylinders. Had the bullet penetrated any of them then the blast could in theory kill everyone in the room.

"It's alright doctor. I killed it." the man responded as Goto hurried across the isolation room to see what he had found. Sure enough the corpse of one of the missing facehuggers was behind the gas cylinders but looking at it Goto did not think that the armed Yakuza was responsible for its death.

"No." he said, crouching down to get a closer look at the dead facehugger. Taking a pen from his pocket he poked the tip into the entry wound visible on the top of the creature and then withdrew it, studying the tip, "This creature was already dead." he said out loud.

"How can you be certain doctor?" Ito asked from outside the room.

"Because the acid it uses for blood has been neutralised." Goto said, taking hold of the facehugger's tail and pulling it away from where it had been when it was shot. Just as he suspected the only damage to the floor came from where the bullet had exited the facehugger, whereas there was no sign of corrosion.

"Doctor, the other one is here." another of the Yakuza called out, kicking a bin marked 'MEDICAL WASTE ONLY' aside to reveal the second missing facehugger and like the first this appeared to be dead. To demonstrate the point the Yakuza reached down and picked up the creature by its tail and allowing it to hang limply in his grasp.

"They are both dead oyabun." Goto told Ito.

"What about our men?" Ito asked in reply.

"Their condition is unchanged. However, now that I can examine the creatures properly the chance of finding a treatment are much better." Goto answered and Ito nodded.

"You may use the one that is already damaged doctor. I want the other left intact if possible. It is obviously valuable and someone may still be interested in buying it."

"Yes oyabun." Goto said, bowing his head to his superior before Ito turned to leave.

Although Goto's scientific curiosity meant that he was keen to study the dead facehugger, his first priority was to his patients and so after Ito left the infirmary he began by examining Ishii and Kichida. Although neither man showed any signs of outward injury, Goto's handheld tissue scanner suggested that there was an unidentifiable mass now present in each man's chest cavity. Goto's suspicion was that these had broken off the facehuggers when they detached themselves. It seemed too much of a coincidence that this had happened to both men for it to be an accident and so this suggested that the purpose of the facehuggers had been to implant this mass within the two men. However, in order to be sure Goto decided to perform a more detailed scan using the higher resolution body scanner he had available to him.

"Nurse, help me get this man into the body scanner." Goto told the nurse who had just finished placing the two dead facehuggers in secure containers to protect them until the doctor could examine them.

"Yes doctor." she replied and between them Goto and the nurse wheeled Ishii over to the larger medical scanner that was built into one wall of the infirmary. They were just about to slide him inside when all of a sudden Kichida let out a gasp from behind them and as they spun around they saw that he had suddenly sat upright.

"What happened?" Kichida asked, recognising his surroundings as he looked around the infirmary.

"Kichida, what is the last thing you remember?" Goto asked as he rushed to examine the man and Kichida tried to remember what had happened before he woke up in the mansion.

"We were at a warehouse." he said, frowning, "We had gone there to bring back the man Fowler but we interrupted a meeting. He was selling his drugs to someone. No wait, it wasn't drugs. There was something inside a pair of drums, something that fell out and attacked Ishii. I saw it, I-" and then Kichida coughed, raising his hands to cover his mouth instinctively and when he lowered them again his eyes widened as he saw the blood splashed across his palms, "Doctor what is-" he began before he suddenly began to convulse and Goto caught him before he could fall to the floor and injure himself. Kichida's convulsions became stronger and he screamed in pain as Goto and the nurse attempted to wrestle him back down onto his bed. "Nurse I need a sedative. Quickly." Goto ordered before a sudden swing of Kichida's arm knocked the woman away from him and she let out a cry of pain as she fell to the floor. Goto was just turning to see whether she was injured or not when there was the sound of tearing flesh and a large splash of blood appeared on Kichida's shirt at the base of his ribcage. Kichida screamed again and he slipped from Goto's grasp to land on the floor beside the nurse who scrabbled back from him. Kichida rolled onto his back and screamed once more as his torso burst open and sprayed blood all around him, some of it catching both Goto and his nurse. It was the nurse that then let out a scream, but this was not one of pain, it was of horror as a creature that looked like an eyeless eel tore its way out through Kichida's chest and shirt. Not wanting to let this chestburster escape Goto lunged towards it with both his hands outstretched to take hold of it.

However, the blood coating the creature prevented him from getting a good grip on it and as he tried to tighten his hold the chestburster wriggled free and in the process sang its tiny yet razor sharp teeth into one of Goto's fingers, severing the digit just as effectively as Ito's oiran had cut off one of Handa's little fingers.

Now it was Goto's turn to scream as he let go of the chestburster and clutched at the stump of his missing finger. This then gave the creature all the opportunity it needed to suddenly race across the floor, leaving a trail of blood behind it before it vanished from sight beneath a desk set against a wall.

"Find Mister Ito." Goto shouted at the terrified nurse, "Tell him that we have a problem."

5.

Warren woke with a queasy feeling in her stomach and she blinked at the brightness of the lights in the hypersleep compartment aboard the *Almayer*. Rolling over she held onto the side of the hypersleep tube she had just spent the last month inside as she leant over it and vomited onto the floor of the compartment. Only then did she notice the pair of feet that were now covered with what had until a few seconds earlier been the contents of her stomach and she looked up to see Gunn standing in front of her in his underwear and glaring at her angrily.

"Oh, err, sorry." she said, "Private Gunn isn't it?"

"Bitch." Gunn snapped back at her, snarling as he stepped backwards and shook his feet one at a time to try and get the vomit off them, "We should have left you frozen and done this without you."

"Don't mind Gunn miss." a voice said from behind Warren and she looked around to see another marine emerging from his hypersleep tube, "He's just an asshole. This is his last drop before he leaves the Corps."

"Yeah," a female marine added as she stretched after getting out of her tube, "the recruiting sergeant didn't even ask him to re-up."

"Enough of that." the team's sergeant called out, "Agent Warren is our guest and she doesn't need to know about that Holland. However, since you and Wesson are so keen to be helpful one of you can grab a mop, the other a bucket and you can clean up that puke before breakfast."

"Sergeant Stoner," Warren said, "perhaps I should-"

"Not at all Agent Warren. Hard work makes hard marines." Stoner interrupted. Then he looked around at the other marines as they got out of their hypersleep tubes. Although the *Almayer's* life support systems had reactivated more than an hour before the hypersleep system brought the marines out of stasis to ensure that the temperature and air quality were adequate there were still complaints about both from several marines, "Quit complaining." Stoner ordered, "Captain Williams is checking that we're in the right place and when he gets back I want all of you jarheads dressed and in the mess hall."

"Did he take the love doll with him sarge?" another marine called out as he looked around as if trying to find Maddie, "Because if he did he might be a while and I'm hungry."

"You show some respect Garand." Stoner responded, pointing at the marine.

"True though sarge." a female marine added.

"That goes for you too Colt." Stoner told her.

Williams had dressed quickly after being woken from stasis and accompanied by Lawrence and Maddie made his way to the bridge. The *Almayer's* computer had guided the starship through interstellar space using star patterns to navigate and now a repeating radio beacon coming from the system's second planet confirmed that they had reached the Beta Hydri system.

"There it is. Raijin." Williams said while he and Lawrence stood behind Maddie looking over her at the display screen in front of the console she sat at.

"Will they have seen us yet?" Lawrence asked.

"Probably." Maddie answered, "We dropped to sub light speed two hours ago and we're only half a light hour out. We'll have shown up on their lidar more than an hour ago. Plus the *Almayer* decided that since we're flying in civilian shipping lanes we should run with our transponder active. They should know where and who we are by now although I don't see any attempt to make direct contact by them in the log. Our ETA in orbit is five hours."

"Do we call ahead?" Lawrence said, looking at Williams.

"Not yet." he replied, "We're too far out for real time radio contact and I don't see the point in using the FTL system just to say 'hello'. Maddie I want you to stay here and monitor communications. Let me know as soon as we hear from traffic control. We'll leave the *Almayer* in orbit while we take a drop ship down to the surface. Make sure they know that."

"Sure." Maddie said, nodding.

"Perhaps I ought to stay as well." Lawrence suggested, "If the Marlow's still down there and the crew finds out that we're on the way they could try to make a run for it whether traffic control gives them clearance to leave or not. Maddie can handle most ship's operations but she can't order the *Almayer* to open fire on a manned starship."

"Good point." Williams said, "I'll have Lewis come up and take over after he's eaten so you can get some breakfast as well." and Lawrence winced.

"Damn." he said, smiling, "Just when I thought I'd be able to avoid eating the crap served in the mess long enough to get a proper meal down on Raijin."

"No such luck." Williams responded.

Even though the current crew of the *Almayer* were not expected to spend long aboard the starship while not in hypersleep Agent Warren had been assigned a private cabin and she was sat on her bunk checking the contents of the suitcase she had brought with her when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in." she called out and the door opened to let Williams enter the cabin.

"You weren't at breakfast so I thought I'd bring you this." he said, holding out the plate of food he had brought with him.

"Thanks. Though the Marine Corps' food is enough to put me off eating ever again." Warren said.

"Yes, we can build starships like the *Almayer* that can travel between the stars but we just can't make synthetic cornbread that doesn't taste like plastic. Sorry about that."

"Well at least I won't have Private Gunn leering at me." Warren said as she took the plate and then took a bite out of the simulated cornbread, "Actually I think that creep might actually have been able to keep my mind off how bad this tastes."

"Lawrence is planning on getting something as soon as we reach Raijin. They have real food." Williams told her.

"How far out are we?" Warren asked.

"We should enter orbit in about four hours. Then we'll have you on the surface a couple of hours after that." Williams answered and Warren smiled.

"That's enough time for me to take a shower then." she said, "Could you show me how it works Captain Williams?"

"There are instructions printed on the wall in the bathroom." Williams replied.

"That wasn't what I meant." Warren said.

Despite the marines' mission to Raijin not being considered a combat assignment the strike team was still equipped with the full range of weaponry it normally would be and this included not only a pair of dropships that could get them from the orbiting *Almayer* to the planet's surface but also an M577 wheeled armoured personnel carrier. Following well practised drills, the marines embarked aboard the vehicle and Williams himself sat at the tactical command station from where he could monitor the video feeds from all of his marines' head mounted cameras at once.

"So where do I sit?" Warren asked as she followed the marines into the APC.

"Down here with me." Maddie responded from one a pair of seats located just forward of the side mounted hatchway, "Where I can keep an eye on you." and she smiled at the Federal agent.

"I'll make sure you're secure." Lawrence added as he closed the hatch and as Warren sat down he lowered the safety restraint over her and locked it in position before taking a seat on the other side of the hatch beside Stoner and pulling his own safety restraint into place. Then he looked towards the front of the APC where the driver was visible, "All set Owen. Get us aboard the dropship."

"Yes gunny." the driver responded and the sound of the APC's engine grew louder as Owen revved the engine and drove it forwards, positioning it directly in front of the open cargo lift of the dropship Lewis and Thompson were in the advanced stages of preparing for flight before he reversed it onto the lift. The moment that the APC was in position its wheels were automatically locked in place so that the fourteen and a half tonne vehicle could not suddenly shift inside the dropship hold while in flight with catastrophic results.

"APC is secure. Sealing the hold now." Lewis reported from the dropship's cockpit and the lift rose up, sealing itself against the underside of the dropship's fuselage. The dropship itself was then moved forwards in the cradle that supported it above the hangar floor until it was over the inner hatch of the launch bay which automatically slid open so that the craft could be lowered inside.

"Outer launch doors opening. Stand by for drop in five. Four." Lewis said, his voice audible to all of the marines.

"I don't need to do anything do I?" Warren asked.

"No." Maddie replied, "You probably won't even notice a thing."

"Two. One." Lewis continued and then all of a sudden the entire APC lurched and Warren felt as if the entire contents of her stomach were about to leave through her mouth for the second time that day as the dropship was released from the *Almayer* and fell towards the surface of Raijin. Seconds after being released its engines flared brightly as they came to life and the dropship shot forwards, "We're clear. I hope nobody forgot anything."

The dropship hit Raijin's upper atmosphere just a few seconds later and immediately the interior of the craft began to shake again

"Is it always this bad?" Warren said as she crossed her arms in front of her so that she could grip the safety restraint.

"Usually it's a bit better. Sometimes it's worse." Lawrence told her.

"Corporal Lewis are there any air pockets you aren't aiming for?" Williams asked as even he began to feel

disorientated by the violent motion inside the APC.

"Sorry about that captain. There's a lot of electrical activity in the upper atmosphere. We should clear it at about ten thousand metres. We'll have comms with the surface in about three minutes." Lewis responded. "I suppose you must get used to this after a while." Warren said as she pressed her head back against the padding of her seat in the hope that it would make the dropship's lurching

The dropship and the APC inside it continued to shake violently as they descended. At first the disruption caused by atmospheric entry kept the dropship out of contact with both the *Almayer* and the surface but as soon as this subsided and the dropship entered level flight the tactical readouts in front of Williams showed him the signal from the traffic control beacon on the surface.

"Captain we've just got our orders from the surface. We're to follow the secondary beacon ten clicks from the space port." Lewis told Williams on a closed channel so that he was the only one in the APC to hear the message.

"They're not setting us down at the space port itself?" Williams replied and behind him Warren frowned.

"What's going on? Why aren't we going to the space port?" she asked, looking at Lawrence. However, all he could do was shrug.

"Beats me." he answered.

"No captain." Lewis said to Williams, "The secondary beacon is military so it looks like they're putting us down at the local garrison."

Williams then turned towards Warren.

"Agent Warren did your superiors mention anything about the local military?" he asked her.

"No." Warren replied, sounding concerned, "Captain I'm supposed to be meeting with members of local law enforcement. I wasn't even told that there is a standing garrison here on Raijin."

"Well it looks like there is and we're heading right towards them." Williams said.

"We're coming through the turbulence now people. Things should get a whole lot smoother from here on."

Thompson reported from the cockpit and as she had promised the shaking suddenly ceased, "ETA to surface beacon is nine minutes."

Had this been a combat drop Lewis would have unfolded the dropship's wings and deployed its missile bays. However, given that the colony existed under the authority of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the marines' mission here was more diplomatic than military he kept the craft's weapons stowed and instead concentrated on just following the beacon while avoiding the civilian air traffic over the capital city.

The garrison structures were easy to identify when Lewis saw them ahead of the dropship. All of the buildings looked to be heavily armoured bunkers with sloping sides and heavily armoured doorways. Extending upwards from the roof of one of the buildings was a squat tower with windows all around the top level that had a dense cluster of communication antennas sticking out of its own roof.

"USCM dropship this is Raijin garrison tower." a voice with an obvious English accent said as the dropship approached the garrison buildings, "You are cleared for landing on pad two. Lighting it up now." and then a ring of lights appeared on the ground around an area of flat tarmac.

"Copy that tower. We're on our way in." Lewis responded before switching back to the internal intercom, "We have clearance to land. ETA two minutes." he said.

"Deploying cargo lift." Thompson added from behind him and as Lewis lowered the dropship's landing gear Thompson lowered the cargo lift, exposing the APC it carried.

A figure emerged from one of the buildings close to the landing pad and walked over to stand by the edge of it before raising a pair of illuminated batons. The figure then began to wave these to indicate to Lewis how to adjust his approach so that when the dropship set down it was at the very centre of the pad. At the last moment the figure dropped into a crouch so that the downward blast from the dropship's engines did not knock him over as it landed.

"We're down. Clamps released." Thompson said as she disengaged the clamps holding the APC in place and as soon as he saw that the vehicle was now free to move Owen accelerated. As he drove past the crouching landing officer Owen saw the man pointing towards one of the nearby structures where a large doorway now stood open. It was obvious that this was large enough to admit the APC and so Owen drove towards it.

The doorway gave the APC access to an airlock of sorts, although there was no pumping in or out of air when the outer door closed, instead the inner door opened straight away to reveal a garage that contained a number of military vehicles ranging from motorcycles and utility vehicles up to a pair of tracked fighting vehicles similar in configuration to the marines' wheeled APC. There were several people in in uniforms marked with the Union Flag of the United Kingdom at work on some of these vehicles and as Owen brought the APC to a halt it was approached by another in a British military uniform along with a woman in ordinary civilian clothes and a man in a dark uniform that was marked 'POLICE' in both English and Japanese lettering.

"Looks like we've got a welcoming committee captain." Owen said and Williams looked at a monitor that

showed him the feed from an external camera.

"Then I guess we should go and introduce ourselves." he said, "Agent Warren I believe that this is your show from here on in." and he undid his safety harness.

Williams and Warren exited the APC with Maddie and Lawrence behind them, with the strike team itself remaining inside the vehicle.

"Agent Warren I presume." the plain clothed woman said, smiling at Warren, "I'm Aiko Hino from the Colonial Prosecution Office. Please allow me to introduce Lieutenant Eto of the Raijin Police Service and Captain Hyde of the Royal Marines."

"Thank you Miss Hino. This is Captain Williams of the United States Colonial Marine Corps. His strike team is acting as my escort for this mission." Warren said.

"Captain Williams." Hyde said in greeting.

"Captain Hyde." Williams responded, "I hope our presence isn't infringing on your operation."

"Not at all captain." Hyde said, smiling, "My platoon are just caretakers really. This is a munitions storage facility and we keep the lights on here for the Royal Navy and Imperial Space Defence Force ships that come past on their way along the arm towards the more newly settled worlds."

"The action against the *Marlow* will be handled by Lieutenant Eto and his tactical team." Hino added.

"That's right. My men have been training based on the standard layout for ships of the *Marlow's* class." Eto said, "We can be through the hatches and secure the ship in under ten minutes assuming there is minimal resistance."

"And if there is resistance?" Maddie asked and Eto smiled.

"Then we will overcome it in about an extra five minutes based on what we know about their crew complement." he said.

"What about the aliens that might be aboard? Have you planned for that?" Lawrence said.

"Ah, no. That's the one thing we couldn't plan for." Eto admitted, "The information about numbers and capability was too vague."

"I'll have my platoon there ready to back the tactical team if necessary." Hyde said, "Dealing with hostile alien lifeforms is a military matter after all."

"I'd like my strike team to join them as well." Williams said to Warren.

"I think I can arrange that." Hino said before Warren could respond, "The order to deploy military force won't specify what nationality those troops have to be."

"Very well, in that case Captain Williams' section will join with the Royal Marines." Warren said.

"Did you have any trouble keeping the *Marlow* in port?" Williams asked, "I've got the *Almayer* on standby in orbit just in case she tries to make a run for it."

"There's no need to worry about that, we've made sure that the *Marlow* is going nowhere." Hino said.

"How?" Warren said.

"It appears that the *Marlow* is having technical difficulties." Eto told her, "Space port control received a request for a replacement master fusion ignition circuit from her. It was a simple matter to tell them that the main processor was out of stock and that we needed to wait for a shipment."

"It's not true of course but fortunately no-one else has requested that part so we haven't had to hold up on genuine repairs. It does mean that we haven't had to invent any reasons for keeping ships on the ground though, which would have been plan B." Hino added.

"In that case here are the details of the accusations against the crew of the *Marlow*." Warren said and she handed a thumb drive to Hino.

"Excellent. I'll get this sent over to the court immediately. We have a judge waiting to issue a warrant authorising the raid on the *Marlow* as soon as this is received." Hino said as she took the drive, "With any luck we'll be able to begin in under two hours."

6.

The amount of space needed for even a relatively small starship such as the *Marlow* to land left so much open ground around the ship that it was impossible to approach without being seen, therefore Eto and his tactical team had had to use some imagination when planning the first stage of their operation – getting to the ship undetected. Instead of attempting to make their approach invisible, the police tactical team would instead disguise it as something innocuous. There were many ground vehicles in use at the space port for servicing starships or space port equipment and so it was decided that the first wave would approach the *Marlow* using one of these. The chosen vehicle was not large enough for the entire team to fit inside so a running board had been added to the exterior of the vehicle on the side that would face away from the *Marlow*, along with a rail that the excess team members could be attached to as the vehicle drove across the space port as if it was making for a vessel on the far side of the ship. At the last moment this vehicle would turn towards the *Marlow* and come to a halt so that the police tactical team could disembark, rush to the nearest hatch and gain entry to the ship. The second wave would begin their approach as soon as the first disembarked, the point at which it would be too late to abort the raid. This would be an airborne assault that landed a smaller unit commanded by Eto himself on the *Marlow's* upper hull close to a hatch that would allow them easy access to the vessel's bridge.

Both the USCM and Royal Marines standing by to support the Raijin police tactical team had their armoured vehicles waiting by the side of a road close to the space port, the Royal Marines deploying in a pair of tracked fighting vehicles that were heavier than the wheeled M577 Williams and he men we in. This spot was chosen for being close enough to be able to reach the *Marlow* in a few minutes but still far enough away that the crew of the ship would not notice their presence. Meanwhile a command post had been set up in the space port control tower and from here both Hino and Warren could watch the feeds from the tactical team in real time just as Williams could do with his troops from his APC.

“Team one, commence operation.” Eto's voice broadcast from the helicopter circling the space port and immediately the space port servicing vehicle began to move towards the unsuspecting *Marlow*.

The speed of this vehicle was kept low, not only to avoid arousing suspicion of it but also so that the police officers riding on the running board would not be at risk of serious injury if their safety lines broke and they fell from it. Each of the tactical team wore identical black uniforms that included full face covering respirators for protection from gas as well as the atmosphere of Raijin and lightweight body armour. Most of them also carried a pulse rifle, although rather than the M41A pattern rifles carried by Williams' marines these were the British built version that also equipped the Royal Marines, a bullpup design that fired a slightly smaller 8.1mm round while a small number instead carried shotguns or launchers designed to fire incapacitating gas canisters.

As planned the service vehicle drove across the space port in full view of the *Marlow* without acting in any way out of the ordinary until it was in close proximity to the starship at which point it turned to drive beneath the hull before coming to a halt,

“Go! Go! Go!” the team leader told his men and from the command post Hino and Warren watched the team deploy from the service vehicle, the feed being relayed on to Williams and Hyde sat at their own tactical command posts in their armoured vehicles. This system enabled all of them to see the police tactical team rush up to the hatch of the *Marlow* and use an electronic lock breaker to override the usual locking mechanism and open it, enabling them to enter the ship unopposed.

At the same time the helicopter carrying Eto and his second tactical team approached from overhead and descended over the *Marlow* until it touched down on the starship's hull. Eto's tactical team immediately disembarked from the helicopter and rushed to the chosen hatch where another electronic lock breaker was used to force it open and all the team were able to enter the ship before the helicopter rose back into the air again.

Had the crew of the *Marlow* been entirely unsuspecting then the police assault teams would likely have achieved total surprise in their raid. However, with Fowler having ordered a round the clock watch to be maintained the crew was alerted as soon as the space port service truck swerved beneath the ship's hull and the first team disembarked. This meant that although they did not have enough time to get into the best defensive positions, Fowler and his crew were already arming themselves as the police forced open the hatches of the *Marlow*.

The team that entered through the lower air lock immediately spilt into two smaller units, one of them heading towards the engineering section while the other turned towards the *Marlow's* hold to secure its lethal cargo and it was here that the police met the first resistance. Given the combination of value and danger of the alien eggs, Fowler had made sure that at least two of his crew were in the hold with weapons suitable for dealing with either unexpectedly hatched facehuggers or uninvited guests. Therefore, when the warning

came that the ship was being boarded the two men in the hold at the time were able to quickly take cover and were prepared when the police came through the door. Armed with a sub machine gun and a shotgun, the two men opened fire the moment that the first armoured police officer appeared. The burst from the sub machine gun slowed the police officer before the shotgun took him off his feet, his life saved by the body armour he wore.

“Contact.” the team leader radioed back to the command centre even though the live feed from the cameras his men wore had already shown them what was happening. Then addressing the crewmen he shouted, “Police! Put down your weapons and surrender.”

The crew of the *Marlow* had been expecting to be attacked by Yakuza gangsters rather than the police and initially they had assumed that their rival criminals were merely using police uniforms to sow confusion about who was attacking. Shooting at police officers was more serious than a gunfight between rival gangsters but the simple fact that the police chose to shout out a warning instead of simply returning fire indicated to the crewmen that they were not Yakuza. However, by this point it was too late to turn back on having already fired on them and they fired again as more of the police team rushed into the hold and began to spread out. Responding to being fired at, the police assault team returned fire and the explosive rounds fired by their pulse rifles ripped through a set of drums that one of the crewmen was using for cover. Seeing the drums he was hiding behind torn open to expose the alien eggs inside panicked the crewman and afraid that one of the eggs could hatch at any moment he retreated, firing his shotgun towards the police as rapidly as he could work the slide.

“Where the hell are you going?” the other crewman yelled at the fleeing man before another shot rang out, followed by the sound of a bullet exploding and the running crewman fell, his body tumbling across the cargo hold floor as fragments of the bullet and bone ripped through his internal organs. Although he was now facing a team of six heavily armed police officers alone the surviving crewman did not surrender. Having shot at them he knew that he would be facing serious criminal charges if he surrendered and his mind turned instead to escape. However, before he could attempt to flee there was more gunfire only this time from another hatchway as Ramirez and another member of the *Marlow's* crew arrived to help defend the ship. Armed with rifles, both of them fired at the police and one of the officers fell with a hole right through his armoured vest before the other officers turned their attention to the two new arrivals.

“The cops are in the hold.” Ramirez said into her radio while her comrade fired another burst at the police team.

Before Fowler could respond to the signal from Ramirez an oval of flame sudden burned through the door to the bridge as Eto and his team used a thermite breaching charge to break in more quickly than an electronic lock pick would allow and Fowler and the other two crewmen present turned around and opened fire, spraying bullets randomly through the hole. Eto had expected such a response, however and rather than have his men attempt to rush the bridge he had his team wait in the corridor. The tactical team still had to duck though so that they presented a smaller target as bullets ricocheted off the bulkhead on the opposite side of the corridor while Eto plucked a stun grenade from his webbing and primed it before tossing it through the hole in the door. A few seconds later there was a loud 'boom' from within the bridge as the stun grenade went off, producing enough light and sound to disorientate the occupants.

“Go!” Eto ordered and the first of his men, a police officer armed with a shotgun, leapt through the hole in the door. The officer moved away from the door as quickly as possible, clearing the way for Eto himself to follow him through. Joined by the other two members of their team, Eto and his men quickly spread out around the bridge while Fowler and his crew were still too disorientated to be able to resist. Organising themselves into pairs Eto's team secured the three members of the *Marlow's* crew that were present before Eto activated his radio again.

“The bridge is secure,” he broadcast and he smiled as he looked at the still dazed and confused Fowler before adding, “and we we have the captain in custody.”

“Something's wrong on the bridge.” Ramirez said to the man standing beside her as he retreated out of the doorway just before several rifle rounds came through it.

“Should we go take a look?” the man asked.

“No, if Fowler couldn't hold the bridge then we've lost the ship. I think it's time we got out of here.” Ramirez replied, “You get the main door open and I'll cover you.” then she leant through the doorway herself and fired a short burst towards the police team that had been advancing towards their position that forced them to take cover, “Go!” she snapped.

The man with Ramirez then ran through the doorway, taking advantage of the opportunity to sprint towards the controls for the main cargo loading hatch while the police were pinned down. However, even though Ramirez fired more short bursts of suppressive fire at the police they were too widely spread out for her to be able to keep them all pinned down on her own and calling out the other man in the hold would have alerted

the police to what she was planning. This allowed one of the police officers to drop to the floor where he was concealed from Ramirez' view by a cluster of the drums that held the alien eggs and he fired a single shot that hit the running man in the back.

Ramirez paused her shooting when she saw the other crewman killed and a police officer took advantage of this to launch a gas canister towards the doorway she was using for cover. The low velocity round struck the wall beside the doorway and bounced back just over a metre before it landed on the cargo hold floor and then burst open to release a number of pellets that began to vaporise immediately to produce a thick white cloud of disabling gas. Ramirez began to cough and found herself blinded as her eyes watered uncontrollably and she struggled to breathe. Letting her weapon drop so that only its sling kept it from falling to the floor, Ramirez reached out blindly and felt for the controls to the air tight door right in front of her. Then as soon as she felt them she pressed down hard to close it, preventing any more gas from getting out of the hold. This did nothing about the gas that had already reached her but now at least she could retreat down the corridor and get out of the cloud before breaking into a run and heading for the nearest air lock so that she could try and get off the *Marlow*.

While Ramirez was making her escape the crewman left behind in the hold cowered behind a set of drums and checked his weapon. The magazine was still half full but he had no spares, meaning that he would soon be defenceless. He looked towards the bodies of the two men killed making for the main cargo hatch, wondering whether he could at least get as far as one of them to recover their weapon and ammunition when his own ran out. However, before he could make a decision on whether or not to try there was another burst of gunfire from the police that struck the drum beside him. As had happened to several other drums struck by gunfire it was ripped open along with both the alien egg it contained and also the facehugger inside that. One of the explosive rounds detonated inside the unhatched facehugger and the explosion produced a spray of the creature's acidic blood that splashed not only onto several of the other drums but also across the crewman, catching him in the face.

From across the hold the police heard the man scream out in agony and saw him suddenly get to his feet and stagger back from the drums with his hands clamped over his face where he had been burned. The damage to the nearby drums was enough that one of the eggs inside them was able to sense the crewman's movement and it began to open.

"Watch that egg!" Williams exclaimed when he saw it opening on the camera feed. His warning was relayed in real time to the assault team and while they were advancing on the injured crewman one of them turned towards the opening egg and took aim right as the facehugger it contained was starting to emerge. Squeezing his trigger the police officer fired a single shot that hit the facehugger and the creature fell from the egg, landing on its back and thrashing about as its blood began to eat away at the floor beneath it. The same policeman then fired again, this time using a rapid burst to finish off the facehugger before it could attack anyone.

"Hold secure." the team leader reported when his team reached the burned crewman, two of them holding him still while the designated medic poured water over his face to try and wash away the acid burning him.

"What about the eggs?" Warren asked from the command post.

"There are dozens of drums here." the team leader responded as he looked around the hold, "Some of them are damaged and that goes for the contents as well. It looks like only the one of them hatched though."

"Don't take any chances. If there are any more eggs exposed then they need to be destroyed." Williams warned him.

"No." Warren said suddenly, "We can't destroy evidence. Just keep clear of the eggs and we'll have your android transfer them to new containers."

"Me?" Maddie said from behind Williams when she heard this and he glared at her, thankful that she was not wearing a radio headset and as such her words had not been transmitted to Warren's command centre.

"We still have at least one crew member loose though." the team leader added, "She escaped and may be heading towards the front of the ship. There's an air lock in that direction so she could be trying to get off the ship."

"This is Eto, leave our support team to deal with her. Leave two men to guard the hold and continue your sweep. I want the entire ship secured." Eto ordered from the bridge and in the hold two of the police officers remained where they were to watch over their prisoner and the alien eggs while the rest headed out through the same door Ramirez had appeared in.

"Curtis." Ramirez called out when she saw the only other member of the *Marlow's* crew still at large ahead of her.

"What's going on?" Curtis asked, "I can't get hold of anyone."

"There are cops everywhere. I think they got Fowler." Ramirez answered.

"What do we do?"

"The only thing we can. We get out of here. We'll need masks from the damage control station then we'll

leave through the forward air lock. If we're quick enough we can still stay ahead of the cops long enough to get away." Ramirez told him.

The damage control station between the pair and the air lock was little more than a storeroom for emergency equipment that could be used to make basic repairs, fight fires and treat injured crew members. The current crew of the *Marlow* paid lip service to the idea of emergency drills but all of the mandatory equipment was still present and this included oxygen masks for use when combating fires or if there was a failure of life support. Ramirez and Curtis each grabbed one of these masks, ignoring the heavy oxygen cylinders that were available as well and instead settling for the basic filters that they hoped would be enough to protect them from the worst of Rajjin's atmosphere. Donning these masks they then ran for the air lock to escape the ship. Despite the noxious content of the planet's atmosphere the air lock did not need to be cycled before the outer door could be open, the lack of a significant pressure difference the inside and outside of the *Marlow* permitting both doors to be opened together. However, the moment that they leapt down to the space port tarmac Ramirez and Curtis heard the sound of sirens and looking around they saw the flashing lights of police cars from the space port's dedicated security force heading towards the *Marlow* at high speed. The officers inside these vehicles carried only sidearms and one shotgun per vehicle but the sheer number of them meant that the automatic weapons Ramirez and Curtis carried would not be enough to give them an advantage.

"This is the police." an amplified voice called out from one of the police cars as they came to a sudden halt around the two fleeing criminals, "Drop your weapons and surrender." and at that moment a pair of police officers got out of each car and pointed their weapons towards them. Ramirez and Curtis hesitated, looking at one another for reassurance, "I said drop your weapons." the police officer called out again and the two criminals then set their weapons down on the ground and raised their hands.

7.

"The area is secure." Eto reported, "There is no-one else aboard the *Marlow*, although from the bunks there is still one more crewman unaccounted for."

"Hopefully the others will be able to tell us what happened to him." Hino responded and she turned to Warren, "Okay Agent Warren, your people can move in now."

"Did you get that Captain Williams?" Warren asked, raising her hand to the headset she wore.

"Yes, I heard." Williams replied, looking around at Lawrence and Maddie.

"Her people?" Maddie asked, "We're her people now?"

"Until we get back to Earth, yes we are her people." Lawrence said.

"Owen get us to the *Marlow*." Williams ordered, "No need to crash the fence though. The nearest gate will do."

"Let's roll." Owen responded, grinning as the APC accelerated towards the nearest gateway through the space port's perimeter fence. Behind it the two heavier tracked vehicles belonging to the Royal Marines also accelerated although their weight meant that they moved slower and the wheeled USCM vehicle was the first to reach the checkpoint at the gate. The space port security staff had already been alerted to the approach of the military vehicles and the gate slid open to allow them through.

The APC then sped across the space port to the *Marlow* before it came to an equally rapid halt.

"Respirators." Lawrence ordered and all around him the other marines inside the APC removed their helmets so that they could fit their gas masks before replacing the helmets again. Even Maddie pulled a gas mask over her face and strapped it in place so that her internal workings would be protected from the noxious elements of the atmosphere outside.

The marines held their weapons at ease as they disembarked from the APC while behind them the Royal Marine vehicles arrived and a car approached from the direction of the command centre bringing with it both Warren and Hino. Then there was a loud 'hiss' as the main cargo loading door of the *Marlow* began to open and Williams looked inside the ship to see Lieutenant Eto and his men waiting just inside the ship.

"Come on in captain, we have your eggs." Eto announced and Williams walked up the ramp towards him.

"Good God." he said, looking around the hold at the sheer number of drums it held, each one potentially containing one of the alien eggs.

"I estimate that there are more than a hundred of them." Eto said and Williams just nodded.

"Easily." Maddie added as she entered the hold just in time to hear.

"If even one of these things got out-" Lawrence added, not finishing his sentence.

"Then it could start an outbreak bigger than anything we've seen before." Williams said and then he turned to face Eto, "What about the crew?" he asked.

"We're holding them in their mess hall. Come on, I'll show you the way." Eto replied.

"We better wait for Agent Warren." Williams pointed out.

"Here I am captain." Warren's voice then said from the ramp and Williams looked around to see her, Hino and Hyde walking towards him while Hyde's marines formed a perimeter around the *Marlow*.

"Is there one of those aliens you told us about in each of these?" Hyde asked when he entered the hold and saw the drums for himself, including those that had been damaged during the raid and now showed their contents.

"It looks that way captain. My men didn't see any empty ones, though they have been keeping their distance from the damaged drums after a creature was seen hatching from one of them." Eto answered.

"Good idea." Williams said, nodding.

"Err, excuse me for asking but what happened to the thing that hatched out?" Lawrence said and he and Maddie both began to look nervously around the hold.

"Was that the one your man shot?" Williams added.

"That's right. That was the only one any of my men saw." Eto responded.

"Then we can consider ourselves fortunate." Warren said before turning to Williams, "Captain Williams I want all of these drums secured for the trip back to Earth."

"We're really taking them back then?" Williams said, "Wouldn't one of the destroyed eggs be just as useful for evidence? We've got the footage from Eto's team after all."

"My superiors were quite clear. We have to be able to demonstrate to a grand jury the scale of what was being done, especially if we're going to go after the people behind all this." Warren said.

"Weyland-Yutani." Maddie said and Hino frowned.

"What's Weyland-Yutani got to do with any of this?" she asked.

"Weyland-Yutani were responsible for taking these from the moon they were found on. They tried to use the *USS Sulaco* to smuggle them back to Earth and later on they tried to destroy the *Almayer* to cover up what

they were doing." Maddie told her.

"None of that has been proven in a court of law yet." Warren pointed out.

"We were there." Maddie replied angrily folding her arms as she glared at Warren through the faceplate of her gas mask, "You can download my memory if you want."

"Captain Williams perhaps you should have your robot assist in getting all this evidence ready to be moved to the *Almayer* while we question the crew of this ship." Warren said, ignoring Maddie.

"Good idea." Hino added, "Weyland-Yutani developed this colony and they still have considerable influence here. If there is even a hint that they could be involved in a conspiracy of the scale you're suggesting then I want these things gone as quickly as possible."

"Yes, Maddie stay here and make sure that the eggs are safely loaded when the transport gets here.

Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence, you're with me." Williams agreed.

"This way if you please." Eto said, pointing toward one of the interior exits from the hold and he led the group consisting of Williams, Lawrence, Warren, Hyde and Hino to the Marlow's mess hall.

Leaving the hold, the group all removed their gas masks now that they were far enough from any open doorways that Raijin's atmosphere would not affect them and when they got to the mess hall they found all of the Marlow's surviving crew members, including Fowler himself, kneeling on the floor with their hands bound behind their backs.

"None of them has said a word lieutenant." one of the police officers assigned to guard the prisoners said when the group arrived.

"Which one is in charge?" Warren asked and Eto pointed at Fowler.

"We think he is, Agent Warren." he said, "We found him on the bridge and before we brought them all here he ordered the others not to answer any questions."

"Do we have an ID?" Williams said.

"Well if the name given on the ship's registry is real then his name is Fowler." Hino said, "Of course we weren't able to check whether or not he has a criminal record. This is the first time his vessel has landed on Raijin."

"In that case Mister Fowler-" Warren said and Fowler snarled at her.

"That's captain to you." he hissed, "This is my ship you just boarded. My lawyer will eat you alive for this."

"Frankly I doubt any lawyer will want to touch your defence case." Warren responded, "You've just been caught red handed in possession of a dangerous alien species. Right now the only thing you've got going for you is what you can tell us about whoever put you up to this. We found the body of a Mister Gibbs, a junior executive from Weyland-Yutani aboard the *Sulaco*. Did he arrange for all this? Were you acting under contract to his company?"

"I'm telling you nothing." Fowler said, looking away from Warren.

"What about the missing men?" Williams added, reminding Warren about the crew members who according to Eto were still unaccounted for and Fowler grunted.

"There's no-one else." he said.

"Ah, so you are willing to tell us something." Warren said, smiling at Fowler, "Now how come there are more bunks made up aboard this ship than there are people? What happened to the other members of your crew?"

"They weren't attacked by any of the aliens you're carrying were they?" Williams asked, worried about the possibility that there could be adult aliens hidden away on the *Marlow* somewhere.

"No, you don't need to worry about that. I tell you what though, why don't you try asking the Yakuza? If their bodies haven't been found yet then the Japanese must have disposed of them along with their own dead."

Fowler answered.

"The Yakuza?" Maddie commented.

"Yes, we have something of a problem with them here on Raijin." Hyde responded.

"I wouldn't exactly call it a problem Captain Hyde." Hino said defensively.

"Oh really? Then why hasn't your office been able to put a stop to their activities Miss Hino?" Hyde said and Hino sighed.

"This isn't the time to be having this conversation again Captain Hyde." she said and she turned to Eto, "Lieutenant I want these men taken in. Find out if those missing men really are dead and what the Yakuza have to do with any of this." then she turned to Warren and added, "I'm sorry about this Agent Warren, it looks like you'll be staying here a bit longer than you anticipated."

"That's okay. If there are two more people mixed up in this then my superiors are going to want them as well. I'm sure I'll find something to keep myself occupied while you find them." Warren replied and then she smiled at Williams, producing a frown from Maddie.

"Message complete." Warren said as she sat in the room she had been provided with at the Royal Marines' barracks. She, Williams, Lawrence and Sergeant Stoner had all been allotted private rooms while the other

enlisted marines were sharing a number of larger ones between them, "Send to all recipients."
"Confirmed." the computer tablet responded in a feminine sounding voice, the words also appearing on the screen as the device spoke, "Sending message under special order one four six two eight zero."
Warren knew that her superiors back on Earth would not receive the report she had just sent for more than three days and since a reply would take the same amount of time to reach Raijin it would be impossible for her receive any new instructions from there on the basis of its contents before she and the marine unit assigned to her were scheduled to leave and as such she needed to just continue with her original mission. However, for the time being there was nothing more she could do to get the alien eggs loaded aboard the orbiting *Almayer* or take custody of the Marlow's crew while they were being questioned by the local police about the whereabouts of the two crew members still unaccounted for and the process of their extradition was being handled. The room that Warren had been given by the Royal Marines included a television set and with nothing else to do she turned it on and began to search through the list of available programs, looking for something to watch. However, nothing appealed to her and so she turned the television off and tossed the control aside before she started to undress.

Williams was also alone in his room, studying his own computer tablet when there was a knock at his door. "Captain Williams are you in there?" Warren's voice called out from the hallway and he quickly turned closed the file he was reading and placed it on the table as he walked over to the door. Opening it he found Warren standing outside wearing a short robe.

"Agent Warren." he said.

"Let me in, I've nothing on under this robe and there's a draft out here." Warren replied and Williams stepped aside to let her into his room, "I wasn't disturbing you was I captain?" she asked when she saw the tablet computer on the table.

"What? Oh no." Williams said, looking at the tablet and without picking it up he shut the device down, "It was just a status report from the *Almayer*. The loading of the eggs has been planned by the way. Three cargo containers have been made available that we can use to house the drums they are currently held in. It's safer than transporting them all the way back to Earth individually. Then we'll just send them up to the *Almayer* one at a time using our dropship."

"That's good. I've told my superiors in the FBI that they can expect them." Warren said.

"So I guess that now we just have to wait for the locals to give us the all clear to take the prisoners with us and someone will finally be held to account for what happened to the crew of the *Sulaco*." Williams said.

"Hopefully, yes. In the meantime though there doesn't appear to be anything more that we can do so I figured I'd come here and we could do nothing together." Warren said before leaning closer to Williams and kissing him, "You'd better lock the door. I'd hate for your robot to come back here and barge in only to see you with a real woman. It might hurt her fake feelings." she added as she undid her robe and let it fall to the floor.

"This is a damned waste of time." Gunn said as he continued checking the seals on the remaining drums that held the alien eggs. Four of the marines has been assigned to this task while Maddie supervised them, ready to step in if there were any signs of further damage and repair any breaks in the drums before the contents could escape. The plan was to load the drums in batches into shipping containers that could also be sealed to provide another layer of security before being flown up to the orbiting *Almayer*, "Why not just fly these things back to on this ship instead of transferring them to ours?"

"Because it costs hundreds of thousands of dollars to run a starship Gunn. If you're willing to spring for the fuel then I'm sure that the captain will hear you out though."

"Maddie, how are things going down here?" Lawrence asked when he entered the *Marlow's* hold

"Oh just great gunny." Maddie responded, pulling a face, "I'm stuck here with these things while the man I love is back at our temporary billet with Agent Warren probably hurling herself at him. Do you know how many different diseases can be spread through sexual contact between human beings? I'm telling you he's safer sleeping with me every night. Days too."

"Well the captain obviously thinks highly of you to trust you with these things." Lawrence said, "After all they do seem to be worth a million dollars a piece." and when he said this Maddie and all of the marines present turned to look at him, "Are you all finished with your jobs because if you are then I can easily find more work for you all." and the marines returned to their task.

"A million dollars? What makes you think that?" Maddie asked.

"The Raijin police are busy taking apart the crew quarters and in the cabin we've connected Fowler to they found a tablet that had messages on it that suggested he was negotiating to sell the entire shipment of eggs to a buyer for a million dollars each." Lawrence explained.

"Wow." Maddie said, "That's a lot of money."

"Yes it is. The problem is that the last few messages mentioned a meeting where Fowler was going let his customer inspect two of the eggs as samples before selling them the entire cargo and the police also found a

case with what looks like two million dollars in it. Cash.” Lawrence said.

“If you want someone to confirm that gunny, then I’ll volunteer.” Gunn called out from across the hold.

“Stop shirking and get back to work Gunn.” Lawrence snapped before he turned back towards Maddie, “So now the question is has Fowler already sold two of the eggs to someone and if so, who?”

“Are you going to call Agent Warren? Perhaps she should go to where the Marlow’s crew are being held and ask him.” Maddie suggested, smiling at the idea of getting Warren away from Williams.

“I think we can just call Hino.” Lawrence replied and Maddie sighed.

“Fine, but if the captain ends up catching something horrible from that hussy don’t blame me.” she told him and he frowned at her.

“Hussy? What sort of word to use is that nowadays?” Lawrence asked and Maddie shrugged.

“What can I say? I guess I’m just old fashioned and think a man should stay loyal to his android lover.”

“What do you mean there could be two of the eggs missing?” Hino asked when Lawrence and Maddie contacted her from the bridge of the *Marlow*.

“I mean we don’t know for sure. All we know is that Fowler was in the process of trying to sell the eggs to someone on this planet and may have already sold two of them. Perhaps you should ask him.” Lawrence said.

“Fine. I’ll try and find out.” Hino replied before turning off her phone. Hino had gone with Eto and his men to the police station to oversee the questioning of the *Marlow*’s crew while their extradition was being arranged by the authorities on Raijin. As was standard procedure each of the crew had been placed in separate interrogation rooms so that they could not confer with one another about the answers they gave to particular questions. Each of these rooms contained a camera to record everything that happened in them and Hino now stood in the room where the feed from them all could be monitored.

“Problem?” Eto asked as she put her phone away. Now that the raid was over the prisoners were being questioned by detectives instead and Eto was on hand just in case they needed any more information about what had taken place during the raid on the *Marlow*.

“Now as well as members of the crew of the *Marlow* being missing there could be two of those alien eggs somewhere on the planet. Do any of the prisoners look like they’re ready to break?” Hino answered and she looked at the screen showing the insides of the interrogation rooms.

“No, not yet and things are only going to get harder when we have start taking breaks. We can keep the prisoners separate but there’s nothing we can do about their lawyers. They’ll be able to meet and swap notes without any interference from us. After that the chance of us breaking any of them will drop.” Eto said and Hino nodded, “We could always go with the classic prisoner’s dilemma.” Eto suggested.

“A deal for the first one to break.” Hino commented.

“Exactly.” Eto said.

“The problem is that these people are all going to be extradited to Earth and they know it. Any deal is going to have to involve us blocking that and if we do then Agent Warren will be furious.” Hino pointed out.

“Maybe, but they’re our prisoners right now and what do you think the Minister of Planetary Security will have to say if there are two dangerous alien lifeforms in the capital and you don’t do everything in your power to make sure no-one gets hurt?”

“I see your point. I’ll speak to the chief prosecutor about drawing up an immunity offer for one of the prisoners. Hino said, “If he agrees then I’ll break the news to Agent Warren.”

8.

Ramirez just stared across the table at the two detectives questioning her, the lawyer she had been provided with by the authorities on Raijin continually reminding them that she was not obliged to answer their questions while she remained silent. She knew that her fellow crew members were being held in rooms just like this one and that as long as no-one spoke at all there was no chance of anyone saying something that would contradict what anyone else said. It was obvious from the presence on the planet of an FBI agent and a team of US Colonial Marines that the *Marlow's* crew would be being taken back to Earth anyway so there was no incentive for any of them to co-operate with the local authorities.

That was until Hino entered the room with a sheet of paper in her hand that she placed on the table in front of Ramirez.

"What's this?" the lawyer asked.

"Your client's last chance." Hino replied, "It's an immunity deal. Our information indicates that there are not only two members of the *Marlow's* crew still at large but also that two of the alien eggs that the ship was carrying could have been removed and are also still unaccounted for. The first person to give us enough information to track all of them down walks free."

"The Americans won't like that." Ramirez commented.

"I'm not American. We have our own planet to worry about. Besides, they'll still get everyone else's heads as trophies. They won't miss one of you." Hino said and she turned to the lawyer, "We'll leave you alone to read that and discuss it with your client. Be quick though. I've still got four more copies to deliver to other people but the rest have already had that offer and as you can see it's only valid for the first person to talk."

and then Hino signalled for the two detectives to leave the room with her.

Outside the interrogation room the corridor was lined with windows made of one way glass that allowed an alternative means of observing what was going on in each of them. Although transparent, the barriers were soundproofed so that it was not possible to listen in on the privileged conversations between a prisoner and their lawyer but it was still possible to gauge how a conversation was going just by watching.

"So do you think any of them will go for it?" one of the detectives who had been questioning Ramirez asked when the door was closed.

"I hope so." Hino replied, "We're at a roadblock in the case and we need one of them to start co-operating."

"Well I don't think it's going to be this guy." another detective said from along the corridor where he and his partner were watching Fowler as his lawyer explained the terms of the deal being offered. It was obvious that Fowler was becoming agitated by what the lawyer was telling him, pacing up and down in the interrogation room and then when he was handed the document Hino had left in the room he turned towards the window and held it up so that the detectives he knew would be watching from the other side of the one way glass could see him as he slowly tore the paper in half before making an obscene hand gesture to the window.

"That does not look like a happy man." the detective commented.

"Good." Hino said, "He's the leader so he can't sell out his crew but he knows that one of them will probably sell him out in exchange for immunity. Now if you don't mind I have more papers to deliver." however, before she could enter the next interrogation room to the door to the one that held Ramirez opened and her lawyer stepped out into the corridor with the immunity deal document in his hand. Holding this out towards Hino he showed her that Ramirez had signed it.

"My client wishes to make a deal." he said and Hino smiled.

"Well then it's your client's lucky day isn't it?" she said.

Hino, the lawyer and the two detectives then returned to the interrogation room where Ramirez sat.

"I get full immunity, right?" the woman said as soon as the prosecutor entered the room again.

"That's right. All charges that the government of Raijin has outstanding against you in relation to the smuggling of the alien eggs will be dropped in exchange for your full co-operation. That includes the extradition. The US government hasn't signed off on this though, so there are no guarantees that they won't try to extradite you if you travel to any other jurisdictions though."

"I have explained to my client that she will be at risk of arrest if she leaves Raijin." the lawyer commented.

"I don't care about that. Once we're done here I'll head for the Outer Rim and no-one will ever see me again."

Ramirez said, "Now what do you want to know?"

"The two missing crew members." Hino replied.

"Dead, just like Fowler said they were. The Yakuza killed them both when they ambushed us at the meet." Ramirez answered.

"Is that the meeting where two of the eggs were supposed to be sold? Who was the customer?" Hino asked.

"I don't know who the customer was, just that he was some corporate suit looking to impress his bosses by bringing them an exclusive deal. If everything had gone to plan we'd be light years away from here by now

with more than a hundred million credits to split between us. The meet itself was to prove to the customer that we had what we claimed we had. We took two of the eggs with us so that he could have them examined. He had a scientist and an android with him. The android did all the work while the just scientist stood back and gave orders. I figure they knew how dangerous those things could be. Anyway, the Yakuza suddenly showed up and started shooting. They'd approached Fowler for a cut and he'd refused so I guess that that was their way of expressing their displeasure. More fool them."

"What makes you say that?" Hino asked and Ramirez grinned.

"I was just getting to the best bit." she said, "The Yakuza didn't have a clue what we were doing. They thought we were smuggling drugs and trying to muscle in on their operation here. Obviously they thought that it was a drugs buy they were hitting or they would have been more careful around those eggs. The android had opened the drums you see and they got knocked over. That's when the eggs hatched and the things inside them came out. The Yakuza were closest and a pair of them got hit." Ramirez continued and she raised her hands to her face in mimicry of a person being attacked by a facehugger.

"Oh crap." Hino said and she spun around, racing out of the interrogation room and pulled her phone from her pocket.

"Let it ring." Warren said as the phone in Williams' room sounded beside the bed they were sharing and he ignored the sound until it stopped. However, shortly later after there was a knock at the door and Captain Hyde's voice called out.

"Captain Williams." he said, "Are you in there?"

"I better see what he wants. I know the British. They don't give up easily." Williams said as he rolled away from Warren and reached over the side of the bed for his trousers. Pulling these on he headed for the door and unlocked it, "Yes Captain Hyde, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"I'm sorry I didn't realise you were occupied." Hyde responded when he noticed Warren sat in bed.

"I take it that this is important?" Williams commented.

"I'm afraid so. Miss Hino just called from police headquarters. One of the *Marlow's* crew agreed to talk and had explained what happened to the two eggs we couldn't account for. It seems that there was a fight between the *Marlow's* crew and the Yakuza."

"The Yakuza have the eggs?" Williams asked.

"Worse. The witness was at the scene of the fight and she said that two of the Yakuza were attacked by the creatures you call facehuggers." Hyde told Williams and he swore when he heard this.

"We need to move quickly." he said as he turned to head back into his room and finished getting dressed,

"We may not have long before the larval aliens hatch from those men."

"It's probably already too late." Hyde said after him, "The witness claims that this happened about a month ago."

Williams froze when he heard this. From the report given by the sole survivor of the commercial towing vehicle *Nostromo*, the first human ship known to have encountered the aliens, as well as his own experience in having a man under his command used as a host for one he knew that the period of time from someone being attacked by a facehugger to the larval chestbuster emerging and growing to adulthood was measured in hours. Given that it had been several weeks since the initial impregnation would have taken place it was obvious that, unless the Yakuza had somehow managed to kill them, both aliens would now have reached adulthood and be at large on Raijin.

"So now the Yakuza know about the aliens as well?" Warren said, reaching out to pick up her robe from the floor beside the bed, "Oh this is just great. This was supposed to be handled discretely to avoid a public fuss. At least one of the *Marlow's* crew is suddenly feeling talkative. If they know where the Yakuza are then we might be able to get that information from them as well."

"Depends on how scared of reprisals from the Yakuza they are." Williams said.

"Oh I wouldn't worry about that." Hyde replied, "The immunity deal that Hino offered to the witness required full co-operation."

"Immunity deal? What immunity deal?" Warren exclaimed when she heard this, "I didn't sanction any immunity deal. All of the *Marlow's* crew are going back to Earth and that's final."

"Perhaps you ought to speak to Miss Hino about that." Hyde responded, "She has asked for all of us to meet with her. This matter has moved beyond simple law enforcement after all."

"Too right it has." Williams commented.

"I don't care. Hino had no right to interfere." Warren said, tying her robe shut, "Now just give me ten minutes to get dressed. Oh and I also need to let Earth know what's going on out here."

"I'll have transport and a driver ready in the motor pool." Hyde said and Williams nodded.

"Thanks." he said, "I can't get used to you guys driving on the wrong side of the road."

"You wanted to see me gunny?" Maddie asked, entering the *Marlow's* bridge where Lawrence was co-

ordinating the remaining operations aboard the transport ship.

"Captain Williams actually. He's on the line now." Lawrence replied and Maddie smiled as he pointed to a communication headset on a nearby console.

"Hi, what can I do for you?" Maddie said after putting on the headset, "Do you need me to help with anything in your private quarters?"

"Maddie I need you to meet me at police headquarters. I'm heading there now. Something's come up and the scope of our mission here has changed. The local police have confirmed that two of the alien eggs were taken off the ship about a month ago. Both were seen to hatch and the facehuggers they held attacked members of the Yakuza." Williams explained.

"So our little babysitting job just became a bug hunt." Maddie said and Lawrence quickly turned to look at her.

"Damn." he hissed as he activated the headset he wore, "Captain did I just hear that right? Are there aliens on the loose?"

"Yes gunnery sergeant. Two of them. To make matters worse they will have hatched from members of the Yakuza so they could be anywhere that they have their fingers. If the information we have about the scope of their operation on the planet is correct then that could mean that they are anywhere within a thousand kilometres or more of here." Williams said.

"I'll come and meet you." Lawrence said.

"No." Williams told him, "You make sure that things are wrapped up at the *Marlow* and then get back to the Royal Marine outpost. We'll need all our forces ready to go, us and the Royal Marines. The local police are mobilising as well but their job will be basic containment. Ours will be to deal with the aliens. I just need Maddie's help with a technical issue."

"Sure thing captain. I'll make sure everyone is ready to go. *Marlow* out." Lawrence said before shutting off the channel and looking at Maddie again, "Okay you go. I'll wrap things up here and be in touch." he told her and the android smiled at him before removing her headset and running from the bridge, eager to get to one of the local police vehicles parked just outside the ship that could take her to their headquarters in the capital.

"Captain Williams!"

Williams was on his way to the motor pool when Warren called out his name and he turned to see her hurrying towards him. She still held her jacket over one of her arms and because of this he could see the pistol she had holstered on her belt.

"Really think you'll need that?" he asked, looking at the weapon he had not seen her with before this point.

"I'm, not discounting anything yet." Warren replied, "Look, I want to discuss with you our options for taking control of the crew of the *Marlow*. All of them, including whichever one the locals think they can give immunity to."

"I think that's a matter for the State Department." Williams said as they began walking side by side.

"The State Department is weeks away captain. We're here now. If I can't get the locals to hand the prisoner over then I'll need your assistance in securing them before they can vanish off planet and we lose them."

Warren told him and he frowned.

"What do you expect me to do about it?" he said.

"You're a USCM officer and you have a team of marines and an orbiting warship at your disposal. Figure it out." Warren said and Williams came to a sudden halt, looking around to make sure that there was no-one close enough to overhear their conversation.

"Are you insane?" he hissed, "Those prisoners are in a building filled with at least fifty cops. Do you think they'll just hand them over?"

"If not then I'm sure your men can handle them." Warren said.

"Oh really? Handle them? Maybe we can, we're marines and they aren't after all. Although I wouldn't want to bet on us being able to handle Lieutenant Eto and his tactical team as well if they're present. And even then what happens next? Are my marines supposed to take on Captain Hyde and his troops as well? Just in case you haven't noticed the Royal Marines outnumber and outgun us. This isn't some frontier colony where we can just show up and throw our weight around, it's a developed colony that is protected by the Anglo-Japanese Alliance. It sounds like you're asking me to start a war with two advanced nations that are supposed to be our allies in the Interstellar Commerce Commission as well."

"Look captain, I'm sure it won't come to that." Warren said, holding up her hands to try and calm him.

"Then what are you planning? To ask nicely while pointing a pulse rifle at Hino's head?" Williams said.

"Asking yes, though maybe not so nicely. Whoever Hino has offered a deal to is a fugitive and we are well within our rights to track them down. If the authorities on Raijin won't hand them over then I want you to use the *Almayer* to enforce a blockade around the planet. I want you to be ready to intercept and board any ship trying to leave so you can search it for our fugitive. Any ship that fails to stop can be fired on."

"Yeah, that should work. At least until the Royal Navy or Imperial Space Defence Force shows up and we're

back to starting a war.”

“A war the Anglo-Japanese Alliance doesn't want any more than you do Captain Williams. I'm counting on the threat being enough for them to turn over the entire crew of the *Marlow* but for that to happen I need it to be a credible threat so when I deliver it I expect you to support me fully. I am in command of this operation after all, captain.” Warren said sternly.

“Yes ma'am.” Williams replied and then he started walking towards the outpost's motor pool again.

A single light utility vehicle was waiting for Williams and Warren when they arrived in the motor pool and Hyde waved to them from beside it.

“Over here.” he called out, beckoning the pair towards him. Although just like the larger Royal Marine vehicles this was sealed against the local atmosphere both Hyde and the driver carried respirators with them and there were additional masks in the back of the vehicle in front of Williams and Warren when they got in. The outpost's outer door opened on command from the vehicle's driver as he began to move off and then he accelerated through the open doorway as rapidly as possible before closing the door by remote control behind them.

As a military vehicle rather than a police one fitted with sirens, the utility vehicle could only carry its passengers to police headquarters as fast as the local traffic laws would allow and by the time it reached its destination Maddie was already waiting for them with a man in a police uniform.

“Everybody's freaking out.” she told Williams, “Hino's waiting for you upstairs in her office.”

“I'll show you the way.” the police officer added.

“Good.” Warren said, “I've a bone to pick with her.”

“I need to discuss something with Maddie.” Williams said.

“Captain I'm going to need you in this meeting. I've told you what I expect of you.” Warren replied sternly.

“I'm sorry agent Warren but this is an operational matter. I can't be expected to provide you or anyone with my full support if I can't be certain of the readiness of my team and my ship. As soon as I've briefed Maddie she can make sure everything is prepared for whatever action we are required to take.” Williams explained.

“Don't take too long.” Warren said sternly and then she began to walk away, accompanied by Hyde and the police officer.

Meanwhile Williams took Maddie aside and handed her his computer tablet.

“A present for me?” she commented as she took the device from him.

“There are two interesting entries in the *Almayer's* status log, both relating to what I asked you about before we left Earth.” he told her and she smiled.

“So Agent Warren's been making use of her super secret command then?” Maddie commented and Williams nodded.

“Yes, once just after the raid on the *Marlow* and then again after she was told about Hino making a deal with one of the crew. I want to know what she said and who she said it to.” he told her.

“I can get you communication addresses easily. I made sure the *Almayer* was creating a secondary log of all destinations that couldn't be wiped unless you knew exactly where it was being stored but the content might be harder. If Agent Warren encrypted her message before uploading it to the *Almayer* then I'll need access to her computer to be able to tell you what she was saying though. I couldn't install spyware that would access external ports without her firewall picking it up but every keystroke and voice command she's given since then is recorded in its raw format.” Maddie said and Williams smiled at her.

“That's my girl.” he said and she smiled back.

“Think we've got time to-” she began and Williams sighed.

“No Maddie. They're expecting us in Hino's office. Do you know the way?” he said.

“Of course. I memorised the layout of the building as soon as I arrived and accessed their public network.”

Maddie answered and then she reached out to take his hand, pulling him in the direction Warren and Hyde had gone.

Approaching Hino's office, it was obvious to Williams which room was their destination from the raised voice of Warren that he could hear coming from inside.

“Uh-oh.” he said.

“It sounds like Agent Warren is making friends.” Maddie commented.

“Then perhaps we should get in there before she declares war on Raijin in the friendliest way possible.”

Williams said as he walked up to the door and opened it without knocking.

“What gives you the right to do a deal like this behind my back?” Warren yelled across the table at where Hino sat, accompanied by another member of the Raijin prosecutors' office while Hyde and Eto sat at the far end.

“I am the chief prosecutor. I have the final say on what cases are brought before the court.” the older man said and Warren looked towards the doorway.

“Ah Captain Williams. I was just explaining to Prosecutor Davis that the United States government expects the entire crew of the *Marlow* to be extradited to us.” she said.

"Perhaps that is a matter for discussion at a later time." Williams said as he sat down beside Hyde, "Right now I'm more concerned about the fact that there are two aliens loose on Raijin. Once we have dealt with them we can discuss what is to be done with the crew of the *Marlow*."

Warren glared at Williams, obviously angry at his refusal to agree with her demand to have the *Marlow's* entire crew extradited.

"First of all we'll need to place the planet under quarantine." Williams continued, "We can't risk starships leaving carrying an alien to another planet. I'd recommend that the destinations of any ships that have left within the last month are contacted to make sure they are properly quarantined when they arrive."

"And what about dealing with aliens here on Raijin?" Hyde asked.

"I understand that the prisoner who has been co-operating said the Yakuza may have them. Does she know where we can find the Yakuza?" Williams asked.

"I haven't spoken to her since she told me about the alien eggs hatching." Hino answered.

"Then perhaps we should go and speak with her now." Hyde suggested.

"Yes let's." Warren added.

"Maybe we should confine the discussion to military matters." Williams said and he looked at Davis,

"Prosecutor Davis, how long will it take for your government to formally request the USCM's assistance?"

"Actually I have the paperwork here captain." Hino replied.

"As soon as the Minister of Planetary Security was told about the situation he issued the order to pass control of the situation to the military and with that includes requesting the assistance of the United States Colonial Marine forces currently in our system." Davis said.

"Good. Then let's go." Warren said, placing her hands on the table as she got to her feet.

"Err perhaps Captain Hyde, Lieutenant Eto and I should deal with this ourselves." Williams suggested.

"Captain I-" Warren began.

"Agent Warren you are here to handle the extradition of the *Marlow's* crew. Dealing with a potential alien infestation is my responsibility." Williams interrupted.

"Our responsibility." Hyde commented with a smile and Williams smiled back.

"Of course captain. Sorry, I didn't mean to tread on your toes there." he responded.

"That's quite alright. Now, shall we and Lieutenant Eto go and pay this informant a visit?" Hyde said.

9.

Ramirez and her lawyer were still in the interrogation room when Eto entered, followed by Williams and Hyde. As a civilian prisoner Ramirez could only formally be questioned by a police officer or prosecutor and so Eto would be the lead in the next round of questioning.

"Miss Ramirez I am Lieutenant Eto." he said as he and the two military officers sat down on the opposite side of the table from her.

"You led the raid on the Marlow. I saw you afterwards when you took off your mask." Ramirez replied and then she looked at Williams and Hyde and added, "Those two turned up later."

"Yes, this is Captain Hyde of the Royal Marines, he currently commands the garrison here on Raijin and Captain Williams commands the USCM team sent to take your crew back to Earth." Eto told her.

"Not me though. We have a deal." Ramirez reminded him.

"Of course and as part of that deal I'd like to ask you some questions about the Yakuza." Eto said.

"Go ahead, though I'd have thought you'd know more about them than me." Ramirez replied in an obvious racial slight against Eto but the police officer let it pass.

"Do you know where they will have taken their infected men after they were attacked at your meeting?" Eto asked.

"No idea. Their ambush was the first time I saw any of them. Fowler was the only one of us who spoke to any of the Yakuza and that was only so that they could threaten him. He did mention something about a place he was supposed to go and meet them though." Ramirez answered.

"Where?" Eto said.

"A bar of some sort I think. The Katana Club. I don't know if the Yakuza run it or if it was just somewhere convenient for them to meet but that's the name he gave me. Now how long until I get out of here? I want to book a flight off world." Ramirez said.

"I'm sorry that won't be possible." Williams told her.

"Like hell. We've got a deal and if you don't stick to it then my lawyer here will tear you a new one in court." Ramirez exclaimed angrily.

"Going back on the deal unilaterally could expose the prosecutors' office to allegations of fraud." her lawyer added.

"Then tell your client that there's no fraud involved." Williams replied, "The *USS Almayer* is currently orbiting this planet and until I give the command for her to stand down her computer will be enacting a blockade of all shipping to ensure that no-one inadvertently carries any hostile alien life forms away from here. I'm sure you understand."

"Seriously? Can they do that?" Ramirez said, looking at her lawyer.

"Yes they can. The United States Colonial Marines are not a party to your deal and their ship's actions are unrelated to it." the lawyer told her.

"Perhaps we should discuss this outside." Hyde suggested and Eto nodded.

"Agreed." he said and he and the two military officers got up again and turned to leave the room.

"Do either of you know anything about this Katana Club?" Williams asked as soon as they were back in the corridor outside the interrogation room and he looked at Hyde and Eto.

"I've heard of it but I've never been there." Hyde replied.

"I've heard vice mention it a few times as a place where some low level drug deals might be taking place but there was never enough evidence to justify raiding it." Eto added.

"Where is it?" Williams said.

"Here in the city. I don't know the exact address but it's in one of the northern districts close to the main docks." Eto said and Williams frowned.

"Something wrong captain?" Hyde said when he saw this.

"If two adult aliens were loose in an urban area then I'd expect bodies to be piling up left right and centre. Have there at least been any reports of odd disappearances over the last month?" Williams asked.

"Not that I'm aware of." Eto said, "Although I don't generally get involved in missing persons cases."

"This would go further than just one or two people being reported missing. The aliens I've dealt with aren't shy about killing." Williams said.

"Perhaps there are no aliens." Hyde commented, "The Yakuza could have killed them. We're only talking about two after all."

"That's possible I suppose." Williams admitted, "But I'd be surprised if that were the case. The first time I encountered these aliens there were only two and that resulted in the deaths of almost my entire team and the loss of a naval vessel."

"That may be but this is the only lead we have." Hyde said and Williams nodded.

"Agreed. We should get our teams ready to raid the Katana club as soon as possible." Williams said.
"My team can give you a one block perimeter. Inside that you'll be free to operate." Eto told the two military men.
"Sounds good to me." Williams said.

The sight of armoured military vehicles travelling through the streets of the capital city, especially the heavy tracked fighting vehicles possessed by the Royal Marines, would have attracted a lot of attention so these were held back out of sight to avoid alerting the Yakuza in the Katana club to the upcoming raid. Instead the marines going into the club approached in three unmarked trucks while Eto and his tactical team used unmarked cars to deploy to key locations where they could swiftly erect the road blocks needed to prevent passers by from approaching the club while the raid was taking place. Williams and Hyde remained with their APCs, along with a driver each and Maddie with Williams while Lawrence would be leading the raid on the ground.

"Thirty seconds to target." Lawrence said, broadcasting to the entire assault team as well as the watching officers, "Safeties off and masks on."

"Copy that sergeant. Deploying road blocks now." Eto responded and from each of the unmarked police cars the heavily armed police emerged and waved at traffic to stop while the trucks sped past them towards the club.

The trucks came to a sudden halt outside the building where the Katana club was located, two of them in front of it while the third drove around the back to deploy the Royal Marines it carried to prevent any Yakuza from simply escaping through either the rear entrance or garage while the main assault group went in through the main entrance at the front.

Leaping from their transports, the mixed force of United States and Royal Marines charged towards the club's doors. At this time of day the club was closed and its doors normally kept locked so as Lawrence led his troops towards them he brought his pulse rifle up to his shoulder and took aim at the hinges at one side of the main entrance. For this operation the grenade launcher beneath his pulse rifle was loaded with heavy duty buckshot rounds instead of the usual high explosive grenades and he fired all three of these in rapid succession. These blasts destroyed the hinges holding the door to its frame and under the force of its own weight the door then twisted and fell inwards, the lock and bolts unable to support it on their own.

"Go!" Lawrence yelled and in two columns the marines charged into the club.

The first room that the marines entered was a reception area that doubled as an air lock to keep the noxious parts of Raijin's atmosphere out of the main area of the club. Here visitors to the club would normally pay their entry charge and hand over any belongings they wanted looking after by the staff. This was deserted as the first marines entered but just seconds later a side door opened and a woman appeared to see what the noise from the front of the club was all about. As soon as she appeared Holland and Garand broke ranks from the USCM line and grabbed hold of her, pushing her to the floor while they made sure that she was unarmed. The woman screamed while the marines were securing her to be handed over to the police that were waiting outside and Lawrence knew that any surprise that they may still have retained after destroying the front door was now lost. At the same time there was a dull booming sound from somewhere at the rear of the building and Lawrence knew that the second unit of Royal Marines had just made their entry.

"Spread out." he ordered, "US take the main club and offices. Royal Marines kitchen and stores."

Immediately the other two members of Holland and Garand's squad, Corporal Nambu and the machine gunner Smith pushed past them to get through the door that led to a staircase heading up to the offices above the club. Browning was first to the door and as he looked up the stairs a man appeared at the top of them with a pistol in his hand. He fired this at Browning and the shot hit him in his chest. Thankfully the body armour he wore stopped the bullet in its tracks and the only effect was to slow him down.

"Get down." Smith said from behind Browning and the corporal dropped to his knees, knowing exactly what the machine gunner intended. There was the roar of gunfire as Smith fired his smart gun up the stairs, the weapon's automatic targeting system making sure that all of the rounds struck the man at the top of the stairs in a neat cluster in the centre of his torso and his body exploded in a plume of blood as the explosive rounds detonated inside him.

Watching the feed from Smith's head mounted camera both Williams and Hyde saw both the Yakuza's initial attack and Smith's retaliation.

"That proves we have the right place." Hyde commented, "Handguns are illegal here on Raijin."

"But the fact that there are people moving around freely suggests that the aliens we are looking for aren't here." Williams pointed out.

Inside the club the marines moved as Lawrence had ordered and this took all but the squad heading up to the offices through the main area of the club. This was separated from the reception area by an unlocked door that the marines simply kicked open as they burst through and the handful of cleaning staff still at work threw themselves to the floor, knowing what was about to come as the two men behind the bar both reached

beneath it for the shotguns they had concealed there.

"Drop your weapons!" Lawrence yelled as the men produced their weapons but neither of them did as he had ordered and he fired his pulse rifle at one of them as he was chambering a round. Several rounds from the burst hit the man while others struck the bottles mounted on the wall behind the bar, causing them to shatter and spill their contents over the man's body as it dropped to the floor. The second man's shotgun boomed as he fired it at a Royal Marine and he was knocked backwards by the impact to his body armour then before he could fire a second round two of the other Royal Marines returned fire with rapid semi-automatic shots and the Yakuza gunman was killed almost instantly.

It was now that the Royal Marines split off from Lawrence and the other US marines, heading for the kitchen at the back of the club and leaving the US troops to search the private function rooms that surrounded the main area.

"Owen, Browning, secure these people." Lawrence ordered, pointing at the cowering cleaning staff, "Everyone else with me."

Lawrence led his remaining marines towards the corridor that connected the club's private rooms. Normally these would be used by wealthy customers who wanted entertainment away from the eyes and often cameras of the general public who used the club each night. Each of these rooms needed checking and since they were kept locked when not in use the marines had to break into almost all of them. One of the rooms was not locked however, because it was occupied by a pair of heavily armed Yakuza and as the marines approached it one of them unexpectedly leant through the doorway to fire a sustained burst from a sub machine gun down the hallway.

The pistol calibre rounds fired by the sub machine gun were unable to penetrate the hard armour plates that protected the marines but these could not cover their entire bodies and a bullet struck Sergeant Stoner in his thigh, just above his armoured greaves. This caused him to fall forwards, dropping his pulse rifle as he clutched at the wound.

"Down!" Lawrence snapped and the marines dropped to their knees, pressing themselves against the walls either side of the hallway before returning fire towards the doorway they had just been fired at from. This fire forced the Yakuza to pull back into the room. However, it did not prevent him from continuing to fire at the marines and he just held his weapon around the door frame and fired it randomly into the hallway. Only Wesson held his fire, using the thermal targeting system of his smart gun to acquire the Yakuza through the wall and adjusting the fusing of the explosive rounds so that there would be a short delay between impact and detonation. Then he fired his smart gun on automatic and the wall between him and the Yakuza splintered as the armour piercing rounds punched right through it before hitting the gangster and finally exploding inside him.

"Stoner are you okay?" Lawrence asked.

"I'll live gunny. Go get whoever else is in there." Stoner replied while he was tearing open a field dressing to apply to his wound. Nodding, Lawrence jumped back to his feet and waved the rest of the marines forwards. Inside the room the second Yakuza had picked up a weapon of his own, a pulse rifle of the same model as used by the Royal Marines and he knocked over a table made of thick hardwood to use as cover before Lawrence appeared in the doorway in front of him. Lawrence saw the gangster and leapt aside moment before he could open fire. Then as soon as the Yakuza ceased fire Colt leant around the doorway to fire back, using several short controlled bursts to dissuade the Yakuza from firing.

"Gunn go." Lawrence ordered, waving at Gunn but the marine immediately behind Colt hesitated rather than charge through the doorway.

"Move!" Nambu yelled from behind Gunn and he shoved the marine forwards before he rushed through the doorway in his place then dropped to his knees on the opposite side to Colt so that they could both lay down suppressing fire while leaving room between them for the other marines to follow. Lawrence was the next to come through the door and he trained his pulse rifle on the table as he charged towards it.

"United States marines! Drop your weapon!" he shouted but the Yakuza instead brought his rifle up again. Lawrence could have simply shot the man but he was keen to take at least one of the Yakuza alive and so instead he quickly turned his own rifle around and used it like a club, smashing the butt into the gangster's face hard enough that he fell backwards. Before the Yakuza could recover Lawrence vaulted over the table and kicked his rifle from his grasp then dragged the still stunned man back to his feet, "Secure him." he said, looking at Colt and Nambu before he shoved the gangster towards them.

Lawrence then took the time to look around the room and he saw a row of boxes sat along the far wall. Several of these were open and inside he saw that they contained a mixture of cash and clear packets that contained a mix of tablets and powdered narcotics.

"Are you getting this?" he asked into his radio, "Looks like the Yakuza's stash."

"Leave it for the police." Williams told him, "Try asking your prisoner if he knows where the aliens are."

Lawrence turned back towards the Yakuza as he was being restrained by Colt and Nambu.

"We're looking for the alien creatures you have. Tell me where they are and it'll go in your favour." he said but the Yakuza just spat a mouthful of blood at his feet and said something in Japanese that Lawrence could not understand but he guessed that it was an insult.

"Hey corporal that's your language, what's he saying?" Gunn asked Nambu from the hallway and the corporal glared at him.

"Screw you Gunn. My family's come from Brooklyn for over a hundred and fifty years." he responded.

"Gunn cut it out." Lawrence added, "What the hell were you playing at earlier? I ordered you in." and Gunn shrugged.

"It didn't look good gunny." he said and Lawrence shook his head before going back to his radio.

"Captain our prisoner doesn't seem to be very communicative." he transmitted.

"He was calling you the son of a whore." Hyde responded before Williams could say anything.

"You speak Japanese?" Williams asked.

"It's called the Anglo-Japanese Alliance for a reason Captain Williams. Every British officer speaks Japanese and every Japanese officer speaks English." Hyde explained.

"This is Sergeant Leyton," another British voice said over the radio, "I think you should see what we just found in the garage." and from their command posts both Williams and Hyde turned to the camera feed from the Royal Marine unit leader. This showed a small group of marines in the back of a van removing a pair of large plastic drums, both identical to those that filled the hold of the Marlow. However, unlike those these were both empty.

"Looks like we've found the proof that the Yakuza have the aliens." Williams said.

"Yes," Maddie added as she leant on the back of his chair and gently stroked his shoulders, "but where are they?"

The prisoner taken by Lawrence and the squad he led was the only one of the more than a dozen captives taken in total who was obviously one of the Yakuza's enforcers. All of the others appeared to instead be connected with the day to day operation of the Katana Club, although this still meant that they were on the Yakuza's payroll and as such they were lined up in the main area of the club for questioning.

"I take there are no signs of the actual aliens." Williams asked Lawrence and the sergeant shook his head. "None at all." he replied.

"One of them must know where they are." Maddie added from beside Williams and he turned to where Hyde was just entering the room after having met with some of his own men in the club's garage, "Find anything more?" he said.

"Sorry Captain Williams, my men have been over every vehicle in that garage and found nothing else that would connect these people to your aliens." Hyde replied.

"Then perhaps you'd be good enough to ask our prisoners about where they might be." Williams said and Hyde nodded before stepping forwards and looking up and down the line of prisoners lying face down on the floor in front of him. As was to be expected of members of and people in the employ of the Yakuza, all of the prisoners had an Asian look to them and so Hyde spoke to them in Japanese.

"I just told them that we are here looking for dangerous alien life forms and that it would be in their best interests to help us find them." he added in English, glancing back towards Williams. However, none of the prisoners taken said anything.

"I don't think they believed you." Maddie commented.

"Tell them that we found the containers that held the alien eggs." Williams told Hyde, "Then that the aliens we are looking for hatch from inside the people attacked by the creatures that come from the eggs."

Hyde turned back towards the prisoners and translated Williams' words but there was still no response from any of them.

"Add that death is certain for anyone attacked by the facehuggers." Maddie suggested and Hyde frowned.

"Okay, though I'm not certain what the Japanese for 'facehugger' is." he said before he again addressed the prisoners. As he did so Maddie watched one of them in particular, an older woman at the far end of the line who had been one of the club's cleaners.

"Her." Maddie said softly so that only Williams and Hyde could hear.

"What about her?" Hyde asked.

"She looked directly at you when you mentioned that the aliens were dangerous and then again when you said that death was certain for anyone attacked." Maddie answered.

"She doesn't look much like a criminal overlord but Maddie's very good at reading people." Williams said.

"I'll see what happens if I question her directly." Hyde said and all of a sudden the Yakuza gunman called out towards the older woman, prompting the Royal Marine standing behind him to slam the butt of his rifle into his spine.

"Shut up!" the marine yelled.

"Looks like someone does understand English after all." Lawrence commented.

"Yes, he was warning the woman to keep quiet." Hyde said. Then he looked at the woman herself and spoke to her in Japanese.

"My son." the woman unexpectedly replied in English, "My son was there when they found the creatures. When our men were attacked."

"Say nothing!" the Yakuza gunman snapped and Hyde looked at his men standing behind the gangster.

"Get him out of here." he ordered and the two soldiers dragged the Yakuza to his feet and towards the nearest exit from the room.

"Anyone that talks will pay." he yelled as he was being dragged away before a sharp blow from a fist knocked the wind from him.

"Cut her loose." Williams said and Lawrence produced a set of cutters to release the old woman from the plastic ties around her wrists before helping her to her feet.

"Perhaps we should continue this conversation more privately." Hyde suggested.

"The kitchen I think." Williams added in agreement, then he, Hyde, Lawrence and Maddie escorted the woman into the kitchen where they found her a chair to sit down.

"What do you know about the aliens?" Williams asked as soon as the woman had sat down.

"There was a fight." the woman said, "My son was there and he told me about the creatures that came from the eggs they found."

"So you spoke to your son after the fight. Did he say what happened to the men who were attacked?" Williams said.

"Yes, my son was among the men who brought the vehicles back here, along with all the evidence that needed to be disposed of before the police could find it."

"Did that include the eggs or the men who were attacked? Were they killed before the aliens could hatch from them?" Williams said but the woman shook her head.

"No, I never saw any of them. My son said that they had been taken to the mansion to see a doctor."

"What's the mansion?" Lawrence said, looking at Hyde but the Royal Marine just shrugged.

"I don't know." he responded, "Perhaps Eto can find out from his colleagues."

"The mansion is where the oyabun resides while he is not here. It is his headquarters on Raijin." the old woman explained, "I've never been there but I've heard it talked about many times."

"Oyabun?" Williams said.

"The leader of the Yakuza." Hyde told him and he nodded.

"Please, my son went to the mansion later on. No-one who went there has been heard from for almost a month now. What has happened to my son?" the old woman pleaded and Williams and Lawrence exchanged nervous looks.

"Looks like we've found our aliens." Lawrence said.

"Yes, but we still need to find the mansion itself." Williams pointed out.

10.

With this new information Williams, Lawrence, Hyde and Eto contacted police headquarters using the Katana club's own telephone system. However, they did not have the opportunity to present this before Warren spoke.

"Captain Williams, do you have the aliens?" she asked.

"I'm afraid not Agent Warren." Williams responded, "But we may have a location for them. The Yakuza have a headquarters outside the capital city known as the mansion. A witness has indicated that the men attacked by facehuggers were both taken there."

"I suspect that this mansion may be one of the estates outside the capital." Eto added, "Their structure would make for good places to conceal something such as an alien creature."

"There are dozens of those estates lieutenant." Hino pointed out, "We need to narrow it down to the exact one before my office can authorise troops to storm it."

"Well you can forget using the Yakuza vehicles to find it." Maddie announced as she entered the room just in time to hear this, "I checked their navigation systems and the Yakuza were smart enough to disable the route logs. There's no telling where any of those vehicles have been."

"What about CCTV? Raijin does have traffic cameras doesn't it?" Warren asked.

"Yes but they are spread thinly outside the city. At best we'll get a general heading." Hino answered.

"Miss Hino, do you have communication data for the estates?" Williams said.

"I can't authorise random wire taps any more than I can authorise a random raid captain." Hino told him.

"That's not what I meant. The woman we spoke to said that no-one who had gone to the mansion in the last month or so had been heard from again. If no-one at the mansion has communicated with the outside world in that time frame then surely that would show up in official records. It doesn't matter who they called, just seeing that anyone from an estate called someone would tell us that their estate is not the one we're looking for." Williams said.

"Leave it with me." Hino said, "I'll see if I can find out. In the meantime what about the Katana Club?"

"My men will remain here to see what evidence of Yakuza activities is available." Eto replied.

"We shouldn't need a police escort outside the city anyway. There won't be any crowds out there." Hyde added.

"A free fire zone then?" Lawrence asked and Hyde nodded.

"Quite." he replied.

"Once we have identified the location of the mansion I might be able to convince the government to permit it to be destroyed from orbit or the air." Hino suggested, "Wouldn't that be easier than sending in ground troops?"

"No." Williams said, "We could easily level any structure on Raijin using the weapons aboard the *Almayer* but we'd never be certain that we got the aliens if they are buried under hundreds of tonnes of rubble or vaporised by the heat of a rail gun round that's just been dropped from space. We're going to have to settle this the old fashioned way, send ground troops in to kill the aliens and recover their bodies to make sure that they are dead."

"Given Captain Williams' familiarity with this species I suggest that he be given tactical command of this mission instead of following the normal convention of the local commander being in charge." Warren said.

"Are you okay with that Captain Hyde?" Hino asked.

"Yes, it seems sensible to me." he said.

"I'd like to make sure that the alien eggs we already have are loaded aboard the *Almayer* quickly." Warren said, "The longer they are stored on the surface, the more chance there is of an accident."

"I'd like them out of the way as well." Hino added in agreement.

"Stoner's injury is going to keep him out of action." Lawrence commented and Williams nodded.

"Plus after Gunn screwed up I'd rather not rely on him to follow orders if we get into a tight spot." he said, "I'll detail him to handle the transfer of the eggs with Stoner's supervision. Everyone else needs to be ready to move out."

Although an aerial or orbital strike had been ruled out the dropship that had brought Williams and his marines from the *Almayer* was still useful for conducting a reconnaissance flight over the mansion after Hino's office was able to identify it from the communication records that indicated no calls had been placed from the property during the relevant time frame and Lewis flew over the building while the marines' ground vehicles were approaching via road from the capital. The feed from the dropship showed the cluster of small islands on which the mansion was built and the terrain around it that was covered largely Raijin's analogue to Earth's trees. This made observing the ground visually difficult but the dropship possessed sensors that could

penetrate the vegetation to provide a clearer picture.

"I'm not seeing any movement down there captain." Lewis reported.

"Nothing on thermal either." Thompson added from behind him.

"Where will those creatures be hiding?" Hyde asked from his vehicle.

"They could be anywhere." Williams told him, "They don't appear to be warm bloodied so they don't radiate any heat that we can pick up on infra red."

"They tend to like it hot though." Maddie pointed out as she drove their APC.

"That place is a fortress." Lawrence commented as he looked at the feed from the dropship.

"Captain Hyde, do a lot of the locals construct buildings like this one?" Williams asked.

"The rich ones do, yes. Given the unpleasant nature of our atmosphere there is a fashion for homes to resemble old style fortifications. Everyone wants to be the lord of his own castle." Hyde replied.

"Thankfully fortifications like that have been obsolete for centuries." Lawrence said, "We've got more than enough firepower to blast our way inside that place."

"Yes, but it's the layout that concerns me." Williams said, pointing to the display, "Look at the way there are numerous smaller structures surrounding the main one. Plus the way it makes use of the islands and water means that that it would be easy for someone to block our path once we're committed to an infantry attack."

"Assuming there's anyone left alive in there." Lawrence said, "The rate we've seen those aliens kill marines I wouldn't be surprised if the reason we're not seeing any signs of life is because everyone inside is already dead."

"Hopefully the aliens won't have moved elsewhere in search of further prey." Hyde said.

"I doubt it." Maddie replied, "Our information suggests that the aliens are a nesting species. Even if they leave to go hunting they'll return to the nest again when they're done."

"Which could work for us." Lawrence said, "If the aliens are out hunting when we get there we might be able to lay a trap for them."

"Do I need to remind you what happened when we tried setting traps for aliens aboard the *Sulaco* and *Neille*?" Maddie commented.

"This time we've got a better idea of what we're dealing with though." Williams pointed out before adding, "I'd like to get a better idea of what's going on on the ground though. Captain Hyde what would you say to a scouting mission on foot?"

"A team from each of our forces?" Hyde responded.

"Yes. Yours know the environment better while Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence has experience dealing with the aliens. If they can find tracks then that might give us a clue as to exactly where the aliens are located."

"Agreed. I'll have a fire team ready to deploy at two thousand metres out."

"Okay Nambu." Lawrence called out, looking around at the seated marines, "Your squad is with me. Masks on everyone. Owen, that includes you while you're filling in for Gunn."

"Great." Owen muttered as the four marines got out of their seats and began to put on their respirators,

"Gunn won't do his job and now I'm the one in the firing line."

When the column of armoured vehicles came to a halt two kilometres from the mansion Lawrence and Nambu's squad of marines rapidly disembarked from their APC, closing the hatch behind them as quickly as possible to limit the contamination of the air inside by the atmosphere outside. At the same time a unit of four Royal Marines were deploying from one of their tracked vehicles and now that they were in a more rural area Lawrence could see how the pattern of their uniforms was designed to blend in closely with the local vegetation.

"Corporal Baxter." the leader of the Royal Marines identified himself as when his men joined with Lawrence and his squad.

"You know what we're looking for corporal?" Lawrence asked and Baxter nodded.

"Anything that doesn't belong." he replied.

"Exactly. Since your men are familiar with these woods I suggest you lead the way." Lawrence said.

"Yes sergeant." he said, then his unit spread out into a line side by side and they began to advance through the woods towards the mansion leaving the armoured vehicles behind.

"Owen get that tracker on line. While Baxter's men are searching for tracks we may as well cover them."

Lawrence ordered and Owen unslung the motion tracker he carried.

"Yes gunny." he said as he activated the device and immediately it showed a row of signals from directly in front of the US marines that represented the British troops moving ahead of them.

The mixed group of marines continued to advance until Baxter brought his men to a halt and walked back to speak with Lawrence.

"Find something corporal?" Lawrence asked.

"No. It's what's missing that's bothering me." Baxter answered and he looked around, "These woods should be full of wildlife. When we got out of the APCs I thought that the noise of the engines had scared them off but now that we're further away we ought to be able to hear them."

"He's right gunny." Owen agreed as he turned back and forth, scanning the area with the motion tracker, "I'm not picking up any movement. This thing will detect a rat if it has to, it's not natural for there to be nothing in an area like this."

"There are no recent tracks either." Baxter continued, "Whatever drove the wildlife away did so several days ago at least."

"Contact!" Owen suddenly exclaimed, "I've got movement to the south west. Single target."

The marines immediately split into pairs and spread out, aiming their weapons in the direction that Owen had identified as they waited to see what was approaching. As far as the marines knew they were the only people in this area but they knew that it was still possible that there could be someone else in these woods and so they did not risk firing before they could identify their target.

The woods reduced the range of the motion tracker from its optimum thousand metres in open ground but the approaching target was still detected when it was several hundred metres distant and Owen began to count down the range.

"Three hundred metres." he called out, "Two-fifty."

"I don't see anything." Wesson said as he tried to acquire a target with his smart gun's tracking system.

"Two hundred." Owen said and Lawrence frowned.

"Any idea how big it is?" he asked.

"Sorry gunny. Can't tell from these readings. It's like its masked somehow." Owen told him.

"It should be in sight by now if it's the size of a person." Lawrence pointed out.

"One hundred and fifty metres." Owen said and all of a sudden there was a snapping sound from in the trees above and the marines saw a brief shower of leaves fall to the ground.

"It's in the trees." Lawrence said as the marines raised their weapons.

"Then it isn't human." Baxter pointed out as the target continued to leap from tree to tree, disturbing more leaves as it came nearer.

"Got it!" Wesson exclaimed when he saw a dark, vaguely humanoid shape as it leapt from one tree to another and he fired his smart gun. The agile target avoid the burst of fire and the explosive rounds instead blew several small branches out of the trees. He was joined in firing by the Royal Marines' own support gunner who also unleashed a burst of fire that likewise failed to hit the alien as it continued to close on their position.

Lawrence pointed his own pulse rifle at where the trees above him moved as the alien leapt between trees again and this time he clearly saw the distinctive long head and tail.

"It's an alien alright." he said before he too fired and all around him the marines joined in the shooting.

Despite its agility the alien could not avoid all of this fire and it let out a loud screech as it plummeted from the trees and came crashing to the ground where it thrashed about, still screeching. No longer able to evade the marines' gunfire the alien was now an easy target and as the marines continued to fire it was torn apart.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" Lawrence yelled and the firing came to an end. The mangled corpse of the alien lay about twenty metres in front of Lawrence and he advanced towards it cautiously. He was certain that the creature was dead after the amount of hits it had taken but he did not want to risk being ambushed if the second one was somewhere close by. However, as he got closer to the alien he noticed something odd about it, "Captain are you seeing this?" he said into his radio.

"Yes, I see it." Williams responded as he looked at the misshapen body of the alien on the feed from Lawrence's helmet mounted camera, "Was that caused by the gunfire?"

The aliens classified as Xenomorph species XX121 that Williams and Lawrence had previously encountered had all been very humanoid in their form but now that this example was dead it was possible to see that its limbs were arranged differently. It still had four limbs that were connected to the torso in the same places but their shape was different, particularly the lower pair of limbs that looked more like the hind legs of a quadruped rather than the legs of a biped. In addition the head was smoother than normal and the four dorsal spines usually found on the creatures' backs were missing.

"Negative captain. I think that this thing always looked like this." Lawrence said and inside the APC William looked towards Maddie in the driver's seat.

"Maddie come and take a look at this." he told her and she got up and hurried to his side.

"Extraordinary." she said.

"Why do you think it looks like that?" Williams asked.

"Remember the aliens we encountered on LV four-two-six? Most of them had a slightly different anatomy to the first ones we encountered aboard the *Sulaco* and the *Neille*." Maddie pointed out.

"Yes, but wasn't that because they were hatched from chimpanzees instead of humans?" Williams pointed out and Maddie nodded.

"Exactly. I think this one hatched from a quadruped of some kind. Possibly a large dog." Maddie said and Williams frowned.

"The woman from the Marlow said that she saw both facehuggers attach themselves to people. We should

be dealing with two of the humanoid form." Williams said.

"Yes but you're missing one thing. What if there are more than two now? What little information we have about their life cycle suggests that this species originates in eggs that are laid in large numbers by a queen. So what if one of the aliens that hatched out of our missing Yakuza either was a queen or later matured into one?"

"Then every one of the missing Yakuza could have been used as a host. We could be facing two hundred aliens, never mind two." Williams said.

"Captain Williams this is Agent Warren." Warren's voice said over the radio from the command centre in the capital where she, Eto and Hino had been monitoring the operation.

"Yes Agent Warren?" Williams responded.

"If you want to abort the mission I can request reinforcements." Warren said.

"I don't think that will be necessary. Besides it would take too long for troops from Earth to get here. By then we could be dealing with thousands of aliens." Williams said.

"All the same I think I ought to report this. Maybe there are other forces more locally that we could call upon." Warren said.

"That is your prerogative Agent Warren." Williams said and then he shut off his transmitter as he turned towards Maddie again.

"Forces more local?" she commented, looking back at him, "That would be convenient."

"Yes it would." Williams said before he turned his transmitter back on again, "Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence, are there any signs of other aliens in the area?"

"No captain. Our motion trackers are clear." Lawrence replied.

"Good. In that case you may proceed towards the target, but be alert. If the aliens have been able to reproduce then there could be a large number of them in the area." Williams ordered.

"Don't worry captain, we'll be careful." Lawrence replied.

Since the Yakuza mansion was located on a cluster of islands the marines were able to study it from a distance across the water using binoculars. The structures featured few external windows and all that could be seen were shuttered, providing no view of what was going on inside.

"I don't see any signs of physical damage." Lawrence commented as he held his binoculars up to the faceplate of his gas mask.

"No aliens around either." Baxter commented as he too studied the various interconnected structures that made up the mansion. Then he lowered his binoculars and looked at the water of the lake, "Unless they can hold their breath." he said, "Do those things swim?"

"That's a good question." Lawrence said, "As far as I know this is the first time that they have been encountered anywhere that has enough surface water for them to try. All the records indicate that they've only been seen aboard spaceships and at colony on LV four-two-six where the terraforming hadn't progressed far enough for rivers and lakes." and hearing this the marines all looked at the water, picturing every tiny wave as a disturbance caused by an alien just beneath the surface.

"Err captain I've got a question for Maddie." Lawrence transmitted.

"I heard you sergeant," Maddie responded, "and the answer is I don't know enough to say whether or not the aliens can swim for certain but I'd guess at yes for at least short periods. Their biology doesn't lend itself to being very buoyant but they are probably strong enough to make up for that."

"Thanks Maddie. We're pulling back." Lawrence said and the marine scouting party began to move further back from the water's edge to make sure that they were not surprised by any aliens approaching from beneath it.

"I see only one entry point from the shore." Lawrence reported when the scouting party had taken up a new position far enough back from the water that they could react to anything coming out of it but still close enough that they could easily see the mansion through the trees, "Although there's the dock on the far side that has a boat tied up on it."

"That matches what we saw from the aerial surveillance run." Williams replied, "Adding in the landing pad and that gives us three choices."

"And three sections of troops." Hyde added, "So do we split up to attack from as many different points as possible or go in together for maximum effect at a single location?"

"We go together." Williams said without hesitation, "If we were just dealing with a human enemy then I'd attack from as many different angles as possible but given what we're dealing with I don't want to risk any of our troops getting cut off and overrun if they're unlucky enough to enter right next to the main nest. Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence I want you to get close to the bridge that is our only entry point that you can assess whether or not it will take the weight of our APCs. I don't want to end up having to drag any of them out of the lake because it collapsed."

"Understood captain. We're moving in now." Lawrence said and the marines started off towards the bridge

that led from the mainland to one of the mansion's smaller outlying structures.

While Lawrence and his team were moving in closer to the mansion Williams radioed Hyde once more.

"Captain Hyde, do you have an equivalent to our UA five-seven-one robot sentry in your inventory?" he asked.

"Of course Captain Williams. We have six of our own robot sentries with us, all armed with our standard eight point one millimetre smart gun. Of course there are several dozen more back at our base with various armaments if you think we need them."

"No, six will probably do and machine guns are perfect for what I have in mind. We have four so that gives us ten in total to cover the shoreline. I want to make sure that none of the aliens manage to escape when we start our assault and an automated smart gun perimeter should do that quite nicely."

"Captain Williams I don't like the idea of you leaving robot sentries unattended." Warren said suddenly, having still been listening in, "Miss Hino, do you think the government of Raijin will approve of the use of robot weapons in an open area?"

"Given the situation I'm sure they won't raise any objections." Hino answered, "I'll run it by them though."

"Thank you. Captain Williams you are not to deploy those sentries until you have clearance from the Raijin government. Do you understand me?" Warren said.

"Of course Agent Warren." Williams responded and at the same time he placed his computer tablet on the command console in front of him so that he would see immediately if it attempted to alert him to anything.

Back at the command centre in the capital Warren excused herself from the group monitoring the assault on the Yakuza mansion and quickly found a private office from where she could send a message from her computer. She rapidly typed up a situation report, explaining that it was likely that the aliens were breeding on Raijin and that that meant there was a queen present. As soon as this was done she encrypted the message and relayed it up to the *Almayer* for transmission before placing her computer back in standby mode. However, just as she got up to return to the command centre she heard a chime coming from the computer that informed her that it had just received a message via the *Almayer's* communication system. Any such message from Earth would have to have been sent while the crew were still in hypersleep for it to have reached Raijin already and so that suggested to Warren that this message had originated somewhere much closer.

Sitting back down she opened up the messaging system and then selected the single unread message in her inbox. The header of this message indicated that it was in response to the one she had only just sent and the sender was not identified. Opening the message Warren saw that it was only a brief section of text that read:

PRESENCE OF ALIEN QUEEN ACKNOWLEDGED. RECOVERY TEAM EN-ROUTE. DO NOT PERMIT MILITARY TO ENGAGE. SPECIMEN TO BE TAKEN ALIVE.

Warren stared at the message on the screen. She knew that the local Weyland-Yutani office had been included in on all of her communications but this response meant that the company must have had a strike force of its own already in the Beta Hydri system and a part of her wondered what the exact purpose of that force was to have been if the *Almayer* departed laden with alien eggs and carrying the only witnesses who could tie the company to the loss of the *Sulaco*

Taking out the phone she had been given on arrival on Raijin Warren tapped in a number she had memorised before leaving Earth, a number where she had been told she should only use in an emergency. Whether or not this counted as an emergency to whoever would answer Warren could not say, but as far as she was concerned the potential for Weyland-Yutani commandos to attack US Colonial Marines and in doing so expose her involvement with the company was an emergency to her.

"Come on pick up." she muttered to herself as the phone rang right before someone answered.

"Hello?" an English accented male voice said.

"It's Warren."

"Who else would it be? No-one else has this number. Now what do you want?" the man asked.

"I was told to call you if there was an emergency." Warren replied.

"Is there?"

"I just got a message telling me that your people are on the way to Raijin to take this alien queen themselves and somehow I'm supposed to get the marines to just stand aside for them. I think that qualifies as an emergency. How the hell am I supposed to manage that without exposing myself?" Warren said.

"By ordering them to stand down Agent Warren. We made sure that you had authority over the marines. Use it." the man told her, "Or do you think that Captain Williams will be a problem?"

"No." Warren answered, "I've got Captain Williams wrapped around my finger."

"Good. Then there's not going to be a problem now, is there?" the man said before he abruptly hung up.

Warren hesitated, still holding the phone to her ear before she sighed and returned it to her pocket. Then she put her computer back into standby mode and headed back to the command centre.

11.

Lawrence and his advanced party saw several ground vehicles parked in a small clearing on the mainland side of the bridge leading to the mansion and they approached these cautiously. The team's motion tracker did not detect any signs of movement around the vehicles but it was not certain that they had been abandoned and so the marines remained alert for an ambush. It was only when they reached the edge of the clearing that the marines were able to confirm that all of them were empty. There was a mix of light vehicles that ranged from motorcycles and cars up to small vans. Some of them had their doors closed while others stood open, suggesting that something had happened to the owners right as they were getting into or out of the vehicles.

"I guess these are what brought the missing Yakuza here over the past month." Lawrence said as the marines spread out to inspect the vehicles.

"Over here!" one of the Royal Marines suddenly called out when he peered into the front of an abandoned car that had its driver's door wide open and he waved at Lawrence.

"Found something marine?" he asked as he dashed towards the man, Corporal Baxter following suit.

"Take a look at this." the marine said and he pointed into the car at the patches of dried blood spread around it. In addition to this there was a large hole in the driver's seat where it looked as if acid had been poured onto it. This had eaten away at the covering and also the springs inside to leave little behind. Lawrence looked at the roof of the car and saw that there was a tiny round hole in it above the front seats that looked to have been made from the inside.

"Are you seeing this captain?" Lawrence signalled.

"Yes I see it." Williams responded from the APC.

Looks like someone got off a shot while he was being eaten alive." Lawrence added and he pointed to the hole, "The bullet went right through the alien and its acidic blood splashed over the seats."

"No signs of any bodies though." Baxter commented.

"No, my guess is they got dragged off into there." Lawrence said and he turned towards the bridge leading to the mansion.

The bridge led across the water to an armoured door that looked somewhat out of place on the traditional Japanese architecture used for the mansion even though it was decorated with traditional Japanese images. Both the door and the frame it was set in were clearly made of metal and Lawrence guessed that they would be highly resilient to attack.

"Baxter, have your men take a look under this bridge. Everyone else keep watch until I get back." Lawrence ordered.

"Where are you going gunnery sergeant?" Baxter asked in response and Lawrence pointed across the bridge.

"I want to take a look at that door." he said.

Although they were shuttered, Lawrence could see that there were several windows that overlooked the bridge, including two positioned above the door so that the walls on either side would provide no hiding place from anyone looking out and he guessed that these were intended to be used by snipers should the mansion come under attack. Certainly Lawrence did not think that he could have made it across the bridge while under fire from them. Fortunately though the Yakuza were not lying in wait for him and he was able to get across the bridge safely and inspect the armoured door. The first thing that Lawrence noticed about this was that although he was looking at a door he could not make out any means of opening it from the outside. As a security feature this was flawless. A locking mechanism presented an inherent weakness, especially as was likely if it was electronic in nature. Without such a feature the only way to enter the mansion was either for someone to open the door from the inside or blast through it.

Without knowing exactly how thick the door was or even what it was made of, using explosives against it risked collapsing the structure around it while there was no way of telling how long it would take to cut through with torches.

"Are you seeing this captain?" Lawrence said into his radio.

"Yes, there doesn't seem to be an easy way in does there?" Williams replied.

"No captain." Lawrence said and then he looked up, "Maybe one of those windows would be a better idea. If I can get a small team inside then maybe we can get to the controls for the door on the inside."

"That assumes there are any." Maddie said.

"How could there not be? How else would the door open?" Lawrence asked.

"Wireless control." Maddie told him, "Take a look around and see if you can see anything that looks like a receiver unit. It won't have to be very big or even very close to the door."

"I don't see anything. I recall spotting a few antennas mounted on the main structure. Could one of them be

what I'm looking for?" Lawrence said.

"I doubt it. It would require cables to be run all the way back to the door." Maddie said.

"In that case I recommend trying to get in through one of the windows above the door with my squad and making our way down to open the door from the inside." Lawrence said.

"It might not be so easy to get in through the windows either." Williams commented but before Lawrence could reply a message from Baxter came over the radio.

"Sergeant Lawrence, I think you should see this." he said, "There's something under the bridge."

"I'm on my way." Lawrence responded and while he hurried back across the bridge both Williams and Hyde turned to the camera feed from Baxter to see what he was looking at.

"It's too dark, I can't make out any details there." Hyde said and Baxter turned on the flash light mounted on his armour to illuminate the substance stuck to the underside of the bridge. This was a similar grey in colour to the concrete used in the construction of the bridge but it was smooth and had a reflective shine to it, "What is that?" Hyde said.

"Resin." Williams said, remembering the substance that the aliens produced to build their nests from, "The aliens definitely call this place home. Be careful corporal, the aliens are well camouflaged if they're clinging to that."

"Yes sir." Baxter said.

"Damn." Lawrence said softly when he arrived and saw the trail of resin that led all the way from the mainland shore to the island on which the entrance to the mansion was built. Being in shadow made it difficult to pick out some details but Lawrence was able to see that there was an opening beneath the far end of the bridge that the trail of resin led to, "I think I've just found our way in." he said.

"How do you know that leads inside the building?" Baxter asked and Lawrence pointed at the uneven surface of the trail of resin.

"Because the aliens are using that as their bridge to cross the water." he explained, "They can grab onto it and pull themselves over here when they go out hunting and then do the same thing in the other direction when they get back. That hole is their way in and out and thankfully they don't have locked doors."

"Maybe not, but there could be more of those creatures right inside that hole." Hyde pointed out.

"As long as the squad Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence takes with him has an incinerator unit with it that shouldn't be an issue." Williams said, "The tunnel can be cleared ahead of them."

Back in the command centre, Warren listened to this exchange. Although her instructions were to prevent the marines from attacking the alien queen she realised that they would be needed to clear out any other aliens present in the nest and that meant they had to find a way inside the mansion. However, once they were inside it would be difficult for her to control what they did in the heat of battle. She was still thinking about how to resolve this conundrum when one of the technicians monitoring the data coming from Raijin's space traffic control spoke up.

"Traffic control is reporting an unscheduled vessel approaching the planet. On its present course it will reach the blockade perimeter in a little over four hours." he said.

"Four hours?" Eto commented, "That puts it well within the system. We should have seen it earlier than this."

"The ship appears to have stealth capabilities. Traffic control are only picking it up now because of its drive plume. There is no noticeable radar or lidar signature." the technician reported.

"Then it's a military ship." Hino said and she looked at Warren, "Perhaps there was a patrol nearby after all and they're responding to your messages."

It was obvious to Warren that the approaching ship carried the team sent by Weyland-Yutani to take possession of the alien queen. In all likelihood it had been in the system since before the *Almayer* had arrived and had been lying in wait for them to leave. Now though it had been forced to break cover to deploy its troops to Raijin.

"Captain Williams," Hino carried on, speaking into her headset, "it looks like we've got reinforcements en route. Their ETA is about four hours. You may want to delay your assault until they arrive."

"Understood control." Williams responded, giving no further indication of what he intended.

Inside his APC Williams took off his headset and reached for the gas mask he had nearby just in case he could no longer rely on the environmental protection of the vehicle.

"Maddie with me. Stay off comms." he said as he got up and she nodded. Then the pair of them donned their masks and exited the vehicle, "Well?" he asked as he led her towards the Royal Marine APC that he knew Hyde was inside and Maddie looked at the tablet she carried.

"Yep. The *Almayer* relayed a signal from Warren's computer to Earth and also another location here on Raijin. Then about a minute later there was a reply from the local address to her computer." she said.

"Weyland-Yutani trying to keep its mess hidden." Williams said as they reached the APC and he knocked on the rear hatch before it was opened and they both quickly entered the vehicle to avoid it becoming

contaminated by the local atmosphere.

"Captain Williams." Hyde said as he turned his chair, a confused look on his face, "What do—"

"Could I ask you to disconnect yourself? There's something I need to discuss in private." Williams said.

"Of course." Hyde replied, removing his headset and taking his own gas mask from its bag. Then he looked at the other marines inside the vehicle, "Wait here until I return." he told them and then he left the vehicle with Williams and Maddie, "Now would you mind telling me what secret is so important that it can't be discussed over the radio?" he asked.

"This whole mission is a set up." Williams told him bluntly, "There's a ship approaching the planet that may be bringing more troops."

"That's good news isn't it?" Hyde said, confused.

"Not necessarily. The timing is too convenient." Williams said.

"Agent Warren has been feeding information about our activities to Weyland-Yutani." Maddie added, "Never mind building a case against them, she's in league with them."

"Those are serious allegations. Are you certain?" Hyde said.

"As certain as I can be." Williams said, "Show him Maddie." and Maddie handed Hyde the computer tablet.

"That shows the messages she's sent and received. The communication is encrypted so we can't tell exactly what was said but we do know that as well as being sent back to Earth there was a secondary recipient here on Raijin." she explained.

"We're guessing that it ended up at the company office here." Williams added.

"Of course Earth is too far away for a reply but the local address did respond to the last message. One that was sent just after we reported that it was likely there was an alien queen here on Raijin." Maddie continued.

"My guess is that that ship was supposed to intercept the *Almayer* after we left and take the alien eggs as well as the crew of the Marlow from us, leaving no evidence of what the company's been up to with the aliens. Now though they're showing their hand for a bigger prize." Williams said.

"This alien queen?" Hyde said and Williams nodded.

"If the queen is what we think it is then yes. The company would be able to produce all the aliens it needed for its research." he said.

"And it's only a matter of time before they screw up and some of them get loose. They couldn't even keep a few dozen properly contained on Acheron." Maddie added, using the given name of LV-426 instead of its catalogue designation.

"I don't think that we're alone right now either." Williams went on, "Warren was dead set against us deploying our robot sentries even before she was in contact with the company. There's probably a small unit keeping tabs on us that would be fire on us if we set up the sentries."

"So what do we do about this?" Hyde asked and Williams smiled at him through his mask.

"Set up the sentries." he said, "We just make sure that no-one finds out we've done it before we need them." Hyde nodded.

"I understand. I'll make sure that the feed from some of my men's camera's makes it look like they're on sentry duty themselves." he said.

"You mean mounting them on poles so that none of them appears in the feeds of the others?" Maddie replied.

"Precisely." Hyde said and Williams smiled.

"What's so amusing?" Maddie asked, frowning.

"Oh just that no matter how much governments think they can use technology to monitor every aspect of the military, common soldiers can always find a way to do things without being found out." Williams answered.

Lawrence was taking only a single squad with him into the tunnel beneath the bridge and before they began Owen swapped his pulse rifle for a flame unit.

"You look nervous." Lawrence said when he saw the marine checking his weapon while a dingy was being inflated to carry them the short distance across the water to the island, "Haven't you used one of those things before?"

"Sure I have gunny." Owen replied, "It's just that this means I have to be on point and from what I hear these aliens will rip a man apart if they get hold of him."

Lawrence smiled.

"Don't worry private, in my experience fighting the things being on point is no less dangerous than being anywhere else." he said.

"That's not very comforting gunny." Colt commented and Lawrence turned towards her.

"It wasn't meant to be. We're marines and everything we do is dangerous. We laugh at danger. We stand firm against danger and when it's all over we find something else that dangerous to do because that's what we're being paid for. Now where is my boat?"

"Ready to go gunny." Nambu said.

“Good, now let’s make like marines and get in.” Lawrence ordered and the squad climbed aboard the dingy before Nambu and Lawrence used their oars to push off from the shore. They kept beneath the bridge as they paddled across the water, with Owen perched at the front of the dingy and pointing his flame unit towards the hole that they were heading for. Behind him Wesson just cradled his smart gun, the weapon being too cumbersome to use while in the dingy but the moment that they reached the opposite shore he leapt out and dropped into a crouching position, his weapon aimed at the hole to cover it while the rest of the marines disembarked.

“Owen hand me that tracker.” Lawrence ordered and Owen unslung his motion tracker and gave it to the sergeant before pointing his flame unit at the hole while Lawrence checked for movement within, “No movement.” he said, “Okay Owen you’re up. Make sure that there aren’t any aliens clinging to the walls in there.”

“Semper fi gunny.” Owen said and he moved up the slope of the shore until he could get a clear shot into the hole and squeezed the trigger of his flame unit. Despite the toxins in Raijin’s atmosphere there was sufficient oxygen for the flame unit to function perfectly and the weapon produced a roar as the jet of burning liquid was propelled into the hole. The flames from this expanded to fill the entire width of the tunnel, flowing into every crevice where an alien could be hiding but Lawrence did not hear the tell tale shrieking of a dying alien and after a few seconds he placed a hand on Owen’s shoulder.

“That’s enough private. If there was anything alive in there then it’s barbecued by now.” he said and Owen cut off the flow of fuel, “In we go.” Lawrence added, looking around at the rest of the squad, “Owen’s on point and I’ll follow. Nambu you’re next and then Colt. Wesson can bring up the rear.”

Owen advanced cautiously into the hole. It was not a tight squeeze for the armoured marine to get inside but there was not enough room to stand and he had to be careful about turning around so that he did not bang the muzzle of his flame unit into the side as he moved forwards.

“This stuff doesn’t burn.” he commented when he saw that the interior of the tunnel was still completely lined with the resin that the aliens secreted.

“No, but thankfully the bugs that make it do. Now keep going, the sooner we’re out of this confined space the better.” Lawrence told him and Owen continued to move forwards along the tunnel. Even through the resin it was possible to tell that the tunnel had not been created by humans. Its shape was too irregular to have been bored out by heavy drilling tools and the implication was that the aliens had had to burrow their way out of the mansion.

The tunnel ran for a short distance beneath the mansion’s outer structure before it reached a chamber that was obviously of human construction and Owen looked out of the tunnel into it. The room was used for storage and this meant that there were multiple hiding places not visible from inside the tunnel. Owen emerged cautiously, holding his flame unit at the ready just in case an alien suddenly sprang out from the shadows cast by the rows of shelves, then paused and let his shoulder lamp illuminate as much of the room ahead of him as possible while the other marines followed him out of the tunnel.

As soon as the marines were inside the storage room Lawrence slung his rifle over his shoulder and then reached up to remove his helmet and gas mask before taking several deep breaths.

“The air’s clear.” he announced when he found he could neither taste nor smell the noxious gases present in Raijin’s atmosphere.

“There must still be power on somewhere to keep the pumps running.” Nambu commented and Lawrence nodded.

“Nambu take Left. Colt go right. I’m going straight on.” he ordered as he replaced his helmet and unslung his rifle. Then leaving Owen and Wesson by the entrance to the tunnel the rest of the squad split up to search the room. The flames from Owen’s flame unit had not reached this far and so none of the contents had been damaged by fire. Fortunately, in Lawrence’s mind when he saw the containers of flammable chemicals stored on some of the shelves. Had the flame unit struck these then in all likelihood the entire room would have been consumed by flames and the marines would not have been able to enter the mansion through the room until they had burned themselves out.

When the marines reached the far end of the room they found a doorway that stood open into the rest of the mansion and Lawrence jumped through before immediately moving to one side to avoid framing himself in the doorway while blocking it for the other marines.

“Clear.” he said when he saw no signs of aliens in the hallway he now stood in, “Form up and let’s move. The main doors ought to be this way.”

The marines then advanced towards the mansion’s large front door, alternating between moving and keeping watch for either any aliens or surviving Yakuza who might jump out from one of the doorways they passed on the way before they reached a large chamber that contained several expensive looking civilian vehicles and had the front door they were seeking at one end.

“This is Lawrence, we’ve found the door.” he signalled and then he turned around, “Colt, see if you can find the controls and get that thing open.” he ordered and Colt nodded.

"Yes gunny." she said before rushing towards the main door.

While she was searching for the control mechanism for the door the other marines of the squad began to search the vehicles inside the chamber, checking inside and beneath each of them. Given that the windows of all of the cars were blacked out it was only possible to check the interiors by opening the doors or if they were locked by smashing their windows. Although all of these vehicles were adapted for use in the unpleasant atmosphere of Rajjin they were still of makes and models that were familiar to the marines and so they recognised the quality of them.

"Seems a pity to be doing this. Somebody obviously had plenty of money to spend on these." Nambu commented as he used the butt of his pulse rifle to break through another car window.

"Yeah, organised crime obviously pays better than the corps does." Lawrence agreed.

"Gunny I've found more of those burns over here." Wesson announced and Lawrence turned to see the smart gun armed marine shining his light at the side of a car that now had a large section at the rear melted away. With this proof that the aliens had already found their way as far as this room Lawrence decided that more caution was needed.

"Okay Owen and Wesson I want the pair of you to cover that internal door." he ordered, pointing at the doorway the marines had used to enter the room, "Watch your motion tracker and don't wait for target ID before firing at anything that approaches. We're not expecting any friendlies in here."

"Yes gunny." Owen responded as he and Wesson darted back to the doorway, positioning themselves either side of it with the smart gun and motion tracker pointing through it.

At the same time Colt had found what looked like the control panel to the main door located on a small desk not far to the side of it. This desk also featured a display screen that showed the bridge outside and the Royal Marines waiting on the opposite shore. Obviously this was a guard post intended to prevent anyone approaching the door without being seen. Even from the inside the controls to the main door required a code be input into a small keypad and so she had to break open the panel and access the circuitry behind it directly in her effort to open it.

"Got it!" she called out when her hack tools registered a sudden voltage shift in the lock controls and there was a loud 'hiss' as the main door began to slid open. The higher air pressure maintained inside the mansion to keep out the local atmosphere created a sudden draft as soon as the door began to open though this was not severe and although a few papers on the desk shifted slightly nothing was hurled towards the opening door.

"Advance!" Baxter ordered from the far side of the bridge and the Royal Marine squad rushed towards the mansion with their pulse rifles held to their shoulders.

"The entrance is secured captain." Lawrence signalled, "You can bring in the rest of the force whenever you want."

12.

"Understood. We're coming in. All units advance. Disembark before the bridge, I don't want to risk our APCs collapsing it." Williams responded, his order broadcast to all the marine vehicles and immediately all three of them accelerated along the road that led to the mansion.

Sticking to the narrow road to avoid any collisions with trees that could immobilise even an armoured vehicle forced the APCs to advance in a single column, with Williams' vehicle at the front. These sped towards the mansion before coming to a halt in the clearing by the bridge. The doors of all three then opened in rapid succession so that the troops they carried could disembark and hurry across the bridge into the mansion. They were joined by Williams who advanced with his pistol drawn until he reached the far side where he was met by Lawrence just inside the mansion's garage and he holstered his pistol and lifted his gas mask from his face.

"I want an area large enough for our APC clearing in here." he said and Lawrence nodded.

"Going to risk the bridge?" he asked.

"Yes. Our vehicle is lighter than the Brits' are and I want a local command centre inside where I don't need to keep putting on one of these to get out." Williams answered and he held up his gas mask. Then he looked around, "No lights anywhere." he commented.

"No, not that we've seen but the environmental control system is working and the door opened up so there's obviously power available." Lawrence said.

"And power means a hot spot." Williams pointed out, "Either there's an external supply that will need stepping down in voltage or there's a local generator."

"Actually captain there's likely to be a generator and an external supply." Sergeant Leyton said as he joined the two Americans, "That's how most of these estates function. They draw power from the planetary grid but their remote locations mean that it can take time to correct a fault."

"Any chance you know where the back up generator would be?" Lawrence said.

"The aliens like it hot. We find the warmest place in here and we'll probably find their nest." Williams explained.

"Sorry captain. I didn't see any overhead lines from outside and a subsurface cable could come in from almost any direction, even under the lake." Leyton said.

"Miss Hino, did you catch that?" Williams asked, raising a hand to his radio headset as he spoke.

"Yes, yes I heard." Hino responded and in the colony command centre she looked around, pointing to a nearby technician who understood what she wanted and began to check the planetary power distribution plans, "We're working on it now."

"Movement!" Owen called out suddenly and the marines in the garage all turned towards him.

"Confirmed." a Royal Marine added as he checked his own equivalent to the Colonial Marines' motion tracker, "Multiple signals closing from the east."

"That's the core of this place." Williams said.

"Looks like we've attracted attention." Lawrence added.

"This is a big signal." Owen said, "A dozen contacts at least."

"Stand to!" Leyton called out and the marines began to gather around the garage's internal door.

"Signals still closing." Owen announced and then he frowned, "The first should be in sight by now." he added.

"There's nothing out there." Wesson added as he pointed his smart gun down the hallway.

"They must be on a different floor." Williams said, "Quick, find every vent and duct access you can and cover them."

Leaving a small group of marines by the doorway the rest of the marines spread out around the garage again, hunting for any alternative ways that an alien could use to get inside.

"Up there." Smith yelled when he saw a grill set into the ceiling high above him and he raised his smart gun just in time to see it pushed free of its mounting. Without waiting for a target to show itself he fired his weapon, overriding the targeting system so that he could spray the rounds all around the newly created hole. This brought an alien crashing down through the hole that had been widened by his fire. The alien was already dead, its torso peppered with holes created by the smart gun's explosive rounds and as it fell its blood spread out around it as well.

A pair of Royal Marines were caught in this spray and they both cried out in pain as the corrosive fluid burned them. One of their nearby comrades attempted to pull them away but in doing so his arm was splashed by the acidic blood as well and he staggered back, clutching at his injured arm.

A second alien came through the hole in the ceiling, this one uninjured and Corporal Browning rushed to support Smith. However, as he ran past one of the Yakuza's expensive cars a black skeletal hand shot out from beneath it and grabbed hold of him by the ankle, tripping him over. Browning screamed as the alien

pulled him under the car as far as the width of his armour would allow, clawing at his legs and abdomen and Garand turned towards him.

"Corporal!" he exclaimed before diving towards him and grabbing hold of his arm to try and pull him free. To aide him in this he thrust the muzzle of his pulse rifle under the car and fired it, sending a burst of bullets into the alien's head and shoulders. The creature was just able to let out a screech before it died and all of a sudden Garand was able to pull Browning free. However, by this point the alien's claws had already ripped through his femoral artery as well as the muscle surrounding it and he had already bled to death. Then there was a loud 'bang' from beneath the car as it was struck from the underside and then one of the doors flew off and struck Garand before she could get out of the way. Stunned by the impact she just about made out the shape of the alien crawling up though a hole in the base of the car that had been created when the blood from the alien he shot had sprayed against it. His instinct was to raise his pulse rifle to defend himself but before he could get the weapon clear of the door now lying on top of him the alien pounced and brought its jaws down on his neck.

"They're all around us!" a Royal Marine yelled before firing a sustained burst from his pulse rifle at an alien as it leapt across the gap between two vehicles and the creature let out a screech as one of the bullets clipped it and produced another spray of acid that immediately began to eat into both vehicles.

"Stay together!" Williams shouted as he drew his pistol again, "Fall back to the bridge by squads."

"Do you need extraction?" Maddie signalled from the APC.

"No. Stay where you are but be ready with the APC's weapons. We may need covering fire. Captain Hyde that goes for you as well." Williams responded.

"Understood. We're relocating now." Hyde said and the two tracked vehicles moved out from behind the American wheeled APC, crushing the empty vehicles already in the clearing as they reorganised their formation from a column to a side by side line that let all three of the armoured vehicles aim their weapons across the bridge.

Inside the garage Wesson and Owen and the Royal Marines with them backed away from the interior door. With movement all around them now the motion trackers they carried were useless and the marines carrying these let them hang loose on their slings as they readied their weapons for use instead.

"Incoming!" Wesson exclaimed when a pair of aliens suddenly came rushing down the corridor he had been guarding and he fired his smart gun at them, blasting both apart in an instant.

Owen then fired a blast of flame through the interior doorway, filling the hallway with fire to block any further aliens from using it to get into the garage before he spun around and started to run.

"Let's move!" he yelled before an alien landed on the roof of a car beside him and with a single swipe of its arm decapitated him.

Seeing this Wesson fired his smart gun at the alien and it exploded under hail of well placed explosive rounds. Still standing over Owen, the alien's body parts and blood landed on top of the dead marine and also his weapon. The acidic blood immediately began to eat away at the flame unit's main fuel tank. This quickly created a break in the container and the thickened naphthal fuel it held began to leak out, forming an expanding pool until it reached the ignition flame at the muzzle of the weapon and it ignited to create an expanding ball of flame.

"Down!" Lawrence shouted as he tackled Williams and pushed him to the floor to protect him from the blast. The exploding flame unit fuel set off a chain reaction inside the garage as several of the nearby vehicles were consumed by the flames and they also exploded as combustible liquid fuel and battery packs caught fire and the effect of this on both the marines and the aliens inside the garage was devastating. The marines' body armour offered some protection from the fragmentation damage caused by wreckage from the exploding vehicles being thrown through the air but it could do little to protect them against the flames. Those caught on the edge of the blast, especially those facing away from the centre were able to escape relatively unharmed but those closer to the centre were not so lucky and in the APCs' command centres the health readouts for a number of marines suddenly flat lined.

"No!" Maddie exclaimed when she saw this and without taking the time to put on a gas mask she opened the door of the US APC and raced across the bridge towards the burning mansion.

"Maddie where's your mask?" Williams asked as he and Lawrence came walking out of the garage.

"I'll be fine as long as I'm not outside too long." Maddie replied as Hyde and the drivers of the Royal Marines' APCs came rushing across the bridge behind her with fire extinguishers in their hands.

"There are still men alive inside." Hyde said and Williams nodded.

"Maddie get the injured to safety, everyone still fit needs to help with the rescue-" he began but before he was finished there was a screeching sound as an alien suddenly bounded out of the garage and leapt towards the group standing right outside. Taken totally by surprise none of them were able to react before the alien slammed into Hyde and the British officer was pushed back against the wall at the side of the bridge. Then there was the sound of a pulse rifle firing as Lawrence brought up his weapon and pulled the trigger. The alien tumbled as it was hit repeatedly until it came to a halt at the edge of the bridge not far from where

Hyde had ended up and Lawrence fired a second quick burst to make sure that the creature was dead while Williams and Maddie rushed to check on Hyde. However, it became obvious that the British officer was dead, his neck broken by the impact with the wall and Williams instead picked up the fire extinguisher the dead officer had dropped.

"Come on, maybe we can still save some of the others." he said.

"What the hell is going on?" Warren exclaimed as she saw the health data from the marines' armour show one after another suddenly killed at the same time as the feed from their personal cameras was cut off.

"It looks like there's been an explosion." Eto said, "Perhaps the marines' dropship can provide us with more information."

"Corporal Lewis do you read me?" Hino asked.

"Loud and clear. Are you seeing what we're seeing control?" Lewis replied as his dropship continued to circle overhead, "It looks like one of the buildings below is on fire, the one that the bridge leads to."

"Yes, that's what we've seen. Can you tell what happened?" Hino said.

"Not from this altitude. I'm going in closer. I can set down in the clearing and find out what's going on." Lewis suggested.

"Very well corporal, you may descend but you are to take off immediately if you or your craft are in danger." Hino told him.

"I don't think that the aliens can fly a dropship." Warren commented.

"I was more concerned about the crew being able to get away," Hino told her.

At the mansion Williams and the two Royal Marine drivers used their fire extinguishers to drive back the flames threatening to spread to more of the parked vehicles while Leyton and Williams searched for signs of life among those marines caught inside. Alert for the presence of more aliens as well, both men held their pulse rifles at the ready.

"Over here." Holland called out as she got her feet from behind a limousine that had escaped the carnage, "Smith is—"

"I'll be fine." Smith interrupted before he also got to his feet and released the harness that mounted his smart gun to his armour, "But this is a write off. The mechanism's wrecked and the targeting system isn't responding." then he looked around, "Jesus, is else anyone left?"

"We pulled a few of the Royal Marines out from by the main door and Corporal Nambu just about got away with his life but apart from myself and Captain Williams you two are the only ones from our team still able to stand unaided." Lawrence told them.

"Smith if your smart gun isn't working you can help Maddie get the injured back to the carriers. Holland keep watch. We've already lost enough good people today to lose any more if there are any more aliens around."

Williams ordered and then he heard a groaning sound from the other side of a nearby car. Drawing his pistol first, he crouched down and peered underneath to see Baxter lying on the floor just beyond the car. The Royal Marine corporal was clearly wounded, a piece of metal sticking out of his arm and Williams stood up and rushed around to see to him, "Can you stand?" he asked and Baxter blinked.

"I think so." Baxter replied and Williams reached down to help the man to his feet right as there was the sound of aircraft engines from outside as Lewis brought the dropship in to land beside the APCs.

"Just in time." Williams said and as Maddie emerged from the APC to see what was happening he waved to her, "Maddie, we'll use the dropship to evacuate the wounded." he called out and she nodded before disappearing back into the vehicle.

Accompanied by Lawrence, Williams then headed for the dropship, reaching the access stairway just as Lewis and Thompson appeared at the top.

"Captain, Miss Hino asked us to come and check on you. What happened?" Lewis asked.

"I'm not sure exactly. We were attacked by a group of aliens and something exploded." Williams answered.

"It looked like a flame unit tank going up to me." Lawrence added.

"Corporal Lewis I want you to fly our injured back to the capital for treatment." Williams ordered and Lewis frowned.

"But captain I—" he began.

"Don't argue corporal. After dropping the Royal Marines off you are to take Corporal Nambu back up to the Almayer. If Sergeant Stone and Private Gunn haven't already relocated to the ship then take them as well. I need you to check on something and I need it doing quickly." Williams said and he looked at his watch, "By my reckoning we've got a little over two hours to go."

"How many men do you have left able to fight Captain Williams?" Hino asked.

"The final count is eleven, including myself." Williams responded, "I've got three of my own troops and seven Royal Marines including the drivers of their two APCs. I think that the situation requires me to go in with the

troops so I'll leave Maddie in my APC to act as a co-ordinator and relay communications between us.”

“Captain do you want me to come out there? I can easily provide you with another twenty men.” Eto said.

“Thank you lieutenant but this isn't a police matter. Your men aren't trained for what we're facing. Besides if we fail then you'll have no choice but to use the weapons aboard the Almayer to level this place and then you'll be needed to double check that nothing survived.” Williams replied.

“What about the reinforcements?” Warren said, “They should be in orbit in a couple of hours. Captain Williams I'm ordering you to wait for their arrival.”

“I don't think so Agent Warren.” Williams said and she scowled.

“What do you mean? I'm in charge of-”

“You're in charge of extraditing the crew of the Marlow.” Williams interrupted, “The authorities of Raijin gave me command of the operation against the aliens. Isn't that true Miss Hino?”

“That is correct Captain Williams.” Hino agreed.

“That means that I'll carry out this mission as I see fit and I still have a viable force left at my command. We know that the alien nest is located inside the mansion and we have a good idea of what to look for in finding it. Once we've located the nest and the queen it probably holds we can wipe them out.” Williams said, “Miss Hino, do you have the information I asked for about the power supply?”

“Yes, we managed to get the records from the local supply company. They say that there is a power line that runs across the lake bed that enters the mansion's main structure from the south-east. Any equipment used to step down the voltage or act as an emergency power supply is likely to be there.” Hino told him.

“The south-east. Understood. We'll be going in as soon as we're ready. Williams out.”

With all three APCs still intact there were plenty of weapons to supply the remaining marines. Despite the catastrophic destruction caused by the exploding flame unit fuel tank another of the weapons was taken from the USCM supply in their APC and given to Smith to replace his damaged smart gun while all of the other marines armed themselves with pulse rifles and as many grenades as they could carry before they made their way back across the bridge into the mansion.

“Careful in here.” Lawrence said as he stepped across the threshold into the burned out room, “There are a lot of places for an alien to be hiding if any of them have crept back in while we were outside.

“Everyone keep your eyes open and don't touch anything.” Williams added.

The route from the garage to the bridge across the lake to the mansion's main structure had been considered an important one by the Yakuza when the building complex was designed and so the hallways between them were wide and easy to follow. This gave the marines plenty of room to manoeuvre and they moved in three groups that allowed them to cover one another as they went until they reached the bridge. This was smaller than the one that crossed to the mainland and being fully enclosed it had rows of narrow windows along each side to permit light to enter. At the far end stood a pair of what had been ornately decorated doors before they had been smashed down from the other side, scattering debris across the floor and the beams of the marines' lights revealed bullet holes in what remained of the doors as well as acid burns to the floor.

“Looks like someone tried putting up a fight against something coming through those doors.” Baxter commented.

“And they left their weapons behind.” Smith added as he kicked a pistol that lay on the floor beside his foot. The weapon had been fired until it was empty, the slide locked back and the magazine ejected to suggest that the owner had been killed while attempting to reload.

“This is a good spot for an ambush.” Lawrence pointed out and Williams nodded.

“Flare.” he said.

Lawrence took a flare from his webbing, ignited it and then ran across the bridge until he was close enough to the smashed doors to be able to throw it through the jagged hole. As soon as the flare had left his hand he dropped into a crouching position and held his pulse rifle in one hand and his motion tracker in the other, ready to react if he detected anything moving beyond the door.

“No movement.” he called out and Williams and the other two US marines came across the bridge to join him.

The red glow of the flare was visible through the ruined door and although this light was not steady it did enable the marines to see that there was nothing moving on the other side.

“Sergeant Leyton bring up your squad. Corporal Baxter cover our rear.” Williams ordered and Baxter along with two other Royal Marines darted forwards to join Williams and his group, “We'll go in first.” Williams explained, “Then when we signal that it's safe I want you and Corporal Baxter to follow us. This is the main area of the mansion so the nest will be close. It's likely that we'll encounter aliens soon.”

“Captain. Shouldn't my men go in first? You're the only surviving officer and-” Leyton said.

“Thank you for your concern sergeant but I think that Private Smith's flame unit makes my squad better equipped to take the lead on this one. If anything does happen to me and Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence then

you can take command instead. Maddie will guide you.” Williams told him.

“I'd be heartbroken if anything happened to you.” Maddie said over the radio from the APC, “I should be there with you as well.”

“Thanks for the offer Maddie.” Williams said, “But I need you right where you are. How are things looking at your end by the way?”

“Just peachy. I'm not picking up any signs of activity out here but Corporal Lewis has reported that he's back aboard the *Almayer*.”

“Good. Then let's go.” Williams said and his squad rushed forwards towards the wrecked doors and stopped right in front of them. Lawrence held his motion tracker to the hole while Smith held the muzzle of his flame unit beside it, ready to set a blast of burning fuel through the hole if needed.

“Still clear.” Lawrence said.

Despite there being a large hole in the door where an alien had presumably smashed its way out, Williams did not want to risk having climb through it each time the marines wanted to move past this way. Anyone doing that would be too vulnerable to attack from a lurking alien for him to comfortable with it and that left only one other option.

“Okay let's get this door open.” he ordered and he and Lawrence both slung their pulse rifles while Holland and Smith stood back to cover them.

“On three.” Lawrence said as he and Williams looked at one another, “One. Two. Three!” and they both pulled on the doors as hard as they could. Although the doors had been well made, the damage already inflicted on them had severely reduced their strength and the two marines easily pulled them open to expose the hallway beyond and this prompted Smith to swear loudly.

“What the hell?” Holland added when she saw what lay on the other side of the doors.

“Marines,” Williams said, unslinging his pulse rifle as he looked through the now open doorway as well, “it looks like we've found the nest.”

“Oh my God.” Hino said as she watched the feed from the marines' cameras.

Just as in the tunnel that the aliens had used to get out of and back into the mansion, the walls of the hallway had been coated with the resin the species secreted only the quantity used here was much greater.

“What is that exactly?” Eto asked.

“The aliens secrete it.” Maddie told him, “In the absence of a suitable structure to use as a nest it would allow them to construct one, assuming that they are capable of that mind you. In this case though the purpose of the resin appears to be twofold, firstly the aliens can use the uneven surface to grip onto while they move along the walls and ceiling just as easily as if it was the floor and secondly it offers them camouflage while they are resting.”

“Yeah,” Lawrence added upon hearing Maddie's explanation, “in other words everyone remember to look up once in a while.”

Looking at the watch on his wrist, Williams checked its built in compass to confirm which direction the main electricity supply for the mansion entered from and he pointed at one of the walls.

“We need to find a way to get in that direction.” he said, “And down of course. I expect the power will come in on a sub level.”

“Splitting up would let us cover more ground but it would weaken each squad.” Lawrence said.

“Yes, in this case I think that strength is preferable to speed. It would make sense to me to have a set of stairs near the centre of this building so we'll head in that direction. I want our trail marked with flares. If we do come under attack and have to fall back I don't want anyone getting lost in here.” Williams said.

“Good idea. All these hallways will look the same covered in this resin.” Lawrence commented.

Not only did the covering of resin make it difficult to tell one hallway from another it also made it almost impossible to determine what the functions of many of the rooms the marines passed had been prior to the arrival of the aliens. Each of these still needed to be checked and it became rapidly apparent that there had been a few structural changes to the mansion. These changes appeared minor but it was obvious that they could have serious consequences for the marines if things went badly for them. Holes had been made in many of the mansion's internal walls that were large enough for a human or an alien to climb through with relative ease. Whether these had been created during whatever fighting had taken place when the Yakuza attempted to defend their headquarters from the aliens or the aliens had taken advantage of the light materials used to make the interior walls could not be determined while the resin covered almost every surface, but it was clear that the aliens now had ways to move around the mansion other than by the hallways the marines were sticking to.

All of a sudden there was a 'crunch' as one of the Royal Marines stepped on something and he looked down at his feet to find out what it was.

“What the hell is that?” he said, stepping back and letting his lamp illuminate the collection of slender bones

on the floor.

"Get in closer. I can't get a good picture." Maddie said from the APC.

"No need, I can guess what this used to be." Williams said as he crouched down to get his camera closer to the bones, "I'd say that we're looking at the skeletal remains of a facehugger.

"It's not covered in resin. It must have come here after the nest was built." Lawrence commented.

"Which means the main nest can't be too far away." Williams added.

"Did you hear that?" Smith asked when he thought he heard a sound.

"Hear what private?" Lawrence asked.

"I don't. Know maybe a-" Smith said before he was interrupted by the sound of a piercing scream.

"This way. Come on." Williams ordered as he got back up and began to run towards the source of the scream and the rest of the marines ran after him.

"Here she comes." Thompson said as she watched the mysterious ship approaching Raijin from her console in the *Almayer's* bridge. The vessel had a very low radar and lidar profile and if not for the fact that its main drive was operating to slow the ship down as it prepared to enter orbit then it may have been able to slip by the *Almayer's* sensors entirely.

"Unidentified vessel this is the *USS Almayer*. You are approaching a planet under quarantine as permitted by the ICC Treaty. If you do not break off then we will be forced to fire on you." Lewis transmitted and then he looked over at Thompson, "Now let's see how they respond to that." he added.

The response took just under a minute to arrive even though the two ships were close enough to one another to allow communication in almost real time.

"*USS Almayer* we are here in response to the planetary emergency. We are carrying urgent reinforcements for the troops on the ground." a voice said.

"Notice that they didn't mention who they are?" Thompson said and Lewis nodded as he reached for the intercom.

"Sergeant Stoner this is Corporal Lewis. The suspect vessel is on approach and refuses to turn aside. You're the ranking marine aboard so I need your permission to engage the *Almayer's* combat systems." he said.

"Okay corporal. Bring the weapons on line but you better send them another warning before you green light any launches. I'm on my way up to you now." Stoner responded.

"You heard the sergeant." Lewis told Thompson and she nodded.

"Engaging automated combat systems." she said, pressing button on her console and a klaxon sounded.

"Unidentified vessel this is the *USS Almayer*, you are not authorised to enter orbit. Our weapons are now live." Lewis transmitted before waiting for a response. With the *Almayer's* computer running the weapon systems, as he waited Lewis expected it to come up with firing solution for each of the weapons the ship carried and present the chances of success for each to him so that he could make the final decision.

However, the computer instead brought up a different message entirely.

COMBAT SYSTEM FAILURE. WEAPONS SHUTDOWN FORCED.

"Thompson run a diagnostic." he ordered, "I want to know what's wrong with our weapons."

"Computer says the weapons were shut by order." Thompson said.

"Well it wasn't either of us." Lewis said.

"No, but the communication log does show a data burst from the hostile ship. Command code one four six two eight zero." Thompson said and Lewis looked at the computer tablet resting on his console that contained the instructions given to him by Captain Williams and he smiled.

"Looks like the captain was spot on." he said.

With the *Almayer's* weapons disabled the stealth ship was able to enter orbit around Raijin before a hatch opened in its ventral hull and a shuttle craft dropped out of the vessel and then shot towards the surface of Raijin. As soon as the shuttle was clear of its mother ship the larger vessel settled into a higher orbit, now apparently completely ignoring the disarmed *Almayer*.

"This is Corporal Lewis to Raijin," Lewis signalled, "someone let Captain Williams know that he's got company coming."

13.

Warren watched the feed from the *Almayer* with horror. When the crew of the marine vessel identified the command used to shut down the ship's weapons she recognised it immediately as being the same one that she used to send her reports to her superiors on Earth as well as her corporate allies. In having that command installed she had been an accessory in the cyber attack on the *Almayer*, something that could be seen only as treason when US Space Command carried out its inevitable investigation. Warren did not doubt that her allies would make sure they escaped all blame and would probably use her as the scapegoat. Of course for her to be the scapegoat then she would have to be around when the dust settled.

"I just need to step out for a moment." she told the others in the command centre and before any of them could respond she made her way out of the room as fast as she thought she could get away with without attracting any undue attention.

Once outside the command centre Warren headed for the nearest elevator to take her to street level but at the last moment chose to take the stairs instead of the crowded elevator. Inside the stairwell she took out her phone and re-dialled the emergency number she had been given

"Hello Agent Warren. I do hope this call is serious. We're all rather busy here right now." the familiar accented voice said.

"Oh you bet this is serious. Your ship just executed a cyber attack on a US Space Command vessel.." Warren said.

"Really? I'm afraid I don't have a clue what you're talking about."

"Oh yes you do because the marines were monitoring the communication channel. They must have been suspicious about that command you had added to their computer. They read out the exact number to the entire Raijin command centre. I need extraction." Warren said.

"Try to calm down Agent Warren. I'm sure everything will be fine."

"Oh you bet it will be because if you don't get me out of here right now then I'm telling Captain Williams everything. How you were planning to intercept the *Almayer* and take the *Marlow's* crew before they could testify about what happened to the *Sulaco* and how you're planning to steal that alien queen. Everything." Warren said.

"Very well. There is a car waiting just outside the building you are in. Make your way to the rear and use the fire escape at the north side. The door is alarmed but you'll be able to get away before anyone can react to you opening it."

"I don't have a mask." Warren commented, realising that she had not thought to get herself a mask to protect her from the atmosphere outside.

"That doesn't matter. You won't be outside anywhere near long enough to suffer any adverse effects to the atmosphere. Now hurry up. That car will be waiting for you." and then the line went dead.

Warren continued to run down the stairs as fast as she could until she reached the ground floor and exited the stairwell, heading for the fire escape she had been told to use. Just as she had been warned there was a sign on the door warning against its use except in an emergency and that it was connected to an alarm but Warren ignored this and pushed the bar to open the door as hard as she could. Then as an alarm began to sound she rushed outside into the street behind the government building and looked around, searching for the car to pick her up.

Warren started blinking as the atmosphere began to irritate her eyes right before she heard the sound of a car breaking sharply behind her and she turned to see a non-descript looking vehicle had pulled up beside her. The front doors of this opened suddenly before two men wearing full face masks leapt out and Warren saw the weapons they held as they took aim at her. Realising that she had just walked right into a trap and that she would never be able to draw her own pistol in time for it to do any good Warren closed her eyes and waited for them fire.

The burst of gunfire came a moment later but it came from behind Warren, not in front of her and she opened her eyes again to see the two masked men now lying dead beside their bullet ridden car. Turning around again she saw Eto and a pair of his men now standing just outside the fire exit with pulse rifles in their hands. "Agent Warren." Eto said, "I think you should come back inside. Oh and you should consider yourself under arrest. I believe that the US Colonial Marines want to extradite you on charges of espionage and treason."

The scream originated in a large room that was lined with more than just the resin secreted by the aliens. In this room the resin had also been used to create cocoons to restrain the mansion's residents so that they would become helpless to protect themselves against the facehuggers that hatched from the eggs that filled most of the floorspace. After the chestbursters hatched the bodies of the Yakuza were left in place by the aliens and so the room stank of human waste and rotting corpses.

"What the hell is this?" Leyton said when he saw the bodies of the cocooned Yakuza lining the walls of the room.

"This is the nest itself." Lawrence replied, "I saw something similar aboard the alien spaceship the aliens were first found aboard. Only then there were only a few people trapped like this."

"And an alien will have come from each of them? That's a lot of aliens." Leyton said.

"One very recently." Williams commented as he turned his attention to the floor, searching among the eggs for the chestburster that he guessed had just been born to cause the scream that had led the marines here. As he searched he noticed that some of the eggs had yet to hatch and he froze, "No-one move." he said as he looked around again, this time focusing on the eggs instead of the floor.

"Smith, get ready with that flame unit." Lawrence said.

"Wait, don't take any action." Maddie's voice said suddenly over the radio.

"Maddie what's wrong?" Williams asked.

"You're in the nest surrounding by alien eggs, right?" Maddie said.

"Yes, that's the point. We need to destroy them before they start hatching." Williams replied.

"But don't most animals tend to protect their young and get rather angry when they are threatened?" Maddie said and Williams' eyes widened.

"Lawrence, check your tracker now." he ordered and Lawrence looked at his motion tracker, turning back and forth as he scanned the widest possible area.

"I'm not reading anything." he said.

"Okay I think we need to back up. Slowly." Williams said, "We'll fall back to the hallway and then use grenades to clear this room. Now everyone move slowly by squads. At the first sign of alien activity open fire and run. Corporal Baxter, you're squad is first."

"Yes captain." Baxter responded and his group of Royal Marines began to make their way back into the hallway outside the nest.

"Okay Leyton you're next. We'll be right behind you." Williams ordered and the second squad of Royal Marines followed the first out into the hallway before Williams and his own men backed out of the nest before any of the eggs around them could hatch.

"We're going to need more distance. The concussion could be a killer." Lawrence pointed out when the marines were all gathered just outside the nest and Williams nodded.

"That corner there should be enough." he said, pointing along the hallway away from the nest, "But first I want to be sure that we're really alone here." and then he pointed his pulse rifle upwards and fired it into the ceiling, using a sustained burst to rake the ceiling all along the hallway with explosive rounds until the magazine was emptied in just over six seconds. The effect of this firing was to blast numerous pieces of the alien resin from the ceiling all along the hallway, breaking through to it in places but nothing more. However, Williams smiled as he ejected the spent magazine and inserted a fresh one from his webbing, "Now we know there's nothing hanging on up there." he said.

"Are you shooting at something?" Maddie said while she continued to watch the feed from the marines' cameras.

"The captain is just working out anger issues on the ceiling." Lawrence responded.

"Really? You know what works really good for that? Sex. Lots of it." Maddie said, smiling.

"That's your answer to everything." Lawrence said.

"Yes and if the captain paid more attention to me when I give him my advice he'd be a major at least by now. A colonel maybe." Maddie said before an alarm sounded and her head turned to a different set of displays.

"Maddie what's wrong?" Williams asked when he heard the alarm over the radio.

"You know those company reinforcements we've been expecting? Well I think they're here. They've just run into the perimeter Agent Warren ordered you not to set up and the robot sentries are engaging them."

Maddie told him.

The primary targeting system of both the US and British robot sentries responded to movement but they were also equipped to detect the heat profiles of enemy troops as well as monitoring for electronic emissions. Not expecting the marines to have deployed robot sentries the first that the mercenaries in the employ of Weyland-Yutani knew of them was when a sustained burst of eight point one millimetre explosives rounds cut one of their number to pieces. Each gun had been set to focus its sensors over a particular angle but the marines had networked them to work together, despite their belonging to different units and so when the first gun fired all of the others immediately shifted their focus and also began to fire.

The mercenaries threw themselves to the ground and began to search for the source of the fire that was now pinning them down. Fortunately for them although the robot sentries were effect weapon systems they were not suitable for holding a perimeter against skilled soldiers on their own. They were immobile and lacking any sort of reinforced firing positions such as concrete or even sand bagged bunkers once their positions had

been identified they were very vulnerable.

"Grenades." the leader of the mercenaries yelled, "Target one hundred and fifty metres that way." and he pointed towards the first gun to have fired on them.

The soldier nearest to the unit leader pointed his pulse rifle, identical to those carried by the US Colonial Marines, into the air before firing the grenade launcher mounted beneath its barrel. Too small to be targeted by the robot sentries, the tiny explosive projectile flew through the air in an arc before dropping back down to the ground and landing just over a metre away from the sentry gun. Exploding two seconds later, the blast from the grenade tore the sentry gun apart and opened up a gap in the perimeter that the mercenaries were quick to exploit. Keeping low, they began to crawl forwards as more bullets flew over them from the other nearby automated weapons. Thankfully for them the uneven nature of the terrain made it impossible for the guns to depress far enough to accurately target them without shooting into the ground several metres short of their actual position. The mercenaries' leader continued to watch the effects of the heavy gunfire on the surrounding vegetation and he used the tiny explosions that blew holes in even the toughest tree trunks to plot the locations of the other guns. Then he directed his men to return fire, sending more grenades towards the robot sentries and making the gap even wider.

Three of the guns had been destroyed by the time the mercenaries reached the wreckage of the first and their leader got to his feet and looked around. Just as he had expected none of the remaining sentry guns fired at him, the intermittent fire still taking place being aimed further away from the perimeter.

"Okay we're clear." he told his men, "The guns won't target us past this point."

Inside the APC Maddie watched as the sentry guns responded to the approaching mercenaries and she hoped that when they stopped firing it meant that the sentries had destroyed all of the company soldiers. However, she knew that that was something she could not afford to count on and that she needed to take alternative steps.

"The sentry guns have stopped." she transmitted, "But three of them were taken out and that leaves a hole in the perimeter that our guests could have got through. I need to go off comms while I get ready for their arrival."

"Understood. Good luck Maddie. We're about to see what effect our grenades have on the alien nest." Williams replied and then Maddie took off her headset and made her way to the rear of the APC where the unit's spare equipment and weapons were kept. Here she rummaged through the various cases until she found what she was looking for and after removing this container from the rack she began to hurriedly remove her clothing.

"This should do." Lawrence said as he looked down the hallway to judge the distance to the alien nest at the far end. The marines were at a junction in the hallway where the stretch that led up to the alien nest went left and right and the marines were dividing up so that some of them were on each side so that they could fire their grenade launchers around the corners, "Although I'd be happier if we could set up a barrier across here to volley fire in a line instead of all having lean around these corners."

"It'll have to do." Williams replied, "We'll fire in three volleys. I want the first sent right down to the far end of the nest, the second as near to the centre as possible and the last one just inside the door. Let each volley detonate before sending in the next. Smith, is that incinerator ready?"

"Ready to roast some bugs captain." Smith responded, smiling.

"Okay then let's do this. If Maddie's right then sending in these grenades should trigger a strong reaction from the aliens. I want you ready to clear the hallway of any that try coming straight at us." Williams ordered as he and Lawrence moved behind the corner to protect them from the grenade blasts, "Grenades. Fire at will." he added.

The first pair of grenades came from Holland and Baxter, both fired level so that they travelled the full length of the nest and hit the far wall before dropping to the floor and exploding when their timers expired. There was a slight difference in the timers of the British and American issued grenades and so there were two loud explosions in rapid succession instead of simultaneous blasts producing one burst of sound. Even in cover around the corners of the junction the marines felt these explosions and they had their hands clamped over their ears to protect them from the concussion.

"Second volley!" Williams snapped as he picked up his pulse rifle and joined another of the Royal Marines in firing grenades into the middle of the nest. This was the hardest volley to aim accurately and the grenades landed apart from one another before they too exploded one after another while the marines took cover, "Third volley." Williams ordered and two Royal Marines each fired grenades at a low angle so that they landed just within the nest before exploding.

The shock waves and shrapnel from the grenades fired into the nest ripped blew apart most of the eggs contained in the room and also ripped through the resin that coated the walls and ceiling easily enough that the structure behind it was also compromised and the sound of the explosions was followed by the sound of

falling masonry as the room fell in on itself, burying what remained of the alien eggs. Then when the sound of this died down the marines heard something different, the sound of hissing.

"I take that's the aliens waking up?" Leyton said as he looked around, trying to isolate the source of the sound and Williams nodded.

"Maddie was right. I think we got their attention." he said.

"Movement." Lawrence said as he began to get signals on his motion tracker.

"Direction?" Williams asked.

"Far side of the nest I think but there are some signals to the sides. I think they know where we are and are trying to surround us." Lawrence said, watching the dots on the screen of his motion tracker as they started to spread out.

"Can they do that? I mean are they that smart?" Baxter asked.

"The basic studies so far say yes. They may even be able to adapt to the point where they will target our technology to remove that advantage." Williams replied.

"Do we withdraw before they surround us?" Leyton said.

"No." Williams replied, "This is a good position. Smith's flame unit should give us the ability to keep at least one direction clear but we need to be ready to defend the others."

"Here they come. Fifteen metres that way." Lawrence said and he pointed along the hallway leading off to the right. The marines turned and their lights illuminated it just in time for them to see an alien leap across the end of the hallway at which point Holland instinctively fired her pulse rifle. The brief burst clipped the alien and it let out a shriek as it disappeared from view again.

"Cease fire!" Williams snapped too late to make any difference, "Wait for them to come at us."

"Behind us." Lawrence called out as his motion tracker showed a cluster of signals from the opposite direction and the marines turned in time to see a group of aliens come bounding towards them down the hallway making use of the resin coating every surface to move along the walls and ceiling as well as the floor.

"Down!" Smith yelled and the other marines threw themselves aside as he turned and brought his flame unit to bear on the charging aliens before he unleashed a jet of flame that filled the hallway ahead of him. Engulfed by the flames, the charging aliens all dropped to the floor screeching loudly in the handful of seconds before the fire did its work and they were silenced.

"Sergeant Lawrence." Williams said, glancing at Lawrence while the marines waited to see whether any more aliens were prepared to charge at them from that direction.

"All clear for now but I've still got signals further out. It still looks like they're trying to surround us." Lawrence replied.

"Then now is the time to move. If they are able to come at us from all directions at once they might be able to overwhelm us. Moving we're a harder target. Just everyone watch out for any aliens hiding ahead of us. We'll head into the nest and see if we can find the queen."

Maddie put her usual coveralls into the container and then returned it to the rack where she had found it. Now in place of these she wore the dark green combat fatigues of a USCM officer that had a lieutenant's bars on the shoulders and a name label on the chest that read 'MADISON'. To complete this disguise she picked up a peaked cap that also featured a lieutenant's bar and put it on her head. Disguising Maddie as a human marine officer was a ruse that had worked previously and now she hoped that it would save her when the company troops arrived. As an android she was considered property and the approaching soldiers would most likely have no qualms about destroying her, however if they thought she was human then there was a chance that they would only do so if they had to to avoid murder charges.

Returning to the APC's command post she double checked the feed from the marines' cameras and was relieved to see that no-one had been killed while she had been away from it. No though she could see that they were on the move, picking their way through the rubble strewn ruins of the alien nest. Then she looked at the readings from the APC's own sensor suite. The APC was equipped with a wide variety of sensors that more than made up for the lack of visibility from the vehicle's interior and these showed a group of human sized figures approaching through the woods. Showing up on thermal as well as motion sensors, Maddie knew that these were not aliens and the only remaining possibility was that they were the newly arrived corporate troops. For a genuine USCM officer it would have been a simple matter to engage the APC's combat computer and designate the approaching soldiers as hostile targets, thus enabling the vehicle's weapons track, target and fire on them automatically. However, as an android Maddie's core programming prevented her from taking any action intended to cause harm to human beings and she could not use the APC's weapons against them even in self defence.

"Guys I've got company." she said over the radio, "Looks like eight troops with rifles only, no heavy stuff."

"Of course not." Williams responded, "I get the feeling they aren't here to kill aliens. They want them alive. Maddie feel free to get out of there if-"

"I'm not abandoning any of you." Maddie interrupted, "I'm going to try and bluff my way through this but I need you to promise you'll come and rescue me."

"I promise." Williams said and Maddie smiled.

"I knew you would." she said, "Now I think you should turn off your cameras."

"Captain, are you sure this is a good idea?" Holland asked as she and the other marines all shut off not only their personal cameras but also the health monitors built into their armour, cutting off the flow of information to the APC and thus also to the planetary command centre as well, "Without this feed no one will know where to look for us."

"That's the point Holland." Lawrence said as he disconnected his armour's data logging system, "When those mercenaries take the APC they won't know how many of us are left or where we are."

"Make sure your receivers are still active. If Maddie needs to update us then she needs a way to contact us. Let's just hope that she's able to bluff her way out of getting shot." Williams said and he took another look around.

The damage caused to the nest by the grenades was dramatic and now almost the entire chamber was open to the floor above while the floor was now littered with debris from the ceiling and the air was filled with dust that made it difficult to see far even with the use of the lamps built into the marines' armour. However, as a consequence of a lot of this having landed on top of the alien eggs the floor was not as difficult to walk across as it could have been. Where falling rubble crushed the eggs and the facehuggers within them it released their acidic blood which promptly began to dissolve the fallen masonry while having no effect on the resin that lined the room. This meant that there was less debris than there otherwise would have been but the floor remained stable enough for the marines to cross without worrying about falling through to the level below. The marines still wanted to find a way down to the lower levels of the mansion though, expecting that this would be where they would find the alien queen that had to be present somewhere and as Williams looked around again he finally saw an opening.

"Over there." he said, pointing towards a hole near the centre of the large chamber, "That could be what we're looking for."

"It could be a stair or it could just be where one of the grenades landed." Lawrence pointed out, "The floor must be tougher than the ceiling for it not to have fallen in as well but that doesn't mean there wasn't any damage."

"As long as it's a way down I don't care." Williams replied.

"You might if we have to come back up in a hurry." Lawrence commented.

The marines again began to alternate between moving and providing cover for the other squads as they made their way over to the hole. Baxter's squad was the first to reach this and they peered over the edge to see what lay below. It was obvious that this had been a stairwell but at some point either during the fighting between the Yakuza and the aliens these had been destroyed and their remains coated in the same resin as all the other surfaces in the nest. One of the Royal Marines edged closer to the hole to try and get a better view of what was below them and Baxter was about to warn him to be careful when all of a sudden a clawed hand reached up through the hole and grabbed him by his ankle.

"Gregory!" Baxter exclaimed as he dived forwards to try and prevent the marine from being pulled over the edge. However, he was too slow and Gregory screamed as the alien dragged him into the hole and then struck at him with its teeth, punching a hole through his skull as his helmet fell from his head.

"Get back. There could be more." Williams ordered as his squad followed Baxter's to the edge of the hole, "Smith, clear the way."

"Yes captain." Smith responded and he crouched down to be able to fire his flame unit through the hole at a shallower angle and he swung the weapon as he fired it to create a short lived curtain of flame that washed over the ceiling of the floor below. This dislodged several aliens that had been clustered around the hole and they leapt down out of the path of the flames before charging at the marines, scaling the remains of the staircase to reach them.

"Open fire!" Lawrence yelled and in unison the marines fired their pulse rifles at the oncoming creatures. Lacking any cover they were left vulnerable and they screeched as the explosive rounds tore them apart. Meanwhile Smith circled around the hole and fired through it again to cover the area of the ceiling that he had been unable to cover from his previous position but this time there was no reaction from below.

"Quick, before more aliens can get here, we need to be through that hole."

The marines moved quickly to descend to the lower level where they found themselves in a room that, despite the covering of resin everywhere could be identified as having been a large kitchen before the aliens took over the mansion. Here and there the work surfaces, cooking hobs and sinks showed through the resin while the food that had been stored here had been devoured by the aliens and now the packaging lay strewn where it had been dropped.

"You feel that?" Williams said when he and Lawrence were stood side by side in the former kitchen.

“You mean the heat?” Lawrence responded, referring to the noticeable increase in temperature in the kitchen compared to the egg chamber above and Williams nodded.
“I think that means we're on the right path.” he said.

14.

Before the company mercenaries could reach her, Maddie put on a gas mask and exited the APC before rushing to the two British vehicles. The Royal Marines had closed the main access hatches to both of these and Maddie now opened them to expose that they were empty. Although she had prepared for the mercenaries to discover her she was still hopeful that she could trick them into thinking that there was no one left outside the mansion and that they would head straight inside. Therefore, after opening the two tracked APCs she made her way over to one of the abandoned Yakuza vehicles and hid behind it, peering around to watch as the mercenaries appeared from out of the woods.

Using hand signals and brief radio messages the leader of the mercenary team directed his men to search the three armoured vehicles, with pairs of armoured soldiers making their way towards each one to check if there was anyone inside.

This gave Maddie the chance to study the mercenaries closely. As she had expected they wore no insignia on their uniforms that would identify them but more interesting were the modifications that had been made to their helmets. Each of these featured an armoured faceplate that was reinforced with metal bars about a centimetre across welded across them in a grid pattern. The purpose of these was clear, it was intended to give them at least some protection against attack by facehuggers. Although the parasites would probably be able to use their acidic blood to melt through both the bars and faceplates themselves were made of, this would take time and that gave the mercenaries the chance to kill the facehuggers before they managed to attached themselves fully to their intended victims. Just as she had expected the mercenaries were armed with Armat M41A pulse rifles of the same type as used by the US Colonial Marines as their primary weapons but she also saw that most of them also carried a long baton slung over his back that had a pair of metal prongs protruding from one end while two instead had telescopic poles that had cable loops fixed to them. The purpose of these was clear, the batons were electrically charged and the mercenaries probably hoped that they would have the same effect on the aliens as they would on a person, disabling them long enough for them to be trapped by the mercenaries with their poles and snares. Whether or not this would be enough to enable them to capture an alien queen was something Maddie could not even guess at though. Everyone who had ever encountered such a creature was dead.

When the mercenaries emerged once more from the empty armoured vehicles they all gathered together and Maddie hoped that this was the point at which they would make their way into the mansion. However, as she peered over the front of a car she rested her hand on one of its mirrors and it unexpectedly broke off, producing a loud 'snap'.

"Oh no." Maddie muttered as she ducked down again and looked around to a new hiding place. Then she heard the sound of running as the mercenaries rushed towards her position, spreading out to surround the car and they appeared on both sides of her simultaneously.

"Don't move!" one of them yelled, his mask muffled his voice somewhat.

"Oh hello boys." Maddie responded, "Would one of you mind helping me up?"

Two of the mercenaries rushed forwards and grabbed Maddie by her arms before lifting her up and then turning her round so that they could push her forward over the car, "Hey! I'm not that kind of girl." she exclaimed as her arms were pulled behind her back and tied together while the mercenaries also searched her for weapons.

"She's unarmed sir." one of the mercenaries told their leader as he strode towards them.

"What sort of marine doesn't carry a weapon Lieutenant Madison?" he asked, reading the name off Maddie's chest.

"One that wasn't expecting to need one." Maddie replied, "I just watch from the APC."

"We were told that this force was commanded by a Captain Williams. Where is he?" the mercenary leader demanded.

"Dead. Along with everyone else." Maddie lied, "I'm just here keeping an eye on things until a police tactical team can get here to deal with the aliens."

"Somehow that just doesn't ring true." the mercenary leader said, "Your troops did well to set up that perimeter of robot sentries without it being picked up by any cameras or our local scouts noticing them. The one bit of good news about that was that it was the scouts that blundered into their firing line so at least I didn't lose anyone important to me. The problem now is that I don't have anyone to scout ahead of my men. That's where you're going to come in." he continued and then he reached out and ripped the gas mask from Maddie's face.

"Hey! I need that." Maddie called out and then she coughed as if Raijin's atmosphere was already starting to cause her problems.

"Not inside there you won't. Now get moving, I want you at least five paces ahead of my men. If there are

any of yours left then I want you between us. Then we'll see if they're willing to shoot at you to get to us." the mercenary leader told her and then another of the mercenaries shoved her.

"Get moving," he said from behind his mask and Maddie began to walk towards the bridge leading to the mansion, occasionally looking over her shoulder to see where the mercenaries were in relation to her.

"This place looks like a bomb went off." one of the mercenaries commented when they got to the other side of the bridge and entered the garage to see the destruction caused by the exploding fuel tank.

"A fuel tank exploded and killed my men." Maddie said and she nodded towards the burned remains of a marine that not yet been removed, "See?"

"She's right captain." one of the mercenaries said as he moved closer to inspect the corpse, "Looks like Brit issue armour on this one."

"What about the aliens?" the mercenaries' leader asked.

"I would shrug if you hadn't tied me up." Maddie answered, "The ones in here got toasted in the blast. Who knows about the others though? That's why I'm waiting for reinforcements."

"Then we push on." the mercenary leader said.

"I'm not picking up any movement." Lawrence said.

"Maybe all the aliens were upstairs." Baxter suggested.

"We don't know enough about their behaviour to be certain but if they are organised like social insects then that seems unlikely. I doubt they'd leave their queen unguarded." Williams responded.

"So which way do we go Captain?" Lawrence asked and Williams checked his compass.

"That way." he said, pointing, "South-east to where the power comes in. I think we'll find the queen there."

The rooms on this lower level were smaller and more numerous than on the floor above and the hallways were narrower with more turnings, all of which made moving along them more difficult for the marines. Every turn and junction could hide an alien and the marines needed to check them all before they could advance further towards the suspected location of the alien queen. However, it was not from ahead of them that the danger came but behind.

"Movement." Lawrence warned as he checked his motion tracker again the marines came to a halt and looked around in search of targets.

"Where?" Williams asked.

"Behind us. I think the kitchen where we came down." Lawrence told him.

"Makes sense. The other aliens that were trying to surround us must have figured out we came down here and followed.

"Well this looks like they're coming right for us. No fancy outflanking manoeuvres this time." Lawrence said.

"Stand to." Leyton said and the Royal Marines took cover among the features of the resin lined hallway and pointed their weapons back towards the kitchen. Lawrence slung his motion tracker and also began to raise his pulse rifle when Williams stopped him.

"No." he said, "Now I think is the time to split up. Sergeant Leyton and the Royal Marines will stay here and hold off the aliens behind us. The rest of us will carry on and try to locate the queen. If there's any sign of the aliens trying to get around us again then we'll fall back and link up again."

With the American marines continuing in search of the alien queen the British troops deployed in the narrow hallway to await the aliens coming down from the hatching chamber.

"Don't wait for an order." Leyton told his men, "Just fire as soon as you spot a target."

Although their movement could be very stealthy, the alien warriors coming towards the marines were bounding from one spot to another so quickly that the noise of their approach was heard well before the first of them appeared and the Royal Marines had plenty of warning before an alien bounded into view and there was a roar of gunfire as all of them opened fire at once.

The lead two aliens were both ripped apart by the explosive rounds fired by the Royal Marines' pulse rifles tore through their exoskeletons and the walls were sprayed with their acid blood. Had these not already been covered in the aliens' own resin then the highly corrosive fluid would have eaten into them but instead the blood ran down them to collect in pools on the floor while more screeching aliens charged into the marines' field of fire and they continued shooting.

"Watch your ammo." Leyton shouted over the sound of firing, "Short bursts. We can't have everyone empty at once."

Inevitably as the Royal Marines continued firing they emptied the magazines of their pulse rifles and had to reload. This took just a few seconds for the well trained troops but it still resulted in a reduction in the weight of fire as the other marines became more careful about their own ammunition expenditure while their comrades were reloading and this enabled the aliens to get closer before being gunned down. This situation continued until one of the aliens got so close to the marines before being gunned down that as it tumbled forwards some of its blood splashed across the floor just in front of them and Leyton realised how close his men had come to being hit by the fluid.

"When you're out pull back." he ordered, setting up a system whereby the Royal Marines steadily fell back while keeping up their fire at the aliens persisting in charging at them. As each marine emptied his weapon he moved to take up a new position behind all the other marines before he began firing again while other marines then began to retreat past him while he fired. All of a sudden the corridor ahead of the marines was empty other than for the remains of the aliens they had shot and they waited to see if any more would appear. "How many do you reckon that was sarge?" one of the marines asked, looking at the bodies of the aliens now strewn along the floor of the hallway. "I wasn't keeping count Trent." Leyton replied. "It must be at least thirty." Baxter commented. "Maybe that's all of them." another Royal Marine suggested. "I doubt it." Leyton said, "Judging by the size of that room where the eggs were I'd say that there are still a lot more of these things around here somewhere.

"Everyone hold up." the mercenary captain ordered and the company troops came to a halt, one of them reaching out to grab hold of Maddie. The mercenaries had just crossed the covered bridge leading to the mansion's main structure and reached the outer edge of the resin coated nest. They had just been taking in the reality of an alien nest when from somewhere in the distance they heard the sound of automatic weapon fire.

"I heard him. No need to get handsy." she said, glaring at the armoured figure who was as anonymous behind his reinforced mask as the others.

"You'll know if I'm getting handsy." the masked mercenary responded sternly before he thrust his hand between Maddie's legs.

"Cut it out." the mercenary captain ordered, "That was gunfire."

"Not ten millimetre." another marine commented, all of them being very familiar with the sound made by the M41A pulse rifles they and the US Colonial Marines were issued with.

"Royal Marines." the captain said and he turned his head towards Maddie, "Looks like not everyone was wiped out in that explosion after all." he said and she smiled back at him.

"Brits. Too stupid to know when they're supposed to be dead." she said, "But there is one thing I should say." "What?" the mercenary captain asked.

"Help!" Maddie screamed at the top of her voice before the mercenary beside her grabbed hold of her and clamped a hand over her mouth. Maddie tried to struggle against the mercenary but with her arms bound she could not make full advantage of the superior strength that her construction offered her and she could only watch as the mercenary captain slung his rifle and drew his knife.

"I can't have you giving us away." he said as he advanced on Maddie and she expected the blade to be plunged into her at any moment, exposing her true nature only when the mercenaries had decided to kill her anyway. However, instead of stabbing Maddie the mercenary captain used the knife to cut through the stitching holding one of her uniform sleeves before cutting along it so that it fell away as a long strip of fabric. He tore this again and screwed up one of the pieces before the mercenary holding Maddie removed his hand from her mouth so that the captain could force the fabric inside.

"Tape her shut." he ordered, "Then she can get back on point." then he looked at Maddie and as another mercenary was wrapped a length of tape around her head so that her mouth was sealed shut he added, "Be grateful, I doubt one of those facehugger things will be able to get past that lot in a hurry."

In response all that Maddie could do was glare at the mercenary, not feeling in the least bit grateful for what he had done.

"There's a flare up ahead sir." another mercenary said when he spotted the start of the trail that the marines had left behind them and the captain turned away from Maddie to look.

"How helpful. They left us a trail to follow. Lead the way Lieutenant Madison." he said and then the mercenary closest to Maddie gave her a shove.

Maddie scowled at the mercenary before she started to walk towards the still burning flare. The compact pyrotechnic had burned along more than half its length now but it still provided a clear marker that allowed the mercenaries to see which way the marines had gone. When Maddie reached the flare she saw the light being cast from another coming from around a corner. She was tempted to try and lead the mercenaries off in another direction to give Williams and his men more time to locate and destroy the alien queen. However, it would take just one of the mercenaries to notice the light for her plan to fail and it was inevitable that they would check the hall in that direction as they passed to make sure that they were not ambushed either by marines or aliens so Maddie turned towards the next flare and continued to lead the mercenaries in the direction the marines had taken.

"Sergeant Leyton." one of the Royal Marines said softly while looking at his motion tracker.

"What is it Robinson?" Leyton asked.

"I'm picking up another group of signals closing in. I think they're still on the floor above." the marine reported.

"More aliens?" Leyton suggested.

"I'm not so sure sergeant. Look at this, the aliens moved as a pack but these are in a distinct line and they keep swapping positions within it." Robinson told him, holding out the tracker so that Leyton could see the readings for himself.

"Looks like those company troops could be here." Leyton commented.

"Do we let Captain Williams know?" Baxter said but Leyton shook his head.

"No, if we break radio silence then we might give our position away. We'll head back to the kitchen and wait for them there. As soon as we're engaged we'll signal the captain. There won't be anything for us to hide then."

The Royal Marines moved quickly to reach the kitchen before the mercenaries could get there ahead of them and Leyton had them deploy in two squads to be able to fire on anyone descending what remained of the stairs from different directions. After that all there was for them to do was wait for the arrival of their opposition.

"Stop." the mercenary captain ordered when Maddie reached the entrance to the room that had served as the aliens' egg chamber and Maddie came to a halt, "Looks like there was something in here the marines wanted to destroy urgently." he added as he looked inside and the light from his lamp illuminated the damage done by the grenades.

"Think it was the queen?" another mercenary asked, "Looks like there are eggs in here."

"If they already killed the queen then why not pull out?" the captain pointed out and then the beam from his lamp revealed the remains of a man with Asian facial features bound to the wall with resin. Significantly the man's chest looked like it had exploded outwards, "No, I think this was where the aliens brought people to be implanted with more of their kind. Take care going through here, if any of the eggs survived what happened here then they could hatch out. Get her moving again." and Maddie was shoved forwards once more.

The mercenaries picked their way through the ruined egg chamber carefully, making certain that there were no intact eggs or active facehuggers along their path. It did not take long for Maddie to spot the large hole leading to the lower level and an idea occurred to her. If she threw herself through the hole then she could feign being dead when she landed. Her structure would most likely survive a fall of a single storey with only minor damage at most but when the mercenaries looked for vital signs they would find none because Maddie lacked a heartbeat and could regulate her simulated breathing. Even if the fall damaged her body to the extent that her synthetic nature was revealed then she could still pretend to have been taken off line by the impact and hopefully the mercenaries would then leave her where she landed instead of using their weapons to make sure she was permanently deactivated.

Without waiting any further Maddie suddenly dashed towards the large hole in the floor and hurled herself into it. Falling uncontrollably Maddie bounced off the remains of the staircase until she landed in a heap at the bottom and rolled sideways. Above her she heard one of the mercenaries call out a warning as she fell and the soldiers rushed towards the hole after her. Maddie expected the mercenaries to come down the hole after her and shut down her simulated breathing in anticipation of this. However, what she did not expect was for a pair of hands to grab her by her ankles and suddenly drag her into a corner.

"Maddie." Baxter whispered as he ripped the tape from her mouth, "Are you okay? And why are you dressed like that?"

"I'm in disguise." Maddie replied quietly as soon as Baxter pulled the stuffing from her mouth, "Now watch out, there are-" but before she could finish there was the sound of gunfire as the other squad of Royal Marines opened fire on the first of the mercenaries to come through the hole after Maddie.

The armoured man was hit repeatedly as he slid down a rope towards the floor and he fell lifeless from about half way up. From the floor above the remaining mercenaries returned fire indiscriminately into the hole and the Royal Marines were forced to take cover.

"Smoke." the mercenary captain ordered and two of his men pulled smoke grenades from their webbing that they primed and then tossed into the hole. Moments later there were two rapid 'pop' sounds as the grenades burst open and the former kitchen began to rapidly fill with thick smoke. Using this for cover more of the mercenaries dropped ropes through the hole and slid down into it. The first of them landed unexpectedly right in front of Sergeant Leyton and before the Royal Marine could bring his weapon to bear the other soldier fired at him. The armour piercing rounds used by the mercenaries easily punched right through Leyton's body armour and he shook as the bullets exploded inside him before collapsing in a pool of his own blood.

"The sarge is gone!" another marine exclaimed as he rolled aside to avoid the next volley of gunfire and Baxter turned to Maddie.

"Go!" he yelled, "Captain Williams went that way." and he pointed down the hallway before he turned back towards the hole the mercenaries were descending through and took aim. However, before he could fire a bullet struck him and he fell backwards into Maddie.

"Oh great." Maddie said as she struggled out from beneath the dead Royal Marine, "Who's supposed to untie me now?" then using a nearby wall for support she got to her feet and hurried away from the fighting.

The mercenary captain saw the muzzle flash of a pulse rifle being fired just as he was about to slide through the hole into the kitchen and knowing that it had not come from one of his own men he paused to return fire, sending an extending burst into the cloud until his magazines was empty. He watched to see if there was more fire from the same place while he slammed a fresh magazine into his weapon but saw nothing through the cloud. Satisfied that whoever had been there was now dead he took hold of the rope and jumped into the hole.

There were only three Royal Marines left now, two of them together while the third was on his own. Despite facing just over twice that number of mercenaries but the well trained soldiers did not panic. Instead they attempted to make use of the same smoke that had covered the mercenaries' descent into the kitchen to try and link up instead of being separated and the pair of marines began to circle around the outer edge of the kitchen, taking turns in moving and firing. One of the mercenaries inadvertently moved into the path of one while he was running in an attempt to get to a better position to fire on the other. Both men were taken by surprise as the other unexpectedly appeared through the smoke and they opened fire on one another at the same time. The Royal Marine was killed instantly while his shots just clipped the mercenary, cracking open his armour and sending bullet fragments into his side. Then as he fell to the floor the other Royal Marine fired on him as well and finished him off before another of the mercenaries shot him in turn.

This left only Robinson and he knew that he could not hold off six mercenaries on his own. Therefore, he took the decision to reactivate the radio transmitter built into his armour.

"Hostile troops have reached the kitchen. We've been over run. I can't-" he said before another burst of gunfire ended his transmission.

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"I don't like the sound of that." Lawrence said when the American troops heard the Royal Marine's last desperate transmission. Moving slowly through the winding hallways of the mansion the group led by Williams had not yet managed to find the alien queen. However, the steadily increasing temperature suggested that they were at least on the right trail.

"Sergeant Leyton do you read me?" Williams signalled, reactivating his transmitter and then when there was no response he tried again, "Corporal Baxter are you there?" but there was still no reply.

"Sounds like we're on our own." Lawrence said and Williams sighed.

"I think so, yes." he said before they heard a familiar voice call out.

"Hello? Is anyone there? I could do with a hand here." Maddie shouted.

"What's she doing down here?" Lawrence said.

"I don't know but I doubt it's good." Williams replied and he waved at his squad to follow him in the direction that the call had come from.

They soon found Maddie peering round a corner as she tried to find the marines and she smiled when she saw them.

"At last. I can't tell you what a relief it is to see you. But could someone be a dear and take these handcuffs off me?" Maddie said before she looked at Williams and added, "Unless you want to keep me like this so I can't put up a fight later on."

"Like you'd ever put up a fight against him." Lawrence responded as he stepped forwards and used his knife to cut through the handcuff ties binding her wrists.

"Thanks." she said, "Now do you know about the company troops behind me? They're following that trail of flares you left. Last I saw, the Brits were putting up a fight but I don't think they'll be able to hold on much longer."

"Yes we know. The Royal Marines are gone." Williams said.

"And it sounds like we shouldn't be dropping any more of those flares." Lawrence suggested.

"No, we just need to focus on getting to the alien queen before those company troops can get to her or us. We'll worry about getting out of here afterwards." Williams replied.

"So why weren't you following the sound of the machinery?" Maddie asked and Lawrence frowned.

"What machinery?" he said.

"That sound? Like a low throbbing." Maddie said.

"I don't hear anything." Holland said.

"Maddie's hearing is better than ours." Williams pointed out, "It does make sense that the aliens would set up near machinery though, there's bound to be more heat there. Maddie could you point the way please?"

"Sure. That way." Maddie said and she pointed along a side passage that the marines had gone right past.

"Maddie take the tracker and keep a constant watch on it. That'll free up Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence.

Private Smith, you're on point." Williams ordered and when Maddie had taken the motion tracker from Lawrence the marines began to move again, this time heading towards the sound of machinery that only Maddie could hear.

The mercenaries moved more quickly through the hallways than the marines could. Their reasoning was that the marines would have already checked for the presence of aliens in the adjoining rooms and hallways and so they did not waste any time checking them, instead concentrating on following the trail of flares left behind them. They continued in this fashion until they reached a junction where the mercenary at the front of their unit came to a halt and held up his hand for the others to do the same.

"What's wrong?" the captain asked and the leading mercenary crouched down and picked something up off the floor.

"Looks like someone cut that officer loose." he said, holding up the remains of the plastic tie used to bind Maddie.

"Impressive that she was able to survive the fall from the floor above and still be able to make her way here. Even jarheads shouldn't be that tough." another mercenary commented.

"Assuming she was human to begin with." the captain pointed out, "We've not seen any signs of the marines' android. They always have one with them, it's standard procedure."

"Then they could be lying in wait for us." another of the mercenaries said.

"I doubt it." the captain replied, "They'll want to find the queen before we can catch up with them. We'll keep after them." and the lead mercenary took a step, continuing to follow the direction of the flares, "Not that way. This one." the captain told him, pointing down the hallway that the marines had gone down, "If the android told them about us then they'll have laid a false trail to try and throw us off."

The sound of machinery was now loud enough for the marines as well as Maddie to hear and it was clear that the cause of this sound was also what was causing the increase in temperature in this sub level. The aliens' resin that coated almost everything in sight was especially thick here and this had blocked the mansion's ventilation system, preventing warm air from escaping. The pumps used to run the ventilation system were still active though and they were running at full power as they struggled to try and remove the hot air to cool down the level.

"Uh-oh." Maddie said and Williams looked at her.

"Uh-oh? What do you mean by 'uh-oh' Maddie?" he asked.

"I'm picking up movement from behind us. Its hard to get an exact reading at this range but I think there are half a dozen signals."

"Human or alien?" Lawrence said, knowing that neither of these possibilities was a good one.

"I can't tell from these readings but my guess would be the company troops are coming after us." Maddie answered.

"Somehow they figured out which way we came." Williams said.

"Unless we find that queen pretty quick they're going to catch up with us and there are more of them than us." Lawrence said.

"Oh that's odd." Maddie added, frowning as she continued looking at the motion tracker, "I think I just picked up something else. It wasn't much but it was there."

"Could there be rats down here?" Holland asked.

"I doubt it. The aliens would eat them." Maddie replied, "Something's moving down here, just not much."

Williams looked at the motion tracker display just as there was another brief pulse of movement from ahead of the marines and he looked into the darkness.

Reaching into his webbing he took out a flare and ignited it before hurling it as far as he could in the direction of this mysterious reading. The tiny glowing light tumbled through the air before it landed and there was an ominous hissing sound.

"Did that sound like-" Lawrence began.

"An alien? Yes." Williams interrupted, nodding and he began to advance, raising his pulse rifle and aiming it into the darkness. The lamp mounted on his shoulder illuminated a short distance ahead and after he had gone a few metres the unmistakable form of an alien appeared out of the shadows, but this alien was like none that Williams or the other marines had seen before.

Suspended from the ceiling by numerous strands of resin, the head of this alien featured a crest that flared outwards from the back and there was an extra pair of arms folded up against its torso. However, these differences from the baseline alien were trivial compared to the massive difference in scale. This alien was twice the size of an ordinary one and that did not take into account the massive pulsing sack that extended from its abdomen.

"I think we found the queen." Williams said and the alien queen hissed again.

"Get back!" Maddie yelled as all of a sudden her motion tracker picked up a pair of signals close to the alien queen as a pair of the more usual type uncoiled themselves from the wall of the nest and charged at Williams.

Standing his ground, Williams turned and fired his pulse rifle at one of the aliens while Lawrence fired at the other, blasting both of them apart and the alien queen let out a sudden loud screech as if reacting to the death of its guardians.

Ominously this was followed by a succession of hissing sounds from all around them and Maddie's eyes widened.

"We've got movement." she said.

"Where?" Williams asked.

"Everywhere." she replied.

"That was pulse rifle fir,," the mercenary captain said to his men when they heard the distinctive sound of firing from ahead, followed by the screeching of the alien queen, "and it sounds like the marines have found what we're all here looking for." then he looked at two of his men and pointed at them, adding, "You two, double back and try to find a way around them. This will work better if we can come at them from both sides at once, but under no circumstances are you to engage without my authorisation. We can't have the queen damaged in crossfire."

"Yes sir." one of the two mercenaries responded before they both turned and headed back the way they had come while the other four mercenaries continued straight on towards the source of the gunfire.

Williams and the other marines formed a circle back to back so that they could see all around them while they searched for the aliens Maddie had detected.

"They aren't human. Give me a pistol." Maddie said.

"Here." Lawrence replied, drawing his pistol from its holster and handing it to her.

"Thanks." she added.

"Just tell us where they are Maddie." Williams said.

"All around. Five metres plus." Maddie responded.

"There!" Holland snapped and she fired her pulse rifle when she saw movement in the shadows of a side passage and there was a high pitched shriek as she hit an alien, prompting a roar from the nearby immobile queen.

Williams looked towards the queen again when she produced this sound and it was then that he noticed the all too familiar shapes that covered much of the floor of the chamber she was suspended from the ceiling of. The room was packed with dozens of alien eggs.

Pointing his pulse rifle into the queen's chamber, Williams fired a burst of explosive rounds that struck several of the eggs. The detonation of the rounds caused the eggs hit by his fire to burst open, spraying fragments of both their leathery shells and also the unhatched facehuggers inside them around. Ceasing fire, he pointed his pulse rifle at another cluster of eggs and looked directly at the alien queen's face.

In response to this the queen let out a low hiss and almost immediately most of the movement shown on Maddie's tracker ceased, leaving just two small groups of signals other than the marines themselves.

"Does that thing know what our weapons are capable of?" Lawrence asked.

"But it's just an animal." Smith added.

"A very smart one it seems." Williams said, "The logs from the *Sulaco* indicated that the alien queen on LV four-two-six was able to operate an elevator."

"Yes, it seems to have a level of intelligence similar to that of higher apes." Maddie said, "Not enough to be able to negotiate with but by threatening its eggs we might be able to keep its children off our backs for a while."

"As long as it's long enough for us to figure out a way of killing it I'll be happy." Williams said.

"I'm afraid I can't let that happen." the voice of the mercenary captain then called out of the darkness and the marines all turned to look back along the hallway, however the mercenaries remained just out of sight, "I assume I am addressing Captain Williams." the mercenary captain added.

"That sounds like their leader." Maddie said softly.

"You have me at a disadvantage." Williams called out, still searching for a target.

"My name is not important Captain Williams. What is important is what I can offer you."

"Offer me?" Williams said, confused, "What could you offer me?"

"How would you like to be a very rich man Captain Williams? You and all of your troops? Let us take the alien queen and I promise that it will worth your while."

"It sounds like he's trying to buy us off." Lawrence said.

"I think that's exactly what he's trying to do." Williams replied.

"My employers really are keen to get their hands on that specimen Captain Williams. Be reasonable and we can all come out of this winners. We'll take the creature back to our ship and it will be taken to where it can be studied safely. The authorities on Raijin don't need to ever know what happened. You and your people will all be set for life, however."

"Sounds like he doesn't know anything about this thing. He'd never get it to a shuttle with just a few men."

Maddie commented.

"Smith how much fuel is left in that flame unit?" Williams asked.

"Enough to roast that giant bug in there if you give the word captain." Smith responded and William nodded.

"Good. I want everything in that room burned. Not so much as a single egg can survive or all of this could start all over again somewhere else." he said.

"The minute he fires that incinerator those company guys are going to come storming down that hallway." Lawrence pointed out.

"I know. We'll need to cover him." Williams said.

"I should do it." Maddie said, "Use the flame unit to destroy the queen I mean. That way all of you can cover me. I can't shoot at people, now matter how big of an ass hole they are."

"She's got a point captain." Lawrence said and Williams nodded.

"Captain Williams, I need your answer. I can't wait forever." the mercenary captain called out.

"Smith give Maddie your incinerator and draw your sidearm. When those company troops move in we'll be ready for them." Williams ordered and Maddie tucked Lawrence's pistol into her belt before taking the flame unit from Smith.

"I'll aim low." she said, "Burn the eggs and the flames should get the queen as well."

Inside her chamber the queen let out another hiss as she watched Maddie point the weapon in her direction and this turned to a screech when the android squeezed the grip and unleash a torrent of flame. Moving the weapon from side to side, Maddie made sure that every part of the floor of the queen's chamber was

enveloped by fire and above the burning eggs the queen flailed her limbs as much as the thick strands of resin suspending her from the ceiling would allow as she screeched in fury at the destruction of her offspring. "You had your chance Williams!" the mercenary captain yelled, hearing both the sound of the flame unit discharging and the screams of the queen and realising exactly what was going on, "Go!" he snapped at his men and the mercenaries began to advance, firing short bursts from their pulse rifles to try and keep the marines from firing at them.

However, now that she and her eggs were under attack directly the alien queen no longer held back the other aliens and in all directions adult aliens began to uncoil themselves from the walls and ceilings once more. The first casualties of this were the two mercenaries sent to try and outflank the marines, just as they rushed through a doorway an alien lunged at them and knocked both over. Landing on top of one of the mercenaries, the creature clawed and bit at the armour protecting his head and chest while he struggled in vain to try and beat it off. As his comrade picked himself up he pointed his pulse rifle at the alien and fired from point blank range. The explosive rounds ripped the alien apart but its blood then showered over both men, eating into their armour as they desperately tried to remove it. However, while they were distracted a second alien dropped from the ceiling and grabbed the standing mercenary, ripping open his abdomen before tearing him in half entirely. Then it dived at the prone mercenary and the smaller set of teeth shot out from inside its mouth, striking the helpless man in his throat.

Outside the queen's chamber Maddie looked at the massive creature as explosive rounds blasted chunks of resin and wall from beside her. The queen was still screeching and this sound was joined by that made by more of the creatures. Then she heard something else, something that sounded like a tearing sound and she looked at the thick strands of resin that held the alien queen in place.

"Err, I think we've got a problem." she said.

"What is it now Maddie?" Williams asked as he ducked out of the mercenaries line of fire after attempting to fire back at them.

"I don't think that queen is quite as immobile as we thought she was." Maddie said.

"Then hit her with that incinerator. Empty the tank if you have to." Williams told her and Maddie took aim with the flame unit, pointing it directly at the queen's massive head before squeezing the grip to discharge it. However, although there were a few brief flames from the muzzle's weapon these did not reach the alien queen before they were extinguished.

"Oops." Maddie said, smiling nervously, "I think I may be out of fuel."

"Just how fast or far can that thing move anyway?" Lawrence said before firing a rapid burst from his pulse rifle down the hallway towards the mercenaries, "That big sack looks like it would stop it walking."

As if on cue the alien queen then let out another loud screech of agony and there was a louder tearing sound that the marines heard as well, accompanied by a large spurt of acidic blood as the queen started to pull free of the bloated egg sack that hung behind her.

"I think we should move." Williams said, "We'll head that way and try to get back to the kitchen."

"Go, I'll cover you." Lawrence responded before he leant around the corner and fired a sustained burst from his pulse rifle at the mercenaries.

Taking the opportunity offered by Lawrence the other marines ran along a side hallway that took them past the queen's chamber and away from the mercenaries. Then once they were clear Lawrence followed after them. Hurrying along the hallway the marines heard another screech just moments before an alien bounded into view, leaping from one handhold on the wall to another. Williams fired as soon as he saw this, emptying what remained of his pulse rifle's magazine into the creature and it exploded as the bullets tore through it.

"Watch for the blood." Lawrence said from behind the other marines, "You don't want it melting through your boots."

"Jump here." Maddie added, leaping over a pool of the alien's blood before suddenly grinding to a halt,

"Whoa." she said.

"Maddie, what is it?" Williams said as he caught up with her but before she could answer he saw the remains of the two mercenaries that had been sent to outflank his team as well as the corpse of another alien, "Let's keep going."

It did not take the mercenary captain long to figure out that the marines had withdrawn from their position and this presented him with a clear opportunity.

"They've left the queen unguarded, let's go." he told his men, waving them forwards as he started to advance.

As they moved closer to the queen's chamber the mercenaries could hear her cries and they raised their weapons.

"No firing unless I order it." the captain said, "You all know what that thing is worth."

It was then that they got close enough to see the queen in her chamber and the mercenaries were taken aback by the scale of the creature.

"How do we get that back to the shuttle captain?" one asked.

"We don't. We'll have to secure this building and let the company bring its research team here." the captain said before all of a sudden there was a 'crack' as one of the thick strands of resin supporting the alien queen gave way and freed one of its larger arms. The queen promptly swung this limb ahead of her and swatted the captain aside as if he was nothing but a doll. Panicked, the mercenaries took aim at the alien queen as it pulled its other major arm free and used them both to reach out and grab hold of the closets. Unwilling to risk shooting at the alien while their comrade was in their line of fire the two remaining mercenaries could only watch in horror as he was ripped in half and the two pieces of his corpse tossed aside at the same time as the queen finally tore herself free of the resin holding her in place.

"Empty the mags!" one of the mercenaries snapped but just as the men opened fire the alien queen charged at them, her head lowered to present its large crest to them and although the rounds fired by their pulse rifles chipped away at this and created tiny spurts of acidic blood they failed to slow the queen down at all.

16.

"That sounds like trouble." Lawrence said when the marines heard pulse rifle fire mixed with screaming, causing them to pause and look back towards the queen's chamber.

"I agree." Williams agreed.

"Think the queen's loose?" Maddie asked and Williams nodded.

"Unless more of the other aliens reached her, yes. Even if she isn't loose yet I expect she will be soon." he answered.

"So what's the plan captain?" Smith said.

"I don't want to fight it in here. Our grenades are probably enough to deal with the queen but the fuse delay may be too long for us to kill it before it gets to us. We'll head for the APC instead. Its weapons should easily be enough to take that thing out."

"Okay let's go." Holland responded and she started to run again.

"No wait!" Maddie called out suddenly when she spotted movement on the ceiling but she was too late to prevent an alien from dropping down on top of the marine and Holland screamed as the creature landed on her. Maddie charged forwards, trying to grab hold of one of the alien's arms in an attempt to break her grip but without any break in its mauling of Holland the creature's tail lashed out and knocked Maddie's legs out from under her. Then there was a brief burst of pulse rifle fire from Holland herself as the marine discharged her weapon in a final desperate act. The burst blew a large chunk from the alien's side, killing it almost instantly but acidic blood flooded out of the wound and poured down onto the already critically injured Holland who gave out one last scream before she died.

"Maddie check your tracker, we can't afford to lose anyone else. Now let's get moving again, we need to keep ahead of that queen." Williams ordered.

Hurrying through the mansion, the marines heard the sound of the aliens gathering behind them and they inspected the walls and ceiling ahead of them often to make sure that there were no further aliens concealed in their path. Williams and Lawrence took the lead with their pulse rifles while Smith brought up the rear with his pistol while Maddie monitored the growing signs of movement following them.

"Here they come!" Smith yelled as the marines neared the kitchen and he fired his pistol at one of a pair of charging aliens. The lightweight rounds bounced off the alien's skull although the creature did let out a scream and drop behind the second. This enabled Lawrence to concentrate his fire on just one alien at a time when he turned and fired his pulse rifle behind them without worrying about the second getting close enough to strike. His first burst ripped apart the alien now in the lead while the second finished off the alien that had emerged unscathed by Smith's pistol fire.

"Keep moving." Williams said, slinging his pulse rifle and starting to climb up one of the ropes that still hung from the floor above.

"I'll cover you." Lawrence responded and he crouched beside what remained of the stairs so that the others could ascend without worrying about any aliens attacking them while they were unable to defend themselves.

"Lawrence, get climbing." Williams called out when he reached the remains of the hatching chamber and unslung his pulse rifle, pointing it back down through the hole to provide Lawrence with cover as he too made the climb.

"I've got movement. They're coming." Maddie said, seeing a cluster of dots on the display of her motion tracker.

"The queen?" Williams asked.

"Maybe, I don't know. But these signals are moving quickly. I'm not sure that the queen could go that fast

down there without smashing through every wall between here and the room where we found her.”

“Smith, ready a grenade.” Williams ordered, “We’ll leave the aliens a little present.”

“Yes captain.” Smith said, smiling as he plucked a grenade from his webbing, flicked off the protective cap and then pressed the button underneath.

“Take my hand.” Maddie told Lawrence as he reached the top of the rope and she crouched down to help him out of the hole.

“They’re here!” Williams snapped when he saw movement from below and he fired his pulse rifle into the hole at the aliens now rushing towards the resin covered remains of the staircase to climb up after the marines.

“Fire in the hole!” Smith yelled and he tossed the grenade into the hole.

Oblivious to the danger from the tiny explosive charge the aliens continued to charge into the kitchen and towards the staircase while the marines retreated away from the hole before the grenade exploded with a large number of the aliens clustered close by. The blast sent flames up through the hole and there were inhuman screeches from below, followed ominously by a single screech that obviously came from a far larger creature.

“I think the queen’s pissed at us blowing up her children.” Maddie said.

“Good. Hopefully that’ll make her follow us all the way to the APC. Now let’s move.” Williams said and he began to run back along the trail of now extinguished flares that led back to the bridge leading out of the nest.

In the narrow confines of the hallways of the nest’s lower floor the alien queen’s movements were limited. She had been much smaller, barely larger than an ordinary warrior when she had entered her chamber and begun the process of growing the now lost egg sack. This meant that while her offspring were able to bound along the hallways using handholds on whatever surface was available she could only lumber along the floor, squeezing around corners and through what remained of doorways until she and her remaining offspring reached the kitchen.

The grenade had destroyed what was left of the staircase and also burned through the ropes left dangling through the hole but the size of the hole to the floor above enabled the queen to rise up to her full height and climb through without assistance. In doing so her own body formed a ramp of sorts and the other aliens leapt on their queen’s back, climbing her and then leaping through the hole to give chase to the marines while the enraged queen followed.

Once beyond the nest the marines ran as fast as they could through the mansion until they reached the burned out garage and from there they rushed outside and across the bridge to where their APC still waited. However, as soon as Lawrence pulled open the main hatch they saw that the mercenaries had taken precautions against the vehicle being used against them by any remaining marines.

“Why didn’t you tell us they did this?” Lawrence asked, turning to Maddie after seeing the exposed circuitry where the mercenaries had pulled out the fire control system from beneath the APC’s command post.

“Because I didn’t know.” Maddie replied, “They didn’t exactly fill me in on all their plans other than using me as bait.”

“Smith go and check the Royal Marines’ vehicles while we see if anything’s salvageable here. Maybe they’re in a better condition than this.” Williams ordered and while he, Lawrence and Maddie entered their APC the other marine ran to the nearest of the two tracked vehicles.

“They really did a number on this.” Lawrence said, crouching down to inspect the damage inflicted to the APC’s fire control more closely. As well as pulling out circuits and wiring looms the mercenaries had smashed some of the components to make simply putting them back in place ineffective.

“I think I can give you control of the forward cannons.” Maddie said, “But you’ll have to target them manually. The automatic select and engage system was controlled by this.” and she held up a circuit board that looked like it had been stamped on.

“How long will it take?” Williams asked.

“About two minutes.” Maddie answered and he nodded.

“Then do it.” he told her and as he sat down in his seat Maddie set to work reconnecting the control circuit for the APC’s bow mounted gatling cannons.

“I don’t know if I can do anything about the main guns.” Lawrence said as he inspected more of the circuitry, “The main damage appears to be to the turret itself so I might be able to give you them but fixed to fire in their current direction.”

“Just do what you can gunnery sergeant.” Williams told him before Smith reappeared in the open hatchway.

“Captain I checked the Brits’ vehicles like you said and they’re trashed too. Maybe we could fix one using parts from the other but-”

“But we don’t know enough about how they work to know what needs fixing.” Williams interrupted, “Just get

in and close that door. Then give Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence a hand.”

“Yes captain.” Smith responded, getting into the APC and pulled the hatch shut behind him.

“Got it!” Maddie exclaimed, “Okay, you should have control of the cannons now.”

“I see it.” Williams said, looking at the targeting console and he tried moving the cannons from side to side to test his field of fire.

“Are you going to test fire them?” Maddie asked but Williams shook his head.

“If they’re the only weapons we have then we may need all the ammo for the aliens.” he said and then as he saw the now all too familiar shapes of alien warriors appear at the far side of the bridge he added, “Speaking of which.” and he reached out to fire the forwards cannons.

Both of the twenty millimetre weapons fired in unison, sending fragmenting 'beehive' anti-personnel rounds over the bridge towards the mansion right at the aliens that began to pour out of it. Each shell burst apart on impact to create a shower of razor sharp fragment that could slice effortlessly through skin, bone and any body armour light enough to be worn by an infantryman and their effect on the aliens was devastating. Just one round was enough to blast an alien apart and the hoard screeched loudly enough to be heard from inside the APC over the sound of the guns as it came under attack. However, although the guns were effective at killing the aliens the repair carried out by Maddie had been hastily improvised and the constant firing meant a constant flow of power through the damaged electronics and a warning flashed on Williams' console.

“The control system is overheating.” Maddie said, “Cease fire and let it cool down.”

“If I stop firing now the guns might not fire again.” Williams replied, moments before there was a 'crack' from under his console and a puff of smoke from the control circuit. Cursing, Williams slammed his fist down on the console as the forward cannons promptly fell silent. However, in addition to the sound of firing, the sound of screeching aliens also ceased at the same time.

“I think you got them all.” Maddie said, looking over Williams' shoulder at the forward sensor displays. These showed no signs of movement across the bridge, only piles of mangled corpses and vapour rising where their acidic blood was eating into the concrete floor and bridge.

“Just in time.” Smith added, smiling but Williams' expression remained stern.

“What's the matter captain?” Lawrence asked.

“I don't see the queen.” Williams replied before, as if she had been waiting for him to mention her, the massive figure of the queen appeared in the garage doorway. Looking down she saw all that was left of her brood before lifting her head and looking across the bridge at the APC and she let out another loud screech before she began to advance, slowly gaining speed as she went.

“Think we're safe in here?” Lawrence asked.

“I doubt it.” Maddie replied.

“So what do we do?” Smith said, looking at his superiors.

“Everybody out.” Williams ordered, getting out of his seat and picking up his pulse rifle.

The marines hurried to the main hatch and Maddie opened it before she jumped out of the APC, followed by Lawrence. Williams then thrust his pulse rifle into Smith's hands right as he was exiting the APC.

“Take this.” he told the marine private and before anyone could say anything he grabbed hold of the handle to the APC's hatch and slammed it shut.

“Hey!” Maddie yelled and she reached for the hatch from the outside but Lawrence lunged at her and wrapped his arms around her to drag her back.

“No Maddie, the captain's got a plan.” he said.

Inside the APC Williams rushed forwards to sit in the driver's seat of the APC and he revved the engine.

Looking through the tiny vision slit in front of him he saw the alien queen now running across the bridge towards the mainland and he pushed his foot down on the gas pedal as hard as he could. Immediately the armoured vehicle lurched forwards and it began to accelerate across the bridge as well.

The structure of the bridge took the weight of both the APC and the alien queen as the pair charged at one another. Seeing the oncoming vehicle, the queen lowered her head so that it would be her thick protective crest that took the force of the collision but she did not try to get out of the APC's path.

The APC smashed into the queen and she was knocked backwards before being pushed along in front of it, still screeching as her limbs flailed. Inside the APC Williams kept his foot on the gas pedal, continuing to accelerate even when he reached the far side of the bridge and drove straight into the mansion's garage. In here the force of the APC smashed aside anything in its path until it reached the far wall and smashed into it at high speed with an almighty 'crash'. With the alien queen still being pushed along in front of the APC she was caught between the armoured vehicle and took the full force of the crash. However, even this was not enough to kill her and she thrashed about, attempted to free herself from where the wrecked APC was keeping her pinned.

Williams was dazed by the crash but not injured and he pulled himself to his feet before staggering to the back of the APC where he took a long crate from one of the overhead storage racks. The side of this was

clearly marked 'M83A2 SADAR'.

Carrying the crate the hatch Williams opened it and exited the APC, heading for the exit from the garage and taking the crate with him. He trod carefully as he started to cross the bridge to the mainland, well aware of the remaining pools of highly corrosive blood that were still present and when he saw the others come running towards him he waved them away.

"Get back. I'm fine." he shouted as he continued to cross the bridge.

The other marines waited at the far end of the bridge until Williams joined them and set down the crate he had brought with him from the APC.

"Now let's finish this." he said, opening the crate to reveal the weapon inside.

The M83A2 SADAR was a one shot, disposable anti-armour missile that was guided by a thermal imaging sensor. Designed to attack enemy vehicles from above where their armour was typically weaker, the missile's guidance system would cause it to suddenly gain height and then plunge down onto its target. Williams lifted the weapon onto his shoulder he disengaged the guidance system so that it could be fired in a straight line using the iron sights without a lock. Then he lined it up on the rear of the APC still pinning the flailing alien queen to the wall behind it.

"Clear behind." he said loudly, warning the other marines of the imminent back blast when the missile's rocket motor ignited.

"Clear." Lawrence responded and Williams fired the missile.

There was a flash from both the front and back of the launcher and as the missile shot across the bridge towards the wide open doorway to the mansion's garage the marines took cover, throwing themselves to the ground then looking up just in time to see the missile hit the back of the APC just beside the main turret. The shaped charge warhead detonated on impact, sending a jet of molten metal through the vulnerable rear armour of the APC and the interior was filled with fire. Then there was a second explosion as the flames ignited everything in the APC that was combustible, fuel, ammunition as well as compressed oxygen used not only in medical kits but also in the APC's life support system for when it was operating on worlds without enough to allow a person to breathe. The alien queen let out one last screech at the moment of this explosion as she too was enveloped by flames and torn apart by the blast of the exploding APC.

"I think we're done here." Williams said, "Now I suppose we wait for the authorities to send someone to pick us up."

Epilogue

"Status?" Williams asked as he sat down in the command seat aboard the orbiting *Almayer*.

"We're in a steady low orbit captain. Main hold is fully pressurised as per your instructions." Lewis responded.

"And what about our passengers?" Williams added, looking towards the doorway where Lawrence stood.

"The *Marlow's* crew are all in stasis already." he answered, "That only leaves Agent Warren. What do you want doing with her?"

"Put her in stasis the same as the other prisoners. We'll hand her over to the FBI with them when we get back to Earth." Williams said.

"What do you think will happen to her? I get the feeling that whoever sent her has influence with the Feds." Lawrence said.

"That's not my problem. At least she won't be any use to them inside the FBI any more. We've cost them an agent at least." Williams told him. Then he looked back at Lewis, "Corporal Lewis are we clear to jettison our cargo?"

"Yes captain. No other traffic within a fifty thousand kilometres and the cargo bay doors are angled towards the planet." Lewis replied.

"Very good corporal. Eject the cargo." Williams ordered.

The doors to the *Almayer's* cargo hold opened on command and with the massive compartment still pressurised to the maximum level there was a massive gust of wind as the air in the hold blew out into space. The only unsecured cargo inside the hold was the shipping container that held the alien eggs recovered from the *Marlow* and this had been left right beside the outer door to ensure that when it opened the container was blown out into space along with the air.

"Cargo ejected captain." Thompson said when she saw the container tumbling through space, "At current speed and heading it will enter Raijin's atmosphere in four minutes and burn up."

"Taking with it all of the alien eggs." Lawrence said, smiling, "You know you'll have annoyed a lot of rich and powerful people doing that?" he added.

"It's worth it. All I'm concerned with is making sure that none of those things get lost anywhere that we can't control them." Williams replied.

Elsewhere aboard the *Almayer* Private Gunn made sure that no one was watching as he made his way to a small storeroom on one of the lower decks. Relegated to loading cargo while his comrades fought the aliens and died, Gunn had seen his chance to provide for himself now that his tour of duty had come to an end and when he opened the storeroom door he grinned as he looked at the stack of five plastic drums he had been able to divert when the alien eggs were being transferred to the *Almayer*.

"A million dollars each." he said to himself, "That's five million dollars total. I can live well on that."